

*To Beth and Susan,
who know the best things in
life aren't free.*

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THE COLLABORATOR

by Janet Morris

"Run, Holy Mother of God, run!" screamed Faun, waking English from his straw pallet in the stables, where the horses were snorting and squealing and kicking their stallboards.

For a moment longer, English's mind insisted he was dreaming. Knuckling his eyes didn't rub away the flashes of light, though. The whole sky, coming in through the stall windows, was full of flame. Horses hate fire. They were bellowing now, so loud he could hardly hear the stableboy's pleas that English help him with the horses.

Halters and blankets rained down upon him as Faun threw tack his way. "Hurry, English. Mi'god, hurry! It's the Weasels! The demon aliens! Pirates! Space raiders! Please, we gotta save the horses! The family wants—"

English was up now, halters in hand. There was one horse he cared more about than the noble family who owned everything in the stable, himself and Faun, the blond stable-boy, included.

He shoved the twelve-year-old Faun out of his way as he began to run, tack in hand, for the stallion barn, where Celtic Pride was probably trying to batter his way out of solitary confinement.

Outside, the manicured lawns exploded in gouts of flame and metal.

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The hospital in Cork was full to overflowing. Casualties groaned in the halls and lay strewn on the lawn like browned leaves after an autumn gust. But the brown was the brown of drying blood, and the stink of fear and death and feces and urine was everywhere.

The Khalian landing in Cork was a *fait accompli*. Every administrative building had been precisely targeted. The hits weren't right on those targets, but what was a few hundred yards, against a helpless enemy?

There was no centralized authority in Cork left to surrender, if the Khalian raiders had been the sort of enemy one might surrender to. It was

possible that there was no centralized authority on the whole of the planet Eire by now, although the larger raid was not the business of the Khalian pirates in Cork. Their business was to take what they wanted, and destroy what they didn't want. To swoop down, hit the enemy, destroy however much they could of the proliferating pest that was humankind, and get out. Alive. Before the human Alliance of Planets found out where the Khalia had attacked and sent the Fleet to interdict the incursion. There would be a suppression mission launched by the Alliance—an attempt on the part of the Fleet to strike back—but this was the worry of the Khalian high command, not the raiding party. The raiders needed only to triumph and lift off, to disappear into the blackness of space and the cloaking physics of faster-than-light travel.

Home base had been safe from human depredations all these years; outposts, for both adversaries, had come to be considered expendable.

On this particular human outpost called Eire, at the city of Cork, the big Khalian troop transports had put down in the main square, and into those belly-landed ships, healthy human slaves were being herded, coffles as long as country lanes.

There was sporadic fighting, resistance in pockets illuminated by plasma weapons and conventional gunfire, but the aerial bombing had stopped now that the Khalian troops were on the ground.

They yipped commands down streets blockaded with cars and trucks and wagons; they sortied in strength through the town, shooting anyone who showed the slightest sign of

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resistance, and all the wounded, the old, the infirm, or the very young.

In cleanup units of twelve, the aliens advanced, block to block, house to house, leaving nothing alive where they had been. They set fire to whatever would burn, including humans, that wasn't worth taking. They hosed down administrative facilities and they gassed the prison, according to a directive that determined what slaves were worth having.

The looting had not yet reached its peak when one of the cleanup squads realized it had found the hospital. The commander, whose fur was naturally red as well as mottled and matted with spattered blood, barked

an order into his hand-held communicator. His black nose twitched. His weasel-like face split into a white-toothed grin that was, among the Khalia, a sign of stress. His tongue lolled.

He was told to wait for reinforcements. He did, closing his squad into a defensive square. While he waited, he fingered the flamethrower he carried, playing with its nozzle. The equipment slung from his narrow shoulders always weighed twice what it should at times like these—times of inactivity.

His second-in-command lashed a black-tipped tail and sniffed openly, looking into the hospital through shattered doors.

Its emergency generators had kicked in when the Khalian airstrike had taken out the power grid. In the flickery light could be seen trails of blood marking white floors like computer routes in a troop carrier's, corridors. And bodies on stretchers stacked like slaves in a hold.

But none of the wounded looked toward the pirates waiting on the steps. These were the humans deemed hopeless by their own kind—the nearly dead, those with lost limbs and blind eyes and split gullets who might have been saved in peacetime but who were as good as dead in wartime, already part of the body count. The smell of them raised the fur on the second-in-command's tail to twice its normal bulk.

The Khalia were carnivores; their hairless enemy called them the Weasels. The fighting had been going on for a hundred years. In all that time, no Khalian soldier had ever admitted to eating the enemy's hearts and livers. But it happened. Oh, it happened in the dark alleys and the confusion of extraction.

It would happen here, in the hospital, before the final order

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to raze the premises was given. But it wouldn't happen until the Khalian general got here. Whenever there were choice assignments like cleaning out one of these hospitals, the brass always got the first pick, the choicest cuts.

"Weasels!" screamed the boy hiding in the bush, because it was already too late for him. Too late to hide, too late to run. But Faun the stableboy

tried that, breaking from cover, dashing away from the family's sanctuary, toward the ravages of the manor house, his blond head flashing gold until it flared red as a Khalian sharpshooter cut him down.

Behind the corpse that flopped to the ground, spasmed, then lay still, came the Khalian pirates. The heavily armed squad moved cautiously among the trees and bushes like the predators they were. Their fur glinted brown in the sun. Their black eyes gleamed and their wet noses twitched, searching for the companions of the enemy who'd cried out before he died. Their clawed, black hands were tight on their rifles.

From the bush behind them, no sound reached their sharp ears as they swiveled. But furred shoulders were hunched, muscular legs bent in half-crouches. Some fingered the equipment belts on hips below which black-tufted tails lashed furiously. Some growled wordlessly between sharp-toothed jaws. The Khalia had been fighting humans long enough—hunting and destroying and enslaving and eradicating the hairless enemy wherever possible—to know that the casualty had shouted a warning, not a howl of fear or defiance as it ran.

So the squad moved very slowly across the alien landscape. One would scuttle forward, knees bent, head down, merely a moving tripod for the automatic rifle it held at ready, and then stop, poised to shoot anything that moved within line of sight until the trooper behind went past, covering the ground ahead.

In this fashion, with various members of the squad rotating on point, the whole group moved up, and onward, toward the corpse and the tumbled remains of the manor house beyond in a stilted minuet of incipient death.

From his vantage in the bush, the Khalian pirates reminded the boy named English of nothing so much as the estate's human gamekeepers out after a poacher. Only the fur and the black noses, the lashing tails and the wordless growls, were different. And the amount of firepower they carried, of course. The viciousness, the violence, the excitement of the chase

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... these the young retainer of Dinneen House—the destroyed manor in the distance—had seen before.

The Weasels were no different than his human masters, no harder to elude, perhaps, thought the young sometimes-poacher crouched in his bower. But the penalties were final if the pirates caught you on the run.

They took slaves, English knew. They had to take slaves. He'd been told so, most recently by Kennedy and Smythe. He'd counted on that, used the thought to calm himself when the raid began. The raid: death raining down from the sky that crushed the poor planetary ground defense of Eire in a single night full of concussion and flame and blast...

The stones of the manor house, the walls of the estate, the stables and the magazines, all gone now as if a cranky giant had swept them aside with a swat of his hand.

But the family remained. Behind him and a dozen other sentries like him, the noble Dinneens were secreted in a cave, still haughty in their concealment, their weapons and retainers and the best of their horses ranged about them.

As Faun, the corpse now being toed by the point Khalian, had died, so must all of the Dinneen retainers die, before the Weasels could have their way with the family of the house.

It wasn't fair. Terry English wanted to run, but he wasn't ready to join Faun, headless on the ground as Khalian pirates barked and growled at each other, fighting over the corpse. Or to be shot as a traitor by the other retainers behind him, ten left now to protect the family who'd had dozens.

So English sat and shook in his leafy cover, his young fist slippery on the game knife at his belt. This wasn't the way it was supposed to be, not at all. The Khalian pirates should have swept overhead in their gleaming warships, razed the house and countryside, and passed on toward Cork, where in the city they'd receive a proper welcome. They shouldn't be out here in the bush, tramping the blue grass, biting at each other in fury over which of them would have poor Faun's right hand.

English closed his eyes and tremors wracked him. There was no use being afraid; there was no use in might-have-beens, or should-have-beens. The Khalian pirates were here, and Faun was already dead.

English had never thought to wonder what the Khalia did with their slaves. Slaves were slaves, in his estimation. Slaves were

everybody—everybody but the families, with their

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courts and their laws and their police forces and their unattainable dignities of wealth and breeding.

Forcing his eyes open, the young groom of Dinneen House watched with all the stoicism of his kind. Was what the pirates were doing to Faun's dead body really worse than what a Dinneen lord would have done to him if he'd been caught poaching pigeon, or even squirrel? At least Faun was dead.

English's buttocks ached, from his crouch and his fear and his empathy for the youth who'd slept beside him in the stables. All the horses, the Dinneens' precious horses, were dead or loose on the grounds now, except the few family mounts in the sanctuary.

The Dinneens had been ready to hide, prepared for a siege, and they'd probably survive it, even if all the posted sentries like Faun and himself died to ensure it.

The Khalian soldiers ahead telegraphed that news to English with every conqueror's affront they inflicted upon the corpse, with every yip of triumph and every growl of joy.

The only Alliance ship in normal space anywhere near Eire when the rescue beacon tripped was still sixteen hours from landfall, if its commander dropped everything and burned parsecs to get there.

Which he did. The crew of the destroyer-class *Haig* were two hundred of the most seasoned veterans the Alliance could field. The Eire mayday was just their cup of tea. They had a penchant for airdrop and ground assault, and even the fifty men of the 92nd Marine Reaction Company, the Redhorse, who were intent on "lengthening their coats": getting enough Khalian tails to make their coup-coats floor length. One of the marines, named English, had a full coat and a bedspread to boot.

The commander looked at his roster and called in three officers, including English, who was a native of Eire, to draw up a battle plan. The destroyer could and would engage the Khalia in space, ship to ship, but the real work in an engagement like this was on the ground. You tried not

to disintegrate an enemy ship leaving a human planet, because there were always so many humans aboard. The electro-intelligence targeting arrays of Alliance ships didn't like firing on humans. And the *Khalia* knew it. Damned slavers.

The thought of Khalian slave holds made the destroyer's

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commander sick to his stomach. But he had a feeling that the *Haig* and her crew had luck on their side, this time. Not only were they inordinately close to the action, but they had a man among them who ought to know Eire like the back of his hand.

Waiting for his officers, the commander toyed with his desk's nameplate, an ornate affair of inlaid mother-of-pearl that his wife had given him. Jason G. Padova, it said there. He always got to thinking fondly about his family when action loomed. It wasn't that he was even the littlest bit cowardly; it was that he'd seen so much combat, and so much Khalian depredation.

He wanted his wife and kids to be able to sleep without worrying about attack from the night. He wanted to do his job. And he could: the *Haig* was an ultracomputerized destroyer; she could handle any three Khalian vessels of her class with only a skeleton crew aboard to stick their heads in the com helmets so the com grids could get brainwave readings and eye movement indicators. Failing even twenty men aboard—or alive—the *Haig* could and would keep on killing anything with Khalian specs that moved within twenty thousand miles until her circuits were melted.

But that didn't do you a bit of good if you were already dead. Padova's incentive was always survival. For Padova, for his crew, for the Alliance craft he'd had under his hand for enough years to bend the rules and get all the extras that the Fleet had to offer. The *Haig* was a reflexive killing machine, with more roboticized functions than were strictly legal, if you thought about it in strict, legal terms. But in the back of Padova's mind was always the last-ditch command sequence he'd made, which assured that the automated functions of the *Haig* would get human commands right up until it was time to self-destruct so that the Weasels wouldn't get their claws on all the *Haig's* ultraclassified goodies.

As long as there was some guy around to say "Fire," the armaments and

their electro-intelligent components were within Alliance law. And a man's digitized last-will-and-fire orders were still the instructions of that man.

So Commander Padova was all ready, when his junior officers came in, to do what he'd been trained to do.

He waved away the salutes of the grizzled task force leader and his female intelligence officer, and smiled at the young skinhead with the pale blue eyes.

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"Be seated, gentlemen," Padova advised the group. And, even before they were: "We've got a Khaüan raiding party on Eire, or did have, when the SOS came in, bounced from a sat relay and scrambled like it might have been from an escaping civilian ship. Data's sketchy—Cork and Shannon, evidently, are the cities hardest hit. English, why don't you tell us all you know about Eire, in as few words as possible."

The young marine scratched his stubbly scalp and his blue eyes hit the floor. "Uh, yes sir. Beyond what's in the logistics data base and the planetary atlases, I guess, sir, I gotta say... it ain't worth saving, sir!" A defiantly frank stare slapped Padova across the face as the marine lieutenant's head came up.

The task force leader's grizzly head snapped around; the intelligence officer flipped up her porta-base's lid; the marine offered nothing more, only his full attention.

Damned land force mentality. Padova nodded slowly, as if considering the marine's opinion, and then he leaned forward over his desk and said, very slowly and very precisely, "Lieutenant English, your assessment is duly noted. It probably doesn't come as a surprise to you, but we're... going... to... save... Eire... anyway. And you're part of the tactical planning staff, as of now." Padova knew his neck was swelling with irritation; he could feel his pulse beating against his collar. "And you're also first on the ground, so let's hear everything about Shannon and Cork that you even think you might remember."

When it came out that English had a fraternal twin brother on-planet, somehow Padova didn't find the revelation the least surprising. Damned marines were all alike; no brains, but plenty of mouth. And guts. And

brawn to back it up.

With a marine calling the shots—a marine who hated the locals the way this Lieutenant English hated the Eirish—the Khalia were in for a rougher than normal encounter with their human enemy.

Padova, who tended to be life-conserving, knew that, and tried not to let it bother him. A little inhumanity might be just the ticket. Now all he had to do was get this crazy bastard into position and pull his pin.

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Watching the stableboy's corpse because he couldn't seem to turn away, Terry English didn't know that he had his fists dug in the turf as if it were *his* helpless body that the pirates defiled; old memories made it seem as if it was. Nor did he know that he wept, long gray worms of tears stealing down his cheeks. He'd prayed for years that the Khalia would come and give the families a taste of their own medicine. Bring down that haughty and venomous horde whom he'd been born to serve, but who were unable even to admit that he and they were of the same race.

The Dinneens and the other noble families had their state religion, their planetwide cult of the highborn, to separate themselves from the lower classes. Would their god of blood, that planetary and unforgiving god who cared only for privilege and lineage, save them now?

Whenever a family member died, the event was hushed up. The dull-witted among the retainers believed what each house proclaimed: that the mighty families were immortal, that death was reserved for the serfs, due punishment for their thieving, subhuman ways, and that the family potentates rose to heaven on goutts of flame, where their youth was restored and they lived forever, the recipients of sacrifices, the granters of prayers, the self-made saints of Eire.

Almost everybody at Dinneen House, everybody in Cork, believed that—everybody but English. English had been traded along with the horses he groomed, traded from Shannon, where the poor were wiser, and where a thief learned a thing or two. He'd been a racehorse groom, and at the tracks all over Eire he'd learned more than just a thing or two. And he'd met a man or two who'd been beyond the clouds, in the track bars where winners were decided before races were run, and bets were placed that could buy a man his freedom.

English was fifteen when he'd grown too tall and heavy to be a good exercise boy for horses whose jockeys never weighed more than fifty kilos, and too manly to pass for a girl at night. Once there'd been beard on his chin, the owner wasn't interested in him anymore, and he began to learn what real hardship was like.

There'd been good times, in the bars with the handlers and the handicappers, though; when he'd been traded with the big steeplechaser, Celtic Pride, to Dinneen House, he'd gone

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sullenly, with a sense of foreboding no worse than the reality to come.

Cork was the sticks. The Dinneens were feudal, inbred, and sadistic. If it hadn't been for the times English had gone into town with the trainer, searching out the best bran and corn and manna for the colts, life beyond the stables would have faded into a half-remembered dream. But he *had* gone to town; he had spent the Sabbath in the horsemen's bars, and it was there he'd first heard the rumors of the Khalian raid. And it was there he'd made his connections, and his choice.

"Hey, English, how's your ass?" The bar was full of smoke and the reek of stale beer; the sawdust under his feet was getting into his boots through the holes in the soles. He flushed when the bookie called out to him, and pretended not to notice, taking off one boot to empty out the chaff.

But then a beery face was breathing into his, a bent head with blood-shot eyes and sticky lips wanted to know, 'You had enough a' them Dinneens on you arse to last ye', boy? If it's still boy...?"

English didn't ball his fist. He didn't slam his boot, heel-first, into the greasy jaw of the man bent over him. He put on the boot and straightened up.

The bookie was named Kennedy, and everyone at the tracks called him Crooked Kennedy, for good reason. There was no mischief this keg-headed, hairy-eared troll didn't get into, so long as it paid.

"What you want with me, Kennedy?" English asked, his voice thick with the effort of trying to hold his temper. His butt ached, its muscles

clamped shut reflexively, and he found himself wishing that Kennedy's taunt hadn't been spoken so loudly that all the horsemen around were watching the two of them and whispering.

But everybody knew, now, what the Dinneens used English for. If they hadn't before. Mary Dinneen was no saint, nor was her brother Alton, nor her father the Honorable Lord Harold. And what went on at Dinneen House wasn't any different from what went on at the other noble houses, English told himself, trying to will the hot flush from his cheeks.

When Kennedy only leered at him expectantly, English said again, under his breath, "What do you want, man?"

And Kennedy replied, "Want to invite ye't' have a mug with me an' my friends."

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"You don't have a friend on this world," English had said, but he'd found himself at the round table anyhow.

There he soon realized that the greasy threesome Kennedy introduced him to had a reason for making his acquaintance. It seemed that the Khalian pirates had their eyes on Eire, and any "sensible fella's got to look out for his own self."

This bogeyman bedtime story, delivered in a horseman's bar by such as Kennedy and his three whiskery cohorts, seemed like the typical drunk's chatter, until Kennedy introduced him to the men one by one, and it turned out that one of them was from off-planet.

"So what's this got to do with me?" English asked, looking at the dark hairs on his wrist that proclaimed him forever of an inferior breed. All the rulers of Eire, all the magistrates of Cork, all the Dinneens, were red-haired and freckled. God loved the freckled. The rest of Eire were no better than beasts of the field.

"With you," said the off-worlder who was as swarthy as Kennedy, but had blue eyes like English. It wasn't a question, that remark. It was a statement. And it was then that English remembered the man's name: Smythe.

Smythe leaned close and caught English in a stare like a pair of manacles. "We could use a man like you—someone inside Dinneen House. For logistics. Maps. Routines. Insider info... Pillow talk from the right beds—"

The screech of English's chair drowned out the rest. Perhaps he reacted so vehemently because of the guilt he felt. Somebody'd looked inside his head and listened to his prayers and figured out that he was the boy to ask. The boy who had prayed so hard and so long for the Khalia to come and kick the noble butts of bastards like the Dinneens... Maybe it was a trap, a trick to test his loyalty. Well he had none, but so what? What had he to be loyal to? He wasn't a masochist, or a bedwarmer. He was a man. But, a traitor?

A hand caught his wrist before he could throw his beer or stalk away, and Kennedy was telling him to sit down, sit down. And pulling on his arm so that he'd have to fight or sit.

English knew what would happen if he started a brawl. He'd lose, against men twice his age and weight. The constabulary would come, and he'd take the blame because Kennedy had money—Kennedy always had money—and wasn't local, and English was a lowlife, an outsider turned Dinneen groom. The Dinneens would decide whether to bail him out or not—what

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with the Dinneen Cup steeplechase three weeks away, they probably would. But then he'd lose hide and food and what passed for privileges. And it would be too long until he could sit down, or sit a horse, without wincing.

So he sat down then, while he still could, before his butt was bleeding, and shook off Kennedy's hand as if he weren't afraid. Then he said, 'Sure you want to tell me any more about what it is you're after? What if I say no?'

'You won't,' said Kennedy, more to the off-worlder named Smythe, and to the others watching as if they didn't give a damn, than to English, who suddenly had realized what the answer to his question would be.

That answer came implacably from Kennedy's lips: "You won't be

lovin' the Dinneens by now, m'boy. But you'll still be lovin' old Celtic Pride."

Threatening the horse went further when English merely stared: "Just a little needle mark can't be seen. Fluid in the knee, the knee explodes during the race, the horse is put down, and it's all your fault—you bein' responsible for his condition, an' all. Or—"

"I'm ready to hear you out," said English then, because he might as well. The big chestnut named Celtic Pride was a yearling when English became a groom. They'd come to Dinneen House together. He couldn't protect the horse without going to the Dinneens, and probably not then. He could see Alton Dinneen's cruel lips smiling in anticipation as English tried to explain just what he'd been doing, keeping company with the kind of men that made such threats.

The deal was simple, at the beginning. Keep his ears open. Listen to the politics. Talk about Alliance ships, comings, goings, was what they were interested in. And the whereabouts of the families. On specific dates. There were meets to make and drops decided. It wasn't hard. It wasn't more dangerous, English told himself that night as he would for six months of nights thereafter, than living with the Dinneens' power over his head.

Smythe, when the details had been arranged, leaned close across the table and said, "Things go down rough, son, you use my name—with the Weasels."

Those words re-echoed in English's head now, as the weasel-like Khalia made their slow and careful way toward the house.

The Khalia took slaves, but they didn't leave survivors.

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Everyone knew that. The Khalian raiders were the main reason Eire and the other planets English had heard of were so poor. Or at least, that was what the Dinneens kept saying. Mary Dinneen tended to talk freely on the phone when English was warming her bed. He'd heard all about the Alliance tax increase, the drive to raise enough wealth from the families to install a Home Defense—a space defense—or force the Alliance into stationing more ships in this quadrant, perhaps a ground base, a real

military spaceport for Eire.

There had been an Alliance of Planets fleet for a thousand years, and in all that time, Eire had never been a base for Fleet operations, although its men were conscripted into army units who fought with the Fleet's land forces. Terry English had a brother who, rumor had it, became a soldier with one of those very "line units."

English hadn't seen that brother since he was five. He was closer to Celtic Pride than to his brother, or to any human. He had no compunction, now, about turning in the Dinneens to the Weasels, if he got the opportunity. And he had to find the opportunity, or he was going to get himself killed, just like Faun.

If Smythe had been lying and the use of the off-worlder's name wouldn't get English special treatment, being a Khalian slave wouldn't be any worse than being a Dinneen retainer. He had the scars and the memories to attest to that.

The thing was, Celtic Pride was with the Dinneens in their shelter. To give up his oppressors to these new oppressors was one thing; to sentence the big chestnut to death or maltreatment—that was something else again.

Frozen with indecision and fear, English hunkered down further into his bower and waited, while the Weasels shot sporadically into the bush and closed on the ruins of the manor house.

From far behind him, in the sheltering cave, Celtic Pride's questioning whinny was hardly audible as the evening breeze began to blow toward the family's sanctuary, downwind from the house, and the Weasels, and English, miserable at his post.

The Khalian raiders tore through the manor house like the wrath of god, setting shaped charges in their wake. When they had everything of value bagged and tagged, including the few

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slaves worth keeping, they blew the place, using the grain magazines for a little extra bang.

Khalian eyes gleamed red in the reflected blaze, where they stood with twenty-odd peasants under their guns. The sixteen captives they'd coffled—healthy, strong, young adults, mostly female—were off to one side, tied to a tree beside the loot.

One of the Khalian's cakewalked around the rest, and calmly shot an aged human. It was a random kill, meant to teach a lesson. One of the women in the coffle screamed and dropped to her knees. A Khalian strode close, forced his rifle's barrel under her chin, and lifted her upright by that means. There was silence in the coffle.

But not among the children and the aged. A boy cried, surely for his mother. He tried to break for the coffle, and took his bullet in the head.

The sortie leader, satisfied that the lesson was taught to the coffle, raised and lowered his hand. He was already walking away from the noise as his men cut down the old and the young. He wasn't hungry anyway. His gut was knotted up, telling him there was something he'd missed. Something, he was sure from the instinct that made his back muscles jump and ache, behind them.

He left three with the coffle, which was too terrified now to think of resisting, despite its overwhelmingly superior numbers, and led the balance of his squad back the way they'd come. Something was missing, and his nose knew it had to be downwind, because there were no jewels of consequence in the household, no fat and coiffed noblewomen, no men clutching gold with which to buy their way out of the inevitable.

And none of the slaves looked upwind, only back the way the sortie party had come. The squad leader had grown rich raiding the human settlements; he had done it by knowing his quarry. It was the hunter's way.

Mary Dinneen was suddenly calm. She'd been planning her thirty-fifth birthday party last night. The moon had been full, bright as day, and she'd been so excited. Now she and Alton and their financial planner and administrative assistant were huddled here, in a cave prepared by her father's father for just such an unthinkable occurrence—a cave no one had bothered much about in her lifetime. Huddled here with the best of the

bloodstock, and fewer than a dozen retainers between them and the disgusting, weapon-wielding animals called the Weasels.

"You'd think," Alton was saying, sniffing the last of his snuff, "that with all we pay to the Alliance, let alone to Shannon, that we'd have some substantial protection from this sort of depredation."

"Up yours, Alton," she said. "I wanted to invest in a ship like the Caldwells, but oh, no, you didn't think it was worth it. 'Ships don't appreciate, my dear. We'll be like the Caldwells, indeed—having to trade and take a loss every few years because one can't have an outmoded ship, can one?' Well, if *one* had had any kind of ship at all, *one* would be well out of harm's way by now, instead of huddling in here with your accursed—and smelly—horses. Horses can't help us now, dear brother."

Alton stood up and walked away, over to where the bloodstock stamped restlessly. Perhaps the horses could help. Perhaps one could mount up and steeplechase one's way out of this intolerable predicament.

But if that were even remotely possible, Alton would have hightailed it away by now, leaving Mary to fend for herself.

Mary Dinneen examined her nails in the light of an emergency fluorescent. She should have married, was what. Then she'd have a husband to protect her, not be dependent on a self-absorbed brother and a few servants whose loyalty might be unquestionable but whose skills weren't up to the present task.

If she ever got out of this horrid cave, she was going to put on a full-time security force, something else that Alton had insisted was a waste of money. If only her father was here. But Harold had gone in to Cork for reasons of state. He'd been slated to speak at a spaceport function of some kind.

She thought dreamily that it would be just like her father to have gotten away, somehow. And if Father was free, he'd find her. He'd save her. He wouldn't let her die with Alton, cut down like a dog in a cave.

She looked past the administrative assistant, who was cozied up with a bottle of wine she'd opened but couldn't drink, to where Alton was playing with his favorite horse. Damned creature. It might turn out that she'd been right to resent the house's preoccupation with horseflesh, all along.

But she wouldn't be pleased to find that out. Mary sighed,

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and passed a hand across her brow in a habitual gesture of exaggerated forbearance, finally appropriate to her circumstances.

She wished she'd kept a few more of the servants inside, to cook something. By the grace of God there was food here to be cooked. She wished, too, she had someone to muck the horses, so the smell wasn't so appalling.

She was just deciding that there was nothing for it but to pull herself together and at least determine a menu for tonight's meal when she heard a shot close by.

She screamed. She couldn't help it. And that damnable stallion, Celtic Pride, screamed too, much louder.

It wasn't fair. It just wasn't fair. She was yelling before she reached her brother, "I can't stand it. You shoot that horse, and the others, now. Or I will. They'll give us away. We'll be prisoners! We'll be held for ransom..."

"Ransom?" Her brother turned on her, one hand on the chestnut's halter. "Where did you ever hear that the Khalia take hostages? They take slaves, my dear. Slaves. I only have six shots." He slapped his hip. "And two of those are for us, if we need them." His mouth was a thin white line. "I'll let the horses go, when darkness falls. Maybe they'll survive."

"At least the horses will have a chance," said Mary bitterly, and with her hands shaking and her heart thudding in her ears, returned to the business of finding out what she might have her assistant prepare for a squalid little dinner by emergency light in a cave snared with horses. What was the sort of thing one ate, while hiding from a nonhuman enemy, anyway?

!?

The shots were shots in the dark, Terry English told himself over and over. He'd managed to hide as the Khalia went by, but he'd heard shouts and moans which told him some of the retainers sentried behind him hadn't.

He'd tried to make himself slip out from cover, walk up to one of the Weasels and introduce himself as the man who'd given their kind so much useful information about the Dinneen estates, but he just couldn't. His legs wouldn't hold him.

One of the Khalian soldiers had come so close that English could see a hairless patch on his hip where a weapons belt had worn away the fur. He could have done it then, but he hadn't.

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Now it was dark and he was afraid. Afraid they'd shoot first and ask questions later. Afraid he'd be found before he found them. Afraid to move and afraid not to move. Maybe they'd just go away, never find the cave.

Maybe.

But he could hear things in the dark. Somebody crying, very low, a bubbling, almost burbling cry that sounded like it had blood in it. And barks like laughter, barks like Eirish foxes might make. But not the same sort of barks that Eirish dogs made. He had to move, soon. He had to get to the Weasels, before the Weasels got to the cave. Celtic Pride was in there, and they probably didn't know one horse from another, or what Pride was worth. He could be hurt in the fray.

English closed his eyes against images of Pride, his fine, long ears; his velvet muzzle, his arched neck; the way he danced when you brought him up behind a ready mare. Then those images got mixed with naked flashes of Alton and Mary Dinneen, and English began once more to quake.

If he didn't do something soon, he was going to be incapable of movement. He'd been beaten enough and punished enough to know what happened when you were trapped, when you were helpless.

He had to do something, soon.

He was just about to stand up, to stride bravely into the dark in the direction of the barks—and of the cave—when all hell broke loose.

He couldn't see much; the moon wasn't high enough above the hills yet. But he heard lots of barks and howls. He heard scattered shots, then more; a steady barrage of automatic weapons fire. Then he heard a stallion's

bellow, and frantic, galloping hoofbeats.

He shrieked, "No!" and bolted toward the cave.

He ran through thickets he should have known enough to avoid. He was torn by brambles. He heard another scream, a loud, horrible horse's scream, and heard more shots.

Then he came upon the Khalian camp, and Celtic Pride was down in the middle of it, bleeding.

English didn't know how he got to the horse's side. He didn't realize he'd run straight through the startled Weasels until he was looking down the barrels of their weapons. He'd thrown himself against the great, warm neck of the downed stallion and was trying to make Pride raise his beautiful head.

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It was no good. There was no life in Celtic Pride. And there was no reason to care about the guns pointed at him or the five-foot-high Weasels wielding the weapons.

Pride was all he had, all he'd ever cared about. The great horse wasn't even quivering. His warmth was ebbing. He farted, the flatulence of the dead.

With tears streaming down his face, uncaring, English let the Khaliens haul him up.

They barked at him and he yelled at them. He didn't know what they said, but he said, "You bastards. You stupid, fur-assed bastards. You kill a horse like this? He's worth more than all of you! Don't you know who I am! I'm English! You wouldn't be here, except for me! I'm the man Smythe found for you, your contact. 'tbu—"

He stopped, thinking about all that he'd said. One of the Weasels sidled up to him and poked him, cocking its head. It growled something.

English didn't care what it said. He told it, "They're in that cave back there. They're no better than you, you know? I don't give a damn what happens to any of them, you think I do? Smythe promised me I'd be safe,

that you'd leave me alone. And he promised that the horses wouldn't be hurt. And he—"

A buttstock hit him in the jaw, and he crumpled, blind with pain, to his knees. Something cracked against the back of his skull, and he fell forward, over the still neck of Celtic Pride, for the sake of whom he'd turned collaborator.

He remembered Smythe promising him how, when all this was over, he'd have Pride all for his own. That he wouldn't be a slave at all, but a free man with a fine horse along with all the others on Eire who'd be picking up the pieces once the raid was over.

Of course, he'd never believed that, not about being free. But he'd never thought that Pride would die on his account. And then something hit him once more. This was something that hit so hard, he couldn't even tell if it hurt. There was just an impact, and then there was nothing more.

The Khalian pirates cavorted over the cache in the cave. When the big animals were all dead, the human slaves counted, and the loot divided, there was much to celebrate. The high-priced slaves were obvious. These were fat, sleek, and heavily

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decorated. The woman's face was painted and she was not scarred or stretched from whelping. They had fun with her, and her tight-arsed companion.

These slaves and their booty were coffled with the crazy slave, who nonetheless was strong, the one who'd come charging into the bivouac area, and these were marched to the manor house, where the team tagged the newcomers and secured them before moving on. A beacon would guide the booty ship to the cache.

The Khalian raiders themselves had received an order to proceed to the extraction site, which they did, playful and raucous now that their work was done. Of course, there was some biting and scuffling among the ranks, now that there was time for it, over protocols and slights. Many noses were harshly bitten by the squad commander over the surprise attack of the big four-footed animal, and the charge of the single human slave. But it was nothing for which a raider needed to die. There were enough spoils

to make up for any sloppy conduct. A roll on your back, a crawl on your belly, submitting your nose to disciplinary teeth, and all was forgiven.

The sortie leader, when they made the hilltop, let out a great howl, his throat arched in the moonlight. The others took up the triumphant call, and the planet Eire trembled under the Khalian raiders' fury for as far as that howl could be heard.

There wasn't much to fight, by the time English's strike force put down in Cork. He leaned against one of the long, lateral landing fins of his APC and squinted up at the sky, where, beyond the cloud deck of early morning, Padova, in the *Haig*, might be having better luck.

Lieutenant English's men were still off-loading ground support vehicles. Had to go through the motions. But the marine's instincts told him there were no Khalia here. The deep indentations in the sward where they'd landed—and lifted off—proved him right. As did the silent, dead town where nothing but casualties could be found.

The hospital, the administrative buildings, everything—what hadn't been bombed had been hosed down pretty good. It was like any other war zone, only this one deserved the drubbing it had taken.

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Toby English had had an odd feeling, during drop, as his craft put out from the belly of the *Haig*, like some part of him had just been severed.

It was a weird, quick, anguishing moment. He felt as if his neck had snapped, but the pain came and went and then everything was fine. In his helmet and ground-attack electronics, that was easy to check out. He was monitored like any other piece of expensive equipment. And expensive he was, with what the Fleet had put into him, added to what the marines had spent, training him up to where he wasn't a hick from Eire any longer.

And he wasn't. He felt a satisfaction he couldn't admit, and something deeper, as he walked his men, in careful wide maneuvers, through the murdered town of Cork. This time, the gutted bodies, the missing livers, the torn-out hearts, the slit throats—none of it bothered him like it usually did.

This time, he had a certain amount of empathy for the raiders. Or

hostility toward the casualties. Civilians: he routinely risked his life to protect them. They were the warp and woof of the Alliance, the taxpayers. But Cork was hell; Toby English knew it like nobody else here knew it.

His sergeant and his men were tight-lipped and wan, frustrated because there was nobody here to hit. If he could, he'd have explained how the Eirish deserved whatever they got. He'd have explained it, except it didn't make any sense, even to him, to think that way.

He'd had a rough time here, yeah. But he'd gotten into the marines here, because even Eire had to send its share of bodies out to protect humanity.

He didn't like his own reactions, and he kept looking at his bio readout to see if anything was wrong with him. He even scrolled back and found the spike, recorded when he'd had the pain on the way down here. But it didn't mean anything, at least not to the computer. So it shouldn't mean anything to him.

He wondered if how he felt had anything to do with his brother. Twins were supposed to have some weird bond, even fraternal twins. But he didn't want to think about his brother. Terry English had made his choice. So had Toby. And whatever suppressed hostility to this whole damned world made Lieutenant Tolliver English less squeamish about counting bodies than usual—maybe it was good. He was a marine lieutenant, not a psychotherapist.

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But he'd put in for a psychover when he got back, if there wasn't anything better to do, like chasing Weasels.

Thinking of Weasels, he used his prerogatives and called upstairs for a readiness check. Maybe Jay Padova had something more interesting for him than preparing to write one of those noncontact reports.

Padova was busy, but English got some news for his trouble. The *Haig* had detected a Khalian infrared track, hot enough to follow, and a good vector. If they caught the enemy before the Khalia dropped out of normal space, there might be some furry tail to kick, after all.

Although English didn't like ship-to-ship combat much (it made him

feel too helpless), he sure as hell preferred it to waiting around counting corpses until the *Haig* got back. If it did. Marooned on Eire for the foreseeable future wasn't his idea of R&R.

So he got cleared for emergency lift, pulled his men in, and started lift-off procedures. The dead would wait.

And they would, in one form or another. Lieutenant English's party lifted off in due time to make its rendezvous with the *Haig*, and well before the lieutenant had a chance to notice a particular casualty, on the green by the deep indentations that the Khalian ship had cut there during landing.

This particular body was lying face down, anyway. Unless the lieutenant had turned it over personally, he wouldn't have been informed that his brother, Terry, lay dead there, cut out of coffer and shot through the neck. The pale eyes staring at the grass weren't enough of a resemblance for any of the marines to have made the connection. The two brothers, living and dead, just didn't look that much alike.

By the time somebody got back to finish the casualty count, none of the dead were recognizable. The Khalia had shot the horses, but they hadn't shot the dogs.

?

In the hold of the Khalian slave ship, Mary Dinneen, naked and shivering, her back already striped with welts, huddled next to her brother. Not for comfort, for there was none. Not for warmth, for the hold was hot from the body heat of so many slaves in such close quarters. But because there was nowhere else to go.

And her brother, Alton, who had always had all the

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answers, was mute and sullen when she asked him, over and over, "How did it come to this?"

They'd had time to find out, from a raving stableboy, that there'd been a traitor in their midst. But there was always a traitor, wasn't there? If not a person, then oneself? One's own shortsightedness? One's own greed?

Mary Dinneen was a survivor. Right now she wasn't sure whether that was a desirable trait. But she was stuck with it. And she wanted to survive.

More, she wanted her brother to survive. Alton was in shock. She knew what shock looked like. She knew that it could kill. And because she had no blanket, no comfort, no medicine or anything but her voice, since her hands were tied, she tried to use that to bring Alton back to reality.

"Alton," she said in her most demanding voice, "I want you to talk to me. I need to know everything you know about the Khalia, and quickly. I need to know what we can expect. I need to know if we can find a way to mitigate our plight. Find a raider who might be amenable to trying to ransom us."

That brought a rise from her brother, who said, "I told you, they don't do deals. There's no contact points, no bureaucratic infrastructure with them—nothing."

"Why not?" she demanded.

"There just... isn't," Alton said dully, shaking his head.

"After a hundred years of this?" she said disbelievingly. It hadn't mattered when the Khalia were a vague threat, when the raids were always on somebody else's planet. Now it mattered, if only to keep Alton talking. "Alton, how can that be? What's the Alliance good for? What do we pay them for?"

"To fight... when they can. For us. I don't—" His face was tortured now, but that was better than a vacant face.

This was going to be a very long ride, Mary knew. She didn't want to spend it next to a vegetable. Or next to a corpse. "Then let's figure it out," she pressed. "How did all this start? Why aren't there representatives trying to negotiate a settlement? What are we paying for, gunboat diplomacy? And if so, why isn't every human settlement protected?"

Mary didn't really care. She knew it wouldn't do her any good to know the answers. But she had to make herself care about something. She couldn't just sit there, not when her fate was so horrid and unknowable. And, as Alton tried to

straighten up and animation came fully into his face, she knew she did care.

Not about how the war had gotten started. But about her brother, and about making sure that both of them survived. She'd seen what happened to crazy English, shot down like a dog on the common. It wasn't going to happen to her, or to Alton, if she could help it. That was what being human was all about.

You didn't give up. You asked questions. You made the best of what you had and tried for better. You bided your time. And you fought back. Somewhere out there, among the slavemasters, would come a time and a place where Mary Dinneen could make her life count for something. Until then, there were the questions. And the answers.

INTERLUDE

"Pocked hulls!" swore the perfectly groomed, clinically handsome and impeccably dressed Fleet Support Officer. He switched off the Omni, still clutching the offending memo.

"Pocked hulls and overheated drives!" He had always been proud of using the same obscenities as battle-hardened Fleet personnel.

On the far side of an office specifically designed to instill a feeling of confidence and professionalism in any visitor, the three-dimensional image of Crag Courage, Fleet Captain, and his radiantly beautiful Executive Officer, Lieutenant Amethyst, obediently disappeared. They had just finished thwarting the extravagantly evil (and after three seasons in the top of the ratings), infamous pirate Mac Niphe. In doing so, they just happened to recover the entire Alliance treasury, so saving all from ultimate destruction for the one hundred and seventeenth time.

Lieutenant Commander Guillame Kanard was proud of Crag Courage. The show had been one of his first successes as public relations co-ordinator for the Fleet. The animated robot of Courage on his desk had been presented to him by the grateful network in a ceremony attended by no less than four admirals.

Gilt was also quite familiar with unreasonable demands. If the

situation didn't call for a miracle, the brass rarely resorted to the Sentient Relations and Communications Division.

The rambling memo could be summarized in two sentences, though no Fleet clerk would stoop to such directness:

- 1) The Khalian situation was rapidly developing into a full-scale war.

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That was fine with Gill, in port and comfortably far from the frontiers where the trouble was occurring. Wars were much easier to sell than the routine dullness that normally characterized the activities of the Fleet's ten thousand plus ships. But—2) Commander Kanard was to prepare a public relations campaign to support the major tax increase which would be requested of the Alliance Council.

No wonder all the Admiral's personal staffs were passing along this hissing grenade. A tax increase? Talk about a no-win situation. If Gill succeeded, then taxes went up and no one would be happy. If he failed, he'd be lucky to find a job doing PR for a Vegan whorehouse.

For several seconds Gill Kanard sat, randomly shuffling printouts. His thoughts raced, seeking a winning solution to an impossible situation. There simply was none. Gill's finely trained mind carefully traced the ramifications, personal, and career, of the order. In less than a minute he had traced the nine most probable result-paths to their conclusions. In all nine he ended up beached and abandoned with his carefully choreographed career in ruins. In one scenario he was actually lynched by a mob of irate taxpayers.

Bitterness edged in and tainted Gill's growing despair. Tax increase projects were the fusion bombs of office politics. Someone wanted very badly to get him.

Then he noticed a short note, on the back of the memo. Just one line on the back of the second page.

Gill, this one's for real. Duane.

A faint smile crept onto the PR officer's face. In four words Admiral Duane, one of the few true fighting admirals left in the Fleet bureaucracy, had changed everything.

This was not just another Fleet attempt to extend its influence or buy more toys for the brass to play with. Nor was it a trap laid by a jealous colleague. If Duane thought so, then this was indeed the start of a real shooting war.

The side of him that believed in Crag Courage crept out from behind a carefully schooled veneer of professional detachment. For a surprisingly long time Gill Kanard toyed with the novel sensation that he was doing something desirable. Finally, smiling broadly now, he slid his chair across the room and placed himself in the center of one of Port's most impressive arrays of communications and computer controls.

He erased notes on the project he had been struggling with, an attempt to convince the notoriously obtuse residents of

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some mudball named Freeborn that joining the Alliance had been a good decision, despite the recent bout of inflation it had caused.

Approaching the problem logically, Gill decided to start at the beginning. In a few deft keystrokes he called up the earliest records relating to the Khalia. They were surprisingly old.

THE TWO THAT IT TOOK

by John Brunner

They MET as total strangers. The meeting brought one fame, the other infamy. The outcome was the loss of countless lives. This is the tale of how it started.

The Change was working in him. Him? No doubt of it: this individual was never destined to bear young. Apart from that, though, his identity was as yet somewhat uncertain. He did not exactly have a name. He was accustomed to utter a noise between a hiss and a screeching whistle, sounding like "Tschweeit," that served to identify him as a member of his species, with overtones of incipient maleness. Also, of course, he knew

inflections that he could employ when it was necessary to establish his clan and his caste within the clan. But these related rather to his family than to him, and he seldom had occasion to use them. Among his kind, the Khalia, recognition was primarily conveyed by odour, and at his age he was not regarded as having enough of a personality for adults to be much concerned about.

However, for the past two seasons, he had begun to shun the company of his coevals; he showed signs of impatience at the presence even of his closest relatives; he no longer responded to casual challenges in the manner of a youngling, by a rough-and-tumble fight more play than purpose, but either dismissed them with expressions of contempt or, if provoked past bearing, went for what might more than once have been a kill, had others not intervened.

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Accordingly, on a day appointed, they took him to a wilderness on the far side of the planet, where he must survive by his wits until they came again. If he were found alive, he would be accepted as an adult. They gave him a baldric from which hung two containers, one for solids and one for liquids, holding rations for about three days. Otherwise he must provide for himself. But there was little water here, and less prey. Besides, there were always hundreds like him undergoing the same trial by ordeal. It was the Khalian way. There was no penalty attached to taking another's kill—or even another's life, if that was imperative to save one's own—though it was best to avoid doing either, for it would entail lasting enmity from every member of the victim's clan, and certain clans were very powerful.

All this passed through his mind as the flier that had brought him boomed away into the sunset. Nonetheless he felt wonderful. The bones of his predecessors who had failed the test were scattered around the spot where he had been dropped. Not even they could diminish his sheer joy at finding himself so alone. He had been told, but until now had not appreciated, how much the Change would make him crave the vastness of wild and open landscape, after the crowded conditions of the multifamily village where he had grown up.

As darkness fell he stared skyward. The welkin was clear, sown with

brilliant specks as sharp as claw-points. He ached to the inmost fibre of his being with longing that he should one day be allowed to roam the greatest wilderness of all, the void beyond the air. All his life it had been his ambition to join the star-rovers, to prey on lesser species, not for food but use, to bring home riches that would make his descendants respected, famous, maybe even the root-stem of a new clan...

He roused himself from dreaming. In order that his ambition should become reality, he must survive this test. But even as he selected a safe place to wait for dawn, his thoughts were with the rovers, with the ravagers.

So too were those of Yuriko Petrovna, though for a very different reason.

And, indeed, she was not as yet aware of the fact.

She—the pronoun was correct, though she had never borne children nor did she have any intention of so doing—was among the not quite lowliest of the Fleet. Her title was grander

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than her actual status. She was officially a pilot, and had command of an FTL starship. In fact, she was scarcely more than a passenger, aboard a single-person scout of a class so numerous its members were not even granted names... though privately she had accorded one to hers: the *Nag*. Her study of history had taught her that that had once meant a broken-down horse. It also, and still, meant someone given to continual complaints and reprimands. Her ship had been refitted so often it was hard to be sure whether anything except a few struts and girders were original, but some of those were past the century mark, while every time she attempted to give a command the computer disapproved of warning lights flashed and its vocal circuits filled the air with harsh objections. So the nickname was befitting on both counts.

As part of her training she, and fifty others like her in similar ships, had been assigned to one of the Fleet's routine tasks: searching—very probably in vain—for a missing merchant vessel, overdue on a trip back to Fleet-controlled space from one of the outlying colony planets.

But to her, if not her colleagues or those who had ordered out the

search party, this was a special case. The lost ship was called *Chrysanthemum*, named by her captain for the national flower of his mother's homeland back on Earth.

His mother... and Yuriko's also, though they had been born some twenty years apart.

Did they realise, back at Fleet Command, how grave a burden they were laying on her mind when they included her in the search party? Well, what a stupid question! Yes, of course! All such data must be instantly available from their enormous memory banks. Therefore she was being put to a test, to see whether emotional commitment would disturb her judgment during a long period alone in space. In a sense that was flattering, for it meant they had their eyes on her with a view to further promotion. Only the coolest-headed, only those who proved most resilient in the face of stress, could make it to the highest echelons of Fleet Command.

But my own brother...!

Sighing, she turned her attention back to immediate tasks.

Of the fates that might have overtaken *Chrysanthemum*, the likeliest was an accident when dropping out of FTL drive. Not even the fastest computers could reconcile all the differences

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between ordinary space and that weird zone beyond the speed of light. Now and then, even in the volume where the Fleet held sway, something went wrong: the mass of a miniature black hole, left over from the beginning of time, might distort the readings that indicated where to bring the ship back into the normal universe, or a fragment of undetectable antimatter might turn out to be adrift at the arrival point, which reacted with the hull or some other part of the ship and saturated its circuitry with wild particles and sleeting radiation...

But of late there had been rumours of another kind of threat, and most often in just that zone *Chrysanthemum* had traded through. (She was growing used to thinking of the ship in past tense—and her brother.) It was suspected that some unknown predatory species might be on the move, attacking human ships and even the most distant human planetary settlements. So far there were only the rumours to go by, or hints and

clues at best, but a few seemed solid enough for the computers that ceaselessly ran simulations of all events throughout the volume of known space to signal low-grade warnings: fifteen, eighteen, maybe twenty percent credibility. Recently, though, the incremental rate had slowed to zero.

Four chances in five, therefore, that this was just another foolish bout of panic, triggered by a handful of accidents that happened to occur in the same region. When there were hundreds of them every year, most of them more nuisance than disaster, and primarily attributable to poor maintenance or radiation damage in computer circuits, what were the chances for even fifty ships, darting hither and yon through such immensity, of tracing the lost vessel, its distress beacon radiating at the dilatory speed of light? There had been no news of her courier projectiles! Every craft aspace carried a stock of miniature FTL message-bearers designed to home in automatically on the nearest Fleet command post, or the ship's base. But if any of *Chrysanthemum's* had shown up, the searchers had not been told.

Thinking of CPs—

Too late. The *Nag's* harsh tones were assailing her ears, reminding her that it was past time for her to dispatch another of her own courier projectiles, the last but two, in order to report her status and position. She was strictly enjoined not to continue the search past the expenditure of the last but one, the last being reserved for ultimate emergencies. And indeed

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by now she was growing weary and resigned. She was looking forward to returning to Fort—horrible though it might be objectively. At least she was assured of human company back there, amid the crackling of the energy weapons that defended its perimeter. One day they might even cure the stink that always leaked, molecule by molecule, through its protective screens...

So...

She authorised the ship to copy her accumulated data into the missile and send it on its way. Then she resumed her habitual but most likely futile review of the known facts about the region of space *Chrysanthemum*

had plied. The computer was so much smarter than any human mind at solving the equations that governed its physical attributes, calculating the most probable course deviations imposed by gravitational anomalies or the movement of mass and energy due, for instance, to the outburst of a nova... of which there had been one in the vicinity not long ago. When the core of a sun exploded it had effects in the FTL universe as well as—

She snapped herself back from despair to optimism. There was one thing humans were better at than any computer. That was using unverbalsed knowledge to turn a guess into a deduction! In view of the difference of age between them, she had never been very close to her brother. But she did remember him, though he had been a distant figure during most of her childhood; she had had a kind of crush on him when she was in her teens and he was already a seasoned space-farer. Sometimes a look had come over his face as though he were gazing past the here-and-now into uncharted regions of the galaxy... That had been why he opted to work for a small, unprofitable space-line, trading as often as not beyond the boundaries of Fleet-controlled space. That had been why she had tried to emulate him, and wound up here—wherever here might be. So few stars had habitable planets; so few compared to the illimitable span of universe space and time!

But it didn't matter where she herself was, as of this instant. What counted was to figure out—and this was her last chance—a high-probability location for *Chrysanthemum*. She could not have flown a galactodesic course for home; there was too much interstellar clutter in the way, intruding mass into her tachyonic line. Back-tracking a ship whose path lay partly

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through the otherness of FTL had much in common with subatomic physics; the number of influences that could disguise the ultimate location was at the power limit of even the most advanced computers.

Suppose, though, she had been her brother, which of the routes open to him would she have chosen—given that all the likeliest had now been eliminated? (There were only a few thousand others! She had grounds to hope!)

Abruptly her patience ran dry. She stabbed a handful of co-ordinates into the board before her. The computer began to voice its inescapable

objections. With an override command she aborted them, and retreated to her bunk.

When she awoke, the viewscreen in her cabin showed wreckage drifting all around the *Nag*.

Shouting for more information, she rushed back to the control room without even rubbing the sleep from her eyes. The answer, of course, was prompt. But there was a difference. For the first time she discerned a conciliatory—almost respectful—note in the *Nag's* automatic voice.

"At the last destination you specified, it became possible to detect a light-speed distress signal then arriving in the vicinity. This damaged ship appears to be its source."

"Identity?" she cried.

"*Chrysanthemum.*"

The cold of space invaded her very heart.

"Prepare my suit!" she forced out.

"First," the *Nag* said firmly, "you will relieve yourself, then cleanse your body and eat."

"But—!"

"There is no sign of survivors."

The machine, as ever, was right. Sighing, Yuriko added one more question before she quit the console.

"Does what happened look like an accident?"

"No," said the *Nag*, after a pause to analyse the implications. "It looks more like the result of an attack."

But how? How?

The mystery plagued Yuriko every second as she complied with her instructions, knowing in her head that they were justified, yet feeling in her guts that if she were only to see with her own eyes rather than through

a screen, she could find

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and take revenge on whoever—whatever!—had callously carved her brother's ship apart.

How? It implied the enemy could track their prey in FTL drive! There couldn't possibly be a way of setting an ambush otherwise!

That, though, was for Fleet Command to prove or disprove, with the resources of the computers at Port. Her task was now to gather data, nothing more. She drove herself to fulfil it.

And very soon grew sick of what she found. The independent merchant ship, unarmed, had been slashed open as by a laser scalpel. In the axial corridors floated corpses, desiccated in the vacuum. They did not include her brother's. Gone. As was the cargo, and much of the ship's machinery. Not destroyed. Removed.

And there was no other clue as to the nature or identity of the attackers—save one.

Sealed compartments, slammed shut automatically when the hull was breached, where she might have hoped to find survivors, had been efficiently forced open. And exactly as many spacesuits were unaccounted for as there should have been additional crew members: five, including her brother. It looked as though they had been taken—well—prisoner.

Yuriko's mood grew ever grimmer as she pondered the implications.

When at last she decided she had learned everything she could, she began to think about the message she was obliged to send back with her last-but-one courier projectile. At random, not seriously expecting an answer, she said inside the helmet of her spacesuit, "Nag, did they have time to fire off a CP?"

The response took her by surprise.

"*Chrysanthemum's* computer records are garbled by radiation, probably associated with the weapon used, but decipherable data indicate she carried three, of which two were launched."

"Two were... You mean there's one left? Or was it stolen by the raiders?"

"It has been retrieved and brought aboard."

She would have clenched her fists so hard her nails dug into her palms but—the suit gloves were far too thick and stiff.

"Is it functional?"

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"Apparently."

"Then..."

An inspiration came to her. But she knew perfectly well what would happen were she to voice it aloud. She contented herself with saying, "That means the attackers may not have understood what CPs are for. I'm coming back."

Mouth dry, heart pounding, hoping the *Nag* would never guess what she had decided to attempt—transgressing the spirit of her orders, admittedly, but not the letter—she did so.

The next stage was fully automatic. It involved dumping data into the last-but-one of her issue CPs and dispatching it, along with a verbal commentary concerning her own observations. As she was recording it, her voice trembled a little—not enough, she hoped, to register a disturbed condition on the medical monitors.

The next stage, if not automatic, should have been reflexive. She should have instructed the *Nag* to head for Port, her mission being at an end. Instead, when the CP was safely on its way, she drew a deep breath.

"Integrate possible interception courses for the ship that attacked *Chrysanthemum* and give me those which trace back to the stars in this volume most likely to possess habitable planets."

"Your orders are to—"

"Return to base after the expenditure of the last-but-one CP on board! I quote! Are there, or are there not, *two* functional CPs inside this ship?"

There could only be one answer. Thanks to a careless turn of phrase on the part of whoever had drafted the brief for the searchers...

Out here she was at the very fringe of human-explored space. But if the enemy were truly alien—from a gas-giant, say—why, after attacking a human ship, would they want to take living captives? The absence of precisely as many spacesuits as there were missing crew members might imply mere scientific curiosity... or something else, something infinitely worse.

In any case, if there were a race out here that treated humans as no better than laboratory specimens—!

My brother among them!

She shuddered, and went on waiting for the *Nag* to perform her duty.

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What passed inside her mind during the next hour was unclear even to herself, let alone the computers at Port that tried to reconstruct it afterward. The most baffling mystery of all was this: what made her overlook the possibility that *Chrysanthemum's* CPs, even though they had indeed been launched, might have been destroyed before they had the chance to achieve FTL? After all, had either of them reached its destination, it should in principle have arrived before the search party was organised.

One obvious possibility was an overweening desire for glory, to be the one who identified the home world of the unknown enemy and led the warships of the Fleet to it. However, this did not match her previous record. She was young, with a promising career before her, and uncountable options open whether or not she decided to continue in the service—was she the sort of person to gamble everything on a thousand-to-one, maybe a million-to-one, chance? People like that weren't recruited!

No, it didn't fit.

Many of the simulations they ran at Port wound up in futile recurrent loops hinting at incestuous attachment, her brother acting as a mental father-substitute... But all this was abstract and artificial, testifying rather

to the ingenuity of the psychologists who had compiled the Fleet's personality profile programs than to what had really transpired in Yuriko's not unattractive head.

Closest, perhaps, came one who said, "I think she simply wanted vengeance."

But he was shouted down by colleagues and Fleet officers who cried, "Against her brother's killers whom she served so well? Or us, because she thought we'd failed in our duty to protect him and his ship?" (That, though, was when the war was fully under way.)

And nobody—not at the time, nor for a long while after—hit on the explanation that could be summed up in one single word:

Grief.

The *Nag* complied, though as it were suspiciously. The extra CP tipped the balance. And, miraculously (or was it? Surely if one met a new race among the stars one would expect to do so close to their home world, where humans still were all things considered!) after allowance had been made for every

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factor—the course *Chrysanthemum* had been embarked on, the detours she had been obliged to make due to the recent nova, the impact of the onslaught she had suffered that had hurled her across a light-month of real space, the effect of all the stellar masses in the neighbourhood, the drag of interstellar gas—there was one, and only one, unexplored system within the scoutship's range from which the enemy might reasonably be thought to hail, unless of course they dwelt between the stars: one, and only one, that hinted at an oxygen-high planet.

"Make for itt" Yuriko directed.

"If the system is inhabited by hostile entities," said the *Nag*, and her tone was incontestably less abrasive than in the past, "the risk of being destroyed is incalculable." Pause. "Owing to lack of data."

"We have two CPs," Yuriko answered stonily. "If it turns out that that is the home system of the enemy, our arrival"—she had never grown used to

saying "I" when the ship seemed to have such a personality of her own—"will trigger their defences. They omitted to remove the CP that you retrieved from the wreckage. That indicates they may not have understood its function. Program it with all data concerning our destination including the likelihood of its being the enemy's lair. Prime it to launch itself if they attack us, using maximum acceleration until it enters FTL. Set the other, the issue one, to do the same if it appears likely that without overt attack we're being lured into a trap. Program yourself to go to FTL and make for the nearest Fleet base as soon as both have been launched, whether or not I am conscious at the time."

"Analysing," said the *Nag*, which indicated that Yuriko's commands so far were questionable but not *a priori* unacceptable in the light of her built-in principles.

But abruptly the pilot grew impatient. She recalled something she had heard mentioned in bull sessions during her training, yet never been able to confirm.

