

Scanned by Highroller.

Proofed by a Proofpack proofer.

Made prettier by use of EBook Design Group Stylesheet.

The Galactic Invaders by James R. Berry

CHAPTER 1

Keith Cranston's muscles tightened as a chill shuddered up his backbone. He forced himself to take deep, regular breaths—a precaution against even a hint of panic—as he searched for a scheme that would avoid their deaths. From behind the square pillar where he hid, he glanced at the figure lying four meters or so ahead of him.

She appeared lifeless, blood now congealing on her arm, a lasegun only centimeters from her outstretched hand. In the swiftly descending darkness, Cranston's eyes picked out a slight, barely perceptible motion in her chest. She was still fully conscious, he knew, but her life depended on her charade of death. That she was alive at all was one of the few lucky breaks they'd had in the last minutes.

He knew little about her: her name was Dione Clarke and she had come to the Citiplex Spaceport to take him to the office of Commander Guy Ulmstead. At the arrivals information desk he had seen a girl whose black hair framed a face that was mostly eyes; the eyes themselves were mostly violet, but with a hint of shimmering blue. She had a figure only another woman might describe as too well filled and had walked toward him, hand outstretched in greeting, her softly oval face tense with worry. That had been twenty minutes before.

A lifetime ago.

Now, Cranston concentrated on escape. Whatever action was taken, he thought grimly, he had to know their exact position. He crouched low and risked a quick look from behind his pillar, spotting a flash of movement to

the right and about twenty meters away. He ducked back just before the flat crack of a lasegun snapped. A pristine beam of light hit the pillar where Cranston's head had been a second before. With a soft "whoosh" a half moon section of the duralloy vaporized.

Cranston noted three of them, still too close together to be effective. But they'd move now that his position was known. Whoever "they" were. Or whatever their motives. He was completely mystified by the sudden, surprising assault.

Cranston shelved speculation and concentrated on priorities. An old trick came to mind, one tired and worn. But, he admitted, he had none better.

He doffed his light coat quickly and again eyed the distance between himself and the lasegun near the girl's hand. He flung the coat high and to the right. In the same motion he moved out, swiftly and to the left.

Two lasecharges cracked almost as one as he scooped up the gun and dove behind a twisted aircushion taxi, its nose embedded in another of the dozens of pillars holding up the tangle of roadways above. The driver was slumped over the wheel, dead.

The old trick had worked. In the dimness they had shot at the coat and, momentarily blinded by the bright lasegun charges, had only half-noticed his swift run to the taxi. And now he was armed. Suddenly the odds weren't quite so disastrous.

"Find him. Circle around." The urgent whisper reached Cranston's ears. The ruse had gained him more time than even he had expected. They knew his general location, but probably no more.

As he paused to consider his next move, Cranston bristled at how suddenly fate could reverse fortune. Summoned from Tau Ceti by Commander Ulmstead, Chief of Naval Spacefleet Intelligence, he had docked his starship, the *Draco 11*, at the spaceport less than an hour and a half ago. He had been too diverted by Dione Clarke's earnest, concerned manner to ask why he needed an escort, and had willingly accompanied her.

Because of the apparent argument between his taxi driver and another, involving an obstreperous bystander, Cranston and Dione had been

herded into one particular taxi. With an audible grunt he cursed his carelessness in not noticing that another aircushion car had followed them. He was slipping, Cranston thought.

Of one thing he was certain. The trouble and arrangements taken proved that the men now stalking him had made no mistake. He and Dione were unquestionably their targets. He shook his head, bewildered, then shrugged. Thinking about it was energy uselessly spent.

Crouching low, Cranston darted to a pillar a dozen meters from the taxi and flattened himself against one of its sides. He waited, motionless. Logically, one of the attackers would head this way. Instead of waiting to be flushed, he'd search them out; the active role suited Cranston's temperament a great deal more than that of passive victim.

He heard a soft, shuffling sound. Cranston glanced toward the noise, barely moving his head. A black shape, a figure just a shade darker than the evening gloom, slid to a pillar not two meters from his own. The shape squatted, surveying the area of the crushed taxi. If ever it was important for Dione Clarke to feign death, now was the time.

In one decisive dash, Cranston moved forward, his lasegun held high. He brought it down forcefully on the man's head; the soft thud and sibilant sigh told him this assailant would never move under his own power again.

The odds were down by one.

He moved forward again, scampering from one pillar to the next, keeping low while circling wide around the taxi. Then, another faint motion located one more attacker. He, too, was crouched, peering toward the wreck, Dione Clarke clearly in his line of sight.

Even in the gloom Cranston noted the man's nervous, jerky movements. At least this assailant was edgy and Cranston decided that he was probably an amateur at this deadly game of hide-and-seek.

With the soft sighs of an intermittent breeze making the only sound, Cranston crept forward to a pillar only meters away. He raised his lasegun and moved out.

Some slight noise, or perhaps instinct, alerted the man. He whirled as

he rose, blocking Cranston's arm with his own gun hand. Cranston's lasegun clattered to the ground as the man's own weapon swept upward. Cranston countered with his left hand and punched with his right.

The attacker groaned and Cranston's right hand clasped the man's gun hand. His left hand circled the man's arm and grabbed his own right wrist. The jujitsu grip was one Cranston had learned on some forgotten planet; done correctly, it was forceful enough to tear an arm from its socket. He bore down and heard the crack of ligaments and a gasp of pain.

"Enough, or I kill you both." The hard, metallic voice of the third assailant surprised Cranston. Number three now aimed his weapon at the two struggling men.

"Release him," came another command, harsh and authoritative and Cranston realized that at least this man wasn't a total amateur. Cranston stiffened, then shoved his own prisoner forward. The man tumbled to the ground, leaving Cranston a dim but certain target for the leveled lasegun.

The assailant's finger tightened on the trigger.

Suddenly, the gunman pitched forward with a yowl of pain. His lasegun cracked and its charge hissed downward. In back of him, a barely visible Dione Clarke stood upright. While this last assailant faced Cranston, she had risen and flung a steel head bar, torn loose by the taxi's crash, into his broad back.

Cranston needed no time for thought: instinct ruled. Knowing that only an instant lay between him and another lasecharge, he dove for his fallen weapon. His fingers gripped the cold metal and in one simultaneous move, Cranston swept up the gun, flung himself backward, and fired at the moving shape in front of him.

His own shot was followed by another a hundredth of a second later; it sizzled through space Cranston had occupied a split second before. The weaving shape doubled over before it tumbled to the ground.

Cranston heaved a huge sigh and glanced appreciatively at Dione Clarke. Thanks to the woman's quick thinking and courage he was still alive.

He checked the two men on the ground quickly, finding what he

expected. Both dead.

Ordinarily, Cranston would have alerted the Citipolice. But not now, he decided quickly. Whatever Commander Ulmstead wanted, it certainly didn't include his being linked to four dead bodies. Ulmstead could handle things at his end. Right now, getting to the commander was their primary objective.

They drove toward the Citiplex in the attacker's vehicle and Cranston had a chance to reconstruct the last twenty minutes or so. The attack had happened so quickly that he didn't yet have the details fixed in his mind: maybe these would offer clues as to motive.

* * *

The events were simple enough.

From the spaceport, their taxi headed for the Citiplex, fifteen kilometers away. Neither he nor Dione had talked of the pending visit to Ulmstead. In an aircushion taxi, the passengers were seated beside the driver on the only bank of seats in the small vehicle. About five kilometers from the city, Dione—who knew the routes better than Cranston—remarked that their taxi had taken a wrong turn.

"Ya want'a drive lady, git yer own cab," was the curt reply. Cranston speculated that taxi drivers everywhere seemed to have been bred for rudeness. Annoyed, he let it pass.

Then the driver took a turn leading under the tangled web of aerial highways branching to different parts of the Citiplex. Dione, anger in her voice, demanded to know their route.

"Short cut lady. Hold on ter yer hair." That had been too much for Cranston.

"Back to the taxipost," he ordered in a flat, hard-edged voice and only a fool would think he didn't mean it. The driver, sullen, ignored him. His own anger rising, Cranston tried again. "You'll lose more than your license in another minute," he said evenly. The driver, as though slightly dazed, still ignored him and shifted his bulk.

Cranston looked down and saw a lasegun in the driver's right hand, the

weapon pointing his way. "Don't move and you'll live a little longer," the driver had said ominously, guiding the taxi with one hand into the network of duralloy pillars that supported the highways above.

It was then that Cranston took a look behind, saw another pair of headlights cutting through the dusk, and realized that the driver had help.

He didn't waste energy on regrets or wondering about reasons. From the driver's words, he knew they'd be dead within minutes. He concentrated on escape, and getting out of this vehicle was the first step.

"Crash. Look out!" Cranston yelled, pointing out the driver's side window. Instinctively, the man's eyes darted aside. In the split second the ruse provided, Cranston's left arm shot downward, pinning the driver's gunhand against the backrest. His right fist, a knurled mass of muscle and bone, crashed into the driver's face. The lasegun cracked, its charge blistering a hole through the bank of seats. The driver cried out in pain and the taxi lurched sickeningly, then crashed into a duralloy pillar.

Both Cranston and Dione had had a fraction of a second to prepare for the crash, but the driver, his head twisted to one side from Cranston's blow, hit a windshield post. Above the sound of tearing steel and smashing glass, Cranston heard a sickening snap. The driver would offer no more insults.

They both leaped from the car, Dione ignoring an arm bloodied from a sharp shard of glass. Cranston held the driver's lasegun. A screech of metal told Cranston that the following aircushion vehicle had skidded to a quick stop. Already the car's occupants would be moving outside, aiming their weapons.

Cranston flung Dione to the ground and tumbled over her as a lasecharge cracked over their heads. "Stay put," he barked and, not pausing to hunt for the lasegun he'd dropped, dove behind a pillar, using himself as bait to distract the assailants from the motionless figure of Dione.

* * *

The entire scene, from spaceport to escape, had taken less than ten minutes. Now, in the second car, they headed toward the New York Citiplex, Dione's arm wrapped in a bloody handkerchief, Cranston with

torn clothes and a face coated with grime, and both unnerved from the sudden, unexpected violence of the attack.

"Have any idea of who they were?" Cranston asked.

The girl shook her head, bewildered as he. "I don't know the driver, and the others... I didn't see them well."

"Could it be anything to do with what Commander Ulmstead wants?" Ulmstead's sudden summons was as much a mystery as the motives for the recent assault.

"I doubt it, Captain Cranston. There've been some kidnappings in the last few months. While you've been away. It's puzzling everybody," she replied, her voice edged with worry. Whatever her concern, Cranston thought, it went deeper than the activity of the last half hour or so.

And, it hadn't seemed like a kidnap-for-ransom attempt, Cranston said to himself, remembering the lasecharges that had just seared past. Dione Clarke was remarkably cool under stress, he noted. A woman worth knowing— brains, beauty, and bravery.

They arrived at the Citiplex, its skyline now barely visible against a dark evening sky. Cranston had a brief moment to contemplate its majestic beauty before Dione pointed to a tunnel leading into the heart of the Citiplex itself. Less than fifteen minutes later they were near the headquarters of Commander Guy Ulmstead, Chief of Naval Spacefleet Intelligence.

"We'll park a few squares from headquarters and walk," Cranston said, not wanting the car found near Ulmstead's headquarters. The two arrived at the building without incident, took a voiceprint ideticheck—a normal security precaution—and a few minutes later were face to face with Ulmstead's pert secretary. She pointed them to his office.

The door opened and a tall man with white hair, a small, pointed mustache, and a tailored uniform that molded perfectly over his straight shoulders and erect back stood in the doorway. He took in Dione's bloody arm, Cranston's grimy figure, and their torn clothes in a single, comprehensive glance.

"You're late," he said. "Come in and tell me about it."

CHAPTER 2

The arched eyebrows, pursed lips, and pale eyes of Commander Guy Ulmstead barely moved as Cranston told of the assault. Only his pointed, white mustache, trim and neat as the man himself, twitched from time to time—the single hint of his anxiety.

A communicator terminal jutted from one corner of his desk. At the end of Cranston's recital, Ulmstead jabbed one of its buttons and in quick, precise sentences ordered a special squad to collect the bodies and trace their identities.

"Now. That's taken care of," he said, dismissing the episode with a wintry smile. "I know you're both shaken and tired, but rest and cleanup time aren't far off. I promise I'll be brief."

Keith Cranston squinted in puzzlement. After what they'd been through, a hasty night conference pointed to something a lot more important than routine problems.

Ulmstead coughed politely, a signal for their full attention. "A year ago I established an outpost in the Nether Quadrant," he began. Cranston knew that region of the Galaxy to be largely unexplored. "This outpost's cover mission was to gather navigational data. It had two covert purposes, one of which..." At this point Ulmstead hesitated slightly, as though carefully measuring the impact of his words, "was to report any signs or traces of the Galactic Invaders."

Cranston felt a shock shoot through his body. Dione turned pale and involuntarily sucked in a breath. Emotion even showed through Commander Ulmstead's exterior as the tips of his white mustache twitched spasmodically.

The Galactic Invaders: twenty years before they had suddenly swept through the Galaxy, carrying wanton terror and destruction with them. They gave neither reasons nor terms, and never even communicated with their victims. Then, at the height of their vicious rampage, they disappeared as abruptly as they had arrived. No one knew why. It was thanks to Commander Ulmstead's efforts that the Earth Federation had salvaged as much as it had, Cranston recalled.

By now—2375 A.D.—Earth Federation warships had prowled through the far reaches of the Galaxy without finding a trace of the aliens. Everyone was certain they had been destroyed or had fled back to the hell from which they had come.

Everybody?

Ulmstead's eyes glinted with a steely light. "With the Earth Federation's current colonization program, it's an unpopular view to suggest they might still be around," he continued. "So let's say the outpost's job is to scrutinize its sector for trouble from *any* source." Cranston had no doubt the Intelligence Chief had similar outposts scattered throughout the Galaxy.

Ulmstead suddenly leaned forward, brushing aside a meter long leaf from a potted fern. His office was filled with luxuriant plants—the space veteran's one quirk. Rumor had it that his best hunches came in the morning when he ritually watered each one.

"This particular outpost has another covert project, one equally important, perhaps more so," Ulmstead continued. "Only two people on Earth know of it. Miss Clarke and myself. It *must* remain confidential—from yourself as well. That's why I've called on you rather than involve an official, and hence more public, Spacefleet operation."

Ulmstead's eyes never flinched, yet Cranston detected in them a plea for help. "I *can* say it involves a project critically important to the settlement of our Galaxy," he added, sitting back in his chair as though conceding an important point.

Cranston stirred uneasily. He didn't like not knowing everything about a mission. In fact, he still hadn't the faintest idea of what the mission was.

Ulmstead noted Cranston's implied question. "I've called you because the outpost has ceased to function. No word for over a week. I want you to find out why."

"My father is in charge of the outpost. He and I worked on the project together," Dione said softly and Cranston realized that this must be the reason for her preoccupation.

Ulmstead rose and went to his office window, brushing aside a huge

avocado plant. He spun around. "I doubt very seriously that there are survivors at the outpost. Miss Clarke already knows of my opinion," Ulmstead said brusquely, his eyes blinking. His arms were behind him, hands clasped, and his back was ramrod stiff.

Ulmstead's long pause was interrupted by the ring of the office communicator. He put the receiver to his ear, his face again an impassive mask. He hung up. His eyes narrowed, his mustache twitched.

"Report from the cleanup squad. No one there. Someone beat us to those bodies. The taxi was stolen, no leads. They're fast and efficient," Ulmstead mused. He gave a shrug that barely creased his smooth-fitting, dark-blue jacket. "Meanwhile," he added, "I'm waiting for an answer from Captain Cranston."

Cranston had worked for Ulmstead before and each case had offered challenge to brain and body. It had been over a year since his last mission and Cranston's tame life as a civilian captain of the sleek courier starship—*the Draco II*—was wearing thin.

He nodded.

Ulmstead beamed, which is to say the ends of his thin, straight mouth budged a couple of millimeters upward. "Good. We'll take care of all the little details—codes, cash chits, orbit periods and the like—tomorrow morning at a formal briefing." His fingers formed an A-frame. "I'd like you and Miss Clarke to leave within the next twenty-four hours."

It took a moment for Ulmstead's words to register. "Dione?" Cranston exclaimed. Someone who wasn't trained in any of the starship's specialties, essentially a passenger on an official, and possibly dangerous, mission.

And, a woman—without provision for anything remotely feminine. Cranston felt Dione's eyes boring into him as he grasped for some reply.

Ulmstead's eyebrows raised imperiously as he read Cranston's thoughts. "Miss Clarke is in a position to discover facts at the outpost not available to you or me," he said, as though regretting having to give this sparse justification.

Ulmstead rose. "It's settled then." The words were more a statement of

fact than a question. "A nurse on our medical staff will tend to Miss Clarke's cut. After that, we'll have a driver waiting downstairs to take you to your respective travotells," Ulmstead concluded, rising and gently ushering them from his office. Cool, efficient, precise, and clever as ever, Cranston thought as the office door closed behind them.

The New York Citiplex bustled in the late morning sun. Electrocars purred down special auto lanes, people milled in the shopping arcades, gawking settlers from colonies strolled slowly through the walk lanes. Cranston had arranged to meet Dione in the heart of the Citiplex, at a bubbling arcade fountain. He spotted her, fresh and lambent in a yellow tunic. Her eyes sparkled with vitality and she smiled as he walked closer: the first real smile he had seen her make. A medipatch covered the cut on her arm.

"Let's pick up our funds," he suggested after greeting her. She gave a quick, assenting nod and they strolled toward the credibank.

Just one hundred years before, the Earth Federation had used computer currency, a person's ideticard serving as money. The system was hell for intergalactic travelers. Docutapes holding vital financial data got lost, lagged behind visits, or never arrived. And without the docutape record of finances, a visitor was as good as bankrupt.

The Earth Federation coped with the growing Galactic travel by reinstating a cash system. And, within years cash became the accepted intergalactic currency. In fact, hardly a bar, pleasure house, travotell, or other business in the Galaxy would touch anything else from an itinerant spacer. Even on Earth the use of cash had become something of a fad, a mild social revolt against the impersonalism of a computer economy.

The credibank had high vault ceilings and bright mosaics covering the walls. "They patterned it after a twentieth-century bank," Dione explained. "Something about nostalgia."

One other thing had remained the same. A row of six bored tellers stood behind a wall of cages, monotonously counting out bills. Cranston and Dione got in one of the lines, currency chits in hand.

A feeling, undefined but persistent, alerted Cranston.

It was nothing as vague as a sixth sense, nothing as concrete as a

conviction. But with an indescribable certainty he knew that something was wrong.

Cranston glanced around casually, soaking in every impression, every gesture, every look. Another person might have doubted the uneasiness he felt, but he had learned long ago not to ignore the slight tingle of nerve endings, the tightened stomach muscles, the dry mouth, the taste of copper salts. His senses had registered something important.

The six lines of people, one for each teller, held varying types. Many were spacers, settlers, and vacationers. Some were less obviously definable. His eyes fixed on an elegantly dressed woman in the line on his right. She stared straight ahead, nervously fingering the strap of a shoulder satchel. On his left, Cranston saw a short, roundish man, neatly dressed, glancing neither to the right nor left. Curious. In one hand he held an almost identical satchel. Cranston looked again at the woman.

Something was familiar about the two... something.

The line moved ahead. Dione pushed over her own currency chit, received a packet of red colored bills, and moved aside.

"Chit," the clerk commanded, catching Cranston's attention. He shoved it over and received, in return, several packets of bills. He turned to leave and felt a small pressure in his back.

"Drop it in the bag," a hushed voice commanded. Cranston turned slowly. A tall man, dressed in a loose-fitting tunic that half hid a small, hand-held lasegun, faced him. In his other hand he grasped one handle of an open satchel.

As if on signal, half a dozen people eased out of the six lines and stepped to the tellers' cages, their weapons half-shielded by satchels they carried. They were, Cranston noted, an odd assortment: men and women, young and old, well-dressed and shabby. Yet, they had one thing in common: a metallic glaze to their eyes that bordered on the fanatic. Partly it had been that look that had tripped off his unconscious warning of trouble to come.

"In the bag," the man said impatiently, shaking the wide-mouthed satchel. Cranston dropped in his bills. With six of them, all armed, resistance would certainly be futile, if not fatal.

The man turned to the teller, whose face had finally become animated. A bank robbery! The first he'd experienced. It would be something to talk about over lunch for months to come.

"Small denominations only," the man growled. The teller began shoveling in packets of bills, trembling from equal parts fear and delight.

"Not those, I told you," the well-dressed woman on Cranston's right snarled in a shrill voice. Furious, she swept a packet of high denomination bills aside. "Low amounts only. Hurry up."

So far, the robbery had been so smoothly run that only a few people had realized what was happening. The gunman who had taken Cranston's bills turned from the teller to Dione, satchel still held by one hand.

"Inside. Make it quick," he said, nodding at her sheaf of bills. His eyes darted nervously around. Dione hesitated a fraction of a second. Then, the robber, enraged, made his mistake.

He raised his lasegun and hit Dione's face a glancing blow with its barrel. Tears of pain and humiliation flooded her eyes. "Next time's worse," he spit out, rattling the satchel again.

Cranston didn't stop to think. He slid quickly to his right and grabbed the man's gun hand, driving a balled fist into the man's solar plexus. The lasegun cracked. The bank clerk howled and clawed one shoulder with his hand.

Someone screamed.

The thug gasped, his eyes wide with pain and surprise. He dropped his weapon, and his satchel thudded to the floor. Cranston spun him around and cradled his throat in a choke hold, using him as a shield against possible lasegun blasts from the others.

Until this point, the crowds had been nervous but calm. Most of those who were even aware of what was happening considered the whole scene some sort of a stunt. Now, prodded by the sharp crack of a lasegun blast, they panicked, suddenly milling around like ants. The thugs, not expecting trouble, became desperate, snatching bills from both tellers and customers. More screams echoed through the bank. People pushed, shoved, and shouldered each other aside, frantically heading for the exits

in a confused, desultory rush.

"He got Lenny," came a screech from the well-dressed woman, a shout that carried above the din of the frightened crowd. The woman aimed her own weapon at Dione, still tightly grasping her satchel with a free hand. "Let go or I shoot her," she said to Cranston.

He saw no alternative. He loosened his hold, prepared to take the almost certain laseblast from the woman's gun. In that fraction of a second Dione spoke.

"I give up," she shouted, flinging up her arms and walking toward the woman.

Flight would have meant a laseblast. But total, passive surrender was the one thing she wasn't expecting. The woman was too confused to remember that Dione's capitulation wasn't what she had demanded. *A dangerous diversion*, Cranston thought, wondering for how many seconds it would last.

Dione, in front of the woman, saw the lasegun wave uncertainly. "Pick up that satchel," the woman said, wide-eyed, gaining confidence by giving a command. Dione nodded meekly.

She turned toward the satchel on the floor and spun back again in a swift, graceful motion, her left hand shooting downward in a block, her right hand, palm flat in a knife edge, neck high. The left hand hit the lasegun. The right hand hit the woman's neck. The woman dropped. The lasegun cracked again and a collective shriek of terror rose from the frightened, still-milling crowd as the bright flash hissed into the floor.

The thieves, as if on signal, began withdrawing, each one clutching a satchel, making no further attempt to rescue the man called "Lenny" or the woman Dione had decked. Like a thick puff of smoke dissipating in a strong breeze, the crowd thinned and disappeared. Suddenly the last footsteps were gone. It was quiet.

The entire scene had lasted perhaps three minutes.

Cranston still held the thug who had raked Dione's face with his gun. Without apparent reason, the body sagged. Cranston let go, noticing a thick, red scar behind his ear as he slid to the floor like a sack of sawdust.

Dione rose from a kneeling position, and any reservations Cranston had about her performance in a crisis vanished. Her calm, poise, and ingenuity were rare for anyone.

Cranston retrieved his packet of bills from the thug's satchel and looked up at Dione. "Kidnappings in the evenings. Bank robberies in the mornings. What's for the afternoon?" He was only half joking. Deep space, with all its dangers, seemed infinitely safer than a teeming Citiplex.

Dione gave a shy, ingenue grin. "In the afternoon we rest for the evening show," she quipped.

Far away, the *woompah* of Citipolice cars filtered into the bank. "Let's get out of here," Cranston said. "We can't afford the time to be witnesses." He glanced at the two people lying on the bank floor and caught his breath. Their figures lay immobile, not a sign of a motion. On a hunch he felt the man's neck pulse. He rose and touched the woman's carotid arteries. Dione watched, a frown on her face.

"Dead. Both of them," he said flatly.

Dione winced. "I didn't hit her that hard," she said, stunned. Her mouth opened but no words came.

Cranston glanced at the man. "He was alive a few moments ago, too. But they're both dead now." The *woompah* was louder now. He grabbed Dione's arm, leading her away and elbowing through a curious crowd that had collected around the credibank. They heard the screech of vehicles and saw the traditional blue of Citipolice hats bob toward the bank's entrance.

They were outside the crowd when Cranston suddenly stopped, Dione practically tripping over him. A memory that had hovered at the edge of conscious suddenly became vivid and clear.

"Dione, did you see anything familiar about that team of thugs?" he asked slowly. She thought, then shook her head slowly. He began strolling again, Dione at his side. He paused once more. "We've seen them, or their equivalent, before," he said. "What's more, I doubt if those two are dead because of us."

CHAPTER 3

Cranston led Dione toward a large park in the heart of the Citiplex, each of them quietly speculating about the robbery and the sudden deaths that ended the incident. They sat on a bench, under the welcome shade of a huge sycamore tree, cool in the late morning sun.

"Why would they leave all the larger bills?" Dione asked, her mouth pursing.

He shrugged, indicating it was as much a mystery to him—one more enigma in a litany of strange events.

Dione shook her head as though to clear her thoughts, her hair bobbing over her forehead. "You said we saw them before," she stated, returning to a question postponed until this moment.

"Not those particular people," Cranston replied. "Last night in the cab. The taxi driver had the same kind of dazed, fanatical look. The way he moved and acted. Mechanical. The same with the people who robbed the bank."

A sudden look of anguish clouded Dione's face as she remembered the dead woman on the bank floor. "If I didn't kill her, who did? And how?"

Again he had no firm answer to support his conviction. "People just don't die like that from a blow. And two at a time? That's a coincidence I don't buy." He realized that he was no closer to understanding what had caused their deaths. "Drugs, hypnotic suggestion maybe," he said weakly, not believing the words himself.

"Keith, could there be a connection between all of this and the mission?" Dione asked.

He bit on an underlip. "It seems farfetched," he replied, his voice trailing off. Yet something kept him from totally rejecting the idea.

"I hadn't known the Invaders were still considered a danger," Dione said, changing the subject abruptly. "Commander Ulmstead told me that your father was one of the few people to see them," she added, inviting Cranston to elaborate.

A cloud obscured the sun. The chilly shadow that followed seemed almost to reflect the sudden change of mood. Vivid memories transported Cranston back to the nightmare of the Galactic Invasions. He began speaking in low, hesitant tones, seeking to convey the terror that had ripped through the Earth Federation's far-flung network of galactic colonies.

They had come, Cranston explained, from some hell hole in the universe. Two colonies in one week were annihilated. No survivors. Scoutships sent to investigate their sudden silence disappeared. A warship was dispatched. It vanished.

"At first, everyone thought a pirate or scavenger colony had begun preying on others," Cranston added.

"Except for Commander Ulmstead."

Cranston grunted in momentary curiosity at how Dione knew so much about Ulmstead's role. "From the first, the Commander suspected an alien race. One of his famous hunches. He was almost laughed out of the intelligence service. Then, they made a sighting," he continued, describing the first reported encounter with the Invaders...

* * *

Roger Laffist, of the warship Celeste, was on sensor watch that shift, happily daydreaming of the buxom lady he'd spent his last leave with. The raucous buzz of the intercept radar broke through his reveries. He glanced at the screen. A large, massive object of peculiar shape was only a few thousand kilometers away and closing fast.

No Earth Federation ship was scheduled for stardrive in this sector and Laffist alerted the captain of the Celeste. The object approached closer, refusing to identify itself. The captain rang for battle stations and strong steady gongs sounded through the ship. He ordered a salvo of mass-sensitive rocket torpedoes unleashed. At the same time, the communications crew began lasebeaming a report, aiming the rays at the nearest receptor planet. It would take days for the report to arrive.

"Got it," Crewman Laffist shouted minutes later as the object on his screen separated into several pieces. Somehow, amidst the flurry of markings showing the dead ship's larger debris, Laffist missed seeing

two small objects speeding for the Celeste.

The captain turned from the screen, congratulations about to be spoken. At that instant the giant warship lurched in space. The roar of escaping air was drowned out by the ear-splitting screech of tearing metal. Laffist's eyes bulged, then popped at the sudden, violent decompression. His last mental image, even as he clawed at his throat, was of the buxom lady he'd left forever at his last port of call.

* * *

"The guesses are that both ships released their weapons at the same time," Cranston added. "It was certainly an alien ship. The Spacefleet accounted for all known spacecraft in that area."

Dione looked across the vast green park. Bright daffodils formed swathes of yellow on the green. The sun sparkled on the rippling waters of a small, nearby pond. In the distance, Dione noticed other strollers, among them two men who sat idly on a bench, throwing food to ducks paddling in the pond.

The peaceful, lyrical scene formed a bright contrast to the history of the Galactic Invaders. "They vanished after that. If I recall correctly," Dione mused. "Everything became quiet after their ship was destroyed."

"I guess you could say quiet," Cranston replied. "They disappeared, that's known. The official word was that they were 'interstellar cowards who had turned tail and run.' Some politician came up with that cute phrase."

"I heard from my father that the commander never believed that version," Dione said, and then, responding to Cranston's surprised look added: "They were close friends. My father and the commander. Have been since school."

Guy Ulmstead, Cranston continued, had roared through the halls of Spacefleet Intelligence, pleading for reconnoiter patrols, begging that the lair of the Galactic Invaders—the term everyone had spontaneously used for the aliens—be found. Again, he was ignored.

The Earth Federation poured its resources into more colonies and advanced versions of the hyperspace drive. Planets once hundreds of

light-years distant became an easy hyperspace leap away. Settlers flocked from a crowded, overpopulated Earth to the ends of the Galaxy, yearning for elbow room, adventure, and profit.

Most found only death.

Cranston's eyes narrowed. "Five years later they hit again," he continued. "They had developed a new weapon, one that could massacre entire populations without risk to themselves or damage to the cities. Within a week the Galaxy became a celestial slaughterhouse."

Both Cranston and Dione fell silent. The faint squawks of feeding ducks reached them.

"Almost Juno, Commander of the *Questin*, a cruiser class starship, made the first report of the new weapon. My father knew Juno. His death hit us pretty hard." Cranston thought back to the *Questin*, to what it must have been like...

* * *

"Haul it in," Juno had commanded, referring to a single small object orbiting a recently destroyed planet below his cruiser. His orders were to discover why all communications had ceased. Perhaps this debris could offer a clue.

Five crewmen in a shuttlecraft snagged the object—which turned out to be someone in a space suit, obviously dead. They hauled it back, figuring someone had tried to escape from whatever befell the planet below in a damaged space launch that ruptured in orbit. No one really cared how the body got where it was.

*Once inside the *Questin*'s docking bay, two of the five crew—with the others standing curiously aside—wrenched off the opaque space helmet. Two vomited on the spot.*

One passed out. The others recoiled, pale and trembling.

The thing inside the suit had neither face nor body. Only a dark, pastelike mass, vaguely resembling a human form, was left. The potent stench seared nostrils. The crew members fled the compartment.

Half an hour later the five were writhing in agony. A nauseated fleet surgeon watched their transformation. Fingernails turned rubbery and sloughed off one by one. Hair became brittle and crumbled from their heads and bodies. Skin softened and began dripping from their bones. Organs swelled, horribly distorting their forms, burst, then became gelatin. All this as he watched, and all before the welcome release of death shrouded the pain. Then came his turn.

Juno was wise enough to forward a running report of events to a scoutship not far away. He guessed what was coming. In an hour it did. An epidemic caused by an unknown, virulent organism raged through the Questin. The communications link to the scoutship was left open. Strong men cried as they heard the gruesome screams of the crew echo through the starship for three solid hours before the last man was comforted by death. ...

* * *

Sweat pebbled Cranston's brow as he finished the story. Dione stared ahead, dumbstruck by the sheer anguish of it all. As if on signal, both rose and began strolling along a pleasantly meandering walk. Cranston felt Dione's arm slide through his own, a comfort he appreciated.

In the distance, two men stopped feeding ducks and began to saunter along a path.

Cranston picked up the narrative. He explained how the plague had toppled the Earth Federation's long-standing colonial program. Passenger liners filled with frightened settlers docked daily and disgorged their angry, rebellious, and impoverished loads on an already overcrowded planet.

Jobs had to be scavenged, refugee settlements created, food supplied. The Earth Federation began to collapse from the weight of the people it had spawned.

And no one—no one—got a glimpse of the aliens, even as their rapacity spread. Colony after colony was struck with the plague, each begging for some antidote or cure that no one possessed.

"They had hidden, then, for those five years," Dione commented. The pair paused to watch the flock of pigeons pecking at crumbs someone had

scattered.

Cranston nodded solemnly. "Probably on a remote planet somewhere while they developed their bacteriological weapon."

Dione lightly squeezed Cranston's arm, aware he wanted to finish the story. "It was one hell of a time and the Earth Federation still hasn't fully recovered," Cranston added.

Not far behind them the two men paused to look at a field of daffodils.

"Commander Ulmstead once mentioned that your father actually saw the Invaders," Dione prodded gently.

For a long moment Cranston said nothing. "He didn't live long enough to describe them. He was too busy telling me something else. I've never understood what," Cranston replied. He noticed Dione's encouraging look.

"We lived in a Navy Spacefleet community, on a resupply and communications planet called Tau Medar. My father was second in command of the warship, *Draco*." Cranston's voice dropped. They began strolling again.

"I was only twelve years old, but it's clear as yesterday," Cranston picked up. "The Invaders attacked Tau Medar. But this time they seemed to want possession of the planet *and* its population. No one knows what they intended."

Dione felt a shudder ripple across her shoulders. Cranston grunted as he remembered that time...

* * *

The nighttime sky of Tau Medar filled with flashes of laserays and the boom of concussion guns. The main city, Villinera, was filling with the dead, dying, and wounded. The Invaders had struck less than four hours before in a surprise attack that knocked most of the Spacefleet's starships from the sky within minutes. Cranston, then twelve, had watched as one giant warship slowly tumbled, end over end, breaking in half on its way down.

Then word came that they had landed near Villinera. A hastily

organized ground contingent—including every male fourteen or over—rushed to stop them in the nearby jungle forest. The sounds of war grew steadily closer. The wounded had first come in like a stream, then like a raging river. Cranston, his mother, and his sister, ran for water, comforted the dying, bound the wounded, and hauled the dead along with the other civilians.

