

NECK OR NOTHING

by David Drake

"Red Section, pull back two hundred meters!" Lt. Arne Huber ordered over the platoon channel. A laser from one of the hostile hovertanks touched a tree to the right, blasting a ten-meter strip off the trunk. Fragments of bark and sapwood stung Huber and the two gunners with him in the combat car's open fighting compartment. "Blue, we'll hold till Red's in position! Six out."

The artificial intelligence in Huber's comms helmet imposed a translucent red caret on his faceshield, warning of movement to the left. Huber was *Fencing Master's* left wing gunner as well as commander of platoon F-3. At the moment, swinging his tribarrel onto the threat took precedence over controlling the platoon's other five cars.

The motion was the hull of a hovertank from a mercenary unit hired by Solace in its war with the Outer States. The vehicle was 300 meters away, much farther than you could generally see in the forests of Plattner's World, and the tank's two crewmen probably weren't aware of *Fencing Master* as they drove across the battlefield hoping to take F-3 in the flank.

The target quivered in Huber's holographic sight picture. He settled his weapon and squeezed the butterfly trigger with both thumbs. The cluster of iridium barrels rotated as they fired, giving each tube a moment to cool after spewing a bolt of ionized copper downrange at the speed of light.

The narrow window didn't allow Huber to choose a particular spot on his target, but the energy a 2-cm powergun packed made most things vulnerable. The compartment holding the hovertank's crew was armored with ceramic layered in ablative sheets, proof against single bolts or even a short burst, but the skirts enclosing the plenum chamber were light plastic to keep the weight down. Huber raked the bulge where the two joined.

A fireball erupted from the tank's port side: the cyan plasma had converted the plastic into its constituent elements--which recombined explosively. The flash ignited even the loam of the forest floor.

"I can't see it!" screamed Frenchie Deseau at *Fencing Master's* bow gun. "Padova, pull up, for Hell's sake! I can't see the target!"

The hostile was directly ahead of *Fencing Master*, so by rights it should've been Deseau's target while Huber watched the left flank the way Trooper Learoyd was doing the right from the other wing gun. It was a chance of visibility that made the tank Huber's prey while the trees concealed it from Deseau.

The tank rocked to the right, then slewed to a halt because Huber'd ripped its skirts wide open. The tank's gunner tried to rotate his roof-mounted laser, but Huber's tribarrel blew the weapon to fiery slag an instant before rupturing the crew compartment itself.

What mattered was that *somebody* got the tank before it took F-3 from the rear; but if F-3 didn't fall back quickly, another tank or tanks *were* going to circle them. There were too many hostiles for a single platoon of combat cars to deal with for long. Where the bloody hell was Anders' Legion, the combined arms battalion that was supposed to follow when F-3 seized the knoll in the face of the advancing Solace column?

"*Three-six, this is Three-three!*" crackled the voice of Platoon Sergeant Jellicoe, commanding the three cars of Red Section. For this operation Huber would rather have operated in three two-car sections, but two of his vehicles were crewed with

replacements. The newbies had been trained and may well have been veterans of other units before they joined Hammer's Slammers, but Huber didn't want to risk anybody operating alone until he'd personally seen how they held up in combat. "*We're in position! Over!*"

"Blue Section," Huber ordered, "pull--"

Fencing Master was already starting to reverse. Although she'd just been transferred to F-3, Padova'd already shown an ability to anticipate orders--sometimes the difference between life and death in combat. As the car grunted backward, Deseau and Learoyd fired simultaneously.

For an instant, saplings ranging from thumb-thick to thigh-thick blazed. When the blue-green bolts had sawn through the undergrowth, they flashed and cascaded from the sloping armor of the hovertank coming up from a swale less than twenty meters away.

"*Via!*" Huber shouted. The tank was well to starboard, but *Fencing Master* shimmied as Padova backed so there was a chance the stern would swing enough to give Huber a shot. He tried to bring his tribarrel to bear as he cursed himself for not keeping better tabs on the sensor readouts. Because Huber was the platoon leader, *Fencing Master* carried a command and control box whose holographic display would show the heat, noise, and radio-frequency signatures of a fifty-tonne tank charging to within stone's throw. He just hadn't taken--hadn't *had*--time to glance at it.

The tank's sloping armor reflected a portion of the bolts' energy as a haze of cyan light, searing the leaves from overhanging trees. The glare was so intense that Huber's faceshield blacked it out to save his eyesight.

Despite the hits, capacitors feeding the tank's laser screamed twice. The first pulse fried the air close enough overhead that if Huber might've lost his hand if he'd raised it at the wrong time. That was probably a chance shot, though, because the second charge ripped empty forest twenty meters to the left, and then the tank's ceramic armor failed under the tribarrels' hammering.

At the temperature of copper plasma, almost everything burns. The gulp of orange flame from the tank's interior was partly plastic, partly fabric, and partly the flesh of the crew.

Padova kept backing away from the line of contact. Flat-screen displays provided a combat car's driver with just as good a view to the rear as forward, but driving through dense woodland in reverse required considerable skill. *Fencing Master's* skirts struck only one tree too thick to shear off. Even that was a glancing blow, though it threw the troopers hard against the fighting compartment's armor.

"Blue Section, pull back!" Huber said, completing the interrupted order as he checked his display. The other two cars were already retreating up the forested ridgeline; their commanders must have filled in the obvious if their drivers had needed the prodding. You didn't have to be a military genius to know that F-3's position wasn't survivable for long, when at least a company of hostile tanks was advancing and there was no bloody sign of Ander's Legion.

The woods were afire in a dozen places, ignited by energy weapons and the violent destruction of several vehicles--all of them hostile so far, the Lord be thanked, but that couldn't last forever. Besides the wall of trees, smoke obscured normal vision. That gave F-3 an advantage because the Slammers' sensors were better than those of their opponents, but in the confusion of battle there were too many inputs for anybody to use

them all. Quick reactions, not technology, had saved *Fencing Master* when the hovertank roared up at them from less than pistol range.

Red Section waited hull-down over the reverse slope of the ridge from which F-3 had advanced twenty minutes before. Huber had expected to form a skirmish line while Ander's Legion dug in to ambush the oncoming Solace column. Ander hadn't come and the hostiles had--*very* aggressively.

Padova brought *Fencing Master* back to where they'd started their advance, in the shelter of smooth-barked trees whose foliage was a golden contrast to the deep green of most of the species around them. The economy of Plattner's World was based on gathering the so-called Moss, a fungus that parasitized the native trees and which could be processed into the anti-aging drug Thalderol. In normal times here, the wanton destruction of forest was a serious crime.

War imposed different standards. The recent engagement had turned a kilometer of woodland into a spreading blaze where munitions occasionally exploded. The hostiles, elements of the West Riding Yeomanry hired by Solace, had halted to regroup to the west of the fiery barrier. The tanks would come on in a moment, buttoned up and using their numbers to envelope the Slammers on both flanks even though Huber had stretched F-3 with forty meters between combat cars.

That was far too great an interval in forest where normal sight distance was only half that. *Foghorn*, immediately to the right of *Fencing Master*, was an occasional glint of iridium through the foliage. Skilled infantry could slip through the line to do all manner of damage before the troopers knew what was happening.

The long burst had heated *Fencing Master's* right tribarrel till it jammed. A smear of the plastic matrix that held copper atoms in alignment in the chamber clogged the ejection port instead of spitting out cleanly. Learoyd was chipping at the mess with his knife while Deseau covered both front and starboard with quick jerks of his head and a tense expression.

"Fox Three," Huber ordered; it was time and past time to cut and run. "We'll withdraw in line behind Three-six on the plotted track."

As he spoke, he entered Execute on the manual controller of the C&C box, transmitting to all the troopers of his platoon the course the AI had chosen to his directions. They'd retreat parallel to the line on which they'd advanced, but not over the same track in case Solace forces had laid artillery on it in the interim.

"I'm going to start at forty kph and I'll raise our speed if I can," Huber continued. "If you've got trouble keeping interval let me know, but I don't want these bloody tanks up our ass. Over."

"*Three-six, this is Three-three!*" Jellicoe called from the north end of the line. "*I've got movement to my rear, El-Tee! D'ye suppose Ander's got his thumb outa his butt finally? Over.*"

"Fox Three," Huber ordered as he switched his display to give the readout from *Floosie*, Jellicoe's car. "Hold in place! Three-six out."

Everything takes time.... F-3 couldn't sit long on a hillside in the face of flames and a hostile armored column, but Huber *had* to process information before he made a decision on which turned a battle and the lives of all his troopers. Beside him, Learoyd spun his barrel cluster a third of a turn to charge the weapon. Deseau slewed his tribarrel to the left; the bearing squealed faintly. Now Frenchie was covering the port side while

his lieutenant concentrated on sensor readouts.

For a moment Huber thought they might pull this off after all: Ander's Legion was late, but the delay would've convinced the hostiles that the Slammers had been left hanging. When F-3 pulled back, the Yeomanry were likely to follow without keeping a proper lookout. With any kind of luck, Ander's force could take them in the flank and hammer them good while Huber brought his cars around to block the Solace line of retreat.

Except--

"Bloody fucking Hell!" Huber shouted.

He didn't want it to be true, but there was no question in the world that it was. Sgt. Jellicoe wasn't at fault: all the cars carried the same sensor pack, but the additional sorting power in *Fencing Master's* Command and Control box made the difference.

There was an armored column coming up fast from F-3's rear, all right, but it wasn't Ander's Legion which rode on *tracked* armored personnel carriers. These twenty-three vehicles, a mix of APCs and gun carriers, ran on six or eight wheels. The AI gave a 93% probability that they were a company of the Apex Dragoons, another of the units in Solace pay.

F-3 was trapped.

"Fox Three, this is Three-six," Huber said, his voice calm. He was speaking noticeably slower than he usually would have. Every syllable was precise, a reaction to stress rather a conscious attempt to be clear in a crisis. "The vehicles approaching from the east are hostile also. We'll charge through them in line abreast instead of withdrawing to the southeast as planned."

As Huber spoke, his right hand laid out routes and targets in the C&C display for immediate transmission to the helmets of his troopers. There were more enemy vehicles than there were guns in F-3, almost four targets per car, so he had to overlap the assignments.

That was if everything went right, of course. As soon as F-3 started taking casualties, its suppressing firepower went down and with it everybody's chance of survival.

"Hit anything you see, troopers, but remember job one is to save our asses," Huber said. "Drivers, keep your foot in it. Don't slow for anything, get through and get out, that's the only way we're going to be around to talk about this afterwards."

Beneath Huber, Padova was rotating *Fencing Master* on its axis to align its bow for the coming attack. Huber was conscious of the change only as vibration and a blur in his peripheral vision; his focus was utterly on the holographic landscape of six blue dots and the hornet's nest of red hostiles through which it F-3's commander had to lead them.

"We'll execute on the command," Huber said, giving the display a last searching glance as he prepared to exchange it for the view through his tribarrel's sights. "And the Lord help us, troopers, because there sure as hell isn't anybody else on our side today. Fox Three, *execute!*"

Padova had *Fencing Master's* drive fans whining at full power. Instead of setting the blades to zero incidence, she'd chosen to cock the nacelles against one another in pairs so that they were already flowing maximum air and wouldn't have to accelerate against a fluid mass when it came time to move. *Fencing Master* pogoed minusculely as it slid downhill through the undergrowth. The Dragoons, approaching in line abreast, were

within half a klick but still on the other side of rising ground.

Fencing Master's skirts crumbled a low overhang into a flat-bottomed swale. There must've been a watercourse here in season, but now the leaves the fans stirred were dust-dry. Huber watched his sector, his tribarrel slanted slightly upward to cover the crest of the ridge beyond the concealing undergrowth.

The soil on the slope must not have been as good as that in most of the region, because the trees were sparser and averaged twenty meters in height instead of the twenty-five or thirty normal for adult specimens of the same species elsewhere. More light reached the understory and low brush grew thicker.

Huber ignored the C&C display to focus on the portion of *Fencing Master's* surroundings for which he was personally responsible. The Slammers' faceshields used sensor data to caret the most probable vectors from which targets might appear. He'd directed the AI to screen out hostiles to the rear. In the unlikely event the pursuing tanks caught up with F-3, Huber and his troopers were dead with absolute certainty: there was no point in worrying about what couldn't be changed.

The vehicles' electronics suites meant the Slammers had a huge amount of information. Unless they were careful, they could drown in information instead of making the sorts of instant decisions a battle demanded of anyone who hoped to survive.

Arne Huber wouldn't allow his mind to lose itself in data instead of action, but the sensors' warning had saved F-3 from stumbling unaware into a superior enemy. The Apex Dragoons were a respectable force, but they didn't have electronics of comparable discrimination and might not even know the combat cars were heading toward them. Though Huber couldn't kid himself that the Solace forces had mousetrapped his platoon by pure accident....

"*Wait for it...*," Deseau warned over the intercom; talking to himself mostly, because they were all veterans and knew what was about to happen.

Padova tweaked her fan nacelles expertly, lifting *Fencing Master* over the crest on nearly an even keel. Below, zigzagging because their power-to-weight ratio didn't allow them to climb the steeper reverse slope straight on, were three armored personnel carriers with a pair of anti-tank missiles on a cupola mounting an automatic cannon. Far to *Fencing Master's* right was a larger vehicle with a long electrochemical cannon in its turret. Huber squeezed his trigger as his tribarrel settled on the nearer of the two APCs on his side.

The APC's commander had his head out of the cupola hatch to conn his vehicle. He'd started to duck, but Huber's first bolt decapitated him in a cyan flash. The rest of the burst splashed on the cupola, setting off an anti-tank missile in a gushing yellow low-order explosion.

Huber'd pulled the APC's teeth by wrecking the turret. Without spending more rounds--*Fencing Master* would be through the Dragoons and gone before the infantry in the rear compartment could unass their vehicle and start shooting--he swung his gun toward the APC that he'd assigned both to himself and the car to the left, Sgt. Nagano's *Foghorn*. Deseau and Learoyd were firing, and the forest echoed with the snarling thump of powerguns punctuated by the blast of the Dragoons' weapons.

When Huber saw black exhaust puff from the far side of his target's cupola, he knew he'd been too late to keep the gunner from loosing a missile. Though the cupola hadn't rotated onto *Fencing Master* yet, as the missile came of the launch rails it made a

hard angle toward the combat car on the thrust of its attitude jets.

"Via!" Huber screamed, knowing that now survival was in the hands of the Lord and *Fencing Master's* Automatic Defensive System. A segment of the ADS tripped, blasting a charge of osmium pellets from the explosive-filled groove where the car's hull armor joined the plenum chamber skirts.

Fencing Master jumped and clanged. The pellets met the incoming missile, shoving it aside and tearing off pieces. The warhead didn't detonate--a good thing, because this close it still would've been dangerous--but a shred of tailfin slashed Huber's gunshield, leaving a bright scar across the oxidized surface.

Learoyd's target, a forty-tonne guncarrier, went off like a huge bomb. The concussion spun *Fencing Master* like a top, slamming Huber against the side of the fighting compartment. Despite the helmet's active shock cushioning, his vision shrank momentarily to a bright vertical line.

The guns of the Apex Dragoons used liquid propellant set off by a jolt of high current through tungsten wire. Besides adding electrical energy to the chemical charge, the method ignited the propellant instantly and maximized efficiency for any bore that could accept the pressures.

Learoyd's burst had detonated the reservoir holding the charges for perhaps a hundred main-gun rounds. The explosion left a crater where the vehicle had been and a cloud of smoke mushrooming hundreds of meters in the air.

Fencing Master grounded twice, sucked down when the wave of low pressure followed the shock front. Padova fought her controls straight, then tried to steer the car back in the original direction; they'd spun more than a full turn counterclockwise and were now headed well to the left of the planned course.

The shockwave rocked the Dragoon APC up on its three starboard wheels. The vehicle didn't spin because it was some distance farther from the blast and its tires provided more stability than the fluid coupling of pressurized air linking the combat car to the ground.

Huber's eyesight cleared; his tribarrel already bore on the APC's rear hull. He fired, working his burst forward while bolts from Deseau's weapon crossed his. Their plasma shattered the light aluminum/ceramic sandwich armoring the APC's side. The hatches blew open in geysers of black smoke which sucked in, then gushed as crimson flames.

Learoyd lay huddled on the floor of the fighting compartment. His left hand twitched, so at least he was alive. There was no time to worry about him now, not with all F-3 in danger.

Fencing Master drove between the two APCs, both oozing flames, and roared down the steep slope. Explosions thundered in the near distance. Huber glanced to his left as a ball of orange flame bubbled over the treetops. It had vanished some seconds before the ground rippled and the walls of the valley channeled a wave of dust and leaf litter past *Fencing Master* and on.

Huber pivoted his tribarrel to cover the rear. In shifting, he banged his right side on the coaming. The unexpected pain made him gasp. The blast had bruised him badly and maybe cracked some ribs.

Deseau took over the right wing gun. Learoyd had managed to get to his hands and knees, but it'd be a while before he was able to man his weapon again.

Or maybe it wouldn't, come to think. Bert Learoyd had the tenacity of an earthworm, though perhaps coupled with an earthworm's intellectual capacity.

Huber checked his C&C display. All six cars were still in action, though the icons for *Foghorn* and *Farsi's Fancy*--Car Three-seven in Jellicoe's section--showed they were reporting battle damage.

Even the Slammers' electronics couldn't discriminate between the signatures of vehicles with some systems running though the crews were dead, and those which were fully functional. Apart from the occasional catastrophic explosion like that of Learoyd's target, there was no way to be sure of how much of the hostile mechanized company remained dangerous. They'd taken a hammering, no mistake, but right now all Huber was concerned about was F-3's survival. Thanks to Ander's inaction, the Slammers had lost this battle before the first shot was fired.

The United Cities government had employed many small units of mercenaries instead of a few large formations, because noplac on the planet except Port Plattner in Solace could land a starship big enough to hold a battalion and its equipment. Hammer's Regiment was one of the the largest units in UC pay, and some of the others were only platoons.

There would've been coordination problems even at best, but the real trouble arose because neither the UC nor any of the other Outer States had a military staff capable of planning and executing a war on the present scale. Colonel Hammer and his team at Base Alpha had taken over the duties because there was no one else to do it, but that caused further delays and confusion. Everything had to be relayed through UC officers who often didn't understand the words they were parroting, and even so other mercenary captains dragged their feet on orders they knew were given by a peer.

Some UC units were incompetently led; that might well be the case with Ander's Legion. Their communications systems varied radically; Central at Base Alpha could communicate with all of them, but many couldn't talk to one another. And some mercenary captains, especially those who commanded only a company or platoon, were less concerned with winning wars than they were with protecting the soldiers who were their entire capital.

Those were staff problems, but they became the concern of line lieutenants like Arne Huber when they meant that his combat cars were left swinging in the breeze. Ander hadn't gotten the word, or he hadn't obeyed orders, or he was simply too bumbling to advance when he was supposed to.

There was an obvious risk of further Solace units following close behind the initial company of Dragoons, but despite that Huber had a bad feeling about continuing on his plotted course to the southeast. He'd already asked his AI to assess alternate routes, but before he got the answers the C&C display threw sensor data across the terrain in a red emergency mask. It was worse than he'd feared.

"Three-six to Fox Three," Huber said in a tone from which previous crises had burned all emotion. "Hostile hovertanks have gotten around us to the south. Fox Three-three--" Sgt. Jellicoe in *Floosie* "--leads on the new course at nine-seven degrees true. Three-six out. Break--"

His voice caught. He thought for a moment that he was going to vomit over the inside of his faceshield, but the spasm passed. There'd been too much; too much stress and pain and stench, even for a veteran.

"--Padova, throttle back so that we stay on the crest after the rest are clear. We may need the sensor range."

The Solace commander had reacted fast by sending part of the Yeomanry around the Slammers' left flank at the same time as the mechanized company circled their right. Huber'd held F-3 too long as he waited for supports that never came, but there was still a chance. The crews of the hovertanks wouldn't be in a hurry to come to close quarters with the cars that had bloodied their vanguard so badly at the first shock.

Fencing Master growled onto the ridge line. The rise would separate the combat cars from the units they'd already engaged, though the tanks approaching from the south were in the same shallow valley. The forest was somewhat of a shield for F-3, maybe enough of one.

Learoyd was on the forward gun now, swaying as though the grips were all that kept him upright. Deseau scanned the trees to the right, the direction the tanks would come from. Undergrowth was sparse here, but the treeboles allowed only occasional glimpses of anything as much as a hundred meters away.

F-3 was in line with the flanks echeloned back. The four cars in the center were across the ridge and proceeding downslope, but Jellicoe had slowed *Floosie* also. The additional ten seconds of sensor data hadn't brought any new surprises, so Huber said, "Padova, goose it and--"

The clang of a slug penetrating iridium echoed through the forest. The icon for Fox Three-three went cross-hatched and stopped moving across the holographic terrain of the C&C display.

"Padova, get us to *Floosie* soonest!" Huber shouted. "Break! Fox Three, follow the plotted course. Three-one, you're in charge till I rejoin with the crew of Three-five! Three-six out!"

Huber hadn't thought, hadn't had time to think, but he knew as Padova jerked *Fencing Master* hard left that instinct had led him to the right decision. Though two other combat cars were nearer *Floosie* than *Fencing Master* was, they'd have to reverse and climb the slope to reach the disabled vehicle. Gravity was more of a handicap than an extra hundred meters on level ground when you were riding a thirty-tonne mass.

Sgt. Nagano--Fox Three-one--was a few months junior in grade to Three-seven's Sgt. Mullion, but Nagano'd been in F-3 when Huber took command a year ago while Mullion had been posted into the platoon only a few days before. Mullion might turn out to be a real crackerjack, and if so Huber would apologize to him at a suitable time. Right now there was enough else going wrong that Huber wasn't about to trust his troopers to an unknown quantity besides.

Fencing Master wove between the trunks of massive trees. Learoyd slid the fingers of his left hand under his helmet to rub his scalp and forehead, but his right never left the grip of his tribarrel. He seemed to be back to normal now, or anyway what passed as normal for a trooper in the middle of a firefight.

Chatter filled the platoon push, but none of it came from Jellicoe and her crew. Huber tuned out the empty noise--anybody was likely to babble in the stress of a battle, no matter how well-trained and experienced they might be--and concentrated on what wasn't there.

The icon for Three-three continued to pulse sullenly. Huber imported a remote image from Jellicoe's gunsight to the corner of his faceshield. He got only a motionless

view of treetops, but at least that was better than the black emptiness of an open channel.

"*There's Floosie!*" Learoyd said. "*El-Tee, they been hit from your side!*"

Floosie was tilted against the west side of a huge tree, spun there by the first of the two rounds which'd hit her. The slug had struck the back of the fighting compartment and penetrated cleanly, angling slightly left to right and exiting above the driver's hatch.

Floosie'd stalled at the impact. The second shot had slammed into the plenum chamber before the driver could restart his vehicle. That wasn't his fault: the combined shock of the slug and collision with a three-meter thick tree-bole was more any anybody could've shrugged off instantly, even protected by the automatic restraint system of the driver's compartment. The follow-up round had put paid to *Floosie*: there was a gaping hole in the skirts and at least half the fan nacelles would've been damaged or destroyed.

A Yeomanry tank had knocked out the combat car from the high ground a kilometer to the west. The hostile gunner had been lucky to get a sight line through the trees, but he'd been bloody good to react to the unexpected target and then to punch out a second round to finish the job. With so many shots ripping through the forest, one of them was bound to connect with something....

"Padova, get us--" Huber said, but his driver was already slewing *Fencing Master* to the right, putting the tree and the bulk of the disabled car between them and the Solace gunner. The tank might've moved forward after it fired; but its commander just might have decided that he was better off where he was than he'd be if he came to close quarters with the Slammers' tribarrels.

Deseau braced himself against the coaming beside Huber, cursing a blue streak. He'd grabbed Learoyd's backup 1-cm sub-machine gun from its sling on a tie-down beside the right tribarrel. It wasn't much of a weapon to threaten tanks with, but at least Deseau could point it toward the probable dangers.

Fencing Master around the tree and grounded hard, its port quarter almost in contact with *Floosie*'s damaged bow skirt. The ragged exit hole was bigger than an access port.

Jellicoe's driver climbed out of his hatch. He'd lost his helmet and his mouth hung open. A bitter haze of burned insulation lay over the fighting compartment, but as *Fencing Master* stopped, Huber saw a hand reach up to grip the coaming: Sgt. Jellicoe was still alive, if only just.

"Get aboard!" Huber screamed to the driver. As he spoke, he lifted his right foot to the top of *Fencing Master*'s armor and leaped into the disabled car. If anybody'd asked him a moment before, he'd have said he was so exhausted he had trouble just breathing. Deseau, continuing to curse, took over the left wing gun.

Floosie's fighting compartment was an abattoir. The Yeomanry guns fired frangible shot that broke into a hypersonic spray on the other side of the penetration. Jellicoe had been manning the left wing gun and out of the direct blast, but the sleet of heavy-metal granules had splashed the thighs and torsos of her crewmen across the interior of the armor. Huber's boots slipped when they hit the floor.

He fell with a dizzying shock. He was up again in a moment, but his right side was numb.

He lifted Sgt. Jellicoe. She was a stocky woman, still wearing the body armor that'd saved her life. Huber didn't try to strip the ceramic clamshell off her now because he wasn't sure his fingers could manipulate the catches. He stepped back and bent,

throwing Jellicoe's torso over his shoulders, then stumbled forward.

Learoyd and Deseau fired past Huber to either side; his faceshield blacked out the vivid cyan of their bolts. *Via!* there was no way in hell he was going to get aboard *Fencing Master*. He couldn't carry Jellicoe and he sure couldn't throw her into--

"*Gotcha, El-Tee!*" Frenchie said, bracing his left hand on the tribarrel's receiver as he prepared to cross to help. "*We're golden!*"

Huber didn't hear the shot that struck *Floosie's* bow slope, but he felt the car buck upward in the middle of a white flash.

Then he felt nothing. Nothing at all.

... *he should be coming around very shortly....* some part of the cosmos said to some other part of the cosmos.

Awareness--not consciousness, not yet--returned with the awkward jerkiness of a butterfly opening its wings as it poises on the edge of its cocoon. *My name is Arne Huber. I'm--*

Huber's eyes opened. He saw three faces, anxious despite their hard features. Then the pain hit him and he blacked out.

He regained consciousness. The world was white, pulsing, and oven-hot--but he was alert, waiting for his vision to steady. He knew from experience that he hadn't been out long this time, but how long he'd been *here*, in the main infirmary at Base Alpha.... He must've been hurt bad.

"How's Jellicoe?" he said. Huber'd heard rusty hinges with better tone than he had now, but he got the words out. "How's my platoon sergeant?"

The technician adjusted his controls, his attention on the display of his medical computer. He nodded in self-satisfaction. Huber felt a quivering numbness in all his nerve endings.

The other men in the room were Maj. Danny Pritchard and--blood and Martyrs--Colonel Hammer himself.

"She didn't make it," Hammer said flatly. "If you hadn't had her over your back, you wouldn't have made it either. The shot that hit Three-three's bow slope splashed upward. The good part of it is that the impact pretty well threw you aboard your own car. Your people were able to bug out after the rest of the platoon with no further casualties."

"It was quick for her," said Major Pritchard. He smiled wryly. "This time that's the truth."

You always told civilian dependents that their trooper's death had been quick, even if you knew she'd been screaming in agony, unable to open a jammed hatch as her vehicle burned. You didn't lie to other troopers, though, because it was a waste of breath.

Huber nodded. Pain washed over him; he closed his eyes. The technician muttered and made adjustments. Huber felt the pain vanish as though a series of switches were being tripped in sequence.

The Slammers used pain drugs only as first aid. Once a trooper was removed to a central facility, direct neural stimulation provided analgesis without the negative side-effects of chemicals. The Medicomp had kept Huber unconscious while he healed, exercising his muscles group by group to prevent atrophy and bed sores. He'd been awakened only when he should be able to walk on his own. The technician was smoothing out the vestiges of pain while Huber lay in a cocoon of induced inputs.

Huber opened his eyes. His brain was still collecting itself; direct neural stimulation tended to separate memory into discrete facets which reintegrated jarringly as consciousness returned. Part of Arne Huber understood it was remarkable that the Regiment's commander and deputy commander stood beside his pallet, but *everything* was new and remarkable to him now.

"How long's it been?" he said aloud, marvelling at the sound of his voice. "How long've I been out?"

"Four days," Danny Pritchard said. "Going on five if you count the time before we got you back to Base Alpha by aircar."

"Right," said Huber. "Well, I'm ready to go back to my platoon now. Are we still in the field?"

As he spoke, he braced his hands on the edges of the pallet and with careful determination began to lever his torso up from the mattress. A spasm knotted his muscles; his vision went briefly monochrome. The technician clicked his tongue.

"F-3 ought to be out of the line," Hammer said in a gravelly voice, "but we can't afford that luxury just now. We've assigned a car from Central Repair and personnel from the depot to bring them up to strength. I've put in a lieutenant named Algren as CO. He's green as grass, but he was top of his class at the Academy."

"I'm the fucking CO of F-3!" Huber said, swinging his legs over the side of the bed. "I can--"

He lurched to his feet. His knees buckled. Hammer caught him expertly and lifted him onto the pallet. Huber gasped, hoping he wouldn't vomit. There was nothing in his stomach, but acid boiled against the back of his throat while the technician's fingers danced on his keypad.

"No, you can't," Maj. Pritchard said. "We need the troopers we've got too badly to let you get a bunch of them killed to prove you're superman, which you're not. Besides, I want you in Operations."

"Right," said Hammer. "Bad as things are in the field, just now I need experienced officers on my staff worse than I do line commanders. I might transfer you to Operations even if you were fit to go back to F-3."

Huber glared at the Colonel, then let himself relax on the pallet. "Yeah, well," he said. "I'm not fit, you've got that right. But...."

"But when you are," Hammer said, "then I guess you've earned your choice of assignments. You did a good job getting your people out of that ratfuck. I won't bother saying I'm sorry for the way you got left hanging, but sure--I owe you one."

"For now you can do the most good to F-3 and the whole Regiment just by helping ride herd on what passes for the military forces of the United Cities," Pritchard said. "If we don't get them working together, it's going to be...."

His voice trailed off. He shook his head, suddenly looking drawn and gray with despair.

"The first thing you can help with," said Hammer, "is coming up with a platoon sergeant. I don't want to bring in somebody new, not with a newbie CO. I offered the job to your blower captain, Sgt. Deseau, and he turned it down; the others aren't seasoned enough on paper, and I don't know any of them personally."

"Frenchie'd hate the job...." Huber said, his mind settling into professional mode instead of focusing on his body and its weakness. "He could do it, but...."

"I can put the arm on him," the Colonel said. "Tell him it's take the job or out--and I wouldn't be bluffing."

"No," said Huber. "There's a sergeant in Log Section now, Jack Tranter. He's worked with us before. He isn't a line trooper, but he's seen the elephant. He's got the rank and organizational skills, and he's got the judgment to balance some young fire-eater straight out of the Academy."

"I remember him," said Pritchard with a frown. "He's a good man, but he's missing his right leg."

"The way things are right at the moment, Danny," said the Colonel with a piercing look at his subordinate, "he could be stone blind and I'd give him a trial if Huber here vouched for him. We don't have a lot of margin, you know."

Pritchard nodded with a grim smile. "Yeah," he said. "There's that."

Hammer turned to Huber again. The movement was very slight, but his gaze had unexpected weight. Huber felt the sort of shock he would if he'd been playing soccer and caught a medicine ball instead.

"So, lieutenant?" he said. "Are you going to do what I tell you, or are you going to keep telling me what *you'll* do?"

"Sir!" said Huber, sitting up. He didn't feel the waves of nausea and weakness that'd crumpled him moments before, but neither did he push his luck by swinging his feet over the side of the bed. "You're the Colonel. I'll do the best job I can wherever you put me."

Hammer nodded, a lift of his chin as tiny as the smile that touched his thin lips. Huber wondered vaguely what would've happened if he'd been too bullheaded to face reality. Hard to tell, but the chances were he'd be looking for a civilian job when he got out of the infirmary instead of arguing about where he belonged in the Regimental Table of Organization.

Danny Pritchard looked at the technician and said, "When'll he be able to move? Sit in front of a console in the Operations shop I mean, not humping through the boonies."

The technician shrugged. "I can have him over there by jeep in maybe three hours. It's not how brave you are or how many pushups you can do, it's just the neural pathways reconnecting. D'ye want me to requisition a uniform or did his own gear come in with him?"

