

War World

The Battle of Sauron

A Novel by John F. Carr and Don Hawthorne

War World Volumes Edited by John F. Carr and J.E. Pournelle

War World I: The Burning Eye War

World II: Death's Head Rebellion

War World III: Sauron Dominion

War World IV: Invasion! CoDominium I: Revolt on War World

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Blood Feuds

Blood Vengeance

The Battle of Sauron

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To our lovely wives, Victoria and Maria.

Prologue

2622 A.D., TANITH

Colonel Gary Edmund Cummings of the Seventy-Seventh Imperial Marine Division sat in his temporary staff office and tried to ignore the moisture beading on his brow. Haven might well have the reputation - among the few who'd heard of her - of being a frozen mudball, but Tanith was like the depths of hell. It was a former prison planet, as Haven had been in CoDominium times, and despite being Sector headquarters it was still rough around the edges.

Cummings packed his pipe bowl with tobacco, tamped it and fired it up. He suspected anyone who did well on Tanith emigrated elsewhere as soon as they accumulated passage money. Cummings was originally from Churchill, another cold world like Haven, so he suffered the heat more than most. Haveners in general, however, were used to extreme climates and most of his command seemed indifferent to Tanith's weather.

His adjutant, Captain Anton Leung came into the room with a more serious demeanor than usual. Leung was of Tartar ancestry, which showed in the folds of his eyes and his stocky thick-boned frame. A native Havener, he had an inborn stoicism that not even Tanith's unbearable heat could touch. Yet something was obviously bothering him.

"What is it, Captain?"

"Colonel, special orders from Admiralty Building."

"About time."

"I heard the *Canada* docked late last night. Maybe we're finally getting off this hothouse."

"I hadn't thought you noticed."

Captain Leung gave a wan smile. "The men have been stationed here too long. We had two more go outback last night. Haveners are great warriors, but they make bad garrison troops."

That was about the longest speech Cummings had heard from the taciturn Leung. Six months on Tanith had not been a picnic for anyone - especially, while there was a war going on everywhere else. Tanith was an important Alderson intersection between several important tramlines, which made it a major military target. If the Sauron Coalition of Secession could forge a victory here they would have a bottleneck that would hamstring the Empire in several different sectors.

There had already been one Battle of Tanith five years ago and Intelligence had reason to suspect the Saurons were preparing for another assault. The 77th was one of six divisions stationed on Tanith to keep them from establishing a planetary beachhead.

Cummings unsealed the orders and quickly read them. When he was finished he looked up to see Captain Leung attempting to read his expression. "Nothing specific. They just want me to report to Admiralty Headquarters at 1400 hours. I'm to see Admiral Lyons. Heard any scuttlebutt about him?"

Leung nodded. "Yes, Colonel, he's supposed to be some young hotshot, with a title. Lord Such and Such of Sparta. Word is he's Lord High Admiral Waterford's hatchet man."

Like Cummings, Leung had made it into the Academy based on merit rather than connections. One of the reasons he was still a captain at thirty-five; although Cummings intended to give him a battlefield promotion the next time the 77th saw action. Leung would have been eligible long ago if he hadn't been tied to staff duty. His problem was he was too fine an administrator; Cummings had no end of young officers who were willing to jump into the breach, but few who could coordinate interstellar transportation, insuring that the Division ordinance ended up with the 77th rather than at some

Alderson Point deadhead.

“It must be important, if they want me there in an hour.” Cummings didn’t bother to speculate why; there were too many possibilities and very few of them looked good for him or the 77th.

The Admiral’s office was paneled in rare Tanith hardwoods and the desk was made from the bole of a tiger tree. Admiral Lyons was a young man with fine features and long fingers, every inch the aristocrat. As Colonel Cummings waited for him to speak, he examined the 3-D holograph of Alexander III, which was flanked with the Spartan flag to the left and the Imperial Eagle on the right.

In his own office Cummings had the Haven flag to the left of the Emperor’s portrait. The Haven flag was a green land gator, snapping its jaws, on a yellow field with a black banner on the bottom reading ‘Don’t Tread On Me’ in gold letters. It went back to CoDominium times and legend had it that it was based on a state flag of the Old United States of America back on Terra. It was rough and crude, but Cummings preferred it to the Admiral’s holo-picture version of an officer’s headquarters.

“Sit down, Colonel,” Admiral Lyons ordered in what sounded like a trained announcer’s voice. The Admiralty Office was air conditioned, a relief to Cummings who didn’t know such luxuries in his own headquarters.

“Thank you, Admiral Lyons.”

“You were at Tabletop, so I don’t have to draw you a picture of why the War is not going well.”

Cummings nodded in agreement; the Empire had taken a terrible beating at Tabletop, losing over half of the Third Imperial Fleet and six Marine divisions. It had been a major loss of capital ships and men the Empire could not afford to waste.

He studied the young Spartan Admiral. Was he one of the bright young men who were going to buy the Empire some time? Maybe even end the war with Sauron if some new Imperial Claimant didn’t pop out of the woodwork in the next few years. Unfortunately for the Empire - as Tacitus had once said: *‘A well-hidden secret of the principate had been revealed: it was possible, it seemed, for an emperor to be chosen outside Rome!’*

“We need to concentrate our forces,” Admiral Lyons continued. “The Sauron Super Soldiers are forcing us to re-think our previous strategy. It’s becoming obvious to the Admiralty that we can’t defeat the Saurons on the ground, without incurring tremendous losses. We lost enough men to raise four divisions trying to re-take Thurston, and for what? A world blasted back to the stone age. No, we need to fight the Saurons where their individual abilities are minimized. We can no longer afford to fight them piecemeal. To do so is an act of suicide.”

“You mean, the Empire is pulling out?”

The young Admiral’s ice-blue eyes studied him as if he were an insect on an examining table. “It appears you did earn your reputation. Yes, the Admiralty has been ordered by the Emperor to pull back our forces from the frontiers. We are to concentrate our units for maximum response. We can win this war, yet, Colonel. But we can’t win by defending every backwater planet and Alderson cul-de-sac.”

The sudden light in Lyons eyes told him that the Admiral believed his words. Cummings wished he were as certain of this policy. He’d fought Saurons almost - hell, his *entire* military career. If he’d learned anything it was that you didn’t beat the Saurons by abandoning useful worlds and allies. What was the Empire but a collection of worlds held together by allegiance to a set of ideas and loyalty to the Emperor? How many strategic withdrawals could you make before that Empire became another coalition or a petty kingdom with a fancy name, ‘The Empire of Man?’

“It could be a mistake. Men don’t fight as well if they think no one’s protecting their homes. Marines

aren't Sauron Soldiers; they aren't automatons bred to fight for no other reason than to do battle, like fighting cocks. They're men from many different worlds fighting for a cause they may or may not believe in and comrades they respect and hold dear."

If Lyons' found Cummings' embrace of anti-Sauron propaganda disturbing, he didn't show it. Ruthless hatred of an enemy like the Saurons was a positive asset, as far as he was concerned. "Nice speech, Colonel. But this has already been studied by several Admiralty commissions."

Cummings examined the younger man closely; he appeared well-intentioned and even intelligent. However, it was doubtful that he'd done much of the fighting he was so expert upon. Unfortunately for the Empire, it appeared the time had arrived when loyalty was more important than competence or experience. It did not bode well for the Empire's future.

"What are your orders, Sir?"

"The new Directive is to abandon certain marginal worlds at the edge of the Empire of Man. If we remove these units from long-established bases, combine them with loyalist units coreward and relocate them on secure bases, we will remove sources of possible future Claimant and Secessionist recruits. Plus, we will have our forces closer to the fighting. True, there is a trade-off, in that we lose a substantial recruiting base; however, the logistics spared trying to defend these marginal worlds will allow the larger population of Coreworlds to be more efficiently developed and protected."

"Admiral, that may be a good strategy with worlds of questionable loyalty, such as New Chicago, which will likely join the Secessionists the moment strong Imperial presence is gone. But it is not good policy for worlds like Haven, where the tradition of Imperial service is long and well established. There was a time, before the War, when the units of the 77th made up part of the Imperial Household troops."

"The Admiralty is appreciative of Haven's loyalty and highly appreciates the value of the "Land 'Gators." While Haven is too far off the major trade routes to consider succumbing to Secessionist propaganda or sedition, we cannot afford to take the chance that some long-lost second cousin of the Emperor might turn up there and raise an army."

"Colonel," Admiral Lyons continued, "the "Land 'Gators" are one of the best units we have. They have a higher kill ratio against regular Sauron Soldiers than any division of the Imperial forces except units of the Imperial Guard. The Empire needs the "Land 'Gators" and their loyalty, and we believe we have come up with a way to ensure both."

"I'm listening, Admiral."

"First, we're going to promote you to General. We want you to go with the 77th Imperial Marines to their new garrison on Friedland. After the new garrison has been established, you will appoint a successor to command the 77th. Thereafter, your orders are to return to Haven as Commandant and evacuate the remaining training cadres, the 77th's support troops, and garrison regulars."

"Then what?" He wondered how Laura would take his latest career advancement; badly, he suspected. She would be overjoyed at returning to Friedland, where her family lived and the home she kept urging him to retire to was located. How ironic, after they had traipsed all over the Empire, Friedland would now be the 77th's permanent garrison, while he left to evacuate Haven. *Another skirmish in a battle almost as old as our marriage.*

"Then, you will be appointed, by His Imperial Majesty Alexander the Third, as Commander-in-Chief of the Haven Volunteers."

Cummings wasn't yet sure how to take this 'promotion'. In some ways it was more of a demotion, since he would no longer be line or staff and soon, no longer a Marine. He was familiar with the Haven

Volunteers; they had been formed during CoDominium times. Legend had it that John Christian Falkenberg, one of the architects of the Empire, along with Lysander the First, was the guiding hand behind the formation of the Volunteers. They had served Haven well ever since.

“But you have heard enough from me. Let an old friend give you the details.”

Cummings heard the door opening behind him. He was as surprised as if his father had come back to life, at hearing Marshal Blaine’s familiar gruff voice telling him to rise. He couldn’t wipe the smile off his face.

“Marshal, you look great.” No exaggeration either, he thought. The Marshal looked better - make that younger - than he had almost ten years ago at Lavaca when Cummings had been on his staff. If he didn’t know better, he’d swear there was more hair on that high dome! And where had the wattles and wrinkles gone?

“Retirement - well, semi-retirement’s been grand. Even had time for regeneration treatments - the Admiralty insisted.”

“They couldn’t have found a better choice,” he answered sincerely. Blaine had single-handedly devised the divide and conquer strategy on Lavaca that had allowed the Imperial forces to out-manuever and out-think their Sauron opponents. He was a national hero on Lavaca, his bust was on display in their Imperial Council Chambers.

“Glad you think so. You always did speak your mind, Gary. Probably held you back with the boards, but some of us have watched your career with interest over the last decade. The same ones who thought you might appreciate hearing what I’ve come to say from an old friend, rather than one of our young hotshots. Anyway, I’ve come with good news, and some rather interesting news. The good news is that the Admiralty believes that you’re a good candidate for regeneration. In fact, as soon as this meeting is over, you’re ordered to Lysander Hospital for the full treatment.”

Cummings didn’t speak, but he could feel his eyebrows raise and his jaw drop. It was almost unheard of for a commoner to get the longevity and regeneration treatments. They were time consuming and expensive. So expensive only industrialists, shipping magnates, and lords could afford them.

“What about Laura? WILL she get the regeneration treatments, too?”

Marshal Blaine shook his head dolefully. “I fear not, old friend. The treatments are hideously expensive, even for the Admiralty. Especially now when we need most of our medical resources for the wounded. And, God knows, we have far too many of those.”

“But why?” he stammered. “How am I going to tell Laura?” *Isn’t it bad enough that I’ve dragged her all over the known galaxy, but now I’m going to turn back the clock while she grows older. I’m fifty-five years old right now, and the treatments will take me back to my early thirties, plus extend my life by half a century. How would any woman feel, especially one as high-strung as my Laura?* “This is not a gift you’re giving me, Marshal. I will get to watch my wife grow old and die before my eyes. Blast it, I may well outlive my own children!”

“I was afraid of this. Gary, it’s for the Empire. We need you, and commanders like yourself, if we’re ever to win this bloody damn war! If we lose, it’s not just the Empire that will disappear. It will be the death of mankind itself. These arrogant Sauron bastards are no more human than army ants. They just don’t know it. You and I do. We were at Lavaca, for Christ sakes. We saw just what Saurons are capable of and just how they think of us ‘cattle.’ If the war is lost, how long do you think any of us ‘cattle’ will live?”

Cummings heard a sharp crack and looked down to see that he’d snapped the stem of his pipe between

his fingers. He shoved the broken pipe into a trouser pocket. Then looked back up at Marshal Blaine, knowing that he had no choice, no choice at all. Duty came first, duty to the Corps and duty to the Empire.

Cummings shook his head. "I don't understand. What does the Empire want me to do? Or do better than what I do now?"

"Gary, this is no comment upon your abilities as a line officer - frankly, you're one of the best we've got. But the time has come for the Empire to face reality. You can't imagine how Alexander has staved off this moment; however, it's time to cut our losses, but in the best way possible. We want you to represent the Empire after the 77th is evacuated from Haven. The Haven Volunteers will need a strong officer, one who will not get involved in local and partisan politics. One who can keep Haven on our side until the Empire can return. And return we will.

"You will be in command of the last of the Emperor's outposts. Again, this is a job of great importance, and we need you healthy and alive... for a long time. This war has gone on for almost twenty years; it may last another twenty, or thirty, or . . . well. No one knows. We *do* know that the Empire will resist until the last man - that is certain. One day, the Imperium will return to Haven and dozens of other frontier worlds, and we want you to be there to welcome us back, General."

"Yes, Sir, Marshal Blaine." The three voices joined in unison. "Hail Sparta and Alexander! Death and destruction to all Saurons!"

Book 1: The Face of the Enemy

2640 A.D. TANITH

One

"The universe exists in chaos.
Man is the measure of the universe.
The ultimate chaos of man's existence,
Is the human endeavor called War.
By mastering War, we master the universe."

Children's song taught at Sauron primary schools, translated by Nigel McKeegan, Director of Imperial Forces of Occupation, Secession Wars Historical Task Force, 2643

I

"What are we?"

The question was directed toward the viewport of the Sauron heavy cruiser *Fomoria* but was addressed to the figure behind the speaker who blinked in surprise at the words.

The officer at the viewport stood with hands clasped behind his back, watching the immensity of interstellar space before him as if he might actually discern something amidst all that blackness. If any human-spawned eyes were capable of it, his were. Vessel First Rank Galen Diettinger turned from the viewport and fixed the young Soldier before him with a piercing glare. "I asked you what we are, Fighter Rank Severin."

"Your pardon, First Rank, but the question is out of context. Are you referring to this ship and her crew, or to you and me . . . or is the nature of the question metaphysical?"

Diettinger nodded slightly, seemingly satisfied and disappointed at the same time. “The context is immaterial, Fighter Rank Severin. You have answered the question.”

Diettinger took his seat at the desk. “Sit.”

Severin sat.

“You commanded the reconnaissance flight to the Tanith System this morning. Report your impressions of the situation there.”

Diettinger noted the tenseness in Fighter Rank Severin’s posture and the disapproval tugging at his lips. He was part of that group of younger Saurons, born since the start of the Secession Wars, who believed that personal interpretation of data to be at best an outdated tradition, and at worst a dangerous indulgence. Accurate information in sufficient quantities made it unnecessary to “read” the enemy’s intentions; whatever his *intentions* might be, his *actions* would be dictated by the actions of the Saurons.

Diettinger was of an older school, one that held prudence to be as crucial as boldness; an idea that Severin’s generation could barely understand, let alone embrace. Diettinger even had an Old Earth antique in his office, a sampler from the Peninsular Campaign of the Sauron role model, Wellington, which read: “Discretion is the better part of valor.”

“First Rank, enemy fleet dispositions at Tanith are three *Chinthe*-class destroyers, the light cruisers *Strela* and *Konigsberg* and the Imperial battle cruiser *Canada*”

Diettinger waited until the silence began to discomfort the Fighter Rank. “Ground force deployments.”

“Deployments, sir?”

Diettinger could see the Fighter Rank was confused. “Yes.”

“Sensors indicated one battalion of mechanized infantry, one of heavy armor and four of foot, with assumed attendant support units and an unidentified concentration presumed to be a special operations brigade. Standard for Imperial ground forces of this size, sir.”

“You seem unconcerned, Fighter Rank.”

Severin shrugged. “Their lack of armor support or infantry vehicles suggests overall poor combat readiness.”

“How low was your reconnaissance pass, Fighter Rank Severin?”

The Fighter Rank’s eyes widened. “Low, sir?”

Doctrine directed that reconnaissance ops be conducted from high altitude, to allow the maximum spread of the sophisticated sensor gear aboard the fighters. “Yes, how low?”

“Standard, First Rank. A hundred and fifty kilometers.”

Diettinger almost smiled. “While you were optimizing the scanning equipment on board your fighter, did you make any use of the scanning equipment in your head?”

“First Rank, Tanith is under almost perpetual cloud cover, I saw no reason - “

“Tanith is under such cloud cover, Fighter Rank, because it is extremely hot. It is a veritable jungle every place above sea level where it is not swamp, or sheer cliff or broken ground. That is the reason for the low vehicle-to-infantry ratio. With very few exceptions, armored vehicles are worthless on Tanith, while infantry with air support, and particularly Special Forces, comprise the dominant forces of battle. Your failure to provide accurate disposition of these enemy forces has endangered the success

of our mission and the lives of hundreds of your fellow Soldiers.”

“But, First Rank, they’re only human norms!”

Now it was Diettinger’s turn to be surprised. Recovering, he looked down at Severin. “What have you learned since release from your training crèche, Fighter Rank? Have you forgotten that it has been ‘human norms’ across known space who have bled Sauron white in this war?”

Severin’s body was rigid with tension, Diettinger noted. He was of the Home World mindset that believed this kind of conversation was perilously close to treason: Sauron’s reverses in the last years of the war could clearly be attributed to the manpower and material superiority of the enemy forces; even at that, such Imperial victories as had been won were, to say the least, Pyrrhic. The situation at Tanith was a classroom exercise: a Sauron heavy cruiser that could not utterly destroy such a meager opposing force, as Severin had reported, was not worthy of the name.

The human norms had an expression for this kind of thinking: it was called, “Whistling in the dark.”

“Your squadron will immediately make necessary reconnaissance sweeps and report directly to me. Those will allow low altitude passes, a hundred *meters* or less, with augmented visual recording gear. If your second report is satisfactory, you and your squadron will not be remanded to combat over-watch during the battle to come. Dismissed.”

Diettinger watched the young Soldier leave. *The new ones arrive filled with the invincibility of Sauron, he reflected. Their historical training is being neglected, or they would know that only losing armies do that to their young warriors.*

Diettinger reviewed his orders once more. They read: “Massive quantities of pharmaceuticals on Tanith awaiting convoy for off-shipment,” followed by a single imperative - “Secure.”

Pharmaceuticals on Tanith meant one thing: *borloi*. While an addictive vice among human norms that comprised the Empire, *borloi* in its most concentrated form was the only drug capable of anesthetizing a Sauron for surgery. With the fearful weapons both sides were employing in this war of secession, more and more Soldiers were being wounded and maimed every day. Although their superior healing ability and resistance to trauma increased their survivability *vis à vis* their Imperial counterparts, they couldn’t grow back lost limbs or organs without help.

At least, Diettinger thought, not yet, until the Breedmasters perfect that capability, we cannot fight the Empire with paraplegics. Regeneration might be an exact science, but grafts and re-growth implantation were not painless, particularly for burn victims. Sauron needed that *borloi* and Diettinger’s ship was the closest to Tanith for the mission.

He accessed the data on the vessel Severin had reported in orbit: three cruisers, three destroyers, two light-cruisers and the original of the *Canada* class of battle cruisers. The *Canada* would be over fifty Standard Years old; perhaps the Empire was straining in this war as well.

Sauron ship designations were derived from weaponry and mission profiles, rather than tonnage, but the *Fomoria* was more than a match for the Imperial battle cruiser. The other ships would be dangerous inasmuch as *Fomoria* would have to ignore them while she engaged the *Canada*. During which time all the Imperial vessels would be firing on her, attempting to overload her Langston Fields with energy weapons and slip missiles past her point defense systems.

Space was the only battlefield where the Imperials could engage Sauron forces on something like an even footing. Diettinger himself had developed tactics to redress that problem, tactics which were now standard procedure whenever Sauron ships faced the Imperial Navy. The naval aspect of the raid was thus the least crucial. The problem was the raid on Tanith herself.

Library data gave him the general layout of Tanith's main spaceport, but it was only accurate to ten years prior, making Severin's reconnaissance update crucial; still, until he knew more, the First Rank would work with what he had. After a few minutes of planning, he had arrived at what he believed was an acceptable battle outline.

He scheduled the staff meeting for one hour after the return of Severin's squadron.

II

Captain William Adderly of the INSS *Canada* and commander of the Tanith patrol fleet launched his pen across the room toward the dartboard for another bull's-eye. It was something he did to relieve tension, and it was almost second nature to him now.

He read the reports again, hoping they would say something different this time, but it was not to be. The *Talon* class, Sauron heavy cruiser *Fomoria* was still in-system. A ship as fearsome as the reputation of her commander. Sauron heavy cruisers were designed to be all-purpose vessels, carrying fighters, ground troops and far more armament than their Imperial naval counterparts. They were an admiral's dream, the first ships in human history truly able to "outfight what they could not outrun, and outrun what they could not outfight."

Adderly launched another pen. Unfortunately, the very flexibility of such a ship made it almost impossible for him to guess what it might be doing here. A force of transports and battleships meant siege and invasion, a force of carriers meant a strike . . . but one heavy cruiser only meant trouble.

The Saurons had arrived in the Tanith System three Terran-weeks ago. As usual in this war, they had been preceded by automated bombs, high-yield nukes on simple clockwork timers, sent ahead through the Alderson Point to soften up anybody waiting on the other end. The disorientation effects of Jump Lag made such a tactic mandatory, since all humans - including Saurons - were so debilitated by the phenomenon that a monitor ship close to a tramline exit could destroy an arriving ship with ease. Computers fared worse, but even Jump Lag couldn't disrupt a spring and a handful of gears.

Since then - nothing. The *Fomoria* had made no move against his meager task force and he still did not dare engage her until the convoy arrived with its escort of reinforcements.

The Saurons had been probing this sector off and on for four years and despite being bloodied in three major naval engagements, they were still far from beaten. It was only by the grace of long travel times between Alderson Points that the Empire had survived the initial Sauron victories of the War. The following decades had been filled with the constant struggle to push the Saurons and their allies back. Now it appeared as if the Saurons were on the wane.

Since the tide of war had turned, the Imperial General Staff had twice launched offensives against Sauron strongholds. Both times the carefully garnered reserves and precious resources of Imperial men and ships had been obliterated, when everything in the Staff plans had predicted otherwise. Now the Saurons were at Tanith, one of the Alderson crossroads into the heart of the Empire. From Tanith, it was only a short trip to Gaea, or Covenant; even the Imperial Capital, Sparta, would be in range of a Sauron Fleet based on Tanith. *If the enemy gets a foothold here...*

Adderly's constant request for reinforcements had gone unanswered; however, he'd been promised that a portion of the convoy escort would be turned over to his command. But he couldn't leave the *Fomoria* out there, unmolested, to welcome the convoy when it arrived helpless in the throes of Jump Lag. Adderly recalled the old military adage, when Saurons still provided loyal troops for the Empire, before the Secession Wars: "No battle plan survives contact with a Sauron." Too true, perhaps even more so of *this* Sauron.

Adderly rechecked the slim Intel file on Galen Diettinger, commander of the *Fomoria*. *At least, he's an*

old warhorse like me, he thought.

One problem with being at war for decades was that details on the enemy's up-and-comers became almost impossible to obtain. There were simply no Sauron defectors and human norms who tried to impersonate Saurons never succeeded.

It wasn't all that tough for a Sauron to tone down his abilities and pass for a human norm. Rumor had it they did not look all that different. For all the racial supremacist bilge water the Imperial Propaganda Committee put out about them, the Saurons differed in physiognomy as much as human norms; they were, after all, "purpose-bred people." They also possessed a number of human allied worlds, allies from which to draw their human espionage community. On the other hand, there seemed to be no end to the petty thieves and bureaucrats willing to betray the Empire for a few feeble promises of neutrality, special treatment . . . or just plain credits.

And what does that say about the state of the Imperial Society I am risking my neck to preserve?

Adderly dismissed the memory of his wife's voice. Alysha would never understand. She never had, although she had promised she would. They'd married during his midshipman days at the Academy, when no one had yet dared to label the Empire's ongoing skirmishes as what they really were; the opening battles of a War of Secession. He had promised her to join her father's merchant fleet as soon as those skirmishes were resolved.

But the Saurons had emerged to lead the Secessionist Cause and the skirmishes had become a war. Four years of required service became a lifelong career, despite his influential father-in-law's offers to get him out of the Navy for "critical civilian service." His refusals had led to battles with Alysha that rivaled those with the Secessionists.

Adderly sighed. At least this Galen Diettinger was more or less a known quantity. The file called him resourceful and innovative, with a flag on the last word. Sauron discipline and aggressiveness tended to make them somewhat predictable; nevertheless, they possessed their share of daring commanders. Being perhaps the ultimate military pragmatists, Saurons were quick to place these exemplars where they would do the most good.

He read of engagements in which the *Fomoria* took part under Diettinger; none of the accounts gave him cause for rejoicing. The *Fomoria* had typically been used to engage numerically superior forces, once even during the Battle of Tanith.

Soon to be renamed the First Battle of Tanith, no doubt, he mused.

Diettinger had one of those records a civilian might have chalked up to mere genius, but Adderly knew better. No military action, in which Diettinger had been in command, had ever ended in defeat - unless he'd been relieved by the arrival of higher-ranking officers. The man was not just good; he was *lucky*.

It was rare to find anyone on either side who could claim a consistent record of naval victories. Ship to ship, the Imperial Navy was equal to anything the Saurons could muster. It was all that was winning the war for the Empire. It was also why Sauron ships were built to be twice as powerful as any opposing vehicle of their type.

If Diettinger moved before the convoy arrived, Adderly knew that any battle plan he might devise would be the first casualty.

He decided it was time to confer with the commanders of the light cruisers *Strela* and *Konigsberg*, and called his First Officer's duty station. "Jimmy. Get Captains Casardi and Saunders online for a briefing in two hours."

William Adderly had been in the Navy twenty years, all of them at war, all fighting Saurons or their

allies, and he had developed a smell for trouble. He looked at the holo of the Tanith System above his desk.

It stank.

Two

I

“The enemy convoy is due in-system at any time. We may expect heavy support in addition to the transport ships. The issue is therefore to be resolved as a raid, with rapid deployment of ground forces to the spaceport to determine the location of the *borloi*, secure it, and maintain the perimeter against local counterattack while the material is being uploaded to the *Fomoria*”

Diettinger turned to the commander of his ground force, Deathmaster Anson QuILLand, and asked, “Status?”

“All forces at operational strength, First Rank. Heavy anti-armor unit outfitting now, heavy anti-aircraft units will be ready in one hour.”

“The Imperial force deployments indicate they are moving their ground units to reinforce the spaceport, evidently to secure it from our attack. But only two enemy battalions have reached it as yet. Augment your force with twice-normal anti-personnel weapons. Use captured projectile weapons as they become available. It will add to the enemy’s confusion if he sees non-energy weapons like his own firing within the spaceport.”

QuILLand smiled; he considered himself fortunate to be in Diettinger’s command. The First Rank was crafty and thorough and under him QuILLand had been promoted quickly. No one else of his *crèche* had yet attained the rank of Deathmaster, the authority to decide who among their Soldiers would be committed to large battles - and thus, who would live and who would die.

Diettinger considered the improved quality of the latest reconnaissance. “Give the command to Fighter Rank Severin.”

Second Rank Althene raised her head.”First Rank.”

“Speak.”

“WILL not all fighter squadrons be required to engage enemy spacecraft?”

“Hopefully not, because your next task is to dispatch an emergency distress buoy through the Alderson Point back to the Second Fleet. Tell them we are encountering heavy and unexpected resistance, with more enemy ships arriving daily and to dispatch all available reinforcements.”

Second Rank’s eyes widened.”But . . .First Rank . . .that is not true.”

Diettinger looked at her. “No, Second Rank, it is not true. Today. Nor may it be true tomorrow. In fact it may *never* be true, but I am not willing to take that chance.”

“First Rank, if word of this gets back to High Command, you will be executed for misappropriation of resources.”

Diettinger did not notice her voice was trembling.

“Second Rank, the Imperials will receive reinforcements when their convoy arrives. They will certainly request more as they engage us, if they have not already; that is standard Imperial procedure. We, too, will request reinforcements as *they* escalate; that is an established Sauron procedure. I am simply

moving up the timetable. I will have that *borloi* for Sauron, Second Rank, and I will take no chance that it will be lost because our fleets are on standby waiting to rescue one of our incompetent allies from their own blunders. Dispatch the buoy. Dismissed.”

He watched her go, her back stiff. How she could be so concerned with procedure, at a time like this, was beyond him.

Couldn't they see - any of them? After two decades of war, the pattern I described to Second Rank is now inscribed in stone. Sauron has lost the ability to seize the initiative, to make the enemy react to us; the Imperials now know exactly what we will do. Not in detail; we still hold that tactical advantage. But in procedure, that field where battles may be lost but the war still won. Diettinger ran a hand through his hair, straight, white and, he realized, thinning.

The Imperial commander at Tanith knows what I will do. My only hope is to deceive him as to how I will do it.

II

“And the hell of it is, gentlemen, that I haven't the faintest goddamned idea of what those Sauron sons-of-bitches are going to do, nor when, nor how, nor even *why!*”

Adderly had been throwing his pens at the dartboard for the last ten minutes; there was a cluster of them grouped around the bull's-eye, each later makeshift dart driven in deeper than the last. He was now starting to pitch them hard enough to bury them in the plastic of the wall behind the board, and it was doing no more to relieve his tension than when he'd started.

Captain Edwin Casardi of the *Strela* leaned back in his seat and spread his hands. “WILL, take it easy; they haven't moved yet. If they wait until the convoy arrives, they're hopelessly outnumbered. If they hit us now, we only have to hold, harass and withdraw. One Sauron heavy cruiser against Tanith Starport's Langston Field won't amount to a pisshole in a snow heap.”

Adderly stopped to look at him, then to Casardi's opposite number, Saunders.”Is that what you think, Colin?”

Saunders was a redheaded Gael from New Scotland, fair skin and freckles making him look eternally young. The freckles almost disappeared when he was angry, as he was now.

“Like bloody hell. Sir.” Saunders did not like Casardi and made no secret of it. The *Strela*'s CO was too confident for Saunders' taste, and too easy on his crew by half. Saunders' own *Konigsberg* boasted the best readiness record of her class, if not the Navy.

“This *Fomoria* is a heavy cruiser, by their rating, a heavy battle cruiser by ours; but she canna' outgun all three cruisers and the *Chinthes* t'boot! We know she's out there, and if she's preparing to hit us, as you say, then I say she'll ne'er be more vulnerable. Let's take all we've got and run the bastard t'ground!”

Adderly rubbed his face with his hands. “I'm amazed, gentlemen; you agree on something.” He looked up at both of them, scowling. “And you're both dead wrong. Pull out, or attack; either way we leave Tanith to fend for herself. Christ, men, we're the bloody *Navy!* What if we guess wrong, Colin, and don't find her, and she slips in the backdoor with a load of thermo-nukes, and Tanith gets slagged in a terror bombing while we're out beating the bush? Or say we pull safely out of range and wait for the convoy to pull our asses out of the fire, and suddenly - *wham* - the Sauron ship drops a battalion of Soldiers through the Field and into the spaceport just in time for *their* reinforcements?”

WILL, there's almost two-thirds of a full-strength Division down there!” Casardi sounded offended. “They'd outnumber a Sauron Battalion by six to one!”

After twenty years of being kicked around by the Saurons and their Coalition of Secession, Adderly knew that the Navy's ranks had been winnowed mercilessly, leaving men who had been fighting in this war long enough to become shrewd, dedicated and skilled in judging their Sauron foe.

I wonder where those men are? he thought, rubbing his eyes. "Ed, Sauron Battalions are *designed* to engage full strength Imperial Divisions; engage them and defeat them.

Casardi almost snorted. "Maybe twenty years ago, WILL, but they're on the run, now, everybody knows that. It's only a matter of time."

"Aye," Saunders snapped. "So you'd as soon avoid puttin' your neck on the lines and let somebody else do the dirty work?"

Casardi's eyes flashed. In her first engagement three years previous, *Strela* had been rammed amidships in a battle off Kennicott, losing half her crew in an instant. Twice since then, she had suffered heavy losses, once when her fighter cover had strayed, exposing her to attack, and again when a missile bay had taken a freak hit through a flaw in her Langston Field. The *Strela* was now marked - an unlucky ship.

"My crew has seen combat, Captain Saunders. I confess I would like to try to spare them further unnecessary glories' which less experienced officers might find welcome."

Adderly had heard enough. "All right, both of you. When this is over I'll officiate at a sanctioned duel if that's what you want, but until then - and I mean this, *gentlemen* - I will relieve you both if you do not put your personal differences aside and start working together immediately. Is that understood?"

The short silence that followed before Adderly's order could be acknowledged was shattered by the battle alarm.

"NOW HEAR THIS. NOW HEAR THIS. BATTLE STATIONS. BATTLE STATIONS. ENEMY WARSHIP DETECTED AND CLOSING. CAPTAIN TO THE BRIDGE."

"Ah, Christ on a crutch," Adderly said with a groan. "You two get back to your ships. Ed, I will want *Strela* in squadron with *Canada*. Colin, *Konigsberg* stands back at reserve distance until further notice."

Saunders was too well trained to object, but the bitterness came out in his "Aye, sir."

Casardi only looked at Adderly. "Right," he said.

Adderly caught his look, pretending to ignore it, as he raced for the bridge. He knew the *Strela's* reputation for hard luck and he knew Saunders' temperament; he'd chosen Casardi's ship to accompany *Canada* for those very reasons. Casardi would be prudent in the engagement, while Saunders might prove reckless. But when the inevitable reinforcement was called for, Saunders would throw his ship into the battle with all the fury he'd built up waiting on the sidelines.

If the Navy wouldn't give him geniuses, he'd have to try and use what he had with brilliance.

III

"Enemy ships holding, First Rank. Three *Chinthe-class* destroyers, the battle cruiser *Canada* and the light cruiser *Strela*. Engagement range in fourteen minutes, *Konigsberg* moving off."

In contrast to conditions aboard the Imperial ships, the Sauron bridge was quiet. No klaxons blared. No stations reported readiness levels; they were always prepared for battle. Only deficiencies were allowed to interrupt the First Rank's concentration, and aboard the *Fomoria* there were none.

Strapped into the acceleration couch, Diettinger watched the display on the battle screens. Tanith's surly orange bulk crouched on the bottom left while five red circles tracked slowly around the middle

of the view. "Marine status."

"Standing by, First Rank." Diettinger's personal modification to space combat was ready; no doubt the Imperials were prepared for it, but there was really no way they could prevent it.

The three smaller circles moved away from the larger two, moving down and to the left, across the face of Tanith.

"Destroyers flanking to port, First Rank."

Weapons half-turned in his seat; the First Rank often waited to raise the Langston Field until the last moment, but he was taking even longer than usual.

The smaller circles were at the lower left edge of the viewscreen."Destroyers off port bow."

"Visual to 360."

The walls disappeared. There was now only Tanith System space.

Weapons' finger hovered over the Field activation pad. "Destroyers to port," he called."Coming about and closing on bearing 255. Destroyers have activated their Fields."

"All enemy Fields activating." The red circles had changed to solid squares of black with red backlighting.

"Targeting stations, abort fixes on *Canada*" Diettinger said."All batteries switch to and engage the middle destroyer. Activate Field."

Weapons' finger stabbed fire pads and the Field key almost simultaneously. "Torpedoes away. Lasers firing."

IV

Aboard the *Canada*, Adderly's bridge crew had locked down their own acceleration couches into the circular floor plate surrounding the combat hologram. Adderly wanted them prepared for violent maneuvering, in the hope that the *Canada's* agility might not be known to the Sauron commander.

The black bubble of *Canada's* Langston Field was charged to maximum, ready for the initial enemy salvo. Adderly wanted to buy time for the destroyers to get in and unload on the Sauron; the *Chinthes* were a new design, greatly over-gunned for their size, and he was hoping they could charge the *Fomoria's* Fields with more energy than could easily be dissipated before *Canada* started firing.

"The Sauron's lost her lock on us, sir!" The weapons officer's elation turned to puzzlement. "Wait, she's locking again - *gods*, they're fast! - right; now she's firing, sir!"

"Engineering, stand - " Adderly watched the traces in the combat hologram reach out and enfold the lead *Chinthe-class* destroyer. That ship too, had her Field at maximum, but it was not nearly so powerful as the *Canada's*, and was never intended to absorb such a flood of energy at one blow. The *Chinthe's* Field went from black to red and up the spectrum to violet almost too fast for the eye to follow. White sparks danced over its surface as the *Fomoria's* battleship-killing lasers burned through with insulting ease.

The Field collapsed abruptly and the *Chinthe* was obliterated.

"The sonofabitch is going for easy kills," a helmsman cursed. "Cowardly Sauron bastard."

The other two *Chinthes* cut hard away from each other, one preparing to pass the rear of the *Fomoria* and the other to go below her.

Adderly was grim."Don't kid yourself; he's working strictly by the numbers. That's one less ship to

help overload *his* Field.” *And I needed her.* “Time to impact the torpedoes?” he snapped.

Langston Fields on big ships didn’t go quickly like those of destroyers; they absorbed lasers and proximity-detonated nukes in prodigious amounts, becoming supercharged walls of missile-eating energy. The time to get torpedoes in was now, before their own beams turned the Sauron’s Field into a free line of defense against them.

There were all sorts of wrinkles to this line of work.

“Ninety seconds, sir.”

“Helm, lay in thirty degrees port, five-Gs emergency burn and stand by.” Five-Gs was more than human norms could take for extended periods, even with acceleration couches; still, Adderly preferred it to being vaporized by the Sauron.

“Signal *Strela* to get positive two kilometers and fire all lasers at will.”

“*Strela* acknowledging.”

V

“Incoming torpedoes, First Rank.”

“Target the *Canada*” The black square representing the middle *Chinthe* was gone from the viewscreen. *Excellent*, he thought. Diettinger’s Intelligence Rank had estimated that this class was very heavily armed for their size, and the enemy commander’s commitment of them at such close range confirmed it. Destroyers usually hovered at the fringe of battle, launching missiles to aid in over-loading enemy Fields. Only if they had great laser capability would they be worth risking close in against a ship like the *Fomoria*.

An alarm sounded, but it was a soft, triple chime from Weapons’ console, “Point defense penetration, First Rank, one torpedo incoming.” Weapons completed targeting the enemy BC rather than anticipate the missile impact; there was nothing to be done about that.

The *Canada*’s torpedo detonated partially inside the *Fomoria*’s Field. Much of the energy was still absorbed by the backside of the screen, but the rest pouring into her hull, vaporizing plates of reflective armor, exposing true outer hull and in places even burning through that. Superheated air and coolants burst within the *Fomoria*’s skin, rattling the heavy cruiser with a sound like bad plumbing in winter.

“*Chinthes* slowing; holding positions aft and negative. They’re firing, First Rank.”

“Assess and report,” he ordered. “Torpedo damage status?”

“Combat efficiency unimpaired.”

“*Strela* at two kilometers positive, First Rank. Opening fire with lasers; locking torpedoes. *Canada* closing, firing again.”

“*Chinthe* assessment, First Rank.”

“Speak.”

“Main laser batteries in the C-gigawatt range, tens-of kilotons thermo-nuclears in torpedoes, but light salvo indicated small load same.”

Diettinger was glad he’d killed one early; the *Chinthes* were armed with the firepower of a light cruiser. The *Fomoria* now had enemy ships pouring fire into her Field from five of her six aspects, leaving only one free for shifting power into areas of the Field that might require it. The trap was obvious. “Aft and ventral batteries, engage destroyers and continue firing until destroyed. Dorsal batteries, engage the

Strela, Weapons.”

“Weapons ready.”

“Mixed ordnance, heavy salvo, on the *Canada*”

Mixed ordnance was the proverbial kitchen sink. The *Canada* would receive fusion torpedoes, particle beams, visible lasers and X-ray cluster bursts in an attempt to burn through her Field and roll back her point defense systems. Weapons’ fingers flew over the control panel in response to First Rank’s commands almost as fast as they were given; this was, after all, what he’d been born to do.

“Engineering, six-Gs in one minute. Deathmaster Quilland?”

“Quilland here.”

“Have your Marines stand by.”

“Acknowledged.”

VI

“Sir, *Chinthes* report their Field’s going into the green,”

“Tell them to hold on for a few more seconds. Signal *Konigsberg* to engage; she’s to take up our position as soon as we’ve cleared and unload on the Sauron ship with everything she’s got. Gunnery, prep starboard batteries for enhanced charge and stand by.”

Adderly watched the hologram; if they could keep up this punishment to the Sauron’s shields, and not lose another ship, this might work. The Sauron should soon have to shunt power from the starboard, non-engaged sector of his Field to those being bombarded and, hopefully, weakened.

Then, if he knew Saunders, the rabid Scotsman would be in their position almost before they left, allowing Adderly to bring *Canada* across the Sauron’s bow and hit the enemy’s thinned starboard Field sector with the battle cruiser’s full broadside. He wouldn’t get a Field collapse out of it, but there might be a few burn-throughs, and that could provide him with the edge he needed.

“*Konigsberg* at two hundred thousand kilometers and closing, sir.”

“Speed?”

“Speed of . . .this can’t be right - uh, he’s coming like a bat outta hell, Cap’n!”

Adderly grinned. *Good old Colin*.

“Helm, execute. Gunnery, stand by.”

“Thirty degrees, five-Gs emergency, aye.”

“Gunnery standing by.” The Gunnery officer’s last word was wrenched out of his lips as the *Canada*’s main and maneuvering thrusters roared into life at five gravities’ thrust.

Three

I

“Engaged Field sectors moving into orange, First Rank.”

Diettinger had activated the overhead viewscreen and was watching the *Strela* in its positive aspect rain its lasers into them.”Enemy status?”

“*Chinthe* shields moving into violet. *Canada* and *Strela* shields moving into the green.”

“Weapons, fire mixed salvo on the *Canada*. Engineering, accelerate to six-Gs. Marines, launch pods.”

Fomoria and *Canada* leaped toward one another at a forty-five degree angle. *Fomoria*'s mixed salvo savaged the Imperial battle cruiser's starboard side, piercing her Field with a dozen burn-throughs. *Canada*'s starboard batteries, overcharged for Adderly's planned enhanced broadside, blew out over half their capacitors, destroying the weapons and turning the surface of the Imperial battle cruiser into ragged foil.

On the heels of the mixed salvo, *Fomoria* disgorged dozens of pods and hundreds of chaff dispensers. The pods were torpedoes, their payloads removed and modified with internal maneuvering controls, and each carried one of Diettinger's picked EVA Marines.

A quarter of the pods sped past the *Canada*, effectively out of the battle until they could be retrieved or turned around. Perhaps a half dozen were hit by point defense, despite the chaff, or caught in the ragged salvo the wounded battle cruiser managed to generate from her ruined batteries, a volume of fire that vaporized chaff and pod alike. But the rest pierced the *Canada*'s shredded Field, losing some kinetic energy to the Field's effect but not enough to keep them from intercepting the hull. The pods maneuvered into position and disgorged the bulk of the Marines in battle armor, who regrouped on the hull and began planting breach charges.

The *Canada*'s own salvo was much reduced, but still effective. *Fomoria*'s acceleration carried her out from between the combined beams and missiles of the *Strela* and the two *Chinthes*, and directly into the path of the oncoming *Konigsberg*. Saunders had everything the light cruiser could bring to bear, firing on the Sauron, with the Field shifting to meet it.

Canada's broadside burned through the *Fomoria*'s weakened starboard Field sector at three Points, disabling two batteries and breaching the hull at the hanger door.

“Proximity alert.”

The *Konigsberg* and the *Fomoria* closed at a combined speed approaching thirty kilometers per second, respectable even at the distances normal in space battles.

“Roll starboard 18, negative five hundred meters. Ventral and port batteries maintain fire, fire for effect.”

Diettinger's orders made little sense to anyone until the moment the *Konigsberg* and the *Fomoria* passed each other. Narrowly avoiding collision, Diettinger's maneuver had kept the distance between the ships to less than four hundred meters, putting them inside one another's Langston Field.

The ventral and port batteries of the rolling *Fomoria* were firing blindly, but it was impossible for them all to miss. The *Fomoria*'s lasers, with no field to stop them, raked across the belly and port-low aspects of the *Konigsberg*, opening her to space like a gutted fish. As if to add insult to injury, the two ships' intersected fields merged into one, a phenomenon their creator Langston had called “hobbling,” combining as they passed, distributing the stored energy in the *Fomoria*'s Field evenly between the two. The *Fomoria*'s screens dropped from yellow back to dull red; all Adderly's work from the beginning of the battle was lost.

II

Adderly, however, was too busy to notice.

“Damage Control! Helm, hard about, come to 170, slow to one-G.” Adderly was coughing as the air filled with smoke. He tried to pick out details on the bridge. The battle hologram stood out brighter than ever in the haze, but now he could no longer see the crew around it.

“Helm, acknowledge, damn it! I know you're not dead, I can hear you bleeding.”

“Hard about 170, aye,” the helmsman hacked out a reply. “Slowing to one-G.”

“Damage report.”

“Starboard batteries out, sir. Field intact, but...” He fell silent for a moment. “Captain, I’m getting weird signals on my board, looks like multiple hull breaches.”

“What?” Adderly directed his acceleration couch to the Damage Control Officer’s station. “What is the location?”

The DCO shook his head. “Everywhere, sir. Mostly toward the rear of the ship, but spread out in pockets - there goes another one!”

“They must have gotten something inside the Field, but what would do -”

He suddenly recalled Diettinger’s file: The product of a race of soldiers and a man who had never yet lost a naval engagement. An innovator. To Adderly those two facts meant Diettinger’s success stemmed from chances he took that the regular Sauron High Command would never have considered.

“I will be dipped in shit,” Adderly whispered. “Helm! Emergency stop, all engines reverse full.”

“Reverse full, aye, emergency stop.”

The next instant the klaxons went crazy, followed by the voice of the *Canada’s* Security Officer on the emergency address system.

“ATTENTION ALL DECKS. ATTENTION ALL DECKS. INTRUDER ALERT. INTRUDER ALERT. ENEMY MARINES ON DECKS ONE AND THREE, SECTIONS FIVE, SEVEN, EIGHT, NINE AND TWELVE. NUMBER UNKNOWN.”

Adderly keyed in the Security Officer’s station. “What the hell is going on, mister?”

The SO was a young Imperial Marine, Lieutenant Harris, struggling to get into his battle dress and talk at the same time. Adderly could hear small arms fire in the background.

“Saurons, Captain, some kind of EVA marines. They’re using breach charges and coming in through the hull. We’re losing atmosphere up here and half my men can’t get to their suits.”

“What’s their strength?”

“Unknown, sir. There are at least a dozen of the bastards inside; they aren’t even trying to secure an airlock. They’re just burning their way in -” Harris suddenly looked confused, then startled, finally shocked.

Adderly realized he couldn’t hear the background noise anymore, understanding only when he saw the lieutenant’s cheeks turn pink and his eyes red as he began frantically groping at the wall where an emergency oxygen hood was mounted. Harris was pulling on it when an impossibly broad shape appeared in the doorway behind him.

“Harris -” No use, there was no atmosphere to carry the warning and Harris wasn’t wearing an earphone. The armored Sauron’s weapon probably killed Harris; it certainly destroyed the communications plate. The screen went black.

“Engineering, seal off decks one through four.”

“Which sections, sir?”

“All of them, stem to stern! And seal deck five as well. Then flood them with whatever you’ve got, and I don’t mean gas. Use coolant, use fuel, use *plasma* if that’s all you’ve got, but do it, and I mean *now!*”

“But... Captain Adderly, there are still men up there...”

The look in Adderly's eyes showed that he knew that; that in fact, he was not likely to ever forget it.

III

“Entering Tanith's gravity well, First Rank.”

“Cut thrust, enter orbital path.” Diettinger had heard nothing from Damage Control, meaning they were on the job. *Fomoria* was now at 87 percent combat effectiveness, well within acceptable limits.

“Deathmaster Quilland: status of EVA Marines?”

“Assault Leader Bohren reports six decks of *Canada* secured, First Rank. Imperials tried flooding the decks with liquid hydrogen from their fuel cells, but the Marines reached the sixth deck before it was sealed off.”

“Very Good.” The EVA Marines were on their own for a while, at least until *Fomoria* emerged from the other side of Tanith. “Communications, enemy status?”

“*Strela* is coming alongside the *Canada*. Both *Chinthes* are firing controlled bursts into the aft decks of the *Canada*, igniting pockets of fuel in the flooded sections.”

Diettinger asked, “What?”

Communications was just as bewildered. “It is apparently intentional, First Rank. I am getting comm fragments that indicate the Imperials think they have trapped the EVA Marines and are trying to finish them off.”

Diettinger thought about what that implied. *Can they be that irrational? Could any race of men hate another so much?*

“And the *Konigsberg*?”

“Drifting, First Rank. I'm picking up sporadic communications that indicate severe internal damage.”

Diettinger nodded, satisfied. It had all gone surprisingly well. The opportunity to fire at the *Konigsberg* while inside her field had decided the battle. He realized Second Rank was looking at him.

“Speak.”

Althene rose from her acceleration couch against the now three-gravities acceleration with little effort and approached Diettinger's chair. “The message buoy, First Rank?”

“Yes, Second. The one I ordered you to send. I presume you did so.”

“Of course, First Rank, but...”

“But now you are concerned that it was unnecessary.”

Second Rank said nothing.

“Recall, Second, that we have not yet secured the *borloi* and we may yet have to deal with an enemy convoy and its reinforcements.” He turned back to the screens. “And, in any case, what is done is done. Return to your station.”

“Entering Tanith orbit, First Rank,” Communications said.

“Time to drop point?”

“Twenty-three minutes, First Rank.”

Diettinger accessed Drop Bay Three. “Cyborg Rank Koln.”

“Koln here.”

“Stand by for drop in twenty-three minutes.”

“Affirmative.”

The featureless cloud cover of Tanith revealed nothing of the surface beneath to the naked eye, but the screens projected the outlines of continents, islands, inland seas, overlaid with the trceries of man’s marks on the face of the jungle world. There were not many of those.

At one minute before drop-point, Diettinger turned control over to Koln. Sixty-one seconds later, Weapons’ panel read green.

“Pathfinders away, First Rank.”

“Deathmaster Quilland. Prepare your men for drop on the next pass.”

“Affirmative.”

Four hours later, Koln signaled the spaceport sufficiently secured for reinforcement, and the *Fomoria*’s drop-tubes opened again. Diettinger’s full complement of ground forces was now committed to Tanith’s spaceport. “Take us out of orbit. Make for the *Canada*. Stand by to retrieve any EVA Marines who have not reached the enemy ship.”

Four

Seeing the *Fomoria* closing on them again from Tanith orbit, Adderly ordered the *Strela* and the two *Chinthes* to try and get any survivors off the *Konigsberg*.

The *Canada* was beyond help.

The Sauron EVA marines had not been caught in the aft decks as was hoped. *Canada*’s marines had been killed to a man by at least fifty Saurons, probably more.

Adderly had given the order to abandon ship, forcing his bridge crew off almost at gunpoint, finally demanding they leave as his final order. He had then tried to initiate the scuttle codes, but found he couldn’t access them. Either the Saurons had done something to the ship’s computer or it had been damaged when the *Canada* took the mixed salvo from the *Fomoria*.

Whatever the cause, Adderly had been frantically trying to run a manual self-destruct program when the Saurons had blasted their way onto the bridge.

The next thing he knew, figures in armor were shoving him into a space-suit. He was prodded down the corridors ahead of a wicked looking energy weapon and hustled into his own shuttle. A Sauron waiting there put cable ties about his wrist while another one piloted the shuttle out of the bay.

He looked out the viewport, hoping for some sign of the *Strela*, but it was nowhere to be found. Instead, the dagger-shaped Sauron heavy cruiser grew in his sight. His shuttle landed in a cavernous hangar bay.

The Saurons always seemed to be in a hurry, but Adderly found that he didn’t really mind. He was beyond caring. No one taken prisoner by the Saurons had ever been heard from again, and he doubted that he would be an exception.

Adderly wound up in a room with a desk, a viewport and a conference table. The two armored guards who’d brought him in the shuttle stood behind him on either side. Incredibly, he found himself looking at a sampler on one wall, a framed embroidery that appeared impossibly ancient and read in Anglic:

“*Discretion is the better part of valor.*”

After a few moments, the door behind him opened and a distinguished-looking man entered. Tall, with sharp features, his straight white hair failed to make him look old. He went to the desk and sat down.

The helmet was suddenly unlatched and jerked from Adderly's head, and he blinked despite the lighting of the room, which was subdued and comfortable.

The man at the desk frowned at the cable ties on Adderly's wrists and said something to the guard in a strange language. One of the Soldiers was about to pull Adderly's wrists apart to break the cable tie, but the man stopped him with a single word of Sauron. The guard instead broke the tie with his fingers.

"You are the commander of the *Canada*" the man said.

Adderly frowned."I am. Captain WILL Adderly. May I ask who you are?"

"Vessel First Rank Galen Diettinger, commander of the *Fomoria*"

Adderly's jaw dropped."What?" He looked over his shoulder at the huge forms behind him."But . . .this is a Sauron ship!"

Diettinger looked puzzled. "Yes. Is it surprising that a Sauron ship should be commanded by a Sauron?"

One of the guards guided Adderly to the chair opposite Diettinger's desk.

"But you...you're *human*" stammered Adderly. "At least, you *look* human."

At that, Diettinger actually blinked. He leaned forward, frowning. "What did you expect, Captain Adderly?"

Since the Secession Wars had begun, interstellar trade had ground to a standstill. Imperial propaganda had been stronger every year, and Imperial paranoia over Sauron eugenics had grown more strident with each passing day. It suddenly struck Adderly that he had been fighting Saurons for his entire *career*; yet this was the first time in his life he had ever actually seen a Sauron.

These were the people who were bringing six hundred years of interstellar civilization crashing down about his ears; who were breeding themselves for war, fine-tuning their genes to create a race of human Warrior Ants. The people who had sterilized a dozen worlds in half as many years.

Somehow, this Diettinger's obvious humanity and apparent decency made it all worse than it already was.

"I expected . . . something different. What do you want?" he asked, his voice dead.

"I had you brought here not as a prisoner of war, but for a parley. My Marines are taking the *Canada* as a prize ship, but you have my word that after this meeting is concluded, you will be released for retrieval by another ship of your task force. Captain Adderly, I am here at Tanith on a simple raid, not for this world's conquest."

"You must think I'm an idiot," Adderly said. "Tanith's Alderson Point routes are old news. Her tramlines reach into Secessionist as well as Loyalist Space. Tanith's System has a mucking great gas giant for cheap refueling. All of which makes the whole system extremely attractive."

Diettinger nodded. "Obviously. But there are many other ways into the Empire, and securing Tanith is the last one I would choose. It must be obvious, however, that more than a single cruiser would be assigned to the task. In any case, that is not my decision."

Diettinger leaned forward, watching him for a moment."And, if I thought you were an idiot, Captain Adderly, you would not be here now."

He doesn't blink, Adderly thought, although he knew it had to be his imagination. Suddenly it hit him: this was the first time in his life he had ever been confronted by someone with a discernible force of will. *Charismatic bastard, I'll give him that.*

"I have a proposition for you that can save a great many lives, both Sauron and Imperial," Diettinger said.

I would have said, "both Sauron and human" Adderly realized. He smiled a tired smile.

"This should be good. Let's hear it."

"I want the exact location of the *borloi* awaiting shipment by your convoy. I have Pathfinders looking for it now; I believe you call them death's heads.' They are supporting Marines who are securing the spaceport for shuttles to ship it to the *Fomoria*. While this situation persists, both your forces and the citizens of Tanith will be subjected to heavy loss of life."

"*Borloi* - -" Adderly said, almost sagging in the chair with relief, but caught himself.

They're here after the borloi? Why? Suddenly he remembered what Diettinger had said about Tanith. "*There are many ways into the Empire*"

Had the Sauron commander meant routes, or tactics? Were the Saurons going to try to destabilize the Empire by flooding it with *borloi*? It didn't make sense, Imperial officials would clamp down hard on *anything* that threatened the war effort, and personal vices like drug abuse received the simplest solution - summary execution of buyer and seller alike.

Adderly wracked his brain, trying to think of any military applications of *borloi*. None came to mind, but the Saurons did nothing without a reason, usually military. They were no slouches in the chemical warfare department, either. Still, if the *borloi* was their target that meant they didn't know the real reason the convoy was coming.

Adderly waited a long time before answering. "All right," he said finally, defeated. "Give me something to write with."

Diettinger smiled. "I have an excellent memory. You may simply tell me the location."

Adderly shook his head. "What good would it do? How old are your maps of Tanith? Sure, the *borloi* is at the spaceport, but where? There are a lot of storage chambers, most unmarked, and all of them underground. The Commandant knows how addictive *borloi* is and keeps it in a special facility, safe from spacers and dock hands."

Diettinger considered a moment, then handed him a writing stylus of some heavy Sauron alloy. "Very well. Please don't embarrass me by trying to kill yourself with this, or yourself by trying to harm me. I promise you that neither your speed nor your hand-to-hand combat skills are a match for mine or those of my Soldiers."

Adderly grunted and began to draw. Rectangles, circles, landmarks, roadways, all neatly labeled, all fiction. He was flirting with treason to buy time for the convoy, so he was determined to be convincing.

He had almost finished when he noticed Diettinger had turned to the viewport, looking out at the wreckage of the *Konigsberg*. Something twisted in Adderly's chest as he watched Diettinger smugly reviewing his defeat of Adderly's command.

Another one for your record, eh? It was hopeless, anyway; he had never entertained the notion that the Sauron's promise to release him had been sincere. He added a few more notes to the fraudulent map while he waited for Diettinger to turn around again. The Sauron's reflexes might be superhuman, but he couldn't react to what he didn't see coming, and they *had* to be as vulnerable as humans somewhere.

He only hoped the pen was heavy enough.

Adderly made shaking motions with the pen. "I thought these things were supposed to work in low gravity."

"I'll get you another." Diettinger began to turn to his desk, and Adderly extended the motion into an overhanded throw.

The pen was a centimeter away when Diettinger saw it - and caught it, Adderly realized with a shock. But it was too late. The makeshift dart had penetrated the Sauron's left eye.

Diettinger's head snapped back and cracked against the viewport. Instantly, Adderly felt a hand close about his throat and lift him off the deck. The guard holding him up began shaking him like a rat.

"No!" Diettinger ordered. He pulled the pen out, and was holding a hand to his ruined eye. The other guard was speaking rapidly into an intercom device, probably summoning medics to treat Diettinger and remove what would be left of Adderly after the guards got through with him.

"Congratulations," Adderly thought he heard Diettinger say, unsure of anything as his vision darkened. His windpipe felt as if it had been crushed, and he began coughing. The guard hadn't killed him, as he'd expected, but he hadn't put him down, either. At least he'd let up on the terrible pressure that had been cutting off his breath.

At a signal from Diettinger, the guard drove Adderly to his knees against the deck. He watched as the Sauron commander's blood fell slowly to the floor, then stopped. He looked up; Diettinger's face was inches away, the ruined eye dark with clotted blood - no longer bleeding.

Fast healing, Adderly thought, groaning inwardly. *They would be...*

"I do not understand you, Captain. I brought you here because you conducted yourself like a soldier, and I wanted to offer you something I thought you valued - the chance to save lives."

The guard was still holding Adderly down, still crushing his throat. He could breathe, but only a little. He felt faint and far away. He cursed through clenched teeth, "As if you bastards ever cared about that!"

Diettinger remained impassive. "In point of fact, Captain Adderly, I do. Although we do not view death the way you do; I am human, after all."

"You're a goddamn traitor, then -" The grip tightened. Adderly desperately wanted to lose consciousness, having no desire to see the end the Saurons would provide him for after this assault on their commander - but his brain refused to shut down.

Diettinger rose. "I serve a Race fighting for its independence from a regime that does not understand our motives and cannot possibly understand our goals. That makes me a patriot, Captain Adderly. You serve that regime, enforcing its will on hundreds of planets, regardless of whether they want you there or not. What does that make you?"

Adderly glared at the Sauron commander. "Patriot? Freedom fighter, maybe? Like hell; you think you're the first ones to trot out that old saw? You started your 'war of independence' by an unprovoked attack on St. Ekaterina! A billion people dead, Diettinger. How do you justify that? Go ahead, give it a shot!"

Diettinger appeared honestly puzzled. "We don't 'justify' our actions, Captain Adderly, any more than you explain your motivations to the family pet. Sauron is the cradle of the ultimate expression of the human race; and that is a far greater responsibility than suffering public censure over the removal of a threat like St. Ekaterina, or an inconvenience such as her mongrelized population of convicts, thieves

and other non-productives.”

“Inconvenience...!” For the first time since being captured, Adderly was truly afraid. Not for *his* life, or any of his crew that might also have been captured. Not for the convoy, or even the Empire. He was suddenly very afraid for all mankind.

The Saurons were making a ruin of the Empire, and they were *losing the war*. What would they make of humanity if they won?

“I will assume this map to be useless, of course,” Diettinger said, “We will carry out the battle, and many will die on both sides. A waste, since the population of Tanith is regarded as genetically promising. But, do understand, Captain, it is immaterial to me whether the Tanith casualties are one or one hundred million. I will have the *borloi*; you have my word on it. The outcome is decided. I merely wished to give you the opportunity to decide the means.”

He gestured to the guards, who pulled Adderly to his feet. “See that his spacesuit is intact. Provide him with a rescue beacon and put him out the airlock.”

Adderly was stunned.”What?”

The Sauron looked back at him with his remaining eye. ”I have given my word to you on two counts today, Captain Adderly. I want you to see that I am reliable on the one, so that you will not make another mistake by doubting the other.”

One of the *Chinthes* picked him up a few hours later.

Five

I

Diettinger was back on the bridge, the left side of his face hidden in bandages.

How could I have been so stupid? he asked himself. *Haven't I seen the evidence of their hatred for us a thousand times? Didn't I see it again, today, when they were willing to risk conflagration aboard their own ship just to finish off Saurons they thought were already trapped and probably dead?*

Diettinger found the idea of such irrational hatred difficult to credit, and impossible to justify. Saurons were trained from birth to accept the nature of the human species as being emotional, rational, predatory, dominant. To these and the dozens of other adjectives summing up the Sauron version of the human condition, the Race that called themselves “The Soldiers” had added a final qualifying virtue: efficient. The level of passion which human norms applied to their activities in general and their relations with Saurons in particular was, Diettinger felt, conspicuous in its lack of appreciation for that virtue.

There was something about them that made personal dealings difficult, diplomacy impractical and surrender for either side impossible.

Diettinger found it all... what?

Wasteful, he realized, although the confusion and distaste he felt was not so easily summarized as that.

And yet, the degree of the human norms' hatred for Saurons was no more than the Sauron's degree of contempt for them. *Probably less*, he thought.

Some Sauron commanders in the Secession War regarded the conflict as one of extermination.

Diettinger was not one of these, but gingerly probing the wounded side of his face, he wondered if all human norms might not be rational beings.

His depth perception was gone, of course. Adderly's throw had been very strong, and Diettinger's optic nerve had been ruined. Damned nuisance. It would require at least a week in regeneration therapy, but there was nothing else for it; he couldn't very well wear an eyepatch like some ancient pirate captain.

Fomoria was in high orbit off Tanith again, now accompanied by the *Canada* as a prize ship. Tanith spaceport's Langston Field was on, and with an atmosphere and plenty of ground water to dissipate energy into, it could hold off a dozen *Fomorias* indefinitely.

Laser communications antennae, lofted by Quilland's units, pierced the Field in a dozen places to establish contact with the Sauron warship. Fighting for the spaceport was reported heavy, but indecisive. Despite the numerical superiority of the Imperials, the large numbers of Cyborgs augmenting the already potent Sauron force prevented them from mounting any assault that would not require leveling the spaceport, and this the Imperial forces were understandably reluctant to do.

"Cyborg Koln. Status on the objective?"

"Material located and secured, First Rank."

Splendid! An eye lost for nothing, Diettinger sighed. Ah, well Live and learn...

"Deathmaster Quilland. Enemy anti-aerospace strength?"

"Marginal, First Rank. The Imperials have been arriving piecemeal, disorganized. We assume this is a result of the poor surface transportation network and low airlift capability, compounded by inclement weather."

Diettinger looked again at the solid mass of orange clouds over the surface of Tanith. "It all looks inclement from here, Deathmaster."

Quilland chuckled, a rare moment of humor, which meant events planetside were going very well, indeed. "Affirm. Weather data being transmitted now, First Rank. Shuttles should have no difficulty."

"Spaceport status?"

"Currently eliminating pockets of Imperials still within the spaceport perimeter. The spaceport's Langston Field generator has been captured intact."

"Very good. Be advised that INSS *Canada* has been taken as a war prize; her shuttles will also be engaged in the off-shipment of materials. Expect first wave -"

"Emergency break in," Communications cut through.

Diettinger changed orders in mid-breath; no human norm mind or tongue could have switched tracks so quickly, or completely.

"Speak."

"Fighter Rank Severin at the Alderson Point, First Rank. Large force Imperials emerging from Jump at three second intervals. Squadrons engaging during Jump Lag."

Standard Imperial convoy Jump procedure, Diettinger recalled. No nuclear precedents; why should there be? They think they're coming into a friendly system.

"Force mix?"

"Enemy battle group . . . first wave, all capital ships; four battleships, one carrier, six heavy cruisers..."

The answer surprised him. This was no ordinary convoy; this was an Imperial Battle Fleet. Diettinger whirled on Second Rank. "Lay in a course for the system asteroid belt at seven-Gs emergency acceleration. Transmit data for same to autopilot on *Canada*."

“Quilland. Enemy fleet arriving in system, stand by for composition. Deploy for siege. Under no circumstances are you to lower the spaceports Field.”

While Quilland set Diettinger’s orders in motion, First Rank returned to Fighter Rank Severin. “Enemy fleet status?”

“Capital ships’ Fields have gone up.” An automatic and expected result of a ship being attacked while her crew was still in Jump Lag. “Enemy ships still emerging, First Rank... ten light cruisers... twenty destroyers... six troop transports...”

Six troop transports? His force on Tanith could not hold out for long against that level of reinforcement; without *Fomoria’s* aerospace support they would inevitably be overwhelmed. Unless...

“Fighter Rank, break-off attack on the capital ships and engage transports. Override the targeting sensors on half of the mines and guide them to the transports.”

“Affirm.”

There was nothing to do now but wait. In minutes, the human norms aboard the first wave would be recovering sufficiently to evade the mines and launch their own fighters. Severin’s voice came back a moment later.

“All enemy Fields up, First Rank. First wave maneuvering into fleet ops formation. Second wave beginning to maneuver. Enemy fighters emerging from carrier.”

“Mines?”

“Closing on all ships. Capitals taking hits... transports evading, First Rank.”

Evading? Then it hit him, of course, they were evading. They bore no cargo to reduce their maneuverability. They were not coming for the *borloi*; the drug’s effect on human norms was so potent that there was more here than they could use in centuries. The real cargo of value on Tanith was the two brigades of trained fighting men, desperately needed by the Imperials, perhaps to fight the Saurons, perhaps to hold their crumbling Empire together as world after world used the war to declare their own independence.

“Fighter Rank Severin, break-off all squadrons and rendezvous at asteroid belt sector five. Do not attempt to engage.”

Diettinger made contact with Quilland once more and informed him of the situation. “We will make a supply pass to your forces before removing to the asteroid belt. Until our own reinforcements arrive, mount only harassment attacks. You may expect greater effort on the part of the Imperials to seize the spaceport. Whatever happens, the *borloi* must be retained.”

“Understood.” Quilland answered.

Diettinger broke the connection.

He turned to Second Rank, who was watching him with an utterly indefinable look.

Well, Diettinger thought, *at least now my request for reinforcements can’t be called misuse of resources. That ought to make her happy.*

The Imperial Fleet was less than an hour behind as *Fomoria* finished her supply drop at Tanith and prepared for the seven-G dash to the safety of the asteroids.

“Status of Tanith patrol ships?” Diettinger asked.

“One *Chinthe* shadowing us, First Rank. *Strela* and second destroyer rendezvousing with Imperial

Fleet.

“And the *Konigsberg*?”

“Still drifting at .001 gravity, no emissions. Effectively dead in space, First Rank.”

Diettinger nodded. “Good. Make for the belt; fire on the *Chinthe* until she’s vapor, or driven off.”

II

For two days, the Imperials hunted the *Fomoria* and her prize ship, the captured *Canada*; the deadly game frustrated each time by the asteroid belt. On Tanith, the Sauron troops and their Cyborg support held off the Imperial ground forces with almost insulting ease. The Tanith troops were far from inept. It was simply that there were so many Cyborgs. Imperial ground forces usually encountered the Super Soldiers as special forces units, or *ad hoc* groups integrated with Sauron allies for support duty, or with regular Sauron Soldiers for a breakthrough. Regular Soldiers were hard enough to contain.

But, as Adderly knew, Sauron heavy cruisers were special operations craft, and carried four times the number of Cyborgs in their troop complement as any other capital ship. On Tanith, no less than a hundred of these “death’s-heads” had been deployed, and the Tanith military simply could not bring sufficient force to bear to root them out without orbital strikes from their fleet, which if provided would pierce the spaceport’s Field. This would undoubtedly destroy the facility as well as the Saurons, thereby marooning the Imperial troops for weeks or even months on the inhospitable jungle planet and cripple the planet until the port was repaired.

So, far above the orange clouds of Tanith, the Imperial Fleet circled, and waited.

III

“First Rank, massive radiation readings at Alderson Point Three. Sauron-wavelength precedents,” reported Communications.

“Enemy presence at Point Three?” Diettinger asked.

“INSS New *Chicago*, sir. Three squadrons Imperial Heavy Fighters.”

“Current overwatch?”

“Two *Chinthes*, sir; twenty thousand kilometers positive. *Strela* is holding at fifteen thousand kilometers negative.”

The Imperials were searching for them, but the asteroid belt blocked their view; *Fomoria* and *Canada* had merely to extend passive sensors out from behind their asteroid hiding places to know when their “shadows” were getting too close.

“Five thousand kilometers negative, make for Alderson Point Three at three-Gs. *Canada* to mirror our maneuver after five minute delay.” The Imperial light cruiser would have to choose whether to pursue from above or below the belt. Whichever way she took, she was outgunned.

“Weapons?”

“Ready.”

“You have discretion here and for *Canada*. If the Imperials pursue either ship, concentrate fire and destroy them, priority to the *Strela*”

“Affirm.”

IV

William Adderly stood on the bridge of the *Strela*, cursing the luck that had left him alive.

The arrival of the Imperial convoy to pick up Tanith's troops had secured the system from the Saurons and trapped their troops on the planet, but it had also brought Admiral Sir Owen Kellogg, whose relationship with Adderly quickly became as inimical as Diettinger's. The Admiral's reaction to the loss of the *Canada* was cold fury.

Within an hour of the task force's arrival, Kellogg had summoned Adderly to his quarters aboard his flagship, the *Aleksandr Nevsky*. After listening to his report, Kellogg had dismissed his secretary and launched into a tirade.

Adderly's report on the Sauron EVA Marines substantiated several rumors that Imperial Intelligence had learned about Sauron naval tactics, but Kellogg dismissed their importance. Instead, the Admiral raged that their efficiency could only have been the result of Adderly's incompetence . . . or worse.

Kellogg brought up the matter of Adderly's capture and incredible release, compounded by Adderly's claim that the Sauron commander had asked about nothing more substantive than the *borloi*. Adderly had exploded at the Admiral's implication, and Kellogg's retorts had culminated with his notification to Adderly that a full Board of Inquiry would convene as soon as the Tanith System was secured.

But the most the Admiral could do for now was pull rank. He couldn't afford to relieve Adderly, so he had deposited him and the other survivors of the *Canada* debacle aboard the *Strela*, leaving Adderly in command of the remnants of the Tanith Patrol, which was dispatched to the asteroid belt to hunt down the *Fomoria*. They were forbidden to engage, only to shadow the Saurons and their prize, with orders to alert the *Aleksandr Nevsky* immediately upon sighting them.

Adderly scowled as he stared at the combat hologram. *And here I can be the first to see when my ship, which I lost, makes a run for it. Good old thoughtful Admiral Kellogg!*

"Son of a bitch," he murmured.

Casardi looked over. He could feel Adderly's strain, and his desire to conn the *Strela* himself, but he knew Adderly would never usurp his authority as Captain. Knowing it, Casardi respected him all the more. As far as he was concerned, Adderly wouldn't have to pull rank. If Adderly ordered him to fly them into Tanith's sun, he'd have done it in an instant, knowing he had a reason, and that the reason would see them through.

After all, Adderly was the man who had led *Strela* into combat, against a Sauron heavy cruiser, and brought her back unscathed. *Strela's* hoodoo was lifted, and every man jack aboard her knew it. An unofficial party had gone on for thirty hours, until every shift had its chance to participate and toast the Old Man's name. Secretly, of course. Neither Casardi nor his men would have embarrassed Adderly by saying anything to his face.

Adderly's bridge crew, however, was another story; they were nursing hangovers they would spend weeks forgetting.

The First Mate turned to Casardi. "Captain, I have multiple nukes at Alderson Point Three; ships on station there report very high-yield precedents." He listened for a moment, then continued. "New *Chicago* reports heavy damage to her fighters, recalling them now . . . Fields going to . . . sir! Fields went straight into violet, one of the nukes was a direct hit on *New Chi's* Field - at least a hundred megas!"

Captain Casardi met Adderly's eye.

"This is it," Casardi said.

Adderly nodded. "They'll move, now. Signal the '*Nevsky*. Tell them we're preparing to shadow the Sauron and - her prize." He just couldn't bring himself to say her name.

The INSS New *Chicago* had backed off from Alderson Point Three, her batteries out of range,

watching as the Sauron reinforcements emerged from Jump. Admiral Kellogg ordered *New Chicago's* commander to hold his position until relieved, so the carrier had recalled her surviving fighters, refueled and rearmed them, and sent them out again.

"*Fomoria* still accelerating, Captain."

"Where's the *Canada*?" Casardi asked the empty screens.

"There, sir. *Canada* going five thousand clicks positive, matching speed and maneuver on the *Fomoria*"

The first Sauron ship through the Alderson Point was the *Leviathan* and she emerged with her Field activated, spewing more precedent nukes; few ships carried large enough Field generators to do so with impunity, but this was one of them.

The commander of the *New Chicago* immediately ordered his flight controllers to warn off the fighters, but it was too late for half of them. The rumor that Saurons recovered from Jump Lag more quickly than human norms was apparently true, for the batteries and missiles of the Sauron battleship almost immediately began sweeping *New Chicago's* fighters from space.

Kellogg had his fleet closing on the Alderson Point at four-Gs, but *New Chicago's* skipper knew that it would not be enough. *Leviathan* was deploying thousands of perimeter mines, clearing the way for the reinforcements which would follow her. *New Chicago* was forced to open range as the *Leviathan* continued to advance, but her sensors still picked up the arrival of at least a dozen Sauron capital warships in the first wave.

Aboard the *Strela*, Casardi's communications officer turned from his board. "Sir, the *Fomoria* is in contact with the Sauron battleship; I believe it's the *Leviathan*, sir."

Casardi and Adderly shared a look. The *Leviathan* had been the vanguard of the Sauron invasion force that had captured Meiji over three years ago. Nothing had been heard from the Imperial world since, and the Sauron battleship had been on hand for most of the Imperial disasters that followed. To say she possessed a dire reputation in the Imperial Navy was to damn her with faint praise.

"More Saurons emerging, Captain..." The comms officer began calling off ship types and identification estimates and, as the list grew, Adderly's spirit withered.

God, we haven't a prayer; we've got half the Eleventh Imperial Fleet here, but there are just so many of them!

"Captain Casardi, please have your communications officer patch me in to the bridges of the *Chinthes* accompanying us. Secure beam, if you would; I'll make the contact in my cabin."

Six

I

"*Chinthes* and *Strela* shadowing the prize ship, First Rank,"

Weapons announced. "*Canada* now firing on the *Strela*"

Diettinger maintained his own visual communication link with the commander of the *Leviathan*, Vessel First Rank Vonnerbek. They had worked well together in the past, and he was confident they would do so now. As the commander on the scene, Diettinger was placed in charge of the *Leviathan* and her attendant forces for the duration of the mission; in this case, the securing of the *borloi*. Vonnerbek waited until Diettinger had finished relating the tactical situation to him before speaking.

“Thank you, Diettinger. Be advised the First Fleet is arriving at this location in nine days.”

Diettinger was thunderstruck; only iron discipline kept the shock from his voice and features. “Do you have information regarding this, Vonnerbek? Is the High Command planning to invade Tanith, attempting to secure it permanently?” He remembered what he had told the Imperial Captain Adderly regarding routes into the Empire, and with good reason. Tanith lay at several tramline exit Points, true, but each one in Empire territory was an Imperial Navy base. On top of that, the jungle world, though undeniably of great strategic value, was industrially worthless and militarily untenable.

Vonnerbek spoke freely; there was no known way to tap into modern communications lasers.

“Affirmative. The First and second Fleets together represent the majority of Sauron’s remaining naval strength. Our planners indicate that if we secure Tanith, even as no more than a refueling stop, and move before the Empire can react, then the next stop could be any or all of the Empire’s primary naval bases, even Sparta itself.”

Diettinger held the other First Rank’s gaze. “That will not win the war, Vonnerbek.”

“That is High Command’s estimate as well. But Socio-Ops are convinced that such action against the Imperial cattle will result in vast civilian backlash against the Imperial military, possibly forcing a peace.”

Diettinger arched his right brow, the one not covered by a bandage. “I see. Socio-Ops is not my field.”

“Nor mine,” Vonnerbek agreed, with a look that spoke volumes.

Diettinger considered it a waste of personnel, talent and resources. From Vonnerbek’s tone he knew Vonnerbek agreed with his assessment. But they were Soldiers, and that meant both followed orders.

“And, of course,” Vonnerbek concluded. “*Leviathan* is carrying special Occupation Breedmasters.”

Occupation Breedmasters were the “eugenic shock troops” of the Sauron Race. They were supplied with hundreds of thousands of fertilized ova from Sauron females to be implanted in selected human norm “Breeders” who would then carry the Sauron fetuses to term. The genetic quality of these walking wombs would have no appreciable effect on the proto-Saurons they bore, freeing female Soldiers for more important war duties.

Diettinger nodded, but the idea did not sit well with him. The use of Occupation Breedmasters signaled total commitment on the part of the High Command, but it was based on incomplete data. He doubted that they were aware of the growing fanaticism among human norms against the Saurons. They had not witnessed the enemy’s *Chinthe* destroyers strafing one of their own, *Canada*, just to kill a few Sauron Marines.

“I wonder what Socio-Ops would make of my interview with the human-norm Adderly.” Diettinger said.

Vonnerbek shook his head, and for a member of a race known for an inexhaustible supply of willpower in the face of adversity, Diettinger thought he had never in his life seen such an expression of complete hopelessness on another Soldier.

“I strongly doubt they would take any lesson from it, Diettinger.”

Diettinger nodded; he and Vonnerbek were in accord.

We have lost, and in this last stage of war, we’re trying to regain the initiative against the Imperial military with diplomatic tricks dreamed up by warriors, and genetic terrorism conceived by diplomats.

Still... if the War of Secession had taught him anything, it was that anything was possible. Perhaps the Empire could be forced into a peace of sorts. And in that peace, Sauron could rebuild.

Unlikely, but we may yet survive. Somehow. That will be up to diplomats. Perhaps the Breedmasters can create a species of Sauron devoted to that art. It will not be up to Soldiers such as myself.

“*Strela* and *Chinthes* breaking off.”

Diettinger acknowledged Second Rank’s update and returned to conclude his conversation with Vonnerbek.”Very well. Prepare task force status for transfer to *Fomoria*’s tactical computer. Secure Alderson Point and stand by for Staff meeting upon our arrival. Diettinger out.”

II

Adderly waited for the skippers of the *Chinthes* to digest what he had said.

Both were on private linkups to him, but each had to know the other was being consulted. He had ordered them not to be influenced by that fact, but he knew it wouldn’t do any good. Finally, each one signaled him that they were willing to try.

“Thank you both, gentlemen. Godspeed, and good luck.”

I’m asking them to commit mutiny, he thought. But I can cover for them if I’m wrong, and if I’m right, I won’t have to.

There was another “if,” of course ...*if* the *Chinthes* were destroyed, by Adderly’s orders or by the Saurons. But there was no point in thinking about that.

“Sir, Admiral Kellogg’s force is closing with the Sauron fleet.”

Casardi looked to Adderly, but he ignored him. “Helm, port fifteen, make for the fleet,” Casardi said quietly.”Signal the *Chinthes* - ”

“Belay that.” Adderly turned to Casardi. “Conn the *Strela* as you will, Captain Casardi. The *Chinthes* have their orders.”

The Imperial and Sauron fleets clashed like ramming icebergs; on initial impact, formations interfacing and locking as ships began pouring energy into one another’s Fields, then the slow dance, as each side probed the enemy’s formation for weak spots, spreading out the concentration of ships in three dimensions, the rainbow-hued Fields connecting in a lattice of green and red lasers and streaking torpedoes. Inevitably, amid the flares of the thermonuclears and the brilliant laser batteries, there came the brighter flashes of collapsing Fields, as outmatched or outgunned ships died.

Unnoticed in the first minutes of the carnage, two *Chinthe-class* destroyers drove through the center of the Sauron formation. Fields at maximum, lasers firing and torpedoes dropping through their Fields to engage targets of opportunity. Far richer targets were available to the Sauron gunners, and the destroyers were ignored. In the confusion of the battle’s early moments, their fate was indiscernible.

Kellogg’s Operations Officer knew only that they disappeared into a maelstrom of Sauron lasers somewhere near the Alderson Point. The Saurons probably knew what had happened to them, but they weren’t telling.

Eventually, a series of lucky hits burned through the Fields of the largest Imperial warships. The Imperial Fleet broke off, but the Saurons were in no position to pursue; all their Fields were into the violet, and Diettinger was determined not to throw away half the remaining Sauron space forces unnecessarily.

Instead, he ordered the Sauron fleet to skirt the system in a wide arc, toward Tanith, to relieve their ground forces and get what he, at least, had originally come for.

“Admiral Kellogg on the line, sir.” Casardi’s communications officer had managed to refine his “sirs” so that Adderly knew when he meant him and when he meant Casardi. The call was for him, this time.

“Adderly here.”

“Adderly. I see you’ve lost the rest of your destroyers.”

He said nothing. Kellogg couldn’t make much of it anyway; half the fleet’s destroyers had been lost this day. But the mood on *Strela*’s bridge went brittle as cold iron, Adderly heard one of the middies mutter an indeterminate profanity, tactfully directed toward his screens.

“Your pardon, Admiral, but we have casualties here, and damage control has us busy. What can I do for you?”

It was insubordinate, of course, but Adderly didn’t give a damn. It would be worth it to watch Kellogg’s face.

“Well, I have good news for you, mister,” the Admiral almost sneered. “The *King George V* lost her bridge crew in that last salvo from the Sauron battleship *Wallenstein*. Captain Lester, his First Officer; all dead. I can’t afford to have the KGV out of action and I haven’t anyone to spare from the Fleet.”

Adderly felt the floor rock beneath him and knew it had nothing to do with the *Strela*. *A second chance? Or was Kellogg really that desperate? And what difference did it make either way?* “My bridge crew from the *Canada* is intact, Admiral. I know they’d be eager to serve.”

Kellogg lost control, slamming his fist against the desk. “God-damnit, Adderly, don’t make me ask! We’ve been mauled in this engagement, but that’s nothing like the worst of it. This mess is holding up an entire relief operation. *We need to get those troopers off Tanith!*”

Adderly felt his face grow hot. Somebody was being a stupid, selfish bastard, and it wasn’t Kellogg. “I’m sorry, sir. We’re on our way.”

Kellogg raised a hand, which he then put to his brow, like a man who’d thought of something he’d been trying to remember all day. “I’ve just seen the reports on *Strela*’s performance in the engagement, Captain Adderly.” He sighed, wearied at holding the words back. “My compliments to you and Captain Casardi. You’ve both been mentioned in dispatches. Signal me when you’re aboard the *KGV*. Kellogg out.”

The connection had not been broken one second when Casardi gripped his hand. “Congratulations, WILL.” He grinned and snapped off a salute as he delivered the traditional Navy farewell to a departing Flag officer.

“And good riddance. Sir.”

He smiled back, but he was not thinking of the *KGV*, not even the *Canada*. As he had been since giving them their orders, he was thinking about the *Chinthes*.

III

Over the next five days, the Sauron and Imperial Fleets kept the planet Tanith between them while they re-formed, tended their wounds and spaced their dead with the ceremonies respective to each Navy. Neither pursued the other aggressively, but the Saurons doggedly drove off any Imperial attempts to bombard the spaceport, and the Imperials made it clear they were not about to allow the Saurons to retrieve their forces from Tanith’s surface.

Maneuvering so close to Tanith put both Fleets deep within the planet's gravity well, where high-speed accelerations would result being slingshot out of the action almost before they could engage. Caution and patience became the watchwords as the opposing fleets circled Tanith in wary maneuvers, waiting for an opportunity to destroy one another.

Between those fleets, Tanith turned under her changeless skies, the ground battle having reached a stalemate. The Sauron and Imperial troops were both unsupplied, but the Saurons were too outnumbered to venture out of the spaceport and the Imperials were not about to storm the gates and go hand-to-hand with a force containing over a hundred Cyborgs.

The enemies waited, and planned.

The *Fomoria* was mated by docking sleeves and umbilicals to a fleet replenishment vessel. Combat and personal supplies were transferred between ships, preparing them for the next engagement under plan by Diettinger and the other commanders of the Second Fleet.

Second Rank Althene was delivering the Fleet status update from the *Fomoria*'s briefing room; the other commanders were tied-in by message laser.

"Casualty reports ten percent in our favor, plus variable advantage conferred by the destruction of an estimated seventy-five percent of the *New Chicago*'s fighters."

"Status of the enemy capital ships?"

"Estimates only, First Rank," she said. "Our reconnaissance cannot close sufficiently for definitive observation."

Diettinger pressed a switch that cut off their signal to the other ships. "Then give me your estimate, Second. An apology for circumstances beyond your control is pointless and time-consuming." He had slept little, his temper was as short as their time for resolving the conflict, and Second Rank's habit of over clarification was becoming annoying.

Second Rank did not look up from her screen as she read: "*Aleksandr Nevsky*, *George Washington* and *King George V* suffered moderate but reparable damage. *King George V* suffered burn-through to her bridge section; ninety-five-percent probability of complete command and crew fatality."

Diettinger listened to the rest of the report, struck by the similarity of casualties taken on both sides. Except for the lucky hit on the *KGV* and the destruction of the enemy fighters, losses were approximately equal. On impulse, he asked Second Rank for specifics about one ship. "Status on the *Strela*?"

"No damage, First Rank, despite its engagement of four of our ships at different points in the battle. The *Strela* is evidently conned by an extremely capable commander."

Diettinger smiled, allowing himself to notice for a moment the dull ache in his face where his left eye had been. *Capable*, he thought, *or highly motivated. Just what did happen to that Adderly fellow? And what about those two Chinthe destroyers that were headed for the Alderson Point at five-Gs? Did that last salvo get them both, or only one?*

"Very good." He turned to face the images of the Fleet element commanders. "As you know, the First Fleet will arrive here in four days. This will precipitate a conclusive battle for the control of Tanith space and the invasion of the world itself, necessitating heavy planetary bombardment. The *borloi* is still there, and must be removed from the surface of Tanith before such bombardment destroys it.

