

*The
Star Conquerors*

To Rosa, and to Michael
who will reach the stars
in more than imagination.

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Chapter 1 *The Loss of Scandia*

I FIRST met Geoffrey Knowland in the last hours of the Siege of Scandia. Of course, I did not know then who he was, or what he was to become.

The Saurian troops of the Masters had struck deep into the Terran Confederation, bypassing several planetary systems at the frontier to attack Scandia. They had appeared unexpectedly in great numbers and seized the three outer planets of the Scandian system before the Terran Star Watch could rush its forces to the area.

Now, for three weeks the battle had raged for the last remaining planet, Northholm, the only Earth-like planet in the Scandian system.

Despite the Star Watch's arrival and the savage defense by the Scandians themselves, the nonhuman warriors of the Masters remorselessly pressed their attack. Their space fleets gradually battled the outnumbered Star Watch ships back away from the planet so that the Saurians could land troops on Northholm at

will, while the Terrans' attempts to reinforce their garrison were being throttled down to nothing.

I recognized the pattern only too well.

On the twenty-third day of the siege the Star Watch Frontier Coordinator ordered me to lead an evacuation team down to the planet and rescue as many humans as possible.

The battle was lost.

I took three ships and headed for the last remaining enter of organized resistance. We picked our way through the Masters' patrol ships without much difficulty and approached the embattled planet on the night side.

I had never seen Northholm before, but it had been described to me as a green flowering world, one of the most beautiful in the Terran Confederation. Now, as our ships glided across the night side of the planet, all we could make out on our viewscreens was the angry red of flames licking up out of the darkness.

When we crossed the terminator into the daylight, our attention was immediately focused on the battle.

About ten Star Watch planetary landing ships were still standing on the plastistone disc of the spaceport. Ringed around them was the shimmering dome of their energy screen which often flared into patches of brilliant red and orange as the Saurians' force-beam projectors fired at it.

Around the erect ships were dozens of smaller aircraft and groundcars. Most of the spaceport buildings were demolished, and several ships of various kinds were blasted and smoking, even inside the energy screen. Outside the screen, the once-green meadowland

was as bare and pockmarked as Terra's own moon. Hundreds of Saurian vehicles and guns were drawn up around the Terrans as we flashed into view.

Flying through an energy screen without getting yourself vaporized, and without letting an enemy follow you inside is a trick requiring careful timing and long practice. The young Star Watch pilots of our three ships were all veterans, though, and we zigzagged through the Saurians' ground fire and slipped through openings in the screen at a prearranged signal from the men inside.

All three of our ships landed safely, although the last one was damaged by an enemy missile just before the screen closed again behind it.

I was met as soon as I set foot on the ground by a young officer.

"I am Alan Bakerman, special adjutant to the Frontier Coordinator. I have been sent to organize a withdrawal of our forces," I said. "Will you please take me to your commanding officer?"

He tried not to show his feelings, but his whole body seemed to stiffen a little. He was a native Scandian, I realized. He was grimy, his uniform tattered, and his face looked as though he had not slept or eaten in days. But this was his planet, and he was fighting for it. Here I was, a stranger, an obvious alien, telling him that he must abandon his home.

"I'll take you to the commander, sir," he said curtly.

He started walking briskly around my ship, toward the other Star Watch vehicles. I had to half-trot to keep up with him, since he was head and shoulders taller than I and covered three of my normal strides with his every step.

The energy screen seemed to make the sky sullenly gray, except for the flashes of brightness in the areas under bombardment.

"How is the screen holding up?" I asked, mostly in an effort to slow him.

He turned his head my way but did not slacken his pace. "It's all right, sir," he said. "Absorbs all the energy blasts the lizards have squirted at it so far. About all they've been able to do is . . . FLAT!"

He hurled himself at me, knocking me to the ground with his own heavy frame right on top of me. Just as we hit there was a ground-rattling explosion. Clods of dirt and debris pelted down on us.

After a few lifetime-long moments, he got up and offered me a hand.

"Sorry, sir. Enemy missile."

I struggled up with his help and took a deep breath to see if his weight had cracked any of my ribs.

"Quite all right. You probably saved my life. Thank you."

"It's just as I was about to say, sir," he resumed his walking, but at a slower pace, "the only thing the lizards have been able to get through the energy screen is a missile once in awhile. They overload one small area of the screen with force beams, then smash a missile through. The screen can't absorb all the radiation and still resist the solid body."

I nodded. And it is only a matter of time until they bring in missiles with nuclear warheads to wipe, out the whole area, I thought.

"Here we are, sir," my guide said, pointing to one of the spaceships.

We walked to the tail fins and he grasped a rung of the battered ladder that dangled from the ship's lowest hatchway.

"All the elevators are stopped, sir, so they can put full power into the energy screens."

"Screens?" I asked.

"Yes, sir. Each ship has an individual screen to protect it against the missiles. The screen runs along the ship's hull, sir."

"I see."

We climbed up the ladder, were admitted through the hatch, and clambered through several levels of decks before reaching our destination. All the Terrans we met on the way looked much like my guide: tall, big-shouldered, thick-chested, dirty, tired but undefeated fighting men. They all towered above my modest height, and they seemed to regard me as something of a curiosity.

Finally, we walked down a short passageway and stopped at an unmarked door.

"In there, sir."

"Thank you."

I opened the door and walked in.

It was an austere little compartment with a viewscreen on one wall, star charts and planetary maps on the others. A rumpled bunk, a closet, a small, bare desk, and two chairs were the only furniture. There was another door on the wall to my left.

Before I could decide whether or not to sit down, this second door opened and Geoffrey Knowland stepped in.

I was first struck by his youth - he was probably

no older than twenty Earth-years. He wore a gray fatigue uniform without insignia, so I could not tell his rank.

He was small for a Terran, not much bigger than I. But he crackled with nervous energy . . . just having him stride into the room like that seemed to trigger a mental shock wave in me.

Beneath the tenseness of the strain he was under, his features were thin and delicate-almost feminine. But his piercing dark eyes were alert and intelligent.

"I'm Geoffrey Knowland, Junior Staff Officer," he said, waving me to a chair.

"You are in command here?" I blurted.

He nodded as he sat at the desk. "The Planetary Commandant was killed six days ago as we retreated to this position. I'm the only J.S.O. left who's still on his feet . . . aside from the native militia, and they're under Star Watch jurisdiction."

"I see. . . . Uh, my name is Alan Bakerman."

"That's a Terran name, but you don't look Terran."

"I am not," I admitted. "I am Rh'khour'mnin . . . my name in my own language is Ahgh'loun B'khrom'mnin . . ."

He laughed. "Okay, Alan Bakerman it is. No Terran could pronounce your language."

"I fled my horneworld last year and sought refuge in the Terran Confederation," I explained. "The Star Watch Frontier Coordinator accepted me as a special adjutant, since I am familiar with some aspects of the Masters and the Saurians."

He eyed me quizzically. "The Frontier Coordinator? Is he here?"

"We arrived with a squadron of ships yesterday, but were unable to reach the planet."

"The Saurians' fleet stopped him?"

"Yes. It was a vicious battle. We lost about a hundred ships of all types, and they must have suffered even greater damage. But they proved we would be unable to reinforce Northholm further. So I have been sent to organize a withdrawal."

"How soon?"

"Immediately," I answered.

He ran a hand through his black, close-cropped hair. "Well, I'm afraid we can't evacuate immediately."

"But you are ordered to!"

He shook his head. "Sorry, but it will take several hours - maybe longer - before we can leave this planet."

I could not believe it.

This young, high-strung junior officer was telling me he would stay on the planet. Surrounded, outnumbered by at least ten to one, he still planned to hold his position.

"But why?" I asked.

"Two nights ago I sent out a volunteer corps of Star Watchmen and Scandians to create as big a diversion as possible behind the Saurians' lines. They're now fighting their way back here. We can't leave until they return."

"Your orders did not authorize you to counterattack the invaders. It's suicide!"

He smiled wearily. "Since the Planetary Commandant was killed, we've received no orders except to hold on as best we can. Well, the only way we've been able to bang on to even this little patch of real estate

was to send the diversionary corps out to stir up a ruckus in the enemy's rear. Those men are all volunteers. I told them that if they could fight their way back here, we'd be waiting for them. So I can't upship and leave them."

I stared at him. He was deadly serious.

"But don't you realize," I tried to persuade, "that the Saurians are already firing missiles through your defensive screen? It's probably only a matter of minutes before they nuclear-bomb the whole area"

"They've already tried it," he said calmly. "That's why we have the individual screens on each ship. We can withstand anything except a direct hit by a fusion bomb."

He stood up and paced across the cabin. "Still, you're right. It's only a matter of time until we're wiped out. But I've given my word to the men I sent out. We'll have to sit tight until they return."

"If they return," I corrected.

"Yes," he answered quietly. "If."

He stared at the blank viewscreen for a long moment, his dark eyes so intent it seemed as though he were trying to see through the ship's hull and out across the horizon to where his men were fighting.

"Well," he said finally, "we might as well go up to the control deck."

"Certainly, Officer Knowland."

"No need for such formality," he smiled. "Call me Jeff."

"Very well. If you will call me Alan."

"Sure, Alan. So long as I don't have to pronounce it in your language."

We left the cabin and climbed up a narrow ladder-

way to the control deck. It was a compact maze of viewscreens, instrument consoles, and automatic computers, all bathed in the eerie greenish glow of the ship's emergency lighting system. In this perch, high in the nose of the ship, Jeff had his energy screen controls, missile trackers and force-beam projectors, communications equipment, and navigation and piloting instruments all at his fingertips.

The viewscreens circling the compartment gave a panorama of the scene outside: the Star Watch ships, the shimmering haze of the energy screen, the flashes of enemy force beams.

There were about twenty men at the various stations of the control deck, and Jeff made the rounds of them all, calling each one by name, talking to them calmly and quietly, easing their tensions, yet at the same time checking on every detail of the situation around us.

But as time dragged on I grew more and more anxious.

"Jeff, how long are you going to wait for your volunteers?" I asked.

He glanced at his wrist watch. "Give them another two hours."

"Two more hours? You were supposed to evacuate this position almost three hours ago. How long do you think the Frontier Coordinator can hold his fleet in waiting for you?"

Those dark eyes lanced at me. "He'll wait. If he were in the same position he'd do the same thing."

"Technically, you're disobeying orders," I said.

Jeff made no reply.

The clock's hands crawled with agonizing slowness,

while the Saurian missiles landed more and more frequently inside the energy screen. Two of the standing ships were hit, but only slightly damaged. The screen itself was flaring into deep blues and violet now, as the invaders' force beams steadily rose in intensity. Soon, I knew, the screen would buckle into dead black and collapse under the terrific drenching of subnuclear power the Saurians were pouring into it.

"Slimy lizards," I heard Jeff mutter as he watched the wavering dials which showed the strain the energy screen was under.

"They call themselves the Family," I said absently.

"What?"

"The Saurians . . . the Masters' troops. Isn't that what you were talking about?"

"Yes."

"They stand erect on their hind legs and tail . . . about your height. Their forelegs have clawlike hands, although they run on all fours when excited. They consider themselves a single family," I explained, "and every member of the race is related to every other member. Their original home was in a globular star cluster near the center of the galaxy - but they have been serving the Masters for so long that they have established themselves on millions of planetary systems."

"How do you know so much about them?" Jeff asked.

I could not tell if his expression was simple curiosity or suspicion. Several of the other men within earshot had turned toward me, and they all seemed to be openly hostile.

"I told you I was Rh'khour'mnin," I said.

"But you're still a human," one of the men countered, "not a lizard."

"Yes . . ." I had gone this far, I thought, I might as well tell them the rest. "But I was raised by the Family."

"Raised by them?" Jeff echoed their single thought. I nodded.

Just then the communications tech leaped from his seat. "Hey! It's them! It's the volunteers . . . they're on their way in!"

Jeff reached the communications console in two strides, ahead of everyone else.

On the screen was the weak, flickering image of a red-haired, square-jawed Star Watch officer.

"We're being closely pursued . . . if you let the screen down, they're gonna jump right in with us"

"Don't worry," Jeff snapped. "We'll take them in with you and close the screen behind you again. Then we'll fight them off and you can board the ships."

The image on the screen distorted wildly, then went dead.

"Enemy interference," the communications tech mumbled, as his hands flicked over the controls.

The officer's picture returned to the screen, but his voice was drowned out by screaming, wheezing static. He seemed to be saying something of great urgency.

"Come on, establish audio contact." Jeff clenched his hands on the back of the tech's seat.

". . . not lizards," the officer's voice broke through. "Do you understand me? The troops following us are not lizards, they're humans. Humans fighting for the Masters."

The screen went dead again.

"No use." The tech shook his head. "They're too close to the lizards' jammers now."

"Humans fighting for the Masters," Jeff repeated.

"I . . . I have never heard of human troops serving the Masters," I said.

Several of the Terrans were watching me uneasily.

Jeff looked at me for a long moment.

"Well," he said abruptly, "we don't have time to worry about that now."

He turned back to the communications tech and began dictating orders for embarking the returning men:

"Ships three, four, and five will lift the energy screen in their quadrant. The men will be closely followed by enemy troops - humanoids - and there will be a fight when our men attempt to leave their vehicles and board the ships. The screen must be re-established as soon as possible to prevent the enemy from rushing more troops through. . . ."

While he issued the orders, I walked across the compartment to the viewscreen showing the area the men would be coming through. In a few minutes Jeff joined me and put a hand on my shoulder.

"You said you never heard of human troops serving the Masters. I believe you."

I turned to say something, but there was nothing I could put into words. He smiled at me.

"If the Star Watch Frontier Coordinator trusts you, I guess I can," he said. Then he returned to the communications console.

Trust is a rarity in war. And for a Terran to have faith in an alien under such trying circumstances was the act of either an irresponsible fool or of a person

of much greater depth and understanding than I had believed possible for someone of Jeff's youth.

In either case, Geoffrey Knowland was an unusual man.

Within minutes, the aircars of the returning men started to show up on the horizon, flitting through the lancing beams of enemy fire and buzzing toward our ships. Swarming around each aircar were dozens of smaller fliers.

One section of the energy screen went down as planned, and a fearful confusion unfolded before my eyes as I watched the battle take shape on the viewscreens.

The Terrans - Star Watchmen and Scandians - were landing their aircars about halfway between the nearest ships and the edge of the energy screen. As they jumped out of their grounded vehicles, I increased the magnification on my viewscreen and watched the enemy attack.

The smaller fliers turned out to be one-man machines: Projectile-shaped cylinders with some sort of saddle in which sat an immense humanoid, bigger even than the biggest Terran.

These strange warriors wore brightly-colored body armor, and evidently their little vehicles had individual energy screens, because the Terran force beams fired from the ships did not affect them.

The warriors plowed through the Terrans like cavalry through foot soldiers, striking with machine pistols, grenades, and huge double-edged swords. As the melee grew more and more confused, with men of both sides mixing everywhere, the enemy troops

relied more heavily on their swords, which could slash a man in two with a single terrifying sweep.

The Terran force-beam projectors were useless, but the enemy's individual energy screens were not strong enough to stop solid bodies. The Terrans fought back with their own rapid-fire side arms, turned empty rocket launchers into clubs, clawed at the mounted enemy with their bare hands and hopelessly inadequate combat knives.

In the wild hand-to-hand battle, the Terrans were being swarmed under, and as more aircars landed the enemy warriors hit the men as they tried to get out of the hatches and fired grenades into the overcrowded ships. Meanwhile, whole battalions of Saurian troops were pouring through the gap in the energy screen and heading for the nearest of the spaceships.

All this took place in less than a minute, and as I watched, horrified, I heard Jeff's voice crackling behind me:

"All personnel not absolutely needed for skeleton maintenance of the ships are to counterattack the enemy. Put as many men as possible into antigrav suits. Drop concussion grenades on the lizard units that are clear of our men. Let's move!"

I turned in time to see Jeff dive through the hatchway and disappear below deck, followed by almost half the men in the compartment. I went to join them, but was stopped by one of the Terrans.

"The commander said you were to remain here and assume command of the ships at your discretion."

A pretty move! I am under orders to get these ships off the planet as soon as possible. Jeff is countermanding those orders to rescue his volunteers. So he puts

me in command while he takes as many men as he can to save what is left of the volunteers. If I follow orders and upship, I must leave him and most of his men behind.

All I could do was watch the battle, helpless to move until one side or the other was annihilated.

Slowly, I was able to make some order out of the wild, confused struggle. The Terrans had gradually grouped themselves into tiny knots of men, huddled close to the blasted aircars, battling the mounted enemy hand-to-hand. The biggest clump of resistance seemed to center around a tall, red-haired Terran, possibly the one I had seen earlier in the viewscreen. He had taken a sword from a fallen enemy and was wielding it with deadly efficiency.

Just then Jeff and his reinforcements leaped into view. Most of them were in antigrav suits, boking like flying robots, raking the Saurian battalions with explosives, then diving down on the airborne humanoids.

As the deadly battle seesawed back and forth I noticed that no more troops or aircars were coming through the energy screen. It had been closed.

Then I spotted Jeff again, leading a charge of his flying Star Watchmen, smashing right into the mounted enemy troops, firing his automatic pistol only when he was too close to miss.

One by one the humanoids were being knocked off their flying horses and overwhelmed by the battered but still defiant men on the ground.

And then suddenly it was ended. There were no more enemy troops left standing. Quickly, the surviving Terrans staggered toward the ships, dragging their wounded with them, leaving their dead behind.

As the first of them reached the hatches, enemy missiles began punching through the energy screen and blasting the area with high explosives and shrapnel.

"All ships prepare for immediate take-off," I commanded, and the communications tech relayed my order.

A tremendous explosion rocked the ship and blanked out all the viewscreens.

"Nuclears," someone muttered.

"All ships signal they're ready for take-off," the tech called out.

Another blast. Closer.

There is no one left alive outside the ships now, I thought. Aloud, I ordered, "All ships up. Full speed. Close formation. Keep the energy screen as intact as possible."

The only noticeable motion was a slight vibration as the subnuclear drive field took over the ship. The viewscreen cleared, and I could see that we were already through most of the planet's atmosphere.

"We couldn't've taken another blast like that last one," the chief engineer said to no one in particular.

"Good timing on your take-off."

I turned to see Jeff climbing through the hatchway, his antigrav suit stained and muddied, a pistol dangling at his hip and one of those huge broadswords clenched in his right hand.

It was not until I saw him that I realized how close he had come to death.

"I was half afraid. . . ."

"Those nuclear blasts?" He grinned. "No, we were all aboard the ships before they hit. Close, though. Too close."

The Masters' ships made a halfhearted attack at our formation as we left the planet, but it was clear that they only wanted to be certain we would leave the area.

When our battered little squadron reached the main Star Watch fleet we transferred from the planetary landing ships to the fleet's deep-space cruisers. Maintenance techs took the ships back to the repair vehicles.

Within six hours the fleet was in superlight overdrive, and I was asleep in a spare bunk aboard Jeff's cruiser.

When I awoke, there was a message on the cabin's phonotape to report as soon as possible to the Frontier Coordinator. I rushed through the autoshower and dressed quickly. As I stepped into the passageway outside, I bumped into Jeff and the red-haired officer. Both were in immaculate black and silver Star Watch uniforms.

"Going to the Frontier Coordinator?" Jeff asked.

I nodded.

"We've been summoned, too. Oh, this is Captain Terrance Radnor, the Star Watchman who led the volunteer raid against the invaders."

"A courageous undertaking," I said. The captain was indeed the man I had seen in the viewscreen and during the battle. He was very big, even for a Terran, with a broad, heavy-boned frame, and thickly muscled.

His square face was set in an angry line and his green eyes smoldered at me.

"We'd have beaten those filthy lizards if it hadn't been for those humanoid traitors. We had fought all the way to their main landing base when the humanoids hit us."

I shook my head. I can't imagine who they are or what part of the galaxy they come from. I never realized the Masters"

"You lived under the Masters until a year ago, and you didn't know about them?" he demanded.

"Now wait a minute" Jeff stepped between us.

But Terrance pushed him back. "Well, how do we know you're telling the truth? If one race of humans will fight against us, how do we know you're on our side?"

I answered as evenly as possible, "Because I say I am. I have placed my life in the hands of the Terran Confederation. I have left my people to fight against the Masters. If you don't trust me, it would be a simple enough matter for you to kill me."

"This has gone far enough," Jeff said. "Terry, there are some limits to the amount of stupidity a Star Watch officer can show in public. Alan, I must ask you to excuse Terry's behavior. He's a Scandian and his family is still on Northholm."

"I understand," I said. "My family is living under the Masters, also."

Terrance said nothing.

The three of us continued our trip to the flagship in embarrassed silence. The fleet had come out of overdrive for a navigational check, and we trans--shipped from Jeff's cruiser to the Frontier Coordinator's in a shuttle rocket.

The Frontier Coordinator was fifty Earth-years old, not quite middle-aged for a Terran. But he looked older. His hair was all gray, his eyes tired, his broad shoulders bent. As we entered his office, he was sitting

at a desk piled high with reports. His stiff tunic collar was unfastened, and he was puffing on an ancient pipe.

This was this same man who, twenty years earlier, had made the first contact between the Terran Confederation and a nonhumanoid race: the Family. It had been a peaceful contact at first, but for the past ten years sporadic raids and frontier clashes had been gradually building in violence and intensity until now the Confederation found itself fighting an undeclared war.

And losing it.

The three of us stood at attention before the Coordinator's desk. He told us to relax, and asked to hear Terrance's report of his raid against the invaders.

Terrance repeated substantially what he had already told Jeff and me earlier, but with a little more detail: the detachment had broken through the Saurians' ring around the spaceships fairly easily and lost themselves in the wooded hills a few miles from the spaceport.

They were not pursued - evidently the Saurians assumed that the raiders were merely deserting the surrounded Terran stronghold. Terrance and his men kept well away from enemy forces until they were within striking distance of the invaders' main landing point. Here were the principal enemy communications and supply centers.

The Terrans struck the landing area's outer defenses and crashed through, only to meet the humanoid troops who had probably just landed on the planet. There was a tremendous battle, the Terrans holding their own until their power supplies and ammunition started to run low.

When the raiders tried to retreat, the humanoids followed them, and a running battle ensued. The battle was not ended until the terrible ordeal back at the ships.

"If it hadn't been for the humanoids, sir," Terrance concluded, "I'm certain we could have destroyed the lizards' landing base and completely disrupted their whole attack on the planet."

The Frontier Coordinator nodded and sucked on his pipe. "My staff officers will probably want a detailed written report, captain," he said. "Thank you for your cooperation."

Terrance saluted and left the compartment.

The Coordinator looked at me. "I suppose someone should tell him he's due for a medal. Scant return for losing his home, though."

"I'll tell him, sir," Jeff said.

The older man nodded. "Later. Right now you can tell me what kind of audacity it is that sends five thousand men out to attack fifteen hundred thousand, and then refuses to obey an order to retreat."

Jeff's face colored.

"This is a war, youngster, not military games. The men who died today are dead forever."

"I know that, sir."

"Then what was your reasoning?" the Coordinator asked, rising from his desk. "I'm assuming, of course, that you did some thinking about what you were doing."

"Yes, sir."

"Well?"

"Sending out the diversionary force was the only thing that allowed us to hang on to the spaceport for as long as we did."

"And your refusal to evacuate when my special

adjutant relayed my orders to you, after arriving with three extra ships to help load every possible man aboard?"

"I was waiting for the return of the diversionary force, sir."

"Very noble of you," the Coordinator said, while walking around the desk.

"Sir," I interrupted, "I'm just as much to blame as this officer"

"You stay out of this, Alan."

"But I gave a tacit approval to his plan to wait. I could have insisted that he obey your orders at once, but I did not."

"This boy was in command of the garrison, not you," he snapped. Then he turned back to Jeff. "How many men did you have under your command just before the volunteer detachment left the ships?"

"Fifteen ships with about two hundred men per ship, plus what was left of the planetary militia - between eight and ten thousand men all together," Jeff answered.

"And you sent more than half your command out to create a diversion," the Coordinator said, half-sitting on the edge of his desk directly in front of Jeff. "How many men do you have left now?"

Jeff met the older man's iron-hard gaze and snapped, "Exactly six thousand one hundred and forty-two, including the wounded."

"So you lost between two and four thousand men for a few hours' glory."

"Glory!" Jeff exploded. "If you think I was having fun down there"

"Quiet!" the Coordinator commanded. "Now listen

to me, son. You were in command of a rear guard action. All you had to do was hold on until we had gathered our scattered ships and were ready to leave the system. Instead you counterattacked and lost almost four thousand men."

"But. . . ."

"No buts, not in war. Whatever your conscious motives for sending out that suicide squad, I know you well enough to be certain that you had a daydream somewhere in your head about driving the invaders completely off the planet. Well, all you did was lose a lot of men who might have lived to fight another day if you had kept your emotions under control and obeyed orders."

Jeff was trembling, and his face was set in a frozen white mask.

"Are you through, sir?"

"Yes. Go back to your ship and think over what I said."

Jeff snapped into a letter-perfect salute, turned on his heel and strode to the door. As he opened it, the Coordinator called out to him, "This was your first command, Jeff. You came close to being wiped out. And I came close to losing a son. Do you understand?"

Jeff did not turn around, but the stiffness of his spine eased a little.

"Yes," he answered softly. "I understand, Dad."

Only then did I realize that the Star Watch Frontier Coordinator was Jeff's father.

Chapter 2 *The Galaxy Map*

As the door closed behind Jeff, I must have been showing my surprise quite openly.

"Didn't you know he was my son?" Heath Knowland asked.

I shook my head. "I should have realized it from the name, of course. But it never occurred to me. I thought Knowland was a common Terran name"

"It is," he said. He walked around behind his desk and picked up his pipe lighter. Sitting, he puffed the pipe to life again. "What do you think of him?"

"Of Jeff? I've only known him for a day and a half. . . ."

"That's enough for you," the Coordinator said. "I've seen you use your extrasensory perceptions to size up men I've known all my life, in a single meeting."

"My e.s.p. powers are no greater than yours," I begged off. "It's just that I've been taught to use them, and you Terrans still apply them only instinctively."

Knowland grinned at me. "All right. I still want to know what you think of my son."

"He is an unusual boy," I said. "Tremendous mental energies . . . you can sense that just by being in the same room with him. He is already a good leader of men. Although you regard his strategy on Northholm as foolhardy, he nearly won the planet back for you and when things went bad he didn't panic, but stood his ground and saved as many of his men as possible. I think you were too harsh with him."

Heath Knowland puffed a huge cloud of smoke, which drifted in silence to the air circulator and was sucked into its grilled face.

"I know I'm rough on the boy," he said finally, "but there are reasons. First off, he's my son. Any hint of special treatment would cause a collapse of morale . . . and, by the nine moons of Saturn, you know as well as I that morale is all we have to go on against the Masters."

"But perhaps. . . ."

He waved me down. "Another thing, and more important to the boy's own future, is that he's a dreamer. He's in the middle of a war - a real, killing, no-holds-barred war - and he daydreams. He had no more chance of driving the invaders off Northholm than I have of defeating the combined fleets of the Masters. But he can't accept that. I've got to drive it home to him that there's no room or time for dreaming any more .he's got to be a man, not a boy."

"How old is he?" I asked.

"I know, I know. It's a crime to force a youngster barely out of his teens to grow up immediately." He leaned across the desk and jabbed his pipe at me, "But I need him. I need those mental energies and his capacity for leadership. I need all the men like him that

I can lay my hands on. And if I have to make the road rough for him, I'll do it. Because if I don't he's going to end up dead and soon."

He sat back and took a deep breath. He seemed to be thinking over what he had just said to make certain it was what he had meant to express.

At length he said to me, "There's going to be an emergency session of the Terran Confederation Council next month back on Earth. They're meeting to try to establish a policy for handling the Masters' attacks."

"Your plan will be up for consideration?"

"It had better be. I'm going to present it to the Council by tri-di broadcast. But to make certain it doesn't get pushed aside in favor of some politician's cure-all scheme, I'm sending Jeff to the meeting. It'll also give him rest from fighting, and it'll be a chance for him to see his mother and his friends back home."

I nodded.

"I'd like you to accompany him, Alan. I can't go with him myself, but I want someone else from my staff along. And your background may be useful to him."

"I see. Of course. I'd be glad to."

The next day I transshipped my belongings from the Frontier Coordinator's city-sized, globular command ship to Jeff's smaller, saucer-shaped battle cruiser.

Jeff's ship, with three escort pickets and a half-dozen scoutships, left the main Star Watch fleet and headed for Terra almost as soon as the hatch closed behind me. Within six hours we had built up enough velocity to switch over to the superlight overdrive.

I did not see much of Jeff during the first two days of the flight. The first day I stayed in my cabin and

caught up on my rest. But the second day I began to get bored. Time is dimensionless in space, especially when you are traveling faster than light and can't see anything outside the ship.

So I started to putter around the ship, probing here and there to pass the hours.

I was walking down one of the narrow passageways when Terrance popped out of a doorway and nearly knocked into me.

"Oh . . . hello." He looked a bit flustered at meeting me so unexpectedly.

"Hello, captain," I said. He was standing so close to me that I almost had to bend my neck over backward to look up at his face.

"I . . . uh . . . look, do I call you 'sir' or what? Just what is your rank?"

I laughed. "I have no real rank. You may call me Alan if you want to."

"Okay." He grinned back at me. "And I'm Terry. Uh . . . I'm sorry about my flare-up a few days ago. I was. . ."

"I'd forgotten it," I said.

He beamed. "Thanks. Say, would you like to look over the ship? That's what I've been doing. Never been aboard a cruiser of this type before. On Scandia we have . . ." his face clouded, "we . . . had . . . older ships."

"Yes, I'd like to see the ship," I said as brightly as possible.

Within a few minutes, Terrance perked up again. He took me through the entire ship, starting at the edge of the disc and working inward, until finally we stood at the very center where the mammoth engines

and generators were rumbling their mighty song of power.

Terrance launched into an impressive-sounding but totally incomprehensible explanation of how the ship was propelled at speeds greater than light.

"The drive field accelerates every subnuclear particle of the ship . . . this eliminates inertia and makes superlight speeds possible," he concluded.

I must have looked puzzled.

"You see, for centuries it was thought that nothing in the universe could go faster than light. But if the ship is inertialess, you can zip right past light-speed and go as fast as you want to. Of course, some physicists claim that when you go faster than light you're not really in this universe at all . . . but when you stop to see where you are, you're back here again."

It was obvious that he was making it plain enough to be understood by any Terran. He looked at me expectantly, as though he knew the light of truth was about to dawn on my face.

I felt more or less obligated to ask him a question.

"Ummm . . . how fast can you go? What is your limit?"

He smiled. "In theory, there's no known limit. Of course, it takes about six hours to accelerate to lightspeed, but after that the only limitation you're under is a practical one - you can't tell where you're going unless you can see where you are. So you have to stop and make navigational checks."

"I see." And I did - that much at least. "How often must you do this?"

"Well, official Star Watch practice is to stop at least once every twenty-four hours. That's Terran hours. We keep time in space by Terran standards. The

longest superlight run on record is six days: a hundred and forty-four hours. In that time the ship went from the Star Watch's Prime Base on Mars to the Regulus system - about seventy light-years."

"That is almost a light-year every two hours," I said.

"Yep," Terry nodded. "They were about five light-years off course when they came out of overdrive . . . but that's not bad for dead reckoning."

I agreed.

As we walked back to the officers' quarters I asked, as indirectly as possible, where Jeff had been for the past two days. Terrance said he had seen little of him.

