

indigenous life, the queens propagated, and when the new world was full, more ships were sent out, the colonization repeated until no planet, no species, least of all Man and Mrdini was safe. The furry and courageous Mrdini had fought the Hivers for centuries, many dying bravely in an attempt to save their own worlds. Now Mrdini and Man combined to form the Alliance- and Humankind had their own weapons to offer-the power and might of the Talents who could not only communicate silently with each other, but could project cargoes, ships and themselves across the deeps of space.

The four children of Damia-Laria, Thian, Rojer and Zara-were Primes amongst the Talents, and all their skills were desperately needed, for the Hivers' terrible Sphere ships were still thrusting through space, unfathomable, impenetrable, and carrying death in their labyrinthine depths.

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This book is dedicated to

Matthew Haveates

for all the hard work, effort and time that he expended in nailing down in an excellent bibliography all the works by this grateful author (except this one which wasn't written yet!)

## Prologue

The first incursion of the Nine Star League by the Hive entities occurred at Deneb where Jeff Raven, and the undeveloped Talents of his planet, staved off a vicious attack by three alien scout ships orbiting Deneb IV

ship. The male merge, with Jeff Raven as focus, then teleport the Hive ship into Deneb's primary.

Nineteen years later, while recuperating on Deneb, Damia Gwyn-Raven, another T-1 Talent and the daughter of the Rowan and Jeff Raven, and Afra Lyon, a Capellan T-2, have `dreams' which they realize are being implanted by the alien figures which appear in these dreams.

Contact is made with these visitors who call themselves the Mrdini.

Through dreams, the Mrdini explain that they have been defending themselves and their colony worlds against the incursions of the Hive for centuries. They had followed the Hive ship to Deneb and been fascinated by its destruction without loss of life on the part of the defenders. They offer an alliance.

In order to establish meaningful relationships, young `Dinis are placed with human children, in the sound belief that early exposure to another species facilitates understanding. Among those selected for this experiment are the children of Afra and Damia, now Tower Prime for Iota Aurigae, a mining world. Their eight children all have `Dini pairs.

At sixteen, the eldest daughter, Laria, is sent to the `Dini home world of Clarf to teach `Dini human language and to expand her own understanding of the adult vocabulary. At about this time, Mrdini scouts observe three Hive ships which separate before the `Dini can catch up. But the ion

Thian Lyon, Laria's next brother, is seconded by Federation Teleportation and Telepath (FT&T) to the AS Vadim to act as Prime with the tracking mission of four ships, two human, two Mrdini. It is his job to improve communications and relations between the Allies, and to receive supplies to keep the ships moving towards their objective.

Thian has always been interested in naval matters so he is well suited to the assignment. Thian is accompanied by his `Dini pair, Mrg and Dpl (Mur and Dip).

When the Vadim encounters a lifeless stationary derelict, it is identified as a Hive ship, though larger by another third than any previously encountered. It appears to have been destroyed by the heat of an expanding nova. Three escape pods seem to have been used, though others were destroyed in situ. An exploration detail of both `Dini and human is to examine the wreck. Encountering hostility from a crewman, Thian is nearly killed on the Hive ship where he discovers undamaged Hiver eggs. These are sent to be studied by the Alliance xenobiologists. Recovering from his injury, Thian elects to continue with the Mrdini ship, the KLTL, as the Mrdinis insist on being certain that a nova has destroyed the Hive world.

Two of the ships in Thian's element are required to start the derelict on its way to a point at which both Mrdini and human

reconstruct, in an effort to learn more about the enemy.

One of the escaped pods, bearing a live queen, is discovered by the Beqing and captured, safely on tow behind the ship. Afra and his son Rojer are sent out to port the pod to the Heinlein Moon Station where it can be safely examined in great detail. There is considerable debate and many factions: some wishing summarily to execute the queen, others wishing to approach it in an effort to establish communications and knowledge of a species never before captured. The Mrdini are particularly against its maintenance. Rojer, with his father acting as focus, easily transfers queen and pod.

Back on Earth, the captured queen pod is secured with twenty four hour surveillance. When she finally emerges, she is seen as a mantis-type creature, eight limbed, and egg-heavy. Since no-one has had much luck in incubating the eggs discovered on the derelict ship, it is decided to deposit these with her.

There has been considerable objection to keeping the creature alive but those who insist that knowing more about the enemy may be a deciding factor in a final victory over its incursions manage to win the argument.

She is kept alive. Food of all varieties is supplied and she is seen to prefer vegetables or fruit. Her actions, when there are any,

much hotter temperature in her parturitional stage. Zara's intercession saves the queen's life although, despite a hope that there has been some empathy between human and Hiver, this bizarre incident is

not repeated nor can Zara explain why she acted as she did. As her parents realize with some regret that Zara is not Tower material, even though a Prime, Elizara, the T-1 medic for whom she was named, and her

great-grandmother Isthia decide she may have healing Talents.

Meanwhile, one of the escaping Hive ships has been tracked to a star system where it is obviously slowing down. Rojer is sent to the Genessee to expedite messages for Squadron B - two human ships and one

Mrdini which is hovering, undetectable, within an asteroid belt of the system.

The crew watch as the arriving Hiver ship is attacked from moon bases and planetary surfaces. When its ammunition is exhausted, the queens flee in escape pods which are disintegrated. This shocks those on the Genessee. As much as the `Dini have observed of their enemy over the centuries, they are as surprised and stunned as their human allies.

other two pods which evacuated from the Great Sphere before it was hit by the nova shock wave. A waiting game is played on several levels and

ethical problems of great magnitude must be addressed by both human and

Mrdini civilizations.

During the course of the next few weeks, while Rojer waited for his older brother, Thian, to replace him on board the Genessee, he spent a great deal more time on the bridge than he had originally thought he would.

Not only was Rojer Lyon the T-1 FT&T which linked Squadron B with its home worlds and the means by which the three ships were kept supplied by twice weekly importations of supplies, he was also able to provide other services to the squadron not in his original brief. If he was referred to as 'the boy' or 'the civilian' he couldn't deny 'boy' as he was not quite sixteen although tall and well-muscled from an active life on his home planet. He also had inherited the family silver lock of hair which made it difficult for some to believe he hadn't yet reached his majority. Most times these references to his age or status were jocular. Sometimes envy or disparagement tinged these epithets - until he 'ported in the next supply drones when he was



tension away.

Since the squadron was on orders to hold a watching brief and to take no direct action against the ancient enemy which occupied the system, tedium became a problem. Even escape pod drills became a welcome variation of daily routine. So, when Captain Osullivan asked Rojer if he could `port the newly developed and undetectable probes to discover what they could about the moons' defences and the three spherical ships in docking orbit around the planet, he was quite willing to oblige.

The activity was one he was well able for: in fact, it gave him no lite satisfaction to know that `the boy/ civilian' had an ability no-one else in the B Squadron had. He was also just as curious as anyone else in the squadron to learn as much as possible about the Hivers world. He had discreet knowledge from Gil and Kat that Captain PrtgIm of the KTTS would have preferred direct action to surveillance and had been extremely upset by the `surveillance' order from the High Council which had originated from Human Supreme Commander, Admiral Tohl Mekturian, and Mrdini Co-ordinator, GktmgInt.

The squadron had been given a stunning display of the planet's defences when they had observed the attack on the refugee Hive ship

few more pieces' amid the clutter that spun in disarray round the world. Frankly Rojer thought such garbage was an appalling way to discard rubbish.

Neither Captain Quacho of the sister ship, the Arapahoe, or Captain Osullivan of the Genessee had expected that the refugee Hiver ship would be attacked by its own species, its queens driven to escape in the pods which had then been summarily disintegrated by the planetary batteries. Captain Prtglm had announced that it was no more than could be expected of Hivers.

Since Rojer's first assignment was to inspect the three sphere ships in their docking orbit, tensions were diffused further when the monitors proved that only one looked to be space-worthy. Quite possibly it had been the ship which had transported the original colonizing group. One of the other two was near completion, though it had significant gaps, probably left open to receive equipment, while the other was only partly hulled. That gave rise to further speculation as to why the planet's defenders had 'holed' the refugee ship, rendering it unusable.

Somewhat reassured by that investigation which he had Rojer relay in his daily message to Earth Prime, Captain Osullivan requested Rojer

Commander Metrios, the engineering officer, considered amazing techniques, and although some fields were fallow, the majority sprouted with vigorous, if unrecognizable, flora. Narrow tracks bordering the fields provided access for the scurrying life-forms involved in agricultural occupations. Their constant presence made it dangerous to attempt to port in a sample-collecting probe. Another variety of beetlelike creatures specialized in irrigation, trundling water, held in body sacs, which was carefully dribbled along neat rows. What surprised Lieutenant Istvan Mrkovic, the science officer, who had made due note of the teeming marine life, was that the Hivers had not made any attempt to harvest nutritious seaweed and plankton so abundant and easily obtained.

‘So they’re vegetarians? Seaweed’s vegetable, he exclaimed.

‘They seem to be single-minded in many respects, said Anis Langio, the astrogation officer whom Rojer admired at a distance. She was the prettiest of the female bridge officers and he was old enough to appreciate her presence. ‘A stagnant culture determined to replicate itself ad infinitum.’ ‘That may alter,’ was the captain’s crisp remark.

‘I’d give anything to see a weed among all that perfection,’ remarked Anis Langio in a tone bordering on disgust. ‘Talk about

Thousands of these installations had been scanned.

They varied in size, evidently depending on the volume of crops, but not in shape; all being square buildings covering three to four acres, four or five storeys in height with interior access at ground level along each side. Rojer had whizzed a sensor close enough to see that the entrance sloped downwards. Activity continued night and day, for the creatures apparently did not require illumination for their tasks.

‘And we thought this duty was boring, ’ one yeoman was heard to mumble, eliciting widespread grins and a mild reproof.

‘Those buildings have to be the access to tremendous subterranean networks, ’ Istvan Mrkovic said thoughtfully. ‘There isn't enough space inside any of them to store the amounts brought in on a daily basis.

Do they pick for daily use, since I noticed they do leave immature vegetables on the vines and bushes, or just to process for storage?

Yet I can't pick up any trace of smoke or heat to account for cooking.

‘Vegetarians eat a lot of raw foods, ’ Anis remarked.

‘Or maybe they have a critter with heat-resistant paddles to stir the stew.

Istvan shot her a reproving look for such levity, though even the

someone of her rank and experience.

`You don't see any of them lying down on the job or expiring from lack of care.

`All mining must be done subterraneously, too, Mrkovic decided.

`I haven't seen anything remotely resembling an adit but those ships required a variety of metals. I've noted the presence of all the ores that we use but only that one finished ship in the construction orbit has been covered with their special coating. And if they have every centimetre producing food, the planet must be full up.

`The last harvest before blast-off;' Anis quipped.

`Not if they've only one space-worthy ship. ' `Maybe the agricultural workers are multi-tasked and once the harvest's in they turn on their construction mode, ' was Anis' rejoinder. Istvan gave her another of his disgusted looks.

`She could be right, ' Metrios said. `The palp that pulls the pepper could also manipulate delicate equipment.

`And the trundlers shift struts and panels . . . ` Anis went on.

`While the irrigators fill the fuel tanks, ' Doplas, the communications officer, said, joining in the fun.

`That is when we must be most cautious, ' the captain said, and turned to Rojer. `You can withdraw the monitors quickly?' Rojer

Lieutenant-Commander Yngocelen, and some of his staff discussing what

would be needed to 'take out' the moon batteries, but no-one had sounded very enthusiastic about success in that direction. Despite all they had seen of this Hive world, there were many unknowns.

From their Mrdini allies, and once at first hand on Deneb, humans did know something about Hive colonization practices. The creatures preferred G-type stars, M-5 type planets, worlds similar to Earth, or Cia the Mrdini home world, which meant that the three species were in competition with each other. The Hive method was to send one of their Sphere ships, managed by the Many Mind of ten to sixteen queens with specialized workers doing whatever crewing was needed. Each Mother ship was equipped with scout vessels which it sent on ahead to investigate appropriate systems. The Hiver then 'cleared' the planet of all life-forms, using as a fumigator first one, then other viral infections until the world had been cleared of its indigenous life-forms. Then the Mother ship landed its queens and propagated its species until the new world, too, was overpopulated, when the process of exploration and colonization was repeated.

'But we've seen no activity at the ships at all,' Anis said. 'Or has the arrival of the refugee caused panic? Hivers wouldn't know panic

laughed.