"First Rank Vonnerbek; the *Leviathan* will lead the first element of the Fleet against the Imperial force. You will maneuver around Tanith and attack from over the north pole of the planet. First Rank Lucan; the *Wallenstein* will lead the second element around the equator with a five minute separation from

Vonnerbek's element. First rank Emory; the *Damaris* will lead the third element over the north pole as well, with a ten minute separation from Vonnerbek's element.

"Between the time *Wallenstein* engages and Task Force *Damaris* departs, *Fomoria* and the combined shuttles of the Fleet will enter geo-synchronous orbit over the spaceport and begin simultaneously resupplying the troops there and lifting the *borloi*. *Fomoria* will then proceed immediately to the Alderson Point Three to Jump out-of-system and head back to Sauron. Task Force *Damaris* will accompany us as escort and to secure the Point for the arrival of the First Fleet. Questions?"

Emory spoke. "Deployment for the initial engagement, First Rank: Would it not be more effective to engage the Imperials from a third flank, thus spreading their forces?"

"Normally, yes. But once the second element of the Fleet engages, the Imperials will perceive a pattern and begin shifting forces to meet the third attack you suggest. Human norms choose patterns in their tactics - orienting their naval ops parallel to the plane of the ecliptic, reacting to sequential maneuvers in a clockwise pattern - it is a trait of which even they are seldom aware. As a result, there is an even probability that they will shift their forces, either toward the south pole, or away from Lucan's equatorial maneuver with Task Force *Wallenstein*, thus further weakening their position for your reinforcement of Vonnerbek's initial thrust."

Emory nodded in admiration. There were few Imperials who could boast Diettinger's mastery of naval tactics, and almost no Saurons.

"Proposition, First Rank," Vonnerbek said. "The *Fomoria*'s ground troops have been on-station for almost two T-weeks; troops of the First Fleet *en route* and those aboard our own ships were designated for invasion ops before departure and are heavily supplied for same. They could assume occupation duty of the spaceport while your troops are returned to the *Fomoria*"

Diettinger considered the offer; the moment the *borloi* was secured, he would be expected to depart for Sauron. Any delay to recover his troops, in the face of the current Imperial presence, could well prove fatal.

He nodded. "Excellent, Vonnerbek. Thank you. Your own shipboard Deathmaster will coordinate with Deathmaster Quilland and Second Rank."

"Casualty parameters, First Rank?" Lucan asked. Quiet, and low-keyed, even for a Sauron, Lucan was widely referred to as "The Phantom." Under his command, the *Wallenstein* had led a charmed life; more than two dozen major engagements, seven enemy capital ships and scores of merchantmen destroyed, all without the loss of a single crewman.

Diettinger smiled. "Let's see how it goes, shall we?" He was confident; these First Ranks were the finest naval officers of the Sauron Homeworld. The First Fleet would have many more ships, but few commanders of their calibre. "The situation will very likely present unexpected opportunities,"

There were no more questions, only satisfied acknowledgements from the other First Ranks.

"Commence task force formation." Diettinger finished the meeting. "Operations commence in twelve hours."

Seven

I

The bridge of the *King George V* was eerily intact. No equipment damaged, the acceleration couches showed no blood or gore; there was even a bulb of cold coffee floating idly in the corner. It looked for

all the world as if her bridge crew had all simply stepped into the next room and would return at any moment. There was nothing to indicate they had all died within seconds of one another.

A squad of Imperial Marines standing guard at the bridge had presented arms, their corporal delivering a mournful Taps before a Navy bosun piped Adderly and his crew through the hatch.

A little late, Adderly thought.

There had been no such ceremony in the confusion of his arrival, but he had demanded it before he would set foot on *KGV's* bridge. He would not explain whether his decision arose out of respect or superstition, but whatever his reasons, the Marines and bosun would carry the word to the surviving crewmen that the new skipper was a man who did the right things.

“All right, Jimmy,” he told his First Officer, calling up the *KGV's* status report at his own command station screen. “Let’s see how the lady’s faring.”

Adderly’s new command had come to him with more woes than just an empty bridge, but most damage-control reports were into the green already, the status lines reflecting the work of an excellent repair crew. Adderly saw that while several lines were still amber, only one remained red: BRIDGE CREW.

He frowned, tapping it with a knuckle, a habit as ancient as it was pointless. Finally he called the Damage Control Officer and informed him of the error.

“Sorry, sir. We show green for the bridge throughout the rest of the ship, probably something boggled by that laser hit. Might have burned the sensors into that setting. Let me try a few tricks at this end.”

But despite the DCO’s efforts, the status line would do no more than flicker briefly into the green before stubbornly returning to red.

A bit creepy, that, Adderly thought, trying to make it sound humorous in his own head, but not succeeding. He noticed that even with a full and busy crew, the bridge was quiet. Men carried out their duties with subdued conversation, if any, and remembering the *Strela's crew*, convinced of their own ill luck. Adderly wanted to avoid any such rumors aboard the *KGV*.

Put the dead to rest, Adderly thought. Sailors as a rule were a notoriously superstitious lot. The other half of the old saying suddenly came to mind. “*And God grant they lie still...*” Evidently Captains were no exception.

He had barely finished reviewing the repair operations when the Fleet alarm went off.

Adderly’s headset was patched into the Fleet Communications Net even before he was strapped into his acceleration couch. His fingers stabbed the acknowledgement codes into the commander’s terminal. *Captain Lester was doing this less than a week ago*, he suddenly thought, wondering what sort of man the *KGV's* former skipper had been.

FleetComNet was chattering in his ears, giving him force deployment and formation orders; those of his officers who needed all this were getting it too, but everything in the Imperial Navy went past the “Old Man” as well.

The faint voices of acknowledgements were overlaid with the signal of Kellogg’s Fleet Operations Officer, Commander Sakai:” - *reconnaissance reports enemy fleet elements approaching from over north pole of Tanith... one-fourth estimated surviving enemy Fleet strength in task force, Sauron Battleship Leviathan identified as core vessel... Task Force Washington, shift to Tanith-positive aspect and prepare to engage... Task Force King George V, status report...*”

KGV's Damage Control Officer replayed the information while Adderly ordered all shipboard systems

to full alert; any repairs left for the *KG V* or the ships with her would have to wait; doubtless there would soon be more to go with those she already had.

Admiral Kellogg's image suddenly appeared on all the command screens, abruptly breaking through the cacophony of voices. "Sorry, gentlemen, but the Saurons aren't giving us much time for a battle briefing. This first wave coming over the pole means they'll probably send the successive waves from the opposite directions along the equator and under the southern planetary axis. We can expect this attack to be typically Sauron-thorough; they rarely leave loopholes in their maneuvers that aren't traps. Keeping that in mind, there is little excuse for us to fall into one. All Task Forces are to maintain strict cohesion; no one will engage until ordered to do so, and all activities are to be coordinated through myself or 'Nevsky's FleetOps officer, Commander Sakai. Kellogg out."

Adderly sighed. *This is twice now they've moved before we were ready for them. Diettinger really is the Sauron innovator the intel dossier has labeled him.* The report had also noted that Diettinger had never lost an engagement of which he was in command.

"Terrific," he said aloud. The *Strela* crews' fatalistic attitude had now attached itself to him.

"Sir?" The First Mate looked up.

Adderly shook his head and grinned, deciding to try to bolster the crew's confidence. "Nothing, Jimmy. Looking forward to some payback, is all. Signal the task force to come into formation." *At least this time there's plenty of backup...*

Task Force *KG V* was ordered to stand by in reserve for *Washington's* move against the Saurons. Adderly found himself anxiously watching the combat holo, listening for the engage order, checking and rechecking the straps of his acceleration couch. Every part of him ached to close with the Saurons, fight them, hurt them, smash them.

He glanced at his bridge crew, survivors of the *Canada*. They were quiet, but not out of respect for their predecessors; now they looked less reverent than grim. Revenge for the *Canada* was at hand, and they couldn't wait.

Adderly looked to his First Mate."Blood in the water, eh, Jimmy?"

The First Mate smiled thinly. "Aye, sir."

Adderly cleared his throat. In a low voice he said "Let's keep our heads even so, shall we, gentlemen? The day of the week is wrong, but the toast fits: '*A willing foe, and sea room.*' I think it's safe to say that we're all getting that wish. Just remember that this foe is all *too* willing, and any mistakes we incur in our eagerness can benefit only him."

II

"Imperial Task Force *Washington* engaging the *Leviathan* element, First Rank. *Wallenstein* element accelerating and moving to engage."

"Signal *Damaris* element to delay engagement until notified." Mentally, Diettinger amended the timetable; the human norms might sometimes be predictable, but they were also more flexible in their thinking than most of the rigidly trained Soldiers. Their adaptability could produce unpleasant surprises.

"Lay in course for the spaceport, standard ground force retrieval maneuvers."

He turned toward the sound of furious activity at a command station. "Weapons. Status?"

"All systems operational, First Rank." Diettinger smiled at the strain in the officer's voice.

Saurons were masters of remotely-piloted vehicle technologies: the *Canada* was now such a platform, its actions dictated by the First Rank, but initiated by Weapons, who still retained all his duties aboard the *Fomoria*. Weapons was carrying out his task admirably, but the *Fomoria* and *Canada* were both formidable ships, and even Saurons could only do so many things at once.

Task Force *Washington* engaged *Leviathan's* group with all the subtlety of a train wreck. The Sauron line held against the initial onslaught, but even the most veteran Soldiers were surprised by the ferocity of the Imperial attack.

At first, Vonnerbek wondered just who was attacking whom, but the engagement leveled off just as the *Wallenstein's* force rounded the equator. The Imperials dispatched TF *Garibaldi* to meet the new threat, holding the *KGV* and *Aleksandr Nevsky* in reserve - waiting.

Aboard the *KGV*, Adderly watched the screens, demanding continuous updates on the ships engaged. He did not have to ask where the *Fomoria* was; the moment the Sauron battle cruiser appeared every officer on the bridge would shout it.

The Fleet Communications Net kicked in. "Task Force *KGV*, this is FleetOps. Proceed with all speed, negative aspect, to southern pole sector Tanith. Prepare to engage Sauron third wave."

Adderly frowned. "Say again, FleetOps! *South* pole?"

"Affirmative, *KGV*. Tactical analysis indicates Saurons attempting envelopment maneuver. You are to cut them off on the far side of Tanith, engage and hold until relieved or recalled."

Adderly looked at the combat holo. The tactical analysis made sense; the guess of a Sauron envelopment *sounded* right - but...

He sighed. "Acknowledged, FleetOps. Helm, you heard the man. Communications, signal the rest of the Task Force we're moving out."

Both officers looked at him blankly. "Speed, sir?" the helmsman finally asked.

Adderly scowled. *All speed*, the FleetOps had said. He turned to the Engineering Officer. "What have we got, Mr. Rostov?"

"Engines are fine, Captain. We can make safe maximum with no problem."

That would be four-Gs, he thought. *Tough on the crew, but bearable for the short time involved. And we will go a long way in that short time.*

"Two-Gs, Helm." He noticed his First Officer's warning glance; the whole Fleet knew Adderly was in dutch for the loss of the *Canada*. Caution now would not set well with the Admiral. "And lay in an emergency course-change; three-Gs at 045, initiate on my order only, no prior notification to the Task Force."

The midshipman at the helm looked to his older, more experienced counterpart. Seeing no reaction there, the middie complied without comment,

Adderly could almost read his thoughts: "*He's the Captain. He knows what he's doing - I guess.*"

It was as comforting a lie as any other.

"*King George V* group moving toward the Tanith south pole, First Rank."

Diettinger instinctively made a gripping motion with his hand. "Signal *Damaris* element to engage *Washington* group. Make for the spaceport."

Expressive for a Sauron, his tone carried a sense of elation that puzzled some among his bridge

officers; they had only fooled human norms after all.

KGV and the other ships of her task force were beneath Tanith's equator, the mass of Tanith's south pole looming above them, when the FleetComNet crackled with a stray signal:

" - *nder Nevsky*, this is *Washington*, third Sauron element joining the *Leviathan*. We are severely outnumbered, requesting permission to break-off..."

"Commo, tie-in to that. I want to hear Kellogg's response."

"Sir, I don't know if - " the Communications Officer began, but Adderly cut him off with a shout, "Do it Mister!"

A moment later FleetOps Officer Sakai's voice came though; Adderly noticed it had lost none of its cool detachment.

"Negative, *Washington*, do not, *repeat*, do not break-off. Task Force '*Nevsky* moving all speed to your sector now, hold position and await reinforcements."

Adderly ground a knuckle into his forehead. He'd expected something like this, but he hadn't been sure. The Saurons had duped them; now what?

His First Mate cursed quietly beside him. "The *Fomoria* must be headed for the spaceport." The Mate suddenly grinned. "That's why you plotted the forty-five degree course change!"

Adderly nodded, once. "Yeah. Helm."

"Standing by, sir."

"Clear that course change from the board. Put us at four thousand meters and compensate for speed of one-point-five-Gs total. We're hitting those Saurons from the rear."

The First Mate looked puzzled. "But, Captain Adderly, the spaceport..."

Adderly nodded, staring at the combat holo. "That's right. The Saurons will get away, or the spaceport will fall, whichever they choose." He turned to the First Mate. "I'm getting weary of doing what this Diettinger wants me to do, Jimmy. The Saurons can easily stand two full gravities acceleration more than we can; by the time we match orbits to engage whatever is at the spaceport, they'll be long gone."

He turned back to the hologram. "But if we can put three Task Forces against Saurons where they're expecting two - we can grind the bastards down to dust."

I hope, he added to himself.

III

Diettinger watched the viewscreens, scanning with the naked eye for information that could only be hoped for on sophisticated sensors. *Where was the enemy? Would they arrive before the operation was complete?*

Before him on the screen, the troop ships turned over to him by *Leviathan*, *Wallenstein* and *Damaris* had moved into position and begun sprinkling points of light toward the black expanses of the planetary Langston Fields. The lights were assault boats launched by the hundreds amid broadband interference decoys deployed by the thousands.

Dozens of lasers reached up from the surface of Tanith to intercept them, and where a laser hit, a light went out, but there were too many lights to extinguish them all. The decoys attracted most of the planetary lasers, wasting the defender's shots.

The *Fomoria* tracked the planetary lasers back to source, eliminating them before the more valuable

shuttles would join the cloud of decoys.

Finally, the pinpoints reached the surface of the spaceport's Field, to disappear into the artificial night beneath, out of sight and out of communication. The planetary defense lasers ceased firing. There was nothing to do now but wait.

The bridge seemed silent for a long time before Communications, monitoring the ground troops, made his report. "First Rank, Cyborg Koln reports eighty-three percent of relief force arrived intact. They are now regrouping at the spaceport."

"Resume suppressive fire on enemy ground lasers. Deathmaster Quilland. Dispatch shuttles and begin retrieval. Weapons. Interpose the *Canada* Remote Platform between the main concentration of ground batteries and the shuttle flight paths."

"*Wallenstein* element is holding against the *Garibaldi* group, First Rank. *Damaris* and *Leviathan* elements breaking through the *Washington* group. *Aleksandr Nevsky* group is moving to reinforce same."

"And the *King George V*?"

"Beyond the south pole of the planet, continuing on course for the equator."

Diettinger called up the data to his own screen. Any moment now, they should be breaking off for the spaceport, but they were not. Were they *allowing* the Saurons to take it? What was worth such a sacrifice to the Imperials?

"Communications, signal *Leviathan* and *Damaris* elements that the *King George V* may attack their rear."

"Your pardon, First Rank, but planetary field interference is very heavy, and no line of sight for message lasers at this time."

"Then put the *Canada* up and relay message lasers through her - immediately."

Either way, we get the borloi, thought Diettinger. And the spaceport is secured for the arrival of the First Fleet, with more troops for the subjugation of Tanith herself. The Occupation Breedmasters will follow, and we'll have our backdoor into the Empire.

His mission was nearly completed, and with it, his status as Fleet First Rank. The Second Fleet had been his official reinforcements for securing the *borloi*, and had been placed under his control. The First Fleet would bring a new commander with a mission of his own.

Just as well, he considered. This damned eye is becoming a nuisance.

Aboard the *Leviathan*, Communications Fifth Rank Boyle strained to catch the lock-on signal of a message laser.

"Message from *Fomoria*, First Rank Vonnerbek, via *Canada*. Enemy group closing in on our elements from the equator."

"Status *Washington*?"

"Multiple burn-throughs, all Fields, all ships, *Washington* group."

Vonnerbek considered. All the *Leviathan* element Fields were into the violet, but there were no burn-throughs as yet, and thus no serious damage. The Imperials would have to preserve their Fleet to have any chance of defending their borders once the Saurons had Tanith. The *Washington* groups would be forced to break-off at any moment.

And the *Aleksandr Nevsky* was closing to reinforce the *Washington* now. Vonnerbek's intel sources had identified the 'Nevsky as the command flagship.

The human norms put great stock in such things, he remembered.

"Fight us through to the *Aleksandr Nevsky* group. Signal *Damaris* element to go about and guard our rear. Maintain fire on the *Washington* group until it disengages."

Saurons were the product of hundreds of years of genetic engineering to produce the perfect soldier, whose defining personality trait was an utter subjugation of the ego to the goals of the Battle Plan. Vonnerbek was too perfect an example of the eugenicist's art.

What he himself did not possess, he could not conceive of in others.

IV

"Last shuttle secured, First Rank. Full complement recovered, cargo intact."

Diettinger actually sighed in relief. *Now, to resolve this battle before -*

"First Rank, enemy group *King George V* is engaging *Damaris* element. *Wallenstein* element is breaking through *Garibaldi* group. *Leviathan* element is fighting through to engage *Aleksandr Nevsky* group."

"Status enemy forces."

The report did not bode well for the Imperials; only the *KGV* and 'Nevsky's ships' Fields were not in the violet. All those in *Washington's* force had suffered burn-throughs, several were destroyed. It was nearly over, now.

"Dispatch all attached forces to return to respective elements and reinforce. Bring *Fomoria* and *Canada* into position to reinforce *Leviathan* element. Signal all element commanders to prepare to break-off engagement."

The naval part of the mission was over. When the First Fleet arrived, Vonnerbek could rack up all the victories he wanted.

"Emergency signal from the *Leviathan*, First Rank."

"Clear."

"*Fomoria*, this is Communications Fifth Rank Boyle. We have massive damage here, request immediate relief."

Fifth Rank? What had happened to the bridge? "Fifth Rank Boyle, who is in command?"

"Unknown, First Rank. One of the enemy Fields collapsed - I think it was the *New Chicago* - we were too close when she went, our Field was already in the Blue. It caught the released energy and overloaded. We have heavy internal damage. No response from bridge or forward weaponry."

"Status on enemy ships?" Diettinger asked Second Rank.

Althene was frowning, unable to resolve what she saw with logic. "No change, First Rank. The *Washington* group has no Field that isn't violet, but they aren't breaking off."

Diettinger went cold. *Of course. They wouldn't.* In that instant, the entire character of the war changed for him. As a Sauron, a Soldier by breeding, training and perspective, he had seen the war as a conflict between industrialized nations, an inescapable result of the dynamics of evolution. The Empire was in the way of Sauron's advancement; Sauron represented the next step in human evolution, therefore the Empire must go.

That the Empire would resist going was axiomatic. But that it would do so suicidally had been an extremely low-probability consideration. Or so Sauron military philosophy had proposed.

But they are wrong, he suddenly realized, and unthinking his hand stole to the wound that had claimed his eye.

It is not, as Sauron philosophy has supposed, simply a war of evolutionary imperatives, not to the Imperials. To them it is a war of extermination.

“Stand by, Fifth Rank Boyle. Signal the crew to initiate evacuation procedures.” A *Fifth Ranker!* “And try to find some officer of command rank.”

“First Rank, the ‘*Nevsky* is in range of the *Leviathan*. She is firing now.”

“Make for the *Leviathan*, use maximum acceleration incorporating gravitational enhancement. All batteries and *Canada* to fire on the ‘*Nevsky*’ ” He considered the wording of his next order.

“Communications. Signal all commanders. No break-off. Continue to fire on all enemy forces until destroyed.”

“Standard pursuit options, First Rank?”

Diettinger shook his head. “Pursuit options unnecessary. The enemy will not attempt to disengage.”

Ever again, he thought. But perhaps he could change their minds; today, at least.

“Weapons. Prepare the following modifications to the *Canada*”

Eight

I

Commander Sakai, Kellogg’s FleetOps Officer, felt he was becoming a part of his console. “Admiral, the *Fomoria* and the *Canada* are closing with us, bearing one-five-zero, our heading, thrust of five-Gs.”

Kellogg was staring at the combat holo. The *Aleksandr Nevsky*’s Captain Harbour was carrying out his orders to the letter. The *Aleksandr Nevsky* poured destruction into the *Leviathan*, burning through her Field again and again. *Washington* had bought them all a chance with her sacrifice of herself and the *New Chicago*; those sacrifices were not to be in vain.

“Who’s on station there?”

“Heavy cruisers *Montpelier* and *Vladivostok*, Admiral, with a destroyer screen of seven *Chinthes*”

Kellogg grunted. “Hmm. Not much against the *Fomoria* and a captured battle cruiser. Tell them to engage and hold the Saurons until we’ve finished off the *Leviathan*”

The FleetOps officer complied, then stared at his screen, confused. “Admiral, I have the *Canada* making seven-Gs and still accelerating.”

“Saurons can stand more than nine-Gs of acceleration, Commander,” Kellogg informed him, mesmerized by the sight of the *Leviathan*’s death throes.

“Yes, Admiral, but.. . Admiral, the *Canada* is at nine-Gs now, and still accelerating. The *Aleksandr Nevsky*’s gunnery officer is saying she has locked all weapons onto us.”

“Our shields will hold, Commander,” Kellogg remained cool. *Canada*’s purloined torpedoes would be impossible to evade when launched at that speed, and most would probably get through their Field. But ‘*Nevsky* was unwounded as of yet, and Kellogg would not lose the chance to destroy the *Leviathan*.” “Unless you’re afraid they are going to ram us?” he added dryly. At 9-Gs, the *Canada* could

not hope to correct for any evasive maneuver taken by the *'Nevsky*.

He went back to watching the holo. Every part of him was directed toward destroying the Saurons; the mission that required Tanith's troops long forgotten.

"Admiral - "

"What the devil is it now, Commander?"

"The *Canada*, sir; she's reversed heading and firing full thrust - she's maneuvering like a fighter!"

At that, Kellogg did turn away from the holo and the death throes of the mortally wounded *Leviathan*. Eighteen-Gs aboard the *Canada* would flatten any living thing, Sauron or not."What's happened to her weapon lock-ons?"

"Holding, Admiral, but her Field is going into the violet and she's still closing!"

"Who the bloody hell is firing on her?"

"*Montpelier* and *Vladivostok* report scoring hits, Admiral. But not enough for *that*"

Kellogg's survival instinct overrode all bloodlust and most of his training. *She's firing into her own Field!* "Cease fire on the *Leviathan*, signal all ships in the vicinity to breakoff and take evasive maneuvers."

FleetOps Officer Sakai had patched in to all the commanding officers of Task Force *Aleksandr Nevsky*; he was about to pass on the Admiral's commands when he died.

Canada's last attack was a marvel of coordination possible only for a suicidal crew... or a very good remote controller. Converted by Weapons' expertise into a forty thousand ton missile, *Canada's* Field opened, and every intact torpedo port launched on the *Aleksandr Nevsky*. As Kellogg had guessed, *Canada's* lasers had been directed against the inside of her own Field, the stored energy then augmented by scuttle charges, and the Field capacitors themselves disengaged.

Canada's Field collapsed while she was only three kilometers from the *Aleksandr Nevsky*, even as her torpedoes drove the Imperial flagship's Field up thorough the spectrum to blue-green. The released energy from *Canada's* resulting immolation proved more than the *'Nevsky* could take.

Aboard the *King George V*, Adderly watched the destruction of the *Aleksandr Nevsky* in mute horror. When he regained his voice, it was to answer his commo officer's announcement of multiple signals coming through.

"Hold them, commo; get me senior commander of the other battleships, first, whoever that is."

Jesus! The 'Nevsky gone; eighty thousand tonnes of battleship - just gone...

"Captain Adderly," the commo officer almost whispered. "The other bridges say that Captain Lester of the *KGV* was senior commander after Admiral Kellogg and Captain Harbour - sir, *they* all want to speak to *you*"

He suddenly found it difficult to breathe.

Sweet Jesus...

II

Rescue of the *Leviathan's* survivors was simplified by the breakoff of the Imperial Fleet. The Communications Fifth Ranker who had contacted *Fomoria* had, indeed, managed to find someone of Command Rank. The Occupation Breedmasters aboard *Leviathan* had demanded priority for the fertilized Sauron ova they had brought for the subjugation of Tanith, In Sauron society, Breedmaster

carried more influence than ancient Spain's Inquisitor General of the Inquisition, so the first thing that came aboard *Fomoria* were seventy suitcase-sized environment boxes, all that had survived of the one hundred that had been sealed away safely at the center of the *Leviathan*.

The Breedmasters complained that less than half might still be viable, but Diettinger ignored them. There were more important things to consider; the Sauron First Fleet had arrived.

"Congratulations, Diettinger," Fleet First Rank Morgenthau spoke from the bridge of the fleet battleship *Sauron*. Pleased at the status report on the spaceport and the damage inflicted on the Imperial Fleet, Morgenthau was less enthusiastic over the use to which Diettinger had put the *Canada*.

The Fleet First Rank was from the same *crèche* as Fighter Rank Severin, Diettinger noted, though of a higher caste. Young, but bred specifically for the job of Fleet Commander."It was an older design, Fleet First Rank. Little could have been learned from her that we did not already know."

Morgenthau appeared about to comment, then stopped."Well done," he said, finally. "We will isolate the remainder of the Imperials from the Alderson Points and hunt them down before leaving. The *Damaris* will escort you there now and accompany you back to Sauron."

"We are still carrying several hundred crew from the *Leviathan*, along with the Occupation Breedmasters and their stores and equipment."

"Immaterial. The *Leviathan* crew should be returned to Sauron for treatment and reassignment. The Occupation Breedmasters as well; we have more than enough of them here with the First Fleet."

"Fleet First Rank, I request permission to stay in the Tanith sector and aid in the hunt for the Imperials. I feel I have gained a particular insight into their nature."

"Request denied. The *borloi* is required immediately on Sauron."

"We could transfer the *borloi* to another ship - "

"Do I have to repeat my orders?" Something flickered across Morgenthau's face."There have been . . . severe reverses . . . elsewhere, First Rank Diettinger."

Can that be why he reacted as he did to the loss of the Canada? Diettinger asked himself. *Are we reduced to using the enemy's captured ships now, as well as their captured females?*

"Understood. Then may I call special attention to the portion of my report that deals with two *Chinthes* which may have escaped early in the battle - "

"Duly noted."

"Fleet First Rank, I stress the danger of reinforcement which those ships present to the - "

"That danger has been assessed, Diettinger. Rendezvous with *Damaris* and return to Sauron."

Disciplinary action among Saurons was rarely needed, and thus, so rarely encountered that Morgenthau's calm reiteration of Diettinger's orders was almost the equivalent of a physical blow.

Diettinger replied with a stoic acknowledgement and broke the connection.

"Make for the Alderson Point, Second Rank. Coordinate with *Damaris* for simultaneous Jump sequences to Sauron."

II

Adderly watched the combat holo with growing hopelessness. The glowing sphere with its ships and navigational aid had filled his vision for the last T-week, undergoing a bizarre apotheosis as it did so. From cold mechanical simulation it had become mildly hypnotic, and it seemed now to *be* Tanith, and

the space surrounding it and the ships that lived and died there. *This* was reality for Adderly and his bridge crew; not the smell of burned metal, the sight of burned flesh, or the wreckage that had been filling Tanith space on an almost daily basis since the Saurons had first arrived.

Now over two hundred vessels surrounded Tanith, Sauron ships of every size and function. Messages from Tanith had continued, but the troops there had retreated from the spaceport. They had no hope of recapturing it now.

By seniority of commission, Adderly was now Commander in Chief of the Eleventh Imperial Fleet. The survivors of Kellogg's force, from destroyer on up to the *King George V* herself numbered less than fifty. The original mission, to pickup Tanith's garrison for use in revolt suppression at New Hibernia, was forgotten. Instead, hopelessly outnumbered, the Fleet had fallen back to the asteroid belt. The same belt, where less than two weeks ago, they had hunted the *Fomoria* and her prize. Now, they were tending to their own wounds and praying for a miracle.

The Sauron Fleet had invested Tanith with saturation bombardment for the past seventy-two hours. The city's Field could not hold out indefinitely, nor could her troops hold off against the planetside forces the Saurons had deployed.

With a deep sigh, Adderly turned his gaze back to the holo. As he watched, two of the lights representing the Sauron Fleet detached themselves, heading for the nearest Alderson Point.

"Jimmy, can you give me an ID on those ships?"

"One's the *Damaris*, sir. Sauron heavy battleship. Huge drives, their IR signature alone is enough to give her away." The First Officer's face screwed up in concentration, then eerily smoothed out to match the lack of emotion in his voice. "The other ship is the *Fomoria*, Captain." He said quietly.

Why were they leaving? Could it be that Diettinger's cock-and-bull story about the borloi had been true all along? Adderly realized suddenly that he didn't care. He felt a weight drop from his shoulders, and at that moment he knew what had happened.

Relieved, he thought. *Diettinger's been relieved*. And despite the irrationality of the thought, despite the fact that he *knew* it was irrational, he found himself feeling like a man who dreamed he'd died, only to awaken safe in his own bed.

Vessel First Rank Diettinger, the only Sauron who had never lost a naval engagement which he commanded, was leaving. At that moment, Adderly didn't know if he'd gone crazy or not, nor did he care. The idea bubbled up in him like a suppressed laugh in a graveyard, shocking, liquid, bright. It was past his lips before he knew it.

"We can't lose!"

First Mate blinked reddened eyes. "Sir?"

Adderly passed a hand over his face, stubble and all. Small wonder, he had been living on the bridge for the past two days. He laughed.

First Mate, now the Fleet Operations Officer, relayed the commands to Adderly's new subordinates.

"Captain Adderly, they want to know the battle plan for the intercept."

"Plan? No plan, Jimmy. No plan at all."

"First Rank, I show multiple drives activation in the asteroid belt, bearing zero-niner-zero our heading."

"Good. Fleet First Rank Morgenthau knows where to find the Imperials. Accelerate to seven-Gs and plot the Jump."

Navigation looked up in horror. The Alderson Points that began and ended tramlines between stars were by no means large; standard procedure called for them to be entered at less than a tenth of a G, since finding them was hardly an exact science. Diettinger's order could just as easily carry them so far past the Point that there would be weeks wasted in realigning for the Jump. Still, Navigation did the best he could.

"We'll never catch them, Captain Adderly."

Adderly watched the combat holo. Fully half the Sauron combined Fleet had left Tanith orbit and was bearing down on Adderly's force. "I don't care if we do, Jimmy. The *Fomoria* and *Damaris* are heading for the closest Alderson Point. At their speed, they'll likely miss it. We, however, will not."

"Sir? We're *leaving*?"

Adderly's look would have dropped snow on Tanith. "You haven't heard me order a general retreat, have you? Now get back to your post, mister."

III

"Status on mines at the Point?" Diettinger asked.

Second Rank checked her screen a second time before answering. "Unchanged, First Rank."

"Unchanged? The First Fleet didn't renew the seeding left by the Second?"

"First Rank, the Second Fleet evidently left no new minefield."

Diettinger was losing his temper, as rare an event as one could hope for. "Get me the monitor at the Alderson Point. Navigation, status on the Jump plot?"

"Complete, First Rank. Comment."

"Speak."

"At seven-Gs acceleration, we and the *Damaris* have less than a fifteen percent chance of accurately entering the Alderson Point when activating our Jump Drives."

"Thank you, Navigation."

"Enemy ships, First Rank." Second cut-in, stumbling over the words. "First Rank, I have massive readings of enemy ships at the Point; there are..." Her voice faded.

Diettinger turned his acceleration couch enough to see numerous figures marching up her console screen.

"Estimate, Second Rank?"

"Approximately two hundred and fifty to three hundred enemy ships, First Rank."

"Signal Morgenthau aboard the *Sauron*"

The return was agonizingly slow in coming. "What is it, Diettinger?"

"A massive enemy reinforcement flotilla has -"

"We are aware, First Rank. And will deal with the threat. All the required information is being coordinated now."

"Morgenthau, there are almost three hundred Imperials coming in and you didn't even mine the Jump Point!"

Incredibly, Morgenthau smiled. "Our combined Fleet is statistically capable of inflicting break off

losses on twice that number, Vessel First Rank. Mining the Alderson Point would only have left the Imperials more prepared.”

“Statistics? You inbred fool, don’t you understand? Didn’t the destruction of the *Leviathan* teach you anything? *There won’t be a break-off!* It took sacrificing the prize ship *Canada* to win the last one, and it will *be* the last one. The Imperials will press the attack beyond all rational military considerations; they will destroy themselves to destroy the Combined Fleet. And you’ve just divided your forces!”

Diettinger’s rage had him leaning out of his acceleration couch against seven gravities, cords stood out on his neck and the wound beneath his bandages had opened. Blood soaked the dressing, streaking down his jaw in the artificial gravity to splash audibly against the floor.

Fleet First Rank Morgenthau’s face went blank. “You have your orders, Diettinger. Evade the enemy fleet and return to Sauron with the *Damaris*.”

Diettinger didn’t ask Second Rank for an update on the enemy fleet; the look on her face told him all he needed to know.

“Alderson Point in two minutes, First Rank.” Navigation usually gave the warning time in seconds, but at seven-Gs, minutes seemed more prudent.

“Evasive action, First Rank?”

“None. We’ll be at the Point before they recover from Jump Lag. Status on *Damaris*?”

“Matching velocity and heading with us.”

“Jump coordinates coinciding?”

“Affirmative.”

Diettinger sat back. One minute and forty-five seconds to go. “Weapons. Set wide pattern mine release at thirty seconds to Jump. Disable seek and maneuver programs on mines and set fuses for simple proximity. Signal *Damaris* to match deployment.” It was all he could do.

The *Fomoria* streaked between the Imperial Fleet ships still recovering from Jump. Her lethal shadow, *Damaris*, narrowly missed colliding with an Imperial dreadnaught, but passed through without other incident. Helpless as the enemy was, the Saurons could do nothing; they were simply going too fast.

With any luck, we’ll miss the Jump Point and have to rejoin the battle, Diettinger thought.

He had not reckoned with the quality of his navigation officer and engineering crew.

Navigation did begin counting down the last seconds to the Alderson Point, pausing at ten seconds with, “Engage Alderson Drives,” and finishing at “zero” with “Jump.”

The *Fomoria* winked out of normal space. The *Damaris* followed behind.

Nine

The result of the last Imperial reinforcements to arrive at Tanith station was summed up by the Fleet commander in one word - “Murder.”

Imperial Navy Command had received word from the surviving *Chinthe* of the original Tanith patrol, dispatched by Adderly on their suicidal run for help. For once, the Naval Staff had acted boldly and seized the opportunity, stripping ships from every available operation and redeploying them to Tanith with one goal in mind - the destruction of the Sauron Second Fleet.

Upon finding the Sauron First Fleet waiting for them as well, the battle became, as Diettinger had

anticipated, one of extermination.

Ship after ship of the Saurons died, their commanders unable or unwilling to believe that the losses the Imperials were suffering would not eventually force them to break-off.

None did. By the end of the fifth day, casualty rates were equivalent to a meat grinder, including actions in such close quarters as to be comparable to ramming. By the end of the third week, the Imperials controlled Tanith's orbital space.

Not to say the Imperials didn't suffer horrendous losses - they did. More than half the ships of the flotilla were either destroyed outright or so badly maimed as to not be worth salvaging. But, the Imperials had always had more ships, and now they were throwing them into the fray with abandon. A tactic the outnumbered Saurons would not emulate, even if they could.

The Saurons occupying Tanith spaceport were dealt with in summary fashion; the spaceport was obliterated. A nearby city complex which the Saurons had captured after landing was officially designated "unsalvageable" and likewise erased from the face of the planet. No demands for or offers of surrender were issued by either side.

Adderly watched all of this, participated in some of it, understood little and could justify less.

By the end of the twentieth day, the remnants of a mighty Unified Fleet, reduced to less than thirty ships, broke for the nearest Alderson Point to escape. Less than a handful made it.

Adderly had been part of that, too, as he had stood on the bridge of the *King George V*, engines at last reduced to a merciful one-point-five-Gs of thrust. They had tried to go to standard gravity, only to find the crew overcompensating and bumping into things. More tools were broken, and more bones, at one-G than during the last week of living between three-and four-Gs. Adderly had watched the ruined hulks fight their way to the Alderson Point, some making it, most not.

Adderly had canceled the final attack, seconds before the last Sauron had Jumped, but he could not say why, only that he had been unable to give the order to shoot.

And therein lies a tale, he thought, waiting outside the offices of the Board of Inquiry. He'd been waiting an hour when a young officer came out to collect him, accompanied by two Imperial Marines. The officer looked as if he had eaten something bad. The Marines just looked like Marines.

"Captain Adderly, I'm Commander Jackson Harold. It's a pleasure to meet you, sir."

Adderly shook his head. "You might regret saying that."

Harold shook his head. "I doubt that, Captain." He looked over his shoulder, back toward the doors of the office where the Board sat. "I always enjoy meeting a fine officer as opposed to a scoundrel in uniform. And if I was ever confused as to the difference, today it was clarified."

Adderly looked at Harold for a moment. "Commander Harold, you look like a man with something unpleasant to say. I wonder if we should be heading somewhere while you say it."

Harold attempted a smile of his own; it almost worked. "Let's cross the grounds, shall we? Marines."

The sky of Tanith was characteristically orange, overcast, sullen and hot. Their tunics clung to their backs within ten paces, but it was *air*, by God, and Adderly allowed that he had never tasted anything so sweet.

Commander Harold walked slowly. "It's all falling apart, you know."

"Yes," Adderly said. "The Sauron Fleets are wrecked; the next move will be against their home world. No more battles at the fringes. This one will be for the war. And after that..." He shrugged. "The

Coalition of Secession can't hold up without the Saurons for backbone. Their Unified State, their Trade Bloc, none of it will last..." Harold was staring at him. "What's wrong?"

"I was speaking of the Empire, Captain Adderly. Ours."

Adderly took a deep breath. "Ah, yes. I guess I knew that, too." But he wondered. *Had* he known? Or, more to the point, wouldn't he have been far happier *not* knowing?

"You're right about the Saurons, of course," Harold went on. "But it won't end with them. The Out-Rim raiders have been pushing, any place we've ignored or stripped of troops or ships to deal with the Saurons."

"The Coalition of Secession is doomed, Captain, but the damage is done. Now there's another crop of Claimants. Did you know that we have three nobles who can prove - *prove*, mind you - the legitimacy of their claim to the purple?"

"To listen to them," Harold continued, "you'd think everybody and his brother were qualified to be Emperor. Right now they're screaming in the Senate for a 'Council of Emperors' based on their contributions to the war. Can you imagine what kind of hydra *that* would be?"

Could he? Adderly didn't know. In truth, he didn't care. The sky of Tanith was beautiful, in its way. This frontier world - that some called a hellhole - that he'd fought for and lived on and given everything to save, was at this moment the most glorious place he'd ever seen.

"Anyway, Captain Adderly - "

"Call me WILL. I'll call you Jack, or do you prefer Jackson?"

Commander Harold's expression went from uncomfortable to downright miserable. "No, sir. Jack is fine. All right; WILL. The loss of *Canada* was bad enough, to say nothing of the part it played in the destruction of the *Aleksandr Nevsky*. Still, few of us have ever run into that EVA Marine tactic of Diettinger's; the same might have happened to anyone. It's the *borloi* that's got to them. That and the fact that the Saurons had you captive and let you go. That's never happened before, WILL. *Never*. And your suggestion as to why it should have happened to you did not go over well with the Board."

"I stand by it. First Rank Diettinger conducted himself like an officer and a gentlemen." *And I returned the compliment by trying to kill him, mutilating him instead.* But he hadn't told them that. They wouldn't have believed him, anyway.

"Yes, well, be that as it may, there is still the matter of the *borloi* drug. The Board will simply not accept that the Commander of an Imperial Planetary Patrol Task Force, who lost a battle to a single Sauron heavy cruiser, should be entertained for a time aboard the enemy ship and then released unharmed."

Adderly had to choke back a laugh.

"They thought it particularly odd that you yourself claimed the Saurons wanted nothing more than the location of the planetside stores of the Empire's most profitable illegal drug."

Now Adderly did begin to laugh, then shook his head in disbelief.

"That's their reasoning, anyway. The Tanith spaceport was nuked a dozen times over, so there's no telling if the Saurons ever got the *borloi* out of it or not. But the Board has had so many dealings with Outies and smugglers, to say nothing of traitors in - "The Commander's voice died before he could say "the Navy."

"The worst part, Captain Adderly, are their motives. Those bastards want to hang you - not because you lost, but because you *won*. A Planetary Patrol Commander holds off two Sauron Fleets for a fortnight.

That's bloody magnificent work! There's a duchy in that sort of thing these days. Now, those fools will fall to squabbling for the glory amongst themselves when you're gone."

Harold continued on past the officers' quarters and led Adderly and the Marines to the left-hand path that cut across the compound and past the gallows. "The Empire is dying," he added in a low voice. "And the jackals are killing each other over the bones."

Adderly shook his head and smiled.

So, in the end, Diettinger's triumph is total. Kellogg got his board, after all the obvious, most convenient conclusion was drawn, and that is the end of William Daniel Adderly, Imperial Navy.

His guilt or innocence hardly mattered, nor did the avarice of the men who judged him. At this stage of the war, treason was a charge whose bare whisper would kill a man, if not physically, then certainly professionally.

The Empire's attitude toward the Saurons had changed irrevocably. They were no longer the enemy; they were evil incarnate. Adderly had seen it growing in his men; he had seen it in himself, the day he met Diettinger. He had seen it again in Kellogg's single-minded attacks, and finally in the Fleet's pursuit of the remaining Sauron ships to the Alderson Point.

That attitude would consume more than the Saurons, he knew... but they would be the first to go.

They had reached the stockade.

"I'm sorry, Captain Adderly. WILL, I mean. But under the circumstances I think it's obvious what the verdict will be if you receive a court martial."

He nodded. Harold had stumbled over the word, but Adderly had caught it."If."

Adderly looked at this improbably young man. Not too young to know that the Navy would take its peculiar care of one of its own. The brotherhood among Naval officers might not be able to save him, but it could send a young volunteer - it was *always* a volunteer - like Commander Harold to show it had not abandoned him.

"If there's anything I can do..."

"As a matter of fact, there is. My wife Alysha. She's living on Gaea. Our address is in the records. Tell her all this, if you would. The real story, not the official one."

"I'll tell her. I'm sure she'll be proud."

"I'm not. But she'll be . . . justified, I think. That's very important to Alysha. I suppose it's important to a lot of people, these days."

Adderly turned at the top of the steps, where two more Marines opened the door. He looked up at the clouds.

"It's peculiar, but I can't stop thinking about them, the Saurons, I mean."

There being nothing to say, Commander Harold listened.

"They're dying," Adderly continued, almost to himself. "And they can't understand *why* they're dying. They think they've been outfought, and they have. But they'll convince themselves it was some flaw in their battle plan.

It will never occur to them that the cold logic of the ultimate Soldier was simply no match for the heart of the Beast."

He turned and held out his hand. "Goodbye, Jack."

The two men shook hands and Adderly felt the expected packet pressed into his palm.

“The men of the *King George V* wanted you to know they appreciated what you did for Captain Lester and the bridge crew.” Harold swallowed. “Goodbye, Captain Adderly.”

Adderly smiled. “WILL,” he corrected him.

Adderly had turned when Harold called him back. “WILL?”

He raised an eyebrow. “Yes? Something?”

“Captain, I’m twenty-two years old and I’m a full commander. It’s not hard to guess why, and knowing why, it’s not likely I’ll see twenty-three. It’s what you said, about how First Rank Diettinger treated you. I’d like to know: What are the Saurons *really* like? I only know the propaganda ministry stuff; but you’ve seen them up-close, *talked* to one. What’s it like to actually look into the face of the enemy?”

Adderly turned and looked at the jungle-choked hills in the distance, rife with some of the most dangerous predators in known space. He had hunted there once, on an absurdly dangerous dare. Closer in, on the far side of the compound, was the building that held the Board of Inquiry. He almost laughed aloud, thinking of how much safer that jungle looked to him now.

The beasts have come down from the hills...

A flagpole in front of the Board’s offices bore a tired banner, its faint movement in the sultry Tanith air reminded him of a dying bird. As he drew closer, Adderly saw it was the flag of the Empire of Man.

Dying; already dead? Or is it too much to ask that it might just be asleep?

Adderly said nothing for a very long time. Finally he turned his gaze back to meet Commander Harold’s.

“With enemies like the Saurons, Jack,” he said quietly, “you don’t need friends.”

Then he went back up the stairs and into the stockade, a Marine on either side to escort him to his cell.

Book 2: The Eye Closes **2640 A.D., SAURON**

Ten

Voices in the darkness:

“...is Sauron Traffic Control to Intruders. Initiate your recognition transponders or you will be fired on. This is Sauron Traffic Control to Intruders...”

Vessel First Rank Galen Diettinger’s head lolled against the backrest of his acceleration couch, twin lines of tears streaking his face; those running from beneath his eyepatch tinged with blood. The hideous disorientation called Jump Lag made all humans sick, most drool, and some rare few go mad; with Diettinger, his eyes watered like fonts. His ship, the *Talon-class* heavy cruiser *Fomoria* drifted from the Alderson Jump Point just beyond the outermost orbital path of the Sauron System’s planets; the Homeworld was still four days away at maximum thrust. Several hundred kilometers off *Fomoria*’s port bow, the Sauron battleship *Damaris* drifted on the same heading. Both vessels were returning from the military debacle at the enemy-Imperial world of Tanith.

Where the last of the Sauron First Fleet was doubtlessly being torn to pieces at this very moment, Diettinger thought miserably. The warning came again; the Homeworld took no chances these days.

The genetically-engineered superhumans known as the Sauron Race were better than normal humans at everything; they couldn't help it - they couldn't even take credit for it. They were, literally, *made* that way. But Jump Lag was the great equalizer. Its effects passed away completely, but they did so in their own good time, whether the victim was a Sauron or a micro-gravity quadriplegic. Computers fared even worse, and some animals were known to simply fall down and die.

But no crew suffered from Jump Lag forever; the longest timed duration of the effect was twenty-four minutes and seventeen seconds, a record that had stood for seventy-three years. As a result, all ships entering Sauron System were given the benefit of the doubt - an extra five minutes and forty-three seconds. At thirty minutes and one second after entry from the Jump Point, or immediately upon initiating maneuvering engines, questionable ships were intercepted by the Sauron System Defense Network.

Or so went the drill in peacetime.

When at war, as now, the Sauron System Defense Network would begin firing on the *Fomoria* and the *Damaris* after twenty-four minutes and thirty seconds. Neither identification markings nor their Sauron configuration would save them at that point; expert military historians, Saurons knew full well the value of the Trojan horse.

So Diettinger turned his remaining eye toward the Jump clock, a simple spring-driven timepiece set into the bulkhead beside the deactivated bridge computer. Artificial brains fared worse from Jump Lag than carbon ones and, so, had to be shut down before Jump or be utterly ruined. The clock was wound and zeroed out by the Jump Watch Officer, then activated simultaneously upon the initiation of the Jump itself; it now read 00:23:58.

The *Fomoria* was nearing a record for Jump lag: twenty-three minutes and fifty-eight seconds. Not a record Diettinger wanted. In twenty-three seconds, Sauron's planetary and asteroid-based defense systems would reduce both *Fomoria* and *Damaris* to glittering debris. Diettinger's mind was clearing faster now, the Jump-induced nausea receding into memory. Around him, other members of the bridge crew were still in the thrall of the Jump Lag. The clock now read 00:24:02.

A response pad was beneath Diettinger's fingers; a hint of pressure to apply the fingerprints of his living hand and the channel would be opened to the Homeworld. Were he even unable to speak, the *Fomoria's* code transmission would instantly identify her as a Sauron vessel, and Sauron's alerted system defense stations would stand down.

He looked at the pad; his hand above it might have been a waxwork. Experimentally, he tried to flex his fingers; they wagged with the fluid grace unique to Saurons.

00:24:05

Reaching out, Diettinger placed his fingers once more over the pad. Nothing. 00:24:09. He clenched his fist, raised his arm and shook it, returned it to its place above the response pad, and, as before, found that he could not seem to move it.

00:24:14

So much simpler this way, a part of him said. *Wait. Another seventeen seconds, and the missiles and beams and fighters and mines and mass drivers of the Homeworld will converge on the Fomoria; they will ignore any attempts at contact made after the cutoff time, of course. Why? Because that is the procedure. That is the way the system works, and the system is a product of the finest military minds in the history of the human race. One might acknowledge such a system's imperfections, but only to negligible degrees; indeed, those flaws provided justification for such rigid adherence to policy.*

00:24:21

Wait, and put all this behind you. The inertia of the High Command; the mindless confidence that had committed the entirety of the Sauron fleet to what now must surely be a slaughter at the hands of the Imperials; the decisions made by committees who had forgotten the vision of Sauron, and were blinded to the inevitable.

00:24:25

Wait, and let it end without your having to see it, his war-weary mind said. Yet he reached for the response pad.

Before his fingers could touch it, the communications panel crackled: “Sauron Traffic Control, this is Vessel First Rank Emory of the Sauron Battleship *Damaris*. The Sauron Heavy Cruiser *Fomoria* is riding off our starboard bow. Our transponder code transmissions are incoming to your station now.”

After another few seconds, Diettinger keyed his own response pad as well. He had forgotten about the *Damaris*. After receiving the acknowledgment of his signal from Traffic Control, he sat back and looked around the bridge once more. Other than himself, only his first officer, Second Rank Althene Adame, appeared to have recovered from the Jump Lag. She was watching him impassively, and as she turned back to her station, he wondered how long she had been doing so. Looking past her arm, he saw that the cover of her own response pad was opened.

“*Ah, well*” he said to himself. He began to signal the various command stations to check in.

II

Fomoria eased into orbit with *Damaris* trailing seventeen miles behind. Several orbiting dry docks were already matching velocities to refuel and rearm both vessels. The warships were receiving priority treatment because they were the only Jump-capable Sauron vessels in the Home System; everything else had been committed to the battle at Tanith.

Ahead of the dry docks, a formation of cargo shuttles were on an intercept course with the *Fomoria*; Diettinger’s Communications officer identified them: “Medical supply shuttles, First Rank. They are here to offload the *borloi* seized at Tanith.”

Diettinger had almost forgotten that his original mission at Tanith had been to secure the Imperial planet’s yearly harvest of the powerful narcotic drug *borloi*; the only known substance potent enough to anesthetize a Sauron for surgery. *Well; no doubt we’ll be needing it in the weeks to come...*

“Confirm their signal and stabilize orbital velocity. Notify all bays to begin zero-G cargo transfer.”

Communications Rank frowned at a new signal. “Additional signal incoming, First Rank.” He patched the signal through to the panel in Diettinger’s acceleration couch.

“Vessel First Rank Galen Diettinger,” the face on Diettinger’s screen looked familiar, “You are to report for immediate debriefing by Sauron High Command. A shuttle is en route to your projected position; ETA, seventy-four minutes from this mark.”

Diettinger’s staff would not be summoned, since Saurons relied on the ability of commanders to assimilate and assess information from their subordinates before reporting to superiors. In their quest to breed a superior human genotype, the Saurons had thus achieved one small triumph for humanity; they had virtually eliminated bureaucrats.

“Affirm. Action by the *Damaris* under Vessel First Rank Emory was crucial to the success of our mission; shall I send one of *Fomoria*’s shuttles to collect her for the debriefing?”

“Negative, Vessel First Rank Diettinger. Separate arrangements have been made for Vessel First Rank

Emory. You will proceed immediately to the rendezvous, now seventy-three minutes from this mark.”

The signal was abruptly cut off, and Diettinger realized why the face had looked familiar. Engaged on all fronts, with every battle a struggle for survival, Sauron’s most precious military assets were now her Cyborg Super Soldiers; yet the person speaking to him in the name of the High Command had been a Cyborg.

What the devil are they doing here? he asked himself. *And by what authority are they speaking for the High Council?*

Fomoria was in the grips of a boarding action, and she was losing. Fully two dozen shuttles were standing off her bows awaiting their turn to dock, while another dozen were already clustered around her gaping bays as teams of Saurons worked furiously to off-load the precious *borloi*. Seventy minutes had passed since the Cyborg had notified him of his summons to the debriefing, and now Diettinger stood in the airlock of Hangar Bay Four while a *borloi*-laden cargo shuttle eased away from its moorings. The shuttle banked to starboard and fell away toward the atmosphere below, revealing the cutter which was coming for him on its final approach. The cutter sliced past the cargo shuttle and missed colliding with it by two meters.

“Looks like a fair pilot for you today, First Rank.” Fighter Rank Stahler commented dryly. Today’s duty officer at the hangar, Stahler was an excellent pilot in his own right.

Diettinger consulted his parietal-implant chronometer, as the cutter’s three landing skids touched down simultaneously - it had been exactly seventy-four minutes - and grunted an acknowledgment of Stahler’s appraisal. He didn’t wonder why such a gifted individual wasn’t serving on the line; any Sauron pilot was capable of such simple coordination. It was the accuracy within hundredths of a second that made him uneasy. The moment he entered the cutter, his suspicion was confirmed.

The pilot did not turn to greet him; gray eyes flickered to the mirror mounted over the viewscreen, “Vessel First Rank Galen Diettinger,” the Cyborg declared; it was an identification, not a question or even an acknowledgment.

Diettinger nodded, buckling the acceleration couch seat belt; the cutter was lifting, backing out of the hangar bay even before the hatch had sealed.

“Secure your acceleration straps, Vessel First Rank Diettinger,” the Cyborg instructed him.

Diettinger looked up, his one good eye locking with the mirrored gaze of the pilot. Cyborgs had never before been assigned pilot-duty to carry Sauron-norms; their much greater high-G tolerance made them incompatible with non-Cyborg passengers, to say the least. But Diettinger had not risen so far nor lived so long without a healthy prudence, and he strapped himself in with the high-G restraints. Securely.

They want to talk to me right away, I see. The weight of the acceleration began pressing him into the chair. *There can’t have been any news, of the outcome of the battle at Tanith, not yet.* Faster-than-light travel had made man an interstellar species, but nothing could transmit his messages faster than he himself could physically carry them. No matter how disastrous such news might be... Diettinger had no doubt that Morgenthau’s refusal to withdraw from Tanith space in the face of overwhelming Imperial naval superiority was even now creating at best a military fiasco; at worst, it was sealing the fate of the Homeworld itself.

They will not like what I have to tell them.

The sensation of his own weight increased; years in space, and in high-G combat, told him they had passed the seven-G point. No human norm had ever remained conscious past ten gravities, no Sauron norm past twelve. Cyborgs nodded off at eighteen. Diettinger had no inclination to prove anything to

his pilot; he willingly let himself drift into the void as the cutter passed twelve-point-five-gravities.

It still troubled him greatly that it was a Cyborg who now chauffeured him planetside; his last thought before oblivion was that Cyborg shuttle pilots meant that the High Command was either humbling the Super Soldiers (no bad thing given their already-growing influence over all Sauron policy) or that they had become utterly dependent on them - a very bad thing indeed.

Eleven

Diettinger stood facing the nine members of the Sauron High Command: all of whom appeared to be in good spirits, all of whom were evidently convinced that Diettinger would bring them news of an impending decisive victory in the long war against the Empire; and three of whom - despite years of governmental assurances that they would never be allowed to partake in policy decisions - were Cyborgs.

“Welcome, Vessel First Rank Galen Diettinger,” the First Citizen and head of the High Command greeted him. “Be seated. You are commander of the Sauron Heavy Cruiser *Fomoria*, which, accompanied by the Sauron Battleship *Damaris* under the command of Vessel First Rank Mara Emory, returned today from a major engagement in the Empire’s Tanith System.”

“That is correct, First Citizen.”

The First Citizen glanced down at his data screen set into the surface of the table before him. “Your mission at Tanith was to secure for our medical branch several metric tons of the natural narcotic *borloi*; in this mission you were successful, incidentally capturing an Imperial battle cruiser - the *Canada* - which was sacrificed in an ensuing engagement to destroy an Imperial Battleship, the *Aleksandr Nevsky*”

“Yes, First Citizen.” Diettinger had barely completed his report on the engagement and submitted it before his summons; Alderson Jumps were instantaneous, but traveling to and from Jump Points was an often roundabout process which could take hours, weeks or even months. *Fomoria* and *Damaris* had been in combat in the Tanith System less than twelve days ago.

“You spoke with Fleet First Rank Morgenthau upon his arrival with the flag battleship *Sauron* and the First Fleet; your report indicates that he is currently engaging the last intact full-strength fleet of the Empire at this moment.”

“I cannot claim to know it is the last Imperial fleet of such strength, First Citizen. I can only state that upon leaving Tanith space, the *Sauron* task force was about to be attacked by over three hundred capital ships of the Empire. I have not seen so large an Imperial force in fifteen years.

The First Citizen broached the ghost of a smile; “Nor are you likely to, ever again,” he said, looking up. He frowned. “What happened to your eye?”

Diettinger relayed that he had lost his left eye to a desperate act of defiance by the human-norm commander of the *Canada*, Captain William Adderly.

The First Citizen stared at him for a moment, then continued. “Do you know why Fleet First Rank Morgenthau ordered *Damans* to return to Sauron with you?”

“At the time he gave the order, the Sauron First Fleet of approximately two hundred ships was more than sufficient for the conquest of Tanith; it wasn’t until *Fomoria* and *Damaris* were almost at the Jump Point that the Imperial reinforcements began to arrive. Vessel First Rank Emory requested permission for *Damaris* to rejoin the First Fleet at Tanith, but Fleet First Rank Morgenthau refused to allow her to do so.” *Because he is a lunatic and a fool*, Diettinger wanted to add, then reconsidered. “I believe he

kept the *Damaris* as an escort for the *Fomoria* to ensure the *borloi* made it back here, First Citizen.”
De Mortuis, nihil nisi bonum, Diettinger thought.

The First Citizen nodded, reading again from the screen, but Diettinger saw that two of the Cyborgs were speaking quietly to one another, while the third watched him intently.

“Very well, Vessel First Rank Diettinger.” The First Citizen looked up. “Your confirmation of the arrival intact of the Sauron First Fleet at Tanith, as well as that of the Empire’s Home Fleet and the subsequent engagement of those two forces is duly noted. You are hereby promoted to Fleet First Rank; formal notification of same to all stations will follow within twenty-seven hours. Upon their return from Tanith, you will relieve Fleet First Rank Morgenthau and assume command of the First Fleet, after which you will begin re-organization of that force for the invasion of the Imperial capital world of Sparta. This operation will commence no later than - ”

“Excuse me, First Citizen,” Diettinger was leaning forward in his chair, unable to mask his disbelief. “The Imperial Home Fleet - if that’s what it was - now attacking our First Fleet at Tanith consists of *over three hundred ships*.”

“Yes, we’re aware of that, Diettinger,” the First Citizen’s tone was warning. “Matched against the Sauron First Fleet of two hundred twelve vessels. Our analysis shows that upon suffering forty percent casualties, the Imperials will be forced to break-off combat to maintain a fleet-in-being for the defense of Sparta, while we will have suffered losses between twenty-seven and fifty-four percent. Remaining ships of our First Fleet will be augmented by Sauron vessels now being recalled for that purpose, providing you with a force of approximately one hundred-ninety to two hundred-fifty ships for the final assault on and subsequent invasion of Sparta.”

Diettinger looked from one face to the next; each regarded him with the faintly bemused and ultimately condescending expressions of people who have just heard an adult admit he did not understand that one and one equals two.

“First Citizen. Members of the High Command,” Diettinger said, as he tried to organize his thoughts; he had been prepared for almost anything but this. “I have attempted to make it clear in my report that we have badly misjudged the human norms’ commitment to victory in this war. It is my firm belief that no amount of losses will force the Imperials to break-off from their engagement of our First Fleet at Tanith, that nothing short of the obliteration of our fleet - or theirs - will end that battle, and that given the numerical superiority of the Imperial Home Fleet in that battle, together with the determination of the human norms and the overconfidence of our own commanders, such an obliteration of our First Fleet, is, in fact, inevitable. Most especially if all our commanders are as sure of the effect of Imperial losses as this Council seems to be.”

The First Citizen leaned back in his chair, the mood in the room reflecting his posture of courteous contempt. Having at first embraced him as a commander returning victorious and destined for greater glory, the entire High Command was now withdrawing from Diettinger.

“Fleet First Rank Diettinger,” the First Citizen spoke slowly, almost kindly, “Surely you are aware that until your experience at Tanith, neither human norms nor Saurons have ever pursued victory at such suicidal cost on any large scale during the entire course of this war?”

Diettinger tried to keep the shock from his face.”First Citizen,” he almost stammered, turning to address the High Command officer seated to the First Citizen’s right: “First Soldier; every great general in history has done - must do - *exactly that with his troops eventually!* And the time for the Imperials to do so is now. At Tanith.”

“We welcome any such effort by the human norms now there to take such action,” one of the Cyborgs

interrupted. “Such fatalism will lead them into an action against our fleet at Tanith which, even if victorious, must be regarded by any measure as Pyrrhic.”

“For whom?” Diettinger tried to interject, but was ignored.

Instead, another of the Cyborgs added in the near-identical voice of his crèche: “Such bloodshed suffered by the Empire will promulgate tremendous public outcry in their Parliament against the war, precipitating demands for a negotiated settlement.”

“Which has been acceptable to us all along,” another High Command member concluded. Diettinger recognized him as the High Command’s Socio-Ops expert.”The mere threat of our invasion fleet will force them into a settlement. Immediately after which, in the period of released tensions such a settlement will bring about in the Empire, our invasion fleet will strike at Sparta. The statistical models, which confirm the accuracy of this projection of events, have been verified in over one million computational analyses.”

Diettinger was silent. Their plan was a bad joke; no one, qualified to sit on the High Command, could possibly regard it as even remotely plausible. He would try once more: “First Citizen, officers of the High Command; under no circumstances will the Imperial Fleet allow any significant portion of our First Fleet to escape Tanith. Whatever ships we have available at this *moment* should be regarded as the only vessels we can rely on having for what will be, in a very short time, a concerted attack by all remaining Imperial forces upon the Sauron Homeworld. I therefore, respectfully, request that the High Command implement immediate fortifications of Sauron System in accordance with expectation of a massive - *massive* - invasion force.”

The members of the High Command looked at one another briefly, the First Citizen turning back finally to Diettinger with a sadly patronizing expression.”Thank you, Vessel First Rank Diettinger. Your request is noted. You may return to your ship.” He looked down at his screen again, then back up briefly to add: “And have that eye regenerated at once.”

Diettinger left the conference hall in the grip of an overwhelming sense of unreality. As he strode through the corridors of the capitol, his mind worked furiously: the only explanation for the behavior of the High Command was an utter conviction on their part that the war had been planned so perfectly that any impending disaster was but the razor edge of an ultimate victory. Diettinger could not suppress a snort of laughter, and waved back a concerned pair of staffers who turned to stare at him, frown, then go about their business. *To even conceive of such a rationalization, he thought, amused, is proof that self-delusion is a contagious disease.*

Checking in with Second Rank, Diettinger learned that the off-loading of the *borloi* from *Fomoria*’s holds had been completed, and that the ship was now being moved to space dock for repair and replenishment. Diettinger checked his personal chronometer implant against his ship’s time; barely three hundred hours had elapsed since *Fomoria* had Jumped from Tanith System, evading the onslaught of the Imperial fleet.

By now, he thought, the fleets at Tanith are engaging one another. The battle is raging, and the fate of Sauron is being decided.

And here he was, charged with composing an invasion force for the conquest of the Imperial capital of Sparta!

Abruptly, Diettinger laughed. Unbidden, his mind had simply shut out the absurdity of his current dilemma, and presented him with a clear course of action.

“Second Rank,” he told her after a pause, “I have matters to attend to planetside; I will be back aboard *Fomoria* within thirty-six hours. You have the conn until that time.”

Diettinger waited until Second Rank had acknowledged and recorded his off-ship status. He terminated the connection before Second Rank could inquire as to his whereabouts for the next day-and-a-half. It was a minor breach of procedure, but there were people Diettinger had to see, and he did not want to be disturbed while doing so. It had been too long.

Diettinger's next call was for an appointment with the regeneration therapists. A central hospital staffer told him that their workload was extremely light this week, and he could come in any time to begin regeneration therapy; no appointment was necessary. Given the current political climate evinced by the mood of the High Council - and the presence and influence of Cyborgs being seated on it - Diettinger was not foolish enough to predict the imminent arrival of several hundred thousand casualties from Tanith, and decided it could wait.

Instead he called for immediate air transport to Amberlea, one of the cities on Sauron's southern continent. Entering his personal codes brought instant accommodation and an assurance that ground transport would be waiting for him outside the capitol's west gate to deliver him to the flight center.

From the ground car, Diettinger called Logistics Center to establish a datalink to his personal workstations in the car and the aircraft in which he would be traveling. With the link, he would begin drafting the plans for a fleet which, he knew, would never exist off-media. At least it would help to take his mind off his growing dread.

Diettinger's preoccupation had prevented him from noticing the security officer who followed him to the car, entered his own vehicle and then followed him to the flight center. Frequently, the security officer's lips moved slightly, as if he were talking to himself.

Twelve

I

Diettinger enjoyed air travel; he never failed to find an ironic comfort in the presence of a breathable, positive-pressure atmosphere outside his cabin, however thin that atmosphere might be.

He had been in flight for a little under two hours, passing from day into the night of the western hemisphere. The equator, too, had slipped beneath them, unseen and unmissed.

Population centers blazed with light, the occasional industrial zone a glittering grey expanse dotted with jewels of lights, landing fields and launch pads. Sprawling agricultural areas, emerald tiles under the golden lace of the automated cultivation grid, the patents for which had made Sauron an economic superpower within the Empire. Those patents had long since been seized by that Empire as enemy assets - not that it mattered, now.

One area under their flight path extended into both day and night side. A vast carpet of mountainous forest that extended to the sea, it was enclosed by walls discernible at 30,000 feet and was the terminus of dozens of transport lines to surrounding population centers. None of those lines penetrated their destination. *A Wild Zone*, Diettinger realized.

Wild Zones were all that remained of the indigenous ecosystems of Sauron. They dotted the surface of the Homeworld, and the rites of passage that took place within them were the closest thing Sauron had to a state religion.

Since its discovery six hundred years before, Sauron had revealed itself to be one of the more merciless crucibles humanity had come across in its colonial exploration of space. Tanith might have proven a close match, but its mass-colonization period never attracted anything like the sort of grimly determined malcontents from Earth as had Sauron. Protected from CoDominium Bureau of Relocation

forced relocatees by powerful corporate backers, Sauron had not been subjected to mass immigrations of criminals and welfare recipients to overburden the new colony, like most CoDominium planets. Sauron citizens were still choosy about the quality of their neighbors. They liked to point out this fact when asked to explain how their colony could survive one year - let alone prosper over six hundred - on a world with an ecology disturbingly close to that of Earth's late Cretaceous period.

But that was all a long time ago, Diettinger thought, watching the great mass of night-blackened green pass beneath him. However large the Wild Zones, they are still only glorified zoos. All the great saurians are penned and tagged, culled by ritual hunts for the eldest children of the colony Firstholders; Sauron's initial colonists and the core of her aristocracy. The giant, protein-rich herd insects are gone completely, only their genotypes remain as matrices for food synthesizers. All of Sauron is ordered, tamed, regulated.

He was not so foolish as to consider it dull. Memories of his own moment of truth in a Wild Zone had long since made that impossible...

Armed with only an explosive harpoon, Diettinger and several other young Saurons his age had drawn lots for different sectors of a Wild Zone, seeking out a kill. Loup-garous and Nightfangs were fast and agile ambushers, and killing either with the weapon Diettinger had chosen would have been impressive enough. But none were in the 2,000 acre hunting area he had drawn, and on the tenth day he saw the reason why; gnawed bark and the potent spoor of the Grizzly he'd now been stalking for three days.

The Sauron Grizzly was named after one of Old Earth's most powerful mammalian predators, but it was not a mammal. Half again the size and with twice the bad attitude of its Terran namesake, Sauron Grizzlies were six-legged reptiloids with some mammalian characteristics. Homoeo-thermic and partially covered with fur, the egg-laying predators were crafty, strong and fast; they were the most dangerous Sauron predator in the size range that most concerned humans. Any of the bigger carnivores - and there were plenty of those, too - were more likely to step on a human than eat them.

In drawing his lot for a hunting area, Diettinger had stumbled into the territory of a big male, extremely territorial and, he knew from his research on Wild Zone predators, only slightly less dangerous than a mother Grizzly guarding her egg clutch or newborns.

His parents' reaction, when he'd contacted them aboard the Proctors' observation floater at the base camp, had not surprised him: "Slightly less dangerous, Galen?" His mother had sounded almost amused. "I remind you that there is no such qualifier as slightly less dead."

His father added, "Son, you are commended on your sense of societal obligation and your willingness to set an example as a Firstholder; but do not forget the First Principle."

Military in tone, the First Principle was more than a military axiom. Keystone of Sauron society, family and strategic thought, the First Principle expressed a virtue that was uniquely Sauron, one that had made the inhabitants of Sauron System the most economically productive and militarily powerful world of the Empire. Put plainly, it said: *Subjugate the ego to the battle plan.*

Diettinger knew that his parents understood. His declaration to the Proctors of a Sauron Grizzly as his chosen prey was no exercise in bravado; judged by Sauron values, such a risk would have earned contempt rather than adulation. But the lot Galen Diettinger had drawn was for a very specific sector within this Wild Zone area; that the sector happened to contain a Sauron Grizzly meant it would have very little else in the way of predators. Until Diettinger made his kill, he would be relatively safe from any other dangerous fauna. "It was luck," he told his father with a grin.

His mother had smiled on hearing the good-natured barb; Saurons as a rule did not believe in luck, only in probabilities, and so Diettinger's hunt continued, to the moment when he came upon the grizzly's

tracks once more, and realized that it had doubled back and was now stalking him.

Almost within the same moment, he felt himself being watched. He did not recheck the charge at the tip of his harpoon; he had checked it already. Slowly lowering the weapon to a ready position, he moved in a widening spiral into a clearing perhaps ten yards wide, attempting to locate his opponent by smell. A Sauron human's olfactory sense was equal to that of an Old Earth foxhound, but the antediluvian Wild Zones were filled with thousands of overlaid smells, each as pungent as the other. Like the beasts they hunted, Saurons could not rely on scent alone, and as he put his back to a tree six feet behind him, Diettinger saw the Grizzly, watching him. Waiting for him. At the same moment, he felt a faint tingling in the soles of his feet, lost in the rumble of the predator's explosive rush toward him.

Head down, eyes locked with his, the Grizzly charged, its four hind limbs driving it unheeding through the thick brush, a scaly, furred juggernaut, its two forelimbs swatting aside trees with trunks the thickness of a man's leg.

Diettinger was dimly aware of the background hum of the Proctors' observation floater. He knew that he could drop his weapon and the Proctors would obliterate the Grizzly with the floater's on-board weapons - and along with it, any chance of his ever inheriting his parents' lands and titles. *Not an option...*

The Grizzly had smashed through the wall of forest growth, its armored back peppered with branches and splinters from trees shattered in its progress. Diettinger knew that it should, according to pattern, check its run at him, compensating for any defensive leaps its prey might attempt. It did not.

The animal's mass would not allow it to change course at its current speed; Diettinger shifted his weight to jump out of its way... and nothing happened. He found, suddenly, that he could not move.

Not an option, he thought once more. As the Grizzly dropped to all six feet for its final rush, Diettinger jammed the base of the harpoon into the ground by his instep and threw his weight forward, aiming the head of the weapon with all the skill of an ancient Swiss pikeman.

A mammal, marginally smarter, might have flinched, but Sauron Grizzlies ate everything. The harpoon's explosive head went past the gaping jaws to bury itself in the base of the animal's skull...

. . .and did not explode.

The Grizzly's weight bore the shaft eighteen inches into the ground and a foot out the back of its head. Even without the charge, the harpoon must have hit something vital, for the Grizzly began to spasm; it seemed to have lost most of the control of its anterior limbs, but had no difficulty in catching Diettinger in its forepaws, mostly because he made no attempt to get away. Instead, to the horror of his parents, he drew the long hunting knife from his belt and buried it deep in the top of the animal's armored skull, a difficult feat even with a Sauron's strength, and utterly beyond the capability of any human norm.

The Grizzly dropped, bearing Diettinger down beneath its weight even as two of the Proctors dropped out of the floater and ran to his side.

"Heir Diettinger," one of the Proctors said as they reached the steaming, two-ton carcass, "We of the Proctors are evenly divided as to whether you are utterly fearless or a complete fool."

Against regulations, his parents too had left the floater and were helping to lift the still-shuddering carcass of the dead Grizzly off their son. His mother grasped his shoulders and tried to pull him out from beneath the animal, and while the strength in a Sauron mother's grasp nearly matched the tenderness, she succeeded only in tearing the fabric of his clothing.

"He's still pinned," she told the Proctors calmly.

While his mother supported him, the two Proctors and his father pushed the Grizzly completely to one side, revealing Diettinger's legs. Both of the young Firstholder's feet were literally pinned to the ground by another of Sauron's charming variations on natural selection: blackgrass, a carnivorous colony plant which grew in a lattice structure an inch or so below the ground surface, with spines which shot up from beneath the sod to impale small prey - and did a very good job of ensnaring men's feet and ankles, as well.

"Had I tried to move," Diettinger explained as one of the Proctors knelt to cut his boots free of the blackgrass, "at best, I would have fallen. I calculated that only standing my ground would give me any chance to live."

"Good choice," the Proctor said, starting on his other boot. "Sauron Grizzlies are too heavy to set off blackgrass; and too strong to be fazed by it, anyway. Sometimes," he nodded toward Diettinger's kill, "the smartest ones learn to herd or lure their more stupid prey into patches of it for that very reason."

Diettinger saw the look in the Proctor's eye as the man sheathed his knife and stood. He had failed to fully research all his possible Wild Zone encounters, concentrating only on the most obviously dangerous. He had survived in spite of his oversight, and that was an important part of the ritual too, but most importantly, he had learned his lesson. He would never again confront an adversary without knowing the enemy's measure in full.

He stood up and looked at his father."I must admit that I did not expect the harpoon to fail."

"It didn't," his mother said. She had gone to inspect the harpoon's tip, jutting from the rear of the Grizzly's skull."The force of the Grizzly's impact was so great that it crushed the detonator." She gently tossed the warhead to the far side of the clearing and, drawing her sidearm, shot it. The impact detonated the charge, leaving a three-foot crater.

When she rejoined his father at his side, both smiled, embraced their son; their eyes shining with relief - and pride.

"Whatever the reason, Heir Diettinger," one of the Proctors told him at his Evaluation, "You stood your ground. Impressive, young man. Your inheritance is approved."

Diettinger did not attempt to suppress his smile of satisfaction. He had been sixteen years old for less than twelve hours.

Probably not the first time a lack of options has led to an erroneous impression, Diettinger reflected, smiling at the reminiscence. He was in a rest state which Saurons called "first stage sleep," similar to a human norm doze, but allowing far more perception of outside stimuli.

II

Three days after his return from the Wild "Zone, Diettinger was in his room at home, working. Scores of documents required his review and signature as part of his new legal status as Heir to his parents' estate, and he was dealing with them as thoroughly as he did with every other responsibility.

He heard his mother's footsteps on the stairs, heard her turn toward his door, and he put down the sampling stylus with which he had been drawing his own blood and tissue micro-samples for the latest stack of documents.

Wiping his hands with a disinfectant cloth, he stood and inclined his head as she entered.

"Good afternoon, Galen," she regarded the papers briefly, then returned her attention to her son's face, the even grey eyes mirroring her own in both hue and affection."We have official visitors."

"I heard, mother. Forgive my distraction for not coming down earlier - " Diettinger stopped. Something

about his mother's bearing put him on his guard."Is something wrong?"

She moved to sit in the reading chair by his window."Galen, as Firstholders, we enjoy privileges not normally afforded to the bulk of Sauron society, of which our material advantages are, perhaps, the least important."

"Of course."

"One such privilege which I have personally held most dear is our latitude in choosing a spouse."

Diettinger smiled. Life for humanity everywhere was dangerous and hard, and nowhere was that more true than on Sauron. The difference was that Saurons, despite a level of technology as high as any in the Empire which might serve to inure them to such danger, never allowed themselves to forget it. Mortality among the earliest colonists had created the Sauron paramilitary social system, which had brought with it several social mores peculiar to this fourth world of Landyn's Star.

Chief among these was conscriptive marriage. The legal marriage age for persons on Sauron was fifteen for males, thirteen for females. Even given Sauron's longer year - relative to the Imperial standard of Sparta's three hundred and sixty-two days - that meant Sauron citizens married very young. More to the point, they began their families a decade sooner on average than in any other planetary society of the Empire. Nor was it coincidence that active military duty for all Saurons, male and female, began at age eighteen. The timing was designed to allow an average of 2.5 children to each Sauron couple, and such was the importance afforded to the birth rate that males and females who had not found acceptable mates by the first year after reaching legal age were assigned them from the same Breedmaster data base that approved the more "romantic" matches arrived at by young couples or, more commonly, their families.

At sixteen, Diettinger's grace period was now over, but he was a First-holder, which meant that he was not subject to Breedmaster assignment so long as his parents had arranged for a suitable alternative. Knowing his mother as he did, he had no doubt whatsoever that she had.

Diettinger smiled, taking a seat on the corner of his bed, facing her. "No less than I, mother; especially regarding my responsibilities of late. I apologize if my concentration on my studies has caused you undue concern, but frankly I relied on you and father to handle the matter for me."

Julia Diettinger regarded her son with a bemused wonder; she had not failed to note the tone of gentle rebuke in his voice, even though she knew he was completely unconscious of it himself.

Julia knew there was no possibility that Galen's reliance on his parents stemmed from either lack of interest or sloth on his part. Galen simply had absolute faith in those of his subordinates whom he came to rely on for anything, as he had come to know that his parents would attend to details of his life for which he had no energy to spare. His opinion of his parents as subordinates in no way indicated any lack of respect for them, or regard, or love. In a culture of soldiers, her son was simply a born leader, and born leaders had no time to accommodate the luxuries of rituals attending the passage of authority from one generation to the next: they simply led.

"As in fact we have, Galen. Please prepare yourself for dinner and come downstairs as soon as you are finished, to greet our guests."

There was only so much subordination Julia Diettinger was prepared to embrace, even to a born leader, when that leader happened to be her son.

Diettinger had no cause to be displeased with his parent's prospective choices for his wife. All were Firstholders, all matched his own genetic codes perfectly and all, as he was fond of pointing out to his father, were more than attractive enough. Saurons as a people tended to conform to an overall Imperial

standard of beauty, but they themselves were rarely influenced by such superficialities. Saurons believed that a person must be judged, literally, by what was inside them; and what was *truly* inside were their genes.

In a week, Diettinger himself had winnowed the field down to four prospective candidates, all of impeccable breeding, intelligence and career prospects of their own; to say nothing of personal wealth. When he announced his choice to his mother, she smiled at her husband.

Diettinger frowned. "Did I say something funny?" he asked.

"Your mother and I predicted you would choose her." His father answered. "Heiress Diana Kirk will be a welcome addition to our family."

Diettinger smiled warily, "I am curious: Why did you assume I would choose Heiress Kirk?" he asked.

"She is the most attractive of four otherwise-equal candidates, Galen," his mother answered. "The eye wants something, too'."

Diettinger studied his parents for a moment; it had always been obvious to him that they loved one another very much. His own love for them was, at times, almost distracting in its intensity.

Almost.

But Diettinger also knew his parents to be ferociously rational people, and it was a wonder to him that after sixteen years, they still could misjudge him so completely.

He reached forward and picked up the dossier on Firstholder Heiress Diana Kirk; all relevant data was there. As Sauron society revolved around breeding, the periods of Diana's ovulation were a matter of public record, for review by anyone considering her as a prospective mate, as was all information regarding Firstholder Heir Galen Diettinger's own fertility.

He glanced at the dates, his mind running ahead, always to the next step, the next task, the long view...

Diana's family will be informed of the choice this afternoon. The union will be recorded by tomorrow, the family celebrations concluded by the weekend two days from now.. Diana and I will take up residence in the Heir's House the following week, consummating our union that night.

Exactly as he had calculated: The first night of their honeymoon would coincide with the start of Diana's peak fertility for this cycle. The next three days of sexual activity would virtually guarantee a new birth within the year. None of the other prospects possessed ovulation cycles so fortuitously timed. And he knew it was important that he give his parents grandchildren - soon.

Because war is coming, he thought. No one will admit it, not yet. Because it will be civil war against the Empire. Sauron's rulers will soon insist that we must be free, and the Empire will never allow that. We are too wealthy, too powerful. Our limited autonomy is a thorn in their side as it is. They do not dare let Sauron become a fully independent political entity. Even the Imperial Senate will not admit that civil war is inevitable, that cracks in the monolithic Empire of Man could possibly exist. But it is so obvious. At least to me.

He smiled at his parents. With luck, all the wedding activity would be concluded before he was called up for mobilization. But who could say what the Empire would do? Or the Sauron's own High Council, for that matter?

For now, he decided, let my parents enjoy their romantic notions.

Diettinger had no doubt that he would, in time, come to love Diana as his father loved his own mother. But like anything which was both inevitable and yet removed in time from his immediate concerns, he could spare no more attention for the wedding than it required. When it happened, it would happen; if it

did not, it would not. Either way, he would prepare for the situation fully, without an erg of wasted energy, and deal with it when necessary, and not a moment before.

He had too much to prepare for right now. For when the war did come, Galen Diettinger intended to be a Vessel Third Rank at the very least, and he would bend every effort to gaining his own command without delay. There were serious weaknesses in Sauron naval theory, he knew, and if not redressed, they would doom Sauron in any conflict with the Imperial war machine, every element of which revolved about a naval tradition that was centuries old, and which Sauron simply could not -

“Galen,” his mother sounded almost cross, but her laugh was beneath her tone. “I know that Miss Kirk is lovely, but surely you can spare a moment from your anticipatory daydreaming to tell us who you would like to invite as guests to the ceremony?”

He blinked, smiling at his parents. “Of course, mother,” he said. “You know how important it is to me.”

III

He was leaning over in the cramped fighter seat, his face pressed against the cool surface of the aircraft canopy. Turning from his blind side allowed him to look out the starboard window and see the Amberlea airport wheeling beneath the craft’s wing as the pilot lined up for her final approach.

He had cadged a ride in a twin-seat supra-orbital fighter, identical to those carried in the *Fomoria*’s launch bays, and now the whine of its lift thrusters drowned out the quiet thump of touchdown.

The ground crew had his hatch opened immediately; he thanked his driver as he threw one leg over the side, slid down the ladder and handed off his loaned helmet. He turned to face two Rankers of the airport security staff; one watched him while the other consulted a datapad. Empowered to arrest anyone, they were outside the normal chain of command. Neither saluted.

“Vessel First Rank Galen Diettinger,” the one without the datapad addressed him. “You are in Amberlea without travel authorization.”

“Correct.”

The one with the datapad looked up; the other one blinked. Both were startled by Diettinger’s obvious lack of concern. No Sauron simply walked away from Security Officers. Sauron society was ordered, rational and proper. Structure had made them what they were today, yet Diettinger seemed to be immune to the natural order of how things were done. Both Security Rankers matched stride with Diettinger as he walked past them.

“You do not have official clearance to leave the Capital,” the first one tried a new tack.

“Also correct.” Diettinger pushed open the doors to the terminal and looked around the room; two Rankers in Naval Security uniforms saw him, rose from their seats and began to approach.

The Security staff Ranker played his trump. “No officer of Vessel Command Rank is permitted internal travel without clearance.”

Diettinger nodded. “Right again.” The naval Rankers reached them as the Security Ranker, at last comfortable with the direction the conversation was going and with the presence of naval support, concluded: “I must therefore detain you until this matter is resolved.”

Diettinger smiled, but shook his head. “Ah, no. And you were doing so well.”

“Good morning, Fleet First Rank,” one of the naval officers greeted him, saluting. “Local time is 0300 hours.”

“I trust you had a good flight,” the other said, as she leaned forward to place a new insignia on his

collar.

“Under the circumstances.” Diettinger answered, adjusting his collar as they headed for the exit.”Report.”

Diettinger nodded occasionally as he was updated on various matters during the walk to his ground transport. He did not look back at the bewildered airport security Rankers as he left. But he did think about them.

Unable to adapt to the situation, unable to shift parameters to understand why he ignored them, they were trapped. Their witnessing of Diettinger's on-site elevation to a rank which authorized his actions negated their interest in him as suddenly as switching off a light. The memory of those two anonymous Security Rankers would haunt him for decades. Had they been told to march in a circle, he had no doubt they would have continued to do so until they died.

Thirteen

Two hours later Diettinger, showered and in a fresh uniform, stepped from the ground car onto the gravel path that led to the front door of his home. The driver took the car back to the front gate and waited. Diettinger walked up the front steps alone.

Firstholder homes, the residences of the original landowning families of the planet Sauron, had all started large; building materials were free, labor was cheap, and indigenous predators meant that staff and additional family members could not be left defenseless in outbuildings. Saurons had learned that safety lies in numbers, and they eventually legislated birth rates to guarantee it.

The flagstones were fifteen-foot wide slabs of maroon slate from Sauron's Vineland Heights; one of dozens of prized stones from the Homeworld's original boomtown days as a mining colony. Fifty of them led in eight-inch rises to the triangular portico flanked by eight columns of Sauron Stygian Marble. Every surface bore the work of master sculptors in frieze or bas-relief; Sauron art had begun in the Homeworld's quarries, where the colonists and their descendants had brought forth beauty from the unyielding stone and rich ores. Inlays of gold, platinum and precious glowsilver vied with master carvings in every sort of stone available.

Through the entryway, Diettinger could see into the atrium, classical in origin, timeless in design, functional in purpose. Long after water purifiers had made its *impluvium* unnecessary as a back-up water supply, the Diettinger family's atrium remained as a garden of water-flowers, lovingly - or at least, loyally - tended by successive matrons of the family, generation after generation.

Set into the arch of Sauron Blue Granite was a plaque, cut from the hull shielding of the first colony ship to reach Sauron, the ancient CoDominium Corporate Transport *Minnesota*. Diettinger's fingers traced the painstakingly even lettering in Anglic and Latin, carved into the shielding by a fine-cut mining laser in a rough, robust hand:

*This homestead
is the work and legacy
of Brennus Diettinger.
Sic Itur Ad Astra,*

The inscription always made him smile. *Thus one goes to the stars.* “And a fine way, it was,” Diettinger whispered to himself. Or perhaps to Brennus.

He stepped into the atrium and looked up through its open roof at the stars; they were fading in the approaching dawn, but he could still make out the constellations he'd learned in his youth. For years,

one or both of his parents would come out here and find him asleep beside his telescope, the glow of a datapad screen lighting his face.

To the right was the window of his old room. Through it he would climb and, once out here, he would study astronomy and military science, principles of Newton, Einstein and Alderson set cheek-by-jowl with those of Sun-Tzu, Clausewitz and Challinor.

In this spot, he had researched the campaigns of Hannibal, Napoleon and Li-Kuan; the battles of Thermopylae, Austerlitz and Second Washington, and the fleet actions of Salamis, Midway and Trans-Luna.

Set upon a stone slab, the day he left for Academy, was the preserved trophy of his Grizzly, the base bearing a plaque with the date of the kill. It was the only hunting trophy in the house. Beside it stood a new telescope; his father now dabbled in astronomy as a hobby. Diettinger leaned down and looked through the eyepiece, surprised that it was only a simple reflector apparatus without image enhancement equipment of any kind.

Perhaps that is not so surprising after all; it is probably all that is legally available, even to a Firstholder. Doubtless there were - or soon would be - a great many things in near-space which the State would prefer its more influential citizens did not see.

“Galen?”

The voice came from the rear of the atrium, at the main entrance to the house. He turned to see a tall figure in a warm robe, hooded against Sauron’s night chill. The figure approached, graceful hands drew the hood back; and Diettinger smiled, stepped forward and embraced his mother.

