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Children were crying all around the chief exobiologist of the SSC starship Bellatrix and the woman in her green Terravegan uniform wanted to cry with them. In ten years with the Tri-Fleet's Strategic Space Command, Lieutenant Commander Madeline Ruszel had never seen such wanton slaughter.

Terramer had been a trial peace colony in the New Territory of the galaxy, populated by clones of races representing one hundred twenty federated planets. A Rojok squadron had managed to reduce it to a smoldering ball of dust in a matter of minutes. An unprovoked attack against a defenseless continent of colonists. A dream of peace gone black in the sleep of treachery. She glared at the turmoil around her. The legendary code of ethics of the Rojok field marshal, Chacon, had gone up in smoke, along with ten million colonists.

She finished the sutures in a quick cytoplasm job on a young Jebob national and gave him a reassuring smile while she checked his vital

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signs with the bionic mediscanner built into the creamy flesh of her wrist. The scanner, standard SSC issue, contained its own diagnostic tools, medication synthesizer and modem. Her patient's thin, blue-skinned face tried to return the smile, but even her strongest painkillers hadn't assuaged the agony of the massive radiation burns on his young body.

She stood up and eyed her medic teams. "Let's speed it up!" she called to them, brushing a long strand of auburn hair away from her sweaty temple. "I want this group of pilgrims evacuated in ten minutes!"

She avoided the pressured glares of her team. "I know, I know," she murmured, "what do you think we are, a bunch of blood magicians?"

They were working against time trying to patch up what few survivors the shoot-and-straft air attack had left. Human and alien children wept softly in a nightmare chorus, looking for parents they'd never see again. The children, she thought, were the worst. The radiation was most damaging to young flesh, and of a kind the Rojoks hadn't used in the early days of the warfare. It was highly resistant to conventional treatment.

She joined Dr. Strick Hahnson at the prefab communications dome that the engineering squad had assembled in minutes, and leaned wearily against the transparent hyperglas.

"We're running out of morphadrenin," she told the husky blond human life-science chief. "Some of these younger ones won't make it, regardless. Strick, what in God's name did the Rojoks hope to gain by this?"

"Ask their commander-in-chief, Chacon," he replied harshly. "We've got worse problems. The comtech can't get through to HQ and I can't find Stern."

She glanced up at him. "He went scouting for the sci-archaeology group. I had hoped he'd take some ship police with him, but you

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know the captain. Strick, the Jaakob Spheres were on that ship, not to mention two VIP Centaurian diplomatic observers. The Rojoks may have taken more than lives here."

He nodded wearily. His blond hair was wet with sweat, and damp splotches made patterns on his green uniform. He looked worse than she felt.

"How many casualties?" he asked.

"About three hundred wounded to lift, if that's what you mean; and those are just the aliens under my jurisdiction. Human survivors number about two hundred more."

"Where are we going to put them?" he asked idly, glancing up at the gleaming orange sky where radiation danced in pale blue patterns. "What about that message, son?" he asked the young comtech in the dome.

"The interference isn't clearing, sir. I still can't get through." The boy's head lifted. "And I can't raise Captain Stern, either. He doesn't answer my commbeam."

Strick glanced down at the scowl on his slender companion's face. "We'll give him five more minutes."

Her pale green eyes swept over the carnage and the ruins of the small jem-hued shops and marble streets to the wooded area beyond. "If anything's happened to those Centaurian diplomats..." She sighed heavily. "The Council would have had a bloody war of its own holding the Holconcom back, in any case. Now, with two of their own people involved, there's no way."

"Which means we'll finally have a half chance of winning this damned war," he told her.

"Amen." She watched the medics loading casualties into the self-propelled transparent ambulifts. "Watch my boys, Strick. I'm going to find Stern."

\* \* \*

Holt Stern strode out of the green tangle of the forest into the clearing where the main settlement had been. He brushed against a spiny moga tree and a ripple of pain shuddered down his arm. Holding it, he glanced around the camp at the neat rows of prefab medical domes where his medical specialists were concentrated.

The personnel were familiar. He knew them. But something about the maze of green uniforms worn by the Strategic Space Command disturbed him. His lapse of memory disturbed him more. It was as if his past life were gone, and only the present remained. And the throbbing in his temple was especially unpleasant.

A rustle of leaves made him freeze at the edge of the forest.

He turned to find the face that went with the husky feminine voice. Madeline Ruszel paused beside a drekma tree. The exobiology chief was flushed with fatigue. Beads of sweat ran down from the mass of auburn waves at her temple to the corners of her full young mouth. She frowned up at him, marring the Grecian delicacy of her face.

"Are you okay?" she asked professionally.

"Yeah. Sure. I just took a pretty hard blow on the temple. Fell over some wreckage." He glanced toward the forest and a hand went to his brow. "I found the sci-archaeo group. Their ship crashed about seventy meters away. Better send out some lifts. The Rojoks left them in pretty bad shape."

"Crashed?" Her pale eyes widened. "Stern, the Spheres?"

"I didn't take time to check," he said flatly. "The diplomatic observers are damned near dead. Better get moving before they're all gone to glory."

"On my way." She eyed him. "Stern, the observers—two of them were Centaurian, weren't they?"

He took a minute to answer. The sound of the word gave him

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sudden chills. "I only saw one. Like I said, I didn't take time to check too closely. Move out, will you?"

She started to say something, but she turned suddenly and broke into a run toward her medics.

Stern strode quickly toward the comtech's hut. "Report, Mister," he said.

"Still no luck, sir," the boy replied. "Even with my boosters I can't even weed out the interference between here and HQ. There's no way to get a message home until it lets up."

Stern's eyebrows jerked. He turned his gaze to the camp, carelessly observing the medics. Sensations tugged at his memory, but they were too vague to grasp. The sight of the bodies, mutilated by massive doses of radiation, didn't affect him at all. Not even those of the children. Why should it? he thought. They were only clones. Duplicates of a dozen alien races whose originals didn't have the guts for a colonization attempt in the New Territory.

"Sickening, isn't it?" Dr. Strick Hahnson asked, ambling up at his elbow. "The last hope of a war-torn galaxy, gone down into the dust of treachery. How long did it take those ten planetary federations to agree to this? Five, ten years? It only took the damned Rojoks one solar hour to atomize it."

"Stow the poetry," Stern told him. "This is a rescue hop, not a—"

"Sir!" the comtech interrupted. "I've got a bogie! She's two AU and closing like a trambeam!"

"Configuration?" Stern asked quickly. "Is she a Rojok, Mister?"

"I can't classify her, sir." The comtech searched his readout screen. "She's making speeds I don't believe, and she scans too light to be a standard warship."

Stern sighed angrily. "Well, can't you make identification from her commbeam?"

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"She isn't carrying one, sir. Her signals are too quick for my analybanks. I'm sorry, Captain, but this one's beyond my experience. I've never read anything like her."

"Keep trying." Stern raised his eyes upward. The skies were brighter than ever with spreading blue glowing radiation. Megabeam radiation, settling on the scarred surface of the planet.

"Hurry it up!" he called to the medics. "Leave the Jebobs and Altairians for now—we'll send a relief ship back for them. Concentrate on the casualties that are ready to lift!"

He turned away from the shocked looks of the medics and back to the comtech. "What about it, Jennings?"

The young comtech shook his head. "She's positioning to assume orbit, sir."

"Beam Higgins on the Bellatrix. Tell him to throw up his screens and prime his main batteries. As soon as he can make a visual ID, I want it. And if she's a Rojok—" he thought for a minute "—if she's a Rojok, tell him to get the hell out of here and get the data to Lawson at HQ. Got that?"

"Yes, sir."

Stern strode out through the makeshift medical prefabs, where specialists in sweat-soaked uniforms were fighting time and the lack of supplies to save life.

"Stern!"

He whirled at the urgency in Madeline Ruszel's normally calm voice, putting a hand to his temple. The pain was back. The tall young officer slowed down from a run just in time to avoid colliding with him.

"We've got it...the sci-archaeo group," she panted. "The medtechs are bringing them in now. Stern, you'd better come with me."

"Strick," he called to Hahnson, "get your people together."

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Jennings," he told the comtech, "I want an ID on that bogie the second you get it. Okay, Maddie, let's go!"

"It's the Centaurian boy," she said when they were out of earshot. "He's wearing the blue and gold colors of Alamantimichar."

Stern felt his neck hairs bristle. "The Royal Clan? My God!"

"That's not all. His sister was with him, according to the ship passenger roster, and she's missing. And so are the Jaakob Spheres. Two of the sci-archaeo scientists were subjected to mind taps. They're little more than vegetables. Two others are missing. The Centaurian boy's much worse."

His hand went to his dark, wavy hair. "There'll be hell to pay now. Those Spheres contained the DNA of every member race in the Tri-Galaxy Council. If the Rojoks have them..."

"The possibilities are endless." She stopped at one of the ambulifts. "Look at this."

Stern leaned a hand against the transparent cylinder and looked in through the blue antiseptic mist. The Centaurian boy inside looked as though someone had taken an old-fashioned straight razor to him, from head to toe. He'd been tortured.

Stern watched him curiously. He was a member of an alien race called the Cehn-Tahr from the central star system near the Algomerian Sector. First contact prompted Terravegan officials to link them with the young Alpha Centauri system near old Earth and call them Centaurians. The name stuck. That, Stern recalled, was the joke of the millennium. These aliens were an ancient race, which legend linked to Cashto, the cat god of Eridanus. Their emperor, Tnurat Alamantimichar, had formed a commando unit called the Holconcom and gone out to conquer neighboring star systems. To date, he had one hundred fifty of them under regional governors with democratic parliaments.

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The alien boy seemed completely human except for the pale golden skin that peeked out from the sleeves and neck of his one-piece suit. His ears, his body, were like any human's. He had no tail or fur. But then his head turned, and Stern had to fight the urge to back away. The huge elongated eyelids opened over great black orbs that sent chills the length of his body. They weren't human eyes. They were the eyes of some human cat, slit-pupiled, unblinking and tortured with pain.

"Don't let it bother you," Madeline said gently. "They have that effect on all of us when we see them for the first time. It's the eyes."

"Cat-eyes," he murmured, but the chills still came. He wondered at his own reaction. The sight shouldn't have frightened him. He'd seen textdiscs of the race often enough.

"Not precisely," she said. "Cat-eyes don't change color. Centaurians' do. Each color stands for a separate emotion. There's blue for concern, green for amusement, gray for curiosity, brown for anger—that's a generalization, of course. It's more complicated when several emotions are at play."

"His are black," he remarked.

"That means pain and/or death. I'll explain someday. Stern, he needs medication. It's a breach of protocol that carries an automatic court-martial if I give it. I don't have a choice."

"Go ahead," he said. "I'll sit on the hot seat with you."

She smiled up at him. "Thanks."

She reached inside the ambulift and laid the bionic wrist scanner against the boy's thin chest, activating the compact unit's drug bank with her free hand. Pressing lightly, the laserdot was triggered to hammer the drug deep inside the frail chest. She withdrew her arm.

The boy's eyes dilated. "Creshcam," he whispered softly. Then, all at once, the great cat-eyes closed gently and his chest went flat.



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She slammed the wrist scanner back through the hatch of the ambulift and laid it against the boy's throat. An eternity of seconds went by before she straightened wearily and, glancing at Stern, shook her head.

"Captain!" the comtech sang out. "The intruder's visual! She's a Centaurian warship, and I'm getting signals from a scout about to leave her!"

"Tell Higgins to keep his distance," Stern called back. "We can't take on the Rojoks and the Centaurians at the same time. And get the ship police out here!"

"Yes, sir!"

"Now just how the hell did that Centaurian ship know what happened here," Stern murmured thoughtfully, "when we haven't even been able to get word to HQ?"

"Beats me," Madeline said wearily. "I just hope this is a congenial group of Centaurian regulars. If it isn't..."

"Go find Strick," he told her. "He's the only man we've got who can translate that cat-eyes garble. He served with them once."

"On my way."

