

Star Crusader [046 4.9]

by
Bruce Balfour

Synopsis:

Human history relives itself as the Gorene Empire drives through the galaxy, much as the medieval crusaders drove through Asia--the Gorenese see themselves as heroes, but the aliens in their path face conquering armies.

Star Crusader A Novel by Bruce Balfour PRIMA PUBLISHING

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CHAPTER 1 ARMEDIA QL1EEN4EOR I'll--BORDERING THE ASCALON RIFT The trick was

to get clear of the launch bay without getting shot. Roman Mexandria, of the elite Gorene Gold Squadron, kept his eye on the engine gauge as the thruster throttled up to full military power. His body vibrated as the starfighter strained against its leash, pulsing with the flow of the roeta-stable hydrazine as it poured into the hellish inferno of the engine chamber.

The catapult officer returned Roman's salute, glanced at the yellow signal light on his control console, then looked across the nose of the starfighter to the opposite end of the launch bay. The safety officer scanned the deck from his cubicle and signaled with his left thumb held high.

The light on the cat officer's control console turned green.

A quick look verified that the Scorpion was ready and the cat pistons were charged. When he pushed the fire button, the stored power of the superconducting catapult was released in an instant, hurling the starfighter forward.

Roman's eyes pressed back into his head as the fighter plunged down the catapult track. The glow of the launch bay's magnetic shield raced toward him faster and faster as the banshee scream of the engine thundered in his ears. As the deck edge disappeared under the starfighter's nose, the craft leaped into the inky black void, allowing Roman to breathe again as the G force subsided. He powered back the throttle, then slapped the gear handle up, rolling the fighter in a tight arc to clear the launch area.

Roman checked the rearview and saw Marsh Lawton, his wingman, closing in to a Loose Deuce formation on his port side. He eased the throttle back to tighten the formation, then scanned his instruments for warning lights. Navigation, fire control, power management, shields, radar, and the individual weapon systems all showed normal. On the left side of the instrument console, the tactical radar monitor showed Lawton's ship, which the IFF transponder iden-titled as a friendly green, despite Lawton's personal animosity toward Roman." They were to form up with Kayla Brool and Hela Selrase at the other end of the hyperspace jump, assuming Brool and Selrase were still alive in the Queln battle zone. On the fringes of the Ascalon Rift, the battle zone was loaded with many more potential enemies, so the Gorenese had to make sure the Queln were defeated before they received reinforcements from the other races.

"Alpha Strike, CAG," barked a deep voice on Roman's comlink.

"Alpha Strike. Go ahead, CAG?"

"BARCAP reports two terminated gomers. No further threats reported inbound from the jump point. Proceed to jump and form up with Selrase. The recon datalink is functioning, so you'll get your nav

update from the Intruder on the other side?

BARCAP, the long-range Barrier Combat Patrol, had reduced the local threats around the Gorene base to zero, giving them a clear track to the jump point. Roman checked his rearview again as he heard two clicks over the comlink from his wingman. Lawton was in position.

"Dash Two is up and locked. Thanks for the update, CAG.

CAG, the Commander of the Air Group, paused before responding in a softer voice. "Bring your group back in one piece, Roman. The Queln don't have many fighters left, but it's hot over there.

"We'll be home for dinner, CAG. Maybe we can finish this and take a vacation. Alpha Strike out.?"

"CAG out.

Roman hesitated before contacting his competitive wing-man.

He never knew how Lawton would react when they were assigned missions together. "Ready to go to work, Lawton?"

"Just give me a target and I'll shoot it.

The two starfighters slowed to a stop as they reached the jump point. Each Gorene ship was equipped with a Singularity Field Generator for long-distance travel through hyperspace.

While the SFG was not an engine in the strict sense, it was capable of producing a field similar to that of a singularity at the center of a black hole. Where an actual singularity caused the curvature of time and space to become infinite, the SFG produced a finite curvature. By manipulating the field density and position, it could be used for long-distance space travel placing a ship within a few hundred kilometers of the destination. Control over the field was too tricky to perform short-distance jumps.

While most of the Gorene pilots understood the general principles behind hyperjumps, they still viewed the loss of control over their fighters with suspicion. In the early experiments, pilots had sometimes popped out of hyperspace into the center of a star or inside a planet. The flight schools assured them that this type of event was now rare; besides, in relation to the immense volume of empty space, there were few stars and planets. Still, when it came right down to it, making a hyperjump involved pressing a button, closing your eyes, and hoping for the best.

Roman's thumb hovered over the jump button as he took a deep breath. "Jump in three... two... one:

The sky exploded around them.

ASCALON RIFT---SECTOR IImTOMB

For millennia, the hostile surface of the planet Tomb had resisted any attempt to mine its rich resources. Pools of heavy metals dotted the landscape under a thin atmosphere, which was continuously bombarded with deadly radiation from the local star. Probes and starships came and went, but none survived any close contact with Tomb, the Tancred world of the dead. Now, Tomb was orbited by a new craft--a Gorene starfighter.

Jharek Bowman shuddered as he looked down at the surface of Tomb..

There was something unsettling about the planet, although he couldn't pin it down. Maybe his discomfort was an aftereffect of the jump, or the fact that he was about to meet with a tancred warrior named Stellerex.

One thing was sure, he wished the Tancreds had picked a friendlier meeting place, and that the Gorenese had sent an actual diplomat to Tomb instead of a fighter pilot. On top of everything else, Stellerex was late, although Jharek didn't mind getting there first.

Jharek shook his head over his misfortune. Even though several pilots had volunteered for this mission, Commander Ferrand had chosen him. Was it his fault that his friends had talked him into drinking two Singularity Generators, without ice, in the pilot's bar? Was it his fault that the alcohol had made him dance naked on the bar with that cute redhead?

Was it his fault that he'd staggered out of the bar and thrown up on Commander Ferrand? Well, maybe it was all his fault, but was it fair for the Commander to send him on this suicide mission as a result?

Okay, maybe it wasn't exactly a suicide mission. The Commander had assured him that it would be a peaceful meeting. Though little was known about the Tancreds (the Gorene Intelligence units that had infiltrated the Ascalon Rift had an alarming tendency to disappear before reporting back), the Commander believed that the Tancreds would be reasonable when confronted with the mighty Gorene armada.

All the Tancreds had to do was accept the Gorenese as their masters and liberators, as so many other races had done in the past. The Tancreds could either accept the diplomatic Gorene offer of peace and allow their race to become civilized or they would be destroyed. It was their choice. From that perspective, Jharek saw no reason why the meeting wouldn't go well. He would return to the ar-1 base as the hero who had accepted the surrender of the Tancred people.

Jharek's daydream was shattered by a brilliant burst of laser light, which left a scorch mark across the nose of his fighter. His left thumb automatically punched the button that activated the shields, which he should have done when he arrived.

A short distance away, the business end of a hydrogen plasma cannon was pointed at his face. Attached to the cannon was a Tancred Warlord, looking as if it could barely be restrained from destroying Jharek's starfighter as it hung motionless above Tomb. Apparently, Stellerex had arrived.

Jharek cleared his throat and tried to sound calm, despite his lingering shock at the sudden appearance of the Tancred strike craft. "This is a diplomatic mission, Tancred! Why did you shoot at Jharek gasped as the humanoid face of Stellerex appeared on the cockpit monitor. He wore a gold helmet adorned with horns just above his heavy eyebrow ridge, and he was baring his fangs.

Tradition, Gorene. It's what you might call a dueling scar: I am not here to duel." Stellerex barked out a harsh laugh. "Have you called this meeting to surrender, Gorene?" Jharek looked at his prepared statement. He knew he had to get the wording right for the flight recorder, especially since it could end up on the newsVMs. q come in the name of the Gorene Empire to seek a peaceful resolution to the dispute between our races. We seek to liberate the Ascalon Rift, not to turn it into a battle zone. We come to this region of space to share the wealth, knowledge, and power of our society with the Tancreds and all the races of the Ascalon Rift. You can share in the glory of the society we've spent thousands of years perfecting: As Jharek paused for a breath, Stellerex snarled. "Is this the same speech you gave the Queln before you attacked them? You are arrogant aggressors, not liberators. You trespass in Tancred space and preach of spreading alien values and laws. The Tancreds have nothing to learn from you. Surrender your vessel or I will destroy it: The conversation wasn't going quite the way Jharek had hoped. According to Gorene Intelligence, the Tancreds should not be aware of the distant Queln war in the Armedia Queensway. The Queln worlds had little contact with the rest of the Ascalon Rift races, except through trade. If the Tancreds knew about the Quein situation, it was interesting

that they had not sent reinforcements to the battle zone.

Jharek thought about arming his weapon systems, but the surge would show up on Stellerex's instruments, giving him plenty of time to shoot Jharek first. Escape was turning into his only option. He would have to rely on his wits and his trained reflexes to get a jump on the barbarian Tancred.

"The Gorene flag will fly in the Ascalon Rift. Whether this is accomplished peacefully or through bloodshed is up to you and the other races. I urge you to cooperate with us, learn from us. Peace is possible."

Stellerex's eyes widened as he screamed, "Never."

The piercing tone of the threat alarm vibrated in Jharek's skull as Stellerex put a radar lock on his ship. Jharek responded by slapping the throttle to full power, then shoving the flight stick hard to port and forward, rolling underneath the deadly shot from the Tancred cannon. The threat alarm stopped as Jharek broke the targeting lock.

The Gorene Scorpion's superior maneuverability and speed might enable Jharek to get behind Stellerex. From there, he hoped to launch a torpedo up the Warlord's tail.

However, Stellerex was not fooled by such a simple trick.

Before Jharek could roll out of his high-G turn, his fighter shook with the impact of a laser shot against his shields at close range. The Damage Control monitor listed the shield generators in yellow, meaning they had suffered moderate damage that could be repaired by the onboard nano systems in forty seconds. But forty seconds was a long time.

Jharek inverted and rolled to starboard, but Stellerex stayed behind him. The second shot rattled his teeth and knocked the shield generators completely off-line. Jharek's palms began to sweat inside his gloves as he switched to the Power Management monitor to make sure the repair system had full power to work on the shields. The surface of Tomb orbited twice around his canopy as he continued to roll in a desperate effort to avoid the next shots. Tancred ships were supposed to be pigs to maneuver, but Stellerex was having no trouble staying behind Jharek, snapping off quick laser shots that tore holes in the Scorpion's armor, taking the ship apart piece by piece. The threat alarm kept screaming in his ears--warning him that Stellerex was a much better pilot, warning him that he was about to die.

To survive, Jharek would have to maneuver within range of the jump point and come to a complete stop before setting the return heading for the jump. He felt helpless.

Stellerex seemed to be laughing over the comlink as he toyed with Jharek, allowing him to maneuver away from Tomb toward the jump point, firing random laser bolts that blistered past his canopy. The Damage Control list was getting longer, overloading the repair systems, but the main engine and the SFG were still functioning. If they could last a little longer, Jharek had a chance of making it back alive.

As Jharek reached the jump point, his pulse racing with adrenaline, he stopped suddenly, hoping Stellerex would overshoot his position. He dialed in the new heading, startled to see that his plan had worked as the Warlord raced past his canopy at high speed. Jharek paused as he realized he was in a position to launch a torpedo, and his fingers hesitated between the weapon systems and the SFG. Then he saw the hydrogen plasma torpedo Stellerex had launched at his position as he had passed.

The expanding plasma fireball ripped the Scorpion to shreds. As the cockpit filled with light, Jharek punched the ejection button. In the slow motion of those final moments, Jharek heard a loud bang, followed by a crushing force and a strange silence as the fierce light burned through his eyelids.

The ejection pod spun toward the dead world of Tomb.

CHAPTER 2 ARMEDIA QUEENSWAY--SECTOR IH--FFESTINIIOG Roman came out of the jump with his usual headache, grit-ting his teeth. He took a deep breath, relaxed his grip on the flight stick, and checked his rearview as he tried to focus his eyes. Lawton was still holding his position in the formation.

Now they had to find Selrase and Brool.

The comlink buzzed as Black Eye, the Intruder recon ship, picked them up on radar. "Alpha Strike! Four bogies coming your way!"

Startled by the sudden threat, Roman glanced at his tactical monitor. It showed four inbound Queln fighters, just now becoming visible through the cockpit window. Since they were still on the edge of the battle zone, the Queln must have been patrolling the jump point.

Roger, Black Eye. I've got a visual.

Lawton's voice was tense. "They're moving fast, Roman.

The Queln weren't spectacular pilots, but they knew enough to travel in large groups. The Gorenes had found that the Queln rarely broke their formations, preferring to act with excellent coordination. If they could force a quick break in the formation, the odds would be improved.

"Lawton, we're going straight in. Full afterburner.

"Straight in? Are you serious?"

A-burn on three. One... two.. ?

Maybe we should--"

"Three!"

Roman punched in the afterburner. A glance back reassured him that Lawton was following, although he was farther behind than before.

Tighten it up, Lawton. When we get through the furball, brake and return.

"Sure, if they don't break us first.

Roman held his flight path straight and level, racing toward the Queln on a collision course. Surprised by the tactic, the Queln fighters took a few wild shots as the Gorene ships bore down on them. At that speed, Roman couldn't get a decent lock on any of his targets, either. He was just starting to wonder if his plan would work, or if his fighter would slam into them at high velocity, when the Queln ships broke formation and scattered in panic. As Roman passed through them, he shut off the afterburner and reversed thrust, swinging the fighter

back around in a punishing high-G turn that placed him in firing position behind one of the Queln. The target lock whined in his ears. "I've got tone. Fox one away.

In less than two heartbeats, the missile found its target.

The Queln exploded with a satisfying flash.

"Fox one," said Lawton, launching his own missile.

Another explosion to Roman's left told him that Lawton had also scored. Then his fighter shook as the shields took a hit from below. He punched the afterburner and spiraled down toward the Queln. Herce streaks of light from the Queln cannon weaved a complex pattern around Roman's fighter as he rolled and dodged while maintaining his course. The target alert beeped three times before he killed the after burner and finally got a lock.

Fox two!"

The missile closed the short distance in less than a second.

Roman watched the Queln fighter pull up, attempting to climb above the shot. The missile removed the Quein fighter's engines in a flash, leaving only the front portion of the fighter intact. Roman swerved to avoid the Queln cockpit as it spun toward him, then he found the fourth Queln closing in on him from above in a perfect firing position. The threat alarm shrieked, not helping his headache. Roman changed course, but the Queln anticipated his move and followed. The threat alarm continued to shriek.

Fox two away; Lawton announced.

The Queln fighter disappeared from Roman's rearview, replaced by an expanding cloud of debris. However, the threat alarm still shrieked.

Roman! Missile coming your way!"

Roman pulled back hard on the flight stick, punching the afterburner again to outrun the missile.

"You're not losing it!"

The missile was closing the gap. Unable to outrun it, Roman killed the afterburner, rotated to face the missile, and shut off his engines.

"Stay clear, Lawton! This might not work!"

Roman punched his firing button, spraying the area around the missile with laser fire. Unconcerned, the missile continued on its path.

Roman muttered a curse--the missile was annoyingly persistent.

His thumb plunged down to launch a missile.

Fox three!

His heart had time to pound twice before the two missiles came together in a brilliant reddish-orange flash. Roman slapped the throttle and turned away, but several fragments from the explosion bounced him around as they ran into his shields.

Lawton chuckled. you should have thought of that sooner.

Roman remembered to start breathing again. I was busy.

The delicate features of Hela Selmse's face, broken by occasional static, appeared on Roman's communications monitor.

Her flashing blue eyes told him she wasn't happy.

"Roman! Are we going to get any help from you, or what?" Cool off, Hela. We had some trouble on our way in.

"The two of us are fighting half the Quein fleet, and you're telling me you've got problems?"

It was hard for Roman to lose patience with her. She was one of the best pilots in the squadron, but nobody expected her patrol to land in the middle of the remaining Queln battle group. She and Kayla Brool had quite a fight on their hands."Hang on. We'll be there in a few.

"Just don't stop for a cold one on the way here, okay?"

Selrase out?

"Alpha Strike out?"

The navigational system could trace Hela's signal, but he was thinking he should ask for an update from the Intruder when his comlink beeped again.

"Alpha Strike, this is Black Eye. We're sending you the new battle coordinates. Your vector one eight zero degrees, forty kilometers, over?"

"Roger, one eight zero and forty. Two birds on their way?"

Hela Selrase knew that Roman wouldn't waste any time in coming to their aid. He had a strong chivalrous streak, even though it could be carried to extremes. He was always quick to acknowledge that Hela could fly just as well as he could, even though his reflexes always seemed to be a few nanoseconds faster than hers. Though she never admitted it to anyone else, she spent most of her time thinking about Roman--that is, when she wasn't trying to kill something.

Since they were both fighter pilots in the same squadron, their relationship had to remain a secret, otherwise they could be separated.

"Alpha Tac, this is Black Eye. Alpha Strike will vector on your position in five. Be advised we show sixteen hostiles launching from the two battle group carriers.

Hela felt her neck muscles tightening. Sixteen against two. Between her and Brool, they had already logged eight kills during this "simple clean-up" patrol. They were both tired. She could only hope the battle group wouldn't launch any more fighters. When they were given their orders regarding this battle zone, there were only supposed to be four fighters with one damaged carrier. Instead, they'd been thrilled to discover that a new carrier had arrived, accompanied by two cruisers providing a full defensive screen. Delayed by technical problems, the Black Eye recon ship had arrived behind Hela's group. After destroying the Queln barrier patrol, Hela and Brool had teamed up against each of the cruisers, battering them until they could no longer function.

Hela had initiated the contact with Roman as they had pulled back to recharge their weapons and allow the onboard repair systems to do their jobs. They had intended that the undamaged carrier be their next target, but the arrival of the new Queln fighters had changed their plans.

With tactical updates from the Black Eye data link, Roman studied the battle zone while he and Lawton were en route.

The Queln must have held their last working carrier in reserve for a final stand near their home planet, Ffestiniog, hoping that the Gorenese would be defeated outside the home sector. The orbiting defensive satellites and smart mines had been destroyed by previous Gorenese strikes. The damaged carrier orbiting around Ffestiniog was unable to move, but it was still able to launch its complement of fighters, most of which Hela and Brool had destroyed. They

could

assume that the remaining Queln would put up a desperate fight in the belief that they were saving their civilization from Gorene enslavement. If they had listened to the Gorene diplomats, they'd have known that their best course of action was surrender. The logic was clear. However, this was another backward civilization that preferred to remain that way.

"Roman, my monitor shows one active carrier and six teen loose gomers in tight; said Lawton.

"Cross check on their heading?"

"Three zero eight moving at four hundred?"

"Black Eye?"

"Black Eye confirm's, Alpha Strike. Three zero eight at four hundred."

"Roger that. Lawton, come around to two seven zero.

We'll screen our approach with the planet between us and the battle group. I know how the Queln enjoy surprises."

Roman looked down at Ffestiniog as they crossed the terminator.

In the gaps between the clouds, the night side of the planet showed the lights of several large cities. As they passed over, it felt as if they were stationary with the planet rotating beneath them. From this distance, it all seemed quite peaceful. Roman found himself wondering what the Queln were like in person. He'd seen projections of the Queln, but he had never met or spoken to one. It seemed unfortunate that most of his contacts with aliens involved killing them.

"Roman? We could use some help out here!" With the planet between them, Hela's voice sounded distant and strained.

"We're bringing up the rear, m'dear."

Over the curve of the planet, the Queln carrier came into view, its dark engines facing them. As Roman watched, a fighter popped out of a launch bay. Only one bay appeared to be operating.

"Lawton, let's bring it in close on their stern quarter. You take the new guy, and I'll shut those launch bay doors. We want to keep this party private."

Roman watched in the rearview as Lawton acknowledged by pumping his fist. The wingman dipped his nose and crossed under Roman's fighter, surfacing off the right wing.

In that position, he would have a wider range of movement as Roman moved in close to the carrier.

He waggled the flight stick, noting the heaviness of the controls that had bothered him when he was first learning to fly the Scorpion. The stick had an artificial feel system that resisted displacement from its center position. Each fighter had its own personality, but Roman had learned his trade in the Liberator strike craft, which required a more delicate touch on the controls. Most of the other pilots thought the Liberator was too touchy, but they had trained on Scorpions in the simulators. When Roman entered the service, they were losing Liberator pilots faster than they could be replaced. Having noted Roman's quick reflexes, the flight school instructors pulled him out of the newbie group and slotted him to fly a Liberator. During the Armedia Queensway campaign against the Queln, the situation had reversed itself so that Scorpion fighter pilots were in short supply.

Roman eased his throttle to full power and punched in the afterburner. Lawton did the same as he started his descent toward the lone Queln that had just left the safety of the launch bay.

"Take him, Lawton. I'll see you on the other side?"

As the Queln fighter noticed their approach from his rear and started to turn, Lawton peeled off and went after him.

Roman continued his course straight in to the launch bay, idly wondering why the carrier defenses hadn't opened up on him yet. As if in answer to his question, Roman's ship bounced as his shields took a direct hit from a heavy laser battery. The flash of the impact left little spots fading in his vision.

The nose of the fighter came down as Roman lined up his shot on the lights of the open landing bay. Inside, he could see another fighter preparing to launch off the cat.

The crosshairs dropped into place as the carrier shields powered down for another launch, allowing him to spray the bay opening with cannon fire. The launching fighter exploded on the cat, slamming against the bay doors. Roman continued to pour cannon fire into the opening until it was clear that the deck had turned to molten metal, glowing in place of the lights Roman had destroyed. No more Queln fighters would be launched until that damage was repaired.

The carrier expressed its opinion of his actions by focusing two gun batteries on his ship. The bright hammer blows of the heavy guns glowed against his failing shields, sending him spinning away from the carrier.

"Another Queln bites the dust," said Lawton, after his own success. He had a tendency to use ancient catch phrases that no one understood anymore. "I'm off to help Hela if you're okay, Roman."

Roman would have answered him, but his helmet kept bouncing off his canopy as he fought to control his violent spin. Damage Control showed he was about to lose his shields. Power Management directed the available energy surplus into repairs to keep the shields going. After more flashing and bouncing, Roman didn't care which way he was pointed, so he kicked in the afterburner as a desperate attempt to get out of the carrier's field of fire.

"Roman? You okay?"

The fighter finally stopped spinning, but Roman's head did not. "I don't have any shields, the armor's punctured on my starboard wing, and I have the worst headache you could ever believe. Yeah, I'm fine. Form up on Selrase and I'll be right there."

Roman throttled back and allowed the ship to drift, giving the repair nanos full power to work on the shields as his head cleared. "Hela? Lawton is on his way and I'm under repair. I took out the launch bay, so there won't be any more fliers."

"Good. We've taken out four more and eight have peeled off, but we're still working on four:

"Are the eight returning to the carrier?"

"Negative."

Under normal circumstances, Roman wouldn't worry about Hela, but she sounded tired enough to start making mistakes. He'd have to wait at least one more minute to get his shields back. His fighter couldn't help anyone if it was blown to bits.

As he checked his tactical display for the whereabouts of the eight fighter group, a glint in the rearview caught his eye. A tiny scout ship was launching from what appeared to be a large torpedo tube near the carrier's stem. Scouts were only launched in a combat situation if someone, or something, important was trying to escape. As its main engine ignited in a white glow, the ship began to accelerate away around the planet, roughly following the reverse course of Roman's surprise approach to the carrier.

Black Eye, Alpha Strike. Course projection on that Queln scout?"

Alpha Strike, the scout is heading three zero two into the scan shadow of Ffestiniog. When it comes out of the shadow, we will advise."

"Roger, Black Eye. Lawton, there's something strange happening here. I'm following the scout.

We need your help with these fighters, Roman! I've got three on my tail! We'll get the scout later!"

Roman turned to a heading of three zero two and throttled up. "I'll be right back.

Roman! Get over here!"

He punched in the afterburner. Roman didn't want to use the afterburner too much because it would deplete his fuel reserves, but he had to catch the scout before it went too far. The scout would only be carrying light armament to conserve weight and improve its speed. Roman thought it was significant that the scout was going in the opposite direction from most of the carrier's fighter wing. If he couldn't intercept it, he at least wanted to get a good idea of where it was going.

Crossing the terminator to the night side of Ffest'miog, Roman gradually closed on the scout. Aware of him now, the scout began evasive action, and Roman took his time lining up the targeting crosshairs. He had five missiles left, so he couldn't afford to waste a shot.

The threat alarm broke his concentration. Somebody had a targeting lock on his ship. He jerked the stick forward, starting a big spiral toward the surface of the planet. His tactical monitor showed the eight Quein fighters approaching from two sides, which explained their absence from the fight with Hela and the others. The alarm was burping as Roman became a more difficult target to lock on, but with eight fighters, one of them would launch a missile soon. His guess about the scout's importance must have been correct.

It continued sailing away to safety while Roman concerned himself with more immediate matters.

A missile was headed his way. Roman stopped his descent suddenly with full reverse thrust. The sudden jerk was hard on his neck, but not as painful as an exploding missile would have been. The missile, unable to find him at the expected coordinates, blindly raced past, heading straight toward the opposite fighter group. He assumed the missile had an IFF, Identify-Friend-or-Foe, system that would disarm the warhead before striking a friendly starfighter, but it had to be distressing for the Quein pilots to see one of their own missiles speeding toward them. The group responded by breaking its formation, which also gave Roman a chance to lock on one of them and launch a missile of his own. The impact destroyed one fighter, while the debris from the explosion shredded a second one nearby. Sometimes he got lucky.

Two more missiles were on their way toward Roman, who was getting tired of the threat alarm screaming at him all the time. He rolled and climbed toward one of the stragglers from the disorganized Quein group, hurtling toward his enemy's engine exhaust with fierce determination.

Roman's forward shield glowed with the intense heat of the nearby engine, but he stayed in place, twisting and turning with the confused Quein's evasive maneuvers, keeping his eye on the incoming missiles. At the last moment, Roman broke off and throttled back, allowing the

missiles to lock onto the Queln fighter's exhaust. The missiles responded with a quick warhead shutdown, but their momentum carried them straight into the engine exhaust, where the heat set off the explosives. Roman turned away before the debris reached him, then he noticed the other four fighter formation closing on his position. He needed help.

Lawton? You out there?" No response.

Alpha aTac, this is Alpha Strike, do you copy?

Silence was a bad sign. Roman might be the only one left.

The planet's shadow might be blocking transmissions, but he'd been able to reach Hela earlier on their way toward the carrier.

Time to assess the situation. Five Queln fighters, four missiles in the tubes, minor shield damage, a hole in one wing, and low on fuel.

Roman sighed--it could be worse.

Since it had worked before, Roman rolled, punched in the afterburner, and aimed his fighter straight at the oncoming Queln group. As he hurtled toward them, Roman admired this group's determination to maintain its formation.

They made a few half-hearted attempts to nail him with cannon fire. He expected them to break formation at any second to avoid the Gorene lunatic coming at them in an obvious suicide run.

Unfortunately, this group wasn't cooperating. Roman yanked on the flight stick in an attempt to avoid the leader, but he still managed to hit the shields and scrape the enemy ship as he went past. It was an exciting moment for both of them.

Roman realized he was breathing too fast. His hands were shaking.

He tried to calm himself by taking a few deep breaths, but that only served to make him lightheaded. He rolled the fighter and reversed course, firing too soon at the four Queln fighters and wasting a missile. They were making a graceful turn back toward him. Then his threat alarm screamed--the fifth fighter! He looked around just in time to see the missile explode against his starboard shields, taking a chunk out of his wing and sending sparkling metal fragments past the cockpit window. He closed his eyes too late, taking too much of the explosion's light in his eyes, blinding him for a moment.

In a panic, he squeezed the afterburner switch and jerked the flight stick in different directions, in order to present a difficult target. The threat alarm startled him into launching another missile--he thought he saw a target straight in front of the fighter, but it was only a bright section of the planet's surface. Another missile wasted. The threat alarm continued to scream, then it abruptly

fell silent. Roman continued his evasive maneuvers, cursing his blindness.

The reassuring subsonic rumble of his main engine whined down to a lower pitch, then died into an eerie silence.

He was out of fuel. A voice in the back of his mind told Roman he was about to die.

CHAPTER 3 ARMEDIA QUEENSWAY---SECTOR m--FFESTINOG

As Roman's vision returned, he was able to verify the zero fuel condition. Life support continued to operate with minimal power. The ship still had forward momentum, but it was floating without direction.

He checked the rearview and saw only darkness lit by an occasional flash in the distance. Since he wasn't shot, he looked around to find that the fight had moved away from him. Lawton and the others must have realized he was missing and come looking for him. It was good to have friends.

"Hela?"

Not now, Roman. We're busy cleaning up after you.

Roman took a deep breath. "Thanks for the help.

"You did your share. Black Eye gave us the update on your situation.

"The last one is down; said Lawton." Anyone interested in going home?"

I'd love to; said Roman, "but I don't seem to have any power.

Roman was pleased to hear Hela's concerned voice. "Are you hurt? How bad is your damage?"

I'm okay, but I'm seeing a lot of colored spots. I took a hot one in my shields.

Can you relight your engine?"

Uh, no, I can't. I'm out of fuel."

Silence followed Roman's announcement--he knew what they were thinking. Only rookies ran out of fuel, and they usually made that mistake only once, but there wasn't anything he could do about it.

Lawton cleared his throat to disguise a chuckle. "Did you say you're out of fuel?"

"Affirmative.

Kayla had to chime in, too. "You're aware that your engine can't function without fuel?"

Give me a break. A guy makes one mistake and you jump all over him.

'If you hadn't run off on your own, perhaps we'd be a little more concerned, said Lawton.

Hela took his side. "Leave him alone, Marsh. He went after the

scout ship.

Lawton paused. "Did you intercept the scout, Roman?"

Well, no, not exactly.

"As I thought; Lawton continued. "You're a radical, Roman.

You're not part of the team.

"Would somebody mind giving me a tow back to the base?"

I'd like to get home before my life support system fails.

Hela's ship turned and moved toward Roman. "I'll tow you back, though I should probably listen to Marsh and leave you stranded.

Roman felt stung by the tease, but he bit his tongue. He was, after all, at their mercy.

Roman's ship bounced as Hela's tractor beam locked on.

Roman sank back in his seat and stretched his legs as far as he could in the cramped confines of the cockpit, relaxing for what seemed like the first time in days. If the intelligence reports were correct, there was a good chance that they had just defeated the last of the Queln battle fleet. In any case, he was tired, and it was time to get some sleep.

ASCALON RIFT--APPROACHING SECTOR I The fist hurtling toward his face startled Roman out of his drunken fog. Acting by reflex, Roman ducked, grabbed the attacker's outstretched arm, stood up straight, and launched the man over his back. Roman turned in time to see Marsh Lawton land on the buffet table, scattering silver trays and sandwiches on the floor. With olives on toothpicks sticking out of his back, giving him the appearance of a Gany-median porcupine, Lawton slid off the table with a groan.

The performance continued as Lawton caught his right foot in the festive gray-and-white table bunting, causing him to stumble and slam his face into the floor, knocking himself unconscious. The crowd of partygoers stared in shocked silence for a moment, then resumed their conversations.

Drunken fights had come to be a common occurrence on the carrier.

Roman blinked and steadied himself against a chair as the spacious Officer's Lounge seemed to spin around him. The long-winded Admiral Gridder had addressed the Gold Squadron pilots for over an hour, and the only way to get through the long speech had been to drink freely of the captured Queln wine. Two weeks earlier, a Gorene patrol had fired a warning shot that had torn off the back end of a Queln wine runner on

its way to the Ascalon Rift. When they iden-titled the cargo spilling out uselessly into space, the quick-thinking pilots had activated their tractor beams, recovering almost a ton of the popular beverage. Roman found the wine a bit sweet for his taste, but it had a delightful kick to it. Of course, he wouldn't have done so much drinking if he'd known he was going to get into a fight.

The announcement of Roman's promotion to wing leader had raised a few eyebrows. Even though the other pilots respected his skills, the constant wear and tear on Roman's starfighters was legendary. It seemed that Marsh Lawton, his only real competition for wing leader, had taken exception to the decision. Roman had noticed Lawton earlier, standing in a corner and glaring at him, but he hadn't expected a physical attack. If anything, Roman was more startled than angry.

Roman took another drink as Lawton groaned and sat up on the floor, pulling toothpicks out of the back of his uniform.

"A sneak attack," said Roman, shaking his head. I'm surprised at you, Lawton.

Lawton tossed an olive over his shoulder and looked up at Roman with cold blue eyes." That promotion should have been mine and you know it.

Roman snorted."You think they'd want a hothead like you in command of a combat wing?" At least I manage to bring my ships back in one piece; Lawton hissed.

As my father used to say, 'Sometimes you have to break a few eggs to make an omelette.'

What's an omelette?"

Never mind,said Roman. He'd always wondered about that himself. Better to change the subject. "So, you think your opinion gives you the right to punch me out?" Lawton started to stand, then winced and sat back down, rubbing his left knee. He glared at Roman."You had it coming: Roman raised one eyebrow. I see. This isn't just about my promotion, is it?

No, and you know it.

Roman looked around, but no one else seemed to be paying any attention to them. He knew Lawton hated him for taking Hela Selrase away from him, but romantic involvements among the pilots weren't allowed. It wouldn't do either of their careers any good to bring their relationships with Hela out into the open."This isn't the time or place to talk about this, Lawton: Lawton grunted and used a chair to steady himself as he stood up, returning to his original subject."I just don't understand how you do it. You've been reckless ever since we started flight school. You interpret orders to suit yourself.

You've got a problem with authority.

it depends on the authority. Just because someone wears a uniform, it doesn't mean I have to agree with them: "You're a Gorene pilot. You have to follow orders just like the rest of us."

"Maybe I know when I should follow orders and when I should think for myself.

Lawton rolled his eyes. "They have no idea what they've done by promoting you.

"If you think I'm such a bad pilot, all you'll have to do is wait until I get killed in combat. Then maybe they'll make you the wing leader.

Lawton limped a couple of steps closer to Roman so he could glare into his face. "You have an answer for everything, don't you?" Roman wrinkled his nose as he smelled Lawton's strong breath, but he held his ground. "No. Not everything. For example, I don't know how to avoid the hangover I'm going to have in the morning:

"That's another thing. You drink too much.

"You don't drink enough."

"Because I don't make a fool of myself in public?"

"It might do you some good;" Roman smirked. He wanted to add that Lawton didn't need any help making a fool of himself in public, but resisted the temptation. After all, he was now Lawton's commanding officer, and one of them had to act like an adult.

"We're doomed;" said Lawton. Then he turned on his heel and stormed away, jostling two of the younger pilots into the wall. Roman noted that there were still three olives on toothpicks sticking out of Lawton's back.

'Nice chatting with you,' Roman called after him. Always a pleasure.

Roman sneezed, spilling some of the wine he was pouring into his glass. The amount of dust in the storage closet was amazing. The glow panel in the ceiling was losing its charge, flickering like an anxious firefly. The cot he was sitting on creaked with his every movement. Racks of first aid equipment towered over him, and he was surrounded by folding cots, blankets, bottled water, bio-diagnostic computers, a barrel of wine, and other emergency supplies. When he wanted to retreat someplace where he wouldn't be disturbed, Roman always went into this forgotten closet, which he had discovered long ago while exploring the sublevels of the super-carrier.

The barrel of wine had been his own addition, an emergency supply that the quartermaster had apparently overlooked when stocking the

closet. As he neared the end of the bottle of Queln wine, Roman considered the wine barrel, loaded with the infamous Porthmadog Blue, then shook his head. It was time to stop drinking before he got depressed.

He looked down at the medals on his uniform, thinking how his parents would have enjoyed his decorations. There was a time when the awards would have meant something to him as well. Hieronymous Vox and Diva Jule had been Gold Squadron pilots for many years. They were fierce warriors, not because they enjoyed killing but because they believed in Gorene ideals. Later, they became famous Gorene diplomats before they were killed on a peace mission to Kenlumpi, overlord of the Cee' Haarra people. Vox and Jule returned home in several pieces.

The Gorene High Command had responded with full force, reducing the remainder of the Cee' Haarra fleet and their homeworld to ashes. Defying his orders, Roman had left his Liberator strike group to launch a direct attack on Kenlumpi's flagship, which he cut up into sections with his cannon fire. When an escape pod bearing Kenlumpi's personal insignia had tried to leave the exploding flagship, Roman wasted no time in destroying it. After the attack, Roman wondered if he'd done the right thing by flaming the pod, but the squadron had supported his actions. What bothered him was the knowledge that his parents wouldn't have approved of his revenge. His parents would have forgiven Kenlumpi as an ignorant savage.

At first, the Cee' Haarra people had been relieved to hear of Kenlumpi's death. As part of the first cleanup team to land on their homeworld, Roman had witnessed their gratitude firsthand. The assignment was intended to give Roman a combat break after the death of his parents. However, the old Cee' Haarra infrastructure fell apart without Kenlumpi's dictatorship, and as the people realized that their one dictator was being replaced by several military commanders, they began to wonder if their lot had improved.

Revolts broke out as Gorene methods took the place of Cee' Haarra traditions. The local culture, religion, government, and educational system disappeared almost overnight.

Roman was one of the "peace enforcers" assigned to hunting down revolutionary groups. With an extensive occupation army, new laws imposed on the citizens, and "mental reconditioning," the Cee' Haarra people eventually came to accept the Gorene way.

By the time Roman left the planet, it was clear that the creativity of the people had been crushed. If new art did not conform to Gorene standards, it was unacceptable. Knowing that his parents would have been pleased by the absorption of the Cee' Haarra culture into the Gorene Empire, Roman felt guilty about his attitudes toward the Gorene military government. Resistance to new ideas was always expected, but this was the first time Roman had witnessed the violent methods used by the Gorenes to squeeze the life out of existing cultures.

Too many things were changing. He remembered the oath he'd taken on his first day at the academy--all new pilots pledged to dedicate themselves to technical, educational, personal, and economic improvement everywhere that life exists. This was the foundation Of Gorene values, which fueled their continuing expansion throughout the galaxy. Many civilizations had to be subdued by Gorene forces before they would accept the training that the Gorenese offered, just as the Cee' Haarra people had, but the Gorenese were willing to pay that price.

However, the longer that Roman was in the military, the more he saw how ambitious people could twist Gorene values to further their own ends. The medals on Roman's uniform could just as easily be badges of shame, marking each new civilization crushed under the heels of Gorene conquest. Would the Gorene expansion ever stop?

He knew these were dangerous thoughts. Except in the presence of Hela, who also grappled with these questions, Roman knew he couldn't discuss his changing views about the Gorene way. Political prisoners had been brainwiped for speaking such heretical notions. Now that he'd been promoted, his superiors would be keeping a close eye on him to make sure he was encouraging "properthinking among the squadron.

He took another drink and noticed that his hand was shaking. There used to be an adrenaline thrill attached to flying combat missions, but recent events had left Roman feeling closer to death than ever before. Trained as a warrior, and raised in the Gorene tradition, he was disgusted with himself for this weakness. If the rebels in the Ascalon Rift were half as good as the intelligence reports said they were, he might have trouble reaching thirty standard years of age.

Roman had realized that he was mortal, and that he did not want to die. He set the wine glass on the floor. He'd had enough morbid thoughts for one day. Too much thinking would only get him in trouble.

The glow panel went dark for a moment. Roman frowned as he heard the closet door open and close. When the light came back on, he saw Hela Selrase standing over him. She looked marvelous in her dress uniform, and she knew it. Her shoulder-length black hair stood out in marked contrast against the white uniform jacket and hat. As always, she had managed to find the one spot in the room where a breeze from a vent could swirl her red cape behind her with dramatic flair. The medals on the upper curve of her chest glittered in the light as she examined the room.

It's dusty in here.

Good evening, Hela.

I really don't understand what you see in this place.

Privacy. Would you like some wine?

She remained standing. Roman moved his wine glass so that her shiny black boots wouldn't knock it over.

"No, thanks," said Hela, taking one step closer. "I had enough wine while trying to sit through Admiral Gridder's speech."

"It was a long one. Did I mention how nice that new medal looks on your jacket?"

"Is that what you're staring at?"

Roman cleared his throat. "It's one of the things."

Hela smiled. Her teeth were perfect. Each tooth lined up evenly with the next as if her entire smile had been cut out of a solid chunk of ivory. "It's warm in here."

It's getting warmer all the time.

Roman started to stand up, but Hela put her hands on his shoulders, pushing him back down on the cot. "Down, boy."

His head began to spin. "Hey, let's remember that I'm your commanding officer now, Selrase. Show some respect."

Hela started unbuttoning her uniform. "Of course, sir."

Accept my congratulations on your promotion. Would it be okay with the wing leader if I took off my jacket?"

Before he could respond, Hela removed her cape and jacket. That would be fine, he said, admiring her dexterity.

The glow panel dimmed again, deepening the shadow of Hela's hat brim over her eyes. She brushed past Roman's face, neatly folding the jacket once and setting it on the wine barrel, the cleanest location in the room. While her back was still turned toward Roman, she reached down in one fluid motion and ran her fingers along the outer seams of her pants, releasing the touch seal, exposing her legs from her hips to the tops of her shiny boots.

"I didn't realize it would be so hot in here," purred Hela, folding her pants on top of the jacket.

"Uh huh; said Roman, admiring the smooth curves of her legs."

"With all this dust, I want to make sure my uniform doesn't get dirty," she said, removing her shirt and leaving just her bodysuit.

Roman nodded, watching her fingers do their work. "Of course not. That would be awful. Dirt is a bad, bad thing."

"That's right, sir. And you've been bad, too."

What do you mean?" Roman was having a hard time thinking straight.

Hela placed her shirt on the wine barrel, then took off her hat and placed it on the pile. She shook her hair and slipped her arms out of her white bodysuit. "Have you looked at your uniform?"

"No?And he wasn't about to look at it now.

She turned away, and her finely muscled back rippled under the dim light as she peeled off her bodysuit. With great care, she slipped it down her legs, over her boots, and added it to the pile, saying "You're getting your uniform all dirty in here, sir.

'Ah,said Roman. He was having trouble with words. He knew she'd said something about his uniform, but he wasn't following the conversation very well.

Naked but for her boots, Hela turned to face him. Hers was the most beautiful body he'd ever seen. It always took his breath away when her statuesque form stood unveiled before his eyes.

"Take them off,she said, gesturing at his clothes.

"Is that an order, Selrase?"

"Yes." Her boot heels clicked on the floor as she approached the cot and started to pull off his jacket. Her breath was hot on his cheek as her mouth brushed past his face.

Roman swallowed. "You realize you're out of uniform in the presence of an officer."

"No, I'm not," she whispered, nibbling on his ear. "I still have my boots on."

"Ah. Good point,"

"Shut up and kiss me.

She pushed him down on the cot. The overhead glow panel flashed and went out, plunging the room into darkness.

ASCALON RIFT--SECTOR I--PRAJNA-7 In the long history of the Gorene Empire, the construction of a full-scale battle station was a rare event, reserved for those regions of space occupied by the most troublesome enemies. Even with automated construction techniques and advanced structural technology, a battle station took almost a full Gorene year to construct, during which time it was in its most vulnerable condition. During the building phase, a battle station's location was kept secret even among the members of the Gorene High Command.

There were few visitors. The only arrivals consisted of robot freighters carrying building materials to the station, supplemented by the occasional Gorene crewmember, who wouldn't be allowed to leave until the station was activated.

Upon completion, a Prajna-class battle station could maintain a rotating staff of three thousand Gorene troops, along with fighter maintenance and refueling crews.

Prajna-7 was the latest development in Gorene battle station technology. Stationed on the outskirts of the Ascalon Rift, it was six months away from completion. At a width of five hundred meters, almost three times the size of a standard squadron base, the angular crystalline shape of Prajna-7 already had an imposing appearance. Although it wasn't ready to defend itself against an all-out attack at close range, the fortress now had a moderate level of protection. Smart mines formed an outer barrier around the station, able to distinguish between friendly and enemy spacecraft before deciding whether to attack. The mines were supplemented by satellites equipped with defensive laser systems. Soon, the shield generators would be functioning to enhance the defensive capabilities of the fortress.