All three men looked reflexively at Huber. Huber gulped out a laugh and felt better by an order of magnitude to have broken his own tension that way.

"Hey, when I came here the only thing I had on my mind was my hair," he said. "Draw me a medium/regular and I'll worry about my field kit later."

"Roger that," said Hammer, ending the discussion. His glance toward Huber was shrouded by layers of concerns that had nothing to do with the man on the bed. "You'll report to Operations as soon as you can, lieutenant, and Maj. Pritchard'll bring you up to speed."

Hammer started out of the room. Pritchard put a hand on the Colonel's shoulder and said, "Sir? You might tell him about Ander."

Hammer looked from his Operations Officer to Huber. "Yeah," he said, "I might do that. Lieutenant, the UC government ordered General Ander's arrest after his failure to execute their lawful orders. While he was in a cell pending his hearing before the

Bonding Authority representative, he committed suicide."

Huber frowned, trying to take in the information. "The UC arrested him?" he said. "Sir, how in hell did they do that? Ander's Legion may not be the best outfit on the planet, but the UC doesn't have anything more than a few forest guards with carbines."

"I suggested they deputize a platoon of the White Mice for the job," Hammer said. "I believe Maj. Steuben chose to lead the team himself."

"Ah," said Huber. He didn't say, "Why would Ander kill himself?" because obviously Ander hadn't killed himself. Huber'd turned down a chance to serve in the White Mice, the Regiment's field police and enforcers; but he understood why they existed, and this was one of the times he was *glad* they existed.

"Right," he said. "Ah... thank you, sir, though I hadn't been going to ask. I know we're in a complicated situation here on Plattner's World."

"You just think you know," said Pritchard over his shoulder as he followed the Colonel out of the room. "After a day in Operations, lieutenant, you'll know bloody well."

Like every other line soldier throughout history, Arne Huber had cursed because his superiors expected him to follow orders without having a clue as to what was really going on. Transferred now to the operations staff, he found himself in a situation he liked even less: he knew the Big Picture, and the reality was much worse than he'd believed when he had only a platoon to worry about.

Even more frustrating, there was nothing he could do to change the situation. It was like trying to push spaghetti uphill.

Huber cut the present connection, watching the image of a dark-skinned officer in a rainbow turban shrink down to a bead and vanish. Colonel Sipaji swore that his troops were already in position outside Jonesburg, save for the few support units which were still en route from the spaceport at Rhodesville. Jonesburg's own spaceport had been closed because of the danger from Solace energy weapons. Like all the ports in the United Cities, it was only a dirigible landing field which small starships could use with care.

Sipaji commanded the Sons of Mangala, a battalion-sized infantry unit, not very mobile but potentially useful when dug in at the right place. Satellite imagery showed that not only were they not in Jonesburg, they were halted only two kilometers outside Rhodesville. The visuals were good enough that with a modicum of enhancement Huber had been able to see the cluster of officers outside the trailer that served as Colonel Sipaji's Tactical Operations Center. They were sitting on camp stools with their legs crossed, drinking from teacups.

And that knowledge didn't make the least bit of difference, because Colonel Sipaji was going to stick to his lie with the bland assurance of a man who knows what the truth ought to be and isn't affected by consensus reality. Sipaji wasn't a coward and if his battalion ever got into position it would be a very cost-effective way of protecting the northern approaches to Jonesburg; but it *wasn't* going to get there before Solace forces had closed the route from Rhodesville. Intent was reality to Sipaji, and he truly intended to go to Jonesburg... soon.

Huber stood. He was at one of a dozen consoles under a peaked roof of extruded plastic whose trusses were supported by posts along each of the long sides. This annex to the Regimental Operations Center was located in the parking lot of the Bureau of Public

Works for the City of Benjamin, the administrative capital of the United Cities.

The portable toilet within the chain link fencing hadn't been emptied in too long, which was pretty much the way life had been going for Huber during the week since he got out of the infirmary. He turned, then swayed and had to catch himself by the back of the console's seat. He'd been planning to go inside the wood-frame Bureau HQ itself, but now he wasn't sure that he'd bother.

"Lt. Huber," said the officer who'd come down the aisle behind him. "Take a break. I don't want to see you for the rest of the day and I mean it."

Huber jumped in surprise. He'd been so lost in his frustration that he hadn't seen the section chief, Capt. Dillard, coming toward him. Dillard was a spare man with one eye, one arm, and a uniform whose creases you could shave with. Huber respected the man, but he didn't imagine the captain had been anyone he could've warmed to even before the blast of a directional mine had ended Dillard's career as a line officer.

"Sir," said Huber, "I can't get the Sons of Mangala to move. I thought if I took an aircar to where they're camped, maybe--"

"Get out of here, lieutenant," Dillard said in the tone he'd have used to a whining child. "If you went to see Colonel Sipaji, his troops still wouldn't move. I don't care to risk the chance that you'd shoot him. That'd cause an incident with the Bonding Authority and delay the deployment even longer. Get a meal, get some sleep, and don't return before ten hundred hours tomorrow."

"But--"

"I mean it!" Dillard snapped. "Get out of here or you'll leave under escort!"

"Yessir," Huber muttered. He was angry--at the order, at Sipaji, and at himself for behaving like a little boy on the verge of a tantrum.

The troopers at the occupied consoles pretended to be lost in their work. Three of the eight were on the disabled list like Huber; the remainder had been culled from other rear-echelon slots to fill the present need to coordinate the mercenary fragments of the UC forces. Text and graphics were more efficient ways to transfer data to the other units, but face-to-face contact had a better chance of getting a result on the other end of the line of communication.

Huber gurgled a laugh, surprising Capt. Dillard more than the snarl he'd probably expected. Huber's stomach was fluttery--he did need food--and if he was letting anger run him like that, he needed rest besides.

"Captain," he said, "it looks to me like we're hosed on this one. The UC's hosed, I mean, so we ought to advise 'em to make peace with Solace on whatever terms they can get. Solace has columns moving on Simpliche and Jonesburg both. We can--the Regiment can--block either one, I guess, but I don't see any way Solace won't capture one place or the other unless the units we're operating with get their act together. And when the core cities of the UC start to fall--it's over, the rest of Outer States'll cut off their financing, and then everybody goes home. Which we may as well do right now, hadn't we?"

"That's not my decision, lieutenant," Dillard said impatiently, "nor yours either. Get some food and rest, report at ten hundred hours."

He made a brusque gesture with his hand. So far as Huber had been able to tell during his week's contact with Capt. Dillard, the man genuinely didn't care whether or not what he was doing had any purpose. Maybe to Dillard, *nothing* had purpose... which

wasn't a bad attitude for a professional soldier. Anyway, it didn't keep Dillard from being efficient at his present job.

Huber walked out of the lot and stumped up the stairs to the back of the HQ building. His quarters were in a barracks within the Repair Central compound in the warehouse district. It was walled and guarded by a platoon of combat cars, making security less of a problem than it would've been elsewhere in the city. There'd be an aircar driven by a contract employee, a UC citizen, in front of the Bureau HQ, or if there wasn't the receptionist in the entranceway would call one.

After he took a leak....

"Lt. Huber?" called the receptionist as he pushed open the door to the rest room. Huber ignored him. To his surprise, the door opened again as he settled himself before the urinal. The receptionist, a middle-aged warrant officer with signals flashes on his epaulets, had followed him in.

"Sir?" the fellow said. "There's a woman out front to see you. She's been waiting, but I told you nobody disturbed the personnel on duty."

"I've been disturbed ever since I was assigned here," Huber muttered, "but that's nothing new. Who is she and what's she want?"

His tension and frustration drained away as he emptied his bladder. Was it that simple? All the trouble in life was just a matter of physical discomfort?

No, there were still the Col. Sipajis of this world. They might have no more value than a bladderful of urine, but they weren't as easy to void.

"Her name's Daphne Priamedes, sir," the receptionist said. "I don't know what she's got in mind, but she's a looker, *that* I know."

She must be, to get a plump, balding veteran this excited. Well, the receptionist hadn't spent the past fourteen hours talking to the commanders of mercenary units who had an amazing number of variations on the theme of, "No, I think I should do something else instead."

"Never heard of her," Huber said. Right now the only thing that was going through his mind was that if he let her, she'd slow him down on his way back to the barracks and a bed. He didn't plan to let her. He turned, closing his fly. "There a car out front to take me home?"

"She's got a car, sir," the receptionist said. "A big one, brand new."

Huber started to swear and realized he didn't have the energy for it. The receptionist got out of the way as Huber lurched toward the doorway and down the hall.

Huber hadn't been able to find a comfortable position to sleep in, and being tired made his left leg drag worse than it would've anyway. Slivers of metal from both the Yeomanry shot and the bits it'd gouged from *Floosie's* bow armor had splattered him from knee to pelvis, and even the most expert nanosurgery did additional damage in removing the tiny missiles.

A striking black-haired woman stood between Huber and the outside door. She was within a centimeter of his height; her gaze was as direct as it could be without being hostile.

"Lt. Huber?" she said in a pleasant contralto. "I heard you tell Chief Warrant Leader Saskovich that you needed a ride. I have a car, and if you'll permit me I'll also buy you a better meal than you're likely to get on your own."

"Ma'am....," said Huber. He wondered if she was going to jump out of his way like

the receptionist--Saskovich, apparently, and this woman had not only noticed the fellow's name but she'd gotten his rank right--or whether Huber would shoulder her aside on his way to the door. "The *only* bloody thing I know is that my job doesn't include talking to civilians. Find somebody in the public affairs section or talk to your own government; I don't have the time or the interest."

Through the glass front door of the building Huber could see a combat car on guard--there were no unit numbers stenciled on the skirts; it was an unassigned vehicle from Central Repair--and two aircars. One was a battered ten-place van with a Logistics Section logo on the side; a local contract employee chewing tobacco in the cab. The other was a luxury vehicle.

"My government is the Republic of Solace," the woman said. She stiff-armed open the swinging door and held it for him. "My father is Col. Apollonio Priamedes. You saved his life at Northern Star Farms where he'd been in command when you attacked. I want to thank you in person before I accompany him back to Solace in tomorrow's prisoner exchange."

Huber's mouth opened, then closed as he realized that all the several things he'd started to say were a waste of breath. He remembered the Solace colonel limping out of the smoke to surrender, just as straight-backed as this woman who said she was his daughter.

Huber knew now what that erect posture had cost Priamedes. Because of that, and because Daphne Priamedes really *was* a stunner, he said, "Ma'am, I don't want company for dinner. But if you'll run me back to my barracks down in the warehouse district, I'll buy you a drink on the way."

"Yes, of course, lieutenant," the woman said. "And I'd appreciate it if you'd call me Daphne, but I understand that you may prefer a more formal posture. Perhaps you're uncomfortable with the attitude toward hostilities we have on Plattner's World."

She strode past and opened the limousine's passenger door for him. That was a little embarrassing, but there wasn't a lot Huber could do about it in his present condition. Walking upright was about as much as he could manage at the moment. He braced his hands on the door and side of the vehicle to swing himself onto the seat, noticing the inlays of wood and animal products on the interior panels.

"I'm not uncomfortable, ah, Daphne," he said, "since it's the same attitude we mercenaries have toward each other: we may be enemies today and fighting on the same side tomorrow, or the other way around. Either way the relationship's professional rather than emotional. But I didn't expect to see a Solace citizen travelling openly in the UC capital when there's a war on."

Daphne Priamedes got in behind the control yoke and brought the car live. The vehicle had six small drive fans on each side instead of the normal one at either end; it was noticeably quieter than others Huber had ridden in.

Aircars were uncommon on most planets, but special circumstances on Plattner's World made them the normal means of personal transportation. The per capita income here was high, the population dispersed, and the preservation of the forests so much a religion--the attitude went beyond awareness of the economic benefit--that people found the notion of cutting roadways through the trees profoundly offensive.

Only in the Solace highlands where trees were sparse and not parasitized by Moss was there a developed system of ground transportation. There a monorail network shifted

bulky agricultural produce from the farms to collection centers from which dirigibles flew it to the Outer States and returned with containers of Moss.

"There's ten generations of intercourse between Solace and the Outer States," Priamedes said. "This trouble--this war--is only during the past six months. We *need* each other on Plattner's World."

Her eyes were on the holographic instrument display she'd called up when she started the motors; it blinked off when she was comfortable with the readouts. She twisted the throttle in a quick, precise movement.

As the car lifted, she glanced over at Huber and went on, "Besides, for the most part it's you mercenaries fighting--not citizens. We in Solace tried to fight with our own forces at the beginning, but we learned that wasn't a satisfactory idea."

She smiled. Her expression as bright and emotionless as the glint of cut crystal.

"War's a specialist job," Huber said, keeping his tone flat. The car was enclosed and its drive fans were only a hum through his bootsoles. "At least it is if you've got specialists on the other side. We are, the Slammers are, and the other merc units are too even if they don't necessarily have our hardware."

He paused, then added, "Or our skill level."

"As I said, we recognized that," Priamedes said. "A disaster like Northern Star Farms rather drives the point home, particularly since it was obvious that things could have gone very much worse than even they did. Instead we're mortgaging ten years of our future hiring off-planet professionals to do what the Solace Militia couldn't."

Huber didn't speak. He regretted getting into the car with this woman, but he regretted a lot of things in life. This wasn't his worst mistake by any means.

Northern Star was a collective farm that'd been turned into a firebase under Col. Priamedes. He commanded an infantry battalion and an artillery battery from the Solace Militia, with a company of mercenaries whose high-power lasers were supposed to be the anti-armor component of the force.

Huber'd led the combat cars in the company-sized Slammers task force that had punctured the defenses like a bullet into a balloon. The Militia were brave enough and even well trained, but they weren't veterans. The cars' concentrated firepower had literally stunned them, and the mercenary lasers were too clumsy to stand a chance against 20-cm tank guns which had virtually unlimited range across flat cornfields.

In retrospect it hadn't been much of a battle, though it'd seemed real enough to Arne Huber as he watched scores of militiamen rise from a trench and aim at his oncoming combat cars. And all it takes is one bullet in the wrong place and you're dead as dirt, no matter how great your side's victory looks to whoever writes the history books.

Priamedes shook her head in inward directed anger, then turned a genuinely warm smile toward Huber. "I'm sorry," she said. "The situation frustrates me, but that isn't your fault and it's not what I came to see you about. Will this place do for our drink? I like it myself."

She banked the car slightly and gestured through her window. On Plattner's World, there was forest even in the cities. She was pointing toward a three-story structure shaded by trees on all sides. On the roof were open-air tables, half empty at this hour, and a service kiosk in one corner with an outside elevator rising beside it. Above, a holographic sign, visible from any angle, read GUSTAV'S. The letters changed from dark to light green and back in slow waves.

"That's fine," Huber said. "Anywhere's fine. I don't know much about Benjamin."

He'd been on seven planets besides Nieuw Friesland where he was born, and he didn't know much about any of them. He remembered the way powergun bolts glinted among the ice walls on Humboldt and the way the whores on Dar es-Sharia dyed their breasts and genitalia blue; those things and scores of similar things, little anecdotes of existence with nothing connecting them but the fact they were fragments from the life of Lt. Arne Huber.

Priamedes brought them around in a tight reverse instead of angling the fans forward to slow them. The car dropped between the treetops to level out just above the gravel roadway. The elevator was descending with a pair of well-dressed men in the glass cage.

Dust puffed as Priamedes landed smoothly in a line of similar cars. City streets in the Outer States were for parking and delivery vehicles. They were almost never paved, because that would speed storm-water runoff and decrease the amount of water that penetrated the soil to nourish vegetation.

Huber reached for his door release; parts of his body decided to protest, cramping when they were directed to move. He gasped with pain, then tried to cover his weakness with a blistering curse.

"Wait, I'll--" Priamedes said.

Snarling under his breath, Huber shoved the door open before his hostess could get around the vehicle to help him. He hopped out, forcing his left leg to work even though it felt as if somebody had turned a blowtorch on the hip joint.

She paused, turning her head away politely, and waited for Huber to join her so that they could walk to the waiting elevator together. "My father was injured in the fighting before he was captured," she said in a neutral tone. "He got off crutches a few days ago and should make a full recovery."

Huber laughed as the cage rose. "So will I," he said, more cheerfully than he felt. "Look, mostly I'm just stiff from sitting at a console all day. I'm not used to desk duty, that's all."

That was part of why he was stumbling around, all right; and he was tense from frustration at the people he had to deal with, which was another part of the problem. But at the back of Huber's mind was the awareness that the fragments he'd caught when the shot struck might have done damage that even time and the best medical treatment couldn't quite repair. That he might never again be fit for a field command....

"Lieutenant?" the black-haired woman said in concern.

Via, what had his expression been like? "Sorry," Huber said, forcing a smile. "I was klicks away, just thinking of the work I've got to do in the morning."

He must have sounded convincing, because Priamedes' features softened with relief. To keep away from the subject of his health, Huber made his way to a table near the wickerwork railing and pulled out a chair for the woman. It was with considerable relief that he settled across from her, though.

A waitress approached with an expectant look. The dozen other customers were glancing covertly at them as well, their eyes probably drawn by Huber's uniform and possibly his limp. There were a lot of mercenaries in Benjamin now, but the Slammers' khaki and rampant lion patch were the trappings of nobility to those who were knowledgeable. On a planet as wealthy and interconnected as Plattner's World, that

meant most people.

Because of that perfectly accurate perception and because of the perfectly normal human resentment it engendered in other mercenaries, the United Cities were going to lose the war. A single armored regiment couldn't defeat several divisions worth of enemies, many of whom were themselves highly sophisticated; and the other UC mercenaries weren't cooperating with the Slammers the way they'd need to do to win.

"Lieutenant?" said Daphne Priamedes, loudly enough to penetrate Huber's brown study. They were waiting for his order, of course....

He swore in embarrassment. "Ah, there's corn whiskey? I don't remember the name for it here, but my sergeant when I was in Log Section...?"

Priamedes nodded understanding and said to the waitress, "Zapotec--and water, I believe, unless...?"

"That's fine," Huber said in reply to her raised eyebrow. "Anything's fine, really."

He didn't know whether Zapotec was generic or a brand name; if the latter, it was probably the best available unless he'd misjudged Daphne Priamedes. Huber suddenly realized that he knew very little about anything beyond what he needed to do his job well. He and his fellow troopers wouldn't have been nearly as effective if they hadn't focused so completely on their jobs, but when he thought about it he felt lonely.

The waitress trotted away. Priamedes glanced around the covered patio, slapping the eyes of the others back to their own proper concerns. When she and Huber were as private as one ever is in open air, she said, "My father told me what happened at Northern Star, lieutenant. At the end, I mean. He said it would've been much easier for you to kill him and his men than to capture them, but you took a considerable risk to spare their lives."

The waitress came back with the drinks. Priamedes entered her credit chip in the reader before Huber even thought to take his out of its pouch. Via! Maybe it was a good thing he wasn't in the field right now, because he was dropping too bloody many stitches.

Though... in the field he knew what he was doing reflexively. This was civilian life, and that was another matter. Arne Huber hadn't been a civilian for a long time.

He took a swig of the liquor; it cleaned the gumminess from his mouth and tongue and focused his mind like a leap into cold water. "Ma'am," he said, "I guess I've done worse things than shooting civilians who didn't have sense enough to give up, but only by mistake or when I had to. "

He drank again; too much. He'd supposed he'd made his opinion of the Solace Militia clearer than he should've to an officer's daughter. The whiskey was good but it was strong as well, even cut with water; the big slug made his throat spasm and he had to cough.

Covering his embarrassment, Huber went on, "Ma'am, I can give you policy reasons why my commanding officer didn't want to blow away your father's men when they made a break for it. The truth is, though, neither I nor Capt. Sangrela really likes to kill people. I'm a soldier, not a sociopath."

"I see that," she said, smiling faintly. "And I still prefer Daphne, lieutenant."

"It's the booze talking," Huber said, smiling back. It was warm in his stomach, though and it felt good. "Look, Daphne, I appreciate the drink, but I really need to get to a bunk."

"Very well," she said, tossing off the rest of the fizzy, light green concoction she

was drinking over ice. "If I can't offer you dinner...?"

"No ma--no *Daphne*," Huber said, rising more easily than he'd sat down. "I'll eat some rations, but right now I need sleep more than company--even company as nice as you."

"Then I'll just thank you again for sparing my father," she said, standing also. "And I hope we'll see one another again in the future when you're better rested--Arne?"

"Arne," Huber agreed. "And I hope that too."

"I'll expect your report in three hours, then, Gen. Rubens," Huber said and broke the connection. He adjusted the little fan playing on him from the console as he thought about the next call he had to make. The day'd started out cool, but now by mid-morning it was unseasonably hot for Plattner's World.

Parts of Base Alpha were climate controlled, but mostly the Regiment's machines and personnel were expected to operate under whatever conditions nature offered. You weren't going to win many battles from inside a sealed room, and the Colonel tried to discourage people from thinking you could.

As a break from talking to people he didn't like and didn't trust--he knew they probably felt the same way--Huber called up the Solace Order of Battle. He wasn't sure he was really supposed to have the information, but he'd found that his retina pattern was on Central's validation list. A benefit of being assigned to Operations....

As he viewed the latest information, his gut told him that he'd have been better off staying ignorant. Sure, things could've gotten worse--things can always get worse--but he hadn't really expected them to go this bad. Daphne'd said Solace was mortgaging its next ten years to hire mercenaries. Huber knew now that she'd been understating the real costs.

He looked out through the fence, trying to settle his mind. An aircar with Log Section markings had landed in the street under the guns of the combat car on guard. The driver, one of the locals the Regiment had hired for non-combat work, waited in the cab. A tall civilian in an expensive-looking pearl gray outfit got out, stalked to the gate, and said, "I am Sigmund Lindeyar Take me to Col. Hammer at once!"

Instead of snapping to attention obediently, Capt. Dillard turned his back to the furious man on the other side of the fence. He was frowning as he called Central on his commo helmet.

The fellow ought to be more thankful than he seemed. Dillard was treating him a lot better than some troopers would've done to a civilian who raised his voice to them.

Dillard grimaced minusculely as he signed off. When he focused again on his present surroundings, he caught Huber's eye. "Lt. Huber?" he called. "Will you join us, please?"

Huber cut the power to his console manually instead of trusting it to turn itself off when he rose from the attached seat. He didn't want anybody else to see what he'd just learned. *Blood and Martyrs, a brigade of armored cavalry in addition to what Solace was already fielding!*

"Sir?" said Huber crisply to Capt. Dillard. He stood at parade rest, trying to look like what a civilian expected a professional soldier to be. He'd picked up from Dillard's expression that Central had confirmed the civilian's high self opinion, so a little theater was called for.

Huber's rumpled fatigues weren't what a rear-echelon soldier would've called

'professional appearance,' but Huber *wasn't* a rear-echelon soldier.

Huber'd thought Lindeyar was an old man; viewing him closely, he wasn't sure. The hair beneath the fellow's natty beret was pale blond, not white, and his face was unlined; despite that, his blue eyes had age in them as well as a present snapping fury.

"Lieutenant," Dillard said, turning to include both Huber and the civilian, "Mr. Lindeyar is the Nonesuch trade representative. His driver brought him here rather than to the Tactical Operations Center at Base Alpha, where he's to meet Col. Hammer. I'd like you to escort Mr. Lindeyar to the correct location."

"Yessir!" Huber said, his back straight. He thought about saluting, but that'd come through as obvious caricature if Lindeyar knew *anything* about the way the Slammers operated. Besides, Huber was lousy at it.

"Mr. Lindeyar," Dillard said, shifting his eyes slightly, "Lt. Huber is my second in command. He'll see to it that there isn't a repetition of the error that brought you here in the first place."

"He'd better," said the civilian, his eyes flicking over Huber with the sort of attention one gives to a zoo animal. "Your colonel is expecting me. Expecting me before now!"

"We'll get you there, sir," Huber said as Dillard opened the gate. He was the only officer in the annex besides Dillard himself, but 'second in command' was more theater. If one of the warrant officers or enlisted men had caught Dillard's eye at the moment he needed a warm body to cover somebody else's screwup, that trooper would have become , 'my most trusted subordinate,' as sure as day dawns.

And screwup it'd been. The driver had a navigational pod, but he or it had chosen the coordinates for the operations annex instead of the TOC. A soldier wouldn't have made that mistake, but to the contract driver it was simply a destination. That probably wasn't the fault of anybody in the Regiment--and it certainly wasn't Capt. Dillard's fault--but Lindeyar didn't seem like the sort of man who worried about justice when he was angry.

They walked toward the street together. The path was gravel and Huber's left knee didn't want to bend. He tensed his abdomen to keep from gasping in pain as he kept up with the long-legged civilian.

"I want you to drive," Lindeyar said as they reached the aircar--a ten-seat utility vehicle that'd seen a lot of use. "I don't trust this fool not to get lost again."

"Negative!" said the scruffy driver--who turned out to be female, though Huber couldn't imagine anyone to whom the difference would matter. "I own this truck and I'm not letting any soldier-boy play games with it!"

"No sir," said Huber, letting himself breathe now that he didn't have to match strides with Lindeyar, "I can't drive an aircar. We won't get lost."

He got into the cab, motioning the driver aside. She opened her mouth for another protest. "Shut up," Huber said, not loudly but not making any attempt to hide how he felt.

He was pissed at quite a number of things and people right at the moment, and the driver was somebody he could unload on safely if she pushed him just a hair farther. Huber didn't know how to drive an aircar, that was true; but he was in a mood to give himself some on-the-job training with this civilian prick along for the ride.

The driver shut her mouth. Huber switched on the dashboard navigational pod, synched it with his helmet AI, and downloaded the new destination. Lindeyar climbed

into the back, looking tautly angry but keeping silent for now.

"All right," Huber said to the driver, more mildly than before. "I'll check as we go, but you shouldn't have any trouble now. Let's get going."

She nodded warily and fed power to her fans. The drive motors were in better shape than the truck's body, which was something. They lifted smoothly, sending back a billow of dust before they transitioned from ground effect to free flight.

Why did a trade representative figure he could give orders to the Slammers? And being pretty close to right in the assumption, given the way Capt. Dillard had hopped to attention after checking with Central. Nonesuch bought half the Thalderol base which Plattner's World exported, but that was no concern of the Regiment's.

Except that it obviously was a concern, if Hammer himself took time to meet with the fellow while the war was going to hell in a handbasket. Huber chuckled.

"You find something funny in this, lieutenant?" Lindeyar said in a voice that could've frozen a pond.

"I'd been thinking earlier this morning that things can always get worse, sir," Huber said calmly. When you've spent a significant fraction of your life with other people shooting at you, it's easy to stay calm in situations where the potential downside doesn't include a bullet in your guts. "I won't say I'm glad to've been right, but I guess I do find it amusing, yes."

Lindeyar didn't reply, not so that he could be heard over the fans at any rate. Huber'd called up a topo map as a 30% mask on his faceshield. Base Alpha lay just beyond the city's eastern outskirts. The driver was holding them on a direct course toward it, the only variations being those imposed by traffic regulations which were completely opaque to an outsider like Huber.

As well as five dirigibles hauling heavy cargoes, there were hundreds of aircars in sight. That in itself was a good reason to leave the driving to a local.

Base Alpha was a scar on the landscape, a 12-hectare tract scraped bare of forest. There was nothing else like it in the Outer States. Even the dirigible fields where starships now landed were smaller. The soil had a yellow tinge and was already baking to coarse limestone. A two-meter berm of dirt stabilized with a plasticizer surrounded the perimeter; the TOC complex was a cruciform pattern dug in at the center.

The clearing wasn't just to house the vehicles and temporary buildings required for the headquarters of an armored regiment: Hammer also demanded sight distances for the powerguns that defended the base against incoming aircraft and artillery fire. The UC government had protested, but that didn't matter. The Colonel didn't compromise on military necessities; he and his troops were the sole judges of what war made necessary.

One or more guns had been tracking the aircar ever since it came over the horizon on a course for the base. An icon quivered in the right corner of Huber's faceshield, indicating that his AI had received and replied to Central's authentication signal.

A kilometer from the base, the driver slowed her vehicle to a hover. Lindeyar leaned forward and said, "Why are we stopping?" in a louder voice than the fan roar demanded.

Huber tapped the green light on top of the navigational pod and said to the driver, "Go on in, we're cleared."

"No, I've got to call in," the driver said. "Otherwise they'll shoot us out of the air. It's happened!"

"I told you, we're cleared!" Huber said. "Do as I tell you or I'll shoot you myself!"

Most of that was for Lindeyar's benefit--but he wasn't in a good mood, that was the bloody truth. Not that he'd have shot the woman while they were a hundred meters in the air and she was driving....

The driver obeyed with a desperate look, though they flew into the compound at a noticeably slower pace than they'd crossed Benjamin proper. The navigation pod directed her to a 10-by-10 meter square just outside the gate through the razor ribbon surrounding the TOC. The troopers on guard in a gun jeep watched with bored interest rather than concern, but their tribarrel tracked the car all the way in.

Huber hopped out immediately and offered Lindeyar his arm for support; the open truck didn't have doors in back, though the sidewalls weren't high. The civilian ignored the offer with the studied discourtesy that Huber'd expected.

A staff lieutenant--an aide, Huber supposed, but he didn't know the fellow--trotted up the ramp from the TOC entrance as Huber and the civilian got out of the aircar. The driver kept her fans spinning, so grit swirled around their ankles and made Huber blink. He didn't bother snarling at her.

"Mr. Lindeyar?" the aide called as he swung open the wire-wrapped gate. "Please step this way. The Colonel's waiting for you."

Well, I guess that's 'mission accomplished' for me, Huber thought. He turned to get back into the aircar. His helmet filters slapped down as the driver took off without him in a spray of dust. Some of it got under his collar, sticking to the sweat and making the cloth feel like sandpaper when he moved.

Lindeyar and his new escort were already entering the TOC, four buried climate-controlled trailers. Corrugated planking roofed the hub, and there was a layer of dirt over the whole. It wouldn't do much against a direct hit by artillery, but the air defense tribarrels took care of that threat. A sniper with a 2-cm powergun could be dangerous from an aircar many kilometers away, though; burying the TOC avoided possible disruption.

Rather than call Log Section for another ride, Huber nodded to the troopers on guard and walked toward a temporary building a few hundred meters away. He wasn't in a hurry to get back to the operations annex. The Lord knew, he'd always tried to do his job; but it was hard to see what good he was doing there, or what good he or anybody else *could* do in a ratfuck like Plattner's World was turning into.

A combat car drove slowly along the clearing outside the berm; Huber could see only the upper edge of the armor. The trooper in the fighting compartment was part of the training cadre, giving a newbie driver some practice. The car was either worn out or a vehicle straight from Central Repair, being tested before it was released to a field troop.

Either way, the car and both troopers were going to be in combat very shortly--unless the UC faced reality and surrendered. The Colonel'd have to throw everything in to stop the Solace juggernaut, and it wouldn't be enough.

The building's open window had screens whose static charge repelled dust. The door with the stenciled sign SIGNALS 2 wasn't screened, so Huber stepped inside quickly and closed it behind him. Three troopers looked at him through the displays of their specialized consoles.

"Is Lt. Basine here?" Huber asked. "I was told--"

Doll Basine stepped out of a side office, looking elfin although she wore issue

fatigues without the tailoring some rear-echelon officers affected. "Arne! Come on in. Yeah, I've been at Central the past three weeks. Are you okay, because from what I'd heard...?"

"Hey, I'm walking around," Huber said with a laugh. "That'll do for now."

Doll's office was really a cubicle, but it had a door as a concession to her rank. She closed it behind Huber and motioned him to the chair behind the console, taking the flip-down seat on the wall for herself.

"You're going to be a remf like me from now on, Arne?" she asked, smiling but obviously concerned. She and Huber had been good friends at the Academy, a relationship simplified by the fact that neither had any sexual interest in men.

"Just for now," he said as he sat down carefully. "I'm getting movement back day by day, and it doesn't hurt much any more."

He shrugged, wishing he could truthfully say more. It felt *really* good to take the weight off his left leg, and that scared him. "A trade representative arrived from Nonesuch for a meeting with the Colonel and wound up in the wrong place. I got to bring him back here."

Doll's face went grim. "Do you know anything about what's going on, Arne?" she asked. She patted her console. "Because I wasn't about to eavesdrop on the Colonel's private meetings."

"Could you?" Huber said, interested.

She grinned, a more familiar expression. "Yeah," she said, "but I couldn't do it without leaving a trail that the counterintelligence people could follow. I don't want to discuss that with Joachim Steuben."

