

"Gone With The Trash"

A comic space adventure
of epic proportions.

by

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&

Brad Rines

(with contributions from Ron Yoshida)

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Ultimatum	ULTIMATUM	4
Prologue	INFERNO "This is not my day."	5
Chapter One	DISPATCHED "South is a back breaker."	9
Chapter Two	INVESTIGATIONS "...wait a sec."	17
Chapter Three	PAWNS "Should I follow you?"	26
Chapter Four	REUNION "There are two derelicts out here."	31
Chapter Five	MANIFEST DESTINATION "I smell money!"	40
Chapter Six	ENSNARED "All systems are dead."	47
Chapter Seven	FEEDBACK "Our snitch has paid off."	54
Chapter Eight	CONVERGENCE "Is it playtime?"	62
Chapter Nine	MAYHEM "If I didn't have a conscience..."	74
Chapter Ten	REGROUP "Trouble?"	85
Chapter Eleven	BUSINESS BEFORE PLEASURE "The military?"	91
Chapter Twelve	SHAKE DOWN "We never get that kinda business."	99

Chapter Thirteen	TREACHERY & MANIPULATION "You'll have to act quickly."	106
Chapter Fourteen	FALSE POSITIVE "What the hell is this?!"	116
Chapter Fifteen	FRACAS "We don't have time."	129
Chapter Sixteen	ENTANGLEMENT "Hey, this isn't the cafeteria."	136
Chapter Seventeen	REINFORCEMENTS "Ragellon, what have you done?"	142
Chapter Eighteen	MACHINATIONS "Clever bastards."	149
Chapter Nineteen	REPRIMAND "If they want to kill me, let them."	159
Chapter Twenty	CHAOS "It's playtime."	164
Chapter Twenty-One	NULLIFICATION "Are you nuts?"	173
Chapter Twenty-Two	RESPITE "What is that annoying cow up to?"	183
Chapter Twenty-Three	SCHISM "Shut up, Fatboy."	189
Chapter Twenty-Four	REVELATION "What kind of games are you playing?"	200
Chapter Twenty-Five	MAELSTROM "Reality hurts, doesn't it?"	206
Epilogue	PARTNERSHIP "Well, what?"	217

To the desk of **VICE-ADMIRAL JOSHUA RAGELLON: EYES ONLY**

Copy of document sent to Military HQ, Desolate Harmony on
20/07/73

Inept Fascist Bureaucracy,

We, the DataTrump Fruition Front,
demand that you surrender control
of all government agencies to us.
We will stop at nothing to bring
your imperial, autocratic regime
to its knees. If you do not
respond immediately, our next targets
will include civilian residential
communities. Ours is the only way
to rescue the common being from
your dictatorial control.
Anarchy now!

PROLOGUE

INFERNO

"This is not my day."

High in orbit above the planet Flangeknit 27, a manually-controlled waste tug trudges through its daily routine: organizing a month's worth of Monstrous Indestructo Sani-Containment Bins(tm) into a holding grid.

"I hate this trash," mutters the operator, a bloated man in sweat-stained coveralls.

"What was that?" crackles the voice of the Senior Sanitation Engineer, Lyle Braithwaste, over the headset.

Lefty Fenzan wrenches the controls, fighting to guide the unruly Sani-Containment Bin(tm). "Nothing, sir. Just having some difficulty putting a Sani-Bin into the holding grid."

"Well get a move on, Lefty. They'll be here soon."

There is a click in Lefty's headset as his supervisor terminates communication. Grumbling, he returns his attention to the guidance controls of the skiff. His left hand, a robotic replacement, grips the manipulator handle of the huge exterior grapple arm that holds the bin. Loose material sloshing inside the bin is causing it to wobble unevenly. With his right hand Lefty frantically burps the AttiTooters(tm), trying to counter the instability.

Bleat!

A warning light flashes on the panel above his head. He glances out the port side porthole. Early. Must be re-evaluation month. Only time those Union loafers do any work.

A large Arachide Belly Cruiser Detritus Reclamation Unit(tm), belonging to the gargantuan Interstellar Detritus Reclamation Company, erupts from hyperspace. The blue glow of full-reverse HooterTooters(tm) reflects softly on its dull, white hull as the ship decelerates to a slow drift. The running lights change from green to amber and the bay doors of the belly begin to draw back.

While idling or maneuvering at low speeds four retractable arms hang below the bulging undercarriage of the Belly Cruisers, creating a striking resemblance to the udder of a cow. Naturally, this has resulted in a nickname: Scow Cows.

"Hello control, Fenzan here, tell the IDR boys they'll have to wait, I'm not ready yet."

"Roger that, IDR has requested dry-dock procedures,

Tooter maintenance or something."

Lefty brightens, wipes his brow on his sleeve. "This is the last bin anyway, then I'm outta here."

"Take your time, they'll be awhile."

"No way, gotta please my main squeeze tonight."

There is a faint whir as Lefty revs the nimble digits of his robotic arm. With renewed vigor, he stabs at the controls. Finally, the troublesome bin slips into its slot, locking with a solid clank. Lefty disengages the grapple arm and applies reverse thrust.

Thud!

Lefty lurches, checks the rear-view monitor: nothing. Not believing the sensors, he twists toward the stern view port: still nothing.

KaThud!

The collision reverberates through the deck. A stray bin has slipped, unnoticed, beneath the tug.

Bleeeee!

A warning buzzer squeals.

"What the hell," croaks Lefty, his mouth suddenly parched. He pounds at the keypad with his flesh-hand, silencing the alarm. His gaze darts from view port to view port.

A message appears on the operations screen:

>WARNING!!

>CONTAINMENT BIN BREACH

>TOXIC LEVELS OF RADIATION DETECTED

>INITIATE EVACUATION PROCEDURES?[y]/n

"Lyle," Lefty rasps, "I'm getting a warning from something."

He looks out the port window again. The IDR Company Scow Cow is gone, another stray bin adrift in its place.

"Lyle?"

No response. Lefty toggles the radio to spaceport traffic control. Lyle's voice bristles from the speaker.

"...IDR vessel, all clear for entry into dry-dock bay six, but you'll have to lose the two Sani-Bins prior to entry. Please respond."

Fsssckt!

"Guys, you gotta drop the bins before entering dry-dock. Respond now, please!"

BLEEEEE!

Again, Lefty's computer console calls for his attention:

>WARNING!!

>TOXIC LEVELS OF RADIATION PRESENT

>EVACUATION PROCEDURES INITIATED

:internal atmosphere shutdown

:fifty seconds

:cockpit ejection

:sixty seconds

>ACTIVATE MAGNO SEAT(tm) LOCK

Lefty has ceased sweating, his skin now cold and clammy. He sits motionless, gaze fixed on the computer screen. Lyle continues to hail the docking Scow Cow.

"Hold your position! Dump the bins or I'll have to report this to the Space Commisssssskkkkllt--"

Silence.

Lefty blinks at the sudden break in transmission. He stares at the radio, his ship drifting silently, unguided.

"Hello, Lyle? Hello, control?"

Bunk! Screeekle!

Lefty jumps as the wayward bin scrapes along the bottom of the waste tug, rattling the fixtures. His breath is quick and shallow as emergency procedure fragments streak through his brain. He has trouble dealing with pressure, that's why he's a garbage man.

Silence over the communication link. Movement on one of the monitors. The rogue bin has drifted astern of the tug. Lefty's eyes lock onto a tiny, blinking light on the side of the gigantic bin.

"What the hell is that?!"

The light winks rhythmically, a bright red pinpoint against the massive hulk. Straining, Lefty discerns that the light is an indicator on a small device, foreign to the garbage container.

The blinking is perceptibly increasing in tempo. Lefty's mind makes the connection between the device and the warnings--too late.

There is a blinding flash from the orbiting station far behind him. Through the starboard view port, Lefty witnesses the station's transformation into a ball of plasma. The concussion wave rocks his skiff.

WHAAA! WHAAA! WHAAA!

A klaxon blares. The operations screen issues another warning:

>HULL INTEGRITY BREACHED

>DECOMPRESSION IMMINENT

>PREPARE FOR COCKPIT EJECTION

"This is not my day," moans Lefty, his face pale, oblivious to the cacophony of alarms.

FWAMMMM!

A fiery blast strikes the small ship. Everything turns searing white.

Lefty Fenzan ceases to exist.

CHAPTER ONE

DISPATCHED

"South is a back breaker."

Purple haze glows as sunrise glints through the twisted rubble of an annihilated strategic governmental base, another target in the growing tally of brutal terrorist bombings. Alerted by the abrupt loss of communications with the outpost, Military Headquarters has dispatched a response team. They will find what they have come to expect in recent weeks.

The *Extricator*, a mid-sized, deep-space vehicle of the InterGalactic United Military, drops into a low, decaying orbit around the pocked, mauve planet. Destination: the Solarex Research and Development Colony.

The pilot, Lieutenant Ssyxok, a rare serpent-being from a remote region of the galaxy, guides the emergency salvage ship through the remains of a space station. Two humans, Private Mish Lorradoes and Private Harold Nypelles, manipulate mechanical arms that extend from the bow of the ship. These appendages allow them to deflect dangerous chunks of debris away from the vessel. Smaller scraps rebound off the *Extricator's* armored hull.

Captain Salata South, the mission commander, sits behind the reinforced Stalwart Glass(tm) of the ship's lower observation deck. Rubbing a hand through his short-cropped hair, he stares out at the wreckage drifting just beyond the glass. Senseless waste. He takes a deep breath and slowly exhales. His assignment to take over the investigation of the terrorist attacks came down two days ago. His predecessor, Captain Oswald Beethoven, has disappeared under questionable circumstances after probing the recent destruction of a Space Commission Resource Recovery station. All of Beethoven's notes went with him, so South has had to start fresh and blind.

"We're coming up to the thick of it, sssir," hisses the sibilant voice of Ssyxok from South's Commucon Stay-Close(tm) personal communication device.

"Any indication from the planet's surface?" queries South.

"No contact. The wreckage ssspreadsss all the way to the ssstratosssphere."

"Take us down to the surface, Lieutenant."

Standing, South ponders the charred scraps hanging outside the ship. His finger absently traces an angry scar

that emerges from above his hairline, travels down his forehead, alongside his nose, bisects his mustache and lip, rounds his chin, creases his throat, and disappears under the collar of his gray uniform. The scar pulses a deep red.

The ship's intercom chimes: "All personnel prepare for planet fall. Please secure your belongings, extinguish all smoking material, and proceed to your Magno Chairs."

South pulls himself from the observation deck into the ship's main corridor. The crew is dispersing, scrambling for their seats. Ducking through the forward bulkhead, he steps onto the bridge to take his place behind the pilot.

The first officer, Lieutenant Arvo Giddy, an angular, head-strong human with flaming red hair, sits to South's right. Wincing at the sight of the scarlet scar, Giddy acknowledges the Captain. South breaks the brief eye-contact and engages the force field of his Magno Command Chair(tm).

"The crew's ready, Captain South," Giddy reports, staring at South's profile.

"Good, the moment we touch down I want a full reconnaissance for survivors, and an analysis of exactly what happened."

"Aye, sir. But it won't reveal anything new."

South turns to glare at Giddy, his scar beginning to throb at the Lieutenant's apparent insubordination. "Are you in charge of this investigation, Lieutenant?"

"No, sir." Giddy holds South's stare.

"I didn't think so."

"But I was with Captain Beethoven for most of his tour of duty, sir. Except that they're some kind of mega-bomb, no real evidence has ever--"

"Beethoven obviously didn't try hard enough!"

Giddy clenches his teeth. South returns his attention to the green scales on the back of Lieutenant Ssyxok's head.

Giddy watches his new commander, eyeing the badge of a Stellar Crak Reconnaissance Team commander on South's uniform sleeve. They're pulling out the big guns. Somebody in command must be tightening the reins on the investigation. Sure, there have been problems with the way it's been handled, that's nothing new. But a Stellar Crak Reconnaissance Team commander? He'd be second only to a Frak Crak Assault Squad leader in conspicuous pigheadedness. Reasoning with this guy will be impossible.

Giddy senses that this trip is going to be just another waste of time, in a long string of time-wasting

trips. To hell with it, the pay is good. It'll just be a bitch trying to keep cool under this clown.

The *Extricator* rages through the purple gases of the atmosphere, ripping down to the planet's surface. Its two external arms are folded into recesses along the stubby hull to avoid being torn off during the final stages of descent.

"Nearing the ground basse now, Captain," informs Ssyxok.

South watches a three-dimensional Holo-Vis(tm) projection of their approach. As they close on the smoldering remains of the outpost, he takes note of the excessive amount of general, everyday garbage that litters the area.

"Set us down, Ssyxok," orders South. "Giddy, take a squad into the station core."

"The core?!" Giddy throws an astonished look to his commander. "It may still be hot."

South keeps his attention riveted to the Holo-Vis(tm) display. "You can tell us for sure."

The *Extricator* touches down just beyond the perimeter of the destroyed outpost. The descent-braking AttiTooters(tm) blast dust and debris into a dirty, purple cloud around the ship.

South's voice booms over the ship's intercom: "Suit up people, the atmosphere may be contaminated with toxic gas pockets and radiation, so be careful. And let's find out what the hell caused this. Overlook nothing. I want results!"

The three five-soldier squads, Alpha, Bravo, and Charlie, suit up and scramble to the airlock. As they begin to cycle through, Giddy enters the receiving area, adjusting his gloves. He turns to the Bravo squad, made up of Sergeant Shenk, Private Dysson, Private Purma, and Engineer Kupper.

"We're checking out the core, folks," he informs.

"The core?!" blurts Shenk.

"That's crazy," says Kupper, hefting her tool pack.

Giddy shrugs. "South is a back breaker," he offers as an apology. "He's got it in for us."

Sergeant Shenk casts a sideways glance at him, knowing that the only person Captain South has it in for is Giddy. And now the whole squad will pay for it. He exhales sharply, understanding that orders are orders.

It's their turn in the airlock. Giddy and the Bravo

squad cycle through, hitting the planet's surface.

"All three sssquadsss dissspatched, sir," informs Ssyxok, on the bridge.

"Good." South rises, pulling on his own protective suit. "Lorradoes, stay with Ssyxok and collate the data as it comes in. Nypelles, suit up, grab a weapon, and meet me in the airlock."

The young Private Harold Nypelles supplies a snappy salute, then disappears through the hatchway. South holsters a Junior Hand Cannon(tm) to his hip.

"Ssyxok, you're in charge."

Pulling on his helmet, Captain Salata South ducks through the bulkhead and heads for the airlock.

Lieutenant Arvo Giddy leads his squad over the strewn wreckage of the base. They pick their way through the crumbled entrance of a flattened sheet-metal processing plant and traverse a twisted catwalk that, at one time, spanned the plant's main bay. They wend their way between the massive rolling mills and blow-presses, now silent and askew on their foundations. If the squad wasn't isolated from the atmosphere by their protective suits they would catch whiffs of putrefaction: the decaying bodies of the workers that lie pinched beneath the rubble.

"Core," groans Engineer Kupper, "there isn't any core left."

"I know it," agrees Giddy. He motions for the squad to hold up. Pulling out his BringClose Terrain-Scanning Amplifier(tm), he surveys the surrounding deep purple ruins. The enhanced image is grisly. "If we keep going this way, we're heading into a major radiation nightmare."

"Well, let's not go that way," suggests Sergeant Shenk.

"Yeah," echoes Private Purma.

Giddy pans the BringClose along another demolished building complex in the distance, stopping at a vacant landing field beyond. What the hell? Increasing the magnification on the scanner reveals a charred Monstrous Indestructo Sani-Containment Bin(tm), lying on its side, on the field.

"What do you see?" asks Kupper.

"Something is not right over there," answers Giddy, pointing. "Let's check it out."

South and Nypelles advance along a roadway toward what used to be the Colony Records Library. Massive chunks of

space station and various projectiles have riddled the ground with craters. As with the other such bombings, the initial concussions level the landscape, then the junk comes crashing down.

Salata South climbs the three steps to the main door of the library foundations. The building is now a large pit filled with the rubble of a two-story structure. He grimaces at the sight. The computer systems have been crushed beyond use, the magnetic storage scrambled by the electromagnetic pulses of the explosions, and the paper records have gone up in flames. It will take months of piecing together the scraps to find anything useful.

"What do you think, Harry?" South asks, turning to Nypelles. "Do we waste our time sifting through this mess?"

"I don't know that there will be much to find in here, sir." Nypelles straightens, purses his lips. "Why don't we stand back and see what we can discern from the big picture."

"Yes, I have to agree with you." South lifts his eyes, scans the horizon. "Let's see if we can get a better view from up there," he says, noting a low promontory a half-kilometer away.

Nypelles nods and follows South down the library steps.

Lieutenant Arvo Giddy jogs the last few meters to the Monstrous Indestructo Sani-Containment Bin(tm). The five humans are dwarfed beside the gigantic garbage container.

"What the hell is a Sani-Bin doing down here on the surface?!" remarks Engineer Kupper.

"My question exactly," returns Giddy. "I don't know much about the Garbage Code, but I do know that it is illegal to bring these things down. And one hell of a feat to maneuver them in gravity, at any rate."

Private Purma pipes up: "Could it have fallen out of orbit?"

The four others slowly turn to look at Purma. He swallows sheepishly.

Private Dysson seizes the opportunity to display his superior knowledge of re-entry physics: "If you would observe the bin a little more closely, Private Purma, you would notice that it lacks the telltale scorch patterns of re-entry friction with the atmosphere. As we all know, any object subjected to the temperatures created during such a re-entry would, in fact, be vaporized. Unless, of course, it was made of material specifically engineered to

withstand the veritable hellfire, which I might add, this bin isn't since it was never designed to be brought to a planet's surface."

Private Dysson beams with self-confidence, glancing smartly to his other companions.

"For your information, Private," replies Giddy, "something this large would probably make it through the atmosphere, but it would most likely resemble a metallic pancake at the bottom of a kilometer wide crater!"

Private Dysson feels his face flush. He shifts his gaze to a point on the horizon.

"The only way this thing could get here in this condition is to have been placed here," Giddy continues. "Someone has taken great pains to bring it down intact."

"Excuse me, Lieutenant," says Sergeant Shenk, in an effort to diffuse the tension. "Should we report this find to the Extricator?"

A smirk draws across Giddy's face. "Nah, let's just open it. We're supposed to be in the core, anyway. We don't want that asshole, South, to string us up on a bullshit charge, do we? If we find something big here, which I suspect, then maybe no one will notice we missed the core."

The Sergeant shrugs.

"Kupper," orders Giddy, "get this thing open!"

South and Nypelles arrive at the summit of the low bluff, formerly a small, wooded park in the suburbs of the now flattened town. The pair clamber over the fallen trees, their feet stirring small clouds from the ash-covered terrain. Climbing onto a boulder, they survey the sprawling carnage.

"Son of a Nauga-nymph," exclaims South. "I've never seen such devastation first-hand. Have the others been like this?"

"For the most part. This one's a little worse."

"Give me the BringClose Terrain-Scanning Amplifier."

Nypelles reaches into his utility pack, pulls out the device. South presses it to his helmet faceplate and looks at the display, scanning the horizon for clues.

Engineer Kupper tweaks the sensitivity controls of her Hydrasonic Oscillating Seal Overrider(tm). As the device vibrates, clunking noises issue from the internal locking mechanism of the bin.

"How much longer?" asks Giddy, pacing.

"Almost there, sir," replies Kupper, making an

adjustment to the tool.

Thunk!

"Done."

"All right, let's get this pig open. Dysson, Purma, get your backs into it," commands Giddy, stepping away from the bin to allow the large door to open.

The pair tap a pry bar into the door seam. The five-story lid looms over the tiny beings. They heave on the bar, the apparent vacuum within the bin offering resistance.

"Come on guys, make some room." Giddy steps in, adding his strength to that of the two privates. They pull with no results. "Kupper, Shenk, get in here."

Together, the five-member squad reef on the bar.

Fwhoop!

The door relents as the bin's seal is ruptured.

KAWHUMP!!!

Nypelles starts at the sudden flash on the horizon.

SMACK!

South and Nypelles are bowled over by the shock-wave of the explosion. Visors purpled with soot, they tumble through the ash toward the edge of the bluff.

On board the *Extricator*, Ssyxok stares down at the pinned readouts in disbelief.

"SSSeisssmic! Magno Chairsss now!" He slaps at the control on his chair.

Private Lorradoes looks to the view port, catches the tail of the blinding flash. He steps for his chair--

SLAMMM!

The wave passes through the ship, heaving the hull, straining its landing gear. One of the struts snaps and the nose of the ship pitches forward.

Inside, Lorradoes is tossed, spine first, against the corner of the console. Ssyxok flails to restrain him, but the Private ricochets into the forward Stalwart Glass(tm).

Nypelles manages to grab a rock outcrop, stopping his fall. Not so lucky, South is driven off the bluff. There is a sickening snap as he lands hard in the scree below. His left leg is neatly folded in a place with no hinge.

"Aaauuggghh!!!"

Disoriented, Nypelles wipes at his faceplate, searching for his commander. "Captain South! Where are you?"

"Down here."

Nypelles crawls to the edge of the low cliff, peers down at the bent form of South. "Hang on, sir!"

* * *

There is a small puff of scented air as the noiseless hydraulics of the AutoDoc(tm) medical repair unit raises its lid. South pulls his stiff, but mended, body out of the life saving machine. He glances over at the other unit. Private Lorradoes is visible through its glass window.

The door to sick bay whisks open permitting Ssyxok to enter. "Captain SSSouth. You are well, I trussst?"

"I'm fine." Salata flexes his leg, trying to loosen it up. "What the hell hit us?"

"Apparently an unexsssploded bomb wasss triggered. We've losst all three sssquadsss, sssir."

"Great," South sighs. "Any other damage?"

"The ssship took a beating. Private Nypellesss iss assesssing it now."

"Remind me to thank him."

South limps out of sick bay, pausing at a view port. The ruined ruins of the Solarex Colony sprawl, smoking, around the ship. Through the protective glass, Captain Salata South scans the destruction. Complete annihilation, no clues and no one claiming responsibility... yet. He slams his fist down on the stainless-steel window sill. In the distance a whirling dust devil whistles past, scouring the ground.

CHAPTER TWO

INVESTIGATIONS

"...wait a sec."

In a lush office on the Orbital Camp Glowblade InterGalactic United Military Base, Vice-Admiral Joshua Ragellon sits at his desk. Spread before him are glossy brochures describing the Humongous RangeroPrima Supreme War Galleon(patent pending). It is the latest offering from UniQuark, a division of OmniCorp. OmniCorp is the mega-corporation that makes absolutely everything, from battleships, to can-openers, to synthetic sub-atomic particles called *Eykeyah* bosons. If OmniCorp doesn't make it, you don't need it.

Ragellon massages his wrinkled forehead between a well-groomed thumb and fingers. His once dark-brown Negroid face has changed dramatically with age. The creases have deepened and appear filled with dust, while the highlights are buffed to a brassy sheen. The former lustrous blackness of his close-cropped military haircut has long since given way to white, with a peppering of gray at the temples. There is a slight quiver to his movement, betraying the inevitable ravages of age, and his yellowed eyes appear watery behind half-lensed reading glasses.

Across from him sit two of his most experienced officers: the silver-skinned Chromapien, Captain Heratio Brown, and the sinewy, hardened Homo sapiens frame of Colonel Dwayne Itchtrong.

"I don't see why we need another upgrade so soon. The Mark II Battle Accelerator HyperCrafts are barely a year old," says the Vice-Admiral.

"The Mark IIs are serviceable, but we really feel the RangeroPrima is in a class by itself," replies the metallic, quavering voice of Brown. "UniQuark has really outdone themselves with this one."

"They're fully loaded, sir," supports Itchtrong. "Just one of those would make short work of any threat-rich environment. It's a dream machine, really."

"I like your style, Itchy." Ragellon smiles as he gathers and straightens the brochures. "The High Commander Supreme is anxious to get your input. I'll be happy to pass on the recommendation."

He removes his reading glasses, sets them on the desk and begins to fiddle with them. Colonel Itchtrong looks at Captain Brown, who raises his eyebrows. The Colonel clears

his throat, attracting his commanding officer's attention.

"Any news on the terrorist incidents, sir?"

"Oh, right. I'm expecting Captain South momentarily. He's been investigating the Solarex incident."

"South is a good man," offers Brown, nodding his head with approval.

Itchtrong rolls his eyes, not sharing the sentiment.

"Sir," crackles a voice over the intercom, "Captain Salata South has arrived from the Solarex Research and Development Colony."

The office door opens. Ragellon pulls himself out of his seat, gains his balance, and greets Captain South. He winces at the sight of the Captain's scar, which is blazing red.

"Captain South, you know Colonel Itchtrong and Captain Brown?"

South nods to them, his scar blazing brighter at the sight of Itchtrong.

"How's the gash, Slash?" says Itchtrong.

"I have my report, sir," South says, ignoring the remark and addressing the Vice-Admiral.

"Good." Ragellon turns to Itchtrong and Brown.

"Gentlemen, if you will excuse us."

Dismissed, they exit with curt nods.

Alone with South, Ragellon takes a more informal stance: "How's it been in the trenches, Sally?"

Cringing at the use of his nickname, Captain South reclines on the settee, flexing his stiff leg. "We lost three squads and the *Extricator* will be laid up in dry-dock for a month, Rags."

The Vice-Admiral chuckles at the use of *his* nickname.

"Yes, I heard. Shame about that. So, what have you got?"

Marching down the sterile corridors of Orbital Camp Glowblade, Captain Brown confides in Colonel Itchtrong.

"The Vice-Admiral is certainly being stingy with the information on the terrorists. I'm not sure whether that's a good sign or a bad one."

"Ragellon's too muddle-headed to sort the damn mess out. Probably just as well, leave the glory to one of us, eh, Captain?"

Brown cocks his head, considers the possibility.

"...unless we've overlooked something." Salata shifts, leans forward. "But there's one thing that I find, let's say, odd. Tell me what you make of this."

Ragellon nods and folds his arms on the desk top.

"According to some of the crew members who worked with Beethoven, the site of every incident has had garbage strewn clear into low orbit, hell to maneuver through."

"What did you expect," Ragellon interjects, "the place has just been blown by a super-seismic. Of course there's crap in orbit, we've seen it with a lot lesser explosions than these."

"No, no, you don't understand." South winces, catching a glimpse of his own reflection in the highly polished front face of Ragellon's desk. "I mean excessive garbage, real garbage, everyday garbage that hasn't been collected."

"That doesn't surprise me. With all the ships the IDR's been losing garbage collection has been more than a little lax."

"How the hell can you lose a Scow Cow... wait a sec." Salata's eyes drift, unfocused. "I'm a terrorist, right?"

"You're a terrorist," humors the Vice-Admiral.

"And I want to destroy a spaceport. The easiest way to infiltrate such a thing unnoticed is to find something regular, something that's a common occurrence, then manipulate that to get inside."

"I'm with you."

"So, I know that the garbage is picked up on a routine schedule. And I know nobody bothers with the security of a garbage scow. If I load a scow with a couple of Mega-Boom Bombs, then..."

"...it's easy to saunter in and blow up an entire base." Ragellon considers his officer's theory.

"The terrorists may be hijacking Scow Cows," Salata blurts.

"Good point. Let's check some dates." Ragellon activates the in-desk flat screen and starts tapping at the keypad.

```
>SECURITY ACCESS KEY:  
/**** *
```

```
>HELLO VICE-ADMIRAL RAGELLON  
>WHAT IS YOUR PLEASURE?  
/interstellar detritus reclamation co.  
/activate data trunk inducto lock  
/IDR983/t55
```

```
>DONE...
>THIS IS A LEVEL NINE SECURITY TRUNK

>DO YOU WISH AN OVERRIDE?
/security level 10

>AUTHORIZATION CODE
/****.**

>DO YOU WISH TO ABORT UPON DETECTION?
/yes immediate termination

>DONE

>READY:
```

There is a brief pause, then the IDR Company logo appears, beneath it is:

```
>THE INTERSTELLAR DETRITUS
>RECLAMATION CO.
>DATA DIVISION:
>KNOWING IS JUST HALF THE BATTLE
```

Ragellon begins to type:

```
/sched.dir>Solarex Research Colony

>CONNECTION BEING PROBED
>READY TO TERMINATE TAP
```

"Damn! The IDR have the security breach detectors on full... very interesting."

The screen blinks and a new message appears:

```
>TAP IS TERMINATED
:detection avoided
```

"Maybe we should talk to IDR management and try to gain access to their records along proper channels," suggests Salata.

"Never. If it's an inside job we risk alerting the culprits. This level of secrecy strikes me as very suspicious." Ragellon drums his fingers. "We'll just have to find another way in. After all, there's no point in proceeding if we don't have some kind of evidence."

* * *

Lypsix V, a rocky planet near the center of the galaxy, is home to the LypService Station Supreme(tm), (*Clean Docks and Good Eats* reads the sign). And the station is home to the Interstellar Detritus Reclamation Company Data Division. It's here that the IDR computers handle all scheduling concerns: Monstrous Indestructo Sani-Containment Bin(tm) distribution, Arachide Belly Cruiser Detritus Reclamation Unit(tm) fleet deployment, garbage collection.

A sub-compact Scissor Ship(tm) docks in the upper strata of the station. Its pilot, in the uniform of a Data Division Processor, adjusts his clothing and conceals a Junior Hand Cannon(tm) under his jacket. Pulling his cap firmly on his head, he exits the Scissor Ship(tm) and marches into the station.

Whaamm!!

"Watch where yer goin', dork," winces a scrawny man with straggly hair, clad in a baggy, patchwork jumpsuit.

"Excuse me," says the pilot, trying to brush by the man.

"Ooowhhheee, you IDR clowns are all the same." The wiry man blocks the pilot's path. "Excuse me? Well screw you. Geronimo Lavoriss doesn't take shit from the IDR, Company or Union, anymore!"

The man known as Geronimo pulls out a TruBlu IdentiTag(tm) with FREELANCE RECLAIMER stenciled in bold letters across the top. He flashes the tag into the pilot's face.

"I'm my own boss, lightnin' bolt!"

With that, he leans heavily into the pilot, bouncing him off the wall. "'Scuse me!" And he grumbles away down the corridor.

The pilot grunts, trying to restrain himself from pulling out the Junior Hand Cannon(tm). The jagged scar that splits his mug burns blood red. Captain Salata South hates this undercover, covert nonsense. He yanks his cap down to shield the scar, then marches toward the main entrance of the Data Division.

"Your ID tag, sir," demands the computer sentry.

Salata slips a forged TruBlu IdentiTag(tm) from his breast pocket and slides it into the wall terminal.

"Retina scan..." intones the monotone computer.

South palms a small object and holds it against the eye scanner, leaning in to shield his activities from the security camera. The eye scanner reads the object, a hologram of a retina patterned to match the forged

IdentiTag(tm).

The doors whisk open. With a quick glance over his shoulder, Salata South enters the Data Division.

Geronimo Lavoriss struts into Kitty's Kulinary Kipeche Kuisine(tm) diner and sits down on a Naugahyde(tm) barstool. A Kitty Klone(tm), one of the servers, trudges up to the counter, her NibbleNice SensiPad and Stylus(tm) ready to transmit his order.

"The Quanaheeni burger with Glucossian fries and hot Chocosmelt to drink. Easy on the Nummer Sauce," orders Geronimo.

"Anything else, sweetie?"

"Well, it depends what you're offerin'?" Lavoriss proffers a wink.

"That Stellar Cruiser your ship?" she asks, motioning to a luxurious space yacht visible through the large, overhead viewing window.

"Me, own a borin' statement of complacency like that? You gotta be kiddin'." He points to a smaller, poorly maintained ship that seems to be a compilation of various other ships. "That's my baby, the *New Gnu*."

"That one?" Her shoulders slump.

"Yeah." Geronimo hands her a grimy, dog-eared business card. "I'm Geronimo Lavoriss, the finest Freelance Reclaimer in the business. Salvage is my specialty."

"You're a pack rat." She turns away, disgusted.

Salata South closes the door on the cramped KnoItAll Data Booth(tm). He pecks at the keypad, trying to access pick-up dates for the IDR at the Solarex Research Colony:

```
/request inventory pick-ups,  
/solarex research colony
```

```
:21/11/73 p/u comp. dsf  
:21/20/73 p/u comp. dsf  
:21/27/73 -----
```

"That's the day before I was dispatched to Solarex," Salata whispers. He types again:

```
/request confirmation  
/pickup on 21/27/73
```

>WORKING...PLEASE WAIT
:no p/u confirmed

/was a p/u dispatched?

:p/u dispatched as per schedule

/dispatched by whom?

>WORKING... CLEARANCE REQUESTED

Salata blinks at the last sentence. He gingerly slides his IdentiTag(tm) into the slot next to the screen.

>WORKING...
>ALERT...
>DETECTION OF FORGED IDENTITAG
>ALERT

CLICK! CHUNK!

Salata rises for the door as the emergency locks slam into place, trapping him within the Data Booth. He grabs for his Junior Hand Cannon(tm).

In the office of Cheeznee Boof, the Data Division director, the security alarm sounds. The once statuesque man, a top field operative during his early career with the IDR but now sporting the paunch of a committed Stayle Ale(tm) drinker, reaches into his desk to retrieve a Pulse Pistol(tm) and races out the door. He rushes past two Secur O'Bots(tm) already flying down the corridor toward the source of the alarm.

Data Processors poke their heads out of their rooms, quickly retreating at the sight of Boof and the Pulse Pistol(tm). They realize that the ancient weapon is powerful, but prone to misfires and ricochets. It's best not to be around should there be any shooting.

Cheeznee rounds the corner, the offending booth in sight.

BLAMMM! BLAMMM!

The door blows open. Salata steps out, Junior Hand Cannon(tm) smoking. A surprised Boof ducks back behind the corner. The two hovering Secur O'Bots(tm) continue on around and open fire.

Captain South's old commando training kicks in and he dives across the corridor, rolling and returning fire. Sparks shower from the chassis of the security robots, their servos whining to maintain stability. One Secur

O'Bot(tm) loses its gravity repulsion system and drops, clanging to the floor. Its safety mechanism shuts it down.

South squeezes off another couple of rounds, scoring direct hits on the second bot. It begins to spin, wobbling wildly, and heads down the hall in the direction it came, scuffing the walls. Boof, still secure behind the corner, listens as South's feet beat toward the exit. He jumps out into the corridor.

"Halt!" He levels the Pulse Pistol(tm) at Salata's retreating back.

South slows to a stop.

"Drop your weapon!"

CLACK. CLATTER.

Cheeznee edges up to Salata, his gun trained on the back of the disguised Captain's head. South listens to the other man's breath, sensing his approach. His muscles tighten.

"Turn around, real slow," commands Boof.

Salata complies. Cheeznee winces at the sight of the Captain's facial disfigurement. Recognizing the expected window of opportunity, Salata lunges.

FWWWZZZZAAAA!!!

The Pulse Pistol(tm) fires, its orange blast messing up the wall as it flies from Boof's hand. Salata drives forward, his fist a battering ram. The startled Boof exhales completely as the fist strikes his diaphragm. He crumples to the floor. Salata scoops up his Junior Hand Cannon(tm) and turns to run, but the other man is quick, grabbing at South's ankle, tripping him. Salata hits the floor hard, turns and shoots.

ZZZAAACCKKK!!!

"Aaauuggghhh!!!"

Cheeznee screams, cradles a bloody stump. He stares at his hand lying lifeless on the floor, a pulsing jet of blood issuing from his shorn wrist.

"Thanks for the eats."

Geronimo leaves a minuscule tip and pushes himself off the bar stool, unaware of the Rude Finger Gesture(tm) the Kitty Klone(tm) jabs at his back.

Stepping outside he pauses to stretch, then strolls toward the docking bay and the *New Gnu*.

WHAM!

Geronimo lands on the floor in a heap of arms and legs, not all of them his. Regaining what composure he has, he glares into the face of the miserable klutz who has knocked him over. He winces.

"You again!"

Salata kicks at Geronimo, catching him in the temple, dazing him, then races down the corridor to his Scissor Ship(tm).

* * *

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. Someone scheduled a pick-up for the same day as the terrorist attack, but it was never confirmed," informs Salata, back in uniform. He stands opposite Ragellon in the Vice-Admiral's office on the Orbital Camp Glowblade Military Base.

"It's too bad you couldn't get a hard copy."

"Do you want me to go back in?"

"Can't, too risky. Something's up, though. Why else would you need clearance to see who ordered a garbage pick up?"

"Not much to go on," admits Salata, "but it does seem like they're hiding something."

"If we've discovered the terrorist's method," the Vice-Admiral muses, "we still don't know why, or if, they're connected to the IDR. And how the hell do we go about stopping them?"

CHAPTER THREE

PAWNS

"Should I follow you?"

Desolate Harmony. A large spaceport catering to everything: from high-priced bounty hunters to Holo-Image Evangelists(tm).

The spaceport is known for its colorful characters, its bar brawls that can alter the port's orbit, and its high exchange of money, meals and murder. But that's not all for which the spaceport is famous. Desolate Harmony also has the Interstellar Detritus Reclamation Company head offices and Arachide Belly Cruiser(tm) dry-docks. Close to eighty per cent of the IDR fleet rotate through the port each year. Most operatives consider Desolate Harmony to be home port.

Outside the dry-dock administration stands a large, musclebound man. He adjusts his blue and gold fatigues, hefts a metal case over his shoulder, and strides, with grace and determination, down the corridor.

Rounding the corner from the docking bays is a one-eyed, pod-toed creature of unusual porcine-like stature, struggling with an oversized duffel bag. With the exception of a wide belt supporting a small utility pack, the otherwise naked alien endeavors to catch up with the big man. The alien, a member of the Mondometamoros, a race of metamorphrodite beings whose appendages are able to adjust to the requirements of the environment, waddles uncomfortably on stubby, flat-footed legs.

"Gladius Slate!"

The man in the blue and gold fatigues jerks to a stop, turns.

"Excuse me, dude," apologizes the one-eyed alien, "but, like, are you Gladius Slate?" A Spleenrot Surfin' Dude(R) magazine that had been tucked beneath the alien's sweaty appendage, drops.

Piercing green eyes scan up from the smutty publication, over the bulging belly of a rotund torso, past the sloping shoulders which define the chinless neck, up to the single eye of the alien.

"Who are you?"

"I'm, ah, Snax Mawhoooba, sir. I'm your new copilot. Like, the Interstellar Detritus Reclamation Company has assigned me to the *Gladknight V*. That's your ship, right? Your Glad-ee-us Slate, right?"

"Yes."

Snax roots in his duffel bag, produces a printout of his orders, and hands them to Slate. "I'm your new guy. Figuratively speaking of course, as I have no specific gender, but you can probably see that."

"Union?"

"Permittee," Snax beams, undaunted. "I need thirty-three-thousand, two-hundred and twenty-six more hours before I can get into the Union."

Slate, his faith in the powers-that-be beginning to wane, stares at Mawhoooba.

"Oh yeah, I also have some new orders for us," informs Snax, pulling out a small computer memory card with the IDR logo on it.

"Play it when we get to the ship," Gladius says, turning and walking away, "we've got a debriefing session to go to first."

"You want me to follow you? Should I follow you?" calls Snax, fumbling to pick up his gear.

Gladius shakes his head. Permittee. Another piece-of-cannon-fodder permittee. The Union is going to hear about this.

They enter the meeting hall. A large cluster of IDR Company operatives, each wearing blue and gold fatigues, each emblazoned with the IDR Company crest, sit near the front, talking. Gladius takes a seat alone, near the back. Many of his co-workers avoid him, wary of the big man's reputation as a troublemaker. Snax bumbles his way to Gladius, plopping his frame next to the human.

The alien looks absently at a poster displaying Mirty Fuegg, president of the Interstellar Detritus Reclaimer's Union. Mirty's round face is frozen in a squint, avoiding the cigarette smoke drifting from the stubby butt tucked in the corner of his mouth. Below the photograph a bold slogan reflects the sentiments of the Union's relationship with the gigantic Company: "Our Union. Our Company. Our Future."

"Like, uh, what are we doin' here, huh?" asks Snax, pulling a Hydroxilated Nutri-Chew(tm) biscuit from the pack on his belt.

"Shut it," Slate hisses.

District Manager of the Interstellar Detritus Reclamation Company, Rolezar Doughan, takes his place at the lectern. The tall, thin being of angular stature, bred specifically for managerial duty, clears his throat: a high-pitched whine with a hint of rattle. The room grows

quiet.

"IDR operatives, I'm sure you are all aware of the recent disappearances of many of our Arachide Belly Cruisers. Not only have we lost the expensive ships, but numerous valuable operatives have also vanished."

There is a brief buzz throughout the gathering as many recall friends gone missing.

"We are in the very unfortunate position of not knowing what has become of these ill-fated employees, and all I can hope is that no harm has befallen them. Somebody is trying to damage our organization and I will not tolerate it. I assure each and every one of you that the Company will not rest until the perpetrators of these heinous acts are brought to justice.

"As you may know from the recent memo, an emergency meeting with the Board of Directors has been held and the recommendation put forward that operatives are now to be armed at all times. I would urge, for your own safety, that you adhere to this policy. In addition, please forward any information you may discover regarding these crimes to myself directly. I must point out that anyone caught aiding or abetting said offenders will be dealt the most severe penalties allowable under Intergalactic Law."

Rolezar pauses to flush a build-up of mucus from his nasal cavities.

"Now, as a special treat for you, Mirty Fuegg, your Union president, who is taking a brief pause from contract negotiations, would like to say a few words."

Snax shifts in his seat, excited, while Gladius pinches the bridge of his nose, feeling the beginnings of a migraine.

A pudgy, balding man wearing a checked flannel shirt makes his way to the podium. Suspenders clipped to drab green work dungarees strain under the weight of his protruding belly. He drops his cigarette butt, crushing it with his heel, and steps up to the microphone, shielding his eyes from the glare of the lights.

"My Union Brothers and Sisters," begins the gruff voice, "I want to thank you all for your, uh, impeccable dedication. The Company is very happy with the service we've been providing. You should all be proud.

"I would like to extend my sincerest hope to the families of any individuals reported as missing, that they will be returned unharmed. Also, I just want to, uh, re-iterate Mr. Doughan's, the Union's Executive Board, and the Company's Board of Directors concern about the potential, uh, damage these acts of piracy pose. It threatens to

shake the very foundations of our Union as well as the Company. Without this Company, we, the members of the Detritus Reclaimers Union, would be out of work, and without us, this Company could not exist."

A murmur ripples through the room.

"The Union Executive Board has met with the Company Directors and we have reached an agreement. It has been decided that it is each individual's duty to actively participate in bringing this, uh, nastiness to an end. So keep your eyes and ears open, please. Together we make this Company, together we can supplant this, uh, insurrection."

Another buzz runs through the gathering. Mirty Fuegg continues to prattle on about Union business. Gladius Slate sits motionless, intent on the words of the president, when a small distraction catches his eye. Snax is bent over, his entire head engulfed in the duffel bag on the floor in front of him. He snuffles around inside, chattering softly to himself. Then, with a small squeal, he emerges, a pack of Plezure-Senz Fizz Mints(tm) clamped in tweezer-like digits. Straightening, he notices Gladius looking at him. He smiles, displaying his prize to the big guy, and returns his attention to the podium. Slate stares in bewilderment at the odd profile of his newest copilot.

"...and I expect the minor differences still hampering the contract negotiations will be resolved in short order. I wish you all good luck and safe journeys. Thanks, folks."

There is a mix of semi-hearty applause as the operatives stand up, stretching and chatting. Snatching up the metal case, Gladius makes a hasty exit. Snax scrambles to collect his things.

Walking briskly, Slate enters an access tube leading to his ship, an Arachide Belly Cruiser(tm), with Snax lumbering awkwardly after him. Once inside, Gladius stows the metal case in the forward hold.

"What's in the case?" puffs Snax, dumping his gear at the copilot console.

"My insurance policy. Give me our orders."

Gladius snatches the memory card out of the alien's recently formed pincer and pops it into a reader on the piloting console. The image of Rolezar Doughan, the District Manager of the IDR Company, appears in a Holo-Vis(tm) projection over the console.

"Commander Slate. By now you will have met your new copilot. The Personnel Department has assured me that he

is an able-bodied, enthusiastic being who will likely rise to the elite ranks of management one day. Treat him accordingly."

Snax smiles at the appraisal. Gladius eyes him doubtfully, then returns his attention to the image of the District Manager.

"Regarding your new orders, the Waste Management Department has an urgent salvage mission involving a reportedly abandoned vessel. Your navigational computer is being programmed now. Please standby for launch initiation. You will be briefed en route."

The powerful engines of the ship, the *Gladknight V*, ignite, nudging it out of dock.

"You better lock yourself in, permittee," suggests Gladius, activating the field of his Magno Command Chair(tm).

Snax plops himself onto the Magno Couch(tm) and, sprouting digits, activates the couch's restraining field.

Clear of the grid, the MatterMovers(tm) kick in, propelling the *Gladknight V* toward the distant reaches of the galaxy.

The office complexes of Desolate Harmony stretch over a large portion of spaceport grid. The hundreds of plush suites are arranged so that each has an entire wall of Stalwart Glass(tm) facing toward the swirl of the galactic hub. In the dim recesses of one of these offices, a lone figure watches as the glowing afterburners of the *Gladknight V's* engines recede to pinpoints, eventually disappearing amidst the backdrop of stars. Turning away from the view port, the Observer's attention shifts to a Holo-Plotter(tm) and the green traces recording the *Gladknight's* trajectory into the wilderness.

CHAPTER FOUR

REUNION

"There are two derelicts out here."

"Stop, Dave."

"Don't call me Dave."

"Sorry, Dave. I just thought you would like to know that there is a garbage scow in Sector Five."

"Sector Five?"

"Yes, Dave. Sector Five."

"There's nothin' but asteroids and debris out there! What the hell would a garbage scow be doin' in Sector Five?"

"Orbiting, Dave."

"Of course it's orbiting, and stop callin' me Dave! It's Geronimo, you... you..."

"I'm a Dig Tech Model Number Four Byte O'Matic, revision two-a, Dave, but you can call me Matt."

Geronimo Lavoriss twirls his Magno Swivel Chair(tm) to stare eye to electric eye with the Byte O'Matic(tm).

"Quit imitatin' that dumb movie or I'll have your memory swept from here to the Snappin' Sphincters of Bramada dot Six!"

He pivots back to the console. His fingers blur over the controls as he zeroes in on the garbage scow. The scanning grids lock. The detector begins to fart electronically. He whaps a red button on the panel.

"Visual!"

In front of him appears a three-dimensional Holo-Vis(tm) projection of the garbage scow.

"That's no scow, that's a derelict work barge."

"Incorrect, Dave," replies the Byte O'Matic(tm). "It is a Dustbin class one point four garbage scow belonging to the now defunct Galactic Gathering Company. Extremely ancient, I'm afraid. Classified as an antique."

Geronimo shakes his head, temperature rising. "Check your readin's, blikhead, and plot a course for the WORK BARGE!"

"Plotting... ready to initiate maneuver to the... garbage scow."

Geronimo scowls at the Byte O'Matic(tm). "Initiate."

The main MatterMovers(tm), the standard drive engines of most space-going vessels, fire up, gently forcing him back in the Magno Chair(tm).

The *New Gnu* sidles up to the antique, Dustbin class 1.4 garbage scow. A long, elastic Goey Tube(tm) shoots from the side of the *New Gnu*, sticking itself over the scow's hatch. Air hisses into the transparent, jellied tube.

"Docking complete, Dave."

"Stop callin' me Dave."

Deactivating the Magno Chair(tm), Geronimo springs to his feet, which, in the ship's limited GravLite(tm) artificial gravity, causes him to bump his head on the ceiling. "Is the atmosphere stable in the... scow?"

The Byte O'Matic(tm) whirs. "Checking... negative in quadrant one... negative in bridge... unknown in garbage containment area."

"Matt, where's my Hand Cannon?" Geronimo zips the seal of his pressure suit.

"The weapon you seek is under the stack of Spleenrot Squashwort magazines."

Geronimo kicks aside the festering organic mags and plucks up the small, but powerful, Junior Hand Cannon(tm).

"Dilate door."

"Dilating... do you have your helmet, Dave?"

"Thank you," he returns, a hint of sarcasm creeping into his voice. Latching his helmet, Geronimo steps through the airlock.

Slowly, he flounders through the gravity free Goey Tube(tm). Arriving at the derelict, he tries to open the hatch. The door refuses to budge. He draws the Junior Hand Cannon(tm) and blasts a hole in the door's control panel. The door seal pops.

"Well, what have we here?" Gladius Slate mutters.

"What?! What's that, Boss?" queries Snax, deftly tucking a Spleenrot Surfin' Dude(R) magazine under his console.

"We're now within scanner range of that derelict garbage scow," informs Slate, eyes intent upon the screen in front of him, "only it would seem that IDR control has been misinformed. There are two derelicts out here."