Admiral Adleman Shylo, the commanding officer of Prajna-7, was an elderly, battle-weary veteran of many Gorene campaigns. One of the rare five-star admirals, Shylo was placed in command of the Ascalon Rift crusade out of respect for his accomplishments and his experience with alien races. Because of his reputation for quick victories, morale among the troops always improved when Shylo visited the front lines. Unable to understand why any civilization would not want to become part of the Gorene Empire, Shylo was firm in his convictions and willing to drive his point home through any alien battle fleet that stood in his way.

Shylo's first inspection tour of Prajna-7 had just been completed when Sector Commander Dithmar Ferrand boarded the admiral's flagship. Ferrand, recently charged with carrying out the tactical details of Shylo's plans with his front-line troops, was nervous about the meeting. He knew Shylo was eager to conquer the Ascalon Rift, since the current feeling of cooperation among the rebellious locals could set a bad precedent for future expansion. The conquest would be simplified with the completion of Prajna-7, but Ferrand knew Shylo did not want to wait that long. This was a precarious opportunity that could make or break Ferrand's career. If Ferrand could make Shylo happy in the Ascalon Rift, his promotion to the rank of admiral was assured.

Ferrand stood at attention in the conference room of the flagship, waiting patiently for Shylo to acknowledge him.

Sweat was starting to drip down Ferrand's back, but Shylo continued to stare out the observation window at the massive hulk of

the battle station.

I had hoped we could avoid constructing such a base in this region. Why are they so stubborn and blind, Commander Ferrand? Shylo's voice startled him. Fear of change, Admiral Shylo.

We've encountered rebellion fueled by fear of change countless times in the history of the empire. The Ascalon Rift is no different from Corgair, FleetsIt, or any of the others. As these alien societies evolve under our rule, they'll come to understand our crusade." Prajna-7 has the power to destroy worlds, Commander.

I hope it's not put to use. The Tancreds seem to be leading this rebellion, but what of the other races?

Ferrand cleared his throat. Shylo had the intelligence report, but apparently he hadn't read it yet. He knew Shylo wouldn't like the news. There is a rumored alliance between all of the alien races in the Ascalon Rift. The Tancreds, Mazumas, Zemuns, Amiens, and Nuubyans may join together and challenge us: Shylo turned and looked into Ferrand's eyes. "Strange.

These races have been at odds for centuries. Perhaps an alliance could aid us in the long run. Even combined, they can't defeat us. If they join together, they may overcome their differences and begin to accept the inevitability of change.

Ferrand couldn't help thinking that Admiral Shylo was getting too old to be managing a war. The probability of the Ascalon Rift races accepting Gorene rule with open arms was about as likely as Ferrand being declared emperor.

'In any case, Shylo continued, we now have three bases of operation near the front. Your assignment, Commander Ferrand, is to oversee the battle fleets that will occupy these bases. The Tancreds scoffed at our latest gesture of peace. We have no choice but to take military action against them.

Of course, Admiral: If the rebels are busy defending their planets, we can keep the location of Prajna-7 a secret. This battle station must be completed on time and without interference. I've reassigned the elite Gold Squadron to the Ascalon Rift to lead the battle. You'll meet their officers at the briefing later today. Perhaps by facing the greatest pilots in the universe, the Tancreds will understand they cannot stop us: Or, Ferrand thought, he'd waste his best pilots in battle against superior numbers. However, he knew they were the only way he could carry out Shylo's orders with any chance of success.

When Roman returned to his room on the carrier, he found a note from Bitis Fulcher, his commanding officer.

The note was an order for Roman, in his new capacity as wing leader, to report to the shuttle for transit to Admiral Shylo's

flagship. A quick check of the time showed that he had four minutes to change clothes, since he hadn't returned to his room after the award ceremony and his visit with Hela.

Changing clothes took considerable effort and concentration, hampered as he was by his hangover. He'd been looking forward to some rest in his own bunk. He certainly didn't feel as if it was a good time to be meeting Admiral Shylo, but he had learned to expect this sort of thing in the military. The thought of food to elevate his blood sugar came to mind, but his stomach recoiled at the notion and there wasn't any time. With one minute remaining before he was due in the shuttle bay, he stumbled out into the corridor and ran right into Blois Fulcher.

I was wondering what happened to you,said Blois."Nobody seemed to know where you went after your little performance with Lawton after dinner.

A slight smile played across Blois's face. He was a big man whose angry stare could stun rookie pilots, but Roman knew he had a good sense of humor. When he started drinking, Blois often became the life of the party. Over six and a half feet tall, Blois was bigger than Roman, and his height often intimidated people, whether he meant to or not. Roman fondly remembered the week-long party they'd attended after graduating from flight school. The inhabitants of Karoten Beta, who bore a strong resemblance to small animated squash, still spoke in awed whispers of the giant man who defeated their greatest warrior during a drunken barroom brawl." Blois was certainly drunk at the time, but the brawl consisted of the featherweight squash warrior being knocked through a window after Blois stumbled into him. This was how legends got started.

'I fell asleep in a closet,said Roman, realizing how odd that sounded as soon as it came out of his mouth.

Blois gave him a knowing wink as they headed to the shuttle bay."Well, that's your business, I suppose. Did you manage to work out your differences with Lawton?" For now, but I'm not sure I'll trust him following me in a starfighter.

Blois snorted.No need to worry about that. He may not be the brightest pilot in the squadron, but you can trust him to do his job.

Oh, I know he's a good pilot. I just think he needs to unload some of the emotional baggage he's carrying around.

'Who doesn't?" Roman gave Blois a sharp look, wondering if he knew about Roman's relationship with Hela. Maybe Blois knew about Lawton and Hela's past as well. The tactical officer's poker face revealed nothing, so Roman changed the subject.

'Any tips for our meeting with Admiral Shylo?

'Try to keep your mouth shut; said Blois. "Only speak when you're spoken to. That's what I do.

'I'll remember that.

As they approached the shuttle bay door, Blois stopped and put his hand on Roman's shoulder. WAnd one more thing.

Commander Ferrand will be at this meeting. Whatever you do, don't make him angry. Don't volunteer for anything.

Don't express your opinions.

Roman frowned. "Why not?"

"Ferrand is an ambitious man. So is Shylo. They're a dangerous combination, and you don't want to get in their way: Aboard Admiral Shylo's flagship, the assembled group heard the words of war. Roman stood in the back of Shylo's office beside Blois Fulcher. Commander Ferrand stood in front of them, facing Shylo across the large holo-table that had just been switched on, creating dramatic shadows on the walls behind them. Through the observation windows, they had an excellent view of the Prajna-7 battle station, impressive even though it was still six months away from being finished. Having seen Prajna-7 on his way to the flagship, Roman was now busy being impressed with Shylo's commanding presence.

The admiral gave the distinct impression that he knew everything about the enemy and their plans.

"Gentlemen," said Shylo, gesturing at the observation windows,"welcome to the Ascalon Rift. Three years ago, we made our first contact with the alien races inhabiting this sector, but that contact has unfortunately led to hostility, not cooperation."

The snarling face of a tancred warrior, enlarged to a monstrous size, appeared above the holo-table. As the face started to rotate, Roman decided that Shylo knew how to put on a show.

Shylo nodded at the hologram."The Tancreds are the most powerful, technically advanced race in the region. They are considered barbaric by some, but their power is respected and feared. Their entire civilization is organized for war. They have been forced to defend their homeworld, Orentes, against attacks by the Zemuns over the last three centuries.

The ominous shape of a Tancred Samurai fighter replaced the snarling face.

"Tancred ships,Shylo continued,"are the most sophisticated in the region, and they have the best weapons.

They have rejected our presence and have started to attack our

fleets.

The gray face of a Zemun appeared in place of the Tancred fighter, rotating with its mouth open, which appeared to be its normal state. Its ears were similar to large fins.

"The Zemuns are a race of religious zealots inhabiting the world Ma'arrat. They worship the god Anjou and consider all nonbelievers to be enemies. Their entire civilization is focused on serving their creator?"

The angular shape of a Zemun Harbinger fighter took shape above the holo-table. Its complex geometry looked quite sturdy to Roman.

"As is true of the Tancreds, the Zemuns have advanced weapons and space technology. They have always been at odds with the Tancreds. Seven years ago, they launched a surprise attack on the Tancreds, and a bloody two-year war ensued. The Zemuns were eventually repelled. Since then, there has been an uneasy peace between the two races. The Zemuns consider us to be infidels and enemies?"

Roman's face remained placid, but he was thinking the Zemuns had good sense to consider the Gorenese their enemies, considering that they were about to try and force the Gorenese way on their culture.

A Nuubyan face, with a pair of tiny red eyes and enormous fangs projecting up from its lower jaw, appeared above the holo-table. Roman thought of the demon stories that Gorenese mothers used to frighten small children. It was a useful image for this type of a briefing, since it helped to promote dislike of a race that looked too different from their own. The Gorenese liked to think of themselves as cosmopolitan creatures of the universe, but Roman was starting to recognize certain racist attitudes for what they were. Or perhaps he was being too harsh. However, Shylo was using that foreboding tone of voice that Roman had been hearing more frequently; the tone of voice that said this new race must be either absorbed by the Gorenese or destroyed.

The Nuubyans of Anqah, on the fringes of the Ascalon Rift, were the first race we made contact with when we entered this region. A primitive race, they were eager to acquire our advanced technology. But we were too impatient to make an ally in the area, and the Nuubyans proved too primitive to understand our ways?"

Shylo shook his head as if he couldn't understand the Nuub-yan's thinking. "We set up bases on Anqah and gave the Nuubyans the technology and weaponry they needed to defend themselves from attack by the Zemuns and Tancreds?"

The hologram changed to show the night side of a planet with vast fires burning on the continents.

"The plan backfired, Shylo continued. "A violent war erupted on Anqah--a war that led to the destruction of the Nuubyan world and

most of its inhabitants. Since then, there are Nuubyan refugees scattered throughout the Ascalon Rift. They now call themselves Nomen from Nether-world, and they blame the Gorenes for their obliteration?

A slim, delicate head replaced the planet scene. The face was smooth and almost featureless.

The Mazumas are chameleonlike shapeshifters,said Shylo, gesturing at the floating head. The smooth face expanded and twisted into the head of an angry Tancred warrior.

They're also the most populous and wealthy race in the Ascalon Rift. They control and inhabit four worlds--Hattin, Silpius, Leinengen, and Nish--which are lush, fertile, and full of natural resources?

The scene changed to show a large population center on the planet known as Nish. The tall city buildings indicated an advanced technology. On the outskirts of the city, jungle and farmland stretched to the horizon.

"The power of the Mazumas comes from their tremendous wealth and the sheer size of their population, which is six times greater than that of the Tancred race.

A Mazuma Buccaneer advanced-technology fighter appeared over the table. Roman had never met one in combat, and he wasn't looking forward to it.

The Mazumas have a formidable army and space force, financed by profits generated from trading with the Tancreds and the Zemuns.

An Amien head replaced the Mazuma fighter. In physical appearance, the Amiens were similar to Gorenes, except for their hairless, knobby skulls.

Finally, the Amiens. Formerly a pacifistic race of extremely intelligent humanoids, they lived as isolationists on the planet Kayzeri, refusing to become an ally of either the Tancreds or Zemuns.

As Roman studied the Amien face, it seemed to watch him. It was a disturbing image.

The advanced technology of the Amiens made them a potentially dangerous foe, so they were not provoked. As long as they didn't seek to expand their power in the Ascalon Rift, the Tancreds and Zemuns were content to ignore them. However, thirty years ago, a deadly plague struck Kayzeri and threatened the entire race. A bizarre antidote--a genetically altered bacteria colony--was developed and injected into the bodies of the Amiens. This bacteria is now essential to keeping the Amiens alive, but over the course of the last twenty-eight years the bacteria has evolved and gained an intelligence of its own.

Roman glanced sideways at Blois, who showed no expression.

The idea of an intelligent bacterial invader was repellent to Roman as well. Gorene bodies also needed common bacteria to survive, but no one liked to think about it.

In the closed environment of a military base or a carrier, the troops received constant medical screening to keep potentially dangerous vital infections at bay. Perhaps the Amiens could be cured by advanced Gorene medicine.

Admiral Shylo had stopped speaking. As Roman turned his eyes back toward the holo-table, he saw Shylo frowning at him. Shylo cleared his throat and continued. The sentient bacteria is more aggressive than the nature of its pacifistic host, which leads to great inner conflict and even schizophrenia.

Although the bacteria's main purpose is to protect the host, our researchers predict that the inner conflict will eventually drive the race to complete madness.

A star map showing the worlds controlled by the races of the Ascalon Rift appeared over the holo-table, highlighted in different colors to show the domains of the Tancreds, Zemuns, Nuubyans, Amiens, and Mazumas.

'There are many rumors that the Ascalon Rift races will join forces in an attempt to drive us out. If that happens, we could have one of the most severe challenges ever to face the Gorene Empire. You have been called here to force a surrender.

Or die trying, thought Roman. Still, he was the wing leader for his squadron now, so it was possible he could make a difference in this campaign. A few quick strikes might show their opponents that the Gorenese weren't fooling around, forcing them to a quick peace. These races seemed advanced enough to have knowledge of value to the Gorenese, so their cultures might not be as easily crushed as the Cee' Haarra civilization. There might be an even exchange of information with these races that the Gorene settlement teams would respect and want to nurture.

A bright yellow spot appeared on the starmap to indicate the position of Prajna-7. It was far from the inhabited planets, but close enough to act as a fleet base.

"When Prajna-7 is completed, we will have the power to take the region by force, but our desire is to avoid such massive bloodshed. If we can weaken and destroy the rebellion now, we can accomplish our mission and save millions of lives. If worse comes to worst, Prajna-7 will be fully operational in six months.

However, said Shylo, looking at each of them in turn, I want this conflict resolved in three. That's why I've assembled the cream of the

most fearsome fighters in the universe.

I hope I will not be disappointed.

I hope I'll be alive in three months, thought Roman.

You will report to ar-1, which is one of our three bases of operation in the Ascalon Rift. Sector Commander Dithnmr Ferrand will give the orders when you've arrived. Three months, gentlemen. I want this conflict resolved in three months."

Shylo gave them each a look of warning. If they failed, he would be unhappy. If he was unhappy, there would be dire consequences. Don't make him unhappy.

You are dismissed," Shylo said, ending the meeting as quickly as it had begun.

CHAPTER 4 ASCALON RIFT, SECTOR V--XERIDLTN

The Alliance prison world of Xeridun was the Ascalon Rift version of hell. Home to the condemned insane and the most dangerous convicted criminals from the Allied planets, Xeridun did not discriminate on the basis of race or religion.

Criminals who defied the Law were sentenced to the prison world, where they would live out the short remaining spans of their lives. From the time of arrival, the average life expectancy was two years. Guarded by an outer barrier of Mazuma patrol ships, the planet was also ringed with orbital satellites that generated a containment force field. The force field kept objects from leaving the planet's atmosphere, preventing prisoner escapes.

Known to be a cesspool of immorality and anarchy, Xeridun's reputation was strong enough for Tancred parents to threaten their misbehaving children with a visit to the prison world. Tancred children were ruthless enough to kill for sport, so it was impressive that such a threat would curb their aggressive tendencies.

The leaders of the Alliance had never physically been in the same room before. Their decision to meet on the prison world of Xeridun was a startling show of diplomacy among races who had been enemies for so long. Now they found themselves floating in the weightless antigravity environment of the Exercise Room, designed to allow prisoners physical movement while keeping them off-balance and defenseless.

Walls of deep black glass over a stained gray stone floor gave the enormous room a feeling of infinite space.

Light was provided by glow panels inset in the floor, giving the dignified leaders the shadowy appearance of monsters lit from beneath. Breathing masks covered their faces, modifying the toxic Xeridun atmosphere to suit each of their optimal physical requirements. The

atmospheric gases were scrubbed by active filters before being allowed into Xeridun structures, but the system wasn't perfect. Prisoners were forced to breathe the toxic fumes without the luxury of breathing masks, further shortening their lives on the prison world.

Tancred Overlord zemlock was anxious about attending the secret meeting on Xeridun, assuming it was some form of Zemun trick. The presence of the other leaders was reassuring, but a conspiracy could not be ruled out until he knew more about their plans. In any case, he knew it was undignified to be floating around the room, and he blamed the Zemun leader, Longmoor, for that. There was no particular reason for laying blame, but the Tancred felt the Zemun deserved abuse whenever possible. "Why must we have this weightless condition inflicted on us! We are not criminals.

Krugahad Longmoor, High Father of the Zemun people

- and Right Hand of Anjou, returned Zemlock's icy glare with a steady gaze. He had always wondered if the five-year peace between the Zemuns and the infidel Tancreds had been a mistake. "No, we are not criminals, Overlord Zemlock. Neither are we friends. In this room, we are all equals despite our physical differences. None of us has an advantage. We meet on equal ground."

Zemlock snorted. "Equal ground on a prison planet guarded by Mazuma patrol ships!"

The Mazumas have the patrol responsibility during this time phase; Longmoor said with a sigh. "Would you have us wait until the Tancred patrol returns? By that time, the Gorenese could have landed on Orentes while we squabble over protocol."

"My homeworld will not fall to the Gorenese; Zemlock rumbled. His withering look seemed to have no effect on Longmoor.

WAnd I would rather be dead than see the Zemun people, and the rest of the Ascalon Rift, under the influence of the Gorene infidels. That is why Anjou has led us here today.

Your god Anjou does not lead the Tancreds. The Tancreds lead the Tancreds:

As you say, Overlord Zemlock:

Zemlock wasn't sure if he'd won the conversational battle or not. Longmoor was a tricky one. Zemlock had always wondered if the uneasy peace between the Tancreds and the religious zealots had been a wise decision.

I welcome all of you to this first meeting of the Alliance," said Longmoor, addressing the others in the room.

Zemlock frowned. "Who made you the leader?"

"Let him speak, zemlock. I tire of your antics," said Mazuma President Phena Warratie.

Thaga Sa, the Nomen representative of the former Nuubyan race, screamed at the top of his lungs, startling all of them. Then he fell into silence again, watching the group with his glowing red eyes.

zemlock shook his head. His ears were ringing. "Who invited that thing?"

The Nomen are part of the Alliance,said Longmoor.

"Thaga Sa speaks for his people?"

"You call that speaking?"

"Thaga Sa, I am. Nuubyan not. Nomen am. No home.

Family not?Thaga Sa ended his speech with a long hiss.

What? Zemlock scratched his head.

Prime Founder Nebity Zaxalt, leader of the Amien people, shook his fist at Zemlock."His world was destroyed by the Gorennes. He has as much right to be here as the rest of us.

"Point taken. I apologize, Thaga Sa. You can't help it if your Nuubyan people are too barbaric to defend their homeworld."

'Thaga Sa, I am! Nuubyan not! Nomen am!'

Zemlock rolled his eyes."So you said?"

"Enough,said Zaxalt. He looked at Longmoor. Must we keep this Tancred in the same room with us? He has nothing constructive to say. You, of us all, should agree with me."

"Nothing constructive? I am offended, Zaxalt. Your words hurt me deeply. Zemlock looked up at the ceiling.

Longmoor held up his hand for silence. "We must all come to an agreement here. The Gorennes are the threat. We must work together to have any chance of repelling these invaders. If we attack one another, we are only helping the Gorennes take the Ascalon Rift.

"The Tancreds don't need your help,said Zemlock."We can save the Ascalon Rift by ourselves, if we choose to do so.

"Without Mazuma resources," said Phena Warratie,"the Tancreds could never survive a full-scale war with the Gorennes.

Bah! The Gorennes are weak creatures! Their flabby bodies are too

fragile to sustain a war against mighty Tan-cred warriors.

Warratie gave zemlock a thin smile. "These weak creatures you're talking about have a civilization that has survived for thousands of years. Their empire continues to expand, much as a blormfish bloats in its groombling season.

The Gorenes will not be stopped without a combined effort between all of our races.

"And the Gorenes may have fragile bodies, but their starfighters are fearsome weaponst Zaxalt added. "We know this from the ships the Gorenes gave the Nuubyans before this war started.

Thaga Sa shook his fists. "Thaga Sa, I am! Nuubyan not!

Nomen am!"

"Yes, yes, Zaxalt said, waving impatiently at Thaga \$a.

"Nomen, not Nuubyan. Sorry." I disagree; said Zemlock. "The fighters are only as good as their pilots. A sturdy Tancred warrior has already destroyed a Gorene scout:

'Gorene not?' Thaga Sa asked.

I have a little demonstration; Zemlock said, awkwardly turning his body toward the distant doors. Guards! Present the prisoner!"

Two Tancred guards floated into the room towing a captured Gorene pilot between them. The identiplate on the pilot's uniform showed that his name was Bowman. The guards wore breathing masks, but Jharek Bowman did not.

The guards awkwardly tried to move farther into the room, then one of them kicked off from the wall, pulling the others along with him toward the assembled leaders.

The Gorene uniform was torn in many places. Jharek's face was cut and swollen, his hair was matted, he was having trouble breathing the toxic atmosphere, and he seemed only half-conscious as he floated along with the guards.

"Gentlemen, we have a guest; Zemlock said, grandly gesturing at the approaching Gorene.

Thaga Sa hissed when he saw the Gorene uniform. The other leaders watched in silence. The guards, busy trying to figure out how to stop their forward motion, continued floating straight into zemlock.

"Idiots! In the old days, you could have been killed for that!"

The guards apologized profusely as zemlock tried to regain his

composure. The impact had sent him tumbling, but he arrested his motion as he bounced off the floor. Then he saw an opportunity.

"I'll demonstrate how weak they are!" Zemlock yelled as his head slammed into Jharek's midsection. Jharek grunted and hunched over, grasping his stomach. Zemlock smiled at the other leaders as he held onto the Gorene's shoulder.

Zaxalt frowned. "Now that I see one up close, I may agree with you, Zemlock."

An Amien agrees with a Tancred? There is hope for this alliance after all," said Zemlock, swinging his arm around to hold Jharek as he punched him in the face. Jharek's head recoiled, then Zemlock released him to float nearby. Red droplets floated out of his broken nose.

Not wanting to be left out, Thaga Sa launched himself at Jharek and kicked him in the head. Jharek jerked and started tumbling in a cloud of red droplets. "Thaga Sa, I am!

Gorene not!"

Zemlock could see that the mood in the room had changed. The captive had focused their thoughts on the important issues, leading them toward agreement on the approach to the Gorene problem. He was pleased. Warlord Klool, his ambitious assistant, had tried to tell Zemlock that torturing the Gorene prisoner was a bad idea, and that he shouldn't parade the prisoner in front of the other leaders at the meeting on Xeridun. Events had now proven that Klool was a fool.

As Thaga Sa started after Jharek again, Longmoor politely stopped him. "Not now, Thaga Sa. There will be other chances to fight the Gorenese: Thaga Sa gave Longmoor a puzzled look, then nodded and relaxed. He glanced at Jharek again, clearly wishing he could spend some quality time alone with the Gorene.

'My main concern is to protect Hattin and the other worlds of the Mazumas, Warratie said. "But we need help to do that. We will cooperate with any agreement this group may execute.

Zemlock motioned to the Tancred guards, who used swimming motions to work their way over to Jharek and haul him away toward the exit.

'The Gorenese are a plague on the Ascalon Rift,' said Zaxalt. "They must be destroyed before they get any further. We agree on that much," said Zemlock. "The question is, how much help will the Tancreds receive in fighting this enemy?" Longmoor, the Zemun leader, frowned. "You seem to think that the Tancreds will be fighting this war alone, Overlord Zemlock. With Anjou's help, the Zemun will also stop the Gorenese. We will use our mighty space fleet to create an impenetrable barrier through which the Gorenese cannot cross." 'As I said before; grumbled Zemlock, "the Tancreds need no help, from the Zemun.

'I'm sure you'll have a different attitude when the Gorenese move into your homes,' said Longmoor.

Zaxalt cleared his throat. "Gentlemen, please! This mindless bickering won't accomplish anything!"

'It's not mindless,' said Zemlock.

'My suggestion,' said Warratie, 'is that we interrogate our Gorenese prisoner. He may have information we can use.' 'Our prisoner,' said Zemlock, 'who was captured by the Tancred's, I might add, is already being interrogated by experts.' Warratie looked doubtful. "These interrogators of yours, do they have the skill to question the prisoner without killing him?" "Of course," said Zemlock, as he gave Longmoor a significant look. "They had practice on the Zemuns?"

Two weeks into the war, the Gorenese Gold Squadron based at AR-1 had flown several successful strikes against robot-driven transport ships and supply vessels. Fighter escorts had been minimal, allowing them easy access to their targets.

As Prajna-7 was being constructed, the Ascalon Rift allies were gearing up for an extended war. During this preparation phase, the Gorenese were attempting to cut supply lines, weaken defenses, and demonstrate strategic superiority to the Alliance. There had been few Gorenese casualties, but the capture of a Gorenese scout named Jharek Bowman had disturbed many of the pilots. Rumors of horrible Tancred interrogation techniques were among the most popular topics of discussion on the base.

Wishing he could stop and take a shower, Roman Alexandria left the hangar deck and started toward the mission briefing that would be held on the other side of the base.

His boot heels clicked on the deck plates as he walked. He inhaled the familiar smell of sweat and burnt oil, which hung in the air despite constant filtering. Usually, he only detected the smell for the first ten minutes after he returned from a mission. First-time visitors to military bases often commented on the distinct odor, which seemed to be everywhere, but the people who lived there rarely noticed it.

The claustrophobic passageways were low and narrow, much like a rabbit warren with tunnels going off in all directions.

Military personnel who were new to bases such as AR-1 found the unfamiliar architecture disconcerting. The intersection signs pointed the way to zones coded with incomprehensible numbers and letters. On rare occasions, words such as "Vulture Deck" would show up on a sign, but that meant nothing to the uninitiated. Roman was following a blue stripe that led to the command levels of the base, but even he wasn't

sure where many of the other rainbow stripes would lead. He had heard that the obscure signs and color coding were designed to mislead any attackers who might manage to successfully penetrate the interior of the base. It was an unfortunate side effect of this clever scheme that it confused the Gorenas as well.

As Roman entered the briefing room and walked toward the front, he scanned the faces of the pilots. Overall, their morale had been good, but Roman noticed that some of the pilots were showing signs of stress.

Additionally, Hela was grumbling more than usual. Roman maintained his usual positive attitude in public, which infected many of the pilots attached to his wing, but Lawton continued to carry a grudge.

Whenever he had the opportunity, Lawton had been telling Blois Fulcher about Roman's unorthodox behavior during missions. Apparently it hadn't occurred to Lawton that Blois was not only Roman's superior officer but his friend, so Roman was informed of each of Lawton's complaints.

Blois had two holo-projectors displaying target information on each side of him. On the wall above and behind Blois, the glittering eyes of the great warbird looked down on them, its wings spread as if it would swoop down and kill them if they made any wrong moves. Roman sat down near the front.

Blois smiled and waited for the group's attention before he started. "Intelligence reports that the Mazumas are furious over our attack on the freighters full of Tancred fighters.

They were not paid for the Tancred shipments, so they've lost a fortune. The Tancreds have sworn vengeance on us for the loss.

Blois looked around the room with a smug expression.

"In addition, our recon ships checked out the debris field where the freighters were destroyed, and they made a surprising discovery.

Coranine," said Roman.

That's right," said Blois. "How did you know?"

I didn't, but there was a big explosion when I blew up two of the freighters. It didn't make sense until now.

Very good; said Blois. He looked around at the other pilots.

"Alliance ships need coranine for hyperjumping, just as we do. The Mazumas have a refinery that processes coranine in orbit around the planet Hattin. If we can destroy it, every alien race in the Ascalon Rift would feel the effects of the shortage. I'm sure the Mazumas have cornered the market on coranine just as they have on everything else here.

Blois turned to Hela Selrase, seated two chairs away from Roman. Commander Ferrand has ordered two strike groups into combat at the same time. Selrase, I want you to fly a Scorpion to defend the Liberator that Pilot Brool will be flying.

Your objective is to destroy the patrol ships so that Brool will have a clear shot at the refinery.

Kayla Brool held up her hand. "Do we have any idea how many patrol ships will be in the region?"

"We feel confident that our recon group near Hattin was not detected," said Blois. "Your strike group should have the element of surprise. There will only be two of you, since we can't send a full squadron that far into enemy territory."

Blois indicated the Tancred frigate near an orange planet in the holo-projection to his left. "Commander Ferrand has also given us our second mission, which he calls Operation Peace Through Force. It's time to make a gesture of peace to the Tancreds. A Tancred frigate known as the Kuntow is traveling through the region of space between the Mazuma and Tancred borders. It's guarded by at least eight armed escorts.

Due to our efforts, the Alliance is starting to learn that they should tie up some of their fighters by escorting freighters.

There was scattered laughter around the room. Roman was pleased to hear it, along with the news that they were going to make a peace offering.

"Alexandria, Lawton, Helmar, and Dept, you are ordered to destroy the escorts, but under no circumstances will you attack the Kuntow. I repeat, you will not attack the frigate.

Wing leader Alexandria is instructed to establish communication with the captain of the frigate and convey the honorable intentions of the Gor/me Empire to him. We hope that the captain will relay the message to the Tancred leaders on Oerites. It should be obvious to the captain that we have the ability to destroy his ship, but we are opting to reason with him instead."

Still drowsy from her short nap, Pilot Helmar brushed the blonde hair back out of her eyes and held up her hand. Is there any chance that the Kuntow could be armed?

Blois shook his head. No. It's strictly a cargo carrier.

Roman waved to get Blois's attention. "How should I phrase my communication, sir?"

Commander Ferrand wants you to take a firm approach with the

Tancred captain,said Blois."However, you should be sure to convey that our goal is peaceful coexistence in the region."

"Peaceful coexistence, as long as it's on our terms,said Hela.

Blois glanced in her direction, then ignored her.

ASCALON RIFT--SECTOR II--KUNTOW

As it turned out, there were eight Tancred fighter escorts around the frigate Kuntow. Roman destroyed three of them, and Lawton got two.

Roman was pleased to see the performance of the younger pilots, Helmar and Dept, who worked together to eliminate the other three fighters. They were learning that the Tancreds preferred to split off into single fighter dogfights whenever they could.

The comlink beeped, and Roman heard a familiar female voice.
"Helmar to wing leader. All escorts have been destroyed.

It's showtime, sir."

"Thanks for the assistance, Helmar. Now, I want the three of you to pull back and give the Kuntow some breathing room.

Roman switched his radio from the tactical frequencies to the unscrambled hailing frequency favored by the Alliance merchant fleet."Captain of the Kuntow, this is wing leader Roman Alexandria of the Gorene Gold Squadron. Please identify yourself: A grizzled oldTancred face formed on the communications monitor. "I am Captain Tawl Shud of the Tancred frigate Kuntow. I will die before I surrender to you. Fire if you must, but know that I die with my Tancred honor and dignity: Roman nodded with respect. "You are brave, like all Tancred warriors, Captain Shud. I do not request your surrender.

I have come to communicate with you in peace. I speak on behalf of the Gorene Empire."

Shud made a sour face."Do not toy with me, Gorene. My resolve will not break under your threats. Destroy my ship if you must, and be on your way: "I can see you don't understand," Roman said."Our goal is to live in peaceful coexistence with the Tancreds and all the races of the Ascalon Rift. We are here to help the civilizations in this region, not to fight a bloody war with them. We offer our assistance, wisdom, and friendship."

Shud snorted."And you attack unarmed Tancred freighters without provocation. Even our robot freighters are not safe with you Gorenese around. Kill us and be done with it, wing leader Roman Alexandria of the Gorene Gold Squadron.

My crew and I are ready to die.

"We have the power to conquer this region through force, but bloodshed is not the answer. I ask you to speak to the Tancred leaders and tell them of my message. Yes, we have used force. We will use force if we must, but that is not our intention. We want to forge new alliances that will revitalize the entire Ascalon Rift. Accept our presence and let us enlighten you.

"Oh, so you want oldTawl Shud to pop over and speak with the Overlord? I know he'll be pleased to hear from me, since he so often requests the counsel of freighter captains."

Roman wondered if the translator system was working properly on his ship. Shud didn't seem to understand what Roman was saying, and there seemed to be some odd word translations from the Tancred language. Roman was sure that the old captain couldn't be as snide as he sounded through the translator.

"Captain Shud, I respect your brave tone. We do not wish to destroy your ship. I bring you this message as an emissary of peace for my people. Please take my message to your homeworld and let them know that peace with the Gorene Empire is possible if they will give us that chance.

Shud was silent for a moment. Although Roman wasn't clear on Tancred facial expressions, Shud's face seemed to reflect puzzlement and, perhaps, acceptance of the possibility."The Tancreds despise the Gorene presence in this region.

You are enemies and trespassers. But you speak with an air of wisdom. You could destroy my ship, but instead you speak of peace. I believe Overlord Zemlock, our leader, may wish to hear your words. When asked, I will tell those who question me that you acted with honor: Roman smiled. Shud recoiled when he saw Roman's expression."Why do you bare your teeth at me, Gorene? Will you attack me now that I have shown signs of weakness?"

Roman quickly switched to a more neutral expression.

"I give you my word that you will return to Orentes in safety, Captain Shud. There will be no further attacks against your vessel."

Shud nodded, then slammed his fist into his chest with a loud thump. "Perhaps we will meet again, wing leader Roman Alexandria of the Gorene Gold Squadron."

"Perhaps we shall, Captain Shud. Good journey to you.

Roman gently turned his fighter to face the other three Gorenas waiting in the distance. "Mission accomplished, gentlemen. Let's return to base.

The holographic projection of Sector Commander Dithmar Ferrand flickered briefly, but that was the only way Blois Fulcher could tell

that it wasn't the real Ferrand standing in his office on ar-1. Before Ferrand could ask, Blois gave him the news they were anxious to hear back on Prajna-7. Roman had already transmitted his report to Blois.

"The mission was a success, Commander Ferrand. Wing leader Alexandria and his group are on their way back to ar-1. There were no Gorene casualties."

Blois thought it was odd that Ferrand did not look pleased. If anything, he looked annoyed, as if he'd eaten something particularly unpleasant for lunch.

"Your new orders are to launch a strike group immediately.

They will proceed to the Kuntow at full speed and destroy it."

Blois gasped in disbelief. "Attack the Kuntow? You can't be serious. Alexandria gave Captain Shud his word that he wouldn't be attacked. How can our mission be peaceful coexistence if we fire on a defenseless frigate?"

Ferrand snorted. "We have received new information. We were now aware that the Kuntow was carrying armaments to Orentes?"

"The Kuntow is carrying food, Commander Ferrand, not weapons."

Don't be naive, Blois. That frigate is loaded with weapons.

Weapons that are going to be used against us."

"But that isn't possible. Our tactical scans verified the presence of food in the frigate's hold."

Your tactical scans are obviously wrong! Besides, the time to negotiate is over! We must use force! The Tancreds need to be shown that we are stronger than they are. Destroying the Kuntow will teach them that lesson.

"Admiral Shylo won't agree; said Blois, shaking his head.

"Destroying this cargo ship now, after we've promised to spare it, doesn't teach them anything."

Ferrand's eyes flashed. "How dare you? You face a court martial if you defy my orders. I am your superior officer.

Remember that. Now, assemble a strike group and give orders to destroy the Kuntow: The hologram faded. Left alone in his office, Blois sighed heavily and put his head down on the desk.

CHAPTER 5 ASCALON RIFT4ECTOR IV--HATTIN

Hela Selrase was tight on the Liberator's tail, following Kayla Brool straight in to the orbiting coranine refinery. The Mazuma planet Hattin dominated their view, with the blues and greens of its globe wrapped in a spotty layer of white clouds. Against that backdrop, the black refinery seemed like an orbiting blemish from a prehistoric industrial age.

The massive structure accepted robot freighter deliveries of raw coranine ore at one end, passed them through the smelting and processing system, then delivered the shiny refined crystals to the loading bay for shipment throughout the Ascalon Rift. The Alliance depended on the refinery's considerable output to power the Singularity Field Generators aboard their spacecraft, allowing them to travel the vast distances only available because of hyperjump technology.

"We're clear on the approach," said Hela. "We'd better make this quick before the Mazuma patrols realize we're here."

Brool snorted. "Let them come. I can handle them. This has been a boring flight anyway."

"You'd rather have them shooting at us?"

"I'd rather not be bored. After a long flight, I want some action."

Hela had never been able to understand Brool's attitude, and she wasn't about to start now. It was hard to hide the disgust in her voice. "Another day, another kill, right?" "What's wrong with that?" Brool sounded genuinely puzzled.

"Where do you want me to start?"

"Don't try and tell me you don't like to kill, Selrase. That's why we're fighter pilots."

"Maybe that's why you're a pilot; Hela sighed as she glanced at her tactical display. "Lock and load. Target in three."

The refinery loomed ahead, filling the sky with its imposing bulk.

"Fox one, two, three, four away," said Brool, sending her warheads streaking toward the processing and power facility at the core of the refinery. She started her turn immediately after the launch.

Staying with Brool, Hela turned the fighter sharply and punched in the afterburner. They needed to get some serious distance between themselves and the refinery before the missiles created a new star out of the refinery's fusion reactor.

Despite their speed, both of their ships shook as the shock wave

from the refinery explosion raced away from the impact point. Hela saw the bright flash in her rearview, then glanced away so as not to be blinded. She scanned her tactical display, expecting to see Mazuma patrol ships, but no threats appeared.

One more look in the rearview confirmed the destruction of the coranine refinery. Huge sections that had not been vaporized in the blast were now tumbling away majestically, creating both a hazard for the local space lanes and a warning to the Alliance.

ASCALON RIFT--SECTOR IlmAR-1 After Roman landed at ar-1, it seemed as if people were avoiding his gaze. Hela and Brool hadn't returned from the coranine mission yet, and Roman noted that there were many more fighters missing as well. He assumed that patrols had been increased due to all their recent activity with the Kuntow and the coranine refinery.

Leaving Lawton and the other two pilots at the landing bay, Roman went off in search of Blois Fulcher. Roman's boot heels clicked on the deck plates as he walked. He was surprised that Blois had not been waiting for him when he landed, but Roman knew he'd find his superior. Two more pilots passed Roman, but they didn't return his greeting.

When he spotted Horus Klep coming toward him in the hallway, he blocked the smaller man's path so that he wouldn't be ignored. Horus was sporting a new black eye, evidence that drunken fights were on the upswing at the base.

"Horus, old pal."

'Hi, Roman," said Horus, trying to pass.

'What's going on around here? No one wants to talk to me?

"They're just uncomfortable,' said Horus, looking at the floor.

"Uncomfortable. Why?"

"You know.

"No, apparently I don't. I've been out on a mission; said Roman. Then an alarm went off in the back of his head.

'Hela? IS she okay?"

Horus looked up at Roman, puzzled."Yeah, sure. Selrase and Brool are on their way back now. They smoked the refinery no problem.

"Then what's wrong?"

You really haven't heard? It's the Kuntow:

"What about it? I was just there.

Uh, you better talk to Blois." Horus tried to slide past, but Roman blocked his path again.

Where is he?" "In his office. He's been there ever since he issued the new orders to destroy the Kuntow:

Roman gasped, then he pushed Horus aside and sprinted away.

Roman burst into Blois's office without knocking. Blois had dimmed the lights; he was seated behind the desk, facing the window and looking out at the stars.

"What's going on? I gave Shud my word there would be no attack, and you issue orders to destroy the Kuntow. Are you mad?" "Calm down, Roman. Ferrand gave the order. I had no choice but to follow it.

Roman stopped in front of the desk, but Blois continued staring out at the stars, his hands folded in his lap.

We're not cold-blooded killers, Blois. I thought we wanted to put down the resistance, not stoke it up. You've made me look like a liar in front of the squadron, in front of the Tancreds.

Blois sighed heavily and rotated his chair to face Roman.

Ferrand had reliable information that there were weapons aboard the Kuntow.

"I was there, Blois! The tactical scans showed only food on that freighter! You preach to us about peaceful coexistence and then you do this! They believe our offer of peace and then we destroy them. It's wrong! Ferrand has made us look' like murderers!

like yourself, I follow the orders of my superior officer.

The destruction of the Kuntow was Commander Ferrand's order. Perhaps he had a deeper understanding of the situation than we did. Perhaps he didn't. I can't really say for sure.

Roman looked at Blois in disbelief."But you didn't give your word to a now-dead Tancred freighter captain: I will remind you that this is not a democratic military unity said Blois, glaring at Roman. aWe do not take votes as to which orders we will follow each day. We are only given the information we need to accomplish our individual tasks.

That's why decisions are made at a higher level by those who have all the facts. We may not like the orders, and we may have our private opinions about the orders, but they must be obeyed. We have no choice in the matter.

"There's always a choice; said Roman quietly.

True, but the choice to go against your orders will have dire

consequences. Let's be patient and see where Commander Ferrand leads us.

To our doom, would be my guess:

Blois's voice was cold. "We're friends, Roman, but don't push me too far. You are dismissed:

Roman turned on his heel and walked out of the room.

Roman lay in his narrow bunk staring at the darkened glow panel in the ceiling. After the luxury of the sleeping plates on the carrier, which created a neutral antigravity suspension field, it was hard getting used to sleeping on a bunk again. He would get sore from sleeping in one position too long, and then toss and turn all night. Between the sleeping plates, he never had to move--he could feel refreshed after only a few hours of sleep. The addition of three other pilots to the same cabin, all of whom snored on full afterburner, did not help. But tonight he probably wouldn't get to sleep anyway--he felt guilty about Captain Shud, he was angry at Commander Ferrand, and he needed Hela. Since his continued survival depended on fast reflexes and alertness, fatigue could get him killed.

Roman massaged his forehead with his fingers. Doubting Gorene motives always gave him a headache. How many would have to die before the Ascalon Rift races gave in and allowed the Gorenese to "liberate" them? What could Commander Ferrand possibly have been thinking in ordering the destruction of a food ship? What kind of an unbalanced mind would send Roman out on a peace mission, then order the death of the messenger who would have taken their peace offering back to the Tancreds? Roman sighed heavily, wishing Hela was there so he could discuss his thoughts with her. She would understand.

As if sensing his need for her, Hela padded softly into Roman's cabin on her bare feet. At least, Roman assumed the only woman who would sneak into his cabin and remove her robe would be Hela. The overhead glow panels were off, so all he could see was her dark silhouette. Roman didn't speak, fearing to wake up the other men. If they turned on the lights and caught Hela standing there naked, that would surely throw a cold towel on everything.

Hela knelt beside the bed, felt for his face, and kissed Roman softly on the lips. Her scent filled his nostrils, and he thought briefly how much nicer women smelled than men.

There was something new about her scent that caught his attention for a moment, but the thought quickly vanished as she pulled the blanket down below his knees and her fingers began dancing over his body, rubbing and caressing his skin. He reached out with his right hand and touched her back, causing a shudder to run through her body. She bent down, kissing him all over, her tongue darting in and out.

Her creativity was one of the many things Roman admired about

Hela--she was always coming up with new tricks.

Then she climbed on top of him, her body flowing in one graceful motion, and his anxious thoughts about his problems disappeared like forgotten dreams.

Roman awoke thinking of Hela. She had vanished during the night, making sure that no one caught the two of them together in his bunk. She had never said a word, but they had communicated. In any case, he had slept very well.

As the squadron filed into the briefing room, Roman managed to walk up behind Hela and subtly give her arm a squeeze. She turned, a little surprised, and then smiled.

I just wanted to thank you for last night; Roman whispered. "I haven't slept that well in a long time.

Hela raised an eyebrow. "Uh, you're welcome, Roman.

What are you talking about, exactly?

