

Warrior-Woman

Mary Ann Steele

Warrior-Woman

Copyright © 2006 Mary Ann Steele

All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. Published in Canada by Double Dragon eBooks, a division of Double Dragon Publishing Inc. of Markham Ontario, Canada.

No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, graphic, electronic, or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, taping, or by any information storage or retrieval system, without the permission in writing from Double Dragon Publishing Inc.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Double Dragon eBooks

PO Box 54016 1-5762 Highway 7 East
Markham, Ontario L3P 7Y4 Canada
<http://double-dragon-ebooks.com>
<http://double-dragon-publishing.com>

Layout and Cover Illustration by Deron Douglas
www.derondouglas.com
ISBN-10: 1-55404-407-3
ISBN-13: 978-1-55404-407-8
First Edition November 22, 2006

Also Available as a Large Type Paperback

Now Available as paperback and hard cover

A Celebration of Cover Art: 2001 to 2006

Five Years of Cover Art

[Companion calendars also available]

www.double-dragon-ebooks.com

www.derondouglas.com

Warrior-Woman: The Forging of the Legend

Dedication

This book is dedicated to Wayne F. "Bear" Steele, the friend, husband, lover, and soul mate whose unfailing support the author deeply appreciates.

Character is destiny.

--Heraclitus of Ephesus, 540-480 B.C.

Chapter One

Down the formidable length of the corridor fronting the locks, the dead outnumbered the living. Contorted bodies sprawled singly, or lay across others: mortal foes intertwined in a final, grim embrace. Black-clad, still forms littered the deck in far greater plenitude than did those shrouded in dull slate blue. Pools of crimson glistened wetly. Smears of the same gaudy hue accented the uniform drabness of the walls. A brooding silence hung in sweat-tainted air lately vibrating with shouts, shrieks, sharp cracks of electronic weaponry, the dull thudding of boots on metal plates, the ringing chime of sword on red-streaked sword.

Feet planted wide apart, lithe body quivering with passion, blue eyes blazing, sword-arm and bright blade splashed with life-blood not her own, Signe glared in regal wrath at the pressure-proof door of the now-airless lock, well aware that the Commander of the Third Columbian Military Corps at this very moment ascended unscathed into the black void of interworld space. Sharply conflicting emotions warred in the Gaeian leader's mind. *Norman still lives!* she raged inwardly. *The instigator of this costly war escaped unhurt--damn his slime-rotted black soul! But he's in transit back to Columbia--soundly defeated!*

We've achieved our foremost goal--driven the invaders off our world, over the broken bodies of these poor bastards Norman abandoned. Knowing that their leader just callously sacrificed their lives, these Columbian spacer-fighters absolutely refused to surrender--died to give the brute the precious time he needed to battle his way to this lock, board his ship and escape. Well, our ten-Earthyear-long struggle on the surface just ended, but a new challenge lies ahead. Norman started this war, but I'll fight it to a finish he and his imperialistic countrymen can't conceive possible!

Two tall figures strode up to stand on either side of the Commander. As the elder man laid an arm in a purely comradely gesture across Signe's shoulders, bleached blue eyes deeply set in a seamed visage disfigured by an old, slanting, sword-cut scar mirrored the emotions racking the victorious world leader. As if some momentary flash of mental telepathy united the minds of the two veteran fighters, Signe sensed that Conor's train of thought paralleled her own. When she turned to meet his glance, he drawled softly, "Too high a price, these gallant fools paid. Norman should be lying dead on this deck."

"I agree," Signe rasped.

"He would be, had these men surrendered," Morgan acknowledged, won to grudging admiration of intransigent foes bent on extracting a final measure of revenge even as they drew their last rattling breaths. His fluidly expressive face swiftly changed as he surveyed the carnage. Contempt flashed across an open, comely countenance spattered with caked gore slowly dissolving in sweat. Having sheathed a long, rapier-like blade, the younger man ran a hand through a thatch of thick auburn hair in an habitual, unconscious gesture. "Norman didn't step out of character when he made his exit, that's for damned sure," he observed acidly.

Circumventing the huddled corpse of a fallen foe, Eric silently studied Signe's expression. Sensing her acute frustration, sharing it, the Senior Captain sought to master the anger inseparable from the fierce delight engendered by the victory.

His joy outweighing his wrath, Sean wordlessly squeezed Morgan's shoulder, prompting that exhausted warrior to smile with manifest satisfaction at his

first cousin.

Behind the five swordsmen whose prowess at wielding those gleaming blades in hand-to-hand combat exceeded that of any of their subordinates, two other members of Signe's core staff now appeared. Theo and Jassy took no time out in which to gloat over the magnitude of the victory. The two veteran combatants detached massive electronic handweapons from slings at their waists, pulled off goggles equipped with imagers for aiming the bulky devices, and issued orders to the men and women threading their way through piles of dead, searching for any survivors: friends or foes. The victory culminating a bitter revolt spanning a decade of Earthyears produced no tumultuous rejoicing. The victors stoically set about the nerve-wrenching task of clearing the final battleground.

An hour later, two husky Gaeen corpsmen strode by their captain bearing the last of the fallen. Indifferently tailored slate blue uniforms clinging damply to perspiring bodies exuded a pungent aroma, offering Theo tangible evidence that the adjustment of the fabric had long since failed. Bleak gray eyes followed the pair hustling the black-garbed corpse towards its destination: the refrigerated antechamber where it would lie waiting its turn in a crematorium direly overworked of late.

We ought to hold a brief mass memorial for the Columbian dead , the scholar-turned-warrior reflected, struck of a sudden with overwhelming conviction. Those Third Corpsmen fought with fanatical valor until the last man fell. If they granted no mercy, neither did they beg for any. I'll see that they aren't simply incinerated like non-recyclable offal.

A mind contemplative by nature stilled the impulse prompting an active, compact body to hasten down the deck defiled by rusty smears, and join in the work of clearing barricades from passageways in the habitat below. The historian in Theo objected, demanding that this moment not pass without comment by an intellect schooled to analyze the significance of epochal changes in human affairs.

Staring unseeing into the distant reaches of the cavernous corridor, the veteran officer recalled the twenty-hour span constituting all the warning of imminent attack afforded the horrified civil leaders of the citizenry scattered over thirty-nine inhabited planetoids within the Gaeen Group. A student of logic applauded the prodigies of organization achieved on Main World after Sigurd and his Council of Ministers deduced that a peace-loving society--one possessing no means of retreat and little of offense--faced invasion by a heavily armed force led by a Columbian military careerist. That enemy, bent on conquest, the Gaeen leaders accurately judged to be motivated by a compelling lust for power allied to elemental greed.

The selfless patriot reliving the past thrilled anew to the call to arms issued by Sigurd's daughter. Pride surged as Theo recalled how swiftly Signe's impassioned appeal rallied the nucleus of a force of fighters around a charismatic athlete who even then possessed amazing skill with a sword: proficiency rare among the Gaeen rebels. Admiration rose uppermost as he visualized the heroic struggle she mounted so as to overcome an all but insuperable disadvantage: the lack of skill at swordsmanship almost universally exhibited by a populace imbued with pacifistic ideals.

We faced enemies who grew up employing the one weapon that Columbian custom traditionally allowed any citizen to wield for the purpose of settling personal quarrels in legally sanctioned duels, the veteran recollected somberly. That initial deficiency cost us heavily in lives.

His eyes remote, the former professor of history reviewed the factors precipitating the violent conflict now entering a new phase. *>From the moment Johann made his landfall in this star-system one hundred fifty-one Earthyears ago, the Columbian majority among his settlers proved themselves treacherous allies to the Gaeian contingent, Theo ruminated sadly. You'd think all factions of the Triple Alliance would have learned something from the wars that devastated Earth's colonies of spacefaring settlers, but no such enlightenment occurred.*

Johann--warrior, pirate, visionary, colony-founder--forged that agreement by the sheer force of his personality. His mercenary spacer-fighters married the sisters and daughters of a creative elite: colonial scientists and engineers far too ruggedly individualistic to feel comfortable rejoining the packed horde of easily led, mindlessly gregarious, bureaucratically controlled humanity indigenous to Earth. Those two groups of hardy adventurers--ancestors of the present-day Columbians--allied themselves with the first Gaeians: clannish pacifists plentifully endowed with the courage required to join Johann in a venture of incalculable risk.

Three great ships, tethered together, utilized some awesome, hitherto untested power external to themselves, which flung them into a near-light-speed journey that perhaps took them temporarily outside our universe. That time-dilated Jump landed our forebears in the environs of a giant gaseous planet of a star in the same spectral class as Sol--a star located an unimaginable distance across the galaxy from the birthplace they knew they'd left forever.

You'd think in their sobering, irreversible isolation from the civilization that spawned them, those refugees from a system devastated by two space wars would have gotten along. But the Columbians never changed that mercenary fighter's mentality, even if Johann rose above it, nor did the Gaeians ever lose their stubborn belief that safety lay not in armament, but in insularity. When the Columbians sought to appropriate Johann's Flagship, he vanished in his fabulous warship. Our ancestors left shortly afterward: lifted the Gaea one last time, and made the transit to an aggregation of dense metallic rocks clustered about the second of two stable libration points in Dyson's orbit around the gas giant.

The first Columbians remained entrenched on Johann's original colony-site. That airless captive asteroid appealed to the leader making his landfall, not only because its density causes its gravity to approach that of Earth, but also because the rock forms one of a pair of binary bodies revolving around the same point in space within the Columbian Group. The second rock of the pair--the Ice World--provides a priceless abundance of water ice.

The Gaeians, settling upon planetoids located at L-4, thought themselves safe from aggression on the part of their treacherous former allies at L-5. Well, they erred mightily. So here we are, those of us who lived to throw Norman off Main World of Gaea: pacifists turned combatants--victors in countless battles waged hand-to-hand through habitats and corridors separated from the vacuum of the void only by the negligible width of steel-plated, water-filled, double hulls. Chancy, our lives, in the best of times--even during that peaceful pre-war existence we nostalgically recall as idyllic.

The man unwounded, but suffering from a severe case of battle fatigue, absently wiped a sleeve across a brow to which curly brown hair clung damply. A faint shadow of beard darkened the pale skin of cheeks that had never known the direct light of the distant sun. Lines of strain temporarily aged the sensitive face so expressive of whatever thoughts animated its owner's intelligent, compassionate mind. Sorrow, relief, revulsion generated by an

innate horror of slaughter, however necessary: all showed on the grave, cleanly chiseled features of the officer in his mid-thirties. One emotion failed to register. Theo possessed a nature incapable of harboring virulent hatred, even for so rapacious an enemy as Norman.

On the day following the culminating battle of the surface war, Signe waved her six captains into seats in an office in the habitat that formerly served as Norman's headquarters. Examining faces nakedly attesting to bone-weariness, the premier warrior saw superimposed over warm, live flesh the ghostly images of men and women sacrificed to insure final victory. Pride contended with still-raw pain.

We're old hands at the sort of fighting we face now--a disciplined, combat-seasoned force of veterans lacking only one crucial skill , she exulted. *Well, we'll remedy that deficiency in short order* . The voice the rebel leader could pitch to carry above a hand-to-hand battle sent galvanic impulses flashing along nerves sensitized to its nuances. "Gentlemen, we're going to steal a Columbian ship."

You might know , the Senior Captain groused inwardly. *Twenty-four hours after she watched Norman's fleeing vessels fade into nothingness on the screens in this very cabin, Signe's planning a raid. Sorrowful shades of our multitudinous dead, girl, take a day or two to savor your victory! Rest up!*

Although no hint of the master swordsman's disapprobation showed on his face, Signe intuitively divined her oldest captain's thoughts. "Eric, there's nowhere to go from the pinnacle we've reached, but down, if we keep our boots firmly planted on this rock," she reminded him levelly. "We can't afford that luxury. This hard-won peace will prove short-lived, if we sit back in smug complacency. We're going up--contest the Columbians' supremacy in interworld space."

She reads minds. Mine, at any rate . Eric managed a wry smile even as his gut knotted.

"Twenty-four hours of peace. I enjoyed this brief spell of knowing I won't need to gear up for tomorrow's battle, but I'm damned well certain that this state of affairs won't last. You're right, Signe. It's time we went mobile in the void!" With a fluid gesture of a hand, Morgan punctuated that boldly unqualified acceptance of a daunting order.

"Peace, hell. All we've won is a pause that lets us catch our breath. Until we match Columbia in fighting power across interworld space, we'll remain as tempting a target for invasion in the eyes of any power-crazed Columbian as we were for Norman." Conor made that assertion adamantly, consciously forcing from the screen of his inner awareness a vivid portrait rising unsummoned, of the beloved wife who fell dead of a lethal electronic pulse as she fought at his side a scant five weeks earlier.

"To fly...take them on in the void! I'm ready."

As ready to fight them on any ground--against whatever daunting odds--as you've been since you joined at sixteen, Sean.

Noting that Signe's face at that moment plainly revealed her thoughts, her youngest captain smiled warmly at the Commander, his response generating an upwelling of pride in the woman silently commending a warrior she honored.

To fly. Could I learn what that feat will require, and then force myself unflinchingly to target manned vessels armed with Earth-built weaponry?

Learning to fight hand-to-hand--to kill--took a toll on my emotional balance, Theo acknowledged, nowise afflicted by self-delusion. But I mastered the art. Signe's right. Sitting back complacently now will lose us everything our best and bravest died to gain. The struggle isn't over. I can't quit until we achieve a peace that will last beyond our lifetimes. As that conclusion grew inescapable, the scholarly Captain's steadfast gray eyes conveyed a mute but welcome message to his superior.

"Whatever it takes to finish what we started, I'm ready to tackle," Jassy growled, no abstruse ethical considerations troubling his stalwart soul. Jaw jutting, bulldog face creased into a black frown, the man renowned as much for his expertise at electronics as for his prowess in battle spoke his thought with characteristic bluntness. "Damned if I can see how we'll fly the ship we steal, though. Surely you don't plan to trust your life to a tamed Columbian captain, do you, Signe?"

"Hardly," the Commander retorted vehemently. "We'll learn to operate a ship. I've spent the bulk of what little free time I managed to gain over the past six Earthyears, studying the theoretical aspects of navigation. The sequences for lifting a vessel and making a transit are for the most part automatic. The calculations an operator needs to insert into those programs, I've learned to perform. I've developed strategies for augmenting that basic knowledge: strategies I'll implement myself. The problem confronting us now is that of acquiring a ship. A prize, this one will be: one of the original twenty-four carried to this system from Earth. A vessel armed with the irreproducible weaponry."

An impulsive exclamation burst from Morgan. "What a coup that would be!"

Signe's got her plan of attack laid out to the last detail, Eric conceded glumly. She'll lead the cream of her warriors on this fearsomely dangerous strike. We could lose the highest echelon of our military leadership if her venture fails. Signe, don't cast away all we've gained at so heavy a cost! Your life especially. Our world can't afford to lose you...

Imperious blue eyes raked the man whose thoughts the war-leader seemed unerringly able to read. "Vacillation constitutes the main danger now, Eric. This opportunist who seized autocratic power over Columbia two Earthyears ago still has his hands full, dealing with the other four military commanders he outmaneuvered. I don't intend to give Arlen the least advantage while he finishes consolidating his power, so he can turn his full attention to us. We'll waste no time before taking to space."

"No one will ever accuse you of vacillating, Signe."

The smile the Gaeian leader flashed her senior officer transfigured the oval face framed by startling silvery hair, softening faint lines etched by sorrow, pain, loss of valued comrades, and conscious acceptance of the consequences of brutally difficult decisions forcefully rendered. Signe looked older than her thirty Earthyears. Emotional trauma engendered by fighting in the forefront of countless assaults as sanguinary as this last, indelibly imprinted her intensely alive, vibrantly expressive, resolutely determined, singularly arresting countenance.

Eric smiled back. For a brief instant, a likeness sprang into being: an uncanny resemblance between the still-young woman so oddly crowned in silver, and her golden-haired, blue-eyed kinsman, a phenomenal swordsman whose graceful body displayed youthful vigor despite his sixty-six Earthyears.

Signe now issued two key men a ringing challenge. "The Columbians know Norman

stripped Gaea of ships, so they're still brazenly working the mine on Penn's Rock they refuse to relinquish³as if the metals Norman systematically plundered all over Gaea weren't loot enough. Unmanned drones once routinely made the transit between that mine and Main World. One of those carriers survives here. Jassy, you'll reinstall the remote-controlling hardware Penn's grandson hid. Conor, you'll refit the vehicle so that a twelve-member assault force can ride the outfit to the mine. One of Third Corps' first-class vessels periodically descends there. We'll seize that ship."

Conor eyed his superior reflectively even as he nodded. "I expect I'll be able to rig something. Won't be any pleasurable jaunt, the trip we take in it, though." *Nor any cinch, what you plan on pulling off* , he qualified his assent mentally.

A soul-searing vision rose unbidden. The utilitarian cabin faded. Consumed with grief, heedless of his own life, Conor again charged towards the enemy force thrown back upon the barricade from which Ione's slayer had aimed the fatal pulse. A wicked blade pierced flesh. Yanking bloody steel free with strength amplified by his rage and his pain, the bereaved husband glimpsed terror in eyes that dulled as the dying foe dropped to be trod under boots that raced onwards. Amid a yelling press of combatants, the Gaeon maddened by blood-lust cut, slashed, thrust, hacked, and shouldered his way towards the burly, black-clad Columbian he targeted.

Unaware that he shouted, the attacker whose distinctively scarred face projected incandescent wrath leaped up the side of the barricade, left hand clawing at the packed debris, right still wielding the now-crimson sword. A warrior-captain universally feared by men themselves redoubtable fighters rose to his full imposing height atop the pile, even as his adversary slipped out of the sling holding the device now wholly discharged, to brandish the heavy weapon like a club. Maneuvering with consummate skill on the treacherous surface, the avenger drove thirty centimeters of steel into the guts of the foe that had felled his wife. Surrounded by antagonists, he fought on with undiminished, deadly effect: killed, and killed again.

"We'll ride home in style, Conor." That confident prediction of Signe's jolted the veteran back to the present, and elicited one of the surviving spouse's rare smiles.

Heartened by that response, the Commander outlined her plan. "Forty men staff the mine. Ten will be occupied far below the surface. Ten more will be asleep. Twenty others will either be doing administrative tasks or relaxing on their off-time. We'll dock during the spacers' main sleep-shift. Their captain inspects goods consigned to a cargo ship that arrives once a fourweek, and transports precious metals Norman evidently refuses to trust to the cargo spacers. This captain--always the same one--docks four days before the cargo ship descends, and leaves the day after it lifts. The Columbians know we possess neither ships nor navigational skills. They won't expect a strike."

Conor's index finger absently traced the sword-cut scar furrowing a face seamed as much by cumulative personal loss as by age. "Those carriers dock in slips adjacent to the habitat. Won't the men manning the boards pick us up on their scanning screens?"

"Not after we spray the drone with a microlayer of Gaeanite."

Comprehension, blended with shock, flashed across six faces. Forgetting to signal that he wished to comment, Sean blurted out, "That would cost a fortune!"

No stickler for protocol when engaged in a discussion such as this, Signe failed even to notice the lack of the requisite gesture of the hand. "In normal times, it would, Sean. However, I've persuaded heads of patriotic mining families to donate a hoard of Gaeinite worth several fortunes, to the cause. Your family, Sean--Morgan's father, and your own--proved especially generous. From their distant rock, they're organizing and financing a crew of former employees living here on Main World, who'll apply a microlayer of the mineral by vacuum vapor deposition. That coating will absorb all wavelengths of electromagnetic radiation illuminating the drone, thereby rendering the vehicle undetectable on scanning screens. Our plasma exhaust will show on multispectral screens, as well as on the vid, but since the former are time-delayed by ten minutes, and no crew monitoring the traffic in the space over a base ever glances at the vid, I'm confident that we'll descend undetected. Jassy, you'll be able to prevent the carrier's contact with the slip from giving notice to the men manning the boards at the mine, will you not?"

"I'll rig a way."

His imagination fired by Signe's visualization, Morgan chortled, "The Columbians won't know where we dropped from!"

Theo again recalled the past. "We owe a major debt to those patriots who died rather than let the smallest sample of the alloy fall into Norman's hands, during ten Earthyears of occupation," he reminded his comrades, shuddering at the thought of what course history would have taken had Norman ever discovered the strategic value of the rare substance, scoured the Group in a murderous quest for hidden hoards, and rendered his military ships undetectable.

We do indeed, Sean agreed feelingly, if silently, recalling the summary execution of a well-loved cousin who, knowing that interrogation under truth compeller would force him to reveal where he hid the treasure in his keeping, had set off a detonation of blasting gel, thereby obliterating a considerable quantity of the precious mineral even as the invaders bent on pillage stormed into the mining facility owned by his family.

Frowning, Sean directed a question at Signe, while resting his eyes on Jassy. "How do we avoid dying when the drone enters the fields that protect the hull of the habitat from the impacts of meteoroids?"

In response to Signe's gesture, the expert offered a welcome reassurance. "The drones emit a signal that deactivates the fields in the slips and surrounding area upon their approach."

"Will we find a pressurized route leading to the occupied part of the complex?"

Meeting Conor's sternly interrogatory glance squarely, Signe unhesitatingly stated the wholly valid concern that she knew prompted the query. "That worries me, I'll freely admit. If we blunder suited into an ambush, twelve aspiring spacer-fighters will die before they can offer even a token resistance."

"Exactly my point," Conor stated evenly.

"We'll die of suffocation before we arrive at our destination, if we vomit in the helmets of our pressure suits during the ride," Eric interjected bluntly, considering that danger to be the worst facing them.

"We'll dose ourselves with the pills that prevent motion-sickness," Signe countered.

"Those didn't do much for me when I made the transit to Columbia thirty Earthyears ago, nor did I fare any better on the return voyage." That epic journey rose vividly in the objector's memory, producing a grimace.

"I could pressurize the drone," Conor offered musingly. "Build into it three cabins from those lifeboats we disabled just before Norman escaped. We could fly suited--don the helmets before leaving the carrier--but once we enter the mine..." Two parallel creases furrowing the scarred warrior's forehead deepened further.

"I hardly expect that Norman's crews altered any of the life-support systems," Signe declared, her brisk rebuttal producing nods of agreement from three of the officers listening intently. "The entire habitat will most likely contain breathable air. We'll shed our suits as soon as we enter the complex. The Columbians won't be expecting any attack, so we shouldn't encounter a welcoming party."

"If one shows up, we'll get caught--literally--with our pants down," Conor retorted tartly, no whit loath to speak his mind to the Commander who routinely solicited the opinions of her staff-members before launching any direly hazardous strike.

Signe's silvery laugh, supportive rather than derisive, warmed her captains without lessening their reservations in the least degree. "I'm afraid that's a risk we'll need to run," the strategist declared stoutly. "Four of us will pack military handweapons--eight will stay unencumbered to fight with swords. We'll keep our battle-plan flexible. Timing will be crucial."

"Will we be able to fly that outfit back here if we're forced to retreat?"

"Only if one of us stays behind to throw the switch on the control panel," the mechanical expert informed his comrade grimly.

His question prompted by curiosity, not fear, Morgan shrugged as he voiced the thought simultaneously striking his five peers. "Retreat won't be an option, so we'll fight the harder for knowing that we've *got* to claw our way aboard that ship." Chancing to meet Theo's eyes, he added sardonically, "Providing we can reach a target defended by the whole forty-man garrison, plus a crew of twelve crack spacer-fighters."

"You give a fight all you've got, whatever the chances of winning," Theo countered, his impulsive commendation conveying admiration wholly unmixed with envy of a man younger than his own self--a man whom the fighter-by-necessity perceived as designed by nature to be a warrior-adventurer.

"Stealth added to the advantage conferred by the element of surprise might well balance odds that seem at first glance damned poor," Conor observed thoughtfully.

"Plus a healthy dose of luck," Sean added equably, no whit unnerved by the danger he would shortly face.

"We'll aim for readiness a day before the targeted vessel is due to descend, Conor," Signe declared, her tone signaling an end to the period of discussion. "Whatever assistance you require, commandeer. Morgan and Sean, you'll lend a hand with the crew your family provides. Our assault force will consist of the seven of us, plus Yuri, Malcolm, Jess, Teeny, and Madelyn."

"Gaeon spacers," Sean breathed. "We'll make the snatch. We can't afford not to." Youthful, handsome features bearing a strong resemblance to Morgan's projected wholehearted acceptance of the need to run a formidable risk.

Consciously exerting the full power of an indomitable will, Eric banished the insidious doubts still plaguing him. "We'll do our damndest," he vouchsafed calmly.

When have you ever done otherwise? Signe silently commended the man she unerringly judged to be still not wholly convinced of the feasibility of her plan.

The day came when Signe's assault team lay harnessed into couches, four people to each of three cabins installed by Conor inside the drone. Of the twelve men and women, Eric alone guessed accurately just how stressful this lift in a vessel not designed to accommodate the sensitivity of human stomachs, musculature, or delicate mechanisms of the inner ear, would prove. *Ordeal, this flight will be* , he warned his alter ego glumly. *I hope to hell this ancient outfit holds together under the strains of the lift!*

Lying tautly within the rigid, fluid-filled cocoon equipped with a breathing regulator--standard gear designed to mitigate the effects of accelerating out of the gravity wells of planetoids so dense that the mass of the largest approached that of Earth--Signe gripped the exterior of the harness with one hand, and a glass-cloth bag providing insurance against disaster with the other. Her eyes fixed upon the clock installed by the meticulous mechanical genius, the Commander counted down the final, seemingly endless seconds until the time set for launch.

Amid a shuddering visible throughout the fabric of the cramped cabin, and a silence the more eerie for the magnitude of the brutal force slamming harnessed bodies downwards into the couches, the ungainly vehicle soared into the void.

Finding the physical effects worse than she expected, Signe fought a devastating onslaught of nausea. The same pressure that assaulted her magnificent physique acted on the fluid in the harness, enabling her finely conditioned body to maintain the flow of blood to her brain, even as the regulator assisted her to breathe. The athlete's digestive arrangements shrieked protest as the first rigor ended. Weightless now, she readied herself to face new trauma.

That came in the guise of a series of yawing motions that the passengers within the carrier experienced as harrowing sideways thrusts. Endeavoring to conquer savagely increased interior stress, the landsman wholly unused to violent changes in motion felt her head drop, and her body tilt, as the drone abruptly changed direction. Assailed by uncontrollable nausea, she retched violently into the self-sealing glass-cloth bag clutched in one hand.

Sean succumbed to the power of suggestion produced by the Commander's surrender. Eric lay spent, having been overcome before the drone completed the liftoff. On the other side of Eric, Teeny, a husky, carrot-haired, female Amazon, her spectacularly homely face contorted into a grimace of disgust, listened, sniffed the overpoweringly pungent aroma, and vomited noisily into her own receptacle.

Johann's ghost, you've no self-control left, woman, the Spartan-souled leader castigated her alter ego as she sealed her brimming bag. *Am I glad we didn't wear the helmets--and that I didn't deposit this ghastly offering in mine, hanging there like an upturned basin off the neck-ring of this suit!* Exerting all the strength of a will fully as indomitable as Eric's, she strove to control her still-queasy stomach.

A seemingly interminable period of weightlessness followed, as the drone now

in free flight sped towards its destination. Veteran combatants forced adrenaline-charged bodies to rest, in anticipation of action to come. Even as she did likewise, the Commander methodically reviewed certain knowledge painstakingly acquired against the arrival of this day. Emerging from a state of intense concentration, she glanced at the clock. *Death and damnation, we're about to descend! Hang on, woman. Hang on!*

The violent motion mercifully ceased. Pale and hollow-eyed, Signe threw off the top half of her harness, and lurched unsteadily to her feet. Rising shakily, Sean managed a wry grin. The woman fighting an attack of dry heaves flashed him a wan smile before tipping her helmet over her head. Cautiously, each of the pair checked the seal of the other's helmet and gloves, as did Eric and Teeny. Four raiders activated the life-support packs integral to the cumbersome suits.

Preceding her subordinates, the leader emerged into the hard vacuum of the slip. *The drone doesn't seal to a lock*, she noted as she climbed awkwardly through the pressure-proof door to exit the makeshift lock rigged by her mechanically adept captain between the last cabin and the hatch leading out of the cavernous cargo bay. *Conor figured it right. Remote-controlled robots must have unloaded these blasted outfits. What if we fail to gain access to the habitat? Damn! There's got to be an entry! The miners surely made repairs at times!*

Suppressing the bone-chilling fears assailing her, the daring risk-taker stalked down the slanting walkway. Ghostly light shed by the splendid turquoise planet dominating the star-strewn black vault of space reflected eerily off the huge bloated form of the drone. Pale radiance illumined the metal deck traversed by the warrior patently conscious of bucking long odds.

Intent on gaining entry, Signe cast no entranced glance at the dark, rocky surface of the planetoid: rugged terrain that stretched away on three sides. A landscape pitted with craters born of random acts of cosmic violence failed to capture any fraction of her attention. The eyes behind the faceplate of the helmet minutely scrutinized the metallic hull-plates of the habitat rising steeply, directly ahead of the suited leader.

There's a lock. Hopefully, the door's not barred from within--ahh. The touch of a gloved finger on a switch set the heavy panel swinging open, to reveal utter blackness. *Did they shut off the power?* the Commander asked herself in dismay. *No. The outer door wouldn't have opened in that case. The lighting malfunctioned, perhaps, due to no one's ever venturing into this part of the complex.*

Twelve silver-suited forms crowded into the cramped enclosure. Hands groped along the walls. Producing a pocket-torch, Signe located the panel. *Is this a trap?* she wondered uneasily as the door behind the raiders sealed, and the lock filled with air. *I'll sweat blood until we shed these suits!*

Armed with a massive electronic handweapon suspended in a sling at his waist, Jassy positioned himself next to Theo, who bore another. Teeny and Yuri, similarly armed, ranged themselves alongside the two men standing in the forefront of a space all knew might form the point of aim of a patrol staging an ambush.

Gear for action, woman. The inner door swung open, revealing a loading dock that stretched away empty. A thin film of dust lay undisturbed on the metal deck, and shrouded massive machinery. Dim, harsh light radiated from fixtures set into hull-plates curving high overhead, and reflected unevenly from

smudged deck-plates and grimy metal walls. The door to the cubicle housing the controls for lifting the drones stood ajar. No footprint sullied the dust carpeting its threshold: an accumulation testifying to Earthyears of neglect.

Twelve tense intruders breathed a collective sigh of relief.

Holding up a hand in a gesture of warning, Conor detached a meter from a ring on the front of his suit, and tested the air pressure. Reassured, he boldly removed his helmet, and inhaled deeply. At his nod, eleven fellow raiders shed helmets and gloves. Eight men turned their backs upon four women, and prearranged pairs assisted each other out of the pressure suits, emerging stark naked to don slate blue uniforms packed in bags snapped to rings integral to the suits.

Strong hands buckled belts from which hung carriers holding long, rapier-like, sheathed swords.

"About face," Signe commanded, when the women finished dressing. Frowning in concentration, she stood tautly still, orienting herself spatially so as to retain an accurate sense of direction. At her nod, the others hastily concealed the suits behind ponderous equipment.

Succumbing to curiosity, Sean slipped into the cubicle to view the gear used to lift the drones. His eyes widened as he beheld a faded but legible map of the entire complex stenciled on the wall.

"Signe! Cast an eye!" he exhorted in delight.

"Shades of the ancients!"

Twenty minutes later, Jassy glided on noiseless, booted feet into a dimly lit barrack crowded with metal bunks. Planting himself in a strategic position, he stood there, legs apart, eyes pitiless behind the goggles equipped with an imager for aiming the massive electronic weapon. The red dot of the tracer illuminated the chest of one of ten miners awakened by a strident command chillingly couched in a heavy Gaeian accent. Madelyn's sword-point pricked the neck of a man lying rigidly still. Red drops welled up to bead the hollow of the Columbian's throat.

"Make a single movement, and we'll wipe half of you before it's completed!" Jassy barked. That ominous warning produced the desired effect.

In the cabin across the corridor, Yuri, flanked by Jess and Malcolm, held the tracer of a second electronic weapon centered on one of seven dumbfounded occupants of the dining hall. In an open area beyond those sites, Teeny aimed a third such device at the entrance to the elevators leading to the lower levels of the mine.

Conor stood nearby, selectively damaging the machinery that operated the commodious, wire-enclosed cages, so as to strand the current shift of ten workers below the surface of the planetoid. Theo guarded the corridor leading to the military base. In the communications cabin, Eric, blade in hand, kept a sharp eye on the board. Morgan and Sean each held at sword-point one of the two officers in charge of the mining operation. In the adjoining office, Signe confronted a hard-bitten spacer.

Rage consumed the Columbian Lieutenant confronting the enemy he instantly recognized. Hair of a silvery hue universally betokening an age in excess of an Earthcentury, uncannily framing a face undeniably that of a young woman, flaunted Signe's identity to her foe. Standing frozen into immobility opposite a lone adversary, the professional soldier gambled against substantial odds.

Possessed of hair-trigger reflexes honed by ten Earthyears of bitter experience gained simultaneously with intensive training in martial arts, the legendary warrior saw her foe's forefinger curl, and caught a glimpse of the blue-black spot marring the fair skin of its tip. Before the Columbian could achieve the necessary peak of mental effort needed to launch the small but deadly projectile implanted under his skin--a missile that would envelop his captor in a cloud of instantly lethal droplets of nerve-poison--the Gaeen leader impaled the attacker on her gleaming blade.

A shriek shivered the air, reverberating off the metal walls. Eyes blazing, Signe pulled her steel free as her adversary slumped inertly to the deck, to gasp his last, strangled breaths. In a gesture practical rather than malevolent, the victor wiped her red-stained sword on the tunic of her fallen foe.

Two other Columbians stared past her through the door she slid open, their eyes glued to the dying spacer. "He tried to use his implant," the survivor of the encounter hissed. "Mistake, that."

As Eric forced one of the pair against the wall, Signe thrust the tip of her gleaming blade against the man's chest. "Want to avoid joining your cohort on the deck?" she inquired in a tone calculated to intimidate. The Columbian nodded mutely, seemingly afraid that his voice might not remain steady. "Man this board," she ordered peremptorily. "Take *exceeding* care. Let slip the faintest hint to the spacers handling the board of the military base that something's wrong here, and my captain will instantly skewer you."

Without speaking a word, the captive thus bluntly adjured seated himself at the panel. "Leave the vid off if anyone calls you," Signe instructed. "Use only the audio. Tell the base the vid malfunctioned, but your partner has the problem all but solved." The Columbian nodded again, glancing uneasily from the silver-haired warrior to the swordsman whose readiness to slay an uncooperative enemy he unerringly divined. Visibly bracing himself, the thoroughly cowed miner concentrated on handling the complex communications center.

Conor appeared in the doorway. "I've trapped the men working down below. There's a shaft sporting a ladder, but I left my subordinate aiming her handweapon through the hatch, and told the crew that over the intercom."

"Good. Take this prisoner to the dining hall." Signe indicated the second captive, who remained flattened against a wall, eyeing the sword Sean held leveled at his vitals. "Bind the miners, and bring the woman guarding them back with you."

Having nodded, Conor strode away, prodding the unresisting head of the mining operation with the tip of his naked blade. A short time later, he reappeared, followed by Jess.

Continuing to refrain out of old, ingrained habit from revealing the names of her warriors in the presence of enemies, Signe addressed Eric. "If this man arouses your suspicion in the least way, kill him, and shut down the board. Let those at the base think it malfunctioned altogether." Pointing in turn to Conor, Morgan, Sean, Jess, and Theo, she commanded, "You'll come with me." Turning to Eric, she announced, "You're in command here. We'll raise you at this station after we gain our objective." Her crisp voice projected magnificent assurance.

Acting as he always did in a situation such as this, the Senior Captain betrayed no hint of his fear for the woman issuing those orders: the person

for whom he cared the most of any alive. Extending his steel, he allowed the tip to prick the neck of the man sweating at the panel. "I'd as soon kill you as chance trusting you'll pull this off," the swordsman confided with ominous softness, spacing his words for emphasis while stating utter truth.

Six raiders melted like wraiths through an untenanted, winding, metal-walled corridor. Standing poised to thrust aside the heavy metal door leading to the military base, Signe whispered, "Morgan, you and Sean handle the men in the barrack--first door to the right. Conor, you and Jess target the recreation hall--first left. Theo, hit communications--second door on the left. I'll cover the office."

Two minutes later, Morgan and Sean stood with blades poised to pierce the throats of two spacer-fighters who had lain asleep. Five others lay rigidly still, obeying their captor's stentorian command that they freeze, or see their two comrades instantly slain.

Simultaneously, Conor and Jess regarded the motionless backs of eleven miners who stood with arms upraised, facing a wall in the recreation hall--men paralyzed by dread after one of their number gasped the name of the one Gaean warrior, other than Signe, whose battle-marked face the enemy long ago managed to match with his eminently feared name. In the communications cabin, Theo held the red dot of his tracer-beam on one of four spacers standing stiffly erect, with their hands held palms-out at shoulder-height.

A rapid search mounted by the Commander uncovered a similar weapon. That prize she delivered to Conor. Shortly thereafter, the miners, their hands bound behind them with stout tape, filed into the barrack and dropped to sit cross-legged along a wall. While the scarred warrior held the red dot of the tracer of the now warmed and ready handweapon on the chest of a burly spacer lying supine beneath the bedcover, Morgan, Sean and Jess thrust sword-tips against the throats of three equally motionless Columbians.

Having collected the sheathed swords hanging from belts slung over the foot of each bunk, Signe retrieved seven pairs of pants from an adjuster in the bathcabin, and tossed the garments onto the beds occupied by the spacers sleeping in the nude in accordance with universal custom. When she again stood with bared sword in hand, poised to kill, she snapped an order for one man at a time to sit up, don his pants, and lie back down, warning that the slightest resistance would result in instant carnage.

Stifling impotent rage, seven tough spacer-fighters sullenly obeyed the directive.

Leaving Jess to back Conor, the Commander led Morgan and Sean to the communications cabin, where each of the two men grasped one of the Columbian Captain's arms in a grip of iron.

Signe fronted the officer immobilized against the wall. Appraising eyes studied the trim, compact, supple body, and searched the hard-featured brown face lacking any claim to comeliness. Deeming the officer intelligent, the shrewd judge of character inferred competence.

"Your name?" she asked.

"Dahl."

The point of the raider's sword punctured the man's skin, just below his breastbone. "I need your cooperation, Captain," she informed her captive, raking him with icy eyes. "We intend to lift your ship into orbit around this rock, and not a one of us has ever performed that maneuver. You're going to

show us how."

"Teach you rebels to operate a military ship? The hell I will!" Dahl neither flinched nor averted his eyes as he couched that reply in a voice as steady as that of his world's archfoe.

The razor-sharp point sank deeper into non-quivering flesh. A small red stain momentarily wet the black fabric of the Columbian's uniform, before the cloth repelled it, producing a transitory wisp of pink cloud. Signe's tone dripped menace. "Are you prepared to die here and now rather than cooperate?"

"Yes."

Strong fingers tightened on the sword-hilt. A wrist of iron advanced an infinitesimal distance, causing a wider stain to test the efficacy of the uniform's adjustment. Backed against the unyielding wall, the Columbian wordlessly conveyed stubborn intransigence to the warrior from whom he expected no quarter. For a span of seconds in which for him, time stopped, he braced for the thrust that would end his life.

No swift impalement occurred. Signe stepped back, breaking the contact of gleaming steel with flesh oozing blood. "A patriot," she rasped harshly, scathingly, enunciating each word with precise care. "*In Norman's Fleet* ." Her lip curled, but the agate eyes raking her obdurate adversary unmistakably accorded him respect.

Staring unwaveringly into the eyes boring into his, Dahl mastered incipient faintness, even as he cursed what he saw too late as culpable slackness in guarding against even a remote possibility of an attack. *How in hell did these supposedly shipless Gaeans dock? No image of any sort whatsoever appeared on our scanning screens!* he fumed, fighting the fear fogging his brain.

Having seen the miners placed in the custody of those guarding hostages, Signe issued orders to Conor and Sean to march the entire complement of surviving spacers to the ship. Addressing Morgan, she commanded, "You'll personally escort this captain aboard." Turning, she strode off ahead of the warrior obeying that order.

Following in her wake, his arms raised, the muscles of his back involuntarily shrinking as the needle-sharp tip of the redhead's blade jabbed the skin between his shoulder blades, Dahl fought desperately to conquer the despair threatening to erode the self-command he had thus far so creditably maintained.

As Sean and Conor hustled ten glowering spacer-fighters to the inner lock roofed by the docking module of Dahl's vessel, Signe climbed the semicircular grillwork rising upwards to the juncture where the base of the module had sealed itself to the top of the lock when the ship docked. Knowing full well that the air supporting the lives of all the spacers occupying this enclosure--air supplied from tanks integral to the vessel--could be pumped back into the ship by a foe lurking aboard, the initiator of a hazardous venture felt the hair on the nape of her neck stir. *We'll all die spaced, if I've miscalculated*, she conceded grimly, even as she forged ahead. *But this ship carries a crew of twelve, and we've accounted for that number of spacers.*

Rising through the hole in the base of the elevator spanning the width of the docking module, the woman gambling her own life as well as those of comrades and foes stepped warily onto the deck ringing the circular aperture. "Send up five men," she called down to Conor. "If any resists, run him through."

Five sullen, barefooted hostages clad only in pants climbed through the opening onto the elevator platform ahead of Sean, to stand with arms held high as Signe touched the switch, setting the conveyance swiftly rising to the top of the dark well. Exquisitely aware that two master swordsmen could kill or maim all of them if they attacked their captors barehanded, they made no such attempt.

Mounting the short ladder, the Gaeian leader rose, naked sword in hand, through the hatch into the bridge of the ship. As she watched, poised to kill, Sean bound with stout tape the wrists the captives reluctantly thrust out at Signe's command.

No enemy materialized. Leaving Sean to guard the five Columbians ordered to lie prone on the deck, Signe turned to her left, and advanced across the width of the bridge, passing between the command center composed of four couches fronting an imposing conglomerate of screens and other electronic gear, and the rear wall lined with lockers. Her every sense on hair-trigger alert, she entered the narrow corridor stretching away in front of her, and halted at the first of two doors, a sliding panel distinguished by a numeral: three. Having thrust the door aside without exposing her body to any enemy who might be lurking within, she entered the cabin, and crossed that cramped space featuring two bunks.

Exhibiting equal caution, she proceeded through the bathcabin, and locked from the outside the door leading from that facility to Cabin Four. A swift but thorough search of Cabin Three resulted in the confiscation of an array of swords and knives. Satisfied that no weapons remained, the Commander imprisoned the first contingent of hostages in quarters designed to accommodate only two crewmen.

Dahl came to a halt within the cylindrical expanse of the inner lock. Turning, he faced the Gaeian raider whose height exceeded his own, whose right hand held a gleaming blade leveled at his captive's chest, and whose glinting green eyes actively sought to detect the slightest hint of resistance sufficient to justify a thrust through his charge's vitals. Tales of Signe's ruddy-haired captain's exploits swirled through a mind frantically searching for a way out of a situation guaranteed not only to wreck a cherished career, but also to initiate appalling consequences to Columbia. Poised to demand his guard's name, the prisoner heard a curt order to mount the semicircular grillwork giving access to the elevator.

Fatalistically, Dahl shrugged. *I won't live to pass on the news even if I do manage to tag Signe's thrice-damned redhead with a name familiar to us!* he railed as smoldering anger flared into hot rage. His nerves quivering, the Columbian preceded his guard through the hatch. Turning, he fronted his captors, while managing to preserve an impassive expression.

"Search Cabin One for weapons, and lock the door leading to Two," Signe commanded. Refusing to allow the unfamiliar complexity of the bridge upon which she stood to daunt her, she issued that directive to Sean in a tone breathing serene assurance. As the recipient of the order strode away to her right, and entered a corridor the twin of the one leading to the quarters on the opposite side of the bridge, thoughts cascaded through the rebel leader's consciousness, momentarily freezing her statuesque body into immobility.

Aware at some subliminal level that Earthmen dead twenty thousand of their planet's years crafted this durable artifact, Signe succumbed to an overmastering accession of awe. *This prize I so covet rode to this star-system clamped to the hull of the Gaea, the Columbia, or Johann's Flagship,* she marveled. Standing motionless, the martial descendant of galactic pioneers

swept a calculating glance over the complex array of navigational and communications equipment forming the dominant feature of the bridge: the board from which those on duty operated the vessel. Fascinated, she surveyed the four couches facing the board, the walls lined with lockers, and the inner plates of the hull curving across the upper reaches of the bridge.

The hatch overhead caught and held her attention. Mentally the raider visualized the exterior of the ship, a sight she had seen only on video screens: the sole method by which members of her civilization could view their inhospitable universe, unless they exited the windowless, water-filled double hulls of ships or habitats to stare into fearsome infinity through a faceplate, while trusting vulnerable respiring bodies to the fragile armor of a pressure suit.

A lofty geometric construct took form in the woman's interior vision: an unimaginably precious warship composed of a horizontal toroidal ring embracing within its circumference a similar but slightly smaller vertical shape, the twinned whole encompassing a spherical volume of empty space. Those interlocked structures, the larger over one hundred meters in diameter, would have reminded an ancient Earthman of two doughnuts intersecting at right angles. The imposing sight offered the viewer the sense that the austere simple main framework rested delicately, improbably, upon the slender column of the docking module. That latter component rose vertically from the rim of the lock that matched its diameter, bearing the far grander body of the vessel on its top, like Atlas standing erect under the weight of a world.

A down-curving, graceful heat shield protected the hull above and the module below its creamy sweep, from the inconceivable heat of water exploding into plasma when the propulsive system activated. A collar of burnished mirror encircled the docking module at a distance, its surface concave, so as to reflect incredibly powerful laser beams issuing from generators rimming the outer edge of the horizontal torus. That concentrated might of intense light the mirror redirected upward and inward, to heat the ring of orifices girdling the top of the module: openings from which direly costly water fuel spewed with reckless prodigality to provide thrust. Designed to lift off airless planetoids and ply the hard vacuum of space, the vessel requiring no aerodynamic shape sported none.

That brief, intense visualization of her priceless acquisition faded. Pressing a switch on the arm of the second helm couch, Signe watched as the board slid upwards, and the seat upholstered in leather-like fabric assumed the position used during launch. A touch on another switch set the flaccid harness integral to the couch, filling with fluid.

At her nod, Morgan thrust Dahl down into the contoured hollow. Crossing her victim's arms, she bound each of his hands to the opposite forearm with sticky glass tape. Deftly, she fastened the top half of the harness over the man's torso and legs, exquisitely aware of the hatred mirrored in the obsidian eyes raking her person.

At the Commander's order, Conor escorted his five captives onto the bridge, where he assisted Signe and Morgan to confine them in Cabin One. Standing in the corridor affording access to that half of the living quarters, the leader following a preconceived plan targeted Conor and Sean with a forefinger. "You'll back those ashore, who guard the hostages," she informed the pair in a tone pitched so as to prevent Dahl's overhearing her words. Indicating Morgan and Theo, she announced, "You two will man the board in the military base."

She means to lift--without any of us aboard! Flayed by that unnerving certainty, Morgan shot the woman for whom he felt more than comradely concern

a glance of frowning disapproval. The forbidding scowl his wordless reproach engendered prompted him to respond by shrugging his broad shoulders directly in Signe's sight. He nonetheless obeyed her order. Striding out onto the bridge, he dropped through the hatch in the wake of the others.

Signe seated herself in the first helm couch. The insertion of an invention of Jassy's into a port on the board allowed her to bypass the feature requiring the operator to key in the startup-code to activate the ship's systems. Reclining, the interloper drew the top half of the harness over her, and fastened the cocoon encasing her from feet to chest. The directory of the functions available rose on a screen. Accessing those supplying certain data, she studied the display, ignoring Dahl the while.

Video screens showed the space outside the hull as the human eye would perceive the view. Graphic displays depicted a stylized image of the vessel resting upon the lock. After launch, the neophyte knew, the progress of the ship along its programmed flight path would appear on those screens. Boldly, she scrolled through the program for lifting the ship.

Dahl lay watching his world's archfoe, the fear convulsing his gut twitching not one muscle of his lean, brown, tough face.

At length, Signe turned merciless eyes on her captive. "I've altered the circumstances, Dahl," she asserted levelly, each word stabbing like a knife into the man's vitals. "The choice you make now will affect ten of your people, not merely yourself. That may cause you to reconsider your decision. I'll accept any instruction you offer me. If you give me none, I'll do the best I can with the theoretical knowledge I've acquired."

"If you crash this ship against the lock, you'll destroy ship and station, and kill your complement of veteran captains," Dahl observed evenly.

Admiration generated a fleeting, sarcastic smile. "Along with forty miners and all ten of your surviving spacers³men whose lives you value." Intuitively, the Gaean sensed the fear underlying the Columbian's hard-held control. Her incisive voice shaded into a calculatedly reasoned tone as she observed, "Dahl, if each one of you in turn made the sacrifice you stood ready to make back there, that collective response wouldn't have kept us out of space. One way or another, we'll achieve mobility in the void. If you decide to cooperate, you'll save at least eleven Columbian lives, and all you'll give us is time. Think about that." Having raked with a penetrating glance the trussed Captain bleakly digesting her words, Signe turned her full attention to performing certain necessary computations.

Dahl strained suddenly against the tape. An adrenaline rush lent strength born of desperation to muscular arms and wrists--strength inadequate to enable him to breach the bonds. Giving up the effort, he mastered himself. Stony-faced, he watched his enemy painstakingly calculate, feed the results into the program, and check her work against a similar sequence stored in the ship's databank.

Noting a disparity, Signe frowned. Keeping his voice steady, Dahl explained how to correct the error. The usurper accepted the advice gravely, as if she expected it to be offered. Having recalculated, she entered new figures. Her mentor continued to coach her. At length, satisfied that the program would lift the vessel safely into a low orbit around the planetoid, the Gaean reached for the control governing the propulsive system.

A sharp objection from her captive jangled nerves strung to fever pitch.

"Signe, wait," Dahl barked. "Your hostages are crammed five to a cabin

featuring only two harness-equipped bunks. Let me warn my spacers what to expect." *They face trauma you could have spared them, had you taken the time to allow them to use eight bunks and two of the couches out here, the dispossessed Captain fumed inwardly. You have to know that much!*

Shades of my ancestors, I thought only of securing them, the woman intensely focused on her self-imposed task chided herself. *Well, those superbly trained spacers won't suffer any harm. Damned if I'll put myself out to show compassion to brutes themselves incapable of pity*. Wordlessly, she switched on the intercommunication system long enough to allow her captive to address the hostages.

"You're in no extreme danger," Dahl ended his communication. *Not yet, anyway, the Columbian mentally qualified that reassurance delivered in a crisp, calm voice. Damn this daring bitch!*

Resolutely, Signe pulled the lever that caused the air to be withdrawn from the lock, activated the mechanism that would, at the proper time, allow release of the clamps holding ship to lock, and initiated the lift sequence. The ensuing surge of nausea she dominated by forcing herself to concentrate on the job at hand. A slight disorientation added to her distress, as her gaze shifted from the forward video screen, in which unwinking stars seemed to flow in stately grandeur across an immense blackness, to the panel displaying the rear view.

Fascinated, the Gaeon watched the planetoid drop rapidly away, faintly visible as a black shape obscuring a shifting panoramic sprawl of other star-veiled black deeps. The giant turquoise planet, which the barren rock orbited, hung in majestic splendor, evoking wonder in the beholder seeing it for the first time on the huge, exceptionally high-resolution screens integral to the board of an Earth-built military ship.

Swiveling her eyes to the graphic display, she followed the ship's progress along the spiral trajectory, noting the colorful depiction of the programmed orbit. Gamely, she sought to interpret the rapidly changing figures projected to the right of that screen--to no avail. Fervently hoping that those numbers indicated no problem needing manual correction, she stole a glance at her captive, and satisfied herself that he monitored data foreign to her understanding.

Excitement mounted as Signe watched the ship's trajectory merge into the projected orbit on the graphic display. When the downward force pressing her into the couch vanished, she touched the switch that set the vertical torus rotating within its protective sheath. Stoically, she ignored the violent protest from her stomach as a powerful sideways thrust racked her tense body. That discomfort vanished after the angular speed reached a uniform rate, producing a sense that the occupants of the vessel once again possessed weight.

An audible sigh of relief escaped the usurper. *I have to admire this captain's guts*, she silently admitted. *Well, he'll need them, in short order*. Turning, she studied her tight-lipped captive, the inflexibility of her determination obvious to him. Projecting supreme assurance, she demanded to be shown how to enter a call-code that would enable those manning the board on the station to initiate the programmed sequence so that the vessel would descend and dock automatically.

His pulse racing, Dahl weighed that order. *Is this accursed slut insuring against my refusing to show her how to dock? Should I try to keep her stranded*

here in orbit until Norman sends a ship? Some hotheaded captain who'd willingly sacrifice an Earth-armed vessel to annihilate Signe--not to mention a discredited rival officer who failed abysmally in his duty? That's an option ... no. No way. This damned whore would forge ahead regardless, and most likely make some egregious error that'd end with the ship's crashing into the station, killing fifty-one men instead of eleven. So do it, spacer . Keeping his voice even, the Columbian coached his captor, who programmed a descent sequence, and entered a call-code known only to herself and Dahl.

That task completed, Signe raised her couch and that of her mentor. Unfastening her harness, she gained her feet. A vague uneasiness forced itself on her awareness, and troubled her splendid physique. Recalling that certain physical effects inevitably took a toll on Earth-evolved bodies when their owners sought to function within man-made rotating systems, the novice ignored the disturbing sensations.

Startled, apprehensive, chafing at his helplessness, Dahl watched his foe warily as she freed him of his harness. Acting with speed generated by the imminence of achieving a cherished goal, Signe strapped her captive's taped forearms against his chest, bound his feet together, and refastened the stiff fabric around him.

What in hell is this demented wretch doing? Dahl railed in impotent fury. She can't intend ... Suffering shades of the hordes of Earth, she's insane! She'll kill all of us!

Seating herself, the apprentice snapped an order into the intercommunication system. "Signe here. Prepare for weightlessness." As her hand pressed the button that stopped the rotation of the torus, she stoically endured the ensuing sideways thrust. When that passed, she freed the Columbian's trussed body from the protective gear. Determinedly, she propelled herself and him upwards to the hatch leading to the lock of a lifeboat.

When the hatch-cover sprang open in response to a touch on a switch integral to an inner plate of the hull, she floated her burden into the lock. Having closed the cover behind her, she opened the one ahead of her, and rose through the docking module of the lifeboat moored to its lock on the hull of the mothership, tugging the taut form of her captive.

Strong hands thrust Dahl's immobilized person into the inflated bottom half of the harness integral to one of the four couches crowding the cramped interior of the small craft. After slashing the bonds on his ankles, Signe fastened the glowering occupant into the cocoon of fluid-filled fabric.

Driven by determination bordering on the fanatical, the usurper strapped herself into the next couch, and surveyed her surroundings. In front of the seats permanently contoured so as to allow the occupants' bodies to recline with knees bent and shoulders slightly raised, no window loomed. Screens offered the operator the sole means of seeing where the craft headed. Below those screens, various meters, panels, and other equipment stretched in daunting array. Controls for manual operation fronted each couch, within easy reach.

The woman's action confirmed the unwilling instructor's worst suspicions. Aghast, he exclaimed hoarsely, "Signe, you can't mean to try to fly a lifeboat! The ship, yes. Its guidance and navigational system is fully automatic--controls the vessel, once you program the sequence. This boat requires some manual operations! You have to be trained--practice on simulations, and then with an instructor! What you plan is suicidal!"

Eyes gone glacial regarded the man offering that vehement objection. "Not suicidal, Dahl," Signe declared evenly. "Desperate, I'll grant you, but not the other. I'll do all in my power to assure that I live through the attempt."

"You and I alone know the call-code! If we're killed, you'll leave ten men stranded in orbit!"

"I checked the inventory. Your spacers won't suffer from hunger before a ship arrives. Its crewmen can dock a lifeboat on the empty lock, and take them off."

"If you employ too great a thrust off, you'll slow the mothership's velocity," Dahl snarled, barely controlling his rage. "It'll drop to a lower orbit--speed up! Activating the call-code afterwards will result in a crash!"

"Then you'd better figure on offering me some intensive instruction before I undock."

Frantically, the irate Columbian struggled to retain his self-control, his hard-bitten face contorted not only by wrath, but by the fear he lacked the power at this point in time to conceal. Maintaining his grip on himself, he rasped, "I can probably talk you off the ship without a disaster. I'll try my damndest. I can also make certain that you program a trajectory correctly, but the final phase of docking on the lock on the station must be done manually. You have to be trained, Signe! Trained to handle the controls with automatic ease! You'll be denied the time to think out what to do! Make one mistake, and I won't be able to talk fast enough to instruct you how to correct your error before both of us die spaced--our boat blown, and perhaps the station as well! Unfasten my arms, at least. Let me back you!"

The derisive laughter provoked by that suggestion jarred the protester badly. "No, Dahl, I won't do that," the usurper declared adamantly. "With only his own life to consider, a man possessing your capacity for self-sacrifice might engineer a crash just to kill me. I'll chance dying while trying to learn, but I won't make you a free gift of my death. So plan a quick course of instruction--one highly comprehensive. Once I've learned what I need to know, I'll bring the ship down with no delay. My word on that."

Hearing finality in the assured voice, Dahl forced himself to take two deep, slow breaths, and concentrate on doing what he saw as an impossible task. Stifling all emotion, he put his trainee through a grueling practice drill, until he felt certain that the hands grasping stick and throttle would respond automatically to situations perceived by a mind able to decide in a split second what movement the highly maneuverable boat needed to make. *The accursed bitch learns fast*, the Captain used to instructing recruits grudgingly conceded. *Damn her to slow rot!*

Focusing the full power of a keen intelligence on her self-imposed, chancy task, coached by the foe whose inner turmoil she sensed, but ignored, Signe programmed a sequence designed to send the small vessel into a trajectory that would spiral it downwards, to the vicinity of the lock on the station. Intent on her captive's words, she heard him emphasize that during the last hundred meters of that descent, the program would cease to be fully automatic. Storing his concise admonitions in a capacious memory, she prepared for an ordeal. Her face a mask of calm, she listened as Dahl catalogued the disasters that would result from various mistakes she could easily make. Far from faltering, she hardened her resolve to extract all possible value from a unique, non-reproducible opportunity.

Signe switched on the power. Dahl watched as the vault of space--blackness

emblazoned with myriads of resplendent stars, bisected by the semicircular curve of the vertical torus of the mothership--took form on the top half of the left video screen. Swiveling his head, he fixed his eyes on the dual scanning screens, one of which presented the same view in graphic form. The second double screen portrayed the bottom curve of the vertical torus upon which their craft rested.

Methodically, the pinioned spacer offered precise instruction that he desperately hoped would enable a novice daring to the point of blind fanaticism to lift the lifeboat with requisite gentleness off the lock. Calmly, he warned her to avoid crashing into the upward-curving vertical torus as she maneuvered the boat through the limited space encompassed by the twin constructs, so as to emerge in close proximity to the vessel orbiting the planetoid.

"Once we clear the mothership, we'll be flying in formation with it--moving along the same orbital path with the same velocity. From that position, our programmed descent trajectory will begin automatically, at the optimum time. We'll program that sequence before we lift," Dahl stated in a voice held commendably level.

Signe carried out the task, needing only a few minor corrections from the tutor whose respect for his captor took a quantum leap. "Not bad, your grasp of theory," he commended her noncommittally. "Did someone teach you?"

"I learned on my own--studied for Earthyears, using texts accessed from our world's bank."

Shades of the slain! Staring in wonder, Dahl shook his head, as admiration contended with gut-knotting fear. His anger he kept rigorously confined below the plane of his consciousness. His voice steady, he cautioned against the fatal error of giving the small craft too much thrust. Searchingly, he stared into the face plainly projecting an inflexible resolve to succeed or perish in the attempt.

Sweat channeled down the captive's forehead to sting his eye. Unable to alleviate the discomfort, he blinked repeatedly, prompting his trainee to withdraw a square of cloth from a pocket, and wipe his face. His mouth compressed into a tight line, he passed no comment. "Withdraw the air from the lock, activate the thrust, and lift us off," he ordered, feeling as if the knot in his gut just turned to stone.

Signe obeyed. Reflexes trained to an unbelievable degree of swiftness by half a lifetime of perfecting skill at swordsmanship and a decade-long, relentless pursuit of excellence at a martial art, served the warrior as well now as in a fight for her life. Her touch light and sure on the controls, her coordination superb, she lifted the lifeboat, which floated up like a wisp of cloud to hover in the space above the bottom curve of the vertical torus.

"Good. Throttle to starboard--easy, now. Keep going. Farther--slow us! A bit more--creep, damn it!"

Watch yourself, woman . Straining eyes fixed themselves on the imposing upward sweep of the vertical torus. Hands deftly maneuvered the small craft around that obstacle. Emerging from the confines of the ring, the boat proceeded outwards, passing beyond the larger circumference of the horizontal torus. The puny artifact surrounded by star-dotted infinitude continued to distance itself from the parent vessel still dominating the view in the screens.

"Far enough. Stop us. So. We're flying in formation with the mothership. Activate the descent sequence."

Nothing visibly changed as the novice obeyed. The navigational system of the small vessel executed the program. Having locked onto reference stars, the automatic controls oriented the boat, and prepared to initiate the first of several periodic bursts of retrothrust necessary to transfer the small vehicle into the programmed trajectory from an exactly determined, optimum point in the ship's orbit. Striving to relax, the woman feasted her eyes on the silvery twinned rings stretching the width of the video screens.

Scanning the face vividly reflecting the breathless exhilaration induced by her initial experience of guiding a lifeboat manually, Dahl could detect no hint of fear. *I have to hand it to the bitch*, he conceded bitterly. *She's a natural at flying!*

At length, Signe felt an invisible hand press her body back into the couch, as the guidance system sent them spiraling down out of orbit. Raptly, she watched the brown, cratered surface of the planetoid--rugged terrain thrown into sharp relief--grow ever more detailed as they approached. The terminator between the dark and sunlit hemispheres became visible. The lifeboat plunged into night-side blackness that in no way affected the view on the scanning screens. Within minutes, the tiny entity emerged from the shadow to plummet towards the pitted, barren hemisphere bathed in the light of the distant sun.

"Get ready to operate manually," Dahl warned, his voice hoarse but steady.

Her heart hammering, Signe stared intently at the detailed, graphically depicted image. The station came into view. Panels on the board monitored various aspects of their motion. Their rate of descent gradually slowed, as the retrothrust decelerated the craft.

"This is it--where you take over!" Dahl gasped. "Throttle us starboard--more! Aft--slow us! Easy, now. You can see the lock. You're drifting to the port side again! Don't... That's better. Slow us almost to a stop. Slow the descent! More! Roll us just--good! Now, set us down!"

An unvoiced, anguished cry reverberated through the consciousness of the man galled past bearing by his helplessness. Mind at a white heat of concentration, the neophyte matched the stem-like docking module of the mushroom-shaped lifeboat exactly with the docking site. Her heart thudded as the clamps automatically locked the vessel upon contact.

Slumping into his couch, her coach let out a long, ragged sigh that caused Signe to regard him with eyes grown suddenly frigid. "Too soon to relax, Dahl. You're not finished giving your lesson," she informed him levelly.

The captive's body visibly jerked back into rigidity. "What in hell..." Biting back the lurid obscenity that threatened to tear out of a throat gone dry as dust, he rasped, "You can't intend..."

Interrupting his protest, his captor stated forcefully, "We're going to rendezvous with the ship, and I'm going to dock us on the lock."

"Signe, you're mad! Insane! That's far harder to do than this! If you crash against the ship, you'll blow it and us! And if you simply wipe the lock, killing only us, you'll make it impossible for a boat to dock and take my crewmen off! They'll starve--slowly and horribly! You and I alone know the call-code! And even if your men learn it--use it after our impact alters the orbit--the ship will crash!"

Softening her tone, Signe replied calmly, "I know all that, Dahl. Your crew won't starve. I'll give mine the call-code--at least insure your spacers a quick death. But your men, and you and I, will run the other risks. Believe me when I tell you that I don't *relish* the thought of dying. I'm taking a calculated chance--placing supreme faith in your cool-headed skill as a teacher."

Forcing the virulent wrath that again threatened to overwhelm him back into a locked compartment of his brain, Dahl managed to gain a renewed grip on his emotions. "I'll instruct you," he agreed icily. " *After you give your men the code.*"

Taking no pains to conceal her admiration of her captive's intestinal fortitude, Signe raised the station. After relaying to Theo the crucial pattern of letters and numbers, she commanded him to fuel the lifeboat. She then issued both men a blunt order to call the ship down in the event that her attempt to rendezvous with the vessel resulted in the destruction of the lifeboat, but not of the mothership.

"Signe!" Morgan's voice, vibrant with dismay, grated on Dahl's flayed nerves.

"I intend to succeed!" Abruptly breaking the contact, the Commander turned obdurate eyes on the fuel gauges.

During the ensuing wait, Dahl endeavored to order chaotic thoughts. Having managed that feat, he coached his student as she programmed an ascent trajectory designed to place the boat into an orbit below that of the ship. Watching intently, he noted his pupil's increasing sureness. Outwardly calm, he offered what advice she needed. At length, his gut convulsed, his pulse pounding, he ordered the neophyte to activate that sequence.

Thrust down into her couch, Signe sought to calm jittering nerves. During the ten minutes of the ascent, she forced from her consciousness any thought of the consequences of failure, concentrating solely on reviewing the theoretical aspects of the maneuver she intended to perform without having received the proper training.

Dahl lay studying the resolute, oval face, unable to guess at his enemy's thoughts, aware only that he detected no fear, let alone panic. *Damned if I can fault Signe's courage* , the Columbian admitted blackly. *Or her tenacity. She blasted Norman's ambitions--rot his savage soul. I have to hand it to her--she's a warrior. Well, this is it, spacer. Put your wits to the job. Ten lives you value, plus your own, ride on your ability to coach the slut.*

The invisible hand pressing the Gaeon downwards withdrew. A fullness in her head impinged on her awareness. Her arms displayed an uncanny tendency to float in front of her face. *We're in free fall* , she concluded accurately. *Brace yourself, woman.*

Dahl's voice resounded jarringly in ears that caught overtones of strain, but Signe calmly obeyed his commands, striving to make the actuality of what she now did mesh with theoretical knowledge stored in a brain operating at maximum efficiency. *We'll catch up to the mothership while we're occupying this orbit I'm programming*, she rejoiced, savoring her accomplishment. *We'll be moving faster . From there, we'll operate manually so as to intersect with the ship's orbit.* Lines of strain clawed outwards from a wide, full mouth. Steely blue eyes fastened themselves on the man offering crucial instruction for the manual phase of the rendezvous. A hand impatiently ran fingers through short-cropped, silvery hair, pushing annoying damp locks back off a high forehead glistening with sweat.

The vessel accelerated, giving the occupants the sensation that they again possessed weight. That automatic transfer complete, Signe listened as Dahl directed her to access certain new data, and helped her complete the program she initiated. Eyes riveted to the scanning screen, where the mothership had become visible, she noted the range--their distance from the ship--and the range rate, the rate at which that distance was closing.

"All right, carry on," Dahl barked. After issuing final, succinct instructions, he watched his world's archfoe take twelve lives directly, literally, in both of her strong, square-palmed, long-fingered, capable hands.

The ship loomed ever larger in the screen. Heart palpitating, Signe narrowed her focus to two crucial numbers, seeking to keep the ratio between those fast-changing figures constant even as she utilized lightflash reflexes to operate a machine alien to her experience until this day. Aware that if she let the closing rate diminish too greatly, and then thrust once more towards the mothership, she risked setting her craft swinging around the huge vessel in an arc, she shuddered as she imagined being forced to choose between committing swift, merciful suicide/murder, and dying of thirst in a boat lacking fuel, adrift in the void. *Slow just a shade ... no more. That's enough ...*

Obeying a stern injunction hissed into her ear to correct a slight drift to larboard, the silver-haired warrior swiveled her eyes to the video screen, where the mothership steadily grew in width, in height, in depth, in grandeur. The two rapidly changing figures scorching themselves into her awareness approached zero.

Her mentor's voice took on a shrill edge as he urged, "Keep your eyes on the screen--coast up and stop! Make sure you don't collide with any part of the ship!" Cursing inwardly, Dahl held his breath, but all he gasped when Signe flawlessly brought the lifeboat to a halt in the very shadow of the horizontal torus was, "You did it."

Glittering blue eyes that had alternated constantly between screen and panel, now feasted solely on the spectacular view. *So far, so good*, the woman whose pulse raced madly encouraged herself. *I can dock on the lock without disaster. I've got to! I can't bear the thought of wasting this priceless experience!*

Gathering all his courage, shutting his mounting dread out of his consciousness, Dahl issued new instructions. "Keep the thrust minimal. You'll advance over the heat shield, rising rather steeply to lift us over the bottom of the vertical torus and position us over the lock. You'll be maneuvering in a relatively tight space. Stay high enough that you avoid scraping our docking module on any part of the ship, but ascend nowhere close to the horizontal torus. All right, take us in."

The small vessel, marvelously responsive, handled like an extension of Signe's superbly athletic body. *Easy to overcorrect*, she warned herself, her heart fibrillating. *Don't blow this one chance!*

Dahl managed to keep his voice from cracking. "Watch it now. Rise--keep going. Your speed's about right. That's good. Lift steeply... That'll do. Slow just a trifle. Stay higher than the other two boats. Up--just right! Slow us. More! All right, set us down. Easy, now--easy! Just a bit farther--you're lined up--now!"