"Jennings!"

"Yes, sir. Scout confirmed. She's on a descent course."

"SPs, line up on my flank," Stern told the ship police as they rushed into view. "Greshams out, on heavy tranquillizer force. Fire only at my order." He turned to the medics. "The rest of you, into the scouts and back to the ship. Move!"

The tension was electric as the taciturn men took their positions. The medics, with their charges in the ambulifts, scattered into the nearby scouts. Hurriedly they secured the hatches and began to gun the lightweight crafts up into the radiation-marked skies.

The pain in his temples subsiding now, Stern drew his Gresham and gripped the jeweled emeraldium power pack tightly in his hand as the alien scout came into view overhead.

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She was sleek and her burnt-copper hull drew the mingled sun and radiation onto a blemishless surface only to scatter the light in strange patterns against the ground.

With unnerving precision, her pilot set her down in the middle of the remaining prefab medical domes and ambulifts. Noiseless until now, a soft hum radiated outward from the bubble dome and suddenly died.

Madeline swept through the ship police to stand beside Stern. She was breathless, and her long hair whipped unkempt around the high collar of her uniform. "Strick's on...his way," she panted.

Stern nodded. The tension was too much for words. The responsibility was more. Centaurians were known for certain barbaric tendencies when members of their race were threatened. But this ship, he already knew, was too advanced to be part of the Centaurian regular army. It was more suited to commando missions, and if his growing suspicious proved true—

A knifelike slit appeared in the smooth hull of the scout. Suddenly nine red-uniformed Centaurians poured out of it, single-file, to converge into a tight, ultramilitary formation around it.

"Those uniforms," Madeline whispered. "My God, Stern, they're...!"

"Holconcom!" He felt chills run the length of his body at the sound of the word on his own lips. "Drop the Greshams!" he barked at his SPs. "They're allies!"

The Holconcom. The peacekeeping right arm of the Centaurian Dectat. A force that no military unit in the galaxy could match or best, if legends held any truth.

"Convince me," Madeline said quietly. "Just because the Centaurian government gave them absolute authority over all the services in wartime, and Lawson requested their help with investigative missions against Rojok positions, doesn't make them allies."

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"Stow it," he snapped. His eyes were on a tenth alien just leaving the ship—a Centaurian in a red uniform. But this one had a single gold emblem on the high collar.

This one was taller than his comrades, and he alone wore a mustache and a beard, short, black and violently contrasting with his pale golden skin. He carried himself with the arrogance of authority, and even at the distance Stern could feel the raw power of his eyes.

The alien glanced around him carelessly, then gestured to his men. They stood at rigid attention while he strode forward, straight toward Stern. As he approached, the brown anger in his huge, elongated cat-eyes became evident and threatening under black eyebrows. He stopped just in front of the humans.

Stern presented the Holconcom officer with a rigid, military salute. The alien returned it, but without respect, then stood quietly, watching him.

"I don't speak Centaurian!" Stern said, raising his voice as if the alien were deaf rather than accustomed to a different combination of syllables. "You'll have to...!"

"I seek two survivors," the alien replied in crisply perfect, unaccented Terravegan Standard English. "A Centaurian youth and a female of our species."

Stern's muscles went taut under his uniform.

"The boy didn't make it," he replied slowly. "We found no Centaurian female."

The huge eyes began to darken even more. "Take me to the boy."

Stern was prepared for anger when they gathered around the ambulift—or he thought he was. But when the Centaurian got a close look at that frail body, with its evidence of torture, he seemed to implode.

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"Maliche mazur!" he roared, and Stern could have sworn that the ground rumbled under his feet. In that one, harsh cry was a kind of grief he didn't remember ever experiencing. A grief that came without tears, but was greater than if it had.

The alien whirled on Stern, a predator looking for prey. "The other observers. Are they alive?"

"Technically," Stern replied quietly.

"You will have them in your Admiral Lawson's office ten minutes after you touch down at the Tri-Galaxy Fleet HQ on Trimerius," he told the captain. "With them, you will present yourself, your chief medic and your ship historian."

Stern started to speak, but the alien silenced him with a cold narrowing of his dark eyes. "But for now, I will know which of your medical personnel dared to lay hands on this boy!"

Madeline Ruszel's face flushed. She'd expected to catch hell for her interference, but she'd done as her code of ethics demanded. Squaring her shoulders, she stepped forward, staring up at the Centaurian officer. "I did," she said curtly. "The alternative was to do nothing to ease his suffering. I gave him a drug that made his passage easier. Nothing more. If you consider that an atrocity, sir, you are welcome to present charges against me."

"My pleasure," the alien replied icily. "Consider it done. By Simalichar, what manner of creatures are you humans, that you dress your women as men and send them into combat to die?"

"Barbarians," Madeline said sweetly. "Sir," she added in a drawl guaranteed to provoke him.

The alien stared at her for a long moment, during which she mentally reviewed what she knew about Centaurians to make sure they didn't eat humans.

The officer turned away. "Komak!" he called sharply.

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A younger, red-uniformed Centaurian ran to his commanding officer and saluted. "Yes, Commander?"

"Take Marcon's body to the ship and have it urred." His tone was deceptively gentle. His eyes were unnerving to Madeline. "Inform Thurat AlamantimicharandtheCouncilof hisdeath,andof Lyceria'scapture."

"It will be done as you say."

The tall alien moved out into the throng of ambulifts. His gaze missed nothing as they wandered restlessly around the ruins. "These casualties will be lifted, of course?" he asked deliberately.

Madeline saluted, hating herself for what she was about to say. But her sense of outrage was stronger than her sense of loyalty. "Sir, Captain Stern ordered us to leave them here..."

"Yes,I did,"Stern growled,glaring at her.His head throbbed suddenly. He touched his hand to it. "We don't have the space to lift them," he added tightly. "The damned Rojoks swiped the Jaakob Spheres, in addition to the carnage they did here. I have to get the surviving sciarchaeo scientists and their data banks back to HQ. These clones—" he emphasized the word as if it were dirty "—will have to wait."

The alien glared down at him. "A life is a life," he said coldly. "You will not leave these wounded behind. I will transport them myself."

"Transport them, hell!" Stern's dark eyes narrowed. "I'm in command here. This is a Terravegan Strategic Space Command rescue operation, and you don't touch those pilgrims without authorization from the Tri-Galaxy Council!"

"By Simalichar!" The alien's eyes dilated and darkened even more. "You have no authority here save what I allow you! The Holconcom are here by Council request."

"I don't care if the tooth fairy sent you," Stern countered hotly. "This is my operation and until I get authorization from SSC HQ, it's going to be handled my way!"

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"Mister," the alien said irritably, "you are a pain in the...so you need authorization, do you?" he added. "I'll show you my authorization. Holconcom!"

Even before the sharp command died on the air, Stern found himself surrounded by nine red-uniformed Centaurians in attack formation, slightly crouching, with eyes that chilled like a fever. A soft, low growl began to rise from the unit. It made the hair on the back of Stern's neck stand up.

"This," the Centaurian officer said shortly, "is my authorization. Interfere at your own risk."

Stern palmed his Gresham and activated it. "Your choice," he replied.

"Hold it! Hold it!" Strick Hahnson came puffing up, stepping out of nowhere to get between the two antagonists. "Stern, put up the Gresham," he said breathlessly. "You're outranked, and if you need verification for that, I can give it. I fought with this officer in the Elyrian uprising. Captain Holt Stern, this is Dtimun, commander-in-chief of the Holconcom."

Stern hesitated, but only for an instant, before he deactivated the Gresham and put it away. The throbbing started again in his temples.

"I know you, Strick Hahnson," Dtimun said in recognition, and extended his arm. The darkness in his eyes had paled into a warm shade of light brown.

Hahnson gripped forearms with the alien. "I know you, Dtimun. You carry your years well."

"At the moment, they lie heavily upon me. Marcon is dead. Lyceria is almost certainly a captive of the Rojoks. And your captain," he growled, eyeing Stern, "proposes the desertion of these survivors, most of whom are Jebob and Altairian nationals, allies of the Centaurian Empire. The Rojoks will most certainly come back to finish what they started here, and these wounded will be slaughtered. I will

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not have an interplanetary incident on my hands because of one officer's warped sense of duty. I will transport them aboard the Morcai." He turned to his men, who were still crouching, still faintly growling. "Holconcom, degrom c'hamas!"

The Holconcom stood erect at once, spread out among the ambulifts, and began to move them toward the Centaurian scout.

"Now, just hold it a minute!" Stern began.

Hahnson caught his arm and drew him quickly aside, with Madeline right beside him. She hadn't said a word, too angry to open her mouth at the treatment she'd received from the alien.

"Holt, there's been enough killing," he said gently. "Dtimun was fond of Marcon, and his temper is legend. He'll call the Holconcom down on you for little more than breathing. Let it go."

Stern sighed with frustration. His eyes went past Dtimun to the clones in the ambulifts. Something stirred inside him, remembering the alien's words. A life was a life—but, even an artificially created one? Was it entitled to the same rights as a naturally born being? For a moment, a soft compassion touched the eyes that lingered on the tortured bodies of the alien children. Then, with the returning pain in his head, it was gone.

"You read too damned many space legends, Strick," he told Hahnson. "They're just a bunch of cat-eyes to me. But all right. All right, dammit, I don't have time to argue. I've got to get my people back home before the Rojoks come back and catch us on the ground. Medics! Let's move out!"

Stern walked away.

Madeline looked up at Hahnson quietly. "He's not himself," she said. "I had to tell the Holconcom commander that he was planning to abandon these wounded. I couldn't live with myself otherwise."

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He put a gentle hand on her shoulder and smiled. "It's okay, kid," he said, using the pet name that was against regulations.

She grinned up at him. "You're a nice old man."

He chuckled. "I'm only ten years older than you, hotshot," he returned.

She started to reply, but the alien commander was suddenly looking at her. The impact of his eyes was a little frightening, even to an exobiologist who specialized in Cularian medicine, to which group Centaurians belonged. She'd studied Centaurians in textdiscs in medical school. But as she was learning, textdiscs were no match for personal encounters. She found him intimidating.

Odd, the sudden pull of her mind, as if it was being examined. She shook herself. She was definitely getting fanciful, and she had work to do. She turned and went back to the ambutubes, doing what she could to sedate the most wounded.



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The labyrinth interior of the Rojok vessel was buzzing with activity. Lyceria of Clan Alamantimichar sat quietly in her temporary quarters watching crewmen dash past the magnetized transparent cell from which there was no escape.

Her slender hand touched a dark blue bruise on the golden silk of her arm. She could control the pain, but not her rage at such rough treatment. Thoughts of her brother made the rage near unbearable. They assumed that she did not know what had been done to him. The fools did not know that the Clan of Alamantimichar were telepaths. She had felt every second of Marcon's agony. She had touched his mind at the moment of death.

She was aware of eyes staring at her, and looked up. The Rojok officer who had abducted her was grinning through the force shield. The slit eyes that peered out of that reddish-bronze face made her tremble. The shock of blond hair that fell on the Rojok's broad brow

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was sweaty and slick. His hair was short, denoting a lesser rank. Only high-ranking officers were allowed to wear long hair.

"You are a rare prize, daughter of Thurat," he told her, studying her fragile beauty. "What a pity that I cannot show you to Chacon. It might mean another mesag mark of rank."

Her chameleon eyes made dark, angry whispers, but her composure was perfect. She rose from the contoured couch, grace personified.

"Had Chacon not ordered my capture, and the death of my brother?" she asked softly.

The Rojok laughed heartily. "Chacon knows nothing of this mission. Some think our commander-in-chief wages warfare in far too chivalrous a manner. Some have promised me his mesag marks for the Jaakob Spheres—and you."

"Think you that Chacon will not discover what you have done when the Holconcom come in pursuit?" she asked.

"The Holconcom?" He laughed again. "They are stories used to frighten children. But pursuers will find themselves pursued. Our forces even now are closing the distance between the planet Terramer and the Tri-Fleet battle lines. No ship can get through them now. Not even your phantom Holconcom."