"Nag! There's supposed to be a command 'Grand Fleet Emergency'! Does it exist?"

"Yes," the computer acknowledged after much too long a delay. That, if nothing else, ought to have warned her...

But it didn't.

"And it overrides general orders?"

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Her hands were clenched; her breathing was a gasp.

"Under certain conditions."

"Is an encounter with a previously unknown but demonstra-bly hostile alien race one of the conditions?"

This time the pause was longer yet. When it ended:

"Yes."

"Then I invoke Grand Fleet Emergency!" cried Yuriko, and after that

she was, as she'd been told, in absolute control.

This much, at least, was reconstructable—because there was no other way she could have made her ship obey so foolhardy an order.

As the days of his ordeal passed, Tschweeit lost his original brash confidence. His elation at being alone faded as he discovered how many rivals were already slinking among the exiguous cover, beating him to all the game worth eating, ahead of him at springs and streams with improvised weapons—branches, rocks—ready for use if anyone disturbed them. He had managed to refill his drink container, but he had used up his solid food and found little to replace it. On the one occasion he did manage to kill a fair-sized quarry with a well-timed pounce, he had scarcely had time to snatch a mouthful before he was sent reeling by a charge from someone bigger and faster, who seized his prize and vanished with it.

Badly weakened by the attack, which left him bruised and aching, as darkness fell on the ninth day, he reviewed his situation and concluded it was parlous. For the first time the possibility crossed his mind that he might be one of those who did not come back...

From the relative security of a high tree-crotch he surveyed the dark landscape. By now he had traversed almost the entire area, and knew how hostile and treacherous it was. Only at the very edge of the permitted range might there be a chance—

Overhead, something bloomed in the sky: a flash, a streak of light. A meteor, quite big enough to reach the ground. Perhaps it was an omen. Although he habitually scoffed at such, his family believed in signs and portents. Whether they were right or wrong, what else now did he have for guidance? He marked the spot where it most probably had landed and resolved to head that way tomorrow.

It was a slow, exhausting journey. He was still limping,

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thanks to the unknown who had assaulted him, as well as hunger-weak. Sustaining himself on foul-tasting insectoids and chewing plant stems despite the bitterness of their juice in order to conserve his precious water, starting at every noise and darting pointlessly into hiding, he did

not reach the impact point until day's end.

And then, crawling warily over a flat-topped rock, he saw what had actually tumbled from on high.

A hammer-blow shook the scoutship stem to stern just as she emerged into normal space. The view-screens blanked and emergency lights reported massive damage to all systems. Yuriko cursed her hotheadedness. Of course! If the aliens possessed the means of ambushing a ship in FTL, it followed that they could detect an approaching intruder!

But this wasn't an attack from outside. The explosion had occurred *within* the hull...

"The CP!" she exclaimed in horrified realisation. What a damnably ingenious booby trap! Why had the *Nag* not—?

She had no time to wonder. The *Nag* was dead, and she was probably as good as, though the automatic seal on the control room had trapped enough air for a few minutes. As though in a trance she rehearsed motions drilled into her during training: donned her emergency suit with its puny shields, its rudimentary computer, its limited reserves of food and oxygen...

Maybe someone would be able to work out, from the last CP she had dispatched, where she had most likely made for after sending it. Maybe there would be convertible vegetation on a nearby planet. Maybe she could survive there until someone came to rescue her.

Maybe its inhabitants would treat her as they had the crew of *Chrysanthemum* ...

The lights on the control boards were winking out as the circuitry failed.

Now or never!

Suit secure, she hit the switch that transformed the *Nag's* control room into a re-entry capsule, programmed to land at the most promising destination within range—and should also have launched her final CP—only that, of course, had been ruined by the explosion. The shock of separation from the rest of the hull almost blacked her out. When she

recovered, to see the bluish-green half-disc of an Earthlike world above her,

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seeming to fall towards her, threatening to crush her, she had to fight primordial terror before she could register the information she was hearing. Temperature range tolerable; atmosphere breathable; adequate free water; presence of CHON life-forms—carbon-hydrogen-oxygen-nitrogen...

"I found it!" she whispered. This could, this must, be the home of the attackers. And she couldn't let anybody know! She couldn't warn the Fleet! Whereas her arrival would serve as a warning to the aliens!

Fool! Fool!

She was on the verge of pressing the detonator button, to convert herself and everything around her into plasma, when the impersonal mechanism of her suit forestalled her. Being obliged to maximise its occupant's chances of survival, it had automatically compounded an all-purpose vaccine against infection by foreign micro-organisms, which it now injected into her leg. Her vision swam. Nauseated, she shut her eyes. They remained closed, and she unconscious, until the frail craft made its planetfall.

When she awoke, she found herself amid a rocky landscape dotted with trees that were not trees and bushes that were not bushes, under a grey sky smeared with high, thin cloud. At least, she thought dully, she hadn't landed in a deathtrap zone like that around Port, where huge predators vied with carnivorous plants...

But if she was right in identifying this as the home world of those who had wrecked *Chrysanthemum*, there must be at least one large predator here. And a terribly dangerous one, at that.

Having eaten and drunk sparingly, having conducted a cautious remote survey of the area, she ventured forth in search of anything her equipment might convert into digestible food. She returned at sundown with a bagful of samples. Her path led past a flat-topped rock...

Alien.

The Change having progressed sufficiently far within his body, Tschweeit responded with the ingrained reflexes of his kind, fundamentally those invoked by any rival's intrusion on a Khalian male's range, but multiplied by the fact that this stranger was trespassing on the root planet of his species. So when the creature—not unlike a Khalian in shape, albeit with

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absurdly long limbs, and as he noted with dismay, much bigger than himself but to all appearances off guard—passed unsuspectingly below his vantage point, he pounced.

It was as though he had attacked the rock he sprang from. Except that rocks don't spin around and deal you such a blow you go soaring through the air for twice your body length and land ridiculously sprawling in the dirt.

Yuriko stared anxiously about her. Was this creature alone? Was it a wild beast, or was it a member of the dominant race? Certainly it must be cunning, if not intelligent, for none of her suit's instruments had detected its presence until the last moment, when its leap had triggered defences honed for generations at Port.

She looked at it again, and this time noticed that it wore a sort of braided baldric from which hung a pair of containers—one had split, and was leaking what looked like water—and a crude club. No mere animal, therefore. And by the same token, far more frightening.

But how to reconcile a beast like this, save in respect of savagery, with the ones that had ambushed *Chrysanthemum*?

It was no use guessing. Setting down her sample bag, she approached the creature warily. It struggled to rise, uttering noises that she took to be menacing, but fell back, betrayed by one of its hind limbs that appeared to be dislocated or maybe broken. After that, it slumped as though abandoning all hope of resistance.

Should she kill it? After all, according to preliminary readings the constituents of organic material here were close enough to those on Earth to be transformed into nourishment by the food converter in what she must now think of not as a control room or a re-entry vehicle, but as her

survival capsule. And if *Chrysanthemum* had been attacked by members of the same species...

She sighed wearily. She didn't know. And, bad though matters were already, she would certainly make them worse if her first act here were to eat a rational being.

The creature was clearly in too much pain to offer any more trouble for a while at least. She ventured to remove the burst container, prepared at any moment to dodge a slashing blow, and analyse the few drops that remained in it. The contents proved indeed to be water. Well, she had plenty of that, thanks

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to a condenser that pulled it by litres out of the air. She returned to the capsule and came back with as much as the damaged container could hold.

Having set it down beside the alien, she retreated a metre or two, and waited.

For long moments the alien hesitated. Its attitude, naturally, conveyed nothing more to her than uncertainty, though doubtless—like any large species—it must possess some kind of body language. What was more, apparently it employed odour-signals, for something acrid was eluding the filters on her suit, as the stench of burning defeated the screens around Port.

Abruptly it seized the container and drained it.

Whether its subsequent posture indicated thanks, Yuriko had no idea, but she hazarded that it might rather express puzzlement. If it was given to making unprovoked attacks it was unlikely to be used to receiving a gift in exchange. It might be a good idea to rub the point in. She refilled the container—which she had already begun to think of as a canteen, despite its peculiar shape—and this time offered it together with the plants she had gathered, in case the alien regarded them as edible. She had food to keep her going for a day or two, and could collect more samples in the morning. Then once again she waited.

The creature's injuries, she realised, were worse than she had imagined.

Even since she first offered the water, the weak hind limb had swollen visibly, and the whole overlong, sinuous torso was curved to the side where her counterblow had landed. But there was no help for that. The general outline of the creature might seem more or less familiar; as to its internal organs, though, its bones—if there were bones...

Help?

She was shaken with astonishment. How short a time had passed since she was thinking only of revenge on those who had smashed her brother's ship!

But there were Earthfolk who did that kind of thing! What were they called—prats? No, pirates. And corsairs and buccaneers and such. And they did it to their own kind. Maybe, just maybe, her brother's kidnappers had been curious, or snapping at an intruder they thought had no right to be in their volume or space, or...

No: she was too weary, and still too logy from the

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all-purpose vaccine, to pursue the idea any further. The best she could manage was to comfort herself with the reflection that at least she was creating a better impression than if she had killed and eaten her new acquaintance.

On the subject of eating: did any of what she had collected appeal? Apparently not much. The beast had discarded most of the samples—which she now retrieved—but retained one thick, sappy stem and gnawed it, though without visible enthusiasm.

/ think, Yuriko said to herself, / may have arrived in a backward area. When humans first landed on the Moon, were there not still Stone Age tribes in New Guinea?

Looking around at the near-desert, she nodded with satisfaction at her own insight.

But—the thought-train rolled on—if a spacecraft had been spotted landing in such a backward area, it would still not have been very long, even in those days, before the Great Powers showed up. So I suppose I'm

accidentally an ambassador, aren't 1?

There was, she concluded, nothing more she could do before she had slept. There was no way she could provide shelter for the injured stranger. She dared not carry it into the capsule, where it would be exposed to alien micro-organisms; besides, her food converter was too basic to be adapted, like more advanced models, to cope with the needs of nonhumans...

In passing, she wondered whether the chemical mix her suit had injected contained a euphoric. It did, but it also included a substance designed to prevent knowledge of the fact from affecting the recipient's judgment. Accordingly, after a quick check of the vicinity to make sure the alien was still there—and wondering whether it would be in the morning—Yuriko switched her suit to bunk mode and shortly was fast asleep.

Tschweeit had never been so humiliated! To have been effortlessly tossed hind-over-fore by a non-Khalian, that thereupon compounded the insult by not according him an honourable end of the kind demanded by his helplessness in defeat, but instead brought drink and what presumably it took to be food—as though dealing with a miserable plant-eater, as though he were some kind of cattlish or shweep being fattened

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for a future meal! It was unbearable! And, worst of all, he had been too feeble to refuse!

The air around him reeking with the stink of shame, he strove to crawl away in search of a private place to die. He could not move. Too many of his muscles had been torn by that incredible blow, and he suspected some internal organ had been ruptured as badly as his drink container. If he had had a weapon he could direct against himself...

But there was nothing within reach: nothing sharp, nothing sufficiently poisonous. Would that a tscherpent might chance by and crush him to a pulp and gobble up his body!

No such luck. As the night wore away, his misery gave place to fury. Why should there be, anywhere in the universe, aliens that did not understand concepts of decency and honour? Manifestly there were, and because of that they deserved nothing better than enslavement, conversion

into bio-circuitry, or processing for food!

A light drizzle started to fall. That made his anger fiercer, even as his mind drifted into blankness spawned of exhaustion. By dawn, when the rain had passed, the shame-reek had been washed away, and only the traces of his rage remained.

"He must have put up a tremendous fight!" was the verdict of the Khalian officer who approached the alien craft just after sunrise. "He's obviously badly hurt, but—well, just check that odour! I'd never have believed that a youngling like him could be so angry!"

"And," added one of his companions in an admiring tone, "instead of making off in search of help he stayed to guard the alien and stop it from escaping."

"That's right. We don't even have to trap it. It's trapped itself. Of course, there may be active weaponry inside the ship, but its design matches the style of that bigger one we took without the slightest trouble because it was totally unarmed, and certainly no major weapons were used against this—what's his name? No, cancel that. If he already had an adult name, he wouldn't be here, would he? What's his designation?"

From the flyer overhead, whence the operation was being co-ordinated, a message shrilled back: "Correct. He is not yet named save by sex, clan and caste."

"Which clan?"

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The Over-commander uttered: "Tschweeit!" with the requisite additional inflections.

"Really!" The officer wished he could groom himself to show appropriate pride, but he was wearing armour, just in case. "That's my clan, you know."

"I do," said the Over-commander dryly. "Congratulations to your kin. This junior has earned an adult name, that's definite. Send a snatch-group to retrieve him."

"And if the alien emerges—?"

"Snatch it too, of course! The ones we captured off the unarmed ship were in too bad a state to endure more than a superficial physical examination. We need a specimen in good shape so we can analyse their weaknesses."

As though pre-empting an objection, the Over-commander added brusquely, "Yes, I know you don't approve of that kind of thing! But, like it or not, you have to accept that our prey here at home evolved on the same planet as we did, so we learned their vulnerable points in the course of nature. Now, though, we're up against unnatural opposition, so what our forebears did by trial and error we must do by trial *without* the error. Granted?"

"Granted, Over-commander," said the officer, and issued the necessary orders.

Among the greatest skills of the Khalia was that of stalking. What little they had learned from the wreckage of *Chrysanthemum* sufficed for them to be able to steal up on Yuriko's capsule without triggering any of its alarms until they were within a few metres. When that happened the suit jolted her awake and she opened her eyes to see on the outside view-screens—

Nothing. Except the same bare ground, and the same bushes that were not bushes and the same trees that were not trees. The injured alien was gone.

So what had set off the alarm?

After a long wait she decided optimistically that it must have been a wild animal. Certainly there was nothing to suggest a threat discernible out there now. But it was light, and she had much work to do if she hoped to survive. After the usual obligatory necessities she checked her food converter and discovered that it was indeed capable of turning at least some of the local growths into palatable victuals. She made a

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list of the most suitable, and set off in search of further supplies.

However...

As she rounded the flat-topped rock she found herself encircled, this time not by savages with no more equipment than a baldric and a couple of field canteens, but bearing what were very obviously weapons. Appalled, she raised her arms. Reflex made her think of that gesture as a sign of unwillingness to fight.

Reflex betrayed her, just as it had Tschweeit. For to a Khaüan it betokened grappling to the death.

But, of course, since they were extremely well trained, and moreover the challenger was the wrong shape, they were able to overrule their instinctual response to her posture. Instead of hurling themselves at her, they merely snared her in a tough and sticky web, and left her to fight in vain against its grip until the powerpack of her suit ran out. After that, they sprayed its air filter with an anaesthetic vapour—based on their study of the captives from *Chrysanthemum*—and bore her away to their main centre for the analysis of alien weakness. It went without saying that, to them, any alien must be weak. For only the Khalia were strong.

Only the Khalia were *allowed* to be strong.

When Tschweeit recovered his senses, it was to hear a paeon of praise for his achievement. He was told his new—adult!—name; he was informed that henceforth he might exercise the mating privilege, or at least as soon as his bodily development caught up sufficiently with his mental, so that he could exude the proper odour of authority. There were means to accelerate the Change in that regard, which would be applied to his body if he so desired. Most important of all, he learned that no fewer than nine ship's captains had requested he be assigned to them on their next voyage. His dream of faring forth among the stars was to be fulfilled.

Even as he fended off wave after wave of fawning compliments, however, even as he stammeringly expressed his gratitude, a little voice at the back of his mind was saying, "But it wasn't like that at all! Not really! That's not the way it actually happened!"

Later, though, with the passage of the years, he was able to silence the reproachful voice, and ultimately he too came to

believe he had in truth performed a heroic act, an inspiration to his kind, a legend for the coming generations. His reputation spread to every Khalian world, and not only direct members of his clan but distant relatives as well groomed themselves in the light of his reflected glory every time they heard a mention of his name.

As for the name of Yuriko Petrovna...

Since there had been a second bomb aboard *Chrysanthemum*, so well disguised that like the one concealed in the salvaged courier projectile the *Nag* had failed to detect it, the Fleet ships which tracked Yuriko's last message back to its point of origin found nothing save a scattering of dust, somewhat anomalous in composition, but not sufficiently to prove beyond dispute that it represented what remained of a starship.

The doubts began.

At first excuses were offered for her, especially by those who had authorised that she be assigned to the search for her brother. Then, though, Khalian raids not only on shipping but also on isolated human colonies grew more frequent, and more captives were taken (what did Khalians do with human beings? Eat them? Enslave them? Turn them into living computers? Give them to their younglings to play with? The suggestions were innumerable, but there was no evidence to indicate a choice between them).

And time and again the enemy spotted a weakness, a lack of logic or skill, some vulnerable flaw in the tactics of those who were sent to oppose them.

Like a fungus spreading its mycelia, misguided conviction took root and grew. It was said, "There's only one key to this riddle. And it has to be called Yuriko Petrovna. She let herself be trapped in their volume. She must have given up without a fight. Or else she can't have had the guts to hit her detonator when she should have realised it was hopeless to go on. So what they know of us, they must have learned from her."

In mess halls, in bars, in bunk cabins, there were nods of sour agreement, for by this time it was clear there was a war—a running fight, scattered over cubic parsecs, but involving commitment by each side to hit the other hard at every meeting.

And whenever the Khalia pulled a smarter trick than

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humans were prepared for, there was one individual on whom all blame was laid: not the squadron commander who had been defeated, not the staff officers who had computer-planned the operation, but someone who must by now be dead.

A scapegoat. A scapehuman.

Only occasionally did the question cross some person's mind:

"I wonder if it really was that way. I wonder if that's how it actually happened."

For a while a few people argued doggedly about her final message, claiming it implied that she might have located *Chrysanthemum* within striking distance of the Khalian home world. However, thanks to the reputation that had by then accrued around the name of Yuriko Petrovna, when Target was discovered all reference to such a possibility was eliminated from the Fleet's strategic planning. The war's nature changed, and from that moment on—

But that's another story. Or rather, many other stories.

INTERLUDE

Gill Kanard scratched his head. He had been scanning the reports of the first Khalian raids for over an hour and he still had nothing there he could use to promote a tax increase. Atrocities may make people angry, but Eire was a long way from Vega or Earth.

Maybe he was taking the wrong approach. What was needed was a Crag Courage, a real hero. Someone the public would be willing to support.

Two minutes of inquiries revealed that in a sector far from the Khalia a commodore had been decorated for singlehandedly forcing an entire hostile empire into joining the Alliance. Enthusiastically Gill requested more information. He was ecstatic to see the officer was from a well-established Fleet family. It never hurt to make friends among the

brass. Better yet, the commodore was the commander of an entire base, meaning whole fleets were involved.

Leaning back with a satisfied smile, Gill punched in the codes that would call up the relevant reports. This was what he needed. Cannons blazing, fleets maneuvering and the hero diving to certain death yet saving the day. The visuals alone would sell half the people!

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TRADITION

by Bill Fawcett

For the last seven hundred years every Monthly Mess in the Fleet had always been scheduled for precisely noon. When the Commodore had not arrived by half past the hour the base's officers shuffled aimlessly around the formally set tables. Each man was in his dress blues with an ornately decorated sword.

Normally the officers of the Fleet tolerated or even occasionally revelled in their service's numerous traditions. Had they held their new leader in more esteem, they might have waited respectfully for hours... but the new commander was a quartermaster, and these battle-hardened soldiers didn't respect him that much.

Outside it was a relatively cool day for McCauley, but the temperature was still over forty degrees Centigrade. The brilliant blue sun baked the walls of the concrete mess building, straining the building's heat exchange system to its limit. The men in their dress blues were uncomfortably warm.

"Here he comes," muttered a captain, squinting toward the compound through several layers of polarized glass.

Their new commanding officer hurried through the shimmering waves of heat that rolled across the compound from the Communications Center. His uniform clung moistly to his back. One of the planet's local pests made a few halfhearted efforts to land before being driven off by his flapping hands. White dust was lifted waist high with every step and coated what had been polished boots.

Commodore Abraham Meier, the tenth generation of his family to serve with the Fleet, was miserable.

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This misery had little to do with the high temperatures or other physical concerns. McCauley's windless heat made it a wretched post, but he could live with that. He always dreaded the stiff formality of the Monthly Mess, but at least it would be a familiar torture. He could even face as a challenge the opened contact with the seemingly hostile Tripean Visualate. What Commodore Meier could not accept was the printout rustling in his breast pocket. Headquarters had just replied to his urgent plea for reinforcements when the Tripeans' hostility became obvious.

"Request Denied. No support available."

Evidently the Khalian crisis was tying up every unassigned ship in the Fleet. McCauley's garrison had been stripped to provide ships for an attack force, leaving Repair and Restocking Base K2/McCauley with less ships than there were planets they were assigned to protect. Meier's predecessor, a full admiral, had chosen to lead the bulk of his forces against the Khaüans.

Even more depressing was that the denial was signed by his sole living relation, Isaac Meier, Admiral of the White and Commander of all forces in the Eastern Sectors. When he had received the assignment as commandant of the repair and supply facility, Abe Meier had been grateful to his grandfather's influence for getting him out of Port. He had really hoped grandfather Isaac would provide some help, if only to save the family name from disgrace. Evidently he had been wrong.

Since his father had died fending off a pirate raid near Freeborn a decade earlier, he had seen little of his grandfather. It hadn't mattered at Port, when he could see him if he really wanted to. Now it was apparent he had been completely abandoned.

Beneath the signature was what was probably meant to be a morale-raising addendum in the Admiral's own handwriting. In this it failed miserably, adding to the tension the young officer felt already. This read, "I am sure you will make do in the finest tradition."

By the second time he had read that short, meaningless sentence Abe Meier's resentment overwhelmed his despair. He was still dwelling on the unfairness of the universe and the Admiralty when he arrived at the door to the officers' mess. A quick glance at his watch also confirmed that he was insultingly late.

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Not quite sure what to say, Commodore-of-three-weeks Meier pushed open the door. He gladly would have made a bold, inspiring entrance, a tall, lean figure with piercing gray eyes dominating his craggy features. Unfortunately he was short, paunchy, moonfaced and had big brown eyes that had watered constantly since landing on McCauley. He looked very much like what he was, a quartermaster in charge of a supply base.

Still, as tradition required, the most junior officer present snapped out a loud, "A... lert," bringing every man in the room to attention. It did not help Meier's morale that much of his command was comprised of men from the nearby Valquez Sector, all of whom towered over his pudgy frame by half a meter.

Stiffly, trying to not look as uncomfortable as he felt, the Commodore hurried to his seat. The back of his jacket felt clammy as the perspiration evaporated in the artificially cooled air. It made his back feel vulnerable, exposed. He rushed to his seat at the head of the long table before the liveried messboy, whom tradition dictated would assist him with his chair, could hurry across the room. Anxious to end the silence, Meier threw himself into the chair, scraped it forward, and looked up at the officers of his command. After a moment's hesitation they also took their seats, a few glaring their displeasure. Quiet conversation began to buzz and waiters emerged to pour wine and place small crystal bowls of sliced fruit at each place. The Commodore busied himself with the tart fruit and no one nearby ventured to start a conversation.

Abe Meier was so lost in his thoughts he barely looked up from his food. He ate slowly, forcing those officers who had finished ahead of him to wait in their seats, as tradition again demanded, until he was through. To pass the time these officers drank more wine or ordered glasses of the dark green liquor which had recently become popular at Port. A few drank more than might be considered wise and their voices became noticeably

louder. Finally the young commander finished a tasty but unnoticed custard dessert and reluctantly looked up. With that he began another tradition, the Hour.

For one hour at the Monthly Mess all the prerogatives of rank and command were waived. Here, with at least no direct

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consequences, any officer could question another. The commanding officer was not exempt, and he had been dreading this session for days. True, too impertinent a question from an ensign to an admiral had been known to stifle the young officer's career, but Meier was painfully aware he held in reality no higher rank than most of the men and women in the room. Several had made it obvious they knew he was in command solely due to the influence of his grandfather.

The first few questions were polite enough, primarily regarding personalities at Port. Then one of the tall, Valquez scoutship commanders who had been drinking more than usual rose carefully and braced herself against a chair. Gesturing widely, she weaved in place as she spoke.

"When are you going to let us teach those Tripes a lesson?... sir." The "sir" came softly and after a long pause. "We've been here for two weeks an' not lifted one ship off this pesthole supply dump. Ain't it our duty to protect this sector, not your spare parts?" By the end of her little speech the officer's voice sounded angry, even if her words were slurred. She sat down with a thump and took another long drink of wine.

The commodore felt his face flush red. It was clear from the expressions around him that everyone else in the room wondered the same thing. What could he tell them? Why did the Tripes have to be discovered just as he took command? Why couldn't they have been friendly, or at least less belligerent? His thoughts ran in tightening circles.

"A review of the situation will help clarify my decisions," Meier stalled, wishing he had some decisions to be clarified. His only thought had been to scream for help and that had been refused.

"The first contact with the Tripes... er... Tripean Visualate was made while I was actually in transit to McCauley." He hesitated, that sounded too much like an excuse. "As the Alliance expands it is not unusual to find

racers, including some formerly unknown, which have carved out their own petty empires. The Tripeans, based upon First Empire records, had an animal power level of culture when the Dark Millennium began. Since then they seem to have learned quite a bit. I have been studying all of the intelligence reports. What we do know comes entirely from independent merchants and one official, uh, encounter with one of their merchant vessels."

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By the mother of all, what was he going to say? Even to himself Meier sounded as if he was rambling. Then he remembered one of the first rules of command: If things are going badly, pass the responsibility.

"Harlan, you head sector intelligence. A few of these officers have just arrived. Please brief all of us on what we do know about the Tripeans."

The intelligence chief had a reputation for telling everyone more than they needed or wanted to know. An admirable trait considering his job, but a bit annoying on so small a base. He was obviously happy to oblige, took a self-important breath and began.

"McCauley was primarily a scout base until a year ago. Then it was decided the sector needed a Class E repair facility. This was before the Khalian action drew off so many ships to the far side of the Alliance. We are then left with a half-completed repair facility and enough general stores for a full fleet. Before he left Admiral Duane ordered that the remaining scouts explore those areas outward from the sector. Less than a week after the 197th Squadron and about half of the base personnel left to join Admiral Esplendadore, we found the Tripes."

Harlan Kramer paused here, savoring the attention. When the silence became noticeable, Meier smiled encouragingly and asked him to continue.

"The Tripes appear to have been a nonspacegoing culture until a hundred years ago. Now understand. This is mostly hearsay from a few tramp captains we found who had been dealing with them."

"Sellin' guns and ships, I'll bet," a voice inserted bitterly from the back of the room. Several more officers murmured their agreement. There was little love lost between the Fleet and most indies.

Trying to look as if he didn't hear the interruption, the intelligence officer continued. "The Tripean Visualate consists of six planets, ruled by a Council of Families. There are nine or ten main families, each of which maintains its own fleet. In times of war they appoint a military leader who assumes overall control. They currently seem to be in the process of electing one. We know nothing about him at this time, not even his name."

At this point two waiters entered, one carrying two pitchers of the green liquor and the other a tray of glasses. They began

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distributing them, and Harian hesitated until they had finished. As they left, several of the younger officers in the back of the Mess had already emptied their glasses and gestured for refills. The intelligence officer glared at the hapless waiter until he abandoned the pitcher and fled the room. When he resumed speaking there was at first a touch of annoyance in the officer's voice.

"We know that there is a peace faction in the council, but have not been able to contact any of them directly. We also have the location of their home planet, though Fleet policy restricts us from attacking it outright."

Commodore Agbera, commander of the remaining combat forces stationed on McCauley half rose, looking as if he was going to comment. Harian froze, his mouth half open. Seeing every eye upon him, the tall, bearded officer brushed a few nonexistent crumbs off his uniform and sat back down.

"Physically the Tripes are bilaterally symmetrical," the intelligence officer continued after gulping a mouthful of air. "They have three legs, three arms and nine eyes. Traders describe their movements as graceful and their arts as highly developed. Not unusually for a young race, Tripean society is highly competitive and individualistic. They are oxygen-breathing, carbon-based and prefer Earthlike planets, if those a bit warmer than we're comfortable on. Based upon those they've colonized, I would think they would be comfortable here on McCauley." Having reached his verbal stride the intelligence officer droned on over the clinking of glasses.

"They are an extremely visually oriented species, able to see far into the

infrared and ultraviolet. Further, they can focus down almost to the microscopic level and at greater distances than we do. They are also noted for their caution, thorough planning and love of detail. One indy captain complained that just one shipping agreement he made with a Tripean merchant filled UK."

One of the junior quartermasters snickered at the comment. He had just received a Fleet directive on letting contracts for the repair of computer terminals which had filled 12K, on a planet with no native population to let the contracts to. This earned him a puzzled glance from Meier, but went unnoticed by the lecturing officer who, about to reveal his latest intelligence coup, didn't miss a syllable.

"For the last week they have been constructing a base on an

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otherwise uninhabited planet less than twenty light-years from here and in an area clearly claimed by the Alliance. As this was a previously unknown world, I will exercise my option and designate it as Harlan's World in all reports." He grinned sheepishly and hurried to continue.

"One of their merchant ships was, uh, persuaded to refit at Allison after having a brush with a, um, skiprunner and then being found by one of our scouts. Their instruments use color shifts instead of dials. Their technology, while less refined than ours, appears to have stemmed from First Empire designs, and is basically similar.

"Their fleet is said to consist of numerous armed merchants and over a hundred scout-and destroyer-class warships. They have purchased materials which leads me to believe they have begun constructing a number of cruiser-class vessels as well."

Several of the scoutship captains looked toward Agberea, as if expecting him to comment. The senior combat officer continued to stare at his glass.

"Even at their current strength, with most of the Fleet tied up on the far side of the Alliance, they have by far the most powerful force in the area. We know very little else and our only consolation is that they seem to know even less about us."

There was an awkward silence before Commodore Meier realized Harlan had run down. He hurried to fill the silence.

"As you can see, we are faced with a delicate and dangerous situation. I've been carefully preparing a plan for dealing with the Tripeans," Meier assured them. "The highest security needs to be maintained over the entire operation. Due to the nature of the plan, it will be necessary for me to brief most of you separately. Those meetings will begin tomorrow.

"Dismissed."

He hurried from the room before anyone could ask him any embarrassing questions.

By midnight that same day Abraham Meier was past frustration. He had spent the last nine hours in front of his command computer reading over and over the meager data on the Tripeans. No solution presented itself. They would have no choice but to view the Alliance as a threat. It was a threat, and Fleet policy wouldn't allow them another generation of

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independence. Their potential for disruption was too great. The two spheres nearly overlapped already with ten Alliance planets located within fifty light-years of the Tripean capital.

Frustrated, the young quartermaster snapped off the console, only to flip it on again a few seconds later.

The Tripeans had fought a minor war against another race twenty years earlier and had won handily. Most interesting, that race was currently considered their closest ally. Now it seemed likely they were getting ready to go to war again. The Tripean fleet was large enough to depopulate this entire sector before sufficient forces could be recalled from the Khalian action. There was no question that in a long war the Fleet would win, but this wouldn't save the millions of Alliance citizens in this sector. It was also a pity, for while they would be formidable opponents, the Tripeans were an industrious race and could be a valuable addition to the Alliance.

This newly discovered race also meant a disgraceful end to the career of one of the quartermaster corp's brightest young officers. This thought sent

the next in a long series of waves of self-pity swirling through that young officer. Meier's eyes slipped involuntarily over to the crumpled message from his grandfather and he hissed aloud "tradition" in such a way as to make it sound obscene. At the moment to him it was.

Meier spent the next ten minutes staring into the empty monitor, not even thinking and too emotionally drained to even generate another wave of self-pity.

"I'm a quartermaster, not a combat officer," he protested to the uncaring wad of paper. "I handle supplies better than the best." Even as he spoke he resented his own words. A hero on the Omni might be able to cobble together a superweapon from the spare parts in his microputer and lead the Fleet to victory with it. Meier was proud of his skill and competence, but none of his abilities appeared to be of any use in facing the Tripeans. The thought of all those who might die because of his inadequacies made the small man shiver.

Finally, because the Fleet had trained him well, Commodore Abraham Meier keyed the console to decision mode and began summarizing the situation one more time.

On the one side there was a new race unfamiliar with or to the Fleet and Alliance. They were intelligent, ambitious, cautious, thorough and well armed, everything necessary to defeat the meager forces he commanded on McCauley.

Upon the discovery of the Tripeans Meier had gathered

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every ship in the sector. This totalled three cruisers, fourteen scouts and three obsolete planetary bombardment vessels. These last three were left over from the Veeveki War and were totally unsuitable for ship-to-ship combat.

Even allowing for better technology and experience, his forces were outgunned at least five to one. Worse yet, he had two dozen planets to defend and the Tripeans could strike at any one of them, more planets than he had ships to guard them.

There was no hope of reinforcements for months, until things were so

far gone he would likely be dead or in disgrace. He also had in his command one nearly completed Class E repair facility with only half its complement of personnel, none of its regular garrison of ships. McCauley also was a Fleet supply depot, which is why he was cursed with command. It contained everything needed to rebuild or repair ships except hulls and guns.

Hoping for a miracle, like finding they had been shipped ten battle cruisers in very large crates, Abe Meier scanned the list of stores. He was, after all, a quartermaster, and he had let everything but worrying about the Tripeans slip too long. On the list he discovered forty thousand barrels of hull paint. Enough to change the colors of every ship in the Fleet. Some other quartermaster had evidently gotten rid of his excess paint by shipping it to McCauley.

In an effort to break his mood, the young officer announced to the empty room that he had a secret weapon. They would throw paint at the Tripes, they liked colors. Paint he understood. Then it became very silent in the small office and Abe Meier sat staring at a scratch in the gray on the far wall for a long time. A contented smile grew as he once more scanned the lists of stores. This time more purposefully. Minutes later he was keying in notes and the smile had grown into a broad grin.

Captain Agbera entered the Commodore's office with a determined look which he tried to soften and failed. His thin face and carefully tended beard gave him a sinister, almost satanic, look which suitably intimidated junior officers and colonial women. Finally he worked his mouth into a smile which served only to set off the tension evident in the rest of his features.

The office walls were bare as Abraham Meier had not

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brought any decorations with him and there were no natives to buy local art from. The only furniture was a desk, two chairs and the massive command terminal which covered the bulk of one wall. Behind the desk was a window. The long silver hulls and green trim of the ships glinted in the blue-tinted sunlight outside it. The combat officer stood in front of the desk and swayed from one foot to another until Meier offered him a seat.

"Let me begin by apologizing for Commander O'Hearn's tone last night.

She meant no disrespect. "Agbera hesitated until the Commodore nodded his acceptance. Then he took a deep breath and continued.

"Still, you have spent the last two decades as only a quartermaster. This is hardly a matter of stores and requisitions. There's no disgrace in admitting you are out of your element... Abe." He paused again to see how his attempt at familiarity was accepted. No reaction. He finished in a nervous rush.

"I've commanded in over a dozen combat situations and am willing to accept command of the combat arm of the base. You can still command groundside. Sort of, er, let us both do what we are best at, eh?"

Commander Meier fought down his anger and stared at the officer for several seconds. Did Agbera really think that he would turn over his command? Then the anger died and Abraham reminded himself that he was going to need this man. Then, as his annoyance subsided further, he let a grin touch the corners of his mouth. Perhaps it would be best if he maintained as much security on the overall picture as he could. If it worked, Agbera's surprise would add extra satisfaction to the success. If his plan failed they would probably all be dead anyhow.

Misinterpreting his commander's smile, Agbera matched it with a relieved smirk and stood to leave.

"Well, if that is all settled," he began.

"There's nothing to settle," Meier interrupted in a soft tone. "I am in command and intend to act as such."

Agbera froze halfway out of his seat, his expression sliding from surprise to fear. He had been confident that a quartermaster would welcome his offer. Instead he had insulted his commanding officer. He recalled suddenly that this was a Meier, a respected Fleet family. Careers had been ruined by less.

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"Still, your experience and skill are vital to the plan," Meier added in even tones, trying not to enjoy the other officer's obvious discomfort. Suddenly his voice hardened. "Now here is a list of materials your crews should be ready to load no later than this afternoon. It will be tight, but

I'm counting on their ingenuity. In addition, each ship should be ready on short notice to carry between four and fifteen auxiliaries. The entire force should be armed and ready for combat on one hour's notice. AH leaves cancelled, pilots to sleep on board."

The commodore rose from his chair and stared out the window as he spoke.

"Finally, I am ordering a number of modifications on the drives of the bombardment ships. See to it personally that they are carried out exactly as ordered, to the tenth decimal.

"Written orders will arrive this afternoon." There was a whiplash in his voice as Meier finished.

Agbera still visibly unsure of himself, lurched the rest of the way out of his chair and snapped to attention. His "Yes, sir" was brisk and he practically ran out of the room. The commodore couldn't see his face, but the clerks in the outer office appeared startled by it as he rushed past.

The quartermaster officer leaned back in satisfaction as the door closed. Right or wrong, it had begun. He enjoyed the familiar sensation of dealing with what he knew best as he began to input the hundreds of detailed orders that would be required.

Chief Petty Officer Ovrarn Checkley had served aboard the bombardment ship *Vilhelm Ranier* for the last twenty of his fifty-five years in the Fleet. For the last eighteen he had spent most of his waking hours ensuring her engines and drives ran at their greatest efficiency.

Ovrarn was a thickset man with graying hair and hands much too large for an already big frame. To punctuate his displeasure the spaceman gestured with a three-foot wrench, swinging the heavy tool in short arcs. The three younger crewmen in the engineering section literally cowered in one corner.

"Twenty years tunin' this pile of scrap," he protested, "and now they want me to mess her up. All because some crazy quartermaster is so scared he's staining his dress

blues." The engineering mate was so enraged he failed to hear the hatch open behind him.

"That will be enough," Captain Agbera snapped as he strode onto the engineering deck. "I fail to see where it is your place to judge the orders you have been given. You are to execute them to the best of your ability."

Checkley stood frozen, the massive wrench stopped in midswing. Then, the Captain let his expression soften.

"Look, Ovrarn, there is a reason. This is vital to our upcoming effort against the Tripes. I'm counting on you to do the job right." And I hope Meier knows what he's doing, because I sure don't, the combat officer added to himself. But to the men he seemed all self-assurance.

"But to detune the engine to these specs and keep 'er there?" the engineering mate protested. "Why, we'll be in as bad a shape as the *Rustbucket*." He was referring to another of the bombardment ships, the *Russell Warren*, which was notorious for having the worst engineering section in the sector. "We'll slow you all down."

"We're counting on you all to do exactly as ordered. Look on it as a challenge." Agbera finished. "I'm counting on you."

When Quartermaster Owen Elrich was confused his voice tended to break. He had already waited for over a decade for age and maturity to cure the habit and was beginning to be resigned to its being permanent. His voice virtually squeaked over the com line as he questioned the orders he had just received.

"It makes no sense, sir, loading a hundred gallons each of ten colors on every ship. That's enough to paint them over twenty times. We haven't even changed admirals."

"Just do as you are told," an equally confused adjutant to Meier assured him. "It is a vital part of the effort to deal with the Tripes." The adjutant hung up and stared at the door to Commodore Meier's office. This was the sixth such call he had fielded that afternoon. Ships were being loaded with more spare fins, antennas and odd hull parts than they could use in ten years of combat, and on a rush basis. His carefully laid out duty rosters were a disaster. Only arming of the bombardment ships with space-to-ground missiles had made any sense. And even then they were

cramming in half again as many missiles as each ship was meant to hold.

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For a moment he had the urge to go through the door and ask the Commodore for an explanation. Still, he'd seen Agberera's face that morning and wasn't anxious to find out what had caused the man's evident panic. Finally he decided that if the Commodore had slipped a gear he really didn't want to know.

The corn-unit buzzed again. This time it was a scout-class ship's captain protesting against having bunks rigged in every open area of his ship. He would hardly be able to move, much less fight. The adjutant wearily assured him the orders really did make sense and were absolutely vital. It was fortunate for his peace of mind he couldn't see the building plans across which Commodore Meier was cheerfully scrawling the words Top Priority.

Harlan's single giant moon was growing rapidly as the *Castigator* approached at combat speed. The moon's airless surface was the color of dirty chalk and pocked with craters. The planet beyond was a collage of yellows and reds, broken by two large purple oceans. Sitting in the observer's seat on the Fleet cruiser's bridge, Commodore Meier was beginning to feel guilty. They should be in combat in less than ten minutes and if he was killed, his plan would be lost. He balanced this against the memory of Captain Agberera's visit to his office and resolved to explain to the officer what this battle was meant to accomplish. Turning to the tall, bearded man he gestured for his attention.

"You are probably wondering why I ordered the formation to drop into real space so far out?" he understated.

Agberera cautiously didn't answer, but nodded his assent and waited for Meier to continue.

"The reason is simple. By dropping into sight this far away we have given the Tripean commander plenty of time to see he is too badly outnumbered to fight. He should be ordering any ships in this system to flee while they still have enough clear space to escape. I don't want us to have to destroy any of the Tripean's ships."

This was too much for the combat officer.

"I suppose you don't want to make 'em mad," he snarled.

"Something like that," Meier agreed. The explanation didn't seem to be doing much to improve relations, but Agberia at least now understood their constraints. "Please issue appropriate orders. All ships are to pursue the enemy

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only at a distance. No shots are to be fired unless I personally order them."

"There's only six," Agberia almost whined. "We could have trapped them against the planet. Why did you have me place scouts at the edges of this system if we're not surrounding them?"

"Oh, yes, please call those scouts every ten minutes, just say hello and sign off and remind the other captains to stay out of planetary laser range until we are sure Harlan's right and they don't have any," the Commodore added in a conversational tone.

Agberia sputtered, but passed on the orders quite efficiently.

Twenty minutes later the last of the Tripean ships, having been pursued half of the way across the solar system by four Fleet scouts, wavered and escaped into FTL. Agberia was grinding his teeth as he reported its departure.

Abe Meier walked casually over to the communications officer. "Please connect me to the Tripean planetary commander."

When the connection was made the Commodore found himself speaking to the first live Tripean he had seen. The trilateral orientation was disconcerting, but not unpleasant. His muscles were knotted and he moved with agitated grace. The creature's skin shifted colors as he spoke, changing from a flat gray to an ominous black tinged with green.

"You have no right to be here." Anger was evident in all nine of the alien's deep gray eyes. Small flecks of gold speckled the skin over his eyelids. Meier decided he liked the way Tripeans looked.

"This is Tripean space and you are ordered to depart." The alien

hesitated, awaiting some reaction. Meier continued to silently study the image on the screen. Finally he spoke calmly, still watching the monitor.

"As you can tell from your sensors all of your ships have fled," Meier pointed out in patient tones. "In one hour the bombardment vessel *Janus* will arrive. I must insist you evacuate all personnel from your three main bases by then as we are going to destroy them. The one ship will complete her mission in less than fifteen minutes. At this time we will temporarily depart, allowing your forces to be picked up and returned to a planet where you have a right to be.

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"This may be considered as our response to any invasion of Alliance space."

"You have no right," the Tripean began to protest weakly. His skin was now a bright shade of violet.

"One hour, beginning now," Meier repeated and then cut off the channel with a satisfying click.

Turning to Agberea he ordered a single missile to be launched from a scout into a desert area five miles west of where the Tripean commander's signal had originated. Finding this command more to his liking, the tall combat officer rattled off a series of commands and a brown splotch, visible even from space, quickly appeared on the surface of the planet below.

It actually took an hour and a half before the *Castigator's* sensors showed that all three of the Tripean bases had been cleared. Commodore Meier gave an order and the first of the bombardment vessels accelerated out from behind the planet's moon.

"The Tripes are monitoring the vessel on visual and related sensor levels," the communications officer intoned in what he hoped was a neutral voice. "Shall I jam?"

"Certainly not," the Commodore admonished him. "That would be impolite."

Everyone on the bridge suddenly felt the intense need to study the

instruments in front of them.

The *Vilhelm Ranier* whiplashed through a nearly full orbit at top acceleration and so was traveling at a considerable speed when she launched her missiles at the first of the Tripean bases. Having just fired off over half its total weight, the lightened bombardment ship surged forward and disappeared behind the moon. Out of sight of the planet she jumped immediately to FTL and began the two-day trip to McCauley.

The planet erupted as dozens of massive plasma charges tore a ten-mile crater along the edge of one of the purple seas. Dust was thrown into the stratosphere, and the sound of the explosions echoed loudly a thousand miles away. To the closest Tripeans, manning a monitoring station thirty miles from the blast, it appeared the entire horizon flashed white and then was filled with smoke. They barely made it to a secure shelter before the Shockwave leveled their small dome. Their carefully protected monitoring equipment continued to take readings on all of the Fleet ships as they hovered overhead.

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On board the *Castigator* every crewman watched the ship's main monitor. On it was the view from a recon drone hovering near the target sight. In the force of the blast the Tripean base's walls first crumbled and then shattered into dust. The ground below the base changed from rock to gas too quickly to follow and joined the walls in the upper atmosphere. Metal, where exposed, glinted painfully, even over a monitor, then seemed to melt. The shiny drops boiling away before reaching the charred ground.

The monitor flashed brighter and then went black. Either the navigator had maneuvered it too close to the blast zone or a wild shot had strayed. Very much a quartermaster, Meier frowned at the waste of equipment. The navigator and the gunner's mate exchanged guilty glances. Then the navigator had the sense to trip in the shipboard sensors and the screen was filled with Harlan and its moon. A large brown blot was visible along the planet's equator.

A few seconds later a second bombardment ship appeared on the moon's far side from where the *Ranier* had disappeared. To the Tripean sensors this was the same ship. The ship's color and outline were the same and she appeared where the *Ranier* would have been if she had drifted in safety behind the moon. The second ship's engine's electronic signature

was identical to the first, even to a desperate need for a tune-up.

Three minutes later this ship launched a salvo of missiles slightly greater than the first one. These completely obliterated the largest Tripean base on the planet. Lost in the explosion was the planetary commander's collection of First Empire artwork, including a rare Disney. He allowed himself one minute of personal rage and returned to dispassionately watching the data analysis as it poured in from numerous stations too small to attract the Alliance ship's attention.

The second ship, following the same orbit as the first, disappeared behind the moon and also ducked into FTL space.

The third ship repeated the process exactly, eliminating the last base on Harlan's World, but then slowed to join the globe of silver and green scouts hovering far behind the moon. Not a single life, Tripean or Alliance, was lost.

The planetary commander's report caused a stir on Tripea. There had been a good deal of blustering about how defenseless the Alliance was. Now it had struck the first blow. All

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three advance bases had been completely destroyed. The war faction of the council found this more than embarrassing. The peace faction, primarily the merchants, seized on every detail to frustrate the other side's future plans. At first the reports were considered exaggerations, particularly in view of the total lack of casualties. Aerial photos showed three craters where the bases had stood.

Later the data on the bombardment ships was considered to be an error understandably made while under fire. A complete analysis of the telemetry still showed that one ship had somehow launched 150% of its own weight in missiles; reconfirmation was requested. After this was received, the peace party was able to force a cancellation of the imminent attack on McCauley.

As the debate continued, the peace faction was able to gain a delay in all hostile activities until more could be learned about the forces they were facing. Even the military had to agree with the wisdom of that tactic. It was decided a delegation, supposedly to discuss peace terms and in reality

intended to evaluate the Fleet's potential, was to be sent to McCauley's World instead. It would be comprised of two intelligence officers and four members of the council, two from each faction.

A week later, Commodore Meier received the Tripean offer of a high-level meeting on McCauley as if he had been expecting it, which he was. Harlan Kramer exploded at the concept of the intelligence problems this would create. Captain Agberera, getting into the spirit of things, smiled knowingly at the outburst and kept his doubts to himself.

For the next week Meier busied himself with details. It kept him from wondering if the suspicions of virtually everyone on the base were correct and he was insane. He hoped not, but at times wouldn't have bet against it. Outwardly he tried very hard to look confident. Occasionally he allowed himself the luxury of muttering vehemently, "tradition," which was quickly becoming his favorite expletive.

Three days later Commodore Meier was taken on a personal tour of the building he had designed. The construction officers hung on his every word, hoping for some insight into the purpose of what they had just built. It was referred to by those constructing it as the Fun House. It had taken the total efforts of every construction worker on the base to complete on

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'schedule. Leaving the building, Abe Meier was amused at the reaction of the officers commanding construction when he ordered the walls dirtied and roughened until their shiny new building appeared to have suffered from several years of use and abuse.

Commodore Meier spent almost all of the next day underground, supervising the completion and capping of the ten tunnels he had ordered dug. That evening he ordered triangles large enough for a cruiser to land in painted on the tarmac, one triangle to stem from the camouflaged manhole at the end of every tunnel. This confused everyone but the marine lieutenant in charge of the base honor guard with whom Meier had spent an hour explaining what he intended. Sworn to secrecy, the marine spent the rest of the week dodging his mates' questions and chuckling to himself. Finally he took to hanging around the surfacecraft service area, where he busied himself modifying one of the smaller troop carriers.

When Commodore Meier ordered every ship on the base to be

repainted red, and in a new pattern, he earned himself the nickname among the enlisted men of "the Brush." For three days they sweated, clinging to scaffolding hanging against the hulls as they scraped and repainted the ships. One scoutship pilot made the mistake of pointing out that it was against tradition for a ship to change colors while under the same command. His lone figure scraping the hundred yard long hull served as an object lesson. No other protests or awkward questions were voiced at the next Monthly Mess.

When personnel received an order to make a search for one set of identical male triplets among the populations of worlds within a week's travel time, it was simply done. They turned out, to everyone's pleasure, to be three very attractive young ladies. They were members of a music act and several of the crewmen recognized them from Omni discs of their performances. The girls arrived the day before the Tripeans, confused as to what they could do, but willing to help.

Councillor Ar'arnaas was a nervous shade of orange as they approached the enemy planet. More than anyone else in the council he had been the advocate of a quick and decisive attack on the Alliance. Because of this, no one was contesting his claim to act as co-ordinator in the upcoming war. His council speeches had invariably ended up as exhortations to attack this Alliance base without any further hesitation. Approaching in

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an unarmed ship the object of so much of his venom made him feel vulnerable. Spread out below them was a base large enough to hold ten times their entire fleet. He was relieved to notice barely a dozen ships, all trimmed in red, were visible below.

"They must be fools to allow us to learn so much about them," he announced confidently to the other councillors. "They even gave us the option of where to land, in any of the triangles. See how they are already trying to curry our favor."

"The ships which destroyed our advanced bases were green and they were in constant communications with unknown forces at the edge of the system," one of the intelligence officers reminded him dryly. His skin was a neutral gray.

"So they have two forces, neither is a tenth the size of ours. We can

crush them in one attack. The war will be over by Plestinfining Fair," Ar'arnaas insisted.

If asked in just the right way the councillor would admit he had always been driven by a lifelong need to dominate those around him. If this included a new race called humans, so much the better.

"And will cost a fortune," Krener'n, leader of the peace faction protested. He too was tinted orange with anticipation.

As they landed, the intelligence officer was busy memorizing the shapes of the hulls for later comparison. No one said anything until the whine of the grave turbines had faded. Rising from their pods, each delegate hurried to be first through the hatch.

"I suggest we settle our colors," Ar'arnaas commented loudly as they hurried down the corridor. As leader of the majority faction, he was to be spokesman for the delegation. The Tripean councillor had already noticed that the two intelligence officers had stayed a placid gray. In a few moments all of the politicians matched them and the hatch was opened.

Two humans stood at the base of the stairs which had extended from the ship. One was recognizable from the recordings of the bombardment. He was the commander of the fleet that had bombarded their bases.

"Welcome," Commodore Meier intoned, bowing slightly in the absence of any idea what the proper Tripean protocol might be. The small translator on his collar repeated the words in Tripean.

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"Greetings from the Mighty Empire of the People," Ar'arnaas answered in his most pompous voice. The humans and Tripeans were of about the same mass, with the humans all taller by a third than their visitors and the Tripeans nearly twice as wide.

"If you wait for a moment, a suitable Honor Guard will arrive. We were not sure where you would choose to land," the Commodore explained. "This is Marine Lieutenant Anders."

A few seconds later a small ground effect vehicle arrived accompanied by the scream of strained fans. It was completely closed with mirrors for

windows and ornately decorated. A reasonable vehicle for a hot climate, the intelligence man decided. They all noted that the craft was large enough to hold only a handful of humans.

"They insult us with the size of the Honor Guard," Ar'arnaas murmured under his breath. He was disturbed when the small translator on the humans' shoulders seemed to repeat his comment, but both men continued to display their teeth in what the councillors had decided must be a sign of approval.

The vehicle had barely settled to the ground when ten men in dark green uniforms poured out of its single door. They formed a short double line on both sides of the doorway.

The Tripeans were about to begin walking the long empty distance to the line when a second squad of ten emerged. These were followed quickly by a third ten and then a fourth. The councillors began to shift colors toward pale lavender.

The aliens' color grew brighter and redder as men continued to emerge until at least two hundred lined their entire path to the seemingly tiny aircar. A livid purple Ar'arnaas led the group toward the car. It was empty when they entered it and seemed no larger than it appeared from the outside.

"Telemetry error," Jard'de, a peace faction councillor and the nephew of the now disgraced planetary commander, commented just loud enough to be heard.

Ar'arnaas turned a darker shade of purple, but said nothing.

"This vehicle is programmed to travel by itself to ensure your privacy," the marine lieutenant explained, sticking his head inside the door. "My men will escort you to your quarters."

Saluting, he pulled his head back outside of the hatch and it closed silently. A moment later the craft rose to the murmur of

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fan blades and began to drift very slowly toward a distant building. The Honor Guard, all two hundred and forty marines, marched alongside.

Adding to the aliens' confusion was the panorama of every ship on the field rising silently and disappearing into the cloudless sky. One of the Tripean intelligence officers spoke into a "decoration" on his harness and then looked up.

"They went FTL a few diameters out," he advised the councillors. "Slightly different electronic signatures than any we have on record. Definitely a second force."

The six Tripeans felt cramped in the small groundcar. As their color returned to gray, each searched the car but found nothing suspicious. All had tinges of blue when the car finally arrived at a building in a remote corner of the base. Ar'arnaas noted that there was only one other building nearby, a one-story structure with only one entrance. It appeared to be heavily guarded.

"Blue! Now he wants blue ships. He's stark raving mad!" Gunner's Mate Simpkins complained loudly as he scraped the last of the red paint off the hull of the Fleet cruiser *Adelaide*. A week earlier he had sweated to scrape green off the same surface under the hot McCauley sun and thought no job could be more miserable. He discovered now that he had been wrong. Doing the same job while the ship orbited just beyond the last, frozen member of McCauley's solar system was an even more undesirable task. The spaceman was stiff and was sore from the effort of working in a spacesuit. Worse yet, he couldn't scratch the spot on his back that itched and it was three more hours until the end of his shift. His curses grew eloquent and imaginative.

The normally ground-based repair crews who were busy a few feet away changing a perfectly good atmospheric stabilizer fin for a slightly different one agreed with every syllable. The day before they had switched the latest model of sensor dish for the unit the new one had replaced six months earlier. They were also getting very tired of sleeping in hallways and being resented by the crews of the overcrowded ships. They could not even send messages home as the main turbines of every ship in the fleet were shut down for recalibration.

The first five days of "peace" talks had so far consisted almost entirely of long-winded speeches by Ar'arnaas. If he

had not pacified his own delegation, explaining that he was stalling for time to allow them to study the humans better, it was likely he would have been assassinated by his own side. The human Commodore seemed quite willing to sit patiently and listen to the drivel the councillor spouted.

The distant blue sun had set and it was nearly dark when Te'eecam, the other War party councillor, burst into the room.

"Another fleet is landing," he announced breathlessly. "Just the same one returning," Ar'arnaas assured his companion. Both Tripeans rushed to join the others on the roof of the building.

"They must not realize how well we see, these small-eyed humans. I've observed their own visual abilities are quite limited," the senior security officer observed as they watched the ships land. "The composition of this force is similar to that of the unit which took off as we landed, but this force has three less of the smaller-class vessels."

"They are all blue," Krener'n stated the obvious.

"The lines of these ships are different," the junior intelligence officer added, turning a dirty brown. It was his job to remember such details and there was no doubt he was right. A few minutes later the crew who had remained on board their ship confirmed that this fleet's turbines' electronic signatures were different.

Most of the delegation spent a sleepless night watching the new ships load a minimal amount of stores, mostly air and foodstuffs. It was before dawn when the ships all rose quietly into the star-filled sky and were lost from sight. It was confirmed that these also went FTL a few hours later.

Over the next three weeks there was no true progress at the peace talks. Twice more one of their number observed a large number of humans emerging from a ground vehicle in circumstances similar to the first time.

The intelligence officer sneaked out twice to examine the ground vehicles closely, but found nothing to explain the phenomenon. Krener'n suggested simply asking how it was done, but was overruled by the others more reluctant than he to admit their ignorance.

One intelligence officer even went so far in one of their nightly briefings to warn against asking any technological questions. "If the Alliance gets

the impression they are

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technically more advanced," he warned the others, "they may take a harder line in the talks or even invade Tripean space themselves." He turned slightly yellow at the thought.

During this time three more groups of ships landed and restocked, each composed of ships identified as being different from all that the delegation had seen before. These were marked with first orange, then violet and finally white.

It was the schooled opinion of the intelligence officers that the Fleet kept its ships in space as much as possible. This alone showed a level of reliability far beyond that of the Tripean navy. He also observed the number known to be based on McCauley were now nearly equal to those of the combined fleet.

The ship which had taken the delegation to McCauley was dispatched with the urgent recommendation that even more covert activities against the Alliance be curtailed until more could be learned. Ar'arnaas felt stranded and alone as he watched their ship leave.

Another week passed and a fleet landed whose hulls were painted almost completely black. Krener'n had taken over as spokesman by a majority vote with only Ar'arnaas dissenting. His speeches began to dwell on the history and advantages of co-operation between the Tripean Empire and its neighbors. Councillor Krener'n also demonstrated an even greater proclivity for long speeches. Ar'arnaas himself was getting bored and developed a plan for a bit of exploring on his own.

The other building near their quarters was still being guarded closely. Guards constantly patrolled its walls and roof. After hours of study Ar'arnaas had discovered a hole in the patrol pattern. Things were not going well and even his fellow faction member was discouraged. Too much time had passed and all that they were learning supported the peace faction's views.

With his superior night vision it proved a simple matter for Ar'arnaas to slip past the human sentries. Once inside the squat building he hurried into a deactivated command center of some sort and waited.

No alarm sounded.

Confidently the councillor began to explore. The next room was empty, its light gray walls scuffed from hard use. Someone had once dragged heavy machinery across the metal floor, scratching it badly. The next room he entered was

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similar in color and shape, but smaller. He could now hear the faint rumbling of machinery from the room ahead. This room, judging by the size of the building, should be the last on the floor. It contained an unknown device about the size of the ground vehicle which had carried so many marines. The machine's surface was covered with dials and blinking lights. Several oddly shaped boxes were stacked against the far wall.

