

CHOOSING SIDES

by David Drake

The driver of the lead combat car revved his fans to lift the bow when he reached the bottom of the starship's steep boarding ramp. The gale whirling from under the car's skirts rocked Lt. Arne Huber forward into the second vehicle--his own *Fencing Master*, still locked to the deck because a turnbuckle had kinked when the ship unexpectedly tilted on the soft ground.

Huber was twenty-five standard years old, shorter than average and fit without being impressively muscular. He wore a commo helmet now, but the short-cropped hair beneath it was as black as the pupils of his eyes.

Sighing, he pushed himself up from *Fencing Master's* bow slope. His head hurt the way it always did just after star-travel--which meant worse than it did any other time in his life. Even without the howling fans of *Foghorn*, the lead car, his ears would be roaring in time with his pulse.

None of the troopers in Huber's platoon were in much better shape, and he didn't guess the starship's crew were more than nominal themselves. The disorientation from star travel, like a hangover, didn't stop hurting just because it'd become familiar.

"Look!" said Sgt. Deseau, shouting so that the three starship crewmen could hear him over the fans' screaming. "If you don't have us free in a minute flat, starting *now*, I'm going to shoot the cursed thing off and you can worry about the damage to your cursed deck without me to watch you. Do you understand?"

Two more spacers were squeezing through the maze of vehicles and equipment in the hold, carrying a power tool between them. This sort of problem can't have been unique to *Fencing Master*.

Huber put his hand on Deseau's shoulder. "Let's get out of the way and let them fix this, sarge," he said, speaking on through the helmet intercom so that he didn't have to raise his voice. Shouting put people's backs up, even if you didn't mean anything by it except that it was hard to hear. "Let's take a look at Plattner's World."

They turned together and walked to the open hatch. Deseau was glad enough to step away from the problem.

The freighter which had brought Platoon F-3, Arne Huber's command, to Plattner's World had a number rather than a name: KPZ 9719. It was much smaller than the vessels which usually carried the men and vehicles of Hammer's Regiment, but even so it virtually overwhelmed the facilities here at Rhodesville. The ship had set down normally, but one of the outriggers then sank an additional meter into the soil. The lurch had flung everybody who'd already unstrapped against the bulkheads and jammed *Fencing Master* in place, blocking two additional combat cars behind it in the hold.

Huber chuckled. That made his head throb, but it throbbed already. Deseau gave him a sour look.

"It's a good thing we hadn't freed the cars before the outrigger gave," Huber explained. "Bad enough people bouncing off the walls; at least we didn't have thirty-tonne combat cars doing it too."

"I don't see why we're landing in a cow pasture anyway," Deseau muttered. "Isn't there a real spaceport somewhere on this bloody tree-farm of a planet?"

"Yeah, there is," Huber said dryly. "The trouble is, it's in Solace. The people the United Cities are hiring us to fight."

The briefing cubes were available to everybody in the Slammers, but Sgt. Deseau was like most of the enlisted personnel--and no few of the officers--in spending the time between deployments finding other ways to entertain himself. It was a reasonable enough attitude. Mercenaries tended to be pragmatists. Knowledge of the local culture wasn't a factor when a planet hired mercenary soldiers, nor did it increase the gunmen's chances of survival.

Deseau spit toward the ground, either a comment or just a way of clearing phlegm from his throat. Huber's mouth felt like somebody'd scrubbed a rusty pot, then used the same wad of steel wool to scour his mouth and tongue.

"Let's hope we capture Solace fast so we don't lose half our supplies in the mud," Deseau said. "This place'll be a swamp the first time it rains."

KPZ 9719 had come down on the field serving the dirigibles which connected Rhodesville with the other communities on Plattner's World--and particularly with the spaceport at Solace in the central highlands. The field's surface was graveled, but there were more soft spots than the one the starship's outrigger had stabbed down through. Deseau was right about what wet weather would bring.

The starship sat on the southern edge of the kilometer-square field. On the north side opposite them were a one-story brick terminal with an attached control tower, and a dozen warehouses with walls and trusses of plastic extrusion. Those few buildings comprised the entire port facilities.

Tractors were positioning lowboys under the corrugated metal shipping containers slung beneath the 300-meter-long dirigible now unloading at the east end of the field. A second dirigible had dropped its incoming cargo and was easing westward against a mild breeze, heading for the mooring mast where it would tether. The rank of outbound shipping containers there waited to be slung in place of the food and merchandise the United Cities imported. The containers had been painted a variety of colors, but rust now provided the most uniform livery.

A third dirigible was in the center of the field, its props turning just fast enough to hold it steady. The four shipping containers hanging from its belly occasionally kicked up dust as they touched the ground. A port official stood in an open-topped jitney with a flashing red light. He was screaming through a bullhorn at the dirigible's forward cockpit, but the crew there seemed to be ignoring him.

Trooper Learoyd, *Fencing Master's* right wing gunner--Huber chose to ride at the left gun, with Deseau in the vehicle commander's post in the center--joined them at the hatch. He was stocky, pale, and almost bald even though he was younger than Huber by several years. He looked out and said, "What's worth having a war about this place?"

"There's people on it," Deseau said with a sharp laugh. "That's all the reason you need for a war, snake. You ought to know that by now."

According to the briefing cubes, Rhodesville had a permanent population of 50,000; the residents provided light manufacturing and services for the moss-hunters coursing thousands of square kilometers of the surrounding forest. Only a few houses were visible from the port. The community wound through the forest, constructed under the trees instead of clearing them for construction. The forest was the wealth of Plattner's World, and the settlers acted as though they understood that fact.

"There's a lichen that's a parasite on the trees here," Huber explained. "They call it moss because it grows in patches of gray tendrils from the trunks. It's the source of an

anti-aging drug. The processing's done offworld, but there's enough money in the business that even the rangers who gather the moss have aircars and better holodecks than you'd find in most homes on Friesland."

"Well I'll be," Learoyd said, though he didn't sound excited. He rubbed his temples, as if trying to squeeze the pain out through his eyesockets.

Deseau spat again. "So long as they've got enough set by to pay our wages," he said. "I'd like a good, long war this time, because if I never board a ship again it'll be too soon."

The third dirigible was drifting sideways. Huber wouldn't have been sure except for the official in the jitney; he suddenly dropped back into his seat and drove forward to keep from being crushed by the underslung cargo containers. The official stopped again and got out of his vehicle, running back toward the dirigible with his fists raised overhead in fury.

Huber looked over his shoulder to see how the spacers were making out with the turnbuckle. The tool they'd brought, a cart with chucks on extensible arms, wasn't working. Well, that was par for the course.

Trooper Kolbe sat in the driver's compartment, his chin bar resting on the hatch coaming. His faceshield was down, presenting an opaque surface to the outside world. Kolbe could have been using the helmet's infrared, light-amplification, or sonic imaging to improve his view of the dimly-lit hold, but Huber suspected the driver was simply hiding the fact that his eyes were closed.

Kolbe needn't have been so discrete. If Huber hadn't thought he ought to set an example, he'd have been leaning his forehead against *Fencing Master's* cool iridium bow slope and wishing he didn't hurt so much.

Platoon Sergeant Jellicoe was at the arms locker, issuing troopers their personal weapons. Jellicoe seemed as dispassionate as the hull of her combat car, but Trooper Coblentz, handing out the weapons as the sergeant checked them off, looked like he'd died several weeks ago.

Unless and until Colonel Hammer ordered otherwise, troopers on a contract world were required to go armed at all times. Revised orders were generally issued within hours of landing; troopers barhopping in rear areas with sub-machine guns and 2-cm shoulder weapons made the Regiment's local employers nervous, and rightly so.

On Plattner's World the Slammers had to land at six sites scattered across the United Cities, a nation that was mostly forest. None of the available landing fields was large enough to take the monster starships on which the Regiment preferred to travel, and only the administrative capital, Benjamin, could handle more than one seventeen-vehicle company at a time. Chances were that even off-duty troopers would be operating in full combat gear for longer than usual.

"What's that gas-bag doing?" Deseau asked. "What do they fill 'em with here, anyway? If it's hydrogen and it usually is...."

Foghorn had shut down, well clear of the starship's ramp. Her four crewmen were shifting their gear out of the open-topped fighting compartment and into the bustle rack of steel netting which hung around the sloped walls of iridium armor. A Slammers' vehicle on combat deployment looked like a bag lady's cart; the crew knew that the only things they could count on having were what they carried with them. Tanks and combat cars could shift position by 500 clicks in a day, smashing the flank or rear of an enemy

who didn't even know he was threatened; but logistics support couldn't follow the fighting vehicles as they stabbed through hostile territory.

"Aide, unit," Huber said, cueing his commo helmet's AI to the band all F-3 used in common. "Tatzig, pull around where that dirigible isn't going to hit you. Something's wrong with the bloody thing and the locals aren't doing much of a job of sorting it out."

Sgt. Tatzig looked up. He grunted an order to his driver, then replied over the unit push, "*Roger, will do.*"

There was a clang from the hold. A spacer had just hit the turnbuckle with a heavy hammer.

A huge, hollow metallic racket sounded from the field; the dirigible had just dropped its four shipping containers. The instant the big metal boxes hit the ground, the sides facing the starship fell open. Three of them did, anyway: the fourth container opened halfway, then stuck.

The containers were full of armed men wearing uniforms of chameleon cloth that mimicked the hue of whatever it was close to. The troops looked like pools of shadow from which slug-throwers and anti-armor missiles protruded.

"Incoming!" Huber screamed. "We're under attack!"

One of the attacking soldiers had a buzzbomb, a shoulder-launched missile, already aimed at Huber's face. He fired. Huber reacted by instinct, grabbing his two companions and throwing himself down the ramp instead of back into the open hold.

The missile howled overhead and detonated on *Fencing Master's* bow. White fire filled the universe for an instant. The blast made the ramp jump, flipping Huber from his belly to his right side. He got up. He was seeing double, but he could see; details didn't matter at times like this.

The attack had obviously been carefully planned, but things went wrong for the hostiles as sure as they had for Huber and his troopers. The buzzbomber had launched early instead of stepping away from the shipping container as he should've done. The steel box caught the missile's backblast and reflected it onto the shooter and those of his fellows who hadn't jumped clear. They spun out of the container, screaming as flames licked from their tattered uniforms.

A dozen automatic weapons raked *Foghorn*, killing Tatzig and his crewmen instantly. The attackers' weapons used electromagnets to accelerate heavy-metal slugs down the bore at hypersonic velocity. When slugs hit the car's iridium armor, they ricocheted as neon streaks that were brilliant even in sunlight.

Slugs that hit troopers chewed their bodies into a mist of blood and bone.

The starship's hold was full of roiling white smoke, harsh as a wood rasp on the back of Huber's throat in the instant before his helmet slapped filters down over his nostrils. The buzzbomb had hit *Fencing Master's* bow slope at an angle. Its shaped-charge warhead had gouged a long trough across the armor instead of punching through into the car's vitals. There was no sign of Kolbe.

The tie-down, jammed turnbuckle and all, had vanished in the explosion. Two pairs of legs lay beside the vehicle. They'd probably belonged to spacers rather than Huber's troopers, but the blast had blown the victims' clothing off at the same time it pureed their heads and torsos.

Slugs snapped through the starship's hatchway, clanging and howling as they ricocheted deeper into the hold. Huber mounted *Fencing Master's* bow slope with a jump

and a quick step. He dabbed a hand down and the blast-heated armor burned him. He'd have blisters in the morning, if he lived that long.

Huber thought the driver's compartment was empty, but Kolbe's body from the shoulders on down had slumped onto the floor. Huber bent through the hatch and grabbed him. The driver's right arm came off when Huber tugged.

Huber screamed in frustration and threw the limb out of the vehicle, then got a double grip on Kolbe's equipment belt and hauled him up by it. Bracing his elbows for leverage, Huber pulled the driver's torso and thighs over the coaming and let gravity do the rest. The body slithered down the bow, making room for Huber inside. The compartment was too tight to share with a corpse and still be able to drive.

Kolbe had raised the seat so that he could sit with his head out of the vehicle. Huber dropped it because he wanted the compartment's full-sized displays instead of the miniature versions his faceshield would provide. The slugs whipping around the hold would've been a consideration if he'd had time to think about it, but right now he had more important things on his mind than whether he was going to be alive in the next millisecond.

"All Delta elements!" he shouted, his helmet still cued to the unit push. Half a dozen troopers were talking at the same time; Huber didn't know if anybody would hear the order, but they were mostly veterans and ought to react the right way without a lieutenant telling them what that was. "Bring your cars on line and engage the enemy!"

Arne Huber was F-3's platoon leader, not a driver, but right now the most critical task the platoon faced was getting the damaged, crewless, combat car out of the way of the two vehicles behind it. With *Fencing Master* blocking the hatch, the attackers would wipe out the platoon like so many bugs in a killing bottle. Huber was the closest trooper to the job, so he was doing it.

The fusion bottle that powered the vehicle was on line. Eight powerful fans in nacelles under *Fencing Master's* hull sucked in outside air and filled the steel-skirted plenum chamber at pressure sufficient to lift the car's thirty tonnes. Kolbe had switched the fans on but left them spinning at idle, their blades set at zero incidence, while the spacers freed the turnbuckle.

Huber palmed the combined throttles forward while his thumb adjusted blade incidence in concert. As the fusion bottle fed more power to the nacelles, the blades tilted on their axes so that they drove the air rather than merely cutting it. Fan speed remained roughly constant, but *Fencing Master* shifted greasily as her skirts began to lift from the freighter's deck.

A second buzzbomb hit the bow.

For an instant, Huber's mind went as blank as the white glare of the blast. The shock curtains in the driver's compartment expanded, and his helmet did as much as physics allowed to save his head. Despite that, his brain sloshed in his skull.

He came around as the shock curtains shrank back to their ready state. He didn't know who or where he was. The display screen before him was a gray, roiling mass. He switched the control to thermal imaging by trained reflex and saw armed figures rising from the ground to rush the open hatch.

I'm Arne Huber. We're being attacked.

His right hand was on the throttles; the fans were howling. He twisted the grip, angling the nacelles back so that their thrust pushed the combat car instead of just lifting

it. *Fencing Master's* bow skirt screeched on the deck, braking the vehicle's forward motion beyond the ability of the fans to drive it.

The second warhead had opened the plenum chamber like a ration packet. The fan-driven air rushed out through the hole instead of raising the vehicle as it was meant to do.

The attackers had thrown themselves flat so that the missile wouldn't scythe them down also. Three of them reached the base of the ramp, then paused and opened fire. Dazzling streaks crisscrossed the hold, and the *whang* of slugs hitting the *Fencing Master's* iridium armor was loud even over the roar of the fans.

Huber decoupled the front four nacelles and tilted them vertical again. He shoved the throttle through the gate, feeding full emergency power to the fans. The windings would burn out in a few minutes under this overload, but right now Huber wouldn't bet he or anybody in his platoon would be alive then to know.

Fencing Master's ruined bow lifted on thrust alone. Not high, not even a finger's breadth, but enough to free the skirt from the decking and allow the rear nacelles to shove her forward. Staggering like a drunken ox, the car lurched from the hold and onto the ramp. Her bow dragged again, but this time the fans had gravity to aid them. She accelerated toward the field, scraping up a fountain of red sparks from either side of her hull.

The attackers tried to jump out of the way. Huber didn't know and didn't much care what happened to them when they disappeared below the level of the sensor pickups feeding *Fencing Master's* main screen. A few gunmen more or less didn't matter; Huber's problem was to get this car clear of the ramp so that *Flame Farter* and *Floosie*, still aboard the freighter, could deploy and deal with the enemy.

Fencing Master reached the bottom of the ramp and drove a trench through the gravel before shuddering to a halt. The shock curtains swathed Huber again; he'd have disengaged the system if he'd had time for nonessentials after the machine's well-meant swaddling clothes freed him. Skewing the stern nacelles slightly to port, he pivoted *Fencing Master* around her bow and rocked free of the rut.

The air above him sizzled with ozone and cyan light: two of the tribarrels in the car's fighting compartment had opened up on the enemy. Somebody'd managed to board while Huber was putting the vehicle in motion. *Fencing Master* was a combat unit again.

There must've been about forty of the attackers all told, ten to each of the shipping containers. Half were now bunched near *Foghorn* or between that car and the starship's ramp. Huber switched *Fencing Master's* Automatic Defense System live, then used the manual override to trigger three segments.

The ADS was a groove around the car's hull, just above the skirts. It was packed with plastic explosive and faced with barrel-shaped osmium pellets. When the system was engaged, sensors triggered segments of the explosive to send blasts of pellets out to meet and disrupt an incoming missile.

Fired manually, each segment acted as a huge shotgun. The clanging explosions chopped into cat food everyone who stood within ten meters of *Fencing Master*. Huber got a whiff of sweetly-poisonous explosive residues as his nose filters closed again. The screaming fans sucked away the smoke before he could switch back to thermal imaging.

An attacker aboard *Foghorn* had seen the danger in time to duck into the fighting compartment; the pellets scarred the car's armor but didn't penetrate it. The attacker rose,

pointing his slug thrower down at the hatch Huber hadn't had time to close. A tribarrel from *Fencing Master* decapitated the hostile.

A powergun converted a few precisely-aligned copper atoms into energy which it directed down the weapon's mirror-polished iridium bore. Each light-swift bolt continued in a straight line to its target, however distant, and released its energy as heat in a cyan flash. A 2-cm round like those the tribarrels fired could turn a man's torso into steam and fire; the 20-cm bolt from a tank's main gun could split a mountain.

One of the shipping containers was still jammed halfway open. Soldiers were climbing out like worms squirming up the sides of a bait can. Two raised their weapons when they saw a tribarrel slewing in their direction. Ravening light slashed across them, flinging their maimed bodies into the air. The steel container flashed into white fireballs every time a bolt hit it.

Huber's ears were numb. It looked like the fighting was over, but he was afraid to shut down *Fencing Master*'s fans just in case he was wrong; it was easier to keep the car up than it'd be to raise her again from a dead halt. He did back off the throttles slightly to bring the fans down out of the red zone, though. The bow skirt tapped and rose repeatedly, like a chicken drinking.

Flame Farter pulled into the freighter's hatchway and dipped to slide down the ramp under full control. Platoon Sergeant Jellicoe was behind the central tribarrel. She'd commandeered the leading car when the shooting started rather than wait for her own *Floosie* to follow out of the hold.