"You know. Last night. You and me?"

Hela stared at him blankly. "You must have been dreaming.

Was she serious? It was certainly no dream, and it had to have been her. Of course, the lights had been off, but no, no, it was her, it had to have been. He knew what Hela felt like in bed.

'I think you've gone over the edge, Roman. Too much stress. I know it's been difficult for you lately, but you have to try and get more rest. I know I was completely exhausted after my mission last night said Hela, sitting down in the front row.

Puzzled, Roman sat down behind her. Kayla Brool walked past, smiled at Roman, and sat down beside Hela without acknowledging her presence.

Hela briefly turned to whisper to Roman. "You know, I never liked Brool. She doesn't even have the decency to greet me properly.

Roman gave Hela a nervous smile before she turned forward again. "I know what you mean.

Roman frowned. Brool? Was it possible? No. Brool was popularly known as the Ice Queen. No man in the squadron had ever managed to interest her, as far as anybody knew. Of course, romantic involvements were discouraged, so she may have been sleeping with several people in secret. She was a brilliant pilot and had managed the second highest test scores in her flight class, beaten only by Hela. As a result, she intimidated many of the younger male pilots. She was attractive, and pleasant enough, but she had never shown the slightest romantic

interest in Roman. No, the smile had just been a smile, nothing more.

He finally decided that the whole subject was beyond him, so he stopped thinking about it.

Blois entered the briefing room and turned when he reached the front.

"I hope you all had a good six hours of rest. Commander Ferrand has increased the number of missions we will be flying over the next few days.

A group groan reverberated through the briefing room.

Roman sensed that there was an atmosphere of bad feeling regarding the Kuntow operation. He wasn't looking forward to the news of their next targets.

"The recon mission flown by Horus Klep was a success, and we now have a clearer picture of Tancred military strength. Commander Ferrand is calling for a staged attack, starting with the elimination of Tancred supply lines to limit their ability to launch an effective counterattack.

Supply lines. Roman wondered how many more food shipments they were going to destroy to weaken the Tancreds. It was business as usual--accept Gorene enlightenment or be destroyed.

"Wing leader Alexandria, along with Pilots Lawton, Helmar, and Dept, will take four Liberators behind Tancred lines, fight their way past some light escorts, destroy the convoy freighters, and attack the supply base on Ariel, the largest moon of Oerites. You can expect reinforcements to arrive once the Tancreds know we're there. With any luck, you'll be in and out before they can respond. This is an aggressive mission, so you'll just have to be careful.

The room was silent. Roman knew Blois was talking an attack on a major Tancred base with a tiny strike group, which was just another way of saying they were going to commit suicide. He couldn't believe it.

Dept abruptly stood up. "Is Ferrand trying to get us all killed?"

Blois glared at Dept. "You're out of line, Dept! Sit down!"

Dept dropped into his seat.

"The plan makes sense; said Lawton. "If we take away Tancred confidence, we take everything. We have to push hard to get results.

Hela turned her cold gaze on Lawton. "I thought we were liberators, not conquerors, Marsh?"

"Officer Fulcher; said Roman. "I respectfully suggest that we go in

with a larger force if we proceed with this mission at all. Doesn't this sound somewhat suicidal to you?"

"We have no desire to waste pilots on suicide missions' said Blois. "If this mission succeeds, and Commander Ferrand thinks there's every chance that it will, then we could shorten the war by several weeks. That in itself will save many lives.

"If you don't think you can handle it, wing leader; said Lawton, turning to look at Roman, I'll lead the mission myself.

Roman stood up. "Not everyone shares your death wish, Lawton. Why don't you fly it alone and show us how good you really are!"

His fists clenched, Lawton stepped up close to Roman, his voice dripping with venom. "I couldn't do that to you, wing leader. When I came back, you'd never be able to live it down. They'd realize what a mistake they made when they placed you in command instead of me!"

Roman thrust out his chin and gestured for Lawton to hit him. "You never learn, do you, Lawton? You want to take another shot at me?"

I'm fully alert and sober this time.

Come on!"

"Sit down!" Blois roared. "And shut up or I'll personally toss both of you out of the airlock so you can settle your differences outside! Have I made myself clear?"

Still glaring at each other, Roman and Lawton sat down.

aNow," said Blois, "if the comedy act is finished, I can conclude this briefing:

The room was silent again.

Blois nodded. "Yes, this mission will be dangerous, and I urge you to proceed with extreme caution. If the enemy numbers are overwhelming, abort the mission and bring your fighters back. As the Tancreds say, the road to Tomb is paved with dead heroes. They think that's a good thing. We, on the other hand, are not Tancreds, so do what damage you can and get back here alive. You are dismissed."

As they filed out of the room, Roman and Lawton glared at each other. In the pit of his stomach, Roman had the feeling that one of them would be dead soon.

CHAPTER 6 ASCALON RIFT--SECTOR IIImARIEL

Flying Liberator strike ships, Roman and the other three pilots had already destroyed the supply convoy freighters and their escorts. Damage to their ships had been minor, but Roman and Lawton had both

been busy keeping Helmar and Dept alive during the dogfights. Now the strike group raced toward Ariel, on the final leg of their mission to destroy the Tancred supply base.

Judging by its size and location in orbit around the Tancred homeworld of Orentes, Ariel was a primary source of resources for the Tancred fleet. Its destruction would make a significant dent in their capability to sustain an armed conflict.

Now that they had gotten this far, Roman had to admit that their strike on the base might be worthwhile after all.

Its loss might well be the key to forcing a Tancred surrender.

Roman studied the target. The supply base on the large moon was an impressive sight. Without any appreciable atmosphere, the cratered surface of Ariel stood out in sharp relief in the light from the local Class G star. Gray, white, and black were the predominant colors, with an occasional spray of orange or red from old meteorite impacts. The bumps and ridges of Ariel's surface was def'med by the interplay of light and shadow, crossed by the long, straight rafts of the mass drivers that launched loads of mined ore into orbit. The seemingly delicate webs of mass catchers danced around the moon, moving as necessary to intercept the launched resource buckets in their giant nets.

Roman held his Liberator level in a steady right turn, eighty thousand feet above the surface of Ariel, as he checked the recon images on his monitor. The earlier recon mission by Horus Klep had given them excellent data, complete with three-dimensional images of the supply base, that the strike group could use for visual navigation on their arrival at the target. Important structures, mainly those under the domes, were highlighted by the targeting computer.

Robots had expanded the base outward in concentric circles from a core mining and processing facility, eventually occupying half of Ariel's rough terrain. While much of the base was underground, the connecting tubes and surface structures gave a good indication as to the age and enormous size of the facility. The occasional containment dome dotted the surface, conveniently marking the locations of power facilities and hazardous fuel depots.

Roman cleared his throat, then glanced around at the other pilots.

"Gold Strike flight, form up on the diamond.

Hard target in five."

Moving into strike formation, Roman'swingman, Marsh Lawton, maneuvered into position forty-five degrees behind Roman's right wing. Roman's neck muscles tightened felt when he realized he was in a vulnerable position if Lawton, decided to shoot him down. However, he had to follow standard procedures for the strike, so he couldn't do

anything about it. He had to trust Lawton's sense of military discipline, which Blois felt was trustworthy. On the other hand, Blois had been wrong before.

Helmar crossed underneath Roman to assume her position off his left wing. Dept brought up the rear, completing the tight diamond pattern.

"Black Eye, Gold Strike is joined and proceeding on course to target. We're at eighty thousand feet descending."

"Roger, Gold Strike five zero eight. Report entering strike zone Bravo."

"affirmative, Black Eye."

Roman glanced to his left to check on Helmar, perfectly spaced one hundred feet from his wingtip. She held her position as if she'd been doing it for years, not just a few months. He smiled, then checked his rearview. Dept's ship wobbled from side to side, but stayed close to its proper position in the formation. Both pilots were inexperienced, so Roman gave Dept a few words of encouragement.

"Gold Strike five zero six. Tighten it up! We aren't going to a party here!"

Dept responded with two clicks over the comlink, then his Liberator surged forward to narrow the gap between his nose and Roman's tail. With time, Dept would learn to make adjustments more often to maintain the formation.

Roman's eyes scanned the blackness around them. He had assumed that there would be more defenses around Ariel, but there were no other lights in the sky besides their own strike ships. On the horizon, the Tancred supply base rolled into view. Roman checked the coordinates on his navigational display.

"Black Eye, Gold Strike flight entering zone Bravo, descending through sixty thousand, slowing to three hundred."

"Roger that, Gold Strike five zero eight."

Roman backed off the throttles to an even three hundred kilometers per hour, max conserve, taking it easy until he needed a faster fuel burn. The other pilots matched his speed immediately. The tactical monitor showed the ground targets on Ariel as the recon images of the strike zone were correlated and verified by the navigational computer, then relayed to the targeting computer. When all of the computers were happy with each other, the first five domes on the supply base glowed red on the tactical monitor.

Once again, Roman scanned the blackness. No new = threats. Not even a mine field. The lack of mines or defensive satellites seemed

odd, but Roman decided it must be due to the nature of the base. Sloppy freighter captains might blunder off course into the mine fields on their way to pick up loads of resources from the orbital mass catchers.

That made sense. The supply base had primarily served civilian freighters at first, so military defenses had not been a priority when the base was established. The Tancreds would soon learn that all of their assets needed protection from the Gorenes, which would stretch their limited military resources even further and force them into peace negotiations.

If a Tancred fighter had to defend a fuel depot or a freighter, it couldn't be out attacking Gorene ships on the front lines.

Roman scanned his instruments, then began preparing the Liberator for the strike. He turned the safety collar on the armaments panel and pulled the selector switch down, activating the launchers on the four torpedo tubes. Each tube carried five missiles that could be delivered at a rate of four per second. Since they were now in the target zone, he threw the switch that energized the master armament circuits.

A blinking red light on the control panel assured him that the torpedoes were ready and waiting to hurl themselves at over two thousand kilometers per hour.

Gold Strike flight, lock and load," said Roman.

His eyes carefully sectioned off the sky for a thorough search. Still no lights. If the Tancreds were going to let them destroy the supply base, Roman would oblige them.

The X-band alarm screeched, warning him of active scans from the ground. Someone knew they were coming.

The ground defenses would need quick reactions to intercept them, but they were prepared for the attack. Roman punched the chaff button to mask the outline of the Liberator, silencing the X-band alarm as the enemy transmitter became confused.

Black Eye, Gold Strike flight descending through ten thousand."

Roger that, Gold Strike. No activity over target zone Bravo."

Affirm, Black Eye.

Roman dipped the nose a few degrees more, going for a fast drop toward the surface of Ariel. The other Liberators matched his descent.

Gold Strike flight on the deck, full power, target lock, said Roman, shoving the throttle forward. The acceleration made him feel heavier and pushed him further back into his seat.

As they leveled off two hundred feet from the surface, Roman's targeting crosshairs lined up on the first dome outlined in red on the monitor. The computer was doing its job.

Roman fired off the first missile. Fox one.

The other three Liberators followed their leader, launching their first rounds. The results were immediate: Brief gouts of flame burst into the black sky over the supply base as the missiles struck home within seconds of each other.

The targeting computer selected the next programmed target. Roman could see it visually, confirming that it was another domed structure.

The Liberators streaked over the initial targets, where the flames were already dying out in the near vacuum, fed only by leaking gases from beneath the surface structures. Roman could see them in his rearview now.

The X-band alarm screeched and Roman saw a line of pulsed laser fire rising past his ship from a hidden gun emplacement on the ground.

Shooting!" Helmar shouted. Her ship bobbed upwards. In the rearview, Dept also wavered, but he held the formation.

Get back in line, Helmar,said Roman. He's behind us now.

Farther ahead, another gun turret spit fire straight at Roman.

He pulled up, then turned hard to the right. The stream of fire reached for him, crossing under the Liberator, then up through the space he had just occupied, jumping around in its attempt to bring him down.

"Fox two; said Lawton.

Out of the corner of his eye, Roman saw the gun emplacement explode in flame as the laser fire abruptly stopped. He continued his turn, dropping back into place beside his wingman. Thanks, Lawton."

Lawton responded with two clicks over the comlink.

Helmar and Dept were still together, but they had moved farther away from the formation.

Okay, let's pull it together and go for the next set,said Roman, checking his threat monitor for Tancred fighters. Still no activity overhead.

The targeting crosshairs steadily moved down until they locked in on the next domed target. Roman activated the scanner to look for infrared and electromagnetic clues of upcoming gunemplacements. White bars moved horizontally, then vertically, across the scan monitor.

After a few seconds, a laser cannon tracking toward them was revealed in the eerie red, blue, and green enhancements of the infrared image.

Fox two,' said Roman, launching another missile to remove the gun before it had a chance to range on the Liberators.

The next wave of targets vanished in flame under the onslaught of the Gorene missiles. Roman and Lawton traded off on blowing up the surface guns with their lasers, allowing Helmar and Dept to concentrate on their computer locked targets. That way, the two younger pilots would avoid wasting missiles on targets that weren't already programmed into their flight systems.

After another ten minutes, the attack was finished. The supply base was severely crippled, with most of its power facilities reduced to smoking ruins. Some of the domes covered processing factories with reactive fuel dumps. These had been stored on the surface of the planet for safety reasons.

The fuel dumps had exploded nicely, removing not only themselves from the surface of Ariel but many of the structures surrounding them.

Black Eye, Gold Strike flight is leaving strike zone Bravo.

We are inbound toAR-I?

"Affirm, Gold Strike. Be advised that thirty patrol craft are headed in your direction from Orentes. Signal intelligence has verified emergency transmissions from the supply base.

They're looking for you."

Roger, Black Eye. We won't wait around for them."

Gold Strike, traffic is clear to the jump point. Your vector is one eight zero."

ASCALON RIFT--SECTOR H--ar-1 The officer's lounge was busier than usual that evening.

The pilots were trying hard to have a good time. But the singing and joking felt forced, the result of heavy drinking, with the occasional brief fight between drunks. Sitting in the shadows of a corner table, Roman drank Hittite firewater, a noxious blend of fermented grains and Hittite waters that could blow the head off a Queln yak. Worry lined his face. The unpleasant tone of the conversations among the more serious officers made Roman uncomfortable. They were fatigued by the constant missions and needed a break, but Commander Ferrand showed no signs of slowing down. As wing leader, Roman's only recourse would be to have another talk with Blois to see if he could break up the pilots' routine with a short leave or longer sleeping periods.

The attack on Ariel had successfully interfered with Tancred battle plans. Tancred patrols and escorts had increased while attacks

on the Gorenese had lessened. However, tension on AR-1 was still high. There were rumors going around that the missions were only going to get worse.

Roman glanced across the room at Dept, draped over a table with a bottle in his hand. Ever since he'd entered the room, Dept had kept to himself. This seemed odd to Roman since he remembered Dept being one of the pilots who always got in trouble for being the life of the party and carrying things too far. He wondered if he should try to find out more about Dept's problems, but he could see that he wouldn't be able to get much out of him now.

"Arr, sir," said a gravelly voice from behind Roman's chair. "Could I interest sir in some Quein jewelry or talking stones?"

Roman turned in his chair to see one of the pirate scouts standing behind him. Pirates still roamed the space lanes just as pirates had always done, their ships loaded with unique trade items. Pirates were tolerated in the Gorenese Empire because they were sources of hard-to-find goods and technology. The pirates went everywhere, so they were also good for intelligence information regarding enemy or unknown civilizations. Since pirates could also pass on useful information about the Gorenese to their enemies, pirate movements were restricted within the empire.

However, the most trusted of the pirates were hired by the military forces as intelligence agents and scouts, such as the one that stood before Roman now.

Roman raised an eyebrow. "I don't know. I've never seen any Quein jewelry.

The pirate's right hand plunged into the side pocket of his long coat. The left breast of the coat had the name, "Capt. Quark;" stitched into it in gold thread, along with an identification code in fine print. His hair was curly and black, extending down past his shoulders. He wore the traditional pirate uniform: A ruffled white shirt, black coat with brass buttons, and baggy sailor's pants with striped black and white socks. His lower left leg had been replaced with the requisite peg leg made of brynwood. Roman knew that tradition required all pirates to have peg legs, and the operation to remove a lower leg was always performed when the pirate child was still young. On his left shoulder was a red bag about eight inches tall.

The pirate held out his fist, then opened it to reveal a piece of gravel.

Roman frowned at the rock. "Not much to look at, is it?"

"Eh?" The pirate frowned and held the gravel up to his face. Then he lifted the eyepatch over his right eye and squinted at the gravel. Arr! Terribly sorry, sir." The pirate tossed the gravel over his shoulder and plunged his hand back into his coat pocket. After a moment

of rummaging around, he held his fist over the table in a small pool of light. When he opened his fist, Roman was stunned. A coarse gold chain held a pendant of cobalt blue crystal that glittered with an inner light.

Arr; said the pirate. His smile had several missing teeth.

Pretty little thing, isn't it, sir?"

'Marvelous,said Roman.

A muffled noise came from the red bag on the pirate's shoulder. The pirate glared at the red bag."Quiet.

"Excuse me?

The pirate smiled again. 'Oh, I wasn't speaking to you, good sir.

Sorry about that.

"Then who were you speaking to?

"Oh, don't be bothered about that, sir. It's not important.

Just look at how the Queln bluestar catches the light!" Roman had to admit that the bluestar was quite attractive.

He wondered if Hela would like it. He'd never seen her wear any jewelry before.

"How much do you want for it?" Roman asked.

"Well, now, sir. Let's see,said the pirate."I know Gorene pilots aren't paid very well. Perhaps I could work out a deal for you, sir?

The pirate left the bluestar on the table, knowing quite well that Roman would be captivated by it. While Roman examined it, the pirate rummaged through his pockets and withdrew a holo-plate calculator and database system. His fingers moved over the holo-plate with expert ease while he frowned, raised his eyebrows, and made several other strained facial expressions.

"Okay,said the pirate."I can't let it go for less than ten thousand Gorene gocredits?

Roman coughed. "How much?"

"Absolutely no less than nine thousand gocredits. Arr?

The red bag made another muffled noise. The pirate glared at his shoulder again. "Quiet!"

"Are you talking to that bag?"

"Yes, sir," said the pirate, picking up the bluestar. When he closed his hand over the gem, Roman felt a twinge of loss. He knew it didn't make any sense, but he had already become attached to the bluestar.

"Nine thousand prompted the pirate. "Nine thousand and it's yours."

"I'll give you five hundred,said Roman, sitting back in his chair and crossing his arms.

"Arr, you drive a hard bargain, sir, but the bluestar is a rare gem. Ffestiniog is the only planet where the bluestar is found, and the Queln don't allow them to leave the planet.

I was nearly killed several times when I smuggled it off-world.

With all the trouble it caused me, I can't let the sparkler go for less than five thousand gocredits?

The red bag squawked on the pirate's shoulder.

"I thought I told you to shut up; screamed the pirate, whacking the red bag with his open palm. Then he looked at Roman. "Sorry, sir.

Me parasite is acting up."

"I'll give you eight hundred,said Roman, taking the credit chip out of his shirt pocket and placing it on the table in front of him. "Take it or leave it."

"Sold! Arr, you've outfoxed me, sir. I thought I could sell the sparkler for much more than that. By the way, me name's Quark. Captain Quark.

"And I'm Roman Alexandria,he replied with a smile.

The red bag squawked again. Quark rolled his eyes with a heavy sigh. "Would you mind?" he asked, indicating his shoulder.

"Mind?"

"Arr, it's me parasite. He claims he can't breathe when he's in the bag for too long.

Roman hesitated. "Oh, well. Make yourself, and your parasite, comfortable.

"Begging your pardon, sir." Quark removed the red bag from his shoulder to reveal a birdlike feathered creature.

The feathers'were all the colors of the rainbow. The creature didn't seem to have any wings, and its legs connected directly to the

pirate's shoulder through a slit in the fabric of the coat. The head was overly large in comparison to the rest of the body, and it was topped with a pointed crest of feathers that moved up and down as the creature got excited. A small mouth took the place of a beak. It looked around the room with its huge red eyes, then focused on Roman.

Good evening,said the parasite. Its voice was irritatingly high in pitch."I'm Mojo.

"Good evening, Mojo," said Roman with a nod, a little unsettled to be speaking to a parasite. But he was determined to be polite.

"You're not buying anything from crazy old Quark, are you?" asked the. parasite.

Quark shook his finger in the parasite's face. "You be quiet or I'll put you back in the bag, you feathered maggot!

"Actually,said Roman,"I'm buying a bluestar gem from the man. Nice, isn't it?

Mojo cocked his head. "Quite nice except..:

Mojo's words were cut off as Quark stuck a finger in the creature's small mouth.

"Wait a second;I said Roman."I want to hear what he has to say: "No, you don't, good sir," said Quark."He's just a translator.

He doesn't have any worthwhile opinions, sir."

Mojo snuffled and honked, moving his head around to try and remove the pirate's finger from his mouth.

"I'd still like to hear him out;I said Roman, removing the credit chip from the table.

With a heavy sigh, and one eye on the credit chip in Roman's hand, Quark removed his finger from the Shuffling creature's mouth.

"That's better," said Mojo, looking at Roman as he cocked his head toward the pirate."Now you see what I have to put up with."

"What were you going to say about the bluestar?"

"Well, they're quite nice except they aren't as rare as the Captain claims."

"Oh, really?"

Quark gave Roman a desperate look."Don't listen to him.

He's just a parasite!"

Mojo looked at Quark with what appeared to be a puzzled expression. "He should listen to you just because you're a host? What kind of logic is that?"

"Well, you're the little thing that's growing out of me, aren't you?"

"That's hardly the point," said Mojo. "If I'm smart enough to speak hundreds of languages, I'm certainly smart enough to have my own opinions."

Quark looked at Roman. "Arr. This is the curse of being a pirate. I'll tell you what, good sir. I'll sell you the sparkler for five hundred gocredits: Roman looked at the parasite."what do you.think?

"It's a fair deal; said Mojo.

"Done," said Roman, setting the amount into his credit chip and handing it to Quark.

Quark accepted the credit chip with a nod and plugged it into his holo-plate. "Thank you very much, good sir." He handed the credit chip back to Roman and touched two fingers to his forehead. "Nice doing business with you, sir.

Have a good morrow."

Quark started to walk away. Mojo's eyes widened as his head revolved to look back at Roman. Something seemed wrong.

Hey, Quark!" Roman called.

Quark turned and looked at Roman."Arr?"

"The bluestone. You forgot to give it to me."

Quark opened his fist and looked down at the bluestone with a startled expression. "Arr! You're so right, good sir!" He rushed back over to set the bluestone on the table in front of Roman. "How silly of me, sir. I'm terribly sorry. Arr.

Roman smiled as he picked up the bluestone pendant.

"Quite all right, Captain."

Quark looked around to make sure no one was watching them, then he slid into the chair next to Roman."Would you like a bit of advice, sir?"

"Advice?"

"Arr? Quark looked around again, then lowered his voice to a whisper."I knew Commander Ferrand when he was just a pup flying his first missions. He Wasn't a very good pilot, but he was the best I'd

ever seen at kissing up to his superiors.

It's a talent, I suppose, but I could never tolerate that sort of thing aboard me own ship.

Roman stared at Quark as he put the bluestone in his shirt pocket. "Go on."

"Arr. This Ferrand, he's a crafty one. I was just out on a tour of Prajna-7 and..: "You mean to tell me; Roman interrupted, "they allowed you on board Prajna-7? That's our most secret base. Nobody can just come and go there."

"Depends on who you know, young sir. Anyway, Ferrand was showing me the sights, and he was bragging about some of his plans for this region. Now, you seem like a nice lad to me, so I just want to warn you." "Warn me? About what?" Roman asked, wondering why Quark's pirate accent had disappeared. That was a warning in itself--this pirate might not be what he seemed.

"Ferrand is planning a full resource assault. He's going to use everything. The entire fleet is going on a simultaneous attack against multiple targets around Orentes.

Roman nodded. "That sounds like Ferrand, all right." Mojo had become agitated when Ferrand was first mentioned.

Now, he couldn't stay silent any longer. "He's mad!

He's mad! Don't trust Ferrand!"

"Quiet, Mojo said Quark. "We don't want to draw attention: "Sorry, Captain," whispered the parasite.

Quark looked at Roman again, shaking his head. "The problem is, Ferrand and Admiral Shylo both underestimate the intelligence of the local races. The locals are expecting something on a large scale, and they'll take advantage of it when it happens.

"How?"

"I don't know yet. When I know, I'll let you know. Goterie pilots are some of my best customers, so I'd hate to lose them.

Roman sighed and looked out at the room full of pilots.

"So would I, Captain. So would I.

A motion caught Roman's eye. Dept staggered to his feet, threw an empty bottle against the wall, and passed out on the floor.

Blois Fulcher slumped back in the chair behind his desk, looking as if he hadn't slept in several days. Roman stood in front of the

desk with his flight helmet under his arm. His face was red. He had finally decided to speak with Blois before the next briefing. His conversation with Captain Quark the previous evening had only added to his fears about the strategies of Ferrand and Shylo. Quark might not be completely trustworthy, but the information sounded believable to Roman.

"We can't keep doing this," said Roman. "We're going to start losing people. They're going to start making stupid mistakes because they're tired, and that's going to get them killed."

Blois rubbed his face with his hands. "I know all that, Roman. This hasn't been easy for me, either."

"It's free with me if you want to keep everyone on alert, but flying missions constantly is wearing them down too fast. They never even got a break after the Armedia Queens-way campaign, and now you're asking them to fly around the clock. It can't be done. These people aren't robots."

Roman, I know that. They're my responsibility. But I'm only following the orders from Ferrand and Shylo. We aren't here to second-guess our command structure. As soon as I can manage it, we'll arrange leave for the squadron.

"I understand that it's not your fault, Blois, but I need some reassurance. Either Ferrand isn't telling you everything, or you're not telling me everything. Neither of those possibilities gives me any confidence. The scuttlebutt says we're about to start on a full-scale assault against the Tan-cred."

If that's true, we're in big trouble: "The grapevine moves faster than light around here," said Blois. He rubbed his eyes. "What I'm about to tell you can't leave this room. If you repeat it, I'll deny it."

"Okay?"

'Commander Ferrand was pleased with the success of your strike mission on the Ariel supply base. He was surprised that your full strike group returned, since we expected stronger resistance there. Command believes the loss of that base, along with the destruction of the coranine refinery, will severely limit the Tancred's efforts to defend themselves. Before they can recover from those setbacks, we're supposed to carry the assault to their front door. The idea is to hit several key targets all at once.

Roman shook his head in amazement. "Are we going to get any help?"

If I understand what you're saying, we can't carry out that kind of an attack with the number of pilots we have on ar-1?

"We won't get any reinforcements until Prajna-7 is finished."

And if this campaign goes on that long, we may not be alive to see it.

Roman just stared at Blois as his heart started to pound against his chest.

"Roman, I must remind you not to discuss this with anyone else. I've done my best to argue against this course of action, but Ferrand isn't listening. And Shylo supports Ferrand because he thinks Ferrand is getting results. The fact is, we've been lucky. I don't know how much longer we'll be able to hold out. Ferrand isn't even providing for sufficient barrier patrols in this grand plan of his. If the Tancreds, or any of the other races, manage to find us, they'll take this base apart. For that matter, I don't know how much longer I'll be able to hold out. Ferrand doesn't like me. I argue too much.

Roman realized he was holding his breath, so he exhaled.

"I'm sorry, Blois. I didn't know all that.

"Well, dealing with Ferrand is my problem. I'm the tactical officer, so I'm supposed to translate the Commander's schemes into executable plans. The problem is, Ferrand doesn't trust me anymore, so he's trying to do my job, too I'm going to try talking to him one more time before our next mission briefing.

"This is insane," said Roman. "Admiral Shylo should be able to see we're pushing too hard. He has combat experience.

Blois snorted. "The admiral's combat experience was a long time ago. I don't think he remembers what it was like to fly round-the-clock missions. He's a strategist, not a tactician.

"So, in your opinion, we're doomed."

Well, that's one possibility," said Blois with a shrug. "But we have the best pilots in the fleet and a long tradition of success. There's still a chance we might pull this off.

"A very small chance," said Roman.

CHAPTER 7 ASCALON RIFT--SECTOR IIAR.1 Roman noticed that the Gold Squadron pilots were unusually silent as they waited for Blois to arrive in the briefing room. Most had heard the rumors that a full-scale attack, deep behind Tancred lines was to be launched from ar-1 and the other bases. Most of the pilots felt that they were not prepared for such an attack, and that they might well be killed. Although he wouldn't admit it to them, Roman agreed.

The pilots exchanged worried glances as Commander Ferrand entered the room. His posture was straight and defiant.

As he strode to the front of the briefing room, he looked at no one.

Ferrand faced the pilots with a look of superior disdain.

No one moved.

Pilots of the Gold Squadron, he began. I have taken active command of this operation. Officer Fulcher has been given a new assignment. This is a crucial phase of our campaign in the Ascalon Rift, and there is no room for doubt and dissension.

Ferrand paused a moment to let the news sink in. A gasp ran through the crowd. It seemed to Roman that Ferrand almost smiled. Blois had been replaced; it was as simple as that. Roman had the feeling that Ferrand might make him disappear as well.

I am the commanding officer of ar-1. My orders stand, and I will not be questioned. Thus far, my plan of attack has been successful. We've weakened the Tancreds by attacking their supply lines, so now it's time to mount an attack on their command and control system. We will create confusion by knocking out their command posts and disrupting their communications.

Roman could see that Ferrand enjoyed briefing the pilots.

The pilots were forced to sit and listen to whatever he said, then carry out his orders without question. To the command staff, pilots were becoming just numbers to move around on strategic plotting projections.

"Four Scorpions will jump into the region where we have pinpointed a series of communication satellites. Your objective is to establish superiority in that area. When you have achieved control by destroying the defensive patrols, four Liberators will jump in to destroy the satellites and the orbital command posts. Secondary targets will include the ground-based command centers on the moons in the Oerites system. The Scorpions will guard the Liberators and maintain security until the strike is completed.

Ferrand looked around until he spotted Roman. "Wing leader

Alexandria, along with pilots Helmar, Dept, and Samsó, will fly the Scorpions. Pilots Lawton, Kemp, and Calabreze will be fortunate enough to fly Liberators along with Commander Nishmar, one of the most experienced pilots in the Goterie forces: Roman's heart beat faster as he absorbed the news. Nish-mar?

Who was this Nishmar? And where was Blois? Did Ferrand think he could just make people disappear without any explanation? Why would Blois be "replaced," except for disagreeing with Ferrand? Was the Gorene policy of "submit or be destroyed" now being applied internally as well? Agree or disappear? Would he be next? Someone had to say something.

Roman jumped to his feet. "Commander Ferrand, why has Officer Fulcher been relieved of his duties?"

"He hasn't been relieved of his duties. He has been reassigned; said Ferrand, glowering at Roman.

"Did Admiral Shylo order this reassignment?"

Ferrand sniffed and held his chin high. "I am the commanding officer here, and I make the orders. Those orders will be followed, wing leader, or others may find themselves reassigned. Do I make myself clear?"

"Quite clear, sir: Roman sat down. This wasn't the right time or place. A frontal assault in public wouldn't do him any good.

Once again, Kara Helmar and Krugon Dept had been assigned to Roman's strike group. They were learning fast, but he wished they had been through more combat before being assigned to this type of strike mission. Most of their experience had been in the Scorpion fighters, so at least they had that to their advantage. Shyke Samsó knew how to take care of himself, and he was good at following orders, so he wouldn't be any problem. Roman would pair the inexperienced wingmen with Samsó and himself so that the experienced pilots could keep an eye on the younger ones. That way, there might be a chance that they could all do their jobs and come back alive.

The Liberator strike group, led by the mysterious Commander Nishmar, would follow them in. Lawton had plenty of experience with the Liberator, Stas Kemp had some flight time in the strike ship, and Varden Calabreze had never flown a Liberator in combat as far as Roman knew.

Calabreze had learned the Liberator in the simulator but had not had much chance to fly against real targets. Commander Nishmar was an experienced pilot, according to Ferrand, but that was all they knew about him. Roman hoped Nishmar knew what he was doing, otherwise the entire strike mission could be in jeopardy. It would be hard enough to get the strike group to trust Nishmar when they had never even heard of him before. If it turned out that Nishmar was an incompetent friend of

Ferrand's, the chances of everyone getting killed were much greater.

Krugon Dept stood up. He was two chairs away from Roman.

Speak; said Ferrand.

"Why are you sending us on a dangerous mission with a pilot we don't know? None of us has ever flown with Commander Nishmar: 'Commander Nishmar is a great pilot and a great man; said Ferrand. I've known him for twenty years, and he's someone I can trust to carry out my orders. You can be assured that he is more than capable of accomplishing this mission. I want to make sure you have the proper leadership on a mission of this magnitude. If you pay attention, you may even learn some things from Nishmar: Roman shook his head. Learn what? Learn how to succeed by toadyLag up to Ferrand? Some desk jockey was goLag to come and show them how to fly? What made Nishmar so special? He had to ask, but he also had to be careful. He knew he was pushing Ferrand, and he wouldn't be able to do anything about Ferrand's plans from inside a jail cell.

Roman stood up again. "But why is Nishmar so important, sir? Does he have special knowledge of the target?"

I can't discuss that; said Ferrand, his eyes boring into Roman."And I don't need to justify my actions to you!" Dept's voice shook. I don't wish to question your orders, sir, but I think we should have a mission confirmation from Admiral Shylo: Roman was impressed with Dept's courage. I agree, sir.

This has been an unusual change of command: The rest of the pilots in the room grumbled their assent.

Ferrand was stunned. His eyes widened even more and his face turned red as he shouted at the room."I can't believe this is our elite Gold Squadron! You're more like hick-erLag cowards than accomplished pilots. Follow your orders or I'll relieve this entire squadron from active duty!" Roman and Dept looked at each other and sat down. As whispering erupted among the pilots, Dept leaned across Lawton and and said,"Roman, what are we going to do?

Ferrand sounds like a dictator. What do you make of this?"

I wonder where he's holding Blois. I'd like to talk to him:

"This is getting very strange; whispered Lawton. Who is this Nishmar?

Seated in the row ahead of Roman, Kara Helmar turned around."I've never heard of him. What if he screws up and we wind up dead?"

Dept nervously ran his fingers through his hair.We have to do something before Ferrand gets us all killed:

"Like what?" Lawton asked.

"I don't know," said Dept, looking at the floor. "something: assuming I can have everyone's attention," said Ferrand, glaring at the whispering group. "I'll get on with the rest of the assignments. Officer Fulcher was obviously too soft on you people. I will not allow conversation during my briefings, and you would be wise to remember that: Ferrand paused, looking around the room. "A target of opportunity has been discovered that we can't ignore. Our recon ships have located an abandoned Tancred repair dock.

It was left defenseless near the Ariel supply base we recently destroyed. Pilots Selrase, Brool, Talmun, and Merlock will fly unescorted Liberators into the sector and quickly destroy the repair base before the Tancreds discover their error. We believe the repair dock is still functional, but Tancred fleet movements have temporarily left it behind: Roman couldn't believe what he was hearing. Things were getting worse. They could assume that the command zone targets would be heavily defended, but Roman's strike group would not be going into the battle with sufficient strength for that type of mission. Now, Ferrand was defying all logic by breaking up the squadron into multiple simultaneous attack groups, which served only to weaken all of them and lessen their chances of success.

Roman found it hard to believe that Admiral Shylo would approve of such plans, but he was apparently doing just that in the hopes of ending the campaign before their three-month deadline. If the Goterie High Command wasn't so anxious to invade the Ascalon Rift, they could wait until there was sufficient military strength based at the completed Prajna-7 battle station. That would mean that existing bases such as ar-1 would be performing a holding action until Prajna-7 was finished. That made much more sense than full-scale assaults on hard targets.

Roman shook his head and stood up.

"You have a question, wing leader?"

"Sir, I respectfully disagree with this strategy. You say we have the Tancreds in a vulnerable position. Why would you jeopardize our advantage by breaking up our forces to strike a repair dock? If we're going to strike at their command and control positions, we should concentrate our forces there.

Ferrand spoke through clenched teeth. "Do I need to remind you of the importance of a deep-space repair dock? If we destroy their repair base, they will have no other damage control facilities in the area. Damaged ships can't fly. Don't question my orders again! If you weren't such a skilled pilot, I'd lock you up for insubordination! Get to your ship before I change my mind. You don't want me for an enemy.

Roman thought it possible that he would look back on the Ascalon Rift campaign in his old age and laugh about his experiences, but he

would need to live that long first. With Ferrand in charge, that looked less likely with each passing day.

Roman peered out into the corridor from the dark confines of a fire control closet. He held the door open just a crack so he could watch without being seen. The air in the closet had a chemical smell that irritated his nose.

Hela Selrase walked toward the launch bay behind Brool, Talmun, and Merlock. They looked unhappy, and none of them seemed to be in any hurry. There was no conversation, only the sound of their boots thumping against the metal deck plates. As they passed Roman's hiding place, he reached out and grabbed Hela's hand, yanking her into the closet.

"We have to talk; said Roman, holding Hela close in the dim light of the closet.

"I was hoping I'd see you, Roman, but this is kind of dramatic, isn't it?"

"We shouldn't be seen together, just in case there's trouble. Ferrand might decide he wants me to disappear, assuming I don't get killed on this mission.

"I'm worried, too. Why would the Tancreds leave a space dock undefended? It doesn't make any sense.

"I agree," said Roman.

%re should have a fighter escort And he doesn't seem to care if the pilots he assigns to the Liberators can actually fly them.

Brool is good, and I'm okay, but Metlock and Talmun don't have enough flight time in a strike ship to handle a mission like this.

I know,said Roman. I've got a similar situation on my mission. Ferrand seems to think the simulator can replace combat experience.

"Ferrand doesn't know what he's doing." Hela put her arms around Roman and pulled him closer. "We might not make it through this, Roman. Something has to be done."

Roman rested his head on hers. "I know. But I don't know what to do. I don't want to lose you.

"Oh, you won't get away from me that easily. I'll come back, one way or another, even if I have to haunt you.

though her tone of voice was light, Roman knew she meant it.

"Don't worry. We'll make it.

They kissed, then Hela pulled away. "I'd better get going.

The others will be waiting for me in the launch bay.

"No," said Roman, pulling her back. "Don't go yet."

"I don't have a choice.

"There's always a choice, Hela.

Hela grinned. "Not when you're in the military. Other people make the choices for us.

Roman took a deep breath. "Usually, but not always. We're still individuals. We can still change things if we want to.

"I suppose we could choose to go somewhere else. Somewhere far away. Together," she said, breathing in his ear.

Roman held her close to him. "I'd like that, Hela, but I can't run away from my problems either."

Hela pushed away from him again. "You think you can save the universe all by yourself, is that it?"

"No. But maybe if I'm lucky I can save a world or two, along with my self-respect.

Hela sighed and held his right hand up to her lips to kiss it.

"My knight in shining armor. You don't have to save entire worlds. I just want you to save yourself so we can be together.

Roman tried to smile, but it was unconvincing. "I'll see what I can do. "Come and find me when you get back, okay?"

'Okay? Hela smiled, then she fumbled with the closet door until she finally gave up and kicked it open.

Roman's heart sank as he watched her go. He knew he should find ways to spend more time with her. Life had a tendency to race past while he wasn't looking. More and more, he felt a sense of loss when she wasn't around. He was sad that they had to be so secretive about their relationship when his inclination was to tell everyone about it.

Not wanting them to be seen with her, Roman waited a minute so that Hela would get to the launch bay before he arrived. He shut the fire closet door and tried to concentrate on the upcoming mission.

Something had to be done, but Roman had no idea what that something should be.

ASCALON RIFT--SECTOR II--JUMP POINT GAMMA

Commander Nishmar was worried. After the launch from ar-1, he had settled in for a thorough examination of the cockpit instruments. He had hoped that the controls of the new model Liberator would be similar to the old version, but there were many differences. The armaments panel, for example, had been completely modified and rearranged.

Certain navigational and repair functions had become automated since he had last flown, and the recon images with the automated targeting system would make the actual strike much easier, but he knew his unfamiliarity with the controls was a problem. He also knew that he couldn't tell the other pilots in the strike group that he didn't know what he was doing. With practice, he was sure it would all come back to him. The last thing he wanted was for other pilots to get killed because of his mistakes.

Commander Ferrand was an old friend who had pulled Nishmar out of semi-retirement because he wanted him to share in the successes of the Ascalon Rift. Ferrand trusted him to do a good job, but Ferrand was thinking of the old Nishmar, the man who had been an excellent pilot before the flying accident and the ensuing year in the med-chamber.

Since the accident, Nishmar had flown nothing faster than an activities desk at Tenaya on D'Zinee, which was one of the military resort worlds. His supervisor there, Office Commander Leelis Sayes Wilnos, had even suggested that the desk job dealing with military personnel on leave was too stressful for Nishmar, and that he should consider full retirement. Nishmar had the sneaking suspicion that she was right, but his pride wouldn't allow him to admit it.

When Wilnos made such comments, Nishmar just grumbled and imagined her head being blown off with a laser shot.

When he received the communication from Commander Ferrand regarding reactivation of his command rank, including a larger paycheck, Nishmar jumped at the chance.

Now that other lives were depending on him, he wondered what he could possibly have been thinking by accepting Ferrand's offer.

Nishmar didn't want to say too much to the other pilots, but he felt he should give them some kind of a warning now that they were about to make the jump into the combat zone. If he said something subtle, they would be on their guard without jeopardizing his authority. Right about now, they would be expecting him to say something appropriate about their mission. "Gold Strike, this is Gold Leader. Please bear with me. I haven't flown an active mission for quite some time.

The other pilots responded with a loud silence.

"You're kidding, sir," said Kemp with a polite, but nervous chuckle. "That's a joke, right?"

"I assure you it's nothing to worry about. I have much more combat experience than you do, Gold Strike two zero three."

Kemp hesitated before responding. "Then why haven't you flown recently, sir?"

"I had an accident," said Nishmar.

"Can you make it through this mission without getting killed, sir?"

Lawton asked.

"Of course," said Nishmar.

"Can you make it through this mission without getting us killed?" Calabreze asked, adding a belated, "sir?"

Nishmar cleared his throat. He was annoyed at the tone of their questions and their lack of communication formalities. "We all face the same hazards in combat, gentlemen. I will do my best to get us through this mission without any fatalities. However, your survival is largely dependent on your own skills, not mine."

Commander Nishmar," said Lawton. "We need to know now if you're not capable of leading this strike group."

"I am quite capable; Nishmar said stiffly, "but since I understand your concerns, I will turn strike control over to pilot Lawton when we have arrived in the target zone. Until then, you will follow my orders exactly."

Nishmar thought he had handled the exchange well. He had warned them, turned strike responsibility over to Lawton, and stressed that he was in command no matter what happened. If the strike failed or they lost pilots, he could always lay the blame on Lawton. All he would have to do is explain that he was letting Lawton stretch his wings by assuming command under Nishmar's supervision. Of course, Nishmar would do his best to protect Lawton from Ferrand's punitive wrath, but he would not accept any responsibility for failure. He hoped they wouldn't lose anyone during the strike, but it was best to plan ahead.

"Gold Strike Leader, we're coming up on the jump point; said Lawton.

"Let's do it," said Nishmar. He liked the sound of that.

ASCALON RIFT-SECTOR III--TANCRED SPACE DOCK Hela sensed trouble the moment they arrived in the battle zone. At first, everything seemed quiet, which was odd for such an important sector of the Tancred empire. Then they started seeing signs of wreckage. Fragments of ships, some identifiable as Gorene fighters, floated past as the group pressed on toward the abandoned Tancred repair dock.

Hela had the unsettling feeling that the dock might not be abandoned after all.