"It'd be a short discussion," Huber said, also with a smile of sorts. Maj. Steuben was as *pretty* as Doll herself. Frequently his duties involved killing somebody, a task at which Steuben was remarkably good. Inhumanly good, you might say.

"I don't know anything about Lindeyar except he seemed to expect a red carpet and wasn't best pleased not to have one," Huber said. He rubbed his neck; Doll gestured to the box of tissues on the console.

"Doll?" he went on, meeting her eyes. "Do you know how bad it is out there?"

She shrugged in turn. "I know it's not good," she said. "My section's job is to keep up the links with friendly units, so I see all the traffic whether I want to or not."

"Solace is pushing us everywhere," Huber said. He was glad to talk to somebody. Misery wanting company, he supposed, and he knew he could trust Doll. "We're just trying to block their advances."

He shrugged again and went on, "The Waldheim Dragoons are landing at Port Plattner in a day's time. They're mechanized and brigade strength, maybe a thousand combat vehicles. They've got powerguns and there's three 5-cm cannon in each platoon. Those'll take out a tank at short range, and a combat car's toast any time they hit it."

Doll made a moue and patted her tight black hair with her fingertips as she absorbed the information. "I can tell you," she said, staring toward the bulldozed wasteland past the slanting louvers, "that the UC isn't expecting the arrival of any significant reinforcements in the next ten days. I'd have been warned to make sure there'd be circuits clear."

"It wouldn't matter," Huber explained. "Solace is landing the Dragoons in a single lift. In a week or less they'll be organized and move out. It'd take a month to unload a

brigade in what passes for spaceports in the UC, and it'd take longer than that to put the dribs and drabs together as a fighting force. Via, what we've got *now* isn't a coherent force except for the Regiment!"

"Could Nonesuch do anything?" Doll asked. "They're the major player in this arm of the galaxy."

"Lindeyar isn't somebody whose good will I'd want to depend on," Huber said. He chuckled at the thought. "But I sure don't see a better hope."

He was still wearing his commo helmet out of habit. The faceshield was raised, so the attention signal chimed in his ear instead of being a flashing icon. At the same time Doll's switched-off console lit under Central's control.

Col. Hammer's face coalesced out of pearly light. He looked grim, though that was normal for the few times Huber had seen the Colonel make a Regiment-wide announcement.

"Listen up, troopers," Hammer said. Huber and Basine stared at the display. Hammer's hard gray eyes were locked with theirs, despite the varied angles, and with those of everyone else who view the transmitted image. "Orders'll be coming down in two hours. Be ready to move with your field kit. This means *everybody*. There'll be reassignments of rear echelon personnel to line slots where they need to be filled."

The Colonel rubbed his forehead; for a moment he looked very tired. His expression hardened again and he went on, "You've been the best soldiers every place you've fought. It's no different here. Do your jobs, troopers; and if I do mine as well as you've always done yours, we're going to pull this off yet!"

The image shrank and vanished; the memory of the Colonel's words hung a moment longer in the small office. Huber got to his feet.

"Going to get your kit together, Arne?" Doll said as she squeezed aside to let him past.

"That's next," Huber said. "First I'm going to see the Colonel."

He grinned at Doll as he opened the door. He felt numb, and there was a glowing wall in his mind that blocked off all the future except the next five minutes or so.

"First...", Huber said as he stepped into the outer office. "I've got to make sure I'm going back to the line!"

Huber strode toward the TOC entrance, his left leg stiff but not slowing him up a bit. He didn't know how he was going to bluff his way through the guards, but as it chanced he didn't have to. They'd heard the Colonel also, and they knew a lot of people were going to be moving fast on Regiment business.

Half a dozen figures came up the ramp from the TOC at the same time as Huber reached the wire going the other way. He unhooked the gate and pulled it open, then closed it behind him when they'd passed.

The last one through was the civilian, Lindeyar. He reached back and caught Huber's arm over the wire. "You, lieutenant!" he cried. "There's to be a vehicle to carry me to Benjamin!"

Huber hooked the wire loop to the gate's frame. He pulled his arm away, suppressing a momentary desire to slap the civilian back on his haunches with the same movement. He nodded to the guards and shuffled down the ramp, keeping to the right

side as three more officers came out of the buried trailers with set expressions. They were on their way to duties that weren't limited to staring at a display as other people fought a war....

Huber grabbed the door before it closed; the air puffing from the interior was cool. The man coming out *now* was Col. Hammer himself, with Maj. Kreutzer--the S-4, Personnel Officer--just behind him. Kreutzer's arm was raised; he was in an agony of wishing he dared to physically restrain his commanding officer.

"Sir!" said Huber, stepping in front of Hammer.

"Not bloody now!" the Colonel snarled. He looked as though he might bull past. Huber braced himself, but there was no contact.

"Sir, you said you owe me," Huber said, pitching his voice loudly enough to be heard over the sound of vehicles spinning up all around the base. "I'm collecting now. I want to go back to the field."

Behind Kreutzer were three other officers, trying to catch Hammer before he went off without answering their questions. Warrant officers sat at consoles to either side of the narrow aisle, immersed in their displays.

"Huber?" Hammer said. His face thawed like ice breaking up on the surface of a river. "Via, yeah, you're going back if you're able to walk."

He looked over his shoulder at the personnel officer. "Kreutzer, you wanted a CO for L Company?" he said. "All right, put Huber in the slot. And brevet him captain when you get a chance."

"No sir!" Huber said. He'd expected the fury in Hammer's expression, so it didn't slow him down as he continued, "Sir, I've never commanded infantry and this is no time for on-the-job training. Send me back to F-3."

"You only get away with crossing me if you're right, lieutenant!" Hammer said; and smiled again, minusculely. "Which you are this time. Kreutzer, got any suggestions?"

"Yancy in L-2's senior enough," Kreutzer said. He shrugged. "We'll see if she can handle it. There's not a lot of choice, not now."

"Not a bloody lot," Hammer agreed. "All right, and we'll transfer--Algren, isn't it? The newbie we put in F-3 to L-2. Get on with it."

He pushed past Huber. The S-4 locked down his faceshield and passed the orders on, his voice muffled by his helmet's sonic cancellation field. Huber fell in behind the Colonel, heading back to the surface and an aircar to take him to wherever platoon F-3 was while the movement orders were being cut.

Lt. Arne Huber was going home.

Huber could've held a virtual meeting, but for his first contact with F-3 since his medevac he preferred face-to-face. The platoon could still scramble in thirty seconds if they had to; as they well *might* have to....

Fox Three-nine was straight out of Central Repair and hadn't been named yet. Until this moment Huber hadn't seen either the vehicle or its crew, three newbies commanded by a former tank driver named Gabinus who'd just been promoted to sergeant.

Its forward tribarrel, tasked to sector air defense, ripped a burst skyward. One of the newbies jumped.

"Relax, trooper," Sgt. Deseau said, making a point of being the blase veteran.

"They're just sending over a round every couple hours to keep us honest. If one ever gets through, then they'll start shelling us for real."

Nothing would get through while elements of the Slammers were stiffening the defenses of Benjamin. This shell popped above the northern horizon, leaving behind a flag of dirty black smoke. The sun was low above the trees, though it'd be three hours before full dark. Three hours before the start of the mission.

"For those of you who don't know me...", Huber said. Because Three-three had been knocked out in his absence, eight of the wary faces were new to him. "I've been at Central for the past three weeks, and I'm glad to be back with F-3 where I belong."

"And we're bloody lucky to have you back, El-Tee," Deseau muttered. "It's going to be tough enough as it is."

It's going to be tougher than that, Frenchie, Huber thought, but aloud he said, "We're part of Task Force Highball--" the whole Regiment had been broken up into task forces for this operation; Capt. Holcott of M Company was leading Task Force Hotel "-- with F-2, Battery Alpha, and the infantry of G-1 riding the Hogs and ammo haulers. We'll have a tank recovery vehicle, but it'll be carrying a heavy excavator. If a car's hit or breaks down so it can't be fixed ASAP, we combat loss it and proceed with the mission. Got that?"

A couple of the veterans swore under their breath; they got it, all right. An operation important enough that damaged vehicles were blown in place instead of being guarded for repair meant the personnel involved couldn't expect a lot of attention if they were hit, either.

"I'm in command of the task force," Huber continued. "Lt. Messeman of F-2 is XO. We've got six cars running, they've got four. There'll be six Hogs--" self-propelled 200-mm rocket howitzers "--and eleven ammo vehicles in the battery, and G-1 has thirty-five troops under Sgt. Marano."

"Thirty-five?" Sgt. Tranter said. "I'd heard they were down to two squads after the holding action at Beecher's Creek."

"Sgt. Marano got a draft from Base Alpha an hour ago," Huber said grimly. "They've all had combat training even if they've been punching keys for the past while. They're Slammers, they'll do all right."

"So what's the mission, El-Tee?" Deseau said. "We're going to hit the hostiles that're pushing Benjamin?"

"Come full dark, we're going to break through the Solace positions around Benjamin," Huber said. "Other units will continue to defend the city. When we're clear, we'll strike north as fast as we can run."

"What d'ye mean, 'north'?" asked a sergeant Huber didn't know. He was a grizzled veteran with a limp, probably transferred back to a line slot under the same spur of necessity that had returned Huber to F-3. "How far north?"

"All the way to the middle of Solace," Huber said flatly. "We're going to take Port Plattner before Solace gets its latest hires into action. We'll cut all Solace forces off from their base and leave them without a prayer of resupply."

"Blood and Martyrs," the sergeant said; Deseau was one of several who muttered some version of, "Amen to that!"

"That's what we're going to do, troopers," Huber said. The left side of his body was trembling with adrenaline and weakness. The future spun in a montage of bright

shards, no single one pausing long enough to be called a hope or a nightmare.

"That's what we're going to do," he repeated, "or we'll die trying."

He laughed, and half the veterans around him joined in the laughter.

A battalion of UC militia held the portion of the Benjamin defenses a klick to F-3's southwest. From there scores of automatic carbines snarled unrestrainedly. The electromagnetic weapons used by all the Outer States fired with a sharper, more spiteful sound than chemical propellants; the fusillade sounded like a pack of Chihuahuas trying to pull down an elephant. Occasionally a ricochet bounced skyward, a tiny red spark among the gathering stars.

"*What've they got to shoot at?*" asked Padova from the driver's compartment. She'd proved solid when it came down to cases, but she didn't like twiddling her thumbs and waiting for the green light. "*Did somebody jump the gun, d'ye think?*"

"They're nervous, they're shooting at shadows," Huber said. "Keep the channel clear, trooper."

He frowned to hear himself. If he hadn't been wound too tight also, he wouldn't have jumped on Padova that way. With careful calm, Huber went on, "Wait for it, troopers, because it ought to be happening right about--"

The sky flickered soundlessly to the northwest: not heat lightning but a 20-cm bolt from one of the tanks holding high ground at Wanchese, thirty kilometers from Benjamin. A moment later there was an even fainter shimmer from far to the east. The panzers were shooting Solace reconnaissance and communication satellites out of orbit. Until now the warring parties hadn't touched the satellites, a mutual decision to allow the enemy benefits that friendly forces were unwilling to surrender.

The Slammers had just changed the rules. The war was no longer between Solace and the Outer States but rather between Hammer's Slammers and the rest of the planet. If the disruption from Solace's certain retaliation caused problems for the UC, that was too bloody bad. To pull this off, the Slammers had to hide what they were doing for as long as possible.

An instant after the big powerguns fired, the rocket howitzers of Battery Alpha cut loose with three rounds per tube from their position near Central Repair in the heart of Benjamin. Backblast reflected briefly orange from wispy clouds in mid-sky before the bright sparks of rocket exhaust pierced them and vanished in the direction of Simpliche.

"Blue element," Huber said, "the batteries in Jonesburg and Simpliche'll be scratching our backs in about eighty seconds. You've all got the plan, you all know your jobs. In and out, shake'em up but *don't* stick around, then reform on at grid Yankee-Tango-Four-four-three, Two-one-four where the Red element will be waiting."

Red element was Messeman with F-2 and the artillery. The guns couldn't move till they'd fired the salvo that would rip the Solace units which threatened Simpliche.

Besides the Slammers' Battery Alpha, there were ten mercenary batteries in Benjamin. It would've been simpler to delegate the preparatory barrage to the others so that Battery Alpha could move instantly, but there was the risk the orders would be intercepted--or ignored.

Central chose to add a minute and a half delay to the Red element rather than chance much worse problems. Huber's combat cars would be delayed much longer than that while they shot up the firebase that anchored the Solace forces facing Benjamin.

"On the word," Huber said, "we'll--"

The sky to the east and west popped minusculely. If Huber had been looking in just the right direction, he might have seen tiny red flashes as bursting charges opened cargo shells several kilometers short of their targets. Calliopes, multi-barreled powerguns, began to raven from the Solace positions. They directed their cyan lightning toward the sub-munitions incoming from both Jonesburg and Simpliche.

The initial shells were packed with jammers--chaff and active transmitters across the electro-optical spectrum. The second and third salvos burst much closer, spewing thousands of anti-personnel bomblets with contact fuses and a time back-up to explode duds three minutes after they left the cargo shell.

"Blue element, execute!" Huber ordered, feeling *Fencing Master* lift beneath him as Padova anticipated the order by an eyelash.

The six combat cars reversed out of the semi-circular berms protecting them from direct fire and advanced through the open woodland in line abreast. Solace troops weren't in contact with the Benjamin defenses anywhere that the Slammers stiffened the line. Hostiles couldn't conceal themselves from the Regiment's sensors, and anybody who could be seen vanished in a fireball in the time it took a trooper to squeeze the thumb trigger of his tribarrel.

Nevertheless Learoyd fired as *Fencing Master* rounded its fighting position, his blue-green bolts raking trees and leaf-litter forty meters from the car. Flames blazed yellow-orange from a shattered tree-trunk. If anybody else had shot, Huber would've thought they were jumpy; Learoyd was as unlikely to be jumpy as he was to start lecturing on quantum mechanics.

The artillery impact zone was out of Huber's sight, but the sky flickered white with reflected hellfire. At least one round of the second salvo escaped the calliopes' desperate attempt to sweep the cargo shells out of the sky before they opened. The calliopes stopped firing when the glass-fiber shrapnel scythed down the gunners who hadn't thrown themselves under cover.

As the crackling snarl of the single previous round reached Huber, all six shells of the third salvo burst over the target. The sky beyond the branches was bright as daylight, and the blast remained louder than the car's intake howl for nearly a minute.

The bomblets were anti-personnel, but several must have hit fuel or munitions. Secondary explosions, red and orange and once the cyan dazzle of ionized copper, punctuated the ongoing white glare.

Huber swore softly. He knew he should've felt pleased. The firecracker rounds were landing on the enemy, clearing a path so that Task Force Huber had a chance of surviving the next ten minutes. Sometimes, though, Huber found it hard to forget that the hostiles were human beings also, soldiers very like his own troopers.

And maybe Huber wasn't alone in his reaction. Frenchie Deseau, nobody's choice for Mr. Sensitive, pounded the coaming with the edge of his left hand. His right was still on the grip of his tribarrel, though.

Stray bomblets had lit scores of small fires outside the main impact area. That and the continuing roar had confused the troops in the ring of Solace bunkers outside the firebase berm. Huber's faceshield alerted him for the oncoming target for thirty seconds before *Fencing Master* wheeled around a giant tree and got a clear view of a low log-covered bunker some sixty meters away. The defenders had cut three firing lanes through

the undergrowth to give them several hundred meters of range along those axes, but Padova had split a pair of them and *Foghorn* to *Fencing Master's* right had done the same.

Huber aimed at the bunker's firing slit. The car's jouncing advance through the forest made perfect accuracy impossible but he didn't need perfection, not with the amount of energy in a 2-cm bolt.

Cyan flashes caved in the bunker's thick face and shattered the collapsing roof despite the layers of sandbags overhead. Ammunition inside blew the wreckage into the air a moment later. The shockwave shoved Huber hard against the side of the fighting compartment and slewed *Fencing Master* against a treebole.

Padova recovered with a savage thrust of her fan nacelles. *Fencing Master* charged through the line of trees into the hundred-meter clearing around the Solace perimeter.

There were bunkers built into the berm, but the troops within them still had their heads down when F-3 roared into the open. The bunker roofs were proof against the anti-personnel bomblets which had carpeted the firebase, but the thunder of multiple explosions was literally stunning. The main blast had ended, but duds continued to go off with occasional vicious *cracks* that were almost equally nerve-shattering.

Huber's helmet picked targets for him, coordinating its choices with the AIs of the platoon's other gunners. *Fencing Master* was on the left of the line, so Huber raked a sandbagged watchtower several meters above the western curve of the berm. The wooden roof--a shelter, not ballistic protection--already smoldered where a bomblet had hit it. Huber's burst was low, but his bolts blew apart two of the support posts. The structure twisted and collapsed under the weight of its armor, spilling sandbags, weapons, and several screaming soldiers.

The night sizzled with the blue-green glare of tribarrels. Every gun in the platoon was firing as the combat cars charged the firebase. Huber switched his point of aim to a bunker and held his trigger down for three seconds. A red flash lifted the roof before dropping it back into the blast-scoured interior.

Coils of barbed wire crisscrossed the cleared area. *Fencing Master* hit a post and slid over it, dragging the tangles of wire under the skirts. If Padova had gotten the wrong angle, the wire would've scraped up the bow slope and decapitated any gunner who hadn't ducked quickly enough.

The pressure of the air in the plenum chamber was enough to detonate anti-personnel mines even when the skirts didn't touch the ground. Several went off in quick succession, *Whang! Whang! Whang!* like hammers striking the car's underside. Huber jumped at each blast though his conscious mind knew the worst harm a few ounces of high explosive beneath *Fencing Master* could do was maybe fling stones into a fan blade.

Padova canted the rear nacelles, swinging *Fencing Master's* stern out to starboard without changing the car's direction of movement. They bumped down into the shallow ditch where Solace engineers had scraped up dirt to raise the two-meter berm. The earth wasn't compacted; it lay at the angle of repose, about 45°.

Padova shoved the throttles to their gates, giving the fans as much power as they could take without overheating. *Fencing Master* mounted the berm at a slant, wallowing but never bogging. Soft dirt sprayed in all directions. She reversed the cant of her nacelles; the combat car roared down the other side and into the Solace firebase.

A heavy electromagnetic slugthrower opened up just as the combat car tipped downslope. The gun was only thirty meters away, mounted on the cab of the tracked prime mover parked beside the nearest of the dug-in howitzers. Heavy-metal slugs spurted dirt to starboard, then clanged into *Fencing Master's* skirts and hull as the gunner walked his burst onto them.

Learoyd's tribarrel tore apart the cab; the metal shutters on the windows flopped open a moment before the plastics and fabric of the interior gushed red flame. The vehicle's light armor had shrugged off shrapnel, but it wasn't meant for trading shots point blank with a combat car.

There was a line of tents along the inside of the berm. Bomblets had torn and flattened many of them, but Huber raked his tribarrel across the row anyway. Treated canvas burst into ugly red flames with billows of smoke, a good way to confuse and disrupt the defenders. Midway through Huber's burst, a crate of flares erupted in red, green and magnesium white sprays, setting alight tents that the tribarrel hadn't reached yet.

Everything was shouting and chaos. *Fencing Master* drove between gunpits, firing with all three tribarrels. Huber aimed down at a howitzer, hitting the recoil mechanism. Hydraulic fluid sprayed, then exploded as the car swept past.

It was impossible to pick targets but there was no need to choose: every bolt served F-3's purpose, to throw the Solace forces off-balance so that they'd be unable to react as the thin-skinned, highly-vulnerable vehicles of Battery Alpha drove through the siege lines, blacked-out and at moderate speed. If Lt. Messeman's escorting combat cars had to shoot, then the plan had failed. All F-3's gunners had to worry about was not hitting friendly vehicles, and their helmet AIs kept them from doing that.

Deseau's tribarrel jammed. Instead of clearing the sludge of melted matrix material from the ejection port, he grabbed his backup 2-cm shoulder weapon and slammed aimed shots at men running in terror.

"Blue section, withdraw!" Huber shouted, hosing a group of trailers around a latticework communications mast. Their light-metal sheathing burned when the plasma lashed it. "All units, withdraw!"

An orange flash lit the base of the clouds. Huber ducked instinctively, but the shockwave followed only a heartbeat later. The blast shoved *Fencing Master* forward in a leap, then grounded them hard. The skirts plowed a broad ditch till the car stalled. The gunners bounced against the forward coaming, and the shock curtains in the driver's compartment must've deployed around Padova.

A red-hot ball shot skyward and had just started to curve back when it exploded as a coda to the greater blast that'd flung it into the heavens. Somebody'd hit an ammo truck or a dump of artillery shells offloaded for use.

Huber hadn't been trying to keep control of his platoon in the middle of a point-blank firefight, but now one of the five green dots along the top of his faceshield pulsed red. At the same instant a voice cried, "*Somebody help us! This is Three-seven and our skirts are clean fucking gone! Get us out!*"

The man shouting on the emergency channel was Three-seven's commander, Sgt. Bielsky--the retread with the limp--but he was squeaking his words an octave higher than Huber had heard from him in the past.

"*Fox, this is Three-five!*" Sgt. Tranter said, his transmission stepping on

Bielsky's. "We've got them, we're getting them out, but cover us!"

Padova had lifted *Fencing Master* and started to turn clockwise to take them back over the berm where they'd entered: if they left the firebase by the opposite side, the north-facing bunkers might rip them as they crossed the cleared stretch. Now instead of continuing her turn, the driver straightened again and accelerated to where Three-seven lay disabled the center of the compound. Huber fired short bursts into a line of shelters that the huge explosion had knocked down. Hostiles might be hiding in the piles of debris, clutching weapons that they'd use if they thought it was safe to.

Another orange flash erupted, this time near the eastern edge of the compound. It wasn't as loud, especially to senses numbed by the previous explosion, but two more blasts stuttered upward at intervals of a few seconds.

Fencing Master rounded a line of wrecked trucks, several of them burning fitfully. Car Three-seven lay canted on its starboard side beyond. Bielsky hadn't been exaggerating: the blast that shook *Fencing Master* had torn the port half of Three-seven's plenum chamber wide open. The gunners were clambering aboard Tranter's *Fancy Pants* as that car sawed the darkness. It was a wonder that they'd survived; they must've had enough warning to flatten themselves on the floor of the fighting compartment.

Huber's faceshield warned him of motion to his left rear. He pivoted the tribarrel. A pair of Solace soldiers knelt on a ramp slanting up from an underground bunker Huber hadn't noticed until that moment. The muzzles of their sub-machine guns quivered with witchlight, light-metal driving bands ionized by the dense magnetic flux that accelerated slugs down the bore. Three-seven's armor sparkled and one of the escaping crewmen flung his arms up with a cry.

Huber blew the men apart with a dozen rounds before *Fencing Master's* motion carried him beyond the bunker entrance. Something flew over Huber's head and bounced down the ramp, then exploded: Frenchie'd emptied his powergun and was throwing grenades.

"Three-five clear!" Tranter shouted as *Fancy Pants* shifted away from the wrecked vehicle, accelerating as fast as fans could push its thirty tonnes. Ropes of 2-cm bolts snapped past *Fencing Master* to either side, other cars keeping the defenders' heads down.

"Blue element, withdraw!" Huber shouted as he raked the camp. "Go! Go! Go!"

Padova fell in behind *Fancy Pants*; Deseau'd reloaded and was leaning out the back of the fighting compartment, punching the night dead astern. The tunnel mouth burped a red fireball. It hung in the air for measurable seconds before sucking in as the bunker collapsed.

Fancy Pants drove through a waste of shelters destroyed when F-3 entered the camp; the car's fans whirled smoldering canvas and scantlings into a sea of flame. Preceding vehicles had scraped the berm to a low hump for which Tranter's driver didn't bother to slow. *Fancy Pants* lifted, then vanished into the night with *Fencing Master* close behind her.

Huber took his thumbs off the trigger as they crossed the berm. Shooting now would call attention to the escaping cars for any of the defenders who'd kept their composure.

That wasn't a serious danger. Huber took a last view of the firebase as *Fencing Master* returned to the forest's concealment. Scores of fires within the compound

silhouetted the furrowed berm. Another explosion flung sparks a hundred meters into the sky.

Huber took a deep breath and almost choked. Struggling not to vomit in reaction to the adrenaline that had burned through his body for the past several minutes, he said, "Red element, this is Highball Six. Blue element will rendezvous as planned in--"

His AI prompted him with a time display on the upper left quadrant of his faceshield.

"--three, that's figures three, minutes. Six out."

Deseau had his tribarrel's receiver open to chip at the buildup of matrix material. It was a wonder that Huber's gun hadn't jammed also: its iridium barrels still glowed yellow. They'd been white hot when *Fencing Master* crossed the berm.

Frenchie glanced back. "*Not bad, El-Tee,*" he said over the intercom. "*About time we showed'em who's boss!*"

Another explosion rocked the night. Solace forces around Benjamin weren't going to be worrying any time soon about the breakout from the city.

But there was a long road still ahead, for the Slammers and especially for Task Force Huber...

Sgt. Nagano in *Foghorn* led the column. Huber'd decided to run without a scouting element a kilometer in the lead. He was more afraid that Solace units would stumble onto Task Force Huber by accident than he was of running into hostiles with their signatures masked against the Slammers' sensors.

Even with the drivers trying to keep minimum separations, the line of twenty-seven vehicles stretched nearly half a klick back through the forest. A single aircar flying between Solace positions could see the column and end the secrecy that was their greatest protection.

Deseau slept curled up on the floor of the fighting compartment. The surest mark of a veteran was that he could sleep any time, any place. On Estoril Huber had awakened one night only when the level of cold rainwater in his bunker had risen to his nose and he started to drown. Soldiering was a hell of a life, a *Hell* of a life, and Arne Huber and every other trooper in the Regiment was a volunteer.

Learoyd braced his right boot on an ammo box to raise his crotch over the coaming of the fighting compartment, then emptied his bladder into the night. He stepped down again, sealing his fly, and said, "Is Frenchie going to take the next shift driving, El-Tee, or d'ye want me to do it?"

He'd spoken directly instead of using the intercom that might've awakened Deseau. *Fencing Master* was driving between the massive trees at a steady, moderate pace, and experienced troopers could hear one another over the intake noise.

Bert Learoyd sometimes made Huber think of a social insect: he seemed to have almost no intellectual capacity, but through rote learning alone he'd become capable of quite complex activities. It was bad to wake up your buddies unnecessarily, so Learoyd didn't do that.

"I'll put Deseau in next," Huber said aloud. Frenchie was too active to be a good driver; he kept overcorrecting, second-guessing himself. Learoyd didn't have Padova's genius for anticipating the terrain, but his stolid temperament was well suited to controlling a thirty-tonne vehicle in tight quarters. "He'll be all right on this stretch; it's

pretty open."

Pretty open compared to much of the forest on Plattner's World, but light amplification didn't make driving a combat car at night through the woods a piece of cake. Huber'd been hoping to raise the column's speed to 40 kph, but that didn't seem likely now that the whole task force was assembled. The combat cars might be able to make it, but the Hogs' high center of gravity made them dangerously unstable while running cross-country. As for the recovery vehicle, it was a full meter wider than the cars whose drivers were choosing the route.

Another thought struck Huber. "Learoyd?" he said. "Have you seen Padova manning a gun? In action, I mean--I know she's checked out in training."

Learoyd shrugged. "She's okay," he said, flicking regular glances toward his side of the car just in case there was something besides treeboles there. "She was on nightwatch when them wog sappers tried to creep up on us a couple weeks ago. She didn't freeze up or something."

Good enough. On this run there'd be no halts except to change drivers. There was no way of telling who'd be in the fighting compartment if the task force ran into hostiles--as they surely would, later if not sooner. The best driver in the Regiment was a liability if she panicked when she needed to be shooting.

"El-Tee?" Learoyd said. He was talkative tonight; by his standards, that is. "What's going to happen back at Benjamin when we're not there? The wogs'll waltz right in, won't they?"

"There's enough other mercs in the garrison to hold the place," Huber said. "The Poplar Regiment and Bartel's Armor, they're troops as good as anything Solace has close by."

He grimaced. Benjamin was all right, sure, but Solace hadn't been making a real effort on the UC administrative capital yet. Jonesburg and Simpliche were in serious danger even before the Slammers there abandoned the defenses they'd been stiffening to run north at the same time Task Force Huber did.

"Look, Learoyd, we've got to hope for the best," he said. "Chances are the Solace command's going to take a while to figure out what's going on. With luck they still think we withdrew back into Benjamin instead of breaking out."

Learoyd shrugged. "I just wondered, El-Tee," he said. "I don't think them other lots 're worth much, but if you do...."

The trouble was, Huber didn't.

He suddenly laughed and clapped Learoyd on the shoulder. "What *I* think, trooper," he said, "is that everybody in Task Force Huber does his job as well as you've always done yours, then we're going to come through this just fine. The other guys, they have to take care of themselves."

He realized as he spoke that he was more or less echoing Col. Hammer. Well, he didn't guess the Colonel had lied to the Regiment, and the Lord knew Huber wasn't lying to Learoyd either.

And because of that, just maybe the Slammers were going to pull this off after all.

According to the topo display, the Salamanca River was shallow at present though it regularly flooded its valley when the rains came in autumn. Huber hadn't expected much difficulty in crossing it until Lt. Messeman--F-2 was in front for the moment--

radioed, “Six, this is Fox Two-six. Take a look at these sensor inputs from--“

Huber was already bringing up the data transmitted from Messeman’s lead car.

“--my Two-five unit. Over.”

“This is Six!” Huber said. He couldn’t fully understand the data without a little time to digest it, but it was *bloody* obvious that Task Force Huber wasn't crossing at the ford Central had picked for its planned route. “All Highball units, halt in place!”

Learoyd obeyed the orders literally: instead of canting all eight nacelles forward for dynamic braking, he feathered the fan blades to drop their thrust to zero. Gravity slammed *Fencing Master* down, chopping the skirts into the soil like a giant cookie cutter.

The car hopped forward, grounded again, and skidded to a complete stop in a cascade of dust and grit. They'd halted within five meters of the point Learoyd got the order.

Huber’d braced himself on his gun pintle when he realized what was about to happen. He swore viciously and he glanced astern to see if *Flame Farter*, the next car back, was going to slam into them. It didn’t, partly from the driver’s skill and partly because he angled his bow into a stand of saplings growing up in place of a giant tree that’d fallen a few years previous.

I’m *the bloody fool who said ‘Halt in place,’* Huber thought. *It’s nobody’s fault but my own.*

“Highball,” he resumed aloud, “keep a low profile. There’s an enemy battalion on the other side of the bluffs across the river we were going to cross. They don’t act like they know we’re here--this is just bad luck. We’ll head southwest, that’s upstream--“

His hand controller drew a line on the terrain display of his Command & Control box, transmitting it automatically to the helmets of his troopers

“--and cross--“

The C&C box provided Huber with both a graphic and a tabular description of the hostiles arriving on the other side of the river. The database identified them as an elite unit of the Solace Militia, the 1st Cavalry Squadron, fully professional and equipped with nearly a hundred air-cushion armored vehicles mounting powerguns.

Instead of driving overland, Solace command had airlifted the squadron to a landing zone in the valley paralleling the Salamanca to the northwest. The terrain made the location safe from sniping by the Slammers’ tanks, and it was as close to the fighting as a dirigible could approach.

“--seven clicks down, there’s another ford there, and we’re on our way again. Fox Three-zero leads until further notice. Six out.”

If Task Force Huber had arrived six hours sooner, they’d have been past before the Solace squadron landed; two hours later they’d have fought a meeting engagement as the hostile vehicles--which mounted twin 3-cm powerguns as well as carrying an infantry fire team in the rear compartment--came over the bluffs on the south side of the river. As it was, it just meant the Slammers had to detour and add an hour or so to their travel time.

Flame Farter lifted and started to reverse in its own length. Deseau--who was blower captain, commanding the car while Huber’s duties were for the whole task force--said over the intercom, “*Turn us around, Learoyd. We’re following Three-zero up the river, now.*”

Padova slapped the receiver of the right wing gun in frustration. She was a slight,

dark woman and smart enough to be an officer some day if she learned to curb her impatience. Padova thought Learoyd should've understood Huber's unit order as meaning he should rotate *Fencing Master*... and so he should've, but--

Before Huber could speak, Deseau took Padova by the arm and turned her so they were facing. Both were short, but Frenchie had an hourglass figure and the shoulders of a wrestler.