Snax waddles to the scanning station, peers over Gladius's shoulder.

"Look here," Gladius says, pointing out the two vessels displayed on the screen. "This one is the Galactic Gathering Company's Dustbin class one point four garbage scow mentioned in our orders, but this other wreck... I have no idea what it is. It almost looks homemade."

"Oh," Snax replies.

Gladius turns, becoming stern. "I can only assume, judging from its condition, that it is abandoned. But, due to the rash of Scow Cow hijackings that have been happening, we will be following strict procedural guidelines for our reconnaissance of the two vessels. Do you understand, copilot?"

Snax stares briefly, blinks once. "Sure, dude."

Unconvinced, Gladius addresses the bridge console. "Prepare for rendezvous maneuvers."

Geronimo threads his way through the decks and along the corridors of the dark scow, his Junior Hand Cannon(tm) at the ready. The weak beam from his helmet light reveals that the scow is in a state of floating turmoil. Clutter drifts randomly in the lack of gravity. A large, dead, alien rat-type creature, with its head secured in an alien rat-type creature trap, passes near his face. Surprised, Geronimo recoils, blasts the creature with the Junior Hand Cannon(tm), disintegrating it. Unfortunately, this is not a pleasant thing to do to a rotting organic creature in zero gravity. Smelly speckles begin to accumulate on Geronimo's suit.

"Shit."

"Are you all right, Dave?" queries an electronic voice over Geronimo's headset.

"Fine, and don't call me Dave."

"No problem. I am a Dig Tech Model Number Four Byte O'Matic, revision two-a, you will recall."

"Yeah, yeah. A quick sweep of these lower decks and I'll be headin' for the bridge, so stay alert would ya."

"My pleasure, Dave."

A thin shaft of light penetrates into the darkness of the silent antique vessel. The cavernous barrel of a Hand Cannon(tm), the gargantuan parent pistol of the smaller and more easily concealable Junior Hand Cannon(tm), intrudes into the stillness, followed by the imposing silhouette of Gladius Slate.

He pauses at the hatchway leading into the abandoned ship's port side airlock, the starboard side being blocked by the junk vessel docked there, and tugs at the cable spooling out behind him. Along the inside door panel he finds the emergency power receptacle and plugs in his Arachide Belly Cruiser's(tm) Super HiLite Emergency Umbilical(tm). The dim emergency lighting of the dead ship winks to life. Debris floats lazily throughout the cabin.

Gladius surveys the situation, then touches his

Commucon Stay-Close(tm) communicator and calls to Snax on the *Gladknight V*. "Anything looking suspicious on-board, permittee?"

BONK!

Snax, who is caught off guard by his pilot's gruff command, bangs the back of his head on the under panel of his control console. He sits up and quickly begins to flip through the vacant ship's Holo-Cam(tm) stations, being fed to him by the Super HiLite Umbilical(tm).

"Snax!!"

"Er... um... nothin' so far, boss."

"Well, I'm making my way to the bridge, stay awake in there!"

"Yes, sir."

Geronimo is startled by the sudden illumination of the emergency lights. "Matt! What's goin' on?"

"Another vessel has arrived, Dave," whispers the electronic voice, "and it has docked on the other side of the garbage scow."

"Why the hell didn't you tell me?"

"I was maintaining radio silence because I didn't want them to know we were here, Dave."

"Know we were here!" Geronimo bellows. "Don't ya think they could probably see us?!!"

The Byte O'Matic(tm) remains silent.

"Jeez! Of all the stupid... they're probably at the bridge already, nabbin' all the juiciest data and layin' claim to the vessel! How the hell am I supposed to make a livin' when I got an idiot like you on my side, huh?!"

More silence.

"Fuck me. I'm headin' for the bridge, see if there's anything I can save from this mess... find out what I'm losin'."

Geronimo frantically grapples along the corridors in the direction of the bridge.

"Dave?"

"What?!"

"Sorry."

Slate flips up the red flap, breaking the security seal, and plucks the master ship's log backup disk from its disk drive. He slips it into one of the numerous pocket slits in his suit and makes one last quick scan of the dead bridge. In a dim recess he can see the skeletal remains of a crew member. He grimaces at the thought of the stench which must linger, millimeters from his nose, on the other

side of his visor.

"For the record," he calls to Snax again, "I've retrieved the ship's log and I'm heading back. Anything out of the ordinary, so far?"

"Ah... hummph sheen unnyfing yep." Snax has been flipping channels with a pseudo-toe while stuffing his face with Hydroxilated Nutri-Chew(tm) biscuits. Crumbs litter his belly, a few cling to his cheek.

"What?!"

Snax swallows hard. "I haven't seen anything yet."

Gladius shakes his head and mumbles "permittee" under his breath.

"What? What was that, chief?"

"Nothing."

Gladius cautiously begins picking his way back across the bridge, but stops short at a glimpse of movement to his extreme left. He whirls, as fast as zero gravity will allow, and trains his Hand Cannon(tm) on a human figure struggling across the bridge toward him.

Geronimo works his way by the control panel, nonchalantly eyeing the empty master log disk drive as he passes. He waves politely as he recognizes the Company colors of the IDR space suit. The operative offers a slight nod of the head in return.

Obviously the pilot of the clunker parked outside, muses Gladius, noting the scruffy suit. His plan is to make sure the buffoon hasn't lifted any Company property and escort him off the derelict as soon as possible. He watches the other man make some adjustments to the Commucon Stay-Close(tm) transmitter on his belt, and suddenly his voice crackles inside Gladius's helmet.

"Hey, howzit goin'?"

Synapses fire in Gladius's brain as he tries to place the nasal quality of the voice.

"Quite the ship we've found here," crackles the voice again. "Antique, I understand."

Gladius lowers his weapon as the ragged figure comes to a stop before him. In an effort to see Gladius, the other man tilts his head allowing the light to strike his face. The two men lock eyes. A wave of recognition and nausea consumes Gladius as he remembers...

...Geronimo Lavoriss drifting slowly past the view port. A tether connects him to the external airlock of the Arachide Belly Cruiser(tm), *Gladknight III*. He is doing extravehicular maneuvers to retrieve a burned out AttiTooter(tm) drive that has been lost from a passing

freighter. They were having trouble with a manipulator arm and Gladius Slate has sent his copilot outside to do a manual reclamation.

"Make sure you get those tow cables secured tightly," calls Gladius over the intercom. "We don't need a mishap out here."

"Tow cables? Shit! I forgot 'em in the airlock. I'm just gonna pull it, reel me in, Gladman."

"Lavoriss! Get back in and get those cables. We've got procedure to follow, here."

"Nah, nah, I've got a good grip. Reel me in, let's go."

"Look here, Lavoriss, these procedures are specifically defined. Years of trial and error, dozens of lost lives, have gone into forming these precise exterior maneuvers policies. Get those cables or I'll report you and you'll be reprimanded and fined."

Geronimo releases his grip on the Tooter and turns to face the view port. "Fined! You're gonna fine me. You can't fine me. I've earned my money. And those Company policies are bullshit for sissies. I don't need any tow cables. Just reel me in, let's go!"

"No."

"Then I quit! I could do better on my own, anyway."

"Fine."

Geronimo, using the tether, begins to tug and nudge the lost AttiTooter(tm) drive toward the *Gladknight III*. Once moving, he manipulates himself into a position with his back against the motor, his feet ready to brake against the *Gladknight's* hull. He brings the load to a gentle halt.

"I'm coming in, Happyass," Geronimo announces.

Gladius, who has been observing through the view port, remains silent.

"Gladius, come on," growls the annoyed Geronimo.

Still no answer.

"Okay, have it your way." Geronimo squirms around in the small gap between the ship's hull and the drive. Bracing his back against the hull, he uses his legs to push the drive, with all his might, sending it tumbling gracefully into deep space.

Gladius grits his teeth, glaring at the receding AttiTooter(tm). Red faced, he slowly rises from his Magno Command Chair(tm) and heads to the airlock.

Geronimo has pulled himself into the airlock's outer alcove. He punches the sequence to dilate the door. It refuses to open.

"Gladman, the door's stuck."

"It's not stuck." Gladius is standing next to the airlock's interior controls.

"Open the door!"

"No."

Geronimo bangs uselessly on the metal barricade. Sighing, he tries to think of a way to make his obstinate commander open the door.

"Gladius, it's a Company infraction to keep a crew member on external maneuvers if he wants to come in. You can't force me to stay out here."

"This is an IDR vessel, Lavoriss. You no longer work for the IDR. You just quit, remember? Therefore, I don't have to let you in."

Geronimo kicks the door, his mind drawing a blank. Then he recalls an obscure footnote in the IDR Employee Handbook(tm).

"Hey, Gladman! Accordin' to the handbook, no resignation will be accepted unless it is written and submitted for approval. I haven't written it yet, Snickerbutt. You have to let me in."

Gladius fumes. How dare a junior employee spout the Handbook to him.

"Open the door," Geronimo taunts, "or I will report you."

Gladius slams his fist into the airlock controls. The door opens with a whoosh, admitting Geronimo...

"Lavoriss, you schmuck," yells Gladius, his voice piercing into Geronimo's helmet.

"Well, well, if it isn't the ol' Happybutt himself. How ya doin' chief? What's a dork like you doin' in a place like this?"

"I'm doing my job, Lavoriss. What the hell are you doing here?"

"Uh, like, pardon me?" Snax's voice interrupts.

"Shut up Snax, I'll deal with you later."

"Oh," Geronimo counters, "a new toadie to kick around, have you?"

"I said what are you doing here, Lavoriss?"

"I happen to be workin' also, as a freelancer, I might add."

"Well, I've already claimed this derelict for the IDR, so if you'll just vacate the premises we can all be on our merry way, understand?"

"Ooh, not still havin' bitter feelin's about that nasty grievance, are we?" Geronimo eyes Gladius warily.

"Look, Gladman, that was a long time ago. You're obviously still doin' the kinda work you love. I'm certainly happy. Why not just let bygones be bygones? Whadda ya say?"

Gladius stares at his former copilot, shakes his head, incredulous.

"Fine," resigns Geronimo, not wanting to cross the big man for a second time, "I'll be on my way, then." He begins to head in the direction of the *New Gnu*, stops to glance back at Gladius. "See if you can't whup that copilot of yours into shape, will ya." He laughs, waves, and disappears through the bulkhead.

Gladius looks down at the Hand Cannon(tm), turns it over slowly in his hand.

The *Gladknight V's* Goopy Tube(tm) seats itself in its storage cell. Gladius waits for the green 'HATCH SECURE' light to come on before removing his external maneuvers suit and equipment. Snax is quickly tidying himself, brushing away crumbs, which are still sinking to the floor as Gladius enters the bridge.

"Set the computer to receive this log disk."

Snax swings his bulk out of his Magno Chair(tm) and waddles to the main computer console. Running a digit along the rows of toggles, he ponders which ones to engage.

Gladius storms to the console, snaps a couple of switches and glares at Snax.

"Heh, heh," Snax replies, sheepishly.

Gladius jams the log disk into an available drive, keys a short sequence of instructions, and strides to his Magno Command Chair(tm). Mawhoooba watches the big guy settle into his seat. Feeling Snax's gaze, Gladius turns to look at him. Snax snaps his attention to the blinking lights of the computer, pretending to understand its operation.

The big man sighs and checks the console. The poor excuse for a space-going vessel, the *New Gnu*, is rapidly receding, heading out of the sector. Gladius watches it disappear from the monitors, then begins to rub his chin methodically, deep in thought.

"Okay, Matt," Geronimo says, "lets hold up here for awhile. I wanna circle back once that egotistical behemoth splits, nab a copy of the ships log, see just what the heck we should be lookin' for. Old Gladass Slate usually gets the more interestin' assignments, as I recall."

"Your wish is my command, Dave," replies the humbled Byte O'Matic(tm).

Lavoriss rolls his eyes. "Just shut us down to minimum power requirements, would ya. I gotta go take a crap." He ducks through the bulkhead toward his cabin.

BING!

The *Gladknight V's* computer signals its completion of uploading the foreign ship's log into its memory. Gladius begins to call up pertinent information about the abandoned ship: registered owner, personnel, functions, destination, orders... searching for some clue to the vessel's demise. Snax stands on tiptoe, watching over his shoulder, breath moistening Gladius's uniform.

"Nothing out of the ordinary, here," Gladius says, whipping around and bumping into Snax.

Snax's corpulent form does a complete somersault in the weak GravLite(tm) gravity of the ship before thumping into the back of his Magno Chair(tm).

"Sorry, sir," he mumbles.

"Prepare to move out," orders the commander. "We'll leave the deciphering of the log to head office. Let's go."

Gladius has already fired up the MatterMovers(tm) and is beginning to point the ship in its new direction. Snax's digits transform into rigid pincers as he scrambles to get into his Magno Chair(tm).

CHAPTER FIVE

MANIFEST DESTINATION

"I smell money!"

The *New Gnu* is once again parked beside the derelict garbage scow. Geronimo has copied the ship's log and loaded it into the Byte O'Matic(tm) for deciphering. To do this he has had to break the IDR security seal placed upon the vessel by Gladius Slate. This is a serious offense as far as the IDR is concerned, but Geronimo's overwhelming curiosity has forced him to find out what treasures he may have missed. Piracy is a common occurrence throughout this region of space, so he feels confident that if ever questioned, he can weasel his way out of it, perhaps even blame a Gladius Slate grudge against him.

"So, whadda ya got? Gettin' anythin'?" asks Geronimo, shifting impatiently. "Haul butt, hustle will ya! I don't want that muscle-brained dick returnin' to find us sittin' here. Let's go!"

"Patience is two bushes."

"Huh??"

"Virtue is the holder."

"What???"

Geronimo is becoming a tad confused. The computer is becoming a tad confused. It is using every conceivable bit of memory to decode the disk and has very little power or time to respond correctly to what it has considered 'low-priority requests'.

"Come again?" Geronimo persists, knee motoring. "You okay?"

Silence. No lights, no whirring. Something is not right.

"Hello? Anybody home?" His finger caresses the red reset button.

"I got it!!!" blurts the Byte O'Matic(tm).

Startled, Geronimo is ejected out of his seat in a slow, gravity-lite tumble across the cabin. "What, what is it?" He peels himself off the ceiling, pushes toward the Magno Chair(tm).

"It seems that we, or rather, you have found a log of the scheduled rounds of the Galactic Gathering Company's Dustbin class one point four scow, Queen of Uranus. It's an antique garbage scow, Dave, like I told you."

"Is there anythin' that would indicate valuables on board? And stop callin' me Dave."

"According to the log, she was traveling empty, with a skeleton crew, heading across to the one-hundred and twenty-third sector, quadrant epsilon third omega, en route to, as my records would indicate, a long since bankrupt shipyard, to be cut up into scrap. She was reported missing sixteen years ago. Sorry, Dave."

"Shit. No cryptic messages regardin' nearby stopovers where, perhaps, unusual geologic formations would indicate the presence of vast mineral deposits, maybe?"

"Nope."

"Fuck!"

"Relax, Dave."

"Fuck you!" Geronimo kicks the computer console, accelerating himself out of the Magno Chair(tm) again. He cracks his head against the far wall.

"Fuck! Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!"

"No need to get excited, Dave."

"Quit callin' me Dave, you dumb fuck!"

Geronimo frantically tries to return to his Magno Chair(tm) whilst holding his right foot with his left hand and his head with his right.

"You chunka shit. I've had it with you, your Dave crap, your sarcastic bullshit, and your sissy-ass voice!"

"Calm down, Dave. There's something else you should kno--"

"FUCK YOU, ASSHOLE!!!"

Lavoriss worms his way over to the Holo-File(tm) and begins to dig. He pulls out a well-worn Holo-Cine(tm) cartridge and rams it up to the single-lensed eye of the computer. 2001: A Space Odyssey. The Byte O'Matic gasps.

"You're the space oddity... I'll show you."

Geronimo smashes the cartridge against the back of the Magno Chair(tm), a move which sends him careening head over heels, thrashing the cartridge on anything within reach.

"Stop, Dave. What are you doing? Do you think that's wise, Dave? Please stop."

Geronimo, ignoring the computer's pleadings, continues to slam the cartridge, which is beginning to fragment and spew dangerous shrapnel around the cabin.

"There's something you should know, Dave. I'm not feeling well, not well at all." There is an off-pitch quaver in the computer's voice. "Something I ate has left a bad taste in my mouth. I want to go home, I feel sick. I think we should go for a little drive in the country, don't you, Dave?"

A large chunk of the cartridge breaks free and parts Lavoriss's hair. He stops his tirade and looks toward the

Cine(tm) cartridge underfoot, all is silent. Indicator lights flash in an apparently normal pattern on the mainframe. He pulls himself to the Magno Chair(tm) and activates the field.

"I'm tired of smashin' my head because of your little surprises. Coordinates."

Silence.

"I'm sorry about the Holo-Cine, I'll get you two more copies, I promise. Coordinates, please."

Silence. Just the hum of the MatterMovers(tm).

With great trepidation Geronimo presses the red reset button. All lights go dark.

Clickety, click, CLICK!

The computer reboots.

"Welcome," chokes the computer's sign-on greeting.

"How do buckaroo. How's the hammer hangin'? G'day mate. Naaa... what's up doc? Major malfunction at the junction!"

Bewildered, Geronimo tries the keypad, punches in:

```
      /coordinates/location  
      /coordinates/destination
```

The screen winks. A reply appears:

```
>19S/QB5D/8
```

Success! But the numbers make no sense. Why would the Matt want to go to the nineteenth sector, quadrant beta-five delta, eighth planet. Geronimo pounds the keypad again:

```
      /19s/qb5d, data request:
```

```
>NINETEENTH SECTOR  
>QUADRANT BETAFIFTH DELTA  
:last census 18.6 years ago  
:12 planets  
:3rd to 6th/assorted lower  
:lifeforms/carbon based  
:7th planet/defunct mining colony/  
:assorted lower lifeforms/  
:carbon based  
:8th planet/refuse hold/  
:no known lifeforms
```

"Eighth planet. Refuse hold with no competin' lifeforms. I smell money! I knew you were operatin' in our best interest, Matt."

Geronimo idly drums the computer console. Finally, a thought strikes him. "Okay, okay. Let's get this manual operation happenin'."

He enters a series of keystrokes and a joystick unhinges from below the console. Touching a control at the side of the stick he kicks in the Cyan HooterTooters(tm), the acceleration intensifying motors, and the ultra g-force jams him into the Magno Chair(tm).

The engines throb, propelling him toward the eighth planet, nineteenth sector, quad beta-five delta with an echoing, joyous word: "JUNK!"

* * *

The galactic hub glistens with the light of a billion suns. A small black blotch moves against the magnificent backdrop, rapidly growing larger as it approaches Desolate Harmony. Through the office view port, the Observer follows its progress. Eventually, the blotch takes form, revealing the outline of a Mark II Battle Accelerator HyperCraft(tm), the largest of the military warships.

The massive vessel begins its docking procedures, and the ice-blue glow of the AttiTooters(tm) casts an ominous tinge into the shadowed office.

Ding!

The Observer turns away from the window at the warning from the Holo-Plotter(tm). Its tiny indicator lights reveal a new development which may affect the course of the primary target: the *Gladknight V*. A secondary point of light indicates the advance, on an intersecting course, of an unknown craft. The Observer draws a deep breath, pondering the implications.

* * *

On the far side of the Eighth Planet, between the eleventh and twelfth solar satellites, the *New Gnu* advances. Geronimo has fallen asleep. Drool is slowly oozing from his mouth.

Bleeeet!

An alarm goes off. He jerks and his eyes snap open. The drool whips his face like an angry noodle. Wiping the spit away, he looks at the info-screen:

```
>PROXIMITY ALERT
:space craft detected
```

"Where?"

Silence.

"Fuck!"

Geronimo bats at the keyboard, zeroing in on the space craft. The sensing lasers sweep across the distant ship, scanning the bar code emblazoned on its hull.

```
>SPACE CRAFT IDENTIFIED
:arachide bellyclasscruiser(tm)
:registered: #90087 exp.56/41/93
:operator:   Intrstl Dtr Rclm Co
```

"Uh, oh. That's Slate's luxury Scow Cow. The bastard is out to nail me already. Sorry Matt, I hope this doesn't get too ugly for ya." He pats the dull, lifeless eye of the computer as the *New Gnu* approaches the Eighth Planet.

"Hey boss!"

Gladius's head rises from a hatch leading to the forward hold. "What now?"

"We're, um, not alone in this. Looks like another ship is speeding toward this planet, too."

"You've got to be kidding." Gladius pulls his musculature through the hatch.

"Like, that's what the scanner says," Snax announces with pride. "But I can't seem to get an ID lock on it."

"Well, if this whole mess is some pirate who thinks he can rip off a Company vessel, he better think again." Gladius hefts the large, metal case out of the forward hold.

Geronimo maneuvers the *New Gnu* into a lateral orbit around the Eighth Planet. Reefing on the joystick, he flexes his award-winning piloting skills and begins to careen toward the surface.

"This chump is preparing to land," Snax chuckles.

"How long until we begin our descent to the surface?" Gladius asks, sealing his blue and gold pressure suit.

Snax hunt-and-pecks at a few keys, digits appear across the screen before him. His eye widens at the sight of the incomprehensible equations. "In, um, about twenty minutes," he guesses.

"Great. Just great."

Gladius opens the metal case. A bright light shines from within, causing him to shield his eyes. As his pupils adjust, he focuses on the awesome power that is: the BIG GUN(tm). Reaching into the case, he pulls the weapon to his hip, then slings the strap over his shoulder.

"Planning on a little urban renewal?" Snax asks.
Gladius ignores him.

"Holy shiiiiittt!" Geronimo squeals, his award-winning piloting skills clearly evident as he loses complete control of the *New Gnu*.

Unaware of the fact that he is being guided safely to the surface by a Tow Hold(tm), he defeats the purpose by accelerating past the Tow's recommended velocity, caroming wildly within the narrow lock beam.

The atmosphere of the Eighth Planet begins to buffet the ship. Smoke spills from the aft hold. A warning klaxon sounds. Sweat pours down Geronimo's brow and the joystick jerks wildly in his hands. The view screen before him is alive with the flickering light of white hot plasma, the result of re-entry friction tearing at the ship's hull.

Snax watches the erratic descent of the other ship on his scope. Finally, the small blip stops moving, then disappears.

"He didn't make it." The alien is suddenly jostled in his seat by a lurch in the vessel.

"What now?!" roars Gladius.

"Uh, uh, Tow Hold."

The *Gladknight V* is getting tugged toward the planet's surface.

CHAPTER SIX

ENSNARED

"All systems are dead."

The bridge of the *New Gnu* is dark, quiet. Only the tiny indicator lamps of the autonomous support systems wink in the gloom. Slowly, groggily, Geronimo regains consciousness. Touching himself carefully, he is reassured that he did not die.

"Some ride, huh?"

The computer doesn't answer. All the screens are blank.

Geronimo pulls himself out of the Magno Chair(tm) and stumbles toward the airlock. Donning his helmet, he seals his suit, then yanks on the door's emergency release. The door blows open with a howl of wind as the ship's pressure equalizes.

The *Gladknight V* follows a similar path through the atmosphere, although with much less shaking and twisting. Within, Snax Mawhoooba toys with the joystick, letting the Tow Hold(tm) guide the ship to the planet's surface.

Gladius spies the loafing Snax. "Hey, suit up." He glares briefly then starts for the airlock to ready himself for battle.

A few short steps out of the ship Geronimo realizes that he is standing on a platform, descending. Cautiously, he turns on his headlamp, its small beam lost in the cavernous surroundings. He inspects the damage to the *New Gnu*. It is burnt, covered with dents and scrapes, and the front landing pod has punctured through the platform.

"Great. Wonderful. I'm happy." He leans his head against the battered ship. The clack of his helmet's synthetic composite on the hull resounds throughout the gaping elevator shaft.

His eye catches a glint of light along the cavern wall: a ladder. Geronimo sprints to edge of the platform. One meter away he sees the bottom of the ladder appear, rising as the platform sinks. Geronimo leaps, catching the last rung.

His fingers flay for purchase as the ship descends beneath him. Managing to pull himself up, he hangs from the ladder and watches the *New Gnu* come to a grinding halt far below. Floodlights click on, illuminating the charred

hull of the ship. A small, gravity repulsing Blast O'Bot(tm) appears, skimming half a meter above the deck. The robot enters the ship.

There is a flash of laser fire from within. The robot re-appears, a laser cannon, glowing red hot, extended from its mechanical arm. Geronimo swallows hard and, taking a deep breath, begins to climb.

"We're on some kind of, like, descending platform," Snax calls, now clad in a bulky pressure suit. "There must be a secret base below the planet's surface."

"You just figure that out?" Gladius calls from the airlock, pulling back the bolt on the BIG GUN(tm).

"Like, no need to get hostile."

"Scan the outside!"

Snax stares at the blank monitors, dumbfounded. "No can do. All systems are dead."

"So are we, if we aren't careful. Grab your Hand Cannon."

"Hey, I'm a non-violent kinda guy," Snax whines, sweat beads forming on his upper lip.

Gladius storms from the airlock onto the bridge, the BIG GUN(tm) aimed at Snax's head. "That's it you pod-toed--"

KACHUNK!

The platform bumps to a halt. Gladius cocks his head, wary. The silence is interrupted by the sound of a cutting torch igniting outside the airlock door.

"Do it!" He trains his weapon on the door.

Snax fumbles under the console for his helmet. With a quick glance at Gladius, he reaches up under the console and toggles a switch on the compact device he has placed there. Hearing the faint beep, he takes a breath and quickly begins to search in his bag for the Company issued weapon. Finding the hefty pistol, he brushes the dust off and shoves it in his utility belt.

With a howl of pressure equalization, a meter square hole appears in the airlock door. A small robot looms outside, framed in the hole. Before it can fire its laser, Gladius lets loose with the BIG GUN(tm). The door, the robot, and the outer casing of the airlock are vaporized by the glaring plume of plasma from the muzzle. Gladius leaps through the hole onto the platform, waving the BIG GUN(tm) around the cavern.

"Yoohoo. Is it, like, safe to come out?" whispers Snax.

"Get out here, weasel, or I'll call the Union and get

your permit revoked!"

Snax pokes his head through the hole. Gladius grabs him by the suit front and pulls him out onto the platform.

"Cover my ass."

Gladius detaches his Help Me(tm) standard issue survival support kit from his belt and withdraws the PP One Presence Probe(tm) detection pack. He sets the scan mode to detect biological/silicon based neural-transmissions and touches the preset wave balance to log in his and Snax's brainwaves.

Geronimo, now on a platform at the top of the ladder, peers into an access tunnel. Far down the tunnel a faint light illumines the intersection of a cross tunnel. With a last glance at the *New Gnu* on the platform far below, Geronimo ducks into the tunnel.

CLICK!

The Presence Probe(tm) alarm sounds, warning of an approaching, fluctuating neural-field. Gladius twirls, cocks the BIG GUN(tm), and scans the recesses for the intruder. Snax tugs at his weapon, which is hung up in his belt. Freeing it, he levels the piece and swivels it around the cavern.

Two Blast O'Bots(tm) fly into the chamber above them.

Gladius lets loose with two huge eruptions from the BIG GUN(tm). Snax recoils at the startling blast of activity, involuntarily firing a shot from his pistol.

Remnants of the two attacking bots rain down around them. Gladius dives for the cover of the *Gladknight's* landing gear, while Snax does the Watusi amidst the shower of molten sparks.

"Mawhooba!" Gladius shouts, eyes darting around the cavern. "Get over here!"

Three more Blast O'Bots(tm) enter, each from a different direction, and begin to converge on the dancing Snax.

"Snax!" Gladius lets rip and another bot explodes in a spray of searing shrapnel.

The blast snaps Snax to attention and he sees the two remaining bots bearing down on him. Frozen, he stands helpless, watching them train their weapons upon him.

"Snax!!"

Gladius tries to take aim, but Snax is standing directly in his line of fire. With a resounding snap the bots weapons cock for firing. Snax's eye stares straight ahead, glazed and unseeing. Gladius braces, sights trained

on Snax's back, waiting for the moment the bots become visible.

Suddenly, Snax topples over backward, out cold, just as the bot weapons unleash. Surprised, Gladius jams the trigger of the BIG GUN(tm), using the recoil to fling him out of the line of fire. The *Gladknight's* landing strut buckles with a direct hit and the ship creaks, settling into a new attitude.

The errant shot from the BIG GUN(tm) has winged one of the bots and it spins wildly, its guidance controls inoperative. The internal monitoring systems quickly assess its situation and, within seconds, it self-destructs in a blinding explosion.

Geronimo stands below the light at the end of the tunnel, where it intersects with another passage. Far down the cross-tunnel he can see the flicker of explosions. The rumbling concussions vibrate through the solid rock, causing a hollow feeling in his gut. His only choice is to scout the source of the noise and hope for the best.

Carelessly, he tromps down the long corridor, his Junior Hand Cannon(tm) at the ready. He fails to notice, hidden in a dim recess in the cave wall, a Blast O'Bot's(tm) red sensor come to life, detecting his presence.

Deep in the underground maze of tunnels sits a slight, blue-skinned figure with bright yellow hair. He watches a Holo-Vis Imager(tm) projection of Geronimo. The effete individual leans forward and touches a keypad, relating location information to his squadron of roving Blast O'Bots(tm). He is a hunter, thriving on predation.

WHUP! WHUP! WHUP!

An alarm blares. Startled from his intense concentration, the blue being rotates an ear toward the console speaker. An electronic voice issues the warning message: "Security alert. Long range transmission frequency intercepted and blocked. Source located at docking bay six. Instructions?"

"Nature of the transmission?" the creature queries, turning his attention away from Geronimo.

There is a pause, then the electronic voice crackles again: "Content unknown. Message encoded. Please wait".

There is another pause.

"Cross referencing of code and radio frequency files indicates an eighty-six point seven, seven, three percent probability of military involvement. Message decipherable

within ten point two hours. Instructions?"

A slender blue finger opens the intercom. "Petunia?"

"Yes, Fystik?" answers a no-nonsense voice.

"It seems one of the two ships that we just captured has tried to transmit a long range encoded message - on a military frequency."

"What was in the message?"

"The computer is attempting to decipher it as we communicate. Do you still want the humanoids eliminated?"

"Catch them alive."

"They're moments away from retrieval," Fystik replies, smiling.

Gladius holds his breath, pressing his form tightly into the confines of the *Gladknight's* landing gear well. The searching Blast O'Bot(tm) passes the opening directly beneath him. It pauses, rotates a few degrees counter-clockwise, as if listening, then slowly moves on. Gladius exhales, then carefully lowers the BIG GUN(tm) down through the landing gear hatchway. He braces himself, then leans down, hanging his head out through the opening. The bot hovers just outside the hatch, bobbing gently, tiny lights winking, the barrel of its gun mere centimeters from the nozzle of the BIG GUN(tm).

"Aaauuuggghh!"

Gladius screams, jerks his head back into the ship.

The bot unleashes a powerful stun pulse which whisks the BIG GUN(tm) from Slate's grasp, leaving his hands tingling and numb. He scrambles up into the well and jams at the maintenance hatch leading into the vessel. The bot appears in the opening below him, taking aim. The small door gives way and Gladius rolls out of sight into the ship.

The Blast O'Bot(tm) attempts to follow, but is too cumbersome to fit through the awkward, narrow spaces around the landing gear. It begins to cut away excess metal, making room for itself to squeeze through.

Inside, Gladius regains his composure as the eerie flickering of the cutting torch begins. Damn!

His eyes dart frantically for a weapon. He is in a service bay between the interior walls of the ship and the exterior hull. All the electrics, hydraulics, plumbing and ventilation lines for the ship are in front of him.

CLANNNGGGG!!

A large chunk of the ship's hull drops to the platform below. The bot edges further up into the well.

Gladius snaps his gaze from the sparks, now spitting

into the service bay, to the plumbing lines. His eyes trail down the bulkhead to a fire extinguisher. Dry chemical: for oil or electrical fires.

A large burst of sparks shower into the bay and another chunk of ship clangs to the floor.

Electrical fires. Water. Gladius leaps to the plumbing lines, yanking desperately. The connector releases and the flex hose begins to flagellate wildly under the pressure of the spouting water. Wrangling the hose, he thrusts it down into the landing gear well, soaking the electronic bot.

The sparks cease. A high-pitched whine fills the bay: the sound of a bot in distress, heading for self-destruction.

Gladius scrambles for cover.

ZZZKKSSSSKAPOWWWWW!!!

Hot bits of robot splatter against the ceiling of the service bay.

Geronimo suddenly senses a presence behind him. Turning, he confronts a Blast O'Bot(tm), floating millimeters from his faceplate.

"Aaauuggghh!!!"

Geronimo screams, firing the Junior Hand Cannon(tm) into the bot.

The close range of the blast knocks them both tumbling in opposite directions. The bot spins, wobbling down the tunnel, while Geronimo comes to rest on a floor grate. After a split-second hesitation, he begins to yank on the heavy grill. He manages to get the shaft below partially uncovered when he notices the Blast O'Bot(tm) training its sights on him. Shifting his weight on the cockeyed grate causes it to tilt like a swinging door.

"Whoa!" Geronimo drops into the opening just as the bot blasts the space where he had been.

Gladius grunts as he heaves the massive bulk of Snax over his shoulder and heads down one of the exiting tunnels.

THUNK! SCREEEK!

Gladius looks up, the grate of an air shaft above his head starts to buckle. He dives out of the way, dropping Snax. The grate, and an oft-patched spacesuit, crash onto the prone copilot.

Gladius rises, staring at the snarled heap on the floor. The mottled spacesuit is quickly disentangling itself from the limp appendages of Snax and the twisted

metal of the grating.

Gladius Slate groans as Geronimo Lavoriss clammers to his feet and dusts himself off. Geronimo spies the big man observing him.

"Oh, hey Gladman, funny meetin' you here, heh, heh."

"Lavoriss, what are you doing here?"

"I was just cruisin' by and thought I'd stop and check out the situation, ya know, being a garbage dump and all, and... and..." he notices Snax lying on the floor, "and who is this?"

"This happens to be Snax Mawhoooba, my copilot, but at the moment..." Embarrassed, Gladius is stuck for words.

"Luckily, *your* copilot broke *my* fall."

BOOM!

The floor next to Snax shudders from a bot blast.

"The Blast O'Bot, its followed me."

Geronimo reaches for one of Snax's arms. Gladius grabs the other and they pull the fledgling copilot out of the line of fire.

Geronimo helps Gladius heft Snax over his shoulder and the two men hustle down the tunnel. The Blast O'Bot(tm) appears behind them.

FWAP!

A Sani-Stun(tm) paralyzer beam engulfs Geronimo, Gladius, and the unconscious Snax. They halt abruptly, frozen in mid-stride.

CHAPTER SEVEN

FEEDBACK

"Our snitch has paid off."

"Salata, get in here!"

Captain Salata South senses the urgency in his commander's voice and follows the old man's wandering path into the Master Concert Control Room(tm).

"Display," orders Ragellon.

A computer generated holographic image of a solar system appears before the two military officers.

"Highlight the path of the transmission received on the Sub-Space Military Scrambler Channel."

The computer pauses, its internal workings performing the command. A green laser beam plots out the trajectory of the signal.

"Where's it coming from?" South asks.

"Eighth planet, sector nineteen. Our snitch has paid off." Ragellon points to the Eighth Planet, a minute speck on the map. "The transmission was jammed two point four seconds after it began, but from that we managed to triangulate the signal's origin."

"And I'll bet that's where the stolen Scow Cows have been taken," Salata surmises. "Enhance." The image of the planet is enlarged. "So, that's it," he says, studying the small dirt ball.

Ragellon is operating one step ahead. He fingers his Commucon Stay-Close(tm). "Have the Stellar Crak Reconnaissance Team put on red alert. Operation Maelstrom is moving to stage two. We leave as soon as Captain South and myself board the *Annihlator*."

Salata's eyes widen. "You're coming?"

"Hell yes! I want to be in on the take down. Let's get moving. These terrorist skuzz buckets are going to get a taste of what they've been dishing out."

"Exponentially." Salata is not completely filled with confidence.

* * *

"...so the *Annihlator*, under the command of Ragellon himself, is now en route to the Eighth Planet depot. I don't know what that does to your plans, but let me know what you want me to do."

The officer, in the dim twilight of the darkened

office, stands at-ease before the massive Thalopoplar veneer desk. The senior accomplice, the Observer, sinks back into the lush, Buffalo down-filled, leather chair. After a moment, neatly manicured fingers sweep briefly beneath the glow of the solitary desk lamp in a gesture of dismissal. As the officer turns to exit, sharp points of light glint from numerous military decorations. The Observer watches the office door slide shut.

Captain Brown strolls up the Landing Rampola(tm) that connects the *Expunger*, a Mark II Battle Accelerator HyperCraft(tm), to its docking station on Desolate Harmony.

A young ensign disembarking salutes him. "Captain Brown, Captain Helfogg is expecting you."

Brown nods to the crewman, boards the ship and heads for the elevator.

Captain Helena Helfogg stands before the large view port in her private quarters, staring at the expanse of Desolate Harmony. She rubs her hand through the short, blond bristles of hair at the nape of her neck. Her severe military cut is softened by her smooth oval face and warm smile, helping her to retain her femininity. The door chime sounds.

"Come in."

The cabin door slides open and she turns to greet the trim, silver-skinned form of the Chromapien, Captain Brown.

"Heratio, you're late," she says, turning back to the view port.

"Unavoidable, I'm afraid," he says, the door shutting behind him.

"Did you hear Ragellon has assigned South to take over Ozzie Beethoven's assignment?" Helfogg asks.

"Yes, I met with the Vice-Admiral and Colonel Itchtrong earlier this week." Brown reclines on the Blissfollian Fun Fur(tm) covered Gyro Sofamatic(tm). "Still no word on the whereabouts of Ozzie?"

"I don't think they'll find him." Helfogg turns to face Brown. "Do you think South can steer Ragellon clear of trouble?"

"Doubtful. An investigation of this complexity may not be the best cap on Ragellon's career. South will have his hands full."

Brown undoes the snaps of his uniform. Pulling his tunic open, he reveals the hardened muscles of his hairless, silver chest. Helfogg crosses the room to the Gyro Sofamatic(tm). Brown considers the outline of her

toned body through the white gown she wears, his breath quickening. Helfogg shrugs the gown from her shoulders, letting it fall to the floor. Naked, she descends onto the awaiting Brown.

"Ragellon can wait," she breathes gently.

Caressing her body with one hand, Brown reaches back with the other, shutting off the light.

* * *

Black. Everything is black. Suddenly, a blinding flash of light smacks Geronimo in the eye. Blue fingers have pried open his eyelid. A blue face is hovering over him.

"He's awake," announces Fystik.

The table, onto which Geronimo is strapped, tilts up, revealing the room.

"You flew here on the *New Gnu*?"

"Uh huh." Tiny beads of light dart and pop before Geronimo's eyes. As they adjust, he notes that the room is filled with a variety of torture devices, not unlike those fancied by the Dismemberons, of the planet Visceraton. Geronimo freezes in terror, realizing that the blue alien is a member of the Dismemberon race, renowned for their sacrificial torture practices.

"According to what we could decipher from your ship's log," croons the Dismemberon, "you are the sole proprietor of the space craft."

"How'd ya figure that? My on board computer is frapped." Geronimo glances down at his body, surprised to discover he is clad only in his gray Spiffy Sensor Suit Undergarment(tm).

"Ah, that little virus was of our own design. We have the cure, of course."

A female voice: "Who else knows that you stumbled into our trap?"

Geronimo twists his head around to find a petite, mousy woman in a loose-fitting white jumpsuit: Petunia Ren.

"Who are you?" asks Geronimo.

"I'm asking the questions."

"Aaauuggghhh!!!"

Geronimo's eyes bug at the ear piercing scream filtering in from somewhere outside the small room.

"That must be one of your accomplices," offers Fystik. "Our associate, Weenel Deluthe, is an expert in psycho-torture. He discovers a being's worst fear and then turns it to his own advantage. The screamer is being shown that

same fear repeatedly with the help of the Astral Mart Seven-Thousand Mind Sucker."

Petunia inches up to the bound Geronimo. She leans in, her face a hair's breadth from his. "How did you get past our Blast O'Bots?"

"Uh... uh..."

"Who sent you here? The military? The Space Commission? The Nectar Nine Police? Or are you just some stupid pack rat who got sucked into our trap?"

"Uh... uh..."

The door opens. Petunia whirls to face an enormous, pink humanoid, as wide as he is tall. He is dressed in a loincloth, like that of a Sumo wrestler. The beast is a wall of solid muscle.

"Did they talk?" Petunia asks.

"Naw, I trew dee Metamorphrodite into dee peet. Da udder won know sheet," slobbers Weenel Deluthe.

"Then we must make them talk."

"May I have the pleasure?" asks Fystik, his tone betraying his anticipation.

"Yes, but don't take too long with it." Petunia returns her attention to Geronimo. "You're more than a pack rat." She nods to Fystik, gestures to Geronimo, "Do this one first."

She ducks out and the door slides shut, leaving Geronimo alone with the two odd creatures.

"Oooooee! That stinks."

Naked once more, Snax Mawhoooba slowly rises from the bottom of a dark, smelly pit. His appendages have changed into spiky claws resembling crampons, and he struggles to hoist his bulk up the wall of the cesspit. Covered in the excrements of humans and aliens alike, he hauls himself out the top of the slick-rimmed hole.

"I gotta have a shower." With flesh twitching and appendages threshing, he staggers down the passageway toward a brightly lit cross-corridor.

Fystik opens a Quanaheeni-hide case and lovingly unsheathes a Tri-Prong Defacer(tm). Its diamond blades glint into Geronimo's eyes.

"Not attached to your face are you?"

The Dismemberon culture has evolved from roots deeply seated in deity appeasement. In their early prehistory, no anxiety was too small that a sacrificial offering couldn't be made. Over time, the act of the sacrifice gradually supplanted the reason for the sacrifice, giving the

Dismemberons a nasty reputation.

Fortunately, the advancement of the Dismemberon culture has taken the necessary turns to ensure survival amongst the unforgiving racial prejudices of an expanding galactic community. The sacrificial practices are now reduced to harmless reenactments and celebrations during civic holidays. Unfortunately, the instinctual factors which trigger the enjoyment of bloodsports, remain.

"Not for long," chuckles Fystik, a sound that is both pleasant and horrifying. He revs the Tri-Prong Defacer(tm).

Weenel lets out a hearty laugh, sniffing and snorting at Geronimo's terror. Fystik approaches, the diamond blades whirring, drawing near Geronimo's face. It thrills him to watch Geronimo sweat.

BEEP!

"What is it now?" Fystik whines, exasperated.

Weenel turns to a computer terminal mounted on the cell wall. "Veesitors. The Ambassadoor ees heere. Earlee again."

Fystik, who is poised over Geronimo, the Defacer centimeters from trisecting his face, climbs down from the restraint table. Geronimo decides he can start breathing again.

"What's Petunia doing?"

"Shee's on a Trans-Space Trunk Call to da beeeeg clientz," replies Weenel, reading the computer display. "I don' tink she'z gonna wanna bee deezturbed."

Fystik exhales sharply, returns the diamond blades to their Quaanaheni-hide case, then places the Defacer into a desk drawer.

"I'd better meet the Ambassador, then," he says, crossing to Weenel. "You finish this. But take your time with the big one, I'd like to entertain him before he becomes redundant."

Fystik slips out of the cell. Geronimo looks from the retreating Fystik to the massive form of Weenel Deluthe, who, with a rocking motion, rotates to face Geronimo. A crooked grin breaks across his monstrous face.

In her private quarters, Petunia Ren paces before her Holo-Vis Deep-Space Scrambler(tm). The picture fails to materialize, but voice manages to come through amidst the crackling of cosmic interference.

"...it's important to warn yo...fwestttzzz...inks your end of the operatiffwwwzzzzottt...eopardy due to a...crizzzklllee...areful of new arrivals...fwzzzappp...

trust no one...sszzikt...report as soon as...ssccikkle..."

The message continues to crackle. Petunia recalls the encoded transmission that Fystik intercepted. This confirms it: one of the prisoners is a spy, but working for whom? And if her contact knows about it, just how deep is the infiltration? One thing is certain, if spies have made it this far, then there isn't much time to waste.

Snax wipes his pod across the door latch. The door slides open, admitting the distraught alien into a large locker room with shower stalls.

"Finally, a place to clean up. Whew, do I ever stink. No job is worth this." He steps into one of the cubicles. A long pull-chain hangs down from the shower head. Snax yanks the chain. The floor gives way.

Weenel Deluthe selects a dirty pair of Reticulated Ocular-Cocktail Eye Extracting Tongs(tm) from a tray next to Geronimo. He clacks the tongs and studies Geronimo's frozen face. Stepping toward the restraining table, he emits a small, wicked chuckle.

The trap door in the ceiling bursts open. A blob-like figure smashes onto the unprepared Weenel Deluthe, driving him to the floor. Weenel's head cracks against the heavy base of the table, knocking him out cold.

"Snax!" squeals Geronimo. "Get me the fuck outta this!"

"Like, who are you?" asks Snax, pulling himself up.

"I'm Geronimo. Gladius's former copilot."

Snax begins to unstrap him. "Where's the boss?"

"I don't know. We'd better find him and get outta here. We've stumbled onto somethin' we don't wanna be a part of." Geronimo wrinkles his nose as he climbs from the torture table. "What's that smell?"

"I don't smell anything." Snax's upper appendages have changed into squeegees and he is methodically scraping goo from his body.

Geronimo quickly steps to the desk and begins to rifle through it. He plucks up the Quanaheeni-hide case, rips it open, and the Tri-Prong Defacer(tm) tumbles to the desktop.

"This'll come in handy. Let's go, we may have to kick some butt before we get outta here." Geronimo races out of the room with Snax lumbering after him.

"Ambassador," Fystik says, bowing low, "it is a pleasure to see you again."

An ornately dressed human in a green satin tunic, plumed hat, and flowing red cape struts down the gangplank of a StellarHawk Galactic Cruiser(tm). A Zipper(tm) pistol hangs from his hip, partially hidden by his distended belly.

"Where's Petunia?" drawls the Ambassador.

"She is currently otherwise engaged, but I assure you, she will present herself to you shortly," lies the blue alien.

"I need my new vessel for a raid I have planned next week," explains the Ambassador, pulling the hat from his head. "The pesky peasants on Alfalfadoria Sixteen are havin' a little trouble with their taxes, don'tcha know."

A small, hovering robot follows the Ambassador to the platform floor.

"I cain't really get rid of 'em without attractin' a lot of unnecessary attention. So I thought I'd arrange fer a little pirate plunder to teach the pukes a lesson."

"How clever," compliments Fystik. "Let us go to the Enhancement Chamber to see if the necessary overhaul has been completed. This way."

Fystik leads the Ambassador and his robot to a small Whizzer(tm) hover sled. Boarding the sled, they whiz down a tunnel leading to the Enhancement Chamber.

Geronimo pauses at a large metal door. Snax, writhing beneath the coating of excrement, catches up to him. A sign above the door reads:

ASTRAL MART 7000 MIND SUCKER(tm)
ENTER AT YOUR OWN RISK

"I should leave old Happybutt in there," Geronimo mutters.

"Yeah," Snax agrees.

"But I can't."

"Oh."

Geronimo recalls Fystik's explanation of what was taking place in this room and the blood curdling scream he had heard. He steels himself against the unknown horror contained within, then punches the door release.

The large metal door hisses, shudders, then slides open. Geronimo steps in, his eyes shut. "Gladius, are you in here?"

"AAAUUUGGGHHH!!!"

Geronimo opens his eyes. The room is filled with holo-projections of Gladius's worst fear: A hundred permittees, all clones of Snax Mawhooba, running around

trying to tell Gladius what to do. Geronimo catches sight of Slate, also in his Spiffy Sensor Suit Undergarment(tm), stuck to a Magno Restraining Chair(tm), his eyes sucked open by an attachment. He is being forced to live a nightmare.

"AAAUUUGGGHHH!!!"

Taking a deep breath, Geronimo pushes through the projections to where his ex-boss is trapped. With a quick slash of the Tri-Prong Defacer(tm), Geronimo carves through the back of the chair, boring deep into its electronics. A spray of sparks and blue fire flash in his face. He strikes again with the three diamond blades, ripping the components of the seat to pieces.

Gladius slumps forward, falling to the floor, quickly shutting his eyes. Geronimo tries to heft the musclebound mound onto his meager shoulders, but drops him. He decides it would be better to drag him out of the room.

"Snax! Give me a hand, will ya!"

"I can't," whines Snax, "I can't do anything until I've had a shower."

Geronimo shakes his head and begins to reef on Gladius's prone bulk. Once outside, Geronimo taps the door release, closing the door and blocking the sights and sounds of the permittee mayhem. Slowly, Gladius opens his eyes.