The Gorene wreckage was recent. Commander Ferrand had not informed the Gold Squadron of any joint attacks being conducted through the ar-2 and ar-3 bases, but that was the only explanation for so much debris in the battle zone. Perhaps Ferrand had decided they should remain ignorant of the danger. The other possibility, that Ferrand didn't know about the destruction of Gorene forces in this sector, was too scary to think about. Command had to be aware of the situation. Somebody must have survived to report back to the bases. Even if no one had survived, the Intruder recon ships would have been able to file reports on the status of the battle zone. A coordinated Tancred defense of that magnitude could not go unnoticed.

Unless it had been a carefully executed trap for the Gorenese.

Hela had to wonder if Ferrand had completely lost his mind. Perhaps he was acting without full authority, which would explain recent events. It almost seemed as if Ferrand was working for the Alliance instead of the Gorenese.

"Alpha Strike Leader, I don't like the looks of this; said Kayla Brool, perceptive as always.

"It's not very encouraging," said Hela, scanning her instruments for signs of activity.

Marsala Talmun's voice sounded high-pitched and nervous. "Those are Gorene ships, aren't they?"

"Scorpions mainly; said Merlock. "But there are a few Liberator pieces out there as well."

Hela studied a section of hull drifting past with Gorene markings on it. A smear of red paint on the hull had the disturbing appearance of blood. She shuddered.

"Maybe we should go back; said Talmun.

"We should find out more before we abort the mission; said Hela. Nothing was showing on her threat display. With all the wreckage floating around, it felt as if they were flying through a cemetery.

"Red Eye, this is Alpha Strike one one two. Anything you'd like to tell us about all this Gorene wreckage out here?" No response.

That was bad.

Hela decided there were three possible reasons for the lack of response from the Intruder. Either they had left the battle zone, which was unlikely, or they hadn't heard Hela's radio call, which would be unusual considering the extreme range and sensitivity of the

Intruder's communications equipment.

The third possibility was that Red Eye had been destroyed by a surprise attack on its distant recon position.

Without a fighter escort, and without the extended eyes of the Intruder, Hela's strike group was completely on its own in the battle zone. The Liberators had good firepower, but they did not have the maneuvering and speed advantages of the Scorpion fighters.

They were on course to the Tancred repair dock, and there weren't any threats showing on her tactical display.

The Tancred ships might have left the area after the battle, assuming there would be no other Gorenes foolish enough to follow the others to their doom. However, that was a remote chance, since the Tancreds appeared to have managed a major victory. If her group made a quick assault on the space dock, perhaps they could hit and run before the Tancreds discovered them.

The quantity of Gorene wreckage in the battle zone was disturbing.

Hela wondered if the Tancreds were using a new kind of weapon. The Tancreds would have had to attack in huge numbers for conventional weapons to amass such an awesome kill rate.

The black vacuum around Hela's ship felt like it was closing in. She thought about all the Goterie pilots whose bodies must be out there somewhere, floating, intact or in pieces, tumbling gently in the eternal dark. Goosebumps spread up her arms when she realized this fragile cocoon was her only protection from the cold space outside. She remembered a recon mission through an old Gorene battle zone, where she found a mummified fighter pilot in planetary orbit. The Pilot's airless spacesuit had helped to preserve the blackened Gorene husk within, bathed in the cool white glow of the local dwarf star.

That pilot had lived on in her nightmares for a long time.

Hela squeezed her eyes shut to block out the image of the mummified pilot; then realized she was breathing hard.

She didn't want to end up drifting alone in her spacesuit, tumbling through space until the air in her suit ran out. Before that happened, she'd suck vacuum voluntarily. On the other hand, if she had to die in space, and she had a choice, she'd rather go quickly in a brilliant explosion.

These thoughts weren't doing her any good. Hela had three other pilots depending on her, so she had to gain control of herself. As she struggled to take deep breaths and calm down, she forced herself to think about Roman and the way his eyes reached into her soul. She thought of the calming effect of his deep voice softly murmuring in her ear.

"Are we going all the way in?" Brool asked. Her voice grated on Hela's ears, but it helped snap her back to reality.

She had work to do.

"It would be a shame to come this far and turn around without seeing the local sights," said Hela. She tried to sound confident, but she knew her voice sounded strained.

"I've seen enough," said Talmun. "Really."

"I'm not picking up anything on my scanner or my tactical display," said Merlock. "I'm ready to attack something."

"We seem to have a clear shot at the repair dock," said Hela.

"I think we should use it. We may not get a chance like this again. If any of you think you can't handle it, turn back now."

Hela was pleased to see that the formation stayed together.

Her only doubts were regarding Marsala Talmun, who was still untested in serious combat. They might yet learn what Talmun was made of during the mission.

Checking with the nav computer, Hela saw that they would arrive at the repair dock in less than five minutes. As part of her routine, she did an infrared scan of the area where they were heading.

"No," whispered Hela, her voice filled with dread. "It can't be."

"What?" asked Marsala. "What's wrong?"

"I just did an infrared scan on the target zone," said Hela.

She cleared her throat. "I don't like the looks of it."

Hela adjusted her scanner to a wider area. She had to confirm the sighting. Thirty seconds later, dozens of heat traces filled the void between the Gorenese and their target.

She frowned at another monitor. The threat display showed nothing in the area, but the heat traces had to be energy signatures from thruster engines.

"They're cloaked!" Hela yelled.

"The Tancreds don't have cloaking devices!" Brool snapped.

"They certainly do now!"

Marsala's shaky voice broke in. "Maybe you're wrong!"

Cloaking would hide all of the radiation from their ships!"
"They're moving too fast. The heat from their engines is giving them away; said Hela, porting the data into her computers for analysis.

Hela's recon and nav computers were able to make a fast vector analysis of the heat signatures. The result was bad news. Fifty-four Tancred fighters were heading straight toward them. They would have already intercepted the Gorennes except that they were still moving at slow speeds to avoid detection before their arrival. But not slow enough. That knowledge was the only Gorenne advantage, but it might not be enough for them to survive. Hela made her decision.

"Return to base,said Hela."Vector three zero two. Full afterburner. Go!"

Hela and the others maintained their formation as they rolled their ships toward the new heading, back the way they had come. Their only chance would be to run far and fast before theTancreds could catch up to them. As soon as the Tancreds analyzed the new Gorenne heading, they'd drop any attempt at hiding their movements and go after the Gorennes at full speed. At their current separation, it was still possible for the Tancreds to reach the Gorennes before they reached the jump point. Outnumbered over thirteen to one, the odds were against Hela's strike group.

Can we make it?Talmun asked.

I don't know; said Hela."I guess we'll find out."

"They've dropped their cloaking; said Brool. They're coming after us."

Hela verified Brool's information with her own instruments.

On full afterburner, the Gorennes were about eight minutes away from the jump point. The Tancred fighters, smaller and faster' should be able to catch up to them in less than six minutes.

"Talmun and Merlock, continue to the jump point and report back to ar-1. Someone has to get this information back to Command. Brool, you follow them at a distance and provide cover. If the Tancreds reach you, try to slow them down enough So that Talmun and Mefiock can return to base.

"If you're giving me a choice; said Brool, I'll stay with you.

I'm not giving you a choice," said Hela. Brool always knew how to get under her skin.

I'm staying anyway.

Fine. We don't have time to argue. Talmun and Mefiock, you understand what to do?"

In reply, Hela received two sets of clicks over the comlink.

Then good luck. Brool, let's back off to two hundred to give them a head start. Lock and load, and we'll see if we can take a few Tancreds with us before we go.

Hela backed off her throttles to two hundred kilometers per hour, max conserve. Brool slowed also, assuming a new position one hundred feet off Hela's right wing.

Watching Talmun and Merlock disappear in the blackness, Hela suddenly felt very lonely.

CHAPTER 8 ASCALON RIFT--SECTOR III--TANCRED SECTOR COMMAND ZONE

Roman tried

to swing his fighter's nose around for a shot, but the Zemun ship racing toward him kept changing course. Roman had found that the Zemun fighters had good maneuverability, shielding, and weapon power, but they were slow to accelerate.

Roman wished he'd stayed in the fire closet with Hela on ar-1. The Tancreds had arranged a fierce defense of their command posts near Oerites. He'd lost track of Samso and Dept. Kara Helmar, busy with her own attacker, couldn't help him right now. The Liberator group waited for Roman's signal to enter the battle zone, but he couldn't send that message until he had achieved the impossible and gained control of the region.

The area was filled with Tancred Samurai and Warlord ships. For variety, the Zemuns had decided to join the party, bringing their Harbinger fighters along with them. At first, Roman had not recognized the unfamiliar shape of the Ze-mun Harbinger. He had never seen an actual Zemun ship until now, having only viewed projections of the various Alliance craft during early mission briefings. The Zemuns were supposed to be busy preparing the defenses in their own sector of the Rift, precluding them from assisting the Tancreds. It now appeared that the intelligence reports were incorrect, since there were plenty of them trying to kill Roman and the rest of his strike group.

The Zemun waited until he had a short-range lock on Roman's fighter. Roman clenched his teeth when he heard the warning alarm, but he couldn't rotate his ship any faster. The Zemuns had already demonstrated their laser and hellfire weapons against the Gorenas. The laser cannons they used were the standard model used almost everywhere, but their hellfire weapon also had a good medium range and damage potential, which seemed to concentrate on the target's shields.

The Zemun had him. Nothing would work now. He'd have to take a direct hit from the hellfire on his shields.

Desperate, Roman reached for his afterburner button. He gasped and covered his eyes with his raised arm as the Zemun exploded in a red and white flash.

"Helmar?" His heart was pounding.

Roman heard heavy breathing followed by Helmar's voice. He was overconfident. He didn't even notice me.

Roman saw Helmar's ship race past in his rearview.

Thanks. What else could he say? The adrenaline poured through his veins; that Zemun had gotten too close.

Krugon Dept had also experienced the hellfire weapon.

He was taking evasive action, trying to avoid the Zemun fighter's follow-up laser shots, while his shields recharged.

Samso was trying to lose two fighters of his own, so he was unable to help Dept, who was making himself an easy target.

Dept's inexperience hadn't gotten him into that vulnerable position; the Zemuns were good.

Roman's eyes widened in amazement as he saw the Liberator strike force appear on his tactical monitor. The Liberators were supposed to wait until they received the relay signal from the Intruder recon ship.

Due to the stiff opposition, it would be impossible for the Gorenas to achieve superiority with the number of fighters they had available. As Roman had told Fenand, a complete battle group would be required to combat the combined forces guarding the Tancred sector command zone.

With one eye on the tactical monitor that showed a War-lord coming his way, Roman cleared his throat. Liberator Strike, this is Gold Escort. you are not cleared for entry into target zone alpha.

No response from the Liberators. a tancred moved in on his tail. Roman didn't have time to fool around.

"Liberator Strike, this is Gold Escort. You are not cleared for entry into target zone Alpha. Tancred forces still have control. Do you copy?"

The Intruder broke in. Gold Escort, this is Black Eye. Liberator Strike is not responding, but they are vectoring in on target zone Alpha. Request you intercept.

There was no time for Roman to respond.

Roman inverted his fighter and dove in a high-G turn, jinking and rolling to avoid the missile fired by the Warlord.

The missile closed in. Roman didn't think he'd be able to avoid it unless his wingman could get off a shot, but Helmar was busy with another attacker.

When Roman's ship bounced and started spinning, he assumed the missile had struck his fully charged shields without physically damaging his fighter. Then he saw the missile pass close overhead, sailing harmlessly off into space.

Apparently the Tancred had anticipated a quick kill, firing his vector cannon at Roman before the missile had actually hit. His enemy's overconfident attitude had saved Roman from the missile, knocking his fighter out of the missile's path. Now all he had to do was avoid the next shot.

Roman punched his afterburner and barely avoided slamming into the TanCred as he tried to control his spin with the extra power. When the spin stopped, Roman opted for a missile launch, since he was too dizzy for laser fire. The two ships were still very close, so the missile found its target quickly, exploding in a flash that almost blinded Roman as he rolled to try and avoid the debris. He managed to gain some distance before a flaming chunk of fuselage slammed into his shields, weakening them considerably. The damage control system was working on the shields at normal speed, so he diverted power to overcharge the shields. With all the activity, he couldn't take a chance on being a defenseless target.

While he searched for Helmar among all the confusion on his tactical monitor, Roman scanned the tactical radio frequencies and caught a piece of conversation from the Liberator group.

"What happened to Nishmar? I've lost him." The voice sounded like Stas Kemp.

It's tOO late; Lawton responded. The Tancred got him.

I saw the ship explode: he jettisoned before the impact; said Calabreze. I'm getting a signal from the escape pod.

We've got three bogies coming in; said Lawton. 'We can't pick him up now: Roman had the feeling that Nishmar wouldn't be the only casualty. He shook his head and turned his attention to Helmar, who was busy dumping laser fire into a Zemun fighter. Roman's shields were about ready, so he turned and accelerated on a course to intercept the Zemun, resetting his damage control system on the way.

The Zemun was busy concentrating on Helmar, so he didn't detect Roman's fighter coming up underneath him until it was too late. Helmar had already weakened the Zemun's shields, so a few well placed shots from Roman's laser penetrated through to the ship's hull, blowing a hole through the cockpit section. Energy from the laser impact left the dead Zemun fighter gracefully rotating as the shower of debris swirled away.

'Thanks, Roman.

That was one of the things Roman liked about Kara Helmar--she was

always polite, even when she was blowing someone's head off with a laser.

My pleasure; said Roman. He glanced at his threat display and saw the Tancred Warlord approaching on afterburner.

We've got a hot one coming in. Form up on me: As Roman turned his ship to face the incoming Warlord, Helmar flipped her fighter into position exactly one hundred feet off Roman's right wing. He admired her precision.

"Nice move," said Roman.

"I learned by watching you.

Roman smiled and glanced at his instruments. The War-lord wasn't even slowing down."He's coming straight in. If he maintains his course, I'll take him from the front while you snap roll on a vector one eight seven and flank him. The Warlords are tougher than the Samurai fighters, so just keep pounding him until he breaks.

"Affirm, Gold leader said Helmar, getting back to business.

Roman had to admire the Tancred. He apparently had so much confidence in his ability that he wasn't even trying to be subtle; he just wanted to fly straight in and kill both of the Gorenes.

Roman's forward monitor flipped into communications mode as a tancred face stuttered and took shape. The fanatical gleam in the eyes and the angry expression were exactly what Roman had Come to expect whenever he saw a Tancred. He couldn't imagine what a Tancred would look like if he smiled, which was probably just as well.

"I am Axlstyx, Lord of the Tancred Empire. Prepare to die, Gorene.

"I'm sorry, Applewicks, but I have plans for this evening.

It would be inconvenient to die right now.

"You jest at a time like this? Have you no honor?"

Roman kept one eye on the targeting screen. The Warlord was almost in range."Maybe you can tell me why the Tancreds feel such a need to introduce themselves before they die?

"Gorenes would not understand the warrior code. I confess that I don't know why I bother speaking with your pilots before I destroy them. Perhaps it is the same reason I laugh at a mugworm before I step on it.

Roman was surprised that Axlstyx hadn't fired a plasma torpedo yet. Perhaps he was waiting for a launch at close range so that the

torpedo would have a stronger impact.

"Somehow that doesn't surprise me, Axe-and-sticks. I bet you spend a lot of your time stepping on mugworms.

"I am Axlstyx, not Axe-and-sticks! Do not toy with me, Gorene. Your death will be much slower if you annoy me."

The Tancred was well within Roman's range, but he also decided to wait. He only had one missile left, and he didn't want to waste it. "Axle, you sound like you need a vacation.

You're way too tense.

"Your death will bring me much happiness, Gorene fool!"

The threat alarm shrieked as the Tancred locked his targeting system on Roman's fighter. Roman was sure Axlstyx was hearing something similar in his cockpit. He glanced to his right. "Go, Helmar!"

Helmar responded in an instant, racing away on afterburner to start her flanking maneuver. At the same time, Axlstyx launched his plasma torpedo. Roman launched a missile and immediately followed it up with laser fire into the expanding plasma torpedo that was racing toward him. The shots weakened the plasma field, but Roman didn't want to wait around and see what damage it would do to his shields, so he punched in his afterburner and dodged away.

Axlstyx plunged his Warlord into a heart-stopping series of maneuvers that confused the Gorene missile, which soon lost its target and sailed away harmlessly into the darkness.

By that time, Helmar had moved in close to the Warlord and was pumping laser fire into the Tancred's side, weakening his shields.

abe right there, Helmar; said Roman, as he angled up for a clean shot at Axlstyx.

Hold still and die like a warrior," said Axlstyx, trying to turn the Warlord fast enough to follow Roman's flight path.

I'd rather be one of the winning warriors" said Roman, firing bursts from his laser cannon at the Warlord. He kept an eye on the gauge showing the laser's power-level. The laser battery needed recharging soon.

Helmar's laser stopped firing. Oops. Bad timing. Sorry, Roman."

Roman swung around for another shot at the Warlord's tail, but Axlstyx was rotating for a shot at Helmar with a plasma torpedo.

Watch it, Helmar. He's coming around.

I'll see if I can hold him; she said, switching on her tractor beam.

For a moment, the Warlord was held in the grip of Helmar's glowing tractor beam, preventing the ship from rotating any further. While the tractor beam held the ship, Roman recharged his laser battery enough to pound the Tancred some more. Finally, the bolts of energy from the laser cannon started breaking through the Warlord's durable shields.

You can't win, Gorene. Surrender now while you still can!

Roman's eyes widened--the Warlord rolled suddenly as Helmar's weakening battery power failed to maintain the tractor beam. Axlstyx now had his plasma weapon facing Helmar at point-blank range.

"Helmar! Move.

I can't! Not enough power!" Just then, Roman's laser started punching holes in the Warlord's hull. Hopefully, the repair systems on the Tancred ship would start drawing emergency power keep the plasma weapon from charging properly, delaying the torpedo launch.

Come on, come on," said Roman. Blow up!

Roman's laser battery failed.

The sturdy Tancred Warlord is hard to break, Gorene; said Axlstyx.

Roman thought of a final option he hadn't learned in flight school. He headed straight for the Warlord, then spun around on the ship's axis so that the mouth of his engine was facing the Tancred. Then, he punched in the afterburner.

The Warlord exploded nicely in the hellish stream of charged particles flying out of Roman's engine.

it isn't so hard to break with the right tools; said Roman.

Helmar's ship backed away from the explosion. The push from Roman's engine had sent most of the wreckage away from Helmar's ship, leaving it untouched. Roman thought she'd appreciate that.

Thanks again, Roman, but you certainly took your time finishing him off," said Helmar.

So much for appreciation, Roman thought.

The battle was going on around them, but they were in a pocket of relative calm for the moment, having cleared the threats out of their section of the space. This sky was good, since they were nothing but weaponless targets until power returned to their laser batteries. They

paused to let their weapons systems recharge.

Then Roman spotted the massive shape of a Zemun dreadnought coming toward them.

Lawton only had two missiles left in the tubes of his Liberator, so he wanted to hold them in reserve. The killing blow to the tancred Samurai would have to be delivered by laser.

The Samurai's shields had just failed, allowing Lawton to burn holes in the hull of the fighter. A shot through the middle of the fuselage hit something that exploded, cutting the ship in half.

Lawton checked his tactical monitor. A Gorene fighter was passing nearby, heading in toward a large concentration of Tancred ships. The pilot seemed unconcerned.

"Gorene fighter heading three two three. Be advised that you're heading straight into Tancred territory."

The face of Krugon Dept blipped onto Lawton's com screen. Goodbye, Marsh."

"Goodbye? What are you doing?"

"I'm leaving. I'm not going back to ar-1. Ferrand is going to get us all killed. This is against everything the Gorene Empire stands for, and I'm not taking part in it. We're not killers or conquerors, Marsh. Someone has to fight Ferrand's imperialism."

Lawton was shocked."Traitor! The Tancreds will kill you!"

"I'd rather take my chances with them,said Dept.

"You'll take your chances with me first! You're not going to defect! I'll kill you before that happens!" The com screen went black.

Lawton's right eye twitched uncontrollably. How could a Gorene defect to the enemy? Should he hunt Dept down and kill him for being a traitor? What was the protocol for this situation? Why hadn't Nishmar survived so he could blame Dept's disappearance on him? As far as he knew, this sort of thing had never happened before. Defection was unthinkable.

He couldn't allow a traitor to set an example for the others.

His course was clear. Dept had to die.

Lawton glanced at the tactical monitor to get a fix on Dept's position, now quite close to the main Tancred force.

There wouldn't be much time.

Lawton ignored the Zemun fighter coming toward him and punched in his afterburner. The Zemun followed. Dept increased his speed.

"Come back here, Dept! Fight me! I want to kill you before they do!"

No response.

The Zemun launched a missile toward Lawton. The warning buzzer irritated him. He didn't have time for distractions.

Now he had to take evasive action before the missile ventilated his fuselage.

"Dept, you traitor! Come back here!"

Dept sighed over the comlink. "You'll never catch me, Lawton. You're too far away," Lawton's fighter spun away from the Zemun missile. He glanced at his fuel gauge--he'd have to shut down his afterburner or risk getting stranded in the battle zone. To top it off, the Zemun would be overtaking him long before he reached Dept. Frustrated, he slammed his fist into the wall of the cockpit.

Dept sailed away into the Tancred lines.

"We can't fight that thing," said Roman, keeping his eye on the Zemun dreadnought as it majestically moved toward them. It was almost as powerful as a Gorene base such as ar-1. It was certainly powerful enough to swat Roman and Helmar out of the sky. With its massive bulk, the dreadnought was slow to maneuver and accelerate, but it had the capabilities of a star destroyer.

"I'm so glad to hear you say that," said Helmar. "I was worried you might lose your mind and tell me we were going to blast it out of the sky."

"Not this time. Maybe if there were a lot more fighters, but the two of us wouldn't even scratch it."

"Roman, do they know we're here?"

"They must know, but I don't think they care. We're not a threat.

We're not even moving. If they've done a full scan on us, they know we're low on power as well. It wouldn't surprise me if they had enough scanning equipment to read our names off our flight suits. Why, they're probably reading our minds right now."

"You're kidding, right?"

"I hope so."

"We could call for help."

"And attract their attention? No, thanks. Besides, there's no one around to help us."

"Gold Escort leader, this is Liberator Strike."

Roman recognized Marsh Lawton's voice. Now that Nishmar was out of commission, Lawton would be in command of the strike group. "Go ahead, Liberator Strike."

"We've lost Krugon Dept."

"Dept? What do you mean? He's attached to my group."

Lawton sighed. "Have you seen him recently?"

"No. You mean he was killed?"

"I mean we've lost him! He's gone over to the other side!"

Roman waited a moment for the news to sink in, keeping one eye on the approaching dreadnought. Dept a defector?

It didn't make sense. "We're a little busy right now, Lawton."

"Are you sure he's defected?"

Lawton's voice was tense. "He told me about it himself. I was warning him about getting too close to the Tancred fleet, but he said Ferrand was insane and he wasn't going to take it anymore."

Helmar tried to interrupt. "Sir?"

"The Tancreds will kill him," said Roman, shaking his head in wonder. He couldn't believe a Gorene would defect.

"I know; said Marsh. "That's what I told him."

Helmar cleared her throat over the comlink. "Roman?"

Roman ignored her. "I've never heard of this happening before."

"If things weren't so hot, I could go after him."

"Gold leader?" Helmar prompted in a tiny voice.

Roman still didn't notice. "What's the point? You'd just get yourself killed as well. If the Tancreds don't kill Dept right away, they'll probably torture him until he dies. Even so, he doesn't know anything they'd find useful."

"He's a traitor! He should be killed!"

Helmar shouted. Roman!"

Roman blinked. He had not taken his eyes off the Zemun dreadnought, which was getting close. A glance at his instruments told him they were almost capable of leaving the area with full shields. His heart beat faster. His fingers drummed impatiently against the console.

"I see it, Helmar. We're almost ready."

"Ready for what?" Lawton asked.

"We're clearing out. You don't have a tracking signal from Nishmar?"

"No. We've been busy. We know the escape pod left Nishmar's ship before it exploded, but we've moved around a lot since then and nobody has been able to pick up the signal from the rescue beacon."

"All right. Check in With Black Eye and return with Calabreze to base," said Roman.

"Affirm that, Gold Escort," said Lawton.

Roman scanned his instruments once more. The batteries were near full power and the repair systems were finished with their tasks. It was time to go home.

"Helmar, what's your status?"

"I can move any time, boss."

Roman was impressed by the Zemun's restraint, since no shots had been fired. As far as the Zemun captain was concerned, he could smash right into the Gorene fighters and his ship wouldn't even be damaged. "Let's get out of here before that Zemun monster runs over us. It's bad enough to die fighting, but I'd hate to get stepped on like a bug.

There wasn't enough fuel left for a fast exit with the afterburner.

They'd have to be conservative on their way home unless they were attacked. Even then, they wouldn't be able to get fancy. In the distance, Samso was still struggling with a Tancred, but it was time to retreat.

As Roman shoved the throttles forward, he recalled Samso, who abandoned his battle and raced to join up with them.

Roman needed a moment alone to think. But as soon as he'd landed back at base, he'd received a message to report to Ferrand's office. Not a good sign. As he passed the fire control closet where he'd had

his last few moments with Hela, he saw his opportunity and ducked inside.

In the darkness of the closet, Roman leaned back against the wall and sagged to the floor, propping his helmet on his kness. Despite his fatigue, his brain wouldn't slow down.

Hela's mission was dangerous and she might not return. He didn't want to think about that. He'd felt the same way about his parents when he was young, hoping they'd somehow come through all their adventures alive, hoping they'd come back to him safely. He knew everyone had to die sometime, and he understood that intellectually. But when it came right down to it, he'd rather die himself than live through the grief of losing someone he loved. The simultaneous loss of his parents--the people who had cared for him, loved him, taught him, and supported him through his growing years--was the worst thing he'd ever been through. That hole in his heart had never completely healed.

And for years he'd maintained an emotional wall that had kept his friends at a distance, knowing he might lose them at any moment. Hela had been the first to get beyond that wall. Despite his reluctance to get too close, Hela had been persistent. She had uncovered his buried emotions. He didn't want to give that up now. She had to return safely.

Nishmar was lost, Dept had defected, and his strike mission had failed. The Tancreds and Zemuns had formed a sturdy defense in the Orentes system that couldn't be broken by anything less than a full Gorene battle fleet. But Commander Ferrand would probably only see that he had failed. Bitis would have understood the situation, even if he'd had to support the decisions of their commanders, but Fen-and was not a reasonable man.

With a heavy sigh, Roman lurched to his feet. As with any other problem, he couldn't make Ferrand go away by ignoring him. After all, the worst Ferrand could do was to chew him out and relieve him of command. And that didn't sound too bad right now.

Roman checked to make sure the corridor was empty. Then he stepped out of the closet and continued toward his meeting.

I'm not impressed with your performance; Ferrand said as he paced back and forth behind his desk. I think Fulcher made a mistake by promoting you to wing leader. There are too many lives at stake to allow this kind of incompetence in the Gold Squadron.

Roman continued glaring at Ferrand, as he had since he'd entered the office. His helmet was still under his arm. I did the best I could, considering the situation.

"It appears that doing your best was not good enough.

One of our pilots defected, and Commander Nishmar was captured by

the Tancreds.

Roman couldn't believe what he was hearing. "I had no control over that! Nishmar was in charge of the Liberator group!"

"Your mission was to secure the area so that the Liberators could safely enter the battle zone. Your group failed in its task, which led to the loss of Commander Nishmar.

"According to the rest of the Liberator group, Nishmar didn't even know what he was doing. He had never been checked out in the new model Liberator. The fact is, sir, you brought in a friend of yours and put him in charge of a strike group even though he wasn't qualified.

Ferrand stopped pacing to give Roman a withering look.

A vein in Ferrand's forehead pulsed. "You dare to question my authority? Commander Nishmar was the best choice.

Roman slammed his helmet down on the desk. "We should never have been sent in there' in the first place! We should have known there would be a heavy defense from the Tancreds--though we certainly didn't expect the Zemuns.

"The Zemuns. Intelligence said they weren't even supposed to be in that area, and I'm suspicious of your sighting reports. You've never actually seen a Zemun ship in person before, have you?

Not until this mission:

Ferrand snorted and resumed his pacing. "As I suspected.

'I know what Zemun ships look like: "Ah, but only simulations, and that's not the same thing, is it? You are no doubt mistaken.

The ships I saw were clearly different from the Tancred style. As I stated in my report, I also got a close look at one of the Zemun dreadnoughts, and the Tancreds don't have anything that large." Ferrand stopped his pacing again and looked at Roman with one eyebrow raised. "Were you able to speak with any of the Zemuns to verify their identity?"

"No, I don't think they were in the mood to talk. They're not like the Tancreds, who talk your ear off. I think the Tancreds use boring conversation as a weapon to distract their opponents."

Ferrand sniffed. "You didn't actually see any Zemuns. You can't prove that you saw Zemun ships. I think you're creating excuses to mask your incompetence, which leaves me with a difficult situation."

"With all due respect, I think you're trying to escape reality," said Roman. After a pause he added, "sir."

Ferrand ignored him. "In addition to your fumbled mission, I've had to declare a state of emergency. It appears that the 'abandoned' repair dock was really an ambush. The Tancreds wanted to draw our attention away from the main battle group in the Tancred command zone."

No! Hela was there! Roman's mind raced. Where was she now? How much did Ferrand know about the situation? If Ferrand was responsible for her death, he'd rip his smirking face off with his bare hands.

"I told you we shouldn't split our forces! You wouldn't listen!"

Ferrand's fist slammed down on the desk. Silence! We aren't the only ones with this problem! Similar distractions also occurred with our advance units based at ar-2 and ar-3. The result has left our Rift forces in a compromised position.

Roman's heart sank. He had to find out what Ferrand knew about Hela without revealing his relationship with her. "The strike group from the repair dock mission hasn't returned yet. You mentioned an ambush." Roman swallowed hard before he finished. If Ferrand answered the wrong way, he'd kill him on the spot and worry about the consequences later. What happened to them?"

Two pilots are on their way back. Talmun and Merlock.

They reported the ambush. Large strike groups from ar-2 and ar-3 were completely destroyed. Even the recon ships from those bases were eliminated before they could report.

Two pilots ran interference to allow Talmun and Merlock enough time to hyperjump back to ar-1. '

Hela and Brool; Roman said quietly.

'Selrase and Brool. I believe that's correct. You could learn something from pilots such as those, Alexandria. They took charge and fought a rear guard action so that we could be warned about the situation.

Proof. There wasn't any proof that they were dead. She wouldn't leave him alone like that. She wouldn't get herself killed. Roman held onto those thoughts, but he felt weak from the news. Either Hela was out there fighting Tancreds somewhere, or she was dead. He preferred to think she was fighting. She was good at that. It could only have been a few hours since her fight with the Tancreds. There was still a chance.

'The Tancreds have brutally attacked us on two fronts, Ferrand continued."Our Rift forces have sustained heavy casualties. The Tancreds allowed a few fighters to survive and followed them back their bases. Now, both ar-2 and ar-3 are under attack. If we lose those bases, it won't take long for the Alliance to find ar-1.

But my new plans are already under way,said Ferrand.

There will be a mission briefing in one hour, but there is no need for you to attend."

Roman took a step back. What? Why not?

Because you are no longer the wing leader of the Gold Squadron. Marsh Lawton will take your place on the next mission."

But--'

You're confined to your cabin until I decide your fate.

Roman picked up his helmet and hurled it against the wall, then he stormed out of the room.

CHAPTER 9 Roman lay on his bunk with his arms folded, staring at the ceiling. He felt cold and empty. Somewhere, Hela was in trouble, possibly even dead. A drawn-out battle without any recharge time would rapidly drain her ship's capacities. A forced landing on a suitable planet might give her a chance at survival, but Roman had no idea what the planets were like in that sector of space. If Hela was near an average system, there would be few habitable planets within the ecosphere of the primary star, and she would have a long distance to travel before a landing was possible. Tancreds or Zemuns might have captured her, but Roman doubted that Hela would have allowed that.

He wondered if she was still wearing the bluestone he'd given her.

Pilots weren't supposed to carry foreign objects during their missions, of course, but good luck charms and small items of personal significance were usually overlooked.

When Roman last saw it, the bluestone looked quite happy, dangling from the gold chain around her neck and shining in the comfortable valley between her breasts.

At least, Roman knew he would be happy nestled between her breasts, so he assumed the bluestone would like it, too.

She had to come back. He didn't want to live his other wise dreary life without her.

Mr, matey!"

Roman was startled by the sound of a harsh male voice near his head. He sat up suddenly, almost hitting his head, and stared at Captain Quark. "Huh?"

Captain Quark and Mojo at your service, good sir?

"Yes, I know who you are, but--" No time to chat, sir. There's a

problem I think you should be aware of, seeing as how everyone else is in the briefing at the other end of the base."

Problem?"

Yes, sir. There's an odd sound that woke me up from a fine sleep." "A sound?" Roman was having trouble following the pirate.

"Kind of a high-pitched whistle, if I was to describe it, sir.

"Why are you bothering me about this?" Well, sir, the last time I heard this kind of a sound, the back half of me ship exploded into bits no bigger than your thumbnail." 'Ah. That's disturbing. Now that he mentioned it, Roman could hear a distant whistling noise.

It was pure luck that we survived that time,said Mojo, with a wise nod of his head.

indeed, it is disturbing, sir, which is why I was looking for some help. There's also the matter of the note.

What note?"

There was a note stuck to the back of me coat. Mojo said it's been there since yesterday, but he didn't bother to - be telling me about it. It's from that Krugon lad that's been hanging around me far too much for the past few days.

a dept left you a note? He never came back from his last mission.

He defected." Quark nodded. "Well, that would be explaining a few things, sir. The note was a warning to leave ar-1 before something terrible happened:

what?"

'Something terrible, I guess."

Leave when?" ' About half an hour ago. around the time the whistling started. Seeing as how everyone else is busy, perhaps you could help me find the source. As you might know, I'm not allowed into certain areas of the base, being a pirate and all.

I risk me neck for these people, but they still don't trust me completely. Mr."

I can try." Roman wasn't sure if the whistling was important or not, but it wouldn't hurt to check. Technically, he was confined to his cabin, but there weren't any guards and the door wasn't locked.

Quark beckoned for Roman to follow. "Right this way, sir."

If Roman hadn't heard the whistling noise himself, he would have thought Quark was trying to trick him into getting access to restricted

areas of the base. Since he'd only met Quark once, in the bar, he was still suspicious of the pirate.

However, the pirate's concern seemed genuine, and the Gorene intelligence unit had seen fit to trust him with more important information, so Roman would trust him for the moment. Quark's previous tip about their last mission had been correct, so that also gave the pirate some credibility.

As they descended to a lower deck, the whistling sound got louder.

The pitch was high enough to hurt their ears.

Mojo ruffled his feathers.

"What do you suppose it is?" Roman asked.

"It's not me way to worry people for nothing, sir. We'll be finding out soon enough:' The hallway ended at an open hatch in the floor with a vertical ladder leading down to the next deck. Alternating black, yellow, and red stripes marked the gray deck around the hole, along with the words "Blue Level Clearance Only in blue letters large enough to be read by a blind person.

"I assume sir is a blue level," said Quark, looking at Roman with expectation.

"More or less; said Roman. As wing leader, he had access to blue and higher level restricted areas. Since he assumed no one else knew of his demotion yet, he could go wherever he wanted on the base. When he was placed in a cell, if that's what Ferrand had in mind, his movements would be somewhat more restricted." "You first," said Roman, gesturing at the ladder.

Quark started down through the hole, his boots clanging on each rung. Roman thought he could detect worry in Mojo's eyes as the parasite looked back up at him. Of course, he was no expert on judging the facial expressions of parasites, so he might just be reading his own concerns into Mojo's furtive glances.

They were now on one of the lowest levels of ar-1, a maintenance deck where multicolored pipes and valves were exposed in the corridor for easy access. The hallway was narrower and shorter than those on the higher decks due to the large quantity of pipes and ducts attached to the walls and ceiling. The whistling sound was getting louder as they moved down the hallway, stepping through hatchways with thick doors standing open.

At the end of the corridor, they entered a room that served as a piping intersection. Pipes of all sizes and colors met here at right angles and continued off in new directions, vanishing through the walls on their serpentine paths.

The whistling was louder in this room. Roman was unsettled by the presence of a slight breeze, since it was an unusual event aboard a self-contained base.

Quark looked around the room for a moment, then ducked under some piping and walked over to a control panel festooned with colored lights. Roman followed, watching Quark study the groups of lights until he raised one eyebrow and glanced at Roman.

"Arr. Seems to be a small problem here, sir."

Roman looked where Quark was pointing on the control panel. The display was confusing, but color coded in some relation to the mass of pipes running through the room.

One section of solid green lights, presumably related to the large green pipe that ran from the ceiling to the floor just a few feet away from them, ended in a flashing red light.

You see that red light there, sir."

"What does it mean?"

"Well, this panel represents the safety valve system for all the pipes in this room. Solid-colored lights match the colors of the pipes. They tell us the valves are in their normal open or closed states. Flashing red lights mean trouble. Some of these pipes vent straight out into space, so it's a cause for concern when a valve malfunctions: "There should be an engineer assigned to this station; said Roman, looking around.

"Arr. The problem is, there's no one here now except us."

"What kind of a pipe is it?"

Quark glanced over at the massive green pipe. Judging by the size of it, I'd say it's a disposal chute."

Roman sighed. "We came all the way down here for a garbage problem?"

Quark looked at Roman with an ominous expression.

"No, sir, we came all the way down here because we're losing our atmosphere through an open valve. I don't know about you, sir, but I'd like to keep breathing for awhile. Arr."

"Me, too," said Mojo.

"Ah," said Roman.

"Seeing as how that valve is the last one in the chain, it's the outer bulkhead door that's stuck open a bit. If it was fully open for

this long, the rest of the pipe valves would be popping open by now, since they aren't meant to withstand prolonged vacuum pressure."

"How do you know so much about this stuff?." Roman asked.

Quark winked at Roman. "Experience, good sir. I'm captain of me own ship, so I have to know more about how things work than me crew. Arr."

"And the last time this happened, we lost our ship," said Mojo.

"Arr. The outer sewer bulkhead door blew clean off me ship. When the rest of the valves blew, half me ship exploded."

"Then we should get this fixed; said Roman. "What do we need to do?"

"Find the secondary leak that's causing that whistle said Quark, walking over to inspect the fittings at the base of the green pipe. As he looked around the far side of the pipe Quark jumped."Arr!"

"What is it?" Roman asked.

"I found the engineer; said Quark."He's stuck in the inspection port: Roman was beside Quark in an instant. The engineer's face was purplish-black. His lips were pulled back in a horrible death grin and his eyes were shut. At first, the position of the head didn't seem to make sense, as it was sticking out of a small inspection port in the side of the green pipe near the floor. Then Roman realized that the rest of the engineer's body was inside the pipe itself. Only the man's head and shoulders were keeping his entire body from flying out into space through the open bulkhead door. The engineer was conveniently plugging the hole, but the whistling leak around his body was getting louder. Roman could see the plug was temporary. If the rest of the engineer crumpled and went through the hole, Roman and the others would quickly follow it out into the black void beyond.

The engineer must have been in the room when the leak developed in the inspection port, sucking everything loose out of the room with tremendous vacuum pressure. The explosive decompression had caught the unfortunate man by surprise, and his body had broken until it fit through the small inspection port. Only the tough bones of his upper body had survived.

For some reason, the room's automatic pressure hatch and the alarms had not responded to the emergency. Roman punched one of the red alarm switches on the wall nearby, but the alarm remained silent.

"Is there any way to fix this?" Roman yelled at Quark as he looked for the com system.

Maybe," Quark responded, rushing back to the control panel. He punched six buttons in succession, but the whistling continued to get

louder.

Roman found the com system and slammed his fist into the button.
"Emergency! Seal off Maintenance Station Twenty-Nine in sub-level four! The waste pipe bulkhead door is open to space!"

No response. The com system ready light was dark. Had all of the safety systems malfunctioned, or had someone disconnected them? Roman ran over to join Quark at the control panel.

The whistling was so loud Roman had to yell to be heard.

"Anything?"

"No! Nothing's working!"

Roman glanced at the maintenance room door, a heavy hatch designed as an emergency pressure bulkhead for this type of situation. "Let's get out of here!"

"You heard him, Mojo yelled into Quark's ear. "Let's get out of here!"

Quark looked up from the control panel. Arrr!

The whistling sound had increased to a howl. The air was now rushing past Roman and Quark as they ran toward the door. Roman's ears popped. If the emergency systems had been working, the drop in pressure would have triggered an automatic door closure to protect the rest of the base.

In the corridor outside the maintenance room hatchway, Roman tried pushing the manual override button to close the heavy hatch. Surprise, thought Roman. The door failed to close. The secondary door that opened into the corridor also failed to close. Someone had done a thorough job of sabotaging the maintenance room.

The howl was lowering in pitch as the rush of air past their faces increased. Roman's ears popped again as the pressure dropped. Quark ran back into the maintenance room, cursing as he struggled to break the inner hatch free of the autolocks. Roman stepped through to help him, but the hatch wouldn't budge. Spotting the pairs of wing nuts that held each of the twelve autolock catches attached to the door and the wall, he immediately started loosening the first pair.

"Help me with these; Roman shouted, as he finished loosening the first set.

Arrr! We don't have much time, sir! Perhaps another door? ' "The others are too far! And these doors are the heaviest!

Quark started on another pair of wing nuts as they heard the sickening crunch of bone. Wide-eyed, they grabbed on tight to the

hatch as the crunch was followed by a loud bang. Mojo squawked once in surprise.

The windstorm started with a roar of air blowing past them. All they could do was hold on to the door, hoping to avoid the fate of the maintenance engineer.

Their feet were lifted off the deck as the cold wind tore at their bodies. Roman's ears popped again, painfully this time.

His breath rasped in his throat as he attempted to breathe and his fingers began to hurt from his intense grip on the cold metal. He wasn't about to let go. The grinning death face of the engineer stayed firmly fixed in his mind.

Roman heard a distant boom over the roar of the wind, then a vibration passed through the heavy steel door. The wind lessened, and they dropped to the floor. Roman's knees banged against the deck, but he didn't care. He was just happy to be alive.

The problem now was air. The oxygen supply continued to rush out into space, at a slower pace.

Rising to a kneeling position, Quark resumed working on the wing nuts that held the door captive. He wasn't going to waste any breath on conversation.

Roman spotted an emergency locker down the hall.

Climbing unsteadily to his feet, he stumbled away, leaving Quark at work on the hatch. They didn't have long before the air supply disappeared entirely. Somewhere, another emergency door had closed, trapping them between a sealed door and the air leak in the maintenance room.

Roman hurled open the doors to the emergency locker and plunged inside. Among the fire extinguishers he found oxygen bottles and masks. Though the masks would leak air in a vacuum, they were better than nothing.

Quark was working on the last autolock catch when Roman returned and held an oxygen mask out to him. Quark grabbed the mask and slapped it onto his face, looping the rubber straps over his head. By the time Quark's mask was secure, Roman had finished removing the wing nuts, telear.

ing the last catch. Quark yanked on the hatch as Roman secured his own mask, but the door refused to budge.

Roman moved to the other side of Quark and slammed his shoulder against the back of the door as Quark pulled.

The door resisted their efforts. Roman turned around and sat down

with his back against the door, then pressed the soles of his boots against the wall, using the muscles in his legs to push on the hatch.

Accompanied by a loud screech, the hatch closed half way. The sudden movement of the door caused Roman to drop flat on his back, bouncing his head off the deck plates.

Quark helped him stand, then pulled him through the hatchway into the corridor. They reached through and yanked the heavy door shut behind them, then Quark spun the lever that bolted the locking pins into the frame of the hatchway.

The breeze and the whine of escaping air'ceased immediately.

They were safe for a moment, but Roman could still feel the oxygen being sucked out of his mask by the low pressure.