Ar'arnaas slipped quietly into the room. Seeing that he was still alone, he began to relax, his skin fading to a merely excited tan. There was nothing else in the building; this device must be what was being guarded. Perhaps it was responsible for the anomalies they had been observing. With that secret they could return to Tripea, add it to their ships and attack with confidence.

Exactly two minutes after the door had drifted closed, intense bursts of light exploded directly over the Tripean's head. Blinded, the alien back-pedalled and slammed into the wall. The lights continued to flash. Ar'arnaas groped along the wall until he found the door he had entered through. Back in the second room his eyes began to function normally. The door had drifted shut behind him and the councillor found himself reluctant to reopen it. Instead he turned to retrace his steps and froze.

This was not in the same room! This room was clearly twice the size he expected and its walls were a curved and pale white. He had entered the machine's room from a small gray room. He had never been in this room before. Cautiously he opened the door at his back and was surprised to see the machine still flashing mysteriously away. There was no evidence on the ceiling of what had caused the blinding flashes.

Nervously Ar'arnaas decided he must have remembered incorrectly. The lights must have confused him. It might be a side effect of the device in the next room, a spatial disorientation. He noticed that the floor of this room vibrated slightly as he crossed to the only other door. It should lead

to the exit, he reassured himself, the building wasn't that large. Ar'arnaas resolved to come back the next night, when he was less unnerved, but now he had to leave before he was discovered. Those flashes may have been some sort of an alarm.

When he reached the far wall he found the door was unlocked. Listening, the Tripean heard nothing and he pushed it open a fraction of an inch. Ahead of him the same machine

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he had seen through the door on the other side of the room blinked and rumbled just as mysteriously. His skin turned a pale lavender. The same odd-shaped boxes sat against the far wall.

Nervously the councillor crossed the vibrating floor a second time. He stayed near one wall, actually brushing it with one arm to ensure that this time he did not get turned around. He was obviously suffering from considerably more disorientation than he had thought and would have to be cautious.

For a few anxious seconds the door failed to open, then it opened easily. Flashing merrily in the room ahead was the machine. The same peculiar boxes sat in the same jumble as they had before. The Tripean's skin was now a livid purple.

In near panic the alien rushed once more across the floor. It had stopped vibrating, but he didn't find this reassuring. The vision of being trapped forever on some three-dimensional Moebius strip added to his terror. Tinges of red began to mottle his skin. Half expecting to find the machine once more, Ar'arnaas threw open the door. He was almost relieved to find instead a corridor that curved gradually behind him in both directions.

He didn't remember any corridors, but at least this wasn't the room with the strange machine. Directly across from him, in the direction which he hoped led out, Ar'arnaas could see three doors. All three were made of highly polished metal.

Moving as quietly as possible the Tripean councillor approached the door on his left. Seeing his reflection, the Tripean was ashamed of his panicky color and paused, trying to mute it.

Pushing the door gently open the trilateral alien saw a human female sitting at a table inside a small, dimly lit room. The human appeared to be watching two video screens whose backs were to him. They lit her face with a green light.

"I'm afraid you have the wrong room," she informed her astonished visitor in heavily accented Tripean. Then looking up from the screens she added, "You know, as the leader of the war faction, there's a way you could become the leader of the peace faction as well." Unable to reply Ar'arnaas backed out the door. He hurried to the second door and flung it open before he lost his nerve.

The same human waited inside the same room. There was

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no mistaking her shape or bright red hair. There was even the same gap between her teeth in the front.

"No, the next room," she corrected him, hardly looking up from the screens. Then she was looking at him and making the teeth showing approval gesture. "Your faction would trust you if you advised peace. The peace faction would have no choice."

The Tripean backed up as she spoke and looked down the corridor. No, he had not entered the same room, or rather he had not gone through the same door. There were doors to his left and right. Nervously he left the center door open and hurried to the first door he had tried.

Just before throwing it open he glanced back. The middle door was just closing, the female human visible in it. She waved an appendage in a friendly manner and showed more approval teeth.

A fraction of a second later the alien dived through the left-hand door and found himself looking at the same girl in the room ahead of him. She had her back to him and was walking toward the table containing the video screens. Turning she showed her teeth again and in a soft voice directed firmly, "I said the other door, the one on the right, and you really ought to think about joining us instead."

Ar'arnaas emitted a high-pitched whistle and backed into the corridor. The metal door drifted closed in front of him. In its polished surface he

could see a bright red reflection. Once more he forced himself into a calmer state. Two minutes later he had managed to reach a creamy pink. Seeing no other alternative he hurried to the last door.

This time he was not surprised to see the same human sitting at the same table and obviously waiting for him.

"You can leave now," she announced. "Just go back the way you came... sort of. And try to think about how you could be the one who leads the Alliance, hundreds of worlds." She made the widest tooth approval gesture yet and turned one of the screens around. On it was the image of the spaceport. A fleet of bright pink ships was just setting down.

The Tripean said nothing as he backed out of the room and ran through the single doorway on the far side of the curved corridor. Rushing into the small room he hurried to the door on the far wall. It opened easily. The strange machine blinked cheerfully just beyond. Examining its walls, Ar'arnaas realized he was looking through the only door that led into the

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room. It was a dead end, yet the human had told him to go back the way he came.

Hesitantly, fighting the feeling he had already lost a game he didn't know the rules for, the alien entered the room with the machine. Cautiously he studied the ceiling as the door drifted closed behind him.

No lights flashed and Ar'arnaas became bolder. Carefully he studied the device. The floor quivered as the machine seemed to vibrate more, otherwise unaffected by his presence. He removed an access panel and stared into the mass of wiring and components behind it.

After several minutes the councillor had to admit he could not comprehend the device's purpose or operation. He had had technical training when young, but there seemed no pattern to its construction. It was as if the strange machine had been cobbled together from spare parts. If it hadn't been for his experiences of the last hour, the councillor would have dismissed it as meaningless junk.

Ar'arnaas realized he had been in the room for a long time. He had been seen by those human females, even though they had seemed

unconcerned. The building should be crowded with guards by now. Though if the woman had given an alarm, he should have been interrupted long ago. Perhaps they were reluctant to enter this room. Expecting to find armed guards waiting, he risked a glimpse out the door.

The room outside was empty and somehow it was the one he had originally entered from. The Tripean didn't know whether to be pleased or frightened. He could escape. Suddenly that was all that mattered. Afraid to allow the room out of his sight, the Tripean literally dove through the doorway, his three legs trailing behind. In a rush the alien retraced his steps until he found himself at the door to the outside.

Easily avoiding the guards once more, Ar'arnaas was able to sneak out of the building. As he slunk through the darkness between the buildings he noticed that the field was once more full of brightly lit ships. Ships painted almost entirely pink.

Once in his room the leader of the war faction sat staring at the walls. His skin ranged several times through the spectrum. By the time McCauley's harsh blue sunlight was bubbling pink paint off the hulls of the newly landed ships, his pallor had settled down to pea green.

The next day Krener'n requested that there be no talks.

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Meier had no objections. Ar'arnaas did not leave his room, though he was visited several times by the other delegates.

The next day one of the intelligence officers inquired casually of Meier's adjutant as to what the procedure for joining the Alliance was. The adjutant just happened to have the information handy.

Three days later the Tripean application to join the Alliance was signed. The first signature on the document was that of Ar'arnaas, the self-proclaimed leader of the newly formed peace and unity faction and Tripea's first candidate for the Alliance Chamber of Deputies.

Commodore Meier took great satisfaction in attending the Officers' Mess two weeks later. There he cheerfully explained what had occurred to the astonished ship's officers.

"Since they were badly outnumbered and had no hope of winning a shooting war, they had no choice." The Commodore paused, contrasting the admiring looks he was now receiving with the glares of a few months earlier. He was definitely enjoying himself and knew he had earned it. "I had to take advantage of the assets we did have."

The Commodore smiled expansively at his combat commander. Agbarea shifted nervously and returned the smile weakly. He felt upstaged, but had to concede Meier the moment.

"The most important of these was that neither side knew very much about the other. Every action we took was designed not to defeat, but to confuse or intimidate the Tripeans, to make them wonder if attacking us was such a good idea. The intent was, at the minimum, to buy some time until the Khalia have been dealt with.

"The bombardment gave them enough doubts to merit their sending us a delegation. Its real purpose had to be to find out more about us. We were fortunate it also contained the leaders of their peace and war factions. This made matters much simpler and saved a lot of time."

Here he turned his gaze to the *Castigator's* communications officer, attending at Meier's invitation. The man looked nervously at Agbarea, who was smiling slightly as he began to understand what had occurred.

"I expected them to monitor our every action, in fact I counted on it. Your failure to jam endowed the one bombard-

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ment vessel they thought we were using with impossible abilities.

"The alterations and repainting further confused the issue and gave them an inflated idea of our strength. By the way, if you can get anyone to volunteer, I think we'd all agree pink is a really embarrassing color for a victorious Fleet squadron."

The Commodore paused until his smile was matched by the other officers. There was a general settling into chairs and a few even raised their glasses in silent toast to their commodore. Savoring their acceptance, he continued.

"The marines were vital in continuing the illusion that there was a lot the Tripeans didn't know about us and our capabilities. Several times a large number of marines would be hurried through the tunnels we dug and enter a groundcar through a trap door under one of the seats. There was plenty of room between the blades for them to fit past. To anyone watching from the outside, it looked as if we had a full company inside a ten-man troop carrier.

"Finally there's the 'Fun House.' Yes, I knew what you called it. You must have wondered when I ordered an elevator the size of a room. You'd have been sure I was certifiable if you'd seen the nonsense machine I'd designed to fit in it. That and some hidden strobe lights served to distract our spy while the room descended. On the lower level Ar'arnaas found what he thought was his way out led instead to a circular room which was really a turntable. A few spins on our carousel and he was ready. Then our beautiful triplets were able to complete the disorientation. We were fortunate that the leader of the war faction personally chose to play hero, though any of the Tripeans would have sufficed to carry the ideas we wanted back to him."

Waiters entered with a clatter, distributing glasses and filling them with fine champagne shipped all the way from Earth. Being a quartermaster did have its benefits.

"I would propose an unusual toast." Meier raised his glass as the last of the officers' was filled.

"To politicians," he announced jovially and emptied his glass. A few of his fellow officers looked confused and others chuckled, but all joined in the salute.

"Politicians of any shape have similar motivations. Dealing with these is one of the unfortunate requirements for being stationed at Port." The quartermaster quickly went on to

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explain. "Ar'arnaas was offered a few ideas by our lovely triplets from New Dublin while he was vulnerable. Ideas which were both to his benefit and the Alliance's. They pointed out a way whereby both he and the Alliance got what they wanted. He is now the leader of a newly formed unity faction which favors membership in the Alliance and is campaigning

hard for its approval by the full Tripean Council. I've been assured by the former head of the peace party it will be approved in a matter of weeks."

At this point Abe Meier paused and took another long drink from his glass. It really was a fine champagne, or maybe it was just the moment. No one spoke, waiting patiently for him to continue.

"I actually have Captain Agbera to thank for inspiring the whole plan. He reminded me I was a quartermaster, not a combat officer."

Agbera blushed, not sure how to take the comment.

"It seemed to me that as a quartermaster, I had to use the resources I was familiar with. It seemed easier to paint our way to victory than to blast our way. I have put the chief in charge of the paint locker up for a Silver Galaxy."

INTERLUDE

No visuals, no blazing fleets. Commander Kanard fought down growing resentment. Why couldn't Meier have fought at least one real battle? Just one tiny battle, swarms of ships exchanging fire while Meier stood valiantly on the bridge. But no, that quartermaster had to do things the easy way.

Discovering he had developed a literal, as well as figurative headache, Gill punched in a request for an endorphine accelerator. Four seconds later an envelope containing two pills slid out of the delivery chute in the left corner of his desk.

"The Med Corps," the PR man mused aloud. "They're safe. I'll find a hero in the Med Corps, saving others at the risk of his own life and all that. Even the Friends on Erdonis would pay taxes to save lives."

Once more Gill seated himself in the center of his control array and began searching the almost immeasurable files of the Fleet. Somewhere out there was a doctor who deserved to be a hero. A nice, clean, valiant hero.

by Jody Lynn Nye

Dr. Mack Dalle kicked the metal box containing the serum back under his seat and straightened up. With a swipe at the wing of dark hair that had fallen into his eyes, he peered out the scoutship's forward port at the steadily growing grey and green disk of the planet 7B-E, named Basilisk. Dalle was stiff from the flight. His long bones and broad shoulders had deceptively little meat on them, and the Fleet made the pilots' seats for somewhat shorter and better padded men. He felt as though he had sat round-shouldered the whole two days. Now as they were approaching, he forgot his discomfort long enough to look out at the planet. Even dulled by the thick blanket of atmosphere, Basilisk was more green than grey; most likely because of its sun, a small green-yellow star, which lit the scout's silver skin with a brassy glow. Portions of all three of Basilisk's three major continental masses were visible. Two of them, elongated triangles set edge to edge, receded over the curve of the planet as the ship turned toward the third and largest, which telemetry revealed as a rough hexagon lined through and through with mountain ranges and rivers.

"Everything's in order," Dalle told Lieutenant Patrick Otlind, the scout's pilot. "Serum, formulae, test strips. Everything the well-dressed planet needs to inoculate itself against Maculocolitis."

"You wonder where these damned diseases come from," Otlind said speculatively, his light eyes reflecting glints from the LEDs dotting his control panel. His hands moved lightly

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across studs and switches, only the last joint in each finger flexing to close connections. He pushed back uncomfortably in his seat, running a hand under the tight impact straps belted over his shoulders. He was a much shorter man than his friend, though they probably weighed the same. Patrick Otlind was not stocky, but sturdy. His hair was an interesting silvery tan which made Dalle think irresistibly of mineral salts. "Every month, another alert, a hustle to synthesize vaccine, another hustle to distribute it. You can't keep immunizing needlessly. Oh, I agree: Maculocolitis is nasty. Anything that attacks your eyes is really dangerous. They had just better start working on quicker diagnosis or quarantine, or something. One day the vaccines're going to start reacting with each

other, and there'll be nothing we can do."

Dalle nodded. "And I wonder why I'm not getting any research done nowadays. I used to think planet-hopping was good for intragalactic relations. Well, I'm off medical courier duty after this mission. I'm going to go planetside somewhere and lie in the sunlight."

"Dustbowler. I never figured out your type's fascination for sitting out in the radiation and frying. You're gonna grow up to be topsoil, you know that? You'd have a better time if you'd just let me show you the ins and outs down in Dylan Thomas Settlement. Everything you could want, and you never have to step outside into the cold air to get it. Girls, entertainment, liquor..."

"Oh, no." Dalle shook a finger at his friend. "I like my fun the way I'm used to it. There's no difference between my 'type' and yours. I notice you don't object to exposure to solar rays when you're on leave. Your people live in limestone caverns because the weather pattern on Basilisk is so rotten. Thunderstorms out the wazoo, right? Well, hiding like animals in burrows isn't for everyone, especially not me." He leaned confidentially over his armrest toward Otlind. "I'll tell you a secret: I'm not too crazy about little dark places."

"Uh-huh." Otlind wrenched a control around, and the scoutship changed direction. Dalle slid back into place in his seat and the cushions under him wheezed. His bruised bones complained. "That's why you work in little boxes in deep space, right?" Otlind patted the shiny beige impact quilting that lined the walls of the bridge.

"In case you hadn't noticed, you gopher, it is rarely completely dark in deep space. I'm a damned good doctor and

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diagnostician. And a claustrophiliac. So are you, or you wouldn't be assigned to flying scouts. Drop it, Pat. I'm not going to let you start an argument about underground living this time, not when you're about to have your whole planet's population backing your side in ten minutes."

"Yup," Otlind said with satisfaction. "Going home. I haven't been back in eons. I'm out of approved leave. Do you know how many favors I had to call in to get to come with you, just to get some home time?"

"Yes." Dalle grinned across at him. "You owe me one, too, for not protesting your assignment with me. I have full pilot qualification, and you know it. I don't need a driver. That's why I spend so much time doing med-courier. It saves one man. On the other hand, it's nice to have company." He took a quick glance over at the instruments. "Urn, Pat, do you want to call someone down there? We're so close they could pick us out of the air with beanshooters."

A quick look at the screen showed that their entire forward view was filled with planet. The lighted indicator on the comlink blinked urgently: an incoming message was being received. Otlind hit himself in the side of the head. "Yow! Sorry. You're right. I'd better dump velocity. I bet that's Senior Leader Morak on the com right now. He might already be aiming 'em our way."

"*Sorry*, he says." Dalle sighed and pulled the impact straps tighter around his chest.

"Surprise, Fritz!"

"Who—?" the thickset man demanded, leaning so close to the video pick-up that Dalle could see bristly black hairs growing out of his ears. The young pilot grinned.

"Patrick Otlind, Fritz."

"Well, well." The big figure relaxed and drummed a broad hand on his console. "Hello, kid. You're looking good. Welcome home." The bushy eyebrows drew humorously together over a broad nose. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"Fleet Scoutship FS-2814, carrying Medical Courier Dalle. We're on another shot run. This one's for Maculocolitis, which is breaking out in Central and in the Brektonne system. Estimate our time of arrival fourteen minutes."

Morak shook his head. "Dammit, can't they keep their bugs to themselves? I've got enough problems to look after. I

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hear you, FS-2814. Acknowledged your ETA of fourteen minutes.

Confirm, please," Fritz Morak asked, formally acknowledging the Fleet's ship code. "And don't mess up the crops on the way in, huh?"

The crisp air-noise rustled in the speaker like paper. "Confirmed, Basilisk. Be down in a minute. It'll be good to get home."

"Right, kid. I'll notify your mother and father you're here. Oh, and you, too, Doctor. We're happy to have one of the genuinely *useful* members of the Fleet visiting, anytime."

"Thanks, I think," Dalle said, with a rueful smile that drew creases down his narrow face.

"Scuse me, Fritz," Otlind interrupted, hands playing out the landing sequence on the controls, "are you expecting anyone else? I've got another blip on my scope, about 20,000 clicks behind me."

"No..." The leader wrinkled his brows so close together that they rubbed, squinting at a screen off to the left of his video pick-up. "Yes, I see it, too. I have no idea who's out there. No communications signal from them. I'm putting us on Alert." He gave orders to an overalled technician in the room, who dashed out of pick-up range.

"Telemetry coming in, Basilisk." Suddenly, Otlind was all business. "Alert planetary defenses. I read a Khalian pirate behind me. Just one ship. My guess is it's a slaver. Leader, I'm dropping into atmosphere to evade. Prepare to repel intruders! FS-2814 out."

The little ship dove, but not soon enough to avoid a salvo from the Khalian ship. Dalle and Otlind were thrown sharply back and up into their seats, forcing groans of protest from the restraining straps. The stabilizers on the starboard side had been destroyed, causing the scout to jerk hard to the right and start a broad spiral just under the first ceiling of atmosphere. Otlind's head impacted with the edge of his pilot's cradle as he tried to bring her up, and he was knocked unconscious.

Dalle, unable to draw in air, plastered as he was to his cradle by sheer gees, tried to grab at the controls. He could smell something burning. His vision shrank to a narrow tunnel as his brain ran out of oxygen. He found he couldn't tell one button from another. Another brilliant explosion of energy on the nose of the craft from the pirate guns and the ship lurched under them. The forward screen flared and temporarily blinded him. The

ship, glowing an iridescent bronze, spun

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into the envelope of air around Basilisk and vanished in the glare of atmosphere. The Khalian ship descended gracefully behind it.

Leader Morak switched the com-unit over to 'receive,' and leaned back into the message wall to give the Alert. The wall was an adaptation of a natural underground feature, a perfect circle five hundred meters across, expanded and smoothed by the settlers over the thirty years the planet had been inhabited. Basilisk was rich in minerals; not gross building materials, but luxury minerals, like onyx, jade, all grades of quartz crystal, and marble. What it lacked in granite, or even deciduous trees for construction, it made up in profit. A mineralogist with an ear for harmonics, Morak himself had discovered the unique quality of the echoes the exposed arc produced, and had insisted on expanding and incorporating it into the structure of the underground settlement when the colonists moved into the caves. What could be better, he had insisted, than a mass communication system that never needed power to run, and never broke down? As the planet's population had increased, and groups broken away from the main system to form smaller settlements of their own, they had carved echo walls in the huge caves of onyx and quartz crystals which provided their shelter and their livelihood. The walls stood only four meters high, barely a fraction of the height of a typical cavern. Functional walls for offices and homes were constructed to accommodate the arc of the wall's passage. All the rooms, including those built within the ring, were joined to the message system by electronic connection, which Morak playfully considered 'cheating.' As a mining colony Basilisk prospered, running rings, so to speak, around rival systems.

"This is Morak," he announced, enunciating clearly. There was no need to shout; the wall picked up the merest whisper and carried it 180 degrees around the circuit on both hemispheres. Still, he had to strain to keep his voice level. "Clear the air. This is a planetary Alert. There is a Khalian pirate ship on the way down. Begin evacuation procedures immediately. Drop everything you're doing—carefully," he corrected himself with a small smile, "and take your assigned places. We haven't got long before they get here. Repeat, there's a Khalian ship landing. Move!" A communications tech had already arrived and had taken over the com-unit to

alert the other settlements planetwide. The low console defense computer in the corner of Morak's office was already flashing notices of Alert-readiness from the other settlements. Its scarlet LEDs made the golden onyx of the walls look like living blood. There was no way to tell which lifesigns would attract the damned pirates. Morak only had an intuition that they would strike at Dylan Settlement.

The colony had never before had to defend itself from outside the Alliance, in spite of its placement on a frontier planet. The planetary defense systems had been used against pirates and cargo thieves. Morak was gratified how quickly his people responded to the alert. Replies from the various stations in Dylan began to come in immediately. Defense groups were forming as per instructions, and evacuation of children and the elderly to the lower caverns was getting under way. "Why now?" demanded Ivor Mulligan, administrator of the settlement infirmary. The hospital center was in the third level of the caverns, its message wall connected to the main one by bounced echo. His voice was faint, but Morak could hear how annoyed he was, and understood. Mulligan had dozens of patients to move.

"They heard the Mushroom Festival was starting, Ivor. I don't know why. Just get ready! We've got to pull the plugs soon. By the way," Morak added, with a hint of malice, "your next shipment of serum is out there with the raiders. The Weasels're looking for extra-healthy slaves."

"That's all I needed to hear," Mulligan groaned, and tapped the out-code.

Morak shook his head and bent over the flat console to concentrate on coordinating settlement defense. The cross-chatter of echoes rang in his ears.

When Mack Dalle opened his eyes, he was on his back, staring into Basilisk's greenish sun. He blinked at the dazzle, listening to the rustling sounds of wind through trees, but all the ship noises were gone. Where was Otlind? In fact, where was *he*? A hairy claw interjected itself between him and the sky, and he was wrenched to his feet and jerked close to a furry face that contained gigantic sharp teeth. He cringed. A Khalian pirate. A particularly large and ugly one, too.

"Khralith na houstay?" the Khalian demanded, shaking him for emphasis on every syllable. This one was obviously

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the pirate leader. The straps clasped around its fur-covered body were decorated with gold and shards of crystal. And human teeth. The others ignored them and patrolled the clearing around the body of the scoutship. They had hauled everything moveable out of the scout, and were going through it for weapons and valuables. So far they hadn't seemed to have found the weapons locker, for which Dalle was thankful. Otlind was nowhere in sight. Dalle swallowed.

"I can't understand you," he explained, stammering. "I'm a doctor. A medic—a healer."

With a snarl, the pirate threw Dalle to the ground and made a gesture. It didn't understand him, either. One of the others, a mean-looking little Weasel whose breast-pelt was dyed red, picked him up again and chained his wrists together. With a vicious tug, she indicated that he was to follow her, and no nonsense. Dalle stumbled after the raiders, twisting his head around hoping to catch sight of his pilot.

He was dragged down a wooded slope on his knees and forced to stand up again before the pirates made him ford a shallow but fast-flowing river. The flat brown stones along the bottom were worn smooth and slippery. Dalle tried to take care crossing, but his arms were jerked painfully forward. His thin flight boots quickly filled up with water, and he squelched after his captors. They were following the directions of one pirate, who held what Dalle recognized as an infrared detector. The raider directed them through blue-and green-leaved undergrowth. Long trailers covered with invisible thorns hooked themselves into the fur on the pirates' legs and dragged behind them, gay streamers decorating grim figures. The Khalia were not bothered by the needlelike hooks that pierced right through Dalle's pants legs.

The ground cover was thin in the shade, revealing broad patches of Basilisk's grey clay-soil face. Tendrils of tough prairie grass snaked over and through the dirt, trying to join clumps of green plants, creating loose, natural triplines for the unobservant. The captain stumbled over one and fell flat. Instantly, silently, the whole pirate crew dropped to the ground, guns pointing outward. Dalle's guard pulled him down with her, a clawed

hand over his face. He breathed, wide-eyed, over the sharp talons digging into his cheeks. With a hissed curse, the captain sprang up, angrily wrenching a two-meter trailer out of the ground. He threw it down and

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walked over it. His crew rose and cautiously followed, watching where they stepped. Dalle followed, wondering if they had been observed.

Behind the next thicket, a cliff-face appeared in which had been drilled, either by nature or by man, a circular thirty-foot hole, the entryway to Otlind's precious labyrinthine home. Moisture gleamed on its white- and brown-streaked limestone facade, and moss and birds' nests were picked out in deep blue green here and there. The captain snarled another command, and his crew spread out into three lines, looking for sentries. There was no human around but himself, even atop the cliff. No light showed in the doorway, not even a safety indicator. Without a doubt, the Basiliskan colonists were watching them from concealed points. There was no need to risk a human when electronics would do the same job. Hoping that the Khalian captain hadn't seen it, Dalle turned casually away from the sight of a communications pick-up concealed in a brown trace of ore in the wall. He spared a moment to hope that his friend was still alive. There were rumors in the Fleet that the pirates ate human flesh. He felt nauseous just considering the possibility.

Just before they descended into the darkness beyond the opening, two of the pirates switched on dim, red lanterns. It occurred to Dalle only then that these would probably be their sole source of illumination. Dalle felt himself beginning to sweat. Red-pelt yanked at the flex, and he followed.

There was no sound inside the cavern except their own footsteps, and an occasional low hiss from one of the pirates. The daylight disappeared with alarming speed only a short way inside. The grey darkness ahead began to develop features in the bouncing red light of the lanterns—threatening features. Nervously Dalle cleared his throat—Hh-hmm!—and listened to the sharp echo from the ceiling. He wondered if the colonists knew that the raiders were entering at this place? With a deep breath, he began to talk. If there was anyone within range of his voice, he should be able to give them information they could use. If the pirates didn't shut him up first.

Leader Morak sat in the dark just under the lip of the first echo ring.

Forty men were ranged in the corridors and alcoves of stone around him waiting for the Weasels to come. From

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his vantage point, he listened to faint progress reports from far inside Dylan. To the intruders, the voices picked up by the message rings would have declined to faint, unintelligible murmurs at any distance greater than five feet from the wall. Morak intended that they wouldn't get beyond the first arc.

The hallways through the primary ring wound back and forth, avoiding stalagmites and other natural outcroppings that acted as girders, holding up the walls and partitions. Only offices and recreation rooms were in this section; not much for the Khalian's to mess up. No control units were in plain view. All sensitive equipment had been removed. Morak had given the order for auxiliary control of ventilation and lights to override first-level switches. The pirates weren't going to get any more light than they were carrying with them. And pretty soon, the air would begin to get stale. Morak imagined he could already taste the monoxides building up in the stagnating atmosphere.

Passages leading off the main hall were also under surveillance. Morak's defense team hoped to lure the Khalia down toward them, where the greatest concentration of traps, deadfalls, and men were secreted. If necessary, the other teams would attempt to herd the pirates toward them. Morak fingered the relay box which controlled the explosive charges set in his hidden traps. An edge of icy hostility crept through his blood, chilling him down to the emotionless state of command. Here was a chance to kill a whole host of the verminous pirates at once. No settler under his protection was going to fall into the claws of the slavers. He wanted to time it until the raiding party had crossed the nearest narrow fissure in the floor. Those silly lanterns of theirs were giving the colonists more than enough light to shoot them by—if there were any left alive after the trap sprung. They'd be just in range of the deadfall—

Wait. Morak stopped, his sweating hand nearly closing the connection. He had heard a human voice amidst the growling of the slavers. Was it Otlind? No, the voice was wrong. It must be Dr. Dalle. There was a chink of metal. *Dammit, he's in chains.* With an inward groan, Morak disarmed the deadfall trigger. His conscience wouldn't let him kill a citizen of the Alliance, especially not a healer.

"What's the hold-up, Leader?" one of his men whispered, hidden in the darkness.

"The Fleet doctor. They have him. Wait."

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"So?" asked a woman hoarsely. "He knows the risks. We have to protect ourselves."

Morak made an impatient gesture, chopping downward with the edge of his hand. "We have other options. We'll get them *without* having to kill another citizen of the Alliance."

"Okay," the woman assented ungraciously. She sighed, sending a lonely sound sursurring up the stone walls. Morak winced, wondering if the Khalia could have heard it, and decided they couldn't. "You're right. My brother's a Fleet officer. I'd want the same for him."

Morak smiled in the dark, and listened for the approach of the pirate band. He knew exactly where they were, even in the dark, just by the resonances of their footsteps on the stone floor. He knew every inch of the labyrinth, as did all the colonists. It would be their best advantage, having to weigh against the Weasels' superior speed and experience, fighter for fighter. He'd have to lead an ambush, give the doctor a chance to get away. As the raiders got closer, he could distinguish what Dalle was saying.

"And they'll roast your behinds, all twenty of you. I figure your pelts will make a great rug for the rec room on the *Elizabeth Blackwell*, four across and five down. Maybe I won't even wait until you're dead before I sew it together. Red-skin here'M be where I usually do jumping-jacks, so I can stomp on your face every day. But you other nineteen musn't feel left out..."

Morak smiled again. Twenty. The medic's deliberate babbling gave him two important facts: the number of raiders in the party; and that none of the Weasels understood English, or they'd have shut Dalle up a long time ago with a bullet. He wondered if that had already happened to Pat Otlind. The kid had a fast mouth. The pirates had a reputation for being short-tempered. The information made up for not being able to take the Khalia out easily, the way he'd counted on. The air was growing heavier.

Before long they would be feeling the effects of anoxia. He only hoped the Weasels would find it harder to bear than they did. Another message began to come through, opening with the code for 'Urgent.' All other traffic stilled. Morak listened.

Patrick Otlind threshed across a shallow stream covered by thick undergrowth, pushing his feet forward carefully so as not to be heard. It had been a feat of legerdemain to roll out of the

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wrecked nose of the scoutship and into the bushes without the pirates seeing, hearing or smelling him. His shields had held just long enough to dissipate the last blast from their guns, but the controls were completely dead. The scout was practically beyond repair. Control wasn't going to be happy with him.

He wasn't too happy with himself, either. If he hadn't been goofing around in the cockpit, he might have picked up the trace of the Khalian ship earlier, and been able to complete evasive maneuvers. He hoped Dalle was all right. His precious serum box was still tucked under the co-pilot's chair. The doctor had been rendered unconscious by the crash. Otlind knew that the raiders wouldn't have just left him for dead even if they couldn't rouse him. They should have plenty of cargo space on that football of theirs. Maybe it was true that they kept humans around to eat as well as to perform menial labor.

The typical Weasel crew on a slaver was twenty plus a captain. Otlind counted twenty marching out of the ship in the direction of the bluffs, with Dalle as their prisoner. Unluckily for the ugly rodents, then, that would mean that only one of the crew was staying behind to guard the ship. Otlind had some plans for dealing with him.

The Khalian ship stood in a broad, gently curved clearing, much like the palm of a hand. Otlind had to admire the pirates' strategy. The advantage was all theirs on this field. No one could sneak up on them without being noticed. Cover in the valley was sparse; only short plants and knee-high grass grew there. During Basilisk's short dry season, it usually became a dustbowl. Otlind lay on his stomach just within cover of some thick brush at the vale's perimeter and watched the guard make its rounds with a heavy projectile gun over its skinny shoulder. This was the first Weasel he had ever seen that wasn't dead or on the other side of a

viewscreen. It certainly would never win a beauty prize. Of all the races the Galaxy had produced, this was one of the most vicious-looking species Otlind had ever seen. This one was man-height, and it looked like its strongest muscles were all in its back and lower limbs. It wore heavy crossed leather straps almost hidden by the fur on its body, which supported a long holster and several knife sheaths. These last were mostly for show, since the Khalia relied on their teeth for combat more than on blades. Otlind touched his throat and reminded himself not to let the thing get its mouth anywhere near his

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neck. He moved to a spot downwind, and started toward the spaceship.

The Khalian marched stolidly on its rounds, scanning the edges of the clearing. It took just under two minutes to complete the circuit, and during only forty-five seconds of that was Otlind completely out of its sight. In his estimation, it would take four runs for him to close the distance, and he was dead if he failed. Without being able to get back to his own ship for bigger firepower, his personal armament consisted of a small needle gun, fully loaded; a long-bladed knife; and a packet of salt crystals, personal stock.

The Khalia didn't have needle guns. They were advanced technological weapons as far as Weasels were concerned. Otlind was pretty impressed with the little guns himself. Accurate at any range up to fifty feet, they propelled a 'smart bullet,' a miniature explosive charge that went off only when it had passed through a soft layer, such as a body wall. Charges which missed and hit hard structures fell harmlessly enough to the ground, though they could take your hand off if you didn't disarm one before you tried to pick it up. Otlind had seen that happen before. It was like watching a plasma gun take out the forward half of a ground vehicle. He had to admit they weren't perfect, but they lengthened the odds considerably of getting out of a fight alive planetside. Owing to the usual thick impact padding on a spaceship, a *soft layer*, needle guns were only employed by boarding parties, never on one's own vessel. A shell was too efficient an explosive.

He was counting on getting within kill range of the Weasel guard without letting himself be seen. Needle guns fired almost silently. Out here it would sound like a gust of breeze. Otlind figured he had time to loose off a second shell in case he missed with the first one. There was so little cover

that he prayed the pirate was too bored to be paying close attention to the bushes. Burrowing low into the sharp sagittate grass, he loosened the knife in its sheath and watched for his first opportunity to run.

His fourth dash brought him close enough. As the pirate rounded the standing fin, Otlind drew bead on him, and fired.

The shell missed. It rebounded from the fin with a *CLANG*. In a blink, the guard spun around and fanned bullets precisely in the direction from which the shell had come. Otlind was impressed. That thing could *move*. And in a moment, it would

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be on top of him. He raised his gun again to squeeze off the second round.

The Weasel wasn't going to give him a second chance. It saw the movement in the grass, hit the ground, and rolled. Otlind barely had time to pull the knife the rest of the way out before the Khalian jumped him.

Otlind brought his knee up, bracing it between them. The pirate tried to drag him closer, its jaws apart. The huge front teeth were shiny with saliva. The Khalia tried to go for the throat, just like the savage animals they resembled. With one arm and his free leg, Otlind flipped them both over. The pirate was surprisingly light. The pilot sat down hard on its chest, and slashed down with the knife. Four sets of claws raked him front and back. Most of the talons slid down his flight suit, but two fingers gashed the skin over Otlind's collar bone. He bounced, hard enough to knock the air out of it, and sliced with his knife.

He connected with its chest. The knife caught on a strap, and he jerked it free. The Khalian hissed angrily at him, and rolled its spine so that the back feet were on the ground. With a twist, Otlind was dumped to his hands and knees. The Khalian was instantly on his back, arms around his neck, teeth seeking his jugular. The pilot clasped the arms and pulled them low on his chest with one hand. He tucked his head over, falling in a classic martial arts roll that threw his opponent flat on its back. The needle gun dropped out of his holster into the grass. As he came up, his other hand drew the knife across the Weasel's face. Blood welled up through the slick brown fur. It screamed at him, doubling up to kick and claw. Otlind swept his foot around and smashed it in the side. It rolled

over and over, and sprang up. Now it was bleeding messily from three wounds.

Otlind was bleeding, too. The torn places on his chest stung badly. They weren't deep, but there was already dirt and sand ground into them. He flipped the knife to his other hand, and dried his palm on his pants leg. He tossed the knife back with his eyes fixed on the Weasel's.

They circled each other. The Khalian had more weapons, but Otlind was discovering he was much stronger than it was. The pirate knew that, too. It was staying well out of his reach.

They both made little lunges, angling for an opening that would throw the other off guard. Otlind sought for his lost

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needle gun out of the corner of his eye. It was a good ten yards from where he was standing. If he wanted it, he would have to expose his back to get it. It was too far to merit the risk. He would have to rely on what weapons he still held. The Weasel took advantage of the break in his concentration, and sprang.

Otlind jumped back, belly drawn in. The claws just missed him. Then they were back to circling again.

"I don't have time for this," he sneered at the pointed, furry face.

"Arragha!" the Khalian hissed back. Otlind's slash across its face had damaged one eye. The swollen lid drooped, the flesh a throbbing red. The pirate wanted to kill him, that was obvious. The fur covering the face didn't hide the hate. He needed an advantage to finish the fight, and fast. He wanted to get into the caves and find Dalle. And his family.

"Yeah, and your mother, too." Otlind grinned. The pirate sensed the sarcasm, and showed all its teeth. "Pretty. I bet you brush after every meal."

He realized then that the Khalian was maneuvering him, steering him toward its ship. If it trapped him in a corner between the body and a fin, he'd be dead meat. He was only paces away from the ship. He let his gaze meet that of the pirate, and kept staring calmly into the animallike eyes.

It'd give the Khalian too much confidence if he showed any agitation. Casually, never looking away, he dropped his free hand back to his pocket, and withdrew the canister of salt.

It fit neatly in his palm, and the lid came off with a POP! with only a light pressure from his thumb. He'd only used this kind of dirty trick once before, in a bar fight. Then, as now, he'd used it to gain time to save his life. The pirate glanced toward his hand when it heard the little sound. That was all Otlind was waiting for. He shot the contents into its face.

"Aaaaaaeeroooya!" it howled, clapping both paws to its wounded eye. Thin red fluid dripped down its face. Otlind could smell its blood, sharp on the wind, over the milder scents of crushed meadow grass. It sprang away from him, scampering blindly for safety. Otlind charged forward, and bowled it to the ground. It fought him weakly, but the fight was over. The pilot brought down his knife once, twice, three times. The pirate sagged, its jaws open in a soundless snarl of pain, and died. Otlind slid bonelessly off it onto the ground, and sat there panting.

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With a few deep breaths, he was up and moving again. No time to waste. The gouges on his chest had stopped bleeding. He patted them dry with the corner of his sleeve. With speedy application of antibiotics and antiseptics, he wouldn't even feel the cuts after a few days. He headed back toward his ship to root through the med-chest. A short trip to the armaments locker on board FS-2814 for a couple of plasma cartridges and some tools, and an equally brief visit underneath the casing of the Khalian raiders' engines ensured that the slavers wouldn't get far off the planet's surface—providing that they ever made it back to their ship at all.

"This'll help your takeoff. Pop goes the Weasel!" Otlind said grimly, tightening a final connection with an abrupt jerk. The tool slipped out of his whitened and ridged fingers. Surprised, he retrieved it from the ground, and stopped to massage life back into his hands. He was amazed how angry he was. He had been clutching the tool so tightly it left grooves in his flesh. His arms were trembling, twitching in sympathy to his nerves. He'd had a lot of practice on demo devices, but he took especial pleasure in fixing up this one, his first real booby trap. The guard's body he dragged into the undergrowth and left for Basilisk's scavengers.

He felt violated. It was unbearable to him to see these detested

creatures, mutated rodents, among things he'd loved all his life, kidnapping citizens—his friends and relatives—for food or slaves. When FS-2814's sensors had pointed out Khalia, he felt as if he was living out a long-suppressed nightmare. Like a nightmare, there had been no time to act before they had attacked him. The explosion would make a nasty hole in the scenery when the booby trap blew, but it would avenge his planet. Even if they found Otlind's device, there'd be no way for them, or anyone else, to disarm it. Some of them would buy it, no matter what.

His bomb was in place. Now Otlind would have to see if he could rescue the Fleet doctor. Uncharitably, he wished that he had come alone, so he would be able to get down to killing Khalia without worrying about someone else. No, he was bothered by more than that: Dalle and he were good friends. Otlind hoped that the doctor was still alive.

No guard was on duty at the entrance to Dylan Settlement. The colony was now relying on hidden electronic surveillance devices. After a year and a half off planet, Otlind had to think

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hard to remember dictated standard procedure for dealing with intruders.

It was perhaps a minor miracle that Basilisk had never before suffered an invasion from the Khalia. There had already been Khalian raids for ten years when the planet had been settled, deep into the designated frontier on the edge of the Alliance. The next planet out from their sun, 7C-E, called Cockatrice, had been invaded. Basilisk no doubt had its unusually stormy climate to thank for having been ignored »or so long. Not that the Basiliskan colonists remained unpix-pared. Otlind was certain that the ground defenses would be sufficient to take care of twenty raiders, when they were well prepared to fend off hundreds of Alliance-bred pirates who came occasionally to hijack mineral shipments. It had become a watchword that the smaller the cargo ship from Basilisk, the more valuable it was. Leader Morak and the others had had to develop advanced safeguards to keep their exports intact.

Not surprisingly, there were no lights on the ground level. He crept in, taking care that no shuffled footstep would set off a tricky echo in the stone roof. Otlind regretted the necessity of darkness; he wanted his first sight of his old home in full light: the shimmering honey- and lime-colored

pillars of the central cavern meeting halfway between stalagmite and stalactite; the rugged, comfortable furnishings of the great stone rooms that looked more as though they had been quarried than constructed; shining underground streams that wound ribbon-like beneath the translucent grey and bronze stone floors. The scents were still there, though, the heavy mineral odors with which he had lived all but the last five years of his life. He breathed it in, trying to be satisfied with one sense's worth of home. Crouched over, he ran on tiptoe to the message wall and tapped out a spate of Fleet code, hoping that the intruders would take the faint staccato to be dripping water. He identified himself, noted his position, and inquired as to the whereabouts of the raiders and Dr. Dalle.

In a moment, he had an answer. Acknowledged. Here. Assist in the kill. Morak.

Skirting around the curving wall, he ran along familiar back passages to catch up to the waiting ambushers.

Dalle pulled back on the rope around his wrists involuntarily every time his captor yanked him forward. It earned him a

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painful punch or kick from one or another of the Khalia, but he couldn't help himself. He had no intention of being drawn farther into the darkness. There was sweat running from under his hair into his eyes, and down the middle of his back. In the cold gloom of the caves, the droplets turned icy, making him flinch in fear, as if someone had poked at him from behind. He didn't dare to turn away from the red lamps. They were all that was keeping him moving forward, with or without force.

Except for responding when he lagged, Dalle's captor didn't seem to notice that he was there at all. She was not the biggest or the strongest of the raiders. It would be possible in a moment of surprise to pull his chain away and run for it. But to where? Otlind had never had a chance to show him around, teach him the layout of the caves. With all the turns they had been taking, he couldn't guarantee that he would succeed in finding his way back to the light. And that was what he craved most of all right now: light. To Otlind and all the others this was home, their bolthole; but to him it was a particularly cruel prison. His childhood fears hounded at him, threatening to summon up old pictures of imagined monsters. He gasped as the lights picked out a giant molded stalagmite, four or five

meters high. It appeared to move, turning its wide stone head slightly toward him. Dalle's stomach tightened, forcing a whimper out of him. The red lanterns disappeared momentarily as the Weasels holding them passed under a stone archway, and the monster vanished in a flash of retinal reaction. He had to hurry to catch up and stay in sight of the lights, keeping his eyes on the Khalia holding them.

At that moment, there was an explosion and a white-hot flash; and the ceiling fell in.

The pirates were still dazed by the reverberating sound and pieces of falling rock when the colonists leaped into the corridor, guns blasting at them. The colonists' rifles were equipped with flashguns, intended to blind and point out targets in the darkness. Two Khalia fell at once, the crash of the explosion echoing around them. The rest of the raiding party, confused as to where the shooting was coming from, spun and drew, firing at random into the cavern. Dalle looked around wildly and dropped to the ground as the battle began.

Fritz Morak and two of his defense team, a young boy and a woman, a former Fleet gunnery pilot, moved in and rolled

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into position, pinpointing targets with their flashguns for the others.

"Watch out for the human!" he shouted, tracking Dalle's captor in his sights. The staccato flares made everything look mechanical, puppetlike. Morak felt as though he was watching an animated performance, white characters jerking on a black background. The flashing affected his reflexes. Even as he loosed his shot, the pirate he was aiming at spun around, and the bullet, meant for her chest, merely grazed her upper arm. She dropped to a crouch, and angry orange flashes scarred the night from her own gun. Morak spat, and lined up another target.

Under shouted orders of their captain, the Khalia divided into groups of two, the buddy system. They broke away with amazing speed and ran in several directions, their footsteps leading the colonists after them. Morak had never had personal experience with the Khalia before, and he was astounded by their agility. He whistled shrilly through his teeth for the next party of ambushers to close in.

One pair of the raiders had found the boy in the darkness by following his flashgun. He hadn't been moving around enough. Didn't anyone retain their training in emergencies? Morak raised his rifle, trying to pinpoint the boy's captors in the intermittent light. They had hauled him to his feet and slapped restraints around his wrists. The boy yelled and struggled as he was pulled away. Morak lowered his weapon and snapped out a command to his men. There were closer targets. One of the others would have to rescue the boy.

A slap from a heavy claw disarmed one of the other men. The pirates tried to restrain him, too, but he managed to break away. In the patchwork darkness, Morak saw one of them leap toward him and stoop to bite the man's throat out with long incisors. The man fell, his head all but detached from his neck. Morak saw it happen as if in slow motion, strobed on the back of his eyes. Anger flushed through him, drying his mouth. Certainly there were other casualties in the darkness, but this was the first murder of a settler he had seen with his own eyes. It was so horribly savage that the only impulse that could get any purchase in his mind was revenge. He fired furiously in the direction of the Weasels, forgetting that they were probably already away from that spot. The cave lit up in blinding whiteness, freezing ally and foe alike in an indistin-

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guishably bleached-out photograph. His explosive anger only wasted ammunition, he knew, but if he stopped to analyze, he might break down. With a whistle, he sent his forces after the fleeing pirates. He himself stopped beside the two fallen Khalia, and blasted their heads off, only partly because he thought they might be shamming death.

The Khalian female and her partner, and the pair that had captured the boy, dragged their prisoners to their feet, and pulled them along the corridors back the way they came. Morak saw the humans rise, and signaled for a momentary cease-fire. The pirates took advantage of their human shields and fled, their captives floundering helplessly behind them on their tethers. Several colonists charged, but three fell with bullets in them, and another had his throat bitten out by the hindmost Weasel. Morak, revolted and angry, signaled to recommence firing.

Dalle experienced a brief moment of hope that the pirates were taking him back outside, but when they turned off into a side passage, his legs went weak. His memory wasn't good at retaining directions gleaned only

by touch and sound, but he was sure that they hadn't made a turn like this on the way in. He slumped to the floor, afraid of going farther into the echoing caverns.

With an angry, warbling cry, the female turned on him and beat him with the butt of her rifle until somehow his feet went back in place under him and held him up. The boy behind him was still struggling grimly with his captors, crying out obscenities that the Weasels echoed with shrieks and grunts of their own. Dalle felt proud of the boy, who was so brave. He was heartened enough to make struggles of his own, and considered again throwing his captor off balance. Together, they could escape. The boy would know where to go, how to get out.

Ahead of them, a male voice cried out, "Flatten out!"

As Red-pelt turned toward the voice, a short flash burned their eyes, and two coughs came out of the darkness. Dalle knew that sound—the sound of a needle gun firing. He thrust himself back against the wall, willing himself to paper thinness. The tiny but powerful charges in a needler's load penetrated and exploded within their victims. It was a horrible way to die. Dalle had done enough autopsies to know that.

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There was no sound louder than a groan, but he was suddenly deluged in blood. Red-pelt and her partner were down, and they wouldn't be getting up again.

The needler's owner pushed past him. Dalle saw the light flash, heard the gun speak again. The charges missed, and impacted against the stone far down the hall, clanked to the floor. Warned, the Khalia snarled and spun around, dragging the boy behind them. The enemy, with the gunner in pursuit, ran back along the passage, their footsteps resonating in the stone chamber. Dalle could hear the boy screaming directions over his shoulder until the voices faded into unintelligibility. Unwilling to be left behind, Dalle followed with his fingertips to the wall for guidance. He was soon disoriented and lost.

Otlind reloaded his needle gun on the run back in the direction of the second cavern. He felt his way to the message ring, and, still running, alerted the colonists that two of the enemy were heading back their way. His own echoed voice chased him along the wall, sounding hollow and

unfamiliar.

Fourteen of the Khalia were still fighting. The defenders worked to herd the pairs of pirates back into the cavern. Another settler was tied up and being dragged toward the main corridor. His captor had a needle gun pressed to the side of his neck and was backing steadily, ignoring the feeble struggles of his prize. The others understood the pantomime blackmail: let them leave unmolested or the man dies.

From behind the edge of the circular wall, a human figure emerged and closed with the Khalian. The pirate turned and stooped to bite in a single swift movement, but the element of surprise was on Otlind's side. He expended a shell from his needle gun into the belly of the pirate, and dove, taking the pinioned man down to the floor with him, before the Weasel could fire.

"Pat!" Morak shouted over the echoing din.

Otlind sat up and waved, then turned at a rush of air that brushed his face to fight with a furry body in the strobed darkness. It wasn't Fleet-trained fighting; it was homestyle: close, hard, and vicious.

The Khalia had discovered that the sparks and flashes generated by their projectile weapons only made them easy targets before the settlers' spotlight guns. Abandoning all but

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their natural defenses, they dropped their guns and started attacking the colonists with teeth and claws. Their slaving mission was a failure; their only object now to leave Basilisk alive.

With no telltale lights to pinpoint the enemy, the settlers too were discovering they were making targets of themselves. The room was already full of smoke, so that a flash-beam might blind a gunner, rather than assist his aim. They were not bothered by the lack of light. Their numbers and their familiarity with the terrain were advantages over the superior natural weaponry of the Khalia. The fight continued in the smoky blackness. Growls and coughs and occasional screams rang over the scuffling sounds. The colonists learned quickly to have a weapon handy in case the next thing they touched had fur. The Khalia moved so fast that one chance was all they had to defend themselves.

Dalle found his way back into the cavern by the sounds. He caught sight of the red Khalian lightbox, which lay discarded inside the lip of the ring wall, and made for it like a child to home free. Before he could reach it, it winked out.

The darkness was crowded. It teemed with bodies that crashed into his, sending him spinning into soft masses that grew colder as his hands rested on them. He came across a slippery rock that felt as though it was covered with bristly rubber. Recoiling, he realized it was a human head, severed from its owner by Khalian teeth. He felt for his regulation sidearm, but it had been taken from him back at the ship. Without armament he was dead if another pirate got a good hold of him. Dalle flattened himself to the floor in the darkness, occasionally getting a glimpse of the red flashes on weapons or Weasel teeth, tantalizing tastes of light. He was unable to see the combatants well. It was as if the weapons themselves were fighting each other.

He moved back as far as he could, still keeping the battle in front of him. The acoustics were so perfectly balanced that the din was as deafening where he was as it had been in the middle of it: cries, shots, explosions, groans, the cracking of bones. Somewhere a woman went on screaming and screaming. He would have liked to find her, to help her, but he hadn't the slightest idea where to go. Under the sheer weight of noise, Dalle felt himself cowering down, curling up with his elbows locked around his knees.

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The darkness began to crowd in more closely around him. There were hundreds of millions of stars in the galaxy; where were they? He closed his eyes, squeezing them shut with his hands. Comets shot through the blackness behind his lids. He followed them with his mind, withdrawing further from the battle. One of them veered between two big moons toward a blue-grey disk, growing in his sight; thick puffy clouds surrounded him and cushioned him, and blocked out the sounds of battle from his mind. The noises died away with the darkness. He was far away. He began to relax.

The remaining Khalia made a scramble for the inner chamber, pursued by the defenders, still keeping to low-visibility weapons. Morak shouted to the message wall to man barricades in the lower chambers, though privately he didn't think any of the pirates would get through. Ten Weasels

were left, against over a hundred of them. Wounded colonists were being withdrawn, replaced by volunteers from the inner caverns.

The fight went on, moving deeper into the settlement. The remaining Khalia were most definitely at bay, snarling insults through their own blood. Otlind kicked one in the stomach, and blasted it with one of the remaining charges in his needle gun. Its belly imploded, and it collapsed onto Otlind, driving him backward. He tripped over a body under his feet, too busy in the dark to tell whether it was Khalian or Alliance, male or female.

A cry from behind him made him spin on his heel. A pirate was leaping toward him, eyes glowing in the residual light from gunfire. He fired the needier again, from the hip, but the little gun jammed. He threw it down, and jabbed a sharp karate kick at the Weasel's midsection. Otlind had learned from training sessions not to get any part of one's anatomy too close to a Weasel's mouth. He connected with some part of it. It grunted. He was not attacked again.

"Here!" a voice cried. It was the young boy who had been taken prisoner earlier. He was standing high atop the outer arc of the message wall, his voice thundering over the sounds of battle. Safely out of reach, he switched his rifle flashgun on steady beam, and began to point out the remaining pirates for his fellow colonists. Half blinded by the brilliant white light

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with their pupils opened wide for the dark, the Khalia were thrown into confusion. The leader attempted to rally them, shouting hoarse commands. He was the first to fall dead, with dozens of Alliance bullets through his body.

Very soon, the fight was over. The Khalia were dead. Otlind assisted the others in dragging the bodies outside.

"Twenty, you said?" Morak asked, wiping his broad face with the sleeve of his shirt. Sweat made standing spikes out of his thick, black hair.

"That's right, Leader. There's one more body over there by their ship."

"That's all, then. Good."

"If you like dead Khalia."

Morak showed all of his teeth, white against his bristling chin, in a grim smile. "I do. As soon as they get the door open, we'll see if there're any left in their spaceship."

"What? No! Wait a minute!" Otlind yelled, and darted away. He splashed through the little stream and over the breast of the hill, straight into the crowd attempting to break into the Khalian spaceship with crowbars and plasma torches. Morak followed, puffing. "Stop!" he cried. "It's booby-trapped. You'll just be doing the pirates' work for them." Quaking with what might almost have happened, he pushed the others away from the door. The colonists muttered angrily about being pulled away until Otlind pointed out the trip charges attached to the bomb. There was a general retreat. The Fleet pilot nearly laughed at their rapid change of expression, from indignation to alarm.

"Nice job," one of the men said, having inspected the device under the engines. "We'll put all the corpses under it, and trigger it by remote. Nice and clean." He grimaced. "We have other things to take care of." Otlind knew what was in the other's mind. He would have some mourning to do, himself. All the people who had died today were friends or relatives of his, too.

"Good idea. Maybe there's something I can help out with."

"Maybe you could use our help yourself," Morak said gently, laying an arm across his shoulder. "Medical help. You're bleeding. You've been wounded."

"Oh, I'm all right," Otlind began. Medical help? Dalle!

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"Has my friend—the Fleet doctor—been found?"

"Oh, yes, our visiting medicine man! I haven't seen him since you appeared. I'll find out if anyone has any news." Morak questioned the bearers who were bringing out the bodies of dead colonists. The wounded were hobbling out under their own power or leaning on the shoulders of others. "No. They're still bumping around down there with portable lamps. We can't get power back up here until they open the creches. Might

as well wait. I'm sure he'll turn up."

"Thanks," Otlind said. He waited for a time, watching the trickle of colonists coming out of the cavern. Dalle never appeared, alive or dead. Finally, his patience exhausted, Otlind barged back inside with a borrowed hand lantern.

"Pat?" A woman stopped him on her way out to the open air. He nodded, and would have kept walking, but she caught his arm. "Hello, sweetheart. Leader Morak told us you were here."

"Mother?" Otlind blurted, studying her closely. She was wearing dirty overalls and had a flashgun rifle on a strap over her arm. He might have been fighting right next to her all the time in the dark, and he would never have known. There was blood in her hair over one ear. He, who considered himself a seasoned fighter and warrior, trembled for a moment at what could have happened. He might have been deprived of his family. Before today, ground battles had always seemed distant to him, not mattering, while the real fighting was done in space, between nice impersonal ships. He was rocked. It would take him a long time to get over the realities of the battle. The memory of the actual fighting was already fading. "I'm looking for someone."

"Then I won't keep you," she said, slinging the rifle to her back. "I'll see you at home later." With a smile, she moved away. Otlind went on, shining the flash before him. The water flowing under the stone glistened, carrying its secrets with it.

It was only a few minutes since the end of the battle, but to Mack Dalle, it felt like ages. He circled the cloudy blue planet in his mind. It was Copen, the world of his birth. He admired the three and a half continents floating in the oceans, counted the moons (two), and the flock of satellites (twenty-seven), sailing in the skies. As he got closer, he could hear sounds,

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coming on as though he was turning up a volume control: the rush of ocean waves, the cry of sea birds, traffic in the population centers, animals trumpeting and roaring and chirping. He drew closer, and the noises became louder and louder, and then disappeared entirely.

Into the silence, he thought he heard a single voice. He was sure it was

an illusion, an echo in his lonely, maddening mind.

"Dalle? Where are you?"

He thought it was a trick. It sounded like Otlind, but Dalle couldn't be sure. He held back from answering.

"Doctor? Are you all right?" Another voice joined Otlind's.

"The lights are on standby from the creches. He can't get to us without light. This place is full of pitfalls. Wait, shine the lantern over there."

He felt it through his eyelids, a glow, a sun, a solar flare. He turned away from the planet, letting his eyes open, fearing the solid blackness of empty outer space. Light. It was there. It came closer and closer to him. He drank it in, let his mind reawaken. It was actually no more than a small LED, but to him it was the universe. And there were voices, human voices. Otlind and another man. He stood up. The light grew, coming toward him, and then shrank again, back to the size of a simple hand-held lantern. Otlind reached out and clasped his hand. His knees went weak with relief, and he sagged.

Otlind was beside him in a moment, but he waved him off. Morak and the others in the ambush party hustled him outdoors into the air, and his bruises were tended shyly by one of the volunteer medics of the settlement.

Morak and Otlind came over to check on him when all his other cares were under control. Groans, loud humming and a few more groans heralded the reconnection of the electrical and ventilation systems. The colonists sitting on the river bank cheered and started moving back inside the caves. Dalle began to rise when the leader sat down beside him, but Morak waved him down.

"Please, Doctor. Stay where you are. You've had enough trouble today."

Dalle shook his head. "Do you know, I've been trying to help, but everyone has politely but firmly told me to stay out of the way."