"I'll tell you, Padova...," he said, shouting over the howl as the fans accelerated under load instead of using the intercom. "When you can make headshots every time at five clicks downrange, then maybe you'll be ready to give Bert lessons on being a soldier. Got it, trooper?"

Padova glanced at Huber, perhaps expecting support. Huber gave the driver a hard grin and said, "Saves me telling you the same thing. You're good at your job, but you're still the newbie in this car."

Padova forced a smile and turned her palms up; Frenchie nodded and let her go. *A first rate driver, and apparently smart enough to learn....*

Huber went back to the display as the combat car shifted beneath him. *Fencing Master* was another world, one he didn't have to worry about right at the moment.

He had plenty of other worries. Reversing the order of march put three ammunition haulers immediately behind the two combat cars in the lead. He'd interspersed F-3's remaining three cars among the artillery vehicles, with all of F-2 in the lead to deal with trouble in the most likely direction. He could reorganize the order of march, but first they had to get away from the Solace cavalry.

The problem wasn't anybody's fault. This Solace deployment must've been planned weeks in the past, but the dirigibles wouldn't've lifted off until after the reconnaissance satellites went down at the start of the breakout. Central couldn't have extrapolated the appearance of an armored cavalry squadron across Task Force Huber's line of march. It'd been close, but close only counts in horseshoes--

"*Bloody hell, Six!*" Lt. Messeman shouted over the command channel. "*There's a couple aircars coming over! They're going to spot us sure!*"

--and hand grenades.

Huber opened his mouth to order the task force to hold its fire; the Slammers' discipline was good enough that his troops would probably have obeyed, though the gunners with a clear shot at the aircars would've cursed him.

But secrecy was screwed regardless. Unless the Solace scouts were stone blind, they weren't going to miss a company's worth of thirty and forty-tonne armored vehicles on the route they'd been sent to reconnoiter.

"All Highball elements!" Huber ordered. "Slap 'em down as soon as you can get both both at the same time! All Fox units, form below the ridgeline--"

His controller drew another line across the terrain map.

"--in line abreast, five meter intervals between cars, and wait for the command to attack. Fox Two-six has the right flank. India elements--"

The infantry platoon under Sgt. Marano, and Lord help them if the influx of rear-echelon troopers weren't up to the job.

"--on your skimmers and prepare to follow the cars over the ridge."

Fencing Master grounded again, not as hard because they weren't scrubbing off the inertia of 30 kph this time. Huber was barely aware they'd halted, but from the corner

of his eye he saw Padova climb out of the fighting compartment. A moment later Learoyd clambered in and seized the grips of his tribarrel. Frenchie was giving the orders Huber would've wanted if he'd had time to think about Car Three-six at this juncture.

Tribarrels, at least a dozen of them, snarled from the head of the column. Huber couldn't see the targets from where he was, but an orange flash briefly filled interstices in the foliage to the north. The aircars were chemically powered, and the multiple plasma bolts had atomized their fuel cells into bombs.

The C&C box had converted Huber's orders to a graphic of routes and positions for the nine combat cars. Huber could've overruled the computer but there was no reason to. He'd planned to put *Fencing Master* on the left end of the line, but that would mean changing position with *Flame Farter* when there wasn't much room or time either one. Sgt. Coolidge and his crew could handle the flank.

Fencing Master was moving again without the bobbling usual when a combat car lifted from the ground. That was good, but having Learoyd on the right wing was better yet....

"X-Ray elements--"

The vehicles seconded to the task force from Regimental command: the artillery, transport, maintenance, and engineers that the line elements were escorting.

"--hold what you got, we'll be back for you."

Huber drew a deep breath and raised his head from the holographic display. *Fencing Master* was passing to the left of an ammo hauler with about the thickness of the paint to spare. Huber would've liked more clearance, but he wasn't going to second-guess Padova.

"Troopers," Huber resumed, his eyes on the trees jolting past, "on the command the combat cars are going over the hill to shoot up all the hostiles we can in thirty seconds. We're going to make it look like we're trying to force the crossing, but we'll pull back, I repeat, pull back in thirty seconds. The infantry follows the cars over the ridge line ten seconds later but grounds and conceals itself on the downslope instead of withdrawing."

Lord, Lord.... He was counting on the hostiles being fooled by a fake withdrawal, counting on them not spotting the infantry ambush, counting on not losing every car in the task force in the initial attack which *had* to look real if this had a prayer of working.

And there was no choice.

"When the wogs 're moving up from the river," Huber continued aloud, "the bypassed India elements will hit their flanks and rear, then Fox comes back over the hill and finishes the job. It'll be a turkey shoot, troopers! Six out."

Huber rubbed his face with both hands. The trouble was that these turkeys would be shooting back.

The combat cars were just below the crest of the reverse slope but still out of sight from across the river. The Solace sensors weren't good enough to pin-point them, although the Slammers weren't making any real effort to suppress their signatures. They couldn't, not and balance on a 20° slope.

Mercenaries wouldn't've tried to use aircars to scout against the Slammers, but the Solace Militia hadn't yet come to terms with what it meant when the other side had powerguns and sensors good enough to tell them exactly when you were going to come

in sight. The Solace scout crossed the river three clicks upstream, then rose above the forested hills to see what Task Force Huber was doing.

Flame Farter's forward tribarrel snarled out six shots, every one of them a hit. The scout disintegrated like sugar dropped into flashing cyan water. It didn't explode in the air, but a fiery mushroom rose over the trees where the wreckage landed.

Frenchie muttered something, to himself or Learoyd. Solace gunners across the Salamanca opened fire, raking the ridgeline and the tops of the trees growing on the southern side. A pair of 3-cm bolts hit the thick trunk to *Fencing Master's* immediate right, shearing it ten meters above the ground. The blasts showered flaming splinters which drew smoke trails behind them. The Solace vehicles mounted high-intensity weapons, slow-firing compared to the Slammers' tribarrels but round for round far more powerful.

The upper three-quarters of the treebole toppled downslope and hit with a crash, igniting the undergrowth. Despite recent rains, there'd be a major forest fire on this side of the river shortly. That didn't matter to Huber, because shortly he and his troopers would either be well north of here or dead.

Learoyd took one hand from his tribarrel's grips and brushed burning debris from the other arm and shoulder. His face had no more expression than a Buddha's.

"Fox elements...," said Huber, his eyes on the C&C display. Three Solace armored cars started down the slope toward the river, moving cautiously instead of trying to outrace the bolts that might come slashing toward them. A dozen similar vehicles were settled on the ridge behind them to overwatch. Their twin guns ripped and snarled, blasting only trees and rocky soil because the Slammers were still sheltered by the high ground.

All the troopers in the task force could watch the situation map on their helmet displays if they wanted to. Most of them wouldn't, avoiding distractions that didn't have much to do with their jobs. Knowing too much is a handicap when instant decisions mean life or death. Their AIs would pick targets for them and they'd hose those targets with their tribarrels; that's all that would matter in the next minute and a half.

"The wogs 've taken the bait," Huber went on, speaking calmly and distinctly as he timed his words with the order to come. "We'll go over in thirty, that's three-zero, seconds. Six out."

Huber shut down the C&C display and straightened behind his tribarrel. The simple choices made by Huber's eye and trigger finger would be a relief after the sorts of imponderables he'd been balancing for way too long....

A haze of dust and leaf litter swirled about *Fencing Master* and the other cars spaced along the forested slope. Their fans were spinning at high output, wasting their energy beneath their raised skirts. When the drivers tilted their nacelles forward, the cars would drop into ground effect and lurch into action on the thrust of those fans.

Infantrymen hunched on their skimmers in groups of three and four a little below the big vehicles. Their nose filters were down so that they could breathe despite the fan blast and the smoke from the scores of fires lit by the Solace powerguns. They must be miserably uncomfortable, but they were still better off than they'd be in the next few seconds. That was a risk that came with the uniform.

"Fox units, execute!" Huber shouted. "In and out, troopers! In and out!"

Fencing Master roared up the remaining slope, moving against gravity with

glacial deliberation though their fans spun on overload power. Padova angled the car to the right where an instant before a pair of 3-cm bolts had grazed the crest, spraying fans of molten rock and organic material southward.

Huber swung his sight picture onto the opposite ridgeline. Deseau fired a heartbeat before the two wing gunners. Huber thumbed his trigger, sending a rope of cyan bolts into the humped shape of a Solace armored car. Its twin guns were mounted on top of the hull in an unmanned barbette. The muzzles already glowed white from firing before the Slammers gave them a target. They fired again, a quick SLAM / SLAM of bolts so fiercely powerful that the slope to Huber's left erupted like a volcano under their released energy.

Padova had allowed for the fact the Solace car was traversing its weapons as it raked the hill. By lifting over the crest where bolts had just struck, *Fencing Master* survived when the gunner twitched his trigger reflexively instead of swinging back to where his target really was.

Huber's burst struck the car's bow slope, the first bolt or two splashing reflected radiance before the thin armor ruptured. The forward compartment bulged; then the fuel tanks on the underside of the hull exploded, sending fiery debris in all directions. The twin powerguns lifted toward the river, tumbling over and over.

The Salamanca valley was shallow and a kilometer wide from crest to crest, but frequent floods had scoured all but scrub vegetation from its slopes. The foliage was almost maroon rather than the vivid green of the forests elsewhere in the lowlands.

The world to Huber's left flashed white as *Flame Farter* took a direct hit. The high-intensity bolt vaporized the right side of the bow armor, swinging the car counterclockwise in reaction.

Flame Farter staggered forward, out of control though its running gear was still whole. Two figures rolled out of the fighting compartment as more bolts struck the vehicle broadside. The spray of molten iridium ignited the coarse shrubs in a ten-meter semi-circle below the destroyed vehicle.

Huber's bolts merged with those from Deseau's gun, raking the Solace car that had fired. Powergun ammunition detonated in an intense blue flash devoured the target.

The Slammers infantry had come over the crest and vanished downslope as planned. The brush grew three meters high; it would've seemed sparse from directly above, but its knitted branches provided good cover from eyes at the height of an armored car's viewslits.

Huber shifted his sights onto another Solace vehicle. It exploded before he could squeeze the trigger. Flames and black, roiling smoke marked the opposite ridgeline, each the pyre of an armored car and most of its crew.

A car of the advance party near the river was still firing, its bolts gouging the hillside; the panicked gunner was shooting low. His bad aim had kept him from being an immediate threat--and therefore target--but now half a dozen tribarrels converged on the car. The rear hatch flew open. Three black-clad Solace Militiamen sprang out, throwing themselves into the brush to hide as their vehicle sank into a sea of fire behind them.

For a moment Huber thought they were going to survive, at least for now, but one of Messeman's gunners switched to thermal imaging that let him see through the thin brush. The third man ran into the open after short bursts incinerated his companions; the single shot that decapitated him was bragging.

"Fox units withdraw!" Huber ordered. "All units withdraw at speed!"

It was war; those three desperate Militiamen were enemies who'd wanted to kill Huber and his troopers. But Huber'd still just as soon they'd been allowed to hide....

Fencing Master shuddered as Padova cranked the nacelles forward. Once *Fencing Master*'d gotten over the crest, she'd let inertia and gravity take them downslope with the fans vertical, supplying lift but no thrust. It was time to get the hell out; in a firefight that meant backing so that the thicker bow armor and all three tribarrels continued to face the enemy.

Their skirts touched, a jar but not a disorienting crash. Padova got control again and *Fencing Master* began to slide backwards up the hill again.

Huber fired a short burst over the opposite crest. He didn't have a target at the moment, but his faceshield indicated a Solace armored car was driving up the reverse slope. He wanted the hostile driver to hesitate until the Slammers were back under cover.

There were vehicles advancing behind the whole length of the opposite ridge. At least fifty Solace armored cars were in line, and there were others forming behind to replace casualties. The Solace commander might not have a subtle grasp of tactics, but there was nothing to fault in his courage or that of his troops. And with odds of ten to one in favor of the Militia, they'd win a slugging match against eight surviving combat cars if Huber were dumb enough to try one.

Fencing Master snorted and scraped, reaching the ridgeline and then dropping with more enthusiasm than control onto the reverse slope. Huber checked his icons; all the cars had made it back except Three-zero, *Flame Farter*. He'd seen two men bail out. The driver was surely dead, but maybe the fourth crewman--

Reality returned, smothering hope like clouds covering the moon. The fourth crewman was dead also, dead when the follow-up bolts had vaporized the fighting compartment even if the initial hit hadn't killed him. The survivors must've gone to ground with the infantry. For now that was a better choice than trying to scramble back over the crest while a lot of very angry Solace gunners were looking for targets.

Learoyd was unfastening his clamshell armor, moving awkwardly because his right arm didn't seem to be working. Deseau turned to help. What in hell had happened to Learoyd?

But that was a problem for later; first Huber had to make sure there'd *be* a later. A storm of 3-cm bolts ripped from the other side of the river, blasting trees twenty meters above the concealed combat cars. The Solace commander had decided to take no chances whatever: his gunners started shooting before they could see the crest, let alone the Slammers below it.

"All Highball units," Huber ordered. He'd have liked to transmit in clear so that the Militia commander might hear him, but that would be too obviously phony to risk. "Withdraw to the southwest along the plotted course. X-Ray elements lead, Fox elements follow as rear guard in present order. Six out!"

The forest was already burning fiercely. There were fires in the Salamanca Valley also, but the brush was green and the flood-swept slopes weren't covered with leaf litter and humus to get a real blaze going in the next half hour. The smoke and sluggish flames would help conceal the infantry in ambush; or at least Huber prayed they would.

Crossing at an upstream ford wasn't a real option now that the Solace forces knew the location of Task Force Huber. By the time the Slammers could grind seven kilometers

through forest and rough terrain, the enemy would've flown in at least a platoon of infantry. The availability of aircars here on Plattner's World meant that light forces could be shifted very quickly; light forces with buzzbombs and 2-cm powerguns were quite sufficient to turn a truckload of artillery ammunition into an explosion that'd clear everything in a half-klick radius.

The withdrawal would *look* real, though; a maneuver forced by desperation on Slammers who had to cross the river and who'd failed to shoot their way through at their first attempt. The Solace commander would certainly have sent a report and request for support back to his superiors, but he'd also be looking for revenge. The 1st Armored Cavalry would follow the retreating Slammers--cautiously, because the Militiamen had learned how dangerous the combat cars could be--in hopes of closing the door behind them when other Solace troops had blocked the way forward.

Of course for Huber's plan to work, the Solace commander had to know what the Slammers appeared to be doing.

"All Highball units," Huber said. "When enemy scouts appear, shoot to miss, I repeat, *miss* them. We want the wogs to know that we've cut and run. Six out."

His helmet buzzed with a series of callsigns followed by "Roger." The ball was in the Solace court. Huber could only hope his opposite number would act sooner rather than later; which was a pretty fair likelihood, given the way he'd responded to the initial exchange.

The artillery vehicles were taking longer to get turned around than they would've done if this had been a real change of plan, but the delays and seeming clumsiness were perfectly believable. The Hogs were bloody awkward under the best conditions, and the ammunition haulers rarely operated very far off a road. The maintenance vehicle was larger and heavier still, but its driver was used to maneuvering anywhere a combat vehicle could go--and become disabled.

Huber brought up the C&C display again to check the location of his vehicles. "Padova," Huber ordered, "get us moving but not fast."

The X-Ray portion of the task force was half a klick south and west of the combat cars. The last Hog in line wasn't moving yet, but it would be before *Fencing Master* closed up. The forest fire was getting serious enough to pose a danger, especially to Lt. Messeman's cars at the end of the line.

Padova eased *Fencing Master* into motion, picking a line close to the crest. The fire was bloody serious, but more so downslope where Solace bolts had flung most of the flaming debris.

Huber looked at his gunners again. Learoyd's body armor lay on the ammo boxes at the back of the compartment. Deseau'd sliced off Learoyd's sleeve with his belt knife and was covering the shoulder with bright pink SpraySeal, a combination of replacement skin with antiseptic and topical anesthetic. Learoyd tried to watch, but because of the angle his eyes couldn't both focus on something so close.

"Bert's all right!" Frenchie said over the intake noise. He gestured with the can of SpraySeal. "Make a fist, Bert! Show him!"

Learoyd obediently clenched his right fist. His thumb didn't double over the way it should have. Frowning, he bent it into place with his left hand.

"A chunk of *Flame Farter* spattered him," Deseau explained. "It was still a bit hot, but Bert's just fine. A little bad luck is all."

Learoyd opened his hand again. This time the thumb worked on its own, pretty well. The molten iridium had hit mostly on the back of his clamshell, but some splashed his upper arm where nothing but a tunic sleeve protected the flesh.

Frenchie *needed* to believe Learoyd wasn't seriously injured. Learoyd being who he was, that was probably true: another man who'd been slammed by a quarter-kilo of liquid metal might well have gone into shock, but apart from stiffness and the fact his shoulder was swelling, Learoyd seemed to be about what he always was.

"Learoyd," Huber asked. He nodded toward the clamshell behind him. "Can you get your armor back on over that?"

"I guess," Learoyd said. He worked his fist again; the thumb still didn't want to close. Doubtfully he went on, "Frenchie, will you help me?"

"Sure, Bert, sure!" Deseau said, his voice as brittle as chipped glass.

He snatched up the armor, holding the halves apart for Learoyd to fit his torso into. The fabric covering the right shoulder flare had been melted down to the ceramic core; in its place was a wash of rainbow-hued iridium, finally cool after flying from *Flame Farter's* hull to strike Learoyd thirty meters away.

"Good," said Huber as he turned deliberately back to the C&C display. "Because we've still got work to do today, and I want you dressed for it."

That blob of white-hot metal could as easily have hit Huber himself between helmet and body armor, burning through his neck... or it could've missed *Fencing Master* and her crew entirely. You never knew till it was over.

Task Force Huber was moving at last. Padova held *Fencing Master* twenty meters off the stern of the last Hog in line. More debris flew from beneath the skirts of a self-propelled howitzer than even a combat car threw up.

Huber grinned. It could be worse: following a tank closely was a good way to get your bow slope sandblasted to a high sheen. Of course if Huber had a platoon of tanks with him right now, he'd be dealing with the Solace cavalry squadron in a quicker fashion....

The C&C display warned of new movement on the Solace side of the river. "Fox elements!" Huber said. "Four wog aircars are lifting; it looks like they're going to swing around us to east and west in pairs. Remember, shoot to miss."

A thought struck him, almost too late, and he added, "And make sure your guns aren't in Air Defense Mode! Put your guns on manual, for the Lord's sake! Six out."

The cars' gunnery computers couldn't be programmed to miss. If a gun was on air defense--and one on each combat car normally would be while the column was in march order--then the Solace scouts were going to vanish as quickly as they appeared. That'd almost certainly be before they could report back.

Frenchie and Learoyd lifted the muzzles of their tribarrels, tracking blips on the inside of their faceshields. *Fencing Master* was now weaving through forest that hadn't been cleared by plasma bolts and the fires they ignited. The gunners were tracking on the basis of sensor data because the low-flying aircars were screened by bluffs and undamaged treeboles. When metal finally showed through a gap in the foliage, they were going to be ready.

The Hog immediately ahead wobbled through the forest, moving at about twenty kph but seeming even slower than that. The leading vehicles had rubbed the bark to either side of the route, leaving white blazes a meter high on the tree trunks. Often their skirts

had gouged brushes of splinters from deep into the sapwood.

Tribarrels volleyed from the tail of the column; an instant later Deseau and Learoyd fired together, their guns startling Huber out of his concentration on the display of sensor data overlaid on a terrain map. He jerked his head up as the upper half of a tree thirty meters toward the northwest burst into red-orange flames. The blasts of plasma had shattered the trunk, blowing it into spheres of superheated organic fragments which exploded with they mixed with oxygen-rich air a few meters away.

In the sky a kilometer away, a diving aircar flashed its belly toward the column. Deseau sent another burst into empty sky; some of the artillerymen were firing sub-machine guns from the cabs of their Hogs.

Huber checked his display again. Three of the scouts had flattened themselves close to the Salamanca's surface. The fourth--

"Six, this is Two-six," Lt. Messeman reported in a clipped, cold voice. "*I regret to report that we hit one of the aircars. The other should've gotten a good look at us before it escaped, though. Two-six over.*"

"Roger, Two-six," Huber said. "Proceed as planned."

This was even better than if all the scouts had gotten away: it made the Slammers' response look real. Messeman would be talking to the shooter when things had quieted down, though. Hitting the car had been a screw-up, and a battle at these odds was dangerous enough even when all your people executed perfectly.

Huber's gunners had blown apart a tree in order not to hit their pretended target. It now finished toppling to the ground with a crash and ball of flaming debris. Undergrowth ignited immediately, reminding Huber that his cars would be driving back through a full-fledged forest fire. That couldn't be helped.

And a forest fire was a hell of a lot less dangerous than what came next, anyway.

"All Highball elements," Huber said, "reverse and hold until ordered to take assault positions."

He'd have liked to put his cars under the hillcrest right now, but he didn't dare do so with the fire so bad on the slope where they'd have to wait. It was one thing to drive through the inferno at speed, trusting nose filters and the temperature-stable fabric of the Slammers' uniforms. Those weren't enough protection that troopers could twiddle their thumbs in Hell and still be ready for action, though.

"And troopers?" he added. "Those scouts had their only free pass. If they come back for another look at us, shoot fast and shoot to kill! Six out."

Fencing Master slowed to a halt, then rotated deliberately on its axis without touching the ground. Huber wasn't sure whether Padova was showing off or if she was simply so good that she executed the difficult maneuver without thinking about it.

"Six, this is Two-six!" Lt. Messeman said excitedly on the command channel. "*They took the bait! They're coming, it looks like four waves! Two-six over!*"

Messeman's *Fandancer* was a half kilometer closer to the enemy than *Fencing Master*, so its sensors provided a sharper picture than Huber's of what was going on across the river. The Command and Control unit synthesized inputs from every vehicle in the task force, though, so Messeman's report--while proper--wasn't news to Highball Six.

"Roger," Huber said, feeling a familiar curtain fall between him and his present surroundings. His hands were trembling, but that'd stop as soon as he placed them back on his tribarrel's grips. "Break. All Highball units, reduce speed to ten kay-pee-aitch but

continue on the plotted course. The wogs must have *some* kind of sensors, and I want any data they get to show we're still moving southwest for as long as possible."

He took a deep breath and continued, "They're coming, troopers. India elements, we're depending on you--but you can count on the rest of us to help as soon as you stick it to them. Six out."

He grimaced and rubbed his palms on his body armor. He wanted to grab the tribarrel, but it wasn't time yet. Lord! he was keyed up.

"*Hey El-Tee,*" Deseau said over the intercom. "*Learoyd and me got a bet on who gets the most wogs this time. You want a piece of it? A case of beer to the winner.*"

"Hell, yes!" Huber said, grinning with the release of tension. "Though one case isn't going to cut the thirst I'm working up on this run."

He turned his gaze back on the C&C display. Nineteen armored cars had driven down the slope and were crossing the Salamanca, in some confusion because the ford wasn't wide enough to take them all in a single passage.

Huber'd expected the Solace hovercraft to be able to skitter across the water's surface, but though they weighed much less than his combat cars, their power-to-weight ratio wasn't as high either. They needed to be able to touch their skirts to the bottom. When two on the upstream end had gotten deeper than that, they'd stalled.

A second line of twenty-three armored cars had just pulled over the crest to follow. The remainder of the squadron, forty vehicles--a mixture of armored cars and headquarters vehicles--lined the far ridgeline with only a meter or two between their bulging skirts.

Under other circumstances Huber would've kept his combat cars where they were and delightedly called in artillery, but the target was too close for Battery Alpha and Central's movement orders had made it clear that every task force was on its own. The operation was more important than the problems of any individual element.

The first wave of armored cars started up the southern slope. For the most part they advanced at the speed of a walking man, but several of the drivers seemed to think speed was protection and drew ahead. They were wrong, of course, but their timid fellows weren't going to survive the morning either if things went the way Huber planned.

"All Fox units," he ordered, "reverse course and take up attack positions. X-Ray units, reverse but hold in place till ordered. Execute. Six out!"

Fencing Master rotated smoothly. Padova dipped the skirts to the ground this time so that she wouldn't run *Fencing Master* up the stern of *Foghorn* whose driver had bobbed the maneuver.

Huber wrung his hands together, wishing he had real-time imagery from the other side of the ridge. Red beads moving on a landscape of green contour lines didn't give him the feel of big vehicles shouldering their way through the scrub, their fans whirling sluggish fires to new life as their paired 3-cm cannon probed the crest above them. The Solace gunners would be ready to shoot if a cloud blew across their sight picture; they'd remember the way a dozen cars like their own had been reduced to flaming wreckage a few minutes before.

Fencing Master began to accelerate, holding interval. Both platoons were returning to the positions they'd held on the reverse slope before the initial skirmish. *Foghorn* roared through what had been a burning treetop before the six cars ahead had

driven over it. Now it was a swirl of sparks, eddying out from beneath her skirts and curling back through the intakes into the plenum chamber again. Sgt. Nagano and his crew hunched over their guns, their hands clamped into their armpits for protection.

Fencing Master followed into a surge of heat with occasional prickles where sparks found bare skin. It was like being in a swamp full of biting insects, frustrating and unpleasant but not life-threatening, not unless you let it drive the real dangers out of your mind. Beyond the first obstacle was what had been a glade and now was so many vertical pillars of flame; they drove through that also. In another thirty seconds, it would be time.

Huber kept his attention on the C&C display, pretending to ignore the distortions that flying debris threw across the holographic imagery. The Solace headquarters group, twelve vehicles armed with only light weapons, left the slope. The second wave was mostly across the Salamanca, and the first was nearing--

The flicker of a plasma bolt through gaps in the blazing forest could've been overlooked, but the *zzt!* of RF interference through the comms helmet was familiar to any veteran. A moment later a column of burning hydrocarbon fuel mushroomed from the other side of the ridge, vividly orange and much brighter than the smoky red flames of the well-watered forest.

One of the Slammers infantry had fired his 2-cm weapon into an armored car, picking his spot. At point blank range the powerful bolt had burst the car's fuel tank and turned the vehicle into a firebomb. Huber hoped the shooter hadn't been caught in his own secondary explosion, but he had more important concerns just now.

"Fox elements, do not engage!" he shouted. "Hold in your attack positions! Do not--"

Though the combat cars weren't back to their start positions, Huber was afraid that one or more of his vehicle commanders would react to the shooting across the crest by piling into it instantly. That was a good general response for any trooper in the Regiment, but right now timing would be the difference between survival and not.

--cross the ridgeline!"

At least a hundred 3-cm powerguns fired at or over the quarter kilometer of hillcrest which was already scarred and glazed by previous bolts. The lighter *crack!* of infantry weapons was lost in the roar of cannons volleying at where the gunners thought the enemy must be. Another fuel tank detonated, lifting ten square meters of glass-cored aluminum armor with it; the magazine explosion a heartbeat later burned so vividly cyan that the light seemed to seep through solid rock.

Fencing Master reached its start position and rotated ninety degrees counterclockwise, putting its bow to the ridgeline and the enemy. Flames licked up behind and beside the car, but the trees close by had been burned and blasted into a bed of coals rather than towers that might topple.

The Solace cavalymen were shouting over at least six channels. Huber'd set his C&C box to give him a graph of the number of Solace transmissions. He could've listened to them as well--most of the hostiles were too panicked to bother with encryption--but Huber already knew what they'd be saying: "*Help!*" and "*Where?*" and "*You're shooting at us, you idiots! Cease fire!*"

Especially "*Cease fire!*", from the armored cars on the south slope who *knew* there was nobody on the ridge immediately above them. Therefore the shots that'd destroyed their fellows had to be bolts misaimed by the cars blazing away from across the

river.

The storm of bolts fired at empty rock slowed, then ceased. Apart from anything else, the Solace cars must've exhausted their ready magazines and heated their guns dangerously hot by sustained fire. The squadron commander would be starting to reassert control; in a moment somebody would realize how the leading wave had been ambushed.

"Fox elements...," ordered Arne Huber as his hands settled on his tribarrel's familiar grips. "Charge! Take 'em out, troopers!"

Fencing Master lifted with the ease of a balloon slipping its tether. By judicious adjustment of nacelle angles Padova kept the hull nearly horizontal despite the slope, so that all three tribarrels came over the ridge together.

Huber squeezed his trigger as his muzzles aligned with an armored car on the opposite ridgeline, its twin guns glowing white. Huber's burst walked down the barbette and blew the glacis plate inward. Fire and black smoke burst from the car's seams; the hull settled into the plenum chamber and began to burn.

Huber's faceshield cared for his next target, also an overwatching armored car, but before he could fire it blew up on the skewer of Learoyd's gun. There'd been more Solace vehicles on the far ridge than there were tribarrels in Huber's two understrength platoons, but the combat cars had destroyed both their primary and secondary targets without taking a single additional casualty. Some of the Solace cannon had burst in vivid rainbows even before Huber counterattacked; they'd been fired so fast and so often that the overheated bores finally gave way.

The timing worked the way Huber'd hoped and prayed. The Solace gunners, confused and half-disarmed by the number of rounds they'd fired into emptiness, couldn't react to the sudden appearance of real targets; and the Slammers didn't miss.

Fencing Master continued forward and over the hill. An armored car was stalled ten meters ahead, its guns traversed to the right. The gunner had tried to reply to the pair of troopers with shoulder weapons lying belly-down on the slope as they blew holes in the thin-walled plenum chamber. The vehicle's cannon couldn't depress low enough to hit them, and the five Solace infantrymen who'd leaped out of the rear compartment lay in a bloody tangle just beyond the hatch. This close, a 2-cm bolt vaporized a human torso and flung the head and limbs in separate parabolas.

Huber put a three-round burst into the car's barbette; 3-cm ammunition in the loading tray gang-fired, devouring the breeches and mountings.

The cannon barrels tilted down. He didn't bother firing into the hull. The Solace driver and gunner might well be unharmed, but they were no longer a danger to the task force.

Arne Huber didn't kill people for pleasure: that was simply an aspect of his business.

His faceshield cared for the smoke-shrouded net of air roots supporting a copse of thin trunks. He didn't see a target--maybe he would've in infrared--but he mashed his trigger with both thumbs. His chain of cyan bolts reached out, spinning eddies in the white haze. A Solace armored car drove out, its hatches blown open and spewing oily black smoke. Huber's nose filters were in place, but he nonetheless smelled cooking flesh as *Fencing Master* passed downwind of the target.

The smoke grew thicker. He switched from normal optics to thermal imaging.

An armored car stood broadside and motionless; had its crew already bailed out,

hoping to be ignored and to survive? The AI called the vehicle a target, so Huber's bolts punched at the forward compartment until something shorted and the car started to burn.

A man in a black Solace uniform ran in front of *Fencing Master*. Huber didn't shoot him but somebody did, a single bolt; probably an infantryman who didn't see any reason to quit just because the combat cars had joined the fight. Vehicles blew up, some of them so violently that the smoke now covering the valley surged and rippled like a pond in a hailstorm.

Fencing Master reached the river, its bank broken down by the armored cars which had recently crossed. At least a dozen were burning in the water or just beyond it. Huber's faceshield cued the far slope. He elevated his tribarrel, noticing that the muzzles glowed white though he'd been trying to keep his bursts short.

Some of the Solace command vehicles were trying to escape. They couldn't be allowed to. This battle had been a victory for Task Force Huber by anybody's standards, but the fragments of the Solace squadron were still sufficient to do serious damage to the artillery vehicles if anybody got them organized.

Fencing Master plunged into the Salamanca, bucking forward in a rainbow of mist. Even drops of water could dissipate a powergun's jet of plasma. Huber waited for the car to lift, concurrently flattening the curtain of spray, before he squeezed the trigger.

His burst struck the squared rear end of a communications van. The plating was so thin that the second round ignited the interior through the hole the first had blown; the three bolts that followed were probably overkill.

There was still shooting, some of it probably at real targets, but Huber's faceshield didn't highlight anything for his gun. Strung out to the right of the comms van, other headquarters vehicles belched smoke and flame. Tribarrels had ripped them open even more easily than they did the armored cars.

Via! That one was an ambulance. Well, worse things happen in wartime....

"X-Ray elements, proceed across the ford at your best speed," Huber ordered. He was panting and for a moment his vision blurred. "Fox Three elements, take overwatch positions on the north ridge. Fox Two elements, wait on the south side and escort X-Ray. India elements, recover to the X-Ray vehicles and mount up. You did a hell of a job."

Fencing Master swerved right, then left, to avoid a pair of burning vehicles. Something *whumped* inside one; a crimson geyser blew debris out of the driver's hatch. It would've been attractive in its way if Huber hadn't realized the tumbling object was a shriveled human hand.