The firefighting gear had never been designed for use in a vacuum.

He also noted that Mojo lay unconscious on Quark's shoulder.

As Quark began work on the autolock catches that held the secondary bulkhead door open, Roman sprinted down the corridor in search of some way to raise the air pressure in that section of the base. He spotted a white oxygen line running along the wall, and he searched for a valve he could open. He hoped he'd find one soon, since he was starting to get dizzy. He was losing more oxygen around the edges of the mask than he was able to pull into his lungs.

When he found the valve, he cranked it open without a second thought. A stream of high-pressure air screamed into the corridor. Roman turned around and ran back to see how Quark was doing.

"Arr. Did you have a nice run, sir?" Quark was leaning back against the closed secondary hatch.

"I got the air turned on, if that's what you mean; panted Roman. He wiped the sweat from his forehead with the back of his right hand.

"Arr. It'll be nice to keep breathing. I don't mind telling you I was getting worried in there," said Quark, jabbing a thumb toward the maintenance room. "I always prefer to keep me feet planted firmly on the deck."

Mojo was blinking and shaking his head."I've got a serious headache."

"Just be glad you've still got your head; said Quark."You could have been floating around outside without it: Roman walked over to the ladder they had used to reach this lower deck. The hatch at the top was closed. A blinking red light indicated that it was sealed, so they were trapped on the lower level until that hatch was opened from the other side."Looks like this is the one that sealed us in here.

Whoever sabotaged the maintenance room doors didn't get around to this one: "Arr. Even the bad guys can't get good help these days.

What's the empire coming to?"

"That's exactly what I've been asking myself lately; said Roman."I don't suppose you have a plan for getting us out of here?"

The hatch light at the top of the ladder switched from flashing red to solid green and was accompanied by a whirring sound.

"How did you do that?, Roman asked.

Quark shrugged. Wasn't me."

The hatch cycled open with a sigh of air due to the slight pressure difference between the decks. Roman's ears popped again as he swallowed, and he hoped this was the last time. He was getting an earache.

Ferrand stepped into view on the deck above and looked down the ladder. when he saw Roman, he shook his head."I might have known it would be you: Out of the corner of his eye, Roman saw Quark sneaking away down the corridor.

Ferrand looked at someone on the upper deck and pointed down the ladder. Arrest that man."

CHAPTER 10 ASCALON RIFT---SECTOR II--ar-1

"The maintenance room was sabotaged," said Roman, pacing in his small cell.

"You can't expect me to believe that; said Ferrand."You'll say anything to get yourself off the hook at this point.

Ferrand was standing outside Roman's cell, his hands clasped behind his back, judging Roman's actions with an unwavering scowl. In the pattern of traditional military cells, the walls and ceiling were painted in a cheerful gray color that matched the stained sink, the toilet, and the lumpy cot.

Breaking with tradition, there were no bars on the cell, since that function was served by a charged magnetic field. Any attempt the prisoner made to walk out of the cell would be met with the thrill of a high-voltage charge. The shock would be enough to knock anyone unconscious for a few minutes. Other than the view of the opposite cell, occupied by a shadowy figure sleeping on the cot, there were no windows to provide any distraction.

"The emergency systems in the maintenance room were all sabotaged by someone who knew what to do to destroy this base, even though they made some mistakes. That also means that the maintenance engineer was murdered; said Roman.

"That's a serious accusation, Alexandria, and you have no proof.

"I don't have to prove anything. This isn't a court of law.

"Not yet, you mean,said Ferrand, his voice dripping with menace.

"I'm just trying to tell you that there's a saboteur aboard this base. If you have any sense, you'll start looking for that person before they strike again. They might be successful next time.

"I've already caught the saboteur; said Ferrand, his eyes boring into Roman.And I'm looking at him right now.

"I'm the one who saved this base while you had everyone else in the briefing room!"

A convenient story, but I'm afraid it's not clever enough to impress me. You don't even have any witnesses.

Roman hesitated. he knew he should mention Quark, but he was reluctant. The pirate was more trustworthy than Ferrand, and maybe Quark had his reasons for sneaking off.

He was a mystery that Roman didn't want to reveal to Ferrand just yet. For the same reason, Roman decided not to mention the note Krugon Dept had left to warn Quark.

"How could I have any witnesses? You know everybody was with you in the briefing room. The saboteur was probably sitting there listening to every word you said." Ferrand looked at his fingerwatch. "I don't have time for this right now. I need to be up in operations monitoring the rescue mission."

"Rescue mission?"

I've sent a strike group in after Commander Nishmar.

Intelligence officers were able to locate him aboard a Tancred cruiser on its way to Orentes.

"You're going to waste more of our ships on a rescue mission? We need everyone here to defend this sector."

"Commander Nishmar knows the exact location of this base, as well as several of my mission plans. Since we're going to lose ar-2 and ar-3 to the Tancreds, we can't make it any easier for them to find us here. Commander Nishmar will either be rescued or the ship he's on will be destroyed."

"We're losing ar-2 and ar-3?" "Both bases have suffered heavy casualties. Fortunately, our location should still be a secret unless Commander Nishmar has already had it tortured out of him." I think you're making a big mistake trying to rescue Nishmar.

"I don't know why I waste my time with you. Enjoy your stay," said Ferrand.

As Fe'and walked away, Roman sat down heavily on his cot. Looking across the corridor, he noticed for the first time Blois Fulcher sitting there.

"I'm sorry to see you here, Roman." Blois looked as if he hadn't shaved in days. He had bags under his eyes.

"Same here," said Roman. "We were told you'd been reassigned somewhere else." That doesn't surprise me. Ferrand wants to keep his plans quiet. I'm sure he'll find a way to explain your sudden disappearance as well."

"I'd like to make Ferrand disappear."

"So, what brings you here, Roman? Did you argue with Ferrand too much?"

"Sabotage."

Blois jerked his head back. "What?"

"Ferrand thinks I sabotaged the maintenance room to destroy the base."

"What happened?"

"Ferrand doesn't like me. I made the mistake of discovering the sabotage, so that gave Ferrand an added excuse to arrest me.

Blois sighed and looked down at the floor. "Maybe you should have left it alone. With the way Ferrand is running things, this base is going to be destroyed soon anyway.

"That doesn't sound like you, Blois.

"See how you feel after you've spent a few days down here.

Roman nodded in sympathy. Blois might be right. He looked terrible. Anyway, with Hela gone, there didn't seem to be much point in worrying about the fate of aR-1. "Has someone been feeding you?" Blois pointed at a slot on the wall.

"No need. It's automatic. Three nutritionally balanced meals a day come out of that little slot. One of the miracles of modern technology. Since there aren't any guards, Ferrand can keep us down here forever without anyone else knowing about it."

"I just wondered. You look awful.

"Thanks. I'm sure I look worse than I feel.

"During training, the manuals told us to maintain good hygiene and eat as well as possible if we were ever captured.

That way, you'll be ready if the chance for escape should arise.

Blois snorted. "Obviously that was written by someone who had never been captured. Certainly not by someone who had been captured by their own side.

"You have a point. Just remember, you have a lot of friends on this base, Blois.

"Sure, a lot of friends who don't even know I'm here. Who do you know that goes for strolls down by the detention cells? Ferrand will tell everyone that you've been reassigned as well, and no one will guess that you're down here.

Roman hated to admit it, but he knew Blois was correct.

"I've had enough excitement for one day," Blois continued, as he lay down on his cot. "I'm going back to sleep.

There had to be some way to stop Ferrand. Roman couldn't stand to see Blois in such a beaten state. He had always been a faithful booster of Gorene ideals, willing to spread Gorene culture and

knowledge throughout the galaxy.

As far as that went, Roman himself had always felt the same way. It seemed that a cancer had struck the upper levels of the military command structure. Now, expansion itself seemed to be the goal, whether or not the new races they met were crushed along the way. Ferrand had a lot of responsibility, but he couldn't operate in a vacuum. If Ferrand appeared to be getting results, Admiral Shylo would support his actions. If Shylo appeared to be getting results, the Gorene War Council and High Command would support Shylo's actions. The opinions of the lower ranks didn't matter.

If you disagreed with the machinery of war, you were doomed to be ground up inside that machinery.

Roman lay back on his cot and wondered how the dim glow panels in the ceiling could have gotten stained to match the rest of the cell's dreary appearance.

Roman woke up from a deep sleep to the sound of a familiar voice nearby.

"Arr. Sorry to wake you, sir, but perhaps you'll forgive me?"

Roman blinked and stared up at the face of Quark looming over him.

Disoriented, he tried to remember where he was. Then he remembered. What was Quark doing inside his cell?

"Quark! They got you, too?"

"Well, sir, not exactly. I was just out for me evening stroll, you might say, when I came across this cell block. I heard you snoring, so I thought I'd drop by and say hello."

"How did you get into the cell?"

"Oh, it's just a little something I picked up in my years as a pirate, sir. Nothing to be concerning yourself about.

Roman pointed across the corridor. "Can you get Blois out, too?"

"Arr. You want me to wake him up? He seems pretty peaceful."

"Please do.

Quark started to turn away, then he stopped and gave Roman a mischievous look. "By the way, good sir?"

Roman sat up on the cot and rubbed his eyes. "Yes?"

There's someone else here who wants to see you: Okay; Roman said hesitantly.

Hela Selrase stepped into the room wearing her flight suit and a brilliant smile. The bluestone was hanging around her neck on its gold chain, between her breasts. Roman just stared at her with his mouth open as Quark left the room. His throat constricted and his vision got fuzzy from the strange dampness in his eyes. She put her fists on her hips and struck a pose.

"Is that the best you can do? Hela asked.

Roman stood and scooped her into his arms. "You're back,he said, his voice faint.

"So it would seem: They closed their eyes and kissed. For the moment, nothing else mattered.

Blois cleared his throat, but Roman and Hela didn't hear him, Quark pinched Mojo, who squawked loud enough to startle everyone. Roman and Hela jumped apart.

"Don't worry," winked Blois. I didn't see anything: Thanks, Blois," said Roman. He smiled.

"Just try to keep a lid on it in public,said Blois. I don't want to have to get the hose: "Okay,said Roman. Blois was beginning to sound like his old self again.

Roman looked at Hela."What happened? We thought you were killed so that Talmun and Merlock could made it back.

At least, that's what Ferrand told us: "Brool and I waited near the jump point with our cloaking devices on while Talmun and Mefiock escaped. I guess the Tancreds didn't expect us to do anything that stupid, so they got real close before we decloaked and started shooting.

We got sixteen of them before it got too hot to stick around. We both made the jump without losing too many pieces of our Liberators."

'Did any of the Tancreds follow you?"

"No. We jumped to ar-2 first, then to the Mooris space dock. They did some repairs on our ships, then we jumped back here. It's been a long trip.Then I find you've been up to no good while I was gone. I just can't leave you alone for five minutes without you getting yourself into trouble, can I?"

I guess not,said Roman."So don't do it again: "Arr. I'd keep an eye on him if I were you," Quark said with a wink."His parents were the same way--always getting themselves in trouble."

Roman noticed Quark's eyepatch had moved. Now it was over his left eye.

"I see you've met the Captain," said Roman. Then he realized that Quark had mentioned his parents.

Me too," said Mojo. "Don't forget Mojo. Everybody always forgets Mojo:

Roman stared at Quark. "You knew my parents?"

"Arr, I pulled their heads out of the exhaust many a time, sir. They asked me to keep an eye on you, too--and that's a good thing since I've only got one," Quark said, pointing at his eyepatch as he made a combined chuckling and snorting noise.

"The Captain was waiting for us when we got back; said Hela, frowning at Quark's odd noises. "He said something about wanting to check on how my bluestone was doing: Arr. I wanted to make sure she hadn't lost it," said Quark, looking away to avoid Roman's gaze and further questions.

"Uh-huh," said Roman. He couldn't help it--he liked Quark more each time he saw him. And now he understood why Quark had been helping him so much. His parents had never mentioned the pirate, but they tried not to talk about "business" when they were home. He'd have to talk to Quark some more about his parents.

"This is all very entertaining," said Blois, "but I've been living in this hole for days, and I have things to do. Could we get out of here?"

Commander Ferrand was having trouble with the pilots.

The mood in the briefing room was hostile, with a lot of grumbling and shouting. He had already threatened them several times, but the grumbling continued. He was disgusted--these pilots were supposed to be the best that the Gorene Empire had available. With decent pilots, he wouldn't have the problems he was facing now. Incompetent leadership among the lower ranks had led to numerous mistakes in executing his carefully thought out strategic plans.

The fall of the other two Ascalon Rift bases, four hours before the briefing, had not helped Ferrand's case with Admiral Shylo. In addition, the death of Commander Nishmar, on the Tancred cruiser destroyed by the Gorenese, looked too much like a botched rescue mission. His options for looking good in this campaign had become limited. Removing Fulcher and Alexandria had helped to correct the situation, but too much damage had already been done. The remaining pilots needed further motivation to go out again. Judging by their current attitudes, a miracle would be required to turn the tide back in favor of the Gorenese.

Ferrand knew he was being watched by Admiral Shylo, the War Council, and the High Command. If he could pull victory out of the jaws of defeat, as his father always used to say, then he still had a

chance of coming through this campaign with a promotion and a shot at an admiral's collar. He would explain every detail of the next mission so that even the stupidest pilots could understand, but first he needed to overcome their resistance. It was too bad that Commander Nishmar had to be destroyed along with the tancred cruiser, for he would have been an excellent tactical officer who would not have argued with his orders.

"I will warn all of you one more time said Ferrand, glaring at the pilots. "If you fail to carry out your mission instructions to the letter, I will personally shoot each and every one of you."

Ferrand smiled inwardly at the resulting shocked silence--he had finally found a way to motivate these impertinent pilots. Sometimes an iron hand was required to demonstrate that he meant business.

"I see that got your attention. From now on, we are in a state of red alert. We believe that the ar-2 and ar-3 bases have been lost. A medical transport ship has been dispatched to carry the casualties from both bases back to Prajna-7?

The crowd murmured in surprise. Ferrand sighed--these were the biggest bunch of whiners he'd ever had the misfortune to meet.

Ferrand gestured at a holo-projection of a Gorene repair dock. "Tancred scouts have discovered the Mooris space dock where several of our ships are currently under repair.

Some of you know that Mooris is close to our current location, so it's only a matter of time before the Tancreds attack it. I'm going to assign a strike group to defend the Mooris space dock and drive the Tancreds away.

Ferrand stopped abruptly as he saw Blois Fulcher and Roman Alexandria entering at the back of the briefing room.

He started to say something, but Fulcher beat him to it.

You couldn't keep me locked up, Ferrand. You're finished, and I'm resuming command."

The stunned pilots turned around to look at Blois, followed by Roman, confidently striding down the aisle.

Everyone remain calm," said Blois. Commander Ferrand has been attempting to maneuver the Gold Squadron to its doom, but I'm not going to allow that. Admiral Shylo has been apprised of the situation, and he supports my actions."

"That's ridiculous; said Ferrand, his fists clenched."I am your superior officer.

"Not anymore. As you're so fond of reminding me, we all have to

follow orders. Admiral Shylo has replaced you.

Ferrand pointed at Blois, who was continuing down the aisle."Someone arrest those men! They're lying! They've escaped from their cells."

A general murmur started among the pilots, who looked back and forth from Blois to Ferrand, not knowing what was happening.

No one moved to arrest the new arrivals. Ferrand's face turned red as he looked around in desperation."Someone stop them!"

Kayla Brool stood up and yelled at Ferrand. Stop them yourself.

Ferrand could see that he'd lost control of the situation.

He startled everyone by sprinting up the side of the room.

ROman moved to stop him, but he was too late. Ferrand was at the rear exit.

"We'll see about this,shouted Ferrand, shaking his fist.

I'll destroy all of you for defying my orders!

Blois yelled at Ferrand, who turned and ran."You already tried that, Ferrand!"

Roman raced out of the rear exit after the Commander.

Ferrand ran down the Corridor both their boots clanging on the steel deck plates. Ferrand turned at the first intersection and ducked through a hatchway into a side passage, trying to control his breathing. The clanging of Romaiifs footsteps got louder, then stopped.

Ferrand backed up against the wall, controlling his breathing to remain silent. He slid over behind the hatch and got a good grip--if Roman looked in, he could slam it on the insolent pilot's head.

Roman was getting closer, moving slowly. Ferrand's fingers tightened on the cold steel of the hatch. He placed his back flat against the wall for better leverage.

Then Ferrand relaxed as Roman jogged away.

Roman returned to the briefing room, cursing himself for losing Ferrand. Blois was at the podium. The pilots were still murmuring, but they were smiling.

"If I could have your attention, Admiral Shylo wishes to speak with you,said Blois.

Blois pressed a button on the podium. A huge holo-projection of

Admiral Shylo's head appeared over the stage.

His amplified voice was almost deafening as he spoke.

"Officers of ar-1, the recent events involving our forces are extremely unfortunate. Commander Ferrand was an unfit leader, and he nearly cost you your lives. For that, I apologize, but we cannot look upon this turn of events as a failure.

You performed exceptionally well despite tremendous adversity. Commander Ferrand's actions have led to deep hatred and chaos, but we must press on. Because of Ferrand, the alien Alliance has declared a full state of war against us.

Until now, with some exceptions, each of the Alliance races seemed to be operating independently. Our intelligence sources say they couldn't agree on how to respond to us.

Now, we have no choice but to fight this war... and win."

shylo seemed to look at each pilot in turn. Roman knew it was a practiced effect, but it gave him a spooky feeling.

"In time, the Gorene Empire will reign over this region, and our mission will be completed. Perhaps the inhabitants here will trust us some day, but we can only achieve this dream if we have sound leadership grounded in impeccable moral character." A brief smile appeared on Shylo's face. Toward that end, I hereby announce that Blois Fulcher will continue as Tactical Officer. Roman Alexandria has been promoted to Sector Commander.

We are not in a position to lose the most skilled pilot in the Gorene forces, so Commander Alexandria must also act as wing leader. Under this leadership, we will prevail!" The pilots burst into applause, and Roman nodded in appreciation. When the applause died down, Admiral Shylo continued.

'Officers and pilots of ar-1, we begin anew. The odds are against us, so it's up to each of us to see our mission through, to expand the Gorene civilization to the edges of the known universe. The alien Alliance in the Ascalon Rift presents the most formidable military force we have encountered, but we have the advantage. We have you, the elite officers of the Gold Squadron, and we have your dedication to the Gorene cause: The pilots applauded once more. Blois and Roman joined in as well, smiling as Shylo's giant head faded from view. A sense of relief flooded through Roman. It seemed that he'd finally awakened from the nightmare that had been plaguing him since they arrived in the Ascalon Rift. Perhaps they'd survive after all.

Blois addressed the crowd. "Commander Alexandria and I have some planning to do before we launch our next mission.

Our next briefing will be at oh nine hundred hours.

You are dismissed: As the officers rose to leave the room, Roman leaned over to whisper to Blois. "We have to find Ferrand. I couldn't catch him. He can do a lot of damage out there on his own: 'He shouldn't be hard to find; said Blois. We'll just listen for the alarms.

Roman followed Blois from the room, delayed only by people stopping him with their congratulations. It felt odd to have people refer to him as Commander Mexandria, but it felt good and he was sure he would get used to it quickly.

Quark was waiting for them in the corridor. Arr. I suppose you gentlemen will be wanting to know where Ferrand went off to in such a hurry: "My guess is that he wants to leave ar-1 as quickly as possible, said Blois.

"Or he's in his office trying to talk his way out of this situation with Admiral Shylo," said Roman.

"He's already been to his office," said Quark. "He spent a few minutes in there, then made his way down to the escape pod on that level."

"Then you're saying we've already lost him," said Blois.

His shoulders sagged.

Roman was surprised. "Why didn't you try to stop him?" "Well, sir, I don't like to get physical with people when it's not absolutely necessary. However, I think Ferrand will find that the escape pod doesn't go very far without a cockpit launch button. He'll need a second person to launch the pod. Arr."

Roman reacted first, sprinting down the corridor in the direction of the command-level escape pod bay.

"I suppose we should follow him," said Blois, watching Roman run away.

Arr. We can't let the lad get himself in more trouble,' said Quark.

Ferrand was standing inside the cramped escape pod bay when Roman arrived. The airlock doors were closed, but Roman could see him through the portholes. Ferrand had discovered the problem Quark had created, which kept him from being able to launch the oval-shaped pod from the cockpit control panel. Ferrand stood in the narrow gap between the pod and the wall of the bay, examining a control box set in the pod's hull by its entry hatch. Roman guessed that he was trying to override the cockpit launch button, since he didn't have an assistant to launch the pod from the control panel by the airlock door.

Roman looked to his right. The external launch system was simple, intended only as a backup. The two airlock doors and the large pod bay door were each controlled by pairs of green and red buttons. When the pod bay door was open and its green light was showing, the white launch button would glow to indicate that the ship was ready to leave.

Roman pushed the button to open the inner airlock door as Blois and Quark arrived in the corridor behind him.

I'm going in to get him; said Roman, as he stepped into the airlock.

"It's not safe; said Blois.

Before Blois could continue, the airlock door closed in his face. Roman had pushed the button to close it from inside the airlock. With a nod through the porthole, Roman turned and walked out through the second door into the escape pod bay.

Ferrand looked up suddenly as Roman entered the bay.

"Surrender yourself, Ferrand. There's no place for you to go." Ferrand drew a laser pistol and pointed it at Roman.

"We'll see about that: You need to discuss your problems with Admiral Shylo.

There might be a graceful way out of this for you." Oh, there's a graceful way out, all right Ferrand sneered.

But Admiral Shylo isn't going to help me. He has his own agenda. He knows I've failed and that I made him look bad, too." Roman took one step forward. You don't need to go like this: "You're mistaken, Alexandria. No matter how you try to trick me, this is a mutiny, and that means I can kill you.

Roman detected an edge of hysteria in Ferrand's voice.

Roman tried to remain calm and relaxed so as not to spook Ferrand. "This is not a mutiny. Admiral Shylo has relieved you of duty.

You're unfit for command."

This is a mutiny! You'll all be court-martialed! Ferrand's hand was shaking. His knuckles were white as he gripped the gun.

"Give yourself up, Ferrand. You need help.

"No! You're trying to ruin me! I've endured too much in my career to be destroyed by the likes of you!"

"Listen to yourself. You're not being rational. Give me the gun before someone gets hurt."

Ferrand blinked, then smiled at Roman. You're right.

You're absolutely right.

Roman tensed. He didn't like the sound of that.

Ferrand fired.

Roman dove to his right, barely avoiding the lance of red light from the laser pistol. The deadly beam passed through the space where Roman had been standing and burned a smoking crater into the wall.

Get up, you coward! Ferrand fired a second time, but Roman rolled toward the open airlock door and avoided the shot.

Blois's voice boomed out of the intercom speaker near the door. stop it, Ferrand!"

The distraction gave Roman enough time to dive back into the airlock and punch the button to close the door between him and Ferrand.

As the door moved, a laser shot burned the floor next to his foot.

Ferrand charged forward and beat on the airlock door as it closed."Come back here!"

The door boomed repeatedly as Ferrand struck his fists against the metal. Ferrand's wild-eyed face pressed against the glass of the porthole. As soon as he saw Roman standing, Ferrand brought the tip of the laser pistol up against the glass and laughed.

Roman slammed his body back against the wall to avoid the shot he knew would penetrate the glass, but a vibration suddenly shook the deck and startled Ferrand. Roman glanced at the porthole again in time to see Ferrand twist away in horror as the outer bay door started to open.

A moment later, with a sudden rush of escaping air, Ferrand bounced along the deck and sailed out through the partially opened bay door. Ferrand tumbled end over end into the black void of space, leaving the base safely behind.

When the airlock door opened, Blois had his hand on the control panel, and Quark was leaning against the wall shaking his head.

'Arr. You flyboys have all the fun said Quark.

CHAPTER 1 1 ASCALON RIFT---SECTOR IlmAR-1 By exercising his new rank as sector commander, Roman arranged a full hour alone with Hela in the observation dome. Surrounded by stars, they sat and held each other in the dim light, happy to be alive together. The air felt cool, but their bodies were warm as they pressed against each other. Roman no longer doubted his feelings for Hela. He wanted to leave behind the constant fighting and settle down on some quiet planet where they could enjoy each other's company. The key would be surviving that long.

Roman held Hela's face in his hands and kissed her.

She smiled.

"Can that happen, Roman? Can all those things really happen?" Ferrand is gone. Maybe the Alliance will realize that we're an honorable people now." Hela looked down, taking his hands in hers. I think it's too late. They've already seen what the Gorenes are like. If we were in their position, we'd be fighting the Gorenes, too: They just don't understand,' said Roman, turning his head to look out at the stars. "They've only seen the violent side of the Gorene way. They think that's all we are." We should go and show them they're wrong,said Hela.

'They've already made up their minds, Hela. We tried sending an emissary to the Tancreds when the Queln were defeated. Bowman didn't even have a chance to finish his peace message before they killed him:

Hela frowned. How do you know that?"

'Ferrand had the cockpit transmission that was relayed to the Intruder. Blois and I watched the holo a little while ago.

Hela's mischievous eyes glittered as she looked at Roman.

We could make contact with the Alliance. Someone other than the Tancreds. Krugon Dept was able to get through: We don't know that for sure, Hela. Nobody heard from Dept again after he defected near Orentes. The Tancreds probably killed him.

"Maybe he talked to the Zemuns first. They seem more rational than the Tancreds. The Zemuns have had chances to kill both of us in battle, but they haven't done it.

'That's just speculation. We have no way of knowing who Dept contacted:

Quark knows:

Roman's eyes widened.What?

"Quark said Krugon's okay. He probably knows more than that, but

he wouldn't tell me any more.

Roman frowned and looked toward the stars. "I suppose that's possible. Quark's an intelligence officer. He has contacts everywhere. And Dept left him that warning about the bomb in maintenance, so I assume they know each other.

"Dept left him a note?"

"Well, it was a warning, but it wasn't specific. Maybe Dept thought Quark would interfere with the bomb, which makes me feel better. What worries me is that Dept wanted to kill the rest of us.

"Maybe not," said Hela. "Maybe he left the note so that Quark would get help to disarm it.

Roman paused for a moment, then nodded. "Possible.

Quark said the note had been stuck to his back for a day before Mojo told him about it. So, why did Dept do it?"

"Maybe he wanted to tell the Alliance he'd planted a bomb here so they'd know he really wanted to defect. They could verify it with a truthscan. He left the note with Quark so that no one would get killed.

"We're assuming a lot of good will on the part of the people who are trying to kill us."

Hela snorted. "They're only trying to kill us because we're invading their territory and trying to kill them.

"Well, yes, that's one way to look at it."

Hela looked deeply into Roman's eyes. He felt his face getting warm. "We should try to help the Alliance, Roman. I don't think Ferrand was the only problem. This whole attitude of conquest at any cost comes from the top down."

Help them? How?"

Her eyes didn't move. "There must be a way.

'But--" Roman was startled by a knock at the door. He looked at Hela, then walked over to the door and opened it a crack.

Blois was standing in the corridor with a serious expression.

"I need to see you in my office before the briefing, Roman. There's been a change in plan.

I'll be right there, said Roman. As Blois walked away, Roman turned to look at Hela. She smiled and waved him on, but he couldn't

leave that quickly. As she stood, he walked over and hugged her.

"Duty calls; he said.

It always does. Maybe we can stop accepting those calls some day.

Roman kissed her. Some day soon, I hope.

Blois Fulcher stood facing the assembled Gold Squadron officers in the briefing room. His face was grim. Roman stood off to one side near Blois. Only a few minutes earlier, they had received disturbing reports from their field intelligence units, altering the plans that Roman and Blois had been devising for the next missions.

"The Tancreds have struck a ruthless blow against us; said Blois." There has been a terrible tragedy. In response to our attack on the Tancred freighter Kuntow, one of our medical transport ships, dispatched to carry casualties from ar-2 and ar-3 to Prajna-7, was attacked by a tancred fighter squadron. The ship was clearly marked, and there were no survivors. Two hundred and twenty more Gorenes are dead at the hands of a brutal enemy.

The crowd gasped in surprise. Roman knew they were thinking of their friends who had been lost. He had known many of the Bronze Squadron pilots himself, having spent two weeks training them in Queln battle tactics before they arrived in the Ascalon Rift.

"We have also received updates regarding the condition of our forces in the Ascalon Rift. The surprise attack in this sector was devastating, and our forces are at an all-time low.

Intelligence sources have discovered that some of our pilots were captured during the massacre at ar-2 and ar-3. They have been taken captive and are being held on the prison world of Xeridun.

A large holo-projection of Xeridun appeared over Blois's head. Glittering satellites were visible in orbit around the planet. Vast areas of white covered the planet's surface.

"We have to rescue our fellow pilots, Blois continued.

Commander Alexandria will assemble a small team for this mission. Our first objective will be to attack the Maz-urea patrol ships guarding the region. Our second objective will be to destroy the series of orbiting satellites.

These satellites generate a containment force field that prevents any object from leaving the planet's atmosphere.

With the destruction of the satellites, we can drop the force field and wreak havoc on Xeridun. Commander Alexandria's infiltration team will jump in from a shuttle with repellor chutes, locate the prisoners, and evacuate them to the lift zone for shuttle transport to

a captured Tancred freighter. Any questions?"

Stas Kemp held up his hand. Blois acknowledged him.

Judging by that image of the planet, there seems to be a lot of ice on Xeridun: Yes, Xeridun is quite cold. I'm sure that those of you who are fortunate enough to go on the recovery mission will see enough snow and ice to last you a lifetime. Your environment suits will protect you from the worst of the weather, but I wouldn't look forward to it being a comfortable journey: Shyke Samsó held up his hand. "Sir, some of us have never had to make a repeller chute jump before.

"It's not hard. You just fall out of a shuttle and plummet toward the ground.

Uh, yes, sir, but....

There was scattered laughter among the pilots.

A brief smile flashed across Blois's face. "Commander Alexandria knows who has been trained for this type of mission.

Very few of you have experience in this area, but we don't have time to wait for specialists. We'll just have to make do with the people we have available. Those captured pilots must be rescued quickly, Or not at all.

Lanthor Metlock waved at Blois as if he'd thought of something that would solve all of their problems. Sir, why don't we just bomb Xeridun? If they're all criminals and military types on the surface, we could soften things up considerably before the infiltration team goes in.

True," Blois nodded,"but we don't know where our captured pilots are being held. I'm sure you wouldn't want to just bomb everything and let our fellow pilots look out for themselves."

"No, sir; said Merlock.

Our infiltration team must use wit and stealth to achieve their objectives on the prison planet. I'm sure Commander Alexandria has chosen the wittiest and stealthiest among you to accompany him on this mission.

Blois pressed a button. The image of the prison planet was replaced with the image of the Mooris space dock, which they had seen at the previous briefing.

"This should look familiar," said Blois. "As the former Commander Ferrand told you earlier, Tancred scouts have discovered our Mooris deep-space repair dock. Mooris is close to our current location, and we're sure the Tancreds will attack it soon. Many of you will be assigned to the strike group that will defend the Mooris perimeter.

However, your main objective in this action will be to destroy any long-range Tancred or Zemun scouts that appear to be headed toward ar-1. The secrecy of this base's location must be maintained.

Blois chose his next words carefully. "To plan for the possible loss of ar-1, Commander Alexandria and I have also discussed scouting and probe missions to find a good location for a secondary base. Of course, these scouting missions won't occur until we have enough personnel available.

What about Prajna-7? gayla Brool asked.

"Prajna-7 is not in a stage of completion where we can use it as our base of operations," said Blois. "It also has the highest level of security, so if there's a choice, we will sacrifice this base to preserve the secrecy of Prajna-7's location.

Establishing a secondary base will also give the Alliance another obstacle to overcome before they can reach Prajna-7: Blois looked around the room, wondering which of these expectant faces he would see at the next briefing. The missions were becoming much more dangerous. It was counterproductive to think that way, but he couldn't help being concerned for his pilots.

"If there are no further questions, Commander Alexandria will give you the mission assignments. Good hunting.

Roman rushed out of his private meeting with Blois to meet his commando team in the shuttle bay. The first reports were that the assault on Xeridun was going well. The Mazuma patrol ships that guarded the approaches to Xeridun were rapidly being eliminated by the Gorene fighters.

A second team of Liberators was hard at work on the ring of satellites that created the containment field around the prison planet.

By the time Roman and his ground infiltration team arrived, the Gorenese should have control of the Xeridun perimeter.

Selecting the members of the Xeridun ground team had been one of the most difficult decisions Roman had ever been forced to make during his career. Intelligence reports were unclear as to the exact concentration of military units and criminal elements on the surface of Xeridun. They had to assume that the entire population on the prison planet would be hostile. The location of the Gorene prisoners was still a mystery as well. Although the intelligence unit believed it knew where the central prisoner processing facility was located, the intended fate of the Gorene prisoners was uncertain.

There were too many unknowns for Roman to be happy with the situation.

Members of the ground team had been selected for a variety of

reasons. Only one of them, Adoth Havenshire, had any experience in covert ground operations, having been part of an intelligence unit during the Armedia Queensway campaign. Trained as pilots instead of ground troops, such experience among the officers at ar-1 was in short supply.

All of them had received some form of basic ground training, but these skills had never been put to use in actual battle. Roman and Blois could only guess at how each of the team members would respond in this situation. They could only hope that they were right about who they chose.

Roman had one glimmer of hope. Quark had stuck a cryptic message inside Roman's helmet stating that help might be found among the residents of Xeridun. Roman didn't know how the Xeridun criminals could help him, but he'd accept it if they did. After he read the message, the white paper turned black, triggered by the heat of his fingers.

Flash paper was often used by the intelligence officers, as it immediately destroyed itself. He was lucky he'd seen it before putting on his helmet, since the heat from his head would have blackened the message before he'd had a chance to read it.

As Roman turned a corner near the shuttle bay, he almost ran into Heh. He was surprised to see her angry expression.

"Where do you think you're going without me, Roman?"

"Xeddun. I couldn't take everybody.

"Kayla said she's going with you. So is Kara Helmar. How many other women are on this mission?"

"That's all of them:

"You've been avoiding me ever since the briefing. Is it because I'm not invited?"

Roman sighed. "We're not going to a party, Heh. This is a ground assault: 'Then why didn't you ask me to go? You know I had Special Forces training, even though I decided to become a pilot later on."

"Well, you're needed elsewhere. We can't assign you to everything: "But I have training for this kind of operation, which is more than I can say for some of your team members. Or is it that you want some private time with Brool?"

"You can't be in two places at once, Hela. You're assigned to lead the defense of the Mooris space dock;" Roman ignored the Brool comment, hoping she'd drop it as a ridiculous notion.

"I want to go with you, Roman. You need me?"

Yes, I need you, but not on this mission."

Hela looked down at her feet. "You shouldn't let your personal feelings influence my assignments. I'm qualified to land on Xeridun.

Roman lifted her chin with his right hand so he could look into her eyes. You're also qualified to lead the defense of Moods. If the Alliance gets past Mooris, they'll find ar-1, and we won't have a base to land on when we return from Xeridun. Do you see how important that is? It's just as dangerous as the Xeridun mission."

"You should have assigned Lawton to Mooris.

Lawton had to lead the strike group on the Xeridun perimeter.

Hela put her right hand on his forearm."I don't care. I want to go with you, Roman."

"Why are you in such a rush to get killed?"

I realized something on my last mission; said Hela, unable to look at Roman directly."I want to be with you all the time. That way, if we get killed, we have a better chance of going together.

Roman couldn't meet her eyes either."I understand what you're saying, but it doesn't make any sense. If you were in my position, I think you'd be trying to protect me as much as you could. I'd love to be with you all the time, but not if it increases the chance of losing you."

Hela put her arms around Roman's waist and pressed herself firmly up against him."I can't change your mind?"

"Not right now. Maybe next time."

"I must be losing some of my feminine wiles if you can say no that easily.

Roman smiled and stroked her dark hair. "Believe me, it's never easy to say no to you. In fact, I think this is the first time I've been able to manage it."

Hela cocked her head as she thought back."You know, I think you're right." She kissed him, then took a step back and saluted. "You're out of my crosshairs this time, Commander Alexandria, but don't let it happen again."

Roman returned her salute. "Try not to get lost on your way back this time, Selrase. Tardiness will result in a note for your personnel file.

Hela shook her arms in an unconvincing display of fear.

"Look at me, I'm frightened!" "And I might have to punish you," said Roman, shaking his index finger at her.

Hela waggled her eyebrows and gave him a sexy smile.

"Now you're talking."

The bulky form of Shyke Samsó appeared at the end of the corridor near the shuttle bay. His helmet was under his arm. "Ah, there you are, sir. We're all ready to leave."

Roman cleared his throat. "Very good, Samsó."

"I'll do as you ordered, sir. You just remember to keep an eye on Brool," said Hela, as she gave Roman a quick salute and walked off down the corridor.

Roman spent a happy moment watching Hela walk away, wondering briefly about her Brool remark. Then he jogged the rest of the distance to the shuttle bay for the ride out to the captured Tancred freighter.

fiSCALON RIFT--SECTOR V--XERIDUN

Roman felt uneasy as the shuttle left the former Tancred freighter in orbit around Xeridun. He didn't like not being able to fly the shuttle himself, though he couldn't do that and jump out with his infiltration team. The loss of control bothered him. He'd already had to trust the Gorene freighter pilot all the way from ar-1 to Xeridun, through an active battle zone, in the hope that they would arrive without getting blown up by a Mazuma patrol ship. Without his own hands on the ship's controls, he felt utterly defenseless. The lack of windows in the shuttle's cabin only made it worse. He couldn't verify for himself that the Mazuma threats had been eliminated.

Roman watched as his team members prepared themselves for the drop to the surface of the prison world. The five of them moved in silence, subdued by thoughts of the coming jump and the events that would follow. As some checked their equipment against the inventory list, others readied their repeller chute units, reassuring themselves that the chutes had a reasonable chance of opening on the way down to the planet's surface. They were bringing enough food and equipment to survive against a small army for three days, even though they might only be on the surface of Xeri-dun for about twelve standard hours, if everything went well.

The freighter and its shuttle would wait in orbit for Roman's retrieval signal. The shuttle would not land due to the hazardous nature of the local inhabitants. There would be little point in arranging a comfortable arrival for the ground team if the shuttle were to be captured or destroyed in the process. Therefore, each team member would jump from the hovering shuttle at ten thousand feet above

Xeridun's surface. The laser ranging units in their chutes would trigger each person's repellot field at the proper altitude, providing each of them with a soft landing.

Kara Helmar was the first to suit up. The combat environment suit was made of a form-fitting, reflective material that would deflect a low power or glancing laser hit. In the event of a solid object striking the suit, the flexible fabric would harden in an instant to protect the wearer from the impact. When necessary, the suit could be pressurized. Heating and cooling tubes were woven into the inner layers of the material to keep the occupant comfortable over a wide range of temperatures. All bodily fluids were recycled by a small unit at the base of the spine to generate drinking water, which was stored in pockets throughout the suit for emergency use. Gases inside the suit were also filtered and recycled.

Horus Klep, the smallest member of the team, had easily slipped through the straps and attached the repellot chute to the back of his suit. Samsa had strapped Klep's equipment beneath the chute, then moved on to help Helmar with her load. Since the surface of Xeridun was almost all white, Klep had slipped into his camouflage gear, composed of a white coverall and a white helmet that locked into the suit's collar.

The hulking bulk known as Adoth Havenshire loomed over Klep and tapped the top of his helmet. Klep looked up at Havenshire and opened his faceplate so he could hear what the blonde giant had to say in his booming bass voice.

This is being your first jump, yes?"

That's right," said Klep. As usual, he was having a hard time trying to place Havenshire's accent and his creative use of the language.

'You are going to be hitting the ground very hard, yes?

Please be trying not to be landing on Adoth, okay?"

Uh, sure. Why do you say that?"

Havenshire tapped Klep's white coverall where it covered the repellot chute. Klep looked around at the others and noticed that he was the only one actually wearing the white coverall. It slowly dawned on him that perhaps he'd been a bit premature in getting completely dressed for the mission.

"Let me guess," said Klep, indicating his coverall. "I don't put this on until we're on the ground."

That is being entirely up to you, Horus. But if you are covering up your chute with the camouflage, you will surely make a big impression on the ground when you land: 'Thanks for the 'tip,

Havenshire." Klep quickly removed the coverall and bundled it into his pack as the others were doing. q'm glad you noticed."

Havenshire barked a laugh."Oh, I am thinking we all no-riced, but it was polite to wait and be seeing if you would be figuring it out on your own."

"I see. Thanks," said Klep, feeling like an idiot.

"Not a problem being. Perhaps you will be doing something similar for me soon in time."

Havenshire turned around to allow Kayla Brool to help strap on his equipment pack, which was the heaviest of all.

She handled the weight of the pack as if she could have carried it hundreds of kilometers herself.

As Roman moved through the shuttle double-checking the power condition and placement of everyone's repellot chutes, he moved them into a neat line by the rear door of the shuttle. When they were over the target zone, the clamshell doors would open and they would each walk down the ramp to step off and plummet toward the surface of Xeridun.

First in line was Adoth Havenshire, the experienced jumper in the group, who would hit the ground first so as to avoid endangering the others by landing on them with his great bulk. The second jumper was the statuesque Kayla Brool, whose long brown hair was tucked neatly into the back of her helmet. Roman noted that she seemed quite calm about the jump. The sturdy Shyke Samso was next in line, tightening the straps that held his equipment pack.

Samso also gave the impression that this was the sort of thing he did every day. Kara Helmar was next; she seemed calm except that she was breathing hard and staring at the ceiling. Finally, Horus Klep was trying to distract himself by .looking at the reflection of his face on the left sleeve of his environment suit.

Roman brought up the rear, where he could keep an eye on the rest of them in case anything went wrong. They were on the night side of the planet, but the two moons in the sky would provide more than enough light. Roman could track their reflective suits with the night-vision system in his helmet's faceplate.

The sound of the door buzzer broke the tense silence, then the clamshell doors opened with a smooth motion, revealing only darkness swirling with windblown snow. The ramp extended out into the black void as if it were a diving board over a backyard pool.

Havenshire looked over his shoulder and nodded at the rest of the group.It's been being a real pleasure knowing all of you people indeed: "Same here; said Roman, marveling that Havenshire's voice still managed

to boom over the environment suit's radio.

Most voices sounded thin and nasal through the tiny speakers in the helmets. "And we look forward to seeing you safely on the ground. So, if you don't mind, you're holding up traffic."

Havenshire grinned, waved, and took a running jump down the ramp. As his body vanished from view, Brool glanced back at Roman. "Are you sure we're over the drop zone? I'd hate to think I was following Adoth into the mouth of an active volcano or something: Roman pointed at the blinking green light over their heads. "Unless our shuttle pilot is working for the enemy, we should be hovering dead center over the target."

"An unfortunate choice of words, but I'm happy to pitch my body out into space at your command; said Brool, taking four quick steps and doing exactly that.

Sams0 shrugged at Roman, walked down the ramp, and hopped out of sight.

Kara Helmar was still staring at the ceiling, as if she wasn't aware of the activity around her.

"Kara? It's your turn," said Roman.

When she didn't respond, Roman gently placed a hand on her shoulder and shook it. Helmar looked at him with wide eyes.

"Are you okay, Kara?"

"Well, no, not exactly," she said. "It's safe to do this, right?"

"I mean, these repellor chutes actually work?"

"They'd better; said Roman, "or I'll get really ticked off: "Have you used them before?"

"Hundreds of times. Never had a problem," he lied. In fact, he'd used repellor chutes on exactly two previous occasions. They had their idiosyncracies, but they worked.

That seemed to reassure her. "Okay: Roman lifted his hand from Helmar's shoulder. She took ten small steps and stopped at the edge of the ramp, straining to see anything in the darkness below.

"How long of a drop is it?"