'Sir, there's no way I can get a probe in those moon emplacements.

Not a niche or a crack and I've no idea of what space is available inside. I can't port blind. 'No, no, of course, you couldn't, Rojer, ' the gunnery officer replied, but his expression remained wistful.

'Been no messages sent there. No communication on any frequency, Doplas said, glancing down at his control console as if it had capriciously malfunctioned.

'Told ya the refugees didn't have the right password, quipped Metrios, a grin on his narrow sardonic face.

Then he suddenly sat up alert. 'Lookee here. Activity in the shipyard. ' All attention was instantly focused on that screen. 'Can you hold that monitor stationary for a bit, Rojer?' 'Sure thing, ' and he complied, trying to see what had attracted Metrios' attention. A wide hatch had swung open at the end of the one uncultivated area on the whole planet - its space facility.

'Doplas, magni, ' Captain Osullivan said and paused a beat before he added, 'Pods! The units they're carrying look the right size and shape to be made into escape pods. ' 'To replace the ones they blew up!

Before the captain could ask Doplas to open a channel, both Captains Quacho of the Arapahoe and Prtglm of the KTTS called in.

`They begin to refit,' Prtglm said. `Time takes. Talent informs Alliance.

`They don't seem to be doing any work to complete the other two ships,' Quacho remarked dubiously, his heavy brows nearly bridging over his Roman nose.

`Those are already fitted with escape pods,' Osullivan reminded him.

`Always queens are first,' Prtglm said. `Time takes.' Rojer dutifully made contact with Jeff Raven to report the activity and was told to relay further developments as they occurred. Once the ground entrance closed, no further activity was seen. Excitement waned and Rojer was allowed to retire from the bridge at the end of his watch.

Rather than have to evade questions on this new development, he spent the evening quietly in his cabin with Gil and Kat, watching more of the Genessee's huge library of old tri-ds until the red alert had him `porting himself and his friends to the escape pod assigned him.

He and the others who occupied his pod were nearly asleep again when the `all-clear' hooted.



`Any corrections needed, Commander?' Rojer asked Metrios, gesturing to the screens and the roving sensors.

`No, Roj, ' Metrios said, with a wry grin. `They're where we need `em right now. We're just lucky there's so much space flotsam that our sensors seem just like one of the boys out there.

`You know, for a planet that's spotless, - said Eri Gander, the morale officer, who often dropped by Rojer's station, `they've made a right mess of space.

`Haven't developed a form to gobble up their garbage, that's all, ' Metrios replied.

`Vegetarians get their iron and minerals from their food, ' Anis remarked with an overly innocent expression on her face. `Which reminds me, Eri, we could use some new tri-ds. There's nothing I haven't seen a zillion times.

Eri and Anis both looked queringly at Rojer who held his arms wide, mimicking Anis' expression. `Look, I'm just transport. I have nothing to do with loading. ' `Which reminds me why I'm here, ' Eri said, turning to Rojer. `I've four to ship back this week. ' He raised his eyebrows queringly.

`No problem. My `Dinis told me that there're two `Dini pairs to go as well. ' Anis heaved an exaggerated sigh. `I'm always glad to know

apply to the process, it's still cannibalism. ' `Term it exigency during long space hauls and accept that interpretation, ' Mrkovic said, but his expression indicated he was in complete agreement with the astrogator.

`At least we have Rojer here. Man and Mrdini's best friend is the local FT&T Talent. ' Rojer grinned back, relieved that the subject of `Dini traditions was not pursued. On the bridge, at least, he wasn't quizzed to the point of aggravation by pruriently curious crewmen and women. He had had to make the point that he might have lived closely with `immature `Dini, but he didn't know much about the adults.

`So what's to be done today. Commander?' he asked Metrios.

`Close watch on the shipyard and those pod elements.

We've got a little self-destruct package in the new ones I ordered up in case we need to put more in action. ' `Don't I just wish we did have some action, ' said Yngocelen as he stared glumly at the static scene on the screen. `Aren't they putting the cart before the horse?

I mean, assembling escape pods when they haven't repaired the hole they put in the refugee ship? Never did understand why they plugged it. Especially after they had already conned the queens into leaving in their escape pods. ' `Puzzling indeed, Metrios admitted, `since it damaged a perfectly space-worthy craft which would have nicely increased their existing fleet. ' Because he now knew these officers

Unfortunately, the entrance point was in deep shadow. What was visible were the clean edges of the torpedo's entrance. The damage would be easily repaired. At least it would on any of the Alliance ships.

`Maybe there was something in that torpedo they sent up, ' Rojer added quietly, steeling himself for dispute.

`Yeah, but what and why?' Yngocelen asked in a caustic tone. `We know from even the partial reconstruction of the Great Sphere which A Squadron discovered that they can seal off decks and areas just as we can.

`Yes, but the queens were evacuating and there'd be no-one to issue orders to the workers to close anything.

I think, ' and Rojer paused so as not to sound as sure as he was of his theory, `this lot wouldn't want the workers spawned by other queens. They'd want to get rid of them before they filled the ship with their personal workers. ' `So the torpedo delivered a gas or something noxious to fumigate it, huh?' Yngocelen asked, mulling over that theory.

`Boy's got a good point, ' Metrios said over Rojer's head but his tone was approving.

`I could send a probe inside the ship to find out, Rojer

was going on inside the hulk. Nothing apart from a haze which still hung like a miasma in the interior, and was especially heavy in the centre of the vessel.

'Could be a combination of things, the science officer said, 'because there sure aren't any workers of any description left, and there are signs of corrosion on the few organic substances the monitor identifies. The Hivers seem to specialize in lethal doses. I wouldn't want to send anyone in to investigate. Despite the hole in the hull letting vacuum in, the stuffs lingering. It's going to take time to flush all that out. 'Sections weren't closed off either, ' Yngocelen said, tapping Rojer approvingly on the shoulder. 'Yup, and that junk even cleared out the tubes where larvae are stored. Clean sweep!' Rojer could not entirely suppress his delight that his theory had been verified but everyone was smiling so he felt it wasn't inappropriate for him to do so, too.

'Good thinking, Rojer, ' Osullivan said to cap his moment of triumph.

None the less Rojer heard - not from the direction of the officers less grateful sentiments from one or two of the ratings on duty.

'It was only a theory, sir, ' Rojer said, altering his grin to modest self-deprecation. It was hard to please everyone all the time

exhaustive scrutiny by both humans and Mrdini, the emphasis had been on establishing what powered Hive ships, what fuel was used, and analysing the peculiar composition of the hull material. Ventilation and life-support systems were a low priority.

'Captain Prtglin would like us to figure out a way to get in that ship,' Captain Osullivan reported to his staff officers. Rojer was also sitting in as he had attended the captains' meeting as translator.

'It has an idea,' and Osullivan's smile was amused, 'of boarding and bringing a relatively undamaged Hive ship back to Clarf. I gather Prtglin is to be retired at the end of this mission and it would like to do so in glory, as it were.' There were murmurs of understanding for such ambition.

'I didn't think Mrdini did things like retire,' Anis Langio remarked.

Osullivan cleared his throat and smoothed back his hair. 'I believe it's a question of size.' 'Yeah, it is the biggest 'Dini I've ever seen, Yngocelen sao thoughy. 'If it gets much bigger, it won't fit in its own ship. It has to bend over to walk our companionways and this ship's built for tall.' As the gunnery officer was just under the

in Rojer's direction.

'Me? I know as much as you do but 'But what, Mr Lyon?' the captain prompted in an encouraging tone.

- 'Well, sir; when I first came on board, I believe I mentioned that groups back on the home worlds are trying to reassemble the innards of the Great Sphere?

We know what the main investigative team is working on - the fuel and engines - but maybe somebody else might have a clue to the life-support area. I could make a discreet enquiry. ' 'Of whom?' 'The T-8 engineer at the Aurigae Tower.

Metrios looked considerably more receptive the moment Rojer mentioned 'engineer' 'Please contact him then. Discreetly, of course, Osullivan asked Rojer.

'Certainly, sir, ' Rojer replied. He had determinedly not fallen into the habit of naval parlance of responding with the usual 'aye, sir'. That was his subtle reaction to 'boy' and 'civilian' Metrios grinned. 'Would you need much power?' 'Not for a query, Rojer said, grinning back. Xexo would be as up to date as possible on what was being assembled, either by the naval or the 'civilian' piece jiggers.

And he might even have some informed guesses. 'Thing worries me, though, is that that explosion might also have taken out the

Everyone in the Alliance would rejoice to have purloined a nearly operational ship from a Hive colony.

He suppressed the chuckle that threatened to upset his composure and sternly focused his mind on the gestalt to send the message.

Familiarity with Xexo's mind made the `pathing easier. Rojer elected to make it an informal query because nothing might come of it and there was no point in getting hopes up only to dash them down.

Xexo was surprised to hear Rojer.

Come through loud and clear, lad. But shouldn't you No, this is between you and me, Xexo, about our piecing.

They don't have a set on board here and I need your help on one aspect of the reconstruction.

Oh, well, in that case Xexo had always been more interested in the mechanical aspects of Tower than protocol so he made no further objections. whaddy need to know?

What Xexo knew about the ventilation and lifesupport systems was incomplete. In fact, Rojer realized that his probe had accumulated more cogent information which he then shared with the T-8. Xexo could then confirm that the main environmental control systems had probably been demolished by the torpedo.

Queens seem to have had an independent emergency supply.

`Since the queens abandoned ship, ' Metrios said when he had a chance to study what Rojer transferred to the screen, `that area would not have been secured.

But it appears, ' and his finger wandered off the diagram, `that one could flush the system of the gas quite efficiently from the main circulation point.

`If we knew how to work such controls, ' Rojer said.

"Dinis keep telling us that the queens developed specific workers for various ship operations. What would a life-support worker look like?' Metrios shmgged. `That'd be a problem. They seem to produce all kinds of workers.

The other officers on duty on the bridge had been following the conversations.

`The `Dini records have reconstructions of some definite types, from corpses that were found after space battles, ' Anis Langio said and keyed in a program. They all watched as the sketches were accessed.

Langio gave a snort. `Take your pick. ' `That queen they've got at Heinlein Moon Base?

Have her eggs hatched yet?' Metrios asked.

`They're growing and she's eating, ' Rojer replied with a shrug.

He was still in two minds about his sister Zara's interference,



that either human or Mrdini had seen. Her continued existence had elicited controversy and, sometimes, strain among the Allies.

Fortunately some of the more liberal Mrdini leaders also felt that the need to know more about their enemy was of greater importance than

a very public and summary execution, no matter how psychologically satisfying. Others found some beauty in her mantis-like appearance: the maudlin were deeply concerned about her total isolation and incarceration.

'I'd heard that each queen lays several different types of workers, ' Anis Langio said. 'Maybe she'd been programmed for the type

we need right now. ' She turned an impudent gamine grin on her audience.

'If we knew what sort we needed, ' Metrios said, gloomily. He leaned forward across his panel. 'If we could somehow clear enough of the gas to put a salvage crew aboard 'Ah, we're much too far away to use tractor beams . . . ' Yngocelen said and then turned brightly to Rojer.

'Hey, don't look at me. That's mass, Commander, ' Rojer said, fending off that suggestion with raised hands.

`No, I couldn't. Not even to give Captain Prtglm its moment of glory. ' `Now wait a minute, ' Metrios said, and turning to his console accessed another program. `To get the Great Sphere back, two Galaxy-class ships acted as tows, and a shuttle was attached to control directional thrusters `So?' Yngocelen asked.

`If we could mount thrusters on the hull - . -` `That would mean we'd be seen from the surface Yngocelen interjected. `Oh . ` he added and turned, as Metrios had, to Rojer.

Rojer shook his head. `Look, sirs, ' and he paused to give the courtesy address emphasis, `I'm glad to oblige with a lot of things but if anyone - - anything - .

down there is monitoring space - and they sure knew when the refligee ship arrived - thrusters big enough to move it out of orbit would be very very visible, even if putting them there wasn't. ' `What do we know about Hiver eyesight?' `They probably have a specialist for that, too, ' Anis remarked in a caustic tone.

`Possibly, ' Metrios agreed and then went on, `but why would they be watching a ship they know is disabled and uninhabited?' Clearly, he wanted to defend his strategy. `They don't know we're here. They certainly wouldn't expect anyone to come robbing them of a ship.

Surprise is a big plus `Our orders, gentlemen, ' and Captain

said and strode to his command chair where he remained for the rest of that watch.