The instructor straining against his bonds stared wide-eyed as the docking module settled with no perceptible jarring force onto the lock, and the clamps moored the small craft rigidly to the docking site. His pulse roared in his ears as he assimilated the astounding fact that the lifeboat once again rode

securely upon the bosom of the miraculously undamaged mothership.

With her sleeve, Signe wiped rivulets of sweat from her brow. Leaning back, she regarded the slumped, drained figure of her mentor, her whole person radiating triumphant joy.

Won to unwilling but profound admiration, Dahl acknowledged gruffly, "Woman, you've got guts."

"You're a cool hand in a crisis yourself." As she offered that accolade, the usurper's handsome face relaxed into a strained, tired, but wholly engaging warm smile.

Having floated her still-immobilized captive to the bridge, the Gaeon harnessed him and herself. Cringing mentally at the thought of what physical trauma six unharnessed spacers would endure throughout the descent, Dahl watched his foe activate the descent sequence that would dock the ship. *At least they're all still alive*, he consoled himself, awash in conflicting emotions.

Signe watched on the screens as the prize she coveted settled onto the lock. For a few seconds, she savored the taste of victory before turning her full attention to the man acutely conscious of his expendability. Fixing him with a penetrating glance, she admitted forthrightly, "I owe you, Dahl. I offer you a choice. Do you prefer to spend whatever duration the hostilities last, interned in Gaea? Treated decently, but confined--a prisoner of war, possessing a slim chance of being exchanged at some point in time? Or do you wish me to leave you here when I go, with your spacers and the miners, to face your commander, and endure the consequences of losing this ship to me? Since Norman's recent defeat will undoubtedly render him even more brutal than he ordinarily is, I think I can assure you that you'd be far safer in my custody. But you decide."

Dahl's gut clenched. That unexpected offer dispelled a black suspicion that his captor might employ the Earth-built weaponry integral to the ship to annihilate the station and slaughter both himself and fifty of his compatriots. *Faced with her options, Norman would do exactly that*, he conceded as fear tempered relief. *She's a gallant adversary, damned if she isn't!*

Norman will order me spaced, he reflected despairingly. *But spend a dreary span of Earthyears pacing the deck in a Gaeon cell, knowing that my career lies in ruins, and my name's reviled in Columbia ... No. I'll be damned if I'll choose life at that price!* "I'll take my chances with my countrymen, Signe--even though I believe your assurance."

Admiration suffused the Gaeon warrior's striking face. "Dahl, you're too good a man to waste yourself serving a thrice-accursed mass murderer. I'd like to offer you a third choice, but I won't insult a patriot I respect by suggesting that he change sides. I'll tell you frankly, though, that if chance had landed you on ours, I'd have valued you."

"We aren't all Normans, Signe."

"Columbia spawns too many like him, and too few like you."

"The Commander-in-Chief figures on changing that."

"Give Arlen my compliments, but tell him I think he's got his work cut out for him."

Smiling grimly as she voiced that final sardonic observation, Signe unfastened her harness, and rose to her feet. Glancing down at the man projecting no trace of the smoldering hatred she had detected earlier, she intuitively judged him incapable of sullyng his personal honor. "If you'll give me your word not to try anything desperate, heroic and foolhardy, I'll cut that tape and let you walk down out of here," she promised. "Otherwise, I'll pack you."

"You have my word."

Striding out of the lock beside the captor to whom he had given his parole, Dahl came face to face with the tall, auburn-haired captor whose green eyes had conveyed so chilling a threat when he thrust his enemy into the couch on the ship. The intent observer read the depth of the relief shining out of those eyes, as the warrior-woman's safe return from her outrageous adventure registered.

Pain lacerated the Columbian's sorely tried soul. *These men would die for Signe!* he admitted to himself. *Any one of them. Gladly! What would it be like to serve a commander you respected? She said she'd have valued me. Damn! I almost wish she'd run me through. Better to die like that, than endure what I'll face shortly. Should I force her to kill me now? No. I eliminated that option when I passed my word.*

Buoyed by the success of her venture, the war-leader dispatched a squad commanded by Theo to toss the pressure suits into the drone, and send that ungainly vehicle soaring back to Main World of Gaea. Conor, Yuri and Jassy appropriated gear they coveted from the military base, while Morgan led a detail that stripped the premises of electronic weapons.

Signe left Dahl his sword. "You might need that," she observed evenly, pitying a courageous, defeated foe. Having locked the spacers and miners in the dining hall, the Commander tied her mentor fairly loosely to a chair in the communications cabin. "My captain has altered the board so you can see what's coming in, but can't broadcast," she informed him equably. "It should take you about half an hour to work free." For a few seconds, she studied the man's somber face. Of a sudden, he saw hers break into a vivid, unforgettable, transfiguring smile. "Thanks for the flying lesson, Dahl. I wish you luck with your countrymen."

Three days after Signe's raid, a Columbian military vessel docked at the mine. No sooner had the board been restored to service, than Norman called the base. His jaw jutting, the Commander of Third Corps conveyed with venomous clarity to the subordinate preserving an expressionless face, just how he viewed the loss of the Earth-armed ship. Signe's instructor passed into the custody of his fellow captain, who incarcerated his prisoner in a cabin. Pacing the deck, Dahl strove to fend off despair.

Twenty-four hours later, the arrival of two spacers interrupted his dour speculations. *Fifth Corpsmen*, the imprisoned Captain noted in surprise as those uncommunicative individuals marched him to his own former office. Shock suffused him when he discovered Arlen seated behind the desk.

Dahl knew the Columbian military dictator by sight, but had never rated a formal introduction. His gut constricted at the notion that he had undoubtedly aroused this man's anger as deeply as he had Norman's. That supposition generated cold fear, which the disgraced offender sought desperately to hide.

Tall, poised, his every fluid movement emphasizing the elegance conferred by the superb fit of his sleek black uniform, Arlen exhibited supreme self-possession. Singularly observant blue-green eyes trained to note and

interpret nonverbal cues gleaned a wealth of information during a seemingly cursory glance at the prisoner flanked by the two guards. A mobile, aristocratic face, animated, expressive, but perfectly controlled, reflected the power of the astute mind residing behind the faintly ironic smile.

With supple grace, the Commander-in-Chief rose, walked around the desk, airily waved the guards out, and gestured Dahl into a chair. Drawing up another, he seated himself facing the culprit sitting stiffly erect, noting the tight set of the man's mouth and the lines of anxiety etched into the swarthy face.

Dahl met squarely the glance leveled at him by the autocratic holder of supreme power over his world.

Having crossed his right ankle over his left knee, Arlen laid both hands over the bent leg encased in a glossy black boot, leaned back with studied ease, and spoke. His melodious voice fell pleasantly on Dahl's ear, soothing flayed nerves. "I'd like you to tell me everything that passed between you and Signe," the military dictator invited rather than commanded. "Word for word, as well as you can remember the substance of your verbal exchanges."

"Yes, sir." A new onslaught of shock threw the Third Corpsman further off balance. *This man could order me spaced!* he expostulated silently, unable to comprehend his superior's motives. *Whatever ...* Struggling to marshal scattered wits, he sorted through his recollections, and related all he could remember of the encounter.

When the narrative ended, the autocrat studied Dahl thoughtfully. At length he inquired, "Did you regard Signe's question as to whether you stood prepared to die to keep her out of space, as a hollow threat?"

"No, sir. I *knew*, beyond any shadow of doubt, that my life was about to end. She had me completely fooled."

"Mmm." Dahl developed an uncanny certainty that his interlocutor read minds with unerring ease. "Do you know how she managed to take this military base so completely by surprise?"

"No, sir."

Succinctly, Arlen explained. The expressive voice conveyed absolute assurance as the dictator concluded his summary by observing, "Signe wasn't bluffing, Dahl. She changed her mind in the last nanosecond before killing you."

"Why would she..." Abruptly, the prisoner fell silent, berating himself for blurting out a question, rather than confining himself to giving answers.

The interrogator chose to ignore the slip. "She acted on impulse. I doubt if she could have told you why, herself, but she obviously admires courage—respects a man capable of making the ultimate sacrifice. Being inflexibly determined to force someone to function as her instructor, she undoubtedly felt safer with a brave man making a reasoned choice between two appalling courses of action, than with a coward she'd scared into breaking. No...you'll never shave death any closer than you did at that moment." Scrutinizing Dahl's bleak expression, Arlen did indeed read his mind. "I understand that Norman has reduced your rank, and intends to discipline you with his wonted severity."

Eyes hard as flint asked no pity. "I lost a ship armed with Earth-built weaponry, sir."

So you did, but I'd have sworn that no captain recruited by Norman would ever

have refused under those circumstances to accede to Signe's demand. Your willingness to forfeit your life to benefit Columbia deserves far better than the harsh punishment my shortsighted colleague plans to inflict on you, spacer-captain.

That rapid mental evaluation of the situation caused no perceptible delay in the autocrat's spoken response. "Signe was right about your giving her only time," he declared ruminatively. "She'd have managed what she achieved, sooner or later. She was right about something else as well. You are too good a man for Norman. I could use an aide who keeps a cool head in a crisis. Your rank would be the equivalent of captain. Will you accept?"

"Will I...yes, sir!" Dahl suddenly looked ten Earthyears younger to the shrewd student of human nature keenly aware that he had just forged a bond of no mean magnitude between himself and his new subordinate. "Thank you, sir!"

"I'll inform your commander of my decision." Arlen's eyes briefly hardened in their turn, confirming the watcher's suspicion that the Commander-in-Chief despised Norman. Intense curiosity drove the next question put to the man giddy with relief. "Tell me frankly, Dahl: what do you think of Signe?"

The reprieved officer's glance strayed to a point past Arlen's head, as an arresting, commanding, youthful visage eerily framed in silvery hair shimmered in his interior vision. Exquisitely aware that his interrogator possessed an astonishing ability to detect a prevaricator in the act of lying, Dahl strove to distill his impressions into a terse, baldly accurate statement.

Memories flashed by as if fast-forwarded. Once more, the cold menace freighting the voice of his world's archfoe chilled his blood. Exactly as before, he grudgingly admired her courage. On the screen of his interior vision, he saw the fierce look of joy generated as the raider progressed with cool daring towards a cherished goal. Racked by fear, chafed by his bonds, he again marveled at hearing her sincere tribute to a defeated adversary even as he maintained his stubborn resolve to decline her gallant offer. The warmth of the memorable smile constituting her parting salute returned to fill him with a most inexplicable sense of regret.

"I can't help but admire her, sir," he admitted truthfully, if a shade defensively. Having voiced that heresy, he added forcefully, "But I regard her as a downright dangerous enemy."

Arlen smiled grimly. "My sentiments exactly," he acknowledged with perfect candor.

Chapter Two

Leaning forward across the polished surface of his desk, Arlen rested his chin on the steepled fingers of both hands, and meditated. Iridescent blue-green eyes gazed unseeing at the perpetually changing, subtly mind-stimulating, abstract light-sculpture dominating one corner of his severely uncluttered office. That spacious suite occupied a prime location: the lofty dome that formerly housed the bridge of the *Columbia*, the antique interplanetary vessel permanently moored within the web of habitats girdling the planetoid bearing the vessel's name.

Relaxing the guard he habitually maintained over his features, the world

leader pondered, sorted options, weighed and discarded ideas, and sifted tentative solutions to problems clouding the future of the state over which he presently exerted autocratic mastery. Acutely aware of the tenuous nature of his hold on that power, he cast his mind back over the past, and analyzed events paralleling his meteoric rise to dictatorship.

Premature, your intense satisfaction over Norman's defeat, the Commander-in-Chief of the Columbian Military Forces scathingly chided his alter self. The bastard's expulsion from Main World of Gaea freed Signe to expand the scope of the war. True, your thrice-accursed rival just lost a superb base of operations: an arena where for the last ten Earthyears a strong military leader given little oversight by an ineffectual civilian head of state operated pretty much as he pleased. Leon failed utterly to control the war he let a power-mad commander in league with greedy civilian officials talk him into launching.

>From the day that culpably weak-willed First Minister broke the Convention by sanctioning the manufacture--and the use!--of weapons that could kill at a distance, he cast a foul blot on Columbia's honor as well as his own. The Gaeans abided by that ancient agreement forged by Johann's successor: an agreement never abrogated. In no way did they offer gross provocation. On the contrary, they withdrew even deeper into isolation, and maintained their traditional refusal even to use swords to settle personal quarrels. They played right into the hands of militant foes, when they clung so tenaciously to the insularity that Johann's Gaeans followers believed to form their best defense against allies they perceived as incorrigibly treacherous.

Had the descendants of those original Gaeans allowed trade to flourish between two far-flung Groups plagued with an imbalance of natural resources, the war would never have started. We lack dense metals. The Gaeans lack water ice. Their metallic planetoids undoubtedly yield natural alloys and minerals unknown to us. Our stony bodies provide light metals and ceramics they're obliged to do without. Interworld trade makes sound sense. If only they hadn't remained so damned suspicious--so stubbornly resistant to change!

Well, this war served to lock the Gaeans into that mindset forever, damn the perverse luck. Norman forged an admirably effective military organization. Give the rotter credit where it's due. Your former peer transformed Third Corps from a mediocre body entrusted with guarding public officials during public functions, into a formidable force of savage warriors primed to follow a ruthless leader whose ultimate goal they knew to be absolute power over Columbia.

Norman ruled that following with an iron hand, but pandered to their basest instincts--condoned butchery and rape while methodically stripping Gaea of portable wealth. My militant rival stands guilty of mass murder of civilians: crimes abetted by captains as culpable as himself--men like Yancey. Crimes those sadistic brutes committed before I seized power. Crimes for which I can't hold them accountable, and stay in power. Well, that latter need's paramount. Vital. Damned if I'll ...

A knock on his door jarred rudely upon Arlen's speculations. Suppressing all evidence of sharp annoyance, he called out, "Come in!"

The door slid open to admit a tall figure as aristocratic in bearing as the world leader. Lively dark eyes formed the most arresting feature of a hawk-profiled, ebony face. The newcomer's lean, supple body moved with the fluid grace characteristic of the master swordsman, as he strode with hand outstretched towards the superior who rose to greet him.

"Amin!" the autocrat exclaimed, allowing his keen satisfaction to show. "I felt certain you couldn't arrive before tomorrow morning!"

"I'm well ahead of schedule, thanks to Evan. Not only did he deliver the parts I needed, he placed half his crew on twelve-hour shifts, and arrived with the other five spacers to spend a full eight hours helping us with the repairs. When I protested, he growled that any man who'd just put in two fourweeks of duty on the Ice World needed a boost to his morale. Winking at me, he pitched his voice to carry, and boomed out his intent to see that my crew got an extra night to spend with the girls. Morale soared, naturally. I owe my old comrade, damned if I don't."

"So do I, for whatever time you can spare me before you take Evan's advice yourself." His own lithe, hard-muscled frame exhibiting no less grace than that distinguishing the visitor, Arlen moved two chairs beautifully crafted of gleaming dark laminate from where they stood side by side on the opulent deckcovering. Gesturing Amin into one, the autocrat seated himself opposite the Senior Captain and trusted friend who figured prominently in the deliberations that had occupied his mind before he retreated into musings on the history of the conflict.

"The night's young yet, chief. I guessed that I'd find you working overtime. Who's the new man on your board?"

"Dahl. My two former aides I caught selling information to Galt. After demoting them both to the lowest rank, I inflicted the punishment the offense merited. That incident prompted me to seek out a man I judged loyal enough to me personally that he'd prove incorruptible. Dahl I appropriated from Norman, a move that did nothing to mitigate the hatred I incurred when I relieved my colleague of four of the six first-class military ships he brought back from Gaea--especially since Signe wrested one of Norman's two remaining Earth-built vessels from Dahl, a fourweek ago."

"Mm. I must say, Norman has been plagued by a daunting series of setbacks lately. Cheers me no end, that circumstance. Evidently Dahl proved innocent of any negligence?"

"Given that a force comprised of the cream of Gaea's warriors, led by Signe herself, materialized out of the void without any of the six men manning two boards seeing a thing on their screens, I couldn't accuse either the miners or Dahl's spacers of negligence when she took them utterly by surprise from the rear. Just how she managed that feat mystifies me. Her raiders must have landed in the slip formerly used to dock drones, but an incoming drone should have shown up as clearly on the scanning screens as would a military ship.

"Signe planned her raid well ahead of time, solely to acquire the prize she stole. Dahl's lieutenant stupidly tried to employ his implant against her. She ran him through, thereby striking fear enough into one of the engineers in charge of the mining operation that he obeyed her order to man his board as if nothing were happening. When Signe holed Dahl deeply enough to draw blood, and asked whether he stood prepared to die on the spot to keep her out of space, he said yes. Evidently his response moved her to admiration, because she stayed her hand. She herded his ten crewmen aboard the ship, and strapped Dahl into the couch next to hers.

"She then coolly announced that with or without his instruction, she intended to lift the ship into orbit around the station. To save the lives of the men incarcerated aboard, he coached her. He assured me most emphatically that she'd done her homework. Once in free fall, she propelled him, securely bound, into a lifeboat that she demanded he show her how to fly. Immobilized, he

talked her off the ship, and taught her enough to enable her to dock the boat without blowing the station where her captains still held forty miners hostage. Signe then managed the astonishing feat of completing a successful rendezvous with the ship. She informed Dahl when his ordeal ended that he was too good a man for Norman. I found I agreed with her."

"Howling hordes of hell!" Shock sufficient to breach the guard over his expression that the Captain habitually maintained showed fleetingly but plainly.

"Amin, we're about to find ourselves at war in space."

"Surely not!" With no hesitation whatsoever, the officer flatly contradicted his superior. "One Earth-armed ship against nineteen! No one in his right mind would buck those odds, and Signe's eminently sane. No, she likely intends to do whatever she can to guard her world against any new invading force."

The Commander-in-Chief took a few seconds to weigh that vehement assertion. *Amin I know to be as shrewd a judge as any authority I could consult, he readily conceded. He's a bold strategist with sixteen Earthyears of experience as an officer, a highly competent leader, and a daring and resourceful risk-taker. But so is that infernal woman. Look at the coup she just pulled off! Damn her to the mythical fire!*

No strong emotion surfaced on the face more striking than handsome. His melodious voice as serene as the features so perfectly obedient to their owner's will, Arlen replied equably, "I don't control all nineteen of the Earth-built ships armed with the irreproducible weaponry, Amin, as you well know. Dexter and Courtney each control three. Galt retains four at his command, and Norman one, now that I've relieved him of the four that bring my complement to eight. No prerogative enjoyed by a commander remains more jealously guarded than possession of those irreplaceable vessels."

"Galt just dispatched two of his four first-class ships to O'Neill, hot on the heels of that archrenegade, Chapell. Dexter takes care to base his three far from the capital, claiming with some justice that his responsibilities demand that pattern of deployment. Courtney keeps one in the capital, and two anywhere except here. Two of mine of necessity guard the outposts on the Ice World."

"Norman, you'll remember, lost two during the war. The Gaeans sabotaged both ships on the locks, damn their willingness to sacrifice two priceless antique artifacts! Norman left the hulks in Gaea. When I interrogated him under truth compeller, he stated that the hulks are beyond repair, so they indubitably are. But even if they weren't, the Gaeans lack the facilities, the parts, and the expertise to rebuild them. Norman stripped Gaea of parts, destroyed the single factory capable of manufacturing replacements, and slaughtered the experts that staffed it, right after he invaded."

Full lips curled back over perfect white teeth as Amin retorted contemptuously, "Typical blunder, that sort of barbarism: ruthless slaughter costly to the perpetrator. Norman's calculated brutality made rebellion inevitable. Now that Signe has won, however, she'll find plenty to occupy her in a world devastated by a decade of systematic looting."

The deep voice turned softly ruminative as the visitor added, "What I've gleaned from hearsay about Norman's nemesis positively fascinates me." A slight pause occurred as a lusty captain possessed of an enviable reputation as a charmer of ladies, even among spacers who prided themselves on the number and variety of their conquests, recalled certain facets of the legend.

"Sigurd's daughter commands fanatical devotion," he observed musingly. "A warrior who's all woman, I'd guess her to be--matured, but not coarsened by her experience. She's foreign to yours and mine, though, I've no doubt, chief. I simply cannot envision a female combatant, and most assuredly not a female swordsman who routinely fought hand-to-hand--against *Third Corpsmen*, no less--and held her own!"

Nor can I--but the reality exists, the listener silently conceded.

"Bastard or not, Norman's a warrior. He handpicked those rapacious curs he led, for fighting ability and ruthlessness. He unleashed them on a civilian populace steeped in a tradition of pacifism, and countenanced what can only be called atrocities. Signe must stand in a class by herself: a wholly unique woman."

"A damned dangerous one," Arlen shot back, reflecting that Amin's perception of Norman's conquest perfectly matched his own. "I've got enough on my hands right now walking a sword-edge over an abyss--consolidating my hold on the state while avoiding civil strife--without the added burden of fighting a war in space, now or in the future. If she'd rest content to administer her liberated world, I'd leave Signe to the task unmolested, but I'll wager a liter of the best brandy available in the capital against a shot of mediocre whisky on my belief that she harbors no such intent."

"The notion strikes me that you'd better concentrate on the now, or you might not be around to face any nebulous future challenges," the visitor predicted in a tone of chilling certainty.

Genuine mirth infused the laugh forming the response of the leader warmed by his realization that this subordinate at least, curried no favor, and spoke his thought frankly to his autocratic superior without first calculating the effect his bluntness might wreak on his career. "Considering that one of my four rivals undoubtedly engineered Leon's assassination, and another spent ten Earthyears cruelly oppressing a civilian populace, and all four commanders aspire to my present eminence, your assessment smacks of understatement, Amin."

So it does. So beware, old friend!

"I've pushed Norman to the wall: relegated Third Corps--what survives of it--to carrying out its former, mostly ceremonial duty of guarding our officials, military and civilian, during public functions. Defeat at Signe's hands rendered Norman relatively ineffectual, but during my two-Earthyear tenure as Commander-in-Chief, Galt has strengthened his hold on power. The Commander of Second Corps cleverly assumed some functions formerly in the domain of the Minister of Internal Security, knowing that I don't dare jeopardize the support I've thus far received from key figures in the civil government, by arbitrarily reversing decisions made by an influential official in the course of his day-to-day operation of his ministry. Dexter and Courtney bide their time while clinging stubbornly to what power I find it politic to leave them."

"You've made solid gains since you outmaneuvered all of your self-serving associates right after Leon's assassination--to the undoubted chagrin of whichever of your four rivals wiped the First Minister." Amin's mind flashed back to that pivotal three hours. *Arlen saw his chance and seized it*, he acknowledged with respect. *For sheer cold nerve, few men equal him. For the ability to react swiftly during a crisis with that extraordinary combination of intelligence, imagination, and daring, none do.*

"I may shortly need to employ supremely risky means to render my position wholly unassailable." The military dictator, who still personally commanded the Fifth Columbian Military Corps, ventured that blunt avowal of his intentions without the least qualm, knowing this subordinate to be utterly trustworthy.

"Rest assured that you can count on me to back you to the hilt," Amin asserted promptly and vigorously.

"If I harbored a shade of doubt that my oldest friend and senior captain might fail me in an hour of crucial need, I'd scarcely have gambled on the moves that gained me what I've won," the Commander-in-Chief responded, favoring his subordinate with an ironic smile. "During the next six fourweeks, we'll see a turning point in Columbia's history."

"Perhaps," the man not entirely convinced of the truth of that final assertion replied equably.

"Well. Call here every morning at 0600, while you're on leave. I told Danner to do the same. I'll impose on you now for an additional favor--one I hate to ask of a man who just docked. Dahl has been manning my board for nine straight hours. He downed a sandwich at 1300, while he worked. Spell him for thirty minutes, would you, so that he can eat a hot meal? Oblige me by keeping out anyone clamoring to see me--unless his business strikes you as vitally important--until Dahl gets back, and you depart to take Evan's advice?"

"I'll guard your inner sanctum like the mythical eagle, and ask Dahl to bring you back a hot meal, chief."

"Karyn will have my dinner ready when I get home."

"It's 2010 now. I'll wager you haven't eaten since 1300--if then."

"Instruct my aide to slip in here without knocking, and leave a sandwich and a glass of milk on the table."

"A hot sandwich," Amin insisted as he took his departure.

Having reassumed his former posture at his desk, Arlen once again sank into a profound reverie. *Signe scored a point*, he admitted, nowise given to deluding himself. *If Columbia spawned more men like Dahl and Amin, and fewer like Norman and Galt, we'd be far better off. It's a wonder you succeeded in outmaneuvering Galt, who almost certainly instigated the assassination of Leon. You pulled off a risky coup because you command certain loyalties--a gratifying confidence in your ability to lead, on the part of those officials of the civil government least motivated by self-interest. That advantage, none of your four rivals--Galt, Courtney, Norman or Dexter--can boast. That reservoir of trust, plus your abundance of unmitigated gall, tipped the scales in your favor. Well. You need to plan ...*

Ten minutes fled into oblivion before a sharp knock again interrupted Arlen's cogitations. *Now what in hell ...* "Come in!"

Amin's tall figure filled the entry. "You've a visitor who swears to the vital importance of her business, chief. She didn't want to be seen arriving. I've arranged that she wasn't. I'll await her, and escort her back out. May I show her in?"

Mystified, Arlen rose. Out of old habit, he took up a position so that his desk formed no barrier between himself and the expected caller, who would need

to traverse a certain distance in the view of the man awaiting her. That ploy gave a highly trained observer the few seconds he needed in which to study subtle kinesic responses--posture, body-orientation, gestures, facial expression, and eye behavior--of the person entering. "Please do."

The autocrat's mobile face betrayed no hint of the astonishment gripping him as he beheld the premier courtesan of the capital enter his office. The woman moved with the surpassing grace of a dancer. Glints of gold highlighted wavy brown hair bound in a coil seemingly poised on the verge of tumbling down its owner's back. A few tendrils, artfully arranged to suggest wanton disorder, hung in long spirals. Those eye-catching curls caressed the cheek of a heart-shaped face, the beauty of which imprinted itself unforgettably into the beholder's memory.

The legendary artist's suit, superbly tailored to accentuate the flair of her hips and the rounded contours of her breasts, flaunted the curvaceousness of her body. The costly fabric, a pale, luminous green, hid nothing of the visitor's erotic appeal. A faint but delicious fragrance wafted about her exotic person as Arlen took both of her hands in his own, and exclaimed, "Adrienne! What a pleasure! Please, sit down. I'll send for coffee."

Adrienne seated herself. The smile she turned on the military dictator bore no trace of seductiveness. Her cultured voice fell pleasantly on his ear as she urged, "Don't go to the trouble, Arlen--please. I won't take any more of your time than is absolutely necessary. I debated fiercely with myself before venturing to intrude upon you here, but I decided finally that you'd believe the assurance I gave your captain: that only a matter of crucial importance--one I couldn't trust to any electronic line of communication--would occasion my coming."

"You worried for no reason."

The woman's eyes, as darkly blue-green as her host's, betrayed a hint of world-weariness oddly at variance with the serenity of her ageless, lovely face. "Arlen, you've been a guest at my nightly gatherings often enough to know what sort of men make up my circle."

"The cream of Columbia's power structure: men as intrigued as I by conversation enlivened by the wit and charm of a fascinating hostess." Incapable of lying, the dictator spoke what he perceived to be unvarnished truth.

"What a compliment, those words, coming from you! And yes, power these days dominates the thinking of the men who patronize my salon, as never before." A flush darkened Adrienne's creamy cheeks, and her eyes hardened momentarily. "Not all who frequent my quarters seek more than conversation, but a good many of those men, at one time or another over the Earthyears, paid handsomely for my services. I've never tried to pry secrets from my clients, Arlen. Never! Any secrets to which I've become privy, I've buried. I most assuredly don't make a habit of intruding on a man who's never been my lover, to confide to him a secret I learned from one sharing my bed! I've never done that, before tonight."

Her shapely body taut, her eyes suddenly overflowing with bitterness, Adrienne leaned forward in the chair facing her host's. "I wouldn't now, except that the threat hanging over Columbia at this point in our history exceeds in magnitude any our world has ever faced. You're the leader best fitted to see us through that peril. If we lose you, we could succumb while your rivals waste their energies fighting each other. So I bear you a warning, trusting that you won't let slip how you heard it."

"Rest absolutely assured of that." *She's speaking what she perceives to be the absolute truth. You'd better heed her warning!*

"Courtney has engaged for some time now, in distilling poison, drop by drop, into the ear of one of his captains. He has gradually succeeded in discrediting you in the eyes of a man your former peer hopes to maneuver eventually into issuing you a challenge in the presence of an ample number of shrewdly chosen witnesses. Warrior that you are, you'd not prevail against this adversary, any more than would any of your four rivals. If you accept the challenge, you'll die—and if you coldly refuse to fight a subordinate, you'll stand convicted in the eyes of the beholders, and the men under you, of cowardice: fear of facing Brant across swords."

"Brant." Arlen's deep voice betrayed none of the cold fury his informant's revelation generated. "You think Brant capable of agreeing to maneuver me into a duel purely to further the ambitions of his commander?"

"No. I surely don't. Nor does the man setting this trap. Courtney's wily persuasiveness at times approaches yours, but he's not constrained, as you are, by any compulsion to adhere to the truth. To the men under him, Courtney projects a bluff heartiness--a calculated pose hard for them to see through. He's most careful never to be caught in a lie, and so enjoys a totally undeserved reputation for forthrightness.

"It takes a woman who sees him in unguarded moments, away from his men, to penetrate that mask he's worn until it seems his face. No, he's playing Brant like a finely tuned instrument. Brant's proud, jealous of his honor, and worried about his career. He fears losing command of his ship in some power struggle among his superiors. His fear I judge to be well founded. Courtney deftly worsens it. Brant's action, if--or rather when--it comes, will be the sincere act of a touchy duelist seeking satisfaction for deeply wounded honor."

Pausing, the woman ventured a bold prediction, knowing this autocrat's capacity to hear truth spoken without giving way to irrational anger generated by wounded pride. "If you try to use your eloquence to persuade Brant that you offered no insult--that the Commander who appreciates his ability and a peer he has no reason to suspect of duplicity both deliberately lied to him--you'll merely succeed in convincing him that you're dishonest as well as craven, and provoke him into escalating the public confrontation fatal to your reputation. Be sure that Courtney will produce a witness to the incident he fabricates to inflame Brant, who won't realize that the Commander of Fourth Corps occasionally covers up indiscretions--even crimes--by subordinates from whom he later exacts a price. Why do you suppose I see your retention of power as so crucial?"

"I'll end by owing you my life--or my honor, which I value more," Arlen stated gravely, deeply impressed by the worldly woman's penetrating insight, and grateful for the warning. "You're absolutely right. No one of the five of us, including Dexter, could prevail against Brant in a duel. I don't know of anyone who could, since Nigel vanished."

A vivid image of a tall, lithe figure smiling sardonically at her out of a face remarkable for its ugliness rose to send regret lancing through Adrienne's inner being: regret sufficient to breach for a few seconds the cool detachment she habitually maintained over the impulses of her heart. Mastering that ephemeral upsurge of emotion, she wrenched her mind back to the problem at hand. "You haven't much time in which to plan your defense, Arlen. Courtney fears that Galt might anticipate him--launch some devious ploy of his own. That might well happen, but at least you've been forewarned of the most

imminent danger. I won't take any more of your time."

"Don't rush off--please. I'd appreciate your answering a question, unless you've some pressing engagement."

"I haven't. I'm merely reluctant to impose on you."

"What dire threat do you see hanging over Columbia?"

"You surely don't suppose that Signe will rest content to disband her military force now that she has driven Norman out, do you, Arlen? Or expect that the hatred Norman bred in his archfoe and her followers will fade any time soon? Or assume that so formidable a warrior won't strive to regain the mine Norman still operates in Gaea? If she succeeds, our world's present glut of the dense metals for which our industries developed a voracious appetite over the term of abundant supply will dwindle to nothing.

"If the Gaeans gain the slightest inkling of the dangers you face--of your less than absolute grip on supremacy--might they not be tempted to strike before you win the power struggle confronting you? Or does your thinking parallel that of the men who disdainfully dismiss Signe as no real threat, simply because she's a woman?" The smile accompanying that last drawling question grew purely wicked.

That thrust evoked an appreciative laugh. "Your political acumen never ceases to amaze me, Adrienne. No, I agree wholeheartedly with your assessment, daunting as I find the thought of fighting on two fronts. You've placed me deeply in debt to you for your warning. I'm fortunate that men find you irresistible."

"I confess to harboring regret that the most attractive man of my acquaintance remains unshakably faithful to his wife." Those words, bearing no provocative nuance whatsoever, emerged as a simple statement of fact accompanied by a smile that warmed the beholder to the core.

Touched by the woman's honesty, no whit insensible to her potent allure, Arlen replied gently, "I have no needs Karyn doesn't satisfy, Adrienne."

"I'm keenly aware of that. Karyn's too innocent to realize how unique a man she married. Arlen, please...take care." The courtesan's richly vibrant voice took on a husky note as she uttered her final words. Flashing her host an enchanting smile, she rose.

Opening the door, the autocrat allowed his guest to precede him into the outer office, where the Captain guarding the entry awaited her. "Amin will see you to your quarters," Arlen declared in a tone that brooked no argument.

"My pleasure." *Death of Earth, might she ...* A lusty spacer-captain deprived of any commerce with courtesans for a span of eight weeks--an eternity, to Amin's way of thinking--experienced a pronounced stirring in his loins, as with courtly grace he offered the lovely woman his arm.

Amin's in need, the canny professional shrewdly deduced. *Well, now*. Smiling up at the high-ranking officer eloquently expressing delight at the prospect of spending time in her company, Adrienne departed with her escort.

Arlen relieved his aide of the meal he offered. "Dahl, shut down the board, and go off duty."

"If you're leaving, sir."

"I'm not, but you are. You've put in thirteen hours of overtime over the last seven days, and fifteen during the prior week. Don't think I haven't kept track. I'm gratified by the way you've handled an onerous job requiring the exercise of tact and discretion. On your next long leave, you'll take the requisite number of hours sufficient to compensate for whatever overtime you've accrued, in addition to the other leave due you."

Shock melted into gratitude, which showed in the aide's eyes. "That's generous of you, sir." *Damned generous, but I need more than a boost to my credit balance. Rot my foul luck ...*

"Not generous, Dahl. Fair. I'll lock up when I leave."

Seated once more behind his desk, the Commander-in-Chief achieved a state of profound concentration. No distraction interfered as he assessed the ramifications of Adrienne's warning, pondered deeply on his future, determined on a bold course, and hatched a plot of his own.

Seated next to his charge on the cramped bench-seat of an autocab, the aristocratic warrior inhaled the faint scent of her perfume, and drank in the sight of her shapeliness. Smiling, the courtesan remarked, "I appreciate both your considerate reception of an unexpected caller tonight, Amin, and your willingness to see me home."

"It's seldom that an order coincides so exactly with a man's personal wish. I'd have offered if Arlen said nothing."

"I believe that, of so gallant a captain."

"A captain who just returned from eight weeks of duty on the Ice World finds the sight of any woman a pleasure, but to be afforded the chance to converse--for however brief a span--with one whose loveliness sets her apart even in a capital famous for the beauty of its women fills me with delight."

Adrienne's musical laugh set her admirer's nerves tingling. "What a compliment!"

"Not at all. I spoke the bare truth."

"Two polished tributes in succession." A thought impinged. Genuine interest rather than cursory politeness prompted the courtesan to inquire softly, "What's it like, Amin, to view a world-sea of ice on your screens?"

No hesitation preceded the reply offered by the cultured lover of classical literature who held a coveted military rank. "Unimaginably beautiful," he stated softly. "Forbiddingly, coldly, austerevely lovely. A serrated, crevassed, fissured, tortured expanse...a frozen waste reflecting the dim light of the distant sun, and the turquoise radiance of the giant gaseous planet riding the black deeps above the horizon. That brooding presence bulks splendidly huge in the primal night of the void veiled by a myriad of unwinking stars. The onlooker gazes in wonder upon a vast, frigid surface unsullied by man and his works, most of it knowing not so much as the press of a boot. Awesome, the prospect. It drives home to the viewer a sense of his utter insignificance, by emphasizing the ephemeral nature of his collective reign, attesting to the unimportance of his individual flicker of existence, and accentuating his eternal loneliness."

Smiling into the rapt face of his astonished companion, Amin entreated softly, "That recent experience prompts me to a boldness I might not have mustered otherwise, and impels me to beg the most legendary courtesan in Columbia to grant me an hour of her company, tonight."

Adrienne found herself at a loss: a situation rare in her experience. She knew exactly the state of her guests' credit balances, and could assess in any given instant whether an applicant could afford an hour--or succession of nights--of her time. Amin, however, had never frequented her quarters. The adept in a demanding profession harbored no wish unwittingly to place Arlen's charming officer in an acutely embarrassing position. She nonetheless refused to compromise her exacting standards. "An hour of Adrienne's time tonight might impose an unwelcome limit on subsequent hours spent in the company of other ladies of the capital," she cautioned, smiling the wicked smile.

"An hour of Adrienne's company tonight might fill me with such sublime bliss as to free me from any further need," Amin countered, his dark eyes glowing. "But I'd surely hate to gain that inestimable privilege, and find myself afterwards unable to meet my obligation." Cocking his head, he inquired, "What would my obligation be, were I to succeed in persuading you?"

"Three hundred credits."

Relief flashed swiftly across the ebony face despite the exorbitance of the sum. The man possessed of the means of gratifying his desire coaxed beguilingly, "Adrienne, think of what comfort the memory you could give me would bring a lonely captain, when next he gazes out on the world-sea of ice! Say that you'll grant me what I so yearn to enjoy tonight."

A laugh that fell on his ears like chiming bells sent hope surging through the petitioner. "I yield to your persuasive eloquence, Amin," the courtesan replied. "I owe you, for your kindness, earlier--and for the vivid, unforgettable portrait of a world I'll never see, etched into my memory forever by the marvelously poetic power of your words."

The wistfulness vibrating through the clear contralto voice touched Amin. Taking one of his companion's hands in his own, he gently caressed the fingers, his gesture more affectionate than amorous.

What a gentleman he is! Adrienne mentally commended her escort. *I savored the idea of a night free of the necessity of satisfying Courtney's needs--a night to myself. Well ... Amin's handsome, personable, and charming. Grateful. Nice change, it'll be, using my arts on a man more appreciative than demanding.*

The automated vehicle threading its way through busy corridors veered out of one of two center lanes, and stopped before the door of a section. In response to a questioning glance, Adrienne nodded. Her client reached a finger to the panel below the front viewport. With a few staccato motions, he programmed the bulbous metal conveyance so as to set it free to respond to a new summons.

Emerging from his side, Amin walked around the autocab, and opened the far door to assist his fellow passenger to alight into the space reserved for exiting or entering the public conveniences. With proprietary grace, the successful petitioner guided his hostess across the narrow pedestrian lane fronting the facades of the sections. Leaning on her escort's arm, smiling up into his hawk-profiled face, the woman pressed her palm to a small panel on the jamb. The door slid soundlessly open.

Having stepped within, Adrienne felt arms encircle her from behind. Amin kissed her under one ear, and nibbled her earlobe, prompting a vivid memory to rise from the ashes of the past. *Twice, today, I've been reminded forcibly of Nigel* , she reflected with renewed regret. *Dead, he must be. Lost at space. What a pity!*

Well, this man has gained comparable repute as a lover . When Amin turned her

to face him, she slid her hands into the fastenings of his tunic, and slipped the garment down over hard-muscled black shoulders. Her patron welcomed the touch of her tongue on the hairless skin of his chest, a sensation that sent galvanic impulses coursing along quivering nerves. Deftly, carefully, he divested the lovely woman of her tunic. Dropping to one knee, he kissed first one breast, and then the other, his tongue intimately caressing each nipple in turn.

Adrienne's hands sifted through crisp dark hair, and she smiled. "Sit down, and let me pull off your boots," she whispered.

Having done that service, the courtesan responded with seductive pliancy, as strong hands pulled her forward across their owner's lap. Amin's fingers withdrew two ornate metal pins from her coil, freeing a cascade of rippling tresses, and releasing a cloud of fragrance. His hand stroked the wondrous length of wavy locks, with unhurried, sensuous strokes. "All night, I've wanted to loose your hair," he murmured, his voice an aural caress. Lifting her of a sudden in muscular arms, he stood, holding her slack body against his chest. "Where...?"

With languid grace, Adrienne pointed to a door at the opposite side of a lushly carpeted expanse featuring plush chairs, two commodious couches, various handsome coffee tables, and a state-of-the-art galley. "Take me to bed," she invited, sliding her arms around the spacer's neck.

Senses erotically stimulated by close contact with warm, bare flesh narrowed the man's focus, but the aristocrat in Amin grew cognizant of the tastefully restrained elegance of the spacious sitting area. His memory painted a sharp contrast between these quarters, the equal in luxury to his boyhood home, and drab antechambers to tawdry cabins in which professional women of far less renown than the legendary lady he bore in his arms plied their ancient trade. The scent of perfume rose like incense, further inflaming desire already hot.

Having deposited his burden on the oversized double bed, Amin deftly stripped off her pants, and stepped out of his own. Exhibiting feline grace, the woman pulled open the drawer of the exquisitely fashioned table by the head, and set a datapad and a stylus on the gleaming surface. Turning to lie supine on a soft, unimaginably costly peach-hued sheet, she invited her patron to recline. She then set about demonstrating the superb skill for which she was famous.

The price Adrienne demanded of Amin represented the amount she customarily charged for an hour of her time. Prepared to give value for credit, she exerted herself to arouse her partner with subtle arts designed to lift him to an unprecedented height while delaying his climax--to prolong his pleasure until the hour seemed an eternity. Men used to hiring the legendary courtesans expected such service, and seldom sought to confer pleasure in their turn. Adrienne preferred that they not try. Habitually, she preserved her own detachment while raising her clients to lofty pinnacles of ecstasy. If her customer's male pride proved such that for full satisfaction, he needed to feel he was man enough to satisfy her, the adept acted a part to perfection. Seldom did she fail to compel her partner's belief.

As she expected, Amin nowise conformed to the norm. Not content to lie back and enjoy her practiced manipulations, he employed arts of his own. Far from hindering the professional as she used her own skill, he complemented her efforts. When with hands and lips and tongue she caressed his tall body in intimate fashion, his hands moved over hers with equal skill; his tongue stimulated her with tantalizing effectiveness. She caught glimpses of the mischievous mirth that danced in dark eyes: amusement that proved contagious, and lent a most unwonted pleasure to the act of raising this chance conquest

to the heights of rapture.

To her amazement, Adrienne found herself growing aroused in her turn. Sternly resisting so unaccustomed a sensation, she managed to stymie her patron's best efforts. Her own manipulations succeeded, causing the Captain to succumb, finally, to a need for release grown intolerable. Satisfaction suffused the adept as Amin achieved a climax that sent him half into trance.

Realizing that she had given her partner an experience as memorable as he could have wished, Adrienne lay slackly beneath him, tormented by a most unaccustomed surge of unsatisfied desire. Outraged by her body's betrayal, and her mind's unruly acquiescence, she lay limply, trying to still her racing pulse.

Amin stirred. Propping himself on an elbow, he gazed quizzically at his companion. One long finger traced the bow of her upper lip, sending a most unexpected tingle down nerves ordinarily lethargic.

"What an incomparable artist you are," the man breathed. "All the legend promised."

"I admit to thinking the exact same thing about you," she responded with perfect honesty, smiling up at her client.

Amin's hearty laugh warmed the courtesan. His finger slid along her full lower lip, parting it from its mate, and once again traced the bow. "But you shrank from letting me succeed in giving you what you gave me in such abundance," he chided gently. "I can imagine why. A woman's more vulnerable than are most men, and you won't risk entangling your heart: arousing emotions dangerous to your peace of mind. I know the feeling. A man in my profession fears that sort of complication just as you do. If you granted me an hour five nights in succession, *my* resistance would crumble. I won't risk *that*. You keep your guard up night after night with the same man, by rigorously refusing to let your partner give you a climax.

"I admire your self-command. Truly, I do--because I sense that you're a deeply passionate and wholeheartedly affectionate person, underneath that admirable self-possession. But you needn't be afraid to let down your guard with me. This is a one-time experience for both of us. One night--one ascent to physical release in my arms--isn't going to endanger your peace. Take me on again, Adrienne...and let me give you a memory as full of delight as that which I'll take away with me."

Stirred to the core, the recipient of that unorthodox invitation gazed wide-eyed at this man--a stranger before tonight--whose assessment she knew to be astoundingly accurate. *Why not?* she asked herself. *One night ... Let myself go ... I trust Amin. Implicitly--the way I do Arlen. For the same reason, I suppose. Amin's a man of equally sterling honor. Rare, that quality, right now, in Columbia. Why not?*

Adrienne replied wordlessly. With a sinuous movement of her body, she rose, to position herself above her partner. Once again she commenced to arouse him.

Having just attained fulfillment, Amin felt far less urgency now, than earlier. With unhurried seductive facility, he indulged in intimate caresses of the sort few of the courtesan's clients employed in an encounter with her, even if they knew how to do so. Aware that her body, trained by her imperious will habitually to suppress the sort of reaction he strove to elicit, would be slow to respond, Amin proved singularly patient, wondrously persevering, languorously, erotically proficient.

Exquisitely conscious of the marvelous degree of artistry his actions displayed, grateful for his willingness to take such pains to give her pleasure, the woman strove to make him an equal return. Slowly, voluptuously, her beauty gloriously enhanced by a joy that animated her face and lent magic to her hands, Adrienne gave herself with abandon, with verve, with a surpassing transcendental channeling of energy into the production of ecstasy.

The pairing took on the semblance of a mystic dance: a rhythmic, graceful, flowing ballet in which every subtle movement reflected meaning. Devoid of guilt, untroubled by any sense of shame, each mind gradually filled with a supreme, consuming, ebullient happiness: a cosmic joy in the touch, the scent, the taste, the warmth, the ecstatic closeness, of two bodies brimming with health, and boasting athletic perfection, their owners each totally uninhibited in the throes of steadily mounting passion.

Time stopped. Their minds meshed, as their physical selves approached the final culmination, and the pair achieved the ultimate ecstasy simultaneously, ending prolonged indulgence in a dalliance that had seemed to last an eon. Spent, drained, floating in the ether, two sensualists lay entwined, fulfilled, satiated, one.

After an age, Amin stirred, and rose on an elbow. Adrienne raised eyelids fringed with dark lashes, her eyes soft with remembered bliss. Leaning down, her companion saw her instinctive movement to avoid a kiss full on the mouth. His hand gently turned her face towards him. "What harm in a kiss, after what we reached together?" He murmured that inquiry, smiling, before his mouth closed over that of his partner.

Surrendering the last shred of her reserve, the courtesan returned his intimate gesture passionately. When at length he freed her lips, and raised himself to look down at her, he declared softly, "Earthyears from now, when I'm an unimaginable distance from here, I'll remember tonight, Adrienne. Your beauty...your incomparable skill...your daring...but most of all, the bold, unfettered spirit inhabiting that soft, pliant, feminine body."

His eyes strayed to the clock, and filled with astonishment. "You granted me an hour, and I heedlessly took two," he apologized. With a determined movement, he reached for the datapad and stylus, intending to write the woman a draft on his credit balance.

The courtesan laid a restraining hand on her patron's arm. "Three hundred credits, Amin," she instructed with uncompromising firmness.

"For each hour."

"For the whole. To cover what I did. For the balance of the time, I owe you."

The frown furrowing Amin's hawk-face vanished. "I sense that I succeeded in giving you a night full of joy," he agreed candidly. "So I'll let you override my scruples. I pay my just debts."

"So do I, spacer-captain." For a second, the two sensualists gazed narrowly at each other. Simultaneously, they broke into spontaneous, delighted laughter.

Rising with lissome grace, Adrienne walked unconcernedly naked to the sitting area, and retrieved Amin's tunic and boots while he donned his pants. With equal aplomb, she returned to help him into his garment, her glorious hair falling in tantalizing disorder about her face.

Before he vanished through the door, the premier lover drew her close, and kissed her gently on the forehead. "Good-bye," he whispered.

"Take care," Adrienne replied, evading the finality of the expression he chose to employ. Smiling, she retreated out of sight of passers-by in the corridor, and watched the door slide shut behind him. Her smile deepened as she strolled in leisurely fashion back into her bedcabin. *What an intriguing personality that man possesses, she marveled. And what skill! I feel reborn--able to face Courtney, tomorrow night, with renewed equanimity. What a pity the men most useful to me never seem to exhibit Amin's charm, or Arlen's decency. Well ... if they did, my resistance would soon crumble.*

I'll wager Arlen acts forcefully on my warning. Will he dare to strip his four commanders of their Earth-armed ships? His running that risk wouldn't surprise me. He agreed that a war in space seems likely. If new conflict starts, Signe may regain her mine. Rare, dense metals will increase tenfold in value. Should I ...? Gamble, Adrienne. Ten thousand credits ... no, fifteen. Now, not tomorrow. It's 2255. Which broker should I ... Meyer. Will he be in bed? I doubt it. It's very likely that he'll just be returning from a coffeehouse.

Having slipped into her tunic, the woman deftly coiled her hair, and fastened the lustrous mass with the pins. Refusing to bother with the pants invisible to the man she prepared to raise on the screen of her terminal, she seated herself. With a series of keystrokes, she accessed her credit balance: the record of her financial worth listed in her world's national databank under her unique given name, and her surname code.

Frowning, she weighed certain unsettling factors. *If I deposit this draft now, Courtney conceivably could discover that I've entertained a new client during the hours I reserve for him. Might he check my credit balance occasionally? I doubt that he'd bother. Besides, I warned him that no man gets a monopoly on Adrienne, when I took him as my current lover. He most assuredly won't suspect that I've violated my hitherto unbroken self-imposed rule regarding discretion. Even if he went to so unlikely a length as to have me followed, he'll conclude that I boldly sought to work my wiles on a spacer-captain famous for his discriminating taste in professional women.*

A chill crept down the spine of the courtesan evaluating the degree of risk to which her actions of the evening exposed her. *If Courtney ever does learn what I did tonight, I'll end dead, she acknowledged with a shudder. Erased. Vanished. But he won't. I trust no other man as I do Arlen $\frac{3}{4}$ with good reason.* Shrugging, the worldly-wise risk-taker plugged the datapad employed by her customer into the terminal, and deposited Amin's draft to her account. Twin minor puckers creased her forehead as she calculated rapidly in her head. At length, she raised the broker.

The patrician face of an elderly gentleman came into view on the screen. "Adrienne! What a pleasure!"

"What gallantry you exhibit to so presumptuous a caller, Meyer! I apologize for bothering you at this late hour."

"Best time to catch me, as you well know. What can I do for you?"

"You customarily act as intermediary between private investors and representatives of Lansing Metals, do you not?"

"I do."

"I'd like to place an order, buy, and arrange for storage of my purchase. I'll pay for both in advance. I've got a list in my head, and I know the prices per kilogram as of two days ago. Let me dictate my order to you."

From her capacious memory, the shrewd investor effortlessly recited the names, quantity, price per kilogram, and total cost of eight different rare metals. "If any of those figures have changed, adjust the quantity to keep the total purchase at fifteen thousand credits, Meyer. Do you wish me to add on your fifteen percent commission, or write you a separate draft?"

"Add it on. I'll settle tomorrow with Lansing."

Her business completed, the courtesan smiled warmly at the businessman regarding her with unconcealed thoughtfulness. Musingly, Meyer remarked, "You obviously believe that your investment will increase in value, stable as prices have stayed for the last four Earthyears. I expect you have good reason. I trust your...intuition...implicitly enough that I'll consider imitating your gamble. I appreciate your placing your order through me."

"I've always found you to be discreet and trustworthy, Meyer. You keep your clients' business strictly confidential, as do I. I value that quality in the brokers with whom I deal."

The recipient of that compliment chuckled. "I wouldn't keep any client long, who discovered I'd blabbed his business to the men chatting in Cyril's, or proclaimed his perspicacity to the patrons of Swenson's. You can rest assured of that. I'll enter this transfer now, at today's closing price. Will that be acceptable?"

"Perfectly so. I thank you."

After indulging in a shower and concluding her nightly ritual of brushing her hair, Adrienne fell asleep on pseudosilken fabric, thinking of Amin, her rosy lips parted in a faint smile.

Arlen drifted off to welcome oblivion in the arms of his wife, soothed by the comforting warmth of Karyn's chest pressed against his back.

Deaf to the strident tones of the patrons conversing volubly all around him, Amin sat alone at a small table in a crowded coffeehouse favored by military men. Lost in reverie, the spacer-captain sipped a cup of fragrant brew as an aching lovely face swam in his inner vision.

Dahl tossed restlessly in his hard bunk, fighting black depression. Arlen's commendation, while welcome, accentuated the aide's consciousness of the change in his fortunes. No balm, no praise, no relief generated by his recent narrow escape from a harsh punishment, disgrace, and possible death, served to allay the fundamental grief tearing at the spacer-fighter's vitals. Flayed by regret, he contemplated the unbearable possibility that he might never again know the soul-satisfying thrill of commanding a ship.

Chapter Three

Twelve raiders buoyed by the success of their snatch of an Earth-armed military ship climbed through the hatch to emerge onto the bridge of the prize won at no cost in lives. Halting, they gazed uncertainly at ominously unfamiliar surroundings.

Sensing her veterans' uneasiness at finding themselves in an alien environment, the Commander briskly issued orders. "Conor, Sean and Yuri,

harness into couches at the board. Eric, ascertain how to assemble the harnesses stored below the bunks in the cabins, and set the crew inflating them. You eight people will occupy the bunks when we lift."

Three apprentice spacers watched intently as the strategist who engineered the capture of this priceless prize activated the board. Concealing the trepidation assailing her, Signe accessed the lift program created under Dahl's tutelage, and scrolled through the complex compilation of data. Confronted with the necessity of programming a flight path for the transit to Main World of Gaea, she jutted her jaw as her gut contracted in a painful spasm.

Acting on a hunch, she mounted a search in the ship's databank. To her vast relief, she located a stored program that could be used to set the vessel on a trajectory to Norman's former headquarters on Main World of Gaea, and a descent sequence that would dock it there. Taking no pains to hide her delight, she exclaimed, "I thought those programs might still exist. None of Dahl's spacers bothered to wipe them! Well. That simplifies matters enormously." Speaking into the intercommunication system, she asked, "Ready, Eric?"

"Ready."

The ship Signe regarded as the nucleus of a fleet lifted into the void. *We must all be purged of everything we've eaten for weeks*, she concluded dourly as her jaded digestive system failed to eject tangible evidence of its wrath. *We face Earthyears of gastric upheaval*. Gritting her teeth, the neophyte stoically endured the trauma.

The acceleration ceased. The ship now moved in free flight along the trajectory monitored by banks of computers and intricate, sensitive equipment. Weightless at this juncture, Signe set the vertical torus rotating within its protective envelope, and warned her companions, who raised their couches as she did. The board slid down to face the novices enduring the wicked sideways thrust that lasted until the rotating structure achieved uniform angular speed.

The warrior-woman felt her flesh sag on her bones, as the centrifugal force duplicated the sensation of possessing weight that, prior to this momentous day, the landsman had experienced solely as an effect caused by her planetoid's gravity. Ignoring the stress produced by the rapid change in motion, she activated the transceiver, so as to listen on the band that only military vessels could employ. Exquisitely conscious that this captured prize could encounter a Columbian warship, she commanded, "Conor, bring up the program for utilizing this ship's weaponry. Figure out how to aim and fire it, while I determine how the others stood the lift."

Ignoring certain unsettling, minor sensations generated by the rotation, Signe entered one of the two narrow corridors leading away from the rear of the bridge, and thrust aside the sliding door leading to Cabin One. Eric sat glumly on the edge of a bunk topped with still-inflated harness, his hand clapped over his mouth, his shoulders shaking from a violent attack of dry heaves. Morgan, pale as water ice, his auburn hair plastered to his clammy forehead, eyed his commander dolefully, but cracked a joke.

In the adjoining quarters, designated as Cabin Two, Teeny stalked out of the bathcabin, sickly white beneath her copious endowment of freckles. Her pale blue eyes watered. Madelyn, slim, dark-haired, shapely, hard-muscled, exhibited only concern for her distressed comrade. Assured by the girl whose face so closely mirrored that of Sean, her brother, that changes in motion

caused her no problem, Signe retraced her steps, traversed the bridge, and entered Cabin Three.

Her customary aura of glamour woefully diminished, Jess sprawled dispiritedly on the bunk from which she had cleared the harness. Rising in haste as her superior entered, the dark-eyed, handsome woman smiled gamely. "Damned if I've got my sea-legs yet, as sailors on Old Earth used to say," she confided shamefacedly.

The other occupant of the cabin chuckled. No paragon of good looks, Malcolm projected a vibrant cheeriness--an unconscious, optimistic joy in having emerged unscathed from a dangerous raid. "I puked my guts out," he admitted with disarming candor. "Hell of a spacer I'll make." That wry assessment provoked a sympathetic laugh from the Commander whose own stomach still churned.

Next door, Jassy morosely regarded Theo, his closest friend, who sat tight-lipped on the bunk, fighting a compelling urge to vomit. As the door opened, the master of electronics turned to greet his superior. "Shades of my land-loving ancestors," he muttered. "I don't think I'm going to like this phase of the fight!"

A sheen of sweat glistened on the brow creasing into a black frown as Theo glared with unwonted heat at his comrade. "I didn't like the last phase," he grated harshly. "I don't expect I'll grow to like any aspect of any fight, ever. But I'll be damned if I'll let my gut dictate what I do or don't take on!"

Shocked, Jassy stared at his habitually even-tempered cabinmate. "Damn, I didn't mean..."

Intuitively sensing that her scholarly captain's mental distress far outweighed the physical, Signe laid a comradely hand on the historian's shoulder. "Theo, if I thought a man under my command took sadistic pleasure in shedding blood, I'd muster him out. I know how you feel. We fought for ten endless Earthyears with no respite. We're all a bit down at the thought of starting over in a new element--one we're not at home in, as yet. I am, I'll frankly admit, but if we expect to keep what we've won at such cost, we'd better *not* let our guts dictate to us."

A momentary sharp struggle convulsed the sensitive soul scourged by fears that he lacked the stomach for the sort of killing which ship-to-ship battles or attacks on military bases would engender. Scalded by shame at having lost in the presence of the Commander the self-control so valued in his Spartan society, the officer quickly regained his accustomed command over his emotions.

"We'll adjust," he declared stoutly, even as his gut heaved. Turning to face his comrade, he spoke with patent sincerity. "I'm sorry I snapped at you, Jassy."

Perceiving that emotional strain rather than anger unwittingly aroused by his best friend precipitated the unusual outburst, the burly warrior squeezed Theo's other shoulder, all but stopping the circulation in the arm. "I wish I'd banked a credit every time I snapped at you over the Earthyears," he vouchsafed with gruff candor. "I could retire at thirty-seven--from earning a living, at any rate. Cheer up, Theo. If those Columbian bastards can fight nauseated, so can we."

That response generated an unforced chuckle. The electrical tension charging

the air vanished. The historian smiled at Signe, whose heart constricted at the thought of what lay ahead. *I could lose them all while learning to handle this ship*, she agonized. *I could die vaporized with any one of them in some ghastly crash into a habitat, or find myself watching them perish in a fearsome collision of a lifeboat with the ship, or a lock ashore. I've seen too many warriors die!* Exercising a well-honed ability to subjugate her emotions to her pursuit of national goals, the military leader inured to suffering tragic losses thrust those gloomy visualizations out of her consciousness. Again focused on the now, she smiled warmly on the pair before departing.

On hearing the Commander enter the bridge, Conor swiveled about in the couch adjusted to its chair-like position. Gesturing towards a display on a screen, he informed her bluntly, "I think I know how to fire the Earth-built weaponry, but I'll be damned if I feel confident that I can aim the outfit accurately. I'd hate like hell to direct the awesome energy I'd be releasing anywhere a miss could blast something we didn't intend to hit--like a habitat on Main World. We'll need to select an uninhabited body, and practice, Signe. I wish I knew more about computerized systems."

You're not the only one, the visionary acknowledged bleakly. *I stand in pressing need of an expert--someone who knows computers on the level of their operating systems. Now that we've freed all of Gaea, perhaps Terence will be able to find me the sort of technician I so desperately wish I could recruit*. "We'll do that shortly, Conor. Well, gentlemen, I'll go over the calculations I used to lift the ship into orbit around the station. This will be your first lesson in navigational math. Once you're proficient, the four of us will instruct the others."

Three men concentrated on the computation. Conor, a genius with machinery, lacked the background in higher mathematics with which Signe had spent Earthyears providing herself during odd hours snatched from the task of leading a violent rebellion. He nonetheless strove valiantly to fix in his capacious memory what his instructor concisely explained.

Sean found himself recalling principles studied before the invasion permanently altered his life.

Of the three novices struggling to acquire the skill, Yuri experienced the least difficulty. Holder of a prestigious scholarship in engineering at the University of Gaea until the war cut short his academic career, the studious youth eagerly and effortlessly absorbed the lesson, his shyness forgotten. Intent on the task, three fledgling Gaeian spacer-fighters--men as used to instructing comrades as to accepting tuition from their peers--strove to master what their commander continued to present until the time arrived for the descent.

Striding ahead of her raiders through the pressure-proof door of the very lock from which Norman's vessel lifted as the last of his men died, Signe halted, acutely conscious of just where she stood. Staring down two hundred meters of yawning corridor devoid of any side entry along that distance which would permit those battling within its cavernous confines to retreat, she relived an isolated fragment of that final bloody advance. Enemy faces swam in her inner vision. Eyes full of hatred bored into hers. Lips curled back over bared teeth. A sinewy hand behind a burnished swept-hilt displayed masterful skill as a gleaming blade crossed hers.

Steel rang on steel, the clash of forte against foible audible above the din as the woman fully as tall as her enemy flawlessly engaged one of Norman's captains. Left arm bent, raised, to provide impetus to a vigorous attack

spearheaded by a muscular right arm and wrist of iron, lithe body moving with sinuous grace as it balanced on agile feet and calves of spring-steel, the premier athlete fenced with consummate skill, no whit daunted by hearing her antagonist shout a harsh command to the men flanking him, to let him settle their score with the Gaeon whose silvery hair proclaimed her identity to her foes.

During this moment of retrospect, Signe readily acknowledged that no terror generated by fronting the archenemy whose exploits fueled a burgeoning legend afflicted that formidable adversary. Ignoring the flashing blades shimmering in his peripheral vision, the Columbian master swordsman concentrated single-mindedly on driving home a lethal thrust.

Stopped in her advance at the head of the first wave of Gaeon swordfighters, the warrior battled the foe bent on killing her. Her eyes blazing, her handsome face mirroring implacable determination, she thrust, parried, feinted, and finally closed the distance between herself and her challenger to engage in wicked, dangerous infighting. The sheer savagery of her attack--a calculated series of moves coolly planned by a mind in perfect control of its emotions even as the body it inhabited exerted itself to the utmost--caused the Third Corpsman to fall back just enough to find himself in the direct line of his opponent's point. Signe's sword penetrated flesh, piercing a vital organ.

Wrenching the steel free in time to take a slashing downward cut on the forte of the blood-wet blade, the rebel champion pivoted to meet a new onslaught by the enemy who materialized within a space freed by the crash of a black-clad Columbian to the gore-drenched deck. Swiftly gauging this latest attacker's next move, she lunged, her feet unerringly finding purchase without tripping on the corpse of the man just dispatched. Fear stared nakedly from the eyes of the foeman who suddenly realized whom he faced: fear that froze on his features as he died.

A ringing battle cry rose above the clamor, as the youthful war-leader rallied her surviving comrades. Waving them on, she charged at the head of the corridor-wide line of sword-wielding Gaeans hurling themselves against an equally formidable row of veteran Third Corpsmen fanatically determined to sell their doomed lives at the highest possible price. On this day the seemingly invincible warrior fighting with astounding skill, unbelievable stamina, and cold ferocity added a whole new dimension to the legend.

Wresting her attention back to this new and bloodless victory, Signe savored an overwhelming relief that so audacious a venture failed to deprive her of the very officers she could least afford to lose. A fierce exultation gripped her as she weighed the magnitude of the accomplishment. Bold plans simmered in the strategist's mind even as she rejoiced in the feel of solid, non-shifting deck under her boots.

Her face broke into a vivid smile as she greeted Gaea's chief civilian administrator, who met the returning raiders at the entrance to Norman's former headquarters. Tall as Morgan, the black-haired, blue-eyed protégé of the initiator of the rebellion radiated a ghostly reminder of his dead mentor's unforgettable charisma. No more a power-seeker than was Sigurd, gifted with a superb talent for organization, Terence owed the high regard in which his fellow Gaeans held him, to his having grappled valiantly over the past ten Earthyears with the dire problems afflicting a state besieged on all sides by a ruthless enemy.

The thought fleetingly crossed Signe's mind that never once had this selfless patriot competed for supreme power with the daughter of the visionary

statesman who had served as mentor to both of them. As deeply imbued with Sigurd's lofty philosophical ideals as was Terence, Signe knew without harboring undue pride that she wielded that power effortlessly and effectively. She likewise knew that Terence held her abilities in high respect, and that he remained aware, as did she, that his administrative skills complemented her tactical ones perfectly. That partnership, both selfless patriots fully realized, conferred an enormous benefit on Gaea.

Holding out both hands, Terence took those of the Commander in a powerful grip. Beaming into the civilian official's ascetic face, she returned the pressure. "We managed the feat, Terence--without losing a one of us."

"Thank the Powers." *Without losing you*, the man silently added as old, still-potent longing surged once again into the forefront of his mind. Forcing the familiar hurt back into the locked compartment it normally occupied, he smiled warmly at the woman projecting affectionate regard for a well-loved foster-brother.

Detecting her associate's pain, the keen observer divined its cause. Sorrow impaled a heart never grown insensible to tender regard even while encased in the impervious armor with which its owner habitually shielded it. Concealing her reaction, she stated briskly, "Terence, I need to discuss a pressing problem, when you can spare the time."

"No time like the present. Drop in at my office in Ministry Central as soon as you're able."

Seated opposite the civilian leader twenty minutes later, Signe sipped the cup of tea he pressed on her. Sweeping a satisfied glance around the spacious but austere utilitarian office, she sensed parallel satisfaction in the man seated behind the plain metal desk.

We've regained our liberty, the Commander rejoiced. *Our decimated populace, rebuilding a world ravaged by war and looting, at least finds itself governed once again from the Gaea. This huge vessel formerly capable of interplanetary flight constitutes the most fundamental symbol of our nation's identity: our hard-working, cooperative, peace-loving citizenry descended from galactic pioneers who made the Jump aboard this antique artifact built by ancient Earthmen. Central to our pride as well as to our national life, this ship: our galactic ark, now permanently set like a precious gem into a globe-girdling web of habitats. It's good to see Terence back where he belongs!*

Exquisitely conscious of the femininity enhanced, rather than diminished, by the warrior-woman's splendid athleticism, the First Minister studied his guest. The tall, lithe body swelled at the bosom and flared at the hips, its shapely curves only partially obscured by the tunic and pants tailored for ease of movement during exertion, rather than for elegance. As modest a covering as any other suit fashioned in a society that sternly forbade both verbal and nonverbal flaunting of sensuality--indeed, spurned frivolous extravagance of any sort--the slate blue uniform fit the norm, yet failed utterly to conceal the physical attractiveness its wearer never consciously cultivated, much less artificially embellished, and most assuredly never deliberately employed in her dealings with male colleagues.

Struck by the hardy athlete's unusual pallor, the shrewd observer accurately guessed its cause. "Tea will settle your stomach," he assured her, smiling. "Dry toast will help, too. Now, what's on your mind?"

"Terence, I desperately need someone who knows computers on the level of their operating systems. Since Layton fell, I've lacked anyone possessed of even

minimal skill. I'd prefer an expert who's also a fighter, but I know of none with the degree of expertise I require. Perhaps you could dig someone out of the shattered remnants of the University--some mere child, or elderly professor."

Well! Talk about fortunate coincidences! "It just so happens I can do better than that, Signe. I'd planned on sending you a man I just met. He's survived an odyssey, by all the wealth of Earth! I won't spoil the impact his tale will make on your mind. Can you spare him the next hour of your time?"

"If he's got the skill I need, I can spare whatever time it'll take to recruit him."

"I'll send him to your office across the hall, right suddenly, then. Ahh. Here's Eustace with the toast. Nibble and sip, while I step out to my board."

Warmed by her colleague's thoughtfulness, Signe ate, finding to her surprise that the unhurried snack did serve to settle her still-queasy stomach. She nonetheless resolved to ask Terence to pressure the Ministry of Health into coming up with a more effective formula.

Fifteen minutes later, the survivor of the odyssey stood poised to knock on the door of Signe's office. Hand suspended in midair, he strove to still a pounding pulse produced by conflicting emotions. Thrilled to find himself within the historic vessel, about to meet the leader behind the legend, he simultaneously suffered sharp pangs of uncertainty regarding what turn his life might take subsequent to this encounter. *Will she let us join?* he agonized mentally. *After pulling off so impossible a feat to get here, I can't bear the thought of meeting with a refusal! She's got to take us on. She'll never quit at this juncture. Not Signe!* The hand suddenly knocked vigorously.

Exhibiting the courtesy habitual to her, the Commander greeted her visitor: a small, slightly built man whose age she judged to be about the same as her own--a man whose round golden face plainly reflected awe. *No warrior this*, she opined in a swift assessment. Holding out her hand, she encountered a grip the force of which astonished her.