"Via, troopers....," he said, looking back across the valley as his combat car swung into position on the crest. Despite the filters, his eyes watered and the back of his throat felt raw. "We *all* did a hell of a job! Six out."

Smoke, gray and becoming black, blanketed the ford. In some places it bubbled above a particular vehicle, but for the most part it hung silently. Because Huber's faceshield was still set for thermal imaging, he could see through the pall to the wreckage littering the valley. The smoke would make a good screen against sniping by Solace survivors, in the unlikely event that any of those survivors wanted to continue the battle.

The tank recovery vehicle carrying the excavator in its bed grunted over the south crest and drove slowly into the smoke. It was the first of the X-Ray units, but a Hog was close behind and then two ammo haulers. Infantry swung aboard the big vehicles, dragging their skimmers up behind them.

Tribarrels continued to snarl, and once Huber thought he heard the sharp hiss of a Solace rocket gun. The ford wasn't perfectly safe, but this was a war and nothing was perfect. Better to run the noncombat vehicles through immediately than wait to completely clear the area and give the enemy time to respond.

Huber eyed the flame-shot wasteland again. "A hell of a job," he repeated. And a job of Hell.

"Six, this is Three-five," reported Sgt. Tranter; he was pulling drag on this leg of the run, while *Fencing Master* was in the center of the column between a pair of ammo haulers. "We've got three aircars incoming just like planned, all copacetic. Three-five over."

Huber examined the data from *Fancy Pants* on his C&C box. Three-five's sensors had picked up the aircars while they were still over the southern horizon. Their identification transponders indicated they were the resupply mission which Central's transmission had said to expect, and they were within ninety seconds--early--of the estimated time of arrival, but still....

"Highball elements," Huber said, "we'll laager for ammo resupply for ten minutes at point--"

The AI threw up an option, a knob half a klick ahead and close to the planned route. It wasn't quite bald, but the trees there were stunted and would allow the tribarrels enough range for air defense.

--Victor Tango Four-one-two, Five-five-one. Take your guns off automatic but keep alert. The wogs could've captured aircars with the IFF transponders and they might just 've gotten lucky on the timing. Six out."

Fencing Master bumped a tree hard enough to throw those in the fighting compartment forward. Padova'd gotten over the reflex of growling every time the driver--Deseau was in front at the moment--didn't meet her standards, but this one made her wince.

"It'll be good to stand on the ground again," Padova said, bending forward to massage her calf muscles. She looked up at Huber in concern. "Ah--we will be dismounting, won't we?"

"We'll have to," Huber said, forcing himself to grin. "Those ammo boxes aren't going to fly out of the aircars. We'll be humping 'em."

He was bone tired, but he wasn't going to take another popper just now. Task Force Huber had a long way to go, and he'd need the stimulant worse later on.

The C&C box projected halt locations in the temporary laager to all the drivers. *Fencing Master* growled up the slight rise, then pulled into scrub forest which the bigger X-Ray vehicles ahead in the column were scraping clear. The place the AI had chosen for *Fencing Master* was across the circle of outward-facing vehicles. They brushed the massive wrenchmobile closer than Huber would've liked, but it was all right. Frenchie wasn't a great driver and it was near the end of his two-hour stint anyway. They hadn't collided, and this wasn't a day Arne Huber needed to borrow trouble.

Deseau set them down and almost immediately climbed out the driver's hatch. He wasn't under any illusions about his driving, though he didn't complain about the duty. Learoyd ought to take the next session, but....

Huber looked at Padova. "You up for another shift?" he asked. "It's not your turn,

I know."

"You bet I am," she said, nodding briskly. "You bet your ass!"

"*Highball, we're coming in,*" an unfamiliar female voice said. "*Three aircars at vector one-one-nine degrees to your position. Action Four-two out.*"

"Roger, Action," Huber said. "Highball elements, hold your fire. Six out."

He knew he was frowning. He'd expected the resupply to be carried out by Log Section, maybe even UC civilians under contract to the Regiment. 'Action' was a callsign of the White Mice.

The recovery vehicle had ground the brush in the center of the laager to matchsticks, then shoved the debris into a crude berm. The aircars came low over the treetops, circled a moment to pick locations, and landed. All showed bullet scars. They each carried two troopers, but the guard on one lay across the ammo boxes amidships, either dead or drugged comatose.

"*Fox elements,*" ordered Sgt. Tranter, acting as first sergeant for the task force, "*each car send two men to pick up your requirements. India elements, two men per squad. Also we'll transfer the dead and wounded to the aircars. Three-five out.*"

"Frenchie," Huber said, "hold the fort. I'm going to learn what's going on back at Base Alpha."

He swung his legs over the coaming, paused on the bulge of the plenum chamber, and slid to the ground. He almost crumpled under the weight of his clamshell when he landed. Via! he was woozy.

The troopers in the aircars were loosing the cargo nets over their loads; they looked as tired as Huber and his personnel. The woman with sergeant's pips on her collar was working one-handed because the other arm was in a sling.

"Tough run?" Huber asked, sliding out a case of 2-cm ammo for Learoyd, who took it left-handed. There were spare barrels too, thank the Lord and the foresight of somebody back at Central.

"Tough enough," she said, not quite curt enough to be called hostile.

"How are things at Base Alpha?" Huber asked, passing the next case to Padova. He didn't know who was defending the base with so many of the combat-fit Slammers running north. He was sure it wasn't a situation anybody was happy about.

"We'll worry about fucking Base Alpha," the sergeant snarled. She met his eyes; she looked like an animal in a trap, desperate and furious. "You worry about your job, all right?"

"Roger that," Huber said evenly, taking a case of twelve 2-cm gunbarrels to empty the belly of the car. "Good luck, sergeant."

"Yeah," the woman said. "Yeah, same to you, lieutenant."

The three dead infantrymen and the incapacitated--three more infantry and *Flame Farter's* left wing gunner--had been placed in the aircars. *Flame Farter's* driver and commander were ash in the remains of their vehicle.

The sergeant settled back behind the controls and muttered something on her unit push, the words muffled by circuitry in her commo helmet. Nodding, she and the other drivers brought their fans up to flying speed again.

"*Action Four-two outbound,*" crackled her voice through Huber's commo helmet. The White Mice took off again, their vector fifteen degrees east of the way they'd arrived. Their approach might've been tracked, so they weren't taking a chance on overflying an

ambush prepared in the interim.

"Bitch," said Padova, who'd been close enough to hear the exchange.

Huber stepped to *Fencing Master* and paused before swinging the spare barrels to Deseau waiting on the plenum chamber. The case of fat iridium cylinders was heavy enough in all truth; in Huber's present shape, it felt as if he were trying to lift a whole combat car.

"Got it, El-Tee," Learoyd said, taking the barrels one-handed before Huber had a chance to protest. He shoved them up to his partner in a movement that was closer to shot-putting than weight lifting.

Huber stretched, then quirked a grin to Padova. "I guess even the White Mice are human," he said, grinning more broadly. "We all do the best we can. Some days--"

He held his right arm out straight so that she could see he was trembling with fatigue.

"--that's not as good as we'd like."

"*Mount up, troopers,*" Sgt. Tranter ordered. He gave Huber a thumb's up from *Fancy Pants'* fighting compartment. "*Fox Three leads on this leg.*"

Padova scrambled down the driver's hatch. Huber climbed the curve of the skirts and lifted himself into the fighting compartment without Deseau's offered hand. He seemed to have gotten his second wind.

As the fans lifted *Fencing Master* in preparation to resume the march, Deseau said, "Glad they brought the barrels, El-Tee. We were down to two sets after what we replaced after that last fracas. I don't guess that's the last shooting we'll do this operation."

"I don't guess so either, Frenchie," Huber said. For a moment he tried to visualize the future, but all his mind would let him see was forest and stabbing cyan plasma discharges.

"Hey El-Tee?" Learoyd said. Huber looked at the diffidently-waiting trooper and nodded.

"What about the panzers, El-Tee?" Learoyd asked. "Aircars can't carry the barrel for a main gun, and even if they could it takes three hours and the presses on a wrenchmobile to switch barrels on a tank."

"I don't know, Learoyd," Huber said. *Fencing Master* reentered the unbroken forest, the second vehicle in the column this leg. "I guess they'll just make do like the rest of us."

Or not, of course; but he didn't say that aloud.

The trees in this stretch had thick trunks and wide-spread branches. That made the driving easier, especially now in deep darkness. Of course if a car hit one of them squarely, it wasn't going to be the tree that was smashed to bits.

A red bead pulsing twice in the center of Huber's faceshield gave him a minimal warning before Central crashed the task force net with, "*Highball, this is Chaser Three-one. You will halt for an artillery fire mission in figures three-zero seconds. Mission data is being downloaded now. You will resume your march after firing a battery three. Chaser Three-one over.*"

The voice on the other end of the transmission was broken and attenuated to the verge of being inaudible. Central was bouncing the message in micropackets off cosmic ray ionization tracks, the Regiment's normal expedient on planets where security was the

first priority or there weren't communications satellites. Even so--and despite interference from the foliage overhead, a screen if not a solid ceiling--the transmission would normally have been crisper than this.

What the hell was going on at Base Alpha?

But like the A Company sergeant said, it wasn't Arne Huber's job to worry about Base Alpha. Nor to ask questions when Central's orders were brusque because there was no time to give any other kind.

"Roger, Chaser Three-one," Huber said. "Highball Six out."

"*Chaser Three-one out*," the voice said, fading to nothingness in the middle of the final syllable.

"Highball, this is Six," Huber said. Deseau had turned to look at him. "Halt at Michael Foxtrot Four-one-six, Five-one-four. Fox elements will provide security while Rocker elements--"

The artillery.

--carry out their fire mission. Break. Rocker One-six, I want to be moving again as soon as possible. Copy? Six over."

"Roger, Highball Six," Lt. Basingstoke replied crisply. He had more time in grade as well as more time in the Regiment than Huber. Huber suspected that Basingstoke thought he should've been task force commander in Huber's place, which was just another piece of evidence as to why a redleg lieutenant didn't have sufficient judgment to command a mobile force. "*You don't want us to reload the gun vehicles before proceeding, then? Rocker One-six over.*"

"Negative!" Huber responded. He bit off the words, "You bloody fool!" but he suspected his tone implied them, which was just fine with him. "Rocker, I don't want to be halted in enemy-controlled territory an instant longer than we have to be, especially after we've been shooting artillery so they know *exactly* where we are. Six out."

Learoyd pulled *Fencing Master* into the halt location the AI had chosen for them. Huber looked up, frowning. The patches of sky overhead weren't sufficient for the Automatic Air Defense system to burst incoming shells a safe distance away. So long as the task force kept moving they were probably all right, but now, halted--

Well, Central knew the score; and anyway, the Regiment wasn't a democracy. *Ours not to reason why....*

The Hogs swung into position, their turrets rotating and launch tubes rising while the vehicles were still in motion. The ammunition haulers pulled off to either side of the guns. The F-2 combat cars tried to keep outside the scattered trucks, but this wasn't a defensive position in any sense of the term. The Lord save Highball's souls if any Solace forces were close enough to take advantage of the situation.

"Lieutenant?" said Padova, leaning close to shout over the idling fans. "I didn't think we were going to hear anything from Central on this run. That we were on our own?"

Huber shrugged. His shoulders ached from the weight of his armor, but that was nothing new. "The operation was pretty spur of the moment, Rita," he said. "I guess they're flying it by the seat of their pants, just like we are."

The howitzers fired, rippling with a half second between discharges so that the shockwaves from the shells didn't interfere with other rounds in the salvo. The nearest gun was within ten meters of *Fencing Master*. Huber's helmet damped the blasts so they

didn't break his eardrums, but the pressure of 200-mm shells tearing skyward squeezed his whole body like loads of sand.

The Hogs weighed forty tonnes apiece, and the steel skirts of their plenum chambers stabilized them better than conventional trails and recoil spades could do. Despite that the big vehicles jounced so hard when they fired that puffs of dirt and leaf litter spurted out of their fan intakes.

The rounds didn't reach terminal velocity for seven seconds, but the *crack!* of each going supersonic stabbed through the deeper, world-filling snarl of the rocket motors. Overhead, branches whipped and shredded leaves swirled in roaring eddies.

Huber'd wondered how the guns would fire through dense foliage, but that obviously wasn't a problem. The shells could course correct if they had to, but the disparity between the massive projectiles and the leaves made Huber grimace at the foolishness of his concern.

The first howitzer launched a second round immediately after Gun Six fired its first; the third followed three seconds later. As the launch tube sank back to its travel position, the Hog's driver began spinning up his fans: they'd been shut down while the gun was firing lest the blades whip into their housings and wreck the nacelle.

"*Highball Six!*" Lt. Basingstoke said, his voice crackling with the effort of Huber's commo helmet to make it audible over the thunderous conclusion of the fire mission. "*Rocker elements are ready to move. Rock--*"

Gun Six fired its third and final round. The shriek of the shells arching southward seemed like silence after the cacophony of the preceding seconds.

--er One-six over."

"All Highball units," Huber said. The whole operation had taken less time than switching drivers; a minute at the outside. "Resume march order. Six out."

He grinned wryly. While he didn't suppose Lt. Basingstoke was going to become a bosom buddy, at least he knew his job.

And because he was thinking that, Huber said, "Rocker One-six, this Highball Six. It's a pleasure to serve with real professionals, lieutenant. Please convey my congratulations to your troopers. Six over."

Foghorn slid out of sight among the trees. Learoyd brought *Fencing Master* up, following thirty meters behind the lead car. That was a greater interval than they'd maintain when the task force had reached a constant speed.

"*Highball Six, this is Rocker One-six,*" Basingstoke said. "*I've passed on your congratulations to my gunners.*" After a pause he added, "*I'm glad we were able to perform to the standard the infantry and your combat car crews have demonstrated in order to get us this far. Rocker One-six out.*"

Huber looked up at branches whipping past against a dark sky. He grinned faintly. "Thank you, Rocker One-six," he said. "Six out."

He wondered how much farther Task Force Huber was going to get. *Who knows? Maybe all the way.*

And then what? Huber added to himself; but that was a problem for another day.

Huber awakened from a doze. He'd been hunched into the back corner of the fighting compartment, held upright by ammo boxes and a carton of rations. Fields of dark green soybeans rolled to either horizon beyond the iridium walls, punctuated by stretches

of native vegetation.

According to the briefing cubes, Solace was several times as populous as all the Outer States put together. Those people were heavily concentrated in the center of the country around Bezant and Port Plattner, however, with the remainder of the country given over to the collective farms which produced food for the entire planet.

Huber frowned as he thought about the rations. He'd swallowed a tube of something a little after dawn as they negotiated the foothills of the Solace Highlands, but he'd had nothing since. He didn't feel hungry but supposed he ought to eat something.

It was an effort to get anything down because he was so fatigued by the constant vibration. Besides, the poppers made food taste like it'd been scraped from the bottom of a latrine. That wasn't much of a change from what ration tubes ordinarily tasted like, of course.

He jolted alert, suddenly aware of why he'd awakened. Padova'd been on duty with the C&C display while he rested. She was trained but she didn't have the sixth sense for what wasn't *right* that'd come with a year or two of combat operations.

"I've got the watch," Huber said. He took the controller from Padova's hand as he spoke, lurching upright. She jumped aside, startled and maybe a little snappish at the lack of ceremony. The reaction passed before it got to her tongue, which was just as well.

As Huber adjusted the display to make explicit what instinct already told him, he said, "Highball, we're going to have to adjust course to the left by thirty degrees. There's a monorail line eighteen clicks ahead, and if we continue as planned we'll be spotted by a train headed southward. We'll--"

He stopped because he'd caught the fine overtone to the sensor data, the descant he'd ignored for the moment while he focused on the electronic signature of a six-car train heading south at 120 kph. Task Force Huber could avoid observation from a train at ground level, but--

"Bloody Hell!" Huber snarled, interrupting himself. "This is going to take a moment, troopers. There's aircars scouting for the train and they'll spot us sure!"

"*Six, this is Two-six,*" Lt. Messeman said on the command channel. "*I suggest it's a troop train and the aircars are escorts. Over.*"

"Roger," said Huber, because it couldn't be anything else once Messeman had stated the obvious. He shook his head angrily. He must still be waking up. He couldn't afford to miss cues; he couldn't, and the troopers who were his responsibility couldn't afford him missing them either.

"Roger," Huber repeated, but with a note of decision. There was nothing wrong with his tactical appreciation once he got his mind in gear. "Highball, we can't avoid them so we'll engage and keep moving. Fox will attack on a company front--"

That was a bit of an overstatement, given that the Fox elements under Huber's command were two understrength platoons, but it'd do.

"--from point Echo Michael Four-two, Six-one. X-Ray elements continue in march order. Fox elements form to the right on Three-six in line abreast with five, I repeat five, meter intervals. Execute! Six out."

Padova looked at him wonderingly. It was too bad Learoyd wasn't on the right gun, but the newbie was going to have to get her feet wet some time. This was probably as safe a place to do it as any.

"Crew," Huber said, switching his helmet to intercom. *Foghorn* was moving up

on their right with the other cars of F-3 slanted farther back as they drove through the soybeans to their stations. Lt. Messeman's platoon would take longer to join from the middle and rear of the column, but it'd be in line by the time it needed to be. "Frenchie, set our guns to take out the scouts when we're sure of getting them both."

The aircars were keeping station to either side of the track, five hundred meters up and a kilometer ahead of the train. They were looking for trouble on the line rather than scouting more generally, but even so from their altitude they were bound to notice the Slammers vehicles.

Deseau keyed the command into the pad on his tribarrel's receiver. Instead of executing immediately he said, "*You don't think it'll warn them, El-Tee?*"

"It's a train," Huber snapped. "They're not going to turn around, they won't even be able to slow down."

Deseau grimaced and pushed EXECUTE. *Fencing Master's* tribarrels slewed to the right and elevated under the control of the gunnery computer.

"The C&C box'll divide our fire so that the whole train's covered," Huber continued, deliberately speaking to his whole crew over the intercom rather than embarrassing Padova by singling her out for the explanation. "We'll shoot it up on the fly, not because that'll damage the enemy but--"

Fencing Master's tribarrels fired, six-round bursts from the paired wing guns and about ten from Deseau's as it destroyed an aircar by itself. Padova jumped, instinct telling her that the gun'd gone off by accident. She blushed and scowled when she realized what had happened.

Above the horizon to the north, a cottony puff bloomed and threw out glittering sparks. The flash of the explosion had been lost in the distance, even to Huber who'd been looking for it.

"--because if we don't, we'll have whatever military force is aboard that train chasing us," Huber continued, giving no sign that he'd noticed Padova's mistake. "We're going to have enough to do worrying about what's in front without somebody catching us from behind."

The gunnery computer returned the tribarrels to their previous alignment. Huber and Deseau touched their grips, swiveling their weapons slightly to make sure that a circuitry glitch hadn't locked them; Padova quickly copied the veterans. *Yeah, she'll do.*

A column of black smoke twisted skyward near where the white puff had appeared in the sky. The second Solace scout hadn't blown up in the air, but its wreckage had ignited the brush when it hit the ground.

"*Six, this is Two-six,*" Messeman said. "*I'll take my Two-zero car out of central control to cut the rail in front of the train. All right? Over.*"

"Roger, Two-six," Huber said. He thought Messeman was being overcautious, but that still left seven combat cars to deal with a six-car train.

Sunlight gleamed on the elevated rail and the line of pylons supporting it across the dark green fields. The train itself wasn't in sight yet, but at their closing speed it wouldn't be long. Huber settled behind his gun, staring into the holographic sight picture.

Fencing Master came over a rise too slight to notice on a contour map but all the difference in the world when you were using line-of-sight weapons. The train, a jointed tube of plastic and light metal, shimmered into view, slung beneath the elevated track.

"Open fire," Huber said calmly. His thumbs squeezed the butterfly trigger.

Padova's bolts were high--meters high, well above even the rail--but Huber and Deseau were both dead on the final car from their first rounds. Huber traversed his gun clockwise from the back of the target forward. Frenchie simply let the train's own forward motion carry it through his three-second burst so that his bolts crossed with his lieutenant's in the middle of the target. By that time Padova corrected her aim by sawing her muzzles downward.

The car fell apart, metal frame and thermoplastic paneling alike blazing at the touch of fifty separate hits, each a torch of plasma. The Solace mercenaries on the train carried grenades and ammunition, but those sparkling secondary explosions did little to increase the destruction which the powerguns had caused directly.

The second car back had something more impressive in it, perhaps a pallet of anti-armor missiles. When it detonated, the shockwave destroyed the whole front half of the train in a red flash so vivid that even daylight blanched. The low pressure that followed the initial wave front sucked topsoil into a dense black mushroom through which the rear cars cascaded as blazing debris.

"Cease fire!" Huber ordered. "Don't waste ammo, troopers, we've worked ourselves out of a job."

He took a deep breath; his nose filters released now that the air was fit to breathe again. Plasma bolts burned oxygen to ozone, and the matrix holding the copper atoms in alignment broke down into unpleasant compounds when the energy was released. Huber's faceshield had blocked the direct intensity of the bolts to save his retinas, but enough cyan light had reflected into the corners of his eyes that shimmers of purple and orange filtered his vision.

"Reform in march order," Huber concluded hoarsely. "Six out."

"*They didn't have a chance,*" Padova said. She sounded as though she was on the verge of collapse. "*They couldn't shoot back, they were helpless!*"

"*It's better when they don't shoot back,*" Learoyd said from the front compartment. He'd buttoned up before they went into action; now the hatch opened and the driver's seat rose on its hydraulic jack, lifting his head back into the open. "*They might've got lucky, even at this range.*"

"*Some a' them caught us with our pants down when we landed here,*" Frenchie Deseau said harshly. "*We weren't so fucking helpless! Ain't that so, El-Tee?*"

Huber flipped up his faceshield and rubbed his eyes, remembering unwillingly the ratfuck when a Solace commando ambushed F-3 disembarking from the starship that had just brought them to Plattner's World. *A buzzbomb trailing gray exhaust smoke as it curved for Arne Huber's head....*

And afterwards, the windrow of bodies scythed down by a touch of Huber's thumb to the close-in defense system.

"No," he said in a husky whisper. "We weren't helpless. We're Hammer's Slammers."

Task Force Huber continued to slice its way north, moving at an even hundred kph across the treeless fields.

"*Highball Six, this is Flasher Six,*" the voice said faintly. The signal wobbled and was so attenuated that Huber could barely make out the words. "*Do you copy, over?*"

Ionization track transmissions could carry video under the proper circumstances,

but communications between moving vehicles were another matter. Huber would've said it was impossible without a precise location for the recipient, but apparently that wasn't quite true.

"Flasher Six, this is Highball Six," he said, shutting his mind to the present circumstances though his eyes remained open. Deseau and Learoyd glanced over when he replied to the transmission, then returned to their guns with the extra alertness of men who know something unseen is likely to affect them. "Go ahead, over."

Huber had no idea of who Flasher Six was nor what he commanded. The AI could probably tell him, but right now Huber had too little brain to clutter it up with needless detail.

Fencing Master's sending unit had the reference signal from the original transmission to go on, so Huber could reasonably expect his reply to get through. It must have done so, because a moment later the much clearer voice responded, "*Highball, you're in position to anchor a Solace artillery regiment. I need you to adjust your course to follow the Masterton River, a few degrees east of the original plot. I'm downloading the course data--*"

A pause. An icon blinked in the lower left corner of Huber's faceshield, then became solid green when the AI determined that the transmission was complete and intelligible.

--now. Central delegated control to me because they haven't been able to get through to you directly. Flasher over."

Task Force Huber was winding through slopes too steep and rocky to be easily cultivated. Shrubs and twisted trees with small leaves were the only vegetation they'd seen for ten kilometers. That was why they'd been routed this way, of course: the chance of somebody accurately reporting their location and course to Solace Command was very slight.

Huber was behind schedule, and the notion of further delay irritated him more than it might've done if he hadn't been so tired. He glared at the transmitted course he'd projected onto a terrain overlay and said, "Flasher, what is it that you want us to do? We're to attack an artillery *regiment*? Highball over."

"Negative, Highball, negative!" Flasher Six snapped. *"These are the Firelords! There's an eight-gun battery of calliopes with each battalion and they'd cut you to pieces. Your revised course will take you through a town with a guardpost that'll alert Solace Command. That'll give the Firelords enough warning to block the head of the valley with their calliopes and take you under fire with their rockets. We'll handle it from there. Over."*

Huber called up the Firelords from *Fencing Master's* data bank; his frown grew deeper. They were one of several regiments fielded from the Hackabe Cluster. Their truck-mounted bombardment rockets were relatively unsophisticated and short ranged but they could put down a huge volume of fire in a short time.

"Flasher," Huber said, switching his faceshield back to the course display, "the Firelords'll be able to saturate our defenses if they try hard enough. I'll have to put all my tribarrels on air defense, and even then it's going to be close. Are you sure about this? Over."

"Roger, Highball!" Flasher said in a tone of obvious irritation. *"Your infantry component will have to handle local security. Are you able to comply, over?"*

"Roger, Flasher," Huber said. It wasn't the first time he'd gotten orders he didn't like. It wouldn't be the last, either--if he survived this one. "Highball Six out."

He paused a moment to collect his mind. The AI was laying out courses and plotting fields of fire; doing its job, as happy as a machine could be. And Arne Huber was a soldier, so he'd do his job also. If it didn't make him happy, sometimes, he and all the other troopers in the Regiment had decided--if only by default--that it made them happier than other lines of work.

"*Trouble, El-Tee?*" Deseau asked without looking up from his sight picture. He'd been covering the left front while Huber was getting their orders.

"Hey, we're alive, Frenchie," Huber said. "That's something, right?"

He looked at the new plot on the C&C display, took a deep breath, and said over the briefing channel, "Highball, this is Six. There's been a change of plan. We're to proceed up the valley of the Masterton River, through a place called Millhouse Crossing. There's a Militia guardpost there."

In briefing mode, the unit commanders could respond directly and lower-ranking personnel could caret Huber's display for permission to speak. Nobody said anything for the moment.

He continued, "We'll shoot up the post on the move, but be aware that they may shoot back. We'll continue another fifteen clicks to where the road drops down into the plains around Hundred Hectare Lake. We'll halt short of there because an artillery is regiment set up beside the lake, the Firelords. We're to keep their attention while a friendly unit takes care of them. Any questions? Over."

"*If they're so fucking friendly,*" Deseau said over *Fencing Master's* intercom, "*then let them draw fire and we'll shoot up the redlegs. How about that?*"

There was a pause as the rest of the task force stared at the transmitted map; at least the unit commanders would also check out the Firelords. The first response was from Lt. Basingstoke, saying, "*Highball Six, this is Rocker One-six. The Firelords can launch nearly fifteen hundred fifteen-centimeter rockets within five seconds. You can't--the task force cannot, I believe--defend against a barrage like that. Over.*"

Huber sighed, though he supposed it was just as well that somebody'd raised the point directly. "One-six," he said, "I agree with your calculations, but we have our orders. We're going to do our best and hope that the Firelords don't think it's worth emptying their racks all in one go. Over."

Somebody swore softly. It could've been any of the platoon leaders. Blood and Martyrs, it could've been Huber himself muttering the words that were dancing through his mind.

"All right, troopers," Huber said to the fraught silence. "You've got your orders. We've all got our orders. Car Three-six leads from here till we're through this. Highball Six out."

Padova obediently increased speed by five kph, pulling around *Foghorn* as Sgt. Nagano's driver swung to the left in obedience to the directions from the C&C box. As soon as they were into the broader part of the valley, they'd form with the combat cars in line abreast by platoons at the front and rear of the task force. The X-Ray vehicles would crowd as tightly together between the cars as movement safety would allow.

Bombardment rockets had a wide footprint but they weren't individually accurate, so reducing the target made the tribarrels' task of defense easier. Not easy, but an old

soldier was one who'd learned to take every advantage there was.

Padova took them up a swale cutting into the ridge to the right. Deseau looked at the landscape. By crossing the ridge, they'd enter a better-watered valley where the data bank said the locals grew crops on terraces.

"Ever want to be a farmer, Bert?" Deseau asked.

"No, Frenchie," Learoyd said.

Deseau shrugged. "Yeah, me neither," he said. "Besides, I like shooting people."

He laughed, but Huber wasn't sure he was joking.

Fencing Master nosed through the spike-leafed trees straggling along the crest. They were similar to giants Huber'd seen in the lowland forests, but here the tallest were only ten meters high and their leaves had a grayish cast.

Limestone scraped beneath *Fencing Master's* skirts as they started down the eastern slope. The landscape immediately became greener, and after less than a minute they'd snorted out of wasteland into a peanut field.

A man--no, a woman--was cultivating the far end of the field with a capacitor-powered tractor. The farmer saw *Fencing Master* and stood up on her seat. As *Foghorn* slid out of the scrub with the rest of the column following, she leaped into the field and began crawling away while the tractor continued its original course. The peanut bushes wobbled, marking her course. Deseau laughed.

"It's like a different planet," Padova said, taking them down the path to the next terrace, a meter lower. *Fencing Master* was wider than the farm machinery, so they jolted as their skirts plowed the retaining wall and upper terrace into a broader ramp. The valley opened into more fields interspersed with the roofs of houses and sheds. "All green and pretty."

An aircar heading south a kilometer away suddenly turned in the air and started back the way it'd come. Learoyd and Deseau fired. Half the vehicle including the rear fan disintegrated. The forward portion spun into the ground and erupted in flames.

"Just wait a bit, Rita," Frenchie said with a chuckle.

The Solace Militia used civilian vehicles with no markings that'd show at a quick glimpse through a gunsight. That aircar might've been a farm couple coming home with all their children, but Huber would've fired also if he hadn't been concentrating on other business. He had to cover the sensor readouts as well as the position of his task force.

Killing civilians--maybe civilians--wasn't a part of the work that Huber much cared for, but you'd go crazy if you let yourself worry about the things you couldn't change. Go crazy or shoot yourself.

In the interests of command, *Fencing Master* should've been farther back in the column with *Foghorn* or *Fancy Pants* leading... but Huber was making the choice, and he knew that afterwards the CO had less to explain to the survivors if he'd been leading from the front. He had less to explain to himself, too, if he was one of those survivors.

Padova increased speed, crossing the fields at 40 kph and using the extra inertia to help break down the retaining walls before accelerating again. Huber frowned, but the rest of the column kept station. Since *Fencing Master* was widening the ramps, the following vehicles didn't have to slow as much to negotiate the terraces.

The valley's lower levels were planted in rice, a green much brighter than the leaves of the peanut bushes. The paddies were flooded; showers of spray, muck, and young plants erupted as the Slammers drove through. Upper fields began to drain as the

column's passage opened the dikes.

Occasionally someone stepped out of a wood-framed dwelling or glanced up in a field to see what the noise was. Some continued to stare as the column howled by, perhaps thinking they were mercenaries under contract to the Solace government.

Twice an aircar appeared in the far distance. A tribarrel in air defense mode ripped each out of the sky.

The Masterton River here was twenty meters wide, too narrow to rate as a river back on Friesland. Even so, it carried more tumbling water than Huber'd have wanted to take his combat cars over without being sure of a ford.

No need to cross, of course. There was plenty of room on the broad bottom terrace to form on a platoon front. *Foghorn* came up on the right of *Fencing Master*, with Gabinus' Three-eight and *Fancy Pants* falling in alongside.

Funnel-mouthed fish weirs lined both banks. The small boys tipping them up to check the catch turned and to watch the passing armored vehicles. *Fencing Master* still set the pace. Padova continued to accelerate now that they were no longer descending the slope.

The town, Millhouse Crossing, was two rows of buildings which began as a straggle of shacks with board walls and roofs of corrugated plastic. Further on the houses were masonry and two or three stories high. The road was barely wide enough for the recovery vehicle, and even the combat cars would have to go through one at a time.

A black-and-yellow Solace flag flew over the cupola of a building in the center of town. All the F-3 vehicles fired as soon as the guardpost came in view, shattering the stuccoed limestone in dazzles of cyan and white.

Chickens were running in nervous circles in the street. A cart and small tractor stood forlorn beside a roofed marketplace on the inland side. The cart was half-loaded, but its owner and every other human in Millhouse Crossing was trying to hide.

"Highball, form on Three-six in line ahead," Huber said. "We'll go back to platoon front on the--"

As *Fencing Master* drew ahead again, Deseau decided he had a fair shot at the facade of the guardpost--and took it. He was more right than not, placing most of his ten-round burst in the ground floor of the government building, though a pair of 2-cm bolts blew in the arched entryway of the private house next door.