"Usually, when he's not busy with anything else, he's working on his map."

"Map?" I asked.

"Uh-huh. He'll probably be at officers' mess tonight . . . he was last night. Ask him to show it to you. It's his pride and joy."

I stayed with Terrance until the evening meal was served, and we sat together in the executive officers' dining room. It was a small room just off the main mess hall.

We sat at a round table with four other officers whom Terrance introduced. About halfway through the meal, the red-haired Scandian nudged my elbow and shot to attention. The others quickly rose, too. Jeff had just come in.

"At ease - sit down," he told us. "No need for formalities. Making your officers stand at attention in the middle of their dinner doesn't gain you any respect."

There were two empty chairs at the table and Jeff sat at the one nearest Terrance and myself. He dialed his selection and punched the order key.

"How've you been, Alan? I haven't seen you since we left the fleet."

"Fine," I said. "Terry has been showing me your ship."

"Oh, yes. It's the first time aboard for both of you, isn't it?"

Terrance looked up from his sea vegetables. "Yep, we're both taking the Terran rest cure."

Jeff's eyes darted to the big captain. "I am, too, I guess."

His meal came out on a servotable and we all ate in silence. Afterward, as we were leaving the dining room, I said to Jeff:

"Terrance tells me that you've been working on a map of some sort."

"Why, yes," he said. "Would you like to see it?"

"I'm very curious."

He led me past the officers' quarters in toward the center of the ship. We went down a ladder into the cargo deck where the ship's supplies, replacement parts, and extra equipment were stored.

"I've commandeered a fairly large compartment," Jeff explained, "although I practically had to throw the ship's quarter-master overboard. He's an old war dog . . . and to hear him tell it, the ship can't function at all unless everything is done the way he wants it."

Jeff was walking slightly in front of me as we went down the dimly-lighted passageway, but I could see the expression on his face. He had started out grinning about the quartermaster, but his mouth tightened and his eyes grew somber as he thought it over.

"I guess there are some disadvantages to having your own ship so young," he said finally.

"Do many Star Watch officers receive commissions at your age?" I asked.

He glanced back at me. "Quite a few, especially with the fighting getting harder all the time. Terry, for instance . . . he's a year older than I and was commissioned a year ahead of me. But he was second-in-command of a whole squadron when the lizards hit Scandia."

"I see."

"Of course," Jeff mused, half to himself, "Terry isn't the son of Heath Knowland. He's just another officer."

We came to a door and Jeff opened it.

"Here we are," he said as the lights came on.

It nearly filled the entire room; an immense, softly glowing disc seemingly suspended in mid-air so that its curving edge hung over our heads as we stood by the doorway. As I stared at its translucent mass, I thought I saw tiny flickers of light deep within it.

"Come on up on the catwalk," Jeff said, indicating a stairway that led up to another level.

At the top of the stairs was a small, railed platform that circled the room. A desk-sized electronic console stood nearby.

From this vantage point I could see Jeff's map more clearly. It was an immense flattened disc, thick in the center and gradually thinning out toward the edge. Dark belts of opaque material spiraled through the outer reaches, but the bulging nucleus was clear and bright.

"The galaxy," Jeff said softly. In the stillness of the big room his voice echoed hollowly.

"*Kh'rtym p'thar*," I said, then translated, "the Wheel of Light."

Jeff nodded. "It's been called the Milky Way on Earth since time immemorial . . . they didn't realize at first that it was a hundred billion stars shining on them."

"Rh'khour'mnin is a cluster of stars, I explained. "On most of our planets the galaxy cannot be seen because the nearby stars are too bright and too close together. It was not until we reached the outer edges of our cluster that we realized how many stars there were."

Jeff sat down at the console and flicked his fingers across the controls.

"The map - or model, if you want to call it that - is made of electrically-sensitive plastic crystals. I can light any crystal or group of them from the controls here."

"Did you build all this yourself?"

"Jupiter, no." He laughed. "It took a team of techs six weeks to brew up this batch of plastic. What I'm trying to do is fix every star known by man on this map. It's a matter of locating the position of the star, spotting it in the proper place on the map, then electronically charging the crystal in that position and setting up the circuitry on the control console here so that I can turn a dial and punch a button and get my star to shine in the right place."

"A tedious business," I said.

"Time-consuming all right. Just to make the job interesting, I try to tune the crystal so that it will glow in the same color as the star it represents: yellow

for Sol, blue for Achernar, white for Vega, red for Betelgeuse"

He toyed with the controls as he spoke, and the stars he named appeared in the map.

"Of course, when you come to the big globular clusters of stars, all I can give you is the general color of the over-all cluster. I'm not going to spend my life trying to sort out the colors of ten thousand stars!"

"No, I suppose not."

Jeff laughed as he punched more buttons. Several of the big globular clusters around the center of the galaxy materialized in the map. One of them, I knew, was the home of the Saurians. Another, the home cluster of the Masters. But there were hundreds of such clusters . . . all of them more than twenty thousand light-years from Sol.

"Do you know the Star Watch coordinates for your home system?" Jeff asked.

I told him, and he looked surprised. "Why, that's the Seven Sisters . . . The Pleiades."

"Yes, I should imagine the brighter of our stars would be observable from Terra."

"Sure," Jeff said, making the Rh'khour'mnin stars appear in his map, "We know the Pleiades: three hundred and fifty light-years from Terra; about three hundred stars in a volume twenty light-years across; mostly very hot, blue, giant stars, with a lot of glowing hydrogen gas in between them. Right?"

"Almost," I said. "Actually, you can't see the dimmer stars in the group; there are really five hundred and seventeen stars. Two hundred and thirty-six of them have planetary systems supporting human life."

Jeff leaned an elbow on top of the console and

cradled his chin in his hand. "And which star does your homeworld belong to . . . not one of the blue giants, is it?"

I smiled. "What makes you think not?"

"Well . . . your coloring: your skin's sort of tawny, and your hair's almost the color of copper, even your eyes are yellowish. Your planet must be cool and cloudy because you're built to absorb every bit of solar radiation that reaches you. If you were born under one of the blue suns, you'd be dark so you could withstand the intense radiation."

My estimation of Jeff's intelligence and education went up several notches.

"True," I agreed. I was born on the innermost planet of a red dwarf star. My homeworld was cool, as you said, but very seldom cloudy . . . the air was usually too cold to hold much water vapor without precipitating it."

"Lots of snow, eh?" Jeff said.

I nodded. "Of course, my memories of my home are vague. I was taken from there when I was quite young."

"Taken?"

"By the Saurians . . . as I told you earlier, I was raised by the Family."

Jeff said nothing, but I knew this was the time and place to tell him about myself and my people.

"To begin with," I explained to Jeff, "although we are of the same human stock, there are many differences between Rh'khour'mnin and Terran. The most basic difference, of course, is that we come from a star cluster where there is hardly ever more than two light-years between stars. Sol, by comparison, is prac-

tically alone in space. In the same volume that holds more than five hundred Rh'khour'mnin stars, scarcely sixty exist in Sol's neighborhood.

"Secondly, our lifespans are much longer than yours. A Terran can expect to live to a hundred and fifty. My expected lifespan is three to four hundred Earth-years.

"So you can see that it was relatively easy for us to reach out from one planet and colonize the whole star cluster: the stars were close at hand, and we had long enough lifespans to be able to travel at speeds less than that of light.

"For you Terrans it was much more difficult. You had to develop a superlight drive mechanism.

"But picture us . . . expanding at our leisure, masters of all we see-until we reach the limits of our cluster and suddenly discover that we know only one small corner of an immense galaxy.

"And in that galaxy, waiting for us, were the Masters.

"I have never seen the Masters, themselves. None of my people have. We were contacted by the Saurians, the Family.

They showed themselves to us at exactly the right psychological moment. Just as we were realizing the immensity of the universe around us, they landed in their superlight ships and told us that they were representatives of a vastly older, wiser civilization . . . a civilization that stretched from the nucleus of the galaxy to our own insignificant little cluster of stars.

"They explained that they were servants of the Masters, and that we, too, would become members of this all-embracing civilization. We had no choice.

Our people realized we could never fight such a powerful society, and the Saurians promised us a share in the galaxy-wide culture of the Masters' civilization.

"And so we submitted to them five generations ago. That is about five hundred Terran years.

"At first the merger must have seemed wonderful. All over our worlds new cities sprang up, the benefits of new discoveries were lavished on us. The sudden depression we had suffered when we reached the end of our own ability to explore and colonize was drowned in the exhilaration of belonging to a galaxy-wide culture of great age and wisdom.

"But slowly the truth dawned. Certain of our planets, those revolving about our brightest, hottest blue stars, were taken over by the Masters. Our people, if any were populating such a planet, were removed. The planets were reserved for the Masters only.

"Our race was gradually being absorbed and devitalized by the Masters. Increasingly, it became apparent that we existed only to do the Masters' bidding. Not that they were cruel or overly demanding; but our people's freedom of mind to follow their own desires in their own way was carefully being drained out of them.

"I was born the third son of a planetary ruler. It is customary - now - for families of certain standing to give a son to the Masters for training. The Saurians told my family that I was to be given a full education, from the beginning. So my family dutifully handed me over to them, and I was taken to another Rh'khour'mnin planet for schooling.

"They trained me well . . . too well. I was given the best education that the Masters could offer. Every part of my mind was trained, even to the extent of developing some proficiency with the latent extra-sensory powers that all humans possess.

"But there came a crisis point. I was to be trained to be a territorial administrator of a new area which the Masters would soon conquer. In order to understand the situation fully, and to do my job properly, they had to explain to me much of the actual history and philosophy of my own people, and of the Masters' empire.

"It was a risk, telling me the truth about myself and themselves, but they hardly considered it as such. They told me enough to make me despise them. But what could I do? I was a stranger to my own people. I had nothing except what the Saurians had allowed me to learn. Where could I turn, except to serve the Masters?

"Then I realized what I must do. I stole a Saurian ship and fled to the territory which the Masters planned to conquer next."

Jeff sat in silence, his thin face set in a grim mask, his eyes burning intently.

"And that territory marked for conquest is the Terran Confederation," he said at last.

"Yes," I replied. "Now you know why I am with you. Now you know how great your danger is."

Jeff looked out at the giant map toward the softly-glowing stars of Rh'khour'mnin.

"Does my father know all this?" he asked.

"Yes. Of course."

He toyed with several controls, then gradually

turned a single dial. One great mass of the map began to gleam brilliantly, then slowly sank into a sullen red glow, stretching from the center of the galaxy across half the massive disk and engulfing my home-worlds.

"Just how far does this empire of the Masters extend?"

"No human knows," I said.

Jeff touched other knobs and buttons and a new set of stars began to appear: a small oval patch that spread from a single star halfway in from the rim of the galaxy and grew in all directions until it nearly touched Rh'khour'mnin.

"This is the Terran Confederation," Jeff explained. "A hundred star systems in an oval volume of space that's only two hundred light-years across on its longest diameter."

I watched the glowing white oval poised on the brink of the crimson spread of the Masters' empire.

"Two hundred star systems," Jeff went on, "with a population of more than a hundred billion humans. Most of them are descendants of Terran explorers and settlers, like the Scandians. A few of the star systems, like Arcturus, Procyon, and Vega, were inhabited by humans when the Star Watch first reached them."

"Then your race is native to several stars," I said.

"No," Jeff shook his head. "Just one - Sol."

"But you said"

"I said we found humans on other star systems. We did. But we found other things, too, first in our own Solar system, then on planets circling other suns. *Men from Earth had been there before.*"

"Your father never mentioned this."

"No, he wouldn't. But there is plenty of archeological evidence . . . and the ancient folk tales of the Vegans even tell the story, in a scrambled, mythical sort of way."

Jeff was gazing out at the galaxy map now, but his eyes and thoughts were far, far back in time.

"It was once thought that man as a species on Earth was only about a million years old. Some anthropologists thought it was more like five million years, but they were a small minority. Then we found that the dead cities and canals on Mars were built more than a million years ago by humans. This was the first link. The humans that built on Mars were Earth-like humans: the same size, the same physical characteristics.

"Then, as we expanded outward to the farther planets, and finally developed the superlight drive that enabled us to reach the stars . . . we found more and more evidence. Man had been there before. He had built an empire more than a million years ago that stretched as far as we've been able to reach today, and probably a good deal farther."

"But what happened to it?" I asked.

Jeff rose from the desk console and walked to the railing.

"It was destroyed," he said. "Demolished, wiped out, crushed so thoroughly that not a shred of evidence was left on Earth."

"But who"

He shrugged. "We don't know. All we've been able to piece together is this: the Terran empire was torn apart by an invader. A monumental war was fought, and we lost. Human life was stamped out on almost every planet where it existed. Mars' atmosphere was

blown away; the planet between Mars and Jupiter was blasted apart; Earth, herself, was scoured clean of human life - they thought. And just to make sure, Earth was subjected to violent changes in climate . . . what we used to call the Ice Ages. We found the mechanisms that produced them on one of the moons of Saturn."

It was almost too much to digest all at once. The magnitude of what Jeff was saying was staggering.

"Every colony world of Earth was wiped clean . . . only a few minor handfuls of humans escaped the invaders, and they were reduced to primitive savages when their planets were ravaged. They are the ancestors of those human populations the Confederation found a million years later.

"On Earth itself human life must have been reduced to almost nothing. The invaders did a thorough job of extermination, but just to make certain that no humans escaped them, they caused the successive climate changes, the Ice Ages. They thought that no highly-developed species could live through that."

Jeff's eyes were blazing now, and his fists tightened around the railing until his knuckles were white with tension.

"But we survived," he said. "No man will ever know how a few human beings lived through the ordeal . . . but we survived. We were reduced to the level of animals again, we had to relearn everything, the whole planet was in turmoil because of the ice sheets . . . but we survived. We forgot our heritage, we battled for existence with mammoths and saber-toothed tigers, we rediscovered agriculture, we relearned civilization . . . and we were always haunted by the stars. We had

to get back among the stars, because up there was our destiny."

He turned to me. "Six hundred years ago civilized men were just beginning to colonize the western hemisphere of Earth. Three hundred years later we were colonizing the moon. Today we're out among the stars again . . . and we know that somewhere among those stars are the Others."

"The Masters," I said.

"Perhaps," Jeff answered. "We don't know who our ancient enemy was. The closest description we have of them is from the Vegan folk tales, where they're described simply as 'fighters' and 'the Others.' "

"Who else could they be?" I asked. "The Saurians have said that the Masters have controlled the galaxy for many millions of years.

"Earth-years?"

I smiled. "I've been living among your people long enough to automatically translate times into your standards."

"Then it must be the Masters," Jeff mused. "They crushed us once, and here we are again."

He looked out at his map once more, then began pacing along the catwalk.

"Do you know the plan my father will put before the Council next month?" he asked me.

"Yes," I replied. "He will ask the Council to raise the largest army and build the biggest fleet the Confederation can afford. Then he proposes to establish a network of fortresses around the Confederation's frontier. With such defenses he hopes to make it too costly for the Masters to continue the war."

"What do you think of the plan?"

I walked back to the console. "I am not a military expert . . . and I don't know enough about"

"I'm not asking you for an official statement," Jeff cut in. "I'd just like to know your opinion, as one friend to another."

I hesitated, then saw that he was serious. "Even if you succeed in stalemating the Masters militarily," I said, "their culture is so vast and so superior that they will absorb the Terran Confederation within a few centuries."

He looked puzzled.

"I know it is difficult for you to accept, but they are older and wiser than we. They control billions of star systems. Billions. Your two hundred stars are insignificant atoms compared to them. They can besiege the entire Terran Confederation for millennia, if necessary. But, worst of all, they can entice your people into joining them willingly. . . ."

"How can they do that?"

"By offering you the benefits of their civilization; by showing you all the advances and comforts they have to offer. By proving to you that you are barbarians - and you are, even by the standards of my people. How long do you think Terrans could resist such pressures?"

Jeff grinned. "You don't know Terrans."

"No," I said, "but you have never seen the glories of the Masters' civilization."

"Well, if they can do all this so easily, why are they attacking us?"

"I don't know. Perhaps they first want to prove to you how futile resistance is."

"Or maybe," Jeff said, walking back to the railing,

maybe it's because we are ancient enemies . . . and they are the Others."

I said nothing, but watched him as he gazed out on his model of the galaxy. It was hard to believe that such a seemingly intense and restless youth had the patience to attempt such a mammoth undertaking. He seemed to be trying to puzzle out something in his mind; his face was somber, his slim body - dressed in the black and silver Star Watch uniform - hunched over the railing.

Suddenly he wheeled back to me. "Why are you fighting the Masters?"

So that was it. A question of values. "I know that I've made it seem hopeless," I answered. "But if men did not fight for what they wanted - regardless of their chance of winning - they would never reach their goal. I can't live under the Masters, and neither can you. To join the Masters is to surrender your right to decide how you want to live; to allow them to rule you means you must give up an essential part of your human nature. The only alternative we have is to fight them."

Jeff nodded agreement and turned back to the map. I walked to him and looked again at the angry red glow of the Masters' empire, stretching from the hub of the galaxy two-thirds of the way out to the rim. And at its edge was the tiny white oval of the Terran Confederation.

"This is our enemy, then," Jeff said. "And this is our battleground."

Chapter 3 *The Planets of Sol*

For the remaining days of our flight back to the Solar system, I practically lived in the ship's library, reading all the available microspools on Terran history and anthropology.

Jeff's summary of his people's background was accurate. As nearly as the Terran scientists could determine, the First Terran Empire had been wiped out about a million years ago.

I searched the records for any hint of who the Others might be. There was none. But I was convinced that they could only be the Masters.

I talked with many of Jeff's officers about it, but none of them seemed very interested. Terrance summed it up best:

"There's nothing we can do now to change ancient history. Whether or not it was the Masters who defeated Terra a million years ago doesn't worry me. It's fighting them now that counts."

Within eight days of leaving the main Star Watch fleet, we dropped out of superlight drive for good and approached the Solar system at half light-speed. We passed several belts of Terran patrols and interceptor squadrons, and finally we were requested to land for inspection on Pluto.

"They're taking no chances," Jeff said. "They're really frightened."

We were cleared at Pluto within a day, and here Jeff and I were to part for awhile. He was going directly to Earth, while I would stop off at the Star Watch's Prime Base on Mars to deliver some personal reports from the Frontier Coordinator to the Star Watch Chief Coordinator.

Before he took off again, Jeff asked me to take a small ship and visit a friend of his on Titan, the largest moon of Saturn.

"He's my former teacher," Jeff explained. "I can't go to see him myself, but I'd like to send a friend instead of just a tri-di phone message."

So I flew to Titan in one of the smaller scoutships that had accompanied Jeff's cruiser.

We landed at the satellite's only spaceport, a small, lonely clump of buildings ringed around a weathered landing disc and set against the shoulder of some frozen mountains. Once we were down, we had to wait for a flexible passage-tube to be connected to the ship's hatch; Titan was the only satellite in the Solar system with a natural atmosphere, but it consisted of unbreathable methane and ammonia, so we walked from the ship to the buildings inside the passage-tube.

When I finally got to the nearly-deserted buildings, Jeff's teacher, Sydney Lee, was there waiting for me.

I had never seen an aged Terran before, and he was obviously old. He was lean, tall, and angular. His face was thin and withered, capped by a little halo of scraggly white hair; his hands were gnarled with age, and his clothes had the timeless appearance that only long wear can achieve.

But his body, though slim, was straight and erect; his eyes were bright; and his expression seemed to say to me, I know I look old and threadbare, but the outside of a man is not so important, is it?

"Professor Lee?" I asked.

He grinned and extended his hand. "And you must be Alan Bakerman. Jeff's message said he was sending an interesting friend, but he didn't tell me you'd have golden skin and amber eyes."

The way he said that, it sounded like an accomplishment.

"Come," he said, pointing to the slidewalk, "I have a groundcar waiting for us."

The slidewalk carried us to an outer area where cars were parked under a plastic bubble-roof. We got into a little two-seater. Dr. Lee punched a button and the car guided itself through the parking area and outside onto a lone road leading up and around the mountainside.

As we climbed up the road, a vast, bleak, frozen plain unfolded below us, stretching to the horizon where another clump of mountains thrust jagged white peaks into the dark sky. Stars were twinkling in that sky, and the snowy plain below us gleamed a pale, frosty blue-white.

"What time of night is it here?" I asked.

Dr. Lee chuckled. "It's nearly high noon, my friend. I'm afraid you're a good bit farther from Sol than you realize."

Just then the car rounded a curve and before us was the planet Titan orbited around - Saturn: a huge globe of gaudy red, yellow, and orange stripes circled about its middle by brilliant knife-edged rings. It hung low in the sky and seemed almost close enough to touch.

"It's always a pleasure to watch a person's face when he first sees Saturn," Dr. Lee said. "I often wish I had never seen it before, so that I could experience the thrill you must feel right now."

"It . . . it's magnificent," I stuttered. "I've never seen anything like this."

"It's a little like having a circus overhead," Dr. Lee said.

We drove on in silence for quite awhile as I watched the giant planet. Soon I noticed the shadows of other moons on Saturn's brilliant surface.

"How many moons does Saturn have?" I asked.

"Nine major ones," he replied, "and from time-to-time it captures a stray planetoid or meteor temporarily; usually they are pulled into the planet or its rings pretty quickly."

Dr. Lee went on to explain that Titan was the largest natural satellite in the Solar system and that at its distance from Saturn the planet looked three times larger than a full moon on Earth.

"Unfortunately, that doesn't mean much to me. . ."
I said.

"Of course," he said, frowning. "You've never been

to Earth. I apologize for boring you with meaningless chatter."

"Not at all," I said. "I will be on Earth in a week, and I can compare the night sky there with this."

"A bit drab," Dr. Lee said.

"I imagine so," I answered.

Dr. Lee looked out at the landscape. "We will be coming to our destination soon."

The road was slanting sharply downhill now, and I could see that it ran out into another plain. But this plain was a tumbled, broken mass of jagged, shattered rocks, with patches of ice and snow everywhere. Far off on the horizon, in the direction the road was running, I could see the spires and domes of buildings.

"Is that the school?" I asked, pointing.

"Where?" he asked, squinting in the direction I indicated. "I'm afraid my eyes aren't as good as yours. But I know what you see. No, it's not the school . . . it's the ruins."

"Ruins?"

"Yes . . . the ruins of the base of the Others."

I was surprised, and must have shown it.

"Didn't Jeff tell you about it? Well, no matter, I'll show you through them tomorrow."

The school buildings - when we arrived there - turned out to be much less impressive than the ruins I had glimpsed from the car. The school consisted of a small clump of plastic bubble-domes huddled together in the middle of that barren, broken plain.

We drove into one of the domes and left the car. I was surprised at the sudden increase in weight I sensed as we entered the dome. Dr. Lee explained that since

Titan was less than half the size of Earth, a special type of energy screen was used at all the human settlements to keep up an artificial gravity field equal to Earth's.

"We don't want Terrans to spend any great length of time in a different gravity field. When they go back to Earth they have to learn how to walk all over again," he explained.

We walked over to a door that opened on a lift-chute. Only then did I realize that the school was almost entirely underground.

We spent the rest of that day looking over the school. It was unusual in many ways. It had no formal name, it was known simply as Dr. Lee's school. There were less than a hundred students; the faculty numbered about thirty.

"Most of them do little actual teaching," Dr. Lee explained. "They are former students who wanted to stay on to continue their studies . . . I somehow don't have the heart to refuse them."

"But how do you feed them?" I asked.

For an answer, he took me to the hydroponics area where most of the school's food was grown.

"Once the chemical tanks were built and the sun lamps installed, the hydroponics became almost self-sustaining. It takes very little money now to grow a completely balanced diet."

It turned out that there was no formal tuition charge for the students, either.

"They pay what they can," Dr. Lee said, shrugging. "I have never found it difficult to raise money. Most of the students' families pay much more than it costs to teach them . . . but the surplus money is useful to

help students who couldn't otherwise pay their transportation here."

I had to smile at him. "And what subjects do you teach here?"

"Subjects?" He blinked.

"Subjects," I repeated. "Physics, chemistry, history, mathematics. . . ."

He shook his head vehemently. "You don't understand. We don't teach any subject . . . not as such. That's the trouble with education . . . too many watertight compartments. We try to teach our students how to think . . . how to use their brains and imagination. Individual subjects can always be learned by a man who knows how to learn. We teach them to think, and the other subjects arise by themselves . . . when a student becomes interested in a particular subject, he studies it for himself, or with a teacher who is also particularly interested in that phase of knowledge."

He pointed a bony finger at me. "Remember this, young man: facts can always be learned and recognized; concepts and ideas are what must be taught."

We ended the day with a sparse meal of the hydroponically-grown vegetables, and a brief tour of the school's gymnasium. Then Dr. Lee escorted me to one of the extra students' rooms, a bare little cell but comfortable enough.

The next morning after breakfast Dr. Lee summoned me to his office. As I expected, it was a small cubbyhole, his desk was littered with papers and worn smooth from years of use. He was dressed in a loosefitting one-piece coverall.

We began talking, and I soon found him curious about the origin of my people. After I tried answering

his questions as fully as I could, I realized how little I knew.

"Quite enlightening," Dr. Lee murmured at last. "From what you've told me, it would seem that the Rh'khour'mnin peoples are not descended from Earth at all . . . but developed entirely independently in their own star cluster."

I nodded agreement. "As far as I know, our first contact with any race from outside the cluster was with the Saurians . . . and the Masters, of course."

"But more important," he mused, half to himself, "is that you can trace your people's history well past the time of the First Terran Empire's destruction by the Others."

"What does this mean?" I wondered aloud.

"Mean? Why, it means several things. First, that the Others either didn't know or didn't care that there were humans elsewhere in the galaxy. Second, that the present Terran Confederation is nearing the limits of the old empire. Finally, and most important, it means that human life can - and probably has - originated in several places in the galaxy, not merely on Earth."

He rose from his desk and opened the door to the hallway Outside, beckoning me to follow. For a man of his obvious age, he was remarkably agile.

As we walked down the corridor, Dr. Lee continued his line of reasoning:

"We've known of only three races - humans, the Saurians, and the Hydra, squidlike creatures who live on high-gravity, low-density planets like Saturn. They also are members of the Masters' empire."

We reached the lift-chute and were carried up to the dome where the groundcars were parked.

"So far, the only humans we've met were descendants of the colonies of the First Terran Empire . . . stragglers that were overlooked by the Others for one reason or another. But you've given strong weight to the idea that human life can develop independently on any Earth-like planet."

"Well," I said, as we entered a groundcar, "I suppose it could. Similar environmental conditions should produce similar results."

"Theoretically," Dr. Lee said. "But you're the first proof that such a thing has actually happened."

"Where are we going now?" I asked.

"Eh? Why, you said you wanted to see the ruins, didn't you?"

He punched a button on the car's control panel and we shot forward.

Actually, the buildings were far from being the crumbled, weathered debris I had expected.

"Whoever built this," Dr. Lee said as we approached, "built it to last."

We drove completely around the group of buildings, which stood gloomily wrapped in the double shadows of Saturn and the distant sun. Beyond the buildings, the barren plain stretched out to the horizon where stars twinkled coldly. One of these points of light, I knew, was Mars; another, Earth.

There were six buildings, five square, squat, featureless structures ringed around a sweeping pentagon-shaped tower which soared upward to a series of domes surmounted by antenna-like spires - the domes and spires I had seen from the road the day before. This central building was connected to the others by a series of arched passageways.

Dr. Lee stopped the car, and we squirmed into spacesuits before getting out. Besides having an ammonia and methane atmosphere, Titan's temperature was low enough to turn oxygen into a liquid. So we needed both warmth and breathable air for our tour of the ruins.

After checking-out the suits and their radios, we left the car and headed for the nearest of the buildings.

As we came up to the building, a low, wide doorway slid open automatically, and we ducked through it.

"Photoelectric control." Dr. Lee's voice sounded slightly strange in my helmet's earphones.

"Odd-shaped door," I said.

"It was built for self-propelled vehicles, not humans," he answered as the building's lights turned themselves on.

There was only one room in the building, and it was crammed with weird-looking machines. They seemed to be generators of some sort, but I had never seen anything like them before; nor do I expect to ever see their like again. Giant coils, banks of tubes, incomprehensible masses of equipment—all laced with broad catwalks that twined between the machines, crawled around and over some of them, and hung suspended from the low ceiling.

As I looked over the sprawling machinery, I slowly realized why this place was considered ruins. Most of the massive consoles were cracked open; tubes and other delicate pieces of equipment lay smashed and strewn all over.

I turned to Dr. Lee, unrecognizable in his bulky suit, standing at the other side of the catwalk.

"It took the best scientists Earth had more than fifty years to discover what this machinery was used for, and how it worked," he said. "Once we were certain, the Star Watch dismantled the whole installation. Now only the lights and the doors still work."

"What is this place?" I asked.

I could hear his breathing in my earphones as he walked over to me.

"This is the wave-generating equipment the Others used to cause the Ice Ages on Earth," he replied. "This is the machinery that was supposed to seal man's doom."

We went through the room and along the low-slung passageway to the central tower. There Dr. Lee showed me the nuclear fusion reactor that still powered the machines that had not been dismantled, the rows of self-propelled maintenance and repair vehicles, and the transmitter that once had beamed Solar-interference waves to Earth."

"With all this equipment to study," I said, "surely you have been able to deduce something about what type of creatures the Others were."

"How could we?" he asked, attempting a shrug inside his spacesuit. "Look around again."

It took me a few moments to understand what he meant. Then slowly it became clear. On all the equipment we had seen, from the outer door to the repair vehicles - there had not been a switch, a dial, a lever anywhere!

"It is all designed as an automatic, self-sufficient installation," Dr. Lee affirmed. "These machines were serviced and repaired by other machines. The whole installation worked by itself for almost a million years."

I walked back to the groundcar with Dr. Lee in stunned silence. All my life I had been told of the magnificence of the Masters, of their perfect science and technology. But this was more staggering than all the words I had ever heard. A giant machine running continuously for a million years, repairing itself without a living hand touching it . . . and silently, efficiently, disrupting the climate patterns of an entire planet.

Once inside the car, I automatically pulled off the cumbersome spacesuit.

"Jeff used to spend much of his spare time brooding here when he studied with me," Dr. Lee said as he started the car. "He seemed drawn to these ruins . . . as though he was looking for something in them."

"He was," I said. "And now he has found what he was seeking."

The next morning I left for Mars.

Dr. Lee drove me to the spaceport, and we talked about the war on the way. I was slightly surprised at his interest, because up until these last few minutes he had not even hinted that he knew the war existed.

He was curious about the Star Watch's plans for defending the Confederation, and I told him the general scheme of Heath Knowland's proposal to build a network of fortresses along the Confederation's frontiers.

"And Jeff is going to present this plan to the Council next week?" he asked.

"Heath will make the presentation himself, via a tri-di broadcast from the fleet," I said. "Jeff will follow up with any additional information and persuasion he can provide."

Dr. Lee was silent for a while. But as we approached the spaceport he said:

"I'm not qualified to judge Jeff's father's plan on its military merits. But tell Jeff that walls built to keep invaders outside also keep the defenders inside. He'll understand what I mean."

Moments later, we were shaking hands at almost the precise spot where we had first met. I had known him for less than two days, but Dr. Lee showed me more warmth and friendship in that short time than any Terran I had known - except Jeff.

Mars was, at the same time, the best and the worst place I visited.

Of all the planets of Sol, to me Mars is the most beautiful. The moment I stepped off the ship at the spaceport, I realized how long it had been since I had been wholly comfortable with my environment.