Jellicoe fired at something out of sight beyond the shipping containers. Huber touched the menu, importing the view from Jellicoe's gunsight and expanding it to a quarter of his screen.

Three attackers stood with their hands in the air; their weapons were on the gravel behind them. Jellicoe had plowed up the ground alongside to make sure they weren't going to change their minds.

Mercenaries fought for money, not principle. The Slammers and their peers took prisoners as a matter of policy, encouraging their opponents toward the same professional ideal.

Enemies who killed captured Slammers could expect to be slaughtered man, woman and child; down to the last kitten that mewled in their burning homes.

"Bloody Hell..." Huber muttered. He raised the seat to look out at the shattered landscape with his own eyes, though the filters still muffled his nostrils.

Haze blurred the landing field. It was a mix of ozone from powergun bolts and the coils of the slug-throwers, burning paint and burning uniforms, and gases from superheated disks that had held the copper atoms in alignment: empties ejected from the tribarrels. Some of the victims were fat enough that their flesh burned also.

The dirigible that'd carried the attackers into position now fled north as fast as the dozen engines podded on outriggers could push it. That wasn't very fast, even with the help of the breeze to swing the big vessel's bow; they couldn't possibly escape.

Huber wondered for a moment how he could contact the dirigible's crew and order them to set down or be destroyed. Plattner's World probably had emergency frequencies, but the data hadn't been downloaded to F-3's data banks yet.

Sergeant Jellicoe raked the dirigible's cabin with her tribarrel. The light-metal structure went up like fireworks in the cyan bolts. An instant later all eight gunners in the

platoon were firing, and the driver of *Floosie* was shooting a pistol with one hand as he steered his car down the ramp with the other.

"Cease fire!" Huber shouted, not that it was going to make the Devil's bit of difference. "Unit, cease fire *now!*"

The dirigible was too big for the powerguns to destroy instantly, but the bolts had stripped away swathes of the outer shell and ruptured the ballonets within. Deseau had guessed right: the dirigible got its lift from hydrogen, the lightest gas and cheap enough to dump and replace after every voyage so that the ballonets didn't fill with condensed water over time.

The downside was the way it burned.

Flames as pale and blue as a drowned woman's flesh licked from the ballonets, engulfing the middle of the great vessel. The motors continued to drive forward, but the stern started to swing down as fire sawed the airship in half. The skeleton of open girders showed momentarily, then burned away.

"Oh bloody bugging Hell!" Huber said. He idled *Fencing Master's* fans and stood up on the seat. "*Hell!*"

"What's the matter, sir?" Learoyd asked. He'd lost his helmet, but he and Sgt. Deseau both were at their combat stations. The tribarrels spun in use, rotating a fresh bore up to fire while the other two cooled. Even so the barrels still glowed yellow from their long bursts. "They were hostiles too, the good Lord knows."

"*They were,*" Huber said grimly. "But the folks living around here are the ones who've hired us."

The remaining ballonets in the dirigible's bow exploded simultaneously, flinging blobs of burning metal hundreds of meters away. Fires sprang up from the treetops, crackling and spewing further showers of sparks.

Huber heard a siren wind from somewhere deep in the forest community. It wasn't going to do a lot of good.

The dirigible's stern, roaring like a blast furnace, struck the terminal building. Some of those inside ran out; they were probably screaming, but Huber couldn't hear them over the sound of the inferno. One fellow had actually gotten twenty meters from the door when the mass of airship and building exploded, engulfing him in flames. He was a carbonized husk when they sucked back an instant later.

Huber sighed. That pretty well put a cap on the day, he figured.

Base Alpha--regimental headquarters on every world that hired the Slammers was Base Alpha--was a raw wasteland bulldozed from several hectares of forest. The clay was deep red when freshly turned, russet when it dried by itself to a form of porous rock, and oddly purple when mixed with plasticizer to form the roadways and building foundations of the camp.

The aircar and driver that'd brought Huber from Rhodesville to Base Alpha were both local, though the woman driving had a cap with a red ball insignia and the words

LOGISTICS SECTION

HAMMER'S REGIMENT

marking her as a Slammers' contract employee. Colonel Hammer brought his own combat personnel and equipment to each deployment, but much of the Regiment's logistics tail was procured for the operation. Supplies and the infrastructure to transport

them usually came from what the hiring state had available.

Huber stopped in front of the building marked PROVOST MARSHAL and straightened his equipment belt. The guards, one of them in a gun jeep mounting a tribarrel, watched him in the anonymity of mirrored faceshields. The tribarrel remained centered on Huber's midriff as he approached.

The orders recalling Lt. Arne Huber from F-3 directed him to report to the Provost Marshal's office on arrival at Base Alpha. Huber had left his gear with the clerk at the Transient Barracks--he wasn't going to report to the Regiment's hatchetman with a dufflebag and two footlockers--but he hadn't taken time to be assigned a billet. There was a good chance--fifty-fifty, Huber guessed--that he wouldn't be a member of the Slammers when the present interview concluded.

He felt cold inside. He'd known the possibilities the instant he saw the first bolts rake the dirigible, but the terse recall message that followed his report had still made his guts churn.

Nothing to be done about it now. Nothing to be done about it since Sgt. Jellicoe shifted her aim to the dirigible and thumbed her butterfly trigger.

"Lt. Huber reporting to the Provost Marshal, as ordered," he said to the sergeant commanding the squad of guards.

"You're on the list," the sergeant said without inflexion. He and the rest of his squad were from A Company; they were the Regiment's police, wearing a stylized gorget as their collar flash. In some mercenary outfits the field police were called Chain Dogs from the gorget; in the Slammers they were the White Mice. "You can leave your weapons with me and go on in."

"Right," said Huber, though the order surprised him. He unslung his belt with the holstered pistol, then handed over the powerknife clipped to a trouser pocket as well.

"He's clean," said a guard standing at the read-out from a detection frame. The sergeant nodded Huber forward.

The Slammers were used to people wanting to kill them. Major Joachim Steuben, the Regiment's Provost Marshal, was obviously used to the Slammers themselves wanting to kill *him*.

Huber opened the door and entered. The building was a standard one-story new-build with walls of stabilized earth and a roof of plastic extrusion. It was a temporary structure so far as the Slammers were concerned, but it'd still be here generations later unless the locals chose to knock it down.

It was crude, ugly, and as solid as bedrock. You could use it as an analogy for the Slammers' methods, if you wanted to.

The door facing the end of the hallway was open. A trim, boyishly handsome man sat at a console there; he was looking toward Huber through his holographic display. If it weren't for the eyes, you might have guessed the fellow was a clerk....

Huber strode down the hall, staring straight ahead. Some of the side doors were open also, but he didn't look into them. He wondered if this was how it felt to be a rabbit facing a snake.

I'm not a rabbit. But if half the stories told about him were true, Joachim Steuben was a snake for sure.

Before Huber could raise his hand to knock on the door jamb, the man behind the desk said, "Come in, lieutenant; and close it behind you."

A holographic landscape covered the walls of Joachim Steuben's office; flowers poked through brightly-lit snow, with rugged slopes in the background. The illusion was seamless and probably very expensive.

"You know why you're here, Huber?" Steuben asked. Everything about the little man was expensive: his manicure, his tailored uniform of natural silk, and the richly chased pistol in a cut-away holster high on his right hip.

The only chair in the office was the one behind Steuben's console.

"I'm here because of the ratfuck at Rhodesville, sir," Huber said. He held himself at attention, though the major's attitude wasn't so much formal as playfully catlike.

Instead of staring at the wall over Steuben's shoulder, Huber met the major's eyes directly. If he hadn't, he'd have been giving in to fear. Because Major Joachim Steuben scared the crap out of him.

"Close enough," Steuben said as though he didn't much care. "What's your excuse?"

"Sir!" Huber said, truly shocked this time. "No excuse, *sir*."

It was the Nieuw Friesland Military Academy answer, and it was the right answer this time beyond question. Platoon F-3's commander had started to disembark his unit without waiting to issue sidearms and to cycle ammunition for the vehicles' tribarrels up from their storage magazines. Five troopers had died, a sixth had lost her left arm to a ricocheting slug, and it was the Lord's mercy alone that kept the damage from being worse.

Steuben raised an eyebrow and smiled faintly. His console's holographic display was only a shimmer of light from the back side, so Huber didn't know whether the major was really viewing something--Huber's file? A stress read-out?--or if he just left it up to make the interviewee more uncomfortable.

Which would be a pretty good trick, as uncomfortable as Huber felt even before he entered the office.

"A fair number of people in the United Cities think it'd be a mistake to go to war with Solace, Huber," Steuben said calmly. "They want to use the way you gutted Rhodesville as an excuse to cancel the Regiment's contract and go back to peaceful negotiation with Solace over port fees. Do you have any comment about that?"

Huber licked his lips. "Sir," he said, "everything my platoon did at Rhodesville was by my direct order. No blame whatever should attach to any of my troopers."

Steuben laughed. It was a horrible sound, a madman's titter. "Goodness," he said. "An officer who has complete control of his troops while he's driving a damaged combat car? You're quite a paragon, lieutenant."

Huber licked his lips again. He had to pull his eyes back to meet Steuben's. *Like looking at a cobra....*

"For the time being," the major continued, suddenly businesslike and almost bored, "you've been transferred to command of Logistics Section, Lt. Huber. Your office is in Benjamin proper, not Base Alpha here, because most of your personnel are locals. You have a cadre of six or so troopers, all of them deadlined for one reason or another."

He laughed again. "None of the others have burned down a friendly community, however," he added.

"Yes sir," Huber said. He felt dizzy with relief. He'd thought he was out. He'd been pretending he didn't, but he'd walked into this office believing he'd suddenly

become a civilian again, with no friends and no future.

Major Steuben shut down his display and stood. He was a small man with broad shoulders for his size and a wasp waist. From any distance, the word 'pretty' was the one you'd pick to describe him. Only if you were close enough to see Steuben's eyes did you think of snakes and death walking on two legs....

"I don't have any problem with what you did in Rhodesville, lieutenant," Steuben said quietly. "But I don't have a problem with a lot of things that seem to bother other people. If the Colonel told me to, I'd shoot you down where you stand instead of transferring you to Log Section. And it wouldn't bother me at all."

He smiled. "Do you understand?"

"Yes sir," Huber said. "I understand."

"Lt. Basime was a friend of yours at the Academy, I believe," Steuben said with another of his changes of direction. "She's acting head of our signals liaison with the UC now. Drop in and see her before you report to Log Section. She can fill you in on the background you'll need to operate here in the rear."

He waved a negligent hand. "You're dismissed, lieutenant," he said. "Close the door behind you."

Huber swung the panel hard--too hard. It slipped out of his hands and slammed. Maj. Steuben's terrible laugh followed him back down the hallway.

The ten-place aircar that ferried Huber into Benjamin had six other passengers aboard when it left Base Alpha: three troopers going in town on leave, and three local citizens returning from business dealings with the Regiment. Each trio kept to itself, which was fine with Arne Huber. He wasn't sure what'd happened in Joachim Steuben's office, whether it had all been playacting or if Steuben had really been testing him.

A test Huber'd passed, in that case; seeings as he was not only alive, he'd been transferred into a slot that normally went to a captain. But he wasn't sure, of that or anything else.

He was the only passenger remaining when the car reached its depot, what had been a public school with a sports arena in back. The freshly-painted sign out front read

BENJAMIN LIAISON OFFICE
HAMMER'S REGIMENT

with a red lion rampant on a gold field. The driver set the car down by the sign, then lifted away to the arena to shut down as soon as Huber had gotten his luggage off the seat beside him.

Would the local have been more helpfully polite if he'd known Huber was his new boss? Huber smiled faintly. He was too wrung out, from the firefight and now from the interview with Maj. Steuben, to really care that a direct subordinate had just dumped him out on the pavement.

He bent to shoulder the dufflebag's strap. "We'll watch it for you, sir!" called one of the guards on the front steps. They were alert and fully armed, but they seemed relaxed compared to the White Mice guarding the Provost Marshal's office at Base Alpha.

The troopers of F-3 had been relaxed when they started to disembark, too. Huber winced, wondering how long he was going to remember the feel of Kolbe's body slipping through his fingers like a half-filled waterbed. For the rest of his life, he supposed.

Gratefully he left his gear behind as he mounted the stone steps to the front doors.

The four troopers were from G Company, wearing their dismounted kit and carrying 2-cm shoulder weapons. Their two combat cars and the remaining crew members were parked at opposite ends of the arena with their tribarrels elevated on air-defense duty. They'd track anything that came over the horizon, whether aircraft or artillery shell, and blast it if required.

"Where's the signals office, sergeant?" Huber asked the trooper who'd offered to watch his gear.

"All the way down and to the left, ground floor," the fellow said. "Ah, sir? You're Lt. Huber?"

"Yeah, I am," Huber said, suddenly cold. The name tape above his left breast pocket was too faded to read; the fellow must have recognized his face.

"It's an honor to meet you, sir," the sergeant said. "You saved everybody's ass at Rhodesville. We all watched the imagery."

For a moment Huber frowned, thinking that the man was being sarcastic. But he wasn't, and the other troopers were nodding agreement.

"Thank you, sergeant," he said. His voice wanted to tremble, but he didn't let it. "That isn't the way it looked from where I was sitting, but I appreciate your viewpoint on the business."

Huber went inside quickly, before anybody else could speak. He was as shocked as if the guards had suddenly stripped off their uniforms and started dancing around him. Their words didn't belong in the world of Arne Huber's mind.

Dungaree-clad locals under the direction of a Slammers sergeant were bringing cartloads of files up the back stairs, two on each cart. When they got inside, they rolled them down the hallway to the big room on the right marked CAFETERIA. It was a clerical office now; the tables were arranged back to back and held data consoles manned by locals.

Huber moved to the left to let the carts get past. The sergeant turned from shouting at somebody in the six-wheeled truck outside and saw him. He looked like he was going to speak, but Huber ducked into the door with the recent SIGNALS LIAISON sign before he could.

Huber could have understood it if troopers turned their backs on him and whispered: five dead in a matter of seconds was a heavy loss for a single platoon. That wasn't what was happening.

Lt. Adria Basime--Doll to her friends--was bent over the desk of a warrant leader by the door, pointing out something on his console. She saw Huber and brightened. "Arne!" she said. "Come back to my office! My broom closet, more like, but it's got a door. Tory, have me those numbers when I come out, right?"

"Right, El-Tee," agreed the warrant leader. Even Huber, who'd never seen the fellow before, could read the relief in his expression. "Just a couple minutes, that's all I need."

There were a dozen consoles in the outer office, only half of them occupied. Three of the personnel present were Slammers, the others locals.

"I've got ten more people under me," Doll explained as she closed the door of the inner office behind her. "They're out trying to set up nets that we can at least pretend are secure. Plattner's World has a curst good commo network--they'd just about have to, as spread out as the population is. The trouble is, it *all* goes through Solace."

Doll's office wasn't huge, but it compared favorably with the enclosed box of a command car, let alone the amount of space there was in the fighting compartment of a combat car like *Fencing Master*. All a matter of what you've gotten used to, Huber supposed. Doll gestured him to a chair and took the one beside it instead of seating herself behind the console.

"What're you here for, Arne?" she asked. "Did you debrief to the Colonel in person?"

"I thought they were pulling me back to cashier me," Huber said carefully. "I didn't need Maj. Steuben to tell me how much damage we did to Rhodesville in the firefight. Apparently the locals want to void our contract for that."

Doll frowned. She was petite and strikingly pretty, even in a service uniform. She wore her hair short, but it fluffed like a dazzle of blonde sunlight when she wasn't wearing a commo helmet.

"Some of them maybe do," she said. "The government's in it all the way now, though. They can't back down unless they want to risk not only losing their places but likely being tried for treason if the peace party gets into power."

"Well, I'm transferred to run local transport," Huber said. He felt better already for talking to Doll. She came from a powerful family on Nieuw Friesland and had a keen political sense. If she said Huber hadn't jeopardized the Regiment's contract, that was the gospel truth. "They had to get me out of the field after the way I screwed up, after all."

"Screwed up?" Doll said in surprise. "You guys got ambushed by a company of Harris's Commando while you were still aboard the ship that brought you. You not only saved your platoon, you wiped out the kill team pretty much single-handedly, the way *I* heard it."

"That's not--" Huber said; and as he spoke, his mind flashed him a shard of memory, his finger selecting three segments of the Automatic Defense System and the *Whang!* as they fired simultaneously. He hadn't been thinking of the bunched infantry as human beings, just as a problem to be solved like the jammed turnbuckle. They were figures on his display; and after he'd fired the ADS, they were no longer a problem.

"Via," he whispered. "There must've been twenty of them...."

Huber had killed before, but he hadn't thought of what he'd done in Rhodesville as killing until Doll stated the obvious. He'd been thinking of other things.

"Yeah, well...", he said, looking toward the window. "Given the way they caught us with our pants down, things went as well as they could. But we *were* caught. I was caught."

Huber shrugged, forced a smile, and looked at his friend. "Maj. Steuben said you could give me a rundown on my new section, Doll. The people, I mean. I called up the roster on my helmet on the way here, but they were mostly locals and there's nothing beyond date of hire."

"I can tell you about Hera Graciano," Doll said with a grin. "She's your deputy, and she put the section together before the Regiment's combat assets started to arrive. For what it's worth, it seemed to me she was running things by herself even on the days Captain Cassutt was in the office."

The grin grew broader. She went on, "That wasn't many days, from what I saw. And he's on administrative leave right now."

"I'm glad there'll be one of us who knows the job, then," Huber said, feeling a

rush of relief that surprised him. Apparently while his conscious mind was telling him how lucky he was to be alive and still a member of the Regiment, his guts were worried about handling a rear echelon job in which his only background was a three-month rotation in the Academy four years earlier.

"Her father's Agis Graciano," Doll said. "He's Minister of Trade for the UC at the moment, but the ruling party shifts ministries around without changing anything important. He was Chief Lawgiver when the motion to hire the Slammers passed, and he's very much the head of the war party."

Huber frowned as he ran through the possibilities. It was good to have a competent deputy, but a deputy who'd gotten in the habit of running things herself *and* who had political connections could be a problem in herself. And there was one more thing....

"Does the lady get along with her father?" he asked. "Because I know sometimes that can be a worse problem than strangers ever thought of having."

Doll laughed cheerfully. "Hera lives with her father," she said. "They're very close. It's the elder brother, Patroklos, who's the problem. He's in the Senate too, and he'd say it was midnight if his father claimed it was noon."