“We don’t sleep much these days,” another voice said from the door a moment later, and he was in the arms of both of his parents. Usually in firm control of his emotions, Diettinger found he was no less relieved for their safety than they were for his, which, he realized, was probably the nature of all homecomings for soldiers fighting on the losing side.

“I can’t stay for very long,” Diettinger told his parents from his seat at the breakfast table. His mother was everywhere at once, moving about the kitchen like a field surgeon, while his father was leisurely preparing some kind of egg dish and, incredibly, staying out of her way.

“Hardly surprising,” his father commented. He smiled over his shoulder at his son. “In fact, much like old times.” He covered the eggs and poured three cups of coffee. “In honor of your well-deserved promotion,” he said, setting down the cups. “Jamaica Blue Mountain,” he finished off-handedly.

“That’s reserved for the Imperial table at Sparta,” Galen blurted.

The elder Diettinger nodded. “So it is. But it has to get there somehow, and many ships fail to reach their destinations in wartime. Word has it that some privateer from Burgess System, a fellow named Hawksley, dropped off a tremendous quantity of it at Slater a month ago, cargo from a prize ship he turned over to Sauron in exchange for re-fit and resupply.”

“I didn’t know that you rated such luxuries, Firstholder or not.” Diettinger savored the coffee, sipping, wondering why ships were being wasted on commerce raiding duty when the Homeworld was threatened.

His mother laughed from the sink. “We don’t. We simply still have friends in the Capital. That was a gift from Breedmaster Kirk.” Her voice did not quite fade off at the name, but while she held her composure, her eyes glistened. She turned to smile at her son. “He asked that we give you his regards whenever we happened to see you, Galen.”

Unconsciously, Galen reached out to place his hand over his mother’s. “Thank you, mother. Please

return my good wishes to Breedmaster Kirk.”

The Diettinger family never spoke directly of Breedmaster Kirk’s daughter Diana. They had not done so in thirty-seven years, not since the day she had been killed in a lifter accident on her way to the Diettinger estate to be married to their son.

An alternate choice of wife was acceptable and, in fact, required by law. Except that one month later, Sauron had attacked St. Ekaterina, and the almost three decades long conflict now known as the Secession Wars had begun. Galen Diettinger had been commissioned directly from Academy to the bridge crew of the Sauron frigate *Aberlea*, and the tempo of his *career* had thereafter precluded any possibility of a normal life.

Instead, Breedmasters had collected genetic samples from him, all of which had gone to the breeding crèches, and that was as close as his mother would ever get to seeing grandchildren from her eldest son.

“Your sister is well,” Diettinger’s father said. “Another son, the last we heard.”

Diettinger nodded. His sister and brother-in-law were administrators of a Sauron colony established early in the war, the location of which was still secret. None of the family entertained any notions they would ever see either of them again, or any of their progeny.

The meal passed with talk of family matters large and small, the list of insignificant yet crucial events that accumulated between visits in every human family. All the things which now seemed to Diettinger to be at once both trivial and vital.

An hour after sunrise, by an act of will, he checked his chronometer. “Father, mother; I have to go, soon. May we take a short walk to the family gardens, together?”

Diettinger saw his father glance across the table to his wife. For as long as Diettinger had known her, his mother had always differentiated between the atrium’s garden of water flowers, and the family gardens, which she visited and tended alone; but now she only looked down for a moment, smiled and nodded at him. “Of course, Galen.”

The family gardens were several acres of flowers and shrubs, herbs and experimental plants, trees and grasses, all a mixture of indigenous and imported plant life, all forming a horseshoe surrounding the Diettinger family cemetery; the true “family garden,” which represented the devotion to the Homeworld of the line founded by Brennus Diettinger more than half a millennium ago. At the apex of the curve were the tall headstones of Brennus himself, his wife Laura and their five children. Successive generations spread out into the arms of the horseshoe in tempo with Sauron’s history and that of the Diettinger line. Many of the graves bore insignia of rank and emblems of service in the armed forces of the CoDominium, and later the Empire. The last row of six graves bore, in addition to the names, the inscription: *In Service to the Sauron State*.

“It is very likely that you are already under surveillance,” Diettinger began quietly. “If not, you soon will be. In either case, I want to speak to you both about something I have in mind.”

“Son,” his father said quietly, “I don’t think that would be wise. I also know that it is not necessary.”

Diettinger looked into his parents’ faces, seeing the same resolution that had always been there, but now it was joined with something else. He looked at his mother and tried to force the issue: “You should both know that - ”

“We know, Galen,” she said. “Or we know all we need to know. We’ve known it for some time. That’s why we’ve transferred all our duties here, to the estate. We want to spend these - decisive months - in our own home.”

Diettinger’s father put his hand on his son’s shoulder. “We’re Firstholders, Galen,” he said. “We’ve

spent a lifetime in service to our world.” He looked back at his wife.”The time we have left, we think we’d like to spend in service to each other.”

He wanted to shout at them to come with him, to join him aboard *Fomoria*; whatever happened, at least they would survive. And they would be together. But that would be worse than dangerous; it would be humiliating. He looked at his parents, and a thought came back to him from the night before, and from before that; on a hot June day in a Wild Zone almost thirty years ago: *Not an option...*

“I understand.” He embraced his father.”I’m glad to have seen you.”

His mother leaned forward and put her arms around him, then kissed his cheek below the eyepatch. “And we, you, beloved son.” Her eyes were moist again, with no attempt to restrain the tears. “Before you leave Sauron again, get that eye regenerated. You look like a pirate.”

Diettinger only looked at her for a long moment. “Goodbye, mother. Father.” All Saurons saluted their superiors, military, social, familial. Diettinger’s was perfect. He turned and walked back up the path to the back of the house, turning at the top of the steps to look back at the gardens, bathed in morning sunlight, his parents standing beside one another, two more black silhouettes amid the headstones. Soon he could no longer tell the difference. He passed through the house without looking left or right, went to his car and was driven away.

Fourteen

I

Half of the *Fomoria*’s bridge crew was planetside, busily engaged in debriefing, genetic registration, and even, on occasion, shore leave. Vessel Second Rank Althene Adame held the conn, her attention focused on the sensor readouts tied in to her station screens. *Fomoria* had been in dry dock for four days and Vessel First Rank Diettinger had still not returned from planetside to relieve her. Althene did not normally crave leave time; she had no one to visit planetside, and temporary command of the *Fomoria*, even in dry dock, was a prestigious berth. But she had found upon looking out the viewport in the captain’s cabin that the sight of the Homeworld drew her as never before.

At first, Althene had tried watching Sauron using the bridge’s huge tactical display, which projected the view from outside the *Fomoria* onto the interior walls, ceiling and floor of the bridge. The effect was to place the bridge crew suspended in space above the Homeworld, and the view was spectacular... but the tactical display was cluttered with combat imagery displays and tactical readouts which could not be disabled, and looking at the Homeworld, overlaid with hundreds of target reticles as *Fomoria*’s computers identified her vulnerabilities, made Althene uneasy. In the back of her mind, she considered that as more days passed with no word from the battle at Tanith, the less she liked the view provided by the Tactical Display.

The bridge Communications officer, a Fifth Ranker named Boyle, keyed an acknowledgment to an incoming signal. Boyle had been transferred to the *Fomoria* from the *Leviathan*, and while he had perhaps shone aboard that battleship, he was still laboring to meet standards set by the *Fomoria*’s First Rank - and mercilessly maintained by its Second Rank.

“Ship-to-ship from the *Damaris*, Second Rank,” Boyle blurted out in a near total breach of protocol.

Althene sighed.”Permission to speak was not granted, Communications. Though at dry dock, we remain at combat-ready as one of only three capital ships in-system. You did not identify the sender of the message, only its source, and you addressed me as ‘Second Rank’, though a *de facto* promotion is in effect for whoever holds the conn in the absence of the Vessel Commander.” Althene’s fingers flashed briefly across her station pad, and Boyle went on to report. Again.

Boyle took the reprimand in stride. Staying aboard *Fomoria* was worth however much self-improvement was required to earn the berth. “Acknowledged,” he said, paused a moment, then tried again: “First Rank.”

“Speak.”

“Incoming ship-to-ship communication, First Rank. Vessel First Rank Mara Emory, commanding the *Damaria*, wishes to speak with you.”

Althene’s mood brightened immediately; Mara was an old friend. *Ah*, she thought, smiling to herself; *girl talk!* “Put it through to the commander’s office.” With Boyle educated and the example thus set, Althene got up from the conn chair - her place taken instantly by the Weapons officer - and went into the office with the viewport. Sauron’s horizon filled the small, thick window, and she turned the small acceleration couch at the desk to improve her view of both the window and the comms screen.

“First Rank Adame of *Fomoria*, here.”

“Good to see you, Althene; how are you enjoying our enforced leave-on-station?”

“I’m more than a little bored with dry dock, but that’s SOP. And you?”

“Actually, I’ve just returned from planetside. I met the most fascinating gentleman at Fleet HQ. He operates as a commerce raider against Imperial shipping, turned over something like eighty tons of rare foodstuffs last month, including some apparently spectacular coffee. His name is Hawksley. He really is quite attractive.”

Althene was puzzled. “I don’t recall any Fleet Ops dedicated to commerce raiding.”

“There aren’t,” Emory acknowledged. “He isn’t from Sauron. He’s just a human norm, from Burgess System.” She shrugged and smiled as she put down her cup. “But he’s good for fun.”

Althene was struck by the demeanor of her friend; Mara’s eyes practically twinkled.

“I also had a meeting with your CO about his new assignment,” Emory continued.

Althene nodded. “It’s ambitious, to say the least.”

Emory shrugged, her eyes saying even more as she answered: “Perhaps ‘bold’ would be a better word.”

Althene felt the danger, heard the warning: *We are being monitored...* Surveillance at some level had been a fact of life on Sauron since the founding of the colony; incredibly dangerous indigenous life-forms had made it necessary to keep track of people who might require rescuing at any second. Part of the Sauron cultural psyche was now an awareness of such surveillance, but not an indifference to it. So, like all humans, Saurons had developed numerous ways to circumvent such scrutiny.

“Indeed. I’ve observed that such considered boldness has always been one of his character traits.”

“Speaking of boldness, I wonder if you’ve the courage to join me aboard *Damaris* for dinner this evening.” Emory’s smoothness of tone compensated for her awkward change of subject. “My service staff fancy themselves the adventurous types, and with this uncustomary access to Homeworld foodstuffs they’re merrily ruining traditional dishes left and right.”

“I would be delighted, First Rank,” Althene answered. “Regretfully, I have no information on when First Rank Diettinger will be returning to *Fomoria*, and I am in command until - ”

The door to the office opened, and Diettinger entered. Despite her surprise, Althene’s first thought was: *He’s still wearing the eyepatch.*

Wordlessly, Diettinger moved around the desk and into the comms-scanner’s field. “Good day, First

Rank Emory,” he said. “My Second Rank will be available to join you for dinner this evening. Please send a shuttle to collect her at - ” he turned to Althene - ”Eighteen hundred hours?” Althene nodded, silently, as Diettinger turned back to the screen. “Eighteen hundred hours, ship time. *Fomoria* out.”

Althene rose. “Welcome back, First Rank. I apologize that we were not prepared to receive your shuttle.”

Diettinger shook his head. “No apology necessary. Officially, Second Rank, I am not even here.” Diettinger sat at his desk and began calling up various screens on his console. Althene saw that all were astrogational referents, Alderson Jump Lines in and around Sparta System. More, different data flickered across the screen.

“May I be of assistance, First Rank?” Althene was an acknowledged expert in Jump Line navigation.

Diettinger’s remaining eye turned to look up at her from beneath his brow. He was silent for too long before answering with a slow, considered “No.” He returned his gaze to the screen. Thank you, Second Rank. Please resume the conn. I will relieve you in time for your appointment with First Rank Emory.”

Althene blinked at the console screen, puzzled. Diettinger turned to her. “Was there something else, Second Rank?”

“Ah . . . no, First Rank.” As she turned to go, Diettinger’s voice stopped her at the door.

“You and Vessel First Rank Emory are old friends, are you not?”

“Yes, First Rank. We were classmates in Naval Operations training.” Before Althene could stop herself, she blurted out: “First Rank Emory specialized in Tactical doctrine, whereas my specialization was Strategic; hers warranted her receipt of a vessel command.”

“As did her other formidable qualifications, I am sure.”

“Of course.”

“You say your specialty was Strategic, Second Rank; yet, that rather understates the case, wouldn’t you agree?”

“I beg your pardon, First Rank?”

“Your file shows that you are a renowned historian; your thesis was an examination of the Peloponnesian War which caused several of your instructors to go back and review their own works on the subject.”

“Yes, First Rank.”

Diettinger nodded, seemingly satisfied, Althene began to feel distinctly uncomfortable. *The vector this conversation is taking, combined with what was on Diettinger’s screen a moment ago, what is still on his screen, because he hasn’t changed it... What’s going on here?*

“Do you have a copy of this thesis, Second Rank?”

“No, First Rank. However, I believe it is still on file with Nav Ops training.”

“Provide me with a copy of it before you leave *Fomoria*. Dismissed.”

“Yes, First Rank.” Althene left, still too confused about what she had seen on the First Rank’s screen to be flattered by his desire to read her thesis. She couldn’t decide which of the First Rank’s interests made less sense - his interest in a fifteen-year old examination of a three thousand year-old war, or in those charts he was studying. Charts of Alderson Jump Lines into and out of Sauron System, not just of Sparta, as she might expect.

Althene was the sort of Sauron officer who, at the moment, could conceive of no possible reason for an interest in such information. Later, over dinner with First Rank Emory aboard the *Damaris*, an answer would present itself to her, and she would snap a wine glass stem before collecting herself and dismissing the thought as a patent absurdity.

II

Sauron could boast of many contributions to the advancement of human culture; cuisine was not one of them. The dinner enjoyed by Diettinger's Second Rank, Althene, and her host, Vessel First Rank Mara Emory of the *Damaris*, would have been almost inedible had it been served to human norms. Generations of privation and hardship during the taming of the Sauron Homeworld had alone nearly killed the Sauron palate; genetic engineering had done the rest.

By necessity as well as design, Saurons could eat just about anything that had at least a nodding acquaintance with protein. There was even a rumor - wholly untrue - that Cyborgs could survive by eating rocks.

But taste is mostly a matter of smell, and while a Race of Soldiers might reasonably be expected to do without the niceties of 'salty, sour, bitter and sweet', they could not function without a highly developed olfactory capability. So while Saurons could eat rotten meat if necessary, they were able to do so more as a result of training than invulnerability to such a meal's inimical bouquet.

As a result, Sauron "delicacies" were defined more by texture, psychology and appearance than by taste; the visual esthetics in serving Sauron cuisine were of great importance. Actual food from Sauron - as opposed to the nutrient rations that were standard fare throughout the Sauron Sphere - was prized far more as a physical link to that Homeworld than for any qualities of flavor. Truth to tell, very little of Sauron's flora or fauna possessed any distinction in the matter of taste, and most of it was very well-suited to making a meal of any Sauron that might try to eat it anyway. Nevertheless, massive quantities of spices, chemical flavor and scent enhancers went into a Sauron chef's attempts to evoke some response - *any* response - from the diner's palate. Saurons had long since given up inviting any of their Secessionist allies to state dinners featuring their own food.

Althene and Mara waited as the steward took away the last of the service, brought both women coffee, then disappeared to his station. By virtue of its aroma, coffee was one of the few foods which Saurons enjoyed as much as human norms. The dinner conversation had begun with reminiscences of experiences shared, moved on to experiences related, and now flowed without interruption to experiences planned.

"Have you met First Rank Dannevar, of the *Keegan*?" Emory asked.

"Not yet. First Rank Diettinger was aboard *Keegan* earlier this week for a conference with him. He remarked, in the briefing later, that Dannevar seemed exceptionally qualified."

"Your tone indicates there is something odd about that assessment."

Althene paused to sip her coffee. "Only the word 'exceptionally'. Diettinger is not normally given to such effusiveness."

"He has mentioned First Rank Lucan of the *Wallenstein* glowingly enough in his report of the action at Tanith."

Althene nodded. "Indeed; but under First Rank Lucan, the *Wallenstein* has never suffered a single casualty in combat. Ever. The reputations of 'The Phantom' and his ship are thus something like a winning streak. I sometimes believe Lucan is so closely watched because of some secret wagering pool among the High Command." She was startled to see her friend pale.

“I’m sure you don’t seriously believe our High Command regards Sauron lives so lightly,” Emory said evenly.

“No. Of course not. I simply meant that there is probably a team of statistical analysts who find First Rank Lucan’s performance to date problematic, at the least, when assessing casualty probabilities.”

Emory nodded, her look saying: *An acceptable recovery, old friend.. .acceptable, and wise...* She added: “How would you compare First Rank Lucan’s combat style to that of First Rank Diettinger?”

Althene frowned. “I have never served with Lucan; but from my studies of his actions, I have observed that he leaves nothing to chance. That might sound like hyperbole, but it is not. I believe Lucan has the ability to absorb tremendous amounts of detail without it affecting his decision making capability, or without being overwhelmed by it. As a result, he is able to place the *Wallenstein* in the optimal position for any given action, much like a Chess Grand Master can perceive the ultimate outcome of a match several moves ahead of the resolution.” She shrugged. “And, obviously Lucan has also been tremendously lucky.”

Emory smiled. “You believe in luck?”

“You asked me to compare Lucan and Diettinger. ‘Luck’ is at the heart of any such comparison. But while Lucan’s command philosophy is aimed at prevailing by anticipating all possible events and their consequences - advantageous or otherwise - Diettinger’s method makes no attempt to predict or compensate for such variables; rather, he actually relies on them occurring, then exploits them to his own advantage. Anyone who has ever served with or under Galen Diettinger comes to believe in fortune, Mara. Diettinger is a master at what I call ‘luck management.’ Thrown into a series of chaotic events, he is able to bend most, if not all of those events, to his purpose as they arise. It’s like that song we sang as children:

*‘The universe exists in chaos
Man is the measure of the universe
The ultimate chaos of man’s existence
is the human endeavor called war
By mastering war, we master the universe.’*

Diettinger has done just that; he has mastered chaos.”

“Then you consider him superior to Lucan as a commander?”

“Without doubt. Lucan’s method does not allow for variables, while Diettinger’s thrives on them, as well as on errors, his own or those of his opponent’s. Ultimately, Lucan must one day find himself in a position for which he has not prepared.” Althene took another sip.”Or, to put it another way, he will run out of luck.”

Emory cocked her head, half smiling. “I suppose it is only fair you should be so effusive in praising your commander; he has certainly shown no restraint in his assessment of your performance aboard *Fomoria*”

“I am honored.”

“Indeed, he has made a formal request that you be retained as his Second Rank for the upcoming invasion of Sparta.”

Althene almost lost her cup. “Invasion of Sparta?” Her features twisted into a snarl of disbelief, contempt, all about to explode into a diatribe against the absurdity of such a plan, when Emory’s unflappable gaze caught her, held her, calmed her.

Emory continued. “Yes. It’s an open secret that Vessel - now Fleet - First Rank Diettinger will

command the operation. After the First Fleet has crushed the Imperials at Tanith, the only logical course is to press the advantage we will surely gain and end this war once and for all. One of the advantages, to the limitations on space travel imposed by the Alderson drive, is that no spy could send word of such an invasion without using a ship to do so; and, of course, no ship can leave Sauron System without clearance.”

Emory rose, pushing off towards her window one handed, while holding her cup. Beside the window, in the same position where Diettinger kept an antique embroidered sampler, Emory had a picture of her husband and their two children, a boy and girl. A band of black velvet ran diagonally across the frame’s upper corner, reminding Althene that all three had been killed during the Imperial retaking of Lavaca.

If Mara can find some comfort with this Hawksley, Althene reflected, then I can wish her well in doing so. I can even envy her.

“That will allow us a tremendous advantage in surprise when the operation commences.” She turned back to Althene, sad eyes saying more than her words told.

“Yes,” Althene agreed, realizing the truth. *We are being monitored, even here. The steward? Probably, but not necessarily. A transmitter or listening device, hidden anywhere in the room or on the wall outside. Maybe even in the frame of that picture...* So the familiar dance began once more, as each strove to make her meaning clear to the other indirectly, in terms that would leave neither open to prosecution.

“Yes,” she repeated. “Surprise will be crucial. But surely the enemy will guess our intentions, don’t you think? They are not fools.”

“No. I should imagine, therefore, that speed and unpredictability will be of the essence. Diettinger is no doubt planning an operation which can be implemented immediately, and modified at a moment’s notice.” She turned to look at Althene. “He is like that, is he not?”

Althene felt a chill. Was Mara drawing her into a trap? “First Rank Diettinger’s capacity for innovation is well-known. It is commonly regarded as his greatest asset.”

“Dannevar and I have been told that, as commanders, we can both benefit from exposure to that quality. It has been suggested that we therefore keep *Damaris* and *Keegan* close-by *Fomoria* in the coming campaign.”

The ensuing silence deepened as Althene considered the implicit threat: *Galen is under suspicion. Why is it that when he is in danger, he becomes Galen to me, while in the heat of combat, he remains First Rank, or at best, Diettinger? Well there is the obvious fact that I am in love with him, of course.*

Emory’s remarks indicated that she and Dannevar had been instructed to watch *Fomoria*, but for what? *Is she warning me indirectly that she would take action, if necessary and instructed to do so? Or that Damaris would support Fomoria in any unorthodox decisions her commander made in the battle to come? Where, then, did that put Dannevar and the Keegan?*

This is why we make such dreadful spies, Althene admitted. It’s the same reason why our food seems so bad to human norms. We can learn to mislead, even deceive, in battle, and at that only with much practice. But true subtlety eludes us. She thought about Diettinger - Galen. *Well. Most of us, anyway.* She decided to gamble on Mara Emory, her oldest friend.

“I know that my First Rank will value such a commitment. Of course, as commander of this operation, he will make all decisions as to the disposition of the forces under his command, and as he sees fit.”

Emory nodded. “Naturally. I believe the - suggestion - was meant to reinforce Dannevar’s intent, like my own, to simply - emulate - your First Rank’s methods to ensure the operation’s success.”

Althene sent a look of understanding. As the steward returned to refill their cups, she added: "Do you know, he has never lost a naval engagement of which he was in command?"

"Yes." Emory kept the irony from her voice, but her eyes said that there was a first time for everything.

Fifteen

Alone in his office, Diettinger reviewed the files he had been working on for the better part of a week. Detailed operational and strategic plans for the invasion of the Imperial capital of Sparta. Every reserve of Sauron troops and materiel were committed, every facet of Sauron's commerce was harnessed to the operation. The remainder of the Fleet, which High Command assumed was even now subjugating Tanith, was estimated and accounted for. Every one of the Allies who had joined in Sauron's Declaration of Secession; several Outworld coalitions; even a Claimant fleet of respectable size had been secured, from a world whose governor had been promised that his dubious Imperial bloodline would assure him the title of Emperor in the puppet regime which Sauron would install after victory.

The plan was finished, ready for his briefing to the High Command in the morning. And Diettinger knew it would all be for nothing if the Imperials at Tanith had fought Morgenthau the way they had fought against him.

He reached for his drink, missed and struck the container, spilling some, still clumsy from the loss of stereoscopic vision. The first treatment for regeneration of his eye was scheduled for tomorrow afternoon, immediately upon conclusion of his briefing, and he was frankly eager to have the whole thing over with. Movement in the orbit of Sauron caught his eye, and he turned to look out the viewport.

Besides his own heavy cruiser *Fomoria*, the only other vessels currently in orbit at the Homeworld were Emory's *Damaris* and the *Keegan* under Dannevar, both full battleships. Despite the similarity in their designs, Diettinger nevertheless fancied it was the *Keegan* which he now saw, moving across its arc over the northern continents, gleaming with reflected light which was itself reflected from the Homeworld below.

All is at peace, Diettinger thought. Tomorrow I will deliver the plans that will send us all - Dannevar, Emory, myself and whoever is left - to our deaths. Simply because the High Command will not listen...

There was a spark in the sky outside.

Diettinger frowned; a brief flare in the darkness, then another, three in all. Instinctively, his hand slapped the communications link on his desk.

"Communications here, First Rank."

"Traffic Control."

Boyle had learned; Diettinger's commo panel began sounding instantly.

"-ders or you will be fired on. This is Sauron Traffic Control -"

Another sweep of Diettinger's hand cut the signal. With a speed possible only for a Sauron, he was on the bridge and securing the straps of his acceleration couch. "Sensor status."

"Phase array bearing on signals, First Rank." The hands of the sensor station duty officer were a blur across his board. In response, *Fomoria's* main detection array sought out the vessels Diettinger had seen appear at one of Sauron System's six Alderson Points.

"Navigation."

“First Rank.”

“Set course for the Dropshot Alderson Point and hold. Stand by to initiate five-G thrust.”

“Five-G thrust, affirm.” Navigation sounded an alarm that notified *Fomoria*’s crew of imminent high-thrust maneuvers.

“Engineering.”

“First Rank.”

“Stand by to provide five-G thrust on signal from Navigation.”

“Five-G’s affirm. Standing by.”

“Communications.”

“F...First Rank.” Boyle actually stuttered; Diettinger changed completely when the *Fomoria* went into battle; flesh and blood metamorphosed into something metallic. Boyle sometimes wondered if the First Rank wasn’t part Cyborg.

“Restore Traffic Control signal.”

Traffic Control had ceased to attempt contact with the incoming vessels; their time, literally, had run out. The *Fomoria*’s bridge crew now listened as the Homeworld’s defense systems began vectoring small craft and missile boats to intercept the intruders.

Diettinger kept looking down, over Communications Rank Boyle’s shoulder; the signal panel still showed no sign that the Sauron Naval Command wanted to talk to him. *Are they Sauron ships, then?* he wondered. “Full tactical.”

The walls of *Fomoria*’s bridge, her floor and ceiling all but disappeared, replaced by the panorama of Sauron’s System spread out around them. The Homeworld loomed above, while directly ahead, several bright flashes of blue light converged on Alderson Point Three.

Diettinger tapped his controls; targeting reticules swept across the holographic images, stopped over the glowing pinpoint of slowly moving light, then began to travel with them.

Diettinger trapped the area around the reticules and enlarged the image. Six Dragon-class system defense boats - little more than maneuvering engines, Langston Fields and missile racks - were closing at high-G acceleration to engage three identical class starships of moderate size.

And all three starships were Imperial.

“First Rank.” Boyle’s eyes flickered to the signal panel.

“Speak.”

“Signal from NavCom.”

“Open. *Fomoria* here, Diettinger commanding.”

“Your vessel, the *Keegan*, the *Damaris*, and System Defense Force 980 now comprise Task Force *Fomoria*, Proceed immediately to Alderson Point Three. Intercept three Imperial vessels at that position. Engage and destroy.”

No confirmation of orders was expected or required; the Communications Rankers and their planetside Naval Command counterparts confirmed transmission and receipt almost automatically. Which freed Diettinger that many precious fractions of a second sooner:

“Signal *Keegan* and *Damaris*. Patch in the *Dragon* squadron leader.”

All of the commanders responded visually. The System Defense Squadron Leader was facing away from the screen, coordinating the initial attacks on the Imperial vessels. The first minutes after enemy ships emerged from an Alderson Point were crucial, as system defense forces attempted to inflict as much damage as possible on the intruders before their crews had fully recovered from the disorienting effects of Jump Lag. The best advantage lay in being close enough to an emergent vessel to attack before its systems and crews had recovered, but that was the height of good fortune, and such was not the case today. The intruders were far beyond weapon range.

They would not be for long.

Diettinger was surprised at first to see his own Second Rank on the bridge of the *Damaris*, then remembered she was visiting First Rank Emory for dinner. That was bad for the *Fomoria*; Second Rank was his most able tactical commander.

“*Keegan*; take up position three thousand kilometers port of *Fomoria* to bracket the intruders. *Damaris*; move to position between the intruders and the Jump Point. Commit all of *Damaris*’ Jump Point mines along the Alderson Point arc.”

Emory cocked an eyebrow. “Confirm signal, please, *Fomoria*; all of *Damaris*’ mines?”

“Confirmed. Under no circumstances are any of the intruders to be allowed to escape back through the Jump Point. All vessels of this task force are expendable for this consideration. *Fomoria* out.”

Diettinger had seen the look in his Second Rank’s eyes at his last order. There was nothing to be done. Reconnaissance reports from the intercepting *Dragons* told him that the three Imperial intruders matched the description of similar vessels recorded by sensors during *Fomoria* and *Damaris*’ escape from Tanith System. The fresh damage they bore on entry into Sauron space, and the known lack of Sauron naval assets anywhere else, meant they could only have come directly from the battle in the Tanith System. That meant the Imperials controlled the Tanith Jump Point, and that meant they had won. Should even one of these three ships escape to relate the paucity of Sauron defenses, the entire Imperial Fleet at Tanith would descend upon the Sauron System, as fast as they could get through the Alderson Points between there and Sauron.

But if they were all destroyed here, on this side of the Alderson Point, the Imperials would have to assume that Sauron’s defenses were too strong to risk attacking them without reinforcement. Diettinger was trying to buy time for the Homeworld, at any price.

“Vessel assessment.” It was *Fomoria*’s Weapons Ranker.

“Speak.”

“Three cruisers, Imperial *Canopus* class. All have suffered battle damage. Estimate offensive capabilities reduced thirty percent overall.”

But heavily shielded, Diettinger knew. *Canopus* class ships were pre-Secession War, designed for commerce raiding. Multiple redundancies in their Langston Field capacitors allowed them to suffer tremendous punishment by escort vessels and still engage the cargo ships.

Any doubt he might have had regarding the mission of these Imperial ships was removed. *They can only be a scouting force*. Even as he formed the thought, one of the reticules on the display flickered, drawing attention to itself, and began to move.

“Enemy vessel *Canopus* Two initiating maneuvers, First Rank.”

Two of the *Dragon* system defense boats detached themselves from their attacks and altered position. Both loosed volleys of torpedoes against the Imperial designated “*Canopus* Two,” while continuing to maneuver themselves between the Imperial and the Jump Point. Dozens of white flares danced over the

surface of *Canopus Two*'s Langston Field, each such flare a twenty-megaton infusion of destructive power designed to drive the target's Field up through the spectrum into Violet and out of existence. *Canopus Two*'s Langston Field rose no further than a dreary terra cotta that looked almost bored.

Diettinger watched the *Damaris*, the only ship of his *ad hoc* task force capable of engaging the moving Imperial before it re-entered the Jump Point.

Maybe.

Diettinger checked the identification codes on the Tactical Display. "Communications."

"First Rank."

"Wide band link to Task Force."

Boyle was so surprised he nearly hit the wrong panel; broadband was unsecured communications, and so was never, *ever* used in action against an enemy, who could always be presumed to be listening for just such a mistake.

But he had learned, at long last, that *Fomoria* and her First Rank had their own rules, so Communications Fifth Rank Boyle followed the order without hesitation.

And so saved the day.

"*Keegan* and *Dragons* Three through Six," Diettinger slowed his speech in the Battle Tongue to just faster than a human norm ear could follow; the Imperials would have to run it through their computers for syntax as well as translation. "Concentrate fire with *Fomoria* on *Canopus One*. *Damaris*, initiate ram course."

Damaris' course changed with a lurch, and the great battleship bore down on *Canopus Two* as it crawled toward the Jump Point. The impact would cripple the *Damaris* for good, even if she survived. Of the *Canopus*, there would not be enough left to register on sensors.

Canopus One hung motionless for another three minutes, then began to move.

"*Canopus One* withdrawing; *Canopus Three* advancing to shadow."

'Shadowing' would place *Canopus Three* between the Saurons and *Canopus One*, where Three's fresh, black Langston Field could take the brunt of the attack Diettinger had ordered while *Canopus One* could cool its own Field. Once *Canopus One*'s Field was black once more, the two ships would trade places again, constantly leap-frogging back toward the Jump Point and escape. Diettinger's numerical superiority would render such a tactic ineffective, given time to maneuver into an encirclement of the two ships, but time was something he did not have.

Diettinger watched the *Damaris* closing on *Canopus Two*, all her weapons pouring destruction into the retreating Imperial's Field. A digital counter was suspended in midair beside the *Damaris* on the *Fomoria*'s Tactical display; seconds to impact. The display was *green*, indicating a collision could still be easily averted. As the minutes flowed past, the digits would warm to a crimson inevitability, and *Damaris* would very likely die.

Diettinger had no desire to sacrifice *Damaris* or her crew, or his own Second Rank; but he also had few options.

Canopus One had almost disappeared behind Three, both ships still moving backward as their Navigation Rankers - for some unknown reason, the Imperials called them 'Sailing Masters' - searched for the elusive thread of spatial displacement that revealed the Alderson Point through which they had come.

The readout beside *Damaris* was now yellow.

Diettinger checked to see that the broadband line was still open. "Navigation."

"First Rank."

"Intercept and ram *Canopus* Three. Communications, signal *Keegan* to ram *Canopus* One; *Dragons*, stand by to destroy any surviving fragments of Imperial vessels."

"Affirm, *Fomoria*" The acknowledgments came back and the thrusters of the *Fomoria* and *Keegan* began firing.

On the screen before him, Diettinger saw that the herald of *Damaris*' demise had gone to a warm amber, when the orange bubble of *Canopus* Two abruptly surged away from the oncoming Sauron battleship and hopelessly out of position to flee through the Jump Point.

Diettinger saw that his gamble was beginning to pay off. Imperials were just as willing to sacrifice themselves in battle as Saurons - often, he knew, even more so - but now it was important that at least one of these ships survive to escape Sauron System and carry back the news of what it had seen. It was just as important for the Saurons to prevent that, and while the Saurons could afford to sacrifice vessels to their purpose, the Imperials, by definition, could not.

Nor were any of the *Canopus* class ships as yet in position to make such a sacrifice as would ensure the escape of any of the others.

That was not the case for the Saurons, however, and the *Damaris* began the laborious process of changing vectors to come about and, once again, attempt to ram *Canopus* Two.

Canopus One and Three, meanwhile, found themselves literally between a rock - the *Fomoria* - and a hard place - the much larger *Keegan*. 'Shadowing' was not an easy operation at the best of times, and the incoming Saurons were pressing the two ships in upon one another, reducing their maneuvering room. Now *Fomoria* and *Keegan* had their own digital countdowns-to-impact with the Imperials.

Diettinger suspected he was the only Sauron who knew how dangerous the game he was playing truly was. He had fully intended that the Imperials should hear and decipher his commands to the Task Force, as he had no doubts they were willing to sacrifice themselves to get one ship back through the Jump Point. But the ship with the best chance to do so had lost that opportunity; now their own fatalism would begin to work against them.

Forced to choose between being rammed or relinquishing their mutual defense, the Imperial Captains held fast, determined that at least one of them should reach the Jump Point and bring word back to the Empire that the despised Sauron Homeworld was defenseless.

Diettinger decided it was time to close the trap on these two. "Communications."

"First Rank."

"Secure lines."

"Lasers up."

"All vessels, cease acceleration. Maintain intercept headings but abort rams. *Dragons*, close to encirclement formation."

The *Dragons* further contained the ever-tightening circles of the Imperial cruisers, and at a mere hundred kilometers from the Jump Point and safety, *Canopus*' One and Three collided. *Canopus* Three's Field went down, victim of an internal power failure, and a salvo of torpedoes from the *Dragons* obliterated the vessel. *Keegan* and *Fomoria* brought all their guns to bear on *Canopus* One,

now apparently unable even to maneuver. The designers of the triple-Fielded *Canopus* class ships had never envisioned the magnitude of firepower now flowing into *Canopus One's* Langston Field. Even so, burn-throughs and their resultant destruction took another hour. The Task Force then regrouped, hunted down *Canopus Two*, offering her crew surrender terms. Her Captain agreed, then, as the prize crew was being shuttled over, tried to ram *Keegan* - no feint, this. *Canopus Two* was sent to join her sisters.

Sixteen

Three days after the battle, a meeting of the High Command received a briefing on the near-debacle by Fleet First Rank Diettinger and Vessel First Ranks Emory and Dannevar. Despite repeated urgings on Diettinger's part, the High Command seemed convinced the three Imperial vessels had been no more than raiders. At best, they were surveillance ships, apprehended before they could attempt to hide in Sauron System's vast asteroid belt.

Emory was cautiously supportive of Diettinger's assessment: "May I suggest to the High Command," the *Damaris'* commander adopted as diplomatic a tone as she knew how, "that several vessels operating in nearby sectors be recalled for Home System defense - on a temporary basis, of course - in the event the Imperials are planning similar raids." Her eyes flickered briefly to lock with Diettinger's.

The High Command considered the proposal, asking for a concurring opinion from Emory's fellow commanders. Diettinger agreed readily; anything to get more ships into the Home System. But Dannevar was noncommittal, and without unanimity on the part of the commanders involved, Diettinger knew that the High Command's over-confidence would doom the idea.

"If I might add, First Citizen," Diettinger put in, "All the ships mentioned by Vessel First Rank Emory are elements of the special operations fleet I have been instructed to compile. If they are brought into Sauron System now, they can be refitted and rearmed early, clearing the docks for those First Fleet - " he caught himself before saying "survivors" - "elements which will soon return from Tanith. The readying of the Sparta invasion fleet may thus be completed ahead of schedule, allowing the timetable for the operation itself to be moved up. And the sooner we can press our - advantage - the greater our prospects for success."

The thought of the Spartan Invasion being moved up did the trick; Diettinger was authorized to recall two heavy cruisers and a dozen more smaller, though still potent, vessels from surrounding areas. The courier vessels necessary to deliver those ships new orders disappeared into Sauron's various Jump Points that very afternoon.

At least, Diettinger thought with some relief, *we did not have to deal with the Cyborgs*. He didn't think the Cyborgs would have been fooled for a moment by anything he'd said. For a moment, he wondered why the three Cyborgs on the High Command council had been absent from this morning's meeting. However, Cyborgs were not known for their expertise or interest in Naval operations, simply because it was one of the few fields in which they did not excel. In the near future, starships crewed by full complements of Cyborgs would be capable of maneuvers so far beyond human norm capabilities as to sweep all opposition from space - but, as of yet, there were not enough of the Super Soldiers to risk losing large numbers of them to a lucky missile shot or Field burn-through.

The Cyborgs were content to be masters of the surface of those worlds between which starships moved, and believed that the rest would come soon enough.

So Diettinger was eventually able to convince himself that the briefing, dominated as it was by review of the naval engagement of the day before, probably would not have been of any great concern to the

Cyborg members of the High Command anyway.

But the policy effect it had would have been of interest, his mind niggled at him. And just why hadn't the Cyborgs been there, anyway?

The Super Soldier, a cultural icon, a dream in the mind of Sauron society, had at last come to life in the Cyborgs. Since the first battle where they had been committed, wherein a single regiment of Cyborgs had defeated three Imperial infantry divisions, it was inevitable that the same culture would develop a reverence for them bordering upon awe.

But for Diettinger, the Cyborgs' quiet acceptance of such reverence had always been more ominous than the reverence itself. Originally proposed to be merely the ultra elite of an elite warrior society, the Cyborgs had now found their way onto Sauron's ruling council. From the cutting edge of the sword that was the Sauron war machine the Cyborgs had, all too quickly, become blade and hilt as well. For all their relative lack of numbers, the Cyborgs nevertheless seemed to be everywhere now, so for Diettinger at least, they were starting to make him more nervous when they weren't around.

II

Cyborg Rank Koln moved through the same corridors as had Diettinger only days before. Where Diettinger had been routinely delayed at security checkpoints, Koln passed with an ease that was equally taken for granted. For Koln was a Cyborg, and though he was commander of the Pathfinder Cyborg unit attached to Diettinger's own *Fomoria*, his real authority came from his genetically-engineered nature. Here on the Homeworld, the influence of a Cyborg - *any* Cyborg - was at its height, representing as they did the genetic imperative of the Sauron people.

Koln entered the inner ring of offices of the Capitol, passing through a dozen more automated - and so, incorruptible - checkpoints, to pass finally through an unmarked door and join the three Cyborg members of the High Command. They sat at a large round table, watching the High Command meeting on a wall screen connected to viewers hidden within the council chamber. Koln took the empty seat and watched in silence with the rest until the meeting concluded.

The three Cyborgs of the High Command turned to Koln. To anyone but another Cyborg, it would have seemed three mirrors turned toward the object they reflected.

Ulm, the Cyborg to Koln's left, spoke first: "Diettinger's influence with the Sauron norms of the High Command increases daily. His analyses are insightful, his proposals inspired."

Saentz, seated across from Koln, added: "I did not believe that his naval reputation was free of embellishment by the Propaganda board. In this I was in error. My background research on Diettinger confirms that indeed, no naval force under his actual command has ever been defeated."

The third Cyborg, Manche: "He would appear to be more than a Sauron norm, yet less than a Cyborg."

Koln nodded. "I have observed him carefully since my arrival aboard the *Fomoria*, His performance as commander of that vessel has left nothing to be desired. But I disagree with your assessment, Saentz. Although Diettinger is certainly more than a Sauron norm, he is not, strictly speaking, less than a Cyborg."

"By definition," Ulm said, "any being not a Cyborg is less than a Cyborg,"

Koln attempted to explain: "Diettinger is different. He thinks differently, at times much like a human norm, but with the military mindset that is uniquely Sauron. He is unpredictable, adaptable, utterly ruthless."

"Yet he lost an eye to a human norm; a captive one, at that."

Koln gave a barely perceptible sigh and admitted regretfully: "He is also chivalrous."

Manche blinked once - a sign of astonishment in a creature that did not need to blink more than once a minute. "Jest."

"Fact. Diettinger had the human norm at his complete mercy. Had the captive been even remotely capable of escape, the incident could not have occurred." He cocked an eyebrow at Manche. "The human's guards were Cyborgs in battle armor."

Ethics between Cyborgs precluded the possibility that Koln would lie to him, yet Manche could not stop himself, "Impossible."

Ulm concurred. "I should have thought so, too. This human norm must have been an exceptionally able specimen."

Koln nodded, reflectively. "Or must have appeared exceptionally unexceptional. Doubtless he has found himself promoted to command of an Imperial battlegroup."

"He lives?" Ulm sounded nearly incredulous.

"Diettinger released him. The First Rank had promised him he would let him live, then promised him he would get the *borloi* off Tanith; he kept his first promise to show he would keep his second."

Ulm, Saentz and Manche looked at one another. Saentz voiced their unanimous opinion. "There is no logical explanation for this behavior, save that Diettinger is in league with the Empire."

Koln shook his head. "You fail to understand; I repeat: Diettinger is *different*. He may be unique in Sauron history. He is certainly so in current Sauron society."

"Sauron society is military in character," Ulm said. "Any member of such a society sufficiently different to qualify as 'unique' cannot, by definition, be integrated into the activities of such a society. That member is therefore of no value."

"Except as a supreme commander." Koln concluded.

Cyborgs rarely showed anger, never rage. Self-discipline was their watchword, and re-focusing the energy and adrenaline wasted in such displays allowed both to be used to greater effect during battle. But Ulm almost shot up out of his chair before sitting back with a quiet: "Unacceptable. Mastery of Sauron society is the Cyborgs' destiny. Introducing a Sauron norm Dictator at our present stage of influence will disrupt our timetable."

"Worse, should he prove sufficiently capable, Sauron could defeat the Empire while led by a Sauron norm," Saentz added. "Such a victory must be achieved with Cyborg leadership to allow the Sauron norm population to appreciate the logic of permanent Cyborg rule."

Assuming such a victory occurs, Koln found himself thinking, then: *Curious; I never doubted that outcome before. Have I been observing Diettinger so long that I have become infected by his defeatism?* For Koln knew that Diettinger believed Sauron would lose, was already losing, the war. Koln's agents, Sauron norms awed by Cyborg superiority into abject obedience, had kept the First Rank under surveillance since the first day of Diettinger's presence on the Homeworld. *What does he see that I do not?*

"Then you oppose Diettinger's appointment as Fleet First Rank for the invasion of Sparta?" Manche asked.

"I do," Ulm answered.

Saentz concurred, adding: "Why not Fleet First Rank Morgenthau, commander of the flag battleship

Sauron? His entire crèche was specifically educated for fleet actions.”

“Morgenthau’s tenure as Fleet First Rank has been twice extended. His growing sense of personal indispensability is beginning to distance him from supporting our goals,” Manche reminded them. “Hence his being relieved of command upon his return from Tanith, as already stated. Added to which, his command style is correct, but not dynamic.”

“Lucan, then, commanding the *Wallenstein*” Ulm suggested. “A near-perfect operational record in his successful prosecution of twenty-eight fleet engagements and forty-three raid operations without a single casualty among his crew.”

“Irrelevant. Casualties are inevitable, eventually. His performance is the result of superior skill in planning, not necessarily in execution,” Koln reminded them.

“Speak plainly, Koln,” Ulm said; “Has your extended observation of Diettinger aboard the *Fomoria* inclined you to suggest his appointment as a supreme commander over all forces, beyond that of Fleet First Rank?”

Koln decided to commit his reserve. “Such an appointment to the office of supreme commander will not occur.”

Manche watched him carefully. “Why?”

“The raid by the three Imperial *Canopus* class ships could only have been a scouting mission. Whether it came from Tanith or elsewhere is irrelevant. If Tanith, it means the Imperials are desperate to see what reserves we have remaining available to commit there. If elsewhere, it means they plan a stronger operation here in Sauron System. In either case, the destruction of these vessels means that more will certainly follow. Human norm patterns indicate they will next send a significantly larger force, although not necessarily one that is decisively so.”

“Your point?”

“Fully support Diettinger as Fleet First Rank. The next Imperial sortie will occur while he is assembling the Sparta invasion fleet. As Fleet First Rank, he will be in command of all in-system assets, which he will be forced to commit to destroy the Imperial intruders; *all* the Imperial intruders, since none can be allowed to escape which may carry warning to the Imperial capital.”

“You propose to edify Diettinger’s status before he leads the invasion as well as during?” Ulm said mockingly.

“On the surface of any world, Sauron soldiers are unbeatable. In space, dependent as we are on materiel no more advanced than that of the Empire, only Sauron norm reflexes and higher G-force tolerance confer any advantage. Both such characteristics can be - are - countered by Imperial equipment quantity and a five hundred year head start in tactics. Although Diettinger’s fleet will not be defeated in Sauron space, the action against Sparta will include long-term ground engagements during the subjugation of the Imperial capital.”

“Sparta should be Earthed,” Ulm said tacitly. The last Wars of Nationalism between political entities on humanity’s home planet had given rise to the term “Earthed” among the off-world survivors. It was a popular euphemism for rendering a planetary surface permanently uninhabitable by the prodigious use of cobalt-encased thermonuclear bombs.

“The Sauron norms feel that Sparta must be occupied as a decisive psychological blow to any lingering Empire-loyalist sentiments,” Manche reminded them. It was a concept no Cyborg fully appreciated; to defeat an enemy, you destroyed him. No ‘psychology’ survived once the head of the enemy that held it was removed from his shoulders. “They will insist on the ground action and occupation.”

“And concomitant loss of Sauron life.” Ulm pointed out. Sauron blood was precious to all Saurons, even the Cyborgs; *especially* the Cyborgs, who saw themselves as guardians of the eventual uplifting of all Sauron norm progeny to Cyborg level.

“This can be turned to our advantage,” Koln continued. “By having our operatives emphasize Diettinger’s expertise in naval matters, his capability as a ground force commander becomes occluded. The High Command can then be influenced to appoint a Ground Force First Rank for the invasion proper; logically - because of the fierce resistance which can be expected from the Imperials in defense of their capital - this should be a Cyborg.”

“If you were made commander of the Cyborg forces aboard Diettinger’s new flagship, you would be the logical choice,” Saentz said. “But such an appointment would generate opposition from those factions still not convinced of the logic of Cyborg authority.”

“Support Diettinger as Fleet First Rank,” Ulm suggested. “*Fomoria* will be his flagship for the invasion, all current staff remain in place, and Koln can be made Ground Force First Rank as a logical extension of his duties.”

“The shipboard Deathmaster holds authority over planetary invasion actions,” Manche said. “And from his record, Deathmaster Quilland is no less qualified for that position than Diettinger is for his.”

“We cannot expect to accomplish everything by subterfuge,” Koln pressed the point. “We have seats on the High Command, we have influence with the other members of the council; this influence should be brought to bear. Appeal to their psychology. Remind them of the contributions of the Cyborgs to this victory, demand a place for the Cyborgs in the forefront of the final battle, impress upon them the need to show the Sauron population that we, the future of all Saurons, were instrumental in securing that future for them.”

The other three practically stared at him. Cyborgs were not ambitious. Their psyches embodied the Sauron ideal of the First Principle that demanded of every Sauron, norm or Cyborg: *Subjugate the ego to the battle plan*. Still, each wondered briefly if Koln did not desire the rank of First Citizen more for himself than for the future of all Saurons. But such a thought was inherently illogical, and each of the three dismissed it immediately.

Their agreement was therefore unanimous.

Seventeen

I

Diettinger was reading readiness reports when second rank brought him news of the arrival of the first elements of his new command.

“Heralds from the carriers *Bucephalus*, *Pegasus* and *Traveller* report their mother ships two days behind them. The Sauron cruisers *Nike*, *Sagittarius* and *Raptor* emerged at the Jump Point an hour ago. The heavy cruisers *Assyria* and *Hokkaido* have just entered orbit. Of the Alliance ships, the out-worlder battle cruiser *Falkenberg* and two New Ireland light cruisers, *Banshee* and *Ire of Eire* will be in orbit within the next two hours - First Rank.”

Diettinger was grinning. “I suppose every navy has a ship called the *Falkenberg*” he explained. “But ‘*Ire of Eire*’? They really *named* a ship that?” Diettinger actually chuckled, and the lines on his face disappeared for a moment. “Well, as long as it can fight” he muttered. “That brings our total fleet strength in-system to thirty-seven capital ships, forty with those three carriers.”

Second Rank frowned. “Forty-one, First Rank. Including the *Fomoria*”

Diettinger only nodded. “Yes,” he said. “Signal the commanders of the Alliance ships that I will meet personally with them in six hours. Send our own shuttle to collect all of them. If they protest their own importance, explain the need to keep in-system traffic to a minimum. Give them no cause for complaint.”

“This *Falkenberg*’s captain has a reputation for professionalism, First Rank,” Althene assured him, “and the New Ireland captains tend to show impatience only when being restrained from engaging Imperial ships.”

Diettinger shrugged, a short, mirthless laugh. “So long as we don’t have a repeat of the *Quantrill* incident.”

Quantrill was a commerce raider from the Secession Alliance world of Burgess. It had arrived last week with three Imperial merchant ships under prize crews, which ships were declared to be “gifts” to the people of Sauron System. Whereupon, her captain had demanded immediate berthing and an audience with the Sauron High Command, almost certainly to request command of the Alliance elements of the fleet. When such permission was regretfully denied, the *Quantrill*’s captain peremptorily dispatched the prize ships with orders to head home to Burgess, and sullenly declared “pressing need of his vessel in defense of Burgess interests elsewhere.”

Diettinger had demanded that the *Quantrill* and its prize ships be seized and the *Quantrill* herself interned, rather than allow any ship to leave Sauron System after seeing the fleet being assembled there.

In the diplomatic disaster that followed, all three merchant ships were scuttled by their prize crews and the *Quantrill* herself was crippled beyond use, her vainglorious captain killed on his bridge and her crew imprisoned incommunicado on one of Sauron’s penal asteroids.

Diettinger had explained to the High Command that the incident would only be an embarrassment if Burgess found out about it, and they certainly would not hear of it from him. Or, he added, from anyone else who had to leave Sauron System to tell them. Still, Diettinger had fully expected to be relieved of his command, until the Cyborg members of the High Command voiced their approval of his action. It was exactly what he would expect from Cyborgs, and for once he was glad they had a voice on the council.

The final surprise had come two days later, when Captain Hawksley, commander of the *Falkenberg*, had publicly praised Diettinger’s handling of the incident. At first, Diettinger had found the impertinence of the man amusing. But as time had passed, he realized that the Burgess privateer’s public statement of support had helped bring several vacillating commanders back into line, strengthening the resolve of the independent forces allied with Sauron for this last battle.

Ultimately, Diettinger had decided this Hawksley might be the sort of person he was seeking for a particular purpose, and he planned to meet with him later in the week to discuss that very thing.

II

“What of the Claimant fleet from Aquitaine System, Second Rank?”

“Nine capital ships and twenty support vessels, First Rank.”

Diettinger stared at her. “Is that confirmed?”

“No, First Rank,” Althene’s tone made it clear what she thought of such boasts. “So far Aquitaine has sent only one fast courier with the information on the composition of its fleet. The Claimant Viceroy of the Imperial sector which is administered from Aquitaine has sent word that all the ships in his task force are undergoing ’last-minute upgrades with advanced weaponry from Aquitaine’s secret weapon-

research facilities.' That's a quote."

"Has the word 'claimant' ever been so aptly used, Second Rank." Diettinger asked rhetorically. "Let's not count Aquitaine's ships until they show up, shall we?"

"Of course, First Rank." After a brief silence, Althene added, "May I congratulate you, First Rank, on your promotion to Fleet First Rank? I wish to express my personal belief, as well as that of my fellow officers on your staff, that the honor is well-deserved."

Diettinger was looking at some point suspended in the air before him. "Thank you, Second Rank." He turned to look up at her, and Althene was struck by something in his face. It was not an expression; rather, it was almost a glow to his skin, a shining of the eyes. *There is a word for that look*, she thought, and although she felt sure that she knew what that word was, before she could remember it, Diettinger said, "I know of no finer crew in the fleet."

Saurons did not praise lightly; excellence in performance was an expression of devotion to duty, and such devotion was expected, a cornerstone of Sauron society. Whatever the name for what she had seen in Diettinger's face, it was forgotten in her own flush of pride. She had long since admitted to herself that she was in love with Galen Diettinger; now she knew that she would die for him as well.

Diettinger thought a moment, then: "What data have we regarding the commander of the *Falkenberg*?"

"A detailed performance record, First Rank."

"Put it through to my quarters."

"At once, First Rank," she lowered her head and left.

After his Second Rank had left, Diettinger took a data-chit from his desk. It could not be loaded in the *Fomoria*'s computer, not yet. To do so risked its being found, and its being found risked...

Diettinger smiled, cheerlessly.

Everything, he thought. *Literally, everything.*

II

It had been three weeks since *Fomoria* had returned to Sauron System, and Diettinger's construction of a viable fleet had been little short of miraculous, even by Sauron standards of efficiency. Most of that fleet was comprised of transports for the legions of troops which would follow the main fleet into Sparta System after the fleet battle had been won, legions which would land upon the Empire's capital world and win mastery of the stars for Sauron ... and her allies, of course. All those worlds that had come to believe they could govern themselves more effectively than could an Empire whose only interest in them had come to be in their tax revenue.

The bulk of the ships which would win the war were due back from Tanith any day. In fact, they were overdue, but no one in the High Command was concerned; rather the reverse. Every day, which passed beyond the expected triumphal return, brought a new round of confident affirmations that the destruction being visited upon the Imperial naval forces was that much greater. Phrases like "Good hunting," "Target shooting" and "Object lesson" began making the rounds, as each person who commented on the still-absent First Fleet strove to find ever more positive interpretations for the delay.

To ease some of the tension, and to allow the various Alliance commanders to meet one another and their Sauron counterparts, a gala had been arranged for commanders and senior staff.

Ironically, the event was catered by a firm from Aquitaine, which represented that political entity's sole representation at the gala.

The overhead observation dome was an illusion. It was certainly a dome, and was indeed meant for observation, but the panorama of stars above and the arc of the Homeworld at the lower edge were projected by the same technology that made the Tactical Display on *Fomoria*'s bridge the best view on the ship. Here, however, no targeting enhancements were displayed - nor any other military data. From Orbital Station Four, the view was only for relaxation. The fact that it was projected onto the inside of armored walls eight feet thick could, for the evening, be forgotten.

By any standard, the gala could be judged a success. The mix of sexes was exactly equal, thanks to judicious balancing of invitations. Unlike many of their allies and all of the most loyal Imperial societies, Saurons made few sexual distinctions in their military, so the attractive brunette an Alliance captain might ask to dance could as easily be a Vessel First Rank as a Socio-Ops advisor. And whatever else could be said about them, even the Empire could not claim that Saurons were an ugly breed of humans; rather, the reverse held true.

The evening therefore allowed dozens of individuals who had been cooped up for weeks aboard starships to relax, mingle and wonder what was holding up the real party; the one that would come the day after Sparta's capitulation.

If anyone was impatient, it was only because everyone was eager for that final drive on Sparta, and that drive could not begin without the return of the hundreds of victorious ships from Tanith. The captain of the Aquitaine courier (the Aquitaine fleet still had not arrived) winked and opined that the notorious Vessel - now Fleet - First Rank Galen Diettinger probably had more than enough ships right now to go in and take Sparta and every world in between.

Diettinger smiled. "Aquitaine is on the way to Sparta, isn't it?" he asked politely.

Some of the Aquitaine captain's drink apparently went down the wrong way, and he excused himself, pale for all his coughing.

The New Ireland senior captain, Brian Connolly of the *Banshee*, cocked his head and favored Diettinger with a crooked smile. "That was a wicked thing to say, Your Grace." The New Irelanders referred to all Fleet Commanders by aristocratic honorifics. They seemed to delight in their ability to use the phrase without sounding in the least deferential, and although Diettinger didn't care for the title, he could afford some concessions to diplomacy.

"My apologies, Captain Connolly. I confess, my tolerance for fence-sitters is wearing thin."

"Hear, hear." James Shannon lifted his glass. Again. "It's my patience that's thinning, Your Grace, that and my lads on the *Ire*. I hope we'll not hold back waiting for Aquitaine once your First Fleet returns from Tanith. The *Ire* will be ready to make Jump one minute after the first Sauron ship gets home."

Althene smiled at the affected accent and inflection of the New Irelanders. As man had spread out from Earth into the colonized worlds that had started as the CoDominium and grown into the Empire, it had become a matter of racial and national pride to retain as much as could be remembered of the old, Earthly ways. She had heard that the lilting, musical patois of the New Irelanders' Anglic was in perfect counterpoint to the rough, highland brogue affected by the New Scots, a world as fiercely loyal to the Empire as New Ireland was devoted to her own independence. Animosity between the populations of the two planets was so great that it was a wonder either had ships to spare for the war efforts of their respective allies. But ships by the dozen and troops by the thousands had gone forth into battle from New Ireland and New Scotland since the beginning of the war. And in their dozens, and in their thousands, they had died.

"Never doubt it, Your Grace," Connolly added, and seeing the effect New Ireland speech patterns had on Diettinger's extremely attractive Second Rank, turned to Shannon, "Sure now, Jamie, and if piss an'

vinegar were thrust and torpedoes, ye'd be in Sparta a month gone by, and that's the truth."

Shannon turned an eye toward Althene and smiled wisely. *No hope there, Brian*, he thought to himself. *This one's taken and taken again. But I wonder if that dark-eyed lovely approaching us now - the one who conns the Damaris - is too awfully married?*

Diettinger, oblivious, turned to greet the new arrival and her escort. Emory was on the arm of a human norm nearly as tall as Diettinger himself.

But whereas Diettinger was fair, solidly built, with flashes of humor that came frequently to his eyes, this man was darker, thinner, almost grim. Something about him made Althene uneasy, but not uncomfortable. His hair was nondescript; light brown or dark blonde, his eyes an equally indeterminate green-brown. He wore an unfamiliar uniform, severe in cut, sparing in decoration, almost Sauron. High black boots, dark blue-grey tunic and trousers, black epaulets, a single gunmetal star on each shoulder and one on each side of his black collar. A black band encircled the cuff on the left wrist of his tunic and bore an ornate silver script which read: "*Falkenberg*"

"Fleet First Rank Galen Diettinger, Second Rank Althene Adame," Mara Emory introduced her companion, "Allow me to present Captain Ian Hawksley, commander of the Burgess privateer *Falkenberg*"

Hawksley bowed to Diettinger, clicking his heels softly. "Fleet First Rank Diettinger; your reputation precedes you, sir. It is an honor to serve under your command." Hawksley's voice was a smooth baritone, low, softened even more so by an indistinguishable accent which softened consonants and graciously lengthened vowels. He turned to Althene, bowed again, and lifting her hand, raised his eyes to hers and *actually kissed* the space a fraction of an inch above the back of it. "Second Rank Adame; First Rank Emory was kind enough to share with me your thesis on the Peloponnesian War. A brilliant piece of work, if I may say so. Thucydides should look to his laurels."

Althene shot Diettinger a look. "Thank you very much indeed, Captain Hawksley. It does seem to be enjoying something of a vogue, of late."

Emory introduced Hawksley to the two New Ireland captains, both of whom, upon learning that the English-derivative sound of his name was only coincidental, accepted him without further reservation.

Diettinger was surprised. From anyone else, and especially in these circumstances, the outworlder's performance would have been ludicrous, the most pathetic sort of comic opera. Yet Hawksley was making even the excruciatingly correct Saurons look like bumpkins. Then it hit him, and the words were out before he knew it, "You were trained at the Imperial Court."

Hawksley nodded, the ghost of a smile moving across his features. "I was, sir, as a child. The Court and I did not agree. We had something of a falling out."

"Would you care to elaborate on just what sort of a falling out that might be?" Shannon asked with a gleam in his eye. "Make this already delightful evening perfect and tell me that you killed one of the Emperors nephews in a duel."

The smile flashed again, fainter than ever, as Hawksley looked down and said, "First Corinthians, 13:11."

"Beg pardon?" Emory asked.

"The Christian Bible," Althene explained. "When I was a child, I spake as a child.. .when I became a man, I put away childish things'."

Connolly and Shannon both nodded sagely. Connolly raised his drink. "And good for you, too, Captain; here's to the rest of known space followin' suit."

“Captain Hawksley,” Diettinger said after the toast, “Please contact my staff to arrange an appointment to meet with me sometime within the next two days. There are some points I wish to discuss with you regarding the disposition of the *Falkenberg*”

Hawksley inclined his head, making the casual nod look like a formal bow, “Your servant, sir.”

The orchestra began a waltz, and sharing a smile with Althene, Emory led her guest away to join in.

“Whouf.” Shannon shook his head and tossed down the remainder of his drink, deftly snatching another from the tray of a passing steward.

“Aye,” Connolly agreed. “The temperature just went up fifteen degrees.” Since settling their world, New Irelanders had rejected and steadfastly refused to re-adopt metric measurements.

Shannon nodded and said, in a conspiratorial tone: “We’ve neither need nor inclination to tell you your work, Your Grace. But don’t put that man on your flank. Fine fella and all that, but fey as they come, and that’s the truth.”

“Aye,” Connolly said, “’Tis a damn shame, too.”

Diettinger frowned, puzzled. Connolly explained, “Fey, Your Grace, is what we Irish call a man who’s made up his mind to die. Doomed to death. When that happens, nothing and nobody can stop him. Captain Hawksley seems a grand lad, but he’s only with us on loan, and that’s a fact.”

Althene was chilled. *Fey*. That was the word she’d been trying to recall earlier, but she couldn’t remember why. It had to do with someone she knew, but who?

Diettinger was talking.

“I’m sorry, First Rank; what was that again?”

“I was saying that Captain Hawksley reminds me of Vessel First Rank Lucan of the *Wallenstein*”

Althene nodded, pretending a shudder. “Ah, yes. ‘The Phantom’.”

It was Connolly’s and Shannon’s turn to be puzzled.

“Vessel First Rank Lucan, ‘The Phantom’, as we like to call him, commands the Sauron battleship *Wallenstein*” Diettinger explained.

Connolly frowned, then brightened. “Ah, right; *Wallenstein!* Bright light of the Thirty Years War.” He shrugged to Shannon. “Well, for our side, at least. Go on.”

“Under ‘The Phantom’s’ command,” Althene embellished, “the *Wallenstein* has participated in over two dozen major engagements. She’s been directly or solely responsible for the destruction of seven enemy capital ships, and her actions against merchant shipping would be unbelievable if fiction.

“Now, ‘The Phantom’ hasn’t always won every engagement he’s taken the *Wallenstein* into; that distinction goes to our esteemed Fleet First Rank, of the *Fomoria*” Althene nodded to Diettinger with a smile, “But Lucan can claim an accomplishment unique among all Sauron commanders, land or space. In all her actions, in all of space, *Wallenstein* has never lost a crewman.”

There was a moment of stunned silence, then Shannon said, “Beggin’ you’re pardon, ma’am, but surely you’re joking?”

“It’s true,” Diettinger confirmed. “In fact, Vessel First Rank Lucan’s name has been brought up a great deal lately.” He looked at Althene, who was inspecting her drink.

In secret High Command Council sessions, that is; was Althene their operative? Perhaps reporting his activities to them? Composing himself, Diettinger turned back to the New Ireland captains. “Lucan’s

always brought his crew home. His casualty record is perfect, yet I've never seen a more grim-looking man, not even Captain Hawksley."

Shannon shook his head. "Lucan, eh? God forbid I'm about the day that man's luck runs out."

"Then you need have no fear as long as you serve under Fleet First Rank Diettinger, Captain Shannon," Althea assured him. "Saurons don't believe in luck. Only probabilities."

Connolly shrugged, and went on talking to Diettinger. "'Tisn't merely the look of a man, Your Grace. 'Tis the bearing. Something in.. something in the eyes." Connolly's voice faded out, and he suddenly found himself looking away from Diettinger. "Ah. Yes, well. Woolgathering. Forgive me."

Diettinger caught the man's tone, and smiled. "Oh, come now, Captain Connolly. You don't seriously expect me to - "

There was a murmur at the far side of the floor, gathering strength as word spread and more and more of the guests looked upward, craning their necks to see. The starfield projected on the inside of the dome of Orbital Station Four was a perfect reproduction of the view outside, from the same perspective. Diettinger realized that the people were looking at a ship which had appeared at a Jump Point.

Instantly, he keyed the communications link in the occipital lobe of his skull, connecting him to the Commo officer aboard the *Fomoria*.

"*Fomoria* here."

Boyle again, Diettinger recognized the voice. *Doesn't that young man ever get off duty?* "Diettinger here, Fifth Rank Boyle. Identify the ship which just arrived in-system."

"Have been and still trying, First Rank. No transponder codes from target vessel."

"What about Traffic Control?"

"Traffic Control is in communications blackout, First Rank."

"*What?*"

"Confirmed, First Rank. Blackout initiated twenty-three seconds after an unidentified vessel emerged from Jump Point."

"Long range visuals from *Fomoria*?"

"Inconclusive, First Rank. Sensor and Navigation both having difficulty determining vessel's true size. Vessel's albedo is very high and appears to be fluctuating."

"Is that a function of its Field?"

"Negative, First Rank; vessel does not appear to be running with Field activated."

"Get a crew with lens optics into one of the hangar bays. Make direct visual observations and - "

Someone dropped a glass; the sound of its shatter was a gunshot. Now the dance floor had gone from a symphony of hushed and wondering whispers to stony silence.

"*Fomoria*, stand by," Diettinger said. He went to the environmental controls and began accessing the various menu commands for the overhead display.

A bright green square appeared on the star field above them; Diettinger pressed a few buttons, and the square glided across the field to surround the glint in space that was the intruder. He activated the image enlargement controls, and the sliver of light grew large enough so that its flickering could be clearly seen; the fluctuating albedo Boyle had mentioned.

The mutterings of the crowd were taking on a tone of impatience; everyone wanted to know what was going on. *Just what was that ship out there? Another Imperial raid?*

Diettinger continued enhancing the image until the borders of the green square suddenly flared out past the edges of the display over their heads and the ship filled the sky.

“Oh, God!” cried one of the Secessionist captains.

One of the Alliance staff officers threw-up. A Sauron stepped quickly to a chair and fell into it.

The ship was flaring with arcs of electrical discharge. Fires gouted from within, fed by its internal atmosphere. Together with random, almost constant explosions along its length, these gave the ship its “fluctuating albedo,” which was not an albedo at all. The ship was not reflecting light, but *generating* it. Aft, holes over a hundred meters in diameter were punched clear through the hull; the engines were mostly gutted, blackened, burning hulks. The view into the wounds showed stars on the other side. Amidships, through great rents in the hull, four and five decks deep, the spine of the vessel could be seen, barely holding the fore and aft sections together. Bulkheads and struts floated alongside held in place by cables, shreds of outer hull and the ship’s own microgravity. Shielding, ten feet thick, lay shredded, crumpled, or trailed in tatters to end in vaporous smears. It was a wonder the ship had survived Jump in once piece.

The forward section was the worst. Here a direct hit to a forward weapons bay had opened the entire fore port quarter to space; more than a third of the vessel’s forward area was simply gone, decks sheared through, seen end on, dark but for fires and more sparking and the dull, lifeless glow of metal inflamed by radioactive explosions, heated in the vacuum of space which would let none of that heat bleed away. The wreck would glow for weeks.

And in that glow would be visible the bodies that floated within, alongside, and behind it. Many had been flattened, insect-like, to the bulkheads. Still more were nothing but great smears of rust-brown or livid red, where dozens of crew members had been crushed or burned or irradiated or exposed to vacuum and died; but not quickly. Humans were tough, and Sauron humans tougher still.

Diettinger stared at the hulk, dimly aware of the movement around him as people began making for exits, heading for anywhere in the station but the room where he now stood, looking up at the wreckage of a Sauron battleship.

Someone was standing beside him: Althene. Beside her, Captain Connolly’s gaze was riveted to the scene above.

“Christ. And I thought the spectre had come to the feast when I met Hawksley.”

Diettinger was running his gaze back and forth over the ruin, trying to find some identifying mark, some distinctive feature; a blade of grass in a bomb crater.

It was as if Connolly read his mind.”Your Grace?” he asked, and his tone said he knew.

“First Rank?” Althene asked, wanting very badly at that moment to call him “Galen.”

Diettinger nodded, slowly.”It’s the *Wallenstein*”

Lucan had brought his crew home.

Eighteen

I

Beyond the condition of the wrecked battleship or her slaughtered crew, the true horror of the

Wallenstein was learned only after Pathfinder Cyborg teams had examined the irradiated derelict, to find that she was no derelict at all.

“The first clue,” Diettinger was telling the High Command, “was that no vessel in *Wallenstein’s* condition could have made the trip from Tanith to Sauron. For that reason, I instructed the Pathfinders to pay careful attention to conditions in the Drives and Engineering sections of the wreck. Their report is presented in detail in the briefings before you.

“To summarize: The *Wallenstein* arrived in Sauron System with an Imperial Alderson Drive installed, and jury-rigged to make a single Jump from one of the nearby star systems to Sauron.”

The First Citizen looked up from his briefing. “But the *Wallenstein* was at Tanith..,”

“Yes, First Citizen. After capturing the *Wallenstein*” - Diettinger ignored the half-dozen sharp intakes of breath at his near-blasphemy; no Sauron ship had *ever* been captured - ”the Imperials must have installed several such packages in various systems along one of the routes from Tanith to Sauron and literally ‘pushed’ the *Wallenstein* wreckage through the intervening Alderson points until it arrived here.”

Panades, one of the other Sauron norms on the High Command and charged with civilian oversight on naval matters, was shaking his head. “To what possible purpose?”

“I should have thought that would be obvious, Councilman Panades. To let us know they were victorious at Tanith. To let us know they have crushed the last line of defense between Sauron and the fleets of the Empire. To let us know they are coming, and soon. The gesture is not without precedent.”

“I know of no such action since the beginning of the war,” Panades dismissed the idea, but Diettinger was ready for him.

“Ancient Earth, First Citizen,” Diettinger ignored Panades. “Theocratic Egyptian society regarded domesticated Terran cats as semi-divine. Hittite invaders slaughtered hundreds of the animals and threw them over the walls of besieged Egyptian cities to drive defenders from their posts and generally panic the superstitious populace. The ploy later evolved into the ‘Dead Horse’ tactic, wherein siege engines were used to launch rotting corpses of draft animals into besieged cities to spread disease and panic.”

“Are you suggesting that Sauron should consider itself under siege, Fleet First Rank?” One of the other Council members interrupted, his tone was all cold malice at so treasonous a notion.

Panades frowned. “No, that can’t be right, Fleet First Rank. Obviously, the *Wallenstein’s* captain lost his nerve at Tanith, fled the battle there and was ambushed along the way. Critically wounded, her commander - Lucan, was it? - this Lucan must have fought his way through to a Jump Point to get here. He must therefore have been ambushed only one system away, at Dropshot, perhaps, or Wayforth, or one of half-a-dozen others.”

Diettinger’s gaze hardened. “Leaving aside for the moment Vessel First Rank Lucan’s *impeccable* record, and assuming that, despite all logic, you are correct: What difference does it make?”

Councilman Panades looked up, surprised by the near-insolence of Diettinger’s question.”What do you mean?”

Diettinger was holding a respectful tone by sheer act of will. “First Citizen, Council members: Either way, a powerful force of enemy vessels is only one Jump away from Sauron. Either way, this is the only warning we will receive. Either Lucan got his ship here to tell us they’re coming, or the Imperials sent it to tell us they’re coming. Either way, the Imperial Fleet is on its way here. Now.” Diettinger had risen to his feet as he spoke; he sat back down.”What is to be done?”

The First Citizen glared down at Diettinger. "I find your tone disrespectful, Fleet First Rank. I remind you that you are still under High Command authority."

"Which is why I now repeat the question, First Citizen." Diettinger's hand clenched. "What is to be done?"

"The invasion of Sparta should go on as planned," Panades told the First Citizen, ignoring Diettinger. "Such an imminent threat to the Imperial capital will dictate a re-direction of their forces to defend Sparta."

"May I ask with what vessels I am to mount such an operation?" Diettinger asked.

Panades shrugged, continued to speak to the First Citizen and ignored Diettinger. "From the extent of the damage suffered by the *Wallenstein*, and the damage which such a vessel, by design, can statistically be expected to inflict before it is lost, we can extrapolate by the number of like vessels committed to Tanith that the Imperial fleet must surely have been destroyed there," he glanced briefly at Diettinger, secure in his logic, "just as we projected. If the price was the loss of the majority of our combined Fleet, it is a grave one, but acceptable. Therefore, the forces currently assembled by the Fleet First Rank should be more than sufficient to overwhelm any defense remaining at Sparta."

Diettinger actually felt a dizzy, wrenching sensation of vertigo. "You propose to leave the Homeworld defenseless?"

"Defenseless against what threat, Fleet First Rank?" Panades asked, and with real horror Diettinger saw the man sincerely believed what he said next. "The on-site system defense network is more than capable of dealing with what meager remnants of the Imperial Fleet might come through our Jump Points."

"Fleet First Rank Galen Diettinger," the First Citizen pronounced, "You are hereby charged to activate the forces currently assembled here in Sauron System, and with them mount an assault on the Imperial Capital System of Sparta, and once there to -"

"Enough." The voice came from the left side of the High Command council table. One moment, the three Cyborg members of the High Command had been seated, quietly conferring with one another.

The next instant, Ulm was standing, Saentz was holding up a communicator and speaking in the Battle Tongue, and Manche stood over the bodies of the First Citizen and Councilman Panades. Both members of the High Command were dying of broken necks, both taking time to finish doing so; Manche was holding them in their chairs with one hand to each throat.

The speed of the coup was enough to make Diettinger think he was hallucinating. *I never dreamed even a Cyborg could be so fast! he thought. Is that how we look to human norms? No wonder we terrify them so!* In seconds, two dozen Sauron norms in battle armor had flooded into the council chamber, led by another Cyborg Diettinger didn't recognize, a giant with the name tag: "SARGUN."

"By order of Emergency Security Provision 12156," Saentz declared, "The High Command council is hereby dissolved as being inimical to the interests and continued survival of the State. It is the motion of this member that Fleet First Rank Galen Diettinger be appointed *Dictator Pro Tempore* for the duration of the current crisis, said crisis to be regarded as the threat of imminent invasion by forces of the Empire against Sauron System."

"The motion is seconded," Ulm said without looking up from the communications panel with which he was directing the sealing-off of the capitol.

"How say the remaining members of the Council?" Manche asked. . he still had one hand against each of the dead men's throats.

The remaining members seemed more relieved than anything else. The “aye” vote was immediate.

“The motion is carried,” Saentz said. “This council is adjourned *sine die*” Only then did he release the bodies of Panades and the First Citizen. Both dropped to the floor with solid, final sounds; Sauron muscle mass made for very weighty dead weight, indeed. Saentz turned to Diettinger.

“This body stands ready to carry out your commands in defense of the realm, Dictator”

For one surreal instant, Diettinger would have sworn he saw the Cyborg actually *smile*.

“What is to be done?” the Cyborg asked.

II

The Sauron populace was informed, briefly, of the implementation of Security Provision 12156. Although few citizens knew of Fleet First Rank Galen Diettinger, everyone knew the law, and Diettinger abruptly found himself without any resistance whatsoever to his plans for the defense of Sauron System and the Homeworld.

“It’s a bit like walking into a stiff breeze all morning and having it change to a tailwind at noon,” he told his Second Rank during a staff meeting.

Althene declined to comment. She had heard Diettinger’s account of the coup and realized, as he did, that its speed was illusory, that all the elements of the takeover must have been in place for weeks, perhaps months, before the Cyborgs had made their move, then left in place, ready for activation whenever the Cyborgs judged it necessary. They would not move for simple power over Sauron society; that they had already, in abundance. They would only take such drastic action for what they deemed the welfare of the Race. Despite a ruthlessness unmatched even by other Saurons, Althene knew that all Cyborgs’ actions stemmed from motives based on the Sauron vision of human destiny.

She also knew that Diettinger could not be unaware of the peril of serving as a Cyborg cat’s-paw, and that he could not seriously think that he was really in control. His current status could only mean that the Cyborgs thought he could actually defeat the Imperial Fleet which must even now be en route to Sauron System.

“Second Rank?”

“My apologies, First Rank. I was distracted.”

Diettinger ignored the lapse and continued entering data on the pad before him. A moment later, he engaged the holographic units and activated the War Room display of Sauron System.

Landyn, the system’s F9 star, had produced seven worlds. Dawkins, Proteus and Niobe marched outward from the star to the Homeworld of Sauron itself and its large moon, Poictesme, both now bearing a single green nimbus of enhancement. Next was the wellspring of Sauron power and prosperity, an unusually dense and valuable asteroid belt, heavily fortified to defeat Imperial or pirate raids. Of the number of emplacements hidden within the slowly rotating field, System Defense Boat squadrons alone ran to the hundreds. Missile bases, particle accelerator and beam weapon bays and thermonuclear mines brought the total figure of defending elements well into four digits.

Despite the huge indigenous population of their asteroid belt, the Saurons did not count the area as one of their system’s worlds. The fifth true planetary body occupied the sixth orbital path, a gas giant called Ostia, which Sauron had tapped for fuel and fourth-state matter since the earliest days of colonization. Ostia was surrounded by a dozen refueling stations, among which twice as many tankers were engaged in transfer rotation, the ships constantly ferrying hydrogen to refueling stations in orbit over Sauron itself.

Diettinger did not expect to hold Ostia for long. Its status as a fuel supply source and its position outside the main defenses of the asteroid belt had doomed it. So the ferries ran hourly, building the fuel stores for the Home-world's defense, and they would do so even after battle was joined, until Ostia was captured or the last of them was destroyed.

The last two worlds of Sauron System, Freas and Barlowe, were mixed blessings. At this point in their respective orbital years, they were almost exactly opposite one another on the plane of Sauron System's ecliptic. Both were occupied by extensive research facilities, lately reinforced by massive shipments Diettinger had authorized immediately upon returning from an inspection of the sites, presumably to augment their extant defense emplacements and, perhaps, allow him some edge in the coming battle, if the Imperials were sufficiently obliging in their approach patterns.

Even without such reinforcements, Barlowe and Freas' opposing orbital positions and extensive supply caches provided Diettinger's forces with Jump-Off points to the areas of greatest danger and greatest opportunity; Sauron's Alderson Points. But it also made it apparently impossible, for task forces detached from either world, to reach the other quickly enough to provide any meaningful mutual support.

Sauron boasted six Alderson Points, where the Stellar thermodynamics of Landyn's Sun generated "tramlines" between itself and half-a-dozen of its Stellar neighbors. These lines had made interstellar travel and empire possible, and would now seem to make the imminent destruction of Sauron inevitable.

Diettinger's viewing console for the immersion display was at the general position of Jump Point One, the route from Sauron System to Wayforth Station. This viewpoint was 2.4 billion kilometers beyond the orbit of Barlowe, twenty-three degrees above the plane of the ecliptic in a wedge-shaped area one hundred-seventeen degrees from a zero point line drawn between Landyn and the galactic center. The zone defined was roughly equivalent to Sauron's orbital position during the planet's month of March.

He pressed a key and the point of view changed to forty-one degrees below the plane and further along in the year, around late July. This was the route to Dropshot System, a little closer at about two billion kilometers distant, and through which had come the last of his reinforcements, nineteen days ago. No courier ships sent through any of these Jump routes in the last seven days had returned.

"Dictator." Cyborg Rank Koln had entered during Diettinger's observations of the system map. He was serving as liaison for the High Council, and had returned with a list of updates on the System Defense Boat squadrons based on Sauron's moon, Poictesme.

Diettinger downloaded the information without acknowledgment, nor was one expected. But Koln watched the Dictator, and Althene watched Koln. Koln's eyes flickered upwards once, briefly, to meet hers. The Cyborg's gaze was placid, neutral, unconcerned. He never blinked, and finally looked back at the system display suspended in the center of the War Room.

Diettinger frowned, leaned forward even as he entered several enhancement commands. A section of the asteroid belt leaped forward, expanded into ever-finer detail. At 1:100,000 scale, the display was filled by a single large body dotted with circular slabs. The slabs were laid out in five-point star patterns, each surrounding a massive particle beam array in an armored turret. Diettinger called up a schematic for the turret, and suddenly laughed without a trace of humor.

Several of the staffers who had been bustling about the War Room stopped in their tracks. Now it was Koln's turn to frown. "Dictator?" he asked. "What is amusing?"

Diettinger turned to Althene. "Nothing at all, Cyborg Rank Koln," he said. "Do you see anything amusing in this, Second Rank?"

Althene looked at the schematic, then back at the asteroid's image in the system display. "This can't be right," she said.

Diettinger motioned to one of the staffers wearing a system defense badge on his sleeve. "Third Rank Pell, what is the operational mode of this type of defense system?"

Proud of his expertise, Pell only glanced briefly at the display; he knew the system implicitly. "The circular areas are missile ports, Dictator. Each contains twelve independently targetable anti-shiping missiles with high-yield nuclear warheads, 100 megaton range. The turret is a quad particle beam mount containing four 1,000 gigajoule particle beam projectors in a linked array with a 360 degree field of fire and a 45 degree vertical traverse. An approaching invader would receive fire from the beam weapons until directly over the missile ports; the missiles are then fired at a sufficiently close range that the intruder's point defense systems cannot lock on and destroy them before intercept."

"This assumes such an intruder approaches parallel to the plane of the ecliptic, does it not?" Diettinger asked.

Third Rank Pell blinked. "No Alderson Point in Sauron System is more than thirty degrees above any such plane, Dictator, nor closer to Landyn than nineteen billion kilometers. Fuel constraints force incoming vessels to approach in this pattern to minimize their time-in-flight to Ostia and the system's other refueling stations. Such an approach pattern provides raiding vessels with the maximum opportunities for cover from planetary bodies, as well as exploitation of the gravity wells of same for maneuvering purposes. Any approach beyond this envelope leaves the intruder dangerously exposed and consumes profligate amounts of fuel."

Diettinger nodded, watching the young Ranker in silence for a long moment. "Carry on." He finally said quietly. He turned to Althene, who was beginning to pale. "He certainly knows his textbook on system defense, wouldn't you say, Second Rank?"

Althene nodded. "It has evidently displaced anything he learned from his historical or tactical training."

Koln looked again, then turned to Althene. "Tyre," the Cyborg said. "Aqaba. Maginot. Corregidor. Dien Bien Phu. New Delhi. Second Beijing." He stopped speaking, but the place names continued to roll off in his mind: *Giannah Prime. New Washington. Meiji Four.* All of them disastrous defeats, all of them brought about when a statistically perfect defense had been surmounted by an enemy who had simply done something statistically improbable.

"How?" Koln turned to Diettinger.

The Dictator looked at the Cyborg without expression. He understood what the Super Soldier was asking him. "How not?" he said. He went back to the console and returned the display to its original detail, then stepped it one setting farther out. Landyn was a bright spark at the center; the outside of the sphere was broadly defined by glowing red ovals which showed the general positions of the system's six Alderson Points. None was closer than two and one half billion kilometers.

"Sauron's first line of defense is the garrison patrols at the Alderson Points themselves. Distance precludes these forces from supporting one another effectively." Diettinger grimaced. Before the Second Battle of Tanith, they could have stationed ships at each Jump Point with enough firepower to blast any invading force into little more than mathematics.

"Drawing the garrison patrols inward, however" he indicated two positions, each about eighty degrees above the orbital plane and only forty million kilometers from Landyn, "splits them into two forces rather than six, and places both less than half an AU from Sauron itself."

"It also leaves the Alderson points utterly unguarded." Althene pointed out.

“He who would defend everything, defends nothing’, Second Rank,” Diettinger reminded her. “It is unlikely that the Imperials will oblige us by attacking precisely as our *statisticians*” he made the word sound distasteful - ”declare they will. But they must have fuel, and that means they must capture Ostia or take and hold access to a Jump Point which they control. Once committed to battle in-system, the Imperial fleet will have to consolidate a bridgehead at either or both locations. This may prevent them from pressing their attack on the Homeworld for days, perhaps even weeks. Ultimately we can be assured of denying them only one of these objectives. We must therefore make the second prohibitively expensive.”

Diettinger sat back from the console. Precious few decisive battles in history had proven to be bloodier than the attackers could tolerate. Even if the entire Imperial fleet were obliterated, it would only mean a respite before another was built and that one launched against Sauron as well. The resources of an Empire - even a crumbling one - far outweighed those of a single system.

Diettinger looked back at the Alderson Points, thinking, *But perhaps time is all we need. If we can somehow get enough of it...*

Diettinger stood up, stretched slightly. His implant chronometer told him the Standard Time was 1100 hours.

“Signal the Fleet.” he told Althene.”Patch through to all force commanders and have them standing by for briefing at 1600 planetary time. Cyborg Rank Koln,” he turned. “I will brief the High Council at 1300.”

“Dictator, permission to speak,” Koln interrupted.

“Do so.”

“Your decision to withdraw the garrison patrols from the Alderson points will not be received favorably by the High Council.”

Diettinger only looked up at him.”Less favorably than the First Citizen’s orders to me to proceed with the invasion of Sparta?” he asked quietly.

“I would not know, Dictator,” Koln answered smoothly. “I merely point this out as a possible complication you might wish to prepare for.”

“Noted, Cyborg Rank Koln. Dismissed.”

Diettinger watched him go, then returned his attention to Althene. “Signal *Fomoria*, inform them I will be transferring my flag aboard at 1300.” He looked about the room briefly. “And find that Third Ranker; what was his name?”

“Ah? Excuse me. Pell, Dictator.” Althene was considering the implications of Koln’s warning.

“Yes, Pell. Have him report to me with his staff immediately.”

“At once, Dictator.” Althene began to withdraw.

“Second Rank,” Diettinger recalled her. “The garrison patrol re-deployment will make sense when it is complete. More importantly, it will be effective, but only if it is carried out *exactly* as I have planned it. Therefore, do not allow any outside comments or opinions to incline you toward any modification of my orders on this matter. I will not tolerate any deviations to the implementation of this plan.”

“Understood, Dictator.”

“Carry on.”

Nineteen

I

“...the garrison fleets are now deployed in an hourglass configuration,” Diettinger was concluding his report, “two cones, one above and one below the plane of the ecliptic, with Sauron at the center of the converging cones. This will allow these fleets to support one another as well as to rapidly re-deploy to any point above or below the plane of the ecliptic in the minimum amount of time. The programs for the re-alignment of the asteroid defense batteries have been completed and are ready for initiation on my command.”

Ulm began to ask a question, “Dictator; your assessment of the defensibility of Ostia - ”

Diettinger interrupted. “Is irrefutable. The solution I have provided is the only practical one. It is being implemented as we speak.”

The briefings were held not to receive any stamp of approval, but simply to keep Sauron’s various planetary administrators apprised of what was required of them. Diettinger was Dictator, after all. Even so, some of the Sauron-norm members of the Council shared looks between themselves; the Cyborgs said nothing.

