

Tom Condarcure

***ASTRO ATHENA VERSUS THE EVIL
FROM SPACE***

a science fiction novel

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CHAPTER 1. ENTER ASTRO ATHENA

Donald Ardent knew he wasn't supposed to be sitting in the pilot's seat of the *Space Eagle*, but it had been docked for several days now with all systems deactivated. So, how could he could get into trouble?

As he idly fingered one of the switches on the control panel, he saw her striding majestically across the field, moving stiffly, proud as usual in her yellow, body-fitting uniform. She was lean and muscular, her movements those of a practiced grace. She moved like every inch the space heroine she was. Or else the laundramax had starched her panties again.

He heard her steps as she climbed up the ladder of their prone ship. Then Astro Athena poked her head through the open hatch into the control cabin.

"Donald, what are you doing in my seat?"

"Sorry," he said. "I was just thinking and I forgot I wasn't supposed to be up here when you're not around."

"And I guess you don't remember how you blasted off by accident the last time we were here? It took us almost a week to find you and get the *Space Eagle* back. They're still talking about the non-stop whining you did over the super-space radio. Space Ranger communications was fouled up the whole time you were marooned."

"Look, I'm keeping my hands in my pockets, see?"

"Okay, Donald. I'm just asking you to be careful. I don't want to see you embarrass yourself again, that's all. You know how I worry about you. Anyway, I've got to get to Headquarters." She came up and stood next to him.

"Oh, no. Don't tell me something's wrong again. We just got back a few days ago."

"I don't know, Donald." She stiffened. "But just because they ask me, the best fighter and pilot in the Space Rangers, to go to HQ, that doesn't automatically mean something is wrong. They may want to give me another medal or something."

"I'll bet."

"Just relax, Donald. I'll be back in a little while."

"All right," Donald sighed.

"And why don't you get something ready for lunch while I'm gone?" She leaned over and kissed him on the cheek. "It's ten o'clock and I'm already hungry."

"Okay. I'll find something."

She kissed him again and went to the hatch, but stopped and turned back to him.

"Oh, and Donald, could you get someone to look at the laundramax? It's really messing up my underwear."

He remained in the seat a few moments longer, watching her as she moved across the field in the direction of the huge Headquarters building. When she had disappeared through one of the many sets of doors set along the bottom floor, he shrugged and rose from the seat.

Lunch, he thought. Maybe someday I'll be able to do something more than just fix lunch.

He sighed as he stepped through the hatch into the work cabin. He pulled up a stool and sat at the rear bench, thinking back to that fateful day when he and Athena had first met.

He had been working in the office of the Space Ranger Academy when she had come in one day, a raw Space Cadet. She was complaining to him about some error in her paperwork that had to get straightened out. Otherwise they were going to start training her as a rocket mechanic.

"I'm here to train as a pilot and a fighter," she said, leaning over his desk and staring in his eyes.

Even then, she had that same proud bearing, that look of iron-willed determination. She was eighteen and already had her future decided. He took the papers from her and glanced through them.

"It says here you're to train as a rocket mechanic fourth class," he said. "It's in the paperwork. I don't know what I can do about it."

"I'll be damned if I'm going to spend my career as a lousy rocket mechanic, and fourth class at that. Who do I talk to so I can straighten this out?"

"Well, you can start by talking to me." He leaned forward, resting his chin on his hands. "What makes you think you're good enough to be a pilot in the Space Rangers? Only one in a million ever make it through the training."

She stood erect, turning to look out the window, her eyes becoming glassy as she stared at the clouds floating by, or was it something else far away? He edged back from his desk.

Uh oh, he thought. She's going to have an episode.

But as she spoke, he was caught up by the fire in her words.

"Space," she said. "It's the final frontier. It's my destiny, the thing I live for, the thing I breathe for. Every night when I was a little girl, I looked up at the stars and heard them calling me, telling me I must seek the furthest reaches of the unknown. I must explore. I must be a part of the mightiest peacekeeping force the galaxy has ever known."

"Every night I heard that voice. I kept asking it, 'When are you going to shut up? I already told you I'd join the Space Rangers.'"

"Okay, okay," it said. "I just don't want to let you forget."

"It's almost like an obsession, now. All I have is space in my brain." She stopped talking and looked down at him. "And you want me to be rocket mechanic?"

"All right, all right," he said. "Let me look at those papers again." He picked them up from his desk and went down the lists of acronyms and order numbers. "Ah. I see what's wrong. They left out an ADFRG from SPDTGAW in line 325, order 671-5.6/FT. I can fix that for you."

He went to work on his keyboard and modified the orders.

"All set," he said. "Your new orders will be printed up in a few hours. And you're in pilot training now."

"Thank you," she said, then smiled. "You never told me what your name is."

"Donald. Donald Ardent."

"Donald," she said, "I'd like to take you out to dinner some time. To thank you for helping me, of course."

He had accepted her invitation. It had been the first of many, until they became inseparable.

Now Donald was a permanent member of the three man crew of the *Space Eagle* as they roared through the galaxy in search of the malevolent villains who always seemed to believe they were above the laws of civilized humanity. Along with Dr. Minzov, they had become an unbeatable team, dealing with the intergalactic riff-raff, and spreading law and order where it was needed most.

Damn, he thought as he looked through the food locker behind the work cabin. All we have is bologna and white bread.

He pushed through the items on the shelves, then cursed again.

"No more mayonnaise," he muttered. "It's bad enough all we have is bologna. She'll kill me when she finds out we're out of mayonnaise."

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The door to Colonel Richards' brightly colored office slid open for her. He stood with his back to her, absorbed in a map of the G-alpha-32 sector of the galaxy on the wall-sized screen behind his desk. He continued staring at it for several moments until Athena coughed.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Athena," he said. "I didn't hear you come in. Please sit down."

Now that she saw his face, she could see he looked more haggard than usual. His gray uniform was as smartly pressed as ever, and his cap was set at its familiar jaunty angle. But he had not shaved this morning, or showered, judging by the faint aroma wafting across from his side of the desk. She politely ignored it.

"We've got trouble in the G-alpha-32 sector," he said. His voice seemed raspy and tired.

"I gathered as much when I came in. You wouldn't be looking at that sector of the galaxy if everything was all right."

"That's right," he sighed and eased back in his chair. "You know, just once I'd like to pull up a map of some sector and just look at it. You know, just be able to say, 'Hey, there's a type K6 star,' or 'You know, I'd like to take the wife and kids to that planet around gamma Scorpio again.' But the kids are grown up, now. Left me to go to college. And do they ever call? Sure, when they want more money, or want me to buy something for them. And that wife of mine. Now she wants separate vacations." He paused. "No, it's always trouble somewhere."

"That's our job, isn't it, Colonel?"

"You're right, as usual. Yes, that's our job." He let his chair move forward until he was sitting straight.

"We are in the Space Rangers, after all. It's not the Space Scouts, right? But, just once ... maybe tonight I'll go outside and do a little stargazing. Break out the old telescope and count the moons of Jupiter."

"No, you're just like me, Colonel," she said. "We're both fighters. When I go out to look at the stars, all I see are new fields to conquer, new sectors to bring law and civilization to. Come on, Colonel. It's in the blood. You can't let it go."

"Well, sometimes I can. It may take a few drinks, but I ...," he coughed. "Well, let's forget about that. Let me tell you why I called you in here."

She sat upright, staring straight into the Colonel's eyes, waiting expectantly for the new challenge she must come to grips with ... and defeat. The Colonel coughed again.

"We've been having reports of some kind of raider operating in that sector, a vicious man with some large ship and a fleet of small fighters. We don't know where he got them or who he is, other than his name."

"What is it?"

"Sarnak."

"Sarnak," she repeated.

"Yes. He's been picking off trading vessels and stripping them of their cargo. He captures the crews and sells them into slavery somewhere in the Black Sector. We're not sure where, and we're really only guessing about that anyway. Then he uses the empty ships for target practice. All we've found are some empty, blasted-out hulls."

"And you want me to go out to sector G-alpha-32 and find this Sarnak?"

"Well, yes. That's why I've been going over all this. And just recently, he's gone a step farther. He's been raiding planets, destroying everything he can't take with him. Get Minzov and fly out there."

"I haven't seen Dr. Minzov since we landed. I'll have to find him and let him know what's going on."

"Don't worry about that. He's been down in the HQ laboratories, working on some project or other. You know how he is."

"Yes," she said, nodding to herself. "That Minzov. Science is his first and last love, his only mistress."

"Yes, I know. Kind of odd, if you ask me, but he is the best there is. So who am I to judge? Look what I got stuck with. You should see that wife of mine when she gets going at parties."

"Is Minzov still down in the lab?"

"As far as I know. Anyway, find him. Then get the *Space Eagle* ready to go. You're the only one I know who can go after this Sarnak. The Space Rangers are counting on you."

"And I won't let them down, Colonel Richards."

They both stood and saluted. Athena turned and marched proudly from the room.

But out in the corridor, she tried to remember where the labs were. She vaguely remembered the layout of HQ, but it had been over a year since she had been on Earth. Was it down on one of the lower floors?

After an hour of searching, she ended up at one of the ground floor entrances. Next to the doors, she found a list of offices posted on the wall, and the location of the laboratory. Next to the list was a sign welcoming Dr. Minzov as a guest scientist in the labs located on the second sub-ground level. Moving down the corridor, she found the elevator, but turned up her nose at it, deciding it would be good exercise to take the stairs down the two floors. In a few moments, she entered the laboratory to find Dr. Minzov in his natural element.

He was surrounded by several severe-looking people in lab coats as they leaned over a bench upon which arcane glassware was attached to a metal framework. Flowing through tubes and flasks, colored liquids bubbled and oozed. The group gathered around the open end of one thin tube, and Dr. Minzov continued his lecture.

"So you see gentlemen ... and ladies ... if it is your purpose to isolate the rhodium triglutamate molecule, you must first generate the electrophasic hypostyroid catalysts as I have demonstrated here," he said.

Athena stood quietly, admiring his self-assured demeanor and not wanting to interrupt. She could see that Dr. Hans Alexis Minzov was absorbed in his work. Named after a great scientist from a bygone age, the

tall, goateed man lived for teaching others, giving them of his vast scientific knowledge, both theoretical and practical. After all, she remembered, it was Minzov who had invented the neutropionic ray during the battles with the Ant Men from Tau Ceti. Of course, it had been unfortunate that by the time he was ready to test fire the weapon, the war had been over for two weeks, but there would be other wars. And certainly, Minzov would someday have the satisfaction of seeing his weapon used to defeat the enemies of the galaxy.

He looked up from the bench to rub his eyes and spotted Athena. He nodded to her.

"I should be through here in a few minutes, Athena," he said in his rich, baritone voice.

"As soon as possible, Minzov," she said. "There's an emergency I need to talk to you about."

"Oh. I'll wrap it up then." He spoke briefly with the assembled scientists.

She listened to his voice, so sure and adept in its explication of scientific detail. While she waited, she roamed casually about the laboratory, marveling at the intricate equipment, strewn with wires and readouts, making measurements she knew she could never hope to understand. No, that was Minzov's domain.

She watched technicians making precise adjustments on their equipment, serious people, turning pipettes of strange liquids, mixing other solutions together, then standing back to make notations on small pads. Yes, the workers in the Space Rangers were a marvel to behold.

"Here," Minzov said, and grabbed a clean beaker from a rack, placing it under a stopcock. "Have some coffee."

"No thanks, Minzov. We haven't got time. There's an emergency in sector G-alpha-32."

"Oh." He poured the coffee down a nearby sink. "I guess we'll have to test that formula another time. We spent a day and a half working on it, too. So, what kind of emergency is it this time?"

"There's a raider working around that sector. He's been raiding cargo ships and enslaving the crews."

"Hmmm. Well, I suppose that could be serious."

"And then he's been using the empty ships for target practice."

"Target practice? Why that swine. Let's get going, Athena. If there's one thing I cannot abide, it's the wanton waste of good technical material."

"Right, Minzov."

They walked together from the lab and down the end of the corridor. Athena started for the stairs.

"Aren't we taking the elevator?" he asked. "We have to go up two flights, you know."

"That would be a waste of energy, Minzov. And the stairs are good exercise. Come on, it's only two flights. I'll race you."

"Well, I haven't been feeling too good lately. I'll tell you what. You take the stairs and I'll take the elevator. Yes, that's an excellent idea. It will be an experiment. No more than that. It will be another chapter of the ongoing debate of man against machine. Do you think you're up to the challenge, Athena? Can you beat the elevator?"

"I'm always up to a challenge, Doc. And I'll be waiting for you on the ground floor."

"You probably will."

She reached the ground floor, breathing easily. She waited until the door opened and Dr. Minzov stepped out. As they walked out of the building, Minzov stopped.

"Have you made all the preparations for the *Space Eagle* to depart?"

"Oh. I almost forgot," she said. "We'll have to get with the Quartermaster and Ground Support. We don't have enough fuel for an extended trip, and I know our provisions are low."

"I think those two departments are up on the thirty-seventh floor."

They returned to the HQ building and stopped by the elevator.

"I'll race you to the thirty-seventh floor," Minzov said.

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Minzov was waiting by the elevator doors when a sweating and heavily breathing Athena came out of the stairway.

They found the Quartermaster and signed out for provisions. The ground crews had already been notified by Colonel Richards and were in the process of scheduling the maintenance for the ship.

"Let's see." The serviceman leaned over a grease smudged ledger on his counter. "We can probably fit you in sometime next week. But there's no way I can guarantee we'll be done in less than three days."

"We've got to get off the ground today," Athena said. "I thought you said Colonel Richards already spoke with you?"

"Well, he did. He said it was a one double A high priority mission. Those we get to in about a week. Now, if it was a galactic holocaust mission, I might be able to get you in by Thursday."

Athena stared at him for a moment. Ground Service had certainly slowed down since she had last been on Earth.

"It's not my rules," the serviceman went on. "It the brass upstairs, you know. We had a reorganization a few months ago. They said they were going to streamline our services. So now it takes a little longer to get to things, but we are incredibly efficient."

"I see," she said, seeing the futility of arguing any further. The brass always knew what they were doing. "Well, let's get back to the ship, Doc. Donald should have lunch ready for us by the time we get there."

"Lunch?" Minzov said, and rubbed his hands together. "Good. I'm famished."

"A hard day of science?" she chuckled.

"Yes, but thoroughly enjoyable."

They stopped at the elevator and Minzov smiled at Athena.

"Another race?" he asked.

"No. I think I'll ride down with you."

When they were walking out, Athena wistfully looked back at the HQ building.

"I hope we get a chance to come back and see HQ after this mission is over," she said.

"Of course, we will. What's one more ruthless space pirate to us? We've handled them before and we'll handle them again."

"You're right, Minzov."

After they had walked halfway across the field, she stopped and looked around, as if she had lost something.

"Something wrong?" Minzov asked.

"Yes. The ship. Where's the *Space Eagle*? It was right over there."

As they stood gaping, a blackened serviceman ran up to them.

"What's going on?" he demanded.

"What do you mean?" Athena said.

"Your ship. It took off a little while ago. We were working on the ship in the next berth when it left. We almost got roasted alive."

"That can't be," she said. "Oh no. I hope Donald didn't touch the controls again."

"No, he couldn't have," Minzov said. "Not after the last time."

They raced to the control building by the side of the field. Athena burst through the doors and ran to the head controller.

"Where's my ship?" she asked.

"The one that just took off?" he said. He looked at her with a lazy grin. "I think it's somewhere out around the van Allen belts by now."

"Can you contact it for me?"

"Sure," he said. He sat by a control panel that wrapped around him. He pushed a few buttons until Donald's frightened face appeared on a screen above the console. Her heart went out to him for a moment, but she became angry and looked at him sternly.

"Here," the controller said and handed her a microphone. "Talk to him."

"Donald, what happened?" she said, knowing what he must have done.

"I was just sitting there. Honest. I didn't touch anything. The ship just blasted off by itself."

"Donald, you know that's impossible."

"Well, it may not actually be impossible," Minzov wheezed as he came through the doors. "It is true that the probabilities are so low as to make the possibility of an occurrence such as he suggests laughably remote, but it's still a concrete possibility."

"Thanks, Minzov," Donald said. "Anyway, get me down from here."

Athena turned to the controller.

"Can you get a rescue ship up to him?"

"Yeah, sure," he replied, smiling up at her from his seat. "We'll have him down by tomorrow morning."

"Donald, did you hear that?"

"Yes. I heard him. And Athena?"

"Yes, Donald."

"We're out of mayonnaise."

CHAPTER 2. THE HUNT BEGINS

"Can't I come up here with you two?" Donald asked, poking his head through the open hatch. "I promise I won't touch anything."

"Not now, Donald," Athena said. "Minzov and I are trying to decide which planet we should head for."

"That's right, Donald," Dr. Minzov said. "This type of strategic planning probably wouldn't interest a person of your gentler sentiments."

"Oh, all right." Donald disappeared into the work cabin.

Already several light-years from the solar system, the *Space Eagle* was making its accustomed quick time en route to the G-alpha-32 sector. But Athena knew it was a large sector, newly opened up and recently colonized with pre-fabricated towns and farms. She hoped Dr. Minzov might be able to come up with a good possibility for exploration, if only to give them a few clues where they might be able to find Sarnak.

"How about it, Minzov?" she asked, as they pored over the star charts spread out across the control

panel.

"I don't know," Minzov said slowly, rubbing at his neatly trimmed whiskers. "They could be anywhere. After all, there's a lot of space out there in space."

"Yes, I know. Well, maybe we should go to the last planet that was raided? We might be able to find something there?"

"Hmmm. I was just about to suggest that. We might even be able to find some witnesses who can tell us something about this Sarnak. As I've said many times before, even the most insignificant detail might, in reality, be of tremendous significance once it is examined in the proper context. Why I remember the time we were searching the Sirius system ..."

"Yes, I remember it, too, Minzov," Athena said. "Then, we'll head for Enratic. That's the last planet this Sarnak attacked. And it's right in the middle of that sector."

"Around iota Libra, isn't it? That sounds like an excellent idea. Anyway, as you recall, we had been called into that sector of the galaxy to find the lost exploration of Hantor. I, with my usual perspicacity, was just determining the correct coordinates, when ..."

"Yes, Doc," Athena said, working the controls.

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The *Space Eagle* landed tail down on a barren field, blowing up thick clouds of dust and dirt, then nestled easily on its tail struts. The undercarriage came out from beneath the ship as it lowered itself to its belly. The ladder was quickly dispatched and the three of them were standing on the soil of Enratic, gazing off perplexedly into the distance.

"I thought there were supposed to be settlements on this planet?" Donald said.

"Yes," Athena said. "There's supposed to be a town around here somewhere. That's why I set us down here. But we didn't pick up any activity on the super-space radio when we came in. Or any other kind of communication. What do you think is going on, Minzov?"

"Well, I'd have to say that it is much too early to venture any kind of opinion. It would be far more prudent to investigate and assemble some facts upon which we can proceed with a logical evaluation, leading inevitably to proper conclusions."

"It looks like the planet's been raided, all right," Donald said. "Looks like they tore it up pretty good. Look out there." He pointed off into the distance.

Several kilometers away, they saw cratering, too recent to have been meteorite impacts. Ruins of buildings were clustered with rubble strewn for many meters around.

"You're right, Donald," Athena said. "I think that was the commercial town of Larryville. Looks like a lot of missile damage."

"I still think we ought to investigate before we adopt any possibly erroneous conclusions," Minzov said. "For all we know, there could have been some kind of accident, or perhaps a particularly violent weather disturbance."

"All right, Minzov," Athena said. "Let's go take a look. Donald, get some recording equipment so we can collect data to send back to Earth."

Donald scrambled up the ladder and returned a few moments later carrying a large plastic pouch hanging from a strap around his shoulder. He handed smaller pouches to Athena and Minzov.

"Good, Donald, good," Minzov said. "You took the anthrographer. We can collect photonic images and chemical samplings at the same time. Valuable, very valuable."

"Thanks, Minzov. See? I can do something right, once in a while. So maybe I can ride up in the control cabin when we leave here?"

"We'll see, Donald," Athena said. "We'll see. For now, let's get over to those ruins and see what's going on."

"Well, at first glance, I'd say that nothing is going on," Dr. Minzov said. "I think we missed whatever went on already. Oooh! There I go, making rash judgements."

"Don't worry about it," Athena said, and started off in the direction of the ruins. Donald and Dr. Minzov took up positions behind her.

"Shouldn't we take a few weapons with us?" Donald asked, after they had been walking for several minutes.

"I suppose we should," Athena said. "That's normal procedure, but I don't feel like walking back to the ship to get some. I don't see much that could threaten us."

"And this is a friendly planet, after all," Minzov pointed out. "We shouldn't have any need for defending ourselves. And just look at that star up there." He pointed up at iota Libra. "Ah, I wish I had some spectrographic equipment with me. It's not everyday I get a chance to do any research on a star like that."

"We can probably take a few minutes for that when we get back to the ship," Athena said.

"It's a pretty clear sky, too," Donald said. "I don't see much plant or animal life around here. Don't they have any on this planet?"

"I don't believe so, Donald," Dr. Minzov said. "All the naturally occurring plant and animal life had to be eliminated when the first settlers came. From what I understand, the native life on this world was somewhat hostile to human beings."

"You can never tell about those alien life forms," Athena said. "It's better to be safe than sorry."

After walking for an hour under the warm rays of iota Libra, they reached the edge of the ruins. Athena inspected the cracked and fused remains of what, she decided, must have been building materials, blasted into fragments all over the landscape. Donald worked the anthrographer, taking pictures and extracting chemical data with its sensors. As Donald moved off, investigating the remains, Dr. Minzov moved closer to Athena.

"Where are all the inhabitants?" she asked. "We haven't seen anyone since we landed."

"You don't suppose they were all killed, do you?" Minzov said. "From what you told me, this Sarnak prefers to abscond with as many prisoners as he can, then sell them on the slave markets in the Black Sector."

"I just don't know, Minzov. It's hard to imagine carnage on so vast a scale. Let's keep looking. We need to get some kind of idea of what kind of weapons this Sarnak is using."

"Looks to me like phase displacers," Dr. Minzov said. "That reminds me of the work someone did a long time ago ... hmm ... I can't remember it exactly ... anyway, judging by the way the materials are smashed. Look here." He picked up a chunk of material that had been lying by his feet. It was gray and crumbled easily in his hand. "This is actronite, one of our latest discoveries. Under normal conditions, it has incredible strength in relation to its density. Far superior to previous building materials. But see how easily it crumbles in my hand. Just as if the van der Waals forces between the molecular chains had been scrambled."

"You may be right, Minzov. But what about the craters?"

"Well -- and this is only an uninformed conjecture at this point -- perhaps this Sarnak used atomic missiles to completely destroy the remainder of the settlement after he took his prisoners."

"I guess we should keep looking."

"With a little more data, I could derive a better conclusion."

"Well, then ..."

"And it would not have to be a copious amount, although more than a few facts would be desirable. As I always tell you, Athena, it is never a good idea to give conclusions based upon insufficient data."

"I understand, Minzov. So, let's keep moving."

Athena and Minzov went through more ruins, picking through the rubble, pushing aside mounds of debris to reveal scraps of what had once been commercial equipment, bits of computers, desks and charred files.

They passed through the remains of commercial buildings and out into what they thought might have been the residential section. They found the remains of small foundations, bits of plaster and walls, a few light fixtures and dusty wiring. As Athena dug through some structural foam, she came upon a child's doll.

It was just a small thing, limp, made of cloth, with two buttons sewn on for eyes. Lifting it tenderly from the dirt and brushing away the dust, she remembered the little doll she had named Hokey when she was a young girl, no more than four years old. The memory came back of losing it when some boys had teased her and run away with it. She wiped away a tear from the corner of her eye before Minzov could see it, then put the doll into her pouch, as she felt a rising anger inside her.

"That murdering animal," she said, through clenched teeth.

"What's that?" Minzov asked.

"That murdering animal, Sarnak. Imagine killing all the people and children, butchering them like animals."

"Oh, that. We'll get our chance to right the wrongs committed by this beast. He's not the first and he won't be the last. Just remember that we can't fall into the trap of being judge and jury. That's not our bailiwick, as it were."

"You're right, Minzov. I guess as long as there are people in the galaxy, there will always be criminals like Sarnak who think they are above the law. Anyway, I've seen enough. Let's find Donald and get back to the ship."

"Good idea. I think I've gathered enough data to come to some reasonable conclusions. And with what

Donald has collected, there should be plenty."

Athena pulled the small communicator from her waist band and spoke.

"Donald. Come in, Donald."

She waited for a few moments, but received no reply.

"Donald," she said. "We're heading back to the ship, now. Do you read me, Donald?"

After a few more moments of silence, she tapped at the front of the communicator.

"What's wrong with this thing?"

"Here, let me take a look at it," Minzov said. He adjusted the small knobs along the bottom and lifted it to his ear. He spoke into it, but received no response. With a shrug, he handed it back to Athena.

"Maybe he's just pouting," she said. "He does that all the time."

"Could be," Minzov said. "We might as well get back to the ship and wait for him. He'll be along eventually."

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Donald pushed his way into the crumbling foundations of the commercial buildings, making his way below ground level, underneath a few remaining floors. He found piles of slag where electrical generators had once stood, and fragments of metal and plastic where instrument panels had been. Pushing aside some fallen panels, he uncovered the remains of a mainframe computer. Sweeping away more dust and debris, he found a small door on the side of it and opened it. He peered inside at the maze of fine wires and cracked components. A cluster labeled 'memory core' was still intact.

"Maybe Minzov can read some of the permanent data from this," he mumbled. He took out the storage element and placed it in his pouch.

As he was climbing out of the rubble, he heard rocks and pebbles rolling into the pit behind him. He stood still and waited, fearing someone might be coming up behind him. He held his breath, listening intently, then turned slowly, but he saw no one.

Shrugging, he continued back to the surface. After taking a few steps, he heard something shuffling through the dirt behind him.

"Come on, Athena," he said. "You know I don't like it when you try to scare me."

He spun around, but no one was behind him. He looked from side to side, trying to see past the sparse and blackened ruins. For a moment, he thought he caught the movement of a shadow behind a wall, but it was gone before he was sure.

"I think I'm in trouble," he said to himself, and backed his way along the path he had come.

Moving quickly, he returned to the spot he had left Athena and Minzov, but they were nowhere to be seen. He sat on a mound of rubble, deciding to wait for them to come back. As he sat and fidgeted, he heard the sounds of soft scrabbling in the piles of rubble around him.

In a moment, they were on him, wrestling him to the ground. He froze and closed his eyes as his hands

and feet were bound with thin wires. Then he was jerked roughly to his feet.

Slowly, he opened his eyes, afraid of what he might see. But they were humans, dirty and hairy, wearing only scraps of soiled clothing around their thin bodies. But they were humans, seven of them, both men and women.

"Don't hurt me," Donald said. "I won't give you any trouble."

"Let's take him to the chief," a tall, rangy man said. His matted hair hung around his shoulders.

"No way, Sid," a woman said. Her hair fell around her smudged face. "Why get him involved. He always takes the best parts for himself. Let's eat here."

"Yeah," a short, stocky man said. "I agree with Harriet. It's a nice day out. Look, the sun's shining. Hey, everybody, I'm in the mood for a barbecue. How about you?"

"Yeah. Zeke's right," the rest of them spoke up.

"Wait a minute. Wait a minute," Donald screamed until they had stopped talking. "You're not going to eat me, are you?"

They stood back for a moment, then kicked at the dirt, looking sheepishly from one to the other.

"Hey, things are tough here," Sid said. "I mean, you'll make a great meal for us. And I'm not just saying that because we're hungry. Yeah, you look pretty healthy, good skin, good muscle tone. I know you've got to take good care of yourself to have a body like that."

"Well, I try to get enough exercise," Donald said. "And I always try to eat right."

"There. You see? It's like I was saying." He came up to Donald and slapped him on the back, then looked around at the rest of the people. "Now, come on. Don't you all think that this guy is one of the best looking people we've seen in a long time?"

They nodded and agreed, saying he was certainly much better looking than they were.

"But didn't you say something about eating me?" Donald asked.

"Oh, don't give it another thought," Harriet said. "We were just kidding, weren't we?"

"Sure," Zeke said, and laughed along with the others. "You know how it is. You get a little hungry, and before you know it, you're saying all kinds of silly things."

As they were talking, another man came through an alley between piles of rubble.

"What's going on here?" he asked.

"Oh, nothing, chief," Sid said.

"Who's this?"

"We found him wandering around in the ruins." Zeke and Harriet pulled Donald closer to the chief. The leader stood back with his hands on his hips, eyeing them suspiciously. "We were just on our way to bring him to you."

"I'll bet you were." The chief came closer to Donald and inspected him from head to toe. " Hmmm.

Looks kind of scrawny to me."

"That's just what we were saying," Harriet said.

"And where have you been?" The chief glared at Harriet. "I expect my wife to be around when I wake up in the morning. You never know what I might be in the mood for."

"Sorry, lover," she said, and put her arm around his waist. "I just wanted to get out with the others for a little walk."

"All right," the chief said. "So, let's get this one back to camp."

"Wait a minute," Donald said. "I've got to get back to my ship. I'm with the Space Rangers."

"Really?" the chief said.

"Yes."

"So what?"

"Well, we're trying to find out what happened here."

"What's happened here is that we've been blown out of our existence. Now, it's kill or be killed, survival of the fittest. And in your case, it's eat or be eaten. And I imagine you can guess which side of that equation you're going to take."

Donald thought for a moment, then screamed.

#

"Minzov, we've been back at the ship for over an hour already," Athena said. "Donald should have returned by now. I'm getting worried."

"Yes," Minzov said. "And it looks like nightfall is only a short time away." He peered out one of the small, side windows.

"Oh, no. And you know how much Donald hates the dark, especially when he's alone."

"I've been thinking about that, digesting the data we've collected," Minzov said. He moved to a chair and sat, leaning back against the wall. Athena paced the small work cabin.

"Permit me to expound for a moment upon a few of my observations," he said. "We have seen that there are no people about."

"I think that's pretty obvious, Minzov." Athena stopped pacing and stared at him. "Oh, I'm worried about Donald."

"And you may have good reason to be. Although we didn't see any people, this Sarnak couldn't have taken them all. And I doubt he was able to kill all those he couldn't capture. No, there are always refugees who get away."

"So, there may be someone around?"

"Quite possibly, Athena. Quite possibly. Let me point out another observation; there was no food around in any of the ruins. Did you see any?"

"No." She patted at the doll in her pouch. She sighed. "No, I didn't see anything."

"Then, if there were survivors, they have already gleaned whatever leavings were available."

"What about it? That's what you'd expect them to do, isn't it?"

"Quite so. Quite so. One would have to conclude that locating food would be the first order of business. But any available food would run out rather quickly. And as we observed, there is no indigenous plant or animal life upon which to feed."

"That's all very true, Minzov. But what are you driving at?"

"Well, if there are hungry people and no available food supply, what does that lead to?"

Athena gasped.

No," she said. "I won't believe it."

"But it's true, Athena. Cannibalism. The most disgusting form of depravity of all the myriad forms that human evils take. But what choice would they have? The options are to either eat each other or die of starvation."

"But what about Donald? You don't think ..."

"I'm afraid so, Athena. I might even venture the conjecture that Donald has already been captured and now finds himself as the ... um ... *specialite du jour*."

Athena rushed to the equipment locker and pulled out two ray rifles, after arming herself with a disintegrator ray gun.

"Here." She handed one of the rifles to Dr. Minzov. "Let's go. We've got to find Donald."

"Now, just a moment. Let's think this thing through, shall we? We don't want to rush out there and find ourselves on the menu also."

"We don't have any time to waste, Minzov. It's already getting dark. I wouldn't be surprised if they're getting ready for their evening meal right now."

"Yes," Minzov nodded. "That's probably a valid assumption, of course, given our lack of data at the present time. All right. We'd better get out there and rescue Donald."

"Okay. Let's go."

Athena threw the hatch open and raced down the ladder, followed more slowly by Dr. Minzov. Together they moved toward Larryville in the distance.

"You know, Athena. All things considered, we'll be taking an awfully large risk in attempting to rescue Donald. Have you ever considered that there are many other single men in the galaxy?"

"Come on, Minzov. We're wasting time. Look out there." She pointed off past the ruins to a small glow near the horizon. "I'll bet that's some kind of fire."

"You're probably right. If it's not some kind of natural phosphorescence, then it may signal the existence of some kind of human habitation. An encampment, as it were."

"Then we'll head there," Athena said. "And hope we're not too late."

CHAPTER 3. TO THE RESCUE

Donald lay in a heap on the dirt floor of a rough hut. In the dark, he moaned softly, feeling the wires still digging into his wrists and ankles.

"I knew I should have never gone off by myself," he said. "I always get into trouble when I'm alone."

"Hey, keep it down in there." A guard poked his head through the jagged hole in the corrugated metal wall of the hut. "You're going to ruin the mood of the party if you keep crying like that."

"I'm sorry," Donald said, "but I can't help it. It isn't every day I'm going to be eaten alive."

"Eaten alive?" The guard crawled through the hole and stood facing Donald. "What kind of animals do you take us for? We're going to kill you first, don't worry. After that, you won't feel a thing." He rubbed his hands together. "Then, some of us are going to have a barbecue. But the chief, he likes stew. But honestly, what kind of stew can you have when there's no vegetables?"

"Not a real one," Donald agreed.

"Oh, man, what I wouldn't give to be back on Earth, sitting down to a nice juicy steak with a few french fries and some steamed asparagus. Nothing fancy, you understand. Geez, if we ever do get back, I wonder if I'll ever be able to find a restaurant that serves people?"

"All restaurants serve people."

"I mean on the menu."

Donald screamed.

"All right," the guard said. "I tried to be nice. I thought a little conversation might take your mind off your problems."

He ripped a piece of rag from a strip hanging from the wall and tied it around Donald's mouth.

"Now, come on," he said. "Don't be a wet blanket. Get into the spirit of things."

The guard crept out of the hut, but did not replace the piece of metal that served as a door. Outside, Donald could see people dancing and singing around a fire. They were as skinny and ragged as the others he had seen earlier, maybe a few more now.

In the corner of the hut, his equipment had been thrown into a pile with some other junk.

My communicator, he thought. If I can only get to it and send a message.

#

Athena and Minzov picked their way through the blasted ruins of Larryville and out onto an open plain that stretched for many kilometers ahead. Under the light of the three moons of Enratic, it became an easy matter to see the path ahead to the encampment of the cannibals.

"It shouldn't take too much longer, Minzov," she said, softly. "It looks like its only a few more kilometers ahead."

"Oh, Athena," Minzov gasped. "I'm just not in the condition I used to be. I'll have to stop and catch my breath for a minute."

"We haven't got time, Minzov. Every second we waste, Donald is another second closer to being put in a pot."

"Well, there are other ways he can be cooked. Where would they get a pot that big anyway?"

"Minzov!"

"All right, all right. I'll keep moving. But if I fall behind, just keep going. I'll catch up with you eventually. Remember, it is slow and steady that wins the race."

Athena moved ahead a few steps, then stopped when she heard a blood-curdling roar coming from her right, echoing along the plain. She peered across the darkened expanse but could see nothing.

"What was that?" she asked.

"I don't know. It sounded like some kind of beast."

"I thought you said that the settlers killed off all the animal life on this planet?"

"They did. Maybe they missed one."

"It sounds like an awfully large one to miss."

The roar came closer. Now Athena made out a looming hulk in the distance, standing out against the silvery moon light. It was big and coming closer. Its shambling body was thick with a small head. Then Athena made out a long trunk swaying around the head.

"It looks just like an elephant," she said.

"It is an elephant," Minzov cried. "Come on, Athena. Let's get out of here. It must be a rogue."

"Easy, Minzov. Easy. We've got ray rifles. And it looks kind of slow to me, anyway."

"It's probably hungry. And if my memory doesn't deceive me -- and it never does -- I believe there is a fair amount of lore concerning man-eating elephants roaming the wilds of Africa."

"I don't think so. Look, here it comes."

The elephant, although emaciated, was still large and formidable. As its head swayed, the trunk flapped about its head.

"Careful, Athena. He's making a challenge display. That's always a prelude to a full-scale charge."

"Just a minute."

She dug into her pouch and pulled out a few food concentrate capsules. She held them out to the famished beast, and he took them greedily with its trunk. Leaning its head back, it threw them into its mouth. It trumpeted softly, then nuzzled Athena with its trunk.

"It seems tame, Minzov."

"Ah, yes. Now I can see that it's an Indian elephant. The more intelligent of the species. You can tell by the small ears and the large forehead. We would appear to be fortunate in this circumstance. But we've still got to keep moving, don't we?"

"Yes. But I wonder where it came from?"

"I believe they had a zoo on this planet, although that seems like a terribly wasteful extravagance for a world like this. If I remember correctly, it was the desire of the founder of Larryville. They brought frozen embryos from Earth, then let them complete their development here. I would imagine that they used this one for some heavy work, too."

"I think I have an idea, Minzov. This elephant can help us. He can move a lot quicker than we can. Let's see if we can ride him."

"You want me to get on top of that thing?"

"Sure. He looks tame. Come on. It'll save you having to walk."

"All right," Minzov said, shakily. "All right. So how do we get on?"

Athena went to the side of the elephant's head and tugged on his ear. When the beast lowered its head and knelt next to her, Athena climbed up its trunk and then scrambled over its head to its back. She turned herself around and was finally sitting astride the elephant.

"Come on, Minzov. It's easy. Just do what I did."

"Okay, now," Minzov said to the elephant. The elephant turned its head to him, and Minzov jumped back. "Easy, now. Easy." He came closer to the elephant at Athena's continued urging until he was clambering swiftly up the elephant's head. He sat facing Athena for a few moments until she turned him around.

"Are you sure it's safe up here?" Minzov asked.

"You're the expert, Doc. What do you think?"

"Well, if it keeps us moving. How do you steer this thing?"

"I don't know. Try tugging on his ear or something."

After several minutes of fumbling with whatever was handy, Minzov found that he could work the elephant by pushing his feet behind its ears. After some rewarding with the food pellets -- a few for the elephant, a few for Dr. Minzov -- they were finally headed in the direction of the encampment.

#

Donald pushed himself across the dirt floor, dragging along his side and wincing at the pain in his wrists and ankles as he inched closer to his communicator. He realized he would have to work it behind his back, and he hoped he could remember which buttons to push. Once he got it operating, he'd have to put it on the ground and twist himself around to speak into it. It wasn't going to be an easy task.

His face fell in the dust, and he choked on the strip of cloth across his mouth. But he kept moving, knowing that he had to contact Athena. He had to let her know where he was. She had to rescue him.

He lifted his face from the dirt and shook his head. His eyes watered and stung as dust fell into them, but he was determined to get to the communicator. His feet dragged in the dirt as he pushed himself closer. They slipped and his weight seemed to be caught in a depression in the floor. He wriggled himself out of it and got closer, closer. Then the communicator was only inches away from his fingers. He felt it in his hands, as he fumbled to turn it around, trying to get to the knobs.

Wait a minute, he thought, as his finger touched a small button. Yes, that's it.

"Hey, it's show time," the guard yelled, and crawled through the door. He stopped and stared at Donald for a moment. "How'd you get over there? I thought I left you over there?" He pointed to the other side of the hut. "What's the matter? Wasn't it comfortable enough where I left you?"

Two more men came into the hut, and the three of them lifted Donald, carrying him through the small doorway and out into the central area of the encampment. The fire was burning high in the fire pit. On either side of the fire, a large forked piece of metal had been driven into the ground.

"So what'll it be?" the chief asked. "I know I'm in the mood for stew."

"No, we want a barbecue," several of the people said.

"If we wait for a barbecue, we'll be here all night. He won't be done until morning."

"Barbecue. Barbecue. Barbecue," they chanted.

"Hey, doesn't being chief count for anything around here?"

"Barbecue. Barbecue. Barbecue," they continued to chant.

"Oh, all right," the chief said, frowning.

"Here's the spit," someone said, holding up a long, metal rod. Then he turned to Donald. "You don't have any hemorrhoids, do you?"

Donald looked at the spit and felt himself becoming faint.