It was the next morning that the captain asked Rojer to report to the bridge before his usual watch.

'It occurred to me, Rojer,' Osullivan said at his most relaxed and genial, 'that we shouldn't miss a golden opportunity.' 'Which one, sir?' Rojer asked dubiously, glancing at Metrios, Doplax and Yngocelen who were ranged behind the captain.

Osullivan grinned as did the others. 'Only that one area of this vessel is destroyed? Right?' When Rojer nodded, the captain went on, 'You seemed to have no difficulty porting that monitor around the interior.' 'It was a small one, with a limited detection capacity Oh, I see At Rojer's sudden comprehension, Osullivan turned to the other officers. 'He catches on real quick. Good lad. If we can present coherent diagrams of every level of this ship, the crews restoring the Great Sphere will have a template to work from. Captain Prtglm informed me that the design has not altered in all the centuries they've been dealing with the Hivers.' 'Except for the size of the Great Sphere - - - Metrios interposed.

'Would you oblige?' Osullivan said, gesturing at Rojer's couch and grinning with invitation.

alterations. ' Rojer found the process more time-consuming than tiring but he was very glad when that watch was over.

Five probes had been affected by the gas and he had deposited them in a gas-proof container in the ship's lab. While it was not as large as the Great Sphere, his first day's investigations had delineated only a very small segment of the total ship. But there was enough to cause every science and specialist officer on all three ships to spend the rest of the day analysing and rendering drawings. The gas had done its work thoroughly: only such stores as had been encased in metal survived.

As Rojer `ported the probes further inboard, printouts became blurred where the gas was thick. There came a point of no input.

Sufficient had been gathered to give the squadron some idea of the interior layout of the vessel: someone called it a `spaghetti-macaroni network of tubes, tunnels and conduits'. There were features in the ceilings and along the floors of the queens' quarters which gave rise to considerable speculation. Was each of the queens responsible for one aspect of the ship's operations? Or were the controls mutual?

`The Rowan said she met a "Many Mind", ' Rojer said, trying to sound impartial while reporting his grandmother's action, `a nexus of the queens which is what she immobilized when she was focus for her

and which would control what!' 'Don't seem to be any touch-type arrangement, Yngocelen remarked. 'But perhaps when back-lit we'd identify controls. ' 'The queens' palps are odd-shaped, ' Mehmet reminded

them. 'Palps end in different-sized triangular joints. ' 'The p, ' Osullivan said, 'is not so much the shape as the function.

On that they were all agreed. Captain Prtglm seemed to sink deeper onto its stool, spreading its bulk noticeably. Rojer thought it was depressed by this current impasse. Gil and Kat said their Great Captain had already achieved many battle honours but it wanted one more

significant honour to add to a career that had spanned over a hundred human-length years. Rojer could sympathize with that wish, knowing that Prtglm's colour would bask in glory for centuries more if it could bring back to Clarf an empty Hive ship.

Rojer and some of the lesser staff members were politely thanked and dismissed from the conference.

Since it was likely he'd be called to send back a report at the conclusion of the meeting, Rojer took the opportunity to grab something to eat. The sort of mental work he did made him ravenous. Rather than appear to eat more than was considered polite on ship, Rojer often

Rojer knew Pkgtglni was a Great One, he had been slightly peeved that it was too great a personage to notice his dear friends. He took Gil and Kat across to the KTTS whenever possible because they did enjoy visiting among their own kind.

`WE USE BIGGEST CARRIER ANYWAY. YOU HIDE IN DARK.

Knowing it would take the `Dini captain time to make its ponderous way from the bridge area to the transfer pod in the cargo bay, Rojer stripped out of his rumpled shipsuit and donned a clean one, buckling on the formal belt and pouch he rarely bothered to wear.

He was in awe of Great Captain Prtglm and a `uniformed' appearance bolstered his morale.

Gil and Kat were so excited they squirmed in his arms as he gathered them up for the `port. Actually, he landed neatly right at the hatch to the cargo bay, and in an empty corridor. He could, however, feel the vibration in the deck plates of a heavy' tread.

`QUICK, YOU TWO, ' he urged, adding body language to his words, opening the hatch and thrusting the two warm furry bodies ahead of him.

`THE GREAT ONE COMES. FEEL HIM?' His two friends scurried to the large pod that would be used. They opened it and were disappearing

The captain required time to settle itself in the pod while the cargo bay crew appeared extremely busy at their stations. Finally, Rojer could enter.

'Is power up, ensign?' Rojer called and received a thumbs up from Menburia. He closed the hatch and tried to compress himself so as not to touch the captain.

A Great One did not appreciate tactile contact.

Rojer picked up the pulse of generators he was now as familiar with as Xexo's at Aurigae Tower. He knew where he was going and `ported them on board the KTTS so lightly he was sure that Prtglm wasn't even aware the transfer had taken place until the hatch was opened by one of its own officers, and it was officially welcomed back on board. Prtglm rattled several phrases off so quickly that Rojer didn't follow the sense of them.

Something about `new probes' and `decision' COME, ' Prtglm said curtly to Rojer as soon as it had its back legs on the deck. Rojer scrambled out to see Prtglm making its way to an opening that led to the interior of the `Dini ship, not to the bridge as Rojer had expected.

It was as well Prtglm made its way without a backward glance for Gil and Kat suddenly clung on to Rojer's hands.

impede his forward progress.

WHAT'S WRONG?' he muttered, bending down to their ear holes.

Kat managed a quavery noise and, taking a breath as if steeling itself, stepped over the hatch and into the big hangar facility. Rojer and Gil followed. Rojer knew his dear friends were awed by any proximity to Prtglm, but there was some new quality in their manner now that began to infect him with doubt and anxiety.

The hangar was dark, but Rojer could make out racks of long, slim shapes that had a metallic shine: many of them. Light came up and Rojer blinked to adjust to the glare. Gil and Kat audibly moaned.

These were not probes, Rojer instantly noted: they had a precision of line that made their purpose unmistakable even before his horrified stare took in the deadly bulb of a warhead on the pointed end. And there were an awful lot of them.

Prtglm's digits flashed over a terminal and the multiple screens above it flicked on, each with a different view.

Three depicted the orbiting sphere ships, another the flat surface of the space field, and the rest were split, sometimes in three separate scenes, showing the largest of the square buildings his probes had found.

The sick feeling in Rojer's guts developed rapidly into a



convulsively to wet his dry mouth and throat.

YOU SEND MANY THINGS TO WORLD BELOW. YOU SEND THESE. TO THESE

PLACES! THEN SQUADRON TAKES SPHERE AND RETURNS WITH TRUE HONOUR.

'Sir, these are bombs?' Rojer forgot all 'Dini.

OF COURSE, and the captain's body made the massive surge from bottom to top that was an angry reaction to the question: indeed to any questioning.

'I am not permitted to destroy, sir. ' Rojer concentrated on speaking clearly and firmly.

YOU 'PORT MANY THINGS. BOMBS ARE BEST!

Most 'Dini voices expressed little emotion but Prtglm's intonations were rich with satisfaction and righteous vengeance.

I AM NOT PERMITTED TO DESTROY, SIR. MY ORDERS ARE STRICT. ' Rojer

fell back into 'Dini, hoping he could make his point better in that language.

YOUR ORDERS ARE TO WATCH, NOT DESTROY ORDERS WHICH CAME FROM

FORBIDDEN BY

HUMAN GREAT ONES TO DESTROY anything, ' Gil said, inching forward with

the greatest respect it could display.

THE HUMAN IS TO OBEY OR HUMAN WILL BE ON THE LINE.

Rojer could not believe what he heard.

I CANNOT OBEY CAPTAIN PRTGLM!' Fury engorged the captain now and,

in a movement so swift Rojer could have done nothing to intervene,

Prtglm's top arms descended on Gil's poll eye and smashed its immature

body to the deck.

`OBEY!' roared Prtglm and, lifting its great gory forearms, began the downward swing that would have also killed Rojer.

``PORT, ' Kat cried, shoving Rojer to one side and taking the blow meant for him which crumbled it beside the mangled body of Gil.

`Port Rojer did, out of the KTTS, and to the one place automatic reflexes could take him without conscious thought!

`Where the hell could he get to?' Captain Osullivan said, scowling with annoyance. `He knows the time he's due here for the daily report. ' `Sir?' Doplas said from his com station, `Ensign Menburia says

back here?' According to their records, the captain's pod is still in place and the human Rojer has not approached anyone on the KTTS.

The

big pod did not return here.

'Aw, now wait a bleeding minute - -' Metrios began in total disgust. 'If the pod is over there, on the KTTS, Rojer has to be there. Talents don't generally port themselves about in a space vacuum. Dangerous. And what's he been doing there for over eight hours anyway.

'I should very much like to know,' the captain said in a tight, controlled voice.

'This isn't like Rojer,' Anis Langio said.

'Darrimit, Anis, I know that,' Osullivan said, shifting about in his command chair, his face grim. 'Metrios, any power use consistent with a long-distance port?' 'No, sir,' the engineering officer said with only the briefest of glances at his station printout. 'And there's no way Rojer could port all the way back to Aurigae or even Clarf which is spatially nearer.

Osullivan stared grimly at the digital time display as the seconds and hundreds turned over rapidly. His fingers rattled an agitated tattoo on his hand rest.

sure the information was understood.

`We search for Rojer y, ) Doplas said.

`RJR LN REPORT IMMEDIATELY TO THIS SHIP, Osullivan added to  
be

sure the `Dini officer also understood.

This time the `Dini officer shook its upper body and then directed  
its poll eye fully at the screen. `NO HUMAN ON THE KTTS. ' The  
screen

went blank.

`What's all this about young Lyon disappearing?' demanded Captain  
Quacho, his image illuminating the main screen. `We've supplies to  
come in and I've two crew needing to go back on the carrier. I've been  
waiting for Rojer's signal to bring them over.

`A full ship search is under way, Quacho. I understand Lyon's  
disappearance no better than you do. And he's not on the `Dini ship!  
Osullivan grimaced and he rubbed his jaw. If the boy had gone to the  
`Dini ship, why hadn't he come back aboard the Genessee?

`Sir?' An excited voice immediately captured his attention. `Sir,  
one of the escape pods is gone. ' `Which?' Osullivan snapped the query  
out in such a hard voice that even Doplas recoiled.

`One oh eight, starboard, sir. And the controls were altered to

said, puzzled, angry and half-despairing. He had grown quite fond of young Lyon. The boy had conducted himself extremely well and been as

helpful as he could, way beyond the scope of his original assignment.

'Something happened while he was on board the KTTS,' Metrios said in a quiet, intense tone of voice.

'His 'Dinis went with him?' Osullivan knew that they had but he grasped at that one possibility of finding out what happened.

'Yes, sir, Ensign Menburia now reports that they slipped on board the probe before Prtglm or Lyon did.' 'They often went with him,' Anis said softly.

Osullivan waved his hand to cut off discussion. The boy had used an escape pod after a trip to the KTTS in Prtglm's company. The 'Dini was determined to return home in honour. Suddenly, Osullivan jumped to a conclusion he did not like, not any aspect of it and not for any reason.

'Let us hope he can reach his family safely.' Everyone on the bridge turned to stare at their captain and then began to exchange shocked glances. Metrios propped his head in his hands and stared down

We had hopes that he has made his way back to you, or his home world. ' Osullivan spoke aloud so that the bridge crew would understand that he was communicating with the Prime.

Surely you realize, Captain, that Rojer is not able to make such a long-distance `portation without assistance. what has happened to my grandson?

`We do not know, sir, and we are extremely worried. ' The captain then detailed the known sequence of events leading up to the discovery of the missing escape pod.

Then he cleared his throat. `Prime Raven, it is my bdief, unsupported though it is, that Captain PrtgIm may know either where Rojer is or why he left so abruptly. But the captain is unavailable.

I request formal permission from GktmgInt to board the KTTS and investigate.

That will be unnecessary, Captain, though the ooffer is certainly appreciated. I am informing the Htg'h Council of Prime Lyon's disappearance. You may expect assistance shortly. Have the courtesy to await it.

`Of course, Prime Raven. ' Captain Osullivan inclined his head in obedience to that directive and then sighed.

Ask your medic for an analgesic, Captain. A direct send to a

The sound reverberated with acutely felt echoes and Osullivan retired briefly to his ready room to find a pain killer before his brain burst through his skull.

Precisely three-quarters of a very long hour passed before a glad message was relayed from the cargo deck.