I had been living on Terran ships, with Terran gravitational fields and temperature levels for so long that I had forgotten what it felt like to bask in the free, cool breezes of a friendly planet.

Now suddenly I could walk easily, with no strain, and I could enjoy a morning that was neither the frigid darkness of Titan nor the warm humidity of a Terran air-conditioning system.

I walked leisurely from the ship across the vast landing disc of the main Martian spaceport. It was a busy port, I noticed, with ships landing and rising on their soundless antigrav fields every few seconds.

Beyond the port buildings I could see a complex sprawl of bigger structures, all flying the blue banner

of the Terran Confederation and the black pennant of the Star Watch.

The port's administration building, of course, was under Terran temperature and gravity conditions. I checked with one of the many civilian clerks, and she nodded to a Star Watch noncommissioned officer who had been sitting nearby.

"Officer Bakerman, sir? I'm Sergeant McDonnell. I'll transport you to Star Watch headquarters, sir."

He took my one bag of belongings in a big hand, and headed for a door. He was a typically big Terran, with an athletic physique, close-cropped blond hair, and a face that betrayed his youth. I went with him through the port's main waiting room - a bustling theater-sized enclosure where Star Watch uniforms predominated in the crowd - down a corridor, out a door, and into a bubble-topped aircar.

We took off vertically, hovered above the spaceport for a moment, then darted out past the Star Watch buildings and toward the horizon, following an ancient canal.

"I thought we were going to headquarters," I said as we passed the Star Watch buildings.

"We are, sir," the sergeant answered. "The installation we just passed is the Star Watch Fleet Command Center. We're going to the Intelligence Center . . . that's where the Chief Coordinator and his staff are located."

"Oh. Am I to see the Chief Coordinator?"

He grinned. "I'm only a sergeant, sir. They wouldn't tell me."

Evidently we had a distance to travel. I settled back to enjoy the trip.

I cannot remember much about my homeworld, but it must have been a lot like Mars. As we flew along the canal, half-filled with calm, cool water, I could see belts of soft green vegetation stretching on either side of it, gradually fading into the pinkish dust of the desert near the horizon. Above us, the sky was a majestic blue, deepening nearly to black at the zenith.

We passed several little knots of buildings on the way, most of them lying close by the canal. They were gleaming white, hugging the contour of the landscape. There were people outside in the sun, children playing, and several times I saw aircars parked near the houses. The sergeant told me that almost all of these homes belonged to the civilian personnel who worked for the Star Watch.

"The Star Watch is Mars' biggest industry," he said. "Practically everybody on the planet is connected with the Prime Base in one way or another."

He went on to explain that it was a good joke, too, since Mars was the war god of an ancient Earth culture, and the Star Watch is the military service of the Terran Confederation.

But if Mars were named for a war god, it was named long before the Terrans had set foot on the planet. A more tranquil, lovely place I have never seen . . . although the sergeant complained about the thinness of its manufactured air and the cold weather.

Abruptly rising from the gentle landscape was the Star Watch Intelligence Center. Blocklike gray buildings thrust their masses skyward in the middle of a warm pink desert. As we flew nearer, I could see that the stark buildings were probably temporary structures, built since the war had grown to serious propor-

tions. Almost completely overshadowed by them was a small cluster of neat, graceful, thoughtfully-designed buildings - evidently the original center, which had been badly overgrown.

We landed, and the sergeant turned me over to a bright-looking young captain, the Chief Coordinator's adjutant.

This was the beginning of an ordeal I shall never forget.

I gave Heath Knowland's reports to the captain, who then hustled me off to a roomful of other officers. Without preliminaries, they began to question me about the status of the fleet and the strength of the enemy we had faced at Scandia. It soon became apparent that what they were really trying to learn was whether or not I could be trusted to tell the truth.

After a few hours of questions, one of the older men pushed a button on his desk. A corporal appeared in the doorway.

"Thank you very much for your cooperation, Mr. Bakerman," the officer said. "Corporal, will you please take this alien to E.T.D.?"

Alien.

E.T.D. turned out to be the Extraterrestrial Department of Central Intelligence, I learned as we went through a marked doorway. There the routine was at first the same, a windowless room full of Star Watch officers asking me questions. But these questions were about me and my background.

"Have you ever been face to face with one of the Masters?"

"How many Saurian troops do you estimate to be stationed in the Pleiades cluster?"

"How many years were you trained by the Saurians?"

"How does your age and maturity compare with a Terran's?"

"What is the physiological make-up of the Saurians?"

"You're positive that you know nothing at all about the Masters except what you've told us?"

It went on that way all through the day. We stopped for meals, but even then the same bright, young, nameless faces were clustered around me, either asking the same questions or thinking up new ones. Finally I was shown to a room - a very comfortable room - and left alone for the night.

But while I slept, some of those eager investigators must have been going over tape recordings of my answers. Immediately after breakfast, which I had in my room, I was summoned to another questioning in another hot little room crammed with suspicious Terrans. This time they were interested in certain specific points we had covered the day before; they now wanted more details, more precise information . . . they wanted all the knowledge my brain held.

In the middle of the morning, as several of them were asking about my training by the Saurians, I saw two of the officers whispering in a far corner of the room. I do not pretend to be a mind reader, but sometimes - especially when under emotional strain - I can detect the general subject of a conversation without hearing the actual spoken words. This is simply part of the mental development that every human is capable of but the Terrans had not yet learned.

I rose from my chair and waved my questioners into silence.

"Those two gentlemen are discussing the advisability of using drugs to help probe my subconscious mind for information that will be helpful to you," I said. The two officers in the corner turned white.

"That is not necessary," I went on, "nor is it advisable. My body chemistry is very similar to yours, but I am not willing to risk taking narcotics or stimulants . . . none of us knows what effect they might have on me, or whether it will cause permanent damage to my nervous system."

One of the older men sitting near me squirmed slightly in his seat and coughed. It was easy to interpret his unspoken thought.

"You are thinking that my wishes in this do not matter," I said to him.

He nearly jumped out of his chair. "No, not at all I merely . . . that is. . . ."

"I can assure you that I will not voluntarily take any drugs," I told them. "Moreover, it is entirely unnecessary. My training, which you are so interested in, included developing total recall . . . I can remember anything and everything that has happened to me since I began my training under the Saurians."

Their reaction to my claim was wordless, but obvious just the same.

"You do not believe me. Well, let me show you a little of what I have learned from the Saurians as far as mental development is concerned. Do I have your permission?"

They all looked around at one another, then turned to the senior officer there. He was wearing the diamond insignia of a commander.

"All right," he said. "Go ahead and show us your mental abilities."

"Very well," I said. "Your name is Robert Armstrong . . . age fifty-eight . . . you were born on Earth, North America, I believe . . . right now you are slightly amused and still a little skeptical . . . but there is a matter concerning your dreams of becoming the Star Watch's chief psych tech which you are trying very hard not to think about. Shall I go farther?"

He stiffened in his chair. "That's quite far enough, thank you."

"And you," I said, turning to a grinning youngster, "are Lester Berger . . . up to now you have been rather bored with your morning's work because you have been thinking about a date you have tonight with a certain nurse working in this building. But you rather enjoyed watching your commander's discomfort a moment ago."

"I wouldn't say that!" he flustered.

"Very well, Mr. Bakerman," Commander Armstrong said. "You've proved your point. Now show us how good you are at total recall . . . I want to know everything you know . . . and I mean everything."

"Wait a minute, chief," one of the younger officers said. "How do we know the lizards haven't planted mental blocks in his brain? Maybe he won't be able to tell us everything."

"They have placed one block," I admitted. "But only one. I cannot remember anything about my family, and my recollections of my homeworld are extremely hazy. But I trust that will not interfere with your plans."

"They blocked out your memories of your family?"

"To make a more efficient servant of the Masters out of me," I said. "But otherwise the Saurians left my mind free to develop as fully as possible."

"We'll see," Commander Armstrong said.

The technique for total recall is a form of self-hypnosis. Fortunately, the brain does not store all the information it receives in the conscious mind. It would be far too confusing and too big a burden . . . like trying to carry all the books you have read wherever you go. But nothing is forgotten. The subconscious mind is the brain's reference library; it takes special skill, though, to open up that store of information at will. Terrans cannot do it, except with the help of a trained psychiatrist. No human can do it unless he is willing to go through a long, arduous mental ordeal.

I cannot tell how many hours I spent draining my mind of every particle of information it held. I only know that I awoke in my room, drenched in perspiration, too weak and physically sick to eat the meal that was waiting for me on a tray beside my bunk. I forced myself back to sleep, and must have slept the clock around before I arose. There was another meal waiting for me, which I ate appreciatively.

As I was finishing it, a soft buzzer sounded somewhere in the room. I looked around and saw a green light flashing next to a blank viewscreen.

I walked five steps to the screen, still a little wobbly, and turned it on. The face that appeared was that of another young Star Watch officer, but instead of the bright-eyed eagerness of the others I had met, this person was smiling pleasantly.

"Mr. Bakerman? I'm Marshall Jordan, a friend of Jeff's."

I answered with a noncommittal monosyllable.

"I called earlier, but I guess you were asleep. I wonder if I could see you sometime today?"

"Certainly," I said. "But you'd better come at once. I'm not sure when the other Intelligence officers will want to talk with me again."

His smile broadened. "I'm not an Intelligence man, and they won't bother you any more. But I'll come right down. I'm in the building now, so I should probably be knocking on your door in five minutes or so. All right?"

"Fine," I said.

Four minutes and fifty-some seconds later, Marshall Jordan entered my room. He was slightly taller than Jeff, I judged, and on the slender side. His face, though, was roundish; he had warm brown eyes and sandy hair that he had allowed to grow well past the Star Watch regulation length. His uniform insignia was that of a junior staff officer.

"So the high-I. Q. boys put you through the wringer," he said after we had gone through the meaningless formalities that begin most conversations. "Jeff was afraid of that when you didn't show up at home, and he sent me up here to shake you loose from the brain-pickers."

I was surprised by his candor. "Well, they are conscientious officers, I imagine, and I'm the first person they have met who has lived under the Masters"

"It wasn't conscientious of them to grill you for two straight days like that," he said. "There's no excuse for

that kind of zeal. And I had to practically raise the threat of armed insurrection before they'd agree to let you go. They were all set to run you into the ground again as soon as you recovered from the session you had two days ago."

"Two days ago?" I repeated.

"Sure. You've been in your bunk for nearly forty-eight hours. But that's all over now. I told the local intelligencia that you had been summoned by the Terran Confederation Council to appear at their meeting this week, and if they didn't let you go immediately they'd have to answer to the Council. And you know, that's almost the truth!"

I had to laugh at him.

Within a few hours Marsh - as he insisted on being called - had gathered up my belongings and escorted me to his private ship, waiting on a small landing disc just outside the building.

"This is not a Star Watch ship," I commented as we entered it.

"Nope, it's mine. My uncle owns a few shipyards back on Earth . . . he's the scion of an old Yankee family of shipbuilders and navigators. I designed this little job myself. Seats four . . . good for short hops."

In his own offhand manner, Marsh was being modest about his ship. It was a beautifully-designed vehicle, both in appearance and performance. Its interior was as plush as any pleasure ship in the Terran Confederation, yet this sleek little runabout zipped us from Mars to a touchdown at a crowded port on Earth in less than two hours.

"We could have gone faster, but it's against the law," Marsh said, somewhat glumly.

Marsh landed at a commercial port in what he called Western Europe. From there we flew by aircar to the home of Jeff's mother, on the outskirts of the Riviera megalopolis.

It was twilight as we approached the giant city. From our altitude of several thousand feet, all I could see was an ocean of twinkling lights, spreading on and on to the horizon.

"Jeff's home is in the foothills of the Alps, on the edge of the city," Marsh said, although his information was meaningless to me then. It was only later that I realized that the city extended from the Pyrenees Mountains on the border of what was once called Spain, all along the Mediterranean coast to the Alps and the Italian peninsula.

We spent nearly an hour flying along the edge of the lights, until finally there was a broad patch of darkness broken only by a tiny glow far off in the distance.

The glow turned out to be a brilliantly-lighted villa standing alone on a hilltop. It was a huge mansion, and as we came in to land on its roof, I could see hundreds of air- and groundcars parked nearby.

As we left the aircar we could hear music coming from below us.

"Jeff's mother is throwing a party for some of the Council members tonight," Marsh told me.

Robots towed our car off the landing area while we walked across the roof to the doorway that led downstairs. It was a warm night, with little breeze. I craned my neck for a glimpse of Earth's moon, but the lights on the roof blotted out most of the evening sky.

We went down three flights of moving stairs to a large ballroom that was filled with people and music.

Smiling, beautiful women in flowing jeweled gowns, men in brightly-colored evening dress, long tables of refreshments, musicians playing, couples dancing, laughter, music, a thousand conversations at once . . . it was both exciting and confusing to me.

"Wow, more than half of Terra must be here," Marsh said.

Then in the midst of the reds and plaids and golds and whites of the party guests I saw a slim young man dressed in the black and silver of the Star Watch: Jeff. And almost as soon as I spotted him, he turned and recognized us.

He strode through the crowd to us. "Alan, how are you? I'm sorry about what happened on Mars"

"It was nothing," I said. "I'm fine. You look well."

"Thanks. I guess I should, after sitting home doing nothing for a week."

Actually, Jeff looked about the same as when I had last seen him; more rested, certainly, but his face was still thin and angular, his body whipcord lean.

"You should have come with me," Marsh said to Jeff, "and seen the old Alma Mater. Things have changed a lot since we've been there."

"Alma Mater?" I asked.

"He means the Star Watch Academy," Jeff said. "Marsh and I met there and spent two miserable years together."

"We learned to be officers and gentlemen," Marsh added. "And don't fall for that miserable stuff. Our boy Jeff single-handedly fractured every record in the Academy's book while he was there . . . top scholastic average, captain of his class, outstanding athlete . . . your records are still untouched, I found out."

"Is that why it took you two days to pick up Alan and bring him here?" Jeff asked, grinning.

Marsh feigned wounded pride. "What a nasty thing to say! I practically had to blow up half the Intelligence Center to make them let go of Alan. I spent at least thirty-six hours cooling my heels in various offices. I just did a lot of phoning while I waited, that's all. Come to think of it, they probably surrendered Alan to me just to unsnarl their communications system."

We all laughed. Jeff said, "That's the way to do it. Make the biggest possible nuisance of yourself, and you'll get what you want . . . providing you promise to leave."

"By the way," Marsh said, "I learned something very interesting while banging around Prime Base They've definitely proved that a ship in superlight overdrive is not physically in this universe."

Jeff was instantly curious. "Proved it? How?"

"Simple. Commander Hickey and his oscilloscope-peekers rigged a robot ship to fly a superlight course right through the middle of the sun . . . the ship went through on course exactly, without even singeing the paint on her name plate. Hickey and two volunteers later made the same run themselves, just to make certain that the instruments were telling the truth. They were. The ship was literally out of this world. Hickey has called the nonuniverse subspace."

"Odd no one thought of it before," Jeff mused.

"Too obvious," Marsh answered. "The obvious needs a man of genius to discover it. Besides, there are some tricky technical details to work out - the star's radiation and gravitational spectra leak into subspace a bit, for instance."

"I thought about flying through a star when we were at the Academy, but I was certain that somebody would punch a hole in my idea because it was so simple . . ."

Jeff winked at me. "Listen to him, Alan. The self-styled man of genius."

"No, I didn't mean it that way. . ."

"He's not happy that somebody finally proved a scientific problem," Jeff went on. "He's only jealous for not having thought of it himself . . . so he invents an elaborate excuse for overlooking the obvious . . ."

Marsh made the sourest face he could contort his features into and answered only, "Aaahhh"

"All right, all right," Jeff said, laughing. "I'm only kidding. Alan, in fairness to our friend here . . . he's the best navigator the Star Watch Academy ever produced, and he got better grades than I did in mathematics." He turned to Marsh. "How's that. Okay?"

Marsh smiled benignly. "In all honesty, I must admit you're right."

Just then Terry steered his way through the crowded room, his flaming red hair towering above everyone else, and joined us. We stood and talked as though we had been friends since birth, the four of us, although not even Jeff and Marshall had known each other for more than three years, and Terry and I had met them - and each other - less than a month ago.

We did not realize it then, but this first meeting of the four of us together was the beginning of a partnership that would eventually take us halfway across the galaxy and end in victory, fame, and death.

The evening wore on and we helped ourselves to food and refreshments as we talked. In time Marsh

and Terry drifted back to the crowd. Then the warmth of the room got to be a bit too oppressive for me and I asked Jeff to excuse me while I got some fresh air.

"Sure," he said. "There's a terrace outside . . . I'll go with you."

"No, I'm all right. I only want a little air. Stay with the party and enjoy yourself."

"I really don't know many of the people here," Jeff said. "They're mostly my mother's friends. I've been away from Earth for most of seven years, first with Dr. Lee, then the Academy, and finally Star Watch service."

But I would not let him join me. "You're home. Dance and enjoy the party."

He shrugged. "If you insist, Alan."

I walked out onto the terrace. It was cooler there, and a soft breeze had sprung up. The terrace was lighted only by the glow from inside the villa coming through the sweeping windows and open doors. I searched the heavens for a glimpse of the group of stars the Terrans call the Pleiades, but could not find them. Behind me I could hear laughter and music; above me were the unfamiliar stars of a world that was alien to me; below me, as I looked out from the terrace, was a sea of twinkling lights, brighter and more numerous than the stars, stretching out to the distant horizon.

"You must be very lonely," a woman's soft voice behind me said.

I turned. She was tall and Dark-haired, dressed in a shimmering green gown.

"I am Renata, Jeff's mother," she said. "You're Alan Bakerman, aren't you?"

"Yes," I replied. "I . . . I had no idea that Jeff's mother would be so young, and so beautiful."

She laughed warmly. "Every woman likes to be told she's beautiful; but telling her that she's young is indeed flattery."

"Not at all," I assured her.

"I'm sorry Jeff didn't get the chance to introduce us," she said, "but I've been kept busy by my other guests until now. I saw you come out here on the terrace and decided to introduce myself."

"I'm very pleased that you did," I said.

Except that she looked too young, I might have guessed that she was Jeff's mother; she had the same facial mold of fine, delicate bone structure, the same coloring, the same intensity of expression.

"You have been with my husband for the past year?" she asked rhetorically.

"Yes," I said. "He is well."

"Truly?"

I could see in her eyes that she wanted no evasions. "His work is difficult . . . and he feels the burden of it. But his health is fine, and his men revere him."

She smiled, but there was sadness in it. I know how difficult his work is, and how long he has been at it, and how far from home it keeps him. That's the reason for this party tonight, really. I can't join him in his fleet on the frontier . . . but I can do every-thing possible here to see that the Council decides in his favor, and gives him the ships and men he needs."

"It must be a very hard and lonely time for you."

"Yes. But in a way, I'm the fortunate one," she said. "At least I'm home, with the friends and surroundings I've known all my life. With Heath and Jeff it's

different . . . their home is a battlefield, and their constant companion is death."

"Yet they must fight this war," I said.

"I know," she replied, "but I also realize what price the war is taking from them. Heath bears the responsibility . . . and the Council sits safely at home, expecting him to keep the invaders away, even though he is practically alone against them."

"Surely the Council will send more help."

"When? And how much? And what help can they send that will ease the burden of responsibility he feels? My husband was leader of the Terran patrol that first contacted the Saurians, almost twenty years ago. Do you know how he is haunted by the after-math of that contact . . . the killing, the terror, the fighting that has gradually grown until we find our-selves at war with an enemy vastly more powerful than we are?"

"But Heath must realize that he is not to blame, merely because his patrol was the first . . ."

"He realizes the truth of it," she said, "but he feels the burden just the same. Knowledge and emotion are two separate forces in the human mind."

I said nothing, but watched her as she stood by the railing of the terrace, the cool breeze playing with her hair, the lights from the party inside reflecting in her dark eyes.

"And Jeff", she said at last. "What about my son? Ever since he was old enough to understand, his father has been fighting an unbeatable enemy . . . an enemy that always wins or melts away before you can strike back.

"I wanted Jeff to be an important leader in the

Confederation. I sent him to the finest schools in the Solar system. I pleaded with him to go into government service; he could be the youngest member ever elected to the Council, someday. But I'm just a woman, and who listens to a mother's advice when a war is being fought?"

I tried to work away from the subject. "Jeff is a fine Officer, and he will attain a high place in the Star Watch."

"Perhaps," she answered. "But he could become one of the Confederation's most influential leaders if he would resign from the Star Watch and enter government service here on Earth. A man of his intelligence and training should be working toward a place of leadership here; there are thousands of officers in the Star Watch doing the same thing Jeff does."

"But does he want to enter politics?" I asked.

She shook her head. "No. But neither did he want to join the Star Watch. All his life, Jeff has wanted only one thing: to explore the galaxy, to discover new stars, new worlds"

"The map," I murmured.

"I've heard of his galaxy map," she said. "Yes, exploring the unknown is his first love . . . filling in the blank areas of his map is what he really wants to do. But the war has closed that door to him. So he's followed his father's path"

She glanced back at the house. "I . . . I should really return to my other guests. I've unburdened my heart to you, Mr. Bakerman . . . I don't know why I should have troubled you with my fears, except that I sensed that you were lonely . . . as I am. Please forgive me."

"I only hope that you found me a sympathetic

listener," I said. "I never realized before that a person could be lonely on his own homeworld, surrounded by friends . . ."

We started toward the doors, back to the party. "About your worries concerning Jeff," I said. "I'm certain that if he uses the abilities he has, he will become the important leader you want him to be, regardless of where he is. There is potential greatness in him."

"I know," she said, pausing before the doorway. "The way hasn't been easy for Jeff. He's always been under pressure to excel in everything he does - even his parents have been guilty of pushing him, I'm afraid. But there is greatness in him."

She reached out and touched my arm. "Alan, he needs a friend . . . someone to stand by him wherever he goes; someone he can talk to, and get advice from. Will you do this for him? He likes you, I know . . ."

"Jeff has been my friend since the day we first met," I said, "and I hope that I've been his."

As we turned to enter the ballroom, Jeff came walking toward us.

"I've been looking around to introduce you to each other," he said, "but I guess you've beaten me to it."

As we stood there, for an instant Jeff's eyes met his mother's gaze. It was only a momentary thing, but for that instant I could see the wordless, undefinable link between the mother and son. It was more than the physical resemblance, more even than familial love for one another; it was a meeting of minds and wills.

In that brief glance Jeff told his mother that, although he would always be her son, he was now a man and he must follow his own life in the way

he felt best. And she said to him, wordlessly, that she understood, even though she could not agree with him.

"I must get back to my other guests," she said to us. "Mr. Bakerman, thank you so much for being such a good listener. Jeff, take good care of your friend."

He grinned. "Certainly, Mother."

She rejoined the chatting couples nearby and was soon engulfed in the crowd. Jeff turned to me and said, "I could use some fresh air myself, now."

We walked back on to the terrace.

"What was my mother talking about?" Jeff asked.

"About you, mostly," I said. "She was telling me about her hopes for your career."

Jeff sat on the stone railing. "Some career choice: go into politics with my mother's family or join the Star Watch with my father's family. I'll always be known as so-and-so's nephew, or cousin, or son, no matter what I do."

"Is it that bad?" I asked.

"Well. . ." he smiled. "No, I guess not quite that bad."

I looked up at the stars again. "A while ago I was trying to find Rh'khour'mnin - the Pleiades," I said.

"Oh, sure . . . they ought to be visible." He hopped down from the railing and pointed. "See? There's Orion . . . and that V-shaped group belongs to Taurus, the Bull . . . now just a little to the right . . . see the cluster?"

Six tiny, twinkling points of light. "Yes, I see them," I said.

I must have sounded terribly disappointed.

"I know," Jeff said, "they're a long way off. But we'll get to them . . . I promise you that."

The moon had risen and we watched it for awhile. Jeff pointed out some of the dry-land "seas" and the craters that were visible to the naked eye. We both strained for a glimpse of Selene City, near the center of the moon's disc, but could not see its lights.

"It's in the daylight side now," Jeff explained. "When it's over on the night side you can see the lights pretty well."

"Dr. Lee told me that Earth's sky was rather drab compared to Titan's," I said, "but I think it's quite beautiful."

"Titan's spectacular, all right, with Saturn hanging up there . . . but home is where the heart is, and home always looks best," Jeff said.

He looked out at the stars again, then turned back to me. "You know, I've been thinking about something you said a couple of weeks ago . . . the night I showed you the galaxy map."

"Yes?"

"You said then that the Masters could absorb the Terran Confederation without firing a shot, because their culture was so superior to ours. I didn't believe you then."

"And now?"

"Well, being home brings back memories that you never realized you had. All day long I've been thinking of a vacation I took with my parents when I was very young . . . about nine or ten, I guess.

"We flew to New Guinea, an island in our major ocean," he went on. "I remember it was a big event for me, because my father was seldom home. The frontier was being raided pretty frequently by the aliens . . . the Saurians, that is."

"Go on," I said.

"Well, my father told me that this island was once an impassable jungle . . . the only people that lived on it were headhunters. Then a big war was fought and the headhunters were suddenly confronted with aircars and steel tools and motor-driven groundcars . . . within three generations the headhunters were just as civilized as anybody else on the planet. They cleaned out the jungle pretty much and turned the island into a tourist resort."

I began to see what he was driving at.

"I've been thinking . . . probably those headhunters, the first ones at least, didn't want to have anything to do with the strangers that showed them how uncivilized they were. They probably wanted to live the way they had always lived. But one touch of modern civilization doomed their old way of life. They were engulfed by the superior culture, whether they liked it or not."

I nodded. "Yes, that seems to be a rule of human behavior - and not only human, but all intelligent creatures."

"So whether we like it or not," Jeff said, frowning, "the Masters' culture is going to absorb ours . . . just like a drop of ink in a glassful of water will eventually spread until it colors all the water."

"But there's a difference," I said.

"I know . . . we want to absorb their culture at our own rate, to digest it leisurely, use the parts of it that we want and reject what doesn't suit us."

"But the Masters will not permit this."

"No, they'll try to ram it all down our throats . . . to

make us into the form they can best use for their own purposes . . . that's what we've got to fight against."

"Hey, there you are!" A voice from the doorway.

We turned to see Marshall Jordan rushing to us.

"They just announced over the tri-di that the fleet is engaged in a terrific battle out on the frontier," he said.

"Where?" we asked simultaneously.

"No exact location was given," Marsh said, "but it sounds to me as though the Saurians are trying to clean up the frontier systems they bypassed when they took Scandia. They'll need those systems if they expect to keep their supply lines open."

"They said it was a big battle?" Jeff asked.

"Full fleet action."

Jeff looked past Marshall's shoulder back into the ballroom where the party was still in full swing.

"Look at them," he muttered, "and all the other billions in the city and all over this planet - I wonder how many of them realize we're at war?"

Chapter 4 *The New Leader*

The next morning dawned cool and bright. I awoke early and had breakfast with Marsh. Jeff, he told me, had already left for the capital.

We were driven to the heart of the city in a robot-groundcar, whipping over miles of intricately cross-connected highways that cut right through the mazes of buildings which made up the megalopolis.

"How fast are we going?" I asked as the city blurred by.

"Oh, about a hundred and fifty or so," Marsh said. "We've got plenty of time, so there's no need to hurry."

I looked at him. "Thanks. This is fast enough for me."

He laughed. "Look, Alan, we could never run a city this size if we didn't have rapid transportation. Centuries ago, it was thought that groundcars would help to disperse the cities . . . spread them over the countryside. Well, the cities spread out, all right. But they didn't thin out. There are more people living in

every cubic mile of this city than the total population of most colony planets."

I tried to grasp the magnitude of the numbers he was hinting at. "That means this city must have a population of more than . . . a hundred million?"

"Two-fifty, last time I checked," Marsh shot back, "and probably a lot more by now. And this is only one city . . . there are about twenty-five megalopolises on Earth . . . Riviera here is a medium-sized one. Eighty per cent of the planet's population lives in 'em. The other twenty percent lives in cities of various sizes."

"Is there no rural population?" I asked.

"Huh?"

"People living on farms. Who grows your food?"

"Oh, sure. We have farms . . . but why live out in the hills when you can have the comforts of a city home? The farms run pretty much automatically, anyway."

Marsh thought a moment, then resumed. "Besides, most of the planet's farm land was exhausted years ago. We get our food from the sea, from hydroponics centers - which can be in the cities just as easily as anywhere else - and the rest of our food is imported from the colonies."

"Then most of your planet is unused land," I said.

"Well, depends on what you mean by 'unused.' Most of it can't be used for anything much . . . exhausted farmland, abandoned mines, deserts, eroded badlands. But the government has been reclaiming a lot of this and turning it into parks . . . no sense trying to grow food on it, since it's cheaper and healthier to use sea food or synthetics."

I looked through the car's window to the endless

rows of towers, the mammoth cubic buildings that held millions of people in them, and the ribbon-like highways threading through everywhere.

"And almost everyone on Earth lives in these buildings," I said, half to myself.

"Yep. Those who prefer the wide open spaces can ship out to the colonies. But you can see why we need fast-moving cars of all types." Marsh patted the armrest of his seat. "This baby is one of the best: frictionless antigrav suspension, photon engine, and a guidance system that'll run either by itself or hook into a city's network, like it is now."

I heard him with only half my mind. I was still staring through the window, watching the thousands of groundcars skimming over the highways, and the equally numerous aircars flitting through the mazes of buildings in seemingly random patterns. To think that these people could spend their whole lives in an entirely artificial environment, without even the desire to see more of nature than an occasional picnic in a well-tailored park - it was both fascinating and appalling to me.

Soon the car turned off the highway and entered a broad mall lined with gleaming towers of marble, glass, and shining metal.

"The government center," Marsh said cryptically. "There's the Capitol building."

He nodded toward a domed templelike structure at the far end of the mall. Crowds of people were clustered about it, and from this distance we could see small groups riding the moving stairways. Marsh led me around to one side and ushered me into an automatic lift-tube.

"The stairways add dignity to the building," he said as he punched a floor number, "but the tubes are a lot faster."

We stepped off an instant later into a hallway. Down at the end of it an armed guard stood by a double doorway. Marsh showed some credentials to the guard, and the doors slid open.

We went through into a small meeting chamber. The Council was already in session - fifteen men of various ages sitting around a large table that had been made centuries ago from a now-extinct tree: Marsh called it a Sequoia.

Another guard inside the door showed us to seats along the wall. Across the room we spotted Jeff and Terry sitting together, their Star Watch uniforms looking strangely out-of-place in this setting.

"The Council is just going through the routine business that starts every meeting," Marsh whispered to me. "Nothing important has happened yet."

The chamber was smaller than I had expected, but very ornate. The walls were marble, windowless, and lined with stereoportraits of elderly men.

"Former councilmen," Marsh told me quietly.

The vaulted ceiling of the room bore a three-dimensional star map of the Terran Confederation.

All four walls of the oblong chamber were lined with chairs, but only a few visitors were attending this session. I guessed that the meeting was open only to those who had been summoned by the Council to give firsthand reports pertaining to the subject under discussion.

Each councilman was seated in something that looked more like a machine than a chair. The arm

rests, which were dotted with push buttons, extended into small desks. Marsh told me that there were tape recorders, fax scanners, and other equipment inside them. The councilmen could tap all the information stored anywhere on the planet without leaving their seats.

But if the room was stiff and ornate, the procedure of the meeting was not. The councilmen wasted no time on speeches and flowery language. They spoke to each other informally, casually, as they went about their business.