Her delicate face lifted proudly. "There is one who will come to avenge the death of my brother."

"Let him try."

"Where do you now take me? To your home planet of Enmehkmehk?"

His slit eyes narrowed. "If your arrogance persists, perhaps you will go to Ahkmau instead."

He was gone, and she felt the chills wander over her slender body in its silky coverings. Ahkmau translated in Rojok as "place of tortures." It was located on one of the three moons of Enmehk

mehk, the planetary capital of the Rojok empire. It was the death camp of the Rojok tyrant Mangus Lo, and even a Centaurian could feel fear at the mention of its name. Had she been capable of shedding tears in front of these savages, she might have yielded to them. But Alamantimichar was a proud Clan, and to show weakness to an enemy was to dishonor it. She turned back to her couch. Dtimun would come. No matter the odds against him, he would come.

Back in the command chair on the SSC ship Bellatrix's bridge, Holt Stern forgot the carnage and the Centaurians. He had a bigger problem. Terramer was located on the edge of the Algomerian Space Sector, which the Rojoks had already claimed as captured territory. If Chacon's hunter squads were still in the area, it was going to take every ounce of his command ability to get the ship home.

"Higgins," he asked his sandy-haired first officer, "how's our fuel holding out?"

"We'll make it back, sir," Higgins said with a grin, "but we won't have enough left over to fill a java cup."

"Like I thought. Helm, is the Centaurian ship pacing us?"

The astrogator shook his head. "They were running a parallel course when we left orbit, sir, but they've disappeared. I assume they've lighted out of sensor range. Our tracker beams can't touch them."

"Sir," Jennings, the comtech, broke in, "I've got the short-range commbanks working now, and I'm getting an alien signal. Close, and on scramble."

"Ignore it," Stern said. "Rojoks use an emergency code like that to get a fix on enemy ships."

"It doesn't read like a Rojok signal, sir. There's..."

"I said, ignore it."

"Yes, sir."

He got up and flexed his shoulders while he checked the starmaps over the astrogation console in the cramped nose of the sleek starship. The headache was better now, although there seemed to be blank pieces of his life even behind the pain-pieces he didn't have time to mourn. His brow furrowed. There were no patterns to indicate an intruder, but Chacon's ships sometimes appeared like ghosts. He felt uneasy, and he'd learned to trust instinct more than machinery.

"Higgins, slow us down to quarter-light and take the ship on bearing 6.25, mark one."

"Yes, sir." Higgins gave the order to the astrogator. "Expecting trouble, Captain?"

"I'm always expecting trouble, Higgins. Steady as she goes."

"Sir," the comtech said, "that alien signal's back. It's in English this time, in the clear."

Stern sighed angrily. "Oh, hell, what's it say?"

"It's a distress call from the Vegan Paraguard ship, Lyrae. They're under attack from a Rojok squad and their weaponry is out."

"Location?"

"They didn't give it, sir. Shall I request...?"

"No!" He slammed down into the command chair. "Under no circumstances are you to reply to that message! Astrogator, prime the auxiliary power units. We may have to make a run for it."

"Sir?"

"Mister, if you were surrounded by a squadron of Rojok ships, and you had time for a single distress call, would you be stupid enough to omit your coordinates?"

"Not me, sir," the astrogator said, shaking his head. "Not unless I was trying to home in on a commbeam by sending it."

"Exactly. Prime those units. Jennings," he shot at the comtech, "do your sensors register any other ships in the immediate area?"

"No, sir. Just a meteor—an 'iron' judging by the density. Strange. I don't remember any on the advance scans..."

"Meteor?" He snapped a code into the console at his elbow and glanced over the up-to-date Tri-Fleet starcharts. No meteors or other celestial bodies were charted on the screen. That didn't mean a rogue asteroid or meteor couldn't be out there. Even so, he had a feel for navigation in space that many of his fellows in the Academy had envied. He knew that it was a trap.

"Throw a modifier on your scanners," he told Jennings, "and tie in the master computer for analysis. I think we've located our 'friend in distress.'"

"Yes, sir." Jennings's slender hands flew over the controls. He smiled. "Well, I'll be a—there they are, sir. Two of them, Rojok configuration. Heading toward us at two sublights, using a meteor holoscreen to mask their signals."

Stern grinned, feeling confident now. "Hold your course, astrogator. Weaponry, tie in your emerillium boosters and give me the best widescan spray pattern you can manage. Fire on my signal. Higgins, bring us down to half-sublight and hold."

"Aye, sir."

Stern leaned back in his chair, keeping his eyes glued to the short-range scanner screen on his console. As he watched the approach of the "meteor" he had to grudgingly admire the strategy of the Rojok captain piloting that lead ship.

The Rojok vessels drew closer by the second. Tension grew on the bridge. The crew was accustomed to these confrontations, but the effect of battle was still the same. Fear, quiet terror, dry throats were all a part of space conflicts. Retreat was impossible once combat was

engaged. Where was there to go, except into cold space? Uncertainty rippled through the crew. No commander, no matter how capable, could guarantee the outcome of a battle.

The Rojoks, depending on their "meteor skin" disguise to camouflage them, were beginning to make their run. To an untrained eye, the only disturbance among the bright stars would have been a wayward little meteor feeling its way to oblivion. But Stern knew, and was ready.

"Weaponry, stand by," he called.

"Ready, sir."

"Watch your screen. Give him five seconds into the run, then lock on to him."

"Counting, sir. One...two...three...four..."

Before he could voice the final number, a violent shock wave hit the Bellatrix and threw it careening off course. Stern's back slammed into the arm of his chair and he fell with a racking thud to the deck as the generators that maintained the pressurized interior hit a blip. He was on his feet before the full effect of the bruising ride hit his suddenly throbbing temples.

"Grab the helm, Mister!" He hit the intercom switch. "Weaponry, post two," he called into the intership lock, "can you lock on to him?"

"Yes, sir. Got him!"

"Fire all tubes!"

The ship lurched as the condensed tubes emitting emerillium waves left the ship, pitching the crew against the bulkheads. Stern grabbed his chair and threw himself into it.

"Helm, divert to secondary course!" he barked.

"Leaving over, sir!"

"Weaponry, success of strike?"

"We hit one of them, sir, amidships," the weaponry officer reported. "But the others..."



"Line up your pattern and fire when ready!"

"But, sir," the officer argued over the screen, "we don't have anything left to hit them with! The hit we took blew hell out of our boosters. We're paralyzed aft!"

"Helm, can we outrun him?" Stern shot at the astrogator.

"We can try, sir, providing we have enough fuel to throw to the auxiliary units. Leaving over now."

Stern's hands bit into the soft plastiglas of the chair arms as the big ship began to lurch forward with a humming surge of power. "Come on, baby," he whispered, as if the ship were a female he could coax. "Come on."

"He's tailing us, sir," the astrogator called over his shoulder. "He's barely a parsec behind and closing. When he makes half that distance, he'll fire. And we can't make any more speed."

Speed, Stern thought furiously. Dammit, speed!

His hand went to his head, to the blinding pain that gripped him when he tried to think, to reason... He fought it. And a flash got through.

"Helm, hard right flank and slow to sublight!" he barked. "Quick, dammit!"

"Yes, sir!"

The astrogator dived for the control, and seconds later the huge ship lurched like a fish out of water. Stern ground his teeth as the braking spools were engaged, bringing the force of thirty G's down onto his chest. He could barely breathe, the pressure was so great.

The stars came blurring back into focus. The pressure eased. He pulled his aching body upright and gasped for breath. "The Rojok?" he asked quickly.

The astrogator turned with an apologetic shake of his head. "Sorry, sir. He's on to us. He slowed as we did. He's right behind us, and I can't give you enough speed to ditch him. I'm...sorry, sir."



Death. He could taste it. He could see in the faces of his crew that they, too, knew. Again, he fought the pain inside his head for a strategy, any strategy, that might spare the ship. But that, too, was a losing battle.

Wearily he looked around at the somber, set faces of the bridge crew. He sighed wearily. "If we die," he said, "we do it like men. Any argument?"

The officers and crewmen shook their heads wordlessly.

He nodded. "Turn the ship, astrogator," he said quietly.

"Course, sir?"

"Straight down the Rojok's throat," he replied, "with every ounce of speed you can manage."

"Yes, sir." The astrogator's fingers whipped the controls into position. "Ready, sir."

Stern fixed his eyes on the screen, at the oval Rojok ship hanging there in space like a fish waiting for a worm. His heart was climbing into his throat, and he felt a fear he hadn't known existed. Familiar, this feeling. As if he'd been through that narrow door once before and dreaded repetition of it. The fear simulated panic, and he had to fight the urge to get up and run.

The pain, the searing pain in his mind, grew steadily. Something alien in his brain was fighting this decision. Trying with pain to force him to countermand his own commands.

His hands gripped the arms of his chair. He remembered Madeline and Hahnson down below and tried not to think about them. He straightened with a tremendous effort. Dignity first. It was the credo of the SSC. Even in death, he had to have the dignity of his command.

Almost blind with pain, he drew in a heavy sigh. "Astrogator," he said in a gruff whisper. "Ahead full!"

The astrogator turned and met his eyes with a somber, resigned ghost of a smile. In it were admiration and honor. "Aye, sir."

\* \* \*

The flagship Morcai sliced through the stars like a giant metallic blade, her massive engines making far less noise than her first officer. Komak's usual high spirits did as much for the weary bridge crew as the promise of shore leave. Only the Morcai's stoic commander seemed to be unaffected by it.

Dtimun, sitting in his spoollike command chair, listened only halfheartedly.

His mind was a galaxy away, on Enmehkmehk, home planet of the Rojok Dynasty. It was there that Chacon would surely take his captive—to Ahkmau, the infamous death camp on one of its moons where political prisoners were kept. The thought of Lyceria in such a place was torture, even to a career soldier's trained mind.

"ETA Trimerius?" he asked the helmsman.

"Two mekkam, Commander," was the reply.

Komak joined the older Centaurian, and the laughing green light left his eyes. They grew blue with concern. "Your eyes speak for you," he told Dtimun, careful lest the others hear him. "I regret Lyceria's capture. I know that the commander's heart was soft for her."

"My heart is soft for no one." Dtimun's darkened eyes belied the words. His gaze went to the main viewscreen. "Maliche, I could make more speed in a crippled scout! Are your gravs malfunctioning, helmsman?"

The pilot glanced at him. "I have not fired them, Commander," he said, and his eyes went to Komak.

"I assumed," Komak told the commander, "that you would wish a lesser speed to keep the Earth ship under surveillance. Should it encounter a Rojok patrol, its defense systems would render it incapable of a counterattack. Human ship designers make no allowance for stabilizing BEK gyros and reflectors such as ours."

Dtimun glared at the younger Centaurian. "I will not play parent

to an inferior shipload of aliens. I have no more love for humans than does the Rojok tyrant Mangus Lo, or his field marshal, Chacon."

"Were it our race that Mangus Lo persecuted in his death camps," Komak said quietly, "instead of the humans, I think your sympathies might find more interest in them."

"By Simalichar, you try my patience!" Dtimun stood up. His chameleon eyes faded from a concerned blue to a questioning gray. "What merit can there be in a race whose entire history is preoccupied with pride in cruelty and contempt for life?"

Komak's eyes went green with mischief. "I had not known that the commander's library included textdiscs on human history."

Dtimun ignored him.

Komak studied the older alien with respectful eyes. In a society where Clan was life itself, the commander wore no Clan insignia and claimed no allegiances. He was as mysterious as he was feared and respected by his men. In his years of commanding the Holconcom, no challenge to his authority had ever been given. Not even by the emperor, whom Dtimun treated with utter disdain. His ongoing feud with old Tnurat Alamantimichar, head of the Dectat, was legendary in the space services. No one knew what had started it. No one dared ask. But Komak knew things about him that the other crewmen didn't. Dtimun was aware that Komak's odd outbursts of insight had a basis in fact. It had been disconcerting when he realized that Komak knew more about him than he'd anticipated. As he thought about it, Dtimun glared at Komak.