"I'm Wong," the diminutive visitor exclaimed, smiling up into the eyes of the athlete who towered over him. "I wasn't sure I'd ever get to meet you, Signe. I'm delighted that I finally rate the chance, late as I am arriving at the forefront of the fight. But better late than never!"

Conceiving an instant liking for the newcomer, the Commander smilingly waved the guest into a chair. "Terence said you survived an odyssey, Wong. Let me pour you tea, before you tell me about it."

The classical reference produced a self-deprecatory grin. "I guess odyssey's the word, but I surely never thought of myself as Odysseus!" As his hostess poured steaming portions from an unadorned ceramic pot, the visitor studying the legendary warrior grew acutely, uncomfortably conscious of the disparity between her stature and his own. *That supple grace she displays in every movement brands her a swordsman*, he acknowledged worriedly. *I'd guess, even if I knew nothing of her exploits. Will she ... Blue sky of a lost paradise, convince her, Wong. Let her know how much training to fight means to you, without begging!*

Smiling at the guest exhibiting reverence unalloyed with any hint of shyness, the Commander urged him to spin his tale.

Taking a deep breath, the man complied. "My people are miners, Signe. Three

families, closely connected by marriage, settled our isolated rock. When the invasion began, my grandfather, our family-head, polled the adults before handing down a decision as to whether we'd evacuate and abandon our holdings, or try to survive occupation. After testing his people's mettle, Grandfather decided to fortify our rock, and meet invasion with armed resistance. Inspired by his eloquence, we unanimously resolved to fight for our way of life, for our property, for our lives."

Black eyes flashed dark fire. Wong's declaration kindled an answering gleam in those of the warrior hanging on his every word: a Gaeian patriot who knew exactly what heart-wrenching mental anguish must have preceded that bold decision to slough cherished pacifistic ideals. Raptly, Signe listened as her guest continued his narration.

"We made good use of the brief delay before Norman located us. The first settlers on our rock tunneled to join five deposits of precious metallic ores, in addition to building five habitats scattered over a wide expanse. They used the rubble from the excavations as shielding against cosmic rays, rather than water inside a double hull, so the domes blended in fairly well with the natural terrain. Our people set traps all through the habitats, tunnels, and excavations."

Eyes remote, tea forgotten, Wong recalled the past. "Norman sent a ship. Four heavily armed Third Corpsmen emerged from a lifeboat, given that our rock lacked any lock capable of taking a military ship. Grandmother, along with three other aged women--those least likely to arouse any thoughts of sexual assault--met the intruders, and insisted that they'd find no men if they searched. Warning that the diggings were dangerous, Grandmother sought to persuade them to leave, acting out of genuine compassion.

"Sneeringly ignoring the warning, the Columbians walked into a trap. Grandfather gassed them with carbon monoxide, killing them before they knew what was happening. Grandmother raised the ship, and reported that the four corpsmen who had descended into the lower levels despite her warning hadn't returned. She asked the Captain to send a search party, insisting that she didn't want to be blamed for any accident. Meanwhile, our people crowded into the habitat farthest from the locks, and prepared to defend it.

"Four more spacer-fighters docked. By that time, Grandfather had rigged a fake rock-fall. He left a boot and an arm of two dead spacers protruding from under a mass of boulders. As the second contingent came upon that unnerving sight, they heard ominous cracking noises: recorded sounds that prompted the Columbians to beat a hasty retreat. After summoning them back to the ship, the Captain--a foul brute named Yancey--loosed a pulse that annihilated the station." Implacable hatred radiated from the narrator.

The worst of Norman's willing tools! Signe railed silently. Mass murderer of noncombatant women and children, Yancey. The thrice-accursed bastard escaped with the Commander he so readily served--damn them both to the mythical fire!

Feeling the heat of that wordless condemnation, Wong took a few seconds to compose his mind before resuming his tale. "Yancey reduced the habitat adjoining the locks--the largest of the five domes, which stood out like a swollen toe--to a crater-lake of molten slag. The murderous rotter never checked closely, or he'd have seen that our rock featured four smaller, more distant habitats overlain with rubble from mining excavations: facilities big enough to house a considerable population. If he did spot those, perhaps he figured they might well be abandoned, and so decided against expending the vast amount of energy loosing a second pulse would have required.

"Grandmother and her squad beat a strategic and exceedingly speedy retreat as soon as the four corpsmen departed. Those elderly women raced down the length of a tunnel far below the surface, before Yancey fired. Luckily, they put three pressure-proof doors behind them before the shock wave propagated through the rock hurled them on their faces. Their astonishing sprint allowed them to survive. We surmised that both you and Norman would write us off as annihilated. That thought cheered us, even though we found ourselves marooned."

Fierce joy at the news that the settlers she had believed to be casualties still lived enveloped the leader remembering her grim certainty that no one could possibly have survived the annihilation of a station by Earth-built weaponry . *No single soul residing on four other stations targeted by Norman and Yancey escaped death* , she reminded herself as hatred seared the mind behind the composed face.

Pausing, Wong remembered to sip his tea before resuming his recital. "My grandparents organized us into a new sort of life. Our family has always sent a host of boys and girls to the University, so our ranks boasted life-support engineers, chemists, physicists, psychologists, historians, and even a physician. We learned to eat the excess organisms from the photosynthetic exchangers. Our mine provided the carbonaceous nitrogenous substances we formerly sold to the Ministry of Food Resources to be used along with the growth yields of the life-support system for synthesis of food, but we ate the organisms as they came from the tanks. Cooked, of course. Hunger's a great cure for squeamishness." A wry grin overspread the round face of the narrator, as a silvery laugh fell pleasantly on his ears.

"Well, we not only survived, we stayed productively busy. The educated taught their skills to the uneducated. We mined what we could without giving ourselves away. Those of us of an age to join the resistance chafed at being denied the chance to do so, despite our knowing that Norman lost no time before confiscating every last Gaeen ship--even the rock-hoppers on which we depended for supplies, and transportation when we needed to travel.

"We clamored to train to fight. When you see the enemy striding into your home, armed to the teeth, you find yourself permanently cured of pacifistic notions." The vehemence with which the wiry raconteur delivered that last sentiment caused the listener to nod with equal vigor.

"Well, Grandfather had tasted blood, figuratively speaking. He enlisted the help of his uncle, a man of ninety-eight, and my own self, to train the young men and women in the martial art in which the old man excelled. After turning ninety, the Master had begun to show signs of aging--a bit of stiffness, and gray streaks in hair formerly space-black--but he eagerly agreed to offer instruction. Our family from time immemorial always included two or three practitioners who kept that martial tradition alive: masters who passed on a skill, together with its ritualistic trappings, to someone younger. I was the man my elderly relative selected to be the recipient of his knowledge, Earthyears before Norman invaded. Our method is purely defensive...or was. I'm forced to admit that I've practiced offensive variations."

Exerting admirable control over her face, Signe concealed profound shock. *Wong a martial expert?* she expostulated inwardly. *Why, I could break him in two--kill him in seconds. Or ... could I? My method's most assuredly based on offence. Could this man mount a defense sufficient to keep someone as highly trained as myself from delivering a lethal blow, or gaining a deadly hold? Shades of the ancients!*

Gifted with a high degree of sensitivity, Wong saw through his companion's

effort to conceal her reaction. "I'll bet I could earn a totally undeserved reputation for reading minds, right now, Signe, if I voiced what I know you're thinking," he remarked with a smile, his ease with his world's supreme leader an outgrowth of a culturally programmed belief in the basic equality of all men and women: leaders and followers. His manner conveyed respect wholly devoid of fear.

"I admit to harboring doubts that may well prove unwarranted," Signe admitted candidly. "When you finish telling your story, would you favor me with a demonstration?"

"You honor me by asking." Wong spoke with an innate, unstudied dignity that impressed the warrior. Wholly at ease in her presence, he swept a speculative glance over her lithe, graceful, powerful, ultrafeminine body: a glance lacking the least hint of any sexual nuance.

Watch yourself, woman , the martial expert scathingly chided her alter ego. Underestimating this man could prove an embarrassing mistake!

"We trained rigorously from then on. Our smiths forged swords, and we practiced daily. No one among us had ever learned swordsmanship, but we accessed old manuals. One of our ancestors served aboard Johann's *Flagship* . That's what prompted the others to gain passage aboard the *Gaea* , and make the Jump with a statesmanlike leader they revered. Our forebear's journals got passed down to us. We studied those, along with old training films. All of us lived rigorous, disciplined lives--learned, waited and hoped. The more we gained in skill, the more frustrated we grew at our enforced isolation. I finally decided to act."

Fascinated, scarcely breathing, Signe listened.

"I'm a trained programmer, and I possess considerable knowledge of complex computer systems. Over the Earthyears, I taught myself higher mathematics. My cousin, who had studied mechanical engineering, knew the theory at least. The two of us collaborated on a project. Together, we built a free-flying, autonomously operated vessel."

So that's how he got here! Damned if that feat doesn't rival any attributed in ancient mythology to Odysseus! Signe marveled.

"Our creation wasn't any prize for beauty, let me tell you, nor did it offer much in the way of comfort. My cousin and I designed the craft together--enlisted the aid of various relatives blessed with greater practical mechanical ability than either of us possessed. We built the ship in sections, with painstaking care. The project took us Earthyears.

"We listened to the short-range emissions from the boards manned by Third Corpsmen on Main World so as to get the news. Fearing that the war might end just as we reached you, we stepped up our efforts. You kept Norman pretty busy at the last, so we chanced assembling our brainchild on the only lock still intact--a slip built for drones. That necessity made docking our creation here chancy. We weren't altogether sure the makeshift craft would seal to an ordinary lifeboat lock, but it did.

"I built the computer systems into the vessel, and rigged the guidance and attitude-control systems. Luckily I was able to pick the brain of an uncle who'd studied navigation, before programming a lift and descent sequence, and a flight path. The vehicle held two of us--my cousin and myself. Your people hauled Inigo to your infirmary, and patched him up. He ruptured his spleen and bruised liver and kidneys when we docked. We hit damned hard--damaged the

outfit, as well as a man less well trained in taking falls than myself. I emerged bruised, shaken, but whole. Inigo's twenty-two--tough as spring-steel. Terence hinted that you might be able to use a laggardly but eager recruit, Signe--one who knows computers at the level of their operating systems. He said you intended to take the war to space, prompting us to hope that you'd allow us to enlist. Inigo's as desperate to join as I am..."

Wong's voice trailed off, but Signe caught overtones of poignant longing as the visitor sought to avoid giving the impression that he pleaded. Rising swiftly, she thrust out a hand to the petitioner who exerted an astonishingly strong grip on the proffered member. "You dropped out of the void like a gift from a benevolent Power, Wong," she assured him, the excitement gripping her palpable--irresistibly contagious. "I stand in dire need of someone with expertise in computers, and I most certainly welcome another engineer. Let me assure you, the most crucial phase of the struggle is just beginning. We've captured a military ship armed with the irreproducible weaponry. I plan to parlay that vessel into a fleet."

The ringing voice projecting absolute certainty thrilled along the quivering nerves of the small man staring mesmerized into eyes that blazed as their owner made that final declaration. *Moldering bones of the founder of our line, but she's magnificent!* he exulted. *She'll achieve what she intends. There's not a shred of doubt in my mind that she will. Not a shred. And she wants us--but just for our expertise? As technicians? Damn, how do I convey that I'll be mortally disappointed if that's all she desires of us? How?*

Exhibiting a degree of self-control superlative even for a Gaeon, Wong settled back into his chair. Having finished his tea, he glanced expectantly at the woman regarding him speculatively over the rim of her cup. "If you're ready, we'll retire to an exercise hall, and try each other's skill," she invited. As the guest rose with sinuous grace to his feet, the Commander noted telltale signs in the way he carried himself. *His small stature blinded you to evidence you ought to have seen immediately*, she reprimanded herself sternly. *Good way to get killed, that. Let this be a lesson to you, woman!*

Standing barefooted, Signe watched Wong position himself next to her, and bow with head lowered. Instinctively, steeped as she was in various traditions demanding ancient, stylized movements expressing respect to one's surroundings, one's instructor, and one's opponent, she imitated the small man's gesture, responding so swiftly to his cue that it seemed that she acted in perfect unison with him. Turning to face her supremely confident recruit across exercise mats spread on the deck, she returned the deep bow he now made her, noting the look of approval animating his open face. Assuming a stance excellent for defense but one from which she could launch a kicking offense, the Commander waited.

Serenely unfazed, Wong issued a startling invitation. "Attack me, Signe. I'll demonstrate the purely defensive aspects of my style."

Five minutes later, having been utterly unable to land a light blow or kick, or to gain any hold on the superlatively active contestant who regarded her out of eyes brimming with mischief, the splendid athlete stepped back, struggling to conceal utter shock. "Shades of ten generations of my ancestors!" she breathed in manifest wonder.

The small master of an ancient art smiled warmly at his adversary. "You just put my skill to the most rigorous test it has ever sustained, Signe. Each of us could learn a vast lot from the other."

"So we could!" Stupefaction contended with unconcealed admiration as the

Commander admitted, "Those holds you sought are new to me."

"You blocked them, all the same."

"Show me what would have happened had I not."

Wong nodded. "Aim a mid-body blow at me."

Signe's right fist shot out. Blurred in her vision by the swiftness of its motion, her opponent's left hand made contact with her extended member, to slide over that arm into the bend of her elbow as with his right hand Wong gripped and raised the right arm with which his statuesque adversary sought to deliver the blow. Employing a reverse grip, the wiry expert twisted, and then bent the captured hand and arm back, as he stepped in with his right foot. "Go with me," he commanded, dropping to his left knee.

Exquisitely cognizant of what appalling damage that twisting motion could cause, the battle-wise warrior obeyed. Unbelievably strong hands forced her far taller body to the mat, and held her immobilized. Releasing his astounded opponent, Wong rose with feline grace to face her.

"You'd be willing to instruct me?" the war-leader demanded, her excitement nakedly visible.

"I'd be honored."

"Would you teach others? Women as well as men?"

"I'd surely be willing, Signe, but my art requires Earthyears of continual study for mastery--a lifetime. I had decades to devote to it. I wasn't fighting constantly."

"I'm fully aware of that. We'll instruct each other, for a time, on a regularly scheduled basis. Then I'll lay on you the task of developing a series of moves you could teach to novices: moves designed solely for self-defense against certain common physical attacks delivered by an unarmed enemy--one taller and stronger. Use whatever suits that purpose from both our styles. I'll help you, but you'll teach the course we develop. I can visualize situations in the near future where such skill might save lives."

"So can I. I'll gladly take on that chore, but you won't bar me from fighting because of my small size...will you?" A beseeching note crept into that softly couched appeal, despite Wong's conscious effort to keep it out.

Signe's infectious laugh, manifestly approving, reassured her fellow expert. "Bar a man who flew here in a vessel he built, from flying the one we stole? Deprive a man I can't put to the mat, of the chance to use those twisting holds on our enemies? Hardly. I offer you a commission, Wong. You'll serve in our reorganized force as an officer, once you complete a period of training, and then gain some experience in actual combat."

Shock melted into delight that shone from the ingenuous round face. "I thank you--from my heart!" A daunting thought impinged. No temptation to conceal a deficiency surfaced even fleetingly. "Would you care to try me in a bout with foils? I'm certain I'm no match for a swordsman of legendary skill, but you'll have tested all my qualifications."

The man's readiness pleased Signe. "I'll take you on. Not as any test--merely because I haven't engaged yet today in the practice bout I never fail to schedule, on any day except one spent fighting a battle. Does now suit you?"

Wong proved no match for the tall warrior at swordsmanship. Expecting that outcome, wholly unruffled by it, he found his regard deepening with every touch the Commander scored. *She's magnificent* , he conceded admiringly. *All the legend promised!*

Signe grew impressed in her turn, not by her undersized recruit's degree of skill--although she considered that not at all bad, considering the way it had been gained--but by his cool exertion of that skill against a fencing partner he obviously held in awe.

No overweening pride afflicted the athlete whose skill with the sword exceeded that of any of her captains, including Eric, the Columbian-trained teacher whom she had long ago surpassed. She knew right well that Eric and Sean came closest to matching her. Equally certain that she would find neither Morgan nor Conor a cinch to kill, should that unthinkable notion ever cross her mind, she nonetheless lived with the ever-present awareness that she remained a peerless master of the blade she wielded with such lethal effectiveness in hand-to-hand combat, or in a duel.

Victor in four duels to the death--encounters firmly woven into the fabric of the legend--Signe constantly observed the unsettling effect that the legend tended to exert on the minds of men or women facing her even across practice foils, for the first time. The unflustered manner in which Wong employed every iota of skill he possessed to meet a challenge he knew would expose his total inability to score on his commander generated unqualified admiration. *This self-trained swordsman keeps his head in a tight spot* , the keen judge of men noted approvingly, even as she scored a touch once again.

The memory of Dahl's cool nerve flashed across the master swordsman's mind. *I hope to hell Norman doesn't spare that poor bastard* , she found herself wishing. *Dahl's a better man than his murderous commander's capable of realizing* . At that juncture, Wong came fairly close to breaching his opponent's guard, prompting his opponent to focus on the here and now. All thought of her blatantly unwilling flight-instructor fled, as the master swordsman concentrated single-mindedly to the engagement.

Standing in a lock below the captured ship, Signe introduced the members of her core staff to the newcomer, and described the dramatic circumstances of his arrival. "Wong's the computer expert I'd hoped to recruit," she informed them. "I've offered him a commission. Morgan, I'm laying on you the task of training him. Special case, his. He possesses valuable skills--unique ones. See to it that he learns what he needs to know to function as an officer."

Taken aback, the tall swordsman stared down at the diminutive recruit the top of whose head failed to rise within thirty centimeters of the crown of his own. His innate courtesy for the moment outweighing his instant misgivings, the redhead thrust out a hand. The force of his new associate's grip shocked him.

Intuitively sensing the reluctance with which the brawny warrior received the order, Wong braced for a trial by fire.

Signe's next words centered her listeners' full attention on herself. "Gentlemen, this afternoon we'll begin the task of familiarizing ourselves with every aspect of this ship: its life-support system, engineering, board functions, propulsive system, fuel requirements, and the like. Concentrate on learning whatever your area of expertise best enables you to grasp. You'll take notes, and submit a written report. Eric, I'll consult with you in Cabin One at this time." That choice reflected a realization that the cabin so designated belonged by right of long tradition to the captain, who used it

both as quarters and private office.

Gesturing her senior officer into the only chair, Signe waited while Eric detached its magnetic inserts from the deck, set it on its legs, and seated himself. Dropping to the edge of a bunk to sit erect, her lithe body evincing imperfectly concealed eagerness to begin her new venture, the Commander narrowly regarded her most trusted advisor. *Eric's still not wholly convinced that our taking the war to space constitutes a workable idea*, she concluded accurately. *Exquisite torment couldn't drag that admission out of him, though.* Amusement rose out of deep affection. *Eric, old friend, what an asset you are!* she silently commended the kinsman studying her as minutely as she had scrutinized him. *How much I owe you!*

Now what in hell prompted her to issue those orders? Eric fumed inwardly, his mind racing. *Strategist, Signe, no doubt about that, but what I see shaping up hints at rank overconfidence. Spacers, she calls us! As if that wish were reality! This damned ship's no rock-hopper, girl.*

The twin worlds of Columbia lie a vast distance from here, across interworld space. We'll require both the expertise and the fuel capacity to fly back and forth between two aggregations of rocks that share with Dyson a single orbit around the gas giant. We'll need to program trajectories with flawless precision, so as to hurtle at unimaginable velocities through the vast emptiness separating one group leading, and one trailing a planetoid of formidable size: an uninhabitable moon shrouded in noxious atmosphere. Our battleground will consist of two dissimilar collections of inhospitable bodies clustered around Dyson's L-4 and L-5 libration points: stable areas where errant asteroids eons ago found a refuge.

What irony! That's exactly what our ancestors thought they'd discovered, when they lifted the Gaea, fled Columbia, and landed here to start a separate colony almost an Earthcentury and a half ago. Spacers. My aching old wounds, what an insult to the real article! And that's what we'll be fighting! Experienced, highly trained, career-conscious military spacer-fighters as good with a blade as the Columbian master who thirty Earthyears ago made a swordsman out of me! Damn!

"Well, Eric," the Commander remarked briskly, no hint of her thoughts surfacing on her face, any more than Eric's showed on his, "so far, so good. We've acquired a ship armed with the irreproducible weaponry, and we'll capture more. I'll schedule training sessions, during which we'll learn to use that gear, and to operate ship and lifeboats. Meanwhile, we need to look ahead--waste no time. I expect it wouldn't be too soon to think about reorganizing our force along lines better suited to a corps of spacers."

Eyes blue as Signe's own widened for a millisecond. *She's deadly serious! Spacers!* A minuscule pause separated outraged thought from reasoned response. "We might as well," Eric agreed warily. "That would channel their minds into new grooves right from the start. If we transform ourselves, we're ahead. If we don't, it won't matter how we're organized." *Those of us surviving the experiment,* the veteran mentally qualified his statement.

"Columbian captains assigned a vessel traditionally enjoy the right to select their lieutenants, do they not? Within certain bounds?"

"They do. Welding the crew of a military ship into an effective fighting unit takes special talents. Isolating twelve people for fourweeks at a time within a space as cramped as this vessel invites problems. Any conflicts of personality that occur swiftly intensify. A potential exists for dangerous,

overt expressions of hostility, unless strong bonding unites people who see themselves as comrades bound by ties closer than those uniting families. Forging such bonds challenges the quality of a captain's leadership to the utmost. He needs a second officer he knows well and trusts implicitly.

"The tradition of letting him appoint his lieutenant traces its origin to the customs of the mercenary fighters from whom the Columbians descend. The designations of rank currently in use, and the system of seniority prevailing in Columbia, also derive from those customs. Other inherited usages preserved within the present Columbian military structure likewise exist to reinforce the bonds uniting comrades serving aboard ships. Even bastards like Norman recognize the benefits to be gained in fostering such ties among spacer-fighters."

"Our people will fit naturally into such relationships," Signe asserted vehemently. "I'll begin by asking each of my captains to select a lieutenant, and then decide on crews. We'll assign the married couples and any strongly bonded twosome of same-sex lovers, in pairs, as we do now in companies ashore. I'll enlist your help in assigning crews. We'll strive towards minimizing any potential for conflicts of personality--aim for groupings that will shake down quickly into smoothly functioning units."

"I'll devote considerable thought to the business of selecting crews." Frowning, Eric refrained from blurting out his immediate conclusion: the likelihood of their succeeding in making off with more ships equaled that of Norman's experiencing a burst of remorse sufficient to prompt him to return the vessels wrenched out of the hands of the Gaeans at the outset of the invasion.

Suppressing a chuckle, Signe replied serenely, "Do that, Eric. So will I. Now, let's review the information our team just gleaned."

For the ensuing hour, the Commander tramped through the interior of the vessel, gauging what inessentials could be stripped away without loss of function, abstracting facts from her men's brains as soon as they assimilated them, weighing choices, sifting data, integrating possibilities with those she already envisioned. Long-range ideas for attaining a fleet steadily assumed clearer form in the strategist's mind.

Five days passed before Signe perfected her plan. Standing before the eight men whose reports she had all but memorized, she exerted herself to the utmost to win their wholehearted support.

"Gentlemen. Now that we've acquainted ourselves intimately with the structure and function of our lone vessel, I challenge you to initiate a daring venture. On the farthest locks of this habitat rest the shattered shells of two Earth-armed military ships we sabotaged on the locks. Norman abandoned those hulks as useless. He took pains not to leave us a single spare component for the board of such a vessel, let alone any major structural assemblies. The sole plant our government operated, which once produced spare parts, our archfoe looted, and then destroyed, ten Earthyears ago--after executing all the staff-members who fell into his hands."

Hatred radiated from the men hanging on Signe's words.

"Terence recently rounded up a few experts who escaped Norman's massacre," she informed them evenly. "I propose that we enlist the aid of those people, and the body of other specialists, including life-support engineers, that Terence is assembling. As soon as that force integrates with the crew recruited by Morgan's and Sean's family, we'll dismantle sections of the functioning vessel

you've studied minutely, to serve as patterns. We'll copy those--build parts, which we'll use to create one serviceable ship from the two wrecks. Once we finish that task, we'll reassemble the dismantled vessel, and spray both with Gaeanite, as we did the drone. Equipped with two undetectable warships, we'll launch lightflash strikes, gentlemen--and capture a fleet."

Passion blazed from eyes of purest blue. Challenge radiated from a hard-muscled, taut body. Scanning eight faces in turn, Signe beheld shock melt into wonder. Moments later, she saw excitement replace both emotions.

In an unconscious, habitual gesture, Morgan ran a hand through his thatch of auburn hair to stand it on end. His grin went straight to the Commander's heart. "Mobile treasures, our ships will be, Signe! Beyond price. Engines of death cloaked in the wealth of an age..of a world. Invisible; deadly. Your idea will work, providing our skill proves equal to the task."

"We'll hone our skill until it serves." Inflexible determination freighted the deep voice of the mechanical expert who realized with daunting clarity the degree to which the visionary's proposal would tax his ingenuity.

Directing a penetrating glance at the scarred warrior, Signe announced, "Conor, you'll assume the responsibility of producing two space-able vessels. Morgan, you'll superintend the application of the Gaeanite. Yuri, you'll draw up specifications, and strip out of each ship every single non-essential panel in the living quarters. See if you can come up with a means of increasing the fuel-storage capacity, even though I realize that goal will prove tricky to meet, given the fine-tuned balance necessary to allow rotation of the vertical torus. You'll then redesign the interior to accommodate an assault force of thirty-two people. You'll employ your expertise with computers, Wong, but during part of every day, you and I'll work at training an assault force of sixty people to withstand a brutal acceleration permitting an increased velocity during each transit to Columbia."

Eagerness shone from the eyes of the newly recruited martial artist, as he nodded.

"I'll also instruct all of you in the art of flying a lifeboat, once I perfect my own ability." Even as she couched that directive in a tone breathing assurance, Signe saw dismay flicker across more than one face. "We've no choice, gentlemen, but to acquire that utterly essential skill, and to master techniques for teaching it in our turn," she warned in a tone that brooked no argument. "I've perfect confidence in the daring of each and every one of you."

If fear clenched the guts of the listeners, they concealed that response. Scanning the resolute faces, Signe let her pride in her officers show. "Well. We've a grueling stretch of work ahead of us. Rest assured that I appreciate your willingness to take on the challenge I've set you."

So began the monumental endeavor that would change the course of history in the star-system. Having seen the basic work begun, Signe turned her mind to reviewing the lessons Dahl had so unwillingly given her.

Day after day, the warrior harnessed herself into the couch of a lifeboat she docked on a lock above a habitat cleared of personnel. Hurling into the void, she pushed both herself and the small craft to the utmost limits of capability. The ineffable sense of freedom experienced on her first flight grew in magnitude, as the initiate gained in proficiency. The ever-present danger served only to exhilarate her. She began to think of the boat as an extension of herself--to feel a cybernetic oneness with a machine as

responsive to the commands of her brain as was her own lithe body.

Morgan initially pressed Signe to take him along, but met with a flat refusal. "I'll risk no life but my own," she declared in a tone that admitted of no argument. "When I feel I've mastered the art, I'll teach my officers. Until then, I don't need company if I die vaporized--much as I appreciate your concern."

The vivid smile accompanying that adamant declaration touched the auburn-haired Captain without allaying his fear in the least degree. No subsequent confident smile relaxed the knot that constricted Morgan's gut every time he watched the daring novice head for the lock. The others made no attempt to dissuade her, knowing her as they did. They merely wished her luck, and wove one more strand into the fabric of the legend.

The day arrived when Signe judged herself ready. Having summoned Morgan from his improvised metal shop, she handed him a supposedly improved variety of pill, informed him that he rated the dubious distinction of serving as her first pupil, and preceded him into the lifeboat.

More afraid of failing the Commander he so fervently admired than of dying with her, the limber swordsman strapped into the couch a body as fluidly graceful as it was robust. Resolutely, he braced for an ordeal. *If Signe can learn this skill, I can*, he resolved stoutly. Stealing a sidelong glance at the woman engaged in fastening her harness, the warrior-captain grew acutely conscious of the femininity of his companion--as if the sudden disappearance of that shapely body inside an obscuring cocoon of fluid-filled fabric rendered the lingering image sharper.

Shame scalded the archetypical Gaeian. *Control yourself*, the man savagely adjured his alter ego. *Channel your thoughts onto this challenge facing you*. A mind schooled from early childhood to exert rigid control over all physical appetites instantly, automatically responded. The alluring visualization vanished, as Morgan focused his faculties solely on the task at hand.

"We lack the simulators the Columbians use to train operators," Signe cautioned her pupil. "I'll be passing on what I've learned, as best I can. If you see a way that I could improve my teaching technique, don't hesitate to tell me. I'm relying on you to help me devise a standard course of instruction."

Let's hope I don't pull some boner that kills us both! That grim but unspoken response accompanied a tightening of Morgan's gut.

As her student's face set into determined lines, Signe hastened to reassure him. "This first lesson I teach right here on the lock. Once you've mastered it, I'll take us for a short flight as a demonstration. You'll remain a passenger, so relax, Morgan."

On beholding a certain disappointment mingle with relief, the instructor hid the amusement reinforcing her profound admiration of the warrior whose ability to keep a cool head in the most appalling crisis prompted her to take him on as her first pupil. For the next ninety minutes, she put him through a grueling preparatory exercise.

Liftoff produced in the neophyte visible evidence of inner distress produced by the severity of the motions, but the instructor detected no hint of panic. *Morgan habitually conceals any fear racking him*, she acknowledged approvingly, stealing an occasional quick look at the pale, intent face of her companion. The beginner listened, answered her questions promptly and

accurately, and observed her actions. Satisfied that he had assimilated all she presented, Signe soared far into the void, and let him acquire a feel for handling the craft. "Flying it out here isn't hard," she remarked in a voice kept studiously casual. "It's docking the boat, or lifting off the mothership, that's tricky--or maneuvering close to the surface of a planetoid. Just don't turn too sharply. Harness or no harness, doing so could black us both out."

"I believe you."

"Your insides appear to be staying calm."

"I've got the rebellion quashed...I think."

"Ignore the vid. The scanning screens offer a far more detailed view of our surroundings."

"I'm taking care to watch only the scanning screens."

"That disorientation from seeing the stars sweep across the vid fades after a time."

A frowning glance projecting patent disbelief constituted Morgan's only response to that pronouncement.

At length Signe docked the boat on the lock, providing a running commentary on the technique as she employed it. "We'll eat lunch, absorb another pill, and come back for another lesson, if you think your gut will stand it," she challenged the trainee, noting the droplets beading the forehead to which discrete, short, uneven points of auburn hair clung damply, the pallor visible in cheeks kept free of any shadow of beard, the ruddy eyebrows creased now into a frown, the green eyes combatively meeting her own, the cleft chin jutting just a bit, below the wide mouth set in a tight line.

"Rebellious gut be damned. I'll be ready when you are!" The frown melted into a singularly engaging grin as Morgan accepted the challenge.

On some subliminal level, the feminine observer reacted to dashing, vigorous, youthful masculinity augmented by charm innate rather than studiously cultivated, but the conscious mind of the warrior-woman shut out the implications of that right-brain, nonverbal impression. Signe saw all she ever allowed herself to see: a brother.

By the end of a rough initiation, the apprentice felt that he had made solid gains. Tautness in the muscles of his jaw, and lines tightening the corners of his mouth, testified to strain.

"Take two hours off, and relax," the Commander urged in a tone that her captain knew to constitute an order. "Sean can handle the chores at the ships."

Five days later, Morgan managed a successful solo flight. "You get to lift on your own now, to practice, as I did," his instructor informed him, smiling radiantly. "I'll find it easier to teach my next trainee, thanks to your welcome, frank comments on my technique."

"You're a born teacher, Signe."

"A better one at this, now."

Morgan's imperturbability, combined with his ability to express himself succinctly in graphic Earth-Standard, had indeed served to improve the course

Signe strove to develop. Brushing the edge of disaster together, the two comrades testing untried teaching techniques had learned from each narrow escape. The novice sensed his mentor's ebullient joy in flight. Even as he grew to be a daring and proficient operator, he fell short of following Signe into the rarefied mental heights he knew she reached. That realization failed to daunt him. As long as he qualified to battle the Columbians in this new element, the redheaded warrior rested content with his own progress.

Satisfied with her evolving skill as an instructor, Signe took on new pupils. To her relief, Conor learned easily despite his having passed his fifty-first Earthyear. His habitual, unflappable calm, she well knew, disguised the lightflash swiftness of his reflexes. Possessed of a liberal endowment of sensitivity, she realized that since the day three fourweeks earlier, when the beloved wife who had fought at his side all through the surface war fell in battle before Conor's eyes, death ceased to hold any terror for the surviving spouse. Danger in the best of times had never fazed the warrior almost as legendary as herself. A mechanical genius, he possessed a mind that automatically attuned itself to the boat. The machine did not exist that could fluster the man. Conor graduated from Signe's course with honors.

Theo took this newest challenge one step at a time. Gifted with a logical, analytical faculty, the historian applied his talents to the task of mastering a new technique with single-minded effort, and improved steadily. Danger he regarded as an unavoidable side effect accompanying the acquisition of a profoundly necessary skill. Theo ignored the danger, as he had long ago trained himself to do. The warrior-by-necessity grew to be a capable operator.

In Sean, Signe found a kindred soul. From the first time the youthful swordsman handled the controls, he experienced a transcendent joy that matched hers. Handsome boyish face alight, he reveled in the explosive expansion of his brain and sensory system into a heady new plane of existence. Intuitively, Sean avoided the mistakes the others all made to one degree or another. He became an artist, an aficionado, a master. His mind and Signe's met on an ethereal high reach of unparalleled dual experience. She not so much taught him, as launched him through a drab barrier, freeing him to explore a new and dazzling realm. In his instructor's imagination, Sean seemed to spread wings for which he only now divined the purpose: to soar into the limitless splendor of the ether. Signe returned from those lessons rapt.

Jassy took an intense dislike to the machine. That reaction he overcame with stubborn, unflinching courage. He fought his way to mastery out of his certainty that acquiring this essential skill formed his only route to fighting the war to the finish. Even as Signe's admiration of a man whose talents she valued increased tenfold, she harbored a definite relief that she had not launched her career as a flight-instructor by taking Jassy on as her first pupil. *I'd have begun and ended with him, vaporized against this rock*, she decided, moved to wry amusement. *He constituted the acid test of my evolving skill at turning middle-aged landsmen into spacers. No doubt about that!*

Yuri, fast becoming indispensable to the Commander in his engineering capacity, she taught along with her captains. The scholarly youth's uncomplaining acceptance of whatever nasty breaks life dealt him, and his self-effacing shyness that so often resulted in his talents' being overshadowed by Morgan's dash or Conor's fearlessness, hid a wealth of courage. Absorbing instruction with the ease of one to whom study formed a way of life, Yuri skirted death with calm detachment, flashing his mentor a self-deprecating smile of apology each time. Signe's regard for her engineer increased immeasurably.

Wong displayed the same cool nerve in this endeavor as he had facing his

commander across foils. His experience of flying the ship he had helped to build served him well, and his wiry, slight body seemed unaffected by motion sickness. Signe found the task of teaching him a pleasure. When he embarked on his first solo flight, she acknowledged that her respect for his ability just took a quantum leap.

Wondering vaguely why she had instinctively left the business of instructing the Senior Captain until last, the Commander prepared to offer Eric the introductory lesson. Having harnessed herself into her couch, she glanced at her companion, and perceived that he had made no move to fasten his. Studying the bleak face he turned to her, she noted the tautness in the muscles of his jaw, observed the lines angling from the corners of his eyes, and beheld the look in those eyes.

"Signe," Eric rasped, "has the thought occurred to you that I may be too old to take on this chore?"

The warrior-woman's gut constricted as she grasped the magnitude of the veteran warrior's fear. In a flash of insight, she realized that Eric dreaded not death, but the act of venturing into an alien element--of leaving behind all that he had fought to preserve, and starting over at sixty-six as a pioneer in a vast, harsh, wholly forbidding realm.

Throwing off her harness, Signe slipped to her knees next to her companion's couch. Laying a hand on his arm, she spoke, her voice thrilling with passion. "Eric...old comrade...for most of my life, you've been teacher...mentor...friend...a second father. I've unthinkingly taken you for granted--I see that now! Eric, listen to me. Don't be ashamed of feeling afraid. So was I. Never more so in the totality of my experience, than when I first soared into space in this lifeboat. I understand. I *know* !"

You don't know. You can't! I'm sixty-six, girl. My body's still supple, my reflexes swift, but I can't flog a mind programmed fifty Earthyears ago for teaching Earth-Standard grammar to children raised in an age that's ancient history, into mastering what you'll demand of that mind now. I can't. I'm too old mentally ! Fossilized ... rigidified! Unable to cope with so radical a change--fighting with my brain instead of my body! I can't!

That cry from the heart resounding within Eric's stressed psyche found no utterance. Mutely, he stared into eyes that exhorted, pleaded, commanded--and silently shook his head.

Quivering with emotion, Signe confronted defeat. Stubbornly, she refused to accept it. Two faces again sprang into uncanny likeness: the younger faithfully reproducing the classic oval shape of the older, its perfect symmetry defined by a straight nose, arching brows, smooth planes of cheeks finely sculpted, and full, wide, delicately bowed lips, their corners upturned during repose. That latter attribute derived from the habitual projection of serene self-confidence on countenances handsome rather than beautiful. The older, overlain by a network of fine lines lightly penciled on rather than furrowed, presaged what age and experience held in store for the younger--the more readily, owing to that extraordinary juxtaposition of golden hair with silver.

Staring at the unwontedly agonized set of a familiar, well-loved face, Signe saw with chilling clarity that despair showed nakedly beneath the fear. Desperately, she ordered turbulent thoughts, and voiced an irresistible appeal. "Eric. Do you remember when your teaching first lifted me into achieving skill with the sword to equal yours? How we'd fight...how you taught me to stand outside myself, a spectator, watching my own technique? How we'd

duel, neither able to touch the other, each knowing both performances to be flawless? You know that thrill?

"Eric...on that first flight, I expected to die. I knew what odds I bucked. But when I felt that vessel lift...and soar...saw the stars sweep across the screen...no other thrill I've ever known matched that one. Believe me! Eric. You've been my teacher for so long...let me be yours now. You don't want to stay behind, bound to the narrow world we've known, free though it finally is. Come with me. More than ever before...more than anyone else...I need you ."

Signe's voice vibrated with strong emotion as she confided, "Eric. Much as I honored my father...much as I learned from Sigurd, respected him, admired him...I never was able to feel for him the unreserved wealth of affection I found myself giving you. You've been my ideal, ever since you returned from Columbia a swordsman, when I was eight, and I discovered that I loved my uncle more deeply than I could my father. Eric, I'll carry you with me, when I leap off. I'll teach *you* , now. Hear? Trust me, Eric. Please, trust me!"

Pierced to the heart by that impassioned exhortation, stirred to the depths of his soul by Signe's final admission, Eric winced as agony mingled with fierce pride. Fleetinglly, he allowed himself to dwell on the shameful truth he habitually scoured from his consciousness. *I am your father!* he cried in the depths of his pain-racked psyche. *You're the product of my utterly dishonorable affair with my brother's wife! No one alive knows, but we're kindred souls, girl.*

Searing guilt blended with ineffable love, as Eric realized with luminous clarity that neither death nor dread of the task at hand would ever generate the terror the thought of failing this woman at this moment of time produced. Broad shoulders straightened. Unshakable resolution flooded the mind suddenly grown surreally calm. "What can I say, Signe, except yes? I won't let you down--or myself," the Senior Captain declared forcefully. "Now, show me how to operate this damned outfit."

Signe caught her breath. A sound between a sob and a laugh escaped her, before her face broke into a glorious, transfiguring smile. "I surely will," she fervently assured him. "Spacer!"

Chapter Four

Awakened an hour before the time he normally arose by the raucous buzzer signaling a call on the video network, Dahl sprang instantly out of bed. Arlen's face appeared on the screen, in response to the fumbling, sleep-drugged movements of the nude spacer's fingers on the keyboard of his terminal.

Rearing abruptly to a sitting position in the next bunk, Dahl's cabinmate ripped out a lurid obscenity. On beholding who issued the summons that woke him, he subsided into silence, quailing inwardly.

"Dress, eat breakfast, and present yourself in my office as quickly as possible," Arlen commanded his bleary-eyed aide. "I need you."

"Yes, sir. I'll be there in ten minutes, sir." *Now what in hell ... He said he needs me ... told me to eat, so he isn't about to light in the middle of me for something I did that pissed him off. But that look in his eyes tells me he's*

got it in for some poor bastard. I'll leave the bunk unmade--risk one of Fulke's officers' pulling an unscheduled inspection. Better hustle, spacer. Bitter pain boiled up to sear the aide's mind. Ex-spacer, Dahl. Skip breakfast.

Striding into the bathcabin, the officer now a member of the Corps personally commanded by the dictator washed with precipitate haste, combed short dark hair, relieved himself, and groped in the adjuster set into the wall, for the uniform left overnight to regain its ability to repel dirt and moisture. Hurriedly, he donned tunic and pants, and pulled on his boots. Thrusting his face into the contoured hollow of the shaving cabinet, he touched a switch. Stoically, he ignored the sharp sting generated as a shadow of beard burned away. Casting a fleeting glance in the mirror, he judged himself presentable. *Get moving!* he admonished his alter ego as he dashed out.

Having crossed the Rubicon, Arlen sat at his desk as if carved of stone. Musingly, he reviewed the merits, or lack thereof, of the captains he planned to employ in a bold bid to render his hold on power unassailable. *You can count absolutely on Amin, Lacey, Danner, and Evan*, he assured himself. *Those four Fifth Corps veterans provide a host in themselves.*

Dahl's wholly loyal, and desperate to prove his worth.

Ford's as superbly able as his peers, and possessed of the same cool daring, but should you meet with stiff opposition, he won't hesitate to shift sides in mid-struggle, if he suspects that you'll lose. Gordon might be tempted to throw in with one of your rivals, should any of them gain the upper hand during the crisis you're about to precipitate, but he lacks Ford's talent for conspiracy. He also lacks the resourcefulness in action displayed by the captains meriting your trust.

Carey possesses the least experience of the lot, but he'll stick by you stoutly.

Simon won't actively maneuver to emerge on the side of one of your enemies if the going gets rough, but he's capable of delaying crucial action until he feels certain that you'll come out on top. He has aged, lately--added an excess of caution to a lifelong unimaginativeness. Hard to fathom why your predecessor raised those latter four men to the rank of captain, but thus far, none of them has offered you solid grounds for demoting him. When you rose to the rank of Commander of Fifth Corps, you inherited some far more pressing problems in the line of personnel--such as those thrice-damned aides who spied for Galt. You've dealt with those bastards, but you could face a dangerous crisis shortly, if even one of your captains fails to follow your orders promptly and exactly. You need to play this hand with infinite care, Arlen.

Arriving a bit breathless from avoiding the slow-moving elevator in Ministry Main Habitat to take the stairs two at a time, Dahl awaited orders, certain that the Commander-in-Chief's expressionless face boded no good for some unfortunate offender.

Crisply, Arlen issued orders. "Two ships--second-class military--occupy Military Locks Sixteen and Nineteen. Raise Carey at Fifth Corps' Headquarters. Issue a command that he fuel both and ready them for flight, and then report to me here. When Amin and Danner call at 0600, direct them to report here immediately. Show them into the conference cabin, and instruct them to wait. Order Ford to turn the fueling installation over to the man Fulke will send, and proceed promptly to my office. Rouse Simon and Gordon, who're on sleep-shift, and tell both men to report here in an hour."

"Yes, sir." So Arlen's readying for some crucial ploy designed to shaft the Commanders maneuvering for a chance to overthrow him! Dahl surmised nervously as he placed a call to Carey. *I hope to hell whatever plan he hatched last night succeeds.* Thrusting black forebodings regarding both his own future and that of his world from his mind, the aide obeyed the orders issued him.

From his office, the Commander-in-Chief raised Evan on the Ice World. When the rugged face of a subordinate he trusted to the hilt appeared on his screen, Arlen announced, "I'm summoning you and Lacey back here to the capital. You'll leave as soon as Simon and Gordon, who'll arrive in second-class military ships, relieve you. Tell no one I sent for you. Come in person to my office as soon as you're back."

Evincing no surprise, Evan automatically responded, "Yes, sir," and kept his emotion off his face. The world leader staring into the image on his screen nonetheless divined the depth of the delight occasioned by the imminence of action, from subtle changes visible in guarded granite features.

Arlen next raised Lacey, and repeated his commands to the coppery-skinned, black-eyed, equally trustworthy officer who took no pains to conceal his satisfaction at hearing the summons.

Rising from his terminal, the inveterate observer of nonverbal evidence placed himself in a position from which he could study the slim man of medium height whom Dahl announced. "Ah, Ford. Sit down."

Ford evaluated the import of Arlen's total lack of expression more accurately than did the aide who admitted him. Light brown hair framed a keen face dominated by tawny eyes that betrayed no hint of their owner's thoughts. Seating himself with his back held ramrod straight, upon the edge of the chair facing the military dictator, the Captain listened.

"For reasons that do not concern you, I'm relieving Demetrius of his ship, without Dexter's knowledge. Avoid undue harshness when you inform Demetrius that you'll employ force to carry out my orders, if his response compels you to go to that extreme, but don't hesitate to use force. You'll dock on First Corps' Headquarters in Bessemer Municipal Unit at 1045 this morning, where Demetrius will have just descended. Dexter will be in space, accompanying Lambert back here to the capital. Make sure no hint of your intent slips out ahead of time, or you may find yourself in a wholly untenable position. Marcel's based in New London, but he could reach Bessemer in twenty minutes.

"Once you've seized the ship, you'll divide your crew in half, and order your lieutenant to dock your vessel on Ministry Lock Five. I'm issuing you a startup-code bypass. You'll convey Demetrius' ship, and himself, back to the capital. You'll dock on Ministry Lock Six, and personally escort your charges to Fifth Corps' Headquarters, where you'll detain Demetrius separately from his crewmen until I relieve you of the duty. I'll expect instant compliance with any additional orders I issue you today." The Commander-in-Chief's eyes, cold as the heart of a comet, bored into those of the self-serving officer who sought to conceal his shock even as his mind raced.

Arlen's anticipating both Courtney's and Galt's moves. Will he win this round? If he doesn't ... "Yes, sir. You can count on me, sir." Rising, Ford took his departure, subtle movements of his slim body--reactions occurring without conscious volition--having confirmed Arlen's estimate of the rush of speculative excitement engendered by his orders.

I can count on you just as long as you think your interests and mine coincide , the Commander-in-Chief silently, disdainfully, castigated his

subordinate. *Ford now knows that I'm moving against Dexter, but he realizes that I control six Earth-armed ships close at hand, and two others an hour away, to Dexter's three, Courtney's three, Norman's one, and the two of Galt's not currently on duty in the O'Neill Group. So my conniving captain won't be likely to risk throwing his support to one of my rivals, when the odds rest in my favor. No, he'll make the snatch smoothly and successfully.*

The sound of the door sliding aside prompted a galvanic change from pensiveness to action-readiness: a reaction that registered on Dahl's senses, sparking a corresponding tautness in the man informing his superior that Amin and Danner awaited him in the conference cabin, having arrived together at 0555.

Striding down the corridor to meet with two spacer-captains whom he unreservedly trusted, Arlen reflected that Amin must shrewdly have guessed on the prior evening that action would follow directly upon information. "My thanks for your coming in person, gentlemen, and early to boot," he greeted them.

Eager expectancy radiated from Danner's handsome face. *About time!* the bluff man of action chortled inwardly. *A chance to distinguish myself--to kick my stalled career back into gear. I figured the chief meditated a preemptive strike. No way will Arlen tolerate a rival's shafting his grasp on power. Right on, Commander!*

Chafing at the proverbial bit, this inveterate careerist, for all that he behaves with admirable cool-headedness in a crisis, Arlen reflected, amused rather than worried by the man's transparency. "Action at last, you're thinking, eh, Danner? Quite so. Well, gentlemen. I'm depriving my colleagues of all but two of their Earth-armed military ships--today, without delay. At 1120, Amin, Dexter will dock on one of three military locks reserved for First Corps here in the capital--aboard Lambert's ship. You'll relieve the pair of the vessel. You and your crewmen will then escort Dexter and Lambert to Fifth Corps' Headquarters. Detain them separately from each other and from the crew, until I arrive. Treat them with the utmost politeness, but emphasize that you'll employ force, if necessary, to carry out your orders."

His hawk-profiled face projecting serene self-confidence, Amin nodded. "Rest assured that I'll handle them both with glass-silk gloves, sir." No qualms arising from his cognizance of Dexter's superb talent for infighting--skill that characterized both his swordplay and his political machinations--attended the Captain's acceptance of what he knew to be a challenging order.

Turning to the shorter man, whose compact, athletic body revealed its owner's excitement no less plainly for standing tautly at attention, Arlen looked deeply into guileless dark eyes that met his squarely. "Danner, Yancey's ship's docked on the military lock reserved for Third Corps. He's due to lift at 1100 today. You'll arrive at 1000, seize his ship as soon as he finishes fueling it, and detain Yancey and his crew at Fifth Corps' Headquarters.

"Keep your detainee separated from his crew, and strive to gain your objective without alerting anyone in Third Corps' Headquarters of your action. I may send you written orders later, to lend the man bearing them, four of your crewmen: Myron, and three others both tough and trustworthy. Make certain that Yancey's afforded no opportunity to warn Norman, who's on duty in Ministry Main Habitat until 1600 this afternoon. Yancey's as savage as the leader he's served so willingly for the past fifteen Earthyears, and he'll oppose you with force if you afford him the least chance. I trust that you can assemble your full crew before 0930, even though your men are on leave?"

"Myron's rounding them up now, sir. He knows where to look, never doubt."
Yancey. *Wouldn't I love to give that bastard what he's got coming! Not today, though, if I can avoid skewering a living blot on Columbia's honor. No way will I sully my own. This operation's a bold, delicately timed strike. Arlen expects it to go off smoothly. Yancey won't get his comeuppance today, damn the luck .* "We'll be ready, sir."

"I'm counting on that, Danner. Well. See that your crews refrain from slipping any hint that any action might be pending, gentlemen. Good luck."

Returning to his office to find Carey awaiting him, Arlen gestured his stocky, broad shouldered subordinate into his inner office, and without preamble, issued commands. "Carey, I order you to relieve Marcel of his ship without Dexter's knowledge. You'll descend at New London at 1000 this morning, dock next to Marcel's vessel, and seize it from whoever's guarding it. You'll then call Marcel out of Dexter's headquarters, where Marcel and his crewmen will be using simulations of lifeboat flight to train recruits. You'll tell him you bear him a message from me to be hand-delivered to him aboard your ship. You'll present him with orders informing him that I've confiscated his vessel, and require that he accept your escort to Fifth Corps' Headquarters. You'll take him into custody.

"Have your lieutenant lift the ship you seize. You'll convey Marcel here, aboard yours. Dock both vessels at Ministry Locks Two and Three, which I've reserved, and then deliver your detainee into Ford's custody at Fifth Corps' Headquarters. I doubt that Marcel will offer any forcible resistance, but rest prepared to compel obedience. Treat your prisoner politely but firmly. Here's the datapad you'll hand him, and a startup-code bypass. Once you've turned your detainees over to Ford, you'll return accompanied by your crew here to my office with no loss of time whatsoever, where I'll employ you in a new capacity."

Although the recipient of those startling commands failed to conceal his shock, he unhesitatingly accepted the orders, snapped a salute, and departed.

As Arlen noted the time--0605--his mobile face creased into a scowl. *Simon and Gordon should have been here five minutes ago*, he reminded himself as anger surged. A dull thud assaulted nerves already on edge, as the door slid open, and the tardy pair strode past the aide who showed them in before letting the panel close behind them.

No sign of sharp annoyance showed on the face again gone expressionless. "I've orders for you, gentlemen. Two second-class military ships, readied for flight, rest on Military Locks Sixteen and Nineteen. Immediately upon leaving here, both of you will assemble your crews, man those ships, and fly with no loss of time to the Ice World. Simon, you'll relieve Evan. Gordon, you'll relieve Lacey. Call in here when you've docked, to inform me of the time of your arrival. Remain on duty there until you receive further word from me."

Arlen watched the surprise fleetingly animating both faces metamorphose into fear that both men strove to conceal. His face creasing into a black frown, Gordon verged on objecting, but the cold rage that leaped nakedly into Arlen's eyes drove any such notion from the spacer-captain's mind.

As soon as the door closed behind the pair, the autocrat turned to Dahl, and spoke curtly. "Step across the hall, and tell Neville, who's here early, that I need the loan of Hoffmann to watch my board for fifteen minutes."

Startled, the man thus peremptorily adjured hastened to obey. *Did I piss him off some way?* he speculated worriedly. *Neville got here three hours early.*

Does the Commander-in-Chief intend to involve his top civilian administrator in a military coup? Hardly! So why ... His gut churning, the aide returned with his replacement.

Having gestured Dahl into the inner office, Arlen closed the door. Smiling for the first time that day, he invited the subordinate whose trim person signaled acute uneasiness to be seated. "I'm sure you realize that I've initiated a chancy strategy," he remarked with calculated candor. "When I recruited you into my service, I told you I had need of a man who keeps a cool head in a crisis. Well, today I've precipitated a crisis, and need every cool head at my disposal. I'm confiscating Yancey's ship. Danner will accomplish that chore at 1000 today. Do you know any of the men forming Yancey's crew?"

Relief surged through the subordinate sitting stiffly erect. "Yes, sir. Three of them served under me, several Earthyears ago: hard cases, but able. Yancey lost half his crewmen in the final battle on Main World of Gaea, fighting his way to his ship after Signe stormed Norman's headquarters. He filled out his crew with those men, and two I've never met."

"Do you know his original six spacers?"

"By sight--and reputation, sir." Hesitating for a microsecond, Dahl weighed the wisdom of volunteering an unsought response. Deciding in the affirmative, he added evenly, "Their brutality equals Yancey's--and Norman's. Norman preferred men of that stamp. He distrusted my stomach for matching it, with good reason. I'd never have been granted command of one of Norman's ships, if he hadn't lost two vessels with all hands, and three captains as well, to Signe's assaults. He *did* know he could trust me not to skim a take for myself off the fortunes in precious metals I constantly transported for him--loot from all over Gaea. That's chiefly what I did for Norman."

Having been reassured initially by the smile and the compliment, Dahl now impulsively ventured that unsolicited self-justification out of an intuitive sense that Arlen despised both Norman and Yancey. That conclusion generated an overmastering urge to dissociate his own self from a horde of former colleagues who, less troubled by scruples than was he, flocked to serve under a commander who willingly raised a perpetrator of war crimes to the rank of senior captain.

Unerringly divining the motivation behind that flagrant breach of protocol, Arlen condoned the infraction, out of satisfaction with the sentiment prompting it. "Do you feel you could trust your back to your three former crewmen?"

"Yes, sir." Kinesic evidence of which Dahl remained unconscious, but which Arlen read with ease, fully supported the vehement verbal affirmation.

"At 1030 today, you'll call those men out of Danner's custody, in Fifth Corps' Headquarters, and hand him my written order directing him to lend you Myron, Lieutenant, and three additional spacers from his crew. You'll repair with those seven men to Simon's vessel, which is docked on Military Lock Nine, and lift promptly at 1100. You'll fly to Dunn, descend on the lock next to Courtney's first-class military ship, which is commanded by Yukio. You'll seize the vessel, and order two of Danner's spacers to board Yukio's ship.

"You'll then proceed with your five remaining crewmen to the shipworks where Yukio will be arranging for a delivery of a large consignment of spare parts to Fourth Corps. You'll summon the Captain to the main office, and deliver him orders from me, to accompany you. You'll take him into custody, and prevent his contacting Courtney. My orders will require that Yukio call his lieutenant

from your ship, and instruct his second officer to carry on. Give your prisoner tactfully to understand that it'll be to his advantage to preserve a manner designed to avoid prompting the man he calls, to raise Courtney.

"If any of Yukio's crewmen show up with him, bring those men along. Leave the others there. Notify Danner's spacers when you've lifted, and order them to escort your ship. Fly your detainees, in Simon's ship, to the military locks reserved for Fifth Corps, and deliver the men you hold to Danner. Leave your three Third Corpsmen in his custody. Return here, to man my board. I'll provide you with the startup-code for Simon's ship, and a bypass to use on Yukio's."

Arlen just trusted me with a role in the action--gave me temporary command of an Earth-armed ship! Fierce joy illumined Dahl's hard-bitten face before the man managed to master his expression. "Yes, sir!" he breathed.

"Handle this chore as well as you have your other duties, Dahl, and you'll captain a ship for me, shortly--assuming that all goes today as I plan."

My aching old wounds, he means that! "You can count on me, sir." Emotion that Dahl tried, but failed, to conceal, revealed itself via numerous nonverbal cues.

"Thank Hoffmann, and dismiss him. Man the board for me until it's time for you to leave. Show Evan and Lacey in here the moment they arrive."

As Dahl strode out, radiating satisfaction, the shrewd judge of men predicted with flawless accuracy, *He'll succeed, or die in the attempt. You needn't fear that Dahl will desert you in mid-struggle, Arlen. Well. Relax for two hours. Calm your mind, and maintain your cutting edge.* Seating himself at his terminal, the initiator of a daring undertaking concentrated on a scholarly work of military history.

When Evan and Lacey arrived together, at 0815, Arlen deliberately allowed his satisfaction to show. "I commend your promptness, gentlemen. Evan, Galt's in space, returning from O'Neill aboard Flynn's ship. Gelett and Regan remain on duty in the O'Neill Group. Flynn's due to arrive at 1510. You and I will intercept Galt and his captain as they leave the vessel. You'll take Flynn and his crew into custody, and detain them in Fifth Corps' Headquarters until I release them. Flynn's hotheaded, and fanatically loyal to Galt. Don't give him the least opening. Try to avoid the use of force, but don't hesitate to use force if no other course lies open to you. I'll handle Galt."

"I'll handle Flynn, sir." Evan spoke with quiet confidence.

Nodding, Arlen turned to Lacey, whose compactly built body projected a keen readiness for action. The Captain's ruggedly handsome face failed to hide its owner's satisfaction at the thought of playing a key role in a strike leveled against this superior's rivals. "Wassel and his crew are on leave," Arlen informed him. "At 1015 today, you'll proceed to the military locks reserved for Second Corps. You'll deliver orders from me to whoever's on guard: orders stating that I'm borrowing Wassel's ship, and that you're having a man move it to Ministry Lock Nineteen. I'll issue you a bypass.

"Once you gain control of the ship, you'll raise Galt's Lieutenant Commander. Inform Marlenn of my orders, and your intent to obey them. You'll then proceed unaccompanied to the lock where you'll change the access code of the vessel to one I'll provide. You'll insert into the port a locking device I'll give you, thus preventing any use of a bypass. You'll leave the ship there, collect your men, and meet me at 1100 at the Fourth Corps' military lock where Otis's ship

is docked next to Brant's--just why, I don't know. Otis is scheduled to be on duty elsewhere.

"You'll seize Otis's ship. Assume that the Captain will be aboard with all his men. You'll have your lieutenant, and three spacers whom you trust implicitly, lift the vessel into a high orbit around Columbia. Tell Rafael to await orders from either you or me. You'll deliver Otis and his crewmen to Fifth Corps' Headquarters, where you'll leave them in Amin's custody. You'll then lift your vessel. You, and in a dire extremity, Rafael, will carry out any command I may see fit to issue during the course of the day, directing you to attack any ship, including the one bearing Galt home."

"Yes, sir." No slightest hesitation shaded Lacey's acceptance of orders that, if obeyed in their entirety, would inevitably precipitate a mutinous uprising guaranteed to spread like a virulent epidemic to include bloody civil strife.

Arlen knows he can trust me with the ultimate responsibility! the maturely cognizant spacer-captain congratulated himself as his pride inflated. Well, I won't fail him. Galt had better weigh the odds with exceeding care--damn his gall! Arlen's a statesman. Galt doesn't cavil at hiring assassins, evidently. Arlen sure as hell never took Leon out, and Galt never spent so much energy suborning our devious Minister of Internal Security for no reason. Backstabbers, Royslott and Galt both!

Arlen sensed his subordinate's implacable determination: a trait that distinguished Lacey. *This weapon won't turn in my hand*, he exulted grimly. "I'll enlist the backing of Carey and his crew, and seize Brant's ship myself, while you're boarding Otis's, Lacey. Then I'll deal with Courtney."

Having seen the two men out, Arlen noted the time: 0835. Briskly, he informed Dahl, "I'll sit the board while you eat a hot meal. I know damned well you skipped breakfast."

Arlen's habitual consideration for his subordinates still possessed the power to shock his aide, who replied, "Yes, sir," and withdrew, having failed to conceal his amazement from the man whose ironic eyes followed the Captain's departing back. *Norman failed utterly to breach the armor with which Dahl surrounds his core of innate decency*, the dictator reflected contentedly before turning his mind to the orders just issued.

Yancey. The name reverberated within Arlen's inner awareness. I heartily wish I could order that thrice-accursed mass murderer to stand trial before a military tribunal! he railed silently. *But that's impossible. He might well emerge unscathed, given the imperialistic fervor animating so many high-ranking officers. I'd lose more than I'd gain--weaken my grip on four of the five military corps, perhaps fatally. So the callous brute will likely never be called to account for annihilating five Gaeen stations packed with unarmed civilian families.*

Nor will Norman. I can't risk more than rendering that bastard ineffectual. He and his veterans bear the aura of war heroes, to the uncritical among the general populace, and the greedy among our leaders. And if I ignored protocol--used my dictatorial power to order Yancey spaced--I'd not only precipitate an incendiary crisis in all five corps, I'd lose the political support that enabled me to outmaneuver Galt. I'd end overthrown--hand Galt on a silver tray what I've thus far prevented his gaining. Chagrin burned like bile within the Commander-in-Chief's vitals as he drew that conclusion.

Exerting his power of will, he forced his mind onto less galling avenues of thought. As he cast back over his reason for launching this hazardous

maneuver, a sharply etched portrait shimmered on the screen of his interior vision. *Adrienne's assessment cuts through to the essence*, he admitted ungrudgingly. *More accurate than Amin's, her prediction. She has listened well and judged sagely, over Earthyears of entertaining the top echelon of our leaders--gambled on her judgment, and won far more than she has lost. She routinely makes shrewd investments. Sharp, the mind behind that lovely face. I wonder whether Amin ... Likely he charmed her into it. I hope so--he needed a break from unrelenting work. Well. You'd better apprise Fulke of the imminent arrival of detainees.*

When his aide returned, Arlen rose. "I'm going to my quarters, Dahl. I'll be back by 0930. Here's the private call-code for my residence. It takes me only five minutes to arrive there. No action's due to start until 1000, but if some unforeseen problem arises, raise me at my quarters. If I'm in transit, do what you think best until you can reach me."

Five minutes later, the Commander-in-Chief strode through the door of his spacious private dwelling. Advancing to the center of the living area, he called out a summons. As always when he surveyed this alternate domain where he lived his private life, at some level below the plane of his consciousness he savored satisfaction in the pleasing simplicity of design that subtly masked both the rarity and the costliness of the furnishings.

A gasping cry fell on his ears. Even as the sound impinged, he enfolded in his arms the lovely woman who darted out of a bedcabin to hurl herself into his embrace.

A faint fragrance tantalized the husband crushing his wife against his sleek black uniform. When he released her, she smiled tremulously up at him, her piquant face only imperfectly concealing the fear and distress tormenting her. Soft hands reached to his collar, and smoothed two slight creases in the band of stiff fabric encircling the base of his neck. Deftly, the woman adjusted the cloth where the pin securing the silver insignia denoting rank produced a pucker. "Arlen, I've worried all morning..." An unwonted huskiness tinged the voice normally lilting.

Heedless of the disorder he wrought in the fashionable coiffure, the autocrat stroked deeply waving dark hair as he murmured an all-but-inaudible endearment. Still holding his wife close, he spoke again, aloud, employing a tone that admitted of no refusal. "Karyn, Oliver awaits you and Tiryll at my private lifeboat lock. He'll fly you and the boy to my great-aunt's quarters at Dayton. You'll leave at once. Lana expects you. I'll raise you there later today. You undoubtedly won't hear from me before 1700 at the earliest. I know better than to tell you not to worry, but don't overdo it. I'll emerge from this venture in a far stronger position. Safer."

The lens of tears filming violet eyes distorted the image of lover and husband filling the woman's field of vision. Ripples appeared, as the moisture she sought to control faultily refracted the light. Blinking back the drops threatening to spill, Karyn imprinted anew in her memory every bold line of the well-loved face of the man who for the past eleven Earthyears had formed the central focus of her existence. Living the sheltered life common to aristocratic wives in a male-dominated society--a life filled with comfort and leisure, but hedged by restrictive prohibitions--she nonetheless knew all too well the magnitude of the danger prompting his sending her out of the capital. "Arlen...I'll live in fear until I know it's over, and you're safe," she confessed softly.

The pounding of the heart under the stylish, dusky-rose suit transmitted itself to the man still pressing the curvaceous body against his chest. His

mouth closed over his wife's. When he freed her lips, he kissed her brow, and smiled into the eyes brimming with tears.

Running her hands up both of his arms, Karyn whispered, "I love you!" with passionate vehemence.

"I love you." Gently, Arlen released his hold, and stepped back. Turning to the boy of nine who had said no word upon finding his parents locked in each other's arms, he embraced the child who bore a remarkable likeness to his father. "Tiryll, you'll escort your mother to the lifeboat lock, and watch over her until I see you both again. Hear?" Arlen issued that injunction with the same gravity with which he would have addressed an adult.

"I hear, Father. I'll take good care of Mother." Standing tall, the boy met piercing eyes the identical color of his own, squarely.

"Karyn, direct Oliver to raise Dahl as soon as he completes his liftoff, and report the time of your departure."

Having seen his wife and son into an autocab, the military dictator withdrew a holster and belt from a closet, and strapped to his person a unique weapon of his own devising. The hatched butt of a black-glass electronic stun-pistol--a device capable of rendering an opponent unconscious for a range of times from a minute to six hours, or of delivering instant death--protruded from the holster that now rode low on the hip of the warrior highly adept in the use of his invention.

Thus armed, the Commander-in-Chief crossed the congested corridor to reenter Ministry Main Habitat. Glancing up from the board at the man returning at the exact time he had specified, the aide nervously geared to handle a crisis in the dictator's absence smiled as his body visibly relaxed. "No premature action of any sort, sir," he reported. "Everything seems normal. I brought back a package of sandwiches and a flask of coffee. Would you care to eat?"

"I'd better. That was thoughtful of you, Dahl."

Seating himself next to his subordinate, the autocrat dined in leisurely fashion, chatting with his aide between calls, and giving no intimation to any casual observer that he just took a daring, irrevocable step that conceivably could cost him his life, and plunge his world into civil war.

For sheer cold nerve, Arlen surpasses even Norman , the spacer-fighter reflected admiringly. Damned if he isn't a leader I'll find it a pleasure to serve. Captain of a ship again. I never thought ... Who else would ever have ... You owe this man, Dahl.

At 0945, the Commander-in-Chief dismissed his aide, seated himself at the board, and waited for the first chessman in his game to appear. *Carey should arrive an hour from now, if all goes well , Arlen mused. His charge won't cause him any problem. I strongly suspect that Marcel will welcome a chance to serve you instead of Dexter, and that he'll prove astute enough to realize that you'll keep him on as captain of the ship you seize. A few of your detainees might accept such an invitation, of those to whom you'd consider tendering an offer.*

Even so, you'll probably end with more first-class ships than captains you feel able to trust with command of so priceless a prize. Why not reserve one of those vessels for your personal use? The height of autocratic arrogance, such a move, but an Earth-armed ship kept continually at your disposal might prove an indispensable asset at some point in the future. Debating courses,

the instigator of a bold strike leveled against ruthless, self-serving rivals waited the seemingly interminable time preceding his entry into action.

Carey arrived in Arlen's office at 1040, relief written large on his open countenance. "No problem, sir. My men are outside in the corridor. Marcel offered no resistance. It seemed almost as if he expected such a move."

Briskly, Arlen commended the subordinate whom he now ordered to accompany him to the lock on which Brant's vessel rested.

At that exact moment, Brant sat in the office of the Commander of Fourth Corps, facing his superior in an attitude not nearly so relaxed as Courtney's. The latter, a burly figure whose lightly freckled and rather handsome face did indeed project the quality Adrienne had described as bluff heartiness, raked with pale blue eyes the tall, limber swordsman whose muscles rippled beneath his superbly tailored black uniform. Straight hair as golden as the dry wine Brant favored over spirits framed a face set in lines etched by habitual pride of caste.

Warily, the aristocratic officer returned the piercing glance, as he tried to calculate just what weighed today on Courtney's mind. He suspected that the same fear that had deprived him of a considerable measure of sleep lately also goaded his superior. Possessed of no illusions that the officer under whom he served would place the interests of his captains above his own, Brant, ambitious and career-conscious, expected that such would be the case, but he considered his brusque Commander to be a man governed by a sense of honor as sterling as his own.

Courtney's acute awareness of Brant's assumption, coupled with his own well-concealed but total lack of any regard for honor, prompted the Commander of Fourth Corps to view the notoriously touchy duelist as a tool inviting manipulation. "We live in interesting times, Brant," he remarked with elaborate casualness. "Space is ours, now that we're no longer involved in a war that a dictator new to the wielding of political power chose not to prosecute with the vigor--not to mention the men and the ships--which would have turned the tide in our favor.