They desperately needed bandages and Cranston trotted to their house on the outskirts of the city for clothes that could be torn into strips. A fifteen-minute steady run brought him to the dwelling. He ran through an open door and stumbled over the body of his father.

He was horribly scorched, his uniform in tatters. Cranston would always wonder how the man had crawled, stumbled, or staggered from the front lines to this house. In the confusion they hadn't even known he was in the ground contingent.

The man was alive, barely. Cranston bent over, tears flooding his eyes. One bare shoulder, he noticed, was covered with a dozen or so tiny puncture marks, each raw, red, and oozing. His father opened his eyes and spoke.

"Get 'way, now," he said weakly. "Saw them," he added, and even in his death throes his eyes glittered with terror. "Defeated," he groaned out, and at first Cranston misunderstood. "INVADERS defeated," he added with a macabre and triumphant grin.

Cranston was bewildered. The desperately wounded man grimaced once more and gasped out a jumble of sounds the young boy would remember all his life: "Loudn 'oises waapn. Don't ev . . er forg't." Then, in one last surge of vitality, he raised a crooked finger and pointed to the rear of the house. "Get way. Now. Plague coming."

Then he fell limp, one of the few human beings ever to see the aliens and live long enough to tell about it.

Cranston was shocked and bewildered, with just enough control left to blindly follow his father's command.

An officer's shuttle rocket for emergency liaison with the warship was in the rear. Cranston knew the function of every dial, lever, and button. He got in, dogged the hatch, and pushed the command button. Fumbling,

but deliberate, Cranston activated the correct sequence of controls.

The shuttle ship rose from Tau Medar minutes before the plague began devastating the planet.

A scoutship that somehow escaped annihilation picked him up over Tau Medar just minutes before it hyperspaced to Earth. Cranston glanced once more at the green planet from the port window, those strange words his father had spoken indelibly etched in his memory.

* * *

"But what did your father *mean*?" Dione asked. "Those last words?" They had stopped again, under a shade tree. Cranston noted that the violet of Dione's eyes deepened when she was concerned.

He shrugged and continued the story. The Galactic Invaders had been defeated, just as they had grasped victory. But by a weapon no one comprehended—least of all the military. After the battle of Tau Medar they had mysteriously disappeared, sowing the plague on that unlucky planet in revenge.

That had been twenty years ago.

"The old colonies are quarantined in case the plague germs are still active," Cranston added, bone weary and exhausted from reliving the past. "Within ten years settlers found new planets to conquer. The Earth Federation began to return to normal."

They began to stroll up a path that led to a hill overlooking the park. In the distance they saw the outlines of the Citiplex's tall buildings against the sky. Behind them, two men began idling in their direction.

"But *what* made them leave?" Dione burst out, after thinking over the story. "Where did they go?" Cranston shook his head slowly. Neither he nor anyone else had the answer.

"You can see why Commander Ulmstead is worried that they're someplace in our Galaxy," Cranston said. "There are enough unexplored sectors for entire empires to hide in."

"That's not likely, is it Keith?" Dione asked eagerly. "After all these

years, they'd have shown themselves someplace."

Cranston remembered how the Invaders disappeared for five years, then returned stronger than ever. "I'm just hoping history doesn't repeat itself," was his unconsoling answer.

Dione shivered and changed the subject. "How did you meet the commander?" she asked, taking his arm again as they moved toward a park exit. Lift-off for *Draco II* was the next day. They both had to take care of a dozen details.

"He was one of my father's instructors at Space Academy. He found a navy family to stay with me until I entered the academy myself."

"You were in the Spacefleet?" Dione asked, with no attempt to hide her surprise.

Cranston gave a short laugh. "For a while. Fine outfit, but I guess the regimentation got to me."

"You don't seem like the subordinate type," Dione interjected, a tinkle in her voice.

"After a stint with the Spacefleet I got my own courier ship. Mortgaged at first. Now it's all mine." The glow of pride was easy to detect in his voice.

"That's when Commander Ulmstead looked me up again. He asked for help in a few intelligence matters. My civilian job is a perfect cover."

Dione looked at Cranston with a Cheshire smile and said in mock-exasperation. "And with all your background, do you know that right at this moment we're being followed? And have been for quite a while."

Cranston looked at her admiringly. Not everyone would have spotted them, he thought, sure now that she'd be an asset on the coming mission.

"By two men. One tall and bald. The other short and built like a gorilla. Right?"

Dione nodded.

"Saw them from the park bench, just before getting up," Cranston said.

"No rest for the weary."

"Let's go meet them," Cranston replied, taking her arm.

CHAPTER 4

"Precautions," Cranston explained, waving as the two men lumbered up the slope to meet them, feeling Dione's tense grip on his arm relax. The tall one's bald head glistened in the sunlight and his gangly arms and legs seemed attached to his body by loose strings. His ears looked like small wings and the edges of his eyes crinkled with crow's feet.

The short one's chest was almost as wide as he was tall. Stubby fingers sprouted from heavy, powerful hands. His entire face seemed flat—nose, lips, mouth, cheeks—as though it had been squashed while still forming. The wrinkled face would have been frankly ugly if it weren't for the spritely eyes, glinting with intelligence and humor.

Both walked in a swaying, jerky motion that indicated more familiarity with the artificial gravity of starships than with that of Earth. Both men glanced around in a casual but regular manner, as though continually looking for someone.

"Dione, my two deck officers. Fred Baret and Tom Gordon," Cranston said, and Dione breathed out a long, silent sigh of relief.

The tall one stretched out a long arm. "They call me Baldy. Maybe you can guess why," he said during a quick handshake. The other pushed out a hand, shook once with a nod, glanced around, and said nothing.

"That's Gor, for short," Baldy elaborated. "Don't expect long conversations with him." The wrinkles around his eyes crinkled as he grinned.

It took Cranston a few minutes to sketch in details of the bank robbery. "Should'a told us to meet in the credibank," Gor said gruffly. His words were clipped and shortened, as though talking were a painful experience.

"After that kidnapping attempt, I asked these two to keep track of us,"

Cranston explained to Dione. "Told them we'd come to this park. I didn't figure we'd have problems before."

Then, as if all necessary formalities had been completed, Cranston added: "Baldy is navigator aboard the *Draco II*. Gor is the chief engineer. I could probably run the ship with just these two if necessary."

"Not prob'ly. For sure," Gor grunted, his face scrawling into an even uglier scowl that Dione, somehow, knew was his version of a grin.

"One surprise for you I haven't mentioned," Cranston said to the pair. Their faces remained blank, as though used to shocks. Only their eyes kept flitting around. "Dione will be joining us. Commander Ulmstead requested it." The last was said as half explanation and half order.

Baldy blinked once. "From what the Cap here says you seem to hold your own. Welcome aboard." Gor gave a low grunt that could have meant anything.

Abruptly, Cranston became all business. Baldy would accompany Dione throughout the day. Gor would do the same with him. He arranged a rendezvous that evening aboard the *Draco II*. He turned toward Dione: "You can board tonight and get settled. Tomorrow morning, early, I'll check some details with Commander Ulmstead. Then we leave."

* * *

Lift-off from the Citiplex Spaceport was routine. The sleek starship took a parking orbit above Earth for about two hours, then shot toward the moon on ion drive. The hyperspace coils began charging, storing the massive quantities of energy needed for a hyperspace leap to the Nether Quadrant of the Galaxy—a sparsely settled section some one hundred light-years distant, and the location of the now-silent outpost.

Two days later the coils were ready. The crew of *Draco II* buckled themselves in bunks or chairs. A warning blast on the ship's horn indicated the hyperspace leap was only minutes away. Then it came.

Dione saw the port windows of the control room turn into shimmering gray mirrors. She, and everyone else, felt queasy and somehow—no one could explain why—objects in the ship seemed disorientated. Something round looked vaguely oval; something long looked wider; something flat

looked curved. Clocks stopped, motion slowed, and no one could tell how long they stayed in hyperspace: a minute, or an hour. No matter how far they traveled in one leap, the duration of this strange time/space state seemed the same.

The starship ducked out of hyperspace. The queasiness left, clocks began moving, objects looked normal. In what appeared to be minutes they had traveled the same distance a light beam—the fastest moving thing known—covers in one hundred years through normal space.

Draco II was now within a mere four day ion-drive of the outpost—a feat of superb engineering and calculation. Baldy corrected the starship's trajectory as it sped toward the planet, every piece of equipment purring efficiently.

They were two days' drive from the outpost when Baldy got a hint of the trouble to come.

"Check this, Cap," he said to Cranston in the control room, a spacious compartment filled with the ship's controls and sensor instrument feeds. On the telescreen a brightly lit "pip" had appeared.

"Not a meteor," Cranston mused. "Too bright and too slow. Get a mass-sensitive report," he said. Gor, at the engineering controls, glanced up.

Baldy punched some keys of the ship's compute center. Sensors fed it information. Delicate instruments calculated a dozen factors, juggled density versus size, and a number flashed on a visual readout.

"Mass about that of a large starship, Cap. Hollow inside," he reported.

Without apparent haste, Cranston moved to the communications panel. His fingers became a blur as he tapped out an identification message and hit a red button. *Draco II* began broadcasting its identity on several frequencies, requesting the same information from the other ship.

"Gor, get a readout on the registry of all ships in this Galactic Sector." Like shipping lanes on the Earth's oceans, the vast space between stars was charted. All starships were required to file approximate trajectory plans in a central registry. If a ship turned up missing, its approximate location—and that of its smaller life rockets—was known.

The compute center balefully clicked out its answer. No ship other than *Draco II* was reported for the vicinity. No response came from the strange starship following them.

Dione, who had slipped into the control room some minutes before sensed the steadily rising tension. Cranston's face had become taut. Baldy's every movement was almost rigid in its precision, while Gor's forehead alternately smoothed and wrinkled. Comments were short, to the point; voices were clipped, even curt.

Dione was bewildered, wondering why the appearance of another starship—one still many thousands of kilometers away—would cause such concern.

"Their course, Baldy," Cranston commanded.

"On our tail, Cap. Just saw 'em a few minutes ago. Might have been eating our blast for an hour."

"Cap, sure identity request is on automatic?" Gor asked.

Cranston looked, nodded. "Has been for some time. They should have answered by now." He saw Dione, sitting in one of the room's swivel chairs, from the corner of his eye. He turned and fitted in a hurried explanation.

"Every starship has an automatic receiver. When it gets an identity request from another ship, the receiver broadcasts its own coded identity—name, registration, destination." Cranston's explanation left Dione only a little less puzzled than before.

"But what's the harm if a ship doesn't reply?"

Cranston turned around sharply. "You have to assume they're hostile. That system began even before the Galactic Invaders, when thugs would get a starship and pirate cargo and passenger craft. It became essential during the Galactic Invasions. Without a quick ideticheck a ship was considered to be armed and dangerous."

Baldy, pausing in his work, looked at her. "It's the space code, an' a lot more important than the official law, Miss Dione. No reason for them not to identify themselves. Other than the evils they intend," he said grimly.

He looked back at the telescreen and his voice tensed. "They're maneuvering directly behind. An' closing, Cap. About thirty-two hundred kilometers away."

Cranston yanked a red-colored lever. Throughout the *Draco II* buzzers alerted the crew to take battle stations. "Maybe nothing serious. But I'm not taking chances," Cranston growled out. "Gor, any chance of a short hyperspace leap?"

"Forget it Cap. We haven't been charging. No need to." Bad news, but Cranston expected it. A hyperspace leap was a traditionally effective means of eluding pursuit in space. No attacking ship could possibly find where the prey had gone to after a space-time duckout.

Cranston's brows furrowed as he thought of the ship behind him. Coincidence? After what happened in the last few days?

"Position report," he snapped out. "Closing quick. Large craft. Old warship, vintage some forty years ago. Built them solid." Baldy said tersely.

"Evasion tactics," Cranston commanded. He glanced at Gor. "What've we got on the auxiliary drive?"

"Good, Cap. Accelerate any time. Change course, if you should want. Sharp change, too," Gor answered.

The clipped phrases meant little to Dione. But she clearly understood that the *Draco II*, darting through space at a fifth the speed of light, was about to play cat and mouse with a pursuing starship.

"Make it fast, Cap. *Fast*," Baldy nearly screamed out. "They've launched something at us. Bastards."

The transformation in Cranston came as a shock to Dione. He moved more slowly, but every action, thought, and motion was calculated for survival. He radiated an aura of total, ruthless efficiency.

"Course change, Gor. Right angle if possible. *Now*," Cranston barked out.

A section of a command panel linked Gor to the crew servicing the

engines and to the servos. The controls were automatic, once activated. But the sequence and degree of activation lay in the hands of the gorilla-like man. And his skill, cunning, and delicacy saved the ship.

Dione felt the pull of inertia as *Draco II* swerved to one side, its more powerful atomic auxiliary engines now added to the lighter—but in the long run more effective—ion drive.

Cranston slumped into one of the soft chairs of the control room. "Nothing we can really do now," he told Dione as *Draco II's* sharp, darting swerve in space continued. "It's all a matter of celestial mechanics. If we turn faster than the torpedoes they've aimed our way, we're all right. Otherwise..." Cranston didn't finish.

The remaining minutes passed in ominous silence.

"Less than two hundred km. away, Cap. A minute, maybe more is all," came Gor's comment.

Now, in a delicately calculated move, Gor gave a short, full-thrust blast of the atomic engines. "Hold tight," he shouted.

Draco II almost leaped sideways in space. Dione was thrown from her chair. Loose equipment spun across the room. Cranston grabbed his chair's armrests to keep from being launched across the floor. Baldy tumbled, then rolled against a far wall.

The sudden thrust stopped. "That'll be the last engine trick for now," Gor said, awaiting whatever fate befell them.

"Arrival time's coming up," Baldy shouted. "I see engine exhaust from the port screens. There it goes." Unconsciously, Baldy pointed out the large screen. "It's missing us, Cap."

A sleek, shiny object was momentarily visible through the port screen. Then, with a fast-expanding flash, it turned orange and red. The colors swelled, faded, then quickly dissipated.

"Concussion missile. Mass triggered," Cranston remarked, turning from the window. He noticed Dione's puzzled look.

"They wanted to disable us. It was a heat sensitive missile. Would have

gone up our starship's exhaust and knocked out our engines, but not necessarily destroyed the ship."

"Cap, look here," came a cry from Baldy.

Cranston leaped to Baldy's side and stared at the telescreen. He gave out a long, low whistle.

"Found an asteroid cluster, half hour's drive from here," Baldy elaborated, pointing to a group of white pips at the telescreen's edge.

Cranston studied the outline of the cluster for a brief, furious second. Then, he nodded. "Gor, get us on course for those asteroids." Cranston jerked his head toward their tail, indicating the pursuing ship. "They'll try something else for sure. This could be the bit of luck we need."

Gor hesitated. Mingling with a group of chunky asteroids could be disastrous. One false maneuver and the sharp chunks of iron and stone could shred a metal hull like aluminum foil. The piloting would have to be as sure as that of a sea captain amid a cluster of icebergs.

Then Gor moved, hitting his controls with a sureness born of skill and honed by twenty years' experience. "Done, Cap," he reported. "Not much directional change needed. Speed'll be equalized to those floaters at the last minute."

Baldy's sharp voice caught their attention. "More coming, Cap. Two rockets are bracketing us. A quick course change won't work now," he said with hate in his voice. His hands balled into tight fists.

"An' Cap," he added with a tone that indicated more bad news. "They're heavier and slower. Bet they're destruct missiles this time."

Cranston spun around. "How long before the asteroid cluster," he asked sharply, sorting out the strange medley of facts. At first, the mysterious ship wanted to disable the *Draco II*. Now, as he was heading for escape, they wanted nothing short of total destruction.

While Cranston vainly pondered the motives of the pursuing ship, Baldy made a series of calculations, his face set in a scowl. "About ten minutes before we arrive," Baldy reported.

Cranston had a knot in his stomach as he turned to Gor, who had been calculating the trajectory time of the missiles aimed their way.

"Okay, Gor. How long before they get here?" he asked.

"I figure about ten minutes Cap, including a bit of acceleration on our part," Gor replied, his forehead wrinkling and unwrinkling almost with each breath. "It's going to be close, no disputes about it."

Ten minutes before the *Draco II* reached the asteroids and possible shelter. Ten minutes before the missiles reached *Draco II*.

He marched to the telescreen. Two tiny pips of light moved steadily toward them, edging closer by the minute. Behind *them* was the brighter pip of the large starship following him. Ahead were dozens of pips—the asteroid cluster.

"Should be in visual sight in the next minute," Cranston murmured, pointing to the asteroid pips on the screen. He faced Dione. "Keep a look at the port screen. Sing out when you see them," he said.

Dione gave one quick nod and peered out the indicated screen. She saw only the cold, velvet-black of space sprinkled with bright dots of starlight. Then, like a faint shadow only a little less dark than the others, she saw the gray outline of a huge asteroid, slowly tumbling as it sped with dozens of neighbors, coming from no place, going to no place—an idle wanderer of the Galaxy that had once circled a now dead sun.

"I see one Keith," Dione shouted out. "We're coming to the fringes of the cluster. There aren't many around."

Good news. Cranston was looking for just enough asteroids to hide behind, but not so many that maneuvering would be difficult.

"Missiles maintaining gain, Cap," came Baldy's unwelcome news.

"Keith, one asteroid is really huge. It looks close, too," Dione shouted.

"Got it on the screen," Cranston replied. "It's about eight hundred km. in diameter. Perfect," he said to Baldy, then turned to Gor. "Let's get in back of it." The huge asteroid, hurtling through the brittle cold of space for billions of years, was at last to prove useful.

Gor nodded and with blurring speed punched instructions to his beloved engines.

"Hurry it. Only another one, maybe two, minutes before happy time," Baldy shouted.

With the agonizing slowness of a second hand sweeping around a clock, the *Draco II* moved in a wide arc, circling behind the asteroid.

"Faster," Baldy fairly screamed out, and Gor made a minute addition to the thrust of the maneuvering jets, chancing the risk of nudging the asteroid and ripping the hull asunder.

"Best we can do," Cranston muttered.

"They're here, Cap. One's going into the asteroid. We outmaneuvered it," Baldy cried out. "But the other, Cap, the other...."

He never finished the sentence.

A dull booming sound thudded through *Draco II*. Cranston glanced at Dione, wondering if in the next few moments they would be gasping for air, slowly suffocating as the atmosphere drained through rips in the hull.

Nothing happened. "Damage reports, Gor," he commanded tersely.

Outside the port screen, the massive, craggy asteroid appeared like a dim, slowly rolling monster.

"Most things functional, Cap," Gor said after scanning the panels before him. "That torpedo exploded close by.

We were probably hit by a chunk of its casing. Tore off some sensor antennas. No obvious structural damage I can find."

They had fared better than anyone could have hoped for. Cranston slumped into a chair, sweat dripping profusely from his face. "Close as I've ever come in space," he said.

Baldy, too, sat in a chair, his face white. Even Gor managed to look relieved. Dione, also seated now, suddenly felt her hands begin to tremble from the delayed strain.

Cranston moved to the communications console and reported the ship's status to the crew. Then he faced the trio in the control room.

"It's not over. They—whoever they are—probably want to follow up. But we have the advantage now."

Dione's eyebrows shot up. If there were any advantages in their corner she didn't see them. Cranston spotted her unspoken question. "The other ship's too big to maneuver in this asteroid cluster. It's hard enough for us. It will try to wait us out. But now that we're out of sight we can use the defense we have."

"An' about time, I'd add," Gor growled. "Murder in deep space, clear an' simple. That's what they tried."

"Activate the spinnet," Cranston ordered, and Baldy headed to the control console. "We carry an instrumented rocket that appears to be the *Draco II* to other ship's sensors," Cranston explained to Dione.

"All set, Cap," Baldy interrupted. "Ready to fire, right after trajectory calculations."

During the few moments pause Cranston picked up his explanation. "We couldn't have sent out the spinnet before. The other ship would have seen two ships. Now, their captain will see our starship leave from behind this asteroid. That'll actually be the spinnet, and he'll think we're making a run for our lives."

"Trajectory fed in the spinnet's computer memory, Cap," Baldy reported. Cranston nodded and one of

Baldy's lanky fingers jabbed a button on the console. *Draco II* shuddered as the spinnet fled from a hull tube. It angled around the huge asteroid, gaining speed, and then headed for deep space.

"Circle around, Baldy. Let's get a close look at that other ship," Cranston ordered, then turned to Dione. "It won't be able to pick us up against the background of the asteroid. We're safe now."

After what appeared to Dione as an endless stream of maneuvers their starship gently circled the dim, revolving asteroid. Baldy kept his eyes glued to the telescreen, manipulating what seemed like a dozen dials at

once.

"Got 'em both in sight, Cap," he finally said. Dione joined Cranston and Gor as they stared at the screen.

Two electronic pips, one following the other, glided across the dark blue of the screen. Thousands of kilometers away, now, a giant ship pursued a small, inoffensive rocket that electronically mimicked all the characteristics of *Draco II*.

"That captain'll have a surprise coming when he finds the spinnet. An' a bigger one if I meet him in port," Gor growled.

"We'll circle for a while. Check all damage while that attack ship gets farther away," Cranston said, weariness creeping over him. "Baldy, compute our trajectory coordinates for that outpost again. We're probably way off course by now."

Later, while Baldy and Gor were checking the damage with the rest of the crew, Cranston spoke with Dione.

"They knew we were coming here," he said in a low, intense tone. "They waited on this side of our hyperspace leap so our coils wouldn't be charged. At first they wanted us alive. Then, they didn't care."

"Keith, we're back to some strange coincidences again," Dione added. "How did they know where we'd be?"

"Someone told them. Simple as that."

Dione's eyebrows shot up. "Only Commander Ulmstead, you and I knew just where we were going, and why," Dione answered.

Cranston had told Gor and Baldy about their exact destination. But only once they were all aboard *Draco II*.

Cranston looked again at Dione, a slow, appraising look that lacked his usual warmth. A cold glance she didn't care for.

"That's right," was all he said.

CHAPTER 5

The damage to *Draco II*, Baldy soon found, could be repaired easily in a spaceport, or with much difficulty during flight. Cranston opted for a stopover at the nearest port after scouting the outpost. In any case, the sensor antennas now bent, twisted, and broken, were a back-up system, not crucial to the ship's functioning.

The sleek starship orbited the huge asteroid several more times. Finally, Cranston was sure the anonymous attack ship couldn't possibly track them. He ordered Baldy to fill the trajectory for the outpost. The delay had cost them a full Earth day.

* * *

"There's an informer who knows every detail," Cranston said to Dione. The two were seated in his cabin. There was an unpleasant concern nagging at his mind; it was painful to consider but too persistent to ignore. And it centered on Dione.

"Commander Ulmstead knew of our missions; I did; and you did. So did someone else," Cranston continued. His mood was not only grim, but defensive. The safety of his crew and his ship were the stakes in the present gamble.

Dione guessed what he felt—not a hard job, after seeing his expression. It was clear that Cranston's suspicions had begun to center on her. The understanding and trust they had enjoyed had dissolved. With an attempted killing in space she could readily comprehend scrapping personal feelings. Still—that didn't ease her anger.

Dione flushed. "Keith, I have as much interest in this mission as you. More even. My father is out there," she said, flinging out an arm toward a port screen.

The logic made sense. Yet the mystery surrounding Dione and her father was an unknown factor that irritated

Cranston. Dione, he admitted, was an unlikely informer. Still, whatever she and her father were doing, it could be the key to their troubles. Not knowing one way or the other was an exasperating irritant.

"Just what was your project?" Cranston demanded, curbing his anger. He saw she was under a strain. Yet, with his ship and crew in danger,

nothing else mattered.

She shook her head wearily. "I can't say. Not yet. I promised Commander Ulmstead." Her hands tensed and the knuckles grew white.

"Commander Ulmstead didn't know we'd be attacked in space or that someone knew where we'd be. That changes the situation."

"Not enough," Dione answered. Her face showed the strong tugs of conflicting loyalties.

"They know practically every move we make," Cranston said, his voice rising. "What you know might explain how."

"The project involved something critical to the settlement of the Galaxy, something maybe even more important than the hyperspace drive. But that's all I can say."

Cranston gave up. Bullying a woman wasn't in character. She was stubborn, all right, he sighed. Even through his annoyance he felt his admiration climb a notch higher.

Communications with Commander Ulmstead were impossible. They were now one hundred light-years from Earth. Messages sent by radio or lasebeam still plodded along at the speed of light—the fastest speed possible in normal space. Any communications he sent would take one hundred years to arrive.

Typically, a starship that wanted to forward a message found a ship in its vicinity, one that was about to hyperspace home. The sister ship would then relay the message.

Slow, cumbersome, and chancy. And right now, without a starship in the vicinity, Cranston had no way of getting to Ulmstead. Whatever Dione's secret, it would remain just that.

"If you change your mind let me know," Cranston said more curtly than he really wanted.

"Keith, really... it's all up to Comman—"

Cranston stalked angrily from the cabin, seething both at Dione and

himself. In any case, preparations had to be made for the coming landing.

* * *

The outpost was on a small but dense planet, with gravity and atmosphere comparable to Earth's, and lush vegetation on huge land masses surrounded by fresh water. It appeared, now, on the telescreen, in close focus.

"Sensor report," Cranston requested. The planet had large lakelike bodies of water instead of tidal seas. It was a certain candidate for eventual settlement, but still too far afield in this sector of the Nether Quadrant. There were many similar planets closer to Earth that still weren't occupied.

"No automatic beam, Cap," Baldy reported. "We've probed but it's a dead response." Typically an outpost or settlement had a homing signal aimed skyward at all times, a navigation aid for approaching starships. This one was silent. A bad omen.

"Baldy, you stay aboard this trip. Gor will come along. Crewmen too. Tell Miss Clarke to get ready," Cranston said.

Baldy gave a quick, surprised look at Cranston's formality, then left the control room. Gor, at the ship's orbit controls, said nothing, his face an imperturbable mask.

Under Gor's manipulations, *Draco II* eased into a gentle parking orbit, its engines shut down to a barely thrusting idle. Baldy came back to the control room to plot coordinates for the landing. Only one problem remained.

Locating the outpost.

Without either radio or lasebeam beacons it was difficult to pinpoint its exact geographical location. Ulmstead had anticipated this and supplied detailed aerial maps. Now they were projected out on a visual readout.

Cranston jabbed a spot with his finger. "It's right there, on that squiggle-like peninsular in a large, diamond-shaped lake. Can you find it for me, Baldy?"

The man said nothing and went to the telescreen. He focused on the planet, which was slowly rotating beneath them. "Got it, Cap," he sang out in less than an hour.

"Take her down, Baldy," Cranston ordered. With Gor at the auxiliary drive and the gravity generators in reverse—lightening the starship's enormous mass considerably—the craft descended. Baldy had the outpost's cleared landing pad sighted well before touchdown and the ship settled easily, vibrating at the last second before its engines shut down. Cranston undogged a ground-level hatchway and a light, tubular ladder telescoped to the terrain a few meters below.

Cranston, Gor, Dione and four crewmen—all armed—descended cautiously. Cranston and Dione had hardly spoken a word during the last twenty-four hours.

Already the landing pad was overrun by vegetation. Tiny plants sprung up from cracks in the baked ground. Tall, fernlike trees at its edge loomed over it, their branches seeming ready to engulf the small clearing. The sky was a pale violet color. The air was warm and moist. Tropical.

Cranston noticed what appeared to be a giant rock at one corner of the clearing. "Pathway to the outpost should be over there," he said softly, remembering Commander Ulmstead's detailed instructions. There was no reason to be soft spoken except that the funereal hush of the towering forest inspired the calm of a cathedral.

Dione, thinking of her father, fell between Cranston and Gor. The silence, she noted, was oppressive. On Earth one would expect the screech of birds, the buzz of insects, the howl of animals.

Here, in this jungle, there was nothing. They marched through a faint path obscured by creeping vines, fuzzy ferns, and bushes filled with strange-shaped leaves the size of dinner plates.

"Can't be far," Cranston commented as much to himself as to the others. Sweat poured from his face and neck. "Wasn't supposed to be more than a ten-minute walk to the—" Cranston burst forth from a waist-high growth of brush into a clearing. "We're here," he said solemnly as Dione and Gor came beside him.

It was, as Commander Ulmstead had claimed, a small outpost. Four

one-story, thin-sheeted, duralloy buildings—more like sheds—formed a neat square with a compound in the center.

The outpost was a shambles. The sides of two buildings caved inward, their roofs broken and fallen. The roof of another was punctured with huge holes, their edges blackened. Doors on all the buildings were open or twisted off. Some hung by one hinge only. The corner of another building was completely missing, the jagged edges melted from heat, then resolidified. A giant antenna column lay twisted on the ground.

"A fight, an' a big one," Gor commented. They moved forward. The junglelike growth was reclaiming its own. Creepers had found their way through holes in the buildings, broken windows, and doorways. Thick, sturdy patches of brush had forced their way through the hard packed, sun-baked dirt.

The trio entered one of the buildings while the crewmen stood guard outside. Gor emitted a low, long whistle and held his laserifle at the ready. Cranston grasped his lasegun. Dione, white-faced, stood still with shock.

Hulks of what once were men lay scattered throughout the interior, each seared and charred. Creepers and thick, fuzzlike molds covered the corpses. "Outnumbered for clear, Cap. Must have gathered here for a final scrap."

Toward the rear of the battered shed were rows of overturned tables. The floor around them was littered with the remains of shattered containers and scattered earth.

Dead stalks covered with withered, dry leaves lay in patches of tinder-dry brush. Unnoticed, Dione walked over and knelt, delicately sifting through the now dead vegetation. Creepers from outside the shed had already invaded this earth, taking root as though repossessing their kingdom. She rose suddenly and, even paler, walked over to where Cranston and Gor stood.

They scouted the other buildings. Each was a scorched hulk, deliberately ravaged and methodically destroyed. Cranston looked in every corner, under every twisted support, through all debris for a hint of a reason for the outpost's annihilation. He found nothing.

"Your turn, Dione," Cranston said outside one of the sheds, his voice

harsh. His anger increased at seeing the senseless killing of an outpost's staff and at his inability to discover even a clue as to the reason.

Dione looked startled. "My what?"

"Commander Ulmstead said you'd be able to tell something. It's your show," Cranston answered.

Her face suddenly wrinkled in exasperation. "I should have remembered before," she murmured almost too low for Cranston and Gor to hear. They looked at her curiously.

"Just a few days before you reached Earth, Keith, Dad told me about a special room he had built. In the headquarters building." Her eyes closed as she concentrated. "A trap-door entrance under a bunk in the rearmost office," she recited as though recalling memorized instructions. Her eyes opened. "He didn't say more about it. I didn't think of it until just now."

Cranston surveyed the buildings. One, slightly larger than the others, had the remnants of a heat-blackened sign: "quarters" it read.

"This must be it," Cranston said, shoving aside patches of underbrush as he headed toward the building. Dim light filtered through holes in the roof and walls. In the rear they found a small cubicle, its door ripped from its hinges.

A cot, seared and twisted by heat lay in a corner. Cranston and Gor flung it from the room. They saw nothing but the smooth surface of the floor.

"There, Cap," Gor spoke and pointed to an almost invisible metal ring on the floor of a far corner. They would have missed it but for faint rays of light from two rents in the duralloy wall.

Cranston tugged once and a square of the floor tilted up. A narrow stairway led down. "Gor, can you find something for a torch?" Gor left and reappeared with a mass of twisted brush, dead and dry. They lit it with a lasegun on wide beam, low power. Cranston descended.

It was a small, fetid hole. By the flickering torchlight Cranston spotted a squat desk, chair, and filing cabinet, their shadows eerily dancing in the light of the torch's flame.

He moved forward and almost stumbled over the figure prone on the floor, right arm outstretched. Cranston bent, holding the torch close. Dead—one side of his face covered with tiny puncture marks. The tiny, inflamed holes revived a tortured memory he couldn't place. Cranston, suddenly dazed, shook off a sudden urge to flee.

He swallowed hard. Already the body was decomposing, though the man must have lived—wounded and probably unconscious—for several days longer than the others. Cranston's gaze fell to the outstretched arm. A writing stylus lay inches from the hand. He could just see faint smudges of stylus ink on the floor. He brought the fast-failing torch closer. One word, laboriously printed out, was barely visible. Cranston traced it:

O-H-M

The last letter of the word trailed off. The man must have lost consciousness about then.

"Got something Cap?" came an anxious query from Gor.

"One who lived longer than the others," Cranston shouted back, rising. He heard a patter of steps on the ladder and then Dione was at his side. She took the torch and looked closely at the man. The torch fell to the floor.

"My father," she said in a broken, tremulous voice. Her hands covered her face and she leaned against the wall. Cranston helped her from the room.

The crewmen shoveled a shallow grave and they buried the body near the shed. Nature would claim the other dead. Dione was some distance away, sitting with her head held high, her eyes closed, her legs crossed. Cranston marveled at her sturdiness as he watched her... meditating perhaps? Simply finding composure? Praying?

The grave was filled, and if respects were to be paid over the mound of earth now was the time. Cranston was becoming edgy about staying amid the destroyed buildings and dead staff. He walked over to Dione solicitously.

Then he stopped—too amazed and startled to move quickly.

A long, piercing moan came from her throat. She opened her eyes in a wide, maddened stare then squeezed them tightly shut, as though the vision she saw had become too much to bear. Her clenched fists beat briefly against her skull. Then, before Cranston could move, she slumped sideways to the ground and lay there, motionless.

CHAPTER 6

Cranston raced forward, Gor at his heels. Dione moaned once again, then lay limp. He felt relief at finding her alive, an emotion only slightly stronger than his puzzlement at what provoked the collapse.

He lifted her to a sitting position. More than ever, Gor's wrinkled face resembled that of a concerned gorilla. "I'd like to be gone from this planet, Cap," he said, his eyes flitting around. "It's giving me the creeps for sure."

Cranston couldn't have agreed more. He too felt something oppressive, something ominous, about the compound, the tall forest, the planet itself. Gor slung Dione gently over his shoulder with no more apparent effort than raising a child. They all headed for the landing pad, Cranston's laser drawn, the crewmen edgy, cautious, and alert for instantaneous action.

None came. They lifted off without incident; Dione, her eyes open, stared sightlessly ahead, obviously in some kind of shock.

It was while Cranston tried to make some sense of the outpost's wreckage and the single clue of a strange name or words, that he became troubled by something. Something somebody had said recently... an inconsistency.

As *Draco II* orbited the outpost's planet and Baldy plotted the ship's next trajectory, it nagged like a pebble in a shoe. Cranston was about to help with the simple orbital maneuvers when the shock hit him.

"Take over," he barked to a surprised Gor. That insistent worry had surfaced. Cranston grimaced. He had been lied to. Probably several times over. He could see no other explanations for the discrepancy he'd just spotted—one he should have noticed hours ago. He cursed as he thought of his own stupidity—and the dangers his crewmen, and his ship had been exposed to because of it.