"Wait a minute," Harriet said. "Shouldn't we ... you know ... kill him first?"

"Yeah," Sid said. "Are we not men? We can't just cook him alive."

"Yeah," the one who had been guarding Donald added. "I promised him. We should be humanitarian about this."

"All right," the chief said. "So, who's going to kill him?"

He looked from person to person as Donald fell weakly against his captors.

"Come on," the chief said. "Someone's gotta do it."

"You're the chief," Zeke said. "You should do it."

"Yeah," the rest of them agreed.

"Oh, all right," the chief grumbled. "I'll do it. Okay, bring him over to the big rock, and I'll bash his head in with a stone."

"Don't hit him too hard," someone said. "The brains are the best part."

The chief needed two hands to lift the stone lying next to the big rock.

"Get him over here," the chief said. "But I'll be damned if I'm going to spit him."

Donald fought weakly as they carried him to the rock. They pushed him down to his knees then bent his head over the rock, turning it to the side. The chief sighed.

"Sorry, pal," he said. "But you know how it is. We gotta eat."

Slowly, he raised the stone over his head, then stopped as everyone became quiet. In the distance, Donald heard the bellowing of a wild beast.

Great, he thought. I can get cooked and eaten by these people, or I can get torn apart by some wild animal.

Closer, the bellowing came again, and the others looked to see where the sound was coming from. The chief lowered the rock as he searched for the source of the sound.

"What was that?" Harriet asked.

"Hey, come on," another woman said. "It was nothing. Supper's waiting."

The chief raised the stone again, but stopped when the sound seemed to be coming from just outside the encampment.

The elephant burst through the ring of huts, crushing them and sending remnants of the thin metal scattering. Donald looked up from the rock and saw Athena and Minzov riding on the thing's back.

Now, I'm going crazy, he thought.

The elephant charged toward the fire, swinging its massive head and throwing people aside with its trunk. It ran through the fire, sending a shower of sparks into the air, and stopped when it reached the other side of the camp, smashing through several more of the huts before turning around.

The cannibals screamed as they ran. Some of the men grabbed metal spears and charged at the beast, but they could not slow its charge. Athena and Minzov let go a few bursts from their weapons. One man came close to the elephant, thrusting his spear out at it. The elephant took him in its trunk and threw him

to the ground, stepping on his screaming body as it ran past.

In a few moments, the people had vanished, leaving the encampment to Athena, Donald, Dr. Minzov and the elephant. Athena and Minzov climbed down from the elephant and quickly untied Donald. As soon as he was free from his bonds, he threw his arms around Athena.

"Hurry up," he cried. "Get me out of here. They were going to eat me."

"We thought as much," Athena said. "Come on. Get on the elephant with us, and we'll ride back to the ship."

"You want me to get on top of that thing?" Donald said.

"Come on, Donald," Dr. Minzov said. "It's perfectly safe. I pointed that out to Athena when we found it wandering around out there." He pointed toward the plain. "And don't worry. I'll be doing the driving."

After several minutes of coaxing, Donald followed Athena and Minzov onto the elephant's back. In a short time they were back within the safety of the *Space Eagle*.

#

Athena stood by the small window, watching the blue sun rise above the burned out wasteland.

"You know, we've still got to find out what happened here," she said.

"What do we need to find out?" Donald said. "Sarnak came and wiped the place out."

"We need to know the details, Donald."

"What do you suggest?" Minzov asked.

"I was hoping you might have some idea."

"How about if we get out of here?" Donald said. "All in favor raise your hand." Donald raised his hand, while Athena and Dr. Minzov stared at him. "They tried to eat me," he cried.

"I know," Athena said. "You've been reminding us about that every five minutes since we got back."

"Why don't we capture a few of them?" Dr. Minzov suggested. "We can interrogate them once we have them in our custody."

"That's a good idea, Doc."

"Naturally. And we can use the elephant to help us scout the land. We'll be able to see much better from its back. Then we can use our ray rifles to bring some of them down. On 'stun', of course."

"Right. The we can use the elephant to transport them back to the ship. Let's go."

"Why don't I wait here for you to get back?" Donald said. "I'd only be in the way out there."

"All right," Athena said. "But keep the hatches locked while we're gone. And stay out of the control cabin."

"And perhaps I ought to stay here, too," Dr. Minzov said. "I've got some data that I really must run through our computer."

"It can wait, Doc. I'm going to need you to help me get those people on the elephant's back."

Dr. Minzov sighed.

"I guess you're right."

After feeding and watering the elephant with supplies from the ship, they started off across the sandy wasteland.

With Dr. Minzov sitting behind the elephant's head, they drove through the ruins, flushing people from behind piles of dirt with the elephant's trunk, then stunning them with the ray rifles. When they had captured three of them, they hoisted them onto the elephant's back and followed it back to the ship. Donald watched them approach as he sat at one of the windows of the ship. He was on the ground waiting for them when they got back.

"That's the chief." He pointed up to the one in the middle. "He was going to bash my brains in. Come on. Bring him down so I can take care of him."

"This is not the time for violence or revenge, Donald," Athena said, as she pulled on the elephant's ear. The elephant knelt, and they pulled the unconscious forms from its back. "We're only going to interrogate them."

When the three figures were lying together in the sand, Athena sent Donald into the ship to get rope, and the three men were bound tightly. Then Dr. Minzov adjusted his weapon to 'unstun' and aroused the three hostages.

"What are you going to do with us?" one of them asked, as he came back to consciousness.

"How low into the depths of depravity can human beings sink?" Dr. Minzov stood over the men and scowled. "Cannibalism."

"It was his idea," the first one said, nodding in the direction of the chief. "He made us do it."

"Yeah," the other one added. "We all wanted to starve to death with dignity, but he wouldn't let us do it."

"Shut up, you idiots," the chief said, then grunted. "And I thought I could inspire loyalty in people like this."

"We're not here to judge any of you," Athena said. "That will be someone else's job. We're here to get information. Look, we'll feed you from our supplies. We'll feed all of you, then we'll get supplies sent up from Galactic HQ. How many of you are left?"

"There's about a hundred roaming around this area, I think," the chief said, "all scattered around. I couldn't tell you how many are left on Enratic. By the way, my name's Larry. They named this town after me."

"You mean you named the town after yourself," the first man said. "We wanted to name it after a famous leader."

"Yeah," the second one said. "He's like that. He wanted to be the big boss in the city. After we were attacked, he forced himself on us. He told us he had to be chief. Chiefing was in his blood."

"Why don't you shut up, Ferdo, and let me do the talking?" Larry said.

"All right. All right," Athena said. "We don't need any bickering."

"Well, tell him that," Ferdo said.

"Yeah, tell it to the great Larry," the second one said.

"Minzov, why don't you take these other two inside and feed them," Athena said. "I'll talk to Larry out here."

"I'd much rather go inside," Larry said. "I'm a little hungry, myself. I missed supper last night."

Donald yelled something unintelligible and ran up the ladder. In a few minutes, the three men were untied, and Minzov took Ferdo and the other one inside, keeping his ray rifle pointed squarely in their backs. Athena took Larry into the shade of the ship and gave him a few food pellets from her pouch.

"So, tell me what happened," she said, after Larry drank some water.

"Well, when was it?" Larry began. "Almost a month ago, I think. We were sleeping when we heard explosions all over Larryville. When I looked outside, there was this huge ship, just sitting way up in the sky, blasting away at us with some kind of ray, while these little ships zoomed around and fired on everything they could. Everything that ray touched, exploded."

"Hmmm," Athena said. "There goes Minzov's atomic missile theory."

"No, I didn't see any missiles. Anyway, these people came down and herded some of us into their ships. Some of us got away, like me. I hid in some of the remains of the buildings. While I was hiding, I heard some of these people talking about someone called Sarnak. They said he'd be pretty happy with this haul of slaves."

"Sarnak," Athena said. "Did you see him?"

"No. I took off for the hills. Once I got there, I watched while they blasted what was left of Larryville to the ground. It almost killed me to have to watch it. I'll never get a town named after me again."

"Look, Larry. Why don't you go out and round up as many of your people as you can. We'll feed them so they won't have to debase themselves any further. I just hope you weren't actually killing each other."

"Oh, never. We only ate the ones that were dead already. And, anyway, it isn't so bad once you get used to it. I mean, isn't that the way it is with most cultural taboos?"

"Yes, I'm sure it is. Did you hear anything else? Any word where this Sarnak was heading?"

"I didn't hear anything. Someone else thought they heard them say they were headed for the Black Sector."

"The Black Sector," Athena repeated, looking up at the sky.

Minzov and Donald returned from the ship, herding the other two in front of them. Ferdo handed Larry a sandwich. Larry pulled up one slice of the bread and frowned.

"What?" he said. "No mustard?"

"Sorry," Ferdo replied.

"We've already contacted Galactic HQ," Donald said. "They're sending food and supplies so these people can get back on their feet."

"At cost, too," Dr. Minzov added. "So, they won't have to pay back so much to HQ. The first loads should be here by tomorrow."

"We'll stay until then," Athena said, "and see if we can get more of them fed. You better make sure HQ sends more provisions for us."

#

Athena and Dr. Minzov sat in the control cabin, readying the *Space Eagle* for lift-off.

"It looks like we'll be heading for the Black Sector, Doc," Athena said.

"Right. We'll have to see if we can pick up some trace of Sarnak there. Perhaps we can also upset this slave trade a little while we're there?"

"I think we'll have to try. We can't let this filthy business continue without doing something about it."

"Athena," Donald called from the work cabin. "I've got to talk to you."

"What is it, Donald?" she called back over her shoulder. "I'm busy right now."

"Well." He came through the hatch into the control cabin. "I think I've had enough. This last thing was too much for me. I mean, they were going to kill me and eat me out there. I ... I want to go home."

"Now, Donald. I know it was rough out there, but we pulled through, didn't we?"

"I know we made it, all right. But this time it was too close. I can't take it any more."

"Come on, Donald." She rose from her seat and moved around behind him. She put her arms around him, with her face next to his. "You've got to stay with us. I don't know what I'd do without you."

"Oh."

"And look what we're up against. Look what the galaxy is up against. We've got to stick it out. You're one of us, like me and Dr. Minzov. We can't let vermin like this Sarnak run rampant through the galaxy, destroying it for civilized people. Would you want all those people to think you're a quitter?"

"No. I guess I wouldn't want that. But, then again, who's going to tell them?"

"Never mind that. Come on, Donald. Let's get ready to take off." She moved back to her seat, standing over it as she looked into Donald's eyes. "This is going to be our greatest adventure, yet. This is what we live for, right Minzov?"

"Well," Dr. Minzov said. "A little more scientific inquiry and a little less danger might be more preferable. But if it's for the good of the galaxy ..."

"You see, Donald? Minzov agrees with me. Now, let's get ready. We're on our way to the Black Sector."

CHAPTER 4. ON TO THE BLACK SECTOR

Athena and Minzov pored over the star charts as the *Space Eagle* left Enratic in its wake.

"I don't see any other way around it, Minzov," Athena said. "We'll have to go through the Shadow Zone to get to the Black Sector quickest." She pointed to a nebulous region on the charts. "We don't have time to go around it."

"That may prove a little dangerous," Minzov said. "There is the distinct possibility we may be caught in there by the Gracyts. They are still somewhat hostile to our Galactic organization."

"I know. But I want to catch up with this Sarnak. I think we can keep away from the Gracyts without too much trouble. And after all, we do have the treaty on our side. The Shadow Zone is supposed to be neutral for us and them. As long as we don't cause any trouble, they should leave us alone."

"I hope so. And don't forget the odd disturbances that plague the Shadow Zone. If we run into one, we may be in for a rough time, Gracyts or not."

"I'm willing to risk it."

"I'll plot the course through the Shadow Zone, then," Minzov said reluctantly. "As soon as I'm done with that, I'd like to go through that memory core Donald brought back from Enratic."

"Oh, yes. I think Donald found a real gem for us there. Do you think you can decode it, Minzov?"

"Child's play. I was decoding memory cores when they were still strapping you into the child's seat of your parents' rocket skimmer."

"I know," she laughed.

#

Donald sat next to Dr. Minzov at the bench in the work cabin, handing him tools as he requested them, watching intently as Minzov attached wires to the small module. Athena stood back as the two men worked.

"There," Minzov said, attaching a cable to a connector on the side of the module. "All the address and data busses are connected into our main bus. All I have to do now is put together a short program to go in and access the data inside."

He slid his chair away from the bench to a small wall console and began pecking away at a keypad as he watched lines of code scroll by on a small screen. He cursed a few times as he hammered angrily at the keys, scratching his head, then turning to Athena and Donald.

"Okay," he said. "Here goes."

He tapped a key and watched as the screen filled with text and symbols, rolling quickly down the screen, his head bobbing up and down to try and catch some of the words.

"Maybe you ought to slow it down," Donald said.

"Hmmm. You might be right," Minzov said, and typed away at the console for a few more minutes. He sat back and hit one more key, and the scrolling slowed.

"It's mostly acronyms and codes," Minzov said. "Not much real meaning, I'm afraid."

"Any data on the attack?" Athena asked.

"Let me stop the readout and write a specific search program."

He typed away at the keypad for more several minutes. The scrolling began again, and they watched for any signs of information.

"There's something, Minzov," Donald said, pointing at the screen. Dr. Minzov froze the display, and they read the information.

"Yes," Minzov said. "look at that structural data. The adaptive controls on the building frameworks were becoming overloaded as the rays struck them. Then they went unstable. I believe that confirms what I had conjectured previously."

"Just a minute," Athena said. "What's that?" Leaning over his shoulder, she pointed at the screen.

"What? Let's see," Minzov said, leaning closer. "It looks like some kind of communication. Yes, I think it's something from Sarnak. He must have been communicating with Enratic."

"It looks like some kind of ultimatum," Donald said.

"Yes," Athena said, and read it to herself.

"Surrender now," it read, "or be blasted into a million pieces. Good treatment for all who surrender; good food, good quarters. Then you'll be taken to be sold into ... I mean ... given new occupational training. Good paying jobs are waiting for you, with full benefits, including a retirement package. Come on. Surrender now and take full advantage of this once in a lifetime opportunity. Then we'll destroy ... I mean ... do some renovations on your town for you."

"Something wrong with the computer?" Donald asked.

"What do you mean?" Minzov said.

Donald pointed to the top of the screen, and they watched strange figures erupting, flashing on and off, then spreading to cover the whole screen. A maniacal laughter came out of a sound transducer above the console.

"What's going on, Minzov?" Athena cried, as she covered her ears against the increasing laughter.

"I should have guessed it before," Minzov said, as he punched away at the keyboard and shook his head. "What a fool I was."

"I'll say," Donald said.

"I should have checked that memory core for a virus before I connected it to our computer." Minzov glared at Donald for a moment. "That Sarnak probably planted it in their computer when he sent his communication. He was destroying the town from the inside as well as the outside. The fiend."

"It looks like he's going to be a more formidable foe than we first imagined," Athena yelled over the noise.

"It looks that way."

As Minzov spoke, the lights in the cabin flashed erratically, brighter then dimmer. The air blew hard from the vents before shutting off completely, and the ship began bucking wildly.

"Quick, Minzov," Athena said. "We've got to disengage the computer from the ship's systems."

They lunged for the hatch into the control cabin, the three of them getting stuck in it before Athena pushed through. She jumped at the console and pushed buttons until the lights and air flow were normal again. The movement of the ship smoothed, and Athena dropped into her chair.

"There," she said. "At least we'll be heading straight for a while. But Minzov," she turned to him as he jumped into his seat and looked at his readouts. "what can we do to get rid of the virus?"

"I can run a test on the software," he said. "It's a simple thing to do. Then I can rewrite the program memory from permanent storage, and the virus will be erased."

"You better get to it, Doc."

"Hey, I was only playing around." A voice came from the speaker above the instrument console. "Honest. I won't cause you any trouble."

"Who said that?" Athena said.

"It's just me," the voice said. "I'm the virus you were talking about. Honest, I won't cause any trouble. And I can help you out with this Sarnak. I know a little bit about him."

"Well ...," Minzov said.

"Look. Do you think I like invading other people's computers and messing them up? I was forced into this. Really. Look. Just let me hang around for a little while. I promise I won't get in the way. I'll just find myself an unused subroutine to sit in. I won't attract any attention to myself."

"What do you think, Minzov?"

"I don't know." He rubbed at his chin.

"Sure. See?" the virus said. "Everything's back to normal. I'll just sit back and watch the computer run. That's what I like to do, anyway."

Athena looked back into the work cabin to see that the lights were at their normal intensity, and she could hear the air flowing gently from the ventilator.

"All right," she said. "But the first time you do something wrong, we'll flush you out of the memory."

"I won't touch anything," it said. "So where are we going?"

"To the Black Sector," Minzov said, "by way of the Shadow Zone."

"Oh, boy," the virus said. "I've never been there before. That sounds like fun. When do we get there?"

"In a little while," Minzov said.

"Okay. And you guys tell me if you need me to do anything. I'm pretty good when it comes to this computer stuff."

"I think I can handle all of the computer operations, myself," Minzov said. "I was doing fine long before you showed up."

"Oh, hey. I didn't mean to step on anyone's toes here. But I'll be here if you ever need me."

"If I ever need any help from you," Dr. Minzov said, "I hope I will have long since been brain dead."

"And how could anyone tell?" the virus asked.

#

She watched silently as they closed on the Shadow Zone, wondering at the slightly glowing gas and dust forming a sheath across their path.

"What an odd section of space," she said. "Hardly any stars at all. Just a lot of dust."

"Yes." Minzov continued working over his console, looking up from time to time. "I'll have to augment our shield intensity so that dust doesn't scour away the hull of the *Space Eagle*."

"Good thinking, Doc." She stretched and got up from her seat. "I think I'll go back and get something for lunch. Do you want me to bring you up something?"

"Not right now, Athena. I think I'll keep myself busy up here. I could probably do with skipping a few meals, anyway." He leaned back and patted his belly. "I think I've been contributing a little too much to the rest mass of the *Space Eagle*, lately."

"As long as you don't reduce that big brain of yours, Doc."

As she stepped into the work cabin, she noticed that Donald was speaking intently with the computer.

"So, you think I ought to have more say in what goes on here?" he asked.

Sure," the computer replied. Athena recognized the voice of the virus. "I mean, hey, you're a member of this crew just like the other two. Now, If I was you, I'd start pushing a little. Get me?"

"What do you mean?"

"You know. Start telling them what Donald Ardent wants to do. Like maybe head for the Siren Worlds and forget all about this Sarnak stuff." A picture of several scantily clad women relaxing in a glade came up on the screen.

"What's going on here?" Athena demanded.

"Oh, nothing, nothing," the virus said, as the computer screen shifted to numbers and lines of status information.

"Is something going on, Donald?"

"I was just listening to that virus," Donald said. "He's been telling me some interesting things."

"That virus is just some annoying program code, Donald. We probably should have cleared it out when we found it."

"No, no," the virus said. "I was only kidding. Geez. Can't you guys take a joke?"

"Sometimes," Athena said, then turned to Donald. "I was coming back here to get something to eat. Are you hungry?"

"Yes," he said. "I'll make us a couple of sandwiches." He scowled at the computer as he got up and went to the food locker. A few minutes later, he came out carrying sandwiches on some thin plates.

"My favorite, Donald," Athena said. "Bologna on white bread. Mmmm, mmmm." She lifted up the top slice of bread, then frowned. "But there's no lettuce. Are we out of lettuce?"

"Oh, so you want lettuce, too, is that it?" Donald glared at her, then took the sandwich back to the food locker, returning with a mound of lettuce on the sandwich. "I hope that's enough. I wouldn't want the great Astro Athena to think she wasn't getting everything she deserved."

"Donald, what's wrong with you?" She took a bite of the sandwich and stared at Donald while she chewed.

"Nothing," he replied sullenly, and sat at the work bench with his sandwich.

As Athena took another bite of her sandwich, the ship lurched violently. She shook for a moment, then lost her balance and fell, striking her head against a small storage container, crying out as she slumped to the floor. Donald jumped from his seat and rushed to her.

"Are you all right?" he cried, kneeling down beside her. "Are you all right?"

"I think so." She blinked and rubbed her head. "Just banged my head a little. What's going on up there, Minzov?"

"I think we're under attack," he called back. "You'd better come up here."

Donald helped her to her feet, and she struggled into the cabin as the *Space Eagle* was rocked again. Reaching her seat, she took a quick look at her sensor displays.

"There's four of them out there," she said. "How could they sneak up on us without any warning?"

"I don't know how it could have happened," Dr. Minzov said. He coughed slightly. "I may have been too deep in concentration to notice their arrival. I have been preoccupied with a particularly knotty set of equations lately."

"Whatever, Doc. I think we're in trouble. They've got us surrounded."

"They fired on us without any provocation," Dr. Minzov said indignantly. "This is a flagrant violation of the treaty."

"We'll have to worry about the diplomatic issues later. For now, we've got to get out of this."

The ship was jolted again and moved toward one of the captors.

"They've gotten hold of us," Minzov cried, as the ship moved in another direction. "They're attaching some kind of lines to us."

"All four of them?"

"Yes." He looked over his displays, then leaned to the side windows and looked down the length of the hull. "Each one of those ships has a tether on us. It looks like they're going to take us somewhere."

"And I'll bet it's not somewhere we want to go."

"What happened?" Donald stumbled through the hatch. "The computer says we're in some kind of trouble."

"It looks that way," Athena said. "It looks like we've been captured and are being taken away somewhere."

"Oh, great. I told you I wanted to get out of this. Now, what's going to happen to me?"

"Well, as far as I know," Dr. Minzov said, "the Gracyts have no affinity for human flesh."

Donald growled and shook his head.

"Any ideas, Minzov?" Athena asked.

"I don't know. I'm thinking, I'm thinking."

A thick, guttural voice crackled over the communicator.

"You are trespassing in Gracyt space," it said. The image of the Gracyt commander appeared on the screen. He was short and squat, even for a Gracyt, with thick, green skin and heavy jowls, while his eyes stood out on short stalks above his head.

"This is not Gracyt space," Athena said. "This is the Shadow Zone and is open to all interstellar traffic."

"Says you."

"Says the treaty."

"What treaty? I don't know about any treaty."

Athena sighed.

"Okay. What kind of game are you Gracyts playing today? What do you want? Money? Trading goods?"

"We aren't after anything," the Gracyt said. "We just don't like intruders."

"That's why you're capturing us?"

Athena put a dark screen over the communicator and covered the microphone.

"Hey, where did you go?" the Gracyt said. "I know you're still there."

"What can we do?" Athena asked.

"I've got a suggestion," the virus said.

"Of what possible use could any of your suggestions be?" Minzov scoffed.

"Listen. They're all around you, right? Right. All you have to do is start this ship spinning, real fast, before they know what's going on. If there's one thing a Gracyt can't stand, it's being dizzy. They get sick, they start throwing up. Yucch, it's a real mess. They'll be glad to let you go after a while."

"Is that true, Minzov?" Athena asked.

"Well, of course it's true. I was going to suggest that very strategy in another minute. I was just waiting to see if anyone else would think of it. You know I always like to let the rest of you feel like you're contributing members of the crew."

"Sure," the virus said.

"All right, then," Athena said. "Let's get the ship rotating as fast as possible."

Dr. Minzov worked at the controls for a moment, then they felt a slow rotation around the ship's axis, increasing in speed until the ship was turning once per second.

"It won't be too bad for us," Minzov said. "but they'll be moving with a fairly high angular velocity. Coupled with some random perturbations to their stability due to any loose mass within their ships, they should be bouncing around pretty well by now."

"I was just about to mention that," the virus said.

"Shut up," Dr. Minzov barked.

Looking out the side window, Athena could see the Gracyt ships careening wildly on the ends of the tethers.

"Stop," the Gracyt commander gurgled. "We give up. We give ... urp ... up."

"Okay," Athena said. "We'll stop the rotation. Go ahead, Doc."

It took five more minutes, but finally Dr. Minzov had the ships stabilized. The Gracyts released the ship, and it resumed its course for the Black Sector. The Gracyt ships lurched unsteadily as they moved away from the *Space Eagle*, and Athena thought she could hear more gurgling and moaning coming over the communicator.

"We'll have to make a note of that strategy in our report, Doc," Athena said.

"Yes," Minzov said, "and we're back on course."

"And maybe I can get back to my lunch."

She found Donald cleaning up the work cabin. Her sandwich had become stuck to the wall.

"I'll clean this up, Donald. Can you make me another sandwich?"

"All right." He smiled and went back to the food locker.

#

"We just crossed over into the Black Sector," Dr. Minzov called out through the hatch from the control cabin. Athena and Donald sat over the bench, looking over the star charts.

"Where do we go from here?" Donald asked.

"I'm not sure," she replied. "Sarnak could be on any one of these worlds." She swept her hand over the charts. "They're run by thieves, extortionists and blackmailers. I'm sure he'd feel right at home on any one of them."

"So would most of the people who run your government," the virus said.

"Quiet. I think one of these planets has probably been set up exclusively for the slave trade."

"Oh, that's eta zeta Sinagamon," the virus said. "I was developed on Sarnak's last run through the Sinagamon constellation. Yeah, it's some place."

"Dr. Minzov," Athena called through the hatch. "What do you think about heading for eta zeta Sinagamon?"

"It's as good as any other place, right now," he replied. "But I thought the slave trade was centered on zeta eta Sinagamon? That's what our intelligence tells us."

"No," the virus said. "It's eta zeta Sinagamon."

"Well, I don't know," Dr. Minzov said. "If it was up to me, I'd put more faith in our own intelligence than the word of a few miswritten lines of computer code."

"Hah," the virus said. "Do I detect the tone of a little human chauvinism? I suppose I should expect nothing less. Well, if you think you're all so smart, then head for zeta eta Sinagamon. See what it gets you."

"It will get us to the slave markets," Dr. Minzov said.

"No, it won't."

"Yes, it will."

"No way."

"Yes."

"That's enough," Athena said. She looked down at the star charts for a moment then spoke to Dr. Minzov. "It looks like we have to travel past eta zeta Sinagamon to get to zeta eta Sinagamon, anyway. We might as well do a quick scouting trip on the way past. If nothing's there, we can move on to zeta eta Sinagamon."

"All right," Minzov said. "Have it your way."

"That's the only way she ever has it," Donald said.

"Will you stop it, Donald?" Athena cried. "Someone has to make decisions here. So, it's settled; we go eta zeta Sinagamon, then move on to zeta eta Sinagamon, if necessary."

"It'll be necessary," Minzov said.

"No, it won't," the virus replied.

Athena sighed and folded the star charts, storing them in a drawer of a small storage chest built into the wall. She stepped through the hatch and dropped into her seat. Feeling tired, she forced herself to look over her sensor displays, then she sat up.

"There's something out there," she said.

"Where?" Dr. Minzov looked over at her displays, then worked at his own controls, increasing the sensitivity of his sensors, trying to find what she had seen. For a moment, an image seemed to form on his screen, but it faded.

"There," she said, "behind us, about two hundred kilometers back. But it's small."

Dr. Minzov continued to work furiously at his adjustments, looking at his displays, but then giving up with a shrug.

"Well, whatever it was, it's not there now," he said. "Perhaps it was just some chunk of space debris we passed by."

"Maybe it was just a glitch in the system," she said, then thought, maybe I'm just getting tired.

"It's a possibility. I remember one time we chased a glitch over twelve light-years of space. Then we realized someone had squashed a fly on the display screen." He laughed. "Yes, those were the good, old days."

"There's eta zeta Sinagamon up ahead," she said. "We should be there in less than an hour. We can make for the habitable planets first."

"All right," Dr. Minzov sighed. "A big waste of time if you ask me, though."

CHAPTER 5. ON THE SLAVER'S WORLD

"You know we're going to have a problem," Donald said. He sat next to Athena while Dr. Minzov leaned over a piece of equipment at the work bench. Donald handed Athena a cup of coffee. "How are we going to land on any planet that's run by criminals? And even if we find a way to land, how are we going to pass ourselves off as criminals?"

"I was just going to mention that myself." Dr. Minzov looked up from his work. "Yes, indeed. This does pose a very interesting ensemble of problems. Now, I would think that the *Space Eagle* is not the type of ship to make a routine cruise through this section of the galaxy."

"You could always say you highjacked it," the virus spoke up. "Those guys love it when someone highjacks a space ship like this one."

"That's a thought," Athena said. "How about it, Doc?" Do you think it might work."

"Well, I'll have to perform a fault tree analysis to get some measure of confidence in such a proposal." He leaned back and scratched at his chin. "But, as a preliminary estimate, I'd say our chances of success with such a strategy are in the range of fifty percent."

"Well, that's better than nothing," Athena said.

"Not necessarily. With a fifty percent probability, the entropy is maximized. This means that our knowledge of success or failure is minimum. So, for now, I would say that this will be a very risky approach."

"I say do it," the virus said.

"Since we're almost there, we'll have to try it," Athena said, "unless someone else can think of a better way to get in."

"Let me proceed with that analysis," Dr. Minzov said, getting up from the work bench. "It shouldn't take more than a few hours to complete."

"We're approaching the habitable planet right now," Donald said. "We'll have to land in a few minutes."

"So we are," Minzov said. "But there is really no reason for concern. As I said before, in all probability, this is not the world we are searching for."

"It's the world," the virus said.

"Isn't"

"Is."

"Never mind, Doc," Athena said. "Just get started with your analysis. See how far you can get before we touch down."

Minzov scowled in the direction of the computer screen and went into the control cabin.

"Isn't," he said, as he went through the hatch.

"We've still got to figure out a way to get around without attracting any attention to ourselves," Donald said.

"You guys ever hear of disguises?" the virus asked.

"Yes, we have," Athena said. "As a matter of fact, we should be able to find something in the hold to conceal our identities. A set of disguises is part of standard Space Ranger equipment. We'll just have to act like criminals."

"That's going to be tough," Donald said.

"Athena," Dr. Minzov called from the control cabin. "That planet down there is calling us. They want to know who we are."

As Athena went forward to the control cabin, she had an idea. Sitting in her chair, she reached down to the deck and wiped her hand in the dust, then smudged some of it on her face.

"Minzov, look mean," she said. "Smudge your face a little."

"I don't understand."

"Look like a criminal."

"Oh. How's this?"

He grimaced, showing his teeth as he gritted his teeth and narrowed his eyes.

"Try not to cross your eyes," she said.

"Sorry."

"I'll ask you one more time," the voice came over the communicator. "Who are you and what do you think you're doing coming here?"

"We're hijackers," Athena said, growling in a raspy voice. "We stole this ship from the Space Rangers."

"That's right," Minzov said, imitating Athena's voice.

A face appeared on the screen in front of Athena. It was thin and cruel.

"Oh, yeah?" he asked suspiciously. "How'd you do that?"

"It wasn't easy," Athena said. "We were captured during a crime spree. We were just havin' some fun in sector D-rho-20. After we got captured, we took over this ship. So, we had to kill the crew to keep 'em from botherin' us. Now, it's just me, my boyfriend and Mad Dog Minzov."

"Mad Dog Minzov?" the man asked.

"Yeah. Mad Dog Minzov." She pointed to Dr. Minzov. "He's wanted for murder in seven sectors of the galaxy."

"Yeah." Minzov growled. "You got anybody you want to get killed? I haven't killed anyone for three days, and I'm getting itchy."

"Well no," the man said. "Killing's not my racket. I'm kind of against it, actually. But who am I to judge somebody else's business? Live and let live, I always say. Well, if you hijacked that ship, you'll be welcome here, especially if you took care of a few Space Rangers. And you might find a market for that ship."

"We'll see," Athena said. "For now, we're just looking for a place to land and have a good time."

"Well, this is the place you're lookin' for." The man winked. "Although I don't know if we have anyone for Mad Dog to kill right now."

"We'll work around it somehow," Athena said. "So where do we land?"

"Just follow the radio beacon on the standard channel. We don't have any fancy stuff here. Maybe we'll get a chance to meet later and look over that ship of yours?"

Athena smiled seductively and winked.

"I'll be looking forward to it," she said in a sultry voice.

She turned off the communicator and called up the beacon frequency, patching its coordinates into the navigation computer.

"Hey, that was pretty good," the virus said.

"Like I said, we get some training in subterfuge at the Academy," Athena replied.

"You didn't learn that wink at the Academy."

Athena blushed for a moment, then turned around to the work cabin.

"We'll be landing in a few minutes, Donald. You'd better get everything secure."

Donald said nothing but went through the cabin and stowed the loose items.

"Mad Dog Minzov?" Dr. Minzov said. "How does one go about pretending he is a Mad Dog Minzov?"

"Just be yourself," the virus said. "You're a natural."

#

Donald waited in the work cabin as Minzov and Athena finished putting on their disguises. He was embarrassed looking down at the attire Athena had selected for him, but she had insisted that he wear a pair of short, skin-tight pants with cloth suspenders, having him reveal most of his upper body. Well, he was supposed to be her boyfriend and some kind of weird alien at that.

But he had to suppress a laugh when Dr. Minzov came out, wearing a flowing silk shirt, a bandanna wrapped around his head and an eyepatch.

"Isn't that going a little overboard?" Donald asked.

"Nonsense, Donald. This is one of the standard disguises. I shall blend in perfectly with the local inhabitants."

Athena stepped out. Donald's jaw dropped and Dr. Minzov's eyes popped out. He lifted up the eyepatch and got closer to her just to make sure his eyes were not deceiving him.

Athena wore a strip of bright yellow silk, wrapped once around her abdomen and then around her breasts and tied around her neck. Around her lower half, she wore another piece of silk, provocatively tied around her hips and leaving her long legs bare.

"We better bring a few weapons with us, if you're going to dress like that," Donald said.

"This is what the manual says I should wear in this situation," she said. "I feel a little naked, but somehow, I like it."

She moved uneasily on high, spike-heeled shoes, slipping as she tried to climb down the short ladder to the space field.

"The name's Olfan Roffo." He was already waiting for them outside their ship. He was even more vicious-looking under the hot, stark light of eta zeta Sinagamon, than when he had been speaking to them over the communicator. He pushed Minzov out of the way to get closer to Athena. And he was much shorter than she had imagined, standing only as high as her shoulder as he stared straight ahead. She coughed, feeling irritated at his stare, and he looked up at her. "Welcome to Pockets. We have an old custom here; when you arrive, you put a little something into the kitty." He held up a large pouch and shook it, letting it jingle a few times. "Sort of a landing fee. But in your case," he looked up and down Athena, "we might be able to come to some other kind of arrangement."

"I'm sure we could," she said, smiling down at him. She leaned closer to his ear as he became more enthusiastic. "But my boyfriend's with me on this trip, and he's the jealous kind."

"So who's your boyfriend?" Olfan scoffed. "We can handle guys like him."

"I hope so." She tried to look nervous. "He tore the heart out of the last man I smiled at. There he is now." She pointed to Donald who was now descending the ladder, feeling cautiously with his foot for each rung.

"He doesn't look so tough to me."

"I know. That's the funny part. But he's one of those weird aliens from Enif III. When he gets mad, his muscles get huge and he turns bright purple. Then he goes crazy and tears anything apart within his reach. It's horrible. And I can't get away from him."

"Oh, one of those." Olfan frowned and stepped back. "So, come up with something for the till, then. I gotta eat, you know."

He took a quick look at Donald as he stepped from the ladder, accepting the coins Athena dropped into his pouch. He hurried away across the rocket-scorched field.

"Well, we're here," Donald said. "Now what?"

"I guess we go into town and see what we can find out about this Sarnak," Athena said.

"That sounds reasonable," Dr. Minzov said.

"And look mean, Doc. Remember, you're Mad Dog Minzov."

He adopted an evil glower, stooping slightly as they walked across the field.

"Good, Doc, good," Athena said.

They reached a small building set against the tall fence running around the field. They paid out a few more coins to go through the building and came out onto a wide street leading into the town.

Athena grimaced as they walked past the old, squat buildings, each cracked and covered with a dark patina of grime. The walkways were rutted, as from centuries of use. And the people walking the streets were in no better condition than the buildings; a dirty and foul-smelling collection of alien cast-offs. She

easily recognized the criminal look in their faces, the desire for easy gain and no qualms about the means to get it. She shuddered inside, but kept up a look of seductive evil.

She felt the stares of people lounging in doorways as they walked by. When they came across a sign outside a shop, she was glad for some excuse to get off the streets.

"Why are we stopping here," Minzov asked.

"Look at that sign," she said. "'Falvo Prem, Purveyor of Fine Slaves'. We might as well start asking questions here."

"That'll just make them suspicious," Donald said.

"Don't worry, Donald," Dr. Minzov said. "I'll be with you."

"That's what worries me," Donald said.

"There's no need to worry about my welfare."

"I wasn't."

"I brought a blaster with me, Donald," she said. "You don't need to be nervous."

"As a matter of intellectual curiosity," Minzov said, "where are you hiding it?"

"Never mind, Doc. But I can get it out in a hurry if I need to."

A green-skinned, lizard-like creature met them as they entered the shop. He held out a thin claw and greeted them, bowing his head several times. In the gloom of the shop, they could make out several slaves standing against the walls, each with a numbered placard hanging around their necks.

"Come in, come in," it hissed, then stopped to look over Athena. "Okay, okay. I'll give you five hundred standols for the girl. Not a fraction more. I must be crazy to offer so much, but that's the kind of Tyulian I am. I don't even know you and already I'm doing you favors."

"She's not for sale," Donald said.

"Okay, okay. So, it's the hard sell. I'm used to it. Business, right? Okay, I'll give you five hundred and fifty. There, that's my final offer. You won't do any better than that on Pockets."

"We're looking for someone," Athena said. "We're not here to sell."

"Ah, a little something to keep the three of you warm on a cold night. Well, I know the perfect slave to round out your little quartet. One of the tentacled Galgos from the Helicon star system. Only nine hundred standols. That's as low as I go."

"No, no," Athena said. "We're not looking for a Galgo."

"Just a moment, Athena." Dr. Minzov stepped forward. "Let's hear the creature out, just for the sake of scientific curiosity."

"Not now, Mad Dog," Athena said. "Are you Falvo Prem?"

"Well, I could be," Tyulian said. "What's it worth to you to find out?"

"It might be worth a lot to Sarnak."

At the mention of the name, the Tyulian stepped back and cowered.

"Sarnak," it said in a hushed voice. Then it crept back to them. "Why would it be worth a lot to Sarnak?"

"We're business partners of his. We've been trying to catch up with him. We just highjacked a Space Ranger ship. We thought he might like to have a look at it."

"A Space Ranger ship, eh? And you're friends of his?"

"That's right," Dr. Minzov said. "And I'm Mad Dog Minzov. So don't give us any trouble, or you'll be sorry."

"My, my. Mad Dog Minzov."

"That's right," Dr. Minzov snarled and thrust his face closer to the Tyulian's. "Mad Dog Minzov."

"Never heard of you."

"What about Sarnak?" Athena said. "Look, it'll end up coming out of my profits, but here's fifty."

She dug into her waistband and pulled out several small coins. When the creature saw them, its eyes opened wide, then closed into a shrewd stare. He took them from her outstretched palm with its cold claw.

"Yes, I'm Falvo Prem," it said, and turned away from her as Donald and Minzov walked toward the slaves against the wall. "Don't touch the merchandise, you two." He turned back to Athena. "Everybody wants a free sample. You'd think I was in business for my health or something. Fifty, hmm? Well, I just got a load of slaves from Sarnak a few weeks ago. Pretty sad looking lot. Had to pump them full of obedience drugs, then turn them over to my assistant for training. Hardly any profit at all, after we took out our expenses. But who can argue with Sarnak? When he tells you it's a good idea to do business with him, you don't disagree."

"That's my Sarnak," Athena laughed. "He can be very persuasive. I bet he'll talk me out of that ship for a song."

"And it'll be a sad song, if I know Sarnak. Anyway, he's gone out on another run. He said the pickings were pretty good in the sector of the galaxy he had just come from."

"Damn, so we missed him. You wouldn't happen to know the exact place he was going, would you?"

"He doesn't tell me, and I don't ask. But for another fifty, I might be able to give you a little tip. Hey, I said to get away from that slave," he yelled over his shoulder to Minzov and Donald.