"I nonetheless foresee ominous developments: changes that will adversely affect Fourth Corps' handling of its traditional responsibility. Those may lead to our finding ourselves hard-pressed to guard all the cargo vessels lifting and descending in remote municipal units in Columbia effectively enough that our world forfeits none in a strike by renegades--or worse yet, loses a priceless shipment of water ice. Too bad the Commander-in-Chief doesn't believe, as I do, that ability should form the first qualification of a captain entrusted with an Earth-armed ship."

"What do you mean by that remark, sir?" *He's mounting a devious verbal campaign aimed at gaining some sort of an edge*, the listener warned himself. *Keep your guard up, Brant.*

"Perhaps I spoke too bluntly. Not a good policy, these times, saying outright what one thinks. A man does well to watch his tongue, especially here in the capital. Of course, I can trust my senior captain to keep what I say in the privacy of my office confidential. Can I not?"

"You know you can, or you'd not have said what you just did, sir."

That rejoinder, delivered just a shade sardonically, evoked a seemingly hearty laugh. In a characteristic gesture, Courtney smoothed back the thick, reddish hair he wore a trifle longer than current fashions dictated. "You're right.

Well, to be frank, I'd have done some juggling, seniority or no seniority, before I gave Simon or Carey an Earth-armed ship--or even Gordon. None of those three men begins to approach you either in all-around ability, or in resourcefulness. I imagine that when Arlen assumed command of Fifth Corps, Simon and Gordon ingratiated themselves--went to any length so as to keep their ships.

"They succeeded--which suggests that the Commander-in-Chief rates obsequiousness above skill. You don't catch Arlen's subordinates addressing him by his name. He doesn't welcome the least informality--never joins his officers when they enjoy sociable dinners or even more pleasant company afterwards. He welcomes boot-licking--only he calls it loyalty."

Brant raised a sardonic eyebrow, but passed no comment. *Courtney assuredly generates no loyalty*, he groused disdainfully. *He'd not hesitate to shaft my career to win a power struggle. But he does value skill--recognizes it, and in ordinary times rewards the exercise of it. He also occasionally joins officers off duty, for a night out. Pleasant company, the Commander can be. Arlen's coldly formal in his dealings with the men under him, from what I can judge--a stickler for protocol. He keeps a distance from those who serve him, and most certainly never joins them in their pleasures.*

Courtney's right. Simon's too cautious, Gordon's too predictable, and Carey's too inexperienced to rank in all-round ability anywhere close to the three of us who command Fourth Corps' first-class ships. I wonder why Arlen didn't juggle assignments--find some pretext to ignore the seniority list? Well, his dealings with his men form no business of mine.

"You know, Brant, it wouldn't surprise me to find that the Commander-in-Chief employs his considerable power of persuasion to talk each of his commanders out of another Earth-armed military ship--or even all of them. If he succeeds in gaining control of those presently assigned to Fourth Corps, you'll find yourself forced to captain a second-class vessel--essentially demoted--while men even less well qualified than Carey command the ships armed with the irreproducible weaponry."

A black frown greeted that galling assertion. "No one's that persuasive, sir."

"The Commander-in-Chief might try, though."

Arlen more likely would use force, Brant conjectured dourly. *At some time in the near future, I just might find myself relegated to a less challenging command that will render promotion far more difficult to gain. Well, I've thus far managed to avoid getting caught in a power play between commanders. If Arlen makes a grab for my ship, could I come out on his side without earning Courtney's enmity? Or on Galt's side, if he succeeds in overthrowing Arlen? Could I shift sides--perhaps twice--without compromising my honor? I wonder.*

Musingly, idly, the canny manipulator remarked as if talking aloud to himself, "Arlen's as persuasive a man as I've ever known--famous for glib charm. That polite front he maintains in public guarantees that he never has to answer for the insults he occasionally lets slip in private. If he did, you'd..."

Breaking off his sentence in well-simulated confusion, Courtney acted to perfection a man absently voicing private thoughts, who suddenly realizes he went too far, and fumbles an attempt to cover a slip. "I want you to know, I'm pleased with the way you've..."

Leaning forward in his chair, his tall body gone suddenly taut, Brant

interrupted his superior. "Just what did you start out to say, sir?"

"What I had no business saying. A slip. I recalled one of those chance remarks passed between officers imbibing a shot of brandy on an empty stomach, after a long, tedious meeting. The sort of careless statement the hearer, if he's smart, seeks to forget. I alone know that Otis overheard the words Arlen thought he used in my presence only. Otis reminded me of the incident, today. I guess that's why my reference to it popped out so inappropriately. I told him to bury what he overheard."

"You've gone too far to do that yourself now, sir. An insult that lingered in both your memory and Otis's demands action on my part. Just what did Arlen say about me?" The renowned duelist's high, clear voice quivered with passion.

"Brant, I surely didn't mean to stir up trouble between you and a military dictator who wields supreme power. If you're wise, you'll relax, and trust two men who value your friendship to keep a careless remark Arlen has likely forgotten he ever made, to their own selves. Now, let's get us a cup of coffee, and..."

The Senior Captain rose, radiating cold fury. "Sir, my honor demands that I defend it against careless remarks passed in the presence of my superior and my peer. I intend to confront my detractor, whether or no. If, having gone this far, you refuse to tell me the nature of the remark, you'll put me at a disadvantage."

Rising in his turn to confront the subordinate controlling burgeoning anger, Courtney shrugged in seemingly reluctant capitulation. "All right. We were reminiscing about professors from whom we took classes at the University, and what sort of subjects various officers chose for their majors. I mentioned the name of a classmate who didn't graduate with us, given that he flunked a required course in mathematics. Arlen airily remarked that your professors were too afraid of your sword to fail you."

The blood drained from Brant's cheeks. Hot ire blazed from the eyes of a man who indeed had found certain subjects difficult, but who had earned his degree honestly, by dogged hard work. His pained cognizance that Arlen, physicist, physician, psychologist, inventor, possessed an intellectual brilliance that few men of his Earthcentury could match, rendered the inflammatory affront the more intolerable, just as Courtney had known it would. The thought never once crossed Brant's mind that his commander might prove capable of uttering a barefaced lie.

Exulting inwardly at the success of his ploy, the practiced dissembler laid an arm in comradely fashion over his dupe's shoulders. "You might, on reflection, suspect that I may have exaggerated the provocation, Brant. If you want corroboration, I'll take no offense if you ask Otis to give his version of what happened. He's making certain arrangements for me right now, in the adjoining office."

Wounded to the quick, goaded by a stinging blow to his pride, the victor in a score of duels angrily shook his head. "I don't suspect any such thing! You'd scarcely urge that I ask Otis, unless he indeed heard exactly what you related. No. I'll demand satisfaction!"

"Brant, listen to me. If you feel obliged to act, don't do it rashly. Arlen's slippery-tongued. If you confront him without witnesses, he'll simply refuse to accept a challenge from a subordinate, and might even..."

"You think I don't know how and where to call out a man who offered me a mortal insult, sir?" Brant's impassioned voice now assumed an ominous

softness, even as faint lines etched by habitual arrogance into a narrow, fair-skinned face gained suddenly in prominence.

"Let me know where and when, and I'll form an additional witness."

"I'll do that."

"Let's get us a cup of coffee." As he spoke, Courtney turned towards the entry.

At that precise moment, the door opened with a clang, startling the two Fourth Corpsmen, who stiffened as Arlen strode into the cabin. Both men's eyes narrowed as they caught sight of the stun-pistol, still holstered, riding low on his hip. Even as the import of that circumstance struck home, Carey, his right hand crossed in front of his body so as to rest on the hilt of his sheathed sword, entered to flank the Commander-in-Chief. Five of Carey's spacers, also armed with swords, ranged themselves along the wall behind their superiors.

Cold fear gripped the plotter who instantly realized that his archrival, unaccountably spurred out of the complacency that Courtney had scathingly attributed to ignorance of the intrigues of four commanders acutely desirous of overthrowing their former peer, might today succeed in cementing his grip on power. Courtney had counted on that complacency, even as he privately derided it as evidence of its possessor's unfitness to hold power. Automatically, his hand crossed to the hilt of his blade, as did that of his senior captain: twin moves that caused the Commander-in-Chief to draw his stun-pistol with astonishing swiftness, and level the weapon at the Commander of Fourth Corps.

Both men's hands dropped.

Arlen's sardonic smile chilled the blood of the trap-setter cursing the lack of foresight that led to his being caught so badly off guard. "Well, Courtney," the dictator observed, his melodious voice radiating supreme assurance, "you undoubtedly guess that I'm seizing control of the Earth-armed military ships of each of my commanders. My men occupy Otis's, Yukio's, and yours, Brant."

Resting his glance on the blonde swordsman's ice-white, furious face, the Commander-in-Chief saw at once that Adrienne's current lover had administered the final drop of poison.

Desperately hoping to provoke his dupe into issuing a challenge before his rival succeeded in employing his formidable power of persuasion to defuse the man's anger, Courtney murmured to Brant, "What did I tell you?"

Before the irate officer could reply, Arlen impaled him with glittering eyes, projecting the full force of his commanding persona. "Courtney evidently suggested that I covet your vessel, Brant. Well, I do--and I covet you as well. Will you accept my invitation to command your ship, as the first captain I recruit to join the Special Force I'm creating to meet the imminent threat of space war with Gaea?"

Thunderstruck, the recipient of that astounding offer stared at the dictator whose glance met his with perfect directness. Conflicting emotions racked the career-minded officer, as suppositions raced through his mind. *That offer's genuine! It has to be, if Arlen made it before Carey and his spacers! To a man he despises--insulted? I can't ...* The thought drove home to the Senior Captain that the Commander-in-Chief seemed on the verge of winning, hands down, a power struggle that he himself initiated. The careerist's inner agony showed

nakedly.

Arlen's smile reappeared, as he inquired, "Did Courtney predict that I'd want you as well as your ship?"

"He informed me that the men you court so glibly in public, you insult in private," Brant hissed, wounded pride prevailing over concern for his career.

"Indeed! No wonder you're angry. I challenge Courtney to a test, Brant, in the presence of these witnesses--a test I'll willingly undergo myself, to secure your service. I'll inject myself with truth compeller, and allow you to ask any question you wish--and urge Courtney to do the same." Turning to the checkmated rival whose ashen face betrayed both fear and guilt, Arlen demanded, "Do you accept? Here, and now, in the presence of these men and any others you choose to act as witnesses?"

"I won't so degrade myself--subject myself to such indignity!" Knowing himself trapped, the plotter managed to infuse that refusal with haughty disdain, even as he knew his response to be far too ineffectual to carry any weight with the witnesses.

"Mm. I will, gladly, with or without your joining me. Carey, send one of your men to the infirmary for a spring-capsule."

A spacer hastened into the corridor in response to his captain's gesture. The man riveting all eyes turned to the stunned Senior Captain, and drawled a provocative query. "Did Courtney try to persuade you to initiate a confrontation the consequence of which would have benefited none but himself, had I chanced to delay making this move for a week or so, Brant?"

Smugly, Arlen savored the expression of outraged comprehension that suddenly overspread Brant's face. Recognizing the hatred in Courtney's as mortal, the canny political infighter determined on a course he knew to be fraught with danger. *Interrogate under truth compeller this devious conniver who treasonably sought to encompass your death, and order him court-marshaled. The bastard will draw a death sentence--more for the despicable method he employed, than for his intent to supplant you. You don't dare leave him even as a figurehead, now. He'll hire an assassin.*

Upon returning, Carey's crewman offered the Commander-in-Chief a spring-capsule. Having pointedly held out the small object for Brant's inspection, Arlen rolled back his sleeve to press the device unhesitatingly against the muscle of his arm.

"Commander...wait." Brant's strained appeal produced a delay. "I now believe you innocent of Courtney's charge. But he said he could produce a witness...a peer I respect...or did..."

"Let's settle this question, gentlemen." Releasing the spring, Arlen sent the drug surging into his vein. "Who gave you the capsule?" he inquired of Carey's spacer.

"Fourth Corps' physician, sir. Cornelius."

"No possibility of tampering, then, would you say, Brant?"

Flayed by embarrassment, the officer thus challenged stared at the autocrat whose mobile face developed a faint flush. Even as Brant watched, the high forehead beneath his superior's closely clipped brown hair beaded with drops of perspiration, and the flush deepened to crimson: two unmistakable signs of the drug's taking hold.

Fighting daunting dizziness, Arlen waited the five minutes all knew to be required for maximum effectiveness. Dropping heavily into a chair, he retched. By the sheer force of an indomitable will, he mastered an onslaught of nausea. With patent irony, he observed, "As you see, I'm not dosed with the antidote, Brant. Ask me whatever you wish."

"Did you ever insult me in Courtney's hearing?"

"Absolutely not! Nor have I ever insulted you in anyone's hearing. I'm not in the habit of passing disparaging remarks behind men's backs."

Every man in the cabin perforce accepted that statement as incontrovertible, being well aware that the potent drug produced an irresistible compulsion not only to answer any question asked, but also to reply with utter truthfulness, however self-incriminating the revelation might prove.

"I believed you, sir, before you went to this length." Turning to Courtney, Brant hissed contemptuously, "I served you to the best of my ability--judged you a man of honor." Deadly venom infused the high voice as the duelist stated grimly, "You lied in your teeth awhile ago, for your own ends. You offered me a mortal affront. I demand the ultimate satisfaction. I'll send my seconds to you in two hours."

Caught in his own trap, Courtney blanched. Shifting his glance from Brant's merciless eyes to Arlen's icy ones, he strove to preserve a seemly dignity, knowing himself doomed. Acidly, he retorted, "I'll give you satisfaction."

Better a clean thrust, than dying spaced after being convicted of treason, he conceded silently and despairingly. *And I will be. Even if the evidence presented consists only of this unsuccessful attempt to manipulate a touchy duelist into issuing a challenge to a dictator who seized absolute power by force of arms--even if it fails to include any conclusive proof of conspiracy on my part--Galt, Norman and Dexter would vote in a heartbeat to dispose legally of a man they know to covet what they themselves want: the chance to supplant this accursed bastard!*

"Send your seconds after 1700," Arlen instructed, concealing his glee at hearing the challenge he knew to constitute a death sentence accepted by the man he had fully expected to refuse the challenge, out of a faint hope that a tribunal of his peers might absolve him of guilt. Resolved now upon letting this fortuitous duel rid him of his rival, rather than pressing charges bound to arouse resentment in the ranks of Fourth Corps, he added crisply, "Carey will be detaining Courtney here, until that hour. Brant, come with me."

Stepping into the corridor, where six of Carey's spacers guarded the entry, Arlen drew the Captain whose loyal service he hoped to secure, out of their hearing. "I take it you accept my offer?" he asked serenely, his mobile face expressing only keen interest in the reply.

"Yes, sir. Gladly. I owe you an apology, sir." Brant met squarely the eyes impaling him as he uttered words that Arlen knew he had seldom, if ever, employed thus far in his life.

"No apology is due me," Arlen avowed crisply. "You acted with courage, on provocation you saw no reason to question. Who was the peer you mentioned, who backed Courtney's story? Otis?"

Manifestly uncomfortable, the Fourth Corpsman reluctantly admitted, "Courtney said Otis would bear out his accusation, sir, but given that the damned brute lied to me, he could well have lied about Otis's involvement."

"Or used some threat he held over Otis to force his compliance. Well. I'll escort you to a cabin in Fifth Corps' Headquarters, where I'll accept your word that you'll remain until I return to release you from your parole."

"You have my word, sir." *You play the game with cool nerve, damned if you don't*, the opportunist commended the victor, as relief surged through his adrenaline-saturated system.

Withdrawing a square of cloth from a pocket, Arlen mopped his brow. Flushed, perspiring, he strove to dominate a daunting lightheadedness aggravated by recurring waves of nausea. As he proceeded down the corridor, the sufferer tried valiantly to keep his gait from betraying the full extent of his giddiness.

Brant noticed. Upon arriving at a flight of stairs, he put forth a muscular arm, and wordlessly steadied the man at his side.

Having negotiated that obstacle, Arlen concluded that he could walk without aid, but passed no comment. Inwardly amused, he allowed his companion to maintain the iron grip that Brant tactfully released as the pair arrived at the entry to Fifth Corps' Headquarters. With courtly graciousness, the Commander-in-Chief thanked his benefactor.

"You're welcome, sir."

Out of courtesy, Arlen personally escorted the detainee into an unoccupied cabin near the main entry, rather than consigning his charge to a guard. No whit reluctant on his own part subtly to manipulate a subordinate so as to gain his own ends, the canny judge of men announced briskly, "Since you've given your parole, I'll not lock the door. I'll have someone deliver you a meal, and coffee. Rest assured that I'll strive to make your tedious wait as short as possible."

Leaving the man gratified by the compliment to meditate on the newly enhanced security of his cherished career, Arlen followed Fulke, the chief administrative officer of the corps that the dictator still personally commanded, into the latter's office, where he ascertained that all of the captains performing their assigned duties had arrived with their prisoners.

Having expressed satisfaction to the Lieutenant Commander upon whose discretion he knew he could rely, Arlen obtained a cup of hot coffee and a bar of high-energy food-concentrate from a galley, and withdrew into a vacant office to rest, hoping to mitigate the lingering effects of the drug.

Well, that gamble paid off, he congratulated himself with pardonable pride. I stand deeply in debt to Adrienne--a debt I'll repay. Close shave, that exchange of verbal thrusts. If Courtney hadn't been so paralyzed by the consciousness of his guilt, he might have shot me a few questions of his own, which in my utterly vulnerable state I'd have been under compulsion to answer truthfully. I might well have spilled vital information I'd regret anyone's knowing. I'd better make damned sure that I'm free of the effects before I deal with Dexter, Galt and Norman. Forcing himself to relax, Arlen ate the sweetish concentrate, and washed it down with coffee.

Shortly thereafter, Dahl sprang his trap on Yukio as the unsuspecting Fourth Corpsman walked unaccompanied into the office of the shipworks at Dunn, to find himself surrounded by six hard-bitten spacers armed with swords. "I'm Dahl, Captain, Fifth Corps," the leader informed him. "The Commander-in-Chief entrusted me with orders for you--these." The antagonist obviously prepared to compel compliance handed a datapad to the brown-skinned man no taller than the

officer confronting him.

Eyes black as Dahl's own glinted with anger, as Yukio grated, "I take it you've possessed yourself of my ship?"

"I have. Your orders--and mine--require that you accompany me. Let's go."

Having followed his prisoner onto the bridge of Simon's vessel, Dahl left one of Danner's spacers in charge of his motley crew, and escorted Yukio into Simon's cabin. Turning to study the detainee's expression, the observer accurately gauged the potency of the man's resentment. "Sit down," Dahl invited.

Wordlessly, warily, Yukio settled onto a bunk.

Pulling the chair loose from its magnetic hold on the deck, the Captain seated himself facing the officer in his custody. "Yukio, if any man knows what it's like to lose a ship, it's I. I lost one of Norman's to Signe and a force that included her full complement of captains. I'd be dead now, or serving a life term in a military penal work detail, if Arlen hadn't investigated, and then demonstrated his belief that I did all any man could have done in the situation in which I found myself. He wrested me out of Norman's service, and took me into his own.

"Arlen's scrupulously fair. While he's said nothing to me of what he intends to do with your ship, you can safely wager that he'll need captains he can trust, if this operation's paralleled by others like it. He ordered me to let you tell your lieutenant that you've been called away unexpectedly, and instruct him to carry on. If you manage so that your second officer sees no reason to call Fourth Corps' Headquarters, you'll earn Arlen's good will. The converse will be true, if you arouse your subordinate's suspicions. I'll report accurately the manner in which you conduct yourself during your call. I urge you to weigh beforehand what you'll say, and watch how you say it."

Rising, Dahl gestured the man who now regarded him speculatively, into the chair.

Yukio sat for a time, thinking. At length, he raised the shipworks.

"Raymond, I've been called away unexpectedly," the captive officer informed his subordinate in a most creditably noncommittal tone. "I'm leaving you in charge of the operation. Once you've conveyed the entire consignment of parts to the loading dock, remain on guard there. Spell off the men two at a time to eat. There'll likely be a delay in the arrival of the Corps' cargo vessel, so prepare your mind to endure what could be a long wait. I'll see what I can do to alleviate the problem."

Dahl read faint surprise, but no suspicion, in the face and voice of Yukio's second officer. "Yes, sir," Raymond responded phlegmatically, and signed off.

"Did that satisfy you?"

"Perfectly. I'll personally inform the Commander-in-Chief of your wholehearted cooperation, Yukio, besides noting it in my report. Harness in, right here. One of my men will join you."

After harnessing himself into the first helm couch, Dahl lifted the ship, and set it on a trajectory that would take it back to the capital. Relaxing, he savored his accomplishment. *I'm not much of a hand at suave persuasiveness*, he acknowledged, well aware that his ability in that line fell far below that of the Commander-in-Chief. *Arlen told me to use tact. I figured with Yukio*

frankness would work better. It looks as if I judged accurately. I hope to hell Arlen comes out on top today!

Having consigned his prisoner and Norman's three spacers to Danner, the aide exulting at the success attending what he perceived as a test of both his loyalty and his ability strode down the main corridor of Fifth Corps' Headquarters, where he spied the Commander-in-Chief emerging from a cabin.

"Ah, Dahl," the dictator exclaimed. "On your way back to my office?"

"Yes, sir."

"Step in here a minute. Let me close the door. What was Yukio's reaction?"

"At first, anger, which he controlled admirably. After listening to me, he handled his lieutenant so that Raymond never suspected a thing. Yukio's a man who keeps a cool head in a crisis, sir."

Arlen's fluid countenance lit with warm amusement. "You of all people should be able to judge that quality accurately," he affirmed. "I commend your tactful handling of an officer whose services I hope to enlist. Well, go on back. I'll return around 1600, if all goes as I hope."

"Good luck, sir."

I'll need it, Arlen assured himself dourly as he strode down the hall to interview Dexter.

Amin rose to his feet in the outer of two offices. "All went smoothly," Arlen's senior captain confided in an undertone, mindful of the presence of the two subordinates guarding the entry. "Not cordially, but smoothly. Dexter's in the other office, and he's angry to the core. Lambert's next door, feeling caught between two immovable forces. He didn't say much--acted as if he'd follow his superior's lead as long as he was under the man's eye.

"Dexter blustered, and tried to overawe me into backing down. He told me I had colossal nerve to threaten to use force to detain a man of his rank. I informed him that I never made threats, as he'd discover within seconds. I declared that if he refused to accompany me on his own two feet, we'd lay ungentle hands on him, much as I'd regret a necessity so repugnant to me. Preston and I advanced with evident intent to do just that, prompting Dexter to growl that he'd walk here himself. I commended his graceful acquiescence to the inevitable, and treated him with the utmost politeness thereafter, but it was touchy for a few seconds."

"You handled a tough assignment admirably, Amin."

Sliding back the door, Arlen strode in to face the tall, sinewy, upright figure rising to confront him. Steely gray eyes attested to the magnitude of the tightly controlled anger their owner focused on the assured, highhanded author of what the Commander of First Corps considered an outrage.

"Well, Dexter, I've spent the day seizing the Earth-armed vessels of my commanders," the dictator announced airily. "I took that route in order to save each of you from the egregious error of refusing a request, and following that refusal with insubordinate action. As things stand, you've done nothing to earn censure from me, given that you accompanied the officer carrying out my order to detain you. I regard my decision as necessary, while regretting the inconvenience it caused you.

"Your detention will last until late today. Tomorrow, I'll meet with all four

of you, and explain certain alterations I'm making in the structure of Columbia's military establishment. I urge you to prepare your mind to accept those changes, if you wish to retain command of First Corps. In the crisis I see facing our world at this point in our history, I need men upon whom I can rely absolutely, in positions of command. I value your talents, Dexter, but I'll most assuredly break a man who employs his talents to intrigue against his commander-in-chief."

Arlen projected unmistakable menace as he concluded that blunt statement.

Dexter stared belligerently at the rival who he knew must now control the bulk of the vessels brought from Earth--ships armed with the irreproducible weaponry. Thus equipped, the Commander-in-Chief could not be overthrown in a lightning military coup of the sort that Arlen himself staged upon Leon's demise. Eyes narrowed, manner frigid, the renowned swordsman decided against issuing a challenge. Scathingly, he retorted, "I resent your assumption that I needed to be forcibly prevented from taking some insubordinate action, had you made a reasonable request regarding the ships. I'll overlook that statement, which borders on insult, and I'll continue to carry out my duties in a fitting manner. Just what crisis do you see facing Columbia?"

"A war in space, with Gaea."

"You think it'll take nineteen Earth-armed vessels to wrest one from the hands of a woman who managed to lift the ship she stole, by luck alone?" That shrewd thrust dripped sarcasm.

"I remember your commenting nine Earthyears ago, Dexter, that it would take Norman all of six fourweeks to quash a force led by a woman--if that long."

Anger shot lividly from piercing gray eyes. "On her own rock, backed by warriors like Conor, Signe prevailed--but in space, in a military ship manned by men wholly untrained, she'd be insane to try taking on our fleet!"

Amin's assessment exactly, Arlen reminded himself. *Am I overestimating what that infernal woman might manage?* "We spend considerable time and energy hunting renegades like Chapell, Dexter--men whose ships don't boast the irreproducible weaponry. We've lost two cargoes to that thrice-damned turncoat's raids in the last Earthyear. Imagine Chapell's commanding an Earth-armed military ship--free to strike anywhere, any time, out of the black--and you'll realize why I'm taking all possible precautions. As for tracking down a lone vessel among the thirty-nine inhabited planetoids of the Gaeon Group, our fleet would be operating in hostile space, a vast distance from Columbia, with no base of supply. No, I see the course upon which I've embarked as an absolute necessity."

"Chapell's a man trained as a military spacer. Signe's a female figurehead--a rallying point for a rebellion!"

"A formidable figurehead, Dexter. Well. I welcome your assurance that you'll continue to carry out your duties in a fitting manner. I'll return as quickly as I can, to end this tedious detention."

Standing before the closed door, Arlen glanced at his watch as he exchanged a few words with Amin. *Exactly two hours before Galt shows up. Check with Dahl.*

Having ascertained that no peremptory callers as yet signaled that news of his strike had leaked out, the strategist debated with himself, and took a further chance. In a series of interviews with the captains his men detained, Arlen recruited Yukio, Lambert, Demetrius, and Marcel into the new force he planned to create, noting that all four men evinced profound relief.

The leader who prided himself on his unblemished honor tendered no offer either to Yancey or Otis. *A man guilty of mass murder, I wouldn't employ were he the only spacer-captain available*, the Commander-in-Chief railed blackly, still chafing against the need to allow a criminal to escape retribution. *And crime or indiscretion--whatever Otis did that Courtney covered up--that alone forms a telling strike against a captain, but one who allowed himself to be blackmailed into an act likely to end in death for a man innocent of any offense, I surely don't need in my service!*

Well. Five capable officers. Six, counting Dahl. Could I possibly persuade Wassel? I might succeed, depending on how well Galt dissimulates the rage my move will produce.

Promptly at 1510, Galt and Flynn, followed by ten spacers, strode through the pressure-proof door of the outer lock into the corridor, to find themselves confronted by eight bared swords and three military handweapons. Evan, his sword sheathed, placed his considerable bulk opposite Galt's captain, whose hand flew to the hilt of his own blade. "Don't draw, Flynn," the Fifth Corpsman warned harshly. "My hands are quicker than your sword-arm."

Aware of the brawny officer's fame as a martial artist, the hothead hesitated. Reluctantly, he decided against bucking too-great odds. Scowling, he kept his eyes glued to the man confronting him.

Galt likewise recognized the futility of precipitating an affray when three opponents bore electronic weapons warmed and ready, and his archrival's hand hung in close proximity to the butt of the deadly device still holstered.

Arlen's imperious voice carried easily to all twenty-four men. "Well, Galt, I've spent the day seizing the Earth-armed ships of my commanders--Wassel's as well as this vessel. I'm leaving you the two ships now engaged in hunting Chapell, or at least, leaving those under the control of the Commander of Second Corps. I'm assuming you'll wish to retain your seniority. To do so, you'll need to accept certain alterations I'm making in Columbia's military establishment.

"Tomorrow, I'll meet with my commanders to explain those. Any one of the four of you who actively opposes those changes, or passively resists implementing them, I'll replace. In the crisis I see facing our world at this point in our history, I need men upon whom I can rely absolutely, in possession of the highest rank. Leaders as effective as yourself, Galt."

Tall as Arlen, but broader in the shoulders, blonde, strikingly handsome, Galt projected an aura of command almost as potent as that of the antagonist he faced. Glacial blue eyes regarded the engineer of a successful coup, and veiled vitriolic hatred for this supremely assured military dictator: enmity harbored for Earthyears prior to this day. When the man spoke, his voice bore only an overtone of sardonic scorn. "I sense that I'm presented with an accomplished fact. Well, I yield to necessity. Whatever alterations Second Corps faces, I'll retain command of the men I'm proud to lead."

"I welcome that decision. Aware as I am of your admirable ability to win the loyalty of the men under you, I'll do you the courtesy to pass an invitation to your captains through you. I'll deploy the ships armed with the irreproducible weaponry into the Special Force under my direct command. I'll maintain our present supremacy in space, and counteract any attempt by the Gaeans to wage war on us in that element. I offer a commission to any of the four men who prior to today captained your first-class ships, should any wish to join me in that endeavor."

Galt returned Arlen a wintry smile. "Seventeen ships to fight one! And two to hunt renegades. Perhaps my veterans should consider your offer. They likely stand in need of a rest."

Flynn, who had not taken his eyes off Evan, snorted audibly. Not a muscle of the martial artist's face so much as twitched.

Arlen countered equably, "Seven of Norman's captains enjoy permanent rest in Gaea, Galt. If I'm overestimating the threat Signe poses in space, my excess of caution will operate to Columbia's advantage. I'm firmly of the opinion that it's best to err on the side of caution. At some point, we'll be forced to meet a challenge. No renegade possesses a first-class ship. One such loose to strike out of the void isn't a threat to laugh off lightly. Well. I regret that you'll undoubtedly talk your captains out of accepting, but I respect their loyalty to their corps and their commander. So. Evan, escort these gentlemen to Fifth Corps' Headquarters, and detain them until I arrive."

Galt's eyes now projected detectable malevolence, but he stalked off ahead of his men. *Of all the foul luck!* he raged inwardly. *Courtney must have blown his chance! What bloody cur tipped Arlen off? Has he a network of informers the equal of mine? Hell, no! I felt sure ...*

Damn! With Arlen dead at Brant's hand, Dexter would have lost no time finding a pretext to skewer Courtney, and make his play. I'd have stepped in to prevent incipient civil war--used my ties to Internal Security to gain a stranglehold on the civilian populace, and my reputation as a warrior enjoying the unswerving loyalty of his own men to rally leaderless Fourth and Fifth Corpsmen behind me. I'd have seen to it that Amin and Lacey met with unfortunate accidents. Early demise! This bastard as well, and that cocky upstart who fancies himself a duelist--Danner. Damn! Twice, Arlen has outmaneuvered me! Twice! Blast his slime-eaten soul!

Standing as if carved of stone, Arlen watched as his Captain marched Galt and his spacers down the corridor. Impressed by the manner in which Evan and his crewmen handled their touchy chore, their superior passed through the outer lock, ascended the ladder that stretched upward to the docking module of the ship, and rode the elevator to the bridge. Having changed the startup-code, and inserted a locking device into the port, he descended, and strode purposefully to Fifth Corps' Headquarters, where he made certain that Evan had arrived with his contingent. From there, he hastened to Ministry Main Habitat.

Confronting Norman as he completed the duty that had occupied himself and twenty Third Corpsmen all day, Arlen summoned Gaea's former nemesis into the privacy of a vacant office, informed him of the changes now in effect, and repeated the stern ultimatum he had issued Dexter and Galt.

The arrogant, deeply lined face of the hearer creased into a scowl, but the intent observer sensed that the heavier blow falling out of the black upon his peers provided a measure of balm to the man's smarting pride. "Since you're presenting me with an accomplished fact, I'm forced to accept your high-handed appropriation of my ship, and accede to the changes," Norman rasped. "I'll retain command of Third Corps."

"I commend you on your flexibility," the Commander-in-Chief replied smoothly, concluding the interview.

Gifted with a formidable power of persuasive eloquence, self-conditioned habitually to hide any emotion he chose not to let show on his expressive face, Arlen possessed a sense of personal honor that rendered him incapable of speaking or acting a lie. He found dealing with an associate whom he regarded

as a criminal distasteful. Exquisitely attuned to the political realities of his world, the military dictator put up with that necessity, and contented himself with rendering the defeated invader of Gaea ineffectual as a rival for power. His realization that Norman's bitter change in fortune constituted a severe punishment in itself for a ruthless careerist who once harbored high ambitions, served to blunt the edge of his disgust at being forced to withhold the punishment the man deserved.

Elated by his victory, Arlen returned to Fifth Corps' Headquarters, where he candidly informed Dexter of his success in persuading the latter's three most experienced captains to join the force he planned to create. That news did nothing to mitigate the Commander's wrath--a fact patently clear to the man unerringly interpreting his subordinate's body language--but the autocrat's subsequent revelations produced in Dexter the same sort of satisfaction with the misfortune of his peers as that which the Commander-in-Chief knew animated Norman.

Having released his detainees, Arlen returned to his office.

Looking up from his work as his superior took the seat next to his, Dahl listened as Arlen raised Lacey, commanded him to dock his ship, and instructed Rafael to do the same. A moment's thought enabled a veteran spacer-captain well versed in military strategy to guess what order Lacey stood prepared to obey throughout that interminable day. *When Arlen determines on a move, he doesn't settle for half-measures*, Dahl reflected. *Well. Signe will find that she has charged headlong into a worse brawl than she can handle, if she takes Arlen on in a war in space!*

Perhaps she won't. She might intend merely to protect her world from any future invasion. A vivid memory of an unforgettable face rose to fill the screen of the aide's mind. I wouldn't put taking the offensive past her, he conceded wryly. *What a woman she is! I can't blame her for hating us, knowing as I do what her people suffered.*

A long, ragged exhalation of breath escaped the ex-Third Corpsman whose eyes grew bleak. *I share in that guilt, if only by association*, he admitted as pain smote him. *I sullied my honor by serving under a butcher, so that I could captain a ship--even if I didn't perpetrate any butchery. I enlisted out of patriotism, learned what I joined so as to learn, and lived with devastating disillusionment, but my guilty conscience didn't stop me from reenlisting for a second six-Earthyear tour of duty.*

Now that my anger over Signe's snatch of my ship has cooled, I realize how lucky we were that she didn't annihilate that station with us on it. Gallant gesture, she made. And now that I serve a man I respect, will I end by participating in Signe's final defeat? Helping to kill her? That could easily happen. I hate the thought, rot me if I don't--but I'll wager that Signe would damned well agree that a corpsman ought unflinchingly to do what his duty to his world demands.

In the hearing of his aide, Arlen raised his wife. Dahl divined the depth of Karyn's relief, though she preserved a seemingly, unemotional bearing as she heard the summons to return. *Lovely woman*, he mused, as he caught a glimpse of violet eyes shaded by dark lashes, and delicate features framed by fashionably coiffed dark hair. *It's been quite a while since I laid a courtesan*, he reflected, stifling a sigh. *No time, this past fourweek. Well, I've got absolutely no grounds for complaint.*

Sitting back, Arlen let a sigh of wholehearted satisfaction escape him.

"Dahl," he instructed, "shut this damned board down. We'll lock up--take off early. You've put in a full shift today. Enjoy a leisurely meal, and relax. Find some charming companion to enliven your evening. We've got a hectic fourweek ahead of us, spacer."

Warmed to the core, Dahl shot the now firmly entrenched holder of supreme power over his world an ear-to-ear grin, confirmed in his belief that Arlen read one man's mind at least, with uncanny ease.

Chapter Five

Feats of stupendous labor succeeded Signe's ambitious directive. Pressure-suited men and women wrought prodigies of innovation while refitting a lock not designed for making repairs into a means of resurrecting a single functional vessel from two shattered hulks. Hanging precariously from spidery scaffolding rising a gut-chilling height above the surface of the planetoid, workers hampered by their protective gear carried out precise, intricate tasks.

Jassy found himself shouldering a crucial responsibility. An expert second to none in the field of electronics, the burly patriot doggedly, painstakingly, familiarized himself with the maze of circuitry governing the operation of the captured vessel. Imbued with reverence for the tenet of civic cooperativeness--a virtue relentlessly promoted at all levels of his socially cohesive, Spartan society--the short-tempered Captain worked for the most part in admirable harmony with his fellows while improvising highly technical solutions to problems posed by Signe's demands. Neither Wong nor Yuri irritated Jassy's sensitive nerves, nor did either man take offense when he lapsed into curt irascibility while frustrated by some aggravating difficulty. As aware of his old comrade's idiosyncrasies as he was of his genius, Conor treated him with the same grave courtesy that the warrior extended to all those under his command.

Standing pressure-suited, his magnetic boot-soles holding him fast to the curving surface of the horizontal torus, Jassy stared across its hundred-ten-meter diameter. Idly, he flexed fingers tired to the bone from delicate manipulations, and wiggled toes numb with fatigue from working the switches integral to his boots when he walked. His eyes, drawn unerringly to the giant turquoise planet dominating his view of the void, remained riveted to that imposing sight. Accustomed to the vista that initially produced awe, he scarcely noticed it now, but at this particular juncture he paid it the attention it deserved.

Dyson, visible as a bright, creamy half-disc faintly mottled with irregular dark blotches, rode low in the star-sprinkled black vault. That satellite of the giant gaseous planet, co-orbiting with the Gaeian and Columbian Groups, competed desultorily with the far-off, diamond-white sun for Jassy's attention. Feynman, a distant, ice-covered moon of the turquoise body, appeared as a luminous, featureless, gibbous shape no more imposing than the brightest stars. The dark rocks making up the O'Neill Group and the unexplored Glaser Group--two aggregations sharing an orbit with Feynman--escaped observation by the naked eyes of the man contemplating the starkly austere beauty of his solar system. On the screen of his mind, an even more impressive image formed: the panoramic grandeur of his wheeling galaxy.

Shifting his glance from the vault of space to the hull on which he stood,

Jassy wrenched his attention back to the delicate operation he had just completed. In concert with his fellow patriots, the Captain concerned himself these days less with the splendor of the view, than with guarding against lethal damage to his suit, and in avoiding any misstep on the scaffolding encircling the perimeter of the huge structure on which he now stood. He worked acutely aware that the slightest error could result in a plunge to an exceedingly nasty death.

Musingly, the archetypical Gaeon focused on the destructive capability of the ship. Certain that the rewiring just completed on the hull beneath his feet rendered the Earth-built weaponry integral to the horizontal torus functional, he grunted in profound satisfaction within the helmet that prevented either the grunt or the ensuing sigh to escape its confines. *No Gaeon ever unleashed such frightful energy with intent to kill*, he reflected morosely. *I wonder which of us might be the first whose duty demands that he annihilate a Columbian ship. Or worse ... a military installation manned by hundreds of men.*

Sobering thought, that. Norman committed mass murder of civilians--reduced five stations to crater-lakes of molten slag. Every one of us lost friends or family when the filthy rotter blasted Davis Station, here on Main World. And at the start... Shades of our martyred dead, why would a man who witnessed that carnage cavil at wiping however many of the bastards he could?

Memories flashed into the veteran's mind. *Norman deployed the massed might of fourteen Earth-armed ships against Gaea when he arrived*, he recalled with searing bitterness. *That array, manned by skilled captains ready and willing to kill, outnumbered the eight identical ships that rode to this system clamped to the hull of the Gaea.*

The canny brute knew what he faced. Four of our ships sat unused, unmanned, on their locks throughout much of our history. We couldn't afford to squander the prodigious amount of water required to operate all eight of them. So they lay moored, providing a site for training exercises. Four other Earth-armed vessels made infrequent transits within the Group when raids by Columbian renegades flying stolen second-class ships from hideouts in the O'Neill Group sparked public outrage. No Gaeon captain ever employed the awesome power of that weaponry in a combat situation. Their possessing the capability to do so sufficed to produce capitulation.

Norman blackmailed Sigurd's pitifully outnumbered corps of spacers familiar with the operation of those Earth-armed ships into surrendering. The thrice-damned cur threatened to wipe all eight municipal units crammed with civilians off the face of our second most populated planetoid, unless they complied with his demand. And when the members of our national defense force voluntarily marched into custody as a group, so as to prevent an orgy of mass murder, he spaced them. Massacred them, to a man. Wrong usage, Jassy. Sixteen of those fifty crewmembers were women.

Hatred swirled up from smoldering depths in the Captain's soul, and flared into incandescent heat. *If I'm the man whose finger rests on the control, I'll fire on whatever target I must*, he resolved grimly, *and lose no sleep over the business. The Columbians started this war, damn the vile curs to slow rot. Signe will sure as hell finish it!*

Slowly, the difficult undertaking drew to an end. Swarms of fighters pressed into unaccustomed labors finished the Herculean task to Conor's satisfaction and Signe's patent delight. Aware of the toll the exacting, dangerous work took on the participants, the Commander decreed that the equally daunting task of using small, mobile, highly specialized vehicles to spray every square

meter of the exteriors of two huge vessels with the vapor obtained by subjecting to extreme heat large quantities of a precious mineral would be delayed for a week.

Standing in the command-center from which she oversaw the recently completed work, Signe swept her eyes over the area crammed with terminals, lockers, counters stacked with datapads, and long metal worktables strewn with more of the slim, rectangular electronic devices. Her glance crossed to the board from which she kept track of her entire military operation. No flashing lights above the complex panels and large screens indicated a call demanding her attention. Seldom during the preceding hectic fourweeks had she entered the office reserved for her use within the Gaea : the seat of civil government more commonly known as Ministry Central.

Conor strode through the door, accompanied by Morgan. Between the two tall swordsmen trotted Wong. The diminutive martial expert felt a bit more at ease with this pair of premier warriors after playing so vital a part in the work just completed, but he still suffered from a sense of inadequacy when he contemplated fighting alongside them. Behind the trio, Theo and Jassy walked in shoulder to shoulder, followed by Sean, Yuri, and Eric. Eight officers seated themselves on hard utilitarian chairs pulled from beneath the largest table, and turned inquiring eyes on their commander.

"Gentlemen, we need a change of pace," Signe announced, scanning faces gray with fatigue. No less tired than were they, from having spent her share of time working suited, watching with fierce pride as the ship rose like the Phoenix from the ashes of avenging wrath, she sympathized with her captains. Her own splendid physique she discovered to be no proof against the exhaustion plaguing those engaged in the heroic endeavor.

"Wong will begin teaching our officers the course he and I are developing. I'll select, and he and I will commence to train, a special assault force: men and women capable of fighting after withstanding brutal deceleration in our altered ships. We won't finish that training by the end of the next seven days--a less stressful interval that'll provide us a chance to rest--but we'll continue while Morgan oversees the application of a microlayer of Gaeinite by vacuum vapor deposition. That task won't require so large a workforce. You'll have time during this week, Morgan, to instruct Wong as I asked earlier."

Nodding in assent, the redhead who managed to conceal grave doubts that his slightly built associate would be able to lead experienced spacer-fighters in battle effectively, resolved to do his best. *Wong ranks as a genius with computers* , he admitted, pondering Signe's motives. *He learned quickly how to work in a pressure suit, and didn't seem fazed at hanging off Conor's scaffolding, more than one hundred meters above the surface. He's got guts--no doubt about that. But fighting hand-to-hand?*

Signe will lose her computer programmer the first time we battle our way through a set of locks, and figure I failed her. Shades of the ancients! And what's this course he's teaching? What can he know that'll help us withstand brutal accelerations? Muscle-relaxing techniques? Special routines for working out?

"At this time, we'll proceed to the exercise hall down the corridor, where Wong will begin teaching his course," Signe commanded briskly.

Well, I guess I'm about to find out , Morgan grumbled inwardly. *Damn! but I'm bone-weary.*

Six tired men faced with acquiring a new skill assembled in a cavernous

facility lined with benches and crammed at one end with exercise sets. Beholding mats spread on the deck, they pulled off their boots, and strode barefooted to the place indicated by a wave from their instructor's hand.

Standing next to the Commander prepared to evaluate the efficacy of his presentation, Wong confronted the comrades on whose faces he read uncomprehending wariness. No whit daunted, the diminutive instructor bowed deeply, first to Signe, and then to his pupils.

Returning his protégé's bow, Morgan strove to keep his incredulity off his face. *He can't be a martial expert! Why, he's no taller than Midori ... less husky than Jess!*

The instructor spoke with easy assurance. "Signe. Gentlemen. One's students deserve to know their instructor's qualifications. Signe laid on me the task of teaching you methods of meeting an attack when both adversaries are unarmed, as well as other skills. Morgan, step onto the mat to face me."

Mastering his shock, the brawny Captain complied.

His round, unlined face utterly serene, Wong directed, "Attack me, Morgan. Grab me, and hold me immobilized."

Guardedly, the man thus adjured studied his opponent. The undersized teacher seemed not to have assumed the sort of offensive fighting stance Signe adopted when faced with an antagonist on whom she intended to use her art. He stood with his hands hanging loosely at his sides. Unwilling to aim a blow at so small a man, the strapping contestant decided to grab Wong's arms. Advancing, he shot out both of his own, to find his reaching hands blocked as the demonstrator swiftly crossed his own.

With a movement so rapid as to appear blurred, Wong gripped the attacker's right wrist with both hands, at the same time executing a sinuous clockwise turn with his left foot. Pain radiated up the tall warrior's arm as with unbelievable strength his antagonist pulled the captured arm across the front of his own body. Twisting the wrist, he raised the arm and ducked under it as he continued his forward movement. By the completion of the turn, Wong had released the grip maintained with his left hand. Holding Morgan's wrist with his right hand, he bent the captured arm inexorably back and down. Commanding, "Go with me," he forced his opponent's body downwards.

Precipitated into a rolling back fall, Morgan felt the aggressor release his iron grip before his adversary touched the mat. With compelling clarity, he divined that he owed his uninjured state to that circumstance. Sitting up wide-eyed, flexing the still-hurting limb spared disabling damage by Wong's timely release, the veteran gazed in manifest disbelief at the adversary whose eyes now danced.

Rising to tower over the wiry martial artist who so effortlessly put him to the mat, the veteran of countless sanguine battles managed a rueful grin when his raking glance detected no trace of smugness, no hint of derision, on the serene face of the instructor. In an impulsive, sportsmanlike gesture he held out his hand, and once again experienced the strength of the deceptively slight expert's grip. "That stunt convinced *me* that you're qualified," the redhead declared with gruff vehemence.

Five startled spectators exchanged glances. Suppressing an urge to laugh, Signe drawled noncommittally, "Don't feel singled out, Morgan. I couldn't put Wong to the mat, and believe me, I tried my level best."

Green eyes widened seconds before a laugh floated out on the ambient air. That

unforced, hearty response won the bested contestant his new comrade's wholehearted admiration. "If you couldn't, I guess I ought to be glad he didn't tear my arm off," the brawny veteran admitted with engaging candor.

Relieved that his calculated gamble failed to earn him the enmity of his colleague, the newcomer for the first time since his arrival felt that he stood a chance of gaining acceptance--even friendship--among veterans of whom he stood in awe.

Signe watched with satisfaction as Wong conducted his lesson. Plans simmered in a mind adept at developing clever strategies. *We've wasted no time*, she assured herself, *but the preparations that lie ahead! The training! Readying for a series of lightflash strikes--what a monumental challenge for people who've never flown the void!*

Well, perhaps a long delay between that first raid and the strike that will gain us new ships will lull the Columbians into assuming that our lucky snatch contented us--that we're thinking only in terms of defense. They're still boldly operating the mine on Penn's Rock, though with far more stringent precautions. Two first-class military ships at a time guard the surrounding space, commanded by captains who seem to operate under Arlen's direct command. He'll undoubtedly figure that if we attack, we'll most likely strike there, and seek to regain control of Penn's Rock.

Two ships. Their presence so close by worries me. If Arlen had launched a strike here--targeted our two defenseless hulks, and our immobilized vessel--we'd have sustained lethally crippling damage, even though crews man the weaponry in those ships twenty-four hours a day. Arlen undoubtedly assumes that we've no means of repairing the wrecks. Conor wasted no time returning the vessel we stole to service, so that I could move it. Once we've sprayed one, I'll feel safer. Mounting a search-and-destroy mission to blast the ship we captured--cruising a vast distance from Columbia, with no base of supply--would prove direly difficult. The cost to Arlen's government would be astronomical.

To implement such a plan, he'd need a base here. He could conceivably secure one, if he threw the whole of his fleet against us, but he knows that this time, we'd field a formidable body of seasoned fighters. If his assault force managed to gain and hold territory in the web of habitats girdling a planetoid, Arlen would find himself in the same position Norman did--afraid to employ that weaponry on any part of the web interconnecting with the banks of habitats occupied by his followers, for fear of initiating a deadly cascade of life-support failures guaranteed to result in the deaths of his own men.

When I saw during that final advance that Norman managed to lift before we could deal him his death, I feared that he might loose a lethal pulse or two from a low orbit, before transferring into a trajectory. On reflection, though, I suspect his annihilating the habitat where his doomed men still fought would have caused an insupportable plunge in morale among his surviving Third Corpsmen. I suppose it's possible that if he'd loosed a pulse at some randomly selected target, his committing such an unnecessary, profitless, purely vengeful mass slaughter of hundreds or perhaps thousands of innocent civilians might have produced negative repercussions in Columbia itself. Besides, now that I think about it, the canny bastard wouldn't have run the risk of wasting fuel in unnecessary maneuvers right before making an interworld transit. So we escaped suffering a final vicious act of mass murder, thank all the Powers.

I've mobilized what defense against a new invasion I can, but Arlen commands nineteen first-class ships. Two of the original twenty-four brought from Earth were lost long ago, and these two hulks now form a single spaceworthy vessel. Daunting odds, we face: almost ten to our one.

Might Arlen be plotting an all-out offensive--a war of annihilation? With the fleet he commands, he could launch a single strike, using the massed might of his ships. He could reduce a considerable expanse of our territory to slag, and slaughter more civilians than Norman himself did. Could this military dictator actually cavil at assuming the responsibility for killing noncombatants on that grand a scale? Even Norman drew the line at committing outright genocide. Perhaps a leader who earned the wholehearted respect of a man like Dahl refuses to commit prodigies of mass murder to wage a war of extermination on a distant world already stripped of its portable wealth.

Time flowed by seemingly in a torrent, as Morgan oversaw the application of the microlayer, producing two rogue ships cloaked in invisibility, undetectable on the screens of either friend or enemy.

Seated across a table from her captains in her command-center, Signe conducted a brainstorming session. "How do we communicate between the two vessels, without our broadcasts' being picked up by the military ships of the enemy?" she demanded, fixing her glance on Jassy.

"We can't. First-class military ships receive all the bands in use commercially and militarily, and broadcast on those and others that commercial or second-class military vessels can't use. The Columbian government maintains a monopoly on the manufacture of all broadcasting equipment, as did ours. Private citizens find it impossible to gain access to the components with which to build such gear clandestinely, and the power required for deep-space transmissions renders replication of the Earth-built communications gear in a military ship impossible to the most talented individual working with stolen or home-built components, or even components provided him by his government. Since we'll have to broadcast on bands we know the enemy will receive, we'll need to use a code."

Conor objected adamantly, "Codes get broken."

"And they're complicated to use. I'd think men manning the boards of two ships undetectable to each other--men engaging in rapid cross-communication during a coordinated attack--would find it impossible to employ a code," Theo added, daunted by the thought of actually commanding a ship engaged in fighting highly skilled foes.

"And developing codes would take considerable time," Sean contributed.

Wong interjected firmly, "True, codes can be broken. Languages can't. They have to be learned."

"Languages!" Morgan expostulated. "We've got enough to absorb, just achieving the goals we've already set ourselves, without trying to master some mind-boggling dead language!" A long forefinger stabbed empty space, targeting the originator of the notion.

"I agree," Wong replied in placatory fashion, his own hands raised palms-out, and held for a few seconds in a gesture unconsciously conciliatory. "But Inigo and I know an obsolete tongue: one I'm certain no scholar in Columbia would be proficient at translating into the universal Earth-Standard. It's one my remote ancestors spoke on the island they inhabited on Earth. Our ten Earthyears of intensive, family-directed study included learning enough of

that obscure variant of a tongue utterly unrelated to Earth-Standard, to include the expressions spacers would need to coordinate an attack. We broadcasted in that language to keep our family advised of our survival during the trip here, without tipping off Norman as to what we were attempting."

"What if either of you were to get killed?" Eric demanded bluntly.

Wong's placid face turned somber. "That possibility most certainly prohibits sole dependence on the two of us, but I could rig a computerized device that would transmit the commands of the man speaking into it, into our obsolete tongue, which would then be broadcasted. The similarly equipped receiver of the other ship would turn the message back into Earth-Standard for the men handling the board. We'd have to keep the commands simple, and reduce to a minimum the terms we'd employ in coordinating an attack."

"Shades of the ancients!" Intrigued, Morgan stared at the diminutive colleague whose fanatical determination to satisfy the harsh demands his mentor's course of instruction laid on him had gained the premier warrior's unqualified admiration. "That would work!" he exclaimed. The long-fingered hand now swept out a fluidly expansive curve expressive of triumphant agreement.

Inspiration struck Jassy. "Signe, we could use a commercial band! Their cargo spacers will likely wonder what in hell's going on, but their military ships might not even pick up our transmissions!"

Eagerly, Wong elaborated on his proposal. "Our language is complicated by an odd factor: voice-tones alter the meaning of words. A singsong progression of sounds might seem to the Columbians to form a code, but if they recognize that it's a language, it would still be difficult for them to find anyone who's studied it. Inigo and I brought the dictionary and grammar on macrodisc. Our linguist/historian/cousin used those to teach the rudiments of the tongue to our family members. It won't take long for me to rig the computerized translator device."

"Marvelous!" Signe exulted. "We'll have to be careful in Columbian space, to avoid colliding with vessels that can't detect us, and to coordinate our movements. Wong, your solution vastly relieves my mind."

Warmed to his depths by that hearty commendation, the newest addition to the Commander's core staff nodded silently.

"Where will we be descending, Signe? Squarely in the heart of the Columbian capital?" As he asked that question, Sean cocked his head, his handsome face set in that accustomed intentness which made him seem older than his twenty-six Earthyears. His wiry, graceful body, slimmer than Morgan's, if as tall, uncoiled a bit from the tense posture induced by concentration on the discussion. Absently, he ran a hand through hair dark rather than red, in an habitual gesture the twin of that so often employed by his cousin.

"Hardly, Sean. No, if we go undetected, we'll seek out a ship docked in a remote municipal unit, and snatch one--or better yet, two. Hopefully, the increased fuel capacity that Yuri's modifications permit will enable us to make a second strike they won't in the least expect. We may or may not employ the newly stolen ship. We'll keep our battle-plan flexible. This first assault offers us the greatest chance of success, given the element of surprise. This venture will reveal our intent, and rouse the Columbians to extraordinary measures--perhaps goad them into launching a retaliatory counterstrike."

Grim nods greeted that final observation.

"I'm betting that they'll not quickly determine why we're invisible," Signe

hastened to add. "Despite the orgy of looting in which Norman engaged, no mining family ever revealed that it produced Gaeinite, let alone apprised the brute of the value of that substance, or of its unique properties. Backs to the wall, the miners blinded him with rare metals, or perfect lab-grown crystals: diamonds, rubies, emeralds, and the like. Never plentiful, Gaeinite has traditionally been produced amid an aura of secrecy. Small hoards of the mineral were the first thing mining families hid--or destroyed--when the invasion began. To my knowledge, Norman never tumbled to the fact that we possessed a substance more precious by far than niobium, tantalum, zirconium, palladium, ruthenium, platinum, diamond, or even water ice."

"And should they guess, there's damned little they could do in a hurry to detect us," Jassy pointed out shrewdly.

"Don't underestimate either Arlen's resourcefulness or his intellectual brilliance," Eric warned, frowning blackly.

"I don't," the Commander shot back. "I'm assuming that eventually he'll nullify that advantage. That near-certainty makes speedy attainment of our goals essential." Rising, Signe cast a transfiguring smile on her advisors. "Gentlemen: my compliments on the monumental effort you've all exerted, and on the quality of the leadership you've exhibited." Those concluding words seemed to each hearer to be directed solely to him. Subtle signs in the way each man held himself as he departed assured the intent observer of her officers' renewed commitment to all but unattainable goals.

Pain broke forcibly from the depths where the warrior customarily imprisoned it. *You'll lose some of them*, she cried in her mind. *Perhaps all. You'll win--if you manage that feat--at a terrible price. Can you pay it, and think the gain worth the cost? Can you, woman?*

Hatred blended with sorrow, as old, still-vivid memories rose unbidden to ravage the Gaean Commander's emotional balance. Those searing reflections precipitated an inner struggle of titanic proportions: a brief, fierce battle that left the woman shaken, but victorious. Thrusting all thought of herself out of her consciousness, she resolutely turned to the problems at hand, focusing her mind firmly on the future.

During eight fourweeks of strenuous labor, Signe gained vastly increased proficiency herself as she coached her captains, and later oversaw the training of a corps of spacers who learned to program flight paths, lift and descent sequences, and orbits. The crews next performed complicated maneuvers in the two black ships. Exhibiting cool daring, the legendary warrior created and mastered a dangerous technique for docking an undetectable lifeboat on the eerily disembodied, unsprayed lock visible on the mothership once its Gaeinite-coated lifeboat lifted. Captains who only lately learned new skills schooled their subordinates in the art of flying ordinary lifeboats. Miraculously, no captain or would-be spacer died during that indoctrination—a circumstance that Morgan stoutly attributed to the efficacy of the program of instruction perfected by the Commander.

At the moment he agreed to follow Signe into a new and forbidding realm, Eric conquered his initial fear. As ready as Jassy--or any of his comrades--to subordinate personal ambition to the overriding good of the population as a whole, the Captain older than any of his peers harbored no qualms at the idea of role-reversal. He accepted instruction from the woman whom his long training had turned into a matchless swordsman as willingly as he had formerly taught her.

The extended span of youthful vigor conferred by the medical and nutritional

science of his day enabled this man born sixty-six Earthyears earlier to equal far younger men and women in the suppleness of his body, the swiftness of his reflexes, the quickness of his mind. Resolutely banishing his purely psychological apprehensions, the supremely athletic veteran of ten Earthyears of gory fighting on the surface met the physical challenge facing him.

A born teacher, the Captain undertook to impart to the men and women of his crew the skill he had so recently acquired. In the process, he discovered that a delicate-seeming female crewmember far outdistanced any of the others at gaining proficiency in handling a lifeboat. Reporting to the Commander, Eric hid none of his intense satisfaction as he demonstrated the innate generosity of spirit his superior so admired in him.

"Signe, Midori's a natural at flying. She's the only one of my crew that is. From the first moment she lifted, she demonstrated an exemplary grasp of the mathematics coupled with an inborn, intuitive ability to merge mind and body with the machine. I sense that ability to be utterly exceptional. She deserves better instruction than I can give her--an advanced course, as it were. I'd appreciate your offering her that, busy as I know you are. You won't find too many of our fledgling spacers able to match her."

"What welcome news, Eric! Of course I'll instruct her--if indeed my own skill still exceeds hers--and I'll ask Sean to do the same. He's by far the most spectacularly adept pupil I've taught. Between the two of us, we'll take Midori as far as we can. I appreciate your bringing the matter to my attention."

Elated, Signe investigated. Seated next to Eric's pupil, watching intently as Midori lifted a boat off a lock on a habitat, she instantly concluded that Eric had not exaggerated in his claim. The petite, black-eyed, golden-skinned woman, serenely self-possessed even for a Gaeon, demonstrated an aptitude that put her right alongside Signe and Sean in the Commander's mental ranking of those learning the difficult skill. The warrior-woman hid none of her potent satisfaction at that discovery, either from Midori, or from Eric.

Pride suffused the Commander. *For the way we were forced to learn, we've met a daunting challenge with courage and daring*, she exulted. *We'll fight the Columbians in their own element--render Gaea free in perpetuity! All we need is time.*

Time! That sobering thought blasted the warrior's enraptured burst of ebullient confidence. Racked early on by her fear that Arlen could be planning some lightflash assault, she had kept her two vessels constantly on the move, docking them randomly at various locations on the five major planetoids of the Group. Reflecting that neither the attack nor the search she dreaded had as yet transpired, she conjectured that Arlen's hold on power might turn out to be transitory.

Recalling the heavy cost in water fuel of making those transits, the leader sighed. She nevertheless took comfort as she recalled that the expenditure produced a prime benefit in addition to lessening the danger of a Columbian strike and reinforcing the training given the crews. A considerable number of the men and women who once manned the ships affectionately known as rock-hoppers--small interplanetoid vessels of uniquely Gaeon design that formerly plied routes within the Group, meeting the needs of families living precarious lives on far-flung stations--surfaced in isolated settlements. Those inconceivably bitter survivors of Norman's systematic purge of their kin--indigenous spacers deprived not only of their livelihood but also of a cherished lifestyle--emerged from hiding to flock to Main World. Fired with patriotic zeal, they not only contributed knowledge and skill to the cause,

they clamored to fight.

The day finally arrived when a superbly trained force of sixty-four people prepared to launch the strike that Signe hoped would gain them the nucleus of a fleet. Jassy commanded one ship, Theo the other. Exhaustive practice in limiting their cross-dialogue to the words on Wong's list perfected the two close friends in the use of the stratagem. Yuri sat the board with Jassy. Malcolm paired with Theo. The two men serving as second officers felt confident, after their own practice sessions, of their ability to coordinate their handling of the two ships while their captains aimed and fired the Earth-built weaponry. Signe, backed by Eric and Sean, led half the force of thirty fighters transported aboard Jassy's vessel. Conor, backed by Morgan and Wong, commanded the other half.

Harnessed next to Wong and twenty-eight other comrades lying upon Spartan accommodations crammed into the limited space of the remodeled ships, Morgan shot his protégé a grin, well aware of the martial expert's eagerness to prove himself in his first battle. To Wong's vast relief, the two men's close association had blossomed into solid friendship, to the extent that the pair anticipated employing a unique battle-strategy made possible by the variation in their sizes.

Having endured the cruelly prolonged acceleration that sent the assault force hurtling towards Columbia at a speed enabling them to reduce the time required for the transit from twenty-four hours to sixteen, Morgan harbored profound gratitude to both Wong and Signe, for the training that made the brutal lift barely tolerable. The uneventful interim, spent in alternate periods of exercise, sleep, and conversation, drew slowly to its conclusion. His eye on his watch, the redheaded warrior stoically prepared to withstand an equally brutal deceleration, as did his comrades.

The transfer into low orbit around Columbia complete, Signe and her officers studied the panoramic view of the surface filling the time-delayed multispectral screens. Swiftly achieving consensus, they determined on striking a tempting target.

Theo remained in orbit, on guard in space. Jassy descended. Water vapor exploding into plasma beneath the heat shield of the ship caused no noise audible to the inhabitants of the military complex formerly under Dexter's command, but now under Arlen's. The vacuum of the void preserved a perfect enshrouding silence.

The glowing sphere beneath the Gaeon vessel's heat shield, decelerating the ship, showed up plainly on the video screens depicting the vault of space, but the four men manning the board in the installation targeted for a strike never glanced at those. Two spacers on duty answered calls, and relayed others to various officers. One man performed routine administrative work. The other kept his eyes glued to the scanning screens.

Upon those graphic displays, the blips denoting incoming vessels appeared as stylized but detailed images revealing the shape of any approaching ship. Those images, generated from characteristic radar signatures, appeared overlain with constantly changing data pinpointing the ships' positions and trajectories. The man on duty checked that data against that provided by spacers manning the boards of the vessels. Were any vessel to maintain silence, he would instantly assume it to be manned by renegades, but he expected no such occurrence, given that a strike on a major military installation by an outlaw had never been known to occur.

Ships showed up on the video screens only as moving, dark, tenuous shapes hard

to see against the star-sprinkled blackness of the void. Only after the vessels began decelerating were they plainly visible, and then only as a glowing sphere of plasma: a luminous, unimaginably hot, gaseous mass of water atoms stripped of their outer layer of charged particles. That familiar sight did not admit of accurate judgment as to distance above the surface, by an observer depending on fallible human eyesight. The man responsible for monitoring traffic from space to locks customarily depended solely on the data obtained as a complex, high-tech receiving system picked up reflected scanning beams. Banks of computers tracked incoming vessels, and assumed partial control of each when such control became necessary to prevent collisions. That system instantaneously integrated raw data into the graphic displays.

The Gaeante microlayer coating Jassy's black ship fully absorbed the scanning beams striking the hull, as the invader coasted towards the planetoid. Deceleration caused the formation of a sphere of plasma, but that phenomenon went unnoticed by the men on the station's board—as did Jassy's transfer into a high orbit while his lieutenant and his superior reconnoitered, and sorted through the flood of communications emissions. The descent likewise escaped detection.

The ship settled onto the lock. No alarm, no flashing of signals on the station's board accompanied its initial contact. Listening intently, Jassy determined that the men manning the board continued to carry out routine business unaware of the proximity of a hostile invader. Anxiety melted into satisfaction as he concluded that the short-out gear integral to the vessel's docking module—equipment of his devising, which nullified such transmissions—worked perfectly.

According to the preconceived plan, the raiders docked at a point from which two corridors stretched away at right angles. Their every battle-sense alert, the intruders waited within the inner lock roofed by the docking module from which they had issued, breathing air released into the lofty cylindrical enclosure from tanks integral to their ship. Huge twin fuel pumps, insulated against the cold and shielded to withstand the vacuum that would again surround them once the vessel withdrew its air and lifted, stood side by side. Those squat behemoths chilled the air inhaled by the throng of warriors crowding against their massive bulk, and seared with bitter cold any unprotected flesh touching them.

Bothered on some gut level by the extreme ugliness of his surroundings, Morgan swept an uneasy glance around the premises. Fixtures ringed vertical gray walls shed harsh light of a malignant bluish cast. In the center of the imposing volume of space, the semicircular grillwork allowing access to the ship's docking module cast weirdly distorted shadows on the frigid metal of the deck. Soft respirations alone broke the oppressive silence.

Upon emerging into the empty expanse of the outer lock, Signe and Wong boldly pressed the switch that caused the pressure-proof door giving onto the corridor to swing silently outwards. At the instant that a pair of guards patrolling the long passageway arrived to investigate the open door, two martial experts sprang out to dispatch the unsuspecting men with bare hands, soundlessly. Thirty raiders separated into two equal complements, and took separate routes towards specific objectives.

Signe's force encountered opposition. Gelett, Galt's senior captain, emerged with seven of his men from the recess housing the elevator leading to the military complex, and strode out into the wide passageway. That battle-seasoned warrior, entrusted by Arlen's archrival with one of Second Corps' two remaining Earth-armed ships, beheld fifteen Gaean raiders bearing down on him. Shock failed to deprive the quick-witted spacer-fighter of his

ability to react swiftly. Barking an order, he sent a man sprinting towards the stairs, even as he unsheathed his sword.

Prepared for such an eventuality, Signe acted. With astonishing swiftness, she drew a slim knife crafted of Gaeanite from a sheath at her belt. Stopping in mid-advance, she threw the weapon, the movement of hand, wrist, and arm so swift as to seem blurred to any beholder. Moments later, the wicked black sliver sank with lethal effect into the back of the man fleeing to give warning.

One by one, the seven remaining Columbians, now engaged hilt-to-hilt in desperate swordplay, fell. Sean's blade found Gelett's vitals. Teeny cut down the dying Columbian Captain's second officer. Within minutes, the raiders gained the lock over the sprawled dead bodies of eight foes. Stooping, Signe retrieved her throwing knife before becoming the last Gaean to enter the outer lock.

Borne upwards through the docking module as they stood on the elevator, six tense raiders waited while Sean pressed the switch that would open the hatch of Gelett's vessel. Signe and Sean rose, charged through, and hurled themselves across the bridge to drop the two startled spacers manning the board, thereby preventing them from broadcasting a warning. Two other Second Corpsmen, emerging from cabins, fell victim to Eric's sword, and Teeny's.

Conor's force met no enemies in the corridor. Quickly and efficiently, his spacer-fighters eliminated the two Columbians guarding the outer lock below Lambert's ship. Morgan swarmed up the ladder of the inner lock, followed by Wong, Jess, Madelyn, and three other members of the assault force. Leaping nimbly upwards, the diminutive martial expert clung to the redhead's broad back, rode his comrade through the hatch ahead of the others, and jumped down milliseconds before Morgan engaged the blade of the astounded Columbian Captain.

Even as five of Lambert's spacers raced out of cabins to cross swords with Jess, Madelyn, and three Gaean men, Wong slipped through the melee to target the crewman who succeeded in initiating a garbled warning before dying from a single lethal blow to the throat. A statuesque blonde female combatant flipped off the screen, chagrined by her awareness that she acted too late to prevent news of the assault from being broadcast.

Lambert crumpled to the deck, both hands clutching at the wound reddening his chest. Moments later, the former First Corpsmen died on the blood-smeared plates of his bridge.

The prize having been gained, Morgan called down to the comrades on watch below. Conor, Jess and a swordsman named Ryan acted as the rear guard. Those premier warriors beheld Yukio charge out of the stairwell at the head of his full crew. Blocking the entry to the inner lock, the three Gaeans fought with savage effectiveness within the diminishing space, as the heavy door ponderously, inexorably, automatically closed. Leaping for the ladder, the trio mounted to the bridge. Conor slammed the hatch-cover shut moments before Wong initiated the lift sequence. Hurling their bodies supine on the deck, the rear guard stoically endured the ensuing trauma unprotected by harnesses.