"About ten thousand feet; said Roman. "No big deal. It's as easy as falling off a log:

"What a strange expression," she said.

"I heard it somewhere a long time ago."

Helmar nodded, then bent over at the waist. Roman was tempted to rush forward and push her off the ramp, but managed to restrain himself.

Roman looked at Klep, who was patiently waiting his turn. "Horus, would you mind?"

The sound of Roman's voice startled Klep, who also seemed quite tense. "Sir?"

'Jump with Helmar. Just don't fall with her. Push off early:
Klep nodded and moved down the ramp to stand beside Helmar. Roman's request actually gave him something to do, so he felt better about his impending doom. Klep reached out and touched her shoulder.

Helmar swatted at his arm. "Don't push!"

'I'm not pushing.

Helmar took another swat at Klep but lost her balance.

With a squeak, she vanished from sight.

"Good work, Klep:

Klep shrugged. "I didn't do anything."

"Never mind. Get moving. We can't stay up here all night.

'Yes, sir' said Klep, stepping out into the void.

Roman was alone. He checked that his pack was securely attached, walked down the ramp, and switched on his night-vision system. The blackness was replaced with a greenish glow of amplified light, showing the rest of his group plummeting toward the surface of Xeridun. No matter what happened, they were committed to this mission, and Roman was responsible for their lives.

Roman took two deep breaths and dove off the ramp into the darkness.

CHAPTER 12 ASCALON RIFT---SECTOR V--XERIDUN

Roman had experienced weightlessness many times, but he preferred to have the sensation within the comforting confines of a Gorene fighter. When he had a choice, he preferred the safe artificial gravity of a Gorene base, although he did enjoy the stimulating head effects generated by high-G maneuvers in his fighter. The ten thousand foot descent through the darkness seemed to take forever, and he had to keep looking down to reassure himself that the surface of the planet wasn't getting too close too soon. He had attempted to count the other team members below him several times, but he could never find more than three at once.

One of the missing persons was probably Havenshire, the first to jump, who could already be on the ground. Roman certainly didn't want to think about the possibility of having lost one of his team members so early in the mission.

Despite all his faith in the technology, Roman was relieved when he felt the sudden pressure of the repellor chute slowing his descent. Having continually measured the separation between Roman and the surface of the planet with its laser range finder, the chute's little computer brain had decided it was time to slam on the brakes if its human cargo was to survive the landing. It had already made a number of calculations on the way down, adjusting its timing according to gravitational effects, wind velocity, surface texture, atmospheric density, and other factors that could make the difference between a perfect landing or a messy impact for Roman. Early models of the repellor chutes had also been given the ability to talk to their passengers: announcing the altitude and other factors to keep the passenger informed during freefall, but this had proved to be so disconcerting that the talking feature was removed from later models.

The chute's buzzer notified Roman that his landing was about to take place. He quickly bent his knees and put his feet together, but the landing in the snow was quite gentle. He switched off the chute by slapping the quick-release clasp on his chest, only to drop another two feet into the soft snow, pitching forward onto his face. The laser range finders still had occasional problems judging the depth of snowy surfaces, which was why Roman now found himself face down on the snow.

Roman mused that this was not the best possible defensive posture if hostile forces were nearby.

A large hand gripped Roman's right arm and hauled him to his feet.

"Your chute tricked you too, I am seeing," said Haven-shire. "Mine was dumping me much in four snowy feet."

"We'll send nasty letters to the manufacturer when we get back; Roman promised. "Did the others get down okay?"

"All are being down except for Klep. We are not seeing him.

Roman frowned. "Klep is missing?"

Roman turned slowly and awkwardly in the snow, making a full scan of the horizon. Visibility was limited, even with his night vision. The wind was blowing the dry, powdery snow into deep drifts, any of which could obscure Klep's body from Roman's view.

"Not seeing?" Havenshire asked.

Roman toggled his suit radio switch to the team broadcast position. "Klep, can you hear me?"

"Yes, sir."

"Where are you?"

"I'm not sure. I don't think I've landed yet."

"You don't think you've landed? You jumped before I did," said Roman.

Sorry, sir. I'm still in the air."

It didn't make any sense. Klep had to be on the ground.

Roman looked up at the sky, wishing the snow would stop so he could get a clear view. They appeared to be on a flat rocky surface, covered in snow, that was unobstructed by trees or other vegetation.

"Havenshire, where did everyone else come down?"

Havenshire gestured toward the north. "Over that way."

Roman took several steps north, trying to get used to the unstable feel of the snow under his boots. He scanned the sky again and caught a glimpse of a dark shape suspended overhead.

"Klep?"

Sir?"

"You still haven't reached the ground?"

Klep cleared his throat. "No, sir."

"I think I've spotted you. I'm standing about twenty feet directly beneath you."

"If you say so, sir. I can't see a thing.

Have you got your night-vision system turned on?"

No. I forgot," said Klep. There was a brief pause. "There?"

"Can you see me?" Roman switched on the tiny flashlight on his right wrist and waved at Klep.

"Yes, if you're the one with the light.

Brool and Samsó walked up beside Havenshire.

"What's going on?" Brool asked.

"Klep is being hanging in sky; said Havenshire.

Samsó was surprised. "How?"

"Being a chute problem would be my guessing."

"Blasted rangefinders, said Samsó. Can't trust them.

Klep kicked his feet. "What should I do?"

"You're only twenty feet up," said Roman. Hit your release.

"I can't! I'll break my legs!"

"You won't break your legs. We're standing in deep snow," said Roman.

"Come on," said Samsó. "Stop whining and break your legs like a man, Klep. We don't have time to build a house here.

"Just bend your knees and keep your feet together, said Roman.
"You'll be fine.

"Okay. Coming down said Klep.

Roman took a few steps back. A moment later, Klep plunged into the snow and disappeared.

Roman started toward the Klep-shaped hole in the snow.

"Klep?"

Brool stepped over and peered into the hole. {rneredid he go?

"I think my legs are broken, said Klep.

Roman knelt next to the hole and looked down. "Stop fooling around and get up here,"

"I'm serious," said Klep. "I can't move my legs. My feet hit something hard. A rock, maybe. And I can't see: Roman turned on his wrist light. Klep had somehow found a deep fissure

in the snow, and Roman could see the top of his shiny helmet about ten feet down in the shaft of light.

"Okay, I can see you, Klep. We'll be right with you.

Havenshire lay down on his chest in the snow next to Roman and dropped the end of a rope down to Klep. "To be grabbing rope, Klep.

Klep felt around until he had the end of the rope in his gloved hand. "Got it:

We're going to haul you up; said Roman."Ready?"

'If you're giving me a choice, no. I'm afraid to move my legs.

Samsó sighed heavily."Oh, let's just leave him here.

Helmar walked up beside Roman. She was carrying two repello chutes."I heard Klep say his legs were broken, so I thought these might come in handy. If we use two together, the chutes might hold Klep up off the ground enough so that we can tow him along behind us.

"Like a balloon,said Samsó. He'll make a good target that way.

"It's either that or we leave him here,said Roman.

Havenshire hauled Klep out of the hole, then stood and began coiling the rope as Klep lay like a beached fish. From the way Klep was gritting his teeth, they could see he was feeling a lot of pain.

Roman gently ran his hands along Klep's lower legs.

They felt like they were broken. "Klep, can you activate your painkillers?"

"How do I do that?"

"Use the tongue switch on the left side of your helmet and press down.

"Got it. You're not going to leave me here, are you?"

"Not while I'm in charge. Helmar had a good idea. We'll just tow you along behind us.

"You'll make a dandy balloon,said Samsó.

"We can't leave him here," said Roman. "It's too dangerous.

For all we know, the locals might dismember Klep if they found him."

Klep smiled briefly."That doesn't sound so bad.

"Hmm,said Roman. "Sounds like the painkillers are working."

"Very nicely. Lovely things, those painkillers,said Klep.

"And the nanobots in the painkillers should start repairing your broken bones pretty soon,said Brool.I love those little guys. I broke my hand once, and the nanobots had it back to normal within a few days."

Helmar and Havenshire put Klep into his white coveralls, then strapped the two repellor chutes to Klep's back. When they were switched on, the chutes were confused enough by the presence of a second repellor field that they gave Klep an extra lift, leaving him suspended about a foot off the ground.

Havenshire tied one end of a rope around Klep's waist and attached the other end to one of the straps on his backpack.

"All set; said Havenshire."You won't be able to drift away now. I'll keep an eye on you."

I feel good said Klep."What planet are we on again?"

"Never mind; said Roman."Just relax and we'll take care of you.

As the rest of the team started climbing into their camouflage snowsuits, Roman slogged through the snow to the top of a rock outcropping, where he did a slow scan of the terrain.

The night vision system revealed a sparse landscape covered in dirty snow, sloping gradually away from their position on the side of a mountain. Looking across longer distances, Roman could detect the toxic gases, which looked like drifting plumes of smoke, blowing across the terrain. He had no interest in removing his helmet. Not only was the atmosphere highly unpleasant, but the instnanents below his helmet's warm faceplate told him the outside air temperature was well below freezing.

Far down the slope from the team's position, the terrain climbed again to a volcanic cone with jagged walls of black rock showing through the snow on its sides. Roman used the telescopic magnification and enhancement abilities of his faceplate to examine the cone. Perched atop the old volcano was the low gray dome of the central processing facility, the first stop for new arrivals to the prison world. The dome seemed to be warm enough that snow wouldn't stick to it.

As Roman understood it, special inmates were kept inside the dome for interrogation, while the average criminal was implanted with a tiny, subcutaneous tracking device before being released into the environment. With any luck, the Gorene prisoners would still be somewhere inside that dome. If Roman's team could release the Gorenese

soon enough perhaps they could avoid the interrogation and torture phase of their stay.

Stretching down the sides of the volcano in neat lines, a string of cubicles, dearily military in design, housed the military support forces for the central facility. Trapped on a prison world along with the criminals, those in control had no intention of succumbing to attacks by the inmates. The sheer quantity of security forces seemed formidable.

Roman spun around as he heard a soft crunch of snow beside him. Kayla Brool was staring off into the distance toward the prison dome.

"Couldn't you knock or something?" Roman asked.

"How are we supposed to get our prisoners out of that place?"

"No problem. We get inside, find our friends, release them, and escort them back to the pick-up zone; said Roman.

Kayla looked at Roman with one eyebrow raised. Did you think of that all by yourself?.

"Yes, I did.

"It's quite a plan. You commanding officer types make it all seem so easy. I can certainly see why you're in charge.

Roman chuckled."If I didn't know you so well, I'd think you were being sarcastic, Brool.

"Imagine that she said, making a wry face. Then she gave him an exaggerated wink, leaving him to wonder what it meant.

Roman couldn't help liking her. She was always calm and competent, and she had a good attitude about being asked to do three impossible things before breakfast. She went back to examining the approaches to the dome.

"We have one big advantage,Roman said to her."It's a prison, which means the builders were more interested in keeping people in than keeping them out.

"That's encouraging. We won't have any problem getting inside, but then we'll be trapped."

"I didn't say they were going to greet us with open arms and surrender.

"Do you see the size of those barricades at the base of the volcano?"

Roman smiled. "Some people will go to great lengths to protect their privacy. Consider it a challenge.

"Oh, I know it's a challenge. I just want to feel as if there's some kind of method to your madness. You do have a plan, right?"

"Of course I have a plan. What kind of a commanding officer would I be without a plan?"

Brool nodded. "Okay. I just wanted to make sure.

Brool walked back toward the rest of the team. Roman resumed his study of the dome and the obstacles that lay ahead. He needed to come up with a plan.

ASCALON RIFT---SECTOR II--MOORIS REPAIR DOCK The glittering metal spiderweb, known as the Mooris space repair dock, flashed repeatedly as it was struck by Tancred torpedoes. Many of the Gorene ships docked at Mooris had already been destroyed by the attackers, so now they were demolishing the dock itself. The Tancreds were concentrating on the space dock while the Zemun ships were flying cover, keeping the Gorenese occupied in dogfights.

Hela Selrase had been working hard as wave after wave of new attackers presented themselves. She had been on patrol with Marsala Talmun and Lanthor Merlock for hours before the Alliance ships had started their attack, which had started almost five hours earlier. Hela had lost count of how many kills she had achieved during this mission. The constant tension had made her neck sore.

Hela had destroyed several of the Zemun Harbinger ships. She learned quickly that her main advantage lay in the speed of her fighter, since the Zemun ships also had good maneuverability, shielding, and weapons. So far, she had not had to absorb any hits from the Zemun hellfire weapon, which temporarily neutralized the shields of the victim's ship to make it easier to kill.

Gorene losses were running high, despite their excellent kill ratio, which was about ten Alliance ships to every one Gorene. There were just too many Zemun and Tancred attackers.

All of the pilots under Hela's command were performing at peak efficiency.

Hela's communications monitor bleeped, then glowed with the image of a Zemun commander. The wide eyes and gaping mouth gave the impression of surprise, but Hela knew from the intelligence images that this was the normal Zemun expression. This was the first Zemun she'd seen in person.

"The greetings of Anjou to you, Gorene commander.

Hela nodded. "The same to you, sir.

"I am Vonric Blacklost, military commander to High Father Krugahad

Longmoor. You have the unfortunate pleasure of my scrutiny at this moment, since I am aboard the Crillee, first Zemun dreadnought of the line and vanquisher of many foes.

"Nice to meet you, Commander Blacklost. I'm Hela Selrase. Where are you?"

"I am not fooled by your clever tricks, Commander Hela Selrase. I will not tell you where I am. Nor will you find me on your tactical scans."

"Suit yourself. By the way, I'm not a commander. I'm a pilot.

"Ah, you seek to trick me again. I know you are the one giving the orders in this sector. Do not underestimate my intelligence.

Hela smiled."I guess the rumors are true. The Zemuns are much more sophisticated than the Tancreds. I see there is no way for me to trick you.

Vonric nodded.The Zemuns have always been superior to the Tancreds. You are a good judge of character and a good loser. It's a pity that you're also an infidel invader.

"We prefer to think of ourselves as benevolent guardians of civilization. We come to spread knowledge and culture to your people.

¶onric rolled his eyes."Even if you have to kill us to make your point?"

"This is a Gorene space dock you're attacking; said Hela.

'I like the way your eyes move," said Vonric. I believe you are also the female of your species. If you wish, you may join us and learn our ways before you judge whether your civilization is superior to that of those who follow Anjou.

She started to roll her eyes, then controlled the urge. She supposed she should be flattered that this Zemun had found her attractive. Of course, for all she knew about Zemun mating habits, Vonric may have made the same offer to every creature in the galaxy, male and female."No, thanks, but I appreciate the offer.

"I do not make it lightly, Commander Hela Selrase. I have fourteen litter mates... I believe you would call them 'wives,' and you could be number fifteen.

Hela snorted with a smile."I wasn't expecting a proposal from one of my enemies."

"Anjou moves in mysterious ways, Commander Hela Selrase.

Then again, Hela thought, she had wanted to contact the Zemuns.

She wasn't interested in becoming part of a harem, but she could learn their ways, teach them about the Gorenes, and exchange information. Perhaps it could be a first step to a peaceful resolution to the Ascalon Rift conflict.

After all, a dreadnought commander must be a highly placed military official.

She almost said yes, but she didn't want to leave Roman.

Even though her trust in the Gorene command structure had been badly shaken--if a man like Ferrand could reach the top, there had to be something wrong with the whole Gorene system--she wasn't ready to abandon it. She needed time to think before she made her final decision.

"What was your real reason for contacting me, Commander Blacklost?"

The Zemun jerked his head back and made gasping noises.

When he was finished, he looked at Hela again. "Excuse my amusement. I did not expect to meet a perceptive infidel.

"Thanks... I guess."

"We have received signal traffic between your base known as ar-1 and this space dock you identify as Mooris.

Since we are now aware of the existence of this ar-1 base, we intend to find it as soon as possible. Your base, and everyone on it, will be destroyed. This does not bother us, because Anjou made us in his image, and you look nothing like the beautiful Zemun form. However, Anjou can be merciful to those infidels who will listen to his words. I am offering you a chance to learn Anjou's way and carry his message to your people. Perhaps the light of Anjou can show the Gorenes the clear path away from the Ascalon Rift, in which we can all live in peace.

Hela was surprised. She had expected the Zemuns to be fanatical religious zealots who killed anyone who didn't agree with them. Vonric Blacklost was clearly not acting that way. Perhaps the Zemuns, by and large, were reasonable beings who just wanted to be left alone to worship their own deity. Even if the Gorenes felt right in doing so, they were still invading the Zemun territory and interfering with their religion. Hela didn't think that was right, though all of her ideological training told her otherwise.

"I will carry your message back to my people," said Hela.

"Will you learn Anjou's way, Commander Hela Selrase?"

Hela paused before answering. "I can't accept your invitation right

now, Commander Blacklost. I have responsibilities among my people. However, I will consider what you've said, and there's a chance I might change my mind. If I live long enough, perhaps we will speak again.

Blacklost nodded. "Well spoken. Let Anjou guide your hand: Thank you, Commander Blacklost.

The communications monitor went dark.

Alpha Guard Leader, this is Alpha Two, said Talmun.

Go ahead, Two.

Do you see what's happening on your tactical monitor?" Hela punched up her tactical display, then switched to a long range view. The attacking ships were starting to leave the area. She was impressed. The Zemuns were clearly not unthinking destroyers. Perhaps the Zemuns knew the meaning of mercy.

Black Eye, this is Alpha Guard Leader. Can you confirm bogie retreat?" The nasal voice of the Intruder pilot responded. Alpha Guard, Black Eye. We confirm. Did you start calling them names or something? They're all going home.

Hela blinked. "Just my natural charm, I guess.

Remind us not to annoy you, said Black Eye.

You should already know that by now. In any case, Alpha Guard will remain on station for a few minutes to make sure this isn't a trick. We can use the recharge time before we start back.

Affirm, alpha Guard. Your return vector two five nine." Two five nine, Alpha Guard out?

ASCALON RIFT--SECTOR VwXER1DUN

Roman's team had covered most of the distance to the prison dome, but he still didn't have a plan. Sitting on top of the volcanic cone, the dome seemed quite secure. Tromping through the deep snow, towing Klep along behind them as if he were an observation balloon, their progress was slow.

Roman was leading the group, looking back on occasion to make sure they were all still there. On his last casual glance over his shoulder, something didn't quite seem right, so he took a longer look. Helmar was bouncing along immediately behind Roman with just enough youthful energy to be annoying.

Samso, scowling at the snow, was a few paces behind her. Brool was in the middle, fully alert, scanning the horizon. Roman had placed her there because she'd been flirting with him and he couldn't concentrate. Behind her, Havenshire casually carried most of their

supplies, as well as towing Klep, who was currently hovering three feet off the ground. Bringing up the rear was the familiar face of Roman Alexandria, calmly walking along as if he'd lived on Xefidun all his life.

The Roman at the rear of the line smiled and waved at the Roman in the front of the line, who found this very disturbing.

Roman held up his hand to halt their progress. "I think we've got a problem.

Helmar's eyes widened. "What?"

"I don't see anything," said Brool.

Roman pointed at the second Roman, who smiled as they turned around to look at him.

"Okay," said Brool. "I see the problem.

"The people here look like you, sir" said Helmar.

Samso pointed his laser rifle at the second Roman. "I don't like the looks of him, sir. Do you want me to kill him?"

"No, let's talk to him first. He looks friendly," said Roman.

He wasn't sure why, but there was something about the newcomer's face that seemed trustworthy.

"I am a friend; said the second Roman. "My name is Copol: Roman nodded. "You're a Mazuma shapeshifter, I assume?"

"Correct. Excuse my appearance, but I noticed you were armed and I had no interest in being shot when I approached you."

"I understand. You're a prisoner here?"

"For over a year. Due to the widespread government corruption on my planet, honest beings such as myself are no longer welcome in the halls of power.

"So, you're not a criminal?"

"I'm innocent. I was framed by those who hate honest citizens. I made the mistake of trying to expose the thievery of high government officials.

"That'll get you thrown in jail every time," said Roman.

Roman was not surprised to hear Copol protest his innocence, since most criminals said they were innocent. However, Roman didn't really care so long as Copol could offer them some help.

"I thought I'd have some immunity since I was a government official myself," said Copol.

'Looks like you were wrong.

Copol nodded."I learned that lesson a little bit too late.

My supporters and I were sent here to keep us quiet."

"What was your position?"

"I was in charge of public works planning.

Not exactly a glamorous job, Roman thought, nor one a lying criminal would make up to impress someone. Maybe there was some truth to his story. "Would you mind explaining why you've contacted us?"

"My friends and I could use some transportation off this planet," said Copol."You obviously aren't from around here, so I thought maybe you could help."

"I've got news for you, Copol. We're Gorenese. We're the enemy.

Copol made a hand gesture to dismiss the thought."If the Mazuma government is your enemy, I'd say we're on the same side.

"Of course, you'd probably say anything to get off this planet. I know I would.

"An excellent point."

Kayla Brool stepped forward. "What I want to know is how you managed to find us. This seems like some sort of a trick to me.

"It wasn't hard to find you," said Copol."My friends and I are very well connected. We know all about how things work around here, and I monitored your approach by tapping into the command system. We also know that a group of Gorene prisoners landed two phases ago, so it was logical to expect a rescue attempt, especially when we heard the orbital containment field was down."

Roman was surprised."You say you tapped into the command system?"

"It's not hard when you know how', said Copol with a shrug.

"Hey," said Samso."If they saw us coming, then the military must have monitored our approach as well.

"Oh, yes. said Copol."They're expecting you.

"Perfect; said Roman. That's all we need."

Copol smiled."I'd like to point out that you have an advantage that the prison security force doesn't have."

"What's that?"

"Me," said Copol.

"And how is that an advantage?"

"I can help you rescue your people."

CHAPTER 13 ASCALON RIFT--SECTOR V--XERIDUN

The Mazuma known as Copol had, indeed, been in charge of public works for his government. Twenty years earlier, he had designed the central processing and security facility for the prison world known as Xeridun. When Xeridun's purpose was expanded to include the imprisonment of political prisoners and dissidents, as well as business rivals and merchants who were too successful, Copol had tried to expose the corruption in the higher levels of his government. Unfortunately, in the eyes of his superiors, Copol's opinions qualified him for imprisonment on Xeridun.

Considering the current population of Xeridun, representing every category of being from the races of the Ascalon Rift, it seemed that everyone qualified for imprisonment there. Always alert to marketing opportunities, the Mazumas soon realized that their prison planet could be a convenient solution for the governments of other civ'dizations as well as their own. The Mazuma government made it known that a small fee could remove criminals, dissidents, politicians, competitors, and other. problems from their homeworlds.

The handy Mazuma Problem Disposal Service would then place the prisoner in isolation on Xeridun, from which no escape was possible. Confident in their detention system, the Mazumas guaranteed that customers would never see their prisoners again, assuming that all fees were promptly paid. ' No one had ever asked for a refund.

As Roman questioned Copol further about his knowledge of their mission, Copol reluctantly filled in the last piece of the puzzle. A certain Gorene intelligence officer, a pirate recruit known as Captain Quark, was Copol's contact. Copol and his friends were part of the extended Gorene intelligence network. Not only had Quark supplied Copol with the knowledge that Roman's team was coming to Xeridun, but he had also given them the location of the drop zone, chosen partially because it was near Copol's base of operations.

That Admiral Shylo had not chosen to inform Roman of Copol's existence only enhanced the Mazuma's credibility, as well as the sensitive nature of the intelligence gathering operation on Xeridun. Now, with the orbital containment field disabled, the Mazuma spies wanted to be rescued. They had removed the tracking devices implanted in their bodies by the Xeridun authorities, so discovery wasn't a problem.

Copol was willing to help Roman with the rescue attempt to earn his way off Xeridun on the Gorene shuttle.

Copol certainly seemed to be telling the truth, Roman thought, but why was Quark suddenly popping up everywhere?

"How long have you known Captain Quark?"

Copol paused before answering. "You are Quark's friend, are you

not?"

"I guess I am, but I don't know him, very well, except that he knew my parents," Copol nodded. "I'm sure he's only trying to maintain his new identity,"

"New identity?"

"Other races find him more acceptable as the outrageously dressed pirate. They have less fear of a creature who makes them laugh."

Roman frowned. "I'm afraid I don't follow your meaning."

"I knew your Captain Quark when his name was Qoloo.

He is considered something of an eccentric among my people. And, as is true of many Mazumas, he does not like our government. He is a peaceful creature, opposed to war,"

"Hold on," said Roman, taken aback.

"You're telling me that Quark is a shapeshifter?"

"Only because he's a Mazuma citizen. One of his eccentricities is that he prefers to maintain only one identity.

When other Mazumas do that, it's because they're lazy.

Qoloo does it because he likes it. And his pirate appearance seems to work well in his profession, as I said."

Roman suddenly realized that he was developing several friends among the enemy. This disturbed him, partly because he knew he was supposed to report such contacts to his superiors, and he no longer wanted to do that. Command discouraged friendly relations with any of the enemy races, since they knew it was harder to kill friendly beings.

The popular view, although it was never formally stated, was that familiarity took away a pilot's killing edge. Pilots couldn't stop to think when their fingers were on the firing buttons. Roman had come to respect the Zemuns and the Mazumas, and he understood the Tancred's need to defend their homes. It made him wonder if this war, and all this killing, was even necessary.

Copol continued his analysis of their situation. The two standard approaches into the prison dome were guarded by Mazuma security forces and a variety of sophisticated defenses. Copol usually entered through the front gate by impersonating Homa Bolo, the fearsome Tancred warden, but that wouldn't work very well now, with Roman's team tagging behind.

However, Copol knew of an escape route that had been installed in the event of a disaster. A diagonal tunnel had been bored through the volcanic cone from its base to the dome's interior, where it connected

to the lowest level of the dome's central prisoner processing facility.

The base of the tunnel was concealed, but Copol had used it on two previous occasions. With his Xeridun tracking implant removed, and his ability to shapeshift, Copol felt secure in using that point of entry. This would serve as the access point for Roman's team, and they arrived there four hours later.

Before they went inside, Roman had to address some° thing that had been bothering him every since they met the friendly Mazuman. "Copol, I think it's about time you stopped looking like me. It could get to be a problem when the shooting starts: Copol made the soft barking noise that passed for a laugh among his people."As you wish, Commander Alexandria. I do not want to offend you.

Copol's facial features seemed to relax, then his skin began to flow and shift around on his head. The hair Roman recognized as his own receded into Copol's head, his nose got longer and wider, the lower part of his face thinned and narrowed, and the eyebrows formed into a single high ridge over narrow black eyes.

"Is this better?" Copol asked when the transformation was complete.

"Well, you're not quite as attractive as you were before; said Roman with a grin,"but you'll be much easier to identify now.

Copol activated the hidden door in the black rock face, which was a circular opening about six feet across. Roman turned to face Klep and Havcshirc. "Okay, Klep, it's your turn."

Havenshire maneuvered Klep's hovering form into the tunnel opening and proceeded to untie the rope that kept Klep from floating away. Klep had taped his laser pistol to his right glove so that he wouldn't drop it in the tunnel. He was feeling pretty woozy from the painkillers in his system, the nanobots continued their repairs on his broken legs, and he didn't want to disarm himself.

Roman patted Klep on the shoulder."You know what to do?"

"Float to the top of the tunnel and report back; said Klep.

"That's right. We'll be a short distance behind you. Think you can handle it?"

"Not a problem, sir. I'm not adding more painkillers until I've done my job up there.

"If you run into any problems, don't try to be a hero. Let us handle it.

Free of the rope, Klep released his grip on the rock wall and started floating up the tunnel.

"Klep okay being alone?" Havenshire asked, watching Klep disappear up the tunnel.

Roman nodded. "Copol says the tunnel comes out in the lowest detention area. If Klep doesn't run into any guards, he should be fine. They certainly won't be expecting anyone popping out of the floor.

The ascent up the slanted tunnel proved to be swift and easy, though they had to walk in a crouch. There were no steps, but the builders had thoughtfully provided a high-friction surface on the floor of the damp volcanic tube.

Klep reported back from the top of the tunnel--the approach was clear--and the team quickly followed. A heavy floor grille with an atmospheric seal blocked the exit, so Klep waited patiently for Havenshire to arrive and remove the obstacle.

The team was on the lowest level of the prison dome, which was the detention area reserved for special prisoners.

Black volcanic stone had been used to form the outer walls and floor of the large room, but metal plates formed the dividing walls and cell blocks. The dim light source on the ceiling was too high to be seen. Somewhere in the distance, a hissing noise provided a constant accompaniment to the staccato dripping of the water, which had created puddles on the floor. The team spread out around the room in silence, watching for guards, prisoners, or anyone else who might spot them.

Copol climbed a metal staircase to the top of one of the cell blocks, then beckoned for Roman to follow. Roman climbed the stairs carefully to avoid clanging them with his boots. At the top, he followed Copol out onto the heavy metal mesh that served as the roof of the cell block. The filthy cage beneath his feet was large enough to accommodate thirty prisoners, but there was no one in it.

The next cell held a small group of Tancreds in ragged clothes who were sleeping on the dirty floor. Some of them looked up as Roman and Copol passed overhead, but they showed little interest. Roman knew these Tancreds had to be special prisoners to remain confined in the prison dome; average prisoners were allowed to roam freely on the planet.

The third cell held eight Gorene pilots, all of whom seemed to be asleep.

Roman dropped to one knee and tapped lightly on the mesh. He didn't recognize any of the pilots, but he was happy to see them.

The tallest pilot had flaming red hair. He looked up and frowned at first, unsure of what was going on. He stood up for a closer look, and the light shining through the mesh formed a pattern on the man's

swollen and bruised face.

"Hey," said the red-haired man. His mouth dropped open in amazement as he recognized Roman's uniform.

Roman whispered, "I'm Sector Commander Roman Alexandria."

The man blinked, then saluted. "Wing leader Jasper Rouge at your service, sir."

"Would you be interested in leaving this place, Rouge?" Rouge looked down at the floor for a moment, then back up at Roman. "I'm not worthy to be rescued, sir, but I'm sure the others are ready to go."

"Why not you?"

"I'm their commanding officer, sir. I failed to defend the base, then I failed to protect my men once we were captured.

The lucky ones died first, but the stronger ones endured a great deal of torture before they were killed. Counting myself, nineteen pilots are all that's left of my command. I don't deserve to be rescued." Roman sighed. Blois had estimated fifty pilots were imprisoned on Xeridun. "I understand what you're saying, but there's nothing you could have done.

Tell that to my dead pilots," said Rouge, looking down again at the floor.

"I'm sorry we couldn't have gotten here sooner. Perhaps you'll feel differently once we get you off this planet.

Copol walked over to the next cell. He showed Roman.

ten fingers, followed by one more. A total of nineteen left, out of fifty taken, meant that the interrogators had been quite busy exterminating the Gorenese. Roman didn't understand why the prisoners had been captured in the first place, since it seemed that they'd been brought to Xeridun to be killed anyway. What did these pilots know that the alliance didn't seem to know already? Perhaps the prison staff was simply overzealous and sadistic, as Copol would probably agree, but there was no way to be certain.

Roman scrambled his helmet's comlink and issued instructions to his team. The Gorenese were released with quick laser shots that melted the locks on their cell doors.

Small explosive charges with timers were set on the other cells. The Gorenese would escape first, and a few minutes later the timers would set off the explosives, freeing everyone.

The confusion of a planet-wide escape should keep the prison military too busy to stop the Gorenese. The team carefully explained to

the other prisoners that the containment field around the planet had been removed and that they were being released by the Gorene Empire. They were free to steal whatever ships they could find to leave Xeridun.

This speech had been rehearsed by each member of the team before they left ar-1. To no one's surprise, the prisoners seemed eager to join in the Gorene escape plan.

Copol spoke to the Mazuma prisoners, telling them where to find several large transport ships that they could pilot to other worlds. Copol knew the Mazuma prisoners would quickly find a way to profit from the situation, probably by capturing the transports and charging high rescue fees to the prisoners they'd fly off the planet. The Gorenese hoped that these radicals and criminals--saved from lifetimes of horror on Xeridun by the Gorene Empire--would spread the word throughout the Alliance of their good intentions.

Before they left, Roman and Havenshire planted four City Buster bombs in the best spots they could find on the lowest level of the prison facility. Once the detonation codes and timers had been set, the final step involved the selection of a camouflage pattern and color from each bomb's computer. Roman selected "lampblack" for the color and rough volcanic rock" for the textured pattern. This active camouflage system enabled each bomb to blend in with its individual surroundings to avoid detection. After Roman had set each bomb, he had a hard time seeing it again.

The location for each mushroom-shaped bomb was chosen for the hardness of its surrounding materials. Hard material would help contain the blast enough to direct the force of the explosion toward the upper levels of the dome. The other prisoners were warned that the dome would be destroyed soon after the Gorenese left. The bombs placed by Roman and Havenshire were more than enough to vaporize the volcanic cone along with the prison dome. Two bombs would have been sufficient to do the job, but four bombs were less likely to fail or all be discovered. Given enough City Buster bombs, made from the same explosives as the dreaded Planet Buster missile warheads, the entire surface of a planet could be destroyed in one titanic blast. Even though the safety systems, with their interlocking codes, kept the bombs quite safe until they were armed, Roman felt much better as soon as he and Havenshire had removed the City Busters from their backpacks.

Samsa discovered a small weapons locker near the entrance to their detention level. A quick shot from his laser rifle gave them enough weapons to arm the Gorene prisoners, as well as leaving a few laser pistols behind for the use of the Alliance prisoners when they made their escape. Roman fully expected that a few of the prisoners, most likely the Tancreds, would go up the stairs instead of down the tunnel, in order to personally get even with prison security.

If they could get far enough before the bombs went off, there was a chance they could steal some of the security ships parked just

outside the main entrance. Roman wished them luck.

With her laser rifle at the ready, Kayla Brool led the first group of prisoners down the tunnel exit, some of whom were limping. Helmar and Samsu brought up the rear of the group.

Since Havenshire had broken the tunnel's atmospheric seal when they arrived, the stronger toxic gases from outside had been seeping into the detention room on a current of warmer air from the tunnel. The air quality had not been great inside the dome before, but now it was worse. Some of the prisoners were coughing already. Due to their limited supplies, the team had only been able to bring a few rebreather masks to filter the atmosphere for the Gorene prisoners. They would be able to tolerate the atmosphere for short periods by sharing the rebreather masks, but Roman knew they would be much better off if no time was wasted in the journey to the shuttle pickup zone.

Roman wanted to wait before releasing the next group of prisoners, but he was acutely aware of the destructive power soon to be unleashed, so he carefully watched the timer in his helmet display.

Hovering several feet above the floor, Klep was now tied to Roman so that he wouldn't drift away. "Sir?"

Yes, Klep?"

I think someone's coming this way. I can see the tops of two heads; said Klep, peering into the distance.

Roman could hear footsteps on the stone floor.

"We've been too lucky so far; said Copol. "I have an idea.

Okay; said Roman.

"The Tancred guards won't bother Homa Bolo, the prison commander. I've done it before.

"Great idea, but what if they're Mazuma guards? Won't they be able to tell that you're not the real thing?"

Copol smiled. "Maybe if they get too close. We just won't let that happen, right?"

"Right." Roman blinked as Copol's face started to enlarge, developing a double chin.

As it turned out, they were Tancred guards. As soon as they spotted Homa Bolo standing beside Roman, Havenshire, and the Gorene prisoners, they drew to attention, a little frightened.

"What are you looking at?" Copol asked the guards. His voice was harsh.

Nothing, Commander," said the first Tancred, averting his gaze from Copol's fierce eyes.

Roman glanced at his timer, showing forty-five minutes before the bombs exploded. It would take about fifteen minutes to get down the tunnel and fifteen to get safely away from the volcanic cone. The Alliance prisoners would be released from their cells with half an hour left for their escape.

It was time to leave.

"Why are these prisoners out of their cells?" asked the second Tancred guard. To him, all Gorenes looked alike.

I let them out,said Copol.

is there any problem, sir?" asked the second guard.

The first guard suddenly noticed Klep floating overhead.

His rifle started to swing into firing position."Who's that?"

Havenshire brought his laser pistol out from behind his back and fired at the first Tancred guard. The guard fell over with a smoking hole in his chest as the other guard threw himself sideways to avoid Havenshire's second shot. As the guard rolled, he aimed his rifle at Roman, but Klep fired his pistol first, putting a smoking crease into the guard's skull.

They didn't know if the guard was dead or not, but the shot had put him out of action.

Keeping one eye on the unconscious guard, Roman gestured for Havenshire to step into the tunnel."We're running out of time. Move." Havenshire ducked and entered the tunnel, followed by the Gorene prisoners. Rouge looked at Roman. "Sir? It might be a good idea if I stayed behind to watch for more guards. If they figure out we're in that tunnel before we've reached the bottom, they could pick us off with one or two laser shots." "Thanks for the offer,said Roman, about that's my job.

You're my responsibility now, and we can't afford to lose any more pilots. We need your skills to defend ar-1:

Sir, I really think..." 'I understand how you feel, Rouge, but I'm not giving you a choice. Get in that tunnel and keep moving." Rouge nodded, but he didn't sound happy when he responded.

'Yes, sir."

Roman turned to Copol."You're next?"

"As you wish." Copol's features flowed as his face and body changed back into his normal appearance, and he stepped into the tunnel.

Roman looked up at Klep, whose eyes were half shut.

Roman assumed he'd had another dose of painkillers. "You awake, Klep? Is this all too boring for you?" "Hmm? No, sir," said Klep, blinking his eyes. "I'm right with you."

"More than that, you're attached to me. It looks like you'll be bringing up the rear this time, since I can't figure any way to push you down the tunnel ahead of me."

"Fine with me, sir. I'll watch your back." "Try to remain alert. If you see anything coming after us, let me know?"

"Will do, sir," said Klep, trying to sound more alert. Roman hoped Klep could stay awake, since his floating form would be blocking Roman's view back up the tunnel.

Roman pulled Klep's line in a bit more and secured it before stepping into the tunnel. Before starting the descent, he tried to plug the tunnel opening the way it had been when they arrived. That way, if anyone gave the emergency exit a casual glance from inside the detention room, they wouldn't notice the difference right away. When the Alliance prisoners opened the exit again to make their escapes, it would no longer matter if the guards saw what was happening.

Roman wanted to be long gone by then.

By the time Roman was halfway down the tunnel, his knees were aching from the crouch required for the descent.

They were making good progress, but Roman was sure the limping prisoners were having a difficult time.

Brool reported that her group had reached the bottom of the tunnel, and Roman told them to continue moving toward the shuttle pickup zone.

Havenshire's voice boomed into Roman's helmet. "We are being having a thing here, sir?"

Roman rolled his eyes. "A thing? What do you mean?"

"One of the prisoners is being on the tunnel floor. Holding his leg, he is?"

"Can you reach him, Havenshire?"

"I am trying that now, sir. One person is being between us, but we are together as we work on this: Roman could see some commotion ahead"

in the tunnel, but there were too many prisoners blocking his way. He checked his timer and felt his stomach lurch.

'How's it coming?' Roman asked, trying to sound calm.

'I am having reach of the fallen prisoner now,' said Havenshire. 'He is having the trouble standing again, so being we may have to drag him down the rest of the way.'

Well; said Roman, 'if it's a choice between dragging him along or dying in this tunnel, I say start dragging.'

We will be doing this, said Havenshire.

They started moving again. Roman avoided looking at the timer in his helmet display. The prisoners were maddeningly slow. He began to wonder if one City Buster bomb wouldn't have been better, since the blast radius would have been smaller. In any case, it was too late now. They would have to run fast and hope for the best. After coming this far, Roman had no intention of failing now.

Havenshire, how far are you from the bottom?' Maybe it's being another five minutes, sir: Roman was afraid he'd say that. We don't have five minutes, hAdoth?

We are hurrying our best; said Havenshire.

Roman stopped to examine the high friction surface they were walking on. He poked his finger into it, then scratched it with his finger. It was black and spongy, like a rubberized coating. It did an excellent job of preventing their boots from slipping on the steep surface.

HavenshireV Sir?' 'Put your laser rifle on the lowest setting and melt the walkway In front of you:

Melting? We'U being slipping on it:

Exactly. We don't have enough time to walk the rest of the way down. We need to slide.

Havenshire hesitated. 'We could all being hurt when hitting the bottom we do.

'We could really get hurt if those bombs go off while we're still in this tunnel;' said Roman.

ryes, sir:

Roman saw the flash of Havenshire's laser rifle, silhouetting the people ahead. It was possible that the laser would do more than melt the walkway, burning its way into the volcanic rock even when it was on its lowest setting. Or the melted surface might burn them horribly on the way down. Or they could pick up too much speed, breaking a lot of bones when they hit the bottom. However, Roman didn't have any better

ideas. The rifle flashes stopped a moment later.

"Okay said Havenshire."The floor is being shiny all the way down being. I will be giving it a try.

"Before you go,said Roman,"tell everyone to wait five seconds apiece before they slide.

I will be doing this, sir.

Roman sensed that there was some confusion up ahead.

He glanced at the timer again."HavenshireV Havenshire responded in a higher, bouncing voice. I'm down going?Then, a few seconds later, his voice had returned to normal. I am in the snow sitting, sir.

"Any problem getting there?" Roman asked.

My butt is hurting,said Havenshire.

We can survive that," said Roman. "As the pilots reach you, get them started following Brool. Tell them to follow the tracks from Brool's group. If they can run, tell them to do it.

i'll be telling them that.

Roman suddenly remembered that Klep was attached to his suit."Klep? Have you been following our conversation?"

"Yes, sir," said Klep.

"I'm going to pull you down as close to me as I can. We don't want you bouncing around too much against the tunnel walls, right?"

I was hoping you'd think of that, sir.

Roman stepped forward behind Copol, who had moved up to the shiny section of the tunnel floor. The other prisoners had all gone. Roman winced when he saw the numbers on his timer. At a dead run, they had little chance of leaving the blast zone now. Copol glanced over his shoulder at Roman."Good luck, Commander Alexandria." Thanks, Copol, but I'd appreciate it if you'd get out of my way." Copol barked his amusement, then slid down the tunnel at high speed. Roman was anxious to see if the rest of the group was laying in a big pile at the base of the tunnel. Anyone who wasn't capable of running from the area would have to be left behind.

Copol is being in the snow,' said Havenshire. He ran into one of the pilots, but they seem okay.

Roman wasted no time. He quickly sat down on the glazed surface after pulling Klep close to his back.Clear the way! I'm coming down with Klep!"

As he started his slide, with the volcanic rock zooming just inches from his helmet, Roman heard a strange commotion behind them in the tunnel. It was too late to see what was happening, but expecting a bright flash and worse, Roman cringed and closed his eyes.

CHAPTER 14 ASCALON RIFr--SECTOR VmXERIDUN

There was no bright flash before Roman reached the end of the tunnel. But there was a lot of yelling behind. With his eyes closed, he was startled as he shot out of the opening and slammed into the snow. Klep plowed into the back of Roman's helmet, knocking him forward for a hard landing on his face.

Roman was lifted to his feet by Havenshire, who started running with him in silence. Klep kept bouncing against Roman's back. The snow had been trampled flat by the many feet before them, and they were able to cover a lot of ground before the dome exploded.

Roman glanced back when they heard the first booming sound. A few small ships were rising from the small field atop the volcano outside the prison dome. Roman had no idea if those ships were piloted by prisoners or by security forces. A moment later, he saw a brilliant flash before they were knocked off their feet and into the snow. Through closed eyes and a faceplate buried in the ground, the light continued to get brighter. Roman's suit temperature rose faster than the thermostat could compensate for it. The ground shook with several rolling shocks as the wind howled. Roman's suit stiffened in several places where debris pounded against the fabric. A burst of static roared through his speakers.

Finally, the commotion subsided.

Roman's muscles ached as he lifted himself out of the snow. Havenshire was already sitting up, looking back.