Her face hardened as she added, "Patroklos is somebody I'd be looking at if I wanted to know how Harris's Commando learned exactly when a single platoon was going to land at Rhodesville, but that's not my job. You shouldn't have any trouble with him now that you're in Log Section."

"Thanks, Doll," Huber said as he rose to his feet. "I guess I'd better check the section out myself now. They're on the second floor?"

"Right," Doll said as she stood up also. "Two things more, though. Your senior non-com, Sgt. Tranter? He's a technical specialist and he's curst good at it. He's helped me a couple times here, finding equipment and getting it to work. The only reason he's not still in field maintenance is he lost a leg when a jack slipped and the new one spasms anytime the temperature gets below minus five."

"That's good to know," Huber said. "And the other thing?"

Doll's grin was back, broader than ever before. "Mistress Graciano is a real stunner, trooper," she said. "And she wasn't a bit interested when *I* tried to chat her up, so I figure that means a handsome young hero like you is in with a chance."

Huber gave his buddy a hug. They were both laughing as they walked back into the outer office.

Instead of a stenciled legend, the words LOGISTICS SECTION over the doorway were of brass letters on a background of bleached hardwood. Huber heard shuffling within the room as he reached the top of the stairs, then silence. He frowned and had to resist the impulse to fold back the flap of his pistol holster before he opened the door.

"All rise for Lt. Huber!" bellowed the non-com standing in front of the console nearest the doorway. He had curly red hair and a fluffy moustache the full width of his face. There wasn't a boot on his mechanical left leg, so Huber didn't need the name tape over the man's left breast to identify him as Sgt. Tranter.

There were ten consoles in the main room but almost a score of people, and they'd been standing before Tranter gave his order. Beside Tranter stood a wispy Slammers trooper; his left arm below the sleeve of his khakis was covered with a rash which Huber

hoped to the good Lord's mercy wasn't contagious. The others were local civilians, and the black-haired young woman who stepped forward offering her hand was just as impressive as Adria said she was.

"I'm glad you made it, Lt. Huber," she said in a voice as pleasantly sexy as the rest of her. "I'm your deputy, Hera Graciano."

"Ma'am," Huber said, shaking the woman's hand gingerly. Was he supposed to have kissed it? There might be something in the briefing cubes that he'd missed, but he doubted they went into local culture at this social level. It wasn't the sort of thing the commander of a line platoon was likely to need.

"Sgt. Tranter, sir," said the non-com. He didn't salute; saluting wasn't part of the Slammers' protocol, where all deployments were to combat zones and the main thing a salute did was target the recipient for any snipers in the vicinity. "This is Trooper Bayes, he's helping me go over the vehicles we're offered for hire."

Hera looked ready to step in and introduce her staff too. Huber raised his hand to forestall her.

"Please?" he said to get attention. "Before I try to memorize names, Deputy Graciano, could you give me a quick rundown of where the section is and where it's supposed to be?"

He flashed the roomful of people an embarrassed smile. "I intend to carry my weight, but an hour ago I couldn't have told you anything about Log Section beyond that there probably was one."

"Of course," Hera said. "We can use your office--" she nodded to a connecting door "--or mine," this time indicating a cubicle set off from the rest of the room by waist-high paneling.

"We'll use yours," Huber said, because he was pretty sure from what he'd heard about Capt. Cassutt that useful information was going to be in the deputy's office instead. "Oh--and I don't have quarters, yet. Is there a billeting officer here or--?"

"I'll take care of it, sir," Tranter said. "Do we need to go pick up your baggage too?"

"It's out in front of the building," Huber said. "I--"

"Right," said Tranter. "Come on, Bayes. Sir, you'll be in Building Five in back of the vehicle park. They're temporaries but they're pretty nice, and engineering threw us up a nice bulletproof wall around the whole compound. Just in case--which I *don't* have to explain to you."

Chuckling at the reference to Rhodesville, the two troopers left the room. Huber smiled too. It was gallows humor, sure; but if you couldn't laugh at grim jokes, you weren't going to laugh very much on service with the Slammers.

And it wasn't that Tranter didn't have personal experience with disaster. The non-skid sole of his mechanical foot thumped the floor with a note distinct from that of the boot on his right foot.

"I'm impressed by Sgt. Tranter," Hera said in a low voice as she stepped into her alcove after Huber. Though it seemed open to the rest of the room, a sonic distorter kept conversations within the cubicle private by canceling any sounds that crossed the invisible barrier. "As a matter of fact, I'm impressed by all the, ah, soldiers assigned to this section. I'd assumed that because they weren't fit for regular duties...."

"Ma'am," Huber said, hearing the unmeant chill in his voice. "We're the

Slammers. It's not just that everybody in the Regiment's a volunteer--that's true of a lot of merc outfits. We're the best. We've got the best equipment, we get the best pay, and we've got our pick of recruits. People who don't do the job they're assigned to because they don't feel like it, they go someplace else. By their choice or by the Colonel's."

"I'm sorry," the woman said. "I didn't mean...."

Her voice trailed off. She *had* meant she expected people on medical profile to slack off while they were on temporary assignment to ash and trash jobs.

Huber gave an embarrassed chuckle. He felt like an idiot to 've come on like a regimental recruiter to somebody who was trying to offer praise.

"Ma'am," he said, "I was out of line. I just mean the folks who stay in the Slammers are professionals. Sgt. Tranter, now--he could retire on full pay. If he didn't, it's because he wants to stay with the Regiment. And I'd venture a guess--"

Made more vivid by Huber's own sudden vision of being cast out of the Slammers.

--that it's because he's grown to like being around other professionals, other people who do their job *because* it's their job. You don't find a lot of that in the outside world."

She looked at him without expression. "No," she said, "you don't. Well, Lt. Huber, again I'm glad for your arrival. And if it's agreeable to you, I prefer 'Hera' to 'ma'am' or 'Deputy Graciano'. But of course it's up to you as section head to decide on the etiquette."

"Hera's fine and so's Arne," Huber said in relief. "And ah--Hera? About Capt. Cassutt?"

She gestured to affect disinterest.

"No, you deserve to hear," Huber said, "after the way I got up on my haunches. Cassutt had a bad time the deployment before this one. It wasn't his fault, mostly at any rate, but he got pulled out of the line."

The same way I did, but Huber didn't say that.

"He's off on leave, now," he continued. "He'll either dry out or he'll *be* out. If he's forcibly retired, his pension will keep him in booze as long as his liver lasts--but he won't be anywhere he's going to screw up the business of the Regiment."

"I...." Hera said. There was no way of telling what the thought she'd smothered unspoken was. "I see that. Ah, here's the transport that I've either purchased on contracted for, based on volume requirements sent me by the regimental prep section. If you'd like to go over them...?"

She'd set her holographic projector on a 360° display so that they both could read the data from their different angles. Huber checked the list of tonnage per unit per day, in combat and in reserve, then the parallel columns giving vehicles and payloads. Those last figures floored him.

"Ma'am?" he said, caretting the anomaly with his light wand. "Hera, I mean, these numbers--oh! They're dirigibles?"

She nodded warily. "Yes, we use dirigibles for most heavy lifting," she explained. "They're as fast as ground vehicles even on good roads, and we don't have many good surface roads on Plattner's World."

She frowned and corrected herself, "In the Outer States, that is. Solace has roads and a monorail system for collecting farm produce."

"I don't have anything against dirigibles in general," Huber said, then said with the emphasis of having remembered, "*Hera*. But in a war zone they're--"

He kept his voice steady with effort as his mind replayed a vision of the dirigible crashing into Rhodesville's brick-faced terminal building and erupting like a volcano.

--too vulnerable. We'll need ground transport, or--how about surface effect cargo carriers? Do you have them here? They look like airplanes, but their wings just compress the air between them and the ground instead of really flying."

"I don't see how that could work over a forest," Hera said tartly--and neither did Huber, when he thought about it. "And as for vulnerable, trucks are vulnerable too if they're attacked, aren't they?"

"A truck isn't carrying five hundred tonnes for a single powergun bolt to light up," Huber said, careful to keep his voice neutral. "And it's not chugging along fifty or a hundred meters in the air where it's a target for a gunner clear in the next state if he knows what he's doing."

He shook his head in memory. "Which some of them will," he added. "If Solace hired Harris's Commando, they'll get a good outfit for air defense too."

Hera didn't move for a moment. Her hands on the display controller in her lap could've been carved from a grainless wood. Then she said, "Yes, if we...."

Her fingers caressed the controller. The display shifted like a waterfall; Huber could watch the data, but they meant nothing to him at the speed they cascaded across the air-projected holograms.

"Yes....," Hera repeated, then looked up beaming. "There isn't anything like enough ground transport available in the UC alone, but if the other Outer States send us what *they* have, we should be able to meet your needs. Though roads...."

"We can use dirigibles to stage supplies to forward depots," Huber said, leaning forward reflexively though the data still didn't mean a cursed thing to him. "We'll need a topo display and for that matter a battle plan to know where, but--"

"Can you do that?" Hera said, also excited by breaking through a barrier she hadn't known of a few moments before. "The map and the battle plan?"

Huber laughed out loud--for the first time since Rhodesville, he guessed. "The topo display's easy," he said, "but lieutenants don't plan regimental operations by themselves. I'll forward what we have to the S-3, the Operations Officer, and his shop'll fill us in when they know more."

He locked his faceshield down and used the helmet's internal processor to sort for the address of the Log Section Deputy's console, then transfer the Regiment's full topographic file on Plattner's World to it. The commo helmet had both the storage and processing power to handle the task alone, but given where they were and the size of the file, Huber let Central in Base Alpha do the job.

He raised his faceshield and saw Hera disconnecting from a voice call. "Oh!" he said. "I'm sorry, I didn't explain--"

"I assumed you were doing your job," she said with a smile that exalted a face already beautiful. "And I can't tell you how reassuring it is to, ah, work for someone who can do that."

She gestured to the phone. "That's what I've been doing too," she said. "I just talked to my father. He's...."

She waved a hand in a small circle as if churning a pile of words.

"I've been told who he is," Huber said, saving Hera the embarrassment of explaining that Agis Graciano was the most important single person in the state which had employed the Slammers.

"Good," Hera said with a grateful nod. "When I said we can get ground transport from the other Outer States, I didn't mean that I could commandeer it myself. Father has connections; he'll use them. It'll have to be made to look like a business transaction, even though the other states are helping to fund the UC's stand against the tyranny of Solace."

Huber nodded acknowledgment. He knew better than to discuss politics with anybody, especially a local like Hera Graciano. It wasn't that he didn't understand political science and history: the Academy had an extensive mandatory curriculum in both subjects.

The problem was that the locals always wanted to talk about the rightness of their position. By the time they'd hired Hammer's Slammers, the only right that mattered rode behind iridium armor.

"Ah, Arne?" Hera said. "It's going to be two hours, maybe three, before father gets back to me. We've certainly got enough work to occupy us till then--"

Their wry grins mirrored one another.

"--but do you have dinner plans for tonight?"

"Ma'am," Huber said in surprise, "I don't know any more about rations than I did about billeting."

The thought made him turn his head. Sgt. Tranter was back; he gave Huber the high sign. The locals still in the office buried their expressions quickly in their consoles; they'd obviously been covertly watching Hera and their new chief the instant before.

"As a matter of fact, I haven't eaten anything yet today," Huber continued to his deputy. "Hera. I didn't have an appetite before my meeting with Maj. Steuben."

Hera's face changed. "I've met Maj. Steuben," she said without expression.

Huber nodded understandingly. "I told you we were the best the UC could hire," he said. "Joachim Steuben is better at his job than anybody else I've heard of. But because of what his job is, he's an uncomfortable person to be around for most people."

For everybody who wasn't a conscienceless killer; but Huber didn't say that aloud.

"Yes," Hera said, agreeing with more than the spoken words. "Well, what I was saying--can I take you out to dinner tonight, lieutenant? You've kept me from making a terrible mistake with the dirigibles, and I'd like to thank you."

"I'd be honored," Huber said, perfectly truthful and for a wonder suppressing his urge to explain he was just doing his job. She knew that, and if she wanted to go to dinner with him, that was fine. He didn't guess it much mattered who paid, not judging from the off-planet dress suit she was wearing even here at work.

"When you say 'trucks,'" he resumed, "what're we talking about? Five-tonners or little utility haulers?"

Hera Graciano was *very* attractive. And if Arne Huber didn't keep his mind on his business, he was going to start blushing.

The restaurant was quite obviously expensive. Huber could afford to eat here on his salary, but he probably wouldn't have chosen to.

"Well, I suppose you could say there was significant opposition to confronting Solace," Hera said, frowning toward a point beyond Huber's shoulder as she concentrated

on the past. "Some people are always afraid to stand up for their rights, that's inevitable. But the vote in our Senate to hire your Regiment was overwhelming as soon as we determined that the other Outer States would contribute to the charges. My brother's faction only mustered nineteen votes out of the hundred, with seven abstentions."

Wooden beams supported the restaurant's domed ceiling. Their curves were natural, and the polished branches which carried the light fixtures seemed to grow from the wall paneling. The food was excellent--boned rabbit in a bed of pungent leaves, Huber thought, but he'd learned on his first deployment never to ask what went into a dish he found tasty.

His only quibble was with the music: to him it sounded like the wind blowing over a roof missing a number of tiles. The muted keening didn't get in the way of him talking with Hera, and her voice was just as pleasant as the rest of the package.

"And all your income, the income of the Outer States," Huber said, "comes from gathering the raw moss? There's no diversification?"

"The factories refining the *Pseudofistus thalopsis* extract into Thaldorol base are in Solace," she said, gesturing with her left hand as she held her glass poised in her right. "That isn't the problem, though: we could build refineries in the Outer States quite easily. We'd have to import technicians for the first few years, but there'd be plenty of other planets ready to help us."

"But...?" said Huber, sipping his own wine. It was pale yellow, though that might have been a product of the beads of light on the branch tips which illuminated the room. They pulsed slowly and were color-balanced to mimic candleflames.

"But we couldn't build a spaceport capable of handling starships the size of those that now land at Solace," Hera explained. "It's not just the expense, though that's bad enough. The port at Solace is built on a sandstone plate. There's no comparable expanse of bedrock anywhere in the Outer States. An artificial substrate that could support three-hundred kilotonne freighters is beyond possibility."

"I've seen the problems of bringing even small ships down in the UC," Huber said with studied calm. "Though I suppose there's better ports than Rhodesville's."

Hera sniffed. "Better," she said, "but not much better. And of course even the refined base is a high-volume cargo, so transportation costs go up steeply on small hulls."

The dining room had about twenty tables, most of them occupied by expensively-dressed locals. The aircar Hera'd brought him here in was built on Nonesuch; it had an agate-faced dashboard and showed a number of other luxury details. She'd parked adjacent to the restaurant, in a tree-shaded lot where the other vehicles were of comparable quality.

Huber wore his newest service uniform, one of three he'd brought on the deployment. The Regiment had a dress uniform, but he'd never bothered to invest in one. Even if he *had* owned such a thing it'd be back in his permanent billet on Nieuw Friesland, since a platoon leader in the field had less space for personal effects than he had formal dinner occasions.

Huber's commo helmet was in his quarters, but his holstered pistol knocked against the arm of the chair he sat in. The Colonel hadn't issued a revised weapons policy for Plattner's World yet; and even if he had, Huber would probably have stuck his 1-cm powergun in a cargo pocket even if he couldn't carry it openly. He'd felt naked in Rhodesville when he saw the buzzbomb swing in his direction and he couldn't do

anything but duck.

"Ten months ago...," Hera went on. "Ah, that's seven months standard. Ten months ago, Solace raised landing fees five percent. The buyers, Nonesuch and the other planets buying our base and processing it to Thaldrol, refused to raise the price they'd pay. We in the Outer States, the people who actually do the work, we're left to make up the difference out of our pockets!"

It didn't look like Hera had spent much of her life ranging the forest and gathering moss, but Huber wouldn't have needed his history courses to know that politicians generally said 'we' when they meant 'you'. The funny thing was, they generally didn't see there was a difference.

That wasn't a point a Slammers officer raised with a well-placed member of the state which had hired the Regiment. Aloud he said, "But you do have multiple markets for your drugs? For your base, I mean?"

"Nonesuch takes about half the total," Hera said, nodding agreement. "The rest goes to about a dozen other planets, some more than others. The final processing takes temperature and vibration control beyond anything we could do on Plattner's World. Building a second spaceport would be easier."

She paused, looking at her wine, then across at Huber again. "The government of Nonesuch has been very supportive," she said carefully. "They couldn't get directly involved, but they helped to make the arrangements that led to our hiring Hammer's Regiment."

"But they wouldn't simply raise their payments for Thaldrol base?" Huber said, keeping his tone empty of everything but mild curiosity.

"Where would it stop?" Hera blazed. "If those vultures on Solace learn that they can get away with extortion, they'll keep turning the screws!"

Based on what Huber knew about the price of anti-aging drugs, he didn't think a five-percent boost in the cost of raw materials was going to make a lot of difference, but he didn't need to get into that. There was more going on than he saw; more going on than Hera was willing to tell him, that was obvious; and probably a lot more going on than even she knew.

None of that mattered. The result of all those unseen wheels whirling was that Colonel Hammer had a lucrative contract, and Lt. Arne Huber was spending the evening with a very attractive woman.

"My brother claims that even with other states defraying the costs, the UC is taking all the military risk itself," Hera continued. "But somebody has to have the courage to take a stand! When the other states see Solace back down, they'll be quick enough to step up beside us and claim credit!"

"It didn't seem when I arrived...," Huber said, the chill in his guts cooling his tone more than he'd intended. "That backing down was the way Solace was planning to play it."

He smiled, hoping that would make his words sound less like the flat disagreement that he felt. Hera was smart and competent, but she was turning her face from the reality the ambush at Rhodesville would've proved to a half-wit. It wasn't what she wanted to believe, so she was using her fine intellect to prove a lie.

"Well then, if they persist--" she said, but broke off as the waiter approached the table.

"More wine, sir and madam?" he asked. "Or perhaps you've changed your mind about dessert?"

The outside door opened, drawing Huber's eyes and those of the waiter. It was late for customers, though the restaurant hadn't started dimming the lights.

"Patroklos!" Hera said, her head turning because Huber's had. "What are you doing here?"