Yukio, unhurt, spread the alarm. Carey and Brant, in space, responded. Carey, closest to Bessemer, where the attack had occurred, picked up on his video screens the ship stolen from Lambert. Boldly, the former Fifth Corpsmen, now a member of Arlen's Special Force, issued a demand that the vessel return to descend at the lock he specified in Columbia, or be annihilated. His fair warning unheeded, the Captain snapped an order to his second officer to blast

the still-fleeing ship.

Brant also spied Carey's ship and Lambert's on his screens, from a greater distance. He saw no other. Carey's command issued from Brant's transceiver. Thirty seconds later, the brilliant visible light marking the passage through the void of the deadly pulse from an Earth-built weapon lanced *from a point in space nowhere near the fleeing ship*, to annihilate Carey's vessel. As the highly trained observer watched through dilated eyes, the disembodied heat-glow signifying acceleration of a ship paralleled the course taken by the stolen vessel.

Realization of the import of what he just saw flashed with stunning force into the supremely competent Captain's mind. "Carey's bought it!" he grated to the men on Arlen's board. "Annihilated by a vessel totally invisible to me, except for the glow of its exhaust! I can no longer detect even that! I'm fighting blind, but I'm following the stolen ship!"

Arlen himself replied. "Drop back, Brant," he commanded, his voice betraying no hint of the cold fury gripping him. "That ship will be totally undetectable, if they're in free flight. You could be blasted before you knew you were under attack. Where does Lambert's vessel seem headed?"

"Towards Gaea--and the exhaust, which is all I can see of the other, indicates that the enemy ship's flying a trajectory identical to the one captured."

"Let both go. Drop back out of range, and return to your base."

Signe heard that command. Certain now that no other vessel pursued, she ordered Malcolm to lift off Theo's ship in a black lifeboat. At her command, a raider undocked one of Jassy's boats, and flew a parallel course with the ship stolen from Galt's senior captain, so as to free a lock. Having entered the Gaeante-coated small craft that Malcolm then docked on that mooring, the Commander flew back with Theo's second officer to dock the invisible craft on the eerily disembodied lock visible as an isolated entity standing out against the all-encompassing blackness which, the spacer approaching knew, shrouded the undetectable main bulk of Theo's black ship.

Signe next commanded the crews manning the prizes to return by devious dissimilar trajectories back to Gaea. After rearranging two crews of the black ships by lifeboat transfers, she headed at a formidable velocity back to Columbia.

So far, so good, the war-leader reflected. Taut with adrenaline-induced excitement, she listened as Arlen commanded the personnel of the mine on Penn's Rock in the Gaean Group to evacuate the premises in the four second-class military ships he kept stationed there for that purpose. Her breath hissed between her teeth as she heard her archfoe order Amin and Evan to escort the vessels back to Columbia. "You can't pick up Signe's Earth-armed ship on your screens," he warned his captains. "She somehow rendered it undetectable, except for the glow of its exhaust when it's accelerating. Don't try to engage either of the ships she snatched, should you encounter them. Your orders are to escort the miners back."

Penn's Rock just reverted to its rightful owners! the Gaean Commander silently exulted.

Boldly, Signe sent her two black ships into a high orbit around the Ice World. Eyes intent on her screens, she studied the two facilities located on that forbidding body, while listening to the cross talk among the spacers manning the enemy vessels.

Those communications revealed what the raider most wished to know: a first-class military ship lay moored at each installation. She also learned that a third such vessel circled the planetoid in a low orbit. On the surface, crewmen of the cargo ship docked next to the Earth-armed ship coveted by the unseen watcher loaded a priceless quantity of water ice into the two holds.

Ten minutes spent eavesdropping on the military band informed Signe that the circling ship would shortly transfer out of orbit to escort the cargo vessel back to Columbia. Sardonic amusement attended her hearing her foes state their erroneous assumption that the expenditure of fuel needed for the operation her undetectable ship had just completed prohibited her doing other than returning to Gaea.

Surprise, you'll get shortly , she promised grimly.

Determining on an audacious attempt, the Gaeon leader relayed her orders via the voice-coder. Jassy's vessel she left guarding the orbiting foe oblivious to the presence of a hostile ship. Timing her maneuver so that she descended unseen by the crew of the vessel circling the Ice World at low altitude, she settled onto the lock next to the military ship, which in turn rested next to the fully loaded cargo vessel. Leaving ten raiders on guard in the lock below her black ship, she, Conor and Morgan led a force totaling twenty men and women down the two hundred meters separating the two moored vessels.

Accompanied by seven of his spacer-fighters, Marcel stood in the outer lock below the cargo vessel. The former First Corpsman recruited by Arlen into the Special Force acted in his capacity of guarding the Ice World and the shipments leaving that outpost.

Lacey, whose vessel orbited, awaited the outcome of a rather heated discussion between Marcel and Lindsay, Captain of the cargo ship moored overhead, regarding Marcel's demand that Lindsay not lift before completing certain burdensome new administrative forms--a duty required of captains docking on the Ice World ever since the creation of the Special Force. Six of Lindsay's crewmen stood in a tight grouping nearby, listening as their captain scathingly declared that he could as easily transmit the blasted busywork from his board after he commenced free flight, as to waste an hour needlessly.

Charged with the duty of guarding the precious shipment of ice during the transit to Columbia, Lacey glanced impatiently at his watch, knowing that it would take him twenty minutes to rendezvous with his orbiting vessel by lifeboat. When Marcel held the irate Fifth Corps Cargo Captain to the letter of the new administrative directives, Lacey's slash of a mouth tightened. Dourly, he weighed whether or not to go aboard now, thereby shaving the edge of non-compliance with his own orders.

The corridors joining the three locks formed an equilateral triangle. That unusual layout permitted Signe's swift, silent, lethal attack on the four spacers guarding the outer lock below Marcel's vessel to go unnoticed. Having possessed herself of Marcel's ship without triggering any alarm, the Gaeon Commander left four raiders to man the prize. Geared for action, she raced at the head of her sixteen-member assault force, bent on attacking the men at the cargo vessel.

Lacey determined on taking his leave. Purposefully, he strode across the outer lock towards the door leading to the corridor, to behold his world's archfoe--supposedly in transit back to Gaea--charge through the entry at the head of a force fully as large as his. Drawing his sword with lightflash speed, Arlen's trusted veteran met the rush of the ruddy-haired raider singling him out for attack, even as Signe engaged Marcel, and Conor crossed

swords with Lindsay, a tall, spare man who swiftly proved himself no middling swordsman.

As raiders engaged all of the foes within the huge circular enclosure, five other Gaeans forged straight through to enter the inner lock, and mount the ladder. The Columbians fighting in the open space of the outer lock, taken by surprise, but outraged by the news of Signe's earlier attack, fought with savage fury.

Wasting no energy on speech, Lacey fenced with all his superb force, seeking an opening. He heard Marcel shriek, and drop to sprawl on the deck now slippery with blood, but nowise let the implication distract him. Focused on his opponent, the Columbian Captain fought with his usual cool nerve.

Morgan swiftly discovered that he engaged an opponent whose skill all but equaled his own. Taller than this coppery-skinned antagonist, boasting a longer reach, the redhead fenced with deadly effect. "That'll do for you," the veteran of countless battles waged through corridors and locks rasped in an undertone as he drove his blade slantwise between two of Lacey's ribs.

To the Gaean champion's astonishment, his adversary failed to go down. His side soaked in blood, the enemy Captain stayed on his feet, and fought on with fanatical determination.

Signe swiftly transfixed the opponent who appeared in Marcel's place. Pivoting, she saw Madelyn fall, run through by a burly lieutenant. Suppressing all emotion but icily controlled, feral rage, the Commander engaged the blade of the girl's assailant. Fighting with savage ferocity, she made short work of him.

Having swiftly sheathed her crimson sword, Signe's chief medical technician lifted the inert, blood-soaked casualty in strong arms. Bearing her dying comrade, Rhea vanished through the door to the inner lock.

Backing to act as rear guards, Signe, Conor and Morgan filled the steadily lessening space of the closing door at the entry to the inner lock. Exhibiting grim purposefulness, the three premier swordsmen battled the few surviving Columbians hampered by the need to maneuver above the bodies of their own dead.

Anguished by the sight of his cousin's taking what he unerringly judged to be a fatal thrust, Morgan yet found himself forced to admire the tenacious opponent still on his feet, still fighting, after sustaining a wound the Gaean knew beyond doubt should have dropped the man. As the aperture inexorably narrowed, Signe imperiously waved back the two swordsmen flanking her. A few seconds after taking the blood-drenched Columbian's last slashing cut on the forte of her blade, the silver-haired warrior whirled, raced through the door ominously close to shutting, and hurled herself at the ladder.

In the outer lock, the last man standing glared through dimming eyes at the door that now sealed off the inner lock. Lacey's knees buckled. His sword slipped from his nerveless hand to clang on the deck as he collapsed on the pile of Columbian dead.

Safe aboard, Signe activated the transceiver. In a tone breathing menace, she addressed those manning the orbiting vessel and that on the lock on the far side of the planetoid, via the military channel.

"Signe here, gentlemen. As you realize by now, I command two ships invisible to you. One tails the vessel now in orbit, its weaponry manually aimed. The other stands ready to blast the ship docked on the far lock, if you attempt to

lift. We'll serve both of you as we did the vessel we annihilated earlier, if either captain proves so foolish as to try to prevent our departing with the two ships you can detect."

Shock reverberated through the mind of Lacey's lieutenant. Staring in disbelief at his screens, Rafael saw absolutely nothing. Fear for the Captain he held in high esteem contended with black anger. "Danner!" he snarled. "Signe hasn't got two ships!"

Arlen's voice intervened. "Assume that she does, Rafael, Danner," he commanded in a tone cold as frozen methane. "Let her prizes go."

"I commend your concern for your men, Arlen," Signe declared evenly. "As I leave, I'll refrain from blowing both vessels we've got targeted, if the one stays docked, and I hear you issue the Captain of the other an order forbidding him to launch a pulse at my prizes."

"Rafael, hold your fire. Danner, stay put. My compliments on a daring double strike, Signe. You may find that you've initiated a war that costs you all you've gained."

"If you contemplate an assault on Gaea, Arlen, take warning. Escalate this conflict by annihilating Gaeian municipal units with Earth-built weaponry, and we'll retaliate in kind. I could have reduced your capital to slag, today, and escaped unscathed. I still could! Better think well before you decide on committing mass murder of civilians."

"As had you!"

Signe smiled contemptuously, but made no reply. Her captured vessels lifted. Escorted by a ghostly guardian, each flew a trajectory back to Gaea.

Rising from the board, the Commander stalked into the cabin where Rhea, the blonde medical technician who had carried the dying girl aboard, stood sadly regarding the corpse of her comrade.

Still holding his cousin's hand, Morgan knelt, his face a mask of bitter grief. Looking up, he rasped hoarsely, "Madelyn never regained consciousness, Signe. I didn't even get to say good-bye. Nor did Sean."

"Nor did I, Morgan. Heavy price we paid, today. We lost three others: Byng, Kunio, and Janella. I share your sorrow...and Sean's." *And Sean's parents' desolation, she railed inwardly. What agonies of worry they've endured! And now this. Bad enough, but our four-fold loss today represents only the beginning.*

Kneeling beside her bereaved comrade, Rhea thrust an arm in comradely sympathy around the man still holding Madelyn's cold hand. Dry-eyed, Morgan suffered silently, inwardly, consumed with his own sorrow, and with pity for the surviving brother and parents of the vivacious girl so easy to love. After resting a hand for a few seconds on the grieving warrior's shoulder, Signe silently withdrew. *What can I say? she agonized. What comfort can I offer?*

Having redistributed her spacer-fighters by lifeboat transfers so as to relieve the dire overloading of the captured cargo vessel, Signe, once again aboard a black ship, glanced through narrowed eyes at Theo's white face and taut body. Noting that the historian stared unseeing at the screens, his gray eyes remote, the Commander laid a hand on his. "They would have blasted us, Theo," she reminded him gently. "You heard their captain give the order."

"I know that. I had no choice but to fire, and I've killed far more than

twelve men over the past ten Earthyears. But still--twelve at once--a priceless ship destroyed..." The Captain's voice trailed off. The concerned witness to his pain saw that his eyes still focused far out into the void.

"I know how you feel." Signe's hand squeezed his. "Truly, Theo, I do, and I admire your ability to fight out of conviction, while hating the necessity. That captain--those twelve spacers--freely chose military careers. They were professional killers, who knew what they risked. Try to put the memory behind you."

"I'll put it where I've stored other memories, Signe--below the surface--but I can't seem ever to forget completely."

"Nor can I, Theo. Nor can I."

The bleakness in the warrior's voice, the depth of despondency in her eyes, startled the sensitive officer. Theo found himself squeezing her hand, offering comfort in his turn. No rejoicing, no exultant gloating over the spectacular success of the venture, animated the men and women mourning the loss of valued comrades while reflecting that they now faced even riskier ventures. Signe sat as if cast in bronze, brooding. Forcing her mind out of the past, she dwelt on new strategies, more strongly convinced than ever that her approach formed the only viable course either for herself, or for Gaea.

Chapter Six

Promptly at 0700 of the morning following the assault that renewed the conflict between Gaea and Columbia, a throng of Gaeian spacers sorted themselves into the order prescribed by custom, in an antechamber fronting wide double doors. Walking with measured, stately tread, Signe and Sean each preceded a single line of people advancing down two side aisles of the severely unadorned hall used solely for memorial gatherings.

Smooth walls rose without seam to the apex of the dome. Woven deckcovering muted the sound of footfalls. Immovable benches, rising from the deck as if growing from the plates, epitomized austerity of design so as to distract no attention from thoughts focused on the intangible. Upon a matching, immovable low table rested four delicately wrought, gracefully shaped, but starkly undecorated urns crafted of a lustrous, silvery alloy.

Moving in unison, the two leaders--Commander and bereaved brother--heading the procession of participants in the ceremony, turned, and walked to the center of the first bench in the rectangular array. Having closed the distance separating them, they faced the ashes of the dead. When the seat filled to capacity, the entire row of people sat down, simultaneously with those occupying the benches behind them. Silence as deep as that enshrouding the crypt beneath the deck enveloped the chamber.

Upon a dais rising behind the table, a man of scholarly aspect faced the assemblage. An expressive, deeply lined countenance framed in silvery hair proclaimed the venerable figure a centenarian. Clad in a severely plain suit tailored from fabric of somber gray, he studied the faces of those come to pay homage to the first casualties of the war in space. Erect, solemn of mien, he yet projected warmth: reverence for the fallen, sympathy for those who mourned. Lively dark eyes scanned familiar faces, and rested on the youthful woman whose hair so uncannily matched the hue of his. Wordlessly, silently, he

saluted her without moving a muscle. As if his mind touched hers directly, bypassing the usual route channeling input via the senses, he managed to convey pride, understanding, condolence. His glance shifted to Sean, sitting ramrod straight on the hard accommodation, his hazel eyes dry, his comely countenance set in lines of unalterable determination. Admiration blended with pity, as the man asked by the next of kin to take the role of Friend, and preside during the ceremony, beheld the youthful warrior's demeanor.

Aaron, you've seen so much of death, and yet your whole existence seems a celebration of life, Signe commended the aged gentleman, as sadness swirled through a mind racked with grief--for the bereft, as much as for the fallen. Intently, she listened as the ringing voice of the Friend carried vibrantly to the last row, and beyond.

"On this day we honor four Gaeian patriots: Kunio, Byng, Madelyn, and Janella. These exemplary men and women laid down their lives in defense of ancient and hallowed principles. In so doing, they demonstrated their belief that worthy life, not life at any price, constitutes the greatest good. These dedicated spacer-fighters made the ultimate sacrifice for Gaeians upholding our traditions today, and for generations of Gaeians yet unborn. They died to assure the continuity of a strong, cohesive world-family. They live on in our memories: heroes and heroines forever inscribed on our roll of martyred dead.

"In the altered state in which our departed comrades now exist, they grow in understanding of the universe, as they grew while alive, in character: possession of the virtues so prized by a society that upholds, instills, and venerates virtue. They displayed wisdom: recognized their duty, and performed it valiantly. They practiced civic cooperativeness: placed the welfare of others above their own. They exhibited fortitude: pursued the right with high courage. They demonstrated self-control: governed even their primal desire to hang on to life at any cost.

"They abode in honor: excelled in personal integrity. They offered loyalty: rendered full allegiance to their family-heads, kinfolk, leaders, and comrades. They felt compassion: respect for humanity as a whole. In death, they affirm life. They fought for freedom against oppression by invaders contemptuous of our national dedication to peace, harmony, brotherhood, and sisterhood. They died to preserve and perpetuate their culture. Let us recall the details of their lives, and praise their admirable accomplishments."

From a trained memory, Aaron eulogized each of the fallen, without referring to any notes. His clear, cultured voice, speaking in Gaeian-accented Earth-Standard, fell sonorously, comfortingly, on the ears of the listeners.

Well aware of the content of the tributes, Signe found her mind traveling dual tracks--hearing the words of the Friend, even as related impressions flashed across a consciousness preoccupied with strategic problems dimly foreseen within a clouded future.

Morgan's brawny shoulder all but touched hers. Sorrow radiated from the man as it did from the youth on her right, but the face so like Sean's reflected equally unshakable commitment to the cause. On the screen of the Commander's interior awareness, well-known visages appeared: a father and mother unable to leave their distant rock to place the dust of their daughter in the tomb, and other members of a closely knit family--old and dear friends of hers--shattered by searing loss.

We're crippled, without our rock-hopper fleet! Signe railed bitterly. *Our outlying stations remain almost as isolated as before. How Norman ever managed to make off with those twelve ships never designed for transits across so vast*

a distance, I can't imagine, but he did. They orbit Columbia, unused. Stored. He couldn't dock them there. No lock in Columbia fits them $\frac{3}{4}$ now, as ten Earthyears ago. Evidently Leon balked at further escalating the cost of a war far more draining on the national finances than he expected. So did Arlen. Bargaining chip, those vessels form. A nation's life-blood, held hostage to political expediency and greed. Damn the Columbians' crass souls to everlasting perdition! Damn their murderous militancy!

Banishing those images fleetingly entertained, suppressing virulent emotion unsuited to the occasion, Signe concentrated single-mindedly on the oration of the Friend.

Sean thought of his parents. *My hands will place Madelyn's ashes in the tomb, he promised them. Don't let grief overwhelm you. Mother ... I know. I know how you feel. I know.*

Morgan mentally bid his cousin a final, gentle farewell.

Conor found this too-oft-repeated ritual blurring with visualizations fogging a psyche as scarred as his face. A ghostly company took form in his inner vision. Wraithlike figures marched in ranked order across a gray expanse of mist. One smiled, and seemed to beckon. *While I live, so will Ione*, Conor mused. *But after?*

Altered state. We can't know for certain. Disembodied spirit ... one with the infinite? Growing in knowledge? Do I want to remember forever? Remember a laugh ... the touch of a hand ... the closeness of that hard, slim body against my own? Her mouth on mine? Damned if I know. But if we could somehow exist as a team ... united ... together ... forever wouldn't be long enough. Not nearly. Ione ...

Across the void, Arlen sat at his desk as if carved of stone. Eyes remote, he mastered the sudden upsurge of fury generated as he allowed his mind to dwell on the consequences of Signe's raid. *Three irreplaceable vessels gone--one annihilated with all hands! Five Earth-armed ships now at the command of that infernal woman. Two--undetected! Incredible. I'd say impossible, but for the indisputable eyewitness accounts of highly trained observers like Brant. How in hell ...!*

Think, Arlen. What can you deduce? Easy to guess that Signe resurrected one of those vessels of Norman's that she sabotaged on the locks. But how ... Never mind how. Accept the obvious fact: somehow she equipped her ships with a shielding that absorbs every wavelength of scanning radiation striking them.

Useless to rant that no such substance exists! Those thirty-nine inhabited planetoids differ markedly in composition from this one, and from the core of the Ice World. That latter core we know to be similar in mineral content to the rocky sphere of Columbia, and to the seven insignificant bodies clustered with Columbia and the Ice World about the L-5 libration point in Dyson's orbit. The Gaeans must mine some naturally occurring substance similar to pigments such as rhodopsin, or retinyl Schiff base salts--some mineral that absorbs electromagnetic radiation at the wavelengths normally used for scanning.

Wouldn't such a coating cause an untenable increase in the mass of the ship? Evidently not. Likely it's a microlayer only a few molecules thick. Whatever the shielding is, a shift through all wavelengths normally employed produced none at which her vessel could be detected. And to top off her exploit, she avoided running short of fuel! Surely she knew exactly how much she'd need for the transit back to Gaea, and for the descent. Impossible, her entire

operation! Impossible--but she pulled it off! Damn her insufferable gall--her phenomenal ability! Damn her cool nerve!

Grudgingly, the dictator succumbed to admiration for his archfoe. *Give credit where it's due, you smarting strategist. Signe refrained from leveling the military complex, or Ministry Main Habitat. You live. You didn't suffer instant annihilation, along with the top men of the civil government and your nearest and dearest, dwelling so dangerously nearby, until you belatedly moved them to Dayton for the duration. You don't lie dead, charred to a black cinder at the perimeter of a wasteland of molten slag. What incomparable conceit, yours! What unconscious effrontery, your assumption of the invulnerability of the heart of your world! Restructure your thinking, Arlen.*

Two undetectable vessels! Signe could have wreaked a fearful vengeance for Norman's depredations. Why didn't she at least blow Lacey's ship, and Danner's? Reluctance to destroy priceless, irreplaceable Earth-built artifacts wantonly, out of savage hatred? She blew Carey's only after hearing him give the order to fire on her prize.

Gallant, her conduct during that snatch. Her restraint paralleled her sparing Dahl and those hostages she could so easily have sacrificed once their usefulness ended. Refusal to stoop to Norman's calculated brutality? Or unwillingness to goad me into launching a war of extermination? An attack on our capital would have precipitated such universal outrage I'd not have been able to refuse, and stay in command. Signe warned me against committing mass murder of civilians--as if she expected I'd contemplate launching my fleet on that course, in retaliation for the limited strike she led. She lumps me with Norman, damn her cheek!

Well, I can't blame her. I found the thought of hurling our remaining sixteen ships against her world with precipitate haste tempting, but unworkable. Face it, Arlen. You lack the stomach for ordering the slaughter such a move would entail--lack the criminal mindset necessary to undertake mass murder of civilians on a scale dwarfing Norman's offenses. Signe harbors scruples that match yours, evidently. Well. Unproductive, indulging in retrospect. What to do?

I need to develop a countermeasure. A means of detecting a ship shrouded in invisibility. How ...?

Determined to find an answer, the Commander-in-Chief forced his supple body to relax, and stretch. Reaching into a drawer, he removed a large datapad, and a stylus. Eyes more remote than ever, he concentrated, focusing the full power of his brilliant intellect on the problem.

An hour passed, and another. Emerging from a state of intense cogitation, Arlen reached for the slender implement with his right hand, and positioned the electronic device with his left. Long, beautifully shaped fingers plied the stylus, swiftly filling the blank space on the face of the flat, rectangular object with calculations. A touch on a tiny switch at the base caused a blank page to appear. Continued feverish computation at length exhausted the memory of the device. Rising, the user plugged the datapad into his terminal, and saved his computations. Having erased the data from the portable unit, he began anew.

Four hours later the investigator sat frowning blackly, his whole person radiating acute frustration. *Glimmer of an idea, that. Radical notion, but elusive. You've reached a dead end--a blank wall. This problem ought to admit*

of a solution, but face reality, Arlen. You could spend decades working in vain for a breakthrough, or waste an inordinate amount of time delegating such a task to specialists you'd need to spend precious time recruiting and organizing--not to mention financing.

You need help: assistance from a mind steeped in an esoteric branch of mathematics new, and dauntingly difficult of comprehension, let alone utilization, even by a man with your background. Who can you ... Of course! Who else but the theorist who invented the tool you dimly see as essential to converting your tenuous notion to practical reality? Levi!

Well. Raise him, Arlen. Summon him here. You can't fire his imagination over the vid. Levi. Of course.

Two hours later, the checkmated seeker of a workable solution to the problem--a matter engrossing him to the point of forcing out all other concerns--narrowly observed the tall, spare individual entering his office: a man whom Arlen knew personally, but had not seen in many Earthyears. Genuine pleasure reflected from liquid dark eyes set in a face of profound sensitivity, as the newcomer strode eagerly forward with hand outstretched. "Commander, how are you? I'm delighted to see you!"

You don't change, Levi , the world leader conceded admiringly. *As ingenuous as ever--as untouched by petty slights and aggravating stumbling-blocks set in the way of your professional advancement by associates prejudiced against your unique, closely-guarded heritage and jealous of your towering genius* . "And I you, Levi. Please, sit down. I've hot coffee at hand. Let me pour you a cup."

A born aristocrat, this man--in the best sense of that word , the caller applauded mentally as with courtly grace the autocrat served his guest.

Over the rim of his cup, Levi studied the striking face of his host. Prominent brow-ridges accented deeply set, blue-green eyes shaded by thick brown lashes. Smooth dark eyebrows rose occasionally, in unconscious punctuation of perceived irony. Two pronounced, parallel, vertical lines above the bridge of the nose derived from that tendency. Two deeper creases slanted from either side of a nose lacking classic straightness, drawing the eye of the beholder to boldly contoured cheekbones. Two faint, v-shaped furrows framed a wide, bowed mouth, the lower lip so full as to emphasize the hollow separating it from the firm, cleft chin and lean, strong line of the jaw. Fine, straight, closely cropped brown hair hid nothing of the wide expanse of forehead. The whole countenance exhibited mobility: an ability to express subtle nuances of emotion worthy of a trained actor. Yet the face never lied--a circumstance well known to the visitor scanning it minutely.

A man of presence, Arlen--uncorrupted by power grasped adroitly and wielded wisely. A decisive but principled leader. What a pity this dismal phase of our history brings to the fore that side of a many-faceted, keen intelligence. Able military officers in a society steeped in a mercenary-fighter tradition far outnumber uniquely gifted researchers. Physicist, physician, psychologist, inventor, this former student of mine--as versatile a mind as da Vinci's--as original as Newton's. Now, what does this dynamic warrior-statesman need with an academician suffering acutely from burnout--a mathematician well past his prime?

Smiling at the professor whose courses challenged even a man of his intelligence, Arlen began his assault on an obstacle he refused to regard as insurmountable. "I'm stymied by a problem to which I absolutely must find a solution, Levi. Let me explain."

Lifting a datapad from a pile on his desk, the Commander-in-Chief thrust the device covered with equations in front of his colleague. With fervor that awakened a corresponding excitement in his hearer, he launched into detailed explanations of the dilemma facing him, his glimmer of insight that pointed to a solution, and his need of specialized mathematical aid.

His scholarly face intent, Levi listened. When the Commander ceased speaking, he perused the calculations. His excitement intensified as he grasped the nature of the problem. A finger darted to the switch, moving a blank page into view. Wielding a stylus with vigorous movements of a sinewy hand, the consultant scribbled computations.

Fifty minutes later, Columbia's foremost mathematical theorist radiated a frustration matching Arlen's. "This approach won't work," he breathed. "Nor will yours. It's more flawed than mine, although your conception of the application of so unique a breakthrough, should one prove possible, seems sound. I can solve the problem. I'm certain of that, but doing so will take fourweeks: an endless succession of fifteen-hour days spent immersing myself totally in the work."

"Will you undertake to solve it, Levi? Spend the time--put forth the effort? Assist in a national emergency? Drop your theoretical pursuits--your teaching duties--achieve the breakthrough that'll enable me to design and build the device I envision?"

Levi's smile warmed Arlen to the core. "Any leader but you would have issued me an imperious order, not a request," he observed accurately. "Yes, I'll undertake the task, and help you later, as far as I'm able, in the practical application." *Dust of the ancient prophets! Arlen just offered a challenge I can't refuse. Might it lever me out of my worn groove--re-ignite the old fire? Will I prove able?*

"I appreciate your ungrudging readiness to offer assistance no one else stands capable of giving. Levi, I'll not ask you to do this out of altruism or patriotism. I'll see to it that your reward--financial and professional--exceeds that of the work normally engaging you."

"Reward!" Astonishment prompted that soft utterance. *Your present eminence in no way affects your innate generosity of spirit,* Levi acknowledged inwardly. Bleakness surfaced in the theorist's eyes as he shook his head. "I need no reward, Commander. A national emergency takes precedence over personal financial concerns, and you've no absolute guarantee that I'll solve the problem, except my perhaps unwarranted faith in my ability. I'm fifty Earthyears old--past my prime as a creative thinker. I'll do my best for you, but I'd hate to accept any reward before I knew I'd deserved one. Arrange to reimburse the University for the salary of whatever professor the Chancellor hires to substitute for me, and let's put off any talk of other remuneration until we see what success attends my attempt."

Arlen's deep voice shook with passion. "Levi, your whole professional career has been one of unselfish service! I'm well aware of the obstacles you've fought to surmount--hindrances placed in your path by small-minded lesser intellects calling themselves theorists and professional educators. I've no doubt whatsoever that you'll solve this problem I've set you--and when you do, I'll demand that you accept a reward commensurate with the unique nature of your contribution."

Shades of the ancients ! "My greatest reward lies in the magnitude of the regard a supremely able former student feels for me, sir." *And that's no lie.*

"A regard you deserve, Levi. Well. I'll assign you quarters and an office, and arrange matters with the Chancellor. I stand in debt to you, as does Columbia. I'm recruiting you, as of now, for an indeterminate period of enlistment, into the Special Force. Your rank as my personal technical advisor will equal that of captain, and so will your salary. Your induction will simplify your gaining access to militarily sensitive information, and electronic components."

"Why...sir...that's most generous of you!" *I can't believe what I just heard!*

Levi's positively elated to find himself abruptly torn from his peaceful academic life. Why? I'd have thought ... "Not generous--fair. It's the least I can do, and not all I intend to do. I'll make the demand I mentioned, when you complete the task. Until then, don't hesitate to ask for any special aid or equipment you need, or my personal services as a consultant with regard to the physics involved in my glimmer of an idea."

Sliding the door closed in the wake of his newest recruit, Arlen experienced a surge of hope. If anyone can find a solution, Levi's the man, he congratulated himself. And he's eager. Past his prime? I'm thirty-six. Will I feel jaded at fifty? I hope not!

The taut frame of the man whose mind characteristically raced ahead of his motor system relaxed at this juncture. Well, Arlen, you need to outfit yourself with a specialized laboratory you can move at a moment's notice. Your personal vessel. That Earth-armed ship you reserved for your own use, despite the shock your captains strove to conceal, and the wrath your rivals prudently refrained from expressing to your face.

Yes. And you need high-handedly to seize the three Earth-built passenger vessels that once plied interworld routes. Enlist the help of the First Minister for those acquisitions--make use of Neville's talent for diplomacy. Three orbital forts-, and your perfected device. Assume that you will perfect it. Signe will find herself permanently shut out of the space around Columbia. Perhaps she'll die annihilated in the process of discovering our invulnerability, fighting as she does in the forefront of any strike she launches. Damned if I'm not forced to admire her unbelievable courage! So. You've work enough facing you to keep three men busy for a fourweek.

Five hours later, the Commander-in-Chief rose, stretched, ate a standard meal, and headed for Fifth Corps' Infirmary, where he looked in on Lacey.

Having awakened some twenty minutes earlier from a long spell of unconsciousness produced by the drug known as sleep inducer, the Captain severely wounded during the recent raid fought an uphill battle against an overpowering lassitude with the same characteristic tenacity that had kept him on his feet after taking so wicked a thrust.

Smiling into the ruggedly handsome face of the man whose narrow escape from death still sent chills chasing down Arlen's spine, the visitor noted the tight set of Lacey's mouth, and the sickly hue disguised by the coppery cast of the Captain's skin. "Awake, I see," Arlen greeted him. "Feel up to talking?"

"That's about all I can do, right now, sir. My ship. Did Signe..."

"No. She refrained from blasting either yours or Danner's--coolly demanded that I issue an order forbidding either captain to fire on those she captured. The two ships in which she and her raiders arrived we found to be utterly undetectable. Nothing shows up on scanning screens--not the slightest shadow. I therefore allowed her prizes to lift. She could have annihilated two

Earth-armed vessels with ease, but she acted with a gallantry I'm forced to admire even as I seethe at the losses we sustained."

"Two ships...both undetectable..." Stunned, Lacey gasped, "So that's why..."

"That's why she took Marcel and yourself so completely by surprise. Besides, she ought to have run short of fuel while conducting those maneuvers at the Ice World."

"I couldn't imagine..." Arlen saw relief flood the black eyes riveted to his. "Perhaps Signe intended to run both ships utterly dry, sir...employ as fuel the water-shielding that protects against cosmic radiation...chance the harm her doing so would expose those aboard to sustaining."

"Perhaps, but even so, she risked utter disaster. Lacey, how many men hit that lock? Can you make any sort of estimate?"

Frowning, the survivor strove to recall the details of the fight. "Signe herself led them...a goodly number. A ship's full complement...or more. The scar-faced swordsman who dropped Lindsay had to have been Conor. A redhead holed me...a young man. Commander...some of those raiders...were women ." Shock looked nakedly from the eyes of a warrior whose every instinct prompted him not only to spare noncombatants of either sex, but also to act chivalrously towards any woman: friend or foe.

Arlen precisely gauged the magnitude of that shock. *Problem, that cultural difference will prove* , he reflected bitterly. *The worst of us precipitated a situation the best of us will find emotionally difficult to handle* . "Signe descended in one black ship, and left the other tailing Rafael. She had to have fielded more than twelve fighters. It's possible she docked the other vessel first--disgorged a force, and then lifted again--but not probable. Damn! Strategist, that infernal woman."

"Signe ran Marcel through. He's dead...has to be...right...?"

"He is. Lindsay's alive--barely. He sustained two thrusts: one minor, and one nearly fatal. The raiders killed three of his cargo spacers, and wounded three others. The Gaeans took the remaining five men prisoner--hauled them along when they stole the full load of ice. Marcel's crewmen all died at the scene. You're lucky, Lacey."

"I should've...killed that damned redhead..." Black anger freighted the invalid's harsh whisper.

"You likely took on the third or fourth best swordsman in Gaea, Lacey, and survived. Be glad of that. Now, concentrate on getting well, and on following Ahearne's orders. Fine physician, he is. I'll look in again, tomorrow."

"I...appreciate that...sir." Exhausted by the effort to talk, the patient closed his eyes, and drifted into a doze.

Arlen strode out. *It's a good thing Lacey didn't ask the full extent of our losses* , he reflected dourly. *No sense unnecessarily depressing a man wounded as severely as he is. Well. I've deployed the remaining fourteen ships of the Special Force around both Columbia and the Ice World, and initiated stringent measures to prevent that blasted woman from ever again taking a ship's crew by surprise.*

Should I deprive Galt of his one remaining first-class military ship? No. We still face the likelihood of raids by renegades--by that damned brute Chapell,

who'll seize every possible advantage offered by a national emergency. In fact, I'd better transfer to Second Corps that new second-class military vessel fresh out of the shipworks. Its crude armament can't harm Chapell's ship--vessel of the same class, his--but it's all I can do.

Only Gelett's getting wiped with all of his crew by Signe and her raiders--of Galt's senior captain's coming off no better than Marcel and Lambert--prevented my suave rival from stirring up a storm of criticism sufficient to undermine my hold on power to a fatal degree. As things stand, I'm less secure than I was. Damn! That pernicious woman will attack again, soon. Safe bet, that.

What's driving her? Not revenge--not a desire to wage all-out war. She's bent on acquiring a fleet of Earth-armed military ships. Is she contemplating eventual conquest? A well-planned, relatively bloodless assumption of control of Columbia, rather like the coup I staged? That could be. Our populace, crowding a belt girdling a single planetoid, offers Signe an opportunity denied me. Impossible undertaking, conducting such an operation against a citizenry scattered over thirty-nine inhabited rocks.

Norman benefited from the dual elements of surprise, and a pacifistic tradition that rendered Gaea's citizens wholly unused to bearing or wielding arms. The Gaeian leadership held to the Convention. They built no weapons capable of killing at a distance. We broke that agreement, never abrogated, which Johann's successor negotiated between the first Gaeians and the first Columbians. The Gaeians even refrained from forging the swords the Convention allowed. That initial handicap renders Sigurd's and his warrior daughter's achievement all the more astounding.

And now, she's decentralized her government. Amin and Evan deduced that, picking up the communications emissions of her civilian officials. Signe commands not only five Earth-armed ships, but also a crack force of veterans: men boasting greater experience in bloody hand-to-hand fighting than do yours. Men, Arlen? Men and women. Damn!

Six hours of sleep gained after battling the poignant regret arising from the unwonted separation from his wife and son restored the mental and physical balance of the dictator who rose at 0400, and set about moving the headquarters of his Special Force out of the capital. Having summoned the officer he had installed as Commander of Fourth Corps upon Courtney's death at Brant's hand, Arlen waved his associate into a chair. "Ah, Orloff. The development of yesterday forces me to reorganize the defense of our world. Even as I regret the magnitude of our losses, I admit to harboring a certain grim satisfaction that my assessment of the danger Signe's possession of even one ship posed proved accurate. I count heavily on your whole-hearted support in the crisis we now face."

Arlen paused long enough to watch his new appointee nod vigorously. "I'm appropriating the facility operated by Fourth Corps at Chemen. I plan to base the Special Force there, so as to remove from the vicinity of the capital the headquarters forming a magnet for any future strike Signe might contemplate. I've begun measures that I hope will shortly nullify the advantage her undetectable ships confer, but until those defenses are in place, we're direly vulnerable to attacks out of the black.

"So. The personnel and second-class ships based at Chemen, you'll remove to the installation operated by Fifth Corps at Guyenne. That facility's smaller, and more distant from the capital, but not as well suited to my need. It's being vacated for you. I'll appreciate your prompt compliance with this

irksome, but most necessary order."

"Of course, sir. I'll oversee the operation personally, starting at once. Eight hours should see us moved." No chagrin surfaced on the face of the officer exceedingly wary of annoying this dictator whom Orloff regarded as having encompassed Courtney's demise, even though his predecessor died impaled on Brant's blade.

"I've arranged for Fulke to send second-class ships to assist with transfer of personnel. That aid should enable you to complete the move in even shorter time. Let me know when the premises are vacated."

"Yes, sir."

The Senior Captain strode in as Orloff departed.

"Ah, Amin! Sit down," Arlen invited, extending a hand. "I'm initiating sudden and extensive changes in the organization of our Special Force. Within six hours, I hope to see the changes implemented. I'm moving my headquarters out of the capital--to Chemen. When he's able, Lacey will act as second in command of that base. Dahl will be stationed there, as well.

"You'll take command of the shipworks at Dunn. Ford and Simon I'll place under your orders. Danner will be in charge at Briedd, over Gordon. Evan will alternate command at the Ice World with Brant. Evan's three-ship force will consist of himself, Waylon and Preston. Brant, Yukio and Demetrius will comprise the other. Whichever three captains are off duty there will man Fifth Corps' base at Rochester. Dahl will act as my coordinator--schedule orbital flights around Columbia by vessels of all those charged with defense of the home world."

Pausing to allow that list of changes to sink in, Arlen fixed his oldest and closest friend with glittering eyes. "I've taken steps to form a defense around our world that will nullify Signe's advantage, and hopefully, detect her presently invisible ships. I'm laying an additional burden on you, Amin. You're a ship-systems engineer. I've appropriated the three Earth-built passenger vessels. We'll utilize those ships as orbital forts, and mount the special devices for detecting Signe's black ships aboard them. Those passenger vessels will form an impenetrable shield around Columbia. You'll oversee the transformation of those ships into forts featuring locks to which military ships can dock. That's why I'm assigning you to the shipworks.

"Your orders will enable you to commandeer whatever talented individuals you need--military or civilian--to press into the work. I've confidence in your tact. I know you'll employ persuasion as far as is possible. That assignment will mean that your lieutenant will be commanding your ship an inordinate amount of the time. Can Jason handle that? I've put you in a bind, having just promoted Preston to a captaincy, and left you with an untried second officer."

That observation produced a vigorous head-shake of negation. "Sir, Jason is fully as experienced a spacer as is Preston. He's equally resourceful: a seasoned warrior. The transition occurred without so much as a ripple in the smooth operation of my ship. Lay your mind to rest on that score. As for the other matter..." Amin's body unconsciously attested to his willingness to rise to a formidable challenge, as forcefully as did his verbal response. "I'll handle it--do my best to justify your faith in my ability."

"My faith's anchored in bedrock. Well. I've ordered the passenger vessels to dock at the shipworks. I'll issue these new orders at once."

Rising as Arlen did, Amin gripped the outstretched hand of his

Commander-in-Chief. "You were right about Signe's intentions, sir," he admitted candidly. "But for your forethought in securing the first-class ships, her strike might have served as a catalyst for a successful coup by Galt or Dexter. It doesn't pay to underestimate so unique a warrior. Her ability defies belief!"

"She's what Norman's conquest retooled out of a protégée of Sigurd's. His daughter displays all his charisma, and more than his daring. Gallant enemy, Signe. She could have blasted Ministry Main Habitat to slag, and reduced our government to a shambles, thereby assuring the ascendancy of some military dictator of Galt's caliber, who'd have initiated a war of annihilation. The resulting bloodbath would have reached astronomical proportions in both worlds. I just hope she doesn't gain too great an edge before my countermeasures rest in place. She'll strike again."

"We'll stay on constant watch. Never doubt that."

Within six hours, Orloff and Fulke notified the Commander-in-Chief that the dual moves of personnel had been completed. Arlen lifted his personal vessel, docked at Chemen, and immediately set a crew of picked technicians to work altering the interior of the vessel to specifications he had drawn up himself with meticulous care.

Having seen the work begun, Arlen called Dahl into his office, and informed his subordinate of his newest responsibility. "When Lacey's able, he'll be second in command here, Dahl, but you'll rank as my personal aide, in addition to your duties as captain. You'll coordinate the orbital flights of the ships under all four captains in charge--Lacey, Amin, Danner, and either Brant or Evan, depending on which of the two is off duty from the Ice World. Work with them, to insure that a force remains aloft to do whatever can be done when Signe utilizes those undetectable ships in a new strike in the interim before I achieve a defense that will nullify her advantage."

"Yes, sir." *Shades of the slain, he's placing more trust in me than in captains who've served him for Earthyears! I can see why he'd not promote Simon. He's older, and far less likely to react swiftly in a crisis. I'd not hesitate to risk all for a chance at proving my worth. Arlen might well see Gordon in the same light as Simon. But why me, rather than Ford? He's as competent as I--as intelligent and as daring, I'd wager, as Lacey, Evan, and Danner. Well, I'll sweat blood for Arlen. Likely he knows I will. Is that why?*

Well aware of the degree of pride his words generated, the shrewd observer savored satisfaction. *Loyalty impervious to the temptations posed by ambition earned you my trust, Dahl*, he silently commended the former Third Corpsman.

"I'm laying on you as well, a second responsibility," Arlen informed the intent listener. "I've recruited Levi, the foremost mathematician of our time, into the Special Force. In his capacity as technical advisor, he'll hold the rank of captain. At the present time, he'll be immersed during the bulk of his waking hours in the crucial work I've laid on him, but even so, I'd appreciate your giving him any help you can, to smooth over a hurried transition from an academic career in the University to a role in a military force. Levi's the man whose importance to the security of our world just at present exceeds that of anyone else."

"Of course, sir. I'll do all I'm able to do for him."

"Lacey's lieutenant will dock here tomorrow. Rafael's bringing Levi. Lacey won't be on his feet for a fourweek or more--if then."

"At least he's recovering, sir. I'm glad of that."

No hypocritical wish, that , Arlen noted with satisfaction. *Dahl's no Ford, secretly rejoicing in a thinning of the ranks that increases his own seniority in the Special Force. Well, Amin will keep a sharp eye on Ford, and report any suspicions he entertains, should my self-serving subordinate decide to ally himself in any way with Galt or Dexter.*

My giving Brant command with Evan will bind a man formerly Courtney's senior captain more firmly than ever to myself. Able officer, Brant. Ambitious and calculating, but a man of honor. He's incapable of the sort of treacherous shift of allegiance to one of my rivals that Ford wouldn't hesitate to commit. Well. I've deployed my forces with care. I need to stay alert while I wait to see what develops.

Dahl met Rafael and his charge in the outer lock, when Lacey's lieutenant descended at Chemen. Expecting to greet a timid, unworldly professor wholly unsuited to military life, the veteran experienced shock when Rafael introduced him to a tall, spare, supple individual wearing a new black uniform as if he belonged in it. Noting that neither sheath nor hilt of the sword worn in a carrier suspended from the mathematician's belt gave the appearance of blatant newness, Dahl held out his hand to the theorist of whose intellectual might the spacer-fighter stood in awe.

"I'm proud to meet a man of your accomplishments, Levi," he greeted his new associate, marveling at the strength of the man's grip. "I'm the Commander-in-Chief's aide, as well as one of his captains. I'll show you to your quarters."

"I'd appreciate that," Levi replied, smiling with a degree of warmth that astonished Dahl. "Rafael, I thank you, for hauling me along."

"My pleasure, sir." Rafael's manner convinced the aide that Lacey's rather reserved lieutenant found his new colleague as refreshingly pleasant a surprise as did he himself.

As the theorist tossed a heavy bag onto one of two bunks in the cabin to which Dahl conducted him, the veteran informed his cabinmate, "We're sharing these quarters, Levi." Mindful of the newcomer's lack of familiarity with the duty schedule, he added, "At least, I'll sleep here when I'm ashore. This is your locker. I'll make us a cup of coffee, while you put away your gear."

Levi's chuckle warmed Dahl anew. "That task won't take me long. One extra uniform, and a spare pair of boots, constitutes my entire wardrobe. The rest of this bulging bag is datapads: a hoard I boldly made off with, when I left the University. I hated the thought of having to scrounge all this data out of the world's bank a second time, or of committing all of it to a macrodisc, which I'd need a terminal to access." Parting the bands holding the glass-cloth duffel bag closed, Levi displayed a greater profusion of the electronic devices than Dahl had ever seen gathered in one place.

"Shades of the uneasy dead! Your former colleagues might have to resort to *buying* one! Here, have a cup. It's this morning's--stout, you'll find it."

"Thank you." Casting a cursory glance around the cramped cabin featuring two metal bunks, built-in utilitarian furniture, a terminal, and a galley, the newcomer inquired, "Which bed's yours?"

"I'll use the far one. You take the bunk next to the terminal. You might want to read in bed."

"I do that nightly. Considerate of you, that offer."

"No sweat. I realize that you'll be immersed for the bulk of your days in the problem the Commander-in-Chief laid on you, but I want you to know that I stand ready to offer you any help I can give, with regard to your fitting into the military establishment here. If I'm in space, and you encounter a problem, or need a question answered, raise me, if the matter can't wait until I'm back."

The lean, expressive face of the new enlistee glowed with pleasure. "I appreciate your comradely offer, Dahl," Levi exclaimed, sensing a genuine wish to be helpful. "You could do me one favor, if and when you've time. I tend to neglect exercise when I'm immersed in a theoretical problem. Without my wife to penetrate the fog--to prod me into doing as I should, however unwillingly--I'll end by neglecting that duty. If you'd condescend to engage in a bout with foils with a man who's unlikely to be your equal with the sword, I'd appreciate the favor."

By the teeming life of Earth ! "I'll welcome the opportunity to take my own exercise fencing." Now why in hell would a man of his genius have taken up swordsmanship? Dahl asked himself in bemusement.

"Don't hesitate to interrupt me, however engrossed I may appear," Levi urged. "Collect me at your own convenience. If I'm at the threshold of some major breakthrough, I'll simply excuse myself on that particular day."

"I'll do that. Well, make yourself at home. My sleep-shift--when I'm here--is supposed to be from 2000 to 0400, but Arlen tends to work late, and I'm often delayed in getting to bed. I'll try not to wake you, if you're asleep."

A chuckle greeted that new evidence of thoughtfulness. "Don't worry on my account. My wife has acquired the habit of rising at all hours to tend experiments. I've grown oblivious to her leaping out of the bed we share, so I'm quite sure I won't be disturbed by your movements about the cabin."

"Your wife's a *scientist* ?"

"A biochemist, Rachel is. She has deposited a considerable body of work in the bank, under the seal of the University." A faint sigh escaped the veteran's companionable new peer. "I'll miss Rachel. Constant access to her company is the only aspect of my former life I'll miss drastically."

"I expect you will. I know Arlen sorely misses his wife. Given the likelihood of the war's lasting a considerable time, I'm glad I'm not married." Draining his cup, Dahl passed a few more cordial remarks before taking his departure, both relieved and surprised by the impression his new charge had made.

Levi actually seems to relish being uprooted so suddenly from his position on the faculty , he mused, puzzled by that circumstance. He's got depth to him you didn't expect. He's not the typical professor, that's for damned sure. Well! I rather think I'll enjoy playing mentor to so likeable a man.

Dismissed by Arlen at 1000 upon the following morning for an hour's exercise, Dahl made an appointment, in the Commander-in-Chief's hearing, to meet Levi in the fencing arena adjacent to the exercise hall of the base. Turning to encounter his superior's questioning glance, Dahl explained, "Levi urged me to interrupt him, sir. He said that without his wife around to remind him, he'd forget to take his exercise. I'll admit that his wishing to take it fencing rather surprised me."

"Mmm...so he kept that skill honed! After he offered Ordway so polished a challenge, and then pinked the man in so masterful a fashion, I'm sure his colleagues entertained no further doubt that he'd willingly defend his honor from their sarcastic slights. Ordway got the point. Levi laid his sword-arm open to the bone."

"Levi's a *duelist*, sir?" Eyes in which Arlen read shock, widened. *Had I not gotten my degree from a branch division of the University, I'd know that*, the son of middle-class parents conceded regretfully, even as he experienced fierce pride in having risen to the rank of captain despite his lacking the cachet conferred by residence at the main campus in the capital.

"Victor in three such encounters. Two when he was an undergraduate, and that one I mentioned, that occurred right after he accepted the professorship he just laid down to accommodate me. Throughout his academic career, Levi has encountered subtle prejudice--slights by men jealous both of his unique heritage and his towering genius. He equipped himself to take action regarding sneering remarks offered to his face, but couldn't defend himself against those tossed off behind his back by his fellow professors, or by administrators passing him over for certain benefits his achievements merited."

Dahl's lip curled. "I find it hard to believe men in positions of authority in a great university could be so petty, sir."

"Indeed." *No such pettiness afflicts you, Dahl*, Arlen reflected with satisfaction. *If you divined that Levi's a member of one of those old families still living in accord with an ancient heritage of scholarship and tradition, you never let your discovery influence your acceptance of the man.*

Dahl found Levi to be the possessor of a most satisfactory degree of skill with the sword. *He's not my equal, but he's no novice*, the veteran judged accurately. "You must practice regularly," he commended his partner.

"I fence five days a week with a teacher of the art--a man of considerable force," the mathematician confided. "I've done so for Earthyears. The activity keeps me in shape. I enjoy the intellectual thrill of trying to outguess an opponent, far more than simply working out on a set, although I do that as well." *Nice chap, Dahl. Comradely, devoid of condescension, unprejudiced. He judges a new colleague solely on his merits. Interesting face--not handsome, but expressive of friendly concern for a man he must see as totally lacking in military skill. Likeable, he is ...s traightforward. What irony! I find this tough, competent veteran a more congenial associate than I did a fair number of my fellows at the University. I wonder whether ... No. Brace up, man. You're here for one reason only. Damn!*

Not a word about his having drawn blood in a duel, Dahl mused. *No braggart, Levi. As unassuming and pleasant a genius as one could imagine. Not in the least what I expected!*

Amin, sharing quarters with Ford that adjoined those of Jason and Donovan, Ford's lieutenant, found himself the object of well concealed but detectable ill-feeling. Well aware of Ford's inward rage at being offered no position of responsibility despite his having served Arlen as long as Evan, Danner and Lacey, and longer than Brant, the man enjoying the coveted rank of Senior Captain in the Special Force brought about the arrangement of quarters. By preventing Ford's using the privacy of a cabin shared with a subordinate as a convenient place in which to foment dissatisfaction, he placed a subtle barrier in the malcontent's path.

Simon just might fall under Ford's sway , the Senior Captain surmised dourly. Well, I won't be here every moment Ford is, but I'll wager this arrangement hampers his activities. Jason will pass along to me any observation he makes of Donovan's abetting his captain's maneuvers, should that occur. Disgusting necessity, this, but it's the least I can do for Arlen. He's bearing a crushing weight on his mind, these days.

Late that night, the object of Amin's solicitude strode wearily into his private quarters. More tired than hungry, he nonetheless exerted his willpower, knowing his need to refuel a body running continuously on a formidable adrenaline high. Reaching into the freezer integral to his galley, he withdrew one of the standard meals synthesized and packaged by the Ministry of Food Resources, indifferent as to its contents. Perusing the label only to determine how long to set the timer, he thrust his dinner into the oven, and programmed the device.

While the food cooked, the Commander-in-Chief stepped into the shower cylinder in the bathcabin of his private quarters. Warily, absently, he soaped himself under the mist cycle, luxuriating with conscious enjoyment as the brief but intense barrage of rinse-water sprayed from jets in the wall. Feeling more relaxed, he stood fluffing his short brown hair as the spray ceased, and warm air issued from the jets.

Emerging dry, he tossed his uniform into the adjuster, and strode out stark naked to eat in that state. Shortly thereafter, he climbed unclothed into his bunk, thereby conforming to the practice universally observed in both Columbia and Gaea: two cultures that considered nightwear an unnecessary waste of costly fabric synthesized from inorganic substances painstakingly mined on airless, pitted rocks. The Gaeans retiring at that same moment far across the void saw no conflict between that utilitarian viewpoint and the ingrained modesty so characteristic of both sexes. Their custom merely decreed that spouses avoid seeing each other nude before slipping beneath the cover of the bed they shared--behavior guaranteed to strike the sexually permissive Columbians as utterly laughable.

Sleep eluded the man tossing restlessly on his hard bunk. *I'm too uptight to doze off--unable to come down off the peak of concentration I just achieved ,* he complained to his alter ego. *I nonetheless require rest. I don't dare take a mild dose of sleep inducer, either, given that I might find myself reacting in mid-shift to a strike by that infernal woman. It's essential that I compose my mind. I'll do well to think of something other than my multitudinous problems.*

Karyn's piquant face floated in the inner vision of the autocrat casting about for a restful topic on which to dwell. Experiencing a familiar stirring in his loins, he sighed as poignant yearning washed over him. *Banish that wish, as well ,* he commanded himself. *Think of something else--some theme unrelated to your present dilemma.*

Historical analysis. Rochefort's treatise on military history. Reflect on the way authoritarian figures repeat the mistakes of former regimes ad infinitum--here, and in the star-system of our ancestors' origin. Focus on that thesis. Keep your mind off your gonads, Arlen. Off your loneliness. Off the plots of your rivals. Off the likelihood that you'll lose men you value highly--men as close as brothers--in the conflict ahead. Think about the dangers to your honor your assumption of dictatorial power poses. Strive to see your present role against the backdrop of history, and take warning. You walk a sword-edge suspended over an abyss, daily.

Mustering all his power of will, Arlen forced from his mind all thought but that last, and fell asleep sternly resolved to avoid the most egregious errors tempting a military dictator governing an historically militant society.

Chapter Seven

Her lithe body taut, her attitude purposeful, the Commander of the Gaeon Military Force swept an appraising glance over the faces of eight officers seating themselves in the presence of their superior. Dark circles reminiscent of old bruises shadowed the youngest Captain's eyes. His handsome face appeared drawn--set in stern lines. *Madelyn's death aged Sean*, Signe admitted bleakly, *and Morgan as well, but sorrow hasn't affected either warrior's will to fight. On the contrary, each seems to have renewed his dedication to the cause. As did Conor. How long will it be before I lose Conor? Or Morgan? Or Sean? Or ... Eric?* Anguish seared the mind of the Spartan-souled patriot, and flayed her heart anew, without weakening in the slightest degree her determination to gain her overriding objective.

"Gentlemen. Two hours from now, we set forth to seize another first-class military ship. We'll transfer both vessels into high orbits around Columbia, and spend considerable time listening and learning. I consider it highly unlikely that Arlen will have devised any means of detecting our black ships this soon, but you can bet your next meal that he'll have ordered his men to watch the vid. We'll be undetectable, unless the enemy spots us when we decelerate. We'll make the transfer over a pole, so as to lessen the chances that our exhaust will be noticed. A ship might chance to be flying a trajectory from which we could be spotted. That risk we'll run. We'll decide on a target once we've listened."

Raking the company with keen blue eyes, Signe detected a collective determination the equal of her own. "This time, Jassy, you and Yuri will fly empty of personnel. That will enable you to hover on your exhaust, and still retain fuel ample enough to enable you to make the transit back to Gaea. If we lose a ship on a lock, you might be able to pick up those surviving on the surface. I'm issuing small but powerful transceivers that will allow those ashore to contact you. We'll enjoy no element of surprise during this operation, but to facilitate our exiting the lock, we'll employ the countermeasure Conor suggested. I'm confident that we'll gain the corridor. Every member of our assault force--thirty-two veterans of the surface war--will hold a decided edge over the majority of the corpsmen Arlen fields."

Scanning the resolute faces, the Commander observed nods, and even a grim smile or two. Fierce pride surged through her as she flashed her memorable smile on her core staff. "Wong, my congratulations on your voice-coder. Our communications emissions seem to have gone undetected. Jassy, we owe you as well. We'd have failed to lift one at least of those ships, had you not taught us what you did."

As she watched, the martial expert nodded gravely, while the bulldog face of the expert in electronics set into lines of even deeper determination.

Twenty-four hours later, seated between Theo and Malcolm at the board of the black ship, the Commander listened intently even as she studied the marvelously detailed, brilliantly illuminated depiction of the surface of Columbia: a panorama visible on the multispectral screens during each crossing

of the belt of habitats. Well aware that the terrain she scanned appeared on the screen as it would have looked ten minutes earlier in time--a circumstance that rendered multispectral screens useless during maneuvers--Signe reviewed the knowledge just acquired, and decided on a strategy.

Sitting back, she turned a speculative glance on Theo. "Arlen has spread out his force--moved his headquarters to Chemen, away from the capital," she observed. "He bases three military ships at this location." A long forefinger pointed at the screen. "That's a small municipal unit called Rochester, located on the opposite side of the planetoid from the capital. Chemen seems to be a large base, as is their shipworks: Dunn. Two other first-class vessels operate out of Briedd. That unit sports a larger military base than Rochester, but it's located on the edge of the web of habitats. I'm going to throw us into synchronous orbit over Briedd. We'll try making a snatch there."

Ninety minutes later, Signe picked up the broadcast in which Danner identified himself to the men on the board at Briedd, and announced his intent to descend.

"Theo, listen," the warrior urged. "That first-class ship on Lock Three, about to ascend, is preparing to take on fuel. This man Danner will shortly dock on Lock One. We're going to use the descent sequence you just calculated, to dock on Lock Four, thirteen minutes behind the ship that's descending. Danner will have pumped the air into the inner lock and gained the corridor, by the time we arrive.

"The men on the station's board will see our exhaust and sound an alarm, but neither captain will be able to lock onto us to aim his weaponry. This ship will absorb the scanning beams of their fire-control systems. They could wipe us by returning a blast along our weapon's scanning beam, if we try locking onto either ship, but I doubt that they'll dare loose a blast manually at a ship they can't detect--not when each captain knows that a vessel commanded by a peer lies moored on the opposite side of us from his own.

"Well. That ship on Lock Three is due to be fueled in ten minutes. Once they start that operation, they won't be able to withdraw the air from the inner lock without spacing half the crew. The men on the station's board will see our exhaust, and field what fighters they can, but the spacer-fighters aboard the ship that just docked will have to run twice the distance we will, to reach Lock Three. That corridor will be heavily guarded, but we won't face any worse fight than Norman's corpsmen customarily put up. This base is manned by Fifth Corpsmen--not by Norman's veterans--and they won't expect thirty foes to emerge. Jassy will stay on guard. He'll warn that second ship not to lift, if we can't snatch it as well. So. This strike will require expert timing. You two coordinate with Jassy and Yuri, while I issue orders to the members of the assault force."

Returning from a weary stint at striving to catch a glimpse of a disembodied exhaust on the video screens of his orbiting vessel, Danner found himself reminded of the ancient reference to searching for a needle in a haystack.

Needle I can imagine, but haystack? A pile of dried grass, he mused, cut and stored where it grew, until it got fed to cows. I can't really envision that. Big pile, it must have been, though.

Damned if I don't feel vulnerable! A black ship in free flight could blast us the way Signe did Carey. That poor bastard never knew what hit him. Well, maybe her last operation will satisfy her for a time. It took her nine fourweeks to strike after she stole that first ship. Could she be rendering her new prizes undetectable? Suffering shades of strangled spacers%I hope not. Two such are too many. Damn! I need eight hours of shut-eye. My head aches

from staring so long and so hard at the vid.

Striding at the head of his crew through the pressure-proof door of Lock One, Danner shot a calculating glance down the long expanse of the corridor. Patent satisfaction suffused him as he observed the four squads guarding the eight-hundred-meter-long passageway. Half of each squad of ten men, four of whom bore military handweapons warmed and ready, mounted guard before the pressure-proof door of a lock, their backs to the stairs and elevators giving access to the base. Five others marched back and forth along the corridor, advancing to a point half the distance to the next lock situated two hundred meters away before retracing their route. At the end of the march, they switched with their fellows, to stand guard over the exits while their comrades patrolled the hundred-meter distance.

Congratulating himself on the readiness of the installation for trouble, Danner unconsciously jutted his chin as his handsome face creased into a black frown. "Damned if I'll risk a blot on my career—a plateau in my steady rise in seniority," he muttered all but inaudibly. "I've made gains--drawn increased responsibility. Best of all, I've outpaced Ford, who's as capable as he is devious. Backstabber, that rotter--or could be. Well, no stain rests on my honor. None ever will, either. Damn, but I'm tired. Know what you need, spacer? An hour in the arms of Little Chloe. Her mouth on your..."

A voice shrill with fear burst from the intercommunication panel to annihilate the vivid picture generated by remembered pleasure. "Attention! All personnel! Disembodied exhaust visible on the vid! It's descending! It isn't Danner--he just docked! We can't tell whether it's heading for Lock Two or Lock Four! Prepare for action, you men patrolling the corridor! You men on sleep-shift, fall out!"

Danner took a split second to think. Instantly, he divined the intent of his world's archfoe. *Four. She'll dock on Four.* "Myron! Take Cheng, and return aboard! Withdraw the air--prepare to lift--and if a chance offers, fire on Signe! Use your best judgment, but whatever you do, don't let her board!"

Myron and Cheng vanished back into the lock. Commanding, "Spacers, follow me!" Danner raced down the four hundred meters separating him from the lock housing Gordon's ship, which, he realized with gut-wrenching certainty, formed the object of Signe's assault. As he ran, he shouted to the men in front of One to proceed to Two.

Gordon had just seated himself at the board when the alert sounded. Flipping on the vid, he beheld the disembodied exhaust settling alongside of him. Swiftly, he accessed the program for operating the Earth-built weaponry, and attempted to lock onto the invisible ship. To his horror, his scanning beam vanished without a trace, revealing no ship. Just as the notion occurred to him to fire manually, a harsh voice couched in a heavy Gaeon accent sounded from his board. "Don't try loosing a blast, either of you ships on the lock! You can't detect me—but I'll sure as hell blow you both, and then reduce the base to slag, if anyone fires on our sister-ship!"

Signe's got two black ships. Only one's docking. Twelve fighters. We can't fire, or that bastard will do exactly as he threatened, but we can take her. Damn her gall! I can't lift--we're still fueling! "Dunbar--you men--follow me!"

Hurling his body down into the inner lock, sword bared, Gordon urged the crewmen pumping water to complete the task. "Board the ship and withdraw the air from the lock!" he bade them in a hoarse shout.

Emerging into the outer lock, he touched the switch to close the door, and waited the eternity it seemed to take for the massive panel to swing shut, and seal. Head high, back ramrod straight, he ranged himself front and center of his spacers standing with their backs to the heavy barrier. Eyes fixed grimly on the outer door, which remained closed, Gordon prepared to defend his Earth-armed ship.

Five guards, two of whom bore military handweapons carried with the generators fully warmed, and therefore battle-ready, stood facing the pressure-proof door at Lock Four when the alarm galvanized them into taut awareness of imminent action. Assuming that the lock they guarded would be the one from which the enemy would burst, the officer in charge of the squad touched the switch. The door swung towards him, exposing the empty expanse of the outer lock. Having proceeded inside, he issued an order to the two subordinates bearing the electronic devices. "Stand to the right--tracers on the crack!" he roared. "Blast through the opening!"

Pounding feet informed him that the other half of the squad of ten just arrived. "Range yourselves behind me!" he bellowed. "Handweapons, to my left! Schmidt--Shinobu--fire through the opening door!" Eyes glued to the panel, he watched the flashing red light change to steady green.

The door slowly, ponderously, began to open outwards. The two tense guards--men charged with dropping whoever emerged--aimed the massive weapons borne in slings at their waists, by employing the imagers integral to their goggles. Both of them centered the red dot of the tracer on the widening aperture at a point the height of a man's chest. Each man's finger rested on the activator. As the gap increased to the span of a hand, two sharp cracks reverberated from metal walls as each combatant fired a lethal pulse parallel to the deck, into the inner lock.

No corpse fell. From a height a few centimeters above the deck, a jet of icy water under fearful pressure shot from a hose with force enough to slam the two corpsmen bearing the devices onto their backs. Water sprayed from the walls, drenching all four electronic weapons. The icy shower cooled the casings of the generators instantly.

The man lying prone played the stream over the four foes sprawled on the slippery deck, before cutting off the flow. Dropping the improvised weapon, Conor leaped to his feet and attacked, bared sword in hand, seconds behind Signe, Sean, and Eric. Behind the leaders, a force of raiders charged through the opening to engage the six unencumbered Columbians.

Preceding six men and women bearing handweapons, Morgan circled those battling. Two of his comrades fell before his eyes, but the surviving members of his squad gained the open door to the corridor. Swiftly, they cleared the space outside of attackers.

Wong and three others subdued the four Columbians bearing handweapons now incapable of being activated, owing to the chill. Having slashed the slings supporting the devices, the raiders gained paralyzing holds on the bearers. The four martial artists then propelled their captives into the corridor, where they used them as human shields.

Danner, meanwhile, stopped at Lock Two. Curtly, he snapped orders to twenty guards--those assigned to One and Two--to guard the lock, surmising that Signe's second vessel might possibly descend there. After disposing those men in strategic positions, he summoned three of the eight corpsmen bearing electronic devices, to flank him. The four Columbian spacer-fighters advanced at a run down the corridor towards Three. Far ahead of him, at the end of the

cavernous passageway, the leader saw a force of men in black emerge from the stairs, only to fall ignominiously. Sharp cracks of electronic weaponry reverberated off the walls.

As he neared Lock Three, the silently cursing Captain beheld four Columbians thrust out into the now cleared corridor, held by figures clad in dull slate blue. That sight prompted him to bark an order to the two men on either side of him, to hold their fire.

Nine other Gaeans appeared, two of whom held hostages. Beside those, her sword dripping blood, strode Signe. "Cease your advance!" she commanded imperiously, her voice pitched to carry. "Drop back beyond Two, or these six men die! And if you sacrifice them to hit us, you'll fall to those behind us, who're armed with handweapons!"

Stifling an obscenity, Danner halted, having advanced to within ten meters of Lock Three. Gut knotted, he weighed the situation. The ten guards in front of Three began to retreat towards Two, walking backwards. Six sword-wielding reinforcements arrived from below via the stairs, only to halt, irresolute, on seeing the plight of the hostages. "Drop to a knee, and freeze," Danner whispered to his men. "Behind those retreating. We'll hold our ground—see what happens." *I've got to stop her! Reach her, engage her blade, and prevail. But how in hell ... ?*

Signe's force of ten advanced swiftly, and gained a position before Lock Three. A peremptory order, reinforced by a threat that the hostages would die if it went ignored, cleared the stairwell opposite that lock of Columbians. Behind the fourteen raiders that included the six holding the hostages, ten more fighters armed with handweapons advanced at a trot. Those ten Gaeans stood shoulder to shoulder, forming a slanting line across the corridor as they covered the retreating guard, and the doors to the stairs across from Lock Three.

Shock surged through Danner. *Twenty-four fighters! More--Signe never left Four unguarded!*

As if to punctuate the man's thought, two sharp cracks sounded from the far end of the corridor. The lurid glow of expanded tracers illuminated the passage of pulses invisible to the human eye. Lethal emissions lanced from the door of the lock to the head of the stairs. Muffled shouts reached his ears.

Damn her incredible gall--she's fielded at least thirty men! he expostulated inwardly.

The door of the outer lock swung open at Three. Danner stayed where he was, taking advantage of the brief shielding the huge door swinging through a hundred-eighty degree arc afforded him. As the ten corpsmen slowly obeying Signe's injunction to fall back to Lock Two arrived at the point where the Captain knelt, Danner whispered a curt order for them to stop and hold their ground. "Raise your hands," he hissed. "They won't drop unresisting men. But stay right here."

Gordon watched the outer door of the lock swing open. Expecting help from the guards, he experienced a spasmodic clutch of the gut as he saw Signe charge in at the head of a force larger than his. "Surrender or die!" she challenged, bearing down on him.

"Damned if I will!" Knowing himself doomed, but stubbornly refusing tamely to surrender his ship, Gordon took on his world's archfoe in a gallant, fruitless, heroic last stand. Two minutes after crossing swords with the silver-haired enemy wielding her blade with unbelievable skill, he fell,

mortally wounded. Two of his men died with him. Three surrendered.