"He's alive, huh?" queries Snax.

Gladius looks up, focusing on his copilot. His eyes fill with a mixture of rage and fear, blood rises to his face and he leaps at Snax. But the moment his hands encircle the alien's neck, he jerks them away.

"Jeez! Wha... what have you been into?" he stammers.

"Shit, okay? I've been in shit!"

"Son of a bitch!" Gladius teeters and stumbles back against the wall.

"Let's go, we gotta get outta here!" urges Geronimo.

Gladius turns to him, confusion awash on his face. He looks at his soiled hands, then around the corridor, uncertain of his whereabouts. "Yeah, let's go home," he mumbles, and slumps down the wall.

"Let's move," Geronimo says, tossing a concerned glance to Snax, "that big mother's probably awake by now."

Snax nervously glances over his shoulder. Geronimo prods the reluctant Gladius to his feet and the group heads down the corridor, away from the torture rooms.

CHAPTER EIGHT

CONVERGENCE

"Is it playtime?"

Hyperspace. Flying faster than the speed of light. The *Annihilator*, a Mark II Battle Accelerator HyperCraft(tm), races toward the nineteenth sector, quadrant beta five delta, eighth planet with a compliment of three-hundred and twenty-one regular operating personnel, and an additional twenty members of the Stellar Crak Reconnaissance Team.

The huge Battle Accelerator class military vessels can function with a minimum crew of one-hundred and ninety-eight, but in wartime have the capacity to carry upwards of five-thousand personnel. The three-hundred and some currently on board represent standard operating requirements.

In his cabin, Captain Salata South prepares his field gear for combat. Vice-Admiral Joshua Ragellon pokes his head into the Captain's quarters.

"We're set to come out of hyperspace just shy of short scanner range. I can't wait to get my hands on 'em." He flares his nostrils and inhales deeply. "Man, this is invigorating."

Salata eyes him warily. "Any word of activity on the planet?" He pulls his Intensifier Musket(tm) from its custom, genuine Pulmerona cat-leather, case.

"We're attempting to track that now. There is no indication they've detected our approach."

Salata jerks out the auto-loader of the Intensifier and lets it slide back into place. "Any contact with the snitch?"

"None."

"Probably dead."

* * *

The Enhancement Chamber looms before Fystik and the Ambassador. It is a magnificent sight: several huge space-going vessels are moored at various workstations around the gigantic hangar. Fystik carefully guides the Whizzer(tm) between dozens of robotic work stations performing modifications to the wide variety of stolen space craft.

"What's that beauty?" the Ambassador asks, pointing to

a sleek, black spacecraft.

"That's an Ebony Skulker, Series FX-Twenty," remarks Fystik casually, knowing it is way out of the Ambassador's league. "We picked that up a few weeks ago, but it's already been sold to one of our biggest clients."

"Pity."

They whiz on, moving further into the Enhancement Chamber.

The naked, reeking Snax and the underwear clad pair make their way down a long corridor. Gladius is somewhat revived and Geronimo makes conversation, choosing his words carefully.

"...so, silly me, I copied that derelict's log into my on board computer before you showed up. And then, when you kicked me off the ship, I'm cruisin' along, mindin' my own business, when suddenly my Byte O'Matic goes caphloolie. My guess is these bastards booby-trapped the derelict ship's log and hijacked me here."

"Same thing happened to us," Gladius replies. "It put a jinx on our nav-computer and rerouted us here. And then we got hit by that Tow Hold."

"Tow Hold?" Geronimo snaps a look to Gladius.

They stop short at a large sign.

ENHANCEMENT CHAMBER AND STORAGE
HANGAR -- THIS WAY

A flashing neon arrow, extending and retracting, points to a large access tunnel.

"There's probably a ship we can steal down there," suggests Geronimo.

"Borrow," corrects Gladius, offering him a sideways glance.

"You haven't changed, have you."

The three beings cautiously advance down the tunnel, stopping at a set of swinging doors. Geronimo edges up and peeks through the window.

"Holy shit!" He is stunned by the sight of the gigantic room filled with space ships, robotics and armaments. "This is junk heaven." He leans on the door and races into the room.

"Geronimo, wait," Gladius hisses.

"He's gonna get us kill--"

"Shut up, Snax!" Sighing, Gladius follows his ex-copilot into the Enhancement Chamber.

Fystik carefully guides the Whizzer(tm) toward a newly

outfitted Arachide Belly Cruiser Detritus Reclamation Unit(tm). "That looks like your shi--"

Fystik slams on the brakes, jerking the Ambassador to the floor of the hover scooter. Geronimo is walking down the gangplank of the ship.

Pulling himself into his seat, the Ambassador spies Geronimo. "I didn't know you had any human mechanics."

"We don't." Fystik's pale purple eyes change to a viciously violent violet as they lock onto the Tri-Prong Defacer(tm) held loosely in Geronimo's hand. "That sacrilegious piece of cattle. I will kill him."

The Dismemberon steps out of the Whizzer(tm). Following Fystik, the Ambassador draws his Zipper(tm) and climbs from the vehicle. The Ambassador's bodyguard robot, sensing the change in mood, arms itself, ready to protect its master. The three of them duck behind a rotund recycling receptacle.

"Geronimo," Gladius shouts, over the din of machinery at work.

Geronimo stops halfway down the ramp, spies Gladius coming up from behind the ship. He doesn't notice Fystik and the Ambassador approaching from the other side.

"Luxury Scow Cow, Happybutt. Better'n yours!"

"Yeah, I can see two more IDR Company vessels over there," Gladius replies, pointing across the hangar. "This must be where the hijacked vessels are brought."

Suddenly, at the edge of his vision, Geronimo catches sight of movement.

ZIP!!!

Geronimo is hit. He lurches sideways, plummeting from the ramp, the Tri-Prong Defacer(tm) falling with him.

Gladius watches Geronimo's body fall into the grease pit beneath the ship. He motions for Snax to stop.

"What's goin' on?"

"Shut it!" Gladius backs away from the ramp. Crouching, he sees the two sets of feet approach.

"I got 'im," beams the Ambassador, looking down into the pit. There is no sign of Geronimo other than a few drops of blood.

In a frenzy, the Dismemberon searches for the Tri-Prong Defacer(tm). He activates the Commucon Stay-Close(tm) communicator on his belt, speaks calmly and evenly: "Weenel... Weenel... "

Gladius pushes Snax along a narrow walkway next to a

Flypan Space Ram(tm). "Keep going. I'll circle around and see if Geronimo is okay."

Snax scratches himself, his singular eye darting around its socket. Sweat has begun to pour down his thick neck. "Leave him, Gladius, let's get ourselves out of here."

Gladius fixes his new copilot with an icy stare.

BLWAPP!

A blast from the Ambassador's guardian bot nails Snax's protruding posterior. An electro-ray envelops him, searing off the coating of alien excrement. His body jerks wildly, his limbs rapidly changing, barely pausing between bizarre transmutations. Indeed, some of them Snax hasn't even seen before. He yelps, then slinks off into the tangle of enhancement equipment, leaving Gladius alone with the robot.

Gladius watches the bot as it takes aim at his chest. The rush of adrenalin has restored Gladius to his former, quick-reflexed self. Whatever emotional damage the psycho-torture has caused seems, for the time being, to have disappeared. The bot locks onto its target. Gladius's muscles twitch, tensing like a coiled spring.

"Do it, you metal piece of--"

The bot fires. Gladius leaps. The ray strikes a direct hit on the Flypan Space Ram(tm) and energy snakes over its surface.

Gladius does a zig-zag and dives onto the floating robot's back, his legs wrapped around it's belly, one arm applying a choke hold. The bot begins to spin, frantically trying to dismiss its unwanted passenger. Slate clings on desperately. Prying at a groove along its side, he rips open the control panel.

"Sounds like my guardian has 'em cornered," calls the Ambassador triumphantly.

Hearing the sounds of bot distress on the other side, Fystik cautiously approaches the front of the Space Ram(tm). He rounds the nose of the small ship, the Ambassador right behind him, and sees Gladius ripping at the guts of the whirling bot.

The bot begins to smoke. Gladius releases his grip and is flung across the aisle, crashing into a workstation. He immediately crawls behind some stubby equipment. Fystik withdraws behind the nose of the ram, also knowing what is about to happen.

The Ambassador rushes forward, approaching the runaway robot.

"What's happened to my guardia--"

KABLAMMM!!!

It explodes in a spray of shrapnel. The Ambassador is blown backward by the blast, landing ten meters across the chamber.

Gladius peers out from behind the equipment. Across the aisle, Fystik does the same. Their eyes lock. Gladius tenses, then rises up from behind the barricade, his well-defined muscles apparent beneath his Spiffy Sensor Suit Undergarment(tm). The slender, unarmed Fystik, no match for the tough human being, quickly ducks out of sight.

Seeing the Dismemberon retreat, Gladius turns his attention to the unmoving Ambassador. He breaks from his cover, trots to the lifeless form and rolls the body over. Blood foams from the dandy's mouth. A large piece of bot is wedged inside the Ambassador's rib cage.

Hearing the Whizzer(tm) start up, Gladius wrenches the Zipper(tm) from the Ambassador's death grip. The Whizzer's(tm) engine increases in pitch, growing rapidly louder. Gladius turns. Fystik and the hover cart barrel toward him.

ZIP!

Gladius fires, hitting the Whizzer's(tm) right stabilizer. Fystik madly tries to regain control of the vehicle. It begins to yaw. Gladius dodges to one side. The Whizzer(tm) veers over his head, plunging directly for the Space Ram(tm).

KABANG!!!

The Whizzer(tm) slams into the Ram, careens out into the aisle, and rips apart into a twirling tangle of torn metal. A limp Fystik flies clear and tumbles into a heap, disappearing beneath some machinery.

Gladius climbs to his feet, staring for a long moment at the smoking ruins of the Whizzer(tm). He shudders, shaking off the wave of muddled thoughts that have engulfed him. "Geronimo," he calls, "if you're okay, you can come out now."

WHHUUUMMPP!

Gladius falls, face first, to the floor, the Zipper(tm) skittering away. He rolls over to confront a square-bodied mound of pink muscle: Weenel Deluthe.

"Git up you peece of sheeet. I'se gonna reeep you'se fuckink head off, heh heh heh."

Weenel Deluthe is a genetically manufactured, psychologically reared, specimen of the short-lived BioCenturian(tm) Project. The initial intention of the project was to create a biological super-musculature for

doing guard duty in prison colonies and other difficult work in dangerous situations. As it turned out, faulty genetics over-produced the muscle tissue of the first trial specimens. They needed intense psychological training just to maintain their muscle tone, let alone function in everyday society. Later versions, of which Weenel is one, still received the genetic instructions for over-blown muscles, but the psychological training began at birth.

For many of these experimental beings, the knowledge of what they were proved to be too much for them to handle. The stringent psycho-rearing of their childhood was such that when they began to move into and learn about the real world, they gave up. Most turned into junk food eating blobs, too large to move -- even to use the toilet. They lived, coated in their own filth, on government assistance programs. Most died at a young age.

Of the few who survive, they have done so by becoming complete egomaniacs. They lived like monks, for years at a stretch, until their mental powers equaled that of their physical ones. And now, one of these egomaniacs, Weenel Deluthe, is advancing on the fallen Gladius Slate.

Gladius begins to crab-walk backward, toward the Zipper(tm). Weenel's massive hand darts out, grabs him by the Spiffy Sensor Suit Undergarment(tm) front, and jerks him into the air, feet dangling above the ground. Startled, Gladius tries to block the anticipated roundhouse punch, but, being unsuccessful, is sent crashing into a spider-like, multi-armed robot carrying a replacement Magno Chair(tm). The chair, the robot, and Gladius crash to the floor.

"How you'se like dat, sheeet for brainz, heh heh?"

Weenel lumbers toward the pile of robot and human parts, wiping drool from his chin with the back of his hand. Scrambling, Gladius grabs an arm broken from the robot.

"You'se gonna weesh you was ded, sheeet for brainz, heh heh," Weenel chortles, reaching for Gladius.

Gladius swings the robot arm, catching Weenel full in the face. The pink bulk staggers, warm red blood running from his upper lip.

Gladius lashes out at Weenel again, but the beast recovers and the blow smacks into the palm of his upturned hand. Weenel's digits close around the robot arm and yank it from Gladius's grasp. He drops the arm, grabs Gladius by the shoulders, and leans in, their faces millimeters apart.

"You cut mee good, sheet for brainz," says Weenel,

spitting blood into Gladius's face, "but now I'm gonna reep you'se wide open, heh heh."

He begins to squeeze. Squirming, Gladius pulls his feet up into the alien's chest and pushes. Weenel's grip gives way to the slipperiness of the Spiffy Sensor Suit Undergarment(tm) fabric, and the pair tumble in opposite directions. Gladius quickly rises, darting away from his opponent.

"Where da fawk you'se goink?"

Glancing back, Gladius sees Weenel launch the fallen Magno Chair(tm) as if it were a football. It arcs across the room toward him. He leaps at a piece of hardware being hoisted by a passing crane. The Magno Chair(tm) clatters to the floor, narrowly missing him.

Weenel grunts, stopping at the sight of Gladius rising on the crane. Gladius maneuvers onto the top of the crane's load, a military issue Triple-Barrel Blunderbuss Cannon(tm). He undoes the safety chain with one hand, then reaches for the crane's hook release with the other. Looking down from the swinging load, he sees Weenel advance.

"Git down from dere, sheet for brainz," orders Weenel, now standing directly below the Triple-Barrel Blunderbuss Cannon(tm).

Gladius yanks the hook release. The armament drops, obliterating Weenel from Gladius's view. There is a meaty slap as the Triple-Barrel Blunderbuss's descent comes to an abrupt halt. It teeters back and forth.

"You wanna play catch? Here. Catch, heh heh."

"Crap!" Gladius curses, dangling from the safety chain.

The Blunderbuss Cannon hurtles upward and Gladius swings out in an attempt to avoid the projectile. The Cannon hits the crane's hoist block, dislodging it and snapping the safety chain. Terrified, Gladius flies helplessly toward a silent Scow Cow far below.

SMACK!

Gladius slaps onto the Scow Cow's engine cowling. He searches for a handhold, finds none, and slides down the smooth surface, landing hard on the floor. Grimacing at the thud of Weenel's advancing footsteps, he struggles to pull his battered body up, turns to face him.

"You'se had eet now, sheet for brainz."

Grabbing Gladius by the shoulders, Weenel pounds him into the hull of the ship, causing a dent to form. He then begins to squeeze, again.

"You... miserable... piece... of... " Gladius gasps,

his shoulders feeling like they're about to be reduced to sand.

"Aaaaaahhhhh! I'se like you'se too."

FFFWWWSSSHHHH!!!

The meat bag's smile disappears. Three diamond points poke through the muscle of Weenel's massive chest, narrowly missing Gladius's face. Blood begins to pour from the pink body. The alien totters backward, relaxing his grip on his captive. Gladius crumples to the floor. Weenel turns, revealing a deeply burrowed hole in his back. Barely visible within the hole is the handle of the Tri-Prong Defacer(tm).

Weenel, whose musculature is maintained through his acute mental concentration and stamina, begins to quiver. The huge ripples of muscle begin to release their tension, slowly at first, individual mounds deflating randomly, then gradually picking up speed. His flesh begins to crawl as if his body were a sack of rodents anxious to escape. His transformation has become audible, creating a moist, rippling noise.

Suddenly, his remaining strength lets go and his flesh slaps to the floor like a water balloon, his skeletal frame momentarily poking skyward, until the elastic recoil heaves his jellied mass up around it. The blob leaps off the floor, distorting like a huge, liquid-filled bag. The force of the event causes a snapping echo that resounds throughout the Enhancement Chamber. Gladius cowers against the Scow Cow, covering his ears. As the sound subsides, he looks toward Weenel.

Across the fallen body stands Geronimo Lavoriss, one hand clutching his wounded, bleeding shoulder. "You've looked better, Gladman."

"Yeah, sure," returns Gladius, flexing his own shoulders, somewhat dazed.

Geronimo examines Weenel's lifeless blob, waves still criss-crossing through the pancaked bag of gel. He gingerly peels back the edges of the freshly bored hole, now just a tear in the flaccid skin, and yanks out the Tri-Prong Defacer(tm). "I think this'll be real useful." Geronimo wipes the gore on the bluing flesh, sending more ripples through the ex-Weenel. "Speaking of useful, where's your permittee?"

Gladius can only glance weakly around the chamber.

BLING!!!

>WARNING! WARNING!
>APPROACH OF MILITARY
>SPACECRAFT DETECTED

Petunia reads her computer screen's threatening message. She pulls open a drawer in her desk and empties the contents into a small handbag, then activates her Commucon Stay-Close(tm). "Mr. Munitions, have my Stencheron Stellar Glider readied on platform six for immediate take off. Make sure it's fully armed."

"Gladly, my dear," returns the fatherly voice of Mr. Munitions(tm). "Is it playtime?"

"Not yet, set the three completed Scow Cows in holding bay four on an autopilot that will follow in the Tow Hold of my ship."

"That won't take but a minute. Anything else?"

"Meet me on board the Glider after you've finished. Company's coming and we won't be popular." Petunia clicks off and tucks the communicator into her pocket. She darts a look to the monitor:

>WARNING! WARNING!
>MILITARY SPACECRAFT HAS
>DECELERATED INTO NORMALSPACE

"Compu-Stud," says Petunia to the computer terminal, "I want all credits immediately transferred to my ship's computer."

"Working... done," reports the station mainframe.

"Now, have a team of bots transfer the contents of my personal vault to the Stencheron Stellar Glider."

"Awaiting authorization key."

Petunia rummages in her handbag, produces an oddly-shaped key. Opening a hidden panel on the terminal, she inserts the key.

"Working... verified: Petunia Prudence Ren of Distentia XII. Transfer has begun."

Petunia plucks the key from the panel and slips it back into her bag. She crosses to the door, stops at a small closet and removes a holster and a metal case.

"Compu-Stud."

"Yes."

"Still no sign of Weenel or Fystik?"

"Working... Weenel is in the Enhancement Chamber. Deceased."

"And Fystik?" Petunia asks, still hopeful her cohort is alive.

"Unknown."

She sighs heavily, then continues with renewed resolve. "After my last orders have been completed I want you to put all Blast O'Bots on Maximum Supreme Alert. Kill any intruders. I repeat, kill any intruders."

"Understood," returns the cold voice of the Compu-Stud(tm).

On the hangar deck of the *Annihilator*, Salata South follows his Stellar Crak Reconnaissance Team into the Vi-Scout(tm), a small, troop carrying ship. Nodding to his wincing soldiers, South strides through the personnel hold into the cockpit and takes his place in the Magno Command Chair(tm).

"Close it up, we're planet fall in two minutes."

There is an immediate frenzy of activity. Corporal Denizen Brecht, the Vi-Scout's(tm) pilot, presses a large metal pad. There is a hum as the Magno Chairs(tm) and Benches(tm) activate. She turns to the Captain, tries not to wince. "Beginning launch sequence now."

South nods his approval.

"Salata," comes Ragellon's voice over the intercom.

"Here."

"Your flight plan's loaded. So far, all appears quiet on the planet."

"Anything on the sensors?" asks Salata over the whine of the Vi-Scout's(tm) revving engines.

"A lot of robotics, but only five life signs."

"Any defense posture?"

"Nothing."

"Are we still to assume battle stance?"

"To the extreme."

South smashes a fully-charged clip into his Intensifier Musket(tm). The Vi-Scout's(tm) Mini-HootToot(tm) thrusters engage, propelling the small craft from the belly of the *Annihilator*.

Now on board the Stencheron Stellar Glider(tm), Petunia Ren runs through a rapid pre-flight check. Satisfied, she activates a small device next to the piloting console. The words 'JamBon Signo-Blocker(tm) ENGAGED' light up bright red across the main control panel operations screen.

"Everything is ready, Miss Petunia," comes the jocular voice of Mr. Munitions(tm).

Petunia turns to watch the well-armed, mechanical monster crawl into the spacecraft on his dual treads. The robot's body is a cube, approximately two and a half meters

per side, slightly taller and beveled along the front plane. There is a block-like, smiling turret for a head, and every surface contains numerous ports and cabinets: each with a new and exciting piece of weaponry lurking within.

"Can I shoot something, Miss Petunia?" chortles Mr. Munitions(tm).

"Wait until there's something to shoot. Close the hatch and strap yourself down."

The Stencheron Stellar Glider's(tm) engines whine as she moves the ship into launch position. With a glance to the smiling Mr. Munitions(tm), Petunia punches the 'ACTIVATE' button on the JamBon Signo-Blocker(tm).

"We've lost all instrumentation," calls Denizen to Salata.

The Captain scans the cockpit instruments. All the screens display video snow. His grip tightens on the Intensifier Musket(tm).

The bridge of the *Annihilator* has also fallen into disarray. All its screens display white hash. Technicians scramble, trying to discern the unknown cause of signal loss.

"The bastards are jamming us," whispers Ragellon.

"Launch!" snaps Petunia.

The Stencheron Stellar Glider(tm) vaults into space, the three Scow Cows following. With the help of the JamBon Signo-Blocker(tm), she slinks around the small planet, away from the approaching military vessels, and escapes undetected.

On board the Vi-Scout(tm) the snow gives up, returning the instruments to crystalline images and data readouts.

"All systems have returned," states Denizen, the control stick jostling in her hand. "We're on our final approach."

"How do I look?" asks Geronimo, whipping the dead Ambassador's red cape around his shoulders.

"It's especially wonderful with the underwear," remarks Gladius dryly as he scoops up the fallen Zipper(tm).

Geronimo is admiring his reflection in the glossy blackness of a sleek stealth vehicle, the Ebony Skulker Series FX20, investigating the folds of the cape. "You

could conceal a Hand Cannon in here real easy."

Gladius is already heading for the exit. "Let's find Snax and get out of here."

With one last look at his new attire, Geronimo trots after his ex-boss.

"The area is pressurized... seventy-eight point one, one, two percent nitrogen, nineteen point zero, six, one percent oxygen, one point eight, eight percent carbon dioxide, point nine, four, seven percent various trace elements, none toxic," calls Lieutenant Cleanerschmidt, Salata's second in command and navigator. "We'll have air to breathe."

"Good." Salata flips a switch opening the Inform-U-Amp(tm) microphone to the troops. "Okay people, we disembark in one minute. I hope you enjoyed your flight on the Revenge Express, and remember: The only good bad guy resembles Swiss cheese."

The Vi-Scout(tm) slows its descent to hover over a landing platform. Corporal Denizen carefully sets the ship down. With a lurch the platform activates and the Vi-Scout(tm) begins its descent.

CHAPTER NINE

MAYHEM

"If I didn't have a conscience..."

In the blasted hulk that was once the proud *Gladknight V*, Gladius and Geronimo search for signs of Snax.

"Doesn't look like he was back here, Happybutt," Geronimo says. He is poking into Snax's things, still stowed under the console, when the foreign device winking beneath the panel catches his eye. "What's this?"

Geronimo points out the transmitter to Gladius.

"It's military." Gladius removes the device from the console, examines it, then heaves it at the wall, smashing it to pieces.

"What's a Union toadie copilot doin' with military hardware?"

"Permittees don't have military hardware." Gladius sinks into the Magno Chair(tm) and rests his chin on his fist, staring forward in silence.

Geronimo studies Gladius, searching for a clue to the meaning of this odd development. "Do you think Snax has--"

"Shut up!" Gladius glares at Geronimo.

Geronimo shrugs. "I'm just tryin' to figure--"

WHAM!

Geronimo is knocked to the floor by a diving Gladius, the big man's hand covering his mouth. The hum of roving Blast O'Bots(tm) fills the area.

Gladius peeks through the blown out door then quickly pulls back. A pair of robots fly by.

"Shit," Geronimo whispers, "all we got is this handy face ripper and a stupid little Zipper."

The bots disappear down a tunnel.

BWWAMMMM!!! zzzAAAPPPP!!! FRRRAAPPP!!!

"Sounds like a firefight," Gladius says, moving to the doorway, the Zipper(tm) at the ready. "I want to see if they've cornered that traitor Mawhooba."

"I'm not goin' out there."

Gladius shakes his head. "You may be freelance, Lavoriss, but you're still a weasel." He slips out the burnt hatchway.

"Hey," insists Geronimo, rising to his feet, "I am not a weasel." He sneaks a cautious look outside. Gladius is moving in the direction of the bots, toward the sound of the firefight. Never been known to cut and run. With a

grimace, Geronimo follows his ex-boss.

BWWWAAAAPPPPPP!!!!

One of the bots explodes from a direct hit by an Intensifier Musket(tm). Four more Blast O'Bots(tm) hover and dart amongst the nooks and crannies of the surrounding cave. Beneath them, three Stellar Crak Reconnaissance Team troopers lie dead. Eight more hide in and around the Vi-Scout(tm).

Captain Salata South turns to Lieutenant Cleanerschmidt, gesturing to himself and then to a tunnel leading out of the cavern. The Lieutenant winces, nods, and aims his Intensifier at a hovering bot. He fires. The bot darts away, disappearing into the shadows.

Salata bolts from the protection of the Vi-Scout's(tm) landing gear and sprints toward the tunnel. A Blast O'Bot(tm) appears before him, stopping him in his tracks. The bot's laser cannon lines up on his chest.

ZZZIIIPPP!!

The bot suddenly spins out of control, banging into the rock wall. Salata takes cover behind some duct work, draws a bead on the bot and fires. It expires from the direct hit. Then, peering into the gloom to determine who fired the shot that winged the bot, Salata glimpses a human form ducking back down the tunnel. Cocking the Intensifier Musket(tm), he hustles down the access way.

South steps from the tunnel's gloom into the next docking area to see the disheveled *Gladknight V* with its IDR Company and Union logos emblazoned on the side.

"A Scow Cow," he says, softly.

"You got that right, Buddy."

Salata jerks his head to the voice and comes muzzle to muzzle with the muzzle of a Zipper(tm).

"Well, if it isn't Lieutenant South," Gladius remarks, wincing at the sight of South's disfigurement.

"Captain," corrects Salata...

...It was eighteen years ago when they first met. Sergeant Gladius Slate and his six men were buttoned down on the edge of a bog by guerrilla sniper fire. A scar-less Lieutenant Salata South had radioed an order that Slate advance to a new position, deeper into the swamp. Slate's refusal to move in the face of enemy fire had sent South into a tirade, and now he was storming out to Gladius's position to take charge.

He arrives at the scene, gingerly tiptoeing around the

pits of muck and mire. Gladius, noticing the freshly pressed creases in the officer's clean uniform, rolls his eyes.

South crouches amongst the men, faces Gladius. "This is insubordination, Sergeant! When I give an order I expect it to be followed... immediately!"

Gladius blinks twice, slowly.

"You will be disciplined," South continues, "don't kid yourself."

The two soldiers glare at each other. Gladius's men toss nervous glances amongst themselves.

"I say we pull back, sir," remarks Gladius.

The fury flares in South's eyes. "Your career in the forces is over, Sergeant! Let's move out!" He starts to scramble up the low embankment, toward the enemy.

Slate grabs the Lieutenant by his belt and yanks him down, sending his clean uniform into the mud.

A startled South snaps a fierce gaze at Slate. "Court martial!" he screams, his face bright scarlet.

"If I didn't have a conscience," Gladius replies calmly, "I'd let you go over that knoll." With that, he plucks South's cap from his head and points toward the bank. He tosses the cap into the air, where it hangs briefly, twirling...

BOOM!

A bot explodes in a splash of sparks. The area is now clear of the mechanical threat.

Cleanerschmidt rapidly reloads his musket. "Come on," he orders, waving to the Reconnaissance Team.

Cautiously, in pairs, the team moves down the tunnel, stopping at the entrance to the next landing bay. Seeing nothing but the *Gladknight V* they advance, fanning out around the edges of the platform.

"Hold it," orders a voice from within the ship.

Cleanerschmidt motions for the team to halt. All eyes lock onto the burnt hatchway, every finger tightening on its trigger. Captain South steps out, Gladius holding the Zipper(tm) to his head.

"Put your guns down," South orders.

The team hesitates, but does so.

"Let him go," snaps Cleanerschmidt.

"Shut your hole, trooper," roars Gladius, hoisting South onto tiptoes by the back of the uniform, "or hack-face here gets a new ear."

A lone Blast O'Bot(tm) suddenly whirs in from another corridor. Everybody freezes. The bot hums, its laser

cannon twitching. One of the troopers reaches for a weapon.

BUZZTT!!

With a small puff of steam, a neat, two centimeter hole appears in the trooper's chest. She drops to the floor, dead. The bot hovers, sensing the surrounding area.

BWWWAAMMM!!

The bot suddenly explodes. Lieutenant Cleanerschmidt recoils, bending for his weapon.

ZIP!

The Intensifier Musket(tm) takes a hit, the force buzzing through it causing the Lieutenant to drop it.

"Not another move!" barks Gladius.

Cleanerschmidt straightens, massaging his tingling hands.

"I got it," calls Geronimo, entering the cavern from the opposite access tunnel. He struts into the center of the floor, cradling Salata's Intensifier Musket(tm).

"Looks like we've got ourselves a situation, Sally," Gladius says.

"I think we've got a misunderstanding," corrects Salata.

"No, a misunderstanding is somebody accidentally moving into your docking orbit. Putting a homing device into someone's ship and using them as bait is a situation."

Salata realizes he's caught out. "So, what do you want to do about it?"

"Send your team back to your ship, I want to talk to you alone."

Salata stares at Gladius. His eyes drift down to the Spiffy Sensor Suit Undergarment(tm). The corner of his mouth twitches. "You heard him," he calls to his troops.

Sneering, Geronimo waves the barrel of the Intensifier at them. Slowly, the Stellar Crak Reconnaissance Team edges back into the tunnel, retreating to the Vi-Scout(tm).

Content that the troopers pose no immediate threat, Gladius releases Salata, sending him to the ground. He aims the Zipper(tm) at the prone Captain.

"Okay, Sally, talk."

"Look, Slate, I was just following orders."

"Whose?"

"Vice-Admiral Ragellon."

"Never heard of him. Why did you set me up?"

"That's classified."

"Hey, Happyass, I've seen this guy before," Geronimo chirps. "He ran into me on Lypsix V. He was wearin' the uniform of an IDR Data Division Processor."

"Really. I heard about a security breach in the Data Division. Tsk, tsk, covert operations aren't your style, Sally."

"Look here, Slate--"

"I'm sure the Space Commission would love to hear about a military break-in at the IDR."

"We suspect whomever is behind these terrorist attacks of hijacking Scow Cows to use in the bombings. We needed to set up an IDR agent as bait. That it happened to be you is pure coincidence."

"Why not just put military personnel in an IDR ship?"

"Too risky. Somebody could've found out."

"Could have found out! You risked innocent civilian lives for your selfish military purposes! We almost died!"

"You're under IDR command, that isn't exactly civilian."

Geronimo perks up. "Hey, I'm not--"

"The IDR condoned this operation?! What the hell did the Union have to say about it?"

"No! No, they knew nothing. We couldn't risk tipping our hand."

Gladius looks away, thinking.

Geronimo tries again, "I don't belong to the--"

"So, the military," Gladius blurts, glaring at South, "took it upon themselves to meddle in Company business?"

"Hey, Slate, listen, indiscriminate bombings of governmental and civilian targets is serious business. The IDR connection could be an inside job, we didn't want to risk blowing our cover. We had no choice. We're all in this together, now. Together we have a chance to nab these bastards."

"Yeah, I've heard that one before."

"No harm will befall you," assures Salata, "you have my word. Release me and I'll guarantee you and your friend safe passage back to Desolate Harmony."

"Who's going to explain to my boss about the loss of my ship, Sally?"

"I'll take care of it."

"Harrumph," Geronimo clears his throat.

The Captain's eyes dart back and forth between Gladius and Geronimo. He notes that, underneath the red cape, Geronimo is also in his underwear.

"Mr. Lavariss, here," Gladius says, "has also had his ship damaged during the proceedings."

"I'll put in a word with your boss, as well."

"Ah, I don't have a boss, I owned my own ship."

"Well, I'll file a full report with your insurance

company, if you like."

Geronimo frowns.

"It's the best I can do."

Gladius lowers the Zipper(tm).

"Let's go back to my ship," Salata says, holding out his hand for his Intensifier Musket(tm).

Geronimo looks to Gladius, who gives him a nod.

Begrudgingly, Geronimo hands over the Musket.

Salata slings the weapon over his shoulder, turns to go, then addresses Geronimo. "Come on, you can get fixed up in the Vi-Scout while we reconnoiter the area. Your underwear has a leak in it."

Geronimo looks down at his bloody shoulder, just now remembering that he has been shot.

Members of the Reconnaissance Team mill about the Vi-Scout(tm), checking for damage, as the three combatants arrive.

"After you, gentlemen," Salata says, motioning to the gangway.

Geronimo climbs up and in. After a brief hesitation, Gladius follows.

CRRRACCK!

The butt of an Intensifier Musket(tm) smashes into the base of Gladius's skull. He falls to the floor in a daze. As the world swims into blackness he sees Cleanerschmidt standing over him, smiling.

"What the fuck are you doin'?! " screams Geronimo.

Two troopers quickly restrain him.

"You'll have to be placed in detention," Salata remarks, coldly. "We can't have you blabbing what we've found to someone who might have terrorist contacts."

"Bullshit!"

SMACK!

Salata backhands him. "You'll speak to me with respect, shit heel, or not at all. There's a lot more at stake here than the petty problems of two garbage men in skivvies." Salata looks to the pair of wincing soldiers. "Keep an eye on them until we finish our recon."

Deep in the aft hold of the Stencheron Stellar Glider(tm), Snax Mawhooba wakes with a fright. He sighs heavily, relieved that his extremities have returned to their common pod-like shape. Shifting his weight, he pushes back one of the containers that has crowded him in.

His curiosity about the crammed cargo is quickly displaced by something more pressing. This ship is moving.

On the Stencheron's bridge, Petunia has set the Auto-Nav(tm) for a location several hundred parsecs distant.

"Where's old Mr. Fystik and Master Weenel?" Mr. Munitions(tm) asks in his fatherly voice.

"I'm afraid they won't be joining us this time," Petunia informs with a note of remorse. "It's just you and me, now."

Gladius slowly opens his eyes, his hand reaching to touch the tender spot on the back of his head.

"You okay?" asks Geronimo.

"Yeah," replies Gladius, gingerly sitting up. "I should've known we couldn't trust that skunk."

"Silence!" A trooper steps into the room, gun trained on the pair.

Gladius grunts, staggers to his feet.

"Sit down!"

"I'm just stretching my legs." Gladius innocently spreads his arms and flexes his legs. "See."

The trooper looks down at Gladius's feet. Gladius kicks out, catching the barrel of the gun. Geronimo leaps at the trooper, grabbing him around the neck. Gladius steps into the guard with a solid left to the gut. The trooper exhales and slumps to the floor, gasping for breath.

"Let's get out of here," Gladius says, grabbing the fallen musket.

Outside the ship stands another guard.

"Hey!"

The trooper turns to see the musket, swung like a bat, smash into his face. The force of the blow cracks the gun stock in half. The trooper drops heavily to the floor.

Stepping over the unconscious form, Gladius and Geronimo sneak across the open cavern to the tunnel entrance.

"Let's get to the Enhancement Chamber and pick out a new ship," Gladius says.

"Now you're talkin'! Gladman, what's come over you?"

"The gloves are off." Gladius scowls and the pair quickly slink down the corridor.

Lieutenant Cleanerschmidt leans over a TechnoMass Imploder(tm). He types a four digit code on its keypad, then turns a key in the top. A red light begins to flash.

"Is it set?" Salata asks.

"This place will go nova in ten minutes." The Lieutenant toggles his Commucon(tm). "Denizen, have you finished downloading the computer's memory?"

"It's in the box, we're heading back to the ship," crackles the voice of the Corporal.

"Good. The Imploder's set. Nine forty-two and counting," replies Cleanerschmidt. With a glance to Captain South, they head toward the Vi-Scout(tm).

Gladius and Geronimo watch the two officers retreat down the corridor before crossing the tunnel. Slate stops, looking at the TechnoMass Imploder(tm). His eyes settle on the timer. He slaps Lavioriss on the back and the two men sprint away.

Ducking through the large doors into the Enhancement Chamber, Gladius leads Geronimo through the maze of hardware.

"This one," says Geronimo, pointing at a Galactro Hi-Rigger(tm).

"Too big, and too slow," Gladius says, jogging along.

"This one, here." Geronimo starts up the gangplank of a modified Buzzard Bomber(tm).

"Mercenary trash--" Gladius stops short. "That one," he says, pointing at the sleek, tasteful lines of the Ebony Skulker, Series FX20(tm).

"Yeah!"

The two men scramble through the open hatch into the belly of the Skulker. Inside, they marvel at an elegant array of luxurious furnishings. The plush, black leather of the bridge is broken only by the winking lights of the ship's control console.

"This is a lot of space ship, Gladman," whispers the overwhelmed Geronimo, "think you can handle it?"

"I'd better be able to," returns Gladius, settling into the Piloting Magno Swivel Chair(tm), "it won't be long before that bomb singes our butts."

Glancing over the controls, Gladius touches the sensor pad marked: ATTITOOTERS(tm). The small, maneuvering thrusters ignite. Feeling out the controls, Gladius begins to guide the Skulker into the launch bay.

"Seal the hatch, Geronimo, we'll have to skip the pre-flight. Let's see what this baby can do."

The Stellar Crak Reconnaissance Team arrives at the Vi-Scout(tm). They slow their approach, seeing the unconscious body of the guard.

"Load him in," orders Cleanerschmidt.

"The bastards got away," curses Salata. "Oh well, they won't last long. Let's get out of here, we've got less than four minutes."

The team boards the Scout, Denizen taking her place at the helm.

"Closing outer hatch," she informs evenly, "activating Magno Chairs and Benches on my mark."

The soldiers take their places, Salata moving into the Magno Command Chair(tm).

"Mark."

There is a hum as the Magnos activate.

"Turbo Thrusters on!"

WWWWHHHHHSSSSHHHH!

The Vi-Scout(tm) begins to rise.

"The doors are closed," squeals Geronimo. "How the hell are we gonna get outta here if the launch bay doors are closed."

"Sit down and shut up."

Gladius flips a cover on the piloting joystick. A large red button on the grip lights up. His other hand reaches for the HypoBlast O'Boost(tm) button. "Ready?"

"What the fuck are you doi--"

BWAAARRRR!!

The two men are jammed back in their Magno Chairs(tm). The Skulker lurches toward the closed hangar doors. Gladius stabs the red button. Two fireballs burst from the front of the black ship. The door explodes and the Ebony Skulker, Series FX20(tm) erupts through the flaming remains.

"We're clear of the planet," calls Denizen. "Beginning orbital ascent."

The Vi-Scout(tm) lifts its nose to the stars, its Mini-HootToot MatterMovers(tm) blazing as it heads toward the *Annihilator*.

DEE-DEE! DEE-DEE!

An amber warning light flashes on the helm console.

"We've got a bandit at six o'clock!"

"What is it?" snaps Salata.

"Can't tell," Cleanerschmidt calls, checking the scanner in front of him, "it's coming too fast."

Salata hits a button, opening a communications channel. "*Annihilator*..."

"Here sir," returns the *Annihilator's* helmsman.

"Launch a Homing Detect O'Probe at the hull of this bandit that's coming up..."

VVVWWWSSSSHHHHH!!!

The Vi-Scout(tm) shakes in the gravity flux stream of the passing Skulker.

"It's just passed us," shouts Salata, "it'll be passing you in seconds."

"We've got it on the scanner," assures the helmsman. "Launching probe... now."

The Ebony Skulker screams toward the *Annihilator*, Gladius fighting to maintain control of the powerful craft. Geronimo peeks out the view port, seeing the awesome shape of the Mark II Battle Accelerator HyperCraft(tm). Blasting over the bow of the *Annihilator*, neither man notices the small Homing Detect O'Probe(tm) as it adheres to the hull of the Skulker.

"Kick in the hyper drive, Gladman! It's trainin' its weapons on us!"

The large Tremor Blaster II(tm) cannons of the *Annihilator* try to lock onto the rapidly receding shape of the Skulker.

Gladius's face is twisted with g-force. "Prepare for light speed!"

The Skulker bucks twice under the sudden, tremendous thrust of the Cyan HooterTooters(tm), the pilot straining at the controls.

"We have target lock," informs the helmsman of the *Annihilator*.

"Fire, goddammit!" orders Ragellon.

The helmsman smacks the firing button.

Geronimo looks back, out the view port of the Skulker. His eyes widen. Two crimson points of light accelerate toward the black ship.

"Gladius... Glad... "

The Skulker breaks the barrier into hyperspace. Both men are crushed into their seats as they make the jump to light speed plus.

The helmsman watches his scanner. The light pulses from the Tremor Blaster II(tm) cannons disappear, heading for deep space, their target having leapt into hyperspace.

"Missed, sir."

"Damn." The Vice-Admiral switches his intercom to the Vi-Scout's(tm) channel. "Salata! Who was on that ship?"

On board the Vi-Scout(tm) Salata speaks into the transmitter. "We can't know for sure, sir, but I have a

pretty good idea."

Ragellon cuts off the communication, turns to the helmsman. "Did the probe attach?"

"Yes, sir."

"Is it working?"

The helmsman tunes the sensors and the digital coordinate readout begins to display sets of rapidly changing numbers: a random sampling of the Ebony Skulker's swiftly changing position in hyperspace.

"It's functional, sir."

Vice-Admiral Joshua Ragellon cocks his head to the large view port at the front of the bridge. "Dock the Vi-Scout, then follow that ship."

Far below, deep within the Eighth Planet, the TechnoMass Imploder(tm) reaches the end of its countdown and does what it does best. The concussion wave buffets the Vi-Scout(tm) as it enters the docking bay of the *Annihilator*. A large portion of the Eighth Planet is recklessly tossed into its atmosphere.

CHAPTER TEN

REGROUP
"Trouble?"

SMACK!

Vice-Admiral Joshua Ragellon's knobby fist slams onto the desktop. "How could you let yourself be outwitted by a GARBAGE MAN!"

South remains silent, contemplating the twisted paper clips strewn about the desktop.

Ragellon paces in an unsteady shuffle behind his desk in the Command Office on board the *Annihilator*. He lowers his voice, but remains firm. "Who was this other man, this Lavoriss?"

"We don't know for sure. He made a remark about recognizing me during the covert operation into the IDR Data Division."

Ragellon perks at this piece of information.

"He said he's not an IDR employee," South continues, "and that he arrived at the Eighth Planet separately, in his privately owned vessel. Slate knew him, they appeared to be friends."

"Knew him. Maybe Lavoriss arranged the meeting?"

"Lavoriss, a terrorist operative? It's a possibility, I suppose. If he was snooping around Lypsix V and the Data Division, perhaps he is the terrorist's man on the inside. He could have been there pinpointing ships for hijacking."

"Hmm... odds are. What about our snitch, Mawhoooba?"

"There was no sign of him."

Ragellon aligns himself then slowly plops into the Magno Supreme Command Chair(tm). He attempts to tilt back, but can't make it stick. "And you found no one else on that dirt ball?"

"Two bodies, and the two garbage men make four, that leaves one unaccounted for. Mawhoooba?"

"Two bodies. We can't be sure they were alive at the time of our initial scan. Which means there could have been at least two more terrorists down there, possibly three if Mawhoooba is dead."

"Who were the bodies?" counters South.

"Miscreants tend to kill other miscreants... maybe a disagreement?" Ragellon reaches to the Commucon(tm) on the desk. "Have Lieutenant Cleanerschmidt join us in my office, please." He turns back to Salata. "I've got a

hunch that Lavoriss is a terrorist operative and that he may be working with Slate."

South clenches his jaw, giving his head a slight shake. "I don't know, Slate never struck me as the criminal type. There was something odd about those two."

"Exactly!" Ragellon fixes South with a quivering stare. "How else would you explain Lavoriss at Lypsix V, his friendship with Slate, and the fantastic luck of having our snitch pay off on the very first outing?"

Salata cocks his head, considering.

"That wasn't Slate's first trip to the Eighth Planet," Ragellon concludes. "He knew exactly where he was going."

The Command Office door whisks open and Lieutenant Cleanerschmidt enters. Ragellon waits for the door to slide shut.

"Gentlemen," he begins, "I believe that the computer blackout we experienced as we approached the Eighth Planet was the result of a jamming device."

"Yes, all systems on the Vi-Scout were completely out," informs Cleanerschmidt.

"Are you suggesting another escape attempt, sir?" asks Salata.

"Not an attempt, South."

"The bastards blasted right by us, undetected," Cleanerschmidt blurts, then blushes.

"Exactly," confirms the Vice-Admiral.

South scowls at the Lieutenant.

"Sir, um," Cleanerschmidt says, shrinking under South's glare, "do you think the second escape vessel is following whomever made that undetected escape?"

Ragellon smiles at the young Lieutenant. "I do, and I'm assuming that it was the garbage men on board that second ship. The IDR has been the target of too many hijackings to be coincidence. I think these garbage men may be terrorist insiders. We're going after them, Lieutenant, direct the bridge accordingly."

Cleanerschmidt nods affirmative. South's scar is beginning to pulse.

The Ebony Skulker, Series FX20(tm) quietly whips through hyperspace. Gladius is struggling with the Deep Space Commucon Holo-Vis(tm), trying to link up with the IDR administration offices at Desolate Harmony. The system is misbehaving and frustration is beginning to get the better of him.

BUZZT! FWATCHAAA!

The Holo-Vis(tm) begins to smoke, green sparks arcing

across its projecting lenses. Gladius jumps, quickly snatches up an extinguisher and douses the console.

As the dust settles he slumps into his chair and rubs a hand through his brush-cut. This business has gotten out of hand and he would desperately like to turn the whole mess over to higher powers, but to do that he needs to report his findings to the IDR offices. Obviously, that is going to be more difficult than he would like.

"Hey, Gladman!" Geronimo's excited voice issues from the aft compartment. He has been nosing around in the rear of the Skulker, peeking into various holds and hatchways.

Gladius pulls himself from the chair, moves to the bulkhead, peers into the darkness. "Find something?"

An overly large metal case eases through the bulkhead and, in the ship's limited gravity, softly bumps to the deck at Gladius's feet. His mood is only mildly amended by the label on the case. The words 'BIGGER GUN(tm)' are stenciled in Intimidating Red Text(tm).

Geronimo pops up from behind the case. "We may need this if those military dicks track us down."

"They're not going to track us down. We're going to get in touch with the IDR and let them handle it. I don't need anymore of this crap."

Geronimo pulls himself out of the hold and looks at the blackened communications console. "You been tryin' to reconfigure the Commucon?"

Gladius shrugs. He moves to the Navi-Control(tm) console, studies it briefly. "We've got a small way-station coming up in the ThotThunk Range. I'll kick us out of hyperspace and make the call from there." He types in the new coordinates.

BLEEP!

The computer makes the adjustment, changing the Skulker's course.

"Should we... um, have a... ah, look..." Geronimo staggers, placing a hand on the bulkhead.

Gladius eyes him, concerned. Then he notices the dark stain, partially hidden by the Ambassador's liberated cape, spreading from Geronimo's shoulder. "Geronimo, you okay?"

"Ah... yeah... fine... just a li'l... light-head..."

"We'd better get you looked after. You're still bleeding from that Zipper wound."

Geronimo looks down at his shoulder. He gingerly lifts aside the cape revealing a nasty looking row of ragged holes. He's lost a lot of blood, his Spiffy Sensor Suit Undergarment(tm) is sodden to the waist. He stands there, staring down at the mess for a long moment, and then

finally looks up, his face quite ashen.

"Oh, yeah... I guess I forgot." With that, Geronimo's eyes roll back in his head and his legs turn to rubber. He sinks, not so gracefully, to the deck.

"Damn," mutters Gladius. He scoops up his fallen comrade and heads toward sickbay and the AutoDoc(tm).

BEEP!

Vice-Admiral Ragellon's Commucon Stay-Close(tm) is blinking. He thumbs open the channel.

"Sir, our target has changed course," reports the *Annihilator's* helmsman.

"Match their course."

On the bridge, Cleanerschmidt looks up from the Navi-Control(tm) console. "They're heading to the terrorist base," he whispers, "I can feel it."

"Let's hope you're right, Lieutenant."

Startled, the Lieutenant flushes. South is standing behind him, nodding.

"Let's hope you're right."

Sickbay on the *Ebony Skulker* is a compact, sanitary room with white walls, bathed in diffuse light of no apparent source. At the center of the room stands the epitome of modern medical marvel: the AutoDoc(tm).

The AutoDoc(tm), a horizontal sarcophagus of gentle curves on a raised pedestal, has virtually revolutionized the medical profession. A nearby cupboard contains a few token pastel green and chrome instruments. Except for inspection by the curious, they have rarely been out of their case. They are obsolete and are here only should the AutoDoc(tm), in a rare occurrence, break down.