Soon the Council President - a wiry, energetic-looking man of about fifty or sixty - beckoned a Star Watch officer to him. The officer, who looked vaguely familiar to me, took the empty chair at the President's left, opened a voluminous notebook, and began reading aloud.

Marsh leaned over and said to me, "The President's name is Josephs - good man; Earth-born, cousin of Jeff's mother."

I nodded.

The Star Watch officer was saying, "We ran his information through our automatic computers, checking it against several proposed courses of action against the enemy. Unfortunately, the computers still showed insufficient data to give a definite probability curve"

Only then did I recognize him: Commander Armstrong, the Intelligence officer who had questioned me on Mars. He was reporting on what I had told him about the Masters and the Saurians.

"We are forced to conclude," he read on, "that our knowledge of the enemy's military strength, disposi-

tions, and intentions is still almost zero." He flapped over his notebook and looked up at the councilmen.

"Thank you, commander," President Josephs said. "You may leave if you wish."

Marsh whispered, "They've got an automatic tri-di tape of his testimony to play back if they need it."

The President said to his colleagues, "Now we'll bear what the Star Watch proposes. Frontier Coordinator Knowland was supposed to make this report via tri-di, but his fleet is still out of contact and presumably in battle. In his place, his son, Junior Staff Officer Geoffrey Knowland, will give the report."

Jeff rose from his chair and walked to the vacated seat at the Council table. Instead of sitting, he remained on his feet.

He looked over the fifteen faces around the table, all watching him. "Before going into the body of this report," he began, "I'd like to make a preliminary comment.

"The plan I'm going to detail was originated by my father. As you know, he has been fighting the enemy for more than ten years. He is familiar with their tactics, from small hit-and-run raids to the full-scale invasion of star systems like Scandia. His plan has been examined and approved by the Star Watch Executive Command.

"This plan, then, represents the best thinking the Star Watch can bring to bear on the vital problem facing us. No doubt you'll find the plan burdensome and expensive. I can only say that, regardless of the cost, some plan of action must be formulated and agreed upon immediately. Our time has already run out. And this Council is the only body in the Confed-

eration which can act to save us. The Star Watch can't put its plan into effect without your approval."

Jeff leaned over and punched a button on the chair beside him. The star map in the ceiling lighted up. Reaching into a panel in the armrest-desk, he took out a small pistol-shaped electronic pointer.

"The main problem facing us," Jeff said, as the councilmen eased their chairs down to see the ceiling comfortably, "is the tremendous distances between our star systems. The enemy has been able to strike repeatedly on one side of the Confederation," he pointed to a portion of the edge of the oval of stars, "and almost simultaneously to hit an opposite side."

Jeff replaced the pointer and snapped off the map. Their attention focused back on him. "The conclusions we've drawn from this are twofold. First: our fleet is greatly outnumbered . . . the enemy can overpower any sector of the Confederation he chooses - he can invade two or more areas at the same time, and each invasion fleet is bigger than our entire Star Watch frontier force.

"Second: we cannot possibly defend the Confederation with only a mobile force like the fleet. The enemy surrounds us, and is capable of choosing its point of attack. While the fleet is fighting in one sector, the enemy attacks in another area. By the time we get there, the battle is already lost."

Jeff stopped speaking momentarily and looked the councilmen over once more. "Gentlemen, this is the situation. We cannot continue to attempt our present course of action, simply because we cannot afford further losses like Scandia. The enemy can - at this

moment - strike any point in the Confederation. Even Earth."

That perked up their ears.

"What are the Star Watch's recommendations?" the President asked.

Jeff replied unhesitatingly, "That the Council initiate the largest, best-manned and -equipped military force that the Confederation can support. We must have a fleet that is numerically equal to the enemy's. All the frontier star systems, and several systems deeper inside the Confederation must be converted into fortress areas"

"For what purpose?" a councilman asked.

"To make deeper penetration into the Confederation impossibly expensive for the enemy," Jeff said.

"It'll be impossibly expensive, all right," the councilman retorted, "but for which side?"

Marsh turned to me. "Councilman Mason . . . a cunning little budget-watcher. Has his eye on the President's chair."

Mason talked for several minutes about the cost of the Star Watch's proposal. He was a short, pudgy, slightly stooped figure with a pasty, bland face. But his eyes were crafty, and his arguments obviously carried weight with the councilmen.

"Councilman Mason!" Jeff called out suddenly, interrupting him in midsentence. "Can we afford to lose this war?"

Mason was stopped cold, but another councilman was on his feet. "Who says we're at war?" He was younger than the other councilmen; tall and lanky, with sharp, chiseled features.

Before Jeff could reply, the councilman added, "We've never received a declaration of war from the Masters . . . or from the Saurians, either, for that matter. Perhaps these attacks on us are the work of outlaws. Why don't we contact these Masters, who-ever they are, and see if we can negotiate with them?"

The President was shaking his head. "Mr. Kaiser, in the past ten years we have made every possible attempt to contact and negotiate with our attackers. Every attempt was ignored or rebuffed."

Councilman Kaiser sat down. "He hasn't been told what to answer," Marsh whispered.

"What?"

"Kaiser isn't speaking for himself," Marsh said. "He's only a puppet for Mason."

"Really?"

Marsh nodded. His expression was that of a conspirator with confidential information which he had just entrusted to an uninformed colleague.

Jeff was still on his feet and answering Kaiser. "In short," he was saying, "I simply can't believe that a ten-year war of constantly mounting intensity is the work of a band of pirates. We are at war, and if the loss of Scandia isn't enough of a declaration for you, perhaps the loss of the Capella system will be!"

"Whew!" Marsh whistled. "Capella is Kaiser's home system."

"Even if we could reach the Masters and talk with them," Jeff went on, "how can we negotiate with them when it is so obvious that we can't even defend ourselves?"

I had something to add, so I rose from my chair. The President saw me.

"Mr. Bakerman, do you wish to speak?" he asked.
"Yes."

He turned to Jeff. "If it's all right with you, Officer Knowland."

"Certainly," Jeff said, and sat down beside the President.

The councilmen turned to me, and I said, "I only wish to point out that my education and training under the Saurians was for the purpose of making me an administrator of part of your Confederation after it was conquered. The Masters have no intention of negotiating with you. Your only contact with them will be through the Saurians, and they will speak to you only as conquerors. Nowhere in their plans for this section of the galaxy do they anticipate peaceful discussion."

For several moments everyone was silent. I sat down.

Finally, Councilman Mason turned back to the President and said, "With all due consideration for Mr. Bakerman, and no intent whatsoever to slur him personally . . . I wonder how much weight we can give his testimony?"

Jeff was out of his seat like a shot. "Mr. Mason . . ."

Mason waved him silent. "I mean no offense. But our own Intelligence people could not evaluate his information . . . for all Mr. Bakerman himself knows, he might have been sent here by the Saurians under unconscious command to subvert our efforts."

Councilman Kaiser agreed. "After all, the Star Watch hasn't won a battle since he joined the fleet . . ."

Jeff leaned across the table toward them. "On several planets of this Confederation your remarks would

be sufficient grounds for a duel," he seethed. "You have not only insulted this man, who is risking his life to aid us, but you have impugned the judgment and ability of my father."

"Nothing of the sort," Mason said.

"If you think for one moment," Jeff went on, "that the fleet could have won a battle in the past year against the odds it's faced, you don't belong on this Council. . . ."

"Gentlemen," the President interceded. "This doesn't help us at all."

Another councilman was on his feet. He was tall, but his stocky build disguised his height.

"Councilman Hines," Marsh informed me. "From Venus . . . a solid citizen."

"There's a consideration of the Star Watch plan that bothers me," Hines said. "It's not the cost - we can always afford what it takes to keep ourselves free. But there's a question of values here that we must think over very carefully."

He shifted his gaze directly to Jeff. "The Star Watch is asking that we train every available man in the Confederation to fight the invaders. This may be necessary. But do you realize what it means? Not only in terms of economics - but what it means to the fundamental concepts of our democracy.

"I take it that the Star Watch envisions a long, hard war. A war with no foreseeable end, as I understand it. If we pour everything we have into fighting the Masters, what happens to our government? Aren't we running the risk of having the Star Watch become more powerful than any other agency in the Confed-

eration? Even if we win such a war - and the cost will be fantastically high - such a huge army will imperil the very freedoms we are trying to defend."

"Right!" Mason snapped. "We can't have the Star Watch turning our Confederation into a military dictatorship!"

They argued for hours over that. Hines, who had brought up the point, only wanted to make certain that control of the Star Watch was maintained by the government, no matter how big an army was needed to fight the Masters. But Mason and Kaiser hammered away at the obvious specter of a military dictatorship.

Servorobots passed food and refreshments among us, but the verbal battle went on without letup. Jeff clung to the argument that, no matter what political arrangements were to be made, the Masters must be faced by the most powerful force the Confederation could muster.

Kaiser, after a long huddle with Mason and two other councilmen, proposed that each star system expand its militia for better self-defense, and leave the Star Watch to guard the interstellar communications routes.

"That's no better than where we are now," Jeff said. "The present Star Watch fleet can't jump around the Confederation fast enough to meet all the attacks the enemy is staging. And even when we engage the enemy, we're too badly outnumbered to win."

The President shook his head wearily. "This is getting us no place," he said. "I suggest we adjourn for the day and straighten out our thinking about this."

The four of us - Jeff, Terry, Marsh, and I - lingered

in the Capitol building autorestaurant to discuss what had happened. I could see through the plastiglass wall near our table that it was almost sunset outside.

"Hines has a legitimate point," Jeff was saying. "The more powerful you make the Star Watch, the more risk you run of someone taking over and making himself a dictator."

Marsh shook his head. "The Council can exert control. . . ."

"Legally, yes," Jeff said, "but a man with an army behind him can usually outvote any government body."

"They'd better decide quick," Terry frowned. "There's not much time left to play around."

"That's the trouble," Jeff pointed out. "And the Council has to come to a unanimous agreement"

"Unanimous?" I asked.

Jeff nodded. "This is a Confederation, Alan; no star system - not even Earth and the Solar system - has the right to impose its will on any other system. If all the Council members agree on a course of action, then their home governments take that as binding. But any councilman can disagree, and his home systems aren't committed to doing anything they don't want to do."

I lapsed into a Rh'khour'mnin exclamation.

"I don't know what you said," Terry grinned, "but I agree with your tone of voice."

Marsh was staring moodily out the window. "Y'know, if the Council can't agree on a firm plan tomorrow, they'll adjourn and we'll probably drag on like this for another six months or so."

"If the past six months are any indication of the future," I said, "the war will be lost by then."

"By the way, Alan," Jeff said, "I've been meaning to ask you how things went on Titan."

I told him briefly of my visit to Dr. Lee's school, and ended by repeating the old teacher's message: "Walls built to keep invaders outside also keep the defenders inside."

"Well, that's pretty obvious," Terry said.

Jeff smiled. "Obvious as an iceberg," he said.

Just then a harried-looking secretary scurried over to our table. "Officer Knowland?" she asked, then went on without waiting for an answer. "The President would like to see you in his office, immediately."

We all hustled out of the restaurant, up a lift-tube, and into the President's suite. Jeff went into the private office while we waited outside with the secretary.

In a few minutes Jeff came out.

He looked dazed, and his face was ghostly white.

"The President has just received word . . ." his voice was trembling. "The fleet . . . has been badly beaten at the frontier. My - my father has been killed."

That was the last we saw of Jeff that night. He rushed home in an autoflier to break the news to his mother. Terry, Marsh, and I stayed around the capital to learn as much as we could about the disastrous battle.

Marsh used all the influence he could, and gradually we began to sift through the rumors and unconfirmed reports that were spreading like wildfire over the city.

The fleet was shattered, about one-third was totally destroyed. The rest had been scattered over a volume of many light-years. The Saurians had evidently solidi-

fied their supply lines to Scandia, and now they commanded a deep wedge pointed toward the heart of the Terran Confederation.

The night was one of wild excitement in the city, almost panic. Mobs drifted around the government buildings - crowds of men and women who were confused and frightened by the news that was leaking out to them. Finally, in an effort to quiet their fears, the Information Agency released a carefully-worded report of the battle. It announced the defeat, announced Heath Knowland's death, but did not say that - for the time being, at least - there was no Star Watch fleet between Earth and the enemy.

The Council was in an entirely different mood the following morning.

Marsh, Terry, and I were there early and watched the fifteen men file in and take their seats. There was no chatter, no last-minute huddles. They simply sat down. The Chief Coordinator of the Star Watch came in, flanked by several aides.

No one looked as though he had slept at all the night before. Probably no one had. Finally, when they were all seated, Jeff strode into the chamber and went straight to the seat beside the President.

The President rose and put his hand on Jeff's shoulder. "There's no need for you to continue your testimony," he said softly. "We understand the shock you've had, and appreciate your courage in coming this morning . . ."

Jeff stood ramrod-straight and said to the older man, "Thank you, sir. But my duty - and yours - is here." He turned to the other councilmen. "I've come here

today to mourn my father in the only way I know - by carrying on the work he gave his life for."

A visible wave of emotion swept the chamber.

"I spent most of the night on Mars, in conference with the Chief Coordinator," Jeff said, nodding toward the aging officer.

"I thought he was home," Terry whispered.

Marsh shook his head.

"The Chief Coordinator," Jeff went on, "has received reports during the night that many of the survivors of yesterday's battle have shown up on scattered star systems deeper within the Confederation. The fleet is reforming, and is being deployed under temporary command until a new Frontier Coordinator is assigned."

Jeff paused; then, staring straight at Councilman Mason, he said, "We have discussed our plans in the light of this crippling defeat. The plan I proposed to you yesterday is still the only one we can see that has any reasonable chance of success. However, the results of the frontier battle, and some of the suggestions made yesterday have caused us to modify some of the details."

Jeff punched a button and the star map glowed into life. The councilmen leaned back and saw a glaring red salient slashing through one side of the oval.

"This is the wedge the enemy has driven into our Confederation. As you can see, it not only imperils all the star systems around it, but the wedge itself is aimed straight at Earth.

"What we recommend is this: Councilman Kaiser's suggestion that local militias be strengthened should

be carried through as fast as possible. The Star Watch will offer as many officers to train the men as it can. In this way, every star system will be responsible for its own defense.

"Secondly, the Star Watch fleet must be enlarged as quickly as possible to a size capable of handling the invaders. This means making the fleet at least five times the strength it was before yesterday's disaster.

"These efforts will take time and money. The money we have . . . the time we don't. So, to gain time, I have proposed - and the Chief Coordinator agrees - that an expeditionary force be sent to raid the enemy staging bases outside the Confederation."

"But we don't know where their bases are or how big they are," a councilman objected.

"I know," Jeff agreed. "But with a sufficiently large and fast-moving force we can find them and upset the Masters' timetable by destroying their supplies and troop concentrations. And perhaps we can recruit other humans outside the Confederation to join us in fighting the Masters."

"How big a force will you need?" Hines asked.

"At least five hundred thousand fighting men in a thousand or more battle cruisers with support vehicles," Jeff snapped.

The councilmen were too stunned to answer right away.

Finally Hines asked, "But that's twice the size of the full Star Watch fleet; where do you propose to get these men and ships?"

Jeff replied without hesitation. "One-third will be battle veterans from the fleet; one-third will come from the Home Guard here at the Solar system; the re-

mainder will be recruited from militia units throughout the Confederation."

"No!"

"Impossible."

"It can't be done!"

Jeff stared them all down. "Gentlemen," he said at last, "It's no longer a matter of what we can do. It's a question of what we must do to stay alive and free. We can't defend ourselves adequately, and we won't be strong enough to defend ourselves for many months. I'm hoping the enemy doesn't realize that.

"We've got to attack them. That's the only way to knock them off-balance and give us the time we need to build up our defenses."

He pointed to Hines. "We've modified our plan so that the defensive forces on each star system will be under the control of the local government. That should prevent a supermilitary organization from mushrooming into a dictatorship."

Jeff swept the room with his blazing eyes. "The Star Watch has organized a plan of attack and defense . . . none of you has offered anything but objections and reservations. The Star Watch has been fighting this battle for ten years and more while you have ignored our requests for the power needed to stop these attacks. Many men - including my father - have given their lives. For what? Only you can answer.

"The plan is before you. I suggest you vote on it."

It was almost pure showmanship. But the President asked for a motion to vote. Hines made the motion and Kaiser seconded it.

It had to be a unanimous approval.

It was.

As we left the chamber I struggled through a crowd of Star Watch officers to Jeff, who was walking beside the Chief Coordinator.

"There are many things I want to say about your father and you," I told him, "but I have no words to express them."

"I know," Jeff said, smiling tiredly. "Perhaps it's just as well. The talking is ended now. It's time for work . . . and action."

Chapter 5 *The First Battle*

I was standing on the control deck of Jeff's flagship. All around me officers and men who were not on duty at the moment were pressing in for a glimpse of the fleet as it cruised by in review.

"This," said one grizzled tech, "is the most awe-inspiring thing I've ever seen."

We were all staring at the main viewscreen as ship after ship, for more than an hour, sailed past and joined formation. In the background was the ruddy, crisscrossed disc of Mars.

The ships kept coming: huge, saucer-shaped cruisers, needle-nosed landing craft, sleek scouts and picket ships, and the sturdy, vital repair vehicles.

Finally, all was ready. The men at the viewscreen dispersed as the techs took their positions at the ship's controls. Overlooking the control deck was the bridge, where Jeff and his staff were poring over last-minute reports and instructions.

Jeff's command consisted of a striking force of fast, powerful ships that could range through enemy territory to destroy communications and supplies. His tactics would depend largely on surprise, and on the fact that ships under superlight drive in subspace could not be easily detected or followed. They could not even communicate with each other over distances greater than a few light-minutes. Even simple voice beams warp out of shape very quickly in subspace.

This was the force that would carry the attack to the enemy.

All eyes turned to Jeff as the last ship joined the formation. He glanced at the bridge's atomic clock, then nodded to the ship's captain. The captain touched a series of buttons and the vibration of subnuclear drive took over.

The Terran Expeditionary Force was assembled, and on its way.

Mission: To upset the enemy's invasion timetable by quick, sharp strikes at his staging bases.

Ultimate destination: Unknown.

The expeditionary force's take-off for enemy-held territory was the result of six weeks' feverish activity by Jeff and his supporters in the Star Watch and Council.

The Intelligence Center's computers had estimated that the next Saurian attack on the Confederation would come within eight to ten weeks of the disastrous defeat of the main Star Watch fleet. This estimate was based on the timing of previous enemy offenses.

If the expeditionary force was to upset the Masters' timetable and give the Terrans time to patch up their

battered defenses, it would have to be ready to strike its first blow in less than eight weeks.

All of us worked day and night from the moment the Council voted in favor of Jeff's idea. But it was Jeff, himself, who worked hardest, longest, and with the most success. With the Council behind him, Jeff had the authority to organize the expedition; but putting together such a powerful fleet in just a few weeks was another matter.

Jeff seemed to be all over the Confederation at once during those hectic weeks. By ship, by tri-di, by personal representatives (including myself), Jeff and his requests for men and weapons appeared on every Terran star system.

And the young man showed surprising reservoirs of skill and persuasion.

He needed a slow-moving colonial governor until the exasperated politician was glad to give Jeff the men and ships he wanted, just to get rid of him. When told that it would be impossible for Arcturus to furnish any troops for his force, Jeff made a public tri-di request for men, and three times the number he had originally asked for volunteered. A Star Watch survivor of the battle that killed Jeff's father thundered that his men and ships had seen enough action and needed a rest; Jeff outshouted him. He wheedled, coaxed, threatened, and begged until he got what he wanted.

Only then did he return to the Star Watches Prime Base on Mars.

I was with Jeff when he reported to the Chief Coordinator. The old man at first tried to mask his surprise as he leafed through page after page of reports on

what each star system had contributed in men, mate-riel, and ships. Finally, as the pages literally covered his desk, he looked up in obvious elation.

"You've done a wonderful job, son. A magnificent job. I never dreamed that anyone could pull so much out of them in such a short time."

But Jeff shook his head solemnly. "Getting the force together is only a mechanical chore. The real task hasn't begun yet."

The Coordinator said nothing.

"Who's going to command the force?" Jeff asked point-blank.

The Coordinator smiled. "Are you applying for the job?"

"Yes."

"It's been yours for the asking since the Council approved the idea."

Jeff exhaled like a man who had been holding his breath for several minutes. He thanked the Coordinator and we stood up to leave.

"Just a moment," the old man said. "I want to tell you something."

He rose from his chair and walked around the desk to stand directly in front of Jeff. He was much taller than Jeff, but years of decisions and defeats had taken its toll on his body. He looked faded, crumpled, and his uniform hung limply on his frame. Jeff stood straight and firm as a sword.

"Many men - even some of my own staff - regard this expeditionary force of yours as a suicide squad, sent out to buy time with blood while we rebuild the fleet and fortify the Confederation."

"I know," Jeff said.

"Like all rumors, this one has a kernel of truth in it. You *are* being sent to buy time for us. And we have no idea of the opposition you'll be up against . . . but I want you to know that you will not be expected to fight and die against impossible odds.

"Your father was the ablest officer and best friend I ever had. He served me well for many years; and I feel his death as my responsibility. I don't want your death on my shoulders, too."

Jeff returned the old man's level gaze. "Death is inevitable," he said. "My father knew that. I only hope that I can serve the same cause he served as well as he did . . . and that people realize that any blow we can strike at the Masters now is because of defenses he organized and ran for so many thankless years."

"Exactly," the Coordinator murmured.

"I know my mission," Jeff continued. "Although we'll be outnumbered, at least we'll be able to pick the times and places to attack. We'll have the advantage of surprise and, as much as possible, superiority of numbers in the local areas we hit. We'll be using the Masters' own tactics against them."

The Coordinator smiled. "The optimism of youth," he said. "Here. . ." he reached across the desk and took a small box in his hand. "If you're going to command the expeditionary force, I think you'll have need of these."

He handed the box to Jeff, who opened it. Inside were two small diamond clips: the insignia of a full commander.

"The official papers will come through before your fleet takes off," the Coordinator said as he shook Jeff's hand. "I know we won't be able to see each other again

unless there's a crowd with us but I won't say good-by. I won't even wish you luck, because luck comes to those who work for it, not through wishful thinking. I'll only say that you wouldn't have been placed in charge of this force if I, personally, didn't think you were the best man for the job."

That was how Jeff received command of the expeditionary force. The rumors about a suicide mission persisted, of course. And it was true that the Star Watch's top-ranking officers were all kept inside the Confederation.

But if the rumors bothered Jeff, he never showed it.

Two experienced Star Watch officers were assigned to head Jeff's staff: Sector Commander Daguere, a blustering old war horse from the Castor system, descended from French-Canadian colonists; and Unit Commander Panjart, a slim, silent Indian from Bengal.

The rest of Jeff's staff, though, belonged to what was dubbed on Mars as the "youth movement." Marsh was promoted to Chief Technical Officer and placed in charge of navigation for the whole expedition. Terry was made a Patrol Commander and given direct command of the expedition's landing troops. I still bore the informal title of Special Adjutant, and became Jeff's liaison officer and trouble-shooter.

At Jeff's insistence, several shiploads of scientists were added to the fleet.

Now, as the expeditionary force got under way, I crossed the control deck from the main viewscreen to the short ladder that led to the bridge. The touch of my foot on a rung started the ladder, which carried me to the bridge and stopped moving when I stepped off.

Jeff was standing by the chart table.

"Well, we're on our way," he said, grinning.

"Yes."

"How's the crew feel?" he asked.

"They were excited as the fleet formed up," I reported. "There is a curious mixture of emotions: eagerness and fear, a desire to search out the enemy's horneworlds and destroy them . . . and at the same time a desire to be safely home and far from the war."

Jeff nodded. "That's about what I expected. Same way I feel, in fact."

He looked out at the bridge's viewscreen. Mars was already a tiny dot, and the ships of the fleet were sprinkled across the sky as far as I could see. Beyond the limits of telescopic vision, each ship was represented on the screen as a tiny electronic dot.

"This is what I asked for," Jeff said. "A fleet that can fight, run, and fight again; a self-sufficient combat force with the range and power to carry the battle to the enemy."

"One thing that puzzles me," I said, "is the number of scientists you've brought along with us. I can see the need for engineers and technicians . . . but why so many anthropologists, physicists, historians, biologists, and all the others? There must be hundreds of them."

Jeff's mouth curved into a strange, enigmatic smile.

"No one knows how far we're going to penetrate into enemy territory, or how long we'll be away from home. If things go as I hope, we'll soon be in areas that no Terran has ever seen before. Then scientists will be more important to us than all the soldiers we have."

I watched him as he ran a hand along the star map on the chart table.

"We'll need the scientists," he said quietly, "simply

because we're going to be sailing completely off the known maps"

Our first raids were, happily, successful.

Jeff struck first at the group of stars the Terrans call Orion. Unlike most constellations, which are composed of stars that are really far distant from each other but happen to be in the same line of sight from the observer, the Orion group is actually a loose cluster of hundreds of stars and large clouds of interstellar gas and dust.

The expeditionary force cruised out of the Terran Confederation in superlight overdrive. Undetected as it sped through subspace, the main fleet proceeded toward Orion behind a cloud of scouts. After a week Jeff had enough information to decide where he wanted to strike first.

He called his staff together on the bridge of his cruiser. Standing before the chart table, he told us:

"The scouts have been snooping out about a hundred light-years from the main fleet. They've investigated several star systems, and the Saurians seem to have only one major base in this immediate area." Jeff took a marking stylus from the chart table and circled one of the stars on the map.

"This is Bellatrix," he said, "a big, hot blue star. There are six planets circling it. The Saurians have a base on Bellatrix II. As far as we know, our scouts have been undetected . . . so we'll hit them tomorrow with everything we have. I want that base totally destroyed."

And it was.

The fleet popped out of subspace within a few

minutes' flight of Bellatrix II. The garrison of the Saurian base was completely surprised. Only a handful of enemy ships were aloft when the fleet attacked.

The first attack was aimed at enemy spaceports and force-beam projectors. Our big attack cruisers pounded them with beams and missiles, overpowering the energy screens that shielded them and leaving most of the enemy installations in smoking ruin.

Inside of three hours after first appearing off the planet, Jeff was sending Terry and his troops down to finish off the garrison. The Saurians were dazed and confused; they fought hard in many places, but were never able to coordinate a planet-wide defense. Before the day was out, every enemy facility on the planet was destroyed, and the surviving Saurian troops had scattered in pell-mell retreat to the hills and underbrush.

Twenty-four hours after the first attack had hit Bellatrix II, the expeditionary force's main fleet was back in sub-space, heading for its next target. The planet behind us was useless as a military base.

Events shaped up quickly after that first raid.

The scouts, ranging farther than before, reported that the Saurians had similar bases on planets of the three stars that compose Orion's "belt" . . . as the constellation is seen from Earth. All three stars were blue giants, like Bellatrix.

These three stars - labelled Delta, Epsilon, and Zeta Orionis on the Terran star charts-lay directly before the fleet. They were roughly a hundred light-years apart from one another, and the closest one, Zeta, was about a hundred light-years from Bellatrix.

Meanwhile, other scouts reported a base of some

sort on a Jupiter-like planet of a red dwarf star lying off our left flank. This star was not on the Terran maps, so Jeff sent Unit Commander Panjart out with a small squadron of ships to "reconnoiter in force." Jeff also included a few astronomers and map makers in Panjart's squadron.

Panjart found the planet to be a base for Hydra, the squidlike creatures who inhabit the ammonia oceans of large, cold, low-density planets like Jupiter and Saturn. Although his ships were not built to enter the planet's thousand-mile-deep atmosphere, Panjart parked his force in orbit around the planet and blasted as much of the enemy's base as his search scanners could find.

The Hydra came up to counterattack, which was just what Panjart wanted. Once he had them in space, he outmaneuvered, outshot, and outfought them. Of the hundred or so enemy ships that came up to fight, less than twenty definitely escaped Panjart's eager gunners.

Again, the enemy seemed totally surprised and bewildered by the presence of a Terran force in their own territory.

Zeta Orionis was different.

The fleet started its second major raid about a week after the first attack on Bellatrix II. This time, though, our scouts had been spotted, and the enemy was alert and waiting for us with ships aloft and planetary bases geared for action.

The main Saurian base was on the first planet orbiting around Zeta, although they had secondary bases on each of the other four planets in the system.

Jeff chose to ignore the secondary bases and strike

first at the main center. It was tricky, flying through subspace so close to the gravitational field of a giant star as powerful as this one, but Marsh navigated us to within ten minutes of the innermost planet.

The fleet had to come out of subspace all at once if we were not to be picked off, one at a time, by the prowling Saurian patrol ships. The maneuver was performed beautifully, and the startled Saurians were suddenly confronted with almost a thousand battle cruisers materializing before their noses. They never expected a force that size.

It was a bitter fight, but the Terrans had a clear-cut numerical advantage.

We slashed our way through the defending patrols right to the planet itself and blasted everything we could see. While the space battle was still going on, Terry landed his troops on the planet and mopped up what was left of the Saurian base. By the time he was finished, the enemy patrols had been beaten and most of the fleet's battle cruisers were blasting the secondary bases on the outer planets.

"The first time we surprised them just by being there," Jeff said over a steaming mug of coffee. "Yesterday, we surprised them with our strength. I think that's all the surprises we can expect to launch for awhile."

We were sitting in Jeff's compartment, just off the ship's bridge. Terry, Marsh, and I were occupying the small room's only chairs; Jeff was slouched on his bunk, sipping coffee.

On the table beside the bunk was a tangled pile of tapes, reports from the scoutships. From time to time

an orderly would appear in the doorway with more.

"No doubt about it now," Marsh said. "They know there's a big Terran force in their back yard, and they're organizing a fleet to crush us."

"More than one fleet," Jeff said.

With characteristic impatience, Terry burst, "Well, what are we gonna do about it? Do we fight or run?"

"Which would you prefer?" Jeff grinned.

Terry opened his mouth to answer, shut it, thought a minute, then said merely, "Depends."

Jeff laughed. "Right, old hothead. We know there's a lot of movement going on in several enemy bases . . . but we don't know enough to act on yet."

Slowly the information accumulated, and it all, looked bad. As the reports came in from scoutships - several of which never returned to the fleet - they were processed through the data computers, which built up a picture of enemy moves, probable intentions, and the probabilities of success for various possible Terran countermoves.

Briefly, the picture was this:

The Terran Force was sailing toward Epsilon Orionis, the second of the "belt" stars, which harbored a big enemy base. Within two days we would be there, ready to attack. According to our scouts, the Epsilon base was manned, not by Saurians, but by the humanoids who had participated in the final battle for Scandia.

When Terry heard this, he was all for hitting the base as soon as possible, regardless of the cost.

But the scouts had also reported a huge enemy fleet heading for Epsilon from the opposite direction, from

Rigel. And a smaller enemy force had already left Delta Orionis, the third of the three "belt" stars, and taken up a position off the flank of the Epsilon system.

"They're building a trap," Marsh said, "and those humanoids are the bait."

But the information that electrified us was that an even bigger enemy fleet was following us - about a week's flight behind.

"There's nothing behind us but blasted enemy bases," Jeff told us, "and the Confederation. This third enemy fleet must be their invasion fleet!"

Jeff had accomplished what he had set out to do: the fleet that had been attacking Terran star systems was now outside the Confederation, hunting for the expeditionary force!

Commander Daguerre shook his head as he looked over the computer's estimates of the enemy's strength. "Too many," he said. "We can't face them all at once . . . there are just too many of them."