This will force the move, Koln thought to himself. The imminence of the Imperial invasion meant that Diettinger would soon be boarding the *Fomoria* to command the defense of Sauron System from his flagship. The plan to put Koln in charge of ground forces for the invasion of Sparta presumed victory over the Imperials in the coming battle. That plan had not changed, but its means of implementation had. Koln looked at Council Member N’kobo, who acknowledged the glance and spoke.

“Dictator,” the Sauron norm said, “Over the past four days, I have reviewed the reports of several ship-to-ship engagements employing the assault tactics which you developed using EVA Commandos. I note that this tactic was especially effective in your recent engagement at Tanith, resulting in the capture of the INSS *Canada*. Your briefing states that this type of operation will be used again during the defense of Sauron.”

N’kobo referred to a tactical innovation Diettinger had developed, as a means of countering the Empire’s equality in space combat, which inserted the Sauron superiority in ground combat into the naval equation. Sauron Commandos - all of them Cyborgs - in powered battle armor were loaded into modified torpedo tubes which they could guide through gaps in a target vessel’s Langston Field, to debark on the enemy ship’s hull. From there, they would cut their way into the vessel and take the battle to the crew. It was based on the old Roman *corvus* tactic of dropping boarding ramps down between galleys, permitting the Romans - themselves never very good sailors - to pit their heavily-armored legionnaires against nearly naked enemy marines, and it had allowed the Romans to change the name of ancient Earth’s inland ocean from *Mares Tyrrhenian, Adriaticum, Aegyptus* and more to simply *Mare Nostrum* - literally, “Our Sea.”

“It is a major aspect of the overall plan, Council Member N’kobo,” Diettinger’s tone was utterly neutral.

“I point out, Dictator, that the combat environment may preclude such a tactic. Surviving Imperial commanders may be ready for it, which would cause unacceptable casualties among our forces, denuding the number of troops available for ground defense should the Imperial attack succeed in landing troops on Sauron or Poictesme.”

Diettinger’s tone remained unchanged, making his next words even worse, “They will attempt no such landings, Council Member N’kobo. The Empire will attempt to destroy the Sauron Home Fleet, then

bombard the Homeworld itself from orbit.”

“A siege, Dictator?” Another pro-Cyborg Council Member, Beaufort, interjected. “With so many subject systems in open revolt elsewhere, surely the Empire cannot hope to maintain a blockade here.”

“Once again, you are not listening,” Diettinger’s tone had gone to steel.” The Imperials will bombard the Homeworld from orbit. Once they have orbital superiority, they will saturate the planetary environment with thermonuclear bombs, perhaps one or more of the prototype meson weapons our intelligence has told us they are developing. They will cease such bombardment only when there is nothing left alive on Sauron, and they may continue to do so even afterward. In short, Council members, Sauron, once defeated, will be Earthed.”

Koln’s elation was so great he actually almost smiled; Diettinger had taken the bait. He felt an odd bewilderment at finding pleasure in having second-guessed the Dictator. Cyborgs did not compare themselves to other humans, not even to other Cyborgs. The former comparison was inapplicable, the latter irrelevant. But Diettinger, as Koln had already decided, was a special case. Outsmarting him was a maneuver in which anyone could find cause for self-congratulation.

Althene braced herself for the inevitable storm of protest; Diettinger’s pronouncement of Sauron’s doom was a heresy which even a Dictator dare not commit. It could not fail to outrage the Council. For his part, Diettinger seemed resigned to the argument which, as Dictator, he must win. Even so, Althene wondered if the Cyborgs’ planning expertise had the new Dictator already waiting outside the Council Chamber.

Instead, N’kobo raised a hand in a reasonable gesture, and replied.”Then surely, more such troops are required aboard the ships of the Home Fleet. Even the garrison patrol vessels could have some portion of their torpedo complements given over to the modified troop-carrying units. May I suggest doubling the complement you have apportioned to this aspect of the operation?”

Beaufort jumped in: “Indeed, Dictator. And may I add, the resulting increase in organizational workload would best be served by appointing another sub-commander, solely for the administration of these forces. Someone with a proven expertise in planetside operations.”

Althene tried to stave off disaster. “Dictator, Council members; we are fortunate in that the *Fomoria*’s own Deathmaster Quilland has an exceptional operational record in this field. May I suggest that he - ”

Diettinger cut her off. “Quilland has insufficient experience with this level of commitment.” He turned to look at Koln, and the Cyborg froze. “I hereby appoint Cyborg Rank Koln as the sub-commander for this phase of Sauron’s defense. He will coordinate EVA operations from the *Fomoria*. In addition, the complement of EVA Commandos aboard all vessels in the Fleet will be doubled, while that of Cyborgs serving in such capacity aboard capital ships is to be quadrupled.” Diettinger turned back to N’kobo. “An excellent suggestion, Council Member N’kobo. My thanks.”

Koln sat watching Diettinger for some time as the meeting was concluded. Finally the Dictator looked at him, briefly, the ghost of a smile passing over his features.

You devious bastard, Koln thought. Given the Cyborg devotion to perfect accuracy in matters of lineage, it was an inaccurate assessment; but Koln found himself at a loss to think of a better one, at the moment.

II

After a history of predominantly victorious aggression, the Saurons prepared for the defense of their Homeworld with little reflection on the circumstances which had taken their planet from the wellspring of conquest to last redoubt.

It was now three weeks, four days and seven hours since any ship had entered Sauron System. The hulk of the *Wallenstein* had been towed into orbit around Ostia; Special Operations units had spent three days aboard the wreck, then set it in a slowly decaying orbit that was even now bringing it into the gas giant's upper atmosphere. Given the tremendous amount of background radiation emitted by Ostia, no one, who did not know there was a wreck there, would detect her unless specifically looking for one. It was doubtful that anyone would. So the *Wallenstein* waited, on-board computers her only crew for her last mission in service of the Homeworld. Above her, the fuel tanker shuttles ran on endlessly, back and forth.

Technicians in the asteroid field system defense network reviewed and re-checked their new station-keeping programs. Vectoring jets on the slowly turning bodies of nickel-iron ore flared slightly; correcting, altering, correcting again as missile bays and beam weapon mounts were brought to bear on new convergence zones. As on the *Wallenstein*, no living Saurons were stationed on these platforms; the control computers buried deep within the asteroids would launch their missiles until their bays were empty, fire their beam weapons until their generators burned out - and perform all other instructed functions until they themselves were destroyed.

Aboard the *Damaris*, Vessel First Rank Mara Emory reviewed the command links between her ship and the rest of the vessels under her command. Task Force *Damaris* was stationed one billion kilometers from Sauron, on overwatch patrol for the Dropshot and St. Ekaterina Alderson Points. At ninety-three vessels, TF *Damaris* was the largest such force in the fleet, excepting only the patrol forces of non-Jump capable ships, arrayed in their curious hourglass formation over Sauron's poles.

Emory did not allow herself to worry about the fact that TF *Damaris* was so far from any hope of reinforcement. It was no part of Diettinger's plan that her command be sacrificed, so it was no part of her own preparations that she allow for the possibility of such waste. She ordered a slight adjustment to the deployment of picket ships guarding the tankers at the task force's center and then, satisfied with her subordinate's implementations of her orders, retired to her quarters for a brief nap of Second Stage sleep. She thought briefly about her escort at the gala, the night the *Wallenstein* had arrived - when the dead horse had come over the wall, so to speak . . . Then she went to sleep. She did not dream.

Across the surface of Sauron itself, thousands of missile silos had been sunk into the ocean floors, beam arrays were set deep beneath the planet's crust, ground troop concentrations were standing by to obliterate any assault forces which might, somehow, get through; all looked skyward, and waited. Newly emplaced units that had been hurriedly deployed to the planetary poles were daily freed of snow and ice by crews who, though perhaps curious as to the reason for their deployment in areas never before regarded as necessary to fortify, were too well-disciplined to question orders which came directly from the legally appointed Dictator.

III

One and one half billion kilometers away, the *Falkenberg* Task Force under Hawksley kept station along with *Banshee*, *Ire of Eire* and three dozen more capital ships at the Wayforth Alderson Point. Beyond the fleet perimeter, *Marius*-class heavy fighters were escorting several minelayers, each of which deployed not only mines, but missile racks as well; light frameworks of torpedoes and sensor packages. Enemy ships exiting an Alderson Point were usually preceded by atomics, and the missile launch racks were well outside such weapons' blast radii.

Captain Ian Hawksley looked out from the *Falkenberg* bridge with no sign of emotion. There was nothing like enough ships in the fleet to cover all the Jump Points of a system like Sauron.

There was a time, Hawksley reflected, *and not so long ago, when Sauron and the Coalition of Secession could have put over four thousand vessels into space. But that had been a great many*

comrades and one family ago.

Now, deep within himself, grew a sickening dread that even if that many ships were available, they would not be enough; that Diettinger's assessment of the Empire's bloodlust was, if anything, conservative; that whatever route the Imperials chose to attack Sauron, they could not be stopped.

Of course, he admitted, not stopping them is part of Diettinger's plan.

He remembered the meeting with the Sauron dictator, remembered being acutely aware of the fact that he came from a world whose motto was "*Sic Semper Tyrannis*," and remembered hoping that Diettinger's astonishingly dangerous looking guards understood that these days, the world of Burgess directed its ill will at the Empire; not at whatever other tyrants happened to be supporting its own desire for independence.

Hawksley's escorts had brought him to the Strategic Operations room deep beneath the Sauron capitol, and having delivered him, they simply went away and sealed the door behind them.

"Come in Captain Hawksley," Diettinger had gestured to the large briefing table at the center of the room, and it was only then that Hawksley realized he was alone with the man. His second impression of Diettinger was much like his first. The Sauron leader exuded an eerie confidence, one born of a supreme self-awareness, and something else... Hawksley realized Diettinger reminded him of nothing so much as the professional gamblers he had seen during his apprenticeship on Burgess cruise vessels.

But if memory served him, he was sure he had never before in his life set eyes on a high-roller the likes of Galen Diettinger,

"Before we begin, Captain Hawksley, I want you to know that I have inquired as to the details of your duel and resultant expulsion from the Imperial Court."

Hawksley said nothing for a long time, then: "I hope that the information you received was correct, sir."

"So do I."

Diettinger began tapping panels on the briefing table, calling up a two-dimensional map of Sauron System. "For if they are, you did not simply kill a member of the Imperial Family in a duel." Diettinger looked up. "You were manipulated into said duel by the eldest son of the Duke of New Gotham, who invoked his familial privilege of allowing his second to fight in his place."

"That is correct, sir."

Diettinger nodded, still apparently absorbed in the briefing table display. "Upon which, you invoked your own rights as a Burgess peer to have the duel made public; broadcast on holo. The young Duke's father insisted that his own son fight or drop the challenge, lest the family be embarrassed politically by its public use of a professional duelist as second." Diettinger looked up, smiling briefly. "Whereupon you killed the Duke of Gotham's heir. Quite bold. You might have lost, and think of the embarrassment to your family, then."

Hawksley almost smiled. "I never considered the possibility, sir."

"I'm sure you did not. Which brings me to the subject of this meeting, Captain Hawksley." Diettinger entered a command which replaced the flat map he had been studying with a three dimensional image of Ostia, Sauron System's gas giant. "I have developed a mission profile for an operation which demands a commander and crew of great skill and flexibility. And, of course, confidence."

Hawksley smiled. "That would be us, Dictator."

Diettinger did not smile. "I do not have the luxury of indulging in theater, Captain Hawksley. You have

not been summoned here to be given the opportunity to volunteer for this mission, but to receive your briefing. *Falkenberg's* design and performance specifications and her crew's unparalleled expertise in raiding tactics make your command the only reasonable choice for this operation.

"I am, however, most impressed with your own personal character. You show every indication of being a man who is incapable of relenting when he has committed himself to a course of action, and that quality is more important to me than any statistical representations of your ship or crew."

"It depends on whether or not I believe the course of action to be right, sir."

Diettinger shrugged. "Of course. Let me then convince you of the rightness of this phase of Sauron System's defense." The Dictator finished with a wry smile.

Diettinger entered several keystrokes that set the holo-image of Ostia turning slowly, and as it did, dozens of blue-white dots became illuminated just beneath the surface of the gas giant's image.

Three hours later, Hawksley left the briefing room. To his surprise, Vessel First Rank Mara Emory was waiting for him in the outer hall.

"Hello, Mara," Hawksley's smile for her had none of its usual irony; in the past few weeks they had been ever more in each other's company and each other's beds, and Hawksley had the envious glances of dozens of other men and his own cracked ribs and bruises to prove it. Mara was beautiful, attentive, passionate . . . and a Sauron, after all.

She frowned slightly as she took his arm and walked with him toward the shuttle wing of the complex. There was something in the privateer's look, something that had perhaps been there since the day she had met him, yet had remained indefinable to her. She felt that she had missed some important decision that had long since been made in Ian Hawksley's heart, and soon it would be put into effect.

But not tonight.

"I have missed you, Ian," Mara said quietly. It would not do at all to discuss Hawksley's meeting with Diettinger. The Dictator had neither time nor interest in paranoia, and made no use of the apparatus of surveillance, but that apparatus remained intact nevertheless, and imprudence was as unwise as ever.

"I've missed you, too, my dear," Hawksley answered.

"I sent my Second Rank back to the *Damans* aboard my shuttle. I assured him you could take me back in yours."

"And he did not seem at all surprised to hear it, I will wager." Hawksley glanced about them as they passed through the security gate to the shuttle area. "You're a wicked girl, Mara."

Mara laughed, shaking her head. "You Burgessers have the strangest reticence about sex, Ian. As bad as the Imperial Court, or so I've heard." They stepped onto a small tram and were whisked away toward the bay holding *Lady Fairfax*, Hawksley's personal shuttle. "You're a wonderful lover and we care for each other very deeply. Letting people know about it is simply a social courtesy."

Hawksley gave her a look.

Mara shrugged. "It's true. It allows them to modify their own demands on our time to accommodate us. You wouldn't *expect* an investment banker to be socially available during standard business hours, nor an avid tennis player when a busy court opens . . . what's funny?"

Hawksley was rubbing his eyes as they stepped out onto *Lady Fairfax's* loading dock. "Ah. Nothing, darlin'. Nothing at all..."

They stepped into the cabin of the shuttle, and Mara glanced around approvingly. "Burgess'

shipwrights design everything with so much more elegance than Saurons do.” She stretched out on a long couch and smiled up at him. “Comfort, too. Come here.”

Hawksley stood next to Emory as the cabin door sealed behind him; Mara took his hand in hers.

“Don’t you need to get back to the *Damaris*?” he asked.

“Not immediately. Besides, your shuttle won’t have clearance to leave for hours, yet.”

“I could request priority clearance . . . ouch.”

He was on the couch and pinned in half a second.

“One of these days, you’re going to forget your own strength and kill me,” he warned her with a smile.

“I guess you’ll have to teach me to behave, then.”

“Hmm. Not likely. First rule of mountain climbing: You must be stronger than the mountain.”

She laughed, hugged him tighter.

“Ow, ow, ow...”

“Sorry.”

“No, it’s not too bad.”

“How’s this?”

“Better...”

“And this?”

“Ahh... *much* better...”

Lady Fairfax missed two more launch clearance windows, and didn’t leave for four hours. She remained berthed at *Damans* for six more after that.

Twenty

I

Alone, sitting in the dark at his desk, Diettinger allowed himself a few moments of First Stage Sleep and pondered his meeting with Hawksley.

“Dictator,” Hawksley had said when it was over, “Do you know very much about ancient history?”

“Some. My Second Rank is really quite an expert on the subject, actually. Why do you ask?”

“There was a general on Earth - Tabletop-lineage, but we won’t hold that against him - named Grant during the Civil War - ”

“Which Civil War?”

Hawksley had looked up. “*The Civil War*, Dictator. For anyone with Burgess’ blood, there has only ever been one. Another reason for our ongoing feud with anyone from Tabletop, by the way. In any case, one of his officers, upon hearing the battle commands for the day, voiced the opinion that, if he ‘understood his order aright’, it could mean the sacrifice of every man under his command.”

“I know this story,” Diettinger told him.

“Then you know the general’s reply.”

Diettinger had nodded. “Yes, Captain Hawksley. I do.”

Hawksley had smiled, that look of fatalistic amusement had crossed his face again, and he had taken his leave.

Now Diettinger was thinking of the hundreds of thousands of men and women under his command, each of whom bore orders not so dissimilar from Hawksley, nor from those issued by General Ulysses S. Grant, dead and buried almost eight hundred years before.

And here, today, almost eight hundred years later, Diettinger’s own reply was no different than Grant’s: *I am glad, sir, that you understand my order aright. . .*

Hawksley sighed, looking around the bridge. His crew were as silent as he, all of them bent to the tasks at hand.

It was not a bad plan, Hawksley knew. It had even succeeded in generating a spark of enthusiasm in him, and that had only happened one other time in the last five years, since - well, since the battle at Holcroft System. Diettinger’s plan was intuitive, flexible, and best of all, if it worked it would claim the lives of tens of thousands of Imperials.

Coming back to himself, Hawksley loosened his grip on the armrest of his acceleration couch, and thought about the only other thing that had sparked any joy in him during this last long half-decade.

“Navigator.”

“Aye, Captain.”

“Station fix, please, relative to the *Damaris*”

“Station fix, aye. Seventeen billion kilometers to starboard of *Damaris*, our heading zero-niner-seven degrees, plus twenty-seven thousand kilometers.”

Further away than I thought, Hawksley thought. He looked out again, his gaze drawn to a line of flickering blue light: the maneuvering drive exhausts of fuel tankers strung out between Sauron and Ostia in a continuous line.

Closer, soon, perhaps.

By dictatorial edict, no ships were allowed within five hundred thousand kilometers of any Alderson Point. A small Coalition corvette had tested this injunction a few days previously, and had blown up, lost with all hands.

Speculation soon spread throughout the Fleet that some new form of mine had been deployed, one which would destroy or at least cripple any Imperials as they entered Sauron space. No attempt was made to allay these rumors among the Coalition ships, but it had been Vessel Second Rank Althene Adame herself, conning the *Fomoria* during one of Diettinger’s rare rest periods, who had given the order to destroy the corvette.

During communications system upgrades by Sauron Technical Rankers, every Coalition vessel had been secretly fitted with a special device. The larger part of this device would transmit a signal to the Sauron flagship if the vessel carrying it was preparing to engage its Jump drives. If such signal was not approved by the *Fomoria* - and none would be - the much smaller part activated a scuttle command to the ship’s computer. Althene knew that the corvette had been attempting to desert, and that simply would not do at all.

II

Cyborg Rank Koln had taken his last meeting with the other Cyborgs of the High Council. He was now

immersed in work of such magnitude and complexity that even his capacity for concentration was taxed. Diettinger's EVA commando tactic had been an important innovation in the war; even so, it had benefited from various improvements in certain aspects of its application, improvements which Koln had devised. The Dictator had been impressed, and Koln's alterations had been implemented throughout the Fleet. Despite himself, Koln had found it impossible to suppress a sense of pleasure at Diettinger's approval, and addressed this very dangerous symptom in a communiqué.

Diettinger is an excellent commander, (Koln had sent the hard-copy message to Ulm, Saentz and Manche with a courier) as well as possessing the gift of inspiring fervent loyalty from even the most rational of Soldiers. Whatever his genetic deficiencies, this fact should not be ignored, as it represents a definite asset for this phase of the defense of the Homeworld, and a dangerous liability for our eventual overt dominance of Sauron society. Upon successful resolution of the coming engagement, popular support for Diettinger will be at its peak, and his voluntary relinquishment of the emergency office of Dictator will then allow him to be legally appointed First Citizen. It would not be in our interests to subvert such legal procedures at that time, so our first priority following cessation of hostilities with the Empire must be Diettinger's elimination via some plausible accident. Despite the paucity of vessels remaining in the fleet, I strongly recommend that such accident be the loss of Fomoria with all hands, as this will also eliminate Diettinger's command staff, who comprise the bulk of his closest acquaintances and supporters.

Koln did not bother to consider the possibility that Sauron might not survive such an invasion, as the Empire was expected to mount, without being wholly dominated by that Empire thereafter. In his opinion, such a society would not be worth living in, even if it were prepared to let him do so.

Which, he knew, it was not.

III

The predominant emotion of any intelligent being before going into battle is fear, and Saurons were no exception. Superb training and a justifiable sense of superiority tempered their apprehension, but it had long ago been deemed counter-productive to breed it out of them completely.

Nevertheless, Communications Fifth Rank Boyle was in too high spirits to allow for much in the way of dread. His formal posting to the *Fomoria* had been authorized that morning, and he had immediately informed his biological parents, as well as the other members of his state-administered crèche. Family life had altered greatly down the years since Diettinger's parents had sent him off to academy, and Boyle's line had not a hundredth of Diettinger's own provenance as a Firstholder heir. Even so, Boyle had received over two dozen messages of congratulations and pride in his achievement. The *Fomoria* was a prestigious berth, and what his familial relations might, by comparison with Diettinger's, lack in intimacy was more than compensated with by their enthusiasm.

Boyle had long since resigned himself to the status of Fifth Ranker. It was no dishonor, simply the reality of his genes. An act of heroism or some procedural innovation on his part would surely raise his rank, but he would always be stigmatized by his Genetic Preference Rating and Fertility codes. His services as a parent were by no means discouraged, but the Sauron gene pool would have to dwindle substantially before they would ever be in any great demand.

Boyle stiffened in his chair. That last thought had reminded him of something he'd forgotten to do.

One of Boyle's genetic drawbacks was a memory which the Breedmasters had declared "less than acceptable" for higher command responsibilities. To overcome his problems with retention and organization, Boyle lived and died by the notes in his datapad daily planner, which device he consulted now.

When he had come aboard *Fomoria* with other survivors from the destroyed *Leviathan* during the battle at Tanith, it had been in the company of several Occupation Breedmasters and their stock of fertilized Sauron ova. This material had originally been destined for the wombs of Tanith's human-norm females, once that planet had been captured. With *Leviathan's* destruction, her part in that aspect of the battle plan had been canceled.

But all those ova are still in the Fomoria's holds, Boyle realized. He had meant to have the materials down-shipped to Sauron, but could not remember if he'd done so.

He keyed up the date and "to-do" list. There it was:

Materials Log: 70 units/OBs/Bay Seven, Section A-19.

OBS were the Occupation Breedmasters, units were the number of suitcase-sized containers which held their caste's peculiar weapons for the subjugation of conquered worlds, and the location note showed them secured deep within the best shielded area of the ship's stores.

Boyle flagged the entry with a note to inform Diettinger or Second Rank Adame of the situation in the morning report.

The First Rank will find some place to put them...

In his cabin, Fleet First Rank Galen Diettinger, legally appointed Dictator of Sauron, lay on his cot beneath a dim light and turned a small packet end over end in his hands. It was a holo of his parents on their last anniversary, and it had arrived by special courier that morning. A claw from his trophy Grizzly was in a small packet with the image, and a note which read, in his mother's handwriting: *My son, we have always been proud of you.* And in his father's: *Good Luck.*

His father, he knew, did not believe in luck. Few Saurons did. And his parents' use of the past tense told him that when the first bombs fell on Sauron, the last Diettingers that had remained on the Homeworld would not hear them.

His home, built by Brennus Diettinger so long ago, would be quiet now, the rooms of the estate dark. His stolid Sauron Grizzly would still be standing watch over the polished brass telescope. When the first thermonuclear flash of heat and light coursed up the valley, it would pass through his mother's Family Garden, up the wide back steps, through the stout halls of Sauron marble. The grizzly would disappear in an irradiated flurry of fur and scales, armature, bone and smoke, and the telescope would first quiver and then fluoresce in a shimmer of vaporizing metal. The doors would go next, the light and heat being absorbed by their black sheen in one radiant instant, to consume them in the next.

The blast wave would follow and, for all his visionary nature, no storm which old Brennus Diettinger had ever experienced, or even imagined, would have prepared him for building against this. The hill would be scoured clean of home, headstones, trees, grass, soil, stripped down to bedrock; everything disappearing in seconds . . . and that would be all.

As Dictator, of course, Diettinger could have had his parents brought aboard the *Fomoria*.

But to what purpose? There is no assurance that we will not be the first ship destroyed in the coming battle. No assurance that my battle plan will succeed or, if it does not, that my fail-safe plan will work, nor if it does, they would even wish to be here to see it.

He knew what his parents had wanted. They had chosen it even before summoning the courier for the holo. Floating in the microgravity of the chamber was the notification from the registrar of his parents' district that he had been named legal inheritor of all title to the family estate and holdings. So had passed the last of the Diettingers on Sauron...

Diettinger rose and went to his desk, removing the datachip he had hidden there weeks ago. He put it

on the table next to his computer panel, and signaled the bridge.

“Second Rank here, Dictator.”

“Initiate Phase One computer security throughout the Fleet.”

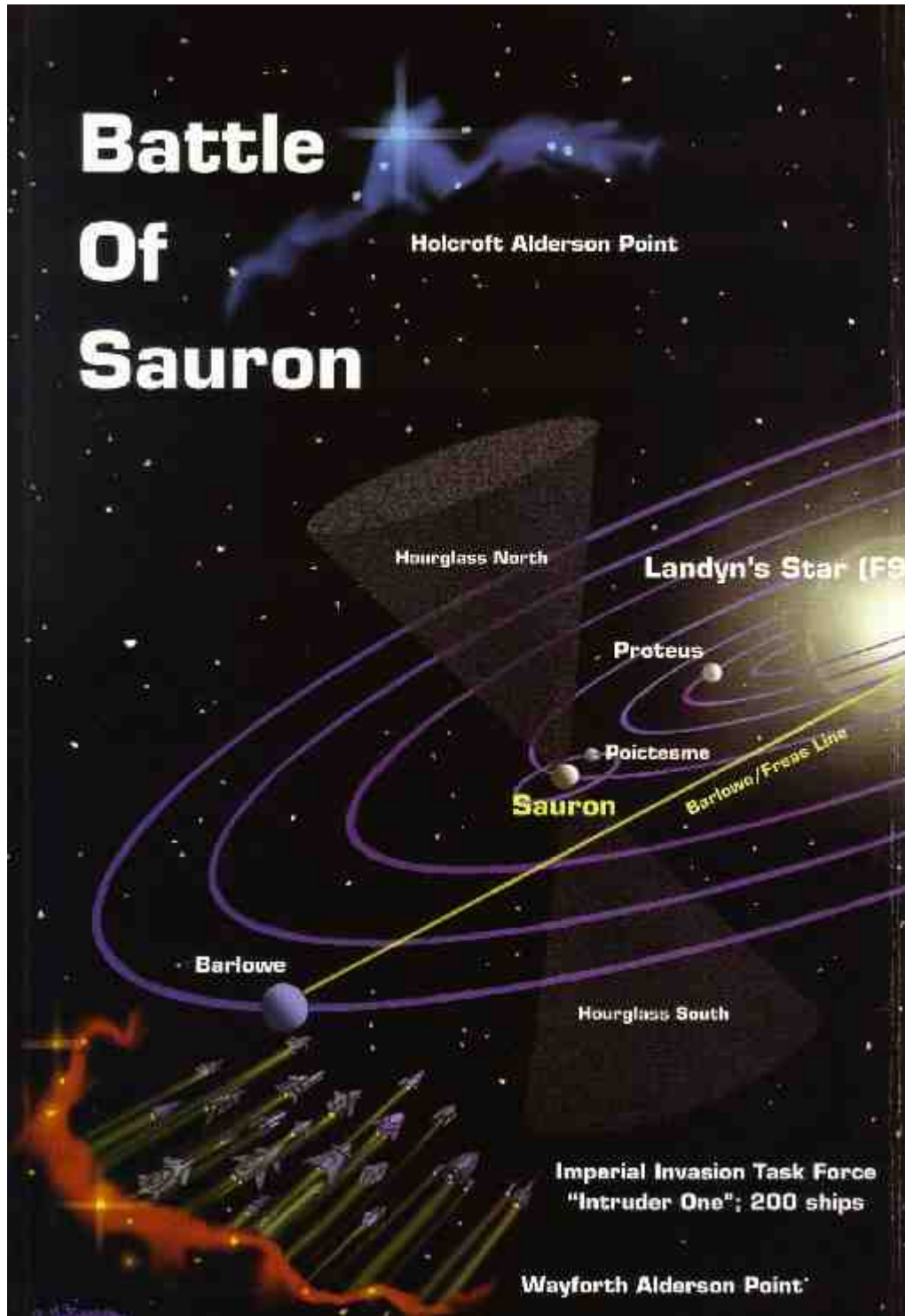
“Acknowledged, Dictator. Phase One lock activated.”

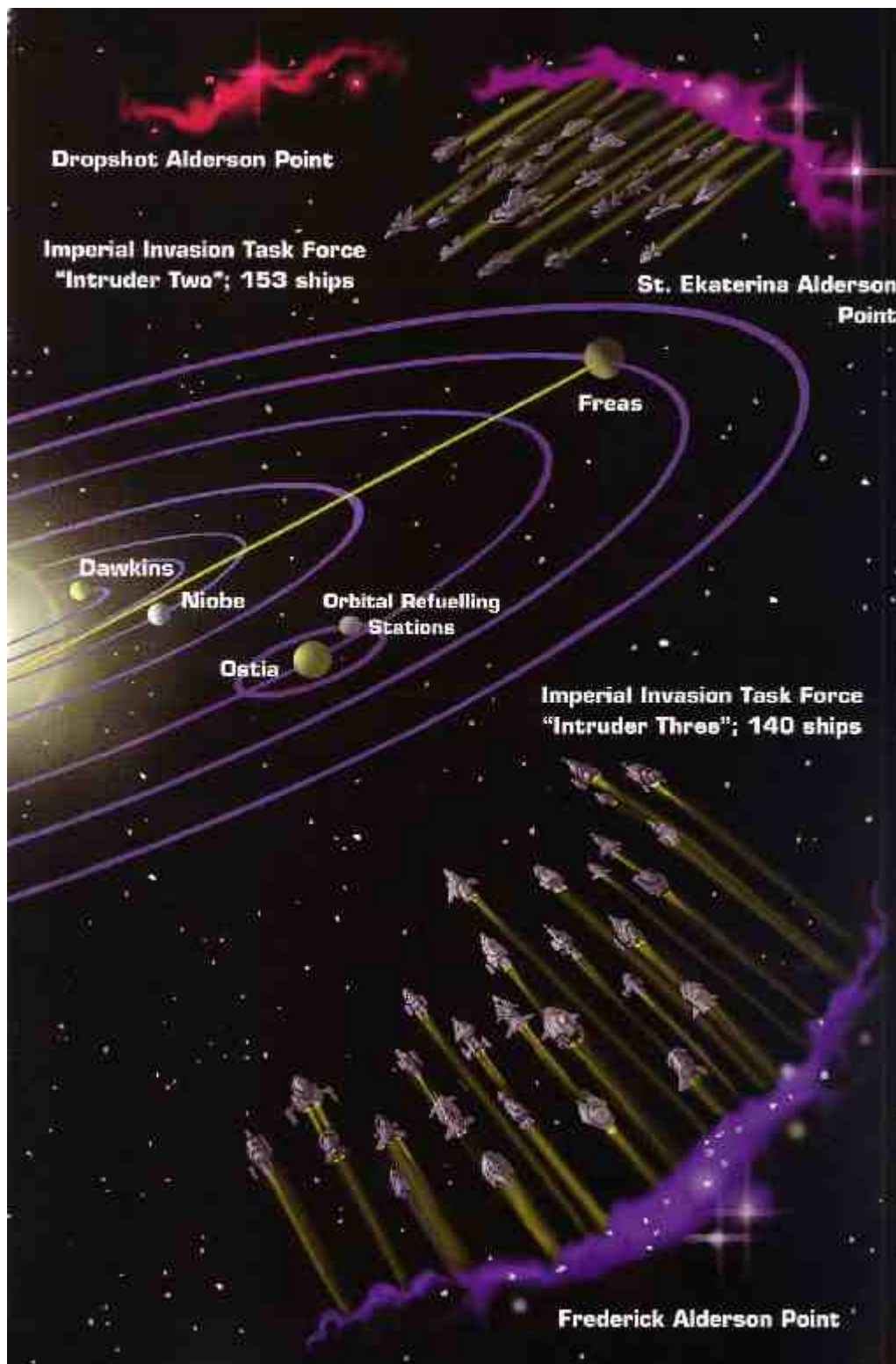
Even by laser, it would take almost two hours to pass on the order and receive confirmation from all the task forces in the fleet, but the *Fomoria* went into security protocol at that moment. From now until Diettinger released them, no ship’s computer could access another without the codes issued by Diettinger himself two days before, now locked within the safe of every captain. The *Fomoria*’s computer itself could not be accessed at all by anyone off-ship, at any level of security.

Upon confirmation of this lockout, Diettinger called up the navigational database, inserted his datachip, and downloaded the last third of the special program he had written. He sealed it within a file labeled “Diettinger,” and when the computer requested a password, he smiled briefly and gave it the best one he could think of.

He looked out the viewport, but he could not see Sauron from here.

Just as well, he thought, and went to sleep.





I

The invasion from space of an inhabited, defended world is the single most complex undertaking in all of human experience. The mapping of the human genotype was a moderately difficult crossword puzzle by comparison. Given that analogy, it was fitting that the Saurons were the first humans to master the techniques arising from both; given the uses to which they had put those achievements, it was likewise fitting that they should suffer the one as a result of their abuse of the other.

The Fleet ran on Sauron planetary time, its activities synchronized with the chronometers of Sauron's capital city of Utumno. At 0400 hours on the morning of December 1 - a Saturday on the Homeworld - aboard the reconnaissance destroyer *Reno* of Task Force *Damaris*, Sensors Third Rank Munoz' screen abruptly flashed red.

"Multiple signals at St. Ekaterina Alderson Point," Munoz declared; "Minefield telemetry shows seventeen initial detonations and counting."

The duty officer confirmed that the *Reno*'s computer had automatically relayed the alert first to the *Damaris*, then on to the *Fomoria* and the Homeworld, and every station in between. That done, she began to record the number and composition of the initial intruder forces.

No warning from Sauron Traffic Control would be forthcoming; every remaining Sauron and Coalition vessel that could be accounted for was already in-system. If these were indeed friendly stragglers, that would just be too bad.

Crawling along at only the speed of light, it would take over fifty-three minutes for the message lasers to reach the command units of the fleet, another hour for word to reach those ships on the far side of the Sauron System. By the time the first Sauron vessel began to respond, the intruders would already be recovered from Jump Lag and underway. Had Task Force *Damaris* been on-station at the Alderson points, a further billion kilometers distant, this response time would have been doubled.

Lacking the necessary superiority of vessels to engage the intruders on arrival, Diettinger had ordered all Jump Zones to be seeded with the highest-yield nuclear weapons ever developed; hundreds of each scattered along the arc of each Alderson Point. Many of these would detonate immediately, others would stagger their ignition to maintain high levels of energy flowing into the Langston Fields of the intruding ships. Still more would lie in wait for succeeding waves of Imperial vessels.

Mining such points was standard practice - though the density employed by the Saurons here was far beyond doctrine. Even so, it was usually dealt with by turnabout; an attacking force would first send through unmanned drones, comprised of an Alderson Drive package strapped to a high-yield nuclear weapon of its own. Such bombs were armed and detonated by a simple mechanical timer and chemical explosives, less sophisticated than the machinery used on the first atomic devices almost seven hundred years earlier. The madness had method, however; while Jump Lag might disrupt computers horribly, it had no effect whatsoever on the physical components of a wind-up clock. Such weapons, arriving as they did immediately prior to the fleet which sent them, were generally referred to as "precedents."

This time, however, there seemed to be no such precedents. The only telemetry received by detonating thermonuclear weapons showed wavelengths consistent with the Sauron versions of such devices.

Diettinger was not surprised to learn this, less than an hour later. He read the initial reports, and only nodded. "They'll be saving their nuclear weapons" he said quietly, almost to himself. Though his Second Rank had heard. The report concluded with Fleet First Rank Emory's signal that Task Force *Damaris* was changing station according to its mission orders.

"Signal to Hourglass North," Diettinger told his Fleet Communications Ranks. "Initiate Delta/Sierra maneuver."

"Delta/Sierra" referred to the first letters of the Dropshot and St. Ekaterina Alderson Points, each on the same side of the orbital plane occupied by Sauron itself; "Hourglass North" was the concentration of System Defense Boats and other craft arrayed over Sauron's northern hemisphere. Diettinger's order was relayed immediately to the cone-shaped formation of ships, initiating maneuvers designed to allow it to react most efficiently to this first Imperial threat. Twenty-five thousand kilometers above Sauron's north pole, the ship at the point of Hourglass North fired attitude thrusters, bringing its main engines

about to point toward the gravity well of the Homeworld.

At each successive level of Hourglass North with its ever greater numbers of System Defense Boats, the maneuver was repeated. Eventually each ship in the formation sat motionless on the same bearing, at a right angle to the plane of the ecliptic. Upon completion of the order, the weapon batteries of the entire formation were pointed directly away from the angle of approach that every naval commander knew must be taken in any attack on Sauron System.

Diettinger watched as the confirmation signals continued. Initial signals from the St. Ekaterina Alderson Point showed fifty-one Imperial vessels. Eight had been destroyed when their exits from the Alderson Point had placed them within meters of several of the high-yield mines. There had still been no indication that the Empire was sending any nuclear precedents of its own ahead of the invasion fleet.

Diettinger considered the implications of that: *Alderson Drives are expensive; perhaps the days when the Empire could afford to literally throw them away to provide a margin of safety for her ships entering hostile space are truly gone, after all.*

Which told him that the Imperial economy was collapsing. With the Imperial Navy engaged throughout known space and ravaged by decades of war, the great Merchant Houses could no longer be guaranteed safe lanes of travel for their cargo vessels. They would be entrenching, withdrawing funds from interstellar interests, consolidating their operations within single systems, or among Jump-Close systems which could provide strong mutual support. Either way, they would be riding out this storm with no room in their lifeboats for politicians.

It has ever been thus, he thought. First merchants and guildsmen, later corporations, then interstellar traders, all reached the point where their wealth became so great they were convinced it was indispensable to the very governments which had provided them with the security to attain it. Throughout history, all these entities in their varied forms ultimately attempted to manipulate those governments, always with mixed results and always doomed to failure. *Because the Empire will deal with them no differently than we did*, Diettinger mused, *when the Unified Trade Bloc which we created as a counter to the Imperial-backed Merchant Houses turned on us.*

The Sauron High Council had not even bothered to nationalize the operations of the Bloc. It had simply replaced each governing panel of each mercantile board of directors with a Sauron governor. The act was authorized not by shareholder votes but by edict of the High Council, and the Unified Trade Bloc, already Sauron in everything but name, ceased to exist as an even remotely independent entity.

But Diettinger knew that the Saurons had societal conditioning on their side. Generations of doing business under Sauron influence or outright authority had more or less prepared the members of the Trade Bloc for such actions. The Empire, on the other hand, had let its Merchants run wild on too slack a leash for too long. They would not take kindly to being reined in, away from their illicit trade with the Outworlds - even, through middlemen, with Sauron itself. And many of the Empire's great Merchant Houses maintained very large "security forces" of their own which were, in fact, nothing less than very well equipped private armies.

"Messy." Diettinger said aloud, imagining the possibilities. *But not something we can count on to be of any help to us, at the moment.*

"Dictator?"

His Second Rank was looking at him, and he realized he had spoken aloud. He ignored the question. "Signal Task Force *Falkenberg* to proceed to Phase Two."

Alderson's development of a drive which could exploit stellar tramlines had made travel between stars not just possible, but effectively instantaneous. But besides Jump Lag, another side effect was the

limiting of interstellar communication to the speed of physical travel. Once in-system, however, communication was still restricted to the slow crawl of message lasers traveling at lightspeed. That made the ships that waged wars to control those tramlines, for all their sophistication and weaponry, no more than scaled-up replicas of the flag-reliant square riggers of a past millennium. Given the firepower of the current millennium, however, requiring commanders to wait for engagement authorization under such circumstances would have been their death warrants.

Diettinger's command station aboard the *Fomoria* was in near-Sauron orbit, two billion kilometers from Task Force *Damaris*. Because all communications were carried by message laser, the combat intelligence he was receiving and acting upon was already an hour old when it reached him. Aboard the *Damaris*, Emory would have moved to engage the Imperials immediately, according to plan. Her ships had probably been in combat for forty-five minutes already. It would be at least fifteen minutes more before Diettinger could expect to receive any data on the size and composition of the initial invasion force, or how well TF *Damaris* was faring in its engagement with it.

II

All things considered, *Damaris* was doing pretty well. The namesake of her task force had beaten off three direct attacks by Imperial vessels while maintaining a steady pressure against the known exit zones of the St. Ekaterina Alderson Point. Vessel First Rank Emory rotated her acceleration couch clockwise, raising and lowering her gaze as she did so, seeing everything of the battle around her. As in the command rooms on the Homeworld, Sauron warships used "immersion displays" in their bridges, full-surround projectors which replaced the walls, floor and ceiling of the combat command center with super-high resolution projections of the area of space which surrounded the vessel.

With such a display, Emory could see that she was still in control of the battle. The Imperials had failed to secure the area of space surrounding the St. Ekaterina Alderson Point; they were in fact being gradually contained and ground down by the ships of TF *Damaris*. The encircling maneuvers of Emory's subordinate commanders on both wings of the formation were closing in around this first Imperial fleet to enter Sauron space.

"First Rank." One of the Bridge Sensor Ranks called out to Emory, whose gaze continued to flicker across the image of the battle spread before her. "Speak."

"Multiple precedents detonating at Dropshot Alderson Point."

For the briefest moment, Emory clenched her teeth in frustration. Then Sauron discipline and her own intellect asserted themselves. "Communications."

"Ready."

"Signal all elements of the task force to disengage and fall back to Sector Nine, position one-one-eight-eight."

"Affirm."

In perhaps ten minutes, Emory thought to herself, *these Imperials we've been mauling will realize we're breaking off and think their reinforcements have saved them*. She reviewed Diettinger's briefing to the task force commanders, for the hundredth time seeing its logic, for the thousandth time dreading that it would fail in spite of it.

I hope to God this works...

III

Diettinger's staff was nearly overwhelmed by the Dictator's demands for minute-by-minute updates on every sensor report of the battle. Within two minutes of the first Imperial entry at the Dropshot

Alderson Point, three full Imperial fleets had emerged from as many different Alderson routes. Two Sauron task forces attached to the *Keegan* and the *Soult* had been nearly overwhelmed before breaking off and regrouping a scant 800 million kilometers from the orbit of the Homeworld.

As the Sauron defensive perimeter contracted, the laser-borne message updates had less space to cover, making the information they carried progressively more current, while the sheer volume of data was increasing as well. Diettinger's Communications Rankers were transmitting data on the composition of the enemy intruders as fast as humanly possible - which for Sauron humans was very fast, indeed.

Diettinger drank it all in through the vast immersion display on the bridge of the *Fomoria*. Switching perspectives from time to time, enhancing some images, deleting others, he began to subtly adjust the display as the battle progressed. Over five hundred Imperial warships had entered Sauron System in the last three hours! Where the Empire had found that many ships, he could not even begin to guess - although one of his aides pointed out that at least one Imperial fleet element of over twenty ships had been positively identified as being from Aquitaine.

Diettinger had nodded and spoken for the first time in forty minutes. "The Imperials will not trust them; the Aquitaine fleet will be sacrificed to engage our larger vessels. Signal the task force commanders that they are not to oblige the Imperial planners if this occurs. The priority remains the Imperial fleet elements."

All the while, he watched. As the sphere of the engagement contracted, Diettinger compensated by adjusting *Fomoria's* Tactical Display downward in detail.

Looking up briefly from his station, Communications Fifth Rank Boyle noticed that the Tactical Display looked odd; it was too - *tidy* was the only word that came to his mind before his attention was demanded by another rush of signals from ships now only light minutes away.

Watching, concentrating, unaware of the gesture, Diettinger half-raised his hand, and when he saw what he'd been looking for, slapped it against the armrest of his acceleration couch.

"Communications."

"Ready." *Fomoria's* senior Communications rank answered, simultaneously rerouting all his own monitoring duties to Boyle's station.

"Signal all fuel tankers on the Ostia run to initiate Plan Green. Signal Hourglass North and Hourglass South to go to Phase Two."

"Affirm."

Communications' own gaze swept the Tactical Display as he sent the orders back to the System Defense Boats arrayed over the poles of Sauron. He noticed the same patterns as Boyle, but to him - born of a higher-caste crèche, better educated, more carefully groomed - they meant something else entirely.

The Dictator's plan might work, he thought; we might live through this, after all...

Hourglasses North and South mirrored one another in their maneuvers: Maximum thrust directly away from Sauron, above and below the Homeworld at right angles to the plane of the ecliptic of Sauron System. On reaching their prearranged positions, together with Diettinger's other task forces, they now comprised a flattened sphere of Sauron fleet elements surrounding the Homeworld. Evenly distributed over the several trillion cubic kilometers of the Homeworld System, the Sauron fleet was in perfect position to mount attacks in strength on any major concentration of Imperial vessels, most of which had yet to fully regroup themselves.

Instead the Sauron fleet kept station, and waited.

IV

It had been three days since Hawksley had received Diettinger's Phase Two implementation order, breaking off and relinquishing command to the apparent relief of the *Banshee's* Captain Connolly.

Aboard the *Falkenberg*, Hawksley's aide had brought him coffee. He had slept briefly and not at all well, and the first alarms of battle had been welcome. The corridors of the *Falkenberg* were dimly lit, her crew spoke in hushed tones, moved carefully; all for no good reason whatsoever. Where the raider now kept station, subterfuge was unnecessary. But her crew was made-up mostly of men and gentlemen from Burgess. There, hunting was still revered as sport, and wherever the hunt, whatever the quarry, habits and traditions carry over and die hard. The hunter's blind was both, and a Burgess favorite.

Hawksley moved the body length from his bunk to his desk and sat down with his coffee. He glanced up to his porthole, a Burgess shipwright's eight-inch diameter concession to the romance of space travel; but there was, as usual, nothing to see.

There was a soft chime from his door. "Come in," Hawksley answered, and his Executive Officer Commander Willoughby entered with a crooked grin.

"Good morning, sir. Skipper, we have inbound signals, bearing 292 degrees mark 315. The readings look like couriers," he added, smiling.

Hawksley took the datapad from his XO and sipped his coffee. It was Jamaica Blue Mountain, seized - and, he reflected proudly, the word was indeed "seized," not "liberated," but "seized" - from an Imperial *Phidippides*-class courier. Incredible that, with the Empire collapsing around their ears, those idiots at Court could still find such nonsense to waste men and ships on, such as maintaining their exclusive claim to one particular type of coffee bean. Obviously, he'd run his dueling sabre through the right Duke.

"Closing?" Hawksley asked.

The Exec nodded. "Speed consistent with couriers too, sir. It's difficult to get clean readings with all this interference, but we managed to track them enough to put it at seven-Gs."

Hawksley frowned, shook his head. "Look at the course. Two wide curves to the left, one to the right." "Could be evasive maneuvering?"

"Oh, it's evasive, all right, Exec; but it's not evasive enough to prevent a lock-on - these sensor logs prove that - and it's too erratic for couriers, they fly straight and fast and pick a clear lane before they start. Remember where we are and what's out there. No, my friend; I'm afraid those are Imperial heavy fighters - I'd say Legionnaire-class, from the looks of the exhaust spectrograph figures."

Willoughby grimaced, realizing that Hawksley was right. "And here we wallow in the muck and mire." Willoughby caught his CO's look and stopped himself. He had already lodged a bitter complaint over the special weapons packages Diettinger had ordered installed aboard *Falkenberg*; bitter, and futile. Despite the fact that the agile and graceful Burgess commerce raider now maneuvered like a crippled barge, Hawksley did not seem to share his XO's outrage. Truth be told, *Falkenberg* still had most of her speed - which was one of the reasons she'd drawn the short end of this particular duty stick.

Willoughby managed to keep the "I-told-you-so" tone out of his voice, and finished, "If they spot us, we could be in deep shit, skipper."

Hawksley looked out once more through the tiny porthole above his desk, at the sickly green-brown swirl beyond.

“We’re already deep in shit, Commander Willoughby.”

On the Sauron Homeworld the battle was also being monitored in SDD sector, the vast System Defense Display complex which had been built centuries before. Upgraded yearly, no one on Sauron had ever seriously considered that it would be necessary. Until now.

The members of the High Command watched, and wondered, and all of them, Sauron norm and Cyborg alike shared the same thought: What was Diettinger up to?

They watched as the Sauron Home System defense forces withdrew from the Alderson Jump Points, and ever more twinkling lights appeared, signaling the arrival of ever more Imperial ships.

Twenty-Two

I

“Imperial elements at station-keeping in the Alderson Jump zones” one of the Sensor Ranks reported. “Task Force *Damaris* reports no concentrated pursuit, harassing fighter activity only,”

“Enemy activity level Ostia?” Diettinger asked.

“Three under-strength squadrons of heavy fighters; reconnaissance sweep patterns.”

Diettinger’s eye’s narrowed, the patch over his empty left socket rasping against his brow. Hawksley, he thought, do not disappoint me...

The tactical display showed all six of Sauron’s Alderson Jump Points firmly in Imperial control. Their supply lines thus secured, the Imperials could now mount their offensive against the Sauron Homeworld almost at leisure. Shifting perspective, Diettinger watched as the pace of the tankers traveling between Sauron and Ostia slowed, then stopped. After a time, roughly half the displays indicating tanker ships began to come about to opposite headings, and soon the entire line of tankers - two hundred and seventeen in all - were on the same course; away from Sauron, toward Ostia, all to enter near orbit around the gas giant.

This was not immediately obvious, however. Tankers which carried liquified hydrogen were dispersed structures, a dozen spherical containers held together by massive lattice frameworks, with drive and attitude thrusters arrayed along their surface in patterns that looked random to everyone but the engineers who had designed them. Efficient they might be; lovely, they were not.

But their ungainly shape concealed an elegant capacity for vector maneuvering, and incidentally made it difficult to tell their fores from their afts when they were moving slowly, and impossible to do so when they were still, as now. In fact, the tankers had no such dimensions, being capable of moving along any axis drawn through their centers of mass and connected by any two of the eight monstrous thrusting engines which they bore.

Only Diettinger, and one other, knew which way the motionless tankers would go next - or, at least, which way they were supposed to go...

II

Sauron’s six Alderson Points had all been secured by the enemy. At each, Imperial warships consolidated their control of the space surrounding them while the flood of reinforcing vessels slowed to a trickle, then stopped. Scarcely seven days after the first Imperial nuclear precedents had emerged from the Alderson Points, the Empire of Man had closed the ring around the neck of its most hated enemy. The battle to come would break the might of Sauron forever, and if the Empire was to fall in that cause, few in its ranks felt the sacrifice a vain one.

Every Imperial sailor, marine, officer and midshipman in the armada had lost someone, somewhere to the Saurons or their allies. Every one of them was eager for the final drive against the Homeworld of the self-styled “super soldiers.” None of them wanted to die, but few expected to survive, and all of them, from Fleet Grand Admiral Ede down to Able-Spacer Murphy, were asking themselves the same question: “What are they waiting for?”

Cyborg Rank Manche had allowed a hint of annoyance in his voice when he asked the question, “What are they waiting for?” and Cyborg Rank Ulm ignored him out of spite. Ulm had been watching the tactical display in the High Command bunker on Homeworld for twelve hours, since taking over for Saentz who had been there for thirty-six previously - eventually, even Cyborgs needed sleep, Imperial invasions or not. Cyborgs were not loquacious, and never asked rhetorical questions. It was therefore part of their peculiar social structure that to presume such about another Cyborg’s inquiries was considered insulting.

Manche perceived Ulm’s disrespect, making a mental note to remember the slight and deal with it later. He walked slowly around the massive holographic immersion display, reviewing the suspended readouts of enemy ship numbers and wondering if there would be a *later*. In a week, neither the Imperial nor Sauron fleets had moved to engage one another. The Imperial bridgeheads in Sauron space had crawled forward from the Alderson Points, linking up and forming three vast task forces of more or less equal size. The term “bridgehead” had no rational basis whatsoever in terms of a space battle, nor did “beachhead” as applied to planetary positions secured after orbital invasions, but after seven centuries in space, humanity had yet to come up with any better ones.

Even without data displays, Manche could see that the Sauron Home Fleet was outnumbered by at least five to one. *Still, Diettinger is operating on interior lines, he considered. The enemy can only observe, communicate and react as fast as the speed of light will allow him; Diettinger is on the inside of that sphere of activity.*

Manche knew that meant the Dictator could be reacting to one event (in the literal, relativistic sense of the word) before it had been - or indeed *could* be - perceived by enemy forces on the far side of Sauron System.

He stopped abruptly. In fact, it was such an obvious advantage, he found it impossible to believe that the Imperial commander would not have thought of it and made some allowance for it. Turning, he strode directly through the center of the display, projected data streaming across his features and uniform in a rain of light.

Typical Cyborg, one of the technicians thought to himself, deft as a tank.

Ulm looked up, the faintest depression over his right brow; an awakening frown on the countenance of a human or Sauron-norm, it was the equivalent of a snarl from a Cyborg. “What?”

Manche leaned across Ulm’s console and addressed one of the Communications Rankers.”Direct link to the Dictator, immediately.”

“Not possible, Council Member Manche,” the Ranker explained, and it was only the fact of his being a Sauron that kept the terror from his voice. “The *Fomoria* is under communications blackout as per the orders of the Dictator.”

Manche calmed himself. It was not his responsibility - or place - to second-guess the legally appointed Dictator. In any case, he decided that Diettinger must surely have dealt with this consideration already.

Hadn’t he?

Manche returned his attention to the display and its representation of the relative fleet positions... then

to the relative positions of the worlds of Sauron System.. .then to the assets around and on those worlds.

He noted that the outer worlds of Freas and Barlowe bore no orbital forces of any kind, and began to wonder anew...

III

So far, Diettinger thought, *So good*. Every hour the Imperials delayed was another ounce on Sauron's side of the scale, a growing probability that his gamble could work. Reconnaissance and intelligence reports told him that the composition of the Imperial Fleets was exactly as he'd expected. An operation such as this required little in the way of innovation; in any case, intelligence reports indicated that despite the current five-to-one numerical advantage in vessels they enjoyed in this battle, they still had an Empire to control, after all. The requirements of doing so, while simultaneously invading Sauron, meant that the war had left the Empire with only a few more options than Sauron in the number and type of ships available - and thus, how they could be used.

Diettinger had been glad to see Hawksley had kept his nerve. Despite daily Imperial patrols across the upper gaseous atmosphere of Ostia, the *Falkenberg* had neither been discovered nor succumbed to the temptation to engage.

Assuming, of course, that the poor devil's ship hasn't been dragged into the gas giant's gravity well and crushed at Ostia's metallic ammonia core, Diettinger thought grimly.

Soon enough, the *Falkenberg* would be allowed to engage. Incommunicado via normal means, Hawksley would nevertheless receive a signal he could not possibly miss, and then the Burgess privateer would bring his ship into battle at what might prove to be the most crucial juncture. Hawksley's action could be no more than a Forlorn Hope, of course, but insofar as he was the hinge of Diettinger's plan, it was only fair that he have at least a remote possibility of survival. That was more than could be granted a great portion of the Sauron Fleet.

Second Rank had argued that no non-Sauron could be trusted with the mission Diettinger had given Hawksley. But it was crucial that a non-Sauron ship carry out the action, and *Falkenberg's* configuration and telemetry were so similar to those of an Imperial vessel that she was actually safer engaging close in with the enemy than fighting alongside her allied Sauron vessels. The few seconds, perhaps even minutes of confusion at the appearance of an apparently friendly vessel might prevent the Imperial commanders from reacting soon enough.

Whether or not Hawksley, his ship or his crew lived or died was not a factor in Diettinger's planning, of course. He was not a reckless man, and did not stake the success of his battle plans on the sacrifice - or the survival - of individuals participating in them. But it would please him if the man from Burgess somehow found a way to live through this.

It will please me a great deal if any of us do, he thought.

"Code Red," one of the Sensor Ranks declared, almost startling him. "All elements."

Diettinger watched the numbers of the display, hanging in mid-air, flickering as the Imperial Fleet elements began to accelerate inwards from the Jump Points, reducing their relative distance to Sauron, the Home Fleet, the *Fomoria*, and Fleet First Rank Galen Diettinger's last gamble in a long war.

Or perhaps, he reconsidered, *the next-to-last...*

Diettinger adjusted his point of view within the immersion display, sweeping across the battlefield to a point above and behind the largest of the approaching Imperial fleet's three elements, designated on the display as Intruder One. In four hours the lead ships of that element would reach the actual perimeter of

Sauron System: The orbital path of Barlowe, outermost of Landyn's Star's seven planets.

Intruder One would never actually come anywhere near Barlowe itself. The small planet had long since passed the point in its orbit which would intersect with Intruder One's present flight path.

"Intruder Two," Diettinger addressed his Sensors Ranker, "Enhance."

Being the first large Imperial element engaged by Emory with Task Force *Damaris*, so now reduced from one hundred fifty-three to one hundred and twelve contacts, Intruder Two was seventy-percent the strength of Intruder One's even two hundred enemy vessels. *But the ship classes are larger overall*, Diettinger noted. *A follow-on force, intended to exploit a breakthrough ...*

"Second Rank. Evaluation: Remaining Imperial force elements."

Second Rank did not take her eyes from her own data displays; her report had been ready for the Dictator ten minutes after the Imperial elements had formed up in line of battle: "The remaining Imperial force, Intruder Three, is the smallest element, at one hundred and forty ships. The majority of these are faster, lighter vessels, comprising what Imperial strategists have called an "operational maneuver group." If Intruder One's mission is to pierce the Sauron fleet defense and allow Intruder Two's forces to pass through that opening and press the attack on the Homeworld, then Intruder Three's mission will most likely be to operate on the perimeter of the battle as a harassing force, causing as much damage as possible while constituting a potent reserve of firepower with a rapid response capability."

Second Rank finally turned to look at Diettinger. "This is implied by the preponderance of *Chinthe-class* light cruiser escorts - extremely fast vessels with high firepower-to-tonnage ratios - comprising Intruder Three."

"Possibly a ruse, Dictator," Second Rank continued."The Imperials may be holding their motherships out-system as a strategic reserve." Second's voice lowered, and now it was her turn to frown. "Or they may be using them as point defenses elsewhere in the Empire. The Outworld Coalition has, to our knowledge, signed no separate peace with the Imperials. The presence of motherships at key systems along the Jump routes would be an effective deterrent to large scale "Outie" raids, while allowing the Empire to deploy the bulk of its Fleet here."

Diettinger frowned. *Chinthes* were most commonly used as escorts for motherships; there being no such large ships among the forces of Intruder Three, Second Rank's assessment seemed reasonable. But there were fewer than ten motherships among all the other Imperial elements combined, and since their appearance ten years earlier, motherships - and the extremely potent attack fighters they carried - had rapidly grown to dominate Imperial fleet tactics. Over the years, Sauron naval strategy had given elimination of motherships top priority in engagements with Imperial forces, but not enough to explain the current lack of such vessels here, at this most crucial of the Empire's battles.

Diettinger nodded, not entirely convinced. He looked back to the immersion display; at this point in their respective orbital years, Freas and Barlowe were on opposite sides of Landyn's star, the sun of Homeworld. A line drawn between the two worlds would barely miss the system's central body, passing comfortably within the gravity well of the F9 star. Diettinger keyed in a command to draw just such a line now. The beam leaped between the displays showing Freas and Barlowe's positions; on one side, toward the galactic core, were Dawkins and Niobe, Landyn's first and third worlds, with half the asteroid belt beyond them. On the other, away from the core and trailing, lay Landyn's star itself, then Proteus, Sauron and Ostia.

Intruder One, on a bearing from the Wayforth Alderson Point, was coming from Coreward, and would cross that line - if it maintained its course for Sauron - at almost the same moment it entered the fringes

of the asteroid belt defense zone. Intruder Two, coming from the Dropshot and St. Ekaterina Alderson Points and heading straight for Ostia, would cross it at a point nearly equidistant from the gas giant and the asteroid belt perimeter. On entering orbit at Ostia, Intruder Two would be much closer to the asteroid field than to the Freas/Barlowe line, and Diettinger decided to let it pass over without incident; Hawksley's *Falkenberg* and the units waiting to support it should suffice to deal with that element of the Imperial forces.

As always, the real worry continued to be the enemy unit whose intentions were unknown; in this case, Intruder Three.

"Sensors."

"Ready."

"Display projected intersections of Intruders One and Two with Freas/ Barlowe line."

"Affirm."

Now green traces of light stretched ahead of the Intruder icons, datalines above them displaying velocities and timetables. Diettinger saw that Intruder One would reach the line in sixteen hours. Intruder Two would cross it in twelve, but not be in position to attempt to secure Ostia for another six.

"Signals."

"Ready."

"Send Task Force *Keegan*: Engage Intruder Two at Freas/Barlowe line. Delay enemy arrival in Ostia zone for four hours, fifteen minutes."

If Diettinger's first plan worked against Intruder One, it would take almost half-an-hour for the event to be perceived by Intruder Two; or indeed, for any laser-borne message from the former to reach the latter.

And if it works well, I want Intruder Two's ships to be too thoroughly committed to come to their comrades' aid.

Twenty-Three

I

The Keegan and her escorts leaped toward the Imperial ships of Intruder Two. Outnumbered three to one, Vessel First Rank Dannevar was determined to make up in ferocity what he lacked in numbers.

Not a reckless man by nature, Dannevar was fully aware of the value of such tactics against numerically superior foes. Strapped into his acceleration couch on the *Keegan's* bridge, he directed each element of his own command as they maneuvered for position against the oncoming Imperial fleet elements.

Despite closing thrusts in excess of five gravities acceleration, the act of closing to battle in space is slow, slower than the tacking and jibing of ancient sail-powered warships, slower even than the scull and pivot of their decked-oared forebears. The distances in space battles are vast, but there is no horizon to mask an enemy's intent. Little subtlety is possible or warranted, and while the exercise lacks a measure of visual splendor, it wants for nothing in the earnestness of its participants' intent.

Still, Dannevar thought, the Imperials appear to be eager to close, even for them. Intruder Two's maneuvering could scarcely be called that. Their drives were burning at three Earth gravities, the maximum sustainable velocity for human norms. Task Force *Keegan's* ships were burning at six.

“Helm. Compensate vectors to close and match velocities at engagement range.”

“Affirm.”

It wouldn't do at all to overshoot the Imperials; after all, Dannevar's job was to engage and hold them for awhile.

Dannevar watched the numbers in his own immersion display as they rippled downward, reflecting the dwindling distance between TF *Keegan* and its opposite Imperial number. This was all preliminary; Dannevar reviewed the opening moves of this battle as he had dozens of others before, the prelude to the engagement of lasers, missiles and particle beams euphemistically referred to by ship captains as “The Dance.”

If the close to “The Dance” is slower than that of the warships of bygone eras, the resolution is slower still, since Langston Fields stand up to a great deal more punishment than oak and the flesh of men. Only at the end can the march of progress be appreciated. Biremes foundered when rammed, oaken Men of War might explode if their powder magazine was hit, either could burn for hours, a lingering, mean death for such beautiful artifacts.

But starships did not linger.

The collapse of a ship's Langston Field meant that half the energy stored in that Field, and all that was pouring into it from outside, transferred directly to the inside of the ship. That much energy would not be contained by mere metal, and would not even note the presence of flesh. Starships, when they die, do so almost instantaneously. They may glow; certainly their constituent components do so. Fusion does that to matter. At best, the crew and their ship die by increments, as was the fate of the *Wallenstein*. In the worst cases, where Langston Fields collapse catastrophically, one spectacular flare of energy consumes decades of design, years of labor, tons of materials and centuries of human lives in a nanosecond.

And it's on to the next target, Dannevar reflected. He watched the display; his “fierce face” deployment had not, as yet, caused Intruder Two to turn tail and run back to Sparta. He had not expected it to. His aggressive advance would be doing its work in the minds of the enemy commanders, bridge crews and gunners.

Still; they do seem resolved; well, that was only to be expected. The point of this whole exercise is to make them reconsider that resolution.

The thought of Sparta had reminded Dannevar of something; something from school, something about the ancient Greek warriors. Not those of Sparta in fact, but of Athens, and their first encounter with a Persian army.

The Persians had waged war in an exceedingly simple manner: they showed up. By fielding a battle host many times greater in number than their opponents, the Persian's reputation alone often led to relatively bloodless contests. The result was their psychologically defeated foes, were rounded up and ransomed, sold into slavery or, just as likely, released. Little blood was shed, since warfare was largely still ritualized. The Persians only wanted to build an empire, and do it reasonably; they weren't interested in actually *hurting* anyone.

The Persians thus watched in amazement the first time a badly outnumbered Athenian force charged against their mighty eastern army with a willingness not just to die, but to actually *kill*, and to do both to great excess. With no more reputation behind them than what they showed that first day, it was the Greeks who routed the Persian host, and the savagery with which they defeated and pursued their foe was unmatched in the Persian experience. So much in fact, that Persian chroniclers declared the Greeks must be madmen, so great was their lust for blood.

That was what Dannevar was trying to do now - or so he thought. A Sauron task force, outnumbered but nevertheless willing to give battle with no quarter asked or given, should have been sufficient to give any sane commander pause.

II

“Task Force *Keegan* engaging Intruder Two, Dictator.”

“Status Intruder One.”

“Time to intersect Freas/Barlowe axis two hours, forty-seven minutes.”

“Status Intruder Three.”

“Holding position one point seven billion kilometers rim-trailing.”

Diettinger shook his head slowly, rocking his cheekbone back and forth along his thumbnail. Holding the Frederick Alderson Point. An escape route or a reinforcement zone, or both. Reinforcements were unlikely, though there was the question of the absent motherships. And no replenishment tankers had arrived yet.

Meaning they are coming soon or the Imperials are confident of their ability to seize Ostia.

If Ostia fell, its orbital refueling stations would be scuttled by the Saurons before they could be captured. Imperial refueling platforms would then have to be deployed; the Empire had starfaring refineries for skimming hydrogen from water planets and gas giants and converting it into usable hydrogen fuel for its fleets. None were in Sauron System yet, nor were they likely to arrive until the initial assault had established at least local space superiority at the system’s gas giant.

So they will bring tankers, Diettinger decided. *And they will come in from the Frederick Alderson Point.* The fast ships of Intruder Three made sense, now. Such ships could intercept any threat to forces arriving from Frederick long before any large-scale attack could be mounted. Should they be overwhelmed, those same new arrivals would have plenty of time to vector along the perimeter of Sauron System until reaching other friendly forces for protection, enough time even to find the Jump Point and leave again.

“Signal Hourglasses North and South to engage, standard thrust.”

On Sauron, System Defense First Rank Eglin received and relayed the commands and turned to his own second-in-command, the newly-promoted Second Rank Pell, commander of the asteroid defense perimeter units. “Platform Commands, stand by.”

Pell allowed himself a faint smile of satisfaction.

He watched as the High Command’s immersion display began to alter, reflecting the shift of forces which would begin the decisive battle of human history.

“Vessel First Rank Dannevar reports heavy losses both to Imperials and Task Force *Keegan*; Intruder Two still advancing toward Ostia, but slowed. He estimates that Intruder Two can be delayed as ordered, but not five minutes more.”

Diettinger glared at the Signals Rank. “Confirm TF *Keegan* engaged only in delaying tactics; no full-on ship-to-ship engagements.”

The Signals Ranker’s hands flew back and forth across his console; a moment later he looked back at Diettinger.” Vessel First Rank Dannevar signals: *Tell them, Dictator*”

Diettinger’s gaze lost its fire. Second Rank Althene watched the Dictator’s face smooth into the old familiar grin she had come to know so well. The tension on *Fomoria*’s bridge was broken, at least for

the moment.

“Signals, send Task Force *Damaris*: Stand by to re-engage.”

Vessel First Rank Emory acknowledged the command and signaled the rest of her forces. TF *Damaris* lay two hundred thousand kilometers above the asteroid belt, just on the Sauron side of the Freas/Barlowe line. The ships of Emory’s command now began gentle, one-fifth-G vectors down and back toward the asteroids in the direction of Sauron.

Emory thought of how the maneuver must look to the Imperials. *We’re drawing back for our desperate last defense of Homeworld*, she thought. *It is the only option left to us. The Imperials will see the time has now come to run us into the ground, and crush us for good...*

The thought made her smile, just as her own Second Rank happened to turn and look back at her. He snapped his head back round so quickly she heard his neck crack. He hadn’t seen a look of such gleeful predation since his Ascension Day hunt. And the face that wore it that day hadn’t been human.

Either, Emory couldn’t help thinking.

III

Diettinger watched the immersion display chronometer’s waterfall of green digits flow to and past the next hour, and then the next. The display showed Intruder Two, having crossed the Freas/Barlowe line, bearing down on Ostia, with Task Force *Keegan* vainly trying to stem the tide. Elements of Intruder Two kept trying to move out to encircle TF *Keegan*, but Dannevar’s ships continued savaging each Imperial ship that left the safety of the main group. Switching viewpoints, Diettinger saw that TF *Damaris* had almost disappeared within the asteroids, while Intruder One bore down on the Sauron Homework! like - *Well, like a judgment*, he thought. Which, of course, was exactly what it was.

Intruder Three remained at its station off the Frederick Alderson Point, but it no longer worried him. From now on, the longer the Imperials waited to commit Intruder Three, the better the chances his own plans would succeed. Several things had to happen at once, and though most of them would not happen at the same time, the laws of relativity applied to combat at this scale dictated that they could at least appear to be simultaneous to the various subjective observers on all points of the lightspeed-information curve. *If all my commanders carry out their orders with the timing which is so crucial to the defense plan.*

He felt he could ignore the Imperial reserve force for the time being.

Of greatest interest to Diettinger were the smaller sets of figures suspended over the icons of Intruders One and Two, figures that reported the estimated average fuel consumption of both Imperial elements. Intruder One had consumed considerable amounts of fuel in its initial engagement with TF *Damaris*, and was continuing to merrily burn it away as it closed with Sauron. Still, it would require several more days of constant three-G burns before Intruder One’s tanks ran dry.

Intruder Two, on the other hand, wasn’t nearly so well off. The ships of TF *Keegan* might be taking a beating, but they were forcing Intruder Two to consume prodigious amounts of maneuvering fuel to inflict it.

Diettinger re-checked the telemetry from TF *Keegan*’s vessels: As he expected, the Sauron ships were burning fuel just as fast, even faster than their Imperial opponents. But the higher-G tolerance of Sauron crews meant that Sauron vessels were designed to carry enough fuel to make such an ability worth having. Sauron also designed her spacecraft for deep penetration missions and long-term operations in enemy territory, far from friendly refueling areas. Thus, while the Sauron ships were also burning a great deal of liquid hydrogen, they had a great deal more to burn.

Meanwhile, the Sauron tankers that had been shuttling between the Homeworld and Ostia had finally stopped running, at least in one direction. No more of the ungainly vessels were headed for the Homeworld. Perhaps forty were strung out between Sauron and Ostia, all bound for the gas giant, to join their hundred and twenty sister ships in various orbits there.

Diettinger called for an ETA on the last of these, and was told it would arrive less than half-a-day before Intruder Two reached Ostia.”Signal tanker control to initiate Phase Three. Secure signal to Hawksley aboard the *Falkenberg*: ‘Snowflake.’ Advise when confirmed.”

Diettinger’s Signals Ranker performed the first task, then repeated the code word so there could be no mistake as to the Dictator’s command.”Estimate one hour to confirmation, Dictator.”

One hour was cutting it close, but close-cutting was what the bulk of his defense plan was all about. Diettinger nodded.”Very good.”

IV

Aboard the *Falkenberg*, First Officer Willoughby picked up the secure line to tell Captain Hawksley of the secure message just lasered from the *Fomoria*, “It’s in your code, skipper. I’ll have Lee bring it to you directly.”

“No need, Exec. My code key is Lilliput, seven-niner-seven. Decode it for me and I’ll read it when I reach the bridge.”

Hawksley hung up, and a moment later Executive Officer Willoughby did the same. He looked at the commo officer. “Captain says we’re to decode the message for him.” Willoughby keyed in Hawksley’s personal decipher key, sharing a look with the young communications officer seated before him. Neither considered it a good sign that their commander felt there was no longer any need for security aboard the *Falkenberg*.

When Hawksley arrived, he read the one word signal and sent a confirmation to the *Fomoria*. ”Helm, take us down another ten clicks;” he ordered, “bring us to planetary coordinates longitude eight degrees north, latitude 23 degrees west and hold.”

Hawksley looked across the bridge to where Willoughby now stood waiting by the Gunnery Station.

“Time to dance,” Hawksley said.

Twenty-Four

I

“Dannevar signals TF *Keegan*’s position untenable, Dictator.”

Diettinger looked at the master mission chronometer suspended within the immersion display. Each Sauron Fleet element bore a duplicate of this figure, representing the Homeworld’s mean time. Beside each of the element’s mean times had been added a second set of numbers, the “local time” for the element, calculated from the task force’s distance from Sauron. The engaged Imperial elements bore their own figures, with the cumulative data allowing Diettinger to see the distance between combat units in light-hours, minutes and seconds, all of it calibrated to compensate for his own subjective position within a battle spread out across twenty-seven cubic light hours. He watched as the master mission chronometer flashed away three more minutes.

“Signal TF *Keegan* to break-off and regroup at mission station 229. Send to Barlowe and Freas: Stand by.”

Diettinger had not taken his eye from the display; now he swung the command console into his lap and addressed its CPU: "Enhance and identify small force detaching from Intruder Two/Ostia."

A glimmer within the display bloomed into a cubic meter enhancement containing dozens of points of light, so densely packed as to resemble luminous clouds to merely human vision. But Saurons had nearly twice as many rods and half again as many cones packed into the tissue behind their retinas as did any human norm, and Diettinger's vision provided all the clarity he needed... if perhaps less depth perception than he might have wished.

Less than a tenth of the lights were red, labeled "Fighter Escort," the rest were pale green, the color for non-combatants, and were marked "Fuel Skimmers."

"Projected percentage of Intruder Two's available total refueling craft based on known complement being the same in original enemy element? Do not modify figure for battle casualties." He'd had enough of the Sauron theorists' propensity for wish fulfillment in their thinking - or, for that matter, their computer programming.

The figure that appeared stopped his breath: "99.99%"

Diettinger saw that *Fomoria's* bridge staff was, for Saurons, nearly euphoric. Second Rank was watching the display with an open smile; even Koln had half-risen from his acceleration couch.

"Cut it in half before you believe it," Diettinger told them, but he could not keep from his voice the one element he most needed to hold in check: Hope.

"Send again to *Keegan*: All speed."

II

"That's it for Task Force *Keegan*" Willoughby announced. "All contacts now reading as standard Imperial Navy transponders. Ostia has fallen, skipper."

Hawksley brought his acceleration couch closer to his command console and checked the systems readouts; *Falkenberg* was hidden, silent and unmoving, within the gas giant's soupy interface between pure gases and not-quite-liquids. Station-keeping at this altitude was impossible; only *Falkenberg's* extremely high orbital speed had kept her aloft this long.

Like all modern spaceships, *Falkenberg* used hydrogen to power her engines. Unlike most, which carried small craft for the job, she was equipped with her own integral skimming scoops, which allowed her to personally extract such hydrogen directly from planetary atmospheres or oceans. *Falkenberg* had been designed from the keel up as a privateer, and her designers had reasoned that space aboard her, normally taken up by fuel skimmers, could be more profitably occupied by small attack craft.

They had not been enough to protect *Falkenberg* during her refueling runs, and all of them had been lost years ago.

Now, the raider was obliged to make her fuel runs as quickly as possible for her own safety. But in this case, speed was not simply important to her survival; speed was life itself. The faster she went, the more hydrogen she gathered, the more hydrogen she could burn, and the more stable an orbit she could maintain, hidden in one of Ostia's thousand-mile wide bands of gaseous color. At her current speed, *Falkenberg* was burning fuel as fast as it sluiced into her condensers.

"We are now in Imperial space." Willoughby announced dryly, then snapped back to the display: "Multiple signals, Imperial heavy fighters, the new *Kakuyoku* class. They're maneuvering to avoid the tankers," he observed, watching the Imperial fighters penetrating Ostia's lower ionosphere. "No surprises there."

Hawksley was leaning into the cowl over his viewscreen. The Sauron techs had fitted *Falkenberg* with an immersion display, and while the rest of his bridge crew were delighted with it, Hawksley found it of no interest whatsoever. He was from Burgess, settled centuries before by disaffected expatriates from the southern regions of North America, a broad mixture ranging from social trash to self-styled aristocrats, all of whom were by turns arrogant, honorable, bellicose or genteel, but all in agreement that old ways were best. *Which, no doubt, was why I killed the Duke of Gotham's son - who also happened to be the Emperor's nephew - in a duel with sabers and not pistols*, he reflected.

Hawksley saw two flights of heavy fighters come about one hundred and sixty degrees and fire their lasers on an abandoned tanker; his bridge crew made a collective noise that translated roughly as nothing good. "Steady," Hawksley told them.

The beams passed through the tanker's dispersed structure and out the other side without hitting very much. The ionized trail they left in Ostia's vapors made them visible to the naked eye, a rare treat that only Hawksley enjoyed, since only he was still using the archaic viewscreen.

"What's the story with that tanker, XO?"

"Minor damage to a support strut and one maneuvering package, sir," the young crewman at the sensors station informed Willoughby; Burgess naval etiquette did not permit direct address to the Captain during battle stations when a senior officer had been addressed first. "They've moved on now."

"What do you make of that, skipper?" Willoughby asked.

Hawksley shook his head slightly, never rising from the cowl. "Might have guessed something; but they didn't press the attack. I suspect they were either calibrating weapons or hoping to flush any crew that might have been hiding on board. Most likely the latter." He blinked and sat up. "Could *Fomoria* have seen that?"

Willoughby looked to the comms officer, who shook his head. "Ah don't think so, skipper. Flag is on the fahr side of the gas jahnt, and this eye-ahh-no-sfeah's been playin' hob with ah'own display; I wun't think it'd be much bettuh thayuh."

"Skipper?" Willoughby brought his acceleration couch across the room to Hawksley's station, as much for privacy as to escape the comms officer's wretched lower-class drawl. "Something else?"

Hawksley nodded, leaning back into his viewscreen cowl. "Might be they're thinking of trying to capture some of these abandoned tankers. Which of course would mean they'd have to bring in one of their big ships for a towing link-up." He flashed Willoughby a quick grin before returning to his scrutiny of the display before him.

Willoughby grinned. "Oh, that would be just too sweet, Skipper." He looked back to the display; their high-speed orbit was quickly leaving behind the tankers and the fighters which had used them for target practice. A new contact abruptly appeared in the display, milliseconds after Hawksley had noted it in his own viewscreen.

"Here come their fuel skimmers," Hawksley's tone changed from one of reflection to thunder in a clear sky. "Mr. Willoughby, signal all stations to stand by."

In the display behind him, green dots had formed into eight lines of ten abreast, all bearing down on Ostia's lower ionosphere. The eight lines of green dots were staggered and no more than fifty kilometers apart; minimum safe distance, but designed to place each trailing skimmer directly on the wake crest of the one ahead. Ostia's atmosphere would roll up into compressed streams with the passage of the lead skimmers, and each of those streams of light gases and precious hydrogen, three times the density encountered by the forward boats, would flow into the following skimmer's gaping

maw, filling its compressor chambers three times faster. It was a maneuver of desperation - or of a foe eager to renew the offensive and come to grips with the enemy. Either way, Hawksley shook his head in amazement. Diettinger's guesses had so far been right on the money, down to the smallest detail.

He wondered how long that could last.

"Mister Willoughby, 'Snowflake' is a go."

"Aye aye, skipper." Willoughby turned to the starboard weapons control officer. "Weapons free, Mister Plunkett."

"Weapons free, aye."

"Captain?" Willoughby turned to Hawksley. Another Burgess naval tradition demanded the first shot fired be so ordered by the commanding officer.

"Mister Plunkett," Hawksley said, never looking up from his screen, "You may indulge yourself."

Plunkett reached forward and pressed a button nowhere near the weapons control board.

On the *Falkenberg's* hull, sixteen microwave signaling turrets whirred about, tracked to find the prerecorded codes of their receiving units, and began pouring excited radio waves into Ostia's rarefied upper atmosphere. Transponder packages aboard the four tankers closest to *Falkenberg* acquired the activation signals and immediately downlinked commands to their respective shipboard computers, then relayed them to other orbiting tankers all around the planet. Stupid by any standards but their own, the mechanical brains of the tankers were geniuses at one task; fine axial maneuvering, to allow precise alignment of their refueling ports with thirsty starships.

The crews of the Imperial skimmers would normally have been only too happy to know that hundreds of fuel tankers were in low orbit at Ostia, but for the unfortunate fact that the refueling ports of all those tankers had been heavily modified, and none of them were now carrying fuel.

If a battle in deep space can be called beautiful, a battle in the roiling clouds of a Jovian-class gas giant must be the equivalent of a drunken brawl in a jungle at midnight. With knives. Eight tankers began tumbling end over end, attitude thrusters burning in apparently random bursts, while from each of their thirty refueling ports trailed steady streams of milky white vapor.

Back aboard the *Falkenberg*, Hawksley had at last turned from his view-screen to regard the immersion display, for the holographic image excelled in one aspect where the viewscreen simply could not do the battle justice; it gave a sense of scale. Each of the tankers displaced just over one million metric tonnes, and the vapor trails they were spreading in their wakes were over six feet in diameter at the source, and already two miles long and growing swiftly as their source tankers accelerated. The trails were beginning to cross one another now, and the "supposedly random" pattern of the tankers' thrusters was revealed to be a programmed maneuver to prevent their own collision while intersecting one another's orbital flight paths.

Back at their starting points, the trails were now less white and bluer, the crystalline, ice blue shade of exactly what they appeared to be - water. Or, more precisely, what water created from the infusion of liquid oxygen into a nearly pure hydrogen environment at the edge of atmosphere instantly becomes, which is to say, ice.

Intent on their mission, Intruder Two's fuel skimmers maneuvered only very slightly to avoid the tankers. Their onboard sensors showed that the tankers themselves seemed to be leaving wakes of denser gases; so much the better. Skimmers gobbled up gases and could even "drink" water, after a fashion.

Slowly.

They had never been designed to fly into a hailstorm at forty times the speed of sound, and the first rank of skimmers to hit the ice-strands might as well have tried to plow through a cloud of buckshot. Most of the crystals were literal snowflakes, but many had coagulated into masses as much as half an inch across. These and hundreds more like them went into the front of the fuel skimmers where, according to design, they were to be compacted by scoops, liquefied by condensers and gathered into compression tanks at the readjust forward of the engines.

Instead, the velocity of the skimmers, on hitting the relatively immobile ice chunks, allowed the artificial hailstones to plow through scoops, condensers, compressors, storage tanks and engines and keep right on not going anywhere.

Also by design, skimmers lack any impressive ability for lateral maneuver, but they maneuvered very impressively indeed in the vertical, and after the first four ranks of skimmers were obliterated in front of them, the next four decided to try climbing out of the trap. Only to find that the tankers had been slowly climbing during their weaving dances, and now the web of ice was above as well as in front. Though more vulnerable through the intakes mounted on their bows, the fuel skimmers fared no better when taking the impact of the ice strands on their upper hulls. The few skimmers, that were sturdy enough to not shatter, ricocheted off the resisting filaments of ice and either tumbled out of control or skipped back downward into the lower, more vertical strands.

Out of the eighty skimmers in the Imperial's first refueling attempt, only six escaped immediate destruction or the slow death of entrapment in powerless, rapidly decaying orbits. Many of the disabled vessels' crews could be heard for hours on emergency frequencies, calling for rescues which would never come.

Willoughby checked Plunkett's telemetry board and informed Hawksley: "These eight tankers are about dry, skipper."

"Take 'em out, Mister Willoughby," Hawksley answered.

Willoughby so ordered, and moments later the eight tankers had ignited the remainder of their internal fuel, adding eight million-plus cubic tonnes of debris to the ice strands that now polluted Ostia's ionosphere.

Lacking much cohesive mass, the ice would eventually break-up and sublimate into gas or sink deeper into the gas giant's clouds. But the pieces of tanker were large, dense, and orbiting at extreme velocities. Better still, they were deep enough in the ionosphere to be beyond visual contact, and sensors would fare little better in fixing the positions of such irregular shapes at their speeds.

"We're getting telemetry from the other tankers, skipper," Willoughby reported. "Comparable results, mostly, with just over twenty percent of the tankers activated."

Hawksley nodded, satisfied. Now activated, the tankers all around Ostia would begin to dump their liquid oxygen automatically on sensor contact with any group of skimmers, but they would not self-destruct without direct signals from *Falkenberg*. To do so might lose the opportunity to further damage enemy vessels; worse, it would reveal to Imperial Sensor teams "holes" in the impromptu minefield created by the tanker's continued presence. That meant the privateer would have to do a great deal of maneuvering within Ostia's cloud cover, but it would also keep the Imperial vessels from fixing her exact position. More importantly, it would create doubt as to just how many Sauron ships were hiding out here.

"Very good," Hawksley addressed Willoughby in a low tone, almost reflective. "Begin evasive maneuvers. Coordinate sensor telemetry on the positions of those other skimmer elements, and keep us in position to intercept the next reasonably close group of enemy craft refueling. When the sheep come

to drink again, I want to be the first cougar at the water hole.”

Willoughby grinned. “Aye, captain. You heard the man,” Willoughby nimbly crossed back through that invisible wall of Burgess society which separated acceptable behavior toward aristocrats from that more suited to the lower classes.”Time to go piss in some more wells.”

III

Diettinger reviewed the reports from *Falkenberg's* initial contact at Ostia. He was unaware that by the end of the report, he had risen out of his chair. He looked around, abruptly aware that his bridge crew were staring at him. “Splendid,” was all he said.

Now, as they usually did, matters hinged on the Imperials' reaction to the events at Ostia. Deprived at least temporarily of their in-system fuel source, they were vulnerable to a counterattack by Sauron fleets which could be refueled by the oceans of the still-secure Homeworld.

Will they now pour reinforcements into a sweep of Ostia to eradicate the unknown number of Sauron ships there? Or press their attack on Sauron itself?, Diettinger wondered.

Either decision required the concentration of Imperial forces in areas where they could be attacked by superior numbers of Sauron ships on such forces' perimeter. Only commitment of the heretofore inactive Intruder Three elements would offset Sauron maneuverability in either battle. And Diettinger was beginning to heartily wish he knew the purpose of those silent, motionless Imperial ships.

“Signals, Dictator.”

“Speak,”

“Task Force *Keegan*, standing by. Task Force *Damaris*, standing by. Hourglass North, standing by. Hourglass South, standing by.”

“Status, Barlowe/Freas stations.”

“Full readiness, Dictator.” *Whatever that means*, Communications Fifth Rank Boyle thought. The Barlowe/Freas stations were under such tight security that it was rumored not even High Command knew their function. *As long as it helps to smash the Imperials...*

Diettinger looked across the *Fomoria's* bridge to the advancing line of Imperial ships that comprised Intruder One. The immersion display readouts showed the Imperials to be ten hours, forty-one minutes from the Homeworld; fifty-two minutes from the section of the asteroid belt to which TF *Damaris* had fled and was now hiding, waiting for them. Diettinger's signal from the *Fomoria* to TF *Damaris* would take twelve minutes to arrive, that to the Barlowe/Freas stations five and nine, respectively.

He activated the immersion display controls, and a new data display appeared, connecting the outlying planets of Barlowe and Freas. What had been up to now only a navigational referent - the “Barlowe/Freas Line” - was now represented by a pale blue line. That line passed across the asteroid field only a few thousand kilometers from TF *Damaris's* position, almost exactly on the forward ships of the advancing Imperial force Intruder One. In seventeen minutes, at their current rate of speed, the line would bisect the Imperial fleet element.

Better to put it just forward of center, Diettinger thought. *Their ships' speed will allow few of them to maneuver out of the way...*

“Send Intruder One position, velocity and vector to Barlowe/Freas. Signal Barlowe/Freas to go active for an intercept two minutes forward of Intruder One main body.”