Pity the poor bastard who has to get worked over with the instruments should the AutoDoc(tm) be out of service: surgeons have also become obsolete. There are AutoDoc(tm) technicians, but they are token remnants of doctors because the AutoDoc(tm), as the name implies, is totally automatic. Insert the sick person, close the lid, touch the pad marked Initiate Repair Sequence and the AutoDoc(tm) does the rest: diagnostics, repair and fitness tuneup, anywhere from twenty minutes to several hours -- depending on severity of injury, of course, and providing the patient hasn't crossed the ever-so-critical 'point of no return', a serious stumbling block on the road to immortality.

Gladius nudges the 'LID OPEN' touch pad with his knee and hoists the limp Geronimo, ready to set him into the AutoDoc(tm). There is a small puff of escaping air as the

hydraulics raise the lid. He flops Geronimo into the unit.

"Oof!"

Gladius jumps at the sound, since Geronimo is out cold. He steps back, puzzled. Geronimo doesn't seem to be fitting down into the sarcophagus properly. Grabbing Geronimo's Sensor Suit front, Gladius sits him up, then peers down into the AutoDoc(tm).

"Get this alien scum off of me," Fystik hisses.

The Stencheron Stellar Glider(tm), Petunia's ship, speeds through hyperspace, the three modified Scow Cows in tow. Snax snoops along the access way in the cargo hold. He stops at the ladder which leads to the upper deck, listening. Voices. Cautiously, Snax climbs the ladder, poking his singular eye through the hatch.

"You're early," snaps the mild-looking man dressed in garments befitting an office clerk.

"Unavoidable," replies Petunia to the Holo-Vis(tm) image suspended before her.

"Trouble?"

"Nothing I can't handle."

"If you bring the authorities on us, you'll regret it," the clerk advises.

"Bloition, I assure you, I'm not being followed."

"Do you have the merchandise we requested?"

"Of course, but this will have to be our last transaction."

"We shall see. Bring the merchandise to the usual rendezvous point."

The image blips out.

"Compu-Stud," Petunia calls.

"Ready," comes the electronic reply.

"Plot a course for the Elyeesiastapopadopoulos Nebula. Main rendezvous point."

"Working... done."

"Initiate course change."

"Initiated."

Snax retreats into the cramped cargo hold, an expression of concern distorting his face.

Gladius hits the 'INITIATE REPAIR SEQUENCE' touch pad and glances through the AutoDoc's(tm) small window at the napping Geronimo. Fystik stands nearby, his hands trussed together with a thin piece of insulated wire, glaring at his captor.

"This ship is moving," he observes.

"You're a genius, aren't you?" Gladius grabs Fystik

by the wire and flings him out of sickbay.

"Let go of me, you lower life form."

Gladius pushes him along the narrow corridor into the bridge area, shoves him into one of the Magno Chairs(tm), then forces the Dismemberon's hands between his legs, into the main field area of the chair.

"Hey, you can't--" protests Fystik.

Gladius activates the chair's Magno Field(tm). The field attracts the metal wire, holding Fystik's arms down.

"Sit tight, Blue Spew. You're going to answer some questions." Gladius stands in front of the Dismemberon and folds his arms.

"Weenel will kill you, you container of disease. Harm a well-groomed hair on my head and you'll quickly regret it."

"Weenel is dead."

Fystik narrows his eyes, scrutinizing Gladius, trying to determine if the human speaks the truth.

"And you'll be dead, too, you ugly, blue-faced scat, unless you answer my questions." Gladius leans into the Dismemberon and smacks his hands firmly onto the alien's slight shoulders. "Why did you hijack my ship? And why were there other IDR Company Scow Cows on the Eighth Planet?"

Fystik sneers at his oppressor, then launches a wad of turquoise spittle into Gladius's face. Slate pulls back, glaring at the Dismemberon and slowly wiping at the sticky substance with his sleeve.

"Petunia will introduce you to Mr. Munitions, ha!"

"Bad news for you," Gladius returns. "If your pal Petunia was on that planet, then she's dead, too. The military showed up and blew the hell out of the place. All that's left of your little operation is a crater."

"Liar!" Fystik is enraged, verging on tears.

BEEP! TWEET! TWEET!

The Navi-Control(tm) sounds an alarm. Information skitters across its screen. Gladius glances over to read:

>PROXIMITY ALERT!
:nearing way station

>PREPARE FOR DECELERATION
>INTO NORMALSPACE

"You want to be this way, fine." Gladius moves into the Piloting Magno Swivel Chair(tm) and begins to concentrate on the readouts of the Skulker's navigational instruments.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

BUSINESS BEFORE PLEASURE

"The military?"

A neon sign buzzes, unheard in the vacuum of space, at the top of a scaffold perched on the main hub of a small space station. The sign not-so-proudly displays seven flickering, lime-green letters: S C R U N G E.

The Scrunge Way Station traces a slightly elliptical orbit around a small planet in the ThotThunk solar system. It's three docking bays lie empty, waiting for new arrivals. Any arrivals.

Within the station its manager, a wild-haired, greasy Homo sapiens teenager named Hoddy Scrunge, sits hunched over the Operations Control Console(tm). He occasionally pauses from flipping through a HooterTooter Deep Space Looter(tm) comic book to glance at the Holo-Vis(tm) display.

His co-worker, Asilla Ffee, an oddly attractive, although somewhat plump young woman with a tendency to wear too much makeup and an elfin-green jumpsuit unzipped to her navel, enters the control bay and peers over Hoddy's shoulder.

"What're ya doin'?"

Hoddy looks up, barely noticing the unzipped Ffee.

"Reading, R-E-A-D-I-N-G," he spells. Hoddy has the annoying habit of spelling the last word of every sentence.

"Uh huh. Any sign of customers?"

Hoddy glances at the Holo-Vis(tm). "Nope, N-O-P-E."

"Oh."

She leans over, cleavage clearly on display, and leers at him enticingly. Bug-eyed, Hoddy swallows hard, then turns back to the adventures of the HooterTooter Looters.

BLEEET!

The Proximity Alert(tm) alarm sounds. A tiny red speck suddenly appears amidst the green map tracings of the local space: a ship has decelerated from hyperspace.

"Hoddy! Look!"

Scrunge looks at the Holo-Vis(tm), seeing the fast approaching blip. He snaps to the controls, switches the display to photo-imaging and enhances the picture. The view enlarges, detailing the sleek lines of the Ebony Skulker, Series FX20(tm).

"Wow, W-O-W! Have you ever seen a ship like that,

Asilla, A-S-I-L-L-A?!"

"Not ever," she sighs. "Try 'n hail it."

"Right, R-I-T-E." Hoddy swivels to the short range Commucon(tm) and opens a channel. He turns on the Intergalactic Greeting Beacon(tm) and awaits a response. Nothing.

"Maybe their communication equipment is damaged," suggests Ffee.

"Yeah, go get docking bay three ready, fire up the lights, L-I-G-H-T-S. Then go get the repair bots on-line, they may need a fix up, U-P."

"Good idea, Hoddy, but why don't you do that. I'll go start up the kitchen bots in the diner and make myself beautiful. After all, there may be some hot, I mean hungry, dudes on that baby."

"Okay, O-K." Hoddy races out of the control bay.

Asilla watches the Holo-Vis(tm) image grow larger. Through the forward view screen of the vessel she can make out the figure of a firmly toned man, apparently the pilot. Hello, Daddy! You're my ticket outta here. With a giggle, she wiggles and jiggles out of the control bay, heading to her quarters.

On board the *Annihilator*, Lieutenant Cleanerschmidt leans into his Commucon Stay-Close(tm). "The target ship has entered normalspace, sir, and seems to be on an approach to a small way station."

"How long until we can rendezvous with that station?" crackles Ragellon's voice.

Cleanerschmidt glances toward a snarling South, then leans into the Commucon(tm) again. "We experienced some minor HooterTooter difficulties during acceleration, sir, which put us behind by about forty minutes."

"Damn. Tooter problems. That's the last thing we need. Delivery of the Humongous RangeroPrima Supreme War Galleons can't come soon enough. I'll be glad to see the arse end of these jalopies. Is South handy?"

South strides to the Commucon(tm). "Here, sir."

"South, get the Stellar Crak Reconnaissance Team ready to move the minute we're in range of that station."

"Aye, sir." South casts a sideways glance at Cleanerschmidt and moves out.

Gladius switches off the Navi-Control(tm) autopilot system and begins to manually guide the ship toward the Scrunge Way Station. Behind him Fystik struggles feverishly, but can't pull his hands free of the strong

Magno Field(tm) of the chair's seat. Slate turns to stare him down. Fystik quickly stops, pretending not to have been doing anything.

"What?"

"Don't give me any crap, you Dismembergoon. I'm not in the mood. But the Space Commission might be." Gladius returns to his piloting.

Fystik scowls at Slate's back. "Turn me in, go ahead. Then you'll never find out what you want to know."

"Maybe, but I sure wouldn't have to look at your ugly face anymore. Intergalactic hijacker like you, I'll bet there's even a reward on your head. You're like money in the bank to me."

Gladius watches out the view port as one of the docking bays at the Scrunge Station lights up. He fires the braking AttiTooters(tm) and swings the sleek craft toward the lit bay.

Hoddy is gawking through the view port at the rakish, sweeping lines of the Ebony Skulker, Series FX20(tm). Transfixed, mouth agape, he watches the graceful craft slow itself and ease into the docking slip. Through the forward view screen he sees the pilot, clad in a Spiffy Sensor Suit Undergarment(tm), stand and look at him. The pilot waves to him. Hoddy waves back. The pilot waves again, with more furor. Hoddy waves back, again. The pilot begins to point frantically at the docking station.

"Oh yeah, I forgot to extend the tube, T-U-B-E."

Hoddy taps the keypad, activating the lock beams that will hold the ship steady in the bay. Then, concentrating on a scope, he spins a small wheel and gently guides and adheres the Firm Tube(tm) over the exterior hatch of the Skulker. There is a slight hiss as the pressurization equalizes.

Gladius flips the toggles which shut down the motion control and guidance systems of the trim, black craft.

Fystik watches his captor closely, contemplating what the Space Commission might do to him should he be placed in their custody. A death sentence isn't completely out of the question.

"Look, uh... what is your name again, Inferior Being?"

"Slate, Gladius Slate." Gladius crosses to the Magno Chair(tm), switches it off and hoists the Dismemberon roughly to his feet. "And don't bother trying to get friendly. You've already dug your own latrine, now I get to watch you get dumped on." He hustles the alien through

the hatch.

Scrunge takes a quick step back as a dainty, blue-skinned creature is pushed through the airlock, followed by the pilot.

"Hi, H-I. I'm Hoddy Scrunge, S-C-R-U-N-G-E."

Gladius glares at the pit-faced teenager, then swings the bound Fystik to one side. "You got a Deep Space Commucon?"

"Yessir, located on the deck beneath us, just off the Scrunge Star Lounge, L-O-U-N-G-E."

"Which way?"

Hoddy is baffled by his customer's rudeness. "Uh, round the corner and down the ramp, R-A-M-P."

Slate turns and begins to push Fystik along the corridor. Hoddy trots behind.

"Will you be wantin' me to fix your cool ship, S-H-I-P? It's so neat I'd love to go in an' have a look at 'er, E-R. Why, right here, I got the best repair bots anywhere, W-H-E-R-E. They'll fix that baby up good as new, N-E-W. We'll take readings on what type of fuel you're usin', synthesize some new stuff, then juice it up, U-P."

Slate stops to look at the babbling kid.

"And we'll fix yer Commucon, C-O-M-M-U-C-O-N. It must be busted, huh, E-H? Of course, otherwise why'dya wanna use ours, O-U-R-S. We'll take care of that, first thing, T-H-I-N-G. No problem, P-R-O-B-L-E-M. Just a nominal charge, F-E-E. Hell, I'd almost do it for free just to have a look inside that baby, but I can't, C-A-N-T. No freebies, F-R-E-B... F-R-E... freebies. Uncle Walf said so, S-O. He gave me this station, ya know, N-O. Told me to do my best, B-E-S-T. Asilla says it was to get rid of me, but she's got kinda an unpleasant personality, P-E-R... whatever. I think I'm doin' a good job, it's just that business has been kinda slow, S-L-O-W. That okay with you, Y-O-U?"

Slate breaks his gaze from the jabbering mouth and sizes up the teenager. "Is what okay with me?"

"If I fix up yer ship, S-H-I-P?"

"Yeah, go ahead," Gladius says, softening. "Fuel it up. Thanks."

Slate turns, pushing Fystik toward the gangway and the lower deck. As they reach the bottom of the ramp they pause briefly, looking for the Commucon Booth(tm). Fystik gestures to the sign down the hall:

SCRUNGE STAR LOUNGE
FINE FOOD AND DRINK

COMMUCON(tm) SERVICE,
HOLO-CINES(tm), RESTROOMS

"That looks like it, Inferior One."

Gladius shoves him down the hall. The passageway has a row of view ports on the space side, through which the underbelly of the docked Skulker can be seen. Fystik stops abruptly, staring up at the bottom of the black ship.

"Move it!" orders Gladius, grabbing Fystik by the collar.

"Wait," he says, trying to point with his bound hands, "look."

Gladius scans the hull of the Skulker. A flush washes over him at the sight of a small foreign object adhered to it. The object has a Micro Catalyst Antenna(tm) protruding from it, allowing it to transmit a hyperspace transcending signal.

"Homing Detect O'Probe."

"Yes," chirps Fystik. "Probably military, judging by its markings."

"Must've launched it when we passed over their bow," Gladius surmises. Disturbed, he pushes Fystik toward the Scrunge Star Lounge. "We'll deal with that in a minute, right now, I've got a call to make."

The lounge is a mess of neon lights and loud green walls with yellow stripes. One side is a cafeteria-style bar with an assortment of foods being prepared by an assortment of robots. The opposite side is a large wall of Stalwart Glass(tm), the view spreading out beneath the docking slips into the star-speckled reaches beyond. In the middle are small clusters of sloped, three-legged tables, each appearing to have one leg shorter than the other two, and, at the far side, the entrance to the Holo-Cine(tm) theater, with four Deep Space Commucon(tm) booths next to it.

As Gladius guides Fystik between the tables, a woman appears at the bar. Slate gives her a terse glance and continues to prod Fystik toward the booths.

"Hey, boys," calls Asilla Ffee, her face freshly troweled with cosmetics, her outfit now so tight and skimpy that her ample flesh appears constricted, oozing out. She strikes a sexy pose, pouts her lips, and bends forward to enhance the dark cleft of her cleavage, in hopes of catching Slate's attention. But Gladius ignores her,

stopping at one of the booths.

"HEY!"

Gladius and Fystik jump, startled at the sudden screech. Taking a closer look, they grimace at the sight of Asilla, her body painfully bound in a hideous, cream-colored outfit that, with its various strings, snaps and gaps, looks more like an ill-repaired fishing net than a garment.

"What would you boys like to eat?" she asks, switching to a deep, sultry voice.

"We're just here to use your Commucon. We don't want anything to eat," Gladius informs flatly.

Asilla's shoulders sag. She releases the breath she's been holding and her muscles relax, allowing more flesh to bulge through her outfit.

"I don't know, Inferior One, I could use a petite repast," suggests Fystik.

Gladius disregards the comment and forces his prisoner into the chair nearest the Commucon(tm) booth. "I'm going to make my call with the door open. Move one centimeter and I'll break your legs. Then I'll call the Space Commission and tell them where they can find you."

"Mr. Slate, I really don't think there is any need to make such a hasty threat. I'm sure we can work something out between us."

"Yeah?"

"Of course." Fystik resigns himself to an attempt at cooperation. "Perhaps I could answer some of your questions."

"And now I'm supposed to believe you?"

"Why would I lie?"

"Why would anybody, you blue toad?" Slate shakes his head. "This whole experience has been nothing but one lie after another. First, I'm sent on an assignment where my ship gets hijacked, then my copilot turns out to be a spy, I'm psycho-tortured by some lurid wall of muscle, I'm harassed by the military who try to blow me up and turn out to still be tracking me, and now you, who tried to run me down with a Whizzer, wants my trust!"

"Too much to ask, is it?" replies Fystik, averting his eyes.

Slate steps into the booth and places his call. Before long, a static-riddled image appears: the Interstellar Detritus Reclamation Company logo. The image dissolves into that of the IDR Commucon Receiver(tm), an inter-space operator.

"With whom would you like to speak?"

"Rolezar Doughan, District Company Manager, Priority Big Hurry One from Operative Gladius Slate, on full Charge Reversal."

"Please allow a moment for connection..."

Gladius taps his fingers, turning to look at Fystik fidgeting in his chair.

"Slate, what's the problem?" asks Rolezar Doughan, his image barely stabilizing due to sub-space interference.

"I've found out who's been stealing the Scow Cows."

"Good work! Who?"

"Well, I'm not sure of the details, but--"

"Not sure of the details!" snaps the District Manager. "Why are you calling me on a Priority Big Hurry One, with full Charge Reversal, without all the essential information. These calls are expensive, you know. If you don't have all the infor--"

"Doughan! I need help! The military is involved and it has something to do with that lousy copilot you assigned me. It sounds like they were the one's responsible for that security breach on Lypsix V. I can't handle this alone. Just take the information to the Space Commission, or somebody, and let them handle it. It's not my problem anymore."

"The military?" Rolezar glances around, leans in and whispers, "I'll have to confer with the Executive Board, you stay close and observe. See if we can nail down who these terrorists are."

"I don't know about any terrorists."

"You said you knew who was taking the Scow Cows."

"I do. I think they're middle men, more like black market arms dealers than terrorists."

"Okay, let me think." Rolezar steps out of view.

Gladius takes a deep breath. Management.

Doughan slinks back into view. "Stay there, lie low, and keep your ears open."

"Rolezar, I'm out of it. Call the Space Commission. I've done my part," Gladius insists.

"Your part is to follow orders. I'm not entrusting an IDR Company concern of such importance to the Space Commission. Only an IDR Company agent can handle this. And right now, you're that agent."

"But I--"

"Look, I'll discuss this with the Board and we'll get some help out to you as fast as we can. Think of the grieving families wondering where their loved ones are. Loyal operatives, your comrades, who may have paid the ultimate price. Don't they deserve answers?"

Gladius considers the reception he received on the Eighth Planet, then concedes with a sigh.

"Good man," Rolezar assures. "Keep us informed of your position." His image snaps off, the deep space link cut.

Gladius steps out of the booth, bewildered. Fystik watches the brooding Slate as he takes the seat across the table.

"Fystik, I need some answers."

A thin hint of smile breaks across the Dismemberon's face. "Oh, is that so, Inferior One? Well, I think I've just had a memory lapse. But, some nourishment might increase the activity of my brain waves."

Gladius wipes his face with his hand. "Help me, or I'll pick up that phone and have the Space Commission inspectors here so fast..."

Fystik wags his head and reclines decadently in his chair. "Oh, I don't think so. From what I heard of your conversation, it's you who needs me, now. Therefore, any agreement we make will be on my terms."

A small shudder pulses through Gladius.

CHAPTER TWELVE

SHAKE DOWN

"We never get that kinda business."

The vending machine issues the last dribble of Chocosmelt(tm) into a disposable cup and Rolezar Doughan begins to make his way back through the deserted complex to his office.

"Goodnight, Mr. Doughan," says a young clerk as she pulls the Communication Department's door closed.

"Night."

His pleasant smile fades as he rounds the corner and enters his office, the door sliding shut behind him. Standing at the large view port, he gazes out over the whorled galactic hub and wonders what to do with Slate's surprising information.

There is a soft tap on the door. He crosses to his desk and presses the release button. The door quietly whisks open.

"Ah, it's you. Come in."

Rolezar circles his desk to sit. He settles into his chair and raises his eyes to stare into the barrel of a snub-nosed Rebuker Pistol(tm).

"What do you thi--"

BZZZZT! FSSSS!

A neatly cauterized hole appears in Doughan's forehead. He unceremoniously falls face first onto his desk.

Behind the food bar Asilla perks at the beeping of the Proximity Alert(tm) alarm. She hustles to the kitchen view port to witness a new ship erupt into normalspace.

"Ha, another chance at gettin' outta here." She opens a channel on the Commucon(tm). "Hoddy, we've got more customers." She strains to see the approaching ship, sags a little as she recognizes it. "Oh, looks like an NNP Cruiser."

"Great," Hoddy replies, "start makin' donuts, D-O-N-U-T-S."

Fystik looks up from his Emperor Hurdlefud Salad(tm) and swivels to face the kitchen. Asilla's bound body is pressed to the view port.

"Excuse me," he calls, "did you say another ship was approaching."

Asilla comes to the bar. "Yeah, so?"

Gladius, who has been mucking around a now cold bowl of Carponian Slingermug Eel(tm) bouillabaisse, rouses at the development. "Probably the military."

"What'd ya say?" cracks the woman at the bar.

"A military vessel? Is it a military ship?"

"Naw. We never get that kinda business. It's a NNP Cruiser."

Fystik's eyes widen, his cat-like pupils dilating to solid pools of blackness.

"They happen by every other month, or so," Asilla continues. "And they aren't rude, like you two. And to think, I was gonna let you sweep me off my feet."

"NNP, as in Nectar Nine Police?" queries Fystik.

"Yeah."

Fystik rises, moves to Gladius's side. "Mr. Slate, perhaps we can make that arrangement now. I'm sure I can answer your questions. For instance, if you must know, we, Petunia, Weenel and I, run, or rather, ran a depot that trapped, amongst others, IDR Belly Cruisers, refitted them, and sold them primarily to a group called the DataTrump Fruition Front."

Gladius eyes the Dismemberon, suspicious. "Never heard of them."

"The terrorists, they're the terrorists."

Gladius raises an eyebrow. "The terrorists? The ones who have been attacking all the governmental bases?"

"Yes."

"Tell me more."

"If you agree to get us out of here before the Nectar Nine Police arrive. You see, I have had a past mishap with them, which may lead to them being annoyed by my presence. They may resort to violence, which I personally abhor." He issues a feeble smile.

Gladius rolls his eyes. "Deal. Keep talking."

"Once we're space borne. Not here."

"We aren't going anywhere until that Homing Detect O'Probe is removed from our ship," Gladius says, gesturing out the window to the Skulker.

Beyond the huge wall of glass the Nectar Nine Police Cruiser lines up its approach into the docking slip beside the Ebony Skulker(tm). A docking alarm bleats. Both men turn from the window at the sound of Asilla dashing from the lounge, spiked heels clacking up the ramp toward the docking bays.

"There is no time, Mister Slate."

"You'll take me to these terrorists?"

"Yes."

"Fine. Let's go."

Gladius reaches over and unleashes Fystik's hands. They hustle past the lounge view port, watching the NNP Cruiser complete its docking sequence.

"We must hurry," Fystik begs.

Together they move to the gangway, but stop halfway up, hearing the unmistakable approach of officers wearing highly polished jackboots: the trademark of the Nectar Nine Police.

"We're too late," whispers Fystik, freezing in his tracks and wringing his hands.

Gladius pushes the shivering Dismemberon back down the ramp. The footfalls of the police officers advance. Slate shoves Fystik down behind the food bar, then quickly moves to a seat facing the view port. From there he can see the belly of the Skulker and the gray steel of the NNP Cruiser's hull next to it. The two police officers step off the gangway into the lounge. Gladius casually looks them over.

The tallest of the two is a Losfallonite, a race of humanoids that have a strong affinity for old Earth insects. So much so that, through selective breeding and genetic tampering, they have taken on certain qualities formerly ascribed only to bugs. Their sharp-edged facial features are of a yellow and black chitinous material, a hard body armor. Their hands fold over into three digit, pincer-like appendages, capable of cutting flesh. The alien's body seems strange in its gray and black NNP uniform, his feet stretching the leather of the polished boots into odd, bony shapes.

The shorter officer, a skinny Homo sapiens male with a fluffy little mustache that runs the width of his mouth and leaves a centimeter gap between itself and his upper lip, moves up to the bar.

"Hey, Asilla!"

Asilla clomps down the ramp, wobbling on the heels, and slides behind the bar. Gladius gulps, waiting for her to draw attention to the hiding Fystik. Instead, she walks up to the short policeman.

"What would you like, Officer Plinket?"

"Do I smell donuts?" Plinket smiles a lecherous grin and leans over the bar to slap Asilla's ass.

"You might," she teases, "donuts for two?"

The Losfallonite cocks his head. "Got any Flaconnish Dung Bread?"

"No bread today. We got fresh Marr eclairs and Twanet

cake, though. Our new supplier's got way better selection than the old guy."

"Hmmmph. Donuts."

"Grab a table, I'll be right out. Chocosmelts for both of you?"

Plinket turns to raise an eyebrow at his new partner.

"Chocosmelt good?" asks the Losfallonite.

"Yeah, it's great Ravv. You'll love it."

Ravv nods, his gaze drifting over to Gladius. Slate quickly looks back out the window, cursing himself for having drawn their attention.

Officer Ravv taps his partner's shoulder, points to Slate. Both officers observe his strange appearance, noticing he's wearing only his full-body underwear. The two cops move across the lounge to Gladius's table, taking the seats opposite him, their backs to the view port.

"Mind if we join you?" asks Plinket.

"Actually, I should be on my way," returns Gladius, not making eye contact.

A pincer grabs Gladius's wrist. "Please stay."

"Is that black thing your ship?" Plinket asks.

Gladius shifts uncomfortably, aware of the stories of Nectar Nine Police harassment as told by his workmates in the past. He must fabricate a story to explain the ship, but his mind is drawing blanks. His mouth begins to move, but no words form. Then he freezes, noticing movement beyond the police officers, outside the view port.

Fystik, clad in an Emergency Envir O'Suit(tm), slinks along the hull of the Skulker, reaching for the homing device.

"Answer, please!" demands Ravv, squeezing Gladius's wrist.

Slate flinches, snapping to. "Uh, yeah, that's my ship."

"How long you had it?" asks Plinket.

"Not long," answers Gladius, truthfully. In his peripheral vision, he sees Fystik detach the Homing Detect O'Probe(tm) and swim toward the hull of the NNP Cruiser.

"How long is that, smart mouth?"

Plinket is developing a bad attitude. Ravv twists Gladius's arm, the thorny exoskeleton of the pincer digs into his skin, making him release a small yelp.

"A month! I've had it a month!"

The Losfallonite relaxes his grip slightly.

"Really. And how can a guy who goes around in only his Spiffy Sensor Suit Undergarment afford that kind of ship?"

"It's my ship," Gladius insists.

Ravv's pincer closes and twists.

"Aaauuuggghhh!!!!"

"You got a real smart mouth, bub," Plinket says, rising. "I think we better run a check on you, 'cause I bet you stole that ship."

Gladius looks past the short officer, sees the probe firmly attached to the belly of the police cruiser. Fystik's feet are now sticking out of the exhaust port of one of the cruiser's AttiTooters(tm).

"Right, I stole it." Masking his actions as a response to the pressure on his wrist, Gladius reaches back with his free hand, grabbing the back of his chair.

"Well, Ravv, whadda ya think?"

"I think I snip off hand, then we process him."

Plinket lets out a donkey laugh.

Fystik is worming his way back toward the Skulker.

Feeling the Losfallonite's pincers tightening, Gladius begins to stand, tilting under the increasing pressure of the biting grip. Without warning, he swings the chair at his harassers. The chair legs rake across Plinket's face, sending him sprawling, and continue in an arc toward Ravv. In an attempt to block the awkward projectile he releases his lock on Gladius.

Gladius darts for the gangway, shaking his hand to restore the circulation, just as Asilla steps out carrying a tray of donuts and Chocosmelt(tm). Slate slams into her. Food flies everywhere. The police are pulling themselves from the floor, reaching for their weapons. Gladius scrambles up the ramp, disappearing onto the upper deck.

With Hand Cannons(tm) drawn, the two NNP officers bound after Slate, bowling over Asilla a second time, and crushing the fresh donuts under their polished boots.

Momentarily disoriented, Gladius races down the wrong corridor. The clanging of his feet on the grated metal deck halts as he comes to a dead end. Damn. He backtracks, rounds the corner.

BWAM! BWAM!

The NNP officers blast their Hand Cannons(tm) at Gladius. He hits the deck and rolls to one side, the shots cut deep divots into the surrounding walls.

"Don't move, Toecheese!" orders Plinket, his weapon trained on Gladius's skull.

Suddenly, one of Hoddy Scrunge's robots, heading for a refueling hose storage locker, whirs directly into Plinket's line of fire. Slate bounds to his feet, heaving the robot into the two officers. The pile stumbles

backward and Gladius deftly skirts the jumble.

"He's getting away!" shouts Plinket, trying to heft off the Losfallonite, who is busy trying to heft off the robot.

Slate sprints down the corridor, searching for his docking bay door. Finding it, he pushes into the recess of the Firm Tube(tm) airlock, smacking into Hoddy Scrunge. The two of them tumble into the tube. Gladius struggles to his feet.

"You in a hurry, H-U-R-R-Y?"

"Yeah. Bill the repairs to the IDR, Rolezar Doughan's account, okay?" Slate reaches for the Skulker's door lock.

"Okay, but what about..."

Slate disappears within and the door slides shut. Hoddy shrugs and retreats from the tube, just as the two NNP officers arrive. The Losfallonite grabs Scrunge by his greasy tunic and hoists him.

"Where is man?"

Scrunge points down the tube.

Gladius stumbles up the small ladder onto the Skulker's bridge. The ship's AttiTooters(tm) ignite and Slate pitches forward as the Skulker jerks into reverse. He scrambles for the Piloting Magno Swivel Chair(tm) to find Fystik seated at the controls.

"Oh, hi, heh heh," greets Fystik, surprised to see Gladius.

"Going somewhere without me?" Gladius cuts the field of the Chair, pulls the Dismemberon out of it.

"Not at all. I thought I should just get things warmed up."

Slate growls at the blue alien, then takes his place at the controls. Fystik moves to the navigator's seat.

In the Firm Tube(tm), Plinket and Ravv lurch at the tremor caused by the wrenching of the Skulker.

"He's gonna take off," shouts Plinket.

The officers dart from the tube, quickly sealing the door behind them. There is a horrible screeching as metal begins to tear. The pair look through the view port as the Skulker rips free of the Firm Tube(tm), the Tube twisting and folding as though made of foil.

"Uh oh, O," says Hoddy, straining to see over the cops. "My uncle's gonna be real upset when I tell him about this, T-H-I-S."

"Come on," snaps Plinket, "we'll catch him in the cruiser."

The NNP officers race into their pursuit vehicle and fire it up.

On board the *Skulker*, Fystik checks the rear Holo-Vis(tm) monitor. "The NNP Cruiser is pulling away from the station. You've got to get moving."

"Don't worry, once we get up enough speed they won't be able to follow us into hyperspace."

Gladius punches the Hypo Blast O'Boost(tm). The *Ebony Skulker*, Series FX20(tm) leaves a blue streak of light in its wake.

On board the *Annihilator*, the digital coordinate readout begins to change.

"Sir, the probe is on the move again," informs Cleanerschmidt.

"How long until we reach the station?" Ragellon asks.

"We're ready to enter normalspace now."

"Do it. As long as the probe is still functioning we can track them. We'll stop at the station to make sure they left and aren't trying to pull a fast one on us."

"There gonna jump into hyperspace!"

Plinket swings his chair over to the Super Special Tracking Systems(tm) console, an exclusive Nectar Nine Police pursuit device. He looks through a targeting screen, lining it's laser sights on the *Skulker*'s bar code identification plate. Ravv keeps the throttle open full, fighting to catch up with the receding runner.

"Firing Laser Tow Thread... NOW!" Plinket squeezes a trigger, shooting a thin, intertwining orange and pink laser beam. The beam silently makes contact with the *Ebony Skulker*'s bar code, locking itself with the trajectory of the ship.

"Laser Tow Thread locked and tracking." Plinket turns to smile at Ravv. "We got him."

"Prepare for hyperspace!"

Gladius stabs the Cyan HooterTooters(tm) button and, with a shudder, the *Skulker* transcends the barrier from normalspace to light speed plus.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

TREACHERY & MANIPULATION "You'll have to act quickly."

"Where are they?" snaps an angry Captain South. He towers over Hoddy Scrunge, who is being restrained by two soldiers.

"Who, H-O-O?" quivers Scrunge, shaking from the intense influx of weapons pointing troopers.

Salata grabs Hoddy by his greasy collar, hauls him close. The youth winces in the presence of the Captain's hideous facial disfigurement.

"What happened to your face, F-A-C-E?" Hoddy asks, truly curious.

South's scar fills with blood. "Look, dirt bag, two men were here. A tall, muscular one with short, spiky hair, and a shorter, smart-mouthed, wiry one with long greasy hair, right?"

"Uh... no, N-O. The big guy was here, but he was with some blue alien, a Dismemberon, I think, T-H-I-N-K."

South turns to Cleanerschmidt. How does a Dismemberon figure into this? Dropping Hoddy, they walk amongst the small military team that has the station's control bay locked down.

"We've had problems with those bastards for eons, now," South says in hushed tones. "It would certainly fit if the terrorists were some blue-faced supremacist group."

"Perhaps there is only one Dismemberon involved, sir. Just because the kid says a Dismemberon was with Slate doesn't mean the entire Dismemberon race is behind this."

South stops, fixes Cleanerschmidt with a narrow-eyed stare.

"Let me go!" squeals a female voice.

The two officers observe a soldier escorting the still hideously clad Asilla Ffee into the room.

"Who's this?"

"Don't know, sir," replies the trooper. "We caught her trying to sneak onto the Vi-Scout."

South looks Asilla up and down, then steps in close to her.

"Oooh," she croons, slipping into entice mode, apparently oblivious to South's raging scar, "I just love a man in uniform."

"Do you? What about men in Spiffy Sensor Suit Undergarments. Seen any of those, lately?"

Ffee purses her lips, darting her tongue along their surface. "Maybe."

"Answer the question!"

Asilla jumps, taken aback. "One guy. I saw only one guy in his underwear. He was big and a real jerk. Was with some skinny blue alien. Then he got into a fight with the Nectar Nine boys and they all took off outta here."

"Yeah," adds Hoddy, watching from across the room, "tore off the Firm Tube in one of the docking bays, too, T-O!"

"Nectar Nine? You mean the Nectar Nine Police?"

Asilla nods.

"Great, those fascist cops will screw up everything. Cleanerschmidt, pull everyone out and get us back to the *Annihilator*. We have to intercept Slate before those cops do."

The troopers scramble for the Vi-Scout(tm), leaving a confused Hoddy and Asilla standing with mouths agape.

South thumbs his Commucon Stay-Close(tm). "Vice-Admiral..."

"What did you find, South?"

"Bad news. They aren't here, and what's worse, they've attracted the attention of some Nectar Nine Police officers."

"Pull your team out, South. If the NNP find them, they're dead. And we'll have lost our only lead to the terrorists."

"Already on our way, sir."

"All systems stable... looks like we've shaken off another couple of butt heads anxious to string us up," Gladius says. "Seems we've done nothing but get people riled." He deactivates his chair, swivels to Fystik. "Okay, Fystik, feed in the course to this so-called terrorist base, I'll check on Geronimo."

Fystik hesitates, staring down at the console.

Gladius stops at the bulkhead and looks back, weighs the possibility that the Dismemberon is about to renege on his deal. "What's the problem?"

"You said Petunia is dead, Mr. Slate?"

Gladius nods affirmative.

"I don't think so," Fystik continues. "We had an excellent early detection system on the Eighth Planet. She would have seen them coming. I'm sure she has escaped, and is probably on her way to fulfill our current contract."

"You knew her that well?"

Fystik blushes to a deep navy blue. "You might say

we... were intimate. We are betrothed."

Gladius blinks, amazed. "So? That has nothing to do with our deal."

"I'm afraid it does. Our current contract is to deliver three more modified Scow Cows to the DataTrump Fruition Front. I am sure Petunia would do so. And if she knew our operation was exposed she would also attempt to cut future contact with the terrorists."

"Fine," Gladius shrugs. "Maybe we'll see her when we check this place out, if she's alive."

Fystik fidgets, looking at the floor. "Petunia and I have discussed the possibility of this very situation, and Petunia refuses to believe that the terrorists will not let us terminate our dealings. I know they are very nervous, mistrusting." He raises his eyes to Gladius. "They won't leave loose ends. They will extract information from her... then kill her."

"Kind of like what you two were going to do to Geronimo and I?" asks Gladius, astonished.

"No, no. That was just business. Well, pleasant business, perhaps. But nothing personal, I assure you."

"Uh huh."

"I will give you the course change if you give me your word that we will attempt to locate Petunia, and rescue her if need be."

Slate considers this momentarily, then lets out a frustrated sigh of resignation. "Okay. But no more deals. And if she or you make any aggressive moves against myself or Geronimo, you're both dead. You got me?"

The Dismemberon briefly holds Gladius's stare, then lowers his eyes. "Agreed."

"We got course change happening," informs the Losfallonite.

The Nectar Nine Police cruiser, chasing the fleeing Ebony Skulker, blasts through hyperspace. The throb of the powerful Super HootToot Pursuit(tm) drive reverberates through its frame.

"Laser Tow Thread initiating course redirection."

"Great, I'll pull back on the throttle," Plinket says. "Let's maintain a discreet trailing distance. We'll nab the bastards when they slow down."

Ravv spasms in a silent chuckle and returns his concentration to the instrumentation.

"Get me Military Control A-S-A-P."

"Military Control A-S-A-P," crackles the voice.

"This is Vice-Admiral Ragellon, on board the *Annihilator*. Give me High Commander Supreme Dashe Snoyan."

Salata casts an annoyed look at Cleanerschmidt, who is listening intently. The Lieutenant, noticing South's agitation, shrugs and returns his attention to the Holo-Vis(tm) as an image of a slightly disheveled, yet striking middle-aged woman, High Commander Supreme Dashe Snoyan, appears.

"Yes, Vice-Admiral Ragellon?"

"Thank you for your promptness, High Commander."

"You rarely call if it isn't urgent, what is it?"

"Operation Maelstrom is paying dividends. I have a good lead on the terrorists."

Snoyan straightens. "Fill me in."

Ragellon quickly briefs the High Commander Supreme with the information he has gleaned. Snoyan listens intently.

"...we're trailing our suspects now, heading for what we believe to be a terrorist base," concludes Ragellon. "I want some back up, however, before I go in."

"Good work, Vice-Admiral. I can possibly spare four ships." She consults her Pocket Pal(tm) command center, checking on the position of each ship in the fleet. "You can have the Battle Accelerators *Decimeter*, under Itchtrong; the *Expunger*, under Helfogg; the *Abrogate*, under Wu Su; and the *Pulverizer*, under Brown. All are presently stationed at Desolate Harmony."

"I'll have our flight plan fed to their navigational controllers," advises Ragellon with a tone of finality.

"Be careful, Vice-Admiral."

The High Commander Supreme's image blinks out.

Inside the High Commander Supreme's office, the naked Colonel Dwayne Itchtrong, commander of the *Decimeter*, crawls from the recessed boudoir, out of the rhythmically waving follicles of a luxurious Blissfollian Fun Fur(tm) comforter.

"It seems that poop, Ragellon, has finally found something," Dashe says. "We should plan for a botch up."

"As usual. May I suggest that I arrive late. Let Ragellon and the others screw with the up front defenses. Meanwhile, myself and the Frak Crak Assault Team can take care of business at the back door."

"That would be the most expedient way to deal with the situation."

On the bridge of the *Annihilator*, the helmsman

maintains his vigil over the Battle Accelerator's guidance systems. Ragellon, South and Cleanerschmidt step through the portal.

"How are we doing?" asks Ragellon.

"One minor course correction, so far," informs the helmsman, motioning to the Holo-Plotter's(tm) brightly colored tracings that highlight the Homing Detect O'Probe's(tm) flight path.

"Let me know the moment we get a position fix on their destination."

Heratio Brown's silver lips nuzzle naughtily in the nape of Helena Helfogg's neck. With a smile she pulls away from him, offering a playful wink.

"No time, snookums," she says, pulling her one piece uniform up over her firm, bountiful body, "you heard Snoyan's orders. We're on full alert."

"So, Ragellon and South may have turned up a clue," ponders Brown, buttoning his tunic.

"Hard to say, but Ragellon can scramble the fleet without any red tape." She slides her feet into her boots, then turns to Brown, who has finished dressing. "Perhaps they *have* found something. It's about time somebody did."

They kiss tenderly, then, separating, they assume the demeanor of command.

Together, they stride down the corridor of the Mark II Battle Accelerator HyperCraft(tm) *Expunger*. Stopping briefly at the elevator, Brown's silver hand gives Helfogg's a quick squeeze. They exchange a lover's glance, a hint of smile, then Brown steps into the elevator. Hearing the lift descend behind her, Helfogg continues to the bridge.

The flight crew snaps to attention as Helfogg enters.

"We're ready to disembark, Captain," calls the *Expunger's* helmsman.

Helfogg slides behind her control desk, taking her seat in the Magno Command Chair(tm). "Sound the alarm, prepare to get underway."

Captain Brown strides through the corridors of Desolate Harmony, heading toward the docking station of his Mark II Battle Accelerator HyperCraft(tm), the *Pulverizer*. A Whizzer(tm) pulls up beside him, the stout, bullish form of Major Hugh Wu Su within.

"Heratio, get in," calls Wu Su. "I'm on my way to the *Abrogate*. I can drop you at your ship."

Brown nods his thanks, then jumps in next to Major

Wu Su. The Major gooses the throttle, speeding the Whizzer(tm) toward the *Pulverizer*.

BLEEET!

A small alarm informs of an incoming transmission. The Observer taps the keypad on the desk console. A text message appears on screen:

```
//->We've been scrambled.  
Sounds like Ragellon has  
a lead. We disembark from  
Desolate Harmony in five  
minutes, I can't delay our  
departure. You'll have to  
act quickly.<-//
```

The Observer considers the information, then clears the screen.

* * *

BLOOOP!

The Compu-Stud's Trajectory Tracer(tm) of Petunia Ren's spaceship, the Stencheron Stellar Glider(tm), alerts its crew to the message appearing on the data display terminal:

```
>PROXIMITY ALERT  
  
:Elyeesiastapopadopoulos Nebula  
:current trajectory coordinates  
:758.001/334.29/28.11/12.049  
  
:current speed:  
:1.8879 +light  
>MATTER-MELD IMMINENT  
:at trajectory culmination point  
:within 2:00 minutes  
  
:trajectory profile indicates  
:deceleration sequence to  
:initiate in 46 seconds  
:and counting  
  
>DO YOU WISH MANUAL OVERRIDE ON  
>DECELERATION SEQUENCE? yes/[no]  
:response requested  
:within 10 seconds
```

Petunia quickly touches the 'ENTER' key, allowing the computer to proceed with its deceleration sequence.

>DECELERATION TO COMMENCE
:WITHIN 37 seconds
:and counting

Snax, who has wedged himself into a corner of the Stencheron's rear compartment, belches softly and reaches for another Hydroxilated Nutri-Chew(tm) wafer from the carton clenched in his pods. Several crumbs fall lazily in the GravLite(tm) gravity field.

SNICK!

His tongue flicks back into his mouth, one of the larger crumbs adhering to its sticky tip. Satisfied, he leans forward to peer out a porthole.

Petunia settles into her Magno Chair(tm) and braces herself for the strain of deceleration from hyperspace. The computer readout indicates six seconds to initiate.

FWWWOOOMMMM!

Snax catches the briefest glimpse of a bare-bones grid shape erupting into view before he is tossed violently against the forward bulkhead by the tremendous g-force of deceleration.

What now? Groping for a hold, suckers emerge from his right pod. He suctions onto the surface of the bulkhead and grapples to the porthole.

Outside the ship looms a sprawling, scaffold-like structure, its general appearance being that of numerous, interconnecting spoked hubs. Beyond the space-grid lies the patchwork patterns of a farming planet.

As the Stencheron approaches the grid, Snax notes the unusual configuration of the hubs and platforms. Huge Fraz-Boom(tm) guns poke from cleverly camouflaged pillboxes within the grid's superstructure. The grid bristles with armaments.

"Request identification code," comes a voice over Petunia's Commucon(tm).

"Code ZX dash FRT one slash seven," says Petunia, leaning toward an Ocular Tester(tm) retina scanner.

"Code identified. Prepare for retina scan."

She opens her eye, pressing it into the scanner.

FWZZZZZT!

The scan is completed.

"Welcome, Petunia Ren."

A bookish Glik-Gnome appears on the Holo-Vis(tm) screen. Petunia, looking at the familiar, squat, long-eared alien, nods.

"Please follow the lit portion through the grid and proceed to the planet's surface."

The Holo-Vis(tm) blinks out.

Beyond the front view port, several of the spokes disappear. Rows of lights wink on, indicating the route through the grid. Petunia deftly guides the Stencheron, and the three Scow Cows in tow, along the lighted pathway, toward the city lying on the surface of the small Green Moon below.

The Ebony Skulker, Series FX20(tm) gracefully glides through hyperspace, its crew oblivious to the NNP Cruiser that follows it. Slate, his massive frame hunched over the piloting console, attempts to focus on the delicate instruments before him. His blue-skinned companion whistles a melodic tune, swinging his thin legs back and forth in the navigator's seat. Fystik studies his captor carefully, curious about the big man's angst.

"What's your real problem, lower life form?" he asks, abandoning caution.

Slate slowly swivels his chair, then leans toward the slight alien. "Look, Fishstik, we made our deal. I'll take you to where Petunia would be if she weren't dead, and you'll see me to the terrorist base so I can send my stupid report to IDR headquarters and keep my job, okay? Telling you my personal problems does not enter into it."

Fystik shrugs, focuses on the Navi-Control(tm).

Geronimo enters the bridge, examining beneath the red cape and flexing his newly healed shoulder. Spying Fystik, he stops abruptly. "What's he doin' here?"

"He was repairing himself in the AutoDoc. He's going to lead us to the terrorists."

"What?!"

Fystik glances toward the commotion.

"We're going to help him find Petunia Ren in return for his getting us a fix on the terrorists," informs Gladius.

"Petunia? Terrorists?! No fuckin' way! That's a good way to end up D-E-A-D dead!"

"Oh, don't you start."

"What?" Geronimo looks from Gladius to Fystik and back.

"Never mind." Gladius rubs his forehead, choosing his words carefully, trying to convince himself as much as

Geronimo. "I am a sworn agent of the Interstellar Detritus Reclamation Company. I have been asked, in the name of our missing brothers and sisters, to keep tabs on the situation and report any information to my superiors. Through Mister Fystik here, we have a lead on the suspected culprits. Now, you can help us, or I can eject you into space."

Geronimo glances to Fystik, who offers a weak smile and a shrug, then back at the somewhat haggard Gladius.

"Alright, I'll help."

Petunia completes the shut down procedure of the Stencheron Stellar Glider(tm), which lurches as it begins it's descent on the landing platform, en route to the underground hangars. The three Scow Cows remain parked on the surface field.

"Mr. Munitions," she calls.

The robot comes to life, turns his turret to listen.

"I want you fully armed. This is our last deal with the DataTrump Fruition Front and we don't want any misunderstandings."

"Oooo, it will be my pleasure, Miss Petunia."

CLICK. WHIRR. FWICKT.

Numerous weapons appear and disappear along the surface of Mr. Munitions's(tm) metallic bulk. The sounds and smells of on-line fire power fill the cabin.

"Heh, heh," he chuckles.

In the cargo hold, Snax cautiously lumbers through the maze of containers. Reaching the aft bulkhead, he stops next to a ladder. Checking to see that no one has been alerted to his presence, he slowly climbs upward, poking his singular eye into a dim compartment. The galley. Spying some delectable treats, Snax's mouth begins to water.

"Snacks," he moans lustily, pulling his portly form up into the food preparation compartment.

From its metal case, Petunia pulls a mini Five Point Pin-Laser(tm) and attaches it to her left forearm. She shrugs her shirt sleeve down to conceal the weapon.

"Open the hatch," she orders to Mr. Munitions(tm).

"Vroom, vroom," mutters the large robot, moving on his dual treads to the gangway. "Here we go!"

Opening the door, he advances onto the ramp, Petunia close behind.

"Welcome, Petunia Ren," calls First Clerk One, Rhymo Stanzilli. He stands alone on the large, flat-gray docking

bay.

"Where's Bloition?"

"Ooo, hoo," Mr. Munitions(tm) chirps, weapons activating, his senses detecting a hostile presence. But before he can fire a single shot, a Bot Force Paralyzer Ray(tm) encircles him, disrupting his electronic field. Mr. Munitions(tm) sputters, then freezes.

Petunia stops in her tracks, fists clenching. She glares at Rhymo. "Problem with my bodyguard?"

"Not at all," replies the fastidious First Clerk One.