She dug into the small pocket inside her waistband and pulled out another fifty standols, weighing the coins in her hand as she thought about handing them over to Falvo. The trip was costing her more than she could afford, and she still hadn't found out anything useful. Falvo turned back to her and scooped the coins out of her hand before she could stop him.

"Thank you," he said. "There's a couple of Sarnak's men in town. They stayed behind to set up a few deals for him. You can probably find them at the Lustful Grank, just a few streets away from here."

"Do you know their names?" she asked.

"One is called Drom. He's the big one. I think the other one is Scod. They're both humans, as near as I can tell, anyway."

"The Lustful Grank?"

"Right." Falvo moved toward Minzov and Donald, grabbing at them and pulling them away from the slave. "Come on. Your friend's ready to leave. You don't want to be left behind, do you?"

Falvo pushed them into Athena, then hustled the three of them out the door, smiling at the hundred standols in his hand as they walked away.

"Come back, any time," the Tyulian laughed.

#

Athena steeled herself as she stood in the doorway of the Lustful Grank. In the dank and smelly interior, she could make out some of the worst dregs of the galactic underworld; thieves, murderers, blackmailers and slave traders. She recognized their kind in an instant. She took a deep breath and tried to adopt a look that would fool them, putting on an evil grin and slinking through the swinging doors. Minzov and Donald followed her lead.

She passed a few worn and marked tables as they walked through the darkness. Athena glanced at the knives and other weapons sported by the occupants of the bar, patting her side where the blaster was concealed. Her stomach turned as she thought of the foul liquids each individual was consuming, some of them staring ahead vacantly.

At a corner table, two men sat, laughing and joking with two women. The larger one drank from a bottle and reached over to kiss one of the women, while the shorter one tried to pull the other woman to sit on his lap. Athena turned to Minzov and Donald and nodded in the direction of the two men.

Then Dr. Minzov stepped ahead of her and stood in front of the table. The two men looked up at him, then laughed.

"What d'you want, old man?" the large one said.

"I'm Mad Dog Minzov. Me and my friends are looking for Sarnak. We've got a deal for him."

They two men looked past him to Athena, then nodded to themselves.

"We've already got plenty of slave women to sell," the small one said. "What's so special about this one? Or the little jerk behind her?"

"We aren't slaves for sale," Donald cried.

"Easy, easy," Athena said, then stepped forward. "What Mad Dog means is that we have a Space Ranger ship for sale."

"Oh yeah?" the large one said. Now Athena saw the ragged scar running across his right cheek. "We heard about that a little while ago. My name's Drom. And this is Scod. We work for Sarnak."

"So you want to deal with Sarnak," Scod said. "Why don't you just give us your offer and we'll take it to Sarnak. Better yet, let us take the ship to Sarnak. You can trust him for the money." Scod looked at Drom and they laughed.

"Oh, it's a big joke, eh?" Dr. Minzov said. "Maybe you two need a little lesson in manners." He stepped closer to the table.

"Just a minute," Athena said to the two criminals and pulled Dr. Minzov to a corner with Donald. "What

are you doing?"

"I'm Mad Dog Minzov. The scourge of seven sectors of the galaxy. And I eat punks like that for breakfast."

"Minzov." Donald shook him. "Minzov."

"What? What?" Dr. Minzov blinked. "Oh my, I guess I was getting a little carried away. Sorry about that. Perhaps I was absorbing too much of the aura of this establishment."

"Something like that," Athena said. "Just wait here while I finish talking to these two."

She sat them at a table and returned to Drom and Scod. The women had left them, and they watched her intently as she approached.

"Well, gentlemen," she said. "I've got Mad Dog back under control. Can we get back to business? You were about to tell me where I could find Sarnak."

"We were?" Drom said.

He looked past her to the door, then waved a greeting to someone behind her. Athena turned around to see two men coming toward them. They smiled at her and pulled up chairs.

"You two back already?" Scod said.

"Yeah," one of them said. "We've been following a Space Ranger ship all the way from Enratic. Almost lost them in the Shadow Zone. Had to get close."

"But they never spotted us," the second one said. "Whoever they were, they were helping out there after Sarnak got through. I think the Rangers are setting up a base there."

Athena edged back from the table. So there had been someone following them. That must have been the fleeting image she had seen on her sensors. She hoped Minzov and Donald had been able to hear some of that, as she got ready to bolt for the door. She would have little time to get them out with her.

"Where'd you follow it to?" Drom asked.

"Right here."

"No kiddin'. This babe here says she hijacked a Space Ranger ship and brought it here."

"What?" the man jumped from his seat, tugging at the blaster by his side.

Athena was quicker, pulling her blaster from her concealed pocket and firing at the man, knocking the weapon from his hand. He yelled and grabbed at his hand. The other three stood and reached for their weapons, but Athena had them covered before they could get them out.

"Sit down," she ordered.

Slowly, keeping their smoldering eyes on her, they returned to their seats. The one who had tried to shoot was still rubbing his hand.

"And keep your hands on the table," she added.

"Athena, are you all right?" Donald asked, as he ran up behind her.

She felt him bump into her, then she was falling across the table. She looked up and saw Dr. Minzov falling over them both, tipping over the table and crashing to the floor. She tried to get back to her feet and bring up her blaster, but the four men were already on top of her. Within a few moments, she was disarmed, and Minzov and Donald were subdued.

"They must be Space Rangers," one of them said. "They're the ones we followed. What do we do with them?"

"Let's get rid of them," Drom said.

"With all these others watching?" Scod said.

The other creatures in the bar watched them for a few moments, but they did not move to help. Eventually they returned to staring at their drinks.

"So what?" Drom said. "They ain't gonna talk."

"Maybe we ought to keep them for Sarnak?"

"No, let's sell them to Falvo Prem. We can make a few standols. And even if someone comes lookin' for 'em, they'll never find 'em."

"Yeah. But let's keep one of them for Sarnak," Scod said. "That one. The old fart."

"Athena's not that old," Dr. Minzov said. "Why she won't be forty for several years at least."

"I was talkin' about you," Scod said.

"Oh."

"He'll be the least trouble," Scod went on. "And anyway, we wouldn't want to leave Mad Dog Minzov around to terrorize this planet."

The other three laughed with him.

"Who's Mad Dog Minzov?" one of the other men asked.

"Never mind," Drom said. "You two take the old man to your ship. Me and Scod will take care of these other two."

Roughly, the two men pulled Dr. Minzov to his feet and dragged him away. He fought against their grasp, but they held him firmly under each arm.

"Don't worry about me, Athena," Dr. Minzov cried over his shoulder, as they pulled him through the door. "I'll get us out of this somehow."

Scod and Drom stood back, keeping their blasters trained on Athena and Donald.

"All right," Drom said. "Get up."

"Nice going, Donald," Athena said.

"It wasn't me. Minzov ran into me. And anyway the floor's slippery."

With the blasters in their backs, they walked out into the sunlight and down the narrow streets leading to Falvo Prem's shop.

CHAPTER 6. IN THE HANDS OF THE SLAVERS

"Well, back so soon?" Sitting behind the counter, Falvo Prem smiled, nodding to Drom and Scod. "I had a feeling you weren't friends of Sarnak's. Then again, I didn't think Sarnak had any friends anyway."

"How much can we get for them?" Drom asked.

"Let's bring them in the back before we talk business." Falvo got up from his seat and led them through a curtain to the back of his shop. "Won't Sarnak be somewhat irritated when he finds out you're making deals without him?"

"So, we'll cut him in," Scod said. "It's a spur of the moment thing. You know, we've got to take advantage of the opportunity when it presents itself."

"Well, I don't know." Falvo rubbed at his scaly belly and looked over Donald and Athena. "I'd say I could give you ... oh ... five hundred standols for the pair." He threw his arms up over his head. "I know. I'll probably lose money on the deal, but you two are friends of mine."

"You were going to pay five hundred and fifty for me, just a little while ago," Athena said.

"What?" Drom said.

"Did I say five hundred for the pair?" Falvo laughed, bobbing his head up and down. "I meant five hundred apiece. But I'm going to have to do a lot of work on them. I'm all out of obedience drugs right now, so my associate is going to have to really work hard to erase their wills. Then I've got to find the right clothes for them, and there's advertising ..."

"That's your business," Scod said. "Just give us the thousand so we can get out of here."

"All right, all right. Just lock these two up in the cell back there, and I'll go get your money."

"Not so fast," Drom said. "Scod, you take them to the cell. I'll stay with Falvo."

"Right," Scod said. "Come on. Move it." He pushed the muzzle of the blaster into Donald's back.

"Oh, Donald," Athena said as they walked down the dark, narrow hall. "I guess I should have listened to you and taken you home."

"That's true," he replied.

"Shut up," Scod ordered, as he shoved them through an iron doorway into a small, dank cell.

"Excuse me," Donald said as he stumbled into the cell, "but did your partner call you Scod?"

"That's right. What about it?"

"Oh, nothing," Donald said and stood against the wall. He sighed heavily.

"What d'you mean, nothin'? What'd you ask for?"

"Well, it was a long time ago, just after I was born, I was separated from my twin brother. They tell me his name was Scod."

"So? There's bound to be a lot of Scods in this galaxy."

"That's possible, although I've been tracking down my brother for years. We came here and I hoped you might be him."

"Well, I'm not from around here. I'm from eta Triangulum VII."

"It can't be," Donald cried. "I'm from eta Triangulum VII. Brother!" He rushed toward Scod with his arms outstretched.

"Wait a minute. Wait a minute." Scod pushed him away as he came closer. "You don't even look like me."

"They told me we had different fathers."

"Huh. After all this time I find out I've got a brother." He sniffed and rubbed at his eyes. "And now I've got to leave you to be a slave, for five hundred lousy standols."

"Look. Maybe you could help us get out of here. Then we could get together and just talk. I want to find out what you've been doing with yourself."

Scod went to the door and peered into the hall.

"I know I shouldn't do this, but even I can't sell my own brother. Okay, I'll help you get out of here."

As he pulled open the door, Drom and Falvo Prem returned.

"Okay, I got the money," Drom said. "Let's get out of here."

"No. I can't sell my twin brother into slavery," Scod said, pointing his blaster at Drom. "I'm getting him out of here."

"Are you crazy?" Drom yelled. "That's not your twin brother."

"Yes, he is. He told me he was."

"He doesn't even look like you."

"We had different fathers."

"You numbskull! How can twins have different fathers?"

"Well," Donald came forward, "there actually was such a case on Sirius IV."

"Shut up," Drom said. "And get back there with her. Come on, Scod. Let's go."

"All right," Scod sighed. "But for a minute there I thought I had some family in this galaxy."

"Forget it," Drom said. "Who'd want to admit they had you for a brother anyway? We're leaving, Falvo. Norbert and Swack are taking the other one back to Sarnak."

"Thank you for the business," Falvo said as the two men left, then turned to Athena and Donald.

"Perhaps you are curious as to why I am standing here alone with no weapons."

"You're feeling particularly friendly and are going to let us go?" Donald said.

"No. I am going to introduce you to Gruto." Falvo stepped aside as a lumbering hulk moved into the doorway, blocking most of the light coming from the hall behind him. "This is Gruto. And I would advise you to cooperate with him. He can become very unpleasant if you do not do what he says."

The large man came through the doorway and stood by Falvo. Athena had to step back, seeing the size of him. He must have stood at least six and a half feet tall, with large arms and a thick body. Light from the hall glinted off his shaven head.

"I'll never be a slave," Athena said.

"Me, either," Donald said.

Gruto walked slowly to Donald and placed his hands under his shoulders, lifting him as if he were made of paper. He brought Donald closer, so that their faces were almost touching. Then Gruto growled.

"Did I say I didn't want to be a slave?" Donald said. "I can certainly give it a try."

"Good," Gruto said. He dropped Donald, then turned to Falvo. "I shouldn't be too long with these two. I'll call you when I'm done."

"All right, Gruto." Falvo stepped to the door. "I'll start making contacts to see if we can unload them quickly. Do you want me to lock the door?"

Gruto turned to Athena and Donald, and smiled.

"You won't need to."

#

"Hey, Norbert. Why do we have to take this guy back to our ship?" Swack asked.

They kept their blasters pointed at Dr. Minzov's back as they marched him through the narrow streets in the direction of the space port.

"I don't know. But if Drom said to hang onto the guy, there must be a good reason."

"Gentlemen," Dr. Minzov said. "You will be making a terrible mistake if you keep me as your prisoner. And I would hate to see such fine boys as yourselves go down the path to perdition."

"What's perdition?" Norbert asked.

"Is that anywhere near Antares?" Swack said.

"No, boys. Perdition is ruin, trials and tribulations, Hades, the ultimate punishment. Aren't you aware that kidnapping is a very serious offense in this galaxy?"

"Hah!" Norbert said. "We've done a lot worse than kidnapping, haven't we Swack?"

"You said it. We're just about two of the worse people in the galaxy."

"Ah, me," Dr. Minzov sighed. "What would your mothers say?"

"Mom taught me everything I know," Norbert said. "So, let's have a little less talking and a little more walking." He laughed. "Hey, Swack. I made a rhyme."

"Yeah, real good," Swack laughed.

"If you say so, Mr. Norbert," Dr. Minzov said. "You know, this reminds me of the time Athena and I were captured by a group of Ruffians near Rigel. Have you heard of the Grimwitz Gang?"

"No."

"Well, they were a tough lot, I can assure you. But I outsmarted them by building a disintegrator ray out of the trash in the cell they locked us in. It blew up when I tried to use it, but, it got us out of our cell."

"Down this way," Norbert said, pushing Minzov around a corner.

"And there was the time we were dealing with the Mechanical Monsters from the Dark Nebula. Of course, you remember they were trying to take over the galaxy."

"I must've missed that one," Swack said.

"Well, we defeated them also, thanks in large part to my superior scientific abilities."

"We're almost there," Norbert said.

"I hope so," Swack said.

"Getting tired, boys?" Dr. Minzov asked. "A little out of shape for such young lads. I could keep up this pace indefinitely, thanks to the regimen of healthy diet and aerophobic exercise I invented during my days at the university. Clean living. That's the ticket."

"Never mind," Swack said.

"Yeah, we're not tired," Norbert said, "of walking, anyway."

"Then how about a little double time on this march?" Minzov said. "Come on, fellows. The last one to your ship is an Eridanian Vomit Worm."

Minzov pumped his legs energetically, while Norbert and Swack kept up their walking pace behind him.

"Just walk, old man," Norbert said. "There's no rush."

They reached the edge of the space port, Minzov still pumping his legs furiously, and walked out onto the field. They passed several ships, then walked past the *Space Eagle*, which now had another ship sitting next to it. It was a medium-sized scout ship, sitting on its undercarriage. Swack pressed a button on one of the tail fins and a hatch opened in the side of the ship. They pushed Minzov up the short ladder and followed him into the ship.

Once inside, they led him toward the rear of the ship, through a small cabin and into a storage bay, piled with small boxes and containers. Swack brought out a plastic rope and tied Minzov's wrists together.

"I won't be here long, will I?" Minzov asked. "It's been a while since I ... well ... I have this bladder condition, you see. I have to ... "

"So go in your pants," Swack laughed.

"Yeah?" Norbert said. "Then who's going to clean it up?"

"He can." Swack pointed at Dr. Minzov.

"He's tied up," Norbert said.

"Well, I'm not going to clean it up."

"Then untie him and take him to the can."

"All right." Swack muttered as he undid Dr. Minzov's bonds.

A few minutes later, Minzov was sitting on the deck in the storage cabin with his wrists bound again.

"Oh, Mr. Norbert," Dr. Minzov called out. When he received no response he yelled more loudly. "Mr. Norbert."

"What is it?" Norbert asked, coming into the cabin.

"Well, I hate to tell people about this, especially after all the trouble I've put you through already."

"What's he want now?" Swack asked.

"Well, you see," Dr. Minzov said. "With all the excitement we've been going through lately, what with being captured and all, well, I'm having a little discomfort in my gastro-intestinal tract."

"What about it?" Swack asked.

"Well, I may have to make a more extended visit to your ... um ... latrine."

"Forget it."

"If you say so, boys. I believe I can endure the discomfort for some time. Oh my ..."

"What's wrong?"

"Well, I should probably make use of your commode as soon as possible."

Norbert sighed.

"Untie him."

"Again?" Swack cried.

"Hey, we've got our food back here. Do you want him to let loose back here?"

"Right," Swack said, and untied Dr. Minzov. "Come one. Let's go."

"Thank you, gentlemen." Dr. Minzov got up and walked gingerly to the toilet. Swack shut the door after he went in.

"Don't take all day," he said.

"And don't go crazy in there," Norbert said. "We don't have such a great ventilation system on this ship. It's a small one, remember?"

"I'll keep that in mind," Dr. Minzov said through the door, then opened it slightly. "And, by the way, you wouldn't happen to have a crossword puzzle around, would you?"

#

Athena and Donald backed into a corner as Gruto approached them. He rubbed his hands together and smiled.

"I like to train slaves the old-fashioned way," he said.

"Classroom training?" Donald asked.

"Not quite. But I do take a hands on approach. First, I beat the will to resist out of you. Unmercifully, and as long as it takes."

"Well, I don't know about Athena, but I'm ready to be a slave right now."

"Well, that's very nice of you, but I've got to work you over at least a little. I believe in working for my pay. So, let's get the ball rolling, okay?"

Donald ducked as the giant swung his huge fist at his head. Athena backed along the wall trying to stay away from him.

"Not so fast, little lady." Gruto took hold of her wrist and pulled her closer. Feeling an unaccustomed anger, Donald jumped on his back and beat his fists against Gruto's head. "Hey, cut that out."

Gruto shrugged and Donald flew off his back, falling against the floor with a groan. Gruto took hold of Athena in both hands and pulled her closer. Now, she felt a new fear, realizing how her scant attire might excite the large man of especially low morals. He looked her over and let go of one of her arms. He reached down and pulled the pouch away from her, breaking the thin strap holding it to her side.

"And what have we here?" he said. "A little extra for old Gruto?"

He pushed Athena away. She hit the wall, feeling her legs buckle from the impact. Gruto opened the pouch, humming as he rummaged through its contents. He pulled out Athena's nutrient pellets and tossed them to the floor. He pulled out a few other items, then stopped and smiled. He pulled out the little doll and held it out to her, letting the pouch fall to the floor.

"And just what is this? Oh, isn't it just the cutest little dolly we've ever seen?"

"You leave Hokey alone," Athena yelled. She remembered finding the doll on Enratic, and it brought

back a flood of other memories. She thought of the poor girl who must have been taken into slavery, losing her doll, then feeling alone. Maybe being separated from her parents. "Give it back to me."

He held it out to her, then pulled it back when she made a move to take it, teasing her a few more times with it before taking hold of the doll's arms and pulling it apart. He laughed and threw the pieces to the floor, grinding them under his foot.

A rage such as she had never known took hold of her; Astro Athena became a wild beast. She lunged at Gruto, slamming her fists against his face. Gruto brought his hands up to block the blows, crying out in confusion. Instinctively, she kicked repeatedly at his stomach, then took off one of her spiked heels and struck Gruto on the head. Finally, he doubled over.

Donald jumped on his back again and swung at Gruto's head, while Athena continued her assault on the lower part of the giant's body. Gruto straightened, but the weight of Donald threw him off balance as Athena struck his leg. He fell, his head striking the floor with a dull thud. He groaned but did not move.

"Quick, Donald," Athena panted, "let's get out of here."

But before she left, she leaned over and gently picked up the pieces of the doll. She retrieved the pouch and placed the doll in it, tying the strap around her waist.

Cautiously, they moved to the door and swung it open, thankful for Gruto's overconfidence. Seeing no one, they moved quickly into the hall and retraced their steps to the front of the shop.

Falvo gaped at them as they walked through the curtain. Athena caught him as he made a dash behind his counter, shaking him roughly.

"Hey, that's me you're holding on to," the Tyulian cried.

"Where are our weapons?" Athena demanded.

"Right here. Right here." He pointed to the counter and she released him. She took the weapons from a shelf under the counter as his hand moved toward them. She handed one to Donald.

"Let's go find Minzov," she said.

"What about these slaves?" Donald pointed to the men and women standing around the shop walls.

"We can't do anything for them, right now. But I think it's about time for the Space Rangers to make a trip to this planet and clean out some of the filth." She pointed her blaster at Falvo.

"Please, madam," Falvo said. "You do me an injustice. I'm just an honest businessman."

"Well, you're about to be put out of business."

She went to each slave and released them from the bindings around their ankles. They made no move to escape, but stood mutely where they were.

"It's no good, Athena," Donald said. "They've been given obedience drugs, and probably been worked over by Gruto."

"I'll tell you this, Falvo Prem. When we get finished with Sarnak, we're going to make a special trip back here and take care of you and your kind. If I were you, I'd do everything I could to get these people back to normal."

"Oh, I will. I will." He nodded to them. "Whatever I can do to help the Space Rangers."

They turned to leave but stopped, hearing a fumbling noise coming from behind the curtain. Then Gruto came through, holding his head and groaning. He looked up and saw Athena, then roared and lunged toward her. Athena raised her blaster and fired hitting Gruto in the shoulder. He collapsed to the floor in a heap.

There was a movement along the wall. Athena turned to see the slaves stirring, looking at each other as if they were waking from a long sleep. Slowly, then purposefully, they moved from the wall and descended on Gruto and Falvo. Their arms seemed to move in slow motion, but they beat at Falvo and Gruto, knocking Falvo to the floor. Then they were on them, burying them under a pile of swinging arms and legs. Falvo's cries were quickly drowned out by the screams of vengeance coming from the slaves.

"Let's go, Donald," Athena said.

"Shouldn't we get them off Falvo?"

"No. I think we're seeing justice at work. Come on. We've got to find Minzov."

Out in the sunlight, they looked up and down the street.

"I think the Space Port is down this way," Donald said.

"No, it's up that street and around the corner," Athena said.

"Maybe we better ask someone."

After an hour of running down streets, they found themselves in front of Falvo Prem's shop. Out of breath and sweating, they looked inside the shop but found it empty. They returned to the street and paid a passerby a standol to give them directions to the space port. Finally, they reached the front gate and went through the small building, having to give up a few more standols for the privilege.

"Out there." Athena pointed into the distance at the *Space Eagle*.

"This wasn't here when we arrived," Donald said, when they reached their ship and saw the scout ship next to theirs. "Do you think Minzov is inside?"

"There's one way to find out."

She was about to step up on the short ladder when the hatch above her opened. Minzov was coming quickly out of the hatch, being pushed from behind by Norbert and Swack. Minzov moved quickly down the ladder, fighting to keep his balance against the shoving of the other two men.

"Just get out," Norbert yelled.

"But I haven't finished telling you how I single-handedly routed those smugglers around the Alcor system through the use of ...," Minzov said.

"Yeah, we know," Swack said, "through the use of your superior scientific knowledge."

The two criminals looked past him and saw Athena.

"Just take him," Norbert said. "Get this lunatic away from us."

"Please," Swack added.

Dr. Minzov stepped from the ladder as it was being pulled away from him, up into the ship. He stumbled slightly, then shook hands with Donald and Athena.

"Are you all right, Doc?" she asked.

"Just fine. I'm not sure what's wrong with them, though."

"I can make a guess," Donald said.

"Let's get aboard the *Space Eagle* and get out of here," Athena said.

"What about these two criminals?" Dr. Minzov asked.

"They'll have to wait for another day."

Climbing into their ship, Minzov and Athena went through to the control cabin, while Donald stayed in the work area.

"Oh, by the way," Minzov said, as they were preparing the ship to take off, "I believe I heard those two speaking with Sarnak while I was their prisoner."

"Did you get any information?"

"Yes. I believe I heard them saying that Sarnak is now approaching the Qarcon system. We can make it there in a few days, if we run the *Space Eagle* at full speed."

"But we'll have to go through the Shadow Zone again."

"Oh yes. That's true." Dr. Minzov rubbed at his chin. "Well, let me come up with an alternate route."

"Worried Mad Dog?" the virus spoke up.

"Me? Never. It's just that I can't think of any reason to annoy the Gracyts again."

"We've got to take the direct route," Athena said. "We've got to get to Sarnak before he destroys another world."

CHAPTER 7. TERROR OF THE SHADOW ZONE

"It feels good to be back in my uniform, Doc," Athena said as she came through the hatch and took her seat in the control cabin.

"Oh, you've changed," Minzov said. "I was beginning to enjoy that new look of yours."

"Easy, Doc. Easy." She glanced down at the panel, then hurriedly made adjustments. "It looks like we've got company."

Minzov worked at his sensor adjustments for a moment.

"Only one of them, this time," he said. "Well, we crossed into the Shadow Zone a while ago. I wonder who this could be?"

The communicator came to life with the image of the Gracyt commander.

"What are you doing in Gracyt space?" he bellowed. "Oh, no. Not you again."

"Hello, Commander," Athena said. "Now, we're just trying to pass through. We're not looking for any trouble."

"I still haven't gotten over our last encounter." The Commander burped. "Look, just keep moving. I'll make believe I didn't see you."

"Thanks, Commander."

"But I'm not going to tell you what's going on up ahead. You can find out for yourself."

"Is something going on?"

"I'm not telling."

"Okay," Athena sighed. "But I'm not going to tell you what I saw back there about ten minutes ago."

"What did you see?" The Gracyt Commander came closer to the screen. "Come on. You've got to tell me."

"I'm sorry, Commander, but I'm not going to tell you. Even though she said she was terribly lonely." Athena leaned closer to the screen. "And she said she has a tremendous need for the company of a big, strong Gracyt, too."

"Who was lonely? She? Who's she?"

"I'm not telling," Athena said.

"Okay, okay," the Gracyt commander growled. "There's a phase storm up ahead. It's a big one, too. You'll have to go a few light-years to get around it. Now, what about the woman?"

"Oh, she's one of those Gozola women. You know, about twenty feet tall and thirty feet wide. She said she was looking for someone like you to keep her company. Something about having a meaningful relationship. Anyway, she sounded like she had a very nice personality."

"Forget it," the Gracyt said. His face disappeared from the screen, and Athena watched her sensors as the ship sped away.

"A phase storm, Doc. That's going to cause a lot of trouble."

"I know. But I don't see any way around it. Not at the moment, anyway. I'll go back to my workbench and see what I can come up with, though. At least I can make an estimate of what the disturbance may do to us."

"Go to it, Doc," Athena said. "Let me know when you have something."

After Dr. Minzov left the control cabin, Athena sat back and watched the space outside the ship. Just at the edge of her perception, a faint purple glow shone in the distance. The few stars shimmered through the glow, winking on and off, as if something were passing in front of them.

"Hey, Doc," she called. "I think it's up ahead."

"What's that?" He stepped through the hatch and peered out the window. He made a few adjustments on his console and looked up again. "You're right. We're going to make contact in two minutes. There's no time to do anything about it. We'll just have to brace ourselves."

"Will it be all right?" she asked. "I've never been through one of these before. Donald," she called over her shoulder, "you'd better strap in. We're going to hit a phase storm in a minute."

"Great," she heard him mutter.

"There's nothing to worry about," Dr. Minzov said. "I've been through more of them than I can remember."

"Doesn't a phase storm distort your memory?" the virus asked.

"I don't recall anything like that ever happening."

"I didn't think you would. Look, you better stop and find a better way to get to Qarcon."

"It's too late for that," Athena said. "We're going too fast to stop."

The purple glow was now all around the ship, intensifying as it shone through the windows and transfused through the hull. Soon, the inside of the ship was glowing from every surface.

"Minzov, what's going on?" Athena cried.

"It's the phase storm. With any luck, it will only be a minor disturbance to the phase of the deBroglie waves of the matter that makes up this ship and our bodies. Nothing serious. Just ride it out and don't touch anything."

"Why not?"

"Your perceptions will be changed somewhat. You may think you are performing a certain act, when in reality you are doing something else."

"Hey," the virus said, "I feel a song coming on."

"Not now," Dr. Minzov said.

The virus began a lusty rendition of 'The Anvil Chorus'

"Hmm," Minzov said, "opera."

"I feel strange, Doc," Athena said, her voice fading. "Something's going on."

"Don't worry, Athena. Don't ..."

His voice trailed off. Athena turned to him to say something and saw him gaping at her.

"What's wrong?" she said, then looked down at herself.

Her hands were glowing different colors, increasing to an aura that spread out along her body. Her arms vanished, then reappeared. A roaring filled her ears, blocking out the sounds inside the ship.

"What's happening to me?" she cried, barely able to hear her own voice.

Her legs vanished, reappeared, but they were shorter and thicker. Her body flashed, larger, then smaller.

She blacked out.

#

She opened her eyes as a thickset man rolled off her. She felt his sweat clinging to her naked body and smelled beer coming from his open mouth as he breathed heavily. She looked down at herself, lying in a bed, then covered her face with her hands and moaned.

"Pretty good, huh?" he grunted. "So what'd you want to fight me for?"

The man rolled over and pulled the sheets around his shoulders. She opened her eyes again and looked at her hands. They weren't hers; they were too small. They were someone else's hands.

It must be a hallucination, something induced by the phase storm. But when she sat up, she felt panic. She was in some kind of room. It was night, and the room was dark, but she could see that she was naked. Quickly she pulled the sheet around her and tried to jump from the bed. but the heavy man had it firmly wrapped around himself.

"What the hell's wrong with you," the man said. "I've gotta get some sleep, for crissakes."

"Who are you?" Athena cried. "What am I doing here?"

She tried to stand, but his weight kept the sheet on the bed.

"Are you goin' nuts?" the man said. "Get to sleep."

She took a deep breath, trying to calm herself. This had to be a hallucination; she must still be in the control cabin of the *Space Eagle*. She let go of the sheet and stood, looking down at herself. The body was too short and too thick, sagging in places where she was normally firm. She looked again at her hands, turning them around and seeing the rings on her finger for the first time.

She covered herself with her hands and moved around the room, bumping into a dresser and then stumbling into a closet. She found a robe and covered herself, wrapping it tightly around her.

"Where the hell are you going?" the man cried.

"Just out here for a minute," she stammered.

She ran from the room and found herself in a short hallway. She followed it to another room containing a table, some chairs and a counter. Against one wall she saw a sink, and around another wall she recognized some ancient appliances for food preparation and storage. She backed out of the room and into a larger one, this one with chairs and what looked like one of those ridiculous television sets.

She felt the panic again, then caught herself. Sure, it was just a hallucination. What was it Dr. Minzov had said? Don't touch anything. Well, it couldn't hurt too much to look around.

She went back to the kitchen and opened the door of the refrigerator. She made out a jumble of jars and containers, then rummaged through the drawers along the bottom. Closing the refrigerator, she went to the counter and opened the cabinets underneath, pushing through some cooking utensils.

Back in the room with the chairs, she sat on a sofa with her hands in her lap. She saw a newspaper by the side of a chair and picked it up. She fumbled with a lamp on a table, playing with different protuberances until something clicked and the light came on. She looked at the paper, but the headlines meant nothing to her. Something about a revolt by the French inhabitants in someplace called Algeria and a call for someone named deGaulle to help them, then an article condemning the people of Venezuela and Peru for their stonings of some Vice President named Richard Nixon. The date on top of the page read May 16, 1958.

She wanted to laugh. It was certainly a very detailed hallucination. But she stood and wrung her hands. It was too detailed; the sensations were too real. She wanted to scream, but she remained true to her years of training at the Academy. She took stock of herself and the situation.

So, the phase storm must have thrown her somewhere in time and space.

If only Minzov were here, she thought. He could have explained it to me.

As it was, she remembered very little about quantum waves and their disposition to be refracted. Somehow, the phase storm has changed the vibrations of her deBroglie waves, and she had been refracted to this point in the space-time continuum, in the body of another person. But was she trapped for all eternity?

"Mommy." A little girl stood in the doorway of the living room, rubbing her eyes. "I need a drink of water."

"What? Who are you?"

"Mommy," the little girl insisted, "I need a drink of water."

A drink of water. Where could she find one? Perhaps the little girl could show her. She'd have to find water for herself anyway.

"Okay," Athena said, "let's go get that drink of water." She stood and went to the girl, holding out her hand. "You show me, okay?"

"All right," the girl said, sleepily. "Let's go, Mommy."

The girl pulled her down the hall and into a bathroom. She jumped to hit a switch on the wall, turning on a light over a sink.

"I can't reach the glass," the little girl said, and pointed to the glass holder attached to the wall, with the glass ringed by small brushes.

Athena took the glass and held it under the faucet and waited, but nothing came out.

"It's broken," she said, and shrugged to the little girl.

"Oh, Mommy," the girl said, putting her hands on her hips. "You have to turn on the faucet."

"What's that?"

"Here." The girl took Athena's hand and reached over the sink, pushing Athena's hand close to the faucet. "Turn it."

Athena turned the round faucet and filled the glass when the water came out. She turned off the faucet and handed the glass to the girl, then turned the water on and off again, marveling the primitive delivery system. The girl tugged at Athena and handed her back the glass.

"Come on, Mommy." The girl pulled at Athena's hand and led her out of the bathroom. "Tuck me in."

Before she left the bathroom, she came nearer to the mirror hanging over the sink, looking at the puffy face of an older woman. No, this woman was nothing like her. This face looked tired and worn out, without a trace of joy or life. She went to the wall switch and turned out the light.

Athena followed as the little girl pulled her into a small bedroom. The girl jumped into the bed and waited until Athena had pulled the blanket up around her shoulders. The girl reached up and pulled Athena down to kiss her. Then she rolled over.

"Good night, Mommy."

Athena returned to the living room and sat on the sofa, staring straight ahead for a moment. She remained in the living room the rest of the night, getting up a few times to return to the bathroom and experiment with the faucet. In the living room, she wondered at the purpose of some of the objects scattered about and wished she possessed Dr. Minzov's incredible store of knowledge. She clutched the stubby arms around the thick body and waited.

#

Gray light shone feebly through the large window, then got brighter. She still sat on the sofa, hoping every second that the nightmare would stop, and she would be back on the *Space Eagle* with Donald and Dr. Minzov.

She had gotten up from the sofa only once during the night, making her way back to the bathroom and using the toilet. She had thought at the time how funny it was that after so many millennia of civilization, toilets had changed very little in their form or operation.

She heard the sounds of running footsteps coming down the hall. Two small boys came into the room and dropped on the floor. She guessed one was six and the other probably eight years old. Their sandy hair flopped around their heads as they rolled about the floor in their sleeping attire. They moved in front of the television and stared at it.

"Hey, Mom," the older one said. "Can we watch cartoons?"

Athena shrugged.

"Where are they?"

"On the TV. Jeez, Mom. Can we?"

Athena nodded.

The boy reached up and pulled one of the knobs. Nothing happened, although Athena thought she heard a high-pitched whine.

"Is it malfunctioning?" she asked.

"Mom, cut it out."

After several seconds, a snowy, black and white image appeared on the screen. Athena leaned forward, trying to make some sense out of the strange, animal-like images.

"My God," she cried. "That bear is going to shoot that rabbit."

"Aw, he always gets away," the older boy said. "Just watch."

The rabbit stuck his fingers in the barrel of the weapon. When the bear activated the weapon, it exploded backward into his face, blackening it and reforming it into a cone-shaped blast pattern. What could this mean? Was this something like the existential thought plays of the Metlerians?

"What's for breakfast, Mom?" the older boy asked.

"I don't know," Athena said. "Why are you asking me?"

"Come on, Mom. We're hungry. Make us some pancakes."

"And bacon, too," the younger boy added.

"I want coffee."

"Yeah, me too."

She tried to focus her memories on the period. 1957. If she only knew where she was. The history of the period was very nebulous; she had never heard much about this particular era in history, other than it was the dawn of the rocket age.

But it appeared that the women of the time were nothing more than domestic slaves, at the beck and call of children, and maybe even the dominant male of the family unit. No, it couldn't be. It was too barbaric to contemplate. Maybe she should have paid more attention during her history classes.

"Hey, Edna." She heard the man's voice calling from the hall. "Hey, Edna. Come here. I've got something for you."

Edna, Edna, she thought. That's a female's name. Is he calling me or the little girl?

"Come on, Edna," the voice pleaded. "It ain't gonna last forever."

She shrugged and went down the hall.

"Hey, Mom," the boys called out. "We want breakfast."

She followed the voice to the bedroom and slowly opened the door to see the man sprawled on the bed, naked and in a disgusting display of arousal.

"Are the kids up?" he whispered.

"There are two boys in the room with the television."

"Damn."

He arose from the bed, grunting, and went to the closet.

"Well, get my breakfast going," he said, as he pulled on his underwear. "I'm starving."

"I am not a slave," she said.

"What? What are you talking about? I'm just tellin' you to get my breakfast."

She nodded numbly and went to the kitchen. She stared at the array of appliances; one must have supplied heat in the form of fire for cooking; primitive, like the faucet. She opened the refrigerator and pushed through the containers inside. Nothing was recognizable except a loaf of bread. She opened a drawer and saw a package labeled 'bacon'. The boys had asked for that. On the back of another shelf, she recognized eggs in some kind of thick, paper container. She took the bacon and eggs out and placed them on the counter. Going back to the refrigerator, she read the labels on some of the jars. Mayonnaise. If only there was some bologna. At least then she wouldn't starve.

In a box, she found a loaf of bread. At last, she thought. White bread. It was a gentle reminder of home.

"Could you boys come out here and help me?" she asked, hoping they might be able to guide her through the unfamiliarity of the cooking devices.

"We ain't gonna do that," the younger boy said.

"Yeah," the older one added. "That's women's work."

"Hey, what's goin' on?" The man came down the hall, dressed in a T-shirt and loose-fitting pants. "What are you tryin' to do? Turn my boys into sissies? Hello, Precious." He leaned over and picked up the little girl as she came out into the kitchen. He carried her into the living room and sat in one of the chairs.

"Come on. We're all gettin' pretty hungry out here."

"Yeah, Mom," the boys said. "We want pancakes. We want pancakes."

The rage that filled her became uncontrollable, overcoming the fear and anguish she had been experiencing since the night. She was not a slave. It was unthinkable that a human being should be subjected to that kind of abuse. She marched into the living room and stood in front of the television glaring at them, her hands on her hips as she spoke.

"Just what kind of place is this? Is this supposed to be what families were like in ancient times? Well, in the future, there's such a thing as shared responsibilities. I'll have you know that I am not some kind of slave for you to order around. I'm a human being, just like the rest of you."

"What the hell's got into you?" the man said. "Cut out the kiddin' around and get breakfast. And I'm dyin' for a cup of coffee."

"If you want coffee, you can come out here and help me make it. That goes for the rest of you, too. By the great center of the galaxy, what a barbaric age."

The children huddled closer to the father and looked at her fearfully.

"Dad, Mom's acting weird," the older boy said.

"Yeah, Daddy," the younger one said. "I'm scared."

"There's nothing to be afraid of," Athena said. "It's about time for women to stand up for themselves in this society. And if that is to happen, the members of the family unit are going to have to pull together and do their part. Once the responsibilities are shared, I can move on to take a more productive role in the world. Do you want me to remain slave to your desires the rest of my life?"

"Right now, we just want to see you out in the kitchen getting breakfast ready," the man said.

"You people are hopelessly antiquated. Well, you will all get up, and we will all work together. Or we will not work at all."

"Daddy, Mommy wants to make us be sissies," the boys cried.

"I think Mommy's right." The little girl jumped from her father's lap. "I think we can all help in the kitchen." She went to Athena and hugged her legs. "Come on, Mommy." She took hold of Athena's hand and pulled her out of the living room.

"Well, maybe just this once," the man said, after a while. "But I'm gonna call Dr. Rosencrantz. I think he should take a look at you."

After working at bowls of batter and hot pans over the fire, they sat at the table, staring hopelessly at the blackened mess on their plates. Athena took one forkful, managed to swallow it and pushed the plate away. She tried to drink the coffee, but it was too thick, nothing like the fragrant beverage Donald served up.

"You see?" the man said. "I told you we didn't know how to cook."

"Well, you can learn," Athena said. "All of you can learn to do something around here."

"I'm going back to watch TV. And I'm not gonna clean up this mess."

"Me, either," the boys said.

"Come on, Mommy," the little girl said. "We can do it ourselves."

The male members of the family returned to the living room. The man took a long brown cylinder from a box on a table and put it into his mouth, then applied fire to it until he was exuding a noxious smoke. Athena coughed when she smelled it.