Communications First Rank carried out the order while Diettinger turned to his Second Rank. “Signal Asteroid Defense Rank Pell to stand by for his firing signal. Activate Hourglass North and move it into

position at point 134, plus one million seven hundred thousand zed. Signal TF *Damaris* to commence maneuvers.”

IV

Second Rank turned from viewing the immersion display and began detailing the information in Diettinger’s orders to her own Communications Rankers and staff elsewhere on the *Fomoria*.

The Dictator’s plan was unfolding. What was about to happen was, she knew, the crux of his design; its masterstroke, so to speak. It also contained the one and only trick he had up his sleeve, the one aspect of his defense of the Homeworld whose value could not be reliably calculated beforehand.

Because it relies on untested technology, she thought, and felt her throat tighten.

Oh Galen! she thought, surprising herself at the intensity of her anxiety. *Do not be wrong. I fear more for you than for the Homeworld.* And that thought shocked her into temporary immobility, for it was nothing less than high treason.

With her excellent Sauron peripheral vision, Second Rank Althene watched Cyborg Rank Koln seated, immobile, his own gaze fixed on the status screens before him, showing his two thousand, seven hundred and forty EVA commando Cyborgs at their duty stations throughout the fleet.

If it does not work, Koln will surely move against you. The other Cyborgs must have instructed him to do so if your defense of Sauron fails. Whether they can save the Homeworld if you cannot will be irrelevant; the Race will at least die with Cyborgs leading them.

She did not turn, for she could assure herself with utter certainty that *Fomoria*’s bridge security officers were at their stations. She also knew that such officers would kill anyone who attempted to harm the Dictator.

What she could not be sure of was that any Sauron could overcome the years of societal training which put them in such awe of the Cyborgs, to the point where they could even believe themselves *capable* of harming one of the Super Soldiers, let alone actually attempt it.

Which was why she had warned the bridge security guards herself to watch Cyborg Rank Koln with special care; he was to be killed the instant he made any threatening move against the Dictator.

Give Saurons a task, she knew, *and we think of nothing else. Give us enough time to prepare for that task, all the while thinking of nothing else, and it soon becomes the only thing we are capable of. Societal training is only what we do; being soldiers is what we are.*

Even so, she could not be sure they would be fast enough to stop Koln, There were only eight of them. She lifted her knee, brushed it once more against the grip of the pistol she had taped to the underside of her console. But if they only slowed Koln down a little, the Cyborg would be dead immediately after Diettinger.

That much, she *could* be sure of.

Twenty-Five

Nine minutes and three seconds later, hundreds of millions of kilometers away, eighteen miles beneath the surface of Freas, eighty-four Sauron Technical Rankers set about justifying an investment of twenty-three years of research and expenditures which reached comfortably into the trillions.

Along with their colleagues on Barlowe, they had been engaged in the development of particle weapon technology for the Sauron war machine. Their expertise had led to advances in weaponry which made

the Sauron ground soldier as superior to his Imperial counterpart in armament as he was in physiognomy.

And that was Sauron society's military blind spot. Convinced that ultimate victory would be an inevitable by-product of individual genetic supremacy, all the best efforts and intellectual brilliance of these men and women had been funneled into ever-more-powerful systems for the Sauron ground trooper, ultimately leading to personal weapons of such potency that they were feasible only for the Cyborgs. Weapon systems whose development might have resulted in naval superiority languished in favor of those with obvious application to planetside conflicts.

But research on such systems had proceeded nevertheless, and now, the people who had kept them alive hoped to prove that their commitment to them had not been misplaced.

The positional data on Intruder One was downlined into computers on Barlowe and Freas. Power generation systems on both worlds were producing enough energy for ten cities. Time differentials were calculated for the limitations imposed by the speed of light over the distances which would be traversed, and with very little fuss, systems on both Barlowe and Freas were activated. And on both Barlowe and Freas, nothing very much seemed to happen.

Minutes later, in the immersion display of the flagship *Fomoria*, the pale blue beam representing the Barlowe/Freas line brightened at each end, and that brightness began to extend outward from each of the two worlds, toward a convergence point slightly closer to Freas than to Barlowe. The size of the immersion display and the scale of its representation of events meant that the extending brightness, which was moving at not quite the speed of light, was advancing at about the same rate as the minute hand of an antique watch. Even so, after perhaps thirty seconds everyone could see that the brightening segments would meet at a point just above the plane of the ecliptic, over the asteroid belt, just ahead of dead center of Intruder One.

Fifth Rank Boyle wanted so badly to know what was going to happen he actually had to clench his teeth. Instead, he turned slightly to look at the Dictator's face, hoping to discern some clue from the C-in-C's expression.

The left side of Diettinger's face was in shadow, his one eye gleaming from within it and seeming never to blink, the thin lines of cheekbone and jaw partially illuminated; the right side was sharply lit, the black eyepatch looking like an empty socket, heavy shadows accentuating the bones on that side of his face. With his lips parted and his teeth gleaming across both dark and light, he looked, Boyle thought, like death coming out of the darkness, a single living eye regarding the dawn.

Boyle decided immediately that the Dictator did not look as though he would appreciate any idle questions from curious Fifth Rankers.

In the immersion display, the bright, airless grey spheres of Barlowe and Freas continued to extend their respective blue lines toward one another.

Aboard the ships of Intruder One, on the bridges and at the sensor stations of the Imperial craft, no one was aware of the activities occurring between the Sauron System's outer planets of Barlowe and Freas. The events were transpiring at the speed of light; they could likewise only be apprehended at that speed. No one could know these events even existed until they could perceive them, and they would not perceive them until they were, literally, on top of them.

By then - if the Sauron technical Rankers were correct in their theories - it would be too late.

What was racing outward from Barlowe and Freas were subatomic particles. Millions of square kilometers of arrays generated the particles in equal portions of negative, positive and neutral charges. The neutral charge particles were wasted, and their part in the process ended there. The positive and

negative charges, however, were focused through several miles of electromagnetic acceleration tunnels bored into the crusts of each of the planets.

These accelerator tunnels concentrated the subatomic particles into streams, raised the speed of those streams to 99.99% the speed of light, and fired them toward the surface. The charged particles would have obliterated any physical matter in their way, but they were doomed the moment they left the mouths of their accelerator tunnels. For neither Barlowe nor Freas possessed atmospheres, and the Sauron Technical Rankers knew that charged subatomic particle streams decayed almost instantly in vacuum. One step remained in the process to make the beams survivable, and it occurred one meter below the mouth of the accelerator tubes on the surfaces of Barlowe and Freas.

Screens of gas and high-powered lasers stripped the extra electron from the negative ions and bonded it to a nearby positive ion. The streams that emerged from the accelerator tubes were particles of completely neutral charges, and these propagated very well in vacuum, indeed.

The tubes on Barlowe and Freas were spread out across the facing surfaces of both worlds. They were numerous but capable of very little in the way of fine adjustment in the discretionary projection of the particle streams which they generated, or so the Technical Rankers had explained to Diettinger, who finally realized that they were telling him they were almost impossible to aim. The project was, after all, still experimental.

No matter, the Dictator had assured them. What he was looking for was quantity of production, and when he had told them why, they had been delighted to realize he had read their briefings on the project much more thoroughly than High Command had.

Diettinger knew that the Imperial Langston Fields would render the particle beams useless. Langston Fields absorbed energy, radiant as in lasers or thermonuclear explosives, or kinetic as in torpedoes, even ramming ships. Using particle accelerator weapons against a Langston Field was like firing a shotgun into tar. Worse, particle beams imparted damage by the sheer number of the particles they delivered to the target; the mathematics of the Langston Field meant that small elements impacting the field were absorbed and their energy dissipated in direct proportion to the energy of the individual imparting element. Lasers, with their constant flow of energy over time, and nukes, with their tremendous release of energy in a rapid burst, could burn through or crash through a Langston Field. A particle beam, on the other hand, didn't even make it glow.

All of which was why Sauron High Command had never embraced the project: no practical groundside application within a reasonable timeframe, no qualitatively superior naval performance to that of the high energy lasers already in use aboard the ships of the fleet. A dead end. At which point the long-term applications proposed by the Technical Rankers had been consigned to oblivion.

Until today.

The particle streams racing outward from Barlowe and Freas were now only seconds apart. From opposite sides of the Imperial fleet element designated Intruder One, they approached one another, subatomic torrents of neutral-charge particles in bundles of beams hundreds of miles in diameter. They began to impact the Langston Fields of the perimeter vessels of Intruder One; Field operators aboard the ships noticed minute surges in their capacitor monitors, calculated what they must be, and ignored them. A few took cold pleasure from what they felt must be eleventh-hour desperation on the part of the Saurons to be fielding such pathetically impotent weapons against the judgment that was about to be visited upon them. Even fewer of those operators bothered to inform their captains of the particle beams; none of those captains deigned to do anything about them.

The streams met.

Timing, Diettinger was to think when recalling the event later, *is everything*.

Particle beams were hopelessly ineffective against Langston Fields. But what the Technical Rankers had been trying to convince High Command they could *create*, and what Diettinger had authorized them to provide, were almost literally a quantum leap beyond such weapons.

At this time in their respective years, Barlowe and Freas lay on opposite sides of the Sauron System, a distance of over five hundred million kilometers. Within that huge volume of space, a large quantity of the high velocity neutral atomic particles in the streams projected by the Sauron research stations on each moon simply passed by one another and on into space. Many more were intercepted by the Langston Fields of Intruder One's constituent ships. But the vast majority met somewhere in between, colliding, and producing yet a third type of particle - a meson.

This immense cloud of propagating mesons spread out in every direction from the area of the beams' intersection. Mesons, as the Technical Rankers knew and as they had told Diettinger, did not interact with normal matter, they only interacted with energy composed of other mesons, and their rate of decay was in the realm of the near instantaneous. As with the aiming problem, Diettinger had understood that what the Technical Rankers were telling him was that Langston Fields were transparent to mesons, and that mesons didn't last very long at all. *All well and good*, he had replied, *but if they do not interact with matter, and they decay almost immediately, what harm can they do?*

At which point, the only Technical Ranker Diettinger had ever met who had a sense of humor asked him what he thought happened to all that accelerated energy when the meson decayed inside the Langston Fields - or, better still, inside a ship inside a Langston Field.

Which was what they were doing now.

II

Aboard the Imperial heavy cruiser *Westphalia*, the fusion engines were rent by mesons which destroyed their shielding. Half-a-meter of super-dense dampening alloys was instantly converted to waste heat, releasing millions of rads into the ship's compartments. Every crewman in the starboard section of the *Westphalia* suffered massive internal hemorrhaging, soft tissue liquefaction, brain embolisms, internal bone ruptures and all the other effects of being trapped in a high-energy microwave field. Cooked alive, they fell dead at their stations. Two hundred ninety-seven men perished in thirteen seconds.

The Imperial destroyer *Phaeton* was cut in half. Crewmen in the forward amidships section turned to see four meters of open space separating them from the aft portion of the vessel. The ends of metal struts and cables, the cross-section of a mess table, all were polished to a mirror finish, severed perfectly at the subatomic level. Men standing partly within the space destroyed by the particles had been cut apart with a precision beyond any surgical procedure. Of the crew members not immediately killed by the meson strike or the resulting loss of atmosphere, those in vacuum suits watched as the aft portion of the *Phaeton*, still under thrust, closed the distance and rejoined its forward portion with an impact that destroyed both halves.

The Battle-class Imperial cruiser *Manassas* suffered internal meson propagation that breached three interior bulkheads and the forward portions of her inboard fuel tanks. Compressed liquid hydrogen roiled out of the tanks and into the unprotected interior of the warship before igniting. The *Manassas* exploded inside her own Field, which shot up through the spectrum to violet before disappearing with the loss of its generators, releasing the absorbed blast energy in a flare that caused burn-throughs in the Fields of two adjacent craft and swept half a dozen escorting fighters out of space and into oblivion.

The bridge crew on the Imperial cruiser *Montserrat* abruptly found themselves in pitch blackness. When the battery-powered emergency lights activated to reveal that the *Montserrat* had lost all power, the first

officer left his acceleration couch and, taking a flashlight, headed for the gangway off the bridge to reach the engine room. Upon releasing the hatch clamps, he was instantly sucked out into the vacuum which had formerly been occupied by a quarter million cubic tons of Imperial spaceship. His flashlight spun end over end out into the darkness, illuminating nothing.

Imperial Flight Officer Lieutenant Tidwell was wingman in a three-craft victory, or “vic” formation of Imperial *Legionnaire-class* heavy fighters, on combat patrol in the ventral portion of the formation. He found himself suddenly alone, watching as the fighters operated by his commander and the second wingman disappeared, erased before his eyes by a swath of nothingness. He suddenly realized that his own craft was banking to port and would not respond to his correction. Lieutenant Tidwell looked down to see that the control grip had been sheared off and was gone, together with his right arm up to the elbow. A red mist expanded rapidly throughout the zero-gravity environment of the fighter cabin, and Tidwell blacked out before he could apply a tourniquet, bleeding to death soon after.

The Imperial strike cruiser *Bee de Corbin* was a dedicated bombardment platform, designed for the sole purpose of delivering ten million megatons of nuclear weapons to the surface of an enemy planet. *Bec de Corbin's* weapons officer blinked and stared as the telemetry readouts for twenty of his warheads went blank. His workstation was one deck above the bomb bay, and - rather imprudently even without knowing what was happening elsewhere among the ships of Intruder One - he reached down and opened the floor hatch for a quick visual inspection. The bomb racks glittered in the dimly lit bay, twenty of his “apples” sliced neatly down their centers, opened like inert training display models. The bombs’ inner workings were clearly visible, right down to the spherical warhead packages which were sliced in half like melons, their fissionable material exposed in neat cross sections, silently, invisibly, and fatally irradiating the only man of the *Bee de Corbin's* ten man crew left alive to see them.

The Imperial battleship *Tiger* lost its Langston Field generator. Of the six operators, the two who were not also claimed by the mesons were looking at it one moment, and the next, it was simply gone, an irregular depression in the deck and bulkhead indicating extra matter that had gone with it. With her Field generator gone, *Tiger's* Field, of course, went as well. And without a Field, random meson bursts were no longer necessary to destroy her. Suddenly exposed to the hurricane of subatomic particles surrounding her, the *Tiger* was stripped of her outer hull and flayed to bits in minutes.

The cruiser *Endymion* suffered the least damage; her cook was badly scalded when the bottom third of the coffee pot he was standing next to disappeared, and the upper volume of coffee sloshed out into the acceleration-generated gravity of the galley.

Throughout Intruder One, ships of the Imperial task force suffered similar fates. Most escaped the meson bursts entirely, but with rare exceptions like the *Endymion*, those that did not were crippled or destroyed outright.

III

Aboard *Fomoria*, Diettinger nodded in satisfaction.

“Intruder One changing course to vector out of the particle beams, Dictator,” Second Rank informed him. “Rising above system plane of ecliptic at six-Gravities acceleration.”

“Signal Barlowe and Freas,” he told his Communications Ranker. “Compensate for Imperial evasive maneuvers. Maintain fire as long as effective.”

The Technical Rankers on Barlowe and Freas were creating convergent cones of particles, which produced a meson propagation field in the area where their “bases” met. They could move that area back and forth between the projecting planets with relative ease - one array simply reduced the projection velocity of its particle stream while the other accelerated or maintained the speed of its own.

They could even broaden the field by simultaneously decelerating the beams or intensify such propagation over a smaller area by coordinated acceleration. An oscillation of the arrays could even propagate mesons in a “curtain” between Barlowe and Freas which, though not so dense as the current effect, would still make the path extremely dangerous for vessels operating less than two million kilometers above or below Sauron System’s plane of the ecliptic.

What they could not do, Diettinger knew, was move that curtain to any other part of Sauron System. The Barlowe-Freas line might be deadly, but it was in the end only that; a line. And the battle for Sauron was being waged in three dimensions; what the Imperials could not safely penetrate, they could ultimately go around . . . or, in this case, “over.”

And that was exactly what Intruder One was doing now, as it climbed “above” the meson field to renew its drive on the Sauron Homeworld. This portion of the Imperial invasion fleet had lost sixty-percent of her remaining vessels to the meson bursts, but though battered, she was not yet beaten.

So Diettinger unleashed the *Damaris*.

“Send *Damaris*” he told his Communications Rank, “Hourglass North at your disposal. TF *Damaris* to engage elements Intruder One at will.” There were, perhaps, three Vessel First Ranks in the whole Sauron navy to whom Diettinger would have granted such discretion; Mara Emory of the *Damaris* was one of them, and the other two - Lucan of the *Wallenstein* and Vonnerbek of the *Leviathan* - were both dead.

There is, he reflected, one other; but he is not a Sauron. And that, Diettinger suspected, was only an accident of birth. Diettinger shifted the immersion display to examine events at Ostia.

Twenty-Six

I

“Getting a bit warm here, Mister Willoughby,” Hawksley informed his XO. *Falkenberg* was engaged on three sides, and dipping into Ostia’s atmosphere wasn’t discommoding her attackers overmuch. The severe attenuation of the Imperial lasers by Ostia’s thick upper atmosphere was helping to keep the *Falkenberg’s* Langston Field a dull brick red, but that would change as soon as more Imperials joined the engagement, which was bound to happen very soon. It also prevented the *Falkenberg* from returning fire with any effectiveness.

“Yes, sir, I’ll see what I can do. Helm, fifteen degrees hard right, up forty.”

“Hard right fifteen, up forty, aye.”

Falkenberg’s overpowered frame bucked like a thoroughbred and groaned in protest, but the Field operator was relieved to report they had shaken the Imperial above them. That left only the two to port and starboard.

“Helm,” Hawksley addressed the man directly, and Willoughby moved his acceleration chair aside reflexively; Hawksley was “on deck,” and, when he was, it was best to stay out of his way and find something to hold onto. “On my mark, cut *Falkenberg’s* forward thrust and rotate her ninety degrees.”

“Forward thrust to zero, starboard ninety, aye sir; awaiting your command.”

Hawksley turned to the weapons control officer. “Mr. Plunkett, arm the starboard array.”

Plunkett’s hands flew over his console. “Starboard array armed, sir.”

“Stand by to fire on my mark.”

“Stranding by; awaiting your command.”

“Field status, Mr. Pettigrew.”

“Field level red/two and holding, sir.”

“Brace for violent maneuvering, Mister Willoughby.”

Willoughby keyed the all-stations address system from the console of his acceleration chair: “Now hear this, all hands brace for violent maneuvers, all hands, brace for violent maneuvers.”

“Helm,” Hawksley was counting something down in his head, then “Mark.”

Nothing much appeared to happen. *Falkenberg*’s internal gravity disappeared along with the rumble of thrusters carried through her deck plates. There was a vague sense of disorientation as she rotated on her axis, the crew sensing their own centers of mass shift with adjustments in personal momentum.

“Stand by, Mr. Plunkett. Helm, six-G thrust on my mark.” Hawksley alternated between his tactical display and the Sauron-built immersion display. In the latter, the Imperial ships had stopped firing on the *Falkenberg*; the privateer now presented a much smaller target, and they obviously feared firing past her and into each other. All three ships continued their forward motion through Ostia’s atmosphere, except that the *Falkenberg*’s right angle orientation made her appear to be skidding. Both Imperial craft were vectoring to close-in on the Burgess ship.”Helm, mark.”

“Six-Gs. aye.”

Falkenberg’s engines roared back to life, and Willoughby would have sworn the ship was screaming until he realized that the sound he heard was coming from his own throat; going to six-Gs acceleration at a right angle from zero-G drift was, he’d heard, a pretty good way to die from heart failure.

“Dis-tance to star-burd targ’t,” Hawksley choked out the query against the punishing acceleration.

Plunkett’s head turned a half-an-inch, a heroic effort, ”Eight . . hundred thousand.”

“Shoot!”

Plunkett’s thumb depressed the firing key and *Falkenberg*, already closing fast on an intercept course with the starboard Imperial, loosed her full starboard weapons array from a point-blank seven hundred and fifty thousand kilometers.

The Imperial’s Field shot up three levels from red to brilliant green, moving her captain to vector away in an evasive maneuver. The emerald sphere of the enemy’s Field drew back, fading into the murk of the Ostian atmosphere.

“Where’s the other one?” Hawksley’s question was too low to be for anyone but the Exec.

“Climbing and closing, skipper... barely in sensor range with all this atmospheric interference. Looks like he’s trying to stay with his buddy and keep a line on us, too.”

“Mistake,” Hawksley’s assessment was barely audible. “Helm, minus one hundred kilometers at ninety degrees and maintain burn for seventy seconds, then cut our thrust to two gravities, come about thirty degrees to starboard and give us a ninety second burn at six Gs.”

At the battle console, Plunkett and Pettigrew shared looks of relief tinged with misery; all helmsman loved to drive their ships like maniacs, and no doubt the skipper’s orders would result in their escape from this latest in an endless stream of Imperial pursuers. But the other junior officers in the bridge crew expected to look as green as that last target’s Field before it was done.

“Mister Willoughby, as soon as our screens are clear of enemy vessels, let’s get to the rest of these

tankers,” Hawksley ordered. “The sooner we’re finished here, the sooner we can get the hell out of Dodge.” Hawksley released a tight sigh: *Where the hell were Dannevar and TF Keegan?*

II

Aboard the *Fomoria*, the blue line connecting Barlowe and Freas in the immersion display was radiant cobalt, actinic where the projected beams met. The dividing line shifted slightly back and forth, as if each stream of projected particles were by turns gaining and losing in some subatomic pushing contest; which was exactly what was happening. Both projection stations were alternating the flow of particles from their accelerators, to spread the point of impacting neutrons back and forth across the line of intersection. The Technical Rankers were attempting to makeup in volume what their system lacked in precision, and so far, they seemed to be doing well.

But not, Diettinger was relieved to see, as well as Task Force *Damaris*,

All around the mass of Imperial ships, TF *Damaris*, reinforced by the System Defense Boats of Hourglass North, ravaged the vessels of Intruder One. The System Defense Boats, unmanned, were under remote control by dozens of Weapons Rankers scattered about the ships of TF *Damaris*. Without even the high-G tolerant Saurons aboard to slow them down, the boats threw themselves into the mass of Intruder One in bursts of acceleration at double-digit gravities. Each pass trajectory incorporated slingshot maneuvers into, through and around multiple bodies of the Sauron System asteroid field or one of the other outlying planets in TF *Damaris*’ theatre of battle. Several elements of the heavily armed drones went too far and too fast to rejoin the attack on Intruder One, and began banking to slip into the gravity wells of Landyn’s Star. From there, they might still find work to do.

“Status on TF *Keegan*?”

“Regrouped, Dictator. Harassing Intruder Two’s attempts to flush the elements hiding in Ostia’s upper atmosphere.”

Even Diettinger’s Second Rank had not initially been privy to the knowledge that the *Falkenberg* was the only ship there, although by now Diettinger knew she had guessed the deception - as must have the Imperials. The hulk of the *Wallenstein*, deep in its decaying orbit within Ostia’s lower atmosphere, had been broadcasting “ghost” transmissions and dropping false transponders, creating the illusion of dozens of active ships when in fact *Falkenberg* alone had been manipulating the tankers which had brought such grief to the Imperial refueling attempts. But *Wallenstein* had been discovered days ago, and scuttled on Hawksley’s command, adding yet more debris to the navigational hazards with which *Falkenberg* had been sowing the Ostian skies.

Diettinger marveled that Hawksley and his ship were not yet vapor; or, at least, they hadn’t been less than one-half of a light-hour ago, when the status telemetry had been sent.

“Status, Intruder Three?”

“Unchanged.”

Diettinger watched the Imperial reserve group labeled Intruder Three; they had not changed their position in nine days of continuous battle that had seen over one hundred Imperial vessels destroyed already. *Are they simply waiting for their comrades to bleed us white by their own deaths? Could they be that determined to eradicate us?*

He shook his head. The question, he knew, was rhetorical, its answer being: *Of course...*

No matter. Intruder Three could be dealt with once Intruders One and Two were neutralized. It was time to begin doing just that.

The immersion display began deleting representative ship symbols one after another from the main

body of Imperial ships designated “Intruder One.”

Immersion displays updated themselves constantly, and along with the positional representation of ships in battle, hundreds of lines of data were also displayed at various clear points in the display. One such column of figures abruptly changed color from green to amber, drawing Second Rank’s comment.

“Dictator,” she addressed Diettinger.

“Speak.”

“Imperial casualties, Intruder One, now at forty percent and still rising.”

The immersion display was set to change colors as enemy casualties had reached a level which could reasonably be expected to result in their breaking-off from combat to regroup. Diettinger, who had commanded at the Second Battle of Tanith until relieved by the now destroyed First Fleet under Morgenthau, knew that in this battle such an aspect of the display was superfluous. Still, watching the display, he could almost convince himself that Intruder One was slowing in its advance,

“Enhance detail, casualties TF *Damaris*” Diettinger ordered quietly.

Second Rank’s throat was tight with hope. “Forty-seven percent casualties on core force, Dictator; but factoring the addition of Hourglass North’s Remotely-Piloted Vehicles into TF *Damaris*’ total number of vessels...”

“... would be irrelevant, Second Rank,” he finished. “If TF *Damaris* is destroyed, Hourglass North’s RPVs will be taken over by Sauron-based controllers under System Defense First Rank Eglin. Whose Second Rank, Pell, against all odds, has survived to achieve command rank while still believing in the existence of an impregnable defense.”

He smiled at Second Rank. “And probably the Tooth Fairy, as well.” He returned his attention to the display. “Status Task Force *Keegan*”

“Continuing only light harassment ops against Intruder Two’s perimeter,” Second Rank reported. “Enemy task force still shows only minimal refueling of elements...” she lowered her voice. “Non-secure signal intercepts imply *Falkenberg* still active in Ostian atmosphere, Dictator... thus far.”

Diettinger tracked his gaze slowly across the room to regard Second Rank, dropping his chin and raising an eyebrow as he did. “Well,” he answered in a low voice. “We simply must do something to save the gallant Captain Hawksley, if only for the sake of old friends who might be commanding critical task forces.”

Second Rank’s back stiffened, her embarrassment undiminished by the fact that Diettinger’s rebuke was too low for anyone else to hear.

“Send *Keegan*” Diettinger continued. “Hourglass North at your disposal. TF *Keegan* to engage and destroy all elements, Intruder Two. Strongest emphasis: Casualties immaterial.”

Second Rank’s gaze swept back and forth across the array, and at once, she understood: It was Carrhae. Ten Roman legions, far from home, cut off from reinforcement, surrounded by horse archers, locked shields in defensive formation against the Parthian horse archers that circled them for hours, releasing volley after volley of arrows into their midst. The Romans had seen it before; they knew they had only to wait out the enemy cavalry, maintaining dispersed formations to minimize the effects of the enemy army’s fire, and when its horses tired and it ran out of arrows - as they always did - the Roman allied cavalry would pin their flanks, holding them until the legions could engage, and the legions, as ever, would triumph.

But the young Parthian general knew his Romans, as surely as Diettinger knew his Imperials. First, contacting the legions in the dry Mesopotamian flatlands, he deprived them of water; then, driving off the unreliable allied cavalry auxilia, he deprived them of mobility; and with the deployment of a thousand camels bearing baskets of arrows to replenish his archers, he deprived them of hope.

Whenever the Romans dispersed their formations to lessen the impact of the Parthian volleys, Parthian heavy cavalry, armored lancers, charged the legions' ranks. The only defense against such a massed cavalry attack was to close ranks and lock shields, which concentrated the Roman infantry and made it once again vulnerable to the hail of arrows from the Parthian horse archers. Heat, thirst, the erosion of morale that followed constant attack by an enemy with which the legions could not come to grips, all took their toll. It had taken over four hundred years, but a means had at last been devised to defeat the mightiest organization of men under arms in history.

But at Carrhae, Second Rank caught herself, the Romans surrendered; and Diettinger has made it clear he does not believe the Imperials will do that, here... which meant that Sauron System must be the grave of the Imperial Fleet, if its people were to survive.

It scarcely mattered. Like every Sauron, like every human since the dawn of intelligence, the moment of the kill flooded Second Rank with emotions beyond number. It was more than enough to distract her from her observation of Cyborg Rank Koln, whose own glittering grey eyes left the immersion display to sweep across the bridge, flicker briefly over Second Rank, then Diettinger, then back to his own duty station.

His scrutiny had taken less than two seconds; more than enough time to gauge the distance between himself, Second Rank's concealed weapon, and the Dictator, and to calculate how long it would take to reach each of them in turn.

There was more than enough time for that, as well...

III

Doubtless there were many in the Imperial force of Intruder Two who felt that their portion of the battle, though frustrating, must be close to an end. The Sauron Task Force *Keegan* had shown such lack of commitment in its attacks, since breaking off, that it could only be due to lack of fuel, morale, ordinance and surviving crew.

If the raiders - or, as all were now sure, only one raider - hiding in Ostia was making it difficult for the Imperial force to refuel, then surely the Sauron force at this side of the system could be faring no better. At which time, the blackness of space between Intruder Two and the Sauron System asteroid belt was filled with hundreds of glittering lights, the distinctive flares of spacecraft engines in vacuum.

TF *Keegan* leapt from the asteroid field, a pouncing tiger; patient for days, its hunger would wait no longer. TF *Keegan* had been mauled, to be sure; her original complement of thirty seven vessels now numbered only twenty-one, but all had been refueled and rearmed from the hidden supply caches guarded by the *Banshee*, the *Ire of Eire* and the dozen other ships left hiding in the asteroid field when *Falkenberg* had broken off to play raider in Ostia's atmosphere.

These too were now placed under Dannevar's flag, raising TF *Keegan's* twenty-one to thirty-three, which in turn were now reinforced by over one hundred of the same *Dragon*-class defense vessels that had been working such grief upon Intruder One.

Lacking Alderson drives, *Dragons* were able to commit far more of their displacement to weaponry and maneuvering engines; lacking living crew, remotely controlled by Weapons Rankers throughout TF *Keegan's* elements, they could use both assets to excess, and this they did now.

Intruder Two began to turn more and more of its flanking ships to meet the onslaught, TF *Keegan* closed remorselessly, and the battle began to resemble a general melee.

Diettinger alerted his Signals Rank. "Send First Rank Eglin: Fire at will."

The defense platforms scattered throughout the asteroid belt were concentrated at those portions of the belt's orbit which corresponded to the general approach routes toward Sauron from the system's Alderson points. For the last six weeks, all of the defensive asteroid platforms under Eglin had been slowly shifted with thruster packages to concentrate their fields of fire in line with Diettinger's overall plan.

At a signal from Eglin, those fields were now flooded with hundreds of missiles, each bearing dozens of multiple seeker warheads, comprising every last vestige of fissionable material the Saurons had been capable of producing. There was not one thermonuclear weapon left on the Homeworld; a fact which would have gladdened the heart of every Breedmaster, but for the circumstances which brought it about.

Millions of megatons raced toward the ships of Intruder One, still clawing its way out of the wreckage of its ships in the line of mesons between Barlowe and Freas, Like Viking raiders clambering over walls only to see rank upon rank of archers, Intruder One's remaining ships stepped into death. The missiles detonating all around them were joined by TF *Damaris* and its own cat's-paw fleet, the *Dragons* of Hourglass North.

Halfway across Sauron System, Intruder Two was amazing its Sauron attackers simply by remaining intact. Now outnumbered and outgunned, the Imperials would not be outfought, and while the heavily reinforced TF *Keegan*, its supporting *Dragons*, and wave after wave of asteroid-launched missiles steadily decimated its ranks, Intruder Two mounted savage counterattacks and simply refused to die.

IV

"Christ, Skipper," Willoughby breathed at the sight in the display. *Falkenberg* had climbed out of Ostia's atmosphere to chance an attempt at gauging the progress of the battle; with the reduction of interference from Ostia's ionosphere, the immersion display had abruptly conjured a vision of an inferno.

Hawksley nodded. "The Saurons are going to win this one, all right," he agreed, "But by God, they aren't going to enjoy it."

"Incoming signal from the *Fomoria*" the commo officer called out.

"Put it through," Hawksley spun himself around a handhold; *Falkenberg* was on minimal thrust, so down to microgravity and giving the crew a respite from the punishing maneuvering of the past few days. He glided to the readout panel and keyed in his command code, reading the message.

"Mister Willoughby," Hawksley called out as he cleared the panel and swinging his own archaic hooded viewscreen into position before him.

"Captain."

"Take a look at that Sauron computer game they plugged into my bridge, and tell me what you see at..." he keyed his viewscreen controls and read: "Sector one-two-seven mark zero-niner-eight; over at Intruder Three."

Unlike his commander, Willoughby liked the Sauron immersion display; of course, he had always liked computer games, too. "Display; enhance detail,

Intruder Three." Willoughby watched as the display kicked up the resolution of the requested area in

preset powers of ten. “Stop...” he was silent for a moment as he read the figures.”Skipper...”

“They’re starting to burn thrusters, aren’t they?”

“Yes they are.”

“Yeah,” Hawksley breathed, then looked up at nothing in particular. “Shit,” he hissed, moving back to his acceleration couch and strapping himself in as he issued commands: “Commo, send *Fomoria*, Signal acknowledged, moving to intercept.’ Mister Willoughby, get us over there with all speed.”

“Aye, aye, Skipper. All hands, six-G maneuvers in thirty seconds. Helm,” Willoughby ordered, “Lay on a six-G intercept with the Intruder Three element and initiate at twenty seconds from my mark... Mark.”

“Six-G intercept, aye,” the helmsman acknowledged while his second repeated the warning to *Falkenberg’s* crew to get to their acceleration couches; anybody not in one in twenty-one seconds was unlikely to get into it before blacking out in twenty-three.

Willoughby moved over to Hawksley’s side and asked in a low voice: “We going in, Skipper?”

Hawksley shook his head. “Just a quick pass-through; Diettinger wants to get an idea of which Imperial group they’re going to try to rescue; although if we can - uhh!” The *Falkenberg’s* engines roared into life and the privateer’s leap wrenched Hawksley’s words from his tongue - “... can break up their... formation... that’d be... nice, too.”

Willoughby nodded; scarcely a lowering of the eyes at six-Gravities’ acceleration. *Well*, he consoled himself, *we shouldn’t have to hold this speed for long*. Six-Gs would take them across the roughly 400 million kilometers to intercept in less than thirty hours, if they didn’t turn at midpoint to slow down - and as *Falkenberg* would be outnumbered one hundred and forty to one by the ships of Intruder Three, Willoughby was very sure they would not.

Twenty-Seven

Diettinger watched as the display icons representing intruder Three began, perceptibly, to move. At the moment, the enemy vector was detected as being a constant one-G acceleration directly for Sauron, a maneuver which would steadily diminish their chances of coming to the relief of Intruders One or Two, and bring them directly into contact with Diettinger’s own Task Force.

Which wouldn’t be the worst thing they could do, he reflected. Intruder Three held one hundred and forty fast ships, while TF *Fomoria* topped out at fifty slower, but much more powerful platforms. A few dozen *Dragons* whose maneuvers had carried them away from their respective control groups were now in high-speed orbits around Landyn’s star, creating a small reserve for TF *Fomoria*, but their fuel and ordinance would be essentially spent. They could be regarded as bonus skirmishers, at best. The Homeworld itself bristled with planetary defense stations which would provide adequate support to his command if the Imperials maintained their course to intercept.

“Signal intercept, Dictator.”

“Speak.”

“Message scanning lasers interfacing all elements of Intruder Three, but...” the Communications Ranker frowned. “None between Intruder Three and other Imperial forces.”

“Your point?”

“Dictator, Intruders One and Two have maintained contact throughout the engagement, but no one has

been, or is, talking to Intruder Three.”

The Communications Ranker was at a loss to explain the data, but in that moment, something passed between him and Diettinger that told them both there was something crucially important about the fact.

“Do you have any message fragments?” Diettinger asked, rising from his command couch and joining Communications at his station next to Cyborg Rank Koln. Second Rank turned uneasily in her own seat, apparently trying to maintain her view of the display on the other side of him.

Communications heaved a sigh. “Only that, Dictator; all coded and no progress on it yet with the cryptography programs. In addition, it is different from the codes being used to communicate between Intruders One and Two; those codes are modifications of older encrypts, relatively familiar, decipherable with some difficulty. But we are at least able to eavesdrop on those communications; whatever the ships of Intruder Three are telling one another, we cannot know.”

Second Rank frowned: “Why would they upgrade one fleet element to this new code and not the others?”

Diettinger knew the question had been addressed to him, but instead of answering immediately, he turned to the command station behind him. “Cyborg Rank Koln. What is your assessment of this information?”

Koln answered immediately, as much a function of lightning Cyborg reactions as to show that he had been eavesdropping all along, himself. “Outdated Imperial tactics; they believe that upgrading one system to a secure code confers some measurable advantage in terms of reserve tactical surprise, when statistically, our ability to monitor two-thirds of their force’s communications,” Koln lifted his head briefly to indicate the display, “provides us with the results we see before us.”

Diettinger nodded, a grim amusement confined to his remaining eye. “Yes. Statistically.” He began to enhance the display sector depicting Intruder Three. “Or, perhaps because the Imperials want us to listen to Intruders One and Two; and rely on our knowledge of them to convince us that - statistically - our then *assured* guaranteed victory over them will leave us sufficient surviving forces to destroy Intruder Three, as well.”

The detail enhancement on Intruder Three stopped when the Imperial fleet element was a glittering array of ship icons, headings and data. Originally arrayed as a sphere, there was now discernible shifting of vessels into a new formation, a lozenge shape which continued to elongate over the minutes of observation by the *Fomoria*’s bridge crew.

Ships at the rear maintained constant thrust, while those at the van increased speed slightly to draw ahead, maneuvering to close ranks. Within an hour, the formation had become a tight cylinder, roughly six ships around and twenty long, each vessel separated by a scant fifty kilometers, with a core of the twenty heaviest vessels traveling in-line down the center of the “tube.”

“I’ve never seen that formation,” Second Rank wondered aloud. “It would allow a rapid break-off; splitting down the long axis to engage both our element and that of TF *Damaris*...”

Diettinger granted the notion a half-nod. “And mask their intentions until absolutely necessary. Minimal vectoring would bring the formation in line with Landyn’s gravity well; that would allow - ” he stopped, frowned, and forgetting he could order enhancement of any aspect of the immersion display, left his acceleration couch and stepped directly into the simulacrum to confirm what he saw. “Sensors.”

“Dictator.”

“Confirm telemetry for this image.”

The Sensor Rank, charged with monitoring the immersion display computers and the accuracy of their projections, double-checked his station readout."Display accuracy confirmed, Dictator."

Diettinger swung back into his couch and strapped himself in. "Helm, all speed to intercept. Cyborg Rank Koln, raise alert status on all EVA Commando units to Level One. Communications, get me the *Falkenberg*"

"*Falkenberg* laser signal incoming, Dictator, seven minute lag time"

"Put it through."

Hawksley's image appeared in another sector of the immersion display; the Burgess privateer's face sagged with the G-forces of *Falkenberg's* acceleration.

"Flag, this is *Falkenberg*, on intercept with Intruder Three; by the time you get this signal, you'll probably know what we know. Intruder Three is accelerating toward Sauron in a cylindrical formation. As of this message, the entire Imperial element has begun a constant one-half-gravity-per-hour-acceleration. As vessels comprising enemy element are among the fastest in Imperial service, we assume they will exceed maximum survivable acceleration of ten-Gs in approximately fourteen hours. We have signaled same data to the Coalition vessels *Banshee* and *Ire of Eire*, these being the fastest capital ships in our sector.

"We are increasing burn to six gravities in an attempt to engage Intruder Three before intercept, but our effectiveness will be greatly reduced after such extended periods at high-G thrust. Request you signal TF *Damaris* to detach some elements to aid us until you can arrive with TF *Fomoria*, *Falkenberg* out."

"Intercept..." Second Rank breathed; she started abruptly, her fingers flying over her console. The immersion display brightened as it extrapolated Intruder Three's path, drawing its brilliant green line down the center of the cylindrical formation, through the orbits of Barlowe, Freas and Ostia, just skirting the "upper" side of the asteroid belt, narrowly missing Sauron's moon of Poictesme...

... and impacting Sauron, beginning with the main continent of Lebensraum.

"Second Rank," Diettinger's voice cut through her horror, "Extrapolate."

Althene only nodded, all the while entering commands into her console. The immersion display computers began pouring out data: Over the course of the impacts, the Homeworld's own rotation would expose seventy-percent of its surface to the steady flow of one hundred and forty capital ship spacecraft massing over 80,000 tonnes each, impacting the surface at speeds well in excess of fifteen hundred kilometers per second...

"Dictator, my calculations indicate impact energy in excess of hundreds of billions of megajoules; nearly one hundred million megatons per impacting vessel. .."

"Yes," Diettinger said quietly."Status, TF *Keegan*?"

"Still heavily engaged with remaining elements of Intruder Two, Dictator. Break-off not feasible." Whatever effect the revelation of Intruder Three's intent was having on the *Fomoria's* bridge crew, it did not extend to the erosion of Sauron discipline.

"TF *Damaris*"

"Intruder One at eighty-seven percent casualties, Dictator, still no attempts by Imperials to disengage. Evidence of Imperial ram attempts."

"Signal *Damaris*: All speed to support Coalition interception of Intruder Three. Send planetary defense stations: Bring all fire to bear incoming units of Intruder Three. And Communications; impress upon them the extreme unlikelihood of any Imperial break-off due to infliction of casualties."

“Dictator,” it was Second Rank.

“Speak.”

“Imperial elements Intruder Three now at seven gravities acceleration and still maintaining maximum burn.”

Diettinger nodded. *The G-forces will be unbearable in a few hours, he thought. Doubtless they have only skeleton crews aboard, likely volunteers for what would undeniably be a suicide mission.*

He wondered if they had made any provision whatsoever for evacuating the vessels before impact. That seemed unlikely, given the need to maintain course, an increasingly difficult proposition at the speeds they would soon reach.

“They must be unmanned, Dictator,” Second Rank assessed the threat. “On-board computers, perhaps a skeleton crew of human norm volunteers.”

Diettinger answered, “Remote piloting would render Intruder Three vulnerable to destruction of the controllers aboard Intruders One and Two.” Computer control had not been feasible for the mission profiles of the *Dragons* of Hourglasses North and South. Intruder Three, of course, had no need for course change capability; its maneuvering requirements were far more brutally simple. That explained the flurry of communications between the elements of Intruder Three; the effort would require the utmost precision in coordination, up to the last second.

He checked the helm readouts: *Falkenberg* would make intercept in four more hours; *Banshee* and *Ire of Eire* two hours after that, about the same time as TF *Damaris*, delayed only by the lag time of the communications lasers carrying Diettinger’s orders. The dagger thrust that was Imperial Intruder Three would still be ten hours from initial impact when they caught up to it, and even the slightest success against it might be enough to nudge its course away from the Homeworld.

“Dictator,” a soft, somehow grey voice at his elbow; Diettinger turned to see Cyborg Rank Koln standing beside him, an acceleration couch being unnecessary for the mere eleven gravities the Cyborg was standing against.

“Speak,” Diettinger answered; not a tone one usually took with the Super Soldiers, but that was the point of being Dictator, after all, wasn’t it?

“The Homeworld must be protected.”

“That is my earnest intent, Cyborg Rank Koln. Return to your station.”

Koln ignored the order, as Diettinger expected him to. “You have not ordered Task Force *Keegan* to join in the intercept of Intruder Three.”

“It cannot arrive in time,” Diettinger answered quietly. He was aware that they were attracting the attention of increasing numbers of the *Fomoria*’s bridge crew.

“Your assessment of TF *Keegan*’s intercept ability assumes a sustained thrust rate of eleven gravities.”

“It does.”

“This is the maximum safe sustainable acceleration only for Sauron norms; I remind you that every ship in TF *Keegan* carries reinforced EVA Commando squadrons - by your command - and that these squads, composed solely of Cyborgs, are capable of sustaining accelerations greatly in excess of twice that amount. They can assume command of the ships of TF *Keegan* and engage maximum acceleration to rendezvous with - ”

Diettinger cut him off. “And what of the Sauron norms aboard those ships? They will not survive such

extended periods of maximum thrust.”

Koln hardly paused. “I anticipated your concern on this point: Those personnel with genetic preference ratings of A-4 and above could use the EVA Commando modules as escape pods for recovery after the battle is won; the rest may naturally be considered expendable.”

“Naturally,” Diettinger agreed dryly.

“I do not propose this action lightly. In balance against the mass of population on the Homeworld, it is simply a foregone conclusion.”

“I do not consider it so. Even leaving that aside, however, your battle plan is flawed.”

“In what detail?”

Diettinger shifted against the G-forces as much from anger as to square his view of Koln’s impassive features. “You fail to understand the importance of continued denial of Ostia to the Imperials as a refueling station. Intruder Two remains sufficiently strong to secure Ostia for refueling should *Keegan* and her elements disengage.”

“Secure,” Koln admitted, “but not retain. Insufficient numbers remain of Intruder Two to warrant classifying it as any threat once the danger to the Homeworld is removed.”

“And what if the Imperials receive reinforcements?”

Diettinger was astonished at what happened next; for the first time in his life, he was actually sure he saw a perceptible emotional reaction cross a Cyborg’s features - contempt.

“The bulk of the remaining Imperial navy is comprised of a field of debris now scattered across Tanith and Sauron space. Your appointment as Dictator assumed your competency to deal with the tactical acumen of these cattle.” Koln’s voice dropped. “Was this assumption in error?”

Diettinger did not break Koln’s gaze as he answered quietly. “I will not know if I can defeat their plans until I have apprehended the whole of them.”

“You will not release TF *Keegan* to Cyborg command?”

“Correct.”

“You endanger the survival of the Homeworld by your fear of an enemy that is already, by any definition, defeated.”

Under different circumstances, it might have been Diettinger’s turn to be contemptuous, but he could not bring himself to do it. Instead, his tone was almost gentle. The Cyborgs were the personification of power; which, he suddenly realized, was exactly what made them so irredeemably naive.

“Don’t underestimate these people, Koln. Don’t make the mistake of equating “inferior” with “stupid.” The human norms have enough experience fighting us to have learned to seek every advantage when doing so. Inferior they may be, but they are well aware of that inferiority, and they take great pains to minimize its impact at every opportunity. That is why they avoided engaging us in ground combat whenever possible. In space, our only marked advantage over them has been our higher-G tolerance. A factor which is more than compensated by their much longer naval tradition and commensurately superior expertise in the space combat environment. You have evidently forgotten that this ‘defeated enemy’ is invading *our* Homeworld’s System, not the other way around.”

He shook his head. “The Imperials *know* that they operate against us at distinct disadvantages in every field, and so they base their entire strategy on compensating for that fact.” Diettinger favored Koln with a grim smile. “In effect, the Imperials have been playing into the hands of our own Breedmasters. By

consciously adapting to oppose us, they are also taking human evolution into their own hands, bettering their own segment of the species day by day. And it is that determination to oppose us at every step that has made them sufficiently dangerous so as to be winning this war. They are, after all, as human as we are.”

Koln’s control was absolute once more, but he could not refrain from rejecting Diettinger’s assessment of the enemy. “The Imperials are weak, mercantile, disorganized, venal and petty.”

Diettinger nodded in agreement. “All true. However, they are not fools. I conclude by pointing out that these defects of character, in and of themselves, have never in human history prevented any one state afflicted with them from crushing another; even if it destroyed itself in doing so.”

Koln stood motionless as only a Cyborg could. Finally, he lowered his eyes and returned to his station. He looked briefly at Second Rank before strapping himself into the acceleration couch.

Second Rank let out a long breath; behind her, the bridge security troopers continued watching Koln - as they lay flattened against their own acceleration couches, hardly able to move against the eleven gravities generated by the *Fomoria*’s thrust.

They would have been as helpless as the rest of us, she finally admitted to herself. She looked back to the display. *Let us be in time...*

The Barlowe/Freas stations could prove to be of some help; they would have to wait until Intruder Three was very close to Sauron, and hopefully was much reduced by then from the predations of Task Forces *Damaris*, *Fomoria* and the three ships of the *ad hoc* TF *Falkenberg*. Still, the meson streams might yet turn the tide. The problem was that any one of Intruder Three’s vessels would, on impact, reduce a large portion of the heavily-populated Homeworld to ruin; the percentage which could be expected to get through could render Sauron uninhabitable for decades, perhaps centuries.

“TF *Falkenberg* engaging lead elements, Dictator,” Signals announced. “TF *Damaris* arriving fifty minutes.”

Emory’s people would pay dearly for the time they’d gained; TF *Damaris* couldn’t have gotten so far so quickly at less than eleven-Gs.

In the display, *Falkenberg*, *Banshee* and *Ire of Eire* were concentrating all their fire against the lead ships of Intruder Three; two Fields shot up into orange, but the intercept speed was so *great* that their ships were soon out of the line-of-fire. Hawksley evidently decided to leave them for the incoming TF *Damaris*, hoping the larger, more numerous Sauron ships would finish what the Burgess privateer and its New Ireland cohorts had begun.

Diettinger began extrapolating figures in his head; it was possible, perhaps only barely, but possible that they could stop Intruder Three. They would need every planetary defense battery, every ship of TFs *Damaris* and *Fomoria*, all the remaining *Dragons* - those without missiles or functioning lasers would follow the Imperial lead and be remotely-piloted in for ram attacks - but Sauron could survive this battle. And then...

And then what? he thought abruptly. *Then we rebuild; we reinforce, spread out, colonize in secret on a massive scale. Disperse so fast and so quietly that we never again risk extinction at the hands of human norms.* Diettinger had no intention of relinquishing the mantle of Dictator before he had undone the damage of decades of Statistician Rankers’ domination of the High Council.

Despite everything, there remained in him a sense of sympathy for the human norms. They certainly showed no sign of reciprocating such sentiment; they despised the Saurons beyond capacity to express, but, he knew, not without good reason. Sauron was after all the future of the human race, Diettinger

still believed that, and he felt that the human norms must know it at some level. Whether the Sauron people led the way or the rest of humanity stumbled blindly, slowly and painfully along to that destiny, in the end the result would be the same.

But no species willingly surrendered dominance to its heirs, and surely no intelligent species could tolerate the obvious presence of the next step in its own evolution - the one which would replace them. No living creature *wanted* to be rendered extinct, he knew; in fact, he could now understand that better than ever before. Along with such understanding came the certainty that the war would end - *could* only end when the last human norm gave birth to a Human norm-Sauron equivalent.

And that, he knew, is exactly how it will end. Diettinger's sympathy remained, but it was tempered by determination. *That will be true even if I am forced to fall back on my last resort.*

"Dictator, two ships of Intruder Three destroyed; TF *Damaris* launching missiles from extreme range, maneuvering to match velocities with incoming enemy vessels."

"It's taking too much time to eliminate those ships," Diettinger considered. "Likely they've removed on-board crew-support systems to accommodate more capacitors for their Langston Fields."

The display flared as two more ships of Intruder Three flared and disappeared.

Too long, Diettinger repeated to himself. But it was happening. Intruder Three was being reduced, and every few dozen tons of mass stripped from the approaching Imperial fleet increased Sauron's chances of survival by millions of megatons. Once TF *Fomoria* reached the battle to link up with TFs *Damans* and *Falkenberg*, Intruder Three was doomed. It would be the closest battle of his life, but...

"Precedents! Precedents!"

"Enhance!" Diettinger slammed his hand against the immersion display controls so hard a crack raced down the covering; Sauron System's three other Alderson Points were flashing red. The bridge was filled with the babble of conflicting reports.

"Holcroft Alderson Point, seventy vessels..."

"Frederick Alderson Point, ninety-three Imperial vessels..."

"Bellerro Alderson Point, readings in excess of two hundred vessels..."

"Report!" It was the only order of his life he had ever had to shout. "Bellerro surveillance, say again."

"Readings show two hundred and fifty-plus vessels have appeared at the Bellerro Alderson Point, Dictator. Telemetry indicates seventy tankers with heavy escort..." the Signals Ranker looked at Diettinger, pale. "Telemetry..." he repeated, but seemed unable to get the rest out.

"Display," Diettinger ordered, "Enhance sensor readings, Bellerro Alderson Point."

The myriad twinkling lights resolved themselves into the green points of friendly vessel indicators, and for one insane moment Diettinger thought some long-hidden Sauron fleet had arrived to save the day.

"Enhance," he repeated, and the images stepped up another notch in clarity.

"Enhance," Diettinger ordered a last time, his voice laden with the certainty of death.

What was it Connolly and Shannon had called Hawksley? he wondered. *Fey; the aspect of a man who has perceived the inevitability of his own doom.*

The display showed the Bellerro Alderson Point filled with Outworld Coalition vessels. Pirates, raiders, former Sauron Trade Bloc and Secessionist spacecraft. All those interstellar nations which had allied with Sauron to topple the Empire, had been branded traitors by Imperial edict, had plead poverty of vessels to support Sauron against the imminent invasion . . . and now, just as obviously, had been granted

amnesty to switch sides. There was no defect in the display; its program simply had not been updated. It could only differentiate friend from foe if it was told beforehand which was which.

And its Sauron programmers had not known that.

Twenty-Eight

I

“Pour it on, Mister Willoughby,” Hawksley’s voice was tight to his Exec, now serving as Weapons Officer; *Falkenberg* had matched velocities with the lead ships of Intruder Three, which meant her crew was dying by inches. Helmsman Plunkett had collapsed and died of a gravity-induced brain aneurysm that morning. He had been twenty-one.

“Captain, Sensors show eight enemy carriers closing on our position; they’re launching fighters.”

Since the Imperials had dropped the other shoe the day before, they had spread to every section of Sauron System. The first wave of fighters had engaged the *Dragons* of Hourglasses North and South. The operators of the remotely piloted *Dragons* couldn’t hope to match the skills of pilots at the scene, engaging the defense boats in real time, with no response lag. The RPVs were wiped from space in a matter of hours.

TF *Keegan* was being systematically dismembered, despite the fact that Dannevar’s command had obliterated four Imperial battleships; eight more had closed in to take their place.

TF *Damaris* was a wounded bear set on by hounds; the remaining Imperials and their new allies would slash at her flanks until several elements of the Sauron battlegroup turned and engaged; in a fury of fire, TF *Damaris* would then dash two or more ships to incandescent slag... but always more replaced them.

TF *Fomoria*, relatively unscathed, maintained a murderous volume of fire into Intruder Three, but the lead elements of the Imperial reinforcements were now engaging Diettinger’s command, drawing more and more firepower away from the crucial attacks on the ships which flew spearlike toward the Homeworld.

At least, Diettinger reflected, *we finally know the whereabouts of the Imperial Motherships*. There was no need for them to guard outlying areas of the Empire against opportunistic raids by the Outworlders. The Saurons had expected the Outworld Coalition to take advantage of the climactic battle of the war. Now, seeing the hundreds of Outworld vessels fighting alongside the Imperial vessels, grinding the Sauron Home Fleet to dust, Diettinger realized that they were, in fact, doing just that. Like any successful parasite, the Outworlders knew when to switch to the host with the best chance of survival.

With the fresh influx of capital ships and their fuel tankers to maintain pressure on the Sauron Fleet, hundreds of Imperial heavy fighters now ranged through Sauron System almost at will. Evidently warned of the Barlowe/Freas stations by their surviving comrades in-system, the Imperials had launched whole wings of assault fighters which had come up on Freas from the backside of the planet, swept in and destroyed the propagator array on the world’s surface. Barlowe was ignored; without both projectors operating, no mesons were produced, and mere charged particle accelerators were no threat.

Diettinger entered a private code into his command console, activating the program he had hidden deep within *Fomoria*’s computers weeks before. Its final activation could now occur from any number of events; his own voice command or key code entry, even a damage threshold being reached aboard *Fomoria* herself. Diettinger had written such fail-safes into his program because, even now, he could not bring himself to activate it until he was certain it was necessary. Not before he saw for himself the

fate of the Homeworld. He could tolerate the prospect of his own imprisonment, even his execution for war crimes, if he could only be sure that Sauron would be invested, occupied, and ultimately, her citizens re-integrated into Imperial society. That would bespeak of some thread of hope for the survival of Sauron. And its survival, he knew, meant its ultimate victory.

Only if the Imperials proved themselves bent on genocide would he initiate his final option. Only if they demonstrated that the society they wished to preserve was not worth living in or dying for.

Hawksley watched as *Falkenberg's* target began to shimmer with burn-throughs; the violet egg of the overloaded Field suddenly swirled with yellow-white lesions that spread, flared.. .then it was gone.

“One more down!” Hawksley shouted. *And a hundred and four to go*, he thought. “What’s happening with those carriers?”

“Launching fighters, captain. Nine... ten... twelve squadrons; looks like they’re all those new Morgan-class Imperial heavies.”

Willoughby turned. “*Morgans?* What carriers *are* those out there?”

The Sensor operator called out the immersion display’s recognition estimates based on the configurations of the enemy vessels: “Looks like we got the *Aquila*, the *Ranger*; two Eagle-class . . . and the *Centurion*, sir - “ he stopped short and shot a glance at Hawksley.

Hawksley caught the look and addressed his exec. “Mister Willoughby,” Hawksley made himself heard over the din on the bridge. “Are you going to have a problem with this?”

Willoughby began locking the *Falkenberg's* weapons onto the next target in Intruder Three. “No sir, skipper.” He did not turn as he added in a low voice, “Just as long as you don’t ask me to shoot down my brother, I’ll be just fine.”

II

Ire of Eire was about to die. Captain Shannon had brought the New Ireland cruiser in too close to the onrushing cylinder of Intruder Three’s formation. Computer controls might not be suited for adroit maneuvering or intuitively-timed attacks, but they are splendid for coordination. Fourteen broadsides along the cylindrical formation’s starboard aspect struck as one, peeling away *Ire of Eire's* Field at one stroke. Debris from the New Irelander paced the stricken cruiser as it continued, out of control, into the midst of Intruder Three.

Had the Imperial ships been programmed to avoid objects in their path, there might yet have been survivors from Shannon’s crew; but that was exactly counter to their purpose.

Ire of Eire tumbled into the path of the Imperial attack cruiser *Camlann*, 75,000 tonnes traveling now at twelve gravities’ acceleration. The New Ireland cruiser disintegrated into fragments, splashing back from the Imperial’s bow and flowing over its hull. *Camlann* fared little better, her forward section splitting like a hammered eggshell, frame cracking down the spine, the wreckage shattering, splintering, tumbling off course and through the formation, grazing another ship of Intruder Three, the heavy cruiser *Lütjens*.

Lütjens survived the impact, but her course was irrevocably altered; hours later she would plunge into Landyn’s Star and be consumed.

Aboard the *Fomoria*, Second Rank noticed brief spikes in various readings at her station, and instructed Sensors to concentrate their instruments on the wreckage of the *Camlann*.

She moved her acceleration couch beside Diettinger’s and reported in a low voice: “Dictator, readings indicate tremendous levels of radiation in the debris from the *Camlann*. If this is indicative, the ships of

Intruder Three must be packed to capacity with solid nuclear waste.”

“This was not previously detected; not even in the debris from the destroyed vessels of Intruder Three.”

“It would be heavily shielded while on board, if only to prevent our sensors from discovering it and guessing Intruder Three’s true purpose,” Second Rank replied. “All previous losses to Intruder Three have been high energy burn-throughs. The collapse of a Langston Field, on ships of this mass, releases more than enough energy to mask the presence of such radioactive material even while it is being converted to plasma.”

Diettinger considered this newest information. “Then even the reduction of mass from atmospheric burn-up works in their favor; what mass doesn’t reach Sauron will spread radioactive waste into the atmosphere.” He cocked his brow at her in a grim smile. “How very thorough.”

Their voices had been kept low during the exchange, but it was simply not possible to keep them low enough. Koln turned in his seat and addressed Diettinger once again. “Dictator.”

“Speak.”

“I call your attention to the results of *Ire of Eire*’s collision with the *Camlann*”

“Elaborate.”

“It is a viable tactic.”

“It is absurd. We are outnumbered, Cyborg Rank Koln. Sacrificing all of our remaining vessels in deliberate ram attacks would save the Homeworld from Intruder Three only to expose it to the remnants of Intruders One and Two and their reinforcements.”

“Then I require release authorization for the remaining EVA Commando units in Task Force *Fomoria*”

Diettinger did not answer immediately. He reviewed the *Fomoria*’s position, made a few brief passes over his console, then looked up at Koln. “Cyborg Rank Koln; given the performance capabilities of the Commando’s delivery torpedoes, what is the probability that your Cyborgs can intercept and board the vessels of Intruder Three?”

Koln’s eyes glittered. “I would estimate approximately twenty-percent of the enemy force could be captured, if TF *Fomoria* is able to match velocities before launching. I point out that this figure would be substantially higher had Task Forces *Keegan* and *Damaris* been brought into the operation earlier.”

“Wasted seed, Cyborg Rank Koln,” Diettinger used the Breedmaster’s equivalent of ‘spilt milk’; a mild Sauron profanity which he delivered with condescension.

“Second Rank,” he turned his attention from Koln for the moment. “Will a twenty-percent reduction of Intruder Three significantly reduce the impact damage to the Homeworld?”

“No, Dictator; and if all of those ships are carrying this poison, it will require only a few to pollute Sauron’s seas and atmosphere for several thousand years. But it would provide us with a significant number of reinforcements able to attack the other elements of Intruder Three from within its own formation, at point-blank range. If nothing else, they could alter course within the Imperial fleet element and perhaps throw the bulk of Intruder Three into disarray. And that would reduce the potential damage to Sauron significantly.”

Diettinger thought for a moment, then shook his head. “No. It would mean the loss of most of TF *Fomoria*’s Cyborgs. A minimum estimated return of twenty-percent casualties to Intruder Three is not sufficient to warrant the expenditure of such assets.”

Koln pounced: “That estimate is based on my coordination of the effort from this station. The capture

estimates rise to sixty-five percent if I participate in the operation personally and coordinate it on-site.”

With only one eye remaining, Diettinger nevertheless managed to generate a glare of sufficient intensity to make Second Rank grateful that she was not the object of his attention. A long moment passed; at the instant Koln was about to repeat his demand, Diettinger cut him off.

“Do it.”

Koln left the bridge so quickly he almost seemed to vanish. Second Rank waited a moment longer before speaking. “Dictator.”

“Not now.”

She thought his rage, though contained, seemed almost palpable. “First Rank,” she prodded in a quieter voice.

Diettinger blinked, turned to her, and finally, his sigh fading into his weary gaze, said, “Speak.”

“Let the Cyborgs be the heroes of the hour. The more that are lost now, the less that will remain to contest your policies should we survive this.”

Diettinger watched her for a long time.” You have no love for the Cyborgs, do you, Second Rank?”

Her gaze was level, remorseless.”They see themselves as instruments *of* Sauron’s future. I see them as instruments *to* Sauron’s future.”

“That is a profound difference.”

“I am comfortable with the distinction, Dictator,” she said, and returned to her station.

“Weapons,” Diettinger addressed the Ranker before him. “Patch communications from Cyborg Rank Koln’s delivery torpedo through to me.”

“Cyborg Rank Koln is entering his torpedo cockpit now, Dictator,” Weapons Rank informed him.

“Status EVA Commandos, TF *Fomoria*”

“All stations ready.”

“Cyborg Rank Koln,” Diettinger said to the panel before him.

Koln’s face appeared; the Cyborg was sufficiently occupied with pre-launch procedures to prevent his addressing the transmitter. “Dictator,” he acknowledged. Now that he was getting his way, Koln could afford to be magnanimous; he had even deigned to leaven his speech with an actual tone of respect.

“I will continue to provide you and your unit commanders with data on Intruder Three as TF *Fomoria* closes with it. I will notify you when launch of your forces will coincide with maximum fire support available from the Task Force; although your release orders will pass through this station, they will cycle directly from *Fomoria*’s bridge throughout the Task Force to coordinate your operation. Will that be satisfactory?”

Koln blinked, looked at the transmitter.”Perfectly,” he answered.

“I will deactivate the pre-launch lock-down procedure, if you wish,” Diettinger added as an afterthought. The lock-down flooded the torpedoes’ interiors with a shock-dampening gel which immobilized the occupant and isolated him from much of the effect of the twenty-five gravities’ brought on by launch acceleration. While it was crucial for the survival of Sauron norms in such operations, it was less so for Cyborgs.

Koln, however, became suspicious. “That will not be necessary, Dictator,” he said. “This is arguably the most crucial operation of the war. It will not do to have even one of my Commandos arrive with

sprained ankles or a broken arm.”

Your commandos, Diettinger thought, but he tried to show only slight disappointment.” Very well,” he answered.”Stand by for launch order.”

Sixty *Morgan* heavy fighters swept toward the seven remaining vessels of TF *Damaris*. Emory’s flagship was at the fore, leading her formation toward the front of Intruder Three. *Falkenberg* and its remaining companion, *Banshee*, were vectoring to intercept the *Morgans* and cover the Sauron units.

III

Aboard the *Falkenberg*, Hawksley was counting the seconds to intercept range. “XO, what’ve we got left?”

“Uh . . . all turrets still operational,” Willoughby reported after a pause. “But . . . we’ve only got eight missiles, skipper.” *Falkenberg’s* executive officer seemed far too distracted for his captain’s liking.

Hawksley’s voice took on the steel-in-velvet tone of the Burgess aristocracy.”What seems to be the problem, Mister Willoughby?”

“Nothing, skipper; just trying to get a lock on the *Morgans* flight controllers; confirm their targets.” He did not look up.

Hawksley didn’t lack brains, of course. What he did lack at the moment was crewmen. *Falkenberg’s* bridge crew was now down from ten officers and non-coms to six, and Willoughby was one of only two men besides himself qualified to crew both the Weapons station and the helm. Hawksley caught the eye of the other; Chief Cooper, now running the sensor suite, who nodded his understanding. Both hoped it wouldn’t become necessary. But Coop was up to the task if it did.

“Mister Willoughby,” Hawksley ordered, “Put the signal intercepts on audio. We might catch something you miss.”

Looking even more miserable than a man should after a week under high-G stress, Willoughby threw a switch, filling the *Falkenberg’s* bridge with randomly intercepted chatter between the commanders of the *Morgan* squadrons and their controllers.

“TF *Damaris* signaling preparation for launch of full missile spreads on Intruder Three from extreme range,” Chief Cooper reported.” They’re going to try to put about two hundred fish into the Impies, Captain, but after that, their bays’ll be empty.”

“Let’s keep those *Morgans* off their back, then. Mister Willoughby, target a spread for our remaining missiles. Put them in staggered intercept courses for the enemy fighter formation. I want to knock as many of those *Morgans* out of the sky as possible before they can screw up TF *Damaris’s* fire solutions.”

“Aye, Captain,” Willoughby acknowledged. Hawksley turned his attention to the audio of the signal intercepts. He knew what Willoughby was listening for, and he wanted to be sure he heard it first.

Twenty-Nine

I

Damaris, with the six surviving ships of her task force trailing to her flanks, was closing with the forward point of Intruder Three. Muted combat lighting did little to mask the damage of fires that had broken out after the last burn-through of *Damaris’s* Field; overworked air recyclers did less to scour the smell of burned flesh from the starship’s closed environment.

Vessel First Rank Mara Emory concentrated on the data lines suspended within the flickering immersion display around her; it made her head ache, but kept her attention from her scarred bridge.

“Weapons; status.”

“Fire solution optimal in twenty-four minutes, First Rank.”

“Communications; maintain open signals to the rest of the task force. Guarantee me synchronized launches.”

“Affirm.”

“First Rank!” It was her Sensors Ranker.

“Speak.”

“Two full squadrons of enemy heavy fighters to starboard of formation, now engaging the *Mago*. *Mago* signals her Field capacitors approaching critical.”

Emory bared her teeth in rage. The Imperial attacks were relentless. No Sauron vessel was gaining any respite to bleed off the captured energy stored in its Fields; if *Mago* went, it would be just the latest in a long line of warships beaten to death since this grim endgame had begun. Worse, it would open a breach in TF *Damans*’ formation which other fighters could exploit.

“Signal *Mago*: ‘break-off. Switch weapon locks to the fighter squadrons and engage at will.’ We have to do something to keep them off our backs for the next . . . Weapons?”

Weapons’ head was bent over his console; he only raised his eyes, looking up at her from beneath his brows: “Twenty-two minutes, First Rank,” he answered.

Emory heaved a sigh. *Well. Every little bit...*

Hawksley checked the *Falkenberg*’s chronometer. “Helm; time to intercept?”

“Full locks on seven missiles, skipper; missile number three is showing a malfunc light. All batteries in range in seventeen seconds.” Willoughby was obviously straining to hear the signal intercepts, and Hawksley was just about to relieve him when he caught the signal fragment amid the clutter.

“... roger that, *Hydra*; closing on your three, standing by for launch go...”

Hawksley’s eyes snapped to Willoughby, but the XO seemed to have missed it. Willoughby was the eldest of seven brothers, two of which had remained loyal to the Imperial faction in what was essentially a civil war. The youngest, a fighter pilot assigned to the INSS *Centurion*, had chosen as his call sign a mythological beast whose seven heads served as his reminder of the supposed homogeneity and survivability of Burgess siblings.

Besides Hawksley’s XO, he was the only one of Mrs. Willoughby’s sons still alive. Hawksley had no desire to destroy the lad; but he had less to be destroyed by him.

“What about those *Morgans*, Mister Willoughby?” Hawksley asked quietly.

“They’re ignoring the *Mago*, skipper, just like you figured.” He turned to face Hawksley; his expression showed he clearly did not want to finish his report. “They’re in range now, sir.”

Hawksley tried to let his tone show that he understood; still, he had no choice. “Shoot, Mister Willoughby.”

Willoughby’s fingers flew over the console, *Banshee*’s Weapons Officer followed suit, and the *Morgans* began to disappear from the display. After the first wave of fire, scattered Imperial fighters began to regroup; they headed straight for the *Damaris*, lead ship in the Sauron Task Force.

In the display, Hawksley saw that TF *Fomoria* was mauling Intruder Three, but not enough. Worse, the bulk of the reinforced Imperial fleet was now bearing down on their position. The lead ship of Intruder Three's remaining one hundred and three vessels was now less than three hours away from entry into Sauron's atmosphere; at its current velocity, impacts would begin eighteen seconds later; assuming Intruder Three lost another twenty-percent of its ships, they would continue for a full rotation of the planet.

So, Intruder Three had to be stopped, TF *Damaris* had to be protected to launch her missiles, and TF *Fomoria* had to remain intact to have any chance of fighting off the rest of the Imperials. Hawksley almost laughed out loud.

Next time, I'll try looking for a real challenge...

"Helm. Intercept the *Morgans* and send us right through the middle of their formation. That ought to break them up."

"Helm, aye," Willoughby acknowledged; Hawksley could hear the relief in his XO's voice. Willoughby obviously thought that the *Falkenberg's* skipper would try to avoid shooting down the *Morgans* for as long as possible.

Hawksley caught Chief Cooper's eye. Coop nodded.

II

Diettinger's attention had been occupied by the battle, but Second Rank finally interrupted him.

"Dictator; Intruder Three now at two hundred and fifty thousand kilometers and closing."

"Yes."

Second Rank was taken aback."Cyborg Rank Koln..."

Diettinger checked his system panel. "Lock-downs in place in all EVA pods?"

Second Rank nodded. "Yes, Dictator. Cyborg Rank Koln is awaiting clearance signal to launch."

Diettinger nodded without looking up. He entered several more commands.

"Dictator?" Second Rank pressed.

Diettinger looked up with an expression of mild interest.

"Dictator," Second Rank said, "*Fomoria* task force now at optimal launch range for Cyborg Rank Koln's forces."

Diettinger nodded. "Yes." he said. A flashing light on his panel drew his attention and he activated the communications link to Koln's torpedo.

"Awaiting launch signal, Dictator," Koln declared.

"Stand by, Cyborg Rank Koln," he answered, then glanced at Second Rank, "Patch navigational control for all vessels in TF *Fomoria* through to our helm, Second Rank. I want perfect coordination for this maneuver."

Second Rank hesitated a moment; had Diettinger left the line to Koln's torpedo open deliberately? He seemed to have wanted the Cyborg to hear. Despite her discipline, she asked, "Dictator, what - ?"

"Attend your duty station, Second Rank."

She lowered her head and returned to her position within the immersion display.

"Time to TF *Damaris* salvo."

“One minute, eight seconds, Dictator.”

The battle was close at hand, now. TF *Keegan*'s last ships had been destroyed an hour ago. Stubbornly holding off nine Imperial heavy cruisers, Dannevar's remaining three vessels had evidently proven to be more trouble than the Imperials were prepared to suffer; three badly damaged Outworld vessels had executed simultaneous ramming attacks. The effectiveness of each varied, but the end result was to break-up TF *Keegan*'s already tenuous mutually supportive formation. Imperial forces fell like wolves upon Dannevar's flagship and the Sauron heavy cruisers *Mordor* and *R'lyeh*; all were dismembered and swept from space. With the destruction of TF *Keegan*, the reinforced Intruder Two was now only minutes away from engaging the remnants of Diettinger's command with a quantity and strength of vessels which could not help but prove decisive.

Now, only the forty ships of TF *Fomoria*, the remaining six of TF *Damaris* and the allied vessels *Falkenberg* and *Banshee* remained between Sauron and the Empire's vengeance, and all were close enough to one another that the communications lag time of message lasers was almost insignificant.

“Communications.”

“Dictator.”

“Signal *Damaris*; ‘Stand by to patch through helm command to *Fomoria*; all ships to initiate special maneuvering immediately following your salvo.’ Cyborg Rank Koln.”

“Yes.”

“Stand by. Launch release in six minutes.”

Second Rank snapped her head around, frowning. *Six minutes? Where had that come from?*

But Diettinger was watching the immersion display.

III

Falkenberg and *Banshee*'s Fields were brick red; interception with the *Morgans* had not broken-up the formation, only allowed the Imperial heavy fighter squadrons to encapsulate the Burgess and New Ireland ships and pour fire into them. The loss of seven *Morgans* had done nothing to encourage the break-off of the remainder, and reinforcements were on the way.

“Time to TF *Damaris* launch?” Hawksley asked.

“Seventeen seconds.”

“That's it. Mister Willoughby, Chief Cooper; take out the rest of these *Morgans*”

Cooper's hand went to the release switch, but Willoughby was faster. “Torpedoes away,” Willoughby announced.

Hawksley kept his voice even. “How many torpedoes, Mr. Willoughby?” he asked quietly. The XO didn't answer, and Hawksley nodded to Chief Cooper.

Falkenberg's turrets began sweeping the *Morgan* squadrons with lasers, and Imperial pilots began to die.

“Task Force *Damaris* now launching, skipper.” It took Hawksley a second to realize that the dead toned voice belonged to his executive officer. Within the immersion display, two hundred blue-green sparks detached themselves from *Damaris* and her sister ships and began accelerating toward the lead vessels in the Imperial formation designated Intruder Three. The Sauron task force immediately changed course and began vector thrusting toward an intercept with TF *Fomoria*.

“All right, we cleared the way; get us out of here, Helm. Bring us about to the midpoint of the Intruder Three formation and let’s get ready to help put the rest of that flying hammer in the hurt locker.”

“Captain,” Chief Cooper called out; “Sensors show surviving *Morgans* closing on *Banshee*.”

“Commo, get me Captain Connolly.”

Connolly’s features flickered into life within the display. He did not look happy to see Hawksley.

“Captain Hawksley.”

“Captain Connolly, can you hold out until we can close in to render assistance?”

Connolly shook his head. “My regrets, Captain Hawksley, but our point defense turrets are out along with half my main batteries. All our missiles are expended, and I believe that *Banshee* has done all she can this day. We are breaking-off combat and retreating. I expect that *Banshee* will be needed at New Ireland in the months to come, and I suggest the same is true of your ship at Burgess. In any case,” he said, reaching out for something on the panel before him, “Fare thee well.”

The connection was broken.

Within the immersion display, *Banshee*’s course suddenly developed a steeply ascending arc that computer projections showed would bring her into a right angle climb above the plane of the ecliptic of Sauron System; the fastest way out of the battle. By virtue of *Banshee*’s course and acceleration, *Falkenberg*’s own current speed and vector would put her directly beneath Connolly’s ship in seconds.

With the *Banshee*’s exit, the three dozen lights, representing the *Morgans* that had been attacking her, all abruptly changed course and began closing on the approaching *Falkenberg*.

Hawksley stared in a mixture of anger, contempt and, admittedly, envy. “Well, Erin go fucking brag to you, too,” he whispered. “Chief Cooper; tell me you can take out those *Morgans* before we’re crippled.”

Cooper checked his screens, found a discrepancy, checked again. He gave Hawksley his answer in a voice filled with resigned sadness. “I can do that skipper, if Mister Willoughby would release his lock-outs on the missiles he pretended to launch earlier.”

Hawksley slowly turned a shocked stare to the ashen face of his executive officer. Willoughby didn’t move, only answered in a low voice, “There aren’t but the two of us left, Captain.” He raised his eyes to Hawksley’s. “What else could I do?”

Well, what did I expect? Hawksley asked himself. *That’s the problem with being a privateer; sooner or later, men without a country come to believe in nothing but friends or, if they’re very lucky, whatever remnants of family remain to them. For that is all that this way of life leaves them.*

He closed his eyes for a moment, remembering his parents, then his wife and children, and finally Mara Emory aboard the *Damaris*.

But only if they are very lucky, indeed...

“You might have considered, Mister Willoughby,” Hawksley told him, “that your actions have probably guaranteed that neither of your mother’s two remaining sons will live out this day. You are relieved, sir.”

Hawksley nodded to Chief Cooper, who took Willoughby’s place at the helm and main weaponry station. “Everything in order there, Chief?”

“Yes, sir. Re-initializing weaponry locks now.”

“Fire when ready.”

Aboard the *Fomoria*, one of Second Rank's assistants double-checked his readings, then announced: "New Ireland ship *Banshee* breaking off under controlled acceleration, Second Rank."

Althene didn't even pause."Spike it."

The officer nodded to Communications Fifth Rank Boyle, who sent the scuttle signal to *Banshee's* special on-board package.

Thirty

I

Damaris' immersion display image was steadily deteriorating, and now it developed a glaring white spot at the point where Emory had last seen the *Falkenberg*,

"What ship was that?"

"Unknown, First Rank; either the *Falkenberg* or the *Banshee*, but - "

"Come about to three-five-seven."

"First Rank, Dictator Diettinger has ordered coordinated maneuvers to begin in - "

Emory was half out of her chair before her Second Rank came to his senses and implemented the course change.

Damaris made for the last known position of the *Falkenberg*, while the other five ships in what had been her task force compensated their vectors, and went with her.

"What the devil is going on with TF *Damaris*?" Diettinger asked."Sensors; time to intercept for their missile salvo?"

"Twelve seconds, Dictator."

"Dictator, rear elements of our task force report Intruder Two closing to missile range."

"Stand by," Diettinger ordered. He checked his chronometer. He had told Koln six minutes; that was two minutes ago. He had four more minutes before he would have to lie to the Cyborg again, or simply tell him the truth; that neither he nor any of his EVA Commandos were ever going to be launched at all.

"First wave of torpedoes impacting now."

The immersion display showed the seven lead ships of Intruder Three had suffered Field burn-throughs, overloads and other fatal disasters. The Fourth and Fifth Rankers on *Fomoria's* bridge could not suppress a ragged cheer, but Diettinger looked farther back along the line of Intruder Three's still-intact formation - over one hundred enemy vessels remained."Number of torpedoes remaining in Task Force *Damaris'* salvo?"

"One hundred and thirty-seven, Dictator," Second Rank answered; a third of the torpedoes had been consumed destroying less than five-percent of the remaining ships in Intruder Three. She sent him a look which told him that whatever secret thing it was he had planned, simple arithmetic dictated that he had best do it soon.

"Communications."

"Dictator."

"Send again all vessels Task Force *Damaris*: You are ordered to come about and place your helm controls under command of this vessel.' Distance to Intruder Three?"

“Fifty thousand kilometers and closing.”

“Weapons lock!” his own Weapons Ranker shouted. “Enemy missiles bearing one-seven-three mark two-ten. Intercept in nine seconds.”

Diettinger shifted the display; nearly a hundred ships of a combined Imperial-Outworlder fleet were in firing range of TF *Fomoria*'s remaining forty vessels. Intruder Two had arrived.

Initial impacts did little to threaten the *Fomoria*, but a lucky multiple strike caused a minor burn-through; just the excuse Diettinger needed.

“Cyborg Rank Koln,” he addressed the message panel.

“Koln here.”

“We have minor damage to our launch electronics; your EVA will be commenced immediately upon effect of repairs; stand by for a two-second launch warning.”

“Understood.” the Cyborg said.

Diettinger cut the connection, then used his networked overrides to disable all EVA launch capacity throughout his task force. He had plans for the Cyborgs, and those plans did not include throwing the Super Soldiers away in the absurdity of a *Gotterdammerung*.

But he wanted TF *Damaris* and its Cyborgs, too. And he was running out of time to collect them. Before him, the immersion display showed him why Emory was not responding to his direct orders, and as he had suspected, it had to do with the *Falkenberg*.

II

The *Morgans* had been joined by the fast battle cruiser *Stonewall Jackson* from the reinforced Intruder Two, and *Falkenberg* was being torn to pieces. “Seven burn-throughs, Captain,” Chief Cooper was shouting through the smoke. “All starboard weapon arrays down; dorsal and port arrays at thirty-percent; skipper, we’re history.”

Hawksley coughed and nodded acknowledgment. The problem with fighting from inside the Langston Field was that it did not allow a ship to lower it in order to surrender. Even opening gaps for message lasers was out of the question, as any such breach would be detected by an enemy torpedo's onboard artificial intelligence, and exploited. And the sheer volume of energy being poured into the Field meant that the moment it was down, any ship it had been protecting would be vaporized before it could so much as key its signaling apparatus to seek terms. For the same reason, lifeboats were useless in combat. A losing ship could only hope that the victor would show sufficient mercy to stop pounding it long enough to allow it to flicker its Field in a gesture of submission; and in all the weeks of this battle, that was something the Imperials had never once indicated they were interested in doing.

“The *Stonewall Jackson* is shifting to bring the rest of her batteries to bear,” Cooper announced. Hawksley watched as the immersion display depicted the massive egg-shaped Field containing the white bulk of the Imperial battle cruiser pivoting gracefully; he could almost reach out and touch the image.. .which suddenly flared brilliant orange, burn-throughs scattered across its Field surface.

“It’s the *Damaris*!” Chief Cooper’s cheer substituted enthusiasm for hope.”And she’s pouring it on!” Hawksley was galvanized.”Helm, what have we got left?”

“Six-Gs, for about ten minutes, skipper.”

“Give it all to me, and put us down the *Jackson*'s throat.” It broke his Burgess heart to be attacking a ship named for a cultural icon of his Homeworld, but now was hardly the time for sentiment.

Falkenberg's engines flared, the privateer's nose came about, and she began to close with the Imperial battle cruiser, the remainder of her turrets firing into the wounded enemy's Field.

Hawksley's acceleration couch lurched suddenly, its magnetic grapples the only thing holding it to the floor."What the hell was that?"

"Primary thruster burn-out, number three engine, Captain; she blew, and bad," Chief Cooper shouted."Just too many hits..."

The Chiefs voice was drowned out by klaxons filling the bridge with alarms which could not be acted upon. The Helmsman looked desperate.

"Helm, tell me something not bad."

"Can't, sir; control linkages went with the blast; we're rudderless."

Falkenberg began a lazy, slow spin that took her bearing batteries off the *Stonewall Jackson*. The *Jackson*, reprieved from one attacker, shifted her Field capacitors into protecting her starboard aspect from the *Damaris'* onslaught. Then, together with the *Morgans*, the battle cruiser rained fire onto the *Falkenberg*.

A privateer, *Falkenberg* had been designed to survive uneven battles until she could make good her escape; but no naval architect could have prepared for the killing volume of fire she now received. *Stonewall Jackson* discharged fourteen missiles and thirty laser turrets into the Burgess ship; *Falkenberg's* Field bubbled, gold-rimmed white-outs of burn-throughs spreading across its surface in blinding lesions. Beams passed through these gaps, tearing into the hull, rending compartments open to the space within the collapsing Field's volume, filled now not with the trace hydrogen of space's near-vacuum, but the roiling plasma of the Field's stored energy, released from confinement and tearing into the ship's hull.

Falkenberg, toughly designed and strongly built, died in pieces; her aft compartments shimmered, converted to energy, vaporized; the amidships Field capacitors discharged catastrophically, breaking her spine; aft of the forward bridge, the weapon bays crackled with misfiring lasers, the energy blasting their own mounts off the hull braces which then flew apart; the bridge went last, *Falkenberg's* bow snapped from the fore end of the hull and was tumbling, streaming atmosphere, into the converging beams of three *Morgans*, whose fire sliced it into ragged chunks of glowing debris.

The *Stonewall Jackson* then turned its attention to the *Damaris*; but here, wounded though the Sauron ship was, the Imperial was greatly outclassed, and hopelessly outgunned. The *Damaris* was no mere privateer, nor even an Imperial battle cruiser, but a full-size Sauron battleship, and the Saurons built their ships oversized, making *Damaris* twenty percent larger than its Imperial counterparts, nearly twice the mass of the *Stonewall Jackson*.

Damaris began by destroying all but one squadron of the *Morgans* with contemptuous ease. Still firing, her lasers swiveled about, turned inward, and converged on the *Stonewall Jackson*. The Imperial's turrets were firing back, but more and more of them were going dark every second, as *Damaris'* unrelenting salvo drove the Imperial's Field up through the spectrum into violet and the inevitable burn-throughs beyond. *Damaris* was continuing to close, and by the time the *Stonewall Jackson's* Field collapsed, converting the battle cruiser to expanding plasma, the massive Sauron battleship simply plowed through the glowing cloud and continued on.

"Remaining missiles in TF *Damaris'* salvo?" Diettinger asked.

"Eighteen, Dictator."

Diettinger ordered an enhancement command for the number of vessels remaining in Intruder Three:

One hundred one. Ground-based missiles were now rising to meet Intruder Three; asteroid defense platforms, emptied of their ordnance, were being vectored into collision courses with the Imperial formation. But there were too many ships, all moving too fast, and all doing something the Saurons had simply never dreamed any rational opponent would ever do.

Fomoria shuddered as a minor burn-through in her Field transmitted a hit to her armored hull. Diettinger stabbed at the panel before him: “Cyborg Rank Koln.”

“Dictator.”

“We have taken a hit to our primary launch control systems; EVA launch impossible at this time. The situation has first priority for all damage control crews; you will be launched immediately upon effect of repairs.”

“What of the other EVA units in the remainder of the fleet?” Koln asked.

“All fleet systems were routed through *Fomoria*; until you go, no one can. Stand by. Diettinger out.”

He looked up to see Second Rank staring at him in wonder; not for his blatant lie, he felt sure. Perhaps only for the incongruous look of triumph he wore in the face of disaster everywhere around them.

And why not? he thought. *Even a Cyborg can't escape from an EVA capsule flooded with lock-down gel.*

And now that he didn't have to worry about the self-proclaimed custodians of the Sauron Race's future, he could try to assure it would have one...

“Enemy vessels engaging task force at all points along the formation, Dictator; Imperial battleship *Lermontov* closing on our position, within beam range in thirty minutes.”

“Fleet formation status?”

“Half the task force in position now, Dictator; projections indicate minimum of forty-eight minutes for remainder to match headings and velocities and complete the formation.,.”

“And Task Force *Damaris*?”

“Still not responding to the rendezvous command, Dictator; down to three vessels and engaging the left-wing of the Imperial fleet.”

Imperial Fleet, he thought. *Not 'Intruder Two', anymore, but 'Imperial Fleet'. That would be the one we were grinding into dust only a few days ago. And now it seems stronger than ever.*

Diettinger looked at his Second Rank; he knew that she and Emory were great friends. He also knew that she would not be the last friend Second Rank would lose today.

He stood against the artificial gravity of *Fomoria's* thrust and stepped forward into the immersion display. Sauron System surrounded him, glittering with pockets of debris that had once been ships, many of which had carried men and women he'd known. Still more had borne strangers, men - the Empire did not allow women to serve in its combat ranks - whose most fervent desire was to see him and every other Sauron eradicated from the universe.

By becoming self-proclaimed opponents of Sauron eugenics, the bulk of humanity had dedicated itself to the systematic genocide of a people who were, in the final analysis, not so very different from themselves. Human norm; Sauron norm...the distinctions were purely clinical. Saurons had conquered, to be sure, and their conquests always resulted in the fertilization of many subjugated women with Sauron progeny.