Not coming for dinner, that was for sure. Senator Patroklos Graciano was a good twenty years older than his sister. He was a beefy man, not fat but heavier than he'd have been if he were a manual laborer. His features were regular, handsome even, but they showed no resemblance whatever to Hera's.

Huber wondered if the two children had different mothers, but that wasn't the question at the top of his mind just this instant. He got to his feet; smoothly, he thought, but he heard the chair go over behind him with a crash on the hardwood floor and he didn't care about *that* either.

"What am I doing here?" Patroklos said. He had a trained voice; he used its volume to fill the domed restaurant. "I'm not entertaining the butcher who destroyed Rhodesville, that's one thing! Are you part of the mercenaries' price, dear sister? Your body as an earnest for the bodies of all the women of the United Cities?"

Chairs were scuffling all over the room; a pair of diners edged toward the service area since Patroklos stood in front of the outside door. There were two waiters and the female manager looking on, but they'd obviously decided to leave the business to the principals involved for now.

Huber was as sure as he could be that there wasn't going to be trouble--worse trouble--here unless something went badly wrong. Patroklos wasn't nearly as angry as he sounded, and he'd come into the restaurant by himself. If his bodyguards had been with him--Patroklos was the sort who had bodyguards--it would've been a different matter.

"Patroklos, you're drunk!" Hera said. He wasn't drunk, but maybe Hera didn't see her brother's real plan. "Get out of here and stop degrading the family name!"

She hadn't gotten up at the first shouting. Now that Patroklos was only arm's length away, she was trapped between the table and her brother's presence.

Huber thought of walking around to join her, but that might start things moving in the wrong direction. From the corners of his eyes he could see that others of the remaining customers were eyeing him with hard faces. The 'butcher of Rhodesville' line had probably struck a chord even with people who didn't support Patroklos' position on the Regiment as a whole.

"Degrade the family name?" Patroklos shouted. "A fine concern for a camp follower!"

Huber scraped the table back and toward his left side, spilling a wine glass and some flatware onto the floor. Freed from its presence, Hera jumped to her feet and retreated to where Huber stood. He swung her behind him with his left arm.

That wasn't entirely chivalry. Huber wasn't worried about her brother, but the chance of somebody throwing a bottle at him from behind was another matter.

If I'd known there was going to be a brawl, I'd have asked for a table by the wall. He grinned at the thought; and that was probably the right thing to do, because Patroklos' mouth--open for another bellow--closed abruptly.

The Slammers didn't spend a lot of training time on unarmed combat: people

didn't hire the Regiment for special operations, they wanted an armored spearhead that could punch through any shield the other guy raised. Huber wasn't sure that barehanded he could put this older, less fit man away since the fellow outweighed him by double, but he wasn't going to try. Huber would use a chair with the four legs out like spearpoints and then finish the job with his boots....

"Fine, hide behind your murderer for now, you whore!" Patroklos said, but his voice wasn't as forceful as before. He eased his body backward though as yet without shifting his feet. "You'll have nowhere to hide when the citizens of our glorious state realize the madness into which you and our father have thrown them!"

Patroklos backed quickly, then jerked the door open and stomped out into the night. The last glance he threw over his shoulder seemed more speculative than angry or afraid.

"Ma'am!" Huber said, turning his head a few degrees to face the manager without ever letting his eyes leave the empty doorway. "Get our bill ready ASAP, will you?"

"Maria, put it on my account!" Hera said. She swept the room with her gaze. In the same clear, cold voice she went on, "I won't bother apologizing for my brother, but I hope his display won't encourage others into drunken boorishness!"

She's noticed the temper of the onlookers too, Huber thought. Stepping quickly, he led the girl between tables Patroklos had emptied with his advance. They went out the front door.

The night air was warm and full of unfamiliar scents. A track of dust along the street and the howl of an aircar accelerating--though by now out of sight--indicated how and where Patroklos had departed. There were no pedestrians or other vehicles; the buildings across the street were offices over stores, closed and dark at this hour.

Huber sneezed. Hera whirled with a stark expression.

"Just dust," he explained. He rubbed the back of his hand over his eyes. "Or maybe the tree pollen, that's all. Nothing important."

He felt like a puppeteer pulling the strings of a body that'd once been his but was now an empty shell. The thing that walked and talked like Arne Huber didn't have a soul for the moment; that'd been burned out by the adrenalin flooding him in the restaurant a few moments ago. The emotionless intellect floating over Huber's quivering body was bemused by the world it observed.

"I can't explain my brother's behavior!" Hera said. She walked with her head down, snarling the words to her feet. "He's angry because father remarried--there's no other reason for what he does!"

Huber didn't speak. He didn't care about the internal politics of the Graciano clan, and the girl was only vaguely aware of his presence anyway. She was working out her emotions while he dealt with his. They were different people, so their methods were different.

It hadn't been a lucky night, but things could've been worse. Just as at Rhodesville....

They stepped around the corner of the building into the parking lot. Things got worse.

There were at least a dozen of them, maybe more, waiting among the cars. They started forward when Huber and the girl appeared. They had clubs; maybe some of them had guns besides. The light on the pole overhead concealed features instead of revealing

them.

“Who are you?” Hera called in a voice of clear command. “Attendant! Where’s the lot attendant?”

“Get back into the restaurant,” Huber said. “*Now!*”

He grabbed the girl’s shoulder with his left hand and swung her behind him, a more brutal repetition of what he’d done with her earlier. Patroklos had been posturing in the restaurant. These thugs of his, though--this was meant for real.

Huber thumbed open his holster flap and drew his pistol. He held it muzzle-down by his thigh for the moment.

“He’s got a gun!” said one of the shadowy figures in a rising whisper. That was a good sign; it meant they hadn’t figured on their victim being armed.

“Shut up, Lefty!” another voice snarled.

The pistol had a ten-round magazine. Huber knew how to use the weapon, but if these guys were really serious he wouldn’t be able to put down more than two or three of them before it turned into work for clubs and knives....

Huber backed a step, hoping Hera had done as he ordered; hoping also that there wasn’t another gang of them waiting at the restaurant door to close the escape route. If Huber got around the corner again, he could either wait and shoot every face that appeared or he could run like Hell was on his heels. Running was the better choice, but he didn’t think--

“Easy now,” said the second voice. “Now, all to--“

A big aircar--it might’ve been the one that ferried Huber from Base Alpha to Benjamin--came down the street in a scream of fans. It hit hard, lifting a doughnut of dust from the unpaved surface. That wasn’t a bad landing, it was a combat insertion where speed counted and grace just got you killed.

Half the score of men filling the back of the vehicle wore khaki uniforms; they unassed the bouncing aircar with the ease of training and experience. The civilians were clumsier, but they were only a step or two behind when the Slammers tore into the local thugs with pipes, wrenches, and lengths of reinforcing rod.

“Run for it!” shouted the voice that’d given the orders before. He was preaching to the converted; none of his gang had stayed around to argue with the rescue party. Huber stood where he was, now holding the pistol beside his ear.

“Arne!” Doll Basime called. “This way, fast!”

She stood in the vehicle’s open cab, her sub-machine gun ready but not pointed. Sergeant Tranter was at the rear of the aircar; he had a 2-cm shoulder weapon. Both wore their faceshields down, probably using light-enhanced viewing. If a thug had decided to turn it into a gunfight, he and his buddies were going to learn what a *real* gunfight was like.

Huber ran for the truck. He heard screams from the parking lot; thumps followed by crackling meant that some of the expensive aircars were going to have body damage from being used as trampolines by troops in combat boots.

That didn’t even begin to bother Huber. He remembered the eyes on him in the restaurant.

“Recall! Recall! Recall!” bellowed the loudspeaker built into Tranter’s commo helmet. The other troopers had helmet intercoms, but the civilians didn’t.

“How’d you get the word, Doll?” Huber said as he jumped into the back of the

vehicle, just behind Basime. Another of the party had been driving; the cab would be crowded even with two.

Doll was too busy doing her job to answer him. Her throat worked as she snarled an order over the intercom, though with the faceshield down her helmet muted the words to a shadow.

Sirens sounded from several directions. They were coming closer.

The rescue party piled into the back of the truck. Two Slammers and a civilian remained in the parking lot, putting the boot in with methodical savagery. Their victim was out of sight behind the parked cars. One of the thugs must've tried to make a fight out of it--that, or he'd hit somebody while flailing about in panic.

"Move it, Bayes!" Tranter called.

Huber pointed his pistol skyward and fired. The *thump!* and blue flash both reflected from overhanging foliage. For a moment the bolt was as striking as the blast from a tank's main gun. The three stragglers looked up in palpable shock, then ran to join their fellows.

Huber hung over the truck's sidewall to make sure Hera was all right. She wasn't in sight, so she'd probably gotten back into the restaurant. If she hadn't, well, better the local cops look into it than that the cops spend their energy discussing matters with the rescue party. *That* was a situation that could go really wrong fast.

The fans roared. Kelso, a civilian clerk from Log Section, was in the driver's seat. From the way the vehicle'd nosed in, Huber'd guessed a trooper was at the controls.

The aircar slid forward, gathering speed but staying within a centimeter of the gravel. Faces staring from the restaurant's front windows vanished as the car roared by in cascades of dust and pebbles.

Only when the vehicle had reached 90 kph and the end of the block did Kelso lift it out of ground effect. He banked *hard* through a stand of towering trees.

Huber could still hear sirens, but they didn't seem to be approaching nearly as fast as a moment before. Witnesses being what they were, Huber's single pistol shot had probably been described as a tank battle.

Doll put her hand on Huber's shoulder. Raising her faceshield she shouted over the windrush, "That was a little too close on the timing, Arne. Sorry about that."

"It was perfect, Doll," he shouted back. The aircar was racketing along at the best speed it could manage with the present overload. That was too fast for comfort in an open vehicle, but torn metal showed where the folding top had been ripped off in a hurry to lower the gross weight. "Perfect execution, too. What brought you?"

They were heading in the direction of the Liaison Office, staying just over the treetops. Kelso had his running lights off. Red strobes high in the sky marked the emergency vehicles easing gingerly toward the summons.

"That's a funny thing," Doll said, her pretty face scrunched into a frown. "Every trooper billeted at Base Benjamin got an alert, saying a trooper needed help--and if there was shooting, the best result would be courts martial for everybody involved. It gave coordinates that turned out to be you. We hauled ass till we got here."

She shrugged. "Sergeant Tranter invited some civilian drivers from Log Section, too. I guess there was a card game going when the call came."

"But who gave the alert?" Huber said. "Did the--"

He'd started to ask if the restaurant manager had called it in; that was dumb, so he

swallowed the final words. There hadn't been time for a civilian to get an alarm through the regimental net.

"There was no attribution," Basime said. She lifted her helmet and ran a hand through her short hair; it was gleaming with sweat. "That means it had to come from Base Alpha; and it had to be a secure sector besides, not the regular Signals Office."

"The White Mice?" Huber said. That was the only possible source, but.... "But if it was them, why didn't they respond themselves?"

"You're asking me?" Doll said. She grinned, but the released strain had aged her by years. She'd known she was risking her career--and life--to respond to the call.

"I will say, though," she added quietly, "that whoever put out the alarm seems to be a friend of yours. And that's better than having him for an enemy."

"Yeah," said Huber. Through the windscreen he could see the converted school and the temporary buildings behind it. Kelso throttled back.

Much better to have him for a friend; because the people whom Joachim Steuben considered enemies usually didn't live long enough to worry about it.

This time Huber had his equipment belt unbuckled and his knife in his hand before he stepped out of the four-place aircar in which Sgt. Tranter had brought him to the Provost Marshal's office. The sky of Plattner's World had an omnipresent high overcast; it muted what would otherwise be an unpleasantly brilliant sun and was turning the present dawn above Base Alpha into gorgeous pastels.

Tranter had shut down the car in the street. He sat with his arms crossed, staring into the mirrored faceshields of the White Mice on guard.

The guards didn't care, but the trivial defiance made Tranter feel better; and Huber felt a little better also. He wasn't completely alone this time as he reported as ordered to Major Steuben.

"Go on through, lieutenant," said faceless guard who took Huber's weapons. "He's waiting for you."

Huber walked down the hall to the office at the end. The door was open again, but this time Steuben dimmed his holographic display as Huber approached. The major even smiled, though that was one of those things that you didn't necessarily want to take as a good omen.

"Close the door behind you, lieutenant," Steuben said as Huber raised his hand to knock. "I want to discuss what happened last night. How would you--"

He waited till the panel closed behind Huber's weight; it was a much sturdier door than it looked from the thin plastic sheathing on the outside.

"--describe the event?"

"Sir," Huber said. He didn't know what Steuben expected him to say. The truth might get some good people into difficulties, so in a flat voice he lied, "I was eating with my deputy in a restaurant she'd chosen. When we went out to get into her aircar, we were set on by thugs who'd been breaking into cars. Fortunately some off-duty troopers were passing nearby and came to our aid. My deputy went home in her own vehicle--"

He sure hoped she had. He didn't have a home number to call Hera at, and the summons waiting at Huber's billets to see the Provost Marshal at 0600 precluded Huber from waiting to meet Hera when she arrived at office.

"--and I returned to my quarters with the fellows who'd rescued us."

“Want to comment on the shooting?” Steuben asked with a raised eyebrow. “The use of powerguns in the middle of Benjamin?”

“Sir,” Huber said, looking straight into the hard brown eyes of Colonel Hammer’s hatchetman, “I didn’t notice any shooting. I believe the business was handled with fists alone, though some of the thugs may have had clubs.”

Steuben reached into his shirt pocket and came out with a thin plastic disk. He flipped it to Huber, who snatched it out of the air. It was the pitted gray matrix which had held copper atoms in place in a powergun’s bore; a 1-cm empty, fired by a pistol or sub-machine gun.

Specifically, fired from Huber’s pistol.

“Sir, I don’t have anything useful to say about this,” Huber said. The bastard across the desk could only kill him once, so there wasn’t any point in going back now. “If it came from the scene of the fight, it must have been fired after we left there.”

“It’s old news, lieutenant,” Steuben said, “and we won’t worry about it. If there had been a shooting incident... let’s say, if you’d shot one or more citizens of the UC, you’d have been dismissed from the Regiment. It’s very possible that you’d have been turned over to the local authorities for trial. Our contract with the UC really *is* in the balance as a result of what happened at Rhodesville.”

“Then I’m glad there wasn’t any shooting, sir,” Huber said. “I intend to stay inside the Liaison Office for the foreseeable future so that there won’t be a repetition.”

The holographic scenes on the major’s wall weren’t still images as Huber had thought the first time he’d seen them. What had initially been a tiny dot above the horizon had grown during the interview to a creature flying at a great height above the snowfields.

Steuben giggled. Huber felt his face freeze in a rictus of horror.

“Aren’t you going to tell me it isn’t fair, lieutenant?” the major said. “Or perhaps you’d like to tell me that you’re an innocent victim whom I’m making the scapegoat for political reasons?”

For the first time since the the ambush at Rhodesville, Huber felt angry instead of being frightened or sick to his stomach. “Sir, you know it’s not fair,” he said, much louder than he’d allowed his voice to range before in this room. “Why should I waste my breath or your time? And why should you waste *my* time?”

“I take your point, lieutenant,” the major said. He rose to his feet; gracefully as everything he did was graceful. He was a small man, almost childlike; he was smiling now with the same curved lips as a serpent’s. “You’re dismissed to your duties--unless perhaps there’s something you’d like to ask me?”

Huber started to turn to the door, then paused with a frown. “Sir?” he said. “How many people could have given Harris’s Commando--given Solace--accurate information as to when a single platoon was landing at Rhodesville?”

“Besides members of the Regiment itself?” Steuben said, his reptilian smile a trifle wider. Huber nodded tersely. He wasn’t sure if the question was serious, so he treated it as though it was.

“A handful of people within the UC government certainly knew,” the major said. “A larger number, also people within the government or with connections to it, could probably have gotten the information unattributably. But it wasn’t something that was being discussed on the streets of Rhodesville, if that’s what you meant.”

“Yes sir,” said Huber. “That’s what I meant.”

He went out the door, closing it behind him as he’d been told to do the first time he’d left Major Steuben’s presence. It was good to have the heavy panel between him and the man in that room.

He walked quickly. There was a lot of work waiting in Log Section; and there was another job as well, a task for the officer who’d been commanding platoon F-3 when it landed at Rhodesville.

Huber hadn’t forgotten Kolbe or the crew of *Foghorn*; and he hadn’t forgotten what he owed their memory.

Hera Graciano arrived at Log Section half an hour after Huber and the sergeant got back from Base Alpha, well before the staff was expected to show up for work. She stepped in, looking surprised to find the Slammers at their consoles.

“I rearranged things a bit.” Huber said with a grin. “I moved my desk into the main office here; I figure we can use Captain Cassutt’s office for a break room or something, hey?”

“Well, if you like...,” Hera said. “But I don’t think...”

“If they see me...,” Huber explained quietly. Sergeant Tranter watched with the care of an enlisted man who knows that the whims of his superiors may mean his job or his life. “Then it’s easier for them to believe we’re all part of the same team. Given the number of factions in the UC right at the moment, I’d like there to be a core of locals who figure I’m on whatever their side is.”

“I’m very sorry about last night!” Hera said, bowing her head in the first real confusion Huber had noticed in her demeanor. She crossed the room quickly without glancing at Tranter by the door. “That isn’t normal, even for my brother. I think something’s gone wrong with him, badly wrong.”

“Any one you walk away from,” Huber said brightly. He was immensely relieved to learn that Hera was all right, but he *really* didn’t want to discuss either last night or the wider situation with her. “I’m paid to take risks, after all. Let’s let it drop, shall we?”

“Yes,” she said, settling herself behind her desk. Her expression was a mixture of relief and puzzlement. “Yes, of course.”

Hera hadn’t powered up the privacy shield as yet, so Huber could add smilingly, “By the way--does the UC have a central population registry? An office that tracks everybody?”

“What?” Hera said in amazement. “No, of course not! I mean, do other planets have that sort of thing? We have a voter’s list, is that what you mean?”

“Some places are more centralized, yeah,” Huber said, thinking of the cradle to grave oversight that the Frisian government kept on its citizens. Those who stayed on the planet, at least; which was maybe a reason to join a mercenary company, though the Colonel kept a pretty close eye on his troopers as well.

Through the White Mice...

“No matter,” he continued. “Would you download a list of all the Regiment’s local employees and their home addresses to me before you get onto your own work, Hera? It may be in this console I inherited from the good captain, but I sure haven’t been able to locate it.”