'Passenger pod aboard, sir. ' 'Escort the passenger to the bridge immediately, Mr Menburia. ' 'No need, Captain, said a curt feminine voice and the Rowan, a large dark-grey 'Dini beside her, and Afra Lyon, with a smaller 'Dini pair flanking him, appeared on the bridge upper level.

Osullivan shot to his feet and was half way to the Rowan when she held up her hand to restrain his impulse. Once again he felt a mental touch and almost recoiled from a second experience.

'Sorry, Captain, ' the Rowan said with a fleeting smile. The pain went as quickly as it had begun. 'It was the quickest way for me.

'We apologize for taking so long getting here, ' Afra went on. 'We stopped at appropriate intervals to listen.

'Ohhhh, ' and Osullivan breathed one single despairing note of denial.

'My grandson is alive, ' the Rowan added, her expression severe. Afra nodded a brief reinforcement of her statement. 'We would

Their air of competence and determination revived him from the despair which had engulfed him since Rojer's disappearance became known.

The generators surged briefly and the group were gone. Someone breathed a 'wow!' of awe.

'The Rowan?' Yngocelen asked in a low voice.

Osullivan nodded.

'I thought she 'never left Callisto. ' 'Not often, but she's the clout needed, ' Osullivan said, encouraged in spite of his pessimistic fears.

'Sir?' Ensign Menburia's voice sounded almost apologetic. 'They brought the supplies, too 'That boy must be found, safe and unharmed!' Osullivan said, bringing both fists down hard on the arm rests. He had personal as well as professional reasons, and a few which would have repercussions that he didn't want to think about, even clear-headed.

'Aye, aye, sir!' The Rowan had been angry before with the stupidity of people, or things, or avoidable accidents, but she had never been so frighteningly angry before. Even as Jeff had been receiving information from the Genessee, he had Gollee Gren contacting the Mrdini High Council representative stationed on Earth. Mrtgrts was



her own son. Aungac may not be without its Prime, Damia, and that's that. But the Rowan had then relented sufficiently to ask Afra to accompany her. You can manage without Afra and lie is the boy's father. But Aungac can't manage without you.

Then how is it that Callisto can do without its Prime?

Damia had demanded caustically. He's my son!

And my grandson and I carry more clout. Callisto is in occlusion or we'd've had to send her.

I'd rather you went, Damia said, subsiding.

We will find Rojer, dear girl. We will. You know Rojer's alive.

Yes, I know he's alive and Damia's tone dwindled off while leaving her mother with the full impact of her shock and despair.

Now report your husband and your `Dinis. We'll need them almost as much as we'll need me.

The Rowan had almost balked at waiting for the cluster of supply pods destined for Squadron B but the handlers at Callisto had the pods attached with such alacrity that she didn't have time enough to voice an objection.

I'd hazard that the supplies are needed for the morale value if nothing else, Jeff said soothingly. Rojer seems to have been very well liked and Captain Osullivan is genuinely and deeply upset by his

made

deep obeisance to Mrtgrts.

THE PRESENCE OF PRTGLM IS REQUIRED, ' Mrtgrts said, its tone coming

from deep inside its strong large body.

The poll eye of every `Dini on the bridge was turned respectfully in its direction.

I, PRIME OF CALLISTO, REQUIRE THE PRESENCE OF PRTGLM NOW!' the

Rowan said, drawing herself up to her full height. Despite being dwarfed by almost all the `Dini bridge staff, she was so imperious in manner that she received equal respect and attention.

I, FR, SIRE OF RJR LN, REQUIRE THE PRESENCE OF PRTGLM, ' Afra said

and he towered above everyone.

Though he knew the `Dini were not empathic, he allowed himself the luxury of radiating the anger and indignation that consumed him despite all his attempts to suppress such un-methody emotions.

Trp and Flk, the `Dinis who had lived with Damia and Afra for the past eighteen years, suddenly began to swell.

WE KNOW. WE GO, ' said Trp, and with no further explanation it and

him to run like that A Gwyn-Raven doesn't run, the Rowan began, her mental tone a vivid purple-red she was so incensed.

`There has been a command failure, ' Mrtgrts told them suddenly and now it, too, made a humble inclination of its upper body to the Talents.

`A what?' `Prtglm has attempted unilateral action that would not be approved by Admiral Mktrn or GktmgInt. ' Mrtgrts bowed again, its colour paling to exhibit a degree of embarrassment that Afra had seen only in very young `Dini miscreants.

`What sort of action?' the Rowan demanded imperiously.

`The Talent offspring of Afra Lyon became so deft at sending unseen probes that Prtglin saw the opportunity to destroy the flinction of this world for ever.

Damn! The word exploded with ferocity in the Rowan's livid mind and included the actions which she desired to inflict on Prtglm's person.

`How dared it!' Afra's fliry matched the Rowan's and Mrtgrts swayed back from them as if it felt the impact as a personal blow.

`That was not the assignment my son accepted and that I, as his parent, approved, Mrtgrts. I do not know what punishment can be meted

The Rowan's face mirrored the horror both she and Afra felt.

No wonder Rojer disappeared, she said in the saddest tone Afra had ever heard from her in all their long association. She swayed and he stepped close to support her.

`ESCORT ME, Mrtgrts told the bridge officer who had met them. Its whole body shuddering, it turned to another of the exits from the bridge facility, Flk and Trp falling in behind him.

The Rowan made a move to follow but Afra restrained her and eased her on to the nearest stool before her knees buckled. Keeping one hand

lightly under her arm to comfort her, Afra blanked out the flood of emotions she continued to broadcast. Far better for all if she dispersed as much of her feelings as possible where it could not be felt or heard before Mrtgrts returned.

why would Rojer's `Dinis be killed, Afra? why? They were young, blameless.

Rojer would have refused outright to `port weapons of any kind, Afra said wearily for he now had a sense of what had probably taken place. He oughtn't really to have sent probes either, but certainly the knowledge that has been amassed is more than worth that shg'ht deviation from his orders. But - Afra shook his head.

determination to wrest that much of a concession from those who preferred non-aggression.

We'll never be able to communicate with that species. I certainly don't want to have to meet any mind of theirs again, single or many!

Afra certainly understood her hostility and resentment of the species but he had been raised on a methody planet which did not approve of violence of any kind, even in self-defence. 'There are always alternatives: keep talking' had been the guiding rule about confrontations that might lead to force and bloodshed.

Until we can find the weaknesses of this species, we cannot arrive at a solution which will produce success without needless waste of life, he said as gently and persuasively as possible.

He didn't wish to aggravate the Rowan, and he knew her sentiments in depth, but he also had the right to his opinions and the right to express them.

Even when Rojer has been the first casualty of such an attitude?

The Rowan's grey eyes flashed at him and she shifted herself away from his gentle support.

He sighed but he expected nothing else.

A door whooshed open and Mrtgrts stood there a moment, its poll eye aimed directly at the two human Talents. As it stepped onto the

The Rowan gave a little shiver. I'd like to consign Prtglm to this primary, not to Cia That would be sparing Prtglm the ultimate humiliation, Rowan, Afra pointed out. I can send a carrier that far if you would rather not deal with the send.

Oh, and her eyes blazed at him, in that case I myself will bump him back to Clarf arid half bury the capsule Afra signalled her to wait as he turned to Fik and Trp. 'WHAT HAPPENED TO GRL AND KTG AND WHY?'

THEY PRESUMED TO INTERFERE WITH PRTGLM'S ORDERS TO RJR. PRTGLM

PUNISHED SUCH PRESUMPTION' The Rowan hid her eyes for a moment and a

sob racked her. Afra sent the gentlest soothing thought he could, though his heart pounded bitterly at the sacrifice, at the terrible shock such a loss would have dealt his son. Rojer was no older, in either `Dini or human terms, than the two who had tried to help him.

Afra could and did allow himself a brief surge of pride in a boy who would not be coerced into doing something against training and conscience.

THEY, ' Fik continued, drawing itself up straight, 'DO HONOUR TO

back.

'Who is to be informed of the reasons for Prtglm's cnme and return?' the Rowan asked Mrtgrts.

The big `Dini inclined its body to the Rowan. `This one will inform Gktmlnt personally of this terrible misconduct of Prtglin who now submits to retribution.

Details will be forwarded to you.

The Rowan responded to that with a curt nod of her head. Gktmlnt was one of the high-placed `Dinis who accepted human reasoning and logic in the Alliance campaign to restrict Hiver incursions. A pall of tense silence was maintained until it was announced that the carrier had been loaded and was ready for transfer.

Afra followed the Rowan's thrust. She did not quite plough the capsule into the concrete of the Clarf landing field. She gave the Clarf Tower Prime, her granddaughter Laria, quite a shock to feel a carrier being brought in so precipitously.

Mother, I just had the most extraordinary orders not to touch that personnel pod. There's a crew swarming over it, painting some kind of message I can't understand. Is there someone or something inside?

Vie sun's boiling here today.

Anything enclosed like that will bake in its own juices.

Clair Prime, such an action would have been totally beyond the parameters of your brother`s position. He has acted properly, and bravely. Had he complied, lie could never have been allowed to run a Tower.

Yes, Callisto Prime, of course I see that. You'll let me know the moment you find Rojer? And it was a caring sister who asked, not a Tower Prime.

He did not con tact you directly for assistance then?

No, Grandmother. He could have reached me. He's got very strong, you know. I'd say stronger than me Than I, her grandmother corrected absently. I doubt you'll need gestalt to hear when we do find him.

Have you any ideas where he might go? Could lie possibly have gone to Deneb? You children were always keen to visit Isthia.

Laria was astute enough to catch the wistfulness in the Rowan's voice. She would have informed you the moment she was aware of his presence on Deneb. And she would be.

Yes, she would be.

Laria hesitated, surprised by the tinge of despair in her indomitable grandmother's tone. You'll find him, Grandmother, I know it. Especially if Dad's with you. You two could hear to the furthest arm of the Milky Way.



which means he's near by, concluded the Rowan and allowed an audible sigh of relief to escape her lips.

WE STAY HERE A WHILE, ' Fik and Trp told Afra.

MRTGRTS, TOO. ALL COLOURS ARE FADED.

THE MISJUDGEMENT BELONGED ONLY TO THE CAPTAIN AND ITS NEED FOR

HONOUR, Afra replied.

NO. THEY WERE REQUIRED TO MAKE THE BOMBS.

THEY WERE GLAD TO THINK THAT IT WOULD BE PERMITTED TO BRING

DESTRUCTION TO THE HIVE PLANET WHEN `DINI PLANETS HAVE SUFFERED SO

MUCH. ' They have a point, the Rowan said but before Afra could argue,

she added, I can't stay another moment on this ship.

CONTACT ME WHEN YOU WISH TO RETURN TO THE GENESSEE, Afra told the

`Dinis who bowed in acknowledgement.

\* \* \* Reporting formally to Captain Osullivan in his quarters, the Rowan and Afra were immediately offered refreshment.

'I knew old Prtglm was up to something, ' he said, 'but it's still

whereabouts, Callisto Prime? We are most worried for his sake. ' 'We appreciate that, ' and the Rowan sighed again.

'I'd've given anything to have spared him such a shock and the loss of his 'Dinis. They, too, are .

were well liked by all the crew and officers. Gave lots of their time teaching us pronunciation and vocabulary Osullivan shook his head.

'I do not think he has gone far, Captain, but we, ' and the Rowan gestured to Afra, 'would like to go in deep gestalt to locate him. ' 'A shock like that to a sensitive young man Captain Osullivan said sadly, 'he may not wish to be found and, knowing what caused him to disappear,

I can't say that I blame him. ' 'Nor do we, which we shall make paramount in our thoughts, ' Afra said. 'But the reason for his disappearance has now been removed.

'I needed that, ' the Rowan said, finishing the last of the small sandwiches and the wine in her glass. She stood. 'Let's find the missing, Afra. ' 'If I might make a suggestion, ' the captain said, his expression startled by the thought that came to him.

'It's always the last place you look. I mean, if you're looking for something or someone. ' He glanced from the Rowan to Afra, hoping

was close to such a vivid personality.

He caught the wry smile on Afra's face and felt himself blush at having been quite so transparent. The barest shake of Afra's head, and an increase in his smile, suggested to Osullivan that his reaction was rather common when the unsuspecting dealt with the Rowan.

Commander Metnos immediately ushered Afra to his chair while the Rowan settled on Rojer's couch.

'We may not need to draw much on the gestalt,' she said with a quiet confident smile that put heart in the engineer's uneasy mind.