"Commander," the comtech called out, "the Earth ship has disengaged her lightsteds and is slowing to a crawl. I show two Rojok destroyers trailing her."

Dtimun turned his angry eyes from Komak to the viewscreen at his semicircle console. The Rojoks were already firing when he

engaged the video. The Earth ship hung as if dead in space, offering no resistance as salvo after salvo connected with her hull and sent her reeling to and fro. Then, with the suddenness of a cosmic storm, she turned slowly and began to pick up speed as she began a run that would take her on a collision course with the lead Rojok vessel.

"Is that black-eyed captain of theirs a madman?" Dtimun growled. "What use can this strategy serve? Komak, check the energy scanner."

Komak's hands flew over the scanner switches on the command console. "His weaponry is useless," he reported. "His fuel output reads less than one-quarter capacity and his repulsers are almost gone. I estimate two more hits will finish him."

Dtimun watched the sleek starship bear down on the Rojok, so quickly that the enemy ship couldn't possibly get out of the way in time. "I understand his motive," he said. "A laudable last resort, but a hollow victory. Helmsman, hard about and prime main batteries!"

"Aye, sir."

Dtimun dropped into the command chair with his long fingers barely touching the master weaponry control panel. It was going to require precision timing, this maneuver. If he fired too soon, the second Rojok vessel would have time to destroy the Earth ship. If he fired too late, the spray pattern would destroy both ships.

The Morcai began to bear down on the Rojoks like a flash of light, and the stars around her seemed to be speeding in the opposite direction in her wake.

"I register a scan," Komak said quickly. "The Rojok has spotted us."

Dtimun's fingers tensed on the firing switch. "If he changes course," he said tightly, "I may cost the human his ship. Helmsman, take me in on a deflect pattern, close range. Time will allow me only one shot. I want the best I can manage."

"Yes, Commander. Leaving over now on deflect course. Engines ahead, full-drive."

Dtimun focused his huge eyes on the screen. His long fingers curled around the firing switch. Out in space, the Rojok grew like a suddenly inflated balloon, filling the viewscreen.

Holt Stern sat quietly in his chair, watching the Rojok flash toward the Bellatrix, with a deceptive numbness in his chest. The bridge already had the feel of a morgue as each crew member spent his last seconds in stonelike aloneness, untouching, unspeaking. Stern clenched his teeth to hold back the fear. At least, he thought ironically, the headache would die with him. And then, the Rojok ship filled the viewscreen...

The Rojok came screaming in toward the Bellatrix. There was a final surge of power as Higgins ordered the astrogator to throw the throttle wide-open. Then, quite suddenly, a ball of green mist enveloped the enemy ship.

It took Stern precious seconds to realize what was happening. In a mind yielded to death, thought came slowly.

"Full about!" he barked at the astrogator, praying the man would recover fast enough to make the maneuver. A split second's delay, and the Bellatrix would go up in atoms along with the Rojok.

"Aye, sir!" The astrogator's thin, trembling hands seemed to hit the switches in slow motion.

Stern felt the huge starship vibrate like a running heart with the sudden braking. She bolted under the pressure, as if torn apart between time and speed. Then, with a recovery that was nothing short of miraculous, she began to turn and inch away from the doomed Rojok ship. In seconds that were centuries to her crew, she pulled away with a rippling burst of speed just as the Rojok ship exploded in silent

fireworks out in the eternal night. The shock wave that came in her wake was enough to rattle the scanners on the bridge.

"God!" Stern breathed in mingled relief and gratitude.

"Sir, we've got the megatrons back in working order, now," Higgins said quickly. "Not nearly up to par, but I think we've got enough charge to hit the other Rojok."

"Lock on target and fire at will!" Stern told him.

"On target, Captain. Megas away!"

Stern watched the blue bolts fly into the second Rojok with boyish excitement. The resulting explosion was no less enjoyable than the first had been, and the colorful display produced nothing more than a light jar to the Bellatrix. Stern leaned back in his chair with a long, shuddering sigh.

"Good work, Higgins," he told his exec. His eyes went to the astrogator and fished for a name, and was surprised when he couldn't find it. "What's your name, son?" he asked.

The astrogator gaped at him. "Why...it's Crandall, sir."

Stern nodded. "Crandall. Good man."

"We're lucky you spotted the first attack in time," Higgins said with agrinathiscommandingofficer. "If you hadn't, we'd beatomsbynow."

"Speaking of attacks," Stern said, leaning forward, "where did that one come from?"

"Had to be the Centaurian," Higgins replied. "But he's..."

"Interspace comm coming in, sir," the comtech broke in.

"Throw it over here, Jennings. Higgins, get me a damage report."

"Yes, sir."

Stern switched on the viewscreen, to be met with a pair of slightly amused pale green cat-eyes. "You present an interesting case for your race, Captain," Dtimun said over the screen. "I had not credited it

with such ingenuity. Status of your vessel?"

"Higgins?" Stern asked.

Higgins's thin face seemed to grow longer. "Sir, we took a hit amidships. Damage control reports thirty injuries and fifty-five dead, including our Amazon unit," he added, noting the specialized female attack squad that was regulation aboard all SSC vessels. Females served in combat, as well as in support units. Many former members of Amazon squads, like Madeline Ruszel, were now officers. A good many were assigned to SSC ships like the Bellatrix, although Stern had no female bridge crew on this particular mission due to rotation and R & R.

The Amazon units were the most well-known, the most respected of the SSC's forward units. They were known even by outworlders like the misogynist Centaurians. Madeline Ruszel had started out in an Amazon unit before she felt an inexplicable urge to practice medicine and petitioned for the right to be sent to medical school. She had a soft spot for the Amazons, especially for the unit that served aboard the Bellatrix. Its commanding officer had gone through training with Madeline.

"Damn!" Stern cursed. Madeline was going to take the news hard. "All of them?"

"Yes, sir," Higgins replied. "It gets worse. Our backup fuel units were destroyed, we have three crushed bulkheads, and our primary engine batteries are dead. We've also got grav holes that we have no means of plugging. We're leaking atmosphere at a lethal rate. Unless that Centaurian ship has a repair deck, we're...well, we're finished, sir."

Stern stared at him blankly. "In other words," he said quietly, "we're a dead ship." He sighed and turned back to Dtimun's image on the viewscreen. "Nice try, Commander, but you might as well have let the Rojoks take us out. We'd need two weeks in a shipyard just to begin repairs."

"If you expect to find one this deep in captured territory, I



withdraw my former statement regarding your ingenuity," Dtimun replied. "Prepare for ship-to-ship lock. I'm evacuating your crew and complement to the Morcai."

"With all due respect," Stern protested, "you could just as easily throw a towbeam on us and..."

"Such a rescue operation is beyond the capability of my vessel," Dtimun replied. "Considering our normal cruising speed, your ship would be ripped in two by the pressure. You have your orders." The screen went blank.

Stern glanced around the somber bridge crew. Their faces were mildly accusing. He almost understood the feeling. The Bellatrix had been home for six years, and her deck had a familiar feel. But what could he do with such a damaged vessel except scuttle her?

"Higgins," he said, rising, "order abandon ship and tell the medics to start loading their patients into the port escape hatches. Prepare for ship-to-ship lock."

"Aye, aye, Captain," Higgins replied halfheartedly.

"Something on your mind, Higgins?" Stern asked.

The executive officer eyed him quietly. "Just one thing, sir. We're damaged, sure, but couldn't we call for help?"

Stern felt sick. "We'd be a sitting duck, with Rojoks everywhere and no weapons. Dream on, son."

"Yes, sir. I guess you're right. I just hate giving up our ship."

He watched his exec as he walked away, with growing resentment. For the first time he could remember, he felt a vague distaste for the entire crew.

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3

The darkness had already fallen on Enmehkmehk when Lyceria was taken from the Rojok ship with her head solidly encased in an opaque helmet. Except for the bonds on her slender wrists, she might have passed for a female Rojok soldier in the thin copper armor she wore.

She knew better than to make an outcry. Her captors had warned her of the consequences. She followed them meekly, gracefully, through the gemstone streets, past the glowing multidome architecture that housed the barracks of Enmehkmehk's largest military base. Maliche, she thought, surely they wouldn't imprison her in a common soldier's barracks! She was a member of the Royal Clan. It would be an outrage that would reverberate all the way home to Memcache, the home planet of the Centaurian Empire and the emperor, her father, himself! No power in space would save Mangus Lo from the Holconcom if she were harmed.

But it seemed that the Rojoks had no fear of her people, because

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the barracks were, indeed, her destination. She was taken into a small circular building adjacent to the main complex and thrown unceremoniously into a small compartment. A heavy door was lowered, and she found herself in complete darkness.

Her huge eyes dilated to let in the faint light, and she had her first look at her new surroundings.

There was nothing in the room except for a small synthesizer on the wall. But she could see two panels near it that would account for a retractable couch and toilet facilities. The floor under her was crystalline and cold, but it was spongy, too, and it broke her fall so that she didn't even feel bruised. Perhaps its function was to absorb force, as well as sound. The walls seemed made of the same amber glowing crystal.

Her hands were still tied. Groggily she pulled her aching body up and walked cautiously to the synthesizer. Leaning against the cool wall, she touched the button to the left of the oval housing with her chin. A contoured couch inched its way out of the curved wall and spread onto the floor. She dropped down onto it, noting that it was made of the same shock-absorbing material as the floor and walls. She worked at her bonds. They were tight, but perhaps they could be loosened with some careful meditation.

Her slender body relaxed on the soft couch. Her eyes closed. She drew inside herself, seeking the strength she would need for the task at hand. Slowly, gently, she focused her mind on the bonds. Concentrating, gently concentrating, she saw them loosen and fall to the soft material under them. Fall, she thought. Fall. Fall!

Her hands were suddenly free. She stood up gracefully, rubbing her sore wrists. Her hands reached up to the thick helmet still on her head. She wrenched it off and tossed it angrily against the wall.

In the dim light, a pale green colored the pupils of her large, elongated eyes. The door was next. Only a little more concentration, and...

Before she could finish the thought, the door shot up and two Rojok soldiers tramped into the compartment. One of them grabbed her roughly and held her down, while the other jammed a tiny cylinder against the bare flesh of her arm. There was a stabbing pain, followed by numbness.

"What...have you done?" she demanded, breathless.

"You will soon know," one of them said, grinning down at her with pale slit eyes in a copper-colored face.

She felt a wave of nausea. Then the room began to grow dark around her. She pitched forward, her legs turning to jelly beneath her. The couch rising up to meet her was the last thing she saw.

Komak was busily directing the humans to their berths when Stern walked through the ship-to-ship elevator tube onto the main deck of the Morcai. It was noticeably colder and there was a smell to it that, while not unpleasant, was definitely alien.

Stern hadn't expected the space he found. Twelve men could walk abreast in the corridor without touching shoulders. The bulkheads were curved and glowed with soft, white light. Centaurians dressed in the familiar red uniform trotted noiselessly past with a military precision and routine that was fascinating to watch.

"I know you, Captainholtstern!" Komak said in greeting, running the human's name together as was his custom, because he had scant knowledge of human address protocol. His green eyes twinkled as he approximated an SSC salute. "As you see, I have studied your Terravegan protocols!"

Stern threw him a salute, too tired and angry to react well to the younger man's banter. "Request permission to come aboard, sir," he said formally.

The young alien's eyes faded to a somber, questioning blue as he

stared unnervingly at Stern. "Excuse me, is there some significance among your people to this question?" he asked politely.

Stern relaxed his military posture with a frown. "It's military tradition in our branch of the space services to ask permission to board another ship," he explained. "Like the salute, it's a custom held over from seafaring days on ancient Earth, the home world of the Terravegan colonies. I'm a Terravegan," he added when the alien looked puzzled.