"--other side of town. Six out."

Huber swiveled his gun so that it covered building fronts a hundred meters ahead on his side. Padova brushed a pair of shacks that'd been built closer to the road than most of the row, knocking them to scrap. A sheet of plywood flipped outward and slapped down over a screened intake on *Fencing Master's* port side; it clung there, partially blocking the duct, till Padova deliberately swerved through another shack and swept the debris off. A brief snowstorm of chicken feathers sprayed from beneath the skirts.

They howled past a house painted pale green. In the corner of his eye Huber saw a white face staring from the interior. The spectator was no threat, and besides Huber's attention was focused on the magnified image of buildings well in the distance. A sniper directly alongside would be for *Foghorn's* gunners to deal with.

Learoyd's gun hammered, the bolts' intense cyan reflecting from the soft pastels of the building fronts. His burst fanned the interior of the government building which Deseau's gun had already set alight. As *Fencing Master* passed, orange flame *whuffed!*

from the window openings, a gas stove adding its note to the ongoing destruction.

Fencing Master hit the cart in the roadway, flinging its contents into the air, and bunted the tractor through the lightly-framed market stalls. Huber flinched reflexively as cans of meat bounced off the armor beside him. Civilians scrambled out of the wreckage running in circles much as the chickens had moments before.

The rest of the way was clear. Padova kept *Fencing Master* on the raised roadbed through the village, then dropped into the lefthand paddy at a slant to let the rest of the platoon fall in beside them as before. High-pressure air squirting from beneath the plenum chambers excavated furrows twice the width of the vehicles themselves, gouging out the young rice.

The crop could be replanted; the damaged buildings could be repaired. In a few years, people in Millhouse Crossing would no longer talk about the day Hammer's Slammers roared through. Nothing really matters but life itself, and death.

The village was twelve kilometers from the mouth of the valley. According to the terrain display, the Masterton River dropped twenty meters in the next five hundred, boiling over a series of cataracts that closed it to navigation and from there meandered another eight clicks to Hundred Hectare Lake.

In the geologic past the lake had been of twice its present area. When the water drained, the original shoreline remained as a limestone escarpment on the south and western margins. Though never more than a few meters high, it was sufficient to cover an artillery regiment against powerguns firing from the Masterton Valley.

Under other circumstances, Huber might've considered taking his combat cars in a balls-to-the-wall charge across the farmland south of the lake. The Firelords' calliopes, emplaced on the escarpment and manned by professionals, made that notion suicide.

Another option--the one Huber would've picked--was to have halted well beyond the twenty-kilometer range of the Firelords' bombardment rockets and let Battery Alpha clear the problem. Again the calliopes were the difficulty. Saturating the Firelords' air defenses would require much of the ammunition the battery was carrying, and there wouldn't be any resupply until after--and if--the Regiment captured Port Plattner.

Which left the third option, Flasher Six dealing with the Firelords in his own good time and fashion, while Task Force Huber took whatever was thrown at them. Maybe next time his troopers'd be dishing it out while somebody else drew fire....

The sensor display gave Huber the warning: not movement but a radio signal from the hills overlooking the broad pass to the north. A Solace lookout was signaling back to headquarters near the lakeside.

“Highball!” Huber called. He didn't aim his own gun; he had other duties. “Tar--“

Deseau must've expected an outpost and set his AI to caret RF sources. Most civilians would be using land lines, but a mercenary unit would generally depend on its own communications system. While Huber was still speaking, Frenchie acted. A three-round ranging burst hiss/*CRACK*ed from his tribarrel, vivid even in sunlight.

“--get at vector zero-seven degrees, radio trans--“

Nobody was good enough to hit a target ten kilometers away with his first shot. Deseau adjusted his aim, dialed up the magnification on his holographic sights, and engaged the gun's stabilizer. Learoyd leaned over his own gun, importing the target information from Deseau's weapon instead of duplicating the effort.

“--mitter. Fire at--“

Deseau and Learoyd fired together. Their tribarrels spat streams in near parallel, merging optically as they snapped through the sunlight ahead of the task force.

--will!"

The distant slope winked--cyan from the impacting plasma, red and gushing gray steam where brush burned explosively. There was a burp of orange and the radio signal cut off.

"Got 'em!" Deseau shouted as he and Learoyd took their thumbs from their triggers. He wasn't on intercom, but Huber could easily hear his excited voice. "Got the bastards!"

Fancy Pants and Three-eight ripped ropes of blue-green hellfire toward the pass. A stretch of hillside where the vegetation was dry began to burn with some enthusiasm. Another gun, this one from F-2 aiming past the X-Ray vehicles, joined in.

"Cease fire!" Huber ordered. "Six to Highball, cease fire! Save your gunbarrels, troopers, because we're going to need them bad. Out!"

"*Here it comes,*" Deseau said, reading the flicker of saffron from beyond the mouth of the valley. "*For what we are about to receive, the Lord make us thankful.*"

The sensor suite analyzed the sound some ten seconds after Frenchie had correctly identified the exhaust flashes reflected from clouds of dust: rocket motors igniting, sixty of them rippling in groups of six every second. A Firelord battery had just launched half the rockets on its six trucks.

"Fox elements," Huber said, "put all your guns, I repeat *all* your guns in air defense mode. Have your backup weapons ready to deal with ground threats."

He pressed his hands against his armored chest to keep from balling them into fists till they cramped.

"Troopers," he went on, "this is going to be hard but we're going to do it. Hold station on Three-six, watch for problems on the ground, and let our gunnery computers do their job. They can handle it if anything can. Six out. Break."

The armored vehicles bucked through the muck of the paddies, throwing up curtains of spray to the rear and sides. The mid-afternoon sun struck it into rainbows, dazzlingly beautiful over the bright green rice plants.

"Padova," Huber continued, "keep picking up the pace as long as the rest of Highball can stay with us. Don't let 'em string out, but the Firelords may not have us under direct observation. I'd like to be somewhere other than they calculate. Out."

"Roger," the driver said. She sounded focused but not concerned. Huber couldn't tell without checking whether *Fencing Master's* speed increased, but he figured he'd delegated the decision to the person best able to make it.

Deseau set the tribarrels on air defense; the guns lifted their triple muzzles toward the northern sky like hounds casting for a distant scent. He took his 2-cm weapon out of the clip that held it to his gun's pintle; Learoyd held his sub-machine gun in his right hand as he snapped the loading tube out of the receiver, then in again to make sure it had locked home. Huber grinned tightly and drew his own 2-cm weapon from its muzzle-down nest between ammo boxes at the rear of the compartment.

All the tribarrels in the task force opened fire, their barrel clusters rotating as they slashed the northern sky. The Command and Control box coordinated the cars' individual AIs so that all the incoming missiles were hit without duplication. Red flashes and soot-black smoke filled the air beyond the mouth of the valley. A rocket, gutted but not

destroyed, spun in a vertical helix and plunged back the way it had come.

The guns fell silent; then Deseau's weapon stuttered another four-round burst. A final rocket exploded, much closer than the smoky graveyard of its fellows. The tribarrel originally tasked with that target must have jammed before it finished the job, so Frenchie's gun was covering.

"*Hold for a jolt!*" Padova called, her voice rising.

The sky ahead flashed yellow-gray again, silhouetting the hills. For a moment Huber, focused on the C&C display, thought the driver also meant the next inbound salvo.

Fencing Master's bow lifted, spilling pressure. The combat car hurtled onward on inertia, its skirts skimming but not slamming straight into the cross dike which had just appeared at the end of the paddy.

Fencing Master came down like a dropped plate. The Lord's *Blood!* but they hit. Padova'd executed the maneuver perfectly, but there was no way you could sail thirty tonnes of iridium into watery muck and the passengers have a good time. Huber had the coaming in his left hand and his tribarrel's gunshield in his right; otherwise he'd have hurtled out of the compartment.

"Padova, slow down!" Huber bellowed, though the driver had already cut back on the car's speed by bringing the fan nacelles closer to vertical. "Highball, watch for the fucking dike here! Six out!"

He glanced to the right to see how the other cars of the platoon had handled the obstruction. Three-eight's driver had negotiated it flawlessly and was still parallel to *Fencing Master*. Sgt. Tranter must've seen the dike coming and warned his driver, because *Fancy Pants* had slowed to climb it in rulebook fashion and was now lurching down the other side.

Foghorn had tried to plow straight through. The dike was only a hand's breadth above the water and some forty centimeters down to the floor of the paddy. It was a meter thick, though, and over the width of a combat car's skirts even mud weighed several tonnes. The crew in the fighting compartment were all down, though the left wing gunner was trying to lift himself with a hand on the coaming. The car wallowed; the driver'd lost control when the shock curtains deployed automatically to save his life.

All the tribarrels fired again, those mounted on *Foghorn* along with the rest; the impact hadn't affected the gunnery computer. That was a good thing, because this time the Firelords had launched 240 rounds, a battalion half-emptying its racks.

Plasma bolts stabbed home. Flame and dirty smoke spread across the sky in a solid mass, replacing the dispersing rags of the previous salvo.

"*Sir, I didn't see the wall!*" Padova said. "*Via, sir, I'm sorry!*"

"Roger that," Huber said. F-3 had gotten straightened out and was cautiously accelerating across the second paddy. Nagano and both his wing gunners were on their feet again, though *Foghorn's* guns pecked the sky in short bursts regardless of what the crew was doing. The X-Ray had element had reached the dike and was crossing in good order, in part because of the holes the combat cars had torn. "Drive on."

The crackling roar of the first salvo's destruction rolled over Task Force Huber as the second flashed and spurted a little nearer. The tribarrels continued to fire, switching from target to fresh target as the rockets curved downward. The math was easy--two hundred and forty incoming projectiles, twenty-four guns to sweep them out of the sky--

Or not.

The left wing gun spun and stopped. It was properly Huber's weapon, but Deseau was at it before Huber could react. Without even a pause to check the gun's diagnostics, Deseau snatched open the feed trough and used his knifeblade to lever out the disk that'd kinked and jammed. Grinning at Huber, he charged the gun and stepped back as it resumed blasting cyan bolts through barrels already white hot.

Huber tensed, waiting for the third salvo; possibly more than a thousand rockets, launched against combat cars whose guns were dangerously hot from dealing with the previous hundreds of projectiles. Instead, cyan light flickered behind the hills. Moments later, rolling orange fireballs mushroomed in response.

"*Highball, this is Flasher Six,*" the unfamiliar voice called. The tone of crowing triumph was evident despite the compressed and tenuous transmission. "*Thanks for your help, troopers. We've got it from now. Flasher out.*"

"*The hell he says!*" Deseau snarled, turning a furious face toward Huber. "*El-Tee, are you going to let them tankers have all the fun? We're not, are we?*"

Another volley of 20-cm bolts speared into the plains from higher ground somewhere to the northeast. Again whole truckloads of bombardment rockets exploded, the fuel and warheads going off in split seconds. Flasher Six commanded at least a company of tanks; their main guns were raking the Firelords, probably from beyond the distance an unaided human eye could see.

Tribarrels didn't have that range... but the combat cars weren't nearly that far away, either. Huber checked the terrain display and made an instant decision. *Like Frenchie says, why should the tankers have all the fun?*

"Highball, this is Six," he said. He might get in trouble for this in the after-action debriefing, but that would be a long time coming--if he survived. "X-Ray elements will halt inside the valley at point Delta Michael Four-one, Three-seven. India elements will dismount to provide security. Fox elements will take hull-down positions in the valley mouth--"

The C&C display obligingly detailed firing positions west of the river for each of the eight combat cars.

"--and engage the enemy. Hit the calliopes first, troopers, and any vehicles that aren't running--but my guess is that with the panzers shooting them up they're going to have forgotten about us till we give 'em reason to remember. Six out."

Padova tilted her fans for greater forward thrust. Lt. Messeman's cars were passing through the X-Ray element, slewing from side to side in the wakes of the big vehicles. The terraces narrowed on the steeper slopes above the cataracts; the C&C box had set their course along the road in line ahead now that air defense was no longer the primary concern.

Huber hadn't taken the guns out of air defense mode, though, because there was still a chance that the Firelords would try to carry their enemies with them to Hell. A slim chance. They were all mercenaries; their war was a business, not a holy crusade.

Sensor suites gave the task force few details of what to expect in the plains below. At this distance electronic and sonic signatures couldn't pinpoint targets, and the cars didn't have a line of sight. Obviously Flasher had the enemy under direct observation, but the link between the tank unit and Highball was too marginal for complex data transmission.

There shouldn't be a big problem. The artillerymen were so busy getting out of the frying pan that they weren't going to worry about the fire.

Because of the angle, F-2's cars were in position before *Fencing Master* tore through the stunted nut trees on the upper slope. Messeman's gunners opened fire while Deseau screamed angry curses at Padova. She ignored him, swinging them with necessary caution around a spur of rock into the position the AI had chosen. Here they'd be sheltered from possible snipers higher up the hill.

The plains beyond were full of targets. After a volley into their rocket-laden trucks had put the Firelords off-balance, Flasher concentrated on the calliopes in firing positions on the lip of the escarpment. The multi-barreled 3-cm powerguns could be dangerous even to tanks at long range. Main gun bolts had blown all of the calliopes to shimmering vapor before the combat cars nosed over the rise, but there were enough other things to shoot at.

Huber swung his tribarrel onto a ten-wheeled truck trying to flee through a field of sorghum. He squeezed and watched his plasma snap in cyan brilliance across the bed loaded with bombardment rockets in five forward-slanting racks. Before the third bolt hit, the vehicle erupted into rolling orange fury, searing a black circle from the crops.

The Firelords had set up between the ridge and the lakeside, shielded from the task force. When the tanks began to rake them from the flank and rear, some of the hundreds of vehicles--not just rocket trucks but also the command, service, and transportation vehicles that an artillery regiment requires--tried to escape west along the lake's margin. Others--the truck Huber hit was one--had climbed out of the bowl and spread out across the fields.

Another volley of 20-cm bolts lashed the milling chaos, setting off further secondary explosions. The billowing flames and blast-flung debris curtained the survivors to some degree from the tanks fifty, eighty--maybe over a hundred kilometers distant, but the combat cars had good visibility.

Huber ripped a tank truck. It turned out to be a water purification vehicle, not a fuel tanker, but it gushed steam and began to burn anyway.

Three white flares burst over the center of the encampment. A man jumped onto the TOC, a cluster of sandbagged trailers, waving a towel--beige, but Huber understood--over his head. All around him was blazing wreckage, but apart from a few hits by 2-cm bolts the TOC had been spared. The Slammers had concentrated on targets that'd give the greatest value in terms of secondary explosions, and there was no lack of those in an artillery regiment.

"*Enemy commander!*" said a hoarse voice. Huber's AI noted that the fellow was broadcasting on several frequencies, desperately hoping that one would get through to the gunners shooting his troops like ducks in a barrel. "*The Firelords surrender on standard terms. I repeat, we surrender on terms. Cease fire! Cease fire!*"

"Highball, cease fire!" Huber repeated, and as he did so another volley of tank bolts lanced into the lakeside with fresh mushroomings of flame. Flasher couldn't pick up the radio signal--a truckload of exploding rockets had knocked down the transmitter masts--and the white flares could be easily overlooked in the general fiery destruction.

"Flasher Six!" Huber shouted, the AI switching his transmission to the ionization track system. "Cease fire! All Flasher units, cease fire! They're surrendering!"

Explosions continued to rumble in the plains below, but the ice-pick sharpness of

plasma bolts no longer added to it. Even before they got Huber's warning, the Flasher gunners would've noticed that Highball had stopped firing. A blast had knocked the officer with the towel to his knees, but he kept his hand high and waving.

"Firelords, this is Slammers command," Huber said, responding on the highest of the frequencies the Firelords had used. He *wasn't* in command, of course, Flasher Six was, but the tanker couldn't communicate with the poor bastards down below. "We accept your parole. Hold in place until my superiors can make arrangements for your exchange. Ah, that may be several days. We will not, I repeat not, be halting at this location. Slammers over."

"Roger, Slammers," the enemy commander said, relief and weariness both evident in his voice. "We've got enough to occupy us here for longer than a few fucking days. Can you spare us medical personnel? Over."

"Negative, Firelords," Huber said. "I hope your next contract works out better for you. Slammers out."

He lifted off his commo helmet and closed his eyes, letting reaction wash over him. He was exhausted, not from physical exertion--though there'd been plenty of that, jolting around in the fighting compartment during the run--but from the adrenaline blazing in him as shells rained down and he could do nothing but watch and pray his equipment worked.

He settled the helmet back in place and said, "Booster," to activate the C&C box, "plot our course north from this location."

On the plains below, fuel and munitions continued to erupt. It didn't make Huber feel much better to realize that the destruction would've been just as bad if those rockets had landed on Task Force Huber instead of going off in their racks.

It was an hour short of full darkness, but stars showed around the eastern horizon; stars, and perhaps one or more of the planet's seven small moons. Sunset silhouetted the three grain elevators a kilometer to the west where three monorail lines merged at a railhead. Timers had turned on the mercury vapor lights attached to the service catwalks as the task force arrived, but there was no sign of life in the huge structures or the houses at their base.

"Suppose we oughta do a little reconnaissance by fire, El-Tee?" Deseau said hopefully. He patted his tribarrel's receiver.

Padova and Learoyd slept on the ground beside *Fencing Master*. They hadn't strung the tarp, just spread it over the stubble as a ground cloth. The car's idling drive fans whispered a trooper's lullaby.

"Do I think you should use up another set of barrels just because you like to see things burn, Frenchie?" Huber said, smiling faintly. "No, I don't. We'll have plenty to shoot at for real in a few hours, don't worry."

A tribarrel across the perimeter snarled short burst. Huber jerked his head around, following the line of fire to a flash in the distant sky.

"*Highball, Fox Two-six,*" Lt. Messeman reported. "*Air defense splashed an aircar, that's all. Out.*"

Probably civilians who hadn't gotten the word that a Slammers task force had driven into the heart of their country. Huber'd lost count of the number of aircars they'd shot down on this run; thirty-odd, he thought, but poppers always washed the past out of

his mind. He needed the stimulant a lot more than he needed to remember what was over and done with, that was for sure.

The tracked excavator whined thunderously as it dug in the second of the six Hogs. The note of its cutting head dopplered up and down, its speed depending on the depth of the cut and the number of rocks in the soil.

The task force was carrying minimal supplies, so the excavator didn't have plasticizer to add to the earth it spewed in an arc forward of the cut. The berm would still stop small arms and shell fragments. If Battery Alpha needed more than that, the Colonel had lost his gamble and the troopers of Task Force Huber were probably dead meat.

Lt. Basingstoke, half a dozen of his people, and three techs from the recovery vehicle, stood beside the Hog whose starboard fans had cut out twice during the run. Sgt. Tranter had joined them. He wasn't in Maintenance any more, but neither was he a man to ignore a problem he could help with just because it'd stopped being his job.

Huber looked westward. Lights were on in the spaceport seven clicks away, backlighting the smooth hillcrest between it and Task Force Huber.

He could imagine the panic at Port Plattner, military and civilians reacting to the unexpected threat in as many ways as there were officials involved. They'd be trying to black out the facilities, not that it would make much difference to the Slammers' optics, but they hadn't yet succeeded. The port was designed to be illuminated for round-the-clock ship landings. Nobody'd planned for what to do when a hostile armored regiment drove a thousand kilometers to attack from all sides.

The sky continued to darken. Huber always felt particularly lonely at night; in daytime he could pretend almost any landscape was a part of Nieuw Friesland that he just hadn't seen before, but the stars were inescapably alien.

Grinning wryly at himself, he said, "Frenchie, hold the fort till I'm back. I'm going to talk to the redlegs."

Another thought struck him and he said, "Fox Two-six, this is Six. Join me and Rocker One-six. Out."

He lifted himself from the fighting compartment as Messeman responded with a laconic, "*Roger.*"

The cutting head hummed to idle as the excavator backed up the ramp from the gun position it'd just dug. Waddling like a bulldog, it followed the sergeant from the engineer section as he walked backwards to guide it to the next pit. A Hog drove into the just-completed gun position and shut down its fans. The hull was below the original surface level, and the howitzer's barrel slanted up at 20° to clear the berm.

Huber nodded to the munitions trucks loaded with 200-mm rockets. He said to Lt. Basingstoke, "I hope the engineers have time to dig those in too, lieutenant. After watching what happened to the Firelords when their ammo started going off."

"If we begin firing at maximum rate....," Basingstoke said. He was a tall, hollow-cheeked man. His pale blond hair made him look older than he was, but Huber suspected he'd never really been young. "We'll expend all the ammunition we've carried in less than ten minutes. No doubt that will reduce the risk."

He smiled like a skull. Huber smiled back when he realized that the artillery officer had made a joke.

Lt. Messeman trotted over, looking back toward his cars and speaking into his commo helmet on the F-2 frequency. He turned and glared at Huber, not really angry but

the sort of little man who generally sounded as though he was.

"Any word on when we'll be moving?" he demanded. "We *are* moving, aren't we? We're not going to have to nursemaid the artillery while the rest of the Regiment attacks?"

Basingstoke stiffened. Before he could speak--and they were all tired, but Blood and Martyrs, didn't Messeman have any sense at all?--Huber snapped, "We're going to leave the two combat cars which I determine to be sufficient for air defense, lieutenant. That's one from each platoon. Personally, I expect to be thankful for all the artillery support we can get when we attack."

Messeman grimaced but shrugged. "Yeah, I'll leave Two-four. The patch we put on the plenum chamber after the breakout's starting to crack. They can use the time to weld it properly."

"Seven kilometers," Basingstoke said, glancing to the west. The crest showed up more sharply against the port lighting as the sky darkened. "That's closer to the target than I care to be, but--"

He gave the other officers another skull smile.

--I've been glad to have the combat cars' company for as long as possible, and I realize that means following you to your attack positions."

Tranter crawled out of an access hatch in the Hog's plenum chamber. He was a big, red-haired man who moved so gracefully that you generally forgot that his right leg was a biomechanical replacement for the one severed when a tank fell off a jack.

"Got it, lieutenant!" he called cheerfully to Basingstoke. "They pinched a cable when they replaced your Starboard Three, so when the nacelles're canted hard right you get a short. The wrenches 'll have it rerouted in ten minutes."

"Three-eight 'll be staying here with the Hogs, sergeant," Huber said, looking over his shoulder. The combat cars faced outward around the artillery vehicles. The circuit was too open for defense against serious ground attack but admirably suited to stop incoming shells and possible Solace infiltrators. If the Waldheim Dragoons and the scattering of Militiamen and other mercenaries in Port Plattner mounted an attack before the Regiment was ready to strike, the cars' sensor suites would give Huber sufficient warning to change his dispositions.

"Roger," Tranter said, nodding. "Ah, El-Tee? Can I swap out Chisum on Three-eight for Stoddard on my car? Stoddard pukes every time he takes a popper, so he's pretty washed out after this run."

"Right, the cars here'll be in air defense mode unless a lot of wheels fall off," Huber said, frowning to hear that Stoddard couldn't take stimulants. That didn't handicap a trooper quite as badly as blindness would, but it wasn't something a platoon leader wanted to hear about a useful man. "Want me to...?"

"I'll tell him," Tranter said, throwing Huber a brilliant smile again as he strode off to inform Chisum and Gabinus, Three-eight's commander. Tranter wore a slip-over shoe on his right foot to raise it to the height of the boot on his left, giving his leg movements an unbalanced look.

The excavator started on a fifth gun pit. Messeman watched a Hog slide into the one just completed with the delicacy required by tight quarters. He said, "Ah, Six? Will we be getting a view of the target before we go in?"

"What I've been told," Huber said, "is that they'll launch a commo and

observation constellation just before we drop the hammer. They're estimating that the new satellites will survive two minutes, certainly no more than five. That's why they're saving it till everything's ready."

Messeman sighed. "Sure, makes sense," he said. "I like to tell my people what we're getting into, that's all."

"Tell them there's nobody on the planet as good as they are, lieutenant," Huber said. His glance took in Lt. Basingstoke as well. "We proved that getting here. Tell them one more push and we'll be able to stand down."

Messeman and Basingstoke nodded agreement; Huber gave them a thumbs-up and headed back to *Fencing Master*.

It was true, as far as it went: one push and a stand-down.

If they survived.

And until the next time.

Automatic weapons had been firing from the port area at intervals ever since sunset three hours ago. Occasional tracers ricocheted high enough to be seen over the hills. Less often, a tribarrel flickered across the cloud bases like distant cyan lightning. That'd be another task force splashing an aircar or something equally insignificant... except for the poor bastards on the receiving end.

The alert signal at the upper left corner of Huber's faceshield was the first message he'd gotten from Central since the fire mission before they'd reached the Solace Highlands. He let out his breath in a gasp.

There might not have been a Central any more. Base Alpha might have fallen and the Solace forces begun mopping up the Slammers task force by task force, bringing to bear as much weight as they needed to crush each hard nut. Huber'd kept his fear below the surface of his mind, but it'd been there nonetheless.

"All units, prepare to receive orders and target information," said a voice as emotionless as the surf on a rocky shore. "Don't get ahead of your start times, and once you commit don't, I repeat do not, stop shooting until you're told to. Regiment One out."

The data dump started at once, progressing for thirty seconds instead of concluding instantaneously. Satellite reconnaissance was updating the information at the same time those satellites transmitted it to the Regiment's scattered elements. Port Plattner, an oval five kilometers by three, expanded on the Command and Control display. There'd been six warehouse complexes spaced about the perimeter when the satellites shut down thirty-six hours before; now there was a seventh beside the huge starship on northwest edge, twelve large temporary buildings with more under construction.

"Regiment One? That's Maj. Steuben," Deseau muttered, unusually worried for him. "Is he in fucking charge now?"

"Shut up, Frenchie," Huber snapped as he scrolled through the download. He was more irritated than he'd have been if a newbie like Padova had made the comment. Deseau should've known they didn't have enough data to guess what was going on. Steuben might be in command of Base Alpha because his White Mice were defending it, but that didn't mean the Colonel and Maj. Pritchard were casualties.

It didn't mean they *weren't* casualties, either.

"Right!" Huber muttered when he had the situation clear. At least it was clear

enough that he knew staring at it longer wasn't going to change anything in a good way. "Red and Blue elements--"

F-2 and F-3 respectively, each with a squad of infantry in support.

--will proceed to designated positions on the reverse slope--"

The download from Central set out the east side of the terminal building as the general objective for Highball's action elements, but Central hadn't known what strength Huber would have available for the attack. Huber's C&C box had broken the assignment into individual targets. Losing two cars and six infantry was probably better than Operations had calculated, though under normal circumstances twenty percent was a horrendous casualty rate.

--and hold there till two-two-three-seven hours, when--"

Battery Alpha opened fire, loosing thunder and the long crackling lightning of sustainer motors as the missiles streaked west so low that they barely cleared the ridgeline. The Hogs rocked from the backblasts, slamming their skirts against the hard clay substrate.

--we'll cross the crest and attack our objectives at forty kph. White element under Sgt. Marano--"

The remaining two combat cars and eleven infantry--some of whom were walking wounded only if they didn't have to walk very far.

--remains here to provide security for the X-Ray element. Any questions? Over."

"*Let's do it, El-Tee,*" Sgt. Nagano said. He raised his gauntleted left hand from *Foghorn*, the thumb up.

"Roger that," Huber said, after a ten-second pause to be sure that nobody had anything substantive to add. "Move out, troopers. Keep it slow till we're in position, and nobody crosses the start line till it's time. Six out."

Fencing Master started forward, barely ambling. The other cars--particularly Messeman's trio from the east arc of the circle--had farther to go to get into position. Padova wasn't letting eagerness make her screw up.

The bone-shaking roar of the rocket howitzers paused on a long snarl as the last of the six rounds in the ready magazines streaked westward. Another battery took up the bombardment as Basingstoke's Hogs cycled missiles from their storage magazines in the rear hull into their turrets to resume firing.

The Hogs were launching firecracker rounds, anti-personnel cargo shells designed to dump thousands of bomblets each. Powerguns from the port's air defenses stabbed the sky for several seconds, bursting all the incoming rounds before they could open over the target. Then one got through.

Huber knew what it was like on the ground--and what it would've been like for Task Force Huber if the Firelords had gotten lucky with their less-sophisticated equivalents. When the bomblets swept over the defenses as a sea of white fire, shrapnel would kill the crews and disable gun mechanisms. Then the next round--and the next twenty rounds--would get through.

The cars aligned themselves to the right of *Fencing Master* at twenty-meter intervals. The eighteen infantrymen were twenty meters behind, their skimmers bobbling in the wake of the cars. They looked hopelessly vulnerable to Huber, but he knew from conversations that most infantrymen regarded combat cars as big targets, and tanks as bigger targets yet. They'd come in handy for clearing the terminal building, if they got

that far.

Padova raised her speed to ten kph but didn't accelerate further. Huber frowned with instinctive impatience, then understood. "Highball," he said, "we're timing--"

Padova was timing.

"--our approach so we'll reach our attack positions at exactly the time to go over the crest. That way we'll already have forward inertia instead of lifting from a halt. Six out, break."

His frown deepened as he continued, "Trooper Padova, using initiative is fine, but don't play games or you'll be playing them in another unit. Tell me what you're planning the next time, all right?"

"Sorry, sir," the driver said, sounding like she meant it. "*I wasn't... sorry, it won't happen again.*"

The cars and skimmers passed to the south of the grain elevators and their clustered dwellings. Deseau looked back over his shoulder, his hand resting lightly on the butt of his 2-cm weapon. If a sniper or Solace artillery observer appeared among the buildings now, the forward tribarrel wouldn't bear on it.

Huber smiled wryly. Frenchie was an optimistic man, in his way.

A line of posts supported plastic netting and a top strand of barbed wire, fencing to keep pastured cattle from straying into the railhead. All six cars hit it within an eyeblink of one another, smashing the fence down with no more trouble than they took with the spiky bushes which dotted the cropped grassland on the other side. Huber had been ready to duck if the wire flew toward him, but instead it curled around the next post to the left.

Learoyd was singing, mostly under his breath so it didn't trip the intercom. Occasional phrases buzzed in Huber's ears: "...and best...lost sinners was slain...."

Fencing Master accelerated smoothly despite the increasing slope. The fans were biting deeper, but their note didn't change because Padova matched her blade incidence flawlessly against the increased power she was dialing in. The cars were nearing the crest. On the other side, sparkling explosions backlit stubble and the thicket of brush which grew from exposed rocks where mowers couldn't reach.

A salvo from Battery Alpha shrieked overhead, so deafeningly close that *Fencing Master* shimmied. Huber's exposed skin prickled and he heard an abrasive snarl against his helmet. He didn't know whether he was feeling debris from the exhaust or grit swept up from the ground by the shells' passage. Deseau shouted in angry surprise, though there was no real harm done.

It would've been a bad time to cross the ridge ahead of orders, though. A really bad time.

"Highball...", Huber said, judging the time by *Fencing Master's* speed, not the clock he could call onto his faceshield if he wanted to.

"Execute!"

Battery Alpha's salvo of cargo shells opened just on the other side of the ridge. This close, the red flashes of the charges that expelled the contents were startlingly visible. The bomblets scattered on separate ballistic courses toward the terminal, detonating like so many thousand grenades just as the combat cars came over the rise. From where Huber watched, three kilometers away, the sea of glittering white radiance was beautiful.

His helmet gave him targets, first a calliope dug into the ground at the edge of the meters-thick concrete pad which supported starships as they landed and lifted off. Huber put a burst into it, his plasma glancing from the iridium gunbarrels but vaporizing the steel frame and trunnion. The gun was silent, its barrels already cooled to red heat: bomblets had killed its crew or driven it to cover.

Powerguns slashed the port's flat concrete expanse from all directions, tribarrels and the tanks' 20-cm main guns. Buildings, vehicles, and stacks of cargo on the immense concrete pad were burning.

There were over twenty starships on the pad. They weren't deliberate targets, but bolts splashed them with cyan highlights.

As Huber switched his aim to a wheeled vehicle racing away from the terminal, a last salvo struck the temporary buildings being erected next to the starship in the northwest. Nothing happened for a moment because instead of bomblets the rounds carried fuel-air warheads.

The delayed blast spilled air from *Fencing Master's* plenum chamber and slammed the car down hard. Huber shouted, instinctively afraid that he'd been flung out of the fighting compartment. He bashed his chest into the grips of his tribarrel. The clamshell armor saved his ribs, but he'd have bruises in the morning.