Nine months, Diettinger considered. *Longer when the women formed emotional attachments to their*

children - as they usually did, only a rare mother despises her child.

As often as not, the attachment carried over to their captors. And was it really so terrible? Carrying a Soldier in their womb had meant only that they were guaranteed at least nine months of kindness, care, consideration; for many of them it had been the only decent food, shelter and medical treatment they had seen since the war began.

He caught himself. *Ah, yes. That. The war. The war which, in all honesty, we started.* Like all humans, Saurons or Imperials, he could be oblivious to unpleasant truths when viewing them beneath the blinding light of necessity.

Or rationalization...

He looked back and forth between the roster of Imperial vessels attacking TF *Fomoria* and those comprising the falling hammer that was Intruder Three.

“Communications,” he said.

“Dictator.”

“Signal the fleet: ‘Stand down from all combat maneuvering; all ships to slave helm operations to *Fomoria* immediately upon receipt of this message.’ Notify me on seventy-percent confirmation.”

Communications and his subordinates were so shocked by the order they actually hesitated; only Fifth Ranker Boyle, so eager to please, so determined to measure up to *Fomoria* standards, executed the signal without delay. Boyle seemed to realize the import of the order only after it had been executed. He looked up at Communications.

“Sir? What are we going to do?” Boyle whispered to his superior.

Diettinger overheard the question; he let the Communications Rank find his own answer.

We could never have won, he thought. The supreme jest; Saurons, who had elevated military history, theory and thought to a life philosophy, whose oldest role model was the ancient Hannibal, had traveled down the very same road as he.

We led a totalitarian state into war against a representative Empire, a republic in all but name. Hannibal’s ironic victory was that his actions forced the Romans to adopt policies that eventually did doom their Republic... and brought about an Empire in its place.

He looked back at the immersion display’s hundreds of Outworlder ship icons; once Sauron’s hope, her erstwhile allies had become her death sentence, these barbarians co-opted by the Imperials to defeat the hated Saurons. Looking closely, he could see that most of the Imperial vessels were at the rear of the formation, driving the Outworlder ships on from behind; which almost brought a smile to his lips.

Now we have forced the human norms to adopt policies which will bring about the doom of their Empire. The end result for the Saurons would be the same as it was for Hannibal’s own Carthaginian people; they would not live to see their revenge on the victors. For in the endless cycles of human political evolution, the state which follows Empire is inevitably...

“Anarchy,” he said aloud. *Cold comfort perhaps, he thought. But enough to warm me...*

The immersion display showed twenty-seven of his remaining forty vessels had acknowledged his order thus far: Sixty-eight percent.

Diettinger had made his decision some time ago; he had been hoping for the remnants of TF *Damaris*, but Emory’s vengeance for the death of the *Falkenberg* had put her ships out of position. *Nothing for it, now.* He returned to his console and entered the last coded key sequence of his program. When the

status screens showed *Fomoria* to be in contact with the computers of all operational vessels, Galen Diettinger, Dictator of Sauron, spoke his last order, a code word:

“*Brennus.*”

Thirty-One

I

Something began to happen among the remaining vessels of the Sauron fleet. Maneuvering thrusters turned the wounded warships on their axis, headings changing to match those of the flagship *Fomoria*. As one, the remaining ships of Sauron began accelerating toward what appeared to be an intercept course with Intruder Three. What none of their crew saw, since it was not being displayed anywhere, was that, in unison, their navigational computers began countdowns to Jump.

At first, the entire Imperial command seemed as stunned into inactivity as Diettinger’s bridge crew; Imperial ships held fire for a moment, apparently attempting to gauge the import of this latest Sauron tactic. The Saurons seemed ready to destroy themselves in a hopeless attempt to prevent the impact of Intruder Three. From the Imperial viewpoint, so much the better. There was still a viable Imperial fleet in-system; if the Saurons continued to engage that fleet, Intruder Three would poison their Homeworld for eternity. If they destroyed themselves to stop Intruder Three, the intact Imperial fleet would reduce that Homeworld to irradiated slag. Either outcome was entirely acceptable to the Imperials.

Then the Sauron fleet began to bank to starboard.

“Time to impact Intruder Three?”

“Forty-one seconds, Dictator.”

“Sensors; concentrate visual recorders on the Homeworld. Maintain lock and record until...” his voice gave out, but he mastered himself quickly, “Until no longer possible.”

“Dictator . . . ?” Second Rank asked softly.

He did not take his eyes from the display. “Not now, Second Rank.”

Intruder Three passed below them, the forward ships of the formation beginning to glow with atmospheric entry.

“Realtime,” he ordered.

The immersion display shifted from data-accompanied icons to visual sensor displays. Sauron lay suspended at the center of *Fomoria*’s bridge, Intruder Three a silvery lance, insignificant against the bulk of the planet below it. Then the tip of the lance flared: once, twice more, then an endless stream of light, pooling in Sauron’s upper atmosphere and spreading, first displacing the fleecy white cloud cover, then adding its own shades to the mass, first grey, then black.

“Impact,” Second Rank read the data aloud. “Multiple impacts, Dictator; several oceanic, mostly land. Scattered data reports indicate much break-up of smaller vessels, but the larger ones seem to be getting through intact. Contact lost with all major equatorial cities on Lebensraum. Northern areas - ”

“Shhh.” Diettinger said. “Just watch, Second Rank. Think about the Spartans.”

She started. *Had he gone mad?* “Spartans?” She could take no more. Even Diettinger’s legendary imperturbability was not to be suffered in the face of the death of the Homeworld. “Dictator - ” she began, but he cut her off with a savagery that took her back two steps.

“Never address me by that title again! Is that clear?”

She realized she had stopped breathing; she wondered why her heart had not stopped as well.

“But . . .the Spartans - First Rank?”

He had returned his attention to the display, gesturing toward it. “Of course. Thermopylae. The Persians drove their vassal troops into battle with whips, climbing over their own dead to reach the lines of the Spartan king, Leonidas. When the Spartans spears broke, they fought with swords; when the swords broke they fought with daggers. When the daggers broke, they fought with fists, and teeth. And still, the Persians came on. Finally, reduced to a bloody handful of defenders on a small hillock, the Spartans held ranks until brought down by hails of missiles. The Persians could not be made to engage them any longer, though now they were less than a hundred men remaining.”

He turned to look at her, and his remaining eye glistened.”What are we, Second Rank?” He swept a hand across the vista before them. “Here is the answer. This is our heritage; to fight . . .or build, or learn, or live, or love, or die, or kill . . .until the thing we do it all for *is finished*. And it is not solely a Sauron trait.”

Diettinger turned and stepped up to his acceleration couch platform and took his seat.

“This is what it means to be human.”

Before them, the Homeworld was dying. By the last third of Intruder Three’s Impacts, the surface of Sauron was ablaze across the equator. Sweeping streaks of low saltwater clouds of brown steam underlit a glowing red from oceanic impacts and columns of smoke from land fires of epic scope. In the wake of the onrushing remainder of Intruder Three, Imperial ships had detached from Intruder Two and joined hundreds of Imperial heavy fighters in low-level runs against the surface of Sauron; glittering charges fell from cargo bays, disappearing into the devastation below to reappear as blossoms of nuclear fire.

Fomoria and her charges moved on; the helm systems’ display showed her acceleration climbing past seven gravities of thrust.

Second Rank moved her acceleration couch next to Diettinger’s and addressed him in a low voice. “First Rank, if I understand my readings correctly, they indicate a sub-routine in *Fomoria*’s computers running a countdown to an Alderson Jump.”

Diettinger could not hold back an ironic smile, “I am glad, Second Rank, that you understand your readings correctly,” he answered.

Turning away from her, he then activated his console’s all-stations address function. “Crew of the *Fomoria*: The battle for the survival of Sauron is lost. The battle for the survival of the Sauron Race is about to begin. *Fomoria*, along with all the ships in her task force, is now locked into a random Jump mode. She is being maneuvered by a computer program locked into a series of mechanical Jump initiators, identical to those used on nuclear precedent mines. The program will take Task Force *Fomoria* to the Dropshot Alderson Point and simultaneously Jump all its ships to that system. At that point, while all crews and ships’ computers are disabled by Jump Lag, the clockworks will run the vessel until the systems recover and Jump us again. Each system Jumped to will contain four or more Jump nexi; each Jump will be chosen randomly. I estimate that the Task Force has sufficient stored energy in its Field capacitors alone to allow for over one hundred such random Jumps.”

Navigation stared at him in horror.”But Dicta - First Rank; that many consecutive Jumps will completely burn-out our drives, even assuming we survive the first twenty!”

“May I assume you would prefer to return to Sauron and take your chances with the tender mercies of

the Imperial fleet?" Diettinger asked.

Navigation only turned back to stare at the display of the ruined Home-world.

"Signal from TF *Damaris*" Communications Fifth Rank Boyle stammered, "well . . . actually, just the *Damaris*, now, First Rank."

"Put her through."

"No visual; voice only." Boyle patched the communication to Diettinger's station.

"Diettinger . . . intercepted signals Imperial Battleship *Lermontov* your rear port aspect. Your intentions known, repeat, your intentions known... expect heavy resistance *en route* to any Alderson points . . . *Lermontov* calling in support to guarantee no Sauron vessels escape system."

"First Rank Emory," Diettinger answered, "Can you bring *Damaris* about and join our formation?"

"Negative, Dictator. But I believe I can guarantee that *Lermontov*'s first wave of requested reinforcements does not join theirs. God speed, *Fomoria*. *Damaris* out."

Within the immersion display, *Damaris* altered course and closed to engage four Imperial battleships, a raging tigress among wolves. Amid streams of lasers and a hail of missile launches, the *Damaris* disappeared beyond the blackening horizon of Sauron, still battling the Imperial capital ships drawn off from the *Lermontov*, as Vessel First Rank Emory had promised.

Fomoria and the ships of her task force had reached nine gravities, and Saurons or not, her bridge crew were being molded back into the gel cushions of their acceleration couches.

"Nine squadrons Imperial heavy fighters closing on heading three-two-six mark two-seven. *Lermontov* has closed to beam range and firing."

"Signal task force to return fire," Diettinger ordered, "But under no circumstances are any ships to attempt to disengage computer lock and break from formation."

"Why?"

He looked down; the voice that came from his communications panel was that of Cyborg Koln.

"The Race must survive," Diettinger answered. "It cannot - it will not be allowed to - do so on Sauron, nor any other world where Imperials know Saurons are still alive. With almost forty ships full of Saurons and over-filled with Cyborgs, we can find a place to hide and rebuild."

"The Empire will pursue us."

"They are not likely to find us. In any case, I doubt that this alliance between the Empire and the Outworlders will last long. Whatever concessions the Imperials made for this aid they will undoubtedly come to regret. By escaping before destroying too many of the Outworlder ships, we leave a strong and intact mercenary element within the borders of the critically weakened Empire, giving that Empire a great many more important things to worry about than tracking down a few hundred thousand Sauron refugees."

Koln nodded inside his helmet. "I am forced to concur. I have been watching the displays of Sauron; its fate was unavoidable. Your plan favors the survival of the Race, and seems viable."

That, Diettinger realized, *was positively effusive praise from a Cyborg*. "My thanks. However, Cyborg Koln," he used the popular form of address, dropping the obsolete 'Rank' as a gesture of respect, "I am somewhat engaged, as you must know." Diettinger felt a touch of magnanimity couldn't hurt. "But I will see to having you and the rest of the Cyborgs released from lock-downs as soon as possible."

Diettinger broke the connection with a sense of relief. Koln had been self-contained and even approving. He would be happy to let the Cyborgs out once they reached some measure of safety.

Especially as there is still an excellent chance that we will not get out of this alive, anyway...

As if to underscore his fatalistic appraisal, *Fomoria* suddenly lurched to starboard as an explosion went off within her Field. The bridge went dark for a moment as power was automatically re-routed to crucial systems; the immersion display flickered, revealing the featureless grey walls of the *Fomoria's* command center that had disappeared when the display had painted them over with the holographic illusion of space that lay beyond them. Fire leapt from a control station and swept over three of the bridge crew before the gas extinguishers smothered the flames that left a third of the bridge blackened and ruined and all of it filled with acrid smoke.

"It's the *Lermontov*, First Rank; burn-throughs in our Field's port zone," Weapons began coordinating power shifts within the *Fomoria* to close the breach in the warship's Fields.

"Enemy heavy fighters penetrating our Field, coming in over the bow," Second Rank called out.

The immersion display reproduced the *Morgans* as they swept over the *Fomoria's* hull, raking fire in a series of walking hits and passing so close to the display's sensors that Diettinger could make out the insignia of a gold-bordered black flag bearing a skull-and-crossbones; the 97th Imperial Fighter Squadron. At some level, he could not help but be flattered that the Empire had thrown the redoubtable "Jolly Rogers" at his ship. He hoped they appreciated the attention he was about to show them in return.

"Clear my sky, Weapons."

Only a Sauron could have accomplished what happened next; Weapons' commands swept the space ahead of *Fomoria* with an interlocking screen of fire from the heavy cruiser's main batteries, creating a lattice so dense and so variable that not even a fighter pilot's reflexes could save them; nor did they. Two of the *Morgans* were obliterated, consumed too quickly even to leave debris.

The satisfaction that was evident on Weapon's face did not however carry to that of Communications Fifth Rank Boyle. "First Rank; we've lost telemetry from the rest of the Task Force."

Diettinger felt his blood go cold. "Are they still receiving from us?"

"Apparently not, First Rank. Helm and Navigation tie-ins have all been severed. The formation is falling behind."

Second Rank nodded. "Confirmed. That last burn-through destroyed our comm laser paths and three-quarters of the projectors; elements of Task Force breaking off to engage the Imperials."

Diettinger stared at the immersion display. Emory's last communication had revealed to him that Imperials were intercepting his message lasers; a difficult prospect to be sure, but easier at such close quarters as the battle had become. One simply aimed a broad-beam scanning laser between two enemy ships assumed to be communicating with one another; message lasers intersecting the scan created distortions whose modulations could be decoded into distinct, if patchy, patterns. Enough patches, and you had a picture of what was being said.

Given enough time, the Imperials might even have decoded the entire random Jump sequence Diettinger had designed, if he hadn't cleverly left the randomization process in the hands of the shipboard mechanical computers; in effect, even he did not know where they were going. But not knowing, he now had no idea what to tell the remnants of the fleet.

So, he couldn't signal the fleet to Jump out and rendezvous somewhere down the line; the Imperials would overhear and follow them immediately. And the *Fomoria* certainly couldn't stay here.

“First Rank,” Second called out, “Receiving scattered signals from all fleet elements.”

“Speak,” he said quietly.

“Various messages, First Rank,” she said after a moment. Quiet as Diettinger’s command had been, her voice was lower still. “All signals are the same general message: ‘We will cover your escape.’ Three send ‘Godspeed;’ two send ‘Vengeance’.”

In the display, Sauron was passing beneath them and to port. From behind the far side of the Homeworld emerged a massive cloud of debris: All that was left of the *Damaris* and the four Imperial battleships that had foolishly pursued the tigress into her lair.

Diettinger let out a long breath. “Status of the random Jump program?”

“Intact, First Rank. Mechanical Jump-clocks now disconnecting from main computer; timers initiating; indicators show all active.”

Diettinger nodded.

“Helm. You guided us into the Tanith Alderson Point at seven gravities’ acceleration. You are to guide us into the Dropshot Alderson Point at no less than nine.”

Helm managed to keep his shock limited to a mere cessation of breathing and blinking. If First Rank noticed, he did not comment.

“Weapons; Status *Lermontov*”

“Still pursuing, First Rank.”

“Discourage her.”

Fomoria lashed out at the Imperial battleship with a fury of lasers. *Lermontov*’s Field went violet, a massive burn-through at her bow, and the Imperial began to turn just as *Fomoria* began to shudder.

“Can we do something about this vibration, Second Rank?” Diettinger asked her.

“Harmonics, First Rank. We have received heavy damage to several main stress-bearing elements and our structural integrity is degrading. The pulse of the thrusters at this acceleration is matching the vibration conducted to the hull and will shake us apart if we don’t slow down.”

Diettinger was almost smiling at her. “A simple ‘yes’ or ‘no’ would have sufficed, Second Rank. Helm, current acceleration?”

“Seven-point-nine Gs, First Rank.”

“Continue to eight.”

Second Rank rolled her eyes.

“*Lermontov* has broken off,” Sensors cut in. “Seven other capital ships vectoring to intercept.”

“Will they catch us?”

She grinned, never taking her eyes from the screens before her. “Not unless they want to have blood-jelly paste for crews, First Rank.”

“How very colorful,” he said quietly.

“The remaining *Morgans* are still with us, First Rank,” Weapons notified him.

“At eight gravities?” Diettinger wondered.

“Acceleration now eight-point-five, First Rank,” came Helm’s update; his voice was shuddering along

with the *Fomoria*, whose tremors were now becoming audible. A panel in one of the consoles, shaken loose by the incessant vibration, suddenly tore free, shot across the bridge at eight-and-one-half gravities and buried itself in the steel of the wall, missing Diettinger by less than a meter.

And the human norms are still keeping up with us?

Well, they are the "Jolly Rogers," after all, he admitted to himself. "Time to Jump Point?"

But Navigation could not hear him; the din of *Fomoria*'s vibration was now too great even for Sauron ears; Diettinger looked to the display. One of the *Morgans* was breaking up, still pouring fire into the *Fomoria* as it went. He shifted the immersion display's viewpoint to look back at the Homeworld, to see the remnants of his task force - of the Sauron fleet - disappearing within a cloud of Imperial warships.

And the Homeworld . . . firestorms and mushroom clouds pockmarked the land. Even the seas roiled as the Imperial ships sought out the great undersea cities. A great red wound ran along the main continent of Lebensraum as the Imperial assaults that had begun with the impact of Intruder Three ended by splitting the planet's crust, while in space above, the bright lights of the Homeworld's hopelessly outnumbered fleet pulsed and disappeared from the immersion display as each ship died. All but one.

Is it possible for the universe to contain so much hate? he wondered. When their fury is spent here, will this be enough for them? Or has it gained a life of its own, now? Can anything this inimical, this dynamic, this alive be put down once released? Or must it feed until it decides, in its own good time, that it has at last had enough blood for one century? Until its time comes round again . . . and will humanity, human norm or Sauron, ever be truly free of it? Should we even want to be? What if one day we find we are not, after all, alone in the universe? Hideous as this conflict has been, relentless as we have been to destroy one another, what if one day humanity encounters something... worse?

The shuddering stopped instantly as *Fomoria* hit the Jump Point and, at nine gravities' acceleration, entered it perfectly.

In the near-instantaneous moment of Jump travel, there comes a sensation of absolute but ephemeral clarity which passes almost before it has begun. In that millisecond of perfect, omniscient apprehension, Diettinger knew *everything*, every question, every answer, every beginning, every end . . . even the answer to the questions he himself had posed on the future of the Race, human norm and Sauron. The answer was there - so obvious, so pure, and so very, very simple.

He reached out for it...

Book 3 The Eye Opens **2640 A.D., Haven**

Thirty-Two

I

General Gary Edmund Cummings, commander of the Haven Volunteers, stared out of the helicopter's cockpit and down at Castell City. The city's linear streets were almost empty of motorized traffic with the exception of an occasional white motorcar. For the most part, only horse-drawn wagons, carts, coaches, bicycles and pedcabs traveled the thoroughfares of the capital. All motorized vehicles were under Government control and ownership. Traffic was light, especially for the major arteries of a planetary capital - no matter how humble. Except for an occasional smoke plume from some factory, he

might have been back on Terra in the eighteenth century.

Cummings' thoughts drifted back to when he'd first landed at Splash Island - almost twenty years ago - to organize the evacuation of the Seventy-Seventh Division of the Imperial Marines. In those days Castell City had been a bustling metropolis: nothing, of course, compared to major cities on Sparta, or even Churchill, but respectable. The streets were full of motorized vehicles, private cars and trucks, and all the modern conveniences of an Imperial capital.

Today, Castell was a city in rapid decline. There was no denying it. Imperial Plaza was still the hub of the city, streets radiating out in strict geometric precision. Only now, the Viceroy's Palace was a mound of blackened rubble - another relic of the War of Liberation, along with hundreds of other ruins that had once been factories, buildings and apartment blocks.

Cummings ran his fingers through his black hair. Everyone, including his wife, thought he dyed it, but he didn't. If he did, it would be to dye it gray. The regeneration treatments he had been given on Tanith had worked even better than the doctors had predicted. Now everyone around him was growing old, while he appeared never to change.

On the other side of the Plaza, rose the Chamber of Deputies, a stone monolith. It was too bad the rioters hadn't burned it along with the Palace, when King David Steele's reign came to a deserved and violent end. Deputy Booth, one of the Brigade's 'friends,' had called him with information that the Speaker, Martin Sanders, was about to put through another measure to place the Militia under Chamber rule. Why not, he thought, they've already given up every other asset - including the goodwill of the citizens of Castell - they ever possessed.

It was true the Empire had strategically pulled back - make that abandoned this sector - but that hadn't changed his orders. Originally a citizen of Churchill, Cummings had been put in command of the 77th back in 09, when it had been unstated Imperial policy to put 'trusted' commanders in charge of Outie military units, as more and more planets joined the Sauron Coalition of Succession.

It had taken him a few years to prove himself as commander of the "Land Gators." Initially, they had not been pleased to have a Churchillian in command of Haven's 77th Imperial Marine Division. It wasn't until the Liberation of Lavaca that he'd earned their trust as well as respect. Now he was as much a Havener as any of his original command, many of whom had died in battles on one or another of the forgotten worlds spanning the Empire.

He had been as surprised as anyone when he'd been given orders by Marshal Blaine to retire from the "Land Gators" and become the Imperial watchdog on Haven. And, while he had his regrets about leaving the Imperial hub, commanding the Haven Militia was not one of them. Just keeping the Volunteers together and out of civilian control, during decades of economic upheaval and civil war, had taxed every bit of his energy and ingenuity.

Thanks to his old friend, Albert Hamilton, he'd been able to work out a compromise that solved most of his payroll problems. The best part was that it had left him independent of local politics. In exchange for a few hundred metric tons of useless durasteel and obsolete weapons, the old Baron had supplied him with enough hard specie to keep his troops fed and clothed. Meanwhile, the Baron had provided positions for retiring soldiers and officers at his estate in Whitehall. In exchange, he had given the Baron the best intelligence he could obtain in these days of decline and technological breakdowns.

A decade before it had begun, the Baron had foreseen Haven returning to a far lower level of civilization and technology. At the time, Cummings had thought maybe Hamilton had taken one too many falls from his beloved horse, *Belisarius*. But he had jumped at the chance to exchange surplus durasteel for hard currency. Now, it appeared the old fox had known exactly what he was doing, and had earned well-deserved goodwill from the Militia in exchange.

Colonel Anton Leung, sitting to his right, pointed to a black plume of smoke coming from the commercial section of Little Frankfurt. "More rioting, or just another act of senseless violence, General?"

Cummings shook his head, while his left hand absent-mindedly stroked the bowl of his pipe. "Whatever it is, we'll be blamed for it, or for *not* stopping it."

"Right. Like that riot last night! Couple of our boys are on R R, next thing you know, they're under attack by armed street rats and gangsters. We should have proscribed this city long ago, General."

"It's proscribed now," Cummings answered. "I used to believe that spending our marks here would make the City Fathers realize that having us nearby was good business. By God, these citizens aren't the enemy, they're the reason we're *here*"

"Some of them know it. The Harmonies and a delegation from Hindu Town protested the Ban this morning. I told them to go talk to Mayor Niles and the City Fathers. They left shortly thereafter."

"Can't blame them," Cummings said, then paused to take a deep draw on his pipe. "City Hall in Castell City is about as stacked with the old families as a cardsharp's deck. Those poor bastards won't get any satisfaction from the Chamber, either, and they know it. I feel the worst for the Harmonies: those poor primitives are virtual prisoners in Melody Town and they have been ever since the CoDominium came and took the planet away from them.

"But right now, it appears, that their shunning of technology has left them better prepared than anyone else for the next couple of centuries on Haven. Of course, the Empire could win the War and return."

Colonel Leung gave out a hollow laugh that sounded as if it might have taken his last breath. Leung was a native of Haven and had no illusions about his home world's importance either to the Admiralty or to the Imperial Council. "Look, General, those thugs are hijacking that beer wagon in broad daylight!"

The chopper was flying lower now and as Cummings looked down, he saw scattered muzzle flashes and men scrambling onto an overloaded beer wagon. Someone had shot the muskylopes and already looters were running out of houses to share in the bounty. One of the guards was firing back, but both the drivers and the other guards were sprawled on the pitted roadway.

"And they call this the *civilized* part of Haven," Leung added, pausing as a series of coughs wracked his frame. He had contracted a nasty strain of Black Lung, Haven style. Even the Militia's stock of medicines, which had the best pharmacy left on Haven, were impotent against the ravages of this slow virus. Leung was far past the infectious stage, but the disease would clog his lungs until he was bedridden, which might be no more than another two or three years. If Cummings' hadn't needed his administrative abilities, he would have put him on compassionate leave years ago.

"Castell is the center of civilization on Haven, Colonel - or was. I had hoped that maybe the Chamber of Deputies and our City Fathers had learned something during Steele's reign. He was not a nice man, but he did stop inflation and put people back to work. Hell, he carved out a nice little kingdom for himself, even called himself King of Haven. If he had allied himself with the Sons of Liberty, instead of taking New Abilene. . . Well, he wouldn't have had to fight both the Sons and the Rhinishers at the same time. And might still be on his throne."

"I've never understood why we just didn't take a couple of battalions into the City and clean the place up ourselves, General." He pointed to the burning wagon below, covered with citizens' prying loose barrels and casks. "We could hardly have done a worse job."

"Maybe. But Generals don't make good rulers. They're not supposed to. Our job is to win wars. It's the

politicians' job to start them. I never signed on to run Haven. Remember what a great job the Federales did on Diego? Not that anyone could have done much better. Sort of like here."

"True," Leung said, "and we don't have many allies in the Chamber of Deputies."

The general bit down on his pipe so hard it left teeth marks on the stem."They've done a damn good job of turning most of the citizens against us, too. Made us scapegoats. Hell, scapegoats we may be, but sitting ducks we're not."

They both sat in silence as the pilot brought the copter down on the little pad on top of the General's walled residence. It had been the Cummings' home since the 77th "Land 'Gators" had pulled out for good back in 2623, but it was where Laura had put down her roots. After decades of roaming the Empire, as Cummings and the 77th Imperial Marines had been rotated from one hotspot to another, Laura had sworn that once he'd retired from the corps, she would never move again. Sworn an oath to it.

She'd kept it too, despite his protests. Now he had to make her break it. Castell wasn't safe anymore for the Militiamen or their families.

They didn't have much of a marriage these days. How could it be, with him only aging a year for every decade she passed? Since Laura had turned seventy, he'd no longer been able to deny the obvious. Physically, he was in his early forties, while she was quickly becoming an old woman. Haven, with its extreme temperatures and harsh radiation, did that to people. Most people, but not him.

He could remember when Colonel Leung was a shavetail Looie; now he looked a decade older than Cummings. It hadn't hurt their relationship, but it had played hell on his marriage, especially since it hadn't been very strong to begin with.

Laura had been such a beautiful young girl when he'd first spotted her on the streets of Old Heidelberg during his days at the Marine Academy on Friedland. He had fallen for her like a gut-shot buck. It had taken him almost a month to learn her name and six more to get permission to 'visit' her at the family estate. It hadn't helped that her father, the Baron, was the Marine Commandant of the Academy.

The war hadn't yet started then, but there had already been clashes with the Saurons and Outie planets. After marrying, they had spent an idyllic year on Friedland, one of the oldest and most beautiful settled planets. Then he'd been transferred to New Washington as part of the 42nd Imperial Marine Division. Another peaceful and earth-like loyalist world; they'd stayed there almost six months before the 42nd shipped out to put an embargo on Meiji.

He and the 42nd had been shifted from hotspot to hotspot until the Succession Wars began with the death of David II.

All Cummings knew, for certain, was the Empire had been at one kind of war or another during almost his entire career.

Laura had liked it on New Washington. She had set-up permanent quarters there with most of the other 42nd's officers' spouses. Only a few intrepid wives had attempted to travel with the Division as it hopped hither and yon from one crisis to another. Their times together had been few, but good. True, like many space wives, Laura had grown to enjoy her independence and after awhile, almost appeared to enjoy his leavings nearly as much as his arrivals. They had had enough time together to bring two beautiful girls and one son into this chaotic period of history.

"Looks like trouble in Melody," Colonel Leung interjected. Cummings peered down at Melody, the Harmony enclave - or barrio, depending on whom you asked - where several homes were on fire. The New Harmonies had been the original owners and settlers of Haven, until the CoDominium decided

that any place that far away from Earth made an excellent dumping ground for political exiles, troublesome minorities and garden variety criminals. Haven was over a year from Earth by way of the old Bureau of Relocation deportee ships, and four Alderson Jumps from the nearest inhabitable world.

In other words, it had been the end of the line. Still is, for that matter.

The Harmonies had lost their world and most of their property in the following years. Now they only occupied a small enclave in Castell City, although there were still Harmony farming communities throughout the Shangri-La Valley. The Harmonies were non-violent - not pacifists, or they would no longer exist on Haven. They had developed certain castes, the deacons and bedes, who took the onerous job of violent confrontation.

He could see scores of them in their black robes scurrying around the burning houses, keeping the growing mob at bay. Cummings had always admired them for their adherence to a code of action that was, in its way, as structured as that of the military. The Harmonies also supplied most of the Militia's grain and dairy products. They didn't believe in taking animal life for any reason other than self-defense. He suspected the attack was directed as much against the Militia as it was against the Harmonies.

He tongue-keyed his tooth mike: "Sergeant Major Slater, call a company of troops into Melody, at the intersection of Concord and Peace." He could see the Harmonies' horse-drawn red fire wagons approaching as he spoke, "Send three of the Falkenberg 120's. That will keep the streets clear." The Falkenberg tanks were fifty years obsolete in the Core of the Empire, but here they were still the most powerful vehicles on Haven.

"Aye, General." Cummings could hear his trusted aide in his earphone. The chopper had a line-of-sight laser comline to Fort Kursk so he wasn't worried about it being intercepted. The last thing they needed was another confrontation with the locals just now. "If the locals ask where we're going, tell them we're escorting dependents out of a firezone. Out."

The General heard the distant pop of gunfire as the copter settled onto the small pad on top of his residence. *I haven't been home in months*, he realized with a guilty start. *Well, there's so much to do...and we really don't get along anymore...*

A trapdoor took them inside the house, where they were met by the butler with a revolver in one hand, pointed toward the floor, as Cummings had taught him. "How are things, outside?" the butler asked.

"Not good, Wilson. Not good. Where's the Missus?"

"She's in the sitting room, sir," the butler said, with a nod that let Cummings know she was already heavily into the sherry. *But then again, when had she not been, especially when she knew her husband was arriving?*

Even though he knew what to expect, General Cummings still wasn't prepared for the sight that met his eyes. Laura was still dressed in disheveled nightclothes, and her thin grey hair looked as if it hadn't been washed or combed in a week. Her face, a nest of wrinkles, looked twenty years older than her seventy years would have led one to expect.

My God, she has every reason on earth to hate my guts! He thought. "Darling, how are you?"

"Well enough, General. And, no, I'm not too drunk to know my own mind. It's early yet. I had a dream about Robert last night, before we came here and this place killed him."

It was an old argument and one that he no longer bothered to respond to. Their twelve-year-old son had died within a month of their arrival of a blood-clotting disease specific to Haven. She had never forgiven her husband for it. He, himself, had only come to terms with it through hard work and the

words of the Brigade chaplain.

“Now that Helga is married and Ingrid is off with that pompous friend of yours, Baron Hamilton, I don’t have anyone left to talk to. The other officers’ wives are too young, and, anyway, most of them actually *like* this bloody Hellhole!”

“Most of them were born here, darling.”

“And they’ll die here, too. Just like I will. Only I *don’t* like it! But don’t worry, General, it won’t be very long.”

“Please, Laura, let’s not get maudlin.”

“You bastard. I should have never left Friedland with you. Now my daughters are gone and I’m left all alone.”

“That’s what I came to talk to you about, dear. It’s not safe for you any longer in the City.”

She slowly raised her head, turning her gaze on him for the first time since the conversation began.

“How dare you! I stayed here during the time that dreadful man, who called himself King of Haven, ran roughshod over Castell, and I never had *any* problems. Why should things get worse now?”

“Because, for all of his faults, David Steele was not a fool. Steele knew better than to harm the wife of the man who was commander-in-chief of the largest military force on Haven. Unfortunately, these self-appointed Deputies at the Chamber don’t have half his common sense. I never thought the day would come when I’d miss that villain, but I do. These damn fools think they can bend the Brigade to their will by threats and intimidation.”

“Then they don’t know my Gary,” she said with cold sarcasm. “Now, do they?”

He sighed. “I don’t want anything to happen to you, Laura. Please, start packing. We have to leave now.”

“No,” she said sternly. “You’ve bullied me enough. This time I will not leave my home; it’s all I have left.”

The General felt his heart sink. He’d been afraid of this. It would only get uglier from this point on. He was tempted to turn around and leave, but the girl he’d fallen in love with still lived inside, under the wrinkles and wattles. It wasn’t Laura’s fault they hadn’t aged together like everyone else. He wouldn’t leave her here unless she absolutely refused to go. No matter what, Laura didn’t deserve the indignity of being carried off against her will by his own soldiers.

Let her preserve what little self-respect she has left, he thought. If Laura truly wanted to stay in their home, fortified by her familiar possessions and memories, let her stay. He owed her that much, at the very least.

Thirty-Three

I

Vessel Commander First Rank Galen Diettinger, of the Sauron Fleet Heavy Cruiser *Fomoria*, stirred slightly in the command seat, waiting for the lag effect of the Alderson Jump to wear off. As his vision cleared, Diettinger realized he could make out more details of the bridge surrounding him than he might have liked. Fire had blackened a third of the room, while smoke still drifted lazily in the red glow of the combat lights.

Somehow, they had made it. Diettinger stood, stretched, and stepped down on wobbling legs to stand

behind Second Rank.

“Summon Weapons and Engineering to the bridge; wardroom meeting of all command ranks in ten minutes.” Second Rank Althene began calling the various personnel at their Jump stations.

“Positional fix,” he said to the Navigations officer beyond Second Rank’s duty station. Navigation shook his head.

“Nothing yet, Dicta - Sorry, nothing yet, First Rank. Very low energy emission signals from the system overall. Looks like a real backwater.”

Diettinger frowned. *Good, and not good.* A place to repair and refit the *Fomoria* would have been ideal, but would likely be heavily defended as well. And they had no strength to secure as such. Next best thing would have been an area in which they could hide, and this system seemed to fit the bill nicely. But after their escape from three squadrons of Imperial heavy fighters, that would mean two pieces of extreme good fortune in a very short time.

Diettinger might believe in luck, but he did not trust that much of it at one time.

The hatch behind him opened, and Engineering stepped through. The Weapons officer accompanying him was bleeding from an arm wound - not serious. Few injuries that did not kill a Sauron outright were.

“Status,” Diettinger said to the Weapons officer.

“Point defense systems at thirty-percent. Main armament intact, auto-mechanisms down. Repair estimate of thirty hours with materials and crew on hand.”

Diettinger almost smiled. This far from the Front, the presence of enemy forces should be unlikely. It would certainly have carried them far away from the front lines. So point defense didn’t really matter. But the main armament could shoot, if not yet aim. He had expected the news from Weapons to be far more depressing. On that account, Engineering did not disappoint him.

“Jump-Core failure. Total. Maneuvering fuel down to twenty-percent from a hull breach, four maneuvering engines down, one beyond repair.” That left *Fomoria* with two currently operational, out of six.” Internal systems now running on cells. Cells damaged. Forty-percent destroyed, twenty-percent damaged, forty-percent operative.”

“You have discretion on manpower and materials necessary for repairs,” Diettinger told Engineering. He turned to Weapons. “Dismantle half of the remaining point defense systems and pack them for transport. All repair is to be directed toward returning the main armament to ready status. Rig all ordnance for planetary bombardment. Calibrate beam stations for precision surface interaction ops.”

Weapons barely raised an eyebrow as he saluted and turned to follow Engineering out the hatch.

Diettinger turned back to Second Rank. She was frowning in obvious puzzlement.

“Wide scan status, Second.”

“No interplanetary traffic or communications, First Rank. An automated refueling station in orbit around an inner gas giant. Source of all non-automated signals and emissions is one of the same gas giant’s moons.”

“Position, sir.” Navigation announced.

“Speak.”

“Byers’ Star, the Haven System. The moon referred to by Second Rank is only settled body. Local name: ‘Haven.’ An old CoDominium relocation colony, Imperial since the Terran Exodus. We’re really

on the fringes, sir. Files show no Imperial presence in this area of the Sector for almost a decade.”

Diettinger scowled. *That makes three pieces of luck*, he thought. Well, perhaps he was garnering some of the lost good fortune of all the billions of members of the Race left behind, on and above Sauron. The scowl became a rueful smile. Now he was really becoming superstitious.

He consulted the chronometer implanted in his skull: two minutes to the wardroom meeting. Diettinger turned back to Second Rank.

“When Engineering has maneuvering up to nominal, make for the automated refueling station. Approach from Haven’s blind side. Avoid at all costs any detection or other satellites. Inform me when on final approach to the station.”

Diettinger hurried through the hatch and down the hall. He was experiencing emotions rare among Saurons. Excitement. Anticipation. Out of sight of his fellow Soldiers, he actually grinned.

He was starting to feel lucky.

II

Lord John Claude Hamilton stood on the battlements, examining the patchwork of farms that stretched around the castle walls as far as the eye could see. Villages dotted the countryside and a small town was sprouting up outside the walls of Whitehall. This once decrepit country estate had grown into one of the major agricultural centers in the eastern Central Shangri-La Valley. Thousands of people now depended upon Greenswards’ military might and network of political alliances; it was a lot of responsibility. *And someday*, a voice whispered in his ear, *all this will be yours*.

John wasn’t sure that he was up to the weight all this represented. If only Raymond would come back from the War. He would know what to do, and do it without question. Raymond, following the family tradition - that John had successfully, albeit not happily, broken - was an officer in the Imperial Navy. A fighter pilot, at least that’s what Raymond had been seven years ago; his most recent message to reach Haven.

They hadn’t heard from Raymond since - or the Empire, for that matter - but that could mean anything. Maybe the Empire had forgotten Haven completely, which looked increasingly likely as the years passed without any official word. Maybe the Empire had lost the war and Raymond was a prisoner or stranded on some former Imperial outpost. Maybe Raymond was too valuable to muster out, or he’d retired from the Navy and couldn’t find passage back to Haven.

A lot of maybes, but there was one certainty; Raymond would never forget the family. He was definitely the ‘right’ sort. The verdict was still out on John, both in his own mind and certainly in that of his grandfather’s, the Baron.

Or Raymond could be - He stopped himself. *Don’t even think that word!* Thinking things sometimes made them true. It was better not to know than to think the un-thinkable.

John had tried to do the ‘right’ thing, ever since he had realized a talent for money exchanging; he’d even given up most of his bad habits. Tried to live a more moderate life. Not that he didn’t, on occasion, sneak out at night to the White Tamerlame for spirits and occasional female companionship. He wasn’t dead, but he’d certainly given up his gambling and horse racing.

Usually, though, he spent his nights alone, too tired to do anything but press his face to the pillow. Managing a large estate, or barony (the return to quaint Medievalism still rankled after all, wasn’t this the Twenty-Seventh Century?) was bloody hard work. However, his grandfather had been right about the de-civilization of Haven. Automobiles were becoming so rare that the family’s traditional semi-annual drive to Cardiff in the Baron’s old Fleet-wood brought the kids out in droves.

How far is down? Shamans dressed in feathers, shaking rattles and casting spells. When does it bottom out? The latest reports from General Cummings told of a Castell City fulminating with riots and beggars on every corner. And only God knew what life on the northern steppes was like -

“Hello, John. Find anything interesting?” asked a pleasant female voice he recognized as belonging to Ingrid Cummings. Ingrid was General Cummings’ daughter; she had come to Whitehall earlier this year after the first big food riots, when two of the petrocarb plants broke down. The Baron had told him that the General had tried to get his wife to come along, too, but she refused to leave their home in Castell. John found it hard to fault her, since even a boring provincial capital city was better than a boring estate east of nowhere.

He shook his head in the negative in response to her question. Ingrid was always asking questions, probing intentions, feelings; just the sort of things he believed were best left alone. The fact that she’d caught him in a rare moment of introspection only made him feel guilty, as if he’d been caught with another woman. Which was ridiculous, since they had no ties of any sort. Ingrid was too old for him.

Well, actually, she was just a year or two older than himself. And even pretty in an acceptable sort of way, if she would only use some makeup.. And her eyes were attractive, especially when she flared up, which seemed to be just about every time they met. He couldn’t imagine what he’d done to offend her this time.

“Your grandfather sent me to fetch you. It’s almost dinner time.”

“Thanks,” he replied. He knew the Baron entertained the notion of a dynastic joining of the two families. Was it possible she resented his meddling as much as he did? - no, not likely. Although, she did not seem like the matrimonial web-spinning type he had avoided for decades.

Not that her desires or his own would thwart the Baron’s plans. An heir was necessary if the Hamilton line was to continue. His sister Matilda already had three children, so the barony would continue, but not under the name Hamilton. To the Baron, the issue was settled; John must get married and have children. The Baron would not die happily until he was certain that the new lord would carry the Hamilton name.

Another weight to carry.

“What’s the matter? You look like you’ve got the troubles of the Empire on your shoulders. Relax. It’s a beautiful evening. Cat’s Eye is about to set.”

He watched as the sky-filling orange gas giant around which Haven was but a revolving moon began to merge into the horizon. Byers’ Star was still up and the evening was turning into Dimday. “Haven’s a harsh world, but it has its beauty, too.”

Ingrid cocked an eyebrow. “I didn’t know you had a poetic side.”

John shook his head. “Sheer exhaustion must be the explanation. Why, the glow of Cat’s Eye even gives your complexion a buttery hue.”

She folded her arms across her breasts, which he couldn’t help noticing. What he could see of them, through her usual heavy sweater, looked like ripe tigemelons.

“Your sweet talk won’t work on us city girls. Save it for the wenches at the White Tamerlame.”

He flinched. *How did she know about that? Damnable woman!* “At least they know how to appreciate a man.” The late summer spell was suddenly broken. *What had he been thinking of?* Had he actually considered...? No, couldn’t have. Exhaustion, that was the only explanation.

“Some figure of a man you cut,” Ingrid finished, giving his mid-section a pointed stare and shaking her

head in disapproval.”Hope you don’t expect to fit in your armor at the next Muster. I’m going to the dining room. Come if you will, or don’t. It matters little to me.”

John looked down at his paunch, and quickly looked away again. It wasn’t his fault his metabolism had slowed down. Maybe some practice time in the tiltyard would melt some of it off. He watched the sway of Ingrid’s retreating backside for a moment, shook his head in dismay, and began to follow quickly.

He suddenly realized he was starving; maybe tomorrow he’d have a talk with the cook about working out a diet. It wouldn’t be wise to rush into anything.

III

There were no distinctions of services among Soldiers, only of caste and rank, so the Deathmasters and Breedmasters were directly subservient to Diettinger, as First Ranker.

Perhaps even more so than when I was Dictator, he mused. That must have seemed quite ludicrous to many of my old staff, for awhile, there. No doubt they prefer having things back to normal...

“Normal” he smiled, almost saying the word aloud. His staff had never been allowed any doubt whatsoever about the chain of command, and the tone of this conference, Diettinger knew, would be maintained along those lines. The Survey officer was presenting as much information as she had on the system they had reached.

“The world is called ‘Cat’s Eye;’ the single habitable moon is Haven. Rotational period for the moon is 87 hours standard, with a longer relative ‘day’ owing to the considerable illumination provided by the gas giant. Drier than we might like, with only a sixty-percent hydrographic index...” The voice of the Survey officer droned on through the communications panel in the wardroom, but the impassive faces of the listeners belied their keen interest.

They were learning about their next conquest, after all, and as military men, and especially as *Soldiers*, they would need every bit of information available to them.

What they have not yet realized, Diettinger thought, is that Haven is to be far more than just another conquest. That realization will come soon enough.

Survey ended her report, and Diettinger threw the switch that secured the wardroom from further communications.

“Breedmaster Caius,” Diettinger addressed the Soldier charged with the standards of racial and genetic purity among the detachment under his command. “How many female Soldiers aboard, including those in the EVA Commandos we took aboard back on Sauron?”

“One hundred seventy-three.”

Diettinger considered the answer a moment, then continued. “All such personnel are to be removed from active combat duty and other responsibilities as of the end of this meeting. Also to be removed from the duty roster are those Soldiers aboard, now serving in any capacity, with a Genetic Preference Rating of A-5 and above, as well as those personnel with Fertility Ratings of three or higher.”

The physical abilities of the elite EVA Commandos aboard would make that order cut sharply into available forces, but if Breedmaster Caius had an opinion, he kept it to himself. Diettinger’s order was acknowledged with a brief nod.

“Deathmaster Quilland.” Diettinger looked farther down the wardroom table, but not to the other end, not quite yet. He wanted the figure seated there to hear all the groundwork before the full plan was revealed. “As senior Staff Rank aboard, you, the Ground Force commanders, and the other Deathmaster Ranks are to review all planetary data as Survey Ranks acquire it. In forty hours, present

me with your recommendation of areas planetside that our available forces can secure and hold against counterattacks from such opposition as we might expect to encounter from the locals.”

If Breedmaster Caius had reserved his opinion, the Deathmaster did not. Fond of nurturing his caste’s reputation for ruthlessness, he broke into a wintry smile at the thought of local resistance having any effect whatsoever against a force of Sauron Supply Clerk Rank Cadets. But elite Commandos? The concept hardly warranted consideration.

“Acknowledged, First Rank.”

Despite Imperial propaganda to the contrary, Saurons were not automata, and Diettinger was pleased to see his orders puzzling some of his officers. *But now, the hard part.* Diettinger looked to the end of the table. Seated and at ease, the figure there still looked tense as spring steel. Since a substantial portion of his anatomy was not dissimilar to that material, that was hardly surprising.

“Cyborg Rank Koln.” Diettinger addressed the figure, deliberately adding the obsolete distinction of “Rank.” To be a Cyborg was by definition to be a superior being, and many in Sauron society had allowed this attitude to subvert the military chain of command. If Diettinger’s scheme was to have any hope of success, he would have to arrest - and overturn - that subversion.

“Acknowledged.” The voice that answered was rich, warm and deep, resonant with humanity - and seemed identical to that of every other Cyborg Super Soldier. It never failed to awe Diettinger at the power that was - had been - Sauron’s, the power to shape the very stuff of life itself.

“You and the other Cyborg Ranks will aid the Deathmasters in the details of said planning. You will not participate in combat operations.”

Cyborg Koln’s shoulder shifted as he sighed briefly. It made a faint sound as sections of augments met within the genetically toughened flesh. “May I ask why?”

Of all the castes in Sauron society, only the Cyborgs were permitted the luxury of such a question. The very capacity to ask had been trained out of most others.

“You and all other Cyborg Ranks are to present yourselves to Breedmaster Caius for propagation research.”

There was a sharp intake of breath on Diettinger’s right as Caius realized both the extent of this task and its implications.

“Acknowledged,” Cyborg Koln said after a brief pause. Diettinger sensed that he had not resolved the issue but had at least bought himself some time. He nodded once, then addressed the table again.

“There is no Sauron Unified State any longer. No Sauron Trade Bloc, no Sauron-dominated Coalition of Secession.” He activated the display screen, and the image of the sundered Homeworld glared darkly from it.

“There is, in fact, no Sauron.”

The recording played out. The silence was absolute. “Whatever is left of the Homeworld and Sauron System’s planets are by now occupied by the forces of the Empire. The war is lost. But the Race must not die.”

Diettinger’s emphasis on the last words would have been expressive among other human species; among Saurons it was almost melodramatic. But it had the desired effect on those listening. They could guess what was coming, and they were eager to hear more.

“The Haven System is isolated, four Alderson Jumps from the nearest inhabitable world. Trade charts of this area have not been updated in over seventy-five years. Records indicated that not so much as a

regiment of Imperial Marines have been in this system in ten years. Fate,” he smiled; none of them believed in fate in quite the way he did, “has brought us here to stay. This must now be home.”

He began to outline his plan.

Thirty-Four

I

General Gary Cummings sat hunched over a pile of computer printouts, surveillance and intelligence reports, from Operatives throughout the Shangri-La Valley and outside. Other than the piles of paper, the General's office was Spartan; the only decoration on his desk was a large acrylic cube containing a gauss pistol that he'd pried from the hand of a dead Sauron Soldier he had killed on Lavaca.

Up close one could see where the dying Sauron had left his finger marks, not prints, pressed right into the steel grip. It was his constant reminder never to underestimate the Sauron enemy.

On the wall directly behind the General's desk were two flags - the Empire's, with the gold Imperial Eagle and a circle of stars, and the yellow banner of the Haven Volunteers. He purposely kept all insignia of any planetary government off the walls, especially that of the Haven World Government, the Cat's Eye emblem on a black background surrounded by twelve stars. These silver stars represented the twelve city-states and towns that King Steele had conquered and added to the country - as it was now called - of Castell.

The Imperial flag was there to remind visitors of the Regiment's true allegiance, that as a unit of the Haven Imperial Marine Reserve, the Brigade's loyalty was to the Empire of Man; not to any of Haven's ragtag governments, no matter how lofty their title or ambitions.

The report that held his attention was an intelligence memo on the breakdown of the primary petrocarb plant in Lermontovgrad. A disaster that left the Valley's second largest city with only two food plants, and meant that they would have no surplus to sell to Castell this winter. And winter would be on them soon. The late-summer chill was already in the air. Cummings shivered, and not just from the cold.

The dunderheads that ran Castell were so worried about passing planetary declarations - which no one outside of Castell gave a muskylope stool about - that they had neglected their own city and economy. Well, not for the first time. However, this spring they had sent out the Castell Guard to quell the local countryside. Other than the occasional rape and farm burning, all this had accomplished was to send about a quarter of the area's farmers into exile.

Aware of what that would mean this winter, Cummings had discreetly sent out his agents to purchase most of the early summer harvest with actual gold and silver coin, specie the farmers much preferred to the government's worthless paper. The Brigade's granaries at the fort were bursting; they would have more than enough food to get them through the long winter.

The same could not be said for Castell. For a city of a million-and-a-half people, they only had one remaining working petrocarb factory which was guarded night and day. God only knew what the City Fathers would do when that too broke down. Still, one food plant alone wouldn't guarantee enough nourishment for more than a quarter of the city's population. They would buy up a good amount of the fall harvest, but there would still be a large deficit. Haven's winters were long, cold and unforgiving.

A familiar double knock at the ironwood door broke him out of his depressing analysis. “Come in.”

It was Sergeant Major Slater, his top noncom and the man who single-handedly kept the Volunteers in tiptop shape. He had been with the General since the day he'd been promoted and transferred to command the 77th Imperial Marine Division.

“It’s your wife, sir. She won’t leave. We thought about carrying her off, but - ”

“No, you did right, Sergeant Major,” Cummings said, shaking his head woefully. Short of abduction, which would completely sever the last bonds between them forever, there was little he could do to force Laura to leave her home. He had tried every persuasion and blandishment known to man, and a few invented right on the spot, during his last visit.

The sad part was he understood her motives completely. Laura was nearing the end of her life and wanted to leave this world she hated in the only comfortable surroundings she knew. Certainly, she would hate the hustle-bustle and confines of Fort Kursk. He thought of having Helga try and talk her mother into staying with her and Ralph, but remembered the last time he’d asked his daughter to talk some sense into her mother. Hegla had left in tears, after Laura had attempted character assassination upon her beloved husband.

Frankly, the General didn’t think much of Ralph Haverstok either; he’d never pass muster in the Brigade. But he was a good husband to Helga and father to their three children. Besides, their home in the Castell suburb of Trinity wasn’t much safer than where Laura was living now.

“Sir, I left Sergeant Sam Constantine and a squad to secure the property.”

The General nodded. Sam Constantine was one of the top sergeants in the Brigade and would give his life to see that no harm came to the General’s wife.

“How many men?”

“Ten, sir. Enough to secure the perimeter. I left them with enough assault rifles and ammunition to hold off half of the Castell Guard.”

Cummings smiled. “They could, too.” The house had purposely been built on a steep rise and the walls were quarter-inch durasteel covered with ferro-concrete foam. Any force, short of a military company, who thought they could besiege that house was in for a rude surprise. Inside that fortress those eleven men were worth a hundred times their number.

“Well done, old friend.”

The Sergeant Major looked uncomfortable, but Cummings knew that deep inside he was touched.

A vigorous knock at the door interrupted him again.

The Sergeant Major, his pistol flap unsnapped and hand on the grip, opened the door slowly.

“Major Hendrix to report to the General, Sergeant Major.”

Slater relaxed and let the Major into the office. Hendrix was a short, broad man built like a fireplug; yet, he had surprising quickness, and many of those who had mistaken his girth for slowness had paid a costly price.

“Come in, Major.”

“Yes, General. I have some urgent dispatches.”

“Can you make a verbal summation, Major?” He pointed to his desk, covered with stacks of documents and reports.

“Of course, sir. It’s the locals. Last night, Boss Rodriguez hijacked a barge of beer and took it into Docktown for a recruiting drive.”

“I know, I was briefed last night.” With a local power vacuum, since the Deputies were too busy with planetary affairs to manage the city, a number of local bossmen and racketeers had set-up shop within

Castell's borders, Rodriguez was a new one, and more ruthless than most. Anton Leung thought he had the makings of another David Steele, given that he could survive and consolidated his power for another five years. Actually, the General wished him success, as keeping eyes on one big boss was easier than following, and cleaning up after a dozen.

"Well, the party went on all night until they burned about half of Docktown down to the foundations. Then someone decided it was time to 'liberate' some of the loot from Bayside, which was only a few streets away."

Bayside was home to most of those who had retained what wealth there was to be had in the capital these days. Several Deputies and their friends had summer houses there.

"The Castell City Fathers had been okay with the insurrection as long as the rioters burned their own homes. When it threatened the Deputies' own property, they put half the police force and most of the Castell Guardsmen into fighting the rioters."

"Good, that will keep them from our gates."

"True, General. But I just got a call from Deputy Sanders and he wants you to use the Militia to stop the rioting. It seems that some of the rioters are as heavily armed as the Guardsmen. Most of the police have already withdrawn."

The General shook his head. "Of course, once again they want us to pull their chestnuts out of the fire."

The Major looked confused.

"It's an old Terran saying. Never seen a chestnut myself, but heard they're some sort of edible tree seed. Old English lives on in Anglic and Americ. So what's your recommendation, Major?"

The Major, who knew of the Generals' fondness for tossing hot coals into the laps of subordinates, had obviously come prepared.

"Well, I think this so-called riot is too well-organized to be the 'spontaneous' outburst it's supposed to appear to be. I believe that one of the big bossmen is using Rodriguez as a cat's-paw to see just what he can get away with. Test the Guard and Constabulary at the same time, for the price of a few thousand dead drunks and hard cases and a lot of guns and ammunition.

"If he's successful, he might let it continue right into downtown Castell, or maybe aim it towards Melody. We could have a city-wide insurrection on our hands this time tomorrow."

"Excellent briefing, Major. I agree with all of your basic assumptions. What do you suggest should be the Brigade's response?"

"I think it would be both good local politics and a good lesson for the Bosses if we took two armored companies into Docktown and restored order. Curfew at dusk. Anyone outside after curfew will be shot without warning. All arms surrendered. All bars and taverns closed. The usual drill."

"Well put, Major." Cummings pulled out his keyboard, made a few quick strokes and a document appeared on the printer plate. "Here are your orders. You can take Companies Bravo and Juliet. It's your baby, Major. God Speed."

"Thank you, General." He saluted, spun around and was out the door.

Sergeant Major Slater smiled. "I can remember when that one didn't know enough to get out of the rain."

The General smiled back. "We've turned a lot of boys into good men over the years, Sergeant. I believe he was one of yours."

“For the first few years. You provided the polish, as I remember.”

The General paused to re-light his pipe. He inhaled slowly, then let loose with a small cloud of smoke. “Maybe we’ve done some good here, after all. Sometimes I honestly don’t know. Things are so bad that it’s hard, until a riot like this starts, to imagine them getting much worse. Then suddenly they do and I don’t know if we’ve done our job. I don’t believe this is what Marshal Blaine had in mind when he gave me the job of keeping Haven a peaceful and loyal vassal to the Empire.”

Sergeant Major Slater bestowed one of his rare smiles. “Sorry, General, but I believe this is exactly what the Marshal had in mind. He was an historian before the War.”

II

On the main continent of Haven, along the densely populated equatorial region of the Shangri-La Valley, the last remaining operational orbital surveillance monitoring station was entering its Tuesday duty shift. Warren Delancey arrived at work with the pastry and hot morning tea typical of clerks throughout the universe.

An offworlder might have noticed the starchiness of the pastry and the poor flavor of the tea, but Delancey had grown up in the years of Haven’s decline, even before the Empire had finally left for good. Good tea was for him but a dim memory. And Haven had not seen offworlders for a long time.

Delancey’s duties now consisted mostly of simple study. The last merchant ship to come through the system had been an independent trader, bearing a paltry few hundred tons of marginally useful items, whose captain and crew had admitted to coming to Haven only out of desperation. Delancey sighed.

No point dwelling on the past, he thought. And nothing to be gained. Today’s task at hand greeted him in the form of a hundred pages of manuscript.

“What’s this?” His assistant, a young student named Alec Farmen, idly (and rather rudely, Delancey thought) picked up the manuscript and began flipping through it.

“Orbital data program from the University. They want data on the degree of oscillation - ”

“ - oscillation in the storm pupil’ of Cat’s-Eye, right?” Alec finished Delancey’s sentence, dropped the manuscript in disgust and collapsed sprawling into a chair. “God, how can you stand it, Warren?”

Delancey scowled. He did not much care being called by his first name by a fellow ten years his junior, but what could you expect from young people these days? Rude, undisciplined, sullen. Since the economy had collapsed, there wasn’t much in the way of jobs. Most youngsters went straight from their farms or the cities into one bullyboy private army or another.

As for Alec, well, his usefulness was unquestioned. He could tinker about and fix nearly any piece of equipment they had here at the station, but God, he could be irritating. He stayed on at University only because he couldn’t abide even the poor discipline a paramilitary life might force on him in the service of one boss or another.

The University, Delancey thought. A center of learning; he almost snorted. Everyone knew the University had become a joke. The Chamber of Deputies only kept it open because it was a symbol of Haven unity. They didn’t provide much in the way of funds so the Board of Regents were nothing but a rubber stamp for the dictator, Enoch Redfield, who supported it as a source of technology. To Redfield, and others like him, technology meant weapons.

In the thirteen years since the final collapse of central government, two things had been occurring on Haven. Rival city-states and countries tried to absorb or kill each other off, while Haven itself tried to kill everybody. The moon had never been hospitable, only tolerable. Now, with the high technology and industrial strength of the Empire fading rapidly from memory...

“.. going on, I mean, how would we know?” Alec was speaking to him. Or, more accurately, at him.

“Eh? What did you say?”

The young man heaved the *great*, expansive sigh of all youth at the stupidity of the universe. “I said, if the war had ended or was still going on, how would we know about it? I read the newspaper every day. I see the same pointless muskylope dung - ” Delancey started at the vulgarity - ”in the ’News of the Empire’ section year after year. There’s nothing ’new’ about any of it; it’s all recycled filler material. The Emperor’s third cousin’s seventh niece has married the same minor lord about fifteen times, now, by my count.”

Alec leaned toward Delancey. “I mean, when was the last time you actually read or even heard of a message packet from Coreward, eh, Warren?”

Delancey shook his head, more in exasperation than commiseration. Of course Haven had been abandoned by the Empire, but her people hadn’t yet given up hope that it was only a retreat, not a withdrawal. Alec’s generation was growing up with the stigma of that abandonment, knowing it for what it was.

“Alec, just do your job, all right? Just get to work, and...” at a loss for words, Delancey finally just grabbed the manuscript and thrust it at the younger man. “And do your job, yes?” he repeated.

Alec rose and stalked off, the pages of the manuscript fluttering in the speed of his departure.

Paper, Delancey thought. *I remember when everything was on datapads. Paper was only found in books in museums...But batteries are scarce, and getting more so. While paper production is basically low-tech. We’re already running out of spares for the shuttles...and when this thing comes tumbling down, we’ll lose our last link to the Empire...*

Delancey turned back to his terminal. The equipment had been old twenty years ago, and now the data line at the bottom of the screen had actually burned into the panel.

Delancey shrugged. People got set in their ways. Why shouldn’t their machines? He suspected the data line had stopped working right years ago. Not that it had mattered. Nothing ever happened in the Haven System, anyway.

The screen display showed no readings within range of Haven’s remaining surveillance satellites. If there had been any activity, a section of the data line would have flashed amber and Delancey could have called up enhancement.

III

“Until off-world communication from Haven is neutralized, nothing is to be done or used that will identify us as Saurons.” Diettinger was briefing the Survey Ranks in the wardroom. They would be charged with the initial reconnaissance of Haven, and their mission would carry several restrictions crucial to its success - and to the continued survival of the Sauron Race.

“Our physiognomy is unmistakably Sauron; there is little we can do about that, except for our troops to avoid visual observation until the landing is secured. By then, it won’t matter. Should any of the cattle” - it was the Sauron term for any noncombatant, not an insult - ”or their military manage to send off a message announcing their plight, they must think they are being attacked by pirates or Outworld raiders.”

Diettinger added, “These days, with the Empire collapsing as fast as it is, no one will bother to respond to another inter-system dispute or pirate raid.”

Diettinger took a sip of water. There were only two thousand gallons left aboard and, with the ship’s

recyclers offline, it was strictly rationed until more could be brought up from the surface of Haven.”Do you have the data I asked for, Second?”

Second Rank’s face showed frank disapproval. She was a Soldier, and while her training taught the wisdom of covert actions, this latest wrinkle did not sit well with her.

“Yes, First Rank. Pirates in these outlying sectors name their ships and outfit their ground forces after myths; an expression of the swaggering attitude prevalent among the criminal element in human norms. Of such fictions extant throughout this arm of the Empire, those of Terran origin are still the most widely known. There is an ironic appeal to the one I’ve chosen. It fits both our needs and character, and even contains a reference to our racial name; an interesting note, as the origins of the word ‘Sauron’ are largely unknown.”

Now it was Diettinger’s turn to raise an eyebrow. “I just said there was to be no connection, Second Rank. Is this an act of rebellion against your new status as a noncombatant?”

The wardroom went still as Second Rank’s temper flared silently in her eyes. As she spoke, she calmed sufficiently to remove the edge from her voice.

“Respectfully, First Rank, it is not. The myth is taken from an obscure piece of adventure fiction from pre-CoDominium times. It possesses several almost complete artificial languages, one of which has many tonal qualities and guttural expressives designed to evoke specific racial responses in readers of standard Anglic. The language therefore is useful even as a code, since my records indicate that the work of fiction from which the whole myth derives has long since sunk into oblivion.”

Diettinger listened to Second Rank’s defense with some enjoyment. He had always thought her verbose for a Sauron. Second Rank’s need to justify her actions was, he suspected, what had kept her from First Rank status.

“Using the myth,” Second Rank continued more calmly, “requires the alteration of our uniforms to a small degree, as well as the configurations of our ground-attack fighters and the transponders on the *Fomoria* herself.”

“Acceptable. See that it’s done. First modify the fighter craft. I want very large markings of whatever style you’ve chosen. Use them in several low-level attacks to announce our presence to the locals. The temporary billets in the docking bay will have to be moved. Supply Ranks are assigned that task.”

The Supply Ranks acknowledged the orders and left to carry them out.

Diettinger considered a moment. “You have a recording of this obscure work of fiction’, Second Rank?” he asked.

“Fragments only, First Rank.”

“Let me see it.”

Second Rank produced the wafer. It was labeled on one side: DOMINANCE MYTHS/HUMAN NORMS/TERRENE. Most likely from one of the Breedmaster’s political research tracts, but possibly from Second Rank’s private collection; she was rumored to be something of an anthropologist as well as an historian.

The other side of the tape bore its title. Diettinger read it aloud.

“*The Lord of the Rings...*” he said. Perhaps Second Rank was right, he thought. There was a sort of power in those words, at that.

Thirty-Five

I

Captain Marinus Leino of the Uossi Suomi Air Force began taxiing his small biplane onto the runway for takeoff. Early in her history, New Finland had borne the hated Slavic version of her name imposed by the old Soviet Bureau of Relocation. But "Novy Finlandia" had disappeared from every map and government document the day after the CoDominium had collapsed, in Haven's first era of abandonment. And since that day, there were few quicker ways to die than to walk into a miner's bar in Uossi Suomi and refer to the place or its citizens by its old Russian name.

Glancing over his shoulder, Leino watched as the four other planes of his squadron taxied forward to line up and wait their turn, their bright metal skins gleaming in the early morning Tuesday sun. As he looked back toward the hanger for clearance, he spotted the mechanic, Flynn, running after him, a communiqué flimsy in his hand. The biplane's engine was designed for virtual silence, but Leino still had to shout since Flynn's hearing was poor.

"What's the matter?" Leino's voice held some concern; his wife was expecting, and in Haven's thin atmosphere, there was no such thing as an easy birth.

Flynn staggered against the thin metal frame of the ship, gasping for breath. He handed the note up to Leino in the cockpit.

"Just came in," the older man gasped. "They said you had...to check...it out... Ah, god damn it!" Flynn caught some breath and spat, cursing his age and infirmity. *To think I once took the Emperor's shilling as an Imperial Marine!* He shook his head and cursed again.

Leino smiled down at him, setting the throttle to idle as he read the note:

TO: MARINUS LEINO, CAPTAIN, UOSSI SUOMI AIR CORPS

FROM: UOSSI SUOMI AIRDEFCOM

RE: COASTAL PATROL, ITD, SABBAD

YOU ARE INSTRUCTED TO PROCEED POSTHASTE WITH FULL SQUADRON TO CENTRAL BORDER DISTRICT, THERE TO RNDZ VS W/AIR UNITS OF RED-FIELD SATRAPY. DO NOT FIRE - REPEAT - DO NOT FIRE ON REDFIELD UNITS; THEY ARE UNDER YOUR COMMAND FOR JOINT OPS, INVESTIGATION OF CONFIRMED - REPEAT - CONFIRMED SIGHTINGS OF SUPRAORBITAL SCOUT CRAFT. ASCERTAIN ID SAID S/O CRAFT AND RETURN. DO NOT ATTEMPT TO ENGAGE SAME.

COLONEL TUOMPO, COMMANDER

UOSSI SUOMI AIRDEFCOM

END

Leino laughed outright at the last order. *Engage an orbital fighter with a biplane? Good thing they expressly forbade it,* he thought sarcastically. *Idiots!*

"Is this some sort of joke?" he asked Flynn. The old mechanic waved his hands in exasperation. The propwash whipped his clothes and thin hair.

"How the hell should I know? You think I run like this for the jollies? You're the flyboy, you find out!" Flynn stalked off, cursing anew.

Leino grinned. *Might as well get to it,* he thought. He would hardly have believed the report himself, but for the rendezvous with the Redfielders. To get the Uossi Suomi government and the Redfielders to

cooperate on anything would take nothing less than offworld contact - or an interplanetary war.

Tension between the two states had grown rapidly ever since Enoch Redfield had moved his operations into the eastern Shangri-La Valley. Through dynastic maneuvering Redfield had married his son to the daughter and only heir of New Anglia. Grand Duke Clifford had conveniently died less than a year later, and suddenly Uossi Suomi had a Redfield Satrap for a neighbor. It was immediately apparent that Enoch was pulling his son Abraham's strings, and no one was surprised when a large contingent of the Redfield Army and Air Force arrived to provide security for the newly "allied" state.

He sincerely hoped there was no mistake; putting his boys in close formation with those Redfield thugs was not his happiest duty. But he didn't worry - much.

His squadron's guns were loaded. He was confident they could handle anything fate might throw their way.

Orbital fighters, he thought again, and laughed, shaking his head. *Well, almost anything.*

II

The *Fomoria* refueled without incident at the automated refining station orbiting Cat's Eye. Meanwhile, her surviving orbital fighters were making low level runs to the surface of Haven, then back out to a close orbit. Their occasional strafing attacks on communication centers were accompanied by false signals to the "pirate fleet" standing off from Haven, supposedly in orbit around Cat's Eye.

EVA teams had emplaced scuttling charges on the refueling station without meeting a single person, even noting the presence of a few remote video sensors, all of them covered with dust and long inactive.

Diettinger was conferring with Weapons on the bridge as the *Fomoria* cleared the station on five maneuvering engines. Engineering had done his best, but the sixth engine had, indeed, been beyond repair.

"Charges status?" Diettinger asked quietly.

"Telemetry indicates full functions all, First Rank."

The station dwindled rapidly as *Fomoria* pulled away at increasing speed. Finally, it was lost from sight against the immensity of Cat's Eye's dark spot, the 'pupil' of the gas giant.

Diettinger waited a moment longer. With his next order, their fate would be sealed, for the *Fomoria* had taken on only half-tanks for her final operation. With the station destroyed, their bridges would be burned behind them. Steeped as Diettinger was in martial history, the parallels to the Sauron Role Model of the Ancient, Julius Caesar, were not lost to him.

"Activate."

Weapons obeyed instantly. With the press of a key, Cat's Eye's pupil developed a brilliant white cataract, fading in an instant as the refueling station was consumed.

"Very good." Diettinger said simply, turned and went back to the Chair. He began to notice the excitement he felt before any battle. There were only human norms on Haven, to be sure; not even Imperial Marines. Not much, really, as opponents went. But Survey had told him that the world was so inhospitable that, with the loss of what little technological base existed there, the moon itself would prove as worthy an adversary as any Soldier could hope for.

"On to Haven, Second Rank." Diettinger spoke matter-of-factly, subduing the fact that maneuvering the *Fomoria* into position for the strike would be Second Rank's last official duty as a Soldier. Diettinger had already extended the deadline for her relief, but soon it would be unavoidable. She was far too

valuable as breeding stock to risk in future ops. She had to accept it, but she didn't have to like it, nor did he. Although he wasn't quite sure why.

III

Warren Delancey leaned forward and tapped his screen. His data line was flickering again. That was twice in the past hour. Not that it mattered; he was due to be relieved in another three hours. The University's patron, Enoch Redfield, took a dim view of technicians who were on duty when equipment failed, for whatever reason. And God knew, there were plenty of engineers and technicians begging in the streets of Castell and Lermontovgrad who would be more than happy to trade places with him.

There it was again. The band flickered amber, green, red and then back to its usual blue. Quite distracting. Delancey supposed he had better do something about it, after all. The old computers weren't much, but they were a damn sight better than almost anything else on Haven,

Delancey thought he had just about traced the problem to its source when Alec breezed into the room behind him.

"How's it working?"

Delancey looked up distracted. "Hmm? How's what?"

Alec pointed to the terminal, grinning.

"I found a couple of bad boards in the system a few hours ago. I've been setting new ones from stores. Is your screen any better?"

For a moment, Delancey was almost touched by the younger man's solicitude; it was evident by his tone and manner that Alec was attempting an act of rapprochement, something he'd seemed incapable of formerly. But turning back to the screen, Delancey's low opinion of the youth returned.

"Evidently not. Look at that." Delancey jabbed an accusing finger at the screen. The data line was bright orange. The words flashing on it in brighter yellow read:

UNIDENTIFIED WARSHIP IN SYSTEM. ENHANCEMENT? Y/N

Alec frowned. He was obviously torn between wanting to believe the detection and admitting he had erred in his tests on the new boards he'd installed. "Well, couldn't it really be...?"

Delancey's smirk of disapproval killed the question on the young man's lips.

"At least with the bad boards, *something* worked. Now I can't even recall the storm oscillation data. You must have lost the fix on the transceiver at the refueling station." Delancey's voice had taken on a patronizing, accusatory tone. If Alec had lost the transceiver, that would likely be the end of the boy. Only one vessel was left that was able to reach the station. The shuttle was kept in neutral territory, and while nominally 'owned' by the University, in reality it was commonly owned by all the fractured power groups on Haven, including the Haven Militia. That meant no one used it much. No one, especially, was going to be happy about using it to fix some University student's blunder.

"You'll be lucky if they don't just launch you into orbit." Delancey muttered as Alec left the room. *Or launch both of us, for that matter.*

Delancey decided to call his relief and tell him not to bother coming in; the fewer people who knew about this the better. Maybe Alec could get things back to normal before anybody found out about it.

IV

The tallest of the four Deputies, Speaker Martin Sanders, stood up and began to pace. All four were

dressed in dark blue cloaks and tunics that had been the height of Spartan fashion a decade before the 77th Imperial Marines had left, over seventeen years ago.

Deputy Sanders cut an impressive figure and he knew it; he was long and lean, tanned a dark mahogany by the wind and sun. His flowing silver hair formed a promenade over the brow of his forehead. Every impatient movement said: I am a man of substance, a man of power, a man not to be kept waiting.

What Sanderson really needs, thought General Cummings, are lights, an audience, and a holocamera; not this empty staff room, stripped of its furnishings and designed to house the headquarters of an Imperial Marine Division. Empty now except for the four Deputies, himself and his adjutant, Colonel Anton Leung.

“Need I remind you General, that as Commander-in-Chief of the Haven Militia you are legally answerable to the highest planetary authority. Furthermore, it is your duty to maintain civil authority and order. As Speaker of the Haven Planetary Chamber of Deputies, I order you to put an end to these raids perpetrated by the so-called “free citizens” of Rhinegold. Our caravans can no longer travel in safety; thus, food stocks in the capital are running dangerously low.”

Now we get to the chase. Already forgotten was the Brigades’ squashing of the insurrection that had started in Docktown and threatened to engulf the entire City in open warfare. It was about what he’d expected.

As far as the Rhinishers were concerned, former King Steele would have sent an army over to Rhinegold and demanded tribute; in fact, he had, on more than one occasion. Upon Steele’s death Rhinegold had declared their complete independence from Castell City - and its rump planetary government along with it.

In the four years since Steele had been deposed - that is, hanged from a lamppost like one of his infamous antecedents back on Old Terra - trade had begun to shrink drastically, almost as much as piracy, hijacking, banditry and other forms of lawlessness had increased. The Chamber of Deputies’ solution: jaw it to death. Maybe it would go away. Maybe it would get worse. Meanwhile, there was a world to run Ha!

The Haven Volunteers had worked to keep an uneasy peace between the City and the towns, but did not have the manpower to police every road and byway. Especially when so much of the Militia’s energies were spent in securing their own foodstuffs, weapons, ammunition, clothing, and other necessities.

“Confound it, General! Something must be done, or thousands are going to starve this coming winter.”

Cummings might have been more sympathetic if he hadn’t seen this coming years ago and warned the Chamber of Deputies to create a city militia, instead of a tin badge Praetorian Guards unit, the Castell Guardsmen. Already people by the hundreds were dying in the countryside as antiquated food factories broke down; the secret of their repair becoming lost as Haven slowly spiraled down into de-civilization.

Cummings and his overwhelmed Brigade were the last protectors of civilization on Haven; a force he wasn’t about to squander to salve the consciences of politicians, jackals who had refused to discipline themselves and their followers into taking the necessary steps to stave off chaos and famine.

General Cummings stood up from behind his desk so that he and Deputy Sanderson were eye to eye. Behind him as a backdrop was the seal of the Empire of Man, the Imperial Eagle with twin lightning bolts in its claws.

“Deputy Sanderson, I understand and - as a human being like yourself - deplore the actions of the growing criminal class; however, I owe my allegiance to the Emperor, and in His absence, to the people

of Haven. It is not in their best interests to squander my few remaining military assets defending a paralyzed government against a foe you helped create by your own inaction and refusal to form a real city militia. Therefore, I deny your request for military assistance.”

Sanderson began to puff up as though he were about to attempt to blow away Cummings’ arguments with sheer oratory, when flashing fingers of red light began to strobe through the room and klaxons howled.

The General, with Colonel Leung in tow, pushed through the Castell delegation and out of the room.

Behind him, he heard Sanderson sputter, “It’s the Empire’s and the Militia’s duty to protect its citizens from outlaws. We demand that you do your - ”

In the corridor outside, the howl grew almost unbearable, drowning out the Deputy’s words. Cummings and his aide took the emergency elevator down into the fortress’ command center in the heart of the mountain. Deep underground there was safety against even nuclear weapons, devices which no one other than the Militia - despite Enoch Redfield’s propaganda - had in their possession. By Imperial law, even these were forbidden. The general had conveniently *lost* some from the Regimental inventory while arranging the 77th’s evacuation: something to be said for being top rank. He was the only one who knew how many.

It was conceivable that some starving physicists might have aided one of the minor powers - the New Communist Soviet, perhaps, or someone else - rediscover the atomic bomb. With all the available texts - he knew with sudden certainty - it was a distinct possibility. Although, one that he had hoped never to face in his lifetime. Civilization on Haven was already spiraling towards darkness. Even one nuclear attack, if placed strategically, could start a domino effect that would destroy everything which remained of Imperial culture and civilization.

Thirty-Six

I

“The designation of the *Fomoria* now reads as the ‘*Dol Guldur*’, First Rank. Markings match those applied to the outer skin of the supraorbital and atmospheric fighters as well as Full Battlesuits. All uniforms now bear the patch with the insignia and trappings described in my report.”

Second Rank next showed Diettinger vids of the units mentioned. In particular, the flarings, added to the Battlesuits, rendered them unrecognizable as Sauron issue. The plain grey uniform tunics of the Rankers and those of the troopers now carried extraneous decorations to aid in the deception. All bore the insignia Second Rank had provided - a lidless eye, wreathed in flames.

Diettinger smiled thinly at the identical insignia he now wore over his own left breast pocket. “Suitably sinister,” he said. “Very good work, Second.”

Second inclined her head at the compliment. Such praise was rare in Sauron society, and Diettinger’s carried more warmth than he had intended.

“I read those fragments, by the way, Second.” Diettinger changed the subject. “I fail to appreciate the irony in some mythical dark god of terror and oppression bearing the same name as our people.”

Second Rank frowned. “That was not the irony I was referring to, First Rank.”

“Indeed? Clarify.”

“It isn’t that the myth matches us; it’s the other way around. The *Fomoria* was named for a race of mythical demonic conquerors from the seas of Old Earth, who engaged in a war of extermination

against the land peoples of an island kingdom. Like the myth in those fragments, their leader was..." Second Rank stopped, swallowed.

"Go on." Diettinger requested.

"Was represented by the symbolism of an eye. In the fragments, it is a single, flaming red orb. In the myth of the Fomorians..." Second Rank seemed to be gathering her will for the next part of her explanation.

"In the myth of the Fomorians, their leader was a peerless warrior, a fearsome, brilliant giant, Balor of the One Eye. His eye was pried open by warriors on the battlefield, and its power was such as to destroy all those who came under its gaze."

Diettinger was openly grinning, now. "What a delightful fairy-story, Second," he said. "And did they win?"

Second Rank shook her head. "No sir. They did not."

Diettinger's grin went to a half-smile, the lines in his cheek deepening under the patch that covered his empty left eye-socket. He nodded, making his point: "That's because it was only a story, Second."

II

Marinus Leino's squadron had formed up in minutes, and rapidly climbed to a cruising altitude of two kilometers. Their operational ceiling was much higher, but Leino wanted to save oxygen for high altitude reconnaissance at the rendezvous point. Haven's air was thin enough as it was; at high altitudes it was almost non-existent; the oxygen would be a precious commodity throughout the mission.

Engines hardly louder than the hum of the guy wires in the slipstream, the five biplanes were at the western Great Forest in minutes, then turned north to follow the foothills to the Forest Border District, the newly demilitarized zone between the Redfield Satrapy, the Anglia Satrap and Uossi Suomi.

Leino regarded the approach to the border with a grim shake of his head. Every year his equipment and recruits got better, but there were fewer of both. Every year, the Redfield Satrapy seemed to double its own available forces and their inferior equipment.

Inferior, but far more easily maintained. And there were many more of them, here and across the Miracle Mountains. Leino wondered how many times in human history the best had been overwhelmed by the numerically superior mediocre? *Best not to think about it*, he decided. His ship's chronometer told him they should be within radio range of the Redfield squadron by now.

"Signal, signal," he spoke, holding his throat microphone. "This is Uossi Suomi Recon Number Seven, Leino commanding." It was also Uossi Suomi Everything Else, Number Seven; he didn't think the Redfielders were fooled into believing Uossi Suomi had ships to spare for specialized duty. But he repeated the identification and proceeded to hail the as-yet-unseen Redfield squadron. "Approaching rendezvous point for joint operations. Redfield Satrapy aircraft squadrons, do you read?"

The answer came back after a few seconds. "Affirmative, Finlandia Recon, this is Redfield Interceptor Squadron Viggen, Viggen commanding."

For a moment, Leino was impressed; only the very best pilots had their squadrons named after them. This Viggen fellow must be quite the golden boy of the Redfield Satrapy Air Force.

He hadn't missed the insult, though. Redfielders, in particular, delighted in referring to Uossi Suomi as *Novy Finlandia* - a taunt almost guaranteed to end in blood.

"You are twelve degrees south-southwest of our position, time-to-contact, seven minutes at your top speed, over."

Leino grinned. They *would* have to let him know that they were aware of his own aircraft's speed and range capabilities. Still, for Redfield toadies, they were being positively civil.

"Confirmed, Viggen," he answered. "Seen any spooks today?"

Leino's attempt to lighten the mood was apparently unappreciated.

"We will hold at thirty-five hundred meters until we have you in visual, Recon. Viggen out."

Leino passed the information on to his squadron, closed the circuit, and sighed. Those damn Redfielders had no sense of humor.

III

In his cabin Vessel First Rank Galen Diettinger watched the information on the screen before him as it scrolled past at speeds too great for human norm eyes to register. Second Rank's final plan for the orbital bombardment had required no revision. The ground assault plans drawn up by Deathmaster Quilland had been only slightly modified; certain aspects contained elements of that predictability to which Saurons were prone, owing to their innate sense of superiority over the human norms they so stubbornly continued to refer to as cattle.' This, despite Sauron's utter defeat at the hands of those cattle who comprised the human norm Empire of Man.

Diettinger sighed and sat back as the screen flow halted, then produced a single line of addenda:

OPERATIONAL REVIEW COMPLETE. REPEAT?

Unmoving, Diettinger continued to watch the screen. After the greatest defeat of the Sauron race, he stood on the verge of its last victory, one which would preserve that Race's dream of human self-determination, and perhaps one day restore the Sauron people to their proper place among humanity as guardians of that dream, guides toward that destiny. That the invasion of the moon called Haven would indeed be a victory, he had no doubt. Diettinger commanded the *Fomoria*, a Sauron heavy cruiser, the most versatile design in the Sauron fleet, and its crew complement included, among others, the 101st Provisional Battalion of the 25th Regiment of the Third Fleet.

Now, of course, he reflected, it is the Sauron Fleet.

But in fact, it was no longer even that. The coming action was more forced-colonization than conquest; its purpose to establish a safe world for the remnants of the Sauron people: seven thousand, four hundred and fifty-one Sauron Soldiers, including Command, Cyborgs, Soldiers, and crew. The entire Sauron Race.

And so, Diettinger thought as he looked about his cabin, the Talon-class heavy cruiser Fomoria is no more. She and her crew would pose as pirates, raiders from beyond the Imperial periphery. Their telemetry was now of a large warship, an old Striker-class relic called the *Dol Guldur*, still of Sauron manufacture, but virtually ubiquitous throughout known space. The majority of the Soldiers aboard had already taken favorably to the new name, just as they had so easily adapted to the rakish cut of their new "pirate" uniforms.

Even their new standard of a burning eye wreathed in flames, originally limited to the wings of the modified strike fighters and powered armor of the assault teams, was finding its way onto tunics and uniforms at an alarmingly undisciplined rate.

"The '*Dol Guldur*', indeed." He looked across his cabin, speaking softly to the plaque above the table which bore the name "*Fomoria*" in the spare, severe Sauron script of Standard Anglic. Beside it was the Great Seal of the Sauron State.

Well, he thought, they gave their devotion to one system, and it failed them. Perhaps they deserve a new

one, at that.

Returning his attention to the screen, Diettinger recalled the Philosophy courses from his days at the Academy. There, Academician Edainiak had driven into their skulls his notion of Nemesis Theory, and in thirty years of combat, from thirteen-year-old Blooder to sixteen-year-old Heir and now to First Ranker - at an age he'd rather not think about - Diettinger had yet to see Edainiak's premise refuted.

Nemesis Theory, Edainiak had informed them, stated that in any conflict between groups of widely disparate capabilities, however gifted the individual commander initiating the conflict, an opposite number inevitably rose from the ranks of the less-favored side to challenge the attackers. Edainiak maintained that there was always at least one such leader, and his appearance was as much a given as evolution itself. Organisms fought to survive, and in any life-threatening environment - given time - they would, to the limits of their ability, produce a suitable response to cope with such threats. As human societies were no less expressions of the organism - man - which created them, the emergence of such an individual, usually male, and thus more likely to mate and reproduce, was inevitable.

Some of these impromptu leaders were, of course, more effective than others; a function of the society which produced them as well as the available resources they provided such individuals to pursue their ultimate purpose.

But there is always at least one, Diettinger mused as he idly rubbed the patch covering his empty left eye socket, even in limited conflicts. *One person who emerges as uniquely qualified to operate in the environment of chaos that is war.*

The ascension of such a man was a forgone conclusion, and the sooner resistance coalesced about him, identifying him, the sooner he could be eliminated, making Diettinger's job that much easier. Other such men would come along, of course, in time. But Diettinger's immediate concern was this invasion and the rapid establishment of Sauron dominion over Haven; and the emergence of a single competent - or worse, gifted - enemy commander was the single greatest threat to the achievement of those goals.

No matter. The Nemesis would arise and another after him, and another after that, and the Saurons would deal with them all. For the corollary to Nemesis Theory was that such a man was of virtually no use to the society from which he sprang once the threat to that society had passed or had become accepted as part of the normal mode of existence. Sauron Role Models throughout history were drawn exclusively from military or political leaders, many of whom had exploited this fact - such as Augustus and Tokugawa, who had engineered the societal acceptance of their rule, or Scipio and Churchill, who despite their triumphs had eventually been defeated by it; they were lessons in themselves.

In the end it was simple human nature, Sauron or otherwise, that defeated the Nemesis. It was not anything so melodramatic as "destiny." It was simply the naked ingratitude of the brute.

Diettinger reached forward and pressed the "Y" pad for a repeat of the upcoming battle plan.

The ultimate defeat of the Nemesis which Haven was sure to produce was, he knew, still a very long way off.

Thirty-Seven

General Cummings left the elevator and hustled into the command center. The low-ceilinged room was full of technical ranks watching screens and punching in instructions to the communications and surveillance scanners. Captain Hastings pushed his way through chairs and scrambling technicians.

"Glad you came, sir."

"Bandits again?"

“Yes, sir. We’re out of phase with Orbiter Prime so we haven’t been able to establish communications with her yet.”

“What about the refueling depot at Cat’s Eye?”

“Offline. No answer, not even via direct laser line.”

“Not good.” Cummings took a deep breath. Their last bridges with the Empire and the outside universe were quite possibly gone. If so, gone for good this time. When the 77th had pulled out, there had been dozens of surveillance satellites at the Alderson Point and many more throughout the system, both at the refueling station circling Cat’s Eye and in Haven’s upper orbit. The first raider, posing as an inter-system freighter, had eliminated all those at the Alderson Points so they wouldn’t have to worry about sneaking out the backdoor.

The next pack of bandits, the Black Hole Bunch, had come in with three ships. They had destroyed most of Haven’s geo-synchronous and near-earth orbit satellites and relay stations except for Orbiter Prime, an unmanned platform maintained by the University of Haven and monitored by their observer station in the plains outside the Redfield Satrapy’s industrial heartland of Home Valley. During their raid on Castell City, the Black Hole Bunch had smashed the spaceport, rendering all but two shuttles inoperable, only one of which was still space worthy. The defenses at Fort Kursk had been good enough to take out one of the raiders, a refitted merchantman, but not good enough to stop the rest from destroying the remaining planetary spaceports.