"We do not salute one another," Komak replied. "Only the commander is accorded such respect." The boy's eyes went suddenly green with mischief. "He has forbidden us to salute even the emperor, Tnurat Alamantimichar. I think it has caused the head of Clan Alamantimichar much discomfort at ceremonial occasions, which is one of the few things that cause the commander's eyes to laugh."

"I know another one," Stern said resentfully, remembering the other alien's amusement at the loss of Stern's ship.

"Where can I set up my surgery?" Dr. Madeline Ruszel interrupted. She was flushed and furious. She'd just come aboard, heading a team of medics guiding ambulifts, and her drawn face showed not only the strain of the rushed evacuation, but of the loss of the Amazon unit, as well. "I've got people dying over here!"

"Follow me," Komak told her at once. He led the medics into what appeared to be a mess hall, with Stern bringing up the rear. The ambulifts were quickly loaded onto the long, oval tables against the bulkheads while Madeline supervised the placing and energized the sterilization units on the cylinders. The young alien watched her with odd interest. Perhaps, she thought, it was her red hair that intrigued him. She was the only member of Stern's crew with hair that color.

"Stern, I need morphadrenin," she called over her shoulder. "Every gram I can lay hands on. And if the C.O. can spare some qualified help, I'd be in his debt."

Stern glanced at Komak. "How about it?"

"The commander's contempt for medics is second only to that which he holds for our emperor," the alien replied somberly. "We carry no complement of medics aboard. But I will inform the commander of the need for additional medical stores. Shall you come with me, Captainholtstern?" he asked, apparently fascinated by Madeline. Odd, he looked at her as if he knew her, somehow...

"Lay on, McDuff," Stern agreed with a grin at Madeline.

"My name is not McDuff," Komak said, puzzled. "It is Komak, of the Clan Maltiche. You have heard of it, of course," he added with faint arrogance.

"Oh, yeah," Stern quipped. "It ranks along with the great Clans of Jones and Smith back home."

"Jones and...?" Komak faltered.

"Never mind," Stern said impatiently. "Let's go. Maddie, I'll see what I can do about your supplies," he called over his shoulder as she went quickly back to work.

Komak started off at a fast trot. Stern increased his pace to keep up with the long legs of the Centaurian. "What's the rush?" Stern asked. "Everybody on this ship seems to be on his way to battle stations all the time."

"It is routine aboard the Morcai," Komak informed him. "All personnel are required to run from post to post. Elevator tubes are strictly outlawed for crew use, as well," he added, bounding onto a ladder that led to the upper deck.

"Uh-huh." Stern got brief glimpses inside the various sectors they passed as they climbed access ladders up three decks. Nothing looked familiar. There was alien script on the walls, unreadable and unpronounceable, denoting departments. The temperature was at least ten degrees cooler than the Bellatrix. The alien, spicy smell of the corri

dors was overpowering. And the icy looks the human got from passing members of the Holconcom were uncomfortable. Stern began to feel like an invading disease. If his reception as an ally officer was this cool

and resented, his people could expect even less. Madeline, of all his crew, was going to feel the pressure keenly, since the Centaurian empire did not allow females aboard its warships. He hoped the trip back to the Tri-Galaxy Fleet base on Trimerius would be quick.

Stern was winded by the time they got to the command deck of the enormous vessel. The oval, high-domed bridge made the Bellatrix's bridge look cramped and primitive by comparison. Above his head, a second bridge circled the main sector like a smooth, white balcony. And both bridges seemed to be perfectly coordinated, as well as efficiently manned. The ten crewmen on the lower level maintained their posts with a silence that would have been impossible for a human crew.

Dtimun, noticing the approach of the human, rose from his spool-like command chair and joined Komak and Stern beside the communications banks. Stern saluted unconsciously, but Dtimun waved it aside without returning it.

"Your people are evacuated?" he asked formally.

"Every one," Stern replied. "What about the Bellatrix?"

"Your ship?" Dtimun nodded at a crewman against the opposite bulkhead. A viewscreen was activated which covered the width and length of half the command sector. The Bellatrix hung there in black space like a charm suspended by a chain. A flash of bluish-green light shot out from the Morcai's copper hull and enveloped the sleek star-cruiser. Then, there was a violent red explosion that came and passed without a sound. Only empty space was left.

"We leave no vessel behind where the enemy might salvage tech," Komak explained.

Stern's eyebrow jerked carelessly. "She was a good ship," he said quietly, and wondered why he didn't feel a sense of loss for his command vessel.

Komak drew to attention and jerked his head in a salute. "Commander, Dr.Madelineruszel," he continued, running her names together again, "has requested supplies of morphadrenin and medical assistance. I informed her that we carry no medics, but..."

"Dr. who?" Dtimun asked, frowning slightly.

"The female with hair like sunfire," Komak explained. "She is a medic among the humans. I have given her the mess hall on deck four for her surgery. Dr. Hahnson has the supply sector on deck four. The other crewmen of the Bellatrix await assignment. I did not know where to place them."

"Maliche, can no one function without using my brain?" the alien exploded with darkening eyes. "Ascertain their specialties and place them in the appropriate departments!"

"The morphadrenin?" Komak persisted, apparently not put off by his superior's bad humor.

Dtimun actually seemed to flush with anger. "I carry on my person nothing save the communicator ring you see on my forefinger," he told the younger alien. "I am not a walking ordnance store! Show the mutinous female where the synthesizer is located and acquaint her with its use!"

"Yes, Commander."

"And make the humans aware that they must not come in contact with the kelekoms," he added at once. "They carry unknown bacteria that might harm the machines."

Stern's eyes almost popped. "Bacteria..."

"The kelekoms are our, how do you say, supercomputers," Komak explained at once. "They are living, self-repairing biological entities,



and they are extremely sensitive to alien bacteria. If they become ill, they do not work."

Stern blinked, only half understanding what he was being told. This technology was far in advance of anything the Tri-Fleet had.

"Tell Hahnson I will expect him to keep his medics in line, and out of the way of my crew," Dtimun told Stern.

The comment almost flew by Stern. He frowned. "Hahnson?"

"He is chief of your medical staff, is he not?" Dtimun replied.

"No, sir," Stern told him. "Dr. Ruszel is."

Dtimun stared at him blankly. "The female? A female commands your medics?"

Stern cleared his throat. "Sir, I do understand that Centaurian social structure is far different from our own. We don't differentiate between male and female in our military. We're mentally neutered to the degree that 'relationships' between enlisted personnel are impossible. Even if they weren't, it's the only death penalty left on our books."

"Your military is mad," Dtimun said flatly. "Women have no place in combat."

"If you tell that to Madeline Ruszel, make sure you have a running head start," Stern murmured, tongue-in-cheek. "She started out as a member of our Amazon Commandos. In fact, she captained a squad of them."

Dtimun shook his head in disbelief. "How many other females do you have in your complement?"

"We had thirty-six, but our entire Amazon unit was wiped out during the Rojok encounter," Stern said quietly. "Madeline's taking it hard. She went through training with the unit's commander."

"Which does not answer my question," Dtimun shot back.

"We have one female in our crew, sir—Dr. Ruszel."

"She is quite lovely," Komak said.



Dtimun's eyes darkened and he glared at the younger alien. "You have your orders. Obey them!"

"Yes, Commander." Komak saluted and turned. His eyes gave a green laugh as they met Stern's. "Is his great affection for me not obvious?" he teased. "He..."

"Domcan h'ab leche!" Dtimun thundered in Centaurian.

"Yes, Commander!" Komak disappeared down the escape ladder, but his eyes were still laughing when he left the bridge.

Dtimun turned to Stern. "Come with me."

Stern followed the tall alien into what appeared to be a briefing room of some sort. It was bare except for an oval desk and a smattering of chairs secured to the deck. Apparently the Centaurians also had trouble with occasional gravity failures. They were an infrequent but annoying nuisance on SSC ships.

Dtimun perched himself on the edge of the desk and folded his arms over his broad chest as he studied Stern. "The nearest route to Trimerius," he began, "will still require five solar days' travel. During that time, certain things will be expected of you and your men."

"Such as?" Stern asked.

"The majority of the Holconcom were reared in a clonery." He waited for the shock to leave Stern's face before he continued. "They have never known touch, save in battle. I know little of humans, but it is said that you are a physical race. Take care that none of you lay hands on the Holconcom, either in sport or anger. To do so could easily provoke a massacre. Second, I expect no interference from your personnel in the routine of this vessel. Conversation will be held strictly to military necessity. Nor will I tolerate idle wandering in the corridors. While aboard this ship, your men will adhere to its disciplines. All personnel will run from post to post, and the first man I catch using a ship's elevator tube will be brigged."

"May I ask what the elevator tubes are for?" Stern asked with growing irritation.

"For transport of casualties, Captain, and heavy equipment." He glanced at a viewscreen on the desk and his huge eyes darkened to a somber, angry blue-gray. His fist slammed at a switch on the console. "Degas, your lightsteds are at one-half capacity. Explain!"

The alien was speaking in his own tongue, but the machine simultaneously translated Centaurian into Terravegan Standard to Stern's amazement. Perhaps the briefing room was constructed to allow conversation between alien races of different tongues.

"If you please, Commander, I had just started to contact you," the Centaurian officer said quickly. "My tramaks register a fleet of Rojok vessels closing in from several deshcams away in all directions, all sending out force nets to mesh the distance between them!"

"Well, Mister?" Dtimun demanded, eyeing his comtech over the viewscreen.

The Centaurian officer met those accusing eyes levelly. "We are cut off from Trimerius, Commander," he said matter-of-factly. "The Rojok fleet is attempting to press us into their advance lines. Once that is accomplished..."

Dtimun nodded. "Yes," he said, cutting the officer off midsentence.

The thought of capture by the Rojoks was oddly satisfying to Stern. He caught himself before a smile flared on his face, and wondered at the unfamiliar feelings that had begun to race through his mind; alien, traitorous feelings that frightened him. Strange, he thought, how those feelings had suddenly and completely replaced his earlier headaches. He hadn't been the same since they lifted from the Peace Planet.

"Tekar, can you beam a message through that net?" Dtimun asked his comtech on the bridge.

Another alien face came into view on the screen. "No, Commander," came the reply. "Our strongest megabeams cannot pierce the molecular density of the barrier."

Before Dtimun had time for another question, Madeline Ruszel came storming into the briefing room, her flowing auburn hair sweaty in spite of the cool atmosphere, her green eyes blazing. Stern ground his teeth together and waited for the explosion.

"I've got people dying down there!" she raged at Dtimun without preamble, bracing her legs as if preparing for a hurricane. "I can't resupply any morphadrenin because your damned synthesizer absorbed some bacteria from my fingers when I touched it, and it's sick. Sick! What the hell kind of machines are you using on this bloody space-going whale? And that's not all! My life monitors are malfunctioning from some kind of magnetic interference, and I...!"

"Baat Ashe!" the alien thundered, staring down the furious exobiologist with angry brown eyes that silenced her immediately, to Stern's amusement. "By Simalichar, hold your tongue before I have you spaced! If you have a request to make, make it in understandable tones and not in the language of a hashheem from a pleasure dome!"

Her mouth opened slightly, and her green eyes dilated. But she regained her composure at once and stood her ground. "All right, sir," she said, emphasizing the "sir." "I need access to a working synthesizer because my morphadrenin is exhausted and my patients cannot withstand delicate invasive surgery without it. I also need a mute-screen to mask the magnetic interference that's disrupting my life monitors. Because this," she added, indicating the bionic panel in the creamy skin of her wrist under the sleeve of her green uniform, "can't be five places at once to read vitals. Furthermore, my medics are going into their thirty-second straight standard hour without sleep or rest, and two of them have already collapsed on me. In short, sir, if this ship doesn't

make Trimerius within one solar day on the outside, we're going to lose every bloody alien casualty we're transporting and maybe the humans in Hahnson's medical complement as well!"

"We cannot make Trimerius in one solar day," Dtimun said in a deceptively gentle tone, "nor one solar month, nor one solar millennium. Because, Madam, we are gradually being surrounded by a fleet of Rojok vessels and we are cut off from Tri-Fleet Headquarters."