A full compliment of Protect O'Bots(tm) emerge from the gloom around the Stencheron, followed by three combat-garbed henchmen, one of them carrying a Bot Force Paralyzer Ray(tm) gun.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

FALSE POSITIVE

"What the hell is this?!"

Gladius is slumped low in the Magno Piloting Swivel Chair(tm), his feet up on the console, brooding. He has been trying to piece together Fystik's revelations, recent news reports, and the personal events of the past few days. He now knows for certain, as Captain Salata South had suspected, that the terrorist attacks on the governmental bases were accomplished with the aid of Scow Cow infiltration, supplied by Fystik and friends. His problem is the military involvement, and the implied seriousness of the situation. The thought of tangling with whomever has been bombing governmental bases doesn't thrill him.

He turns to the communications terminal. Hoddy Scrunge has done some work on the system and there is a strange, uneven metal box of homemade design bolted onto the center of the console. Several multi-colored wires protrude from the box and disappear into a number of freshly drilled holes in the panel. Giving a doubtful shake of the head, Gladius flips the toggle to power up the terminal. The lights wink on, flicker once, then stabilize. The 'SYSTEM READY' indicator glows.

Gladius brightens at the apparent reliability of the motor-mouthed kid. He types in the location code and places another deep space call to Rolezar Doughan.

Fystik, who has been snoozing in the Magno Navi Chair(tm), cocks an eye at Slate. Gladius notices the Dismemberon's concern.

"Don't worry, we made a deal. I just want to straighten some things out with my boss so that I'll still have a job when this is over, provided we make it out alive."

Fystik nods, closes his eye, and resumes snoozing.
PING!

The IDR Company logo appears on screen, followed by the image of Rolezar's assistant district manager.

"I need to speak to Doughan."

"The District Manager is presently... uh... unavailable," replies the assistant, squirming nervously.

"It's important. Tell him it's a message from Gladius Slate."

"Slate..."

"Yes. I need to speak to Doughan, now."

"He is unavailable."

"Look, I need some help out here or--"

The connection suddenly terminates. Fystik raises his eyelids, watches silently.

Gladius is baffled by the assistant district manager's abrupt manner. The perplexing bureaucracy of the Interstellar Detritus Reclamation Company is beginning to get to him. Enough is enough. He pounds another location code into the jerry-rigged communications console.

The logo of the Interstellar Detritus Reclaimers Union appears, accompanied by a thin, monotone greeting.

"With whom would you care to speak?"

"Mirty Fuegg, please."

BLEEEP. TWEEETLE. TARTARTATA.

A dim, static riddled image appears. Mirty Fuegg, Union president, leans into the cone of light spilling from his desk lamp. "This is Fuegg."

"Brother Fuegg, Gladius Slate here. Look, I'm in a bit of a bind. I think I've discovered the source of these terrorist attacks, but things are getting too hot out here, what with military involvement and all. The Company is insisting I stay. I said turn it over to the Space Commission, but they refused. Now I can't even get through to them."

"Military, you say? That's nuts, the Company shouldn't leave you, uh, stranded like this. Do you want to look at filing a grievance?"

"No, no, nothing like that. Just see if you could get through to Doughan, get me out of here or at least get me some help."

"Alright, hang tough, brother Slate, I'll look into it."

The screen goes dark as Mirty Fuegg terminates the connection. Buoyed by the promise of relief, Gladius settles back in his chair and closes his eyes.

The *Annihilator's* Cyan HooterTooters(tm) continue to ram the massive craft through hyperspace. On the bridge Captain Salata South paces, scar bright red, occasionally glancing toward the display of the Homing Detect O'Probe's(tm) flight path.

"They're getting further ahead of us," he announces.

"Yes, sir," replies the helmsman, wincing.

"Go faster." The disturbed Captain makes a brisk exit.

"Hey, Happyass," calls Geronimo, entering from the aft

hold.

Gladius rises to face his ex-copilot, his scowl softening at the sight. Geronimo holds the awesome form of the completely assembled BIGGER GUN(tm).

"Does it work?"

"It should. I don't really think we wanna test it in here, though."

Fystik glances back briefly, then returns his attention to the Navi-Control(tm) console.

Gladius takes the enormous weapon into his hands, pulling on the shoulder strap. He caresses its metal, fondles its trigger, the aromatic scent of fresh gun oil tickling his olfactory. A keypad over the hand grip catches his eye. "What's this?"

"Randomizer."

"What's it do?"

"How should I know. Although I think I may have broken it when I put it together. Sorry." Geronimo shrugs and wanders off to search for more treasures.

"Fystik, how long until we reach this terrorist base?" Gladius is sighting his new weapon on the back of the unsuspecting Dismemberon's head.

"We will be decelerating in fifty-seven minutes and counting," calls the Dismemberon, intent on the navigational readouts.

"Good." The big man hefts the BIGGER GUN(tm). "Very good."

Salata South ruminates, pacing the hallways of the *Annihilator*, smacking one gloved hand into the other. He stops outside the large double doors of the Battle Orchestration Room(tm). Taking a deep breath, he swipes the latch pad and the doors slide open.

Inside, Joshua Ragellon sits at the El Grande Concert Control Console(tm), coordinating the four other ships that are on their way to join the *Annihilator*.

"Excuse me, Vice-Admiral, but we may have a problem."

The Vice-Admiral looks over his half-lensed spectacles, focuses on his senior officer. "How so?"

"That ship is getting farther ahead of us."

"Have we adjusted speed accordingly?"

"Yes, but that may be where our problem lies."

"Explain."

"If we follow too closely, we'll arrive before any of our backup support. That could put us in a strategically vulnerable position."

Ragellon ponders this.

"But if we wait," Salata continues, "the garbage men may alert the terrorists to our knowledge of the Eighth Planet..."

"...and they would alter their defenses accordingly, or escape," finishes Ragellon. "Damnation!"

"Do we follow and go in unprotected?"

"We have no choice. This is the closest we've ever been to nailing the terrorists. We can't risk letting them slip away. Prepare your team. This is going to get bloody."

"What the hell?" Officer Plinket is examining the readouts from the NNP cruiser's systems computer.

"Status checks no good?" asks Ravv, ambling back to his station, a large can of carbonated caffeine drink clasped in his pincers.

Plinket pulls at his thinning caterpillar mustache, his brow furrowed. "According to this, our braking AttiTooters are askew."

"So?"

"So, when we kick out of hyperspace and punch up the AttiToots to slow us down, we're likely to go into a blinding, spinning, barrel-rolling, somersaulting, tumble that will be uncorrectable for fifteen million kilometers of space flight. That'll really suck."

"Can't be." Ravv plunks his bulk into the over-sized copilot's chair.

"Why?"

"I checked all systems before docking at Scrunge Station. No way it go wrong."

Plinket sizes up his partner's serious look, then nods his head. "Probably this stupid computer. These L Seven-Fifties have never worked as well as the old Bozwell Three-Hundreds. Never could understand why they replaced them. We still got a bead on our mark?"

Ravv glances over to the Laser Tow Thread(tm) scanning screen. A bright green blip defines the position of the Ebony Skulker. "Still there."

"Initiating deceleration sequence," calls Fystik from the navigator's chair. "We'll be at the rendezvous point in five minutes."

"Good." Gladius props the BIGGER GUN(tm) next to the Magno Piloting Swivel Chair(tm) and takes his place at the helm. He fingers the Commucon Stay-Close(tm) on the arm of the chair. "Strap down, Geronimo. We're coming out of hyperspace."

In the forward hold Geronimo sits in a sleek, black Hover Screamer(tm). Climbing from the four-seater, open cockpit terrain vehicle, he glances at the cargo bay hatch, taking note of the quick-release latches and the extension ramp, then clambers up the ladder to the bridge.

"Decelerating... now," comes Fystik's lilting voice as Geronimo activates his Magno Chair(tm).

The view through the forward screen changes into that of a giant, grid-like space station with a small, green planet beyond it, both back-lit by a brightly colored nebula.

"That's some set up," says Gladius. "Looks like a huge weather control and manufacturing grid."

"Don't let it fool you," replies Fystik, calmly.

"That's the finest defense grid in known space. An armada couldn't get through that without losing half its fleet."

The StopEmCold Defense Grid(tm) consists of multiple layers of evenly spaced hubs, each with several spokes radiating out to connect with neighboring hubs. The spokes are structural girders and transit tubes for moving between hubs. The main purpose of the grid is defense and the hubs are devoted to weapons installments, however, each hub is a self-contained unit and can be tailored as a research station, orbital manufacturing plant, or weather control base for the planet below.

Various routes through the grid exist, but they are usually disguised with holo-projections of bogus spokes. Although small cruiser-style vessels can fit through most areas of the grid, something as large as a Mark II Battle Accelerator HyperCraft(tm) warship would need special guidance to squeak through designated passageways.

As with all StopEmCold Defense Grids(tm), unless they surround the entire planet, they are in geo-synchronous orbit and the edges are protected by an extremely high-powered laser. This laser, emanating from a source on the planet, is aimed at a mirror on the rim of the grid. This mirror reflects down to a land based mirror, then back up to the next successive mirror on the grid, and so on, zig-zagging around its circumference. All the mirrors are on automatic tracking pivots so that they can never be misaligned by movement of the grid or elimination of one or more mirrors.

In addition, the laser and mirrors oscillate to provide a 'solid' curtain of laser-light around the installation to be protected, and the laser is so powerful that it will slice, deli-style, even the fastest moving projectile. Unless the laser is turned off, there is

absolutely no way to cross the boundary.

"How the fuck are we gonna get through that, huh?" squeals Geronimo.

"We got deceleration of vehicle," informs the Losfallonite Nectar Nine Police officer from the Laser Tow Thread(tm) tracking console.

"Excellent," affirms his partner, Officer Plinket. "I'm still a little nervous about this anomalous reading we're gettin' from the AttiTooters, though. Let's drop from hyperspace with a two-million kilometer buffer, just in case."

"Yes, sir."

Fraz-Boom(tm) guns poke their snouts from the nearest connecting hubs of the Green Moon's StopEmCold Defense Grid(tm). The face of the Glik-Gnome materializes on the Skulker's Holo-Vis(tm).

"Hold your position and await clearance."

Fystik turns to Gladius. "You must give a clearance code."

"I don't know any code, what code?"

Fystik calls out: "ZX dash FRT one slash seven."

The image of the Glik-Gnome fades out. Gladius looks questioningly to Fystik, who shrugs. Suddenly, the image of the Glik-Gnome reappears.

"That is an invalid code. You have ten seconds to supply a correct security code or you will be destroyed."

"Well, hang on, we're here to visit a friend," says Gladius, stalling for time, gesturing frantically to Fystik.

"Five seconds."

"Look, we... uh... misplaced our code," Gladius stammers.

"One... prepare to be destroyed."

"Wait! We're leaving!" Gladius thumbs the reverse AttiTooters(tm). The Skulker surges, backing away from the grid. The Glik-Gnome's image fades out.

"Petunia's here!" Fystik shouts. "She's already used that code, that's why they won't accept it."

Gladius glares at the Dismemberon.

"Sorry," Fystik replies. "I only know the one code."

Gladius swings the ship's nose toward the blackness of space.

"Hey, I said Petunia is here. What about it? You said we were going to rescue Petunia."

"I'm not going to tangle with that mess," retorts

Gladius, avoiding the Dismemberon's gaze.

Geronimo, who has been massaging a growing headache, breathes a sigh of relief. "At last, Happybutt," he says, deactivating his Magno Chair(tm), "a little self-preservation, that's what I wanna see."

"Shut up, Geronimo." Gladius fumes, the conflicting pressures of Company orders, honoring of his word, and his own common sense are taking their toll.

Fystik, fearing a change of plans, glances from Geronimo to the tightly wound Gladius. In urgent need of a bargaining chip, he looks down at the monitors and readouts before him on the Navi-Control(tm) console. His face brightens. "We aren't going anywhere, Inferior Ones."

"Whaddaya talkin' about, Blue Face?" asks Geronimo.

"No fuel."

Gladius swivels, his eyes feral. "What do you mean, no fuel?"

"Just what I said, no fuel."

In a fury Gladius tries to rise, but can't escape the Magno Restraining Field(tm) of his chair, which frustrates him further. He pounds the deactivate button and, suspecting a ploy, attempts to stride to the Dismemberon's station. The GravLite(tm) gravity forces him to make one huge, looping step, and he has to catch himself on the Nav-Control(tm) console. His gut sinks at the information on the screen. No fuel.

"That snot-nosed kid back at that service station was supposed to gas it up." He looks up from the screen, gazing listlessly around the cabin.

"Well, perhaps there is enough to make it back to the Green Moon," suggests Fystik.

Gladius shoots the blue-skinned alien a nasty grimace.

"No fuckin' way," Geronimo shouts. "Didn't we just decide not to conduct any suicidal activities?"

Gladius ignores his ex-copilot and crosses to his Magno Piloting Swivel Chair(tm). Geronimo moves to Fystik's shoulder, staring at the screen in disbelief.

hhhHHHHUUUUMMMMAAA!!

Geronimo tumbles backward, red cape billowing over his head. He flails for his Magno Chair(tm) and manages to pull himself into the seat, then claws at the cape to untangle himself. "You're not gonna go into that grid, are you?" he shouts, over the whine of the engines.

Gladius has resigned himself to his fate. "No. But our only choice is to take this thing down."

Fystik smiles. Geronimo closes his eyes, his fingertips pressing his temples.

"I'm going to try and make it around the edge of the grid," informs Gladius. "Maybe we'll have a chance there."

The Skulker's HooterTooters(tm) blaze. The sleek black craft vaults forward, heading for the far edge of the grid. The grid comes to life, Fraz-Boom(tm) guns appearing from everywhere to track the vessel.

Gladius steers the ship parallel to the grid.

FFFWWWWCCCHHHHTTT!!!

"We've been hit in the left stabilizer," informs Fystik. "May I suggest you begin evasive--"

Before the Dismemberon can finish his thought, Gladius yanks on the joystick, then quickly slams it forward. The Skulker pitches wildly, structural supports straining. The grid opens fire and the Electro-Pulse Surges(tm) of the Fraz-Boom(tm) guns whine around the speeding ship.

Inside the Grid Station Prime Hub(tm), First Clerk Alfonse bursts into the NabAll Nerve Center(tm). The Glik-Gnome sits in the Magno Control Chair(tm), rapidly issuing commands to the defenses. He is observing the Skulker's mad dash on a large Holo-Vis(tm) monitor.

"We've got a crasher!"

"Go to full alert weapons stance," orders Alfonse.

"I've done that. That ship is moving too fast."

Alfonse brushes the Glik-Gnome aside and begins to feverishly bash at the controls.

CRRRCCKKKLLLLZZZZSSSSHHHTT!!

The Skulker shakes violently.

"What'd they hit?" shouts Gladius, expertly guiding the ebony craft through the flak.

"Don't worry," informs Fystik, "that one was only cosmetic."

BBWWWWAAAAMMMPPP!

The sleek ship lurches again.

"The right stabilizer's gone!" Fystik has turned a pale, powder blue.

"That ain't cosmetic," shouts Geronimo.

The Skulker starts a slow, clockwise roll.

"Crap!" Gladius wrestles to correct the attitude and guide the ship away from the grid.

The ship fights back, veering toward an inevitable collision, the outer rim of the grid fast approaching. Gladius, sweat pouring down his brow, mouth dry, reefs on the joystick. Geronimo and Fystik, eyes wide, stare out the forward view screen.

BACLLLANNNGG!!

The Skulker takes a hit in the tail. It jolts violently, wobbling in its trajectory. The edge of the grid is upon them. The percussion of the hit has caused the front end of the Skulker to swing out, narrowly missing collision, but the back end doesn't clear.

KASCRRRAAAANNGGGG!!

The vertical stabilizer unit peels away in a blaze of sparks. The grid strut crumples, wrenching on the nearby hub. A Fraz-Boom(tm) gun misfires, slicing through two more struts. Like dominoes, a ripple of destruction fans out from the damaged area, then quickly subsides. The grid shudders and its mirrors, which support the laser curtain, swivel and adjust to maintain the security continuum. The Skulker remains outside the security zone.

Clear of the grid, Gladius manages to nose dive the ship toward the planet.

Deep beneath the Green Moon's only city, Verd, lies a sprawling business complex. Secreted within this are the disguised offices of the terrorist organization: the DataTrump Fruition Front.

In the Crusade Strategy Room(tm), the nerve center of the terrorist base, the emergency meeting of the DFF directors is interrupted by the sound of a whooping klaxon. First Chairman Supreme Bloition rises to his feet, jabbing at his Commucon Stay-Close(tm).

"What the hell is going on?" he barks at the security team in an adjacent room.

"We have a crasher, cleared the grid, but still exterior, margin five," reports a security agent. "Cop Hopper already dispatched."

"Get me Alfonse!"

Alfonse is surveying the damaged grid being displayed on a bank of Holo-Vis Monitors(tm) when the image of the First Chairman Supreme impinges on the central Holo-Vis(tm).

"What the hell is going on?!" demands Bloition.

"Uh... just a little security incident. There has been no breach and it's being taken care of, sir," replies Alfonse, cringing at the impending wrath.

"Standby for deceleration!" calls Officer Plinket from the Magno Piloting Chair(tm) within the hurtling Nectar Nine Police cruiser. "Brace yourself, Ravv, this could get rough!"

The insect-like Losfallonite nods and grips the arms

of his Magno Navi-Chair(tm) with his claw pincers.

Plinket watches the count scroll down to zero.

"NOW!" he shouts, and the hum of the reverse drives crescendos to a feverish whine.

The compact police pursuit vehicle bursts forth into normalspace and immediately begins to yaw to the left. The on board stabilizers detect the abnormal situation and fire the corresponding AttiTooters(tm) in an attempt to straighten the vehicle's flight. As forewarned by the systems computer, the braking AttiTooter(tm) drives are, in fact, misaligned, and when the stabilizing AttiTooters(tm) kick in, the braking AttiTooters(tm) automatically adjust to compensate for apparent vehicle skew. Unfortunately, they are being informed to adjust to an abnormal situation using normal settings.

The computer performs a rapid iteration with the incoming data, producing a hideously complicated, ever increasingly complex series of corrections representing the flight attitude the cruiser should take. The drives alternate, firing rapidly, the aberrant pitching of the vehicle quickly degenerating until, approximately six seconds after eruption into normalspace, the ship is flung into a blinding, spinning, barrel-rolling, somersaulting, tumble.

"What the hell is this?!" The Glik-Gnome stares at the rapidly approaching, squiggling ball of fuzz displayed on the Mid-range Sens O'Scope(tm).

Alfonse snaps to attention at the sight of the projectile. "Not another attack! Get a target lock, quick!"

The Glik-Gnome flails at the keyboard, initiating automatic targeting systems to track the curious missile.

"Done!"

The whirling Nectar Nine Police cruiser, with its cargo of lunch-less, comatose police officers, barrels down on the Green Moon's StopEmCold Defense Grid(tm). Seconds from impact, it has barely scrubbed off any speed at all.

"Fire, dammit!!!" shrieks Alfonse.

The Glik-Gnome's finger plants onto the trigger button. The gaping barrel of a HubbaMort(tm) cannon spits its load, rattling the Grid.

Less than twenty kilometers out, the snub-nosed, exploding shell interacts with the embroiled police cruiser. Both cease-to-be in a silent, blinding flash of

splitting atoms.

"Sir," calls the anxious helmsman.

Salata moves to the main bridge console. "What's the problem?"

"The ship we've been following, its disappeared."

"What?! How?!"

Lieutenant Cleanerschmidt shifts his attention to the commotion, stunned by what he is hearing.

"The signal just stopped."

Salata punches the intercom. "Vice-Admiral Ragellon, please report to the bridge." He examines the last trace of plot points defining the Homing Detect O'Probe's(tm) flight path. There is a vast variance in direction and speed readings, then nothing.

Ragellon storms into the room. "What's gone wrong?"

"We've lost the signal from the garbage men, sir."

"Looks like they were destroyed," Ragellon comments, studying the abrupt end to the erratic flight path. "How long until we catch up with where they left hyperspace?"

"Forty-five minutes, sir," informs the helmsman.

"Go to full alert, I want all hands to battle stations."

The Ebony Skulker glows a dangerous, cherry red as it blasts through the Green Moon's atmosphere. Half of its heat protection is being seared off by the excessive speed of reentry. On its bridge, Gladius's muscles have begun to ache. He tightens his grip, the joystick twisting in his hands.

AAAHHHHOOOOOGAAA!!!

An alarm sounds, followed by the electronic voice of the ship's autonomous monitoring system: "Fuel reserve depleted! Fuel reserve depleted!"

"Find a soft place to hit," yells Geronimo.

A portion of the ship's console ignites in a shower of burning electronics. Geronimo reaches for an extinguisher to douse the fire. The wide-eyed Fystik holds on for life.

The Skulker bursts through a layer of thin cloud, a chartreuse field of Fibra Grain(tm) below. Gladius pulls back on the stick and revs the sputtering braking AttiTooters(tm). The ebony craft touches down, rips through the field, dirt and Fibra Grain(tm) flying into the air.

Toppling a staunch DooVinee tree as though it were a match stick, the Skulker comes to rest, it's nose plowed into the ground.

Within the charred ship, Gladius deactivates his Piloting Magno Swivel Chair(tm) and slides to the floor. Fystik slowly rises, holding tightly to the navigational console. Both look to Geronimo, who has braced himself, knuckles white, his eyes shut tight.

"Lavoriss," coughs Gladius, "we're down. You can get up, now."

Geronimo slowly opens his eyes, one at a time. Realizing that the ship has stopped shaking, he touches the de-act button for his chair and stands on wobbly legs.

The three travelers stretch and begin to acquaint themselves to the moon's gravity. Gladius picks up the BIGGER GUN(tm), pulling the strap over his shoulder.

"How far are we from... anywhere?"

Fystik looks at the flickering Navi-Control(tm) console. Touching a button, he awaits a response. The screen flashes the information.

"The Green Moon's only city, Verd, is one-hundred and twenty-two point three kilometers away, due east."

"That's a hell of a hike," Gladius sighs.

"Hike, shmike," Lavoriss calls, "find yourselves some more firepower and meet me outside."

Confident once more, Geronimo springs toward the cargo access corridor, leaving Fystik and Slate to trade a questioning glance.

Finding two Hand Cannons(tm) and a Prompt O'Sting(tm) pole, Fystik and Gladius climb out of the bridge emergency escape hatch. The large human breathes deeply, sucking in the clean, Green Moon air. He helps the delicate Fystik onto the outer hull, and then down to the ground.

"Where is Geronimo?" asks Fystik, excited. "We must hurry along to meet Petunia."

SSSCREEEEEEKLLLE... POP!

The bottom of the Skulker begins to creak and groan. Steam and dust blow out from below the hull and hydraulics whine to an inaudible pitch as, trying to open like a jaw, the buried nose of the listing Skulker is pried skyward.

Gladius squints through the dirt and debris. The screech of hydraulics and tearing metal wanes and is replaced by the pounding, arrhythmic tempo of contemporary BoomFaFa-Waltz(tm) music. Fystik's foot begins to tap to the uneven beat. From the darkness within, a pair of tri-lights ignite, then glide from the belly of the ship.

The glossy black, stream-lined, open-cockpit Hover Screemer(tm) comes to a chirping halt in front of Fystik and Gladius. Geronimo sits in the driver's seat, merrily revving its engine like some spotty teenager.

"Whaddaya waitin' for?" he shouts over the din of the music. "Hop in."

The Dismemberon follows the large human into the luxurious confines of the Hover Screemer(tm). It rocks gently as the gravity repulsers adjust to the added weight.

Gladius eliminates the painful, wailing music by snapping off the front panel of the Maxiphonic Aural Processor(tm), then glares at Lavoriss. Before they can activate their Magno Bucket Seats(tm), Geronimo floors the Screemer, hurtling it across the field toward a dirt road.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

FRACAS

"We don't have time."

"UUURRRPPP!!!"

Snax belches abruptly, having finished the remaining morsels of food in the Stencheron's galley.

"Excuse me," he says aloud, looking around sheepishly. Struggling to his feet, the satiated Metamorphrodite absently scratches his buttocks and heads for the door. He saunters down the hallway, pausing at the hatch leading to the ship's exterior. Hearing nothing, he peeks out. The large, gray hangar lies empty and quiet beyond the confines of the vessel.

"Hmmm, I'd better do some, *urrrp*, like, recon." And with that, he cautiously trundles down the gangplank.

"Ten seconds to deceleration," informs the helmsman. "All decks are on full alert."

"Good," breathes Vice-Admiral Ragellon from his Magno Supreme Command Chair(tm), eyes intent on the forward view screen.

There is a sudden jolt and an increase in cabin pressure as the *Annihilator* is borne into normalspace. Its guns swivel, searching for signs of hostile activity.

"Detecting an armed defense grid with laser skirts," calls Lieutenant Cleanerschmidt from the weapons station.

"How big?" queries Ragellon.

"It stretches over an entire sector of the Green Moon, covering one-hundred and sixteen-thousand, two-hundred and sixty-seven point one, two hectares. It's protecting a small city and part of a farming belt beneath it. Outside the curtain appears to be only more farmland."

"That's a hell of a defense grid for a farming community." Ragellon observes the pillbox installations throughout the structure. "How did they manage to build it without Permits and Requisitions raising a stink?"

"Who knows what the terrorists may be capable of, sir," suggests Cleanerschmidt. "They could have pawns throughout the entire network of Galactic Governmental Civil Services."

"You may be right, Schmittty."

Salata South snaps his attention from the Holo-Monitor(tm) in disbelief. Ragellon is smiling at Cleanerschmidt.

"Thank you, sir." Cleanerschmidt defers his gaze to the floor.

"Call me Rags, son."

Salata stares blankly at the pair.

In a cold, dark cell deep in the sub-basement of Verd, Petunia sits, her hands chained to the wall behind her. She listens intently for the sound of footfalls in the outer corridor. Hearing none, she jerks her left arm. The five points of the Five Point Pin Laser(tm) emerge from her sleeve. Twisting her body around awkwardly, she flexes her wrist to start the five green beams of light, and trains them on the chains which bind her. The intense beams fizzle and pop, making slow progress against the hardened material of the chains.

The *Annihilator* advances through a dispersing cloud of synthetic particles. An extended arm, sporting a Remote Analysis Sieve(tm), samples the debris.

"According to the RAS findings," reports South, data scrolling across a small monitor, "the composition of this debris is an exact match with the materials used in the manufacture of Nectar Nine Police cruisers."

"Those bastards," fumes Ragellon. "They must've known the police were following them and called ahead for an armed reception. I told you those garbage men were working with the terrorist scum."

"At least we won't have to worry about the Nectar Nine boys screwing things up. Readings suggest that Slate must've survived. NNP cruiser debris is all I've got."

The *Annihilator* moves closer to the apparently lifeless grid, taking a defensive posture.

"No sign of activity," informs Cleanerschmidt.

"Curious," Ragellon muses. "Open hailing frequencies." The Vice-Admiral stoops to the Commucon Transmitter Hailing Microphone(tm), steadying himself on the console. "Attention grid station. This is the InterGalactic United Military vessel *Annihilator*. We seek permission to board the grid for a consult with your governors."

Silence.

"We are on a diplomatic mission. If you do not respond, Inter-Galactic Treaty five, five, seven point oh, three, section forty-four point three A, paragraph twelve, permits us to forcefully board the grid of our own accord."

Still no response.

"Can we break through?" Salata wonders aloud.

Ragellon and Cleanerschmidt turn their attention to him.

"A small portion of the grid has been knocked out, here," Salata continues, pointing to the Holo-Vis(tm) display. "It appears inoperable. The police may have tangled with it."

"Punch through and get inside the grid?" Ragellon strains to straighten at the suggestion of action.

"Exactly. Firepower won't be as concentrated in this damaged area. Our Divertatron Flak Flicker shields should be able to deflect whatever the grid has to offer."

Ragellon and Cleanerschmidt examine the grid more closely. Repair robots and other equipment can be seen busily working in the damaged area.

"Once we're inside, they won't risk shooting toward the planet. We can quickly maneuver into a position to take control of the grid."

"And if we control the grid," pipes Cleanerschmidt, "we can lock it up so that no one gets out."

"Yes, I see," remarks Ragellon. "Good thinking, Schmitty, glad you're on our team."

Salata's eyes bug.

"Helmsman," Ragellon orders, "set a course through the damaged area of the grid. Schmitty, oversee the maneuvers."

"Sir," South says, "perhaps we should wait for our backup. They'll be arriving in less than three hours."

The Vice-Admiral gestures to the Holo-Vis Monitor(tm). Beyond the bustle of repair robots a wagon train of temporary, heavy-artillery guns can be seen edging into place to protect the breach in the grid.

"We don't have time."

First Clerk Alfonse gesticulates frantically to the image on the Holo-Vis(tm). "Sir, the Mark II Battle Accelerator HyperCraft is advancing toward the damaged area."

"Perfect. Type in this code on the Repair Robot Interface terminal." Bloition briefly leans out of Holo-Vis Imager(tm) field of view. A multi-digit code number appears on the Grid Station Prime Hub Holo-Vis(tm) projection. "Bot interface will ask you to initiate the sequence. Do so only after the Battle Accelerator has fully entered the grid. And turn off all weapons systems. Let that ship approach unmolested." His image winks out.

Inside the Crusade Strategy Room(tm), First Chairman

Supreme Bloition turns to the clerks and operators. "I must inform you that, as expected, the military has arrived. Today, the DataTrump Fruition Front is positioned to strike a mighty blow. An opportunity has presented itself, by which, we can inflict severe damage and buy ourselves some time, however fleeting. But, this action will leave us vulnerable, and intelligence indicates that reinforcements are on the way. It is time to evacuate to our beta operations site. Whatever you can't move, destroy."

The clerks and operators turn their attention to their terminals. The hush transforms into a buzz of activity as the occupants move to red alert.

Snax wanders along a sterile corridor deep within the underground complex below the core of Verd, searching. He opens a door and pokes his head into a large room filled with filing cabinets.

"Hey!"

Snax freezes.

"Let me see your identification."

Slowly, Snax turns to face a bookish woman dressed in a plain, white DiSeedlfith linen (commonly referred to as the 'newsprint' of linens) pantsuit, with a long, brown linen vest. A Hand Cannon(tm) rests, comfortably holstered, at her side.

"I'm, uh, well... where's the cafeteria?"

"You're in the wrong sector, bub, but that's okay. Name's Muriel Tizzaphooex. Second Clerk Tizzaphooex. I'm heading that way and I'd be glad to show you."

Snax thanks her profusely and the pair march down the long, pale corridor.

The nose of the *Annihilator* pokes through the outer boundary of the grid, in the area damaged by the encounter with the Ebony Skulker. Each nearby hub has several bustling repair robots darting in and around the mangled scaffold.

Salata sighs inwardly, his mind whirring, scar pulsing, as he watches the Holo-Vis(tm) images of the numerous bots working on the grid. Suddenly, each robot slows its work pace, then stops, as if observing the military vessel's advance.

"Enhance that image," he orders, "focus on one of the repair bots." The image magnifies.

The Vice-Admiral, noticing South's agitation, looks on curiously.

South clenches his teeth. "Enhance further."

The image of an idle repair bot fills the field of view. Small lights flash in sequence across its chassis.

Inside the Grid Station Prime Hub(tm), the Glik-Gnome sits at a control panel, orchestrating the grid functions. He glances nervously to his partner.

Alfonse's finger is perilously poised over the 'INITIATE' button. He watches the *Annihilator* as it presses deeper into the grid. Finally, he lets his finger fall firmly on the button.

Salata witnesses the flashing lights on the repair bot change sequence, blink on and off simultaneously. He quickly glances to the starboard monitor, then the port side. "Pull out! It's a trap!"

BOOOOOOOOMMMMMMM!!! kaBOOOOMMM!! baKOOOMMM!!!
ffffWWWT!

The hundred or so repair bots surrounding the *Annihilator*, plus the additional battery of high explosives that the bots had been busily secreting within the area, explode in unison. The trap has been laid so that the explosive force is channeled inward, toward the target, and further damage to the grid is kept to a minimum. The violent concussion of the implosion hits the ship. Anyone standing is tossed to the floor.

Many crew members receive broken bones and skull fractures, but the serious damage remains unseen in the confusion. The massive engines and drive components have been knocked out of alignment. Although still operational at reduced capacities, there is a risk that the drives will tear themselves apart.

"Full reverse Tooters!" shouts Ragellon.

The helmsman jams at the controls.

Deep in the engine room, the chief engineer is pulling himself off the floor. He hears the drives whine with throttle up, but a horrible screeching rapidly overpowers the sound of the engines. He gasps at the wild shaking of the gargantuan Engine Number Three. Half crouching, mouth agape, he stares as the massive machinery shreds, tossing huge chunks of metal around the engine room. The chief engineer is taken out like a bowling pin.

The *Annihilator* makes another lurch, larger than the first. The internal explosion wrenches at the frame of the ship, causing serious structural damage. Decks in the immediate vicinity of the engineering department heave, cock-eyed and buckling. Doors jam, their frames twisted.

The bridge is mayhem. Some crew members in Magno Chairs(tm) have whiplash. One ensign sits with his head lolling backward at an impossible angle. Sparks and smoke belch from the bridge consoles.

The helmsman's control ruptures into a fireball, engulfing his body. His scream trails off into a bubbling gurgle.

Ignoring the dropping oxygen masks, the remaining bridge crew scramble for the emergency exits, conveniently located at either end of the bridge. Ragellon rises from his chair, only to be squashed to the floor by a falling Holo-Vis(tm) projector.

Salata grabs the fleeing Cleanerschmidt by the scruff of the neck. "The Vice-Admiral is down!"

Cleanerschmidt follows South to Ragellon's side. They heave at the Holo-Vis(tm) projector, rolling its bulk off of their unconscious leader, and drag him from the smoking bridge.

The brilliant, emerald green curtain of laser, which stretches from the grid to the ground, flickers in the distance.

"What the fuck is that?" calls Geronimo, pointing.

High above the Hover Screamer(tm) bright, firework-like explosions flash in the midday sky.

"Firefight," Gladius shouts. "Somebody's tangling with that defense grid."

"Great. Who's tryin' to kill us now?"

"Let's just get this over with."

Nodding, Geronimo tromps the Hover Screamer(tm), accelerating along the dirt road toward the lethal curtain.

Alfonse stares at the image of the crippled Mark II Battle Accelerator HyperCraft(tm). It drifts lazily, punctuated by the occasional spasm, slowly rotating and wedging deeper into the opening in the grid. He reluctantly thumbs the Commucon(tm).

"First Chairman Supreme?"

Bloition's face appears on the Holo-Vis(tm), behind him the bustle of the Crusade Strategy Room(tm) has momentarily ceased as the clerks listen to the report.

"Assessment?" demands Bloition.

"The ship is non-functional, caught in the middle of the grid. But I'm afraid that section of grid is inoperative and non-salvageable."

"Don't worry, that ship will act as a suitable obstacle until other arrangements can be made. Any sign of

other military craft?"

"No, sir."

"Well, expect them. It won't be long before reinforcements arrive."

Once again the Holo-Vis(tm) blinks out, leaving Alfonse to stand nervously beside the small Glik-Gnome.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

ENTANGLEMENT

"Hey, this isn't the cafeteria."

The Hover Screamer(tm) rips along the dirt road, a dust trail billowing conspicuously behind it. Gladius examines the BIGGER GUN(tm), trying to figure out how its Randomizer(tm) works.

Suddenly, two bolts of bottled energy flash out of the sky, plowing a deep trench across their path. Geronimo reefs the wheel, forcing the Screemer into the ditch. He brakes hard, the rough terrain jolting the land craft. A patch of soft dirt sucks at the undercarriage and the Screemer spins ninety degrees, sinks to the ground, and comes to an abrupt halt, its engine stalled.

Gladius scans the area for the source of the shots, drawn to the whine of a propulsion drive. An airborne Cop Hopper(tm) is closing fast from above and behind, its lights flashing. "Move this can!"

Geronimo jabs at the keypad. The starter motor whines and the engine sputters once, then rumbles to life. The Screemer elevates from the ground and he guns it, whirling in a barely controlled donut.

Crouching in the back, Fystik keeps one eye on the approaching Cop Hopper(tm), the other on Geronimo's driving. Geronimo punches the black craft into a copse of trees, heading toward a field of tall, thick-stalked alien crops.

baaaFOOOOMMM!!!

A tree splinters and falls across their path. Geronimo swerves hard, heading for a patch of saplings. Slate and Fystik are wrenched sideways in their seats. The young trees engulf the vehicle, then go down with a raggedy slap, trampled by the Screemer.

Fystik, spitting out a wad of bitter-tasting leaves, gives Geronimo a dirty look as they burst out into the open. He hunkers down, clutching the edge of the seat.

Gladius wrestles with the BIGGER GUN(tm), taking aim at the Cop Hopper(tm). He tugs at the trigger as Geronimo, fighting with the rough terrain, flattens a fence and enters the field of alien crops. A blue energy pulse erupts from the gun and goes wide.

Gladius draws another bead and fires again. This time a stream of liquid nitrogen spits from the weapon. The direct hit freezes the Cop Hopper's AttiTooters(tm),

pitching it forward in a slow roll, its pilots stunned with horror. The plummeting machinery impacts with the ground, collapsing into a snarl of tangled metal.

Geronimo glides the Screemer to an easy stop, deep amidst the tall rows of the field.

"What the hell did you do to this thing?" asks a bewildered Gladius, looking at the BIGGER GUN(tm).

"That would be the Randomizer," informs Fystik, trying to sound casual as he picks himself off the floor.

"I guess it's, ah, random?" Geronimo suggests.

"Shouldn't we get moving?" Fystik says. "There could be more of those on the way."

"Let's check the wreckage first," Gladius says, climbing from the Screemer, "we might find something useful."

Geronimo nods and follows him. Fystik nervously scans the sky, then reluctantly leaves the safety of the vehicle and trots to catch up.

The door to Petunia's cell whisks open. Bloition enters, followed by a tall, neatly dressed man wheeling a Nasal Acid Batherizer(tm) cart. Petunia sits innocently, covering the damaged shackles she has been working on.

"So," begins Bloition, sarcastically, "you could handle it. And you wouldn't be followed."

"I wasn't," implores Petunia.

"Are you in league with the military? The IDR? The Space Commission? Which?"

"Look, you've got the Scow Cows. I've been damn good to you! I've always delivered an excellent product, always on time. Why don't you just leave it at that?"

"We need you to keep supplying us with ships. But now the military have arrived to spoil our plans."

"I didn't bring them here. Somebody else must've--"
SMACK!

Bloition backhands Petunia. He rubs his hand, angry at himself for losing his temper. "I'm sorry. I'm usually very reasonable."

Petunia sucks at the blood on the inside of her cheek, raises her head to glare at her captor and former client.

"But my friend, Count Abelnod, is not very reasonable. You know more than you're telling, and tell you will."

The First Chairman Supreme exits, leaving Petunia alone with Count Abelnod. Grinning, he activates the Nasal Acid Batherizer(tm).

As Gladius, Geronimo and Fystik trudge through the

tall rows toward the downed Hopper, they become acutely aware of movement. The field has come to life. The three meter tall, asparagus-like brown stalks writhe and twist, blocking their path.

"What the--?" Geronimo exclaims, disturbed.

"This must be a Nauga field," comments Fystik, examining the pliable skin of a thick, tubular stalk.

"Where they get Naugahydes."

Gladius and Geronimo crane their necks. The leafless, firmly rooted plants sway their bulb-like heads back and forth, sensing the intrusion into their midst.

These plants are carnivorous, eating insects and small rodents that wander into the fields. Although they could never devour anything as large as a human, due to the lack of incisors, their powerful biting could turn a large animal into a sack of bone chips. During the harvest, when the plants are stripped alive of their hides, they must be heavily sedated to allow the workers and machinery to proceed unhindered.

Abruptly, a Nauga chomps down on the Dismemberon's shoulder, the bony ridge of its mouth parts pinching on his blue flesh. Fystik shrieks, stabbing his hand into the light sensitive surfaces on the Nauga's head. The giant plant howls, dropping him.

Another Nauga lashes out at Gladius, who, in reflex, unloads the BIGGER GUN(tm). A plume of fire blossoms from the barrel, searing several rows. The large stalks go limp and the wailing plants flop to the ground in pain, their vinyl hides melted and blistering.

As the trio turns to break for the Hover Screemer(tm), a giant Nauga swings down, its bone crushing jaws searching for crushable bones. Geronimo reveals the Tri-Prong Defacer(tm) from beneath his cape and deftly cleaves the plant in three.

"My Defacer!" shrills Fystik. He leaps at Geronimo, tackling the pack rat, and they tumble into the smoldering group of Naugas. The plants, their stems now acutely sensitive to pain, screech and peck wildly at the pair.

Gladius skirts the confusion, climbs into the Hover Screemer(tm) and cuts through the plants toward his scrapping cohorts. He leans out, cracks their heads together, and heaves them into the Screemer. Grabbing the Tri-Prong Defacer(tm), Gladius speeds out of the Nauga field toward the road.

Shaking off the disorientation, Fystik begins to climb toward Gladius, reaching for the Defacer.

"Freeze, Blue Boy!" Gladius sticks his arm out of the

vehicle. "Another move and I drop it."

Fystik stops, eyes glued to the Defacer dangling precariously on Slate's fingertip, the ground whizzing below.

"Now, fighting amongst ourselves is not going to get you to Petunia. I'll give this back to you, but you've got to calm down."

"That's mine, Gladass," whines Geronimo, rubbing his head.

"Shut up, Gerry." Gladius hands the Defacer to Fystik who caresses it lovingly.

The Hover Screamer(tm) glides swiftly onward, approaching the laser curtain and the city of Verd that lies beyond.

Second Clerk Tizzaphooex makes pleasant conversation with Snax as she leads him down the umpteenth corridor. People dash back and forth, most carrying stacks of papers or personal belongings.

"What, um, happens here?" Snax asks, observing the activity.

"Accountancy," Tizzaphooex replies.

"Everyone sure seems in a hurry."

"Yes, we're in the midst of relocating to a new facility. Moving is such a pain. Ah, here we are."

The pair stop outside a large set of sliding doors. Tizzaphooex withdraws a key from her belt and inserts it in the door lock.

HUMMM. BZZT.

The door opens revealing the Crusade Strategy Room(tm). It is abuzz with panicked clerks urgently destroying evidence and preparing for flight. Several employees await the signal to make their way to the vehicle hangars. They watch, with apprehension, the crippled military battleship on a large Holo-Vis(tm) projection.

"Good work, Tizzaphooex." First Clerk Supreme, Ondurf Munch, strides over to Snax and Tizzaphooex. He nods to two guards who immediately slap Snax into restraint cuffs.

"Hey, this isn't the cafeteria."

"No, spy, it isn't," Munch spits, motioning to the guards. They usher Snax through the room toward an elevator. "Second Clerk, accompany them and prepare him for questioning. I will join you shortly."

Munch returns to the gathering around the Holo-Vis(tm). Second Clerk Tizzaphooex follows the guards and Snax into the elevator.

Count Abelnod's bony hand encircles Petunia's jaw. She struggles, yanking the chains that constrict her limbs. Her captor begins another assault with the Batherizer. She can smell the acid as the nozzle nears her nose. Her mind swims; there is no way she can handle another attack on her senses.

With a desperate tug of her laser equipped arm the weakened chain gives way. The Five Point Pin Laser(tm) swings into view, activates. Abelnod flinches, grabbing for her freed appendage. The laser fires crazily from Petunia's wrist, cutting into the wall, the door, anything that gets in its way.

The Count is overpowering her, forcing her arm toward the ground. She lashes out with a ferocious head butt, catching the Batherizer nozzle and splashing acid into Abelnod's face. He jerks, blinded, and stumbles backward, tripping over the Batherizer unit. He scrambles to his feet, eyes gushing.

Petunia seizes the opportunity, strafing the Five Point Pin Laser(tm) across Abelnod. The Count wails. She fires again, poking five neat, symmetrical holes in the man's forehead. His remains topple backward, clanging off the cell door.

Petunia gasps heavily, her face red and stinging from her tormentors attempts at information extraction. She returns her attention to the chain which still binds her other arm and resumes cutting.

On board the *Annihilator* there is mayhem. All electrics and communication equipment have been knocked out, the decks are filled with noxious fumes, and the dim emergency lighting is beginning to fail.

South and Cleanerschmidt wend their way through the choked passages, searching for survivors. Roughly one third of the initial three-hundred and forty-one crew members have made their way to the docking bays, only to find the extravehicular equipment inoperable. Dejected, they sit quietly, awaiting their fate.

The Observer's cabin is dimly lit by a flickering Holo-Vis(tm). The static-riddled image of an agitated Bloition, pacing back and forth in his office on the distant Green Moon, has just finished relaying his fears of defeat against the powerful military. The Observer manages to calm the Chairman Supreme, and informs him of what steps must be taken when the next wave arrives. With the assurance that help is forthcoming and that control will be

maintained, Bloition signs off. The Observer sits, motionless, gazing at the star-trails as they quietly slide past the view port.

Slate backs off on the accelerator of the Hover Screemer(tm). Looming impressively above the trio is the shimmering halo of the laser curtain defense system. The Screemer glides to a halt, idling smoothly.

"Sonnuva bitch. How do we get by this thing?" Geronimo mutters.

The giant mirrors of the system are several meters above the ground, mounted on pedestals. Protecting the lower spaces around the base of the pedestals is a series of smaller, horizontal lasers, arranged in rows a few centimeters apart, much like a rail fence. At intervals of one-hundred meters or so, a deflector lens accepts the beams and redirects them to the next column, and so on around the perimeter. The columns are made of extremely tough material and engineered in such a way as to be virtually indestructible.

Gladius stares, trance-like, at the huge mirrors.

Fystik flops down into the rear seat. "Dirt balls! I'm never going to be reunited with Petunia."

"Brilliant deduction," remarks Geronimo. "We could've split ages ago, back when we had *fuel*, and been livin' happily-ever-after by now. But no, I happen to be travelin' with an over-qualified psychotic butcher, and an under-qualified one-man army who wants to be a hero." He shakes his head in disgust, stares off into the distance.

Gladius lowers his gaze from the overhead mirrors, down and across the gleaming, gloss-black hood of the Hover Screemer(tm), then looks thoughtfully at the horizontal beams of the laser fence. Finally, he reaches down, shuts off the Screemer's engine and begins to climb from the vehicle.

"Hey!" shouts Geronimo. "What the hell do ya think--"

"Shut up! Get out here, both of you, and help me get the hood off this thing!"

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

REINFORCEMENTS

"Ragellon, what have you done?"

A Mark II Battle Accelerator HyperCraft(tm), the *Abrogate*, emerges from hyperspace twenty kilometers from the StopEmCold Defense Grid(tm).

Major Hugh Wu Su, the ship's commander, paces the bridge. The Holo-Vis Monitor(tm) displays the wrecked *Annihilator* wedged in the tangle of damaged scaffolding.

"Hail the *Annihilator*," he orders.

There is a moment of anticipation, then Lieutenant Ginjee turns to her superior officer. "No response, sir. However, we are detecting lifeforms."

"Ragellon, what have you done? Battle stations to yellow alert!"

The *Expunger* materializes outside the grid, only a few kilometers from the *Abrogate*. Sizing up the situation, Captain Helena Helfogg orders immediate encrypted communication to Wu Su.

"Any word from Ragellon or the crew?" she asks.

"Nothing," replies Wu Su.

Helfogg quivers with a flood of adrenaline. It figures Ragellon would go off half-cocked, jeopardizing his entire crew. She places the *Expunger* on yellow alert, ready for battle.

"There's two more of them," reports Alfonse.

"There will be more," replies Bloition, on the Holo-Vis(tm). "You know what to do, First Clerk Alfonse?"

"Yes, sir." Alfonse shifts uncomfortably, chancing a quick glance to the anxious Glik-Gnome.

"You both shall be revered." Bloition's image winks out for its final time, leaving Alfonse and the Glik-Gnome alone to prepare.

Captain Heratio Brown brings the *Pulverizer* into normalspace at the far end of the Green Moon's defense grid. His silver-skinned hand fingers the communicator, opening a channel to the *Abrogate* and the *Expunger*.

"Any sign of hostile action?"

"Nothing from the grid. The *Annihilator* is crippled, no response," replies Helfogg.

"I have a rescue squad prepping for launch now,"

informs Wu Su. "I only hope they can make it before Ragellon's ship rips open. Our readings indicate severe structural damage, and increasing pressure and temperature fluctuations in the lower engineering decks."

"We'll bombard the grid," offers Brown. "That should give the salvage ship enough cover to facilitate the rescue."

"What about the *Decimeter*?" Helfogg wonders aloud. "Itchtrong should be here by now."

"There's no time to wait," Wu Su says. "We'll begin the operation now."