Cranston rose and thought of Dione, considering the possibility he might be wrong. She was in her cabin and still in a daze. Well, thought Cranston, it would take about one microsecond of the starship's compute time to verify his suspicion.

He strode directly to the compute center—*Draco II's* brain and nervous system combined.

"Ready for trajectory, Cap," Baldy said.

Cranston barely acknowledged the report. "Baldy, *get* me a register on traffic within lasebeam range of this area from..." Cranston thought a moment, "ten days ago before we lifted from Earth until lift-off."

"Two minutes," Baldy answered. If he thought Cranston's manner unusual he gave no indication.

Cranston glared at the compute center's telescreen readout as though expecting bad news. Then, exasperated—and more for something to do than anything else—he sat in his command chair and readied to leave orbit. He maneuvered the controls of the command console with the delicacy of an orchestra leader. The ion engines began to hum and the lights dimmed as power drained into ignition coils. The starship's checklist was read out automatically by the compute center in a busy series of clicks. Fuel pressure: ionization rate: temperature: power supply: auxiliary fusion engines on ready... and a dozen other items.

Gor had gone to check on Dione's condition. He entered the control room. "She's still weak, Cap. But restin' nicely as a pea in its pod. Brave 'un she is," he said and it was clear that he liked the girl. Gor's reactions were more instinctive than intellectual, Cranston knew. More than once he'd been puzzled by his engineer's likes or dislikes—only to discover later how valid they'd been.

Baldy strode over, a frown on his face. "Sure you meant this area, Cap?" he asked, holding a list from the compute center's printout. "Nothing was around then. Least nothing in the registry."

Cranston felt numb, cheated and, as the numbness slowly dissipated, furious.

He said nothing to his two officers. Not yet.

"Baldy, where's the nearest spaceport we can have our backup antennas repaired?" he asked, avoiding the questioning looks they both shot him.

"Got it located, Cap. Earth-sized planet called Raker. A short hyperspace hop from here. The Manual of Colonization claims it's got full spaceport repair facilities."

"I've got us wanned up, Baldy. Get us in a trajectory flight. Gor, charge up the hyperspace coils," Cranston ordered. "First stop after Raker is Earth. And none too soon for me."

Later, Cranston ate alone in his cabin. The information Baldy told him ricocheted inside his head—information that proved Dione was a clear and clever liar. He thought of any way he might be making a mistake and only came to a firmer conclusion he was right.

How had Dione known her father had built a small, hidden room underneath the headquarters shed? She had said, Cranston remembered for the twentieth time: "*A few days before you reached Earth, Keith, Dad told me about a special room he had built.*"

Damning words. False words. Lies.

Baldy had checked. There had been no starship anywhere near the outpost a few days before he had landed on Earth. And the outpost was one hundred light-years away. Only a starship that had hyperspaced to Earth could have carried Jason Clarke's message to Dione. None had.

But then how did she know about that room? Why did she lie? One other puzzle added to his irritation. Why had she collapsed so suddenly?

Cranston shelved his first suspicions that she was an informer. She, too, seemed to be in as much danger as anybody. Yet, the source of their leak could be connected with her special project. Not knowing one way or the other galled him. As it was his situation was impossible—defense against what appeared to be a completely informed enemy. And Dione, it seemed, had information that might reverse their predicament; information that might allow him to initiate some sort of offense, some action that could put whoever sought his death off balance.

Perhaps now that she'd witnessed the wanton destruction of the outpost and the death of her father, she'd understand.

He shoved his half-eaten meal aside, rose swiftly, and stormed toward Dione's cabin. He remembered to knock, but just barely. She was sitting in her bunk, still pale. Cranston took a small chair at the bunk's foot. She smiled winningly, and Cranston had to fight to keep remembering that despite her warm, friendly look she was a dangerous—and perhaps deadly—impediment to him, his crew, and his ship.

"How did you know your father had built that room? Underneath the shed?"

Dione's hands unconsciously rose to her mouth. Then she stared into Cranston's eyes. It was an uncomfortable few moments.

"I can't tell, Keith. I promised Commander Ulmstead." Her eyes dropped.

"Whatever you're holding back is risking your life, mine, and that of the crew." Cranston spoke calmly, with only a hint of the frustration he felt surfacing. "That information may explain why these attacks took place. More important, it might help us avoid another."

Dione nibbled on a trembling underlip, feeling miserable. Then, coming to a conclusion, she sighed. "Keith, I'll tell you what my father and I were working on. But only after I've spoken with Commander Ulmstead. I owe him that much."

"Then you *did* hear from your father?" Cranston asked, his eyebrows rising in renewed confusion.

"I can't say more, Keith. Please understand. But I didn't lie to you," Dione added softly.

"Why did you faint down there?" Cranston hoped for an explanation to at least one puzzle.

"I don't know," Dione answered, her voice weary and strained.

"Well, what were you thinking or doing just before?"

She looked at Cranston with an expression that pleaded for understanding. "I can't say, Keith. No matter what Commander Ulmstead says, I will tell you. But he has to know first."

She slumped down in the cot, exhausted. Cranston nodded and, despite his worry about lives and his ship, managed a weak grin. "It's unique. I'll say that. This mission for the commander."

Dione attempted to return Cranston's smile. It was obvious that she'd prefer to explain everything. Only a promise to Commander Ulmstead held her back.

Only? What would he do in a similar instance? Cranston thought. In all probability, the exact same thing, he concluded, not liking his own answer.

Cranston returned to the welcome familiarity of the control room, frustration still gnawing at him. "How're the hypercoils doing?"

"Humming, Cap. Enough power stored to get us to Raker right now," Gor answered.

"Then let's go," Cranston barked out, buckling himself into his swivel chair. "The sooner we get to Raker the sooner we get back to Earth." Baldy punched the warning for a coming duckout into time-space.

* * *

Raker: another lush planet with several cities, a booming population, a mining and agricultural economy, and the bizarre architecture resembling what Earth Federation histories pegged as "nineteenth-century American West."

Most buildings were log cabin constructions, because Raker's vegetation included the Totem tree—with its thick, straight trunk and a hard wood impervious to dry rot or weathering. Raker prospered because of this cheap building-material, managing to avoid the expensive importation or manufacture of duralloy and similar plastic materials. In fact, Raker's largest initial import expense had been axes, saws, wedges, and automated wood-cutting machinery.

In its main, bustling spaceport city, Stetville—named for an early settler—streets were made of planks. Log cabin bars, banks, stores, houses, and other buildings stood neat and trim. Every day, so the citizens of Stetville proudly claimed, a new building went up. One would almost expect to see a wild west gunfight on its streets, with women in long,

calico dresses scurrying for safety, bar doors swinging open to disgorge curious customers, and two opponents cautiously marching toward each other on a dusty street.

In Stetville, only the bar doors swung open, and they did so with a regularity that kept them squeaking day and night. The town was, despite its archaic, log-cabin appearance, a modern spaceport, servicing not only the starships that touched down, but also their thirsty and cash-laden crews. Business on Raker in general, and Stetville in particular, boomed.

Draco II landed and within an hour Cranston had arranged for the antenna repairs: one day, one-and-a-half at most, the spaceport officials said. A skeleton crew remained aboard; everybody else headed for Stetville in the electrocabs that were three times the cost of an Earth taxi. Cash.

The crew dispersed. Dione and Cranston got adjacent rooms in the Raker Hotel, a three-story log building on the edge of Stetville's main street. Gor and Baldy shared a room one flight below.

"A long, hot bath. Wonderful," Dione fairly squealed at the thought. To save water showers on *Draco II* were hot but short. Later, they met in one of the city's restaurants, refreshed. Dione had donned a fresh tunic that matched her black hair and violet eyes in a way that made her fairly glow. She, Cranston, Baldy, and Gor ate together. Dusk descended and by the time they had finished, Dione stifled a yawn.

"Sleep time for me," she said drowsily.

Cranston felt as tired, but wondered about his starship.

"Think we could get a night crew to work on those antennas? Perhaps leave early tomorrow?" he asked Baldy and Gor.

Gor's massive head cocked to one side. "Some coaxin' might hurry it on," he commented. Baldy's quick nod indicated agreement.

Cranston let out a long resigned sigh as visions of a deep, comfortable bed evaporated. "Dione, suppose you go back to the hotel yourself. We'll try and get that repair work speeded up. I'll be back later." His tone, while not warm was at least cordial.

"To tuck me in?" she replied impishly, trying to break the strain that

still existed between them. Baldy grinned. Gor's face wrinkled.

"To make sure you're all right," came Cranston's stiff reply. He turned to Gor and Baldy. "Smiling time's over," he said briskly. "Let's go."

It took longer than they thought to persuade a crew to work through the night, even though the repair job was simple enough. No welds were necessary; friction-sealed bolts would fasten the spare antennas to the hull. A promise of bonus money aided the decision.

Cranston returned to the hotel tired but eager to leave in the morning. Before entering his own room he knocked on Dione's door.

The hollow rap echoed throughout the room. He knocked again, louder this time, and then tried the door handle. It turned and the door inched open, a vertical line of darkness showing the length of its edge.

Cranston pushed it open and flipped on a light. He stood there surveying the scene. The room was a shambles. Chairs were overturned, clothes strewn about, bedsheets torn and scattered, pillows on the floor.

Cranston quickly rampaged through the room, knowing already what he'd find: nothing. Dione, of course, was gone.

CHAPTER 7

Within thirty seconds Cranston was in Gor and Baldy's room. "Someone's snatched her," he snapped. His eyes glowered, reflecting his murderous mood.

"Sit, Cap," Baldy said, noting that Cranston maintained his control by only a hair.

"Time for figuring now. Not running off in all directions," Gor added.

Cranston forced himself into a chair. The question of how the abductors knew they were on Raker, or who they were, he shoved aside as useless speculation. Right now, they had to get Dione.

And not only because she was part of the mission. Cranston's throat tightened as he thought of her either dead or disabled. Yes, the other reason was just as good: because he wanted her back.

"I'll check with the hotel's staff. Someone must have heard a rumpus, seen something," Baldy said. He left the room quickly.

"When they carted the lady out they got to be seen, Cap. City's too small. Too many spacers in town livin' it up. I'll round up the crew to help find her," Gor said, rising. Such a long statement was a measure of the man's concern.

Cranston rose too. Gor's idea of rounding up the *Draco II's* crew was a good one. With the men to help, chances of picking up scraps of information increased a hundredfold.

They met Baldy on the stairway. "No one saw a thing and all heard less," he reported glumly. "At least according to the hotel keeper. They don't want to become involved." Gor explained their plan. The trio hurried for Stetville's main street.

Draco II had a complement of twelve men, besides the three officers, each handpicked by Cranston and approved by Gor and Baldy. Two had remained aboard the starship as security. Ten were in the spaceport and each one found was another to help look for the rest. In fifteen minutes these had all been unearthed from various buildings, states, and positions.

It was the equivalent of midnight and the town was in full swing, obviously a fact that had helped obscure the abductors' movements. One thing was certain. Dione hadn't gone with them willingly. They had to carry her. And a large, body-sized package was certainly conspicuous.

In front of their hotel, Gor talked to the crew. "An' find yer mates from other ships, too. Ask 'em about some trouble by the Raker Hotel, an' a large package they might have been carrying. The package was a crewman," Gor caught himself at that, "a crewwoman. You've seen her. She was a member of the ship an' shanghaied at that. If we let it pass once, it'll be one of you mebbly next."

Cranston stood in admiration. Gor knew exactly what strings to pluck. The men roared as one, increasingly angry at one of their own being taken. They shared the age-old fear of being shanghaied that lives in the deep unconscious of all spacemen—of being forced to serve a captain they didn't choose. More than one of the men now listening to Gor had had it happen to him.

"Now spread out," Gor concluded, "an' bring yer findings to my room. Run now, men, be gone."

The crew dispersed quickly, some in pairs, some alone. Cranston, Baldy, and Gor had the hard part: waiting. For an officer to enter one of the dozens of bars, pleasure rooms, or bath houses serving spacers would bring instant embarrassment to all. Worse, they'd get little or no information.

"We'll wait, Cap. In the hotel. No sense wasting energy doing more," Baldy said gently.

Cranston suppressed his urge to keep moving. Baldy was right. Action without information was wasted effort. They returned to Baldy's and Gor's hotel room, where Cranston began the longest twenty minutes of his life.

After an eternity had passed a timid knock sounded on the door. Baldy wrenched it open. Two crewmen stood there, unsure of themselves and awkward in manner.

"Come in an' say yer piece," Gor barked out. They entered and nodded. Cranston knew them as engine maintenance men—Yates and Dressier. He nodded.

Yates spoke up. "Don't know if this'll be of use, Captain. But a mate of mine from the Tau Ceti docked here yesterday and was passing by the hotel. He said he saw three guys, not spacers probably, shoving something that looked like a thick rug all wrapped up into one of those there electrocabs that cost so much an—"

"The *details* man. We don't want to know every word ya've learned since childhood," Gor interrupted.

"Righto, lieutenant," Yates said. Dressier shifted his feet nervously. "Well, this here taxi took off with a package inside." Yates stopped.

"Is that *all*, man?" Gor fairly shouted. Yates shook his head. "Not much more, lieutenant. Only my friend from the Tau Ceti wanted a cab just then. It was sitting in back of the hotel. He was leaning against it, waiting for the driver." Yates paused to take a breath. Gor stifled his impatience and choked down his urge to roar at the crewman. Yates continued: "Then these guys comes out. Had a light trunk cover, the cab did, lighter than

the rest, so he said," Yates said almost as an afterthought.

"A light trunk cover," Baldy almost shouted, knowing that they now could trace the cab. Yates' voice droned on. He was a man who liked to tell a full story.

"An' my friend got in a good-sized argument, 'cause without a cab he was about to miss an event the crew'd planned at a pleasure house, an' miss it he did. He's looking for that cabbie and in a foul mood—"

"Thanks, Yates," Baldy interrupted, realizing that they had all the useful information he had to tell. The man nodded. "Round up the crew now. Whoever you can find. Get them in front of the hotel. We'll be there shortly."

Yates and Dressier—the latter not having said a word—left.

"An electrocab with a light-colored hood. Should be easy to find, Cap," Gor said. "An' the first place to ask is the hotel keeper downstairs."

"He wasn't helpful before," Baldy added wryly. "The town may make its money from spacers, but the people don't want to get involved."

"Do they not?" Gor purred. He stood, breathed in deeply and hunched his shoulders. "Be back briefly." He said it flatly, but when he opened the door the hinges creaked. They heard his regular, deliberate steps descending the staircase to the hotel keeper's quarters below.

A short while later a thin, warbling wail floated up to their room, a cry that contained overtones of pure terror. The wail rose again—weaker now—and petered out. Not long after, Gor's heavy footsteps plodded up the stairs. He entered the room.

"The cab with a light-colored hood belongs to one of the town's citizens, name of Wynn. He lives three kilometers from the town's edge. I have the directions." Cranston saw the cold, burning light of Gor's eyes and felt a flash of pity for the hotel keeper below.

"Let's go," Cranston barked out. "We'll take whoever of the crew is below."

The three stormed from the room, clattering down the stairs. At the

bottom, Cranston glanced through an open doorway. The hotel keeper sat upright in a chair, white-faced, staring ahead sightlessly. His hands trembled. Cranston and his men went outside.

Four crewmen, including Yates and Dressier, were waiting. More would be coming, but Cranston didn't want to waste a moment. One of the numerous electrocabs cruised by.

"Hold it," Baldy cried out. The cab skidded to a halt. The plump driver, his face gray with stubble and his greedy eyes set in a round face, estimated to a fraction just how much the group was worth.

"To the End Forest Road," Gor commanded as they began piling in.

"No go," the driver said curtly. It wasn't worth such a trip, he figured. He'd get five spacers in town during that time. Maybe, even, he could roll one if he was drunk enough. "Beat it, get another."

Gor stepped forward. A thick, hairy arm yanked open the cab door and grabbed the driver's collar. The driver arced out of his seat and Gor's clenched fist connected once with the jaw. The driver slumped.

"Drag him back where he won't be found." Baldy pointed to two crewmen. They were back in seconds and piled in. The cab sagged, bottomed once, and moved forward.

"Straight out the main road," Gor said. "Go right at a cluster of Totem trees, onto a dirt road." They drove through the town quarter nicknamed Spacerville. Bright, garish lights lit the road. Spacers milled about, bar doors swung open and shut. Loud laughs and sudden shouts filled the night and high-pitched giggles from the open windows of the pleasure rooms rounded out the noise.

The cab passed through in less than three minutes and the sudden silence was accompanied by an equally startling darkness. Within five minutes the electrocab's light illuminated several Totem trees beside a dirt road.

"Wonder how far up this road—" Cranston mused.

"Hotel keeper claimed it was a kilometer or little more," Gor answered, and Cranston marveled at how much information Gor had retrieved from

the man.

The cab bounded up the rutted road. Baldy flipped the headlights off. They could barely see the road's edges in the pale light from Raker's two small moons. Then, a pinpoint of light appeared through a screen of bushes and trees.

"Home," Gor muttered.

"Any closer, Cap, and they'd hear us, likely enough," Baldy added.

"Right," Cranston muttered. The cab stopped. They piled out and moved toward the light, darting ahead of one another, scouting the unknown territory. They found no guards. Whoever was inside the house certainly wasn't expecting company.

A hulking shape loomed ahead of them. "An electro-cab," Baldy whispered. Even in the faint light they could tell the hood was lighter. "Right house for sure."

Lights came from a wing on one side, a wing covered with clear duralloy. They crawled closer. Inside, barely illuminated by two light panels, was a huge arboretum, lush with massive plants that soared to its ceiling then dripped down like green waterfalls.

In a clear space, in the middle of the wing, was Dione, strapped to a table, motionless. Cranston counted five men hovering around her, viewing the scene with enforced calm, again squelching an urge to dive in and begin slugging: the amateur's way. Instead he stared at the scene and digested the layout of the plant-filled building, noting doors, windows and overall layout.

He pointed to Yates, Dressier, and another crewman. "That back door, on the side opposite. In five minutes crash through and charge," he whispered. The two men nodded, Yates rubbing his hands together, eyes gleaming in anticipation. Millennia of human civilization hadn't yet erased the pure pleasure some men found in a fight.

"Gor, think you and Baldy can ram through that side window?" Cranston asked, pointing to one end of the arboretum. Gor gave only a low, menacing growl in answer. "Five minutes then," Cranston said.

Meanwhile he and the remaining crewman, a surly but dependable kid named Foyle, crouched below a tall window. The men inside obviously expected no trouble, for the window was unlatched. Cranston checked his watch. Two minutes to go: one: fifteen seconds...

The tear of wood and crash of a falling door sounded. The three crewmen stormed through, ten seconds early. In the instant before Cranston sprung into action he saw the three fan out—as they should—and head for the table where Dione lay motionless. Even as he and Foyle dived through the window, Cranston saw one of the crewmen fall. From the corner of his eye he noticed the five men recover from their surprise and spring around.

Then he was inside, rolling, tumbling, rising, running—crouched low, on the alert for a lasegun or other weapon, heading for the table.

He saw another crewman fall and, goaded by the thought of his men being harmed, lunged toward one of the abductors. The man grabbed a hoe used in the arboretum and swung it at him. Cranston bent his knees and torso simultaneously, the heavy weapon shirring just above his head. Then, still moving and still low, he struck the man's belly with his elbow and heard the "whoosh" of expelled air. The man doubled and Cranston hit his neck with a hammer stroke. The man dropped as though poleaxed.

The scene had taken, perhaps, twelve seconds. Half way through Cranston had heard another crash and the enormous, strident bellow of Gor rushing to battle. The sound was meant to frighten and confuse. And it had. For a moment, two of the men had hesitated at the echoing roar that was more characteristic of a wounded animal than a human being.

From somewhere one of the abductors had fished out a lasegun. In response Cranston grabbed a potted plant by the stem, swung it underhand, and let go. The pot arced, the plant leaves whistling in the air, and struck the man's chest in an explosion of dirt, pot shards, and leaves. The lasegun cracked and a bright stab of light pierced the duralloy sheets above.

Before the man could fire again Gor grabbed his arm. A short screech of pain filled the room and Gor's heavy fist silenced any further sound with a monstrous blow to the chest. The man was lifted high. He soared through the room and crashed amidst a tangle of tables and plants.

The other three fought like savages. One had the misfortune to pull a knife on Baldy, whose fighting style was different from Gor's punch and pummel, being more like the dodge and strike of a cobra. The knife flashed upward. Baldy spun away, sidestepped gracefully, shoved the knife hand aside with one hand, ducked in and, with a force that might have punctured an elephant's hide, drove his elbow into the knifer's stomach. In a swift continuation of the same movement, Baldy stepped in, bent, and flipped the man high over his back.

Somehow the man's knife had become transferred to Baldy's hand. He whirled in a pirouette, crouched, feet apart, arms outspread, ready for further action.

None came. The room was suddenly silent. The remaining kidnappers, both large, beefy men, were pinioned by Foyle and the remaining crewman. Gor and Cranston rushed to Dione. She breathed heavily, in short snatches of breath, a strap around her neck almost cutting off her air. But at least she breathed.

Then Baldy was there, and his knife sliced through the straps. Cranston looked around. Two of his crew remained on the floor.

He sped over to them. They were among the first group to break in and Dressier was one of those now ominously still. Cranston bent and felt their pulse. Nothing. He turned them over. He noticed that each of their shirt-tunics was mottled with blood. He tore Dressier's open.

The man's chest was covered with a dozen tiny puncture marks, each swollen and inflamed. At the tip of the tiny caverns of each wound, blood oozed out. He was dead. So was the other.

A numbing daze hit Cranston, accompanied by an impulse to flee. He had seen those marks before. Recently... on Jason Clarke. And before, long before... Cranston's memory faded. He shook his head, trying to shake off an anesthetizing feeling, a blankness of mind.

He stood, recovered and turned to the two men held prisoner. At long last a tangible, concrete *something* to work with, a source of information. Until now he felt as though he had been fighting his own shadow.

With two dead crewmen on his conscience, Cranston was damned sure he'd learn why from those two. He walked slowly forward. The thick, tall

background of plants, murky and indistinct in the dim light, gave the chamber the appearance of a jungle.

The dim glow of a light panel illuminated the two prisoners, each staring straight ahead, sullen and resentful. Cranston came closer. From his vantage point, a few feet from the men, he was the only one who clearly saw what happened next.

As though they were one, the two men trembled. Then, in unison, their eyes rolled upward, filling their sockets with white. Their eyelids snapped shut. They slumped to the ground.

Cranston didn't have to walk another step to know with absolute certainty that the two were dead.

CHAPTER 8

The ion drive hummed. The hyperspace coils charged. The compute center of *Draco II* softly clicked. Lights blinked on a control panel. Cranston, Gor, and Baldy sat in the control room, silent and morose. They had buried the two crewmen and were now a day's ion drive from Raker.

"The girl's the key then," Baldy said, breaking a long pause. Ten minutes before, Cranston had called in the two for a council of war. He had told them all he knew. And their single most pertinent question was identical to his own.

How were they—whoever *they* were—getting their information?

Cranston didn't have a clue—except for whatever Dione knew.

To make things worse, he felt a pang of shame as he remembered that all he had for Commander Ulmstead—for all their efforts plus two dead crewmen—was one name. A name that Jason Clarke had laboriously scrawled out: Ohm. And, maybe not a name at that.

"If she's made a promise to Commander Ulmstead there must be a good reason," Baldy piped up.

"She'll be up and around today," Gor said solicitously, and Cranston marveled at the concern the two had come to feel for her. Dione

remembered only that several men had burst into her room, quickly injecting her with a potent drug. Only now were the last effects wearing off.

"I sure would like to find out how they knew we were on Raker," Gor said. "Them and their funny little scars." Cranston's head snapped up. "What's that Gor?" Gor elaborated. "Sure Cap. Those fellas in that greenhouse. Two of 'em we were holdin'. They had thick scars behind their ears. Thought it funny both had 'em." Gor studied Cranston for a minute, curious.

More information to digest: another piece of an already complicated puzzle. Scars? The two bank robbers that died after the robbery also had scars behind their ears.

Cranston gave up sorting out details. A talk with Commander Ulmstead seemed more imperative than ever. Ten minutes, Cranston promised himself. Ten minutes to learn about Jason Clarke's project—or quit this mission.

"Cap. *Cap*. Yates has something that 'pears important." Baldy was speaking to him. Cranston looked up. He hadn't heard his name called the first time. Baldy was looking at him, Yates at his side.

Cranston's gaze focused on Yates. "What is it?"

"That small rotational sensor antenna near the rear engine compartment," Yates blurted out. "Radioman was just saying goodbye to someone on Raker." Yates paused and flushed. Personal messages weren't supposed to be broadcast from a starship in flight. But Cranston knew as long as spacers had access to communications equipment the rule would be broken.

"So?"

Yates stammered. "Well, the rotational antenna wouldn't turn. I took a look on our remote TV scanner. There's a small package caught between the antenna and a supporting strut," Yates repeated.

"Let's take a look," Cranston replied, marching toward the remote TV scanner on the control panel. Whatever the package might be, Cranston knew it meant nothing good. Indent-mounted TV cameras dotted the

ship's hull at strategic points and were used to monitor malfunctions or extra vehicular excursions, EVE's.

He activated the TV circuits. The sensor antenna came into focus on the starship's telescreen. Cranston cut in the high powered lens. The image swelled. At the antenna's base, wedged between a strut, was a rectangular object that looked as harmless as a wrapped birthday present.

Cranston grew numb. He had no doubt what it was.

"Retrieval's necessary," Cranston snapped out. "Yates, how about your trying an EVE. Get that thing off and into space. That's an explosive limpet if I've ever seen one."

At that moment, Dione entered the control room, rested and recovered. Cranston quickly sketched in the details as Yates suited up. "We'll see him best from the bay ports," Cranston said as they walked up a short, circular staircase to a bay above the control room. A slight bulge of *Draco II's* hull made the bay. From its screens was a clear view of the entire top half of the ship.

They saw Yates exit from an air lock, a long umbilical safety line gently unfolding behind him. He floated toward the antenna, propelling himself with bursts from a compressed air gun. He reached the antenna brace and cut the package loose with a scissorslike tool. He lifted the package with one arm, about to fling it toward the stars.

A white and yellow explosion erupted from Yates' extended arm, instantly enveloping him and part of the ship in a mass of hot, expanding gases. A large shape hurtled toward the bay.

Dione screamed. "God," Cranston muttered. Baldy and Gor turned white. It was Yates—still alive, one of his arms missing. The stump spewed out blood that instantly froze into red ice. His mouth contorted wildly as he gasped for air. His face blackened and slowly ceased its wild, agonized contortions. Then, Yates drifted from the window, a lifeless hulk that would forever haunt interstellar space.

Alarm bells pealed and airtight doors slammed shut, sealing off sections of the ship. Emergency oxygen supplies opened and the gas hissed into all areas until the pressure became normal.

Cranston scrambled for the control room, Baldy and Gor at his heels. Red lights flickered on the large control console. "Two sections depressurized," Gor growled out. "They got us good this time."

Baldy checked other signals. "Everything's sealed up, Cap. Could be worse. No air leaking out. But communications are a mess." Baldy made some quick tests. "That explosion cut through our internal communications cables," he explained. "No way of getting to the rest of the crew for now."

Well, they *could* all have been dead now, Cranston thought, as the vision of Yates came to mind. The force of a conventional explosive had rapidly dissipated in airless space. Yates had taken the package just far enough away from the hull to prevent a complete disaster.

"Keith, perhaps you should have a look at this." Dione's voice came from the bay compartment above.

With the present emergency Cranston had precious little time to pay attention to idle sights. "Is it necessary?" he growled out, more harshly than he intended, remembering that Dione's information might have prevented this—and the other—attacks.

"You be the judge of that," she answered frostily.

"I'll take a look, Cap," Baldy said. In the bay, Dione pointed out a small screen in one of the lower ports.

"Right outside and to the left, Baldy. What do you see?"

Baldy looked. A small silvery package, a little bigger than the one Yates had taken from the antenna strut, was fastened to the hull.

"Cap, got problems up here. Big ones," Baldy yelled out.

From below, Cranston's exasperated voice boomed out. "What?"

"Looks like they zapped us with another limpet bomb," Baldy shouted. "An' this one'll take away the bay hull along with some of the ports. The whole control room will go."

Cranston sped to the bay, Gor close behind. He looked out and glanced

at Dione. He didn't need to apologize for his harshness; his face said it for him.

She swallowed. "I didn't see why they'd only put one on the ship. So I looked around. I saw that package."

"Sure an' you did well, girl," Gor said firmly. "They double decked us, Cap. The first was to take our attention. They aimed the second to finish us off."

Cranston's hand cut through the air. "Gor, Baldy. Any idea of how we get it off. The ship's sealed. Every airtight compartment is shut. It'll take fifteen minutes or more to open them with our communications blown. *How do we get to that bomb?*"

"Cap, just below the control cabin there's an old work and tool compartment. It has a bolted hatch in the hull. Used to haul in the old-time oxygen bottles. It leads to just below that bomb," Gor growled.

"Let's go," Cranston said. As if by agreement no one asked when the second limpet would explode. If it was one minute or ten it would make no difference. In either case they had to try to rid the starship's hull of that package.

The three men scrambled down the narrow stairway into a corridor, Dione close behind. No more than five meters ahead a giant door sealed off the hallway, a reminder that no help would be forthcoming from the crew. Gor pulled at an airtight door in the corridor, the one leading to the rarely used compartment.

It was long and narrow, cluttered with spare parts, used oxygen bottles, cables, rope, tools, spare space suits, and a dozen other miscellaneous materials.

"Here Cap," Gor said, pointing. A round hatch not more than half a meter in diameter was bolted to the main hull. "But it's smaller than I remember. None of us can get through in our space suits."

Cranston's fist banged against the hull in frustration. A hand-width away was the vacuum of space, seemingly un-accessible.

"I can." The three turned and faced Dione. Baldy looked at her size.

"She's right, Cap. We've got small suits that'll fit her. She just might get through that hatch."

Cranston had no choice and spent little time on mental debate. The alternative to not letting Dione try was certain death for everyone. "Start unbolting that hatch. We'll all suit up and work from here." Then, with a second thought, he turned to Baldy. "Watch from the bay compartment. Use a suit radio for communications."

Gor grunted and tugged at the eight hatch bolts with a long wrench from the compartment. Baldy and Cranston helped Dione into the smallest of the spare space suits, Baldy giving Dione a running commentary on space walking.

"Keep looking at the ship. Otherwise you'll get disorientated and panic. When you cut that package free with this," Baldy thrust a cutting tool into the belt of Dione's suit as he talked, "hold on to something with one hand. Otherwise you'll float away. We'll be helping you over the suits' communicators."

"Ready, Cap," came Gor's terse comment. "All loose but still holding." Baldy left for the bay, dogging the compartment's airtight door behind him. Gor and Cranston scrambled into their space suits and turned on their radio communicators. Their voices sounded hollow.

"Open the hatch," Cranston said. Gor unscrewed the eight bolts he'd previously loosened, the room's air pressure pressing the hatch in place. Gor opened a petcock and the air in the compartment leaked into space. Air pressure disappeared and the small, circular hatch cover dropped free. Gor eased it to the floor.

The open port was filled with black velvet sprinkled with stars. Cranston wrapped a thin plastic-strand rope around Dione's waist and tied a firm knot in it. Their eyes met through their helmets. Cranston gave a thumbs up sign and helped her through the hatch.

Her helmet and shoulders barely fit. Cranston shoved and Dione popped through and floated in the space outside.

"See the bay port?" Cranston asked.

"Yes," came the high-pitched reply. Even the radio's distortion didn't

camouflage the nervous edge to Dione's voice. "I see Baldy in the window. Just waved to him."

Cranston gritted his teeth in frustration. "This isn't tea time," he muttered to himself.

"It's easier than I expected. There are hand holds along this side of the ship," Dione said, her voice steadier.

"Just a bit farther," Baldy's voice coaxed. "You're just below that limpet." Cranston played out the rope.

"I've reached it," Dione called out. The sharp rasp of her breathing became faster. "Starting to cut through what looks like wire. Holding on to one of those handholds," she grunted out.

Gor, crouching beside Cranston, said nothing. His face, viewed through the helmet, was a wrinkled mass of intense concern.

"Cut free," Dione panted.

"Heave it from the ship. Quickly," Cranston shouted.

"Make it fast," Baldy added.

"It's caught in my suit. Some of the wire... hooked into the belt." The belabored breathing of Dione hissed over the radio. There was a grunt as she wrenched the limpet free of her belt. "There, got it undone," she said.

"Heave it. Fast an' far," Gor shouted.

"Throwing it now," Dione answered. The three heard the gasp of effort as she jettisoned the package.

A moment later Cranston saw a second flash of white and orange light. It momentarily lit up the black hatchway like an orange sunset on Earth. A shout from Baldy pierced their ears.

The plastic rope jerked from Cranston's hands. The coil at his feet dwindled rapidly as the rope snaked through the open hatchway—Dione tied to its other end.

The last bit of rope uncoiled and whipped toward the black hatch hole

leading to deep space.

CHAPTER 9

Gor acted first.

He pounced on the rope's end with the speed of a panther and braced himself. He was yanked against the hatch like an oversized stopper plugging a drain. Dione—a hundred meters from the starship—jerked to a halt and rebounded like a rubber ball on a string, tumbling aimlessly in space.

A second later, Cranston was hauling on the rope while Gor—the wind knocked from him—slumped against a bulkhead. A high-pitched sound hissed from their suit communicators like a far-away waterfall.

"Air leak," Gor bayed with the atavistic fear every spacer felt towards sudden decompression. Somewhere, they knew, Dione's suit was torn by the explosion, the hiss of rushing air picked up by her suit communicator. The suit's oxygen valve opened automatically at a pressure loss. But her supply could only last minutes at its present escape rate.

The rope whipped on the room's floor in tangled coils as Cranston hauled and when Dione neared the open hatchway she seemed like a lifeless marionette held to the ship by a string. Cranston maneuvered her helmet through the port while Gor moved clumsily to his side. In one mighty heave they pulled her inside the ship.

The plastic-impregnated fabric of one leg was rent and Cranston's gloved hands circled the tear and squeezed. The hissing slowed. Gor needed no command to fit the hatch cover in place. "The door, Baldy. We need pressure," Cranston grunted. He felt Dione's leg move and experienced an indescribable relief.

A blast of incoming air almost bowled Cranston over as Baldy swung open the door. Seconds later Dione's helmet was off. She breathed in narrow, shallow gasps, and almost immediately her face regained color. They desuited.

Gor fitted and tightened the hatch cover's bolts. Cranston gently carried Dione to the control room. She would come no closer to death and

miss than in the last few minutes.

* * *

Dione had a long but shallow shrapnel gash in her right calf. She rested in the control room, her lower leg white with bandages from the med kit. As for other damage from the last explosion—there was none. Extraordinary luck. But how long could they live on luck? Cranston asked himself bitterly.