“Yes, of course...,” she said, bringing her console live. She seemed grateful for an

excuse to look away from Huber. Last night had been a real embarrassment to her.

One more thing to thank her brother for. It was pretty minor compared to the rest of what Huber suspected Patroklos was involved in, though.

Other clerks were coming in to the office; perhaps merely to make a good impression on the new director, but maybe they'd heard about the business last night and hoped to get more gossip. Huber grinned blandly and set to work with the file that appeared in his transfer box.

The business of the day proceeded. Log Section had been running perfectly well without Huber for the past three weeks, but as more starships landed--three in one mad hour at the relatively large field here in Benjamin, and four more during the day at other members of the United Cities--there were frequent calls to the Officer in Command of Log Section. None of the Slammers calling wanted to talk to a wog: they wanted a *real* officer wearing the lion rampant of the Regiment. They were fresh out of stardrive, with headaches and tempers to match.

Huber fielded the calls. He almost never knew the answer to the angry questions himself, but he dumped quick summaries to Hera through his console while holding the speaker on the line. As a general rule she had the answer for him--a vehicle dispatched, a storage warehouse located, or a staff member on the way to the scene--in a minute or less. When it was going to take longer, that warning appeared on Huber's console and he calmed the caller down as best he could.

Not everybody wanted to calm down. An artillery lieutenant shouted, "Look, are you going to stop being a dickheaded pissant and get my bloody hog out of the marsh you had us land in?"

Huber shouted back, "Look, redleg, when my platoon drove out of the ship there was a kill-team from Harris's Commando waiting for us. We managed. If you fools can't avoid a hole in the ground, then don't expect a lot of sympathy here! Now, I say again--there's a maintenance and recovery platoon due in Youngblood's Vale tomorrow and I'll vector the recovery vehicle to you people in Hennessey ASAP. If you'd prefer to keep saying you want me to drag heavy equipment out of my ass because your driver's blind, you can talk to an open line!"

There was a pause, then, "Roger, we'll wait. Two-Ay-Six out."

One thing a soldier learns by surviving any length of time in a war zone is that you use whatever you've got available. Huber smiled grimly.

In between the work of the Log Section, he played with the data he was gathering on his other job. Huber didn't have the sort of mind that leaped instantly to the right answer to complex questions. He worked things over mentally, turning the bits and fitting them first this way, then another. It was a lot like doing jigsaw puzzles. At the end of the process there was an answer, and he guessed he'd be working on it till he found what the answer was.

Hera left for lunch. She invited Huber but didn't argue when he turned her down, and she didn't argue either when he insisted she go on as she'd planned instead of staying in the office because he was staying. Huber knew as well as the next guy how important it was to get some time away from the place you were working; otherwise you could lock yourself down tighter than happened to most prisoners.

It didn't apply to him, of course. He was too busy to worry about where his butt happened to be located at the moment.

The Regiment already employed more than three hundred UC citizens. There'd be over a thousand by the time the deployment was complete, and that was without counting the number of recreation personnel hired to deal with the off-duty requirements of the combat troopers. On a place like Plattner's World most of that last group would be freelance, but the Colonel would set up and staff official brothels if the free market didn't appear to him to be up to the job.

Central Repair was one of the larger employers of local personnel. CR was where heavily damaged vehicles were brought: for repair if possible, for stripping and scrapping if it weren't. Line maintenance was mostly done at company level, but at battalion in the case of major drive-train components; Central Repair dealt with more serious or complex problems.

Fencing Master was thus far the Regiment's only serious battle damage on Plattner's World, but there were plenty of things that could go wrong with complex vehicles transiting between star systems. Furthermore, there were a dozen blowers deadlined from the previous contract. They'd been shipped to Plattner's World for repair instead of being held behind and repaired in place.

Late in the day, Huber got around to checking addresses. There were many groupings of employees who gave the same home address. That didn't concern him. Besides members of the same family all working in the booming new industry, war, many of the personnel came into Benjamin from outlying locations. Those transients lived in apartments or rooming houses here in the city.

Three of the mechanics in Central Repair lived at what the voter registration records--forwarded to Huber by Doll Basime; he didn't go through Hera to get them--listed as the address of Senator Patroklos Graciano. *That* was a matter for concern.

Huber looked around the office. Hera was out of the room; off to the latrine, he supposed. That made things a little simpler. Kelso, the local who'd driven the rescue vehicle the night before, looked up and caught his eye. Huber gestured him over, into the area of the privacy screen.

"Sir?" Kelso said brightly. His thin blond hair made him look younger than he probably was; close up Huber guessed the fellow was thirty standard years old. Kelso dressed a little more formally than most of the staff and he seemed to want very much to please. *Looking for a permanent billet with the Regiment*, Huber guessed; which was all right with Huber, and just might work out.

"I've got three names and lists of former employers here," Huber said, running hardcopy of the employment applications as he spoke. "I want you to check these out--just go around to the listed employers and ask about the people. I'm not looking for anything formal. If the boss isn't in--"

He handed the three flimsies to Kelso.

"--but the desk clerk remembers them, that's fine. Take one of the section jeeps, and I'd rather have the information sooner than later."

"Sir, it's pretty late..." Kelso said with a concerned expression. "Should I chase people down at their homes if the business is closed, or--"

Huber thought for a moment, then laughed. "No, nothing like that," he said. "But if you can get me the data before tomorrow midday, I'd appreciate it."

"You can count on me, sir!" the fellow said. Holding the hardcopy in his hand, he trotted past the consoles--some of them empty; it *was* getting late--and out the door just

as Hera returned.

They passed; she glanced questioningly from the disappearing local and then to Huber. Huber waved cheerfully and immediately bent to his console, calling up information on the Officer in Charge of Central Repair. Hera might have asked what was going on with Kelso if Huber hadn't made it pointedly clear that he was busy.

Which he was, of course, but it bothered him to treat her this way. Well, it'd bother her worse if he told her what he was doing; and there was also the risk that...

Say it: the risk that this bright, competent, woman, attractive in all respects-- would be loyal to her brother if push came to shove, instead of being loyal to the regiment of off-planet killers she happened to be working for at the moment. Surviving in a combat environment meant taking as few risks as possible, because the ones you couldn't avoid were plenty bad enough.

CR was at present under the command of Senior Warrant Leader Edlinger; Buck Edlinger to his friends, and Huber knew him well enough from previous deployments to be in that number. Instead of doing a data transmission through the console, Huber made a voice call. It took a moment for Edlinger to answer; he didn't sound pleased as he snarled, "Edlinger, and who couldn't bloody wait for me to call back, tell me!"

"Arne Huber, Buck," Huber replied calmly. He'd been shouted at before--and worse. Edlinger'd been squeezed into a place too tight for him to wear his commo helmet, and he wasn't best pleased to be dragged out of there to take a voice call slugged URGENT. "I've got a problem that may turn out to be your problem too. Are your people working round the clock right now?"

"Via!" Edlinger said. "No, not by a long ways. You're in Log Section now, Huber? What're you about to drop on us? Did a shipload of blowers come down hard?"

"Nothing like that, Buck," Huber said. Edlinger must have checked Huber's status when *Fencing Master* came in for repair. "I want to check what three of your locals 've been working on, and I want to check it when the locals and their friends aren't around."

"What d'ye know about maintenance oversight, Huber?" Edlinger said; not exactly hostile, but not as friendly as he'd have been if it hadn't seemed an outsider was moving in on his territory.

"I know squat," Huber said, "but I've got a tech here, Sergeant Tranter, who you gave curst good fitness reports to back when when he worked for you. And you can help, Buck--I'd just as soon you did. But this isn't a joke."

That was the Lord's truth. This could be much worse than a company of armored vehicles getting bent in a starship crash.

"You got Tranter?" Edlinger said. "Oh, that's OK, then. Look, Huber, I can have everybody out of here by twenty hundred hours if that suits you. OK?"

"That's great, Buck," Huber said, nodding in an enthusiasm that Edlinger couldn't see over a standard regimental voice-only transmission. "We'll be there at twenty hundred hours."

"Hey Huber?" Edlinger added as he started to break the connection.

"Right?"

"Can you tell me who you're worried about, or do I have to guess?"

That was a fair question. "Their names are Galieni, Osorio, and Triulski," Huber said, reading them off the display in front of him. "Do they ring a bell?"

Edlinger snorted something between disgust and real concern. "Ring a bell?" he

said. "You bet they do. They're the best wrenches I've been able to find. I'd recommend them all for permanent status in the Regiment if they wanted to join."

Huber grimaced. "Yeah, I thought it might be like that," he said.

"And Huber?" Edlinger added. "One more thing. You wanted to know what they're working on? That's easy. They're putting your old blower, *Fencing Master*, back together. She'll go out late tomorrow the way things are getting on."

When Tranter came in with Bayes, the sergeant laughing as the trooper gestured in the air, Huber cued his helmet intercom and said, "Sarge? Come talk to me in my little garden of silence, will you?"

A console with regimental programming like Hera Graciano's could eavesdrop on intercom transmissions unless Huber went to more effort on encryption than he wanted to. It was simpler and less obtrusive to use voice and the privacy screen that was already in place around his area of the office.

Tranter patted Bayes on the shoulder and sauntered over to the lieutenant as though the idea was his alone rather than a response to a summons. Huber was becoming more and more impressed with the way Tranter picked up on things without need for them to be said. Sometimes Huber wasn't sure exactly what he'd say if he did have to explain.

"Do we have a problem, El-Tee?" Tranter asked as he bent over the console, resting his knuckles on the flat surface beside the holographic display.

Huber noticed the 'we'. He grinned. "We're going maybe to solve one before it crops up, Sarge," he said. "Are you up to poking around in a combat car tonight?"

"I guess," Tranter said, unexpectedly guarded. "Ah--what would it be we're looking for, El-Tee? Booze? Drugs?"

Huber burst out laughing when he understood Tranter's concern. "Via, Sarge!" he said. "You've been on field deployments, haven't you? All that stuff belongs, and so does anything else that helps a trooper get through the nights he's not going to get through any other way. No, I'm looking for stuff that our people didn't put there. I don't know what it'll be; but I do know that if something's there, I want to know what it is. OK?"

Tranter beamed as he straightened up. "Hey, a chance to be a wrench again instead of pushing electrons? You got it, boss!"

"Pick me up at the front of the building at a quarter of eight, then," Huber said. "We need to be at Central Repair on the hour--I've cleared it with the chief. Oh, and Tranter?"

"Sir?" The sergeant looked... not worried exactly, but wary. He wasn't going to ask what was going on; but something was and though he seemed to trust Huber, a veteran non-com knows just how disastrously wrong officers' bright ideas are capable of going.

"Don't talk about it," Huber said. "And you know that gun you were holding last night? Think you could look one up for me?"

"Roger that, sir!" Tranter said, perfectly cheerful again. "Or if you'd rather have a sub-machine gun?"

Huber shook his head. "I want something with authority," he explained. "I don't think there's a chance in a million we'll have somebody try to pull something while we're flying between here and Central Repair tonight... but I do think that if it happens,

I'm going to make sure we're the car still in the air at the end of it."

Chuckling in bright good humor, the sergeant returned to his console. The other clerks looked at him, but Hera was watching Huber instead.

Huber cued his intercom and said, "What's the latest on the ground transport situation, Hera? Did your father come through?"

The best way to conceal the rest of what was going on was to bury it in the work of Log Section; and the fact that quite a lot of work was getting done that way was a nice bonus.

Central Repair was a block of six warehouses in the north-central district of Benjamin. Engineer Section had thrown up a wall of plasticized earth around the complex as a basic precaution, but the location was neither secure nor really defensible despite the infantry company and platoon of combat cars stationed there.

Tranter brought the four-place aircar down at CR's entrance gate. They were tracked all the way by a tribarrel of the combat car there--*Flesh Hook*, another F Company vehicle--and, for as long as the aircar was above the horizon, by the guns of two more cars within the compound. Huber would've been just as happy to ride to Repair in a Regimental-standard air-cushion jeep, but Tranter was proud of being able to drive an aircar. There were plenty of them in Log Section's inventory since they were the normal means of civilian transportation on Plattner's World.

Tranter wasn't a good aircar driver--he was too heavy-handed, trying to outguess the AI--and there was always the chance that a trooper on guard would decide the car wobbling toward the compound was hostile despite Huber's extreme care to check in with detachment control. Still, Tranter was investing his time and maybe more to satisfy his section leader's whim; the least the section leader could do was let him show off what he fondly imagined were his talents.

The car bumped hard on the gravel apron in front of Central Repair. The gate was open, but *Flesh Hook* had parked to block the entrance. Huber raised his faceshield and said, "Lt. Huber, Log Section, to see Chief Edlinger. He's expecting me."

"Good to see you, El-Tee," called the trooper behind the front tribarrel. The driver watched from his hatch, but the two wing guns were unmanned; they continued to search the sky in air defense mode under detachment control. "You guys earned your pay at Rhodesville, didn't you? Curst glad it was you and not us in F-2."

"I don't know that I feel the same way," Huber said; but he even if he'd shouted, he couldn't have been heard over the rising howl of drive fans as the combat car shifted sideways to open the passage. Tranter drove through the gate in surface effect.

Central Repair would've been much safer against external attack if it had been located within Base Alpha. It remained separate because of the greater risk of having so many local personnel--well over a hundred if combat operations persisted for any length of time--inside the Regimental HQ. Losing Central Repair would be a serious blow to the Regiment; the sort of damage a saboteur could do within Base Alpha wouldn't be survivable.

The warehouses had been placed following the curve of the land instead of being aligned on a grid pattern. Tranter followed the access road meandering past the front of the buildings. Three of them were empty, held against future need. The sliding doors of the fourth from the gate were closed, but light streamed out of the pedestrian entrance set

beside them.

Three troopers looked down from the warehouse roof as Tranter pulled the aircar over. Huber waved at them with his left hand; he held the 2-cm powergun in his right.

Chief Edlinger met them at the door. "Good to see you again, Huber," he said. "Tranter, you need a hand?"

"I haven't forgotten how to carry a toolchest, chief," the sergeant said, lifting his equipment out of the back of the car with a grunt. And of course he hadn't, but his mechanical leg didn't bend the way the one he'd been born with had; balance was tricky with such a heavy weight.

Huber had offered help when they got into the car. If Tranter wanted to prove he could move a toolchest or do any other curst thing he wanted without help, then more power to him.

"I appreciate this, Buck," Huber said as he entered the warehouse. The air within was chilly and had overtones of lubricant and ozone; it was a place which only tolerated human beings. "I'd like there not to be a problem, but--"

"But you think there is," Edlinger completed grimly. He was a wiry little man whose sandy hair was more gray than not; he'd rolled his sleeves up, showing the tattoos covering both arms. Time and ingrained grease had blurred their patterns. If even the chief could identify the designs, he'd have to do it from memory.

Huber laughed wryly. "I think so enough that if we don't find something, I'll worry more," he admitted. "I won't believe it isn't there, just that we didn't find it."

"That looks like the lady," Tranter said, striding purposefully across the cracked concrete floor. There were two other combat cars in the workshop, but *Fencing Master* wore like a flag across her bow slope the marks of the buzzbomb and the welding repairs. Iridium was named for Iris, the goddess of the rainbow, because of the range of beautiful colors that heat spread across the metal.

Tranter and the chief spent the next two hours taking off panels, running diagnostics, and sending fiber optic filaments up passages that Huber hadn't known were parts of a combat car's structure. He stayed clear, sitting mostly on an empty 40-liter lubricant container. The techs worked with the natural rhythm of men who'd worked together often in the past; they spoke in a verbal shorthand, and they never got in one another's way.

It struck Huber that the chief must really have regretted losing Tranter from his section. Huber hadn't known the sergeant very long, and *he'd* bloody well miss him if something happened.

"Hel-lo, what have we here?" Tranter called, his voice echoing out of the iridium cavern into which he'd crawled. He'd removed a hull access plate beneath the driver's compartment; only his feet showed outside the opening. "Chief, what d'ye make of this? I'm sending it on channel seven."

Huber locked his faceshield down and cued it to the imagery Tranter's probe was picking up. He had no context for what he was looking at: a series of chips were set in a board bracketed between iridium bulkheads. On the bottom of the board was an additional chip, attached to the circuits on the other side with hair-fine wires.

"Hang on, I've got the catalog," Edlinger replied. They were using lapel mikes because their commo helmets were too bulky for some of the spaces they were slipping into. "Can you give me more magnification? Are those two reds, a blue and a...."

“Purple and white, chief,” Tranter said. “The fourth line’s a purple and white.”

“Roger that,” said Edlinger. “A simple control circuit, sonny. Probably made on Sonderby, wouldn’t you say?”

A dozen chips flashed up on Huber’s faceshield beside the real-time image, matches that the chief’s AI had found in a catalog of parts and equipment. They could’ve been yea many mirror images as far as Huber could tell, but the techs and their electronics apparently found minute differences among them.

“Galieni said he’d been trained on Sonderby,” Edlinger added in a somber voice. “I don’t doubt that he was, but I’d be willing to bet that it wasn’t North Star Spacelines that hired him when he left school.”

The original image blanked as Sergeant Tranter squirmed back out of the equipment bay. Huber raised his faceshield as the chief walked around from the other side of the car.

“All right,” said Huber. “What does it do? Is it a bomb?”

“It isn’t a bomb, El-Tee,” Tranter said, squatting for a moment before he got to his feet. “It’s a control circuit, and it’s been added to the air defense board. It’s got an antenna wire out through the channel for the running lights--that’s how I noticed it.”

“They could’ve set it to switch off the guns when somebody sent a coded radio signal, Huber,” Edlinger added. “That’s the most likely plan, though it depends on exactly where on the board they were plugged in. I’m not sure we can tell with just the maintenance manuals I’ve got here.”

“I’ve got a better guess than that, Buck,” Huber said, standing and feeling his gut contract. “Shutting the guns off wouldn’t be a disaster if it just affected one car in a platoon. What if that chip locked all three tribarrels on full automatic fire in the middle of Benjamin? What do you suppose would happen to the houses for a klick in every direction?”

“Bloody hell,” Tranter muttered.

Huber nodded. “Yeah, that’s exactly what would happen: bloody hell. And coming on top of Rhodesville, the UC government’d cancel the Regiment’s contract so fast we’d be off-planet with our heads swimming before we knew what happened.”

The technicians looked at one another, then back to Huber. “What do we do now, El-Tee?” Tranter asked.