The volcanic cone had disappeared.

In place of the cone was a smoking crater, glowing red with hidden fires beneath the surface. Between Roman and the crater, the snow had melted, replaced not with muddy soil but with dirt baked dry by the blast. The ground under Roman and Havenshire was still wet, but the only other moisture was higher up the slope, farther from the blast.

Then Roman realized that Klep was missing.

"Klep!"

There was no response. Roman looked high up on the slope, scanning the terrain for any sign of Klep or the other group. The tracks left by the others continued up past the snow line and disappeared over the top of the ridge.

"Brool, can you hear me?"

"Loud and clear.

"Did Copol make it up where you are?"

He went farther than we did, actually. He was at the top of the ridge when the bombs went off. He flew right past us.

Is he okay?

"He's fine. Just a few bruises here and there: "How about Klep? Have you seen him?"

We thought he was with you." Roman swallowed. He was." "I'll form a few search teams,said Brool."If he's up here, we'll find him."
"Okay,said Roman. There was no telling where Klep could have been thrown when the shock wave rolled past.

"We'll be there in a few minutes.

The search parties were unable to find Klep. Roman and Havenshire performed a thorough examination of the hillside between the snow line and the top of the ridge before joining up with Brool's group, but there was no sign of their missing balloon man. Roman cursed himself for not pulling Klep down with him.

The orbiting "Tancred' freighter responded instantly to Roman's retrieval signal. The group made the short trek to the pickup zone where they found Copol's two Mazuma friends, Vanna-Ty and Benes-Cy, waiting for them. Roman was not surprised to see them, since Copol's base of operations was near the pickup zone. The surprise guest was Horus Klep, floating peacefully over the head of Vauna-Ty.

Klep!" Roman shouted."Where have you been?" Klep pointed at Vanna-Ty."With her?"

Vanna-Ty nodded at Roman. "We found him stuck between two rocks on the slope above our base of operations.

He didn't know we were there because the entrance to the underground base is covered by snow right now.

I thought I was going to have a heart attack when I saw these two pop up out of the snow, ' said Klep, "but I sure was glad to see them. I thought that bomb was going to blow me straight off the planet.

Thanks for retrieving him,said Roman."He does tend to get himself in trouble when I'm not around.

Our pleasure; said Vanna-Ty.

They all looked up when they heard the distant thunder of the shuttle's engines. When the shuttle was overhead, the landing engines whipped up a snow flurry around the group.

Roman grandly gestured at the opening clamshell doors at the back of the shuttle. Would anyone like a ride?" Roman had to dodge out of the way to avoid being run over in the stampede.

ASCALON RIFT---SECTOR IIAR-1 After his triumphant return from the Xeridun rescue mission, Roman introduced Copol to Blois Fulcher. The Mazuma spies had brief interviews with Blois before being sent on to Admiral Shylo's flagship.

Roman also sent Rouge and the other former prisoners to the infirmary with Klep, where they would be allowed a brief recuperation period before receiving their new assignments with the Gold Squadron.

While Roman was at Xeridun, there had been a lull in the attacks by the Zemuns and Tancreds. This was a welcome relief, since no new missions had been flown since the return of Hela Selrase's group from the Mooris space dock.

The pilots finally had a chance for a decent amount of rest.

Before going to sleep himself, Roman checked the message that was waiting on the tiny message monitor by the head of his bunk. The message was encoded at gold level three, which meant that it had to come from Blois or Shylo.

Roman entered his decoding key, then pressed his right thumb against the monitor so that the laser could scan his fingerprint. The decoded message appeared on the monitor: To: Roman Alexandria, Sector Commander, Gold Squadron From: Blois Fulcher, Tactical Officer, Gold Squadron Classification: GOLD THREE, FOR YOUR EYES ONLY While you were at Xeridun, several probes were launched for the purpose of locating a secondary base to replace ar-1. Long-range probes into the region known as Vesto-3 have successfully identified a suitable planet. This region is particularly valuable since we have verification that none of the races involved in the Alliance have any interests there. We will not relocate to the new planet in Vesto-3 unless the ar-1 base is disabled. In fact, I am assigning the probe report a classification of Gold Three, meaning that only you and I have access to it. This report will not be sent to Admiral Shylo or the Gorene High Command until such time as ar-1 is about to be destroyed. I'm sure you understand the need for secrecy in this matter.

Roman was too tired to care.

After sleeping for almost ten hours, Roman was ready to meet with Blois Fulcher and discuss the information regarding Vesto-3. They might also do some mission planning based on the new information gathered from the rescued Mazuma spies. Based on his conversations with Copol, it might even be possible to use the Mazuma underground to help the Gorenese topple the current Mazuma government.

Before his meeting, Roman decoded a new communication that had arrived on his message monitor and printed it out so he could read it on the way to Blois's office.

The corridors were as silent as the tombs at Fomalhaut as Roman

made his way to Blois's office. The only signs of life were the occasional snoring sounds coming from open doorways.

His footsteps seemed unusually loud, but he didn't think there was a danger of waking any exhausted pilots.

Roman glanced at the message in his hand; it was from Admiral Shylo. He frowned as he scanned it, then read it a second time with more urgency.

Roman ran the rest of the way to Blois's office and burst in. Blois looked up startled.

"Something's going on; said Roman. "I just received a message from Admiral Shylo. He said the War Council on Prajna-7 has already planned our next missions. We've been ordered to suspend any current operations in lieu of this new plan.

Blois nodded."I got the same message. So much for calling our own shots. I hope Shylo isn't going to pull a Ferrand on us.

The admiral seems competent, but why is the War Council suddenly stepping in? I suppose we have to hear them out.

"There's no need for a negative reaction just yet. Let's see what the admiral has to say. I'll gather the squadron for the briefing: The mood among the pilots was good as Roman and Blois mounted the stage in the briefing room. There was much joking and laughing. The lull in the missions seemed to have done some good.

The room fell silent as the huge projected head of Admiral Shylo appeared over the stage.

Let me congratulate Commander Alexandria, Officer Fulcher, and the Gold Squadron for a job well done. The raid on Xeridun, as well as the defense of the Mooris space dock, were clearly accomplished through excellent planning and leadership. Let me say that I am not here because I doubt Commander Alexandria's decision making. I couldn't be more pleased with his leadership. I am here because the War Council on Prajna-7, which I oversee, has a much broader view of events than Commander Alexandria or Officer Fulcher have at this time. Extensive interrogation of our Mazuma spies has yielded a vast amount of intelligence that we can use right now.

Roman thought Shylo's phrasing was curious, but he didn't dare interrupt the briefing at this point.

Now that the Tancreds and Zemuns have been shaken as a result of the Mooris space dock defense, we must focus our efforts upon weakening the Mazumas. The War Council believes that, in order to accomplish this, we must strike at the core of Mazuma strength: their wealth, economy, and industry. The planet Hattin--the strongest link in the Mazuma economic chain--is a minirig world, abundant with natural

resources. The War Council has learned that vast amounts of their surplus mined resources are stored inside orbital containment satellites for later shipments.

Shylo paused. Roman was disturbed they were planning an attack on the Mazuma homeworlds. Without the help of their Mazuma spies, who admittedly hated their own government, they would not have easily managed the rescue of the Gorenese from Xeridun. Roman felt that the War Council was overlooking potential friendly relations with the shape-shifting race, especially if the Gorenese Empire could appeal to their highly developed sense of greed.

Our spies have reported that zenzac--a highly toxic and unstable radioactive isotope that fuels plasma torpedoes and other weaponry for the Alliance--is mined on Hattin.

We believe that three of the orbiting storage satellites contain zenzac: Blois interrupted. If we could somehow confiscate the zenzac satellites, rather than committing ourselves to an all-out assault, we could still hurt the Tancreds and the Mazumas. Without zenzac, the Tancreds can't have plasma torpedoes and the Mazumas lose out on Tancred capital." Roman joined in. "Why don't we harness the satellites and carry them into deep space? Once we're far away, we can destroy them harmlessly. That should send a strong message to the Mazumas and the Tancreds.

Shylo listened patiently, then shook his head. The War Council has a stronger message in mind. Commander Alexandria will lead a small squadron of Liberators back to Hattin, where our pilots previously destroyed the coranine refinery.

Their mission is to break through the Mazuma defenses to damage the satellites without vaporizing them. This is a crucial distinction.

Once crippled, the damaged satellites will fall into Hattin's atmosphere and burn up. Zenzac isotopes will then rain down on the surface and render the planet uninhabitable in a matter of hours.

Hela Selrase jumped up from her seat. "Destroy an entire world! Why?"

Blois shouted, startling everyone. "We're Gorenese, not apocalyptic destroyers! You want us to exterminate an entire planet, admiral?"

Roman recognized the look in Shylo's eyes. It was the same fanatical gleam he'd seen in Ferrand. Nothing had changed. The fanatics were still in charge.

Shylo spoke through clenched teeth. "We've attempted a peaceful expansion into the Ascalon Rift, but we have been repeatedly provoked and attacked. The Alliance declared war, so war it is. And there is only one rule in war, Officer Fulcher and Pilot Selrase--to win as

quickly as possible. It may sound brutal to speak of destroying an entire world, but such a feat will send the enemy a message like no other."

The room was completely silent. Roman was so shocked he couldn't think of anything to say.

Shylo continued. "This attack will strike fear into the Mazuma people, weaken their morale, and cut into the heart of their economies and defenses. Remember also that Hattin is a mining world. A very small percentage of the Mazuma population actually lives there."

Marsh Lawton stood and looked around the room. I agree with Admiral Shylo. We're here to win a war, and sometimes it takes a catastrophic event to force a surrender."

Roman just looked at Lawton and shook his head.

Hela, still standing, turned to glare at Lawton. "This is against everything the Gorene Empire stands for! I will have no part in this mission!"

"Such an impulsive act would lead to court martial and imprisonment, Pilot Selrase said Shylo in a threatening tone.

Roman looked up at Shylo. Pilot Selrase has been under a lot of stress, admiral, but she's one of my best pilots. We need her: Roman gave Hela a meaningful look. She took a deep breath and glanced down at the floor.

"I was wrong, she said. "I'm sure the War Council knows what it's doing."

"We'll discuss this matter later; said Shylo. "Right now, you have a mission to fly."

"I'm ready," said Lawton. Let's do it:

Shylo nodded as the projection of his head disappeared, leaving the room in a shocked silence.

ASCALON RIFT--SECTOR IV.--HAITIN

Roman's strike group of fourteen pilots arrived in the Hattin system in silence. The hyperjump had given Roman his usual headache, but his main concern was figuring out how to achieve his mission objectives without making Hattin uninhabitable, despite what the War Council wanted. His strike group was composed of four Liberators and ten Scorpions, since the Mazuma fighter defenses and orbital mines would have to be overcome to reach the planet. The Liberators, flown by Roman, Marsh Lawton, Kayla Brool, and Kara Hel-mar, had the responsibility of destroying the three zenzac storage satellites.

Judging by his tactical display, Roman saw that the first group of five Scorpions was about to make contact with the Mazuma patrol ships flying the outer barrier of Hattin defenses. There appeared to be only five of the slow patrol ships, with Samsu and Havenshire among the first group of Gorene fighters, so Roman wasn't concerned about their chances. With the assistance of the local Intruder recon ship, Blue Eye, Roman laid in a course that would allow his Liberators to bypass the first Mazuma patrol and continue on toward Hattin.

"Gold Strike Leader, this is Strike four two nine.

"Go ahead, Kara.

"Have you decided how we're going to handle this zenzac problem?"

"Not yet. I'm still trying to come up with a way to destroy the satellites without dumping the zenzac isotope cloud into Hattin's atmosphere.

Why?" Lawton asked, defying communications protocol.

"Our objective is to eliminate the zenzac and kill everything on Hattin's surface.

"Why try to save them? Because I've had contact with the Mazuma people. Some of them have been very helpful to us.

I don't think the civilians should be killed just because the War Council wants to make a point.

Those are our orders; said Lawton. "We can't just change the orders because you don't like them.

"As sector Commander, the tactical methods I use to carry out my orders is my decision. The War Council seems to think it can expand its function by planning our missions for us, but they aren't here to evaluate the situation in live combat,said Roman.

"Personally,said Lawton, "I don't see why so many people are having a problem with this mission. This is a war.

Killing people is what we do. When the Alliance wants us to stop killing them, they'll surrender. Until then, I intend to kill as many of them as possible before they kill me. If that means blowing up a radioactive satellite and dumping its contents on a mining planet to kill the few Mazumas that live there, then I'm happy to do it.

I'll keep that in mind; said Roman. Lawton had just given a brief summary of the true gorene philosophy. Conquest at any cost. The ends justify the means. Why hadn't that philosophy been apparent to him before? We'll let you do the shooting at the satellites if it comes down to that." "That'll make me feel better; said Helmar. "I'll fly Support, but I don't want to shoot those satellites down myself.

Brool joined the discussion. "I find that it works better if you don't think about the lives involved. Just think of the targets, like the zenzac satellites, and ignore the rest. It's the only way to stay sane." Roman was confused. Did they really have to act like robots to stay sane? Was that the only way for a proud member of the Gorene race to survive?

You people disgust me;" said Lawton. You don't deserve to be Gold Squadron pilots.

Because we think?" Brool asked. "You hate it when people think, don't you, Lawton?" I'm not paid to think; said Lawton. I just do my job.

'Sorry to interrupt this stimulating discussion; said Roman, "but we seem to have another Mazuma patrol coming toward us. They're trying to force us into their smart minefield.

Roman issued instructions to his second group of five Scorpion fighters. Hela was in that group, although she'd been relieved of her command by Shylo as a punishment.

The Scorpions would intercept the eight incoming patrol ships while the Liberators skirted the edge of the mine field.

If they came across any more patrols, the Liberators would have to handle the threats themselves.

Roman's threat alarm buzzed as he came within range of a smart mine. The mine had identified him as an enemy ship, so its navigation system had locked onto Roman's fighter as a target. Once it got started, the mine moved quickly toward Roman's ship, so he punched in his afterburner and started flying an evasive pattern to break the mine's target lock. By the time Roman decided that the mine wasn't impressed with his evasive tactics, Lawton swooped in and shot the mine out of the sky.

"Thanks, Marsh; said Roman.

"Well," said Lawton, "I would have blown it up sooner, but I always hate to take the life of a mine unnecessarily. It just tears me up inside.

"Gold Strike Leader, this is Blue Eye. Be advised that Scorpion flight five zero eight has left group two on a course to intercept you.

Five zero eight is not responding to our transmissions.

"Confirm, Blue Eye, said Roman. "Identity?"

"Gold Strike five zero eight is Pilot Selrase, inbound on one nine seven to your position.

"Thanks, Blue Eye.

What was Hela doing? It wasn't like her to leave her assigned group and go off on her own--that was more his style.

Roman checked to see if Hela was in com range. Gold Strike five zero eight, this is Gold Strike Leader.

Her voice on the comlink was dim, but clear. "Roman, what are you going to do?"

He was surprised by the question. What?

You're the sector commander, Roman. Shylo can't push you around so easily anymore.

Roman sighed. I still have to follow orders, Hela. I don't get a vote in the War Council's decisions.

Those people are going to die, Roman! Civilians! They're not a part of this war!"

"They told us Hattin was sparsely populated. It's a military target.

"Anything is a military target if Shylo says so, is that it?"

The War Council selects our objectives?

"You're starting to sound like Lawton. Why are you defending them?" I'm not defending them! Why are you attacking Roman slammed his elbow into the side of the cockpit, then regretted his outburst. His reaction surprised him.

Hela paused. She tried to soften her tone. I'm trying to get you to think about what you're doing, Roman. You can fight the problem or be a part of it. You have a choice. Think about your parents. Your parents would never have attacked a civilian target, and certainly not an entire planet full of civilians.

Those were the old days, and command would never have assigned such a target.

Roman saw a hostile target appear on the tactical monitor, but it was still out of range. "what do you want me to do? I can't just recall the group and go back. I'd face a court martial, and they'd put someone like Lawton in charge of the squadron. Do you want that? One way or another, we're committed to this mission."

"You have a choice, Roman. The man I know would do the right thing."

Roman noticed he was grinding his teeth. "Can't you see I'm not sure what that is? Can't you just support my decision?"

I'm not asking you to land on Hattin and shoot civilians!

All you have to do is fly cover for the rest of us! Is that so much to ask?"

"I can't support you when you're wrong, Roman. I can't be a part of this." Her voice sounded sad and quiet. Then she closed the connection.

Hela?"

No response.

Roman took a few deep breaths and tried to focus.

Couldn't she see that he was trying to find a way to save the planet and accomplish the mission? The nav system showed they were about four minutes from their destination.

Hattin loomed ahead of them, a ball of blue and green wrapped in white bands of cottony clouds. Roman thought it looked too nice to be a sparsely populated mining world, but Mazumans had four main planets. Having never seen the others, Roman wondered if this really was the least desirable of their four worlds. Could Hela be right? Maybe their superiors had lied to them about the population of Hattin. What if the world was the center of Mazuma culture and government?

The communications monitor beeped as the undisguised face of a Mazuma pilot took shape.

'Hear me, leader of the Gorene squadron. I am Tuta Phona of the Mazuma patrol forces. You must leave this region at once. Traffic is not allowed in Hattin's orbital space.

There are container satellites orbiting Hattin that contain deadly material of no strategic value. These containers must not be disturbed. If you don't heed my warning, we will all surely die!"

Roman introduced himself. "If you wish to survive, Tuta Phona, I suggest that you leave the area immediately.

"Perhaps there is some form of financial arrangement that would allow us to keep our satellites intact?" asked Tuta Phona.

"I'm sorry, but we don't take bribes; said Roman.

Fox one, said Lawton, interrupting the conversation.

The monitor suddenly went dark as Roman saw a brief flash in the distance.

"I did not give the order to fire on that ship, Lawton! I was giving him the chance to surrender; said Roman.

I saw the target, I shot the target," said Lawton. "I'm following the admiral's mission plan. You may outrank Blois Fulcher now, but Admiral Shylo still gives the orders."

"You're a maniac, Lawton. You kill for sport.

"Is that a problem?"

They were approaching the first of the zenzac satellites.

Roman had to make a decision. The unsuspecting planet below was certainly going to learn something about the way Gorenese fought a war, but was it the right thing to learn?

The Tancreds were capable of ruthless killing, but did that make it right for the Gorenese, with their supposedly higher standards, to do the same thing to the Mazuma people? The Mazumans Roman had met--Copol, Vanna-Ty, Benes-Cy--seemed like decent beings. Quark certainly wouldn't kill without reason. Even Tuta Phona had tried to warn them off without firing a shot.

The matter was settled by Marsh Lawton, whose laser cut the zenzac satellite in half. The exploding hulk of the satellite rotated wildly as it spun away toward the lower atmosphere, spilling its powdery white contents. Roman imagined the screams of the planet's inhabitants as they all realized they were about to die.

I didn't think anyone else was going to do it; said Lawton. His voice sounded mechanical.

As you said, we have our orders, Roman said solemnly.

Brool moved into position and cut the end off the second zenzac satellite with her laser. Once again, the satellite went into a wild spin, moving away toward the surface of Hattin.

Eventually, it would burn up as it made a fiery plunge into the atmosphere, spilling its contents to form a toxic cloud that would kill all life on the planet within a matter of hours.

It was hard for Roman to imagine the magnitude of suffering that would result from their actions. Innocent civilians, families, children, mothers, fathers, young, and old were all going to die soon. Roman imagined their screams as they realized the air they were breathing, the same air they had always taken for granted, was now dooming them with each breath. He could do nothing to stop it. The horror would continue until every living thing on the planet was dead. Hattin would become a cemetery world whose name was spoken only in whispered legends, the same way the Tancreds spoke of Tomb, their world of the dead.

Helmar located the third zenzac satellite and hovered close to it.

She waited there, as if she was preparing to execute the killing blow, but her laser cannon never fired a shot.

As Roman watched Helmar, waiting to see if she'd damage the last zenzac container, a Gorene fighter approached at high speed.

Hela's voice was loud over the general squadron frequency. "I can't let you do it!"

Roman was startled. Hela?"

Lawton fired, and the third satellite tumbled away, spraying white powder in its wake. Hela's fighter swooped past, then rolled suddenly to avoid the tumbling satellite.

"Murderers! You call yourselves Gorene pilots?"

"I do; said Lawton, and that means I follow my orders:

Hela's fighter gradually turned to face them, slowing to a halt.

"Roman, I can't believe you did this, said Hela. "This planet will die because of you! Why wouldn't you listen to me?"

Roman couldn't find the words to answer her. Her voice cut right through him. He saw no point in explaining that he never fired a shot at the satellites himself. He was the leader of this strike group, and their actions were his responsibility whether he agreed with them or not. But she was right; it was his indecisiveness that allowed Lawton to carry out the attack. He could have stopped it, but he didn't. A world was dying from his lack of courage.

"We had our mission to perform, said Brool. We did it. You should understand what that means, Hela. Roman was doing his job, and so was I when I blew up one of these satellites.

You can rationalize it any way you want. I'm not buying it, said Hela.

"I thought you made your choice earlier, said Brool.

Why are you here?"

I wanted to stop you. I thought I could talk Roman out of this: After a long pause, she finished her thought. I guess I was wrong... about a lot of things. You're pathetic, Roman.

You're one of them. I'm sure you'll fit in quite well with Shylo's plans, but I can't be a part of this. This isn't war, this is just murder. Don't expect to see me again."

Hela's fighter turned away from them and raced away on full

afterburner.

Roman had to clear his throat before he could speak.

Hela?

She didn't respond. Roman felt helpless."Hela?

Where is she going?" Lawton asked, rotating his fighter.

someone has to bring her back!"

"No,said Roman. She's made her choice."

What choice? I'm going to bring her back!" No! Roman turned his guns toward Lawton's ship. If you defy my orders again, Lawton, I swear I'll blow you out of the sky!"

Lawton's ship hung motionless. Finally, Lawton said, As you wish, Commander, but I'll be filing my own report about this mission."

You're free to do so,said Roman. "I'm sure it will be entertaining.

"Gold Strike Leader, this is Blue Eye.Your zone is clear of bogies. No new threats inbound. Return vector two three two on the backside: Roman's response was automatic as the navigational coordinates were transmitted to his flight computer from the Intruder."Affirm, Blue Eye. Vector two three two. Gold Strike returning to base."

Roman had never felt so alone in his life.

CHAPTER 15 ASCALON RII.--SECTOR IlmAR-1 Hela never returned from the mission to Hattin.

Intelligence reports indicated that the toxic zenzac cloud had, in fact, killed every living thing on the surface of Hattin.

The Mazuma government was stunned by the attack. Alliance attacks in all sectors of the Ascalon Rift ceased immediately.

Admiral Shylo was ecstatic over the successful results of the Hattin mission. The Gorene High Command was happy, the War Council was happy, Shylo was happy, and they all showered their congratulations on Roman Alexandria, who was miserable.

Two standard days passed, during which no new missions were flown.

Roman spent most of his time in his room, staring at the ceiling and thinking about Hela Selrase. For Roman, the manner in which she had left was almost worse than if she had died and never returned from a mission. She was rejecting both Roman and the Gorene way of life. Her rejection was not an easy thing for Roman to understand or accept. An important part of his life had suddenly disappeared, leaving a gaping wound behind. Buried in his sorrow, Roman never heard the announcements for the mission briefing. Blois Fulcher finally came to Roman's cabin to escort him to the briefing room.

The huge projection of Admiral Shylo's bald head was a disturbing sight. As soon as Roman and Blois had made their way down the steps to the stage, Shylo started speaking.

For the first time, Roman noticed that Shylo's voice was quite irritating.

Shylo smiled briefly. Fellow Gorenese, our unified effort has weakened the Alliance. As a result, our intelligence sources inform us that a major event is about to unfold, although we are still unsure of what it may be. All we know is that several diplomatic escort ships were tracked leaving the various Alliance homeworlds.

A simple strategic map showing ar-1 and two adjacent sectors of space, marked as Exta and Vigo, replaced the projection of Shylo's head.

These ships; Shylo continued, rendezvoused in the Exta Sector. Whomever they were transporting boarded a single cruiser that set off for an unpatrolled area of deep space in the Vigo Sector.

Shylo's head reappeared. They obviously want privacy and secrecy. Perhaps representatives from each civilization are meeting to discuss a possible surrender... or to formulate regrouping strategies. Regardless of their motives, we must find out what this meeting is about. Commander Alexandria, I want you to travel to the Vigo Sector alone and establish a line of communication with the diplomatic cruiser. No patrol ships accompanied it, which means one of two

things: either no important individuals are aboard the cruiser, or it contains very important people indeed. It's quite possible that former foes who still don't quite trust one another are meeting in a neutral setting and 'leaving their guns at the door,' as I believe the saying goes." Roman blinked--why was he was being sent on this mission by himself?. It seemed very odd not to have a wingman assigned to escort him.

If there are representatives from each of the Alliance races aboard," Shylo continued, "issue a warning that Prajna-7 is near completion, and we will use its full power against all of them if they do not cooperate with the Gorene expansion plan. Reiterate, however, that we come in peace to enlighten the Ascalon Rift, not to conquer it.

Your point will be reinforced when they realize you could have destroyed them at any time. Although such an act would cripple the Alliance, Gorenes will never attack unarmed diplomatic ships." Roman nodded. Shylo was speaking the words he expected to hear from a true Gorene officer. Perhaps Roman's fears had been exaggerated. However, he still questioned whether Shylo's idea of peace and enlightenment was the same as his own. Two days earlier, he would have pictured the concept of peace as living quietly somewhere with Hela, raising a family. Now, things didn't seem so clear.

"You should be quite safe, Commander Alexandria. The diplomatic cruiser is clumsy, and poses no threat to a Gorene strike ship. An Intruder will be posted in that sector as part of a special communications link to relay your transmission.

I anxiously await your report."

ASCALON RIFTsSECTOR VII--VIGO

Roman grew excited as the bulky diplomatic cruiser became visible on his tactical display. The trip there had been silent and lonely, allowing Roman to dwell on the loss of Hela and the seeming futility of his own life. With Hela gone, it seemed that the military provided his only reason for existence, but his previous black-and-white views of the world had become shades of gray, with no clear distinctions. All he could think to do was to continue carrying out his duties, doing what was expected, surviving from day to day, and hoping that enlightenment would somehow come to him.

Roman initiated a full scan of the diplomatic cruiser and punched in full visual magnification on his monitor. The cruiser did appear to be unarmed. Bright coloring on the side of the cruiser caught Roman's attention, so he keyed in some image processing on the computer to bring out the deta'fis. A moment later, four shield emblems came into focus.

The intelligence archive revealed that the shields iden-titled ships transporting leaders of the Alliance. Four shields, four leaders.

Roman opened the special comlink relay to Admiral Shylo.

'Admiral, I've located and scanned the diplomatic cruiser.

It's unbelievable. The leaders of the Alliance are conducting a secret meeting. The ship bears the shields of Mazuma President PhenaWarratie, Tancred Overlord Zemlock, Amien Prime Founder Nebity Zaxalt, and Zemun High Father Kruga-had Longmoor.

Excellent," said Shylo. "Open a line of communication with the cruiser and keep this link active so I can hear the conversation.

Roman used the Alliance hailing frequency to make the connection with the cruiser. "This is Roman Alexandria, Sector Commander of the Gorene Gold Squadron. I come with messages of peace. The Gorenese seek a peaceful existence with all the races of the Ascalon Rift. We can help solve your problems and share our wisdom with your people.

After a brief pause, Phena Warratie's face appeared on the communications monitor. You say you come in peace, but you have destroyed the planet Hattin. You are a liar, Sector Commander.

Roman sighed. "It was wrong of us to attack Hattin, but we were left with no choice. We didn't assume an offensive posture until you declared war on us.

The image of the Mazuma president was replaced by the Amien, Nebity Zaxalt. Our problems are ours to solve. We don't need your help.

"We can work together; said Roman. "Our medical people could end your plague.

Zaxalt shook his head. "The Gorenese are the plague.

What gives you the right to think you can spread your Gorene ways here without our permission?" The Zemun, Krugahad Longmoor, took Zaxalt's place at the monitor. You will not spread your values or your beliefs to my people. Anjou knows all. He created the Zemuns in his image, not yours.

'I ask you to accept my word,' said Roman. We don't want this war to continue. Let us settle in the Ascalon Rift.

We can share so much with you. We don't want to force you to follow our ways. How could that lead to our only goal of peaceful coexistence?" Admiral Shylo signaled for Roman's attention. Commander Alexandria, the War Council has changed your orders.

Intelligence reports that the real purpose of their meeting is to plan a full scale attack on ar-1 and Prajna-7. This provides us with a rare chance to weaken all of our opponents simultaneously. A robot

drone ship packed with explosives has hyperjumped to your coordinates. The drone will destroy the diplomatic cruiser and all aboard. Your job now is to protect the drone, which should be there in a few minutes, and make sure it reaches its target. Return to base after the cruiser is destroyed.

Roman was aghast. Admiral! The cruiser is unarmed.

You're talking about an assassination!

It's a bloody war, Commander, and Goterie lives are being lost. The only rule in war is to win as quickly as possible.

This is our chance to do just that, before they kill more Gorenese.

My order is final.

Roman's tactical monitor beeped as the drone ship entered the strike zone. The tiny white blip, moving much faster than occupied ships could fly, was right on course to its target.

Overlord zemlock appeared on the communications monitor with an expression of outrage. "Our scanners show us the truth, Gorene! I knew I should never have agreed to this meeting without Tancred patrol ships to guard me. Our mistrust for each other is going to get us killed. Clever tactic, Alexandria.

Make contact, tell us lies about peaceful coexistence, and keep us here until your flying bomb can strike us down: Roman shook his head violently. I didn't know about this plan!

Zaxalt's calm face reappeared on the monitor. If you didn't know, then your people lied to you. You can't trust them, Commander Alexandria. You know in your heart the Gorene presence in our region is wrong. Join us. You've been betrayed, as we have. Help us. You're the only one who can save us.

Krugahad Longmoor appeared on the monitor. Roman's head was swimming.

Longmoor's gaze pierced Roman. "I would rather be dead than see the Ascalon Rift and my people under the influence of the Gorenese. Aniou holds my fate in his hands. He will punish you, Alexandria, for the murder you commit. You will drown in the blood of millions. You will be tortured by the screams of those you subjugate. Save your soul and destroy the bomb before it reaches us.

Roman didn't know what to do. He couldn't grasp the depths of Shylo's evilness if he could commit such an act.

The probe had hyperjumped so quickly that Shylo must have had this plan in mind all along. Suddenly, a Gorene face appeared on the monitor. It was the defector, Krugon Dept.

Roman, it's me, Krugon: Krugon? What are you doing here?" 'I've joined the Alliance, Roman. I've turned my back on arrogant Gorene expansion. Ferrand betrayed us and nearly got us killed. Why? For more territory? More wealth? More control over alien races that we have no business interfering with? Shylo and the War CoUncil have betrayed you and the rest of the Gold Squadron. They're asking you to be part of this brutal assassination.

Roman was speechless.

Don't let them get away with it,' pleaded Dept. I've learned things that are shocking. The War Council has no regard for you or the Gold Squadron. We've received coded transmissions that indicate you will be attacked before you return to base. Shylo doesn't want any witnesses to this attack to survive. We're pawns in the ugly Gorene quest for power, Roman. Shylo will blame you for this assassination--is that how you want to be remembered? I made my decision, now it's time for you to make yours.

Roman watched the inexorable flight path of the robot drone, mindlessly carrying its load of explosives toward its target. The cruiser wasn't trying to escape because they knew they couldn't outrun the bomb. Even Roman couldn't outrun a ship moving at that speed. Their only hope was for Roman to intervene.

Then Hela Selrase appeared on his monitor. At first, he thought he was hallucinating, but then she spoke to him.

Listen to us, Roman. I know it's shocking, but it's true.

Your friend, Quark, sent us the decoded intercept about their plan. He wants you to survive, as we all do.

Hela? Is that really you?" Shylo spoke to Roman with a calm voice, sounding like the voice of reason."Don't listen to them, Commander. They're liars, using clever gimmicks and illusions to confuse you.

Are you foolish enough to believe that Dept and Selrase are really with them? They're Mazuman disguises. Don't destroy your brilliant career. Remember why we're here: to spread Gorene wisdom and wealth throughout the Ascalon Rift and improve the lives of all its inhabitants." 'Except for the inhabitants we kill?" Roman asked.

Alien faces swam across the monitor. Phena Warratie said, Join us, Commander Alexandria. Listen to your friends.

Only you can help us save what is rightfully ours.

Zemlock snarled at him."What will it be, Alexandria? Do you have honor, or are you a liar like your Admiral Shylo?"

Dept's panicked face appeared. "The explosives ship will strike any minute, Roman. Save us! Don't trust Shylo.

Shylo cajoled him. "Commander Alexandria, stand aside and let the drone ship strike its target. Don't become a traitor.

Remember the Gorene lives that have been lost in this war.

Hela's face showed nothing but concern. 'Roman, I wouldn't lie to you. We've known each other since our first day at the academy. I care about you. Blast the ship and come with us.

Roman wasn't sure what was real anymore. There seemed something right and wrong about both sides. He knew the Mazumans could shapeshift, but if Hela and Dept were dead, how could the Alliance know enough to use their faces against Roman? His parents had died in the service of the Gorene Empire--if they were alive, would they respect him or shun him for switching sides? On the other hand, what would he lose by joining the Alliance?

Even if Roman continued rising in his career, he would only become closer to those he was learning to hate. Perhaps that was the key: Admiral Shylo had lied to him repeatedly.

Roman had allowed Shylo to manipulate him into deceiving the Tancred freighter captain, to destroy Hattin, and to attack this unarmed diplomatic cruiser. The Gorene way had become the way of lies and death, and Roman wanted no part of it.

The robot drone was less than a minute away from reaching its target, but it would have to get past Roman first.

Roman swung the Liberator directly into the path of the drone. The drone would be able to correct its flight in time to avoid the new obstacle, but that maneuver would give Roman an extra second and a better shot. He knew he had only one chance to knock it down before it delivered its deadly payload. There would be no room for mistakes. His main problem was to get the targeting system recalibrated fast enough so that he could launch a missile at a Gorene target. The automatic error correction systems built into the targeting computer, which normally operated in synchronization with the automated friend-or-foe transponder, made sure that Gorenese didn't blow up other Gorenese by mistake.

Roman had the panel off the tracking system computer in seconds. His manual recalibration would be crude, a matter of disconnecting the transponder receiver, but it would be sufficient. The disconnects were designed to be operated by pilots with damaged transponders who would not appreciate being disarmed by their own computers. The surgery complete, the tactical display changed the color of the drone from white to red, matching the red outline of the diplomatic cruiser.

Now that the targeting computer was receiving false information,

it was more than happy to lock a missile onto the the incoming threat. The bomb drone was not smart enough to use evasive maneuvers for missile avoidance. Drones depended on speed, not skill or intelligence.

Roman punched the fu-ing button. He felt a slight recoil vibration as the missile raced away from the Liberator, streaking toward the incoming drone.

The drone exploded almost too close to Roman and the cruiser, and the massive shock wave shook both ships. The Liberator's shields sparkled in the shower of charged par-tides and debris. Roman shielded his eyes from the bright flash and shuddered. The bomb had nearly ended all of their lives.

Hela appeared on Roman's monitor. Her smile was brighter than he'd seen it in a long time. Great job, Roman!

You did the right thing by stopping Shylo's vile assass'man plot. You won't regret this. What you've done proves that you're a true Gorene. I'm downloading jump coordinates to your ship's SFG computer so that you can return with us to the rebel base. I'm looking forward to seeing you again.

Roman looked forward to seeing Hela again, too. he thanked Hela, then watched the diplomatic cruiser move off slowly and majestidy. They weren't going to wait around to see what else Admiral Shylo would throw at them.

Roman could still detect a glow in the space where the drone ship had exploded. In a sense, the destruction of the drone was also the destruction of Romaifs past. Goterie ideals, might remain in his character, but their methods had changed and he could no longer be a part of that. Life as he had known it was over.

CHAPTER 16 ASCALON RIFT--SECTOR IVtALLIANCE BASE ALPHA Alliance Base Alpha,

located on a large asteroid in the Hattin system, had been built by the Mazuma government as a secure place to combine the various alien fleets as they became operational. It was never intended to be a permanent base, so it looked as if it had been hastily thrown together from spare parts. Roman's first impression of the base was that it looked functional, but flimsy, as if a breeze might blow it away.

Fortunately, there was no atmosphere on the asteroid. However, Roman knew the construction of the base required sophisticated technology, since the asteroid had been hollowed out by the Mazumas so that most of the base was inside, shielded from radiation and from scanning by the casual observer.

After Roman touched down in the landing bay with his Liberator, the craft disappeared through a tunnel opening to be processed into one of the massive hangars. The system seemed efficient, but he had arrived ahead of the cruiser, so no one was there to greet him or tell him where to go next.

He knew he couldn't stand around in the automated landing bay, so he searched and found a small door leading through an airlock into an observation area.

Roman's first shock was seeing Blois Fulcher standing there waiting for him. No one else was around.

Blois?"

'Surprise Blois said with a smile.

'What are you doing here?"

'You don't think you can go anywhere without me, do you? I monitored your communications with the admiral.

When Shylo changed his orders, I knew what you'd do, so I made my escape in the chaos that followed." So many strange things had happened, it was hard for Roman to stay shocked for very long. He nodded, looked down at the floor, then squinted at Blois."Tell me I didn't make the biggest mistake of my life by coming here. Part of me feels as if I've betrayed my people, but another part believes in what I did. Am I a traitor?" Blois put a hand on Roman's shoulder. You can only betray yourself, Roman. You did the right thing. I wouldn't be here if I didn't believe in you and your decision. Do you remember the oath you took on your first day at the academy?

We pledged to 'dedicate ourselves to technical, educational, personal, and economic improvement everywhere that life exists." Remember?" Blois turned and walked over to look through the observation window at the empty landing bay."Shylo and Ferrand had a distorted view of that ideal. We have no business here in the Ascalon Rift. What can we offer these alien races? We're the aliens here. They're advanced

civilizations who have their own ways, so they don't need our wealth or ideals. Our presence here is solely expansionism for the sake of power. We should have made a peaceful approach to these people with trade and diplomacy, not imperialism and ultimatums.

"We're still Gorenese, Blois. We haven't turned our backs on the Gorenese ideal to advance the universe. We've only rejected the schemes of greedy and corrupt leaders who lost sight of the true Gorenese mission?"

"Exactly. Sounds like you've answered your own question about betrayal."

Roman rubbed his neck. His headache was fading, but he still felt tense. "We have to drive Shylo away. The Gorenese of the Ascalon Rift are our enemies now."

"The only way we can force them to leave the Ascalon Rift is to destroy Prajna-7 before it's fully armed and manned."

"And we're too exposed here in the Hattin system. It won't be long before they find this base, possibly within hours or days. We have to move somewhere safe and build a base for the Alliance."

Blois turned to look at Roman, who suddenly realized what Blois was thinking.

"We've already got an answer for that one," said Blois.

"The information from the probes never went beyond you and me, and I destroyed those coded records before I left ar-1. The planet we found in Vesto-3 has an excellent atmosphere."

"There's also a primitive civilization on the planet to help disguise our activities, so we should be safe there for quite some time."

"So it all depends on how quickly Shylo looks for us."

"How long do you think it'll be before they organize a major attack on this system?"

Blois smiled. Roman noted he was smiling much more than he ever did when they were on ar-1. "You were the most respected leader in the forces. The pilots understood and trusted you. Your defection will create a wave of doubt and chaos." Roman snorted. "I thought Shylo would tell them I was killed during my mission."

"No," said Fulcher, shaking his head. "People will know the truth. As I said, I was monitoring your communication with Shylo. When I realized what you were going to do, I recorded a brief summary of the situation to be automatically delivered through the public messaging system six hours after my departure."

"Then it will be a while before Shylo can manage a full re-con of this system?"

"The main thing,said Blois,"is that Shylo has to rebuild a chunk of his command from scratch, so this is our chance to slip away undetected."

Their attention was diverted by the booming arrival of a shuttle. When its airlock doors opened, they saw it had come in from the diplomatic cruiser, presumably still in orbit around the asteroid since it was too large to land on a base of that size. Hela Selrase was the first person out of the shuttle. She ran across the landing bay toward the observation room occupied by Roman and Blois. Having known about their"secret" relationship all along, Blois watched with a pleased smile as Roman and Hela lunged toward each other.

Roman met her at the door. "You took your time getting here."

Hela's only response was to throw her arms around Roman and give him a long kiss.

"Not that I'm complaining," said Roman, after she let him come up for air.

ASCALON RIFr--VESTO-3---NEW ALLIANCE BASE Three months had passed since Roman Alexandria defected to the side of the Alliance. During that time, the Alliance had constructed a formidable military base in a backwater region of the Ascalon Rift known as Vestto-3.The third planet of the local star had a wide range of climates, but Roman and Blois had chosen one of the vast deserts in which to construct the new fortress.

Fleet movements had presented some logistical problems during this period, but the gradual consolidation of the various warships available to the Alliance had brought the greater portion of the offensive forces to the Vestto-3 system.

New sources of coranine and zenzac were located among the local asteroids and outer planets, providing them with substantial new sources of supplies for the warships.

Roman wasted no time in establishing communication with the local labor force, trading food and supplies in return for their help during the construction of the base. The locals were simple people, humanoid, shorter than the average Gorene, and wore clothing that did little to cover their muscular bodies in the hot climate. They seemed to have a good sense of humor because they often pointed and laughed at Roman and his friends, sometimes mimicking the way the aliens walked. Perhaps because Roman had made contact with the local people, they seemed to prefer his company to that of the Tancreds or the other aliens.

Even though they had a low technology civilization, with a city built of mud huts, the locals learned fast and worked hard with the new

high-tech tools, hollowing out a mountainside and building two pyramid-shaped structures for the base. The hangar bays, living quarters, and sophisticated equipment were located inside the mountain to avoid detection by Gorenese probes and scanners. Officers were housed in one of the pyramids, while the other pyramid concealed long-range sensors and scanning equipment directed toward the blue sky.

Now the fleet was ready for its first major operation under the joint command of Tancred Overlord Klool and Roman Alexandria. Since Roman had become Blois's superior officer with his promotion to sector commander, Blois had stepped back to allow Roman the lead role. Over the previous three months, Roman and Blois had worked hard to develop trusting relationships with the leaders of the Alliance.

Overlord Klool was one of the progressive Tancred leaders, charged with the command of the far-flung military forces operating under the banner of the Alliance. Roman had found Klool to be a well-educated, open-minded, and clever individual who shared many common interests with him.

Klool taught Roman the Tancred logic and strategy game known as Tetrax, which had turned into a gambling addiction on Orentes. They spent many hours competing with each other to be first to organize the pyramid shapes. The game appealed to the need for control and order that both of them found necessary in their lives.

Roman, Blois, and Klool stood on a pyramid-shaped platform to address the assembled pilots of the Alliance. Although many of them had worked with the Gorenese during the last three months, trust of the Gorenese among the Alliance members was not universal. Roman held up his hand to quiet the murmuring crowd. Among the sea of strange faces, only the independent Nomen were absent, since they had decided to carry on their own battles with the Gorenese, keeping them busy while the secret base at Vesto-3 was constructed.

The last few months have not been easy; Roman began.

'We've had our share of disagreements. It has been difficult for former enemies to trust one another, and the uncomfortable desert weather has made everything all the more trying.

I appreciate your patience during the time we've spent hiding and building here. We had to be sure that the Gorenese had no idea where we'd fled. Now, after months of careful planning, we're finally ready for action--if we can put our differences behind us and band together as a unified team.