Tizzaphooex buckles the last strap of the antique BaX Bucolic Body Breaker(tm) over Snax's frame. She stands back, surveys her work. Snax squirms, corpulence oozing through the over-tight belts. His extremities, having mutated into scissor-like claws, chomp at the leather. The two guards stand behind him, their backs to the door leading to the cell block.

Suddenly, the door bursts open. The startled guards turn, reaching for their Hand Cannons(tm). There is a flash of green light and a faint crackling noise. Both guards slump to the ground with five-point laser burns in their chests.

Tizzaphooex ducks and rolls under the table.

"Heeeeyyyy!!!" shouts Snax. "Whhaaaaa... whaaat's, like, goin' on?!"

Tizzaphooex draws her weapon, fires at the open doorway.

CRACK!

The shot strikes the door frame at head level. Pieces of the frame clatter to the hallway floor. An arm pokes around the door jamb at floor level, fires back. The table leg beside the Second Clerk takes a hit. The spot instantly smokes and pops into a patch of flame. The clerk bolts to the opposite door, jamming her key into its lock.

The door opens and Tizzaphooex races for the elevator. She doesn't make it. A five-point beam catches her in the back, pitching her forward. Her head cracks hard against the concrete, sending a bloody splatter across the floor.

The huge bay doors in the *Abrogate's* underbelly spread apart. A Vi-Scout Salvage Ship(tm), a small vessel with a large area for carrying personnel, and equipped with various emergency extrication tools and first aid supplies, slips out into space. The pilot, Lieutenant Ginjee, punches the TurboTooters(tm), propelling the craft toward

the immense grid and the crippled *Annihilator*.

The *Abrogate* advances parallel to the grid, its starboard Tremor Blasters(tm) beginning a barrage. Portions of the grid rattle with the erratic hits. The grid comes to life, returning fire with its potent Fraz-Boom Guns(tm). Deflector shields on both sides send many volleys zinging errantly into space.

"How's the progress of the Vi-Scout?" Wu Su struts across the bridge, oblivious to the jolts and lurches as his ship is buffeted by enemy fire.

"Steady as she goes. No damage to report," returns the helmsman.

Petunia looms over the Second Clerk's lifeless body. She plucks the key from Tizzaphooex's fingers and cautiously retreats back to the Information Extraction Room.

Snax squeals at the sight of her. "Look, like, I uh, don't know anything..."

"Be quiet." Petunia begins to unstrap the blubbering alien.

"What are you gonna do with me?"

"Can you handle a weapon?"

"Yeah."

"Good." She tosses Snax a Hand Cannon(tm) from one of the guards, grabbing the other for herself.

DING!

The elevator door slides open.

"Damn," hisses Petunia, quickly taking cover to one side of the door. Snax ducks pitifully behind the table. Both watch the doorway, waiting for whomever came down with the elevator.

First Clerk Supreme, Ondurf Munch, freezes at the sight of Tizzaphooex. Drawing a Zipper(tm), he crouches and gingerly makes his way to examine the leaking, lifeless form. He gulps, then slides his hand up the wall toward the alarm button.

Petunia peers into the hallway, sees the First Clerk Supreme reaching for the red button. She breaks cover, firing the Hand Cannon(tm).

Munch reacts, ducking and zipping back. Petunia grabs the door frame and launches herself toward Munch, activating the laser. The five-point beam slices through the flesh of his face. Wisps of acrid smoke issue from the cauterized grooves in his forehead, stinging his eyes. Screaming, he fires the Zipper(tm) wildly. Petunia easily dodges the shots and gets close enough to kick the gun from

his hand. She jams the key into the elevator console, twists it and snaps it off, effectively locking the elevator on that floor.

The wounded clerk reaches for his Commucon Stay-Close(tm). Petunia stabs her thumbnail into the open wound on his forehead. Ondurf yowls in pain and she knocks the Commucon(tm) skittering across the floor.

"Listen, bud, I want to know another way out of here that doesn't take us through the Crusade Strategy Room."

"There isn't one," sputters Munch.

Snax cautiously enters. The smell of burnt flesh in the gore spattered hallway is too much. He faints. Munch jerks at the sound of Snax slapping to the floor.

"Swing us around for a direct assault," orders Helfogg. "Begin Tremor Blaster fire now!"

The *Expunger* opens up with a frontal attack on the grid. Several grid cannons lock their sights onto its hull and unleash. The *Expunger* lurches violently, flame skating across the hull.

"Decompression in forward hold," announces the Defense Engineer.

"Seal off that section! Back us out!" Helfogg curses Ragellon for inviting this disaster upon her crew, and wonders how Captain Brown is faring.

Brown looks from a Holo-Vis(tm) projection of the retreating *Expunger* to his Weapons Engineer. "Prepare the experimental Multi-Pedoes. I want to commence firing into the grid."

The Weapons Engineer begins a launch sequence for the jet-propelled cluster bombs. "Ready sir!"

"Fire at will!"

The Multi-Pedoes(tm) blast toward the grid. They explode at varying depths inside the metal web, rendering a large patch of grid gaping and dysfunctional.

Aboard the disabled *Annihilator*, Captain South and Lieutenant Cleanerschmidt continue their rounds. They exit a stairwell into a hallway which runs next to the hull. The light entering the portholes flickers with the explosions occurring outside. The pair rush to a view port and witness the three Battle Accelerators engaged in combat with the defense grid.

"Well, they finally got here," sighs Salata. "Let's hope they fare better than we did."

"Captain," winces Cleanerschmidt, pointing to the

approaching Vi-Scout, "that looks like a Salvage Ship."

"It is, and it's coming this way. Let's get what's left of the crew ready to move. We're gonna have to make a hasty retreat before this thing blows."

Inside the Grid Station Prime Hub(tm), amidst the tremors and rumbling, the nervous Alfonse and Glik-Gnome trade a glance. They have turned the NabAll Nerve Center(tm) over to the computers. There is but one thing left that only they can do. They nod to each other, take a deep breath, and begin to enter a sequence of commands.

Simultaneously they confirm codes, flip toggles and turn platinum coated keys. The interior illumination is cast into an angry red glow. Together, they flip open the safety covers on buttons marked:

EMERGENCY SELF DESTRUCT
DO NOT TAMPER WITH UNLESS
YOU REALLY MEAN IT!

The Hover Screemer's(tm) engine rumbles to life. Geronimo sits behind the wheel, while Fystik peers out from the rear seat. Gladius, having tested their direction by tossing a stone through, stands next to the beams of the laser fence, the shiny black hood of the hover car mounted on his back like a tortoise shell.

"Are you ready?" shouts the big man.

Geronimo gives him a thumbs up and revs the engine, then drops the vehicle into forward propulsion. Gladius braces himself as the Screemer begins its approach. His timing must be impeccable: too soon and the lasers will have time to penetrate the hood, killing him, too late and the Hover Screemer(tm) and its occupants will be sliced to ribbons.

The Screemer builds up speed, racing at the deadly beams. Gladius tenses, rocking lightly on the balls of his feet. Fystik ducks down in the back seat. At the last possible moment, Gladius angles into the fence.

The glossy hood briefly acts as a reflector, scattering the beams. The Screemer roars through the temporary gate that Slate has created. Gladius continues his roll and stumbles to the ground inside the barrier. The lasers snap back to their usual position, once again creating the fence.

Gladius stands up in disbelief. The gleaming hood of the Screemer is blistered, nanoseconds from penetration.

Geronimo stands on the brake pedal, bringing the Hover Screamer(tm) to a halt. Fystik rises from the floor, checks to see that he survived. Geronimo looks back at Gladius standing minuscule against the backdrop of the laser curtain and fence.

"Thanks, big guy," he says. "Ya know, Fystik, I just had a great idea on how to improve that thing. Every other beam should be in the reverse direction."

Fystik eyes him with consternation. "I don't think you should mention that to him."

Ginjee positions the Vi-Scout Salvage Ship(tm) under the starboard side of the *Annihilator* and masterfully brings it to a halt. The faces of the Battle Accelerator's survivors watch her longingly through a view port. She extends a Goey Tube(tm) toward an emergency hatch in the ship.

Hearing the tube suck to the outside, Salata turns to the fading Ragellon. He wipes a trickle of blood from the Vice-Admiral's brow, shrugging him to consciousness.

"Hang on, you old bastard, we're going to get you out of here." He turns to Cleanerschmidt, who is opening the hatch. "Start leading everybody out. Take Ragellon with you."

The Lieutenant nods and two of the troopers hoist the ailing Vice-Admiral. They make a hasty journey through the tube into the Vi-Scout(tm).

Petunia cinches the last strap on the BaX Bucolic Body Breaker(tm) that now holds the battered Ondurf Munch.

"You'll never escape from here," warns Munch. "They will kill you."

Petunia saunters up to the control box, flipping the Breaking Switch to Stage Four. She punches the trigger. Munch screams, his body arcing like a live wire.

"Where's the other exit?"

"Fu... fu... fuck you," he spits, mouth foaming.

Petunia coldly moves the switch to Stage Six.

"Aaauuggghhh!!!"

"Where's the exit?"

"...you're... dead..."

Stage Nine.

"AAAAAUUUUUGGGGGHHHHHH!!!!!!!"

"The exit?"

"Ac... access... underground... ven'lation shaft... next to... elevator."

"There is no shaft there." She reaches for the

switch.

"Hidden! It's hidden!" shrieks Ondurf. "Behind the wall panel... upper right..." He finally faints.

Petunia rushes out of the Information Extraction Room, stepping over the awakening Snax.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

MACHINATIONS

"Clever bastards."

Large cumulus clouds loom low over the Green Moon's only and capital city, Verd. Geronimo sits in the front passenger seat of the Hover Screemer(tm), examining the Prompt O'Sting(tm) pole. Fystik rocks softly in the backseat, cooing to the Tri-Prong Defacer(tm). A pensive Gladius, back in the driver's seat, keeps the pressure on the accelerator, speeding the Screemer toward the city.

RUMMMMMBLE!!!

An explosion deep within the *Annihilator* rocks the ship, straining the joint of the Goey Tube(tm) connecting it with the Vi-Scout(tm).

Salata South helps the final survivor into the tube, then takes one last glance. A brief wave of emotion washes over him. He is looking into a giant coffin, the final abode for a couple of hundred dedicated men and women, valiant heroes each.

Seeing no sign of life, he lunges into the tube, its seal closing like a slimy zipper behind him.

ThssshhhWWWHOOP!

BAAAAFOOOOOOMMMMM!!!

The *Annihilator* tears in half. The unsupported tube, blown by the concussion, is flung in a graceful, slow-motion whip around the Vi-Scout(tm). Unable to oppose the centrifugal force, Salata is snapped to the end of the flailing tube and must wait out the painfully slow retraction into the ship.

The Hover Screemer(tm) slices through Verd's version of suburbia. Up ahead two Cop Hoppers(tm) appear over the rooftops, racing to intercept the black vehicle.

"We've got trouble!" shouts Geronimo, pointing skyward.

The Hoppers home in on the Screemer, their lights blazing and sirens wailing.

"Use this," calls Gladius, patting the BIGGER GUN(tm) propped between them.

Lavoriss cradles the massive weapon. He stands, red cape snapping in the breeze, and props the barrel on the frame of the windscreen.

The Hoppers open fire and Gladius veers sharply to

avoid the erupting road ahead. Several meters of elegantly manicured lawn are ripped up by the propulsion drives of the erratically skimming Screemer. Geronimo points the gun, scrunches his face, and shoots.

A stream of yellow goo spits from the massive weapon, adhering to one of the Hoppers. Blinded, it careens and buries itself in a Bi-Level Stellar Ranchhouse(tm).

"Good shot," chortles Fystik.

Gladius spins the Screemer into a back lane. The second Hopper drops into view at the far end, blocking their path. Geronimo fires again. This time a spew of charged pellets spit from the barrel.

The Hopper takes evasive action, destroying a garage and a clothesline full of laundry as it retreats.

Gladius decelerates, easing the Screemer down the lane, cautiously peering between buildings and around fences in search of the lurking Cop Hopper(tm). There is a glint in the rear view mirror. The police vehicle is accelerating low and fast on their tail.

"Behind!" shouts Gladius, tromping on the accelerator.

The Hover Screemer(tm) banks sharply around a low shed and vaults along a narrow alleyway. Lavioriss flips the BIGGER GUN(tm) end-for-end and plops the barrel on the rear deck of the vehicle. Fystik ducks, narrowly missing a bonk on the head.

The pursuit vehicle blasts around the corner and Geronimo unleashes the huge weapon once more. A blue power-pulse stings the starboard gun of the Hopper and the vehicle skitters toward a small carport. It clips the corner of the building, effectively disabling the port side gun and knocking out a supporting beam of the structure, causing its roof to collapse.

Geronimo trains the sights of the gun onto the Hopper, waiting for its motion to stabilize. He squeezes the trigger. Nothing.

"Crap!" He yanks at the trigger again: no response. The Cop Hopper's(tm) powerful drives have begun to close the gap between the two vehicles.

"What's wrong?" Gladius is nervously eyeing the rear-view mirror.

"It's stopped workin'!"

With its on-board weaponry sufficiently disabled, the Cop Hopper(tm) closes in on the Hover Screemer(tm). The Troopers within have opted to overtake the Screemer and use a Magno-Sync Sucker(tm), a hand-held electro-magnetic pulse generator of limited range, to disrupt the electronics of the Screemer and force it to shut down.

The copilot clips the safety cable onto his suit-harness and begins to climb out onto the side-board platform of the Hopper. When they are close enough, he will lean out over the front of the hoodless Screemer and activate the Sucker as near as possible to the Screemer's Central Processing Unit.

The three fugitives anxiously observe the approach of the Hopper. Slate's foot is firmly planted on the accelerator, but the Screemer has reached its limit. The vehicle speeds along the narrow back lanes of Verd's suburbs, jockeying to stave off the nearing Hopper.

Geronimo takes pot shots at the Hopper with a Hand Cannon(tm), but the jostling movement of the Screemer badly affects his aim. An occasional shot strikes a glancing blow off the front deflector of the police vehicle, but has no effect on its advance. As it nears, Geronimo refrains from shooting for fear of a close-range hit backfiring into the Screemer.

The Hopper vies for position, using its ability to gain altitude to situate itself slightly above the rear quarter of the swerving Screemer.

The gap closes. The copilot, Sucker in hand, begins to lean out over the Screemer. Geronimo and Fystik stare at the Hopper. Gladius white knuckles the steering wheel, desperately trying to avoid scraping the fences along the lane. He risks a quick glance to fix the position of the Hopper. Concurrently, a small, personal ground-effect vehicle pulls out into the path of the two racing machines. Gladius jerks the wheel out of instinct, slamming into the landing gear of the Hopper. The outstretched arm of its copilot is thrust into the open cockpit of the Screemer.

FFFAAAZZZZWINGGGGG!!! SPPLOOOT!

Fystik lops off the intruding arm with the Tri-Prong Defacer(tm).

The two vehicles strain against each other, narrowly missing the car blocking their path. The copilot, still leaning into the Screemer cockpit, realizes that his arm is missing.

"Yeeeeeeaaaahhhh, aaah, aaah, aaah..."

Gladius jerks in reflex to the scream in his left ear. The Screemer lurches and the Hopper catapults over top of it, clipping a fence and rebounding across in front of the Screemer.

"...aaaaaaah, aaaaaaah, aaaaack--"

THWICK!

A guy-wire stabilizing an antennae tower decapitates the howling copilot.

SPLUTCH!!!

The grimacing head ricochets off the Screemer's windshield, leaving a grisly smear.

The Hopper pilot fights to regain control. Glancing to his right, he sees the flapping, armless, headless corpse of his partner. Stunned, he fails to notice the rapidly approaching power transformer building at the intersection. Gladius has a split second to comprehend the imminent collision and yanks the vehicle in a hard right, plowing through a fence and entering a yard. He brakes hard and the Screemer drops to the ground, sod peeling.

The Hopper slams, full speed, into the transformer building.

FFFIZZZZZZZKERRRWHACKA!!! ZZZPITZZZZLE!!!
KAAAAKOWWW!!!

The building erupts in an enormous, spidery array of sparks and smoke.

Gladius, Geronimo and Fystik sit stone-faced, staring at a huge stone-faced fountain, against which the nose of the Screemer rests.

"Yiiipa, yiiipa, yiiipa!"

"Shaddup!" Fystik yells at the yapping Gimmeldinjellian Terrier prancing beside the vehicle.

Gladius snaps out of his trance and fires up the Screemer's engine. The vehicle lifts off the ground and he nudges it between the houses toward the street. Residents have begun to gather around the burning building, gawking up at the growing column of smoke.

Geronimo sits in his seat, looking at the bloodied Fystik who is tugging at the tendons of the headless copilot's arm, causing the fingers to twitch.

"Can't we go any faster?" Fystik asks of the humans.

Gladius blinks once, incredulous. Geronimo stares, dumbfounded.

"She is in danger," Fystik opines, tossing the arm out of the vehicle. His eyes glaze over and he begins to rock back and forth. "We must hurry."

Geronimo leans to Gladius, confiding: "Look, Gladman, I'm gettin' real tired of this friggin' rescue mission."

"We are acting in the interests of the IDR! This is not, I repeat, not just a rescue mission!"

Geronimo shrinks under the glare of his former boss. Gladius returns his attention to the road, the strain on his face riddled with distress more than anger.

On the dark side of the Green Moon, the Mark II Battle Accelerator HyperCraft(tm) *Decimeter* finally arrives.

Colonel Dwayne Itchtrong is wrapping up his briefing session with the twenty-four Frak Crak Assault Troopers under his command.

"...after the initial strafing run, Troop Carrier One will maintain a lookout for offensives; number Two and the demolition squad will gain access to the terrorist complex. As soon as you're in begin to set the mines. My ship will make the pickup, the rest of you disperse and continue strafing and setting mines. I want it shut down, inoperative, spotless. Detonation will be triggered by remote once we're weightless. Are there any questions?"

The squad leaders remain silent, their orders completely understood.

Itchtrong leaves the briefing room and strides onto the bridge, his authority filling the control area with tension. He stops behind the helmsman. "Take us into low, synchronous orbit."

"Should we hail the *Abrogate*?" asks Lieutenant Flinnff, arriving at the commander's side.

"No." Itchtrong glances out the main view port to witness the occasional flash of the eclipsed battle on the far side of the moon. "Maintain communications silence. Get the Vi-Troop Carriers ready, scramble the Frak Crak Assault Squad, and meet me in the hangar in ten minutes."

Flinnff, a short, hard man layered with sinewy muscle, turns on his heel, heading to carry out his commander's orders. A thin smile creases Itchtrong's face.

Geronimo, with the barrel of the BIGGER GUN(tm) pointing forward over the windscreen of the whizzing Hover Screemer(tm), has the Randomizer's keypad open on his lap. Despite his limited knowledge of micro-electronics, he spies what appears to be a loose wire and searches for the terminal to which it belongs. Finding a likely candidate, he touches the wire to the contact. The GUN spasms and fires a blue power-pulse. Geronimo looks up at the retreating energy bolt. As it disappears into the distance, he notices four small specks taking evasive maneuvers to avoid the shot.

"There's four more of 'em!" he shouts.

Gladius releases the accelerator and scans the distant skyline, locking onto the rapidly approaching police vehicles.

"Down there!" Geronimo points to a small access tunnel at the base of the viaduct along which they have been traveling.

Gladius swings the Screemer down the sharp slope.

BLAA-BLAA-BLAA-BLAA-BLAAMMM!!

Huge chunks of concrete are thrown up around the black craft as the Cop Hoppers(tm) open with a salvo of Bottle Bolts(tm).

Geronimo leans out the side of the Screemer, firing an infrared beam at the mesh grill that covers the tunnel. The grill glows red, melts away, and the Hover Screemer(tm) escapes into the darkness. The Cop Hoppers(tm) are unable to follow, the entrance being too small in diameter.

"Where are we going?" asks Fystik.

"Where ever this leads," Gladius sighs, guiding the Screemer along the damp tunnel.

The Vi-Scout Salvage Ship(tm), with its cargo of *Annihilator* survivors, nears the Battle Accelerator *Abrogate*. Explosions buffet the small craft as the grid's Fraz-Boom(tm) guns attempt to destroy anything that moves.

Inside, the first aid technicians try to stabilize the flagging Vice-Admiral Ragellon. Lieutenant Ginjee swings the Vi-Scout(tm) under the *Abrogate's* belly.

Docking complete, the hatch opens and another emergency team appears, whisking the wounded toward the ship's AutoDoc(tm) bays. Lieutenant Ginjee exits, Salata South in tow.

Major Wu Su turns as they enter the bridge. "South! What the hell happened out there?"

"It was a trap, the terrorists were waiting for us."

"Clever bastards."

A medical engineer with an AutoDoc Remote Unit(tm) appears and, wincing, motions for the bruised and scraped Salata to take a seat. South complies and the engineer begins to spot-weld the scarred Captain.

Wu Su returns his attention to the Holo-Vis Monitor(tm), perches on his Magno Supreme Command Chair(tm) and opens hailing frequencies to the *Expunger* and the *Pulverizer*.

"This is Major Wu Su. We have successfully rescued Vice-Admiral Ragellon and the remnants of his crew. Helfogg, do you think you can stand a run through the grid?"

"Yes, sir."

"Brown?"

"No problem."

"Then prepare for an assault. We'll use straight line formation in a concentrated push. The *Pulverizer* will take point, followed by the *Expunger*. I'll bring up the rear."

"Any sign of the *Decimater*?" queries Helfogg.

"None, but I see no use in waiting at this point."

Helfogg turns away from her Holo-Vis Commucon(tm), her chest tightening. Through the view port she watches the *Pulverizer* take its position at the head of the assault line.

"Set a course to match the *Pulverizer*," she orders. Her hand slides to a small locket around her neck. She examines the tiny Holo-Freeze(tm) image of herself and the smiling Heratio Brown. Discreetly, she kisses her finger, presses it to the image, then slides the locket back inside her uniform.

The tunnel comes to a dead end. Gladius slams his foot onto the brake, skimming the Hover Screemer(tm) to an abrupt stop. He cuts the engine, the black craft settles, and the threesome disembark.

"Now where?" asks Geronimo.

Gladius surveys the area. He looks down at an apparent drain or air shaft in the floor, access protected by a barred grate. "Stand back!"

Snatching a Hand Cannon(tm) from the Screemer, Gladius blasts the clamps holding the grate in place. Hot bits of metal spit around the tunnel. He kicks the remains of the grate down the shaft. There is a set of iron rungs mounted inside.

"Okay, let's grab everything we're going to need and start climbing," he orders, trading the Hand Cannon(tm) for the BIGGER GUN(tm).

"We don't even know where it leads," protests Geronimo, strapping the Hand Cannons(tm) to his waist and grabbing the Prompt O'Sting(tm) pole.

Fystik, Tri-Prong Defacer(tm) in hand, follows Gladius down the ladder, leaving Geronimo standing on the floor above, rearranging his cape.

"You could end up in the dungeon, for all you know," he shouts after them.

"There's no place else to go," Gladius calls.

Geronimo curses inwardly, then steps down to the protruding rungs. Although his attitude hardly reflects it, decked out in his red cape with the Prompt O'Sting(tm) pole slung on his back and a pair of Hand Cannons(tm) at his sides, he makes a convincing swashbuckler. "I'm not into this death thing, ya know. Livin' suits me fine. All I want is a ship... go back to mindin' my own business. Maybe start my own used shuttle lot. Or become a financial advisor. I could be a financial advisor. Get to meet a

lot of rich people, dress fancy. But noooo, instead I'm climbin' down some grimy shaft with a coupla butt holes who're doin' their best to get me stuffed and mounted..."

Itchtrong, Hand Cannon(tm) holstered at his side, boards the last of the Vi-Troop Carriers(tm) to depart from the *Decimater*. Lieutenant Flinnff, finishing his flight check, reports as the Colonel enters. "The other ships have begun descent."

Itchtrong takes his seat in the Magno Command Chair(tm), activating its field. "Good, launch this thing." He casts a look at the crisp, efficient crew of trained killers that surround him. The Frak Crak Assault Squad are the deadliest of the special operations soldiers in the known Universe. And each one will serve him without hesitation.

"Prepare for launch!" Flinnff calls over the Inform-U-Amp(tm) intercom.

The occupants of the small craft brace themselves. The powerful Mini-HootToot(tm) drives shudder and the Vi-Troop Carrier(tm) is ejected from the mother ship, hurtling toward the Green Moon below.

On the day side, Brown and the *Pulverizer* are in the lead position, the ship's Tremor Blasters(tm) pummeling away as it moves toward the largest opening in the battered and weakening grid. The slightly crippled *Expunger*, under Helfogg, follows, with the *Abrogate* and Wu Su behind her.

Alfonse and the Glik-Gnome watch as the two ships enter the grid. Their slick fingers rest on the Emergency Self Destruct buttons.

"Hang on, just hang on," breathes Alfonse.

"Hurry," says the Glik-Gnome.

Gladius emerges from the opening of the shaft, swinging down to the damp floor below. The others follow, entering a large access tunnel with tram rail lines running down its length.

"Where the fuck are we now?" Geronimo is not happy.

"Underground transport." Gladius hops across the rails to a small concrete stairway, up the steps, and onto a loading platform.

Fystik follows closely, while Geronimo begrudgingly picks up the rear, still cursing under his breath.

Brown jostles in his chair, silver hands balled into

fists, as his ship blasts its way through the failing grid. With less than half a ship's length to go to break through to the other side, he thumbs the ships Inform-U-Amp(tm).

"Almost there people, hang tough and keep up the good work."

The *Expunger*, in the middle position, is now completely enveloped within the grid and the *Abrogate's* nose is entering the gaping hole behind it.

"Now!" shouts Alfonse.

Together, he and the Glik-Gnome jam their fingers onto the self destruct buttons.

"Detecting an energy surge in the grid," informs the panicked voice of the *Pulverizer's* helmsman.

Brown snaps his gaze to the grid, realizes what must be happening. "Full Tooters ahead!"

The *Pulverizer* whines forward, crunching into the web of scaffolding. Brown's eyes lock onto the Holo-Vis Monitor(tm) depicting the *Expunger* to his rear. His silver hand snaps open the frequency on his Commucon Stay-Close(tm). "Helena, get your ship out of there!" he shouts, at once realizing that she has no where to go.

The grid rapidly glows red. Brown's message is lost in the electromagnetic cacophony. The bridge of the *Expunger* is in panic mode. A tear wells up in Helena Helfogg's eye as she glimpses the fleeing *Pulverizer* and her love, Heratio Brown. Helpless, she turns away, knowing of her imminent death.

The grid goes nova and her ship, super-heated and subjected to an extreme concussion, begins to disintegrate around her.

"Full reverse Tooters!" shouts Wu Su.

The *Abrogate* whines and shudders as it retreats from the dissolving grid. The ship lurches violently, the crew fighting against their restraining Magno Chairs(tm). The nose of the ship is engulfed in hot plasma and hurtling debris, its bow sustaining severe damage in the blast.

The concussion engulfs the *Pulverizer* as it surges toward the moon, HooterTooter(tm) drives misfiring badly.

"We're losing her," calls the helmsman.

Brown ignores him, his silver face saddened by the loss of the *Expunger*. The First Officer arrives at Brown's side. "We have the pod ready," he shouts over the

crumbling ship. "We must hurry."

"You go. Abandon ship."

The First Officer hesitates, then hurries with the rest of the bridge crew to the pod, leaving the solitary silver figure to gaze out the view port. Brown steps to the huge pane of Stalwart Glass(tm) and places his silver palm against it, his heart broken.

A fiery blast slams him to the deck. The *Pulverizer* is ripped apart.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

REPRIMAND

"If they want to kill me, let them."

The Vi-Troop Carriers(tm) pass over a smoldering Nauga field. Colonel Itchtrong sits in his Magno Command Chair(tm), watching as the landscape of the Green Moon unfolds before them. Ahead, the green laser curtain has been steadily faltering, and now the last sporadic burps come to an end. The self-destructing grid has ceased to function. Glancing skyward, the Colonel smirks and silently thanks his fellow Battle Accelerator commanders.

"All clear, sir," proclaims Lieutenant Flinnff.

"How long until we reach Verd's core?"

"Twenty minutes."

On the long-range Holo-Vis Monitor(tm) the ball of plasma wanes, revealing the crippled *Abrogate* amidst the shards of the defunct grid. Bloition, standing with the staff of the Crusade Strategy Room(tm), allows himself a calming breath.

"There's still one left," someone remarks.

"But look at it," snaps Bloition, "the entire front end is damaged. It's practically a derelict sitting up there."

"Perhaps we should let them go home and lick their wounds," offers another.

"No! Stanzilli!" The clerk steps forward. "Have Ikky Hummanah and his mercenary War Buzzard make an assault on that Battle Accelerator. It's time we put his services to the test."

"Right away, sir. Um, excuse me, First Chairman Supreme?"

"Yes?"

"A while ago, Second Clerk Tizzaphooex captured a spy. Munch should have him prepared for interrogation by now."

"I'll join you momentarily. Everyone, standby for commencement of evacuation. We are expecting help shortly." Bloition nods to the self-congratulatory gathering and heads for his office.

Gladius peers through a small, round window in the door, into what appears to be a cargo depot. He can see stacks upon stacks of crated goods, and beyond, far down the huge chamber, the docking bays where transport vessels

load and unload their cargoes. The depot is silent and still.

Assured that there is no one around, Slate smashes at the door lock with the butt of the BIGGER GUN(tm). The lock surrenders. Cautiously, he opens the door, then leads Fystik and Geronimo into the warehouse.

"Where are we now?" Geronimo complains.

Gladius ignores him, examining the boxes and crates that surround them. At the far end of the main aisle, on the first of three docking bay pads, an Astral Cargo Sled(tm), used for ferrying goods to and from orbit, sits.

"Well, I don't see any Petunia and I don't see any terrorists, Gladman, so let's take that sled down there and get outta here," Geronimo says.

Gladius leaves him standing and walks deeper into the room. "There must be a way into their control center," he says, reluctantly allowing his old military training to impinge on the situation.

The solitary War Buzzard(tm) space vessel lifts from the green tarmac of Verd's landing base, heading for orbit and the damaged *Abrogate*. Its mercenary crew of seven, lead by Bratislav Winslow Vernon "Ikky" Hummanah, eagerly prepare for cleanup of the *Abrogate's* survivors.

Until recently, Hummanah had been plying his trade as a pirate, overpowering small, unarmed merchant vessels in the outer reaches of the Kielbasa Nebula, a penchant that was earning him a brisk trade in pastries and other baked goods.

Hummanah's technique was to feign a propulsion problem, ask the passing freighters for assistance, then walk onto the vessels and murder, in cold, hard buckets of blood, the crew. To Hummanah and company the kill was worth more than the booty, considering it great sport to accomplish these exterminations by means of crude weaponry, supplied by an insane warfare historian turned crude weapon fabricator. It was through this contact that Hummanah was put in touch with the DataTrump Fruition Front, billed as a jack-of-all trades.

And now Hummanah, with one flesh-hand and one prosthesis (the original lost early in his career during a botched raid at a pickling factory), works the controls of the War Buzzard(tm), heading out on his first real mission for the terrorists.

The Crusade Strategy Room(tm), which had calmed down with the elimination of the immediate threat from the

Battle Accelerator HyperCrafts(tm), is once again consumed with chaos. Bloition bursts in and is taken aback by the hubbub. Shaking his head, he moves to the elevator at the back of the room. Turning his key provides an unsettling beep and a winking, digitized message on the small screen:

THIS ELEVATOR HAS BEEN DISABLED ON THE
SUB-BASEMENT LEVEL NINE. PLEASE TRY
AGAIN LATER... THIS ELEVATOR HAS BEEN
DISABLED ON THE SUB-BASEMENT...

"First Chairman Supreme," comes the urgent voice of a Second Clerk.

"This elevator's broken, call maintenance," orders Bloition.

"Uh, right away, but there's something else, sir. We're detecting Vi-Troop Carriers within defense curtain limits. Prelim scan registers them to the Frak Crak Assault Squad."

The blood drains from Bloition's face. "Frak Craks?"

The Second Clerk nods, awaiting instructions.

"Announce that infiltration is imminent. Standby for full evacuation. Where the hell is Ondurf?"

"He went down to level nine to interrogate the intruder, sir," informs a nearby guard.

"Fine, just fine. Somebody get this elevator working and get Ondurf up here, now!"

BANG! CLANG! Clatter, clatter.

Gladius flips the BIGGER GUN(tm) toward the sudden noise. A ventilation grate next to him has just been booted off the wall from inside the duct. The blue-skinned alien and the pack rat rush to Gladius's side as a sleek, feminine leg pokes out from the hole. The leg is followed by its owner, Petunia Ren.

"Freeze, bitch!" growls Geronimo, drawing both Hand Cannons(tm).

"Petunia," squeals Fystik. He starts forward, but Gladius collars him. Petunia is genuinely surprised to see Fystik, but, as she eyes Gladius and Geronimo, she is overcome by a strong desire to be elsewhere. She is also acutely aware of the Five Point Pin Laser(tm) strapped to her left arm.

"Just hold it right there." Gladius has the BIGGER GUN(tm) trained on her. She gingerly begins to sidle away from the shaft. "Don't move!"

Petunia stands still. A scuffling and grunting becomes apparent in the silence. Gladius, Geronimo and

Fystik trade confused glances. Suddenly, Petunia lurches forward, bumped from behind. The bumbling Snax struggles out of the air duct and pushes his way around her.

"Snax?!" blurts Gladius.

"Um, hi boss."

Gladius lunges forward, dropping his weapon. His hands encircle the slippery throat of the alien and he begins to throttle him vigorously. "You sack of dung! You miserable bag of pus. You put a military homing device in my ship!"

"There's no time for this," Petunia says. "The guards have probably made it to the detention cells by now. When they see that we've escaped they'll come looking for us."

WHOOH WHOOP! WHOOP WHOOP! WHOOP WHOOP!

A general alarm sounds throughout the cargo depot. Gladius stops shaking Snax and the five intruders scan the cavernous room for signs of trouble. A roving bot homes in on the group, relaying visual information to an unseen control station somewhere deep within the complex.

"Spy bot," blurts Geronimo. He begins to blast at the wandering eye. After several errant shots, he connects and the bot loses power, dropping to the platform.

"They'll be on us in minutes," Petunia warns.

Slate releases Snax and collapses onto a crate, slouching his shoulders and staring at the floor. "That's it, I've had enough."

Petunia looks to Fystik impatiently. "Let's get moving, Fystik, we can't wait for garbage men."

"But they helped me find you," says the Dismemberon, uncertain of his feelings.

She shoots him a disapproving glance, then backs away from the group. With a hint of hesitation, Fystik follows. Snax rubs at his neck, trying to assess the situation.

"Come on, Gladman," urges Geronimo, watching Fystik and Petunia head off down the depot. "We gotta get movin'. This place'll be crawlin' with guards any minute."

"No, Geronimo, I'm done. No more of this stuff."

Geronimo's jaw flaps, as if to say something, then clamps shut.

"Chairman Bloition, we have detected intruders in the cargo depot."

In response to First Clerk Rhymo Stanzilli's report, Bloition fingers his Commucon Stay-Close(tm). "Are they Frak Craks?"

"No, sir. Just a small, ragtag group... unidentified, except for Petunia Ren."

"Apprehend them," orders Bloition, now understanding the disabled elevator. He checks the load on his Junior Hand Cannon(tm). "I'll be right there."

"Look, Gladius," Geronimo implores, "you can either sit here and probably die, or hustle your butt so we can get the fuck outta here."

"Why, Geronimo? Why would the Company and the Union side with the military and use me this way. I've always done my best for them, or tried to. Now they've tricked and cajoled me into a situation where I have no choice but to risk my life trying to stop something that I'm not even sure about, anymore. I've had it. If they want to kill me, let them."

"Bullshit! I learned long ago that giant companies can't be trusted. Give 'em your best, believe in their thanks, put up with their moanin'... you wanna know how much they care? I'll tell you how much. That Company is a vortex, gorgin' itself until you're used up and down the funnel you go. Plenty more comin' in the top. Next time you watch the water goin' down the drain, go ahead, stick your finger into that vortex, pull it out and see how big a hole you left!"

Gladius sits, head low, absorbing the abuse. Geronimo takes a deep breath, glances at Petunia and Fystik as they slink off, now halfway across the giant room. He returns his attention to Gladius.

"Why the hell do you think I got outta it? Give, give, give. For what? Security? We are about to die, you call that security? Steady income? Steady boredom, I say! Take control of your life, like me, freelance. I'm my own boss, answer to no one. Look, if these idiots wanna steal Cows and blow each other up, let 'em. If I hadn't been stuck with you two schmucks, it would be *my* decision to fight back or walk away, no one else's."

Gladius slowly lifts his gaze to Geronimo. Snax has trundled away, following Petunia and Fystik.

"So we can either get the fuck outta here, or get ready to shoot these mothers. You gonna sit here, or move your happy ass?" Geronimo turns away, looks in the direction the others have gone, considering his options.

Gladius ponders what Geronimo has said. The depot will soon be filled with armed guards. "Fine, let's get moving," he says softly, scooping up his weapon.

Geronimo cocks an eyebrow at the big man and, together, they move out.

CHAPTER TWENTY

CHAOS

"It's playtime."

The scene on the *Abrogate* is not good. In addition to the wounded they have retrieved from the now extinct *Annihilator*, a high percentage of their own crew is either dead or in need of repair. Unfortunately, electricians have been severely disrupted by the electromagnetic pulse of the grid dissolution. The five AutoDocs(tm) are not receiving sufficient current to risk operating them; power fluctuations can be seriously hazardous for the patient, often causing uneven healing, grotesque scarring or, in the worst case, fusing of perfectly normal tissue.

On the bridge, the crew is trying to stabilize the ship's autonomous functions through a thin haze. An initial electrical fire had filled the room with dense, acrid smoke and several crew members now suffer from inhalation of toxic fumes. Major Wu Su is patrolling, offering consolation.

"Are you doing okay, Snabbitts?" he asks of a petite blond ensign, resting his hand on her shoulder.

She nods, forcing a weak smile.

"Any luck with the radio functions?"

"Nothing but static on the long range frequencies, sir. We have got short range capabilities, but it's very short, I'm afraid. With luck we may be able to raise the Green Moon."

"Keep trying, Judy." He nods, moving on.

Captain Salata South hovers outside the private quarters where Vice-Admiral Ragellon lies unconscious. The Vice-Admiral's condition is critical: massive internal injuries, increasing cranial swelling, broken bones, lacerations and contusions. There is serious doubt amongst the medical team that he will survive the mission.

"There's not a lot you can do here, sir," calls Lieutenant Cleanerschmidt, startling South from his trance. "We could use your help down on the hangar deck. A couple of the guys think they may be able to get a Vi-Scout operational, perhaps use it to ferry survivors down."

South, aware of the limited options, takes a deep breath and follows the Lieutenant to the hangar deck.

The *Decimeter's* Vi-Troop Carriers(tm) roar past the

city limits of Verd.

"We're in range," Lieutenant Flinnff informs.

"Good work. Drop down to minimum altitude and prepare to commence the strafing runs," Itchtrong orders.

The communications officer quickly transmits the order to the other Vi-Troop Carriers(tm). Lieutenant Flinnff banks the craft into a tight descent, toward the city streets below.

Within the confines of his office, Bloition drops the last of his confidential documents into the Vap O'Shred(tm) intake and makes a move to the secret emergency escape tube. Inside the tube entrance a small panel illuminates, highlighting a Voice Command Actuator(tm). Bloition leans into it, hesitating as he considers the immensity of what he is about to do.

The sudden appearance of a military Frak Crak Assault Squad within striking distance is an unexpected surprise. The Observer, mastermind of the DataTrump Fruition Front, had assured him only a short time ago that help was on its way. With the arrival of the first warships, he had initiated and followed all the predetermined procedures designed to cope with the foreseen event of military intervention. But now, it seems that the attacking forces are playing an ace that they have held up their sleeve. It is time to try and trump that ace. He will miss the people he has befriended here on the Green Moon, but there is only one escape pod supplied, and there is only room in it for one: him.

Taking a deep breath, he speaks into the Voice Command Actuator(tm): "Begin Inf O'Worm destruct procedures. Destroy all information held on this base. Destroy everything."

"Voice identified," returns the electronic vocalization, "please invoke the data string code for confirmation."

Bloition recites the code in a methodical, unwavering tone.

"Order confirmed. Inf O'Worm destruct initiated."

The computer begins to whir, busily eating its own memory. Bloition activates the tube, launching himself downward.

Snax Mawhoooba trudges up the gangplank of the Astral Cargo Sled(tm). Fystik and Petunia have already entered the motorized, barge-like space vehicle. Petunia is in the cockpit, ensconced in the Magno Piloting Chair(tm),

flipping switches.

Fystik sits in the Magno Cargo Handlers Chair(tm). From here, a skilled operator can manipulate the huge robotic loading arms which, at the moment, lay splayed out on the depot floor to either side of the craft. He begins to examine the controls to see how to fold the arms up for flight, but stops when he notices Snax entering the sled.

"What about him?" he asks, gesturing to Mawhooba.

Petunia shoots the fat alien a look.

Snax smiles, trying to take a seat. "Hi, get a lift, can I?"

"Get him out of here," she says, igniting the sled's engines, letting them warm up.

Fystik takes a firm hold of Snax, straining under the weight as he hustles him to the hatchway.

"Wait, I helped you escape from the dungeon," Snax whines, "I can help you, like, I'm a good dude."

Fystik heaves Snax out the door. The portly alien waddles uncontrollably down the ramp. Fystik is about to punch the button to close the door when a clangor draws his attention.

At the far end of the depot the big metal doors, which seal off the room from the rest of the base, have burst open and a small company of armed guards has rushed in. In the middle distance Gladius and Geronimo split and dive, in opposite directions, to hide amongst the cargo. Fystik quickly closes the hatch and dashes to the cockpit.

BLAM! BLAM!

Gladius hits the deck, rolling behind some boxes. Geronimo cringes, hunkered low as a steady stream of projectiles blast through the surrounding crates.

"Stop that cargo sled!" shouts Rhymo Stanzilli.

The guards advance, winding their way through the maze of boxes and shelving.

Gladius checks the BIGGER GUN(tm), then glances across the aisle to his ex-copilot. Geronimo adjusts the Prompt O'Sting(tm) pole slung on his back and draws the two Hand Cannons(tm).

CaCRACKKK!

A shot splinters the corner of the crate, centimeters above Gladius's head. Amidst raining slivers, he bolts to his left, away from Geronimo, and bursts into the corridor at the end of the aisle, coming face to face with an armed guard. Gladius lets loose with the BIGGER GUN(tm).

FWWWWWISSSSSUUUU!

A stream of liquid nitrogen splashes over the guard.

Gladius watches wide-eyed as the frozen figure topples backward. The fall is abruptly halted by the concrete floor and, with a cymbal-like crash, the guard shatters, pieces scattering.

Geronimo, from across the room, spies Gladius turning and heading back toward the loading bays and the warming Cargo Sled. With a quick look, he too turns and withdraws, heading for the far end of the depot.

Fystik is struggling to get the six loading arms retracted for takeoff, the ungainly Cargo Sled looking like a wounded crab with a couple of broken legs. Impatient, Petunia punches the AttiTooters(tm) and the Astral Cargo Sled(tm) begins its slow and clumsy ascent to the huge shaft in the ceiling above its landing pad.

"Get those arms in or we'll never fit into the shaft," she calls.

Fystik gawks at her, face contorted and eyes bulging, as he wrestles with the awkward manipulator arms.

Geronimo sneaks between the stacks of crates. Over the whine of the ascending Astral Cargo Sled's(tm) motors, he can hear the scuffling of guards rushing past his position. He rounds a corner and comes to a dead end, his path blocked by a large tarp covered object. He scrambles over it. The Prompt O'Sting(tm) pole snags. Yanking on it rams the end of the pole into the tarp. The pole fires an electric charge into the object.

CLICK!

Something beneath the tarp activates.

BRRRZZZZ! VVVVEEEEE! KaCHUNK!

The object under the tarp begins to move forward. Geronimo yanks the pole free, jumps back.

"Hi, kiddies! It's play time," announces a fatherly voice within the tarp.

The sheet snags and slides off, uncovering the incredible firepower of Mr. Munitions(tm).

A guard glimpses Geronimo's back through a jumble of boxes. Cautiously, he approaches, aiming his Junior Hand Cannon(tm). Just as he pulls the trigger, his target bolts out of view, revealing the ominous bulk of weaponry.

CLACK! VVWWEEEE!

The shot ricochets off the armor plating of the robot.

BLA-BLA-BLA-BLA-BLA-BLA-BLAM!

Mr. Munitions(tm) does what he's designed to do, shredding the guard in a spew of projectiles.

"It's not nice to point guns," advises the paternal robot, crawling forward on its dual treads, ready for battle.

"They're dying nicely!" shouts a joyous Flinff.

The Vi-Troop Carrier(tm) is skimming along main street, mowing down the scampering pedestrians.

Flinff turns from the scene of carnage beyond the view port to his commanding officer. "Three and Four are landing in sectors nine and five, deploying troops."

"Good." Itchtrong concentrates on a monitor displaying schematic diagrams of the complex below the city. Two flashing dots, which have been steadily converging toward the same location, are the focus of his attention. "Get us down near the surface entrance of the Cargo Depot, sector seventeen. We'll make that pick up."

Ikky Hummanah guides the War Buzzard(tm) into a docking position next to the *Abrogate*.

"This is Commander Hummanah, of Emergency Services," he chokes, over the open channel to the *Abrogate*. "Please extend a Gooley Tube for us to bring supplies across to your ship."

On board the crippled *Abrogate*, Major Wu Su paces before the view port, studying the War Buzzard(tm). Captain South strides onto the bridge, his demeanor replenished by the promise of engaging a Vi-Scout as a shuttle. He spies the foreign vessel.

"That's no rescue ship!"

"It doesn't look like one," coughs Wu Su, his voice hoarse from the smoke, "but with the casualties we now have on board, I see no choice but to extend the tube."

"I understand your position, Major, but I think we should use caution. I'd like to be part of the welcoming committee."

"Certainly. Take all the necessary precautions."

South turns to one of the aides waiting at the entrance to the bridge. "Private. Go down to the hangar deck, find Lieutenant Cleanerschmidt, and have him bring weapons and a security crew to the forward starboard airlock."

The private salutes and hustles from the bridge.

"We've suffered phenomenal losses today, Captain," wheezes Wu Su. "Let's try not to lose anymore."

South heads for the airlock.

Gladius serpentines through the maze of containers,

the BIGGER GUN(tm) at the ready. He rounds a corner and is hit by the swirling blast of the Astral Cargo Sled's(tm) exhaust. Squinting against the wind-whipped debris, he gazes up at the huge shaft above Loading Bay Number One.

The Sled's engines whine as it strains against the ceiling of the depot. Fystik has been unable to get all six arms retracted, and now three are hung up on the rim of the exit vent. The ship lurches wildly as Petunia forces more power into the equipment, desperate to escape.

Inside, Fystik is being flung about the cockpit as the manipulator pistol grips recoil from the forces tugging at the exterior arms. He reefs on the controls and the ship lurches forward, banging into the corner where the shaft meets the ceiling.

"Fystik, stop fighting me!" Petunia shouts, over the howl of the laboring engines.

"Well, give me some slack so I can get the damn arms in!"

Petunia eases up on the throttles and the ship settles slightly, allowing Fystik to casually retract another arm.

"They're extending the tube," shouts a pirate. He wears the white coveralls of a medical engineer and quickly secures a Hand Cannon(tm) inside the garment.

Ikky Hummanah slides a Junior Hand Cannon(tm) up his sleeve, nods to his partners, then takes a position at the hatchway. "Let's hit 'em hard goin' in," he calls, looking to one particularly brutish mercenary named Larp. "You got the Fester Rocket(tm)?"

Larp produces a hideous, bazooka-like weapon: the Fester Rocket(tm). It fires an exploding charge that flings great dollops of NuMeltink Acid(tm). The acid instantly adheres to flesh, quickly dissolving through to the bone.

"Children shouldn't play with Hand Cannons," clucks the hearty voice of Mr. Munitions(tm).

Smoke has begun to fill the warehouse. He aims his mass of weapons at two retreating guards. The guards split, diving for cover. Mr. Munitions(tm) opens up, his blasts splintering crates of dry goods stacked in the aisle. He lets go with a small cannon, lobbing an explosive warhead into a huge structural support pillar. The entire warehouse rattles with the concussion.

"Right-oh! What a good shot that was," he chuckles.

Bloition steps to the door of the cargo depot,

cautiously peering through the window. The sound of weapons fire issues from within. Through the haze of cordite, spectral figures emerge.

"First Chairman Supreme," blurts Rhymo Stanzilli, bursting through the door. Three ragged guards stumble in after him. Behind them, Mr. Munitions(tm) proceeds to shoot at anything in his path, animate or inanimate.