“Have you disconnected the chip?” Huber asked.

“You bet!” Tranter said with a frown of amazement. “I cut both leads as soon as I saw them. Whatever the thing was, I knew it didn’t belong.”

“Then we shut things up and I go talk to Major Steuben in the morning,” Huber said. “I’d do it now, but--“

He grinned with wry honesty.

“--not only do I think it’ll keep, I *don’t* think I’m in any shape to talk to the major before I’ve had a good night’s sleep.”

Sergeant Tranter rubbed the back of his neck with his knuckles. “And maybe a stiff drink or two, hey El-Tee?” he said. “Which I’m going to share with you, if you don’t mind.”

“I’m buying for both of you for what you’ve done tonight,” Huber said, thinking of the coming interview. “And I just wish you could carry it the rest of the way with the major, but that’s my job...”

Major Steuben wasn't available through the regimental net at dawn plus thirty, at noon, or at any of the other times Huber checked for him into mid afternoon. Huber didn't leave a message--he was sure Steuben would learn about the calls as soon as he wanted to know--and it didn't even cross his mind to talk to some other member of the White Mice. Little as Huber liked the major, this was no time to bring a subordinate up to speed on the problem. He began to wonder if he was going to reach Steuben before 1800 hours, close of business for the regular staff.

Huber smiled at his own presumption; he'd gotten to think that Steuben would be there any time he wanted him--because the major had been in his office the times he summoned Huber. Why his mind should've reversed the pattern was just one of those mysteries of human arrogance, Huber supposed.

It wasn't like Log Section didn't have work to do, after all.

Now that more crews and vehicles were on the ground, the Regiment was setting up a second operations base outside Arbor Palisades, the second-largest of the United Cities and located on the northeast border with Solace. Two platoons from L Troop plus support vehicles would be leaving Base Alpha tonight for the new location. Huber with the approval of the S-3 shop had decided to send a column of thirty wheeled vehicles along with them. The civilian trucks could've moved on their own--the UC and Solace weren't at war despite the level of tension--but it gave both the troopers and the civilian drivers practice in convoy techniques.

"Via, El-Tee," Sergeant Tranter said, shaking his head in amusement. "You better not let anybody in L Troop catch you in a dark alley. The trip 'll take 'em four times as long and be about that much rougher per hour besides."

"Right," said Huber. "And nobody's shooting at them. Which won't be the case if we have to do it for real, as we bloody well will when those trucks start supplying forward bases inside Solace territory as soon as the balloon goes up."

Huber didn't take lunch, though he gnawed ration bars at his desk. Most people claimed the bars tasted like compressed sawdust, but Huber found them to have a series of subtle flavors. They were bland, sure, but bland wasn't such a bad thing. The commander of a line platoon had enough excitement in his life without needing it in his food.

At random moments throughout the day, Huber checked in with the Provost Marshal's office. At 1530 hours instead of a machine voice announcing, "Unavailable," Major Steuben himself said, "Go ahead."

"Sir!" Huber said. His brain disconnected but he'd rehearsed his approach often enough in his head to blurt it out now: "May I see you ASAP with some information about the Rhodesville ambush?"

"If by 'as soon as possible' you mean in fifteen minutes, lieutenant..." Steuben said. He had a pleasant voice, a modulated tenor as smooth and civilized as his appearance; and as deceptive, of course. "Then you may, yes."

"Sir, on the way, sir!" Huber said, standing and breaking the connection.

"Tranter!" he shouted across the room as he rounded his console; he snatched the 2-cm powergun slung from the back of his chair. "I need to be in front of Major Steuben in fifteen minutes! That means an aircar, and I don't even pretend to drive the cursed things."

Huber waved at Hera as he followed the sergeant out the door. "I'll be back when I'm back," he said. "I don't expect to be long."

The good Lord knew he *hoped* it wouldn't be long.

He and Tranter didn't talk much on the short flight from Benjamin to Base Alpha. The sergeant turned his head toward his passenger a couple times, but he didn't speak. Huber was concentrating on the open triangle formed by his hands lying in his lap. He was aware of Tranter's regard, but he really needed to compose himself before he brought this to Major Steuben.

This time when Huber got out of the car in front of the Provost Marshal's, he reflexively scooped the 2-cm shoulder weapon from the butt-cup holding it upright beside his seat. If he'd been thinking he'd have left the heavy weapon in the vehicle, but since he was holding it anyway he passed it to the watching guard along with his pistol and knife.

"Expecting some excitement, lieutenant?" said the man behind the mirrored faceshield as he took the weapons.

"What would a desk jockey like me know about excitement?" Huber said cheerfully as he opened the main door.

He wondered about his comment as he strode down the hallway. It struck him that it was the first interaction he'd had with the guards that wasn't strictly professional. As with so much of his life since he'd landed on Plattner's World, Huber had the feeling that he was running downhill in the darkness and the only thing that was going to save him was pure dumb luck.

Major Steuben nodded him into the office. Huber closed the door behind him and without preamble said, "Sir! Three of the techs in Central Repair are living at Senator Graciano's townhouse. That is, Patroklos Graciano, the--"

"I know who Patroklos Graciano is," Steuben said through his cold smile. "Continue."

"Right," said Huber. He was blurting what he knew in the baldest fashion possible. He understood Major Steuben too well to want to exchange empty pleasantries with the man. "We checked--Chief Edlinger and a former tech in my section, that is--checked the combat car they were working on. There's an extra control chip in the air defense board with an antenna for external inputs. I think it was meant to send the tribarrels berserk while the car was in the middle of Benjamin."

"You've disconnected the chip?" Steuben said. For a moment there was a spark from something very hard glinting in his voice.

"Yes sir, but that's all we've done thus far," Huber said. His muscles were tight across his rib cage and his tongue seemed to be chipping out the words. In a firefight he wouldn't have been this tense, because he'd have known the rules....

"Good," said the major, smoothly unconcerned again. "You've properly reported the matter and your suspicions, lieutenant. Now go back to your duties in Logistics and take no more action on the matter. Do you understand?"

Huber felt the anger rise in his throat. "No sir," he said. He spoke in a normal voice, maybe even a little quieter than usual. "I don't understand at all. Senator Graciano is certainly a traitor, probably the traitor who set up me and my platoon at Rhodesville. We can't leave him out there, looking for another place to slide the knife into us. One more chance may be just the one he needed!"

Steuben didn't rise, but he leaned forward very slightly in his seat. He wore his 1-cm pistol in a cutaway holster high on his right hip. Inlays of platinum, gold, and rich violet gold-uranium alloy decorated the weapon's receiver, but the pistol was still as deadly as the service weapon Huber had left with the guards outside the building.

And the dapper little man who wore it was far more deadly than Huber had ever thought of being.

"You've shown initiative, lieutenant," Steuben said. "Because of that, I'm going to politely point something out to you instead of treating your insolence as I normally would: even if everything you believe regarding Senator Graciano is true, he remains *Senator* Graciano. He has a large following in the United Cities and is in some ways more influential in the remainder of the Outer States than any other UC politician, his father included. Probably the best way to boost his standing still further would be for off-planet mercenaries to accuse him of being a traitor."

"Sir, I lost friends at Rhodesville!" Huber said.

"Then you were lucky to have friends to begin with, lieutenant," the major said, rising to his feet. "Friendship is an experience I've never shared. Now *get* back to Log Section and your duties. Or submit your resignation from the Regiment, which I assure you will be accepted at the moment you offer it."

Huber's lips were dry. He didn't speak.

"I asked you before if you understood," Steuben said, his left fingertips resting lightly on the desk top. "You chose to discuss the matter. Now the only thing for you to understand is this: you will go back to your duties in Log Section, or you will resign. *Do* you understand?"

"Sir!" Huber said. "May I return to my duties now?"

"Dismissed, lieutenant," the major said. "And lieutenant? I don't expect to see you again until I summon you."

As Huber walked down the hallway, his back to the door he'd closed behind him, he kept thinking, *It's in the hands of the people who ought to be handling it. It's none of my business any more.*

The trouble was, he knew that at the level of Steuben and Colonel Hammer it was a political problem. Political problems were generally best solved by compromise and quiet neglect.

Huber didn't think he'd ever be able to chalk up the sound of Kolbe's body squishing down *Fencing Master's* bow slope to political expedience, though.

"Got any plans for tonight, El-Tee?" Sergeant Tranter asked as he followed Huber up the stairs to Log Section. "There's a game on in the maintenance shed."

The paint on the stairwell walls had been rubbed at the height of children's shoulders; it was a reminder of what the building had been. Whether it'd ever be a school again depended on how well the Slammers performed. If things went wrong, the Outer States--at least the United Cities--would be paying reparations to Solace that'd preclude luxuries like public schooling.

"I'm thinking about throwing darts into a target," Huber muttered. "And don't ask whose picture I'm thinking of using for the target!"

Hera wasn't at her desk. In her absence and Huber's, a senior clerk named Farinelli was in titular charge--and he obviously had no idea of how to deal with the two

armed Slammers who stood before his console. Their backs were to the door and the remainder of the staring locals.

“Can I help you gentle--“ Huber began, politely but with a sharp undertone. A stranger listening could have guessed that he didn’t much like aggrieved troopers making personal visits to Log Section when a call or data transmission would get the facts into his hands without disrupting the office. Midway in Huber’s question, the troopers turned.

“Deseau!” Huber said. “And you, Learoyd! Say, they didn’t reassign you guys too, did they?”

The troopers smiled gratefully, though Learoyd knuckled his bald scalp in embarrassment and wouldn’t meet Huber’s eyes. “Nothing like that, lieutenant,” the sergeant said. “We’re here to take *Fencing Master* back to the unit as soon as they assign us a couple bodies from the Replacement Depot. I figured you wouldn’t mind if we stopped in and saw how you were making out.”

From the way Deseau spoke and Learoyd acted, they weren’t at all sure that Huber *wouldn’t* mind. They were line troopers, neither of them with any formal education; the only civilians they were comfortable with were whores and bartenders. It must have been a shock to come looking for the lieutenant who’d been one of them and find themselves in an office full of well-dressed locals who stared as if they were poisonous snakes.

Huber thought suddenly of the ropes of 2-cm bolts sending the dirigible down in fiery destruction over Rhodesville. There was never a poisonous snake as dangerous as either of these two men; or as Arne Huber, who *was* after all one of them.

“Mind?” he said. “I’m delighted! Sergeant Tranter--“

Huber took his men by either hand and raised his voice as his eyes swept the office. “Everybody? These are two of the people who kept me alive at the sharp end: my blower captain Sergeant Deseau and Trooper Learoyd, my right wing gunner. That won’t mean much to you civilians, but you can understand when I say I wouldn’t have survived landing on Plattner’s World if it weren’t for these men!”

Learoyd muttered something to his shoes, but he looked pleased. Deseau’s expression didn’t change, but he didn’t seem to mind either.

“Do you have plans for tonight?” Huber asked. “Ah, Sergeant Tranter? Do you think we could find these men a billet here in the compound?” He switched his eyes back to Deseau and Learoyd, continuing, “There’s usually a card game, and I think I can promise something to drink.”

“And if he couldn’t get you booze, I can,” Tranter said cheerfully. “Sure, we can put you guys up. It’s best the El-Tee not go wandering around, but you won’t miss Benjamin.”

“If I never see Warrant Leader Niscombe,” Learoyd said to his boots, “it’ll be too soon.”

“Niscombe runs the enlisted side of Transient Depot, sir,” Deseau explained. “He figures that something bad’ll happen if he lets folks passing through from field duty just rest and relax. He’ll find a lot of little jobs for us if we bunk there.”

“Something bad’ll happen to Niscombe if he ever shows his face out in the field,” Learoyd muttered with a venom Huber hadn’t expected to hear in that trooper’s voice.

“Which he won’t do, you can be sure of that.”

“Right,” said Huber. “I’ll send a temporary duty request for the two of you

through channels, but for now consider yourselves at liberty.”

He glanced at Hera’s empty desk. “Ah, does anybody know when Deputy Graciano’s due back?” he asked the room in a raised voice.

Everybody stared at him; nobody answered the question, though. It struck Huber that all this was out of the locals’ previous experience with the Slammers. When Captain Cassutt was director, there hadn’t been troopers with personal weapons standing in the middle of the office.

“Sir?” said Kelso from the back of the room.

“What?” said Huber. “Via, if you know something, spit it out!”

“Yessir,” said Kelso, swallowing. “Ah, I don’t know when the deputy’s coming back, but she went out as soon as I gave her the information you requested, sir.”

“Information?” Huber repeated. For a moment he didn’t know what the local was talking about; nonetheless his stomach slid toward the bottom of an icy pit.

Then he remembered. “You mean the previous employment data.”

“Yessir!” said Kelso, more brightly this time. “None of those techs had worked at the places they put down. Not a soul remembered any one of the three!”

Huber opened his mouth to ask another question, but he really didn’t have to. He’d given Kelso the full applications including the applicants’ home addresses. That’s what Hera had seen, and she wouldn’t have had to check to recognize the address of her brother’s townhouse. The fact that the men’s listed employment records were phony would be a red flag to anybody with brains enough to feed themselves.

“What’s the matter, sir?” Tranter said.

“I screwed up,” Huber said. His face must’ve gone white; he felt cold all over. “It’s nobody’s fault but mine.”

Hera could’ve gone to her father with the information; she could’ve gone to the civil authorities--though Huber wasn’t sure the United Cities had security police in the fashion that larger states generally did; or she could even have gone to Colonel Hammer. Any of those choices would have been fine. The possibility that scared Huber, though, was that instead--

His helmet pinged him with an URGENT call. Huber wasn’t in a platoon and company net, so the sound was unexpected. He locked down his faceshield to mute the conversation and said, “Fox three-six, go ahead!”

In his surprise--and fear--he’d given his old call signal. Somebody else was leader of platoon F-3 nowadays.

“Arne, this is Doll,” said Lieutenant Basime’s voice. “We don’t exactly monitor the civil police here, but we are a signals liaison section. Ah--”

“Say it!” Huber snapped.

“There was a police call just now,” Doll said mildly. She was a solid lady, well able to stand up for her rights and smart enough to know when that wasn’t the best choice. “There’s an aircar down west of town. The driver and sole occupant is dead. Initial report is that it’s your deputy, Hera Graciano.”

“Right,” said Huber. He felt calm again, much as he’d been as he watched the stern of the blazing dirigible slide slowly into the terminal building. The past was the past; now there were only the consequences to deal with. “Can you download the coordinates of the crash site?”

“You’ve got ‘em,” Doll said. There was an icon Huber hadn’t noticed in the terrain

box on his faceshield. *“Anything more I can do, snake?”*

“Negative, Doll,” Huber said. “I’ll take it from here. Three-six out.”

He broke the connection and raised his faceshield. “Trouble, El-Tee?” said Sergeant Tranter. Tranter had been in the field, but he didn’t have a line trooper’s instincts. Deseau and Learoyd stood facing outward from their former platoon leader; their feet were spread and their sub-machine guns slanted in front of them. They weren’t aiming at anything, not threatening anybody; but they hadn’t had to ask if there was trouble, and they were ready to deal in their own way with anything that showed itself.

The civilian clerks looked terrified, as they well should have been.

“Tranter, I need a ride,” Huber said. “West of town there’s been an aircar crash. I’ll transfer the coordinates to the car’s navigation system.”

“We’re coming along,” Deseau said. He continued to watch half the room and the doorway, while the trooper watched the clerks on the other side. “Learoyd and me.”

“You go relax,” Huber said in a tight voice. “This is Log Section business, not yours.”

“Fuck that,” said Deseau. “You said we’re at liberty. Fine, we’re at liberty to come with you.”

“Right,” said Huber. He was still holding his big shoulder weapon; he hadn’t had time to put it down since he entered the office. “You--Farinelli? You’re in charge till I get back.” He thought for a moment and added, “Or you hear that I’ve been replaced.”

“But Director Huber!” the clerk said. “What if Deputy Graciano comes back?”

“She won’t,” Huber snarled. Then to his men he added, “Come on, troopers. Let’s roll!”

“She was up about a thousand meters,” said the cop. He was a young fellow in a blue jacket and red trousers with a blue stripe down the seam. For all that he was determined not to be cowed by the heavily-armed mercenaries, he behaved politely instead of blustering to show his authority. “She had the top down and wasn’t belted in, so she came out the first time the car tumbled.”

It was probably chance then that the body and the vehicle had hit the ground within fifty meters of one another, Huber realized. Hera had gone through tree-branches face-first, hit the ground, and then bounced over to lie on her back. Her features were distorted, but he could’ve identified her easily if the UC policeman had been concerned about that; he wasn’t.

There was almost no blood. The dent in the center of her forehead had spilled considerable gore over Hera’s face, but that had been dry when the branches slashed her and wiped much of it off. Huber was no pathologist, but he’d seen death often and in a variety of forms. Hera Graciano had been dead for some length of time before her body hit the ground.

“Why did the car tumble?” Tranter said, kneeling to check the underside of the crumpled vehicle. It’d nosed in, then fallen back on its underside with its broken frame cocked up like an inverted V. “There’s an air turbine that deploys when you run outa fuel. It generates enough juice to keep your control gyro spinning.”

“You’re friends of the lady?” the cop asked. He was expecting backup, but the Slammers had arrived almost as soon as he did himself. He seemed puzzled, which Huber was willing to grant him the right to be.

But it was a really good thing for the cop that he hadn't decided to throw his weight around. Huber wasn't in a mood for it; and while he wasn't sure how Sgt. Tranter would react, he knew that the two troopers from *Fencing Master* would obey without question if their lieutenant told them to blow the local's brains out.

"She was my deputy," Huber said. "She worked for the Regiment in a civilian capacity."

"Somebody whacked the turbine with a heavy hammer," Tranter said, rising from where he knelt. "That's why it's still stuck in the cradle."

He pulled at an access plate on the wreck's quarter panel. It didn't come till he took a multitool from his belt and gave the warped plastic a calculated blow.

The local policeman looked at the sky again and fingered his lapel communicator. He didn't try to prod the dispatcher, though. "There was an anonymous call that the car had been circling up here and just dropped outa the sky," he explained. "D'ye suppose it was maybe, well... suicide?"

"No," said Huber. "I don't think that."

"That's good," said the cop, misunderstanding completely. "Because you guys might not know it, but this lady was from a bloody important family here in the UC. I don't want to get caught in some kinda scandal, if you see what I mean."