"Old-time explosives," Gor muttered, watching Baldy testing switch after switch on the control console, trying to gauge the mayhem of the first explosion. They all knew that outpost planets, such as Raker, used conventional explosives to cut through rock, build water cofferdams, blast out foundations, and a dozen other jobs. They were, in specialized cases, cheaper and more effective than laserblasts. Practically anyone in the Raker spaceport repair crew could have sabotaged the ship.

The click of switches stopped and Baldy looked up from his console. "Half an hour to patch communications through the ship, Cap," he reported. "But we're still alive and that's something." None of the airtight doors would be opened before damage was known: a rigid law of space when air leaks were a danger.

Cranston saw Dione bite on a lower lip, obviously from pain. He got analgesic pills. "Thanks," he said softly as she swallowed. It seemed a curiously inadequate expression of gratitude for saving their lives and preventing his starship from becoming one more lifeless wreck in space. But he could think of none better.

Within the hour, communications were active, the damage assessed, and most airtight doors opened. The first explosion had left the vital hyperspace coils and power supply unharmed. But it had pierced a hull section over some of the crew's quarters. One crewman had been inside. He was dead—a combination of sudden decompression and asphyxiation.

They buried him in flight, sending his corpse into deep space through an air lock. It was the second such service Cranston had presided over in the last two days and it left him fuming.

Commander Ulmstead—he was the key. Until he revealed Jason Clarke's project, Cranston knew he hadn't a chance in hell of getting a handle on

this mission, what was left of it. So far he felt he'd been fighting from inside a rubber sack. He could take no initiatives, make no sallies, cause no discomfort to a seeming swarm of enemies with impeccable information sources. Worse, besides not knowing who they were, he hadn't the slightest idea of what they were after.

Impossible. Cranston had never felt so impotent.

From the funeral service he stalked to the control room of *Draco II* and ordered the hyperspace coils charged to the maximum rate. His, and everyone else's time, was filled with the bone-wearying task of rechecking all the starship's systems and doubling for the lost crewmen. Cranston worked, ate, slept, and worried. Until he spoke to Ulmstead he had inclination for little else.

They hyperspaced to Earth and Baldy's superb navigation served them well. They were a mere two days ion drive from their mother planet. Cranston contacted Ulmstead in the code they'd established and got a priority landing slot in return. He'd deliver the scanty information found at the outpost in person. He didn't give his usual grin at the flagrantly imaginative and equally unprintable comments the other orbit hoppers made as he leap-frogged the landing sequence and docked at the New York Citiplex spaceport.

Cranston spent an hour on exasperating but necessary details. He arranged repair for the ripped hull, standard dock maintenance, and crew leave. Baldy stayed with the ship. Cranston paused when it came to Dione, then opted for her staying at a Citiplex hospital. The leg wound itself would justify a short visit. But, with the Raker abduction fresh in his mind, he took no chances. Booking her into a hospital under an assumed name would provide a fair hiding place. Add Gor as a bodyguard and there could be none better under the circumstances. Gor took fifteen minutes to arrange the details. With barely a word to anyone, Cranston boarded a taxi for Spacefleet Headquarters.

* * *

Ulmstead was waiting. Despite his own fury, Cranston was frankly shocked at the man's transformation. The commander's eyes had sunk deep into their sockets. The skin beneath them was dark and puffy. He looked more haggard than Cranston ever remembered. Obviously, Ulmstead had quite a bit on his mind.

"The mission, Cranston. Did you find anything at the outpost?" the commander asked without preamble. It was a measure of the man's concern that he skipped even cursory greetings. But his azure eyes bored into Cranston; whatever his physical state, his mental condition was as keen as ever.

Cranston found himself relating the highlights of the mission—the anonymous attack in space, the ruin of the outpost, the kidnapping on Raker, the sabotage of *Draco II*. His voice gained an edge of bitterness as he continued the ugly litany of events. "Dione's safe now. And my starship's serviceable," he concluded, without mentioning just where Dione was. A security leak existed somewhere, and he wasn't about to take further chances with her safety. Cranston had hedged when it came to the name Jason Clarke had scrawled on the floor. He'd get to the fine details later.

"It's been something of a suicide mission, Commander. Men are dead because of information I don't have. Information about what Clarke was doing. I should know what his project was."

The words came out as a flat demand.

Ulmstead rubbed his underlip. "Since your departure a cargo and a passenger starship have disappeared. So far we've managed to keep this quiet and avoid panic," he said as though he had chosen to ignore Cranston's words.

Ulmstead sat back in his chair and continued. "In addition, the very puzzling phenomenon of bank robberies has increased; again only low denomination bills are taken."

Cranston fidgeted but Ulmstead continued before he could interrupt.

"Add to this an unexpected but powerful lobby by prominent Earth Federation officials *against* our Galactic settlement program—a lobby that borders on civil rebellion." Cranston snapped alert despite his own concerns. Galactic settlement was a vital function that siphoned off the aggression the Earth Federation states once used against each other. That was *one* reason for its importance.

Ulmstead concluded, "Now we find several attempts to thwart your mission by an anonymous force, one singularly well-informed. One that

has a network of agents that extends even to settlement planets." Ulmstead hadn't missed the significance of the highly placed security leak.

"Does all of this suggest something to you, Captain Cranston?"

The question caught Cranston by surprise. He shook his head warily, forgetting his own demands, wondering what was coming. Ulmstead's eyes fairly glittered as he answered his own question.

"Singly, any of these events might be unusual but understandable. Considered together they are an extraordinary coincidence. And I don't believe in that kind of coincidence." Ulmstead leaned forward, hands on his desk, a gesture that emphasized his next words. "I have a hunch, *feeling* these... disturbances are related."

Ulmstead had Cranston's full attention. He sat back in his chair. "The Earth Federation is now under siege. By parties unknown. There is a common denominator linking these recent events. I *know* it." The last words were punctuated by a slap of Ulmstead's hand on his desk.

A dozen questions leaped to Cranston's mind. Siege? By whom? For what reason?

"Jason Clarke's project was a threat to the same people who tried to stop you. I'd like to know what you found—it might be vital."

Cranston's chest tightened. The commander had spotted his hesitation when describing the outpost. Then, he remembered the dead crewmen he'd buried. The picture of a marionette dangling in space by a thread came to mind.

"What was Jason Clarke's project?" Cranston demanded, fire in his eyes. He was damned if men would die without his knowing why. And he had something to trade for the information. He'd wrench the answer from Ulmstead one way or the other.

There was no wrenching involved. "Perhaps you should have known from the start. But it seemed premature. I hadn't realized the... scope of events at that time," Ulmstead replied with a note of contrition in his voice. "*But first, what did you find at the outpost?*"

Fair enough, Cranston thought, yielding to Ulmstead's plea. Tit for tat.

"Jason Clarke wrote out a word, or a name, before he died: Ohm. That's all we found."

Whatever Cranston had anticipated it didn't match Ulmstead's extraordinary reaction. The man turned pale. His mouth opened, then closed as though speech had been overpowered by emotion.

Ulmstead suddenly stood. He breathed in deeply. "You may have stumbled over the common denominator, Cranston," he muttered. "If so we have little time left... if any." Ulmstead's voice was a bare whisper. His right hand trembled.

The commander's back straightened. "Cranston. I have some facts to check. Files to find. Some trusted colleagues to talk to." He glanced at his chronometer. "Can you return with Dione in two hours? Bring your lieutenants if you wish." Ulmstead's entire demeanor was of a man harassed by sudden, overwhelming events.

"Jason Clarke's mission, Commander." Despite his surprise at Ulmstead's reactions, Cranston was firm.

Ulmstead's hand waved him to silence. "Cranston. Right now I suspect we can measure the Earth Federation's existence in hours and days. Even minutes count now." The man's voice held a desperation that Cranston had never heard. "A full explanation would consume vital time. A sketchy outline would tell you little." Half apologetically he added, "Dione has my consent to explain every aspect of the project."

As he spoke, Ulmstead led Cranston to the door. "Two hours? It's important." The request was half question, half plea. Cranston was too amazed at the tornado of emotions a simple word had provoked in Commander Ulmstead to balk. He nodded. The door closed.

Then he remembered again: Three dead crewmen, a marionette tumbling, attempted murder in deep space.

A helpless fury gripped him and he stormed past Ulmstead's ever-present secretary, her head bent at some task on her desk. Jason Clarke's project was still a mystery to him. Add to that Ulmstead's violent reaction over a name. And, from the commander's manner, he knew too well that a return from the outpost wasn't necessarily a conclusion to the mission.

He knew as little about more than ever before.

Cranston strode to the hospital in heel-jolting strides. A cruising aircushion taxi slowed, then speeded up as Cranston waved him off. He needed to walk—some physical action to work off his anger.

Night had descended on the Citiplex, and in this area only a few late workers now scurried to their dwellings. The click of his footsteps echoed from near deserted streets as his meeting with Ulmstead whirled through his mind.

He had little thought for anything else. Otherwise Cranston's senses might have told him of the shadowed movements across the street, silent and swift, that stalked him intently as yet a third shape flitted not far behind.

CHAPTER 10

Cranston's subconscious registered danger and wrenched his thoughts from his meeting with Ulmstead. His stride remained steady. But his mind, now sharply alert, evaluated the signals all around him.

A flicker of a shadow at his extreme right told Cranston that at least one person was behind him. Logically, at least another was there to fit out a team. And, probably, he could count on three.

Cranston smiled grimly. In his present mood he almost welcomed a fight. But next time, he warned himself, he'd better crank in more lead time. As it was they were beginning to close in. He mentally cursed his lack of foresight in not carrying a weapon. He never had in a Citiplex. The habit of leaving his lasegun aboard his starship had become a ritual. That was going to change.

He spotted a stairway, marked by a green light, inside the arcade of a building: an entrance to the Citiplex's underground tubeway. A strategy came to mind.

On the street, in the open, he could easily be encircled. But in a tunnel or narrow passageway, his attackers would be more constrained.

Cranston darted for the stairway and descended into a long, narrow

vestibule, obviously given heavy use during the- working day but now empty. A row of entranceways—open for the crowds—was now barred shut. A single stallway at the end of the vestibule gave the only access to the tubeway platform a flight below. The entrance resembled an air lock and fit one person at a time.

Cranston moved into the boxlike stallway, jabbed his ideticard into a slot, and pushed. The entrance revolved and he was inside. A computer would automatically bill the charge to his credit account. He hoped he'd be alive to pay it.

A string of light panels dimly lit the narrow passageway ahead. A few steps away another stairway led down to the tubeway platform. He listened and heard the scuffle of steps on the stairs. They'd reach the stairway in a moment. Cranston quickly undid a thick belt circling his waist and wrapped one end around his hand. The heavy buckle hung free. If he didn't have a weapon, he'd improvise.

Darkness would be an ally. Cranston moved toward the light panels. The belt whirred and the buckle hit the panels in quick succession. The plastic covering of each cracked. Circuits broke and the electrofluorescent panels dimmed and died. Only the faint light through the now-barred entranceway cut the gloom.

He flattened himself against a wall, a step from the stairway, belt in hand. A murmured conversation, the low tones felt as much as heard, and the scratch of an ideticard in a slot reached his ears. He tensed.

The stairway spun and a man exited swiftly, ducking as he moved. Cranston swung, aiming for the man's face, correcting his swing at the last second. As it was the heavy buckle connected with a forehead. The man bellowed with pain, flinging his hands to his face. Cranston stepped in and kicked. With a grunt the man doubled over and collapsed.

Cranston searched for a lasegun. There was none; they took no chances. The first one in was unarmed to avoid just such an eventuality. The stallway creaked again and Cranston knew that without hearing from the first they'd come out shooting.

He dashed for the stairs as another came through the stallway. The man aimed at Cranston's dim figure, firing as he tripped over his fallen partner. The brilliant lasecharge seared past Cranston's shoulder and

smacked into a wall with a hiss. Even as he darted down the stairs Cranston noted that they hadn't fired when on the streets. Their caution indicated they had no desire to attract attention.

The tubeway station Cranston had entered was actually a spur of a main line. At this time of evening, a shuttle car passed every half hour to pick up stray passengers along the route. Now, the platform was deserted. Even so, it was well lit and deadly. Only one direction offered safety.

Cranston leaped to the monorail track bed and dashed into the tunnel, his eyes half closed to preserve his night vision. That would give him an extra minute or two headway—he doubted if they'd think of the same trick. Another bright flash spiked to his left and dissolved part of a post. A snap shot. They were becoming desperate.

Cranston paused in the tunnel's darkness. He could probably outrun them to the next tubeway platform. But what advantage was that? They would follow. And the longer they remained behind the greater the risk of his being cauterized by a lasecharge.

As his eyes adjusted to the tunnel's gloom, he looked around for any situation he could use to his advantage. Only a series of widely spaced, weak light panel's broke the absolute darkness. Ahead and to his left he saw a dim blue light marking a doorway. He entered, closed the door behind him and flipped on a wall switch. The light panel was encrusted with years of grime and gave off but a dim glow. He was in a storeroom, obviously rarely used, and filled with half a century of miscellany.

For a brief moment he considered barricading himself in the room, then remembered the laseguns. They could blast through the door easily. He glanced around and saw a short length of steel monorail and other items. Monorail... the length of heavy metal sparked an idea.

Cranston switched off the light, opened the door a quarter of the way, and went to work. His muscles strained and sweat poured from his face and body. By now, he knew, the two remaining attackers must be threading their way through the tunnel, their own vision steadily adapting to the dim light.

With a last, silent effort Cranston was finished. He carefully crawled from the room, then walked in a stoop up the tunnel, a tunic pocket bulging with a heavy metal spike, the kind used to hold the tubeway

monorail in place.

He slid behind a supporting beam and waited, forcing himself to breathe in quiet, shallow breaths. He felt sure the pair would notice the doorway he'd just left. In fact everything depended on it. Yet a nervous prickling raced up his spine. If they *had* missed it one might now be circling behind him...

The blue light over the storeroom went out and Cranston paid silent tribute to the attacker's stealth. He hadn't heard a thing. They had to check the room now. Cranston wondered how they'd do it. Perhaps one would crawl through the open door while the other waited to rush into the room. He waited, breathing momentarily suspended.

The tunnel became alive with the bedlam of crashing metal mixed with one, pain-filled howl. Cranston had improvised a deadfall—the length of monorail perched from the lip of the door frame to a hairsbreadth over the open door top. He had balanced a heavy bucket of rusty bolts, sharp spikes, and an assortment of metal tools on the monorail. The slightest nudge against the door would bring it crashing down. A slight nudge *had* brought it crashing down.

Another low groan echoed through the tunnel. One more to go, Cranston thought, relishing the moment but doubling his caution. The last would be more alert than ever.

Almost ten minutes passed, Cranston's senses straining for any break in the pattern of darkness or silence. Then, he heard the faint rasp of breathing, the strange acoustics of the curved tunnel magnifying the sound tenfold. He froze, trying to locate the sound's direction. He turned his head slowly to avoid the sudden movement the human eye so easily detects.

Cranston spotted a bulking outline of the man, no more than five meters away. He had got there without Cranston's knowledge. A dangerous enemy indeed. And, he was armed. It would be only minutes before the slow, steady sweep of the man's vision picked Cranston out from the near black of the tunnel.

Cranston gently eased the spike from his tunic pocket. Years before, when he had been a fledgling officer, his starship had been temporarily stranded on a sparsely settled planet called Arcturus. He had noticed a

group of crewmen throwing knives into huge-stalked trees that skirted the landing area. An ancient art popular with many spacers.

He had asked a grizzled old veteran—one of the best—how it was done. The white-haired engine hand had explained: "Keep yer elbow bent and yer arm stiff. An' open yer hand without bending the wrist. That's the secret, laddie," the crewman had said, protocol between officer and crew temporarily suspended.

Cranston had practised hours each day, absorbed in the simple geometry of it. And, at the end of two Earth weeks, while spare parts arrived, he had become as good as the best.

Now, those weeks of practise proved their worth. Cranston hadn't thrown a knife in over a year. Yet the movements returned to him instinctively. He grasped the spike firmly in his hand. He raised his arm.

The shape in front of him stiffened, then began to turn. Some noise, perhaps the rustle of his tunic, had reached the attacker's attention.

Cranston's hand was behind his head, the muscles of arm and shoulder stretched to their fullest. His arm snapped down ("keep yer elbow bent an' arm stiff...") in a blur of motion. He released the spike, his thumb relaxing first then the other fingers, his wrist straight ("an' open yer hand without bending the wrist. That's the secret, laddie").

The spike whirred forward.

Cranston heard a gurgle followed by the crack of a lasegun. The intense beam of light passed within a hand width of his waist. The man staggered, hands clawing at his throat, then tumbled to the ground like a heap of rags.

Cranston had aimed for the man's chest. The spike had caught him in the neck, its point entering one side and just emerging from the other. Not a bad throw for a year without practise. Cranston remembered the grizzled old engine hand and wished him well, wherever he might be at the moment.

He didn't bother searching them. Whoever had been arranging the attacks had a history of deadly efficiency. Their ideticards would be stolen or forged. He glanced at his chronometer. An hour had passed since he

had left Commander Ulmstead's office. One more to get Dione, Baldy, and Gor and return to Spacefleet Headquarters.

Cranston sheathed the fallen foe's lasegun in his waist. The first of the attackers might have recovered, so he avoided the entrance he had first descended and trotted instead to the next tubeway station at a quick, distance-eating pace. Even now the man might be waiting by himself—or with reinforcements. Their communication seemed as impeccable as their information.

Again he'd been set up. They must have known he would be at Commander Ulmstead's office and picked him up when he'd left. Instant assassination. But how and why? Who told them? The questions spun in his head like a gyrocompass gone mad.

He reached the station and exited from the underground tubeway, sticky with dried perspiration, dirty from crawling in the storeroom, and seething at being no closer to answers now than at the mission's start.

Again he headed for the hospital, armed and careful. He reached it in a half hour's walk, found a side entrance, and slipped in as he heard a faint, powerful rumble. Cranston headed for a service elevator, too irritated to wonder what might cause such a concussion.

If he had been outside just then he would have seen a red glow flash quickly in the sky and slowly fade, followed shortly later by another long, slow boom, like thunder from an approaching storm.

CHAPTER 11

Cranston eased open the doorknob to Dione's room and slid through. He was one step in when a sinewy arm wrapped around his throat, a knee bent him backward, and the sharp point of a long, thin knife pricked at his kidney.

"Gor," he gasped out, remembering that they hadn't arranged a recognition signal. Well, you can't think of everything.

"Cap, had no idea it was you," Gor said, releasing his hold. Cranston flipped on a light. No need for apologies. Gor was doing his job—and doing it well. His eyes widened as he saw Cranston's clothes. "It's more

trouble ya had, for sure."

"Explanations later," Cranston said, looking at Dione. She slept peacefully, her hair fanning over the pillow like black moss. He shook her gently, and she awoke with the languorous ease of a kitten. "Commander Ulmstead wants to see us," he said. She rose, starting at the sight of his clothes and began to speak. "Later. Get dressed now."

It took only minutes for Dione to dress and Cranston to wash off most of the grime. She walked with a limp—fourteen sutures had closed the wound in her calf. But, happily, the muscle tissue had barely been scratched.

They left, unseen, by the service elevator, avoiding questions from the hospital staff. As they drove off in a car Gor had appropriated, Cranston filled in details of his conversation with Commander Ulmstead and the events in the tubeway in terse sentences. Gor muttered unintelligible imprecations under his breath. Dione clasped her hand in his, a move that was more tender than sensual.

Only once was his narrative interrupted, when they saw a sudden glow on the horizon followed seconds later by a low rumbling sound. "Storms?" Dione said, looking at the clear night sky through the vehicle's rooftop window. Then, again, they were swept up in Cranston's story.

Gor dropped them at the Spacefleet Headquarters, parked the car several squares away, and rejoined them in the building's lobby. It was bustling with as many uniformed personnel milling around as during the day, most looking as though they'd just been roused from bed. Cranston gave his name to the security guards and they were waved upstairs after a hurried voiceprint ideticheck. There was no doubt Ulmstead was in a hurry to see them.

For the first time in Cranston's memory Ulmstead had his jacket off. His face was shiny with a sheen of perspiration and a stubble of white beard covered his face. His collar was damp and limp. The shadows under his eyes were darker than before.

He gave a cursory nod to Dione and then to Gor, whom he'd met on previous missions. If he noticed Dione's limp he didn't say so. "Sit," he commanded, waving to some chairs. He arranged a stack of file folders on his desk before looking up.

"I'll be brief. I believe I've found a candidate for our common denominator. One that is responsible for a good deal of my grief, but also for the several... inconveniences you've experienced."

Inconveniences! They'd damned near been killed twice over, Cranston thought. And Ulmstead didn't even *know* of the latest... inconvenience.

Commander Ulmstead's voice was steady, but strained with fatigue. "Gaspard Ohm, a man long familiar to me... But some background first." Dione's forehead creased. Somewhere she had heard that name.

Gaspard Ohm was a genius who at the age of thirteen was an accomplished astronomer, Ulmstead explained, a hint of awe in his voice. By fifteen he had added physics and biochemistry to his store of knowledge, gaining advanced degrees in all three specialties. By twenty he had formulated a new theory of tachyon behavior that was responsible for a major improvement to the hyperspace drive. Thanks to Gaspard Ohm's brilliance, it now took only days instead of weeks to charge hyperspace coils.

Ulmstead gave them a moment to digest Ohm's accomplishments, then went on. Ohm's genius, however, rankled for he was as impatient with ineptitude as he was brilliant. While on the faculty of a major Earth Federation University he quarreled with colleagues over the direction of hyperspace research and publicly proclaimed them a pack of aging goats—the equivalent of starting a barfight at a society ball. Five years after maneuvering Ohm's discharge, his colleagues discovered he was right.

"The Intelligence Division had a file on him by this time. Routine for scientists important to our Galactic settlement program," Ulmstead said. "Ohm then entered industry and developed improvements for laseray transmission, discovered a new version of the gravity generator and other technological advances."

Ulmstead pulled over a file, scanned it, and continued. "When Ohm was twenty-six he became attracted to a young woman, the daughter of an industrialist bidding on patent rights to the gravity generator. The industrialist got the rights. But Ohm didn't get the girl. The loss seems to have permanently affected his attitude. Hopeless, really, to think of it..."

Cranston frowned but before he could frame a question Ulmstead filled

in. "Ohm has a hormone disease called acromegaly. Growth of some bones continues, those of face and legs for example. Others remain the same size. The result is something of a freak. Ohm had always felt... apart from others and his loss of the girl, really a doublecross, deepened his alienation from humanity."

Ulmstead actually sighed. "Ohm disappeared, embittered and disillusioned twenty-five years ago. He settled in self-appointed isolation on a deserted planet he named Greensward. It's in a section of the Nether Quadrant that's scarcely yet been explored."

"The same area as the outpost," Gor exclaimed. To a spacer, the same "area" was anywhere within fifty light-years.

Ulmstead pointed to the stack of folders. "It's taken most of two hours to trace all of this, done mostly through credit transactions and equipment purchases Ohm made through agents on Earth. I also found that in the last ten years his research has centered on botany, specifically plant physiology. This interest is uncomfortably close to that of Jason Clarke's and it might explain all our troubles. Including the latest."

"Latest?" Cranston asked, wondering what other troubles they could possibly have. He realized, then, that Ulmstead was leading to something. From the commander's viewpoint, their mission was far from finished.

Ulmstead avoided a direct answer. "A man of Ohm's brilliance and instability wouldn't be content with self-appointed banishment," Ulmstead said. "Add his genius and misanthropy and you have a clear and present threat, one that has now surfaced.

"For the last hour the Earth Federation has been in the midst of an insurrection," Ulmstead pronounced solemnly. "The siege I mentioned to Captain Cranston seems to be underway."

They were too stunned to reply. The Earth Federation government—an alliance of what were once independent countries—had worked smoothly for over a century-and-a-half. Galactic settlement was a keystone of its policy. Except for some local skirmishes, war had been abolished. Earth's population was held steady and, while wealth was still unevenly distributed, at least no one starved to death. Changing policy now would mean chaos.

"The insurrection is highly organized and several major Citiplexes have capitulated, an obviously pre-arranged surrender. An attack was mounted on our own Citiplex, but that's being repulsed successfully," Ulmstead said. The meaning of the light flashes and the bustle of the headquarters lobby became clear.

Ulmstead went on with the dreary litany. "Several member states have pledged allegiance and many prominent figures support their aims, which includes cessation of galactic exploration. A counter government has already been formed. The Earth Federation, then, is in turmoil, though so far it appears a near bloodless fight," Ulmstead added with a note of gratitude.

"You had no hint?" Cranston asked. "None. Unless you'd call a feeling that trouble was near a hint," Ulmstead admitted. "It's not only highly organized, with a hard-core cadre ready to assume command, but it has superb communications. That's why I suspect Ohm—"

"But he's a hundred an' fifty light-years from Earth, Commander," Gor said incredulously. "At least if he's on Greensward. How could a mortal man organize a mutiny from that far away. He couldn't keep in touch."

"Not by ordinary methods. But I'm certain that Ohm has developed other means. It's one coincidence I'll accept," and Ulmstead glanced at Cranston, "that Jason Clarke was also working in the same area." He glanced at Dione, as though she could offer confirmation.

"My father knew him," she replied, suddenly placing Ohm's name. "They once worked together, decades ago. He said that Ohm was the most brilliant scientist he'd ever known."

Ulmstead looked surprised. "I hadn't known that fact. Give the devil his due. Ohm is more than mere genius," he muttered. "How he got so many prominent officials to reverse their Galactic policy without any one suspecting is astounding. But the fact is, Ohm is probably in constant touch with every one of them."

"But he'd have to have made advances my father hadn't even dreamed of... it would be operational," Dione's voice faltered in confusion.

Cranston flushed. Again, Jason Clarke's project had popped up. "*What* would be operational," he demanded angrily.

Ulmstead blamed Cranston neither for his anger nor for his insistence. But there simply wasn't time to explain. Not now. He still had another hurdle to cover. "Dione will explain once you're aboard your starship—"

"Aboard? We got a tear in a hull section that's under repair," Gor said accusingly. "An' where would we be going with such damage?"

"To Greensward, Gor." Cranston looked at Commander Ulmstead. "Correct?" Ulmstead nodded, his eyes half closing, then opening again.

"Why not send in a bloody warship and take the bastard?" Gor shouted, worried now about a hyperspace leap in *Draco II*. "If you can't take him, blast his planet to a cinder."

Ulmstead's color became a shade whiter. "Ohm's discovery must be preserved at all costs. Destroying the man—if we could—might retard galactic settlement for decades..."

"But ya claimed that him and his bloody mutineers were *against* galactic settlement," Gor interrupted, frankly confused.

"He might be. But his research is invaluable. And that leads us to your prime objective on Greensward," Ulmstead slipped in as though the matter were decided. "Find out what Ohm's developments are. Dione's background will be an inestimable aid. She can explain while in trajectory. Then, if you can, bring back Ohm..." Gor's mouth dropped open as he listened. "I'd also like to know how he arranged this mutiny."

"Do ya mean to say we can skitter up to Greensward, invite ourselves for a cup o' tea, and leave like a visit to a family aunt?" Gor asked. Cranston would have phrased the question differently, but it was one he wanted answered.

"Surprisingly, I doubt you'll have trouble landing on Greensward. Ohm hates humanity, but his psychological profile indicates a weakness for human companionship. But only if he believes he's appreciated," Ulmstead answered. "There's no reason for violence on his part. You're not going there to destroy him—he'd spot that soon enough. He has nothing to lose by your landing."

"Ya haven't mentioned the leaving part, Commander," Gor shot back. "A fly lands on a web easy enough. It's the delay getting off that's his

undoing."

Ulmstead glanced at each of them in turn, silent for a moment. "The Earth Federation could be overthrown. If it is, the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse will rampage over our planet: war, famine, pestilence and death. You might prevent that. Ohm has a discovery that might accelerate exploration of the galaxy and keep those four horsemen safely stabled for centuries to come. You might find out what. I'm asking your help to do both. No doubt there are risks," Ulmstead concluded lowly.

After a moment Cranston turned to Gor. "We arrived here in *Draco II*. What's the actual damage liability. Can we do it?" he asked, emphasizing the word "actual" to counter a crewman's natural tendency to emphasize any malfunction or damage.

"Possible, Cap," Gor admitted, reluctant but willing now that Ulmstead had stated the alternatives. "We can seal off the cabin in case they haven't finished welding the crack. The crew'll have to double up, but since we're shorthanded anyway it might work."

"Good. My secretary will give you the details. Coordinates of Greensward and such," Ulmstead said as though concluding arrangements for a tour. "Just one thing more..."

Cranston eyed the Commander and sat back in his seat. "I believe the insurrection was premature. It might yet succeed, but if Ohm had waited for a month or two there wouldn't be any doubt. I don't know why he rushed it." Ulmstead drummed his fingertips together. "There's a weakness there someplace. It's not like Ohm to make mistakes like that. Something else is involved. I *feel* it. If you can find out what, you might use it to your advantage. Perhaps Ohm is even slipping—losing his judgment."

Later, when Cranston was to think back on this meeting, he would be amazed that Ulmstead's hunches could be so correct in essence—yet so far off the mark in substance.

CHAPTER 12

Baldy was even less content with a stardrive toward Greensward than Gor. "They finished the hull crack weld, but it's not tested," he said to

Cranston, shaking his head. Only after Gor spent fifteen minutes explaining the alternatives Ulmstead had described did Baldy relent. "Dangerous as hell, Cap," he commented, then helped Gor round up the crew and begin a countdown.

Four hours later they lifted off from the spaceport, found a parking orbit, and began a thorough systems check. A breakdown would be doubly serious after leaving the parking orbit. Even a slight malfunction during a hyperspace leap could be disastrous. More than one starship had simply disappeared while in a time-space duck-out. And no one agreed on just *where* such a ship was.

To add to their troubles they were shorthanded by four. Two crewmen were lost on Raker; Yates was lost on his EVE while jettisoning the limpet bomb; one other had been sleeping peacefully when it went off. That left eight, not counting Gor and Baldy. Dione asked to be assigned crewman's duties and she made up for one—helping with a dozen different jobs from checking ship's stores to running a watch on the ion engine meters. Even with Dione's help it took a full day of orbit time to find and correct the minor problems that cropped up.

As another precaution, they accelerated toward the moon after leaving their Earth orbit. If a malfunction occurred, chances were it would happen sooner than later. And any number of spaceports on the moon offered emergency havens.

Somehow, Cranston agreed with Ulmstead that their trip to Greensward would be unchallenged. He knew it didn't make much sense. Why would bees sting in the field but not at the beehive itself? Yet, he took no chances and stationed a crewman at the ship's scanners and sensor probes. These would trip an alarm at anything approaching his starship. But a watchful eye could see the meters' fluctuations and give a minute's added warning before the circuits tripped.

Cranston ordered the hyperspace coils charged at maximum rate. "You'll have no coils left if you keep treating 'em this way," Gor muttered a half dozen times. Even allowing for the exaggerated pampering any ship's engineer bestowed on his equipment Cranston knew it was chancy. But under the circumstances their duckout for Greensward took precedence.

It was a full two days before the heavy routine slackened. Until then sleep was grabbed a few hours at a time, pre-made meals gulped while

standing, and conversation confined to barked commands and quick reports of the starship's systems. A balky gravity generator caused twelve hours of anxiety, hours of lost sleep, and many curses. At last, it functioned as smoothly as everything else.

After the bout with the gravity generator, Cranston slumped in the control room, Baldy and Gor each at their consoles. Dione appeared, just off the sensor watch shift, dressed in slacks and blouse, her hair tied in back. Loose strands hung over her forehead and when she glanced at Cranston her face radiated a vitality that no fatigue could hide.

Cranston waved her to a chair at the command console and asked Baldy and Gor to join them. It was time to learn the nexus of the entire—and now extended—mission: Jason Clarke's project.

The actual moment was anticlimactic. "We'd like to know what you and your father were working on," Cranston said. Dione brushed back the strands of hair from her forehead. She and her father had kept the project confidential for so long that simply blurting out its details now was difficult. She took a deep breath and began.

"We were working on a way of communicating instantly over long distances. Dad called it 'biocommunication.' It involves a form of energy we still haven't uncovered. Dad was finding out more about it every day."

"Long distances? Like from the Earth to a moon-base?" Baldy asked suspiciously. If so, it wasn't all that important. Laserays did it in seconds.

"I mean over light-years," Dione corrected. "Biocommunication isn't governed by laws of relativity. Dad and I used it all the time between the outpost and Earth."

"This could get complicated," Cranston said flatly and spoke to Dione. "Suppose you begin... well from the start. How did you come across this biocommunication?" His voice betrayed skepticism.

"Three summers ago I was in a residential apartment in the New York Citiplex," she began and for the first time Cranston realized how little he knew of her life. "I was doing something—I'll come to that in a moment—when I *knew* that Dad was arriving at the spaceport that afternoon. I knew the time and name of the starship." Dione's mouth puckered. "It came as half mental picture, half sensation."

Cranston tried to hide his disappointment. He was familiar with dozens of cases when people heard arrival times and starship names, forgot they knew, then dredged up the information from the subconscious. Gor and Baldy were thinking almost the exact same thing.

"It wasn't a subconscious memory because Dad returned from some planet suddenly, to get some botanical samples back to Earth. No one knew he was coming," she explained as though reading their thoughts. "I went to meet him."

"I suppose he was surprised," Cranston said dryly, wondering if this was a version of mental telepathy now that subconscious memory had struck out.

"Amazed would be more like it," Dione retorted, annoyed and defensive despite herself at the skepticism in Cranston's tone. "Of course he wanted to know how I knew his arrival time, or that he was landing at all."

"An' how did you, Miss Dione?" Gor asked kindly.

"It took us months to find out, Gor. We tried to recreate the exact situation at the moment I got that mental picture of his arriving. There was a key element we overlooked at first. It seemed so insignificant. It concerned something I was doing at the exact instant I got the message." Dione paused, thinking how implausible the next bit would sound.

"Which was..." Cranston nudged.

"Repotting a geranium," Dione answered. A long silence hung over the control room like a winter frost. A click of the compute center sounded like the crack of a lasegun.

"Repotting a *geranium*?" Baldy asked slowly, as though wanting to make sure he heard correctly. He knew of many occult space stories, but this...

Dione flushed. "We can skip explanations if you want," she challenged.

Baldy immediately became contrite. "No. I'd like to hear it. But getting a message while repotting a geranium takes a bit of adjustin' to."

"No more interruptions," Cranston said as much to himself as to Baldy

and Gor. Something in Dione's story must have convinced Commander Ulmstead of its validity. The Intelligence Chief wasn't one to be taken in by phantoms. He asked Dione to continue.