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"There's no need for you to work here. You're our honored guest, Doctor. It's the least we can do. We'll retrieve your vaccines from your ship

in a little while. You can explain what we'll need to do with them later. The scout is a wreck, so you'll stay with us until another can be sent for you." A tiny smile twitched at the corner of Morak's lips, and Otlind turned red, suddenly finding something very interesting to look at in the shrubbery. "Pat sent out the word to the Fleet himself. Very brave of him, considering the amount of flak he was getting for losing his ship. But they're glad to hear both of you are safe. In the meantime, please enjoy our hospitality. Anything we can do for you, please ask."

"I came here to serve you, sir. You couldn't give me anything better than what I'm enjoying right now," Dalle said, leaning back and letting the light warm his face. "The sun."

Otlind smirked down at him. "Dustbowler," he said.

INTERLUDE

Fleet Support Officer Guillaume Kanard's formerly perfectly pressed tunic hung limply over a model of the *Caffrey*, the only combat vessel on which the officer had even briefly served. The man himself was propped on his elbows and his head hung just as limply over the blank CRT of his communications console.

Three quarters of a standard day had passed and Gill found himself no closer to finding the hero he needed to rally support, to personify the Fleet's efforts to the billions of tax-paying civilians.

A vagrant thought fought its way through the numbness of frustration. Why use a new hero when an old one would do? Hadn't there been a Fleet officer whose exploits had thrilled him as a teenager? A sort of real Crag Courage? Who was it? It has only been twenty years, he'd still be on active duty.

What was the name?

McWilliams, that's it. He could see the credits already. The Further Adventures of Jeremy McWilliams. Maybe they'd budget a whole series for this. He'd always wanted to do an Omni series.

Once more alert, the officer strode purposefully over and retrieved his jacket. It somehow felt wrong even to call up the files on someone like McWilliams in less than full uniform.

Unconsciously coming as close to standing at attention as you can get while sitting at a console, Kanard called up the records and began to read.

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THE THIRTY-NINE BUTTONS

by Margaret Weis

So THIS IS it, thought Captain John Roberts to himself as he stepped out of the hatch of his ship to the accompaniment of twittering pipes and the beat of a snare drum. There was a certain off-key shrillness to the pipes that set Roberts's teeth on edge, and he made a mental note to instruct Midshipman Brooks to check the computer again. There *must* be a glitch in the damn program!

"Sergeant"—Roberts turned to the marine standing at attention on the docking platform—"you have your orders?"

"Yes, sir," said the sergeant, a beefy-faced, middle-aged veteran. He had been puking up rotgut whisky on some godforsaken outpost when John Roberts was puking milk on his mother's shoulder, and he never let Roberts forget it. He kept his eyes straight ahead.

"Repeat them, please," Captain Roberts said irritably.

"AH hands to remain aboard ship awaiting your return, Cap'n," growled the sergeant. "No one is to come aboard without your permission."

"Very good, Sergeant. You are to shoot anyone who disobeys."

"Yes, sir."

The severity of the order was necessary, considering the type of place they were in. Roberts had seen his men crowded around the viewscreens, hoping to catch a glimpse of

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... what? Roberts sneered. It was nothing but a space station, after all. Quite a remarkable space station, but a space station nonetheless and it

looked like countless others. He had seen their eyes on him when he left ship. He knew they envied him. He also knew he was the butt of an entire fleet of jokes currently circulating below decks. This distressed Roberts and gave him additional reason to detest this assignment. A newly appointed captain, he was self-conscious and nervous about his ability as a leader. Sensitive to a fault, he feared the jokes were undermining his dignity.

And so Captain Roberts stood on the platform, moodily slapping his dress gloves in his hand. He didn't want to go through with this; dreaded it, in fact. He felt awkward, ill at ease, and completely out of his element. And he'd only just set foot off his ship! He was still in the sterile environment of the docking bay! He could imagine what it would be like beyond... through the hatch...

Briefly, Roberts considered striking up a conversation with the sergeant, stalling for time, then put it instantly out of his mind. He would look a fool, probably already did look a fool, standing here, staring like some farm boy on his first trip to the big city. He was visible on the viewscreen to his lieutenant, if not to half a dozen other people on board ship. The thought propelled him forward.

"Carry on, Sergeant," he said unnecessarily.

"Yes, sir," the sergeant replied and, if the man grinned behind his helmet, Roberts's sideways glance was not quick enough to catch him.

Briskly, trying to look as nonchalant and casual as it was possible for a naval officer to look in full dress uniform—another bit of arrant nonsense!—Roberts walked across the steel platform of the docking bay, his polished boots (a bit run-down at the heels, but he hadn't been able to afford new ones) ringing on the deck.

So this is it, he repeated to himself, approaching the hatch at the end of the docking bay, reading the name in letters of solid gold. The famous—or infamous as the case may be—Club of the Thirty-nine Buttons.

Located on the fringes of the galaxy, far beyond the reach of the law—had it been supposed that the law might want to reach it—the Club of the Thirty-nine Buttons was the most exclusive, the most costly, the most talked about whorehouse, gambling casino, and drug den in the known universe.

The Club of the Thirty-nine Buttons.

Part of its mystique, Roberts decided as he entered the airlock, lay in its extraordinary name. According to legend, which he had heard repeated at practically every meal since he had received this distasteful assignment, the woman who owned and operated the "establishment" wore a dress slit completely down the front. Thirty-nine small buttons kept that slit closed. For a price—an astronomical price, said a midshipman who considered himself a wit—a man might undo those thirty-nine buttons—one at a time, very slowly (so it was rumored), to savor the delights beneath. Recalling the speculations concerning these delights, Roberts grew uncomfortably warm around the tight collar of his uniform. The airlock opened with a whoosh, and he thankfully removed his helmet, which always gave him a smothering, claustrophobic feeling.

Roberts glanced about, slightly startled. This certainly wasn't what he had expected—no red velvet wallpaper and crystal chandeliers. He was in a large, elegant entry hall, decorated with all the taste money could buy. Seated behind a huge rosewood desk were two "concierges"—Roberts supposed they were called here, although "bouncers" would have been the term anywhere else. They looked him over. Roberts eyed them as well. With war imminent, there was the usual scramble for able-bodied men. And these were certainly two of the most able bodies he'd seen in a long time. Although the press-gangs were officially condemned, they were unofficially operative. The Admiralty knew it was tough to get good men to serve belowdecks. And out here, far from any civilian authority, well... who was to know or complain if they did? This place was breaking every law—civil and moral—in the books. What would they do, call the cops? This trip might prove worthwhile after all, Roberts thought, cheering up.

Meanwhile, he had to undergo the scrutiny of these muscular, slim-waisted, golden-haired bronze gods, conscious that their eyes were noting the frayed cuffs and baggy knees of his one best uniform. But they were polite—after all, he supposed—a paying customer was a paying customer.

"Welcome to the Club, Captain Roberts. What is your pleasure?" asked one of the gods, his hand going to a pad that stood on a steel desk to one side. The eyes that studied Roberts were intelligent, cool. "Are you a new member? I don't recall your face—"

"I'm not here for pleasure," Roberts said crisply, reaching into the pocket of his uniform and bringing out a plastic disc, which he tossed carelessly on the rosewood. "I'm on official military business, as I told your boys when we requested permission to land." He gestured at the disc. "There's my credentials."

Taking the disc, with a glance at his fellow god, the "concierge" inserted the disc into the computer and studied the information that lit up his screen.

"Very well, Captain Roberts," he said, removing the disc and handing it back. "Please describe the nature of your business at the Club. I will, of course, have to clear your admittance with my superiors, but that is only a formality."

"Of course," Roberts said, attempting a smile. His orders were to be pleasant and tactful. He wondered how he might pleasantly and tactfully shanghai these two before he left. That grizzled old sergeant might have some ideas... "I'm looking for a man named Jeremy McWilliams. Captain Jeremy McWilliams," he added, unable to keep a certain bitterness from his voice.

"And why are you looking for this... Captain McWilliams?" the bronze god asked coolly. Roberts saw the hand of his fellow god slip casually beneath the rosewood desk and he made a mental note that they had an alarm system in operation.

"Oh, I'm not here to arrest him or anything like that," Roberts said, forcing his smile to broaden into a grin. "I have a commission for him, in fact." Roberts patted his pocket. "He's being called to active duty."

"Indeed?" The bronze god removed his hand from below the desk. "Just a moment." He gave the computer a voice command, asking for a list of club members currently residing on the space station.

"Things going that badly out there, Captain?" his friend asked conversationally.

"I'm not at liberty to discuss military matters with civilians," Roberts said brusquely. "Sorry."

The bronze god shrugged. He hadn't been interested anyway.

"I'm sorry, Captain," said the other god, turning to Roberts from the computer. "But we do not have a McWilliams, Jeremy listed as a member. I—" A sudden thought struck the bronze god, apparently right between the

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eyes, judging from the stunned expression on his face. Touching his cohort on the shoulder, he whispered into his ear. The look of stunned shock might have jumped from one face to the other, it was such a perfect copy.

"What is it?" Roberts asked uneasily.

"Captain," said the bronze god, swallowing what was either fear or laughter, Roberts couldn't tell, "do you have an identification disc on this... Me Williams?"

"Yes, here it is," Roberts said, fumbling in his pocket. Finding it, he handed it over to the bronze god, who hurriedly inserted it into the computer once more. An image came on the screen. Roberts refused to look at it. He'd see the original soon enough, and he had already pictured the man in his mind.

Captain Jeremy McWilliams. Roberts knew his service record, knew it by heart, as did almost everyone else in the Fleet. Posted a year before Roberts—that meant he'd have to salute him and call him sir—McWilliams had more decorations for heroism in battle than Zenob 36 had moons. It had been McWilliams, still a lieutenant, who rescued the *Lucy Marie* and its valuable cargo from pirates off Micawber's Sun. The bonus money voted by the Alliance Council for that exploit alone had made him a millionaire. McWilliams in the battle of Moorina 7... He still held the record for "kills" without taking a hit himself. McWilliams, who—Oh, confound it! Roberts shook his head angrily. The man was good, all right. And, on top of that, he was wealthy. Probably handsome, charming, debonair. His dress uniform wasn't fraying at the cuffs. Hell, he probably owned a few dozen! He hadn't been forced to live on half-pay, grubbing about for whatever jobs he could scrounge until the service saw fit to decide it needed him again. No, McWilliams was living in luxury here in the Club of the Thirty-nine Buttons.

And he had influence. Roberts gnashed his teeth. Who had they sent with his—Roberts's—commission? Some toothless old seaman, more machine than man, who'd smelt of tobacco, rum, and lubricating oil. And what was Roberts's first assignment as Captain in the Fleet? Errand boy! To go to a whorehouse and bring McWilliams his commission! Dress uniform, no less, on orders from Admiral Dodsworth himself!

No, Roberts hadn't wanted to look at McWilliams's ID disc. He figured he'd be spending enough time with that face—traveling back to HQ...

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"Captain Roberts, sir"—the bronze god jolted Roberts out of his seething reverie—"I have located and spoken to... uh"—the man stuttered—"Cap-captain McWilliams. You are expected. Level thirty-nine."

"You are expected," Roberts mimicked in an undertone as he stepped into the tube. The door shut and he was whisked upward. Jamming his hands in his pockets, he swore, watching the numbers on the levels as he went past. 30, 31, 32... McWilliams must have a penthouse suite, he thought gloomily. He could imagine it, visualizing what he would like himself. Furnishings of fine, expensive wood, clean-cut and simple, with a few choice paintings on the walls. McWilliams's decorations would be hanging there, too. Tastefully framed, nothing ostentatious...

39. The tube stopped and the door opened instantly. Stepping inside, his feet sinking into four-inch thick carpeting, Roberts stared around, blinking in astonishment. Once again, this certainly wasn't what he'd expected.

He stood in a huge, circular room filled with furniture of the most feminine and delicate design. Flowering plants scented the air with a sweet perfume. Somewhere in the distance he could hear the soft splashing of a waterfall. Roberts glanced about, confused. My god, he realized suddenly in disgust. This must belong to McWilliams's whore! Of course, *he* would refer to her as his "mistress."

A serve 'bot appeared out of nowhere, hovering near Roberts with its beady little blinking eye focused intently on his hat and gloves.

"No, thank you," Roberts said firmly. Removing the hat, he tucked the gloves into the brim and thrust it beneath his arm. "I won't be staying."

The serve 'bot appeared devastated. Could it bring him something to drink, eat?

"No, thank you!" Roberts said grimly. He wanted to get this over with as quickly as possible. Get McWilliams back on the ship and back to HQ.

"Please reconsider, Captain Roberts," said a low voice; a sultry voice; a dark, throaty animal voice. "Have a drink. It's been a long journey for you."

Roberts turned at the sound. From out of a door that opened onto the circular room came a woman. She matched the voice, was his first thought. It was his last thought for the next few

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seconds—at least his last coherent thought. The rest were impressions, random, fleeting due entirely to sensory overload. He saw masses of red hair tumbling over cream-colored skin. He saw green eyes, clear and brilliant. He saw a dress made of some silky black material, poured like shining oil over a body of surpassing beauty. And down the front of that dress, beginning just where a man—any normal, healthy, human male—might like to begin, was a row of buttons—shining, glittering diamond buttons.

Roberts didn't count them; at that moment he couldn't have counted his fingers. But he knew that there were thirty-nine.

And then, once again, he heard the voice.

"How do you do?" The woman stepped forward, her dress making a soft, shimmering sound like rippling water. She extended her hand. "You must be from the Admiralty?"

"Yes, ma'am," he said, confused, taking hold of the hand, tingling at the touch. "And you are—"

"Jeremy McWilliams. Captain Jeremy McWilliams," said the sultry voice.

"There must be some mistake," said Captain John Roberts when he was able to persuade his dry tongue to say anything at all.

The woman laughed, hearty laughter that came from her throat and bubbled through Roberts's veins like champagne. "You didn't look at the ID disc, did you?" she asked. "But, then, why should you? Seen one captain of the Fleet and you've seen them all."

She shrugged the cream shoulders. Two thin straps were all that held the black dress up over what lay beneath those thirty-nine buttons and, when she shrugged, one of the straps slipped, falling down over her slender, round upper arm.

Roberts flushed. He remembered the stunned looks of the bronze gods in the sanctuary below. He recalled their voices, the hidden laughter as they looked at the disc. No, he realized, there was no mistake. The Fleet simply didn't make mistakes. This—this was Captain Jeremy McWilliams! He could tell himself that, but, staring at the lovely woman, his brain was staggering around in a drunken stupor. Fortunately, the discipline of the navy gripped him firmly by the throat and slapped him across the face.

Hardly conscious of what he was doing, Roberts reached

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into the pocket of his uniform. "Captain Jeremy McWilliams," he said in a voice that might have more appropriately come from the serve 'bot, "I hereby present you with a commission calling you to active duty—" He said a lot more—state of emergency, declaration of war, the date and that sort of thing. He believed at least some of it made sense. But he couldn't recall. All he was aware of were green eyes that had suddenly become intent and serious. His hand trembling, Roberts handed Captain McWilliams the sealed packet containing her commission and her orders to report to duty to the nearest HQ.

Jeremy—he could think of her as a name, now, though what a name!—accepted the packet but did not look at it. Her eyes were on him. "I think you had better have that drink," she said finally, with a smile.

"Yes, thank you," Roberts replied, his voice cracking. Clearing his throat, he followed her to a couch that seemed, from the way it molded itself to his body contours, to have been waiting all its life for him and him alone. The scent of the flowers was all around. So was her scent, different from the flowers, more alive, more animal. Instructing the serve 'bot to make their drinks—Roberts never afterward knew what it was, he drank it

but never tasted it—Jeremy sat down beside him in languorous fashion, drawing her legs—encased in the black silk—up on the couch and kicking her high-heeled shoes onto the thick carpet.

"Excuse me, er—Captain," said Roberts, taking a gulp from his drink. "I know this sounds crazy, but—why Jeremy?"

"My name?" She smiled again. "What story would you like, Captain Roberts, I believe that is your name... at least so Bruce told me?"

"Yes, I'm sorry," he said flushing. "John Roberts. But please call me John."

"And we will forget rank and the fact that I am higher and you will call me Jeremy. Oh, yes," she added, seeing his look of discomfiture, "I still keep in touch with the Fleet." Jeremy made a graceful gesture toward a computer console. "It was easy to verify your identity through the naval office."

"But access to their computers—That requires security clearance..." began Roberts, appalled.

"Yes, it does," Jeremy said nonchalantly. "Now, I believe

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you wanted to know about my name." Leaning back against the cushions, her long red hair falling over her breasts, she looked at him through lowered eyelids, her finger running round and round the rim of her glass. "Which story would you like, John?" she repeated. "The one where my father was so disappointed he named me for the son he never had?" She shrugged again, causing the other strap to slide a little farther along her shoulder. "He might have, I suppose. But he didn't stick around long enough to name me anything. Actually, Jeremy isn't my real name. My real name's Pearl. Surprised?"

Roberts could only nod, and take another gulp of the cool liquor.

"Mother had a literary turn of mind," Jeremy said. "Her name was Hester and she thought it appropriate, under the circumstances. I thought it atrocious. So, when I sent in my application to join the service, I changed it to Jeremy, figuring it might be useful to be mistaken for a

man. And I chose Jeremy because that was the name of my first lover. Something which / think appropriate. Another drink?"

"N-no, thank you, I... must be getting back to my ship," Roberts stammered. "And you must have a lot of arrangements—"

"Oh, come on," Jeremy said, motioning to the serve 'bot. "You know you're frightfully curious about all this." She made a vague gesture that included the serve 'bot, the drink, the room, the space station and may have even encompassed the universe as far as Roberts was concerned. "From naval hero to madam of a bordello?"

"Well, frankly, I—"

The serve 'bot thrust a glass into Roberts's nerveless hand and he drank, aware of a slight buzzing in his head, but not knowing whether it came from alcohol or the intoxicating presence of the woman near him.

"I got tired," said Jeremy casually, "and I quit."

"Quit?" Roberts appeared puzzled. "You mean you resigned?" They didn't send commissions to people who had resigned.

"No," Jeremy answered, sipping her drink, "I didn't resign. I just quit. I'm not certain I told anyone either."

Roberts choked. "You mean you're AWOL?"

"That's as good a term as any." She shrugged again.

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The strap of her dress slid down another fraction of a centimeter. Roberts tore his gaze away, trying to think. They certainly didn't send commissions to officers who were absent without leave! "But—but—" He was incoherent.

"Ah, this?" Jeremy lifted the commission in her hand, thoughtfully and playfully tapping it against her mouth. Her lips were full and curved and she didn't wear lip rouge, Roberts noticed. She had a habit of running her tongue over them every now and then, to keep them moist and shining. She did it then, letting her tongue touch the edge of the commission

paper, and Roberts felt desire twist its knife in his gut. "This," she said, "is, I imagine, dear old Dodsy's way of getting me back in." Sliding a finger beneath the seal, she opened the parchment—how the navy loved tradition—and read, her lips pursed. "Yes. I thought so." She nodded, pointed to the signature, and sighed. "Dear man," she said, "but thick-headed."

Lord High Admiral Geoffrey Dodsworth. Dodsy. Roberts shuddered, slopping his drink on his best uniform.

"He's a friend of mine," Jeremy said, by way of explanation.

I can imagine, Roberts thought. God help me, I can imagine! He shook his head to clear it of the... liquor.

"But why did you leave?" he demanded. "You were good—"

"I was damn good," Jeremy said matter-of-factly.

"Maybe the best!" Roberts didn't hear the interruption. He finished his drink and accepted another that the serve 'bot had ready for him. "I've heard stories about you ever since I joined up!" he continued thickly. "War hero! The greatest pilot, revered captain, respected by his... her men... and now you're a... you're a..." The word was on his lips. He bit it back.

"A whore," Jeremy said it for him.

"Why?" was all he could think of to ask.

She leaned toward him, her breasts full and ripe and kept from his touch, held in place by the first of those thirty-nine buttons. "Can't you understand?" she said in a soft, low, sincere voice that thrilled him to the core of his being. "It was the killing. The death. I couldn't take it anymore. So, I quit." She shrugged again. The strap slid off her other shoulder, leaving them both bare.

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"But what about... honor?" Roberts said, disgust and desire warring within him, darkening his voice. "Dignity! You... you sell your body, for god's sake..."

"And you don't?" she retorted, her voice rising sharply. "Ha!" She laughed again, but this time it was ugly, mirthless. "You sell it every day, Captain John Roberts! What's worse, you sell your mind and soul along with it! Go here, go there. Kill this, destroy that. Where's the honor in seeing your comrades blown to bits, in having their brains spattered over you and running down your uniform. Where's the dignity in butchering some fellow creature whose only fault is that he's sold his body just like you to some government that's telling him to go out and butcher his fellow creatures?"

"Look at you," she gestured, sneering, "dressed in the uniform you wore the last time you were on active duty because they've forced you to live on half-pay until they could come up with another war to fight. And they'll use you and, if you die, they'll see you're honorably buried—which means you're tossed out into space in a plastic bag."

"Oh, no, Captain John Roberts," Jeremy said, leaning back against the cushions, regarding him from beneath lowered lashes, "there is no difference between us, really. The Admiralty screws us both, it's just the positions that differ. You're vertical and I'm—generally—horizontal."

Roberts's face burned.

"I think you had better go, Captain," Jeremy said, rising slowly and gracefully from the couch, her hands smoothing the silk of the black dress.

"You'll be court-martialed!" Roberts said hoarsely, staggering to his feet. The room spun.

"Perhaps," Jeremy said, and again there was that throaty, bubbling laughter. "Do you think they'll find any officer to sit on the Board of Judgment that hasn't been in my—"

Reaching out, Roberts caught hold of her and clasped her body to his. He tilted her head back and kissed her lips, kissed her passionately. She yielded to him, pressing against him, arousing him with practiced skill. His mouth went from her lips to her neck, his hand to the front of the black dress, his fingers fumbling with the first of those buttons.

And he felt her hands fumbling with the waist of his trousers—

Neatly, deftly, Jeremy stuffed the commission down the

front of his pants. "Make love, not war, Captain," she murmured.

"Damn you!" Angry and embarrassed, Roberts shoved her away from him.

"You'll give the Admiralty my answer, won't you, Captain Roberts?" she asked him, her voice cool and dark and smooth as the black silk dress.

"Damn you!" He gasped again. Jerking the commission out of his belt, he held it up before her. "Don't you care about anything?" he shouted, panting for breath. "Doesn't any of it mean anything to you? The service? The lives of those men you talked about?" My life? he wanted to scream at her. Everything I've worked for, lived for? Doesn't that mean anything?

"Oh, yes," said Jeremy softly. "It means something." She ran her white hand, slowly and languidly, down the length of the black silk dress. "Didn't you wonder, Captain? Why thirty-nine?"

Roberts could only stare at her, the room canting away beneath his feet, the blood pounding in his head.

"How many buttons are there on the full dress uniform of a naval officer, cadet?" Jeremy snapped, her voice the voice of Roberts' instructor, way back in the days of basic training.

The words came to his lips but he didn't say them. Turning slowly away from her, Roberts stumbled toward the tube, the thoughtful serve 'bot whirring along beside him, one mechanical arm under his to assist him. It even helped him inside the tube with the care a mother might have given a sick child and gave the floor number of the first level. The doors slid shut with a soft whir and the tube descended, leaving Roberts's stomach up there with the perfume and the black, silk dress.

Slumping down on the floor, clutching the crumpled commission in his hand, he murmured. "Thirty-nine... sir. Thirty-nine..."

INTERLUDE

It was a typical night for Port. The corridor lights glowed redly, supplying just enough illumination to walk comfortably. Occasionally Gill

passed a marine patrol. He noticed that they were armed slug throwers, not just stunners. Evidently someone had put Port on war status.

Few others were about at this hour. Particularly not this high in the complex. Normally Gill met only other displaced colonials like himself when visiting the sun garden. Those raised on Port never seemed to need relief from the drab sameness of its metal corridors.

From the darkened sun garden, the PR officer paused to survey the top of the city of Port, sole human habitation on the planet of Port. It was night and illumination came only from the distant starport and the irregular fire of the automated lasers that ringed the city. Beyond the city the tangled jungle was occasionally red when illuminated by laser fire.

Finding a lonely corner unoccupied by lovers, Gill hugged his knees and thought.

He had been more upset by the revelations he had unearthed that day than he wanted to admit. The part of him that refused to accept the careful cynicism of Public Relations was having trouble giving up parts of its pantheon. The whole situation was slinging his emotions into an unstable orbit.

It was three hours later when the tired officer had finally decided on what appeared to be a safe beginning to his PR campaign and stumbled back to his quarters.

The next morning he shocked everyone by improperly arriving half an hour late at his duty station. In the interest of

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discipline Gill forced himself to look contrite, but inside he was once more bolstered by the knowledge that he was finally doing something truly meaningful.

For several minutes he sat at his com console, reviewing the strategy he had decided upon. Rather than make one man or woman a hero, he would begin a media blitz showing how competent the Fleet was. He would build faith in the organization until people wanted to identify with it, even if

only by paying a few credits more in taxes.

He'd even settled upon his first example. They all had to be real; too many Omnihounds were waiting to catch the Fleet in a deception. He'd commission a special Omni program on the activities of Admiral Esplendadore. It was perfect, a former hero supervising the efficient construction of a vital base. A scenario nothing could complicate.

KLAXON

by Robert Sheckley

i.

On the seventh day of Generius, in the year 932, Local Style, shortly past the noon hour, the great alarm bells went off in the town hall tower. When they persisted past the tenth second, we knew this was not a test. The radar network must have detected an intruder ship entering our stratosphere, and I'm sure in the minds of everyone in the city was the same thought. The Khalian raiders had returned after almost twenty-seven years.

We had been carefully drilled in what to do. All were to proceed quietly, without panic, to the nearest entrance of the underground defense system. Of course you can't defend yourself very well underground. But our only alternative was to remain on the surface and either be slaughtered or carried away as slaves by the Khalia—those furry fiends had invaded our planet three times in seventy-three years.

By charter, we are not permitted to have planetary defenses or guard ships. We gave away those rights hundreds of years ago when we joined the Alliance. Now we must put our faith in the Great Fleet which protects most of the human planets and their allies against the incursions of the Khalia and other intransigent alien species. It wouldn't have done us much good to try to protect ourselves: Trinitus is a small world with a total

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population of less than five million. There is only one city worthy of the name: Panador, my home. Still it irked us to give up the elementary right

to self-defense.

The Fleet worked well for us, but they were spread pretty thin across I don't know how many millions of miles of space. With over three hundred heavily populated planets to guard, it was natural that some would get neglected. It was also natural that the ones that got neglected would be worlds like Trinitus V, with small populations far from where most of the human populations dwelled.

Our underground defense system was actually a series of great caverns and natural tunnels existing beneath Panador, which we had extended over the centuries. Generally the Khalia couldn't be bothered going down into the tunnels after us. What they sought were our goods and our foods. Only if they were on a slave raiding expedition would they pursue us down into the caverns. Sometimes there were desperate battles in the darkness, where the close confines of the space tended to make our weapons more or less equal to theirs.

The tunnels were well laid out for defense. Scattered here and there were caches of weapons and ammunition, food, water, and fresh clothing. I had learned how to handle the short-range laser pistol and the various grenades which we were permitted to use in our self-defense. Though I was a girl and just eighteen that month, I was as good a shot as anyone. Although this was a terrible thing that was happening to us, yet I couldn't help but feel a thrill of excitement, for girls are permitted to have heroic dreams, too. I had long had fantasies of defending my parents with a blazing laser pistol in either hand.

There was no time to go home and find my parents. We had been told to go into the nearest underground entrance when the alarm sounded. So I entered the tunnel shaft near the Theagenes Theater. If I had been thinking more clearly I would have wasted a few more minutes and gone to one of the entrances nearer to my home, because I knew the passageways around there tolerably well. One of the first things we learned in school was the layout of our home tunnel systems and how they fed into the main tunnels. No one could be expected to know all of the twistings and turnings of our defense system,

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because new additions were always being added, and dead end mazes were often put up to baffle invaders.

I hurried down alone into the gloom. I had never been into the Theagenes Theater entrance so it was new and adventurous for me.

First there were flights of stone steps, spiralling down ever deeper into the gloom. The walls were lit by dim bulbs, giving just enough light so that they threw enormous shadows as I descended, and these frightened me as much as anything.

The first branching was easy: the rule in the city was that no matter where you begin your descent, for the first three branchings you must always take the right-hand turn. After that I found scratches on the wall left by the workmen. They indicated to me the correct turns to take.

It was strange down there in the darkness. Of course, I had been in the tunnels many times. We used to have drills at school, and we would all go down into the defense system. By the third turning I had decided to slow down and arm myself. I found one of the arms caches, located the odd-shaped rock above it, and pressed in the way I had been taught. It opened as it was supposed to, and I took out a laser pistol.

Soon I came past the newer defenses into the cavern system. It began to disturb me that I saw no other people. There were stories about children, or even grownups, who took a wrong turning in the tunnels and ended up lost forever in the natural caverns underneath. Some said that the ghosts of dead children, who had never found their way back up to the light, still haunted this place, moving like shadows and beckoning you to follow them ever deeper, to a fiery region of sulphur pits and glowing lava.

After a while I had to pause for breath. My ankles ached from stumbling on the irregularly shaped rocks. I was a very great distance beneath the city of Panador, how far I could not tell. As I continued down, the lights became fewer in number. Some of them had burned out and had not been replaced. I began to fear I would misremember the turnings, and not find my way back. I slowed down and finally sat down to catch my breath. Reason told me I had gone far enough. Surely the Khalia would not pursue past this point. They were always in a great hurry to scoop up whatever they could find and get away before a defense could be mounted.

I was just congratulating myself on my successful descent

when I heard, from above, the sound of heavy footsteps. My heart froze. It could have been one of my own people, of course, but somehow I thought not. There was something ominous about those footsteps, something military. I knew I was in trouble. I got up to run. And then the man was upon me before I could think.

He was enormous, and he wore some sort of heavy uniform which in the darkness appeared to be gray. He had a broad face with big moustaches, and he seemed to be carrying some sort of beam weapon in one big fist.

He was saying something to me, but I couldn't tell what it was. I lifted the laser pistol and took aim, walking backward at the same time. I tripped over a rock and in the next instant he was on me, pulling the pistol out of my hand, then lifting me to my feet.

"You're not going to take me into slavery!" I screamed at him. "I'd rather die first!"

"No need for that, miss," he said. "Don't you know who I am?"

Then I looked at him—really looked at him—for the first time. I saw the insignia of the Alliance on his cap and on his uniform.

"You're from the Fleet!" I gasped.

"Indeed I am," he said. "What on earth did you take me for?"

"I thought you were one of the Khalia," I said, feeling very foolish indeed.

"But the Khalia are five feet tall and covered in fur," he pointed out.

"I know that. But I got excited. You're really from the Fleet?"

"Aye, miss. I'm advance party from the cruiser *Skua*. Commander Shotwell, at your service."

"*Skua*? That's Admiral Esplendadore's flagship!" I said.

"I see you know about us," he said, pleased.

"It's in our history books. I thought Admiral Esplendadore must be long

dead, he's so famous, or at least very old."

"I suppose anyone over twenty must seem old to a child like you."

"I'm eighteen," I said, "and why didn't you people announce yourselves first, instead of dropping out of the blue like a Khalian raider?"

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"We had to keep radio silence," Shotwell said. "But a party of us was sent ahead to tell the people about it, so there'd be no alarm."

"You seem to have arrived a little late for that," I said, somewhat tartly, I fear. "What do we do now? Go on talking here in the darkness until someone finds us?"

He chuckled. "Nothing I'd like better, miss. I'm glad to see there are some attractive girls on Trinitus. They told us you were a race of pygmies and that you all had warts."

I was just getting angry again when I noticed, even in the dim light, that he was grinning. He was quite a nice-looking man when he wasn't trying to scare innocent people to death. He wore a Retrace on his watchband, and began to lead us back to the surface. It was just as well, I wasn't sure of all the turnings.

On the way I learned that his first name was Milus, and that he piloted a small single-seater spaceship of his own on special missions, and had already seen action twice against the Khalia. He was from the planet Astrakhan II, was twenty-three years old, and unmarried.

It wasn't until early the next day that the *Dreadnought* descended to two thousand feet above our city, established radio contact, and rather brusquely asked coordinates for a suitable place to put down. It was a spectacular sight, that great silvery machine coming down majestically through the clouds and settling down at last in the middle of Poletryer Park, a large recreation area close to the city. It landed as light as gossamer, a tribute to the skill of its pilot.

Cruisers are eight hundred feet long, displace thirty thousand tons and carry a crew of four hundred. This I had learned in elementary school. What I also knew was that never before in the history of our planet had a

Fleet ship of this size come to call. I had the feeling that something gigantic might be afoot. I was glad, because I had always wanted to live in interesting times.

All the notables of Panador had gathered to greet them, and they were dressed in their best official finery. Closer to the

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ship now, we could see that its smooth hide had been dented and scorched, then pounded and scraped into near new condition. A blue line one foot in width encircled the entire ship. Some of the more knowledgeable among us recognised this as the fighting colors of Admiral Esplendadore, Baby Blue Esplendadore, as he was known, one of the great fighting admirals we had read about in our history books.

Presently, after keeping us waiting for what they must have judged a sufficient length of time, a tall portal opened in the side of the ship. A landing stage carpeted in light blue velvet came down with it. Out marched the ship's band, resplendent in turquoise and scarlet with tall black shakos on their heads. After that came the guard of honor, a hundred heavily armed marines. Then a procession of secondary officers and finally Esplendadore himself in a glittering silver uniform decorated with exotic, iridescent feathers and bead work. A barbaric sight, but these were, of course, the emissaries of civilization.

Speaking through the ship's PA system, which was far more powerful than anything we had on the planet, Esplendadore said, "Good people of Trinitus, forgive us for coming on you unannounced. We did not mean to startle you; but it was judged best to put forth no radio communication. There are spies everywhere.

Esplendadore had a heavy, pompous, self-pleased voice which I disliked at once. Maybe he was one of the great admirals, but I thought he was stuck-up. But what he was saying was of the utmost interest, so I listened carefully.

"Six months, ago," Esplendadore continued, "advance scouts from the Fleet discovered a planet far from the usual areas. This planet was a small oxygen world and it was uninhabited. It was a poor little place without much in the way of natural resources.

"This planet, circling its small red dwarf star, had one feature, however, that interested us extremely. It was close to a star system from which most Khalian raids emanated.

"Therefore, this deserted planet, which has been named Klaxon, becomes of extreme interest to us as a site for a base from which we can launch a major attack against the Khalia. Our engineers have calculated that in less than one year, we can, by mounting an all-out effort, put up a major base on this location. This will be needed for the large resupply program

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which is planned. Klaxon will be a major factor in what we expect will be a major surprise blow against the Khalia.

"We have come here, as we have stopped at other worlds, to ask for skilled volunteers to come to Klaxon with us and help us build this new base. Many skilled categories will be open. We are offering standard one-year contracts in which workers will be paid at a level equivalent to Guild Workers from Earth. And, if you choose to stay on beyond the first year, you will be assigned permanent positions with pensions, medical benefits and vacation leaves in the Fleet Civilian Personnel Division.

"I needn't tell you what a great opportunity this is for some of you. You are provincials, and you live very far away from the First Thirteen. In the normal course of things, most of you would never get the opportunity to leave your home planet. What we are offering is a chance not only to do well-paid labor for the benefit of mankind, but also to have a chance to open yourself to a wider life traveling around the galaxy.

"My men will be setting up recruiting booths around this park. If you wish to apply, you must present two certificates, one from the police department showing that there are no crimes currently lodged against you, and one from the tax authorities showing your taxes are paid to date. In the case of exceptionally desirable categories, the Fleet will waive some of its requirements.

"Our ship will leave here again in exactly three local days. Those of you who are accepted, please be prepared to assemble here three days from now for embarkation.

"Good people, I thank you for your attention."

Already, as the Admiral was ending his speech, I was making my way to the outskirts of the crowd. I wanted to get home as quickly as possible in order to get my parents' permission. Legally, I didn't need it, of course, because I was of age, but I knew it would please them if I asked and it might be the last nice thing I ever could do for them, because I was going to join the Fleet and travel to distant planets.

My father was very nice about it. He had always dreamed of being a deep-space trader until the carboats shut down in our sector of space for lack of paying markets. He was small and olive-skinned, as I am, and I had inherited his sleek black hair, quick movements and small features. My mother was short and fair and large-boned, sweet-natured and thoughtful.

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I don't think I inherited anything from her except the dubious family gift of second-sight. And it was to this that she referred when she tried to get me to change my mind.

"Lea, dear," she said, "you realize that your second-sight renders you more delicate than most. The aura of this new planet might not agree with you."

"Oh, Mother, come on," I said, somewhat childishly, but that's the effect she has on me.

"But of course, it's entirely your decision, my dear."

"I'll be all right," I told her. "The second-sight only comes upon me occasionally. It's no worse than a headache and it passes in a few hours. And anyway, maybe it will make me better suited for this sort of work than people who can't glimpse anything ahead."

Because I was able to do that sometimes; smell out danger when it lay ahead. I never knew specifically what it was, only that something was wrong and something was impending.

"Anyhow, Dr. Bokson said I'd outgrow it. I really do want to go. Is it all right?"

They looked at each other, and then smiled and we all hugged each other. It takes good parents to love you when you're leaving.

I hurried back to Poletryer Park. Quite a few people were already lined up at the recruitment booths. I looked around for Milus Shotwell, but didn't see him anywhere. Finally I found a short line and soon I was facing the recruiter.

He was a big, burly man resplendent in a tight-fitting uniform of forest green with stainless steel buttons. "Well, miss," he said, looking over my papers, "I guess you're not old enough to have gotten into much trouble yet, eh?"

"I'm old enough to work for the Fleet," I said. "It's true that I haven't learned a whole lot of things yet, but I can type, and I can enter data, and I was pretty good in all my subjects in school."

"We're not looking so much for specific skills as for abilities and propensities," he said. "Here, put your hand down here. We'll give you a little intelligence test."

He indicated a small black machine with blinking red lights that sat on the table beside him. There was a shiny silver plate where I was to put my hand. I did as he wished.

"This is a funny sort of intelligence test," I said. "Don't ask any questions?"

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He chuckled. "We're not looking to find out what you've learned in school, miss, or even how glibly you can reel off your homework. This machine gives us a readout on your neural functioning. Look here on the screen."

I looked and saw what looked like a shifting web of closely spaced, interlocking lines.

"What you're seeing is an analog of neural activity," he told me. "This just shows us what your intelligence is physically capable of. The more finely spaced the lines, the more complete is the ability to hold complex mental structures in mind. That's the sort of intelligence we are looking

for."

"Well, how did I do?" I asked.

He laughed again. "You have a fine mind, miss. We are happy to accept you. I don't know what you'll do yet, but it'll be something better than washing dishes."

He looked at my papers again. "I see here that you have positive reading on the latent psi scale."

"Oh, yes," I said. "It's what my family calls the second-sight, but it doesn't really get in the way."

"I wasn't implying that it does," he said. "Psi ability is one of the things the Fleet keeps its eye on. Quite a few Espers already work in Communications. Sign here and here. Initial here and here. This is the Standard Waiver, sign here. Here is the Pledge of Obedience to the Fleet. Please sign here."

He put the papers away and shook my hand in a formal manner. "Welcome aboard," he said. "You are now Civilian Fleet Personnel. Now go say your good-byes. We leave in precisely two and one-half days at 02400 hours."

HI.

I had imagined that I would be able to observe the Fleet cruiser take off, and watch Trinitus dwindle behind us. In this I had been naive. We did see the takeoff, but only through the overhead television monitors as we lay on our acceleration couches.

It was a noble sight, all the same, even given the interference on the television. We watched as Trinitus dwindled to a pea-point in the glowing screens, and then to a single point of light, and then disappeared entirely. Then Admiral Esplendadore had us stand by as he switched to FTL drive. I'm pleased to say that I was not sick to my stomach. So many

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novices are the first time they are exposed to Faster-Than-Light drive. Our television set blanked out as we entered FTL.

I had no time to marvel at this, however. The Fleet loudspeakers announced indoctrination lectures for the first group of recruits. And now there began a round of lectures, tests and interviews, which was to last for the next six standard days.

Most of the men who joined up were wanted for various jobs on the construction crews. The Fleet is an old hand at managing personnel, and they tried, whenever possible, to give us jobs which would suit our tastes and abilities. Since we were one of the early planetary levies, others to follow weeks or months later, there were many more jobs than there were personnel to perform them. There was even, strange as it may seem, competition among section and project leaders, to try and recruit new people to their specialties.

The Fleet could have settled any disputes that arose over this because they had every job prioritized and ranked. But they also liked to allow a certain amount of individual initiative among section chiefs. This is, after all, one of the things we were fighting for, and it gave us recruits a measure of choice as to which branches of the services we would go to.

And there was also this to consider: the branch of service that we joined would have a direct effect upon our ability to progress in rank in the Fleet, assuming we made the decision to stay on after our year contract. Some services were looked upon with more favor in the Fleet than others.

The first time I saw Allan Bantry was at the welcome ceremony for new Fleet personnel. It's quite an important occasion, and everyone wears their best. It's the time when you get together with the people you're going to share the station with, the people who are going to help you in the struggle against the Khalia. You're maybe a little anxious to make a good impression. Allan Bantry chose that occasion to wear his tharg suit.

To say the least, he stood out.

"Who is that fellow?" I asked Milus Shot well.

"It is our new alien psychologist, Dr. Allan Bantry."

"And what's that he's wearing?"

"A tharg suit. Where he comes from it's considered formal dress."

The tharg suit, I learned, is worn by male populations of

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twenty-two human planets with combined populations of sixty-three billion, all of them directly related to our remote ancestor, Adam Sapiens. But those populations live rather far away from Earth and the two hundred or so planets in our vicinity that adhere to the Terran dress code, with its emphasis on the sort of tailored, rugged good looks that only a uniform can give you. A tharg suit is large and baggy with huge pockets for carrying the sort of stuff men must have, such as pencils and sandwiches. It makes even a rather rugged man look a bit like an Easter bunny. In any event, it doesn't have the tailored look which some people, especially military ones like Commander Esplendadore, consider vital in males.

"If that's their idea of formal dress," said Shotwell, "I'd hate to see what they wear to run down to the supermarket." He collapsed into loud laughter at his own unfortunate joke.

Among the many disciplines which the Fleet embraces, and from time to time makes use of, is that of Alien Psychologist. The post is invariably held by a civilian since some of the more influential of the warlords of the Fleet had never admitted that aliens can *have* a psychology. It was not a favored branch of service, and so I had more or less made up my mind in advance to avoid it, even before Dr. Allan Bantry asked to interview me.

Allan Bantry was very tall and thin and looked too young to be called "doctor." I found out later that he was twenty-seven years old, which seems quite old when you're eighteen, and that he had taken his doctorate at Luna University three years before. He wore dark, baggy tweeds, the sort of thing university people wear all over the galaxy. He had an odd manner of being either totally attentive, or impossibly distracted, with very little in between.

I liked him at once, because he seemed to me to be the sort of person who thought a great deal about what he wanted to get done rather than how he looked or what other people thought of him.

Dr. Bantry explained to me a little about his specialty. An Alien Psychologist, as the name implies, is a specialist in the psychology of nonhuman races. There are quite a few in the Alliance. Some of our allies

derive their heritage from remote reptilian ancestors, others avian.

The way Dr. Bantry, or Allan, as I came to know him, described it, Alien Psychologist was really an important

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position, for he was the man in charge of first communications with races unlike our own. So *tsar*, these races had had no particular significance, militarily.

Because of this, the Fleet high brass thought of their Alien Psychologists as about as important as their etiquette officers. But I was interested, and at the conclusion of my interview I told Dr. Bantry that I would certainly consider his proposal that I sign on as his assistant.

I had several more interviews, and then, abruptly, our time in space was at an end. The announcement came over the loudspeakers.

"All personnel, prepare for changeover from FTL to normal drive."

Then Esplendadore's voice came on, saying, "Now all you people, hear this: we have arrived at our destination. Go to your acceleration couches and keep your eyes fixed on your screens. The next sight you will see will be your new home, the planet Klaxon."

We came out of FTL drive without incident. My eyes were fixed on the screen. Slowly, a glowing dot appeared. It enlarged swiftly and I had my first view of Klaxon.

Frankly, I was not too impressed. The first view from the air showed a sphere in which oranges, yellows and tans predominated. As we descended, I saw long layers of grayish-yellow clouds hiding the land from us. We passed through them to see mountains and deserts, and a great empty plain which might once have been a sea bed. Then more mountains and rugged rolling land.

We broke through another layer of cloud cover, and I saw below me a wide green valley enclosed between barren mountain ranges. This, I learned, was the only fertile area on this side of the planet, a single valley, about a hundred miles long, by twenty-five miles at its widest point. This was where the new base would be built. The Valley was named AT334L,

but the Fleet people referred to it as Xanadu.

I had a sudden irrational sensation of fear as we began our descent to the surface. It was that second-sight of mine kicking up again. It was like I had received a quick, instant mental snapshot of the planet Klaxon and the main emotion it had given me was one of struggle, pain and outrage. It was an uncanny feeling, and I couldn't account for it at all.

I managed to shrug it off as the ship's doors opened.

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IV.

Our camp was sprawled untidily over several acres of rocky ground just at the beginning of the green valley of Xanadu. The rock was some kind of limestone, colored dirty white with bits of mica sparkling in it, and here and there red splotches that somebody told me were from iron deposits. Just beyond that was the lovely valley itself, nestled between two bald mountain ranges. Xanadu was a lush green than I remembered from home, as if all the life and vitality of this planet were concentrated into this single small valley. It was a place of low rolling hills, and a small river ran down the middle of it.

The officers' quarters had been built first, and then the officers' mess, so I heard. The Fleet has an ancient and unashamed tradition of privilege for higher ranks. Communications came next. There was a small relay station on Klaxon, but what was used mainly were the big radio rigs on the cruiser, *Skua*.

Immediately after disembarkation we were assigned to our new quarters. I had a large combination bedroom/sitting room with a small kitchen. My picture window had a view out over the green valley.

One of the problems the Fleet had to deal with was the sense of constriction that Fleet personnel get after long weeks and months of keeping station in space. Because of this, in the interest of simple mental hygiene, the Fleet tried to make its base accommodations spacious and inviting. It cost very little more for them to build large than to build small.

The furniture was quite nice, too, Danish Modern, one of the most pleasing of the old designs, and there were copies of famous paintings on the walls. Unfortunately, all of the furniture in all of the living units was identical. Still, it was the first place I had entirely to myself, and I liked it right away.

The Fleet had even tried to do something about the usual mess hall arrangements. We could eat in any one of five different restaurants on the base. Each had a different decor. There was Joe's Hawaiian Village and Eddie Lee's China Town and, my favorite, Harriet's Cafe, which looked just like a place I had known back home.

Of course, they all served the same food. The Fleet hasn't

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gotten quite far enough to think of supplying different cuisines.

Earthmovers and bulldozers had already moved into the valley of Xanadu. The first group of structures had already gone up. They needed only glass for the windows to be ready for occupancy.

It happened that the very first night of our arrival marked the beginning of the troubles that were to plague the Klaxon base.

Work proceeded, but it didn't go well. There were many accidents. Stresses must have been miscalculated, because sections kept collapsing. Some areas, which surveyed as solid granite, turned out to have soggy parts where the rock was hollowed away.

V.

Two weeks later, the first section of buildings was ready to be opened for everyone's use. They looked a great deal like office buildings—four hundred feet high, built out of concrete and aluminum. Just before the dedication ceremony, Commander Hansen, the chief engineer, inspected the foundations. He found what looked like a slight subsidence. The buildings seemed to have settled down a bit on one side.

Hansen frowned. They had done thorough tests on the load-bearing capacities of the substrata. This shouldn't be happening.

Hansen went down to the lower basement. At the bottommost level he found that one of the main girders had pushed right through an unsuspected sinkhole in the concrete-reinforced earth. The stresses of the building were distributed unequally.

Hansen stared at it. It was impossible, but it had happened. Now the whole damn structure was in danger of collapse.

He ran to the emergency phone. He could hear strange creaking sounds, the building starting to settle.

"Get me the Admiral at once!" he told the yeoman who answered. "Emergency!"

Esplendadore was just coming out of his shower. His dress uniform was carefully laid out on the bed. In twenty minutes he had to make a speech, dedicating the building and thanking

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everyone for their efforts. Why did they have to bother him with details? Still, it was part of his legend that he was always available for emergencies. He dried himself and picked up the phone.

"Sir. Hansen here. Something's wrong with the building structure."

"Hansen, what are you talking about?"

"One of the girders has collapsed. The whole structure is starting to collapse. You must get all of the people away from the area!"

Esplendadore had a thousand questions, but there was no time to ask them. He hit the general alarm. Everybody would drop whatever they were doing and assemble as quickly as they could at the spaceship. It was the fastest way of getting them away from the new structure.

Down below in the subcellar, Hansen had seen enough. He ran for the elevator. There were loud crashes all around him. Heavy girders began to let go. He just made it to the elevator and started up.

The elevator was barely under way when there was a dazzling flash of light as a girder snapped and carried away the electrical cables with it.

Hansen opened the trap door in the ceiling of the elevator. Through the dim stand-by lighting in the elevator shaft, he could see the iron stanchions set into the walls for emergencies. The engineer started climbing toward the surface.

Above, on the ground level, the crowds had been rapidly evacuating the area of the new buildings. But those at the back of the crowd felt the ground tremble under them, saw the foremost building bend gracefully as though it were bowing to the distant mountains, heard the shriek of tortured metal as the whole thing collapsed.

Hansen, down below, felt the elevator shaft start to buckle. He pulled himself to the surface and scrambled out a second later, just before internal pressures closed the elevator shaft like a well-squeezed toothpaste tube. It had been a close thing.

VI.

Esplendadore had been a great fighting admiral in his day, but that day was some years past. Now he was a very good desk chair admiral. A lot of the dash and fire of his youth had

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just faded away with the passage of years. As his hair grew grayer, his decisions became more tempered. Ever since his great victory at Achilles' Star, Esplendadore's career had been in a decline. It was a slow decline to be sure, so slow as to be almost imperceptible, but it led downward all the same. His most recent postings over the last several years had been to quiet sectors with no possibility of combat. He had complained about this.

"Take a rest," the top brass had told him. But he suspected that what they meant was, "Let somebody else have a chance." He had seen his career and his life slipping away into dignified decay. Desperately he had pulled strings, used all the influence he still possessed. He had to get out of this rear-echelon status they had posted him to. He was a fighting admiral, not a glorified supply clerk.

After intrigues worthy of the courts of Byzantium, Esplendadore had managed to get appointed to this new Klaxon expedition which had been dreamed up in the high councils of the Alliance... probably after someone had smoked some rather potent stuff. Esplendadore had his doubts about

the soundness of the scheme. It all depended on keeping knowledge of the Klaxon base from the Khalia so that a single giant blow could be attempted against them, a blow that would fall as though from nowhere and be utterly devastating.

Well, it was a pretty dream, of course. Civilians were very good at dreaming up these plans that involved violent changes of fortune through subterfuge and required the utilization of very little in the way of vital means and material. Sneaky and secret, that was a politician's idea of warfare. But how likely was it that the Khalia would not learn about this through their numerous turncoat spies? How long did he have to prepare everything and launch his attack? A month? Six months? It was impossible to say exactly how much time he had. Obviously, the best likelihood of carrying out the plan unknown to the Khalia was to build the base and launch the attack as quickly as possible. •

That was exactly what Esplendadore was determined to do. Strike one blow for mankind—one great, and perhaps last, blow for himself.

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VII.

The next day I went to work at Fleet Victuallers Division of the Supply Wing. I learned how complicated are the procedures needed to feed nearly seven thousand civilian workers, and an unknown number of Fleet personnel—I would judge them to be at least five thousand in number, counting a few hundred Space Marines whom we saw but rarely, for they had their own camp several miles from us. In all, at least ten thousand or so people who needed three good meals a day with some variety, even though we lived on a planet which, before our arrival, bore none of the grains or cereals that humans live upon.

On the morning of my first work assignment, I went out into the Valley, following the well-marked path that led to the agriculture area. This was some hundreds of yards into the Valley itself, and what it consisted of were long, low glass-topped buildings, greenhouses, such as we have back home. There was a small, central power-booster plant. Inside, the hydroponics and the soil experiments were well underway. The person in charge was Dr. John Edwardson, an older man (and married), and he showed me around.

It was interesting to learn that in this single small agricultural area nearly twenty percent of our food was being grown. Of course, our main food supply was still the fast-frozen, freeze-dried products. Some of these foods had been stored in depots in space for a very long time. It seems that science has made it possible for us to store food that will keep almost forever. There still seems something wrong in eating a steak that has been frozen over a hundred years. But, of course, there are some people who say it takes that long to properly tenderize the grade of beefsteak that the Fleet buys.

I was very pleased to see so many species from Old Earth doing so well here in this, for them, exotic environment. Dr. Edwardson told me that you could never tell how an Earth plant would do once it was transplanted to alien soil. Some did well, others not. He showed me how vigorously the turnips and the Brussels sprouts were growing. I must admit that I rather wrinkled my nose at this accomplishment.

"What about the native species on this planet?" I asked him. "Is there room here for both them and the Earth plants?"

"Well," Dr. Edwardson told me, "that depends upon whether two of them are fighting for room in the same

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ecological niche. But of course, warfare is the way of nature. All plant species are constantly engaged in a slow-motion battle with all other species."

It was nice to see these Earth plants, which are the same plants we have successfully raised on Trinitus. I knew from my schoolbooks that the Fleet cruisers all carry biological packs filled with the most useful species of plants from Earth. The doctor confirmed that this was true, and said, with kind of a laugh, that we were performing a kind of a warfare with our Terran plants against all of the other plant life of the universe. It was a little creepy to think of it that way. The doctor called it a form of manifest biological destiny. He said it was only logical that we human beings and our plants should ultimately be stamped out, or become standard everywhere in the galaxy. And, after that, in all the galaxies, and, after that, the entire universe which contains them.

I told him that didn't sound very nice of us. It made us seem predatory.

As the days passed, I became fascinated with the struggles of our plants against the alien plants of the planet Klaxon. The doctor and his assistants gave the plants a little help of course. The seedlings were planted in partially cleared ground. But he didn't try to spare them from every menace.

"These plants have to survive on their own," he told me. "We won't be around here all the time to spread pesticides for them."

My own work had to do mainly with writing out little tags and hanging them on the little plants, and then making entries in the computer noting that I had done so.

I realized that I was part of something vast and wonderful, of course: the extension of the food supply of the Alliance planets. But somehow my own role in it was not very dramatic. I began to think again about Dr. Bantry and his Department of Alien Psychology.

VIII.

There was a full investigation of the accident to the new buildings. Admiral Esplendadore needed at least a partial answer right away. He needed something upon which he could base further action.

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The initial findings were not too encouraging to a man who was in search of a simple, clear-cut answer. All of the advance planning appeared at first glance to have been sound. The collapse itself was attributed to a land fault triggered off, perhaps, by something minor, but whose existence could not have been detected with present instruments.

Was such a thing likely to occur again, Esplendadore wanted to know. His scientists could only shrug their shoulders. By all rights, it should not have happened in the first place.

Considering all this, Esplendadore began to think about the possibilities of sabotage. You wouldn't think a human being would ever sell out to a weasel-shaped thing with a loud chattering voice and a generally unpleasant disposition. Still, there are men who will do anything for gain, even sell out their own race.

Treachery has been a part of humankind's makeup since earliest days and who can tell exactly what pro-survival situation it may encourage? We assume it must have some sort of a survival value, but that's not how it looked now when the Fleet was extended to its limit.

The Khalia could be contacted through certain non-Alliance alien planets. They were reasoning beings, at least to the extent that they were able to work together co-operatively, and to make and keep promises. Informers were paid well. The Khalia were able to pay not just in gold and platinum, but they also had access to many of the rare art treasures of the worlds that they had plundered.

The humans and their allies of the Alliance, the three hundred-odd planets that made up civilizations as we knew it, were allied in their detestation of the Khalia and their determination to resist Khalia incursions. They were much less united when it came to their dealings with each other. In fact, the various planets of the Alliance were a swirling mass of treaties, special groups, alignments, organizations, one against the other, forever seeking local advantage. In this regard, at least, mankind had not gotten over its ancient propensity for aggression and competition.

There were factions among the Alliance planets which felt that the Fleet itself was a greater danger to their life and liberties than the Khalia. Especially resented was the loss of the right to defend one's own planet with spaceships. It made sense, of course; it would be a senselessly expensive duplica-

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tion of effort if each planet, some of them with very small populations indeed, should undertake their own guard. The security of all of the planets depended upon a strong Fleet which could handle any menace.

This much was obvious and almost everyone agreed. Yet it still went hard to see swaggering armed men on liberty on your home planet when you did not have the right to arm ships. Humans were still caught in a dilemma: that many of them didn't feel free unless they were able to have their own fleets. But if they did, it rendered peace and security impossible.

Given the various rivalries among the various planets of the Alliance, Esplendadore knew that it was not impossible that several of the

sponsoring planets might want his expedition to fail. There was always the question of council members trying to promote the careers of home town admirals. And this would not be the first time that an Alliance effort had been sabotaged.

Esplendadore discussed these matters with his security chief. The security chief agreed that there was every possibility that some sort of sabotage was involved. He vowed he would get to the bottom of it.

The building of the new base did not go well. There seemed to be a rather large number of accidents. Several more smaller buildings collapsed unexpectedly. Everyone was getting nervous.

Everything was way off schedule. These delays posed an increasing danger upon the entire expedition. It was at this time, also, that Esplendadore began to get more direct evidence that somebody was willfully interfering with things. It seemed that expensive machine tools had been left outside, and their highly polished metals were corroding much faster than they should have been.

IX.

Lea had the first of her strange "second-sight" dreams. In her dream, she was going to visit her cousin, Iris. In real life, Lea didn't have a cousin Iris, but in the dream she did. The dream happened in a place that looked very strange indeed, but when she was dreaming it, it seemed exactly as it should be.

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Iris lived in one of the huge apartment buildings near the center of town. This one was called the Emerald Arms and it housed several thousand families.

Lea felt right at home when she went into Iris's building. She took the suction tube to the fourteenth floor and then hopped on a roller which carried her over the mile or so of corridor to Iris's apartment door.

"I'm very glad to see you," Iris said, "but you must forgive me if I don't pay you much attention. I'm on emergency phone duty."

Lea noticed now the thin black wires that went into Iris's head and led

to outlets in the wall.

"Jeepers! Is something up?" Lea said. "Why are you doing emergency stuff?"

"Why, it's the war, you silly thing," Iris said. "You do remember our war, don't you?"

"Oh, yes. We're being invaded or something, aren't we?" Lea asked. "Frankly, I haven't paid much attention to it. I've got a lot of big career decisions I have to make this year."

"Well, you'd better start paying attention to it," Iris said. "They're still advancing, you know."

"But I thought that our forces repulsed them at great loss," Lea said.

"We halted them temporarily, at the cost of over ten thousand of our lives. But they've already begun moving again. Uh-oh... hold on, there's a signal."