"I see what you mean," Huber said. His eyes drifted across Tranter for a moment, then resumed scanning their surroundings. They were within ten clicks of the center of Benjamin, but the forest was unbroken. Trees on Plattner's World had enough chlorophyll in their bark to look deep green from a distance. Their branches twisted like snakes, but the leaves were individually tiny and stuck on the twigs like a child's drawing.

The cop grimaced. "I wish the Commander Miltianas would get the lead outa his pants and take over here," he went on. "Of course, he probably doesn't want to be mixed up in this either--but curse it, it's what they're paying him the big bucks for, right?"

"There's four fuel cells in this model," Tranter said, his head inside the vehicle's stern section. "The back three are disconnected and there's a puncture in the forward cell."

He straightened, looking puzzled and concerned. "El-Tee," he said. "It looks to me like--"

"Drop the subject for now, sergeant," Huber said. He gestured to their own vehicle, a ten-place bus rather than the little runabout Tranter had used to ferry Huber alone. Four troopers in combat gear would've been a crowd and a burden for the smaller car. "We'll talk on the way back to the office."

"But--" said Tranter.

Deseau rapped the side of Tranter's commo helmet with his knuckles. "Hey!" Deseau said. "He's the man, right? He just gave you an order!"

Tranter looked startled, then nodded in embarrassment and trotted for the bus. There were three aircars approaching fast from Benjamin. Two had red strobe lights flashing, but they weren't running their sirens.

Huber turned to the cop. "Thanks for letting us look over the site," he said. "We'll leave you to your business now. And we'll get back to our own."

"Yeah, right," said the local man with a worried frown. "I sure hope I don't wind up holding the bucket on this one. A death like this can be a lot of trouble!"

“You got that right,” Huber muttered as he got into the cab with Tranter. The tech already had the fans live; now he boosted power and wobbled into the air, narrowly missing a line of trees.

Kelso would have done a better job driving, but this was no longer business for civilians. Huber locked his faceshield down.

“Unit, switch to intercom,” he ordered. Nobody but the three men in the car with him could hear the discussion without a lot of decryption equipment and skill. “Tranter, I’m leaving you in the circuit, but I’m not expecting you to get involved. You’ll have to keep your mouth shut, that’s all. Can you handle that?”

“*Fuck not being involved,*” Tranter said. His hands were tight on the control yoke and his eyes were straight ahead; a degree of hurt sounded in his voice. “*I knew the deputy better than you did, sir. She was a good boss; and anyway, she was one of ours even if she didn’t wear the uniform. Which I do.*”

“Right,” said Huber. “Deseau and Learoyd, you don’t know the background. I figure her brother killed her or one of his thugs did. It was probably an accident, but maybe not. She’d have gone to see him, threatening to tell the world he was an agent for Solace. She maybe even guessed he’d set up the ambush at Rhodesville.”

Sergeant Deseau made a sound loud enough to trip the intercom. In something like a normal voice he went on, “*We gonna take care of him, then?*”

“He’s got a lot of pull,” Huber warned. “I went to Major Steuben about him and got told to mind my own business. It’s going to make real waves if somebody from the Regiment takes him out. *Real* waves, about as bad as it gets.”

“*El-Tee?*” Learoyd said, frustration so evident in his tone that Huber could visualize the trooper trying to knuckle his bald scalp through his commo helmet. “*Just tell us what to do, right? That’s your job. Don’t worry about me and Frenchie doing ours.*”

Learoyd was correct, of course. He had a simple approach of necessity, and he cut through all the nonsense that smarter people wrapped themselves up with.

“Right,” Huber repeated. “There’ll be a gang of thugs at the guy’s townhouse, and they’ll have guns available even if they aren’t going out on the street with them just yet. It could be that he’d got a squad of Harris’s Commando on premises. I doubt it because of the risk to him if it comes out, but we’ve got to figure we’re going up against people who know what they’re doing.”

He paused, arranging his next words. The aircar was over Benjamin now, but Tranter was taking them in a wide circuit of the suburbs where the tree cover was almost as complete as over the virgin forest beyond.

“For that reason,” Huber said, “I figure to borrow *Fencing Master* for the operation. There’s a detachment leaving Central Repair for Base Alpha tonight. We’ll tag onto the back and trail off when we’re close to the bastard’s compound. If we can, we’ll duck back to CR when we’re done--but I *don’t* expect to get away with this, troops.”

“*I been shot at before,*” Deseau said calmly. “*I can’t see anything worse’n that that’s going to happen if they catch us.*”

Learoyd didn’t bother to speak. Huber heard the *clack* as the trooper withdrew his sub-machine gun’s loading tube, then locked it back home in the receiver. Like he’d said, he was getting ready to do his part of the job.

“Sergeant Tranter,” Huber said, turning to the tech beside him. “Now that you

know what we're talking about, I think it'd be a good night for you to spend playing cards back at the billets. You're a curst good man, but this really isn't your line of work."

Tranter's face was red with suppressed emotion. "*Guess you'll need a driver, right?*" he snapped. "*Guess I've driven the Lord's great plenty of combat cars, shifting them around for repair. I guess it bloody well is my line of work. Sir.*"

"Well in that case, troopers..." Huber said. "We'll leave our billets for Central Repair at twenty hundred. Start time for the draft is twenty-one hundred, but they'll be late. That'll make the timing about right."

Tranter muttered, "*Roger,*" Deseau grunted, and Learoyd said as little as he usually did. There wasn't a lot *to* say at this point.

Huber wasn't frightened; it was all over but the consequences.

Senator Patroklos Graciano was about to learn the consequences of fucking with Hammer's Slammers.

The racket of drive fans made every joint in the girder-framed warehouse rattle and sing. There were two other combat cars besides *Fencing Master*; all three thirty-tonne monsters were powered up, their fans supporting them on bubbles of pressurized air. From the way the interior lights danced, some of the overhead fixtures were likely to be sucked down into the intakes unless the cars either shut down or drove out shortly.

"Are they going to get this bloody show on the road?" Sergeant Deseau muttered. His faceshield was raised and he wasn't using intercom. Huber wouldn't have understood the words had he not been looking into Deseau's face and watching his lips move.

"Can it!" Huber snapped. "Take care of your own end and keep your mouth shut."

Deseau grimaced agreement and faced front again. They were all nervous. Well, three of them were, at any rate; Learoyd seemed about as calm as he'd been a couple hours before, when he'd been methodically loading spare magazines for his sub-machine gun.

"*Seven Red, this is Green One,*" ordered the detachment commander--an artillery captain who happened to be the senior officer in the temporary unit. If the move had been more serious than the five kilometers between Central Repair and Base Alpha, the detachment would've been under the control of a line officer regardless of rank. "*Pull into place behind Five Blue. Eight Red, follow Seven. Unit, prepare to move out. Green One out.*"

"Tranter, slide in behind the second blower," Huber ordered. "Don't push up their ass, just keep normal interval so it looks like we belong."

Chief Edlinger had put Huber and his men on the list for admission to Central Repair, but that was easily explained if it needed to be. The chief didn't know what Huber planned--just that it wasn't something he *ought* to know more about. The detachment commander didn't know even that: he was in the self-propelled gun at the head of the column. The eight vehicles leaving for Base Alpha included two tanks, four combat cars, the detachment commander's hog, and a repair vehicle with a crane and a powered bed that could lift a combat car. The crews didn't know one another, and nobody would wonder or even notice that a fifth car had joined the procession.

The lead car jerked toward the open door. The driver, inexperienced or jumpy from the long wait, canted his nacelles too suddenly. The bow skirt dipped and scraped a shrieking line of sparks along the concrete floor until the car bounced over the threshold

and into the open air.

The second car followed with greater care but the same lack of skill, rising nearly a hand's-breadth above the ground. The skirts spilled air in a roar around their whole circuit. The car wallowed; when the driver nudged his controls forward Huber thought for a moment the vehicle was going to slide into the jamb of the sliding door.

"They've got newbie crews," Tranter said scornfully. *"Via, I could do better than that with my eyes closed!"*

"I'll settle for you keeping your eyes open and not attracting attention," Huber said tightly. "Move out, trooper."

Fencing Master slid gracefully through the doorway and into the warm night. The skirts ticked once on the door track, but that wasn't worth mentioning.

"Let's keep him, El-Tee," Deseau said with a chuckle. *"He's as good as Kolbe was, and a curst sight better than I ever thought of being as a driver."*

"Keep your mind on the present job, didn't I tell you?" Huber snapped. "I don't think any of us need to plan for a future much beyond tonight."

Deseau laughed. Huber supposed that was as good a response as any.

Plattner's World had two moons, but neither of them was big enough to provide useful illumination. The pole lights placed for security when these were warehouses threw bright pools at the front of each building, but that just made the night darker when *Fencing Master* moved between them. Huber locked down his faceshield and switched to light enhancement, though he knew he lost depth perception that way.

The rocket howitzer at the head of the column started to negotiate the gate to the compound, then stopped. The tank immediately following very nearly drove up its stern.

There was something wrong with the response of the hog's drive fans, or at any rate the captain thought there was. He began arguing off-net with Repair's Charge of Quarters, a senior sergeant who replied calmly, *"Sir, you can bring it back and park it in the shop if you like, but I don't have authority to roust a technician at this hour on a non-emergency problem."*

The CQ kept saying the same thing. So did the captain, though he varied the words a bit.

Huber listened for a moment to make sure that what was going on didn't affect him, then switched to intercom. "They'll get it sorted out in a bit," he said to his crew. "The blowers are straight out of the shops and half the crews are newbies. Nothing to worry about."

"Who's worried?" Deseau said. He stretched at his central gun station, then turned and grinned at Huber.

They were all wearing body armor, even Tranter. The bulky ceramic clamshells crowded the fighting compartment even without the personal gear and extra ammo that'd pack the vehicle on a line deployment.

Learoyd could've been a statue placed at the right wing gun. He didn't fidget with the weapon or with the sub-machine gun slung across his chest. Though his body was motionless, his helmet would be scanning the terrain and careting movement onto his lowered faceshield. If one of the highlights was a hostile pointing a weapon in the direction of *Fencing Master*--and anybody pointing a weapon at *Fencing Master* was hostile, in Learoyd's opinion and Huber's as well--his tribarrel would light the night with cyan destruction.

“Unit, we’re moving,” the captain announced in a disgruntled tone. As he spoke, the hog shifted forward again. Metal rang as the drivers of other vehicles in the column struggled to react to the sudden change from stasis to movement. Skirts were stuttering up and down on the roadway of stabilized earth. *You get lulled into patterns in no time at all....*

Huber brought up a terrain display in the box welded to the pintle supporting his tribarrel. *Fencing Master* didn’t have the sensor and communications suite of a proper command car, but it did have an additional package that allowed the platoon leader to project displays instead of taking all his information through the visor of his commo helmet.

The column got moving in fits and starts; a combat car *did* run into the back of the tank preceding it. Huber’s helmet damped the sound, but the whole fabric of *Fencing Master* shivered in sympathy to the impact of a thirty-tonne hammer hitting a hundred-and-seventy-tonne anvil.

“Via, that’ll hold us up for the next three hours!” Sergeant Deseau snarled. “We’ll be lucky if we get away before bloody dawn!”

Huber thought the same. Instead the detachment commander just growled, “Unit, hold your intervals,” as his vehicle proceeded down the road on the set course.

“Dumb bastard,” Deseau muttered. “Dicked around all that time for nothing, and now he’s going to put the hammer down and string the column out to make up the time he lost.”

That was close enough to Huber’s appreciation of what was going on that he didn’t bother telling the sergeant to shut up. He grinned beneath his faceshield. Under the circumstances, a lieutenant couldn’t claim to have any authority over the enlisted men with him except what they chose to give him freely.

The tank got moving again smoothly; *its* driver at least knew how to handle his massive vehicle. Tanks weren’t really clumsy, and given the right terrain and enough time they were hellaciously fast; but the inertia of so many tonnes of metal required the driver to plan her maneuvers a very long way ahead.

The collision hadn’t sprung the skirts of the following combat car, so it was able to proceed also. Its driver kept a good hundred and fifty meters between his vehicle’s dented bow slope and the tank’s stern. The rest of the column trailed the three leaders out of Central Repair and into the nighted city beyond.

Tranter lifted *Fencing Master*’s skirts with a greasy wobble, then set the car sliding forward. They passed the guard blower at the gate and turned left. Huber waved at the trooper in the fighting compartment; he--or she--waved back, more bored than not.

“Tranter, when we make the corner up ahead,” Huber ordered, “cut your headlights and running lights. Can you drive using just your visor’s enhancement?”

“Roger,” the driver said calmly. Behind them the guard vehicle was pulling back across the compound’s gateway; ahead, the last of the cars in the detachment proper slid awkwardly around an elbow in the broad freight road leading west and eventually out of Benjamin.

Even here in the center of the administrative capital of the UC, there were more trees than houses. The locals built narrow structures three or four stories high, with parking for aircars either beneath the support pilings or on rooftop landing pads. Most of the windows were dark, but occasionally they lighted as armored vehicles howled slowly

by on columns of air.

Even without lights, *Fencing Master* wasn't going to pass unnoticed in Senator Graciano's neighborhood of expensive residences. This'd have to be a quick in and out; or at least a quick in.

Tranter was keeping a rock-solid fifty meter interval between him and the stern of Red Eight. He seemed to judge what the driver ahead would do well before that fellow acted.

"Start opening the distance, Tranter," Huber said, judging their position on the terrain display against the quivering running lights of Red Eight. "We'll peel off to the right at the intersection half a klay west of our present position. As soon as Red Eight's out of sight, goose it hard. We've got eighteen hundred meters to cover, and I want to be there before they have time to react to the sound of our fans."

"Roger," Tranter said. He still didn't sound nervous; maybe he was concentrating on his driving.

And maybe the technician didn't really understand what was about to happen. Well, there were a lot of cases where intellectual understanding fell well short of emotional realities.

Fencing Master slowed almost imperceptibly; the fan note didn't change, but Tranter cocked the nacelles toward the vertical so that their thrust was spent more on lifting the car than driving it forward. Red Eight ahead had gained another fifty meters by the time its lights shifted angle, then glittered randomly through the trees of a grove that the road twisted behind.

"Here we go, Tranter," Huber warned, though the driver obviously had everything under control. "Easy right turn, then get on--"

Fencing Master was already swinging; Tranter dragged the right skirt, not in error but because the direct friction of steel against gravel was hugely more effective at transferring momentum than a fluid coupling of compressed air. As the combat car straightened onto a much narrower street than the route they'd been following from Repair, the headlights of four ten-wheeled trucks flooded over them. An air cushion jeep pulled out squarely in front of the combat car.

"*Blood and bleeding Martyrs!*" somebody screamed over the intercom, and the voice might've been Huber's own. Tranter lifted *Fencing Master's* bow, dumping air and dropping the skirts back onto the road. The bang jolted the teeth of everybody aboard and rattled the transoms of nearby houses.

The combat car hopped forward despite the impact. They'd have overrun the jeep sure as sunrise if its driver hadn't been a real pro as well. The lighter vehicle lifted on the gust from *Fencing Master's* plenum chamber, surfing the bow wave and bouncing down the other side on its own flexible skirts.

A trim figure stood beside the jeep's driver, touching the top of the windscreen for balance but not locked to it in a deathgrip the way most people would've been while riding a bucking jeep upright. The fellow's faceshield was raised; to make himself easy to identify, Huber assumed, but the glittering pistol in his cutaway holster was enough to do that.

"Lock your tribarrels in carry position!" Huber shouted to his men. As he spoke, he slapped the pintle catch with his left hand and rotated the barrels of his heavy automatic weapon skyward. "That's Major Steuben, and we won't get two mistakes!"

Tranter never quite lost control of *Fencing Master*, but it wasn't till the third jounce that he actually brought the car to rest. Each impact blasted a doughnut of dust and grit from the road; Huber's nose filters swung down and saved him from the worst of it, but his eyes watered. The jeep stayed just ahead of them, then curved back when the bigger vehicle halted.

The trucks--they had civilian markings and weren't from the Logistics Section inventory--moved up on either side of the combat car, two and two. They were stakebeds; a dozen troopers lined the back of each, their weapons ready for anybody in *Fencing Master* to make the wrong move.

That wasn't going to happen; Huber and his men were veterans; they knew what was survivable.

"*Bloody fucking hell,*" Deseau whispered. He kept his hands in sight and raised at his sides.

"*Get out, all four of you,*" Major Steuben ordered through the commo helmets. He sounded amused. "*Leave your guns behind.*"

Huber slung his 2-cm weapon over the raised tribarrel, then unbuckled his equipment belt and hung it on the big gun also. He paused and looked, really *looked*, at the White Mice watching *Fencing Master* and her crew through the sights of their weapons. They wore ordinary Slammers combat gear--helmets, body armor, and uniforms--but the only powergun in the whole platoon was the pistol on Major Steuben's hip. The rest of the unit carried electromagnetic slug-throwers and buzzbombs.

"Unit," Huber ordered, "let me do the talking."

He raised himself to the edge of the fighting compartment's armor, then swung his legs over in a practiced motion. His boots clanged down on the top of the plenum chamber. Starting with the empty bustle rack as a hand-hold, he let himself slide along the curve of the skirts to the ground.

Deseau and Learoyd were dismounting with similar ease, but Tranter--awkward in body armor--was having more difficulty in the bow. The technician also hadn't taken off his holstered pistol; he'd probably forgotten he was wearing it.

Huber opened his mouth to call a warning. Before he could, Steuben said, "*Sergeant Tranter, I'd appreciate it if you'd drop your equipment belt before you step to the ground. It'll save me the trouble of shooting you.*"

He tittered and added, "*Not that it would be a great deal of trouble.*"

Startled, Tranter undid the belt. He wobbled on the hatch coaming, then lost his balance. He and the belt slipped down the bow in opposite directions, though Tranter was able to keep from landing on his face by dabbing a hand to the ground.

Huber stepped briskly toward the jeep, stopping two paces away. He threw what was as close to an Academy salute as he could come after five years in the field.

"Sir!" he said. Steuben stood above him by the height of the jeep's plenum chamber. "The men with me had no idea what was going on. I ordered them to accompany me on a test drive of the repaired vehicle."

"Fuck that," Deseau said, swaggering to Huber's side. "We were going to put paid to the bastards that set us up and got our buddies killed. Somebody in the Regiment's got to show some balls, after all."