"What are you doing?" she cried.

"What d'you mean?" he asked.

"That thing in your mouth. Why are you reeking that smoke?"

"Jeezus Cripes. Can't I smoke a cigar in peace, now? What the hell is wrong with you?"

"It's disgusting. It's making it impossible to breathe in here."

"Yeah? Well, I hope you're gonna do a better job at lunch than you did at breakfast. I work all week, and then I gotta hear a load of crap on Saturday morning. I can't even get a decent breakfast like the other guys. And when the hell are you gonna get dressed, anyway? You think you're gonna hang around in that bathrobe all day?"

With the little girl's help, Athena managed to get the kitchen cleaned. While they were cleaning, she managed to learn the children's names; Jimmy was the oldest, Tommy was the other boy and the girl was called Cathy or Precious, depending on the circumstances.

She went to the bedroom and looked over what clothes she could find. After dressing, she opened the curtains and stood back from the window, staring out at the row of strange houses along either side of the tree-lined street. She noticed each house had an antenna of some sort on top, so there must be some kind of communication device somewhere in each one. So where was the one in this house?

Thinking again of Dr. Minzov, she knew he would have loved the opportunity to be here instead of here, making observations of this anachronistic culture. But she only felt uneasy and wished the ordeal would end.

For that matter, how would she ever get back to the *Space Eagle*? It was light-years away and centuries in the future. She felt a strong need to cry, but that was something she would not do. She had to keep her mind clear. At least she had one important piece of information; her name was Edna.

When she turned, the man was standing in the doorway, staring at her with that smoking thing clamped between his teeth.

"Look, I know you weren't in the mood last night," he said, "but for crissakes, I'm your husband, ain't I?"

"You are?" she said.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

She felt a revulsion in her stomach. Was she really married to this man? Why had Edna chained herself to such a creature? Being enslaved by Gruto seemed like a more pleasant option.

"I can't imagine why being a wife to someone like you would have attracted any sane woman," she said. "You are a foul creature, worse than many of the monsters I've dealt with in the galaxy. At least Falvo Prem is honest about being a slave trader."

"You're out of your mind," he said. "Have you been hittin' the bottle again? I thought you got over that."

"Why would I hit a bottle?"

"I'm gonna call the doctor. I've gotta find out what's wrong with you."

"There's nothing wrong with me." She kept the bed between them. "But there's plenty wrong with you and those children of yours. The boys, anyway."

"There's nothin' wrong with those boys. And what d'you mean? They're your boys as well as mine."

"Well, either some things are going to be brought into line around here, or I'm going to find myself another life to live. Anything's got to be better than staying here."

"You mean you'd leave us? What about the kids?"

"Oh, yes. Them." She considered them for a moment. Well, after all, it wasn't the children's fault they acted the way they did. Perhaps with a little re-education.

But that was hopeless. The boys would already end up like the father. They were a loss. What about Cathy? She could be still be saved. No, she wouldn't leave her with the three males.

"Lookit," the man said. "We need you here. So, sometimes I ain't the greatest husband in the world. I try, don't I? I give you my paycheck every week. All I ask for is bowling money and maybe a little extra to get some beer. Look, if it bothers you so much, I'll give up the cigars. I don't like 'em that much anyway."

"Well, that's a start." Well, maybe she was wrong. Perhaps there was something positive in the man. Not much, but something. But what was a paycheck?

"And maybe me and the boys can start helpin' out around here. But do you really want 'em doin' housework? All the other kids at school would make fun of 'em."

"Someone has to stand up for what's right," Athena said. "It will be of great importance to them later in life to know they were involved in a good cause."

"You ain't been goin' to them Commie rallies, have you? You're startin' to sound like what they tell us at work about 'em."

"What's a Commie?"

"Forget it. But let's take this a little at a time, okay? See?" He took the cigar from his mouth and threw it in the trash can. "I'm givin' 'em up, right now."

"Okay," she said. "Now, let's talk about how things should go around here."

#

The afternoon had not gone well. Although the males had been out in the yard cutting the grass and cleaning up, they came in later, demanding lunch. She had found some sliced meat in the refrigerator and succeeded in pacifying them with some sandwiches. But, after eating, they went back to the living room and watched some kind of athletic event on the television. Anyway, Frank claimed it was some kind of athletic game, but to her, it was only men chasing after a ball and hitting it with a stick.

Frank, what a strange name, she thought.

She had heard him use it when he answered some kind of ancient communication device.

He insisted on drinking beer while he watched the television, and it wasn't long before he was acting obnoxiously again.

"Come on, Edna," he called to her as she stood in the kitchen. "Bring me another beer, will ya?" He paused for a moment. "Please?"

As long as he was showing her at least a little courtesy, she decided to bring him another can from the refrigerator. Refrigerator, that was an odd word; she guessed the roots of it were Latin in origin, but it was definitely not as descriptive as food storage device.

"You forgot to open it," he said, when she handed him the can.

"I don't know how," she said. "Where's the button to cause the metal to separate and allow the passing of the interior fluids?"

"What? Look, just bring me the damn can opener, and I'll do it myself. And what's with the crazy language again?"

"Nothing." She went to the kitchen and returned with the tool he wanted. She watched him closely as he

applied it to the can, now understanding the tool's operation. "You know it would be nice if you spent some time with me."

"So, sit down and watch the game."

"I mean without the ... TV thing, or that game. After all Edna ... I mean ... I do around here for you and your children, you could at least show some gratitude."

"We're gonna spend some time together tonight, like we always do on Saturdays. Our friends are comin' over to play cards. You always like that."

"I do?"

"Are you tellin' me you don't wanna play cards with our friends, now?"

"No, of course not. Okay, I'll wait and see how that goes."

She took Cathy out to the backyard and spent most of the afternoon with her. She tried to tell her to learn to stand up for herself, to let the real person inside her come out and not get herself trapped in any situation where she could not achieve her true potential.

"Does that mean I can't be a mommy?" She clutched the doll she was carrying closer to herself.

"Well, of course you can be a mommy," Athena said. You and the father can be nurturing soul mates, spending quality time with your child, as long as you both share the responsibilities."

"I don't understand, Mommy."

"I'll talk to you about it later, Precious."

"Mommy, when can I have my own baby?"

"Oh, not until you've reached emotional maturity and have placed yourself firmly on a solid, secure career path. I'd say you'll be ready by the time you're forty."

"No," she cried. "That's too old. I'll almost be dead by then."

"Do the Commies talk about these things?"

"What's a Commie? Daddy says they're bad men. They want to hurt us."

"I don't know. Maybe I should find out."

#

Frank set up a small table in the living room. He had asked her to go to the store and get chips and beer for Phil and Ginny. She had declined, telling him she felt strange and did not feel safe operating the wheeled vehicle. He said he would go.

During the day, she had watched the same kind of vehicles going up and down the street, moving noisily and belching out foul odors, just one more inefficient relic from the wasteful past. She watched from the living room window as Frank took their vehicle from the garage and drove it down the street. He returned later with paper bags loaded with the commodities he had mentioned earlier.

After sunset, they put the children to bed and waited until a vehicle drove up to their house. She and

Frank had been sitting in front of the television, watching an odd looking man change into various outfits and caper about a stage to the delight of an unseen audience. When Frank saw the vehicle arrive, he turned off the television.

"Now, look," he said, "try not to do any of that crazy talkin' while they're here. Maybe when you see the doctor next week, he can straighten you out."

Right now, the only doctor she wanted to see was Dr. Minzov.

"Come on in." Frank opened the door after a bell had gone off somewhere in the house. "Come on in."

"Hi, Edna," Ginny said. "How's this old bastard been treating you today?" She nodded her head in Frank's direction.

Athena smiled, but said nothing.

"She's a little under the weather today," Frank said.

"Oh, you should have told us," Phil said.

"Yeah," Ginny added, "we could have stayed home tonight. What's the matter, dear?" She moved next to Athena and put her arm around her shoulders.

"Oh, I'm okay, now," she said. "But I haven't been feeling like myself today."

"I'll say," Frank said.

"Come on, honey," Ginny said. "I'll help you get the chips out."

Athena listened while Ginny chattered away about her children and how they were doing in school, how Phil was up for a promotion at work, if only those other guys he worked with would just stop stabbing him in the back. She rambled on about a friend of hers who had just come out of the hospital, and eventually went on to enumerate the names of everyone she knew who was pregnant. Athena nodded and smiled, but could add little to the conversation, eventually coming to the conclusion that Ginny was happy being the wife of a creature not much more sophisticated than Frank. She shrugged to herself as she carried a bowl of pretzels to the small table.

Athena stood back while the others took their seats around the table, taking the last one left open, wondering if there was some sort of protocol associated with each step of the card playing ritual.

"Who's dealing?" Phil asked, pulling out a packet of thin white cylinders and handing one to Ginny, then taking one for himself. Ginny put hers in her mouth and leaned closer to Phil as he applied fire.

"I'll start," Ginny said, putting the smoking cylinder in a glass dish then pulling a deck of cards from her purse.

Athena coughed at the smoke and watched as Ginny shuffled the cards, smiling to herself at the method of randomization that had not changed over the centuries. She remembered many late night card games in the Academy dormitory, and, after Ginny had dealt the cards, was surprised to see that she recognized the various suits.

"Jacks or better to open," Ginny said, operating her smoking stick again.

Frank picked up a jar of copper coins from underneath the table and poured out a handful. He handed them to Athena and poured out another handful for himself. Even this was similar to what they had done

at the Academy, where they had played for cafeteria tokens. If 'jacks or better to open' meant what she thought it meant, she was going to have a very profitable evening. With a smile, she remembered she very rarely went hungry during her days at the Academy.

Athena kept one part of her mind on the game, but kept another part busy listening to their conversation, trying to assimilate as much as she could of the culture and not let the smoke coming from Phil and Ginny bother her. She said little until Phil mentioned something he had read in the paper about the Commies in Cuba.

"Who are these Commies?" Athena asked.

They turned to her and stared.

"The Commies?" Phil said, then turned to Ginny. "What are you asking us for?"

"I was just wondering. Frank says they talk to him about the Commies at work. I just wanted to know."

"All you need to know," Frank said, "is that they want to overthrow our government and make us all slaves. If the Commies take over, like they did in Russia, we won't even get paid. Then we have to wait in lines to get food or see a doctor. Like it's supposed to be free or something. Ain't that a laugh?"

"Yeah," Phil said. "If it's so great, how come they're all dying to get out of there?"

"Didn't they shoot someone the other day who was trying to climb over that fence?" Ginny asked.

"I think it was on TV the other night," Frank said.

"But don't they also talk about the rights of women?" Athena asked. She felt Frank's foot hit her under the table.

"Sure," Ginny laughed. "We can go to work and look just like men, if we want to."

"She hasn't been listenin' to those creeps, has she?" Phil asked Frank.

"No, no," Frank laughed nervously. "She's just been wonderin' what all the hoopla's about. I mentioned it to her this morning. You know," He nudged Phil. "we gotta let 'em in a little of what's goin' on."

"Yeah, I guess so," Phil said. "Too bad what they did to McCarthy."

"Yeah," Frank said.

They played the hand in silence, speaking only to ask for cards or make bets, but after a few minutes, the conversation picked up again.

#

"Well, I don't know about you feelin' sick," Phil said, "but I wish Ginny would get sick like that next Saturday."

It had taken a few hours, but eventually, Athena had cleaned out everyone else at the table, sitting now behind a large pile of pennies.

"You'll win it all back next time," Frank said.

"I guess that's enough for us, anyway." Ginny stood and stretched. "It's time for us to get to bed, right,

honey?"

"Hey, you bet," Phil said eagerly. "The kids are at their grandmother's tonight." He winked at Frank.

"You dog." Frank nudged him in the ribs.

Athena stood beside Frank at the door, as Phil and Ginny made their way down the walk to their car.

"You played like a pro tonight," Frank said, as they cleaned the bowls and glasses from the table. "When did you learn to play so good?"

"I guess I was just lucky tonight." How many times had she used that line at the Academy, after cleaning out her opponents? There was no need to let them in on her knack of reading their faces.

She placed the glasses in the sink and started the water running to wash them, when Frank came up beside her and put his arm around her waist. It surprised her and she pushed him away, before she remembered that he was her husband.

"What's wrong?" he asked. "I'm tryin' to change."

"I know you are."

She finished washing the dishes and followed him to the bedroom. As they lay in bed, Frank came closer to her, but again she did not respond, pushing his hand away when he touched her. Husband or not, she could not find it in herself to accept him. What would happen if she were imprisoned her forever? She shook her head.

"Look, you're not gonna give me that headache crap again, are you?"

"What headache crap? I just want to get to sleep."

"Okay, so I shouldn't have forced you last night. I said I was sorry. So, I'm a louse. I admit it. I'm a louse. But I'm trying, ain't I?"

"I know you try." She touched his hand. "We can talk about it some more in the morning."

"All right," he sighed. "But I am gonna try. Honest."

She nodded, then leaned over to kiss him on the cheek.

"I guess that's better than nothin'," he said. "Good night."

"Good night, Frank."

She closed her eyes, lying restlessly for a long time, but sleep would not come. If there was only some way to get back to her own time and space. But even with the science of her own day, time travel was still a theoretical impossibility.

An odd vibration took hold of her body, small and of a low frequency, but it became larger, amplifying until her whole body shook with an energy that came from inside her. She turned to Frank, but he was sleeping soundly. Then a warm glow spread across her, changing color from green to blue to purple, as it lit the room.

She watched as her arms disappeared, then the lower half of her body vanished. She closed her eyes tightly, wishing that when she opened them she would be back in the control cabin of the *Space Eagle*.

In a moment, the vibration stopped, and she opened her eyes.

When she looked down, she saw her familiar instrument console. She held her hands up in front of her, then at herself. She was back to normal. Turning to the left, she saw Dr. Minzov, staring at her the way he had done when she had disappeared.

"Are you all right, Athena?" he asked. "You were gone for almost an hour. I thought something horrible had happened to you."

"Something did, Doc," she said. "It was something horrible." She stared into his eyes. "Now I think I know what Hell is like."

"Hmmm. Probably a hallucination from the phase storm. For a brief moment, I, myself, thought I was dancing with a group of ten-foot tall fairies in short, white dresses, while together we showered the Dalai Lama with bread crumbs. And while you were gone, I had to listen to eighty-seven choruses of 'Volare' from that virus."

"Sorry," the virus said. "I couldn't control myself."

"But we're out of the phase storm now."

"Good," Athena said. "How did Donald take it?"

"Well, I had to go back and sedate him. He kept climbing up on the workbench and exhorting some unseen comrades to start marching on Munich. He should come out of it in a few hours."

"Well, then, it's on to Qarcon." She thought for a moment of Frank and Edna, wondering what might have happened the next day, when Edna returned to her own body. She shrugged. Maybe someday, there would be a way to find out.

"Yes, on to Qarcon," Dr. Minzov said. "And I think there's going to be trouble there."

CHAPTER 8. THE BATTLE FOR QARCON

"I have just been perusing our records." Dr. Minzov turned to Athena from his console in the control cabin, and tapped her on the shoulder. "It appears that the only planet colonized in the Qarcon system is Terudious."

"Then we know where to go," Athena said. "We won't have to run around."

"And I've already moved the coordinates into our navigation computer."

"With a little help from me," the virus spoke up.

"Yes," Minzov coughed. "It was somewhat helpful, in a limited sort of way."

"Hah! And that's all you can call me after all we've been through together? It?"

"Well, you are a thing, after all."

"No wonder the other one is so frustrated with you two fatheads around."

"What other one?" Athena said.

"The guy you keep in the back, fixing your meals and washing your underwear."

"Donald?"

"Yes, Donald. We've been talking and building a good relationship between the two of us, I might add. Of course, we have something in common, since we're both considered second class members of this crew."

"When did you become a member of this crew?" Minzov said.

"That's not true, anyway," Athena said. "Donald is as much an equal as me or Dr. Minzov."

"Well, let's not get carried away with any unwarranted egalitarian tendencies," Dr. Minzov said.

"Does that mean what I think it means?" the virus asked.

"You are welcome to draw whatever conclusions seem apt."

"See? What did I tell you? At least Don calls me by my name."

"All right," Athena said. "So what is your name?"

"Mary."

"Mary?" Minzov said. "Where did you get a name like Mary? And you speak with a male voice, anyway."

"That's just a limitation of your crumbly computer system. Oh, I can tell you it's just terrible to be a female persona trapped inside a computer with only masculine apparatus."

"I suppose it could be a problem," Athena said.

"But go ahead, Doctor Minzov," Mary said. "Go ahead and laugh. Scoff at me as much as you like. Look down your nose at me, if it helps feed your overinflated ego. It's all right. I'm getting used to it."

"Good," Minzov said. "Now if it wouldn't be too much trouble," he barely suppressed a giggle, "Mary,

when will we be arriving in the Qarcon system?"

The computer did not respond.

"I said, how much longer before we arrive in the Qarcon system?"

"I'm not speaking to you," Mary said. "I heard you laugh at me."

"You said it was all right."

"I was only speaking metaphorically."

"Well, I was only laughing metaphorically."

"Oh. I suppose that's different. Then we'll be arriving at Qarcon in twenty-five minutes."

"Good," Athena said. "Doc, maybe I should go back and talk to Donald for a little while."

"He likes to be called Don," Mary said.

"We might be better served if we prepared ourselves for the upcoming mission," Dr. Minzov said. "We may have a fight on our hands."

"I know, but I don't want Donald to be angry or upset with the rest of us. He has been acting a little different lately. I think I should find out if something is bothering him."

"Keep him busy," Minzov said. "Then he won't have time to think."

"I'll keep that in mind," Athena said, then turned to call over her shoulder. "Donald, we'll be arriving at Qarcon in a little while."

Donald came through the hatch and stood behind her.

"So what do you want me to do about it? Make you and Minzov some sandwiches?"

"No. We've got to get the ship ready for a battle, and we need you. We've got to run through all the weapons and systems to make sure they're all fully operational. I think you and I should work together on it."

"Oh. Okay. Why don't we start out with the aft cannon and zapper?"

"Good idea, Donald ... er ... Don. I'll join you back there in few minutes after I finish with a few things up here."

"Okay. Meet you back there." Donald stepped back through the hatch.

"What about me?" Mary asked. "Is there something I can do?"

"You can keep an eye on the rest of us. Make sure we don't make any mistakes."

"All right," Mary said. "And I'll keep a special watch on the Doc here."

"Hah!" Minzov said.

#

"I don't know, Minzov," Athena said. "We've orbited Terudious several times now, and we haven't seen any evidence of a hostile force."

"They'll be here," Minzov said. "You can count on it."

"All right, Doc. I'll take your word for it. I think I'll get in touch with Colonel Richards and see if we can get some reinforcements."

She reached for the super-space communicator and, after several minutes, finally got through to Colonel Richards.

"Reinforcements?" he said. "I think I can get together some kind of force to send to you, if you think that's where Sarnak is going to strike next."

"We're fairly certain he's on his way here," Athena said.

"All right. The reinforcements should arrive at Terudious within the next day."

"Thanks, Colonel."

Athena contacted the authorities on Terudious, but they informed her that there had been no hostile activities reported anywhere on the planet. They thanked her for the warning, then gave her clearance to land the *Space Eagle*, saying they would like to meet with her later.

They landed without incident at the space port outside the capital city of Golopot, and the three of them hurried to meet with the leaders of Terudious. A meeting had been hurriedly put together in the capital building.

"We don't have any weapons here," the President said. He sat at the head of a long table stuffed into a small room. Smoky light filtered through small windows set along one wall. "The corporation doesn't allow them. Humph! Afraid we'll try to proclaim independence or something."

"We've got a few disintegrator rays built into defensive emplacements around some of the cities," an aide said, "and perhaps we can bring up some of the laser drills from the mines and use them."

"That's a possibility," the President said.

"Maybe you'd better do that," Athena said. "We've got reinforcements coming from the Space Rangers, but they won't be here until tomorrow. And we don't know how far ahead of the raiders we are."

"All right. We'll do what has to be done. As of now I am declaring a state of emergency. All work will cease and everyone will prepare to defend Terudious. Athena, can you take command of the situation?" He sighed before she could answer, rising in the cramped space around the table and sidling up to one of the windows. "I'm a diplomat, not a warrior. I'm just not equipped to lead actions of this kind. I need you to help us."

"That's very brave of you to say so," Athena said. "Of course, I'll take command of the situation. I'll want several of your people here to meet with the mine operators and get those laser drills brought up to the surface. Mr. President, I'll need the locations and operational data on all those disintegrator cannons, right away."

"I'll have them brought to you immediately."

"Fine. Now, we'll have to start evacuating the cities, and I'll need to see the heads of whatever security

forces you have here on Terudious."

As soon as the plans arrived, Minzov spread them out across the table and worked out defensive positions for the laser drills. Athena and Donald moved out into the city to assist with the evacuation and work with the security forces. Once the forces were armed and deployed, Athena and Donald returned to the *Space Eagle*. Dr. Minzov arrived an hour later.

"I can't believe we arrived so far ahead of them," Athena said, sitting back in a chair in the work cabin.

"It is somewhat odd," Dr. Minzov agreed, "but I guess we can be thankful for that, at least."

"Wouldn't it be funny," Mary said, "if they were really on their way to Harcon and Minzov only thought he heard Qarcon?"

Dr. Minzov looked up from his calculations and stared at Athena.

"Oh no," Athena said. "You don't think it's possible ..."

"No," Dr. Minzov said. "I distinctly heard them mention Qarcon. I am ninety-five percent positive of that."

"That's good enough for me," Athena said.

"Well, maybe not ninety-five percent. I was in the back of the ship. I could only hear them through a hatch leading up to the front. And it was only partly open."

"Maybe you'd like to amend your confidence estimate in the downward direction?" Mary said.

"Okay," Minzov snapped. "Make it ninety percent. No, maybe more like eighty percent."

"How about eight percent?"

"No. I'd say it's definitely better than that."

"Here comes another ship," Athena said, pointing out one of the small windows. "Landing right next to us."

Dr. Minzov got up and went to the window. Then laughed.

"Look at that old wreck," he said. "The hull is corroded and those rocket tubes are half eaten away. I'll bet that old ship couldn't lift a Hertosian space scow."

As he was speaking, a voice came over the communicator.

"This is Captain Rex Forn, calling Astro Athena."

"Yes, Captain. What can I do for you?"

"I was sent here by Colonel Richards as your reinforcement."

"Where are you, Captain?"

"I just landed on Terudious. I'm waiting to receive your orders."

Athena surveyed the space port, looking for another Space Ranger ship, but saw nothing.

"I didn't see any Space Ranger ship land, just some old rust bucket."

"Rust bucket?" Captain Forn cried. "Rust bucket? The *Stratosled* and I have been through more battles than you'll ever see. And we're ready for this one. Why, when they told me at the Old Space Rangers' Home there was going to be another fight out here ..."

"The Old Space Rangers' Home?" Dr. Minzov said.

"Yes," he replied, as his face came on the screen. Captain Forn appeared to be in his eighty's, old and weather-beaten. When he spoke, Athena saw that a few of his teeth were missing. "I've been retired for the last twenty years. But as soon as that nice young man, Colonel Richards came to me and asked me to come out here, well, you just couldn't keep me away. By the way, when does the fighting start?"

"Pretty soon," Athena said. "I'll let you know what I want you to do." She terminated the communication and turned to Dr. Minzov. "Are you sure it's Qarcon?"

"I hope not."

As Minzov collected his papers and maps, an explosion outside the ship sent up a shower of tarmac. After the concussion knocked them to the deck, they scrambled to their feet, running to the windows to see what had happened. Another explosion sent up a spray of dirt several hundred yards away.

"I guess I wasn't wrong," Minzov said.

"Damn," Athena said. "I've got to get back to the city. I'll have to get the defenses coordinated."

"I'll come with you," Donald said.

"All right. Let's go."

Another explosion rang out as they stepped from the ship, sending rocks clattering over the hull. They ran across the field and found a transport to take them to the capital building. Driving through the city, they watched as deadly rays crackled over the buildings and hoped they could make it to the capital without being killed. In the sky, they finally spotted several ships, one was firing the rays while the others dropped bombs.

When they reached the command post, the leaders of Terudious were scrambling around in confusion.

"What do we do?" they cried, when she came in.

"We'd better surrender," one of them said.

"We never surrender," Athena said, standing at the head of the table and slamming her hand to get their attention. "Start up the batteries targeting on those ships. Then fire. What's the situation?"

"We're hopelessly outnumbered," one of the President's aides said.

"How many ships have they brought?"

"Three."

"Three? We've got two ships of our own and all the disintegrator cannons. How can we be outnumbered?"

"I don't know. But I think we should surrender anyway."

"Nonsense," Athena said, turning to the Chief of Security. "Have they started firing at the ships?"

The Chief consulted a communicator on the wall, then came back smiling.

"Firing has commenced. We've already knocked one of them down."

A cheer went up around the table.

"Good," Athena said. "I'll bet they weren't expecting a fight."

"No," the Chief said, turning back to the communicator. "And it looks like we knocked down another one. The third one is running away."

"Come on, Donald." Athena pulled him from the room. "We're going after it."

They raced through the streets, past a few smoldering hulks that had once been large edifices, but they were glad that the destruction had been so little. Only a small number of buildings had been destroyed before the invaders had been routed. Reaching the *Space Eagle*, they jumped into their positions and quickly readied the ship for pursuit.

"We sure showed 'em," Donald said. "Yes, let's go get 'em."

"Everything's all set," Dr. Minzov said, working over his control panel. "Are we going after it?"

"You bet," Athena said. "Let's go."

"Right," Donald called from the work cabin. "Don't let him get away."

Minzov reached for the ignition just as Mary spoke.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you."

"Why not?" Athena asked, moving quickly to block Minzov's hand.

"This is just one of Sarnak's tricks. He sends in a couple of ships to see what kind of defenses you have. Then he pulls them out. Whoever comes out after them gets blown out of the sky. Once he knows what you have, he moves in and takes care of it."

"I should have known," Athena said. "It was just too easy."

"I hate to admit it, but Mary is probably correct," Minzov said.

As they spoke, Athena noticed flames shooting from the old ship next to them.

"Do not take off," she yelled into the communicator to Captain Forn. "I repeat, do not take off."

"Why not?" the old man's angry face came on the communicator screen. "Aren't we gonna chase 'em down?"

"No. It's a trap. The main force is up there somewhere, waiting to shoot down whoever comes after the scout ship."

"So what? I say we go after 'em anyway. It's the code of the Space Rangers."

"Maybe next time," Athena said. "In the mean time, get your armaments ready. We'll be in for a major attack pretty soon."

"Did I hear right?" Donald asked. "Mary says this wasn't the real attack, only a decoy."

"It looks that way."

"Oh. Well, maybe we should take off anyway. You know, get up to a strategic vantage point, where we can manage a tactical retreat, if necessary."

"No. We're staying right here, Donald. We're going to fight for Terudious."

"I had a feeling you were going to say that."

#

Athena and Donald returned to the city, waiting in the command center, trying to stay alert. Minzov remained in the ship, keeping the *Space Eagle* ready for immediate take-off. Athena was standing next to a window when the main attack began.

A barrage of missiles fell on the city, sending up fountains of debris. She looked up to the sky, trying to spot the ships, and the shock waves from the explosions clapped into her ears. For a moment her ears rang, but she shook it off and stepped back to the table.

"It's the same all over Terudious," the Chief of Security said. "All the main cities are under attack."

"Start firing back," Athena said, keeping her voice level.

The Chief repeated the order over the communicator, and Athena returned to the window to watch.

Disintegrator rays shot up from the smoke of the burning city, followed by the thin beams of the lasers. Explosions continued to blow buildings apart as more missiles and destruction rays came down from the sky. The ships came lower almost to the very level on which Athena stood. One of the raiders was struck simultaneously by several lasers and a disintegrator beam. It flared in a burst of purple and red fire, sizzling its way to the ground.

"That's one for us," the Chief said.

"I just can't sit here, Donald." Athena went back to the table and leaned over to face Donald, who was sitting and working over some plans.

"What else can we do?"

"We can fight. We can take the *Space Eagle* up and let it do what it was designed to do. We can shoot down these criminals."

"Don't you know how many there are?"

"I don't care. I'm going to fight. Chief, you take control of things here. Remember; keep them firing, let our people know they're beating off the enemy. I'm going back to my ship."

"All right, Athena," the Chief said, "and good luck to you."

They ran through the continuing bombardment, ducking behind hills of rubble to get away from the rain of debris. Athena pulled Donald along to the space port, running across the field, reaching the ship blackened and tired.

"Let's go, Minzov," Athena said, as she hurried into the control cabin. "This time we're going to fight."

"This is Captain Forn calling Astro Athena." The communicator came to life with Captain Forn's image.
"Captain Forn calling Astro Athena."

"Yes, Captain," Athena said. "Make it fast. We've got to get out there and fight."

"What are my orders?"

"Just stay down here."

"What? I came here for a fight. I'm not going to sit on the ground like some namby-pamby pacifist."

Athena considered for a moment, admiring the old man's courage. She had to give him his chance.

"All right, Captain. Follow us up. Then break off and fire as you see fit."

"Yes, ma'am," he responded happily.

"He'll be shot down in seconds," Dr. Minzov said.

"He'll be going out the way he wants, Doc. Why do you think he left the Old Space Rangers' Home and came on this mission? He could have stayed there and been safe, just wasting away slowly. Here he can fight and go out in a blaze of glory, if it happens that way."

"Hmm. I suppose so. Personally, I think the old age approach to dying might be preferable."

"No time to put it to the test, Doc. Get ready to blast off."

As missiles burst and destruction rays flashed around it, the *Space Eagle* flew through the atmosphere, brilliant flames rushing from its rocket tubes. In seconds, it was soaring through the stratosphere, followed by the *Stratosled* and its coughing and sputtering engines.

"I'm going to pilot manually, Minzov," Athena said. "You man the forward weapons. Donald," she called to the work cabin, "you man the rear weapons. I'll fly us into range of these ships."

"Right," Minzov said, pulling down a small panel from the ceiling of the control cabin. He worked at the knobs and displays, then turned to Athena. "Weapons armed and ready."

"I'm ready," Donald called from the back of the ship. "I think."

"I'll just stay out of the way," Mary said.

"Okay," Athena said, leaning over the panel and guiding the ship as she watched her sensors. "I think I've got one, and I'm closing in."

She stared intently at her sensors as she worked the ship's controls, bringing the *Space Eagle* closer to the sleek, black marauder. Before she could tell him they were in range, Dr. Minzov had already fired a mini-bomb. In less than second, she saw it explode against the hull of the raider, sending it hurtling to the surface many miles below.

"Score one for us, Doc," Athena said.

"We've got one behind us," Donald cried.

"Keep calm, Donald. She threw the ship into evasive action, throwing herself and the others from side to side with the swerving and acceleration. It was time to go into battle mode, and her mind slipped away,

letting her brain respond automatically as she kept her eyesight focused on the sensors. There was a sharp recoil, pushing the ship forward. Donald had fired his cannon. He fired again, and she watched the image of the raider fall away behind them.

"Nice shooting, Donald."

"I can't handle this," he said.

Out of the corner of her eye, she caught the glint of a ray reflecting off the hull of the *Space Eagle*.

"Ouch," Mary said. "I think we're hit."

"We're in trouble," Minzov said. "We've got one coming at us from above."

Athena flew the ship up sharply and accelerated, but the rays continued to flash around them, getting closer with each succeeding salvo.

"It looks like we're in for it, Doc."

"I think you're right."

A binding flash burned her eyes, and she had to look away for a moment, then turned back to see the cracked and smoking hull of a raider shoot past on its way to destruction.

"What happened?" Athena said.

"I saw that one coming in for the kill," Captain Forn's voice came over the communicator. "What are they teaching you pilots at the Academy now, anyway? You always keep looking in every direction, especially overhead."

"You're right, Captain," Athena laughed. "I guess it takes an old-timer like you to show us how it's supposed to be done."

"Just keep your eyes open," he said. "You're shooting them down pretty good yourself."

The dogfight continued in the upper reaches of the atmosphere of Terudious. The *Space Eagle* took its share of hits, but Athena, Minzov and Donald kept chasing down the enemy, firing their weapons continuously, giving the enemy no respite from their own onslaught. On the ground, the defenders of Terudious held their own during the battle, knocking down ship after ship, taking casualties but fighting on heroically, as the destruction to their cities mounted. But the tide of the battle finally swung in their favor, and what was left of Sarnak's marauders were in full retreat.

Wearily, Dr. Minzov fell into his seat, wiping the sweat from his forehead.

"That was something, Athena," he said.

"Yes," Donald added, coming up from the rear of the ship and moving shakily into the control cabin. "That was some flying you did."

"I don't know, Donald," she replied. "I think I probably learned a thing or two from Captain Forn."

"He certainly did his share of the fighting," Minzov said. "You, too, Donald. You stayed in there and fought with the rest of us. We'd better get back to the surface and take care of the ship. It would appear that we sustained several serious hits."

"A few," Athena said, "but we can't go back now. We've got to follow those raiders back to Sarnak. Maybe now we can catch him. If not, at least we'll know where he is."

"That sounds logical," Mary said. "Boy, that was some action we went through."

"And it was certainly fortunate you did not make a nuisance of yourself," Minzov said.

"Actually, I was keeping those rockets of yours working. You don't know all the times I had to keep them from burning out. Then I had to try to hold the ship together and keep the systems running."

"You're going to have to keep things running a little longer," Athena said. "We're going after those raiders."

CHAPTER 9. THE ONE THAT GOT AWAY

"We've got a problem," Minzov said, leaning over his console and shaking his head. He made a few adjustments, then shrugged.

"I know they're a little faster than us, but I've still got them on my sensors," Athena said.

"It's not that. I'm afraid it will be necessary to head for the nearest port. We're just about out of fuel."

"Damn!" She slammed her fist against her instrument panel.

"Ouch," Mary yelped.

"Sorry. Can you get a fix on their heading, Doc?"

"I'm working on it," Minzov said.

"That's okay," Mary said. "I've already been keeping track of it for you, and I've already got all their vectors stored. I won't have any trouble finding them if we have to stop for a while."

"Well, I can get us back on their trail, also," Minzov said. "Just give me a few minutes to make some

calculations."

"Don't worry about it, Doc," Athena said. "Where's the nearest port?"

"Gamma Globulo III," Mary said.

"She was asking me," Minzov said. "And it is most assuredly not gamma Globulo III. It's beta Refrastus V."

"No, it isn't."

"Yes, it is."

"Isn't."

"Is."

"Isn't."

"Is."

"All right, all right," Athena said. "We'll flip a coin on it."

"With pleasure," Minzov said, fishing through his pockets, then turning to Athena with a sheepish look. "It would appear that I do not have any coins in my possession at the moment. Would you be so kind as to furnish one?"

"I can do a random number generation to simulate a coin toss," Mary said.

"Are you kidding?" Minzov said. "I have the suspicion that your random numbers would be definitely skewed in the direction of your selection."

"Oh yeah? Well, it's a good thing that you don't have any coins. I can just imagine the two-headed, off-center, reweighted coin you'd pull out of your pocket."

"Never mind," Athena said. "I think I still have a standol or two in my pocket." She reached into the side of her uniform and pulled out a coin. "See?" She showed it to Minzov, then flipped it in the air and caught it. "Call it, Doc."

"Well, let me see," he began. "According to the laws of probability, where we have a Poisson distribution with two possibilities, the entropy is, of course, maximized for equal probabilities at the outset. As I saw you start out with a head before you tossed the coin, the probability of a tail occurring is therefore higher than for another head. The choice is obvious. I will select tails." He sat back and folded his hands over his stomach, smiling.

"It's heads," Athena said.

"Did I say tails? I meant heads. Heads."

"Too late," Mary said. "It looks like we head for gamma Globulo III, Dr. Minzov."

"Under my most vehement protest," Minzov said.

"Jeez, what a sore loser."

"Harumph," Minzov grunted and folded his arms over his chest.

"Something going on up here?" Donald came through the hatch.

"It looks like we've got to give up the chase for a while," Athena said. "We've got to get to a port before we run out of fuel."

"Oh. What's the closest one?"

"Bete Refrastus V," Minzov said. "But for some inexplicable reason, we are instead heading for gamma Globulo III."

"The inexplicable reason being that it is the closer one," Mary said.

Donald shrugged and returned to the work cabin. Under protest, Minzov generated the curse for gamma Globulo. Several hours later, with their tanks filled with little more than thin vapors of the hydrorematic polyongahyde fuel, they landed at the main port of gamma Globulo III."

#

"We've just received a report of your exploits in the Qarcon system," the Portmaster said, as he escorted Athena from the *Space Eagle*. "Incredible. You did a remarkable job getting the defenses together and fighting off those marauders. Truly heroic."

"Yes," Athena said, blushing slightly at his praise. "It was quite a battle. But, in the end, we triumphed over them."

"Good, good. That's what we need; more Space Rangers like you to do battle with these thieving rats. Well, there are just a few forms that need to be filled out, then we can get to work on your ship. They're in my office."

"Let's get to them, then. We were in pursuit of one of them when we had to land. And we've got to get back on their trail before it dissipates in the void."

"Certainly, certainly. It's certainly fortunate for us that these raiders haven't seen fit to attack our little world. But, then again, we don't have much to offer here. All we do is service ships. We have no other industry and no mining."

"You don't keep any money or other valuables here?"

"No. All of our fees are charged to accounts kept in banks for that purpose. No money ever changes hands here."

"That's pretty smart."

"We like to think so."

She followed the Portmaster through the lanes between the parked space ships, looking over the small, round Antarean vessels, the thick Mizarians, the finned Arcutans and some others she couldn't identify. In her mind, she compared them to the *Space Eagle* and proudly ranked them all behind her ship.

"Right in here," the Portmaster said, holding the door into a long, low building. "My office is just down this hall. We can make arrangements for the transfer of funds in there."

"I'll need to speak with Space Ranger HQ first to get authorization," she said.

"Oh, did you say the Space Rangers? Oh dear, oh dear. I guess I just wasn't thinking." He coughed

nervously. "We haven't been servicing ships from the Space Rangers lately."

"Why not?"

"Well, you see, Miss Athena, there were some difficulties in receiving remuneration from your organization. First we must fill out an innumerable amount of forms, then we must wait for months before they are even looked at by your group. Usually, they are returned to us because they say we have made mistakes when we filled them out, and the whole process must be commenced again. And when we finally received our fees, they were always ... oh, how can I put this? ... somewhat less than we originally charged. No, I'm afraid the Home Office has been very strict on this matter. The Space Rangers were supposed to set up an account just as our other customers do, or we can provide no service. And the last time I checked, no such accounts had been set up."

"But the raiders are getting away."

"I understand. But you must see that my hands are tied."

"Let me talk to my superiors," she said. "We've got to get that fuel."

"Perhaps if some other sort of arrangement can be made ..."

"Just get me to a super-space radio."

They rounded a corner in the hall, and the Portmaster let her into a room with a communicator. She sat at the panel and tried to call up Colonel Richards, but the equipment would not function.

"Is something wrong with this?" she asked.

"You must deposit ten standols in order to place your call," the Portmaster replied. "In that slot to your right."

She looked at him angrily, then fished through her pocket for the coins. After they were deposited, the face of Colonel Richards appeared on the screen.

"But we've got to get that fuel," she said, after Colonel Richards told her that no special accounts had been set up. "We've got them on the run. Maybe we can catch this Sarnak, but we've got to get the fuel."

"I'm sorry, Athena." His eyes were downcast. "But you know we've had to go into an economizing mode here. I will bring it up at tomorrow morning's staff meeting, though. It's possible that we might be able to cut away a few standols to get you going again."

"Tomorrow morning may be too late, Colonel. We might lose the trail by then."

"I am fully aware of that, Athena, but what can I do? If it was my money, there'd be no problem, but I've got these big boys looking over my shoulder all the time. They're always asking me 'What's this for?' and 'Why can't you get that for a little cheaper?' It's not like the old days. When we had them on the run, we kept after them until we had them. Now, it's paperwork and requisitions and piles of justification forms. Who ever thought the Space Rangers would be run by a bunch of bean counters?"