Bright sparks flashed across one of the wires that went into Iris's head. Iris whispered to Lea, "It's from the Southern Salient. There hasn't been much happening there for a while. I think something big is about to break. Isn't it exciting?"

"Yes, it is," Lea said. "But it's also very sad. All those nice boys being killed. I wish I could do something about it."

"Well then, why don't you?"

"What could I do?"

"Talk to them. Try to make them understand. Tell them to go somewhere else. There's plenty of room on this planet. Why must they choose this spot, for heaven's sake?"

"But why me?" Lea asked.

"Because only you can do it. You live in their world."

"Iris!" Lea said. "What a shocking thing to say!"

"But it's true," Iris said. "You know it's true, don't you?" Lea was going to protest again, to explain that she was pure

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Ariji, just like Iris. Then she woke up. She was one very disturbed human.

X.

I just didn't know who to talk to about my dreams. I felt that I had to talk to someone, because they were really disturbing me and I was beginning to wonder if I weren't maybe going crazy. I didn't feel crazy, but my dreams were crazy. I really needed someone to talk to about them.

There was the Interdenominational Chaplain, of course. He was the official spiritual advisor for all of us. I had seen him from a distance. He was a middle-aged man, a widower, rather slightly built, and he had a short, gray beard and he wore gold-rimmed glasses, not because his eyes were bad, but because on this planet gold-rimmed glasses were a mark of the clergyman. I decided against speaking to him, however, because I suspected that my dreams were not really a spiritual problem, were not in his province, so to speak.

I knew several girls at work, but I didn't know any of them well enough. There was Milus Shotwell, of course, and I knew he liked me. He was a sensible young man and quite good-looking and very much my type. I think that's very important when you're discussing intimate things like dreams. So I decided to talk to Milus and I honestly don't know how it was that I found myself walking down the long dusty corridor that led to the small lab and rather dismal living quarters they had found for Allan Bantry and his unwanted Department of Alien Psychology.

Allan was working alone in his lab as usual. He had on a grimy lab coat and his frizzy hair was standing on end, the way it gets when he forgets to comb it. But I was pretty glad to see him.

His lab was a small room with two work tables. His computers and their peripheries and printers occupied all of one table. On the other he had his audio equipment. When I came in he was playing something I knew, Bach's Little Organ Fugue.

"Hi," I said. "How's military life?"

"I wouldn't know," he said. "I'm civilian labor, just like you are."

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"I'd have thought the Fleet would have its own military psychologists."

"Of course it does. But they're for the member races exclusively. The Fleet has no interest in outside aliens except to kill them."

"Then why do they bother hiring an alien psychologist?"

"In order to demonstrate their interest in the advancement of knowledge. It's good publicity when the time comes for military appropriations."

"Why aren't you wearing your tharg suit?"

"Please," Allan said, "don't remind me. How was I to know people didn't wear tharg suits here? So. Have you decided to work for me?"

I told him I came in order to tell him about a dream I'd had.

"Why me?" he asked.

I had been wondering that myself, but I suddenly knew the answer.

"Because no matter what I say I don't think you'll tell me I'm crazy. Or am I crazy to think that?"

"Lea, sometimes I have difficulty following you. Sit down and tell me your dream," he said, motioning me to a rather fragile-looking rocking chair.

I told him all about my imaginary cousin Iris. When I had finished I started to rock furiously while he sat and ran his fingers through his hair, a sure sign he's thinking. For a terrible moment I thought he was going to say, "Lea, I'm sorry to tell you this but you're just plain crazy."

Instead he said, "Lea, I need you."

My heart thrilled to his words. I had already decided that I cared for

him a little. I knew that he liked me, but I had not imagined it was to this extent.

"Oh, Allan," I said. "Why?"

"Because," he said, "you've got the highest psi rating among any of us, military or civilian, on Klaxon. This dream convinces me of it. I think it's an important dream."

"But what has that got to do with your needing me?"

"Lea, I am convinced that only by looking to psi will we get to the bottom of what's going wrong. Please come and work in my division."

I really didn't know whether to be flattered or not. But I did

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begin working for Allan Bantry in the Department of Alien Psychology.

I always record my dreams in a diary. So I had the dates of each of them. But even without the diary, I knew that each dream had come on the eve of some terrible accident. The first was when the new buildings collapsed. Then there had been the destruction of the mill. And then the accident in the car pool. I had even begun to suspect that my dreams were somehow responsible for the terrible things that were going on. But Allan talked me out of that.

"Forget that nonsense," he said. "What is happening is obvious. Somehow you are in contact with the people who are causing the accidents. With one of them, at least. Iris."

"But those things I dream never happened. Not really."

"I believe they happened, but not in the way you remember. The images of your dreams were your mind's way of making sense out of what you saw."

"Allan, you don't really believe I could be in telepathic contact with the people who are sabotaging our base. I mean, it isn't even proven yet that anyone is doing it. It could all be like accidents."

"There's very little statistical possibility of their being accidents," he

said. "No, there's obviously an intelligence behind this."

"Then it must be one of our own people. There's no one on this planet but Fleet people and Fleet civilian workers. Or do you think someone else may be hidden out there?" I gestured in the direction of the great wasteland that surrounded Xanadu.

"No, I do not," Allan said. "I don't think it has anything to do with treachery or sabotage. I suspect we're dealing with an alien intelligence which is opposing us for reasons of its own."

"You mean there are aliens out there on the planet?" I said.

"There would have to be," Bantry said. "They could have been here even before we arrived. Remember, this planet was only hastily surveyed. We assume there's no intelligent life here, but that may just mean that the initial survey didn't turn up any."

It was an idea. Frightening. If Iris and her people really existed, where were they?

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It was ail getting very solemn, but then I thought of something that made me laugh.

"Does my alien hypothesis strike you as funny?" Allan asked somewhat frostily.

"Not at all, Allan! But you must admit, it's just the sort of hypothesis you'd expect of an alien psychologist."

He looked very affronted for a minute, and then he grinned. I was glad of that. I think it's good for a man to have a sense of humor, especially when I'm around.

"You know something?" he said.

"What's that?"

"You're weird, Lea. Definitely weird."

That's when I knew for sure that he liked me.

XI.

I really didn't want to do the mind exercises. I had a lot of other things to think about. Allan and I had just found each other. That was something to think about. But Allan really didn't seem quite *aware* that we had found each other. That was something else to think about. But mainly I didn't want to think. I was in love and I just wanted to feel good, sort of lazy and laid back, that's how I felt. Languorous, the poets called it. I felt languorous when I was around Allan.

But Allan didn't seem to feel romantic around me. I don't really think it was in his repertoire. He was a serious-minded young science jock and he wanted me to do mind exercises.

I had to wear funny metal things on my head and stare at ball bearings on a polished glass surface. I was supposed to get them to roll. Can you imagine that?

I tried. I pushed against them with my mind. Sometimes I could almost feel I was making contact. I could feel the coldness of the steel against—not my real forehead, of course, but the forehead I was projecting against the little steel ball.

But I couldn't budge them. I could see that Allan was disappointed. After a week of this I think he was ready to give up on me, until I discovered the trick.

I called it a trick, though Allan said it was just my individual way of focusing. I imagined a tiny lever, and I stuck one end of it under one of those bearings, and gave a push, and the thing started to move. After that it was easy for me to push

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it a little faster with my imaginary forehead. I can't take all the credit. The psi booster I wore on my forehead helped. Thanks, psi booster.

After the steel balls, Allan wanted me to try to turn keys in locks at a distance. It was easy once I got the hang of directing the force in a sort of twisting way. After that we turned to communication.

The next time I dreamed, I seemed to be walking down a street in a city

which afterward seemed very strange but at the time of dreaming seemed perfectly normal and commonplace. There were a lot of buildings and they were colored white and blue, and there were no entrances or exits. Allan told me later that many of the details probably had no definite correspondence to reality, but were examples of the mind's analogizing tendency, the way it simulates environment. That's how alien psychologists talk.

The streets were made of porcelain cobblestones. There were horses and riders in the streets, though I realized later that they weren't horses at all.

I walked down the street and a lot of people were hurrying past me. They weren't really going anywhere urgent, I knew that somehow, they just always moved around very quickly, it was the way they were. I went on and came into a sort of village square, and there was a fountain in it, and in it was a fountain with a statue, only the statue had no head and water was gushing from its neck. It didn't seem to me strange at the time because I knew the statue had been there for ages.

Then I heard a voice saying, "All citizens, assemble at once at the statue in Sector 22 Orange. We have some important news to tell you."

I went there and it was a sad sight. A lot of our soldiers were back from the front, and they had been wounded badly, many of them. There were a lot of stretchers, and ambulances kept arriving and leaving. Some of our men were bandaged and moving around on crutches, and some of them were on six legs, some on seven. It broke my heart to see how they had lost legs and could never dance in the May dances again.

I went on. I thought I had something important to do, someone to meet. There was some reason for me to be there. If I waited, I would remember it. But there was no time to sit around. Just then Iris's brother Ingendra came over.

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"You're just in time," he said. "The council is moving into supreme session. They're about to make a very important decision."

"What's that?" I asked.

"Come with me," Ingendra said. "You can see everything."

The council hall was a very high-ceilinged room, and it was lit by some sort of indirect lighting. All of the councilors of the city were there, and the President of the Ariji was there, too. She was very fat, and she wore a lot of black eye makeup. She was old, but I thought she was very beautiful. She frightened me, because I thought she could read my mind and everyone else's. It's something they can do, the Presidents of the Ariji.

"So you're Lea. We were hoping you'd come visit us again."

"But why? I've always lived here."

"No you haven't, Lea. Try to remember where you really come from."

I thought about it, and I got the feeling, there in my dream, that I was dreaming, and that the real me was lying asleep out there in another world, the real world, perhaps.

"Do you know where you come from?" the President asked.

"Am I really from the other world?" I asked.

"Indeed you are, child. It is a wonderful opportunity for us. We had despaired of ever getting into contact with your people. But now there is a chance."

"Hey, look," I said, "I'm not sure about all this. Am I supposed to go back there and tell them that I had a dream only it's real?"

"They will have to believe you. We have something planned."

"What is it?"

"I can't tell you yet. But you'll know when it happens. And then you must speak to us again."

"I don't want to do this!" I shouted at them. And then I woke up and I was back in the lab.

"You dreamed, didn't you?" Allan said. He turned on the recorder. "Tell me all about it." I told him.

"When is this something supposed to happen?"

"Very soon, Allan. Maybe we'd better warn the Admiral."

"Warn him about what? We don't know what they're going

to do. He'd just tell us we were crazy." But he picked up the telephone anyhow and asked for an

interview.

XII.

Admiral Esplendadore was sitting in his room having late morning coffee. Coffee for the Fleet had to travel a long way to get to Klaxon. It was one crop which had not taken well to alien environments. Esplendadore sipped his mocha Java mixture and looked over the projection printouts which his engineers had given him. He was still behind deadline. It was annoying that things were going as slowly as they were. And there was still no indication of who had been sabotaging the base. Several of his men had theories, but theory wasn't much good without good solid evidence to back it. What they had was all inference. He was especially annoyed at Bantry's strange idea. Strange races existed in the galaxy, of course, you couldn't discount them. At Bantry's request he had had a thorough aerial survey made of Klaxon's surface, including probes into its two freshwater oceans. They had turned up no signs of anything that could be called intelligent.

It was going to get sticky if he didn't sort this out soon. The top brass had their eyes on him. This was an important mission, one that, properly executed, could set the Weasels back for a good long time, and give the Alliance the decisive advantage it needed to stamp them out once and for all.

He sipped again at the coffee, then noticed that there was a faint agitation on the surface of the brown liquid. A tremor. As though it were picking up some vibration that his own senses hadn't yet been able to detect.

He frowned, went to his desktop computer, punched up a status report. Everything seemed to be all right, although a few sectors gave inconclusive

readings.

Now he could feel the vibration. It seemed to be in the floor of his office. He wondered if someone were building something in one of the lower floors, or running some sort of equipment. He decided to check up on it.

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He picked up his phone. "Haskwell," he said into it, "come in here. I've got some orders for you."

There was no answer. Esplendadore realized that the telephone was dead. He tapped it several times. Nothing. He went to the door and pressed the light-sensitive latch. There was no response. He banged on the door. That did nothing. He shouted at the door, "Haskwell, can you hear me? Open this door!"

There was no response. The door was soundproof, of course. He calmed himself and walked back to his desk. He didn't bother checking the windows. They were permanently sealed, with steel shutters welded over them for security. The door was the only way in or out, and it was malfunctioning. The telephone was his only means of communication with the outside. And it was dead.

Except for his computer!

He logged in and tried to call up another computer on the networking circuit. The machine didn't respond. Instead, the screen flashed, "Please stand by. Priority message coming through."

There was nothing he could do but wait. As he waited, the tremor in the floor became more pronounced.

Then, suddenly, Esplendadore's suite went dark. The darkness was absolute, since he had no window on the outside. He could hear strange buzzing sounds in the walls—something to do with the wiring, no doubt. But the sound persisted. It was not like the crackle-pop of electrical cables. This sound was more like some kind of movement within the walls—rats, perhaps, or something equally obnoxious.

Esplendadore made his way to his desk, fumbling in the darkness. He

located his desk, found the top right-hand drawer, opened it and took out a late-model laser pistol. He adjusted the aperture to wide. Deeper in the drawer was another laser weapon, this one a hand-held lance, a devastating short-range weapon. With these he was ready to fight anything that came at him.

He wished he knew what was happening to the rest of the base, however. He knew that Wintage, his second in command, was perfectly competent to handle anything routine. But this was far from routine. He just hoped Wintage didn't panic. The last thing in the world Esplendadore wanted was

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someone to start sending off a CP to Fleet with some wild story about an invisible invasion. That sort of thing could make him a laughing stock. Of course, it *was* an invisible invasion. But that didn't matter. It still sounded bad.

Sooner or later they'd have to show themselves. Then whoever it was out there was going to get it.

The Admiral of the Fleet, Baby Blue Esplendadore, was not amused.

Presently he detected movement. His room seemed to be swaying. Then it lurched, and he had to grab the desk to keep from falling. His entire suite of rooms seemed to be moving. It was impossible, it was unlikely, but it seemed to be the case.

It was an uncanny feeling, to be within a pitch-black room moving in an unknown direction. What Esplendadore feared was that Khalian agents were somehow effecting this. If that were the case, his career was sunk. It was typical of the man that he thought of his career before he thought of his life. No matter what the outcome, if the Khalia had been able to kidnap him in his own suite of rooms right out of the heart of a military base, he'd never live it down even if he managed to live through it. The room was perfectly soundproof. The only proof of movement he had was the swaying and lurching which the room underwent, and the feeling he had that somehow the whole thing had been lifted and was being born away. By whom? That remained to be seen.

They would have to speak to him sooner or later. They were going to

have to come through that door. He positioned himself behind the desk, securely wedged against any further movement, the laser lance and pistol both pointed toward the door. He was ready for them now. A little late, true, but who can guard against the totally unexpected?

He couldn't tell how long he had been in the darkness. The room was like a total immersion tank, all sense of time was lost.

But he did realize when, after a while, the movements of the room stopped.

They would be coming now.

He squinted toward the door, hoping to protect his eyes against the sudden burst of light which would come forth when it was opened. His finger was ready on the trigger.

Then the telephone rang.

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* * * XIII.

"Yes, who is this?" Esplendadore barked into the telephone.

"Sir, I am Allan Bantry, Alien Psychologist for the Fleet."

"Bantry, I don't know what the hell you are doing on the phone. Where's Haskwell? Where's Wintage? Where's my Chief of Staff."

"Actually, sir, they're off with the troops. They're planning a commando action to rescue you."

"Damn good show," Esplandadore said. "Tell them to get those men moving at once. Where the hell am I, by the way?"

"Admiral, your suite of rooms has been cut loose from the main complex and carried a distance of almost half a mile from base perimeter. I'm working to have television reception restored to you. There it is, now you can see for yourself."

The TV monitors flashed into life. On three sides, Esplendadore was looking down into a pit slanting downward into a deep chasm. On the

fourth side, he saw a narrow tongue of land extended over the chasm. His suite of rooms seemed to be perched on that tongue of land.

"The reason I want you to delay the commandos," Bantry said, "is that I'm afraid too much movement could collapse the tongue of land your suite is perched on and send the whole thing into the pit."

"Well, hell, that's no good," Esplendadore said. "Tell them in my name to hold off, or to find some other way of hitting at the bastards who have kidnapped me. By the way, who did kidnap me?"

Bantry hesitated. "Sir, you aren't going to like the answer."

"What has that got to do with it? Just tell me!"

"You aren't going to like this at all, sir."

"Bantry, stop blabbering and tell me."

Bantry cleared his throat. "Admiral Esplendadore, what would you say if I told you that the connections attaching your suite to the rest of the building have been severed by the actions of several million hard-backed beetles each about the size of a one-credit coin?"

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"I'd say you were crazy, mister, and that you're talking yourself straight into a court-martial."

"That's what I was afraid of," Bantry said.

"I suppose these beetles picked me up on their backs and carried me here?"

"I'm afraid that's exactly what happened sir. Several million beetles can carry extremely large objects."

"I warn you," the Admiral said, "an insanity plea is going to do you no good... You're sure this is what happened, Bantry?"

"Yes sir."

"Is anyone there with you? Any responsible officer?"

"Your batman, Captain Walters, is here."

"Put him on. Walters? What about all this?"

"Nobody knows exactly what's happening," Walters said. "But what seems to be happening is, someone or something is directing these millions, maybe billions, of beetles. Something or someone with intelligence. Maybe it's the Khalia, sir."

"You actually saw this happen?"

"Yes sir. I watched the beetles take you away. We didn't dare attack them with explosives or gas or fumicides for fear of killing you. So we haven't been able to take action against them. But just say the word—"

"Don't be hasty," Esplendadore said. "We owe it to science and to our own future security to talk with these creatures, find out what they want. Are they attacking my men?"

"No, sir. An unofficial truce line seems to have been established. They stay on their side of it and we stay on ours. So far there have been no hostilities. Aside from your kidnapping, that is, sir."

"They are actual beetles?" Esplendadore asked.

"As far as we can determine. We don't have a trained entymologist or whatever those fellows are called who study bugs. But one of our people from Agriculture says they look just like Japanese beetles, only with blue dots."

"What is known about Japanese beetles?"

"Nobody here knows much about them. Shall I send a CP requesting information?"

"No, don't do a thing yet. Do you think by any chance you could get a move on and get me out of here?"

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"I'm trying, sir. But there are difficulties."

There were several reasons why Esplendadore wanted out. Not least of

which was that when the beetles had taken away his suite of rooms, they had neglected to take the bathroom along with them.

"What difficulties?"

"When we try to approach your suite, they threaten to chew away the landbridge and let you fall into the landfill. It's a fall of several hundred feet, sir."

"Well, dammit, can't you give them something that will lure them away? I have heard that beetles like rotted meat. Tell the cook to try out his latest ration of beef. Pour some honey over it. That ought to get them."

"I don't think you understand, Admiral. These are not simple, old-fashioned beetles. I mean, they are not simple-minded in the way we have always known beetles to be. These beetles want to discuss something with you."

Esplendadore stared at the telephone. "I can just barely believe that a million beetles carted away my suite. But that a beetle told you he wanted to *discuss* something with me—well, that's difficult, Walters."

"Beetles can't talk, sir, you're correct about that. Not to us, anyhow, although apparently they can with each other. No, sir, they communicated their demands through an intermediary. It seems that one of our civilian workers, a young lady from the planet Trinitus who works for Dr. Bantry of Alien Psychology, is telepathic. They communicate through her, sir."

Admiral Esplendadore was tired, and hungry, and his bladder was full, and he was in a ridiculous situation that threatened his career and probably his life.

"Put this young lady on the telephone," Esplendadore said.

XIV.

"Am I to understand, young lady, that you are in telepathic contact with the king or general or representative of these beetles?"

"Yes, sir," I said, "and believe me, I'm just as surprised as you are about it. I always knew I had the second-sight, but I never knew it could get me into something like this. Commu-

nicating with an alien species I mean. But I suppose it's Allan's fault—Dr. Bandy's, I mean—because he made me do the mind exercises that made this whole communication thing possible."

"Young lady," the Admiral said, "a little less personal history, all right?"

"I'm sorry, sir. I was just trying to explain."

"Now then, these beetles. Who directs them?"

"They direct themselves, sir. Under their President, I mean. She told me to tell you that."

"They have a President?"

"Not an actual one, sir. An imaginary one."

"These beetles have an imaginary President?"

"It's a little hard to explain, sir. See, they have a single group mind, a mind which is made up of a part of all their minds. If I understand it correctly. I mean it's almost as new to me as it is to you. So bear with me, sir. Sorry to keep on explaining, sir."

"And these beetles were able to plan my kidnapping, and taking me out here and threatening my life?"

"Yes, sir. That is, they planned your kidnapping, but they aren't really threatening your life. They just want to get your attention."

"Well, they've got it. What is it they want?"

"They want you to leave Xanadu."

"But it's the best spot on the planet!"

"They feel that way, too, sir. In fact, it's the only place on the planet where they can live. It was better in the old days, they say, but that's how it is now. They also point out that they have lived here for a long time. They claim that you are invading them, and that this is contrary to the rules of the Great Charter of the Alliance as they have understood it

through my explanations. Government was never my strongest subject, sir, but I did my best. We *do* say that planets are the sole property of their indigenous intelligent races, don't we, sir?"

"Yes, we certainly do."

"I just wanted to be sure I got that part right. They point out that you can spend a little more money and bring in soil and water and stuff from wherever it is you come from (that's how they express it, sir) and make your own Xanadu. There's plenty of room. They'd even be glad to give you

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samples of local seeds and stuff. But they say it's not right that you should try to occupy the only spot on the planet where they can live."

"Wait just a minute," the Admiral said. He put down the telephone, and, in a move carefully thought out beforehand, relieved himself in an empty coffee thermos jug. He capped it carefully and returned to the telephone.

"I don't understand their problem," the Admiral said. "We're not competing with them. They can continue to do whatever it is beetles do in this valley. Why should they care if we build a few buildings?"

"It's not so much the buildings," Lea said. "It's the other stuff that's burning them up."

"What stuff are you referring to?"

"Bringing in all those alien plants and trying to get them to grow here. They consider that a violation of fundamental ethics, and they are fighting both for themselves and for their vegetable allies."

"To hell with them," Esplendadore said. "I won't have anything to do with a race that accuses our plant life of acts of aggression."

XV.

Several hours later, Admiral Esplendadore gave his word as an officer of the Fleet that he would set up his camp in a different region of Klaxon, at least one hundred miles from the Valley.

The Admiral was no coward. He would have chosen death if he felt he was doing something disadvantageous to the Alliance and the Fleet. He agreed because the Ariji offered to send several million of their number along with the Fleet to the new base location, and there assist in the work to the extent of their abilities.

Esplendadore could see at once how greatly this would speed things up. Although he was certain of his ability to wipe out every living thing in Xanadu any time he wanted to, that would gain nothing. What counted was getting the base built.

Despite this, Esplendadore was reluctant to inform the Fleet that he had conducted a treaty with a race of beetles.

It couldn't be kept secret for long, of course. It was too big.

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And when it did break, it was going to mean great things for Allan Bantry, the alien psychologist who had made this discovery. He was probably going to have a whole new school of alien psychology named after him, and get a really good research lab.

Allan was very nice to me after that, but he seemed nervous when I was around. When I asked him what the matter was, he just said he was in awe of me. I knew that that was a bad sign, romantically speaking. But I couldn't help it, I was pretty awesome. Especially after they named me Senior Linguist to the Ariji, since I was the only one who could talk with them, and anyhow, Iris insisted. It was an important position, but a lonely one, until I met Armand Dunkirk, the very presentable young charge* d'affaires who came out from Earth to establish the first Consulate for Alien Invertebrate Intelligences. But that is a different story.

INTERLUDE

A lesser man would have been discouraged. With over a hundred billion citizens in the Alliance, the Fleet tried not to settle for lesser men. Even with his latest plan demolished, Gill Kanard continued doggedly with the problem. He applied every formula he had learned in his decade as a PR specialist.

By the Mother's wrath, they were in the right this time! It was hard to

view this assignment with perspective. The Fleet was struggling to protect the Alliance against THE ENEMY, just like the charter said. All he had to do was sell that fact to the populations of some three hundred major and countless sparsely populated planets.

Maybe I can scare them. That raid on Eire was savage enough, even if it did give the Fleet the excuse to move in and clean up a wretched social system. Idly he wished he knew more about the Khalia, or even a world they had occupied.

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CONTRAPUNTAL

by Steve Perry

Jiwi shared the thin, hard-black shade of the twisted shrub with a pair of mating lizards. The hot wind from the edge of the Black Desert ruffled the fine, scaled feathers on Jiwi's neck, bringing with it the sounds of intruders upon his solitude.

The Master of Assassins shifted his perception, heightened his senses, but did not move his body. He continued to sit *seiza* on the warm sands, motionless and emotionless, waiting.

Three came. Two males and a female, of his own species, rather than the off-world Khalia. He had no love for the ratlike aliens his people called Panya, but they had had sense enough to avoid antagonizing the Guild. So far, at least. That the majority of Ndege was slaves bothered Jiwi not at all; his loyalty was to the Guild, as it must always be.

He knew the males. They were his, members of his Guild, more than students, but not yet fully trained. But the female? Why did they bring her? What could be so important that they would disturb his meditation? It was true that strange things had come upon the world of late: the Panya, with their delusions of being Overlords, whispered together in their harsh language of an impending attack by a mysterious force calling itself "the Fleet." But the Guild With No Nest had weathered the winds of a thousand years, and Jiwi expected that this latest storm would pass as had all the others.

The copulating male lizard exhausted himself. He withdrew and

crouched behind the female, his bent-needle ribs showing

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through his gray-scaled skin. Perhaps he hoped for a rebirth of energy, to continue his alliance, but the female had apparently been satisfied. She scurried across the black sand, heedless of the male's intentions. She did not look back.

"Master?" That would be Wembe, the senior of the two tyro assassins. He was fifteen summers, not yet come into his full avian splendor.

"Speak."

"In the court of the Dying Eagle, we found an unContracted killing. Fat Bata Mzinga, the swizz dealer, was slain."

"One of the Panya?" The question was natural; only an alien would be so stupid as to slay one of the Ndege without official sanction.

"Sir," the nestling blurted, "it was this one."

Jiwi regarded the female in shock. Avicide? By a female? He held his face carefully calm as he examined her. She was tall, perhaps half a feather length less than his own height, and slender. Her face was high-boned and thin-nosed, her head scales particularly fine and feathery. Her fire-green eyes were fixed in their stare upon him, and there was no fear in those eyes.

Jiwi considered that. There should be fear, for she was condemned by her action, dead upon the perch where she stood. Nobody was allowed to kill another Ndege, save for Guild members, and the barbarian rats, who had enough weaponry to enforce their stupidity. There were laws, there were customs, and they must be observed to avoid chaos.

"Why?" Jiwi finally asked. To be so direct was proper, among students and females; neither had training in fuge. He matched her stare. Young, he saw, maybe twenty. No. Twenty was not young. At twenty, he had killed his father and thus become Master of the Guild With No Nest. And that only three summers past...

"For money," she said. Matter-of-fact.

Saykomo, the younger of the tyros, sucked in a quick breath. Sacrilege!

Jiwi suppressed his own outrage. This was not done. Passion, though inexcusable, could be acknowledged. But coldly, and for pay? A non-Guild member and *a female*?

"And who promoted this illicit contract?"

The female stared at him, defiant.

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Jiwi now had to suppress a smile. She was dead, and yet she showed no lack of confidence. A brave one, this. Good. He liked her for it. She had to die—some things were sacred, after all—but one admired bravery where one found it, friend or enemy. It was only proper.

"Master," Saykomo said, "I—I would... question her."

Ah. Once, Jiwi would have leaped to do the same. But the Guild did not deal in torture, had not for ten generations. Death must be clean, even though the old methods of interrogation were still taught. Barbaric ways from barbaric times, but part of the Way. Security lay in tradition. Always.

The male lizard, perhaps alarmed by the sudden nearness of so many giants, managed to scuttle to the base of the twisted shrub. He moved as if the weight of a thousand years rode upon his spine. Sometimes, Jiwi felt like that.

"No person may enter into a Killing Contract, save with the Guild With No Nest," Jiwi said formally. "We will know who has set you to this before you die."

"Master—," Saykomo began.

And at that instant, Jiwi thrilled at the sudden knowledge of what the female intended. Her posture was subtle, but he was a Master: he felt it, tasted it, knew it. She wore nothing more than a simple *chub* shift and the two tyros would have searched her very thoroughly for weapons, doubtless

delighting in it, so she could hardly be armed. And yet—

She moved. The female slashed the stiffened edge of her hand across Saykomo's throat, faster and harder than Jiwi would have thought her capable of doing. Before Saykomo could block, he was choking and falling.

Wembe was more skilled, and he had a second's warning. He shifted, spun, and kicked, his heel driving for her solar plexus—

She moved around the kick and clawed, stabbing her fingers into Wembe's face—

Jiwi allowed himself to smile, finally. He came up in a single move, thick black sand *chee-cheed* under his bare feet and he took a single step.

Wembe fell back from the female's attack, blinded.

Jiwi took another step.

The female spun, sensing his motion.

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By all the Feathered Gods, she was good! Better than any he had ever seen outside the Guild, and a female, besides!

She punched and kicked at him, a smooth and controlled series—

Jiwi became liquid, wrapped in the perfection of the *Amqji* Trance. Once initiated, the dance of a fully trained Master did not stop, until the opponent was defeated or the Master himself dead. But even as it gripped him, Jiwi recognized the female's attack: she cast Hummingbird-to-Flower, from the Fourth Kata.

Impossible. A Guild Dance. She could not know it!

There was no way for Jiwi to stop his dance, but he could, as a Master, alter it somewhat. He could stun instead of kill. She had to live, this female, for this had to be explained.

Hummingbird-to-Flower was best answered by Dying Dervish. Jiwi's body spun, and his arm became the wing of the mythical bird, slicing the hot air. His tight fist slammed into the female's temple, just *there*, at the

precise spot. She went boneless and into the sand. Her impact threw a thin cloud of black dust which ran before the desert wind.

The vibration sent a shiver into the male lizard under the shrub. Still wrapped in the fighting trance, Jiwi watched the lizard scale the rough bark and climb for the sun.

"Your name?"

She shook her head and stared at Jiwi. "What?"

She was not yet fully conscious, he saw. He waited.

They were in his room behind the main hall in the orgy palace. The walls were adobe, proof against the day's heat, and the room was courtesy of the unfrazilian madam and her current raptor, the bouncer. Thin, gummy, white paint peeled from the darker tan under it; the air circulator set into the dark ceiling, run by piped-in water, rattled and vibrated like an angry snake in a cage.

The woman lay on the gel cushion that was his bed, her breathing still ragged. "Berq," she finally said. "I am called Berq."

Jiwi nodded and turned his back to her. His plain brown robe swirled across the catskin carpet; static electricity stirred the blue of the rug in a rippling wave. He said, "How is it you move with such—?" He stopped speaking. To simple folk and females, a Master spoke directly. To one who might be

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capable of fugue, one composed questions differently. One had to be circumspect, one had to dance about the edges, one needed to be oblique. She was a female, and yet he had *seen* her perform a Guild kata. There were only a certain number of possibilities, but they must be examined to determine the true answer. One who knew Fourth Kata might—and should—know fugue.

Instead of a question, he made a statement.

"You must have had an interesting childhood."

In saying this, he had discarded several thought-lines. No chance encounter or even a lover from the Guild could have taught her Fourth Kata skills. Such a level of complexity and performance took at least ten years.

Assuming she knew no more than she had already demonstrated, a thing yet to be determined.

Was that the ghost of a smile on her lips? He watched her only peripherally, and when he shifted gaze the smile—if indeed it had been one—was gone.

"My father made my childhood most interesting."

Ah. So she was familiar with fugue. No real surprise, but interesting. That she could not possibly know either fugue or kata would have been a given yesterday. Today had proved that assumption wrong.

She had learned from her father, if her fugue was pure. That meant *he* must have been highly ranked in the Guild. Assuming average onset of his puberty, this female's father would now have to be in his mid-thirties, at least, and possibly older. Assassins were usually retired or dead by such an age, and ex-assassins were not allowed to stay on the main continent, but were banished to the Fire Lands to the south. So her father was most likely dead or gone.

"I would likely have enjoyed meeting your father."

"I am certain he enjoyed knowing you."

Ah! Two more things. His assumption that her father was no longer around was correct, and that the traitor had been somebody he had known. That narrowed things considerably. Only a few would fit the cloak. Of these, Atler was of the castrati and obviously no one's parent; Mugabi had been monosexual and had borne a hatred of females; Mkono still lived, so that left—oh.

Jiwi's mind ground to a halt. He looked more carefully at the female's face, searching for signs of parental genes. Yes.

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Now that he knew, he could see the father in the daughter. Njia. Master Njia.

Even as he thought to deny it, Jiwi knew it could well be so. But—*why?* The old man had never done anything without deep purpose. He had been the most convoluted worker of fugue in the Guild. Even teaching a female would have been within his bent, so twisted as to be opaque to ail but the finest fugue players. No one had known Njia well, but Jiwi had known him as well as any. He should.

Master Njia had been *his* father, too.

Jiwi's mother had died at his birth; therefore, Berq was Jiwi's half-sister, if what she said—and he saw—was true.

Damn. Here was a nicely embedded thorn.

The canon continued:

"Your father was a great man." / *know who he was and therefore who you are.*

"Yes." / *acknowledge your knowledge.*

"He was often very abstract in his thinking. *What in the Thirteen Hells did he mean by creating you.*

"The motives of a great man often are." *This is your problem, brother. You figure it out.*

Ah. Purpose. Likely she knew what, but she was testing him. The audacity!

An inconsistency tumbled into his mind. Berq was superior to the two students who had "captured" her after her crime; therefore, she had willed it so. Why? And the charade in the desert, the fight, what had been the point of that? She would have only needed to approach him and state any part of what she had just said and he would have been intrigued enough to pursue the matter to its end. She must have known that. Why hadn't she done it that way?

What did she want?

If she had the kata skills and she could play fugue, it seemed likely that she would also know the Law. That she was his half-sister meant nothing, the Law allowed no exceptions. She must die. Yet, she had allowed herself to be taken. Why?

On the gel pad, Berq shifted her position. The thin cloth of her garment slid back, revealing her slim, muscular legs. Her knees parted slightly and her attitude... changed. Suddenly, her pheromones called to him, along with the shadowy darkness of her mons, revealed just *there*. More important, her *Id* spoke to him, her spirit singing to his: she wanted him, as a female wants a male.

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Jiwi became aware of his response. This female was the most attractive creature he had ever met. To be sure, her body was no better than a dozen others he had known carnally; but her essence, her *being*, was far superior to all of those. She was his counterpoint, as much as any female could be. She was trained, she carried the genes of his father, she was an enigma. More than anything, Jiwi, Master of the Guild With No Nest, wanted to catch this beauty to him, to become part of her, to make her part of him. To join in that oldest of dances...

None of this showed, of course. The Way taught much more than how to fire a weapon or mix a poison or kill with a hand or foot. Body control began early.

Blood that wished to trap itself *there*, engorging sensitive tissue and swelling *this* organ found itself shunted elsewhere. The pulse that would race slowed instead. Jiwi was a Master and his control was very nearly perfect. Nothing showed.

None of that mattered. She knew.

She smiled, shifted her pose slightly, and the invitation was gone. But only for now. She wanted him and now she knew that he desired her, as well.

And Jiwi knew that she knew *he* knew.

Fugue. Canon. Contrapuntal melodies from the dawn of time, from the days when his kind ruled the skies, these tunes lived, all covertness and

circularity. Obvious to one trained in fugue, as obvious as though they had been shouted. He had never met a female who could play other than instinctively, and none at this level. -

Jiwi suddenly felt unsure of himself. This was thin air for flight, too dark to see the trees, too windy to hold steady. What did it all mean?

"I have matters to which I must attend," he said. "I shall return here to discuss things with you shortly." *I've got to chew this bolus; you would be wise to wait here until I return.*

"Of course." No fugue play needed for that.

Small waves lapped at the fat pilings under the heavy dock. From ten thousand times ten thousand spans the wave had come, only to find the barnacle and slime-crusting wood waiting. The sea winds turned at this city, bringing storms that failed to venture deep enough inland to slay the desert. The air carried salt-smell and fishy odors, and the sounds of the little brothers of the air, searching for some fisher

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woman's chum scraps left imprudently unguarded. Normally, such background aided his meditation, the waves crooning peacefulness: not to worry, all things circle in their time.

But not today. Today, the waves were discordant. They calmed themselves, maybe, but not the Master of Assassins.

The female. He wanted her. Wanted her legs wrapped around his hips, wanted above all for her to live. And yet, she must die. It was the Law, and he was the highest keeper of that tradition. The Assassins had their niche, it had been that way for a thousand years, and it must be continued. But the female was something never seen before.

Choice. Dilemma. Problem. Trouble.

Why did this thing exist? Master Njia, blood-father and greatest modern Master of the Guild had designed it so, that was why. What purpose, old man? What have you done?

Above, on this very pier, Jiwi had killed Master Njia, three years past.

The old man had been convoluted, had known his own death was needed for his son to develop. He had arranged it so that Jiwi had not known he was being led to it until much later. And now there was this female.

He remembered another female, one who had died the same day as his father. He had loved her, or so he had thought, but even she had been a tool shaped by the old man. An assassin must know love, else he was nothing but a killer. Njia had set him up to love her, and then killed her to provoke Jiwi. Gods, what a complex soul he had been!

What were you thinking of when you trained my half-sister, old man? Why have you set her at me? It was you who taught me the Law, you who laid the traditions before me. Not in two thousand years has there ever been a female in the Guild, never, and yet, you taught her.

Sire of my flesh, molder of my spirit, what deviousness have you designed now? To haunt me from beyond?

The edge of Jiwi's left hand itched. He scratched at it idly as he watched the waves cycle in.

Abruptly, he stood and stripped the thin robe from his lean body. The pattern of his scales gleamed in the sunlight as he stood naked on the slippery rocks beneath the dock, but his feet were sure, his balance precise. He stepped easily into the water. The waves sucked at his ankles and then his knees as he walked; when they lapped at his chest, he put his face down and began to fly in the water.

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He flew—swam, the aliens called it—for ten minutes, then turned to look back at the shore.

The town baked in the hot sunshine. Tail spires and glazed-green roof tiles sent the hard light back into the sky; the thrum of the aliens' machineries gave out a throaty drone.

He floated on his back, and thought about the swizz dealer Berq had slain. He was scum, and death was fitting for the chemical misery he sold. Sooner or later, the Guild would have had a legitimate contract for his removal. But only the Guild. Who would have paid Berq to kill the man? No one sane—for the penalty for them would be the same as for her. He

wondered if she had been hired at all. The murk around the enigma had cleared not at all; indeed, it seemed to thicken as he thought about it.

There were no answers here. He turned toward the shore, and flew the surface of the sea back to the land.

The sunshine dried the last traces of the sea's moisture. Jiwi brushed the fine layer of salt away from his scales and slipped back into his robe.

The temptation was strong. He could allow her to live, to become his consort, hidden away in some kiosk. There might even be children—the aliens had certain technologies that dealt with such things, so he had heard. Berq was his match, certainly more than any other female had ever been.

He climbed the rickety wooden ladder to the surface of the dock. Yes. She could live—if he broke the Law. But—was there no other way?

One of the Guild stood waiting on the dock. It was Teal, one of his best men. He would be coming to report on a Contract. Jiwi nodded solemnly at the younger man, and began the ritual: "In the matter of Simbala Jeth, Lord Undersecretary to the High Council, I would hear your report."

"Master, the Contract has been fulfilled."

"And the manner?"

"A single cast of the zekahn venom star, a distance of five spans three, in the open. There were two bodyguards armed with pattern spikes; they were not injured."

Jiwi kept his face composed, but he was pleased. At least this went well. That he had not had to kill the bodyguards spoke well of his skill. He gave the ritual response: "A good Contract and well executed."

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Teal hesitated.

"Was there something else?"

"Master, I—I—am... shamed."

Jiwi blinked. "How so?"

"I—I felt... pride, Master. It bordered on contempt for the victim and his guards. It was so—so—easy."

Jiwi nodded again. "I see." Indeed, he saw. Teal was young, only seventeen, and had already discharged twenty Contracts successfully. Jiwi had been young once, a long time ago it seemed now, and he remembered the feeling. There was a ritual response—more than one assassin had felt more than necessary pride—and the Master's answer was well charted. He was to admonish the assassin lightly and speak of practice and humility. A certain amount of pride was allowed, but arrogance would only lead to overconfidence, nearly always fatal in this business.

The Master of the Guild With No Nest gathered his thoughts, to say what must be said. But then, his hand began to itch, and it distracted him, reminding him of his thoughts only moments ago in the sea. The female.

He looked at Teal. Why should he admonish him? The boy already knew his error, else why would he bring it up? He also knew what should be done to correct it.

Why, then, was the ritual necessary?

What purpose did it serve? To paint the Rainbow Cliffs was foolish.

To deny tradition was—was—unheard of, however.

Teal waited patiently, as Jiwi's mind suddenly reeled under the impact of his heretical thoughts.

Abruptly, Jiwi made his decision. He scratched at the edge of his hand, and said, "Think no more of it."

Surprise flashed on Teal's face before he could cover it. This was not the way it was supposed to go, Jiwi could almost hear his thoughts.

"I have another assignment for you," Jiwi continued. "It concerns removal of one of the aliens. Find me in four days, for details."

"One of the Panya?"

"Unless there are other aliens upon our world of which I am unaware."

"N-n-no, my Master!" The joy in his face could not be disguised. Many of the young hated the occupying aliens. And so far, none of them had been subject to the Guild's focus.

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Recently, however, Jiwi had met with one of their leaders. They were cold and dangerous beings, and cruel to his people. But, it also seemed, not gentle with each other. An understanding had been reached.

After Teal had gone, Jiwi sat on the dock, listening to the waves and wind as something stirred in his mind, swirling around in the depths, unseen but important. That exchange had meant something, more than what had been on the surface.

Why had he broken the ritual?

That it served no useful purpose meant little. There existed a number of rituals for which a purpose, if any had ever existed, no longer seemed apparent even beneath the most searching scrutiny. Perhaps in the past there had been good reason for clinging to the arcane rules, but with time's passage, change had rendered them obsolete. One no longer wore the feather-masks in polite society, any more than one made the sign of the Great Raptor as protection against the Dusty Plague. Society had learned that these things were no longer valid or appropriate.

Ah. Was this an answer? It wriggled in the corner of his mind, not painful, but an unscratched itch, much like the small irritation that deviled his hand. Yes, perhaps this was it. The subject of change was all around him today, and his deepest soul felt the importance of it.

There would be change. The thing was—what part would he and the Guild play in it?

Jiwi threaded his way through the mass of mostly naked bodies, male and female, locked into various manners of sexual congress in the main room of the brothel. There, there was even one of the furred and rat like aliens, lying on his back with a female of Jiwi's own species astride the Panya, pumping madly. Perversion? Who was to say?

In the small room behind, Berq was waiting.

"I can see your father was most convoluted in his thinking." / *recognize the test.*

"I know this." *But do you, really?*

Suddenly, Jiwi wanted no more of fugue, no more hidden meanings. The events of the day had been too convoluted already, and he wanted to speak simply. "Yes. All things

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change. Living things must change, for if they stop, they die. And organizations are like life. Rituals and traditions are fine, but if made into dogma, they can be fatal to the believers."

"So," she said, smiling. "I live, then."

He nodded, feeling relief. "Yes."

"But to what purpose?"

Purpose? Wasn't staying alive against the weight of the Law enough? What else could there be?

He looked at her, and saw that she clearly expected more. What?

He turned away and stared at the wall. The old man had trained her, she was better than most in the Guild. There must have been easier ways of testing Jiwi, and Njia had rejected them for this, the most radical thing Jiwi had ever encountered. Why? *Why?* What purpose could a female so trained possibly serve?

It came to him then, and he felt stupid for having missed it before. There was a simple and logical reason, so simple he had passed over it without thinking.

He turned to face Berq. "Why, you will join the Guild, of course."

She smiled. Her spirit sang to him, and he knew he had said the proper thing, had passed his dead father's greatest test. A female in the Guild. *That* would stir things up.

"He was the wisest among us, our father," she said. "He had visions, did you know?"

Jiwi nodded. "Sometimes he spoke of them."

"He knew the aliens would come. He also knew of many things that would happen to our world, of vast empires that would suck us unwillingly into their conflicts."

"He did not speak of this to me."

"Yes, he did. I was only to deliver his message to you when you were ready to hear it. He speaks to you now."

Jiwi nodded again. Part of the test.

"If we are to survive as a Guild—and as a people—we must be prepared for the sweeping changes that will find us. The old Guild would not survive. You have become all that he had hoped you would," she said.

"But what if I had not? What if I had refused the test?" He smiled, thinking of how it might be between them later. "What if I had refused to consider this twisted lesson about change and merely had you killed? I would never have known,

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and it would have cost me nothing. Surely the Guild would have survived at least my lifetime. You would have died and I would have lived. Hard to believe our father was so trusting of me."

She stood, bent, and tore a strip of cloth from the hem of her dress. She extended the ragged patch to Jiwi. "Chew this," she said.

He did not understand. "Why?"

"Because I *know* that Dying Dervish is the best reply to Hummingbird-to-Flower."

Jiwi looked at the swatch of cloth. It was stained with some fluid. He replayed the brief fight in the black sand. He had spun and hit her on the temple...

He lifted his hand, which itched again, as it had before he had gone flying, as it had when he had spoken to Teal. He laughed softly. "The old bastard!" He began to chew on the cloth, sucking at the bitter taste it produced.

"He left nothing to chance, did he? I would be worthy or I would be dead."

"Yes."

Three years into the grave, and still his father taught him. The old man had risked his teachings, his children and his Guild, and had triumphed. Fugue. Canon. The contrapuntal song of life, ever complex, ever subtle.

Jiwi laughed, as did Berq. Whatever dangers the galaxy held, his people would meet them with confidence. Any race that could produce such souls as his father had a fighting chance against anything.

Or anyone.

INTERLUDE

"Lieutenant Commander Kanard to see Captain Sein," Gil! announced, standing before the security scanners.

He was already a bit nervous. The wing housing Fleet Intelligence was in an isolated corner of Port. Any farther out and it would be beyond the automated protection of the perimeter. He had to force himself not to glance over his shoulder to see if something with too many teeth was climbing over the durillium wall that surrounded the city.

There were tales about unusual prisoners and unsavory activities in this complex. The fact that two megawatt lasers were focused on the exact spot Gill stood also contributed to his understandable unease.

It was twenty minutes before Commander Kanard was admitted to Captain Sein's office. Gill suspected that part of the wait had been simply a show of independence. Admiral Fieisher's aide had called while he stood right there and had emphasized the importance of the PR man's mission. The PR man was grateful that the Admiral himself had not called, he might have been kept waiting for an hour.

Sein himself couldn't have been friendlier.

"Whatever you need," he'd agreed cheerfully after they had exchanged introductions. "You have a full clearance," he added just to show he had checked.

"I need a situation where we won one against the Khalia," Gill admitted candidly. "Something small, preferably against impossible odds."

He waited, half expecting the Intelligence Officer to burst out laughing. Instead the man's reply was serious, if unnerving.

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"I assume you got stuck with the tax increase. Tough luck." As a not so casual afterthought he added, "You know that's what got your predecessor. He's running a Rec facility in the Jove Sector now. Takes ten weeks to get the mail."

Somehow Commander Kanard didn't need the added reassurance.

"Have you got anything?" Gill tried not to sound nervous. He'd wondered what had happened to Shenks. Now he was sorry he knew.

"Just one, but I doubt you can use it."

"Classified?"

"Not really, just skim it here." Sein gestured toward a com console to his left.

PAY TRIBUTE TO THE FLEET

by E. Gary Gygax

Freeborn showed a slim crescent of aqua as *Retaliation* arrowed outward in pursuit of the alien ship. We watched the viewscreens in fascination, sitting quietly, waiting. There was nothing else for us to do. Not yet. The silvery dot of the Khalian raider grew perceptibly larger on one screen. Then the green-gold globe of Brigit floated out from behind Freeborn, our home world. The high-pitched whine of the FTL drive of the

new frigate suddenly stopped, replaced by the deeper thrumming of the standard magnetic engines. *Retaliation* shuddered.

"Just changed drives," Captain Downing remarked.

"Yessir," I replied, not daring to point out that even the raw recruits in the company would realize what had happened.

The Captain must have realized how useless his observation had been, for he squared his shoulders, looked at me with a flat gaze, and said, "See that the men have their gear in order, Lieutenant. I'm going to the bridge." With that, Captain Downing clicked off his field, stood up from his chair, and departed through the hatch in the forward bulkhead of the troop compartment.

We were gaining on the pirate vessel. The screen showed the enemy ship as a bigger blob now. *Retaliation* would be within firing range of the raider soon. We meant to stop and board that ship... or die in the attempt. The Khalian pirates had raided Freeborn once too often. The Fleet was never around

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when you needed them, but the folk of Freeborn had the answer—our own Navy. The frigate, *Retaliation*, was it. With the Navy went the Marines. That's why I was aboard. Lieutenant Franz Hohenstein, second in command of the detachment aboard the frigate. Two officers and thirty men who were meant to capture the enemy ship and rescue its cargo of humans.

The alien race known as the Khalia took prisoners. We weren't certain if they were for slaves or food. The only "Weasels" we ever came in contact with were dead or dying, so they couldn't or wouldn't talk. Some of our local militia who had encountered a small body of the Khalia took the Weasels on and a handful of the brave men actually survived. Their reports confirmed that the aliens were as nasty as their nickname implied, and ferocious opponents in combat. The Khalia neither gave quarter nor asked for it. Now we were closing with a Khalian ship half again as large as the *Retaliation*, bent on doing battle with these rapacious marauders and teaching them a lesson.

"All right, you men! Listen up," I said with as hard a tone as possible. I knew the metallic ring carried into the little speakers in their helmets would make me sound far more tough and assured than I felt right now. "The Captain wants to make sure that there'll be no screw-ups. Check your weapons, make sure your gear's squared away."

First Sergeant Bannon took over. "You heard the Lieutenant," his gravelly voice called loudly. "Move your dead asses! Move 'em now! Buddy system... and I'll be checkin' up too, so do it once and do it right!"

How much time before we loosed a salvo at the enemy? Only minutes. I wondered if there were any other Weasel ships in the system. The odds didn't seem good as it was. I noticed the shiny shape on the forward viewscreen moving laterally toward the right. They had finally picked us up, I thought. *Retaliation* was coated with a layer of light-absorbent material. The stuff also absorbed all sorts of radio waves, so the frigate was pretty hard to spot. It must have been the gravitational engines kicking in which had alerted the Khalia's detectors that their vessel had company. Too late for them now. They were swinging by Morrigan, Nuada's satellite, evidently aiming to use the gravity to spur their ship on until they could kick in their FTL drive and escape. *Retaliation* would bring the Weasels to battle before that happened.

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The sun looked small and quite green from where we were. Brigit is an F-type dwarf, a little hotter and bigger than Terra's Sol, but good to us of planet Freeborn. Originally, Freeborn was called Manannan Mac Lir. Not so strange, I suppose, to be named for the Celtic god of the seas, for the planet's surface is about eighty percent water. When the first colonists came a couple of centuries back, though, they renamed it Freeborn. When we joined the Alliance we did so under that name. Now charts show the sun Brigit's second planet as Freeborn.

Brigit has six planets. Goibhnie, the nearest of them, is pretty much like Sol's Venus, and its orbit is just a little farther out than that planet too. The same is true of Freeborn. Our world is just far enough away from Brigit so that the heat makes only the equatorial belt unbearable. Gravity is a bit higher than Terran Standard, and the seasons aren't radical because Freeborn's axial tilt is only about 16° (as a third generation citizen, I found that natural). Trivid tapes of Terra made the ancestral planet seem too crowded, too pale blue, too... un-Freeborn.

Now my home world was a star like glimmer behind, and the disc of Nuada shone a livid ochre on one of the big viewscreens in the compartment which housed my company of Freeborn Marines. Thirty-two selected out of almost three thousand volunteers and six hundred regulars. I was one of the chosen.

"Company ready and everything's checked out, sir," Sergeant Bannon said over the channel reserved for reports. "Hope we get into action soon, though; the men are really on edge."

"Thanks Bannon," I replied informally. "Tell 'em to keep their eyes on the forward screen. Commander Fitzosbourne will open up on those Weasels any time now." Bannon spoke to the men, and I went back to thinking, even as I too watched the viewscreens.

Ideas are entities unto themselves. As long as they are known, passed on, they live. They may grow, change; but they continue to exist and influence people. Ideals are even more vital. Two millennia after the concept of democracy was born on Terra, it found a home on what was then a continent new to that ancient time. From that sprang the ideals which formed the society of Freeborn another three millennia later. Liberty, self-reliance, and the idea that "government is best which

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governs least" took root on the soil of an alien planet and flourished as never before. On a planet not discovered until a thousand years had passed on Earth after true liberty was established, a planet where humans hadn't set foot until just a few centuries ago, the ideals of independence and free will flourished and enabled the six million citizens of Freebom to stand tall and proud, alone in all the hundreds of planets of the Alliance in allowing absolute liberty for all.

"I wonder if the Weasels hit the *Devout*," I mused aloud, thinking of the original colonists who had landed on Freebom almost five centuries ago and were never heard from again.

"Who... sir?"

"Never mind, Sergeant," I replied, mentally cursing myself for leaving my throat mike open. "Carry on," and I nodded my head sharply to click off with my chin.

"Prepare to launch missiles." The sonorous voice of the shipboard computer called over all channels and into the room via its speakers as well. Finally. We were about to strike a real counterblow at the Khalian raiders, alien killers who had plagued us for fifty years now. I riveted my gaze upon the forward screen, just like all the rest of the grunts were doing. I didn't want to miss a second of this. The *Retaliation* was armed with small-sized missiles with exceptionally tough metal alloy noses and packed with shaped-charge high explosive. Penetration and perforation, that's what the manual said. Could a young, unorganized, and underpopulated planet actually strike a successful blow against the Khalia? It was obvious that all of us thought so!

Two centuries ago the second group of colonists landed on Freebom and established the Commonwealth of Franklin. Patrick Henry, its capital, is still the only big town on Freehold, but there are a half-dozen other commonwealths now, as well as twice as many autonomous communities and freeholds spread across a million square miles or so of the planet. Yet from Disobedience in the north to Elbowroom in the south, all citizens of the world supported the establishment of a navy—our *own* navy, that is. Freebom refuses to quarter the Fleet, and their squadrons are never around when you need them anyway. Like a half-century ago.

That's when the Weasels first struck Freebom. Compared with what happened later, it wasn't much of a raid. The Khalian ship came down near a village several hundred kilometers away from Patrick Henry in a territory named

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Rising of the Moon. It's now a part of Franklin, but it wasn't then. The Weasels sealed off the area, kept an outer perimeter secure, and proceeded to round up every human inside of it. Perhaps someone pissed them off by shooting back. It doesn't matter much now. When they left, a hundred people were missing and twice that number were dead... butchered dead.

A fast courier went off to Terra, another to Tau Ceti. Earth sent condolences and the Fleet poked around Brigit for a time. Their intelligence officers landed on Freeborn, I'm told, and asked a lot of stupid questions. The only eyewitnesses to what had happened were dead or gone, that's why questions were stupid. In time the Fleet went away, and everyone at home settled down to routine. We didn't even know who had attacked, but after a few years folks tend to forget. Ten years to the day

after the first raid, the Weasels came again. This time they hit a bigger place, and it so happened it was a "verger settlement." By verger, I mean those rough-and-ready types willing to face the native fauna of Freeborn and fight them for the turf. Despite losses, the vergers claimed to have killed a number of the laser-armed foes. In fact, the survivors had three Weasel heads, trophies to back up their statements. The Fleet took them from the verger-folk, of course. That's when we first heard of the Khalian "pirates"—exactly forty years ago today.

Isolationist. Ornery. Clannish. Out of touch. We of Freeborn have been called all of those and more. Nobody has ever said we're stupid. Ten years later, when the third Weasel raid struck, the Concentonated Freeborn Defense Forces were alert and waiting. The marauding vessel was spotted coming from the far side of the sun and heading for the shelter of Goibhnie. We tracked it all the way to where it set down on our planet. I say "we," but I mean my ancestors and the others of the time. I wasn't born until four years after the incident. What happened then is in the history books of Freeborn. We hit them with everything we had. Hard. It didn't phase their spaceship, but it did do for quite a few of the surprised Weasels. I'll bet those furry bastards humped it back to that big ship of theirs in one hell of a hurry. Whatever. We paid the price. When the Khalian vessel took off, it used its plasma cannons and missiles to pound the hell out of anything that looked human on Freehold. The Fleet didn't show up until two days later. A snafu at Tau Ceti had gotten the dates of the

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raids wrong. Those damned spacemonkeys actually thought they were arriving a day early to protect us!

When Freehold petitioned the Alliance for permission to construct its own war craft, the request was turned down. The Fleet brooks no competition. Of course we went right ahead and began secret construction of *Retaliation* immediately thereafter. Now I was aboard the forbidden frigate three decades later, Terran Standard Calendar, on her first voyage of hostile action. It might seem a long time, thirty years, but our planet is not rich. Freeborn lacks just about everything in the way of capacity to build warships except one. We have ingenuity. Two maybe, because we also have determination. Until this very year, *Retaliation* hadn't even lifted off planet to test drives, weapons, and equipment.

Meanwhile, the Weasels kept up their strikes, and they came more frequently now. The Khalia aren't stupid either, so their ships hit at random times, usually attacking interplanetary cargo ships and traders who plied the routes to the mines on Nuada and Luga's five big moons. I have to admit that the Fleet came frequently to our sector of space. A flotilla of smaller ships or a squadron of bigger ones was a frequent sight. There was even a brush with a fleet of the Khalia. I remember seeing it on the trivid news when I was a kid. After that, the Weasels stayed away from us for some time. When they finally started raiding again, it was only with single, relatively small vessels. I suppose the Fleet saved Freeborn from a full-scale invasion. At least that's what old Galactic Admiral Thrushwaite claimed. Thanks. When the big action was ended, the Fleet lost interest, and the Weasels were still killing and enslaving the folk of our planet.

There was a cloud of little sparkles on the screen. The motes twinkled, then faded. "Blast em!" one of the grunts nearby said through clenched teeth. The flashes which followed were the missiles launched by *Retaliation* striking the Khalian vessel. Just as I saw the impact on the viewer, the frigate shook along its entire sixty plus meter length. A fierce, high-pitched humming caused the vibration, or was part of it. Who knows. It made teeth ache and nerves feel as if there was fire running along them. I knew about the reason for it. After all, being the son of the Commandant of the Division gave me some inside information. The magnetic engines did more than power the ship undetectably. They also operated one hell of a big gun in the nose of *Retaliation*. We were beaming a stream

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of positrons at the Weasel's ship, and if it worked right, their magnetic screens wouldn't be worth squat a couple of seconds from now.