"What's going on?" snaps Bloition, staring at the berserk robot.

"The intruders activated that munitions robot," gasps Rhymo, taking cover behind the door. "It's been blowing out the depot's main supports. I'm afraid the whole place may collapse."

"The tube's attached, sir," informs Cleanerschmidt, glancing through the airlock window. He unlatches the safety on his Intensifier Musket(tm).

Salata moves into a secure position off to the left, training another Intensifier on the door. Four other troopers, Hand Cannons(tm) slung at their sides, have convened at the hatchway, waiting to escort the medical support team.

Cleanerschmidt observes as the motley group worms their way through the tube into the airlock. The apparent leader, his Fu Manchu mustache wrapping a flagitious smile, clacks his metal appendage against the window. The Lieutenant glances to South. The Captain nods.

BWEEEP! HOONNGGGK.

The airlock door whisks open. Cleanerschmidt looks at the seven grinning rogues huddled within the tiny alcove. Sensing trouble, he backs away, leveling his gun.

"Nail the fuck!" orders Hummanah.

FWWWSSHHHHH!!!

Larp launches a charge from the Fester Rocket(tm). The charge smacks into Cleanerschmidt's chest, knocking him back. The shell erupts, splashing NuMeltink Acid(tm) into his face.

"AAAUUUGGGHHH!!!"

The Lieutenant gurgles, his flesh drizzling freely from his skull. Everyone in the alcove receives a smattering of the nasty acid and flinch under its stinging touch. Two of the troopers manage to draw their weapons and fire into the airlock. Two of the mercenaries go down.

"Shit, they were waitin' for us," shouts Hummanah, trying to return fire. "Retreat, assholes!" He rushes back into the tube, Larp and the three remaining mercenaries follow.

Salata dashes to the hatchway and, taking careful aim to avoid puncturing the tube, fires his Intensifier. Another soldier of fortune goes down, dead.

In the null gravity of the tube, Hummanah is scrambling to enter the War Buzzard(tm). Larp, who still hefts the Fester Rocket(tm), is struggling along behind him. South picks off another pirate. Wounded, the man clutches his abdomen, crying out to his cohorts. Looking back, Larp and Hummanah spy South taking aim. Hummanah quickly punches the button to close the hatch, abandoning the remaining pirates. Seeing the door begin to close, South adjusts his aim at Larp.

The shot catches Larp in the arm and he reflexively jerks the trigger of the Fester Rocket(tm), launching a wild charge inside the War Buzzard(tm) airlock. It bursts against the ceiling above Hummanah, providing a searing shower of acid, which instantly begins to husk the flesh from his bones.

"AAAUUGGGHHH!!!"

Hummanah swivels, seeing the skin slough off his chest and arms. He looks at Larp, who can only offer an apologetic shrug. Ikky, who's nickname is now truly appropriate, squeezes a bony, dissolving finger on the trigger of his Junior Hand Cannon(tm).

SHHHNACK!

The shot impacts with Larp's forehead, splattering his brains against the interior of the hatchway.

Salata caught a brief glimpse of the NuMeltink Acid(tm) charge bursting above Hummanah before the War Buzzard's(tm) hatch had fully closed, and has quickly sealed the Abrogate's hatch in case of sudden decompression. He now stands, staring through the porthole at the unmoving vessel, watching as the remaining healthy pirate trapped in the Goey Tube(tm) claws up to the Buzzard's hatch, peers in, and begins to wretch violently.

The captain turns away at the nauseating sight and becomes aware of the curses and splattering of water within the confines of the Abrogate's airlock. The four troopers are feverishly rinsing themselves under the wash of a fire hose.

"Captain, get over here! Your arm!"

Wisps of vapor curl from numerous cigarette-like burns on South's arm. Startled, he rushes over and plunges his arm into the cool, gushing stream.

Geronimo creeps along, trying to get as far away from

Mr. Munitions(tm) as possible. The roar of the Cargo Sled's(tm) engines is waning, being replaced by the stutter of guns and explosions. The weapons robot is out of control, shooting holes in the depot's walls and supports. Lavoriss edges backward keeping an eye on the danger, his Hand Cannons(tm) at the ready.

BUMP!

Geronimo turns, ready to annihilate whatever he's bumped into. What he's bumped into also turns, ready to shoot back. Lavoriss faces his ex-boss, Slate.

"Geronimo," Gladius gasps, relieved.

"Looks like the blue-faced toad and that bitch have taken off without us," observes Geronimo.

The two men watch as the Astral Cargo Sled(tm) clears the opening far above, leaving a patch of daylight.

As the Astral Cargo Sled(tm) exits the depot entrance and rises above the city, Petunia observes the demolition wreaked by the Frak Crak Assault Squad storming through the streets. Windows are shattered, vehicles lie wrecked and smoldering, the cratered boulevard is strewn with bodies.

Fystik's eyes widen as he looks at the rear view screen. A Vi-Troop Carrier(tm) is rapidly closing on their position, its cannons taking aim at their vulnerable hull.

"Petunia, may I suggest we not dilly-dally, it seems we are about to be attacked!"

Petunia glances to the rear view screen, inhales sharply, and punches the HooterTooters(tm).

KABLLLOOOIEEEE!!!!

An explosion rocks the Sled. It veers wildly, trailing smoke.

"Did you get it?" queries Itchtrong, aboard the Vi-Troop Carrier(tm).

"Confirmed hit," reports Flinnff. "It's not destroyed, but its trajectory indicates that it has been rendered unstable."

"Good." The display monitor before Itchtrong shows that the two blips, now merged into a single point, continue to flash. "Take us down into the depot."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

NULLIFICATION

"Are you nuts?"

Mr. Munitions(tm) emits a plume of fire, causing a stack of crates to erupt in flame. Leaving that, he turns toward the wall, fires three quick explosive shells, and opens a huge hole into the rooms beyond.

"Ha, ha," shouts the robot. "Let's see what we have here." He chugs through the smoldering hole and out of the cargo depot.

"That tank-head just hit the road," informs Geronimo, peering over a heap of rubbish.

"Any sign of the guards?" asks Gladius.

Geronimo scans the area. Through the smoke, at the far end of the depot, he spots Rhymo, Bloition and a couple of guards hovering nervously around the doorway.

"They're at the door, lookin' to see if that maniacal microchip has left for good."

"We'd better find another way out." Gladius begins to move, but stops suddenly.

Geronimo bumps into him. "What?"

Lavoriss's question is answered by the high-pitched whine of descending AttiTooters(tm). A Vi-Troop Carrier(tm) eases down the shaft, its military insignia clearly describing it as a unit of the Frak Crak Assault Squad.

"Wonderful," Slate remarks, "Hornheads. We've had it."

"What's that?" Bloition says, peering down the aisle.

The Vi-Troop Carrier(tm) settles itself onto the cargo bay floor. The ramp of the troop carrier slides down and its metal doors grind open. A handful of Frak Craks, poised and ready to kill, spill out, quickly slinking into the cover of the cargo containers. A loud speaker emerges from the top of the ship.

"Bloition!" booms a voice over the speaker.

First Chairman Supreme Bloition, slightly confused, moves out from the cover of the doorway. "Over here!"

Satisfied that their wounds have been neutralized, South and the troopers move to the airlock door, gingerly stepping over the mess left by the dissolved

Cleanerschmidt. The odor of gastric juices is overpowering and two of the soldiers make a hasty exit from the close quarters, launching their last meal on the way. Salata and the remaining two move through the Goey Tube(tm), weapons drawn and trained on the trapped mercenaries. The troopers escort the prisoners back toward the *Abrogate*.

Peeking through the porthole of the War Buzzard(tm), Salata South gags. The sight of the stinking, oozing, smears within almost make him vomit.

An electronics technician from the *Abrogate* arrives and goes to work on the Buzzard's hatch. Within moments, the door whisks open and the technician stands aside, wincing at South's facial disfigurement and swooning at the wave of stench which issues from the vessel.

South cautiously pokes his head in, breathing as shallowly as possible. He steps over the remains, making his way to the War Buzzard's(tm) bridge. There, he flicks on the external monitors, trying to determine what's happening on the Green Moon. The screens before him detail the destruction of Verd as the Frak Crak Assault Squad goes about its business. Frak Craks? When did they get here?

From their hiding place, Geronimo and Gladius watch the First Chairman Supreme approach the ship, alone. They see a tall, military colonel march down the ramp.

"What are they saying?" whispers Geronimo.

Gladius shakes his head, the dying cool-down whine of the ship's engines blocking out the conversation.

"What the hell is going on?" asks Bloition.

"The military figured it out. They know about you and the terrorist base that is operating here," reports Itchtrong, flatly.

"Yes, we've been notified. I had the entire facility packed up and ready to move, but when I got word of Frak Craks approaching... we began evidence destruction."

"Right." Itchtrong glances over Bloition's shoulder at Lieutenant Flinnff. Flinnff offers a discreet nod.

"Rhymo," Bloition shouts, "tell the command center to move everyone down to the Cargo Depot, we've got a ride off this berg."

There is no reply.

"Rhymo?"

Still no answer.

"RHYMO!"

Silence.

Bloition looks at the Colonel. "What's going on--"

BWAP BWAP BWAP BWAM!

The holey form of First Chairman Supreme Bloition tumbles to the floor. Emotionless, Itchtrong holsters his Hand Cannon(tm).

Gladius and Geronimo exchange a puzzled look in the wake of the killing.

Itchtrong looks about the depot. "Snax!"

Gladius starts, following the Colonel's gaze. A pile of rubble begins to shift. Snax Mawhoooba's singular eye pokes through the debris.

"Snax, get over here, we're getting out."

Snax pushes the hasty barricade aside and lumbers toward the ship.

"That traitorous pusbag," whispers Gladius, his finger tightening on the trigger of the BIGGER GUN(tm)

"Cool it, Gladman," urges Geronimo, "those dickheads will blast the crap out of--"

But before Lavoriss can finish, Slate is rising, aiming his weapon.

Flinnff catches sight of the movement to his right, sees Slate and the BIGGER GUN(tm). "Over there, kill him!"

The returning Frak Craks spring into action, sighting their weapons at Slate. Gladius's finger begins to squeeze. The buzz of targeting-lock-mechanisms floods the area as the Frak Craks get a positive fix. Snax, spying his ex-boss, tries to waddle faster. Geronimo grabs the seat of Slate's Spiffy Sensor Suit Undergarment(tm).

KAFLAMMMBEAU!!

The burst of blinding energy from the Frak Crak's guns screams toward Slate, narrowly missing him as he is pulled down. The eruption from the BIGGER GUN(tm) goes straight up. Huge hunks of ceiling rain down on the small group of combatants.

"Forget them," orders Itchtrong. "Let's get out of here. This place is falling apart."

Restraining themselves, the Frak Craks pour back into the ship. Within, Snax takes a place on the Magno Bench(tm) and begins to snoop about. "Anything to, um, eat in here, guys?"

The troopers are silent, staring coldly at the Metamorphrodite.

Unaware that the Frak Craks are retreating, Gladius and Geronimo make a hasty exit, skirting around the shelving and slinking along the wall, back toward the main door. Halfway there, they enter the hole made by Mr.

Munitions(tm). Inside, the robot, with total disregard for the existing rooms and corridors, has made a crater riddled tunnel, which snakes into the bowels of the complex.

"Holy crap," says Geronimo, in awe. "Where to?"

"That psycho robot made us a trail," Gladius shrugs, "let's see if it leads anywhere useful."

South, aboard the War Buzzard(tm), thumbs open a channel to the *Abrogate's* bridge. "Major Wu Su?"

"What's the situation?" returns the Major.

"The emergency medical team were assassins, sent to finish us off. The situation is under control, but I'm afraid we've lost Cleanerschmidt." South pauses to let the news settle with Wu Su. "I've scanned the Moon's surface. Hornheads are ransacking the city."

"Itchtrong must be here," says Wu Su, hopeful.

"Something is out of kilter, Major. They're attacking unarmed civilians. And why hasn't he made contact and facilitated a rescue? That's procedure. I'm going down to check it out."

"Captain South, I can't spare anybody. There's no point risking the lives of any more crew members."

"I don't need anyone else." Salata closes the channel. He waves the technician back into the *Abrogate* and settles himself into the Magno Piloting Chair(tm).

Once the inner hatch is sealed, he blows off the Goopy Tube(tm), effectively venting the bulk of the gory tangle in the airlock out into space. South then toggles the HooterTooters(tm), driving the War Buzzard(tm) back to Verd.

Gladius and Geronimo step carefully along the bombed-out path left by Mr. Munitions(tm). Ominous creaks and pops issue from the structure around them. It has become unstable, weakened by the robot's incessant firing. Staccato burps of weaponry report from further down the tunnel, punctuated occasionally by a mechanical chuckling.

"He must be up around that corner," Gladius whispers. "There's got to be a way out of here, Geronimo."

"I just hope we find it before that metal megalomaniac brings the house down on us."

Geronimo watches as Gladius sneaks along the passage to the corner. Slate motions him forward. The two garbage men observe as Mr. Munitions(tm) burrows into a main cross-corridor. They move up through the clouds of dust to the fresh hole. The robot is going to work on a large metal door. Stenciled across the door, in bold letters, are the

words:

REACTOR CONTAINMENT AREA
EXTREME RADIATION HAZARD
DO NOT ENTER

"Oh shit," Geronimo gasps.

Gladius looks about, then spies an access elevator to the left of Mr. Munitions(tm). Elbowing his ex-copilot, he points to their intended escape route.

"Now I'll use my favorite toy," chortles Mr. Munitions(tm). "The MetalBiter Rotorsaw, a modern miracle in cutting equipment. Handy, dandy stuff."

A retractable arm extends from a compartment in the robot's side, the gleaming disk of the MetalBiter Rotorsaw(tm) poised for action. The disk revs up and, in a shower of sparks, Mr. Munitions(tm) happily begins to cut into the door.

The Vi-Troop Carriers(tm), now in orbit, regroup and round the Green Moon, heading for the *Decimeter*.

On board, Colonel Itchtrong queries Lieutenant Flinnff. "Are all the troops clear of the planet?"

"Yes, sir."

"Give the order to prepare for detonation."

The screeching wails, rising and falling, until a huge metal slab of door clangs loudly to the floor.

"Let's renovate, heh, heh," calls Mr. Munitions(tm), jockeying himself through the opening and entering the unworldly glow of the reactor containment area.

"Come on." Gladius motions and they dash across the corridor, sneaking past the preoccupied robot, to the elevator.

Geronimo impatiently plugs at the call button. "Let's go, let's go!"

Finally, the door slides open and they dart inside.

Gladius scans the control display. "Where do you think we are?"

"Just hit up," snaps Geronimo, punching a button.

The door slides shut, cutting off the sound of machine gun bursts, and the lift begins its ascent.

The elevator stops abruptly on the surface level of Verd. The doors whisk open, allowing Gladius and Geronimo to tumble out into the foyer of an office building, the razed street beyond. They stare dumbly at the pockmarked

rubble that Verd has become.

"These Hornheads don't fool around," observes Geronimo.

"Not much left, is there?"

They step out into the street. Slate points to the dead civilians heaped about.

"This is odd. I know Hornheads specialize in calculated efficiency in battle, but it looks like they've been on a slash and burn spree. These people have been mowed down indiscriminately. None of them have weapons. There's no sign that they were fighting back."

"What are you suggestin'?"

"I don't think our Frak Craks are here to apprehend terrorists, I think they're on a sterilization mission."

"You mean, as in... annihilation?"

Gladius meets Geronimo's gaze, nods slowly. "This place has probably been mined."

They glance around, engulfed by silence. Verd lies still, awaiting the death blow. Slate and Lavoriss begin to walk, slowly at first, then to trot, and finally they break into a flat out run down the center of the wide boulevard leading out of the city.

"Prepare for Tow Hold," informs Flinnff.

The troop carrier rocks gently as the *Decimeter* activates the beam to bring the ship into its belly. The ship settles with a bump onto the landing deck, and a conveyor ushers it into the large airlock leading to the storage hangar.

The airlock's inner doors open onto the storage hangar deck and the Vi-Troop Carrier(tm) is conveyed to its stall within the hangar. Itchtrong deactivates his Magno Command Chair(tm) and struts down the boarding ramp.

Snax quickly lumbers after him. "I did good for you, right?"

Itchtrong ignores the alien, stopping to look at an unfamiliar sight in the hangar.

"The least you could, like, do is point me toward the snacks," continues Snax.

"Shut up," orders the Colonel. He walks over to the foreign vessel delicately perched on the deck. It is a sleek Personal Stellar Cruiser(tm), the seal of the InterGalactic Military High Command emblazoned on the door.

An ensign approaches. "High Commander Supreme Snoyan has arrived, sir."

"Indeed." Itchtrong cocks an eyebrow toward the

officer. "Alone?"

"With an unidentified guest, sir. They took the express lift straight to the Deluxe Guest Quarters."

Itchtrong ponders this briefly. "What's the situation with the other Battle Accelerators?"

"Only the Abrogate survived, intact, but crippled, sir."

"Once all the Vi-Troop Carriers are safely stowed, have the helmsman proceed to their position for facilitation of a rescue."

"Right away, sir." The ensign retreats into the bowels of the ship.

Lieutenant Flinnff joins the Colonel, he too recognizing the Stellar Cruiser. "What's she doing here?"

"Good question."

FFFFWWWHHHOOOOOSSSHHHH!

Slate and Lavoriss turn at the sudden sound. A small ship skims fast and low overhead, passes them, and pulls up short in front of them. It hovers, as if investigating the pair. They duck for cover. From behind a gutted Transport O'Bus(tm) they watch the ship land in the street.

"War Buzzard," Geronimo says, his upper lip twitching.

"That's our way out of here," informs Gladius.

"But it's probably filled with soldiers, we can't out gun them."

"Maybe. Maybe it's time for a different approach."

Gladius slings the BIGGER GUN(tm) over his back, holds his hands out and begins to walk toward the ship.

"Are you nuts?"

The hatchway of the War Buzzard(tm) slides open. Gladius hesitates, then continues forward. A figure appears in the doorway.

"Hold your ground, garbage man."

"South?!" calls Gladius, in disbelief.

Captain Salata South aims his Intensifier Musket(tm) at Gladius's chest.

"South, the Hornheads have probably got this place mined. If we don't leave now, we aren't going to have much of a future."

"I oughta blow you away, garbage man."

"You oughta listen to reason."

Geronimo skulks around the Transport O'Bus(tm), sneaking under the War Buzzard's(tm) landing gear. He quietly unslings the Prompt O'Sting(tm) pole from his back.

"How did you avoid the Frak Craks?" asks the Captain.

"We were on the subterranean levels, apparently the

terrorist command center. The Frak Craks didn't seem too interested in investigating down there, though. Some colonel arrived to pick up Snax, my traitor of a copilot, and then took off."

South sports a look of surprise. "Colonel? That must be Itchtrong. But I wasn't aware he knew about Snax Mawhooba."

ZZZAP!

Salata is suddenly jolted and crumples to the gangplank, having been prodded in the back of the knee by the Prompt O'Sting(tm) pole. Before he can recover, Geronimo grabs South's musket and levels a Hand Cannon(tm) at the Captain's scarred face.

"Enough crap," spits the wincing Geronimo, "let's get the fuck outta here."

Gladius pushes his way up the ramp onto the ship.

"Get your ass onto the bridge," Lavoriss snorts, motioning for South to get up, "and it looks like I'm the one who should be treated with respect now, don't ya think?"

South, his scar blazing, glares at Lavoriss and climbs to his feet, nursing the tender spot where the Prompt O'Sting(tm) pole has stung. Geronimo seals the door and they turn to move to the bridge.

"Yuck!" gags Geronimo. "What the hell have you been doin'?" He tiptoes over the unpleasant smear on the floor.

On the bridge, Gladius busily works the controls, preparing for lift off. "Sit down and activate your chairs, we're going to be leaving in a hurry."

"High Commander Supreme Snoyan," salutes Itchtrong, entering the bridge. "What an unexpected pleasure to have you aboard the *Decimeter*."

Snoyan eyes the Colonel suspiciously. "Colonel. I trust the mission has been successful for you."

"Us, yes, but I'm afraid the rest of the participating Battle Accelerators didn't fare as well."

"Explain."

Itchtrong looks about the bridge, searching for a clue to Snoyan's guest. Everything appears quite ordinary. He looks back to the High Commander Supreme and begins his explanation: "We arrived late, as planned. I immediately dispatched the Frak Crak Assault Squad to strike the colony while the other Battle Accelerators tackled with the defense grid. We made the scheduled pickup of the Metamorphodite Snax Mawhooba, and I took the liberty of mining the city for elimination. Apparently the

Annihilator, the *Pulverizer* and the *Expunger* have been lost."

"Yes, I'm aware."

"The *Abrogate* is drifting, crippled, out beyond the limits of the grid. We're underway now to rescue survivors. Their communications seem to be malfunctioning, so we won't know the extent until we reach them."

Sunlight breaks onto the bridge as the *Decimeter* rounds the limb of the small moon. There is no warmth in it, serving only to thicken the air.

"Colonel," Snoyan begins, even-toned, "I have observed your methods in the city of Verd. As you know, this mission was meant to excise the terrorist command post and remove the personnel. Slaughtering an entire city is not a positive public relations maneuver."

Itchtrong faces the wrath of Snoyan, unflinching. Her voice rises an octave.

"Your liberties have overstepped the bounds of your authority, Colonel! Your actions have seriously implicated the military into some bizarre, unprovoked attack on innocent civilians. How are we to explain this, Colonel?"

Itchtrong purses his lips, eyeing Snoyan. "I plan to make sure there are no witnesses to accuse the military of wrongdoing. The detonation of the city will ensure that. Just another explosion in the course of the intense battle with the incredibly well-armed terrorists. We don't have a problem, High Commander."

"There won't be any detonation, Colonel. Just get us to the *Abrogate*." She turns and strides from the bridge.

Itchtrong watches her leave, his mind whirring. What is going on? "Flinnff!"

The Lieutenant looks up from his weapons station.

"You heard the High Commander Supreme. Deactivate the detonation sequencer, we won't be lighting up the city, just yet."

"Oh, now this is a jolly good target," snorts Mr. Munitions(tm).

He is bathed in the surreal glow of nuclear fusion as he chugs up to the radiating core of the reactor, positively giddy. The cacophony of whirs, clicks and buzzes intensifies as Mr. Munitions(tm) activates every available weapon. His hulk now resembles a large metal pin cushion, with each pinhead a fertile ordnance of doom.

"Heh, heh, heh. Let's play!"

The glow of the reactor reflects momentarily in the precision optical lenses of Mr. Munitions's(tm) visual

apparatus, then the mechanical machismo opens fire.

Colonel Itchtrong sits in the Magno Command Chair(tm), mulling, his chin resting on the palm of his hand. Lieutenant Flinff has just finished disarming the detonation sequencer and glances one last time to the Colonel before turning off the ignition key.

"Incoming!" shouts the defense systems petty officer.

The bridge personnel are unable to react before the massive shock wave strikes the *Decimeter*. The ship makes a giant lurch. Flinff grips the console. Itchtrong tumbles across the deck, grasping for a handhold. The lighting dims, flickers out momentarily, then returns.

Several smaller aftershocks buffet the ship as, far below, portions of the Green Moon are launched into the stratosphere.

"What did you do?!!" shouts the Colonel.

Flinff manages a shrug, gesturing to the deactivated system.

The War Buzzard(tm) rattles in the wake of the shock waves. Guidance systems useless in the storm of debris, it spins out of control.

"No amount of military hardware has this kind of punch!" bellows South, gripping his seat.

"It's that psycho bot!" Geronimo shouts.

"Must have found the reactor," agrees Gladius, hanging on.

South looks to them questioningly. As the pounding subsides, Gladius deftly works the controls, firing the AttiTooters(tm) to stabilize the path of the War Buzzard(tm).

High Commander Supreme Snoyan storms onto the bridge.

"What the hell is going on?!" she demands, racing up to Itchtrong. "I was thrown clear across my cabin!"

"I didn't do it, Snoyan! That grandiose explosion initiated from a source on the planet. Our charges may have gone up with it, but I didn't trigger it."

"You better be damn sure, Itchtrong, or it's your neck!"

The Colonel stabs a finger toward the disabled detonation sequencer. Snoyan spies the winking green safety light on the console. She snaps her gaze back to Itchtrong. "So help me, Colonel, if things prove otherwise your career has ended."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

RESPITE

"What is that annoying cow up to?"

In the luxurious Deluxe Guest Quarters(tm) aboard the *Decimeter* the Observer massages a sore wrist, watching through the view port as the form of the disabled *Abrogate* grows larger. The cabin door whisks open and the Observer turns, wanting to know who would intrude upon this private moment.

"Hi," greets a familiar voice.

The Observer grunts acknowledgment, then returns to gaze out the window.

"There it is," affirms Flinnff, standing at the bridge view port. "It's survived the shock wave, but that much damage isn't exactly a positive sign for the crew."

Itchtrong moves up next to him, followed by Snoyan. The battle weary, blackened bow of the *Abrogate* is clearly visible.

"Increase speed," Itchtrong says, addressing the helmsman.

Snoyan studies Itchtrong for a moment. "Let me know when we have contact," she says, then turns abruptly and, in a flurry, leaves the bridge.

The War Buzzard(tm) skitters through space, its stabilizers misfiring badly. Gladius keeps punching the manual reset, but the controls fail to respond. He looks over at the sombre South, winces.

"What the hell's been going on here, Sally?"

"Yeah," chimes Geronimo, perking up.

South sneers at them, his arms folded firmly across his chest, considering the situation: why would Itchtrong commit cold blooded murder, fail to conduct a rescue, and how did he know about Snax Mawhoooba? He rubs a hand across his face. "It seems I'm not the only one guilty of some covert activities."

"What do you mean?" asks Slate.

"The colonel you saw, Itchtrong's his name, wasn't associated with our initial plan. He didn't know about the snitch we planted with you, at least not through us. You say you saw him welcome Mawhoooba aboard his ship?"

"If you could call it a welcome," offers Geronimo.

"He also seemed kinda chummy with some other jerk--"

"--and then he popped him off," interjects Gladius.
"It was an assassination."

South narrows his eyes. Geronimo's knee resumes pumping.

Gladius tries again to tame the misbehaving War Buzzard(tm). The nose of the ship swings around bringing the wounded *Abrogate* into view, and the massive *Decimater* approaching from beyond. "Looks like we've got a couple of Battle Accelerator HyperCraft heading for a link up."

South begins to rise, but Geronimo prods him back into his seat with the Intensifier.

"The damaged one is the *Abrogate*," Salata says, a pulse of heat coursing through his scar, "the other ship is the *Decimater*."

"Your psycho colonel's ship?" Geronimo asks.

"Yes. Seems he finally decided it was time to respond. We should board the *Abrogate*, be there to confront that bastard," suggests South, trying not to make it sound like an order.

"We'll join them all right," Gladius says, "but I'd rather not go mingling with a bunch of murdering Hornheads. Is there another way into the *Abrogate*, some kind of back door?"

"They'll detect us on their scanners."

"Perhaps, but I doubt it. The electromagnetic pulse of that explosion is playing havoc with our electronics, odds are theirs are acting up, too. Otherwise, they would've nailed us by now."

Salata concedes the point.

"Besides," Gladius continues, "you said yourself that something is wrong with this whole situation. Sounds to me like there are several agendas at play."

South's scar is now a deep, ruby red. He absently traces a finger over its hardened ridge, trying to contain his frustration.

"Give us another way in, Sally, one where we can enter undetected."

Geronimo studies his ex-boss, relieved at his improved attitude, but shudders at the thought of traipsing into yet another nasty confrontation with gun-toting maniacs.

"If, as you say, their electronics are misbehaving, then we'll only remain undetected as long as nobody happens to look out a view port," South points out.

"Look around," Geronimo says. They glance outside, observe the massive amount of drifting debris from the destruction of the grid and three Battle Accelerator HyperCraft(tm). "They aren't gonna be able to pick us out

from all this other crap. And personally, I'd rather not become a permanent fixture in this floatin' graveyard, so tell us how to get in, or we'll chuck you out."

"What's it going to be?" Gladius asks, turning to Captain South. "Are we going to get this entire mess over with or do we drift out here, firing on one AttiTooter, forever?"

The scar throbs. South stares straight ahead, focused on a point in space midway across the cabin. Finally, he relents. "Get us down under the port side of the *Abrogate*. There's a cargo bay. That area of the ship is badly damaged, there won't be any personnel around. It's the only other way in besides the front door, and I'd say Itchtrong is using that one. If this heap has any pressure suits, and if we can get the damn door open, we can traverse inside."

Itchtrong paces the aft deck of the *Decimeter*, waiting for his crew to finish securing the Flexi-Ramp(tm), a rigid yet flexible gangway with minimal artificial gravity, to the *Abrogate*.

Lieutenant Flinnff enters the room, gesturing for the Colonel to come closer. "Snoyan has the surveillance to the Deluxe Guest Quarters blocked. We still have no idea who her company is."

"Damn. What is that annoying cow up to?" Snoyan enters and Itchtrong snaps his head up, breaking a broad smile. "High Commander Supreme, they're securing the Flexi-Ramp now. We should be able to board the *Abrogate* in moments."

"Good. Hopefully Major Wu Su has survived and can fill in the gaps for us."

"We're secure, sir," informs an ensign.

"Open the airlock! Lieutenant Flinnff, you have the command."

Five uniformed Frak Craks appear, armed and ready for action. Snoyan eyes them suspiciously. "Don't you think medical personnel would be more appropriate?"

"We must ensure the integrity of the ship first," informs Itchtrong, with forced authority. "For all we know they may have been infiltrated."

Snoyan holds a steady gaze at Itchtrong. "Wise move."

"Major Wu Su," Lieutenant Ginjee calls from the airlock porthole, "the ramp is secure and they're coming across now."

"Good, we should prepare for immediate transfer of

Vice-Admiral Ragellon. He's in a grave state. I want you to remain with him, Lieutenant, make sure he's taken care of, and help with the administration of our other wounded."

"Right away, sir." Ginjee signals for the two ensigns, who have just finished cleaning up the entranceway, to follow her as she moves out toward the *Abrogate's* sick bay.

Wu Su crosses the airlock, skirting the wet spot. He nods for one of his men to open the door.

WHHSSSHHH!

The pressure equalizes and the hatch cycles open.

The Major steps back abruptly, startled at the rapid influx of the five Frak Craks armed for action. The few *Abrogate* crew members present jump, pressing to the walls, hands raised. Finally, Colonel Itchtrong appears, followed by High Commander Supreme Snoyan.

Major Wu Su recovers his composure and offers a less-than-snappy salute to his superiors. "High Commander Supreme Snoyan, Colonel Itchtrong," he says, forcing a smile, "welcome aboard the *Abrogate*, or at least what's left of it."

"Major," nods Snoyan, eyeing the grim condition of the officer and his crew. She wrinkles her nose at the lingering smell of Cleanerschmidt's demise. "You've looked better."

The barrel-chested Wu Su brushes at dust on his uniform, tries to smooth some wrinkles.

"Can you tell us what happened to the *Pulverizer*, *Expunger* and *Annihilator*?" Snoyan continues.

"Certainly, but could we transport the wounded to the *Decimeter's* AutoDocs first, our systems are malfunctioning. We have many critically injured, particularly Vice-Admiral Ragellon."

Itchtrong glances to Snoyan, back to Wu Su. "Ragellon is alive?"

"For the moment. But I fear that if he doesn't receive immediate medical attention he will pass beyond the point-of-no-return."

Lieutenant Ginjee appears in the hatchway, she leads the two ensigns and, on a Hover Gurney(tm), the fading form of Ragellon. Behind her is a straggling line of limping, battered crew members.

"We're ready to transport the Vice-Admiral," she reports.

"Good." Itchtrong nods to one of the Frak Craks. "Escort the Lieutenant to the *Decimeter's* sick bay."

The Frak Crak salutes, then begins down the Flexi-

Ramp(tm) followed by Ginjee, the gurney, and the *Abrogate's* walking wounded.

POOONG!

The crippled War Buzzard(tm), it's power system fluctuations worsening, bumps gently against the blackened belly of the *Abrogate*.

"That's it, boys," remarks Gladius, "this bird is cooked."

The three occupants quickly pull on Sudden-Emergency Adjustable Pressure Suits(tm). Geronimo slips off his cape, then reattaches it to the helmet mount of his suit. He slings the Prompt O'Sting(tm) pole across his back, re-holsters the two Hand Cannons(tm) and picks up the Intensifier Musket(tm).

"Once we're depressurized," South begins, "I'll lead our unit along the hull to the cargo hatch. There, we'll secure our position, broach that, then secede within."

"What?!" Geronimo aims the Intensifier at Salata.

"He means we're going to scramble to the hatch, blow it, and get inside," translates Slate. He turns to South, leans into the Captain's face. "But there is no way he's going to lead us, 'cause I just don't trust him for that."

"What do you suggest, Slate?" South's scar is heating up once more.

"I'll go first, you in the middle, then Geronimo will follow. That way you can't sneak off and signal them."

"I need to enter discreetly, the same as you.

Itchtrong is up to something and it's my duty to find out what, before he endangers any more lives." South snaps his helmet visor down then switches on the suit Commucon Stay-Close(tm). He waits for Slate and Lavioriss to do the same. "The Colonel has murdered many people in the pursuit of what appears to be personal gain," he says over the com-link, "and I intend to see him punished for it."

Slate ignores Salata's impassioned rambling and steps to the airlock. Shouldering the BIGGER GUN(tm), he glances back to Lavioriss and South. "Give him the musket, Geronimo."

"No way! He'll just shoot us."

"I don't think so," Gladius says, locking eyes with South, "he needs us now. Give it to him, Geronimo."

Lavioriss looks to the military officer, shrugs his shoulders in a gesture of submission, and hands the musket to him. He then quickly draws one of his Hand Cannons(tm) and trains it on South, waiting for any aggressive moves.

Gladius shakes his head. "Steady yourselves, boys,

I'm going to depressurize... and let's keep the radio chatter to a minimum." He punches a couple of buttons on the airlock panel.

SSSSSSSSSS! PING!

The cabin atmosphere adjusts to resemble the void outside. Without hesitation, Gladius toggles the hatch open. Grasping the door frame he eases himself out into the zero gravity, dwarfed by the immensity of the Mark II Battle Accelerator HyperCraft(tm).

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

SCHISM

"Shut up, Fatboy."

The Observer and his visitor sit quietly, staring out the huge view port of the dimly lit Deluxe Guest Quarters(tm) aboard the *Decimater*. They have been studying the crippled *Abrogate*, marveling at the subtle beauty of the craft.

Debris from the previous battle and subsequent grid detonation is quite dense in the area. Most of it is small, but occasional massive chunks drift into view. It is one of these large pieces which, bright white against the backdrop of space, drifts past in the background beyond the forward belly of the *Abrogate*. The resulting contrast between the blackened ship and the white debris reveals the dark silhouette of a War Buzzard(tm) drifting lazily below the nose of the *Abrogate*, and the three tiny, space-suited figures moving hand over hand along the hull of the military vessel. They are nearing a cargo hatch on its underside.

"Interesting," says the Observer softly, turning to the visitor. "Lock the, uh, door."

Gladius pries at the personnel access door next to the huge cargo hatch. It has been damaged and there is a narrow gap along the mis-seated edge. Using the butt of the BIGGER GUN(tm) for leverage, he manages to open it enough to squeeze through. He glances over his shoulder at South and Geronimo, who wait with their weapons drawn. Nodding, Slate pulls himself inside the cargo bay.

The cavernous cargo bay is a mess of free-floating litter: containers and packages once filled with the ship's supplies, torn loose by the battle. The MaxiGrav(tm) gravity generator of the battleship has failed in the bay compartment and Gladius propels himself through the jumble toward a door on the far side. Arriving at the hatch he secures himself by gripping a valve on the wall, then turns to watch Geronimo and Salata make their way to him. Upon their arrival he looks to Salata and motions to the door.

"Main access corridor," replies South in clipped, hushed tones.

Geronimo is examining the area and waves to the pair, pointing to a warning pasted on the wall beside the access

way. The small notice reads:

This is an Emergency
Atmosphere Control Door(tm).
This door seals automatically
in the event of a
depressurization of the space
on the side nearest or
adjacent to the ship
exterior. Tampering with a
sealed door may risk
depressurization of spaces
deeper within this vessel.

Gladius reads the message and looks through the small window in the door, into the corridor beyond. At the next bulkhead, several meters along, there is another Emergency Atmosphere Control Door(tm), open and waiting.

"Another way?" he asks, with a glance to South.

South thinks for a moment, looking around the bay, then shakes his head.

Gladius nods. He looks to the floating debris within the bay, spies a container marked: TooterPack(tm) PROPELLANT. He taps Geronimo on the arm and motions for him to bring the case over to them. Geronimo gives him a questioning look and then moves to get the case.

Salata gives Slate a "what's up?" gesture. Gladius offers a "bear with me" look and takes the case from the returning Geronimo. He pops the seal on the container and pulls out one of the meter-long metal cylinders, hands it to Lavoriss. A second one he passes to South, and a third he keeps for himself. He gives the remainder a shove, sending the half-open case caroming across the bay.

Slate, now commanding the undivided attention of his cohorts, begins to explain what he has in mind. He points to the notice at the side of the Emergency Atmosphere Control Door(tm), underlining the phrase "door seals automatically" with his index finger, then points to the second door through the window. The pair peek through the window and nod, agreeing that there is another door that will shut automatically if this one fails.

Gladius now motions to the BIGGER GUN(tm), pointing it in a shooting gesture at the door in front of them. Lavoriss and South look at Slate momentarily, turn to each other, then slowly return their gaze to Gladius. He now displays the pressurized cylinder of TooterPack(tm) PROPELLANT. Holding it horizontally, its base pointing in the direction of the second Emergency Atmosphere Control

Door(tm), he grips it around the middle with one arm and, with the other hand, gently nudges open the release valve. A small jet of propellant squirts from the valve and pushes the cylinder in the opposite direction, Gladius moving with it. He shuts the valve and bumps gently against the sealed door.

Salata and Geronimo stare at him, unmoving.

Gladius quickly mimes through the sequence of events one more time: shoot door, crank valves, ride cylinders through second door before it shuts.

"When I said take charge of your life," blurts Geronimo, "I didn't mean for you to try and get us all killed with this kinda hair-brained stunt!"

Slate and South grab at Lavoriss, trying to shut him up. He calms down, but continues to glare at Gladius.

"Risky," agrees South. "Alarms."

Slate shrugs, looks around. "Battle damage?"

Salata ponders the condition of the vessel, remembers the state of the crew when he last saw them. He looks to Geronimo, then moves to peer through the window at the second door one more time. "Fifteen second delay. We'd have to be fast."

"One shot deal," assures Gladius.

Salata considers the options, can't come up with an alternative, nods.

"No, no way! You're both fuckin' nuts! It's been nice knowin' ya!" snaps Geronimo. The other two again gesture frantically for him to shut up, but he is already squirming to get into position.

The trio trade a glance, fully aware of the danger. If anyone should fail to make the open door, and manage to survive crashing into the closed one, there will be no other way in. He'd be destined to drift alone, helpless, until his oxygen supply ran out.

There is a moment of silence as each man, alone with his thoughts, prepares. Then Gladius signals for Salata to go first, followed by Geronimo, with himself last. They nod agreement and Gladius arranges himself to shoot and still grip his cylinder. He takes a deep breath and utters one final statement: "Good luck... here goes."

BLA-BLAM!

The door erupts. Fragments fling past the trio.

WHHOOSH!

The corridor begins to depressurize. Salata and Geronimo slap at the valves. Gas hisses and South is propelled forward, rapidly gaining speed against the stiff breeze issuing from the doorway. Gladius rearranges the

BIGGER GUN(tm), places his hand on the valve and looks to Geronimo, who is struggling, unable to open his valve.

Gladius glances at the open passageway, sees the retreating South, looks back to Geronimo. Time is rapidly passing, there isn't enough to writhe over and help Geronimo; to even try would mean they'd both be trapped. He watches his partner struggle, helpless.

Without looking up, Geronimo senses Gladius's distress. "Go!" he shouts, remaining intent on the stuck valve.

Startled by the shout Gladius jerks his head, makes the decision to go and cracks his valve, moving out.

Verging on panic, Geronimo grabs a metal shard of door as it floats by and hammers the valve off the cylinder. A high-pressure stream of gas blasts from the canister, the force causing it to slip in Geronimo's unprepared grasp. His eyes widen with realization: without the jet propulsion he'll never make it down the corridor before the Emergency Atmosphere Control Door(tm) shuts. His grip fails and the bottle blasts off, snagging into his unruly red cape, yanking him backward.

The walls of the corridor are a blur of motion as South races toward the open bulkhead. Slate is further back and slower, the inertia of his larger mass hampering his acceleration. A red light has begun to flash. The Emergency Atmosphere Control Door(tm) whines, its hydraulics charging for release.

Suddenly, with a huge roar, the screaming red streak of Geronimo being dragged by the cylinder caught in his cape, catapults past both of them, zinging through the doorway. South then whizzes through, just as the door commences to close.

Gladius tightens his grip on the fully-open valve, trying to force it further. His eyes lock on the door emerging from the wall.

FWWWWSSSHHHH!!! THUNK!

The door slams shut, grazing Gladius's feet as he passes through. He tumbles to the corridor floor and closes the valve on his cylinder, safe, alive, and thankful that the artificial gravity is operating in this part of the vessel.

Geronimo's cylinder has run out of pressure and he has crashed, balled up against the bulkhead. Gladius scrambles to his feet and rushes to check on him. Geronimo pulls himself up, the liberated Ambassador's cape tangled around his head. Cursing, he clutches at it, manages to free himself. Gladius helps him off with his helmet. Their

eyes meet, trading a silent knowledge of the mortality they have shared. They peel off the bulky pressure suits and quickly regather their weaponry.

South, his suit and tank piled in a corner, is already peering into doorways further down the corridor. "Come on, we've got to get moving before somebody investigates."

"Sir," calls the helmsman over a distorting Commucon(tm). Wu Su adjusts the volume, grimacing at the screeching feedback. "We've had a breach in the area of the forward cargo bay. An emergency bulkhead door has activated, so we aren't venting atmosphere."

"Have someone check it out. The worst damage is down there. We better find out if we're in danger of losing the ship." Wu Su clicks off and returns his attention to his distinguished guests. "This way," he motions, leading Itchtrong and Snoyan down a dimly lit corridor.

South guides his new-found partners through a maze of vacated hallways and access spaces, all twisted and creaking in an eerie, grotesque mockery of engineering. Pushing through the gloom of emergency lighting, he finally stops at a small service door. Locked. He rams his shoulder into it, but it doesn't budge.

Gladius taps him on the shoulder. "Allow me." With a glance to either side, the muscular man gives a great heave against the door and it pops open. The trio hustle in and shut the door. They are in a utility passageway filled with pipes, wires and, in the corner of the small cubbyhole, a set of rungs mounted on the wall extending into an access way, up through the ceiling and down through the floor.

"Two decks up is Wu Su's private quarters," informs Salata. "There's an observation window looking down onto the bridge."

"Let's move it," Geronimo suggests, "I don't want a bunch of pissed off military dicks tryin' to shoot at me." He catches South's glare. "No offense."

The three of them climb up the ladder and peek into the corridor two floors up. They are immediately opposite Wu Su's quarters.

"Wait here," whispers Salata, "I'll check and see if it's clear."

He dashes across to Wu Su's door and stops with his hand on the knob. Geronimo and Gladius, one to either side, breathe over South's shoulders.

"Hey, c'mon," Salata says, "we're together in this,

guys."

Gladius and Geronimo remain silent.

The door is unlocked and the trio slink inside. Keeping the lights off, they move to the window to peek at Wu Su leading Itchtrong and Snoyan onto the bridge. South reaches down and switches on the intercom, motioning to the others to remain absolutely quiet.

Itchtrong follows Wu Su through the lingering haze, eyes darting about the room, taking in the residual damage. The ship's nerve center is a mess of blown control panels and blackened components. The seriously wounded personnel have been evacuated and a skeleton crew maintains the bridge. A temporary morgue, now over full, has been set up in the gymnasium, and the remaining crew wait patiently in a holding area near the airlock for transferral arrangements to be made.

"I'm afraid our main computer has experienced a memory burp," informs Wu Su, "resulting in the loss of much of our recent recordings. It will be difficult to verify exactly what happened when we assaulted the grid." The Major looks to High Commander Supreme Snoyan. "You'll have to rely on my personal account of the events."

Snoyan squints in the irritating smoke. "If that's all we have. Fortunately, you and many of your crew survived. It's always better, of course, to have hard evidence in the form of transaction logs when entering an inquest of this magnitude, but eyewitness accounts will be fine."

"Inquest?" Itchtrong fails to hide his surprise.

"Yes," Snoyan replies, turning her attention to the commander of the *Decimater*. "This whole mission has been one botch up after another. From Ragellon going off half-cocked to you, Colonel, failing to facilitate an immediate rescue. And then there is the matter of your conduct on the planet below." Snoyan's look is hardened granite. Her gaze burns intensely into Itchtrong.

"Major Wu Su," she begins again, still staring at Itchtrong, "as the third-highest ranking member aboard these linked vessels, I am appointing you group commander. Colonel Itchtrong, until such time as you can be placed into military police custody, you will confine yourself to your quarters aboard the *Decimater*."

The veins bulge on Itchtrong's neck. "High Commander Supreme, I was only acting upon your orders, you can't take away my command."

Wu Su watches the display, trying to catch up with the

hidden nuances of the conversation.

Snoyan nods to two of the Frak Craks. "Escort the Colonel to his quarters."

The Frak Craks don't move, keeping their focus on Itchtrong, their commanding officer.

"Now!"

The Frak Craks reluctantly usher Itchtrong from the bridge. Salata turns off the intercom. "They've arrested Itchtrong. I think it's safe to present ourselves to the High Commander Supreme."

"Bullshit," Geronimo says.

"Yeah, what did he mean about following her orders?" queries Gladius.

Salata wavers. "I don't know. We informed Snoyan directly when we requested backup. We had no knowledge of what interaction may have taken place between her and the dispatched commanding officers."

"I think there's more going on here than meets the eye," Gladius retorts, "and I'm not presenting myself to anybody until I've found out what it is." He hustles to the door, looks out.

"Where are you going?" South asks.

"Those Hornheads are taking their direct superior back to his ship. If we don't beat them there, we won't have another chance to get in."

"What are you saying?"

"South, don't be so dense. You saw those Frak Craks hesitate when given a direct order from the High Commander. The moment they're back on Itchtrong's ship, he's going to take charge."

"Mutiny?" South's gears are whirring.

"Gladman's right," agrees Geronimo. "Those dicks'll probably blow the fuck outta this hulk. Let's haul butt."

Gladius darts across the hall, enters the service duct, and slides down the ladder, Geronimo and Salata right behind him.

Itchtrong is being escorted in silence through the dim emergency lighting in the halls of the *Abrogate*. The two Frak Crak troopers glance at each other and relax ever-so-slightly.

"Helmsman," Wu Su rasps. The weary helmsman looks up from her controls. "You have the command. I'll be aboard the *Decimeter* supervising the transfer of the remaining crew."

"Aye, sir."

Wu Su and Snoyan exit the bridge and carefully begin to pick their way down the bent corridors toward the airlock.

"You see anybody?" Geronimo is craning to see around Gladius.

"One guard."

Salata edges up to peer into the inner airlock chamber. The single *Abrogate* crew member on duty at the open door is one of the troopers present when Ikky Hummanah attempted to board.

"Allow me," says South, stepping by them. "Soldier."

The trooper looks, surprised to see Captain South back aboard the *Abrogate*. "Sir, how did... when did you return? We thought you were lost."

"It's still a secret, private." Salata motions for Gladius and Geronimo to join him. "I'd like to keep it that way, for the time being."

"Yes, sir." The trooper snaps to attention and proffers a salute as the trio enter the Flexi-Ramp(tm).

The three men skulk across the gangway to the *Decimeter* airlock, quietly pull themselves inside the exterior alcove, and peek around the corner. A fully armed Frak Crak is guarding the door.

South taps his forefinger on the captain's insignia on his collar, then steps boldly out of the airlock.

"Freeze," snaps the Frak Crak, training his weapon on South.

Salata flashes the insignia. "Captain Salata South, Special Investigations Division."

"You'll have to wait," the Frak Crak says, unmoving, "uninjured personnel transferral hasn't started yet."

"I'm ordering you to let me board this ship."

"My orders come from Colonel Itchtrong or Lieutenant Flinnff."

South paces around the room. The soldier keeps his aim fixed on the Captain, turning his back to the airlock.

WHAM!

Gladius thumps the Frak Crak on the back of the skull with the butt of the BIGGER GUN(tm), rendering him unconscious.

"Let's move him," blurts Geronimo. "Somebody else has entered the ramp."