Jeff said nothing. He stayed in his cabin almost the entire day before we were scheduled to reach the Epsilon system. Outside, on the bridge, the communications ticker chugged out fresh report tapes, and the computers digested and analyzed them; men went through their duties automatically; you could feel the tension building up all through the ship.

In subspace, flying faster than light, it was impossible to communicate with the whole fleet at once; orders had to be relayed from ship to ship. We were scheduled to come out of superlight drive once more for a navigational check and final orders-before the final day's run to Epsilon.

About an hour before the scheduled navigational check, Jeff came out on the bridge and called his staff officers together.

"I've formulated a plan of battle," he said. "I'd like to hear your opinions of it."

We looked around at each other. So Jeff was going to fight!

Jeff sat down by the computer, and we all dragged up chairs and sat around him.

"The reports we've received look pretty complete now," he began. "The humanoid force on the Epsilon system is about the size of our fleet; the fleet from Delta Orionis is still patrolling just outside the Epsilon system - that force is about half our size; the Saurians coming down from Rigel outnumber us two-to-one; and the invasion fleet following us out of the Confederation is also about twice our size."

"Overwhelming odds," Commander Daguerre complained. "More than five to one"

"Yes," Jeff agreed, "if you lump them all together." He stood up and walked to the chart table. "But look at their positions. The invasion fleet is a week behind us . . . the Rigel fleet won't reach Epsilon until a day or more after we do."

"That whittles 'em down for us," Terry said.

"No, I'm afraid not," Commander Panjart objected. "It will take us at least a day to conquer the humanoid base . . . perhaps longer. While we are so engaged, the fleets from Rigel and Delta will combine and overpower us."

"If we stop to hit the humanoids on Epsilon," Jeff said.

"You can't bypass them," Commander Daguerre

pointed out, "and leave a force our own size free to strike us in the rear."

"I know," Jeff said. "But this is what we can do:

"The humanoids are just sitting on their planet, waiting for us to come down and set off their trap. We can't ignore them . . . and we can't leave them alone, either. But what's to stop us from hitting them hard and fast with just part of our fleet . . . never landing on the planet, but destroying their spaceports from aloft so they can't take off and attack us."

Marsh lighted up with delight. "It's beautiful! Then the main fleet can bypass the humanoid base and hit the Rigel fleet long before they expect to meet us."

"Right," Jeff said. "We'll be trapping the trappers."

Commander Daguerre shook his shaggy mane. "It is very dangerous to split up the fleet in the face of such odds."

"It's either that or run away," Jeff said. "And I'm not running when we've got that invasion fleet out of the Confederation. We've got to destroy that fleet, or at least cripple it so badly that the Masters won't be able to continue their attacks on the Confederation."

Commander Daguerre rose from his chair. "What you propose is extremely risky . . . but you're right. If we run away now, we destroy the goal we set out for. What are your orders?"

Jeff looked into the old officer's eyes. He said nothing, but his expression told us all how he valued this vote of confidence.

"The plan of battle," he said at last, "will be this: Terry, you will take a fast striking force and raid the Epsilon system; your goal will be to destroy all spaceports and launching facilities . . . keep those hu-

manoids grounded, so we can deal with them later. Once this is accomplished, you'll engage the fleet from Delta, keep them busy while our main strength is attacking the Rigel fleet.

"Commander Daguerre, you will take a squadron of cruisers and guard our rear against the vanguard of the Saurian invasion fleet. If necessary, you can also lend support to Terry's command.

"I'll take the main fleet and speed toward the approaching force from Rigel. If we can hit them before they expect us, so much the better. Once they're broken up, we'll pivot and fall on the flank of the Delta fleet. Then we'll all join forces to meet the invasion fleet."

He looked around at us. "Any questions?"

"Just one," Terry said. "When do I start?"

Jeff grinned. "Right now."

When the fleet broke out of subspace for its last navigational check, Terry shuttled across from Jeff's command ship to his own attack cruiser.

Meanwhile, Jeff addressed all the men of the expeditionary force on the tri-di.

"Men, in the past two weeks we've proved that Terrans can fight - and win - against the so-called invincible troops of the Masters. Now we're heading for a showdown against the best fleets the Masters can throw against us.

"They'll have more ships than we do - but not better ships. And they'll have more men than we do - but not better men. The only thing I can promise you is a solid week or more of the hardest fighting we've faced yet. But if each of us does the best he's capable of, the final outcome will be a smashing victory for us.

"I want you to remember only one more thing: A large part of the enemy forces we'll be up against consists of the fleet that's been attacking the Confederation. We'll be facing the Saurians who've raided our homes and killed our people. We've interrupted their invasion of Terran worlds; now we have a chance to destroy the invaders themselves!"

Within a half hour Terry's raiders split off from the main fleet and headed for the humanoid base on Epsilon. Commander Daguerre's rear guard took up its position, and the rest of the expeditionary force accelerated back into subspace, aiming for the approaching Saurian fleet from Rigel.

We broke out of subspace for good and took up battle positions the following morning, after passing the Delta fleet that was still poised off one side of the Epsilon star system.

Almost as soon as we returned to normal space we began getting reports from Terry's group. They had attacked the humanoid base as planned; the enemy had hundreds of patrol ships orbiting around their planet and a fierce battle was in progress. The results were still in doubt.

Meanwhile, Jeff's scouts were sending back word that the approaching fleet from Rigel was heading toward us at full speed. The scouts harassed the oncoming Saurians by destroying as many enemy ships as possible whenever they popped out of subspace to make a navigational check. After six lone enemy ships had been destroyed in that one day, the Saurians began using full squadrons for their navigational checks. That discouraged the scouts.

Everything and everybody in the fleet seemed to be

in frenzied motion as we prepared for battle. Everything and everybody, that is, except Jeff.

He sat calmly on the bridge, the map table to his left, the viewscreen to his right, and the data computer a few steps behind him. His watchful eye took in all the activity of the control deck below his perch. But although he was outwardly calm, his mind was racing all over his well-deployed fleet. I doubt that there was a single report coming in to the ship that he did not personally read.

Just as the computer finished its final prebattle estimate of the enemy's size and position, we got a tri-di report from Terry himself.

You could tell the result of the battle by his flushed, exultant face even before he had said a word.

"We hobbled 'em for you," his voice boomed over the viewscreen's speaker. "They put up an awful fight, but their patrol ships are no match for our cruisers."

Jeff beamed.

"We knocked off their patrols," Terry went on, "then blasted out every rocketport and launching pad we could find. We really pasted the planet. There'll be no traffic in or out unless we land, ourselves."

"Fine," Jeff said. "Did the Saurian fleet from Delta give you any trouble?"

Terry shook his head vigorously. "Nope. They're still parked out there. Either they're waiting for us to land on the planet, so they can hit us from behind, or they're waiting for your ships to show up and fight."

"Good. Now, do you still have enough ships to engage them in a holding action?"

"Sure! We'll chase 'em all the way back to where they came from if you want us to."

Jeff grinned. "No, not yet. just keep them busy while we tackle the Rigel fleet. Any word from Daguerre?"

"Uh-uh. Everything's peaceful in his sector."

"Fine. Well, we've got a chore coming up. Congratulations . . . keep up the good work."

"We intend to!" Terry said.

Minutes later, the first units of the Rigel fleet walked into Jeff's trap.

The classic tactic of space warfare is englobement: trapping your enemy inside a sphere of your ships. The enemy cannot run because he would be disintegrated when he hits the overlapping energy screens of your ships; and with several ships pouring force beams on any one enemy target, it is only a matter of minutes before his energy screen is overpowered and the ship is destroyed.

Like most textbook schemes, the situation rarely occurs in actual battle.

But in this first deep-space battle between Jeff's expeditionary force and the Saurian fleet from Rigel, the opportunity presented itself . . . and Jeff pounced on it.

The Saurians undoubtedly realized after the events of the preceding twenty-four hours that they were much closer to battle than they had originally estimated. So they sent three squadrons out of subspace to make a final navigational check and reconnoiter the area.

The squadrons materialized in three separate spots close to the waiting Terran fleet. As the enemy ships showed up on the control deck's tracking screen, Jeff snapped out a single command:

"Englobe them!"

Before the Saurians realized what was happening, they were surrounded and blasted by the nearest of the Terran units. They tried to escape, but were trapped and outnumbered.

Abruptly, it was over. The last Saurian ship was destroyed and the Terrans returned to formation. No more Saurians appeared.

"They're trying to figure out what to do," Jeff half-whispered.

The lighted numbers of the bridge's atomic clock crawled along: five minutes . . . ten . . . twenty. . . .

Jeff paced over to the viewscreen and punched a button.

"Attention, all ships," he commanded. "I want you to spread out as far as you can without opening a gap in the energy screens. The enemy will be coming out of subspace any minute; he may appear where the scouts did, but more likely he'll choose another spot. I want our fleet to cover as much area as possible without scattering too much. Be prepared to move fast in any direction as soon as the Saurians materialize."

On the tracking screen I could see Jeff's ships spreading out in obedience to his command. Jeff was building a giant net, and betting that the enemy would appear close enough to be trapped in it.

Exactly thirty minutes after the last Saurian scout had been destroyed, the whole Rigel fleet emerged from subspace.

The enemy ships appeared in a single close-knit grouping off the upper left corner of Jeff's formation.

They outnumbered us, and they knew it. They were

not worried about being englobed, since a smaller force can-not possibly surround a larger fleet-theoretically. They had come out of subspace in a tight formation so that they could concentrate their firepower on the Terran ships.

But the Saurians did not realize how good the Terran pilots were.

Like a parade-field exercise, Jeff swung his fleet around in perfect order and attempted an englobement of the Saurians. The Terran ships were strung out as far from each other as they could go without opening gaps between their energy screens.

The Saurians either did not realize what was happening, or did not believe the Terrans could accomplish the maneuver successfully. They stayed in their tight formation and flew right into the net Jeff was closing about them.

What followed is hard to describe in words.

As the two fleets closed in on each other, the battle turned into a thousand separate fights between individual ships. Jeff had maneuvered his men into the best possible position, it was now Terran against Saurian, with the odds two-to-one in the enemy's favor.

The Saurians lost all concept of fleet strategy. I know that Jeff was barking orders and jockeying his ships constantly throughout the battle. But as I stood on the bridge watching the tracking screens and scanners, all that registered on my mind was a series of flashing images:

A Terran cruiser exchanging shots simultaneously with two enemy saucer-ships; a Saurian ship blooming into a brilliant flare of radiance as it ran into someone's energy screen; the drifting hulk of an unrecog-

nizable ship split by force beams; three tiny Terran scouts pouring force beams into a giant battle cruiser until the big Saurian's energy screen collapsed and the ship burst open in a titanic explosion.

It all seemed unreal, dreamlike, as I watched the battle from Jeff's bridge. There were no sounds except the scuffling of men's feet on the control deck below us, Jeff's urgent voice, and the constant hum of power that pervaded the ship. The firing, the explosions, the twisting, fighting ships I saw on the screens were all silent in the emptiness of space.

The battle took on a definite pattern now. The Terran ships were all around the enemy, and the Saurians were bunched in a huddled, confused mass. The englobement had been successful. Many of the Saurian ships could not even fire at us because they were trapped in the middle of their own formation.

What had started as a battle was fast becoming nothing but target practice. Ship after ship of the Saurians flared into sunburst explosions as the surrounding Terrans concentrated the fire from two, three and even more ships on individual enemy targets.

The Saurian ships twisted and dodged and tried to break through the sphere of Terrans that hemmed them in. All to no avail.

It looked as though nothing could save the Saurians from a complete massacre when Jeff's viewscreen sounded its emergency signal.

It was a call from Commander Daguerre.

"The Saurian invasion fleet," he reported worriedly, "is much closer than we had anticipated. Already its advance units are engaging my ships!"

Jeff frowned. Here he had the chance to annihilate

the Rigel fleet . . . but if he remained to finish the slaughter, Daguerre's rear guard squadron would probably be lost to the approaching invasion fleet.

"All right," Jeff decided. "I'll break off our engagement here and get to you as soon as possible. Hold on for further orders."

"Yes, sir," Daguerre replied.

What followed took quick thinking and rapid, precise maneuvering.

Jeff disengaged his fleet from the battered Saurians and started off to Daguerre's rescue. The distance involved was too short for a subspace hop, but long enough to cause us all a lot of anxiety.

What was left of the Rigel fleet limped back toward its home base. The battle had cost Jeff fourteen cruisers and thirty-seven scouts definitely lost, plus a few hundred ships damaged in various degrees of seriousness. The Saurians had more than half their fleet wiped out, and the survivors were probably in no frame of mind to fight again for a long time.

Between Jeff and the oncoming invasion fleet was Terry's holding force and the small Saurian fleet from Delta Orionis. Something had to be done about them. No one knew whether they would run away with the Rigel survivors, or try to join the invasion fleet.

In an attempt to bluff the Delta fleet out of the area, Jeff temporarily split his force in two, sending Commander Panjart, with a unit of fast attack-cruisers, around the Saurians, while he slowed his approach to the enemy fleet. It took almost half a day to accomplish the maneuver exactly the way Jeff wanted it, but it was worth the effort and delay.

At the end of the same day that had seen the fleet

from Rigel crushed, the Saurian commander of the Delta fleet was suddenly confronted with two Terran forces - both equal in size to his own command - bearing in on him from opposite directions, like the jaws of a trap snapping down.

Outflanked, cut off both from the retreating Rigel fleet and the approaching invasion fleet, and still facing a determined holding attack by Terry's ships, the Saurian commander took Jeff's unmistakable hint: he broke away and headed for deep space, accelerating as fast as he could to superlight speed and the safety of subspace.

Jeff was grinning broadly as he watched the tracking screen. "They're running just as fast as they can, he said.

"It seems that way," I agreed.

"Don't worry," Jeff said. "We'll put a scouting squadron on their tail to make sure they don't stop and come back to hit us from behind."

But our celebration over the bloodless rout of the second enemy force was cut short by a steady stream of urgent messages from Commander Daguerre. The whole Saurian invasion fleet was out of subspace now, heading for Epsilon. Daguerre was trying to slow them down by hit-and-run tactics, but he had to fight on the run, and the Saurians were riddling his ships.

"This is it," Jeff said grimly, as we sped toward the enemy. "No holds barred, no quarter asked or given. Them or us."

Jeff chose to swing slightly to one side of the oncoming Saurians, so that he could hit them from a different direction and make them pull away from Daguerre's group.

As we neared the enemy fleet, our tracking screen began to look like a blizzard, with each "snowflake" representing a Saurian ship. We all saw that we would be outnumbered by far more than two to one.

But only Jeff saw a chance for victory in the formation of the enemy. He noticed it instinctively, I think, and he took full advantage of it without a moment's hesitation.

"Look at how strung out they are," he said to me.

Only then did I realize what he had seen at once: the Saurian fleet was spreading itself thin in an attempt to wipe out Daguerre's retreating squadron. The fastest Saurian ships were leading the chase, while the heavier ones were lagging behind in an elongated column that was noticeably weak in several places.

Even as I was taking in what Jeff had spotted, he was on the viewscreen crackling out orders. He kept all three units of his fleet - Terry's Panjart's, and his own - together for one powerful thrust at the weakened middle of the Saurian line.

We swooped in on them at top sublight speed and smashed through the enemy ships easily. Then we swung around and faked an englobement maneuver on the rear section of the shattered Saurian line. They pulled back, trying to avoid our trap, while the forward section - which had been battering Daguerre's squadron - abruptly stopped and attempted to break into our formation.

Surprised and stunned, the Saurians had panicked. In their haste to avoid an englobement, they had scattered most of their fleet beyond recall. The Terrans, under Jeff's deadly-calm direction, pivoted back and forth, knocking off the stragglers and breaking up

the enemy's attempts to reorganize their formations.

Once again, man for man and ship for ship, the Terrans proved themselves better fighters than the Saurians. Jeff's tactics had nullified the enemy's superior numbers, and now the Saurians were being shot to pieces by the men they had planned to conquer.

Jeff shook his head as he watched the battle turn into a rout. "They've been so used to beating us easily that they just got careless, I guess."

The crowning touch came when Daguerre's almost crippled little squadron turned on the biggest Saurian dreadnaught in the fleet and blasted it to atoms.

Only a handful of Saurians escaped the vengeful Terrans.

"They didn't have any troopships with 'em," Terry complained as the battle died down.

"No," Jeff said, "they were strictly a battle fleet. The invasion troops are still back in the Confederation, I guess. But they won't be going anywhere without their fleet to protect them."

"Guess not. Well, let's get down to that planet and wipe out those humanoids on Epsilon, then back to the Confederation and finish the Saurian troops."

Jeff shook his head, "Not yet. They'll both have to wait. Besides, I want our scientists to study the humanoids for awhile from orbit. I want to know who they are and why they're serving the Masters."

And with that step the whole picture changed.

The boy became a man, the warrior became a statesman, and the history of the entire galaxy was permanently altered.

Chapter 6 *Tavia*

The next six months were busy ones for all of us. Jeff had passed his first test as a military leader. With the main enemy fleets destroyed or routed, he had conquered an area roughly five hundred light years in radius, more than five times the size of the Terran Confederation. His first act was to send Commander Daguerre and Terry to consolidate the territory and clean out any remaining Saurian detachments or bases.

But we soon discovered that this area was inhabited by several human races, and immediately Jeff's overriding ambition was to make allies of them.

"We need these people on our side. The Confederation just doesn't have the manpower to beat the Masters singlehanded," Jeff said to me.

So, while Terry and his men were eliminating isolated Saurian bases, and Daguerre's ships were patrolling the frontiers of this newly-conquered territory, Jeff set up his headquarters on one of the human-

populated planets, the capital of a group of star systems which the natives called Morenia.

Physically, the Morenians more closely resembled my own people than the Terrans. They were short and slight, fair-haired and light skinned. I could see that they were both curious and afraid of the big, boisterous, barbaric Terrans who had overthrown the only government they had known for countless generations.

Their capital planet was a pleasant world; the seat of an ancient and serene culture. The entire planet was as carefully cultivated and landscaped as any formal garden; even the weather was controlled so that Morenia displayed an endless succession of sparkling, fresh days and cool, still nights. I found this relaxing, but several of the Terrans complained that even perfect weather gets monotonous after a while.

There were no cities on Morenia, no groundcars and no roads. This, too, the Terrans found difficult to accept. The Morenians were spread all over their beautiful pastoral countryside, living in sun-powered homes, meeting for social gatherings in large, gracefully-sweeping domes of sparkling metal and plastic.

They traveled almost exclusively by antigravity, using a tiny, fist-sized propulsive unit instead of the unwieldy flying suits the Terrans knew.

Jeff took one of the big meeting-domes for his headquarters, with the pleasant agreement of the Morenian leaders. They seemed to have only a rudimentary planetary government, and their interstellar affairs had been entirely in the hands of the Saurians - and the Masters - before we arrived.

Jeff launched into negotiations with the Morenian

leaders immediately. He wanted them to join his fleet and fight against the Masters. But they had never known any other government, and their lives were not uncomfortable. They had been happy to have the Masters make all their decisions for them, and were not accustomed to making their own. Many of them feared that the Masters would soon return to crush the Terrans, and punish any Morenians who joined the Terrans; others feared Jeff and his men, and the strange new attitudes and problems they represented.

While all this was going on, Terry and his men were methodically going from planet to planet, wiping out Saurian strongholds. The Saurians fought hard in many places, but without a fleet to help them, they were doomed. The shattered remnants of the defeated fleets had left the area completely.

Commander Daguerre's scouts reported many fleeting, shadowy contacts with enemy patrol ships out at the frontier of the newly-conquered territory. There was a lot of movement going on, but no massing for attack.

So far.

"They're waiting and watching," Jeff said, as he leafed through his scout's reports. "They've got time on their side, and numbers . . . they can throw a million ships at us if they want to."

"It takes time to gather a million ships from all over the galaxy," I pointed out.

"I know. But how much time?" Jeff mused. "How long do we have before they counterattack?"

But while the Masters waited, Jeff and his men were in a fever of activity. He established the new terri-

tory as a buffer between the Confederation and the Masters. He devoted more and more of his time to negotiations with the Morenian leaders. Terry, after some truly heroic work in cleaning up the last Saurian bases in the area, got his wish and was sent back to the Confederation to lead the liberation of Scandia and the other Terran star systems seized by the Saurians. Marsh took charge of many of the administrative chores of running the fleet.

I was assigned to questioning the few prisoners we had been able to take from the Saurians and Hydra.

For the first time in my life I found myself in a position of command over a Saurian, but still it was an unpleasant experience.

Saurian and human vocal systems operate on mutually incompatible sound frequencies, so I had to use telepathy. It was exhausting work - especially since I was getting no cooperation from the prisoners.

For days on end I sat in a bare little room, while a drugged Saurian stood drowsily on his hind legs and tail before me, his scales glinting feebly in the room's softened lighting, his long snout sagging until all his jagged teeth were visible, his malevolent little eyes flickering weakly under the effect of the sedatives.

We would face each other for hours, with an energy screen between us, as I probed the Saurian's mind, going gradually deeper and deeper until one of us was exhausted. The information I got, whether it was from former governors over the Morenians or the lowest-class space hands, was of little value to the Terrans, and certainly not worth the effort it took to get it.

With the Hydra, in their specially refrigerated tanks of liquid ammonia and hydrogen, simply estab-

lishing contact was a major feat. Getting intelligible information from them was impossible.

Someday humans will communicate by telepathy with each other, and alien races, as easily as we now speak our various languages. But that day is so far distant that it cannot be measured by years or generations or even centuries - it will take millennia.

It was toward the end of our second month in Morenia that Jeff met Tavia.

He had put in a particularly trying morning, attempting to persuade the Morenian leaders to call for a conference of all the star systems in the newly conquered area, of which Morenia was only one, for the purpose of discussing whether they would join the Terrans in fighting the Masters.

The Morenian leaders were polite and even friendly, but they completely evaded giving Jeff a direct answer to his request.

"It's like shadowboxing with a myth," Jeff said, shaking his head. He was still sitting at the head of the long, polished conference table in one of the many meeting rooms of his headquarters dome. The Morenians had all left.

"They admit that we've defeated the Masters," he said, "and that we've liberated their people. They say that they prefer us to the Masters, and thank me for freeing them. Yet they just don't seem to understand what freedom means! They don't seem to realize that they can do what they want without waiting for the Masters to tell them what to do."

"They're afraid that the Masters will return," I suggested.

Jeff snapped, "They won't if I can get all the humans to stand together and fight."

"Give them time," I said. "Freedom is new to them." Jeff rose from his chair and stretched his tired body.

"Time is what we have the least of, I'm afraid."

We walked together out of the conference chamber, downstairs and out along a colonnaded pathway through a bright garden.

"This is a lovely world," Jeff mused. "I hate to think of its people being so afraid . . ."

Just then we both saw a girl standing at the end of the pathway.

She was a small, slight young girl with golden hair falling to her shoulders and wide brown eyes. She wore a loose-fitting white robe. Standing beside her was a four-legged animal of some sort, about the size of a large Terran dog, but much more thickly built.

She walked toward us, with the animal padding heavily behind her.

"Are you the leader of the Terrans?" she asked. Her voice was light and almost trembling. Standing at her full height, she only rose up to Jeff's shoulder.

"Yes," Jeff answered seriously. "I'm Geoffrey Knowland. This is Alan Bakerman, my friend."

A fleeting smile. "I am Tavia, daughter of Loreno Tavar."

"One of the leaders I was talking with this morning," Jeff said.

"Yes . . . you speak our language quite well," she said.

"Thank you. I was taught by one of your scholars, with the aid of your translating machines."

She looked at Jeff, then at me, but said nothing.

Jeff was puzzled. "Is there something you wanted to talk to me about?"

She nodded. "But I don't know if I have the courage to speak."

"Is it so terrible?" he asked, laughing.

"I have come . . ." she hesitated, then blurted out, "I have come to ask you to spare our planet!"

"Spare it? From what?"

"From destruction! We know it is only a matter of time before you send your soldiers to kill us all. I've heard my father and my uncle talking; they are afraid to ask you for mercy, but someone must, because we have no troops to defend ourselves and, and . . ." she burst into tears.

"Destruction?" Jeff echoed. "Kill you all? Who told you that?"

"It . . . it is common knowledge," she sobbed. "All over the planet your men and ships are waiting. Every day they train themselves for battle . . . we have watched them practicing for our slaughter."

"Practicing for . . ." Jeff stopped, thunderstruck. He turned to me. "What's she talking about?"

I had a guess. "Perhaps she has watched your men exercising and playing games in their off-duty hours."

Jeff's jaw sagged open. "And she thinks . . ." He started laughing, and the more he thought about it, the funnier it became. I had a hard time resisting the temptation to join him.

The girl choked down her sobs and looked up at him. "Is the thought of killing us all so amusing to you?"

Jeff shook his head. "My dear child . . . "

Her chin went up. "I am not a child. And my name is Tavia."

"All right, all right . . . Tavia. My men aren't practicing for slaughter. They're playing games, exercising. These men have been cooped up for weeks in their ships . . . they're just flexing their muscles. Don't you have sports?"

She wrinkled her nose in a sort of half-frown. "But, I saw with my own eyes . . . your men were knocking each other down and throwing a horrible black bomb back and forth . . ."

That stopped Jeff for a moment, then he realized what she was talking about. "That," he said, "is an ancient Terran form of mayhem called football. It's a sport."

"Really?" she asked in a small voice.

"Come on," Jeff said, "and I'll show you."

He reached out his hand to her, but the beast beside her growled and bared a formidable set of fangs.

"Edon! Be quiet!" Tavia scolded. She turned back to Jeff. "My pet is overly protective."

"I don't blame him," Jeff said. "I would be, too, if I were entrusted to guard you Would you like to see my ship? Probably some of the men are out beside it right now, playing some Terran sport."

That was how they met. For the next few weeks, Jeff devoted more and more of his time to Tavia.

After he had shown her that Terrans were at least not cannibals, she in turn began to show him her planet and people.

Gradually, as Jeff met Tavia's family and friends,

and went with her to Morenian concerts, social gatherings, and theater performances, the Morenians began to understand that the Terrans were not quite the barbarians they had feared.

And aside from winning the confidence of the political leaders, Jeff enjoyed being with Tavia. For the first time since I had met him, I saw Jeff completely relaxed and happy. It was almost as though he had forgotten the enemy waiting for him out among the stars.

Time passed easily. The weeks melted into months, and as each day added to the others with no avenging fleet from the Masters sweeping down on us, the Morenians began to see there was some truth in Jeff's arguments.

Although nothing really exciting happened during those weeks, there were always the nagging day-to-day administrative duties inherent in any organization the size of Jeff's expeditionary force. So while we complained of the lack of things to interest us, there was always plenty for us to do.

It was during this time that Marsh sent a scout to investigate one of the "reserved" planets which the Saurians had marked off limits both to the Morenians and themselves.

The scout reported an incredibly inhospitable world: its surface scoured clean down to bare rock, orbiting so close to its giant blue sun that it had seas of molten metals, and so radioactive that the scout scuttled back home as soon as he heard the noise from his scintillation counters.

"And no sign of life?" I asked Marsh.

He shook his head. "Not even a blade of grass. They must have scoured the planet clean after some battle."

"No," I said. "The Morenians say the planet was once inhabited by them, but the Saurians moved the people off."

Marsh puckered his roundish face into a scowl. "Why would the Masters turn an Earth-like planet into a radioactive ball of bare rock?"

"The scientists may be able to answer your questions," I said.

But I was wrong. Not even the scientists could answer the riddle . . . then.

After more than three months of spearheading the Star Watch's liberation of captured Confederation worlds, Terry's return to the expeditionary force hit Morenia with the impact of a planet-wrecking meteor.

Backslapping, laughing, booming, red-haired Terry uncorked months of pent-up emotions when he re-joined us. He seemed to be all over the planet at once, and wherever the giant Scandian went, the laughter and rejoicing of his news went with him: the Confederation was now clear of invaders for the first time in more than ten years.

Terry had been in the thick of the fighting that overcame the Saurian invaders. And he had been allowed the exquisite pleasure of leading the avenging troops back to his native Scandia.

On his jacket front he wore the golden sunburst of the Star Watch's heroism medal, given to him personally by the Chief Coordinator. And around his right wrist was the emerald-set bracelet of a Knight of Scandia, placed there by his people's monarch at

the end of the final battle that ended the Saurians' occupation of his homeworld.

But Terry also bore other reminders of the fighting he had been through. He was noticeably leaner than I had remembered him to be, and there was a light scar running across his left temple that even the Terran plastic surgeons could not completely erase.

He carried a sheaf of personal messages to Jeff from the Chief Coordinator, from the Council, his friends, and his mother. Everyone realized that Jeff's expeditionary force had been directly responsible for clearing the Confederation of enemy forces. Terry summed up the reactions of the Confederation's hundred-billion-odd population:

"We're the biggest sis-boom-bah heroes in the history of mankind!"

After several weeks, even Terry's endurance was worn down, and he settled into the same routine as the rest of us: waiting. Waiting for Jeff to convince the hesitant Morenians and other human races to join our forces; waiting for the Masters to strike their counterblow.

One evening Jeff, Terry and I had dinner together on a terrace projecting from the side of the giant dome of the headquarters building. It was beautiful there at sunset, with the big blue sun sinking to the horizon in a panorama of green and violet splendor.

"No . . . uh, politics . . . tonight?" Terry asked as we sat down around the table.

Jeff laughed. "No. She's busy tonight."

"Is Marsh going to join us?" I asked.

Jeff shook his head. "He's all wrapped up in mathematics. Seems that he's stumbled onto some work the

Morenians did on stellar gravitational fields . . . they've built instruments that can detect the presence of a grav field in subspace."

We were interested, but hardly enthusiastic.

"Marsh thinks he can use the Morenian data to identify gravitational spectra among the stars," Jeff went on, "in subspace . . . just as we identify visual spectra in normal space."

"You mean he'd be able to tell one star from another in subspace?" Terry asked.

Jeff nodded. "The star's gravitational field leaks a little into subspace, and Marsh is convinced he can work out a system that will allow us to identify any star by its grav spectrum . . . we'll be able to navigate without ever coming out of subspace for navigational checks!"

I began to understand. "This means that there will be no limit on your speed in subspace, since you won't have to decelerate to less than light-speed for navigational checks."

"Exactly," Jeff said. "We can stay in subspace and accelerate all the way for as long as our engines hold out. We could fly completely across the galaxy - a hundred thousand light-years - or maybe someday even fly to another galaxy."

We were all silent for a moment. Then Terry said, "Marsh stumbled onto this in a Morenian study?"

"Yes. Like all the races the Masters have conquered, the Morenians never developed a superlight drive themselves. But they've done some physics and mathematics work for the Saurians. Marsh found this in a mathematics report."

Terry shook his head. "I'll never be able to understand a man who reads mathematics for relaxation."

"It takes all kinds to make a war," Jeff said, grinning.

"Some war," Terry grumbled.

"Huh?"

"This isn't a war any more," Terry said, "it's a political campaign. The Masters are out there with billions of troops, and we've been sitting here for months doing nothing. I don't understand it."

Jeff might have lost his temper if anyone else had said that. But with Terry he merely smiled.

"Look, old hothead . . . I know just as well as you how much work we have ahead of us, but there are more ways to fight an enemy than by throwing rocks at him. We need the Morenians on our side."

Terry squirmed in his seat. "But they still haven't agreed to help you . . ."