Metrios had been excoriating himself for not having kept closer tabs on Rojer, on the messages recorded, or not, on his own station.

'We suspect he has parked the escape pod on the refugee ship,' Afra said by way of explanation.

'Of course! Why didn't we think of that?' And Metrios wallowed for a moment longer in guilt.

'Not that it would have done you much good, except relieve your apprehension, Commander,' Afra said, radiating conciliation. He glanced at the Rowan and the pair immediately went into a mind merge which focus stabbed in the direction of the deserted ship.

The pod is there! In a cargo hold on the perimeter of the ship which is in full vacuum, clear of the gas. I believe we could

honourable.

Are Gil and Kat honourably dead then! The anguish/shock/loss/hatred/fury in Rojer's tone had to be fended off by parent and grandparent.

Laria is correct, the Rowan said on a tight aside to Afra, Rojer has strengthened significantly.

More the pity that his tour should end on such a tragic note.

We will make positive out of the negative, old friend.

Swiftly, the Rowan told the boy what had ensued.

I could have, should have stopped Prtg/m. I could have, using force, Rojer said, still grieving and accusing himself.

NO! both the Rowan and Afra said so fiercely that Rojer recoiled from them.

Sorry, son, Afra said. I know you feel the loss of Gil and Kat very very deeply. Trp and Fik do, too, and with an implacable hatred I have never seen from any `Dini before towards one of its own kind.

Prtg/m is, I believe, roasting in its personnel carrier on Clarf, the Rowan added with some relish, in the noonday sun.

Despite the appalling consequences, Rojer, his father added, you behaved exactly as you should Going awol, Dad? I should have called you! That's what I should have done. Thian got to Granddad when he

grief to realize that. She felt his hesitant contact and let him see how deeply she, and beyond her all his kin, joined him in mourning.

That seemed to astonish the boy out of his self-absorption. So she went on in a brisker tone. Now, will you need assistance to bring that escape pod back to its proper position?

You're tired, son. Let us help you.

I got myself here, Dad. I'll get myself out.

The Rowan approved of his attitude but, in a tight aside to Afra, she proposed that they surreptitiously assist him.

Grandmother, I'm not being cocky, but this I will do myself All by myself Rojer surprised them both by saying.

Before he had completed the mental sentence, Commander Metrios jubilantly announced that the pod had been reconnected to the Genessee.

The Rowan abandoned dignity and `ported a very weary grandson directly into her embrace on the bridge.

Don't embarrass him, Rowan, Afra began until he saw how tightly the boy clung to his grandmother before he turned to his father, and Afra knew that her instinct had been correct.

A cheer cut through their private reunion and Metrios was the first to grasp Rojer's hand and pound him on the shoulder, forgetting

`No, you're not exactly unharmed, lad, are you, after such an encounter, but you have our sympathy for your losses and our appreciation of your courage. I should have been hard-pressed to stand up to Prtglm when it was so obviously deranged. ' The captain's admission surprised Rojer so much his mouth dropped open.

Close your mouth, boy. Learn to accept praise with proper modesty, the Rowan said, but her tone was kind.

Rojer immediately closed his mouth and managed a smile.

`He's out on his feet, Captain, ' Afra said, putting a protective arm about his son's shoulders. `I'll take him to his cabin. ' Which Afra did with as much tenderness and affection as he thought would not rob Rojer of his new manliness.

Then the Rowan indicated to the captain that she wished to speak with him privately and he led her back to his ready room.

`What Rojer had no authority to do, I have, ' she said, gracefully seating herself.

With no subtle prompting from her, he offered wine which she accepted with relief They both sipped, organizing their thoughts. The Rowan had acutely experienced Rojer's trauma which went deeper than she

had expected. But then she had not had close `Dini relationships. The

lowed

a slight smile to put him at his ease. `That refugee ship must never be used by Hivers. Nor the other ships in orbit.

We have enough of this species loose in the galaxy right now. She held up her hand when Osullivan opened his mouth. `I certainly cannot condone - much though in essence I approve of Hiver containment - what

Prtglm had planned nor its proposed delivery. As you may be aware, controversy rages over whether we, the Alliance, have the right to inflict the atrocity of destroying occupied Hiver worlds. That's the sort of barbaric retribution which we humans have outgrown.

Yet we cannot, by the same token, permit them to continue to exterminate life on the planets they wish to colonize.

`It has been put forward that perhaps they recognize only their own species as intelligent and sentient and are unaware that they are slaughtering developing sentient forms. Be that as it may, certain actions have \* \* been discussed and this situation here allows us some leeway. I will propose to GktmgInt and Admiral Mekturian, subject to their agreement, that Squadron B demolish the three orbiting ships to prevent the obviously imminent colonial expedition. I shall myself `port the missiles so expediently available: an action in which T-2

being examined. ' She grinned with wicked delight. 'How much more we can learn from an intact vessel than a melted hulk. ' Osullivan's expression brightened considerably.

'Prime Rowan, it went severely against the grain to know that those Hivers would have four colony ships available to them. ' She chuckled, twisting the stem of her wine glass, her grey eyes sparkling at him over its rim.

'Soon there will be none. I'm delighted you find yourself in tune with this plan.

'Delighted isn't strong enough but it will suffice, Osullivan said. 'I'm certain that Captain Quacho will concur. I assume, ' and he hesitated, 'that the KTTS will release the missiles to us.

'The KTTS will insist on taking part as well, Captain. Their honour needs some restoration. ' 'Shall we confer with Captain Quacho?' 'Of course, ' and Osullivan turned to his console to key in the signal.

Afra joined them some time after the Rowan, having obtained Quacho's enthusiastic co-operation and Mrtgrts's agreement, had relayed the proposal to her husband who put the matter before the two Alliance



`He's asleep, ' Afra replied, `with Flk and Trp to ease him with good dreams.

`May I say how heavily this despicable incident rests on my mind?'

`You have in many ways, Captain, ' Afra said solemnly, `and we have been

aware of each, even if we have not properly thanked you for the depth of your concern. Rojer will recover. He certainly bears you no rancour. Ah, ' he said, changing the subject as stewards entered with steaming dishes, redolent with delectable aromas, `I hadn't realized how hungry I am. ' `You were very considerate to bring in those supplies or, I can assure you, my cook would have been hard put to present you

a

decent meal. ' `This is a feast, ' the Rowan said, holding up her glass for more wine. `Where does this vintage come from?' `You can't guess?'

Afra asked in polite surprise.

`Then it has to be Capellan, ' she said with a mild grimace. `It has always amused me that such a methody planet produces such fine vintages.

Let that be a surprise. It'll cheer you up, I know.

The next morning Afra and Rojer left for Deneb where Rojer would

would inform Rojer if he felt the knowledge would be therapeutic.

The Rowan also awaited the decision of the High Council though she had some assurance from Jeff that there was little doubt the proposal would be accepted.

It would salve the conservatives that the planet would be left unharmed and placate the militants that all space capability was destroyed.

The decision was affirmative but she would have to await the arrival of Thian Lyon as FT&T replacement and an additional T-1 to assist in the seizure of the refugee ship. Even the Rowan had to admit that the sphere ship had too much mass for her to move even with the assistance of more gestalt power than Callisto Station ordinarily provided.

If it makes you feel any better, my dear, her husband informed her, the T-2s replacing your good self at Callisto are working their balls off desperately awaiting your return.

Do `em good, the Rowan replied smugly.

Does you good, too, my darling, to find that you are nnot, after all, moving mountains all by yourself Jeff teased her.

Ha! who are you sending?

He gave her a phantom hug and an enthusiastic kiss and a

blistering note about exceeding orders.

He'd've been exceeding his if he did, the Rowan replied tartly.

love, you can't have it both ways.

I can try!

Until Thian on Squadron A's `Dini KLTZ had reached a point where he could be `ported to the Genessee, the Rowan busied herself reviewing

the fascinating tapes Rojer had gathered by probe. Before, the Hivers had been featureless creatures in a death-dealing sphere, now they were

still featureless - as humans reckoned such matters - but the work ethos, the discipline, the minutiae of daily life in some of the orders of Hiver creatures, was depicted: and at least one of the worlds the Hivers had chosen to populate. The Rowan spent more time than she intended on such records. Then, resolutely, planned how to destroy the planet's spacefaring capability. The two half-finished ships would be easy to demolish, but the third ship was tightly sealed.

Commander Yngocelen pointed out that the weapon ports would do nicely: there were sufficient of them to penetrate into the ship and then it was a simple matter to `port in sufficient explosives to disintegrate it.

all information the `Dinis had amassed, would be surface-to-orbit shuttles. The scout vessels might be stored on the closed sphere and blown up along with the ship, but if they were available as deep-space pursuit, the squadron received permission to destroy them, too.

Assuming that there was, indeed, no inter-colony communication, this Hiver world could not call for reinforcements which might follow the squadron's ion trail. By the time a suitable deep-space vessel could be constructed on this world, any traces would have dissipated.

With plans and materiel in place, Thian's arrival was keenly awaited. His grandmother thought he looked a trifle gaunt but she caught a remarkable energy exuding from him, once he recovered from

a

stunned surprise at finding her on board the Genessee.

`Where's Rojer then?' he asked, glancing about him, having looked forward to a reunion with his brother.

His `Dinis, Mur and Dip, were also looking about, for they had been eager to see Gil and Kat. He was perplexed by the minute shock

he

read from his grandmother. An indefinable sadness darkened her eyes.

Then, with a nod of greeting to the `Dinis, the Rowan unexpectedly hooked her arm in her tall grandson's and walked him from the cargo

Thian had no reservations about what he obviously considered necessary destruction, only determination and an eagerness to assist her in any way possible. She was well pleased with a mental attitude that did not emanate any vengefulness or malicious delight; feelings which she had sensed in some officers and many crew members. She preferred to think of their coming actions as deterrent rather than vindictive.

Know that your father is not of a militant disposition, the Rowan said, honour requiring her to mention the fact.

Dad find me a hardened militant all my months on board a `Dini ship, but that would not be why I find this course of action justified, Grandmother. Until we can communicate with the Hive species .

That you'll never be able to do, the Rowan said flatly. I know!

But I understood that the captive queen Is understood at only a very basic level, and on the one or two occasions when a human has been

in her presence, the visitor has been totally' ignored as if the human didn't exist I'm beginning to think that they don't recognize any species but their own.

Thian gave a wry grin. You sure do hate `em, don't you, Grandmother?

them on you.

The Rowan scowled and then had to break into a laugh because

Thian

was enough like his father to ignore what Afra had always called her fits and starts.

`Rowan, ma'am, ' the ship's com system began, `please return to the cargo bay for an incoming personnel carrier.

`Damn, ' the Rowan said, spinning on her heel to retrace her steps, `he could have warned me. ' `I'd say he wanted to give you time to brief me, Grandmother, ' Thian said, not at all put out.

`Do you have to stick up for him?' she asked irritably.

`As Grandfather or Prime?' Thian asked, but he had a sense of eager anticipation. His grandfather was subtly providing a diversion from what had been a large dollop of bad news.

`Never mind, ' she said and walked all the faster back to the cargo bay.

They had reached the facility just as the generators lifted briefly and then a shiny new single carrier landed smoothly on the cradle. The ensign on duty shot a glance at the Rowan and Thian but she nodded for him to lift the hatch.

Oh, am I late, Cal/is to Prime? was the quick concern of a

`A pleasure to meet you, Flavia, ' the Rowan said, stepping forward in turn to touch fingers briefly with the girl. Don't gawk, Thian, she added tightly.

He took two long strides forward as if he had merely given his grandmother precedence. In fact, he had been nearly as stunned as Tollert. Flavia wasn't beautiful in a classical way, not as Laria or some of his cousins were, but she had large and startlingly vivid green eyes and long straight blonde hair which she wore simply pulled back from her oval face by green combs. Standing next to the too-slender Rowan, she appeared well-fleshed and her pale green shipsuit emphasized a very womanly body.

`Thian of Aurigae, ' he said, exerting control not to touch her fingers longer than Talent protocol dictated.

Mint/green/rose was her touch.

`I believe Jeff said you are the grandchild of Bastian and Maharanjani, ' the Rowan said. `I worked with them, Thian, in the tower on Altair. ' Flavia nodded briefly with a becomingly reserved smile.

`The duty has been explained to you?' She nodded again. `It is an honour to work with Callisto Prime for any reason.

`Humph, ' the Rowan said.

`How are your `Dinis called, Prime Thian?' `I'm just Thian, ' he laughed, disclaiming any title, `and these are Mur and Dip.