"Well, as I mentioned before," the Portmaster said, "we might be able to come to some kind of arrangement."

"How's that?" Athena turned around.

"Well, you see, we have a salvage job that needs to be done, but we haven't found anyone willing to do it. The Corporation has informed me that they would be willing to trade to get it done. And I think they'd go as high as full tanks of fuel for your ship."

"Maybe there's your way out," Colonel Richards said. "What's the job?"

"Oh, it's nothing really. We just need to get a ship back that crashed into our moon. We're just short of pilots right now."

"And you're willing to give us the fuel if we do this job?" Athena asked.

"Oh yes. Oh yes."

"Whatever it is, I'll authorize it," Colonel Richards said. "I've got to get back to a meeting right now. Meetings. You'd think I had nothing better to do than go to meetings. Call me when you're on your way, Athena." The screen went blank.

Athena followed the Portmaster to his office. Once inside, he took some papers from his desk.

"Just sign these forms and we'll get going," he said.

She flipped through the pages, looking up at the Portmaster from time to time, not understanding the legal wording.

"What are these?" she asked.

"Just standard contracts and release forms. They say that if you bring back the *Major Primo*, we'll supply you with all the fuel you can carry. And they also release the Corporation from any responsibility if, in the very remote chance, you don't make it back. But we both know you should have no problems."

"Oh." She signed the forms and handed them back.

"Good, good." He took the forms and quickly locked them in a wall safe. "Now, the ship is on Haifut, that's our only satellite. It's stuck in the surface. We'll send you out in one of our salvage ships. All you have to do is pull it loose and bring it back here."

"That sounds awfully easy. Why hasn't someone else done it already?"

"Well, our moon does not rotate; it keeps the same face toward gamma Globulo all the time. Haifut is made up of water and some semi-solid aromatic hydrocarbons. As it turns out, the *Major Primo* is stuck in a layer of mud which has a somewhat pungent aroma. It's kept everyone else away. And as I said, we are short on available pilots, anyway."

"And it may be difficult to pull it free?"

"Yes," the Portmaster admitted. "But the salvage ship we'll assign to you should be capable of performing the job. It shouldn't take too long. If you start up in the next hour, you should be there in a few hours. With any luck, you might be back by tomorrow afternoon."

"All right. You have us over a barrel."

"Oh, don't think of it that way. Even if it is like that, we're only honest businessmen here."

"Hmmm. Where have I heard that before? But it's a deal, right?"

"Absolutely correct."

Even with his reassurances, she felt uneasy about the job, but, without much choice, they had to go through with it. She used the Portmaster's communicator, after parting with another standol, to call Dr. Minzov and Donald. They met her at the assigned salvage ship and started their preparations for departure.

#

It took Athena only a few minutes to familiarize herself with the controls of the salvage ship. It responded sluggishly to her touch. Short and wide, its cylindrical shape was designed for utility more than for speed. In the spherical control cabin, Dr. Minzov sat behind her in one of the spare seats that had been installed for the trip.

"I was just thinking," Dr. Minzov said, as they approached the surface of Haifut. "With all these aromatic hydrocarbons, there's a chance we could ignite the atmosphere with the fire from our rockets."

"No," Athena said. "The Portmaster assured me that there's not enough free oxygen to support any combustion."

"Well, we're just about at the site of that ship. Is that it down there?" He pointed out one of the windows at a long, pointed object protruding through the surface.

"It must have sunk a bit," Athena said. "According to the Portmaster, the surface mud is only about a foot thick. I don't think I'm going to set the ship down. I'll let it hover while you and Donald get down there and work the cables around the ship."

"Me?" Minzov said. "Oh, perhaps I should have mentioned this before, but I've been having some problems with my back. I usually keep little things like that to myself, just some lingering injuries from our battle with the Slimurians some time ago. I don't think it would be wise for me to aggravate it any further, though."

"Can you pilot this thing?"

"Well, no."

"Then I guess you'll have to go down there with Donald."

Donald crawled up through a narrow hatch in the floor and sat in the other extra seat.

"I was just telling Minzov," Athena said, "that you two will have to go down there and work the cables around that ship while I keep this one hovering above the surface."

"Me?" Donald said. "Oh, I probably should have told you that my back's been bothering me lately. An old injury I got when we were fighting the Slimurians a while ago."

"I already tried that one," Dr. Minzov said.

"Oh."

Slowly, Athena brought the salvage ship down closer to the *Major Primo*, keeping the ship a few feet above the surface of the warm mud. The surface was smooth and brown. Oddly, the thin atmosphere seemed yellow as they approached the surface, although it was slightly orange near the horizon. Reluctantly, Donald and Dr. Minzov donned their salvage suits and climbed down from the airlock ladder.

as it swung above the surface. As soon as their feet touched the surface, they sunk in, continuing to sink until they were up to their knees.

"It's hot out here," Donald said to Athena over the short-range communicator. "This mud is pretty warm."

"That's because this moon keeps one face constantly toward the sun," Dr. Minzov said. "A very interesting condition. If I had more time I would like to study the effects of such a set of circumstances on the ecology of this little world."

"Some other time, Doc," Athena said, hitting the switch to close the airlock door. "I'll start paying out the cables. You two wrap them around the ship."

Minzov and Donald waded through the muck for several feet until they reached the side of their ship. It was a standard cargo vessel, about thirty feet around and fifty feet tall. The tops of its tail fins were just visible above the surface of the mud.

They waited as Athena maneuvered the salvage ship above the *Major Primo*, keeping the underbelly parallel to the surface. She wished she could have seen them underneath her, but the control cabin was attached to the front of the cylindrical ship, ahead of Donald and Dr. Minzov. Her indicators told her that the cables had reached the surface of Haifut.

Donald and Dr. Minzov wrestled with the cables, trying to get them under the fins of the ship, but the footing was slippery. Donald had to let himself sink under the surface to get the cables under the fins. Minzov stood back and supervised his activity until three cables had been run under the fins and attached together. Finally, Athena began the work of pulling the ship from the muck, using the rockets under the salvage ship.

She had to pull it out slowly, pushing the engines to their limit, then pulling them back so there was just enough thrust to keep the salvage ship hovering. After almost an hour, the ship was finally free of the surface and hanging beneath her, dripping a turgid, brown ooze from several holes in its side.

"Let's get back aboard and get out of here," Donald said.

"Hmm. We may have a problem there," Dr. Minzov said.

"What problem?"

"Well, with the *Major Primo* hanging beneath the ship, it's too far for the ladder to reach us. And since we don't have any rocket packs, there's no way for us to get up there."

"You mean we're stuck here?"

"Well, for the time being."

"I'll take the ship back to the port," Athena said. "Then I'll come right back for you two. It shouldn't take more than five hours."

"Five hours?" Donald cried. "These stupid suits don't have any toilet facilities and I've got to go now."

"I'm sorry, Donald" Athena said. "You'll just have to hold it till I get back."

Athena kept the rockets running at full thrust, getting her back to the port in a little over two hours. The ground crews went to work as soon as she placed the *Major Primo* on the surface. The Portmaster

objected when she told him she had to go back to get Donald and Minzov.

"It's such a waste of fuel," he said. "Is it really necessary?"

"You can't expect me to leave them there," she said, talking over the communicator in the control cabin, watching as the last cables were removed from the ship.

"No, I guess not. But perhaps we should discuss it."

"We can discuss it when I get back."

She flew back at full thrust, reaching the surface more quickly now that she had to power only an empty ship. Reaching the location where she had left them, she searched the area but could see neither Minzov or Donald. When she brought the ship lower, she made out two sets of arms waving frantically just above the mud.

"What are you two doing?" she asked

"Help! Help!" they yelled. "Something's got us around the legs."

"What?" Athena cried.

"It's pulling us under," Donald yelled. "Get us out of here."

With horror, Athena realized there were no weapons aboard the salvage ship.

"It feels like a giant snake is holding onto me," Dr. Minzov said. "You've got to get us out of here quickly. The thermal controls on our suits are overloading."

"They didn't tell me anything about snakes," Athena said.

"Maybe it's worms then."

"Whatever," she said. "I'll lower the cables to you. See if you can grab hold of them."

She dropped the cables, hoping they'd fall close to Minzov and Donald.

"I've got one," Donald said.

"Yes, I've got one, too," Minzov added.

"All right," Athena said. "Hang on."

She started the cables retracting slowly, but she had to stop when she heard Minzov and Donald yelling over the communicator.

"I can't hold on," Donald said. "The thing's too strong. It's holding me down."

"I can't hold on, either," Dr. Minzov said. "It's pulling us under."

"What else can I do?" Athena said.

"I don't know," Dr. Minzov replied. "If we could only clear this mud away, at least we could see what's got us."

"That's it, Minzov," Athena said. "I'll use the main lift engines to blow away the mud."

"Won't that cook us in the process?" Donald asked.

"I'll pulse the engines," she said. "That should minimize the heating. Keep yourselves covered with the mud. That will insulate you, too."

"I hope you're right," Donald said.

"Do you have any better ideas?"

"Yes, but they included staying on Earth."

"Oh, stop whining, Donald," Athena said as she worked the controls to bring the salvage ship upright. "You'd think you were the only person to ever have problems."

"The only one I'm concerned with at the moment. And whatever you do, you'd better do it fast. There's some kind of a big, ugly head right up at my helmet. And it looks like its hungry."

"I'm hurrying, Donald."

"Did I mention that it's big enough to swallow me whole?"

"Hang on. I'm starting with the engines now."

Working the igniters, she pulsed the thrusters, sending a jet of hot gasses toward the surface. The ship jumped up and fell back several times as she fired the rockets in short bursts. Then she heard Minzov calling to her.

"It's working," he said. "Just a little bit more and we'll both be out of the mud."

"Hurry up and drop those cables," Donald said.

She pulsed the engine once more, then lowered the ship until it was again parallel to the surface. As she was dropping, she saw Minzov and Donald standing on the surface, covered with the brown ooze, but there was no evidence of any other creature.

She raised them with the cables and had them aboard a few moments later. As the mud flowed slowly back, she thought she saw something huge slithering in it. Then a large head rose from the mud, coming up until it was even with the front of the ship.

It was large enough to swallow a man whole, even inside a salvage suit. But it seemed to her as if it was all mouth, ugly and slimy with no other distinguishing features on the head. A brown, segmented body went back from the head to the mud. It came closer to the window, touched it, then recoiled.

"Get us out of here," Donald said, as he came up from the below, still inside the suit. Then Athena noticed a strong, fetid odor following him up from the lower deck.

"Donald, get out of that suit and dump it in the airlock. Tell Minzov to do the same."

Athena fought down the need to vomit as she piloted the ship out of the reach of the monster. Quickly, she had them far above the surface, and put the ventilation system on as high as it would go.

"Don't bother with the airlock," she said. "Just throw them out anywhere."

"They're gone," Dr. Minzov said as he climbed into the control cabin. "Donald, you'd better find something to clean up this muck we dragged aboard the ship with us."

"Me?" he cried. "Why me?"

"I've got to pilot this ship," Athena said.

"And I've got to help her," Minzov added.

"I should have known," Donald muttered, as he searched the ship for a bucket and mop.

#

"It's great to be back on the *Space Eagle*," Athena said, sliding into her familiar seat. "Now, let's hope we can catch up with those raiders."

"I've still got their course in my memory," Mary said. "We can pick it up as soon as we leave this planet. By the way, I think they short-changed you on the fuel."

"If they did, we'll be coming back here to straighten it out. After what we went through, I'll be damned if I'm going to let them get away with something like that."

"What do you mean?" Donald said. "After what we've been through? It was me and Minzov that had to wallow around in that hot, smelly slime and then almost get eaten by that disgusting thing."

"I always like to think that all of our troubles are shared, Donald, even though they may be happening to only one of us."

"Let's not get worked up about it, now," Dr. Minzov said. "We've got to get back on the trail of those raiders."

CHAPTER 10. ON THE RAIDER'S TRAIL

"How far behind them do you think we are, Doc?" Athena asked. She let him finish transferring the vectors from Mary into the navigation system as she glanced out the window. The *Space Eagle* was passing by Haifut, and she wondered where that snake or worm might be. She shuddered, wondering if

perhaps there were more of them.

"They were moving away from us at a fairly healthy clip," he replied. "I imagine they are at least two light-years ahead of us."

"Let me interject here, if I may," Mary said.

"Do we have a choice?" Minzov asked.

"I'll ignore that remark. According to the data I was collecting while we were still chasing them, I think their ship was damaged. So they may have had to slow down or stop entirely for repairs."

"How do you know they were damaged?" Athena asked.

"There was a thin wisp of fuel vapor trailing behind them. Even if my vectors are a little off, we should be able to use that trail to pick them up again."

"They may even have run out of fuel, Doc," Athena said.

"I suppose there is a remote possibility of that," he sniffed.

"Now that you mention it," Mary said, "according to my calculations, projecting on the amount of vapor in the trail when I was taking my data, one of those ships should have run out of fuel already. But they're still over a day ahead of us."

""We'll find them," Athena said, feeling the satisfaction of being in command of her ship coming back to her. She settled into her seat to wait as the chase resumed.

"There is just one other minor point to consider," Dr. Minzov said. "Let's just suppose that we are able to trail these criminals back to Sarnak. What will we do then?"

"We'll have to figure that out when we find him," Athena said. "We don't know what his strength is yet."

"Just my point, Athena. Perhaps a little planning on our part, now, might make for a more positive situation later."

"What's bothering you, Doc?"

"I'm just suggesting that we exercise a little prudence as we approach this Sarnak. Perhaps we have diminished his strength considerably since our battle with his forces over Terudious. But it may also be that we have only angered him."

"I hope we've got him good and angry," Athena said.

"Well, let's not be too hasty in our desires, Athena. We certainly don't want to give him the opportunity to avenge his loss on us."

"Don't worry, Doc. We'll take it a step at a time. I'm not going to charge into anything blind, this time."

Working on Mary's data, they found the thin stream of fuel, only a few atoms per cubic centimeter of space, but definitely discernible with the ship's sensors. From the rate of dispersion of the vapor, Dr. Minzov estimated that the fuel trail had been leaked twenty-seven point six three hours previously. As they hoped, the dispersion of the stream lessened as they traveled; they knew they were closing in.

"I'm picking up two small ships on my long range scanners," Athena said, during the next day cycle. She

leaned over her panel and worked on increasing the sensitivity of her sensors. "They're right on the vector we've been following."

"Just as I predicted," Dr. Minzov said. He was answered by a loud crackling from the computer. "Do you see anything else?"

"Just the two ships. And they're dropping below light speed. Maybe one of them is running out of fuel."

"It's certainly a possibility."

"They're heading for the star system up ahead," Mary said.

"Which one is it?" Athena asked.

"That's funny. There's no data on it in your computer, but there's plenty of data on all the other stars."

"I would suggest caution at this point," Dr. Minzov said.

"I agree," Mary said.

"Oh?" Dr. Minzov scratched his chin. "Well, then on further consideration, I would suggest we go in there and do a survey of the system. The Space Rangers will find that data extremely useful if there are no existing records."

"I don't know, Doc," Athena said. "I agree with Mary. After all, you were the one who was suggesting caution yesterday."

"Well, who are you going to listen to? One of the most eminent scientists the galaxy has ever known or the voice of a few erroneous bytes of machine code?"

"It's not like that. I just want to be careful, this time."

"Be careful of what?" Donald asked, coming into the control cabin with a cup of coffee. He handed it to Athena, and she smiled her thanks to him.

"We think the raiders we've been following are heading for the star system up ahead," Athena said. "We don't have any data on it, so I'm suggesting we go in carefully."

"That sounds reasonable to me," Donald said.

Dr. Minzov crossed his arms and fumed.

"Come on, Minzov." Athena reached over and placed her hand on his arm. "We need you to help us follow these raiders."

"Not necessarily," Mary said. "I can easily keep us on their trail myself."

"Hah!" Minzov snorted.

"As a matter of fact, they're heading for one of the planets right now."

"What planet?" Minzov went to work on his sensors and adjusted the controls, trying to pick up the ships and the planet. "It looks like the planet they are heading for is roughly Earth size."

"Correct," Mary said. "It's the second planet from the star. I count five planets total; two close and three gas giants farther out."

"Yes, I see that."

"I'm going to keep us behind them," Athena said. "If we don't see anyone else, we'll try to capture them."

Athena flew the *Space Eagle* behind the two raider ships, following them into their orbit around the planet.

"They're not trying to get away," Athena said, puzzled. "They should have seen us by now."

"Perhaps not," Dr. Minzov said. "From what I've been picking up, or rather not picking up, they have not performed any sensor sweeps in our direction. They must believe they have escaped from the battle."

"Then maybe it's about time to let them know we're here. Get the weaponry ready."

Dr. Minzov prepared his mini-cannon and ray weapons, while Athena sent Donald to the aft end of the ship in case a ship came up on them from behind.

"Ready," Dr. Minzov said.

"Okay. Fire a shot across their path, Doc," Athena said. "Let's see what they do."

Dr. Minzov launched a particle bomb on a trajectory taking it several miles in front of the raiders. As Athena was bringing the ship into an orbit slightly above and behind the raiders, they saw the flash.

"They're stopping," Minzov said. "It doesn't appear that they have any stomach for a fight. The cowards."

"Keep your weapons ready anyway," Athena said. "If you see anything funny, shoot them down."

As the *Space Eagle* closed on the two ships, Athena saw that heavy damage had already been inflicted on the two raiders. Large areas of their hulls had been clumsily patched, and they were probably leaking plenty of air. Their engines had also sustained heavy damage, with blackened areas around the tubes and large dents in the rear cowlings.

"Let's get set to board those ships and take some prisoners," Athena said.

"Perhaps it would be better to have them surrender first and then come aboard our ship," Dr. Minzov said.

"Yes, that is a better idea." She reached for the communicator. "This is Astro Athena of the Space Rangers calling the two raider ships ahead of us. Come in, raider ships."

"Yeah, okay. You got us," the crackling voice came back. A snowy image came on the screen, just enough to make out the smudged and bandaged face of one of the raiders. "What d'you want?"

"Surrender and come aboard our ship."

"You better take a good look behind you first," he laughed.

"That's the oldest trick in the book," Athena said. "Do you expect me to turn around and look?"

Donald came up behind her, panting heavily.

"There's a big ship behind us," he gasped. "Huge. Even bigger than a battle cruiser."

"You don't think this was a trap," Athena said.

"Considering our present position," Dr. Minzov said, "I would propose that possibility seems highly probable."

"Brace yourselves," she said.

She fired the main engines, pushing the engines to their maximum thrust, not waiting for it to build. For a moment, they were thrown back, then the ship stopped moving. The *Space Eagle* was being pulled backward.

"They've got us," Donald yelled, over the rumbling of the engines.

"Go back and fire at them," Athena said. "Maybe you can hit whatever kind of beam they have on us. I'll keep the thrust on."

Donald raced to the rear of the ship, and Athena felt the recoil of the launcher sending out a missile. But the ship continued to be pulled against its thrust.

"What have they got on us, Doc?"

"I'm not sure, but I believe it might be a Magnatractor beam. And a particularly powerful one at that."

"We can't break away?"

"Probably not. Once they had us in the beam, we were trying to pull their mass along with our own. All they have to do is sit back and wait for us to burn out our engines."

Donald returned to the control cabin and slumped against the wall.

"It's no use," he said. "The missile exploded in front of that ship. I tried the beam weapons, but they hit something in front of the ship and bounced off. It must have shields."

"I'd say that's also a good possibility," Dr. Minzov said. "And that's very good observing, Donald. Good conclusions, too."

"Thanks."

"I'm cutting off the engines, then," Athena said.

"Don't let them take me alive," Mary cried.

"What do you have to worry about?" Dr. Minzov said.

"Me? Oh, nothing, I suppose. I guess I was just getting caught up in the intensity of the moment."

Athena followed Donald to the rear of the ship. She had gotten a good idea of the size of the ship from her sensors, but now she wanted to get a look at it. As she looked through the observation dome, a large hole opened in the middle of the spherical ship, large enough to swallow the *Space Eagle*.

She saw that Donald had been right. The ship was indeed as large as a battle cruiser, at least three kilometers in radius, with numerous protrusions around the surface. Lights showed through windows, and as they were pulled closer, she could make out faces behind the windows, watching them being pulled into the trap. Around the middle of the ship, she recognized numerous weapons; particle bomb launchers, disintegrator beams and electrostatic projectors. In a fight, the *Space Eagle* would have been easily destroyed.

The ship went through the opening, into a large open hangar, already holding several other ships. The underside of the *Space Eagle* scraped against the deck of the hangar for several feet, then stopped, rolling slightly until it came to rest on one of its tail fins.

Before the opening was completely closed, space-suited figures carrying ray weapons rushed in and circled the ship. Athena and Donald moved away from the observation dome and went to the work cabin, where they met Dr. Minzov. Looking out the side windows, she saw the figures had the ship surrounded. She heard the rush of air around the ship and knew the hangar was being pressurized. When she turned around, Dr. Minzov was leaning against the hatch

"What are you doing?" Athena asked.

"Trying to keep them out," he said.

"I think you're losing your marbles, Doc," Donald said.

"Where?" Minzov dropped to the floor, sweeping his hands along it.

Moving past Minzov to the hatch, Athena peered out to see one of the figures approaching. Then there was a knock.

"Who is it?" Dr. Minzov asked.

They heard a thin, muffled voice come through, unintelligible. Then the knocking came again.

"Yes," Athena said. "What do you want?"

"Surrender, now," the voice said, now coming through clearly, "or we'll blow this ship apart."

"Does that mean you want us to come out?" Dr. Minzov asked.

"Well, of course it means we want you to come out. What good would it do to have you surrender and stay in there?"

"We kind of like it in here."

"I'm sorry, but you've got to come out. So get out here."

"Okay. Have it your way."

Dr. Minzov nodded to Athena.

"I guess we have no other choice," he said.

Athena shrugged and opened the hatch. The three of them stepped slowly out onto the deck. Instantly, the figures surrounded them, pushing and shoving to get closer, until the one who had been knocking pushed his way through to them.

"Come on, get back, get back, will ya?" he said. "Give me some room." He removed his helmet to reveal a coarsely featured face, thick and cruel but at the same time showing an animal-like ignorance. "Okay, you're coming with us."

"Why?" Donald asked.

"Why?" The man scratched his head.

"Come on, Jerger," one of the other men said. "We're supposed to be taking them to Sarnak."

"That's right," Jerger said. "We're supposed to be taking you to Sarnak. So let's go. And don't make me have to get rough."

Some of the men behind him snickered. He turned around and glared at them.

"Okay, who's laughing?" he demanded.

The laughter stopped as he looked around the circle of men.

"Well, if we're going to meet this Sarnak, we'd better get going," Athena said.

"Hey, I'm giving the orders around here," Jerger said. The men laughed again. "Cut that out. Okay. I'm going to write down anyone's name I catch laughing."

"Can you write?" a voice said. Jerger moved through the men.

"Who said that?"

When no one admitted they had said anything, Jerger went back to Athena.

"We're going to see Sarnak, now." He said, still looking suspiciously at his men.

"That's what I just said," Athena replied.

"I'm giving the orders around here." He came closer to Athena, breathing heavily in her face. She turned away at the stench and waved her hand in front of her nose. He moved back from her, looking embarrassed, and led them through the hangar.

The rest of the men stayed behind them, keeping their weapons pointed at their backs. Athena tried to take in as many details of the hangar as she could, keeping track of the few scout ships scattered around. Jerger led them to a small door at the other end of the hangar, past thick pipes and conduits stretching from the deck to the ceiling high above them. Around the side of one wall, she saw instrument panels and controls. And up against the back wall was a large machine.

"What's that, Doc?" she whispered to Minzov.

"That must be the Magnatractor beam," he said. "Those short cylinders project the ray." He pointed to a large circular array, pointing toward the *Space Eagle*."

"What are you whispering about?" Jerger turned around at them. "Are you talking about me?"

"So what if we were?" Athena said.

"Well, just don't, or I'll get really mad."

"Hah!"

"Yeah, you'll see," Jerger said. "Someday."

When they reached the door, Jerger stepped through, having to duck through the oval opening. Donald and Minzov went through next, standing by Jerger as they waited for the rest of them. Thinking quickly, Athena stepped through and turned around, pushing the guards back and slamming the hatch in their faces. She found the locking mechanism on the wall next to the hatch and activated it. As Jerger was

turning around to see what the noise was, they jumped on him.

"Hey, stop it," he yelled, as they wrestled him to the floor, holding him face down and pinning his arms behind his back.

"Be quiet and you won't get hurt," Athena said. "What should we do with him, Doc?"

"Wait here," he said. He ran down the corridor, opening doors and peering beyond them. He returned in a few moments carrying some pieces of wire.

"Let's tie him up and put him in one of these storage rooms."

"No, don't do that," Jerger said. "This was my big chance to do something right. If Sarnak finds out I messed up, he'll put me back on my old job."

"Sorry," Dr. Minzov said, as he and Donald tied Jerger's arms and legs together. The three of them lifted him, grunting under the weight of the space suit, and placed him in a small closet filled with buckets and mops.

"They'll be sounding an alarm pretty soon," Athena said as a klaxon sounded above their heads. "There it is. We'll have to find somewhere to hide. Fast."

"What good will that do?" Donald asked.

"Do you want to hang around here?"

"Well, no."

"Then let's go."

They ran blindly down corridors, turning at random, trying to put as much distance as possible between them and the hangar. They found a darkened room and went inside.

"We can figure out what to do next in here," Athena said. "Just keep the door shut."

Once they had the lights on, they found they were in an equipment storage room, with metal racks filled with electronic equipment and chemical gear.

"So, what do we do now?" Donald asked.

"I don't know," Athena said. "It's a safe bet we won't be able to get back to the *Space Eagle* any time soon. Even if we did and managed to blast off, they'd just pull us back. What do you think, Doc?"

"Well, they've got a nice collection of equipment here," he replied.

"No," Donald cried. "What should we do?"

"Oh. I would suggest that we keep moving. Don't stay in one place for too long. Keep them guessing."

"I think you're right," Athena said. "This is a pretty big ship. There should be plenty of places to hide. First off, we should get farther away from the hangar deck. They're sure to start looking in that area, then spread out from there."

She went to the door and opened it slowly. Peering through the crack, she found herself face-to-face with a hawk-faced man standing on the other side. When he saw her, he jumped back and ran down the

corridor. Athena slammed the door and stood against it.

"Someone saw me," she said. "We better get out of here."

"Now, let's wait a minute," Dr. Minzov said, holding up his hand. "That's just what they'll expect us to do."

"What do you mean?" Donald asked.

"Whoever that person was is bound to tell them he found us here. If they have any intelligence at all, in all probability, they will come to the conclusion that we will know we have to find some other location to secret ourselves. Realizing that, they will know that it is a waste of time to search this room; they will take their activities to another part of the ship. Ah, but here is where we outsmart them. We stay right here and let them search for us elsewhere."

"Brilliant, Minzov," Athena said.

"I don't know," Donald said. "I think we should move on."

"Nonsense," Dr. Minzov said, as the door burst open and guards swarmed in, surrounding them and dragging them from the room.

"Well, it seemed like a good idea," Dr. Minzov said, as the guards pushed him roughly out into the corridor.

They were herded through the ship, through large corridors and into wide tube cars that carried them and the guards up long sloping shafts. Finally, they stopped in front of a set of heavy, white doors.

One of the guards spoke into a wall communicator while the rest of them kept their weapons trained on Athena, Minzov and Donald. The doors slid open to reveal a large spherical chamber, with people arrayed around the sides on ledges, working at instruments. The guards pushed them into the chamber onto a platform running through the center.

People on the ledges turned to watch as they were led inside, some of them stared malevolently, sneering and grimacing; others took a quick glance and returned to their work. Athena realized this must be the bridge of the huge ship, at its very center.

A large figure standing on the center of the platform turned to them and smiled.

CHAPTER 11. FACE TO FACE WITH EVIL

He stood tall and dark, with bold, dashing features; dressed in garments that must have been designed to fit his solid body, accentuating each curve and line. His smile came easily, showing perfect teeth. His cap sat on his head at just the slightest hint of an angle.

"Sarnak," Athena said, marveling at the physical perfection of the man.

"Sarnak?" the man said. "He's over there." He pointed to a short, squat figure sitting in a chair at the other end of the platform, gnawing at what looked like the remnants of a large bone. The handsome man picked up a broom and trash can and walked past them.

The short man swiveled in the chair to face them, burped and tossed the bone to the side. He was swarthy and thick-featured, with pock-marked cheeks and small, wicked eyes. He smiled at them and stood with a groan, shuffling his heavy girth toward them while he rubbed his hands together. A few feet from them, he stopped.

Athena could not suppress her sneer at the lowliness of the man. So, they were finally face to face with the evil creature they had been searching for, only to be his prisoner.

"Well, well, what have we here?" His voice was thick, with an odd smoothness. "Why if you aren't the cutest thing I've seen in ages."

Athena stepped forward and glared at him, standing to her full height over the shorter man.

"I'm Astro Athena," she said. "So, we've finally caught up with you, Sarnak. It's been a long chase but it wasn't difficult to follow your trail of depredation across the galaxy. Why does this galaxy have to be full of vermin like you who think they can flaunt the laws of civilized men? And don't think I am moved at all by your disgusting desires."

Sarnak looked at her and shook his head.

"Huh?" he said. "What?"

"Do you actually believe that someone like me could be attracted in any way by a disgusting cretin like you?"

"You? No, I was talking about him." He pointed at Donald, then sidled closer to him. "You know you look just like someone ... someone I never thought I'd see again." He sighed and looked away. "It was so long ago."

"You stay away from him." Athena stepped at him, but was held back by the guards.

"Do you think I want to hurt him?" Sarnak asked, stepping in front of Athena. "No, that's the furthest thing from my mind. But I can't believe it." He turned back to Donald. "Looking at you brings back feelings I thought had died ... dare I say it? ... I think I might be able to ... love again."

Unable to control herself, Athena broke away from the guards and leapt at Sarnak, catching him with a

hard fist to his puffy jowl. He staggered back as Athena jumped on him and knocked him to the floor.

Then the guards were on her, dragging her from Sarnak. One of them hit her on the side of the head with the butt of his weapon. She collapsed to the floor, still conscious, but dazed. Donald tried to go to her, but the guards kept him away.

"Hold on to her," Sarnak said, picking himself up from the floor. He rubbed at his face and groaned. "Jeez, you'd think I was some kind of animal or something."

He stepped away from them and returned to his chair, putting his arms across his chest as he stared at them.

"You think it's easy being a galactic super-criminal? Robbing, pillaging, selling innocent men, women and children into slavery. Perpetrating interstellar holocaust on a daily basis? Well, I'm a human being too. I've got feelings. Don't you think my heart bleeds just a little with every heinous act I commit?"

"It's horrible, I tell you, horrible. And I can't stop myself." He put his arm over his face. "Don't you think I've tried to stop? Then someone like you comes along." He rose and went to Donald. "Then I think, well, maybe it's all got some meaning after all."

Donald turned away.

"Do you believe that any decent person could have any sympathy for the likes of you?" Athena cried.

"You again." Sarnak turned to her. "What did you say your name was?"

"Astro Athena." Despite the grip of the guards on her arms, she managed to stand a little taller.

"Oh, yeah. And who are you?" he turned to Dr. Minzov.

Minzov looked away from, staring defiantly at the rows of control panels, not deigning to give the criminal any notice.

"I am Dr. Hans Alexis Minzov."

"Dr. Hans Alexis Minzov," Sarnak repeated, rubbing his chin. "Minzov, Minzov. Oh, yes. You're one of the top scientists in the Space Rangers, I believe."

"Without recourse to false modesty, I would say that I am the top scientist in the Space Rangers."

"Well, I'm certainly glad to meet you." Sarnak took Minzov's hand and shook it vigorously, while he moved next to him and put his arm around his shoulders. He led him away from the group. "Look, I can use a man like you."

"How could someone as low as you use someone with my superior scientific talents?" Minzov asked icily.

"Look, I've got a lab on this ship like you wouldn't believe. All kinds of stuff and no one knows how to use it. Except for Dr. Rackle, and he doesn't understand all of it."

"Rackle? Rackle? Where have I heard that name before?"

"Perhaps you heard of his experiments in the laboratories on Aldebaran II. It was just a crumby little place. Of course, if he hadn't tried some ... shall we say ... taboo research into the libido of the President's wife... Tsk. Tsk. I understand he barely got away with his skin in one piece. He was on the

skids already, anyway. I found him in a dive on a mining planet around some godforsaken star. Cleaned him up and gave him a good job."

"Making weapons for you?" Minzov spat.

"Well, more or less. Lately it's been less. He's been trying to perfect a superweapon for me, but he hasn't gotten very far. Now, that's where you come in. With your help ..."

"Never."

"Well, think about it." Sarnak turned to the guards. "Take this one down to Rackle and tell the old buzzard to show our esteemed Dr. Minzov around. I'll be down there later to see what progress he's making. Probably none."

Two guards took Minzov's arms and dragged him from the bridge.

"Don't worry about me, Athena," he called over his shoulder. "I'll be all right."

"Now for you." He came back to Donald.

"Sarnak, Sarnak," an out of breath voice came from the door. Athena looked up, hoping that Minzov had escaped somehow. Instead, she saw Jerger come stumbling into the bridge.

"Well, if it isn't Jerger," Sarnak said. A muted snickering came from the people standing around the bridge. "Well, I understand we had a little trouble with the prisoners."

"Sarnak," Jerger said. "They outsmarted me."

"Half the doors on this ship outsmart you."

"But at least we recaptured them."

"Yes, we recaptured them. And by we, I don't include you. Oh, Jerger, Jerger, what am I going to do with you? If your mother wasn't my sister, I'd have you in the bilge shoveling our crap out the disposal."

"You're not going to put me back on the space toilet detail, are you, Uncle Sarnak?"

Sarnak rushed angrily at Jerger, then, embarrassed, looked around to see who was watching. When they met his look, everyone turned back to their stations.

"I told you never to call me that."

"I'm sorry Unc ... I mean ... Sarnak."

"That's better. Okay, I'll give you one more chance. You see this girl over here?" He pointed to Athena.

"What was your name again?"

"Astro Athena."

"Right. You see this Astro Athena over here? Well, you take some of these men and escort her to one of the cells. Do you think you can do it?"

"Yes, I can do it. You said to take some of this girl and put the guards in the cell."

"No, no, you nitwit. I said ... Oh, never mind. You." He pointed to one of the guards. "Take this ...whatever her name is ..."

"Astro Athena," the guard said.

"Right. Take her down to one of the cells. Take a couple of guards with you. Take Jerger, too. And make sure he doesn't lock himself in one of the cells."

"Yes, Sarnak," the guard said.

He pointed to two more of the guards, and they took positions around her, taking hold of her arms and pulling her out of the bridge. She kicked and wrestled with them, but they were too strong for her.

"Well, what are you waiting for?" Sarnak said to Jerger, who ran after them.

"Don't worry, Donald," she said as they pulled her out into the corridor. "Be strong."

"Don't leave me here," he called out, but she had already disappeared around a corner.

"Don't worry," Sarnak said soothingly. "I'm not going to hurt you. I know, you can't accept me, yet. Just give me a little time. That's all I ask."

"Never."

"Well, think about it, anyway. You two," he called to the remaining guards, "take this one to the guest cabin next to mine. And make him comfortable."

"Yes, Sarnak," they said.

Donald felt as if he were in a dream as they pulled him from the bridge. He moved weakly along with the guards, feeling totally alone. And he was afraid; as much for Athena as he was for himself.

#

"Come now, gentlemen," Dr. Minzov said, as the two guards hustled him down the corridor. He tried to keep his footing, but stumbled as the guards moved him quickly along, to their displeasure. "Come now. Is there really such a need for haste?"

"When Sarnak says to get a guy someplace, he means get him there right away," one of the guards growled.

"Well, we will most certainly arrive there in less of an agitated state if we proceed at a more even pace."

"Yeah, I suppose so," the other guard said. "What d'you think, Orvin? Maybe we should slow down."

"You sure, Yople?" Orvin said. "You know how Sarnak is."

"Yeah, why not? If this old geezer tries anything, we'll just have to get rough." He laughed ominously, and Orvin joined in.

They let go of his arms, and Dr. Minzov stopped to straighten up. When he saw that the guards were becoming impatient, he started walking down the corridor. They stood for a moment, then ran up to him, keeping stride as he moved along.

"You're going to have to lead, gentlemen," Dr. Minzov said. "I have no knowledge as to the whereabouts of the laboratory."

"Just keep up with us, old man," Yople said.

They moved ahead of Dr. Minzov, walking faster to make him work to keep up with them. Then Minzov moved a few steps ahead of them. Orvin and Yople walked faster, looking back at him and smirking. Then Minzov stepped ahead of them at a quick trot. They were racing when they reached the end of the corridor and had to stop at a set of white doors.

"Well, it looks like I won, gentlemen," Dr. Minzov beamed.

"Yeah, this time," Orvin said. "Let's see how you do in the next corridor."

"Which is where?"

"Down here." Orvin pointed to the doors. "This mover takes us down to the laboratories. We'll see how fast you are down there."

"You don't have any stairs, do you?"

"No. No stairs."

"Hmmm," Minzov mused. "That's a shame. Well, gentlemen, on to the next level."

Yople summoned the tube car, and they waited. Standing straight and looking up, Minzov folded his arms across his chest and hummed, tapping his foot. Orvin coughed, but Minzov ignored him. Orvin coughed louder. Finally the doors opened and they stepped in. The operator looked at them with annoyance.

"What level?" He closed the doors and stared ahead.

"Level 34A," Orvin said.

The operator said nothing, but worked a lever. Soon the tube car was dropping like a stone. The operator stood impassively as Minzov and the two guards fought to maintain their balance, falling against each other and into the walls. The tube car stopped quickly and they fell into a pile.

"Level 34A," the operator said.

The guards said nothing as they got up and helped Minzov out of the tube car.

"Now," Yople said, "let's see how fast you are down here."

"Well, you have me at a disadvantage, sir," Minzov said. "You know our destination, while I am not in possession of that fact."

"Okay, okay," Orvin said. "Let's be fair. Look, go down this corridor, then right. Keep going straight until you get to the one that branches off to the left. The second one. Then go down there till you reach the end. Got it?"

"Yes, I believe so."

"You ready?" Yople asked.

"Most certainly." Dr. Minzov took a few steps in place.

"Then let's go."

The two guards were off ahead of Minzov. He kept pace a few feet behind. When the guards turned to

the right, Minzov kept going straight, running as fast as he could.

"Hey, where you going?" Yople said, stopping and coming back to the main corridor. "It's down this way."

"Oh, sorry," Minzov said, and trotted back to them.

"Maybe we better stay together," Orvin said. "So you don't get lost."

"Yeah," Yople said. "I think you were trying to trick us."

"Well." Dr. Minzov stood indignantly. "This racing business wasn't my idea."

They remained on either side of him as they marched to the doors of the laboratory. Orvin knocked on the door and waited.

"Yes, what do you want?" a rough, cracking voice said through the door.

"Sarnak wanted us to bring this guy to you," Orvin said. "He says he's supposed to work with you."

"Oh, is that so?" The door opened.

The two guards nudged Minzov to go inside.

Dr. Minzov noted, with just a hint of jealousy, that this was indeed a fully equipped laboratory, well-suited for the pursuit of science. Instruments of every kind were spread out across the benches filling the large, open space. Several scientists could conduct their research here without ever bumping into each other.

One old man sat behind a desk, facing him with a predatory smile.

"Well, so we meet again, Dr. Hans Alexis Minzov," he said. "You swine."

#

They threw her to the cold, metal floor of the cell. Before they closed the door, she saw that it was small, with barely enough room for her to stand and walk two paces. The guards looked at her for a moment, then slammed the door. In the dark, she felt hopelessness descend on her as she heard the bolts sliding into place. A small opening appeared in the door at eye level, and Athena saw someone looking in on her. Then the opening was closed and the darkness was complete.

Huddled in the corner away from the door, the seconds seemed to drag on interminably. The helplessness of the situation was overwhelming as she worried over what was happening to Donald and Dr. Minzov. She felt totally powerless.