Now, Orbiter Prime was out of contact: Assumed destroyed. Along with the refueling station and the new satellites which had taken years to put into orbit and had cost so much of their limited resources. Now they would never be replaced - not without outside help. These raiders either intended to stay or, having refueled, had no plans of ever coming back.

The pirates had also made sure that no one else would ever leave this beleaguered moon. Haven, four Alderson Jumps from the nearest habitable world, was now not only the end-of-the-line, but for all intents and purposes - a one-way stop.

“What happened?” Cummings asked.

“We assume Mother Bandit took out the refueling station. We don’t know about Orbiter Prime, yet. Mother Bandit is moving toward the Valley with multiple signals in attendance, which we assume are fighters. This is not a typical bandit, her Langston Field is far larger than that of any pirate I’ve ever seen. She might even be a man-of-war; heavy cruiser, I’d guess.”

While Hastings was talking, three screens suddenly went blank. “Damn it, there goes another eye.”

An irreplaceable eye, thought Cummings, silently cursing the raiders. He knew only too well how limited the Fort’s resources were - finite and impossible to replace. He didn’t even want to think about the refueling station. “Target Mother bandit, while we still can. Deploy the *Invictas* and Gamma-Four batteries against the smaller contacts.”

Shielded by a Langston Field, there was nothing a cruiser-sized ship need fear in Fort Kursk’s stripped-down arsenal. As the last world at the edge of the Tanith Sector, Haven had never been a serious military target, so Fort Kursk had never been provided the defensive weaponry to take on a man-of-war. Nor had the sparsely settled moon ever had the resources to do the job itself. Now everyone on Haven would pay for that negligence.

Two of the four batteries of Gammas fired into the atmosphere. Both missile groups were vaporized by point defense beams from the Mother Bandit. A score of outclassed *Invicta-class* fighters streaked upward to engage the bandit fighters.

“We’ve got a match on Jane’s,” shouted one of the communications officers. “Pirate’s hell; the Field signature is that of a Sauron heavy cruiser, Talon-class!” Four more screens blinked out as the floor abruptly rolled beneath them.

“Saurons, what the hell!” Hastings cried.

In a few minutes we’re going to be blind, Cummings thought. There wasn’t even time to begin exploring the implications of finding a Sauron heavy cruiser at the end of the Imperium, attacking a world the Empire had abandoned decades ago. The big question, though, was: Why was it wearing a disguise? Was this forward-line-of-battleship, like Haven, cut-off from the rest of human occupied space?

Suddenly the room jumped and shuddered once more, lights and screens flickering off and on. Then a bright flash and the lights went out for good. “We took a big hit,” someone shouted.

Moments later the whine of the auxiliaries kicked in and the lights returned, although dimmer than before.

“Not us!” answered one of the technicians as he studied his flickering screen. “Castell City just lost ten megatons-worth of real estate.”

Cummings felt his personal universe tilt as well as the room; his wife, at her insistence, was still living in Castell rather than the compound at the fort. Laura, my love, may God help you! I just pray that Helga and her family are still alive, or - Maybe a quick death might be the best thing, rather than the lingering one from radiation poisoning.

They hadn’t had much life together, for a long time. But that hadn’t prepared him for Laura’s sudden death. Not this kind of death. At least it was painless. *Thank God Ingrid is at Whitehall with the Baron.* He couldn’t imagine losing all of his family at once. Maybe it was better this way -

Cummings paused for a moment, put his personal feelings back in the compartment where they usually stayed during his tour of duty, and turned his attention back to the screens.

The outer fort had already taken half-a-dozen major hits from missiles and aerial bombardment. Why no nukes?

Only one explanation made sense: the Saurons didn’t want to destroy the fort. They undoubtedly had plans to use it as a staging area for their invasion, much as they had done on Comstock with Fort Anzio. A time that now seemed another era, when the “Land ‘Gators” were still based on Haven, before they’d been transferred to Friedland. Yet, as Baron Hamilton continually reminded him, it could be much worse. Had been much worse, even on Haven, in the dark years after the Patriotic Wars and the fall of the CoDominium.

The room rocked again, but not with the same force. Someone whispered, “Hell’s-A-Comin’,” It was so apt a pronouncement that, for a moment, Cummings forgot it was also the name of Haven’s third-largest city.

“Captain Hastings, have someone try to get through to Whitehall. We have to warn the Baron about this. Let him know the Saurons have come.”

Cummings felt Colonel Anton Leung’s hand as it squeezed his shoulder. Leung, too, had family in Castell. Two techs were bent over their terminals, openly weeping. Other eyes were turned his way, searching for an answer, a plan. Something. Anything. He mentally reviewed their contingency plans: raiders from space, internal revolt, rebellion, piracy, brigands, insurrection. No one, himself included, had thought of invasion.

Who but people born and bred here, would want to live on this snow-hell of a world? A world that was

more a loophole than any sort of home for terrestrial life. A world so far from the usual Alderson tramlines that it required a three-month journey, through almost a dozen Alderson points, from the nearest 'civilized' world, and that being Narak, a former prison planet, itself not much more hospitable to man than Haven.

No one but Saurons. But why? Had the Saurons destroyed the Empire and won the war so quickly? The last dispatch to Fort Kursk had been six years ago, a dozen message balls from an Imperial survey craft bringing supplies to the refueling station at Cat's Eye. It had been the usual combination of war propaganda and mail from expatriates scattered throughout the Empire. Reading between the lines, it was obvious that Haven was not the only place from where the Empire had withdrawn. It was also obvious that the war effort was beginning to place an intolerable strain on those linkages of trade, communication and law that made up the Empire. But there had been no evidence that the Empire was on the verge of complete collapse.

Had the Saurons destroyed the Imperial might in a series of lightning strikes? If so, this lone cruiser might well be mopping up the final holdouts. Or was it the other way around? Was it Sauron that lay in ruins? If so, was this band of Soldiers a lost legion, going aground at humanity's farthest outpost? The fact that the Saurons had come alone and in disguise supported the latter argument.

Would he ever know?

The room shook again and someone shouted, "Two more *Invictas* gone! The bandits are slaughtering them..."

Cummings shook his head. Too many questions that would probably never be answered, certainly not in the short lifetime he and his force could expect at the hands of Sauron overlords. He might make a useful Quisling to the Saurons, but he preferred death's momentary sting to a lifetime of betrayal.

He was the heart of Haven's resistance, or at least the Haven Volunteers were. Momentous decisions had to be made quickly, before the Saurons pinned them down in the fort, then dispatched them in detail. He wondered how Colonel Cahill and the second regiment were holding out at Fort Fornova.

"Use the secure line to see if we can make contact with Colonel Cahill."

"Yes, sir," one of the communication techs answered, obviously glad to be doing something.

Cummings turned to Captain Hastings. "Can we get off a message to the Empire? Obviously, a message ball or anything light speed is out of the question. A radio message will do, even if it takes a hundred years."

Hastings shook his head. "Cat's Eye is acting up. The electromagnetic spectrum is shot to hell! Not that it matters. The EMP from the Sauron nukes has burned out most of our transmitters. Our big laser is out! It just took a hit upstairs. Right now we couldn't get an intersystem message out as far as Cat's Eye - even if our lives depended on it."

General Cummings brought his hands together and clasped them tightly. "Colonel, start evacuation procedures immediately. We have a few hours at most, before the Saurons believe they have softened up our position enough for a direct assault. If that is truly a Sauron heavy cruiser, then they will have assault boats. Colonel Leung, I want you to coordinate our defenses so that it appears we are preparing to hold out for a long siege."

"Yes, sir."

"Major Rotella, I want you to organize the evacuation. Dependents, women and children, first. Use the nuclear threat contingency plan. I want everyone out of the underground bunkers and into the tunnels immediately - "

The command center shook violently as a barrage of missiles struck the outer fortress. Two more screens winked out and the lights flickered. Clouds of dust rolled through the chamber like smoke.

“Major Hendrix!” Cummings ordered, as the room stopped shaking, “I want you to activate Operation Masada. Unless the Saurons captured the Admiralty Headquarters on Sparta they have no way of knowing how much this fort differs from standard design. Commanders have tunneled through this mesa and built underground fortifications for almost four centuries, going back to the CoDominium and the Shimmerstone Wars. We’ll let them take the underground command bunkers, but that is all.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Captain Hastings, see that all data files are wiped clean, all the way down to sewage disposal records. We’re not going to give those bastards anything!”

“Yes, Sir!”

“Leung, I want to hold back some of the heavy ordinance. We’ll give them a good fight, then let them have the fort. For a while. Meanwhile, let’s shift most of the personnel, except for a company of volunteers, out the backdoor.”

“I volunteer to command fort resistance, sir,” Colonel Leung said sternly, until a cough wracked his frame.

“No, Colonel Leung. I need you with me.” Catching the stubborn look on Leung’s face, Cummings added, “I will not take no for an answer.”

“What about us?” Deputy Sanders cried.

Cummings turned in surprise; in the turmoil of the attack he had completely forgotten the Deputies. “I’m sorry, gentlemen, but you will have to leave with my command.”

“What about our families!”

Cummings’ finger pointed to a blank screen labeled “Castell,” showing a rolling wash of signal noise and two words:

CONTACT LOST

“We all have families in jeopardy. Our entire way of life, our very existence, is in danger. Having seen our command center, you gentlemen are a security risk. I offer all of you a commission in the Haven Volunteers,”

One of the Deputies, obviously a realist who could read between the lines, stepped forward. “I volunteer, sir.” He was quickly joined by another deputy.

Deputy Sanders looked on in horror. “I refuse to be ordered around by an Imperial Marine reject. As Speaker of the Haven Planetary Chamber of Deputies, I order you to put together a force to rescue our families and fellow Deputies from the ruins of our beloved city - ”

“Major Rotella, put this man under house arrest. And the other one, too. Please have them escorted to a secure facility until such time as we evacuate these premises. Take our two new recruits and provide them with proper uniforms.”

“General, how dare you - ”

Sanders’ words were cut off when a soldier put one hand over his mouth and used the other for a come-along arm-lock. The chamber rocked gently back and forth as a carpet of bombs landed overhead, moving south to north.

“Colonel Harrigan, on line blue,”

“Colonel,” Cummings said, taking one of the phones. “Yes, I understand. We are under attack here, too. Yes, its radar signature is that of a Sauron heavy cruiser...No, it’s trying to disguise itself as a Talon-class vessel.. .And, no, I don’t know why or what it’s doing here. Colonel Harrigan, we don’t have much time. Evacuate Fort Fornova under Operation Masada...Yes, I believe this is an invasion, not a raid. The War has come to Haven.”

Thirty-Eight

“To maximize the speed of the initial attack,” weapons said, as he presented his bombardment operation plan to Diettinger and Second Rank in the wardroom, “I have posted the *Dol Guldur* on a contra-orbital run along the equator. Thus, even Haven’s minor rotational speed is added to our orbital velocity. We can make a complete circumnavigation well within time constraints, even allowing margins necessary to acquire and fire upon the target positions indicated as they come over the horizon.”

First Rank Diettinger was concerned at the ease with which the crew accepted the *Fomoria*’s new name, not to mention the open delight they had for the new uniforms. As Soldiers, they were expected to follow orders unquestioningly, and Diettinger had, indeed, ordered them to refer to the ship as the *Dol Guldur* and themselves as pirates, to help them fully embrace the deception required of them. Still, he sometimes felt that the appeal of the whole thing was spinning out of control.

He returned his attention to the holographic projection of Haven, on which Weapons was indicating various target zones.

“Haven’s cold climate and thin atmosphere have concentrated virtually all of her population in the equatorial region. Within that region, only the lowest altitude zones - valleys and coastal areas - have enough air for comfort.” Contempt crept into Weapons’ voice as he spoke. “The typical cattle aversion to hardship has lined them up in perfect targeting position, sir.”

Diettinger nodded. He studied the holographic display. Across its surface were scattered points of light in white, yellow and red. Concentrations of industry, energy generation, and communications, in relative order, as determined by the Survey Ranks. There were pitifully few of any of them. Diettinger indicated one particularly large cluster on the major landmass.

“Survey is confident that this concentration in - what is this valley called?”

“Shangri-La, First Rank.” Second Rank provided the name with a hint of irony.

“Shangri-La Valley. This concentration poses no real threat? No planetary defense position of any sort, nothing they might have kept secret all these years?” Diettinger wondered if he might be unduly concerned about such matters. However, he had only to consider the consequences of failure to realize that the phrase “unduly concerned” was, in this instance, a contradiction in terms.

“Highly unlikely, sir,” Weapons said. “The Haven Militia, which according to Records is called the Haven Volunteers, have taken residence in two forts abandoned by the Seventy-Seventh Imperial Marines. Both are presently under air attack to neutralize them. Haven, being so far from the Imperial Core, evidently never did have any real planetary defenses; and if the evacuation proceeded along established Imperial procedure, the 77th left little in the way of ordinance or heavy weapons.

“As a result, the Haveners don’t seem to know the meaning of security; their comm broadcasts tell us the disposition of their fractured governmental militias down to the ammunition allocation in local police forces - and there are very few of those.” Weapons was obviously scornful of the attitude these

cattle applied to their own security, but still pleased at how easy it made his job.

“Good. Then the target priorities remain the same.” Diettinger held his right hand an inch off the table, placing a finger against the metal surface as he enumerated each item. “All satellites of out-system communications capability have been eliminated. Anything we might find useful, such as weather or surveillance satellites, are to be left alone. Destroy all planetary emplacements capable of off-world or out-system communications.

“This mission is made easier by the fact that Haven evidently relied very heavily on such things as the transceiver equipment we saw at the automated refueling station. We won’t depend on it, however. Any such additional ground targets are to be nuked.”

“What about the former Imperial fortresses?” Weapons asked.

“Incapacitate, but do not destroy. They will come in useful later during the consolidation.”

Second Rank nodded thoughtfully. She too, apparently, took the long view on this operation.

Good, Diettinger thought, *after all, this is our new home*. He paused for a moment. “Will doubling up on these targets leave us any nuclear weapons in stores?”

Weapons nodded. “Plenty, First Rank. We will use high-radiation-yield neutron bombs wherever practical. We had little chance to use our stocks of such weapons against the Imperials.”

“Good. Then also modify some for enhanced electromagnetic pulse. Use your own judgment as to how many, but guarantee me no coordinated broadcast communications on Haven for at least one hundred hours. And none whatsoever to be beamed off-planet.”

Weapons acknowledged the order as Diettinger finished the target list; energy generation centers were next, industrial centers last. Without power, the industrial targets would be useless anyway, until the Saurons appropriated them. And the Soldiers would be bringing their own energy generation equipment to Haven.

Cutting off all communication from Haven was critical to Diettinger’s long-range plans. In the Haven System they were helped by a number of strong magnetic belts that orbited Haven’s primary, Cat’s Eye, and her other moons. Ordinary radio and short-wave transmissions were dissipated by magnetic forces long before they left the system.

And any signal that did leave the system intact would crawl along at the speed of light and take decades or centuries to reach Imperial ears. But the Empire might take centuries to collapse to the point where it no longer posed a threat to the Race. And Diettinger had no doubt that the discovery of a remnant of Sauron, however pitiful, would bring as many Imperial ships as could still Jump for the last battle of extermination. This time, there would be no escape.

He turned to Second Rank. “You established the flight plan for this next orbital run, Second?”

She paused, watching him with a level gaze. “Yes, First Rank. All the information and target dispositions have been entered into the flight program. Navigation can activate it from his station. I have constructed the program with enough detail to let even a cadet use it.”

Her bitterness was unmistakable, inexcusable, and, Diettinger realized, impossible to alleviate. If they were to survive as a Race, as an ideal, it would depend on the success of his plans from this day on.

And the greatest part of those plans lay in breeding.

“Thank you, Second Rank. Well done.” Again Diettinger could not hold back the warmth in his praise of Second Rank. He knew how she felt at being relieved of her duties, and he honestly regretted losing her. He marveled that he had kept an officer of her qualifications at all, in the last dark years of the war.

Sadly, though, he realized his sympathy was not enough. Nothing ever could be. Diettinger thought it ironic that, as Soldiers, the living embodiment of the term, Saurons had always been taught to willingly make any sacrifice required of them. But how did you ask them to sacrifice being Soldiers?

Diettinger answered his own question. *You didn't ask*, he knew. Soldiers never asked, never were asked, anything. Soldiers gave - and took - orders.

"Report to Breedmaster Caius in Bay Seven," Diettinger made the order brief. Second Rank saluted and left the wardroom without a word.

The silence returned, Diettinger noticed. Saurons were not a gregarious people, but the tension over the operations of the next few hours had brought them all to even deeper levels of concentration on the tasks at hand. Diettinger went to the bridge, where Navigation told him the planned trajectory had been established.

"Status on scout fighters?"

"Reconnaissance shows no concerted military effort planetside. Individual city-states appear to be alerted to the fighters, but show no sign that they know about our position, or even that we're here. We've been getting bandits and missile barrages from both forts, but nothing heavy. Their best weapons are obsolete gunboat-fighters and missiles the Empire abandoned last century."

Diettinger shook his head. The *Fomoria* - that is, the *Dol Guldur* - must be visible to anybody with a decent telescope by now. He sighed. *This really is going to be depressingly easy*, he thought.

"Weapons. Give the fighters another fifteen minutes, then recall them. Prepare for final orbital strike. Secure for planetary assault."

"Acknowledged, First Rank."

Thirty-Nine

I

Leino saw the Redfielders first, six ugly wood and low-reflection canvas triplanes in formation above his own ships.

"Leino here. Redfielders, please acknowledge."

"We have you, Novy Finlandia. No contacts, here. Base informs us our ground observers spotted two, repeat, two Extra-Atmospheric fighter craft this vicinity. More in Valley, vicinity of Castell and Tampa. Ex-At fighters did some damage to local ground targets, not serious. Any luck with your group?"

"Negative, Redfielders. No contacts our altitude. You have oxygen aboard?"

"Of course."

Leino sighed. *Just trying to be polite*, he thought, something the Redfielders certainly weren't making any attempt to do. One more reference to 'Novy Finlandia' and he would clear his guns - accidentally, of course...

"Let's split-up into two-plane groups. One of yours, one of mine; our craft have a slightly higher ceiling than yours. My man goes top cover over your man, both get as high as possible. We can rotate the pairs as their O2 gets low."

The Redfielder did not answer immediately. Perhaps he was offended by Leino's reference to the superior ceiling of his own ships; with fighter craft, altitude was everything. Touchy people.

“Good show, Leino,” the Redfielder came back coolly. Leino was mildly surprised at the compliment. “But our craft uses less fuel than yours, and have much greater range. Your man should take a quick jump to altitude, straight up to maximum, straight down; ours can circle below and wait for him.”

Leino caught the humor in the Redfielder’s voice and barely suppressed an outright laugh of his own. Despite the obvious merits of the Redfielder’s modification to his own plan, the temptation between two fighter pilots to out-boast one another was irresistible.

“Acknowledged, Viggen. This round to you.”

“Thank you, Leino. Standing by for your orders.”

Leino did laugh, then. Orders said there would be no combat between their forces, but that didn’t mean they wouldn’t still find some way to duel.

II

Delancey’s relief had been only too glad to accept a day off from orbital surveillance. Delancey himself hoped that Alec could fix whatever he had done wrong before anybody in the Redfield forces called them on it. Some officer named Kettler, of the Redfield Satrapy Air Force, had in the last hour already left three cryptic and ever-more threatening demands to return his calls, and Delancey felt his planned excuse of poor landlines garbling the connection would ultimately do little to save his neck.

The data line stubbornly resisted every effort to change it from amber to anything else.

Worse still, it was now flashing a secondary red line on the left and another on the right.

ALERT: SUBORBITALS ALERT: UNIDENTIFIED
DETECTED IN WARSHIP HAS ENTERED
ATMOSPHERE CLOSE ORBIT
ENHANCE? Y1/N1 ENHANCE? Y2/N2

UNIDENTIFIED WARSHIP IN SYSTEM. ENHANCEMENT? Y/N

Delancey hissed in irritation and began pounding keys. *What the hell has that fool been doing?* Playing wargames with the master program again? He spun hard about in his chair, his elbow striking his forgotten teacup and spilling the icy brew across his lap and onto the floor.

“Alec!” he shouted down the hall. “Damn it to hell, boy! Do you want to get us both shot? What the devil are you doing back there?”

There was no answer. In a moment, Delancey heard Alec’s footsteps as he raced up the corridor toward him. The younger man burst into the room, grabbing the doorframe to stop himself. The look on his face sent Delancey cold. Alec seemed to be terrified and elated at the same time.

Is he using drugs? the older man wondered. *Is that why befouled up things so badly?*

“Warren...” Alec, for the first time, was at a loss for words. “It’s real!”

“What?” Delancey asked in a small voice. He knew very well what, but he couldn’t believe it, didn’t want to believe it.

“The ship. It’s out there, whatever it is. Unauthorized; no reports from the refueling station. I’ve checked and re-checked everything a dozen times over. I did everything right. It’s the old boards that were bad. There really is a ship out there. A *warship*, Delancey! An Imperial warship!”

He ran past Delancey to the screen and began hammering at the keys with trembling hands.

“Enhancement, hell, yes, I want enhancement!” Alec muttered. Delancey, overwhelmed by the younger

man's energy, began to get excited, too. But he was older than Alec; in his excitement was also fear. *Warship*, the computer screen had read...

They tensely watched the screen as the computer began accessing its outdated files for something which looked like the vessel the satellite had spotted. In a few nanoseconds, it had acquired enough of a suitable list of comparable data to be reasonably sure of its assessment.

ENHANCEMENT COMPLETE:

WARSHIP IS SAURON HEAVY-CRUISER, TALON-CLASS

NOW ORBITING IN CONTRA-ROTATIONAL BOMBARDMENT PATH

DEFAULTING TO EMERGENCY NAVAL ALERT CHANNEL VIA 'CAT'S EYE' REFUELING STATION RELAY ARRAY.

EMERGENCY NAVAL ALERT CHANNEL INOPERATIVE. RELAY ARRAY NOT RESPONDING. PRESUMED DESTROYED.

Delancey's first thought was incongruous relief that it had not been his or Alec's fault that the station transceiver signal had been lost. It took a moment before he forced the words out.

"We've got to tell someone, Alec."

Alec stepped slowly back from the terminal, sat down in the chair beside Delancey. "Who?" he asked finally. "Who do we tell? Against *Saurons*?" He ended in a ragged shout.

"Pirates; perhaps they're pirates..."

"Sure, and they destroyed the only refueling station within four systems? It has to be *Saurons*."

Delancey looked around him at the large, empty room, most of its computers long gone. Also gone were the Imperial orbital defense techs who had once watched over Haven. All that remained was dust, neglect, and the ghosts of machines long since cannibalized for circuits, wiring, and finally the very metal of their bones. A great, hollow, drafty place with a puddle of cold tea on the floor. Abandoned. Forgotten.

Thrown to the wolves, he thought in sudden bitterness.

"Who *could* do anything about it?" Alec whispered. "*Saurons*..."

After another moment of stunned inactivity, Delancey realized he was shaking. But not in fear, not anymore. In anger. He yanked the radiotelephone from its console and began pushing buttons in a grim rhythm.

Orbiter Prime's path over the equator guaranteed line-of-sight contact with the Shangri-La Valley and the outlying territories, when in phase. It was approaching the eastern Shangri-La now, and the monitoring facility where he and Alec were stationed was about to lock onto its signal. Still out of phase with Fort Kursk, but well within reach of the Satrapy. Which might prove for the best.

"Hello, Defense Operations? I want to speak with the Redfield Air Command, please. There's a Colonel Kettler there, somewhere. Get him!"

II

John Hamilton sat uncomfortably in the hard, straight-back chair in the study. He was still uneasy about acting as Lord of the Manor, and even more uncomfortable about the bad news he was going to have to give to this poor refugee and his family. The Baron was in a tête-à-tête at Bridgeford Manor with Lord and Lady Kendricks and a dozen other large landowners; it would be a few days before he was back at Whitehall.

The shabbily dressed man, accompanied by two armed guards, approached the desk with eyes down,

doing everything but tugging his forelock in supplication. "Sorry to disturb your Lordship, but my brother-in-law, Robin Caldwell, is a vassal here. My family and I are fleeing from Redemption, where the Lord Mayor has disbanded the City Assembly and declared himself Lord High Mayor and Exchequer."

John sat up a little straighter; it appeared Mr. Caldwell had more than a passing acquaintance with a book or two. They already had more men working the land than they needed, and no end of Petitioners, but there was always room for skilled teachers and tradesmen. "Mr. Caldwell, what was your occupation back in Redemption?"

"Sir, I am a shoemaker."

"You worked in a shoe factory?"

"No, sir. Before the Troubles I worked in a shoe factory. But as your Lordship knows, most of the factories have broken down or are working short hours because of all the brownouts. So I went back to the old craft and started making my own boots. That's all I've been doing for the past ten years. I was earning a good living doing it, too, sir. Until the Lord High Mayor doubled the City Revenues - now I can't even afford to buy proper leather. I damn well - excuse me, My Lord - refuse to make inferior boots."

John nodded, thinking to himself. *We've got one good cobbler, but he's overworked, even with two apprentices.* He was sure the Baron would approve Caldwell's application for employment.

John scribbled a note. "Give this note to our Steward, David Kanter. He will assign you and your family temporary quarters. Do you have samples of your work with you?"

"Yes, sir. Would you like to see them? I have several pairs of my boots in our cart."

"Not now. You'll need to petition the Baron for a Residence Petition when he returns. Bring your samples with you when your audience is approved."

"Thank you, thank you, Your Lordship."

Truly it is a Time of Troubles, John Hamilton thought, *when good craftsmen have to flee their homes because of high taxes and no representation.* The Baron was right, when he said that the dark ages were coming.

"Next Petitioner," he said to the guards. Before they could leave, David Kanter rushed in, holding his chest as if it were about to explode. Kanter was a tall, thin scarecrow of a man, but knew more about the estate than the management computer ever did, even before it broke down.

"What is it, David?"

"Emergency call," he huffed.

"Catch your breath."

After what seemed an interminable wait, the Steward began to speak again. "Tight beam call from the General. Saurons! Here on Haven. Attacking the Fort!"

"What?"

"That's all we got, before they stopped sending. Radioman's getting nothing but static now."

Saurons, he thought. *The Empire will never be back now. Raymond's gone too. That makes me next Baron - my God!*

He shook his head to clear his thoughts. This was no time for woolgathering. "Have the Master-at-

Arms call out the Household troops. Shut off the radio! Then shutdown all electrical appliances and keep all the lights turned off.”

“I’ve already informed Master Cromwell about the attack. He should have the Guard out as we talk. He didn’t think it was necessary to call out the levy.”

“He’s right. Too little information. Besides, we don’t want to look like an armed camp. It might draw the wrong attention.”

“Your Lordship, who should I tell about this? What about the Baron?”

‘*Your Lordship?*’ *That’s a first*, thought John. *The old boy must really be shook!* “We don’t want to frighten anyone, so tell the Staff that we’ve got a report of raiders in the area. They’re used to that drill. Same with the subjects. I’ll talk to the Master-at-Arms. We’ll need to send a fast rider over to Bridgeford to give a message to the Baron. I’ll write it now.”

While John wrote a short note, Kanter dismissed the line of petitioners at the doorway. Then he took the note and dashed out.

John took a handgun out of the desk, and took his leave of the manor. He was at the front door, when he heard Ingrid Cummings’ voice, “Who are these *raiders*, John?”

“Just some bandits. Sparks got word of them on the shortwave.”

Ingrid turned him around with the light touch of her hand. “Don’t lie to me, John Hamilton. I’m a General’s daughter and I’ve been lied to by the best. These are not household variety bandits. I take it you’re on your way to the Tower?”

John nodded.

“Then I’m coming with you.”

“It would be safer if you stayed here.”

“I’m right, aren’t I? Aircraft? Who could that be? The Redfielders can’t make it over the Miracle Mountains in those cloth kites of theirs. And they don’t carry enough gas to get here from the Anglia Satrap, or whatever Redfield’s calling New Anglia, these days. Of course, if Old Enoch has divined anti-gravity we’re all in trouble.”

John smiled in spite of himself. He could see she was going to keep at him until Eyefall unless he invited her along. “Follow me, then.”

“Such a gracious invitation, Your Lordship.”

He ground his teeth. The Tower was the original keep of the castle that Old Edmund Hamilton had brought with him from Scotland (not New Scotland, but Scotland, Terra) during the CoDominium era. It was also rumored to be the spot where he had hidden the treasure of gold and silver ingots that had given House Hamilton security and strength, while everyone else on Haven scrambled to survive, as the planetary economy splintered and cracked into a million small pieces.

These days the Tower was used as an armory and they had to make their way through stacked cases of rifles and munitions, as well as man-sized boxes containing the durasteel armors created for the Baron by General Cummings seven or eight years ago. The accommodation had worked out well for both parties; the Baron had gotten almost impenetrable armor and the General had gotten enough gold and silver to feed and pay his troops. All parties had prospered - until now.

The stone staircase was large enough for four abreast, but was cold and drafty. John found himself putting his arm around Ingrid, who was shivering, to keep her warm. It wasn’t uncomfortable, and

when she snuggled closer he found himself frowning at the unexpected closeness and the animal awareness of a shapely female at hand it brought to his attention.

Ingrid turned and caught his frown. "Wipe the smirk off your face, John Hamilton. If it's too difficult to keep your lecherous thoughts under control, then I'd just rather be cold, thank you."

"Aaargh!" he spluttered, jerking his hand off her shoulders as if he'd accidentally laid it on a hot stove. *Damnable woman!* It wasn't as if he had an abundance of female companionship around here, anyway. Most of the attractive women at Whitehall were wives or young daughters of friends or allies. Which surely cut down on his opportunities. The most available - and attractive, blast it - woman on premises had the spit and snarl of a Tamerlame. Not that he'd ever thought of Ingrid as an 'available' woman. Bloody hell, she was doing it to him again!

They walked the rest of the way up the old staircase in silence. At the top of the Tower all looked well. It was still several hours to Eyefall and the countryside that fell away below them looked as peaceful as a painting. They could hear the clank of armor as the Guard formed up along the battlements and took positions inside the courtyard.

A loud boom sounded overhead.

Ingrid flinched."What was that?"

"Sonic boom, I believe. It's been years since we've heard that sound here."

"I do hope Dad's okay. Mom, too." Ingrid shivered again, but this time it was obviously not from the cold.

It was hard to think of General Cummings as anyone's Dad, but he too would hate to see anything happen to the man who'd been Greensward's savior on more than one occasion. According to the Baron, the General had been awarded the Imperial Cross for valor and was one of the heroes of the Liberation of Lavaca. He'd also fought the Saurons at Tabletop and had led the "Land 'Gators" to victory in the First Battle of Tanith. *How old was he anyway?*

"How old is the General?" he asked Ingrid, partly to take her mind off her worries, and partly to satisfy his curiosity.

"Seventy-three Terran years. He had full regeneration treatments before we came to Haven, back on Friedland. I know everyone wonders why I'm so much younger than Mom and Dad. I was the last child, late in life."

Her face crumpled."Born of my father's rejuvenated lust, that's how my mother puts it. She's still bitter that he could only arrange treatments for himself. But it wasn't father's fault, he was under orders from the Admiralty. He's attempted to explain it to mother many times..."

John had only met Laura Cummings once, while living in Castell City. That meeting had been uncomfortable enough so that he'd made sure their paths had never crossed again. Even a decade ago she had looked more like the General's mother than his wife. Treated him like a mother, too. Another reason he preferred to stay single and free. Marriage turned the entire breed into stobors - and usually sooner, rather than later.

"Don't take it so hard, Ingrid. I never was able to know my parents, they died in a road accident when I was a young boy. Hard to imagine these days, traffic being what it is now. The Baron raised me and the only woman in the house was Mrs. Ransome, the housekeeper. I didn't shed many tears when she passed away."

"So you never knew your mother?"

“Only as a very young child.”

“You were lucky. I don’t mean to be cruel, but my mother still holds grudges she nursed back on Friedland as an infant. She despises my older sister for marrying beneath her, as she puts it, and living in the suburbs. I think mother’s just jealous she didn’t have enough gumption to refuse to leave Friedland with father in the first place. But Friedland’s a conservative place and her family would have been scandalized if she’d stayed instead of leaving with her husband. I would have done it anyway.”

John was certain she would have stayed. It was one of the reasons she was still single. She had come to Whitehall against her mother’s wishes. It was true that Ingrid got along famously with the Baron, which was probably where the Old Man got his idea that the two of them were a good match. Thankfully, this was the middle of the twenty-seventh century and dynastic marriages were no longer arranged. *Give it a few decades*, he thought wryly. *Maybe not; best to be on guard. It would be just like Grandfather to bring the custom of arranged marriages back to Haven!*

“Ingrid, I take it you’re not anxious to return to Castell City?”

“No. I don’t have many friends there. The Militia is not popular since my Father refuses to do as the Chamber of Deputies or anyone else asks. Not that I blame him. They can’t even run the City, much less Haven.”

John nodded. The Hamiltons had already had more than one near-fatal brush with Castell, when former King Steele had sent an ‘army’ to take Whitehall. And another when they’d taken their force back to Castell to teach the blackguard a stiff lesson in diplomacy, John could sympathize with Ingrid wanting to be out of the City, but why here? And with him? Although he suspected he was no more her choice than she was his.

“Look over there!” she cried. There was a brief flash, not enough to hurt the eyes so he knew it was some distance away, couple hundred clicks at least.

Then they saw the familiar dark plume, from old newsreels and 3V anyway, followed by a rumble that shook the old stone walls.

“Jesus wept,” John said without thinking.

Tears were streaming down Ingrid’s face. “Those poor people. Our world is coming to an end.”

John nodded.

“Is the blast far away?” she asked.

“Yes, or we’d be blind.” He took her in his arms without thinking. Ingrid buried her face in his thick wool sweater. *Damn, she feels good*, he thought. Then they caught sight of the mushroom cloud and didn’t say or think anything for a long time.

Forty

I

The second pair of Redfield/Suomi planes was maneuvering to relieve the first as Leino watched from a circling pattern due west. *A boring and silly exercise*, he had decided, but it did give him and his men the chance to study the Redfield ships and pilots at close quarters.

The last skirmish with the Redfield Satrapy had brought a few of their planes down in Uossi Suomi territory, and the technicians were both delighted and astonished to find that the enemy aircraft had wooden frames with canvas skins; except for the engine, almost no structural metal at all. This made

them more fragile than the Suomi aircraft, but lighter and more agile as well, much less prone to stall or loss of control in the thin atmosphere of Haven.

It was Leino and the fighter pilots like him who had to learn that the Redfielder ships were also practically invisible to Uossi Suomi's powerful radars, modified from designs for detecting metal-skinned fighters - such as the *Invictas* flown by the Militia and some of the richer Valley states. They'd learned that the Redfield planes didn't appear on their screens until very close, indeed. And they learned it the hard way.

It makes an interesting match, Leino thought. He himself had brought down three of the Redfielders' ships during that last flare-up, but the enemy had given a good accounting of themselves, as well.

Something gleamed along the coast, two thousand meters below. *Two somethings*, Leino corrected himself.

"Viggen, this is Leino, do you read?"

"Leino, this is Viggen, I see them. Do you have a signature?"

The Redfielder's voice had gone tense. Leino's radar had not sounded its detection tone. He increased the gain, aligning his aircraft toward the two glittering streaks below, already very much closer than any conventional aircraft could have gotten so quickly, and climbing. There was still no image on his screen. Yet they were obviously metal jets.

"They're either jamming us or using -"

Leino's voice choked on the word "stealth"; the level of technology required to render jet aircraft invisible to radar was so far beyond his experience as to be practically mythological.

Another voice came on over the channel, one of Viggen's squadron.

"They're splitting up, sir, one making for - *Christi!*"

The spook passed so close that Leino could clearly see the great, flaming eye insignia on the fuselage, could even make out the pilot in fully secure extra-orbital flight gear.

Pirates, he realized, and in the next instant a thunderous shock wave of displaced air battered Leino's aircraft straight up and back. Leino's face struck the instrument panel, shattering glass, and blood filled his eyes. The shock wave must have deafened him, too, because he couldn't hear his engine. *I hope it's my ears*, he thought, as he wiped the blood from his face. He would need the engine to recover, now; his aircraft had gone into a flat spin.

II

As the all-terrain vehicle bounced along the twin ruts that passed for a road, General Cummings tried to keep from biting his tongue in two. He was in the backseat of the rover, with Colonel Robert Thurstone, the commandant of Fort Kursk. The Sergeant Major was driving, while Cummings' aide, Colonel Leung, rode shotgun. The makeshift 'road' led to a barn where a small helicopter had been hidden.

No one was sure just how good Sauron surveillance was, nor did they want to find out. Few battle plans survived contact with the enemy; in this war, the General had learned, *no* battle plan survived contact with a Sauron, and where they were involved, things were always worse than they appeared. The combined maxim hadn't failed him yet.

The evacuation of Fort Kursk was going as fast as possible, better than expected. The only good news so far. They'd cut communications to the absolute minimum and had been left alone by the Saurons, almost as if they were not a serious target. *They probably aren't*, he thought, grimly. Most of the

Militia's jets, the *Invictas*, had been destroyed or put of commission. A few had landed on out-of-the-way airports, as directed in the contingency plans, but he had little hope they'd survive the invasion. Not that they were much good against Sauron fighter craft, whether supraorbitals or just plain air breathers.

"I don't think you should leave, General," Colonel Robert Thurstone said. "We need you here to take charge of the evacuation. We have thousands of dependents to look after and I for one don't think we have much time before the Saurons hit us again."

Thurstone, like himself, was a former Imperial Marine from Churchill. He was a wonderful commandant, and with Colonel Leung, had Fort Kursk running like an Imperial Naval vessel. However, he was a true peacetime warrior. He was also his oldest friend on Haven.

"We aren't leaving," the General said. "We are temporarily relocating to Fort Fornova. At least, I am. I want the Regiment to disperse into companies and lay low until we learn more about this invasion. For some reason, the Saurons haven't touched the forts at all. That worries me."

"Last report is that another shuttle landed outside Evaskar. Maybe they plan to establish the bridgehead there."

"It makes sense. Whoever controls the Karakul Pass holds the steppes in the palm of their hand. It's where I'd have landed at the outset if the situation were reversed. First, take Fort Stony Point, and then Evaskar at my leisure. Fort Fornova is the next stepping stone to holding the northern Valley. That's probably why they've left Fornova alone; they plan to take it in one piece and use it as their own."

Colonel Thurstone nodded. "You're right, General. If the Empire lost this bloody damn war, part of the reason would be leaving you stranded on this godforsaken ball of ice. They should have kicked half the General Staff upstairs and made you Lord Marshal; the Saurons wouldn't have known what hit them."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence, Robert. But I seriously doubt my leaving the war had much to do with the Empire's success or failure. What I do need to do is get to Fort Fornova before the Saurons. If they're going to set-up camp at Evaskar, I want to have a little surprise waiting there for them."

"You should get bloody-all-full support from Colonel Harrigan. Should we send any of our troops with you?"

"It will be difficult enough just to get me and a small staff there without alerting the Saurons. Impossible with a company or two along for the ride."

"The nuclear depot. You had everyone convinced they were stored right here at Fort Kursk. It kept King Steele reined in; he was always afraid you'd play the nuclear wild card."

Cummings laughed. "That's because he was a vain little man who thought himself the best the species had to offer, so obviously no one could be more clever. A serious failure of the imagination."

"Why not let Harrigan take care of it?"

"Colonel Harrigan is a good officer, but he's better at taking orders than fulfilling them. He tends to think he knows more about any situation than he does. We need to husband our small nuclear cache and use it for the largest possible gain."

"Right, General," Thurstone nodded, frowning. "I can see where Colonel Harrigan, or Cahill, his junior, might have some 'ideas' of their own about what the best course of action is. Are you sure you can trust him?"

"Yes, as long as he's certain that the Brigade is still under my command. We don't have much time before long distance travel is out of the question. What we can't afford to do is wait to see what the

Sauron game plan is.”

Sergeant Major Slater slowed the jeep as they approached an abandoned farmhouse; the house was mostly subterranean, Harmony-style. The barn was still standing.

Slater honked the horn twice and the barn’s double-doors opened, revealing a small chopper. The pilot and two militiamen left the barn and approached the General.

“Any problems?” Colonel Leung asked.

“No, quiet as a church.”

“Won’t be for long,” the pilot said, with a grin.

As Slater and militiamen moved the copter out of the barn, Colonel Thurstone turned to the pilot. “Think it’ll be safe up there?” He pointed up towards Cat’s Eye, then he cocked his thumb in the General’s direction. “We can’t afford to lose him, you know.”

“We’ll hug the ground, keep our radar signature down.” the pilot shrugged, adding casually, “should be as safe as taking a barrel down the Alf River.” He laughed then, as if he had just cracked the best joke in a century. The small gathering nodded glumly at his more-than-accurate assessment.

III

Fighter Rank Vil smiled at the fragility of the human norm craft. *Museum pieces*, he thought in wonder. At least the Imperial *Invictas*, even half a century out-of-date, had been adversaries of a sort. He hadn’t actually meant to destroy the kites, only shake them up a bit, but at least two of the triple-winged high ones, the ones that didn’t register on his radar, had simply disintegrated as he passed. *Fascinating, really*. He looked down at the remaining enemy ships, most out of control, one or two fighting to recover from his pass. He saw no parachutes.

That’s interesting, he thought idly.

Still, any survivors would have the word out that the “pirates” were here, in force. He and his wingman, Stahler, had been waiting all morning to show off their newly painted fighter craft.

Fighter Rank Stahler hailed him on the combat frequency. “Amazingly frail ships.”

“Affirm. What do you think of my introduction to the cattle of the *Dol Guldur*’s air superiority?”

“Effective, but a bit overpowering, don’t you think?”

Vil checked his screen and visuals. He shrugged unconsciously.

“Evidently not. A couple of the kites are re-forming. We should have time to splash another pair before returning. Let’s go subsonic; be sure to give them a good look. I’ll show them some vertical thrust maneuvers.”

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“Have fun,” Stahler said without emotion. He had not embraced the pirate role as wholeheartedly as Vil and most of his fellow pilots, and he had never believed in arrogance toward an outclassed opponent. Desperate foes did desperate things, and could very easily surprise you.

IV

The flat spin was often fatal, Leino recalled coolly from his flight school classes. None of the aircraft’s control surfaces interacted with the surrounding air stream the way they had been designed to. Uossi Suomi craft used to have tail chutes or canard airfoils to help in such situations, but that was a long time ago.

Leino began going over every technique he knew to recover from the spin. Every aircraft type recovered in a different way, and you couldn't really be sure how a particular ship would do it - or if it would do it at all - until you had to try and do for real. By then there was often no time to learn.

But he was lucky; he had altitude, his engine was still running, even his hearing had come back - in one ear, anyway. The airframe was making a high-pitched rattling sound, like a snare drum.

Leino dropped the flap opposite to the direction of the spin and kicked the rudder likewise as far as it would go. The airframe groaned impressively, but there seemed to be little effect otherwise. The ground was a good deal closer, now. Leino repeated his last maneuver and added a hard push on the stick, then yanked the throttle.

The biplane shuddered as its engine roared, the tachometer needle snapping past the redline. The ship stood on one wing, turned onto its nose, and dropped like a stone into a power dive.

Wonderful, he thought. *At least before, I was going to die sitting down - not face first.*

But it was possible to recover from a dive. He pulled out of it with a scarce hundred meters of daylight beneath him. He didn't blackout, and that was a blessing, too. Recovering with a roll, Leino regained his former altitude in minutes, only to see the formation utterly shattered. Three aircraft were missing from the Redfielders' squadron, and one of his own as well.

The spooks were nowhere to be seen but at the speeds they were obviously capable of, they could be back at any moment.

"Viggen, this is Leino, do you read?" His voice sounded funny to him; he ran his tongue over his gums, finding very little left of his front teeth. *I must look wonderful*, he thought; *blood running down my face and no teeth. The wife'll love this.*

"Leino, this is Viggen, I read you; thought we'd lost you for a few seconds there. Nice flying."

"Thanks. What the devil were those things?"

"Looked like supraorbitals. Some kind of fighter. Insignia makes them pirates, by my guess. Not scruffy ones either, like that Black Hand bunch that passed through here a while back. And pirates would make that sort of pass on ships like ours - arrogant bastards. Shock wave took out four of our boys. Sorry, still no pickup on radar."

The radios squawked with another signal.

"Break, break, break. This is Viggen Four." It was the Redfielder pilot who had been at high altitude with one of Leino's men.

"Go ahead, V-Four," Viggen said. The Redfielder squadron was indeed well-trained. Despite the obvious superiority of their opposition, they had all reformed into flying formation, and Leino's boys were right with them. Leino felt a little better. He was airborne among some of the best Haven had to offer.

Not that it had saved four of them when that supersonic sky-train had gone by.

"I have visual on the spooks, bearing 227 degrees, very far below your position, closing fast. Doesn't look like they're making the same speed as before, sir."

"Leino, I am to defer to you in this mission," Viggen's voice came through with a hard edge of desire. "What are your orders, engage or disperse?"

"My orders for my group were specific that Uossi Suomi ships were not to fire on your aircraft, nor to engage these things, Viggen."

“You are breaking up, Leino. “Say again,” Viggen’s signal was crystal clear.

“Leino out.”

Good luck, Viggen, he thought. I would very much like to have met you. Leino banked his craft and watched the Redfielders position themselves for the interception courses that would perhaps allow them a firing pass at the spooks.

Forty-One

I

“Time to recovery of fighters?” First Rank Diettinger asked.

“Seven minutes, sir. Attack run to commence in twenty-seven minutes, by Second Rank’s program.”

Diettinger noted the tone in the mention of Second Rank, a respected officer, as dynamic as she was competent, and blooded as a Soldier; the bridge crew resented her re-assignment. Saurons, they believed, were Soldiers to fight, not livestock to breed.

Diettinger knew they were only half-right. Saurons were warrior stock, bred to fight.

He kept silent, however. Against his will, he realized he missed Second Rank, too.

“Vil, this is Stahler. Do you see what I see.”

The rhetorical question brought a grin from Fighter Rank Vil. The cattle were actually turning to attack them. Bright flashes of light along the cowls of the antique enemy aircraft revealed the firing of their archaic slug-throwers.

Vil held a straight and steady course, compensating for the loss of lift with vertical thrusters, cutting his speed back as much as possible to give the cattle a target they could not miss. The high velocity slugs flattened themselves against the Sauron fighter craft’s skin and canopy, to no effect.

“My turn,” Vil said quietly. He acquired four of the rear aircraft with his weapons radar; for some reason the attackers actually bearing down on him still did not register on his sensors. No matter. Four light missiles lurched away from the underbelly of his craft, lancing up to the rear aircraft in seconds.

Leino saw the missiles. Instinctively, he allowed the one bearing down on him to come as close as he dared before pulling the stick back and dropping into a hammerhead stall. There was a noise like a pickax piercing a steel drum, and Leino actually saw the missile pass through the thin metal of his upper right wing and fly on through, the fire from its rocket motor melting a hole around the puncture point and setting his sleeve and headgear aflame.

Either the wing hadn’t offered enough resistance to detonate the warhead, Leino thought in numb disbelief, or the proximity fuse had failed. Either way, I’m still alive.

The same could not be said for the remainder of his squadron. Clouds of blast-dispersed smoke hung over columns of flaming debris tumbling downward, glittering in the bright, late-morning sun.

Leino slapped out the fire on his arm and headgear before it could spread to the oxygen supply in his mask; if that happened, he knew, he was gone. Not that he held much hope for himself, now. The vibration in the airframe was rattling his teeth, and he could barely hold the stick on a steady course.

He looked over the side to see that the pirates were actually hanging in midair. Resting, he supposed, on vertical thrusters, as the Redfielders circled and fired on them, to no apparent effect. One of the spooks began to ease forward, apparently readying to make another pass.

Leino made a decision and thought of his wife and unborn child. He hoped it survived. If so, he hoped it was a boy. Haven was a bad place for a girl without a father.

“I confess I’m beginning to enjoy this, Stahler,” Vil signaled. “One more pass?”

“We have to leave some of them to spread the news of the *Dol Guldur* ‘pirates’; recall time coming up, anyway. *Leave* that biplane alone and take out as many as you can of those triplane stringbags as we leave.”

He had decided Vil could have all the ‘fun’ he wished. Stahler had little stomach for slaughter. It was inefficient.

“Good enough,” Vil cheerfully agreed. Despite all their training as Sauron Soldiers, there was something of the freebooter in every fighter pilot who ever lived, and Vil was no exception.

But if all fighter pilots are rogues, then all are heroes to some degree as well, and of that, Marinus Leino was a prime example.

The Redfielder craft, Leino knew, were even more fragile than his own. If his ship was rattling fit to shake apart, theirs could not survive another close pass by the spooks, and it was obvious to him that another such flyby was about to occur.

From above and to one side, he could see the spooks begin their vectors. Leisurely, almost insultingly slow, they were giving him a wide berth, letting him have plenty of room to run home and spread word of the godlike, star-spanning pirates who had come to call. *Look on our works, Haveners, and despair*; Leino thought with a grim smile.

The taste of blood from his face and gums was salty and warm in his mouth. He spat. Perhaps he could send these fellows back home with a message of his own.

“Surprise,” Leino whispered, as he pushed the shuddering stick forward. The biplane quivered, humming like a guitar string, as it nosed into a dive.

Fighter Rank Vil saw the kite above and to his right begin a dive, and promptly dismissed it from his thoughts. Its pilot had obviously decided to take the opportunity to make his run to safety. The recall signal sounded, and at the same moment, another tone went off in the cabin, this one a strident, warning. Vil’s radar proximity alarm had activated. And at that moment, Fighter Rank Vil’s Sauron reflexes did something they had never done in all his twenty-two Standard Years: they failed him. Shock had numbed them.

Stahler watched incredulously as the cattle’s obsolete kite slammed into Vil’s right front quarter. The fighter craft’s atmospheric intakes were wide open, supercharging air through the engines for the vertical thrusters. Great chunks of the ramming ship were gobbled up by the turbines, which proceeded to shred themselves to bits on the invading materials.

Fuel feed lines ruptured, spraying liquid hydrogen into the empty maw of the gutted turbine housing; most of its insides had been spewed out the rear and bottom fans, along with the remnants of the pilot and his plane. The fuel ignited in the superheated environment, in hundredths of a second

it spread to the fuel tanks, and Fighter Rank Vil and his ship vanished in a colossal blue-white fireball.

Stahler saw the other kites beating away, almost at ground level by now. He was intensely impressed. Vil had been a Sauron and a comrade Soldier, but even human norms deserved praise for such an act. Ignoring his own recall signal, Stahler executed a slow circle, standard tribute among fighter pilots to a downed enemy since man first took his wars to the skies. Then he nosed the fighter up and took her out of the atmosphere.

II

Diettinger was mildly surprised at losing one of the supraorbital fighters in combat. When he found out how, he too was impressed. Haven evidently bred warriors. *So much the better.* He would need such people.

The moment the docking bay notified him that Stahler's craft was secured, Diettinger turned to Weapons.

"Weapons, stand by."

"Acknowledged, First Rank."

In the immersion display before him, Haven turned, filling the bridge with its blue-green immensity. *The new homeworld,* Diettinger thought. The Breedmasters were optimistic that the moon's history and its rugged environment would have produced a hardy strain of humanity, many of whom would be acceptable for interbreeding with the Saurons settling there. And, according to Second Rank, they had already bred fine warriors in the past; Haven was the former home of the Seventy-Seventh Imperial Marines. A division that had been a thorn in the side of High Command on more than one occasion, especially at Lavaca.

But before the Saurons could settle, they would have to be sure they would not be discovered. The Race must survive, at all costs, Diettinger knew. And that meant Haven must not ever be found. Not until its new masters were ready. To that end, Weapons had sent one of the shuttles off to the Alderson Point, setting detection mines and missile pods. The next few ships which might ever enter Haven System, during those perilous few seconds of Alderson disruption, would find a fatal welcome.

"Status?"

"Primary communications centers coming into range of beam weapons now, First Rank. Low-orbit EMP satellite warhead armed, ready for detonation." Weapons turned. "This is the main concentration in the large lowland valley. All electromagnetic transmission observed on our first pass has ceased."

Diettinger rubbed his good eye. *My last one,* he thought. The old myths spoke of the god Odin, who had traded an eye for wisdom. *I should certainly hope it made him wiser to lose an eye. I know that it did me.*

It occurred to him suddenly that in the legends Second Rank has appropriated for their use, the warrior-king Balor's one great eye had been a weapon. An eye-like storm cloud dominated the surface of the gas giant around which Haven orbited, making Cat's Eye the distinctive world of the Byers' Star system which owned it. Now their disguise was as minions of a great, flaming orb. Diettinger wondered why, with all these eyes in his thoughts, he couldn't discern the future of his people more clearly. He shook his head. *Too tired,* he thought. *I'm beginning to ramble.*

He had no real doubts about the course that he had set for his people; and certainly no compunctions regarding the effects that course would have on the teetering civilization of the world below them. Still, he had been at war for almost forty years, and the thought of it all ending with a final, eternal run-to-ground depressed him. He shook his head, sighing at the realization of his own fatigue. There were few things sadder, he considered, than a Soldier with no more battles to fight.

"Begin."

Vessel First Rank Galen Diettinger gave the order that ended the world.

III

The first visible action was the detonation of the enhanced EMP devices in Haven's upper atmosphere.

Even as squabbling city-states on the surface finally began negotiating on how best to deal with the “pirates,” their communications ended in mid-word. Weapons’ timing and deployment were flawless.

The *Fomor*ia - now the *Dol Guldur* - was large and low enough to cast her shadow on the clouds, lands and seas of Haven as she passed overhead.

As that shadow passed, it left a swath of destruction in its wake beyond the experience of any living Haveners.

The orbital surveillance monitoring station where Delancey and Alec waited for the end went in a massive nuclear fireball. The University of Haven communication center had been quiet since the Castell City nuclear strike. All three had been on the priority targets lists.

At the Uossi Suomi airfield where Flynn was listening to hysterical radio reports before the EMP, no nuclear weapons were employed. Here the *Dol Guldur*’s beams sufficed. The hangars were neatly, almost comically sliced into collapsing segments, their dusty, oil-soaked interiors quickly catching fire, consuming themselves.

Men ran to and fro, no real sense of direction in their movement, only a frantic, desperate need to put distance between themselves and the scene of destruction. But the destruction was all around them, and running from one ignited hangar only brought them face to face with another.

Flynn, alone, retained some measure of calm as he trotted into the field office and spun the big telescope there over to the skylight. The day had been one of Haven’s razor-edged, clear-skied beauties, visibility unlimited. Flynn was sure he could get at least a glimpse of the attackers’ ships.

The sounds of explosions outside affected him little; he was, after all, nearly deaf. Looking back along the steepening angle of the beams, he found their source, the great tapered cruciform shape of a starship, long end forward. It was gliding almost directly overhead now, seeming to be moored to the surface of Haven by the dozens of threads of destructive energy connecting it to the carnage there.

Flynn could just discern the huge device of the flaming eye on its underbelly, but he recognized the general construction style and displacement of weapons. As a former Imperial Marine, he was not fooled for a second.

“Saurons,” he whispered, more in wonder than fear or loathing. “I’ll be a sonofa - ”

The last particle weapons discharge from the *Dol Guldur* was a direct hit on the Uossi Suomi airfield office. Master Mechanic Flynn died in despair, sure that the Saurons must have won the war if they were down to annexing places like Haven.

Forty-Two

I

John Claude Hamilton woke up very slowly, feeling unusually content and at peace with the world. He cracked opened his eyes to find himself in an unfamiliar room. The smell of perfume and musk lay heavy in the air. No, he amended, the room was familiar, but changed. It was his grandmother’s old room - *What am I doing here?*

My God! he thought, as realization of where he was sunk in. It took all his willpower to keep himself from bolting straight-up. He looked at the antique dresser and saw a picture of a young General Cummings in an Imperial Marine uniform. He slowly turned his head to the other side of the bed where the covers were bunched up over an unmistakably female form. *What have I done now?*

A very nice, slender female body, if memory served him right...*Stop that, you idiot! That’s what got you*

into this mess in the first place. Ingrid Cummings was not some serving wench from the White Tamerlame or kitchen maid he could use and then forget. She was the daughter of the most powerful man on the world. And his Grandfather's best friend. If they found out, it could mean – marriage!

He'd leave his ancestral home first. Marriage was completely out of the question.

How had this happened? Memories of last night suddenly came flooding back: Kanter telling him about the Sauron invasion, the journey into the Tower, the bomb -

Sweet Lord, the Saurons were here.

Then Ingrid bursting into tears, worried sick about her mother and father. Him comforting her, kissing her, their bodies pressing against each other in a primal rhythm. A torturous trip in the dark, down the Tower stairs, with Ingrid in his arms. A mad dash across the courtyard and into her room...taking, no tearing off their clothes, then a wild coupling, meshing of two bodies. Later another, slower this time and more tender -

How could I have let this happen? I am almost forty T-years old, not some green kid. Right, but the world doesn't get invaded by Saurons every day, old boy! Settle down, the question now isn't what you've done. That's a fait accompli. The question is what are you going to do about it? Who saw you carry Ingrid into her room?

He thought as hard as he ever had: *No one, or everyone. I can't remember running into or seeing anyone, but then I wasn't paying attention to anyone but Ingrid at the time. What have I done?*

That, he *realized*, was no longer important; what he had to do now was to get out of this room, preferably without waking - he hadn't the faintest idea of how he could talk his way out of this mess! Ingrid? Maybe she'd be as ashamed as he was and forget the whole thing - wishful thinking! Well, he was pretty sure that she was no more anxious to marry him than he was to marry her. Hell, they'd never had a nice word for each other until last night. And there hadn't been much talking then.

John glanced over at the blanket-covered, sleeping form and noticed the covers had shifted, exposing her slim, silky thigh -

Damn it, enough of that, fathead! He slowly pushed his way out of the covers and into the chilly night air. *It was the best*, came unbidden into his mind. *Out, treacherous thoughts! I don't even like the lady.* Lady, that was the key. *One did not ravish Ladies.* God's Teeth, was he in trouble!

He slowly rolled out of the bed, quickly pulled his clothes on and slipped out the door like a thief. *Oh, I'm that and worse.* It had been sheer good fortune that the Baron hadn't been home.

As he made his way down the hall toward his room, John heard voices downstairs. One was the gruff tones of his Grandfather's voice. *I'd better get down there, I'm supposed to be in charge here!*

The Baron and his closest advisors were in the study, crouched around a pile of maps on the table. As he came in, his Grandfather looked up at him, saying, "I hope we didn't disturb your sleep,"

He knows, was John's first thought. But when the Baron turned back to the map, he realized that the Old Man thought he'd spent the night with one of the serving maids. A wave of relief flooded through him.

"Almost all radio communications have been cut off," the Baron said, "just a few ham operators, mostly those with vacuum tubes, are still on the air. Castell City, Falkenberg, Lermontovgrad, Redemption, half-a-dozen other cities nuked. Mostly tactical and neutron bombs, though. Killing people with minimal property damage, and to hell with any hope of bomb shelters saving anyone. Still, that's not standard Sauron raiding tactics.

“And no confirmation concerning Saurons, except from Cummings. Everyone else is talking about pirates, but why would pirates bomb cities which hold potential wealth? Even clean nukes spoil loot.” He shook his head. “It has to be Saurons, nothing else makes any sense. And tactics that don’t fit Sauron raid profiles fit very well into descriptions of Sauron invasions.”

“Your, Lordship, what are the odds of them, Saurons I mean, coming here to Whitehall?” Master-at-Arms Jubal Leonard asked.

“As long as we keep radio silence and don’t do anything stupid to call attention to ourselves, I’d say quite slim at the moment. If there’s more than one ship, a major invasion, we’ll see them soon enough. If it’s only a single ship - and I’m not sure they’d waste more than one on a snowball like Haven - then we may never see them again.”

“So everything will stay the same, Baron?” the Steward asked.

“Didn’t say that. There’ll be changes aplenty, whether they come to Whitehall or not. That’s why we’ve got to be careful.”

“I think we ought to help organize some kind of resistance,” John volunteered. “We have a secure position and lots of neighbors and allies. None of whom want to see Saurons on Haven.”

“John, you are talking as if the Saurons were just another band of brigands, better armed and organized than, say, the Flemming Gang. They’re not. I fought them on Tabletop. They’re a whole other order of bad news. Each Sauron Soldier is worth a score of real humans, or ‘cattle’, which is what *they* call us. If it truly is Saurons who have attacked Haven, this entire world will never be the same. The last thing we want to do is give them a reason to come here.”

“But, those bastards nuked Redemption and Castell and Hell’s-a-Comin’ - ”

“I know,” the Baron said, his voice growing in volume. “I don’t like it. I despise what they’ve done to our world. And there is much worse to come. However, if we draw attention to ourselves, how will that help Haven? It’s not as if we have the means to destroy a pinnacle full of these Super Soldiers - much less a shipfull.

“If Cummings and his Militia can’t do the job - and there’s no reason to think that they can - we certainly can’t. The Haven Volunteers don’t have the ordinance or the facilities to successfully engage a man-of-war. I know, I spent ten years in the Imperial Navy aboard the *Wellington*. I’ve seen firsthand what a warship is capable of. General Cummings, God Bless his heart, doesn’t stand a chance.”

“So we pull the shades down and hide in the dark!” John couldn’t keep the scorn out of his voice.

“Exactly, and pray to God that the Saurons don’t decide that they want to settle in this part of the Shangri-La. This is a big valley; if we’re lucky we may live out our entire lives and never see a Sauron.”

“I don’t call that a life!”

The other advisors turned away, embarrassed by John’s outburst. He was too angry to care. This was a cause he could believe in, die for if necessary.

He could see his Grandfather visibly rein in his temper. In a cold, controlled tone of voice he said, “In this small part of the Valley we are a big-sized fish, but compared to the Saurons we’re a minnow. In a world quickly sliding its way back to the Middle Ages, we were a military power. Now we’ll be lucky to maintain our local autonomy. The Saurons can rip through these walls like a drillbit through a cardboard outhouse.”

“But how can we just pretend that nothing is happening? There’s a war for the heart and soul of Haven

being waged beyond these castle walls!”

“We can and we will. That’s an order!”

The other men looked down at the floor.

“This includes all of you. Understood?”

The Baron’s eyes bored straight into John. He nodded his head, but felt sick inside. He needed this, needed something to make up for the mess upstairs, the mess of his whole life. *When will I ever learn?*

Captain Aram Mazurin, John’s brother-in-law and local liaison with the Militia, broke into the room. John gave a guilty start.

He paused, his lungs laboring like bellows. “Sauron ship. Big mother! Just passed over the Miracles, must be coming from the Redfield Satrapy. It’s passing overhead with two-dozen fighters in tow! Better come out or you’ll miss it.”

“Is it firing?” the Steward asked. Obviously, he had never been in combat.

Captain Mazurin shook his head. “Not much to shoot at around here, just farms and this old castle - I don’t think we’re big enough to qualify as a military target to a warship. I pray we’re not. Otherwise, it’ll be the last thing we ever see.”

II

The *Dol Guldur* maintained its orbital strike on the surface of Haven for nine days, at intervals. During that time, it began sending down Commandos and assault teams to the surface to secure and inspect the areas Survey had reported as suitable for long-term occupation. When the fires below began to burn out, Diettinger ordered the area to be given another pass. If an area tried so much as a transmitted appeal for mercy, he ordered it atomized.

Tight-beam laser communications were the only form of contact between the ship and groundside Saurons. Not as much as a radio wave was to leave Havens surface. Every identifiable radio source was pinpointed for bombing or ground action.

Diettinger held no animosity for the Haveners; one did not hate cattle, after all. Nor was he by nature a cruel man. He had fought in many battles, and had always shown courtesy to his foes whenever possible. One such act had cost him his eye. But before you could show courtesy, both sides had to understand the rules of the game, and the only rule the Haveners needed to know right now was: *Don’t Talk*.

As of now, courtesy did not enter into his equations, or mercy. This battle was far more important than even the defense of Homeworld had been. For this battle could be won.

And would be.

III

By the end of the first day of the bombardment, Colonel Aden Kettler, late of the Redfield Satrapy Air Force, had used up every bit of pilot’s luck he felt he had. No matter. The airstrip at Fort Fornova had not been touched by the Sauron bombardment, and was lined up neatly below him. His landing was perfect. On solid ground again, he eagerly accepted the bolt of brandy offered him by one of the Militia watch commanders, a husky sergeant major in a gleaming breastplate.

Twenty-four hours, from bottle to throttle, he thought, remembering the ancient flyer’s admonition against mixing liquor with aviation fuel. “The hell with that,” he muttered. If ever there were extenuating circumstances, these were it. He caught his reflection in the non-com’s flawless armor.

Until the Empire had abandoned Haven, along with most of its technical support, people would have laughed at the notion of using such archaic armor. The Redfield Satrapy and the Haven Volunteers had had their disagreements in the past, however. Kettler did not laugh.

“Right this way, Colonel,” the Sergeant Major said, gesturing toward a small jeep idling at the side of the runway. “The General’s expecting you.”

The driver threw the car in gear the moment Kettler hit the seat. He had thought flying through turbulence and updrafts generated by the strikes were bad, but God, this road!

As he became accustomed to the jolting ride, he began to wonder about the fort. Why hadn’t Fornova taken any strikes from the invaders? It didn’t seem possible that Cummings could ever sellout to the Saurons, but it was strange. Maybe it was his own paranoia, from living in a police state ruled by a man who saw treachery behind every footstool. As far as he knew, Cummings had been awarded the Imperial Cross; Kettler would not believe such a man would ever work with the enemy.

But, they did live in strange and terrible times. The Empire had left Haven with too few guardians and way too many outlaws. After all, hadn’t Enoch Redfield been the leader of the Workers for Freedom opposition party that had finally swept into power right after the Imperials left? It was hard to reconcile the idealistic professor of political science whom he had followed with the stern, authoritarian dictator who now ruled his self-proclaimed state with an iron fist.

The jeep bounded through the gates of an abandoned manor, not Fort Fornova, and skidded to a halt in the middle of the courtyard. Kettler was out of the jeep and running for the main doors before it had stopped. He was immediately ushered into the great room.

At the end of the long walk was the table where Cummings’ aides received envoys. Kettler was suddenly all too aware of the rumpled uniform he wore; there had been no time to take a flight suit. Here, all the uniforms were old but they were well used, not worn. As he walked forward to meet the General, Kettler thought about his own comrades, fellow airmen in the Redfield Air Force. He feared the worst for them.

When that technician Delancey had told him what was going on, Kettler had simply commandeered an aircraft and left. He was sure Protector Redfield suspected the worst of him, but, in fact, he had not deserted his nation.

He had tried to explain his plan to Enoch Redfield personally by radio, but then an EMP blast had detonated over the Satrapy, and Kettler lost contact. He was now one hundred-percent on his own, more than five thousand kilometers from home, and it would take a miracle to get him back. Hell, it had taken him several to get here. Three unauthorized stops at airstrips, if you could call them that, at cities technically enemies of the Satrapy. But now, thanks to the Saurons, Haven was one world again and, unless everything had turned topsy-turvy, Cummings was the only man left on Haven who could successfully take the fight to the Saurons.

General Cummings looked at him impassively for a long moment, taking a deep pull on his pipe before he spoke. “Colonel Kettler,” the General said simply.

Kettler saluted. “At your service, General Cummings.”

“You have a personal request for me, I believe?”

“Yes, but first, where’s Fort Fornova?”

The General’s eyes hardened. “We evacuated it four T-days ago. Yesterday it was occupied by a company of Sauron Soldiers and EVA Commandos. If we’d have stayed, you’d now be talking to my replacement.”

“Understood, sir. If I may speak bluntly, sir?”

“You may. Such times call for setting aside the polite forms of address. Please continue.”

“My interest, General, concerns Fort Fornova’s ‘secret’ stock of nuclear weapons.”

The General laughed, grinning broadly. But there was no amusement in his eyes. It was strict Imperial policy to never allow nuclear capability on any world not directly under Imperial rule. When the Empire left, all nuclear weapons left with them. To be allowed any nukes showed either just how much clout the General had with the Throne, or just how devious he really was. Kettler wasn’t sure which fact he preferred.

“I think I’d trade fifty gauss riflemen for one of Enoch Redfield’s Protectorate Ministry spies,” the General said. He gestured for Kettler to sit and pulled out a rolled map of the Shangri-La Valley. An aide spread it out on the table before him.

“Now,” the General said, “let’s see what *we* can do.”

Forty-Three

I

Pilot Rank Stahler tightly gripped the stick as another updraft swatted the small scout copter hard to the left. Deathmaster Quilland, in the observer’s seat, moved efficiently and safely with the yawing, pitching craft. Stahler compensated, trying to watch for evidence of the torturous winds before they reached them. He was an excellent pilot, his reflexes were beyond the imagination of any human norm, but here he felt his abilities tested nearly to their limits.

The Karakul Pass, as the cattle called it, was a small cleft between two major mountain ranges, the Atlas Mountains to the west and the Girdle of God - tip of the Miracle Mountains range - to the northeast. From the air it was obvious that the two ranges had been joined together at one time. *That must have been the mother of all earthquakes*, he thought, fighting a sudden downdraft.

The turbulence was brought about by the colder, dryer air of the higher northern steppes trying to descend through the Pass and into the warmer and wetter air mass of the Shangri-La Valley that stretched below for millions of square kilometers. Buffeted by massive air pressure systems, sometimes the air rushed through the Pass with all the force of a runaway locomotive. Flying a small helicopter in this kind of turbulence was like flying a supraorbital fighter through one of Cat’s Eye’s magnetic storms. And just as dangerous.

The tilt-rotor gunships following behind were having less difficulty with the turbulence because of their greater size and weight, but they were harder to correct once caught in an up or downdraft. A minor course miscalculation or over-correction could result in a sudden collision or being slammed into the eastern wall of the Pass. Stahler didn’t envy those pilots; on the other hand, they were used to piloting rotary craft. As a Fighter Rank, he wasn’t; it had been years since he’d last taken a helicopter up. But then, as a fighter pilot, he was expected to be able to fly anything, and usually could. *What would it be like to take up one of those Havener kites?* he wondered.

It had been his decision to volunteer to fly on this mission. He was well aware that his days as a Fighter Pilot Rank were quickly coming to an end. It was unlikely there would be more than half-a-dozen more flights before all the fighters were permanently grounded. There was nothing in their class left to fight, never had been on this dismal moon. The score of out-classed *Invictas* were either destroyed or in hiding - and they were Haven’s best. Most importantly, the Sauron fighters, even the atmospheric craft, used too much of their limited stocks of fuel. One thing they had quickly learned was the scarcity of

liquid hydrogen or even petroleum on Haven; most motorized vehicles used alcohol instead of gasoline.

In the distance he could see the multi-layered compound called Fort Stony Point. This fort controlled access to the only viable northern pass into the Shangri-La Valley. A few antiquated anti-aircraft guns began to boom and he saw the sputtering smoke trail of a slug-throwing, multi-barreled mini-gun. Most of the walls and emplacements were empty of men or weapons. A score of men were running between the inner tower and the first walled emplacement,

Deathmaster Quilland pointed to the ground.”This must be a ruse,” he said, as they banked left to avoid an antique missile.

Stahler fired off an answering missile, and saw a satisfying blossom of flame and smoke rise from a missile battery. Some of the tilt-rotor gun-ships spat bullets, some complex frequencies of sound waves, just beyond the range of the defender’s weapons. Half-a-dozen of the defenders fell to the ground.

According to some captives from Evaskar there was only a company or so of under-supplied city militia garrisoned in the fort. With modern weapons, a battalion of good troops, and plenty of supplies, this fortification could holdout forever. It would take a nuke to put it out of commission.

It was hard to believe that the Haveners had left it almost deserted. He knew this was a backwater, but this strategic travesty was just plain irresponsible.

The winds were not so tricky high over the fort, since they were now well out of the Pass itself. Stahler watched as one of the gunships landed, troops rolling out and into the inner courtyard. There was sporadic fire from the defenders, but the circling gunships returned fire before the Haveners could change position. More missiles flew up, one of them almost grazing a gunship. The return fire was devastating, clouds of smoke rolled through the fort.

As they circled above the carnage, the Deathmaster studied the screens and called out orders in Battle Tongue into a microphone.

“This place is nothing less than a gift to the first well-armed invader,” Stahler said.

“And here we are,” Quilland agreed quietly.

As Stahler watched, more of the tilt rotors landed and discharged troopers. The missile batteries appeared to be silenced, for now. Soldiers dashed into doorways, flew across the courtyards, climbed up sheer walls and towers as they stormed the fortress. Occasional pockets of Evaskar militia returned fire, but as soon as they began to group into fire teams the gunships opened up on them.

Within minutes firing had almost ceased. Organized squads of Saurons now patrolled the courtyards and held the walls of Fort Stony Point. An occasional shot rang out, but for the most part the fighting appeared to be over.

“Objective secure,” came the first reports.

From the time the first Soldier had hit the ground, less than seven minutes had elapsed.

Quilland turned on the ship communicator and reported their success to First Rank Diettinger. He finished with: “Opposition has ceased, First Rank. No prisoners. I’ll leave a company to hold the fort from any cattle counter-attack.”

“Good,” Diettinger answered, satisfied. He signed off.

Quilland said, “Let’s check the lower Pass.”

The rotor swept in ever-larger circuits of the battleground, then broke away to the south. They descended the steep southern slope toward the cattle outposts that guarded the lower end of the Karakul Pass. At the northern end, the Karakul Pass held giant stone and concrete walls, earthworks, even towering wooden gates, to guard the Shangri-La from the nomads of the northern steppes. While at the southern entrance, there were only a few crumbling stone walls and a bunker with half-a-dozen small figures outside, all wearing Sauron battle armor.

Quilland tapped his shoulder.

Stahler carefully piloted the craft through the strong winds, landing in front of the outpost, which up-close was more of a shack than a bunker. About half-a-dozen sprawling blood-soaked Haveners lay still in the dim sunlight.

A young Ranker ran over to the rotor. "Most of them were asleep, Deathmaster. Seven enemy casualties, no prisoners. No friendly casualties."

"Any sign of alarm in Evaskar?"

"None, Deathmaster," the Assault Leader answered.

"Carry on." Stahler turned southward toward the city of Evaskar. It sat atop a series of descending plateaus; its one hundred thousand inhabitants were as ignorant of the coming holocaust as their nearby herds of sheep. Stahler set himself against a fierce chill breeze; Quilland seemed unaffected by the cold. "It's a good day," the Deathmaster said, climbing back into the rotor.

They flew up into the orange sky, and the city of Evaskar sprawled out below them. The stepped expanses of ramshackle stone buildings were surrounded by a low rock wall. A wide road leading to the Pass bypassed the city.

"A stone wall," Quilland muttered, more to himself than to Stahler.

From above, it was obvious that the city had once been much larger and that buildings and houses had extended for kilometers beyond the stone walls to the south. All traffic into or out of the Shangri-La had to move past Evaskar. Once this city had been the heart of a mighty kingdom, perhaps during the early Imperial rule.

It's seen some hard times since the Empire left, Stahler thought. But not as hard as some, he added, thinking of bomb-swept cities in the central Valley.

"Return," Quilland ordered.

"Aye, aye, sir."

Between Evaskar and the mountainside redoubt called Fort Stony Point was Firebase One, the landing site for shuttles, as well as the staging area for the upcoming ground invasion. Stahler studied the firebase, its Landing Zone a clean scar on the ground, its carefully laid out bunkers and buildings as familiar as any and every base camp he'd ever lived in. *This time, he thought, it's different - this time, it's home.*

He had never thought he'd call any place but Sauron home, but Sauron was gone - forever. *Damn you all! You culls may have won the war, but I hope it costs you everything!*

They circled through the winds back to the air space above Fort Stony Point, where Stahler and Quilland saw smoke here and there, and Soldiers fighting fires. *No more cattle to fight, thought Stahler.* The Soldiers were using shovels and dirt. Only one team was using a fire hose.

The Deathmaster monitored the Battle-Tongued situation reports, occasionally mentioning some pocket of resistance. Quilland, supremely confident of his troops, only offered advice when he had something

to bring to the fight. Stahler was impressed by the Deathmaster's complete and instant grasp of almost any tactical situation.

"There," Quilland pointed to a pitched battle that had just ignited. Stahler took the rotor over the courtyard where the small engagement raged, shrapnel pinging against the copter's fuselage. He caught an updraft and took the rotor away from the fighting.

He checked his display readouts and listened to his craft's turbines and rotors carefully. "No damage showing."

The Deathmaster grunted in answer; he was busy checking the readouts himself. Hailing the three teams in the courtyard, Quilland ordered. "Southeast corner, grenade."

He nodded for Stahler to proceed to the next spot-check on the list, not even pausing to watch the grenade's devastating effect on the fort's few remaining defenders.

Occasionally, rifle bullets rang against the fuselage, but the battle for Fort Stony Point was over almost as quickly as it had begun.

"Secure," came up from the two-man teams, one after another, as they reconnoitered the remaining buildings and fortifications.

"This place is vast, a labyrinth," an intel Ranker reported.

"Circle the fort once more," Quilland ordered.

As they flew over the complicated, ring-walled, much-ruined and much-repaired tier of structures, the Deathmaster studied them with the intensity of a Sauron Nightfang eyeing its prey. Quilland had Stahler fly closer here, fly slower there, hover over this or that courtyard. He nodded to himself now and then.

"We can use this," he muttered.

The Deathmaster often turned to look at the Karakul Pass, which narrowed a third of the way through, dog-legged, then widened and dog-legged again before narrowing to about half-a-mile of bumpy hillocks. The northeastern side was almost sheer, straight up for about ten kilometers, while the southern side gradually ascended through a series of foothills, to the Atlas Mountains looming above.

Fort Stony Point commanded the Pass, yet remained inaccessible to almost any ground force that didn't have good air cover. Even Stahler could see that, properly defended, this enormous fortification would be virtually invulnerable to attack; certainly by any forces that the beaten and disorganized Haveners could put together.

"It's a citadel," he heard Quilland mutter under his breath. Stahler could only agree; he suspected the Deathmaster had plans for it even now.

II

Water had been brought aboard the *Fomoria*, and Diettinger was sure he had never tasted anything so wonderful. The recycled water aboard the ship was metallic and sharp even to Sauron taste buds. It had been too long since their last planetfall.

It was twenty days since the bombardment of Haven had ended, and the ground forces had firmly established their beachhead. Diettinger was speaking with Deathmaster Quilland planetside. Quilland's forces had just consolidated their position in a small mountain pass in the northeast corner of the Shangri-La Valley.

"By your leave, First Rank." Quilland's image looked fit and well, if a little flushed. Haven's thin air

took its toll, he had reported, until one got used to it. That he and his men were “getting used to” air pressures that rendered human norms delirious was immaterial; they were Saurons, after all.

“Speak, Deathmaster. You seem pleased.”

“I am, First Rank. I have the final report on the settlement area around Firebase One. The hard data is being uplinked to the *Dol Guldur*, but you asked for a verbal briefing when available.”

“Proceed.”

“The large valley below us, in addition to being almost completely protected by the surrounding mountain ranges, is centered on the equator and thereby enjoys higher atmospheric density than most other areas on Haven, as well as a more temperate climate. As expected, the early inhabitants concentrated their settlements in the Shangri-La Valley. Captives report that females frequently fail to carry children to term in the thin atmosphere elsewhere on Haven. The Upper Valley cattle had established a taxation system for passage when the outlying districts needed to bring their women into short-term leased areas for birthing purposes.”

Diettinger found the information encouraging. Sauron genetic engineering did not extend to providing maximum birthing capabilities among their females; in fact, quite the opposite. With high standards and constant experimentation in gene crossing, Sauron women often had difficulty in carrying fetuses to term. The advanced technology of the Sauron State had dealt with this problem through massive artificial reproduction, exo-genesis programs and embryonic vats. These options were no longer available to Diettinger’s Saurons. He felt he knew what Quilland was getting at.

“I understand your command now occupies one of the major way-stations built by the locals to regulate such access.” Diettinger gestured to the towering structure of natural stone and heavy timbers looming behind Quilland, a stronghold if ever he had seen one.

“Better than that, First Rank, this fortification is the major way-station into the Valley. The air in the upper reaches of these mountains is too thin for most of the cattle to tolerate, save for a handful of passes such as this one. Of these passes, only a few are open during the summer thaw, and of those, only this one is wide enough to allow mass transportation of personnel and trade goods.

“I recommend establishing a citadel here, with material from the *Fomoria* and most of our troops. There are few heavy elements here in the northeastern Shangri-La Valley, and every scrap of metal we can salvage from the ship will be of great value. It is also close to Firebase One and the city of Evaskar, a trading center we can use for our own purposes. The citadel is located in a position to regulate the flow of cattle to and from the Shangri-La Valley and its critical safe-birth zones. This provides us the opportunity to exact whatever tribute we require while culling the indigenous population as we see fit.”

Diettinger nodded. “It also guarantees us control and access to the entire Shangri-La Valley.” He did not add that his first concern in the matter of tribute would be acceptable female breeding stock. With less than two hundred Sauron females available, he did not have to.

“Proceed, Deathmaster. The Combat Engineer Ranks will be put at your disposal.”

Quilland saluted. Diettinger broke the connection, but before the image faded, Diettinger noticed the flaming eye insignia on Quilland’s raised arm. The need for secrecy was past. Indeed, what cattle had been captured and interrogated seemed only too aware of the true identity of their invaders, though not their reason for taking so worthless a place as Haven. Most thought the Saurons had defeated the Empire and were claiming Haven as spoils of war.

And yet few of the Soldiers had relinquished their insignia. The “pirate” designation they had abandoned immediately, with noticeable relief. But something is in their character that had not been

there before, he thought, something the insignia and more rakishly cut tunics was fostering. *A swagger*, he decided.

Diettinger was not sure if this should be allowed to continue, but, if it helped his Soldiers accept this harsh world, he was not opposed. He suspected it was their way of coming to terms with the loss of the Sauron Homeworld and becoming citizens' of this new one. A side effect he had noticed was that it ran counter to the old State's blanket "pro-Cyborg" policies. And anything that diminished the Cyborg mystique among the rank and file was, he decided, perfectly acceptable to him.

Now it was time to consult with Breedmaster Caius.

III

Deathmaster Quilland examined the force drawn up before him, with Fire-base One in the background.

Assault Leader Bohren approached him and saluted."All in order, sir."

The Deathmaster nodded his agreement. Certainly, they had more than enough forces to take Evaskar, a town protected only by pitiful stone walls and a bedraggled city militia. For the attack, Bohren had two full companies, one infantry and one mechanized, for a total of two hundred and twenty Soldiers.

The mechanized company included twenty-four of the light, two-man Walmire AFVs. The tanks came disassembled, with engines mounted on a hex-frame. The rest of the tank was built from strong, lightweight tubes which were connected by joints to create individual vehicles best suited for local terrain. For an Imperial force, the tanks would have been larger, used steeper outside angles, and lower profiles to deflect armor-piercing rounds.

On Haven, speed mattered more since expected resistance was fairly primitive. The tubes could be filled with sand or dirt, which strengthened and weighted the chassis, which itself could ride on a variety of wheels or treads. The engines were basic HCT's, hydrogen conversion-turbine engines, and could drink anything containing the first element for fuel, including water; a real plus given Haven's thin air and extremely limited petroleum supplies.

Typically, Walmire tanks carried no armor of their own, since they were designed for swift attacks. Pockets opened into slots on the outside frame which were filled with sand or dirt surrounding the body of the tank, sometimes with sheets of flexible Kevlon that unrolled to stiffen along their molecular grain into plate armor. Walmires were easily transported, even by interstellar ships, and could be bulked up quickly for maximum protection to crew and tank.

Two or more Walmire frames could be combined into larger vehicles and even armor could be forged for special situations. Quilland doubted armor would be necessary for the attack on Evaskar. It might be needed later when they besieged Fort Kursk, headquarters of the Haven Militia. Saurons rarely conducted sieges, and Quilland couldn't imagine a situation in Evaskar that would require anything heavier than these vehicles.

Quilland watched as Bohren climbed aboard the lead tank. He wished that he could take charge personally, but administrative details over the arrival of the *Dol Guldur* had left him little time for anything else. Bohren was a competent, if unimaginative, commander. He would do.

Forty-Four

I

Colonel Nelson Harrigan examined the General with a look that was just shy of insubordination.

"We've only got three nuclear shots, General. Why waste one on this Diettinger when we could better

deploy them to take out this main Firebase of theirs?"

Not for the first time, General Cummings decried the breakdown in Militia command that had given Colonel Harrigan delusions of independence. *It's probably my fault*, he thought. *Spent too much time at Fort Kursk and not enough at Fornova*. On the other hand, there had been no end of crises at Kursk and he hadn't much time to travel or make needed inspections. *Well, I'm paying for it now*.

"You overestimate the power of this weapon, Colonel. It's a tactical nuclear weapon with a quarter megaton blast, not a city-buster. The Saurons have already hardened their staging area. The worst we can do now would be to cost them a few casualties and some inconvenience."

"Not if we set up a diversionary attack - "

"Yes, Colonel, and have half our command caught in our own blast!"

"No. But - "

"Enough, Colonel. If we can take out Diettinger and some of his aides, we can chop the head right off the Sauron serpent. From the transmissions we've been able to crack, there's already a split in the Sauron camp between the Cyborg Super Soldiers and the regular troops. If we can kill Diettinger, there's a good chance this will break into open warfare. Besides, Diettinger is frighteningly capable even for a Sauron.

"I just wish we had better communications with the Empire. I'd like to know what Diettinger's been up to in the past half-a-dozen years since our last dispatch. I'm convinced that Galen Diettinger is the key to any long term Sauron success on Haven."

"So how do we stop this Diettinger's clock?"

General Cummings pointed to a series of mountains just southeast of the Sauron beachhead. "We'll put one of the missiles up there with a squad. Then to keep the Sauron's attention where we want it, we'll start a counter-offensive against their firebase."

"Sweet Jesus!" Harrigan cried. "You want to talk about casualties; they'll be horrendous. Well, maybe not so bad if we use the last of the aircraft in a simultaneous airstrike."

"Exactly. It's go-for-broke time. Besides, we're not going to use the entire Regiment, just a battalion. We'll use the attack to withdraw the rest of the regiment into the foothills of the Atlas Mountains. Here we're just sitting ducks; it's only a matter of time before the Saurons take Fornova. In the mountains we can conduct guerrilla operations and build-up our support among the mountain peoples."

"But what will taking out Diettinger accomplish?"

"Maybe a little, maybe a lot. It won't end the war, but it just might start another one. With Diettinger gone, there won't be anything to keep the Cyborgs from taking over."

"And that's good news?"

"Actually, yes. Cyborgs are great soldiers, the best ever seen. But the invasion is over - for now. If the Saurons plan to establish a colony here, as the landing of their battle cruiser indicates, then it will be up to the Cyborgs to set-up and maintain that colony. I'm betting they'll do a lot worse job of it than Galen Diettinger. A lot worse!"

"I hope so, General. Because the success or failure of that attack will determine the future of this Regiment."

II

The Breedmaster looked up from his data terminal as First Rank Diettinger entered. He almost seemed

to be smiling. Diettinger was sure it was a trick of the light; Caius was virtually humorless.

“First Rank,” Caius acknowledged. “I was about to contact you myself. Cross-fertilization tests on captured cattle gave the expected results. Full compatibility.”

Diettinger grunted in relief. “Any progress on the Cyborg issue?” he asked.

Despite the difficulties they posed to his continued leadership, the survival of the Super Soldiers was crucial to his long-range plans for the Race. The Empire that had destroyed Sauron was dying - he knew that for certain. The first race to emerge from the Interregnum with technological and military superiority would dominate human occupied space for the next thousand years. The Cyborgs could be the critical factor.

But Caius shook his head. “Very bad, I’m afraid. Cyborgs were typically altered within their gestation capsules, all through their development, with the chemical, physical and biological augmentations that make them what they are. That technology is of course lost to us now. However, there is hope.”

Caius called up a list of information on his screen.

“That hope arises from the fact that the word ‘Cyborg’ is almost a misnomer. The Cyborg’s abilities, as opposed to those of the failed experiments conducted hundreds of years ago by the Imperials, come not from artificial constructs implanted within their bodies, but from synthesized, purpose-built genetic material, which the fetus assimilates as it develops. Much like the ‘royal jelly’ process that creates fertile queens out of sterile workers.”