Three eye-searing flashes. Blannng! BLONG! *Retaliation* did a crazy dance. One of the viewscreens looked like a kids' kaleidoscope. The other five were just plain black. I looked around. One of the part-timers had been careless. Maybe he was out of his web to make a last minute trip to the head. Unforgiveable. The shock from the Khalian missile hits had tossed him against a steel bulkhead and turned him to pulp. Shit! Regulars knew better, but it's pretty hard to keep a standing force of Marines in a society which doesn't believe in regular armed forces, government, or taxes. We do pretty well, all things considered.

"Sergeant Whitson! Get that mess cleaned up!"

"Yessir!" He detailed a couple of our paramedics to the job. It wasn't a risk now, for it would take a couple of minutes for the enemy to ready its next salvo of missiles. Better to take a chance on an early firing than to leave a corpse in front of a company of nervous troops steeling themselves for their first boarding action. The corpse disappeared, and in a minute both men of the detail were snugged up in their webbing again. The computer, meanwhile, had its servos replace the shattered opticals, so all screens were in full operation again. When the forward one lit up there was a cheer from the whole company, myself included.

Commander Fitzosbourne had hosed the Weasel ship. I wasn't sure about its screens, but it was no longer moving under power. The readout on the screen showed its acceleration was a constant. *Retaliation* had blown the enemy ship's drive out from under the Weasels, and we were now almost parallel to the Khalian vessel. It was *big*, almost twice as long as our frigate; and the damned thing was a whole hell of a lot thicker. *Retaliation* looked like a stogie. The Weasels' ship looked like a football. Yeah, we still smoke cigars on Freeborn. How you kill yourself is strictly your own business. None of this bull pucky about banning anything. Sure. We play football too, only it's more like the game was played by the ancients. No robo-players, no special body shields. Sorry. I'm getting off the track.

Plasma cannons began blasting away at the enemy. The gunnery officer aboard *Retaliation* was good. We doused 'em good, but he didn't hammer any one place too much. Our little

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frigate matched velocities, circled the Khalian vessel like a satellite, and kept pouring fire upon it. Every sensor, antenna, anything not solid hull metal went up in atoms. So did a fair amount of the aliens' armor.

They hit us too. Before we'd silenced their guns, the Weasels had battered *Retaliation* pretty heavily. Damage reports coming in told us that we had wounded crew and a hell of a lot of exterior stuff shot away too. It was a good thing that the magnetic cannon had been needed only once, for the Weasels laid a heavy barrage square on the frigate's bow and turned *Retaliation's* blunt nose, gun and all, into molten slag. Tough, but not a big deal now. We were uptight, but only insofar as the Khalian ship was

concerned. We had closed enough now to lock on to the enemy and now a red light was flashing. "BOARDERS AWAY. MARINES TO BRAVO-LOCK. ON THE DOUBLE!" The voice was Captain Down-ing's.

I had the company up and moving before the last word was out. Two files, one headed by First Sergeant Bannon, the other by Sergeant Whitson, were moving out toward the opposite side of *Retaliation*. Captain Downing would lead, and I was rear man. Not my choice, but orders are orders. Freeborn Marines look a lot like a cross between ancient warriors and hardly less ancient pirates of Terran legends, only our colors are drab; nothing bright, nothing shining on nylosteeel body armor, polarized helmet visor, or even heavy swords and cluster-pistols. Lasers can play hell with the armor, but nothing's perfect, is it? Polarization saves the face and eyes, and the headgear and armor are proof against gas... as long as both are intact. We hoped that the Weasels we were about to take on were garbed as usual—a whole lot of fur and straps for weapons. We weren't disappointed.

As soon as we'd magnetically clamped on to the enemy ship's hull, the crew had swung open the starboard boarding lock and set to work with the big lasers. Temporarily cemented to the Khalian ship by epoxy foam, *Retaliation* quickly became one with the Weasels' interior as a big, square hole was burned through the enemy hull and Marines began jumping through the opening into the bigger vessel. The lasers had caused a lot of smoke. The Weasels were alerted as to our intent, of course, but before a single grunt jumped through the newly made hatch, a hail of the centimeter-sized discs from

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cluster pistols and lobbed grenades greeted the waiting enemy. The cluster pistols fire thin, coin-like projectiles which spread out into a half-meter area at about twenty meters, maximum effective range. After twenty meters, the discs lose their velocity and are pretty much harmless at thirty meters—harmless but painful. We shoot for targets under twenty meters naturally. We use hand-hurled grenades too because of the close quarters in a boarding action. They generate thick smoke which makes humans, at least, who breathe it dizzy and stupified, and the vapor cloud tends to make lasers ineffective.

You might think that we really knew our stuff from hearing me talk. Weil, we had practiced boardings like this one frequently. Only this time it

was for real, and the Weasels were shooting back and fighting to kill. Training operations just don't prepare you for that. The *Khalia* *are fast*. You hear about it, but until you see one in action, it doesn't really register. After we'd sprayed the Weasels good with pistol fire and lobbed in a dozen grenades, Captain Downing lead the first section of boarders into the enemy vessel. By the time I made it into the Khalian ship, the fighting was somewhere else. There were a dozen dead Weasels in as many meters. There were a few of us with them. A couple had died by hits from the needlers used by the enemy troops, but the rest had been bitten to death, locked in hand-to-hand with one of those furry bastards. Now I was glad I had the heavy cutlass with me.

"Weasels grouping toward the bow!" The excited message was from Bannon. My helmet had been crackling with such short reports since the beginning. In the fog we'd created, communications were absolutely vital, because you couldn't see worth a damn. There was a roaring sound from the little speaker, but I ignored it. Foreward was the objective of Captain Downing's section. I was working ahead and aft, with my own men, Sergeant Whitson leading the advanced squad.

"What's up, Whitson?" I said through my throat mike.

"We got the bastards on the run, Lieutenant!" The reply was excited but confident. "Two casualties, and we've taken out every one of the Weasels we've encountered."

Spacemen from *Retaliation* were moving in behind us, mopping up any of the aliens we missed. "Carry on, Sergeant. I'm taking Fourth Section forward to reinforce

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Captain Downing. Bannon's report sounded like trouble. You kick ass!"

"Aye, aye, sir!" Whitson responded.

I hit band four and called for the grunts in the section to rally at the intersection of the route we moved along laterally and the main axial route through the enemy vessel—most have the same layout. In a minute six men were there. "Corporal Garza?" He didn't need another word.

"Zoller bought it, Lieutenant," Garza said tonelessly.

"Yeah," I replied as emotionlessly. "Spread the men out and follow me, Corporal. We're going to see if we can assist the Captain." It was pretty obvious we were on the same route as First Section had taken. Dead Weasels and blasted hatches marked the path clearly. As we moved up, I took the left, Garza the right, with the rest of the squad fanned out behind. It was because I was pressed up against the bulkhead that I heard it. First there was a vibration, then the humming of a motor, and the bulkhead started to slide sideways.

"Shit!" was all I managed to get out. Reflexes took over, and I spun as I dropped, discharging both barrels of my pistol into the opening which had suddenly appeared. Garza went down, a ruby-colored line having burned his leg. Evidently the Weasels didn't care how much they damaged their own ship. Bigfox and McDonnel both got off shots, though, and Gigantos flipped a grenade right through the middle of the newly opened hatch. Between the ricocheting discs from the cluster pistols and the gas, the Weasels in the elevator didn't have a chance. We laid another couple of blasts into the lift for effect, then went in with cutlasses to finish off any survivors. There were ten of the buggers strewn around inside the steel cube, and a big weapon of some sort.

"Captain Downing, Lieutenant Hohenstein, sir," I said on the officers' communication band. I heard the Captain's voice in reply, so I gave him a fast rundown on what had just occurred. "Looks like they're using reinforcements from upper or lower decks to move in behind us," I concluded.

"Use their damned elevator to roust 'em out, Franz," he said back. "We're doing okay, so if you can keep the Weasels busy, we'll have their bridge and then it's all over for the bastards."

"You got it, Chauncy!" The expletives which came back made me chuckle despite the situation. "Aye, aye, Captain

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—providing I can manage it!" Downing had suggested some anatomically impossible things for me to do. He didn't care much for his first name... I clicked onto the regular band and ordered the squad into the elevator. Garza hobbled in last, his leg bound with a big dressing. I couldn't see his eyes, but I nodded at him as he came on, saying, "Hang tough, Corporal!"

"Now I really owe those Weasels one, Lieutenant," he replied, and then checked his bandoliers for grenades and spare clips.

Figuring out how to get the elevator to go up wasn't hard. After all, the Weasels are bipedal and use handlike forepaws much as humans do. Two levels above, two below. I punched in the top one and got ready. When the door slid open we poured out. A Weasel was there. He moved so fast he nearly gutted me with his wrist-encircling dagger weapon. Nylosteel armor or not, the Weasel punched me with his left, and I felt the point of the dagger on my skin. At the same time, it wrapped its right paw around my arm and tried to bite my shoulder. I went down hard, chopping with my sword as I fell. O'Brien ran the alien through, and I scrambled back onto my feet.

"You all right, sir?" It was Bigfox, squad paramedic.

"Hardly scratched," I replied, ignoring the trickle of blood I felt running down the front of my right leg. "Grenade any compartment and then blast the bastards with pistols. I want the area full of nothing but dead Weasels when we move down!"

Nobody replied. They were already moving out to see the order carried out. I kept my pistol ready now, so that I could send two dozen discs into the next Khalia I saw. The soft "whumps" of grenades exploding, followed by the sharp slaps of cluster pistols being discharged sounded terribly loud here. The enemy toward the stern of the vessel were sure to hear the squad at work. I dropped flat, sheltering behind the dead Weasel, and peered along the dimly lit corridor. Sure enough, here came a knot of the alien creatures, running flat out to handle our "disturbance." They moved so fast it wasn't hard to wait. By the time my brain got off the message to my trigger finger, the Weasels were only a couple of meters away. Unlike the weapons of the enlisted men, officers have fully automatic fire, and I used it now. When all twelve rounds had

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been expended, not a single one of those Khalian bastards was standing. Better believe I slammed in a new magazine before investigating.

This was no time for being chivalrous. I hacked any Weasel that even looked like it was twitching. As I was at it, a laser beam nearly fried my

face. Again I was peering out from the cover of dead Weasels. Another shot, and the corpse which I was behind sizzled. I squeezed off a fast, three-round burst. There was a satisfying squealing sound, and the red pencil of light went out. To make certain, I threw a grenade in the direction of the enemy and followed it with a second. Animal-like choking noises indicated that the one I'd taken out had buddies, so I fired into the area blindly, then moved left and crouched. A pair of half-blinded Weasels came stumbling out of the smoke. One I shot; the other I cut down with my sword.

"We're clear, Lieutenant," Corporal Garza's voice said clearly in my ear. "What orders now?"

"Get back to my position—by the elevator," I told him on fourth channel. "I found a whole den of these furry turds!"

"You in trouble?"

"Don't know yet, Corporal. Took out a bunch of them, but if more come I might need help," I answered.

"Be right there, sir." I heard the squad coming toward me in less than a half a minute.

We worked aft, moving so quickly the Weasels didn't have time to seal off the stern of the deck. Good thing. We had only two loads of nitroplast with us. It blew open the hatch at the portion of the deck where there was a steep ladder down. I was in the lead again, and I went down the steps two at a time. There wasn't an alien in sight, but the companionway there was long, open, and headed straight back toward the bow again. It was quiet here, so I took a chance. "Listen up! We're heading back to that elevator and going down to the hold of this tub!"

"Aye, aye, Lieutenant," Corporal Garza said so all could hear. If he thought I'd lost it, he didn't let on. We were bypassing a whole deck, and it could be crammed with Weasel troops for all I knew. I was the officer, so what I said went. Good NCO, Garza.

We double-timed down the companionway. There were some open hatches, some closed, but not a hint of a Khalian

anywhere. When we came to the right place, I hit the panel with the angular marks on it, and in a few seconds the big metal slab slid open and we tumbled aboard the lift. This time Gigantos punched the lowest oval, and the thing hissed as it took us to the lowest deck of the alien spaceship. Three of the men went prone and the rest of us kneeled. Seven pistols were leveled as the bulkheadlike hatch moved aside. A group of Weasels assembling some sort of heavy weapon was even more surprised to see us than we were to catch them with their proverbial pants down... if the furry buggers wore pants, that is. Everyone opened up at once, and the aliens went down, torn to bloody shreds by scores of the heavy little discs. A couple of the bastards were behind a metallic storage crate. One of them got away and must have pulled an alarm.

A klaxon began hooting mournfully, filling the hold with its horrid noise. At the same time, bluish-green gas began to spurt out of overhead vents. McDonnel shoved Corporal Garza back into the elevator, hit an oval, and jumped out before the hatch slid shut. Meantime, Bigfox had a patch out and over the place where the Weasel's blade had pierced my combat armor. By this time the gas was obscuring everything above us and moving downward at about a meter a minute.

"Head aft," I called over my helmet radio. "That lousy Weasel went that way, and we're going to be on his ass like arrow-leeches on a behemoth!" I suited action to command, running towards the forward portion of the big hold, crouching to keep my head below the cloud of gas above. "Spread out, and shoot anything that moves," I growled over the radio. I caught glimpses of the squad fanning out to flank. Schmichael to the left, MacGregor to my right. I wasn't sure where McDonnel, Bigfox, Gigantos, and Carp were, but I was sure they were with me. That's what counted.

There was a fair amount of cargo stowed amidships, and we used the cover to work rapidly aft, trying to locate the enemy and find out what was going on in the hold before the gas made it impossible for us to see anything more than a couple of meters distant. A laser burned into a crate next to me, and I ducked back. There were soft coughing sounds audible over my speakers. Somebody was firing their cluster pistol.

"Blew his ass off!" That was Carp.

"I drilled one too!" That was McDonnel.

"Position, Carp?"

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PFC Carp's voice came back instantly. "Left flank, Lieutenant—and there's movement just ahead of me."

"McDonnel?"

He too replied quickly. "Right flank, sir, and I see at least three Weasels makin' a stand," he added with a grim satisfaction in his voice.

"The gas bothering them?" I asked the question to the squad at large, for the vapors were now down to about two meters above the deck.

"They got masks over their muzzles, Lieutenant," Gigantos called, "but they're crouchin' down too! I think they'll pull back when the stuff gets near to 'em—the one I can see keeps lookin' up at the gas overhead."

"Fire only if you have a good target," I ordered. "MacGregor and Schmichael, I'm moving up. Cover me, and when I stop, you two follow, and I'll cover you. Clear?"

"Yessir!" Both men spoke in unison.

I made my move, keeping really low and moving evasively. After covering about ten meters, I stopped and looked for Weasels. One almost burned my head off, but my own fire drove the alien to concealment. "Move up," I ordered. "There's one just ahead of my position."

Thump! Thump! Whump, whump, whump! Grenades and pistol fire from both flanks. I should have been more careful. The whole squad was advancing as ordered, not just Schmichael and McDonnel. I was about to shout for the men to halt when the Weasel in front of me came out into the open and began humping away on all fours. In my excitement, I forgot to say anything except, "UP YOURS!" as I sent a three-round burst into the creature's retreating rump.

There was excited babble similar to mine. "Runnin' like rabbits!" and "Blasted the bugger!" or "Lookout! Weasels movin' left!" All the while, the sound of cluster pistols chuffing out their deadly little discs could be heard, and I was suddenly overcome with elation. Without thinking I stood up, fired off every last round in my weapon in the general direction of the enemy, and waved my cutlass.

"CHARGE!" Then I ran in stooped position, my head just below the swirling layer of gas. There were shouts and cries from the men. They were moving ahead on the run too, intent on closing with the Weasels. The Khalia might simply have been pulling back to get out of their own cloud of gas, or

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perhaps they had been ordered back to a new defense line. Fast as they were, they weren't able to outrun our fire, and we left a litter of kicking, jerking casualties behind us as the seven of us charged like crazed berserkers. When we arrived at a cleared space before the forwardmost bulkhead, there were only five of us left, but there wasn't one Weasel to contest our right to be there.

I pointed to a closed hatch. "Nitroplast?" Gigantos nodded, unwound a thick rope of the explosive, and had it in place in a jiffy. Then he stuck the little detonator into the stuff and we all dropped flat. BANG! The hatch fell inward with an even louder clang. Beyond was a companionway and an area which must have been for secured cargo of a special sort. Very special. I could see something resembling a brig and hear faint cries for help coming from that direction. Trouble was, the gas was now beginning to seep into the heretofore clear area we had just gained entry to.

"Croaker," I said, using Gigantos' nickname, "go and get those prisoners out of the cage—and tell them to lay flat so's to stay clear of the gas!" As he hurried ahead to handle it, I waved to the other three. "MacGregor, come with me. You two go back and see if you can find our wounded. Be quick!" Bigfox and Carp—I knew them by sight, but they had their names blazoned on their armor too, of course—went to find the missing McDonnel and Private Schmichael. Freeborn Marines would not leave wounded or dead, behind. Finally: "Come on, Red; you and I have to find a way up and out of this stinking hold!"

"Aye, aye, Lieutenant!" Somehow I thought I detected a lot of admiration in MacGregor's gravelly voice. The dumb grunt must have thought I actually knew what I was doing! Well, I wouldn't disillusion him just now. Not when we had so much to do... like saving our asses.

I located a small elevator, but MacGregor found a ladder. Red went up to make sure there were no Weasels waiting overhead, and when he radioed the all clear, I began sending the prisoners up as fast as they could

run. For civilians they were a tough lot. Never even screamed when that damned gas blistered their skins. Freeborn. Some had to be helped. The Weasels had already begun to bleed them—food source maybe. It wouldn't be proper to describe what had happened to some of the captives. Suffice to say we discovered a

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laboratory in the course of locating an escape route. The Khalia had used their time to open up a handful of their prisoners. Fortunately, none of them were still alive.

There was a hatch at the top of the ladder, and the second deck was secure enough for our purposes. When Bigfox came back he was crawling, dragging Schmichael. A second later, Carp came stumbling into the companionway, McDonnell over his big shoulders. "Get the hell out of here!" I ordered, helping Joe to get Schmichael on his back. It was easy covering the rear of the movement, for there wasn't a Weasel to be seen.

After dogging the hatch closed, we moved out. I didn't like escorting the gaggle of civilians, but every one of them was in rough shape and needed medical treatment now—or as soon as we could get them aboard *Retaliation*. I was beginning to wonder why I hadn't heard from Captain Downing, so I tried to raise him on my communicator. AH channels were dead except fourth band. That near-miss must have screwed up my radio. We managed to get one of the alien hatches open manually, and I saw clouds of smoke beyond. I jumped through, and the men slammed it shut. The stuff would be too much for our folks to withstand in their condition. Then I shouted as loudly as I could, my voice sounding muffled even to me, enclosed as I was in armor and helmet.

Some ensign finally figured out that he should try *all* the Marine communication bands. He heard me yelling into my throat mike like a madman and managed to ask, "Is anyone in Fourth Squad still alive?"

"Goddamned right, boy! This is Lieutenant Franz Hohenstein, you asshole! I'm leading Fourth Squad, we're alive, and we have the captives with us!" I was screaming at the last, because somebody, certainly not a marine, was still firing blindly through the smoke in my general direction. "Order your goddamned swabbies to cease firing at me!"

"Ahh—" That's all the ensign managed to say before being interrupted.

"*Lieutenant* Hohenstein! Commander Fitzosbourne here." The voice was chill. "If you will cease your profanities and report your location, I will order any Naval personnel in your vicinity, to withhold their fire. Then give me a report on the freed prisoners, *Lieutenant*, and do it in military manner!"

"Yessir!" I swallowed hard and took a deep breath. "My

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unit is one deck below point of entry, sir! We're forward, and everyone except me is safe behind a secured hatch, sir! We're midships, but otherwise uncertain of exact location, sir. The civilians are in rough shape, and all have been exposed to a slight degree to the *Khalia's* gas—"

"Explain," the crusty starman ordered.

Before I could speak, I heard another voice in the background, wherever that might be, but presumably the *Retaliation's* bridge, ordering the spacers in my area to cease all fire. It worked. As I replied, not one weapon was discharged down the companionway. "About ninety survivors, sir. The Weasels cut up four, but the rest are alive. Some are pretty weak from being bled, and the alien gas has blistered them all, so I'm not sure how long they can survive without attention. That's it, sir."

"Thank you, *Lieutenant* Hohenstein. I'd give you a well done, but your breach of discipline in communications is a serious matter. As soon as we have countered the CS fog in your area, you will lead your unit back to *Retaliation*. Report to me on the bridge, *Lieutenant*, after seeing that the civilians are safely aboard."

"Aye, aye, Commander." There wasn't anything more to be said.

A shadowy form loomed suddenly out of the smoke. I could hear it hissing from where I lay crouched on the metal deck amidst a scattering of bent and distorted discs—some flattened from impacting on my own nylosteel body armor. Reflexes almost won over rational thought, but I didn't leap up and hew the figure down with my cutlass. It was a spacer, decontaminating the air with a spray from a bulky canister affixed to his back. In a minute, only a yellowish residue remained to mark where the gas from our grenades had filled the atmosphere.

With the help of the crew of *Retaliation*, we managed to get our civilians aboard the frigate and into the hands of the surgeon and his mates quickly enough. Better rephrase that. It took only a little while, and as a result no more than a score of them died from exposure to the Khalian poison gas, although it was touch-and-go for three times that number for a while. Senior Lieutenant Zumkher, the frigate's surgeon, commended me personally for fast action and exceptional conduct in locating and freeing the prisoners—and getting them out,

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naturally. He also must have mentioned it to Commander Fitzosbourne, because the Old Man didn't have me court-martialed.

"Lieutenant," he said to me quietly, "you were speaking under the heat of fire, so I'll forget what you said over the communications system of the *whole vessel*. Ensign O'Malley is quite willing to drop the whole matter too, although he could demand satisfaction for your insults on the field of honor. The whole thing is to be forgotten, understood?"

"Aye, aye, Commander," I replied softly.

Ho eyed me strangely. "Your father is a friend of mine, you know..."

"Sir?"

"Well, Lieutenant, you *did* lose your head and totally breach all courtesy in your communication with an officer of the Freeborn Navy!"

I wasn't quite sure what to say about this chickenshit lecture from an officer who was supposed to be the toughest and ablest starman in or out of the service. Fitzosbourne didn't allow me to make any response at all. He winked. "Relax, son. If this were the Fleet, they'd probably bust you for what you did, but we're Freeborn, and as far as any of us are concerned, you deserve a medal for your bravery and conduct under fire. In fact, I'm recommending you for battlefield promotion and whatever medal they decide is appropriate next time the government gets around to holding a formal session back in Patrick Henry!"

I was stunned. The old fart had been having me on. I wasn't so sure about his sense of humor, but I did like what I'd heard.

"Thank you, sir," was all I could think of.

"You're welcome—Captain Hohenstein. Captain Downing is in sick bay. Weasels burned him and punctured him pretty good, but he's too tough and mean to let that kill him. While he's on R & R, however, you're breveted to captain and in command of the company—what's left of it. Now get your young butt down to sick bay yourself and get that stab wound taken care of!"

"Aye, aye, SIR!"

The Old Man looked stern again. "Dismiss!" I got off the bridge and back to sick bay pronto.

An injection and a piece of synthskin slapped on the hole and I was pronounced fit for duty—after a reprimand for

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allowing the wound to go unreported for a day. Explaining that I simply forgot about it would have been looked on as an attempt to excuse my conduct, so I took it like a Marine. After sleeping about twelve hours, I climbed out of the sack and felt as good as new. In all we lost ten men and suffered fifteen wounded, seven seriously. The spacers took it on the chin too, having seven dead and nineteen wounded by the time the action concluded. Did I say we took a pounding? Let me rephrase that. In kicking the Weasels' asses from here to Sirius we suffered losses but just about wiped out the whole of the Khalian crew. Two surrendered unharmed, another dozen were taken wounded and unable to resist. The rest, and that's well over two hundred, were consigned to space without honors. Even so, the crew quarters were pretty glum when I showed up. I gave the men congratulations, assured them they'd all be in for commendations, and then began the tedious process of debriefing them, one by one, with *Retaliation's* Executive Officer, Lieutenant Commander Bainbridge.

The story that emerged was so filled with skill, courage, and the most incredible luck that it left me shaking my head. I hoped that I'd never have to try to do what we—and I mean Marines and Spacemen alike—managed to pull off in taking the alien raider and destroying its crew! I can't talk about most of it—top secret material and all that. I can say flatly, though, that the Weasels plain underestimated us. If they would have concentrated their troops and hit us immediately, Freeborn's only warship would be a

Khalian prize instead of vice versa. That brings up the sore point.

We're proud folks, we Freeborn. I don't know about anyone else, but I'll give credit to the Fleet where its due to them. Their ships have tractors and pressors which are so much superior to ours that I'd trade one of their auxiliary units for any of our main beams and kiss 'em in the bargain. I mention this because by the time we'd taken the enemy vessel and sorted things out, *Retaliation* was a million and a quarter kilometers away from Brigit and moving outward rapidly. *Retaliation* maneuvered in a broad arc, the enemy prize in tow, but we had to move slowly and carefully in order to avoid breaking the fragile tractor beam linking it to our frigate. No one aboard knew how to operate the Khalian controls, so the ship was a lifeless hulk tugged after us as we curved around and set course to intersect Freeborn's orbit.

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Believe it or not, it took us seven days to get back home! Now you know just how piss-poor *Retaliation's* tractors are. It was more than a rough week with all those civilians aboard. Some of them were females, and a close watch had to be kept on randy spacer and horny grunt alike. We finally made it, safe and sound. The prize was put into orbit over Patrick Henry, so the whole city could look up at night and see it glittering above and feel good. *Retaliation* had lived up to her name. A swarm of small, private vessels were warned off by Planetary Guard cutters, and a whole raft of officers and scientists were soon aboard the Khalian ship to trivid, search, and study everything, outside and in. Most of it was all finished when a pair of Fleet destroyers showed up to join in the party.

Were those martinets mad? Does a griscat hate tokeweed? They came storming down planetside, demanding to know how we had managed to beat up and capture a Khalian raider equal to a light cruiser in terms of Fleet classifications. Admiral Thrushwaite, bless his iron spine, asked the off-world delegation for their permission to land on Freebom. The ranking martinet started to snap something which might have been a denial of such necessity, then thought better of it and clamped his thin mouth shut. Having forgotten all about such petty formalities, the ships of the Fleet were technically trespassers at best, and could be brought before the Alliance. Whether in judicial or diplomatic terms, the Fleet had stepped into it deep. The angry officers beat a hasty retreat to their ships and lifted off to take up stations around Freebom while one of their little

courier vessels ran off to Tau Ceti to report this flaunting of disobedience of "authority."

There was actually quite an uproar on Freebom too. Some of the hotheads thought we should declare war on the Fleet for their invasion. Some idea, that. Imagine the results of hostilities. A week after they began, our planet would have been a lifeless ball circling old Brigit. It was decided, however, that no real information or cooperation would be given. *Retaliation* was stowed away in an underground hangar and carefully shielded against any probes the Fleet might use. Then we concocted a story of what we had done to capture the Weasels' vessel. It wasn't really believable, but so what? Our government didn't report to anyone. As a member of the Alliance, Freebom is an autonomous partner, not a subject—especially of the Fleet.

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Eventually, one of their Star Admirals showed up, the formalities were conducted with rigid exactness on both sides, and then an inquiry into the matter was held. Freeborn didn't actually have to allow it. We could have withdrawn from th^ Alliance. That was virtually unthinkable. We depend too much on off-world trade to dissociate ourselves from the rest of humanity. Then again, Freeborn *had* been saved from a major invasion by the Khalia once. The government chose a sort of middle road. We flat out lied about the action. The Concentonated Defense Force was adamant. Vessels of the Planetary Guard attacked the raider as it attempted to approach our planet, they claimed. In a running battle, the swarm of light craft managed to break through the fire and screens of the Khalian vessel, boarded it, and successfully captured the alien ship with heavy losses. There were bits of spaceships out around Luga even now to prove it. There were also several breaches in the Khalian ship's hull to show how small cutters had managed the operation. The Fleet didn't have any real choice.

"The blatant disregard of Freeborn's Government for veracity and proper authority leaves grave doubts in my mind as to the continuing possibility of that world's full membership in Our Great Alliance," Star Admiral of the Fleet Kestobor wrote gravely. "It seems evident that Freeborn has flaunted their violation of Alliance restrictions regarding armed warships and then engaged in a planetwide conspiracy to conceal their criminality," he went on. "If such behavior is allowed to go unchecked, unpunished, then it is only a matter of time before every

separate government in the Alliance will build a navy of their own. At the first sign of possible disagreement between Alliance Policy—that which is deemed most beneficial for *all* planets as a whole, not the special interests of the few—and local desires, then the armed vessels of dissident worlds will be sent forth to enforce such special interests' selfish aims. Hostilities will become rife. There will be rebellions, wars, and all of their attendant woes.

"In order to check such insurrection, to nip it in the bud, I urge that the Fleet be granted permission to cordon off the Brigit system. I respectfully request that we be further authorized to declare the planet Freeborn under Martial Law, so that the Fleet may land in force upon the offending world and conduct an exhaustive search of Freeborn to discover the

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extent of that world's criminal activity. If, as I suspect, the depths of their traitorous activity are such as to require, I further request that the Fleet be allowed jurisdiction as to punitive measures, including the removal of all political authority on Freeborn, replacement with Fleet provosts, and the establishment of Fleet Protectorate status in place of the current Full and Equal Planetary Membership now held by Freeborn, until such time as the citizens prove they desire and deserve such privileges again." You could almost hear the thunder in Star Admiral Kestobor's voice by reading the last. The good man was certainly full of righteous indignation. Someone had dared to question the rights and prerogatives of the Holy Fleet.

Unfortunately, about two-thirds of the other planets in the Alliance were prone to accept the Star Admiral's statements. They thought as he did. Fortunately, the Alliance is pretty loose, and the debate over the matter went on for weeks and weeks. Meanwhile, our few friends and allies went to work with our own Delegates, and the process of defusing the bomb began. Someone asked if the steps the Fleet wanted to take weren't the same thing as Star Admiral Kestobor was warning against. Another world's delegation thought that it would open the door to tyranny. Yet a third proposed simple expulsion of Freeborn, while a fourth thought a Special Committee should be formed to investigate the matter more fully before any action was decided upon. To show our own good will, the Freeborn Delegate offered not only to deliver the captured Khalian raider to the Fleet Headquarters at Tau Ceti, but to allow a Special Committee

full authority to visit our world and investigate to their heart's content at the expense of the governments of Freeborn. The other Delegates liked that, naturally. What politician isn't up for a junket?

The sop of the captured raider was good enough. The Fleet got that and nothing else. A month later a group of twenty Delegates and ten times their number of assistants, aides, and other functionaries were roaming all over Freeborn, from Patrick Henry's red light district to the wilds of the Verge on hunting expeditions. There was actually quite a bit of probing during the weeks that followed. In the end, the Special Committee determined that we were not only blameless but good, solid members of the Alliance. The Fleet had no recourse or comment.

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Retaliation had long gone. She went to Nuada in the belly of a big old freighter. She's still there, serving as a model for the two larger frigates being laid down there now. There's a little corvette being built too, so pretty soon Freeborn will have a real navy. It won't be any match for the Fleet; not in size it won't, but ship for ship, and in spirit, I think it will be a hell of a lot better. Freeborn is also building solid planetary defenses now, so that if the Khalia ever decide to come at us in force we'll have something to make them sorry. It's a foregone conclusion that we'll never get anything but sweat and regret from Admirals of the Fleet. They visit the Brigit System, of course; frequently so, but they blink in and out only to see what we're up to. If the aliens came tomorrow with a whole invasion force, I do believe that Star Admiral Kestobor might volunteer assistance for the Weasels' attack. He's a bitter man, that one.

Yes. Freeborn did pay the Fleet tribute. We gave them the Khalian vessel, a prize that rightfully belonged to us. So what. It bought us time, and anyone you might care to ask about it on Freeborn will give you the same assurance. It won't happen again! There was more than enough time for us to take the Weasel ship apart, study her, and put it all back together again. The experts on Tau Ceti's Fleet Headquarters complex got her then. They'll learn how to go as fast in FTL drive as the Khalia do... just like Freeborn's own navy can right now. One nice thing about a thousand-year-old organization: being ancient and tradition-bound, the Fleet will take a decade to get around to upgrading its ships to any new technological development. Its bureaus put the *B* in bureaucracy.

Another couple of years and the Freeborn Flotilla should be making

ports of call on its first interstellar cruise. We'll have to withdraw from the Alliance of Planets, but what the heck. It is high time for that anyway. Although most of the habitable worlds belong, there are a few outside the Alliance who will trade and recognize us as a sovereign planet. Sure, some are ruled by despots, and most of them are peanuts compared to the Alliance. At worst it will mean Freeborn won't have as many luxuries, but there'll be no more taxes to Terra, and the Fleet, either. No more tribute either.

Me? The field promotion was approved, and I'll be commanding the marine contingent aboard *Liberty*, sister ship to *Freedom*. Captain Downing is Major Downing now, and he's

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the senior officer of Marines assigned to the Flotilla. We're heading for a nearby system to explore a planet which might be suitable for Terraforming—Freebornforming, I mean. It seems that the publicity we received from our little fracas with the Fleet roused a lot of interest on many of the worlds belonging to the Alliance, even on old Terra. Brigit is swamped with applications to immigrate, and being as we are, the governments can't very well turn 'em down. Elbowroom is growing crowded these days, so there's nothing else to do but look for another planet to settle on. We're naming it Liberated, of course, whether it happens to be the one we visit first or another we locate later. By the time we get through with our first cruise, I hear there will be over twenty million citizens on Freeborn, and that will mean we're just about out of space for folks to live in. If that doesn't give our mission impetus, I don't belong shipboard.

If you're one of those who are sick and tired of regulations without reason and conformity to compress your consciousness, you're a prime candidate for Freeborn Citizenship. One thing though. You have to remember that independence requires vigilance, and the price of liberty is always paid in the blood of those who would be free. The Khalia are bad, but they're aliens. Perhaps they just don't know any other ways. The Fleet? It is a tyrant and the tool of those who wish to make you conform to their own mold. Individually, its officers and men might be sterling examples of homo sapiens, but as an organization, it leaves a whole lot to be desired, if you ask me. Hell, if you're Freeborn, you can take up arms and handle things for yourself. If not, well, you can always accept the yoke and rely

upon others to do your fighting for you... maybe.

INTERLUDE

Gill looked up and found Sein was watching him. For the first time his smile extended into his eyes. The PR expert nodded his head in agreement. There wasn't much he could do with the heroes on Freeborn. They shouldn't have won and letting anyone know they did would only encourage similar, but probably less lucky, activities elsewhere.

"I've got some real heroes for you," Sein said and broke the silence. "Though I doubt you'll be able to use them either."

Curious as to what a chief in intelligence would describe as a hero, Gill smiled his agreement and turned back to the screen.

The label on the file was MOST TOP SECRET/NO ACCESS BELOW FLAG RANK. He glanced inquiringly at Sein. Was this a trap to see if he would read the file or not? Was Intelligence playing a game with him?

Even as he watched the screen Sein entered his personal code. A few more commands and Guillaume Kanard was included on the list of those cleared for the report.

He had already begun reading when Gill realized that Sein had to be more than just a captain in Intelligence. Mere captains do not have the authority to reclassify clearances on Flag Rank documents.

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by Poul Anderson

They came for me at my hotel shortly after dark, as the video-blanked call had said they would. There were two of them, both male, alike drably clad, hulking and heavy-boned as Procrustes had made so many of their kind. Geno Deledda I know, though a respirator covered much of his leathery face. The whirr of the air compressor on his back sounded louder than it really was in the stillness that suddenly brimmed my room. The other man was black—not by birth; the eyes looking out of that skin-doctored obsidian hue were gray and his hair was straight. It was

nearly white on top, brown at the roots, growing back to its natural shade now that yonder sun no longer bleached it.

After a moment I blurted, "Oh, Geno, you're not having trouble breathing again, are you?"

His voice came muffled by the mask: "Yes, missy. Oftener and oftener, worse and worse."

My indignation was genuine. "How much longer will they keep you waiting? Damnation, you're *Fleet!*"

He shrugged. I knew it wasn't actually neglect. Transport from outlying regions like this had gotten sparse, now that the battle of Target was intensifying. Not only such Khalia as operated away from that planet, but other breeds of skiprunner were taking advantage of the Alliance preoccupation to raid around, and this in turn tied up human forces on widespread counteraction duty. And no doubt casualties were swamping medical facilities, even the specialty shops at Port Tau Ceti. It does take highly specialized people and gear to restore to

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Earth-normal function a body—organs, biochemistry, everything—modified to fit an environment never meant for our kind of animal. The effort isn't always entirely successful.

"I still get by without apparatus, most of the time," Deledda said. "No matter now. Uh, this is Jarlath Vosmaer. Sir, let me, uh, introduce Valya Monier."

The black man and I shook hands. His palm was hard and dry. "Well met, my lady," he said, and I knew immediately we weren't speaking his mother tongue. Where might he be from? The accent suggested New Idaho on Christopher, but I wasn't sure. Not even a journalist is expected to know all the ways and byways of well over three-hundred-odd planets, human and nonhuman. Doubtless his origin made no difference. It sufficed that he had obviously served in the uplands of Procrustes, as Deledda had done in the lowlands.

(Uplands, lowlands, stormlands, drylands, sealands, as if that planet, an entire world, were a single country! *Which* uplands? Kazir of the winds? Ure'l, where the barbarians howled and loosed their arrows as they galloped up out of the cloud deck? Holy Indalag? Or some outpost I never heard of, enduring what I never imagined?)

The paleness of Vosmaer's gaze, in the midnight of his visage, made it feel doubly sharp, probing me. "Please take a moment to think before we go," he continued. His tone was dispassionate. "You may prefer not to come along after all. At least, you must assure us that your absence for a period that may stretch into days will cause no concern."

I decided he'd been an officer, quite likely high-ranking. Deledda was just a marine sergeant, combat engineers. He'd happened to be the one I got friendliest with in the course of gathering my material. That material included a lengthy interview with him. He was a natural, articulate in a bluff and earthy fashion, angry but basically amiable. Vosmaer was wary of me.

Best meet him head on. "May I ask your rank, sir?"

Slightly surprised, he replied, "Why?"

"I'd like to know the form of address to which you're entitled."

"Colonel—um, Third Eridanian Division. If that means anything to you," he finished with a snap.

"It does," I said. "Imperatrix Gloria's Own. You moved around in the mountains, but mostly you held Ure'l."

That disarmed him enough, I suppose, for his mask to

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dissolve and let the bitterness through. "What does it matter? I am detached—inactive. We all are, waiting to be taken back. Some will be discharged, some will serve out their terms on duty almost as empty. I intend to resign my commission."

I saw him realize he had shown himself vulnerable and start hastily putting on a new mask, and I pursued my advantage while it lasted, my

words quiet, swift, and hard.

"You are still Colonel Jarlath Vosmaer, Marine Corps of the Alliance Fleet, with all your honor. Well, I am freelance telejournalist Valya Monier, and my kind has its honor too. You know I'm working up a story, a program, on the veterans of Procrustes; and you know, or ought to, that it'll be sympathetic. What are you wondering about?"

He had recovered. His own voice came impersonally polite. "Well, this meeting will be rather special."

"I've had foreshadowings of it," I said.

He nodded. "I know. Then we hope you understand that what will happen is unforeseeable. It could be misinterpreted. We may have to ask that you keep silence, perhaps stay for a while, until we have resolved any problems."

"Uh, begging your pardon, sir," Deledda put in, "what the colonel means, missy, is we got some hotheads amongst us, and they might say what could be taken wrong. We can cool them down, but we don't want stuff reported that could get them in trouble."

I laughed. "Is that all? Why, I expected as much." Turning to Vosmaer "Colonel, we haven't met before—several thousand of you veterans—so you may not be aware that I am my own boss. If you care to wait a minute, I'll cancel a couple of appointments and be free to disappear for any number of days."

I'd smiled my warmest as I spoke. The black man finally smiled back and said, "Thank you, my lady." It's often helpful being a smallish brunette with regular features and a reasonable figure.

Still, he did not lose forethought. "Don't you have family who might worry about you?" he asked.

"Not on this continent. I'm from Westland. And unmarried. So if you don't mind stepping out into the hall—"

He raised his brows. "While you make those cancellations?"

"Aw, come on, sir, let the lady have her privacy." Deledda winked at me.

Did he assume I had to break a passionate date?

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Vosmaer hesitated. "I'm sorry, I must insist," I declared. "Else I can't go with you." And his cause would not have its advocate before the public.

He frowned but yielded. The wait was brief. I had kept a bag packed. Otherwise I needed only my omnigraph.

The men had left a car balanced on an upper parking flange. We got in and took off. For a little while the lights of Alisa formed a multicolored galaxy over which other vehicles flitted like comets, then we were bound across the Sapphire Ocean. Traffic dwindled to fugitive glints in the night. Stars showed few, what with two moons hurtling nearly full and the vast, soft rainbow of the rings. The water shimmered beneath us. Vents let in air that even at this altitude was mild and moist. Bellegarde is, mostly, a wonderful planet for humans. That's one reason its possessors are so strict with strangers. They want to keep it for themselves and their posterity.

We'd fallen into silence. I glanced at Deledda on my left. His blocky head, half alien behind the breather snout, was silhouetted athwart the rings. He stared before him. I wondered what he was remembering.

It felt good, sad but good, to be in Amadrör again. The atmosphere that would have driven an unadapted man into giddiness, craziness, and presently death was warm on his skin, musky-sweet in his nostrils, rich in his lungs and bloodstream. The great slow wind boomed gently, full of soughings from the forest, songs and cries of flying creatures whose wings passed vivid overhead, sounds from farther away, a low surf-pulse of sea. You never heard this clearly on the heights. The woods were a harmony of leaves brown, russet, golden, where rainflowers made startling counterparts of scarlet. The perpetual overcast was not gloomy but silvery, for those who had eyes to see. Lesser clouds made arabesques below it.

This day was sad, though, because now his good-bye began.

He and his partner, Lea Sikelianos, also a sergeant and, for years, his wife, walked slower than they needed to along the path from landing lot to factory. Their shared, unspoken wish was to enjoy it as long as might be. Of course, they could not have matched the pace and grace of Mertoutek in any event. Their kind had evolved in a gravity field only three-fourths of

this.

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It was the native who broke the muteness, and that was unusual enough to bespeak ix's own pain. "You are truly leaving us forever?" ix trilled.

Deledda regarded ixen for a while and searched after words before he replied. How beautiful, in their own way, Procruste-ans were. Not quite man-shape—too fluidly muscular—and the fur glowed like amethyst sprinkled with quartz and the head could almost have been a cat's except that it was full-browed and sensor tendrils quivered above the great golden eyes—Mertoutek wore simply the kilt common to these parts, but at the belt hung a pouch for a calculator, and ix was a hell of a fine electronics technician.

"I'm afraid so," was all that Deledda could find to say. He used his own language, knowing he would be understood, for at the moment he lacked the will to wrestle with Amadroran.

"But why, friend? After two lifetimes!"

Sikelianos used her transponder to answer in the vernacular; the little disc converted the noises a human can make into the lilt and music that belonged here. "The high command has decided it is no longer necessary or desirable to maintain our bases. We've broken the Faami and the Liberation Warriors; there are no bandits left in this part of space to harass commerce and loot worlds. At the same time, the fight against the Khalia is sharpening. It calls on every resource the Fleet can spare from other tasks."

"But we, the Folk, we have supported you, we have supplied you. Never were we a drain on your strength. Now let us continue making weapons for you to use on these new enemies."

"We mourn, Mertoutek, my mate and I mourn that that is not to be. We are told the distances are too great, the supply lines would be too long and precarious, for World-of-Yours to become part of the stellar munitions complex." Sikelianos spread her hands, helplessly. "How can I judge? We are told that keeping us here does draw on the Fleet somewhat. Administrative costs—ships and guns and persons tied up when they could

be employed elsewhere—"

How could you and me be, old girl? wondered Deledda. Aloud: "Well, we aren't abandoning you flat, you know. We two, we've been sent to give you whatever advice we can, so you can convert your factory from making fire control systems to, uh, to something useful for your people."

The pelt stood up on Mertoutek's body. Ix's tendrils

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shivered. "What will be useful save weapons, once our guardians have left us?" ix keened.

"That, yes, that may be—"

"But we make things for your spaceships. And we have no spaceships of our own. What help is a computer against the Northern buccaneers?"

Deledda swallowed. "That's, uh, one of the things we'll have to think about." The words stumbled from him. "Convert to, uh, production of cannon or—or communication devices or—"

"We will strive for your well-being while time remains to us," said Sikelianos's transponder. "Remember, this was our home too."

The island lay about a hundred kilometers off the coast of Windstead and belonged to that Landholding. From above, as we slanted down, I saw by the light of rings and moons that it was heavily wooded. A cluster of glitter at the east end bespoke a small town; otherwise I caught no sign of habitation. When I remarked on that, Vosmaer said, "Recreational preserve. Under the direct governance of the Landholder."

I nodded. The choice was shrewd. People who wanted to meet without risk of eavesdroppers—and the Council of Magnates was getting quite annoyed with the Procrustean veterans—could arrive here little noticed, by ones and twos and threes, on public conveyances. Doubtless an automatic rail from the harbor made a circuit of secluded spots inland. Such a ground could have been reserved, ostensibly for a large picnic, in the name of a fictitious organization. Any local person who got suspicious would naturally contact the bailiffs office, and that man could have been instructed beforehand to do nothing except reassure.

Not that I imagined the Landholder himself had issued orders. He shared the attitude of his fellows on the Council, that the evacuees were a nuisance which might develop into a trouble. True, Bellegarde was the nearest human planet inward from Procrustes; and the Fleet did maintain a replacement depot on it, to the profit of local businesses; and the marines had been taken off in available transport, swagbellies unequipped for the long haul to Tau Ceti; and several thousand people were too many for the depot barracks, so perforce the Fleet paid them an allowance to cover the cost of cheap food

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and lodging in the poorer districts of Alison; therefore it behooved the rulers of Bellegarde to permit this. But they didn't have to like the influx. They were free to long for the day when proper troopships could be spared from the operations around Target and dispatched here to carry away these bothersome, querulous, often unsightly outsiders. How long? Surely not much longer! It had been three months already.

So, I thought, did Mattes Torskov think. But his younger son Jerik had for years been fascinated by Procrustes and its garrison, had visited there more than once, now hobnobbed with officers and ranks alike. Jerik could have arranged this rendezvous for them.

Vosmaer directed our car to a meadow near the middle of the island. Tall pale trees walled it in. Lamps in front of them illuminated greensward, tables, benches, fireplaces, a stage for dance performances such as amateurs like to put on in Windstead—and a dark, roiling crowd of people whose number I guessed at five hundred. *Are that many of them rebellious?* I marveled. *Well, it should be a reassuring sight for the authorities, if they have observed in spite of precautions taken. Five hundred can't be conspirators. Any secret would escape faster than air from a missile-struck hull. Besides, these are the Old Crusties—underneath the military discipline, rambunctious individualists. The planet made them that, for survival's sake.*

We landed offside among several other-vehicles and got out. The early night was cool, with a pungency of eucalyptus in it. Not many worlds are so hospitable to the descendants of Mother Earth. Most are honestly lethal. It is the marginal ones like Procrustes that are cruel and treacherous to us; but a few we have nevertheless turned into homes for our kind.

Vosmaer and Deiedda conducted me toward the stage. Persons who saw us stared and muttered. A sense as of a gathering thunderstorm prickled through me. They were weirdly mixed, these folk—in uniform or, mostly, disreputable civvies that showed sign of having been worn for days on end; male, female; Caucasoid, Negroid, Australoid, Celestoid, half-breed; tall, short, stocky, rangy; young, middle-aged, grown old in the service; everybody marked, changed, shaped by it, whether the biotechs had been at work or merely the planet on which they were stationed, but no two in just the same way. I spied some as black as Vosmaer and I spied albinos who had been in the foglands; several individu-

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als needed mechanical help to breathe the air of Bellegarde, like Deledda; two were entirely encased in flexsuits, because local germs would attack the fungoids that kept at bay the azuria they had inevitably contracted in the swamps of Hirhavo; scars on faces marked where skin cancers had been removed that the ultraviolet blazing over the highlands had evoked—and more, and more, and more.

It was no horror show. These were basically healthy people; the Fleet takes its invalids straight home. It was simply that most of them needed treatment of one kind or another, in certain cases prolonged and highly specialized treatment, to make them fit again for an Earthlike environment. GNC 43376 III held too many different environments. Once the Fleet had established a support base there, the name "Procrustes" inevitably supplanted "Walsing's." Eventually it became official.

"You can shoot from the platform, next to the speakers," Deledda told me, gesturing ahead.

"I expect I'll want to get down and circulate, take close-up views of individuals," I said. The omnigraph was a small, oddly comforting weight in my left hand.

"While discussion is going on?" asked Vosmaer. "Well, don't be intrusive about it." His look reminded me that I was here on sufferance.

We reached the dais. Vosmaer mounted it and beckoned me to follow. Deledda stayed below in a cluster of enlisted persons from his regiment. Vosmaer saluted the man who stood near the edge, erect in uniform. I knew those harsh, pocked features well. Brigadier Jiao greeted me with

the same clipped courtesy as at our previous encounters. "Have you met the honorable Jerik Torskov?" he asked.

"Not yet," I said, and clasped hands with the big, blond-bearded young fellow at his side. Iridescent, fur-trimmed tunic, silver tights, upward-curling toes on shoes flashed almost grotesquely amidst the plainness everywhere around. Nevertheless Torskov looked anything but effete, and tales of his explorations on strange worlds had entered Bellegardean folklore.

"Welcome," he boomed. "So you're who's to tell the Alliance about the Crusties and their plight. Think you can?"

"I can try," I answered.

He frowned. "You can describe past hardships and heroisms in danger of being forgotten. But the story may turn out

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to be less simple than that. You may find yourself asked to explain demands, or outright actions, that provoke resentment. Are you willing to try?"

Yes, he was no mere adventurer; he thought about things, and underneath the joviality he displayed to the universe, he felt them more keenly than most of us do. "I'm a reporter, sir," I said. "I'll do my best to picture the truth, regardless of my own opinions."

"Good enough. We may well be in great need of that."

"Shall we commence?" snapped Jiao.

I grew conscious, as he must have been, of the silence that was falling. It wasn't total; it buzzed and mumbled. But those sufficiently close to the stage to hear us talk were listening as avidly as they watched, and the word passed back through the crowd and stirred it as a grassfield is stirred by the first breath of wind before a storm.

Torskov nodded. "We shouldn't tax their patience any further," he agreed. "This miserable situation has worn it thin."

I chanced to be looking in Vosmaer's direction, and saw a brief, slight writhing pass through his lips and over his face. What he for that instant remembered must be strong indeed to crack his control that much.

In the pitiless white sunlight, flames danced pale where they devoured the village; but smoke rose in a pillar of night until the turbulences aloft strewed it across blue. Land reached golden with ripeness, from a distance-dimmed sierra to the dropoff of the plateau and the cloud deck like a sea of snow beneath. The barbarians had left a gash of devastation upon it.

Having sacked and torched Arakoum, they were departing for their next victim when the aircraft snarled into sight. Vosmaer perforce admired their courage and discipline. They didn't scatter in panic, they put spurs to their zateks and raced for a tree-grown hill where they could perhaps make a stand. Helmets and lanceheads shone, danced like sparks. Pannons streamed with the haste.

"Give 'em a missile, sir?" asked Captain Layard. "A kiloton ought to do for them."

"No!" Vosmaer exclaimed. He barely kept from adding, "You fool!" That would have been unfair. Layard didn't

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know. He was newly transferred from Kazir, which Gloria's Own also held, and it was quite unlike Ure'l. "Those are Cho-Lengn. They'll have prisoners. They mean to send them back to their slave markets, such as survive the trip. That's why I've brought troops. We'll have to take them on the ground."

He wished he could have brought more. That might have awed the raiders into surrender. As it was, they were naturally shaken by the appearance of his detachment. If they'd known that every chieftain hereabouts now had a radio with which to call Fort Hirayama, they wouldn't have left home—at least, not in the direction of civilization. But that distribution was a recent thing, and news traveled slowly in the uplands.

Which gave another reason not to annihilate them. Leave some alive to straggle back, carrying the word. Vosmaer's command was too small to do

more than guard a few key points and come to the aid of friendlies elsewhere, if news of need arrived in time. His basic strategy must be to convince the nomads that attacks on the settled tribes weren't worth the risk; and his basic problem was that that frequently was not true.

He issued his orders. The carrier dropped to a bone-jarring landing and disgorged marines. His pursuit craft hovered while he observed. The magnifying viewer let him examine single pieces of the action that looked as though they might teach him something. After nearly a hundred years on Procrustes, humans still knew deadly little.

It wasn't pleasant duty. He saw a band of lancers charge straight into ripgun fire. They were stocky and barrel-chested, like all natives of these heights where the air was as thin as above the seas of Earth; but they shared the feline beauty of low landers—and God, they were brave! The slugs struck, exploded, scattered them in splinters of bone, gobbets of flesh, fountains of purple blood. Worse, in a way, were the zateks. Those poor animals hadn't killed or pillaged anybody, but they died just the same. Many took a while to do it, threshing and hooting in agony they could not understand.

A couple of barbarians who had been herding the captives along jumped from their saddles and drew sword. *Dogs in the manger*, Vosmaer thought sickly; and then, *No. Their concept of honor says you must not leave anything for the enemy if you can help it.* A prisoner tried to evade, but the rope connecting

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the *ix's* neck to the one ahead and the one behind brought the first *ixen* up short. The nearer nomad swept *yi's* blade through a short, efficient curve. At least *yi* killed *ixen* instantly.

"Wow, great!" whooped Layard. A squad of humans had broken through the swirling mass of the foe. Their rifles put a stop to the slaughter. But a boy took an arrow in his eye, and yet he, like the zateks, needed minutes to become quiet, in the arms of a comrade while battle ramped around them. There'd be no reviving him after that kind of brain damage. There'd only be the burial at the fort, a volley, Taps, and the letter to write to his parents.

Vosmaer honestly wished he could be in combat himself; and he had no

romantic illusions about it. But he couldn't any longer, of course. He'd been raised to colonel; his duty was to direct the men so that they got the job done with minimal loss.

This operation proved rather neat, considering what a tiny force he had. Soon the last Cho-Lengn found the escape routes he'd directed be kept for them and were fleeing back east. His men cut the prisoners loose from the coffles, gave first aid to the wounded and brought them back into the carrier, took formation behind Vosmaer after he landed and debarked. Dwellers were swarming toward them from ruined Arakoum.

The survivors were more than he had expected, about a hundred. Their chieftain had led them into a temple built of stone, which they had managed to hold. The barbarians didn't persist in assaulting it, being in a hurry to push onward. Now the defenders came to meet their redeemed kindred, embrace and jubilate or go quietly aside and mourn.

The chieftain, a grizzled being of grave dignity, made a deep salutation, then drew Vosmaer aside. "Our souls forever thank you," ix said.

"Your words reward us," the man replied through his transponder. "How I wish we could have come sooner. Had you no warning?"

A movement of negation rippled the violet robe. "A cloud stream blew over Fallen Star Pass. They must have taken advantage of it to surprise and overrun the garrison there, then followed it on across the plateau. When the midmorning sun burned it off, they were at our door."

"Ill is this," Vosmaer said. "We must—first we must see to relief for you and help in rebuilding, lest you freeze to death come winter. Afterward we must put a new stronghold in the

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pass. I will seek to provide it with more firearms." He meant simple weapons such as uplanders would be able to maintain.

Amber eyes gave him a lingering regard. "You are very kind to us, dear alien."

"We have our reasons," Vosmaer answered gruffly. "You stand between the wild folk and richer country below."—*which feeds the Seruenu cities,*

which feed us and make those things we need for our mission.

The chieftain leaned heavily on ix's staff. This day had changed ixen from middle-aged to old. "Yet I have heard you cannot eat our food." The voice wavered. "We whom you saved cannot offer you as much as the Beaker of Fellowship."

"Our kind of food can be raised in the lands that you wall off from the reavers." Nevermind about ecological conversion, let alone the fact that the plantations were mainly a reserve, in case hostiles knocked out the synthesizers. "It is we who are in your debt."

"We will strive to remain worthy." Tacit was the hope that someday these people would have earned assistance against more than the nomads—famine, pestilence, toil. Rumors had risen this high, concerning what the humans had done for Seruenu. They must have infinite powers.

If only we did, went through Vosmaer. Or if only we could bring to you a fraction of what our race does know how to do. But we aren't gods or kings on this world of yours. We're just a garrison too, keeping a pass on the far frontier.

"Come to order," Jiao directed, and the assembly did. Amplified, his voice continued to be a softness around a steel core. The screen behind the stage lighted up with our enlarged images. I wondered if these troops had experienced this commonplace, a close look at whoever was talking, before in their lives. Those had been such impoverished lives; or had they, really, always?

"It was important to see how many would come to this meeting," Jiao went on. "If few were strongly opposed to being evacuated, there would be no sense in talking. You could go on griping, but you would have to conform. Well, the count stands at 537. That is significant. The meeting will proceed.

"I shall not waste time discussing the petition that has been

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circulating. I have already made inquiries at the top level. The possibility of restoring the force on Procrustes does not exist."

A growl rose from those gathered. Eyes and teeth gleamed in furrowed, toughened faces. Jiao lifted a hand to quell the noise. "Be calm," he said. "From the viewpoint of efficiency, the Fleet is perfectly justified."

"Think. What we actually maintained was a naval base on the fringe of Alliance space. That sun is well situated for monitoring the region, where skiprunners and war lords had been making havoc in traffic and on planets. Our ships first provided escorts and guardians. Later, piece by piece, in the course of decades, they sought out and destroyed the nests of banditry.

"Besides the location of the sun, Procrustes was a decisive factor in choosing the site of the base. It is the single world thereabouts where humans can live without artificial help."

I heard a laugh or two. Didn't somatotypal selection and, in half the cases, biomodification, count as artificial? The brigadier proceeded unperturbed: "Moreover, it has intelligent natives, certain of whom have developed preindustrial civilizations. They could produce a great deal of the necessary supplies and war materiel at modest cost. Otherwise, maintaining the outpost at such a distance from the centers of the Alliance—the long lines of communication—would have been very expensive; and to the Fleet, expense doesn't mean money so much as it means personnel and resources urgently wanted elsewhere.

"The civilized natives were willing, eager, to assist. They knew what benefits to them would follow. However, given the primitive state of their technology, conversion to manufacturing for the Fleet soon took most of their energies. They could no longer defend themselves against barbarians and half-civilized rivals. We took over that task, as well as instructing and leading them in the new engineering projects.