Roman stopped to judge the crowd's reaction. As usual, he was having a hard time reading their expressions, but they remained silent, so he continued. "You must see Officer Fulcher, Pilot Selrase, Pilot Dept, and myself not as Gorenese--your enemies--but as part of your cooperative Alliance. We do not believe that the Gorenese belong in the Ascalon Rift, and that's why we decided to join you. Even though we

are underdogs in this struggle, with limited supplies and limited numbers, I know we can win if we stick together.

It seemed to be going well. None of the crowd had left the room or fallen asleep, so Roman was encouraged.

"Our first mission is to determine the status of ar-1.

When I left to join you, the Gorenese were preparing to evacuate the base. We're not sure if this has occurred yet, but shortly before he left, Officer Fulcher reprogrammed ar-1's self-destruct program, which he linked to a trigger mechanism at the top of the base's dome. I plan to fly a fighter to the base myself, accompanied by a full strike wing.

If the trigger mechanism is still operational, we may be able to destroy it. That would destroy the base and cripple Gorenese military efforts from that flank."

A particularly ominous Tancred pilot stood up and glared at Roman.

It took a moment, but Roman finally recognized him as Stellerex. "You're going to return to the Gorenese and tell them where we're hiding! I knew this was a trick.

"I give you my word, Stellerex, this is not a trick." Stellerex hissed. "You once gave your word to my friend, Captain Tawl Shud. Look where it got him. I will accompany you to ar-1. You will not lie while I watch you.

Kloul gestured at Stellerex to sit down. "I admit that I have hesitations as well. This could be an elaborate Gorenese plot to deceive us, but I have worked with these Gorenese for the past three months, and I think we can trust them.

Roman nodded at Kloul. "You have to trust us. Without my knowledge of Gorenese tactics and their bases, you'll never win before they receive reinforcements and complete the construction of Prajna-7: President PhenaWarratie spoke from the front row. The Mazumas have a say in this also. I believe we can trust these Gorenese to help us: "You had better be correct, shapeshifter," said Stellerex, glaring at Warratie.

Urco, another Tancred pilot seated beside Hela Selrase, stood with a growl. "I don't agree! I smell a trap!" Hela laughed, surprising everyone. "You smell yourself, Urco. Now you know what I've had to put up with for the last three months. When are you going to realize that we're on your side?" Urco was not pleased with the resulting laughter from the crowd. He glared at Hela. "There could be a hundred Gorenese ships waiting to attack us when we arrive." Then you can stay here, Urco; said Roman. I'll take other pilots if you don't have the stomach for it.

Urco looked down at his stomach with a frown. I have a stomach!

Don't tell me I don't have a stomach!" When he heard more laughter from the crowd, Urco sat down in defeat and confusion. Hela patted him on the top of the head to console him, which he didn't seem to mind.

Roman was impressed that Hela always had the same effect on men, whether they were Gorene or alien.

Vonric Blacklost, commander of the Zemun dreadnought, stood up in the front row, smiling at Hela in the row behind him before turning to face Roman."Count me in. I would like nothing more than to watch that garish Gorene base explode into a billion pieces. If you wish, you may accompany me aboard my dreadnought, Commander Alexandria.

Roman smiled. "I appreciate your offer, Commander Blacklost. Perhaps next time.

Blacklost nodded and sat down. The dust storm brewing outside managed to howl through the doors, blowing dust into the room. Since the atmosphere of the planet was nontoxic, airlocks and other atmospheric seals were not required on the base, which saved a considerable amount of effort during the construction of the fortress. However, the Tancreds were quite vocal about their dislike of the hot weather. Lord Kraw was one of the dissenters. He took the momentary silence as another opportunity to express his opinion.

This is a terrible place to have a base,said Kraw."This is a large world with diverse climates. Why are we in the middle of a barren desert? Can't we move someplace where the temperature is cooler and the air is fresher?

Roman looked at Klool to allow him to answer, but he saw that Klool was sweating also. "It's doubtful that the Gorenese will find this planet, but if they do, they'll surely scan regions where life would be most abundant and come fortable. They won't think we're torturing ourselves by living in a scorching desert where life itself barely exists.

Yeah, we sure fooled them; mumbled Kraw as he wiped the sweat from the top of his head.

The Zemun pilot, Endilskar Dardrac, was another grumbler who hated to miss an opportunity, so he stated his own complaint.The primitive desert dwellers who call this place home are strange and have no souls.

They offend Anjou. We can't trust such simple creatures to continue helping us: Hela mined to face the Zemun."Don't be foolish. They're in awe. It's a combination of fear, wonder, and excitement all at once. Put yourself in their place, Endilskar. Their civilization has barely been born, and they can't comprehend the arrival of aliens--especially when the aliens are as ugly as the Tancreds: The crowd laughed again. Roman knew Hela was trying to keep the conversation light so that they might all remain friends, or as close as they'd ever get to being friends, after the past.

Stellerex looked at Hela. "We may not be beautiful in your eyes, Pilot Selrase, but we are brave and honorable and--" Hela dismissed Stellerex with a wave. "Yeah, yeah. Let's get on with the mission: Stellerex didn't know what else to say, so he sat down with a puzzled expression. Roman was impressed that Hela could bait the Tancred's so often and get away with it, but they actually seemed to like it.

"The sooner we end this war, the sooner I can get out of this desert," said Kraw.

ASCALON RIFT--SECTOR H--AR-1 Krugon should have blown it up when he had the chance, Hela said over Roman's comlink.

Hela was flying a Tancred Warlord ship alongside Roman's Gorene Scorpion fighter. They were approaching AR-1, flying in the considerable shadow of Blacklost's Zemun dreadnought along with several other Tancred craft. The Gorene outer barrier patrol had already been eliminated and the Alliance ships were moving in fast on their target.

"What?" Roman asked.

"AR-1. Dept had the chance to blow it up, but he couldn't go through with it. He had too many friends there at the time.

That's why he left that warning note for Quark. He knew somebody would take care of the problem before all the atmosphere leaked away. That's why he didn't sabotage the whole system: "He told you all this? I thought he'd want to keep it a secret from the Alliance: "He didn't tell anyone else but me. He wanted to demonstrate his goodwill to the Alliance, so he set the bomb. If they'd done a mindscan to see if he was telling the truth, they would have been able to verify his story. Of course, the Zemuns didn't scan him, they just trusted him. They're funny that way--and their words actually mean something: Roman started to respond, but he was interrupted by the shrill sound of an alarm. Someone had a target lock on his ship. He started an evasive maneuver, then canceled it as the alarm shut off.

"Did I startle you?" Stellerex asked.

Roman slapped his forehead as he realized how stupid he'd been. "I never changed my transponder settings: 'That's a good way to get killed, Gorene: Roman hastily made the correction inside his instrument panel. The change in his targeting system had already been made so that he could shoot at Gorene targets, but the transponder still identified his Scorpion as a Gorene ship, which could lead to problems in a situation like this one.

Thanks for mentioning it, Stellerex: "Just remember we're on the same side now, Gorene. I'm watching you."

Roman had a feeling there was a real threat nearby. His eyes

carefully scanned the blackness around them, section by section, until he finally saw two Scorpions, cloaked so they wouldn't show up on sensors.

The angry face of Shyke Samsó appeared on Roman's communications monitor. "I wondered how long it would take you to show your traitorous face. You're an enemy of the Gorene Empire. I trusted you, and you betrayed us."

Roman was about to respond when the image on the monitor disappeared. Then he saw the flash of Samsó's ship exploding as a Tancred fighter swept past it. This was the part of the plan that Roman dreaded the most: killing his former friends and teammates. He hoped he wouldn't run into any more pilots he knew well, but that was unlikely.

There was a second flash in the distance as the other cloaked Gorene fighter exploded.

Alliance intelligence had reported that two Gorene strike groups were going after Tancred targets in the Orentes system, leaving ar-1 lightly defended after the three month lull in aggression by the Alliance. Roman was sure the Gorenese felt confident now, since they felt free to send a major portion of their AR-1 forces to distant battles. Shylo had fallen back into his old pattern, thinking only in terms of offense instead of defense.

ar-1 was rapidly approaching. Now that the attackers had been detected by the inner patrols they had just destroyed, the Gorene base was launching more fighters. Roman and Hela stayed with the Zemun dreadnought as the rest of the strike group peeled off to engage the Gorene defenders. They had planned this earlier so that Roman and Hela could avoid fighting their friends as much as possible while going after the explosive trigger in the ar-1 dome.

Roman activated his armaments panel. Several lights flashed in response to show that the targeting computer and the auxiliary systems were ready.

Strike Two, this is Strike Leader."

Two:

Lock and load, Hela. Ignore the rest and shoot for the dome. Vonric will take out the shields."

"I can't do this, Roman."

Roman knew why she was hesitating. "Shylo sent two large strike groups to the Orentes sector. Most of the pilots we know will be there."

Her voice was grim. Maybe:

"They're the enemy now, Hela."

Roman heard Blacklost's voice over the comlink as he spoke to his gunners on the dreadnought. "Commence firing on shields: The Zemun Hellfire weapon hurled multiple streams of glowing purple plasma at ar-1. The shields of the Gorene base glittered as they were struck by the continuous flow of the charged particles. As the dreadnought continued its approach to the base, the stream got bright enough that Roman was unable to look at it directly. He was glad he wasn't on the receiving end of the Hellfire's considerable wrath, since the dreadnought could generate enough power to make a Gorene fighter's shields disappear immediately, leaving it completely exposed to other types of attack.

"Strike Two, throttle back to one-fifty, max conserve, and cloak it," said Roman. He wanted to give the dreadnought time to do its job.

In the meantime, there was no need to get much closer or remain exposed to the Gorene targeting systems on the base. Roman checked the charge on his cloaking battery and activated the system now that they were moving slow enough to use it.

ar-1 used all of its available power to maintain its shields, but the Hellfire weapon had finally worn them down. When the shields failed, ar-1 started firing back at the dreadnought with its lasers, which were unable to penetrate the Zemun shields. The dreadnought responded with its other special weapon, the Energy Siphon.

The Energy Siphon was designed to operate only after the target's shields were down. It formed a connection between the dreadnought and the target, sucking energy from the victim back to the weapon's capacitor to power weapons, shields, or maneuvering engines. The victim would lose the same amount of power that the Zemun ship gained.

While the dreadnought maintained its focus as ar-1's primary target, Roman moved closer and locked his targeting system on the dome of ar-1. If Blois's self-destruct reprogramming was still intact, a direct hit on the dome would trigger the explosives aboard AR-1. Originally intended to be used only if aR-1 was about to be captured, the designers had not included a fail-safe system to restrict the effects of sabotage.

"Fox one away; said Roman, as he launched the first torpedo.

Hela's voice surprised him. "Fox one?"

Hela's torpedo followed Roman's straight into the dome.

The explosions severely damaged the dome, but it took four more torpedoes from each of them to penetrate the dome and trigger the self-destruct system.

The resulting explosion caught them by surprise. The dreadnought could only back away slowly, so Roman and Hela used the bulk of the ship for a shield against the shock wave coming their way. They were able to gain only a short distance from ar-1 when they were caught by the first shock, then struck by fragments that shook their ships as the pieces hit their shields. Roman glanced into his rearview to see the dreadnought rotating faster against the backdrop of what appeared to be an expanding star formerly occupying the position of ar-1. He looked away so that he wouldn't go blind, since the filters in the cockpit canopy and his helmet would be overloaded by such brilliant intensity.

"Commander Alexandria, we would appreciate a warning next time; said Vonric Blacklost."That explosion was much larger than we expected.

Fortunately, Anjou was on our side:

Roman looked back again to see the dreadnought plod ding along behind them. The star behind it was fading fast.

"It surprised me too,Vonric. Sorry about that.

"We have sustained only medium-level damage said Black-lost.

"Our shields absorbed much of the impact. The new self-repair technology, which Officer Fulcher installed with our technicians, will be put to a good test this day. If your Gorene nanobots are as good as you say they are, we should have little damage left by the time we return to the base.

"Blois knows what he's doing,said Roman."He helped design the original system with our Gorene scientists."

"We shall see. We are in Anjou's hands."

The various elements of the Alliance strike group wasted no time in forming up on the dreadnought for the return trip to the base in the Vesto-3 system. During this process, Roman noticed that Hela remained very quiet.

"Thanks for the help, Hela. That dome was a lot harder to crack than I thought it would be.

"I did my job, that's all; said Hela."No need to thank me.

I just wonder which of our friends was aboard when the base exploded: "We'll find out next time," said Roman."Prajna-7 won't be so lightly defended now that they've lost their only forward base2 ASCALON RIFT-sEcTOr-3-.-NEW AllIANCE BASE

The destruction of ar-1 was a complete success in the eyes of the Alliance. Roman was now recognized by the aliens to be a capable leader--aided by Overlord Klood, of course. Roman and Hela made a brief appearance at the victory celebration upon their return to the

new Alliance base, then sneaked away to their room. Among their new friends in the Alliance, Roman and Hela were able to have their relationship out in the open, but it was still difficult to get uninterrupted privacy.

Their room contained two hard chairs, a writing table, and a bed that was too small for two people, but they had come to appreciate the spartan simplicity. Excess baggage, along with the flotsam and jetsam of personal memorabilia, had been left behind on ar-1 with their pasts.

This space that they shared was a safe haven where they could speak of rebellion, plan, and dream together without fear of being caught or exposed. Despite the stark surroundings, their room held the luxury of freedom.

Returning from the mission, they had undressed in silence to lay on the bed and stare at the dim glow panel in the ceiling. Their mood was grim, thinking about the Gorene friends they had left behind who might now be dead. They wished they could have left their former lives behind without a struggle, but the past refused to die so easily.

"You know we have to go after Prajna-7," Roman said.

His voice echoed off the bare walls.

"I know; Hela lightly placed her hand on his chest.

"They still haven't finished it. That means we have a chance to destroy it while the core is still exposed."

"I know.

"And there's bound to be a lot of confusion after the loss of ar-1. Shylo might even panic.

Hela rolled onto her side so she could look into Roman's eyes.

"Which one of us are you trying to convince?"

Roman sighed. "I just want it all to stop. I don't want to kill anymore. I just want to be left alone to live here with you.

"Yes," Hela said, kissing his cheek. "Soon: 'We have to keep killing our friends; Roman's voice was faint.

Hela put her head down on his chest. "One more time; she said. "Then it can stop. Then it can all stop. You'll see: Roman wanted to believe her, but he was unconvinced.

He stroked her hair. "Yes. One more time: After a sleepless night, Roman and Hela emerged from their room the next morning to find a mound of food outside their door--another offering from the primitive local inhabitants.

The locals understood that something wonderful had happened, and that Roman was responsible for it, even if they didn't understand the nature of that wonderful thing.

At the mission briefing after breakfast, the mood among the crowd was much better. Success, and full stomachs, gave them courage. They were anxious to hear what Roman had to say.

"My friends; Roman said to the assembly,"we have been given a perfect opportunity. Our intelligence reports show that Prajna-7 is still unfinished. Three thousand Gorene forces are on their way to man the base, since the War Council is concerned about its safety. However, those reinforcements will not arrive for two standard days. If we strike quickly, we can attack Prajna-7 while it's guarded only by a light, battle-weary defensive force."

There were murmurs of approval among the crowd as Roman continued.

"This will be our most challenging mission, and perhaps our last if we succeed. We will use everything we have in three strike groups. First, we'll have to defeat the Gorene fighters, destroy the mines surrounding the base, and attack any defensive satellites they have in position. The main force will be involved in these activities as the small third group strikes Prajna-7's main generator, which should lead to a chain reaction explosion that will destroy the base. This is a wonderful opportunity to end the war in the Ascalon Rift."

The crowd applauded, honked, stomped their feet, and made hooting noises to show their approval of the plan.

Blois stepped forward and smiled at the crowd."We've come a long way. Let's pull together one last time and win this war: Blois's words were greeted with more clapping and hooting.

At first, Roman found the alien noises disturbing, but he knew they meant well.

i'm proud to have flown with each of you; said Roman.

We've been through a great deal. We've had our differences, and we've all witnessed and taken part in acts that have made us question our values and beliefs. Despite the obstacles, we have remained together and accomplished what we set out to do to free the Ascalon Rift. If we do win this war, it will be because of your efforts: The crowd started in again with the clapping and honking, but Overlord Klool held up his hand for silence.

I don't wish to argue with you, Commander Alexandria, but if we do win this war, it will be because of you."

Roman smiled and looked down at his shoes. Before the crowd went nuts again, Blois said:"We will win through all of our efforts: "Thank you, my friends, for not giving up when you could have... and probably

should have. Thank you," said Roman.

The Tancred Lord Kraw jumped up from his seat. "Does this mean I can finally get off this planet? I hate it here."

Most of the crowd laughed, although some of the Tancreds nodded their heads in agreement.

"Really?" Roman asked. "I like it here."

"That's because the locals think you're their god," said "You have a point, but what's wrong with that?" Roman asked.

SelraSe smiled at Kraw. "They probably think you represent supreme evil, Kraw.

"And what's wrong with that?" Kraw asked.

Roman allowed the laughter to die down as he shook the hands of Blois and Overlord Klool. When the crowd had calmed down, Roman concluded the briefing. "Don't think this mission will be easy. Many of you may not return. We may not have as many pilots as the Gorenes do, but our weapons are strong and we are defending your home-worlds.

Destroy Prajna-7, and you destroy the Gorene presence in the Ascalon Rift.

The crowd went wild. Roman hoped he could make himself believe what he'd just said. If not, he was sending them all to their doom.

CHAPTER 17 ASCALON RIFT-secTOR IwPRAJNA-7 Roman's hyperjump headache was back. He was standing on the starbridge of the Zemun dreadnought, watching the forward viewscreen as Vonric Blacklost guided them toward their destination, the Prajna-7 battle station. Roman glanced over his shoulder at Hela and Blois, standing at the rear of the bridge, their expressions sad and grim. Long-range scans had shown that Admiral Shylo's flagship was not present in the area, so Roman assumed he had shifted his command center to the bridge of Prajna-7. The flagship would be parked in one of the battle station's cavernous hangars.

The battle station was still showing a fair amount of open framework as construction continued, and it seemed to be behind schedule, even though the central section had a finished appearance. The laser bays around the core were in place but, to Roman's trained eye, the heavy gun bays that bristled along the battle station's outer faces were clearly inoperative. One entire face of the battle station was a spiderweb of metal framing that left one side of the main generator exposed at the core. When the station was completed, the main generator would be an impossible target, blanketed with hundreds of decks and heavy equipment.

Intelligence reports indicated that the strike groups returning

from the Orentes system had been thrown into chaos when they found their AR-1 forward base missing. Desperate for a place to land, many of the ships went to the Mooris space dock, which was not able to refuel and turn around such a large number of spacecraft in a short period. Some of the pilots had run out of fuel, but most of those had been towed to Prajna-7 with the remainder of the Gorene strike ships. The battle station had the landing capacity for all those ships in its bays, but it didn't yet have the technical staff, or completed facilities, required to refuel and turn around that many fighters. The ensuing traffic jam meant there were many returning ships still motionless outside the landing bays, their fuel spent and their pilots asleep, waiting for a chance to land.

Roman turned as the bridge doors hissed open. Krugon Dept entered, nodding to Roman with a somber expression as he trudged over to stand watch beside Blois. All four defectors were on the bridge. Roman wondered if he'd ever see them together again.

Admiral shylo was quite shocked to learn that a massive Alliance armada had entered his sector of space, flying straight toward Prajna-7. shylo's first thought was to board his flagship and leave the incomplete battle station behind, but his exit route was blocked by stacks of Gorene fighters, empty of fuel, waiting to be processed into the hangar bays.

His second thought involved revenge. If Prajna-7 was destroyed, shylo wanted to make sure that the traitorous Roman Alexandria would not live through the experience, since he had to be the reason why the Alliance had found the battle station.

The corridors near the launch bays were crowded with pilots standing in lines. The technicians were cycling the fighters through the bays as fast as they could, but it wasn't fast enough. At the point where two long lines converged at the entrance to one of the bays, shylo elbowed his way to the front and turned to shout at the pilots.

Attention! You may find Gorene starfighters among the enemy fleet! If your targeting system identifies one of these ships as a target, shoot it like a target! There are four traitors attacking us! Former sector commander Roman Alexandria is among them! They must all die! However, to encourage your best efforts, the pilot who kills Roman Alexandria will immediately be retired from military service, with full honors, as a wealthy citizen of the empire!"

shylo was pleased by the response. He had to jump back to clear the doorway.

Upon hearing shylo's message, several pilots found a way out of the battle station's crowded bays. Marsh Lawton broke out of line, grabbed one of the younger pilots who was climbing into a Scorpion on a launch catapult, tossed him aside, and took his place in the cockpit of the fighter.

When the traffic control officer found a launch opening among the jammed ships outside the battle station, the catapult hurled Lawton's fighter out of the bay.

Aboard the Zemun dreadnought, Roman and Blacklost studied the confusion of traffic now visible outside Prajna-7.

Using a tactic similar to the ar-1 attack, the dreadnought would attempt to knock out the battle station's shields while everyone else destroyed the defensive mines, satellites, and fighter cover.

This might be easier than we thought," said Blacklost.

"Don't bet on it," said Roman. "They may be confused with all the refugees from ar-1, but there's plenty of firepower out there."

"If so, why didn't we see any of the outer barrier patrols such as those that guarded the ar-1 base?"

"That's a good question, but our main problem will be the battle station itself. The primary gun batteries at the core look operational."

"Perhaps you're correct, Commander Alexandria, but you may be underestimating the power of this dreadnought."

Roman nodded. "I don't mean to insult your fine ship, Commander Blacklost. My purpose is only to warn you about what we're up against."

The Gorenese have built battle stations such as Prajna-7 for other military campaigns, and they were never defeated:

"Point taken, Commander. We'll proceed with caution."

That's all I ask. Your ship is the anchor for our entire strategy. Do you know if my fighter is ready for launch?"

"Fueled and waiting whenever you're ready:

It seemed stupid to leave the safety of the dreadnought, but Roman's fingers itched to be on the controls of his Scorpion, in command of his own destiny. Aboard the Zemun.

ship, there was little to do now that his plans were under way.

He would not be content to stand there and watch everyone else do the work. Turning to leave, he discovered that Hela and the other defectors had disappeared from the bridge.

When Roman arrived in the launch bay wearing his flight suit and helmet, he found Hela climbing into a tancred War-lord on a parallel catapult track. She glanced over her shoulder and smiled when she saw

him.

"I knew you'd be coming; said Hela.

'Are you sure you want to go out there?" Hela snorted. I can't let you go by yourself. You know what happens when I leave you alone for too long: 'I don't suppose I can talk you out of it he said, climbing the ladder to the cockpit.

"No, so get in your fighter and shut up:

"Yes, dear."

The darkness brightened around them as the intense Hellfire stream lanced out from the Zemun dreadnought, slamming the charged particles against the shields of the battle station. The purple stream of plasma glowed with a brilliance that was painful to Roman's eyes, so he avoided looking at it. Besides, there were plenty of other things for him to see, such as the four Gorene Liberators racing toward him.

"Lock and load, Hela: Roman saw no point in sticking to the archaic communication protocols any more.

"Armed and ready,' said Hela. Her voice sounded grim, but steady.

Roman felt comforted by one thought--if he had to die, Hela would be with him.

"Fox one,said Roman.

"Fox one,said Hela.

Roman's torpedo made a valiant attempt to stay with the Liberator he was aiming at, but the Gorene pilot was too clever and managed to outmaneuver Roman's shot. However, he didn't outmaneuver Roman's follow-up laser fire, which did an excellent job of punching holes in the Liberator's shields. The pilot rolled and dove when he realized he was being hammered by Roman's laser fire, only to discover that it was a distraction for Roman's second torpedo.

The Liberator explosion happened so suddenly that Roman almost flew into it.

Hela's first torpedo missed her target entirely due to a sudden evasive maneuver, but it continued on to hit the second Liberator in the line. It surprised everyone when it struck and disabled the second ship.

Roman was disappointed to see that the remaining two Liberators had separated. If he had trained them, it didn't show. He didn't know who they were, and he didn't want to know, but they were using sloppy tactics.

One of the Liberators exploded as it swooped back around toward Roman and received two torpedoes from underneath. A Tancred Warlord swooped past, wagging its wings at Roman.

"Thanks, Stellerex. Nice shot.

'It was too easy,said Stellerex."He was asking for it.

'Unfortunately, I agree.

As if she'd been flying the Tancred Warlord for years, Hela dispatched the remaining Liberator with little effort.

The battle zone was getting more active now. Most of the Alliance ships were fighting Goterie ships. If the Gorenese hadn't been tired, as Roman knew they must be, they would be killing four Alliance fighters for every one Goterie. As it was, the ratio had come down to two Alliance craft lost for every Gorene. Roman hoped Vonric would be able to puncture Prajna-7's shields before the Alliance lost too many ships. The destruction of this Gorene base was the key to winning this battle, and this war, if the Alliance could maintain its fighting force.

Marsh Lawton's snarling face appeared on Roman's communications monitor. "Roman, you traitor. Admiral Shylo has a bounty on your head, and I'm going to collect it.

Don't listen to Shylo,said Roman. "If you place your trust in him, he'll get you killed. Join us.

"And turn my back on my people? Never. You're a coward, Roman. You've disgraced the Gorene Empire." "I did the right thing. You're the one who's blind to the truth.

Lawton sneered at him."I was always a better pilot than you, Roman. Face it. Now, I'll prove it to you once and for all. You're my ticket to a leisurely life in retirement.

"Don't force me to kill you, Marsh.

Lawton laughed and broke the connection. Roman shook his head at the dark communications monitor.

Lawton's Scorpion came toward Roman at full speed, firing his lasers. Roman recognized Lawton's usual psychological ploy for what it was, so he made a minor correction in his course and fired his lasers directly across Lawton's path.

Lawton swerved as his forward shields brightened from the touch of Roman's lasers.

Roman switched to the Gorene tactical frequency that Lawton would be using."You'll have to do better than that, Marsh. I know you too

well. Sure you won't change your mind?"

"You talked Hela into defecting, didn't you?" asked Lawton, swinging his Scorpion around for another pass at Roman.

"It was her choice, Marsh. She defected before I did.

"Liar! You planned it that way.

Lawton launched a torpedo. Roman slammed the stick down and to his left as he punched in his afterburner. He'd let Lawton get a bit too close, but there was still a slim hope that he could avoid killing him. Roman knew Hela had rejected Lawton in the past and that he was a hothead, but he had also saved Roman's life many times in combat. If nothing else, he respected Lawton's ability; he'd make a great pilot for the Alliance.

Roman managed to evade the torpedo with several quick maneuvers, but the target alarm continued to scream at him as his shields flared with the laser fire Lawton was pumping into his ship.

"I've always wanted to fight you like this; said Lawton, breathing hard. "It's the only way to prove I'm the better pilot." "That's one way to look at it, I suppose said Roman, gritting his teeth against the G force of the tight turn he was making.

Roman dropped in behind Lawton and pumped four laser shots into his rear shields. One of the shots made it through and blew a small chunk off Lawton's rear fuselage. Lawton responded with a tight turn that placed his ship upside-down under Roman's ship, heading the opposite direction.

"Don't let it go to your head," said Lawton. "I'm still going to kill you.

'Just so you know, Hela's in one of the Tancred Warlords nearby.

'Great. She can watch me kill you.

Roman sighed and launched a torpedo. Lawton avoided easily, then placed his ship in an excellent position to punch holes in the shield over Roman's head. Roman slammed his stick to the left, then right, then he killed his speed with a sudden stop, which was the only way he managed to avoid more than a minor scorch across the top of the fuselage behind the canopy. Lawton launched another torpedo. Roman hit his afterburner, hoping he could get enough speed from a dead start to outrun Lawton's delivery. Spotting a third Scorpion nearby, Roman swerved toward it.

'Calabreze? Lawton shouted. "Heads up?"

Roman swooped around Calabreze's Scorpion in a tight arc. Before the young pilot had a chance to react, Lawton's torpedo refocused on

the new target, punching straight through the center of Calabreze's fuselage before it exploded.

Pieces of the ship shot past Roman, who was trying to get as much distance as possible from the explosion Roman's ship shook with the impact of something heavy hitting his rear shield. When he looked in the rearview, he saw a chunk of Calabreze's cockpit rebounding away, but another piece of Roman's fuselage had also been gouged.

out. And another friend was dead.

"I'll kill you for that, Roman!"

"You were planning to kill me anyway, weren't you?"

Roman knew Lawton was beyond threatening now; his temper had taken control. Roman's shields had taken a major hit from Calabreze's ship, so he focused the ship's self-repair system on the task. This wasn't the time for him to be losing shield power.

Another missile from Lawton. This time, Roman tried to bring it back around toward Lawton, who was busy pumping laser fire into Roman's shields. The shields were glowing with the energy, preparing to fail. Roman poured power into the shield system, overcharging them beyond their rated limits so that they'd hold a bit longer. He fired his torpedo.

Lawton broke away, but Roman followed, diverting some power back to his laser batteries. Roman checked his rearview and saw the torpedo gaining ground, so he tried evasive maneuvers to try and break its target lock on Roman's ship. While evading, he also tried to stay behind Lawton and fire an occasional laser burst into his shields, but this forced him to split his concentration too many ways. Lawton's torpedo advanced, and Roman finally had to gain more distance by using his afterburner. Lawton was still busy with Roman's torpedo, so Roman held his breath and strained to remain conscious while whipping the Scorpion around in the tightest turn he could manage without blacking out. Coming out of it, he Poured laser fire into the torpedo until it finally exploded a short distance away. The nearby concussion caused Roman's forward shield to overload and fail, leaving him defenseless from that direction.

The power system tried to compensate, causing the damaged rear shield to fail also. Roman directed the power management system to concentrate on keeping his remaining shields up while overcharging his lasers, because Lawton had turned to charge straight at him.

Lawton's first shot removed a chunk of the nose from Roman's Scorpion before he could turn to take the next laser shots on his starboard shields. Roman's torpedo still followed Lawton, who was attempting to transfer its target lock to his ship. Roman hated it when people tried to use his own tactics against him. Lawton had to be aware of his missing forward shield, so Roman did the unexpected and

turned to face Lawton directly, punching in his afterburner.

Lawton started to turn, then hesitated and changed his mind, continuing straight toward Roman. The torpedo following Lawton now saw one enlarged target, which it was about to hit. Roman poured laser fire into Lawton's ship until his forward shield failed and the shots started shredding the Scorpion's nose. Lawton did the same thing, shaking Roman's ship with laser impacts all over his fuselage.

Roman killed the power to the rest of the shields, dropping what little defense he still had, and overcharged the laser cannon. Smoke curled around inside his cockpit. Several red lights pulsed danger signals at him from the instrument panel. Then Lawton locked his tractor beam on Roman's ship in a death grip.

The extra power in Roman's laser fire caused all of Lawton's shields to collapse just as Roman's persistent torpedo finally caught up to Lawton's tail. Roman closed his eyes against the brilliant flare of light: the last thing he saw was the ship coming apart directly in front of him. The pieces of Lawton's ship slammed into Roman's Scorpion as he tried to change course, but the afterburner sent him straight through Lawton's wreckage. The booming and pounding noises against Roman's fuselage were terrifying, but he couldn't avoid the exploding hulk. He knew it would come down to this, but he also knew it was the right thing to do.

Accepting his death, he thought of Hela. Then he stopped breathing, knowing it was pointless to continue.

As Prajna-7's shields failed under the onslaught of the dreadnought's Hellfire weapon, half of the Alliance armada moved in to hit the battle station on all sides, dodging the blasts from the heavy laser batteries. Plunging toward the open face of the battle station's unfinished construction zone, Hela Selrase focused on the exposed primary generator at the core. She felt a sudden chill in the pit of her stomach as she realized Roman wasn't there with her. There were no Scorpion fighters in the vicinity. As she flew in among the metal framing of the battle station, she slowed to dodge the struts and other pieces of the station that skimmed past close to her ship.

The laser batteries couldn't hit her now that she was inside Prajna-7 itself, but the structure itself was dangerous.

This was not a flying environment, and her shields had already flashed several times as they touched the metal projections, which seemed to reach out for her as if they were claws. She felt goosebumps on her arms, not so much from the danger around her but from thoughts of Roman.

Distracted by her thoughts, she cut a beam in half with her starboard shield, giving her ship a violent shake. Close enough to see her target, she slowed a bit more, eyed an opening that would get her back into open space, and dumped her full load of torpedoes straight

into the core of Prajna-7.

She turned and punched her afterburner, hoping to get around the outer face of the battle Station for some protection before the construction zone became a concussive inferno.

She detected the beginning of the flash in her rearview, racing outward, collapsing the metal framework it passed, reaching for the attacker who had delivered the killing blow. Speeding up, she had less time to dodge obstacles, so the Warlord's wings ripped through supports and deck foundations, her shields flashing. As soon as she nosed into open space, she swooped along the face of Prajna-7, allowing the completed portion to protect her from the growing blast. Then she angled away, hoping to get clear before fragments of the station got their revenge on their murderer..

Hela gave the afterburner button a constant squeeze, desperately trying to wring more speed out of the Warlord by force of will.

The rest of the armada retreated at various speeds, but some had already been caught in the growing fireball. Hela watched desperately as they disappeared, hoping the same thing wasn't about to happen to her. The surface of the battle station receded behind her, the dull metal erupting into a sea of flame. It was as if she was flying away from an exploding star.

Distance brought safety. Even as other ships vanished within the expanding fireball, she had enough speed now to outrun it. A distress beeper caught her attention as a blinking blue light on the tactical monitor appeared near her flight path. An escape pod. Whether Alliance member or Gorene, the occupant of the pod would soon be engulfed by the expanding remains of Prajna-7.

Hela altered her course, then saw the Scorpion pod ahead of her with its emergency lights blinking. Slowing just enough to snag the pod, she activated her tractor beam and grabbed the small container, hauling it in a high-speed tow. The pod's occupant might be bruised by the shock, but they would escape Prajna-7's dying fury.

CHAPTER 18 ASCALON rift---Sector IV--NEW ALLIANCE BASE

Fourteen escape pods--some Alliance, some Gorene; and some unidentified--were recovered by Alliance ships returning to the base at Vesto-3. The first pod to be opened held a startled Horus Klep. When Hela landed her Warlord, technicians started working on the second pod, its hull scorched and dented enough that they wondered if it had been part of Prajna-7. Due to its battered condition, heavy laser cutting equipment had to be used to slice through the pod's reinforced hull. Curious to see if the occupant of the pod had lived through the beating, Hela watched patiently as the technicians forced their way into the hapless container. Concentrating on the activity, she barely noticed the dark shape that walked up behind her. Her breath caught in her throat as she spun around.

"Ro--!" She interrupted herself as she recognized the familiar face of Quark. Her heart sank.

"Ro to you, too, madam. Arr?"

Hela sighed and looked down at the ground. "I'm sorry. I thought you were someone else. How did you get here?"

"Well, it seems whenever I get settled in someplace, you people come along and blow it up. I barely managed to get off ar-1 before you arrived. Then I told the old admiral that I had information for him, so he let me land on Prajna-7. I just managed to beat the rush. Arr?"

Okay, but I was asking how you got here?"

"Well, that's kind of a long story." Hela rolled her eyes as Quark took a deep breath.

"When the ar-1 survivors started arriving, the technicians on the battle station were too busy to refuel me ship. I couldn't leave right away, so the admiral cornered me and demanded to hear the important news I'd brought for him. I had to tell him the location of the secret Alliance base." Hela gasped. "You did what?"

Quark chuckled. "I told Shylo the Alliance had built a base on Ffestiniog, assuming the Gorene fleet wouldn't return to a Queln planet it had already conquered. It's at the opposite end of the Ascalon Rift from here.

Hela relaxed. "And he believed you?"

"Art. I can be very convincing sometimes. And the man was desperate:

"So how did you get away from the battle station?"

"I was there when Shylo heard about the invasion fleet, so I sneaked away and managed to get me ship launched. Me and Mojo certainly didn't want to hang around on Prajna-7.

Everyone knows how vulnerable those battle stations are when they're under construction.

Hela frowned. "You said you didn't have any fuel?"

Arr. Not much. Once I got started, my fuel ran out and I kept drifting. I knew someone would be along. One of your Tancred lads, a fellow named Stellerex, was good enough to give me a tow on his way here. Arr?"

Hela was startled to hear that Stellerex had helped someone other than himself, but these were strange days. She jumped at the sound of

a loud bang behind her. She turned and saw that the top of the escape pod had been cut off by the techs.

The techs reached into the pod and gently lifted a limp Gorene out into the open air. Hela gasped, then lunged forward to help, as she recognized the scorched figure of Roman alle Alexandria.

Hela elbowed the technicians out of the way and dragged Roman away from the pod, then started babbling. "You're okay! You're okay! Aren't you? Say you're okay!"

Roman started coughing. Hela had her arm around his shoulders, holding him in a sitting position.

"Say something! Say anything! Don't just stare at me and cough! I hope you're not going to nag me like this after we're married," said Roman.

Hela let go of Roman's shoulders and his head bounced on the ground. Ow Alliance casualties had been high during the Prajna-7 battle, but not as high as Roman had feared. Krugon Dept died in the company of a Zemun fighter group. Many of the losses had come when Hela blew up the battle station, since the ferocity of the blast had caught many of the Alliance ships by surprise. However, the mission itself, the last one to be flown in the Ascalon Rift campaign, was an unqualified success.

Two days after Roman's return to the Alliance base, the last of the stragglers from the battle had returned. Roman stood with Hela, Overlord Klool, and Blois Fulcher on a platform over the entrance to the base. The sun was bright on the sand and the nearby pyramids. Roman noted the perspiration on top of Overlord Klool's head, but the Gorenese were comfortable in the dry heat. The Gorenese were dressed in their casual white uniforms. Roman's gold-colored headgear, which fanned out in straight lines from the side of his head and his collar, always caught the attention of the locals because it reminded them of their local star. Klool was dressed in his usual dark uniform, which made him even more uncomfortable in the desert sun. Some of the locals were standing nearby, with a small crowd of aliens, watching the informal ceremony as Klool awarded the three Gorenese with Tancred Honor Stars.

"It was an honor to serve with you, Overlord Klool," said Roman with a slight bow.

Klool smiled. "It took much time before I finally trusted you, Commander Alexandria, but you proved that your word is true. You've accomplished something extraordinary.

You also demonstrated remarkable leadership and courage."

"And I want to thank you, Overlord," said Hela, fingering the gold star at the end of its light blue ribbon. "I'm just glad I was able to

help correct some of the mistakes I made in the past with the Gorennes.

Blois thanked Klool for his medal, then looked at him with a serious expression. "The Gorennes will be back, overlord."

"I'm aware of that," Klool nodded. "For now, let's savor our hard-fought victory. At least the Gorennes will think twice before they return."

Roman nodded.

Commander Alexandria; Klool continued, "I would like to promote you to Overlord in the Tancred forces. This is the highest honor ever bestowed on a non-Tancred. You're a born leader of warriors who could lead us into battle with bravery and honor."

Roman smiled. "With all due respect, I must regretfully turn down your generous offer. Believe me when I say that I do not wish to offend you. I'm proud that you see me as a fit leader, but the war took a great deal out of me. I'd like a chance to contemplate my future... and rest."

"I assume you'll rest here, Commander?" Klool asked.

eyes?

Perhaps you could teach Officer Selrase the intricacies of the Tetrax game.

"She'll be better than both of us in a matter of days," said Roman, smiling at Hela.

Klool looked out at the small crowd. "I wish you well, my friends, but be careful. Those who inhabit this world see you as more than mortal. That can be as dangerous as it is exciting. I will stay in touch with you. Thank you again, Commander."

Roman gave Klool a slight bow. "Thank you, Overlord Klool."

Klool proudly turned and made his way down the steps without looking back.

"You don't want to go home?" Blois asked.

Hela frowned at Blois. "Don't give him any ideas. We already talked about it, and I'm forcing him to take a vacation."

Roman shook his head. "I don't have a real home. I haven't had a home since I became a cadet. I've constantly moved from place to place, giving everything to whatever cause I believed in. Maybe this will be a new home for Hela and I, at least for a while."

"Why?" Blois frowned. "It can't be the weather. And you're too restless to stay in one place for too long."

Roman smiled and looked out across the desert. A cooling breeze blew past. I've grown accustomed to the simplicity of this world. The people may seem primitive, but they're sincere, grateful, and hardworking.

"I'll say; Hela chuckled, putting her arms around Roman's waist." You've had these people working hard since you got here, but they still worship you.

"You're exaggerating; said Roman.

"Look at this place; said Blois, sweeping an arm across the horizon." Before we arrived, these desert dwellers worshiped the hardy desert rat as their god. Now they're using the tools you gave them to build a monument to you!"

"This is their planet, not mine; said Roman, shaking his head. "They're simple people who live off the earth, but they like new tools.

I'm just a friend who wants to help them along. My first lesson will be to teach them that I'm no god.

"Just don't teach them too much," said Hela. "Gorenes tend to overdo the whole teaching thing.

Roman looked away, drifting off into his own world." Agriculture--that'll be next. And art--might as well start with the 'A' topics."

Hela rolled her eyes, then looked at Blois." He's lost his mind. Help me with him."

"I can't stay. I have to return to Eysleria and tell our people the truth. The Emperor must know what happened in the Ascalon Rift. He must learn about the deceit at the heart of Ferrand's and Shylo's actions. I wish you were both coming with me.

Roman nodded at Blois." I'll be back to help you. We have to reeducate the Gorenes on the dangers of imperialism. It has to stop.

Hela frowned at Roman." I suppose we could go back for a visit. Then she looked at Blois with concern." It'll be dangerous for you to return home.

"If there are any problems, I have friends in the intelligence community. I'll create a new identity for myself.

They heard a familiar voice shout at them from ground level." Arr! You ready to go, Officer Fulcher, sir? We can't be waiting around all day, Mojo and me.

They walked to the edge of the platform and looked down at Captain

Quark, who gave them a quick wave."Arr!"

"I didn't realize you knew Quark that well; said Roman.

"As I said, I have friends in high places; said Blois."I've known Quark for years.

Roman grinned. "Who hasn't?" "The ship's leaving!" Quark yelled as he stomped away.

"Be on it or stay here, makes no never mind to me, sir!"

"I guess I'd better go,' said Blois, shaking their hands.

"Goodbye, Blois,' said Roman.

Hela patted Blois on the shoulder, lifting the bluestone out of her uniform to catch the light."Don't let that crazy pirate sell you any jewelry. He told Roman this was a real bluestone, as if anyone could afford to buy such a thing.

Blois smiled and started down the steps."It is a real bluestone.

Good luck to you." Hela was stunned as Roman laughed and waved goodbye to Blois, who pointed at the crowd."Your followers are waiting for you!" Roman's eyes glazed over as he looked at the crowd.

"Quark told me that one of the neighboring tribes has been stealing some of their water.

"Just stay out of it. The other tribe probably needs water, too. And let's hope these people don't get violent when you tell them you're not a god,said Hela, slipping her arms around Roman's waist again.

"They need me,' said Roman."That's a good feeling: "So do I.There's one thing that bothers me, though?

"What's that?"

"The monument they're building over there. It started out looking like a giant rat, but now they're giving it your face: Roman snorted. "That's not my face?

Yes, it is. Look at it." Hela pointed at the proud stone rat standing on its hind legs on the sand near the pyramids. The face was being modified by some of the locals with the laser tools Roman had given them. They hadn't made the nose yet, but the rest of the face bore a striking resemblance to Roman. He would never admit to Hela that the rat's face looked like his, but it gave him a warm feeling inside anyway.

"That's not me,he said.

"You're impossible.

Roman smiled at her, and he knew that smile would last a long time. He was home.

About the Author Bruce Balfour has been designing, writing, producing, and directing computer game projects since 1986, including Neuromancer, The Dagger of Amon Ra, and Outpost--one of the top-selling computer games of 1994. In addition to his work in the electronic entertainment industry, he has two professionally produced stage plays and over 50 published comic books, including his graphic novel, Jack the Ripper.

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