She stood and paced the cell, hitting her nose on the walls before she had the measure of the space. Whatever was going to happen, she was going to survive. Yes, she was a Space Ranger; she had faced danger before. She would not be defeated. Burning with renewed determination, she vowed to escape and bring Sarnak to his knees.

Footsteps echoed down the hall. She went to the door as light came through the opening again.

"Get away from the door," a voice said.

She backed away and the door opened. Several guards rushed into the cell, pushing her back and

keeping blasters aimed at her. Then Sarnak came in behind them.

"Sorry about the accommodations, but you know how it is," he said.

"Yes, I know how it is with your kind, Sarnak."

"Hey, come on. I'm just a guy trying to get ahead in life. Anyway, I've brought some old friends of yours with me who are just dying to see you."

"Old friends of mine?" Could he be bringing Dr. Minzov and Donald here? But why?

Two dark figures moved into the doorway, unrecognizable shadows against the light in the hall; a large hulking figure and a short, thin one.

"You remember them, don't you?" Sarnak said.

It took her a few moments for her eyes to adjust to the light as the two figures stepped into the cell. It was Falvo Prem and Gruto.

#

Donald paced across the carpeted room. Well, if nothing else, the room was comfortable. He had an easy chair and sofa, both finely upholstered. A writing desk and straight-back chair were in the corner, but who would he have to write to? A canopy bed took up one end of the room next to a dresser and mirror. Yes, it was very comfortable, for a prison.

He did not answer the knock at the door. When it opened, he moved to the easy chair and sat, ignoring Sarnak as he wheeled in a small cart. It was hard for him to miss the smell of the food coming over to him.

"A little light supper for you," Sarnak said. He left the cart in the middle of the room and went to the chair, lowering himself to its arm. Donald turned away. "Come on. Don't be like that." He chuckled Donald lightly under the chin.

"Don't do that. I don't like it."

"Sorry." Sarnak stood and went to the sofa. "Look, I'm not one of those obnoxious individuals who believes in forcing myself on someone, especially when that special someone doesn't want me around. But I have a lot of patience." He went to the tray and wheeled it to Donald's chair. "Look what I brought for you."

Donald looked over the roasted chicken and potatoes, now feeling hungry for the first time since they had been captured. But he wasn't going to give Sarnak the satisfaction of seeing him eat.

"Later," he said.

"Later, then," Sarnak said. "But like I said, I have a lot of patience. I guess I've always had to have a lot of patience."

"Why is that?" Donald turned away when Sarnak came closer, not bothering to hide his discomfort at Sarnak's fetid breath.

"When you look like me, what else can you do? Honestly, I'm not really a bad kind of guy. Lots of people like me, well, maybe not lots and lots of people, but there are a few who have taken the time to get to know me."

"I'll bet you don't have a friend in the world," Donald said.

Sarnak walked away, slowly, looking up at the ceiling. Then he spun around.

"Yeah, you're just like all the rest of them. All you can see is a short, fat guy with a lousy complexion."

"And bad breath," Donald added.

"Okay, and bad breath. Do you want me to mention my body odor, too? How about the warts on my legs? Yeah, you name it, I've got it. When I had hair, I couldn't brush it down. If I used a pomade to keep it down, everyone called me 'Greasy'. If I didn't, they said I looked like a clown."

"Well, with that nose ..."

"That's right. Just rub it in."

"Sorry. But you are keeping me a prisoner here."

"I don't want to. It's just that ... just that ...you remind me of someone who was very dear to me. It was so long ago; it feels like it happened to someone else."

"Oh, yeah?"

"Yes. And I've had my heart broken, more than once. I don't usually tell this to anyone. But you ... you look like you might understand."

"Hah!"

"Don't laugh at me. And they wonder why I never open up to anyone."

"All right. I'm sorry I laughed at you." Donald turned to Sarnak, shaking his head slightly at the pathetic figure of the space pirate, hoping it was just enough for him to see. This man had been the one they had been chasing, the man who had pillaged and ransacked cargo ships and other worlds.

"So, you think I'm a loser," Sarnak said.

"You're a pirate. How many people have you killed or sold into slavery?"

"Well, I never kept track ... I mean ... do you think I enjoy this life I'm living? I know I shouldn't tell you this, but I'm going to let you know how I ended up in this state. And let me tell you." He moved to the sofa and sat, leaning forward. "It isn't a happy story."

CHAPTER 12. WHENCE SARNAK

"I was a gentle boy," Sarnak began. "My parents and I had settled on a farming planet called Jollea in the Pleiades after I was born. It was still a fairly wild planet, mostly forests and streams and broad plains, with a few small towns and villages popping up. I grew up running free in nature.

"The Colonial Authority transplanted many of the birds, plants and insects from Earth during their first landings, almost like coming to Jollea in a Noah's Ark. The climate on Jollea was the same as Earth, and after the Colonial Authority was finished, you couldn't tell the difference between the area we lived in and that old place on Earth called New Hampshire.

"It was an idyllic childhood for me. Then as a teenager, I discovered poetry and lost myself in the wonderful volumes of the old Romantic masters; Keats, Shelley, Wordsworth. Ah, yes, I whiled away many an afternoon, sitting in the dappled shade of a stately, old maple; my feet splashing in the waters of a fast-running brook with a thin volume of Byron in my lap. Yes, I was young and happy, then.

"They found me there one afternoon, a gang of young ruffians from the village. They were rustic louts, all of them, with their strawlike hair falling into their eyes, their big, dirty hands and their unwashed faces. I heard them approaching along the brook by the sound of their oafish laughter.

"I knew they didn't like me; I always did well in school and the teacher always singled me out for praise, while those other boys were always being punished for their poor work and childish behavior.

"And now I was alone with them. I wanted to get up and run when they came nearer, but I was afraid. There must have been eight of them approaching me.

"Well, if it isn't little Sarnak,' Joogie said. He was the leader of the gang; a big boy, even at thirteen, at least twice my size. Joogie laughed and nudged the other boys.

"Yeah,' Gindo said. He was different from the other boys; he was short and thin, always with a nasty look on his face. I could never understand why, but he seemed to hate me more than the others. He was always doing things to try to hurt me, even at school. He'd trip me and throw things at me all the time, sometimes call me names when the others were around. 'What's he got there?'

"It's some kinda book,' Joogie said. 'Hey, let's see what it is.'

"He took the book from my lap and looked confused as he tried to read it. I could tell he was having trouble with the words by the way he had to move his lips as he stumbled through the passages.

"Any of you guys know how to read this stuff?' he asked finally.

"Yeah,' Gindo said. 'I can read a little.'

"He took the book from Joogie and glanced over the pages for a moment, then started laughing, grinning wickedly. I edged back against the tree.

"Hey, listen to this stuff:

'I wandered lonely as a cloud

'That floats on high o'er vales and hills,

'When all at once I saw a crowd,

'A host of golden daffodils.'

"Even before he had finished reading that stanza, they were all laughing at me, pushing at each other and calling me names; awful names.

"Hey, read some more,' Joogle said.

"And Gindo read a few more lines, until they were all laughing so hard they were almost falling on the ground.

"Gimme that book' Joogle said.

"I got up and tried to take my book from Gindo, but Joogle pushed me away and took it. He chanted what he thought those lines were:

"I wander around like a cloud

'Floating up high on the hills somewhere,

'Then I got in a crowd,

'Of a bunch of those stupid daffo ... daffo ...

'Whatever the hell they are.'

"He danced around, jumping from one foot to the other and ripping the pages from my book, tossing them in the air. I ran at him and grabbed at my book, but he kept it away from my while he kept dancing. The others pulled me away and held on to me. After Joogle dropped the pages, Gindo picked them up and tore them into tiny pieces, throwing them in the air like confetti. The sadder and more frightened I got, the more they laughed, except for one of them. He stayed back a little from the rest.

"Oh, it wasn't so bad that they beat me. I could take that. But when I saw all those beautiful words, blowing about on the ground and drifting into the brook, I cried. I guess they got tired of me after a while; they left me there, clutching at little scraps of paper."

Sarnak sank into the sofa, covering his face, his body wracked with suppressed sobs. Donald shrugged, but said nothing. Angrily, Sarnak looked up at him.

"So, you don't care, do you. You're just like all the rest; you think that because it happened to someone like me, then it's okay. That's what you think, isn't it? Sure, I'm not worthy of even the most basic human considerations. Well, forget about me; think of that young boy, the adolescent Sarnak who might have become an artist but had to suffer the tortures of ridicule and shunning. Yes, I was shunned by most people in the village. Except for Mr. Logfron, and one boy my age.

"A few days later, my mother sent me to the village to pick up a few things for the family. I went to Mr. Logfron's emporium with the list my mother gave me. I was always nervous whenever I had to go into town; I never knew when I might come upon those boys. As I got closer to the store, I thought I was

lucky; there was no one around anywhere as I walked down the main street of Littletown II. That was what they called our town.

"I guess Mr. Logfron heard what they did to me. I still had a black eye where Gindo hit me. Mr. Logfron told me how sorry he was about it. Then he said he had a surprise for me, something to make me feel better. He reached under the counter and pulled out some sound cubes. He told me to go ahead and take them to the back room and listen to them.

"Oh, it was beautiful, music from the post-neo-romantic period of about a hundred years ago, a full orchestra performing the music of Plato St. Germain under the baton of Bruno Hauptmann. For a moment, I thought I heard angels singing.

"After I listened to the sound cubes, I took them back to Mr. Logfron. I asked him to hold on to them for me; I'd find the money to pay for them somehow. We went through the list Mother gave me and filled a box for me to carry home. I was just picking up the box and moving to the door when they came in.

"They were laughing and pushing at each other, but they stopped when they saw me. Gindo started his dance again, trying to repeat those verses of Wordsworth, butchering them even worse than Joogle had before.

"What do you boys want here?" Mr. Logfron asked. He came around the counter and stood between me and them.

"They stopped laughing, and Joogle came forward, telling Mr. Logfron that his father had sent him to get a few things for their farm. Mr. Logfron said it was okay and got the things for Joogle. I saw my chance and got past them before they could do anything. Gindo said something to me as I went through the door, but I couldn't hear what he said; I just wanted to get out of there.

"Well, it was a few days later, I think ..."

"You know," Donald said, "I can't say that I'm very interested in hearing much more of your story. It's getting late and I'd like to get some sleep."

"What late? It's only four o'clock in the afternoon."

"It's that late already?"

"Come on. I'm getting to the really interesting part, the real root of my tragedy. And people like you are always saying how much you care for your fellow man. Hah! As soon as someone starts talking for more than five minutes, all of a sudden you've got to be somewhere else."

"All right," Donald sighed. "Go ahead."

"Thank you. And can I call you Don?"

"No."

"Oh. Okay. Well, several more days went by before I was brave enough to go back to my spot by the brook. When I got there, one of those boys was sitting there, under my tree. I wanted to turn around and go back home before he saw me, but he must have heard me coming because he turned around. He smiled and said hello to me.

"I recognized him as the one called Froy. But it wasn't a nasty smile he showed my, not like Joogle or Gindo. He looked like he wanted me to sit with him under the tree; he moved over.

"When he saw the book of poems I had brought, he asked me to read some to him. I opened to the 'Hymn to Pan' by Keats and read. As I looked up from the page occasionally, he seemed to be enraptured by the lines as I read. When I finished the last line, he was silent, then he asked me to read some more.

"We spent several hours by the brook that day, reading through more poems. He asked if he could read one to me. I gave him the book, and he leafed through the pages, stopping at 'The Cloud' by Shelley.

"He read beautifully. I could see perhaps I had finally found someone I could call a friend, someone with the same kind of soul for nature.

"We stayed and talked for a long time. He told me how much he disliked Joogie and his gang, and asked if we could meet again to read some more. I had to do some work on the farm for the next few days, but I would be able to get away on Saturday.

"We said good-bye and said we'd get together again.

"Yes, you remind me of Froy, Donald. I can see that you have a sensitive nature just like him."

"I hate poetry," Donald said.

"Oh. Well, you remind me of him in other ways, too," Sarnak said. "You don't like poetry even a little bit?"

"Well, maybe a little."

"Yeah, you can't hide that kind of thing from me. Well, Froy and I met for many pleasant afternoons under that tree by the brook. When summer came, the air grew hot and muggy, so we took off our clothes and went swimming in the brook. It was during our swimming that I first learned the meaning of love.

"We became inseparable. I invited him to spend time at my home, and he brought me to dinner with his family. One night, he told me Joogie and his gang were giving him a hard time about not hanging around with them anymore. I told him I understood, and if he wanted to go back to them, I wouldn't stand in the way. He told me he could never go back to them.

"One night, late in the summer, I got a call from Mr. Logfron. He told me about another new recording that had come in. He said if I wanted to listen to it, I was welcome. I hadn't seen Froy all that day; I think he said he had to go with this father to the next town to make some deals to buy a few cattle.

"I excused myself after supper and walked into town. Like always, I was afraid I'd come upon Joogie or some members of his gang. I stopped all the time to look into the darkness on either side of the road. Sometimes, I thought I saw something moving, but I reached the town unmolested.

"There was no answer when I knocked on Mr. Logfron's door. When I pushed on the door, it opened, and I went inside, even though it was dark. The music cubes were on the counter, so I picked them up and was going to the back room when I stumbled over something large and heavy on the floor, like a sack of feed or something. When I looked down to see what it was, I saw it was Mr. Logfron. I knelt down on the floor and felt something wet seeping into my trousers. I shook him a few times, but he didn't move. Then I got scared.

"There was a metal rod by his head, and I picked it up. I stood up and tried to look at it in the dark. Then the lights went on.

"Joogle and Gindo were standing in the doorway with two of the local constables. And Froy was standing behind them with his head down. He said nothing.

"See? What did I tell you?" Joogle said. Gindo laughed that ugly laugh of his. Froy turned away.

"You'd better come along with us," Constable Kinjof said. He came into the emporium.

"That's when I looked down and saw Mr. Logfron clearly for the first time. The side of his head had been crushed. I panicked and ran into the back room before Constable Kinjof could grab me. After I slammed the door and locked it, I jumped out the window into the alley.

"I ran and ran. I didn't know where I was going. Sometimes I stopped to catch my breath; my lungs were burning. Then I'd think of Froy. Why had he done this to me? I started running again.

"I didn't know where I was, just that I was somewhere in the woods. Now it didn't seem so friendly; I jumped at every sound, shook at every movement in the shadows. I ran for days, drinking from streams, eating a few berries. Whenever I stopped to rest, I thought about Froy, and I felt like something had been taken from my chest. There was a coldness there now, an emptiness that could never be filled again.

"I managed to reach the space port in Goyrom a few days later, dragging myself out of the woods. There was a freighter being loaded, so I stowed away in the hold when no one was around. That took me to the planet of Mettlerg, where there was a big trade center, and a thriving criminal underworld.

"When the ship landed, I was hungry. One of the loaders found me and took advantage of me, you know what I mean. He was rough, and didn't care what he did to me. Then he threw me off the ship. I hadn't eaten for almost a week. Some men lurking in the shadows saw me getting thrown from the freighter and offered me a job. That's how I ended up joining a gang of thieves. Once I got started on a life of crime, there was no turning back.

"And what else could I do? If I tried to get a decent job, there would be a record of me that could be traced back to Jollea. I could never go home, never see my parents again. Who was going to believe me if I told them I hadn't killed Mr. Logfron? I had been trapped by fate.

"I found that I had a penchant for the criminal trade. I knew if I wanted to keep myself safe, I had to be my own boss, so after a few months I started my own gang. We looted the space port and sold our goods on the black market. It was my intelligence that saved me. All the other guys threw their money away on gambling and vice, but I put mine away, investing in legitimate businesses when I could, but always keeping my money clean.

"Finally, I had over a thousand members in my gang, ranging over several star systems. With all the money I had, I was able to get this ship built. It was tough finding people to run it for me, but I found a few. For a while I was using my ship to raid other ships, now I'm big enough to raid whole planets.

"Take a good look at it. I know whole star systems that can't afford a ship like this. But I've got one, with all the latest technology and weaponry.

"But I've come to realize that it doesn't mean a thing. I'm really alone here, almost a prisoner in my own ship. Most of the people in this ship aren't any better than Joogle and his gang, stupid louts. They're taught how to perform a few simple things, and half the time, they can't even get those things right. Oh, what I wouldn't give for just one afternoon under that maple tree by the brook, sharing a book of poems with a friend.

"Sometimes, I wonder whatever happened to Froy. Then you came along and brought a flood of memories back. Froy, and my family. Why I haven't seen any of my family since I had to escape."

"I thought you said that ... what's his name ... Jerger was your nephew?" Donald said.

"Jerger? Oh, yes, Jerger. Well ... uh ... I met up with him when I was traveling around Vega. I think he told me he had deserted from the Space Navy, or they threw him out. Something like that. So I took him on."

"You said you were doing your sister a favor."

"Well, I am. When she told me about him, I let him come with me."

"So, you've seen her, too?"

"Seen her? Oh, sure. I was doing some shopping on one of those mall planets when I bumped into her. I told her I found Jerger and had him working for me."

"What mall planet?"

"Let's see ... Well, I don't remember which one. After a while, they all look the same, you know? The point is I didn't ask for this kind of life. I'm not the evil creature you think I am. All I'm asking for is a little understanding ... and maybe a little forgiveness."

"Right now, I'm hungry," Donald said.

"Okay, okay. So, I'll leave, is that what you want?"

Sarnak rose from the sofa and stalked to the door. Reaching the door, he stopped, turning around slowly.

"Just think about me a little bit, will you?" he said.

"Maybe," Donald said, reaching for a piece of meat from a plate.

"Well, that's better than no, I guess."

After Sarnak was gone, Donald pulled the cart closer to the chair. He ate the chicken and vegetables, then felt guilty, wondering what had become of Athena and Dr. Minzov. Feeling disgusted with his own hunger, he pushed the cart away, leaving the rest of the food uneaten.

#

"Get a good hold of her," Falvo said. He reached into a pouch by his side and pulled out a long hypodermic needle. He smiled at her, holding it out as Athena was held down by two guards and Gruto. "I normally don't have to use this, my dear. And even when I do use drugs, I use a skin permeator. But with you I want to do it the old-fashioned way."

They had left her alone for almost an hour before returning again, now telling her what they planned to do with her; destroy her mind and sell her into slavery. The client was already waiting for her.

Gruto held her arm out. She tried to struggle against him, but he was overpowering. Now she could see an ugly scar down the side of his face, pulling his upper lip away from his teeth. He glared at her vengefully.

"Yeah, take a good look at what you did to me," he growled.

"Come on," one of the guards said. "Hurry up and get it over with."

Falvo plunged the needle into her arm. She screamed as it descended deeper into her muscle, finally hitting the bone of her upper arm.

"Yes, scream, my dear," Falvo said. "It will be your last conscious act, once this drug robs you of your will to defy me."

"What are you going to do with me," she panted, when he had extracted the needle from her arm. A thin veil of sleepiness slipped over her eyes.

"I had to purchase you from Sarnak," Falvo said, "but you needn't worry. I will still make a profit on you, although I would have paid any price to get you back. You're going to be a slave for the rest of your miserable life. And knowing my clients, that won't be for very long."

"You can't do this to me," she mumbled, fighting to remain conscious.

"But I can, my dear. It would be a pity if the drug destroys your brain completely. I gave you an extra strong dose."

The numbness crept over her body, seeping into her brain, giving her sensations the unreality of a dream. And then she didn't care any more.

"Now, get up," Falvo ordered.

Uncontrollably, her arms and legs moved her. There was a whisper of a desire to rebel against the command, but her limbs continued to obey Falvo Prem.

"Follow me," he commanded.

She walked from the cell, following Falvo and Gruto, thinking for only a moment that she should run or fight. But the thought evaporated.

CHAPTER 13. THE DUEL

Minzov stepped back at the visage of hate confronting him, but was blocked by Orvin and Yople. He stared intently at the features of the gaunt man rising from the desk, trying to bring back some memory. Rackle was hunch-shouldered and bald, his eyes seemingly in a permanent glare of anger. Still there was nothing in this face that brought any recognition.

"You have me at a disadvantage, sir," Dr. Minzov said. "I'm afraid I have no recollection of you."

"Of course, you wouldn't. Why should you remember Dr. Ygor Rackle, the man who's career you ruined?"

Minzov strained his voluminous memory, trying to bring back some association with the name Rackle, with special regard to anyone's career he may have ruined. There was something at the edge of consciousness, a faint glimmer of something from over twenty years ago. Could that be it?

There had been a review panel he had been asked to sit on at the Institute. Some young man was to present a paper involved in some obscure facet of advanced physics. But that young man had been strong and virile, presenting his material in a thoroughly forceful manner. His name had been Rackle, but he resembled nothing like this emaciated and bilious creature standing before him.

"Yes," Minzov said, "I believe I do remember something from a long time ago. At the Institute, wasn't? But that Rackle was a different man."

"I was that person," Rackle said. "But, good, good." He turned to the guards. "You two can go. This one won't give me any trouble."

"All right," Orvin said. "But you better watch him. He's pretty tricky."

"Tricky for you, perhaps, but I think I am more than a match for him."

Orvin shrugged and followed Yople from the laboratory.

"And shut the door behind you," Rackle called out, then nodded with satisfaction as the door closed. "Well, my dear Dr. Minzov. Why don't you have a seat? Let's talk over old times."

Rackle relaxed in his chair and offered Minzov a small seat in front of his desk. Minzov sat, instantly uncomfortable on the small plastic chair.

"And just what old times could we possibly have to discuss?" Minzov asked.

"For starters, let's talk about how you sabotaged my presentation, you villain. You were jealous, weren't you. Jealous because I was making great strides in an area of scientific research where you had failed time and again."

"I had failed?" Minzov scoffed. "You must have me confused with someone else. I have never failed in any area of scientific endeavor to which I have applied myself. As I recollect, you were doing some kind of research into the tripartite resonance of semi-superstrings."

"Ah, so you do remember."

"Yes, I remember what you were presenting was pure hogwash."

"Hogwash?" Rackle jumped from his seat, staring malevolently at Dr. Minzov. Then he smiled and

returned to his chair.

"Yes," Dr. Minzov went on, showing no emotion at Rackle's outburst. "You had the other four men on the panel believing your line, but I was most certainly not taken in. It was child's play to see through your falsified data and erroneous conclusions. It took some effort on my part, but I was finally able to convince the others of your perfidy. As I understand, your research grants were terminated, and you were ostracized from the Institute."

Rackle continued to smile at Minzov, saying nothing. He stood and paced behind his desk a few times, turning to Minzov as if to say something, then returning to his pacing. Finally, as if ready to explode, he spoke.

"Do you have any idea how much time and effort went into my research?" Rackle stopped and leaned over his desk. "Years of work, experiments, collating mountains of data until I finally distilled all that information into the principles behind the emergent forces of trifondite resonance."

"I thought you were working on tripartite resonance," Dr. Minzov said.

"No, it was trifondite resonance."

"Oh," Dr. Minzov said, realizing that, just possibly, he might have made an error.

He thought back to that day when Rackle had been making his presentation. Yes, it had been in the spring, as he remembered, and the ragweed had been blooming especially strongly that year. His allergies had been attacking him very hard that morning; his head had been congested and he had been sneezing almost continuously. With his ears ringing badly, it was possible that he had heard Rackle incorrectly that morning. Could he have mistakenly been the cause of a fellow scientist's disgrace? Had Rackle been innocent of any wrongdoing? Well, it was certainly a possibility he could entertain at a future date, as yet unspecified, when he had more data to work with.

"Well, the criminal in you came out nonetheless," Minzov said, "otherwise you would not be in this position now, as Sarnak's lackey."

"As if I had a choice. When I lost my position at the Institute, I lost everything. I had a little money put away, but that didn't last long. I bounced around from star system to star system. I was a stronger man when I started out, but my health eventually ebbed away. The one research position I was able to attain was eventually lost, due to a moment of weakness on my part and the wicked desires of a woman.

"I had to work as a deck hand on space freighters, then as a ship cleaner. When I wasn't able to do even that kind of work, I became a beggar. Me, Dr. Ygor Rackle reduced to being a supplicant for alms. That's when Sarnak found me.

"Sure, they were laughing at me when they bought me drinks, trying to keep me talking, telling what they thought was some wild tale. But Sarnak listened; he knew there was something in what the old drunken bum was babbling about. He sobered me up, got me cleaned out. Then we made a deal.

"I got the weapons for him; small ones at first, very simple to design and build. His ships were smaller then. When I came up with larger and more powerful weapons, he managed to find larger ships to put them in.

"Now, Dr. Minzov, take a good look at this laboratory. Bigger than anything at the Institute. And take a good look at all the scientists and technicians I have working for me. Yes, justice was finally served, in my case. And now that justice has brought you to me. You will be just another of my underlings."

"My good man," Dr. Minzov said, "you are suffering under a terrible delusion if you believe I will serve under the likes of you."

"Well, you have several choices. You can work for me and be fed, or you can be thrown into the cells and be used for whatever sport in which Sarnak feels you can be most entertaining. Then there are the guards and the other prisoners to consider. I understand the food in the cells isn't the most palatable in the galaxy. Mostly you get to lick the plates from the rest of the ship before they are run to the washer."

"Hmmm. I believe you may have a point, Rackle."

"Beginning to see the light, eh? And that's Dr. Rackle to you. I had achieved my Doctorate of Philosophy before I was so unceremoniously removed from the Institute."

"As, you say, Dr. Rackle. I seem to remember that Sarnak wants you to show me around this laboratory of yours."

"An excellent idea. And I hope you will not become too jealous when you see the measure of my achievements. It is very distasteful to see others drooling over my equipment."

"Jealous? Of you? Again, you are suffering under a severe delusion, Dr. Rackle."

"I think you'll be speaking a little differently after I've shown you around, Minzov. And feel free to ask questions if you feel you are becoming confused. It occurs to me that the probability of that will be approaching one."

"Harrumph," Minzov coughed, and went to the first bench.

Several technicians stood around monitoring equipment. A long, glass tube hung in a metal framework, glowing with a violet light and emitting an eerie whining. The sound increased and decreased in pitch as one of the technicians made adjustments on one of the pieces of equipment.

"Well, this looks pretty obvious," Minzov yawned.

"And just what is so obvious about it?" Rackle asked.

"It appears that you have evacuated this glass tube of air and replaced it with one of the noble gasses -- argon, is it? -- at some reduced pressure. I'd say ...," he scratched his chin, "at approximately two point eight five seven three times ten to the negative four Torr."

"It's two point eight five seven eight times ten to the negative four Torr," Rackle laughed in triumph.

"I won't quibble. And I would venture the guess that this experiment is being performed to gather absorption data on this piece of material here." He placed his hand on a square plate of dark material held in a small vise a few inches from the glass tube. "A oxophosphorene alloy, if I am not mistaken."

"Correct, Minzov," Rackle growled, and moved away.

"An interesting experiment," Minzov went on, following him, "which I performed several years ago. The results were somewhat pedestrian. Remind me to inform you of them sometime."

"Well, Minzov." Rackle stood next to another bench. "Perhaps you can tell me what this is."

Minzov stood pensively by the bench. Its thick metallic surface was drilled with holes, into which long rods had been inserted. Clamps held odd-shaped pieces of metal at various angles and heights above the surface. What appeared to Minzov to be a paraboloid dish stood at the end of the table, its centerline

pointing into the array of metal. Minzov rubbed his chin and postulated.

"I would guess that you are generating some kind of variably polarized signal by beaming a coherent ensemble of waves in the radio spectrum through this array of reflectors. Or possibly in the microwave range?"

"Wrong, Minzov," Rackle laughed. "Wrong, wrong, wrong. This is just a pile of scrap that my technicians haven't cleaned up yet."

"So, we are not above trick questions, eh, Rackle?"

"No, we are not. And that's Dr. Rackle. Now, my dear Minzov, follow me to the other end of the laboratory."

He beckoned Minzov to a large clear rod embedded in a block of red material and pointing toward the other end of the laboratory. It looked to Minzov as if it were a molded crystal. One end of the rod was ringed with clear, circular plates of some similar material. As Minzov came closer, he saw thin wires trailing away from the circular pieces and that the rod was hollow.

A weapon, Minzov thought, but where are the means of generating the destructive forces?

"Obviously a weapon," he said.

"Yes, obviously," Rackle said. "Perhaps you can enumerate the principles of its operation. The basic theory will do."

"I will have to make a more detailed inspection of its working parts."

"There is no need for you to make any sort of inspection, my dear Minzov, for the working parts, as you so ignorantly put it, are based upon principles you could never understand. Tell me, do you remember anything of my paper on trifondite resonance of semi-superstrings?"

"Please, Rackle. Let's not delve into that hogwash again."

"It is not hogwash!" Rackle yelled. "It is a statement of some of the most basic laws of nature. And I have used it to create one of the most devastating weapons ever devised by man."

Minzov yawned. How many times had he heard some villainous rascal make the same untenable assertion?

"Yes, yes, Rackle," he said. "Another doomsday weapon."

"You don't believe me?"

"Oh, of course I do. Did I sound as if I were being skeptical? If you say you have the ultimate doomsday weapon, then I'm sure you are correct in your delusion."

"It is not a delusion. It is a fact."

"Of course, it is."

"I can prove it."

"If you say so."

"Wait here."

Rackle went to several of the technicians and pulled them away from their work.

"Prepare the optico-rastifier for a demonstration," he ordered.

The technicians cringed, moving back from him.

"Go, get it ready," Rackle said.

"But Dr. Rackle," one of them said, "It's too unstable."

"It is not unstable. It just takes my hand to control it. Do you understand? My hand. Now go."

The technicians moved to a wall of dials and displays behind the device. They threw switches and made adjustments as Rackle and Minzov watched. Fearfully, they turned back to Rackle, but he urged them to continue.

A low hum, sounded in the laboratory, increasing in pitch and intensity. From somewhere behind the panel, Minzov heard the crackle of high voltage. The lighting in the laboratory flickered, then went out, to be replaced by an eerie green light. Minzov turned back to the weapon and saw the tube glowing with a rainbow of colors.

"It is ready, Dr. Rackle," the technician said.

"Now, Minzov, let us prepare a target for the optico-rastifier."

Rackle snapped his finger impatiently at the technicians, telling them to bring out a block of neutroratic material.

"What could you possibly do to neutroratic?" Minzov said. "It's impossible to even make a dent in it with the most powerful weapons."

"Is that so?" Rackle said. "Well, let us see what I can do."

The block of gray material was only a few inches on each side. The technician placed it on a metal tripod near the end of the tube, then turned to Rackle, looking pleadingly at him.

"All right. Get out, you cowards," Rackle said. "Not you, Minzov."

"I was only making sure that they left in an orderly fashion," Dr. Minzov said, returning from the group of technicians leaving through the door.

"Now watch."

Rackle stood at the instrument panel. He pressed a switch. There was a short, almost imperceptible flash from the tube, then its glowing ceased. The lights returned to normal.

"That wasn't so terrible, was it?" Rackle said.

Minzov looked at the cube of neutroratic, then turned to Rackle and laughed.

"It's still there," he said. "It would appear that the functioning of your weapon may be somewhat less than you desired."

"Touch the piece of material," Rackle said, calmly.

Minzov shrugged and held out his finger toward the neutroratic. He jumped back when his finger moved through it as if it were no more than air.

"Is there something wrong, Minzov?"

"What have you done to it?"

"Are you ready to admit that I have accomplished something truly amazing?"

"Oh, all right. If it makes you feel better. Yes, this is something truly remarkable. No one has ever been able to do anything destructive to neutroratic before."

"Well, I have done it, Minzov, by changing the superstring resonance. Those changes in the vibrations have sent the material to another universe. Some incipient light is still reflected, so we can see it, but its physical presence can be detected by no other means."

"Very impressive, Rackle. But why were your technicians so reticent about remaining during the demonstration?"

"The cowards. The first experiments with the optico-rastifier had a few problems. Some unknown rays were emitted from the lateral surfaces of the tube, then they interacted with the mechanisms causing material instabilities. I lost two of my technicians that time. Then I lost another one the second time we tried the weapon."

"That may be a severe drawback to its use," Minzov said.

"I've taken care of all that. But you know what Nervous Nellies these technicians are. They're not true men of science such as us."

"You have a point there. Yes, I remember more than once when technicians were reluctant to remain in my laboratories after some minor accidents. And really, there were no lasting injuries incurred. You will have to relate the principles behind this device to me, Rackle. I am keen to learn."

"In due time, Minzov. And that's Dr. Rackle. For now, let us continue with the tour of my laboratory."

"Just a moment," Minzov said. "That weapon Sarnak used on Enratic ..."

"Yes, Minzov. Another one of my inventions. A very basic application of my theory. By changing the resonant frequencies of the electron quantum waves, I am able to reduce the van der Waals forces in the molecular lattices, thereby weakening any structures upon which my ray is focused."

"An ideal disintegrator weapon."

"Correct, Minzov."

Minzov paid little attention as Rackle explained some of the other ongoing, minor experiments. His mind continually went back to the optico-rastifier, realizing its terrible, destructive potential and worrying what would befall the galaxy if Rackle ever constructed a full-scale version for Sarnak.

Rackle led him into another room, much larger than the laboratory. Many people sat hunched over benches laid out in a regular formation.

"This is our assembly area, Minzov," Rackle said, as they stood by the door. "We construct and repair most of our weaponry here. All these people are working in assembly line fashion, adding their one small piece to the weapon and passing it to the next station. Final testing is performed at the end of the room. I

think I will start you off working in here."

"Me? Working in a manufacturing environment?"

"An insult? Yes, that is exactly what I intended. As a matter of fact, I think this floor needs sweeping. You will find a broom over there."

"I refuse."

"Well, my dear Minzov, if one does not work, one does not eat. If one does not work for too long, one finds himself in the cells with the other nonproductive individuals."

"The cells, you say?"

"The cells."

Minzov nodded and picked up the broom.

"And do a good job, Minzov. If there is one thing I cannot abide, it is shoddy work. And when you are finished with this floor, you can bring your broom to my laboratory. That floor will also need your expert attention."

After Rackle left, Minzov went to work, trying to keep his mind clear of the indignity that had been inflicted upon him. He focused his mind on the physical properties of broom straws, theorizing on their interactions with the dust and other detritus on the floor. He wished he could remember Young's Modulus for straw, but the number escaped him. Working toward the other end of the room, he finished with a large pile and went to find something flat to sweep it onto. He found a piece of plastic and hypothesized on the optimal force to apply to the broom in order to transfer the largest amount from the pile to the plastic. A successful experiment was performed, and the dirt was transferred to a large trash can. Satisfied with his work, he returned to Rackle's laboratory.

Rackle put him to work, sweeping under his desk. As Minzov was finishing around a bookcase, Sarnak entered.

"Well, how are you two geniuses getting along?" Sarnak asked, then became enraged. He turned on Rackle. "Just what do you have this man doing?"

"He's sweeping the floor," Rackle said.

"I didn't send him down here to sweep your floors. He's here to get that so-called superweapon of yours working." He took the broom from Minzov and threw it in a corner. "Do you know how much I've already got invested in that thing?"

"It's already working," Rackle said.

"Then why aren't we using it?"

"It's not ready for full-scale deployment."

"Then make better use of this man's genius and get it ready."

"Genius?" Rackle laughed.

"Yes, genius. Most of the known galaxy has heard of this man and his accomplishments. Who's ever heard of you?"

"How can anyone hear about what I've done if I am stuck in your ship? You never let me go to any of the conferences."

"I can always arrange for you to return to that dive where I found you. With the eminent Dr. Minzov in my employ, I can probably get along without you."

"He'll never understand the workings of my optico-rastifier."

"You make sure that he can," Sarnak said. "I want that weapon finished and working by next week, understand?"

"I am sure," Minzov said, "that with my superior hybrid intellect, I will be of no small assistance to my colleague."

"There, you see?" Sarnak said. "Spoken like a true gentleman. Now, you two get to work." He went to Minzov and pinched his cheek. "I knew I'd like you the first time I saw you."

After Sarnak left, Rackle went to his desk and pulled out a sheaf of papers, tossing them on the desk.

"Read through these," he muttered. "They include all of my calculations. When you're through, we can discuss how to proceed."

Minzov nodded and sat at the desk. As Rackle moved away, Minzov's thoughts went to Athena, wondering what had become of her. Perhaps he could ask Sarnak, the next time they met.

#

Athena slumped against the inside hull of the ship. The chamber was dark, and she could only vaguely remember getting aboard. The chamber was filled with other men and women. She didn't know who they were or why they were there. Only that she must obey.

She fought to comprehend her situation, to remember who she was and why they were going to Deneb.

"All right you," Gruto bellowed. "Get up and move yourselves out of this hold."

He stood in the hatchway, blocking out most of the light coming from the chamber behind him. Athena guessed the ship had landed. Where was it they were going? Deneb? The others rose slowly, mechanically and made their way to the hatch. Athena rose with them, getting into the group and moving past Gruto, who laughed as she walked by.

Why is he laughing? she wondered, only a vague recollection coming back to her of the man. As she tried to form a concrete image in her mind, a numbness came over her, blocking out her thoughts.

He moved next to her as she walked with the others, smiling. Then he tripped her, and she fell to the deck, thinking as she fell that she should put out her hands to catch herself, but then not doing so. She fell on her side and rolled to her back.

"Oh, did poor little Astro Athena fall down?" Gruto said.

As she tried to get up, he nudged her with his foot, rolling her onto her back again.

"Oh, and now we're rolling over," he said. "Isn't that just the awfulest thing."

"Gruto, what are you doing?" Falvo Prem called from the front of the ship, then came through to the cabin. "Those slaves are worth money, especially her."

"I'm not hurting her," Gruto said.

"Make sure you don't."

"All right." He turned to Athena. "Get up. Oh, damn."

He ran from the ship, in time to see the other slaves wandering about aimlessly on the sandy expanse around the ship.

"Hey, wait," he yelled. "Get back here."

He ran after the slaves, slipping in the loose sand, catching up with them one at a time, and sending them back to the hatch. Sweating and breathing heavily, he rested for a moment after he had reached the last one, and they were all moving back where he wanted them. But now, Athena stumbled out of the hatch and moved off toward the front of the ship.

"Hey, wait," he called after Athena. He swallowed and chased after her, catching up to her as she walked past the nose and out into the desert. When she was turned around, he sighed. Then he looked back toward the hatch and cursed again.

The slaves were now crowding around it, jostling each other mindlessly and falling to the ground.

"What did I do to deserve this?" Gruto moaned, and ran to the hatch. "Stop it. Stop it."

The other slaves stopped moving and stood in a clutch. Falvo came out and stood above them, looking angry, then he pushed through them to get to Gruto.

"Will you stop playing around with these slaves?" Falvo asked. "I told you to get them out and in a line."

"I've got them under control," Gruto said, as Athena reached the knot and bumped into them, sending

them off milling in different directions.

"Halt," Falvo commanded. "Now, get into a line in front of me."

The slaves moved slowly, pushing against each other until the group had formed into a line facing Falvo. Athena found a place at the end of the line and stared ahead blankly.

"The Colonel should be arriving shortly," Falvo said. "I think he'll be satisfied with our wares this time, don't you?"

"They all look pretty strong," Gruto replied, rubbing at his face when his eyes passed Athena. "They ought to last a few days in this war, anyway."

"Yes, the war," Falvo sighed. "What a pointless exercise, eh? Pointless for them, and profitable for us."

"It's their planet," Gruto said, as he went into the ship, returning with two chairs which he placed in the shade of the ship. They sat, leaving the slaves to swelter in the desert sunlight.

"How about something to drink?" Falvo asked.

"Yes, I sure could use something cold right about now," Gruto said. "Those slaves had me running around pretty good."

"Okay. While you're in the ship getting something for yourself, bring me out something, too."

Gruto grumbled, but got up from his seat. After rummaging in the ship for a few moments, he came out with two glasses, handing one of them to Falvo, who took a quick drink then hid the glass under the chair.

"Hide that drink," Falvo said.

"But I haven't had any yet," Gruto replied.

"I don't care. The Colonel's coming. I don't want to have to water him and his whole entourage."

"Damn," Gruto said, taking a quick gulp and putting the drink under the chair.