That assault took but five minutes. Crouching behind a burly guard burdened with a handweapon, who stood with hands raised, Danner watched as Signe and the seven raiders unencumbered with hostages disappeared into the lock. The ringing chime of steel on steel assaulted his ears. As he fumed inwardly, the six Gaeans holding human shields vanished inside as well. The ten others wielding electronic weapons stood immobile, warily watching the enemy force standing frozen farther down the corridor.

Minutes later, Danner saw Signe emerge, accompanied by two swordsmen. Still crouched on the deck, the irate Captain observed three of the Gaeans armed with military handweapons melt from the line, to hurry into the lock. As he watched, their seven comrades ran backwards towards Four, flanked by Signe and the two men holding bared blades. Glancing at the door to Lock Three, he rejoiced at seeing it swing slowly out from the wall.

Mistake, you just made, woman , he exulted.

Issuing a curt command to his three spacers to follow, Danner raced ahead, hugging the wall, shielded by the wide, heavy door from the view--and the aim--of those who would have to stop running in order to fire a pulse with maximum accuracy. As the four Columbians rapidly advanced, the door passed through ninety degrees of its arc, and continued to close.

Just as his cover began to shrink, Danner reached Lock Three. Speeding around the almost-closed door, he beheld one of his three subordinates plunge to the deck a mere fraction of a second before he and his crewmen heard the sharp crack of a handweapon. Ducking into the lock, the Captain stared at the hostages sprawled on the deck, but caught no glimpse of their captors. *She killed them anyway!* he raged.

As he stared irately at the limp forms, he saw the chest of the man nearest him rise and fall. *No. Unconscious.* Risking a glimpse outside, he waited until Signe's force reached Lock Four, waited until she touched the switch to close the door, waited until the heavy panel began its outward swing. At that juncture, he barked an order to his two surviving companions. Three men sprinted with adrenaline-enhanced fleetness towards the enclosure sheltering the enemy.

Arlen's eminently career-conscious officer reached the slowly closing door thirty seconds later, to find that he faced Signe, a scar-faced tall swordsman, and a younger man. "Faulkner, Chavez, Signe's mine!" he rasped, his blade ringing against that of the woman taller than himself. With savage but controlled elation, Danner engaged his world's archfoe over the fallen bodies of the corridor-guard, and fought to kill.

No squeamishness regarding gender affected the duelist's clear-headed exertion of formidable skill against a warrior of legendary prowess. Faulkner boldly took on the distinctively scarred Gaeon warrior who he correctly assumed to be Conor. Chavez engaged Sean, who soon realized that he faced a master swordsman.

Admiration of a worthy foe in no way impeded Signe's efforts to impale her adversary.

Instantly aware that this antagonist exceeded in force any with whom he had ever crossed swords, Danner kept his head. Lifted to a height of performance surpassing the best he had hitherto achieved, mainly through his icily inflexible determination to prevail, he fenced with surpassing effectiveness.

That circumstance enabled him to live through a closer brush with death than any yet faced in a career notable for narrow escapes.

Slowly, inexorably, the door swung through its arc, causing the aperture to lessen in width. "Back, men!" Signe commanded, just as Conor drove his steel home through Faulkner's upper arm. With a gasping cry, the wounded Columbian reeled backwards, to trip and fall across the dead. Sean, followed by Conor, withdrew into the lock. Signe parried Danner's last thrust, intercepting it with the forte of her weapon. Just before the door clanged shut between them, the premier warrior smiled in triumph into the scowling face of her adversary.

No relief at having escaped impalement impinged on the mind conscious only of failure. *Damnation!* the master swordsman railed impotently. *I had Signe within reach, and failed even to wound her!*

Pounding feet surrounded the Captain cursing aloud. One of his spacers touched the switch, but by the time the door slowly reopened to a degree allowing passage of the wrathful officer through the expanse of the outer lock, the flashing red light on the pressure-seal door of the inner announced the imminent withdrawal of the air. "How in hell did she mount that fast?" the frustrated Columbian snarled. "Can the slime-rotted bitch fly?" Florid, unprintable invectives rose like lava to his lips. Choking them back, Danner stalked out to view the carnage in the corridor and stairs.

Signe, Conor and Sean mimicked flight. Leaping upwards, they grasped paired metal rings fastened to a line, and clung with both hands while a high-speed winch lifted them in a well-practiced maneuver, past the ladder, through the circular hole in the elevator platform, through the docking module and the hatch, and onto the bridge. Having slammed the hatch-cover closed, Morgan dropped supine to the deck next to the rear guard unprotected by harnesses, as those manning the board lifted the undetectable vessel.

Finding his vessel to form the target of three converging military ships able to see his ship's plasma exhaust, Theo broadcasted a chilling warning. "I'm locked on the base," he grated. "You can't lock onto me! I'll level the habitat if you don't veer off, and my partner will exact a fearful penalty if you try to blast me manually! So beware!"

Jassy had passed a similar threat when Eric ascended in the stolen prize. Having calculated the odds, Dahl, Ford, and Demetrius reluctantly held their fire. Gordon's ship, paralleled for a short time by two eerily disembodied glowing exhausts, vanished in the void.

Ten minutes after the second black ship lifted, Arlen docked his personal vessel on Lock Two of Briedd. Striding into the corridor from which Danner had overseen the clearing of the dead and wounded, the Commander-in-Chief advanced to meet his captain.

"Signe got away with Gordon's ship, sir," the survivor of the raid announced levelly. "She crossed swords with Gordon herself when he valiantly refused to surrender, and ran him through. Dunbar and Carl fell. The others yielded. Those aboard did as well, when the enemy Captain aloft threatened to annihilate the ship on the lock if they didn't. Signe took six of the guards hostage. She shot them with sleep inducer when she left."

Braced to hear censure, the Captain unconsciously jutted his chin a trifle as he announced, "I lost Orrin when I advanced down the corridor. Signe's assault force wiped four guards and seven off-duty reinforcements. Her raid cost us fifteen lives. The guards cut down two of her spacers in Lock Four, but the Gaeans bore off the bodies of their dead. One of her raiders employed a well

conceived, novel strategy. He ran a hose from a pump in the inner lock, to the door, and directed a pressurized stream at the men wielding the handweapons. The frigid water cooled the generators. The Gaeans made off with the four devices. We figure that Signe fielded at least thirty veteran fighters--some of them women--in an extremely well-planned attack."

Eyes cold as the deeps of space narrowed. "Thirty fighters! From one ship?"

"No other explanation fits, sir. Myron and Cheng manned my board throughout the assault. Only one ship docked--on Lock Four. The other stayed aloft. That captain broadcasted a warning that if Myron or Gordon fired manually on the vessel descending, he'd blow both ships and slag the base. Dahl said he wasn't in synchronous orbit--that he hung poised on his exhaust, high up. Dahl maneuvered so as to be able to fire manually without endangering either the base or any commercial vessel in orbit, but the bastard accelerated, and then vanished before Dahl could aim a blast.

"How in hell that captain figures he's got fuel enough to dock when he arrives back in Gaea, I don't know, unless they pull a second hit to try to refuel. Those thirty raiders had to emerge from that one black ship. Just how they communicate with each other beats me, as well. No one--Dahl, Ford, or Demetrius--picked up the slightest trace of any cross-communication. Myron recorded on disc, and searched through it afterwards. Nothing unusual turned up, on any band used by the military. Myron assured me that the scanning beams of our weaponry couldn't lock onto the descending vessel. It's as if those ships absorb every damned beam that impinges."

"They do, on all wavelengths used by scanning devices, and likely others as well. They're totally undetectable, except for the visible glow of the exhaust. Well. Signe didn't snatch your ship, at any rate."

"No. But I crossed swords with her--got that close!--and failed to inflict so much as a scratch. She smiled straight at me as she parried my last thrust before the damned door closed. I had a hell of a time keeping my feet."

"You're lucky you lived. Gordon excelled as a swordsman."

"He did indeed, and it took Signe all of two minutes to skewer him. His men said the legend's justified--as I discovered myself. She outclasses me, much as I hate to make so galling an admission. Chavez met his equal, and that Gaeon who laid open Faulkner's arm had a deep, highly visible, sword-cut scar slanting down the whole right side of his face from hairline to jaw."

"Conor." Noting the signs of fatigue in the officer reporting, Arlen sensed the career-conscious Captain's fear of being judged negligent. "You did all you could, Danner," he reassured this man he trusted to the hilt. "Quite a coup, Signe pulled off, but she could have annihilated your ship and slagged the base as she left--employed the armament of three first-class ships, two of which are undetectable. She might have succeeded in blowing Dahl's as well, had she tried. So our losses, devastating as they seem, could have been far greater. I've put out a full alert, and deployed ships throughout the space around both worlds, but I'll wager she heads for Gaea. She picks up all of our emissions, damn her to slow rot!"

Arlen's impassioned tone flayed the careerist's hypersensitive nerves, even as he savored relief that the Commander-in-Chief saw fit not to hold him accountable for the loss of Gordon's Earth-armed ship, and fifteen good men.

At that juncture, Myron emerged from Lock One, and strode up to his superiors. "Commander...Captain...I just searched through those bands I recorded, again. I still found nothing, but there's a cargo vessel descending on Lock Three. The

Captain--Barclay--says he has information for the Commander-in-Chief."

"Ahh...Barclay captains Lacey's cargo vessel! Come with me, gentlemen." Fervently hoping to hear some bit of data that might constitute a lucky break, Arlen proceeded at a swift pace to the lock from which Signe so short a time ago lifted her prize.

The civilian who emerged from the lock, a lean individual of no imposing height, struck all three officers hastening to greet him, as a man of quiet force, self-confident and capable. "I'm Barclay, sir," he announced, offering his hand to Arlen. "Captain of the cargo ship Lacey owns. I'm aware that Signe's ships can't be detected, and that the Gaeans seem not to communicate with each other over any band the military can pick up. The thought occurred to me that she could be using a commercial band, so we've been listening, and standing prepared to record on macrodisc. Today we picked up a really strange emission that's possibly a coded message. Here's the disc. If it helps, fine. If it's a false alarm, I apologize for bothering you during the aftermath of a raid, sir."

"Barclay, if every commercial spacer displayed your diligence, shrewdness, and patriotic willingness to absorb the cost of a profitless descent and a delay, we might unravel some of the mystery shrouding these strikes. I thank you. Whether or not your information's helpful, you'll take on a full load of fuel while you're here on this lock." Arlen's eyes flashed as he pocketed the small case Barclay tendered.

"I appreciate that, sir." *Damned if I don't! Magnanimous, this leader.*

Ten minutes later, Arlen, Danner, Myron, and the officer who had been in charge of the detail manning the board during the raid, listened intently to a wholly unintelligible transmission: singsong, clipped sounds all seemingly produced by a single set of human vocal chords, even though the difference in volume hinted at an exchange between ships at a distance from each other.

"That's got to be some sort of code," Myron breathed.

"Strange...it's a two-way exchange, but it sounds like one voice," Danner growled, rubbing his chin with his hand.

"It is one voice, which suggests that they're using an electronically reproduced series of sounds prepared ahead of time," the dictator declared musingly. "But a code? I wonder. I'd hate like hell to have to convert my cross-messages to a fellow helmsman into code, doing the sort of maneuvering those two captains did today while avoiding collisions with ships unable to see either vessel on their screens! Code? Hardly. Nor is that an example of some sort of electronic scrambling of Earth-Standard phrases. Let me play that again." Frowning, Arlen listened. Shaking his head, he asserted, "That's no code. That's a language!"

"A language! Bloody..." Controlling himself, Danner bit back the sulfurous obscenity threatening to emerge.

"But sir, nobody in Gaea speaks any language but Earth-Standard! Nobody among Johann's settlers ever did! The differing accents only developed over the last Earthcentury and a half!" Having blurted out his immediate thought, Myron stared at the Commander-in-Chief in dismay. "I mean--excuse my contradicting you, sir." *Dust of the dead, watch your mouth, spacer! Arlen could break you with a word--reduce your rank, and void the position on the seniority list you've spent twenty Earthyears sweating to reach--drop you to a status equaling that of raw recruit, the way he did those two aides he caught selling*

information to Galt! He's pissed as all hell!

Instantly divining the stricken spacer's thoughts, Arlen spoke in a calculatedly reasoned tone. "I'm not an infallible judge, Myron, and what you said is perfectly true, but I'll wager a bottle of old brandy, nonetheless, that what we just heard is an ancient tongue, revived out of necessity. I'll get this disc deciphered by an expert linguist."

"Even if we do, sir, we still won't be able to detect either ship when it's in free flight." Bone-chilling implications of that circumstance flitted across Danner's interior vision.

"True--and a solution to that problem will take time. We'll concentrate on keeping our guard up, but the more effectively we defend against such strikes as this, the more likely it'll grow that Signe will employ her weaponry against a base or a ship."

His ire somewhat cooled by his consciousness that his career seemed not to have suffered irreparable damage, Danner grudgingly but candidly voiced two facts now grown exquisitely clear to him. "Signe could have slaughtered every guard in that corridor today, sir. She fielded ten fighters armed with handweapons. Thirty pulses, they could have loosed, but they didn't. And if I hadn't raced to the lock to beat the door's closing, in what proved to be a wholly futile attempt to stop her, Orrin would still be alive."

"If you'd prevailed, you would have stopped her. Your bold maneuver would have worked, had you not faced the three best swordsmen in Gaea. Damned if I don't find myself admiring a commander who takes the risks that woman routinely does, even as I seethe."

"I've been seething myself, sir, ever since I heard the alarm."

Arlen's mental state grew no more tranquil as he reviewed the situation while in transit back to his headquarters.

On the day following the return of the raiders to Gaea, Signe declared a holiday: twenty-four hours of complete relaxation. Moodily, Morgan reflected upon hearing the order that the respite came too late for the two valued comrades who had died before his eyes so short a time ago, or for Madelyn.

Well, he chided himself, moping about won't bring them back, nor will it serve to stiffen morale. You need to set an example. So smile--or at least, quit frowning. Ask Wong if he'd care to take you on in a bout with swords, and then give you a lesson in his art.

Conor and Sean arrived at the huge domed expanse of the fencing arena to behold the incongruous sight of Morgan's crossing foils with a man who lacked a full thirty centimeters of his height--an opponent whose reach fell far short of his own. Exchanging smiles, they watched for a time before donning protective gear.

Striding to the center of the adjoining long, narrow strip marked on the deck, the bereaved survivor still consumed by grief faced the colleague regarding him gravely from behind the clear, hard mask. Both fencers wore a plastron impervious to a thrust by a blunt-tipped practice-blade. Sean offered the formal sword-salute: the intricate, elaborate posture of sword and body signifying respect for a worthy adversary. Having returned the gesture with fluid ease, Conor engaged his comrade's blade with force only a shade inferior to that exhibited by the youthful master swordsman.

A few minutes later, Jess arrived with Ryan. Two seasoned veterans saluted

each other, exhibiting no less grace than did the pair now engaged. The tall, reserved warrior vigorously commenced a bout with the woman fully his equal in prowess, grateful for the chance to force a hurt-filled mind onto something besides a searing sense of loss.

Striding into the arena, accompanied by Teeny, Signe surveyed three sets of combatants with manifest pride, grown instantly cognizant of Conor's and Jess's motives in selecting those particular partners. No trace of the emotional pain generated by the recent losses of valued comrades showed on the handsome, faintly lined face beneath the startling silvery hair. Saluting the redheaded woman who returned the gesture with supple grace oddly at variance with her spectacularly homely features, the Commander engaged an opponent whose aggressive attack forced her full absorption in the task at hand.

A considerable time later, eight spacer-fighters stored foils, masks and plastrons, and retired to the dingy canteen across the corridor for drinks. Malcolm, seated opposite a delicately lovely, sloe-eyed, golden-skinned woman, greeted those dropping into chairs around a battered table. Smiling on the newcomers, Midori did likewise.

Glancing from face to face, Morgan inquired, "Anyone want something different from his usual? No? I'll fetch a tray."

As the majority of those seated helped themselves to tea, the purveyor of the refreshments set a steaming cup of bitter brew before Conor. "Try that on your tantalum-steel gut, spacer," he grunted. "It's a wonder you can sleep ten hours later, after you drink what our Ministry of Food Resources fondly calls coffee."

Placidly, the scarred warrior sipped the dark liquid. "Worse than usual," he admitted. "But tea seems insipid after you acquire a taste for this rot-gut slop. The Ministry's food-chemists must slip something in their wretched imitation that makes addicts of what few customers they've got left."

"I planned on sending them a packet of that Columbian coffee from the galleys in those ships we stole," Malcolm remarked disgustedly. "I figured on asking whether they could duplicate it, but every last smidgeon of the powder disappeared down the gullets of our spacers."

Midori's infectious laugh warmed her hearers. "I've got enough for one cup stashed, Malcolm," she confided. "Write the message, and I'll donate my hoarded powder."

Wong let the chatter flow around him. *As if the pain occasioned by the loss of comrades weren't enough, we find ourselves contending with additional sorrow generated by wounds to our psyches*, he mused bleakly. *Morgan's wholly oblivious to the way Jess's eyes change when he speaks to her. He has eyes for no woman but Signe, who cares for no man other than as a brother. Ryan's mourning Madelyn, but even if he weren't, he'd see Teeny purely as a fellow warrior--a comrade. Not even as female, let alone as desirable. Teeny entertains no hope of ever marrying--never did, I'll wager, even before Ryan grew so infatuated with Madelyn. And I find it a test of my willpower to treat Midori purely as a pupil--a most promising novice at my art. I manage to hide how I feel, but at a cost to my peace. The only ones among the eight of us whose happiness shows all over them, are Malcolm and Midori.*

Well, there's hope in that, for the future we're risking our lives to make free of fear for a new generation. I wonder whether any of us will live to produce sons or daughters. By the time this war ends, it could well be that the cream of our warriors will have died without issue.

Sad, that. Conor's the last of his line--sired no children. He keeps his wholly unhealed wound hidden, but suffers. He won't quit till the war's won, though. Not Conor. Nor will Signe. She takes every death to heart, even as she plunges us into new danger. Leads us. That's the key. The Commander risks herself first and foremost. She habitually declines to send a fighter where she refuses to go herself. Daring strategist, Signe, but that skill pales before her ability as a leader.

A vast distance away, across the void, Levi sat before his terminal, his dark eyes remote. Wholly unaware of the cup of fragrant coffee gone space-cold on the counter beside him, of the fact that the dinner-hour had come and gone, of the noise occasioned by a faulty blower in the ventilator shaft above his head, he sat erect, still. Mind at a white-hot peak of concentration, he thought on a plane most men could not attain, in the symbolic language of pure mathematics. True, pictures formed, but those visions bore no semblance to the world his body inhabited.

An hour passed. One by one, the advancing seconds marched into oblivion. Dahl entered, on tiptoe. Seeing that his cabinmate neither moved, nor spoke--seemed in a trance--he left again, sliding the door soundlessly shut behind him. Well aware of Levi's ever-deepening abstraction throughout the previous day, the solicitous spacer-captain had refrained from intruding on the mathematician's reflections. Not given in the best of times to idle chatter, Dahl projected comradely warmth without speaking: a circumstance that registered on some nonverbal portion of Levi's churning brain, enabling him the better to concentrate. At 1800, Dahl returned, bearing a hot premium steak dinner. His cabinmate seemingly had not moved during the six hours since his earlier intrusion.

Shades of the ancients, surely Levi needs to eat! the dismayed Captain fretted nervously. Should I ... Perhaps the smell will entice him . Setting the container on the counter beneath the galley , he again tiptoed out, shaking his head. I guess he's all right. He looked ... entranced. No ... eager, but far off. Lost in a realm we can't reach.

Genius, Arlen says he is. I don't doubt that in the least, but I somehow thought geniuses tended to be cranky, petulant, and self-absorbed. Levi surely isn't. He isn't even absent-minded--or at least, not more so than most of us get, at times. He constantly cooks the coffee to black sludge that would float a bolt, but says he's used to his wife's handling that aspect of his domestic life.

He misses Rachel--I can tell. Some woman she must be. Biochemist. My aching old wounds! I can't imagine a woman's qualifying as a scientist--doing original research. Well ... I'll stay out, till bedtime. Why not raise Lacey on the vid, and cheer him up? He's giving the medics fits, Rafael says--wants out of the infirmary. Ahearne won't hear of it. Might there be a terminal in Lacey's cabin? I'll inquire.

Having persuaded a disgruntled medical technician to push a portable terminal next to the invalid's bed, by promising to soothe the irate patient's nerves, Dahl spent thirty minutes visiting with the Captain whose whole person radiated frustration.

"Rafael's carrying on," Dahl assured him briskly. "The Commander-in-Chief has filled the space around Columbia with ships, all searching on the vid for a disembodied exhaust. All the corridors fronting locks, he's keeping heavily guarded. Signe targets first-class military ships--or has, thus far. One of these days, she'll overreach herself, and fall in one of her assaults."

"Don't hold your breath." Frowning blackly, Lacey growled, "Danner crossed swords with her, but didn't so much as score on her."

"He'd just run six hundred meters at top speed, before taking her on--after spending eight hours on duty. Brant will drop her, if he ever gets the chance."

"I wonder." Petulantly, the convalescent threw back the gray bedcover, exposing his heavily bandaged torso to the view of the comrade staring into his screen.

"You're looking better," Dahl observed cheerily.

"I need out of here! I'd heal just as fast aboard--or at least, in my quarters at Chemen!"

"You're doing just fine where you are, I'd judge." Sensing that his blunt assessment annoyed the invalid, Dahl confided, "Arlen recently took steps he hopes will lead to our being able to detect Signe's ships." As he spoke, he noted the gauntness of the coppery face, and the stubble of beard shadowing sunken planes beneath high, flat cheekbones. The warrior-captain's black eyes alone seemed unchanged, retaining their impetuous fire.

"Let's hope so! I can't believe we're fighting opponents we can't see!"

"Barclay heard one, though. He passed Arlen a disc containing a code of some sort. The Commander set an expert evaluating it."

"Code! Who in hell could fight at the same time he had to turn commands into code?"

"That seems impossible, I'll agree, but then so do undetectable ships. I think I see now how Signe showed up to snatch mine, though. Six men on two boards never saw a thing."

"Damn her to hell!" A clenched fist slammed robustly into the mattress.

Dahl smiled bleakly. "You never met her, Lacey. I did. And damned if I don't admire her, despite the way she scored on me. She's a unique woman, let me tell you."

"I can't say I met her. She skewered Marcel right next to me, though. And yes...unique's the word. She's a warrior, all right. Blast her!"

At 1950, Dahl walked down the corridor towards his quarters, smiling to himself as he conceded, *I don't envy that harassed-looking medic. Damned if Lacey won't prove a handful before he's on his feet! Well, he's recovering. No doubt about that.*

Just as he reached for the handle, the door slid open with a bang. Levi charged through the aperture to collide heavily with his cabinmate. Reeling from the force of the impact, Dahl instinctively clutched at the taller man, who in turn sought to prevent his comrade's toppling ignominiously to the deck. After engaging in a momentary, incongruous ballet, each regained his equilibrium.

"Dahl!" Levi exclaimed breathlessly. "I've done it! I've solved it! I can finish now..."

"Marvelous! I figured you must be close when I left the steak."

"Steak?" The mathematician's eyes, which had glowed with eagerness, regarded his associate blankly. "I never noticed..."

"You were off in a parallel universe. No sweat. I'll reheat it. You can eat after you get back."

"I need to report to the Commander-in-Chief, if he's available. I'll dine afterwards. Dahl, I thank you."

Clapping the mathematician on the back, the Captain offered hearty congratulations, shaking his head in a mixture of awe and relief as he watched the lean figure hasten towards the office of his superior.

Rising precipitately, Arlen met the man whose entire person radiated contagious excitement, halfway, hand outthrust. "Levi! You've solved it!"

"I made a major breakthrough, sir. Today...minutes ago. I've eliminated the worst barrier preventing my finishing the calculations. A week or ten days hence, we'll be able to sit down and plan practical applications. Or you will, with my admittedly feeble assistance. I'm not the physicist you are, but between us, sir..."

"Between us, Levi, we'll devise a countermeasure that'll nullify Signe's advantage." Exerting a powerful grip on the sinewy hand he still held in his, Arlen added grimly, "We stand in need of a break, damned if we don't. The linguist identified the root tongue, but says he fears that what's on the disc is an obscure variant. Numerous subfamilies of the main language-family existed on Earth, he informed me. He says this variant's as far removed from the main language as is Earth-Standard from Pre-Unification French or Spanish, and he can't locate any dictionary or grammar in the bank similar to what's on the disc."

"Even if we could hear them, we can't see them," the listener reminded the world leader whose frustration he sensed. "Well, I'll grab a few hours of sleep before attacking the problem again. The end is in sight now, sir."

"You'll grab eight hours of sleep!"

A transfiguring, warm smile greeted that adjuration. "I'll wager I get as much sleep, or more, these next few weeks, as you do, sir," Levi retorted mischievously, his manner conveying admiration rather than reproach. "I seriously doubt that your habits have changed since you were an undergraduate pursuing dual degrees, while inventing--as a pastime--things like a new method of generating the fields that protect ships and habitats from strikes by meteoroids. Fields twice as effective as those in use before that breakthrough!"

Arlen smiled in his turn. "Touché," he acknowledged. "But snatch eight hours tonight. At least start out rested."

After the door closed behind the mathematician, the dictator heartened by the news strode to the locks, and lifted his personal vessel. Thirty minutes later, he sat facing his senior captain in the latter's office at the base in Dunn. "Amin, Levi just made a crucial breakthrough. A week or ten days should see me able to start on the device. Brief me on your progress to date."

"I've refitted the three passenger vessels to accommodate crews, and mounted crude beam weaponry on their hulls, sir. They're ready. I scoured both the military and the University for engineers--even robbed Galt of a man he values, which served to deepen your colleague's underlying anger at your retention of power. We've designed openwork that will surround the ships:

modules that can be easily locked together by men in mobile assemblers. That framework will support docking modules to which military ships, fuel ships, and cargo vessels can lock, and a corridor that will allow access to the passenger vessel through its docking module.

"I've suspended production of all vessels, military and civilian, until this work's complete. In two more weeks, we'll start assembling the forts. That'll be touchy. I've muzzled my engineers--made plain that any who indulge in loose talk about this project risk serving a term in a military penal work detail. I've also forbidden them to use any electronic means of communication--forced them to brainstorm face-to-face, right here. In fact, I've sequestered them rather brutally, but I couldn't risk Signe's picking up a telltale broadcast, from a black ship. She evidently spends time listening, from orbit, before a strike, while totally invisible. She timed that raid on Briedd to perfection."

"She did indeed. I feel badly about that. Gordon died valiantly, defending his ship."

Amin nodded. "'Nothing in his life became him like the leaving it,'" he quoted softly. "I honor his valor, but it'll take more than futile heroism to defeat the foe we face now. You have nothing with which to reproach yourself, Arlen."

The Senior Captain spoke as friend to friend, his action arising from a bond older than that uniting subordinate and Commander-in-Chief. His measured words fell with soothing force into the stressed mind of a leader besieged on more than one front. Accustomed to the isolation arising from a position of autocratic power--an eminence the object of envy on the part of three able and ruthless commanders--Arlen experienced an upsurge of warmth. "Always the apt quotation," he remarked, smiling. "You're the original Renaissance man, Amin. Scholar, engineer, leader, warrior. Well-rounded."

"It takes one to know one. Well. When our forts are ready, we face a dangerous task. They'll be direly vulnerable while they're being assembled in orbit."

"Indeed they will. Let me assure you that I'm gratified by your accomplishments to date." *And by your unfaltering, loyal concern for a Commander-in-Chief backed to the wall by a thrice-damned female strategist the equal of any of us in daring!*

Rising, Arlen took his leave. An hour later, he dropped into his bunk. Tired to the bone, he determined to let his mind dwell on fanciful notions divorced from the problems plaguing him. *I just need time*, he mused drowsily. *No ... veer off that course. Drift ...*

Time. The hour is the same here as on the opposite side of Columbia ... the same as at Briedd, or Dunn. The same here as in Gaea, or on board a ship in transit between worlds. What is time, but a means of measuring change? Earthmen told time by the rotation of their planet, and its revolution around the sun that ruled their lives. Day equated with sunlight--warmth, for crops grown in soil. Night meant starlit darkness. Men living at one particular location on Earth knew their lives to run a certain span of hours behind or ahead of their fellows living at a different location. They saw the inconvenience as unalterable.

Earthmen. To their displaced descendants whose bodies still follow circadian rhythms rooted in the spinning of a planet unimaginably distant in space and time, the motions of rocks orbiting the gas giant bear no relevance. Arbitrary, our system. Artificial, but convenient, for men who live out their lives within windowless habitats shielded from cosmic radiation by double,

water-filled hulls.

No sun rules our lives. Artificial light bathes us constantly--bright by day, dim by night. Agriculture's a quaint myth. We synthesize meat indistinguishable from the flesh of slaughtered animals, from inorganic chemicals. We set our clocks by a standard unrelated to the minisystem ruled by our giant gaseous planet: the radio emissions of a pulsar. Clocks synchronized system-wide record time counted from 0100 on Monday of the first fourweek of the Earthyear 1 AJL. After Johann's Landfall, instead of Anno Domini ... hours, days and pseudoyears geared to our history in this star-system. Thirteen fourweeks to an Earthyear: exactly 364 days. On the day one of us celebrates his hundredth birthday, he's fourteen weeks younger than an Earthly ancestor who lived one hundred of his years.

What matter? We valued simplicity--knew that improbable, exotic, life-bearing planet of our origin to be forever lost to us. Earthmen measuring time experienced problems with accuracy. Our arbitrary system-standard time suits the sons of galactic adventurers: spawn of Earth, who brought their flawed, aggressive instincts with them. Genetic, our penchant for resorting to war? Or a learned response? Some contradictory combination of both?

Damn ... drop off the edge, Arlen. "To sleep ... perchance, to dream ... " By all the Powers, that man understood human nature. None better, down through seven Earthcenturies of time. Playwright whose insight still puts psychologists to shame ...

At Dunn, Amin also made a conscious effort to thrust his multitudinous responsibilities from mind, and invite sleep. A face floated into his inner vision: an achingly lovely, laughing, ageless face. Welcoming the diversion, he dwelled on a memory undimmed by the tumultuous passage of days filled with an incredible press of work. The smile playing over the lean hawk-features persisted on the aristocratic ebony face until Amin at length drifted into oblivion.

Within airless deeps bathed in diffuse light from a distant, splendid sun, rocks in thrall to a giant planet moved with stately grandeur, their rhythmic, complex dance no whit altered by the presence in their midst of an egocentric alien race.

Tossing restlessly beneath the coarse gray bedcover of her hard bunk, Signe pondered her options. *That last raid put a dent in our supply of fuel, as did my sending the cargo ship on a round of the thirty-nine inhabited rocks. More settlers survived than I'd figured. Tough folk, those. We gained some recruits: rock-hopper spacers seething at the loss of their ships, and young people as eager to fight as Wong and Inigo. Well, we needed replacements for the fighters I know I'll lose shortly.*

Face grim fact, woman. Your next prizes will cost you--in lives, and perhaps in ships. You've got to fight a restrained war comprised of lightflash strikes, until our fleet equals theirs in number, or Arlen nullifies our one advantage. And he will. Brilliant mind, Eric says he's got. He should know. He lived for eight Earthyears in their capital before he came back a swordsman, and taught me the skill that turned out to be the most precious gift he ever gave me. I could lose ... Eric. Oh, don't think of what you'll lose! We'll all die sooner or later--fall fighting for all we hold dear!

Think how you'll snatch another ship, and a load of fuel. Raid the Ice World? That's just what Arlen will figure we'll do. Hit Rochester? No. We just struck

a small base. Chemen? No. Raid Dunn, Signe. Strike their shipworks. Fuel ... that installation will be awash in fuel! It's essential that you devise new strategy. Think, Signe. Think!

Chapter Eight

At 0500 on a Friday destined to see drastic changes impact numerous lives, business as usual occupied the personnel of the Columbian base at Dunn. Arlen lifted from the Ice World, en route to Columbia. Ford, on patrol, orbited his world. Jason docked Amin's vessel on the first of six military locks, to emerge into a corridor swarming with Fourth and Fifth Corpsmen. Amin stalked at the head of his team of engineers through the huge domed workplace on the far end of the base.

Simon's Earth-armed ship lay moored on one of four locks normally used for building new ships, while a crew of technicians repaired damage to the elevator in his docking module. Two of Simon's spacers sat his board. Four others slept. After the repairmen finished the job, the Captain, surrounded by five of his crewmen, listened to the engineer's report. "Wear on the assembly constituted the main problem, sir," he explained. "Metal dust, and even shavings, accumulated in..."

Abruptly, he broke off in mid-sentence, as a tense voice thundered from the intercommunication system. "Disembodied exhaust docking--we think! We can't tell exactly! If it's an exhaust, it's being obscured somehow! But it isn't--hell and damnation, it's docking on the construction and repair locks! Fall out, you men on sleep-shift! All hands to the construction locks!"

Fear penetrated to the marrow of Simon's bones.

Corpsmen patrolled every section of the base. Dodging across the wide, cluttered expanse of the workshop towards the corridor leading to the construction locks, Amin collected a sizeable force, and raced at its head to the doors of a short passageway connecting the huge domed section he occupied with the one being attacked. A muffled roar assaulted his ears. Seals shot into place across the corridor he sought to enter. "Breach in the habitat!" he barked. "Follow me!" Mentally gauging the point of the rupture, the battle-wise warrior pivoted, and took a flight of stairs three at a time.

A strained voice issuing from the intercommunication system conveyed a new, far more chilling warning. "Three enemy vessels are docking, not one! We can't blast them. The Captain of an undetectable ship aloft threatens that if we do, he'll annihilate the dome and wipe the first-class ships converging! All hands to the construction locks!" Even as that rasping adjuration issued from a myriad wall-panels, a series of dull booms signifying explosions of blasting gel sent vibrations rippling through the deckplates beneath racing feet.

Amin reached the foot of the stairwell leading to the cavernous corridor fronting the construction locks, to behold a smoking tangle of wreckage lying within a gaping hole where stairs and elevator had stood only minutes earlier. Even as the warrior seething with wrath whirled with intent to mount a second, more distant flight of stairs, a new detonation informed him that he now possessed no route whatsoever to the battleground.

Assuming command in the corridor most heavily packed with guards, Jason barked orders after hearing the initial alarm. His battle-wise spacer-fighters

promptly relieved eleven inexperienced Fifth Corpsmen of handweapons warmed and ready, even as their superior officer himself donned the goggles and slipped into the sling of a massive weapon. Snapping a command to the Fifth Corpsmen in charge of twenty guards, Amin's lieutenant incorporated that body of men into his. Thus reinforced, he advanced at a swift pace towards the site of the attack.

As he reached the entry to the storage area separating him from the corridor fronting the construction locks, he came to a halt. Standing in front of the jamb, he touched the switch. Just as the door slid aside far enough to allow him to enter, a muffled roar coincided with the eruption outwards through the portal of a blinding ball of flame.

Fire enveloped Jason even as he staggered back. Two of the spacers ranged behind the Lieutenant caught the man still on his feet, as seals shot across in front of the aperture, containing the raging inferno. "I'm all right," their leader gasped. "Let go!"

The eyes staring into his reflected sheer horror. "Don't touch those goggles," one of his crewmen cautioned with determined force as another extinguished the Lieutenant's burning hair. "Or his face. Rovere, run like hell for a medic! Hear?"

Three pairs of practiced hands lifted Jason's now shuddering body, and held it horizontally. That trio of spacer-fighters carried the severely burned officer swiftly towards the nearest medical station, as his leaderless crewmen and the squad of corridor guards stood contemplating the sealed entry in manifest frustration.

After hearing the first alarm, the Lieutenant in charge of the guards stationed in the wide span of deck fronting the construction locks--space that normally held huge assemblies awaiting installation in a ship being constructed, but which at this juncture yawned empty--employed impeccable logic. While unsure from which of three vacant locks the raiders would emerge, the cool-headed officer assumed that his world's archfoe would choose one of the two next to Simon's ship. Precipitately, he raced to position himself with the men stationed before the lock on which the first-class vessel obviously targeted by the foe lay moored.

On hearing the alarm, Simon hurled himself up the ladder, yelling to the workers to detach the top of the scaffolding still in place around his docking module. "Just unbolt it, so we can lift! You four go aboard, after you finish! Hurry!"

The second warning blared from the panel, causing the guards ranged before the construction locks to go tense in anticipation of imminent action. To the consternation of the officer in charge of the defenders, every lock previously vacant spewed forth raiders: hordes of them, to his fevered vision. Thirty fighters burst from the far pressure-proof door, hacked their way through a line of guards, and headed for the passageway leading to the domed workplace. The Gaeans issuing from the other locks concentrated on cutting down the Fourth and Fifth Corpsmen fighting tenaciously to defend Simon's Earth-armed ship.

The spearhead of premier warriors charging across the open space sustained heavy casualties before certain of their number succeeded in hurling numerous missiles into the stairwells and elevator shafts. The ensuing explosion breached the hull, effectively stopping Amin's advance. Other raiders bombed the corridor leading through the storage area, inadvertently igniting a flash fire. Seals crashing into place informed the unwounded defenders fighting for

their lives that retreat just ceased to form an option.

Surrounded by a sea of flashing blades, the Columbian Lieutenant rallied his remaining men, and fought valiantly. A tall, dark-haired, handsome lad appeared in the place of a foeman who fell. That agile enemy took a slashing cut on the forte of his blade, instantly proving himself a formidable opponent. In a series of brilliant strokes, the youthful master swordsman breached the Lieutenant's guard, and drove home a wicked thrust. Impaled by thirty centimeters of steel, the officer crumpled to the deck running blood, clutching his abdomen with both hands as his sword clattered on the plates. Cracks of weaponry, and shrieks--none his--assaulted the severely wounded Fifth Corpsman's faltering senses.

The din grew worse: ringing chimes of steel on steel, thuds of falling bodies, sharp cracks of handweapons, trampling boots, screams, shouts, orders thundered by stentorian voices, a melee that surged around the still-conscious casualty before retreating to a greater distance. Bleared eyes beheld red-streaked, slate-blue-clad raiders pass out of view as a few staggering figures in black dropped nearby. Pain flared into agony, before merciful unconsciousness overtook the fallen leader sprawled face down on the deck running blood.

Simon beheld the red dot centered on his chest. The last bolt holding the scaffolding to his ship slipped from his hand to drop through the long intervening distance before striking with an echoing clang on the deck below. Knowing his body to be targeted by the tracer of a military handweapon capable of launching a lethal, lightspeed pulse, he froze. Four cowed technicians and five scowling spacers standing on a level section of the scaffolding, on seeing themselves trapped, raised their hands.

Blood welling from a stab-wound in her thigh, Signe mounted the ladder. The insignia of the high-ranking officer targeted by the tracer caught her eye. "Your name?" she demanded imperiously.

"Simon." The word emerged in a hoarse rasp.

One of Arlen's captains . "Send a man to inform your crew aboard that if they don't file down unarmed, you'll die with all their comrades, right here. If they try to pump the air out of this lock, we'll blow the ship even as we suffocate!"

The recipient of that command riveted horrified eyes to the fuzed device thrust into his view by a stocky, plain-visaged female raider who ascended the ladder behind Signe. Simon snarled an order. A spacer delivered the threat. Turning about, the Captain preceded the six crewmen descending to stand sullenly on the elevator platform.

Gesturing to Sean, the Gaeen leader commanded him to escort Simon and his lieutenant aboard, and secure them. Eric obeyed her order to clear the inner lock.

Having borne away their dead and wounded, Signe's surviving spacer-fighters lifted four ships. Theo's threat to slag both the base and any hostile vessel that employed its weaponry, from the point where he hung unseen in synchronous orbit, reached the captains of the ships converging above Dunn. Amin's order, issued with vehement force in Arlen's name, not at any cost to risk the shipworks, registered on the men of the Special Force. Brant, Yukio, Ford and Danner watched in impotent wrath as one murkily blotted disembodied exhaust escorted three vessels, one obviously a cargo ship, and none undetectable. The plasma beneath all heat shields but that of the prize, the stymied watchers

saw to be barely visible through obscuring clouds of black vapor as Columbia's enemies vanished in the void.

Arlen docked fifteen minutes later. One glance at his old friend's face sufficed to inform the glacially calm observer that some personal tragedy just befell his senior captain.

On being ordered to report, Amin described concisely what just transpired, his accents more than ordinarily clipped. The Commander-in-Chief maintained his icy calm as he listened to the first half of the account.

His voice steady, unemotional, the officer reporting continued his recital. "Jason arrived at the head of his crew just as the storage area erupted in flames. A ball of fire billowed through the door to envelop him. Luckily, he packed a handweapon. The goggles prevented his being blinded. His uniform's heat-regulating capacity wasn't overtaxed. That circumstance saved him from being seriously burned over his whole body. The gloves integral to the sling protected his hands, so all that got horribly burned was his face, but he could well be gruesomely scarred for life."

Even as Arlen's mobile countenance remained frozen into rigidity, his eyes smoldered.

"Pearson rallied the guard after the initial onslaught, the survivors said, and fought valiantly. He took a wicked thrust in the guts, and fell in action. He's alive--just barely--but he'll make it, according to the physician. Twenty-three guards died outside the locks. Simon and Cantrell Signe took prisoner. She carried them to Gaea."

Glowing, Arlen silently digested that news. Mastering an upsurge of incandescent fury, Amin finished reporting.

"Who's caring for Jason?"

"Forsgren treated him before sending him by medivan to the capital, to Fifth Corps' Infirmary. Ahearne enlisted the aid of a burn specialist in the capital: Hughes."

"Neither the passenger vessels nor the modules sustained even minor damage?"

"None, sir. I've kept the three passenger vessels docked on the municipal locks, outside the military complex. The raid caused no damage to any mobile assemblers, or other crucial equipment. In fact, we're ready to assemble your forts. Say the word, and we'll place them in orbit."

"We can't, until the devices are perfected. Levi's finishing the calculations, but it'll be several weeks before I get the first device built--if that soon. Even if I work twenty hours a day, which I will."

"Well...Signe sustained a wound, and her assault force suffered heavy casualties. She has captured six first-class military ships, in addition to one other she must have resurrected from the scrap heap, and when she snatched that cargo ship, its holds held a full complement of water ice. Her raiders slaughtered twenty-three good men today, and wounded fourteen others. She took a high-ranking hostage, and hauled away a wealth of liquid water in the stolen cargo vessel. Maybe she'll rest content to stay home and recuperate for a time." Acerbity freighted the measured voice summarizing the enemy leader's accomplishments.

"We'd better not count on Signe's doing that, Amin." Sensing the exhaustion exacerbating the frustration, sorrow and anger generated by the raid, Arlen

laid a comforting hand on the shoulder of his closest friend. "I know Hughes to be a highly competent specialist. He'll do all he can for Jason. We're lucky no workers died in the fire."

"I'll give credit where it's due," Amin replied levelly. "Two engineers got trapped in there when the enemy attacked. The raider carrying the fuzed devices shouted a warning. He let them run out into the open before he hurled the bombs, and none of the Gaeans killed any unarmed technicians."

"I can't say the same for Norman, Amin."

A heavy sigh escaped Arlen's senior captain. "No--nor for Yancey. But the men taking it on the chin now played no part in the war crimes those bastards committed!"

"No one ever proved that life's fair, but Signe's no mass murderer determined on wreaking a fearful vengeance. She could have slagged the base."

"She could have blown our ships aloft. She seems bent on acquiring a fleet, not on destroying ours."

"Well, if all goes as I hope, we'll be invulnerable to attacks such as these in a few more fourweeks. Meanwhile, we'll need to stay vigilantly on guard. Especially here, Amin. She varies her tactics. She might just strike twice in the same place: do the unexpected. I'll direct Fulke and Orloff to send you reinforcements."

"I appreciate that. I'll disperse the three passenger vessels among several municipal units, elsewhere, and mount heavy guards there as well."

"I'll order Norman to deploy contingents of his veterans to back them." As he spoke, Arlen laid an arm in a comradely gesture across Amin's shoulders: the act of a friend, rather than a superior.

The five vessels that docked on Main World of Gaea disgorged a sorely battered force. Still on her feet, Signe climbed stiffly down the ladder, her mouth set in a tight line. Rhea packed Inigo down in a stretcher. Wong, unhurt, followed.

A second medic, Thurston by name, hauled Morgan in a stretcher, much against that warrior's will. "Damn it, I can walk," the wounded man protested as Midori helped Thurston maneuver the conveyance through the hatch.

"And tear out those staples holding that gash across your abdomen closed." The technician rendered unwontedly testy by seeing two lives slip out of his grasp despite his heroic efforts to save them, suddenly lost the remnant of his patience with this man he knew would live. "One more word out of you, and I'll shoot you with another dose of sleep inducer," he barked. "Just one more word!"

Morgan subsided into aggrieved silence.

His shoulder bandaged, his right arm carried in a blood-stained sling, Conor watched as Ryan and Jess, bearing a stretcher, halted before the scarred warrior standing as erect as ever. "Talley's still hanging on," Jess informed her captain, the lines of fatigue clawing out from her eyes and mouth seemingly set in stone. "She took a slashing cut and a thrust under the ribs. Rhea says she'll recover."

The limp figure on the stretcher stirred. The angular, olive-skinned face below crisp, short, tightly curling black hair glistened with cold sweat.

Eyelids fringed with black lashes opened. Gray eyes that seemed startlingly out of place in the dark, plain countenance, met Conor's squarely. "Damned right I'll live," the wounded fighter grated. "I've taken worse. Is Teeny going to make it?"

"Teeny took a slash down her arm, and another across her thigh. She lost a lot of blood, but she's in better shape than you, thanks to your quick action. You worry about getting back on your own feet, girl."

Thus reassured, Talley lapsed into unconsciousness.

A transfusion of blood substitute administered during the transit bolstered the resilience of Teeny's iron physique. Aware that the stretchers had all been used for those severely wounded, the muscular redhead peremptorily demanded a lift up from her bunk, from a slim, tawny-eyed, unhurt comrade.

Although she regarded her closest friend dubiously, Dana obliged. "Easy, now," she cautioned. "You're dizzy, aren't you?"

"I'm all right! Just a bit woozy. Help me to the hatch." Gritting her teeth, Teeny by sheer force of will managed to avoid a plunge to the deck as she resolutely descended the ladder.

Standing erect, her face hard as flint, Signe listened to the tally of losses as medics, physicians, and a swarm of veterans aided the wounded and carried out the dead. Eric, one leg wrapped in a gory self-adhering bandage, laid an arm across the warrior-woman's shoulders. "Lupe lost Seth," he informed her, his voice charged with sorrow. "Fighting right alongside his mortally wounded body, she fended off three Columbian swordsmen before we engaged the two we dropped as she cut down the third. Seth died on the deck, in her arms."

"They'd have married, in another few fourweeks." Pain showed nakedly in the eyes unflinchingly viewing the results of the raid. "We lost seventeen men and women of our specially trained assault force. Over a quarter, Eric."

"But no captains. No irreplaceable leaders."

"No. Sean's unhurt³as is Wong. Conor's not badly damaged, but Morgan's out of action for now. You and I came off better."

"We'd have lost Teeny, if it weren't for Talley, Conor said."

"Talley will be a while recovering, I'd guess. As will Inigo. Cool head on that cousin of Wong's."

"Damned right!"

"We need to strike again, Eric, and soon. Time's running out. That officer in charge of the base betrayed dire fear of our blasting that facility."

"We'd have slaughtered two or three hundred of his men."

"True, but that's their shipworks. Not a single partially completed vessel lay moored on those construction locks. They've lost enough ships that you'd expect they'd be turning out replacements, but they're not. Besides, they had all three of the passenger vessels docked nearby."

"At a distance, on locks not part of the base."

"That's so...but Arlen's preparing some sort of countermove. The longer we wait to strike again, the more likely it'll be that we'll meet with disaster. That

cargo vessel we remodeled into a fuel ship contains a full load of water. One more stolen prize wrested from them, and we'll have our own back: the eight original ships that rode from Earth on the Gaea . Far better odds, eight to twelve, than none to twenty."

"We could have lowered the odds, if we'd blown those four vessels that converged. Our chivalrous restraint will cost us lives, in the end." Sorrow rather than anger freighted that observation.

"Arlen could have hurled his whole force at us in the beginning, and invaded a world still reeling from ten Earthyears of losses, and precipitated a bloodbath," Signe reminded him. "He refrained from taking that course. If he's developing a countermeasure, it'll most likely be a defensive one, but if we blew those four ships public outrage would force him to launch an all-out offensive, if he even stayed in power. No, Eric, I won't risk initiating a war neither side will win. One more strike, and then we'll reassess where we stand. I'm going to interrogate under truth compeller that captain we captured."

"Not a bad idea."

Strapped into a chair in Signe's office, Simon glared at the woman impaling him with icy eyes, as a slim, dark-eyed physician injected the high-ranking prisoner with the drug. Well aware that what she would learn would depend solely on her skill at asking the right questions, Signe reviewed what her eavesdropping sessions over Columbia had revealed. Relieved to see the telltale flush and the perspiration denoting that the captive was not dosed with the antidote, she glanced at the physician, who nodded. Eric, standing beside her, listened intently.

"Who commanded the base at Dunn?"

"Amin."

"One of Arlen's captains?"

"Yes."

"What other captains are stationed there?"

"Ford. And...I was."

"Is the shipworks now rushing to build new second-class military ships?"

"No. Not...now." Nausea threatened to overcome the captive fighting daunting giddiness. Determined to preserve what dignity he could, Simon fought the urge to vomit.

"When did that effort cease?"

"The last ship...came off...right after your first raid. When you killed Gelett, Lambert, and Marcel...blew Carey's ship. That last new second-class ship went to Second Corps. No more have been started...let alone finished."

"Why the order to cease producing replacements?"

"I...don't know. Something's in the works...not ships."

"Arlen doesn't confide his plans to his captains?"

Bitterness infused the halting voice of the man retching with disconcerting frequency. In the grip of the irresistible compulsion produced by the potent

drug, Simon could do no other than to reply with perfect honesty. "Not...to Ford...or me."

"Why not?"

"Arlen doesn't...trust Ford. Or even...me."

"Has he valid reasons for not trusting either of you?"

"Not...for not trusting...me. I've served him as best I know how...though he passed me over for promotion, as well as Ford. I never...let Ford...sway me. Ford...would sell Arlen out...if he saw a chance to profit by it. He's...jealous of men like Amin...men the Commander-in-Chief trusts to the hilt."

"What use does Arlen intend for the three passenger vessels?"

Surprise showed plainly in the eyes meeting squarely those of the interrogator. "None...that I know of. Those three ships have been mounted with crude beam weaponry...but I figured...for defense. They'd not stand a chance against an Earth-armed vessel, even now..."

Signe and Eric exchanged frowning glances. "Chemen serves as Arlen's headquarters?"

"Yes."

"He operates out of there, himself?"

"Yes."

"Which captain hauls Arlen, when he travels?"

"None. He operates his personal first-class vessel himself."

Raising a sardonic eyebrow in response to information that struck both Gaeans as proof that the Columbian autocrat high-handedly disregarded the best interests of his world in order to insure his own immunity from a military coup similar to that which he himself staged so as to seize absolute power, Signe unconsciously let her lip curl. "Which captains are stationed at Chemen?" she demanded of the captive a shade puzzled on beholding evidence that she regarded her archfoe with contempt.

"Lacey. And Dahl."

"Dahl!" To Simon's astonishment, his captor's face broke into a wide, if grim, smile. "Indeed. Arlen values cool daring, I see. Do you know of any plan to nullify the advantage my black ships confer on us?"

"No."

"Does Arlen have such a plan?"

"I don't know."

Shrugging, Signe impaled her captive with agate eyes. "Well, Simon, I'll be detaining you and Cantrell for the duration of the hostilities, unless some unforeseen chance permits an exchange. Right now, Arlen holds none of my people. That could change. You'll be treated considerately. You needn't fear suffering any abuse. You'll be allowed to bear each other company on a daily basis."

Relief mingled with chagrin in the mind of the prisoner of war now afflicted

by debilitating weakness as well as nausea and lightheadedness. Having unstrapped him, Eric assisted him to gain his feet, and exerted a steady hold. "Give me your word that you won't do anything silly--like offering useless resistance--and I won't use restraints."

"You have it."

Upon returning from seeing to the prisoners, Eric complained disgustedly to the woman pondering her options, "We nabbed the wrong captain. Arlen won't give a damn whether or not he gets Simon back."

"Oh, yes, he will. If he allowed a man to whom he refrains from confiding his plans to captain an Earth-armed ship, he must value his both his ability and his experience. Arlen's likely highly secretive. He probably plays his hand close to his chest, while trusting very few of his followers. For the sake of his men's morale, if for no other reason, he'll strive to get Simon exchanged. We're holding a valuable bargaining chip we might need badly at some point."

"He must be hard up for captains, to employ one actively fomenting dissent."

"We've taken out five, and captured one. Heavy toll."

"If he's using the shipworks to produce his countermeasure, why in hell would he station two captains he doesn't trust at the most crucial location?"

"Good question, that. I'll wager that he spread his preparations over all of his bases, though--decentralized, as we've done. He himself operates out of Chemen. I wonder just how much of the work of building whatever's--in the works, as Simon said--he'll do there."

"Hard to say, but he stationed fewer ships at Chemen than at either Rochester or the Ice World."

"We drew a blank with Simon, I'll admit. Well...we'll give our spacers a break for a day or two. I need to plan."

"You need to lie abed, for a day! Rest up!"

Signe clapped the Senior Captain on the shoulder. "Will you take your own advice, spacer-captain?"

"I'm not hurt as badly!"

The smile the Commander flashed the man hurling that retort uncannily reminded him of a far younger Signe. "Hard-headedness ran in the family, Uncle Eric. We inherited most of it, between us. If any new notions strike you, let me know."

Even as he emitted a short, sharp, monosyllabic grunt, Eric conceded defeat.

Seated next to Levi at a table in his office, Arlen strove to absorb the esoteric explanation of the breakthrough the mathematician came to report. "I think I grasp what this will allow...through a glass, darkly," the erudite aristocrat muttered, falling into Amin's habit of passing an obscure allusion gleaned from wide and voracious reading of ancient works. "I don't need fully to understand your proof...only your astounding result."

"You see how we can detect the undetectable? By what *isn't there* ?"

"That I do see, Levi--a way to reduce this superb but abstruse theoretical breakthrough into a practical application. Relatively simple, the device itself will be--as is that austerely elegant, symbolic expression of a

profound insight into the immutable laws governing the universe!" A long forefinger pointed to an equation on the datapad resting before the Commander-in-Chief.

"Euclid wasn't the only man to look on beauty bare," the mathematician responded softly, his eyes dancing.

"Touché! Well, Levi, I've gone as far as..." A brisk knock on the door startled both men. Frowning, Arlen called, "Come in!"

Dahl's apologetic face appeared in the doorway. "I realize you didn't wish to be disturbed, sir, but your wife's on the vid. She seemed unwilling to sign off without speaking to you. She said it's 2230 at night, sir. Long past the hour when you should be engaged in work. I felt I should tell you."

Rising from his chair, Arlen nodded wearily. "Thank you, Dahl. I'll take the call in here."

Tactfully, the mathematician strode out in the wake of his fellow captain. After transferring the call, Dahl bestowed a warm if wry smile on his cabinmate. "I'm sure as hell glad that you take the time to raise your wife once a day, Levi."

"I bounce my ideas off Rachel. Sounding board, she is. I miss her dreadfully. It isn't hard to remember to call one's alter self."

Shock reverberated through the unmarried spacer-captain's consciousness. *He said that in the same tone one would use in mentioning calling one's tailor! Can a woman really mean to a man what this genius says Rachel means to him? I can't imagine ...* "I'd surely like to meet your wife."

"Once Arlen's defense is complete, we'll invite you for dinner, Dahl. Steaks³spiced with conversation."

"I'll look forward to that!"

Arlen emerged from his office ten minutes later, pain shadowing a face lined with fatigue. "I've been reminded of the lateness of the hour, gentlemen. Let's call it a day. Dahl, I'll be working aboard my ship, tomorrow, and for most of my waking hours, for a while. You'll be in space, as will Rafael. I want the guard doubled in the corridors before the locks, and a pair of trustworthy men on my bridge. Two of your crewmen."

"Yes, sir." A pause ensued. Dahl added worriedly, "Your lone vessel will form a prime target for a raid, sir. Perhaps we should arrange to have three second-class ships dock, so as to keep all the locks occupied."

"That would cause you and Rafael a major headache, in addition to those afflicting you now. No--that infernal woman isn't invulnerable, Dahl! Ninety-six men patrolling the corridor surely ought to be guard enough. Four ships side by side might just tempt Signe to destroy the base--or at least, to blow all four vessels--if we thwart any attempt on her part to dock. Her luck can't hold forever. She'll fall, in one of her raids. The odds against her surviving grow longer with every coup she manages."

"She spent ten Earthyears fighting hand-to-hand during the surface war, sir, and prevailed," Dahl reminded his superior, unable to quell his urge to point out that truth.

"Against an invader. Here, the psychological advantage belongs to us. *She's* now the invader."

"Yes, sir." A vivid vision of a tall martial figure smiling down at her pinioned captive while wishing him luck with his countrymen rose on the screen of Dahl's mind. His gut clenched as his imagination painted a lurid picture of that same decidedly feminine body lying broken, still, amid the corpses of those the dying warrior took into eternity with her at the end. Fragments of the legend as related by Norman's spacers surfaced with chilling clarity. *No man ever wounded Signe, and lived*, Dahl reminded himself. *A wound turns her savage ... lethal. She'd never surrender. Never! Damn ...*

A fraction of Dahl's being doesn't want to see Signe fall, Arlen conceded a shade enviously, raking his subordinate with eyes that...unerringly read the man's body language. *Incredible, the impact she makes on the men she encounters! On Danner, who can't forget the way she smiled as the door shut in his face. On Lacey, whose admiration grows steadily less grudging as his wound heals.*

Standing by the hard metal bunk identical to those of his subordinates, in quarters as severely utilitarian as theirs, Arlen stripped off his elegantly tailored uniform, grateful on some subconscious level for the sole privilege he assumed due to his rank: that of privacy. Bleakly, he addressed his alter ego. *Go to bed, you strung-out excuse for an inventor. Rest. Karyn's lonelier than you. Almost ... accusatory, she seemed, tonight. Unlike herself. You've got to call her oftener. Got to ...*

From somewhere deep inside, an overwhelming wave of discouragement surged up, constricting Arlen's breathing, and causing his throat to burn. *Galt's making headway with the militant among our civilian officials!* he railed inwardly.

He's keeping Roylott under his thumb--insinuating himself into the operations plainly the province of the Ministry of Internal Security--widening his sphere of influence. Second Corps hasn't put that archrenegade Chapell out of business, or even Kent, who just got clean away with a cargo of medical supplies priceless to outlaws. Galt needs to tend to his proper business!

He's charging that he's understaffed. Well, he is, but damn it, so am I. And so is Dexter, who's guarding our facilities for the manufacture of electronic weapons and parts for ships. A strike on the plants operated by the Ministry of Public Manufacturing at New London and Bessemer would be catastrophic! Perhaps Signe hasn't tumbled to the strategic importance of those manufacturing sites yet. I fervently hope not!

Well ... she'll know I'm based here. Thank the Powers Simon's the man she holds, and not Amin. Poor bastard. Amin emphasized that Simon seemed proof against Ford's subtle feelers. I'll have to try to arrange an exchange. Too bad it wasn't Ford she captured. She'd get a poor impression, though, interrogating Ford, rot me if she wouldn't. She won't learn much from Simon, except that I'm forced to employ men I don't trust. Dust of my ancestors! Signe generates fanatical devotion. Damned if I don't envy her that charismatic appeal. Go to sleep, Arlen. You've a daunting chore facing you.

Three days of intense concentration followed: twenty-hour spans, at the end of which Arlen achieved a breakthrough. That night, he skipped sleep entirely, his mind at an incandescent peak of concentration, his body running on a formidable adrenaline high. On the fourth day, he came down from the heights. Savoring intense satisfaction, he grabbed five hours of sleep, and attacked the work engrossing him, anew.

Late in the afternoon of the fifth day, the Commander-in-Chief left the command center of the base, and mounted the stairs leading to the cavernous corridor stretching the long distance spanned by the locks. Dahl, returning

from his ship docked on Lock Two, snapped a salute to the superior he spied emerging from the stairwell.

Arlen habitually disdains to use an elevator , the shrewd analyst reminded himself, intrigued by that observation. Does that quirk represent impatience with the slowness? A touch of claustrophobia? Or merely an instinctive revolt against slothful ease ... a preference for exerting an athletic body instead of passively riding a mechanical contrivance? He has neglected to exercise, lately. Perhaps he's compensating. I can't imagine why. He looks exhausted.

Halting in his tracks, the concerned observer watched the athletic figure proceed with long, swinging strides down the expanse swarming with guards. *He's heading for his ship. He'll put in eight straight hours, now, at the least .* Shaking his head, the chief coordinator of the defenses aloft stepped into the elevator, and returned to his post.

An hour later, Dahl raised his lieutenant, whom he had lent to his superior, and ordered Miles to summon Arlen to the board. When the Commander-in-Chief appeared on his screen, the aide, quailing inwardly, managed to preserve both a phlegmatic tone of voice and an impassive face. "I'm sorry to interrupt, sir, but Karyn and your son just docked in a lifeboat. Oliver flew them here. They're disembarking at Lifeboat Lock Two."

Incredulity registered for the mere fraction of a second it took for the mobile features to become completely expressionless. "Thank you, Dahl. I'll meet her there." *Karen! Here! Risking her neck, and Tiryll's! How dare she violate my express command! What in hell has come over the woman? Brazen, this defiance! I'll ...*

Burgeoning wrath blended indescribably with longing, as Arlen crossed the corridor fronting Lock Six, and strode down the narrower passageway giving access to the lifeboat locks. *Karyn. When did we last made love? Weeks ago ... no, fourweeks. Damn, but I need ... No! I can't allow ... can't let my wife ... Damn this inexplicable disregard for my orders ... this crass gall!*

A most enticing recollection danced on the periphery of Arlen's awareness: a curvaceous nude body melting against his, as an elusive fragrance ensconced itself unforgettably in the most primordial archive of his memory. A piquant face radiated provocation. Wide-set, memorable eyes shot a sidelong glance from under lids heavily fringed with dark lashes. Soft, questing hands slid down the curve of his spine to offer an intimate, electrifying caress. That vision superimposed itself over the one consciously summoned and tenaciously entertained: of an autocrat imperiously issuing commands to the wife culturally programmed to defer to the wishes of any husband, but especially one who held absolute power over his world.

Arlen met his spouse at the door to the lock. No trace of the conflicting emotions racking his mind showed on his face. In accents rigidly controlled, he greeted the woman whose own features plainly reflected a most unwonted determination, and embraced his son. Only after gaining the privacy of his quarters, and instructing the boy to remain in a separate cabin, did Arlen allow his displeasure to show.

Sternly, the autocrat demanded, "Karyn, whatever possessed you, to disregard utterly my explicit injunction that you stay where I know you're safe? You've laid Oliver open to dismissal for gross disregard of my orders. I've enough weighing on my mind right now, without the added worry your presence and Tiryll's poses! You're going back. At once!"

Trained eyes observed unmistakable evidence of an imminent loss of habitual

self-control. Desperation lent poignant urgency to the voice that pleaded. "Arlen...please. Not at once. Tomorrow, yes. But tonight... Arlen, it's been so long since... I've missed you so..." Tears spilled down pale cheeks--tears at variance with an expression overtly rebellious.

A familiar scent impinged, bypassing neural channels overlaid on the most primitive center of a brain endowed with a high order of complexity. The image fleetingly entertained earlier expanded into boldly colored, sharp relief. Arlen grew conscious of a stirring in his loins: an urge as primal in origin as his subliminal mental response to the tantalizing odor.

Mastering potent anger, he gathered his wife into a close embrace, to feel hot tears vaporize against the front of his uniform. "Karyn," he murmured reproachfully, stroking her hair as he held her close against his chest. "You think I haven't missed you? And Tiryll? You think I haven't longed for a night in your arms? But not here! I'll try to take the time soon to pay a visit...manage a short stay..."

"You've been too busy to miss me! Too wrapped up in your work to miss either of us! You don't know what longing is!" The ultrafeminine body pressed against Arlen's chest stiffened. Violet eyes met his squarely, challengingly, belligerently.

The vehemence of Karyn's retort shocked her husband. Seldom if ever did she raise her voice. That shrill accusation, totally out of character for a woman who normally bore herself with admirable self-command, and who unfailingly preserved a dignity befitting the wife of a public figure, reverberated off the metal walls of the cabin, filling her spouse with profound dismay. He read more than petulance in his wife's body language. Accurately, he gauged the depth of what he recognized as near-despair.

Guilt washed over him. *You miss Karyn at night*, he acknowledged with bitter honesty. *She misses you constantly. She's got too much time on her hands ... she's right ...*

"Karyn, look at me." The deep voice breathed command. Still mutinous, the matron stared into eyes filled with raw pain. "I *am* wrapped up in my work. I admit that. I have been, and will continue to be. I can't promise otherwise, but don't make the mistake of assuming that my absorption forces all thought of you...and of my son...out of my consciousness. Karyn, if I didn't cherish you both...love you as deeply as I do...I'd not be able to stand separation from the two people I care most about of any alive. Believe me. But your lives are at risk every moment you both spend here!"

Touched by those words, but no whit swayed from her purpose, the woman regained the best part of her command over herself, but her voice lost none of its unaccustomed insistence. "If the danger here is so great, we could lose you, at any time! Arlen, you want to know that we're safe. Once you do, you thrust us out of mind. But you don't care if I live daily--hourly--with the frightful thought that you could be dying even as I pace the deck worrying about you. Tiryll lives constantly with the same thought. He's growing so fast! He's changing and maturing...without you. Let us share your danger for a few hours...a night! Just a single night! At least after even so short a time with you, I think I'd be able to face the loneliness better."

As his wife's arms tightened convulsively around the Commander-in-Chief, he felt her bosom heave. Intuitively, he divined the overwhelming severity of her distress. *You could lose her! Forfeit her regard ... her trust ...* The autocrat's hitherto inflexible resolve to send the first--the only--love of his life back to her refuge without delay, wavered, as the impact of her physical presence

on his senses weakened his judgment.

Intuitively aware of her husband's mental agony, Karyn pressed her advantage by turning a tear-wet, beseeching face up to his. His mouth closed over hers. The passionate intensity of his partner's response, the scent of that signature perfume, the sensual warmth of the shapely body melting against him: all combined to vanquish Arlen's resolve. His own unslaked longing for the sound of this woman's voice and lilting laugh, his surpassing need for her presence in his bed, rose in a wave to submerge his fear beneath suddenly irresistible desire. "All right," he whispered hoarsely. "One night. Early tomorrow, Oliver will fly you back. Drastically early tomorrow. But right now...we'll dine...just the three of us. We'll catch up on our visiting, and retire early. Karyn, you don't know...can't guess...how often I've lain awake tossing...wanting you...missing you..."

"I miss you every hour of every day!"

The patent truth of that cry from the heart pierced Arlen's own with swordthrust force.

Two hours spent in soul-satisfying conversation with the radiant wife buoyed by her victory over her husband's scruples, and the son hungry for the company of the father he idolized, drew to an end. Having tucked the boy into bed, Arlen bid him goodnight. Impulsively, the world leader knelt beside the bunk, and brushed his lips across Tiryll's forehead.

Two sturdy arms shot round his neck, and tightened. "Father, I've missed you." That admission came couched in a husky whisper.

"I realize that, Tiryll. Believe me, I've missed *you*. I want you to know that I'm proud of you, son—for the manly way you've done your job: studied hard, and cared for your mother. After I've finished doing *my* job, these separations will come to be only a memory...like a bad dream. Now, slip off to sleep, lad. I'll be waking you early."

"Goodnight, Father." The boy's smile at that moment uncannily mirrored that of the man rising to gaze down at the son in whom he indeed felt pride, and a veritable wealth of love.

As the door slid shut behind him, Arlen beheld Karyn emerge from the shower, and stride unclothed, arms outstretched, into his enveloping embrace. Sweeping her into strong arms, he carried her to his bunk, passion looking nakedly, hotly, from eyes darkened with the intensity of his desire. Hers reflected the need in his. Stripping off his uniform, he dropped on her. He found it no chore to arouse her to a fierce response. When at length both partners lay spent, slack, entwined in each other's arms, an innately considerate lover knew that he had lifted his wife to an unprecedented height of bliss.

Satisfaction flooded his mind. The tiredness he had felt when he forced his body out of his bunk that morning, he recollected only dimly. Physical release combined with the joy the evening afforded him filled him with a sense of languorous well-being. His hands moved over the soft flesh of the woman he loved, in a caress that evoked a long sigh of pleasure from his spouse. "That was marvelous," she murmured. The soft expulsion of breath through the lips touching Arlen's bare skin sent a delicious impulse racing down an obscure neural pathway.

"I love you, Karyn."

The fervor of that impassioned declaration brought conviction the woman did not need. "I know that, Arlen," she whispered. "I've known it for twelve

Earthyears. But I wish..."