"Take your time," Jeff advised. "The Masters will still be there next week. Our scouts will let us know if they're massing for an attack. And from what the Morenians have told me, there are millions of human star systems farther inside the Masters' empire. If we can form a coalition of all these humans against the Masters, if we can get them to join us as we liberate them . . . then we've got the manpower to totally defeat the Masters for all time."

"Well, I still think," Terry said, toying with his spoon, "that if the Morenians haven't seen the light by now, they never will."

"Give them a chance," Jeff said. "They've been under the Masters' rule for generations . . . we've only been here a few months. This idea of freedom to

choose their own future is new to them. And the thought of fighting the Masters just never occurred to them before."

Terry shook his head. "You're still trying to be a politician instead of a military commander."

"What's wrong with that?" Jeff asked.

"What do you mean?"

"What's so wrong about being a politician? How do you think we put the expeditionary force together, in the first place? Have you forgotten the wheedling and coaxing we had to go through?"

"Oh, that's different," Terry said, "that's. . . ."

"That was politics, friend, pure and simple," Jeff insisted. "Look, politics isn't just campaigning for election and making speeches. A politician - if he's a good one - is a man who can get free men to work together."

Terry looked puzzled.

Jeff continued, "I can command this expeditionary force, and you and the rest of the men are duty-bound to obey me. But I can't command the Morenians. If I want them and the countless other human civilizations in the galaxy to work with us, I have to be a politician."

"Well, maybe," Terry mumbled.

"I know", Jeff said. "You don't normally think of a politician in that light. But a good politician is a man who can get things done. The measure of his worth is not how many elections he's won, but what he's added to his group: what problems he's solved, what new ideas he's put across. They don't even have to be his own original ideas - but putting them across to the public is the politician's job."

Terry finally stopped arguing, either because he

saw what Jeff was driving at or he was tired, and we dialed for our meals.

The food was blander than the usual Terran fare, but we had all become accustomed to it. As the servorobots trundled away with the last of the dishes, Jeff leaned back and told us:

"We're going to take a little trip tomorrow."

"Where?"

"Epsilon Orionis."

"The humanoids!" Terry's face broke into a grim smile.

"Take it easy," Jeff cautioned. "We're going there to talk, not fight."

"Talk? What about?"

Jeff glanced at his wrist watch. "I'm expecting a call in a few minutes . . . let's go down to my office."

As we left the terrace, Terry again asked, "What's there to talk about with the humanoids?"

Jeff looked at Terry for a long moment as we walked down the corridor leading to his office.

Finally he answered, "I want to see if they'll be willing to join us"

"JOIN US?" Terry exploded. "The same savages that wrecked Scandia? The troops that wiped out half"

"Hold on," Jeff commanded. Terry stopped in mid-sentence, but his face was dark with outrage.

"Our scientists have been studying those humanoids for several months now from orbit, and recently they've made successful landing expeditions. We know quite a bit about them. They're professional warriors, serving the Masters."

Terry said nothing. We came to Jeff's office. The

door slid open as we approached, and the lights turned up inside the room as we entered.

Jeff sat on a couch near his desk. Terry and I took chairs.

"The humanoids - they call themselves Komani - were once enemies of the Masters, from what the anthropologists have found out. They originally lived in a globular star cluster near the Masters' home cluster. Eons ago they fought a gigantic war; the Masters couldn't beat them, even though they nearly wiped them out."

Jeff paused for a moment, then resumed. "To this day the Komani boast that they are the only race the Masters never defeated. They're deluding themselves, of course, because the Masters took them over completely . . . only they don't realize it. The Komani devoted every ounce of their civilization to fighting their war, and when the war was over, they had nothing left except a generations-long tradition of fighting. So the Masters took what was left of them, and made them the shock troops of their galactic empire.

"They've done all the Masters' hardest fighting for thousands of generations now; the entire race knows nothing except war. The Masters provided them with transportation on Saurian ships, so the Komani have been completely dependent on them. They don't have their own spaceships, and couldn't fly them if they did."

Terry's face was a thundercloud. "And you want to let them join us."

"Regardless of how you feel, Terry, they're terrific fighters," Jeff said. "Their entire race is on that planet. They travel in one unit. They have enough adult males

to match every fighting man we could throw against them; and if we seriously tried to fight them, I don't think we'd win . . . the whole race would jump into it. We could try to wipe them out from the ships. Or we could try to talk them into joining us."

Jeff got up and walked to his scowling friend. "It's your decision to make, Terry."

"Mine?"

"Yes," Jeff said. "If they come with us, they'll be under your command, since they are strictly planetary fighters. And I won't take them unless you agree."

"But I . . ."

"Think about it. Sleep on it. Tomorrow we'll go to the Epsilon Orionis, either to fight to the death with them or to take them in as allies."

Terry stood up, looked around uncertainly, then headed for the door.

As it slid open, he turned and asked, "Couldn't we just leave them on the planet and forget about the whole thing?"

Jeff smiled. "It would sort of be like leaving a man-eating animal in a cage, wouldn't it?"

Terry nodded unhappily and walked out. The door slid shut behind him.

Jeff shook his head at me. "I know, it's a rough way to treat a friend, but we can't let the Komani alone any longer. They're getting ready to kill themselves, they're so edgy at being held prisoner on that planet."

I said nothing.

"Besides," Jeff went on, "Loreno Tavar thinks he can talk the other Morenian leaders into calling a conference of all the human governments in this area for

the purpose of joining us against the Masters. But he thinks it would be better if we were off the planet for a few days while he tries to convince them."

The viewscreen on one side of the desk chimed softly. Jeff went to it and flicked it on. Tavia's face appeared.

"Hello!" Jeff was delighted.

But Tavia was frowning with worry - or was it fear?

"Jeff, my father and his brother, my uncle Tassilo, have just had a fearful argument about your request for an all-human congress. Uncle Tassilo is violently opposed to it. . . and you."

Jeff grinned. "I can get along without your uncle."

"But you don't understand," she said. "He hates you . . . and he hates my father for supporting you."

"Well, I'm sorry to cause trouble in your family . . ."

"No," she said impatiently, "That's not it. Tassilo is a stubborn, ruthless person when he's angry. He has sworn to do anything he can to stop you"

"So?"

"Jeff . . . he'll try to discredit you, to humiliate you before our people"

"That can't hurt me," Jeff said.

Tavia's eyes were wide with fear. "Jeff, he may try to kill you!"

Chapter 7 *Allies and Enemies*

If Favia's warning upset Jeff, he did not show it. The next morning we left for Epsilon Orionis, as planned. Terry came along, and reluctantly agreed to Jeff's plan of inviting the Komani to join us against the Masters.

When we arrived at the main ship orbiting above the planet, we learned that the Komani leaders had asked to talk to the Terran leader and his lieutenants. Face to face.

"Smells of a trap," Terry warned.

But Jeff would have none of it. He even called Marsh away from his mathematics for a quick flight to join us. Jeff was not afraid of the Komani, but he certainly wanted to impress them. He insisted that we all wear full-dress uniforms And side arms. I felt rather silly in the stiff black and silver Star Watch tunic and tights with a heavy Terran blaster strapped to my side. Terry

and Marsh looked quite impressive, though. Terry even wore two blasters.

But Jeff outdid us all.

He wore a special uniform of blood red with black trim, high black boots and a polished titanium helmet. He carried a blaster on his right hip and a captured Komani broadsword on his left.

He even had a horse.

"I thought they were extinct," Marsh gulped when he saw it.

"They are," Jeff answered, "in the Confederation. But Tavia told me that they were native to a few systems here. We found them, and learned to ride together."

He was all black, shiny, and majestic.

"He's a beautiful animal," Terry said. "What's his name?"

"Bucephelas," Jeff said. "I named him after the favorite horse of an ancient Terran conqueror."

The time came for us to start planetward, and we boarded the landing ship. The pilot landed us on the plateau close to the twisted wreckage of what was once a spaceport. The sky was just beginning to turn pale with dawn.

We left the ship, Jeff on horseback, the rest of us afoot, while the crew stayed aboard at battle stations, just in case.

For several minutes nothing happened.

Then we saw a flickering glow on the horizon. It gradually drew closer, resolved itself into three distinct lights, then stopped and remained stationary. By now the sun was edging over the horizon behind us, and the sky was a bright yellow-green in color.

"I guess they've come halfway across the plateau," Jeff said finally, "and they're waiting for us to meet them."

So we left the ship and started across the grassy flatland. No one spoke, and I imagine we all looked rather grim. Especially, since we were carrying enough firepower to wipe out a good-sized battalion of troops.

And then we saw them - stretched out across the plateau to the horizon, thousands of Komani warriors, all dressed in bright body armor, many astride their one-man fliers, all carrying swords and guns. The lights we had seen were gigantic ceremonial beacon fires, which they had mounted on tracked vehicles.

They were formed in a giant semicircle, with lances and pennants marking off divisions of men at regular intervals.

At the center of this great living arch was a gleaming plastic bubble. Standing before it were the brightest and most richly-dressed Komani: the tribe's chieftains.

Evidently Jeff had his psychology correctly figured. A noticeable stir went through their ranks as we approached. Even a few of the chiefs standing directly before us turned to each other for a hurriedly-whispered interchange.

Jeff stopped his horse a few paces in front of them.

"I am Geoffrey Knowland, a commander in the Terran Confederation Star Watch and leader of the Terran Expeditionary Force. These are my lieutenants: Sir Terrance Radnor of Scandia, Chief Technical Officer Marshall Jordan, and Special Adjutant Ahgh'loun B'krhom'mnin, of Rh'khour'mnin."

It was the first time I had ever heard Jeff attempt

to speak words of my native tongue. He did fairly well for a Terran. I learned later that he had practiced it with Tavia for months.

The tallest of the Komani stepped forward.

"I am Tamar Kang, chief of the Komani." Both he and Jeff had spoken in the Morenian tongue.

Tamar Kang was a picture of savage strength. He was taller and wider even than Terry, and his skintight uniform showed every bulge of muscle. He wore no armour, but had a huge sword buckled to his waist.

He gave me the impression of a jungle beast of prey: velvet-sheathed claws and ferocious cunning. The pupils of his eyes were fierce narrow slits, like a cat's in daylight. He had powerful sloping shoulders and broad, strong hands. He had no hair to speak of, but his face and the backs of his hands were covered with a light greenish downy fuzz. His ears were flat against his skull.

On a closer inspection, I saw that his lips covered all his teeth, but he certainly looked as though he ought to have fangs.

We discussed no politics that whole day. Tamar Kang insisted on entertaining us; we were his guests, he said, and the whole Komani race would honor us. They led us down off the plateau to a grassy valley where the rest of the tribe was encamped in a mammoth circle of collapsible plastic bubble-tents.

The people were polite, yet reserved; we were the guests of their chief, but we were strangers. They stood by as we went through the encampment, tall, strong, proud, and silent, following us with their unblinking yellow cat's eyes.

They made no move to hinder us, and the guides which Tamar Kang had given us carefully showed us everything we expressed an interest in. But I sensed a tenseness, a feline nervousness, just beneath their quiet, grave manner. They seemed inwardly coiled and ready to spring . . . or was it only that we were nervous at being so completely engulfed by them?

Jeff was keenly interested in seeing how the Komani lived, even though he already seemed to know much about them from the observations of the scientists.

Marsh and even Terry were impressed by the firm dignity and openhanded treatment we were receiving. We were shown through much of the encampment, from family-sized bubble-tents to the large, ornate council tent - another bubble but much bigger and fancier.

What impressed me most about the Komani was their singleness of purpose. Their children had no toys except plastic swords and miniature replicas of guns; their art was confined to decorative metalwork for their weapons and armor; their music consisted almost entirely of battle sagas.

They were fighters and nothing else, roaming the galaxy, at the will of the Masters, in ships that the Saurians furnished; they knew no other life and had known none other for countless ages.

It seemed to me that the Komani had evolved from a feline race-much as the Terrans had branched off from a type of four-legged, ground-dwelling monkey, and my own people had arisen from a small, fuzzy mammal, very much like a miniature Terran bear.

I asked some of the Komani elders we met that day

about their racial origins, but their answers were all vague and cloaked in mythology. Either they considered a stranger's questions impertinent, or they had actually never stopped to scientifically examine their own racial background.

I suspected the latter. Since their alliance with the Masters, the Komani had had no need to develop any science beyond the rudimentary engineering of planet-bound warfare. Nor would the Masters allow them to, if they showed an interest in science, I believe.

That night we were escorted to the council tent by a guard of honor and treated to some wild feasting and celebrating. It was very late when we were finally shown to our sleeping quarters - a small but well appointed bubble-tent. The four of us took turns on watch while the other three slept.

Early the next morning - too early - we were summoned to Tamar Kang's council tent. This time the full Komani council of chieftains was sitting in formal session.

We were shown to low-slung benches on one side of a long, curving table; the council members were all on the other side. Jeff was placed opposite Tamar Kang, of course. The table, built by the Komani for their own use, was at an awkward height for us, except for Terry, who was as tall as most of the Komani.

The council eldest members began the session by reciting long, intricate, formal histories of the race's deeds in battle. They took turns, going down the table, each man chanting about a particular battle.

When it began to look as though this would go on all day, Tamar Kang raised his hand.

"Enough," he said. "There is no need to weary our guests further with formalities."

"Not at all," Jeff protested, and I think he meant it. "I find your sagas most interesting."

"There will be time enough for songs and histories later," Kang rumbled. "We have matters to discuss today that pertain to today . . . and tomorrow."

"Quite true," Jeff said, nodding.

Tamar Kang stared down at Jeff. Finally, he said, "You have held my people prisoner on this planet for many months. Why?"

"First, because we didn't want you to fight against us while we were destroying the Saurian fleets . . ."

An audible gasp went through the council.

Jeff smiled. "Yes, we destroyed them: the fleet from Rigel was badly mauled, the fleet from inside the Terran Confederation was completely wiped out, and the fleet from Delta Orionis - which was supposed to be your transportation, I understand - turned and fled from us."

The council members murmured to one another.

"You say the Saurians fled from you?" Tamar Kang asked stiffly.

"Yes," Jeff said. "We had destroyed the spaceports on this planet in the hopes of keeping you grounded and out of the fight. But the Saurian fleet could have landed here at any time. Instead, they ran away."

The murmuring stopped. The bubble-tent was absolutely silent.

"If you were victorious over the Saurians," Kang asked craftily, "why did you not come to do battle with us?"

Jeff took the question good-naturedly. "I was curious about you," he answered, smiling. "I wanted to know why human beings were serving the Masters, and depending on Saurians who would run away and leave you prisoners."

Jeff had not missed the bitterness they showed when they learned that they had been deserted by the Saurians. He was playing this advantage to the hilt.

"We serve no one," Tamar Kang said evenly. "We have an alliance with the Masters: we fight for them in return for transportation and spoils."

"Oh?" Jeff asked, with a carefully-modulated incredulity. "Then where are the ships they promised you? Where are your spoils? You fought hard and well at Scandia, yet I understand you took no spoils there."

Tamar Kang's face clouded over. "We were asked to leave Scandia immediately after the final battle was successfully concluded. Instead of spoils from that planet, the Masters rewarded us in many other ways."

I glimpsed at Terry's face: a grim white mask.

"I can see that," Jeff said, almost insolently. "And as soon as they got into trouble, the Masters decided to allow you to become prisoners rather than risk any of their ships for you."

Tamar Kang stiffened visibly, and the other council members muttered among themselves.

"I notice you are wearing a Komani sword," Tamar Kang shifted the subject.

"I took it from one of your warriors on Scandia," Jeff said.

"He was dead?"

"Yes. I killed him."

Another silence. Tamar Kang's eyes were glowing hotly.

Then Jeff rose to his feet. I think we've talked long enough. It is clear that we are equals - Komani and Terrans - indeed, all humans everywhere in the galaxy. If we fight each other, we are obeying the wishes of the Masters. When we kill each other, we hurt no one but ourselves.

"You have fought nobly for the Masters, and your reward has been to be left behind as prisoners. Is this a warrior's fate?"

"No!" some of the Komani shouted.

"Tamar Kang, I offer you a bargain: join with me. Fight against the Masters and the Saurians who have betrayed you. Together with the other human races, we can defeat the Masters and rule the galaxy.

"I know the risks are great. Defeat is possible, death a certainty. But would you rather die prisoners or free men? Would you prefer to be exterminated here or to fight?"

The council was in a hubbub of excitement.

Tamar Kang raised his hand and they were instantly quiet. "Under what terms do you expect us to join you?" he asked.

"I want you to consider yourselves as part of the army of humankind. No special terms, no special privileges."

"And spoils?"

"You will receive the same pay, same equipment and transportation, and the same rewards as any other part of the army."

Kang glanced at the other council members on either side of him.

"What you ask is of a very grave nature," he said slowly. "The council must discuss this matter at some length."

"Certainly," Jeff agreed.

We were escorted from the council tent back to our quarters, with a small squad of Komani youngsters tagging along, watching us curiously.

Back in our bubble-tent, Jeff asked me, "What do you think?"

"You have offered them their lives in exchange for their allegiance," I said. "They will accept."

It was nearly dark before we learned the council's decision.

We were sitting in the bubble-tent, Jeff and Marsh trying to play a Komani version of tri-di chess, Terry lying quietly in his bunk.

Suddenly the door slid back and Tamar Kang's bulky frame ducked through it.

Jeff stood up. Without a word, Kang took a large gold medallion and chain from around his neck and placed it over Jeff's shoulders. Then he grasped both of Jeff's hands in his own mighty fists and said simply:

"We will be ready by sunrise to follow you anywhere in the galaxy."

He left.

Jeff stood there, staring at the now-closed door.

"Well, it's done," he said at last.

Terry swung up from his bunk. "I hope you know what you're doing."

"There's an old Terran saying," Marsh observed, "about grabbing a tiger by the tail. You'd better keep a good firm grip on him, Jeff."

We remained at the Komani encampment for a few days more, while Jeff summoned groups of his scientists and administrators to work out the details of fitting the new warriors into the Terran Expeditionary Force.

It turned out that the Komani, who once fought a life- and-death struggle with the Masters, no longer knew where the Masters' horneworlds were. A globular cluster of stars near the center of the galaxy - that much they had retained in their old battle sagas. But which of the hundreds of gigantic clusters of ten thousand or more stars? This information had evidently been blocked out by the Masters.

During this time Jeff attempted to make a personal friend of Tamar Kang. It was hard to tell whether or not he made any headway with the giant, unsmiling warrior chief.

At any rate, in the midst of this new bustle of activity, we received word from Loreno Tavar that the Morenian leaders had agreed to call a congress of all the human governments in the area under Jeff's control.

We flew back to Morenia just in time for the opening of the Congress of Humankind.

If Jeff had tried his hardest to impress the Komani with his warlike prowess, he attempted with equal vigor to show the humans at the Congress that he was civilized.

The Congress convened at one of the big meeting domes spotted across the Morenian countryside. To our surprise, the response to Morenia's call was overwhelmingly greater than anyone had expected. Every

star system in the area sent not only a representative, but teams of men - most of them important leaders in their home governments. They were all curious to see the Terran youth who had outmaneuvered and out-fought the invincible servants of the Masters.

The group - some thousands in number - met for the first formal session outside a huge meeting-dome. It was a typical Morenian morning: bright, clear, warm, with a slight breeze swaying the trees and shrubs around the glass and metal dome.

The men stood in a vast group before the main entrance of the dome, a shifting, intermixing mass of variegated costumes, colors, tongues, customs, physical shapes and sizes - all human, all basically the same pattern, but each single person different, individual.

They were excited. Never before in the memory of any of them, or even in their histories, had they come together for a meeting such as this. Under the Masters, they had been kept separated, each culture remaining in its own little sphere, following its own laws and customs, ruled by the watchful Saurians and the never seen, but always felt and obeyed, Masters.

Finally, when the group was fully assembled, and even the latecomers had joined the crowd, Lorenzo Tavar and Jeff walked out from the dome's main entrance and stood before them.

Jeff was dressed in a severely simple uniform of white with gold trim. He bore no weapons, carried no decorations. His head was bare, and his short-cropped dark hair was in startling contrast to the pre-dominantly light-haired men around him.

We all wore Morenian translators: an electronic combination of computer and amplifier which could

instantly translate any of the languages spoken by the assembled group.

Loreno Tavar spoke first. He simply introduced Jeff as the leader of the Terrans, and said that he would explain the purpose of the Congress.

As he turned to Jeff, it seemed that the whole planet grew still and listened. Even the breeze slacked off.

"My purpose in asking you to come here is quite simple," Jeff said, with no preliminaries. "The Terran Expeditionary Force has cleared this area of Saurians. You are, for the moment, free of the Masters. I want you to consider what you will do with your freedom."

He went on to elaborate, explaining the events that had led up to this moment, telling them what he knew of the history of the Masters and how they had attacked the Terran Confederation.

"I know that, to you, we Terrans seem strange and even primitive. We have much to learn from you, that is true. But we have learned one fact that I want to impress on you:

"Freedom is not maintained by wishful thinking. The Masters will attempt to reclaim this area. When they do, I will need your help to defeat them. And you will need my help if you wish to remain free."

"You speak of freedom," a young man in the front of the crowd called out. "What do you mean by it?" He was a good-looking youth, about Jeff's size and age; copper hair, pleasant face, and, judging by his robes, a Morenian.

"By freedom," Jeff answered, "I mean the ability to do, to think, to act as you please . . . without asking permission of the Saurians, or wondering what the Masters expect of you."

"Then an animal in the forest is free."

Jeff smiled. "Yes, until a larger animal kills him. As for men, their freedom is based on mutual trust, and mutual help. A free man's only limit is the consideration of his fellow men. And for a man to remain free, he and his fellow men must be strong enough to resist those who would enslave him."

Marsh, Terry, and I had been standing off to one side of the crowd with a group of Morenians and other Terrans during this interchange.

"Who is that guy?" Terry asked.

"Dardus," one of the Morenians said. "The son of Tassilo, and nephew of Lorenzo Tavar."

The son of Tassilo, I thought, remembering Tavia's warning to Jeff.

Jeff talked and answered questions for most of the morning. Then the group broke up for smaller conferences inside the dome. There were too many men to sit in a single group, even in the dome's main meeting room, so they spread through the many meeting rooms for conferences and a midday meal.

Jeff and most of his staff made the rounds of these smaller conferences, answering questions, discussing ideas.

I accompanied Jeff most of the time. He hammered away on his basic theme: humans must be free to decide their own fate, and to do this the Masters must be defeated by an army of united humankind.

Repeatedly, they wanted to know what the advantages of freedom would be. Many insisted that they had all the freedom they could use under the Masters.

"And your people's birth rate . . . is it going up or down?" Jeff would ask.

Static, was the answer. Static for tens of centuries, or perhaps a slight downward trend.

"And what new inventions or discoveries have your scientists and technicians made recently?"

After much hemming and hawing, the answer was almost always: none. Or at best, something so inconsequential that it could be better described as a slight development of an old invention.

"Have you learned anything or done anything that your father did not know or do?"

Again, when the basic facts were uncovered: no, not much.

"And you say the Masters have allowed you all the freedom you need," Jeff scathed. "You have been allowed the freedom to stagnate, to wither up, to die. The Masters must reckon time by millennia . . . by revolutions of the galaxy, instead of our paltry planetary revolutions. How many revolutions of the galaxy do you expect your race to remain alive, at the rate you're now going?"

And to another group he pleaded, "Don't you see? The Masters have taken the growth out of you. How can you talk about being allowed certain amounts of freedom? A man is free because he has the brains and the courage to stand on his feet and go his own way, both as an individual and as the member of a group. When you are allowed only certain amounts of freedom, you're not free - you're on a leash, and you've tied the knot around your necks yourselves!"

It was not until late that afternoon that the trouble occurred.

Jeff was in the main conference room, locked in intent conversation with a group of men from Betelgeuse,

when Dardus entered, accompanied by an older man who looked so much like him that I assumed him to be Tassilo.

Dardus was smiling, but he seemed tense, and the smile forced. He made his way across the big room slowly, chatting briefly with knots of men, nodding to others, but always edging toward Jeff.

I excused myself from the group I was with and made my way to Jeff also.

I got there just as Dardus and his father did.

Jeff turned to them as they joined the group.

"The man who wants to know what freedom is," he said, smiling.

Dardus replied crisply, "The Terran who knows the answers to all things."

"Not everything," Jeff said, "For instance, I don't know your name."

"I am Dardus of Morenia," the youth said. "This is my father, Tassilo."

"Oh, yes," Jeff said, and I saw recognition on his face. "You are Lorenzo Tavar's brother. He has spoken of you often."

Tassilo's fingers fiddled with his robe. "My brother and I do not always take the same side of an argument. As he has probably told you, I am opposed to your plan for turning Morenia into a battleground."

Jeff's eyes flashed, but he instantly regained his poise. "Your brother didn't mention your opposition," he said truthfully. "As for turning Morenia into a battleground, if I can raise enough ships and men, I propose to fight my battles far from here . . . as close to the Masters' homeworlds as I can."

"Do you really think you can defeat the Masters?" Dardus asked sharply.

"I already have," Jeff said.

"One battle does not make a war."

"No. But winning one battle is better than losing it. I think we've shown that Terrans can defeat Saurians when the odds are reasonable."

Dardus, smiling nervously, retorted, "I think all you have proved is that you have had uncommon luck. And you know as well as I that the Masters will crush you whenever they choose to."

Jeff looked around the room ingenuously. "I've been here six months. Where are they? What are they waiting for?"

Tassilo made a noise in his throat. "You are living on borrowed time. And you are trying to take us down to destruction with you."

Jeff locked his gaze on Tassilo's grayish eyes. "Don't think for an instant that I'm such a fool. If I really thought I had no chance to beat the Masters, I wouldn't be standing here talking politics . . . I'd be fortifying a hiding place for myself and my men."

"But that is the way a civilized man would behave," Dardus said. "No one expects a Terran barbarian to act intelligently."

Jeff held on to his temper, but just barely. "If it is an act of barbarism to resist the Masters, then I am a barbarian - and glad of it. I would rather be such a barbarian than to go through life without the intelligence to realize that I am a slave and that my race is dying before my eyes."

"You prove your own ignorance," Dardus snapped.

"I am ignorant on only one point here," Jeff said. "I don't know what the Masters have promised you to make you try to block my plans."

"You accuse me of treachery?" Dardus shouted.

"Either you or your father . . . perhaps both."

"That's grounds for a duel!" Dardus said, whisking a small, slim rod from beneath his robe.

"That's fine by me," Jeff answered. "Where and when?"

"Here and now," Dardus said.

Before I could say anything, Dardus, Tassilo, Jeff, and a few other Morenians and Terrans were striding from the room, heading for the meadow outside the dome.

I ran to Jeff's side, and had to scamper to keep pace with him. His face was a dark cloud.

"You can't!" I pleaded. "Whether you win or lose this duel, your behavior will prove to the Morenians and the other humans that you are an uncivilized brawler. If you kill Dardus, all Morenia will turn against you."

"Maybe he'll kill me," Jeff said.

"That is extremely probable," I said, somewhat breathlessly, trying to keep up with him and talk at the same time. "Do you have any idea of what that weapon he was toying with could be?"

"It's a Morenian side arm," Jeff said, as we went through the main doorway and outside. "Uses electromagnetic beams to disrupt the nervous system."

"Have you ever fired one?"

"No."

"Do you know how to use it at all?"

"No."

"Then he will kill you!"

The group was walking around the dome now, toward the back. We had attracted quite a crowd already. I saw several members of Jeff's staff, including Terry. Lorenzo Tavar was rushing toward us.

"Certainly he'll kill me," Jeff said, "if we use his weapons. But I'm the one who was challenged. Right?"

I was relieved to see that Jeff had not taken complete leave of his senses. But all this meant was that, at best, Jeff would be considered a barbarian and murderer; his hope for an army of humankind to battle the Masters would be killed at the instant he killed Dardus.

Jeff stopped and called to Dardus. "This looks like a good place."

"Fine."

"Since you challenged me, I believe I have the choice of weapons."

Dardus' face fell as Jeff beckoned to a Star Watch officer. "Go to my quarters and get a couple of dueling swords, please."

We had to wait almost half an hour while the officer antigrav'd to Jeff's quarters and back.

Lorenzo Tavar joined us. "I beg you to stop this."

"How?" Jeff asked. "It's just as Tavia said. Tassilo has me in a spot where he can either discredit me or kill me. If you don't mind, I'd rather save my skin first and worry about my reputation later."

"But you will have to kill Dardus!"

"He's offered to do as much for me," Jeff answered without humor.

"But you don't understand. He knows nothing of politics. My brother has put him up to this"

"He's old enough to know what he's doing."

Loreno Tavar gripped Jeff's shoulder. "Listen to me. Dardus is only old enough to know that Tavia is more interested in you than in him."

Jeff was stunned. "You mean that he's. . ."

"He's been betrothed to Tavia since childhood. And he loves her."

"And she?"

"She accepted the fact that one day she would marry him . . . until she met you."

Jeff looked past Loreno Tavar at Dardus. "I'm not very familiar with your customs," he said. "How binding is this betrothal?"

"It is binding only if both parties are willing to be bound by it," Loreno Tavar answered. "But I beg you to stop and consider. He is my nephew, and dear to me. I know his death will weigh heavily on me . . . and on Tavia, too."

Jeff said nothing. Soon the officer returned with the swords.

"You know of fencing on Morenia," Jeff said to Dardus as he gave him his choice of the swords.

"For sport," Tassilo spat out. "Only a barbarian would consider them as weapons."

Jeff looked at him. "They'll kill you just as dead as an electromagnetic beam."

He turned on his heel and walked away. By now, most of the representatives had left their conferences and joined the throng outside to watch the duel. Dardus dropped his robe and faced Jeff in tunic and shorts. Jeff loosened his collar and saluted with his blade.

There were no referees and no formal seconds. . . .

the two opponents merely stepped up to one another, crossed swords, and began.

Dardus began cautiously, testing Jeff's reflexes with a series of feints and short thrusts. Jeff sat in a fencer's crouch and parried, slowly giving ground. Dardus' probing gradually grew sharper and more intense, until he was pressing a real attack. Jeff still backed away, content to parry with only an occasional counterthrust.

This went on for several minutes, with Dardus' attack growing steadily more furious until it seemed he would push Jeff right into the curving wall of the dome.

But a foot or so short of the wall, Jeff suddenly stopped retreating. At first no one realized it, but Jeff merely stood his ground, parrying every slashing drive that Dardus aimed at him. Finally, it became apparent that the Morenian could not penetrate Jeff's guard . . . even Dardus himself began to see it, and the exultant light in his eyes began to fade.

Then Jeff's blade flicked in almost faster than you could see, and Dardus' tunic was ripped open. He began to back away from the Terran. Jeff followed, catlike. He lunged again, and this time Dardus' left shoulder began to trickle blood.

They stood for a moment, both of them unmoving, facing each other in their half-squatting fencer's poses. A lightening flash, and Dardus' blade was slapped out of his hands.

The crowd was silent. Beyond Dardus' form, Jeff saw Tassilo and his brother, both ashen-faced.

"Pick it up," Jeff said.

Dardus retrieved his sword, and Jeff began stalking him again. The Morenian gave ground steadily as

Jeff flicked in and out of his guard, easily parrying his attempts to counterattack.

It was evident that Jeff was complete master of the situation, that he could kill Dardus at any moment. Yet he played with him, cat-and-mouse.

Then, suddenly, Jeff mounted a furious attack that drove Dardus off-balance and sent him sprawling at his father's feet.

Jeff slammed his booted foot on the Morenian's blade.