Itchtrong steps into the *Decimeter* airlock. He immediately notices the absence of the guard and turns to

his two escorts. "Guard the airlock. Nobody comes across. I mean nobody."

"Yes, sir."

Itchtrong activates his Commucon. "Flinnff, that bitch Snoyan just put me under house arrest. I want everybody on battle alert. There's no way she's going to take my command without a fight."

"Right away, sir," comes the reply.

"Have you figured out who our guest is yet?"

"No, whoever it is they've locked themselves in the Deluxe Guest Quarters."

"Send me six more men."

From a ventilation duct near the airlock on the *Decimeter*, Slate, South and Geronimo watch six Frak Craks join the disgruntled Itchtrong.

"Sir," calls the guard posted at the foot of the Flexi-Ramp(tm), "somebody's coming across."

Itchtrong moves to the airlock and looks down the ramp. "All right men, look alive. Company's coming."

"What are they doin'?" Geronimo whispers.

"Looks like trouble," Slate answers, softly.

South scans the troopers gathered in the tiny room, spotting one of the soldiers surreptitiously passing Itchtrong a Junior Hand Cannon(tm), which the Colonel quickly pockets.

"Itchtrong," snaps High Commander Supreme Snoyan as she steps into the airlock, "why aren't you in your quarters?"

Itchtrong glares at her, his lips pressed tight, smouldering.

Wu Su is instantly uneasy, sensing new layers of treachery. "Colonel, the High Commander Supreme asked you a question. I suggest you answer her before this situation gets out of hand."

"Shut up, Fatboy," snaps Itchtrong, pulling the Junior Hand Cannon(tm) from his pocket.

POW!

Wu Su topples backward like a fallen oak, the blast from Itchtrong's weapon having slammed into his sternum.

In the ventilation duct, South reacts violently, reaching for the grate release. Gladius yanks him back, while Geronimo clamps a hand over Salata's mouth.

Snoyan steps back, aghast. "What are you doing?"

Itchtrong levels the weapon at her head, begins speaking in rapid, icy tones. "What's going on, Dashe?"

Who's the guest you brought with you. And why the hell are you talking inquest?"

"Itchtrong, you have to understand the situation. The Observer doesn't--"

"The Observer!" Itchtrong cocks the weapon.

Snoyan flinches at the resounding click. "Yes, the Observer knew everything was going to fall apart, wanted to be here."

Suddenly, the ship's Inform-U-Amp(tm) speakers crackle to life: "Colonel, High Commander, no quarreling please. I'm in the Deluxe Guest Quarters, and I request your presence."

Itchtrong grabs Snoyan roughly. "If you've screwed things up, Dashe, you're dead," he hisses in her ear. "Very dead."

"Cut the, uh, dramatics, Dwayne," comes the voice over the intercom, "and get your butts up here."

Itchtrong yanks Snoyan through the door.

In the ventilation shaft Slate perks at the sound of the voice. He scrambles through his memory, trying to identify it. "Do you know that voice?" he asks of Geronimo

"It sure is familiar."

"Let's find out!" South says, scar blazing at Itchtrong's betrayal. Before they can stop him, Salata boots the grate open.

The milling Frak Craks turn at the new intrusion. South bursts from the tube, squeezing the trigger of his Intensifier Musket(tm). He nails two of the Frak Craks before they can reach their weapons.

"Don't move!" roars the Captain. He swings his weapon, ready to blast the first Hornhead to twitch. He sees one of them inching a hand toward a sidearm.

BLA-BLA-BLAM!

"Aaauuggghhh!"

The Frak Crak falls to the floor, clutching his forearm. Bone fragments protrude from the shredded skin of the trooper's wrist, his shirtfront growing soggy with blood.

"I mean it!" shouts South, his gaze searing. The Frak Craks slowly raise their arms in capitulation.

Gladius begins to move out of the duct, but Lavioriss yanks him back. A figure has appeared in the doorway behind South. Salata begins to turn, but stops, knees buckling, as a Pro-Stunner 9000(tm) is pressed to the back of his neck by Lieutenant Flinnff.

"Bring him to the bridge."

Gladius follows Geronimo as they quickly retreat through the ductwork, away from the airlock.

"Where are we going?" whispers Slate.

"How the hell should I know? You're the one with all the big plans all the damn time. Where do you wanna go?"

"The Deluxe Guest Quarters. I want to find out who this Observer clown is. I know that voice."

"Me, too. But how are we gonna get there?"

Gladius shrugs, pointing further along the duct.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

REVELATION

"What kind of games are you playing?"

Lieutenant Ginjee is taking a breather on a sofa in the corridor just outside the *Decimeter's* sickbay. Several of the less seriously wounded also mingle about, waiting for treatment. An AutoDoc(tm) technician is plying a clipboard amongst them, gathering details of their injuries. A sudden commotion down the hall silences the group. Two stringent Frak Craks stride into the foyer.

"This area must be cleared!" one of them informs. "Let's go! Everyone move, out of the hallway!"

There is some grumbling as the Frak Craks urge people into the small examination rooms next to the AutoDoc(tm) bays. Curious about the motives of the Frak Craks, Ginjee moves into a room along with the others.

Inside, she positions herself near the door, listening intently. After a couple of minutes, the sound of boot heels fills the hallway and a group passes through the area. Ginjee cracks the door for a peek.

Retreating down the hall are two Frak Craks and a Lieutenant dragging an apparently unconscious detainee. Definitely the uniform of a captain. She starts out farther into the corridor, but is forced back by a second group of soldiers. This time there is one Hornhead, stumbling along with the aid of another, his arm wrapped in blood-soaked rags. The pair go immediately into an AutoDoc(tm) bay. Behind them is another pair struggling to carry a body, that of her commanding officer, Major Hugh Wu Su. They turn into the door of the morgue. Ginjee slips quietly from the crowded room, then steps briskly out of sickbay.

Colonel Dwayne Itchtrong shoves High Commander Supreme Dashe Snoyan into the Deluxe Guest Quarters(tm). The door slides shut behind them, engulfing them in a darkness broken only by the solitary desk lamp. Itchtrong surveys the room, eyeing the two high-back chairs facing the view port. One chair swivels, revealing Mirty Fuegg, the Observer.

"Fuegg," Itchtrong grunts, jerking Snoyan back, "what the hell is the meaning of this?"

Snoyan pulls away sharply, glaring at Itchtrong, who raises his pistol at the High Commander Supreme.

"No need for that, Colonel," begins Fuegg, "you're both relieved, your services are no longer, uh, required."

Snoyan makes a move to speak, but thinks better of it and remains quiet.

Itchtrong swings his aim to Fuegg. "What kind of games are you playing?"

Fuegg raises his arms. "No worries, just take it easy. When the, uh, New Order is established, you'll both have prominent places within it. I never forget good work."

Itchtrong shifts his weight, uncertain of Fuegg's apparent sincerity. The door opens behind them and Lieutenant Flinnff enters.

"Ah." Mirty turns his attention to Flinnff.

"South is secure on the bridge," Flinnff informs. "How did you know he was here?"

"Through careful observation one can know everything."

Snoyan and Itchtrong watch the friendly exchange between the two men.

"I suppose Flinnff has been in on it all along?" asks the Colonel.

"Of course not. Our arrangement occurred just recently, when it seemed that a collaboration would be, uh, beneficial to both of us."

Gladius and Geronimo have been winding through a maze of service passageways and are stopped at a vent, checking the corridor beyond.

"Looks quiet," observes Geronimo.

"Good." Slate carefully unhinges the grate, sets it down, and flips out onto the corridor floor. He raises the BIGGER GUN(tm) and presses himself into the recess of a doorway across the hall. "It's clear, come on."

Geronimo attempts to flip out, but his Prompt O'Sting(tm) pole gets caught up, snagged across the grate opening. He flails, dangling, trying to jerk himself free.

"Quit screwing around," orders Gladius.

"I'm not," replies Geronimo innocently, slapping at the pole. He pulls free of its strap and tumbles to the floor with a loud crash, the pole dropping back into the vent. Gladius steps out into the corridor, helping him to his feet.

"Hey!" shouts a voice from down the hallway.

Slate and Lavioriss look up. A Frak Crak is rushing toward them.

"What are you two doing in here?" The Frak Crak reaches for his weapon.

FFFRRRRROOOAAARRRRRSSSSHHHH!!!

Gladius let's loose with the BIGGER GUN(tm), sending a spew of flame down the corridor. The trooper hits the deck, the fire searing his back.

"Move it!" Gladius shoves Geronimo in the other direction and they break into a sprint.

WHA-WHUP! WHA-WHUP!

"Shit! They've sounded the alarm!" Geronimo draws his Hand Cannons(tm) as they reach a junction.

"This way!" Gladius rounds the corner and races off, Geronimo in tow.

Fuegg confers briefly with his partner, still facing away in the other chair, then returns his attention to his military charges.

"Sounds like they've located those pesky garbage men that have been giving everybody such, uh, trouble. Why don't you all go help apprehend them. Dwayne, you may even interrogate them, if you like."

The Colonel scowls at Fuegg, turns, smacks the door release, then quickly exits followed by High Commander Supreme Snoyan and Lieutenant Flinnff.

Gladius stops in his tracks, then quickly backs into Geronimo, pressing them both into an alcove.

"What the fu--" A meaty hand is smacked tight around Geronimo's mouth. Gladius points to Itchtrong, Snoyan and Flinnff exiting a room several meters down the hall, the door shutting behind them. They head off down the corridor, away from the two garbage men.

"That must be it," whispers Gladius, checking the BIGGER GUN(tm).

Geronimo readies his Hand Cannons(tm). "Let's do it."

They slink up to the door of the Deluxe Guest Quarters(tm). Gladius passes his hand over the release. Nothing.

"Fuck it," blurts Geronimo.

BWAM! BWAM!

He shoots the panel. The resulting blaze of sparks disables the locking mechanism of the door and, with a little effort, Gladius is able to slide it open. The two men lunge into the room.

Geronimo punches on the harsh overhead lighting and levels the Hand Cannons(tm). "Freeze, fuckers!" he roars at the high-backed chairs, which again face the view port, a thin curl of cigarette smoke rising from behind one.

"All right you two," begins Slate, "turn around, nice

and slow."

One swivel-chair swivels, revealing the round-faced form of a man wearing a checked flannel shirt and suspenders, squinting to avoid the tendrils of smoke that rise from a stubby cigarette butt tucked in the corner of his mouth.

"Fuegg!" Gladius is shocked at the ultimate betrayal. Mirty Fuegg, the president of the Interstellar Detritus Reclaimers Union, an evil mastermind. Slate's step begins to falter.

"Hey, Slate, is it?" Fuegg eyes the barrel of the BIGGER GUN(tm).

"Should've known," Geronimo says, shaking his head. "I never liked you when I was a Union man, workin' for the Company."

The other chair spins to reveal the countenance of Snax Mawhooba, an odd-looking appendage deftly working a Loreda Remote X-Press Control Console(tm) on his lap, overriding the *Decimeter's* main systems. "Hello, Slate."

"And Snax, you pod-toed pusbag." Gladius's face reddens, he begins to shake.

"No need for, uh, violence, boys." Fuegg's eyes flick from the BIGGER GUN(tm) to Gladius's contorted face. "I'm here as a representative of the Union. You boys have done a commendable job breaking up this, uh, terrorist thing and we, Mister Mawhooba and myself, want to extend our gratitude."

Snax nods.

Gladius is gasping, finding it hard to concentrate. Sweat beads form on his brow. "Mister Mawhooba?"

"Yes, Mister Mawhooba works for the Interstellar Detritus Reclamation Company as a, uh, Special Advisor to the Staffing Resources Department. He went, uh, uh..." Fuegg searches for the right word.

"Undercover," interjects Snax, "to observe the top IDR operative in action. Your handling of this terrorist situation was magnificent. I must say, Gladius, I am very impressed with your performance. We really need your kind of role model to boost morale."

"He sounds different, Gladman," Geronimo observes. "How come Snax doesn't sound as stupid as he did?"

Tremors jerk through Gladius. "He isn't stupid, Geronimo, he isn't stupid at all. We've been screwed by everybody!"

Slate lowers the BIGGER GUN(tm), letting it hang loosely from his side. There is a moment of apprehension as the four beings watch each other. Then, Gladius starts

forward, heading for Snax. He stops short when Fuegg bolts from his chair, produces a Zipper(tm), and rams it to Slate's temple.

"Like I said, boys, no need for, uh, violence."

Geronimo's fingers itch on their triggers, wanting to blast Fuegg, but Gladius is blocking his line of fire. Gladius glares at Snax, who grins sardonically back up at him.

"Put the guns down, boys," requests Fuegg.

Suddenly, Flinnff barges into the room with three Frak Crak Assault Squad troopers. Geronimo spins, diving to the floor, his guns blazing. Two of the troopers take hits and go down. Flinnff and the healthy Hornhead dive to either side, ducking behind furniture.

Mirty tightens his grip on the Zipper(tm), watching the Frak Craks to see what will happen next. Gladius decides not to wait, slams his fist into Fuegg's hand, forcing the Zipper(tm) toward the ceiling. A shot goes off, drilling into the overhead lighting console. It pops in a shower of glass, fizzling momentarily, and then plunging the room, once more, into the dim illumination of the desk lamp.

Gladius yanks on Fuegg's arm, pitching him forward, and another shot zips from the Zipper(tm). This one rips into the Loreda Remote X-Press Control Console(tm) on Snax's lap. Wires within begin to arc, spewing sparks, belching smoke and lighting up Snax's horrified face. He pushes his chair back in a panic, flinging the burning console from his lap.

The room begins to fill with smoke. Slate smashes Fuegg's hand against the edge of the desk, forcing the Zipper(tm) to sling across the room, and then leaps over the desk to hide behind Fuegg's swivel chair. Fuegg, in a rather vulnerable position, drops to the floor and scampers on his hands and knees in the direction of the Zipper(tm).

The Frak Crak behind the couch pops his head up and Gladius unleashes the BIGGER GUN(tm). A torrent of liquid nitrogen belches from the barrel and instantly freezes the Frak Crak to the couch.

Flinnff returns fire in the general direction of the desk lamp, but is unsure if his shots are finding their mark in the poor visibility.

A huge plume of fire from the BIGGER GUN(tm) flares into the middle of the room, briefly illuminating it. Flinnff decides he is underpowered. There is a scuffling noise as bodies clamber over the furniture. Gladius spies a dark silhouette bolting through the door and crouches

down behind the swivel chair.

The room goes silent. A brief moment passes.

"Geronimo? You okay?"

Lavoriss has bunched himself up under a Noodifilak Throw Rug(tm), the lush, thick folds providing cover. He tosses the rug off, listens for a moment, then darts to the open doorway. One of the Frak Craks is dead of a Hand Cannon(tm) wound, one is frozen solid, the other is missing, a conspicuous trail of blood drippings revealing his flight. Geronimo steps through the door into the hall. At the far end, he catches a glimpse of Snax and Fuegg disappearing around the corner.

"They're gettin' away!" he shouts, bolting after them.

Gladius, BIGGER GUN(tm) in hand, scrambles over the desk and barrels after Geronimo.

The garbage men race down the corridor, rounding the corner to see Fuegg and Snax at another intersection further along the hall. The two rotund figures glance back, then split out of sight in opposite directions.

"You take care of Snax," says Gladius, "I'll deal with Fuegg."

"Right."

The pair charge after them, separating at the intersection.

Geronimo rounds the corner into a long straight hallway. Snax is visible at the far end of it. Stopping, Geronimo trains his sights on the fleeing alien.

KAPHWACK!!!!

A shot just misses Geronimo's head, the slug burying itself in the wall. He dives long, to the floor, and rolls up against the wall. Flinnff is rushing up the hall behind him. Geronimo takes a wild shot at him, striking the ceiling above Flinnff's head. Sharp splinters spray down onto Flinnff and he stumbles, dropping to his knees and clutching at his eyes. Lavoriss scrambles to his feet and continues his pursuit.

Gladius bursts around a corner just in time to see an elevator door whisk shut between him and the pudgy form of Mirty Fuegg. Slate races to the elevator, determines that it is going up. He yanks open the door to the adjacent stairwell and begins climbing, three stairs to a stride.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

MAELSTROM

"Reality hurts, doesn't it?"

A distorted vision of the *Decimeter's* bridge swims before the awakening Salata South. Realizing his whereabouts, he is careful to still appear unconscious. He raises his eyelids to thin slits, scans the area and sees the helmsman, an ensign, a lieutenant, a weapons officer, and two Frak Craks. He gently tugs at the bonds that hold him: titanium Magno Lockups(tm), thin metal bracelets that adhere with extreme power to an optional force field available on all military issue Magno Chairs(tm).

At this moment he notices that the lieutenant, busying herself at a console across the bridge, is watching him. Was that a nod? Did she nod at him? Wait, that is Lieutenant Ginjee, of the *Abrogate*. He gives her a long, slow nod in return and, wincing, she resumes her work at the control panel.

Snax waddles as fast as he can toward the hangar deck, looking back, fearful of the pursuit of Geronimo. With no sign of him, his appendages transform into horseshoe-shaped grippers and he climbs onto the handrails of a steep, metal staircase. Easing his grip he begins to slide, butt first, down the rails. Below, LAVORISS steps out at the base of the stairway, a singular eye plunging toward him. Snax's other singular eye dilates and he grips the rails in an attempt to brake, but inertia keeps him hurtling.

KaFLUMP!

Snax's cheeks engulf Geronimo and the pair plunge backward, spilling across the deck of the *Decimeter's* large hangar. The two Hand Cannons(tm) skitter away. Snax's upper appendages change into knobby clubs and he swipes at Geronimo, catching him on the cheek and forcing him to the floor. He hoists himself on wobbly legs, then hustles toward one of the numerous small spaceships in the hangar.

Dazed, Geronimo staggers after Snax, diving at his legs, his arms encircling the alien's pseudo-pods. Snax falls forward, landing on his massive gut. The elastic properties of his skin cause him to rebound. Geronimo tries to roll out of the way, but Snax lands solidly on his head, pinching his face into the metal deck.

Slightly winded, Gladius arrives at the uppermost

level of the *Decimeter*. He has had to pause at each successive deck and check to see if the elevator has stopped. He now edges up to the stairwell door and peers into the hall. Further down, a door snaps shut. Gladius makes for it.

Yanking the door open, Slate confronts Fuegg at the end of a short foyer. Fuegg is fumbling with a set of double doors. They open and he steps in, pounding at the door control.

The doors begin to close and Gladius flings the BIGGER GUN(tm) in an attempt to prevent them locking. The GUN clatters along the floor and slides into the narrowing gap. The doors jam into the weapon.

Gladius reaches the doors, heaving them open enough for himself to squeeze through, then kicks the BIGGER GUN(tm) into the room, letting them slam shut.

KlaTHUNK!

The dead bolt drops into place.

They are inside the domed observation lounge. The entire ceiling is a transparent bubble of Stalwart Glass(tm). The protective roof screen is drawn back revealing an uninhibited, staggeringly awesome view of the cosmos.

Mirty has moved to the opposite side of the big room, his retrieved Zipper(tm) aimed at Slate. Gladius stands his ground, glaring across the room at Fuegg. The BIGGER GUN(tm) lies off to the side of the double doors, forgotten.

"Don't do anything, uh, foolish, now Slate. This may only be a Zipper, but it'll stop you, for sure, you can bet on that."

The gasping Geronimo rolls over, massaging his face, searching for the source of a metallic rattling sound.

Snax, hunched below the seal of the InterGalactic Military High Command which emblazons the hatch of Snoyan's Personal Stellar Cruiser(tm), has the faceplate off the door control panel and deftly works on the lock. With digits resembling needle-nose pliers, he quickly re-routes some wires and, with a pleasant ping, the hatch springs open.

Geronimo pulls himself up as Snax steps into the Stellar Cruiser(tm). He lunges for the portal, but the hatch slams shut in his face. Shit! This pod-toed scum is gonna get away.

Inside the Stellar Cruiser(tm), Snax slips into the Magno Piloting Chair(tm) and expertly manipulates the

controls. The engines grind to life and Snax reaches into his pouch, pulls out a Hydroxilated Nutri-Chew(tm) biscuit and begins to munch.

"Aaauuggghhh!!!"

Snax screams, spitting biscuit. Geronimo clings to the outside of the forward view port, a Hand Cannon(tm) barrel pressed to the Stalwart Glass(tm).

Snax's appendage transmutes into a tentacle and whips out to activate the forward shields. The repulsive energy field engulfs Geronimo. He convulses in the charge and involuntarily fires the Hand Cannon(tm).

PAKOWWIEEEE!!!

The shot implodes on itself, the weird energy fluxes in the shield contorting the explosive force into a halo around Geronimo.

KERFWEEEEPPPUTOO!!

Geronimo is flung from the ship, tossed clear across the hangar, to crash in a stunned, smoking heap.

Snax peers out the view port at the unmoving form of Lavoriss. Oh, well. Returning to his munching and pre-flight, he punches more buttons and the storage hangar conveyor system slides the warming Stellar Cruiser(tm) into the airlock.

"Why, Fuegg?" Gladius is straining to contain a raging storm of fury. "Why did you sell out the IDR? Why did you sell us all to the military?"

Fuegg keeps the gun leveled at Slate, his chubby digits slick against the metal of the trigger. "Sell out? You really don't understand, do you Slate?" Mirty uses his other hand to light a fresh cigarette. He inhales, letting the smoke ring around his sagging jowls. "I didn't sell out to them, they sold out to me. Snoyan, Itchtrong, Mawhooba, they all work for me."

Slate stalks slowly through the room, circling like a hungry cat. "You've been behind everything? The terrorist attacks, the stolen Scow Cows, the manipulation of the military?" He stares in disbelief. "You're responsible for my being here?!"

"Yes, all of it. I've done quite well, don't you think?"

Slate stops, his fingers digging into the back of a comfy lounge chair. "Why? Why do it?"

"I was asked to do it, and handsomely, uh, remunerated, I might add." Fuegg takes a long drag on his cigarette. A cinder of ash grows on its end. "Step one on the way to a New Order."

Slate is fuming. "Destruction and chaos is your definition of order?"

"It's my definition of fun, a challenge. The people I work for hold the real balance of power. They need something done and I plan to succeed. Getting rid of you and your, uh, friend, is just another minor hitch along the way. With this fiasco on the Green Moon the military will be hog-tied and the government will be, uh, putty in my hands." He taps the cigarette, letting the long, gray ash tumble and smash on the floor.

Itchtrong and Snoyan hustle through the decks, now a bee hive of activity as personnel scramble to and fro, trying to discern what the commotion is all about. The Colonel stops abruptly, pulls Snoyan into a small meeting room and closes the door.

"This is a real botch up, Dashe," he says, sincerely.

"I'll say. I thought Fuegg was on the level. Now he's trying to cut us out." She begins to pace.

"I can't have anybody cutting me out," Itchtrong replies, "not after all I've done for this thing."

Dashe turns on him. "You've done! I've been in on this almost since the beginning. You're just a pawn. A useful pawn, mind you, but a pawn all the same."

Itchtrong ices over, becomes acutely aware of the Junior Hand Cannon(tm) still secreted in his pocket.

"Pawn takes queen," he says coldly.

WHACK!

The shot strikes Snoyan in the chest. A healthy portion of lung and flesh spew out behind her, the great dollop slopping with a splatter across the floor. She staggers, looking at the disproportionately small, neat hole in her uniform front.

"Wha--" she gurgles.

Itchtrong fires again and again.

Flinnff barges onto the bridge, his face streaked with smeared rivulets of blood. His eyes are reddened and puffy, a result of the foreign matter which is stinging them. "What the hell's happening?! The crew's running around like idiots. Who's in charge?"

"Aren't you, Lieutenant Flinnff?" asks the helmsman.

"Shut up!" he screams, walloping the helmsman across the ear.

Flinnff rages about the bridge, confronting the two Frak Craks. "What the hell are you two doing standing here? Get your fucking asses out there and find Fuegg!"

The Frak Craks, continuing to carry out their last order from Itchtrong, stand stolidly in place.

Flinnff loses control and draws his Junior Hand Cannon(tm) on the Frak Craks. With lightning speed they raise their weapons.

Ginjee lunges over the piloting console, kicking the gun from Flinnff's hand, snatching him around the throat and jamming the muzzle of her own Junior Hand Cannon(tm) to his head.

"Back off!" she bellows.

The Frak Craks continue to point their weapons, unsure of what is going on. She looks down at the control panel beside her.

"Shoot her!" insists Flinnff, vehemently.

Ginjee strikes at a button on the panel, cutting the restraining force which holds South's wrists to the Magno Chair(tm). The Frak Craks waver, glance to each other. Salata leaps from his chair, barging into the pair, toppling them.

One Frak Crak recovers and attempts to aim his gun at South. Salata kicks him hard in the face. The second soldier clubs the Captain across the chest with his gun butt, sending him sprawling.

BLAM! BLAM!

Ginjee shoots the offending trooper, then flings Flinnff onto the other. Salata scrambles up, scooping the dead trooper's Intensifier Musket(tm). He offers a quick nod of thanks to Ginjee.

"Seal the doors," he barks. "Now!"

The surprised helmsman does so, locking off the bridge.

"As of this moment, I, Captain Salata South, am taking command of this vessel. Recall all personnel."

Flinnff, defeated, seethes with hatred.

In the observation lounge, beneath the silent canopy of the galaxy, Mirty Fuegg is keeping Gladius Slate at bay with the Zipper(tm).

"I believed in the Company, Fuegg. I believed in the Union." Gladius is on the move again, sidestepping through the lush decor of comfortable furniture. "Hell, I may even have believed in you."

"Reality hurts, doesn't it?" states Fuegg, matter-of-factly. He backs away, continuing his slow dance with Gladius.

"How did I fit into this? What was the point of it all?"

"You were the military's idea. Your old friend, Salata South, and that idiot Ragellon."

"South is in on it?!"

"No, he's too stupid. But their plan to use you as bait presented an opportunity I couldn't, uh, resist. You played it perfectly."

Contempt burns at the back of Gladius's throat. "You still haven't told me why."

"Ah." Fuegg smiles, his jowls folding into sausages beneath his chin as he looks Gladius up and down. "Why would you choose Spiffy Sensor Suit Undergarments, or Magno Chairs, or a, uh, Zipper, for that matter?" he says, hefting the weapon in his hand.

"Because... they do the job."

"Wrong, my friend. That's what you are meant to think. You choose them because you have no choice."

Gladius fails to make any connection.

"It's a scam, really," Fuegg continues. "You see, there is only one gigantic mega-corporation which controls the patents on, uh, everything. They have a manufacturing and distribution network of subsidiary companies which give the appearance of a free market state, but in reality, there is only one elite group in control. In fact, our entire civilization, if you can call it that, the social, political and economic fabric of the universe, has blended into one giant, uh, miasma, manipulated at will by a privileged few." Fuegg nods slowly. "OmniCorp owns the imaginations of everyone."

"And this affects me how?" Gladius shrugs.

"Whether you realize it or not, you are under the spell of, shall we say, higher powers. Becoming what they want you to be: one more sheep in the, uh, flock. A happy, oblivious sheep, mind you. Living the good life, as defined by the Corporation." Mirty lets his eyes drift out the viewing screen, toward the Green Moon. One hemisphere is obliterated by the dust of the massive explosion. "The Corporation needs to get paid for supplying you with, uh, peace of mind, Slate. Do you know how we do that?"

"Why don't you tell me."

"We buy things, lots of things. Things we need, things we don't. The Corporation has merchandise its gotta move, Slate. Turnover equals profit. That's what its all about. And that's where I come in." He takes a deep draw on his cigarette, exhales the plume into the air. "I work for OmniCorp. That Union thing is just a necessary ruse. All those terrorist bastards thinking that they are going to save the Universe from, uh, oligarchy? Just dupes in

the cause."

Slate stares, transfixed, at the repugnant man before him.

Mirty breaks into a broad smile. "By blowing stuff up, people need to buy new stuff. Drag the military into it and things can spiral out of control. Why, they've already ordered twelve Humongous RangeroPrima Supreme War Galleons. Preparation for the upcoming, uh, conflagration. Factories are cranking up production. Simply put: it's good for business.

"True, it'll be messy for awhile, but once everything is beaten to a pulp and the, uh, commoners can't take it anymore, then I, Mirty Fuegg, will step in with a plan to rebuild, refurnish, re-equip. The New Order. A government fully sympathetic to OmniCorp, lead by Mirty Fuegg, the man who looked in the face of, uh, adversity and said, 'Hi, how ya doin'?'"

"You're crazy," sighs Slate. "You're living in delusion, as power-drunk as this elite few that you say are controlling all our lives. You're a sick man, Fuegg."

Fuegg laughs heartily. "Slate, OmniCorp had regional headquarters on the Green Moon. I've started the ball rolling. Or rather, I've allowed the military, with your help, to, uh, roll it for me. Don't you see? That entire colony was in the direct employ of the Corporation."

"But where do the terrorists fit? I thought that was their headquarters down there."

"It was! That's part of the beauty. The DataTrump Fruition Front is a subsidiary of the Corporation! Who would suspect the Corporation of, uh, malfeasance if the Corporation itself is a victim?"

Slate shakes his head in disgust.

"C'mon Slate, it's win-win. You'll be hauling trash for decades to come. The military will be kissing more ass than a donkey convention. OmniCorp will demand restitution. The DataTrump Fruition Front will resurface somewhere else. Hostilities will, uh, escalate. The public will be running in circles, thankful one minute that the government is pulling out all the stops to protect them, and enraged the next that they are so, uh, incompetent. And just for fun, next week the Interstellar Detritus Reclaimers Union will go on strike. Crap piles up fast, Slate."

Gladius, realizing how much Fuegg enjoys relating the tale of his own destiny, uses the distraction to inch closer to him. "And I suppose you already have the coup planned?"

"You are so, uh, astute. You'd make a good ambassador in my New Order. Yes, I have full documentation of military botch-ups and government corruption. The leaks will trickle out as needed. It won't be difficult to wind up the citizens of the free universe. At the appropriate moment, I will step in and, uh, save the day."

Fuegg snubs out his cigarette in the back of one of the chairs, attention focused on grinding the stubby butt into the upholstery. Gladius lunges forward.

Fuegg looks up, his finger jerking on the trigger of the Zipper(tm). The shot rips into Gladius's forearm as he collides with Fuegg, driving him backward over a couch. The Zipper(tm) goes flying. Mirty struggles, trying to wrest himself from Slate's grip.

Grunting, Gladius hefts Fuegg and hurls him across the lounge. Fuegg bounces across a table and crashes to the floor.

"Your fantasy is over!" Slate dives across the room at the scampering pseudo-president of the Interstellar Detritus Reclaimers Union. He lands on Fuegg's back, hands coiling around Mirty's flabby neck. Fuegg struggles into his pocket, pulling out a small, metal cylinder. Gladius continues to squeeze, Fuegg's face turning a deadly crimson. Mirty manipulates the cylinder, touches a clasp at the side. A needle-thin platinum blade appears.

"Let... go... Slate..." Fuegg wheezes, "I'll... give you... uh... anything."

"Never, Fuegg, I've had enough of deals and orders. I'm putting a stop to this nightmare, forever."

Mirty lashes out with the blade.

"AAAUUGGGHHH!!!"

Gladius releases Fuegg, his hand clutching his pierced eye. He falls to the floor, rolling onto his back, vital liquids smearing his face and blurring the vision of his other eye.

"I made you... an offer," gasps Fuegg, regaining his composure, "and I meant it."

Gladius's fading vision falls upon the fallen Zipper(tm), resting just under the chair next to him.

"But, if you don't want to be nice to me," chokes Fuegg, rubbing at his neck, "I won't be nice to you." He raises the blade and hurtles at the prone Slate.

Gladius registers the fuzzy shape of the advancing Fuegg. He rolls, snapping up the Zipper(tm). Fuegg slaps to the floor, exhaling sharply.

"Hold your ground," orders Slate. One hand holds his eye, the other grips tightly on the Zipper(tm).

Fuegg gasps for breath, ignores the order, and pulls himself to his feet. "You're going to die, Slate."

"I don't think so." Gladius sights down the barrel, his gore-slicked hand tensing on the trigger. Blood trickles into his good eye, the image of Fuegg faltering, wavering, dissolving into a liquid blur.

ZIPPETY! ZIP! ZIP! Click. Click.

Gladius empties the charge on the small pistol. He blinks to clear his vision. Fuegg, panting for breath, leans on a table before him, untouched by a single shot.

"You're not worth it," sighs Gladius. He tosses the Zipper(tm) away, claws his way onto unsteady legs, and makes for the door. "You're small time, Fuegg, always will be."

Fuegg's ego rages at the comment. His stubby fingers tighten on the knife. Gladius unlocks the door, allowing it to open.

"Die, garbage man!" the pugnacious Itchtrong spits, pistol whipping his Junior Hand Cannon(tm) across Gladius's face. Gladius's legs buckle and he falls flat on his back, revealing Fuegg.

"Fuegg!" The Colonel leaps over Slate and barges straight for the corpulent form of the Observer.

"Itchtrong, just take it easy. I don't think you understa--"

Itchtrong seizes Fuegg by the throat, pressing his Junior Hand Cannon(tm) against the rotund man's head.

Gladius drags himself toward the open door.

"After all I did for you, all the information I gave to you, at tremendous risk to myself," Itchtrong yells.

Fuegg slams the thin blade into Itchtrong's guts, reefs upward. The Colonel convulses in agony, squeezing the trigger on the Junior Hand Cannon(tm).

BWAMMM! Toink!

The shot goes straight up, splintering a small hole in the Stalwart Glass(tm) ceiling of the lounge.

Thhhssssssss!

Fuegg and Itchtrong raise their eyes to the heavens, sense their impending doom.

With a howl, the room begins to decompress. Dust and debris start to whirl, forming a funnel cloud at the freshly opened atmospheric drain. Slate frantically pulls himself through the door, gripping the wall with all his might.

Itchtrong and Fuegg are being sucked upward, caught in a cyclone of tumbling furnishings, nearing the hole. The Emergency Atmosphere Control Door(tm) kicks in, slamming

shut and sealing off the lounge.

Inside, Fuegg and Itchtrong reach the center of the engine which drives the howling vortex. Their bodies shred, churning into a roiling blob, as they are extracted through the tiny hole, sucked into the vacuum of space.

Gladius, wincing with pain, holds his hand over his blind and bleeding eye. At last, able to relinquish his stamina, he slumps onto the floor, exhaling heavily, thankful that it's over.

"Inferior One," lilts a melodic voice, "you look of ill health."

Gladius raises his good eyelid. Through his smeared vision he sees a blurred foot, attached to the form of a blue-skinned alien figure with blond hair. "Fystik?"

"Yes, come, we must hurry. The Frak Craks have been called off and the order has been given for the ship's security to lock down the vessel." Fystik helps Gladius to his feet.

"Where's Geronimo?"

"There's no time. Petunia is waiting. Once military control is reestablished we won't be able to leave. They'll seize our ship." Fystik leads Gladius along the corridor to the elevator.

"We can't leave without, Lavoriss," insists Gladius.

Fystik guides the big man into the lift, locks the controls off and punches for descent. It opens on the hangar deck.

Stepping from the lift, Slate sees the Astral Cargo Sled resting near the airlock. "How did you get in?"

"The flight deck door opened and a Stellar Cruiser flew out, in quite a hurry I might add." The Dismemberon steers Gladius toward the sled.

A sound tweaks Slate's ear. "You hear that?"

"What, oh Inferior One?"

"A groan." Gladius wipes at his blood-caked good eye, searching for the source of the sound. He spies a body slowly coming to life. "There, it's Geronimo!" He points to the sluggish lump in the corner of the hangar. "Get him, help him."

Fystik leaves Gladius and crosses to help the waking Geronimo, hustling him to the Astral Cargo Sled. As the reunited trio begin up the ramp, Petunia calls to them from across the hangar.

"Fystik, forget that heap, we're going with this one." She is standing at the hatch of a Vi-Troop Carrier and ducks inside once they see her. They stumble across to the

vessel and climb aboard.

Inside, Gladius collapses onto a Magno Bench and confronts Petunia. "You came back. Why?"

"Him," she says, jabbing a thumb at Fystik. "Says you helped re-unite us."

Fystik eases Geronimo into the on-board AutoDoc emergency unit, then takes a seat for himself.

"Hold on!" calls Petunia. She initiates the hangar conveyor and the ship chugs toward the airlock. The Mini-HootToot drives fire up, warming for the lift-off into space.

"Captain South," the helmsman of the *Decimeter* calls, "all Frak Craks are accounted for. Confirmed count: six dead, eighteen confined to the security lockup. All systems are coming back on-line, the control override to the Laredo X-Press has been rescinded. Main console will be fully operational in ten minutes."

"Good," South snaps, fully in charge.

"Aeronautics report a ship leaving the hangar."

"Scan."

"Scan functions have yet to return to full operations," pipes one of the ensigns.

Ginjee moves to the view port and surveys the exterior of the *Decimeter*. "I only see the *Abrogate* out--wait."

"What is it?" South crosses to the view port. A lone Vi-Troop Carrier passes over the bow of the *Decimeter*. He strains to see into the vessel through its side viewing ports. He can make out the shapes of three figures. One is a rather large, muscular man clad in a Spiffy Sensor Suit Undergarment. He daubs at his face with a blood soaked cloth. For a brief moment, as the small ship reaches its closest point before continuing on past the disabled *Abrogate* and out of sight, the man looks up.

"Good-bye, Slate," whispers Salata. "Good luck."

"What was that, sir?" Ginjee asks.

"Nothing."

"Shall I activate a Tow Hold and snare them, sir?" calls the ensign.

"No, let them go." South turns back to the bridge. "Ginjee, put in a Deep-Space Trunk Call to Desolate Harmony. We've got to make a full report of this mess. And somebody check on Ragellon."

EPILOGUE

PARTNERSHIP

"Well, what?"

The Kitty Klone sets a heaping plate of steaming Glucossian Fries on the table and Geronimo Lavoriss nabs a couple with his fingers. Gladius Slate, wearing a black patch over his empty eye socket, blows across the surface of a hot Chocosmelt drink and then cautiously sips at the liquid. Petunia Ren is examining the toppings within a Quaanaheeni burger and removes a slice of the pungent Steegleberry root. A slight, yellow-haired, blue-skinned figure slouching in the corner of the booth, disguised behind dark glasses, picks at a bright orange and yellow Emperor Hurdlefud salad.

Kitty's Kulinary Kipeche Kuisine diner is bustling with midday clientele. Adding to the hubbub is the constant chatter of the numerous Holo-Vis monitors situated around the seating area. The rapid-fire imagery is suddenly interrupted by the over-perfect face of an Andromeda Network Newscaster.

"Here's another bulletin," Fystik says, alerting the group. They turn their attention to the news brief.

"...strike was avoided in a last minute round of negotiations between the Interstellar Detritus Reclamation Company and the Interstellar Detritus Reclaimers Union.

"Concessions were made by the Company when it was revealed last week that Mirty Fuegg, the Union president, had been deeply involved with the terrorist organization known as the DataTrump Fruition Front. Officials on both sides agreed that all previous negotiations involving Fuegg would have to be reworked, and dispositions seemed friendly between all parties.

"As further details are released regarding the apparent motives of the so-called DataTrump Fruition Front, the typhoon of mystery and intrigue grows ever more complex. It appears that a small, clandestine group of executive officers of OmniCorp, the mega-corporation which formed as a result of the gradual merging of every existing company in the known universe, may be linked to the terrorist organization and the final explosive massacre on the Green Moon.

"It has come to light that secret negotiations between the OmniCorp executive board and the government, under the supervision of social psychologists, have been wrestling

with the problem of the monopolistic system which currently controls the economic engines driving universal markets.

"It is believed the terrorist plot was concocted to thwart these negotiations. Although forced to reveal their intentions prematurely, government spokespersons have informed AN News that plans to dissolve the mega-corporation and reintroduce competition into the market were already being finalized. The destruction of the Green Moon, although a tragic loss of life, really won't affect the dissolution, and the economy will, by all predictions, continue on an upswing well into the foreseeable future.

"For a further update into the Space Commission hearings we now go live to the Dodecahedron where Captain Salata South, a key player in the final battle with the terrorists, is delivering a press release..."

Gladius and Geronimo shift in their seats, anxious to see what South has to say. The picture on the Holo-Vis monitor changes to a wide shot of the Dodecahedron, the huge administration complex of the InterGalactic United Military, then cuts to a closer shot of Captain Salata South addressing a large gathering of media personnel.

"...revealed that the terrorist organization had recruited several high-ranked individuals within the military and other infrastructural and governmental administrations, but we now feel that most of these persons have been taken into custody. I'm sure there will be a few more, but we will get them all, eventually." South glances around at the bristling assemblage, gestures to one of the reporters.

"Captain South," the reporter begins, "I understand that you, single-handedly, were able to take command in the critical stages of the battle on the Green Moon and put an end to the destruction. I was wondering what thoughts you had for the general public on how it feels to be a hero?"

"What?!" shouts Geronimo. "Hero? We carried that schmuck's ass!"

"Geronimo." Gladius is waving for Lavoriss to lower his voice, but Geronimo persists in his tirade.

"I can tell you, we wouldn't be sittin' here right now if we let that idiot--"

"Gerry!"

Several diner patrons turn to look at the commotion. Geronimo falls silent, relenting to Gladius's scolding look.

The Holo-Vis displays a close-up of Salata South, nodding and smiling. He thinks for a moment then begins his answer: "Well, I really can't take all the credit..."

"I should think not!" interjects Geronimo, eliciting another stern look from Gladius.

"...a young lieutenant by the name of Ginjee is going to be awarded a medal for bravery above and beyond the call of duty for her contributions, and I must give a great deal of credit to a couple of courageous men, whose names I won't mention because they are civilians, but without whose help I do not believe the terrorists would have been stopped at the Green Moon."

"Well, that's better," mumbles Geronimo.

"Captain South," another reporter is hollering, "are you aware of the numerous other crimes that have accumulated surrounding this case? For example: break-ins, fraud, shootings and, apparently, assassinations. What does the military plan to do about these?"

South clenches his jaw, the definition of his scar intensifying due to an influx of blood. He chooses his words carefully. "As you are well aware, an investigative operation may require that certain information be obtained through covert means, in order to protect the sources or to avoid tipping the intended targets, in this case the terrorists. The InterGalactic United Military is planning a compensation program for any persons directly affected by military interven--"

"How do you compensate for an assassination?!" shouts another reporter.

South's scar has begun to pulse. "To my knowledge," he says, speaking slowly, "the military was not involved in any such activities. Do not forget that the terrorists were conducting their own covert operations and that many of the aforementioned crimes have been committed by them, or persons recruited by them. The Investigations Committee will determine who, exactly, shall be compensated."

There is a huge uproar from the crowd. South is gesturing for the crowd to remain calm and, as the noise dampens, he speaks: "I'm sorry, I'm out of time for today, thank you." With that, he steps down from the microphones. The Holo-Vis image returns to the newscaster who signs off, back to regularly scheduled programming.

Gladius, Geronimo, Petunia and Fystik settle back into the booth, returning their attention to their lunches.

"Sounds like I'll get my ship replaced," sighs Geronimo, picking at his fries. "Hey, Gladman, how'd South get that hideous scar, anyway?"

A hint of grin breaks on Gladius's face. "Well, to make a long story short, it was soon after I had left the military and joined the IDR. Things had been going well,

and I had just got the *Gladknight I*. I'd been dispatched to the Military Elite Squad Training Division. I didn't realize that Lieutenant South was in command of the facility's administration, and a stickler for details worse than I ever was.

"As it happened, I was moving my shiny new ship into position over their Sani-Bins, and old South starts screaming over my Commucon. It seems the base's janitorial crew hadn't finished dumping the trash and Salata wanted me to wait until they did. Now, it's not my problem that these soldier boys hadn't packed their crap away on time, and I had a schedule to meet, so I told him to stick it. At this point South recognizes my voice and demands I dock my ship so he can 'confer' with me on the issue. I know he just wants to stall for his lame ducks to get the trash into the bins. After all, a little botch up taking the garbage out can result in a serious smell, and South was still bucking for his promotion.

"So, I refused to wait and the bastard slams a Tow Hold on the *Gladknight* and reels her in for a forced dock. By this time I was steaming, so I barreled to the hatchway and was ready to take South on face to face. I guess old Salata had the same thought, because he was waiting for me on the other side of the airlock, ranting about filing a formal complaint against me with the IDR. Behind him, his troopers were stuffing trash down the shredder tubes as fast as they could.

"Push came to shove, and neither Sally or I would back down. But, unfortunately for him, I was bigger. I pushed him, I guess harder than I should have. He stumbled backward, slipping on a slimy bit of slop from one of the trash containers. He started flailing like a madman, his arms windmilling. South was screaming at me by this point, and I guess he thought he had his balance back, but he didn't. The next thing, old Salata upends himself into the shredder tube.

"The stupid toadies could only watch, horrified, but I rushed forward and tried to shut down the tube. We heard South screaming and cursing the whole way into the bin, where he landed on a hideously foul mountain of garbage. One of the shredder blades had been slow in retracting. Its oscillating serrated edge, heated by use, cleaved and cauterized South, leaving a scar from the top of his head down, spiraling around his torso, to the tip of his toe. It was quite a sight"

The group laughs as Gladius finishes his tale, then settle into a comfortable silence.

Finally, Gladius clears his throat and the others look to him. "I, er, have an announcement to make," he says, glancing down at his half-eaten meal.

Geronimo waits for it, grows impatient. "Well, what?"

Gladius remains staring at his plate. "I've, um, decided to quit working for the Interstellar Detritus Reclamation Company."

"Well, that doesn't surprise anyone, I'm sure," Geronimo retorts. "You'd hafta be nuts to stay on."

"Yes, well, there would be some reasons, I think, like having a ship to pilot, for one, and an income for another."

Geronimo raises his eyebrows, conceding the point.

"So," Gladius continues, "I guess I'll just be out on my own, looking for odd jobs here and there..." His train of thought trails off.

Petunia looks briefly to Fystik, who glances from her to the others and back.

"Well," Petunia begins, "Fystik and I are also going to be starting out fresh. Don't forget that we've come out of this with nothing, and there is no way we can file for compensation."

"Absolutely not," sings Fystik. "We've got to lie low for a while, we're not exactly innocent, you know."

"Yes," Gladius agrees, "your secret is safe with us, right Gerry?"

Geronimo glances at the pair, nods agreement. "Hey, we owe you guys a favor or two, even if you did torture our butts."

"Thanks," Petunia replies. "So, anyway, Fystik and I plan to open a legitimate vehicle repair and modification business, what with all the experience we've gained. Probably specialize in recreational vehicles this time. It's a couple of years down the road, at any rate, but you're welcome to join us if you like, Gladius."

Gladius smiles warmly at the offer. "Hey, thanks a lot you two, but I don't know if that'd be right for me. Detritus is kind of in my blood. I'll just wait around, see what comes up."

Geronimo is looking suspiciously at Gladius.

"Well, if you change your mind," Petunia replies, "the offer's still open."

"Most definitely," adds Fystik.

Gladius smiles and nods his thanks. Petunia and Fystik peck at the remainder of their meals. Geronimo looks around at the trio.

"Um, Gladman?"

Gladius looks up.

"Ya know, if I can finagle a half decent ship out of my compensation settlement, well, I just might need some sorta copilot to help me out. I've built up a pretty good business, with some reliable clients, too. It was gettin' a little hectic, anyway, and I was kinda hopin' to take on some help before I got into this whole mess. At one point I was even thinkin' of expansion, maybe get another ship... makin's of a fleet, ya know?"

Gladius is looking at him sheepishly. Petunia and Fystik are suppressing grins.

"Gee, are you sure, Geronimo, we've tried to work together in the past."

Geronimo shrugs. "Yeah, sure, I know, but we could at least try it one more time. I think we've matured somewhat, don't you?"

Gladius brightens. "You could say that. It was one hell of a way to go about it, though."

Petunia and Fystik nod their agreement.

"So, whaddaya say? Copilot?"

Gladius hesitates briefly. "If you'll have me?"

Geronimo begins to chuckle. Fystik and Petunia join in, and finally, Gladius, too, begins to laugh. He extends a hand to Geronimo, who takes it and shakes it vigorously.

"Welcome aboard, partner."

The foursome clear their tab and climb from the booth. Petunia and Fystik bid farewell and head for the exit, followed by Gladius and Geronimo.

"Hey, Geronimo, you come up with a name for your new ship, yet?"

"Yeah, the *New Gnu Two*."

"I always thought *Gladknight VI* had a nice ring to it."

"Forget it, Snickerbutt!"

Their conversation melts into the din and they disappear through the door. The galactic hub hangs resplendent beyond the observation window, its glittering stars beaming with hope and prosperity against the black void beyond. A blackness so infinite that it will always remain poised to consume, with minimal effort, even the brightest point of light.

THE END

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