"And that is why you were on Procrustes. That, and no other reason. The spaceborne units have now worked themselves out of a job and are needed for the Khalian war."

His tone slowed down to somberness. "Why have I reviewed this history, which everybody ought to know already? Because tonight you are not a troop being briefed, you are individuals met to decide what should be done. First you must decide what you actually want. If the terms of discussion were

not spelled out at the beginning, you would spend these too few hours wrangling over them, instead of getting on with your real business. At best, I doubt that a group like this can come to agreement and then act in concert, decisively. But since enough of you have demonstrated your feelings by coming here, I am prepared to give you your chance.

"Before reporting on the possibilities available to you, I want to know more precisely what those feelings are. The meeting will be open for a limited time to discussion from the ground. Questions?"

A hand shot up in the crowd. The pickup found its owner and put her likeness on the screen. She was young, the idealism not yet leached out of her. Tears quivered on her lashes. "Doesn't the Fleet know where we're needed?" she appealed. "Back on the planet we've left, with our friends!"

I glanced at Jiao, and for a heartbeat's time something played across his face as it had over Vosmaer's. But this was gentler, I thought, a memory that might make the brigadier weep once he was alone, except that I supposed he had forgotten how.

A century had wrought vast changes throughout Seruenu. Mines and their tailings scarred mountainsides. Roads and rails webbed the valleys, seamed the ridges. Factories dominated the town in which they had arisen. Amidst the browns and yellows of pastures, croplands, woods, there were swathes rustling green or blooming white, crops that once grew on Earth. Motors pulled more vehicles than zateks did; the gallant spectacle of cavalry was only for ceremonies; the scions of warrior houses most often became technicians, while bards sang less of ancient deeds than of wonders aloft among the stars. Shrines were seldom visited. Instead, those who could travel made pilgrimage above the overcast, in order to behold the stars for themselves.

Yet Seruenu had not lost its soul. The new buildings were harmonious with their surroundings, gracefully pillared and turreted. Countryfolk still danced the springtime in, and welcomed home the spirits of their ancestors at harvest; possession of an exact calendar had, if anything, added deeper meaning to the festivals. With rigidities dissolving, the highborn served the commoners better than before the humans came. Prosperity enabled the arts to flourish, a burst of

creativity like nothing since the Age of Dourva. Above all, the country was at peace. The Ilkai glowered and grumbled beyond the northern frontier, but not for generations had their armies crossed it. One could count on living out one's life, one's dreams.

Still Ouahallazin soared in walls and towers, alabaster topped with domes of blue and gold. Still the River Taouriri toppled down the cliff beside the city, and the slow thunder pervaded streets, homes, beings. These nights it lighted lamps, as oil once did, but brightly, brightly; and the hydroelectric plant was so made as not to mar the snowlike purity of the fall.

From the terrace where he stood, Jiao glimpsed mist blown off the water. The breeze was cool, a benediction after the heat of the day; at this altitude, air pressure was less than two bars and he breathed easily enough. His view swept down the curtain wall, which was fragrant with flowering vines, to the stream rushing on into its canyon. It gleamed. Looking upward, his back to every window, he saw the sky of early dark filled with soft, shifting glow. The sun was in a flare period and had turned the permanent cloud layer auroral. Strange that a star so fierce could evoke beauty so gentle. Far northward, though, thunderheads loomed, monstrous blacknesses, lightning aflicker in the caverns of them.

Tazrou gestured yonder. "Our forebears would have called that sight an omen," ix said low. The storm was of a size and violence extraordinary even for the south temperate zone of Procrustes. "They would have thought the Deathsower was readying to ride."

"You no longer believe in omens," Jiao replied. "Do you?"

The Mayor Paramount made a sound that whistled through the endless rumble of the cataract. A human would have sighed. "We have at least kept a sense of the world as being somehow a whole. It may be chance, but it is fitting that rage-weather should arise over Ilkaizan just after you brought word that you are forsaking us."

Jiao stiffened. He would *not* stand and be accused, however mildly. "This is no abandonment. I came to warn you, give you ample notice. We will help you prepare yourselves. We will leave you the means of defense."

"The enemy has weapons akin to ours." That had been foreordained. The Ilkai were civilized in their fashion, which

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was not a fashion to make them cooperative with foreigners. Their artisans were quite able to produce firearms once a few had been stolen and studied. "War is an art that we have lost, but to them it remains the crown of life. The thwarted ambitions of ix's predecessors burn high in their Dominator. When ix hears you shall be leaving, ix will begin marshalling for the day when you have left."

"We have our orders," Jiao rasped. "That is something you must learn over again in Seruenu, to follow orders—to be soldiers."

"Will we have time to learn? It is knowledge that must go into the bones, is it not?" Tazrou paused. Ix's fingers closed hard on the parapet. "This is a terrible saying. Yet... before you go, you could destroy the Ilkai. For us."

A few nukes; a few cities, a million or two lives, blazed out of existence; youngsters farther from ground zero screaming, eyeballs melted and skin burned off; survivors fighting for what was left, disruption, starvation, plague; make a desert and call it peace. Jiao chose his words with care. "Do you truly wish that?"

"Not truly. It required utterance. I have grandchildren."

"Grandchildren also live across the border. Besides, it would do you small good for a short spell, and what happened afterward would be pure evil. We humans kept the Ilkai curbed for you, and it cost us more than you ever knew. We did not conquer them, for then we would have had to govern and protect them, and that was beyond what we could do. Now, if the Ilkai should suddenly cease to be, the wild tribes on the far side of them would come ravaging over their lands and into yours. With the Dominator you can at least deal."

Pride rang: "If we are willing to be wrung dry; and we are not." His voice died out. Tazrou lowered ix's head. "No," ix murmured, "you have right; you cannot be butchers. We must stave off the flood as best we can. I think we will lose much. Ouahallazin will surely fall. But belike we can save the heartland of Seruenu, and perhaps after many years fight our way

back."

"Good!"

The light within Jiao flickered low again as Tazrou went on: "But what will be the end of it? Will we and they grind each other down, until at last we are so weak that the barbarians can overwhelm us both? Or else must Seruenu turn into a monster, a thing more grim than the Ilkai themselves? Whatever befalls,

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that life our forebears created and knew, it will be no more than a memory, borne away on the night wind like the odor of these flowers. I am selfishly glad that before then I shall be dead."

Ix's fingers brushed feather-light across Jiao's cheek. "Meanwhile I shall miss you, old friend," ix finished.

It was astonishing how many and loud were the shouts that followed the woman's call. "Your loyalty is commendable," the brigadier responded dryly. "However, your oaths were to the Fleet."

"Where's any loyalty to us?" Deledda roared. "What are we to the high command but a boxful o' goddamn chess pieces?" He swallowed and added, "Sir." It was lost in the growl that lifted anew.

Jiao raised an arm and chopped it downward. The gesture brought swift silence. "Self-pity is contemptible," he rapped. "You are receiving your due, adequate quarters and living allowances—"

A mass groan interrupted. Well, I had visited the sleazy rooms, eaten in the greasy cafes, watched little girls shrink aside in fright and little boys jeer, women draw fastidiously aside and men glower, when a half-human-looking Crusty walked down the street or boarded a bus. I'd sat in on a couple of parties, veterans squeezed together in somebody's kennel or huddled together in a park, passing the bottles and the tokes around for lack of any better recreation. After a couple of nasty brawls, taverns everywhere on Bellegarde had been put off limits for them.

"And you should have the guts to make do," Jiao said. "You'll be taken away as soon as transport is available. It shouldn't be much longer. Then

those of you who are fit, or who can be rehabilitated, will get new assignments. They are virtually certain to be in easier environments than almost any place on Procrustes. Those who are not fit for continued service will also get whatever medical attentions called for, then their discharges and pensions. What more do you want?"

The question was rhetorical but fair. The Fleet would not have persisted these many centuries if it did not look after its own. And that was part of the trouble here. "Sir, they'll break us up," Deledda protested. "We won't be in our old outfits anymore. Our outfits won't *be*."

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I saw the bleakness on Vosmaer. He too had belonged to his command. How could he now end his service, except as an anonymous key pusher in a bullpen of an office? No wonder that he meant to resign. But surely even his birth world would be alien, if he went back to it.

Deledda sagged where he stood. The screen showed, in brutal detail, how weariness laid hold on him. His amplified mumble ran around the meadow and lost itself among the trees. "Not that we'll keep the uniform, Lea and me. We'll be no use anywhere. We knew we wouldn't be, way back when we were young and volunteered for biomod. We figured after we retired we could settle down where we'd been. Had us a bit of a farm lined up—"

Some alterations of the body go very deep; and habitat makes its own slow changes, which finally become irreversible. The medics at Port Tau Ceti could probably fix the sergeant so he wouldn't require a machine to help him breathe at ordinary pressure; but he would never be comfortable. He would wheeze and shiver while swift age overtook him.

"You will have your pensions," Jiao reiterated. "You will find a place where you want to live."

Torskov stirred. "Sir, I believe we've covered the obvious things," he said. "We ought to move on and consider what to do about them. May I take over?"

The brigadier nodded. Torskov stepped to the front. Rainbow-clad and golden-bearded, he might have been a pagan god appearing before a conclave of trolls. His blue glance traveled downward and rested for a few

seconds on Deledda, as though he was reminded of something. And when he spoke, from deep in his throat, what he first said was, "I know what it can be like for an old soldier from a strange world."

Terreneuve is a good planet for normal humans and, in areas where the climate is less than idyllic, not too expensive.

Wind scouring from the North Pole struck cold through clothes; dry snow flurried before its whistle; but there was an exhilaration in it, a challenge, and when you had had enough you could go indoors. The houses of Aubourg clustered close together, windows cheerfully aglow, their backs to the winter.

Thus the Lodge seemed doubly stark, a foursquare block outside of town, alone on the white prairie. Torskov's walk to

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it had made the blood tingle in his veins. Abruptly his enthusiasm waned, and he stood hesitant a moment in the wind before he touched the call plate.

A minute or two passed. A gatekeeper must be scanning him. He'd had to search out a resident who had business in Aubourg, practically force an acquaintance, then cultivate it over days, before he got the invitation he wanted. At that, he must promise not to document the experience in video, audio, or print.

The valve opened for him. He stepped into an airlock chamber. It closed again and a pump chattered, thinning the atmosphere. Moisture went out also. His mucous membranes smarted, and he slipped on his nose mask. A tube led to a water bottle and humidifier. It was equipment he'd had to prepare for himself. Nothing like it was on sale. Town dwellers hardly ever came into the Lodge.

The inner valve opened and he strode forward. Heat assailed him. The light was sullen red. He wished he'd brought supplemental oxygen; but he wasn't going to be active, he was merely going to look around and converse with whoever was willing. "To satisfy my curiosity," he'd admitted. "I'm a wanderer, a dilettante. Of course, if I can do anything to help you people—"

"You can't," Ventura had replied. "It's too late. Except that I think a lot of us will enjoy listening to you yarn about your adventures. That's why we're letting you in. Our lives are so enclosed."

"Do they have to be?"

"What else is ours?"

Ventura waited to meet Torskov. He had the gauntness, big rib cage, parched appearance of most veterans of Eremos. His garb was a surprise, in spite of its being known that they dressed in special ways here. An elaborately plumed bonnet rested on his head, a scalloped cloak swirled above a tapestried jerkin, fluorescent trousers bagged into half-boots. He caught the newcomer's stare. His smile was spastic. "Clothes have many meanings for us," he said. "It's one game we can play."

They went down a corridor. Doors giving on it belonged to apartments. Ventura showed Torskov a couple. The tenants weren't in. Nobody used locks. There was nothing worth stealing. The places were minimally furnished and small

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almost to the point of being cells. "When we'd clubbed together to build ourselves this home, not much money was left for comforts."

Souvenirs of Ercmos were in abundance. "Yes, I suppose most of us would go back if we got the chance. Not that that's any paradise, but you do have room to move around, a worldful of room, the deserts, the mountains—sunrises above the Bitter Ocean... But the treaty with the natives forbids. Only personnel on active duty allowed groundside."

"Did you foresee you'd end like this?" Torskov asked, and realized it was a stupid question.

"Ha! Of course not. We knew we'd need special support systems in terrestroid conditions, but the bonus offered made it seem worthwhile. We were young then. After our discharges—Well, at last most of us gave up the struggle. It was hopeless, everywhere we tried. So we started this colony. Aubourg offered us the site free, because the construction would boost the local economy; and we still make our purchases there. No hostility. The townsfolk keep trying to be friendly, to organize joint social

events, what have you. Or did. Lately they've quit."

Torskov nodded. He'd heard the members of the Lodge called everything from standoffish to brainsick.

"It's simply that we're too different from them." Ventura kept talking and talking. He must unconsciously have yearned through the years for someone to explain to. "That's why we don't tune in many shows, either, read many books, keep in touch with the outside. It means less and less to us. Or it reminds us of too much. Your stories ought to be good entertainment, if you keep them about things that are not human."

Passersby looked hard at the stranger. Not all were fancifully costumed, but each had an emblem: headband, sash, brooch, brassard, medallion, or shoulder patch. None appeared less than about fifty years of age. Most walked in silence, whether or not they had companions. They had exhausted their conversation long ago.

The passage ended in a large central space, a kind of forum. In its recesses, individuals played at being storekeepers or handicrafters. Torskov had noticed the work offered in Aubourg. He was told that occasionally tourists bought it.

Ventura gestured at an ornate door flanked by pillars and

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surmounted by a winged sun disc. "The Sanctum," he explained. "Where we practice the Mysteries." He glanced around and lowered his voice. "They've grown quite elaborate. Give us something to do. Some pretense of meaning in what's left of our lives."

"—no future worth having, and you know it."

Torskov could be eloquent when he chose. His voice rolled around and around the meadow like waves, and a sea breeze was in it too, fresh from reaches beyond the horizon. The sad, angry folk watched him as compulsively as I did.

The climax smashed forth: "—never. But you're not bound to this. You're free men and women. You have tomorrow yet before you. Well, claim it! Make your own destiny."

"You can return to Procrustes."

A long-drawn gasp exploded in yells. The crowd seethed. My gaze came to focus on Deledda and his wife. They joined both pairs of hands, and a fire kindled inside them.

Torskov lifted his arms for silence. When the racket had ebbed choppily away, his words came crisp: "The Fleet has left your planet to its fate. Thus far nothing terrible has happened there, but you know that soon it must—unless you, you who are here tonight, forestall it. You can. You're only a few hundred, but you know that world and you know your trades, war, engineering, everything necessary to take leadership. Arsenals and factories are in place. A spacecraft capable of entering atmosphere is a heavy weapon by herself; the sonic boom alone can scatter an Iron Age army. We can guard Seruenu while it builds its defenses under our guidance. Later we can rescue civilizations around the globe. Can you dream of a more splendid future?"

He had not enthralled everybody; far from it. "Yeah," cawed a man whose missing arm was supposed to be regrown at the Port, "sure I can. Like being court-martialled." A few laughs barked.

"Who's going to carry us?" demanded a woman, and a chorus of "Who? How?" came after.

"I will," Torskov answered.

I plucked Vosmaer's sleeve. "I want to circulate and get individual sequences," I said through the noise. He nodded absently, himself rapt and quivering. Jiao stood impassive.

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I sprang down and squirmed between bodies, omnigraph in hand. Torskov's bass rolled onward.

"I have a ship capable of taking all of you, a freighter of this Landholding. The crew are personally plighted to me. On Bellegarde, that means they're mine in the same way you've been your regiments'—not your officers'—underlings, but marines of your regiments. She carries two auxiliaries for planetfall and supplies for a year, till we can get synthesis and agriculture restarted on Procrustes. And she is in parking orbit right

now!"

"My God," breathed a man under the tumult, "how much money has he got, anyway?"

He was a lean, intelligent-looking fellow with lieutenant's bars. Probably he had served in the uplands, for he was very dark, though in his case that was by birth. I positioned myself before him and cocked the pick-up toward his face. "He's a younger-son aristocrat," I said. "Rich, yes, by your standards or mine; but mainly he has certain loyalties at his beck."

The marine blinked. "Won't this get him in trouble?"

"Oh, cosmos, yes. He must want it in his marrow, to take such a gamble."

He looked closer. "Who are you?"

"Valya Monier, journalist. Invited because your leaders there, Brigadier Jiao and Colonel Vosmaer, want a person like me to tell the worlds your side of the story. Will you answer a few questions?"

"Uh, hold on."

Torskov was fielding the cries that flew at him from every square meter. "—totally unexpected move. We'll be out of reach before Fleet or planetary government know we've left."

More commotion. "All right," said the lieutenant to me. "A few."

"Name, please?"

He gave it and said yes, he would absolutely go back if he could, though first he had business in Alison to take care of.

"Don't you know you're talking mutiny?" bawled a man near us. His insignia were a major's. His cheeks were inflamed with anger.

"We are, we are," muttered my lieutenant. "Let the Fleet make the most of it. Enough, lady." He waved me off. "I've got to listen."

Jiao took the word from the stage. A hush fell. It seemed to

ring with unheard echoes. His metallic tone of authority had not changed in the least:

"Yes, we are talking mutiny, therefore already we are engaged in sedition. Do not pretend you have harbored no such thoughts. If you had never, you would not be here. We can speak of a higher duty, to allies who have trusted us or to ourselves and our families. But the practical fact is that those who go will be listed as mutineers and deserters. They cannot soon return. They must live, and raise any children they may have, on Procrustes—at least until a habitation more comfortable for some among them can be built in orbit or on the moon. Those who are not prepared for this should stay behind."

Somehow, abruptly, he stood even more straight than before. "I will lead the exodus. You must also be prepared to come under my command and the command of my officers. You will have to sign new articles. We will be in this together, irrevocably."

I went about recording faces. "Do you want to?" I would whisper, and hear, "Yes—No—Don't know—Go away—"

"What's in this for you, Torskov?" Deledda bellowed.

The big man tossed his head—the golden mane flew—and laughed aloud. "Deeds worth doing!" he trumpeted. "And, yes, fame. I'd like to be remembered as more than a star tramp. Understand, I'll be outlawing myself right along with you. The Council of Magnates can't just tell the Fleet it's sorry about this. They have a covenant. But you'll need a space service, for transport and patrol and support of the planetside forces. Organizing and leading it will be my job."

A woman's voice pierced the hubbub: "It's no use. The bastards will come snatch us back and shoot us."

"No," said Jiao. "I have considered that, made inquiries, run psychosocial computations. Bellegarde doesn't have any such capability. The Fleet has a war to wage on a distant frontier, plus duties throughout Alliance space. Seeking us out—on an entire large, cloudy, mountainous, wilderness-covered planet, where the natives would hide us or die to defend us—is next to impossible, totally impractical."

"They can missile us real easy!" a man screamed. I felt shock. Had morale disintegrated to the point where anybody in the Fleet, anybody at all, could believe that of it?

Vosmaer responded first. I had not thought he ever let

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himself be this emotional. "Killing innocent natives by the thousands, wrecking their society, for spite against us, who threaten nobody except robber barbarians? The Fleet has not lasted a thousand years by being an atrocity machine."

"The high command will be furious, but they will accept the *fait accompli*," Jiao added. "As long as we stay in the system of Procrustes' sun, we are safe."

"From everything but Procrustes," jeered a man.

It went on and on, back and forth, to and fro. Among civilians it would have become sheer turmoil. The marines had more discipline, more sense of unity. Nevertheless it began to seem that each last person there must speak his or her piece. I went around among the crowding, milling, shoving bodies and recorded. When an opportunity flitted by, I put my queries.

"—will we become Overlords? I don't like that."

"Who can tell what will happen?" Torskov replied. "Humans will be a special class in Seruenu, obviously. Later, everywhere on the planet. But I don't see us ruling the natives. We're too unlike, we and they."

"What the hell *can* we do but soldier for them?"

"Be teachers and enterprisers and neighbors and friends," Torskov said. "You'll never be bored or feel futile, I promise you."

"—exile."

"Not forever. We'll be... citizens... of Seruenu, which is a sovereign state that has in the past contracted treaties with the Alliance. In due course we'll be forgiven. Successful rebels always are. I don't suppose we'll get

back the benefits or property or status we forfeited, but we'll have gained our own by then, and be free to move among humans again. In fact, we'll be heroic figures."

"If we've lived that long."

"Which would you rather," Torskov retorted, "rot or take risks?"

Questioning, quarreling, posturing, denouncing, arguing, erupting. Twice I saw individuals come to blows, though others quickly stopped them. The moons went down. The shadow of the planet crept across its rings.

Finally: "Order! Attention!" Jiao's amplified voice hammered the racket flat. I pushed through the crowd. It reeked of sweat. With my recorded encounters I climbed back onto the dais. Things were close to climax.

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When silence filled the chill air, Jiao stated: "We have had too much monkey chatter. The time is overpast for realities. How many of you will return to Procrustes?"

I deemed that a couple of hundred hands flew up. "Too few," Jiao said. More lifted, and more. "Four hundred is the minimum I judge we require. If we have less, all we can do is go back to Alison and wait for the troopships." More hands fluttered aloft. The hesitancy was greater for each second that slipped by. Meteors darted overhead. Their numbers are a wonder of Bellegarde, but tonight they were like scribbled interrogation marks. "Have we failed?... Aah, no, we've gotten our number now." And immediately another thirty or forty joined in.

Those who stood refusant glared uneasily about. Where they saw ones like themselves, they sidled toward each other, until the gathering was spotted with knots of denial. Deledda and his wife were almost alone in looking radiant. For most, whatever the decision was, it came hard. You do not easily cut the ties of decades, whether they be to the Fleet or to your comrades in it.

Torskov trod forward. "We're going!" he rejoiced. "Those who choose to stay behind—you'll keep silence, I'm sure, till we're well away."

"*Will they?*" My lieutenant thrust himself to the forefront. His image on the screen cast glances right, left, rearward. "Can they? If they do, they'll be co-conspirators."

"Nobody has to know they were here tonight," Vosmaer said. He flung his appeal out: "You understand us, don't you? That's why you came. You elected not to join us, as is your right, but you won't betray our trust."

I saw the major's lips pinch together.

"When do we start?" sounded from the mass, and "When? Yes, when, when?"

"As soon as possible," Torskov answered. "This same night. The auxiliaries will ferry us to the ship."

"No, now, wait a minute," the lieutenant said.

Murmurs around him strengthened to a babble, a shouting match. Of course this was too sudden. Aiming my audio, I caught several of the demurrals. The lieutenant had a girl back in Alison, she was not handicapped and hence not among the malcontents, but he had to see her one last time, didn't he? Somebody else had a debt to pay or a debt to collect. Everyone

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had small possessions to fetch. And... let's not be reckless about this, we're being rushed, let's think about it a little more... We shouldn't submit ourselves to Brigadier Jiao, we should elect our own officers... Yes, the Human Republic of Procrustes... Need we all be on the damned planet? I know about minerals in the asteroids...

"Order! Attention!" Jiao called.

"Screw you."

"Hoy, wait, you can't say that to your commander."

"Who says he's my commander? We're going to be free."

"Quiet, quiet," Torskov pleaded. "If we don't cooperate, we're done for. Trust your leaders."

"Trust—" Jiao's eyes narrowed. Abruptly his finger stabbed at me. "We do have an outsider observing."

Deledda heard from the ground. "Hold on, sir," he dared object. "You know what she is. And she agreed we could keep her with us till—uh—"

Projected on the screen, the confrontation on the dais drew vision and minds to itself. Stillness descended layer by layer. I felt the night breeze crawl across my skin.

"This is ridiculous," Vosmaer snapped. Hesitation came upon him. "Although—we do have nothing but her word—"

Torskov approached me. "Let's dispose of the matter quickly," he urged. Low: "That should help soothe them, show them we're competent. Else they'll squabble till dawn and settle nothing."

"I'm afraid they will regardless," Vosmaer said unhappily.

Torskov addressed me: "I'm sorry, milady Monier. We've got to go through with this." Aloud, while a smile creased his face: "So you are covering our story."

The stares from the ground were like a physical force pressing in on me. I nodded. "By your permission," I said. "I want to document and present the truth about you and what you do."

"We could use that. I assume it will be the truth."

I fashioned a smile. "Well, give me my in-depth interviews."

"Maybe later. Who are you working for? The News League? The Guild?"

"Myself. I'm a free-lance."

"And hope to sell what you produce to a big distributor. I see. How did you hear about us?"

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"Why, your arrival was news everywhere on Bellegarde. I scented a story and came to Alison on the track of it."

"Really? I shouldn't think it'd be mentioned outside this planet. A very minor item, at most. And aren't you from off-planet?"

"No, no," Vosmaer said. "Milady told me she's from Westland."

Torskov raised his brows. "Oh? Where, may I ask?"

"Why, why—" My smile tightened. "No fixed abode. I'm a roamer."

"Surely you were born and raised somewhere," Torskov purred. "What's your hometown? I may well know it."

The silence and the staring thickened.

"Wanwater!" I cast at him.

He stood for a moment before he shook his head and murmured, "Wanwater, eh? Strange. You don't talk like a person from there—or anyplace else on Westland—or on all Bellegarde. What about that, milady?"

I took a step backward. Vosmaer's black visage congealed. He sprang behind me and pinioned my arms. My omnigraph thumped on the stage.

The sound from the crowd reminded me of arctic pack ice grinding together.

By a gesture, Jiao took over. "We must investigate this," he said. "Will a woman please come conduct a body search?"

"I was in the MPs," said she who joined us.

The frisking was deft and brief. My transmitter was inside the locket at my throat. She cast it down and crushed it under her heel.

"I haven't used it." My voice was thin in my ears. "It was only for emergency. To bring help in case... matters got out of hand—"

"Yah, sure," said Vosmaer. Sarcasm poisoned his tone.

"You have recorded us," Jiao said. "In your mind as well as your instrument. They will know exactly who intended exactly what."

"Wait, you can't hurt her!" Deledda bawled.

"Certainly not," Torskov said. "We're no lynch mob." That lowered the outcries of wrath. He turned wry. "But you present us with a problem, my lady."

"Who are you spying for?" Vosmaer grated.

"The, the Council," I stammered. "They suspected—"

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"And engaged a... free-iance detective." Torskov donned calmness. "Where are you from, really, Monier?"

"Terreneuve," I gulped.

"No matter, I suppose. What does matter is that we are suspected. And we are guilty of sedition and conspiracy. Governments don't voluntarily let individuals make foreign and military policy. When you don't call in tomorrow, the Council will alert the Fleet, and we'll be arrested for investigation."

Torskov swung about. To the massed horror before him he shouted, "Unless we leave now! It's our single chance. Are you with me?"

The first faint responses strengthened. Soon they roared.

Vosmaer let go of me. I stood head bowed, in the winter wind of their hatred, and sought shelter among my memories.

The prairie had billowed silver-green under a springtime breeze when we again walked from Aubourg, hand in hand beside the river. There bluefruit trees grew. They shed petals onto us, and the nesting flutewings sang.

"I missed you," I said frankly.

"And I you," Torskov answered. "I thought more and more about paying a return visit here."

"Until a practical reason decided you."

"I would have in any case."

"Eventually, perhaps. Jerik, let's not play games. I'm glad you want me for something I can actually do. Afterward... we'll see."

His grin was rueful. "Good Lord, but you have a way of taking a man aback." Drawing breath: "All right. I've come from a stay on that planet I mentioned to you last time, Procrustes. A tragedy is about to happen there. I've been talking to people, including one top-ranking officer. He and I have groped our way to an idea of what might be done about it. But we'll need outside help, an agent who can't be identified locally. It strikes me you are just the sort."

"Just crazy enough, hm?" Tiny lightnings went along my backbone. "Well, tell me."

—And in my hotel room in Alison, while dusk stole in the windows to veil a sweet chaos:

"They'll be several hundred, Valya. That many can't

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conspire. You're a journalist; you know how a leak is absolutely guaranteed. Somebody will disapprove or hope for an advantage and tell on us. Or if, miraculously, that doesn't happen, how do we coordinate such a movement, how do we herd those natural-born nonconformists off without anybody noticing?

"Unless we've gotten them together for what they think is a meeting to discuss grievances, and then spring an opportunity on them, and straight afterward a crisis, with no choice left them but to move at once."

My cabin has a small viewscreen. I sit on my bunk and watch Procrustes as we orbit it. The planet is blue-white, like incandescent steel, in the light of its brilliant sun. Here and there, uplands thrust darkling out of the clouds.

The door opens. Jerik steps through and closes it behind him. "Time to go," he says dully.

I jump to my feet. "Already?" rips from me.

We hold each other close, as we haven't dared on the voyage. " 'Fraid so," he sighs into my ear. "The Fleet ship has called us. She'll rendezvous in an hour." He attempts a chuckle. "And we won't have the dissenters to guard anymore while they gorge themselves on our rations."

Dissenters—It took repeated ferryings to bring all those people aloft. Anyone who had meanwhile boarded the next railcar to town could have informed the police that this was not the collecting of plants for a botanical garden on another world that the Landholder's son had described when he filed his operations plan. More than one would have informed, in fear or greed or indignation. Therefore the majority compelled the minority to come with them, adding kidnapping to their crimes. Jerik had programmed his home phone to tell the depot command of the situation after three days, when we'd be uncatchably distant. The message ended by requesting transport back for our prisoners. And the government spy, of course.

I shiver in his arms. "Are you sure that isn't an armed vessel that will open fire on you after the exchange has been made?"

"I've told you before, dear worrywart. Our troops are on the planet. Destroying this ship would be a pointless evil and

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antagonize the whole Alliance. Old Jiao knows his Fleet psychology." Jerik pauses. "You'd better spend your mental energy rehearsing the story you'll have to tell."

That I had in fact been conducting surveillance, for pay and for the thrill of playing detective, but that I had been misled to believe it was on behalf of the Council of Magnates, whereas actually my employer was another younger son of a Landholder, with hopes of making a politically powerful name for himself. Jerik's cousin doesn't mind that he'll seem a bit foolish. What he really wants to do is anthropological and xenological research, and Procrustes will be a unique field for him.

I press against the hard-muscled form. "Must I really wait two years before coming back?"

"Minimum." Jerik's lips brush over my cheek. His hands tighten on my waist till they hurt. I don't complain. "When they're preoccupied, busy, the

grudge nearly forgotten. Then they'll accept that Admiral Torskov couldn't get the beautiful enemy off his mind and finally, letters going back and forth, has gotten her to pay him a visit, which leads to—" Again he chuckles. It sounds a little forlorn. "Let future scholars figure out what rascals we actually were, you and I."

My look goes past his shoulder, to the world that crouches waiting. It isn't mine. Human and nonhuman, those are not my people. Will they suffice me for the rest of my life? Will he? "Be careful, darling, darling," I beg him. "Stay alive."

INTERLUDE

"Just who are you?" Kanard asked pointedly, but only after he had finished the file on Procrustes.

"Captain Sein, Intelligence." The answering voice was level, almost a monotone.

"Look, I'm not here to play games," Gill protested. He hadn't slept well since this assignment had come down, and was both tired and annoyed. If Intelligence wanted to play games, let them do it with the Khalia.

"I assure you, Lieutenant Commander Kanard, I am not playing a game."

There was what seemed to Gill a long period of silence. Finally Sein spoke again.

"Admiral Fleisher's request put me in an awkward position. To carry it out I have to give you access to Intelligence files, trusting in your judgment. This has already cost me a good deal with those in my department less aware of the importance of your task."

"And what will this cost me?" Kanard was more than suspicious.

To Gill's surprise Sein laughed. It was a short, but friendly laugh and the smile returned to his eyes.

"You impress me." He paused and chuckled again. "If you ever want to transfer to Intelligence, look me up."

"Price?" the PR officer insisted, refusing to be diverted by compliments.

"No price," Sein assured him. "Someday I may need a favor for an equally good cause. Then, only if in your judgment you can, you may return this one."

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It sounded harmless to Gill, but this was Intelligence. He made what was meant to be a noncommittal grunt and was frustrated when Sein took this as agreement.

"I have a hero you can use here," the Intelligence officer added smoothly. "The situation has almost all you need. A valiant battle against impossible odds, sacrifice, two actually, and a happy ending."

"What's the catch?" Gill asked, noting a peculiar tone in Sein's voice.

"Well, I doubt you will be able to use any visuals of the hero," was the enigmatic answer.

Gill, admitting he was hooked, turned back to the console.

DUTY CALLS

by Anne McCaffrey

With the sort of bad luck which has dogged the Alliance lately, escort and convoy came back into normal space in the midst of space debris.

We came from the queer blankness of FTL drive into the incredible starscape of that sector, so tightly packed with sun systems that we had had to re-enter far sooner than the Admiral liked, considering nearby Khalian positions. But we had no choice. We had to leave the obscurity of FTL in relatively "open" space. It would take nearly six weeks to reduce our re-entry velocity of 93%C to one slow enough to make an orbit over the beleaguered world of Persuasion, our eventual destination. We also were constrained to reduce that tremendous velocity before nearing the gravity wells of such a profusion of stars or the Fleet could be disrupted, or worse, scattered to be easily picked off by any roving Khalia. The Admiral had

plotted a brilliant two-step braking progress through the gravity wells of nearer star systems to "lose" speed. So we emerged from FTL, nearly blinded by the blaze of brilliantly glowing stars which was, as suddenly, obscured. Then WOW! Every alert on the Dreadnought *Gormenghast* went spare.

Considering my position, attached to a landing pod, slightly forward of the main Bridge Section, I immediately went into action. Under the circumstances, the faster we could clear the junk the better, because 1) many of the supply pods towed by the freighters could be holed by some of the bigger tidbits flying around at the speeds they were moving and 2) we were

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awfuldam close to a colony the Khalia had overrun three galactic years ago. If they *had* set up any peripheral scanners, they'd catch the Cerenkov radiations from our plasma weapons. So everything that could blast a target throughout the length of the convoy was!

Me, I always enjoy target practice, if I'm not *it*, (which in my line of work as pilot of the Admiral's gig is more frequently the case than the sane would wish). Against space debris I have no peer and I was happily potting the stuff with for'ard and port side cannon when I received an urgent signal from the Bridge.

"Hansing? Prepare to receive relevant charts and data for Area ASD 800/900. Are you flight ready?"

"Aye, aye, sir," I said, for an Admiral's gig is *always* ready or you're dropped onto garbage runs right smart. I recognized the voice as that of the Admiral's aide, Commander Het Lee Wing, a frequent passenger of mine and a canny battle strategist who enjoys the full confidence of Admiral Ban Corrie Eberhard. Commander Het has planned, and frequently participated in, some of the more successful forays against Khalian forces which have overrun Alliance planets. Het doesn't have much sense of humor; I don't think I would either if only half of me was human and the more useful parts no longer in working order. I think all his spare parts affected his brain. That's all that's left of me but I got spared an off-beat but workable humor. "Data received."

"Stand by, Bil," he said. I stifled a groan. When Het gets friendly, I get worried. "The Admiral!"

"Mr. Hansing." The Admiral's baritone voice was loud and clear, just a shade too jovial for my peace of mind. "I have a mission for you. Need a recon on the third planet of ASD 836/929: its settlers call it Bethesda. It's coming up below us in a half a light-year. The one the pirates got a couple of years back. Need to be sure the Khalia don't know we've passed by. Don't want them charging up our ass end. We've got to get the convoy, intact, to the colony. They're counting on us."

"Yes, sir!" I made me sound approving and willing.

"You'll have a brawn to make contact with our local agent who is, fortunately, still alive. The colony surrendered to the Khalia, you know. Hadn't equipped themselves with anything larger than handguns." The Admiral's voice registered impatient disapproval of people unable to protect themselves from

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invasion. But then, a lot of the earliest colonies had been sponsored by nonaggressives long before the Alliance encountered the Khalia. Or had they encountered us? I can never remember now, for the initial contact was several lifetimes ago, or so it seems to me, who has fought Khalia all my adult life. However, it had been SOP to recruit a few "observers" in every colonial contingent, and equip them with implanted receivers for just such an emergency as had overtaken Bethes-da. "Het'll give you the agent's coordinates," the Admiral went on. "Had to patch this trip up, Bil, but you're the best one to handle it. Space dust! Hah!" I could appreciate his disgust at our bad luck. "You've got a special brawn partner for this, Bil. She'll brief you on the way."

I didn't like the sound of that. But time was of the essence if the Admiral had to prepare contingency plans to scramble this immense convoy to avoid a Khalian space attack. Somehow or other, despite modern technology, a fleet never managed to reassemble all the original convoy vessels and get them safely to their destination: some mothers got so lost or confused in the scramble they never did find themselves again. Much less their original destination. Merchantmen could be worse than sheep to round up, and often about as smart. Yeah, I remember what sheep are.

"Aye, aye, sir," I said crisply and with, I hoped, convincing enthusiasm for the job. I hate dealing with on-the-spots (o.t.s.): they're such a paranoid lot, terrified of exposure either to Khalian Overlords or to their planetary colleagues who could be jeopardized by the agent's very existence. Khalian reprisals are exceptionally vicious. I was glad that a brawn had to contact the o.t.s.

Even as I accepted the assignment, I was also accessing the data received from the *Gormenghast's* banks. The computers of an Ocelot Scout, even the Mark 18 which I drove, are programmed mainly for evasive tactics, maintenance, emergency repairs and stuff like that, with any memory limited to the immediate assignment. We don't *know* that the Khalia can break into our programs but there's no sense in handing them, free, gratis, green, the whole nine metres, is there? Even in the very unlikely chance that they *could* get their greasy paws on one of us.

The mortality and capture statistics for scouts like mine don't bear thinking about so I don't think about them. Leaves most of my brain cells able to cope with immediate problems.

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Brawns have an even lower survival rate: being personalities that thrive on danger, risk and uncertainty, and get large doses of all. I wondered what "she" was. What ancient poet said *The female of the species is more deadly than the male*? Well, he had it right by all I've seen, in space or on the surface.

"Good luck, Bil!"

"Thank you, sir."

Admiral Eberhard doesn't have to brief scout pilots like me but I appreciate his courtesy. Like I said, the mortality for small ships is high and that little extra personal touch makes a spaceman try that much harder to complete his mission successfully.

"Permission to come aboard." The voice, rather deeper than I'd expected, issued from the airlock corn-unit.

I took a look and damned near blew a mess of circuits. "She" was a feline, an ironically suitable brawn for an Ocelot Scout like me, but she

was the most amazing... colors, for her short thick fawn fur was splashed, dashed and dotted by a crazy random pattern of different shades of brown, fawn, black and a reddish tan. She was battle lean, too, with a few thin patches of fur on forearm and the deep ribcage, which might or might not be scars. At her feet was a rolled up mass of fabric, tightly tied with quick-release straps.

I'd seen Hrrubans before, of course: they're one of the few species in the Alliance who, like humans, are natural predators, consequently make very good combat fighters. I'm not poor-mouthing our Allies, but without naming types, some definitely have no fighting potential, though as battle support personnel they have no peer and, in their own specialties, are equally valuable in the Alliance war with the Khalia. *A shacking goo*, as the man said.

This representative of the Hrruban species was not very large: some of their troops are B I G mothers. I'd say that this Hrruban was young—they're allowed to fight at a much earlier age than humans—for even the adult females are of a size with the best of us. This one had the usual oddly scrunched shoulder conformation. As she stood upright, her arms dangled at what looked like an awkward angle. It would be for the human body. She held herself in that curious, straight-backed, half-forward crouch from her pelvis that Hrrubans affected: the way she stood, the weight on the balls of her furred feet, thighs forward, calves on the slant, the knee ahead of the toe, indicated that she stood erect right now, by choice,

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but was still effective on all fours. The Khalia had once been quadrupeds, too, but you rarely saw one drop to all fours, unless dying. And that was the only way I wanted to see Khalia.

"Permission..." she began again patiently, one foot nudging the folded bundle of fabric beside her. I opened the airlock and let her in.

"Sorry, but I've never seen an Hrruban quite like you before..." I ended on an upward inflection, waiting for her to identify herself.

"B'ghra Hrrunalkharr," she said, "senior lieutenant, Combat Supply."

And if survival is low for brawns, it's even lower for Combat Supply

personnel. If she had made a senior lieutenancy, she was *good*.

"Hi, I'm Bil Hansing," I replied cheerily. Ours might be a brief association but I preferred to make it as pleasant as possible.

She flung a quick salute with her 'hand' turned inward, for her wrist did not swivel for a proper Navy gesture. Then the corners of her very feline mouth lifted slightly, the lower jaw dropped in what I could readily identify as a smile.

"You can call me Ghra, easier than sputtering over the rest of it. Your lot can never get your tongues around rs."

"Wanna bet?" And I rolled off her name as easily as she had.

"Well, I am impressed," she said, giving the double s a sibilant emphasis. She had lugged her bundle aboard and looked around the tiny cabin of the Ocelot. "Where can I stow this, Bil?"

"Under the for'ard couch. We are short on space, we Ocelots!"

I could see her fangs now as she really smiled, and the tip of a delicate pink tongue. She quickly stowed the bundle and turned around to survey me.

"Yeah, and the fastest ships in the galaxy," she said with such a warm approval that my liking for her increased. "Mr. Hansing, please inform the Bridge of my arrival. I take it you've got the data. I'm to share the rest of my briefing when we're under way."

She was polite, but firm, about her eagerness to get on with what could only be a difficult assignment. And I liked that

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attitude in her. With an exceedingly graceful movement, she eased into the left-hand seat, and latched the safety harness, her amazing "hands" (they weren't really "paws"—Khalia have "paws"—for the "fingers" on her hands had evolved to digit status, with less webbing between them for better gripping) curving over the armrests. The end of her thickly furred tail twitched idly as the appendage jutted out beyond the back of the cushioned seat. I watched it in fascination. I'd never appreciated how

eloquent such a tenable extremity could be.

Nevertheless, duty called and I alerted the Bridge to our readiness. We received an instant departure okay, and I released the pressure grapples of the airlock, gave the starboard repellers a little jolt and swung carefully away from the *Gormenghast*.

I enjoy piloting the Ocelot. She's a sweet ship, handles like a dream, can turn her thirty meters on her tail if she has to, and has, though not many believe me. I remind them that she's a Mark 18, the very latest off the Fleet's Research & Development Mother Ship. Well, five years galactic standard ago. But I oversee all maintenance myself and she's in prime condition, save for the normal space wear and tear and the tip of one fin caught by a Khalian bolt the second year I commanded her when Het and I ran a pirate blockade in FCD 122/785.

Of course, she's light on armament, can't waste maneuverability and speed on shielding, and I've only the four plasma cannons, bow and stern, and swivel lers port and starboard. I'd rather rely on speed and zip: the ship's a fast minx and I'm a bloody good driver. I can say that because I've proved it. Five g.s. years in commission and still going.

I pumped us up to speed and the Fleet was fast disappearing into the blackness of space, only the slight halo of light where they were still firing to clear lanes through the damned dust and that quickly dispersed. Those telltale emissions which could prove very dangerous. That is, if the Khalia were looking our way. Space is big and the convoy was slowing to move cautiously through a congested globular ASD cluster to make our ultimate orbit about ASD 836/934. Everywhere in this young cluster there was dust which was a navigational hazard despite its small to minuscule size.

The reason the Fleet was convoying such an unwieldy

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number of ships through this sector of space, adjacent to that known to be controlled by Khalia, was to reinforce the sizeable and valuable mining colony on Persuasion 836/934: and strengthen the defenses of two nearby Alliance planets; the water world of Persepolis, whose oceans teemed with edible marine forms chockful of valuable protein for both humanoid and the weasel-like Khalia, and the fabulous woods of Poinsettia which were more splendid and versatile in their uses than teak, mahogany or

redwood. In the ASD Sector the Khalia had only three planets, none valuable except as stepping stones so that a takeover of the richer Alliance-held worlds had a high probability factor which the Alliance was determined to reduce by the reinforcement of troops and material in this convoy. Or, once again the great offensive strike planned for Target, the main Khalian base in Alliance space, would have to be set back.

As the tremendous entry speed was reduced, the convoy was, of course, vulnerable to any Khalian marauders during the six months that maneuver took. FTL is the fastest way to travel: it's the slowing down that takes so much time. (You got one, you got the other. You live with it.) So Alliance High Command had created a few diversions in Sectors BRE, BSF, attacks on two rather important Khalian-held planets and had thrown great Fleet strength into the repulsing maneuver at KSD: a strategy which was evidently working to judge by the lack of visible traces of Khalian force hereabouts. In FTL, you have obscurity—Alliance or Khalian. But in normal space, the emissions of your drive make ever-expanding "cones" which *are* detectable. The large number of ships included in our convoy increased the detection factor—to any spaceship crossing the "cone" trail. "Cones" were, fortunately, not detectable from a planetary source, but the plasma bursts were—that is, if Bethesda had the right equipment.

If we could be spared any further unforeseen incidents, the convoy had a good chance of relieving Persuasion and the other worlds before the piratic Weasels could summon strike elements to the ASD area.

I had never actually been near a Khalian. Maybe my decorative brawn had. I intended to ask her as soon as I had locked us on course. Ghra's tail tip continued to twitch, just slightly, as we reached the Ocelot's cruising speed. I had now programmed in the data needed to reach Bethesda, and to

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re-enter normal space at three planetary orbits away from it, on the dark side. I checked my calculations and then, warning Ghra, activated the FTL drive and we were off!

Ghra released the safety belt and stretched, her tail sticking straight out behind her. Good thing she couldn't see me gawping at it. Scoutships with a good pilot like me, and I'm not immodest to say so, could utilize the

FTL drive between systems, where the Fleet, if it wanted to keep its many vessels together in some form of order, could not.

"If you'll put what is now the spaceport area of Bethesda on the screen, Bil, I'll brief you," she said, leaning forward to the terminal. I screened the relevant map. She extended one claw, using it to show me the landing site. "We're to go in north of the spaceport, low, where they won't be looking for anything. Just here, there're a lot of canyons and ravines. And a lot of volcanic debris, some of it bigger than your Ocelot. So you can pretend you're an old mountain fragment while I mosey into the settlement to see the o.t.s."

"And when the sun comes up and shines off my hull, it'll be bloody plain I'm no rock."

She gave a rippling chuckle, more like a happy growl. "Ah, but you'll be camouflaged by the time the sun rises," she said, pointing her left hand toward the couch under which her bundle was stored.

"Camouflaged?"

She chuckled again, and dropped her lower jaw in her Hrruban smile. "Just like me."

"Huh? 'tbu'd stand out a klick away."

"Not necessarily. D'you know why creatures evolved different exterior colors and patterns? Well, markings and colors help them become invisible to their natural enemies, or their equally natural victims. On your own home world, I'll cite the big felines as an excellent example." She twitched her dainty whisker hairs to indicate amusement, or was it condescension for us poorly endowed critters? "Tigers have stripes because they're jungle inhabitants; lions wear fur that blends into the veldt or grasslands; panthers are mottled black to hide on tree limbs and shadows. Their favorite prey is also colored to be less easily detected, to confuse the eye of the beholder, if they stand still."

"We've finally caught a few prisoners. A major breakthrough in Khalian biological research suggests that they are

blind to certain colors and patterns." She indicated her splashed flanks. "What I'm wearing should render me all but invisible to Khalia."

"Ah, come on, Ghra, I can't buy that!"

"Hear me out." She held her hand up, her lustrous big eyes sparkling with an expression that could be amusement, but certainly resulted in my obedience. "We've also determined that, while Khalian night vision is excellent, dawn and dusk produce a twilight myopia. My present camouflage is blended for use on this planet. I can move with impunity at dawn and dusk, and quite possibly remain unseen during daylight hours, even by Khalia passing right by me. Provided I choose my ground cover correctly. That's part of early Hrruban training, anyhow. And we Hrrubans also know how to lie perfectly still for long hours." She grinned at my skeptical snort.

"Add to that inherent ability the fact that the Khalia have lost much of the olfactory acuteness they originally had as they've relied more and more on high tech, and I doubt they'll notice me." Her own nostrils dilated slightly and her whiskers twitched in distaste. "I can smell a Khalian more than five clicks away. And a Khalian wouldn't detect, much less recognize my spoor. Stupid creatures. Ignored or lost most of their valuable natural assets. They can't even move as quadrupeds anymore. We had the wisdom to retain, and improve, on our inherited advantages. It could be something as simple and nontech as primitive ability that's going to tip the scale in this war. We've already proved that ancient ways make us valuable as fighters."

"You Hrrubans have a bloody good reputation," I agreed generously. "You've had combat experience?" I asked tactfully, for generally speaking, seasoned fighters don't spout off the way she was. As Ghra didn't seem to be a fully adult Hrruban, maybe she was indulging herself in a bit of psyching up for this mission.

"Frequent." The dry delivery of that single word assured me she was, indeed, a seasoned warrior. The "fingers" of her left hand clicked a rapid tattoo. "Khalia are indeed formidable opponents. Very." She spread her left hand, briefly exposing her lethal complement of claws. "Deadly in hand-to-hand with that stumpy size a strange advantage. A fully developed adult Khalian comes up to my chest: it's those short Khalian arms, incredibly powerful, that you've got to watch out for."

Some of the latest "short arm" jokes are grisly by any standards: real sick humor! And somehow, despite your disgust, you find yourself avidly repeating the newest one.

"The Khalia may prefer to use their technology against us in the air," Ghra continued, "but they're no slouches face to face. I've seen a Khalian grab a soldier by the knees, trip him up, and sever the hamstrings in three seconds. Sometimes they'll launch at the chest, compress the lungs in a fierce grip and bite through the jugular vein. However," Ghra added with understandable pride, "we've noticed a marked tendency in their troops to avoid Hrrubans. Fortunately we don't mind fighting in mixed companies."

I'd heard some incredible tales of the exploits of mixed companies and been rather proud that so many of the diverse species of the Alliance could forget minor differences for the main Objective. I'd also heard some horror tales of what the Khalia did to any prisoners of those mixed companies. (It had quickly become a general policy to dispatch any immobilized wounded.) Of course, such tales always permeate a fighting force. Sometimes, I think, not as much to encourage our own fighting men to fight that much more fiercely as to dull the edge of horror by the repetition of it.

"But it's not going to be brute force that'll overcome them: it'll be superior intelligence. We Hrrubans hope to be able to infiltrate their ground forces with our camouflages." She ran both hands down her lean and muscled thighs. "I'm going to prove we can."

"More power to you," I said, still skeptical if she was relying on body paint. While I was a space fighter pilot, I knew enough about warfare strategies to recognize that it was only battles that were won in space: wars are won when the planets involved are secured against the invader. "There's just one thing. You may be able to fool those Weasels' eyes, but what about the humans and such on Bethesda? You're going to be mighty visible to them, you know."

Ghra chuckled. "The Khalia enforce a strict dusk-to-dawn curfew on their captive planets. You'll be setting us down in an unpopulated area. None of the captured folk would venture there and all the Khalian air patrols would see is the camouflage net."

I hoped so, not that I personally feared the Khalia in the air or on the ground. For one thing, an Ocelot is faster than any atmosphere planes they operate, or spacecraft. The Khalia

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prefer to fly small vehicles: as far as we know they don't have any longer than a cruiser. Which makes a certain amount of sense—with very short arms, and legs, they wouldn't have the reach to make effective use of a multiple function board. Their control rooms must be crowded. Unless the Khalia had prehensile use of their toes?

"Yeah, but you have to contact the o.t.s. and he lives in the human cantonment. How're you going to keep invisible there?"

She shrugged her narrow shoulders. "By being cautious. After all, no humans will be expecting an Hrruban on Bethesda, will they?" She dropped her jaw again, and this time I knew it was amusement that brought a sparkle to those great brown eyes. "People, especially captive people, tend to see only what they expect to see. And they don't want to see the unusual or the incredible. If they should spot me, they won't believe it nor are they likely to run off and tattle to the Khalia."

Then Ghra stretched, sinews and joints popping audibly. "How long before re-entry, Bil? Time enough for me to get a short nap?" Her jaw dropped in an Hrruban grin as she opened the lid of the deepsleep capsule.

"Depends on how long you want to sleep? One week, two?" Scoutships are fast but they also must obey the laws of FTL physics. I had to slow down just as the convoy had to, only I could waste my speed faster by braking a lot of it in the gravity well of Bethesda's sun.

"Get us into the system. We'll have plenty of time to swap jokes without boring each other," she said as she took two steps to the long cabinet that held the deepsleep tank.

She pulled it out and observed while I set the mechanism to time and calibrated the gas dose. Nodding her approval, she lay down on the couch, attached the life-support cups suitable for her species with the ease of long practice. With a final wink, she closed the canopy and then her eyes, her lean camouflaged frame relaxing instantly as the gas flooded the

compartment.

Ghra was perceptive about the inevitable grating of two personalities cooped up in necessarily cramped conditions, for too long a time with too little activity. We brain ships are accustomed to being by ourselves, though I'm the first to tell new members of our Elite Corps that the first few months ain't

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easy. There are benefits. We are conditioned to the encapsulation long before we're placed in any kind of large, dangerous equipment. The good thing about being human is our adaptability. Or maybe it's sheer necessity. If you'd rather not be dead, there is an alternative: and if we, who have had bodies and have known that kind of lifestyle, are not as completely the ship we drive as shell people are, we have our uses. I have come to like this new life, too.

The Ocelot plunged on down toward the unseen planet and its mission. I set external alarms and went into recall trance.

As the Ocelot neared my target, a mild enough looking space marble, dark blues and greens with thin cloud cover, it roused both Ghra and me. She came alert right smart, just as a well-trained fighter should. Grabbing a container of the approved post-sleep fortified drink, she resumed her seat and we both read the Ocelot's auto-reports.

The detectors identified only the usual stuff—comsats, mining transfer gear, solar heater units, but nothing in orbit around Bethesda that could detect the convoy. The only way to be dead sure, or dead, was to check down below as well. Ghra agreed. Dawn was coming up over one of the water masses that punctuated the planet. The shoreline was marked by a series of half circles. They looked more like crater holes than natural subsidences, but there had once been a lot of volcanic activity on Bethesda.

"How're we going to make it in, Bil? Even with what the settlers put up, the Khalians could spot us."

"No, I've lined the Ocelot up with the same trajectory as a convenient trail of meteoritic debris. You can see the planet is pocked with craters. Perfect for our purpose. Even if they have gear sensitive enough to track

the Ocelot's faint trail, they'd more than likely figure it was just more of the debris that's already come in."

"I had a look at Het's data on the planet," Ghra said. "Bethesda's spaceport facility had been ample enough to take the big colonial transport jobs. Last recorded flights in before the Khalian capture were for commercial freight lighters, but the port could take the biggest Khalian cruisers and destroyers, not just those pursuit fighters."

"What did Het say about Khalian update on the invasion?"

Ghra shrugged. "That is unknown. We'll find out." She grinned when I made one of those disgruntled noises I'm

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rather good at. "Well, they could be busy elsewhere. You know how the Khalia are, mad keen on one thing one moment, and then forget about it for a decade."

"Let's hope the decade doesn't end while we're in this sector. Well, we've got a day or so before we go in, did you hear the one about..."

Ghra knew some even / hadn't heard by the time I was ready to activate the trajectory I'd plotted. I matched speed with a group of pebbles while Ghra did a geology game with me. I thought I'd never see the last of the fregmekking marbles, or win the game, even though we were getting down at a fair clip. Ghra was betting the pebbles would hit the northern wasteland before we flattened out for the last segment of our run. Whose side was she on?

Ducking under the light cloud cover, I made a low altitude run over the night side toward the spaceport and the small town that serviced it. The Khalia had enslaved the planet's small resident human population in their inimitable fashion, but there might just be some sort of a night patrol.

"Here's our objective, Ghra," I told her as we closed in on our landing site, and screened the picture.

She narrowed her eyes, mumbling or purring as she memorized landscape. The town had been built along the coastline and there looked to be wharfs and piers but no sign of sea traffic or boats. Just beyond the

town, on a plateau that had been badly resculptured to accommodate large craft landings, was the respectably sized spaceport, with towers, corn-disks, quarters and what looked like repair hangars. Infra scan showed two cooling earthen circles but that didn't tell us enough. I got a quick glimpse of the snouts and fins of a few ships, none of them warm enough to have been flown in the past twenty-four hours, but I didn't have time to verify type and number before we were behind the coastal hill. I dropped the meteor ruse just in time to switch on the gravity drive and keep us from planting a new crater.

"And there," I put an arrow on the screen, "is where I make like a rock. You'll be only about five clicks from town."

"Good," and she managed to make the *g* into a growl, narrowing her eyes as she regarded the picture. Her tail gave three sharp swings. "May I have a replay of the spaceport facility?" I complied, screening the footage at a slower rate.

"Nothing fast enough to catch me, Ghra, either in the

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atmosphere or in space," I replied nonchalantly. I made the usual copies of the tapes of our inbound trip for the Mayday capsule. Commander Het collects updates like water rations. "Strap in, Ghra, I'm cutting the engines. Het found me a straight run through that gorge and I'm using it."

That's another thing about the Ocelot, she'll glide. Mind you, I was ready to cut in the repellers at any moment but Het had done me proud in choosing the site. We glided in, with due regard for the Ocelot's skin for we'd be slotted in among a lot of volcanic debris. Some of that was, as Ghra had promised, as large as the scout. No sooner had we landed than Ghra retrieved her bundle and hefted it to the airlock, which I opened for her. Locked in my sealed chamber, I couldn't be of any assistance in spreading the camouflage net but she was quick, deft and very strong.

"Have you got a com button, Bil?" she asked when she had returned, her breath only a little faster than normal. She walked past the console into the little galley and drew a ration of water. "Good, then you'll get the gen one way or another." She took a deep draught of the water. "Good stuff. Import it?"

"Yeah, neither Het nor the Admiral likes it recycled," and I chuckled. "Rank has some privileges, you know."

Shamelessly, she took a second cupful. "I need to stock up if I have to lie still all day. It's summer here." She ran a claw tip down the selection dial of the supply cupboard and finally pressed a button, wrinkling her nose. "I hate field rations but they do stay with you." She had ordered up several bars of compressed high protein/high carbohydrate mix. I watched as she stored them in what I had thought to be muscle but were carefully camouflaged inner forearm pockets.

"What else are you hiding?" Surprise overwhelmed tact.

She gave that inimitable chuckle of hers. "A few useful weapons." She picked up the button I had placed on the console. "Neat! What's the range?"

"Fifteen clicks."

"I can easy stay in that range, Bil." She fastened the little nodule to the skull side of her left ear, its metallic surface invisible in the tufty fur. "Thanks. How long till dawn?"

I gave her the times for false and real dawn. With a cheery salute she left the Ocelot. I listened to the soft slip of her feet as long as the exterior sensors could pick up the noise before I

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closed the airlock. She had been moving on all fours. Remembering old teaching clips about ancient Earth felines, I could see her lithe body bounding across the uneven terrain. For a brief moment, I envied her. Then I began worrying instead.

I had known Ghra longer than I knew most of my random passengers, and we hadn't bored each other after I roused her. In her quiet, wryly humorous way, her company had been quite a treat for me. If she'd been more humanoid, and I'd been more like my former self... ah well! That's one of the drawbacks for a gig like me; we do see the very best, but generally all too briefly.