“Terran bees,” Caius explained.

Diettinger nodded his understanding of the reference. Born and schooled before the war, his education was more well-rounded than that of most Saurons, but every Sauron knew about social insects.

“This synthesized DNA was fashioned *in toto* by our scientists, but its necessary similarity to normal Sauron genetic structure allows for the occasional ability of Cyborgs to breed true, even down to the concentration of polarized metallic lattices in their skeletal structures.” Caius turned to Diettinger, and this time, he did smile. “End of genetic biology lesson, except for one thing: For at least the first few generations, the female mates of the Cyborgs must be of the highest physical and genetic qualifications, to allow any chance of survival for the offspring of such unions, to say nothing of the mothers.”

“Then,” Diettinger said slowly, “every attempt will have to be made to protect the Cyborgs and afford their assigned mates the utmost care. They will be mated only with Sauron females, I presume?”

“That would allow the greatest chance for success.”

“Make the necessary arrangements.” Removing the Cyborgs from combat duty would go a long way toward finishing them off as competitors for social dominance in the new order. But the loss of Sauron females as mates for the crew was a problem. Quite a few had already established liaisons with one another.

No matter. The Race came first; Diettinger really had no choice. He took a stimulant and hurried down the corridor for his meeting with Engineering.

The engine bay was a cacophony of noise that set his teeth on edge as Ranks worked at gutting the *Fomoria* for her precious high technology. Around him the walls were bare metal in most places; the Jump engines had already been disassembled and removed, as had the non-functioning maneuver engine. Soon the walls themselves would be attacked by the engineering crew, hacking away at the *Fomoria* like leafcutter ants. Someone was speaking to him, and he turned.

“What is it, Engineering?” he shouted over the surrounding din.

“First Rank.”

“Status.”

Engineering appeared to study him closely before he began speaking. “Of the three remaining orbital fighter craft, one has been disassembled planet-side and is en route to the new citadel. Thus far, seven hundred and seventy tonnes of metal have been down shipped to Firebase One.”

“Time frame?”

“A two-and-one-half-hour round trip, First Rank, allowing for loading, off-loading, and refueling.”

That was too much time. Diettinger had overestimated the load-bearing capacity.

“My apologies, Engineering, but I will have to redirect your crews. Begin loading personnel and technical equipment immediately. High grade metals will be moved to the center of the ship; we’ll have to risk them making it intact through the drop.”

Engineering did not look too hopeful, but acknowledged the order. Then he added, “Permission to speak, First Rank.”

“Granted.”

“You require rest, sir. The sooner the better. The fate of the remainder of the Race is in your hands. We depend on your judgment and acuity for our survival.” Engineering’s voice dropped slightly. “Also, the Cyborg Ranks are still a threat to your authority. They will not hesitate to exploit any sign of weakness on your part.”

The concern in his fellow Soldier’s voice was not lost on Diettinger. “At once, Engineering. And thank you.” Although how he was going to get any rest, having just taken a stimulant, was beyond him.

Engineering nodded. “These new orders will keep the engineering section occupied for another seven hours, and if I may extend my conscription privileges, I can keep the rest of the on-board crew busy for at least twice that long. Rest easy.” He left to reassign the crew as Diettinger headed for his cabin.

Once there, First Rank removed his uniform and showered, his first in Haven water. Hygiene was important to Soldiers, and the water brought up from the Haven had boosted morale considerably. Overcrowding was gone, too, since most of the crew and Soldiers were now planetside.

And the insides were being ripped out of the Fomoria, Diettinger thought. He could not go on referring to his ship as the *Dol Guldur*. That was a game for the younger men in the crew. For him, the ship - *his* ship - was becoming a hollow place. The soul was going out of her.

And, he thought, *her commander’s fatigue had him lapsing into maudlin images*. He pulled off his eye patch and massaged the smooth, numb flesh beneath it. Sauron physicians could have replaced the organ easily. But regeneration therapy would have required his removal from active duty for at least a month, and there had been no time. The war had come to Sauron too soon.

Diettinger stretched himself out on his bed and began to use his training to counteract the effect of the stimulant he had imprudently taken. Sauron slept in three levels of increasing rejuvenative power and correspondingly reduced outside awareness. He was determined to get to the third level. He knew he needed it.

At first, his concern for his crew seemed determined to hold his rest at the second stage, but eventually he managed to shrug off enough of the effects of the stimulant to reach full recuperative sleep. This state left a Soldier completely defenseless, and was only used when in a secure area. Thus Diettinger had no way of knowing when Second Rank entered his cabin.

The now-demoted Second Rank of the *Fomoria* waited in the doorway a moment, then closed and locked it behind her. She could see that Diettinger's defensive senses had not awakened him at her entry. *Third-level sleep*, she decided after observing him a moment longer. *Good.*

She sat down at the desk in a corner of the room and waited.

III

John Hamilton moved through his duties like an automaton for the next few weeks, and volunteered for every patrol duty that took him away from Whitehall. He ate in the field or kitchen at every meal. As a result, almost five T-weeks passed before he unexpectedly met Ingrid Cummings face to face in a castle hallway.

"Lord Hamilton," Ingrid said, her voice stiff. Her face was frozen, devoid of emotion. Her complexion was as pale as the first snow outside, and he couldn't help but notice that she looked more beautiful than ever.

"About our night together - "

"What night?" she asked in a voice cold enough to frost a Tamerlane's fringe.

"I wanted to apologize - "

"You fool," she hissed.

John drew back as though physically struck. He'd tasted steel with less bite. "I'm sorry."

"What kind of man are you? Or are you a man?"

Her claws drew blood. John was at a complete loss for words.

"Just leave me alone," Ingrid said, through clenched teeth. He noticed her deep blue eyes were wet.

"I didn't mean to hurt you."

"You! How could you hurt me? What a fool I am."

"I never meant - "

"You never mean anything, will never mean anything...or amount to anything. I was vulnerable, you took advantage. I should have known better."

"It was not that way, really. There was more to it than just...you know what I mean?"

"Is that why you slipped into the night like a thief, never to return? If not why haven't I heard from you since?"

"I'm sorry, I just - "

" - didn't mean a word of what you said. I *was* warned; I should have known better."

His mind was blank. John didn't remember saying a thing, although he did remember drinking deeply on numerous occasions from a flask. He also remembered the silken softness of - *Enough of that! What trouble has my tongue got me into this time? My God, did I actually make some formal proposal?*

"You can wipe that stricken look off your face, John Hamilton. You didn't make any foolish promises you wouldn't keep anyway."

"You impugn my honor, Madam."

The force of her blow knocked him reeling. "You know no honor, only false bravado and enough sweet lies to win a woman's favor. Get out of my sight, before I rip that lying tongue right out of your

mouth.”

She spun around and ran out of the hallway. Before the night they had spent in each other’s arms, he would have cursed her and her breed soundly and went off to a night of sound slumber. Now, he found his thoughts were as inflamed as his burning face. Was it possible he actually had feelings for Ingrid Cummings?

No, *impossible*, he decided. Her lost virtue and his part in its loss was what he decried. He was certain that he could never redeem himself in her eyes, but he needed to do something to redeem himself in his own. *Raymond, my dear departed brother, why did you leave me with all of this? Whitehall is your patrimony. I don’t deserve it. I don’t want it. Any of it!*

IV

“*Fomoria*, this is Groundmaster Helm. Shuttle now departing.”

As in any such operation, in any military, this man’s actual rank was immaterial; while he was the designated Groundmaster, he exercised the power of life and death over anything that moved within his domain, from the lowest ranker to Diettinger himself.

The landing zone was at the northeastern limit of the Valley, directly at the base of the Karakul Pass in whose upper reaches sat the newly christened Citadel. An early attack against the landing zone had been mounted by the cattle and they had suffered disastrous losses. They had scattered and fled, the nearby city stormed and taken. The cattle had not made the same mistake again, and were quiet for the moment.

After First Rank had consulted with Deathmaster Quilland and Breedmaster Caius, he had decided to make the Citadel their permanent encampment, and patrols had begun collecting local beasts of burden. These were used to immediately begin the transshipment of material up into the Pass. All technical gear had particular priority: Eugenics equipment first, data processing and communications gear second, energy supply stations third, and so on.

Groundmaster Helm nevertheless felt the most crucial machinery was being neglected and assigned extra men to its security. Fifty Soldiers stood guard over the vast array of heavy machining and engineering equipment. Helm knew the Saurons were here to stay, and even the best-cared-for weapons broke down eventually. With these tools they could manufacture spare parts for all but the most advanced energy weapons in their arsenal. Helm was not about to let anything happen to them.

Unlike virtually every other Sauron in the force, Helm had not embraced the myth they had used as a ruse in their invasion. When Diettinger had rescinded the order to use the code name *Dol Guldur*, Helm had gratefully reverted to calling the ship by her true name. He didn’t care for myths. And he cared even less for the way most of the younger Soldiers had taken to swaggering in a manner worthy of the pirates some of the cattle probably still believed them to be. Helm thought it bad discipline to allow such behavior in time of war. Had anyone but Diettinger been in *charge*, he might actually have wondered if the Cyborgs might not be their best chance for salvation. However, Diettinger *was* in charge, and that meant Helm could sleep easy. His faith in the First Rank was as firm as his faith in himself as a Ground-master; these mountains would crumble sooner.

The last lights of the shuttle disappeared, and Helm immediately dispatched the last team of bearers to begin driving the load animals - muskylopes, the locals called them - up the Pass to the Citadel.

Cat’s Eye was dipping below the horizon; the wind came up as Haven’s Truenight began, and even Sauron ears began stinging in the biting chill.

Helm consulted his implanted chronometer, now modified to the Haven time cycles for this time of

year and area.

“In five hours the sun comes back up,” he told his relief. “*Fomoria* will be brought down within an hour after that. This whole zone is to be cleared and all equipment and personnel secured at Firebase One or in the Citadel before drop time.”

“Acknowledged.” The relief Groundmaster glanced over the area, taking in the sprawling vista of men, women, and machines, draft animals, electric carts, troopers’ kits, crates, and weapons. A non-Sauron would yet have remarked at how orderly everything was; not a scrap of trash anywhere, not a single piece of gear out of place. The relief was confident the time limit would be easily met.

So was Groundmaster Helm. He handed his terminal pad over to the other Soldier. “Ranker Houten, you are Groundmaster in Command. See you in two.”

Helm saluted and left for the command tent at the edge of the landing zone. It was a measure of his concern that the tent was next to the manufacturing equipment cache.

Stepping through the seal, Helm went over the records of the last shuttle lift, confirmed his notations, and opened the beam to the *Fomoria* above.

“*Dol Guldur* here, Groundmaster,” It amused Communications ranker Boyle to bait the officer with the now widely used name of the ship. Helms’ distaste for the overall masquerade was well-known. “One moment, please. First Rank is in his cabin. I’ll wake him.”

Diettinger came on line a moment later. He appeared displeased with something, but nothing in the First Rank’s tone indicated problems for Helm.

“The Citadel staging area is being cleared of the last of the cargo, First Rank. The landing zone will be ready for *Fomoria* on schedule.”

“Acknowledged, Groundmaster. Check back with me for final clearances. Diettinger out.”

Helm sat at the darkened screen for a moment. He was sure he had glimpsed Second Rank seated at the table in First Rank’s cabin. Helm shrugged. *Not my concern*, he decided.

Forty-Five

I

Albert Hamilton put two glasses of rare imported Scotch whisky - *Glenmorangie*, from the last of three bottles bought from an Imperial trader twenty-one years ago - onto the nightstand. According to the merchant, these had been distilled on New Scotland. It had the fire and smoothness of good whisky so he suspected it was true. He hadn’t been on that rocky mudball in over forty years, when he’d met his departed wife Mary. If it hadn’t been for this god-blasted war, he would have made a pilgrimage to New Scotland and spent his last years in solitude and remembrance.

The Baron felt the chill of Truenight steal through the castle’s stone walls and his smoking jacket to settle into his aged bones. He massaged the aching rheumatism in his left knee, the residue of a wartime bullet, then tottered over to put a few more coals on the brazier. Four hours sleep a night was just not enough. No help for it, though; there was so much to do and so little help.

Raymond, my lost grandson, this was all done for you. Will the war ever end so you can return home?

He heard McGee’s hesitant knock on his bedchamber door. “Come in, Sergeant-Major,” he said.

The old soldier, who had been ten years older than the Baron when he had first served in the Imperial Marines under his command as orderly on New Washington, limped into the room. His thornwood cane

was much in use and even his twisted beard hairs were as white as hoarfrost.

They clasped hands, like old comrades, then the Baron motioned for him to sit in one of two leather easy chairs that faced the charcoal brazier inside the fireplace.

“Mind if I put on some more coals, M’Lord?”

“Go ahead, Sean.”

The coals flared briefly, sending out a blast of hot air.

“Ahhh. Does these ol’ bones good. I’ll miss these times most when I’m called to the Beyond.”

“Hush,” Albert Hamilton didn’t like the turn their conversation was taking; it was too reminiscent of his own woebegone thoughts of a few minutes ago. “You’ll outlive me yet, Sean.”

“Har!” the Sergeant Major began a harsh laugh that quickly turned into a rasping cough. Once he’d regained his breath, he continued. “Not with these lungs, Baron. This Haven cold’ll be the death of me.”

Albert passed a tumbler of whisky to his former comrade in arms. He noticed the tremble in Sean’s hand. *It’s possible he may not make it through this winter*, the Baron admitted to himself. Yet another piece of the past he would lose...and mourn. “ ‘Tis cold, Sean; want a tartan?”

“Aye, Baron.”

He passed a tartan woven in the Hamilton plaid to his old comrade, who placed it on his lap, over his thin shanks. The Baron put one over his own lap and felt the subtle change in temperature. *We old men are like land ‘gators, always looking for the sun and warm places.*

“Did ye see the lass tonight at the dinner table, M’Lord? Her eyes ave been red since we returned from the Kendricks.”

“Yes, I have,” the Baron said. “I also noticed the way Ingrid avoided my grandson and how stilted he behaved in her presence.”

“Ye don’t think!” the Sergeant Major said, with a catch in his throat. “Not the daughter of yer old friend? No, nay our laddie.”

The Baron took a deep draught of the *Glenmorangie*, which burned all the way down past his breastbone. He sputtered for a moment, then blurted out, “You’re damn right I do. Where’s the young ram been for the past few days? Never in his life have I seen him so eager to go on patrol. Curse the boy, damn him all to Hell!”

“Ya don’t mean it, Baron.”

“Yes I do. If he weren’t the Heir...And, it’s not as if we don’t have enough serving wenches to slake any young man’s coals, and that one’s no longer a boy!”

“Aye,” McGee said with a morose sigh. “Bad business, this be. The General, one o’ yer oldest friends and one o’ Greensward’s staunchest allies. And with him away fightin’ the Beasts.”

“Yes, the boy’s timing, as usual, is impeccable. I had hoped that bringing those two together might forge an alliance with the most powerful house on the world. Instead, we’ve offered the General a deadly insult. And broken faith with a friend to boot. A girl under our protection, no less!

“Weren’t the flesh pots of Tampa and Last Chance good enough for the boy?”

“Aye, the lad spends more time in the kitchen than the cooks,” Sean agreed.

“Bah! It’s long past time for him to settle down and raise me a brace of grandchildren. I had such

hopes. It's not as if Ingrid's plain in appearance. Or stupid or ignorant. She's well-educated, smart, a good conversationalist, and, unless these old eyes of mine are playing tricks, she's a woman that could take the chill out of any man's bones!"

"Aye, and it appears she has. And a bonnie lass she is, too."

"I should have insisted on a chaperone, but at their age...? He must have taken advantage of her, why else would he be so scarce? Yet, nary a complaint from her. Praise be, as otherwise, I'd have to set out on a course that we would all regret before it ended."

"Ye don't think she'll tell her father?"

"Not that lady. She knows how to take her licks and still keep her back straight. I wish I could say the same for my Grandson. They could be good together, but this bickering between them must cease."

"But how, m' Lord? Neither of these youngins takes to the bridle. I don't understand young Hamilton. I'd thought he'd changed after leaving Castell, but not so much, I fear."

"He's been restless ever since we raided Castell and bearded King Steele in his own den. He is bored with our provincial life, I fear. I indulged him too much, and Mary did too, bless her, after my son's death. I should have taken a firmer hand to him, but it's too late now."

"Aye. And he is the Heir."

The Baron's hand came down hard on the small rosewood table, knocking the Sergeant Major's empty tumbler onto the thick carpet. He felt his friend's gnarled hand on his shoulder.

"I know, 'twas Raymond ye were groomin' for the barony, but ye'll have to put those thoughts away. He's doin' his duty fightin' the Beast in some far off part of the Empire. I doubt he or his issue will return to Haven in this century, or the next."

The Baron nodded numbly, "I know that in my mind, but not in my heart. I miss my boy. He was a man and a leader. I had hopes he would take my place and fill these stone halls with grandchildren..."

" 'Tis not too late for John, m' Lord."

"McGee, the boy is almost forty T-years old. He's not a lad anymore. It's long past time for him to set aside his childish ways."

"Yer Granddaughter, Matilda, has two fine grandsons, and maybe another on the way."

"Yes, but they're Mazurin's, not Hamiltons."

"Ye could put it in yer will that to inherit - "

"Blast it, I could never do that to her husband. I'm not going to take the man's name away from him. Aram Mazurin has been a good son-in-law and vassal. True, he retired from the Militia to please my daughter. In peaceful times, he might be accepted, but not now. Besides, what would our liegemen say if I passed over my own flesh and blood?"

"Aye.'Tis true. John's well-liked by the vassals, too. Didn't young Hamilton volunteer to take command of the battalion against the big raiding party, Wheelock's Raiders, they call themselves?"

"This blasted Sauron attack has every bandit gang in the Valley up in arms! I'm still not happy how John used his position to pass right over the heads of men who've fought in more battles than he's seen. I don't want him to die, no matter how convenient it might prove."

"M' Lord; he *is* the Heir!"

"You're right. It is time he took his rightful place and led the troops. I fear this war with the Saurons

may be the death of that boy.” “Aye, Baron, or perhaps the birth of the man.”

II

“I believe it not only impolitic for you to be in my cabin, Second Rank, but positively rude. And possibly insubordinate.”

Diettinger had been awakened by Groundmaster Helm’s call, but his first sight had been of Second Rank seated at his desk in the darkened room.

“Permission to speak, First Rank.”

Diettinger waited a long time before he gave it.

“There is a power struggle going on behind the scenes, of which you are only partly aware,” Second Rank said.

“I will deal with the Cyborgs in my own manner, Second.”

“No doubt, sir. But I do not refer to Cyborgs. I refer to Haven.”

If Diettinger had been a cat, his ears would have arched forward on his head. “Clarify.”

Second Rank paused as if gathering her thoughts. “Saurons are soldiers, not pioneers. We are the development of thousands of years of refinement in the martial arts and sciences. Thus, we could only come about within the framework of an ordered civilization, such as the Empire.”

Diettinger almost groaned. Second Rank *was* an historian, after all, with the historian’s need for lecturing.

“Now we have come here: a battle of conquest, with no further battles to follow. Every trooper here has grown up under the auspices of a starfaring military society. Conquer and move on to the next battle.” She shook her head. “Such a lifestyle is gone forever, now. We are here to stay, and as our survival instincts, both natural and engineered, begin to activate, we will adapt our character to the environment far faster than we will our genetic structure.”

“And what do you think will be the result of this adaptation?” Diettinger asked. Despite himself, he was captivated by Second’s line of reasoning.

She gestured with one hand. “You see it all around you. The dominance myth I used has backfired. The Soldiers have embraced it wholly. Faced with an inferior opponent, Saurons previously conquered and left it at that. The possibility always existed that the next foe might be better. But now, there is no longer a greater Sauron social order around us to judge our actions, thus our troops begin to act as, to think of themselves as, pirates. They strut, they boast, they are full of their own superiority. Before, only enemy non-combatants were referred to as ‘cattle’, the term is now being applied to all non-Saurons on Haven. In time, patrols will not return. They will simply establish their own minor fiefdoms among the Haveners. Military discipline will dissipate. What social structure we do have will collapse as we are overcome by the vacuum of authority on Haven.

“In three generations, at the outside, the Sauron Race will degenerate into barbaric warlords, our martial heritage a thing of dim myth. And at that moment, the Empire’s victory will be complete, for then the Race truly *will* die.”

Diettinger could feel the tension in her, and in himself. The only hope for his people was their adaptation to Haven. *But at what price?*

“Do you have a recommendation for avoiding this situation?” Of course, First Rank. I would not be here otherwise.”

“Speak.”

“You are the First Rank, thus you are *de facto* the First Soldier. You must become the First Citizen.”

“Martial virtues are not social virtues, Second.”

She shook her head. “Nor can they ever be. But with you as political and military figurehead, the Sauron system can be started anew here, on Haven, as it was on Sauron hundreds of years ago. A society of militarists: Soldier-citizens, bound by codes of military behavior, dedicated to the propagation of the warrior Race as an ideal.”

Diettinger and Second Rank looked at each other in silence for a long time. Finally he spoke.

“Are you suggesting, then, that I re-establish the dynasty, here on Haven, with myself as patriarch?”

“Such an act would legitimize your status as First Citizen to the Cyborg Ranks, as well as to the troops. They all support you, First Rank, but a world of sheep can be very seductive to young wolves.”

“The establishment of such a dynasty requires issue with Sauron parentage on both sides. All such Sauron females are already assigned to Cyborgs.”

“Come, now, sir,” Second Rank’s voice dropped. “Surely by now you’ve deduced the most obvious reason for my being here...”

Diettinger nodded, then sighed. He wasn’t going to get back to sleep, after all.

III

Lieutenant John Vohlt lay flat against the cold stones of the cliffs that shielded him from the Saurons along the floor and opposite rock walls of the Karakul Pass. His chest ached from contact with the chilling rock through his parka, but the pain was bearable - and it helped keep him awake. The long-range scanner he held to his eyes was the last one in his unit, possibly the last from the entire force General Cummings had sent up into the Atlas Mountains.

By the time Vohlt and his team had arrived, Colonel Harrigan’s forces were ready for their planned maneuver. What little organized resistance there had been to the Saurons in the northern Shangri-La Valley was over. There remained only the diversionary attack before they pulled out of the Valley completely. Colonel Harrigan had not come to get his force butchered in a last desperate act of defiance.

Well, not the entire force, anyway, Vohlt thought with a humorless grin. *That’s our job.*

“You’ll take your men up through here.” Harrigan had indicated Vohlt’s route on a map of the Valley passes, pointing out a small depression in the rocks over the eastern side of the Karakul Pass. “There’s a small - as in hand-sized - plateau here, and you can make camp in the overhang just back from it; it should keep you out of sight of the Sauron opticals and any air reconnaissance they might have.”

Harrigan had taken a bottle of domestic rum and poured a healthy amount into his tea. The command tent was bloody cold.

“You’ll have to pull this up by hand, of course. We can’t risk anything as big as a muskylope being seen.”

Vohlt had nodded. “Can we have the rum, too, sir?” he had asked, grinning.

Harrigan had smiled back, sadly. “Why not.”

Vohlt and five other men had left an hour into Harrigan’s attack. When the “rout” came, they had split off and quickly hid in the passes. Major Seastrum’s company had provided the diversion - make that

'suicide attack' - that had covered their exit. Vohlt lifted a metal capful of rum to his lips and sipped it carefully. "Absent friends," he whispered.

Behind him, the four surviving members of the team were sleeping.

Beyond the bed-rolled men squatted the object they had laboriously manhandled up into these rocks. Harrigan had admitted that it would not defeat the Saurons. It wasn't powerful enough to take out their staging area, and had arrived too late to be used there anyway. The Saurons were on Haven to stay.

But General Cummings believed it would go a long way toward keeping the Saurons cautious for a long time to come. Haven was no major world; it couldn't even stand against one shipload of Saurons. But even an old dog could still bite.

The image in Vohlt's opticals was fading. He shook the device and looked through it again. A little better. *The charge is going*, he decided. He switched it off to conserve the little cell's energy and considered the item in his hands. Light intensifying binoculars with range-finding capability and up to 10 X 120 power magnification, more than you could ever possibly need.

But when the last of the charge is gone, it will be half a kilo of junk, he thought. He set it for simple lens magnification, lowest power cell use, and put it back in its case until it would be needed. Maybe he could rig something up out of the basic lenses after the charge was gone.

He laughed at his trivial plan for the future. He had almost forgotten why he was here.

IV

According to the scouts, Wheelock's Raiders were less than half-a-klick from their position. It was still dark, about an hour and a half before Truesday. John Hamilton had read that nomads didn't like to fight either at dusk or dawn, which might explain why they were all milling around, occasionally shooting off automatic rifles into the sky, like children with strings of firecrackers.

The scouts said the raiders were bunched around campfires, drinking and bragging. Probably building their courage and their bloodlust.

Regardless, it wouldn't be long now before they rushed their position. In their own way, the raiders were as committed to this attack as the defenders were to stopping their advance. A loss of face here would bolster defenses throughout the central valley, and cost the raiders stature as well as loot. John took out his gauss gun and sighted it on the top of the rise, where the first outriders would appear. The infrared scope picked up the boulders' slightly higher temperature. Were the raiders to attack now, they would be sitting ducks.

According to his scouts, there were about five thousand of them, a big raiding party pushed south by the Sauron's consolidation in the north.

Wheelock's Raiders had sacked and burned half-a-dozen small towns and villages in the past week. Fingers of flame had pointed out their passing to the Whitehall's residents. Rumor had it they were nomads from the Northern Steppes driven south by the Saurons, who had little use and no tolerance for them. According to information relayed by General Cummings, the Saurons were turning Fort Stony Point into their primary planetary fortress.

Grandfather was right, he thought, *they are here to stay*.

While this raid had come at a bad time for the barony, being so close to harvest, it was good for him. Planning and preparations had taken him far from the castle and Ingrid's accusing eyes. What had possessed him? Would he ever stop thinking with his prick, instead of his brain? Now, the wall between him and Ingrid had turned into an ice sheet. *It was damned sad, she had such beautiful eyes when aroused - Stop it. I've lost her now, as well as my own self-respect. Maybe the best thing for everyone*

would be for me to fall in battle. An honorable end to a not-very-honorable life...

Stop being so damn dramatic! He thought, disgusted with himself. *I don't want to die, and no one else really wants me to, either. The Baron, Ingrid, his friends, their liegemen, they all need me to do my best.* Well, he would give them that much, at least.

For awhile, John had hoped this small army would pass them by for easier prey. But rumors of Hamilton wealth or hard knowledge of Hamilton guns, or perhaps just desperation for Hamilton food had pointed them to the castle. Whitehall was filled to the bursting, with liegemen, landholders, servants, soldiers, neighbors and anyone else who could claim safety within its walls. The locusts from within could prove as destructive to Whitehall as those outside, were a siege to drag on for any longer than a week or two. No one survived a Haven winter low on foodstuffs.

This was not the only danger Whitehall faced from siege. John Hamilton, as Castle commandant, had been put in charge of the castle defenses. While he knew they could weather a siege far longer than the raiders, it was the end of the growing season and there were crops to be harvested. If the siege went on for any length of time, those crops not lost to brigandage and trampling would be lost to the cold weather. Already they had had their first light snowfall. A long siege would cost more lives in the coming winter than those lost in combat, plus leave the castle vulnerable to disease and winter raids.

The machine guns, given to them by General Cummings, and their own locally made Gatling guns, were set in positions with the best possible fields of fire. In the first few minutes of battle, these would inflict the most casualties and, according to plan, tip the balance to victory. With only eight hundred troops, John knew he did not have enough manpower to halt a determined frontal assault. On the other hand, these brigands had not yet encountered a well-armed and determined foe during their trek down the Valley from the north. The Baron and he had agreed that such an opponent might quickly dim the Wheelock horde's enthusiasm for battle.

The crackle of distant gunfire rent the air once more as Wheelock's army drew courage from their indiscriminate fire into the darkness. The bad news to John was that they evidently had ammunition to waste, which meant they were better armed than the Baron had surmised.

The Hamiltons' second line of defense was the armored tin pots, his Grandfather's men-at-arms, in durasteel plate armor, armed with pistols, lances, and swords. It had taken his most skilled persuasions - and surprisingly, those of Ingrid Cummings as well - to keep the Baron from commanding his Iron Men, as he called them, himself. John doubted they would be of much help, these armored anachronisms, seated on former dray horses.

He had about two hundred of these mounted men-at-arms in reserve, should the raiders breach their position. True, the Iron Men had once proved useful against King Steele's invasion force, but that had been a fluke. John expected little help from the tin pots in today's battle against an enemy comprised mostly of what could only be considered light cavalry. The Iron Men were there to provide a screen for him and any survivors, if the battle took so disastrous a turn as to require a retreat back to Whitehall.

John wondered what kind of man sacked and burned defenseless villages, and then took all their foodstocks and women? A barbarian to be sure. King Steele had been a power-hungry wolf; yet, he had kept to the codes of civilized warfare. According to the refugees, Wheelock knew no restraints. The stories of rapine and torture that followed in the raiders' wake were like those out of Terra's early barbaric history - Genghis Khan or Timur the Lame would have understood this creature.

His brother-in-law held the third force, a small body of some hundred and fifty men. According to the plan, they were to strike from behind once the battle on the ridge began in earnest. It might give the nomads pause, let them think treachery within their ranks, or that they fought two foes. It was a good plan for a force outnumbered five-to-one, but only if events cooperated. Captain Mazurin liked to quote

the Imperial maxim that no battle plan ever survived contact with a Sauron, and apply it in blanket terms to all combat. John hoped this fight would be an exception.

There was a reserve of about three hundred armed men at the castle, mostly older soldiers and retirees, who would have to hold the castle if their plan failed. Cut-off from the main force, he doubted they could hold the castle a week.

If only he had some real guns. It was cannon they needed, but the ones at the castle were all too large and no one had thought to design gun carriages. True, they all had expected things to grow worse as Haven descended into de-civilization, but not so damn fast! The arrival of the Saurons had removed the last restraints that had kept Haven's various factions from taking the final plunge into darkness. Now, instead of working together against the common foe, everyone was out to grab what little they could take by force before the Saurons got it first.

John began to make out the enemy's distant war cries as a scout came bursting over the ridge, riding hell-bent for leather. John's heart began to quicken. He took several deep breaths and checked to make certain his gun was loaded, charged, the safety off. He looked down at his watch - about an hour to go.

"Marshal, shall I give the orders?" Master-At-Arms Cromwell asked, as he turned his head, grinned and sighted his automatic rifle.

"Tell them to aim at the whites of their eyes," he ordered, some half-remembered phrase out of a dusty history book. "Maybe, if we tell them now, it'll sink in and they'll remember when the heathens rush the ridge."

"Yes, sir," Cromwell answered.

Surprise and superior firepower were their twin advantages. He prayed the rumors of bow-shooting nomads were more fact than fiction. If the raiders were adequately armed with rifles and automatic weapons, this battle might prove to be too close to call. The bursts of gunfire they kept shooting off through the night were not reassuring, at all. He began a prayer he half-remembered from childhood.

Forty-Six

I

Groundmaster Houten checked his chronometer and reviewed the night's accomplishment: an hour yet to Truesday, and the landing zone was as bare of people and equipment as if it had never been occupied. He turned and followed the first group of load animals and personnel, winding their way up into the pass toward the Citadel. Toward... *home*,

Diettinger found himself looking again at the face of Second Rank, sleeping on the cot next to him. Even more than most Saurons, he was a realist; a moment's consideration would have told him that it would have come to this, but he had simply not taken the time. Or perhaps he had been determined to avoid the truth of the matter.

As it happened, he seemed the only one in the crew surprised at this turn of events. When, after the long and fruitless argument with Second Rank over her decision, he had finally admitted the wisdom of it, he had called Breedmaster Caius.

"Second Rank is to be removed from the roster of Cyborg mating personnel, Breedmaster. You may list her as officially mated to me hereafter."

"I have already taken that liberty, First Rank," Caius had matter-of-factly informed him. Diettinger had raised an eyebrow.

“Indeed? And would you care to share your justification for such an act with me?”

Caius was utterly blasé. “Your Genetic Preference Rating is A-3, Fertility Rating two, well within the parameters you established for breedworthy personnel. Second Rank’s qualifications and genetic code complement your own very well. Far better than they do those of any Cyborg in the pool.” Caius paused a moment. “I had merely prepared the matchup as a hypothetical one. Purely as a guideline.”

“Of course,” Diettinger said dryly. “You would agree, then, that the mating of myself and Second Rank, and any issue resulting therefrom, would help in establishing a stabilizing influence for our presence here on Haven?”

Caius nodded. “It would have the added virtue of offsetting the considerable influence the Cyborgs have among the troops as well, First Rank.”

Diettinger nodded, smiling thinly. “Yes, something like that was pointed out to me by Second Rank herself. Thank you, Breedmaster. Diettinger out.”

And now he watched as Second Rank - *Althene*, he reminded himself; *her name is Althene* - turned in her sleep, moving towards his warmth. With an awkwardness he sensed he was rapidly losing, Diettinger gathered her into his arms, pulled her close, and closed his eyes.

Better late, he thought, than never.

He woke at the bridge summons signal to find himself alone in the bed. The sounds of a woman in his bath were unfamiliar, yet utterly unmistakable. Diettinger keyed the intercom.

“Diettinger.”

“Groundside secured, sir. Citadel signals ready to receive the *Dol Guldur* whenever we are ready to send her.”

Diettinger scowled. As always when he had slept too long, he awoke irritable.

“Communications, we are about to end the life of what is probably the last ship of the Sauron Home Fleet; pass the word to all ranks that henceforth she will be given the courtesy of being referred to by her true name.”

“Acknowledged, First Rank.” Communications’ tone reflected his humility. “Engineering reports the *Fomoria* ready for drop.”

“Very good. Muster all remaining shipboard personnel in the shuttle bay in half-an-hour.”

“Acknowledged, First Rank.”

Diettinger cut the bridge link for what he suddenly realized was for the last time. He looked at the communications console in reflection for a moment, then turned to see Althene in the doorway to the bath. Silhouetted in the dimness of the cabin by the bright light behind her, she presented a romantic image as old as humankind.

Diettinger thought of the jokes cattle made about Sauron matings; none bore repeating. Cattle would never appreciate that the Saurons were just as emotional as any other race of men; more so, since they were trained not to deny the basic nature of the human species. Non-Saurons saw Diettinger and his people as sexless automata. The prejudice had likely not spared any captured Sauron females in the ruined Home System from rape at the hands of Imperial soldiers.

“Althene,” Diettinger said her name aloud.

He could only sit and look at her for the moment. *This is the price of three decades and more of solitary living*, he thought. The speaking of emotions was a skill that required practice, and he was

sorely lacking that.

“Yes, Galen,” she said quietly, her tone one of affirmation. Cattle would have said it sounded like “Acknowledged, First Rank,” but Diettinger knew the difference.

“It’s time to go.”

She nodded, went to the desk where she had left her kit bag. Diettinger watched her every move. How had he lasted this long, he wondered? Relations among crewmembers on Sauron ships were inevitable, and if the genetic potential was promising, encouraged. Yet in the years she had served with him, not once had he considered his former Second Rank in anything more than a professional light. Perhaps there had not been time. Or perhaps he had known that the first step toward intimacy with this particular woman would be a very, very steep one. And the last.

Now, he thought, *there would indeed be time*. Time for himself, and for Althene. There still was much to do before the subjugation of the world below them was complete, and more beyond that before the Sauron Race was safe and could begin to rebuild. But that would be resolved by his heirs.

No matter. He had done the hardest part, he knew. He had given his people a chance, if a slim one. Time now to keep some small part of his life separate from his duty as a Sauron and a Soldier. And Althene would be that part.

“Ready?” he asked.

Althene nodded.

Smiling, he slid the door open and held it for her as she passed through.

II

It was almost an hour after sunrise before the raiders raised a great howl and began their charge. The first nomad to come over the ridge was completely unlike anything John Hamilton had expected. The man was wearing a brown flight jacket and blue jeans; he could have been one of the Hamiltons’ neighbors, except for the snarl on this face and the hate that glowed in his eyes. He crumpled in a hail of bullets.

“HOLD YOUR FIRE!” shouted the Master-at-Arms.

John looked down at his rifle, it was still at rest. He took it up and aimed.

Six raiders topped the ridge at once and a concentrated volley pitched them from their mounts. The next group to come over was ten times that number and not so easily stopped.

“MACHINE GUNS, FIRE!” cried John, and he watched as the ridge was suddenly emptied of the enemy. A moment later the ridge was swarming with their replacements and the line of fire was so crowded the machine guns were doing double duty. Some of the nomads hid behind fallen horses or used their dead allies as shields.

John shot one bearded muskylope rider right out of his saddle, and was aiming at a second, when he toppled from his mule. Then the ridge top was covered with so many raiders that he didn’t even bother aiming. Their coats and half-armors were every color of the rainbow and only a few were shooting bullets; the vast majority were armed with archaic but potent recurve bows, and shot arrows.

Hundreds died in volley after volley of concentrated fire, but Hamiltons’ liegemen were taking casualties as well. Steven Hammond dropped over with a red kiss in the middle of his forehead and Robert Frisse’s body just slumped over in final repose. Within what seemed seconds - but judging from the carpet of bodies on the ridge front, must have been minutes - the raiders were upon the stone wall that the Hamiltons were using as a barricade.

A logical part of his mind reasoned that the moment they breached the stone wall the melee would occur and then the raiders numbers would give them an incalculable advantage. John turned to the snarling Master- At-Arms, who was using his empty rifle as a club. He shouted, "Call the Iron Men!"

A large caliber bullet pinged off his helmet and he felt dizzy for a moment. He shook it off, grabbed hold of the Marshal's arm and repeated his command.

A film of bloodlust visibly cleared from Cromwell's eyes and he turned to a young trumpeter and gave the signal. There was a loud trumpet blast and for a moment the crazed killing ground froze in front of John's eyes. There were more than two thousand raiders on the killing floor, filling the twenty meters from the ridge top to their barricade. At least half that many casualties littered the stones, some caught in grotesque poses on bramble bushes they had strewn around the wall to stop the raiders' mounts.

The machine guns and Gatling guns were still taking a terrible toll, but as he watched, the nomads overran one machine gun and fought to take another. John knew that if the Iron Men didn't turn them back, the tide of battle would turn completely and he'd be lucky to survive with his skin intact.

Then from the Hamilton right flank came a sight out of a history holo: a mass of gleaming armor charging forward on massive horses, with the Hamilton banner at the fore. He felt his chest swell with pride. The enemy seemed to be caught in a quick freeze as the massive tide of armor and horseflesh slammed into the raiders' left flank. His liegemen, suddenly heartened by the carnage, regrouped and began to fire on the massed raiders who were caught between an iron wall on the left and a hail of bullets in the center. To the right was a sheer cliff face and already scurrying raiders were careening to their deaths over the stone lip.

The raiders coming over the ridge were now stalled, both by bodies and by their own amazement at the sight of a living wall of armored steel. One or two of the Iron Men toppled from their mounts, but most were as oblivious to the hail of bullets headed their way as their mounts were to the bodies they trampled underneath their hooves. Suddenly hundreds of raiders were being pushed, thrust and carried over the ledge. Those reinforcements bold enough to top the ridge crest were met with a renewed and invigorated volley of small arms. The press of battle had turned.

When most of the raiders had been pushed over the cliff, the wall of steel pulled up, wheeled and turned to the ridge top. In the twinkle of an eye, they were over the ridge and down the mild incline. John, along with most of his men, except for a small reserve held there by the Master-At-Arms, ran to the crest to witness a sight straight out of the thousand-year s-gone Hundred Years' War. The armored wave broke the nomads' charge, going through and over the smaller horses, and turned the entire army into rout. Hundreds of bodies and mounts lay tossed in their wake.

The Iron Men were now in hot pursuit, shooting nomads out of saddles with their pistols, riding them down with their lances and cutting them out of their saddles with sabers.

Then out of the gully where they'd been hiding came the Hamilton reserve straight into the face of the fleeing raiders. The main body of the Wheelocks were enveloped and destroyed almost to a man. No prisoners, no mercy. Those who tried to surrender were shot out of their saddles or cut down by swords. Those who tried to flee were run down and trampled. The wounded were dispatched with blades across the throat.

A half an hour later, going over the body-littered ridge, John estimated that there were four to five thousand nomad casualties. Of the thousand or so that had departed, he doubted more than a few hundred would escape their pursuers. As with most battles, the vast majority of casualties occurred when the enemy broke formation and were killed by the pursuing victors.

Still, one had to give the raiders credit; they had left more than a thousand dead on the ridge crest and

at least that many again had been pushed over the cliff. He felt a little lightheaded all of a sudden and forced himself to sit down. The Master-At-Arms came over to report. "We got most of them, Marshal. I don't think more than a hundred or two will escape the pursuit and, with the tales they'll tell we shouldn't have any trouble from the nomads for a long time."

John nodded. "How do you explain their courage? I thought the machine guns would stop them cold."

Workman held up a suede pouch and pipe. "Most of them had kits like this. Their leaders had them smoke hashish before the attack. It's a concentrated resin from the hemp plant. Under the right circumstances and if enough is smoked, the warriors come to believe they are invincible and feel almost no pain during the battle. It's use dates back to old Terra and the Muslim *hashshashin*. We were damn lucky!"

John felt his vision begin to blacken. He felt dizzy, too.

"Marshal! What's wrong - "

III

The corridors of the ship resonated with the sound of their passage; all material that could be stripped from the *Fomoria* was long gone, particularly anything flammable. Diettinger and Althene's boots rang on the naked durasteel decks. Power was at a minimum, so they took the access ladder to the shuttle bay.

Waiting at the bay were Engineering with two of his assistants, Communications, Navigation, and the Shuttle pilot, a Fighter Rank whose name patch identified him as 'Stahler.' Diettinger remembered the name from the Battle of Tanith.

"Stahler." He read aloud.

The Fighter Rank cracked to attention. "Yes, First Rank."

"You were on the mission that lost one of our craft to the locals. I understand the enemy pilot rammed your wingman?"

"Yes, First Rank. Brilliant compensatory maneuvering by the enemy pilot flying an utterly obsolete ship."

Diettinger had been impressed by the news the moment he'd heard it. Stahler's personal rendition did nothing to dampen that earlier regard. Haven evidently bred hearty sons and daughters. All to the good for breeding purposes, but such resolve to fight would bear close scrutiny of those "subjugated" peoples waiting below on the surface of the new homeworld.

"Everyone accounted for, then?" Diettinger asked Engineering, after he had dismissed the Fighter Rank to begin preparing the shuttle for departure.

Engineering nodded, held up a portable computer. "This is our remote piloting device. *Fomoria* has sufficient fuel left to maneuver and brake for most of her descent. After that, the engines will have drained the fuel tanks dry to avoid igniting residual hydrogen in the heat of entry into Haven's atmosphere."

"Excellent, Engineering. You will allow Second Rank - " Diettinger caught himself, then continued, "I beg pardon. You will allow the Lady Althene the honor of guiding the *Fomoria* to her last berth."

Engineering bowed and presented the portable to his former superior officer. Althene accepted it with a murmur of thanks and a look of pure gratitude at: Diettinger.

"Make your goodbyes, then," Diettinger said quietly, scanning the naked, featureless bay surrounding

them. Every piece of equipment and removable metal had been shipped down to the surface; now, even the air was getting stale, life support equipment having left two hours ago on the shuttle's last cargo run. Breedmaster Caius had insisted it would be necessary for decent hospital facilities and breedchambers.

Outwardly an unemotional people, the Saurons were no less prone to pathos than anyone else; they simply resolved such emotions more quickly. Single file, they followed Fighter Rank Stahler up the ramp into the cramped shuttle, found seats and strapped themselves in.

Althene activated the terminal immediately upon securing herself into the acceleration couch. Diettinger, seated beside her, watched as the screen revolved itself into a miniature duplicate of the Second Rank command station on the *Fomoria's* bridge.

In minutes, the *Fomoria* was "dry," her remaining internal atmosphere vented into space. With internal power down, Engineering threw the emergency switch that blew open the now-powerless shuttle bay hangar doors. As the great triangular slabs drifted aside, the moon Haven was directly visible for the first time. Beyond the horizon of the new homeworld hung the colossal mass of the parent planet.

"Cat's Eye," Diettinger said aloud. The gas giant's storm center was aligned almost perfectly with Haven's horizon and the *Fomoria's* orbital path.

The Cat's Eye was looming over the equatorial horizon of Haven, an aroused god peering over an azure fence, its gaze boring directly into the hanger bay of the *Fomoria*.

"... and the warriors of the Tuatha Da Danaan halted their charge, for there before them the Fomorians had brought forth onto the field of battle their mightiest Champion, who was Balor of the One Eye." Althene was looking out at the spectacle, quoting from another myth cycle she had drawn from the history of old Terra.

"And lo, the warriors of the Fomorian host brought forth great bars of bronze, for the touch of iron was anathema to them; and with these bars they prized open the orb of Balor, and from it issued forth the Death, and the army of the Tuatha Da Danaan withered as autumn leaves cast into a forge..."

Diettinger had never seen a deciduous tree; for a moment, he wondered idly what 'autumn leaves' were. *No matter*, he decided. He had the feeling he would soon know both the meaning of the phrase and the reality for which it served as metaphor. *In many ways*, he thought, *the battle has only just begun*.

The shuttle exited the *Fomoria's* hold and took up chase position three kilometers from the great, gutted starship. Studying the data on her screen intently, Althene appeared to see something she had been waiting for. "Drop window approaching, First Rank."

Diettinger smiled. *Once a Soldier, always a Soldier*, he thought. "Take her in, Second Rank."

This time no one reacted to his use of his new mate's former active duty rank; Diettinger's consort was being given the honor of piloting the *Fomoria* on her last flight. It was fitting Althene should fly it with her full rank restored.

Diettinger watched the fire in his new wife's eyes. *Sauron's deathstroke had come with the impact of a hundred Imperial vessels streaming into her atmosphere, raining destruction from on high; Haven was an Imperial world, and now we send a Sauron vessel crashing into her. But to build, not destroy. I wonder, does Althene feel some small measure of revenge at the thought of turning the tables, here? As I do...?*

From their position to the right and rear of the *Fomoria*, the passengers of the shuttle watched as the great ship's maneuvering engines glowed feebly.

“The *Fomoria* will drop aft foremost.” Althene reviewed the drop plans to Diettinger, more in affirmation of her upcoming duties than in any need to instruct the First Rank. “That lets the mass in the engine section absorb most of the punishment and heat from atmospheric entry, as well as deflecting the ionization effect away from the bulk of the vessel trailing. The denser materials of the engines will also burn away more slowly, prolonging the protection of the forward sections.”

Diettinger nodded, his mind already elsewhere. The *Fomoria* would create a huge ionization field as it entered Haven’s atmosphere. He turned to Engineering.

“How much difficulty will we have contacting the surface after *Fomoria* begins entry?”

Engineering considered a moment, frowning.

“As close as we will be to the effect, First Rank, we will be effectively cut off. If you have anything you want to say to the ground forces, you’d best do it now.”

Anticipating this need, Communications had kept a tight beam link with the communications station at the Citadel. Wordlessly, Communications passed Diettinger a handset.

“Diettinger here.”

“Ground Force Commander Quilland standing by, First Rank.”

“Drop is initiated, Deathmaster Quilland. Status?”

“Ground Forces are stationed in the foothills and along the valley floor around the drop zone perimeter. No cattle activity for the past three days. There was a skirmish two days ago with forces from some northern valley fiefdom; very good, very well-led, but they evidently realized the futility of a protracted conflict with our forces.” Despite the wording of his report, the Deathmaster’s voice carried no tone of arrogance.

Diettinger was still uneasy. He felt he had prepared for every eventuality, but his training reminded him that the commander who could do that had yet to be born, as Lucan of the *Wallenstein* had learned at the end.

“Double the watchfulness of the perimeter troops, Deathmaster. The cattle did not have much to resist with, but they gave all they had. Some units have fought to the last man. Such people do not accept defeat readily.”

“Acknowledged, First Rank. Permission to speak.”

“Granted.”

“The entire Ground Force wishes you and the Lady Althene good health and a Long Line.”

Sentimentality like this was inevitable from a swashbuckler like Quilland, but Diettinger was pleased, nevertheless. It let him know the troops were firmly behind him, despite the sometimes overawing influence of the Cyborgs planetside.

“We thank you, Deathmaster Quilland.” Althene smiled briefly, her attention still riveted to the control terminal balanced in her lap.

“We will see you at the Citadel, First Rank.”

“Until then. Diettinger out.”

Forty-Seven

“*Fomoria* entering atmosphere, First Rank,” Althene spoke without looking up. “Three minutes to first braking fire.”

Diettinger looked out the port beside him for a glimpse at his old command. The ship was falling toward Haven like a short sword dropped pommel-first. The aft engine section and the extended drives and launch bays, the ‘hilt,’ were blackening with the gathering heat; seconds later, the anti-corrosive coating vaporized, and the metal beneath began to glow red.

Fighter Rank Stahler paced the big ship down, keeping the shuttle at a safe distance yet easily in range of Althene’s remote control terminal.

“First braking fire.”

The glow from the heating tail of the *Fomoria* was dimmed by the glare of her engines firing. With no oxygen stores aboard her, tons of her remaining fuel were consumed inefficiently as the intakes gathered meager quantities of oxygen from Haven’s thin upper atmosphere.

“Slowing appreciably, First Rank. *Fomoria* now entering stratosphere.” Althene looked up from her terminal to Engineering. “I had some trouble with my signals for a moment.”

“It’s partly range, partly the ionization effect; communications to and from *Fomoria* will be increasingly difficult, then impossible. All the braking telemetry will have to be finished before that happens.”

“Boosting the signal won’t help?” she asked.

Engineering shook his head. “Like trying to shine a dim light through a steel wall, Second Rank. Sorry.”

Lady Althene shrugged, returned to her terminal with a frown, and began calling up more data. In a moment she looked up again at Engineering. “Can we risk leaving fuel in the *Fomoria*’s tanks until after the ionization effect has dissipated?”

Engineering looked at Diettinger, then back to Althene. “I would estimate a sixty-percent chance such fuel would be ignited by the heat. The *Fomoria* would likely disintegrate.”

Althene looked at Diettinger. “Too high a risk.”

He nodded. “Survey tells us Haven is drastically poor in metals in this area. The hulk of the *Fomoria* will be our single greatest asset in the years to come. We can’t be roaming this continent picking up the pieces. Do your best, Second Rank.”

Althene gave her agreement. “Signal’s very erratic. I’m initiating full and final braking fire.”

As the atmosphere of Haven began to surround the shuttle, the world outside the ports was lightening. Away and below them, the *Fomoria* was fast disappearing in a colossal cone of orange-white flame, super-heated gases produced by the ship’s sublimating metal skin being consumed in her entry into the atmosphere.

Althene pressed a switch, and the cone erupted downwards as the last of the *Fomoria*’s fuel went, along with much of her maneuver engines. For a moment, the great hulk became visible amid the flames as its descent slowed almost to a stop. Then it began to fall again into its own mass of smoke and debris. Seconds later, it left the cloud and began falling Havenward once more.

There was enough atmosphere around the shuttle now that they could hear the roar and feel the shock waves of the *Fomoria*’s drop, and Fighter Rank Stahler pulled away slightly, expertly compensating for the buffeting.

For a moment, Diettinger wanted to ask if the *Fomoria* might hit the Citadel itself, but there was really no point in worrying about that. If it happened, they might just as well spiral the shuttle into the ground after it. And, if that happened, it truly *would* be the end of the Sauron Race. Diettinger turned back to the portal, but the *Fomoria* was fading from view in the high cloud cover over Haven's Shangri-La Valley. Stahler was diving the shuttle to catch up with it.

Soon, now, Diettinger thought.

II

Lieutenant Vohlt jerked awake at the touch on his shoulder. Only his training had kept him from crying out in his sleep. *Gods, what a dream!* he thought.

Behind him, Pederson hobbled over from the small stove. His toes had gone black with frostbite in the last two days of waiting, and all their food was gone. If the Saurons didn't make their move soon, Vohlt and his men would die in vain. They were too exhausted, too low on supplies, to make the journey back down the mountain.

Bleary-eyed, he looked up at the man who had awakened him, Turlock, older than Vohlt by a season, younger by two wars.

"There's something coming in, sir. I think the pirates are making their drop."

"They're not pirates," Vohlt grumbled, as he rose up on ominously numb feet. "They're Saur - "

The sight in the sky over the northern Valley shocked him into silence. The high clouds were roiling back in the turbulence of the fireball dropping through them. It seemed to be directly overhead, and primal instinct churned Vohlt's insides as he watched what was beginning to look like a burning city falling directly onto him.

Vohlt needed something to do, he realized, before he panicked. He knew, logically, that the ship was not targeted to hit anywhere near him.

He also knew, logically, that there had been no reason for the Saurons to come to Haven in the first place.

"Is the launcher ready?" he asked, forcing his gaze downward and reaching for the image intensifier gear.

"Yes, sir. Powering up now. Be ready in another few seconds; didn't want to chance the Saurons detecting emissions from the generator."

Vohlt switched the power back onto his field glasses and looked back up at the descending starship. He would never see it's like again. The dateline at the base of the viewfield faded in and out as he put the added strain on its charge of a time-to-impact equation. Three minutes, sixteen seconds flashed along the dateline, then the entire image went blank.

"Well, that's it for these," Vohlt said in resignation, handing the glasses over to Turlock, who put them to his eyes in a perfunctory gesture, scanning the Valley floor from his standing view.

Vohlt walked stiffly to the launcher crew, glad that the weapon they were giving their lives to use was not prone to human weakness.

"What was that?" Deathmaster Quilland had been looking off to the sides of the Valley at the steep foothills surrounding the Citadel, when something glimmered in the morning sun. Just a brief flash, indistinguishable to lesser than Sauron vision.

"I didn't see it, sir," his aide replied.

“Looked like a reflection; metal, or perhaps optics. Scan that zone” - he indicated the relative position on the map before him - “for any emissions; electrical, nuclear, infrared.” *Something is very wrong*, Quilland felt. “Hurry.”

Pederson’s feet were beyond hope, but his hands and brain worked well enough. He adjusted the targeting equipment and nodded to Vohlt.

“Acquisition?” Vohlt asked, tension winning over fatigue in his tone. Pederson nodded.

“Heat signature alone from that sum’bitch is enough to go by. Trying to keep our energy signature low, but I’ve got it just about locked.”

Vohlt checked his watch. He could hear the distant roar of the falling Sauron spacecraft in the not-distant-enough distance. One minute, twenty-three seconds to go.

“Get your final lock-on. Use as much juice as you need to paint it with everything you’ve got.”

“I have an odd reading, Engineering,” Althene spoke aloud. Fighter Rank Stahler was working to keep control of the shuttle against the air turbulence caused by the *Fomoria*; Diettinger’s eyes were locked on the great craft herself. Engineering leaned over to check Althene’s terminal.

“Looks like a radar emission. Too regular to be entry phenomena, too weak to be anything but a reflection.”

Engineering looked up; Diettinger had turned at the word “radar,” and their eyes met.

“The cattle must be targeting the *Fomoria* with something,” Engineering said. Althene’s head went up in shock, but the look on Diettinger’s face was unfathomable. The First Rank nodded and turned back to the window.

“Enemy targeting sensors, Deathmaster, emissions at level nine and locking on target.” The astonishment was impossible for the ranker to keep from his voice. Quilland’s jaws clamped as he grabbed the communications microphone.

“Suppressive fire, immediate, these coordinates,” Quilland spoke rapidly in the monosyllabic Battle Tongue of the Saurons; simultaneously, he pressed the switch that fed the coordinates of the emissions trace to the launcher crews waiting along the rim of the Valley wall.

In seconds, targeting lasers converged on the small space in the rocks Quilland had spotted only by blind luck earlier.

Vohlt saw the small pinpoints of reflected green light on the stones around him and instantly recognized them for what they were.

“Got it, Pederson?”

Pederson nodded. Vohlt looked over the rim of their rock shield and saw tiny white puffs of smoke all along the Valley walls. The Saurons were launching their suppressive strikes on his position. He and his men had seconds to live.

“Okay, men, this is it. Drop the other shoe, Pederson.”

Captain Vohlt took the small canteen with the last of Colonel Harrigan’s rum from its resting place on the rocks and drank it down.

“Guess wrong, you bastards,” he said quietly, as the roar of the missile engine behind him drowned out the high-pitched whine of the approaching Sauron tacticals.

The air superheated with the passage of the missile they had so laboriously dragged up into position,

and for a moment, Vohlt and his crew were warm again, one last time. Seconds later, the Sauron artillery rounds detonated, on target.

“Direct hit, Deathmaster.” The ranker’s voice was quiet, still tense; a great cloud of dust hung over the position the cattle had launched from. A moment later the Engineering ranker added, “Sir, too late. Sensors show the enemy missile still active.”

But Quilland did not need sensors to see the bright needle of light exiting the cloud just made by his suppressive strikes; a silvery arc rising smoothly upwards toward the *Fomoria* and the shuttle, rushing to meet them.

His gaze shot to the readout. Saurons depended little on computers for rapid calculations, and his own mind extrapolated the data it presented. He swore aloud.

The Sauron Race, he felt, was doomed.

“The cattle have charged us, First Rank,” Stahler spoke over the cabin intercom to Diettinger in the control compartment.

“Interdict their missile.” *The wealth of raw materials in the hulk of the Fomoria is indispensable,* Diettinger reasoned. *We are not.*

The shuttle gave a sickening lurch as Stahler maneuvered to interpose it between the hulk of the *Fomoria* and the approaching missile. Engineering’s lap terminal and various other items flew against the wall as the small craft fought the G-forces of the violent maneuver. Diettinger looked away from the view of Haven and at Althene.

“I anticipated this, I’m afraid,” he shouted to her over the roar of the shuttle’s passage, “We cannot allow the cattle to destroy the *Fomoria*” he told her. “Nor to irradiate it with a high-yield weapon, preventing our people’s use of it.” He looked at Althene tenderly, his mate. *All too briefly that,* he thought.

Second Rank was doing something else with her terminal; the image of the *Fomoria* control station on its screen was replaced by one unfamiliar to Diettinger, then she turned it away from his view. He smiled at her sadly.

“Second Rank, you are relieved from duty.” She smiled back at him, shrugged; a gesture that understood all the things that now would never be. “I am sorry, Althene.”

Althene nodded. Engineering sat back. *Too bad,* he thought. *The challenge of life on Haven would have been interesting.* But duty to the Race came first.

Stahler fought the controls to move the shuttle as quickly as possible; the craft was ungainly now and badly out of position. Diettinger had guessed the Haveners might take such an action, but of course he could not know which direction they would launch from, and the shuttle was on the wrong side of the *Fomoria*’s hulk.

Fomoria had perhaps forty-five seconds left to impact; the missile would hit it in thirty. If it had any decent yield at all, the remains of the Sauron star-ship would be scattered over the entire Shangri-La Valley and worse, likely irradiated. The northern Valley was so metal-poor that control of the wreckage of the *Fomoria* would make the Saurons absolute rulers of it, the rest of the Valley, and eventually the entire moon. Diettinger had no choice but to sacrifice their lives for it.

Fighter Rank Stahler’s concentration was locked on the view ahead of him; the approaching missile, the falling, precious *Fomoria*, his own craft’s relative position to both. He did not see the blinking red warning light on his control panel.

EVAAE EVAAE EVAAE ENEMY LOCK-ON EVAAE EVAAE EVAAE

The missile had closed to sufficiently short range that it no longer needed the camouflage of pretending to attack the *Fomoria*. Pre-programmed orders switched on in its brainchip as it activated its own targeting suite, locking onto the shuttle; the *Fomoria* was no longer its prey.

Diettinger reached out for Althene's hand; she had retained her portable computer and picked it up to place it aside. She looked at him for a moment, then smiled.

"I'm sorry, too, Galen." She threw a single switch on the terminal. The shuttle lurched yet again. The control array wrenched itself from Stahler's hands and the small craft dropped into a vertical power dive. The Havener missile lost its target and activated its optional acquisition mechanism. Its true primary target gone, it switched back to the nearest heat source without a friendly transponder and flew on, detonating within the mass of the immolated Sauron starship *Fomoria*, thousands of feet above the Valley floor.

"What happened? What in hell happened?" Quilland had lost all composure at the sight on his crew's screens. The enemy missile was heading for the shuttle. The shuttle! Quilland thought in rage at these hideously crafty cattle. The next instant, the shuttle had vanished, while the missile continued on to detonate within the storm of flames surrounding the *Fomoria*.

The ranker shook his head in confusion. "Hopeless, sir. It looks like something happened aboard the shuttle; she dove off the sensor screens like a falcon. I had to replay the data to tell even that much; I see her on sensors, now, but how could her pilot pull out of a dive like that?"

Over the northernmost expanse of the Shangri-La, the Truesday morning sun was dimmed by the huge pall of the *Fomoria*'s destruction. What meager segments of the ship remained intact fell in blazing fragments to the ground with thunderous impacts. Quilland could see the shock waves rippling out from the impact points, feel the vibrations through the granite beneath his boots.

He gave up trying to see where they all hit. It was hopeless. Nothing remained larger than a cargo container. Quilland sighed. Now his troops would be required to make recovery sojourns into the flatlands of the hostile Valley, exposed to the Haveners far more than he cared to think about. *Dangerous*, Quilland thought, *but not impossible*. He grunted. *Be good for the Soldiers, no doubt, in the long run. Give them more chance to learn about these cattle than their previous pacification raids had allowed.*

Deathmaster Quilland gave a short, grim laugh. "Pacification," he said out loud. The Sensor Ranker beside him looked up curiously.

"We haven't even come close to 'pacifying' these cattle," the Deathmaster told the lower Ranker. His short laugh of a moment before became an open smile. "I doubt that we ever will."

Forty-Eight

I

Stahler, suddenly finding his controls responsive once more, recovered the shuttle with room to spare. The resulting sonic boom over the Citadel brought several messages of congratulations from the Soldiers stationed at the communications outpost there, once they were sure it was not an impact explosion.

Diettinger inspected Althene closely. She returned his stare. Engineering was repositioning himself in his acceleration couch after tending to the body of Communications. Unprepared, the young Sauron had snapped his neck during the violent maneuver, dying instantly.

“Thank you for relieving me of command, First Rank,” Althene was saying. Diettinger turned to her. “On active duty I would have been guilty of disobedience in using my terminal to override Stahler’s controls.”

Diettinger stared. She had kept the lap terminal long after control of *Fomoria* had been lost; now Diettinger knew why. She had been infiltrating the control panel of the shuttle, anticipating Diettinger’s own plan to sacrifice the craft. The strange control panel he had seen on her terminal’s readout had been a duplicate of Stahler’s station forward.

“You knew,” he said.

Althene shrugged. “I guessed.” Their voices dropped as the speed of the shuttle decreased; Stahler was making his final approach for landing.

“The cattle’s choice of our shuttle for a target over that of the *Fomoria* makes little sense to me,” Diettinger said. “The military value of the hulk is unmistakable.”

“They weren’t thinking in military terms, Galen.” Althene spoke quietly, firmly. “They were making a statement, one with little strategic value, but of high importance in terms of morale.”

“Clarify, O Muse,” Diettinger said, laughing in relief. Althene laughed back.

“They must have guessed our commander would be aboard. They can’t eavesdrop on tight beam communications, but they’d be aware of them.”

Diettinger laughed again. “You flatter me, Lady. I cannot believe the cattle would waste a nuclear weapon on me.”

Althene smiled sadly. “I am an historian, First Rank,” she said formally. “And history shows that humanity will not always make the best choice in a seemingly hopeless situation. As often as not, they will make the most satisfying one. This time, they were the same. The cattle wanted to hurt us, even if they couldn’t beat us. The elimination of our entire command structure would have little impact on us under battlefield conditions; underofficers would advance to fill the void.” She shook her head again.

“But this is not a command structure.”“ She took his hand. “It is a dynasty, now. And Haven cannot be a battlefield any longer. It must be our home.”

Diettinger nodded. “Our strength was always our discipline,” he said quietly. “But it made us predictable.” He rubbed his eye patch as he spoke, suddenly weary. There was time, at last, to be tired. “No doubt it was why we lost the war.”

Althene lowered her head in silence. There was nothing to say.

“It may be the single distinction of our existence on this world,” Diettinger spoke again after a moment, “that we are never to really understand our enemies here; nor they us.” He turned back to the window.

II

John Hamilton awoke slowly to the soothing touch of a gentle hand on his forehead. He kept his eyes shut to prolong the pleasurable sensation, a subliminal remembrance of his long lost mother’s touch. He heard the whisper of cloth as the nurse sat down and his head followed the sound. He opened his eyes to see Ingrid Cummings’ blue eyes searching his face with concern.

His heart skipped a beat. It was too late to close his eyes and pretend she wasn’t there. He tried to smile, but it felt all wrong.

“Are you still in pain?” Ingrid asked.

Her words brought his attention back to a persistent throbbing at the right side of his head. He nodded,

not trusting himself to speak; he was afraid he would say the wrong thing again, and that she would leave. Maybe forever this time.

“Doc Glazzer says that you took a large caliber bullet to the side of your head. It didn’t penetrate your helmet, but it bruised your skull and caused a concussion. That’s why you passed out.”

“How long have I been like this?”

“You’ve been unconscious for almost two days. We were all worried. Your Grandfather was here all day. I took night duty.”

“Thanks. It means a lot.”

Her face suddenly hardened, as though she suddenly remembered to whom she was talking to.”But don’t get in your mind that this has changed anything. I’m not one of the servant girls.”

“Please! I know that. I’m sorry.”

She rose up and turned toward the door.”Then don’t forget it. And...,” she turned back toward him.

The overhead lighting caught her profile in sudden relief as she turned, and he felt as if he were seeing Ingrid for the first time. She was beautiful: high forehead, golden-hued brown hair, with a slightly turned-up nose that he would have loved to kiss. His chest felt as if it had taken a bullet! Now, maybe too late, he knew what love was. He thought of the hidden delights that were secreted behind her no nonsense skirt and blouse. His pulse began to race and he felt lightheaded.

“Yes,” he said, his voice slightly trembling.

“I’m planning on leaving as soon as I hear from my father. I know how uncomfortable it has been for the both of us the past week. As soon as an alternative safe house can be arranged, I will leave.”

John wanted to protest, cry out, ”No!” But he couldn’t get the words past his tongue. She would never forgive him for that night of stolen pleasure. Now that he knew deep inside he loved her, he could not forgive himself. He nodded his agreement. Maybe it was better this way.

She turned again and left his bedchamber turned hospital room. Her leaving left an emptiness in the room that matched the feeling of desolation in his heart.

III

General Cummings rose up from his desk, covered with maps and briefings, as Colonel Harrigan was ushered into the makeshift office inside an underground bunker, far from the overhead spy eyes of the Saurons. He clasped the Colonel’s hand. “Well, done. We gave the bastards a bit of their own medicine.”

The tanned skin of Harrigan’s long face was drawn tight against the bones underneath. ”But we missed the target, General! What a waste. We’ll never get an opportunity like this again. A squad of men all gone for a dead starship.”

“True. But there was something gained in the loss, as well. That ship would have constituted the biggest concentration of metals in the entire northern Shangri-La Valley. Its strategic and military value to the Saurons would have been considerable. Now it will take them years to pick up the pieces, even then they’ll only be getting the odds and sods. So perhaps we’ve put a crimp in their invasion plans today, after all.

“As far as their commander is concerned, yes, he was the primary target. What I know about Galen Diettinger, and most of it from military records decades old, is that he is one of the most innovative Sauron commanders ever to helm a man-of-war, Sauron or otherwise. In a Race that breeds Soldiers for

conformity and single-mindedness of purpose, he's practically an anomaly. I wonder if that was why he was sent to this God-forsaken snowball."

"Maybe he was too creative, General. Punishment detail, cleaning up the dregs of the Empire."

"I hope not, because if that's true, we'll see more of these Super Soldiers, as the Cyborgs like to call themselves."

"Super Swine, you mean," Harrigan said. "But this Diettinger is still in command."

"True, but we've singed his beard, so to speak. And, maybe, taught him some respect for Haven's native sons in the process. I'm sure we'll have another opportunity to clip his wings, but that ship of theirs is gone for good. And that, Colonel, will help us in the long run."

Harrigan's face loosened and he even displayed a crooked smile. "You think *we* taught *them* a lesson, General?"

"I have to think that, Colonel. And I have to believe it's just the first of many. It's time we got to work on phase two of Operation Liberty."

"My men and I are at your disposal, General."

"Excellent. I suggest for the next phase we begin guerrilla operations right here," Cummings paused to pick up his pipe and use the stem to point out the mountainous area around Fort Stony Point on the large geographical survey map that covered almost the entire back wall of his office.

"But no one lives there."

"Ha! You're wrong there, Colonel. I've had reconnaissance teams in the area ever since we realized that the Saurons intended to occupy and re-build the old Fort. From what my recon teams have been able to learn, the Saurons are involved in a massive reconstruction of the complex. Like ourselves, they well understand its strategic value; it's the faucet that turns on and off the human flow in and out of the entire northern Shangri-La.

"The moment I realized this attack was not the act of pirates, but a determined takeover of Haven, I considered fortifying and strengthening the Fort's garrison. But, while it's nearly invincible to raiders from the Valley and the surrounding hillsides, it is impossible to defend from above; at least, with our limited resources."

"Then we can't take it back from the Saurons, General?"

For the first time Cummings' face lost its animation. He put the pipe stem in between his teeth and pulled out a lighter. After firing the bowl, Cummings said, "Not in our lifetime. But maybe by our children's children's."

Harrigan's face fell, adding another decade to his dour countenance.

"Don't despair. We're fighting this war for the future generations of Haven so that they will not have to endure the slavery and bondage of these inhuman spawn. Should they ever get reinforcements, that job will be impossible. But my suspicion is that this Diettinger is some sort of rogue, cut adrift from his fellows. He's gone to ground to setup a petty kingdom of his own, and I'll bet a year's pay that there are no reinforcements from Sauron."

"You think the Sauron High Command would exile an entire battalion because they don't trust its commander?"

Cummings cocked an eyebrow and smiled at him through the clouds from his pipe. "Stranger things have happened in the annals of military history. Caesar Augustus started a war from Rome with the

most important general of his day, Marc Antony - who was living in semi-exile in Egypt - for just the same reasons. It almost destroyed the Roman Empire. I could see a case where a High Command - why, perhaps even our own Imperial High Command - would find the loss of a single Battalion to be cheap at the price of getting a charismatic and dangerous leader out of the picture. Can't you, Colonel Harrigan?"

Harrigan felt a chill at Cumming's gaze and the tone of his voice, and the realization came without warning: *Or a charismatic General and his loyal command*, he realized. *Of course...*

Centuries after its establishment as the CoDominium's finest place of exile, Haven was still serving as the best out of the way place in human-occupied space for putting humans - both norms and Sauron - in exile.

Cummings' voice pulled Harrigan out of his revelatory musings.

"I'm sure the Cyborgs that run Sauron are no more happy about potential claimants than is our current Emperor - whoever he may be."

Harrigan cleared his throat, nodded. "Then I'm really pissed that we didn't take out that bastard when we had the chance!"

"That's not our last nuke, Colonel. And, as I said, we will have other opportunities."

Harrigan watched the General for a long time.

IV

Outside and below the shuttle, Sauron troopers advanced in march order to meet their commander, a ritual considered meaningless in a society based on duty and efficiency. But the bright flags of the flaming eye on its night-black field fluttered in the wind of the heights, the embroidered patches gleamed in the sun, and there were other priorities on the troops' minds, now.

Their king is safe, Diettinger realized with an ironic smile. Haven was already changing his people, as it had its own. But perhaps for the better, despite Althene's warnings. Closely watched, firmly guided, the children of Sauron might yet spring forth from this place and set the universe to right.

The cattle had acted in a way unanticipated by almost all the Soldiers. But his dream for the Race would go on, if with greater difficulty after the loss of the *Fomoria*, because one of his Soldiers had thought like the cattle.

Cattle? He thought, as the shuttle bumped lightly on the cleared space in the large outer courtyard of the Citadel. The tower loomed high overhead. From its roof fluttered the red, white and black banner of the lidless, flaming eye.

No, not really.

Some, but by far, not all. Haven had been at war for a very long time, longer even than Sauron and the Empire. Haven's people had fought first their world, then each other, with little experience wasted. Haven had only begun to tap that heritage when she had sent the first of her sons across space to fight on far-flung worlds for the glory of the Empire. There would be few but the best left among the peoples of Haven, now.

"We may make Soldiers of these Haveners yet," he told Althene with a sudden smile.

They stood in the hatch, to the cheers of the assembled ranks below and around them, then they stepped down the ramp and at last felt beneath their boots the surface of the new homeworld.

"As surely as we will make Haveners of ourselves."

Epilogue

I

Assault Leader Bohren watched from outside the command bunker as sentries halted the delegation from Evaskar well outside the perimeter of Firebase One. It was a ragtag outfit dressed in what passed among the locals as their finery. To Bohren they looked like a band of gypsies. It was hard to see any use for them, but the Deathmaster's orders had been firm. "Inform these cattle of their new status. They are former bureaucrats, so they'll have no loyalty to anything but themselves; still, they may turn out to be useful tools."

The sentries trained weapons on the cattle and from a quarter kilometer away he heard the Under Assault Leaders say, "Surrender all weapons and do exactly as we say, when we say, or you will die immediately." *A bit chatty*, Bohren thought, but it got the point across.

The delegation, to give them benefit of the doubt that they were anything other than a lost circus troupe, dropped numerous primitive edged weapons and obsolete slug throwers. The resulting clatter was clearly audible.

"Do not test us," the Under Assault Leader ordered, knocking one of the Haveners off his horse with a slap. "You will follow my vehicle. Any deviation will result in death."

Bohren listened to the cattle bray; if they had any idea of just how good Sauron hearing was they would have stitched their mouths shut. But they were cattle, after all. It was almost amusing at how they connived among themselves, as if they could curry or buy favor from their new overlords. *If they only knew*, he mused. *They are our tools now. Poor ones, perhaps, but ours nevertheless - and ours, alone.*

Bohren returned to the command bunker before the delegation came into normal human sight. It was best if they believed him completely disinterested in their future welfare. It was very close to the truth. Nor did he like long negotiations, especially not with cattle.

The Groundmaster came out of the bunker when the lead Walmire tank arrived. He examined the delegation with studied contempt, noting their pathetic attempts at finery. "Do you represent the city?"

"We do," answered a high voiced man of Asian background. Bohren dismissed him as a eunuch.

"And we are here, good sir, to - "

"Lady Althene Diettinger authorizes me to say that your city will now be known as Nurnen. All weapons must be surrendered, and a curfew is now in force, violators being subject to summary execution. City government shall be transferred to Sauron administration forthwith, and full cooperation is required. Any resistance will be met with our wrath. That is all."

"But...why?" a woman delegate asked.

He turned and went back into the bunker. He listened with amusement as the departing delegates worried over the meaning of the new name of the town. No talk of resistance, only a kind of simian curiosity. Former Second Rank Althene was quite brilliant in her way; she had supplied the name as well as the plan. She truly was an excellent match for First Rank Diettinger.

II

John Hamilton saw a large dust plume rise over the upcoming slope. He reined his mount over to the side of the dirt road, next to a stand of oak, and slipped his carbine from the saddle holster, levering a shell into the chamber. His four Guardsmen dismounted, and followed suit.

John was relieved to be out of the constricting confines of Whitehall, at last, where he had been forced

to live side by side with the woman he loved but could never possess. His head still ached from his concussion, but other than that he was as fit as ever - on the outside.

While his patrol was still within Hamilton territory, there had been more people on the road today than at any time since the troubles with Castell City. Many of the dispossessed had lost their homes when Wheelock's raiders had sacked their towns and were headed to Greensward for protection and housing. Some were refugees from cities, like Tampa or Redemption, that had been bombed by the Saurons, while others were fleeing from bandits or worse, unleashed by the breakdown in what had passed for law and order in the Central Shangri-La Valley.

All were looking for refuge or housing. Most of them would be turned away. Other than machinists and trained craftsmen, his orders were to turn everyone away.

This band was probably friendlies. The border guard wouldn't have let a large group pass without signaling Whitehall. Still, these were unusual times. It was possible that anyone sent from Whitehall to notify him might still be on the road or been taken prisoner.

When half-a-dozen all-terrain vehicles, bristling with rifle muzzles, topped the rise, John felt his pulse quicken and his trigger finger tighten. Then he recognized the markings of the Fighting First and raised a hand in greeting. It was hard to imagine any other outfit on Haven not under Sauron domination with that much ordinance and rolling stock.

"Hello, John," a familiar figure called, as he drove the lead vehicle over to the side of the road, next to John's horse. The stocky Militiaman stepped out of the vehicle and held his hand out for a handshake.

"Major Hendrix! What are you doing out here?"

"Reconnaissance and survey. General Cummings wants to know if there's been any Sauron presence in this area."

"Not yet. Their ship made a flyby just after the initial attack. Not many targets out here, and fortunately they overlooked Whitehall."

"Good. Just what the General expected. This is a big Valley for just one ship." Hendrix paused to take a drink out of his canteen,

"Then there is only one?"

"So far. We've lost all of our imaging equipment and we have no way of communicating offworld, but the level of Sauron activity is about right for a single battle cruiser. About the only good news that's come out of this fiasco."

"How's the fort?"

"Fort Kursk was evacuated, with a token force left behind. The Saurons overran the defenders. They occupy it, for the moment. The General's abandoned Fort Fornova, too, and is keeping on the move with the Falkenberg Irregulars, to keep the Saurons from discovering his position. He's looking for a new staging area, far enough away from the Sauron landing site near Evaskar to go unnoticed, but close enough to do some harm."

"What about the Fighting First?"

Hendrix smiled. "The Regiment is still dispersed or in hiding, waiting for the counter-offensive. After that we'll need a bolt hole."

"Whitehall would be perfect. To the Saurons it's just another old stone fortress, so they're not likely to come back anytime soon. We have enough troops to be useful."

“That’s what I told the General before he left for Fort Fornova. He didn’t agree. It’s too far from Evaskar for his plans. He’s in command of the Falkenberg Irregulars for the moment; Colonel Harrigan was killed yesterday by Saurons in an ambush.

“I caught a ride out of Fort Kursk with a unit going to help in the evacuation of Redemption. We were too late. So I thought I might stop by for a chat with my old friends.

“It’s my opinion, and that of some of the other junior officers, that the Irregulars are going to have a full-time job just keeping out of the frying pan, that close to the Citadel - that’s what the Saurons are calling old Fort Stony Point. Whitehall would be an ideal headquarters for the Fighting First. Just because the Saurons have established their home base in the north doesn’t mean we should abandon the Central Valley. With your help, I’m sure we can convince the General.”

“Is the General planning on coming back?”

“Oh, yes. He’s got something up his sleeve, back at Fort Kursk. Nobody knows what. General Cummings gives out information on a need-to-know basis only. Keeps leaks to a minimum.”

John nodded, thinking to himself. *If the General used Whitehall for the resistance, there wasn’t anything the Baron could do about his joining the Militia.* Of course, that meant there could be problems if Ingrid talked to her father, but he couldn’t see her doing that. She was not the type to run to daddy.

“Anything wrong?”

“No, but the Baron might need some convincing. I think he wants to sit this one out.”

“Ha, fat chance. No one on Haven’s going to sit this one out. There are no neutral parties in this war.”

“I agree, Major, and pledge my support.”

“Excellent, Lord Hamilton. I’ll go on ahead and talk with the Baron. We can share a drink later at Whitehall.”

III

Deathmaster Quiland was pleased. The fortifications at the Citadel were proceeding tolerably well. They’d even had time to set up proper quarters for First Rank and Lady Althene, when they had arrived; thankfully, unscathed from the *Fomoria* disaster. The loss of so much valuable mass was not critical at the moment, but would slow down future efforts at expansion. Already, teams of Soldiers were scouring the countryside surveying recoverable pieces of the former starship.

One of the squads had accidentally stumbled on a party of Militia men that had evacuated the former Imperial garrison at Fort Fornova. If the documentation was correct, they had bagged and killed the commander of the Falkenberg Irregulars, a Colonel Nelson Harrigan. Too bad it hadn’t been the wily fox himself, General Gary Edmund Cummings, the commander of the First Haven Volunteers. That would have been a kill that would have brought a smile to even Cyborg Koln’s impassive countenance.

As the Deathmaster peered out his casemated lancet window, he could see a large, twisted hunk of metal on the bed of a large transport being driven through the Karakul Pass. It looked like a section piece from one of the *Fomoria*’s hanger bays. Behind it followed a horse-mounted band of merchants, wearing the festive rags that passed for garments in this sector of the Shangri-La Valley. He was pleased to see that the locals were returning to pre-invasion activities so quickly. It boded well for the local economy.

Evaskar had fallen with predictable ease, almost a textbook assault. The city had already been re-christened Nurnen, and all traces of the former name were being eradicated. The local cattle were

cowed, and already scrambling to curry favor from their new masters. There were reports of small arms fire as the various political and ethnic factions competed among themselves for advantage. This was not discouraged as long as the fighting was kept off the streets and no Saurons were in the line of fire.

Let the cattle cull themselves, he thought with satisfaction. *It will save the Race valuable ammunition and improve the breed overall.*

Transports had already brought up representative breeding stock to the Citadel. Holding pens for thousands of fertile local women were already finished and filling up at Firebase One. The seeds had been planted for long-term occupation. Nurnen would prove a useful adjunct to the new Sauron capital.

Best of all, though, are these cattle. They had already mounted several effective, if limited, assaults on his outlying positions. Two Soldiers had been lost, and several weapons, in exchange for only a hundred and sixty-two enemy. Quilland knew that such a ratio meant these cattle showed promise. Haven indeed bred well.

Quilland favored the cattle with a thin smile. Perhaps his favorite example of their character had come only an hour ago. Assault Rank Bekker's squad had almost been wiped out by his own command. The cattle had taken a Sauron radio from Dyksos' unit and called in mortar fire from the Sauron RAM positions on the heights, into the Sauron team that was assaulting their own position!

When the deception had been realized, only barely in time, all the cattle had escaped. One of his Rankers had asked Quilland if the cattle here could possibly be that good.

It would appear so, Quilland thought.

IV

"For God's sake, Baron! Let it go?"

Baron Hamilton of Greensward, smiled thinly and nodded at the younger man seated before him. "Yes. Let it go, Major. If it would help exterminate the Saurons, I would personally burn Whitehall to the ground. It wouldn't though." *Nothing will, but I can't say that to one of Gary's officers.*

Major Hendrix looked around the paneled study, with its high ceilings and ornate tapestries. Such elegance had always been rare on Haven. Now, after the widespread destruction brought by the Saurons, it was unique. "Saurons. Why us?"

"I've wondered that myself, Major. We're at the arse-end of the Empire. Maybe that has something to do with it. Maybe the Saurons are losing the war, and this shipload of the bastards is trying to hide."

"God, I hope so," Hendrix said. "And the Fleet will be back. It will."

"It might be a while." *And probably not*, he thought to himself. *Certainly not in your lifetime or your great-grand children's.* "Meanwhile we hang on, and ruining Whitehall won't help."

"I don't want to ruin Whitehall, the General wants you to take our refugees. And maybe act as headquarters for the Irregulars. That would give us a strong presence in the Central Valley, far from the enemy's stronghold."

"Same thing, really. If we take in everyone you send, we won't last a season. As an outpost, we'd surely attract Sauron notice. Better that a few survive, than none."

"And what do you think you accomplish by the mere act of survival?"

Hamilton shrugged. "Possibly nothing. But I can try. I want to save Whitehall, because losing it won't make any difference. If we survive the invasion we can rebuild. Major, if every one of those monsters drops dead tomorrow, we will still be generations away from civilization!"

“But the Empire - ”

“Major, I doubt the Empire will return. Ever. They abandoned us before the war heated up. Even if the war is over now - and we don't know that - Sparta has its own rebuilding to do. They don't care about us. Never did, really.”

“Then you won't help us?”

“Major, I *can't* help you, not with anything that will do you any good. House Hamilton can't even meet obligations to our own. We're turning out relatives of our own liegemen. Do you think I like that?”

“No, of course not - look, can you do anything? Anything at all?”

“I can take in your family. Yours and the rest of the General's. No more. And I can send you a hundred volunteers, reasonably well-supplied and equipped.”

“No more than that - ”

“You can't feed more than that,” Hamilton stated flatly. “Well-supplied' means they aren't starving. It doesn't mean we can spare a month's rations.”

“Damn it, that's no help at all! Your grandson promised us more - ”

“John does not command here,” *There. I've done it. Disavowed my grandson's pledged word. And there may be hell to pay for it.* Hamilton suppressed a smile as he watched Major Hendrix. It was all too easy to see what Hendrix was thinking. Hamilton's Whitehall Guard was scattered, and Hendrix had his own platoon of escorts. And John had already promised. One bullet, and there would be a new and more tractable Baron at Whitehall. *I think he may try it.*

Hamilton whistled, a short trill tone. One of the elaborate panels opened to reveal three Guardsmen. The sergeant touched his cap in salute. Hamilton nodded in acknowledgment.

“Yes, Baron?” the Guards sergeant asked.

“Please send word to my grandson that I wish to see him.”

“Yes, sir.” The panel closed again.

Hamilton sighed in relief. Good. Hendrix didn't have time to do anything he needed to apologize for. Maybe he wouldn't have anyway. *Maybe.*

“If that's all you will give me,” Hendrix said.

“All I *can* give you, Major,” Hamilton corrected.

“Can? I don't agree, but I suppose I should take what I can get.” He hesitated. “Also, I will take you up on your offer - I will be sending you my family, Ruth and the two kids. The General, well... his wife and daughter, Helga, were in Castell during the first strike.”

“Please give the General my condolences. Your family is quite welcome.” The Baron paused to look the Hendrix straight in the eyes. “I will keep them as safe as I keep my own. And the General's youngest daughter.”

He wasn't sure he could protect Ingrid from his grandson, but he could guarantee they would never go un-chaperoned again.

“Thank you, sir. We...well, we have a plan.”

“I'd be amazed to find you didn't. I hope it's damned successful, and damned bloody. Go kill some Saurons for me,”

Cyborg Rank Koln stepped forward onto a strip of naked stone which jutted out from below the walls of the Citadel. Here, in this lonely, windswept, frigid place, he was suspended between two worlds. Behind and above him were the sweeping spires of the castle whose towers soared above the valley floor, in graceful arches which belied their strength, but spoke eloquently of their purpose: Nothing moved between the valley and the steppe lands beyond, without the approval of those who held this fortress. And below, the debris-littered northeast expanse of the valley the natives called the Shangri-La, where the scattered fragments of the *Fomoria* still glowed with enough residual heat to be visible to the infra-red range of his genetically augmented vision. The pall of irradiated smoke above the Shangri-La Valley remained stubbornly anchored to wreckage against the wind, a last mark of the great ship's passing. The cattle had struck a blow - futile, of course, but impressive nevertheless.

From even higher than the towers overhead, the sonic boom of First Rank Diettinger's shuttle had fallen on Koln's Cyborg ears to a faint sigh. Standing there on the brink of that precipice, at the terminator line separating the shadow of the mountains behind him from the sunlit valley before, Koln felt as divided as he looked. He was filled with a sense of impending conflict and yet, typically Sauron, even this was cleanly divided into two clear choices: to turn and re-enter the ranks of the society which must now be built? Or take a single, brief step out into that abyss that began ten centimeters from his boots and ended more than a thousand feet below. Cyborg Rank Koln sighed again, dispiritedly.

Alas, I would probably survive such a fall no worse than crippled. Koln's jaw clenched at the thought of such an injury, for surely it was now beyond the capability of such meager resources as the Saurons had brought to Haven to repair him. And then he would truly be a slave of the Breedmasters, who would only be too happy to have at their disposal - literally - a Cyborg whose only value would be his seed.

Koln made a turn so sharp as to swing half his bulk out over that vertiginous gulf, then left the precipice and his own fatalistic musings behind. He began walking up the steps to the landing area, to meet the First Rank's shuttle. Although he was still six levels below them, the cheers of greeting from the Soldiers assembled to greet the First Rank were already a roar; and growing louder.

Climbing the steep, narrow paths cut decades before into the stone of the mountainside, Koln reflected that while he had turned away from one brink, it would not be long before he must come to another. And the step he took then would have far greater consequences than the death of one lone Cyborg.

The End