"This war won't last forever. Once I achieve what I'm on the verge of accomplishing, I'll have rendered Columbia impervious to attack. The war will dwindle to a state of border skirmishes...a periodic testing of defenses. I know the toll my absence continues to take on you...on both of you. That realization tears at me constantly, but six fourweeks...or less...will see a breakthrough. I'll be home far more often, from then on. I promise you that. Muster enough patience during the short time left, Karyn. Soon, the pain attending this enforced separation will fade from memory." *She's got no work to absorb her ... nothing to occupy a mind obsessed with fear ...*

"I'll try to cultivate patience. Truly, I'll try. Arlen..."

Give her memories to cherish . Arlen's mouth closed over his wife's, and for a considerable time thereafter, no words proved necessary.

Dahl lifted at 2000 that night.

At 0230 of the sixth morning, Preston, whom the Commander-in-Chief had recently promoted to the rank of captain, descended to Lock One. The man formerly Amin's lieutenant, having been issued orders to lift and join Evan, headed for the main communications center to report to Merck, the Fifth Corpsman in charge of the command center in Dahl's absence. As he strode away, his second officer set the spacers fueling the ship bound for the Ice World.

In the deeps between worlds, a ship cloaked in blackness akin to that shrouding the starless night of intergalactic space relentlessly absorbed the pallid rays of a distant sun. The intrepid voyager sucked into its very substance the turquoise radiance reflected from the magnificent gaseous sphere holding the fragile artifact on its course. No ghostly observer discerned the tenuous shape of intersecting rings as the invisible construct moved against the star-eaten backdrop of infinity. No capricious Power observed the grotesque, outsized excrescence rising from the central of three lifeboat locks. No inhuman, all-seeing eye noted the strange protuberances disfiguring the graceful, curving sweep of the vessel's heat shield. Alone in the vastness, the hurtling warship black as a mythical spider, and as deadly, plunged in carefully calculated free fall through the vacuum of the void.

Inside the vertical torus rapidly rotating within its protective envelope, Signe sought to relax mind as well as body. Lying full length on the inadequate padding integral to the unorthodox harness fastened to the metal plates of the deck, she surveyed the ranked array of twenty-eight members of her assault force: men and women as uncomfortably accommodated as was she. Theo alertly monitored the screens at the board. Next to him, Malcolm rested, in anticipation of taxing maneuvers to come.

Wong occupied a makeshift couch situated beside the Captain and the Lieutenant. Adrenaline flooded his wiry body as he reviewed one last time the sequence of manual actions he knew he must perform faultlessly once Signe gave the order for the upcoming assault to begin. Exquisitely conscious that thirty-two lives hung on his skill, he forced all thought of his comrades' danger out of his mind, and focused solely on the unnerving challenge facing him.

Reclining between Ryan and Jess, Conor observed the tension stiffening the slight frame of the martial expert. *Too soon, Wong, he warned, as if seeking to communicate on an extrasensory band. Relax. You'll tire your brain--dull those lightflash reflexes. Conserve your energy.*

Whether by coincidence, or some uncanny touching of two minds momentarily and miraculously attuned, the hunched shoulders straightened, and the stiffly erect torso slumped back against the awkward seat. *That's better, lad. No sense spending yourself prematurely* . A ghost of a smile fleetingly lit Conor's seamed, scarred face.

Two hours later, Wong marshaled every iota of his formidable computational skill, and exerted to the utmost his superb mind-body coordination. Slim fingers delicately manipulated sensitive controls. Black eyes riveted themselves to a graphic display weirdly different from any hitherto seen aboard a military ship. A wasp-like object, sooty in color, predatory in aspect, separated itself from the central lifeboat lock, and flew in formation with the undetectable ship in synchronous orbit over Chemen. Obedient to the governing intelligence, the eerie entity spiraled downwards *in a trajectory parallel with that of the vessel now beginning its descent to the surface of Columbia*.

Having activated a control extraneous to the board, Theo stared through narrowed, anxious eyes at the video screens. "It's working!" he hissed at Wong and Malcolm. "The Gaeante dust is obscuring our exhaust to perfection!"

Wong never heard that exclamation. Mind at a white heat of concentration, he painstakingly guided by remote control the unique vessel built with his own hands, and Inigo's--the ship that once bore two would-be warriors to Main World, to enlist in the force commanded by the leader behind the legend. The wasp-like shape descended slowly, inexorably, towards an aperture open to the void. Wong ceased breathing as he negotiated the unmanned vehicle through the wide circumference of a lock, and watched its graphic image drop at an infinitesimal pace downwards.

Sensors trailing from shielded wires attached to the perimeter of the remotely guided vessel dragged along the deck of the inner lock. Those sensitive devices recorded the final crushing of the ladder melting from the heat of a clouded exhaust, and conveyed with exactitude the steadily diminishing distance separating the base of the invading vehicle from the deck towards which it settled. As the mothership clamped to a lock two hundred meters beyond that penetrated by its unmanned companion, Wong saw his creation come flawlessly to rest on the plates. His heart palpitated wildly. By sheer force of his will, he sat back and audibly inhaled a long, deep breath of air.

"Allow us fifteen minutes," Signe rasped to the operator of the ingenious contrivance. Dropping through the hatch, she led twenty-eight crack raiders towards a rendezvous with destiny.

At 0250, Arlen escorted his wife and son, and the old family retainer profoundly relieved to find that he still held a job, to the narrow corridor giving access to the lifeboat locks. Four contingents of guards patrolled the premises. "I'll say good-bye here," Arlen told his wife. Drawing her against his chest, he kissed her. Having freed her lips, he dropped to one knee to embrace his son. "Take care of your mother, Tiryll," he adjured the boy softly.

"You know I always do that, Father," the child replied stoutly.

"Arlen, take no unnecessary chances," the matron breathed. "And call often."

"I gave you my word," Arlen reminded her. "Oliver, call my board, once you've set down at Dayton."

"I'll do that, sir."

Chin high, shoulders straight, Karyn turned, and walked without a backward glance down the passageway, firmly clasping Tiryll's hand in her own.

After watching for a few seconds, her autocratic husband strode back into the larger thoroughfare he must cross, to enter his ship.

At that moment, a thunderous explosion rocked the deck upon which Arlen stood. An incandescent ball of fire erupted far down the corridor fronting the military locks, momentarily blinding the shocked observer. The harrowing sight abruptly vanished, as seals crashed into place, sealing off the section of the passageway fronting Lock Three. Shouts arose in the near portion: the half so abruptly truncated. A second, more muffled roar followed directly on the first blast.

Realization hit the dictator with stunning force. *Signe just struck with no warning! That blast created an impassable barricade! She's after Preston's ship--or mine! Karyn! Lifeboat locks ... Signe won't strike those. Lift, Arlen! You can't afford to lose what you've got aboard!*

Even as those thoughts flashed through his brain, Arlen acted. Sprinting into Lock Six, he beheld Dahl's lieutenant. "Miles! What in hell's happening?"

"We didn't see a damned thing, sir, but something exploded in Lock Three. The main board's dead."

"Follow me!" Moving with precipitate haste, Arlen mounted the ladder, raised the elevator, and gained the bridge. Dropping into a couch, he stared into the vid.

Blackness blotted out even the stars. A hoarse, Gaeon-accented voice issued from the panel. "Don't try to lift, or to fire! I'll annihilate the base! You can't see me, or the ship that just docked! Try to prevent any ship's ascent, and I'll blast you! Hear, Arlen?"

Fury clawed at the Commander-in-Chief's vitals. He made no reply. His face seemingly carved of stone, he watched as a sphere of glowing plasma soared upwards from Lock One. Five minutes later a second exhaust ascended from Lock Two. The latter appeared eerily misshapen: obscured by a cloud of black vapor that all but concealed the incandescence from view. "Signe's shielding the plasma," he grated. "Spewing out a fortune's worth of an exotic rare something, damn her to everlasting fire!"

Ten minutes later, the two vessels vanished. Amin's voice sounded from the board. "Commander, I'm docking. I can't raise your board. I'm docking, hear? On Lock One!"

Arlen turned to the vid, to behold an ebony face contorted in rage. "I expect that bastard aloft can hear that you're not pursuing," he grated. "Make the descent, Amin. I don't know what happened to Preston, but Signe just made off with his ship."

Having emerged from the lock, Arlen raced across the corridor to the entry of the passageway from which he had so lately emerged. Horror all but paralyzed him, as he saw that a seal barred him from passing the portal. Two white-faced Fifth Corpsmen stood with their backs to the heavy slab of metal. "You can't go in there, sir," one informed his superior with desperate vehemence. "The corridor must be breached."

"No..." The word barely registered on the ears of the guards. One man reached out a hand to steady the haggard leader whose face drained of color.

Pounding feet sounded in the stairwell. Merck burst from the door. "Sir, don't go in there. The explosion in Three breached two of the four main air vents serving the corridors, and blew the pump. The air escaped back down the vents in a matter of minutes--into space--from this corridor, and the one below it. Seals kept the air from rushing out of the rest of the base, except for the breached area around Lock Three."

"My wife...my son...are in there! Were...unless Oliver managed to lift..."

"I've got men deployed to reroute the vents from a spare pump, sir. That'll take some time...twenty minutes." His eyes riveted to the ice-white face of his superior, Merck fell silent, fearing to offer hope that he judged would prove false.

Arlen stood rigidly still, his mind churning. *Dead. Karyn's dead. Tiryll is. Dead. You killed them both, by your fatuous willingness to listen to her. Dead! And the base ... Preston ...* Controlling a sudden onslaught of faintness, the Commander-in-Chief clutched at the shreds of his self-possession. *You're in command here. Pull yourself together!* "Merck. Did Preston survive? What happened?"

"Preston's dead, sir. We saw absolutely nothing on the vid. No disembodied exhaust. Signe evidently docked a black ship on Two, and landed some invisible something crammed full of blasting gel, on Three. That vehicle exploded right on the deck of Three's inner lock, as far as we can tell. The concussion blew the pressure-proof doors out, and sent seals sliding shut in the corridor, on both sides of the breach. The blast killed three guards, and locked the others away from aiding the twenty guards Signe attacked along with Preston and his spacers.

"Thirty fighters emerged from that ship. The Gaeans bombed the stairs opposite the communications center, but by sheer luck, a squad coming on duty managed to prevent their destroying those facing Two. We fought our way out into the corridor, and did what we could, as did Levi, sir--right beside me. Signe's force managed to divide, gain the locks, and close the doors. When we opened them, the red lights were on. How in hell two sets of rear guards got aboard in the time it took for the doors to reopen, we don't know. And whoever operated that thing they landed in Three's blown to atoms. A suicide mission, that must have been."

She masked her exhaust. Dust ... some gaseous form of that damned coating! Docked ... killed! Karyn ...

Amin emerged from the stairs, his hawk-profiled face the embodiment of dread. "Arlen...they've pumped air into the corridor before the lifeboat locks. I'll go with you...and look. But no boat lifted from here. I'd have seen one."

Dead.

That single word reverberated in Arlen's befogged consciousness. The seal slid back with a harsh clamor. Three pairs of eyes stared down the long corridor strewn with the still forms of guards, and fastened onto one inert feminine figure clad in bright green.

Dropping to his knees beside the motionless bodies of his wife and his son, still clasped in each other's arms, the stricken husband and father reached out to confirm that the two beings he loved best were dead. Pain greater than any he had known rose to shatter him. Slowly, that emotion submerged below a fearful wave of savage self-condemnation. Tears burned behind the eyes the viewer could not tear away from the lifeless remains of the woman he loved,

and the boy in whom he had taken such pride. "Karyn," he whispered hoarsely. "Tiryll..."

The agony convulsing Arlen drove his mind into a shadowy realm of the past--into otherwhere, otherwhen--but failed to bring merciful unconsciousness. Awareness seared him; regret flayed him; sorrow threatened to unhinge the mind exquisitely conscious, grimly accepting, of full responsibility for the tragedy. As moisture spilled silently down cheeks gone white as frost, the widower's hand stroked dark hair, while the faint scent of perfume wafted upwards. Existence at that moment became an excruciating totality of unbearable pain.

Amin dropped beside the man on the deck, who felt through the intensity of his ordeal an arm encircle his shoulders. "Arlen..." Words failed the scholarly aristocrat normally so adept in their use. Tears momentarily filmed his own eyes as he sensed the magnitude of his oldest friend's inconsolable grief.

"I'm responsible." That rasping whisper sent fear as well as pain lancing through Amin's generous heart. "I should have sent them back the moment they arrived. I weakened...let Karyn sway me...let this happen..."

"Arlen, it could as easily have happened anywhere. In the capital. In Dayton, even. Anywhere an Earth-armed ship chanced to set down, to tempt a strike. Don't add guilt to the intolerable weight of pain. Arlen, old friend...I'm so sorry..."

As his shock wore off, Arlen's agony increased, putting his habitual self-mastery to a fearful test. His consciousness that as Commander-in-Chief he bore responsibilities on his shoulders other than personal ones enabled him to retain command of himself. Rising stiffly to his feet, he cast a final anguished glance at his dead, and turned to the men gathered about him: men whose eyes reflected mute sympathy. In a voice held creditably level, he issued orders, and watched as his subordinates obeyed.

Chapter Nine

Amin presided at the memorial for Karyn and Tiryll. Seated between Danner and Evan on the hard bench beneath the lofty dome, Lacey strove to master debilitating weakness. Holding himself stiffly erect by the power of an unyielding will, the Captain suffering from a still-unhealed wound savored his recent feat: mustering enough impassioned eloquence to convince the physician of his fitness to leave the infirmary solely for the duration of this ceremony. Forcing his mind off the pain stabbing with breath-catching force through his emaciated frame, he listened, all the while exquisitely conscious of the sorrow emanating from the bereaved husband and father sitting ramrod-straight just in front of him.

"We stand too near the gulf between us and the departed," the Friend asserted gravely. "Only time heals the wounds dealt by sudden forced separation from those we loved. What lies in our future hides behind a veil. We know only that what passed before this rift was precious. The day will arrive when unfading memories offer exquisite comfort. Those who precede us in death await us in an altered state--another species of existence. Let us not sink into despair, nor buckle under the formidable weight of sorrow. Let us imagine our loved ones saying with the poet, 'We have fulfilled ourselves, and we can dare/ And we can conquer, though we may not share/ In the rich quiet of the afterglow/ What

is to come.'"

Karyn's a little pile of ashes , Lacey demurred bleakly, rejecting the conventional solace. At peace: oblivion holds no sorrow. But Arlen has taken a wound that may never heal. He loves differently than do most of us. Harder. Deeper. He loves exclusively ... permanently. Would I suffer what he's feeling now, if I lost my wife of twelve Earthyears tomorrow? I'd hurt, naturally. I'd grieve, but I'd recover. Am I more selfish? More shallow?

I wonder. Somewhere along the line, that original fire I felt for Elena died. Sputtered out, almost without my noticing. I'm a husband from habit. I took on responsibilities to a wife and two daughters. I don't duck out of commitments--don't shirk duties of any sort. And I love my girls deeply. If I lost a daughter ... Nicole, especially ... I'd suffer, all right, but my marriage never grew to be what Arlen's must have been. Vulnerable, a man capable of that degree of affection. So vulnerable ... Damn, but I feel rotten. Amin, wrap it up. What comfort can any of us offer? Even you?

Arlen sat unmoving, shrouded in all but unbearable pain.

A fourweek passed. Despite the ravages to his psyche wrought by the raid that claimed the lives of his wife and son, the man bereft, scourged by remorse, flayed by guilt, achieved his goal of producing a device that he knew past all doubt would detect a vessel coated with a substance that absorbed all wavelengths of scanning radiation. The necessity of completing that work forced the Commander-in-Chief's thoughts, for the bulk of his waking hours, off the worst of his grief.

Levi credited that circumstance with saving the sanity of the colleague for whom the mathematician's kindly heart ached. Arlen worked himself brutally, dreading the hour when utter exhaustion forced him into his bunk. Agonies of regret, of bitter self-denunciation, accompanied his fevered efforts to compose his mind and fall asleep. Only his fierce, unflagging determination to render his world safe from further attacks kept him from withdrawing into a private mental hell from which he might otherwise never have emerged with his brilliant intellect intact.

Faced now with action, the widower felt some of the fog of pain lift. Hours passed when the bitter memories subsided below the surface of his consciousness, and his mind grappled with the work at hand, unhampered by the recurrent, intrusive thoughts that produced brief periods of total abstraction. Those disturbing lapses, his subordinates tactfully outwaited in respectful silence, even as fear mingled with compassion. Exerting himself to the utmost, the statesmanlike military dictator planned the installation and guarding of three orbital forts.

One morning, Arlen arose to the realization that he had spent a full eight hours sunk in profound, dreamless slumber. He felt physically invigorated, and intellectually renewed. Searing, debilitating grief had somehow transmuted into settled, permanent sadness. He found himself thinking of others beside himself. In a sudden access of shame, he realized how self-absorbed he had been in his all-consuming sorrow. *Amin is bereaved as well , he chided himself. He lost one old comrade--a man closer than a brother--and aches owing to the suffering of another. Yet he strove mightily to comfort you --lent you his strength when you stood in direst need. It's time you exerted your habitual self-command. You need to lead, not run in place.*

Having thus sternly admonished his alter ego, Arlen recalled a promise as yet unkept. Striding into his office with a purposeful step that Dahl observed

with profound relief, he summoned Levi. While awaiting his technical advisor, he reviewed Merck's spirited account of how the new recruit had responded to the alarm.

Levi coolly deduced that the smaller explosion wiped the stairs before One , the Commander-in-Chief mused. For all he knew, that infernal woman might have succeeded in advancing close enough to the stairwell to bomb the only remaining route leading to the base. No one uses an elevator in an emergency! It's far too easy to die trapped inside, or be killed by someone standing in wait, prepared to fire a handweapon--or toss a bomb--through the opening door. But Levi gamely stepped into the elevator opposite Two, and emerged in the thick of the battle raging outside the entry to Two's stairs. A professor with no experience of combat cut down the Gaeon about to take Merck in the flank, and then fought beside Merck as he and a force of guards, who chanced to be coming on duty just as the raiders appeared, prevented the enemy from drawing close enough to bomb the stairwell. Levi never gave one thought to the fact of his mind's being a national asset too priceless to risk.

Responding to the summons, the subject of Arlen's soliloquy hastened down the corridor still evincing visible traces of Signe's assault. Metal of burnished newness adjoined that dulled by slow oxidation over a long span of time. Scaffolding still rose to the curved upper plates, where workmen methodically replaced damaged lighting elements in the array of overhead fixtures. Moving with the athletic grace characteristic of a swordsman, the mathematician mechanically threaded his way through a maze of spidery metal supports.

Ruminatively, he assessed his achievement, and sighed audibly. You ought to feel elated ... proud. You didn't fail the autocrat who placed such touching trust in a burned-out academician. Arlen asked, rather than demanded, and promised a reward. If only ... Damn! By his very generosity--his recruiting you on such favorable terms--he unwittingly deepened the depression that's plagued you for so long a time, and worsened since you managed your breakthrough. Don't let on, Levi. Look at the sorrow afflicting the Commander-in-Chief. Your pain pales beside his. Just be glad you succeeded!

Rising from the chair before his terminal to greet the man striding through the door, Arlen smiled. His visitor beamed, immeasurably heartened to behold an expression on his superior's face that no one had seen in weeks. "Sit down," the dictator invited, gesturing to a chair. "Tomorrow will see the installation of a fort begun. Today, you're going to accept a reward commensurate with the unique nature of your contribution."

"Sir, there's no need..."

"Levi, you heard me. I won't take no for an answer, and I'd as leave offer what will do you the most good. Don't argue. State your preference."

Levi knew that tone. He sat erect, still. Dare I ask what I want so badly? Would Arlen regret his generosity? Could I handle so radical a change? Could Rachel? No. I'm too old for this as well. I'd see Rachel only seldom. I've missed her so ... Could we ... No! You risk placing in an acutely embarrassing position this man who just passed through hell. No!

Arlen saw a gleam of fierce joy, of ardent hope, of wistful yearning, fade into resignation. Levi smiled, finally. "I'll just let you bestow what you think proper, sir."

"No, you won't! There's something you want, but won't request, out of fear that I'll regret making the offer. Say plainly what compensation you desire."

Dark eyes widened in shock. *He reads minds* , Levi decided in wonder. *What should I ... I can't ask that.*

"Levi, state your preference. That's an order, and don't think I won't know, if you try a hasty substitution."

He will know. He infallibly detects when a man's lying. "All right, sir, I'll mention what thought leaped to prominence, but I won't blame you for refusing to grant it."

Rallying his failing nerve, the reluctant petitioner stated his wish. "I'd like to stay on in the Special Force, sir...to undergo training as a spacer, and eventually, as an officer. I'm fifty Earthyears old, and unused to military life, but I'm willing...eager...to learn. I'm past my prime as a creative thinker. I enjoy teaching, but I've instructed a long succession of students at the University for thirty Earthyears now, and haven't yet found a successor: a mind the equivalent of what mine once was, when I was sixteen...eighteen...twenty. I've settled into a sterile groove. I like this life...relish the companionship...even the danger. When you don't know whether you'll live to see tomorrow, today seems a priceless gift. I haven't felt as...alive...in decades. This theoretical breakthrough was my swansong: the last upflaring of a dying fire. I need new goals."

Thunderstruck, Arlen stared at the mathematical genius seated stiffly erect, meeting his eyes squarely. For a span of milliseconds, he weighed the request while controlling his face to perfection. At length, he smiled with beguiling warmth. "I offered a reward for service, and you beg to go on serving--plead eloquently for the dubious privilege of risking your irreplaceable, precious life. You ask to resign a position conferring high social standing, to enter a dangerous, demanding new profession, in the midst of a war! And yet I realize that you just requested what you do most deeply want. Well, you've got it."

Far less practiced than was his superior at keeping his thoughts hidden, Levi found it impossible to conceal either his fierce delight, or the attendant amazement. "Sir, I... You don't think me...presumptuous...?"

"For asking to serve in a new capacity? Hardly. As for training, you'll need to undergo a long, difficult apprenticeship under men who rank as your peers--some of whom might resent my raising you to their rank arbitrarily, as a reward for service far different from their own. But you're no stranger to prejudice, Levi, and I'll employ men I trust, to undertake that chore--men who'll fully realize that your genius made an impenetrable defense possible. I surely don't intend to reduce your rank. No, I'll arrange a different sort of induction than the usual."

Stunned, Levi digested the astounding fact that his life at this juncture changed irrevocably. *I'm grasping at this chance at Rachel's expense* , he agonized silently. *I miss her so, now! But she'll understand. She realizes how I've felt.* "Sir, I didn't expect to keep the rank to which you so generously raised me--a rank I don't deserve. I'd be willing to start at the bottom."

"Well, you won't. I'll delegate to you in your present capacity the responsibility for overseeing the scanning with new devices unfamiliar to the men who'll use them. That'll drive home to all of them the fact that this breakthrough constitutes your contribution. Amin's presently deprived of his lieutenant, and lacks a replacement capable of exerting authority with the firmness and even-handedness that characterize an experienced second officer. Amin's a man wholly lacking prejudice of any sort. I'm raising him to the rank of Acting Commander of the Special Force, and entrusting him with the external defense of the forts once all three installations are in orbit."

"You'll oversee the manning and utilization of the devices. That'll be tricky. Our devices won't connect to weaponry. We'll have to relay coordinates to men firing blind, until I can produce variants capable of being interconnected with the weaponry. I'll use your talent there, as well. I lack your skill at programming, but most especially, at programming Earth-built computers."

"Ahh...I'd anticipated that difficulty. I've given it a wealth of thought, these past few days. We'll manage that, as well." Dark eyes burned with eagerness, as Levi's lean frame shouted his ebullient joy in the Commander-in-Chief's unexpected response to his appeal.

I've just gained a wholly loyal, incredibly talented addition to my force! Arlen acknowledged bemusedly. *A man who keeps a most extraordinarily cool head in a crisis. Levi ... captain of a military ship? Why not? You're not the warrior Amin is, or Evan. Nor Danner's equal as a swordsman, let alone Brant's, but you started out as captain of a military ship, yourself. Your swift ascent to power came about through your ability to outguess--to outthink--to outmaneuver--your peers. To your sheer gall--your willingness to take fearful gambles with your own life, and those of the men closest to you. To your ability to command the loyalty of men like Amin, Danner, Evan, Lacey and Dahl, and to handle talented captains whose own careers come first in their thinking, such as Brant and Yukio. But Levi's the soul of honor--the epitome of loyalty. And he's beholden to you, now. You offered a reward, and gained more than you'll give. Well!*

The next fourweek saw an effort of monumental proportions: one extremely well planned. Arlen high-handedly commandeered what men, ships, technicians and engineers he needed, well able to select the very men whose special talent the endeavor required. As each fort underwent construction from materials ferried to a point in space which the passenger vessel would occupy, a force of seven military ships kept constant guard, occupying orbits slightly closer in, therefore moving faster than the fort, or farther out, moving slower.

Arlen's vessel traveled exactly the same orbit as the passenger ship housing the workers, close enough to fly in formation with the clustered mass of openwork components and attendant gear. Flocks of men in mobile assemblers--small vehicles from which a single occupant operated robot arms--began constructing the framework around the capacious vessel. As the worked progressed, the Commander-in-Chief worked on the modifications he hoped to perfect for devices as yet untested. Components of his own invention, integrated into the board of his ship, allowed him to listen, as he worked, to the cross-communications of his captains, to speak, if an occasion demanded orders, and to see the men speaking, on a large video screen built into the wall enclosing an area originally forming two cabins: space remodeled now into a single workshop-laboratory.

Levi spent time with each of ten captains and crews, explaining with the ease of a born teacher the operation of the devices, and giving a non-mathematical, concise overview of the manner in which the invention worked. "You'll not see the ship itself," he explained crisply. "It'll show up as gray space possessing the shape of a ship, seen against a background of scintillating color: an effect produced by radiant energy incoming from elsewhere in the galaxy. Sensors locked onto referent stars will allow the coordinates of the ship to be computed and displayed.

"This device can't lock onto the black ship, any more than your scanning screens can, but if the vessel changes course, it'll traverse a portion of its trajectory that's infinitesimally small compared to the distance between the celestial bodies emitting the background radiation utilized by the device.

That pattern, now entered in the memory of the computers, will be overlain by the shape produced by absorption rather than reflection of incoming radiation.

"The computers will shift the view automatically to keep that pattern in the center of the screens while displaying the changing coordinates. To blast the ship, you'll have to listen to data relayed, and fire manually, until the Commander-in-Chief and I finish the chore that will enable us to integrate the device with the computers in the fire-control systems of the Earth-built weaponry. We're working on that."

Twelve men listened, their faces reflecting keen excitement. "What if we're maneuvering even as the enemy's dodging?" Brant asked, his eyes intent on the professor whose class had driven an ambitious, non-mathematically-adept, would-be spacer-captain almost to despair, and consistently, to late-night sessions of desperate cramming.

"The same principle holds. Your motions, as well as those of the enemy, result in movement over infinitesimally small distances, compared to those between the emitting bodies. True, your motions will vary considerably both in speed and direction from those of the enemy, but two banks of exceedingly fast computers handle both your velocity and the enemy's, and integrate both against the overall pattern. You won't lose the image unless either you or the enemy increases the usual speed by a power of ten. Good question, Brant." Levi smiled warmly upon a former pupil whose unflagging diligence he well remembered.

A flush of gratified pride suffused the narrow, arrogant face of the recipient of the compliment. *Levi doesn't know how to sneer*, Brant reflected, recalling slights both to peers and students tossed off by certain of Levi's fellows on the faculty: slights that the perpetrators, normally secure in their cognizance of their notable prowess as duelists, took care not to offer Brant, even then. *Levi's wholly incapable of sarcasm on a par with the cutting remarks Doncaster so often employs, or Ordway*, he acknowledged. *Levi pinked that latter bastard with cannily calculated ease. Genius/duelist. Amazing!*

Studying his captain, Arlen read Brant's thoughts as accurately as if the man had spoken them. *My touchy careerist stands in enough awe of his old professor that he'll accept Levi as an equal*, he surmised. *So will Evan, whose ability at mathematics doesn't exceed Brant's by any appreciable amount. Dahl and Lacey both like the man. Danner coolly weighed him, but he'll cause no problem for my new captain. Ford seethed. Should I elevate him to a position of command? Soothe his scalded pride ... give his career a boost?*

No. I'll be damned if I'll promote a man I don't trust, and if I catch the bastard entering any treacherous alliance with Galt or Dexter, I'll break him--and them, if I can see my way clear. No. Let Ford rise to a position of strength, and he'll develop notions of supplanting me himself. His ability exceeds that of Waylon, Demetrius, and even Yukio, who's highly competent, and loyal. No. Keep a wary eye on Ford, Arlen.

His heart aching for Jason, whose mental as well as physical agony wounded the Captain's sensibilities every time he visited the Lieutenant, his mind filled with sorrow arising from the early death of Preston, Amin heard with misgivings Arlen's command that he train a wholly inexperienced man of equal rank. He nonetheless found himself liking his charge. Well aware of Levi's genius, having taken two courses from the mathematician decades earlier, Amin employed all the wealth of tact at his command, without lowering his lofty standards one iota. The Acting Commander managed to offer Arlen's technical advisor the standard practical instruction given any new recruit in ship-systems repairs, and exhaustive, demanding physical training, without

undermining his fellow captain's authority over the crewmen.

Navigational mathematics, that bane of recruits' existence, the novice knew on a level to which Amin himself had never risen. Shrewdly exploiting that circumstance, the Captain arranged that Levi teach not only his crewmen, but himself as well, a course that challenged the brightest of them. As Amin expected, the new officer taught as unselfconsciously as he accepted instruction, earning the respect of the crew. Two qualities--his transparent good nature, coupled with a flair for dealing firmly but fairly with students--transmuted effortlessly into a corresponding ease at handling the men under him. The new Captain soon won his subordinates' liking.

In daily private sessions, Amin drove Levi unmercifully, fully expecting to generate the anger he customarily aroused, and then used to keep mentally and physically exhausted men striving. To his astonishment, Levi exhibited no anger. Intense pressure served to make the novice ever more implacably determined to qualify, without arousing the least resentment at his mentor.

He'll do , Amin conceded ungrudgingly. Eventually. He won't be experienced, but he'll be competent. And who knows what sort of fighting we'll see before this ill-omened war ends?

Across interworld space, Signe asked that identical question of herself. *That last raid took a fearsome toll on our assault force ,* she acknowledged grimly while seated alone in her office. Gray metallic walls wavered in her vision before melting into nothingness as a flashback devoured present awareness. Superhuman exertion during a pivotal battle froze time into stasis. The warrior relived, rather than remembered, that surreally stretched segment of a life fraught with peril. Eyes unclouded by fear observed each facet of the battle. Standing outside herself, a spectator of the melee even as her muscular body engaged in violent combat, the Commander fixed the event indelibly in memory.

Once again, Signe burst, sword in hand, from the outer lock below the black ship docked on Lock Two, flanked by six raiders armed with handweapons. Stunned corridor-guards died even as they whirled to face the foes materializing with no warning. Lethal pulses dropped those farther away before they could react. A squad of Columbians--men scheduled to relieve the guards presently patrolling the corridor--arrived at the top of the stairs opposite Lock Two just as the surprise attack commenced. That massed body of veteran corpsmen fanned out to prevent the enemy's gaining the stairs, suffering heavy casualties as they battled the force of Gaeans striving to draw close enough to the recessed stairwell to bomb it, while avoiding precipitating a blast in the corridor itself: a maneuver likely to prevent the Columbians from bringing up reinforcements, but at the insupportable price of denying the raiders access to the lock to which they had moored their black ship.

While that battle raged to her rear, Signe raced towards Lock One at the head of a second force of Gaeon swordsmen. Four raiders wielding handweapons, running shoulder to shoulder, paralleled the advance of the comrades keeping well to the right of those halting occasionally to aim and fire the electronic weaponry, and sprinting forward to stay abreast of their comrades. Surviving guards fleeing towards the far stairs sprawled headlong, instantaneously slain by invisible pulses flashing along arrow-straight paths limned in lurid red. Lupe, her sword sheathed, a fuzed explosive device held lightly in her right hand, prepared to implement a crucial part of the battle-plan. The breathtakingly lovely spacer-fighter maintained a position directly behind the Commander leading the assault.

Spacers manning the pumps in the inner lock roofed by Preston's ship heard the

din. Nine men charged into the corridor, weapons drawn. A tenth frantically strove to shut down the operation, even as a burly Gaeon bore down on him. Whipping sword from sheath, the spacer fought and died in the spreading lake of icy water issuing from the imperfectly closed nozzle of the hose he had cast away. Theo's harsh ultimatum to the two men reeling with shock in front of Preston's board prevented their lifting from Lock One.

With deadly precision, the two-pronged assault force cleared the corridor opposite the lock of guards, but suffered numerous casualties. Ryan fell, transfixed by the blade wielded by Preston's lieutenant. Conor battled his way towards the slayer whose death he sought, but it was Jess, fighting with rabid ferocity, who avenged her old comrade. Eric, maneuvering alongside of the crumpled body of his severely wounded second officer, engaged in vicious infighting before killing the spacer who had run Wyatt through the thigh. Lupe succeeded in hurling her missile down the stairwell opposite the lock. The deafening explosion that ensued followed directly upon the far more thunderous blast ripping through Lock Three.

Amid screams, shouts, curses, and the clamorous clash of seals sliding into place to close the breach and isolate the contested stretch of corridor forming the battlefield from the remainder of its length, Signe duelled the Captain singling her out from all other enemies as he and his surviving crewmen mounted a valiant but futile defense of their ship. No match for his world's archfoe, Preston fell, transfixed through the heart.

Wrenching her steel free, the silver-haired warrior fought on, until her gore-drenched blade drove home into the vitals of the last Columbian crewman still on his feet. The surviving raiders hauled their dead and wounded aboard their prize, and lifted, having seen that their comrades fighting before Two's stairs managed to complete an orderly, strategic retreat to their ship.

The vividly real re-enactment faded. Pain enveloped the woman who stared unseeing into space, her mind focused on visions of prior deaths: acts of heroic self-sacrifice, and prodigies of unselfish daring. Pride mingled with pain. *We won't forget our fallen warriors, she vowed. Their names will live in our oral tradition, and in our written history. Our men and women cast aside ingrained traditions of pacifism to learn fighting skills even as they used them against a ruthless, experienced, rapacious invading force.*

Far older memories superseded the new. Hatred shone nakedly from eyes gone suddenly icy: hard as blue diamonds. Recollections that Signe normally kept locked deep inside her surged past mental barriers to ravage her mind. Her face changed, twisting into a mask of virulent anger. Well aware of the corrosive potential inherent in those searing visualizations, she scourged them back into the dank dungeons of the mind that could control, if not banish them. Exerting her wealth of willpower, the Spartan-souled woman got herself in hand. *Think of the future*, she ordered her alter ego. *Of the course this war will take, now. Well. Here's Wong, right on time.* "Come in," she called.

The martial expert dropped heavily into the chair Signe offered. *He looks tired, she noted. Strained. Well, so are we all.* "Wong, let me congratulate you not only on your willingness to sacrifice that unique vessel, which by rights ought to have gone to a museum, but for your taking such pains to convert it into a remote-controlled vehicle. That strategy was all that made the snatch possible."

"Conor deserves your congratulations far more than I do, Signe." *That wound took a toll, but grief exacted a worse one*, Wong concluded sadly. *The ultimate patriot, this woman. She conserves her warriors, but unhesitatingly*

sacrifices comrades grown ineffably close, when that price needs paid. She never falters--never loses that clear perspective she has maintained from the start.

Signe holds the ideal of freedom for Gaea in perpetuity as more precious than the life of any individual, however heroic. She hazards her own even more readily. She suffers, when she views our dead, yet refuses to allow herself to grow desensitized to the agony of others. She steadfastly disdains to armor her heart against her own pain. How does she bear the weight of incalculable sorrow? Stay detached, decisive, cool-headed--as unaffected by the hatred I sense she feels, as by a burden of command strong men might find intolerable? Could it be that her very femininity protects her--tempers both hatred and rage? Allows her to endure--insures that she'll prevail? I wonder!

Why do I get the uncanny feeling that Wong sees more deeply into my soul than does even Eric? Signe asked herself as she intuitively gauged the import of subtle changes flitting across the round golden face of the diminutive warrior. "Conor did as much as you, but not more, Wong. Your genius with computers allowed us to attain our goal. Well. I've another project in mind, for both of you. I'm all but certain that Arlen's working on some defensive measure to detect our black ships. Given his brilliance, he'll likely succeed. We need a sacrificial vessel³one we can afford to see blasted. The Gaeante-coated drone we used to make the transit to the mine where we stole our first prize springs to mind. We'll find it necessary to control our decoy from a distance, and vary the tactic we employed at Chemen. Can you manage that?"

"I'll manage it, Signe." Wong offered that assurance in a tone breathing perfect confidence.

"Good. We'll need to approach Columbia with infinite caution, next time⁴not count on our being undetectable. We may reconnoiter before actually testing whatever Arlen's planning."

"We'll be ready." Rising, Wong strode out, his slight body radiating determination.

Plagued with guilt that he knew to be irrational, over the circumstance of his battle station's preventing his taking any wound, Theo found himself with time on his hands: a most unusual circumstance. Jassy, on the other hand, spent every waking moment working, given that Wong and Conor sought his help while remodeling the drone. Deprived of the company of his best friend one evening when the majority of his comrades were occupied, the former historian encountered Eric as the Senior Captain returned from the quarters in which the Columbians were confined. The sight of the warder produced a most thoughtful notion in the mind of a man incapable of harboring blind, unreasoning hatred. Striding down the corridor from which Eric had just emerged, Theo called upon Simon.

Startled by the entry of a strange enemy officer, the prisoner of war rose from the bunk where he had been sitting, moodily contemplating the consequences of his imprisonment, and regretting the heavy burden of unaccustomed leisure. Warily, he fronted the newcomer.

"I'm Theo," the visitor announced. "Captain, in Signe's Fleet. The thought occurred to me that you're likely chafing at enforced idleness. I can't do anything about that, but I can lend you books on macrodisc, if you'd care to read, to pass the time. I realize that you've been denied access to our world's bank, but you've a terminal in here."

Profoundly astonished, Simon stared the scholarly, sensitive face framed in curly dark hair. Ingenuous gray eyes in which he detected no trace of sneering contempt, let alone hatred, met his searching glance squarely. "I'd welcome so thoughtful a gesture," he replied courteously. "Sit down, please. I candidly admit that I'd enjoy talking to someone who's my equal in rank--not that I don't appreciate the opportunity to visit with my fellow detainees."

Seating himself on the opposite bunk, Theo asked, "What sort of books would interest you?"

"Historical works, if you've got any. Civil or military history%ancient or modern. Works by Gaeian authors I'd find most engrossing, not having had any chance to read such."

The visitor's eyes widened. "You're an historian?"

"That was my minor. I majored in ship-systems technology, but I rather think I'd find it hard to concentrate on technical treatises, just at present." Bitterness fleetingly animated a face lately grown vacant, as its owner withdrew ever more deeply into self-absorbed apathy.

"My degree is in history," Theo confided, reading the ominous evidence of incipient despair on the deeply lined face of a man well past middle age. "I taught at the University, before the war. I own a voluminous library of works of both Gaeian and ancient history--even selections from ancient literature. The macrodisc I'll lend you contains my entire extensive collection. I'll also provide you a datapad or two, if you wish to make notes."

"I'd be most grateful!" Thinking that he had never beheld a less militant-appearing captain, Simon studied his enemy. "Are you...a veteran?" he asked, curiosity overcoming his fear of giving offense to a man making so gracious an offer.

"A veteran of eleven Earthyears of war, Simon, but I don't think of military service as a career. When the war's over, I'll return to engaging in historical research--to writing, and teaching. Meanwhile, I do what I must, out of a desire to assure that Gaea remains free in perpetuity."

"I see." All hint of listlessness fled the face now projecting admiration. "Perhaps...you'd care to discuss early history, at times...over tea?"

"When I rate a free hour, I'll drop in, Simon, and bring my whisky ration. We'll talk over a drink."

Shock leaped fleetingly into the eyes of the Columbian. *Whisky ration ...!* "Have you time to talk...tonight?"

"I do." *This poor bastard's bearing himself with dignity and courage*, Theo admitted. *Imagine how you'd feel, in his circumstances! Spare him an hour.* "Have you read Radley's account of the forging of the Convention?"

"Indeed I have. Richelieu's, also. They differ in several important respects, and I never have figured out which eyewitness altered the facts to fit the preconceptions of the audience for whom he wrote."

"I've decided both did. Let me tell you about an obscure reference I discovered, quoted at length within a treatise on economics."

Theo stayed for ninety minutes, surprised to discover that he thoroughly enjoyed the respite from tedious duty. By mutual, unspoken consent, both men avoided mentioning the present conflict, restricting themselves to discussion

of early history. When the Gaeon rose to go, the captive declared with patent sincerity, "I'm in debt to you, Theo."

"I'll come when I can, Simon." The historian took his departure, never dreaming that his impulsive act of kindness to a foe would one day bring him an incalculable return.

While the compassionate Captain offered comfort to his enemy, his lieutenant sat in the unlovely environs of the canteen frequented by Signe's spacer-fighters. His heart in his eyes, Malcolm gazed across the scratched, worn surface of a battered table at the woman he knew with exquisite clarity that he loved. Pain throbbed along neural pathways simultaneously with ineffable yearning. A cultural imperative that the archetypical Gaeon saw as insurmountable effectively prohibited any overt acknowledgment of his passion. Unpremeditatedly, mutely, he conveyed to his companion the depth of his regard, even as hopelessness gripped him.

As rigorously programmed by her society as was the man whose love she reciprocated, Midori experienced equal distress, but she refused to succumb to despair. Twelve Earthyears spent fighting in a savage conflict had matured the lovely woman swiftly and irrevocably. The death of both parents early in the surface war resulted in her paternal uncle's accession as head of her family. His authority, inherently less absolute than that exerted by her father, weakened still further owing to his niece's enlistment in Signe's force. Seldom home, Midori unconsciously grew more self-reliant, and stood less in awe of hallowed ancient custom, in a world she knew to be forever changed.

No impulse to rebel outright against the inflexible social decree that family-heads possessed the sole power to arrange marriages for both sons and daughters ever entered the woman's head. She nonetheless applied an eminently practical mind to the problem, and resolved to share her thoughts with the man she desperately desired to marry.

"Malcolm, it's time we talked of our feelings for each other, don't you agree?" she inquired forthrightly, meeting her comrade's eyes with no hint whatsoever of coquetry.

That appeal crashed into Malcolm's consciousness like a meteoroid striking an airless moon. Rigidly conditioned never to discuss matters even remotely sexual in general conversation, he gave a perceptible start as his heart lurched. His own good sense came to the fore. "I love you," he blurted, stating exact truth.

A golden, delicately chiseled face melted into a smile of transcendent warmth. "I know that," Midori admitted with endearing candor. "As you've realized all along that I love you. Malcolm, this two-phase war has irrevocably changed the lives of people like us. It may go on for decades. You and I know no other life. It makes sense for us to marry, rather than accept a civilian spouse our family-head selects for us. I think I could bring my uncle to see that. Could you persuade your father to consider an overture from my uncle?"

"I've got the right not to accept any wife," Malcolm responded stoutly, even as his heart fibrillated wildly. "I'll tell him it's you or no wife, ever. That won't be any lie, Midori."

"I'll issue a similar ultimatum," the smiling woman promised. "Tactfully, but most firmly. Malcolm, we could die at any time. I'd as soon serve aboard ship with you, so that if we're blown...we go together."

"What about..." Ingrained modesty prevented the utterance of the question trembling on Malcolm's lips.

"I've been rendered reversibly sterile," Midori replied serenely. "In case I get captured and raped. We'll wait until the war's won to found a family."

Now why can't I equal her serene ease in talking of such things? the severely repressed Gaeon asked himself in rueful wonder. *Our happiness--our whole future--hangs on our settling such questions to our mutual satisfaction. I need to restructure my thinking, damned if I don't.* "I sure as hell wouldn't want to start a family until the war's over," he admitted softly. A smile of infinite tenderness touched the man's homely face with irresistible appeal.

Ebullient joy set Midori's inner being aglow, lending her exotic person an ephemeral transfiguring aura. "I'll call my uncle tonight," she promised. Two rapt lovers bemusedly savored their unorthodox agreement. No hand reached for another. No urge to touch, much less to kiss, rose to tempt two sternly temperate souls. True to the code universally followed in their society, each maintained his accustomed rigorous self-control. Radiant faces expressed all that either betrothed partner needed to communicate at this point.

By the time Signe judged her force fully recuperated, Arlen's forts occupied their strategic positions. The Commander enlisted Morgan's aid, inwardly amused that the order to accompany her on a dangerous mission restored her disgruntled captain to better humor. Three subordinates formed her crew: Morgan, Luke, Morgan's lieutenant, and Ian, an original member of the assault force.

The reconnaissance team made the transit in the unsprayed cargo vessel, a ship that normally would lack the fuel capacity of a military ship of either class. Both holds, however, had been remodeled to carry liquid water, and fitted with gear that allowed that reserve to be tapped for fuel.

"We'll try to avoid coming in contact with any Columbian military ship, whose crew might suspect that we're a renegade's vessel," Signe cautioned her companions. "We'll fly a complex trajectory: one that won't lead any observer to think we're heading from O'Neill to Columbia. We can't answer a peremptory demand that we identify ourselves."

"That bastard Chapell still preys on his countrymen despite their being at war with a foreign enemy," Luke observed scathingly.

"He and a horde of lesser brutes," Morgan agreed. "But his compatriots brought their present problems on themselves."

"So they did," Ian muttered, thinking of his parents, ruined financially by the invasion, and sadly broken in health.

As Morgan and the two crewmen performed the routine work required of those manning the board, Signe studied the slowly enlarging sphere of Columbia on the bright, detailed, but time-delayed multispectral screens: an integrated system utilizing passive sensors, which employed natural radiation over a wide range of wavelengths. That gear, she knew, produced no emissions that might evoke a blast down the beam impinging upon a ship operating with weapon-control systems set to detect such illumination and respond automatically. Frowning, Signe stared intently at the screen. "Morgan, look. That's no ship, orbiting Columbia. Far too big--and the wrong shape--or at least, part of it is. Now what... Shades of the ancients! Two military ships are orbiting farther out than that object, whatever it is."

"Orbiting, hell! They're transferring out of orbit! I'm switching to manual maneuvers. Hold on!"

Reaching for controls, Signe set the automatic fire-control system of the crude beam weapon the vessel carried, on automatic return. Staring into the video screen, she voiced her conclusions. "They haven't tried to lock onto us," she rasped. "They don't dare. A lucky shot could damage equipment external to the ship, even if their hardened hulls are invulnerable to our armament. They're counting on overtaking us--figure we're an ordinary cargo vessel."

No one replied. At that moment, Morgan's maneuver all but blacked out the lot of them. Gritting her teeth, Signe mastered the surging nausea, the ominous faintness, as she heard the harsh, clipped demand that they identify themselves. Morgan accelerated for an eternity, for an eon, during which steadily increasing g-force stressed even lungs assisted by breathing regulators integral to fluid-filled harnesses.

Vision narrowed, dimmed. Pain stabbed laboring chests. Just when Signe determined upon trying to achieve legible speech, although uncertain whether the breathing regulator still conferred the ability, the trauma faded. *We're on a trajectory*, she exulted as the pain receded. *Moving at an inconceivable velocity: one our pursuers can't match. Thank the Powers that we carry so large a quantity of water. We'll need an incredible amount of fuel to decelerate before reentering the Group*. "I've got that orbiting whatsit on videodisc," she gasped, her chest heaving, hurting. "We'll get the image enhanced, but I'll wager that's Arlen's defense."

"We've outrun those two ships. I'll bet they're wondering just what in hell they chased," Morgan chortled.

Luke nodded, but dared not speak. Bile seared his throat, and burned his nasal passages, as he sternly willed himself not to vomit. Ian, his face pallid, his chest feeling as if penetrated by a sword-blade, never so much as nodded.

Signe slumped in her harness, her eye on the fuel gauges. *That survey cost us*, she grouched bitterly to her alter ego. *Our force is low on fuel. Terence continues to ration water on Main World--diverts all he can from the interconnecting web of life-support systems--but he can't supply what we'll need. We'll have to take time to send this ship on a tour of stations, to collect what we can commandeer from ice-prospectors' caches, and the like. That reserve we discovered in the mine the Columbians evacuated helped, but we've expended a veritable fortune in fuel! And if Arlen has developed a means of detecting us, a raid on the Ice World would be suicidal. We need to test his defenses--soon!*

Within an hour of being apprised that the last of the three forts now circled Columbia, complete and battle-ready, Arlen called Amin in from space, where he orbited, far out. "I need Levi's expertise in the next phase of the work," the Commander-in-Chief informed the man responsible for the defense of the perimeter. "You'll be deprived of his assistance for a span of weeks."

In swift obedience to that order, Amin docked at the fort where Arlen's personal vessel lay moored. He and Levi floated through a series of locks, traversed the corridor, bypassed the entry to the passenger vessel, entered the docking module of Brant's ship, and emerged into the bridge where Arlen and Brant sat harnessed into couches at the board. Amin and Levi settled into the vacant places.

Having warned the crew, Brant touched the switch that initiated the rotation of the ship's inner torus, prompting the mathematician to reflect that the counter-rotation of two solid metallic rings--two dense, massive structures

housed in tubes embedded in the outer hull of the protective sheath surrounding the vertical torus--initiated automatically whenever an operator set the huge hollow ring containing the habitable portion of the ship rotating. That second motion provided a compensatory force, thereby assuring that no change would occur in the fort's orbit around Columbia, owing to the spinning. *The angular momentum of the solid rings rotating in one sense, and the inner torus rotating in the opposite sense, adds up to zero*, the theorist silently noted. *Amazing, the quality of the engineering that went into the construction of these durable artifacts built on Old Earth!*

When the four men again regained the sense of possessing weight, Arlen threw off his harness, and turned to his senior captain. "You reported an unusual encounter with a cargo vessel, Amin," he observed musingly. "One that refused to identify itself. Turning, it accelerated to an incredible velocity on a trajectory that could take it to Gaea, but not to O'Neill. That vessel showed quite clearly on the vid, did it not?"

"It did. We spotted it on the multispectral screens. I doubt that Signe's black ships appear on those, but we've been using them to study incoming vessels. The outline plainly indicated that one to be a cargo vessel. It had no business being where it was, and didn't answer our demand that it identify itself. At first, we judged it renegade, but it wasn't on a course from--or to--any body in the O'Neill group, including O'Neill itself.

"We discounted the idea that it might be Signe's, until we saw the incredible speed with which it accelerated. That vessel had to have had its holds full of water. It's quite likely that we caught Signe reconnoitering our new defenses. I almost wish I'd locked on, and risked sustaining damage from the crude beam weapon that ship carried, but if we'd dodged successfully--and we were far enough away that I know with certainty that we could have dodged a blast--the pulse could well have hit the fort, and wreaked havoc."

"There'd be no sense in risking that, as long as the ship turned tail and ran. Well, she likely suspects, now, that we've..."

"Sir!" Brant exclaimed, interrupting the speaker in blatant disregard of protocol. "A shadow! On the device!"

While his superiors conferred, the Captain had monitored the board. He had dismissed the three of his spacers on watch with him, so as to facilitate the entry of the two captains meeting with Arlen. Shifting his gaze routinely from the video display to the screens of the new device, he caught sight of an amorphous gray blob in the center of the multicolored, scintillating background he felt wearied to the bone of watching. All eyes now riveted themselves to the screen.

"Brant! Are you getting that blip?" Danner's voice, tense with excitement, boomed from the panel.

"I've got it, too! It's not a ship!" Ford interjected sharply. "But it's growing in size, and it doesn't show up on the vid!"

"I've got it as well! Ford's right!" Brant exclaimed.

Levi breathed softly, "Whatever it is, it's as black as Signe's ships!"

Arlen shifted his eyes from the slowly expanding gray shape to the display giving the location in space and the velocity of the approaching vessel. "Brant, challenge it to identify itself," he ordered. "Signe will have a ship tailing that one advancing."

"Attention, vessel approaching the fort! Identify yourself, or prepare for destruction by Earth-built military weaponry! Come in," Brant ordered, his high voice unmistakably projecting readiness to make good on the threat.

The mysterious visitant changed course. "It's dodging, but still advancing!" Brant hissed. "Shall I test the efficacy of our defense, sir?"

Studying the video screens, Arlen saw no vessel accompanying the intruder. Shifting his glance to the multispectral screens, he pointed. "There's a ship--far out. See that moving glint of reflected sunlight? There's no exhaust--it's in free flight, too far away to show on the vid. If we use our scanner, we'll invite a blast from Earth-armed weaponry--perhaps from more than one vessel." Speaking into the transceiver, he employed a tone charged with menace. "Attention: black ship. You have one minute in which to identify yourself, and surrender! If your advance continues, we'll use you for target practice! Come in!"

The bloated blob on the screen grew larger. Again, it veered, but it continued its advance. Silence as deep as that pervading the vacuum of the void enshrouded the four men sitting with eyes glued to the screens, their ears straining for input.

Exactly sixty seconds after uttering his warning, Arlen issued a terse command. "Brant, Danner, Ford, Yukio--fire manually! Blast that thing!"

"Levi, call out the coordinates to me!" Hand poised on the control of the weapon, eyes on the displays integrated with the Earth-built armament, Brant listened, and made the adjustments that swiveled the external extensions of the complex unit mounted within the hull, until it aimed at the point in space that coincided with the position Levi at that moment called out. With pressure of a finger, the Captain fired. The oddly shaped, swollen object vanished in a blinding burst of visible and invisible light.

His eyes riveted to the video screen, Arlen saw four intense beams converge on a single point, generating the awesome brilliance denoting annihilation of the black object. Where the target had been, a four-pronged light-shape--one that paled as it enlarged--slowly faded.

Levi handed his superior the datapad he had carried aboard. "I drew the outline, sir," he explained. "From the gray pattern on the screen."

Arlen tore his eyes from the multispectral screens, where the speck had vanished. Having perused the drawing, he handed the device to Brant. "Do you know what that might be?"

Brant and Amin studied the sketch. "Levi, I'm saving this drawing," the latter announced as he entered the data into his terminal. "Brant, raise Dahl. I've an idea."

A swarthy, chagrined face rose on the vid. "We missed the action," Dahl growled. "The planetoid interposed between us and the attacking vessel."

"We destroyed the incoming object," Amin informed his subordinate. "Dahl, look at the drawing I'm transmitting. Does that shape mean anything to you?"

"Hmmm. Odd..." Silently, the former Third Corpsman pondered the question. Obsidian eyes glowed, suddenly, as a concept lanced out of the black. *Not a ship. Could that have been what ...* "Amin, I've never seen a Gaeian drone, but that thing has a shape that would fit in the slip at that mine Norman operated."

"Drone." Frowning, Arlen scrawled some calculations on the datapad. "Huge, that vehicle we just blasted. Whatever landed in Lock Three at Chemen lit right on the deck of the inner lock. This craft wouldn't have fit through the opening to which the docking module of a military ship seals."

Amin nodded in assent. "No--nor was that outfit that exploded in Lock Three a lifeboat. The engineers studying the wreckage reported that the composition of what few shards of shrapnel imbedded themselves in the walls and pressure-proof doors differed from the metal used in lifeboats."

"If we just blasted a drone, we likely didn't kill anyone," Arlen conjectured, "but I tend to assume that a man on a suicide mission operated whatever landed in Lock Three. That assault was perfectly coordinated, and that object crammed full of blasting gel descended right next to the prize, dangerously close to a ship carrying Signe and her fighters. A slight miscalculation would have resulted in her dying with her whole assault force."

"Our experts couldn't tell whether they'd examined the fragments of three bodies or four," Amin pointed out dourly.

"A human operator seems most probable," Arlen replied. "And ditto for this intruding vehicle today. It would take some highly ingenious engineering to remodel a remote-controlled drone into a ship able to dodge the way that one just did. If Signe had simply wished to test our defenses, she could have sent it hurtling straight at us."

"Dahl, can you conceive of Signe's ordering a suicide mission?" Levi queried, his tone betraying his expectation of a negative answer.

The ex-Third Corpsman pondered that question for a time. "Not of ordering one," he at length conjectured. "No. Nor of asking for volunteers for one. I'd judge it possible, however, that some fanatical follower could persuade her to let him sacrifice himself. Gaeans don't think the way we do, and they're fighting for a cause in which countless numbers of patriots have died already. Rear guards battled Norman's corpsmen until the last man or woman fell."

"Mm. But Signe generally fights in the rear guard actions she mounts, herself," Arlen reminded his colleagues.

"When she lifted that lifeboat off my ship, I considered her action insane enough to rank with suicide," Dahl offered evenly. "It could be that if a Gaeon perceives the slimmest chance of living through a mission, he doesn't regard dying while carrying it out, as suicide. Maybe the operator hoped he could dodge in close enough to blow a fort on which two first-class ships lay moored."

"That ship that never came close vanished as soon as we fired," Arlen observed, marshaling arguments now against the theory he himself had originally advanced, being unsure, deep down, what to believe. "Those aboard conceivably could have controlled the carrier, and perhaps Signe equates descending right next to a jury-rigged, remote-controlled, lethal charge of blasting gel with trusting to your cool head when she lifted the lifeboat, Dahl--and in both cases, her trust proved justified. Well! Levi, my congratulations. You've rendered Columbia invulnerable to attack by Signe's black ships."

Levi shook his head. "We, sir. Not me. And we've not finished the job, either, but that datapad holds a program I think might run in our weaponry's Earth-built computer systems."

Having nodded in assent, Arlen turned to the board, and addressed his

captains. "Gentlemen: Brant, Danner, Ford, Yukio. My congratulations on your spectacular, simultaneous hit on what had to have been an hitherto undetectable vessel of some sort. Our defense works. Now, we need to employ constant vigilance, until Levi and I achieve a method of integrating the devices with our weaponry, so that a strike will be automatic. Remember, however, that Signe commands six unaltered first-class military ships, and that she's a formidable strategist. Report any unusual sighting to me with no delay. I commend you on your performance today."

Well, you've met your goal, Arlen: shut Signe out of the space around Columbia, and rendered the Ice World far easier to defend. Your work's not finished, but the end lies in sight. You next need to turn your eyes--and your mind--towards what's happening in Columbia. Focus on thwarting the plots of your rivals, and on strengthening the civil government. Immerse yourself in work, so you don't have time to think of yourself. Strive not to dwell on your sorrow, your loss, your culpability. Pain swirled out of dark depths in the bereaved leader's soul: pain that woefully sapped his justifiable pride in his achievement.

Chapter Ten

Jason made a slow recovery, healing physically. Busy as Arlen continued to be, buffeted emotionally by a searing sense of bereavement as he was, the Commander-in-Chief nonetheless kept in close touch with Ahearne regarding the injured officer's progress, and paid several visits to the patient battling despair. When the day arrived in which the attending physicians agreed to discharge the man cruelly scarred for life, Arlen went with Amin to help Jason through the trauma of crossing a daunting threshold, and returning to his ship and his comrades.

Striding into the small cabin in Fifth Corps' Infirmary, bearing a duffel bag containing one of his lieutenant's freshly adjusted uniforms, Amin crisply greeted the subordinate slumped in a chair, announced that the time had come for him to return to duty, and directed him to dress.

Arlen unerringly discerned the spacer's deep depression. Forthrightly, he declared, "Jason, you've been incarcerated in this cramped space for far too long, as necessary as a quiet interval was to your recovery. It's time you engaged your mental faculties in assisting Amin to handle the new responsibilities I've laid on him. Neither you nor myself can afford to dwell on personal sorrow to the exclusion of other concerns."

That blunt reference to Arlen's personal tragedy jarred Jason out of the fog of acidly corrosive self-pity into which he had sunk after he first beheld the irreparable, ghastly effect produced by his freakish misfortune. The hard, ridged, pinkish-white flesh of his ravaged face--a surface bearing no resemblance to skin, too stiff readily to allow the subtle, unconscious movements reflecting changes of emotion--horrified him. A rampaging allergy to chemical residues coating the numerous tiny fragments of metal embedded deep in the burned flesh had fatally interfered with the specialists' efforts to graft on new epidermal tissue cultured from Jason's healthy skin. Fearing dangerous complications, the physicians reluctantly allowed healing accompanied by scarring to take place.

The surgeons had restored the shape and bulk of features burned away. Their patient again possessed a nose, and ears. Thick, dark hair grew from the original hairline with undiminished vigor, but those benefits afforded little

comfort. The twisted mouth gave a bitter cast to the ruin of the face that its owner felt certain any beholder--a man, and most especially, a woman encountering him for the first time--would regard with profound revulsion. His mutilated flesh revolted even himself.

Arlen held bleakly rebellious dark eyes with his own--eyes luckily undamaged. Aided by the clinical detachment habitual to a physician, he concealed an upsurge of pity behind an expression as inflexibly demanding of an officer in the Special Force as it was warmly accepting of Jason's disfigurement.

"I...heard, sir. I'm deeply sorry about your loss."

Arlen's pain showed nakedly despite his effort to appear unmoved.

Well aware that he just witnessed an incredible failure of will on the part of a man self-conditioned to hide any emotion he sought to conceal, Jason gauged the intensity of his superior's grief. For the first time in days, his generous heart went out to another. *Arlen hurts terribly owing to losing his family*, he admitted silently, *but he kept in touch with Ahearne, asked about you constantly, and even came personally to check on you. Pull yourself together, spacer!*

As Arlen watched the object of his solicitude unconsciously square his shoulders, and instinctively stand more erect, the Acting Commander of the Special Force produced the uniform that his lieutenant donned. Bracing himself, Amin issued a brisk injunction. "Well, let's go."

Jason took a tentative step towards the door. Involuntarily, he halted. A searingly exact, utterly unforgettable awareness of what the multitudes of people outside this refuge would see--a blistering certainty regarding the way they would react to that sight--froze the afflicted spacer into despairing immobility. *I can't face the horror that'll reflect in the faces of the people I'll meet!* he railed inwardly. *I can't! Why in hell can't anyone realize that? I simply can't!*

Amin's heart constricted as he divined his second officer's thoughts. *What can I say?* he agonized. *What can I do, other than I've done? Prepared both my crew and those of the other captains ... exhorted them not to show any emotion ... but everyone else ... I can't ...*

Gently, but most firmly, Arlen addressed his gruesomely disfigured subordinate. "Jason, I expect you wonder why I didn't ask whether you wished to be freed of the obligation of serving out the term of your enlistment. I know how you feel. You don't want to walk out into corridors teeming with civilians who owe their own comfortable, unchanged existences to the valor of spacer-fighters like yourself. You don't want to face the pity you know will show on startled faces.

"But your comrades don't feel pity, Jason, nor will they feel uncomfortable, after the initial shock wears off. They of all men know the meaning of scars. They of all men know the person who lives behind that altered face. Every last one of them honors the warrior behind those scars for his ability and his courage. They're the companions you need most, now. And Amin desperately needs *you*. The pity that'll damage you worst is self-pity. Brace yourself to walk out of here between Amin and myself, and resume a career you'll find still engrosses you."

Shock melted into self-castigation. *Arlen's right*, Jason conceded, as guilt mingled with the pain flaying his sorely tried psyche. *He's making no concessions to your sensibilities ... your self-pity. Pull yourself together.*

You can't hide in here forever. You can't hide anywhere. You've no way to avoid what you abhor facing, unless you plan to become a recluse. Amin does need you. So steel yourself, spacer. Bad enough that you just let both Arlen and Amin detect what they did . Squaring his shoulders consciously now, the veteran without a word strode out into the corridor of the medical facility, and took up a life that would never again be the same as it was prior to the raid on Dunn.

Nine men summoned by their commander to view the enlarged and enhanced shots of the structure orbiting Columbia stared dejectedly at a clearly visible orbital fort. Hands on hips, eyes glacial, Signe stood to one side of the screen, and scanned the faces.

"Well, gentlemen," she greeted her officers evenly, "Arlen has perfected a means of detecting and blasting our black ships, just as Eric and I figured he would. That fort's undoubtedly one of three such. I wondered why he'd docked the passenger ships so close to Dunn. Now we know."

"A strike in Columbia itself forms an impossibility, now, Signe. The majority of Arlen's twelve military ships guard the perimeter of those forts. He'll deploy the remainder around the Ice World, but he's only got three passenger vessels, so the Ice World will be guarded by military ships alone," Morgan observed, looking askance at his leader as he voiced that hint.

"Military ships sporting a means of detecting vessels sprayed with Gaeenite," Jassy reminded the enthusiast.

"In one sense, the war's over," Theo averred ruminatively.

"Hardly," Wong objected. "We can scarcely just shrug, and disband our fleet. Those forts alone--plus a first-class ship or two--would suffice to render Arlen's home world impregnable. He could leave two or three more guarding the Ice World, and launch six or eight on a strike here--hurl at us a force equal to ours. We couldn't safeguard all thirty-nine planetoids, and if we concentrated our fleet around Main World, an assault on one of the less populated rocks would become all the more certain."

"What would Arlen gain?" Theo demanded. "If he had contemplated conquest, why wouldn't he have struck right after our first raid? Launched fifteen ships against our five?"

"He was vulnerable then to our ships' being undetectable," Morgan interjected. "Had he attacked Gaea, he'd have chanced our devastating his capital. He risks no strike, now, on his home world, whatever he does. He's got twelve captains commanding his Earth-armed ships--men who've made a career of fighting--men who'll not rest content to spend the balance of those careers tamely orbiting Columbia, guarding against the remote possibility of some suicidal assault on their impregnable fort. Hell, no. He'll find himself pressured to launch a campaign of conquest--or at the least, to regain the mine he evacuated without a fight."

"We'll need to test his defenses periodically," Conor agreed. "Let him know we're guarding our perimeter--that we're alert and ready. Keep things at a standoff, though I foresee staggering difficulties arising out of that scenario, as well."

"Such as fuel," Malcolm noted. "They've got all they need, and we're hurting for water."

"I wonder..." Yuri breathed his response in an undertone, as if speaking aloud

to his own self, rather than to the group.

"You wonder what, Yuri?" Attuned to the mind of this shy, self-deprecatory friend of many Earthyears' standing, Sean sensed that his brilliant colleague harbored an idea worth considering.

"The logical thing to do, at this point, is to contact the Columbians, and ask whether they might be ready to consider a truce, and eventually, a peace treaty. We'd be negotiating from a far stronger position now than we held right after we drove Norman off Main World." Once prodded into sharing his thoughts, Yuri spoke with passionate conviction.

"A peace treaty!" Morgan snarled, outraged. A clenched fist descended with jarring force on the tabletop. "The Columbians violated the Convention! Built weapons that could kill at a distance--stockpiled them--while that agreement banning them was in full force! Then invaded--out of the black--a world holding to its pacifistic tenets! A world populated by people who didn't even use swords! With no provocation--no warning! Out of sheer greed--lust for conquest! For killing! We'd be insane to trust them again!"

"Leon violated the Convention," Yuri protested calmly, even as he thrust a hand palm-outward towards the objector, in placatory fashion. "And Norman. Arlen seems to me to be a different sort of leader."

Shrugging, Conor drawled sardonically, "Somebody assassinated Leon. Arlen rose to power right afterwards. Makes you wonder, Yuri."

"That might not have been cause and effect," Theo demurred.

Eric spoke with impassioned force. "I've always doubted that Arlen effected Leon's death, and if you notice, he hasn't employed Yancey as one of his captains. That name has never surfaced in any of the transmissions we've monitored."

Standing facing the men seated along one side of a long table, Signe crossed her arms as her oval face set in stern lines. She nonetheless responded dispassionately to the man making the suggestion. "Yuri, Morgan definitely scored a point, about Columbia's historical penchant for treachery. The first Columbians plotted to seize Johann's *Flagship*, so as to subjugate the first Gaeans. That attempt failed for one reason: Johann lifted in the only one of the three huge vessels that jumped from Earth, which was a warship. Whoever controlled that legendary mobile stronghold, controlled the system--then, and if it were rediscovered, now.

"Johann's vanishing in that ship--his hiding it where it's never been found, and presumably dying aboard it--was all that prevented the first Columbians from conquering the first Gaeans. In the aftermath of Johann's courageous act of self-sacrifice, the early Columbians signed the Convention, after the Gaeans left Columbia and settled here. But the present generation of our foes deliberately, premeditatedly, violated that agreement. I'd feel safer trusting to a strong defense."

"I don't propose any weakening of our defenses, or lowering of our guard, Signe," Yuri countered, undeterred by his Commander's manifest lack of enthusiasm for the idea. "No way! But we face Earthyears--decades--of a standoff, now, unless we can devise some new strategy offering an insuperable military advantage, and render Gaea itself impregnable. Talking to Arlen face to face might not be a bad idea."

"Signe, you can't risk a meeting! They'd likely assassinate you," Morgan growled. Having targeted the Commander with an extended forefinger, he jabbed

it twice in her direction.

"I don't propose that course, either, Morgan," Yuri replied without heat, meeting his comrade's flashing green eyes squarely. "I agree with you. I'd like permission to contact a friend I made before the war. A student at the University of Columbia collaborated with me from across the void, on research involving metallurgy, despite the aggravation posed by the time-lapse. I'd thought of reaching Arlen through this civilian engineer. I'd be willing to act as an envoy: fly to Columbia under a symbolic flag of truce, feel Arlen out, and see whether I could arrange some way that he and Signe could meet in a place where each would be safe from treacherous attack.

"What harm could such an overture do? One or two of us could assess whether our archfoe seemed genuinely interested in working to end the standoff, lukewarm to the notion, or hell-bent on conquest. Signe would find out whether we're looking ahead to decades of patrolling space, armed and ready, or whether we might conceivably be able in the near future to negotiate a breakthrough that would let both sides return to peaceful pursuits."