He looked at Tassilo. "I know that this boy is fighting me because you want him to. I only wish you were young enough to face me, yourself." He turned back to Dardus, who had risen to one knee. "As for Tavia, it's for her to decide who she loves, not for us to decide for her by trying to kill one another."

Dardus rose to his feet. He was sweaty and covered with grime where he had fallen. "I challenged you to fight," he said, shakily. "Give me my sword back and we'll finish this. I'm not asking to be excused."

Jeff banded Dardus his own sword. "I don't want your life," he said. "But I could use your courage and your good right arm. Will you join me?"

Dardus stared at Jeff for a long moment, turned to his father, then dropped the sword and ran through the crowd into the dome.

The Congress lasted three days more. In the end, Jeff got what he wanted. The representatives voted to raise an army and join the Terrans in the fight against the Masters. Jeff had his army of humankind.

More, in fact. Because on the last day of the Con-

gress, Tassilo and Dardus appeared before Jeff. Tassilo said:

"I still disagree with you, and believe that your plans will lead to nothing but ruin for all of us. But you have spared my son when you could have easily killed him. I must thank you for that, and apologize for deliberately provoking the duel between you."

Jeff answered, "I respect your opinion, and your honesty. No apology is necessary. As for you," he said to Dardus, "I meant what I said two days ago. Will you join me?"

"I have already accepted a commission in the Morenian fleet," Dardus said.

The two of them - Jeff and Dardus - talked for about an hour after that. If they mentioned Tavia at all, I do not know, for I was busy with my own duties at the time.

But that evening, Jeff and Tavia met again for the last time, as it turned out.

They must have felt that there would be little time left to them. They sat on a balcony of the dome that was Jeff's headquarters, and talked for hours. It was nearly dawn when they finally parted. They had many things to say to each other . . . so many things to say, and so little time to say them.

The next morning we received the ultimatum from the Masters.

Chapter 8 *Battle for Life*

The Masters' ultimatum was delivered by a Saurian admiral, in person.

The very day the Congress of humankind broke up, we received word that the Saurian had piloted a one-man scoutship into the Terran patrols near the star, Spica. He claimed a truce, saying he had a message that could be delivered only to the commander of the Terran forces.

It was only many days afterward that any of us realized that, legally, the Saurian should have spoken to the Chief Coordinator of the Star Watch, or perhaps even the President of the Confederation Council.

We all assumed, when the Saurian asked for the Terran leader, that he was referring to Jeff. This is perhaps not important in itself but it shows how our viewpoint was becoming detached from the confines of the Confederation and projected into a larger arena. Jeff, Terry, and I flew immediately to the cruiser

where the Saurian was being held. Marsh declined to come. He was still deep in his mathematical work on the new subspace navigational system.

He was the biggest Saurian I had ever seen, and even the cocky Terran crew of the patrol cruiser dubbed him a "dragon" instead of the usual "lizard."

Like all the Saurians, he rested on two heavy hind limbs and a supporting tail. His forelimbs were short and weak-looking, but ended in clawed hands. He wore an arm band indicating his rank and a curious pendant on his chest.

Unlike the other Saurians I had known, he was fully as tall as any Terran, and no doubt weighed much more. His scales were a brilliant mixture of blues and yellows. His head was much smaller and not nearly as toothy as other Saurians.

"We've tried to communicate with him;" the captain of the cruiser told Jeff, "but he refuses to talk to anyone but the commander of the Terrans."

We were all standing on the bridge of the patrol cruiser, observing the Saurian - who was locked in an empty cargo compartment - over the ship's intercom system.

"Well," Jeff said, watching the unmoving reptile, "he's either come to surrender, or advise us to surrender. Let's see which."

The three of us, accompanied by the captain and a well-armed squad of guards, went to the compartment. The Saurian stared unblinkingly at us as Jeff introduced himself, Terry, and me. He spoke Terran. The Saurian seemed to understand.

"Then you are in command of the Terrans?" His

mouth did not move. The words-metallic, machinelike-came from the square pendant hanging from his neck.

Jeff said he was. The Saurian took a moment to digest this, then asked:

"This person at your side is Rh'khour'mnin?"

"I am," I answered, "and I have joined the Terrans."

"*We can always afford to lose a slave,*" he suddenly switched to telepathy. "*However, it is fortunate that you are present. The translating machine is slow and inexact. You will translate for me.*"

"Is he communicating to you?" Jeff asked.

"Yes," I replied without taking my eyes from the Saurian. "He wants me to translate between you."

"Can you?"

"Yes."

"It isn't too much of a strain?"

"Not if he cooperates," I said.

"What is your purpose in coming here?" I asked the Saurian.

"*I have a message for the Terran leader.*" I told Jeff. He nodded to proceed. What is your message?

The Saurian stirred slightly, then closed his eyes and delivered his message:

"From the Masters of the galaxy, rulers of the stars for countless ages, acknowledged leaders of all intelligent beings: Greetings to the men of Earth.

"In recent times you have chosen to resist our gifts of civilization (and peace in preference to living in your own benighted fashion among your poor scattered stars. You have even attempted to convince your neigh-

bors, who have long been our faithful subjects, to join you in a war against us.

"We have no desire to annihilate you, and since you are so violently opposed to our proffered friendship, we deign to leave you in peace to live as you please. All the star systems you have conquered may remain under your rule. We are not so poor, nor so vainglorious, as to desire your meager worlds at the cost of further bloodshed.

"However, should you refuse this offer of peace and attempt to continue the war, know that your fleets shall be decimated wherever they appear and your homeworlds shall feel the full weight of the mightiest armies in the galaxy.

"We can utterly destroy you at any time, but we offer you the freedom you so rabidly desire - even at the cost of learning the benefits of an older, wiser civilization.

"The choice is yours: Peace or destruction."

There was a long silence after I finished translating the Saurian's message.

Terry was the first to break it. "Nice of them to admit we're at war. 'Gifts of civilisation!' " He snorted. "First time I've ever heard an invasion called a gift."

Jeff was staring at the Saurian, but his mind was obviously racing far and fast.

"Jeff," I said, "Do you realize what the Masters are offering you?"

"I think so."

"They are asking to call off the war. They are suing for peace. . . ."

"At the status quo," he said.

"Yes," I replied. "You can keep a territory a thousand light-years in diameter ... five times the size of the Terran Confederation!"

"It's not enough," Jeff muttered.

"Not enough? Jeff, think a moment. This area has never known a single, unified government. If you can assure them that they can live in peace, without fear of the Masters' reprisals, Morenia and all the other human systems will make you their leader. You can be an emperor! The Terran Confederation will make you Star Watch Chief Coordinator at least . . . perhaps Council President . . ."

Jeff shook his head. "I know all that, old friend. And don't think it's not a tempting proposition. But remember why we're fighting the Masters."

I stopped a moment.

"Do you think that even the present area we control is big enough to keep from being digested by the Masters? Remember, Alan . . . warfare is only one of their methods. They won most of this area centuries ago, without firing a shot. You, yourself, pointed out to me that they can win the Confederation without a war . . . it would only be a question of time."

"Yes, of course," I said, realizing what I had known all along, but forgotten in the excitement of the Saurian's offer.

"No," Jeff said, "if we settled for the area we've won now, the Masters would absorb us all in a few generations. And besides, I can't agree to place a limit on Terran expansion. We humans are an odd type, Alan . . . we must expand . . . dynamic stability is built into our culture. If we stop expanding, we turn

into passive lotus eaters, like the Morenians and the others."

Like my own people, I thought to myself.

"We can't make peace with the Masters until we can face them as equals . . . until we have broken their power and are strong enough to digest their culture without being absorbed into it against our will," Jeff said. "Tell him that."

"There is no need," the Saurian projected. "I understand you. You have chosen to die."

The expeditionary force left Morenia in battle formation the next day.

"The Saurian's ultimatum means two things," Jeff told us, when we met on the bridge of his cruiser as the fleet got under way. "First, they're assembling a force that'll overpower us by sheer numbers. Second, they haven't completely put it together yet. They're daring us to fight, but I don't think they're ready yet."

"They've had six months to get ready," Terry pointed out, slouching in his chair.

"I know. But consider their communications problem . . . they're trying to put together fleets from all over the galaxy, distances involving tens of thousands of light-years. Six months is barely enough time to get started."

"You hope," Marsh kidded.

"Let's all hope," Jeff grinned back.

He swiveled his seat and punched a button on the bridge's communications console; his galaxy map appeared on the viewscreen.

We saw the small white patch of the Terran Confederation set off to one side of a larger, almost circular

area - the area the expeditionary force now controlled. All of these stars were part of a broad spiral arm that extended from the central nucleus of the galaxy and swept far out beyond the Confederation, one of three such arms.

"You can see," Jeff said, "that we're sailing down the Orion arm of the galaxy, going toward the central hub, more than twenty-five thousand light-years away. This is all new territory to us, but not to the Masters."

Marsh nodded vigorously. "The astronomers are bursting blood vessels with joy . . . gillions of new stars to map and investigate. They've sneaked so much equipment onto some of our scoutships that I've considered telling the scouts to save ammunition when they meet the enemy and just throw spectrometers at 'em."

"Never mind," Jeff laughed. "We need all the astronomical information we can get, if we hope to navigate through this area."

"Why don't we try a few raids to see if we can pick up enemy star charts?" Terry suggested.

"Good idea," Jeff agreed. "At any rate, we're going to have to do a lot more than try a few raids. As I said, we'll soon be in hostile territory, and a trap might be sprung on us at any time or place. So, as we, go cruising along, we mustn't leave a single enemy base intact behind us. I want a clear line of retreat open at all times."

"That's going to be a big order," Terry said.

"I know. But I think if we repeat the raiding tactics we used in the Orion area, we can keep our communications with home base open, and at the same time

force the Masters to come out and fight . . . perhaps before they're really ready for a showdown."

"Sounds good enough," Marsh said.

"Well go slowly at first," Jeff said. "In a few weeks we should be joined by the Komani. Terry, they'll come under your command."

"Okay," he said.

"There's a Star Watch fleet on its way from the Confederation, too. It will stop at Morenia and join the humankind fleet, which Commanders Daguerre and Panjart are organizing. In less than two months we should have a fighting force that'll make the 'Masters' eyes pop . . . if they have eyes."

Marsh and Terry left after a few more minutes' conversation, and returned to their own ships just before the fleet went into superlight overdrive.

As Jeff saw them to the shuttle rocket, I stayed on the bridge and looked at the galaxy map on the viewscreen. It was a long, long way down that spiral arm of stars to the galaxy's central hub. And somewhere in that vast nucleus of stars and star clusters was the Masters' globular cluster. How many battles would we have to fight before we found it? How many years would it take: to make our way through that immense distance?

My gaze inadvertently drifted back up the spiral to a small blue dot off to one side of the Terran Confederation: Rh'khour'mnin. Only three hundred fifty light-years from Sol, but in the opposite direction from our goal.

"I know what you're thinking."

I turned to see Jeff standing beside me.

"I didn't know you had returned."

He smiled. "I can guess how you feel about the way the war's going . . . we seem to be getting farther from your homeworlds, instead of closer to them."

"Yes. But I understand."

"Alan, if I had the ships and men to spare, I'd send you back to free your cluster. But I can't afford to right now."

"I know," I said. "It would merely involve you in a needless fight that could tie clown valuable forces for months. The Saurians occupying lkh'khoi still haven't the strength to attack the Confederation by themselves, but they could cause plenty of trouble for an invading force."

Jeff nodded. "It has to wait, Alan, but someday. . ."

"Someday," I agreed. "Really, it is not as vital to me as you think. I . . . I hardly know my own people; I am much more familiar with the Saurians than my fellow humans. But someday, if we live to see it, I would like to liberate Rh'khour'mnin and give my people back the sense of dignity and self-confidence which the Masters have taken from them."

For three months we slashed our way through the Masters' territory without much opposition.

It was a repetition of our earlier raids: the fleet would pick out all enemy base and neutralize its patrol ships, spaceports, and ground installations; then Terry and his men would land on the planet and mop up what was left. There was plenty of hard fighting on the planets, but no enemy fleet appeared to oppose us.

And, of course, Terry had the Komani serving under him now. They were fierce fighters, afraid of nothing.

But they were hard to control. On one planet they decided to loot the defeated Saurians, and only Terry's unhesitating threat to take his ships away and leave them stranded on the planet halted them.

After that, Tamar Kang personally saw to it that looters were discouraged-usually by capital punishment. And Jeff saw to it that the Komani, as well as all his men, were constantly rewarded with fresh equipment and gear, and plenty of food.

Commander Daguerre rejoined the fleet with the humankind contingents - which numbered almost as many as the expeditionary force and Komani combined, and we encountered thousands more human star systems as we penetrated deeper into the galaxy's heart. Jeff left teams of Terran scientists and administrators in each group of systems, and we were provided with a constant trickle of recruits to swell the ranks of the humankind army.

In their determination not to leave a single enemy base intact behind us, Terry and his men even began raiding the big, low-density, Jupiter-like planets where the Hydra were stationed. Encased in special one-man flying pressure tanks, Terrans, Komani, and humankind troops dived into the heavy gravity and ammonia and methane atmospheres to carry the fighting right down to the Hydra's lairs.

Special detection devices were needed because human eyesight was practically useless on those frozen, dark worlds; they were developed and built. Special tactics were needed to fight the constantly retreating, ambushing Hydra; they were created, improved upon, and became second nature to Terry's men.

But no matter how many planets we captured, no

matter how many human star systems we liberated, no Masters' fleet appeared to challenge us.

"They're waiting for us to stretch our communications line back home to the breaking point," Jeff observed. "They've plenty of territory; they can afford to give ground, build up their own fleet, and wait for us to make a mistake."

But Jeff was wrong. The Masters did not wait for our mistake.

They struck at precisely the time and place they had picked months earlier.

It happened when we were more than a thousand light-years from Morenia; fully fifteen hundred light-years from Sol.

We had reached a curious gap in the starry arm of the galaxy, an open space devoid of stars, about a hundred or two hundred light-years across. It was difficult to tell how wide it was, because this was strange territory to us, and the astronomers needed time to make careful observations and check them.

Ahead of us was this gap; to one side was the rift between the Orion and Sagittarius arms of the galaxy - a giant gulf between two of the spiral arms that ran beside one another out of the central nucleus of the Milky Way.

On our other side was a long stretch of interstellar gas and dust: nothing to be afraid of in itself, but extremely difficult to see through, even by electronic means.

The fleet had spread out quite a bit despite Jeff's best efforts to keep it together; so now, as we faced the gap, we came out of subspace and regrouped.

As the fleet tightened its formation and coasted in normal space at sublight speeds, Jeff sent out a swarm of scouts. He was particularly suspicious of that big, impenetrably opaque cloud on our left flank.

"If I were attempting to trap an enemy fleet," he muttered, looking at the vast darkness of the cloud in the bridge's viewscreen, "this would be the place I'd do it."

Several hours passed, the ships gradually regrouped into their assigned formations, reports came in a steady stream to the bridge of Jeff's cruiser, but lie still watched the viewscreen moodily.

He was tense, like an animal sniffing the wind to see if a predator is lurking nearby, stalking hint.

And then it came.

EMERGENCY. IMMENSE ENEMY FORCE DEPLOYED IN DUST CLOUD ON YOUR FLANK. ADVANCE UNITS CIRCLING TO YOUR REAR. ESTIMATE THEM AT LEAST FIVE OR SIX TIMES. . . .

The report ticker abruptly stopped chugging, its tape hanging limply from the output slot, big red letters blaring danger.

"Where's the rest of that message?" Jeff bawled into his intercom.

"Sorry, sir," the tech down in the communications center answered, "the message stopped. We lost contact, sir."

Jeff turned to me. "That's one scout they got."

He punched the general alarm button on his viewscreen and began issuing orders. Meanwhile the ticker suddenly chugged to life again.

ENEMY FLEET LYING: ASTRADDLE OUR INTENDED COURSE THROUGH GAP. ROUGHLY FOUR TIMES OUR NUMBER. HEAVY

CRUISERS, DREADNAUGHTS PREDOMINATE IN BATTLE FORMATION.

There were hundreds of such reports pouring out of the ticker, the viewscreen, the voice beams . . . every method of communication open to its.

They all added up to a dangerous picture: the Saurians and Hydra had a strong force directly ahead of us, and an even larger force on our left flank. They were circling around us, attempting a mammoth englobement, and we had no way to retreat except into the starless void of the rift.

"Retreat will be no good," Jeff said. "They'll merely march in and occupy the star systems we've just come through and wait for us to come out of subspace."

"But wouldn't it be better to fight them at a place of our own choosing?" I asked.

But Jeff shook his head. "You saw how scattered we were after a short hop in subspace. If we popped out of subspace in that shape, they'd just pick its off one by one. No, we fight here . . ." He grinned. "This is what we've been asking for. Now, we fight or die." I smiled back, rather weakly, I fear.

"Scared?"

I nodded.

"Good. Anyone who says he's not is a liar. Well, let's go to work."

I took over handling incoming reports, feeding the main ones to Jeff, as he took up his station at the viewscreen where he could analyze the whole situation and command his fleet.

The enemy ships were coming out of the dust cloud Dow, all along our left flank, stretching out in a net-

work several ships deep, and so long that even our biggest scanners could not get them all into one picture screen.

Jeff sent Terry and his men to our rear to form a stationary defense line and prevent the enemy from swinging up around us and completing an englobement. It was a desperate maneuver because Terry's ships were not intended for deep-space fighting; they were troopships, lightly armed and not as well protected as the battle cruisers. Jeff ordered as many scouts and picket ships as he could afford to aid Terry's stand.

Then he split his battle cruisers into three units. The largest consisting mostly of untested humankind ships mixed with Star Watch forces from the Confederation he stationed along the flank with orders to slow down the advancing enemy as much as possible.

Jeff placed his second unit - largely veteran expeditionary force men - on his right flank, to one side of the enemy force ahead of us. Then he and the smallest group of all, but a group consisting of the fastest, heaviest cruisers he had, sped toward the "corner" formed by the juncture of the two enemy forces.

"We've got to hit them hard and fast," he told his ship commanders. "Smash into them, shock them, pry them apart . . . break open their lines and fall in on the flank of the bigger force."

As we charged across the emptiness toward the enemy, I suddenly began to feel sick. At first I did not know what was causing it . . . I felt a dull pain in my head, and a queasy, almost nauseous sensation in my innards.

I recall trying to keep control of myself and not let anyone see how I felt, for fear they might think me sick from cowardice.

But as I gripped the edges of the little table on one side of Jeff's bridge, struggling to remain conscious and alert, no one noticed me at all.

They were too busy trying to keep alive.

Jeff's flying charge into the Saurian line: was only partially successful. The small group of cruisers hit the enemy with a terrific shock, buckled their line, but failed to break it. The Saurians had packed their ships ten- and twenty-deep . . . Jeff's force simply did not have the weight to penetrate them.

I learned later that Jeff swung his group around, digging into the side of the Saurian fleet that was advancing out of the dust cloud. With his ships blasting one end of the line, and the humankind group making the enemy pay dearly for every step forward they took, the whole big Saurian line was slowly grinding to a halt.

The whole line, that is, except for the flying detachment that had been sent to circle our rear. This fast attack group ran into Terry's troopships and scouts. Tony's men fought valiantly, but they simply could not cope with fully-armed cruisers. They were pushed back, taking fearful losses as he stubbornly retreated.

I must have lost consciousness,

One moment I was fighting for self-control, sitting rigidly at the table while reports piled up before me. . . .

The next thing I knew I was refocusing my eyes on Jeff's intent face. He was leaning over me. I was flat on the bridge's deck.

"Alan, what is it?"

"The battle . . . forget about me . . . you have to direct the fleet . . ."

New faces appeared in front of me. I was picked up and placed back in my chair. Someone was feeling my wrist, someone else holding an odd-looking instrument before me.

"Commander! The right wing has been shattered!" I heard a viewscreen voice shrill. "The enemy is pouring through and englobing us!"

"All ships in Unit Three come about," Jeff barked. "Disengage the enemy and proceed at full speed to the right flank!"

The ship lurched crazily, knocking me back onto the deck. The bridge lights wavered, then steadied.

I got up under my own power while the other men on the bridge did likewise.

"Almost blew out the energy screen," Jeff muttered.

"Sir," one of the medical officers said, "we . . . eh, we can't seem to find anything wrong with him, sir. Pulse beat is high, but nothing else out of the usual."

I leaned against the table. The nauseous feeling was gone, but I felt weak, and my head was throbbing as though . . . as though . . . suddenly I knew!

"Jeff! Jeff! The Masters! They are *here!*"

"What?"

"My sickness . . . I've been receiving powerful mental impulses . . . so powerful they upset my entire nervous system."

Jeff waved the two medical officers away. I sat at my chair again and Jeff leaned over the table.

"We've only got a few minutes before we're back in action again, Alan. What are you trying to tell me?"

"The Masters are here, somewhere in this area. They must be directing the Saurian fleets by telepathy. I felt some of their impulses . . . that's what made me sick."

Jeff eyed me intently. "Do you feel them now?"

"Only faintly."

"Where were they most intense?"

"A few minutes ago," I said. "When I lost consciousness." Jeff said nothing. But his mouth was clenched into a thin line, and his eyes were ablaze.

He whirled to the viewscreen and punched a button. "All ships in Unit Three: cancel previous order. Follow my ship . . . wherever I go, follow me.

Then he turned back to me. "Alan, can you lead us to the Masters? Are you up to it?"

"I can try," I said.

"Trying is no good," he told me. "We're outnumbered a dozen to one, and almost englobed. Finding the Masters and destroying them is our only hope of getting out of this alive. We've got to destroy the enemy's commanders. Will you lead us to them?"

I took a deep breath. "I will."

The next few minutes I shall never forget. Most of all, the expression on Jeff's face - white-lipped determination and eyes flashing with eagerness, as though he realized how close he was standing to death, yet dared death, to claim him. That look on Jeff's face will always be burning in memory.

I have only seen it twice in my life. This was the first time.

Jeff's little squad of ships was racing across a crumbling Terran line back to the spot where I had felt

the Masters' presence to be strongest. Meanwhile, the Saurians were tightening their globe around us, battering our badly outnumbered ships. They seemed certain of victory.

The pain was returning. To anyone who has not experienced the overwhelming pressure of tremendous mental forces smashing against him as impersonally as an ocean wave breaks against a sea wall . . . what I was feeling was indescribable.

The Masters were sending telepathic messages to the Saurian ships. I was receiving parts of those messages; not enough to understand them, only enough to feel.

And the feeling was pain.

Jeff's ship scuttled across the advancing Saurian line. I felt the pain start to recede and told him to double back. We did, and the throbbing in my head grew.

The ship turned along that line and started in toward the Saurians. The pain became steadily more intense.

Finally, it was a thick haze around me . . . surrounding me with agony.

Dimly, I felt the ship bounce and shudder as Saurian force beams pounded us. Vaguely, I heard Jeff calling for every available Terran and humankind ship to join him in a desperate slashing drive into the enemy line. Far, far off, I seemed to see his face: weary but determined. Exultantly defiant.

And then the pain snapped off!

I looked up, and Jeff was staring unbelievably at the viewscreen.

"They've just disappeared," he said. "Just winked off, like a light."

The communications tech's startled face appeared on the screen. "Sir, as far as we can tell . . . they jumped into subspace."

"Without any build-up of acceleration at all?"

The tech shook his head. "They were sitting there one moment, sir . . . the next instant they were gone!" Jeff turned to me.

"They're gone," I said. "I can't feel them any longer."

We had smashed through the Saurian line of ships and spotted six ships - the Masters. As Jeff bored in on them, they vanished.

And within minutes we began receiving the real proof: what had been a carefully-integrated, well-organized Saurian attack was splintering up into a hunched fragments.

Saurian units were no longer meshed together in a mammoth fleet that moved as one single: group. They were individual units again, disjointed, out of contact with one another.

Without the Masters to guide the over-all battle, the Saurians were suddenly deprived of their communications and intelligence. They hesitated, confused. And in that hesitation, Jeff struck. He rattled off orders in an unending flow for almost six hours. He organized his badly mauled fleet into a single-minded fighting force that slashed viciously at the confused Saurians. With nothing more than his unquenchable personality, he turned a shattered, defeated fleet into a cohesive, disciplined force.

Jeff threw every ship that could still move into one flank of the surrounding enemy. The Saurians gave ground, split apart, then - the humans concentrated

a withering fire on one hapless section of their enemies - they turned and fled.

That was the breaking-point. Jeff's ships fell on the other Saurians, who were either milling about waiting for orders or were already sliding out of formation and heading for safer parts of the galaxy.

At the end of six hours the nearly-victorious Saurians had been reduced to a panic-stricken mob fleeing in all directions, with the grim Terrans and their allies wreaking a fearful vengeance on them.

For three days we pursued the remnants of the Saurian fleet and hunted for the disappeared Masters. Finally Jeff called a halt and ordered all ships to return to formation for repairs and new orders.

When the Terran staff finally got together, no one past four days. But they were all jubilant about our victory.

All but Jeff.

"We haven't won a victory," he told us. "We merely scattered a fleet that nearly wiped it out. Most of that fleet escaped. And we still have more than twenty thousand light-years between us and the Masters' home-worlds. Do you realize how many fleets like this last one they can organize in all that area?"

Chapter 9 *The Gamble*

In the histories that have been written, taped, sung, and carved into stone in different parts of the galaxy, what happened next to Jeff and his men has been variously described as the result of careful scientific investigation, the laws of probability, luck, and divine inspiration.

If it was any of these, it was all of them.

Certainly it was careful scientific probing that unraveled the mythology of the Komani folk sagas. A staff of anthropologists, led by a perpetually-smiling, dark-skinned young Terran from Aldebaran, Ernesto Bardun, had been working on the Komani sagas since Jeff first ordered a study of the catlike warrior race.

Now, after months of puzzling together allegorical references, clues that had been obscured by the passage of uncounted ages, Bardun and his aides thought they had a good idea of where the Komani's original homeworlds had been.

And, more important, once they knew that, they could estimate with fair accuracy the location of the Masters' star cluster.

The laws of probability entered the picture when Terry's men, who had been assigned to mopping-up operations after the Battle of the Gap, stumbled onto an intact set of Saurian star charts.

They swooped down on a lonely planetoid huddled close to a dwarf star, after discovering a damaged Saurian cruiser there. The Terrans seized the ship before it could be destroyed by its surprised crew. The Terran patrol leader caught the Saurian captain in the act of attempting to burn the star charts. The captain was shot when he chose to fight rather than surrender.

The star charts came to me for translation into Terran.

Their coordinate system was unlike any I had ever seen before; the names and classifications of the stars were meaningless to me. But in the center of one of those charts was a globular cluster of stars marked with only one word: Masters.

Not even the astronomers could get any useful information out of the captured Saurian maps until they got together with the anthropologists, who supplied a coordinate system they had learned from the Komani.

It was lucky for us that these two events happened almost simultaneously. One was incomprehensible without the other.

The maps began to make sense. And the location of the Masters' cluster which the maps showed agreed rather well with that deduced by the anthropologists from the Komani sagas. This made the anthropologists

feel much better, because they had been the first to point out that their conclusions were based on very tenuous evidence.

So scientific investigation, the laws of probability, and luck added up to point the way to the Masters' homeworlds.

The divine inspiration came from Jeff.

It took a few weeks for all this to happen. The main body of the fleet was tending to its wounds after what the historians now call the Battle of the Gap. Officially, we had won a victory, but we all knew how close to disaster we had come.

Meanwhile, the astronomers and anthropologists huddled together for days on end - and often long into the night - to decipher the tantalizingly-obscure information they had obtained.

When they finally agreed on a firm location for the Masters' home cluster, I went straight to Jeff.

Well, not exactly straight. First, I put in a call for Marsh; I knew he would be interested in the star maps, which were now fully translated into the Terran language and coordinate system.

I waited almost an hour in my cabin with the maps locked in my desk while the fleet communications people tried to find Marsh. Finally a puzzled-looking young tech appeared on my viewscreen:

"Sir, we can't find Officer Jordan. His ship is reported to be on special detached duty, by order of the commander."

I was surprised at first. Then, as I threaded my way through the ship's corridors to Jeff's cabin, I became just as puzzled about it as the tech. I decided to ask

Jeff about it, since I was bringing the maps and the news to him, anyway.

But my news about the Masters' home cluster had to wait. Jeff was on the bridge, locked in a quiet but grim struggle with Tamar Kang.

"My men were forced to sit in your cramped little ships while the Saurians shot us down like vermin," Kang was rumbling, as I came on the bridge.

Jeff looked tired, sitting in his chair beside the chart table. "I know your losses were heavy. Terry's men took the same punishment. It couldn't be helped."

"We were not even allowed to fight," Kang continued, pacing all the while.

"If I had fighting ships to put you in, and you knew how to fly them, don't you think I'd have let you fight?" Jeff answered. "There were no planets in the area of the battle, so there was no ground-based fighting."

"My men are unhappy," Tamar Kang went on, "and my people mourn their dead."

"So do I," Jeff said. "I mourn them all . . . and I mourn for those who are yet to die."

Tamar Kang stopped his pacing before Jeff's chair. His immense frame loomed over Jeff.

"My warriors are ashamed to have been in a battle without firing a shot," he said, "and they have suffered many killed . . . in a coward's death."

Jeff rose from his chair to his full height. He was still more than a head shorter than Kang, but his ramrod posture and blazing eyes forced the bigger man back a step.

"You and your men will see enough fighting in the months to come. You will all live in the memory of

your people as the greatest heroes the Komani have known. All men, everywhere in the galaxy, will remember you. But for now, you must be patient."

Tarmar Kang blinked his eyes once, then replied: "A warrior cannot sit and do nothing. My men need a battle. Find us a Saurian planet, and we will destroy it."

"Can't do it," Jeff said, shaking his head. "The only Saurian bases in this area have already been attacked from aloft by our cruisers. The only other inhabited planets within fifty light-years are occupied by Saurian civilians."

"Let us attack one of them and loot it."

"No!" Jeff snapped. "We are fighting the armies of the Masters, not civilians. You'll get enough fighting as soon as the fleet is ready to move again . . . we have a lifetime of fighting ahead of us."

Tamar Kang turned and started to leave. Just before he reached the doorway I was standing in, he turned back to Jeff.

"Some of my men might commandeer a small ship and its crew and raid a Saurian planet on their own. I cannot control them all under these conditions."

Jeff leaned tiredly on the bridge rail. "Any ship trying to leave the present limits of our formation will be shot down by our pickets. That's a standing order. Tell your restless warriors that for me."

Kang bristled. "I will!"

He stormed past me and left.

Jeff slumped wearily into his chair. "You look tired," I said.

"I am."

I sat in a chair next to him. "Are you ill?"

"No, I don't think so. It's just that keeping the

Komani and humankind contingents happy and in line is a much bigger job than commanding the expeditionary force."

"I know. You've been working too hard, too long. You should rest."

"Rest?" He smiled bitterly. "With Tamar Kang grumbling and the humankind leaders still scared stiff from their first battle? With nothing in sight but more battles against constantly-stronger enemies? Who can rest?"

"I can see you need some good news."

"I could use some," Jeff said.

"Then listen: we have located the home cluster of the Masters."

Jeff stared at me without speaking. You could hear the soft droning hum of the ship's electrical system, the muted rumble of her engines, and the faint sounds of men moving and working on the control deck below the bridge.

Finally Jeff uttered a single word: "Definitely?"

I nodded. "The astronomers and anthropologists have double-checked each other. We have found information in the Komani sagas and captured Saurian star charts."