Padova got them under weigh again, straightening their course; the blast had slewed the car a quarter-turn clockwise while shock curtains deployed around the driver. A column of kinked black smoke rose from where the shells had landed.

The pad wasn't cratered: the explosive had spread in a thin smooth sheet before it went off, and concrete has great compression strength. The structures which had covered more than a thousand square meters of the pad were gone except for twisted fragments which had fallen back after the blast blew everything skyward. The starship, thick-hulled and weighing over 150,000 tonnes, appeared undamaged. The valves had been wrenched off the two open cargo hatches, however.

Huber found the truck he'd been aiming at; the shockwave had shoved it into the loading dock which extended from the back of the terminal building. He gave it a three-round burst from reflex, watching it burst into flames as his AI found him something more useful to shoot at.

Deseau and Learoyd were firing at gun positions on the roof of the terminal, though nothing moved there except the haze of smoke from the antipersonnel bomblets which had gone off seconds before. Instead of a nearby target, Huber's helmet targeted a line of vehicles on the northern edge of the pad. At least a company of the Waldheim Dragoons were using blast deflectors as breastworks against the Slammers attacking from that side. Tribarrels on the Waldheim APCs and 10-cm powerguns on their tanks stabbed the distant hills.

The walls now raised from the pad were meant to deflect a giant starship's full takeoff thrust skyward so it wouldn't knock down everything within a kilometer. The structures were sufficient to stop even a 20-cm bolt, but the cars approaching from southeast had a clear shot at the sheltering vehicles.

Huber set the target and brought up his sight's magnification. He was using light amplification rather than thermal viewing; the many fires dotting the port's flat expanse provided more than enough illumination. When his pipper centered on a tank's turret ring, he thumbed the trigger and let the stabilizer hold his bolts on target. The tank's own

ammunition blew it up in a cyan flash.

Huber shifted to the next target over, an APC rocking in the shockwave of the tank's destruction. Before he could fire, a 20-cm bolt hit the lightly-armored vehicle and sprayed molten blobs of it a hundred meters away.

Fencing Master continued to advance. The ten-story terminal building blocked Huber's line of sight to the Dragoons; his faceshield caret windows instead. He squeezed, slewing the tribarrel to help the car's forward motion draw his burst across the seventh floor from left to right. The rooms were dark till the bolts hit, but gulps of orange flame followed each cyan flash as plasma ignited the furnishings.

An equipment park on the southwest side of the pad had taken a pasting from incendiaries. Hundreds of vehicles were alight. Every so often one erupted with greater enthusiasm like a bubble rising in a caldera to scatter blazing rock high in the air. Eight combat cars skirted the park to the south, moving fast. Their tribarrels raked the back side of the terminal building.

At the beginning of the war, Solace had started building concrete-roofed dugouts at intervals around the perimeter of Port Plattner. The work had stopped when Solace command realized that the Outer States were barely capable of defense, and even those completed--three of them in the sector Central had assigned to Huber's troops--appeared to be unmanned.

Deseau and Learoyd had burned the firing slit of the southernmost to twice its original size. Now as *Fencing Master* swept around the squat structure, Learoyd depressed his tribarrel and fired a long burst down the entrance ramp at the back. The steel door gushed red sparks and ruptured inward, but there was no secondary explosion.

White flares popped from the roof of the terminal building. More flares followed from a dozen points across Port Plattner, including the northern perimeter where the Waldheim Dragoons had been fighting. "*UC forces, we surrender!*" a woman's voice cried. "*Terminal control surrenders, by the Lord's mercy we surrender!*"

She must have been using the port's starship communications system because her high-output transmission blanketed all frequencies. Every floor of the terminal building was ablaze, but those were merely administrative offices. The actual control room was in a sub-basement, armored against the chance of a starship crash.

Fencing Master turned left, away from the base of the terminal. Padova dropped the car twice onto the sodded lawn to scrub off inertia that wanted to carry them into the burning building. The other Highball cars were braking in roostertails of red sparks as their skirts skidded on concrete. The terminal was a tower of flame, lashing the ground with pulses of heat.

"*Sir, what should I do!*" Padova said. They were moving slowly south along the face of the building, crushing ornamental shrubs under their skirts. *Foghorn* and *Fancy Pants* followed, while Lt. Messeman's cars had halted on the other side of a wing-shaped entrance marquee which extended twenty meters from the front entrance.

"*All Slammers units,*" a familiar voice growled. "*This is Regiment Six, troopers. Cease fire unless you're fired on. Under no circumstances fire on the starships that'll start landing shortly. Hammer out.*"

Deseau tracked a man running across the pad to the left. He didn't shoot, but he was touching the trigger. Huber hooked a thumb to back him off, then said, "Highball, we'll laager a hundred meters back the way we came. Infantry in the center of the circle."

He looked at the plot the C&C box suggested, approved it, and concluded, "Six out."

That was far enough from the terminal building that they wouldn't broil, though Huber wanted to keep Highball reasonably close to its objective until somebody got around to ordering them to move. The Lord knew when that'd be, given what the Colonel and his staff had on their plate right now.

The eight vehicles crossing the pad from the west slowed as they approached the terminal. Huber's eyes narrowed: one was a command car, a high-sided box built on the chassis of a combat car to hold far more communications and display options than could be fitted into a C&C box. Mostly they were staff vehicles, though Huber knew a couple of line company commanders preferred them to combat cars.

The shooting had probably stopped, though it was hard to say because munitions continued to explode. That wouldn't end for days, not with the number of fires burning across the huge port. You could get killed just as dead when a truck blew up as you could by somebody aiming at you....

That reminded Huber of casualties. He checked the readout on his faceshield and saw to his pleased surprise that all the personnel were green--infantry included--except for a cross-hatched icon on *Foghorn*. "Three-one, what's your casualty?" he said.

"Six, the right gun blew back and burned Quincy both arms," Sgt. Nagano replied. "We got him sedated and covered in SpraySeal. He'll be all right, I guess, but he won't be much good in the field for a few months. Over."

"Highball Six," broke in another voice before Huber could reply, "*this is Regiment Six. We're joining your laager but leaving you in local control. Out.*"

Huber felt a momentary jolt, but that was ingrained reflex; his conscious mind was far too exhausted to be concerned. "Roger, Six," he said. "Break. Highball, spread the laager to accommodate eight more cars. The command group's joining us. Highball Six out."

The eight vehicles with Col. Hammer, five of them from K Company, idled toward Highball. The cars of Huber's original command reformed as the eastern half of circle instead of the complete circuit. Instead of steering *Fencing Master* straight to its new location and rotating the bow out, Padova drove the car sideways. She was bragging, but Huber was too wrung out to call her down for it.

"*Guess they didn't have a walkover like we did,*" Deseau said as he gave the newcomers a professional once-over. Three of the combat cars had holes in their plenum chambers; one was shot up badly enough that its skirts dragged. It probably couldn't have kept up with the rest of the unit if they hadn't been crossing such a smooth, hard surface. "*Nobody even shot at us that I saw.*"

"*They shot at us, Frenchie,*" Learoyd said. He tapped the bulkhead beside him with the knife he was using to scrape his ejection port.

Huber leaned forward to look past the trooper. Three projectiles, each separated from the next by a hand's-breadth, had dimpled the iridium inward. The third was deep enough that the armor had started to crack.

"*From the bunker when we got close,*" Learoyd explained; he sounded apologetic. "*I guess I shouldn't 've quit shooting when something blew up inside.*"

The impacts must've been audible in the next county, but Huber hadn't been aware of them, nor Deseau either it seemed. Aloud Huber said, "No harm done, Learoyd."

Nobody'd guess their compartmentalization was that good, and it's not like there wasn't anything else needing attention."

The laager was complete with two meters between adjacent cars: tight, but giving them room to maneuver fast if something unexpected happened. The right wing gunner of the car next to *Fencing Master* raised his faceshield and shouted over the idling fans, "How's your leg, lieutenant?"

"Sir!" Huber said. He'd expected Colonel Hammer to be in the command car. "Sir, my leg's fine, I guess, but I haven't been using it much except to stand on."

Huber's left leg ached like a wall was leaning on it, but the rest of his body wasn't much better. His skin itched and the slickness where his clamshell rubbed over his hipbones was either popped blisters or blood. In the morning, that might matter; right now, Arne Huber was alive and that was good enough.

Huber's AI pulsed a warning on his faceshield. The task force was still under combat conditions, and a pair of aircars were approaching from the northeast a thousand meters up. The cars' tribarrels weren't on air defense, and the AI thought maybe they ought to be.

"*They got running lights on, El-Tee,*" Deseau said, swinging his gun onto the aircars manually. "*They're not trying to sneak up on us, but maybe they're just too smart to try what wouldn't work.*"

"Put that gun on safe, trooper!" Colonel Hammer roared. Then he snapped his faceshield down and continued, "*All Slammers units, do not shoot. Under no circumstances harm the incoming aircars. They're bringing Solace representatives to treat with us! Six out.*"

The aircars hovered a kilometer from the perimeter of Port Plattner. Hammer continued an animated conversation with someone on a push that didn't include Highball Six. After nearly a minute's discussion, the aircars mashed toward the laager together. The command car's rear door opened; Maj. Pritchard stepped out of the vehicle.

Col. Hammer nodded approval and swung his legs over the coaming of his fighting compartment to stand on the plenum chamber. He looked at Huber, grinned, and said, "Come along with me, lieutenant. We're going to take the surrender of the Republic of Solace.

The two squads of infantry tilted their skimmers on end and stacked them in groups of three between the combat cars of Highball section. Sgt. Tranter swung down a cooler from *Fancy Pants* since the infantry's supports were back with the Hogs.

The troopers looked more concerned with the Colonel and his operations officer in the center of the circle than they were with the crackling destruction that covered most of the near distance. They'd seen destruction more often than they'd been this close to the Colonel, after all.

The aircars hovered for a moment, then landed a hundred meters out from the laager. Hammer grimaced and snapped to Pritchard, "Get 'em in here, major. Do they think we're going to walk over to them?"

Huber wasn't sure he *could* walk that far. His left leg had been numb till he dropped from the plenum chamber to the ground. That shock had seemed to drive a hot steel rod straight up from his heel to the hip joint. His knee didn't want to bend, and every time he moved the rod burned hotter.

Pritchard spoke into his commo helmet. He must have had a link to the aircars through his command vehicle, because after a moment they lifted and crawled toward the laager in ground effect. He smiled tightly to Hammer and Huber, saying, "The gentleman from Nonesuch was concerned that the terminal might fall in this direction. I assured him that the shell of a ferroconcrete building will remain standing after its burned itself out."

His grin grew even harder. "I've got a lot of experience with that, of course. We all have."

"Right," said Hammer. "That's why they hire us." He glanced at Huber and added, "You've met Mister Lindeyar already, haven't you, lieutenant?"

"Him?" said Huber, shocked out of his torpor. He wasn't sure he'd heard right; or if he had, that his brain hadn't taken a shock during the battle that was making him remember things that'd never happened. "There was a Lindeyar at Benjamin, but what's that got to do with Solace?"

A starship was dropping slowly. It was still at high altitude but the effort of supporting its mass in a controlled descent made it pulsingly noticeable. Hammer'd mentioned ships landing, so Huber supposed it part of the plan. Somebody's plan, and no concern for a line lieutenant.

"Sigmund Lindeyar is the Nonesuch representative for all of Plattner's World, not just to the United Cities," Maj. Pritchard said, sounding detached. "Quite an important man back home, I gather."

Hammer spat on the dirt at his feet. "Yeah," he said, releasing the catches on the right side of his clamshell. "And if you don't believe us, just ask Lindeyar himself."

The aircars landed again, this time a few meters short of the bows of the combat cars. The slick-finished limousines reflected the surging firelight like pools of oil; by contrast, *Foghorn* and *Fancy Pants* were hulking gray boulders, scarred by the ages.

The starship continued to drop, balanced on the repulsion of two self-generated electromagnetic fields. Violet corona discharges danced across the heavens, crackling and roaring. Huber glanced at it, then frowned as he looked higher in the sky. A second starship was descending, and he thought a third waited above the second.

"*El-Tee, there's a couple more aircars coming up from the south,*" Deseau said over *Fencing Master's* intercom. "*I don't guess there's a problem--they're responding with Regimental IFF--but I figured I'd mention it.*"

Huber nodded to Deseau. Learoyd had the receiver cover of the left wing tribarrel raised to adjust the feed mechanism. The crew of a CO's vehicle caught a lot of extra work, which bothered Huber. Neither Deseau nor Learoyd seemed to notice, let alone care.

And it wasn't like either one of them wanted to be platoon leader.

A group of military and civilian personnel were getting out of one of the aircars. Among them was an attractive--

Via! The attractive young woman was Daphne Priamedes, and the senior officer whom she'd bent to help to exit was her father, Col. Apollonio Priamedes. Huber'd never expected to see either one of them again.

Lindeyar had arrived in the other vehicle, alone except for three bodyguards. Huber looked at him and smiled wryly. *How many people have I killed in the last two days? And not one of them anybody I knew, let alone disliked.*

"Colonel?" Huber said aloud. "There's two more aircars coming from the south. I

guess you've already got that under control, but--"

"But you thought you'd make sure I had the information," Hammer said with an approving nod. "Right, I do."

He gestured to the southern sky. "That's the UC delegation," he said. "They're our principals on this contract so they need to be here."

The first starship settled onto the far end of the pad, close by the ship that had brought the Waldheim Dragoons. The new vessel was about the size of the one that had held an entire brigade of armored cavalry. Its sizzling discharge ceased, but the concrete continued to vibrate at a dense bass note.

Lindeyar straightened the fall of his jacket and strode into the laager past the combat cars. His bodyguards waited beyond the circle.

The civilians who'd arrived in the other vehicle huddled for a moment. The old man wearing a fur stole and cap of office directed a question at Col. Priamedes with a peevish expression.

Priamedes snapped a reply and walked after Lindeyar, his daughter at his side. Daphne kept her face blank, but Huber could see from the way she held herself that she was ready to grab her father if his body failed him. Exchanging looks of indignation, the four civilians followed.

The two aircars coming from the south landed with a brusque lack of finesse; one even bounced. Huber leaned back slightly to get a better look between two vehicles of Lt. Messeman's platoon. He'd been right about what he thought he'd seen: the four civilians getting out of the aircars were members of the UC Senate whom he'd seen before when he was assigned to duties in Benjamin, but White Mice were driving and guarding them. Their battledress was as ragged as Huber's own, and one trooper's plastron had been seared down to the ceramic core.

The man in the fur cap glared at Hammer. "You sir!" he said. "I'm President Rihorta. Col. Priamedes tells me you're the chief of these hirelings. May I ask why it's necessary to hold these discussions in such a, such a--"

At a loss for words, he waved a hand toward the chaos beyond. His sleeves were fur-trimmed also. As if on cue, a fuel tank in the vehicle park exploded, sending a bubble of orange fire skyward.

"--a place?"

"Well, Mr. President...," Hammer said, putting a hand under his breastplate to take some of its chafing weight off his shoulders. "If I needed a better reason than that I felt like it, I'd say because it'll convince you that you don't have any choice. I could burn all of Bezant down around your ears even easier than I took the spaceport that your survival depends on."

"Bezant is a civilian center, not a proper target of military operations," Col. Priamedes said in a tight voice.

"Is it?" Hammer snapped at the Solace officer. "I could say the same about Benjamin, couldn't I?"

He waved his hand curtly. "But we're not here to discuss, gentlemen," he went on. "We already did all the discussing we needed to with those--"

He pointed to the bullet-gouged hull of the combat car he'd arrived in.

"--and with the Hogs. We're here to dictate the end of the war on such terms as seem good to our principals."

The UC senators walked between the combat cars with as much hesitation as the Solace delegation had shown. One of them was coughing. The air reeked of smoke and ozone, so familiar to Huber that he hadn't thought about it till he watched the civilians' grimaces and shallow breaths.

A woman of thirty wearing battledress of an unfamiliar pattern entered the laager with the UC civilians. She nodded to Hammer, then stood at Parade Rest and watched the by-play with eyes that were never still.

"Masters and mistresses," Hammer said. His tone was even, but Huber noticed he gripped his breastplate fiercely enough to mottle his knuckles. "You politicians probably know each other--"

The delegations exchanged wary glances, even faint nods. They had more in common with one another than they did with the soldiers and war material surrounding them.

"--and you know Mister Lindeyar--"

The Nonesuch official looked around the gathering, his face without expression.

"--but you may not know Mistress Dozier, who's the Bonding Authority representative with responsibilities for the contracts here on Plattner's World."

The woman in battledress said, "Good day. I'm here solely as an observer, of course. My organization has no interest in the negotiations between principals except to see that all parties adhere to the contracts which we oversee."

The second starship was in its final approach. Hammer raised his hand in bar. President Rihorta started speaking anyway, but the overwhelming *CRACKLE CRACKLE CRACKLE* penetrated even his self-absorption after a moment.

When the sound and dazzling corona died away, Sigmund Lindeyar said, "Rather than draw these proceedings out unnecessarily, I'm going to take charge now. Nonesuch has been subsidizing the mercenaries which the Outer States have hired for this conflict. In fact some eighty percent of the charges have come from our coffers--"

"What!" said President Rihorta. "But you've been insisting we raise port duties to upgrade the facilities!"

"You traitorous scum," Col. Priamedes said in a quiet voice, stepping toward Lindeyar. Daphne tried to stop him. Huber placed himself in front of the Solace officer and held till weakness and Daphne's efforts forced Priamedes back.

His knees started to buckle. Huber caught him and shifted around to his right side, continuing to support Priamedes while Daphne held her father's other arm.

"I'm scarcely a traitor, colonel," Lindeyar said with a chuckle. He fluffed the lapel of his jacket. "I've been quite successful in advancing the interests of my nation... which is Nonesuch, you will recall."

The UC delegates were whispering among themselves. Lindeyar fixed them with his cold eyes and said, "Now as for you gentlemen--"

The word was a sneer.

"--the first thing you need to know is that my government has withdrawn its financial support. I've already informed the Bonding Authority--"

Mistress Dozier nodded agreement.

"--that as of this moment, Nonesuch will no longer pay the wages of the mercenaries employed on Plattner's World. Therefore unless the UC and its local partners are capable of paying those charges by themselves, the war is over and all the

mercenaries will go home immediately. Can you pay, gentlemen?"

The four UC Senators gaped at Lindeyar. Senator Graciano said, "Good Lord, man, of course we can't. But why would we want to? We've won. This is what we've been hoping for all along!"

"Mister Lindeyar," Maj. Pritchard said, "there was discussion about transferring the contract of Hammer's Regiment to Nonesuch directly."

Lindeyar met the unspoken question with a wintry smile. "Was there?" he said. "Perhaps there was. In the event, however, my government has decided to depend on its national forces for defense of its new concession here on Plattner's World."

The third starship landed near the two which had arrived minutes before. Huber couldn't see the ships from where he stood, but while everyone waited for the roar to quiet he shifted the upper right quadrant of his faceshield to the view from an H Company tank on the north side of Port Plattner.

Hatches on the first ship began to open as soon as the third touched down. The crew had been waiting till that moment. As close as the vessels were to one another, there might have been danger if the first-landed had begun disembarking previously.

The first personnel out were ship's crewmen, adjusting the ramps with hydraulic jacks. Starship personnel were used to the agonizing disorientation of interstellar travel. They had the same splitting headaches, the same blurred vision, and the same nausea as those who travelled less often, but they'd learned to work through the pain.

The noise died away. As Huber cut his remote to return to Lindeyar's response, he saw huge tanks on caterpillar treads starting to roll out of the starship.

"That's right, you've won, gentlemen," Lindeyar said with dripping disdain. "Go home and tell your people about your victory. Celebrate!"

He swung his blond, handsome head about the circle like a wolf surveying the henhouse he's just entered. "As for you, Mister President and *your* fellows, our terms are simple: Port Plattner is now an extraterritorial division of the Polity of Nonesuch. Port controls and fees are no longer your concern. If you choose to argue the matter, then we'll take over the administration of all Solace."

He pointed his left arm to the north, fingers outstretched, though he didn't turn his head away from the Solace delegation. "There's a division of the Nonesuch National Guard on the ground already. We can bring more troops in if we have to, but given the condition of your forces that obviously won't be necessary. And if you're thinking of mercenaries--I'm afraid you've overextended your off-planet credit already. Now that you no longer hold Port Plattner, Solace is bankrupt. The money you've placed with the Bonding Authority will just cover repatriation of the units already contracted to you, and the Authority won't approve any further hires."

All eyes turned to Mistress Dozier. She shrugged and said without emphasis, "The Authority isn't in the business of making moral judgments. We're employed--"

Her face hardened.

"--by all parties, let me remind you, to enforce contracts, nothing more. Mister Lindeyar has correctly stated the situation insofar as the Bonding Authority is concerned."

Col. Priamedes' head lolled on Huber's shoulder. "Papa?" Daphne whispered urgently.

Huber touched the colonel's throat with an index and middle finger; his pulse was

strong. Priamedes hadn't recovered from the knocks he'd taken at Northern Star Farms, and the present events were simply more than his system could handle without shutting down.

Huber's leg didn't hurt any more; the adrenaline surging through him was the best medicine for pain. He didn't know how long he could keep this up, but for the time being he could do his job--whatever that job turned out to be. He eyed Sigmund Lindeyar without expression.

"I don't have to explain this to Col. Hammer," Lindeyar said, "but for the rest of you I'll point out that any mercenary unit which works without a paid contract becomes an outlaw in the eyes of the Bonding Authority. Civilization can't survive with bands of mad dogs roving from planet to planet without rules."

Hammer began to laugh so hard that his loose breastplate flapped back and forth. He said, "Oh, what a principled gentleman you are, Master Lindeyar!" and then bent over again in another spasm of mirth.

"On behalf of the Colonel," Maj. Pritchard said as the delegates of both sides stared at Hammer in disbelief, "I can assure you that Hammer's Regiment is scrupulously careful to operate within the constraints of the Bonding Authority. We aren't vigilantes who imagine that it's our duty to impose justice...."

Pritchard swept the politicians with a gaze as contemptuous as that of Lindeyar a few moments earlier. He went on, "And if we were, we'd be hard put to find an employer who could meet our standards, wouldn't we?"

Lindeyar seemed more disconcerted by Hammer's laughter than he might have been by anger. He looked at the bodyguards standing by the aircar he'd arrived in: all three had their hands in plain sight. When he followed their gaze back, he saw Deseau's tribarrel aimed at them. Frenchie grinned down and pointed his right index finger at Lindeyar's face like a pistol.

In a careful voice, Lindeyar said, "Of course, Col. Hammer, your troops' performance on Plattner's World won't go unnoticed, particularly the brilliant stroke by which you captured the port here. I'm sure you'll have no difficulty finding employment in the near future."

Hammer straightened. The laughter was gone; he gave Lindeyar a look of cold appraisal.

"I worry about a lot of things, Mr. Lindeyar," he said. "It's my job to worry; I'm in charge. But I've never had to worry about somebody hiring us. My Slammers are the best there is, and the whole universe knew it before we came here to Plattner's World."

Lindeyar nodded, licking his lips. "Yes, of course," he said. He cleared his throat before going on, "Since there's no need to conclude the formalities at this moment, I'll be off to other matters which require my attention. President Rihorta, I'll be in touch with you regarding the wording of your government's concession of Port Plattner."

He backed away from the circle, smiling fitfully each time his eyes met those of one of the Slammers. His hip bumped *Foghorn's* skirt; he turned with a shocked expression, then walked at an increasing pace to his aircar.

Col. Priamedes was able to support his own weight again. Huber released him and stepped aside, though Daphne kept hold of her father's other arm.

"I guess you people have things you'd better be about as well," Hammer said, surveying the delegations. All the civilians seemed to be on the verge of collapse;

Priamedes, whose difficulties were merely physical, had gotten his color back and now stood straight. "Go on and do them."

He focused on Senator Graciano. "You and I'll talk regarding financial arrangements tomorrow. Mistress Dozier, you'll be present?"

"Yes, of course," the Bonding Authority representative said.

Lindeyar's aircar lifted and curved toward the ships disgorging a Nonesuch armored division. Huber'd left his 2-cm weapon in *Fencing Master*, so all he had was the pistol on his equipment belt. He'd never been much good with a pistol; but if he fired in the direction of the aircar, Frenchie would swat it out of the air in blazing fragments.

That'd be a violation of the contract, of course. The Colonel would have him executed immediately as the only way to prevent the Regiment from being outlawed and disbanded.

We're not in the business of dispensing justice....

The delegations started moving away toward their own vehicles. Daphne Priamedes said, "It's over for us, now--Solace and the Outer States as well now that Nonesuch has the port. 'Woe to the conquered.' That's how it's always been."

Arne Huber thought about Sgt. Jellicoe, about *Flame Farter's* two crewmen and all the other troopers he'd lost here on Plattner's World. He watched the aircar landing among the disembarking Nonesuch soldiers and said aloud, "Yeah, I suppose. But it's not just to the conquered, sometimes."

Arne Huber stood on the berm against which *Fencing Master* nestled bow-on, surveying the landscape. It'd been a field of spring wheat before the engineers gouged Firebase One out of it two days ago and moved a third of the Regiment's combat elements into it.

Huber hadn't been a farmer; he'd seen no magic in the original flat expanse of green shoots stretching to the hills ten kilometers away. He was willing to grant that it'd been more attractive than this scraped yellow wasteland, though.

Deseau crawled carefully out of the plenum chamber. He was a small man, but battle and the hard run had left him stiff. You could hurt yourself on sharp, rusty metal when your muscles don't work the way you expect them to. He stepped away from the access port before he dusted his trousers with his hands; Padova followed him out. He grinned at Huber and said, "Funny to be on Plattner's World and not be skating in mud, ain't it, El-Tee?"

.....
A dirigible slinging three pallets of howitzer ammunition was crawling upwind to the cargo pad. The big airships didn't overfly the firebase: they dropped their loads outside the berm, from where trucks with troopers driving hauled the material the short remainder of the way.

"Hadn't really thought about it, Frenchie," Huber said. His eyes were on the dirigible, but he wasn't really thinking about that either. "I can't say I like the dust here in the highlands a lot better."

"Hey, Learoyd?" Deseau called to the trooper in the fighting compartment. "Slide into the front, will you, and run up Port Two?"

Learoyd didn't work in the plenum chamber unless he had to. He was too big for the hatches even when he was fit, and now his right arm was in a surface cast to keep him from rubbing off the medication that the Medicomp had applied when things settled

down enough for the support equipment and personnel to arrive from Base Alpha. A fresh set of barrels for the 2-cm automatics had arrived, so Learoyd was working on the tribarrels while the other crewmen realigned the nacelle that'd taken a knock from the dense rootball of a tree *Fencing Master* had driven over.

"I'll do it," said Padova, mounting the bow with a hop and a grab for the first handhold on the hull proper. Rita'd settled in during the run and the three days of quiet following Port Plattner; now she was a member of *Fencing Master's* crew, not just a skilled driver.

"Any word about when we might be moving out, El-Tee?" Deseau asked, shielding his eyes with his hand as he looked up at Huber. "I mean, we're off the clock, right? Paying for our own time."

A dotted line of dirigibles stretched to the southern horizon: Huber could see at least a dozen airships at once. There'd been a solid stream of airships transferring supplies and material from the UC ever since the Regiment pulled twenty kilometers back and set up three firebases equidistant from Port Plattner. They'd leave in a single giant transport from Port Plattner rather than in dribs and drabs from makeshift starports in the UC, so Huber supposed it made sense. Not that anybody cared what he thought.

"So far as anybody's told me, Frenchie," he said, "we're going to stay here till we've all grown long white beards. I don't expect that's what'll happen, but your guess is as good as mine."

Padova switched on the portside fans and ran them up together. Huber cocked his head, listening with a critical ear for any imbalance in the harmonics. So far as he could tell, the nacelles were tuned as sweetly as if they'd just been blueprinted in the factory.

"El-Tee?" called Learoyd. He pointed to *Fencing Master's* port wing gun, slewing incrementally under the control of gunnery computer. "There's something coming."

Huber looked south again, noticing this time that two enclosed aircars were approaching fast below the dirigibles. His eyes narrowed: the cars' IFF must have been responding correctly or else the tribarrels on air defense would've shot them out of the sky a minute ago, but the drivers were taking a chance anyway. Even with the war over....

"Hey, what d'ye have?" Deseau said. He couldn't see what was happening from ground level, but he'd noticed Learoyd's and Huber's interest. Instead of immediately jumping onto the plenum chamber to see for himself, he first latched the access port closed so that *Fencing Master* would be able to maneuver again.

The aircars came over the berm twenty meters up, braking to a hover with a slickness that showed the drivers were expert. They set down in front of the TOC, between two of Battery Alpha's dug-in howitzers; dust skittered, dancing away to the west.

Huber jumped from the berm to the plenum chamber, his boots clanging. He climbed into the fighting compartment just as Deseau did; both men reflexively checked their tribarrels. Learoyd locked down the third barrel on his gun and slipped the adjustment wrench into its pouch on his belt.

"What d'ye think, El-Tee?" Deseau asked. "Did that bastard Lindeyar have second thoughts about terminating our contract?"

"None of them are Lindeyar," Learoyd said. "They're the other politicians' cars."

Fencing Master's tribarrels couldn't bear on the aircars because they were straight behind them, and anyway you didn't point a gun across a firebase unless you wanted to

lose your rank. Frenchie was holding his 2-cm weapon in the crook of his arm, and Learoyd unclipped his sub-machine gun from the bracket on the inside of the armor.

The limousines' doors opened. Huber recognized Sen. Graciano and his three colleagues, and the woman in battledress getting out of the front was Mistress Dozier. From the other aircar came President Rihorta and another member of the Solace delegation. The man accompanying those two was a stranger.

Aloud Huber said, "I don't know who the tall guy is. He's off-planet, that's for sure. I've never seen a hat like that--"

It was more of a turban; the stranger donned and adjusted it carefully before proceeding with the others toward the ramp down to the TOC.

--on Plattner's World before."

"That's the Colonel waiting in the entrance for 'em," Deseau said. "I swear it is!"

"What do we do now, El-Tee?" Learoyd said. He knew the situation'd changed. He wasn't worried, just looking for direction from somebody smarter than he was.

"We wait for orders, trooper," Huber said. He pursed his lips, then added, "And while we're waiting, I think we've got room here to stow another case of tribarrel ammo. Let's see if the quartermaster can help us out."

Huber's mind registered motion--a streak of light across the purple-black sky. He opened his mouth to shout a warning over the squadron net, then realized it was a shooting star rather than incoming artillery.

Padova stood on the plenum chamber where she could quickly slide down the driver's hatch. She looked into the fighting compartment and shook her head. "How can Frenchie sleep?" she muttered.

"I'm on watch, Rita," Learoyd said. "Why shouldn't he sleep? The El-Tee's awake too."

He blinked. "And you."

"Frenchie's been here a lot of times, Rita," Huber said, using that formation instead of, "Frenchie's a veteran," which the driver might find insulting. "As soon as there's a reason, he'll be up and doing his job."

He grinned with a kind of affection he felt only because he and Deseau were part of the same family. "Besides, if the job's killing, Frenchie could do that without waking up."

Padova'd seen the elephant by now, that was for sure; but there was a difference between one hard run punctuated by firefights and the bone-deep awareness that this might be the last chance to sleep for days or longer. Frenchie's *body* understood that sleeping curled up on the floor of the fighting compartment was best present use of his time.

"You think it's going to be fighting again, don't you?" Padova said angrily. "But who? The only people who could hire us is Nonesuch, and who would they need us to fight? They've got a fucking division on the ground, we saw them land it!"

"We're going to fight Nonesuch, Rita," Learoyd said calmly. He withdrew the loading tube from his back-up sub-machine gun, wiped it with an oily cloth, and clicked it home in the receiver again. "We're going to take the port back."

"And who the bloody hell is *paying* us to attack Nonesuch!" the driver snarled, balling her fists in frustration. "Are we going outlaw, is that what you mean?"

"I don't know who's paying us," Learoyd said, bending to check the bearing in the pintle supporting his tribarrel. "But there's nobody else to fight here, so we're fighting Nonesuch."

He shrugged. "The El-Tee knows we're getting ready to fight, we all know that. So it has to be Nonesuch."

Huber looked at Learoyd's round, placid face; as calm as a custard, reddened as usual by sun and wind. None of them understood how the Regiment could be going into battle again on Plattner's World. Learoyd was the only one who wasn't bothered by ignorance: he didn't expect to understand things.

"Yeah, Bert's right," Huber said. "Curst if I know how or why, but I can't say I'm sorry. I didn't like Lindeyar when I first met him, and he hasn't improved with time."