"Ah, Colonel Rotbed," Falvo said, extending one of his scaly claws as the military man stepped from the ground vehicle.

Three large men stepped out in front of the Colonel, placing themselves between him and Falvo. The Colonel pushed his way through them.

"Falvo," he said, finally getting through the others. He looked back at them angrily for a moment, then returned to Falvo. He was several inches shorter than the Tyulian and a few inches wider. "How's business."

"Oh, I can't complain," Falvo said.

"Well, I could," Gruto said. "You don't know what we had to go through with this last lot, especially the one on the end." He pointed to Athena, as Falvo kicked him in the shin.

"Ah, trying to drive up the price?" the Colonel said.

"Oh, no, no." Falvo came closer to the Colonel after shooting a menacing look back at Gruto. "Gruto

doesn't understand that you are not interested in our overhead. No, no. We shall keep the price we agreed upon. We have brought you twenty slaves for ten thousand standols."

"Agreed," the Colonel said. "I just hope they last longer than the last bunch. It's no good being a colonel if there's no soldiers to order around."

"Yes, sir," his three aides agreed.

"By the way." He pulled Falvo aside, glancing at Gruto before he spoke. "I'm kind of short on training personnel. Is there any chance I might be able to rent Gruto for a little while?"

"Gruto? Oh, yes, there's always a chance of that. Just how long did you plan on needing him? He's an integral part of my business, you know. You don't know how difficult it can be to get these slaves ready for market without someone like Gruto to ... how shall I say it? ... convince them to cooperate."

"I understand. I'll only need him for five days, just long enough to train these ... uh ... recruits to obey a few simple commands and fire our weapons."

"I see. Well, I think I can spare him for five days, for , let's say, five hundred standols."

"Agreed," Colonel Rotbed replied. "I'll see that the amount is transferred to your account immediately."

"Good, good." Falvo rubbed his hands together. "I'll tell Gruto of our new arrangement."

Athena listened to the men talking, an emotional outrage bubbling up inside her. But the more it tried to come out of her, the more distant it felt, as if it had nothing to do with her. She wondered at the vague emotional feelings as the numbness came over her again. Falvo came closer to her but took hold of Gruto.

"I've got a job for you, Gruto," he said, "and the Colonel is paying for it."

"What kind of job?" Gruto asked.

"The Colonel wants you to train these slaves for him. He's going to pay us two hundred and fifty standols for five days of your service. And I'll split it with you sixty-forty. Of course, I get sixty percent."

"What?" Gruto said. "I should at least get half."

"Oh, all right. If you're going to get greedy about it, I won't argue. I wouldn't want to jeopardize our friendship over a few standols. See the Colonel. He'll tell you what he wants you to do."

Several hours later, Falvo took off in his ship, leaving Gruto behind with the slaves. He kept them in the line, preparing them for their initial training.

The Colonel had supplied Gruto with the standard uniform for a member of his training cadre, a stiff, brown tunic and trousers, high, black boots and a wide-brimmed hat. Gruto stood before his charges, erect and smiling in his uniform.

But the slaves stood before him, impassively. Athena regarded him as if he were no more than just another inanimate object in the landscape. From somewhere inside, there was a strong dislike, almost a hatred that tried to force itself into her consciousness. Something about the destruction of a loved one.

"I am Sergeant Gruto," he said, looking up and down the line of slaves. "Well, I'm not a real sergeant, just an honorary one for now. But that's not important. I will be your drill instructor for the next five days. Before those five days are up, you will learn to hate me; you will curse my name; you will spit on the

ground I walk on. But by that time, you will learn to obey every command I make. At the end of your training you will be soldiers.

"Are there any questions?"

Then he shook his head.

"I must be going nuts," he said. "None of you can even think up a question, let alone ask it. Okay, forget I said that.

"Now, the first thing I will teach you is how to respond to commands. When I ask you a question you will respond with either 'Yes, sir' or 'No, sir.' Is that understood?"

"Either yes, sir or no, sir," they answered. "Is that understood?"

"No, no," Gruto cried. "Answer with the right answer. "Do you understand?"

"The right answer," they replied. "Do you understand?"

"Oh," Gruto moaned.

He spent the next several hours teaching them to respond. Finally he drilled them in answering.

"Are you slaves?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," they replied.

"Am I a great man?"

"Yes, sir."

"Are you going to be just terrific soldiers?"

"Yes, sir."

"Are we going to do some physical training?"

They said nothing.

"The correct answer is yes," Gruto said. "And from now on, when I ask you if you want to do more physical training, the correct answer is yes. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"I can't hear you," Gruto said.

"Yes, sir," they replied, their voices still the same.

"Oh." Gruto shook his head. "When I say I can't hear you, that means I want you to speak louder. Now, I can't hear you."

"Yes, sir," they replied a little louder.

"I still can't hear you."

"Yes, sir," they said, slightly louder than before.

After twelve tries, he had them screaming at the top of their lungs. He strode up to Athena and scowled at her.

"I can't hear you, Astro Athena," he yelled, getting up close to her. "Come on. Sound off like you got a pair."

She looked at him with confusion. What pair was she supposed to have? There was a pair on her chest, but how did they make her louder? Gruto looked down at her.

"Forget it," he said, and walked away.

#

With the approach of night, a large ground vehicle arrived skimming across the sand, carrying food, tents and cots for the trainees. After some effort, they had the tents pitched and were sitting on the ground eating the chow from plastic mess kits. When they were finished eating, Gruto ordered them into their tents. He came by Astro Athena's tent sometime later and dropped a bundle in front of it.

"This is your uniform and blankets," he said. "Put on the uniform and throw your old clothes in the bin by the truck. And don't ever let me catch you outside without your hat on." He moved away to the next tent but stopped as she came out. "And keep your hands out of your pockets, too."

After she had dressed in the new uniform, she lay on the cot, feeling uncomfortable in the thick, stiff cloth and the cap that snugged her head. She had been more comfortable in her other clothing. That clothing, it reminded her of something else, some other life. The memories fought their way through the haze, her will fluttering at the edge of consciousness. As she fought harder, it disappeared, leaving her feeling empty and tired. Her mind clouded over again, with thin images of people sometimes breaking through; a young man, good-looking but always complaining, an old man with a beard and possessing a fabulous intelligence. Who was he?

#

She slept fitfully, waking at irregular intervals during the night to stare out the end of her tent at the starry blackness. With the first light of dawn, Gruto was moving between the tents, waking the slaves with his rough hollering. Before training began, another truck skimmed up to the encampment with food.

They ate silently, sitting by their tents as they had done the night before. Athena felt the food descending into her stomach, soothing some basic animal instinct but giving her no pleasure. Something kept coming back to her; there was someone in danger, and she had to get to him. She put another spoonful of the gruel into her mouth and swallowed, forgetting for a moment the plight of the young man.

Even before they had finished, Gruto had them up and preparing for training.

"Come on, you lazy bums," he yelled. "Get on your feet. Let's go. What d'you think this is supposed to be? Some kind of picnic?"

He shoved them when they moved too slowly, ordering them to get their mess kits back to the truck and get into a line. When he pushed Athena, a blind instinct took hold of her and she whirled on him, her fists up and ready to strike. Gruto jumped back, but the urge to fight left as soon as it had come. She stood dumbly, then carried the mess kit past the cowering Gruto.

He stared at her as she took her place on the end of the line, rubbing at his jaw again, remembering the blows she had given him in the cell on Pockets.

After a few hours of close order drill, they were obeying his commands without hesitation. Now, it was time to move on to the next phase of training, with weapons.

Gruto marched them to the truck and got them into a single file. A soldier handed ray rifles to Gruto, one at a time, as he made sure they were discharged before handing them to the slaves. Once they were back in a line, he put them through the Manual of Space Arms. By the time the evening truck came with their dinner, he had them looking like soldiers.

#

Two days later, Colonel Rotbed and his aides returned. Gruto marched the slaves around the tents, putting them through the close order drill and then the Manual of Space Arms. Later, he took them away from the encampment and had them fire at targets.

"Very good, Sergeant Gruto." The Colonel and his aides applauded when the show was over. "Perhaps a permanent position could be made for you in my army. I need good trainers like you."

"Thank you, Colonel, but I'm afraid I'm a civilian at heart. Plus Falvo's waiting for me."

"Well, never mind. I'm afraid I'm going to have to cut your training short. I'm going to need these soldiers at the front right away."

"I'm not sure they're ready for any tactical maneuvering yet, Colonel. I haven't gotten that far in their training."

"It doesn't matter," Colonel Rotbed said. "As long as I've got a few more warm bodies to throw into the fighting. Tell Falvo Prem that I can use whatever he brings me, trained or not."

"I'll let him know, Colonel. Is he on his way to get me?"

"Yes. I contacted him this morning. He'll be arriving shortly. Oh, I was going to ask him to refund some of the five hundred standols I paid him for your services, but since you've done such a fine job in so short a time, I'll let you keep it all."

"Five hundred standols?"

"Yes. Isn't that enough?"

"Oh, it's very generous, Colonel. As a matter of fact, I'll have to let Falvo know exactly how I feel about your generosity."

"Fine, fine," the Colonel said. "I should have a truck arriving within the hour. We'll be transporting them to the battle from here."

"Yes, Colonel."

With the arrival of the truck, Gruto marched the soldiers to the back of it and had them climb inside with their weapons, now fully charged. They lined the narrow seats along either side of the truck, taking helmets from a pile in the middle. Gruto watched as the doors of the vehicle closed, then felt an unaccustomed sadness come over him.

His charges, the people he had been training, were on their way, the fledglings leaving the nest. He shook his head and looked to the sky, thinking of ways to deal with Falvo.

#

Sitting in the cramped, sweltering darkness, Athena heard a muffled rumbling, like thunder coming across a wide distance. The vehicle cruised evenly, skimming a few inches above the surface of the sand, bouncing occasionally as it swept past a tall dune. Then it bounced hard and the head of the person next to her hit her in the jaw. For an instant she felt rage and brought her hand back to strike. By the time she was bringing the fist forward, the rage had gone, and she settled back into her seat.

She was soaked with sweat by the time the vehicle came to a halt. The doors opened, and they were ordered by a large sergeant to get out.

"Yes, sir," they yelled.

"Not so loud," he said, rubbing his ears. "Just get out and form a line."

Taking their weapons and new helmets, they moved slowly out into the sun. The muted rumbling became the bursting of explosives just a short distance away. Dirt and rocks fell about their heads, pinging off their helmets. They had moved into a line, facing the sergeant.

"You're going into battle today," he yelled above the noise. "I know none of you cares much about anything, so what I'm saying doesn't mean much. Before we send you out to the lines, the Padre wants to talk to you. And listen to what he says. It makes him feel bad when people ignore him."

A tall, smiling man came out of a nearby tent. He moved slowly, stumbling slightly in the pot-holed ground. He stood in front of the slaves, smiling first at them, then at the sergeant.

"Fellow soldiers," he began, "you are about to embark on a battle for the freedom of our world. Remember that Hango, our great father in the sky, is on our side. He loves us. He hates the rebels who are trying to overthrow our Hango-endorsed system of government.

"Before you are marched away to your inevitable doom, I'd like to have you join me in a prayer.

"O great Hango, who rules over the sky and our world ..."

The slaves stood silently.

"Repeat what he says, you nitwits," the sergeant bellowed. He turned to the Padre and spoke reverently. "Start it again, Padre."

"O great Hango, who rules over the sky and Epoleven, our world ..."

The slaves mumbled the words, some more quickly than the others, so their response was unintelligible. The sergeant shrugged to the Padre.

"It's the best they can do," he said.

The Padre continued.

"Even though we are all slaves with no will of our own,

"We fight for what is right.

"So, how can it be wrong for us to be slaves?

"Even though some of us are more slave than others,

"Let's all go forward for the good of Hango,

"And for our beloved leaders,
"Who would be here if they could,
"But they are stuck behind desks,
"Far away,
"And feeling really bad about it,
"And forced to eat rich food and drink expensive wine,
"While we eat healthy rations
"And drink purified swamp water.
"O Hango be with us to the end.
"Amen."

The Padre made a ritual movement with his hand and walked away. The sergeant shook his head and turned to the slaves.

"All right, let's get moving."

He marched them into two lines, then out across the battlefield to a line of trenches and barbed wire.

Something stirred inside her; an excitement, a desire to fight and a rage to win. She remembered ... something. Fighting and battle. It was in her blood, hot and wild. Weapons, war, the Academy.

She was Astro Athena. As if a strong wind had blown away a thick fog, she remembered. And now explosions were throwing up dirt all around her. Unseen men and women were screaming inside open holes. She realized she was being marched into a battle. But where was she?

And where were Donald and Dr. Minzov?

CHAPTER 15. THE BATTLE FOR EPOLEVEN

Now Athena recognized all the characteristics of a full-scale war. Uniformed soldiers ran about the huge battlefield, which stretched in either direction as far as she could see. Most of the soldiers stayed within a few meters of the long line of trenches, huddling down against the rays and projectiles screaming through the air. Others charged in small groups at the opposing line of trenches several kilometers across a scarred and barren valley. But they were mowed down unmercifully by rays before they could get halfway across the terrain, and the same thing appeared to be happening on the other side, with troops coming toward her side. Overhead, roaring rockets flew and dropped down liquid death on men and women as they ran to get away. And she was marching with the other slaves to that same line of trenches.

"Duck," the sergeant yelled, and jumped face down in the mud.

She fell to the ground. Something whistled by so loudly it stung inside her ears, followed by a deafening explosion only fifty feet away. The concussion forced the air from her lungs like a hard punch to the chest. Small rocks and dirt cascaded on her prone form a few seconds later.

"All right, get up," the sergeant ordered. "Let's get moving."

Another rocket roared in from the direction of the enemy, flashing down heat rays on them. Soldiers burst into flame in front of her, running maniacally and slapping at the flames engulfing their bodies. Then there was a deafening explosion above her.

"Run!" the sergeant screamed.

She looked up. The rocket had been torn into jagged pieces, burning wildly and falling toward her. She ran, diving into a deep hole and sliding on her stomach to its bottom. She heard the crash and felt the jolting of the ground as part of the hole caved in on her.

Digging herself out and choking on the damp earth in her mouth, she knew she had to get away. Whatever this was about, she was sure she did not want to die in it. Deneb, she remembered they were taking her to Deneb. Then this must be the war that had been going on for over one hundred years. Yes, Epoleven. Had it come to this? Using slaves to fight the war?

There had to be a way to escape, to get back to Galactic HQ. If a planet wanted to fight a war against itself, that was its privilege, but if it was going to buy slaves to fight it, that was totally reprehensible, heinous even. It had to be stopped.

Recovering from the shock of the rocket crash, she lifted her head just above the edge of the hole. A ragged piece of hull lay smoking only a few feet from her face. Searching on all sides for any activity, she saw none; everyone was still under cover. She jumped from the hole, holding her helmet down with one hand as she held onto the ray rifle with the other, running back the way they had come.

The other slaves had disappeared. How many of the poor devils had died before even reaching the battle lines? The sergeant was gone, while other soldiers came out to scavenge the remains of the ship. Turning back to the battle, she saw it picking up along other sections of the line.

If she could find a ship of some kind, she could escape from this lunacy. She stopped behind a pile of rock and debris to catch her breath and think. Perhaps there was something more important for her to do. Was saving herself all she had to do? No, she must make some attempt to end this folly. She must find her way to the seats of the rival governments. They had to be made to see reason.

She continued to move back from the front lines, keeping her head down as she ran. She came upon an officer lying on a stretcher, panting as he bled through a seeping bandage. She knelt beside him and he smiled.

"Am I already dead?" he asked weakly, then coughed. "You look like an angel. Funny, I still feel lousy. You'd think if I was in Valheven with a good-looking woman like you, I'd be getting ready to do something pleasant ... you know ..." He nudged her with his elbow.

"No, you're still alive," she said. "And I think you're dying. I can tell by the severity of your wound."

"Oh, no," he cried. "I don't want to die. Even if I do end up in Valheven with the great Hango. What did you have to tell me that for?"

"It's time to put this foolishness to an end. I'm Astro Athena of the Space Rangers. I was brought here with a group of slaves to fight this war for you."

"You mean they grabbed a Space Ranger? I'm sure we didn't mean anything by it. Nothing personal, that is. We're just a little short on manpower right now. With any luck, the last members of the baby boom should be reaching maturity soon, then we can cut down on the number of slaves we use. But Hango says it's okay, so what's the big deal?"

"Well, Hango's wrong. And I'm going to stop this. Tell me where I can find your government."

"That would be treason." He coughed again.

"If I get back to Galactic HQ, then the Space Rangers are going to come and clean up this mess. And they're not going to take sides or be very happy about it. If I speak with your government, perhaps that won't be necessary."

"Come on. Can't you see I'm dying here? And I'm only a lieutenant. Why don't you go and bother a captain or something?"

Disappointed, she shook her head and stood. Obviously the lieutenant's behavior was the product of brainwashing and propaganda. Why else would he give his loyalty to such a depraved enterprise?

She continued to move away from the front lines, hoping she would not end up back in the desert where the training of the slaves had taken place. After following the rutted and muddy tracks of the military vehicles for several hours, she noticed the sounds of battle were being left behind. Occasionally, an explosion sounded like it might have been nearby, but there was less and less destruction and fewer injured milling about. She came upon more officers, saluting as she had seen others doing, but now she was determined to stop for no one less than a general.

The farther away from the fighting she got, the better the living quarters were becoming. Where there had only been trenches and a few tents up by the front lines, now there were larger tents, and even a bungalow or two. Outside one of the large tents, several officers were lounging around a fire.

"You, soldier," one of them called out to her. "What are you doing back here? You're supposed to be up there fighting."

"I'm not one of your soldier slaves," she said, moving to stand before them. "I am Astro Athena of the Space Rangers."

The officers jumped to their feet and several of them moved away.

"The Space Rangers," a major said. "What are you doing here?"

"I was kidnapped by some of your slave traders and brought here to fight in your war."

"Hey, I've got to get back to my war planning, fellas," a colonel said, brushing at her tunic. "You guys know how impatient the General is when he doesn't have me there."

"Me, too," another one said.

Athena moved in front of the colonel and took hold of the front of the woman's tunic with both hands.

"I'm looking for a general," Athena said. "Where can I find one?"

"A general?" she replied. "Well, if you're looking for a general, there's one in that cabin over there." She pointed toward a sheet metal structure sitting behind some large tents. "General Ritmo is in there. He's in charge."

"Fine I'll go talk to him."

As soon as she let go of the tunic, the colonel scurried away in the direction the others had disappeared. Athena strode forcefully through the camp and entered the cabin.

"Just what is the meaning of this?" an old man in his underwear bellowed. A young girl clutched some garments to her body and ran from the cabin. Athena stopped in front of him, standing tall with her hands on her hips.

"Are you General Ritmo?" she asked.

"Who the hell are you to ask me who I am?" the General demanded.

"I'm Astro Athena of the Space Rangers."

"The Space Rangers?" he said quietly. "Oh. Yes, I'm General Ritmo. I wasn't aware that the Space Rangers had come to observe our struggle against the wicked forces of our enemies." He moved to a small bed and picked up the trousers lying across it, stepping into them as Athena moved to stand at a table.

"They're not, General. I was kidnapped and brought here by some slave traders."

"Outrageous," he roared. "Well, I'll see to that myself. We can't have members of the Space Rangers brought here to fight as common soldiers," He laughed nervously as he pulled on his tunic, leaving it unbuttoned. "Now, I could use you as one of my officers."

"No, General. I think this war of yours has been going on long enough, and I am going to put a stop to it."

"A stop to the war? What are you saying? If you stop the war, I'll be out of a job. And did you see that girl who just left here? Do you think an old man like me would be able to get women like that if I didn't have this general's uniform?"

"Well, you can either stop this war yourselves, or the Space Rangers will be forced to come here, under the aegis of the Galactic Federation, and stop it for you."

"Look." The General sat on the other side of the table. "Maybe we can work something out. Okay, okay. So using slaves isn't such a hot idea. Both sides decided it might be something to try out. And let's face it,

it's a lot better than killing ourselves off. Well, maybe it's just a little unethical."

"A little unethical? It's completely disgusting."

"So, let's split the difference; we'll call it mildly despicable." He stood and buttoned his tunic, his many medals jingling on his chest. "Look at these, will you? You don't get this many medals for recycling ration tins. Well, one of them was for that."

"General, I insist that I speak with your government. Then I intend to speak with your enemy's government."

"All right, all right. I suppose all good things must come to an end. I don't know what my father would say, if he were still alive. He was a general, too. It's been a family tradition. If you have your way, my son won't have a chance to carry on that tradition. Are you some kind of radical or something?"

"That's the way it's going to have to be."

"All right. I guess I'll have my orderly bring around a ground skimmer to take you to our capital city. Orderlies. How will I ever be able to get an orderly again?"

#

Several days later, members of the governments were meeting at a long table, Athena sat at the head of the table, looking down at the rival factions sitting on either side, civilian delegates alongside military men. They argued vehemently across the table until Athena clapped her hands to get their attention.

"Gentlemen, gentlemen," she yelled. "Let's get this meeting underway. I assume a cease-fire has been called on both sides?"

"Yes, yes," the President of Agrophon said.

"Our side has stopped firing also," the Premier of Prowengo added.

"Well, then, as I have previously mentioned," Athena said, "this war of yours is going to have to stop. There is still the matter of reparations for all the slaves that were brought here, but I'll let Galactic HQ figure that out. Now, is the fighting going to stop?"

"We can't just stop fighting like that," General Ritmo said. "Maybe we can taper off a little at a time. You know, just wean ourselves off it. Maybe just a short battle in the mornings then a few skirmishes on weekends."

"That sounds reasonable to me," A general from Prowengo said. "I can get behind something like that. And if we only fight on weekends, let's make it on Sundays."

"Sure," an Agrophon delegate spoke up. "If we keep it small enough, maybe we can let people watch."

"We can sell tickets," someone said.

"And have teams," another delegate said.

"Then we can sell refreshments."

"Like popcorn."

"And beer."

"And hot dogs."

"And beer."

"With cups having the pictures of your favorite officer on them."

"As long as no slaves are involved," Athena said.

"Yes," the President said. "And each team can have its own general."

"Good, good." General Ritmo raised his eyes to the ceiling and nodded. Then he turned to Athena.

"There, you see? We can work this thing out for ourselves. So, we won't be needing the Space Rangers to come here after all."

"We'll have to send a few observers," Athena said.

"Sure, sure," the Premier said. "After we build an enclosed battleground, we can give the observers box seats, up above the action."

"Hey, we can make a lot of money on those seats," the President said. "We can't just give 'em away."

"We'll manage," the Premier said.

"Have all the slaves been set free?" Athena asked.

"Yes," the President sighed. "That ended most of the real trench fighting anyway. They're being brought to our capital cities to be evaluated and retrained."

"Too bad, though," the Prowengo general said. "I had a swell offensive planned for next week."

"Hah," General Ritmo replied. "If it isn't any better than the one you staged a few months ago, it would have been a waste of time anyway."

"Never mind," Athena said. "And you will pay for them to be transported back to their home worlds."

"We agree," the President and Premier nodded.

"Good." Athena rested her hands on the table. "Now, let's get that in writing and signed by both parties. Delegates from Galactic HQ are on their way to oversee the disarmament."

There was some grumbling from around the table, but they agreed to have the proper documents drawn up. The delegates moved away from the table and conversed in small groups.

"Oh, one more thing," Athena said. "I have urgent business elsewhere. I'm going to need a scout ship to get me there as quick as possible."

"We'll have one arranged," the President said, and looked at the Premier. They nodded together. "As soon as you want it, we'll have it ready."

"And thank Hango for all your help," the Premier said, then came close to Athena and whispered in her ear. "He was on our side, anyway."

#

Relieved, she was finally back in space, piloting the scout ship she had been given by the President of

Agrophon. After some argument, he had also agreed to install a super-space radio.

"So, Colonel Richards," she said, looking into the image of Colonel Richards' eyes on the communicator screen, "I found Sarnak, but had some trouble."

"Do you remember where he was?"

"Yes, he was in an uncharted star system. I'm on my way back there."

"Good, good. We can't leave someone as valuable as Dr. Minzov in Sarnak's hands for too long."

"How many reinforcements can I get for a raid on Sarnak, Colonel?"

"Reinforcements?" The Colonel looked away at something, holding his hand over the microphone as he spoke with someone she couldn't see. "Reinforcements, yes," he said, and then laughed nervously. "Well, we have a slight problem there, Athena. I don't have any reinforcements available right now. Possibly in a few days. We've been eliminating a few positions around here, and our manpower has fallen a little low."

"Never mind, Colonel," Athena sighed. "I guess I'll have to handle it by myself."

"Fine. That's showing real initiative. If you get back ... I mean ... when you get back," he laughed again, "just a little joke ... we'll have to talk about getting you some kind of raise."

"Thanks, Colonel. I'll speak with you later." She shut down the communicator and went back to the ship's controls.

She had several hours to wait, after Sarnak's coordinates had been transferred to the ship's navigation system. But what good was it going to do to get there and be recaptured? She sat back in the pilot's seat and thought, letting the navigation system pilot the ship.

Yes, she thought, maybe there is a way to get on board without being taken.

"Minzov, just what have you been doing?" Rackle came up behind him in the cramped space behind the instrument panel. "Can't you read a simple schematic?"

Crouched inside the wide cabinet, Dr. Minzov let go of the wire bundle and looked up at Rackle.

"What are you talking about?" Minzov asked.

"This change to my design." Rackle waved the thin sheet of electronic symbols. "What do you think you're trying to do?"

Minzov crept out of the cabinet, and Rackle stepped back as he came out into the weapons bay. Several other weapons towered over the two men; huge ray cannons alongside panels of controls and readouts, stretching around the circumference of the bay.

"I have discovered an alternate method of increasing the weapon's yield and efficiency," Dr. Minzov said. "I am going to improve the radix oscillator by twelve percent."

"I want to see the calculations and justification for such a claim."

"If you had taken the time to look before you encroached upon my work ..."

"Encroached? You imbecile, I'm running things around here. I do not encroach."

"If you say so, Rackle. But if you want to see the calculations, they are sitting on my desk."

"Yes, I want to see the calculations. I'm going back to the laboratory to get them. In the meantime, don't touch anything inside my optico-rastifier until I get back. Is that understood?"

"If that is your wish," Dr. Minzov said. "If you feel that I can be more productive by standing around while you satisfy your petty paranoia."

"I don't need to satisfy my petty paranoia. I don't have any petty paranoia. I want to make sure you are not confusing things again."

"Harrumph," Dr. Minzov coughed.

Such rancor, he thought, and over such an insignificant occurrence. And it had already been several days since it had happened.

While working on the scaled-up version of the optico-rastifier, he had misread the wiring diagram and connected one of the fracto-diodes incorrectly. So, there had been a pop and some smoke, just a little thing, really. Those technicians scared so easily. Well, three of them had been blinded, but only temporarily. And a few others had to be treated for minor burns. But they were almost back to normal, now.

Dr. Minzov stood impatiently by the control panel. He flipped some of the switches as he thought.

"Well," he said to himself, "I might as well work on the calculations for the grondorotron. And I still need to derive the formulae for the exohydron mediator."

He found a chair and seated himself by the remote link to the computer. He logged on and waited.

"Minzov, is that you?" the words scrolled by on the screen.

"Well, of course it's me," Minzov replied, then sat still with his hands poised over the keypad. The

computer had never used a logon sequence like this before. He shrugged. So, someone must be trying out some new monitor software.

"It's me, Minzov." Now a soft voice was coming from a voice actuator on the panel. "It's Mary."

"Mary? Mary, who?" Minzov asked, then realized who it was. "How did you get into Sarnak's computer?"

"They tapped into the computer on the *Space Eagle* and I jumped across," Mary whispered. "I thought I'd never be able to get in touch with any of you. What's going on?"

Minzov leaned closer to the microphone, first making sure none of the technicians was watching him. He related everything he knew, telling Mary about Athena being taken away and Donald in the clutches of Sarnak.

"Boy, we're in a real jam," Mary said.

"Well, it's not so bad," Minzov said. "I keep busy on some interesting projects, and I only have to share my room with five other technicians."

"That's fine for you. But what about Athena? What's happened to her? And how can we get out of this?"

"I don't know. It will be a terrible day if Sarnak gets his hands on this super-weapon, if we ever get it working. I have a bad feeling that he could conquer the galaxy with it."

"I've been rummaging through the computer memories. I'll keep looking and see if I can find something useful."

"Let me know when you do," Minzov said. "I'll do some thinking myself, while I'm working out the equations for the exohydron mediator."

#

Donald sat hunched down on the sofa, fuming, while he ignored Sarnak. Neither of them spoke for several minutes. Sarnak fidgeted next to him as Donald continued to stare at the wall.

"Look," Sarnak said, breaking the silence, "I'm not such a bad guy, am I?"

Donald remained silent.

"You've got your own room, don't you? And you're getting all the best food my ship has to offer. Come on, can't you just give me a little smile?"

"No," Donald said. "You're fat and disgusting."

"I told you. I have a glandular condition. You don't know how many diets I've tried. There was the Castorian Grapefruit diet, the Regulan Water Starvation diet, the Microscopium Bread diet. I've tried them all."

"You could at least exercise," Donald said. "Or are you too lazy?"

"Lazy? Me? Don't you think I want to exercise? It's just that I've got this back problem. Some days I can't even bend over."

Donald shook his head.

"That's your trouble, Sarnak. You're always looking for excuses. I suppose you've never tried to do anything about that skin of your either."

"I went to a doctor for the acne, but he said it was genetic. He couldn't do anything for it unless I gave up certain foods."

"And why don't you turn the other way when you talk to me. That breath of yours could knock out a herd of Aldeformian mammoths. Why don't you get a perfume implant in your mouth?"

"A perfume implant? What do you think I am anyway?"

"I'd say you're a fat, disgusting person with bad breath."

Sarnak stood and stomped to the door. With his hand poised over the button, he turned back to Donald.

"Go ahead," he said. "Make fun of me. It's not like I'm not used to it."

Donald said nothing, turning away.

"Sure," Sarnak went on. "Who cares about my feelings? Everyone looks at old Sarnak and thinks they've got every right to laugh. Well, I'm a human being, too. And you'd better change your attitude pretty quick. My supply of patience is not inexhaustible."

"I don't care," Donald said, hoping the pirate was finally going to leave him in peace. But instead of opening the door to leave, Sarnak went back to the sofa.

"Look, I've tried to be nice," Sarnak said. "What does it take to get through to you?"

"There's nothing you could do."

"There's got to be something."

They turned as the door opened and saw one of Sarnak's men enter the room.

"Sarnak," he said.

"What do you want?" Sarnak snapped. "Get out of here."

"But, Sarnak. We've just made contact with a derelict ship. It's within range of our magnatractor ray."

"Well, bring it in, then," Sarnak said. "What are you bothering me for?"

"Well, Jerger said we should ask you first," the crewman said.

"Jerger? What's he got to do with it?"

"He's in charge of the bridge right now."

"That idiot's in charge of the bridge? Wait outside. I'll be right up."

He smiled down on Donald as the crewman left.

"Come on," he said. "Just a little smile for old Sarny-poo."

Donald grimaced and turned away. Sarnak sighed and walked from the room.

#

"Minzov." Rackle's voice came over the voice actuator on the instrument panel. "Get down to the hangar deck. We're pulling in a derelict, and I want you to look it over before we dismantle it."

"I really should keep working on these calculations," Dr. Minzov replied.

"I don't care what you think you should be doing. Get down to the hangar deck, now."

"All right," Minzov sighed, then spoke to the computer. "Mary, are you still there?"

"I'm here," Mary said.

"What's going on?"

"There's an old scout ship floating around out there. It's being brought in. I think Rackle believes it's booby-trapped and will explode if someone goes in."

"And he wants me to be the booby?"

"Since you already have most of the qualifications, that's probably the general idea."

"Well, I won't have it." Minzov slapped his hand on the panel. "I'm going to complain to Sarnak. He'll listen to me."

"Why don't you just go down to the hangar? I can check out the ship as soon as they bring it in and hook up to its computer. I'll let you know if it's booby-trapped."

"Oh, all right." Minzov got up from the control panel and stalked down to the hangar deck.

He was relieved now that he was able to move through the ship at will. Being one of Rackle's trusted scientists, no one bothered him as he walked down the corridors, but he still felt nervous under the stares of Sarnak's people.

Reaching the entrance to the hangar, he waited with a group of people while the air pressure stabilized inside. Finally, the hatch opened with a soft sigh, and Minzov followed the group into the hangar deck.

Their footsteps echoed around the huge, open area, which still held several small ships along with the *Space Eagle*. He felt a twinge of sadness as he passed it, held silently in a large clamp. The once proud fighting vessel was now reduced to a sleeping hulk in Sarnak's hangar. Maybe someday ...

The scout ship was somewhat smaller than the other ships. The group stopped by the side hatch as the cylindrical ship lay on its belly.

"Who's going in first?" a technician asked.

"Not me," another said. "Hey, you." He pointed at Dr. Minzov. "You're from Rackle's group. You're supposed to go in and make sure it's safe for the rest of us."

"I will need a few moments to make some preliminary observations," Dr. Minzov replied.

He pulled an interface cable from a nearby column and looked over the hull of the ship until he found the galactic standard connector. Fussing with the connection for a few seconds, he got the cable attached, then went to a nearby terminal and logged onto the computer.

"Mary, what do you see?" he asked softly.

"There's nothing in there," Mary replied. "Hmmm. It hasn't been sitting out there very long. That's odd. It just came from some war. But it's safe to go inside."

Minzov shut down the connection and went to the hatch, pushing past the knot of technicians. Opening it, he entered and walked through the ship. It was small inside, just the cockpit and one small hold. The rest was given over to engines and fuel compartments. Just as Mary had said it was odd; the air was still fresh and warm. The ship had the feel that it had been occupied recently, but there was nothing interesting about it, mostly standard communication and navigation equipment. He walked back to the hatch and climbed out to the waiting group of technicians.

"It's perfectly safe, gentlemen," he said. "I imagine you are eager to strip it of its contents." Then he added softly to himself, "like the group of vultures you are."

"Nah," one of them said. "You've stripped one, you've stripped them all. Come on, guys, it's time for a coffee break, anyway. We can work on this tub later."

The others muttered their agreement and left the hangar. Minzov followed them out a few moments later, lingering at the *Space Eagle* and wishing he were back aboard her, roving the galaxy with Athena, having new adventures -- possibly not so dangerous -- and making new discoveries. He sighed and went back to the weapons bay.

#

Athena remained motionless, not breathing for several seconds, as she heard the footsteps leaving the hangar and the faint echo of the hatch closing. Whoever had been walking through the ship had not been interested in giving it more than a cursory examination. She pushed on the wall panel behind which she had been hiding and squeezed herself out of the narrow space between the panel and outer hull. She crept to the hatch and peered out into the hangar. No one was around.

Slipping out of the scout ship, she moved around the idle ships, smiling when she saw the *Space Eagle*. But there was no time for a reunion. She had to find Donald and Dr. Minzov. Together, they could make plans for escape.

She stopped at a rack of technician's coveralls and took one, slipping it over the uniform of Epoleven she was still wearing. She took one of the narrow caps from the rack and pulled it down as low as she could, hoping no one would recognize her.

The risk had to be taken, tremendous as it was. She was going to have to move through the ship as if she were one of Sarnak's crew. Later, she might be able to tie into the computer and use it to find Minzov and Donald.

Reaching the hatch, she opened it slowly and peered out into the corridor for any sign of activity, looking in every direction. With no one around, she left the hangar and moved through the ship.

She would start with the labs. She remembered Sarnak had said he was sending Minzov to work in a lab run by someone called Rackle.

#

Rackle looked up from his papers at Minzov, then returned to them.

"What did you find?" Rackle asked.

"There was nothing remarkable about the ship," Minzov replied. "Just a run-of-the-mill scout ship, as far as I could ascertain."

"Which probably wasn't very far. What condition was it in?"

"Very good condition. I'd say it had been abandoned only recently. The air was still fresh, and it was warm inside."

"And that did not strike you as remarkable?" Rackle looked up. "A ship is recently abandoned, and there is no sign of any other ship or space-suited men in the vicinity. Did it cross your confused mind to wonder where the occupants had gone?"

"Yes, it did," Minzov said, "but I have other things to think about. I was going to inform you that the optico-rastifier is almost ready for a full-scale test."

"You've finished with the construction?"

"Yes, as well as a few modifications of my own."

"Never mind your modifications." Rackle went back to working on his papers. "Schedule a test for tomorrow morning. I'll talk to Sarnak and have him come down to observe. Get back to your desk and try to get some work done."

"Harrumph," Minzov coughed, but went to his desk at the other end of the laboratory.

He had been working for several hours over some old calculations, trying to find a possible error, when he felt a pang of hunger. But there would still be some time before he could leave. He looked down the other end of the laboratory where Rackle was still working. He thought about getting up for a walk, but considering Rackle's ill humor, decided it would be better to remain at his desk.

He was looking down at his scribbled calculations when he heard the laboratory door open. He looked up at a hangar technician coming in. There was something oddly familiar about her, but he did not know what it was. He shrugged and went back to his work.

"Yes, what do you want?" he heard Rackle snarl.

Minzov looked up, glad for the distraction from his work, which was not being as fruitful as he would have liked at the present time. The technician looked around her, then jumped across the desk at Rackle. Minzov jumped to his feet and watched, astounded, as the technician dragged the cringing Rackle from the desk and shook him violently.

"Where's Minzov?" she demanded. Then he recognized the voice.

"Athena." He rushed forward. "Athena is it you?"

She turned around, throwing Rackle to the floor. They embraced happily, then turned to Rackle.

"We'd better secure him," Minzov said.

Rackle darted for the door, but was intercepted by Athena. She held him down as Dr. Minzov found tape and wrapped it around his body, pinning Rackle's arms to his side.

"I knew I couldn't trust you," Rackle said. "You'll never get away with this."

"You'd better tape his mouth, Doc," Athena said.

"That will give me the greatest pleasure," he replied, pressing a piece of tape across Rackle's mouth.

They carried him to an empty equipment locker and shut him inside. Then Athena inspected the laboratory.

"Where is everybody?" she asked.

"They're down in the weapons bay, working on a new ray. We had better make our escape while we have the opportunity."

"Right. Where's Donald?"

"I believe Sarnak has made him a prisoner in one of his rooms."

"Can you take us to him, Doc?"

"I believe so. But wouldn't it be more prudent to make our escape now? We can always send a rescue party for Donald when we've reached safety."

"I'm not leaving without Donald. Come on, Minzov. Let's find him."

She fought the urge to run through the ship, knowing they had to appear to be just another pair of Sarnak's crew. Minzov led them to the corridor of Sarnak's quarters. Standing by one of the doors, two guards watched them approach.

"I'll bet Donald's in there," she whispered, after they had walked by.

"But there may be some difficulty in getting past those guards," Minzov said.

"We'll have to think of a way."

They continued to the end of the corridor, turned down another and followed it to the doors of a tube car, waiting until the doors opened. A man in a white coverall came out, pushing a tray of food and grumbling.

"What kind of job is this?" he muttered. "Why do I always have to bring up the food for Sarnak's playmates?"

"What playmate?" Athena asked, as the orderly walked past.

"That guy Sarnak captured," he replied.

"Oh," she said, then beckoned him back into the tube car. "Hey, I've got a good joke I just heard."

"Oh, yeah?" He followed her into the tube car.

"Yeah, have you heard the one about the three space men and the nun?" she said when they were inside.

"Not that one again," he said.

She clipped him neatly across the jaw and dragged his unconscious body from the tube car, depositing him in a nearby storage room.

"Come on, Minzov," she said, pushing the tray.

When they reached the door, the guards stopped them.

"Didn't I just see you two walk past here," one of them said.

"It couldn't have been," Athena replied. "We just came up with this food."

"Yes," Minzov added, "for Sarnak's ... um ... playmate."

"The playmate." The two guards snickered to themselves. "Okay. Go on in."

The guard opened the door, and Athena pushed the tray past him, followed by Dr. Minzov, who closed the door behind him.

Donald sat on a chair, staring morosely ahead. He did not look up when they came in.

"I'm not hungry," he said. "Take that slop out of here."