"Surrounded?" she echoed numbly.

"Yes. Surrounded." The Centaurian sighed angrily, as if the prospect of impotence was beyond acceptance or even belief. "Noon ship, even this one, could penetrate the force net of the Rojok fleet and survive. They now seem intent on capture rather than destruction or they would already have fired on us. And that," he said in a chillingly soft voice, "I will not permit, even if it means destroying the Morcai myself."

Stern glanced at the Centaurian, puzzled. "Why so much flurry over one lone ship?" he asked pointedly. "They have the Jaakob Spheres and the Centaurian princess. What's left?"

The alien ignored the question. He turned back to the comm unit and addressed his navigator. "Degas, how many ships are they throwing against us?" he asked the comtech.

"I read two hundred, Commander, traveling at half sublight speed."

"Maliche, they are confident!" Dtimun growled.

"The casualties can't take another battle," Madeline said tightly. "And I didn't save them just to have you blow them up, sir. It isn't their bloody war. There must be one aid station we can reach before—"

"What we have reached at the moment, Madam," the Centaurian interrupted abruptly, "is the limit of my patience." His eyes were enough to silence her. He turned slowly to the comm unit again. "Degas, can we make Benaski Port?" he asked, naming a notorious way station on the outskirts of the civilized galaxy.

"If we reduce our weaponry capability and divert all power to the engines," the Centaurian navigator replied. "It is the only neutral port within reach."

"Then throw your lightsteds and make for it at maximum light."

"Yes, Commander."

Dtimun turned back to Madeline, his eyes calmer but still tinged with brown anger. "I will have Komak supply another synthesizer, which you will not touch. They respond readily to speech, even Terravegan speech, because of the translators we employ in all comm units aboard. I gather that your knowledge of bionic tech is as limited as your knowledge of proper female behavior."

"Proper...?" Madeline just gaped at him.

"Our science has been long capable of producing self-sustaining, self-perpetuating machines. Living machines, if you will," he continued unabashed. "They are extremely sensitive to alien bacteria, a fact which Komak was sent to impart to you. Apparently he was too late."

Her green eyes narrowed. She was struggling with an urge to knock him on his superior rear end.

His eyebrows arched, and his eyes became threatening at once.

Madeline blinked. It was coincidence, surely, that anger. "What a pity," she said with mock softness, "that your science couldn't also provide a means of inoculating the machines against alien bacteria."

Dtimun let that insult fall unnoticed. "Until your people were taken aboard, no humans had ever set foot aboard the Morcai. Such preventions were unnecessary. We have had to make modifications to our language banks to accommodate you. There was no time to attend the machines."

"What about more medtechs?" she persisted.

"I suggest that you make arrangements with Hanhson to acquire some of his." He held up his hand when she started to protest. "I am

aware that your specialty is Cularian medicine, and his is Terravegan, but surely some medical expertise is preferable to none at all. That problem rests with you. Benaski Port is still three days away at our present speed. You must accommodate the delay."

"Perhaps some of the wounded will last that long," she said tightly. "By your leave, sir," she added with a salute.

"One thing more, Madam."

She turned, the question only in her resentful eyes.

"The next time you step onto my bridge," he said quietly, "tread lightly. Your disregard for military routine could easily grant you a place in history textdiscs as the first human female ever spaced aboard a Centaurian warship. Am I understood?"

Her teeth ground together. But all she said was, "Yes, sir."

The alien watched her leave the bridge with a ramrod stiffness in his posture. Then he turned to Stern. "See to your men, Mister. Word has already reached me of unrest among them, even in the small time since you came aboard. No incidents of violence can be tolerated."

"For that," Stern told him, "you will need a miracle. Sir."

He saluted and followed Madeline's trail off the bridge. For that one, brief instant, he felt almost like his old self.

Mangus Lo, the Rojok dictator, sat at his many-hued stone desk in the palcenon and drank in the news his chief advisor had just provided.

"Is it true?" he asked with a malicious smile. "The Holconcom vessel has fallen into the trap? Cleemaah! We have him!"

"But, Excellence, the trap is not yet sprung," the tall, slender Rojok advisor protested gently.

"A mere detail. Chacon knows nothing of what has been done?" he asked quickly, searching the younger man's eyes.



"No, Excellence," he replied. "I instructed the soldiers in secret, as you ordered."

The dwarfed, middle-aged Rojok nodded in something like relief. "He is my ablest commander," he said, "yet his distaste for my methods is a hindrance. The terror must be maintained!" He slammed the polished stone desk with both fists and his eyes gleamed almost transparently.

Compassion is the death of the cause! Why does she oppose me? Does he not know that I could have him killed with a word?"

"If your Excellence will permit me," the advisor said, "he has become something of a legend among our people. To have him killed would be to welcome revolt."

"Silence!" Mangus Lo eyed the advisor with a piercing, deadly fury. "You, too, are expendable! You are all expendable!"

"Excellence, I did not mean...!" he began quickly.

The dictator waved him off. He stood up slowly, dragging his withered, useless leg as he moved, eyeing the advisor for any sign of contempt—a sign which, if he saw it, would cost the ambitious diplomat his life.

"The trap will shut," Mangus Lo said. He gazed out the oval window at the small, white moon over his towering winter palace on Enmehkmehk. Ahkmau was there, his notorious place of tortures. In his mind, he could see the smoke rising from the sonic ovens. He did so enjoy watching the annihilation of his enemies. He smiled. "I will have Dtimun. And, with him, I will have the power to bring the Tri-Galaxy Federation and the Centaurian Empire itself to their knees!"

"I...do not understand," the advisor ventured.

He whirled on the younger Rojok. "You are a diplomat! You are not expected to understand, only to obey!" he screamed. "One word more and I will have you sent to the ovens!"

The advisor paled. He stood rigidly, unmoving, unspeaking.

Mangus Lo smiled at his companion's terror. He turned back to the window, his eyes glowing with a strange, mad fire. "It is ironic," he mused, "that only I know Dtimun's worth. When I have him, I have the universe in my hands. The universe!"

Holt Stern called his officers together in a briefing room near the improvised medical stations and delivered Dtimun's ultimatum. The reaction was predictably unfavorable.

"Like being captive on a slaver," a weaponry officer grumbled.

"Aye, and it's not even our fault," Declan Muldoon, the aging engineer, agreed with a harsh glance at Stern.

"If there's any fault," Stern said loudly, "it's the Rojoks'. Whether we like it or not, we're stuck here for the next three solar days and we'll make the best of it. I want our boys kept in line. Do it with words if possible, brig them if you have to. I don't want any trouble on our side."

There were irritated looks all around. Stern could feel their eyes measuring him, and the unfamiliar hostility infuriated him.

"You shudna let that cat-eyed terror yank us off the Bellatrix and blow her up," Muldoon said reproachfully. "We could have got her to port."

Stern glared at the Irishman, then at each man in turn. "The past is dead, gentlemen. I'm in command here, and you'll follow orders or I'll brig the lot of you. Is that clear?"

Muldoon lowered his mutinous eyes, but his face only grew redder.

"I've had reports of grumbling and even threats being overheard," he told them. "If you've got a problem, you tell me, and I'll handle it. Who's first?"

Higgins stood up. "Sir, before I became your exec, I was trained to be an astrogator, and they've assigned me to the weapons deck. I'm not complaining, maybe there's no room for another astrogator

in their navigation sector, but I'm getting a lot of static and hard looks from the Centaurian execs. I don't know their technology, and no one will explain it to me."

"I'll see what I can do." Stern looked around. "Anyone else?"

"Yes, sir." Jennings, the comtech, rose. "The communications exec's got me polishing the consoles wearing space gear. He says I'm a walking bacteria bank and he won't let me touch his precious equipment unless I'm properly attired. I started toward the kelekome unit but he stopped me outside the door. He said something about me giving his kelekoms germs. Sir, what the hell kind of cyberbionics do they use to run this crazy ship?"

A brief skirl of laughter passed through the crew and they relaxed a little. Stern remained rigid. "They use living machines," he said, "highly vulnerable to our bacteria. Do what they tell you."

Madeline Ruszel stood up. "Dr. Hahnson and I are currently practicing medicine," she said, "in a glorified storage room and what seems to be a mess hall," she added with a wince. "The Centaurians are still trying to use the mess hall and storage facilities with our sterile fields in operation and surgery being performed."

"I'll take care of the problem," Stern assured her.

Muldoon stared at the dark-eyed captain. "Sure, and what'll you do about them cat-eyes struttin' around like they was kings and making one big joke out of us? One of those SOBs threw a damplegraft at me and made noises like a mugwort when I fell trying to catch it. I canna press two hundred pounds of metal! I almost threw a punch at the..."

"Keep your hands off the Centaurians," Stern told him. "That goes for the rest of you, as well. If you mix it up with the aliens, it'll be your necks and I don't have the authority to countermand the commander's orders. All I could do is wave at you when he kicked you out the airlock. It's his ship."

"Thanks to you," an anonymous voice muttered.

Stern ignored it. "If that's all?" He waited, but only a sullen, resentful silence met his ears. "All right. Dismissed."

Madeline was the last of the Bellatrix department heads to leave the compartment. She turned at the door. "You made a mistake, Stern," she said.

"What kind of mistake?"

"Telling the men you wouldn't back them up. It does nothing for morale, and theirs is just about shot. They're being bullied by the Centaurians. You've as much as said you won't stop it."

"Why lie?" he asked blankly.

Her eyes narrowed. "What's the matter with you? I've never known you to back away from a fight, even when you were outmatched!"

"Maybe I'm tired," he said coldly, resenting the words.

"Maybe you'd better pull yourself together before you get the bloody lot of us killed," she snapped back. She turned and left without another word.

Stern glowered after her. She irritated him. They all did. The humans were suddenly as distasteful to him as the aliens.

He shook his head as if to clear it. Other thoughts were shaping themselves in his mind. It would be soon, now. He had duties to perform, a mission to accomplish. Let the humans whine while they could. A slow, alien smile touched his lips.

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The massive Tri-Galaxy Council chambers had the feel of an eons-old tomb. Tri-Fleet Admiral Jeffrye Lawson, a Terravegan native, sat numb and rigid in his solitary chair, unmoving in the maelstrom of motion around him.

The gray-haired old warhorse eyed the diplomats with quiet contempt. The stoic neutrality of the majority here in the costly war was responsible for casualty lists that left him sleepless and haggard. Idealists, the lot, he thought bitterly. Establishing "Peace Planets" like the colony on Terramer while the Rojoks were building better ships and bigger armies and sending hunter squads to terrorize the New Territory by killing colonists. The neutral solar systems didn't even have the guts to send representatives of their various governments to Terramer, at that; they'd sent clones. In this universe, clones had no social status whatsoever, despite the best efforts of activists. They were property, at the mercy of governments that had no mercy.

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Above the heads of the member delegates, Lokar, the Jebob chairman of the Council, stood quietly at his raised podium. In his thin, blue-skinned hands he held the small communidisc that had heralded an emergency session in the middle of Trimerius's night.

Around Lawson, diplomats in various state of national dress were hurrying into their seats around the circular chamber. In seconds, all eyes were on Lokar's long face.

"As you were told," Lokar began in a gently accented voice, translated by the prompter into an uncountable number of languages and dialects that fed directly into each member's implanted receiver, "the communication I hold is from the Imperial Dectat of Centauria—the seat of the one hundred twenty planet empire of Tnurat Alamantimichar."

Lawson grimaced and moved restlessly in his chair, waiting for the patient old Jebob to continue in the sudden death hush of the assembly. Just the mention of Tnurat's name was enough to cause panic.

"I will activate the message." Lokar laid the disc on the dais and touched it with his sonar ring.