Padova hugged herself in frustration. "If we're really going to fight," she said, looking in the direction of the TOC, "why hasn't Central signaled us to stand to?"

"Do you see anybody in the base who isn't at his action station?" Huber said. "An alert might warn other people. Everybody's waiting for it, even Frenchie. Especially Frenchie."

He brought up the F-3 stats again on the C&C display. They were still at four cars. Sgt. Bielsky was bringing a repaired vehicle up from Benjamin, but he wouldn't arrive for thirty hours. The four cars of the present complement had shaken down during the run and attack, even Gabinus' Three-eight--which now had *Flamingo Girl* painted in fluorescent blue on both sides of the fighting compartment. All the guns had been rebarreled, all the fans were running within 70% of optimum, and each car had a full crew.

He glanced at Learoyd, his right arm in a stiff bend though the hand was free to grip with. Replacements had flown up from the UC in aircars, but there was no way in hell that Deseau--the car commander--or Huber wanted to go into battle with a trooper they didn't know in place of Learoyd with one arm. There were a couple more wounded crewmen in F-3 for the same reason; it wasn't ideal, but....

Huber chuckled.

"Sir?" Padova said, frowning at what she didn't understand.

"Kind of an old joke," he said. "If everything was ideal, nobody'd be hiring mercenaries, would they?"

He chuckled again; and as he did so, the alert signal pulsed red. Sgt. Deseau was on his feet, reaching for his tribarrel's grips before his eyes could focus.

Col. Hammer's voice rasped in their commo helmets, "*Troopers, the United Cities and Republic of Solace in combination have hired us to wrest control of Port Plattner from the foreign invaders now holding it. Normally I don't discuss the financial details of the Regiment's contracts, but in this particular case I'll mention that our payment is guaranteed by a consortium of planets which in the past have purchased about half the Thaldrol base produced on Plattner's World. They seem to feel it wouldn't be to their benefit if Nonesuch controlled access to the product.*"

Deseau whooped and clapped his hands. Padova had already dropped into the driver's compartment. Huber switched the C&C box to display the download that would shortly arrive from Central.

"Your assignments are on the way," Hammer continued. "*Artillery prep will begin in three minutes, and the action elements will begin moving out of the firebases at the*

same time. Don't get overeager--we want plenty of time for the shells to soften 'em up. For this operation we won't enable the lockout on our guns. I'd rather take the risk of being shot by a friendly than having a software glitch keep me from nailing a hostile because there's a friendly on the other side of him. But remember, the terrain is dead flat and your gun'll shoot any bloody thing that you aim at."

The Hogs of Battery Alpha elevated their launch tubes. They faced outward in a clock pattern centered on the TOC; now their turrets rotated so that the whole battery was aligned to the northwest, the direction of Port Plattner.

"I don't want any of you to think this 'll be easy," Hammer continued. "They've got a hundred and fifty tanks and their other vehicles mount tribarrels too. It doesn't matter how slow and clumsy they are, because they aren't coming to us--we have to go to them. But troopers--we've faced worse. Get out there now and help me show people what happens when you try to cheat the Slammers! Six out."

The satellites were up again; some satellites, anyhow. The download had full real-time coverage of the port. Approaches, lines of sight, threats and targets--the initial targets being the threats, of course--shimmered onto the holographic display in standard color overlays, as familiar to Huber as the grips of his tribarrel.

Four Nonesuch tanks moved in echelon to join the twelve parked in front of the smoldering terminal building. Each was built around a centerline 25-cm powergun. Though the big weapons could only be adjusted a few degrees in azimuth, their bolts were powerful enough to penetrate even the thick plating of a starship.

A line of dun-colored space-frame tents, sandbagged to the concrete, stood beside the vehicles. More tents--thousands of them--dotted the edges of the pad, most of them serving the infantry riding APCs. The latter, tracked like the tanks, had iridium armor and mounted a tribarrel in a one-man cupola.

Nonesuch fatigue parties worked on the perimeter bunkers without heavy equipment. Soldiers were mixing concrete in hand troughs. Huber wondered whether Lindeyar and his cronies had tried to buy construction mixers from Solace and been refused, or if this was merely a stopgap until dedicated support units arrived aboard later vessels.

Three ships, even such large ones, were barely enough to carry a division; the Nonesuch planners had concentrated wholly on combat personnel and equipment, accepting discomfort and inefficiency in order to frighten their possible opponents into quiescence. So far as the Solace Militia went, that may have been a good plan....

"Fox, this is Fox Six," Captain Gillig said. Her voice had a pleasant alto lilt even when she was giving battle orders. "Fox Three will trail on the approach, but we'll attack with all platoons platoons in line. There's a tank company in our sector, but the panzers'll deal with it while we hit targets of opportunity. With a division to choose from, there shouldn't be any lack of those."

Deseau turned to Huber and said, *"Hey, El-Tee? I couldn't believe that bastard Lindeyar was going to get away with shafting us. Could you?"*

Huber thought for a moment. Given the delays in star travel, this coalition must have taken weeks or even months to put together. Hammer must have started planning it almost as soon as the Regiment arrived on Plattner's World.

"I did believe it, Frenchie," he said. "But that's all right--I'm just a line lieutenant. So long as I do my job, I can leave the rest to the Colonel."

The Hogs lit the night with flaring backblasts, beginning to shower 200-mm missiles on the enemy. The roar shook the ground. Moving as smoothly as water swirling down a drain, 1st Squadron's tanks and combat cars slid from the firebase, advancing toward Port Plattner twenty klicks away.

"*Target!*" said a machine voice in Huber's ear as *Fencing Master* led the rest of F-3 out of the angled passage through the berm. His faceshield gave him a vector.

So far as Huber could tell, the caret point on the crest ten kilometers distant was a few meters of brush and low trees, no different from everything for a klick to either side, but you didn't argue when Central told you to shoot. He laid his tribarrel on, careful not to overcorrect as the stabilizer fought with the combat car's motion, and dialed up magnification as the sight picture slewed toward the target. Huber was using a false-color infrared display, so the caret was a black wedge thrusting down from the top of the image.

He actually saw them in the instant his thumbs squeezed: three soldiers wearing drapes that almost erased their thermal signature, pointing a passive observation device toward Firebase One. They'd remained hidden till now, so they must have just attempted to send information back to Port Plattner.

Huber grinned with fierce pride that the *hiss/CRACK!* of his tribarrel's first round preceeded the sound of *Fencing Master's* other two guns by a fraction of a second. He didn't often beat Frenchie and Learoyd to the punch, and neither did anybody else.

The eleven tanks of D Company--two more, deadlined for repairs but able to shoot, remained behind in the firebase for defense--had been first through the berm and were deploying across the wheat in line abreast. Col. Hammer's combat car and that of the S-3--Huber wondered whether Maj. Pritchard was in it, as he certainly would choose to be, or if he'd been forced to remain in the TOC to coordinate the attack--followed, taking the right of the tanks along with two five-car platoons of G Company; the remaining platoon and the command cars of Regimental HQ Section remained behind as base defense. Capt. Gillig and the Sergeant Major were next out, followed by F-1, F-2, and finally F-3.

The engineers had sited the firebase on a low rise, so *Fencing Master* in the entrance was slightly above the vehicles already spreading out to the northwest. Central tasked Huber and his crew because they had the best line on the target. Huber'd chafed to wait for everybody else to get under weigh before his cars did, but it'd worked out after all.

There's a lot of chance in life and especially in battle. Arne Huber just happened to be in the right place at the right time to send a burst of plasma bolts snapping straight as a plumb line into what till that instant was three enemy soldiers. His faceshield blocked their cyan core, but dazzle reflecting from the landscape quivered across his retinas.

Huber's first round hit the observation device, probably a high-resolution thermal imager. It contained enough metal to erupt into a blaze of white and green sparks. After that it was hard to say who hit what, because the three tribarrels put ten or a dozen rounds apiece into the target.

Huber switched his gunsight back to its normal 7.5° field. The freshly-lit fire on the ridgeline was only a quiver at this distance. In the magnified image Huber had seen

an arm fly from an exploding torso and white-hot fragments blasted from the granite outcrop behind the scouts.

His gunbarrels shimmered, sinking back from yellow heat. The cluster continued to spin, pulling air through the open breeches to cool the bores.

Padova followed the course Capt. Gillig's C&C box had programed. She didn't ask about the shooting. Huber supposed she was scared--as the good Lord knew he was himself--but she'd shaken down just fine. She'd be driving *Fencing Master* until she got a promotion, which at the rate she was going wouldn't be long.

F-3 followed 200 meters behind the first and second platoons on the left flank, a reserve not only for Fox Company but for the whole squadron. Despite satellite coverage and the Regiment's sensor suites, there was always risk of an attack from some direction other than straight ahead. Huber's cars stayed back to deal with it.

"Good to burn in our guns like that," Deseau said as his cluster stopped rotating. "A few rounds to make sure the barrels're seated and there's no cracks in the castings."

Cyan bolts streaked up from the northwest horizon, ending in yellow flashes made ragged by the smoke of the explosions. Despite the decoy missiles of the first salvos, the Nonesuch defenses--over eight hundred tribarrels on the APCs and tanks--were shooting down the firecracker rounds that followed. The Nonesuch command hadn't been caught napping, more's the pity....

The lead combat cars began firing. Flashes and the sparkling detonations of submunitions bloomed on the other side of the high ground separating 1st Squadron from the port. At least one Nonesuch artillery battery was firing on the attackers, a *much* faster response than Huber had expected from planetary forces which probably had no experience of real warfare. The shells didn't get through, but if the Nonesuch tankers were as good as their artillerymen this was going to be a very long night for the Slammers.

A long night, or a short one.

Much brighter cyan flashes lit the night: the tanks of Dog Company punched the ridgeline five clicks away with their main guns. Their thunder echoed across the fields.

Huber checked the C&C display, then said, "Fox Three, there was a Nonesuch infantry company picketed on the reverse slope. They moved into position and the panzers are taking care of them. Three-six out."

One of the eight Nonesuch APCs opened fire before it had reached the crest. The bolts of its tribarrels streaked five hundred meters over the Slammers in a rising slant. When the APC advanced high enough that its gun might have been able to bear on the attackers, the tank which had been waiting for a target fired. A brilliant secondary explosion lifted skyward a divot of soil and wood-chips.

Moments later, a *bum! bum! bum!* directly overhead made Huber twist to look up. Cargo shells from Battery Alpha had opened at low altitude, sending fingers of smoke toward the ridgeline. Their thousands of antipersonnel bomblets hit to carpet the target with lingering white flashes, scouring the hasty positions of Nonesuch infantry who'd dismounted before their APCs tried to engage.

Dirty smoke hung over half a kilometer of the hilltop. Huber could penetrate it with thermal imaging, but there was nothing to see except bare rock and the pulped remnants of the trees and shrubs that had grown there moments before. The enemy troops and their equipment had vanished except for the continuing sizzle of a battery pack

shorting through commo gear, forming a hotspot on the image.

"*Nothing for us there,*" Deseau said cheerfully. He patted his tribarrel's receiver. "*Well, we'll have our chance yet tonight, I figure.*"

"*Fox Three, this is Fox Six,*" Capt. Gillig ordered. "*Move up on the left flank of Fox One, keeping ten meter intervals between vehicles. We'll take firing positions below the crest. Six out.*"

Huber tensed as his faceshield flashed warnings. Chuckling, he relaxed. The squadron had torn through the fence separating the wheatfield from the pasture on the rougher terrain to the north. Wire flew up in springy coils around the vehicles, and the tug jerked the posts out of the ground in front of F-3. The motion was the same quick flicker men would make leaping to cover.

The northern sky quivered as with heat lightning. "*Hoo-boy!*" Deseau said. "*Some a' them firecracker rounds are landing where they ought to. I tell you, with a division of 'em down there, I don't mind a bit a' help from the cannon cockers.*"

"*We get paid the same if we get shot at or if we don't, Frenchie,*" Padova said. Her voice sounded artificially bright, but *Fencing Master* slid as if on rails to where it belonged on the left flank of the Squadron. "*I'd just as soon get easy money.*"

Deseau laughed. Huber glanced at him, then looked away. Frenchie wasn't suicidal: he figured the risks that came with the job were plenty bad enough without doing crazy stuff. But when Frenchie had a chance to kill, the fact he might die didn't concern him.

Fencing Master started up the final rise, tearing through three-meter shrubs with as little difficulty as it'd had with the wheat. Huber glanced back. Plenum chamber pressures compressed and deformed the loose earth of the plowed fields. Each of the vehicles had left a trench the full width of its skirts with a mound of soil and young shoots to either side.

Huber kept most of his attention on the Command and Control display. His cars were in the same condition as when they left the firebase, fully ready for battle if not for a rear-area inspection. The rest of the squadron was in similar shape, though a Golf Company car had lost a pair of fans and lagged behind on the slope. Sometimes bad luck was the only kind of luck there was; but if the car had been in Huber's platoon, tomorrow its sergeant/commander would be proving the problem wasn't because of a maintenance failure.

If the sergeant/commander survived, of course. And if Huber did.

Three shells from the Nonesuch battery burst several clicks back, sending spouts of black earth into the sky. Air defense hadn't bothered with them since they were no more danger to the Slammers than they were to the guns which'd fired them.

"Fox Three, this is Three-six," Huber said, glad to have good news to point out to his troopers a few seconds before they jumped into a tough one. "The hostiles are shooting where we used to be, so they don't have us under direct observation. When we reach our firing positions, we're going to get the first shot. If we can't kick their asses then, Via! we don't belong in this line of work! Six--"

Because of the way the ridge curved, *Fencing Master* pushed through the brush into a clear view of Port Plattner a heartbeat before the rest of the squadron did. Huber already had his tribarrel aimed at a predicted location even before his faceshield gave him real targets.

He squeezed the butterfly trigger as he shouted, "--out!" to his platoon.

A company of ten Nonesuch APCs had left the pad and was driving toward the ridge at the best speed turbine engines could move their caterpillar tracks. Their side armor, though thinner than that of the combat cars, was iridium, but hatches on the roofs of their troop compartments were thrown back so that the infantry in back could use their personal weapons.

Huber depressed his tribarrel and raked the hatches. Nonesuch troops carried powerguns; the blue-green flash of their stored ammunition melted the APC's frame from the inside so that the bow tilted upward. Fuel cells on the underside blew a circle of orange flames around the glowing wreckage.

Tanks and combat cars were firing all along the ridgeline. Though Huber couldn't have seen most of the Slammers' vehicles even if he'd taken the time to look to his side, streams of cyan plasma from their tribarrels and the tanks' stunning, world-searing flashes stabbed downward into easily visible targets.

The tanks were in hull-down positions where the firecracker rounds had scraped and sculpted the ground in erasing the Nonesuch picket. They shot as quickly as their gunners could work the foot-trips of their main guns, aiming at the company of Nonesuch tanks below. A 20-cm bolt hit massive frontal armor, rocking the target back on its treads in blinding coruscance.

To Huber's half-conscious horror, the centerline 25-cm gun shot back despite the Slammer's direct hit. The bolt gouged the hillside at least fifty meters from the nearest target, but the fact the tank fired at all was amazing.

A second bolt from the same Slammers tank struck where the armor glowed pulsingly white from the first. This time the glacis failed. The 25-cm magazine detonated, scooping the hull empty. The thick shell remained as a white-hot monument.

Huber swung his gun onto a company of buttoned-up APCs moving slantwise left to right in two echelons. They were several kilometers away, still on the concrete, when Huber hit the nearest vehicle in the lead row. Its side armor blew inward under the hammer of his 2-cm bolts. As the rest of the line drew ahead, Huber shifted his aim slightly onto the next APC and slashed it open the same way.

Huber steadied on the third APC, but as he did so the four second echelon vehicles opened fire on *Fencing Master* with their cupola tribarrels. One of them walked his burst up the sod, then splashed two bolts on *Fencing Master's* bow slope and a third into the armor of the fighting compartment.

The combat car rocked at each impact. Huber's helmet deadened the clangs, but the jolts transmitted through the floor of the compartment buckled his knees. Before the Nonesuch gunner could finish the job, Deseau raked the APCs' cupolas, dismounting their tribarrels in rainbow brilliance.

Huber's third target exploded in a mushroom of crimson flame. As he hammered through the cab of the fourth and last, he saw Deseau's and Learoyd's guns crossing his burst to slaughter the soldiers bailing out of the vehicles Frenchie had disarmed.

The infantry weren't much of a threat now even if they got clear, but Huber shifted his own fire onto a car that his troopers hadn't hit yet. Body parts flew up at his lash before a secondary explosion finished the job in a saffron fireball.

Despite the filters over Huber's nostrils, *Fencing Master* stank of ozone and the vile slickness of burned metal. Vaporized iridium had burned the side of his neck, and his

seared left sleeve stuck to his elbow. *Blood and Martyrs, that was close!*

Fencing Master jumped again. *We're hit!* but it wasn't incoming: a strip of the automatic defense array at the top of the skirts had gone off, sending a load of small osmium slugs out toward the left front. They met the anti-tank missile homing on the combat car.

The warhead detonated partially in a red flash. Bits of the debris sprayed *Fencing Master*. The concussion staggered Huber and a chunk of the rocket motor whanged the hull, but that was a cheap price. If the round'd hit squarely, the jet from its shaped charge would've gutted *Fencing Master* like a trout.

A 25-cm bolt hit close by, vaporizing a combat car forward of the rear bulkhead. A cloud of glowing iridium shimmered through all the colors of the spectrum, turning the ridgeline as bright as noon in Hell.

"*Shall I back up? Shall I back us up?*" Padova shouted into the intercom. *Fencing Master* lifted, quivering on plenum chamber pressure instead of resting its skirts firmly on the ground.

"Set us down!" Huber shouted, swinging his gun onto the pair of Nonesuch tanks sheltering at the side of a starship like tortoises in the lee of a high cliff. His tribarrel floated on a frictionless magnetic bearing, but inertia made slewing it a deliberate business. "Give us a solid--"

He had his target, not the glacis that could resist a tank's main gun nor the treads which a tribarrel could weld, immobilizing the huge vehicle without affecting its firepower. Huber aimed at the bore of the main gun, the 25-cm tunnel glowing from the bolt with which it had turned a combat car and its crew into fiery gases.

"--platform!"

Fencing Master thudded back to the ground as Huber's thumbs squeezed, but the stabilizer was locked on. His stream of blue-green bolts flared and sparkled against the tank's muzzle, its gun tube, and the mantle which covered the glacis opening.

A 25-cm bolt put such stresses on the bore that the guns' rate of fire was necessarily low, no more than two rounds per minute. Huber'd laid his tribarrel on the first tank nonetheless because that gunner'd proved he had the Slammers' elevation. Even the centerline gun's limited traverse would be sufficient to sweep six or eight vehicles to either side of the one it'd destroyed.

It was a calculated gamble, though, because the other tank was able to fire *now*. When a vivid cyan flash enveloped it, instinct told Huber this was a bolt which might blast *Fencing Master* and its crew to dissociated atoms.

The Nonesuch tank hadn't fired. A pair of 20-cm bolts had hit it simultaneously, lighting the concrete field with a rainbow bubble similar to what the combat car had become a moment before. Huber's faceshield blacked out almost totally. He kept his thumbs on the trigger, burning out his bores as he slashed his own massive target.

His faceshield cleared except for the streams from *Fencing Master's* three tribarrels and the smudge of reflection where they hammered together into the Nonesuch tank. Then the tank and the world vanished again.

The protective black curtain cleared seconds later as the shockwave reached the ridgeline. The roof of the tank's fighting compartment toppled back toward the chassis which had been cleaned of its contents like a raccoon-licked clamshell. The tank's gunner had chambered another round. 2-cm bolts glancing down the bore from *Fencing Master*

had detonated it before the breech was fully locked.

Focused on his gunsight, Huber hadn't heard the freight-train roar of 200-mm rockets passing low overhead, nor the *plop plop plop* of small charges ejecting sub-munitions from the carrier shells. The Nonesuch air defenses had been able to stop most of the incoming while it was simply them against the Hogs, but when the Slammers' vehicles appeared on the ridgeline the Nonesuch tribarrels were switched to direct fire. There was nothing to stop salvos from the batteries surrounding Port Plattner.

Each shell's twelve sub-munitions went off between twenty and forty meters above the ground, a yellow flash and a rag of smoke as the explosive charge forged a plate of uranium into a white-hot spike and drove it downward toward the Nonesuch vehicle its sensors had chosen. The Hogs were firing anti-tank shells, not firecracker rounds that barely scratched the paint of armored vehicles.

The self-forging fragments shattered the Nonesuch defenses already bruised by powerguns firing from the high ground surrounding the port. They punched through roof plating, relatively thin even on the tanks. Inside, the friction-heated uranium turned into balls of flame enveloping everything in the penetrated compartment. Hundreds of Nonesuch vehicles vanished into simultaneous blow-torch flames: fuel, flesh and munitions, all pulverized, all burning at the temperature of a star's surface.

Two more salvos popped in the air and raged on the ground. The thunderclaps of detonations died away, though some of the burning vehicles screamed as they lit the night with jets of fire.

Huber's gun had jammed, but nobody in 1st Squadron was shooting any more. There were cyan flickers on the pad's northern perimeter, but that might have been guns continuing to fire as they melted into the vehicles on which they were mounted.

"Cease fire!" Col. Hammer rasped. *"All Slammers units, cease fire! Nonesuch representatives on the starships have offered their surrender. Cease fire, troopers, it's over!"*

Huber took his hands from the grips of his weapon. The barrel cluster continued to spin, a white blur that made the air throb it threw off heat. Huber had a multi-tool in his belt pouch, but when he reached for it to clear the jam he realized that his fingers didn't want to close properly.

Deseau's tribarrel had jammed also. He held his backup 2-cm weapon, but he wasn't shooting into the thousands of helpless human targets sprawling and staggering on the concrete below. The hell-strewn carnage was enough even for Frenchie.

Learoyd took off his commo helmet to rub his bald scalp with his left hand. The skin of his chin and throat below the faceshield's protection was black where iridium vaporized from his gun bores had redeposited itself. He looked older than Huber had ever seen him before.

"Fox Three-six to Fox Three," Huber said in a voice that caught at every syllable. "Good work, troopers. Nobody ever commanded a better unit than I did tonight."

He swallowed and added the words that almost hadn't gotten past his swollen throat. "Three-six out."

Then, because his head throbbed and any constriction was an agony he couldn't bear for the moment, Huber took off his helmet. He regretted the decision immediately with the first breath he took of the unfiltered atmosphere.

He turned and vomited over the side of the fighting compartment. No matter how

often he encountered it, the smell of burned human flesh always turned Arne Huber's stomach.

"Hey El-Tee!" said Deseau, standing with Padova on the plenum chamber to brace the replacement plate while Learoyd applied the cold weld. "That black-haired piece you met the first time the wogs threw in the towel? She's coming to see you."

"He's not an el-tee any more, Frenchie," Learoyd said, laying his bead along the seam as evenly as the fully-mechanized factory operation which put *Fencing Master* together to begin with. "He's a captain now."

Huber looked over his shoulder in the direction of Frenchie's gaze. He wasn't sure how Daphne Priamedes would take to being called a 'black-haired piece', but it was accurate given Deseau's frame of reference. The other part, though....

Huber got up from the empty 10-liter coolant drum he was using as a seat while he worked at the Command and Control box. He wiped his hands on his utility blouse--newly-issued three days before and still clean enough--and said quietly, "I met her in Benjamin, Frenchie, back when I was in Operations."

"Capt. Huber?" Daphne called from the ground. "I hope you don't mind my coming to offer you lunch. The orderly said that you have an office but that you usually worked in your combat car."

Huber shut down the display. "Glad to see you, Daphne," he said as he swung himself, left leg first, over the side of the fighting compartment. "I could use a break, but I don't know about lunch. Maybe...."

He paused as he slid to the ground, careful to take the shock on his right boot. He'd been going to say, "... the canteen," but the facilities here at Base Beta consisted of a plastic prefab with extruded furniture and dispensers for a basic range of products. Bezant was only twelve clicks away, so there was no need for the Regiment itself to provide off-duty troops with anything impressive.

Daphne flashed a smile of cool triumph. "I thought you might say that," she said, "so I've brought a cooler in the car. I thought we'd fly to a grove where we could find some quiet."

Huber looked down at his uniform. He hadn't been doing much manual labor--well, *much*--but he'd have wanted to change before an interview with Hammer; or with Joachim Steuben, now that he thought about it.

Daphne repeated the cool smile. "Come along, Arne," she said. "The trees won't care any more than I do. I left my aircar by the TOC."

She crooked her elbow for him to take and started off. Base Beta was an expansion of Firebase One, no prettier than it'd been before Engineer Section trebled its area to hold all three squadrons. As he passed *Fancy Pants*, Huber saw Tranter looking out of an access port and said, "Hold the fort for an hour, sarge. If anybody really needs me, I've got my commo helmet."

"Roger that, sir," Tranter said cheerfully. He was holding a multitool and a pair of pliers, doing technician's work and pleased at the chance.

"Hey El-Tee?" Deseau shouted from *Fencing Master*, loudly enough that half the camp could hear him. "If there's any left that you don't need, remember me'n Learoyd."

Daphne appeared not to notice the comment, unless the faint smile was her response.

Huber cleared his throat, taking stock of the situation. Daphne was wearing a pants suit, simply cut and of sturdy--but probably expensive--material. It would've been proper garb if Huber'd decided to put on his dress uniform and take her to one of the top restaurants in Bezant, but it wasn't out of place in a firebase either.

Well, he'd never doubted that she was smart.

A starship lifted, its corona shiveringly bright even in broad daylight. The rumble of shoving such a mass skyward trembled through Huber's bootsoles, though the airborne sound was distance-muted and slow to arrive.

Huber nodded toward the rising vessel and said, "This time they're repatriating the other mercenary units before they terminate our contract. It'll probably take a while to find so much shipping."

"Yes, but the amount of trade Port Plattner carried before the war is simplifying the problem," Daphne said. They'd reached her car, parked on the concertina-wired pad under the guns of an A Company combat car. The Colonel and the staff he'd brought with him on the run north were sharing space in the trailers with the squadron commanders. That must've been tight, though Huber had his own problems. Tents beside the buried trailers provided overflow for activities that nobody would care about if the shooting started again.

"As for continuing to pay your hire until all the other forces are off-planet..." Daphne continued in a wry, possibly amused, tone. "That was a condition Col. Hammer set on agreeing to allow us to employ the Slammers. Though I think that after seeing the mistake Nonesuch made, we would have decided to find the money whether or not it was a contract term."

The sergeant in charge of the White Mice at the aircar pad spoke to one of her troopers, who swung open the bar wrapped in razor ribbon. Huber noticed the sergeant's arm was in a surface cast, then recognized her as the commander of the resupply aircars. He nodded and said, "I'm glad you came through all right, sergeant."

"Same to you, captain," she said, surprised and obviously pleased at his notice. "And congratulations on your promotion."

They stepped into the fenced area. Daphne's limousine was as much of a contrast to the battered utility vehicles as she herself was to the several contract drivers resting in what shade they could find.

"I haven't congratulated you on your promotion, Arne," she said. She opened the door, then bent to touch the switch which slid the hardtop in three sections down into the seatback. "I'm very glad things worked out for you."

Does she know what she's saying? Huber wondered; but maybe she did. Various things Daphne'd said showed that she was far enough up in the government of Solace that she could probably learn anything she wanted to.

"Yeah," he said, getting into the front passenger seat. "The Colonel offered me an infantry company before we headed north, but I wouldn't have known what I was doing. I'm glad I waited."

Waited for a 25-cm bolt to turn Capt. Gillig, a good officer and a first-rate bridge player, into a cloud of dissociated atoms. A bolt that could just as easily have hit fifty meters south and done the same thing to Lt. Arne Huber and his crew. There were religious people--some of them troopers--who believed everything happened by plan, and maybe they were right. Huber himself, though, couldn't imagine a plan that balanced

details so minute and decided that tonight a particular lieutenant would be promoted instead of being ionized....

Daphne ran her fans up to speed, then adjusted blade angle to lift the car off the ground in a jackrabbit start. Huber remembered that on pavement she'd been more sedate; she was outrunning the cloud of dust her fans raised from the scraped, sun-burned, clay.

"To be honest," she said, her attention apparently focused on her instruments and the eastern horizon, "I thought you might already have looked me up now that the war's over."

Huber didn't speak for a moment. He *had* thought about it. He'd decided that she wouldn't be interested; that she wouldn't have time; and that anyway, he flat didn't have the energy to get involved in anything more than a business transaction which cost about three Frisian thalers at the going rate of exchange.

Aloud he said, "Daphne, I just got promoted to command of Fox Company. I'm trying to integrate new personnel and equipment as well as repair what we can."

What remained of Capt. Gillig's *Fantom Lady* would stand, probably forever, on the crest where it'd been hit. The eight fan nacelles hadn't been damaged, so Maintenance had stripped them off the hulk.

Relatives of the crew would be told their loved ones were buried on Plattner's World. That was mostly true, except for the atoms that other 1st Squadron troopers had inhaled.

Huber laughed. "No rest for the wicked, you know."

Daphne looked at him with unexpected sharpness. "Don't say that," she said. "You're not wicked. You saved our planet. Saved us from ourselves, if you want to know the truth!"

Did you have friends working in the terminal building when I shot it up, honey? Did you have a cousin paying his vehicle taxes when we blasted the police post at Millhouse Crossing? Other people did!

"Ma'am," said Huber, speaking very slowly and distinctly because this mattered to him. "I appreciate what you're saying, but don't kid yourself. If there's such a thing as wicked, then some of what I do qualifies. Some of what I've done on Plattner's World."

"I don't think you appreciate how true that is of other people too, Arne," Daphne said. She looked at him steadily, then put a hand on his thigh and squeezed before returning her attention to the horizon and steering yoke.

Well, that answered a question which, despite Deseau's certainty, had remained open in Huber's mind. Frenchie didn't have much to do with women like Daphne Priamedes.

He grinned. Neither did Arne Huber, if it came to that.

"The alliance of nations on Plattner's World which hired your Regiment," Daphne said, switching subjects with the grace of a mirror trick, "will continue to operate the port as a common facility rather than a part of Solace. We'll be raising the price of Moss and of Thaldrol base to pay for port renovations."

She looked at Huber and grinned coldly.

"Which will be extensive, as you might imagine."

"Yeah," Huber said, "I can."

Just clearing wrecked equipment would be a bitch of a job: the melted hull of a 200-tonne tank wasn't going to move easily, and thousands of plasma bolts had not only

scarred the surface but also shattered the concrete deep into the pad's interior. The terminal building was gone, and the guidance pods which humped at regular intervals across the pad were scarred by shrapnel from the firecracker rounds if they hadn't been blasted by stray powergun bolts.

"Your backers are agreeing to the price rise?" Huber said. "The planets who funded us the second time, I mean."

"Their rates will go up ten percent," Daphne said primly. "They're quite comfortable with that. The rate to Nonesuch will go up thirty percent."

She looked at Huber and added, "I suppose you're surprised that we don't refuse to sell Thaldrol base to Nonesuch regardless of the price?"

"No ma'am," Huber said, fighting to control his grin. What a question to ask a mercenary soldier! "I'm not surprised. I'd say it was a good plan to keep Nonesuch from getting so desperate that they'd try a rematch despite all."

Daphne smiled wryly. "Yes," she said, "I suppose it is at that, though I don't believe anyone was thinking in those terms when we came to the decision. We just wanted to set the rate at the maximum we thought they'd pay. We need the money rather badly, you see."

They both laughed; the tension of moments before was gone and nothing was hiding in the background so far as Huber could tell. Well, no conflict, anyway.

The aircar was five hundred meters above the ground, mushing along at about 80 kph. They'd flown beyond the wheat fields; below was pasture in which large roan cattle wandered in loose herds. Brush and small trees grew in swales, green against the rusty color of the grass at this season. Fencelines occasionally glinted from one horizon to the other, but there were kilometers between tracts.

Huber took off his commo helmet and set it in the compartment behind him. He probably wasn't going to be back in the hour he'd told Tranter, and that was all right too.

"A nice day," he said, stretching in his seat before he put an arm over Daphne's shoulders.

"Yes," she said, setting the aircar's autopilot as she leaned toward Huber. "A nice day for normal things instead of with guns and destruction."

They kissed, wriggling closer in their bucket seats.

In his mind, Port Plattner blazed with plasma bolts and the rich, red light of burning tents. *But for me*, Huber thought as he raised his hand to her breast, *guns and destruction are what's normal*.