"At the same time I was with my geranium, Dad was tending a leaf plant he named the Tanneger, from some new planet. We hadn't seen each other for over a year. He was wishing, hoping, I'd meet him. He thought of his arrival time and the name of the starship. I picked up the picture. It took us awhile to discover that *we* weren't doing the communicating. The *plants* were. Both Dad and I are...were, sensitives. Able to pick up bio-energy. The situation was perfect for a transmission. Once we knew it was the plants, we were able to do it regularly between the Washington and New York Citiplexes. The Tanneger and geranium were a particularly good transmitter-receptor pair." Dione paused, not sure what to explain next, wanting them to believe, to understand.

"And this communication between plants is instantaneous?" Cranston asked.

Dione nodded. "Apparently its field bypasses the space-time continuum. It got so Dad and I could easily communicate between the outpost and Earth. Dad went there to test and improve reception over long distances. Also we were working on transmitting words, or verbals, instead of just pictures, or visuals, when—"

The loud smack of Cranston's balled fist hitting an open palm interrupted Dione. "That's how you knew about that room? The one your father built under the headquarters shed?"

Dione nodded and Cranston suddenly became convinced of her story. There was no other way she *could* have known of that room. Commander Ulmstead hadn't been exaggerating when he underscored the importance of Jason Clarke's project. The implications were enormous for galactic settlement. Communications would no longer depend on the meager speed of light or the chance passage of a starship. Time itself would change. No longer would it be an implacable barrier to information exchange, coordination, or settlement.

Dione picked up her story, encouraged by Cranston's sudden interest. "Dad was trying to improve biocommunication. He used different plants, some singly, some in groups. Lots of things. He had that room built for his records and told me about it simply to practise transmitting and

receiving. It wasn't all that important at the time."

"An' why hasn't this biocommunication been found before, Miss Dione? Sure it must be common enough," Gor asked, adding the silent thought "if it's at all true."

Dione shrugged. "Maybe it has. Dad and I found reports of experiments with plant sensitivity to human thought as far back as the 1970s. One man, I forgot his name, attached a primitive instrument called a lie detector to a plant leaf. The meter moved at some of the man's thoughts. But the research somehow faded. Perhaps not enough people believed it *could* be true," she said.

"Was it coincidence? That first transmission between you and your father?" Cranston asked.

"Coincidence? We were both tending plants that made a good transmitter-receptor pair. And we're both sensitives. I guess that's a coincidence." Then, almost as an aside, Dione added: "You have to have a kind of rapport with plants for biocommunication to work."

"Rapport? You've got to be *friendly* with a plant?" Baldy asked, his eyes squinting in confusion.

"Well, some people are sensitives. Most aren't. Maybe everyone can develop it. Plants do the communicating and we, sensitives, pick up the transmissions."

"But..." Gor had so many questions he scarcely knew which to ask first. "How would your... geranium know a message was important to you? Sounds like all plants are in steady contact like one giant, universal brain." Gor smiled at his own levity.

Dione said nothing but stared at Gor steadily. His eyes widened. "Yer not saying that's what you *really* think?" he yelped.

"I don't know. Dad thought it might be something like that. Not a brain, of course. But if bio-energy, the force that transmits the messages, bypasses normal time, it might have other strange characteristics. Dad was working on it. There's so much we don't know that anything's possible," Dione said, suddenly sad over her father's death.

A slow understanding came to Cranston. No wonder Commander Ulmstead refused to give him a short explanation. Cranston knew he simply wouldn't have believed it. He still had a healthy skepticism. Yet, everything fit. Knowledge about the room. The instant contact between whoever was pitted against him. The contact Ohm could maintain with the insurgents on Earth.

"Does this have something to do with your passing out at the outpost?" Cranston asked, already knowing the answer.

Dione squeezed her eyes shut for a moment. "That was a horrible moment. Yes. I was trying to pick up trace images from plants around the outpost. That's another aspect of bio-energy. I was getting something, too. Pictures of what had happened. Then... it was as though someone pounded at my mind. I thought I'd go crazy for a moment. Then I blacked out."

The compute center gave a quick series of clicks, as though it too had a question. A light flashed on at Baldy's control panel. He glanced over. "Hyperspace coils charged full, Cap. We can duck out for Greensward any time."

Greensward. One other question stood out in Cranston's mind. "Any connection between the outposts' destruction and Gaspard Ohm?"

"Dad had a bank of plants, a native species that showed a lot of promise as transmitter-receptors. They were methodically destroyed and burned. I sifted through them. It may be that Ohm is also working on biocommunications. That's why I'm along; as a sensitive. I may pick up trace images on Greensward.

Cross talk between plants? Trace images? Intercepting a plant's *thoughts*? Baldy and Gor blinked at each other. Cranston jabbed the button that indicated a half hour prep time for the coming hyperspace leap. Any more questions could be answered later.

Baldy went to his console and poured over his navigation instruments. This was a long duckout—one hundred and fifty light-years. Any error at this end of the leap would be magnified a dozenfold when they exited. Some error was inevitable. But a navigator tried to keep it at a minimum.

A half hour later Baldy punched in the hyperspace coils. The *Draco II*

vanished from its moon trajectory and plunged from the normal time-space continuum. They exited a short, three day ion drive from Greensward—an almost negligible amount considering the distance covered. Those days were packed with more checks and double checks of the ship. A busy time, an expectant time. The questions they asked Dione between tasks brought little new information. She knew about as much as she had first told them.

Greensward—circled by two moons—finally hove into full telescreen view. The starship's sensors picked up a faint but steadily stronger bleat of the planet's beacon. "Least he's got that going," Gor muttered darkly, thinking about a fly stuck on a spider's web.

"Maybe it means a welcome mat," Baldy retorted.

"Maybe we'll get a welcome. It's the wave goodbye that worries me," Gor shot back.

They took a parking orbit around Greensward while Baldy fixed the location of the landing port by beacon signals and calculated their descent trajectory. The telescreen—even on full magnification—spotted no more than a planet lush with vegetation. Their sensors picked up even less.

"He might be livin' underground for all the signs of life we see," Gor commented with a chance accuracy that they soon came to appreciate. Their attempts at verbal communication brought nothing but the crackle of static in return.

Cranston ordered weapons distributed—hand-held laseguns and laserifles. Baldy fixed the navigation coordinates. Gor patched in the atomic landing engines. The gravity generators were thrown into reverse. Descent began.

The *Draco II* settled on Greensward, landing gently as a feather on a well-tended lawn.

CHAPTER 13

Greensward could have been used as a model for a travel poster.

Riotous colored flowers on thousands of trees, shrubs, and plants

graced the periphery of the landing area. A delicately sweet aroma that reminded Dione of honeysuckle wafted over them. Water tumbled over a small cliff of vine-covered rocks at one end of the area and a rainbow of mist rose where the waterfall splashed to the ground. The air was cool, dry, and only slightly higher in oxygen than that of Earth. The vegetation was not the confused tangle of a thick jungle as much as the growth of a semi-tropical, manicured forest. The trees echoed with the chirps, trills, and warbles of birds and Cranston wondered if they were native to the planet or imported by Ohm.

They descended from the starship, leaving two of the eight remaining crewmen on guard. All were armed. All were alert. All were impressed with the gracious beauty of Greensward. A planet with such a perfect balance of oxygen, vegetation, and climate was a rarity. It rivaled the best Earth itself could offer.

Two strobe beacons began flashing from one corner of the landing area. "They got us on a monitor, lifeless though it seems," Gor muttered.

They strung out single file, arms at the ready, and headed for the beacons at the clearing's edge. Some rocks underfoot showed scratches where tracked vehicles had passed. Not surprising—starships would be bringing cargo from time to time and it had to be unloaded with heavy vehicles. Obviously there was a roadway ahead.

The road began between the brashly blinking strobe lights, a wide swath through the forest paralleled by a narrower walkway paved with flatstone ranging in color from dark blue to light green. They entered, and the bright sunlight dimmed to dappled shade. Every one hundred meters or so another strobe light blinked, a silent invitation to follow the walkway.

Cranston was alert for any eventuality—an attack from above or from the sides, a massed charge or the crack of a sniper's lasergun. He assigned two crewmen to scout their flanks. One guarded their rear, and a point man went ahead. They traveled slowly, feeling their way overground. They were prepared for anything. Anything, that is, except what they came upon.

The point man halted, then waved them forward.

They approached. The walkway widened into a clearing punctuated

with a huge gazebo. In its middle were a row of tables laden with delicacies Cranston recognized as culinary specialties from several planets. The boiled Shard bird, used at ceremonial feasts on Cyrus; the tasty Beften shoots from Nimbus; marinated Rappel tongues from Vargus—a delicacy that cost a fortune per kilo on Earth. Cranston knew these. He wasn't familiar with a half dozen other dishes.

Stone bottles lined the tables, too, and in clear goblets already filled he saw the delicately colored pink liquid he recognized as the Langue drink, produced only by a certain region of a small planet called Haydron, its principal and abundant source of revenue. The "precious liquid left a melodious taste that lasted for hours and produced an elevated, lyrical mood with no heaviness of head. It was a prized and expensive luxury.

Obviously their arrival had been expected and carefully planned for. Almost imperceptibly the crew clustered around the tables, eyeing the luxuries hungrily; Cranston waved them back. The food could be poisoned or drugged—an easy way to eliminate them all. His own mouth watered as he looked at the feast.

No one saw the figure approach.

"Welcome to Greensward," a deep, full voice pronounced ceremoniously.

They spun around and faced—or rather looked down at—a one meter high dwarf dressed in full livery, including a long black coat with tails, a stiff white collar and black bow tie, striped pants, and impeccably polished shoes. He held a round, silver tray at shoulder height. On it lay an envelope. How he had slipped past them was a mystery. The dwarf walked forward, stiff and formal, his face the impassive mask of the perfect servant. His wrist spun expertly and the silver tray appeared at Cranston's waist. An engraved note was inside the envelope and Cranston read the ornate calligraphy.

Welcome to Greensward. As my guests I trust you will take advantage of the repast before you. Given the amount of suspicion evidenced toward myself I regretfully find it necessary to assure you that the collation offered is safe in every respect. Please count these as the "hor d'oeuvres" as I expect the pleasure of your company for a banquet at the beginning of the fourth quarter of Greensward's revolutions, eighteen hundred hours evening by Earth standard. My manservant, Victor, will show you to your quarters once you have refreshed yourselves.

Looking forward to your acquaintance I remain, hopeful of the future

G. Ohm.

Cranston passed the note to Gor, Baldy, and Dione. Even as he read it his blood pressure rose several notches. Once again their plans had been known. He had half expected it, but not in such intimate detail. How had Ohm known that there was "suspicion evidenced" toward himself? Ohm's probable role had surfaced only recently, in Ulmstead's office. The note also indicated that Cranston's own hunch about an unimpeded arrival on Greensward had been correct.

Which didn't mean they weren't in danger. Yet, somehow, he doubted it would come from an unexpected quarter. The delicacies before them *were* undoubtedly safe. Ohm wanted something from them—he wanted them to be safe, at least for the present. A mystifying turnabout. Whatever danger they faced would be much more subtle than drugged food.

Cranston accepted the invitation, also not wanting to rile Ohm with a first act of suspicion. They dipped into the ambrosia before them, a welcome contrast to the flat-tasting pre-fab meals aboard ship. Ohm's manservant, Victor, stood stonily in one corner of the covered gazebo, apparently indifferent to them or what they did. The dwarf resembled a penguin in coattails and when they had finished he strutted up to Cranston. "Please follow," he commanded stiffly, spun on a heel, and marched up the path.

They followed, laseguns still at the alert. The path led to an overhanging cliff, its rock wall glistening with huge bay windows. An entrance was cut into the solid rock. A door slid open and Victor waved them through.

"After you," Cranston said. If violence did occur it would strike the dwarf first. Victor gave a slow blink that held a hint of disgust and entered without question. They followed him into a huge elevator.

"Sure that's why the sensors didn't pick up buildings," Gor whispered to Cranston as the elevator moved upward. "All inside solid rock. Hollowed out."

He was right, but it would be hard to tell from the inside. They exited into a hallway luxuriously lined with what looked like rosewood panels. Thick carpets covered the floors and soft light from hidden light panels illuminated the corridor. "Spares himself no comfort," Gor remarked.

Victor strutted ahead, then stopped before a door. He bowed, one hand extended. "Your quarters, Captain Cranston."

"We'll stay together," Cranston said, nodding to his officers and Dione. The dwarf's face had all the expression of basaltic rock. They entered into another paradigm of luxury. A huge window looked on the forest below. Deep padded chairs, thick carpets, paneled walls, and an expanse of a deep sofa were in the room. The dwarf marched to a connecting door. It led to another half of the suite, equally large, no less luxuriously furnished, and holding two huge beds.

Cranston resisted an impulse to fling Victor a coin and winked at Baldy, who followed to see where the six crewmen were quartered. He noted their doors, a few steps down the hallway and knew without a word that they'd establish watches. No attempt had been made to disarm them. In fact, no resort palace anywhere in the Galaxy would have been more satisfactory. No fly had been welcomed into a web with more fervent cordiality.

They took turns at watch while the others got badly needed sleep. Dione hadn't yet tried to tune into any of Greensward's plants. As yet she hadn't the solitude, energy, or favorable opportunity for such a strenuous effort. Greensward's sun lowered toward the horizon. The shadows lengthened and even through the bay window they heard the birds' cheery chirping that indicated a good night's feeding.

Their turn came. Almost at eighteen hundred hours—six o'clock Earth time—Victor called for them, inscrutable as ever. For this mission he carried a staff with a gold ball at its tip and wore a long, black coat that parted in back like a swallow's tail. They had discussed attending a banquet with Ohm. It presented risks, true, but they were no greater than remaining in their quarters. Besides, a meal with the man would be an occasion to take his measure.

Victor led them through a winding maze of carpeted corridors, the six crewmen cautiously trailing behind. After another trip in an elevator and more marching through corridors, Victor halted in front of two huge, counterweighted doors. He pushed, the doors swung open and everyone moved in.

It was really a hall, huge and oval, with a clear plastic dome for a ceiling and green turf for a floor. Lush plants of every size and shape lined the room's edges, many dripping greenery that reached the floor. At the center

of the oval was a long table, set with silver plate and crystal goblets and lit by the orange gold glow of a dozen candles. The plants, the hall's vast size, and the soft turf underneath gave the surrealistic impression of having dinner in a jungle clearing.

Victor escorted Dione with old-world manners to a chair near the table's end. Cranston sat opposite, with Baldy and Gor beside them. The crew filled the remaining chairs. Overseeing the table, from its head, was a huge Dante chair. Empty.

Then he entered.

A gradual hush spread over the table. Necks craned and chairs shuffled.

Gaspard Ohm stood in the doorway and Commander Ulmstead's description hardly prepared Cranston for what he saw.

The man was gigantic, at least seven feet tall. His face resembled a scooped out, elongated dish. A pointed chin almost reached his breastbone. A thatch of gray hair covered an extraordinarily wide, tall forehead. His cheeks bulged like those of a chipmunk carrying acorns. His nose was a monstrous length and dipped over a mouth that was mostly meaty lips. His head was perpetually cocked to one side, as though he continually debated what he saw in front of him. Two elephantine ears drooped almost to his shoulders.

He walked forward and for a moment Cranston imagined the man was on stilts. His hands were folded in front of him and such was the length of his arms that they seemed like the prow of a ship. As he approached Cranston noted the fiery glow of his eyes, colored brown but flecked with gold specks. He was dressed in a thick robe of red velvet. A golden chain hung around his neck. He wore flamboyantly colored rings on every finger.

"Welcome to Greensward," Ohm said in a mellow tone, and despite his grotesque appearance, his voice was normal. The man radiated an almost magnetic aura and without realizing it Cranston and the rest of his crew slowly rose from their seats. Only Dione remained seated.

Ohm approached and held out a hand. "You, are Captain Cranston," he said and his hand engulfed that of Cranston. He greeted Baldy and Gor in turn, nodded to the crew, and turned to Dione. "Miss Clarke," he intoned. "You are especially welcome," and bowed from the waist. His voice held a

sincere note of warmth.

"Why especially?" Dione shot back.

Ohm smiled and his mouth spread across his face, showing rows of teeth. "All in good time. Good time, indeed," he replied genially. His arms spread apart, and covered by his heavy robe, he resembled a gawky, prehistoric bird that was spreading enormous wings.

"Be seated," came a royal command. Hardly a sound was heard as the men settled into their chairs. Ohm, with a flap of his robes, settled in the heavy Dante chair. He grasped a goblet in his enormous hand and raised it before him. "Enjoy Greensward's felicities," he said solemnly. "They are yours to savor and mine to loan. And, to the world of the future."

A strange toast, Cranston thought, as he raised his glass already filled with the rare Langue drink, thinking of the number of times they had been asked to enjoy either Greensward's hospitality or "felicities." The crew, confused and embarrassed by the archaic formality, fumbled for their goblets, held them high, and downed their contents.

They were less confused and considerably more elated as the doors again swung open and a parade of dwarves, Victor at their head, marched into the room. Each one held a covered platter laden with viands, sauces, and legumes. Quietly and unobtrusively they served a meal the men who survived the trip would remember for the rest of their lives. In comparison, the delicacies downed in the gazebo were mere tidbits. No goblet was empty for more than a few seconds before one of the dwarves filled it anew.

"Your voyage to Greensward was uneventful, despite the damage to your ship?" Ohm inquired, cocking his head to one side like an inquisitive child. He seemed genuinely interested.

"You know a great deal about me and my ship," Cranston countered.

Ohm nodded sagely. "True," he said in agreement. "And your curiosity regarding this could be relieved shortly. In the meanwhile..." Ohm turned toward a platter one of the dwarves held before him and sampled its contents. Cranston noted that he did the same for every new dish brought to the table. A gesture of good will? An assurance that the food wasn't drugged? A gourmet's pride to assure each course was properly prepared?

"Victor is at his best tonight," Ohm remarked.

The banquet progressed with a never-ending series of different delicacies filling their plates. Ohm was charming, solicitous for his guests' welfare, and bubbling with apparent pleasure at their appreciation of Greensward. He had an entertaining knack of gearing a comment, observation, or question to his listener's interest. With Gor he spoke about gravity generators, and Gor nodded sagely as Ohm explained a thorny theoretical aspect of monopoles that Gor had always puzzled over. To Baldy he suggested improvements in the present navigational methods, hitting on a topic the *Draco II's* navigator had often complained about. He talked with Cranston about a finer integration of a starship's sensors, so as to yield much greater information without an iota more equipment.

His theoretical basis was faultless and his application of theory to the practical shrewd. Cranston marveled at the scope of the man.

Only with Dione did Ohm appear constrained. He treated her courteously, but with a rigid formality he dropped for the men. Several times during the meal Cranston noted Ohm's glance fall her way, as though appraising an unknown factor. And, at each glance Cranston felt an irrational but strong irritation.

Once during the long, luxurious meal Ohm's self-possession did seem to crack. Baldy commented idly on the flora of Greensward and the beauty of its flowers. Ohm's eyes glowed and a fierce look of elation animated his face.

"The plant kingdom is the underappreciated half of the organic world," he said, the gold specks in his eyes bright and glistening. Ohm's long, bony arm swept the room, the wide sleeve of his robe flapping like a tent sail. "Flora have accomplished the most amazing of the universe's mechanisms: photosynthesis—a feat that has reduced the animal kingdom to a role of parasitical existence. Yet plants remain imprisoned and underestimated by mankind's scornful pride."

Ohm raged on with a demoniac intensity, lauding the abilities and virtues of plants. Everyone at the table stared, some of the men with their goblets half-raised. Ohm's shovel-like hands waved in front of him as he edged into a tirade of how only plants could be trusted with honesty, faithfulness, and companionship—virtues that no animals, especially mankind, could boast.

As Ohm raved, Cranston again thought of the accuracy of Commander Ulmsteads' appraisal. It took only amateur psychology to realize that Ohm was talking not only about plants—but about himself. "Mankind's scornful pride."

"underestimated."

"virtues... of companionship."

Then, Ohm launched into an extraordinarily logical plea for a natural dictatorship of plant life and the inevitable subjugation of mankind, building into a paean that kept the crew wide-eyed.

Ohm suddenly stopped, as though awakening from a hypnotic trance. His arms swept down to the table. He smiled gently—a winning, almost pitiful, smile. The man, thought Cranston, is touched with madness. But a clever madness, for not one of his statements was either illogical or stupid. He had made a brilliant case for the domination of the plant kingdom over animal life.

Ohm had, in fact, overlooked only one small fact.

"You talk as though there were an intelligent species of plants," Cranston commented as the table slowly came to life again. Goblets began to tinkle, the men began to murmur, silverware scraped across plates. Ohm grimaced wanly, and the bright shine of his eyes' gold flecks dulled. He swept his wide brow with his hand.

"Would that be any stranger than the millions of mysteries the Universe holds in its bosom?" Ohm said in a surprisingly low voice. He turned to Dione. "You too have an affinity for the plant kingdom, Miss Clarke. Do you have views on the subject?"

If Cranston had had any doubt that Ohm was involved in the death of Jason Clarke, this comment would have erased it. The man was too well informed—even about Dione's abilities as a sensitive—for an innocent bystander.

"Only that seeing's believing," Dione quipped with an answer calculated to prod more information from Ohm.

Instead of an answer he raised his goblet in tribute and drank.

"Perhaps you and Captain Cranston would care for a tour of my facilities?" Ohm hadn't taken the challenge. At least not obviously.

Cranston nodded, giving Dione a quick look indicating that she should accept. This could be a chance to plumb Ohm's resources, information sources, and intentions.

Ohm clapped his giant hands together. The door opened and his troop of dwarves marched in and began clearing the table. The banquet was over. Ohm rose, dominating the room by his height.

"Your crew and officers will be taken care of, have no fear for their safety, Captain Cranston," Ohm stated solicitously, and Cranston didn't doubt his word.

"Come," Ohm commanded gently as he moved to an apparently impenetrable thicket of plants at one side of the oval hall. "You may consider the next moments the experience of a lifetime."

Modesty, thought Cranston, was definitely not one of Ohm's prime virtues.

CHAPTER 14

Ohm brushed aside the thicket of branches and hanging vines and opened a tall narrow door behind them. A passageway led downward and Ohm disappeared into the cavernous corridor. Cranston and Dione followed and it wasn't until several steps later they realized the corridor lit as they passed, then darkened behind them.

"Bioluminescence," Ohm commented, his voice hollow in the corridor. "A fungus I developed. It grows over the walls and emits light in response to body heat. The light is much like that produced by a firefly."

The tunnel ended at another door. Ohm opened it with a flourish. His long, bony arm, the velvet robe draping from it like a curtain, swung forward in a courteous gesture.

Cranston and Dione entered a room illuminated with conventional light panels. Glass tubes, flasks, condensers, pumps, and other equipment filled several low work tables. At one end another giant bay window looked over

a portion of Greensward. From where they stood, Cranston and Dione could see one of the planet's two moons.

"A laboratory for Victor and his friends?" Dione asked.

"Accurate, Miss Clarke. Victor and his entourage, like myself, are ones whom Earth feels free to ostracize because of genetic variation." A fire briefly lit Ohm's eyes, then died. "They and I have both found peace on Greensward."

"They're your laboratory assistants?" Cranston asked.

Ohm hummed, his face contorting into a disapproving frown. "Victor is an accomplished biochemist in his own right. I initiate and direct much of the research he and his... colleagues carry out. He is not as much an assistant as a versatile associate." Versatility hardly described the dwarf: scientist, gourmet cook, manservant, and valet were all functions he seemed to perform competently.

Ohm faced them. "This, of course, is only the biochemical laboratory, the focus of recent interests. I have one for my work in stellar physics, energy transformations, genetic manipulation—and various other sundry occupations," he added without a trace of a boast. If Ohm wasn't modest, perhaps he had the right not to be, Cranston thought.

"And just what is your current interest?" Dione asked with an innocence no one could doubt. Cranston felt his stomach lurch. He knew it was a calculated risk on her part to probe so directly.

Ohm was delighted at the question. For all his brilliance he candidly enjoyed interest expressed toward his work and suffered a long repressed desire to be on equal, friendly terms with fellow creatures. Both Cranston and Dione felt a flash of pity for this giant, whose physical features had led him to an exile from his own kind.

Ohm gazed at Dione. "I have hopes that we might delve into that at more leisure," he said softly, avoiding an answer. "Our interests coincide and the qualities you possess could lead to triumphs mighty beyond belief. Ohm's entire mien radiated a smouldering intensity beneath a calm exterior and Cranston remembered that he had once had an attachment for a woman—and been cheated. He wondered if Dione resembled Ohm's lost love.

Ohm suddenly turned to one of the several doors that lined the laboratory. The spell was broken and Cranston saw more than heard Dione's sigh of released tension.

"While this laboratory is more or less the domain of Victor, this," Ohm flung open another door with a flourish, "leads to my private *sanctum sanctorum*."

Cranston and Dione were unabashedly impressed. The room was a private study and tailored to Ohm's size. On a normal scale it would have been a medium-sized chamber—or monkish cell. Intricate tapestries hung from the walls, a huge fireplace dominated one side, while shelves filled with ancient books lined the other walls. A light-tight shutter covered the only window.

Most impressive was Ohm's outsized desk, carved from a single block of wood. The desk's top was covered with what, at first glance, appeared to be a disorganized litter: papers scrawled with symbols; trays holding samples of plants; printed books, some of which lay open; and—strangest of all—a writing implement Cranston recognized as an archaic quill pen. Stacked at one corner of the desk was a pile of heavy books that looked like ledgers. The desk—in fact, the entire room—had the flavor of a master's chamber in an ancient castle.

"An Earth historian once remarked that no great ideas were born in a large room. It is in this chamber that I have challenged Nature and most often won," Ohm said, a note of grave respect in his voice.

He had made at least one concession to the twenty-fourth century. On a side table, next to the massive desk, was a compute terminal, including a telescreen readout. It was, undoubtedly, a necessary piece of apparatus. But it seemed as out of place as a crystal radio in a starship.

Ohm's velvet robe rustled softly as he sat behind his desk. His massive hand patted the stack of books at his right. "It is in these tomes that I record my secrets," he said, his guard lowered by the very genuine interest shown by Cranston and Dione. "Secrets uncovered in the last decades. Secrets that are destined to change the history of the Galaxy, to revolutionize the smug arrogance of Earth toward the Universe, and to tame its hatred of the unusual."

The fiery look had returned to Ohm's eyes and his nostrils narrowed as

he spoke. He stared blindly ahead for a brief moment, as though seeing before him the destiny he contemplated. As quickly as the mood possessed him, it left. He offered an engaging smile, again radiating a seductive charm that totally transcended his bizarre features.

He slapped his hand once again on the stack of books. They held, Cranston guessed, the information he sought.

A glance through them would be at least as valuable as bringing Ohm back to Earth.

Ohm rose and led them to the laboratory again. "Do these lead to other research areas?" Dione asked, glancing at several closed doorways lining a wall.

Ohm's forehead furrowed briefly as though deciding the intent of the question. He seemed undecided for a moment. Abruptly, his mood changed. He became somber, distant, and defensive. "Some do, but an intensive tour is more appropriate for another time," he said enigmatically. "It's been a busy day, for me as well as you." Cranston stole a sidewise glance at the doors before Ohm guided them from the laboratory, through a labyrinthine network of passageways, and flung open a door. They found themselves in the long corridor leading to their rooms.

"Confusing at first, I know," Ohm said, then tersely bid them goodnight. He disappeared down the corridor like an apparition, both Cranston and Dione musing over his words "at first."

They quickly told Baldy and Gor of their suddenly truncated tour with Ohm. "We've got to get a look at Ohm's notes, in those ledgers," Cranston concluded. An invaluable source of information lay at their fingertips.

"An' how can you find the bloody place again? Those corridors wind and cross like the inside of an ant's nest," Gor asked, worried about the risk. Returning to Ohm's private study was dangerous. But the possible rewards were incalculable. Risks? Of course—there was no telling how Ohm would react if they were caught in his private study.

"We'll chance it. I tried to memorize the route," Cranston said doubtfully.

"No chance involved. I marked those passages," Dione said primly as the three faced her in surprise. She pulled a dinner knife from her tunic. "Every time we turned a corner, I cut a nick in the fungus—at shoulder height. I don't know how quickly it will grow in again, but the marks should be useful for a little while."

The three men admired her foresight. Obviously Dione had appreciated the potential of Ohm's notebooks. "We'll get some sleep now. Let Ohm and his dwarves have time to settle down before moving," Cranston said.

"What about this... biocommunication, Miss Dione?" Baldy asked. "Have you picked up anything?" In his obsession with Ohm's notes, Cranston had totally forgotten Dione's abilities.

"No, and that's what's strange," she replied, quickly answering their unspoken question. "I *should* get something. Those plants at the banquet tonight. I got a chance to try but..." she groped for an explanation that wouldn't sound too outlandish, "there should have been some kind of background noise when I tried to tune them in. Like static. There wasn't. Something's blocking me. Deliberately. Either that or I'm not a sensitive anymore."

They delayed any further conversation. Conjecture would be worth nothing right now. Ohm's notebooks might answer all their questions. Four hours later—but what appeared like seconds to Cranston and Dione—Baldy woke them. "Time for prowling," he said.

Cranston and Dione plunged into the corridor Ohm had led them from, Cranston's lasegun at his hip. Much to Gor and Baldy's consternation, they were left behind. Dione might be needed to evaluate Ohm's notes. They were needed as a backup—and, unspoken, to get the crew off Greensward if Cranston and Dione didn't return.

Without Dione's blazed trail of nicks in the fungus they'd have been lost in minutes. As it was it took twice as long as Cranston had estimated to find the small slashes. They noted that the marks were already beginning to grow in again.

Only once were they nearly spotted. They had reached a junction of two corridors. Dione glanced around the edge of their tunnel, looking for a marker and saw a light approaching from the intersecting corridor. "On the floor," Cranston whispered, remembering that the fungus's

bio-luminescence was triggered by temperature. The bioluminescent light dimmed, receiving less heat from two bodies prone on the floor, but still glowed softly. They held their breath, Cranston clutched his lasegun, aiming it ahead and low: dwarf height.

A dwarf sauntered by, and in the brief moment he passed across the tunnel's mouth Cranston realized he wasn't a sentry. He looked neither to the right nor the left, appearing totally absorbed by something he carried. Ohm for some reason trusted the party from the ship. Perhaps because he wanted to be able to trust them, because no effort was made to prevent any clandestine explorations. Or maybe Ohm relied on the complexity of the corridors to thwart spying. Cranston felt a vague guilt that he quickly shrugged off. All's fair in love or war, and if the insurrection on Earth wasn't a war nothing ever would be.

When they reached the laboratory, Cranston peered inside. "Clear," he whispered, moving by the eerie yellow light cast from a full moon. They moved past a row of doors and Cranston recalled Ohm's reluctance to show them the inside. With Ohm's notes a few steps away, they could wait. A few seconds later they were in Ohm's study.

Cranston shuttered the single window and hit a light switch. Incandescent lights—Cranston had only known them as antique curiosities—lit the room. Ohm certainly had a penchant for the ancient.

The books lay at the desk's corner like a stack of monastical ledgers. Cranston sat in the chair, dwarfed by its size. He opened the first while Dione searched the room for any other clues to Ohm's plans. It took Cranston a few minutes to become accustomed to Ohm's florid writing style. The man was an anachronism in more ways than one.

The books were a mother lode of revelations and Cranston hit paydirt in less than ten minutes. There, written in flourishes, was the reason for the attempts to kidnap, capture, kill, and sabotage them. A few pages further on he discovered who their informer was and how Ohm had been omnipotently sure of all their plans. At that moment, Cranston realized that Ohm never had the slightest intention of letting them leave Greensward.

After half an hour's reading of a single tome he found the origin and general outline for the insurrection now infecting the Earth Federation. The first seeds had been sown over a decade ago. Later, another page

explained the reason for the many bank robberies taking place on Earth, and the odd contradiction of thieves stealing only low denomination notes.

Still further into the pages Cranston saw—meticulously recorded—an evaluation of Jason Clarke's work, along with a short note that his endeavors had been terminated. Other entries described Ohm's work in biocommunication, with odd references Cranston made no sense of.

In fact, most of what Cranston read made little or no sense—or, rather, incomplete sense. He knew who the informer was—but not how the information was relayed. He knew what the bank thieves were after—but not why. And, there were curious, oblique references to various experiments and intricate calculations—all laced with personal observations that were as much an intimate diary as a scientific journal.

A more careful and complete scrutiny of this and the other two books would probably make the present questions clear. Considering what he had already found, Cranston wondered what the import of the remainder would be. Enormous enough. The information would keep Earth Federation scientists pondering for decades.

Cranston closed the book and smiled grimly at the irony of discovering this vital data on a planet one hundred and fifty light-years from Earth in a handwritten ledger.

Cranston rose, shoving the ledgers under an arm. Probably Ohm had kept others, but Dione hadn't found them in the study. Further scrutiny was a waste of time.

"We're getting off Greensward. As soon as we get back and get the crew. Commander Ulmstead doesn't need Ohm. These books are enough," Cranston said. Dione glanced around, relieved. They were pushing their luck and she felt an icy edge of apprehension.

They slipped from Ohm's study and Cranston saw the line of doors. Curiosity gnawed at his better sense. "A look behind one before we go. Only a minute," he said.

Dione tugged at his sleeve, then let go. Ohm had a strange, tortured mind. No telling how he'd react to their sally. They had uncovered many of his secrets and she preferred to leave now. Instead she followed Cranston.

He opened a door at random and fumbled for a switch, prepared to risk a beam of light through a window. "Close the door," he whispered and pressed the switch.

Dione gave a short, gurgling screech before the sight paralyzed her voice. Ohm's books thudded to the floor.

Ohm hadn't written all his secrets in those ledgers. Not nearly all. One more lay before them now.

A sane man touched with madness?

No, that wasn't the right equation to describe Ohm, Cranston thought. Ohm had to be a madman who could only simulate episodes of sanity.

CHAPTER 15

It was a long, rectangular room that could accommodate Ohm's height, but barely more. A solid mass of creeping, crawling, dripping plants—arrayed like a phalanx of green soldiers—covered three sides. In front of the plants were long rows of tables.

And on each table, lying flat, unconscious, and immobile, was a naked human being. A thick green stalk emerged from the mass of vegetation and entered behind the ear of each silent victim.

"Ohm's totally insane. Where did he get all these people?" Dione gasped.

"The vanished starships Commander Ulmstead mentioned," Cranston whispered. "Settlers, crews. There must be more in other rooms."

They moved forward, Dione grasping Cranston's arm. Cranston touched one of the stalks leading behind an ear and fought off a wave of nausea. "It's *growing* into his head," he exclaimed. "Growing from this mass of vegetation."

Dione shuddered. "What for? Why are they here?"

"No telling... wait." A memory of a thick, red scar came to Cranston's mind. The man in the bank, the one that suddenly died. He had a scar behind his ear. On Raker, too, the men in the greenhouse had the same

mark. Gor had seen it. He told Dione of those scars as they moved down the rows, glancing at the men, women, and children, each as inert as death.