Tnurat Alamantimichar's deep, powerful voice filled the chamber. No image came with it. Only high military and political leaders had ever seen him. The emperor's reputation for privacy was legend, like his military. "At 1600 hours Terravegan standard time this day," he began, "the Rojok federation decimated Terramer. Among the dead is my son, Marcon. My daughter, Lyceria, is presumed to be a captive of the Rojoks. This Council," he said accusingly, "guaranteed the safety of my children as diplomatic observers on Terramer. The guarantee was worthless. The Holconcom, after rescuing one of your Tri-Fleet ships from attack, was cut off behind enemy lines and communication discontinued. Before contact was lost, I was informed that the Jaakob Spheres were also in Rojok hands."

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There were murmurs among the councilmen. Lawson cursed under his breath. It was a disaster. The Spheres gave the Rojoks the key to the DNA of every Tri-Fleet member race. With them, the Rojoks could engineer viruses to target each specific race. But, even worse, there was one tiny strand of DNA which encoded the history and military capability of each one, as well. These secrets were not even shared with outworlders. Old Lokar had persuaded the Tri-Galaxy Federation members to include that secret in the Jaakob Spheres, guaranteeing their safety. They had been carried aboard the diplomatic observers' ship for safekeeping. What a joke! Safekeeping, indeed.

"I demand," Thurat continued, "that the Council retaliate for this atrocity. If such retaliation is not forthcoming, the Dectat will act in a declaration of war on the neutral member planets of the Council. I allowed the limited use of my Holconcom as forward scout support for the Tri-Galaxy Fleet in response to a plea from your Admiral Lawson, after the latest Rojok incursion into Tri-Fleet territory. Now I ask, no, I demand, that the Council, including the neutral worlds, send armed units to support my government's troops in a declaration of war on the Rojok tyrant Mangus Lo. The alternative is that you will fight not only the Rojok, but the Centaurian Empire, as well. The vanguard of our military is the Holconcom," he added in a soft threat. "Some of you may remember how they put down revolutions in our planetary space. And how they deal with enemies. The choice is yours. Help me rescue my daughter and stop Mangus Lo's aggression, or face the consequences. I will expect a reply within one standard hour."

A long, heavy silence fell over the room. Lawson watched idealism die in the eyes of the diplomats, giving way to what was undeniably fear.

The Terravegan ambassador stood up. "May I speak?" he asked Lokar.

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"You may. I present the human ambassador from the Terravegan colonies, Giles Mourjey."

"Honorable Chairman, members of the Council," Mourjey began, his eyes sweeping among the male and female delegates of the Tri-Galaxy Council, one of whom was an imposing Centaurian female named Karimasa. "The only force standing against the Rojok invasion of the New Territory has been the Royal Legion of Terravega, with some small assistance from the Altairian and Jebob militaries. I think it goes without saying that the human regiments of the Tri-Fleet have made the larger sacrifice of men and women. You may also have heard of Ahkmau, the Rojok death camp, where two million human soldiers have been systematically tortured to death in Mangus Lo's insane lust for galactic conquest. With all due respect, delegates, while you were pursuing the idealism of interracial harmony with your clones on Terramer, the Royal Legion of Terravega's Strategic Space Command was pursuing a different goal. It was enforcing the only war vote of any member planetary systems in this Council, standing against a bloodthirsty dictator who's already enslaved two planetary systems that declared neutrality. The humans have been decimated by Rojok attacks in the New Territory!"

A dark green, slender delegate stood up quickly. "What he says is not true," the delegate, a Vegan colonial, growled. "The Meg-Vegan High Council also issued a war vote and our Guards even now fight with the humans."

"Yes, indeed, Ambassador," Mourjey replied, "in rec halls on bases all over the three civilized galaxies, they fight with us. But on the battle lines, they turn around and run!"

The Vegan turned dusky under his green skin, but he didn't deny the charge. Instead he sat down, smoldering.

Mourjey faced the Council. "Delegates, the human colonies are



getting damned tired of fighting this unholy war virtually alone. If it's peace you want, if you hope to retain your own planetary systems, you'll have to crawl out of your holes and fight for them! If you'd rather not involve yourselves in the danger, then by all means, go home and learn to speak Rojok. That is, if the Rojoks don't take the New Territory before you have the time, and throw the lot of us into Mangus Lo's sonic ovens!" He sat down.

Lawson swung around and got to his feet. "He's right," he said. "I've tried to tell you delegates that the conflict can't rock on like this. I've only got five hundred thousand men left in the Strategic Space Command of my Royal Legion, out of the five million I started with. We've lost ships, we've lost supply transports, we're even now patching comm units into neutral ships because we're losing outposts by the day. I need help, or the Rojoks are going to grab the solar systems in the New Territory. If they do that, its mineral resources and colonization possibilities and water resources and fertile farming plains are going to be dead to us. Our overflow populations and dwindling energy and food stores will send some of us into oblivion as a race, and the Rojoks won't have to fire a single shot to accomplish our demise."

"You might also remember the Spheres that were captured by the Rojoks," Mourjey broke in. "If the Rojoks have them, they hold the key to the complete obliteration of every member race of the Council. The military information alone which they contain will guarantee our defeat. I'm sure some of you remember slavery?"

The Rigellian delegate pursed his yellow lips. "Some of us also remember the Great Galaxy War," he said quietly. "Another like it and some of us would be obliterated regardless."

"Freedom has a price," Lawson said philosophically. "But fighting Rojoks isn't your only option now. You have a choice between fighting

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the Rojoks or fighting the Rojoks and the Centaurian Empire as well. Would any of you care to match the cream of your military forces against the Holconcom?"

There was a long silence, interspersed with urgent whispers. Council members glanced at each other in obvious apprehension.

Lokar spoke for them. "Some of us have also suffered the penalty for provoking the Holconcom, and remember it well. Nor do I harbor concern for the Holconcom ship, which has been cut off by the Rojok vessels," he added with an amused glance at the Centaurian delegate, whose fine lips pulled into a very human smile. "My sympathy, rather, is for the Rojoks. We will call a vote."

Lawson saluted Lokar and left the chamber. He knew when he left what the outcome would be. He only regretted that it had taken so many lives, and Thurat Alamantimichar's threat, to open the eyes of those diplomatic moles. So many human lives, so many atrocities...

Then he remembered the reference to the Holconcom rescue operation. He permitted himself a tiny smile. The Bellatrix. It had to be. And Captain Holt Stern and his crew were alive after all. But for how long? Humans and Holconcom together, in a confined space, under pressure. The Holconcom would slaughter them with little provocation. They knew nothing of humans. Only Dtimun had any real experience of them, and he was notorious for his dislike of the entire species. His heart sank. Perhaps it would have been more merciful for the humans if a Rojok blast had claimed the Bellatrix with all aboard!

The harsh sound of Rojok voices brought Lyceria back to consciousness. Waves of vertigo wound through her head as she tried to sit up on the bed. She peered through the dim light toward the door. Behind it, a flood of Rojok voices rushed in at her. Three voices; one obliging and placating, one defensive, one harsh and threatening.

The autodoor zipped up. One lone Rojok entered the small cubicle. He walked with authority. He was tall, reddish-skinned, hard-muscled. His long shock of blond hair was neatly trimmed, flowing down over the high collar of his black, long-sleeved uniform jacket. His slacks followed powerful legs down into heavy black boots. His slit-eyes peered at her from a lean, stern face that showed no emotion. His sleeves displayed a pattern of mesag marks that denoted high rank, as did the long hair, which only officers were permitted to wear. He had faint scars on his face, and lines around his eyes. He was a warrior.

Lyceria stood up, only a little intimidated, preparing herself for whatever was to come. "Am I now to be taken to Ahkmau?" she asked.

A flicker of shock touched the alien face. The Rojok's eyes narrowed and his jaw tensed proudly. "It is not the custom of the Rojok," he said in perfect Centaurian accents, "to condemn royalty to the death camps."

"No?" A tiny smile touched her full lips. "I was told that if I did not comport myself as expected, I would be placed there."

The Rojok glared toward the door where the other two aliens stiffened, quickly saluted and moved back a safe distance. In different circumstances, the action would have been amusing to Lyceria.

When he looked back at her, his eyes were still narrow with fury. "No more threats will be made against you. You have my word."

"It is said," she replied, "that the word of a Rojok is as the wind."

"Is it also said of the word of Chacon?"

Her eyes flashed brown at the Rojok as she recognized him from textdiscs. Here was no ordinary soldier. This was the most powerful field marshal of the Rojok army, the most famous of them all.

"You!" She stepped forward, momentarily forgetting the required dignity of her station. "Murderer of women and children! Torturer of boys!"

A muscle in his cheek flinched. "The attack on Terramer was perpetrated without my knowledge," he stated flatly. "As was the murder of your brother. Those responsible will be punished."

"And what punishment will return my brother to me, Commander Chacon?" she asked bitterly. "Tell me that."

"I cannot undo what was done. Atrocities are frequently committed in the name of war, by all soldiers." His eyes softened slightly. "Come. You will be provided more suitable quarters."

"In your prison, no doubt."

He watched her quietly, with eyes as deft as a hunter's aim. "Your bitterness is understandable. But bitterness is an acid. Beware, lest it eat you alive."

"Grief is not shared with outworlders," she told him.

"Not among Rojoks." He stood aside to let her pass. "Have you eaten?"

"I care for nothing," she replied. Inside, her ribs felt near collapse from the three-day fast.

"You will eat," he said, "or you will be fed forcibly. Do you understand? I will not allow you to commit suicide."

"Allow?" She looked at him defiantly, with brown anger coloring her pupils. "And do you think to dictate to me?"

He smiled. A thin, self-confident smile that was disconcerting. "Until the war is over, at least. You are a political prisoner. As such, you will tolerate my 'dictates.'"

"And the consequences?" she chided. "Shall you send me to Ahkmau?"

"If you continue to oppose me, you may be sent to my harem," he warned mockingly.

Had she known how, she would have blushed. A mingling of color touched her eyes, and she hid them from him. Dtimun would teach this Rojok choapha manners. Among other lessons the Holconcom would provide.

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Stern was still nursing hostility when he went into the mess hall with Madeline and Hahnson two "days" later. The tension in the room was so thick it could have been filleted.

The compartment was filled to capacity, with humans and Centaurians sitting uncomfortably integrated at the long tables. The close quarters bred tension.

The ship was still running from the oncoming net of Rojok ships, which it had managed to avoid with amazing tactical skill. Stern was beginning to believe the C.O.'s reputation for eluding superior forces. Apparently there was some sort of technology in use that was able to broadcast false ion trails to lead the Rojok ships astray. How long that would continue to work was anyone's guess. Meanwhile, hope was growing that the vessel would make neutral Benaski Port in time.

The situation aboard the Morcai, however, was growing desperate. In the past twenty-four standard hours, disaster had been averted by seconds on every deck. The mixture of aliens and humans grew more explosive by the minute. Thanks to the translators, the humans understood enough Centaurian to realize that they were being chided, denigrated and insulted with every other breath. The Holconcom were eloquent about their distaste for having to share quarters with those they thought of as inferior beings. They abused the humans for being unable to meet the same physical challenges as the Centaurians. They chided them for their lack of stamina. The humans, on the other hand, knew that the Centaurians were clones, and treated them with contempt. Among human colonies, clones had no status, no rights, and were frequently kept in cooling tanks in suspended animation and used as spare parts for their originals.

Some of the Centaurians had to move out of their quarters to accommodate the unexpected guests aboard their vessel. The humans

got in the way of routine. They didn't understand Centaurian discipline, they didn't follow the protocols, and they acted as if they owned the ship. Stern made no attempt to smooth things over. Hahnson had, but his misgivings grew when he noticed how careless Stern's attitude was to the growing danger. He'd mentioned it to Komak, who frowned and commented that perhaps a word to Dtimun would be wise. The exec offered to speak to his commanding officer for Hahnson, and not mention it to Holt Stern. Hahnson dreaded having Stern find out that he'd gone behind his back. But something was different about his captain; something radical. He looked around him at the integrated mess hall and wondered how anyone could think combining the groups a good idea. The Centaurians had never known physical contact with other races except in war, and these humans knew nothing of how they fought on a battlefield. Hahnson had known humans to have nervous breakdowns just from seeing the Holconcom fight. Stern had never seen them in combat. Perhaps that helped explain his odd lack of concern for his men.