`FLV TRUSTS THAT YOUR DREAMS HAVE BEEN GOOD, ' she said  
in  
excellent `Dini.

Score one for the child, the Rowan said privately to her grandson.

And Granddad, Thian said with a sparkle in his eyes as he opened the hatch for the women.

`Do your `Dinis mind `portations, Thian?' the Rowan asked.

`Not any more, ' he said and closed the hatch behind him.

He clasped Mur and Dip against his legs, nodding to the Rowan that he was ready to `port. They all did, arriving in the corridor outside the Genessee's conference room. The Rowan tapped the panel for admittance and a yea-woman smartly opened the door.

M within stood at her entry and throughout her introductions of her grandson and Flavia Bastianmajani of altair.

Thian kept his expression bland as mixed comments reverberated from minds keyed up in anticipation of action. `He's bigger than Rojer. ' `That young slip of a girl's a Prime?' `Quite a family resemblance to Rojer with that same white lock of hair. ' `Wouldn't mind Priming with her. ' `Carries himself well. ' `She's a bit young for this



to this mission, and she was certainly a lovely young woman, but Thian was not going to settle quite so quickly into the family pattern of an early marriage.

Captain Osullivan formally made Flavia, Thian and his `Dini companions welcome. Then, with the Rowan on his right side and Flavia

on his left, with Thian seated beside her, he opened the official final planning conference. The captain was certainly not in on any of grandfather's machinations but Thian was extremely conscious of Flavia's proximity, aware of the delicate scent she wore, of the pulse of her very finely tuned and attentive mind. After a year on the KLTZ, he had mastered the art of concentration.

`This is, as I'm sure you're all aware, the first time the Alliance has taken action against a Hive world. You have all seen tapes of the kind of ground-to-air missile attack on the refugee ship but we also know the extent of its range. However, we must not be for a moment lax in vigilance against any unsuspected retaliatory strikes. ' Mrtgrts nodded in verification of that caution.

`As you also know, the Rowan has already `ported explosives into the assigned positions to destroy the orbiting ships. Heat-seeking missiles are ready in each ship of the squadron for use in destroying

questions?' After a brief pause, Thian raised his hand. 'Grandmother, Flavia, may I escort you to our vehicle so we can get this show on the road?' 'You may be mixing metaphors, thian, but if Commander Metrios' engines are ready to support gestalt. . . She turned to Mrtgrts and Captain Quacho 'Are you ready to return to your own ships?' 'Ready indeed, ma'am, ' the engineer said but his last word was spoken to empty

air for all five had gone. 'I wish they wouldn't do that!' he murmured, giving a shake.

'Stations, everyone, ' Captain Osullivan said, rising.

'Red alert!' 'This must be the captain's pod, ' Thian said as the three T-1s made themselves comfortable in the escape pod.

'It's a lot roomier than the last one I was in.

'For three, yes, it's roomy enough, ' the Rowan said.

'Shall we?' and she nodded at both young people.

'Of course, ' Flavia said and Thian murmured consent.

This would be a brief rehearsal for the longer, harder merge they would have to make.

He'd never worked with his grandmother but he was accustomed to merging with his parents and was very pleased when Flavia deftly slipped in behind him as if she had similar hours of practice.

They were immediately assailed by the most intense stinging-pizz that emanated from Hive metals, a sensation peculiarly limited to the Talented.

Flavia gave a visible shudder, looking about her, a grimace marring her features. 'What is that?' 'I do beg your pardon, Flavia, we should have thought to warn you,' the Rowan said, casting an accusatory glance at Thian. 'Talent is susceptible to a resonance from Hive metals.' Flavia worked her mouth, producing saliva and shuddered again.

'Unpleasant taste in your mouth, too?' Thian asked helpfully.

She swallowed. 'Yes, at the back of my throat. How can you stand it?' 'I,' the Rowan said rather loftily, 'ignore it. When Flavia looked astonished, the Rowan relented. 'It is particularly strong since we are inside a Hiver, but shortly we'll be busy enough to be able to put it out of our minds. We'll only have to endure it for a very short time.' 'Thank goodness for that,' Flavia said, pursing her lips and rubbing her tongue against her cheeks and teeth in an attempt to hydrate her mouth.

The Rowan initiated the merge then, ever so slowly pushing the ship out of its orbit and the gravitational pull of the planet. Since the manoeuvre was also being performed as night fell across this

expressed speed and relative distance from the planet. Slowly they reached the mark on the dial when they had passed beyond the known range of surface-launched missiles.

Stop hunching your shoulders, you two, she added at a later point.

Any missile they could launch would have to penetrate the diameter of the ship to reach us. If that is, they had any idea we are here.

That made both Thian and Flavia smile. He rotated his shoulder blades because he had indeed been unconsciously hunching himself against an attack from the rear. He grinned at Flavia who was rubbing her neck and still trying to swallow the stingg-pzzt away.

`Good. Now we can speed up and complete this snatch, ' the Rowan said, absently licking her lips and swallowing against the concentration of stingg-pzzt.

Thian felt the intensity of the merge now and surrendered himself to her guidance at the same instant that Flavia did. He hadn't ever thought to be capable of moving such mass but, with the merge and the gestalt capability, it was abruptly accomplished. He did feel the drop in his energy level when his grandmother released them from the merge and then the slight jar as the tractor beams from the squadron latched on to the sphere.

`I do hope something down there was watching, ' the Rowan said with

`I feel like I need a good long soak to rid me of that awful reek,' Flavia said, making another grimace of revulsion.

`Later, when our work is done, my dear, the Rowan said. `We will have time, however, for a drink to take the taste out of our mouths. '

`Something sharp, Grandmother, like orange juice.

`Does this ship have something like that?' Thian `provided' the juice in long cold glasses to Flavia's obvious relief and his grandmother's only marginally less fervent thanks.

`You were far enough away not to have felt any shock waves, Captain Osullivan said when they joined him on a bridge that was packed

with officers and crew, and ringed with additional screens so that every view of the theatre of operations was accessed. `Ah, that's our first casualty,' Osullivan added, pointing to the screen which had just ceased broadcasting. `One of the probes Rojer hid in the flotsam. '

`The ships?' Thian asked, rapidly checking the secondary screens.

`Reduced to the debris you see floating in a band around the planet,' the captain said with quiet satisfaction. `What the bombs you placed, ma'am, didn't fragment, the mines you sowed did. Mind you, there is a time lag between the event and our visuals of it .

`Do any monitors need replacement?' the Rowan asked. `Now that

emerging from an underground hangar.

'Mrtgrts here, Osullivan, ' came the 'Dini's liaison officer's unmistakable voice over the squadron link. 'Is the second wave ready?'

'It is, ' the Rowan answered. 'thian, you will use the missiles on the KTTS as you're more familiar with 'Dini ships. Flavia, have you located the Arapahoc's?

Good. It's as easy for us to work from here as on the separate ships. ' She waited until she could feel the young Talents 'reaching' the missiles on the other ships, her eyes never leaving the screen as first one scout ship, then another, and a third became visible.

'Three. The normal complement of a Hive colonial ship. They'd be a much more interesting challenge if they changed their tactics, ' she added almost ruefully. 'thian, take the right hand one; Flavia, the one that's just emerging, and I'll dispose of the one that made it to the field. I believe it's about to launch. At my count . three, two, ONE!' Each Prime 'ported the heavy torpedoes easily to the recommended

range. Then, before the Hiver world's warning systems could alert defences, launched them at the correct velocity for devastating strikes.

There was, as Captain Osullivan said, a time lag before the

exploded, parts arcing up and then showering down on the trundling Hivers that had been massed on the space field. The debris fell almost gracefully to the now riddled surface and lay smoking and burning in a circle of destruction spread well beyond the perimeter of the space facility.

`Someone's left the doors open, Thian remarked.

`In that case, ' the Rowan said with a shrug, `let us take advantage of such carelessness.

Even as additional missiles were armed and sent on their way by the three Talents, more hangar doors punched upward out of the debris on the field, revealing the squat forms of shuttle craft. These emerged at speed from the protection of the hangars but not swiftly enough.

`Fire as ready, the Rowan ordered Thian and Flavia and they lobbed missiles at the shuttles and then into any aperture that could be seen through the smoke and raging fires.

`Is this their only space facility?' Thian asked when no more targets were visible. `There are other substantial buildings on the planet.

`They seem to be agricultural collection depots, ' Captain Osullivan said.

orange alert, ' Osullivan said, touching the arm-plate for inter-ship communications.

`Captains? Any queries?' `A successful attack, ' Captain Quacho said, his brows drawn together in what seemed to be a satisfied scowl.

`Do not rule out the possibility of reprisal, ' Mrtgrts said.

Behind it on the bridge, `Dinis could be seen waving their forearms about, expressing their triumph at the success of the mission.

Only Mrtgrts appeared dissatisfied and pessimistic.

`Reprisal with what, Mrtgrts?' the Rowan asked caustically, surveying the destruction on every screen.

Then, putting both hands on the arm rests, she pushed herself to her feet. `If we are needed, call us, ' she said to Captain Osullivan.

Thian caught the surprised expressions of Langio, Metrios and Yngocelen but he, too, rose, indicating that Flavia could join them.

He paused by the captain's chair.

`Permission to leave the bridge, sir?' `Of course, ' Osullivan said, eyes widening at Thian's formality even as he shrugged as the Rowan disappeared.

`She'd be the last to admit it, sir, ' Thian said, leaning confidentially towards Osullivan, `but Grandmother had to expend more energy as focus than we did. ' `Yes, yes, of course.



gave me specific orders on the care and feeding of his favorite wife  
His only wife And the only Prime who can m Ca dinis to and you are  
tired.

Fighting a war at any age is tiring.

Flavia's little gasp of surprise caught Thian unawares.

'Was that a war we just fought?' Thian stuttered in surprise.

'Well, a battle, certainly.

What did you think you were going to do here?' 'Keep the Hivers  
from leaving this planet.

'And that's not war?' 'It's analogous to clearing out vermin. ' 'On  
rather a large scale, ' Thian said, wondering at her curious calm.

'We have to do so often enough on altair when there's been  
prolonged and heavy rains in the swamplands. Otherwise the towns  
and

settlements would be overrun, Flavia said quite matter-of-factly.

Your grandfather did know what he was doing, said the Rowan in a  
tight tone to Thian and added a snort of amusement.

Dad? There was the special note in his daughter Laria's voice  
that brought Afra sharply to attention. He was alone in Aurigae Tower,  
making some minor in-system shipments. Damia was out hunting with  
Morag, Ewain and all the 'Dinis.

of the four Mrdini colony worlds. Laria had recently been assigned Clarissia Negeva as her assistant, a T-2, who had been trained by David

of Betelgeuse. Clarissia was replacing Stierlman who had not achieved the necessary rapport with Laria. She'd had no trouble at all with the other members of her Tower staff Vanteer, the T-6 engineer, or Lionasha, the T-7 station-manager and expediter.

Although there had been `Dini-human pairings on her home planet, Clarissia was unaccustomed to working with them and never gave direct orders to the six paired with the other three station personnel, who happily doubled as cargo-handlers or whatever other functions could be done by non-FT&T personnel.

Clarissia's not working out either? Afra asked.

I do better running the station on my own, Dad, was the tart reply.

She's been here nineteen weeks and she still turns pale when more than our `Dinis are present and you know that `Dinis notice colour changes. And she's been moaning about that carrier ever since it got here. Not, and Laria's mental tone altered, that I enjoy the sight, or more recently the stench from it. Prtglm is definitely deceased.

I'm beginning to think they don't intend to move it, leaving it

I have and he says it's too obscure for him but he's still trying to find references. He does reassure me that they're not antihuman.

This is one of those occasions, Afra said firmly but soothingly, when you know that humans don't interfere with `Dini customs.

The custom I can ignore if I understood even if the reek is omnipresent, but I have to be very careful about transfers.

Originally, Prtg/m's carrier came down - hard - on the middle cradle. I was told not to move it to one side, but I didn't, for one minute, realize it was going to take up such permanent residence! I could have used that cradle a hundred times.

Once again her tone altered to one less assured. Daaaad, does anyone there know why it's being LEFT? most don't blame Clarissia but I also need to understand what's going on about it - Prtglm, I mean so I can deal with the reason it's been left there so long. Is it a subtle way of punishing me because I'm Rojer's sister - I doubt that!

Afra replied stoutly. `Dinis don't think in those terms.