Ghra had sounded real confident about this camouflage scheme of hers.

Not talk-herself-into-believing-it confident, but sure-there'd-be-no-problem confident. Me, I'd prefer something more substantial than paint as protection. But then, I'm definitely the product of a high tech civilization, while Ghra had faith in natural advantages and instinctive talents. Well, it was going to take every asset the Alliance had to counter the Khalian pirates!

Shortly before Bethesda's primary rose in the east, Ghra reported.

"I'm in place, Bil. I'll keep the com button on so you'll know all I do. Our contact's asleep. I'm stretched out on the branch of a fairly substantial kind of a broad-leafed tree outside his window. He's not awake yet. I'll hope he isn't the nervous type."

An hour and a half later, we both discovered that he was not the believing type either. But then, who would have expected to be contacted by what at first appeared to be a disembodied smile among the broad leaves shading your side window. It certainly wasn't what Fildin Escobat had anticipated when his implant had given him the warning zing of impending visitation.

"What are you?" he demanded after Ghra had pronounced the meeting code words.

"An Hrruban," Ghra replied in a well-projected whisper. I could hear a rustle as she moved briefly.

"Arghle!"

There was a silence, broken by a few more throaty garglings.

"What's Hrruban?"

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"Alliance felinoids."

"Cat people?" Fildin had some basic civic's education.

"I'm camouflaged."

"Damned sure."

"So I'm patently not Khalian..."

"Anyone can say they're Alliance. You could be Khalian, disguised."

"Have you ever seen a Khalian going about on all fours? The size of me? With a face and teeth like mine? Or a tail?"

"No..." This was a reluctant admission.

"Speaking Galactic?"

"That's true enough," Fildin replied sourly, for all captive species were forced to learn the spitting, hissing, Khalian language. Khalian nerve prods and acid whips effectively encouraged both understanding and vocabulary. "So now what?"

"You tell me what I need to know."

"I don't know anything. They keep it that way." There was an unmistakable anger in the man's voice, which he lowered as he realized that he might be overheard.

"What were you before the invasion?"

"A mining engineer." I could almost see the man draw himself up with remembered pride.

"Now?"

"Effing road sweeper. And I'm lucky to have that, so I don't see what good I can do you or the Alliance."

"Probably more than you think," was Ghra's soothing response. "You have eyes and ears."

"I intend keeping 'em."

"You will. Can you move freely about the town?"

"The town, yes."

"Near the spaceport, too?"

"Yeah." Now Fildin's tone became suspicious and anxious.

"So you'd know if there had been any scrambles of their fighter craft."

"Haven't been any."

"None?"

"I tol' you. Though I did hear there's supposed to be's'more landing soon."

"How soon?"

"I dunno. Didn't want to know." Fildin was resigned.

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"Do you work today?"

"We work everyday, all day, for those fregmekking rodents."

"Can you get near the spaceport? And do a count of what kind of space vehicle and how many of each are presently on the ground?"

"I could, but what good does that do you if more are coming in?"

"Do you know that for sure?"

"Nobody knows anything for sure. Why? Are we going to be under attack? Is that what you need to know all this for?" Fildin was clearly dubious about the merits of helping a counterattack.

"The Alliance has no immediate plans for your planet."

"No?" Fildin now sounded affronted. "What's wrong? Aren't we important enough?"

"You certainly are, Fildin." Ghra's voice was purringly smooth and reassuring. "And if you can get that information for me, it'll be of major importance in our all-out effort to free your planet without any further bloodshed and unpleasantness."

He gave a snort. "I don't see how knowing what's on the ground now

will help."

"Neither do I," Ghra said, allowing a tinge of resentment creep into her silken tone. "That's for my superiors to decide. But it is the information that is required, which I have risked my life to obtain, so it must be very important: Will you help the Alliance remove the yoke of the oppressor, help you return to your former prestige and comfort?"

There was a long pause during which I could almost hear the man's brain working.

"I just need to tell you what's on the ground now?"

"That's all, but I need to know the types of craft, scout, destroyer, whatever, and how many of each. And would you know if there have been battlecruisers here?"

"No cruisers," he said in a tone of disgust. "They can't land."

If colonial transports could land on Bethesda so could Khalian battlecruisers, but he didn't need to know that. What Ghra had to ascertain from him was if there were cruisers or destroyers that could be launched in pursuit of our convoy. Even a scout could blow the whistle on us and get enough of a

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head start to go FTL right back to Target and fetch in some real trouble. Only the fighters and cruisers escorting the convoy would be able to maneuver adequately to meet a Khalian attack. They would not be able to defend all the slowing bulky transports and most of the supply pods and drones that composed a large portion of the total. And if the supply pods bought it, the convoy could fail. Slowing takes a lot of fuel.

I took it as a small sliver of good luck that Fildin reported no recent activity. Perhaps this backwater hadn't been armed by its Khalian invaders.

"Cruisers, destroyers and scouts," Ghra repeated. "How many of each, Fildin, and you will be giving us tremendously vital information."

"When'll we be freed?"

"Soon. You won't have long to wait if all goes well."

"If what goes well?"

"The less you know the better for you, Fildin."

"Don't I get paid for risking my hide? Those nerve prods and acid whips ain't a bit funny, you know."

"What is your monetary exchange element?"

"A lot of good that would do me," Fildin said disgustedly.

"What would constitute an adequate recompense for your risks?"

"Meat. Red meat. They keep us on short rations, and I'd love a decent meal of meat once in a while." I could almost see him salivating. Well, there's no accounting for some tastes. *A shacking goo.*

"I think something can be arranged," Ghra said purringly. "I shall meet you here at dusk, good Fildin."

"Don't let anyone see you come! Or go."

"No one shall, I can assure you."

"Hey, where... What the eff? Where did it go?"

I heard Fildin's astonished queries taper off. I also heard Ghra's sharply expelled breath and then a more even, but quickened respiration. Then some thudding, as if she had landed on a hard surface. I heard the shushing of her feet on a soft surface and then, suddenly, nothing.

"Ghra?" I spoke her name more as an extended *gr* sound than an audible word.

"Later," was her cryptic response.

With that I had to be content that whole day long.

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Occasionally I could hear her slow breathing. For a spate there in the

heat of the afternoon, I could have sworn her breathing had slowed to a sleep rhythm.

Suddenly, as the sun went down completely, the corn-unit erupted with a flurry of activity, bleatings, sounds of chase and struggle, a fierce crump and click as, quite likely, her teeth met in whatever she had been chasing. I heard dragging sounds, an explosive grunt from her and then, for an unnervingly long period, only the slip-slid of her quiet feet as she returned to Fildin Escobat's dwelling.

"Fardles! How'd you get that? Where did you get that? Oh, fardles, let me grab it before someone sees the effing thing."

"You asked for red meat, did you not?" Ghra's voice was smooth.

"Not a whole fardling beast. Where can I hide it?"

"I thought you wanted to eat it."

"I can't eat a whole one."

"Then I'll help!"

"NO!" Fildin's desperate reply ended in a gasp as he realized that he had inadvertently raised his voice above the hoarse whisper in which most of his conversation had been conducted. "We'll be heard by the neighbors. Can't we talk somewhere else?"

"After curfew? Stand back from the window."

"No, no, no, ohhh," and the difference in the sound I now received told me that Ghra had probably jumped through the window, right into his quarters.

"Don't put it down. It'll bloody the floor. What am I going to do with all this meat." There was both pleasure and dismay at such largesse.

"Cook what you need then." Ghra was indifferent to his problems, having rendered the requested payment. "Now, what can you report?"

"Huh? Oh, well," and this had patently been an easier task than accepting his reward, and he rolled off the quantities and types of spacecraft he had seen. I started taping his report at that juncture.

"No further indication of when the new craft are due in?" Ghra asked.

"No. Nothing. I did ask. Carefully, you know. I know a couple of guys who're menials in the port but all they knew was that something was due in."

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"Supply ships?"

"Nah! Don't you know that the Khalia make their subject planets support 'em? They live well here, those fregmekking Weasels. And we get sweetdamall."

"You'll eat well tonight and for a time, Friend Fildin. And there's no chance that it's troop carriers?"

"How'd I know? There're already more Khalia on this planet than people."

Bethesda was a large, virtually unpopulated planet and Alliance High Command had never figured out why the Khalia had suddenly invaded it. Their assault on Bethesda had been as unexpected as it had been quick. Then no more Khalian activity in the area, though there were several habitable but unoccupied planets in nearby systems. High Command was certain that the Khalia intended to increase their dominance in the ASD Sector, eventually invading the three richly endowed Alliance planets; Persuasion for its supplies of copper, vanadium and the now precious, germanium; Persepolis for its inexhaustible marine protein, (the Khalia consumed astonishing quantities of sea creatures, preferably raw, a fact which had made their invasion of Bethesda, a relatively "dry" world, all the more unexpected.)

To send a convoy of this size was unusual in every respect. High Command hoped that the Khalia would not believe the Alliance capable of risking so many ships, materiel and personnel. Admiral Eberhard was staking his career on taking that risk, plus the very clever use of the gravity wells of the nearby star ASD 836/932 and Persuasion to reduce velocity, cutting down the time in "normal space" when the convoy's "light ripple cone" was so detectable.

Those fregmekking Khalia had been enjoying such a run of good luck!

It'd better start going our way soon. Maybe Bethesda would come up on our side of the ledger.

I had screened Het's sector map, trying to figure out from which direction the Khalia might be sending in reinforcements of whatever. If they came through the ASD grid, they'd bisect the emission trail. That was all too likely as they controlled a good portion of the space beyond. But I didn't have more charts, nor any updated information on Khalian movements. The *Gormenghast* would. It was now imperative for the Admiral to know about those incoming spacecraft. Ghra was as quick.

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"It would be good to know where those ships were coming from," Ghra told Fildin. "Or why they were landing here at all. There seem to be enough ships on hand for immediate defense, and surveillance."

"How the fardles would I know? And effing sure I can't find out, not a lowly sweeper like me. I done what I said I'd do, exactly what you asked. I can't do more."

"No, I quite perceive that, Fildin Escobat, but you've been more than helpful. Enjoy your meat!"

"Hey, come back..."

Fildin's voice dropped away from the com button although I heard no sounds of Ghra's physical exertion. I waited until she would be out of hearing.

"Ghra? Can you safely talk?"

"Yes," she replied, and then I could hear the slight noise of her feet and knew she was loping along.

"What're you up to?"

"What makes you think I'm up to anything?"

"Let's call it an educated guess."

"Then guess." Amusement rippled through her suggestion.

"To the spaceport to see if you can find out where those spaceships are coming from."

"Got it in one."

"Ghra? That's dangerous, foolhardy and quite likely it's putting your life on the line."

"One life is nothing if it saves the convoy."

"Heroic of you, but it could also blow the game."

"I don't think so. There's been a program of infiltrations on any Khalian base we could penetrate. Why make Bethesda an exception? Don't worry, Bil. It'll be simple if I can get into place now in the bad light."

"Good theory but impractical," I replied sourly. "No trees, bushes or vegetation around that spaceport."

"But rather a lot of old craters..."

"You are not crater-colored..."

"Enticing mounds of supplies, and some unused repair hangars."

"Or," I began in a reasonable tone, "we can get out of here, go into a lunar orbit and keep our eyes peeled. All I'd need is enough time to send a squeal and the Admiral will know."

"Now who's heroic? And not very practical. We're not

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supposed to be sighted. And we're to try and keep the convoy from being discovered. I think I know how. Besides, Bil, this mission has several facets. One of them is proving that camouflaged Hrrubans can infiltrate Khalian positions and obtain valuable information without detection."

"Ghra, get back here!"

"No!"

There wouldn't be much point of arguing with that particular, pleasant

but unalterable brand of obstinacy, so I didn't try. Nor did I bother to threaten. Pulling rank on a free spirit like Ghra would be useless and a tactic I could scarcely support. Also, if she could find out whence came the expected flight, that would be vital information for the Admiral. Crucial for the convoy's safety!

At least we were now reasonably sure that the Bethesda-based Khalia had not detected those plasma blasts to clear the debris. Now, if only we could also neutralize the threat posed by incoming craft crossing the "light cone!" We needed some Luck!

"Where are you now, Ghra? Keep talking as long as it's safe and detail everything. Can you analyze what facilities the port has?"

"From what I can see, Bil, nothing more than the colonists brought with them." Having won her point, Ghra did not sound smug. I hoped that she had as much caution as camouflage.

Dutifully she described her silent prowl around the perimeter of the space facility, which I taped. Finally she reached the far side of the immense plateau, where some of the foothills had been crudely gouged deep enough to extend the landing grid for the huge colony transports. She had paused once to indulge herself in a long drink, murmuring briefly that the water on the Ocelot was much nicer.

"Ah," she said suddenly and exhaled in a snort of disgust. "Sensor rigs which the colonists certainly did not bring with them."

"You can't go through them without detection. Even if you could jump that high."

"I know that!" She rumbled as she considered.

"Ghra. Come on. Pack it in and get back to me. We can still do a lunar watch. Under the circumstances, I'd even try a solar hide." Which was one of the trickiest things a scout,

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even an Ocelot, could attempt. And the situation was just critical enough to make me try. Jockeying to keep just inside a sun's gravity well is a real challenge.

"You're a brave brain, Bil, but I think I've figured out how to get past the sensors. The natural way."

"What?"

"They've even supplied me with the raw materials."

"What are you talking about, Ghra? Explain!"

"I'm standing on an undercut ridge of dirt and stone, with some rather respectable boulders. Now if this mass suddenly descended thru the sensor rigs, it'd break the contact."

"And bring every Khalian from the base, but not before they'd sprayed the area with whatever they have handy, plus launch that scout squadron they've got on the pads."

"But when they see it is only sticks and stones..."

"Which could break your bones, and how're you going to start it all rolling?"

"Judiciously, because they really didn't shore this stuff up properly."

I could hear her exerting herself now and felt obliged to remind her of her risks even though I could well visualize what she was trying to do. But if the Khalia entertained even the remotest thought of tampering by unnatural agencies, they'd fling out a search net... and catch us both. Full dark was settling, so the time of their twilight myopia was nearly past. If she counted on only that to prevent them seeing her...

I heard the roll, her grunt and then the beginning of a mild roar.

"Rrrrrrow," came from Ghra and she was running, running away from the sound. "There! Told you so!"

I could also hear the whine of Khalian alert sirens and my external monitors reflected the sudden burst of light on the skyline.

"Ghra!"

"I'm okay, okay, Bil. I'm a large rock beside two smaller ones and I shan't move a muscle all night."

I have spent the occasional fretful night now and again but this would be one of the more memorable ones. Just as I had predicted, the Khalia mounted an intensive air and land search. I willingly admit that the camouflage over me was effective. The Ocelot was overflown eight or nine times—those Khalia are nothing if not tenacious when threatened.

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It was nearly dawn before the search was called off and the brilliant spaceport lights were switched off.

"Ghra?" I kept my voice low.

A deep yawn preceded her response. "Bil? You're there, too. Good."

"Are you still a rock?"

"Yessss," and the slight sibilance warned me.

"But not the same rock. Right?"

"Got me in one."

"Where are you, Ghra?"

"Part of the foundation of their command post."

"Their command post?"

"Speak one decibel louder, Bil, and their audios will pick you up. It's dawn and I'm not saying anything else all day. Catch you at sunset."

I didn't have to wait all day for her next words, but it felt like a bloody Jovian year, and at that, I didn't realize that she was whispering to me for the first nano-seconds.

"They're coming in from the 700 quadrant, Bil. Straight from Target. As if they'd *planned* to intercept. And they'll be crossing the 800s by noon tomorrow. By all that's holy, there'll be no way they'd miss the ripple cone. You've got to warn the Admiral to scatter the convoy. Now. Get off now." She gave a little chuckle. "Keeping 'em up half the night was a good idea. Most of 'em are asleep. They won't see a thing if you keep it low and easy."

"Are you daft, Ghra? I can't go now. You can't move until dusk."

"Don't argue, Bil. There's no time. Even if they detect you, they can't catch you. Go now. You go FTL as soon as you're out of the gravity well and warn the Fleet. Just think of the Admiral's face when he gets a chance to go up Khalian asses for a change. You warn him in time, he can disperse the convoy and call for whatever fighters Persuasion has left. They can refuel from the convoy's pods. What a battle that will be. The Admiral's career is made! And ours. Don't worry about me. After all, I was supposed to subject the camouflage to a real test, wasn't I."

Her low voice rippled slightly with droll amusement.

"But..."

"Go!" Her imperative was firm, almost angry. "Or it's all over for that convoy. Go. Now. While they're sleeping."

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She was right. I knew it, but no brain ship leaves a brawn in an exposed and dangerous situation. The convoy was also in an exposed and dangerous situation. The greater duty called. The lives of many superceded the life of one, one who had willingly sacrificed herself.

I lifted slowly, using the minimum of power the Ocelot needed. She was good like that, you could almost lift her on a feather, and that was all I intended to use. I kept at ground level, which, considering the terrain, meant some tricky piloting, but I also didn't want to go so fast that I lost that camouflage net. If I had to set down suddenly, it might save my skin.

I'm not used to dawdling, neither is the Ocelot and it needed finesse to do it, and every vestige of skill I possessed. I went back through the gap, over the water, heading toward the oncoming dusk. I'd use sunset to cover my upward thrust because I'd have to use power then. But I'd be far enough away from the big sensors at the spaceport to risk it. Maybe they'd still be snoozing. I willed those weaselly faces to have closed eyes and dulled senses and, as I tilted my nose up to the clear dark night of deep space, the camouflage net rippled down, spread briefly on the water and sank.

On my onward trajectory, I used Bethesda's two smaller moons as

shields, boosting my speed out of the sun's gravity well before I turned on the FTL drive.

From the moment o.t.s. had mentioned the possibility of an incoming squadron of Khalia I had been computing a variety of courses from Target through the 700 quadrant to Bethesda's system. There was no way the Khalia would miss the convoy's emission trail entering from the 700s, and then they'd climb the tailpipes of the helpless, decelerating ships. I ran some calculations on the eta at the first gravity well maneuver the Admiral had planned and they were almost there. I had to buy them just a bit more time. This Ocelot was going to have to pretend it was advance scout for ships from another direction entirely.

So I planned to re-enter normal space on a course perpendicular to the logical one that the Khalia would take for Bethesda when they exited FTL space. Their ships would have sensors sensitive enough to pick up my "light cone" and I'd come in well in advance of any traces which the convoy had left. If I handled it right, they'd come after me. It's rare that

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the Admiral's gig gets such an opportunity as this, to anticipate the enemy, to trigger a naval action which could have a tremendous effect on this everlasting war. It was too good to work out. It had to work out.

I did have several advantages to this mad scheme. The Fleet was out of FTL: the enemy not yet. I needed only a moment to send my message off to the Admiral. The rest of it was up to him. The disadvantage was that I might not have the joy of seeing the Fleet running up Khalian asses.

Once in FTL, I continued to check my calculations. Even if I came out right in the midst of the approaching Khalia I could manage. I only needed two nano-seconds to launch the message and even Khalia need more than that to react.

They had to come out *somewhere* near my re-entry window. They were great ones for using gravity wells to reduce speed, and there were two suns lined up almost perfectly with Bethesda for that sort of maneuver, just far enough away to slow them down for the Bethesda landing. My risk was worth the gamble and my confidence was bolstered by the courage of a camouflaged Hrruban.

I had the message torp set and ready to launch at the *Gormenghast* as I entered normal space. I toggled it off just as the Khalian pirate ships emerged, a couple thousand clicks off my port bow, an emergence that made my brain reel. What luck!

I was spatially above them and should be quite visible on their sensors. I flipped the Ocelot, ostensibly heading back the way I had come. I sent an open Mayday in the old code, adding some jibber I had once whipped up by recording old Earth Thai backward, and sent a panic shot from the stern plasma cannon, just in case their detectors had not spotted me. I made as much "light" as I could, wallowing my tail to broaden it, trying to pretend there were three of me. Well, trying is it.

The Ocelot is a speedy beast, speedier than I let them believe, hoping they'd mistake us for one of the larger, fully manned scouts to make it worth their while to track and destroy me. The closer they got the faster they would be able to make a proper identification. I sent MAYDAY in several Alliance languages and again my Thai-jibber. Until they sent three of their real fast ones after me. It took them two days before their plasma bursts got close. I let them come in near

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enough for me to do some damage. I think I got one direct hit and a good cripple before I knew I was in their range. I hit the jettison moments before their cannon blew the Ocelot apart.

"Well, now, Mr. Hansing, how does that feel?" The solicitous voice was preternatural ly loud through my audio circuits as consciousness returned.

"Loud and clear," I replied with considerable relief and adjusted the volume.

I'd made it after all. Sometimes we do. After all, the Fleet would have engaged the pirates, and someone was sure to search the wreckage for the vital titanium capsule that contained Mayday tapes and what was left of Lieutenant Senior Grade Bil Hansing. Brains have been known to drift a considerable time before being retrieved with no harm done.

"What've I got this time?" I asked, flicking on visual monitors.

As I half suspected, I was in the capacious maintenance bay of the

Fleet's Mother, surrounded by other vehicles being repaired and reserviced. And camouflaged with paint. I made a startled sound.

"The very latest thing, Lieutenant."

I focused my visuals on the angular figure of Commander Davi Orbrinn, an officer well known to me. He still sported a trim black beard. His crews had put me back into commission half a dozen times. "An Ocelot Mark 19, new, improved and..." Commander Orbrinn sighed deeply. "Camouflaged. But really, Mr. Hansing, can you not manage to get a shade more wear out of this one?"

"Did the convoy get in all right? Did the Admiral destroy the Khalia? Did anyone rescue Ghra? How long have I been out of service?"

The Commander might turn up stiff but he's an affable soul.

"Yes, yes, no and six months. The Admiral insisted that you have the best. You're due back on the *Gormenghast* at 0600."

"That's cutting it fine, Davi, but thanks for all you've done for me."

He gave a pleased grunt and waggled an admonishing finger at me. "Commander Het says they've saved something special

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for you for your recommission flight. Consider yourself checked out and ready to go. Duty calls!"

"What else?" I replied in a buoyant tone, happy to be able to answer, and rather hopeful that duty would send me to retrieve a certain camouflaged Hrruban.

And that was exactly what Duty called for.

INTERLUDE

For the first time in three months Gill Kanard looked happy. An hour before, he had watched the omnicasters repeat his only slightly edited version of the glorious Fleet victory off Bethesda. Edited to leave out references to the minor fact that Bethesda had not been the object of the exercise or that the planet was still occupied by the Khalia.

Watching from the sun garden, he was empathizing with the efforts of one of Port's native sauropods to break through the city's defenses. The creature was at least ten meters tall and all muscle and teeth, with very little brain. Evidently the scent of human meat beyond the barrier was nearly irresistible. Four times it had charged the wall, only to be stung by lasers and frustrated by the seamless durillium of the wall that separated Port from the planetwide jungle surrounding it.

It was limping forward for a fifth attempt when Gill's personal corn-unit buzzed. He answered without taking his eyes off the struggle.

"Kanard here."

"Gill, it's Allen. You'd better get down here." It was his admin assistant. He sounded more excited than concerned.

"Something wrong?"

"It's Target, the counterattack. They've landed. We're getting in the first reports." Allen sounded understandably happy. Strange having an enemy that you don't have to make up any atrocity reports about. If anything, the Sentient Relations and Communications Division had covered up the worst, in fear of starting a panic in the threatened sectors. There were few more authentic supporters of this war than

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Gill's own department. He liked to think it added a good feel to their press releases.

This would be a great follow-up to the Bethesda story. They could contrast the humanity of the Fleet marines on Target with the Khalia's behavior.

RESCUE MISSION

by David Drake

"Is rr true," demanded one of the First Platoon corporals in a voice that filled the echoing bay of the landing craft, "that this whole operation is so

we can rescue Admiral Mayne's nephew from the Khalia?"

Captain Kowacs looked at the man. The corporal stared back at the company commander with a jaunty arrogance that said, *Whatcha gonna do? Put me on point?*

Which of course was the corporal's normal patrol position.

Kowacs took a deep breath, but you learned real fast in a Marine Reaction Company that you couldn't scare your troops with rear-echelon discipline. Trying to do that would guarantee you were the first casualty of the next firefight.

"No, Corporal Dodd," said Kowacs. "Admiral Mayne is planning coordinator for this mission, but neither he nor any nephews of his have anything behind-the-scenes to do with it."

He glared at his assembled company.

The behind-the-scenes order had come from Star Admiral Forberry; and it was Forberry's son, not a nephew, who'd been snatched—no body recovered, at any rate—when the Khalia raided the Pleasure Dome on Iknaton five years before.

Nobody else spoke up; even Dodd looked abashed.

Kowacs gazed at the hundred and three pairs of waiting eyes—wondered how many of them would have any life behind them in twenty-four hours...

Sighed and thumbed the handset controlling the holo projector.

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The image that formed above Kowacs' head was fuzzy. The unit was intended for use in a shielded environment, while the bay of the landing ship *Bonnie Rarker* was alive with circuits and charged metal.

No matter this was the 121st Marine Reaction Company, the Headhunters, not an architectural congress. The projector would do for the job.

"Fleet Intelligence believes this site to be the Khalia's major holding facility for human prisoners on Target," Kowacs said, referencing the hologram with a nod. "Their slave pen. Reconnaissance indicates that slave ships land at a pad three kilometers distant—"

A second hologram bloomed briefly, the scale of distance merging it with one wall of the big room.

"—and their cargoes are carried to the holding facility by air trucks which touch down on the roof of the Administration Building," Kowacs continued as the image of the outlying spaceport disappeared. The building in the center of the main hologram brightened and began to rotate in three dimensions while the Marines squinted.

"Based on analysis of captured Khalian structures," Kowacs said, "Intelligence believes the building is an integral polyborate casting, probably of two above-ground levels—"

"That high and the Weasels only got two floors?" demanded a sergeant from the Heavy Weapons platoon. She was concerned, not gibing like Dodd earlier. "Them little bastards, they *like* low ceilings."

"Good point, Sergeant Rozelle," Kowacs said, as if he liked to be interrupted... but soldiers who were too dumb to think for themselves were too dumb to trust with your life in a reaction company. "Intelligence believes the building is scaled to the needs of human—slave—intake. But there aren't any windows, and there may well be a third level inside."

Kowacs cleared his throat. Before any of the half dozen Marines poised with further questions could interrupt again, he continued, "The walls and roof are rigid enough to withstand considerable stress, but they're apt to shatter once their integrity is breached. Intelligence believes that strip charges will hole them and that plasma bolts should crumble sections large enough for easy entry,"

Almost the entire complement of the 121st was veteran. Even the scattering of newbies was aware that Fleet Intelligence believed a lot of things—but all Fleet Intelligence knew

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for sure was that no analyst's butt was going to be on the line if his

belief were false.

"The admin building is separated from the camp proper by double fences with fifteen meters between them," Kowacs continued as the hologram of the building froze and that of the fenced area brightened in turn. "The intermediate separation is believed to be mined and is swept by automatic weapons sited on the building's roof coping. The fence may be electrified."

Marines nodded, easy in the knowledge that barriers impassable to a bunch of unarmed civilians were going to be a piece of cake to *them*.

The forty-eight buildings splayed like a double row of spokes around the hub of the admin building, twelve and thirty-six, brightened as the hologram fence dimmed.

"Beyond that are the slave pens and workshops themselves," Kowacs said.

Just for a moment he paused, his mouth half open—prepared speech interrupted by memories of Khalia and slaves... Memories of his father and mother, dead on Gravely, and his sister's body left behind two weeks later on LaFarge when the same raider landed to replenish its stock.

Its larder.

"Intelligence doesn't even guess at the structure within the compound." Kowacs forced his tongue to continue, though it was several moments more before his eyes were focusing again on the Marines. They were draped over folded bunks and the equipment crated to deploy with them. Some of them looked back at their captain with vacant expressions that Kowacs knew must mirror his of a moment before.

"There may be guards in the barracks, there may not," he continued thickly, damning the emotion that clogged his throat and made him less able to do his job—

Of erasing every living Weasel from the universe.

"If there are guards, they probably don't have weapons; but most of you know an unarmed Khalian can still be a dangerous opponent."

"It's still a fucking pelt, too," growled someone from a corner of the bay.

"Yeah, it's that too," Kowacs said in a voice with an edge. "And any Marine taking trophies while there's still a job to do, I'll take his ears myself. Do you understand?"

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The newbies thought that was a threat. The veterans knew it was a promise.

Kowacs took a deep breath and, fully in control of himself and the situation again, continued as the hologram changed. "The outer perimeter is a double fence again, but with guard towers on the exterior."

The tower images glowed like strung jewels.

"Most of them are automatic weapons," Kowacs said without expression, "but there are rapid-firing plasma guns—"

Six of the jewels stood out from the rest.

"—for anti-vehicle defense; and there are a pair of missile batteries. Ship-killers."

"Fuckin' A," said Dodd. He wasn't interrupting, just vocalizing what all the Marines in the bay were thinking right now.

Kowacs included.

"Sir?" asked Sergeant Atwater of Third Platoon, a black Terran who was in line for a slot in the Officer Training Unit. "What forces are being committed to this assault?"

"Right," said Kowacs. "The *Carol Ann Fugate* and the *Ladybird Johnson* will land as close to the perimeter as they can. The One-Twenty-second is responsible for the west half—"

That portion of the hologram brightened.

"—and the One-Twenty-third handles the rest. Kamens and Eckland think their companies are nearly as good as mine—"

The back of Kowacs' mind wore a smile at the scene in Admiral Mayne's office, when he and his fellow company commanders had been told their assignments.

"—so I guess they'll be able to take care of the job."

"Ah, sir?" said Atwater, his eyes narrowed on the completely highlighted perimeter of the slave compound. "Ah—where will *we* be?"

"The *Bonnie Parker* sets down on the roof of the admin building," Kowacs said quietly.

He didn't bother to change the hologram; everyone else in the bay was staring at the face of their commander, including the platoon leaders who'd already been briefed on the plan. "You're the best there is in the Fleet, Headhunters. Anybody doubts you, tell him suck on *that*."

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Nobody said anything at all.

"Yeah, well," Kowacs continued after a moment. "Your platoon leaders will give you your individual assignments in a moment. Ah—"

He looked out over his company. "Ah, I have been ordered to, ah, emphasize to you that the high command considers Khalian prisoners to be a first priority of all the Target landings, this one included."

He cleared his throat. "Any questions before I turn you over to your platoon leaders?"

"You mean you want us to bring in Weasels *alive*, Cap'n?" Dodd blurted in amazement.

Beside Dodd sat Sergeant Bradley, who acted as Kowacs' field first—company headquarters, headed by the Table of Organization "First Sergeant," was back on Port Tau Ceti, forwarding supplies, mail, and replacements to the company. Bradley was a man of middle height; his flesh was drawn so tightly over his bones that the pink keloid, replacing his hair since a too-near plasma burst, did not appear unusual.

Now he turned to Dodd, lifted the junior non-com's chin between his

thumb and forefinger, and said very distinctly, "Did he *say* that, dickhead?"

"No, Sergeant," Dodd whispered.

Bradley faced front with the disdain of a fisherman releasing an undersized catch.

"Any other—"

"Sir?" said Atwater crisply. His arm was lifted but only the index finger was raised, a compromise between courtesy and honor. "Will there be some feints to draw off Khalian forces in the area before we go in?"

Kowacs nodded, but that was a comment on the cogency of the question, not a response to it.

"There's concern," he said carefully, "that when the Khalia realize that we've landed on their home world, their first reaction will be to execute their slaves. Therefore—"

He paused, too clearly aware of the Marines he was leading. This would be a suicide mission if the general invasion timing were off by an hour, maybe even by a few minutes.

"Therefore," Kowacs continued, "a ground-attack ship will go in ahead of us to prep the defenses. We—the assault component—will follow at a three-second interval. No other Alliance forces will be committed to Target until we're on the ground."

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"Fuckin' A," somebody repeated in a whisper that echoed throughout the bay.

Commodore Herennis stood as stiff as if a Weasel were bugging him in Kowacs' tiny office—a cubicle separated from the landing bay by walls of film which blurred light and sound into a semblance of privacy. Anger wasn't the only emotion holding Grand Admiral Forberry's military secretary rigid—but it was one of the emotions.

"I told you," said Kowacs from the room's only chair—Herennis had

refused it, and there wasn't floor space for both men to stand—"that while I didn't care to leave my men just now, I would of course obey a direct order to report to you on the flagship."

He was holding his combat knife toward the striplight in the ceiling; its wire edge was too fine for his eyes to focus on it, no matter how hard he squinted.

"You *knew* I couldn't formally give an order like that!" Herennis snapped.

Kowacs looked up at the smartly uniformed staff officer—his social, military, and (no doubt) intellectual superior.

"Yes, Commodore," said the Marine captain softly. "I suppose I did. Now, if you care to state your business, I'll take care of it the best way I can."

"Yes, I..." Herennis said. His body quivered as embarrassment replaced anger as his ruling emotion. "Here is the, the chip that was discussed."

The hologram would take up only a corner of the data capacity in the Marines' helmets, nestled among the sensors and recorders that Jet the high command look over each man's shoulder after the action.

From a safe distance.

Kowacs set his knife on the fold-down desk that doubled as a keypad when he chose to power up his computer terminal. He took the holochip from the commodore and inserted it into the bulkhead projector. The unit was balky; he had to jiggle the handset several times before there was a hum and a face appeared in the air near the filmy opposite wall.

"That's the boy?" Kowacs said. "Well, I'll have it downloaded into the men's helmets before we go in."

The Honorable Thomas Forberry wasn't a boy, not really. His image looked to be mid-forties, and that was at least five

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years back. Blue eyes, a ruddy complexion—dark blond hair with curls

as perfect as an angel's tits.

For all its pampering, the face was hard and competent. Young Thomas hadn't followed his father into the Fleet, but he ran the family's business concerns, and the Forberrys would have been rich even without the opportunities a grand admiral has of profitably anticipating economic changes.

Used to run the family business.

"Ah, five years could..." Kowacs began, letting his voice trail off because he didn't choose to emphasize the changes five years as a Weasel slave could make in a man—even if he survived.

"Yes, he's aware—" Herennis said, then caught himself. "Ah, I'm aware of that. I'm, ah, not expecting... I know you must think—"

Kowacs waved his hand to cut off the staff officer's words, his embarrassment.

"Look, Commodore," he said gently. "Nobody in my outfit's got a problem about releasing Khalian prisoners. If it takes something, whatever, *personal* to give the high command the balls to cut the orders—okay, that's what it takes. Tell your friend not to worry about it."

"Thank you, Captain," Herennis said, sounding as if he meant it. He wasn't done speaking, but he met the Marine's eyes before he went on with, "The unofficial reward, ah, I've promised you is considerable in money terms. But I want you to realize that neither I nor—anyone else—believes that money can recompense the risk you and your men are running."

"Commodore..." Kowacs said. His hand was reaching for the leather-wrapped hilt of his knife, but he restrained the motion because Herennis might have misunderstood. "I lost my family in the Gravely Incident."

"I'm sor—"

The Marine's hand moved very sharply to chop off the interruption.

"About half my team could tell you their own version of the same story."

Kowacs saw the doubt in his visitor's eyes and smiled. "Yeah, that high a percentage. Not in the Marines in general, and sure as *hell* not in the whole Fleet. But you check the stats on the reaction companies, not just mine, and see what you find."

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Herennis nodded and touched his tongue to his lips.

"Besides that," Kowacs went on with the same tight, worn smile—a smile like the hilt of the knife his hand was, after all, caressing, "we're the ones that hit dirt first after the raids. We've seen everything the Weasels can do to human beings. Do you understand?"

Herennis nodded again. He was staring at Kowacs as if the Marine were a cobra on the other side of a pane of glass.

Kowacs shut off the holo projector. "You're right, Commodore," he said. "None of my team does this for the money, yours or the regular five percent danger allowance.

"But you couldn't pay us *not* to take this mission, either."

The *Bonnie Parker's* thunderous vibration was bad enough on any insertion, but this time they were going down in daylight. The bay was brightly illuminated, so you could look at the faces of the Marines beside you—blank with fear that was physical and instinctive.

Or you could watch the landing vessel's wiring and structural panels quiver centimeters under the stress—far beyond their designed limits—and wonder whether this time the old girl was going to come apart with no help from the Weasel defense batteries at all.

A shock lifted all the Marines squatting on the deck.

Kowacs, gripping a stanchion with one hand and his rifle with the other, swore; but the word caught in his throat and it wasn't a missile, just the shock wave of the the ground-attack ship that had plunged down ahead of them in a shallow dive that would carry it clear of the landing zone—

If its ordnance had taken out the missile batteries as planned.

Kowacs wanted to piss. He did what he had learned to do in the moments before hitting hot LZs in the past.

Pissed down his trouser leg.

Three plasma bolts hit the *Bonnie Parker* with the soggy impact of medicine balls against the hull. The ship rocked.

The magnetic screens spread the bursts of charged particles, but the bay lights went off momentarily and the center bank stayed dark even after the rest had flickered into life again.

"About *now*—," said Corporal Sienkiewicz, two meters tall and beside Kowacs in the bay because so far as the Table of Organization was concerned, she was his clerk.

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Kowacs and Bradley could file their own data. There was no one in the company they thought could do a better job of covering their asses in a firefight.

Sienkiewicz's timing was flawless, as usual. The *Bonnie Parker's* five-g braking drove the squatting Marines hard against the deck plates.

Automatic weapons, unaffected by the screens, played against the hull like sleet. The landing vessel's own suppression clusters deployed with a whoompwhoompwhoomp-whoomp noticeable over the general stress and racket only by those who knew it was coming.

The *Bonnie Parker* was small for a starship but impressive by comparison with most other engines of human transportation. She slowed to a halt, then lurched upward minusculely before her artificial intelligence pilot caught her and brought her to hover. The landing bay doors began to lift on both sides of the hull while the last bomblets of the suppression clusters were still exploding with the snarl and glare of a titanic arclight.

"Get 'em!" Kowacs roared needlessly over his helmet's clear channel as he and the rest of the company leaped under the rising doors in two lines, one to either side of the landing vessel.

Thrust vectored from the *Bonnie Parker's* lift engines punched their legs, spilling some of the Marines on the roofs smooth surface. Normally the vessel would have grounded, but the weight of a starship was almost certain to collapse a pad intended for surface-effect trucks. The old girl's power supply would allow her to hover all day.

Unless the Weasels managed to shoot her down, in which case she'd crumple the building on top of the Marines she'd just delivered.

Well, nobody in the 121st was likely to die of ulcers from worry.

There were half a dozen dead Khalia sprawled on the part of the roof Kowacs could see. Their teeth were bared, and all of them clutched the weapons they'd been firing at the landing vessel when the suppression clusters had flayed everything living into bloody ruin.

There was a sharp *bang* and a scream. Halfway down the line on Kowacs' side of the vessel, Corporal Dodd up-ended. One of his feet was high and the other was missing, blown off by the bomblet unexploded until he'd managed to step on it.

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"Watch the—," called one of the platoon leaders on the command channel.

At least one plasma gun on the perimeter had survived the ground attack ship. The Weasel crew turned their weapon inward and ripped a three-round burst into the *Bonnie Parker* and the deploying Marines.

One bolt hit the waist-high roof coping—Intelligence was right; the polyborate shattered like a bomb, gouging a two-meter scallop from the building. Kowacs was pushed backward by the blast, and half a dozen of the Marines near him went down.

The other bolts skimmed the coping and diffused against the landing vessel's screen with whiplash cracks and a coruscance that threw hard shadows across the roof. Kowacs' faceshield saved his eyes, but ozone burned the back of his throat and he wasn't sure that anyone could hear him order, "Delta Six, get that f—"

Before anyone in Heavy Weapons, Delta Platoon, could respond to the

order with their tripod-mounted guns, Corporal Sienkiewicz leaned over the coping and triggered her own shoulder-carried plasma weapon.

The weapon was a meter-long tube holding a three-round magazine of miniature thermonuclear devices. The deuterium pellets were set off and directed by a laser array, part of the ammunition and consumed by the blast it contained.

The crack of the out-going plasma jet was sharp and loud even to ears stunned by the bolts that had struck nearby. Downrange, all the ready munitions in the guard tower blew up simultaneously. The blast across the dull beige roofs of the slave barracks was earth-shaking.

"Assigned positions," Kowacs ordered, looking around desperately to make sure that his troops weren't bunching, huddling. Because of the *Bonnie Parker*, he had only half a field of view. Maybe all the Marines who'd jumped from the port side were dead and—

"Move it, Marines! Move it!" he shouted, finding the stairhead that was the only normal entrance on the building's roof.

"Fire in the hole!" warned the First Platoon demo team that had laid a rectangle of strip charges near one end of the flat expanse. The nearest Marines—except the assault squad in full battle suits—hunched away. Everyone else at least turned their faces.

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"Fire in the hole!" echoed Third Platoon at the opposite side of the roof—so much for everybody being dead, not that—

The entry charges detonated with snaps that were more jarring to the optic nerves than to the ears. Each was a strip of adhesive containing a filament of PDM explosive—which propagated at a measurable fraction of light speed. The filament charges were too minute to have significant effect even a meter or two from the strip, but the shattering force they imparted on contact was immense.

A door-sized rectangle of the roof dropped into the building interior. Marines in battle suits, their armor protecting them against the glassy needles of polyborate, shrieking and spinning from the blast, criss-crossed the opened room with fire from their automatic rifles. Their helmet

sensors gave them targets—or their nervousness squeezed the triggers without targets, and either way it gave the Weasels more to think about.

Similar bursts crackled from the other end of the roof, hidden by the *Bonnie Parker* and attenuated by the howl of her lift engines.

"Alpha ready!" on the command channel, First Platoon reporting. Kowacs could see the Marines poised to enter the hole they'd just blown in the roof.

"Beta ready!" The two squads of Second Platoon under their lieutenant, detailed to rappel down the sides of the windowless building and secure the exits so that the Weasels couldn't get out among the helpless slaves in a last orgy of destruction.

"Kappa ready!" Third Platoon, whose strip charges had blown them an entrance like the one Kowacs could see First clustered around.

"Delta ready!" Heavy Weapons^ now with a tripod-mounted plasma gun on each side of the roof. One of the weapons was crashing out bolts to support the units securing the perimeter.

"Gamma ready!" said Sergeant Bradley with a skull-faced grin at Kowacs from the stairhead where he waited with Sienkiewicz and the two remaining squads of Second Platoon.

"All units, *go!*" Kowacs ordered as he jogged toward the stairhead and Bradley blew its door with the strip charges placed but not detonated until this moment.

Three of Second's assault squad hosed the opening. Return

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fire or a ricochet blasted sparks from the center Marine's ceramic armor. He staggered but didn't go down, and his two fellows lurched in sequence down the stairs their bulky gear filled.

"Ditch that!" Kowacs snarled to Sienkiewicz as she slung the plasma gun and cocked her automatic rifle.

"It's my back," she said with a nonchalance that was no way to refuse a

direct order—

But which would do for now, because Kowacs was already hunching through the doorway, and she was right behind him. The air was bitter with residues of the explosive, but that was only spice for the stench of musk and human filth within.

You could make a case for the company commander staying on the roof instead of ducking into a building where he'd lose contact with supporting units and the high command in orbit.

Rank hath its privileges. For twelve years, the only privilege Kowacs had asked for was the chance to be where he had the most opportunity to kill Weasels.

The stairs were almost ladder-steep and the treads were set for the Khalia's short legs. One of the clumsily armored Marines ahead of Kowacs sprawled onto all fours in the corridor, but there were no living Weasels in sight to take advantage of the situation.

Half a dozen of them were dead, ripped by the rifle fire that caught them with no cover and no hope. One furry body still squirmed. Reflex or intent caused the creature to clash its teeth vainly against the boot of the leading Marine as he crushed its skull in passing.

The area at the bottom of the short staircase was broken into a corridor with a wire-mesh cage to either side. The cage material was nothing fancier than hog-fencing—these were very short-term facilities. The one on the left was empty.

The cage on the right had room for forty humans and held maybe half a dozen, all of them squeezed into a piling mass in one corner from fear of gunfire and the immediate future.

The prisoners were naked except for a coating of filth so thick that their sexes were uncertain even after they crawled apart to greet the Marines. There was a drain in one corner of the cage, but many of the human slaves received here in past years had been too terrified to use it. The Weasels didn't care.

Neither did Kowacs just now.

"Find the stairs down—," he was shouting when something plucked his arm and he spun, his rifle-stock lifting to

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smash the Weasel away before worrying about how he'd kill it, they were death if you let 'em touch you—

And it wasn't a Khalian but a woman with auburn hair. She'd reached through the fencing that saved her life when it absorbed the reflexive buttstroke that would have crushed her sternum.

"Bitch!" Kowacs snarled, more jarred by his mistake than by the shock through his weapon that made his hands tingle.

"Please," the woman insisted with a throaty determination that overrode all the levels of fear that she must be feeling. "My brother, Alton Dinneen—don't trust him. On *your lives*, don't trust him!"

"Weasel bunkroom!" called one of the armored Marines who'd clumped down the corridor to the doorways beyond the cages. "Empty, though."

"Watch for—," Kowacs said as he jogged toward them. Bradley and Sienkiewicz were to either side and a half step behind him.

The Khalian that leaped from the 'empty' room was exactly what he'd meant to watch for.

A Marine screamed instinctively. There were four of them, all members of the assault squad burdened by their armor. The Weasel had no gun, just a pair of knives in his forepaws. Their edges sparkled against the ceramic armor—and bit through the joints.

Two of the Marines were down in seconds that blurred into eternity before Sergeant Bradley settled matters with a blast from his shotgun. The Marines' armor glittered like starlit snow under the impact of Bradley's airfoil charge. The Khalian, his knives lifted to scissor through a third victim, collapsed instead as a rug of blood-matted fur.

Cursing because it was his fault, he shouldn't have let Marines manacled by twenty kilos of armor lead after the initial entry, Kowacs ran to the room in which the Weasel had hidden.

It was a typical Khalian nest. There was a false ceiling to lower the dimensions to Weasel comfort and a heap of bedding which his sensors, like those of the first Marine, indicated were still warm with the body heat of the Khalia who'd rushed into the corridor to be cut down in the first exchange of fire.

Except that one of the cunning little bastards had hidden *under* the bedding and waited...

You couldn't trust your sensors, and you couldn't trust your

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eyes—but you could usually trust a long burst of fire like the one with which Sienkiewicz now hosed the bedding. Fluff and wood chips fountained away from the bullets.

"Hey!" cried one of the assault squad who was still standing. Kowacs spun.

An elevator door was opening across the hall.

The startled figure in the elevator car was bare-chested but wore a red sleeve that covered his right arm wrist to shoulder. The Khaian machine-pistol he pointed might not penetrate assault-squad armor, but it would have stitched through Kowacs' chest with lethal certainty if the captain hadn't fired first. Kowacs' bullets flung his target backward into the bloody elevator.

"Sir!" cried the Marine who hadn't fired. "That was a friendly! A man!"

"Nobody's friendly when they point a gun at you!" Kowacs said. "Demo team! Blow me a hole in this fucking floor!"

Two Marines sprinted over, holding out the partial spools of strip-charge that remained after they blew down the door.

"How big—" one started to ask, but Kowacs was already anticipating the question with, "One by two—no, *two* by two!"

Kowacs needed a hole that wasn't a suicidally small choke point when he and his troops jumped through it—but the floor here had been cast in

the same operation as the roof and exterior walls. He was uneasily aware that the battering which gunfire and explosives were giving the structure would eventually disturb its integrity to the point that the whole thing collapsed.

Still, he needed a hole in the floor, because the only way down from here seemed to be the elevator which—

"Should I take the elevator, sir?" asked an armored Marine, anonymous behind his airfoil-scarred face shield.

"No, dammit!" Kowacs said, half inclined to let the damn fool get killed making a diversion for the rest of them. But the kid was *his* damn fool, and—

"Only young once," muttered Sergeant Bradley in a mixture of wonder and disdain.

"Fire in the hole!" cried one of the Demolition Team.

Kowacs squeezed back from the doorway to give the demo team room to jump clear, but the pair were too blase about their duties to bother. They twisted around and knelt with

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their hands over their ears before the strips blew and four square meters of flooring shuddered, tilted down—

And stuck. The area below was divided into rooms off-set from those of the upper floor. The thick slab of polyborate caught at a skewed angle, half in place and half in the room beneath.

An automatic weapon in that room fired two short bursts. A bullet ricocheted harmlessly up between the slab and the floor from which it had been blasted.

"Watch it!" said Sienkiewicz, unlimbering the plasma gun again. She aimed toward the narrow wedge that was all the opening there was into the lower room.

It was damned dangerous. If she missed, the bolt would liberate all its

energy in the nest room, and the interior walls might not be refractory enough to protect Gamma.

But Sienkiewicz was good; and among other things, this would be a real fast way to silence the guns beneath before the Marines followed the plasma bolt.

The demo team sprinted into the corridor; Kowacs flattened himself against the wall he hoped would hold for the next microsecond; and the big weapon crashed a dazzling line through the hole and into the building's lower story.

Air fluoresced at the point of impact and lifted the slab before dropping it as a load of rubble. Kowacs and Bradley shouldered one another in their mutual haste to be first through the opening. Sienkiewicz used their collision to lead them both by a half step, the plasma gun for the moment cradled in her capable arms.

It wasn't the weapon for a point-blank firefight; but nothing close to where the bolt struck was going to be alive, much less dangerous.

Kowacs dropped through the haze and hit in a crouch on something that squashed under his boots. The atmosphere was so foul in the bolt's aftermath that the helmet filters slapped across his mouth and nose in a hard wedge.

The Marines were in a good-sized—human-scale—room with a cavity in the floor. There was nothing beneath the cavity except earth glazed by the plasma bolt that had excavated it.

This was a briefing room or something of the sort; but it was a recreation room as well, for the chairs had been stacked along the walls before the blast disarranged them, and two humans were being tortured on a vertical grid. The victims

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had been naked before the gush of sun-hot ions scoured the room, flensing to heat-cracked bones the side of their bodies turned toward the blast.

But the plasma gun hadn't killed them. The victims' skulls had been

shattered by bullets, the bursts the Marines had heard the moment before Sienkiewicz blew them entry.

Several of the chairs were burning. They were wooden, handmade, and intended for humans. On the wall behind the grid was a name list on polished wood, protected from the plasma flux by the torture victims and a cover sheet of now bubbled glassine. The list was headed DUTY ROSTER.

In English, not the tooth-mark wedges of Khalian script.

Each of the six other bodies the blast had caught wore a red right sleeve—or traces of red fabric where it had been shielded from the plasma. They had all been humans, including the female Kowacs was standing on. She still held the Khalian machine-pistol she had used to silence the torture victims.

"*Renegades*," Sergeant Bradley snarled. He would have spat on a body, but his filters were in place.

"Trustees," Kowacs said in something approaching calm. "The Weasels don't run the interior of the compound. They pick slaves of the right sort to do it. Let's—"

He was looking at the door and about to point to it. More Marines were tumbling through the hole in the ceiling, searching for targets. The air had cleared enough now that Kowacs noticed details of the body flung into the doorway by the blast. Its arms and legs had been charred to stumps, and its neck was seared through to the point that its head flopped loose.

But the face was unmarked, and the features were recognizable in their family relationship to those of the woman caged upstairs.

Nobody had to worry about treachery by Alton Dinneen anymore.

"—go, Marines!" Kowacs completed. Because he'd hesitated momentarily, Bradley and Sienkiewicz were already ahead of him.

They were in a long hallway whose opposite wall was broken with doorways at short intervals. Somebody ducked out of one, saw the Marines, and ducked back in.

Bradley and Sienkiewicz flanked the panel in a practiced maneuver while Kowacs aimed down the corridor in case

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another target appeared. He hoped their backs were being covered by the Second Platoon Marines who'd been able to follow him. The survivors of the assault squad couldn't jump through the ceiling unless they stripped off their battle suits first.

"Go!"

Sienkiewicz fired her rifle through the door panel and kicked the latch plate. As the door bounced open, Bradley tossed in a grenade with his left hand.

The man inside jumped out screaming an instant before the grenade exploded; Bradley's shotgun disembowelled him.

They'd all seen the flash of a red sleeve when the target first appeared.

The trustee's room had space for a chair, a desk, and a bed whose mattress had ignited into smoldering fire when the explosion lifted it.

He'd also had a collection of sorts hanging from cords above the bed. Human skin is hard to flay neatly, especially when it's already been stretched by the weight of mammary glands, so the grenade fragments had only finished what ineptitude had begun.

Short bursts of rifle fire and the thump of grenades echoed up the corridor from where it kinked toward Third Platoon's end of the building. Nobody'd had to draw those Marines a picture either.

First and Third would work in from the ends, but Kowacs didn't have enough men under his direct command to clear many of the small individual rooms. He'd expected Weasel nests...

But there were only two more doors, spaced wide apart, beside the briefing room in the visible portion of the hall.

"Cover us!" Kowacs ordered the squad leader from Second Platoon. "Both ways, and *don't* shoot any Marines."

In another setting, he'd have said "friendlies." Here it might have been misconstrued.

His non-coms had already figured this one, flattening themselves to either side of the next door down from the briefing room. Kowacs' fire and Sienkiewicz' criss-crossed, stitching bright yellow splinters from the soft wood of the panel. Bradley kicked, and all three of them tossed grenades as the door swung.

There was no latch. The panel's sprung hinges let the

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explosions bounce it open into the corridor with its inner face scarred by the shrapnel.

Kowacs and his team fanned through the door, looking for targets. Nothing was moving except smoke and platters jouncing to the floor from the pegs on which they'd been hanging. In the center of the floor was a range. There were ovens and cold-lockers along three of the walls.

Well, there'd had to be a kitchen, now that Kowacs thought about it.

The man hidden there picked the right time to wave his hand from behind the range that sheltered him—a moment after the Marines swung in, ready to blast anything that moved, but before a quick search found him and made him a certain enemy.

"Up!" Kowacs ordered. "*Now!*"

He was plump and terrified and hairless except for a wispy white brush of a moustache that he stroked with both hands despite obvious attempts to control the gesture.

"The rest of 'em, damn you!" roared Bradley, aiming his shotgun at the corner of the range from which he expected fresh targets to creep.

"It's only me!" the bald man blubbered through his hands. "I swear to God, only me, only Charlie the Cook."

Sienkiewicz stepped—she didn't have to jump—to the range top. Her rifle was pointed down and the plasma gun, its barrel still quivering with

heat, jounced against her belt gear.

"Clear!" she reported crisply. Charlie relaxed visibly, until he saw that Kowacs was reaching for the handle of the nearest cold-locker.

"Not me!" the civilian cried. "Charlie only does what he's told, I swear to God, not—"

Sienkiewicz saw what was in the locker and saved Charlie's life by kicking him in the teeth an instant before Bradley's shotgun would have dealt with the matter in a more permanent way.

Heads, arms, and lower legs had been removed in the course of butchering, but there was no doubt that the hanging carcasses were human.

Kowacs stepped over to the sprawling prisoner and cradled his rifle muzzle at the base of the man's throat. "Tell me you cooked for the Weasels," he said quietly. "Just say the fucking words."

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"No-no-no," Charlie said, crying and trying to spit up fragments of his broken mouth before he choked on them. "Not the Masters, never the Masters—*they* don't need cooks. And never for me, never for Charlie, Charlie just—"

"Cap'n?" Bradley said with the hint of a frown now that he'd had time to think through his impulse of a moment before. Shooting a clearly unarmed captive... "The, ah—"

He tapped the side of his helmet, where the recorder was taking down everything he said or did for after-action review by the brass.

Kowacs grabbed the prisoner by the throat and lifted him to his feet. Charlie was gagging, but the Marine's blunt fingers weren't stranglingly tight. Kowacs shoved the man hard, back into the open locker.

"We'll be back for you!" he said as he slammed the door.

Someday, maybe.

Kowacs was shuddering as he ejected the partially fired magazine from

his rifle and slammed in a fresh one. "Told a guy yesterday I'd seen everything the Weasels could do to human beings," he muttered to his companions. "Guess I was wrong."

Though he didn't suppose he ought to blame this on the Khalia. They just happened to have been around as role models.

"One *more!*" Sienkiewicz said with false brightness as her boots crashed to the floor and she followed Bradley into the hallway again.

The squad from Second Platoon had been busy enough to leave a sharp fog of propellant and explosive residues as they shot their way into the sleeping rooms on the opposite side of the corridor. They hadn't turned up any additional kills, but they were covering Kowacs' back as he'd ordered, so he didn't have any complaints.

He and his non-coms poised at the third door in this section. It jerked open from the inside while he and Sienkiewicz took up the slack on their triggers.

Neither of the rifles fired. Bradley, startled, blasted a round from his shotgun into the opening and the edge of the door.

The airfoil load chewed a scallop from the thick wood panel and tore swirls in the smoky air of the room beyond.

"*Don't shoot!*" screamed a voice from behind the door-

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frame, safe from the accidental shot. "I'm unarmed! I'm a prisoner!"

Kowacs kicked the door hard as he went in, slamming it back against the man speaking and throwing off his aim if he were lying about being unarmed. The room was an office, almost as large as the kitchen, with wooden filing cabinets and a desk—

Which Sienkiewicz sprayed with a half magazine, because nobody'd spoken from *there*, and anybody in concealment was fair game. Splinters flew away from the shots like startled birds, but there was no cry of pain.

Starships or no, the Khalia weren't high tech by human standards. In a

human installation, even back in the sticks, there'd have been a computer data bank.

Here, data meant marks on paper; and the paper was burning in several of the open file drawers. The air was chokingly hot and smoky, but it takes a long time to destroy files when they're in hard copy.

The man half-hidden by the door stepped aside, his hands covering his face where Kowacs had smashed him with the panel.

He didn't wear a red sleeve, but there was a tag of fabric smoldering on one of the burning drawers.

What had the bastard thought he was going to gain by destroying the records?

Kowacs was reaching toward the prisoner when the man said, "You idiots! Do you know who I am?"

He lowered his hands and they did know, all three of them, without replaying the hologram loaded into their helmet memories. Except for the freshly cut lip and bloody nose, the Honorable Thomas Forberry hadn't changed much after all.

"Out," Kowacs said.

Forberry thought the Marine meant him as well as the non-coms. Kowacs jabbed the civilian in the chest with his rifle when he started to follow them.

"Sir?" said the sergeant doubtfully.

Kowacs slammed the door behind him. The latch was firm, though smoke drifted out of the gouge next to the jamb.

"They'll wipe the chips," Kowacs said.

"Sir, we *can't* wipe the recorders," Bradley begged. "Sir, it's been tried!"

"We won't have to," Kowacs said. He nodded to

Sienkiewicz, lifting the plasma weapon with its one remaining charge.
"We'll leave it for the brass to cover this one up."

And they all flattened against the wall as Sienkiewicz set the muzzle of the big weapon against the hole in the door of the camp administrator's office.