Madeline was watching a group of Centaurians and humans at another table with growing concern. The "accidental" elbowing by the humans was all too conspicuous, and the chiding tones were unmistakable despite the language barrier that even the rudimentary translators were working valiantly to correct.

"He might have left us segregated," Madeline said angrily. "This forced integration is going to cause a riot before we ever reach Benaski Port."

"Forced?" Hahnson eyed her. "Did Dtimun give orders to integrate at mess? I can't believe he'd risk it." He frowned as he studied the other diners. "This could result in a slaughter. Are you sure it was the C.O.?"

Madeline scowled. "Well, no. But if not him, then, who...?"

"I integrated our ship's complement with the Centaurians," Stern

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said carelessly. "They'll have to learn to get along one way or the other, and the sooner the better."

"Are you nuts?" Hahnson exclaimed. "Don't you know what's going to happen if one of our men lays hands on one of the Holconcom?"

"The Holconcom will sit there and take it, of course," Stern replied smugly. "You yourself," he added to Hahnson, "told me that the commander threatened to kill the first one of his men who fought back if there were any confrontations."

"The commander still doesn't realize just how physical humans are," Hahnson protested. "I'm the only one he's spent much time around, and we never came to blows!"

"Try the green jell," Stern said casually, lifting a spoonful to his lips. "It tastes like anything you imagine it to be. It's ingenious."

"Holt..."

Hahnson never finished the sentence. Before he could, an ominous clatter of hyperplastic hitting the deck cut him off. A brief, stunned silence followed the commotion.

A Bellatrix crewman shot to his feet, glaring down at a Holconcom noncom beside him. "That's it, you damned cat-eyes!" he roared, red in the face. "I've taken all the insults and all the sarcasm I'm goin' to take from you!"

The Holconcom pointedly ignored the outburst and kept eating.

Confident now, the human grew bolder. "No guts," he spat at the alien. "You guys are all talk. Come on, stand up and let's see if you bleed!"

Hahnson gaped at the crewman. He knew the man. It was one of the engineers, Declan Muldoon, and he was one of the most levelheaded humans he'd ever known. It wasn't like Muldoon to actually start a fight.

Just as Hahnson started to relay that opinion to his colleagues, Muldoon laid a heavy hand on the Centaurian he was baiting and, deftly turning him, threw a heavy-handed right cross to the alien's jaw.

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The Holconcom sat and stared at the human, unmoved by the blow, which would have felled any crewman at Stern's table.

"Tough guy, huh?" Muldoon persisted, grinning. "Try this on for size!" He threw another punch, putting everything he had into it. The Holconcom absorbed it as easily as he had the first. But his eyes began to dilate. As he turned toward the human, Madeline saw the elongated cat-eyes slowly turn brown.

"Stern, do something while there's still time," Madeline said quickly.

But the Bellatrix's captain only sat watching the byplay with oddly blank, dark eyes.

Suddenly a low, soft growl began to grow in the silence that followed the human engineer's next deliberate blow. The sound built on itself, like a low roar that quickly took on the ferocity of a jungle cat's warning cry. It exploded abruptly in a high-pitched inhuman scream that froze Stern's heart in his chest with a terror that bordered on panic. The blank look left his eyes as his jaw dropped. He'd never heard such a nightmarish sound in his life, even in combat.

"My God!" Hahnson whispered. "The decaliphe!"

Before the soft words died on the air, the Holconcom regular was on his feet. He began to crouch, his eyes darker by the second, his hands slowly assuming the shape of a cat's open paw. They flexed. Beneath the tips of the fingers, steel claws began to extend in gleaming sharp points. It was a form of bionic engineering that none of the humans had yet seen.

Madeline pushed Stern, but he didn't react. He was frozen in place by the low growl that built again in the Centaurian's throat.

Madeline grabbed for Stern's Gresham and fired it at point-blank range, into the back of the Holconcom, with the setting on maximum burn. It should have killed the alien. It should have dropped him to



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his knees at least. It did neither. She fired again, cursing under her breath, with the same result.

"What in the seven netherworlds...!" Madeline exclaimed huskily.

The Holconcom group had risen in unison. They were standing, watching the other Holconcom who crouched in front of Muldoon.

Hahnson got to his feet. "Twenty Greshams wouldn't stop him now!" he told Madeline. "He gave the decaliphe—the death cry. Only Dtimun can bring him down! Hold the other men back, no matter what the Holconcom do, if you can. I'll get the C.O."

He was out the door at a dead run. Madeline moved forward with the Gresham leveled, ignoring Stern, who still sat as if in a trance.

"Hold it!" Madeline barked at two human noncoms who were in the process of rising from their seats. "Move and I'll drop both of you," she added, her green eyes backing up the threat. They sat down.

But Lieutenant Higgins, the Bellatrix's exec, rose from his chair despite the threat of Madeline's Gresham. Across from her, the Holconcom regular was moving with a catlike stalking gait toward Muldoon, who had by now realized his peril and had begun to back away, his face mirroring his fear.

"He'll kill Muldoon, if we don't do something," Higgins pleaded huskily. "He's my friend. If we could just get Muldoon out of here...! You don't know what they'll do if the alien actually attacks Muldoon." He nodded toward the Holconcom. "You haven't seen them fight. I have." He swallowed, hard. "There won't be enough of Muldoon left to bury, and then they'll go for the other humans in a solid mass. They can't help it, Doctor, it's the way they fight...!"

Another sharp, catlike cry from the Holconcom interrupted him.

The hairs on the back of Madeline's neck stood up, but she held her ground. She had, after all, been an officer in the Amazon regiment, long before she became a doctor. "Move toward him again,"

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Madeline told Higgins, "and he'll have company. It's Hahnson's show. He knows what he's doing."

The rest of the Holconcom were still standing, and when the humans began to stand, as well, the Centaurians' eyes began to grow darker and the pupils dilate.

Hurry, Strick, she thought silently. She wasn't certain what the outcome would be, but she was inclined to believe Higgins. She'd heard things about the way the Holconcom fought, as a unit. None of the Amazons had ever seen them in combat or been liaisoned with them. The Centaurians had no female military, due to their obviously backward culture, she thought wickedly. But she had a feeling that if any of the humans made a move toward Muldoon, the Holconcom would mass and there would be a massacre. Higgins meant well, but his interference could bring about the very situation he feared.

Muldoon was looking paler by the minute, but he stood firm. "Go ahead. Kill me. Or try to kill me," he taunted the Holconcom.

"Shut up, Muldoon!" Madeline called to him, in a tone that demanded obedience.

He gave her an odd look. One of the other humans turned to the Centaurian next to him and put up his fists. There were more growls. The Holconcom began to merge into a mass of red uniforms.

God, Madeline thought in anguish. There was nothing else she could do. If Hahnson didn't hurry...!

She heard the autodoor opening behind her with relief, and moved her eyes to it.

But it wasn't the C.O. It was Hahnson, grimacing. "Komak's going after him," he told her.

"Think we have time?" she wondered with black humor, taking her eyes off Muldoon for an instant.

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It was enough. Higgins sprang into action. He went for the Holconcom bracing Muldoon and clipped him at the knees.

Incredibly the Holconcom was like a solidly rooted tree. He didn't move an inch. But his hand did. He caught Muldoon by the throat with one hand, flung the human away and slammed him to the deck, where he lay still, unmoving. Then he turned toward Higgins.

"Oh, God!" Madeline ground out when she saw the Centaurian's eyes. They were black. Pitch-black. As black as death. She'd never seen that color, but she'd read about it...

She fired the Gresham, again and again and again, but the emerillium propelled plasma spray simply bounced off. She could hardly believe her eyes. Then, just as the Holconcom reached Higgins, there was a sound behind her.

"Mashcon!" The single word had the ring of steel hitting rock. It froze the humans in their stances, like action figures. It muted the building growls of the other Holconcom.

All eyes turned toward the doorway. Dtimun was standing just inside it, with Komak at his side. The alien's eyes, as black as those of his Holconcom, looked and held on those of the Centaurian who had Muldoon in his grasp.

The soldier's eyes suddenly calmed. The black death was gone from them, to be replaced by a color that Madeline's whirling mind couldn't classify. His face abruptly contorted, and he screamed—something unheard of in the ranks of the Holconcom.

The scream died. He stood there, facing his commanding officer with a fear so complete it seemed to radiate from him and touch every Centaurian in the mess hall.

"You were warned," Dtimun said, very quietly, "of the consequences of conflict. You have seen the power of the Holconcom. Now see the power of their commander."

He moved forward so quickly that he was a blur in the eyes of the humans. He had the Centaurian by the neck in a heartbeat. A split second later, his hand flexed and the alien flew completely across the mess hall, over the heads of the Centaurians and the humans, with lightning speed. The offending Centaurian hit the Plexiglas wall and bounced off onto the floor, to lie still with his huge eyes open, with his mouth open, as well. He arched, once, and then lay unmoving, like Muldoon.

Madeline swallowed hard. She was a doctor. Before that, she'd been an elite warrior. But in all her battles, she'd never seen anything like the commander in action. She'd never have believed that any humanoid could move that fast until she'd seen it. Beside her, she felt Hahnson's arm tense like a coiled spring.

Dtimun's black eyes calmed into a somber blue. He straightened regally, with barely noticeable effort, and turned to the others. His expression was so fierce that Higgins actually backed up. "There will be no further incidents," he said quietly. "Or the perpetrators will answer to me. Am I understood?"

The entire complement of the mess hall stood at rigid attention, including the Holconcom.

"Who integrated the mess?" the alien added abruptly, and turned to Komak.

"Not I," Komak replied.

"I did," Stern said, finding his voice at last.

Dtimun moved toward him without seeming to move at all. He was a head taller than Stern. He stared down at the human with barely concealed rage. "Once, I would have killed you for such an infraction. Your rank in the Tri-Fleet prevents me from such discipline. However," he added with cold eyes, "it will not spare your subordinate." He whirled and shot an order in Centaurian. Two Holconcom

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went to the downed human, Muldoon, and dragged him to his feet.

He was conscious, wide-eyed and visibly terrified.

"Captain Stern!" Muldoon called piteously. "Help me!"

Stern's mind was a nexus of conflicting emotions. He stared at Muldoon blankly as he realized what he'd done, and what the consequences could have been. He couldn't believe he'd put his men at risk like this!

"What will you do with him?" Stern asked the Holconcom commander.

Dtimun didn't reply. He turned back to his officers. "Prepare him." He glanced at Stern. "All officers will go immediately to the green section airlock," he added. "Video monitors will be activated for the crew, so that they may watch, as well."

He made a gesture with one lean hand, which prompted the Holconcom with Muldoon to act immediately, almost carrying a protesting Muldoon out of the canteen. The man's sobs could be heard like echoes of fear.

Madeline gasped aloud. "You can't mean to space him!" she exclaimed. "There are protocols...!"

Dtimun didn't answer her. He looked straight at Stern. "Ask your captain the penalty for inciting intermilitary conflict in time of war." He turned and followed his officers and Muldoon, expecting obedience.

The humans gave Stern shocked, angry looks as they filed by, too shaken by what they'd seen to risk the commander's temper.

"Stern, for God's sake, do something!" Madeline raged.

"It's too late," Hahnson said for him, his face set in hard lines. "No power in the galaxy will stop Dtimun when he thinks he's right. Damn it, Stern! You've cost us one of our best engineers!"

He filed out behind the other humans. Madeline hesitated, but only for an instant. She was shocked at Stern's unnatural behavior,

at his instigation of the conflict. She turned her eyes forward and followed Hahnson.

Stern watched them go with wide, blank eyes. He was puzzled and vaguely frightened by his actions, but he couldn't seem to stop doing insane things. Perhaps his concussion had prompted it. Regardless of the reason, Muldoon was about to be spaced, and Stern couldn't do a thing to stop it. Not a single damned thing.