He spit into the dust beside him. Deseau had the bravado of a lot of little men; his pride was worth more to him than his life just now.

Joachim Steuben, no taller than Deseau flat-footed, giggled at him.

Learoyd walked up on Deseau's other side. He'd taken his helmet off and was rubbing his scalp. Sergeant Tranter, his eyes wide open and unblinking, joined Learoyd at the end of the rank.

"What did you think was going to happen when a Slammers combat car killed a senior UC official and destroyed his house, lieutenant?" Steuben asked. The anger in his tone was all the more terrible because his eyes were utterly dispassionate. "Didn't it occur to you that other officials, even those who opposed the victim, would decide that Hammer's Regiment was more dangerous to its employers than it was to the enemy?"

"I'm not a politician, sir," Huber said. He was trembling, not with fear--he was beyond fear--but with hope. "I don't know what would happen afterwards."

"Not a politician?" Steuben's voice sneered while his eyes laughed with anticipation. "You were about to carry out a political act, weren't you? You do understand that, don't you?"

"Yes sir, I do understand," Huber said. The four trucks that surrounded *Fencing Master* had turned off their lights, though their diesel engines rattled at idle. The jeep's headlights fell on Huber and his men, then reflected from the combat car's iridium armor; they stood in almost shadowless illumination.

"Is there anything you want to say before I decide what I'm going to do with you, lieutenant?" Steuben said with a lilt like the curve of a cat's tongue.

"Sir," Huber said. His muscles were trembling and his mind hung outside his body, watching what was going on with detached interest. "I'd like to accompany you and your troops on the operation you've planned. It may not be necessary to discipline me afterward."

"You mean it won't be possible to discipline you if you get your head blown off," the major said. He laughed again with a terrible humor that had nothing human in it.

"Yes, that's a point."

"El-Tee?" said Learoyd. "Where are you going? Can I come?"

Huber looked toward the trooper. "They're carrying non-issue weapons, Learoyd," he said. He didn't know if he was explaining to Deseau and Tranter at the same time. "Probably the hardware we captured at Rhodesville. They're going to take out Graciano just like we planned, but they're going to do it in a way that doesn't point straight back at the Regiment."

"I shot off my mouth when I shouldn't 've, major," Deseau said. "I do that a lot. I'm sorry."

Huber blinked. He couldn't have been more surprised if his sergeant had started chanting nursery rhymes.

Deseau cleared his throat and added, "Ah, major? We carried an EM slug-thrower in the car for a while till we ran out of ammo for it. The penetration was handy sometimes. Anyway, we're checked out on hardware like what I see there in the back of your jeep."

"So," Steuben said very softly. "You understand the situation, *gentlemen*, but do you also understand the rules of an operation like this? There will be no prisoners, and there will be no survivors in the target location."

"I understand," Huber said; because he did.

"Works for me," said Deseau. Learoyd knuckled his skull again; he probably

didn't realize he'd been asked a question.

"We're going to kill everybody in the Senator's house, Learoyd," Huber said, leaning forward to catch the trooper's eyes.

"Right," said Learoyd. He put his helmet back on.

"Caxton," Major Steuben said to his driver, "issue slug-throwers to these three troopers. Sergeant Tranter?"

Tranter stiffened to attention.

"You'll drive the combat car here back to Central Repair," Steuben said. "And forget completely about what's happened tonight."

"Sir!" said Tranter. His eyes were focused into the empty night past Steuben's pistol holster. "I can drive a truck, and I guess you got people here--"

He nodded to the truck beside him, its bed lined with blank-faced troopers.

--who can drive *Fencing Master*. Sir, I deserve to be in on this!"

Joachim Steuben giggled again. "Deserve?" he said. "The only thing any of us deserve, sergeant, is to die; which I'm sure we all will before long."

He looked toward the cab of an idling truck and said in a whipcrack voice, "Gieseking, Sergeant Tranter here is going to drive your vehicle. Take the combat car back to Central Repair and wait there for someone to pick you up."

Huber took the weapon Steuben's driver handed him. It was a sub-machine gun, lighter than its powergun equivalent but longer as well. It'd do for the job, though.

And so would Arne Huber.

Major Steuben's jeep led two trucks down the street at the speed of a fast walk. Their lights were out, and sound of their idling engines was slight enough to be lost in the breeze to those sleeping in the houses to either side.

Huber and the men from *Fencing Master* rode in the bed of the first truck; Sergeant Tranter was driving. The only difference between the line troopers and the White Mice around them was that the latter wore no insignia; Huber, Deseau, and Learoyd had rank and branch buttons on the collars. Everyone's faceshield was down and opaque.

In this wealthy suburb, the individual structures--houses and outbuildings--were of the same tall, narrow design as those of lesser districts, but these were grouped within compounds. Road transport in Benjamin was almost completely limited to delivery vehicles, so the two-meter walls were for privacy rather than protection. Most were wooden, but the one surrounding the residence of Patroklos Graciano was brick on a stone foundation like the main house.

Huber muttered a command to the AI in his helmet, cueing the situation map in a 50% overlay. He could still see--or aim--through the faceshield on which terrain features and icons of the forty-six men in the combat team were projected.

The other two trucks had gone around to the back street--not really parallel, the way things were laid out in Benjamin, but still a route that permitted those squads to approach the compound from the rear. They were already in position, waiting for anybody who tried to escape in that direction. The squads in front would carry out the assault by themselves unless something went badly wrong.

Few lights were on in the houses the trucks crawled past; the Graciano compound was an exception. The whole fourth floor of the main building was bright, and the

separate structure where the servants lived had many lighted windows as well.

The gate to the Graciano compound was of steel or wrought iron, three meters high and wide enough to pass even trucks the size of those carrying the assault force if the leaves were open. As they very shortly would be....

An alert flashed red at the upper right-hand corner of Huber's visor; the truck braked to a gentle halt. The light went green.

Huber and all but three of the troopers ducked, leaning the tops of their helmets against the side of the truck. The three still standing launched buzzbombs with snarling roars that ended with white flashes. The hollow *bangs* would've been deafening were it not for the helmets' damping. Gusts of hot exhaust buffeted the kneeling men, but they were out of the direct backblast. The second truck loosed a similar volley.

Two missiles hit the gate pillars, shattering them into clouds of mortar and pulverized brick. The leaves dangled crazily, their weight barely supported by the lowest of the three sets of hinges on either side. Tranter cramped his steering wheel and accelerated as hard as the truck's big diesel would allow.

The rest of the buzzbombs had gone through lighted windows of both structures and exploded within. The servants' quarters were wood. A gush of red flames followed the initial blast at the ground floor, a sign that the fuel for the oven in the kitchen had ignited.

Tranter hit the leaning gates and smashed them down. He roared into the courtyard, knocking over a fountain on the way, and pulled up screeching in front of the ornamental porch.

The truck's tailgate was already open. Huber was the first man out, leaping to the gravel with Deseau beside him and Learoyd following with the first of the squad of White Mice. The ground glittered with shards of glass blown from all the windows.

A buzzbomb had hit the front door; the missile must've been fired moments after the initial volley or the gate would've been in the way. The doorpanel was wood veneer over a steel core, but a shaped-charge warhead designed to punch through a tank's turret had blown it off its hinges.

Scores of fires burned in the entrance hall. White-hot metal had sprayed the big room, overwhelming the retardant which impregnated the paneling. Huber's nose filters flipped into place as he ran for the staircase; his faceshield was already on infrared, displaying his surroundings in false color. If fire raised the background temperature too high for infrared to discriminate properly, he'd switch to sonic imaging--but he wasn't coming out till he'd completed his mission....

There were two bodies in the hall. Parts of two bodies, at any rate; the bigger chunks of door armor had spun through them like buzzsaws. They were wearing uniforms of some sort; guards, Huber assumed. One of them had a slug-thrower but the other's severed right arm still gripped a 2-cm powergun.

The stairs curved from both sides of the entrance to a railed mezzanine at the top. Huber's visor caret movement as he started up. Before he could swing his sub-machine gun onto the target, a trooper behind him with a better angle shredded it and several balustrades with a short burst.

The staircase was for show; the owner and guests used the elevator running in a filigree shaft in the center of the dwelling. It started down from the top floor when Huber reached the mezzanine, which was appointed for formal entertainments. He couldn't see

anything but the solid bottom of the cage. He put a burst into it, chewing the embossed design, but he didn't think his sub-machine gun's light pellets were penetrating.

One of the White Mice standing at the outside door put seven slugs from his heavy shoulder weapon through the cage the long way. One of them hit the drive motor and ricocheted, flinging parts up through the floor at an angle complementary to that of the projectile. The elevator stopped; a woman's arm flopped out of the metal lacework.

Huber jerked open the door to the narrow stairwell leading upward from the mezzanine. A pudgy servant in garishly-patterned pajamas almost ran into him. Huber shot the fellow through the body and shoved him out of the way. The servant continued screaming for the moment until Deseau, a step behind his lieutenant, ripped a burst through the dying man's head.

Huber ran up the stairs, feeling the weight and constriction of his body armor and also the filters that kept him from breathing freely. Platoon leaders in the combat car companies didn't spend a lot of time climbing stairwells in the normal course of their business, but he'd asked for the job.

The door to the third floor was closed. Huber ignored it as he rounded the landing and started up the last flight. Teams of White Mice would clear the lower floors and the basement; the men from F-3 were tasked with the senator's suite at the top of the building.

The door at the stairhead was ajar. Huber fired through the gap while he was still below the level of the floor. As he'd expected, that drew a pistol shot--from a powergun--though it hit the inside of the panel instead of slapping the stairwell.

"Learoyd!" Huber shouted. He crouched, swapping his sub-machine gun's magazine for a full one from his bandolier. Deseau would cover him if somebody burst out of the door. "Gren--"

Before he finished the word, Learoyd spun a bomb the size of a walnut up through the narrow opening. Huber had seen the trooper knock birds off limbs ten meters high; this was no test at all for him.

The grenade blew the door shut with a bright flash that to the naked eye would've been blue. The bomb's capacitors dumped their charge through an osmium wire. Electrical grenades had very little fragmentation effect, but their sudden energy release was both physically and mentally shattering for anybody close to the blast. Huber rose to his feet, leaped the final steps to the landing, and kicked the door open again. He went in shooting.

For the first instant he didn't have a target, just the need to disconcert anybody who hadn't lost his nerve when the grenade went off. The carpet of the sitting room beyond was on fire. A man lay in the middle of it, screaming and beating the floor with the butt of his pistol. Huber's burst stitched him from the middle of one shoulderblade to the other. The man flopped like a fish on dry land, then shuddered silent.

There was a doorway ahead of Huber and another to the right, toward the back of the building. Huber went straight, into a small foyer around the elevator shaft. The top of the cage remained just above floor level.

Huber jerked open the door across the foyer. The room beyond was a mass of flame. It'd been a bedroom, and the buzzbomb had ignited all the fabric. Huber slammed the door again. His hands were singed; and only his faceshield had saved his eyes and lungs from the fire's shriveling touch.

At the back of the foyer was a window onto the grounds; concussion from the warhead going off in the bedroom had blown out the casement an instant before it slammed the connecting door. Through the empty window, Huber heard the lift fans of an aircar spin up.

He jumped to the opening. To his right a closed car with polarized windows sat on a pad cantilevered off the back of the building, trembling as its driver built up speed in the fan blades. It was a large vehicle, capable of carrying six in comfort. The front passenger door was open and a uniformed man leaned out of it, firing a heavy slug-thrasher back toward the sitting room. The aluminum skirts that propelled the osmium projectiles vaporized in the dense magnetic flux, blazing as white muzzle flashes in Huber's thermal vision.

Huber aimed between the hinge side of the car door and the jamb, then shot the guard in the neck and head. The fellow sprang forward like a headless chicken, flinging his gun away with nerveless hands.

The aircar lifted, the door swinging closed from momentum. Huber fired, starring the windscreen but not penetrating it. Deseau and Learoyd were in the doorway now, pocking the car's thick plastic side-panels; their sub-machine guns couldn't do real damage.

The car half-pivoted as its driver prepared to dive off the edge of the platform and use gravity to speed his escape. A buzzbomb detonated on the underside of the bow, flipping the vehicle over onto its back. The instant the warhead hit, Huber saw a spear of molten metal stab through the car's roof in a white dazzle. The driver would've been in direct line with the explosion-formed hypersonic jet.

The blast rocked Huber away from the window, but the car had taken the direct impact and the building had protected him from the worst of the remainder. Deseau and Learoyd, running toward the vehicle when the warhead went off, bounced into the wall behind them and now lay sprawled on the deck. Learoyd had managed to hang onto his sub-machine gun; Deseau patted the tiles numbly, trying to find his again.

A man crawled out of the overturned car. The right side of his face was bloody, but Huber recognized Senator Patroklos Graciano.

The senator stood with a look of desperation on his face. Huber braced his left elbow on the window opening and laid his ring sight at the base of Graciano's throat. He fired a short burst, flinging the man backward. Tufts of beard trimmed by the pellets swirled in the air, falling more slowly than the corpse.

There were figures still moving in the car. A stunningly beautiful woman tried to squirm out, hampered by the necklaces and jewel-glittering rings she clutched to her breasts with both hands. She wore a diaphanous shift that accentuated rather than hiding her body, but on her a gunnysack would've been provocative.

Huber aimed. She looked up at him, her elbows on the chest of her lover so freshly dead that his corpse still shuddered. A powergun bolt blew out her left eyesocket and lifted the top of her skull. Her arms straightened convulsively, scattering the jewelry across the landing platform.

Major Steuben stood in the doorway from the sitting room, his pistol in his delicate right hand. His faceshield was raised and he was smiling.

The girl still in the car was probably a maid. She opened her mouth to scream when she saw her mistress die. The second pistol bolt snapped between her perfect teeth

and nearly decapitated her. Her body thrashed wildly in the passenger compartment.

Learoyd was getting to his feet. Steuben grabbed the collar of Deseau's clamshell armor and jerked the sergeant upright; the major must have muscles like steel cables under his trim exterior. The muzzle of the powergun in his other hand was a white-hot circle.

He turned toward Huber, looking out of the adjacent window, and shouted, "Come along, lieutenant. We've taken care of our little problem and it's time to leave now."

Huber met them in the sitting room. Steuben waved him toward the stairwell. Sergeant Deseau still walked like a drunk, so Huber grabbed his arm in a fireman's carry and half-lifted, half-dragged the man to the trucks. Every floor of the building was burning. The major was the last man out.

In all the cacophony--the screams and the blasts and the weeping desperation--that Arne Huber had heard in the past few minutes, there was only one sound that would haunt his future nightmares. That was Joachim Steuben's laughter as he blew a girl's head off.

If I buy the farm here on Plattner's World, Huber thought as he walked toward the open door of Major Steuben's office, they're going to have to name this the Lt. Arne C Huber Memorial Hallway.

There's never a bad time for humor in a war zone. This was a better time than most.

"Come in and close the door, lieutenant," Steuben said as Huber raised his hand to knock on the jamb. "And *don't*, if you please, attempt to salute me ever again. You're not very good at it."

Huber obeyed meekly. The major was working behind a live display, entering data on the touchpad lying on his wooden desk. It wasn't a game this time: Steuben was finishing a task before he got on to the business who'd just walked in his door.

He shut down the display and met Huber's eyes. He smiled; Huber didn't try to smile back.

"This will be brief, lieutenant," Steuben said. "The United Cities are in a state of war with Solace, or will be when the Senate meets in a few hours. There's been a second attack within UC territory by mercenaries in Solace pay. This one was directed against Senator Patroklos Graciano here in Benjamin."

Steuben quirked a smile. "It was quite a horrific scene, according to reports of the event," he went on. "Graciano and his whole household were killed."

Huber looked at the man across the desk, remembering the same smile lighted by the flash of a powergun. "If I may ask, sir?" he said. "Why did the, ah, mercenaries attack the particular senator?"

"It's believed that the Solace authorities had made an attempt to turn the poor fellow against his own people," the major said blandly. "Graciano had gathered a great deal of information about Solace plans and was about to make a full report to the Senate. The attack forestalled him, but as a result of such blatant aggression even the former peace party in the Senate is unanimous in supporting military action against Solace."

I wonder how many of the senators believe the official story, Huber thought, and how many are afraid they'll go the same way as Patroklos Graciano if they continue to

get in the way of the Regiment's contract?

Well, it didn't really matter. Like he'd told Major Steuben last night, he wasn't a politician. Aloud he said, "I see, sir."

"None of that matters to you, of course," Steuben continued. "I called you here to say that a review of your actions at Rhodesville the day you landed has determined that you behaved properly and in accordance with the best traditions of the Regiment."

He giggled. "You may even get a medal out of it, lieutenant."

Huber's mouth was dry; for a moment he didn't trust himself to speak. Then he said, "Ah, sir? Does this mean that I'm being returned to my platoon?"

Steuben looked up at Huber. He smiled. "Well, lieutenant," he said, "that's the reason I called you here in person instead of just informing you of the investigation outcome through channels. How would you like a transfer to A Company? You'd stay at the same rank, but you probably know already that the pay in A Company is better than the same grade levels in line units."

"A Company?" Huber repeated. He couldn't have heard right. "The White Mice, you mean?"

"Yes, lieutenant," Steuben said. His face didn't change in a definable way, but his smile was suddenly very hard. "The White Mice. The company under my personal command."

"I don't...", Huber said, then realized that among the things he didn't know was how to end the sentence he'd begun. He let his voice trail off.

"Recent events have demonstrated that you're smart and that you're willing to use your initiative," the major said. His fingers were tented before him, but his wrists didn't quite rest on the touchpad beneath them.

The smile became amused again. He added, "Also, you can handle a gun. You'll have ample opportunity to exercise all these abilities in A Company, I assure you."

"Sir...", said Huber's lips. He was watching from outside himself again. "I don't think I have enough..."

This time he stopped, not because he didn't know how to finish the sentence but because he thought of Steuben's hell-lit smile the night before. The words choked in his throat.

"Ruthlessness, you were perhaps going to say, lieutenant?" the major said with his cat's-tongue lilt. "Oh, I think you'll do. I'm a good judge of that sort of thing, you know."

He giggled again. "You're dismissed for now," Steuben said. "Go back to Logistics--you'll have to break in your replacement no matter what you decide. But rest assured, you'll be hearing from me again."

Arne Huber's soul watched his body walking back down the hallway. Even his mind was numb, and despite the closed door behind him he continued to hear laughter.