Nothing made much sense. They had facts to deal with, but not the meaning behind them. And Ohm's notes weren't a help—at least those Cranston had read. Whatever Ohm was up to in this room was the work of criminal insanity. The man deserved no quarter.

At the far end of the room the tables ended, although the thick wall of plants continued. Cranston and Dione halted, awestruck by the obscene sight of human beings attached to the vegetation by a green, cranial umbilical cord.

"Keith. Let's get off Greensward now. Let's get the crew—" Cranston grabbed Dione's arm. She was dangerously close to hysteria. Understandably so.

Just then a movement near the far end of the room caught Cranston's eye. Almost in the same instant the lights went out. He heard a sudden rustling sound, as though dry leaves were being stirred. Dione screamed and Cranston reached for his lasegun. But then his head exploded in a burst of technicolor fireworks and consciousness slipped from his grasp. From far away he heard another shattering scream. Then darkness obliterated his mind.

* * *

Gold flecks. Hazy gold flecks surrounded by a blur of spinning brown. The twirling brown discs slowed, then stopped. The gold flecks became sharp. Gaspard Ohm's eyes came into focus.

Cranston blinked, a long squeeze of eyelids accompanied by a quick series of short headshakes. Some fuzziness disappeared. He could take in all of Ohm's face now at a single glance. The side of his head ached with each pulse.

He remembered and his head jerked around wildly.

"Miss Clarke is safe," Gaspard Ohm said. The low rumble of his voice bespoke an ominous mood.

Cranston fought to get his bearings. The dizziness evaporated. The sharp head pain segued into a tolerable numbness. He realized that his arms were firmly bound behind the chair he was seated in.

Gaspard Ohm stared at him, unblinking. Steadily, intently, curiously. An appraising stare that reserved final judgment.

They were in a room Cranston hadn't seen before. A small one, given Ohm's size. And again, the ubiquitous plants lined the walls, draping from the tall ceiling and all but covering a single window at one end.

Instinctively, Cranston took the initiative. "This an example of your hospitality, Ohm?"

Ohm stirred and Cranston was surprised to see that his taunt had stung. "An abuse of hospitality merits retaliatory measures. My welcome to Greensward did not extend to furtive, nocturnal prowls," Ohm countered. "Nor does it include stealing research notes, insignificant though they might be."

Warning signals buzzed in Cranston's head. Ohm obviously wasn't sure how much he and Dione had discovered. Now he was probing, trying to find if they'd read his journals.

Cranston shrugged and managed a look of innocent curiosity. "You can't expect us not to wonder what you've been doing, Ohm. You're considered a genius on Earth. Erratic but brilliant." Cranston hoped that the cliché "flattery will get you nowhere" would be suspended in this case.

Ohm hummed as he exhaled and his thick lips stretched into a faint smile. "You must have some questions, Captain Cranston. Ask if you wish."

The signals buzzed louder. Another probe. Any reference to the books' contents would be a clear admission he'd had time to read their secrets. "Where's Dione? My crew?" Cranston asked. Ohm gave out an almost imperceptible breath of relief.

"Safe. Confined but safe. For the moment," Ohm said in a tone marginally less ominous than his first statements. "I'll postpone questions I have about your motives until later. I hope to persuade you—not by force—of more advantageous allegiances you might embrace."

Cranston blinked at the apparent double talk. Ohm was being oblique to the point of obscurity. So far neither of them had mentioned the room with... those people. If Ohm didn't, Cranston sure as hell wasn't going to either.

The gold flecks in Ohm's eyes grew brighter. "You and Miss Clarke have a chance to participate in events of Galactic scope. Events now underway. With her talents and a certain... enterprise of which you're capable, these events will be all the more successful," Ohm explained, but succeeded only in mystifying Cranston even more.

Ohm paused and the fanatical light in his eyes faded, the rigid cast of his face relaxed. "In the case of yourself and Miss Clarke I have suspended, at least temporarily, my view of human beings as little more than arrogant bunglers consumed by parochial self-interest. It is by no accident that you landed safe on Greensward."

"Quite a concession," Cranston replied. "And what is the expected return on your investment?" A dash of truculence at this point wouldn't hurt, Cranston thought.

Ohm's eyes flared anew. "My reward will be a regime of order established where chaos now reigns. An order where merit prevails despite its origin." Ohm's voice grew louder, his face tensed. His eyes looked beyond Cranston into the future he contemplated. "A regime not dependent on the erratic nature of human judgment..." Then, as though he had said too much, Ohm concluded. "You and Miss Clarke could participate in such a regime and become distinguished from the common mass by a fair degree of power."

Cranston realized that Ohm's madness was supported by too great an intellect to be treated casually. A tactic came to mind: not full cooperation—Ohm's paranoid mind would immediately recognize such a ruse, but a tenor of bedazzled confusion. That might most appeal to the twisted mentality of Gaspard Ohm.

"Regime?" Cranston shook his head as though trying to sort out his thoughts. "Political power isn't what I handle best, Ohm. Besides, an Earth revolution just leads to more of what you don't like. Rule by human beings."

Ohm smiled a condescending, rubbery smile. He had been placated

about Cranston's motives. He must know they were here in the service of Commander Ulmstead. Was it possible that Ohm thought Cranston's allegiances would change?

"I have something to show you and Miss Clarke," Ohm said, and his conciliatory tone carried a faint plea for approval. "However, at this moment, you will have to join the others." Ohm rose, his huge frame towering over Cranston. His giant hands clapped together. Victor opened the door and, wordlessly, led Cranston outside. Ohm stared after them, his hands folded inside the drooping arms of his voluminous, velvet robe like an ancient Chinese mandarin.

* * *

The crew and Dione were somewhere in limbo—not quite prisoners, not quite free. They were secured in a suite of spacious rooms dotting Ohm's endless corridors. Cranston entered and within seconds Baldy had undone his hands. Despite Ohm's last minute flicker of amity, he hadn't been willing to release his captive. His trust was conditional at best.

"Ohm claimed Dione was here," Cranston asked. He noted that his entire crew was present—including the two left on the *Draco II*. Another question to be answered.

"Restin' in the other room. An' sure she might, with such a lump on her head," Gor answered, his eyes gleaming coldly. "She told us what you saw. Those settlers an' crew. Lying there—"

"The maintenance crew. Why isn't someone on board ship?"

"Ohm again, Cap," Baldy answered. "One of those dwarves brought a message. Said it was from you. Said to come. Handwritten it was and the crew had no cause to doubt. So they're here, too."

Cranston took stock—the first moment he'd had available since that chamber with the bodies. A movement. The lights had gone out. Something had crowded around him and Dione. Then, unconsciousness.

Who? Cranston was sure no one was there. More questions. At least some could be answered. "How did Ohm get you all together?"

"Simple enough, Cap," Gor said, crestfallen. "Another message from

that circus freak. Said you had something to tell us. We had no way of knowing your condition or what harm he'd do."

"And weapons?" Cranston asked.

Baldy answered sadly. "No go, Cap. Ohm specified they be left behind and those gnomes of his searched, too. He hinted that you'd pay for any reluctance on our part. Miss Dione was already here when we arrived."

So far Ohm was a clear cut winner.

"You've checked the quarters?" Cranston asked, knowing the answer.

"Tight, Cap. Comfortable, like a travotell suite. But these doors won't budge. An' they seem the only exit," Gor answered.

Cranston nodded and rose from the chair he'd slumped in. His head had begun to throb and he suddenly realized how exhausted he felt. He had had only four hours sleep since touching down on Greensward.

He entered the smaller room and saw Dione lying on the bed, asleep and breathing deeply. He stroked her head and felt the lump. Whatever had hit him had done equally well to her. They could compare headaches later. Now was sleep time. Cranston dreamt about a traveling troupe of entertainers, including a huge, thin juggler with necked eyes that spun in his head.

* * *

Cranston felt someone shake him and he edged into consciousness, balky and reluctant. "Cap. Cap." The words floated down through his sleep than yanked him awake. Baldy was over him. Light from Greensward's sun poured through the windows. It was mid-morning on Greensward. He'd had at least a full eight hour's sleep.

"That runt of Ohm's is here. There's another of those letters. On a silver tray," Baldy added, most surprised by the tray.

Cranston rose stiffly. Victor, the tray perched on five stiff fingers, looked at the crew, sprawled in various positions, with distant disdain. He proffered the tray to Cranston.

The new regime is at hand. You and Miss Clarke are cordially invited to meet the instruments of its execution, and participate in Galactic history. Victor will introduce the way to you.

G. Ohm

Cranston passed the note to Gor and Baldy. "Wait here," he said to Victor and went to Dione. His two officers scanned the note and followed him.

"You're not going with that runt," Gor said; Cranston didn't reply. "Cap, they're dangerous. Let's make a run for it now."

It wasn't an easy decision. But even given the chance to reach their ship—and Cranston knew that Ohm would have made *some* provisions against that eventuality—they'd return to Ulmstead's office practically empty handed. Already an unexpected rebellion raged through many of the Citiplexes, a rebellion that had an excellent chance of success. Now, references to a new "regime"—new bodyblows to the Earth Federation. No. Not knowing what Ohm's plans were was infinitely worse than bringing home the skimpy information he'd learned. He didn't even have Ohm's journals as booty.

And Ohm's invitation was tailor-made to glean more facts about the regime the madman raved over. The fact that Ohm, at least at the moment, hoped for Cranston and Dione's cooperation was some safeguard.

"We're going," Cranston said, gently shaking Dione awake. She sat up almost immediately and Cranston told her of Ohm's note and his conversation with the giant. In five minutes she was ready.

"It's crazy, Cap," Gor exclaimed in exasperation. "You get caught with goods in hand, then feed Ohm a thin story creamed with flattery. He swallows. Now he's going to make you king..." Gor glanced at Dione, "and queen of some new regime thing. Why?"

"Because he *wants* to believe us," Dione answered softly. "Up to now he's only had mutants like himself to trust. We're his last link with normal human beings. Probably his last link with sanity. He doesn't want that link broken."

"With all of those settlers you saw, with things growing from their heads, that's a lot of expecting," Baldy said darkly.

"It's not logical, Baldy. He's focused on us... on me, too. The others don't count for him," Dione said and again Cranston wondered how closely Dione resembled the girl Ohm once coveted.

"It's thin ice, Cap. That freak is as fickle as a balky ion engine. I hope what he knows is worth it all," Gor muttered.

"We'll soon find out," Cranston said. He and Dione followed Victor through another maze of corridors and Cranston wondered if the dwarf deliberately redoubled his tracks to confuse the route further. Finally he halted before a doorway. Without apparent reason it slid open.

Gaspard Ohm was inside, staring out another of the windows overlooking Greensward. His hands were entwined in the arms of his robes. He turned and Cranston was surprised to notice that Ohm actually appeared nervous. His face had an anticipatory look and a film of moisture covered his forehead.

"Prepare yourself for a revelation of a lifetime," Ohm intoned, his voice barely audible. His eyes flicked from Cranston to Dione. "I trust my confidence in your cooperation is not misplaced," he whispered and the tone carried a raw menace uncharacteristic of the man.

Victor moved to Ohm's side and a malicious smile covered his tiny, impish face. "Speak low if you speak at all," Ohm commanded mysteriously and moved toward yet another entrance in his giant strides, Victor trotting at his side. Dione's eyebrows arched and her shoulders hunched as she gave Cranston a quick look.

Ohm paused before the door as though entering a throne room, flung it open, and entered. One of his arms swept forward, indicating they were to follow.

Cranston and Dione moved into a large, well-lit chamber crowded with vegetation. For a moment Cranston wondered if the giant were playing some sort of game. Except for themselves and the dense growth of plants, the room was empty.

Cranston glanced around, a frown on his face. A patch of vegetation

trembled, then parted. His eyes squinted, then widened.

No. Ohm hadn't recorded all his secrets in those ledgers. For the second time on Greensward, Cranston and Dione were hit with a shock. Dione's hands slapped to her ears as her face contorted in agony.

Ohm's face beamed with a maniacal, beatific light as he whispered reverently. "You are now in the presence of... Plantifer."

CHAPTER 16

The *thing* shuffled from behind a camouflaging wall of greenery with a surprising agility. It stood about a hundred and sixty centimeters tall and if it resembled anything remotely terrestrial it was a large stalk of asparagus half-covered by a scaly foliage akin to the leaves of an artichoke. Gossamer hairs covered its lower half and four rope-thin tentacles sprouted around its circumference. Three crystalline circles dotted its slim body, one at its top, the others in a straight line below, forming a vertical triad of eyes. Its means of locomotion was hidden by bushlike growths covering its base.

It stopped before them, silent and immobile, as though growing from the floor. Only the tentacles moved, undulating slowly from side to side while gently coiling and uncoiling at the same time. Each of the tentacles' tips had an appendage with six jointed claws, a rough equivalent of hands.

Dione's hands slid from her ears. She was chalk-white. "It was *communicating* with me. The same way as plants. Pictures and impressions. It *hates* us," she said weakly.

Ohm spoke as though introducing royalty. "I present Plantifer. An intelligent life form not known to this Galaxy. The ultimate development of the vegetable kingdom. The rightful ruler of a universe." Ohm regarded Plantifer with a rapture men reserve for their gods.

Dione suddenly stiffened and her mouth dropped open. A slow malevolent smile spread across Victor's face. "It's talking again, Keith," she said, and paled. The events that brought the bizarre creature to Greensward spun through her mind like sequential pictures on a telescreen. But more, too, came with the flash of pictures: motives, attitudes, impressions—a loathsome sequence she felt with the vividness of

a living nightmare.

Dione buried her head in Cranston's chest and her fingers dug into his arms. Finally the torture ceased. Her fingers relaxed and she stood shakily, supported by Cranston's arm around her waist. Her mouth opened once, but no words came.

Ohm looked down at Victor. The dwarf spoke quickly in a language Cranston had never heard. Ohm's rubbery lips stretched in a satisfied smile. "I see Plantifer has deemed it proper to inform you of his origin and purpose," Ohm said triumphantly, and immediately Cranston grasped one limitation of the man.

"You're not a sensitive, Ohm, are you? Victor's the one you have to depend on."

"A gift not granted to me, Captain Cranston," Ohm admitted, "nor to you. A gift Victor is graced with and one that Miss Clarke possesses to an enormous degree. She is a valuable specimen." Ohm looked at Dione, a voracious look that combined admiration, envy, and covetousness.

"What's it all about?" Cranston asked Dione. He was sure that right before him was the ultimate secret of Greensward, and the greatest danger to the Earth Federation.

Dione tried to speak, but at first the memory of those nightmares overwhelmed her. "Plantifer..." she stuttered, gaining control. She stared briefly at the alien then looked away. "The Galactic Invaders, Keith. This is one of them. There are more here. They're the remnants that managed to hide. Ohm's helping them. They want..." Dione choked as she remembered the hate of the creature before her.

Ohm filled in. "Plantifer—and I—expect control of the Galaxy and subjugation of animal life. Humans. Nothing more or less, Captain Cranston," he said flatly. "Such natural dominion is even now progressing smoothly. Plantifer and a modest group arrived on Greensward after the debacle on Tau Medar, your home planet, over twenty years ago. What one method couldn't accomplish, another can."

"You'd help murderous aliens take over the Galaxy?" Cranston barked out. "After what they did to all those people. That plague." He stared at Ohm, his voice suddenly rising to a shout. "You're an original, Ohm. You

don't betray a cause. You betray mankind."

A terrified look spread over Ohm's face. The gold flecks of his eyes glittered. And whatever Ohm might have said in riposte, his words came as a complete surprise to Cranston and Dione.

"You will keep your voice down in Plantifer's presence," Ohm hissed out. "There will be no shouting." The vehemence was unmistakable. Even the normally unperturbable Victor looked worried. The dwarf shot a concerned glance at the alien, then a menacing one at Cranston.

"They want us to help, Keith. They want cooperation during a Galactic takeover and afterwards. We'd be local viceroys," Dione added in a low voice.

Ohm looked placated. "At first, when Ulmstead contacted you, you were a menace. Now that you're here you could be an asset, participating in a rule by a benevolent vegetable kingdom, one not tainted by ridicule for the unusual." Even during Ohm's new ranting his vibrant voice remained subdued. "Most rules have exceptions. Plantifer suspends his hatred of me and my associates and could do the same for you."

"What claim do they have for benevolence after wiping out planet after planet with the plague?" Cranston shot back. "And with those people downstairs. Kidnapped, and forced into whatever you have planned?"

Ohm dismissed the question with a wave. "Mere pawns in a struggle greater than they could comprehend or have a right to understand. Like most of mankind on Earth. These insignificants," and Cranston knew Ohm referred to the naked figures he'd seen, "are now our willing servants. Their joy is one of servitude to destiny."

That humans were somehow under Ohm's control came as no great shock to Cranston. The kidnappings, attacks, sabotage—all had been carried out by Ohm's command. Cranston stared again at the alien called Plantifer. Could this be responsible? But how could it or Ohm control a human being from one hundred and fifty light-years away? A word Cranston had read in Ohm's notes came to mind. Astatine. There was a connection someplace. He shook his head. He faced more important problems right now—getting away from Greensward was the most important.

Cranston thought quickly. Interest in Ohm's schemes had got them this far. But a feigned cooperation couldn't be played further. Ohm would certainly spot suppressed reluctance. Besides, his ravings had become progressively more disjointed and his moods steadily more volatile. The man's attitudes could change overnight. More, Cranston had a natural dislike of even appearing as a conspirator in something so monstrous as assisting the Galactic Invaders.

No. Whatever they did it had to be accomplished soon. Another approach came to mind. Ohm had a reverence for Plantifer that bordered on idolatry—another psychological vulnerability that could be played on.

"Ohm, you're way off base. This hunk of shrubbery isn't going to get you far. It may have intelligence, but not guts. It couldn't win a fight with the Earth Federation twenty years ago. Now it's trying to sneak in the kitchen by the back door." Cranston shot a disgusted glance at Plantifer.

Ohm's reaction was instantaneous as well as drastic. His face paled and he turned rigid. The veins on his huge jaw bulged. His mouth curved downward at the ends and the thick lip trembled. Even through the half-closed slits of eyelids Cranston saw the glow of those gold flecks. A physical blow couldn't have enraged him more.

Ohm said an incomprehensible word to Victor. The dwarf looked slyly at Cranston, smiled viciously, and closed his eyes. The alien's four tentacles began moving in swift, darting patterns.

After a few moments Dione grunted, and slapped her hands to her ears again. "Keith, it's communicating to Victor. I can understand. It..." Victor spoke to Ohm in quick staccato words. A satisfied smile spread over the giant's face.

"Keith, it wants you to fight another of its kind. A warrior plant. It's been bred and trained just to fight."

"No guts?" Ohm's voice was a low growl. "Let's decide by the oldest method known to mankind. Primitive but decisive. A duel. You, representing the Animal Kingdom, against one of Plantifer's cohorts, a delegate of the Plant Kingdom. Perhaps your arrogance can be tamed. A lesson for all."

Ohm rubbed the palms of his huge hands together savagely. "It will

take some hours to arrange," he said. He spoke to Victor who nodded, left the room and returned a few moments later.

Ohm looked positively delighted. "A duel between Kingdoms. A classic situation with an intragalactic twist. The first such duel of its kind." The giant began to vibrate. His chest and head twitched. His large ears flapped against his neck. Low, quick grunts came from his throat.

Ohm was chuckling.

Cranston glanced at Plantifer. Its three crystalline eyes seemed to glint evilly. Its tentacles, for the first time, were motionless.

* * *

The men had been moved to a large cell-like chamber, cut from rock as all the rest, with a window high above them and with no pretense about imprisonment. They were, now, captives. A massive door at one end sealed the room. Victor was joined by three more dwarves, each carrying a lasegun, as they marched Cranston and Dione to the cell. They looked like children playing with large toys. But Cranston didn't doubt their willingness to fire if he resisted.

And to what advantage? His crew would be cut down and the secret on Greensward would remain just that—a secret: At least until the collapse of the Earth Federation. He had stirred up Ohm all right. Something might come of that.

"They gassed us, Cap," Gor reported. "One minute we were awake and pert. Then Foyle," Gor nodded to a crew member, "heard a hiss. An' we woke up here. Didn't happen long ago." Cranston remembered that Victor had left for a time. Probably he had arranged the details then.

Cranston glanced around, an instinctive search for an escape route. "We've been over it all, Cap," Baldy said. Cranston didn't doubt that this cell once held the passengers and crew of the missing starships. Tight and secure with Ohm's customary meticulousness.

"Gor, Baldy. They want Keith to fight a... a *plant*" Dione said suddenly. They looked at each other, and then at Dione, with concern.

"That's right. A plant," Cranston confirmed and gathered the crew in a

circle. He explained what they'd discovered. The group was too stunned to ask many questions, but visibly angry at the other human beings—Ohm, Victor, and the other dwarves—cooperating with the detested Galactic Invaders. Whatever their reaction, it included a healthy dose of fighting spirit. The crew would go where he led without question.

They rested. Cranston sat in one corner, Dione nestling beside him. The crew sprawled on the floor, just as the settlers must have done Cranston thought. Gor and Baldy sat aside, talking in low, glum tones.

"What did Plantifer, say to you?" Cranston remembered Dione's reaction of fear and shock.

She shuddered anew and drew closer to him. "It was a mental feeling of hatred, more than anything else. Hate of anything animal. It doesn't really talk with a language. It's more like a series of quick-moving pictures. But more intense and clear than I've ever gotten from other plants."

Cranston squeezed Dione's shoulder in encouragement. She buried her face in his chest for a moment, then continued. "Plantifer lived on another world in another Galaxy. I got the idea that there was a war between them and semi-intelligent animal race. It wasn't too clear. The animals enslaved the plant race," Dione trembled again, "for food." Dione looked into Cranston's eyes. "Plantifer's kind were kept as slaves, mostly to be eaten."

"Couldn't those... vegetables defend themselves?" Cranston asked. "They did a good job of destroying the Earth Federation's Galactic settlements."

Dione shrugged. "The only other impressions I got was that Plantifer, and whoever came with him, were descendents of a group of his race that hid for centuries. They developed, or stole, a technology including something like our starships and left their galaxy. They've kept their hatred of anything animal."

Puzzling. If they could build starships and the weapons used during the Galactic Invasions why couldn't they at least fight a battle for their own planet? And why cooperate with Ohm? He was animal too. Perhaps because the giant hated people as much as they did, Cranston thought.

A sharp rasping sound caught their attention and a slit in the massive door opened. Ohm's face was framed in the square rectangle of a Judas hole. "Captain Cranston," he called. Cranston and Dione went over.

"Petulance triumphed for the moment," Ohm said, conciliation in his voice. "But it need not preempt our interests. Again, I urge that you join in our approaching triumph."

"Did you have to kill my father and everyone else at the outpost?" Dione retorted angrily. Until now, Cranston had avoided direct mention of the outpost. Now was as good a time as any for explanations.

A genuine look of pain crossed Ohm's face. "Jason Clarke was one of the few humans I appreciated. His death was essentially an accident."

"How did it happen, Ohm?" It might be the last time Ohm would give them hard information.

For a moment the giant seemed undecided, then said, "Jason was close to uncovering Greensward's activities. He had begun to intercept our instructions to Earth. His methods were as yet primitive compared to our developments. But he represented an information leak that had to be contained."

"So you killed him," Dione said bitterly.

Ohm shook his head. "No. No. He was to be brought here. However, some members of the raiding party became... overly enthusiastic. I had no part in his death."

"You mean, Ohm, you can't control these vegetables you call allies?"

Ohm's face grew rigid. "Controversy, Captain Cranston, is not the lubricant of compromise. You may be interested to note that two additional major Citiplexes are now in our hands. The Earth Federation's collapse is imminent. We need enterprising agents—of a human variety. You and Miss Clarke will do nicely under my tutelage. Your refusal will accomplish nothing. Your acceptance will help make Galactic history."

"When I finish with this bush I'm to fight, Ohm, we'll see What kind of Galactic history you will make."

Ohm looked as though he'd been struck. He slammed shut the trap bolt with a bang. "An hour, then, Cranston," came Ohm's voice, and even the thick door couldn't muffle the distorted timbre of a scorned man gone completely insane.

CHAPTER 17

"Cap, we got something for you," Baldy and Gor stood before Cranston. Baldy held a strip of leather with two cords dangling from each end.

A sling.

"Foyle, there, suggested it, Cap," Gor explained, also holding two, heavy tungsten-steel ball bearings in his other hand. Ammunition. The leather had come from the tongue of a shoe—some men claimed that the more typical soft plastic never felt as supple as the rarer leather. The cords were laces. And, the often sullen Foyle carried the bearings as some sort of charm. Now donated to the cause—conquest of a plant.

Cranston grunted at the tragicomic burlesque unfolding before them: in the year twenty-three hundred seventy-five, a Medieval hand-to-hand duel using one of the oldest weapons known to mankind. A sling. Against an alien plant.

Told at a spacer bar, the story would probably bring roars of knee-slapping laughter at the inventive use of imagination. Fighting a plant? Well, spacers were always making up outlandish tales.

Cranston stuck the sling and ammunition into a side pocket. "This too, Cap." Another donation. Gor held out a thick leather tunic. Cranston hadn't realized so many of the crew wore items of animal skin. A tight fit, but the half-sleeved garment protected his chest. The question was, against what?

Cranston rested, Dione again nestling silently in his arms. The trap bolt in the door rasped and she jerked up at the sudden noise.

"All is arranged, Captain Cranston. Your insolence is about to meet its reward." Ohm's voice. The door opened. The giant stood in the entrance, a towering shadow. Beside him were the miniature silhouettes of Victor and some of his retinue. No one doubted they were aiming a bank of laseguns in their direction.

"You may bring your lieutenants and Miss Clarke as unimpeachable witnesses to defeat," Ohm announced, then disappeared.

They followed. Victor and the other dwarves marched Gor, Baldy, and Dione down a long corridor. Ohm took Cranston to yet another of the limitless rooms in his aerie. He was unarmed. With Dione, Gor, and Baldy as hostages, he didn't have to be.

Suits of armor, knives, daggers, swords, maces, halberds, pikes, and other ancient weapons filled the room like a museum's display. "Another of my interests, Captain. Medieval history. The origin of my proposal for a duel, in fact. You may choose a hand weapon. Your adversary is content to use his natural accoutrements."

It seemed fair, but Cranston knew the odds were in favor of the house. Sure, he might have a weapon. But he didn't have an inkling of his foe's weaknesses. How do you kill a plant? It, by contrast, certainly knew a human being's vulnerable spots. Plantifer's race had had plenty of practise, Cranston thought grimly.

Cranston made his choice, a pointed sword with a fine cutting edge. A needle-sharp rapier had caught his eye. But in the end Cranston opted for a cut and slash weapon rather than a thrust and puncture variety. His armament: a sword and a hidden sling.

He followed Ohm through yet more corridors and, finally, past a doorway. It opened into the vast oval hall where they had been so regally welcomed by a banquet. A room now decked out as an arena.

In its center was an oval combat space, surfaced with green turf. Light streamed in from the clear-domed ceiling. A tall, ornate chair rested at one end of the battle area. Ohm was really pushing Medieval ritual, Cranston thought. A balcony Cranston hadn't noticed rimmed one side of the room. Gor, Baldy, and Dione were there, seated and grim. In his brief glance Cranston saw they were gagged, and caught the glitter of manacles around legs and arms. Obviously Ohm didn't want any cheers for the visiting team. Thick green vegetation hid the room's sides.

Cranston stood at one end of the battleground while Ohm pompously sat in his chair. The thick screen of plants shuddered and Cranston got his second look at Plantifer. The alien moved quickly towards Ohm's side, as though on rollers, and faced Cranston, its tentacles never ceasing their graceful coiling movements. As though on signal, Victor and his retinue strutted out, a ludicrous sight in their white and black, penguin-like suits. They formed a line on either side of Ohm and Plantifer, like a guard of

honor.

Ohm raised his right hand in a royal gesture, then dropped it to an armrest. Plantifer's tentacles gyrated in a slow arc. The thick screen of vegetation lining the walls rustled again. Cranston's foe emerged.

Cranston had steeled his nerves to expect anything. Even so he felt a momentary weakness wash over him. Whereas Plantifer was graceful in its slim appearance, the monster that shuttled out was thick, squat, and ugly in proportion. It was as tall as Plantifer but much wider, and despite its graceless look it moved with a smoothness that Cranston didn't miss. Its bulk made it appear clumsy, but Cranston didn't underestimate its speed for a second.

Four tentacles ringed its bulk and Cranston resolved to stay from their reach. Claw-like spikes sprouted from their ends and he saw that they were genetic adaptations to the more fingerlike apparatus at the tips of Plantifer's tendrils. One addition was apparent. Two stiff, paddle-like leaves grew from its sides, appendages not present on Plantifer. Cranston couldn't even guess at their function. Three crystalline eyes in a vertical row glinted in the light. A weak spot for sure, but difficult and dangerous to reach. One other difference. The warrior's tip tapered to a spear-shaped spine as sharp as a cactus needle.

The creature emanated an aura of brutish efficiency. It turned toward Plantifer in short, jerky motions, the bush-like leaves of its lower half vibrating. Its tentacles lashed out and remained stiff—four appendages pointing to all points of the compass.

Plantifer uncoiled his tentacles, stiffened them for a moment, then reeled them in again. The warrior plant curled his tendrils and in staccato movements turned so that its three eyes faced Cranston. A differential salute between warrior and king before combat? Whatever the aliens' strange mentality, a social hierarchy appeared to be included. One more bizarre bit of pageantry in an already outlandish scenario.

The arena was strangely quiet and even though Ohm barely whispered Cranston heard his words plainly. "No quarter shall be asked, Captain Cranston, none given." Ohm punctuated his comments with another regal gesture. Plantifer's tentacles waved again. The vegetation surrounding the arena rustled, and Cranston saw at least twenty more of the aliens skulk from the mass of plants. They stood in a circle, only their tentacles

moving, their crystal eyes gleaming at the expected massacre.

"You may start," Ohm hissed. Plantifer's tentacles dipped.

The alien scuttled toward Cranston. The battle began.

And it began badly.

With incredible speed one of the alien's tentacles lashed out like a bullwhip. Cranston dodged, but neither fast nor far enough. The claws at the limb's end raked his face, leaving three parallel gashes. First blood for his foe.

Another tendril feinted forward and Cranston's sword flashed to meet it as a second limb whipped out. Cranston had the effective striking length of the tentacles estimated. He swung at the first limb—then seeing his danger—tried to dodge the second. He was too slow. Claws raked his neck and Cranston grunted in pain as he felt the warm trickle of blood. Better. But not good enough and more blood flowed to prove it.

Again the creature feinted and again Cranston dodged. And once more, he was almost fast enough, but again the claws found a mark and blood poured from his hip.

Cranston moved back and circled the alien. The thing was playing with him. Any one of those lashes could have punctured more deeply. Ohm and Plantifer wanted a show. And his adversary was giving them one. Time to alter the script.

Cranston had noticed that the creature turned in slow, jerky movements. Forward motion was swift. Circling appeared slower and more abrupt, a limitation that Cranston now exploited.

He darted toward the plant, dove in a long arc to its right and rolled to his feet. The alien moved around in sudden hops, its tentacles flailing the air at random, slowing its pivot when not quite facing Cranston. Another limitation became obvious: tunnel vision. The alien's tentacles coiled for a stroke only when facing Cranston. Its three eyes could barely see an object at its flanks.

Cranston leaped to the creature's left and rolled again. He was on his feet and moving in before his foe had waddled through a complete turn,

his sword held high. The alien caught a hint of danger and blindly whipped out a tendril. Cranston's sword flashed. The steel sliced through the appendage as easily as hacking off a soft vine. The dismembered tentacle churned on the ground like a snake with a severed head. A thick, white sap oozed from the stump.

The alien retreated a few paces, its three remaining tentacles whirling aimlessly in the air. It had wanted a show and lost the equivalent of an arm during the performance. Game time was over.

The plant's three tentacles coiled for a strike, and the strange paddle-like leaves at its base snapped forward, looking like stiff ears. Cranston circled, trying to stay outside his enemy's narrow vision, his sword held firmly, readying for another dive and roll. The creature jerked in a suddenly quick step, for an instant facing Cranston. One of its paddle leaves contracted.

Cranston felt a quick series of tugs at his chest and he glanced down. A dozen thorn-like darts stuck from the thick leather. A bizarre evolutionary twist—plants that launched projectiles. And no doubt poisoned. Cranston knew that without the vest as armor he'd now be writhing in a death agony. No wonder Ohm had been so smug about his defeat.

Cranston circled more quickly. Projectiles? He'd forgotten about his improvised sling. He drew it from his pocket as he moved and quickly fumbled one of Foyle's bearings into the pouch. The sling whirred overhead and Cranston paused just long enough to take aim. The missile sped toward the plant at an enormous velocity. Just then the plant's other paddle contracted.

All projectiles struck. Most of the darts hit the leather vest. Most. Two pierced Cranston's lower-left arm and he gasped at a sudden, stinging pain a giant wasp might cause. The bearing smashed close to one of the alien's crystal eyes. A visible shuddering ran through the creature. Its three tentacles waved wildly in the air and its lower leaves thrashed with a dry, rustling sound. Ohm half rose from his seat, his lips compressed into a tight line.

Waves of pain rolled up Cranston's arm, the fingers already numb at the tips, as the alien again rushed forward. Ordinarily, the charge would have been too swift for Cranston to dodge. But the creature, too, had been weakened, and its movements were perceptibly slower. Cranston darted to

one side and rolled—the single successful evasive tactic he'd discovered, his sword clutched tightly in his right hand.

The warrior plant had anticipated the move. It stopped short and began its jerky turn while Cranston was still on the ground. A tentacle lashed out as, by cunning more than plan, Cranston swung his sword while on his knees. The tendril whipped toward Cranston's face and met razor sharp steel. Another ropelike tentacle squirmed on the ground like a cut worm.

Cranston darted to his feet and moved out of reach of the remaining tendrils, blood dripping from his face, neck and side. His left arm was completely numb and hung uselessly at his side. A dull ache numbed his shoulder. His chest heaved as he gasped in air.

But the damage wasn't all one sided. The alien was now minus two tentacles—and didn't seem the happier for it. Cranston noticed a white ooze of sap from a wound near the thing's eye. The bearing had punctured its surface. The creature's movements were now sluggish and it seemed in no great hurry to charge again.

The two combatants backed off, as though by mutual consent, and regarded each other in the hush of the arena. With an insight that transcended race and time, Cranston and the alien both knew that the next clash would be decisive. Both were weakening quickly. Both wanted a quick, neat finish. Both adversaries mustered their reserves, prepared to gamble all in one desperate effort at victory.

With one arm numb the sling was useless. Similarly, the alien's paddles were empty of the darts. Victory or defeat would be decided by close combat.

Cranston circled quickly, but often stumbling from near exhaustion. The alien spun slowly, its hops sluggish. They moved warily, steadily reducing the distance between them, like two pit dogs preparing for a kill. The alien's two remaining tentacles hovered in full coil. Cranston tightened the grip on his sword.