I sure hope so, Laria replied, exhibiting some of the distress she had been covering.

I can ask Jeff. I already did and he doesn't know but he doesn't have `Dinis. Do yours know anything?

We never did get any more answer to queries about Mrdini penal

judgement even in the `Dini lexicon, and certainly several against humans. They don't want a repetition and that may be their way of driving home the lesson.

When one's own son had nearly been a victim of PrtgIm's coercion, it was very hard indeed not to take a judgemental stand. Once Afra knew that Rojer was responding to the discreet therapy of his grandmother, Isthia, on Deneb, he felt less bitterness, a most unusual emotion for him, towards the misguided PrtgIm. The latest report was that Rojer could now mingle with both humans and `Dinis without the intense grief/loss/ deprivation reactions he had initially experienced.

He was becoming more and more engrossed in his practical engineering studies. His uncle, Jeran, Deneb's Prime, was going to insist that, when the Hiver ship that had been `appropriated' by the Rowan merge reached the investigation orbit at the Mars space facility, Rojer would have a place on that study team. Of course Rojer needed to meet the qualifications, but that had given him a definite goal and he was studying with good purpose and diligence to satisfy the requirements.

I know that, Dad, but to have that grisly reminder on my Tower field Afra could feel the anger flaring within his daughter's mind, an

animosity. where I know how much damage the Hivers have done to

`Dini

worlds, and hundreds of others, that . . .

that Xh-33 really should have been When Laria could not find an adequate fate, Afra couched his suggestions in an ironic tone he rarely used with his children. Exterminated? Fumigated? Wiped of life forms?

Scorched beyond use?

There was a long pause. Some thitig like that, so that that planet could never be able to colonize, to massacre innocent life forms on any other planet.

So? We must emulate their methods?

Well, just look what they did. Forcing queens of their own species out of their ship then blasting them, with out ever trying to find out why the ship came? Indignation now coloured Laria's anger.

That's very much a `debatable point, Laria.

It's not that I'm ignoring other opinions, Dad. Aren't I transmitting messages backwards and forwards every day?

You are, but are you listening to the content or just the context?

what do you mean by that, Dad? And what group do you support?

Her tone was aggressive as if any other than the position she

either, Laria said caustically.

Afra smiled, keeping his amusement well away from his argumentative daughter. I disagree, Laria. the material recorded from Rojer's probes is still being analysed All it shows is that the Hivers have not changed their methods or the dominant drive of their species in the centuries the `Din have known them.

The `Dinis never got close enough to a Hive world to make observations, or attempt contact, Afra said patiently. Laria's feelings were quite pent up, by which he guessed she had had the tact not to discuss this with her Tower staff.

But we know what they do to planets. We know they've been doing it for centuries. Laria sounded querulous.

We know that the `Dinis have reported for the centuries of their sigTh to avoid being `exterminated' and that limited to destroying Hive ships in space. Vie planet Xli-33

is the only one where they, and we, have seen populated by Hivers.

There is a lot more to be known there what we do even by extrapolation, Laria. what exactly upsets you, my dear?

Jh I knew i-m-in; confided in what Afra recognized as a -w of conflict in loyalties.

It is not up to us to dispute the `Dinis' right to punish their

is a matter of no little achievement. Prtglm caused its own downfall by exceeding orders from the High Council of Alliance: orders in which it and our captains had been thoroughly briefed and in agreement. Do you not see that much?

That's the easy part. w}Lot bothers me so is that Gil and Kat are dead, defending Rojer when none of them should have been put in jeopardy in the first place. But Prtglm is still there!

I can't escape seeing its carrier and knowing what's inside and Suggest in your most off-handed manner the next time you have occasion

to speak to either Plrgt r - who's its main assistant know Figtm and Plrgt's now Pl6.

Plrgtgl has been very efficient. I hear its name mentioned more and more. Suggest that the carrier is impeding the full use of the area available to you and is there not somewhere else that it can be placed for even more effect?

Out of sigh4 out of mind, huh, Dad?

Well, out of your sight at least ri it is distressing you to the extent that it has It's not just the corner Ah yes, the matter of ClarisA? If she's not working out, my dear, request her transfer.

But Granddad's going to be furious with me, and there was a quaver

disillusionment again, but you're you and she's the Rowan and You  
have

exactly the same right to - - - ah - dismiss unsuitable personnel  
though I hope you won't need to go through as many as she did to get  
a

comfortable fit' in your Tower. Furthermore, your situation on Cia is  
Jar more sensitive than Callisto or Altair ever were, so it's even more  
important that you are totally comfortable with and can rely on each  
member of your staff -A tone of hopefulness entered the conversation  
Do

you really think so, Dad?

I know so. As Prime to Prime, informm Jeff Raven of Earth FT&T  
that T-2 Clarissia is unable to integrate or accept the special  
requirements of Cia Tower and you must I can't say `must' to  
Grandfather Possibly not to `Grandfather', dear, but certainly to Earth  
Prime Raven! Make the distinction and request a replacement.

And keep in mind, too, that you haven't had a vacation from your  
duties at Cia Tower in over a year. You might benefit from a respite.

Not right now and not if I have only Clarissia to mind the shop  
while I'm away, Laria said brusquely. And when did you and Mother last  
have a break from Aungae?



Oh, Dad, I don't consider me unique. Her tone held the quaver of a laugh but immediately altered. Sometimes - - sometimes I don't know what to believe. Then I do, and then something shakes me up again. I really ought to know my own mind by now.

Your mind you know, Laria, dear, Afra said with an affectionate chuckle. It's your emotions and changing perceptions that cause problems. I'd hate to think your ideas were graven in granite at not quite twenty-three. Briefly Afra remembered instances of his Damia's captiousness which her eldest daughter certainly had not inherited.

And change is a constant we must all bear with. At least, and he let a grin colour his mental tone, we are not locked immutably into a cultural pattern as the Hivers are.

Gee, thanks for that, Dad!

You're welcome, he said with equal mockery. But he also caught the steadier quality of her mental tone. She'd talked out some of what bothered her. If he and Damia had trouble rationalizing the matter, how hard it was on Laria, a Prime who had not yet found a personal companion to sustain her in arduous and, so often, deeply troubling times. Now inform Earth Prime of the fact that Clarissia's not working out and why. Either inadequacy is ample cause for replacement.

Actually, Laria was as strong a T-1 as the Rowan had ever been: a

to do with the nature of the exchange than age, since the Rowan was older than he and still going as strong as ever. That was when he also felt a bit of the framework on the left side of the couch, coming through the cushioning. How long had the couches been in use now?

Nearly four decades. About time to replace the padding.

He reached out for Damia's mind but she was joyfully retrieving the scurriers she'd brought down with her accuracy on her sling-shot.

He smiled as he felt Morag's envy and Ewain's amazement at their mother's casual skill. They could discuss Laria's conundrum later.

Bringing her home for a brief respite from all those pressures and conflicting theories would certainly rest her mind and buffer her when she returned to duty.

They might be, as so often Talents said between themselves, only a thought away: but that was not precisely accurate. Contact, yes, but similarity or mutuality or harmony of thought was another matter: so was a cuddle when one was depressed.

Afra found himself at odds with his older son on many points on the issue of the Hivers, and even more puzzled by the bizarre actions and notions of his daughter, Zara.

Fortunately, her grandmother and Elizara, the T-I medic for whom she was named, were coping with her and she had passed through a

Just like the framework of long-held ethics and morals was - in some minds - prodding minds through the once comfortable habits of generations.

Afra was also fully aware of other pressures at the highest level - for the Rowan and Jeff often used him as a sounding board and, as often as not, followed his advice.

The intransigence of Prtglm and the deaths of Gil and Kat were having more far-reaching effects on human-Mrdini relations than that carrier left on Claris Tower field. A strong faction of high-ranking Mrdini were of the opinion that, if Rojer Lyon had been old enough for the duties of a Prime, then he should have complied with Prtglm's plan to devastate the planet Xh-33, regardless of the facts that Rojer was a noncombatant, a minor, following the orders he had been given by his superiors. He had only been on the Genessee as a substitute until his older brother was available. The fact that Thian also would not have complied with Prtglrn's orders was irrelevant. But Thian already had 'hero' status in 'Dini eyes which would have given him the stature to reason with the 'Dini captain and helped him defuse the incident tacfully. It was also quite likely that Prtglm would never have tried to coerce Prime thian Lyon.

Yet, since the Mrdinis had allied themselves with humans, Afra

In total, such information boiled down to a painfully intimate knowledge of Hive ordnance, its range and destructive abilities: of the number of suicide ships needed to penetrate and destroy any Hive intruders; enough of the Hive mode of colonial expansion to know it was fatal to any planetary life-form. Deneb V was remarkable as the only world where Hive tactics had been unsuccessful.

Since these tactics had been effective so long, the Hive species had not altered them, or its ships and armaments, in the centuries that the Mrdini had been defending themselves. The Mrdinis had, on the other hand, improved space ships, peripheral technologies, and more effective unmanned missiles. They had managed to protect their own colony worlds, all the time searching for allies, the Hive home world and new resources to help them win the final victory.

Humans had far too long eschewed wars: naval strength being deployed more in the search for colonial worlds, or as deterrent against the occasional renegade privateer. Consequently, minor incidents of friction were bound to occur between a war-honed species and one which had been at peace, where the only casualties had occurred

in space accidents which were then so ruthlessly investigated that repetitions were unlikely.

ever seen by the Mrdini: a hulk which had been partially destroyed by a searing nova explosion.

To discover if the nova had indeed destroyed the system which had spawned the Hive species, one resolute `Dini ship, with Prime thian Lyon on board, had driven to the origin of the fading ion trail.

Discovery of the damaged Hive ship disclosed that three escape pods had managed to leave the mother ship shortly before the nova shockwave hit it. The human ships had gone in search of the pods to prevent even a single queen from surviving to start a new colony on an hospitable world: a circumstance that the Alliance wished to thwart.

One pod had already been captured and it contained a live queen.

She had been `decanted', as someone termed it, at the Heinlein Moon Facility from which escape was unlikely. Her apprehension made her the first live specimen of this enigmatic species for both human and Mrdini. Shortly after her arrival at the moon facility, she had laid a huge mass of eggs.

The other two pods had also been accounted for: or rather the remnants of the one which had collided with an asteroid and the other whose occupant had died when its supply of oxygen had given out.

The KTLZ, through Thian, had reported the absolute surety that the Hive home system had been incinerated by its nova-sun.

systems with M-5 planets that had been identified during the pursuit: to see why the Hive ships had ignored them. Were these already infested with the Hive species? But investigation was certainly in order to discover if these primaries had generated planets suitable for colonization for either species of the Alliance.

The quandary of continued pursuit now obsessing the High Councillors was ethical in substance. Was it right, knowing that once the Hive ships found the sort of world they needed to colonize, to let them exterminate whatever life-form might exist? Certainly one of the avowed aims of the Alliance was to seek out and identify worlds that had been taken over by the Hive species and prevent them developing to the point where their population had expanded to the point of recolonizing.

Twenty eggs of the captive Hive queen had suddenly hatched, producing creatures who were apparently limited to attendance on the queen, cleaning her, bringing her food, or sent scurrying down the empty corridors of the Heinlein Base: useless errands since there was nothing but unfurnished rooms, offering only more empty space.

Of more immediate, and perhaps helpful, value was the refugee Hive

star charts that might identify which worlds were Hiver-occupied.

Ever since the Rowan mind-merge had subdued the Many Mind on the

Leviathan Hive ship attacking Deneb, it had been assumed that the queens managed all aspects of control on the ship, formulating tactics and forwarding orders to their specialized minions. Whether the duties were equally distributed among them or whether each of the ten to twelve queens on board a colony ship had different responsibilities had yet to be discovered: hopefully from the type of controls in each queen's quarters. Engineers, astronauts and technicians, human and Mrdini, were eagerly awaiting clearance to board this entire ship and begin their investigations.

These positive activities of the Alliance had been somewhat eclipsed by the Prtglm episode: as had the tapes Rojer had taken, unique in establishing the culture, or rather agriculture, of the Hive species.

Destroying Xh-33 `s imminent colonization project was the least controversial solution of the several that had been available. Most `Dinis would have preferred to see the planet devastated in retribution for those innocent worlds which had been fumigated by Hivers.

Human opinion was virtually solid that destroying the Hive ability

`ported to the nearest of Xh-33's moons. Any activity in Xh-33 space could be recorded. Should any occur, unlikely though that seemed, the Alliance could then vote on more lasting punitive action.