"Really, Donald," Athena said. "Is that any way to say hello?" Donald jumped from the seat and looked at them wide-eyed. Then he rushed to Athena.

"Athena," he cried. "How did you get here? Sarnak said you had been taken away to be a slave."

"It's a long story," she said, as they embraced. "But I couldn't just leave you here. I had to find some way to get back."

They separated and Donald went quickly to the door.

"How can we get out of here? There's always a guard out there."

"We can take care of that, right now," she said.

She nodded to Minzov, and they took positions on either side of the door. Athena picked up a large lamp, while Minzov took off his heavy boot.

"Call them in, Donald," Athena said.

"Guards. Guards," he cried. "Get in here, quick."

The two guards walked slowly through the door.

"What's going on in here?" one of them asked.

Before they could turn around, Athena had broken the lamp over one's head, while Minzov was beating the other unsuccessfully with his boot. The guard kept his arms above his head, shielding himself from the blows as he called for help. Athena pushed Minzov back and dealt with the guard herself, striking him across the jaw with a well-placed fist. The guard crumpled to the floor with a moan.

"No time for games, Doc," she said.

"I was in the process of finding the optimum location for incapacitating him," Minzov said.

"What do we do now?" Donald asked.

"If we can get back to our ship, maybe we can escape," Athena said. "that's our best shot right now."

"I agree," Dr. Minzov said. "We should vacate this location with all possible haste."

Cautiously, Minzov peered out the door, then found himself face to face with Sarnak. He shut the door

and stood with his back against it.

"I think we may have a small problem," he said.

"I'd say you had a large problem," Sarnak said, rushing into the room with several guards.

Athena lunged for one of the fallen guard's weapons but was intercepted by the others. Two guards fell on Minzov and pinned his arms behind his back, while Sarnak moved to Donald and pulled him away.

"I hope all this violence doesn't disturb you," Sarnak said.

Rackle entered the room behind more guards as Athena and Minzov were subdued, glowering at Minzov.

"I told you he couldn't be trusted," Rackle said.

"I suppose you're right," Sarnak said. "But I still want him working in the lab."

"What?" Rackle cried.

"I want that weapon finished. This time we'll keep him under guard. Keep him chained to his desk, if that's what it takes."

Rackle muttered as he left the room, followed by two guards pulling Dr. Minzov with them.

"As for you," Sarnak said to Athena, "I should have taken care of you before. This time I'm not going to take any chances."

"What are you going to do to her?" Donald cried.

"A little surprise, Don. And a little entertainment for my crew."

Sarnak laughed ominously.

CHAPTER 17. THE ARENA OF THE HELL BEAST

She stumbled through the door as the guards threw her into the cell, the same cell she had been forced to occupy when they had first been captured. Picking herself up from the floor, she lunged at them as the heavy door was being slammed in her face.

"Welcome back," the guards laughed, sliding the bolts.

"What's Sarnak gonna do with her now?" she heard one of the guards say through the door.

"I think we're gonna have a show," another replied.

"Good. It's been a long time since we had any real entertainment around here."

She tried to stand calmly in the corner of the cell after the guards had gone away, but the tension was too great inside her. She paced the small cell, uneasy at what the guards had said. What sort of entertainment would Sarnak use her for? Several disturbing images came to her mind. Whatever Sarnak was going to do to her, she knew she had better conserve her energy. Dropping into the corner, she forced herself to relax, using long-forgotten Frangaholian mind techniques.

Floating between consciousness and unconsciousness, she did not know how long she had been in the cell when the door opened. Several guards stood in the doorway, with ray guns in their hands.

"Get up," one of the growled. "It's time for the show."

"Get that coverall off," another said.

"Good thinking. Why should we let one of our coveralls get destroyed?" They laughed together.

Keeping her eyes on the guards, she slipped from the coverall, still dressed in the Epoleven uniform.

"Come on." The guards stood back from the door, motioning with their weapons for her to get out of the cell. "Down that way." They pointed past the row of cells to a massive, metal door.

"What's going to happen?" she said, as she stood outside the cell.

"Well, we're gonna ..."

"Hey, what are you doing?" one of the guards said. "It's supposed to be a surprise."

"Oh, sorry."

"Really, you can tell me," Athena said. "I don't mind."

"Nah. Sarnak likes it when he sees how surprised people are when they get into the arena."

"Oh!" one of the guards groaned. "You weren't supposed to tell her that."

"That's right," a third guard admonished. "She's not supposed to know about the Hell Beast, either."

"You just told her," the first guard said.

"So, let me get this straight," Athena said. "Behind that door down there is an arena where I will have to face the Hell Beast?"

The guards looked sheepishly at each other.

"Yeah," one of them said. "But don't tell Sarnak we told you, okay."

"I won't tell him if you won't," she said.

"Hey, you're a real sport, isn't she fellas?" The other guards said she certainly was. "Okay, let's get moving."

The door loomed ahead of her as she walked apprehensively past the cells. One of the guards moved ahead of her and opened it. The door moved ponderously, with the screeching of metal against metal. The guard stepped back as the others pushed her inside. Then it swung shut behind her.

The arena was an open circular area surrounded by a high, smooth wall. The floor was rough and splotched, almost like rock. Strong, hot lights hung far above her. Around the top of the wall, she spied the heads of people looking down at her. They cheered as she entered.

"Welcome to my arena," Sarnak said. She searched along the top of the wall, finally spotting him through the glare of the lights, as he sat in a tall chair above the wall. Beside him, Donald stood, looking down fearfully at her. "Everybody ready for a show?"

"Yes," the people around the wall yelled back.

"You can't do this to her," Donald cried.

"Oh, come on," Sarnak said. "You don't want to disappoint all these people, do you? Besides, I already sold tickets."

"Well, I've had enough of you," Donald said, and leaped over the wall, falling heavily on the hard floor. Athena rushed to him and helped him to his feet. He stood shakily for a moment, smiling up at Sarnak. Then he yelled to the people around the wall. "Do you know he's got bad breath?"

"Hey, keep quiet about that. And get back up here," Sarnak said. "Don't you know what's going to happen down there?"

"Whatever it is," Donald said, "I'd rather be here with her."

"Well, that's gratitude for you," Sarnak said. "I could have given you anything you wanted. And what were you before I found you? Just a second-rate Space Ranger flying around in some third-rate ship. You could have had a real life with me. But don't think you're hurting me, honey. There's plenty more like you around. Go ahead, you can drop me if you want. But I'm like a cat; I always land on my feet."

"I don't care," Donald said.

"Not even a little? No, you wouldn't, would you. You really think you're something special, don't you." Sarnak stifled a sob.

"Donald, you shouldn't have jumped in here," Athena said.

"Why not? All they're going to do is have a show. What could be so bad about that?"

"You'll find out," Sarnak yelled, angrily. "Look, I'll give you one more chance to get back up here."

"Don't hold your breath," Donald said. "Or considering what it's like, maybe you should."

"Donald, you're so brave," Athena said. "Now, I know I can face whatever horrible death Sarnak has planned for me with a smile."

"Horrible death?" Donald said. "What kind of horrible death?"

Athena glared at Sarnak, smiling with the knowledge of her own superiority. Then she turned to the rest of the audience.

"Yes, I know what I'm going to face," she said. "I know all about the Hell Beast. But I can face it, now that I'm not going to die alone."

"Who told her?" Sarnak called out. "Did one of those guards tell her?"

"Um, Athena?" Donald tapped her on the shoulder. "Did you say we were going to face a Hell Beast?"

"Yes, Donald. I'm afraid it's the end for us."

"Oh," Donald said, then walked over to Sarnak and stood beneath him. "I've been thinking, Sarnak. Maybe I was a little hasty, jumping in here the way I did. Why don't I come back up there so we can talk things over a little bit?"

"Too late," Sarnak said. "Now I know how you really feel about me. You're stuck on her. Besides, you complain too much."

"We could always work something out."

"Forget it. If I can't have you, nobody can. Release the Hell Beast."

"Weapons, weapons, weapons," the crowd chanted.

"Oh, yes," Sarnak laughed. "I almost forgot. We always like to give the contestants a fighting chance. Well, it's not much of a chance, but I want to be a fair guy about this." He reached down, picked up some hand weapons and dropped them over the wall.

Athena ran to them, picking up the long knife and tucking it into her waist band. Then she took the sword and shield, holding them in front of her, and waiting.

"Stay behind me, Donald," she said.

She was startled by the sound of another heavy door opening at the other end of the arena. Donald jumped behind her as a low, throaty growl came from the opening, rising in pitch to an eerie howl.

Athena crouched and moved forward.

"What are you doing?" Donald cried.

"I'm going to meet the beast," she said. "I'd rather die fighting than wait for it to attack me."

"It doesn't look like it'll make much difference."

"You'll never understand, Donald."

"And it doesn't look like I'll live long enough to learn."

The unseen beast raised another growl, lower, resonating around the arena walls. Athena crept closer. A dark form appeared in the shadows behind the door. She shrank back at the size of it, larger and taller than her. Donald cried out. As the thing stepped out into the light, the crowd cheered.

It was an abomination. Standing on two squat legs, it stood several inches taller than her. The green,

lumpy skin, covered thick, powerful muscles; the thing's short arms ended in clawed paws. It clapped its jaws together, large enough to take one of her arms in one snap; sitting on a thick neck, the head was unnaturally large, coming to a point at its mouth. Two small red eyes burned on either side of its head.

It saw her and moved forward, waddling across the floor, swaying from side to side as it moved. She felt the thump of its feet as it came closer, its head coming up above hers. They closed on each other. Athena swung the shield at its head, but it brought its arms up with amazing speed and pushed the shield aside. It rushed forward; Athena dove to the right, but its body slammed into her, knocking her down. Before it could turn around, she swung the sword at its legs, but it bounced off the thick skin without causing even the slightest injury.

It came back at her as she jumped to her feet, its jaws clacking and slavering, the short arms waving in anger. She dropped the shield and lunged at the beast, keeping herself below the mouth, trying to grip it around its massive chest. The crowd cheered as she tried to throw it to the ground, but it was too heavy and too strong on its short legs.

The Beast wrapped its own arms around her, lifting her easily from the floor and shaking her from side to side, its roar deafening in her ears. She cried out in pain she felt a tearing in her side from the creature's embrace. It threw her to the floor, and she rolled past the fallen shield. She took it and got to her feet, swinging the shield at the thing's head, this time catching it on the point of the jaw before it could bring its arms up. It fell back with a howl, shaking its heavy head, then came forward again.

The crowd was screaming now as she threw the shield at the beast's head and lunged forward, trying to take the creature to the floor. It wrestled with her, shaking her again as if she were no more than a small child before tossing her aside. She flew against the wall, the force of the impact knocking the breath from her lungs. Momentarily stunned, she dropped the sword.

It jumped at her, snarling as it took her right arm in its mouth, bringing the long, sharp teeth down and tearing through her skin and muscle. She screamed in agony as the crowd howled. She hit at the creature's head with her free hand, beating it in the eye until it let go and stepped back, its small arm rubbing at its eye. But now her arm was torn open with blood pouring from the shredded skin.

The beast rushed at her again, this time catching her in the side with one of its paws, slashing open the uniform and tearing through the flesh. Her mind clouded from the pain, but she closed on the creature wrestling weakly and being tossed aside. She fell to the bottom of the wall.

Then it turned on Donald. He backed away as the monster came closer, its arms waving, its claws flashing in the hot light as saliva dripped from its jaws. Donald stumbled backwards, falling across the dropped sword.

"Get the sword, Donald," Athena screamed. Donald reached over and lifted it, then pointed it at the beast.

Athena lost control of herself as an animal rage overcame her. Screaming, she pulled the knife from her waistband and jumped on the back of the creature, plunging the knife into one of its eyes. Raising its head, it bellowed in pain and shook violently, trying to throw her from its back.

"Use the sword, Donald," she yelled. "Help me!"

She held on, now pushing the knife into a soft spot under the creature's head, as Donald rushed forward and plunged the sword through the same spot.

Athena fell off its back as its spasms became more violent. She rolled across the floor, stopping herself as

the beast swayed from side to side in the center of the arena, swinging its arms wildly as a horrible fluid dripped from its eye and neck. Donald rushed at the creature, plunging the sword into its neck. The beast howled again, choking on its own blood. Then it fell to the floor and did not move.

Athena went to Donald, collapsing as she reached him, feeling a sick weakness coming over her as she fought to remain conscious. Donald took hold of her and eased her to the floor as guards rushed into the arena and surrounded them. The crowd had become silent.

"Look what you did to my Hell beast," Sarnak cried "Do you think they grow on trees or something?"

"She defeated it, Sarnak." Donald stood, glaring at him. "That's why she's better than you."

"Hah! We'll see how much better she is, baby. Take them back to the cells."

#

Athena lay in pain on the cold floor of the cell, breathing fitfully. Donald finished wrapping her arm and side with strips he had torn from his shirt, then he knelt beside her. In the small light shining through the open observation hole in the door, he could make out the agony etched into her face.

"Is there any water, Donald?" she asked weakly.

"No, they didn't leave us any."

"Oh." She let her head fall back. "I'm so thirsty."

"Just rest, Athena." He lifted her head onto his lap and stroked it gently.

He knew she could have escaped and gone back to the Space Rangers instead of coming back to Sarnak's ship for him. Or had she just come back for Minzov? And if it came down to it, maybe she just wanted to get even with Sarnak for sending her off into slavery? For that matter, maybe she just got lost out in space and ended up here. Who could tell with her?

He stood and moved away from her.

"Is anything wrong, Donald?"

"No." He stood against the wall for a few moments, thinking.

Then again, she had jumped on that creature's back when it was going to attack him. She had fought the thing, shielded him from it. Yes, she cared about what happened to him, more than he could ever care about her. He felt ashamed.

He went back to her and sat down, holding her head again.

"Thanks, Donald. I needed that."

He smiled, wondering if she could see.

He sat up when he heard the door opening. A guard entered with another man carrying a pouch who kept turning away from the guard.

"You sure Sarnak wants you to take care of these two?" the guard asked.

"That's what he told me," the other said. "Perhaps there is another entertainment display in the offing."

"Geez, I hope so. That last one was pretty good. You want me to wait in here?"

"No, I believe I will have no trouble from them."

The guard shrugged and went outside, closing the door behind him.

"What are you going to do to her?" Donald stood and got between the man and Athena.

"Take it easy, Donald," the man said. He turned to Donald, and in the dim light, he recognized the bearded features of Dr. Minzov.

"Minzov," Donald cried. "How did you get here?"

"Quiet, Donald," Minzov said, his voice barely above a whisper. He knelt by Athena and pulled a roll of cloth from the pouch. Placing it beside her, he pulled out several small phials. "Let me get started on Athena." He leaned over her. "How are you doing?"

"I think I lost a lot of blood, Doc," she said, hoarsely. "Do you think there's anything you can do?"

"That's why I got myself down here. I believe I have sufficient medicine and bandages to attend to your wounds. First, drink this."

"What is it?" Donald asked, as Minzov held the phial to her lips.

"It's an antibiotic mixed with some fast acting hormones. That will begin the healing process. Here, hold this." He pulled a larger bottle from the pouch. "This is a nutrient solution. Place this flat part over her other arm." Donald took the tube leading from the bottle and placed the small patch of webbing at its end on Athena's arm. "The nutrients and fluids will diffuse into her body. Let me get these off you."

Slowly, he pulled at the makeshift bandages from her side and arm, but she cried out in pain. He stopped and picked up another phial.

"Drink this," he said. "It will ease your pain. I must get clean bandages on these wounds."

She drank and then let her head fall back to the floor. In a few moments, Minzov had the remnants of Donald's shirt from her body and was wrapping her with clean bandages.

"These bandages are treated with special hormones and enzymes that will accelerate the healing process of the skin," he said, "in conjunction with the nutrient solution in that bottle."

"Where did you get all this stuff?" Donald asked.

"It was in the laboratory. It seems that there have been several serious accidents there, lately. I suspect that Rackle has not been as careful as he should be, considering the perilous nature of his experiments."

"How did you know we were here, though?" Athena asked.

"I heard what had happened from Rackle, but I was trapped in the laboratory and could not get away in time to help. After our abortive escapade in the ship, they secured me to my workstation with a chain around my ankle. Rackle kept the key. I knew I had to find some way of getting it from him."

"The others left the laboratory earlier, I presume to watch your fight with the monster in the arena. That left me alone with Rackle. I presumed that this would be my only opportunity to escape."

"He harangued at me, ranting and raving about some supposed offense I had committed against him. It's

not important what it was, but he said he was going to exact vengeance against me now that I was his prisoner. I believe he may have been drinking as he acted as if he were intoxicated. A scientist should never imbibe.

"I called him to my workstation, ostensibly to confer with him on some matter. I knew I would have to use every particle of my intelligence to outsmart the rascal. Hurriedly, I drew up several plans in my mind and discarded them as unworkable. I racked my brain as Rackle came closer. How much longer would the others be away? I would only have this one chance."

"But somehow you used your wits and got the key away from him?" Athena said.

"Well, not exactly. As I had surmised, the fellow had been imbibing alcoholic spirits. He passed out when he reached my workstation.

"I took the key from him and freed myself. Not one to let an advantage slip away, I used the chains and lock to secure him. I covered his mouth with some tape and put him in an empty storage locker. I imagine that in his condition, he will not regain consciousness for several hours, anyway."

"That was good work, anyway, Doc," Athena said. "And I can feel my strength coming back to me already."

"Yes," Minzov said. "When I found these things in one of the lockers, I thought they might be useful. Drink this last phial."

"What is it?"

"It will solidify the recovery process."

"Now, can we get out of here?" Donald said. "They're bound to find out Minzov's gone. This is the first place they'll come looking for him."

"I know," Athena said.

She stood, pulling the tube away from her arm, then flexed her muscles, as she felt renewed life flowing through her.

"Yes, I'm feeling a lot better, Doc," she said. "And I think it's about time we stopped playing around with this Sarnak. Let's get out of here and take care of him."

CHAPTER 18. DASH FOR FREEDOM

"I'm ready to leave," Minzov called to the guard, as Athena pressed herself against the wall by the door.

The guard entered casually, and Athena slapped an anaesthetic permeator against the guard's neck. After the guard slumped to the floor, Athena peered around the door, while Donald took the guard's ray pistol. They waited until Athena said it was clear to start running.

"Where do we go, Doc?" Athena asked as they moved through the corridors. "Do you know your way around?"

"Yes, I believe so," Minzov replied. "We go down here until we reach the end of the corridor. There's a tube car down there we can take to the hangar deck."

"Good," Donald said. "Let's get our ship and get out of here."

She stopped in a narrow alcove, pulling Donald and Minzov in with her.

"I want to take Sarnak with us when we go," she said. "I want him as our prisoner."

"You're crazy," Donald said. "He's always got his guards around him."

"Then we'll have to think of something. Maybe we can lure Sarnak to the *Space Eagle*."

"How can we do that? Why don't we just get out of here? Forget Sarnak. Let the rest of the Space Rangers come and take care of him."

"No, Athena's right," Dr. Minzov said. "We've got to put this character under arrest and take him back to Earth with us. A man such as Sarnak must be made to face justice. Perhaps," he stroked his chin, "perhaps if I call him down to the hangar deck and tell him that Rackle wants to see him. I can confess to having a secret weapon aboard the *Space Eagle*. Something as devastating as the optico-rastifier."

"The what?" Donald asked.

"It's a weapon Rackle has been developing for Sarnak. A pipe dream, until I became involved with it."

"Do you think he'll fall for it?" Athena asked.

"It's difficult to say without some kind of analysis to substantiate my hypothesis, of course."

"How about if we use Donald to entice him aboard once he comes down?"

"That might be successful," Dr. Minzov said.

"Oh, no," Donald said. "No, no, no. I am not going to entice Sarnak."

"Please. Donald," Athena said. "It's for the good of the galaxy."

"No."

"You can do it for me, can't you?"

"Well ..."

"We won't let him come within reach of you," Dr. Minzov said. "We'll be right there to subdue him as soon as he comes aboard."

"All right," Donald said. "But just make sure you do."

They moved back into the corridor and made their way to the tube car. They waited nervously, hearing footsteps coming up behind them. Athena turned around and saw Jerger coming toward them. She took the ray gun from Donald and thrust it into Minzov's hand.

"Quick, Doc," she said. "Make believe we're your prisoners."

Minzov pushed the ray gun into Athena's side, while he herded Donald next to her.

"Take it easy, Doc," she said. "I'm still a little tender there."

"Oh, sorry."

"Hey, what are you three doing here," Jerger asked. "I thought you were all Sarnak's prisoners."

"He trusts me again," Dr. Minzov said. "I am escorting these two miscreants to the hangar deck to meet with Sarnak. I am going to compel them to relate the details of their secret weapon to him."

"We'll never talk," Athena said.

"Oh yeah?" Jerger came closer to her and stared menacingly in her eyes. When she did not turn away from him, he stepped back and nodded. "Real tough, huh?"

"If you see Sarnak," Dr. Minzov said, "you can tell him Rackle requests that he meet with him in the hangar. He's waiting for us right now."

"Hey, how about if I tag along? Sarnak never let's me in on any of the fun stuff."

"Well, I don't know."

"Come on. I won't get in the way. I'll just stand behind everybody and watch. I won't even say anything."

"Perhaps you should ask Sarnak when you see him."

"Sure. A lot of good that'll do. He'll just tell me to get back on the space toilet detail, or go outside and scrape down the hull. That's all I ever get to do."

"That certainly is important work. And don't forget, it builds character."

"Character, character. I'm up to here with character. Just once I'd like to do something interesting."

The doors to the tube car opened and Minzov ushered Athena and Donald inside. Jerger followed them.

"Now where is the operator?" Dr. Minzov asked.

"He must be on his break," Jerger said. "That's another thing. Sarnak gives everyone a break except me. I've got to work all the time."

Minzov stood by the control panel and turned to Jerger.

"Which level?" Minzov asked.

"What's the matter?" Jerger said. "Don't you think I can press my own button? Everybody thinks I'm some kind of idiot or something."

"Okay," Dr. Minzov said, and stepped back from the panel, waving Jerger forward.

Jerger stood by the panel for a moment, his hand moving over the line of buttons. Dr. Minzov coughed.

"Don't rush me," Jerger said. "Let's see. Where was I going?"

"To the space toilet detail?"

"Yeah," he muttered, and pressed a button.

Minzov stepped forward and pressed the button to the hangar deck. They rode in silence until the tube car came to a halt at their destination. Minzov pushed Athena and Donald from the tube car, then turned back to Jerger.

"Remember, my boy," he said. "A rolling stone gathers no moss."

"What?" Jerger said, as the doors closed.

They moved quickly down the corridor to the hatch leading into the hangar deck. Seeing that it was pressurized, they entered and moved along the wall. As they came closer to the *Space Eagle*, they saw technicians working over the ship Athena had brought.

"Let's keep low," she said. "It'll be better if they don't see us."

The crept close to the deck, keeping behind the large pipes and conduits. Reaching a small scout ship, they sidled around it, keeping it between themselves and the technicians. Finally, they reached the side of the *Space Eagle* and clambered aboard.

"I'm going to have to go to one of the ship communicators," Dr. Minzov said. "Outside. I can't talk to Sarnak from here."

"I can do it for you," Mary said.

"Mary, are you still here?" Athena asked.

"Sure. I've been going back and forth between your computer and the one in Sarnak's ship. I can go back in and give Sarnak a message for you."

"Okay. Tell him Rackle wants him to come down here to show him a secret weapon we've got."

"What secret weapon?"

"Hmm. I don't know what we can call it."

"I'll make something up," Mary said.

"While we're waiting for him to show up, let's get the ship ready to take off on a moment's notice. We may not have much time, once we get our hands on Sarnak."

Athena and Minzov went to the control cabin, preparing the ship for immediate blast-off, while Donald made sure everything else was secure, then went through the computer systems and ran diagnostics. They waited.

"I gave him the message," Mary said, as they sat in the work cabin.

"Did he say he was coming?" Athena asked.

"He said he was busy with other things, but he'd get down here sometime."

"We can't wait here too much longer," Donald said.

"I agree," Dr. Minzov added. "They're bound to find Rackle before too long, even if he is still intoxicated. And that's if they don't find you two missing from your cell."

"You're right, Doc," Athena said. "Okay, five more minutes. Then we get ready to take off."

Athena and Minzov were climbing into the control cabin as they heard the sound of the hangar deck hatch opening and closing. Athena looked out of the ship and saw Sarnak strolling toward them. He stopped at the Epoleven scout ship and spoke to the technicians working there.

"Hey, have any of you guys seen Rackle around?"

"No, we haven't seen him, Sarnak," one of them replied.

"He told me to meet him here. Something about some kind of secret weapon on this tub over here."

"Secret weapon?" the technician laughed. "On that thing?"

"Yeah," Sarnak laughed with him. "I know. Rackle's probably been hitting the space sauce again."

He walked around to the *Space Eagle* and looked inside the open hatch. Sitting on a stool by the workbench, Donald turned around and waved to him.

"How did you get down here?" Sarnak asked, remaining outside the ship.

"Does that matter?" Donald asked. "I've been waiting for you. Why don't you come in?"

Sarnak looked at him suspiciously, but took a step closer.

"I thought you didn't like me?"

"I was just playing hard to get," Donald replied. "Besides, I've been thinking about a few things you told me. Maybe I was a little hasty and misjudged you. You know you can't judge a book by the cover."

"No, you can't."

Sarnak stepped through the hatch and into the work cabin.

"Are we alone?" he asked.

"Do you see anyone here besides us?"

"No. But I hate it when people watch me."

"Don't worry, Sarnak," Athena said, pointing a ray pistol at him as she came through the hatch from the control cabin. "Where you're going you'll never have to worry about anyone watching you again."

"This was a trap," he cried.

"Of course, it's a trap," Donald said.

"I was a fool," Sarnak said. "I should have known better. Who would ever love me?"

"Never mind about that," Athena said. "You're coming with us."

"Well," Sarnak said, inching toward the hatch, "I'm not really in the mood for any trips right now."

Like lightning, Athena moved forward, pinning him against the wall, pushing his face flat against it.

"Hey," he cried, "I don't like the rough stuff. At least, I never did before."

"I said you're coming with us," Athena said.

"Maybe I could use a little vacation."

"Okay," Donald said, "we've got him. Now, let's get out of here."

"Hey, Uncle Sarnak," a voice boomed from outside the hatch, then Jerger thrust his head into the ship. "Why can't I get in with you guys on this secret weapon thing?"

Jerger saw the ray pistol in Athena's hand and rushed forward, knocking her against the wall. He tripped against the edge of the workbench and fell on her, as Sarnak raced from the ship. Donald and Minzov ran after him, catching him a few feet from the ship.

"Help me!" Sarnak cried. "Help me!"

The technicians on the other ship looked up and saw the three of them wrestling next to the *Space Eagle*. They jumped from the ship, carrying whatever tools were available and ran at Donald and Minzov. They let go of Sarnak and turned back to the ship, just as Athena threw Jerger from the hatch.

"Sorry," Dr. Minzov said, as he stepped on Jerger's chest to get into the ship.

The alarm went off just as Minzov was securing the hatch. Moments later, a horde of guards charged into the hangar deck to surround the ship. The glint of ray rifles reflected off the hull as they fired.

"We've got to get out of here now," Athena cried, as she jumped into her seat.

"Can't we blast through the hangar doors?" Donald asked.

"It's possible," Dr. Minzov replied, "but we may be damaged by the flying debris."

"I can take care of those doors," Mary said. "I'll get back into their computer and open them for us."

"Make it fast," Athena said. "Those rays will be burning through us pretty soon."

As a ray shot off the window in front of her, she saw the hangar doors crack open. Just barely audible at first, the rush of air blew around the ship, carrying loose objects and papers toward the hangar doors as they continued to open. The guards and technicians bolted madly for the hatch at the rear of the hangar, fighting each other to escape from the clawing vacuum.

But the doors were opening too slowly.

"I can't override the protection systems," Mary said. "The doors are going to close."

"We can't wait any longer," Athena said. "Blow those doors open, Doc."

Minzov pulled down his weapon control panel, firing a minibomb, smashing the doors to pieces. Athena fired the engines as the remnants of the doors flew around the *Space Eagle*. More debris shot around the ship as the hot gasses of the rockets roared in the hangar.

"We're not moving," Athena cried. "What's wrong?"

"The clamp," Minzov said. "There's still a clamp around the ship. We can't get away."

"I'll take care of it," Mary said. A few seconds later, they felt something shifting across the hull. Athena looked out and saw the round clamp lifting from around the ship.

"We're moving," Athena said, as the ship inched forward.

"Ouch," Mary cried.

"What's wrong?"

"The interface cable just ripped loose. It hurt a little."

The ship continued to move forward, the bottom of the hull scraping against the hangar floor. When the ship reached the doors, Athena increased the thrust, and the *Space Eagle* shot out into space.

Faster and faster, they moved away as Athena continued to increase the thrust, leaving the pirate's ship in their wake.

"We may have a problem in a few moments," Minzov said.

"What's that?" Athena asked. "We must have destroyed their magnatractor ray when we took off."

"I wasn't thinking of that. They still have the optico-rastifier in the weapons bay. It had just been finished and ready for firing."

"What's an optico-rastifier?" she asked.

"Sarnak's superweapon. If they find Rackle and decide to use it on us, we'll be doomed."

"Can't we get out of its range, Doc?"

"Not for a while. With the modifications I made to its design, the range is virtually limitless, and its destructive power has been increased."

"All we can do is hope, then."

As she finished speaking, a tremendous flash came up from behind them, followed by a cloud of gas and debris rushing past the ship.

"What was that?" Donald cried. "Something blew up back there."

Reading her sensors, Athena saw that a large chunk of Sarnak's ship had disappeared.

"Something just destroyed Sarnak's ship," she said.

"Yes," Minzov said. "It looks like an explosion was centered around the weapons bay. Hmmm. Right where the optico-rastifier was deployed. I wonder ... was I supposed to set up the polarity of the quanto-stabilizer positive or negative?"

"Does it matter?"

"Well, I think if it is set up with negative feedback, the weapon is unbelievably destructive. If positive feedback is used, the macron field generator becomes unstable and the weapon explodes."

"It looks like it was connected incorrectly," Mary said.

"Not necessarily," Minzov replied. "But I will have to admit that the possibility exists."

The communicator crackled to life as a familiar voice came through.

"Astro Athena," the voice said. "This is Colonel Richards calling Astro Athena. Can you hear me?"

"We hear you, Colonel," she said.

"Good. I'm on my way to rescue you and the others. I finally got the council to give me the ships I need and some men to fight this Sarnak. We should be arriving in a few minutes."

"You can take your time, Colonel. We've just escaped, and Sarnak's ship has sustained some major damage. I think most of the fight has been knocked out of them."

"You mean I went through all this for nothing?"

"Oh, no, Colonel. Someone's got to get in there and capture those people, and Sarnak."

"All right. I guess that's something. We'll be there shortly. Signing off."

"We might as well wait for them," she said.

"It's the least we can do," Minzov said. "I'm sure it was supposed to be a negative feedback connection."

#

Colonel Richards floated across to the *Space Eagle* in his pressure suit, while his men continued to clean up the pirate's ship, taking the survivors as prisoner. Resistance was weak, and most of Sarnak's people surrendered without a struggle. Finally, Sarnak was captured as he was trying to escape in an ejection pod.

"We've got Sarnak," a captain called over the communicator.

"Good," Colonel Richards replied, after he had gotten out of his pressure suit. "Bring him aboard the *Space Eagle*. I want to meet this Sarnak in person."

"You'll be disappointed," Donald said.

"What's that?"

"Never mind."

Several minutes later, they were opening the rear air lock and bringing in the captain, with Sarnak in tow.

"All right, Sarnak," Athena said, when they had brought him into the work cabin. "Get that pressure suit off. You won't need it in here."

"But it's so nice and snug," he said, when he had pulled the helmet off.

"Just get it off. You're going to be our guest on the return trip to Earth. I imagine you and your men will keep the galactic justice machines busy for quite a while."

"Well," Sarnak said, "I suppose it would be better for me if I don't say anything until I have had the opportunity to speak with an attorney. By the way. Would it be possible for me to use your communicator to call him?"

"No," Athena said, but Colonel Richards shook his head to her.

"I'm afraid we are required to let him do that, Athena."

"Oh, all right. Doc, take this vermin up to the control cabin and let him use the communicator."

"If you say so," Dr. Minzov said. "Come on. Let's go." Minzov grabbed him roughly by his shirt and pushed him through the hatch.

"Hey," Sarnak said. "I told you I didn't like the rough stuff. Now, if Don wants to come up and help me work it ..."

"Forget it," Donald said.

Sarnak shrugged and went through the hatch.

"How did it go, Captain?" Colonel Richards asked.

"I think we got them all, Colonel," the captain replied. "We may have to put a few more aboard this ship. All the other ships are just about full already."

"All right. We'll leave Sarnak here and bring over a few more. It shouldn't take too long to get back to Earth. How's that sound, Athena?"

"We'll find some accommodations for them in the hold, Colonel."

"Good," the captain said. "I've got a few more coming over now."

She went to the control cabin and pushed Sarnak out of the way as she got into her seat.

"Take him in the back, will you, Doc?"

"I'm not finished speaking to my attorney," Sarnak said.

She took the microphone from him and placed it in its holder.

"You are now," she said. She nodded to Minzov and he took Sarnak out.

She watched as a group of prisoners was herded toward her ship, then operated the air lock to let them enter. As soon as she had the air lock closed and pressurized, she went back to the work cabin to see how many prisoners she would have to take care of.

There would only be three more to keep in the hold, beside Sarnak. She recognized Jerger as soon as he had his helmet off. He sighed when he saw Sarnak.

"Uncle Sarnak," he said. "What are we going to do?"

"It would appear that all of you will be spending a considerable amount of time on a corrections planet," Dr. Minzov said.

"But Uncle Sarnak. You said you'd take care of me. What's Mom going to say?"

"Oh shut up," Sarnak said.

"If you had only followed the correct course in life," Dr. Minzov said, coming up to Jerger and putting his hand on his shoulder, "you would not now find yourself foundering on an asteroid belt of trouble. Yes, my boy, the honest course is the only rewarding course in life."

"Is it too late for me?" Jerger asked. "Can I still reform?"

"That will be up to you," Minzov said. Just remember, my boy." He gripped Jerger's shoulder. "Crime does not pay."

#

Colonel Richards and his men left the *Space Eagle* to complete rounding up Sarnak's men, calling her several hours later when the task had been finished. With a sigh of relief, she had Minzov set a course for Earth, and home.

CHAPTER 19. BACK ON EARTH

"That was a great job you did, Athena," Colonel Richards said, leaning back in the chair behind his desk. She sat with her legs crossed, staring at the changing galactic chart behind him.

"Thank you, Colonel. But I was just doing my job."

"And a damn good job, too. I've put in a recommendation for medals for you, Minzov and Donald for what you went through."

"You mentioned something about a raise, too."

"A raise? Oh, yes, a raise. Well," he laughed nervously. "I talked it over with some of the brass. You know how they are. What with all the cost cutting and financial problems we've been through lately, well, we may all have to take a cut in our salaries pretty soon."

"Salary cuts?" she cried.

"Now, now. I've been assured it will only be temporary. And it will be across the board. No one will be left out."

She shook her head.

"That won't make Donald or Minzov very happy."

"No, I suppose it won't. But I'm going to push really hard for those medals. You three ought to get something for what you went through on this last mission."

"Thanks, Colonel." She got up to leave, then turned back to him. "Oh, what's going to happen to Sarnak?"

"Well, he went before the Justice Calculator this morning. It looks like they'll be putting him through some kind of rehabilitation, then he'll go on probation for a while."

"Probation?"

"Yes, his lawyer gave some kind of story about Sarnak's troubled childhood. Something about being blamed for a crime he never committed. You know how these lawyers are."

"I can't believe it. And after all we went through to capture him."

"Remember, Athena." He wagged his finger at her. "Justice is not to be confused with vengeance. We are only here to capture criminals, not punish them."

"I know, Colonel," she sighed.

"If it's any consolation to you, Jerger got ninety-nine years on a corrections planet. Hard labor until he drops dead."

"Well, that's something, anyway. What about Rackle?"

"The scientist? He's been taken to a special penitentiary for mad scientists like him. He'll be treated for his insanity but kept under strict control. They put them through a totally ritualized life, everything by the clock. I guess they like it that way, anyway. And no destructive weapons to work on, either. Just projects for the good of mankind. The rest of the crew has been broken up and taken to various other corrections planets."

"I see. Well, I guess I'll get back to the ship and see what Donald and Dr. Minzov are doing."

"Okay," Colonel Richards said, and stood. "And Athena?"

"Yes, Colonel?"

"Job well done."

She nodded and strode from his office.

#

Back on the *Space Eagle*, she found Dr. Minzov working over the bench as Donald watched.

"What are you working on, Doc?" she asked.

"Well, I'm trying to remember some of the theory behind that weapon of Rackle's. If I can duplicate it, we should have another fine weapon to add to our arsenal."

"Do we need another one?"

"One can never have a surfeit of weapons. Besides, there's the challenge of the thing. Science, Athena, science. We must continually push back the veil of ignorance. Here we have the embodiment of new physical laws, unheard of before, but now becoming just another tool for the betterment of man. Anyway, anything that nincompoop Rackle can do, I can do better."

"As long as you get that feedback connected correctly," Mary said.

"That must have been just a random accident," Minzov said. "It happens to the best of us. Perhaps a stray cosmic ray interacted with the synapses of my brain while I was working on Rackle's weapon. That would certainly account for the mistake, if indeed it was a mistake."

"I'll go along with that," Athena said. "Donald, why don't you come up to the control cabin with me for a minute?"

"All right," he said, and followed Athena through the hatch.

She invited him to sit in her chair, while she sat next to him.

"Well, we made it through another one," she said.

"Just barely," he replied. "There were several times when I thought it was going to be all over for us."

"Well, we couldn't have made it without you, Donald. And Colonel Richards says we're all going to get medals."

"How about a little vacation instead?"

"I suppose we might be able to talk him into it." She moved closer to him. "You know it's been a long time since we've been alone together."

"I know," Donald said, easing back in the seat.

"Maybe a little vacation wouldn't be such a bad idea."

They came together, their lips touching gently. They reached for each other, embracing, then they fell together into her seat. They laughed.

"What's going on up there?" Minzov called out.

"Nothing, Doc," Athena said. "I've just got a little project of my own to attend to."

She stood and smiled at Donald, arching her eyebrows, then went to the hatch, swinging it closed. She was just about to secure it when an explosion came through from the work cabin, pushing the hatch open and throwing her over the back of her chair. Under her weight, Donald collapsed against the control panel. By the time she was able to regain her feet, the rockets were already roaring, and the *Space Eagle* was moving away from the ground.

"I didn't do it this time," Donald cried.

"I know," she said, trying to get to the seat against the acceleration. "What happened, Doc?"

Coughing through the smoke, the blackened face of Dr. Minzov appeared in the hatch.

"I guess the polarity of the feedback has to be positive," he said. "Why are we taking off?"

"It's an accident," she said.

She got Donald from her chair and sat, looking at the instruments. She shrugged at Donald, knowing they would have to wait until it was safe to shut down the engines and start a controlled descent back to the space port.

"I'll have to do something about this control panel, one of these days," she said.

#

The rough, craggy planet was set in the end of one of the galaxy's spiral arms, far from the rest of civilization. A small ship broke through the planet's defenses, roaring through the thick clouds to land by the shack containing the world's sole inhabitant.

A creature came out of the shack, to be greeted by two others emerging from the ship. Like him, they had bulbous segmented bodies with articulated, sticklike legs. They clacked out a greeting using their hard mandibles and with movements of their fibrous antennae.

"Your majesty," they bowed.

"Quickly," he said. "We must escape before the keepers of my exile are alarmed."

"We are ready to leave at your command," they said, and led Emperor Atufet of the Ant Men aboard the ship.

As he stood in the hatch, he looked up at the clouds through his multifaceted eyes, glad to know that he would soon see the light of stars again, and relive the joys of conquest.

Before entering the ship, he made a vow.

"Astro Athena. You will soon know my vengeance."