Cranston charged, using his final energies on one last ruse. He dove quickly—but in the opposite direction to his circling movement. The alien, caught off guard, tried to reverse direction. A fraction of a second's delay. But it was all Cranston had wanted.

Cranston rolled behind the creature and rose in a crouch, sword held high. A tentacle lashed out at random. The alien had to protect its blind spots or risk a sword thrust through its body. And Cranston was ready.

He swung with one hand and again steel sliced through plant tissue. A third tendril squirmed on the ground and a dry crackling sound from rubbing leaves indicated that the creature felt pain. The force of Cranston's swing carried him forward and for a moment he perched on two knees and his sword hand.

A costly pause.

With a last burst of speed, the alien snapped his fourth tentacle around Cranston's throat. The tendril dragged Cranston to the plant's side. The stench of white ooze was overpowering. His head buzzed and dots danced in his eyes as the tentacle squeezed. Cranston battered his foe's body with the butt of the sword handle, trying to slow the throttling grasp that squeezed his life away. His blows had no more effect than a child's hand pounding against a stone wall. He desperately tried to cut the appendage that throttled him. He was pressed too close against the alien to place his sword's cutting edge.

Cranston's vision glazed then disappeared in a red haze. In his last moments of consciousness he raised the sword like an oversized dagger and reached around the creature. The sword point punctured the alien's body and the tentacle convulsed even tighter. Cranston uttered a croaking gasp as his head was forced behind his shoulders.

As his last supply of air was squeezed off, Cranston gave a mighty pull on the sword. Then he blacked out and collapsed, his hand clutching his weapon with the force of a dead man's grip.

CHAPTER 18

Something tapped his face. Something wet and cold. Cranston regained consciousness as Dione knelt beside him, cleaning blood from his face with a wet cloth. Someone called to him, someone from the far end of a long tunnel.

"You'll be Okay, Cap." Cranston opened his eyes and saw Gor's wizened face. Baldy knelt at his other side. A group of faces hovered over those

three—the crew. His dizziness disappeared gradually. He sat up, aided by Baldy, his head spinning afresh. He glanced around and saw the familiar walls of their cell.

Cranston swallowed, then groaned. Every muscle in his throat was bruised. His larynx felt twice its normal size. "The alien?" His voice was little more than a croak and each syllable renewed the pain he felt.

"Done in, Cap. Close though it was," Gor replied, then added "for all the good your winning's seem to done for us."

Cranston moved and felt fire shoot up his left arm. He looked and saw two festering pinpricks, their tops like suppurating volcanoes. His stomach churned as he recognized those marks. The outpost: Jason Clarke had the same imprint. And his two crewmen on Raker—the same kind of wounds.

And another time... a new wave of dizziness swept over Cranston, then faded. The memory of a dying man, one gasping out his last words to a small boy came to mind. His father's shoulder and chest filled with the oozing molehills the darts caused.

Baldy saw Cranston's look and held out the borrowed tunic to him. A dozen, quill-like darts still protruded from the thick leather. "Saved you, Cap. They're hollow and poisoned. Would have buried themselves inside your chest." As it was the two darts that had nicked his arm had all but paralyzed his left side. Only now were the effects beginning to wear off.

Through his pain, Cranston marveled at the freak of evolution that had endowed an intelligent plant life with the ability to launch darts. Effective, too. He knew of four human beings killed by them—two of his crew, Jason Clarke, and his father. He had just missed becoming the most recent victim.

Then, through the ache in his throat and the sharp sting in his arm, he remembered. "What are we doing here? I won," he managed to get out.

Gor scowled. "That madman flipped out completely," Gor told him. "Raved and ranted after you killed that overgrown vegetable. An' back here we are, without much, chance of being set free. Claimed you cheated..."

Gor and Baldy pushed Cranston down gently by his shoulders. A low, croaking growl came from his throat then died out as pain overwhelmed him. "Calm it, Cap. Save yer strength," Gor added. "Doubt if he ever intended letting us go."

For the first time since regaining his senses Cranston got a good look at Dione. Her eyes were red, her face drawn and pale. She put her hand on his shoulder and the faint pressure calmed him more than all of Gor's logic. "It wasn't fair, Keith. Ohm was so sure you'd lose."

The trap bolt of the Judas hole shot back and almost as one they looked at the door of their prison. Ohm's long face stared at them like a morose mask. "Speakin' of the Devil," Baldy said.

Ohm ignored the taunt. "Cranston. A word with you," the giant said. Aided by Gor on one side and Dione on the other Cranston rose. His entire body ached and his legs shook. He looked up at Ohm through the rectangular slot in the door. He said nothing. Even if words came easily he would have remained silent. It was Ohm's play. There was no predicting what he wanted now.

"You have destroyed a cherished associate of Plantifer," Ohm accused. "He is highly disturbed." The arrogance of the man left them all momentarily speechless.

"When children play with fire they get burned," Dione retorted, her eyes flashing. "You've learned something. Maybe."

The gold flecks in Ohm's eyes glittered, then dimmed. He looked at Cranston. "Your fate has been decided. Plantifer—"

"You thought *you* were heading that gang upstairs. Now we find it's the tail that's wagging the dog," Cranston interrupted, ignoring the ache in his throat.

Even in the dim light they saw Ohm's face turn livid. "Your place among the stalk ears is merited," Ohm shrieked and immediately Cranston was alert. Information could be as valuable as a lasegun. Ohm was undoubtedly referring to the rows of naked settlers. But even his notes hadn't elaborated on what was happening to them.

"One more of your developments, Ohm?" Cranston croaked out. His

interest was genuine.

"Indeed. One of the most difficult," Ohm began and they could sense the pleasure he took in parading his inventions before them, as though it excused his duplicity. "Biocommunication demands the unique cellular characteristics of plants as a trans-recept medium. After laborious work I found a method of growing a specific algae throughout the dura of the human brain. Plantifer's commands are instantly transmitted and just as quickly obeyed. Those... specimens have become drones in his service. In a day, twenty-four Earth hours, they will be his slaves. Shortly after, you will have that honor." Ohm's voice had mounted to a crescendo.

"Careful, Ohm. Remember. No shouting," Cranston said, recalling Ohm's fright when he had yelled in front of Plantifer.

Spittle flew from the giant's lips. The trap bolt shut with a thunderous bang.

"Sure an' he left mad," Gor said, shaking his head.

"Cap. What was that all about? Stalk ears and algae growin' in heads?"

"Ohm's found a way to grow plant cells in human brains. After that Plantifer takes over by biocommunication. They must have hundreds of humans under their control." Cranston again remembered the thick red scars he'd seen after the bank robbery.

"Is it possible, Cap? I mean... making bloody robots out of humans?" Baldy asked incredulously.

Cranston signaled to Dione. "Ask the resident expert," he wheezed. His throat was better. Now it merely felt as though he'd swallowed a cupful of pins.

"I'd guess it's possible, even though algae is just on the border of plant life. But it's more than just biocommunication. It's biocontrol. That growth must suppress voluntary initiative," Dione replied.

"One thing, Cap," Gor said solemnly. "No one's going to get me on those tables alive. I'll be dead before I become a mindless robot doing what an alien vegetable says." Cranston agreed. No one even noticed that, by now, they all accepted biocommunication without question.

Another trap bolt slid back, this one near the base of the door, and food and containers of water were shoved through. Cranston glanced at his chronometer. Over eight Earth hours had passed since his battle with the warrior plant. He was hungry: a good sign. They ate. Then they slept—a palliative Cranston sorely needed.

Later, when he was awake, Baldy and Gor came over. "Cap. You said something to Ohm that's been picking at my mind. About those overgrown vegetables sneaking in the back door." Baldy munched on a crusty cracker that had been given them, his head cocked to one side.

"What about it, Baldy?"

"Well, just that you were right. They *are* sneaking through the back door. But why? Why are they here, fiddling the same tune as Ohm? How come the Galactic Invaders are reduced to playing with a madman?"

Gor spoke up. Obviously the two had spent some time discussing the problem. "Seems like they've got to have a weakness someplace. Maybe one we've missed. Otherwise, why'd they stay here on Greensward? Not for *this* food, guaranteed." Gor spat out a mouthful of cracker.

A weakness? Once the Galactic Invaders had seemed invincible. They had almost controlled the Earth Federation's galactic empire. Now they were on a backwater planet. And only thanks to Gaspard Ohm were they a major threat.

Something had defeated them. Suddenly, too. Defeated...

A memory of a small boy looking at a badly burned, dying man came to Cranston's mind. "Defeated. *Invaders* defeated." His father had said that. But how had he known they were defeated? How had he been so sure?

A weakness?

"Loudn 'oises waapn. Don't ever forget." More words his father had said. But *what* wasn't he to forget? "*Loudn 'oises waapn?*" Cranston played with the phrase. Suddenly the last word of the mumbled phrase became clear.

"Weapon," he said loudly. Dione, Baldy, and Gor looked at him, startled.

"Got something, Cap?" Baldy asked.

Cranston shook his head, thinking. *Something* was a weapon.

Cranston's mind raced over the words—sorting, arranging, switching.

An enormously loud sneeze followed by a raucous cough interrupted his thoughts. Annoyed, Cranston stared at crewman Foyle. A vulgar oaf. Steady and reliable within limits but... Again Foyle's mouth stretched wide. He emitted another monstrous sneeze followed by the same grating cough that made them all wince.

"He'd better not do that in front of Ohm," Dione commented, grimacing.

"Why's that?" Baldy asked.

"Once Keith shouted at Ohm in front of Plantifer. Ohm nearly went berserk. He—"

Then Cranston had it.

He rose, wide-eyed. He felt almost as amazed over its simplicity as astonished at its effectiveness.

"What, Cap?" Gor asked after glimpsing Cranston's expression.

"Not loudn 'oises waapn," he said slowly. His father had slurred the words in his death throes. "It's *loud noises weapon*." Cranston stared ahead. "They're affected by noise. Loud noise," he said suddenly.

The trio before him looked skeptical. "Keith... just *noise!*" Dione asked. Her doubt was plain.

It *did* seem implausible—too simple, too easy. But it fit with the utter simplicity of piecing together the last sections of a complicated jigsaw puzzle. It explained why the Galactic Invaders couldn't possibly defeat the Earth Federation by force. They had been desperate to try it. The secret of their vulnerability had been lost on Tau Medar, true. But it would have been rediscovered almost immediately in a pitched battle. That's why they were here, cooperating with Ohm, taking over the Earth Federation by stealth rather than force—by the kitchen door. It explained the strange

quiet on Greensward and Ohm's anger when he had shouted. It explained the gags on Dione, Baldy, and Gor when he fought the warrior plant. Ohm wasn't worried about cheers that encouraged. He feared the noise of the shouts, period. He had taken an enormous, prideful risk in forcing the recent duel. The most surprising aspect of the fight was that Plantifer had agreed.

Cranston nodded. "Yes. I'm sure. It's as simple as that."

"If so, Cap, it's a mighty big weakness," Gor said. "One that makes puppy dogs of them." And one that *had*, Cranston thought, wondering how his father and the defenders of Tau Medar had stumbled onto the secret.

The sound of the bottom trap bolt slamming back interrupted further talk. More of the tasteless crackers and water were shoved into the cell. Bland, but no doubt nourishing. Ohm wanted them in good physical shape.

Twenty-four hours Ohm had said; already half that had passed.

Cranston's mind raced. An idea formed, coalesced, and moved him into action. He darted toward the door before the trap bolt closed.

"Victor. Tell Ohm I want to see him," Cranston shouted into the open slot. "*Tell Ohm I want to see him.*" No matter that it might not be Victor behind the door. Any of the dwarves would do.

No sound came from the other side. More crackers slid through. Then the trap bolt crashed shut.

"What's up, Cap?" Baldy asked. Cranston gathered the crew around him and outlined his plan. Details would come later. The men nodded approvingly. It was no doubt their last chance to escape Greensward and everyone in the cell preferred risking death to becoming one of the moribund "stalk ears" Ohm had boasted about.

Now to wait. If Ohm came, Cranston would have to talk fast—playing once more on the deteriorated, schizoid personality of the giant. If Ohm came. If...

An hour later the Judas hole in the door slid open quietly. "A last

request, Captain Cranston?" Ohm asked imperiously.

Cranston shuffled over. "Something like that, Ohm. But for my crew."

Ohm smiled in satisfaction. "No pleading for a reprieve? No change of mind about joining our enterprise? No desperate requests for Miss Clarke's safety?" His voice was taunting, contemptuous. But he had come.

"None of that, Ohm," Cranston replied, adding as much humility to his voice as he could muster. "It's too late."

Ohm nodded sagely. "Indeed. Neither I nor Plantifer consider you valuable any longer. It has become obvious that your place is among the drones of humanity—expendable drones at that." Ohm gave Cranston a haughty look. "My time is valuable," he said.

"They want to see the race that defeated us." Cranston nodded towards his crew. "They've heard about the power of the Galactic Invaders. They can't believe that they're simply vegetables." Ohm's face tightened and for a second Cranston thought he had gone too far. "I mean... well."

"That an alien life of photosynthetic, eucaryotic cells is superior. Simply because you and your animal crew have eaten such material all their dull lives." Ohm's face lit in devout triumph while Cranston pondered the technical description of the aliens.

The gold flecks brightened. "Request granted. A parade of the defeated before their logical masters. An encounter between the low and the mighty, then into the preparatory chambers."

"How long, Ohm," Cranston asked, still acting the role of oppressed victim.

"An hour. Perhaps two. Then begins the process by which you become the servants of Plantifer begins." Ohm raged on in another fanatical tirade about the virtues of Plantifer's race and the vices of rule by animals. It took no great insight to see the man no longer had even a vestigial identification with mankind.

Cranston stood, listening, knowing that Ohm's egomania would prod him to savor the humiliation of those he now scorned. Ohm finally finished and, with a wild grin, shut the small trap door.

"You played him nicely, Cap," Gor commented. A thin sheen of sweat covered Cranston's face. He had got his concession, but only because the man's madness had dulled his normal sense of caution.

Now for the next part. A loud, stunning noise.

He called the crew again, and as they gathered Cranston wondered at the secrets Plantifer and his race must hold. A race that was genetically paralyzed by sudden noise. Yet, a race that had developed starships—and with a handicap he doubted mankind could have overcome. Despite his hatred for the Galactic Invaders, Cranston's respect for their ingenuity grew. They probably had uncovered technologies undreamed of by Earth's scientists, even beyond their natural abilities of biocommunication. Technologies that could prove invaluable to the settlement of this—and other—galaxies.

His mind snapped back to their present problem. The crew sat in an attentive circle. His idea was tricky—and not without dangers. In fact, he fully expected some casualties. He listed the alternatives. Not one among his listeners balked.

"An' the sudden noise, Cap. What do we do about that?" Gor asked before Cranston had finished. Earlier, Cranston had remembered a puzzling event on Raker, one that had become clear only when he learned of Plantifer's weakness. From that incident came his idea for a noise powerful enough to stun the aliens. He hoped.

Time for details. A murmur rose from the crew as he explained.

The crewman called Foyle asked the pertinent question. "And if they don't get knocked off by this here sound? What then?"

"We're all dead. And not pleasantly, either," Cranston answered. "Last chance to back out." He held his breath. If one quit, others might. None did.

As the hour droned on the men improvised weapons to use against their guards. Ends of belts were weighted with pendants, decorations, and other bits of metal to become heavy blackjacks. Foyle made another sling, pulling yet more ball bearings from somewhere in the recesses of his clothes. Laces from tunics and shoes became garrots. Incredibly, two of the men fashioned a primitive sling shot between them—the heavy elastic

from a money belt, the strut fashioned from a metal bracelet. One of the men plucked out a three-pronged false molar from his mouth for ammunition. It weighed almost as much as one of Foyle's bearings.

Then, their time came. The Judas hole slid back. Once again Ohm's face appeared. "Plantifer is waiting," he said, and from the man's tone Cranston suspected he must have had to use a lot of persuasion to whip up the coming parade. No wonder. A single, Inadvertent loud noise could paralyze this plant race. If Plantifer—or Ohm—suspected that they knew the aliens' weakness they'd be gunned down by lasebeams. Happily, Ohm's deep insanity still overrode normal caution.

The door creaked open. Two of Victor's fellow dwarves backed off grimly, each holding a lasegun. Grouped as they were, one laseblast would roast half a dozen men.

With as much defeat as they could feign—but with aggression in their hearts—Cranston, Dione, and the crew stumbled out. "Do or die" was never a more apt cliché for the next minutes of Cranston's lifetime.

CHAPTER 19

They tramped down the corridor like defeated refugees, the armed dwarves behind them. Dodging a laseblast was chancy at best and impossible in such a confined space. Even a single charge would mean several deaths. Resistance would be patent suicide.

"Halt," Ohm commanded before a door at their right. Ahead of them, and to their left, was another dwarf, ensconced in a recess of the wall. He aimed a weapon at them. A good vantage point, Cranston thought. He was protected even if all laseguns blasted at once. Ohm's lunacy didn't prevent meticulous planning.

"You may enter," Ohm jeered, as though they had a choice. They went in, recognizing the same huge chamber where Cranston had fought his duel. Two more dwarves were waiting. Additional firepower—in fact more than Cranston had anticipated. Bad, but they'd have to cope. If they hadn't maneuvered this charade of defeat, Cranston remembered, they'd now be entering the preparatory chambers one by one.

As planned, the men grouped together in the middle of the arena. Ohm

left and appeared on the balcony lining the hall, Victor at his side like a loyal dog. Four dwarves kept careful guard with laseguns.

Cranston saw a dozen flaws to his scheme, a dozen ways it could go wrong, a dozen weaknesses in his planning. His own doubts multiplied by the second. Then the thick mat of vegetation around the walls shuddered. Any change of mind was too late.

At least two dozen of the aliens shuttled from the greenery, Plantifer among them. Some resembled the warrior alien Cranston had fought, though most were more streamlined, like Plantifer himself. All the aliens' tentacles maintained a slow, undulating coiling and uncoiling, as though constantly massaging the space around them.

Cranston's crew had fought many battles on many planets. They were neither cowards nor weaklings. Yet for a moment they were stunned by the sight—the *alienness* of the creatures before them.

"Buck up, time's close," Gor growled out. Even the crewman called Foyle was momentarily stunned by the sight and Cranston wondered if he'd be able to carry out his assigned role. He was ideally suited for it—naturally pugnacious and aggressive, yet with a queer kind of self-preservation and loyalty. "Now's time," Gor hissed out.

Foyle recovered. He stumbled back from the group as though drunk. Four dwarves were immediately alert. Four laseguns tracked him. "'Orrible. They're 'orrible, them there big plant things," Foyle cried weakly. He stumbled back, arms flailing as though he were overwhelmed by fright. Cranston wondered how much of a diversionary act it really was.

Foyle rolled on the ground, something not planned for, but then Cranston saw why. The laseguns lowered, aiming at his torso. "They're blasted, 'orrible things," Foyle groaned, rolling toward the dwarves. Gor gave a signal and the men tensed. Foyle rolled on his belly, tucked his legs under him, and leaped.

"Now!" shouted Cranston. At his words the paddlelike projections of several warrior plants stiffened as several things happened at once. The crew, along with Dione, bellowed out a mighty, stentorian roar that reverberated throughout the arena. Even as the roar rose in a forceful crescendo a crewman howled with genuine pain and fell to the ground, holding a leg pierced by darts. One of the aliens had managed to get off a

salvo. Cranston glanced at the rows of plant creatures. Their tentacles had shuddered at the deep roar he and the crew had sounded. Now, they were stiff and unmoving, the aliens seemingly frozen in position. His guess about the noise's effectiveness had been correct.

Foyle's leap had carried him high in an arc and on top of one dwarf. The crack of a lasegun was practically in-audible amidst the caterwaul of sound the crew was then making. The dwarf had been aiming at Foyle's torso but even so the charge caught his foot. For another man the searing pain would have been disabling; for Foyle, the shock stimulated his anger. He grabbed the dwarf by the hair, holding on as they bowled over. Quicker than a cat, Foyle was on his feet, the tiny man held in front of him as a shield. Small teeth bit into his arm. Foyle punched. The dwarf grew limp.

The dwarves were momentarily confused by the attack on the plants. They had been ready for an assault but not for the deafening roar. The three seemed unsure of what to do. Still shouting two other crewmen attacked the remaining armed and confused dwarves with their improvised weapons. The slingshot pulled back and snapped forward. One dwarf, in a paroxysm of movement, dropped, his lasegun and flung his hands to his head. The three-pronged, false molar struck. One other dwarf was struck by a bearing launched from the sling.

The crew had scattered even as their roar faded, following Cranston's instructions. One crewman, his weighted belt swinging, headed for the fourth dwarf. The heavy buckle landed on headbone as the lasegun cracked. The man doubled over and the stench of burning flesh was proof he would fight no more. A high price to pay for the now-wailing dwarf, the lasegun fallen to his feet.

"Get the laseguns, lads," Baldy shouted, leaping toward the first two disarmed dwarves. They were recovering fast. The one hit with the bearing, one hand on his eye, had snatched up his weapon and was now taking an unsteady lead on Baldy. Baldy dove, his fingers clawing for another fallen weapon, and rolled—all in one movement. The dwarf's lasegun cracked and a huge, searing hole appeared in the turf where Baldy had been a fraction of a second before. Baldy fired and the dwarf disappeared in a red ball of fire, his small frame vaporized out of existence.

Then it was over. The three dwarves still alive were held as hostages, all now kicking and screaming.

Then another sound filled the arena. It wasn't a shout of anger, nor a bellow of frustration. Rather, it was a sharp, keening wail that ebbed through the room. The crew suddenly became silent. Ohm, like some majestic statue come to life, was shrieking lamentations over his lost dreams. His arms flailed wildly, looking like the broken wings of a giant bird. Tears streamed down his long face. Then the angular arms bent and his two massive hands slapped to his eyes, as though to hide the vision of his defeat. Ohm moved forward and one bony leg stumbled over Victor who, still faithful to his master, stood stonily in front of him. Ohm tried to catch himself, his arms twirling anew, the long sleeves of his robe a whirlwind of motion. His waist hit the balcony's railing, his torso continuing the fall.

Ohm tumbled with an eerie caterwaul that ended in mid-note as he plunged onto one of the warrior plants below. The sharp spiked tip of the alien pierced Ohm's back and grew from his chest like a dagger. Ohm's limbs writhed in slow arcs, then ceased all motion. It was the final irony of the giant's life that he had been killed by one of an alien race he had come to cherish more than his fellow human beings.

Cranston mustered the crew together. They gave another roar, for they had no way of knowing how long the aliens were stunned by a single bellow. Most of the men wanted to incinerate the bizarre creatures where they stood.

Cranston firmly refused. There was no way of knowing the ties that bound the stalk ears to Plantifer and his group. Killing them could well cause those under mental control to die or become mad—too high a price for a few moment's revenge.

In any case, the Galactic Invaders and the dwarves would be effectively marooned on Greensward, to be dealt with at Ulmstead's leisure. Ohm had been the driving force behind Greensward. Without him, initiative would be low, if not gone. Whatever risk isolating Plantifer on Greensward presented, Cranston felt it was small enough to chance.

They tied the dwarves well enough to avert any efforts to stop the departure of *Draco II*. Then Cranston had a short private talk with Victor.

The dwarf had fallen into a lethargy at his master's death. There was little more to fear from him. Those settlers—the latest and last group of stalk ears—needed expert care. Bringing them to Earth in the *Draco II*

was out of the question. Any harm to them, warned Cranston, would return redoubled to Victor and his retinue. Even in his state of shock, Victor nodded glumly. He understood.

Then they left, pausing only long enough on Greensward to recover Ohm's journals and to bury the dead crewman. It was a long established space tradition that, if possible, no dead be carried aboard a starship. It took them fifteen minutes. They lifted off for Earth.

The ion engines hummed at maximum rate. Two days at most, Gor promised, for the hyperspace coils to be charged. And, with Earth as their destination, even he complained only once about abusing the ship's delicate machinery.

During the two day's charge time, Cranston poured through Ohm's writings—sometimes stunned, at other moments horrified, but always fascinated. He already knew that a substance called astatine was connected with Ohm's stalk ears. Now, he discovered how Ohm got it, what it was, and its vital importance—knowledge that would easily defuse Plantifer's biocontrol of the helpless human robots.

In Ohm's laborious script, he read of the giant's first meeting with Plantifer—and saw how the man's tortured mind formed his scheme to become master of Earth. The notes, too, showed how so many of their impressions of Ohm and Plantifer were so totally false, and Cranston breathed a grateful sigh of relief at not destroying the Galactic Invaders. Nothing could surprise him any more, he thought at one point, then became astonished again as new revelations became clear.

Several hours before the hyperspace leap was due, Cranston's vision blurred. His body ached from sitting in his cabin reading Ohm's journals. His mind revolted at the agony Ohm had endured and inflicted. He heard his door swing open and felt two small hands gently slide over his eyes. "Guess who," Dione teased.

"Feels like an alien's tentacles." Dione punched his side playfully. He pulled her to his lap. He stroked her cheek lightly and her eyes closed and her lips parted. Cranston's eyes caught Ohm's books. "He might have ruled Earth. He began thinking of it while still in his teens," Cranston said.

Dione's eyes opened. Her hand reached out and closed the book with a pronounced slam. She turned to Cranston and ran her hands through his

hair. He pulled her to him—and for the next hours neither of them had any thoughts about Ohm, the Galactic Invaders, or—for that matter—anything but themselves.

* * *

Their leap through hyperspace put them two days from Earth. Cranston sent a coded message to Ulmstead by lasebeam requesting immediate landing priority. He knew the Earth Federation was still under siege—many Citiplexes had already fallen. He also knew how to stop the civil war. But he didn't relay that to Ulmstead. Their security leak—the source of all of Ohm's information right from the start—was within Ulmstead's office. Any information received by lasebeam would be in Plantifer's possession minutes later. And, even though Plantifer was marooned, he was still a menace—at least until the insurrection was over. The less he knew the better.

Only once during the entire trip to Earth did Cranston and his lieutenants have a moment together free of the endless duties aboard the shorthanded *Draco II*. "Close, Cap. Nearly beaten by a vegetable and a circus freak. No one's going to believe it," Gor mused, thinking about the laughs the story would cause in a spacer bar.

"A *shout* doing in the Galactic Invaders," Baldy echoed, overawed by the simplicity of it. "And a good idea, too, Cap," he added.

"Thanks to Gor," Cranston replied.

Gor's face squirmed into various shapes; his eyes nearly disappearing under a ledge of eyebrow. "Me, Cap? How so?"

"On Raker. When we got to Dione two crewmen were killed even before those robot abductors turned around. By darts. There had to be one of those warrior aliens hidden in the thick foliage. Then Gor charged in, bellowing like a bull in heat. No more darts after that."

"The *shout* I gave, Cap? That knocked out one of those... bushes?"

Cranston nodded. "No other reason why it didn't kill us all. We were grouped together at the end. If your shout did it to one, I figured the crew yelling together would fix them all. A guess. But it worked."

"Dart-throwing, murderin' aliens hidden away in greenery. It's too much, Cap. It's not in the normal course of things." A red light flickered on a control panel. Gor rose quickly. "Ion engine's being balky again," he said, relieved to return to something he knew about and could fully understand. Baldy went to help. For the fiftieth time Cranston began another check of every life support and drive system of his starship.

They docked at the New York Citiplex spaceport. An armed guard was there to meet them—twenty stern military men, all armed, and equipped with swift-moving turbocars. Cranston assigned two as guards for *Draco II* and along with his crew and Dione he boarded the vehicles. But first Cranston checked the guards—peering behind each man's ears, even if it meant pushing away a shock of hair. More than one of the guards shot Cranston a hostile look. He didn't care. Right now Plantifer would do his utmost to destroy him and his crew. From the alien's point of view, all Earthmen—especially Cranston—were the enemy.

No scars. They were clean.

Within twenty minutes they reached Spacefleet Headquarters. Minutes later Cranston and the others were again face to face with Commander Guy Ulmstead.

"I hope you have something worthwhile to report," Ulmstead said from behind his desk. With the strain he was under, Ulmstead was even more curt than usual. He saw they were safe. Recounting the difficulties could come later.

"These for one thing," Cranston said, handing him Ohm's journals. Ulmstead opened one up, interest flickering in his face. He began a question. "Just a minute Commander," Cranston interrupted. He looked toward Baldy. "Got a knife?"

Baldy squinted and handed one over. Cranston rose, and while the others looked on incredulously, he cut the cable leading from Ulmstead's desk communicator with a swift chop.

"I suppose you have a good reason for destroying official property," Ulmstead said, fingering the limp ends of the severed cable.

"I do. But explanations later. Right now it's time to put an end to the insurrection."

"We've been attempting that for some time now," Ulmstead replied dryly, letting the cut cable fall to his desk. "But I'm willing to listen to any reasonable suggestions."

"You can stop it by seizing all the Earth Federation's supply of astatine," Cranston said.

Ulmstead's mouth puckered. "Astatine," he murmured, as though trying to recollect a memory. Then he had it. "*Astatine*. That's the stuff they use in..."

"Currency," Cranston interrupted. "Low denominations only. For the oldest of reasons. To spot counterfeit bills."

"I'd be grateful to know what counterfeit bills have to do with the safety of the Earth Federation," Ulmstead challenged. He glanced at the loose ends of his communicator cable again and wondered if Cranston's trip to Greensward had produced a mild breakdown.

"It's there. In Ohm's notes. He found a way of growing plant cells in brains." Cranston explained Ohm's method of turning humans into biocontrolled robots. "But to maintain biocontrol, each stalk ear has to take minute doses of astatine. It serves in an entity called a co-enzyme. Without it the plant cells die. Biocontrol, and biocommunication, fades, then cease to work."

"Like energy pills, Cap?" Gor asked. The entire thing seemed farfetched. But after their stay on Greensward, Gor would accept anything. Cranston nodded.

"Hence the rush to steal low denomination bank notes," Ulmstead said thoughtfully.

"I don't get *that*, Cap," Baldy said.

"Astatine is one of the rarest elements in the Universe. It's not even *found* in our Galaxy. But it's easy to detect. So they put traces of it in low denomination bank notes. One that doesn't have astatine is a counterfeit. Detectors scan batches of notes at a time."

"But where does it come from? And why put it only in low denominations?" Dione asked.

Cranston answered the first question. "The Treasury makes it. In a huge, old fashioned cyclotron. Equipment that Ohm couldn't import to Greensward without too many questions being asked. That's why he had to steal it."

Ulmstead took Dione's second question. "Low denominations only because few people attempt to counterfeit large bills. Too tricky to pass off. When Ohm had only a few human robots he got enough astatine from his own banknotes. One dose would fit on the point of a pin. Remember, Ohm was rich. His own wealth provided enough astatine in the beginning."

"Beginning? When did all this start?" Ulmstead interrupted.

Cranston pointed to Ohm's journals. "Over ten years ago, a decade. Long after the defeat of the Galactic Invaders on Tau Medar."

Even Ulmstead's normally inscrutable expression showed surprise. "Galactic Invaders?" he said in astonishment, then fell silent. One thing at a time. There was obviously a lot to absorb.

"The Galactic Invaders, Gaspard Ohm, and the present insurrection are intertwined," Cranston said to Ulmstead. "You'll find that the officials who support the mutiny have scars behind their ears. They'd be kidnapped, usually on a vacation, then return under Plantifer's control. Ohm managed to infiltrate enough of the Earth Federation's directorate to almost assure success."

"And he kept increasing his output of biocontrolled humans. Which meant more astatine. His only steady supply was in those notes. Bank robberies followed. And now?" Ulmstead asked.

"Plantifer will continue where Ohm left off," Cranston replied. "He's... it's desperate. He needs a large, reliable supply." Again Cranston nodded to Ohm's journals, indicating they'd explain why. "Without such a source he hasn't a hope of controlling enough officials and population to govern the Earth Federation. And, in short, that's what Ohm planned to do."

Cranston paused to emphasize his next words. "Whoever controls the cache of astatine now on Earth wins. Simple as that," Cranston said.

"I say blast him off Greensward," Gor muttered.

"And see perhaps hundreds, maybe thousands by now, of human beings keel over and die?" Cranston retorted, remembering the sudden deaths in the bank and in the arboretum on Raker. "Besides, Plantifer and his remnants have some salvaging virtues," he added cautiously. A little information at a time, he thought. Whatever shocks they were used to, one more in Ohm's journals would provoke the greatest disbelief.

"It will be difficult to persuade me that there is any merit to a life form that so barbarically destroyed our Galactic settlements," Ulmstead said coldly, and the edge in his voice dissuaded Cranston from even trying. It was a blind spot the man had, one forged by witnessing the ravages of the plague years and the near-collapse of the Earth Federation.

"I fully agree," Cranston said truthfully, watching Ulmstead's puzzled expression. "Right now we need the Earth Federation's supply of astatine. If we have it, Plantifer can't possibly win. We can bargain for those people under his control. And besides..." Cranston fell silent, his words unspoken. There was no use going further now. Ulmstead would have to form his own opinions—after reading Ohm's journals.

"Where is this element kept?" Dione asked Ulmstead.

The Commander's eyes rose in surprise. "I haven't the faintest idea. Before you entered this office there wasn't the slightest reason to be concerned with an obscure element used only to prevent counterfeiting."

CHAPTER 20

"For want of a nail the shoe was lost; for want of a shoe the horse..." An age-old refrain drummed through Cranston's head like a discordant tune. Ultimately, through a sequence of events, a kingdom was forfeited because of that single nail.

"We've got to get it, Commander. There's no choice."

Ulmstead rose. "Properly, the astatine is regulated by the Earth Federation's Treasury Department. We have some contacts with their security division." Ulmstead glanced at the cut cable and grimaced at Cranston. "I'll use a colleague's office for a moment. You can explain this later."

"Better now, if you're leaving, Commander." Ulmstead sat again. "The informer heard every conversation in this office through those cables.

The Commander's mouth opened, then closed. "Irene?" he whispered, dumbfounded. "She's been with me over twelve years."

"Your secretary," Cranston confirmed. "She, or someone, fixed the communicator so every conversation in this office was recorded under her desk. She listened later. Whatever you find from the Treasury Department should be kept from her. Otherwise Plantifer will know the details in seconds. It's in Ohm's journals. That's why I cut the cable."

One more jolt to absorb, but there had been so many lately that Ulmstead was numbed to new surprises. In any case, the astatine came first.

He rose without a word, his shoulders hunched, left the room and returned ten minutes later. "A clever procedure indeed," he reported, staring at the ceiling from behind his desk. No one understood his cryptic remark. His gaze lowered. "The astatine is now unavailable. To us, to Plantifer, to anybody—"

"But *where* is it? Cranston asked, bristling. They *had* to get that supply. If it fell to Plantifer's robots Ohm's incredulous design of rule by the alien plant could well come true.