Sean spoke with quiet determination. "After more than twelve Earthyears of unrelenting warfare, a man wonders if peace isn't an impossible dream. We fought to make Gaea free, not to see her drained indefinitely of people and resources, enslaved in a new sort of bondage%forced to patrol an unimaginable volume of space. Signe, if you'll permit Yuri to take a tentative step to try for a breakthrough, I'll go with him, if we succeed in arranging a meeting."

Suppressing an impulse to denounce the past perfidy of Columbians in more savage terms than had Morgan, Signe reviewed Yuri's and Sean's appeal. *Does Arlen really want peace? He's a military dictator. Morgan's right about his captains' being professional military men steeped in traditions originating with Johann's mercenary fighters. Arlen could well be contemplating an assault on Gaea, or at least, of regaining the mine on Penn's Rock. If he desired an end to the conflict, wouldn't he make an overture?*

Frowning, Signe yet responded with reasoned calm. "Yuri...Sean...I sympathize with your idealistic yearning for peace, even as I admit to harboring reservations fully as deep as Morgan's. I won't forbid your contacting Yuri's former acquaintance, but I advise you not to seem too eager. See what comes of your feeler. Meanwhile, gentlemen, we need to decide how we'll handle this new phase of the struggle."

Conor voiced the thought weighing on all present. "Malcolm pinpointed our major problem. We're hurting for water. Flying a fleet of eight military ships on patrols designed to detect any offensive move by the Columbians will require an astronomical supply."

"I'm exquisitely aware of that," Signe declared in a tone charged with challenge. "Two notions rise to mind when I lie awake racking my brain for a solution. Capture a comet, or haul supplies periodically from Feynman."

Nine men stared at the visionary, astounded. *You think on a bold, large scale*, Conor saluted her mentally. *That questing mind habitually generates daring leaps of the imagination, sparking flights of innovation that your skill as a leader transforms into workable, novel strategies. Youth renders you malleable: mentally flexible. Sigurd left you a rare legacy, girl, when he provided you an education that liberated your intellect, instead of channeling it into rigidified patterns of conventional thought. I can lead--inspire men to fight with passionate fervor--but I lack that ability to conjure up visions of radically unique possibilities. You're the war-leader the crisis demands.*

Columbia never produced a greater one!

Morgan broke the pregnant silence. "You don't think small, do you, Signe? Feynman. An ice world, only the ice isn't solid all the way to the surface. Slush underlies a hard top layer of indeterminate thickness. That sea of ice and water completely covers that outer satellite of the gas giant. Feynman's a daunting distance from here when it's closest: roughly, once every eight weeks. More often, it's farther, and when most distant, almost twice as far away as Columbia. Just how did you figure we'd land on a body on which no human being has ever set foot?"

"We'd have to remodel the docking module on our cargo vessel," Signe replied, frowning. "Don't think I underestimate just what fearsome problems such an attempt would involve. I threw out both wild notions just to set all of you thinking."

Conor remarked ruminatively, "Not so wild, that notion regarding Feynman. We could equip the cargo ship with a pentapod--five legs that would rest on the frozen crust when we landed--but cutting ice with electronic cutters would take far too much time, and require a huge crew. We'd find the work impossibly slow, and drastically costly. You know...I wonder..."

Signe watched bleached eyes turn remote, as Conor's voice died away. No one broke the silence that fell to enshroud the group. Five minutes passed before the warrior returned to his present time and place.

"An idea just struck me," he informed his comrades. "One wilder than Signe's. I'd need to consult with experts in several fields, but suppose that we employ the crude beam weaponry mounted on the cargo ship to melt a hole through the solid surface ice, to the slush. Suppose that we force down an insulated, jacketed casing--one that could be heated--so that we could pump water into the holds of the cargo ship, rather than load blocks of ice. That procedure would constitute a dangerous drain on the ship's stored electrical power, even if we'd just freshly tapped the gas giant's current sheet. Movement of the ice might trash the casing, in between trips. We could only make a run approximately once every two fourweeks, when Feynman comes closest to Gaea. But we'd gain a wealth of fuel."

"Conor, what a marvelous notion!" Signe's eyes blazed as she urged, "Research it, by all means!"

Mental agility must rub off on minds attuned to yours, girl . Gravely, Conor nodded.

"You know...if that notion turns out to be feasible, we'd require a base in orbit around Feynman. Not a ship...a small planetoid," Wong mused. "Perhaps we could equip with arcjets a rock featuring an abandoned mining facility, and head the body that way. At just the right trajectory, the base would near its destination in five to six fourweeks, coincident with Feynman's arrival at the point in its orbit closest to Gaea. We could dock a ship on the habitat at that juncture, and transfer the rock into a stable orbit."

"That's another intriguing possibility, Wong," Signe commended him. "Conor, research the feasibility of your wild idea. In the meantime, gentlemen, six of you will fly patrols in the unaltered ships. That duty will enable you to shake down your crews into cohesive teams. Eric, I'll lay on you and your spacers the chore of making the rounds in the cargo vessel, of whichever of the thirty-nine inhabited planetoids has fuel available that we can divert to the cause. You'll each orbit Columbia, far out, for a fourweek, and then return for a break. I'll schedule staggered leaves. Conor, you'll spend the

first week ashore. The rest of you will lift tomorrow morning."

Jassy caught up to Sean and Yuri as the two friends walked out together.

Cooperate, he admonished himself sternly. *So what if you end in a bind? These men just put themselves at dire risk.* Resolutely, he addressed the sensitive colleague who well knew that the older man's gruff manner masked shyness almost as profound as Yuri's. "Sean, when Signe offered to let us select our lieutenants, I naturally chose the person with whom I'd worked so closely, flying those missions aboard the black ships. I'd hate like hell to lose you, Yuri, but while the two of you work together to implement your plan, you'll find it easier if you serve aboard the same ship. I'll make whatever rearrangement suits both of you."

The two youths, close friends for Earthyears, exchanged excited glances.

"Jassy, what a generous offer!" Sean exclaimed. Gratitude burgeoned, generating thoughts of cooperativeness that prompted a major concession. "Would you care to trade lieutenants?"

What an offer! "If Dallas would feel comfortable working with me, I'd be delighted to have him!" Concern for morale tempered the burly captain's surging elation. "Talk to Dallas, Sean. If you sense that he's upset or resentful at the notion, don't press it. I'll make do with a less forceful leader than your battle-wise second officer."

"I'll broach the idea with all the tact I can muster," the recipient of a welcome gesture promised his comrade.

True to his word, Sean arrived within the hour to knock on the door of Jassy's quarters, accompanied by a lean, tall, brown-skinned swordsman an Earthyear younger than himself. Thick, dark-gold hair hid the worst of a narrow scar that slanted down the youth's forehead: a reminder of an old sword-cut that had barely missed his right eye. Pronounced lines clawed out from a thin mouth. The veteran's face radiated assurance, and his bearing suggested a lethal competence.

Sean addressed his fellow captain. "I explained Yuri's problem to Dallas, Jassy. I assured him that I'd never propose a solution so painful to me, in less than extraordinary circumstances. I mentioned what you said about his being a forceful leader. He readily agreed to serve where he's most needed."

Dallas held out a hand. "I appreciate your willingness to take me on, Jassy," he announced forthrightly. "I'd make any sacrifice to further a chance at a negotiated peace, but I don't regard this switch as a sacrifice on my part. I'll be proud to serve under you."

Jassy's grip all but crushed the sinewy brown hand he squeezed. "I'm grateful to you, Dallas," he declared with patent sincerity, his bulldog face projecting both relief and warmth. "We'll hope this overture succeeds. Meanwhile, we'll prepare for the worst...together." Two men as unschooled in the delicate art of concealing their thoughts from their associates as they were of lying even for courtesy's sake, walked off shoulder to shoulder, mentally adjusting to new circumstances of service in the cause both saw as superseding any personal concern.

So began a new endeavor: one not as Herculean in scope as the first, but one that took seven fourweeks of heroic effort to complete. Both Terence and Signe employed all of their charismatic appeal to cajole fuel from settlers already living lives of forbidding deprivation. Jointly, they appealed to ice-prospectors donating the fruit of brutal, dangerous labor, to industrialists struggling to recover from the ravages of a decade-long,

rapacious occupation, to a populace striving valiantly to rebuild shattered institutions. Unselfishly, the citizenry donated not only resources, but also flesh and blood: sons and daughters eager to train as replacements for those who had died in the assaults that recovered Gaea's fleet.

Faced with the task of appointing a new second officer to replace Ryan, who had fallen at Chemen, Conor now chose Jess to rise to the rank of the old comrade he sorely missed. The legendary warrior's action engendered fierce pride in the woman acutely conscious that she owed both her prowess at swordsmanship and her ability to lead, to his tutelage. Together, Conor and Jess trained replacements for the sadly decimated crew that had borne the brunt of the battle to reach the site they bombed and breached, at Dunn. Given that Conor immersed himself in the technical aspects of his wild idea, Jess worked sixteen hours a day, striving mightily to shoulder as much of the work burdening the Captain as she could.

Rhea, Jess's cabinmate, spent the bulk of the first week tending survivors of those two final, costly raids. She saw with deep satisfaction the rapid recovery Talley made. That scarred warrior, dreading the thought of being left behind indefinitely, battled her way back to a state of health sufficient to convince the Chief Medical Technician of her fitness to serve.

"Morgan's short on veterans," the seasoned fighter insisted, eyeing the notoriously strong-minded caregiver warily. "I'm on my feet. You know damned well that if you'd recovered to this degree, you'd go aboard."

Having studied the angular, plain face of her old comrade, Rhea surveyed the ugly new scar, which began below the less than ample swell of a firm small breast, and continued around the right side of a lean torso, above a puckered puncture-wound. Other, older scars disfigured the hard, dark body bared to the technician's searching eyes. Reluctantly, she nodded. "I'll discharge you³after you pass me your word that over the next three fourweeks, you'll see whichever medic's here on Main World, every time Morgan docks."

"You've got it, woman." Profound relief reflected from sunken gray eyes as the convalescent awkwardly donned a slate blue tunic and pants marred by rents closed, if not concealed, by patches neatly cloth-welded to the inner surface of the garment.

So began a period of long, tedious, cautious flights. Veterans spent endless weary hours searching screens for glimpses of enemy vessels. Recruits underwent rigorous training, conducted by officers feeling their way towards achieving a tightly knit, well-coordinated crew.

Slowly, Conor's vision transmuted into solid reality. The day came when the first supply of fuel loaded at Feynman arrived back at Main World. The cargo vessel, commanded by Eric and escorted by Conor's military ship and an undetectable vessel flown by Signe, landed upon a flat area on the surface of Main World, close to the northernmost edge of the globe-girdling web of habitats. Five sturdy legs now encircled the docking module remodeled into a lock. Twelve pressure-suited crewmembers exited via the slanting walkway that descended from the module after the rock seared by the plasma exhaust cooled. Stepping a trifle gingerly onto the baked surface, the spacer-fighters began the long, arduous walk to the nearest habitat, leaving to a horde of suited technicians the task of attaching gear that would allow the liquid water in the holds to be pumped into tanks.

Eric and his crew emerged through the second of a pair of locks allowing ingress to the habitat. Wyatt, Lieutenant, a quiet man of thirty-seven--a spacer-fighter barely recovered from a wicked sword-thrust taken at

Chemen--unlatched the Captain's helmet.

"Men, face this wall," Eric ordered. "Midori and Lupe, face opposite. Tell me, when you're dressed." Twelve spacers shed cumbersome pressure suits, and donned slate blue uniforms showing signs of hard wear.

Striding out into the corridor at the head of his crew, Eric greeted the Commander, who stood awaiting him, accompanied by the spacers who had manned her ship. "That ingenious ploy worked better than I ever thought it would," he admitted with smiling candor. "What few problems surfaced, Conor and those engineers he brought along solved, and the rock's right on course."

"We'll figure on hauling a load every time Feynman's close to Gaea, Eric. Once the rock orbits the ice-moon, we'll see if we can't manage two loads."

Flanked by Jess, Conor strode into view two hundred meters away, followed by his crew. The originator of the idea hastened towards the silver-haired woman meeting the group halfway.

"Conor, what a triumph!" Signe commended the mechanical genius, flashing him her memorable smile. "Marvelous!"

Praise from a master is praise indeed, girl . "We've perfected the technique, so we won't find the chore nearly so chancy, next time round. I suggest we let the other captains observe the process, once that rock is in orbit."

"We'll train all of them. Meanwhile, we need to venture close enough to Columbia to guard our perimeter. We'll use the six detectable ships--make our intent plain."

"About time."

Three days later, Lacey, gaunt, hollow-eyed, but back on duty commanding one of the three orbital forts, caught sight of a military ship on his multispectral screen. The Captain alerted Amin, who deployed Evan's, Waylon's and Demetrius's vessels to observe the ship's trajectory. Having detected the mysterious visitant on the video screens, the Acting Commander of the Special Force conferred with Brant and Dahl, the men in command of the two remaining forts. Amin then peremptorily challenged the intruder.

"We're an Earth-armed military ship of Signe's Gaeon Fleet," a Gaeon-accented voice asserted boldly. "Try locking onto us, and we'll blast you! We're making sure that you're holed up in your forts, not preparing to repeat Norman's error. You'll be seeing us often, gentlemen."

"Well, of all the nerve!" Lacey spluttered. "For sheer insolence, that beats anything I've ever heard!"

Amin bit back the scalding retort boiling to the surface. "Best watch yourselves, my overconfident foes," he warned in a voice cold as liquid nitrogen. "We'll blast you with manifest delight, should you let down your guard in the slightest degree." Silence fell like a pall over his bridge.

Undeterred by his unerring perception of the magnitude of Lacey's wrath, Levi, seated next to the veteran spacer-captain, candidly spoke his thought. "That's no black ship. It's flying a trajectory that'll allow it to transfer into an orbit far higher than that of the forts--one that will take it nowhere near the Ice World. They're doing exactly what that Gaeon said they were."

"Damn that woman's gall!" Controlling by sheer force of will a temper Levi intuitively knew to be mercurial, Lacey forced rugged coppery features into a

mask of tight-lipped impassivity as he glared at the screen.

Seated in his office in Ministry Main Habitat, where he had been attending to the administrative affairs that had engrossed him ever since he witnessed the efficacy of his defenses, Arlen listened to Amin's description of the encounter.

"They're evidently making certain that we launch no strike on Gaea," the Acting Commander reported. "They boldly proclaimed their intent. We've seen only the one ship, but Signe undoubtedly plans to employ all eight. I'd gladly risk a ship-to-ship battle, knowing that they won't dare lock onto us, lest they take a return blast down their beam. We could outmaneuver them while they get into position to fire manually, so that any pulse aimed at the point in space we vacated moments before they loosed that energy fails to score. Those Gaeen captains won't be as experienced as we are at that sort of maneuvering. Shall I take them on, sir?" *Let us wipe one of the arrogant bastards, at least!*

"No, Amin. And you'll issue stern orders in my name, to the other officers%forbid them to go out of their way to provoke a skirmish. Stay battle-ready, but don't initiate a fight. Try to determine how many ships Signe's sending this far out. She's got to be hampered by their perennial shortages of fuel. Let me know what you learn. Warn Danner to stay vigilantly on guard at the Ice World. Have Levi relieve Brant at Third Fort, and order Brant to reinforce Danner's guard."

"Yes, sir."

Sensing the impotent anger underlying that crisp, conventional response, Arlen wearily pondered his position. *Dexter's engaged in a military plot against me. I've set him up. It'll be only a matter of time before I trap him into betraying himself. Galt increased his power over world security while the war fully occupied me. He's taken pains to appear motivated by a patriotic wish to assist me by assuming extra responsibility, while scrupulously avoiding any appearance of disloyalty. Regan's blasting Kent served to bolster the public's perception of Galt's effectiveness. I wish to hell Second Corps would wipe Chapell!*

Norman's the only one of my three rivals who isn't giving me a problem, other than keeping his veterans discontented at their lot. Defeat at Signe's hands broke the back of Norman's fierce ambition, evidently. He's carrying out his onerous duties with impeccable efficiency. Not that he wouldn't turn on me in an instant, if an opportunity offered, but he sees none. Nor will I give him one.

And now this evidence that Signe plans ... something. Or is she merely determined to prevent any new invasion of Gaea? Why in hell can't she simply turn her considerable talent towards rebuilding her world's economy? That captain plainly announced their intent. Is that a forthright warning, or some sort of feint? Could she be preparing for a large-scale strike on the Ice World? I can't see how. She'd lose the bulk of what she's gained. But bear in mind that she came up with a most unexpected strategy once already. Don't underestimate your daring and unconventional enemy, Arlen. Dangerous error, that.

A knock on the door interrupted Arlen's dour meditations. "Come in!" he called, knitting his brows. *Now what in hell! I told Hoffmann not to admit anyone!*

The aide appropriated from Neville, the First Minister whom the military dictator entrusted with overseeing the mundane functioning of the civil government, appeared in the doorway. "I'm sorry to interrupt, sir," Hoffmann apologized warily. "But after hearing what the gentleman pleading for an interview had to say, I assumed that you'd wish to interrogate him yourself."

Divining that a novel circumstance prompted that decision, Arlen commanded, "Send him in."

The gangly visitor, whose slightly rounded shoulders and shuffling gait shouted his total lack of any training as a swordsman, appeared to be in his early thirties. Clad in a smartly tailored suit that the shrewd observer suspected he wore seldom, but had donned for this occasion, the man exhibited perceptible nervousness as Hoffmann introduced him. "This is Paige, sir. He's an engineer in the employ of Lansing Metals."

Arlen rose quickly enough to avoid calling attention to his penetrating analysis of the visitor's nonverbal behavior. Offering a hand, he noted the unworldly, contemplative cast to the brown-skinned face of the engineer. Subtly pitching his melodious voice so as to place the civilian more at ease, he greeted him cordially, and urged, "Please be seated." Gesturing to a chair, Arlen took one opposite. "What business brings you here, Paige?"

Sitting stiffly erect on the edge of the comfortably contoured seat, the civilian studied the holder of supreme power over his world. Moments later, he relaxed a trifle, judging the courtly courtesy to be habitual, not assumed for the occasion.

"Sir, I'm a chemical engineer. Twelve Earthyears ago, while an undergraduate in the University, I began a project of original research in metallurgy. Norman's invasion of Gaea hadn't yet occurred. I solved a vexing problem in a most unorthodox manner--by enlisting the aid of an engineering student at the University of Gaea. We conferred across interworld space, bearing with the inconvenience of the time-lag. This man, Yuri by name, proved an inestimable help. Nice chap--shy, but brilliant. Our collaboration proved most advantageous to me.

"Well, five days ago, Yuri managed to contact me. He hasn't changed much, sir. He's most definitely the same man with whom I formerly corresponded. He's now one of Signe's officers. He and a second Gaeian--Sean, one of her captains--recently gained Signe's permission to contact a non-military Columbian: myself. Both Sean and Yuri wish to act as envoys from Signe to you, sir, to ascertain whether you'd eventually consider meeting with their world's leader in mutually agreeable circumstances, at some secure place. They hope to negotiate a truce that will lead eventually to a peace treaty."

Dust of my ancestors! Shock surged through the dictator whose face betrayed no slightest hint of his sudden, profound excitement. "Indeed!" he remarked, consciously projecting wary interest. "Why does Signe not contact me herself?"

Arlen detected the caller's uneasiness as Paige replied, "I talked to both men a second time, sir, an hour after Yuri first raised me. I didn't inform you at that point, fearing that I might lose all contact with them. The connection was unsatisfactory both times. I asked that question. Yuri stated flatly that Columbia's history of treacherous actions--our ancestors' plots, which forced Johann into the drastic course he took, as well as Leon's and Norman's violating the Convention--rendered the majority of their associates highly suspicious, sir. Signe reluctantly permitted two men wishful for peace to contact a noncombatant intermediary, so as to relay a message to you, but evidently she intends to keep her guard up.

"Sean declared even more bluntly that Signe's core staff suspects that she risks assassination if she docks on Columbia. Any meeting between you and her would have to occur in a place and a manner that would absolutely assure her high command that no such attempt could succeed. Yuri emphasized that while Sean and himself had secured their commander's permission to meet with you, all they'd be attempting would be to assess whether you really entertained any desire to forge a treaty."

"I see." *Haughty sorts, those two. Plainspoken. For self-appointed, would-be envoys, they exhibit no suavity--no finesse--but admit the galling truth, Arlen. The Gaeans abided by the Convention--trusted in it. They adhered to so rigorous a pacifism that they abjured even the use of swords to settle personal quarrels in duels. They maintained an aloof, unyielding isolationism, rebuffing any overtures regarding interworld trade, but the Gaean leadership didn't offer any gross provocation sufficient to justify Norman's legalized plundering of their world--conquest sullied by vicious rapine and callous slaughter of civilians.*

Norman talked Leon and his civilian advisers into an act that did indeed cast a foul blot on Columbian honor, and I rose to power as a result of Leon's assassination. Easy to guess what Signe and her captains assume. I can't blame them. Well! This development offers possibilities, but damned if I'll give any impression of blatant eagerness.

Those thoughts racing through Arlen's mind produced no appreciable pause in the conversation. "I find your news intriguing, Paige," he resumed smoothly, "but hardly conducive to the generation of high hopes. I'm not averse to the idea of meeting with Signe's envoys, merely wary. Did these two men seem willing to dock in Columbia, themselves?"

"Most definitely, sir. They feared for Signe's life, not their own. I suppose they figure they're unlikely to form any target for assassination themselves. They're just messengers. They said they'd call me back, and set a time three weeks from today. They plan to fly to Columbia under a symbolic flag of truce--just the two of them, in a military ship. Sean said we'd have to accept that necessity, as would they. He emphasized that no other type of vessel is available to them."

What in hell did Signe do with the cargo ship? Arlen asked himself. Perhaps they crashed it. Given her ingrained distrust of Columbians, she'd surely prefer to risk that vessel, rather than allow a military ship to dock here. Can we risk letting one of her Earth-armed ships dock? "I'll devote profound thought to this matter, Paige," Arlen assured the engineer. "Let me ask you: what impression did you form of these two men?"

"They're tough and dedicated, but sincere, sir. Yuri I know to be extraordinarily gifted. He ought to be doing research. I can see where he'd yearn for peace."

This civilian just spoke what he feels to be the absolute truth, Arlen assured himself, convinced by a set of subtle, nonverbal cues unconsciously exhibited by the engineer. Well! Perhaps a breakthrough's in the offing. Better proceed with infinite caution. "I thank you for coming, Paige," he affirmed with gracious warmth. "I'll be in touch with you. Be sure before you leave that my aide knows where to reach you at any time."

Reseating himself at his desk, Arlen reviewed the intermediary's recital.

Perhaps those two officers' very bluntness--their lack of diplomatic polish--offers hope, he mused. I'd enjoy a definite advantage in an encounter

with straightforward types unused to devious maneuvers--men unable to conceal their reactions. Besides, if Signe agreed to let them hazard a military ship, she surely must entertain some slim hope of a breakthrough. Negotiating face to face with her would be an entirely different matter than dealing with these youths. Such a confrontation would pose a challenge, but I'd likely still hold an edge.

I'll need to arrange the circumstances surrounding the arrival of my archfoe's envoys with exceeding care--effectively guard both these Gaeian officers, and their ship, so as to demonstrate that no assassin could reach Signe, should she agree to a meeting. I admit to entertaining a wish to meet that woman. Formidable foe, she turned out to be. Adrienne's assessment struck right on the mark.

Pain swirled up from the depths where the widower strove constantly to keep it locked away, out of his consciousness. *I could use ... relief. But not ... Karyn ... I miss you ...*

Succumbing to a most uncharacteristic impulse, Arlen laid his head on the arms folded on his desk, and fought back despairing, scalding tears.

Chapter Eleven

"So, gentlemen, I intend to receive these two envoys from Signe. This unexpected overture might well open the way for a negotiated end to a costly war. Such an outcome I consider far preferable to the current frustrating stalemate. At this time, I'll apprise you of my plans for handling the situation."

Supremely at ease, Arlen swept an imperious glance over the faces of his five commanders. Coolly, he weighed the reaction of each stunned subordinate to his electrifying announcement. Fulke's phlegmatic countenance registered acceptance bordering on relief. Suppressing a scowl, Norman stiffened the body held tautly erect. Compressing thin lips, Dexter narrowed eyes gone suddenly speculative. Arlen surmised correctly that Orloff experienced no chagrin over the war's ending, but concluded that he did fear the adverse effects a cessation of the conflict might wreak on his career.

Galt's handsome face consciously, skillfully, projected wary hopefulness. Roused to sardonic admiration of the man's capacity to conceal his true feelings, Arlen studied his most dangerous rival. Eyes hard as diamond met his unflinchingly. *Once I've neutralized the threat Signe poses, I'll deal with you ¾ never doubt that,* the Commander-in-Chief mentally challenged the officer inwardly seething with incandescent anger.

As he strode out of the meeting, Galt took pains to preserve a glacial calm. That demeanor distinguished him until he gained the privacy of his office in Second Corps' Headquarters. Serene features suddenly contorted into an expression of virulent hatred. Like a caged, feline animal, the broad shouldered athlete paced the deck.

Damn and blast this new development! he fumed. *This turn upsets all my plans. Just when I see my way clear to augmenting the authority I enjoy as Commander of the Corps entrusted with guarding the space around Columbia from attack by renegades, this happens! Our traditional role--scouring outlaws out of their*

havens on O'Neill--severely limits me. I need to go on absorbing into that sphere of influence various functions formerly reserved to the Minister of Internal Security! And now this thrice-damned advocate of appeasement proposes to end the state of war that justifies my assumption of new responsibilities!

Damn Arlen to a vile death! A negotiated peace will free him to concentrate the bulk of his energy on destroying me. He'll find ample time in which to eviscerate Second Corps. Look what he did to Third ... and to Fourth! Not that I wish that Courtney still survived. No way! But that development foreshadowed other unsettling changes. Norman has been rendered ineffectual. Orloff's Arlen's puppet! So is Fulke! Dexter's plotting some increase in his own power--very likely, a coup. Damn! Why in hell doesn't Dexter find some pretext to challenge Arlen? He'd prevail, master swordsman that he is! That would give me the opening I need--allow me to seize the supreme power that Arlen grabbed for himself after Leon's death. Likely Dexter figures I'd do so, though, and doesn't feel ready, yet, himself. And if I suspect that Dexter's plotting some coup, likely Arlen does, as well. Dexter fails utterly to bind his men to himself with ties of loyalty! Appeals to their greed--their own lust for power! Fool!

Give Arlen credit where it's due, Galt. He rivals your ability to command loyalty, even if he doesn't match you as a warrior--or Dexter, that superb swordsman, or Norman, that savage, scarred veteran. Damned if you can fault the bastard's nerve, though. Just think back! You savored a most welcome certainty that Arlen's stupidity in walking in to negotiate face to face with that psychotic maniac holding three Fifth Corpsmen hostage--three men not even officers!--would assure his death, but he sweet-talked that insane brute into surrendering the handweapon he held trained on Arlen's chest! Walked out of there unscathed! The slippery sod could beguile a whore into parting with her life's savings! He'll talk that Gaeian slut into withdrawing to her blasted rock--to staying home! Peace! A cessation of hostilities will trash the best opportunity ever afforded me, to come out on top!

Peace. What if ... Arlen emphasized that Signe fears assassination. He looked me straight in the eye as he added, "And with good reason." My accursed rival's morally certain I engineered Leon's death, but he never uncovered a shred of proof. He won't, either, but what an opportunity I lost, right then! The best I ever engineered--only to find that I'd accommodated Arlen ! Shades of the slain!

Neville's the bastard who made the difference--threw his support to my worst enemy. Well, Neville will pay for giving Arlen the edge he needed to outmaneuver me. When I act, our bootlicking First Minister will forfeit his miserable life.

Assassination poses too great a risk of exposure. I'd precipitate civil war--a titanic struggle I'd lose--if the men in the Special Force and Fifth Corps suspected that I engineered Arlen's death. No way could I prevail against the massed might of eleven Earth-armed military ships. No. Leon's demise sprang from a unique, non-reproducible opportunity. But what if I prevent this overture from succeeding? Keep the war going--force Arlen to stay occupied by the conflict, while I solidify my position? Strengthen mine, while weakening his? How could I ...

Of course! You blind ... Why not? Second Corps' military locks--back-to-back with those where the envoys will descend! My rival's keeping the details secret from the public. Arlen fears for the lives of the Gaeians, and the safety of the ship. He worries that the envoys might make some hostile move,

as well, though he won't admit that. So they'll dock directly opposite Fifth Corps' Headquarters, and be met by a guard under Norman himself.

Clever of Arlen, that arrangement. He judges that if some attack were planned, Norman's veterans would most likely be the ones initiating it. So he laid the responsibility for security on Norman personally--placed him in a position where both his pride and his rank as Commander of Third Corps lie squarely on the line. Any attack by present or former Third Corpsmen would destroy what's left of Norman's career.

Well! Those envoys are officers. Veterans of the surface war, I've no doubt. Men who'll bear savage hatred for Norman. Arlen knows that. Is he testing their willingness to look ahead ... not back? Right at the start? Understandable. And if they do blast somebody, it'll be a man Arlen coldly sees as expendable. As do I. It surely wouldn't sadden me to see Norman wiped!

So why not ... Could I swing that? What a coup, if no one ever suspected! Not sufficient this time to outface lingering suspicions allowing of no verification. I'll require a titanium-steel alibi. I'll need to be standing right next to Arlen himself. So how ... Think, Galt. This could be the breakthrough of a lifetime. Think!

The man weighing desperate courses--all equally treasonous--suddenly stopped short in his fevered pacing of the deck, his face a study in malevolent elation. *Of course! My manipulation of that crazed genius worked to perfection four Earthyears ago. He's grown steadily more paranoid. They've incarcerated him in his quarters, and retained keepers. But if they still let him tinker ...*

Why wouldn't they? His mental aberrations don't affect his inventiveness, or cloud his understanding of physical principles. Would he still remember me? He's become considerably worse lately, Marlenn says, but my periodic visits over a span of a half-dozen Earthyears--visits I made so as to bind Marlenn's loyalty all the more firmly to myself while disguising my real interest--should have served to keep my memory fresh in that deranged mind. I had Reinwald figured. Worth a try, that notion. Definitely worth a try!

At 1900 that same evening, Galt stepped out of an autocab in a corridor to the rear of Ministry Main Habitat. Standing before a facade, he braced himself to tackle a ticklish chore, before pressing the buzzer at the entry to a section. A burly man wearing the dark gray uniform of a medical technician in the employ of the Ministry of Health opened the door, and stared in surprise at the caller.

"I'm Galt, Commander, Second Corps," the visitor identified himself in a tone freighted with authority. "Marlenn's my Lieutenant Commander. I've known his uncle for Earthyears. I earned Reinwald's friendship before his malady gained so unfortunate a hold on him. I rather think he'll remember me. I used to visit him often, in happier times. The thought occurred to me that a man shouldn't abandon his friends, no matter how great a misfortune strikes them. I'd like to pay him a visit. You're his keeper?"

"One of six, sir. Jamison, I am. But as for a visit... I'm not sure how Reinwald would react. He's grown deeply paranoid--dangerous. Capable of violence. It takes both my assistant and my own self to handle him, at times. I'd hate to run such a risk to your life, sir."

Galt's hearty laugh plainly conveyed derision. "Reinwald's frail, elderly, and lacks a third of my height," he drawled sardonically. "Both my strength and my

training give me an edge in a hand-to-hand encounter with a renegade my size--a man in the prime of life. I hardly think I need fear a physical assault. Not that I'd hurt the old gentleman while fending off an attack³no way. Now, let me chance a visit, Jamison."

The Commander's imperious manner overawed the still-dubious public employee. "Well...I guess we can see how he'll react, sir, but I advise you to leave your sword here. He might assume you intend to use it on him."

Slipping the carrier off his belt, Galt laid the sheathed blade on a once-plush chair worn threadbare. A swift glance around the fusty premises generated an eerie sense of incipient decay, of brooding malignancy. "Do you still let your charge work at producing new inventions?" the caller inquired with calculated casualness. Focusing on the crisply uniformed, middle-aged attendant, the warrior seldom if ever troubled by morbid imaginings strove to shake off a feeling that he consciously judged irrational.

"We do, sir. Reinwald putters in his workshop for hours at a time. Keeps him calm, that activity, although we found we need to keep a sharp eye on just what he's doing in there. He constructed a most ingenious weapon, once--a crossbow. Norris figured out what it had to be--he'd seen a program on the vid featuring clips from ancient films taken on Earth. But normally, the old man builds electronic devices similar to those he was once famous for inventing. One of his creations starts the oven in the galley by remote, from any cabin in the quarters or the laboratory. We use that outfit all the time, now."

"Brilliant mind, Reinwald's. A pity, what's happened to it. Well. Let's see whether or not he remembers me."

Although still patently dubious, Jamison nonetheless led the way to a sitting area off the corridor that separated the quarters from the laboratory. A second gray-clad attendant rose from a squat metal bench. That individual, younger than Jamison, kept his eyes riveted to the thin, slight, hunched form that sprang with astonishing agility from a frayed chair unpleasantly stained where its occupant's head and hands customarily rested. Combatively, the former inventor confronted the pair arriving. Bright black eyes narrowed as they fixed themselves on the tall, blonde, black-uniformed military figure.

"Ehhhh! Galt!" the old man screeched. "Still in one piece, I see! Well, now! Takes some doing, that! Look at me, would you! Surrounded by sniveling hypocrites trying to ferret out my secrets! They've moved in on me! Damned brutes!"

His face wreathed in a smile, Galt strode forward with hand extended. "Good to see you alive and kicking, Reinwald."

A claw-like member gripped the proffered hand. Now what brings you here, you archplotter? No mere wish to chat, I'll bet my next meal. I used you once ... rid myself of an enemy. Kept your secret ... and my own. Ahhh ... you don't change, Galt. Cold as liquid nitrogen, that shriveled organ that passes as your heart. Dangerous, you are, but I'm a match for you ... see through you.

With no warning, the psychopath turned vituperatively on the two attendants, one of whom stood somewhat to the rear of his patient. "Don't sneak around behind my back, you damned prying nuisances! Get out, will you? I'm visiting. I still have one friend left. Get out!"

Jamison and Norris exchanged anxious glances.

"Leave us, gentlemen," Galt commanded. "I'm quite sure I can handle things."

Oh, yes. To perfection.

Reluctantly, the two attendants retired into an adjoining cabin. Having slid the door closed, the peppery inventor waved his guest into a chair. "Sit down, Galt. I see no enemy has found your back unguarded, yet." *Yours ... or mine!*

"Not yet, Reinwald. No...I've never encountered so dangerous an enemy as the one from whom you delivered both of us, so long ago. I don't forget what I owe you, either."

The small man glanced furtively over his shoulder. Bright, black, bird-like eyes swept the cluttered environs of the cabin. The reedy voice dropped to a whisper. "I fixed him, didn't I? You need to watch what you say here. These bastards spy on me constantly. Interfere with my work. Pester me beyond bearing. Keep me locked up. Marlenn's behind all of it. My conniving relative has persecuted me for Earthyears. They've locked me out of my old workplace. All I can get into is one small part. So much lost...lost! Damn them!" *Could I employ Galt to rid me of Marlenn, if I play this hand with exquisite care?*

"Reinwald, I've a new enemy: one dangerous to our world. I need your help. I'd not ask you, given the severity of your own troubles, except that no one else stands able to do for me what you can. You'd need to keep this as secret as the other..."

So! A shrill cackle raised the hair on the back of Galt's neck. Eyes glittering with demented cunning stared piercingly into his. "Secret! You think I'd tell these damned jailers my business? Or blab to my conniving relations? I've buried all sorts of secrets, over the Earthyears. Mine...and yours. Yes. These fools don't believe me when I tell them the time of day. Say I'm...daft! Crazy! Oh, I know what they claim! That's their pitiful excuse for locking me up and plundering me in my own home! Bastards!"

"But you're no fool, Galt. You're as canny at protecting your back as I once knew how to be. But...I've slipped. Let these accursed nuisances invade... Grown old...feeble..." The harsh voice turned querulous, and softened to a whine.

But not senile, my murderous pawn. "You're not too old to help me, Reinwald. Let me explain. I need a device built: a remote controlling device, capable of aiming and activating the Earth-built weaponry aboard a military ship, from without. A device I can install in a lock, program, and initiate from a distance of two hundred meters. The initiator would have to be small enough to fit into my pocket, and be capable of activating the main mechanism from a similar distance. Could you build me such?"

The narrow, seamed face puckered into a grimace of frowning appraisal as Reinwald studied the man sitting relaxed, seemingly wholly at ease. "I could have, once. You know where I used to build such things...test them. I can't get in there now, and I couldn't test what you want. Earth-built weaponry. Challenge, that. No specs in the bank. I never have seen such a device...not that I'd need to, if I knew certain details. Do you know anything about electronics?"

"I majored in ship-systems technology, and minored in electronics, Reinwald. Yes, I know a good bit. Not a patch on what you do, but enough to clear a few hurdles. As for your not being able to get into your old retreat...I could. From below--you know how. I could bring you what you need."

"And you could lever Marlenn out of my life, if you chose." *Indispensable, my talent. Worth a price--ehhhhh, you slippery conniver?*

Watch yourself, Galt . "So I could, if I supplant my rival, old friend. Not before, but I reward those who serve me, Reinwald--generously. On the day I take control of our world, I'll house you royally, and honor you publicly. You'll be free to live as you please. My word on it." Eyes glued to his prey, Galt smelled a musty odor. A surge of revulsion assaulted him when he realized that it issued from the rumpled, food-spotted suit, obviously out of adjustment, which hung loosely from the scrawny frame of his senescent host.

Promises. Words. So much stale air, most men's bleating, but Galt dares to act, while other men spout drivel. This bastard doesn't scruple to kill ... or to abet an avenger bent on exterminating an oppressor. Why not? What have I got to lose? My canny ally maneuvered me close in ... Got me out unseen ...

Marlenn's next! "I'll do what you ask, Galt. Trust your word." Spittle dribbled from one side of the old man's mouth, as he flicked a wet tongue over a wizened upper lip.

He's visualizing a death. I saw the same mad light in those eyes when he dropped Leon. My death? By all the ... No. Marlenn's. Got to be. Chance it, Galt. "You'll find that trust repaid, never fear, Reinwald. But we'll have to out-plot your jailers. Outfox them. Let them think you're merely tinkering, and that I'm simply humoring you."

A second cackle set Galt's teeth on edge. "I'm your man, old friend. I'll build what you need. Yes. Right under the damned noses of my jailers. Spin them a tale--tell them I'm building an oven-starter for your corps, ehrrrrr, Commander?"

"That would form a most plausible pretext, Reinwald, but time's short. I'll need the device finished within ten days." *Don't croak before then, you moldering bag of bones!*

"Come back in three. I'll know what I need from below, then." *For you--and for me!*

Rising with fluid grace, Galt extended a hand. "I owe you now, Reinwald, and I'll owe you far more, shortly. I won't forget my debt to a man whose genius few of his contemporaries appreciate."

"No new thing historically, that. Well! Let's march out there and toss dust in the eyes of *my* enemies."

Knowing better than to slip behind the madman, Galt strolled out ahead of him. Despite his relaxed attitude, he walked with every sense alert, every reflex battle-ready. The practiced conspirator knew better than any man alive just how murderous this lunatic could be. He also knew with exactness that Reinwald was never more dangerous than when seeming to employ valid if sinister logic.

Jamison rose abruptly from a chair, relief written large on his face, when he saw Galt stride through the door. "Ah, there you are, sir. I was beginning to worry."

"No need, Jamison. I told you, your charge and I are old friends. He's been complaining to me that you've curtailed his workspace--says he lacks components he needs. I promised I'd bring him a few items. After all, better a renowned inventor stays occupied, eh?" The high-ranking caller winked at the man whose eyes widened in surprise.

"That's so, sir. Well. I'll see you out. Norris, start supper."

The medical technician accompanied Galt to the exit. "He did remember you," he

admitted in wonder, "although his memory's not badly affected. He tends to see enemies everywhere, though. Don't ever think that you're perfectly safe around him, sir. He's unpredictable. Some chance bland word could set him raving. Turn him against you."

"I fully realize that. What a pity, this worsening of his condition. I'll drop in again, shortly. He's enthusiastically talking about building me a device similar to your oven-starter, but on a grander scale. I humored him. If the practical side of his mind stays occupied, perhaps the aberrant part might lie more quiescent. I expect you have your hands full with him, at times."

"We do, sir--and so does Marlenn. I appreciate your kindness in visiting our patient."

"Marlenn's a man I value, Jamison."

Striding away to an autocab post, Galt smiled his wintry smile to himself. *But Reinwald's a man I value equally*, he ruminated. *Stark, staring mad as he is. A most useful tool, Reinwald. Quite as useful as Marlenn. Oh, yes.*

Watching Sean and Yuri take leave of their crew and comrades, Signe battled an onslaught of nagging doubts. *Sean seems so confident*, she reflected bleakly. *He trusts his former friend's assurance that Arlen hasn't closed his mind against the idea of negotiating a peace. Well ... if there's a chance, I can scarcely turn my back on it, without so much as a try--but I wonder. Would a military dictator believe that peace would benefit him? Arlen still holds the edge in military might: twelve Earth-armed ships to our eight, and countless second-class vessels, plus an impregnable defense around his world, and limitless fuel. Damn! Would you negotiate, if you stood in his boots?*

Yes. I would--in order to redirect the incredible output of human energy and staggering wealth of resources being squandered in both worlds by this continuing, futile struggle. Perhaps Arlen deplores that waste, as well.

Or would he? His captains are career-minded military men, as is he. Scientist, inventor, physician...why would a man of his brilliance take up a military career, if not because he craved unbridled dominance? Could he stay in power, if the war ended? Would those subordinates lusting after new conquest tamely accept peace, or would some new tyrant rise to depose or assassinate Arlen?

Hard for me to judge. Well. We'll see.

Morgan, Wong, and Jassy patrolled space, far out beyond the orbital forts, as the envoys stood poised to make the transit to their destination. Theo's vessel guarded the environs of Gaea. Wyatt, Eric's lieutenant, and Jess, commanding Conor's crew, did the same, in the two black ships. Conor stood by, prepared to transport Signe and Eric close in, to the perimeter of Columbia, to wait and listen while Sean and Yuri descended.

Concealing her doubts, the Commander held out her hands to the two men approaching to bid her farewell. His handsome face wreathed in a smile, Sean eagerly gripped her hand. "Well, we're ready, Signe. We'll do our best. Both of us will study Arlen's reactions, although he's noted, evidently, for being able to hide what he thinks. We'll see if we can't at least arrange for the two of you to meet at some intermediate safe place. You'd match his skill at diplomacy, I've no doubt whatsoever." *Just as you've checkmated him in war, you peerless spacer-fighter!*

"That you would, Signe. Peace. After twelve Earthyears!" Yuri's voice breathed yearning.

"I'd welcome the chance to try, at any rate. Sean, Yuri, take care. Keep your tempers firmly under control. Don't allow anyone to goad you into speaking impulsively. Don't act too eager, or give the impression that I want peace at any price."

Sean met his superior's eyes squarely. "I'm not your oldest captain, Signe, nor your most experienced officer, but I know exactly how you think. I'll bear myself so as to reflect credit on you, and on Gaea--as will Yuri. We'll do all in our power to open the way to a lasting peace we can accept with honor."

I believe you, Sean . Signe gripped the patriot's hand. Her vibrant face expressed fierce pride, as she simultaneously squeezed Yuri's. "Take care," she urged again.

The youthful envoys lifted their ship, and set out on their quest.

Twenty-one hours later, Signe sat the board between Conor and Eric, aboard Conor's vessel. Boldly, the premier fighter had flown farther in than had been the wont of the Gaeans patrolling. At a peremptory demand from the orbital fort that he approach no closer, he had acquiesced, after coldly informing the challenger that he intended only to observe the envoys' descent. Signe watched Conor maneuver so as to be able to pick up the communications emissions from both Sean's ship and the board manned by the men controlling the traffic in the space above the capital of Columbia. Her body taut, she observed as the operator balanced the ship on its exhaust.

"Sean here. Captain, Signe's Fleet. Come in, you men manning the orbital forts. I request permission to dock under a symbolic flag of truce. Your Commander-in-Chief expects us."

"Amin here: Acting Commander of the Special Force. Permission granted. I'll transmit the data you'll need to program a descent sequence that will allow you to dock on a military lock of the capital. Stand by."

Conor jotted the data as well.

Sean replied, "I've got that. What arrangements have been made to receive us?"

"Arlen here, gentlemen. You'll be docking on Lock Eight of those reserved for Fifth Corps. You'll be met by a guard of honor headed by the Commander of Third Corps: the body traditionally entrusted with insuring the safety of both civil and military officials on the surface of Columbia. While you may not regard Norman in the light of protector of the persons of those important to the welfare of our world, that duty now constitutes his chief responsibility. Since you come seeking a route to peace, I trust that you'll not find it difficult to look ahead, not back. Your escort will accompany you to Fifth Corps' Headquarters, where you'll be met by myself; Fulke, Acting Commander of Fifth Corps; Orloff, Commander of Fourth; Galt, Commander of Second; Paige, the intermediary who contacted me; and Hoffmann, my aide. I look forward to meeting with you, gentlemen."

Shocked to her core, Signe expostulated, "Norman!"

Conor hissed, "Butcher turned protector. Arlen's gall I find incredible!"

Eric alone protested. "But he's right, Signe! Third Corps traditionally *did* provide guards of honor, and protect the persons of officials. If Norman still commands that corps, he'd be the officer in charge!"

Sean's voice, level, unemotional, reached the listeners. "We'll accept the escort of whomever you charge with our safety, Arlen. I'm Sean. Yuri and I

will step out of our ship unarmed, trusting to your word that you receive us under a symbolic flag of truce--that we'll be allowed to dock, meet with you, and leave again."

"You have my word, Sean and Yuri. I look forward to meeting you both."

"Signe..." Conor riveted eyes glinting with anger on his superior.

"He passed his word, Conor."

"He enjoys an unsullied reputation as a man of honor," Eric observed evenly.

"He did before he assumed dictatorial power, four Earthyears ago! That might have changed!"

"Gentlemen!" Signe's peremptory exclamation silenced both men. "Sean accepted the danger. So did Yuri. I don't like the arrangement, but I won't countermand the joint decision of two brave patriots willing to risk their lives to try for peace. Conor, if I order them back now, I'll be broadcasting on a wide band to Arlen and his entire military establishment that the mere mention of Norman's name scared us off. Surely if Arlen contemplated harm to our envoys, he wouldn't have said publicly what he did, both to his own men and to us. And if he truly intended merely to put Sean's and Yuri's ability to look ahead, not back, to a test, they passed. Every man of his Special Force just heard him give his word. Could he break that word, and stay in command?"

Conor pondered that shrewd question. "Damned if I know," he growled.

"I doubt it," Eric maintained stoutly.

"So do I." Having deliberated with lightflash speed, Signe voiced her belief.

On the surface, Arlen stood behind the men manning the main board in Fifth Corps' Headquarters, flanked by Fulke, Orloff and Galt. Galt had gained admittance to the group receiving the envoys, by calculated maneuvering. The ruthless political infighter harbored no illusions regarding Arlen's ability to see through any attempt on his part to act a lie.

Confronting the Commander-in-Chief a day earlier, the Commander of Second Corps had offered blunt objections to the idea of entertaining any overture from the Gaeen envoys. "Signe started the war in space," he pointed out. "She employed daring, unconventional tactics to gain a strategic advantage, and fought in the forefront of every battle herself. Wily strategist, she has proved herself to be. This request may constitute a devious method of concealing some new tactical ploy. If she genuinely wants to negotiate, I'd expect that she'd come herself. She's sending two captains: young men. Strange, that. Well. The decision to meet with them, of course, is yours to make, but I formally request that I be allowed to form part of the group receiving them, sir--that I be granted a chance personally to assess their sincerity."

Pausing, Galt smiled his frosty smile. "Not that I'd mind a situation which rendered highly questionable your need to employ eleven-twelfths of our Earth-armed ships in a passive defense rather than the apprehension of renegades. Should peace become a reality, I'd hope that a less top-heavy distribution could be effected." That last remark bore the unmistakable ring of truth.

Arlen assessed his rival's motives. *Could this bastard plan some overt act of hostility towards Signe's envoys? In my presence, and that of Fulke and Orloff? Hardly. He'd be mad to offer me so welcome a means of sending him to*

stand trial for treason. He's spoken no lies. On that last score, he's right. I'll find it difficult to offer a plausible pretext for denying Second Corps the use of more first-class ships, if I succeed in negotiating a peace. Perhaps that factor actually does form Galt's main interest.

Or might he hope to catch me making some blunder he can later exploit to undermine my authority? That could be. Well, what harm can his presence do? If I refuse, he'll charge that I'm maintaining a suspicious degree of secrecy. He might even align himself with Dexter, who's already letting the fact be known that he thinks I'm going soft--losing my will to win. Dexter's setting the stage for some future augmentation of his own power. Damn them both! Should they join forces, they could together cause me endless trouble.

Eyes cold as interstellar space raked the Commander of Second Corps. "Time enough to consider the re-disposition of our forces when a breakthrough has been made, Galt. I'll conduct the negotiations with these envoys exactly as I see fit, but warily. Of that you can rest certain. I've no objection to your forming an observer along with Fulke and Orloff. I'll welcome your sharing your impressions with me afterwards."

"I'll do that, sir." Hurriedly, Galt forced from his mind his potent satisfaction at having gained what he sought, well aware that face, eyes and body could combine to betray him.

Arlen detected satisfaction, but failed to plumb the full depth of an emotion he assumed to arise from Galt's having secured a concession he sought for some devious reason. Now, faced with receiving the envoys from his enemy, he recalled that conversation. *What harm can result from Galt's witnessing our meeting?* he asked himself again. *None--and I'll forestall any accusations of conducting negotiations crucial to the national interest, in secrecy. Well. Interesting encounter, this discussion promises to be.*

Staring into the vid, Signe watched the descent while Conor balanced on his exhaust. She heard the routine comments passed by the men manning the board in Fifth Corps' Headquarters. "Ship descending on Lock Eight," a clipped voice droned. "Two minutes from touching down. Guard of Honor, take note."

"We've sealed to the lock." Sean's words fell clearly on his comrades' ears. "We're preparing to..."

The envoy's communication abruptly broke off in mid-sentence, even as an incandescent eruption of blinding visible light appeared on the screen. A strangled gasp escaped Signe. "That's... Arlen's blown them! That's a blast from Earth-built weaponry! Eric! Did you see..."

"Yes! Damn his treacherous soul!"

Amin, in synchronous orbit just above the ship bearing the envoys, saw as well, but placed a totally different interpretation on the evidence erupting across the screen. *A sphere of light! No elongation! Those thrice-damned envoys just fired their weaponry either straight downwards, or very nearly so! They've likely annihilated Fifth Corps' Headquarters! Damn the perfidious ... "Men of the Special Force! Blast that Gaeian ship that's nearest!"*

Conor found himself the target of three military vessels that suddenly maneuvered out of orbit with evident intent to destroy him. Acting with the habitual, unflappable presence of mind that never deserted the legendary warrior in the face of the most appalling danger, conscious that Signe's survival depended now on his skill, Conor handled his ship manually, with

surpassing dexterity. Lightning reflexes, slowed no whit by age, enabled him to maneuver swiftly enough to dodge the pulse launched at him from the vessel closest to his. Mind at a white heat of concentration, he dodged again, and saw a chance. "Fire at that..."

Signe's reflexes equaled Conor's in swiftness. Forcing from her mind hatred, outrage, searing pain, and vitriolic anger, she concentrated on one overmastering, savage necessity: to kill in retaliation--to blast the enemy capable of such incredible black treachery. Aiming the weaponry manually, she waited, her mind operating with surreal clarity. When the chance offered, she fired, even before Conor's exhortation reached her ear. A Columbian military ship vanished: annihilated in a blinding burst of light the twin of that which minutes earlier killed Sean and Yuri.

No other chance offered. Having glanced at his fuel gauge, Conor bowed to bitter necessity. Still focusing every faculty, mental and physical, on maneuvering to evade the two ships in hot pursuit, he headed back to Gaea.

"Eric! Man the weaponry!" Signe grated. Harsh commands to annihilate the Gaeans issuing from the military band broke off abruptly as the Commander switched to the little-used commercial frequency she employed when some crisis made verbal communication a necessity.

Morgan, Wong and Jassy, reeling with shock, heard the announcement delivered in a voice radiating incandescent fury. "Attention! Arlen just blew Sean's ship! Right on the lock! He used the weaponry of an Earth-armed ship! Killed two men he'd just given his word would be allowed to dock, meet with him, and leave! Blatantly committed an act of callous, premeditated perfidy! Damn his soul to the mythical fire! I trusted his word! The bastard never wanted peace! We've only fuel enough to get us home! You three watch yourselves! We destroyed one enemy vessel, but eleven Earth-armed ships hunt you! Keep us informed over the voice-coder!"

Signe tuned the transceiver to that frequency, and so never picked up the expostulations of shock, outrage, and anger equaling her own, which issued from the captains hearing Amin's wrathful explanation. No vessel--commercial or military--heard the impassioned version of the tragedy that Signe transmitted over that little-used frequency. No instructions came to the Special Force from the surface.

Amin visualized Arlen's instantaneous demise. On the screen of his mind, he saw a crater-lake of molten slag form below the location where Fifth Corps' Headquarters transmuted into an expanding sphere of radiant energy. Curbing his rabid desire to destroy every Gaeon ship between his force and the Gaeon Group, he acted on the black certainty that he had better keep the Special Force close to his world, in case either Galt, or Dexter, or both, took advantage of the opportunity to seize power on the surface. Snapping curt orders to his subordinates, he left Lacey in command of the Special Force, and docked. Only then did he realize that Fifth Corps' Headquarters remained unscathed.

Within Fifth Corps' communication cabin, Arlen stood watching the board as Sean's ship descended. Automatically, he scanned the graphic displays, taking note as Sean's Gaeon-accented, unemotional voice announced, "We've sealed to the lock. We're preparing to..."

The fearsome blast--a rapidly expanding sphere of raw energy, which annihilated Sean's vessel and caused a crater-lake of slag to form where the lock and its environs formerly stood--killed Norman and twenty Third Corpsmen instantly. Tightly focused, unimaginable energy designed to be launched at a

target from afar, directed straight downward by a vessel clamped securely to a lock a negligible distance above the solid surface of a planetoid, rocked Fifth Corps' Headquarters to its foundations. The deck rippled beneath the feet of those standing, sending them sprawling. The walls perceptibly wavered. A titanic explosion all but deafened the stunned men knocked into a tangle of bodies on the still-vibrating deck. The sound of seals crashing into place across the entrances leading to the military corridors assaulted ears still ringing from the initial din. The air heated perceptibly. The board went dead. The lights failed.

Dim emergency lighting revealed thunderstruck faces staring wildly at each other as the men scrambled to their feet. "The Gaeans!" Orloff gasped, speaking the thought of all.

"Keep calm, gentlemen," the Commander-in-Chief ordered imperiously. "Fulke, dispose your men so as to find out what's going on outside. The rest of you, stay put, until we're certain no new attack is imminent." Arlen's deep voice, icily level, resonant with authority, galvanized Fulke into action even as it froze the others in place.

Galt's fingers still gripped a small device hidden in a pocket. Relaxing his hold, he withdrew that hand in which he now clutched a square of cloth. Wiping his brow, he drawled sardonically, "They missed you, Commander, but they can hardly have failed to kill Norman."

"It would seem so." *Dust of my ancestors! Signe did this . Signe!*

Fulke returned after five minutes. "That ship must have fired its weaponry at the surface, while clamped to the lock, sir. No other ship took damage. Seals shot into place, and held. No installation suffered a lethal drop in pressure but the military corridors. Norman and the honor-guard are presumed dead. I've got officers assessing how many other corpsmen died. Likely not many. Norman had his route pretty well cleared. Why in hell did she do it?"

Silently, Arlen pondered that question. *Did Norman form the magnet for this obscene attack? Did I ? Did both of us serve as targets? If so, why did those two thrice-damned Gaeans wait till they docked? Why didn't they blast us from above, as they descended? But they'd have died almost instantly in that case as well. Amin's spacers would have targeted them manually--blown them before they could abort the descent, or re-aim the weaponry. They didn't know how far away this installation is from the military locks. If they thought my headquarters directly adjoined the locks, as did Norman's, in Gaea, they likely figured they'd kill me as well.*

Damn! Signe set this up! Employed the same sort of fanatics as she used to land that lethal outfit in Lock Three at Chemen! Signe!

All these Earthyears, I've admired that woman's gallantry! Honored her, for her steady refusal to employ her weaponry against civilians! Well--she didn't today. But they lied! Signe deliberately, callously, violated a truce! Sent me a pair of fanatical, lying assassins!

At that moment, Arlen's regard for his archfoe took a mortal thrust. A most inexplicable regret washed over him. *I deemed Signe a chivalrous enemy , he railed inwardly . She's no better than Norman! Well, she revenged herself on him, all right. Damn her to slow rot!*

Arlen spoke, striking chills into Paige, who had stood mute, aghast at the thought of what his acting as intermediary might bring down on his head.

"Signe evidently sent me a suicide mission, gentlemen, which targeted Norman, my own self, and three of my Commanders. Had the Gaeans gained all of those objectives, they would have thrown our military establishment into dangerous disarray." Eyes cold as the depths of space impaled the shaken engineer. "Well, Paige, your estimate of those men's motives proved vastly erroneous!"

His face working, his heart thudding, the engineer nonetheless met Arlen's baleful eyes squarely. "Sir...I believed them to be men of honor. I simply can't..."

Sturdy faith in his judgment overrode stark fear. Frantically, the man cast about for an alternative explanation. Hoarse with emotion, he queried, "Could that blast have been some ghastly accident? I'd have staked my life... I *did* stake my life, waiting here with all of you! I simply can't imagine either of those men to be capable of an act of gross treachery!" Conviction clearly infused that adamant assertion.

Gripped by cold rage as he was, Arlen yet noted all the kinesic evidence that the engineer spoke exactly what he thought. "I know you to be sincere in what you say," he conceded grudgingly. In a tone less accusatory, he added, "I didn't expect such perfidy myself, of a leader I admired until today. If anyone's to blame, I am. You face no reprisals from me, Paige. You're free to leave."

Taking that as dismissal, the civilian withdrew in haste, before the dictator whose authority extended to ordering him spaced changed his mind.

"Fulke, Galt, Orloff, see to your headquarters, and assess the damage. Report to me as soon as possible."

"Yes, sir." Three men replied simultaneously.

Vastly relieved by his cognizance that Arlen's attention had been focused on Paige, and not on the subordinate striving to conceal smug elation, Galt strode away. *That madman's device worked like a charm*, he gloated. *Arlen never suspected a thing. Well, that blast will scotch the possibility of any negotiated end to the war. Permanently!*

Amin entered as the three officers left, his ebony face grim as death. As he beheld the man he had earlier assumed to be dead, his heart hammered, and his chest constricted. Gripping Arlen's hand, he all but crushed it. "When I saw that sphere of light erupt on the vid, I felt certain those damned envoys had leveled Fifth Corps' Headquarters," he rasped. "I judged that the blast had to have occurred right above, or directly on, the locks. I figured you'd bought it!"

Despite the fury gripping him, Arlen divined the extent of Amin's mental turmoil.

"The Gaeans flew a ship fairly close in," the eyewitness asserted. "One that balanced on its exhaust, and observed the descent. Three of us attacked it, seconds after the blast. The man at the helm dodged with more skill than I'd have believed any Gaeans could muster. He targeted Yukio's ship, and got clean away when three other enemy vessels intercepted those of us pursuing. I'd have harried them back to Gaea, had I known you were still alive, Commander, but I figured that if you'd died in the blast, Galt or Dexter might pull some instant coup."

The listener's gut convulsed. "Yukio's dead?"

"Yes, sir. He and all his crew."

Rage looked nakedly out of Arlen's eyes. *Signe sacrificed one of her Earth-armed ships, but she evened the loss. Damn! Yukio! A man I valued highly! Why in hell ...*

Forcing a torrent of black anger out of his consciousness, Arlen reviewed everything he knew of the assault. *Paige spoke the truth as he saw it, and what an opportunity for either Galt or Dexter, if the enemy had wiped me! But Galt would have died, as surely as I would have, had those thrice-damned assassins blown Fifth Corps' Headquarters. Dexter would have been the only Commander to survive.* "Amin, are you absolutely certain that no ship on our locks annihilated that Gaeon vessel?"

"Arlen, I was sitting with my eyes glued to the vid, directly above the ship descending. Had another ship fired on the Gaeans across the locks, I'd have seen an elongated brightness, not a sphere. No pulse shot across the two hundred meters or multiples thereof separating the two vessels. Two Earth-armed ships rested on the locks: Evan's, and your own. You know damned well that *Evan* didn't violate the truce!" That bold, impassioned reply Arlen recognized as an exhortation hurled by his oldest friend, not by a subordinate.

So I do , Arlen silently admitted as he nodded.

"Five second-class ships--three belonging to Fourth Corps, one from Fifth, and one from Second--rested on their respective locks. The ship from Second was closest to the one that blew. It might have sustained damage. But whatever the source, that blast damned well issued from an Earth-built weapon!"

"So...the envoys loosed the pulse. I can't imagine their doing it by accident. 'We're preparing to...' Preparing to fire, that bastard must have meant! Did the Gaeans aloft attack you when they heard those words?"

"We attacked them. They never broadcasted a single word over the military band--then, or later. After failing to score, I called off the chase, thinking I'd better keep the Special Force close in. I thought you dead, Arlen!" Expressive eyes eloquently testified to the depth of the fear that had gripped their owner.

Touched, despite his wrath, by that glimpse into Amin's soul, Arlen admitted glumly, "I never expected such perfidy of Signe. Never! I'm to blame for allowing her supposed envoys to dock in an Earth-armed ship. I suppose I ought to thank the Powers that they didn't slag the entire military complex!"

Evan's large bulk filled the doorway. "Sir, I just heard you're all right. I thought..." The brawny warrior strode in, his rugged face wreathed in vast relief.

"Evan, were you aboard?"

"No, sir. I was ashore, in a corridor not far from the locks--on leave, sir. Tilden and Warton were aboard, relaxing in their cabin. They rushed to the board--thought the ship might shift off the lock. The shock wave from the blast rocked it violently. They saw that glowing crater, and figured Signe must have attacked in force. While Warton manned the weaponry, Tilden tried unsuccessfully to raise Fifth Corps' Headquarters. He called the orbital fort, and heard the details from Lacey. I got there right then. I had a hell of a time circumventing the area sealed off. Lacey ordered me to report to you, and see whether you need help. Tilden and Warton wait outside, sir."

If ugly supposition surfaces, that pair of same-sex lovers can bear

incontrovertible witness under truth compeller that no Fifth Corpsman loosed the blast from the bridge of Evan's ship , Arlen noted with relief. "Evan, find out what the men guarding my personal vessel saw. Report back to me here."

Alone once more with his oldest friend, the autocrat remarked bitterly, "I appreciate your concern for the idealistic fool who let this happen."

Laying a comforting hand on his superior's shoulder, the Acting Commander urged softly, "Don't take all the blame on yourself, Arlen. Norman earned the Gaeans' mortal enmity. It wasn't as if he were an innocent victim. Neither were his guard of veterans, I'll wager."

"Perhaps not, but he died doing the duty I laid on him--died through my miscalculation. I find myself regretting that aspect, at least. Well. Keep me closely informed of what transpires on our perimeter, Amin."

"I most certainly will."

Evan arrived back shortly after Amin departed. "The guards outside your lock sustained injuries when the blast occurred, sir. They've been taken to Fourth Corps' Infirmary: the one nearest. The two men mounting guard on your bridge activated the board after the blast rocked your vessel, but they saw exactly what Tilden and Warton did--a crater brimful of slag. They raised Lacey when they couldn't get through to Fulke's officers. He told them to withdraw the air from the inner lock, and stand by for orders. I had to contact Lacey myself, to get those rescinded, so that I could go aboard."

"I see. Evidently the envoys did this themselves, on Signe's orders--or at least, with her consent. They violated the truce so as to kill Norman."

Evan's granite face and brawny body radiated wrath. "Damned treacherous bastards--sir."

"So it seems. How badly were the guards hurt?"

"The shock wave hurled them into a wall. They sustained severe bruises, and burns from the heat, before the seals closed. Painful, the burns, but not life-threatening."

"Well. Report to Fulke, Evan. I expect he needs all the help he can get, about now."

"Yes, sir. Tilden's rounding up my crew. I figured we'd be needed."

Having snapped a salute, Evan departed. After brooding for a span of seconds, Arlen resolutely squared his shoulders before striding out prepared to hear the reports of what he knew to be catastrophic damage.

Morgan heard Signe's impassioned accusation with stunned, disbelieving shock. Pain enshrouded him, searing his affectionate heart. *Oh, no!* he cried in his mind. *No! Not Sean! No! His poor mother ...* Tears burned behind the warrior's eyes, even as he maneuvered his ship. Consumed with a feral desire to kill, he recklessly expended precious water as he strove to take out a Columbian vessel while dodging the enemy's fire.

Luke, his eyes on the board, nonetheless sensed the white heat of his captain's incandescent wrath. Cursing under his breath, the second officer grasped the controls of the weaponry, hoping desperately to succeed in obliterating the foe whose third pulse narrowly missed its target. His lean, tough face contorted in fury, he fired four times, but failed to hit the

enemy. "We're running low on fuel, Morgan," he grated through clenched teeth, frustrated beyond bearing by his failure to score.

"I see that. Those miserable bastards are withdrawing to their haven⁴perish their accursed souls! Damn that foul brute whose word's a glib joke! We've no help for it, Luke. Head for home."

Signe sat between Eric and Conor, her eyes filmed with tears of pure rage. "I let them go, Conor! Your judgment was sounder than mine. I sent Sean and Yuri to their deaths! The gall of that smooth-tongued brute! Arlen passed his word--lied, in the hearing of his entire force of men! How can they serve a bastard of that stamp? How could a man like Dahl respect him? Well, Dahl served Norman. They're all alike! Rotten to the core--to the bone! Why did I think there was ever a chance? Damn my stupidity! Will I never learn? Arlen's as vile as Norman! A worse backstabber! Fully as callous! Damn him to endless fire--perpetual torment!"

The intensity of the hatred mirrored in the warrior's blazing blue eyes shocked Conor. Sensing that such corrosive venom posed a danger to the mind harboring it, he considered what he might say, but found no words adequate to his need. Staring into the oval face contorted with passionate fury, he made no reply.

Eric waited until the Commander's initial wrath spent itself, waited until she fell into seething silence, before countering evenly, "Signe, you acted on tenable, solid grounds. You made a judgment I saw as reasoned. We don't know for certain that Arlen's responsible. It's just possible that one of his rivals for power blew Sean's ship, and Arlen with it. Three commanders waited with him, not four. The absent man could have done this as part of an attempt to overthrow a military dictator. Even if Arlen survives, we won't know but that he only escaped dying by the span of a molecule.

"Signe, I feel as devastated as you do, over the deaths of two comrades for whom I cared deeply, but even as I sit here filled with anger and grief, I find it hard to believe that a man could so change in a few Earthyears as to lose all concern for his honor--break the word he gave in the hearing of all his men."

Glaring at the Senior Captain through eyes narrowed to slits, Signe rasped, "Let's suppose you're right. Why isn't Arlen striving to raise us now? Making voluble protestations that the offenders are being punished?"

"Perhaps he's dead."

"If he is, we'd better prepare for an invasion," Conor warned harshly.

"Either way, we'd better prepare for an escalation of the hostilities," Signe asserted, her eyes still smoldering. "Eric, I admire your idealism. It's hard for a man himself the soul of honor to believe a leader capable of the perfidy we just witnessed, but I sadly fear that we've underestimated Arlen's capacity for treachery. Even if the bastard's dead, all chance of a negotiated settlement's ended. Permanently!"

"I expect you're right, Signe," Eric admitted, his voice as full of pain as his lined face. "But...damn."

Conor interjected softly, "Signe...all of us live daily with the knowledge that we could die at any time. Likely none of us will survive to see a peace forged--one that Gaea could accept with honor. We'll die fighting. Dying I consider easier than living with the pain of losing those who go before us. The longer we last, the greater the number of those wounds we'll all carry.

Sean knew what he risked. So did Yuri. They'd not want you to feel guilt, at letting them undertake a mission for which they volunteered. Be certain of that."

Exquisitely aware of the magnitude of the wound Conor carried under his valiant heart, Signe dwelled on his words. Sorrow flooded her mind, displacing that savage wrath. *He's right* , she conceded bitterly. *We'll all fall in some skirmish--die blown, or run through the vitals in a bloody lock. One of our own, perhaps. The last of Gaea's defenders, dying conscious that we failed her in her greatest need. Pull yourself together, woman. Your worst battles may lie ahead of you!*

Having reviewed the past, Conor projected himself into the nebulous future irrevocably altered by the tragedy. *Signe and Arlen will one day meet* , he divined with sudden, clairvoyant certainty. *I doubt that he's dead. Neither world leader will rest content to endure a costly, interminable stalemate, but when they finally stand face to face ... Damn! Is there such a thing as justice?*

Forcing the tension out of her splendid fighter's body, Signe sat erect, still, her chin outthrust, her eyes icy. Staring unseeing at the board, she rededicated herself to the continuing, seemingly endless struggle.

Available in Jan 2007 from Double Dragon Publishing Inc. - **Master Of Intrigue**
- the adventure continues.

Do You Need Cover Art?

If you like our cover art, you can commission our artist to create beautiful and one of a kind art for your title! Contact information and portfolio can be found at <http://www.derondouglas.com>