You could see the tiredness drain out of Jeff. "Well, any time you can get astronomers and anthropologists to agree with one another," he grinned, "you *must* be on the right track."

I spread the Saurian maps and their Terran counterparts on the chart table, and told Jeff the whole story in detail.

He listened, asking a question here and there. When I was through, he said, "I want you to double-check

this. We captured several high-ranking Saurians in this last battle. See if you can get an affirmation of this from them."

"Very well," I said. "I had also intended to show these maps to Marsh, to see if they are sufficient for navigational purposes."

Jeff nodded. "Good idea. They look as though they'll be plenty to navigate by. Marsh is on a special assignment for me, but he should be back in a day or two . . . I hope."

Jeff's face was bright with eagerness now. But underlying it was a tenseness, an unshakable determination. I could sense that his mind was leaping ahead now, foreseeing battles and campaigns that would take place months, even years, from now.

What I did not realize was that we would never fight those battles.

Questioning the upper echelon Saurian prisoners about the location of the Masters' home cluster was simple.

I merely projected a picture of their own star chart on a viewscreen, then brought them into the room one by one. All I had to do was check their reactions to two questions. I became a living lie detector.

The questions:

"Do you know the location of the home cluster of the Masters?"

"Is that location shown accurately on this map?"

To the last man, every Saurian answered no to the first question and refused to answer the second one at all. And they all clamped down on their subconscious telepathic activity as hard as possible.

Some of them were either telling the truth, or were extremely good at controlling their telepathic reactions. But most of them were almost visibly startled when they saw the map, and jolted out a burst of subconscious impulses when I asked the questions.

The evidence was conclusive, then. We had the Masters' homeworlds definitely spotted. But there was still roughly twenty-five thousand light-years between us and their cluster. And we had to fight our way down a spiral arm of stars, which made the distance even greater.

That is where Jeff's divine inspiration came in.

I had spent a whole day in questioning Saurian prisoners, and was midway through a second day's worth, when one of the Terran guards told me I had been summoned to the bridge.

I left the improvised brig - actually unused cargo compartments - and went up to Jeff's nerve center. Terry was on the bridge with Jeff. And Marsh.

Marsh was in the middle of an excited explanation: ". . . and back again in a week! We accelerated half the distance, then decelerated the rest of the way until we came out into normal space. Our top speed was phenomenal . . . and we could have kept right on accelerating, gaining speed, as long as we wanted!"

"Where did you come out?" Jeff asked. He was standing by the message ticker with Terry.

"Right smack on the button within ten minutes from parking orbit at Pluto!" Marsh slapped the chart table with his open palm at every word.

"Pluto?" I asked from the corridor doorway. They turned to me.

"Alan," Jeff called. "Glad you're here. I didn't want

to disturb your questioning of the prisoners, but as you can see, our prodigal has returned."

"I don't understand," I said. "Did you say you went to Pluto?"

Marsh was grinning with the delight of complete triumph. "Yes, I said Pluto. And Neptune. And Uranus, Saturn, Jupiter, and Mars."

"What our excitable friend is trying to say," Terry explained, not perfectly calm himself, "is that he's tested the new subspace navigational system."

"And it works!" Marsh exclaimed. "It works beautifully."

"I sent Marsh to the Solar system to test his navigation idea," Jeff said quietly. "He made it to Pluto in a little under three days, spent a day at Star Watch Prime Base on Mars, and returned to the fleet in a total elapsed time of six days . . ."

"Seventeen hours, twenty-two minutes and point zero eight one seconds," Marsh finished.

We all laughed. Jeff asked, "I meant to ask you about the time. Many physicists say there should be a time difference in subspace. How did the clocks on your ship check with the clocks on Mars and back here at the fleet?"

"On the nose," Marsh said. "First thing I checked. Personally. Curious about it, myself. No detectable difference, and these atomic clocks are good down to one second every three, four thousand years."

"Well, that does it," Jeff said. "That's all the evidence you need."

"By the way," Marsh said, "while I was on Mars, the Chief Coordinator gave me two things to deliver

to you personally, in addition to the routine messages and reports I brought."

Marsh walked over to one of the chairs, where he had left a small pouch. He reached into it and pulled out an envelope and a little black plastic box.

"First: a new rank has been created for you, Jeff, Special Coordinator, in charge of Galactic Operations. The Council voted you this rank shortly after the battle at Epsilon Orionis."

Marsh handed Jeff the box, and he opened it. Inside were two star-shaped diamond insignia clips.

"I'll have to show these to Tamar Kang," Jeff kidded. "Increase his respect for me."

"The other item I'm supposed to deliver is a message. It's confidential. . . ."

"We have no secrets among ourselves," Jeff said.

Marsh nodded. "That's what I thought" He looked us over with a malicious grin, relishing our anticipation. "The Chief Coordinator told me that he's ready to resign his post in your favor any time you say."

Jeff was genuinely surprised. "What? Resign . . . why?"

"He wasn't fooling," Marsh said, "or trying to make you feel good. Don't you realize that most of the Star Watch is now under your command? The only forces left back at the Confederation are the border patrols, a few token garrisons, the various planetary militia, and the Prime Base staff. You've got the meat of the fighting ships and men."

"But I'm still following orders from Prime Base," Jeff argued.

"What orders?" Marsh asked. "They can't give you

orders, and they know it. How can they command you from Mars when you're out here in an area no Terran has ever seen before? You're running the show . . . whether its official or not."

Jeff leaned back in his chair. "Yes," he said, thoughtfully, "I realized that a long time ago. But I guess I just didn't want to make it official. We can leave things as they are – officially - for the time being. As long as no one tries to interfere with us."

That was the first time I had heard Jeff acknowledge the fact of his unrivaled position of authority. For many months we had all realized that he was the most powerful leader the Terrans had. There was no unusual excitement or discussion about it. It was simply a fact. Now Jeff would soon have to accept the formal recognition of his leadership, with all the responsibilities it would add to his already-heavy burden.

He kept pretty much to himself for the next few days. We were all busy getting the fleet back into fighting trim. Marsh leaped joyfully into the work of preparing subspace navigational charts based on the captured Saurian maps.

Then came the message from the Masters. This time it was delivered, not by a Saurian intermediary, but directly by the Masters themselves.

It had been almost a week since I had seen Jeff, and after finishing my duties for the day, I went to the bridge to find out how he was.

As I arrived there, Jeff was sitting before the viewscreen, talking to his chief communications officer. Some extremely powerful interference was drowning out our ship-to-ship tri-di messages. The communications techs had been reduced to using voice beams

only, and even these were being garbled by the interference.

"See if you can track down the source and keep me posted," Jeff said, then shut off the screen. He swiveled his chair toward me. "Hi, Alan."

We talked for several moments, then the screen flashed on again. It was the communications officer. He looked shaken.

"Sir! We're receiving a message from outside the fleet!"

"Outside the fleet?" Jeff puzzled. "Who in space could?"

"It's the source of the interference, sir," the officer explained hastily. "The message is drowning out our own broadcasts. It's on an unusual frequency, our receivers weren't properly tuned for it."

"What's the message?"

The officer's troubled face disappeared, and a view of space filled the screen: thousands of stars, so many of them that they formed clouds swirling as far as the eye could see, and in the foreground the closer stars sparkled like gigantic solitary jewels.

A voice was saying: ". . . all these are but a small part of our empire. You Terrans cannot conceive of the majesty and immensity of our civilization. Worlds without end are armed to battle you. For every ship you have, we can launch a thousand against you. For every man you have, we can send a million warriors who have spent their lives conquering the galaxy. Know that to fight against it is hopeless. You cannot win. Go back to your meager worlds on the rim of the galaxy and we will suffer you to live in your own barbaric manner."

The scene shifted, and we watched as a single yellowish star seemed to rush toward us until it filled the viewscreen.

"But if you insist on fighting against us," the voice event on, "watch and learn what awaits you. This star is very much like your own beloved Sol. Imagine it to be Sol, with your precious planets of home circling about it. Observe'."

The screen flared into a brilliance so terrific that we both threw our arms over our faces, and even then the glare left us blinded for several moments.

When we recovered, the screen was dead. Then the communications officer's face reappeared. "They . . . they've cut off . . . end of message, I guess."

Jeff nodded, his face a mask. He turned the screen off.

For several minutes neither of us said a word. I could sense Jeff's reaction - anger, fear, uncertainty about how this would affect the humankind allies - all this I expected. But something else was racing through Jeff's mind, a steady current of mental energy that was not emotion but precise, hard, rational thinking. Jeff was creating a plan.

The report ticker clacked off a message from one Of Our Scouts: SUPERNOVA OBSERVED AT COORDINATES MINUS 06732j84 TIME 1742. ASTRONOMER ABOARD PUZZLED BY BRIEFNESS AND INTENSITY OF EXPLOSION. NO STAR VISIBLE AT THAT LOCATION NOW.

I pulled off the tape and handed it to Jeff. He glanced at it, then said, "I thought so. Well, this confirms it."

He swiveled his chair around and slapped a button

on the viewscreen. "Call my complete staff to the bridge, please."

Jeff turned back to me, and smiled grimly. "The Masters have called the tune, and we'll have to do some pretty fancy dancing. I've been considering a possible plan of action for sonic time . . . but now it's the only course left open to us."

Within an hour Jeff's bridge was crowded with his regular Star Watch staff, plus various leaders of the humankind contingents and Tamar Kang and a few Komani lesser chieftains.

Most of them had seen the Masters' message. Those that had not, had already heard about it. A bubbling undercurrent of fear pervaded the bridge, although no one mentioned it aloud. Each man saw his own home star exploded, his homeworld vaporized.

And each man looked to Jeff.

They talked in worried whispers as they assembled on the bridge. Jeff was in his cabin with Marsh and Terry. I stayed outside, sizing up their feelings. Then Jeff stepped out on the bridge. All conversation stopped.

"There's no need of me explaining, why I called you here," he began directly. "You all know the Masters' threat. It's no bluff, I'm sure of that. But it is an admission of fear on their part. . . ."

"On their part?" one of the humankind leaders gasped. "They've threatened to obliterate our home worlds. . . ."

"I know," Jeff said quietly. "But by that threat they've inadvertently admitted that we are posing a tremendous military problem for them."

Jeff walked along the railing of the bridge as he spoke, looking from man to man, "If they thought they could defeat our fleet as easily as they claim, they wouldn't try to frighten us into running back home. And the very nature of their threat takes the form of terror, not military action. An army tries to defeat another army war is fought to force your will on the enemy's people. But destroying the enemy - as the Masters have threatened - is not war. And it leaves no profit from victory. . . ."

"And certainly none from defeat," Tamar Kang remarked dryly.

"I'm convinced the Masters are afraid of us," Jeff said.

"That doesn't help us," Commander Daguerre observed.

"Yes it does," Jeff countered. "But no matter. Look! The Masters must need time, and a lot of it. Their military organization in this area is shattered. Even if they intend to destroy our stars, they'll need a military expedition and they'll need time to organize it"

Several men nodded agreement.

"We won't allow them that time," Jeff said. "We're going to strike directly at the Masters homeworlds. Now!"

At first the words dazed them. Then, slowly, realization began to dawn.

"The Masters' homeworlds?" "But the distance. . . ."

"We don't even know where they are."

"There are a thousand armies and fleets between us and the center of the galaxy."

"It will take years to reach there."

Finally, they realized that Jeff knew something they did not. They stopped objecting and listened.

Jeff said simply, "We have learned from several sources the location of the Masters' home cluster. And Officer Jordan, here, has developed a technique for navigation in subspace . . . He's already tested it, and it works. Marsh, how long will it take us to fly to the Masters' cluster?"

"About a month," Marsh answered, "if we stay in subspace all the way."

"But it's impossible."

"What's to stop the Masters from wiping out our star systems while the fleet is in subspace?"

Jeff motioned for silence. "Now listen to me," he said. "We've got to race against time. If we can hit the Masters' cluster within a month or even six weeks from now, we can shatter their whole system so completely that they'll never be able to counterattack our home-worlds. Perhaps we can end the war."

They buzzed objections and arguments for several minutes.

"Finally Jeff said, "The decision is yours to make. The Terran Expeditionary Force leaves in forty-eight hours. In twenty-four hours, I'll have to know who wants to accompany its. I will not take any man or group that does not wish to come."

The group broke up into knots of puzzled, chattering men who slowly drifted from the bridge to the shuttle rockets that had carried them to Jeff's cruiser. We spent that night and most of the next day waiting.

Then, slowly at first, but in an ever-increasing flood, came tri-di calls and personal visits from the various

humankind leaders. By dinnertime, more than half of them had agreed to try Jeff's gamble.

Almost exactly twenty-four hours after Jeff's request, Tamar Kang appeared on the bridge.

"The Council of Elders and my chief warriors have voted to follow you to the Masters cluster," he said simply.

"Good" Jeff said, reaching out to grasp the Komani's giant hand.

Tamar Kang parted his lips in what was probably a smile. "And on the planets that have been capital of the galaxy since time immemorial," Kang said, "there will be much loot."

"There will be no boting as long as you're under my command," Jeff snapped.

"Of course," Tamar King murmured. "Of course."

The month in subspace was monotonous for most of the men, but not for us. Jeff was nearly killed.

He had taken to prowling restlessly through the ship, instead of remaining at his usual nerve center on the bridge.

During one of his frequent tours through the big cruiser, a pair of Komani chieftains - who were aboard as liaison officers for Tamar Kang - burst into the corridor Jeff was walking through. They were yelling wildly and brandishing force-beam side arms. One of them fired a bolt at Jeff.

Jeff ducked out of the way as the beam ripped open the corridor wall beside him. A Star Watch guard, who had been stationed nearby, heard the blast and rushed into the corridor, his rifle cocked and ready.

The Komani insisted that they were having a private argument and had not seen Jeff. Terry was all in favor

of executing the two of them, but Jeff ordered them placed in the brig until we came out of subspace and they could be transferred to Tamar Kang's ship for his own judgment of them.

In the end it didn't matter. One of the Komani strangled the other, and then committed suicide with a small blade he had concealed in his boot.

Terry insisted it had been an attempted assassination, and Tamar Kang's idea. Jeff shrugged it off; but he no longer wandered through the ship alone.

It was all quickly forgotten, though, when we came out of subspace and saw the incredible brilliance of the Masters' star cluster close at hand.

Chapter 10 *Conqueror and Captive*

I was born and spent most of my life in an open cluster of about five hundred stars. The paucity of stars in Sol's neighborhood grieved me. Terrans lived in a stellar desert.

But I was as unprepared as any Terran for the overpowering beauty of a globular cluster seen close at hand . . . more than ten thousand stars filling every angle of the sky. As we flew into the Masters' cluster, space became a night without darkness, a child's wonderland of countless brilliant stars, almost close enough to touch. It was so dazzling that it seemed we had flown into the heart of some massive, gleaming gem.

They were mostly red stars, of tremendous size but very low density, and very cool. Many of them were visibly pulsing, undulating.

"Dying stars," Jeff said as we watched them through his viewscreen.

"These globular clusters must contain the oldest stars in the galaxy," Marsh said.

Except for that first brief glimpse of incomparable glory, we had little time for sight-seeing. We were in the enemy's capital, and as we girded for battle the feeling ran through the ship that this was the final struggle, win or lose.

Even Jeff, normally the calmest person in the fleet as a battle approached, was as impatient and jumpy as a high-strung musician preparing to try his most difficult solo.

"This could be it," he muttered to me as we sped into the cluster. "One fight more - the best and the last," he quoted.

We expected to be swarmed upon by thousands of enemy ships. But only a few buzzed up from the myriad star systems, and they were quickly dispatched by Jeff's pickets and the outermost ring of battle cruisers.

Terry landed with a detachment of troops on the first planet we came to. It was densely populated with Saurians, almost entirely covered with vast complexes of factories, building-sized computers, spaceports, mammoth concentrations of dwellings - and it was practically undefended.

The Terran troops swept through a feeble resistance, rounded up the Saurian soldiers - in a few hours, and were ready to hop to the next point of attack. The buildings and civilian population were left untouched, once the Saurians surrendered.

This went on for several days. Saurian resistance was practically nonexistent, and Jeff's men and ships spread through the cluster in ever-widening waves, crushing what little enemy action they encountered.

The Saurians seemed shocked, totally unprepared for fighting, and unable to organize an effectively-

coordinated defense. They had plenty of men and ships, enough weapons to destroy half the galaxy, but they were crumbling before the concentrated force of Jeff's attack.

After a week, Jeff's men were dispersed over thousands of planets, with no serious resistance in sight. No Masters had yet been found.

"It's all over," Terry said. "We've won."

I disagreed. "There are still thousands of star systems in this cluster. The Masters could be hiding an overwhelming force, waiting for us to spread ourselves so thin"

Jeff shook his head. "I don't think so, Alan. They can't afford to give up all the important communications and manufacturing centers we've taken. If they were going to counterattack, they would have done it before this. A serious battle now would tear this cluster apart, and they know it."

"We've surprised them," Marsh said. "The cream of their fighting forces is out there near the gap, waiting for us and wondering where we got to. They never expected us here so soon. How could they imagine we'd jump across twenty-five thousand light-years and hit their home base?"

After a moment's thought, I had to agree. In the past months, impossibilities had occurred so fast and often that we were all inclined to take them as commonplace.

"This is what I hoped for," Jeff said, his dark eyes shining with intensity. "Much more than I dared dream of, in fact. It's all over but. . . ."

The viewscreen flashed on. A worried Star Watch officer appeared.

"Sir, we have a delegation of Saurians here who

are asking for clemency. They say some of our men are deliberately wrecking their planet after they surrendered."

"What men?" Jeff demanded.

"The Komani, sir," the officer answered.

That galvanized Jeff into action.

"I was afraid of this," he said as his cruiser sped us to the trouble spot.

It was a large planet, evidently an important commercial center, judging from the many spaceports and warehouses we saw in the viewscreen. The planet's sun was a dull red supergiant, large enough to swallow all the planets up to Mars if it had been placed in Sol's position. A detachment of Komani warriors had been dropped there by Terry's ships.

Much of the planet was obscured by sullen gray smoke as the cruiser settled into a tight orbit. Jeff and the three of us, together with a picked squad of Star Watch men, transferred to a landing ship and flew down into the planet's atmosphere.

From this lower altitude we could see that many of the buildings were: wrecked and gutted by fire. Komani warriors were methodically pillaging the planet, taking what they wanted and destroying what they did not take.

"Then we found a large open plaza, and at one end of it sat Tamar Kang and his chieftains, while warriors filed past, depositing half their loot.

Jeff's face was tense as he put on his helmet and buckled a gun to his waist. "Set us down in that plaza," he told the pilot.

"That's a little tight for a ship this size, sir," the pilot said.

"I know."

We landed, settling tailfirst at the far end of the plaza. By the time we had gotten out of the ship, the Komani procession had stopped. The warriors were grouped in a ragged half-circle, flanking the chieftains and Tamar Kang.

Jeff walked straight to the giant leader.

"I told you that as long as you were under my command there would be no looting."

Kang smiled, as gray smoke drifted through the shattered building behind him. "The war is over. To the victor goes the spoils."

"You have not been released from my command," Jeff snapped.

"When I first met you," Kang said, seemingly ignoring Jeff's words, "you were wearing a Komani sword which you claimed to have taken from a warrior that you killed. There cannot be two leaders of the Komani. One of us must make way for the other. Will you fight me for the right to rule?"

Jeff looked about. The lurid red sunlight filtering through the pall of smoke, the wrecked buildings staring emptily onto the plaza, the ranks of men standing tensely, waiting for a signal to leap into battle, everything about the scene had a somber nightmarish quality to it.

"Give me a sword," Jeff said.

One of the chieftains handed him a Komani broadsword, and Jeff walked back a few paces with it.

"Jeff," Terry protested, "he's too big and strong for you. He can handle that sword as though it were a wand. You practically need both hands just to swing it."

"I can't back down, either," Jeff said, "without get-

ting everyone here embroiled in a fight. They outnumber us three to one at the moment."

He turned and faced Tamar Kang, who was standing, armed and ready. "If I don't make it," Jeff said, "you challenge him, Terry."

From the first motions Tamar Kang made, it was evident that this would be no fencing match such as Jeff was accustomed to. Kang rushed in, swinging his mighty weapon in terrifying arcs, trying to use his size and weight advantage to its fullest, while keeping Jeff's superior agility and reflexes at a minimum.

Sparks flew from the clashing blades as the Komani giant pressed a slashing, ever-mounting attack. Jeff gave ground, attempted to thrust in on his opponent between those savage swings, but he could not get close enough before another mighty sweep of Tamar Kang's blade would force him to parry.

Kang was trying to overpower Jeff, to knock the sword from his hands, push him off-balance, break through the Terran's guard in any way he could. One solid blow with that diamond-sharpened blade: would smash any living thing.

Jeff was constantly forced back, edging his way across the gutted plaza, almost stumbling over debris as he got closer and closer to the walls of the buildings. Kang's strength was beginning to tell, Jeff's guard was dropping lower, and his parries were coming later with each of the Komani's powerful slashes.

And then he smashed through Jeff's guard with a mighty overhand sweep, knocking Jeff's helmet off and sending him spinning, half-stumbling into the wall.

In the flash of an instant I saw it all: Kang crouched for his final spring, Jeff sprawled against the wall,

blood trickling across his forehead and down his cheek, both arms down, gasping hard for breath.

But on Jeff's face, in that brief instant, I saw the look he had worn during the worst moments of the Battle of the Gap. He was facing death again, and he was mortally determined to conquer.

As Kang leaped in on him, Jeff grasped his sword in both hands and met the Komani's wild attack with a mighty swing of his own. Pushing outward from the wall, Jeff met Tamar Kang's strength with strength, and forced the bigger man back.

For a moment Kang hesitated, and Jeff seized the attack. He swung two-handed, slashing at his enemy with every ounce of might and will left in him.

Then he ripped his blade in below Tamar Kang's guard, and as the sword swung up past Jeff's shoulder, I could see blood on it. Kang stood immobile, transfixed, staring at his small opponent, as Jeff brought his blade back with a sickening thud against the side of Tamar Kang's skull.

The Komani chieftain crumpled. Jeff stood there, staring at the man who had nearly killed him, leaning on his stained sword, gasping for breath.

No one moved.

Jeff looked up at the Komani warriors. "You heard what he said; now I am your chief. You will remain here on this planet until I decide where you will be moved."

As we walked back to the ship, Jeff said, "We'd better get the anthropologists to find some home for the Komani and settle them down peacefully, with the least possible damage to their racial character. They're too bloodthirsty to be allowed free run of the galaxy."

Weeks passed, and we spread our forces through the entire globular cluster. News from Morenia and the Confederation arrived: the Saurian fighting forces were collapsing everywhere. The war was ended.

But still we found no Masters.

And then Jeff received a report from a team of scientists who had found what looked as though it might have been the Masters' original homeworld. It was a dead, airless planet circling an almost inert dwarf star. The planet was so old that there was no trace of radioactivity anywhere on its surface or as deep into its interior as the scientists' scanners could probe. There were cities on the planet so perfectly preserved that the archeologists could not even guess how old they were.

And the cities were built by and for humans.

Everything else in the cluster had been built to Saurian standards, for use by Saurians.

Jeff and I sped there.

We spent several days walking through the dark airless, long-dead cities in our spacesuits. The buildings were not of impressive size, and the cities themselves were nowhere near as large as the megalopolises of Earth.

But the whole planet had a dismal foreboding to it, a sense of antiquity beyond all human comprehension.

"This was once a planet like Earth," I heard Jeff's voice in my helmet earphones. We were prowling through a large, single-roomed building, piercing its gloomy darkness with our helmet lights; it might have been an ancient theater or temple.

"Once men like us lived and worked and built here," Jeff continued. "But time itself must have forgotten how long ago."

"You will know someday."

"What did you say, Alan?", Jeff asked. But I had not spoken.

Jeff realized it just as I did. We looked at each other.

"Someday you will find the answers to all your questions."

We turned to the far end of the room. A man was sitting atop a raised platform - perhaps it was once a stage. And he wore no spacesuit.

"You have sought the Masters over half the galaxy," I heard this voice in my earphones. "I am one of them."

We were both too stunned to move.

"I have only a few moments to stay here. My purpose is to answer some of your questions. Not all, but some."

Jeff and I decided, long afterward, that we could not make out the details of his face. At this distance we could not even be sure his lips were moving. His whole body seemed to be aglow, shimmering with light.

"You young primates have come charging, half-way across the galaxy to exterminate us, eh? Well, it is not that easy. Oh, you have won the war, never fear. You won it with your first battle . . . at Epsilon Orionis, as you call it. We should have realized then that we were too old and too tired to push a full-scale war against you hot-blooded barbarians." His voice seemed half-amused, half-sorrowful. "Do you know what you have won?"

"The galaxy," Jeff answered.

"By the pulse of the cosmos, no! Half the galaxy . . . closer to three-fifths. More than eighty billion star systems, if that excites you. That is your prize, your

reward for youth, for strength and dating. And do you know what the price you must pay will be?"

Jeff shook his head.

The voice grew grim. "Responsibility. For all the ages since the dawn of history, the Masters have controlled an ever-increasing domain of star systems and the intelligent beings that inhabit them. Now that control is shattered. At this moment, commerce throughout our wide domain is at a standstill. Fear and panic, the horrible aftermath of war, are rampant. It is your responsibility to restore order. Unless you can prove that you are more than barbarians, people you have never heard of will starve . . . by the trillions."

"You make it sound as though it's our fault," Jeff said.

"Is it not?" the voice demanded, and the shimmering body stirred on its improvised throne. "Have you not wrecked the government of the galaxy? Did you not ruin the system of providing for all peoples . . . a system that was working well when your planet was still perpetually cloud-covered and its only pretense to life was a few lichen? It is your fault."

"But you attacked us," Jeff insisted. "We were merely defending ourselves."

"Your defense has ruined half the galaxy."

"But that's just as much your fault as ours."

The man seemed to shrug. "Perhaps," the voice said. "Who can be totally free of the blame for war?"

"But why did you attack us?" Jeff asked.

"Would you quick-tempered Terrans have accepted our civilization if we offered it to you?"

"No, we have our own civilization. We fought to preserve it."

"We knew you would," the voice said. "And we knew that our only chance of absorbing you into our domain was to defeat you militarily. Unfortunately, we were disastrously overconfident of our military strength. Still, if you had not roused your people. . . ."

"Why didn't you leave us alone instead of attacking us?"

The voice darkened. "Because we are an ancient, ancient race, and we have always won our wars. We could not leave you alone because you were young and virile. Given two or three more generations, and you would have attacked us. We had to conquer and absorb you quickly, before you conquered us. In the end it did not matter, did it?"

"Where are the others of your race?"

"Gone, my young conqueror . . . fled to safe havens. As I said, we are an old race. There are only a few million of us left. We will scatter through the galaxy and settle on unpopulated planets near hot blue stars. Some of us will leave the galaxy altogether. You will never hear from us again. In a way, we are glad that someone younger and stronger is taking over the reins. The responsibility is yours. The Saurians will serve you, just as they have served us, but the burden of managing half the galaxy will still be yours."

The Master rose from his chair.

"Wait!" Jeff called. "There's so much I have to know. . . ."

"I said I would answer some of your questions. I will not answer them all."

"Answer one more: Are you the Others? The race that nearly wiped out Terran humanity a million years ago?"

He seemed to smile. "I knew you would ask that. No, we are not the Others you seek. They came from outside the galaxy and attacked many star systems along the rim in your area. Our domain did not reach that far in those days, but the Others marched across the galaxy to us. We fought a monumental battle, at the place you now call the Gap. The Others defeated us, but we retreated and destroyed the stars as we left them behind. The Others decided that they would not profit from this, and left us in peace.

"They returned to finish destroying your people. Perhaps that should have been our clue. When faced with the alternatives of destroying you or us, the Others turned on you. Probably they knew that you would turn out to be the stronger race. Whoever they were, they came from another galaxy and have never returned."

He stepped away from the chair. "And now I must leave."

"I'm not sure I'll let you," Jeff said.

"Young fool," the voice taunted. "Have you no eyes? Do you realize that what you see is not my natural form? Can a human breathe in vacuum? Have you not yet learned that we exist on pure energy radiated from the hot, young blue stars? Yes, once we were human, but long ages ago we outgrew that form. Fear not, you will never see us again. The galaxy is yours, little conqueror . . . I wish you more success with it than we had. "

And then his form seemed to coalesce into a brilliant, blinding sphere of light that shot upward and out of sight, going through the ceiling without disturbing a single atom of its unbroken expanse.

Jeff stared at the ceiling for several moments, then turned to me. Even through the visor of his spacesuit I could see the wonder in his eyes.

"Those six ships directing the Saurians at the Gap . . . they weren't ships at all!"

And there, really, the story of the star conquerors ends. The Masters turned over their empire to the Terrans . . . to Jeff.

It was inevitable that Jeff would become the leader in peace as well as war. At every turn he had been the man in charge, the one who saw farther and more clearly than all the rest of us.

It had been Jeff who saw the need of an outright attack on the Masters' invasion bases near the Confederation. His skill and leadership had won the pivotal battle at Epsilon Orionis; his insights into races strange to his had led to the Komani and humankind additions to his force; his quick thinking and racy courage won the Battle of the Gap; his keen, certain instincts had led him to gamble the course of the war on Marsh's new navigational technique.

And now, through more than half the galaxy, from Sol to the Masters' cluster, Geoffrey Knowland was being proclaimed the Galactic Coordinator. The Terran Confederation made Jeff Star Watch Chief Coordinator and a Council member, the first time any one man had held both posts. Morenia and the other humankind planets hailed him as overlord, although he told them they must fully develop their own internal governments.

Regretfully, Jeff accepted the inevitable. He knew that he was not a conqueror, but a captive, and in seeking Terra's freedom he had surrendered his own

to the endless tasks of administrating the vast domain the Masters had left behind.

"And the Others are still as mysterious and far away as ever," he told me ruefully.

Jeff had his galaxy map taken from his cruiser and installed in one of the buildings in the Masters' cluster which the Saurians had converted to his use. His dream of exploring the farthest reaches of the galaxy were gone now; he would remain at his desk while men like Marsh and Terry made the explorations.

Now I am sailing back to the Terran Confederation. Rh'khour'mnin has been liberated, I know, and some day I will visit my people. But now my place is with Jeff, helping him.

He has sent me to the Confederation to report to the Council for him. Already he is far too busy to leave the Galactic capital.

On my return, I am to bring three people with me.

Renata, his mother; she will visit the son who has put his tremendous energies to a task far greater than even she could envision nearly two years ago.

Dr. Lee, his teacher; his knowledge and ability to teach will be invaluable to Jeff in his new duties.

And Tavia, the girl he loves; she, more than anyone, is the person Jeff cannot do without. With her beside him, no burden will be too great, no task too difficult.

The war is over, the battles ended, and - as always - the intricate, unending tasks of peace will be far more laborious than the quick, emotion-charged decisions of war.

But - as always the future promises much more than the past has shown.

About the Author

Ben Bova is a graduate of Temple University in Philadelphia. He obtained his degree in journalism, and was for a time an editor of the *Upper Darby News* in Upper Darby, Pennsylvania.

He has been a Technical Editor for Project Vanguard with the Martin Company in Baltimore, and is now a screenwriter for the Physical Science Study Committee of Educational Services, Inc. in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Mr. Bova is an enthusiastic amateur astronomer, and did a great deal of stellar map-making and astronomical research while writing *The STAR CONQUERORS*. He and his wife and young son, Michael, make their home in a suburb of Boston.

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