"No one knows. No one is supposed to know. The astatine, many hundredweight's worth, is in a container. That container is somewhere underneath the Atlantic Ocean. The container rises periodically, once a month. If it receives a simple coded radio signal within fifteen minutes of rising, it remains surfaced. Otherwise it sinks again until the next month."

"An elaborate piece of finery," Gor commented. "An' when under those waves I suppose it's hard to get at."

"Virtually impossible," Ulmstead replied. "It took some prodding... but I know its own internal guidance system keeps it to a ten square mile area. Even a dozen ships dredging for a week would find nothing." Ulmstead drummed his fingers on his desk. "A clever way of protecting an invaluable substance needed periodically. One wouldn't have thought the Treasury Department capable of such imagination."

Then the implications shook Cranston. "When's this container due to rise?" Already he guessed the approximate answer. If he was correct, the insurrection was even more carefully planned than he had imagined.

"My thoughts, too, Cranston," Ulmstead answered. "Coincidentally, it will surface in exactly two hours from now. If you believe in coincidences," he added wryly.

"Not this coincidence, Commander," Cranston snapped out. "The insurrection was timed to get control of the Citiplexes, especially this one. So they could get the Earth Federation's supply of astatine. Their plan was premature—you felt it was. You sent out feelers to the outpost. Ohm pushed up the schedule because he got worried that either I, or someone else, would learn about that critical supply of astatine."

"Which you did," Ulmstead said. "Obviously, their sole objective in capturing this Citiplex was obtaining astatine."

"That probably explains why the shooting's died down," Baldy added. "They're waiting. For that container to rise. Guess we're lucky once more. Learning of it now rather than later."

Cranston nodded at Baldy, amazed at the intricacy of Ohm's scheme. Their entire project depends on that astatine to keep the robots going and to create more stalk ears. Without it the insurrection will collapse."

"How long can the... they last without the co-enzyme? Without the astatine?" Dione asked.

Cranston thought back to Ohm's journals. "It's complicated. The body doesn't store the stuff. So they have to repeat a dosage every two days or so. Their supply must be low right now. The container is their last hope."

"How can we stop them, Cap?" Baldy asked. It was the same question on everybody's mind.

"Where's that retaining signal sent from? The one that holds the container at the surface?" Cranston asked Ulmstead.

"The Marine Division of the Treasury is at the lower end of the Citiplex," Ulmstead answered. "The retaining signal is in code and sent by compute tape. From the top floor. I've been told. Stop that tape and you've

prevented the signal's broadcast. Fifteen minutes later the thing sinks."

Cranston *knew* the insurgents—guided by Plantifer—would be at sea with triangulation equipment to locate the surfaced container. And, just as certainly, they'd have an armed team at the Treasury building to assure the retaining signal was sent. Perhaps they'd be overconfident and send only a small force. Cranston didn't count on it.

"Could you get a team at sea to hold them clear of that container?" Cranston asked Ulmstead, hoping to avoid more danger for his crew, Dione, and himself.

The Commander drummed his fingers on his desk. "Everybody's spread thin. The Treasury Department will never believe in this story of biocontrol, alien plants, astatine, and human robots. It's hard enough for me." Ulmstead muttered the last phrase as much to himself as anyone else. "There are limits to my authority. So don't count on it."

"It's from the land side of things that we've got to work," Gor growled out. "It's up to us. Shouldn't be much of a problem after all else we've done." Gor was expressing hope as much as conviction.

"Your lieutenant is correct, and I can more easily aid in this instance. I can spare several younger... associates. Efficient and, if necessary, ruthless. Between them and your crew you'll have a chance," Ulmstead said.

Ulmstead, too, wondered at the size of the force that even now must be occupying the Telecommunications Room, where the retaining signal would originate. They would be desperate defenders. This was the second suicide mission he'd sent this small group on in the last weeks. His shoulders slumped perceptibly as he looked at the faces before him. He caught himself. This was no time for sentimentality, he thought. His shoulders stiffened.

"Why not simply go to the Citpolice? Tell them the Treasury is being invaded or something?" Dione asked. The problem seemed unnecessarily complicated.

"And suppose a Treasury official, one with a scar behind his ear, is sending the retaining signal? Suppose the Citpolice squad is headed by another of Plantifer's robots?" Ulmstead replied. "No. With Plantifer's robots everywhere this is a private task to be done independently."

Cranston rose, glancing at his chronometer. "Less than two hours to find and destroy that coded tape." He pointed to Ohm's diary and looked at Ulmstead. "The first half. Read it, Commander. If you haven't had enough surprises already, another in there will make your day."

Ulmstead's mustache twitched. He thought sadly of Irene. The secretary had been with him over a decade. If there was anything he didn't want, it was more surprises. He looked regretfully at Ohm's journals, knowing he would read them before Cranston's return. Ignorance may be bliss. But it was also dangerous.

Cranston, Dione, Baldy, and Gor rejoined the crew. Ulmstead produced six "associates"—taciturn men with the build of bulls—and put them under Cranston's command. Ulmstead also provided a variety of weapons. He seemed to have nearly limitless facilities for covert operations.

Cranston surreptitiously checked each of the new men for a scar. Clean. They left for the Treasury Department's Marine Division in a turbocar personnel carrier. Cranston no more thought of asking Dione to remain behind than Baldy or Gor. She had shown herself as capable as any man he'd met.

They reached their destination without incident, quickly moving through the nighttime streets of the Citiplex. While still in the vehicle Cranston asked one of Ulmstead's men if the insurrectionist attacks had subsided.

"There've been none lately, least 'round here," came the reply and Cranston wasn't surprised. It could have been a great deal bloodier. Cranston wondered just how many political leaders supporting the revolt had the half-moon scar behind their ear. Most, probably.

It had been a relatively quiet war, but now it would be different. With the astatine supply at stake any Queensbury Rules followed before would now be ignored. Possession of that container meant political and military victory. And, Cranston realized, deaths were a minor consideration compared to ruling the Earth Federation and its Galactic empire.

They reached the building and fanned out as they entered, prepared for anything. They didn't see a single guard. Cranston wasn't surprised. A force in the building's lobby would only attract attention to no advantage. The top floor—where the broadcast unit was located—was where the

insurrectionist contingent would be.

Cranston broke his force into three groups, led by himself, Gor, and Baldy. He glanced again at his chronometer. Already an hour had passed. Plenty of time left to find and destroy that coded tape. If all went well.

The building contained several banks of elevators. Each group headed for a different one. When one group located the Telecommunications Room, it would notify the others by the pocket communicators Ulmstead had also supplied. Then they'd launch a concerted attack on the room. Simple as that. The elevator door slid shut.

A figure emerged from a utility closet of the huge lobby. Cranston was correct when he assumed there was no armed force below. But in their haste they missed what, for Cranston, would be routine—a lookout. A single person who could hide and report.

The figure jabbed at the controls of a wall intercom. He spoke briefly and urgently. And, even before he was finished, an armed force of insurgents on the Telecommunications floor had mobilized into several defensive perimeters—each perimeter farther from the all-important Telecommunications Room. A flying squad headed for the elevators, hoping to cut down opposition as they exited.

Only the speed of the elevators saved each group from being slaughtered by laseblasts. As the doors of Cranston's elevator opened, and as his group spread out quickly, the insurgents had only come close to his particular area. They pulled back without being seen. Surprise could work two ways.

Not everyone was so lucky. The snap-crack of laseblasts followed by a huge roar of collapsing masonry showed someone had been spotted. Cranston muttered a curse. He hadn't doubted for a moment that an armed crew would safeguard the tape. But he'd counted on surprise as a major weapon.

No longer.

The building's corridors ran like spokes on a wheel, with access lanes bisecting them in concentric circles, forming a lacework of corners and alleys to prowl through and hide in. They located the Telecommunication Room with anticlimactic simplicity. A diagram near the elevator banks

indicated position and purpose of each office. A quick glance was enough to show that their goal was at the wheel's hub. The easiest point to defend. The hardest to overpower.

A roar of laseblasts, mingled with the screech of wounded, sounded again. The mobilized squads of insurgents had moved too late for total decimation, but quickly enough to take Cranston's groups by surprise. The intense defense told Cranston something else. He'd expected a small squad of defenders. This was a large contingent and they had the heaviest of hand-held weapons.

More, each insurgent was perfectly willing to die—or, rather, Plantifer was willing for them. One more advantage to their side. They could afford heavy losses—he couldn't.

Cranston crouched and waved his team forward. A procedure rapidly developed whereby one man peered around a corner, then darted across one of the concentric access lanes if all was clear. He covered the others as they advanced.

One of Ulmstead's men took the point in Cranston's group. He looked down a corridor, saw nothing, then moved across just as a figure emerged from one of the dozens of office doors peppering each wall. A movement caught the man's eye and he dove for the floor, but too late to avoid the searing lasegun charge. The man vaporized before their eyes.

It was the worst kind of warfare for attack. Innumerable offices lined each corridor, and Plantifer's robots could be behind any one. It would take hours to search every room—even if they had the manpower. Cranston had little doubt that the other two parties were moving as slowly as his own.

He looked at his chronometer. Half an hour gone. Thirty minutes before a container somewhere in the depths of the sea began its rise to the surface, rested in the open air, then plunged to the bottom for another thirty days. Or—if it received its retaining signal—remained to be picked up.

A figure, small and doll-like at the far end of a corridor, darted into view, leased a powerful lasecharge, and retreated around a corner before they could fire. The maneuver was more for harassment than accuracy. Yet, chips of molten metal scattered through the corridor like shrapnel.

The lasecharge signaled an attack.

It must have been a suicide squad, for they showed no hesitation about dying and a great enthusiasm for killing. They swarmed from lane to lane, down corridors, and into office rooms, firing as they ran, ignoring their own wounded and dead. Laseblasts deafened Cranston and his group as they returned fire. Cranston's gun grew hot in his hand and he saw another of his crewmen fall, half his body a black char.

The insurgents had held Cranston and his group to a dozen meters from where they had first started. At this pace they'd be dead before even sighting the Telecommunications Room.

"Raise the other groups," Cranston shouted to another of Ulmstead's men. The man spoke rapidly into his communicator, listened, then reported the bad news. They're under fire like us. Casualties in each group. Lots of 'em."

Cranston looked down the long corridors, assessed their situation, and gave an order he loathed. "Move back. Use the stairwells to get to the roof. We'll meet there." The man spoke rapidly into his broadcaster and Cranston saw the relief on his face. Even through his own fury at failure he recognized a strong respite at lessening the odds against dying.

It was an unvarnished defeat and a complete rout. But Cranston had no choice.

* * *

Hundreds of meters beneath the ocean several timer circuits made contact in a spherical metal ball. Compressed gas fed into a ballast tank. The sphere began to lighten as ballast water was forced out. It trembled, then budged as it pulled free of the muddy bottom.

At about this time a powerful helicopter with a three man crew took off from a remote point of the Citiplex's shoreline and skimmed over the sea. Each of the crew had a thick, curved scar behind one ear.

* * *

The light cracks of hand-held laseguns and the deep thunderous boom of laserifles followed Cranston and his group toward a stairwell. Molten

metal flew like rain and everyone in the group sustained burns. They scuttled up the stairs and onto the roof in ignominious defeat—the group in tatters. Two were cinders on the floor below. One was seriously wounded. The rest, including Cranston, were severely shaken. Dione's arm was pockmarked with burns from molten shrapnel. She would carry scars from this battle the rest of her life.

They spun around at the sound of feet on the roof, fingers half-squeezed on the triggers of their weapons. "Cap. Cap. You around?" It was Baldy's discouraged voice. His group was as mauled as Cranston's. Then Gor appeared, nursing a hand with three fingers seared off. He and one other were the only survivors of his team. There was no immediate need to bandage Gor's hand. The lasecharge had neatly cauterized the knuckles where his fingers now ended.

One more bitter irony to digest, Cranston thought. More of his crew had been killed in the last few minutes—at a seemingly forthright job—than during the entire mission put together. He remembered the row of stiff aliens on Greensward, helpless before them. In the face of his losses, and in the bitter frustration of calling retreat, Cranston cursed his decision not to incinerate the plant creatures where they had stood.

A quick, cautious search of the roof showed it was empty. Cranston stationed one man at the head of each stairwell. He doubted that Plantifer's minions would follow them to the roof. They had what they wanted—the Telecommunications Room. But, Cranston thought bitterly, if you order a retreat keep the rear guard safe. Any one of the men at a stairwell could hold off an army with a single lasegun.

* * *

Deep in the ocean, compressed air still hissed into a ballast tank of the metal sphere. It grew steadily lighter and rose with increasing speed. Timer circuits made contact and power flowed through electronic circuits. The sphere surfaced amidst white foam, bobbed, and began to rock gently. It began broadcasting its homing signal from a whip antenna at its top.

Inside the Telecommunications Room a man with a curved scar behind his ear heard the first bleats of the homing signal. He fitted a coded tape into a broadcast module and jabbed at a red button. The tape began turning, sending a beam of signals toward the ocean.

In a helicopter skimming the sea's surface, three men suddenly became alert. They began a zig-zag course, their triangulation equipment beginning to pinpoint the location of the steady, bleating signals sent from the metal sphere.

* * *

Cranston glanced at his chronometer and knew the container had surfaced. He looked toward the sea, as though contemplating the months of war and probable defeat ahead of them, then toward the stars—the source of Earth's misfortunes. Something caught his sight and for a moment Cranston stared incredulously. Then he whirled toward the despondent group huddled on the roof.

Luck, Cranston had once read, is quick initiative in the face of unexpected opportunity. And success was in their grasp—if only the initiative could be taken quickly enough.

* * *

On the sea's surface, the metal sphere bobbed cheerfully. Electronic circuits within registered a familiar series of coded impulses. Electrons flowed through a small silicon chip, their stream growing stronger as the signals continued. At a precise, critical point, now being reached, this flow of electrons would trip a relay. The ballast circuits would inactivate and the container would continue its merry bobbing at each swell of the water.

CHAPTER 21

Cranston drew his lasegun as he whirled. "The antenna pole. Fire at it. Aim for the dish on top." Everyone responded immediately. No one wondered why the insurgents had overlooked this vital link to the container—the directional antenna that was now forwarding the coded retainer signals. No one paused long enough to wonder if this *was* the right antenna. It was a chance. And they took it, with nothing to lose.

Only by chance had Cranston spotted the triangular pole with the antenna dish on top as he gazed toward the stars. Now, a dozen bright-red lasecharges vaporized the pole, the antenna, and part of the roof abutment, in an explosion of color and vaporized metal.

* * *

At sea, inside a metal sphere placidly bobbing on the water's surface, the violent whirl of electrons through a silicon chip had almost become strong enough to trip a relay. The relay arm trembled once, then began a microscopic vibration preparatory to snapping shut, waiting for only one more group of signals.

The signals stopped.

The flow of electrons slowed, then ceased. The relay arm quieted its trembling. The timer mechanism that triggered the ballast tanks continued—unimpeded. A short while later a vent opened. Water flowed into the tanks. The sphere lowered perceptibly in the water.

A helicopter appeared over the container, wind from its whirling blades beating the water flat. One of the men yanked frantically on a lever and a mesh net spread under the helicopter dropped over the spot where the bobbing sphere had just disappeared below water.

The net sank, its ends beginning an encircling move designed to embrace—and capture—anything it grasped. The mesh closed, snagging a whip antenna on the sphere's top.

The container, becoming heavier by the second, broke free and descended to the sea's muddy bottom. A timer circuit clicked and began a slow turn that one month from this time would, once again, raise the sphere to the water's surface.

* * *

Cranston again faced Commander Guy Ulmstead. The Commander's eyes were tired from reading Ohm's journals, which lay open on his desk. Beside Cranston were Dione, Baldy and Gor, the latter's hand heavy with white dressings. Cranston had asked his two lieutenants to join this parlay with Ulmstead. After what they'd been through they had a right to be in on the windup. They would, in turn, report to the remnants of his crew—now resting someplace in the vast Spacefleet Headquarters building.

Compared to the events within the Treasury building getting back here had been absurdly simple. They had waited several hours after blasting

the antenna, then sent scouts to see if the elevator banks were guarded. They weren't. The insurgents—Plantifer's men, robots, or stalk ears, whichever term fit—had fled once the tape was played. They had no reason to linger.

Using considerable pressure, combined with a half-true story of attempted theft of astatine, Ulmstead had managed to break free two armed Treasury Department helicopters. They had found the insurgents desperately casting their wire mesh net over and over again, in a vain effort to snag the container. A short fire fight took place. The insurgents had crashed.

Now, the dawn sun rose over the New York Citiplex. An orange beam of light slanted across Ulmstead's desk and dust motes danced in its narrow glow. Ulmstead had debriefed Cranston on all aspects of the mission. Haggard though his face appeared, he seemed filled with a strange peace. Perhaps it was simply satisfaction at knowing that the Earth Federation was now permanently safe from an enemy of old—the Galactic Invaders.

But things weren't as they had at first seemed.

Ulmstead waved a hand at Ohm's journals. "A great many changes of opinion are called for after reading these," he said. "I'm not sure I can make the transition in one day."

Cranston understood. The other three exchanged perplexed glances. "Commander, I think the first order of business is contacting Plantifer to set up a deal so none of the stalk ears are hurt. Without the astatine he's got to bargain."

A barely stifled grunt drew all eyes to Baldy. "Cooperate with *them*? Bargain? The Galactic Invaders? They've killed a good half-million settlers."

Ulmstead raised his hand. "I share your anger over those deaths," he said to Baldy, but included Dione and especially Gor. "But Ohm's journals give a new perspective. About the invasions themselves and the twenty years following. We can't allow rage to cloud reason. Especially if the people worst hurt are ourselves."

Baldy stared and Gor's face wrinkled in exasperation. Dione shook her head. Ulmstead's face grew even wearier. "I know. It's a difficult

adjustment to make. But shortly you'll see why it's necessary and even proper."

Baldy looked toward Cranston for confirmation. "Things aren't like they seem, Baldy. Give it a couple of minutes. But first, we've got to get in touch and begin a deal. It... knows as little about us as we do about them."

"An' how might that trick be accomplished," Gor muttered, neither happy nor convinced about cooperation with the Galactic Invaders.

Ulmstead and Cranston exchanged glances and Cranston yanked open the office door. "Irene," he called.

His secretary rose and entered the office and for the first time Cranston noticed her strange mechanical look and walk of the stalk ears. Not too surprising he hadn't marked it before. She blended in with Ulmstead's office so smoothly that he had barely glanced twice at her.

Irene gave a questioning glance at Cranston as she passed and stood before Ulmstead. "Yes, Commander?" she said, her eyes flicking suspiciously around her.

"We want you to contact Plantifer for us," Ulmstead said, leaving no doubt that they knew where her enforced allegiances lay.

Cranston had wondered what her reaction would be. Even Ohm's journals didn't elaborate on any personality change the stalk ears underwent. Irene gave a quick, startled look, then her face became a blank mask. Cranston guessed that she—and the others—had some free expression of personality. But only in areas that didn't effect Ohm's, now Plantifer's, ambitions.

Irene gave a stiff nod. Ulmstead spoke. "Tell Plantifer that if he causes you or any other human beings harm I will order the disintegration of Greensward. If he pursues any further aggression against the Earth Federation I will destroy him with equal swiftness."

Ulmstead's voice softened as he looked directly at his secretary. "One more thing. When you and the others like you are restored to normal we and Plantifer can then discuss areas of mutual interest. I will not destroy him if these conditions are met."

Irene's eyes closed and Dione's forehead wrinkled. Ulmstead's secretary stood immobile for a few brief seconds. The Commander's hands were folded in front of him, his expression inscrutable. Then Irene opened her eyes.

"He agrees," was the simple reply. The answer was no surprise. Any other would have been suicide. Ulmstead nodded gently toward Irene and the woman left.

"I suppose Irene is the reason you've met with so much... antagonism," Ulmstead said regretfully, as though part of the blame was his own.

Cranston simply nodded, stunned by Ulmstead's mastery of understatement. "When could she have become... like that?" he asked, a wistful tone to his voice.

"Maybe on a vacation trip. Snatched, operated on, then under Plantifer's control. Perhaps it was years ago. It doesn't matter now."

Ulmstead turned to Dione, glad to change the subject. "Did you pick up anything while Irene was communicating with Plantifer?"

"A vague kind of static, like white noise. That's all. It was disappointing."

"But not surprising," Ulmstead said, slapping Ohm's journals with an open hand. "These give some indication of how sensitives like yourself might communicate directly. Be assured the problem will be solved."

Ulmstead coughed politely, leading to the next subject. His mustache twitched gently. "Which brings me to the last, albeit, unexpected, phase of the Ohm affair."

"An' what might that be, since we're leaving Plantifer and his fellow murderers whole an' healthy?" Gor said.

Ulmstead ignored the interruption and sat back as though contemplating a problem of cosmic dimensions. "Simply put, Plantifer and his associates were not to blame. For any of what happened—"

"What next?" Gor spat out. Ulmstead met the challenge patiently. No sense becoming angry over what would be an all-too-typical reaction. One

simply couldn't ask people to switch attitudes as easily as changing clothes.

"Just yesterday I shared your views entirely. Information has changed them. That same information might change yours. If you'll grant some moments to listen," Ulmstead said firmly.

Gor swallowed his anger and nodded. He wasn't unreasonable. But he would take considerable convincing. Ulmstead began speaking.

They had come from another Galaxy, he related, and went on to describe the alien animal form that had subjected Plantifer's species to slavery. Not surprisingly, the vegetable race developed a strong antipathy for anything animal.

Biocommunication was natural to them. By chance—a twist of fate—they homed in on Greensward, attracted by Ohm's brilliant exploration of biocommunication. They expected to find another vegetable life form.

They found Ohm instead. He persuaded them that Earth was populated by vicious beings similar to those they had just fled. It took no great persuasion given their prejudice toward animal life forms. They accepted Ohm because of their shared hate, believing he was an exception to the rule. Ohm, in turn, viewed Plantifer and his people as instruments of his craze to dominate all humanity.

"It was Ohm who masterminded the destruction of the first outer planets, beginning the Galactic Invasions," Cranston said intently as Ulmstead paused for breath. "He persuaded Plantifer that they were eradicating a race they dreaded."

Gor, Baldy, and Dione's interest had been captured by the story. Incredulity—but also the beginning of belief—were plain on their faces.

Ulmstead continued.

Then came a crisis—one that ended in desolate horror. Ohm persuaded the Galactic Invaders to arm their single starship and attack a Spacefleet warship. Both were destroyed, along with half of Plantifer's surviving group. Ohm used the incident to further distort Plantifer's view of mankind.

Ohm also changed tactics. His hatred pushed him to germ warfare. He developed the plague bacteria.

"It was *Ohm*?" Baldy asked, interrupting Ulmstead's narrative, expressing an astonishment Gor and Dione also felt. Ulmstead barely bowed his head in confirmation as he continued.

"Evidently, Plantifer seems to have objected to the mass carnage. Ohm tried for a direct confrontation and invaded Tau Medar. Fortunately, Ohm hadn't accounted for a major disability of Plantifer's race: their strong sensitivity to sudden atmospheric compression—otherwise known as noise. Their native planet had a much lighter atmosphere. Noise wasn't transmitted easily and there they had no such limitation. Ohm desperately tried to compensate with various drugs. They didn't work well. The invasion collapsed. Plantifer and his people were immobilized. Ohm was barely able to rescue them."

Ulmstead closed Ohm's journals as he concluded. "A small party of defenders saw them become stunned," he looked at Cranston, "your father among them. Ohm couldn't allow this limitation to become known. He sowed the plague on Tau Medar."

"The bastard. It was Ohm who murdered all those settlers," Baldy exclaimed, the impact of Ohm's viciousness sinking in. Cranston stared ahead, remembering a small boy watching his father die.

"Ohm had patience as well as cunning. After the defeat Ohm concocted another scheme for Galactic domination. He developed his operation to implant vegetable cells in human brains and by subterfuge placed high officials under Plantifer's powers," Ulmstead said flatly, then added.

"One more problem arose. Jason Clarke's coincidental work with biocommunication. Jason overheard signals from Plantifer to the stalk ears. He didn't know what he was receiving and replied. Ohm had to destroy the outpost to avoid disclosure. He and a force landed. Plantifer's race was whipped up by Ohm and killed everybody. Probably, Ohm really did want to preserve Jason Clarke's life."

"An' that's where we came in," Gor added.

"The bastard," Baldy repeated. "It was Ohm. All along."

"Difficult information to digest," Ulmstead added. "Ohm was a misanthrope who came within a hair's breadth of ruling the Galaxy."

"A hateful man," Dione said fiercely, remembering the death of her own father.

"A man more to be pitied than blamed," Cranston corrected. Four pairs of eyes focused on him. "Ohm was forced to become an outcast. He was cheated, scorned, and hated for his brilliance. Perhaps feared and envied, too. Add to that the ridicule for his deformity and you can see why he was driven mad."

Cranston looked at each listener in turn. "Suppose his brilliance had been cherished rather than scorned. Aren't all those who helped hound him from humanity as much to blame for the Galactic Invasions as he?"

Commander Ulmstead broke the long, startled silence. "I'm not a moral philosopher. But in an unofficial capacity I tend to agree that blame is usually spread over many more shoulders than suspected." Ulmstead sighed. "Right now the question is academic. Through a combination of luck and skill we won and Ohm lost. It was, at best, a narrow victory. But one that brought some benefits we must take advantage of."

"I'd like to know what benefits there's been from all this," Gor said glumly, massaging his bandaged hand. The stubs of his missing fingers were beginning to ache.

"The benefits include one of the most powerful instruments yet discovered for Galactic settlement. Instant communication." Ulmstead felt the fatigue of the last few days weigh at his bones. One more request he had to make of Cranston and his group. Together, they embodied all that determination and fortitude that made the stars man's rightful destination. At least this coming request wasn't a suicide mission.

"Throughout Earth's history every improvement in communication resulted in accelerated settlement of unknown lands. In this case those lands are the planets of our Galaxy, and the galaxies beyond," the Commander began.

"It'll take time for the Earth Federation to treat the Galactic Invaders as allies rather than enemies. I suppose you've thought of that?" Cranston asked Ulmstead.

"Years in fact," Ulmstead answered. "At first their very existence must be kept a government secret. The information in Ohm's journals will be assimilated gradually."

"I'd guess it will take less time for Plantifer to realize that not all humans are evil," Cranston mused. "From what I read in Ohm's journals, Plantifer had doubts about Ohm's motives. Toward the last he was even something of an unwilling partner."

Ulmstead offered them a large smile, the first Cranston had seen him make in a long while. "Meanwhile..." he began and all four regarded him suspiciously.

"Meanwhile, during their coming hibernation we'll explore the many facets of biocommunication. With Plantifer's aid, that research should progress smoothly. Miss Clarke, I'm sure, will become as sensitive to Plantifer's emissions as she was to those of her... ah, geranium."

Cranston's mouth dropped open as he grasped the Commander's coming request. Before he could speak Ulmstead rose, looking at him, Gor, Baldy, and Dione in turn. "And you, of course, are in a remarkably favorable position to initiate cooperation with Plantifer."

Gor's face wrinkled again. Baldy began to speak but only managed a ghost of a grunt. Cranston smiled.

Return to Greensward, to begin the long arduous task of understanding Plantifer, his mentality, and, in short, begin the first fruitful contact mankind had ever had with an alien race. Gor and Baldy's dislike of Plantifer would fade as they comprehended Ohm's role.

Even with all the questions that came to mind none of the four could deny the idea was intriguing. It was, in fact, an adventure most people would fight for.

"In addition," Ulmstead concluded with a wry smile, looking at Cranston and Dione, "Greensward must be a lovely planet for a honeymoon."

EPILOGUE

It was a luxuriously furnished room on top of a skyscraper filled with the tinkle of glassware and the hushed efficiency of hurrying waiters. A large window overlooked the New York Citiplex skyline, now a twinkling silhouette against the dark blue dusk of approaching night.

Cranston and Dione sat at one of the tables—a striking couple. They sipped idly at the rare Langue drink, remembering the last time they had had it on Greensward. Their crystal glasses clinked together in an unspoken toast to their success on Ohm's former planet.

They had married the day before in a simple and quiet ceremony at the Citiplex Marriage Hall, with Gor and Baldy grinning like idiots and the remaining crew of the *Draco II* offering a cheer as the couple exited. Commander Ulmstead had sent regrets that he couldn't appear. The note asked that they join him for dinner the following evening—at one of the most exclusive dining clubs in the Citiplex.

"There he is," Dione said, slightly tipsy from the drink.

Commander Ulmstead strode into the room like a well-dressed ramrod. His uniform was impeccably tailored and his silvery hair and spritely white mustache stood out in the dim light like beacons. The headwaiter greeted him like an old friend and led him to their table.

It was toward the end of the meal that some of the twinkle left Commander Ulmstead's eyes, to be replaced by a more calculating look. He had toasted the newlyweds properly, amazed them both with a store of space anecdotes, and amused them with wry commentary about prominent political figures. He was genuinely happy for them both.

But he had also seemed preoccupied and finally Ulmstead gently steered the conversation to their departure for Greensward—two days hence.

"You should receive cooperation from Plantifer, perhaps even willing cooperation. I suspect he's as suspicious of us as we are of him," Ulmstead said, sipping lightly at a cordial. The headwaiter brought over a box of cigars as if on signal. Cranston declined.

Ulmstead carefully selected a cigar and lit up. "Ohm did a pretty thorough job of convincing Plantifer that we Earthlings are vicious animals," he said as though the conversation hadn't been interrupted.

"You and those accompanying you should be able to prove otherwise."

"I suppose it will take longer for the Earth Federation to accept them," Dione said wistfully.

Ulmstead actually grinned. "In fifty years time the tales of the Galactic Invaders will be relegated to ancient history. People adjust quickly to making new allies of old enemies. Take my word for it."

Ulmstead let loose a mighty puff of smoke. "It will need some adjustment to accept sharing our Galaxy with another intelligent race. But there's plenty of space. And when that is exhausted there are a few more galaxies around," he said, smiling.

Already the Earth Federation had begun to return to normal. Two weeks had passed since the container had sunk to the sea. The insurrection had simply vanished an hour after Ulmstead's ultimatum to Plantifer. Without her periodic dose of astatine Irene—the Commander's secretary—had already lost her ability to communicate with Plantifer. The period when she was under his control was vague and confused and her case was typical of the other hundreds of former stalk ears.

"Would you mind a stroll on the club's roof garden?" Ulmstead asked. Cranston and Dione were pleurably surprised. They had never seen the Commander so informal. But neither did they miss the somber crust under Ulmstead's gregarious exterior.

A warm breeze caressed the three of them. Wisps of clouds flitted through the night sky and the Citiplex's lights glittered like jewels.

Ulmstead looked at the stars, his hands clasped behind his back, as though gauging the depths of the Universe. Cranston slipped his arm around Dione, and felt her hand slide in turn around his waist.

The Commander turned from the stars. "There's something else I'd like you to do on Greensward," he said, looking directly at Cranston and Dione. Dione felt a quip come to her lips, then caught it. It simply wasn't the moment for light banter.

Another breeze blew over the terrace, lifting Dione's hair like black, billowing silk. She drew closer to Cranston, shivering pleasantly. His arm tightened.

"That alien race Plantifer fled from. Ohm's journals suggest it was a predatory life form. One unencumbered by any sense of decency as we know it. Ruthless as well as vicious," Ulmstead said flatly.

"Just what we thought Plantifer was," Dione mused.

Commander Ulmstead again glanced at the pinpoints of stars. "It had to come sometime," he said, his voice barely audible.

"Ummm?" Cranston pulled Dione even closer, sharing her body's warmth now as he knew they would later. But even with Dione at his side he had become alert. The Commander was being especially circuitous.

"I hold no sympathy for the view that an alien race is necessarily friendly because it hatched in a different galaxy than ours," he said, coming to the point. "We know now that there's at least one life form out there," and Ulmstead swung his hand toward the heavens, "that would very willingly enslave or destroy us."

It was an aspect of the mission that neither Cranston nor Dione had considered. Ulmstead paused to let his words sink in. "In a way we're lucky," he finally continued. "We know of them, but they don't know of us. We know—or Plantifer knows—where they are. They don't know our location. We may need those advantages."

"You're thinking of a Galactic War, Commander?" Cranston asked incredulously.

Ulmstead smiled. "Yes, but not quite yet. Maybe never. But we were bound to meet such a race while exploring the stars. Inevitable, really." Ulmstead took a long, last puff on the cigar. The smoke wafted from the terrace like dissipating mist.

"It's the future I'm thinking of. The technicians I'm sending with you will probe for details of this race, among other things. But I'd like to find, well..." Ulmstead's mustache twitched nervously, as though it could help stir up the words he was searching for. "A *feeling* of what they're like. Their aspirations and fears, their weaknesses and strengths, even their moral virtues and vices. It's something that can't be put into a computer."

"All from Plantifer? I suppose he has the information," Cranston said.

"Yes, but he might not even realize that his *impressions* of his former oppressors are important. Plantifer's race lived under them for eons. They would have absorbed more than technicians would think to probe. I'm asking you to do so."

Both Cranston and Dione kept silent, marveling at Ulmstead, a visionary who planned decades ahead, well beyond his own years.

As though to confirm their thoughts Ulmstead added, "A conflict with the race that enslaved Plantifer's species probably won't happen in my lifetime. In fact, it's more likely that your children's children will be the combatants. But we should begin preparing now."

Suddenly Ulmstead thrust out a hand toward Cranston. "Good luck, Keith. You're all pioneers, the avant-garde of a new era, associating with the first alien race man has come across," he said solemnly. Cranston hardly realized it was the first time in his memory that Ulmstead had ever used his first name.

The Commander turned to Dione and kissed her lightly. "Your work on biocommunication will assure that the entire Galaxy will fall under our domain. It will, someday in the not-too-distant future, also become a potent weapon that will help guarantee the sovereignty of Earth and its empire."

With that, Ulmstead turned and left, a figure whose cautions and insights had almost singlehandedly preserved the Earth Federation—and who was now preparing for the far future.

Cranston and Dione glanced again over the Citiplex—the embodiment of the civilization they were bound to preserve. Its lights twinkled more strongly now, in the close dark of early night. A huge orange moon, just rising, peeped through the canyons of the tall buildings. The stars glittered above.

They faced each other and Cranston pulled Dione close. He felt her soft body, the sweet scent of light perfume, and the silk of her hair. She nuzzled his neck, then stretched on tiptoes to brush his ear with moist lips.

"Maybe we can begin now," she whispered between quick, soft kisses.

Cranston's hands slid to her waist, pulling her even closer, kissing, her

eyes gently. "You mean begin wondering about a race of aliens we might fight a hundred years from now?" he murmured teasingly.

"No, dummy," Dione whispered in return, pressing her thighs close to his, her face flushed, her body warm. "I mean beginning those children who'll be the parents of the children the Commander was talking about."

Their lips met and Cranston's hands slid along the full smoothness of her tunic. They embraced once more and left the rooftop for their hotel.

It wasn't much longer after that—as Galactic history goes—that the first child the commander referred to began its existence.