Meanwhile there were other enigmas to interpret: if there was no communication between Hive worlds or ship-to-surface contact, how could

the Alliance hope to establish any interface with the Hivers? If no communication was possible, there was no hope of arriving at any mutually satisfactory, non-aggressive cohabitation of a galaxy which had sufficient M-type systems to accommodate all - with some control on

overexpanding populations.

Afra sighed. Being of a methody upbringing as well as Talented, he eschewed violence: didn't really know if he would even defend himself. He would, he thought, defend his children, but probably not himself. Except that that would leave Damia unsupported. So he might

even defend himself much as he would abhor the necessity. Humans had

grown beyond that exigency.

Association with the `Dini had, unfortunately in Afra's



towered above her not inconsiderable form.

That she could see and hear had been established by adroit remote testing. Various frequencies and combinations had elicited no more response from her than a twitch of discomfort. Those settings were kept on record.

It must be an amazing mind-set, Afra thought, to consider one's self the only being of worth in the galaxy.

There had been humans who had had such delusions.

They had generally died because of them and remained as small paragraphs in the greater history of humankind.

In an oblique fashion, it followed that, in the Hiver extermination of all life-forms on any planet they had chosen to colonize, they were totally unaware that they were eradicating entities which might feel they had the inalienable right to live.

The Hivers must also have been surprised by Mrdini resistance, though only the most determined attacks by Mrdini squadrons and fleet units had deterred the creatures.

Did other Hivers know of Mrdini resistance? If the Raven-Rowan merge had not sent the one survivor back to the Mother ship, would it have known that Deneb would resist?

His musings solved nothing and he could `hear' his family

tone that Laria began to relax and wonder why she'd delayed so long in broaching the problem. Nearly five months was a long enough period to allow Clanssia to integrate and the girl hadn't. Laria did not mention some of the young woman's other less admirable characteristics which had enraged Vanteer from time to time and certainly annoyed Lionasha.

I'll have a word with Gollee Gren and see if he's got any promising candidates. And stress `Dini adherents Of course, it would be best to have a `Din i-raised kid like you.

That solves most of the problem Clarissia posed.

How many `Dinis were paired out, Grandfather?

Gren's got such figures. I seem to remember there were about a thousand in the first adoptions. Not all to talented families, of course, arid spread about the old Nine Star league worlds.

And then as many as the `Dinis could spare for placement.

There'll be someone. And mind you, miss, you keep after me until a proper match's been made. That's more important than you may realize

and it is certainly my function to make sure any Prime has the right support group. Hear me? You put up with Stierlman far longer than you had to. As my old mother used to say, if a shirt's dirty, it's dirty.

`vkaat?

immensely relieved as she was not to have to put up with Clarissia much

longer, Laria hoped that she'd have time enough to warn the girl. It wasn't exactly Clarissia's fault that she couldn't abide `Dinis No, it was Clarissia's fault because she'd made absolutely no attempt to see `good' in the Mrdinis.

In fact, all latent sympathy Laria had for transferring the girl dispersed two minutes later when Clarissia contacted her.

There is a delegation of those creatures on its way across the field, Prime Clarissia's tone reeked of distaste.

Laria looked out of her Tower window, though the Clarf `tower' was no more than a four-sided plasglassed cupola, raised eight feet above the rest of the complex, and saw that the delegation contained the large form of Plrgtgl, two medium-sized assistants and six lesser, smaller `Dinis.

Vanteer, Lionasha, full honours. Clarissia, can you at least assemble the proper refreshments?

Yes, came so curt an acknowledgement that Laria could almost see the repugnance on the girl's long face and the twitch of her slender hands, indications of the revulsion the young Talent felt at having to deal with the `creatures' in any capacity. Another twinge of pity

divert `Dinis from approaching Clanssia.

It was as well, Laria thought with a sigh, that native `Dinis did not read human countenances as well as the Tower `Dini contingent did.

Nor did any of them really notice that Clarissia conveyed no body language at all - standing stiff and straight as if lacquered in position.

That was a mercy since she would have made the true depth of her revulsion all too easily readable in movements.

Once Plrgtgl announced its mission, Laria had no further time to fret over Clarissia's possible misdemeanour. Plrgtgl had a huge job for the Tower, requiring it to organize and expedite the timetable for a considerable amount of cargo to be shifted: to the other `Dini planets and to the satellite space docks. Without it being stated, Laria and her staff realized that a goodly portion of the `Dini space fleet was being refitted and resupplied in the shortest possible time.

Such activity provided her with the perfect reason to remove Prtglm's corner.

WITH SO MUCH TO BE SHIPPED TO DIFFERENT PLACES, ALL CRADLES WILL

BE NECESSARY, she said as she riffled through the documentation.  
`THE

TOO. A CREDIT TO THE COLOURS.

Plrgtgl rolled its. poll eye, attractively covered by a crown of lace which had recently become a `Dini fad.

Laria was well accustomed to such scrutiny and continued to scan the cargo way-bills to the red ones that indicated live `portations.

IT WILL BE GOOD TO SEE THE KTLS, ' she added as nonchalantly as she

could since she was over joyed to see the ship listed as an arrival.

Laria kept very good track of what went to the KTLS since her brother Thian had spent so much time on board. And saved so many `Dinis from the ultimate sacrifice of their kind.

Thian was now T&T on board the Genessee and they exchanged news

whenever she had a shipment for the squadron.

YES. THE KTLS HAS HONOURED ALL MRDINIS AND EVERY COLOUR THAT

SERVES ON IT, ' Plrgtgl said, shifting its lower limbs, body language she had come to read as `pleased'. `THN LN HAS SERVED THE KTLS TO THE

HONOUR OF YOUR HOUSE.

As she bowed in acknowledgement of such praise, Laria kept her

Keeping count, are we, Van? asked Lionasha whose eyes twinkled.

And thank whatever gods there be that you're getting rid of that monstrosity. if you're downwind, the stench is appalling.

Vanteer added a flash of himself holding his nose and gagging.

Even my `Dinis are complaining.

Laria dared not react or even shoot him a warning glance. All her attention must be on Plrgtgl. She signalled for Lionasha to take the documentation and begin organizing a timetable for the `portations.

THERE WILL BE A GREAT RECEPTION CEREMONY FOR THE ARRIVAL OF THE

TRIUMPHANT KTLS, Plrgtgl said.

AS THERE SHOULD BE FOR A SHIP THAT HAS DONE SO MUCH, ' Laria

replied formally and made the necessary body gestures that signified pleasure, honour, delight and acceptance. She could carry on high-level communications now with just body language, though more and

more `Dinis had become fluent in Basic and prided themselves on using it in the presence of humans.

She flicked her eyes to where Tip and Huf were standing respectfully to one side of the great Plrgtgl and caught their approval

imported from Terra, knowing how much `Dinis liked them.

I'm not telling you your business as Tower Prime, Vanteer said on a tight private level, but we're going to have more `Dinis in and out of here and she's becoming more and more of a liability.

We'll back your decision in that, Lionasha added.

Your Prime's already initiated the appropriate steps for her transfer, gang, Laria replied, focusing her thought to the two, though Clarissia was so tight in her xenophobia she wouldn't have been aware of a telepathic shout in her vicinity.

Hallelujah! was Vanteer's response in an archaic term that surprised both women.

Despite Clarissia, the official visit went off very well and Plrtgl was so excited in its own fashion with such imminent traffic Plrtgl was rather possessive of the Tower as its special project - that her reserve went unnoticed.

`We'll be busy, kids, ' Lionasha said, having had a chance to estimate how much Tower time and energy would be required for the material and animate objects scheduled to be `ported and received.

She

grinned around the room but her grin faded at Clarissia. The thin girl stepped forward then, swallowing convulsively.

Vanteer were too self-possessed to show any surprise at Laria's abruptness and were kind enough to make appropriate sounds of dismay.

`No, really, I must go, Clarissia said, her fingers twitching at her sides, and without another word actually `ported herself out of the room.

`Well!' said Lionasha and turned to Laria, hoping for an explanation. Vanteer's grin got broader and he winked at the Tower Prime.

`As I said, I've been working on the problem, ' she said casually.

`I just got the official permission today.

We may have to work harder Not really you'll meet me half way and bring me in, said a male voice that Laria did not recognize.

She glanced from Vanteer to Lionasha to see if the `path had been audible to them. Apparently not, so she continued her sentence.

`But not for long it seems. So where are you so easily retrievable?

Not precisely `easily'. I'm currently with C Squadron, and his spatial co-ordinates tagged on to the `path. Ting on the A. S.

Strongbow as courier and pack mule.

Laria could almost see a wry grin on the speaker's face. She also



There was that in his tone of voice that touched an echo of deep empathy in Laria.

'Tower generators up, please,' she said, taking the stairs to her eerie two at a time. 'What is the squadron going to do about resupply,' she asked, 'are you're here?'

I've been reliably informed that my replacement will follow swiftly.

And you are? Laria asked, suddenly realizing that although she would now recognize his mental touch anywhere in the galaxy, she didn't know his name.

Oh, and she heard him chuckle, I have been on board too long. I'm T-2 Kincaid dano, Altairian bred.

You'll be very welcome, Kincaid.

Thanks. And a laugh again echoed in her head. My 'Dinis are ecstatic at the posting, never having touched down on their homeland.

Laria let an exaggerated sigh of relief escape her lips.

He had volunteered the answer to her most important question.

That's probably the only reason I got promoted, clarf Prime, he said with another dry chuckle which told her he had at least heard, and understood, her sigh. Another plus which he couldn't possibly know

commissioned and her T-2s had been sent there. Lionasha joined her  
and

Vanteer, and Stierlman was sent as her T-2. A Tower Prime did need to find exactly the 'right' personality for a good rapport - those complementary qualities which her grandmother had found in Afra after trying to adjust to many incompatible personalities.

Kincaid's 'Dini affiliations would now be essential, to counter any harm Clarissia's short tenancy might have caused.

A totally wayward thought made her choke back audible laughter: what if Clarissia was to be Kincaid's replacement? A shipful of long-voyage officers and crew might just be what the girl needed.

Being 'Dini-paired is certainly an advantage here, she 'pathed, but that would scarcely be the deciding factor, Kincaid.

The Tower generators were reaching the necessary whine as she asked Lionasha to put the relevant space charts up on the screen for her. She triangulated the position and, settling into the couch, reached out with her mind for the unmistakable mass of metals and humans which had been vivid in his peripheral identifications of his current position. She felt for the equally identifiable mass of a carrier, Kincaid and his two 'Dinis within.

Ready?

Vanteer, do the honours, will you? She could sort out this `important' when they were face to face. He's Kin ca id dano of Altair, our T-2 replacement, plus `Dinis.

Clarissia, she added in a direct `path to the girl, a personnel carrier has just arrived and is available to take you to Blundell - ri you'll give me an estimate of how long it will I can go right now!

Clarissia was either hysterical with relief or joy, or bOth at the serendipity of release. By the time Laria had risen from her couch and gone to the window overlooking the field, she saw Vanteer shaking hands

with a tallish man - his back was to her. Her sense of his fatigue was reinforced by the sag of his shoulders. When he and Vanteer turned back to the carrier to assist two well-grown `Dinis to alight, the lid of the carrier hid his face from her. Clarissia, with a welter of luggage following her, half raced across the plascrete. The two men then helped her and her gear into the carrier. Laria grinned as Vanteer closed the lid with a definitely firm shove.

She's ready to go, Laria. I'll bring Kincaid, Npl and Pis up to the Tower.

Laria nearly `ported herself back onto the couch she was so eager to send the girl away! She could also feel Clarissia's assistance in

Laria stifled the dismay such animosity caused her.

She refused to respond to silly mouthings and threats.

And the service her family gave could scarcely be considered sinecures. She forced herself to respond with dignity You are a competent T-2, Clarissia, and as that I can recommend you to your next post with no hesitation. Goodbye!

You haven't heard the last of ME!

Laria ignored the virulently delivered rejoinder but she flipped the carrier as fast as she could back to the huge Earth landing field at the Blundell Cube.

Gollee!

Open to you, Laria.

clarissia's a good T-2 but watch her.

I had that intention ri she couldn't work out with you, Laria.

In Gollee's tone was an anodyne for Clarissia's parting venom.

Are you coming down, Laria? asked Vanteer in an 'I think you should' tone.

You bet I am.

clarissia launched a choice parting shot? asked Lionasha with a trace of anxiety.

Laria did not respond but came down the stairs in a far lighter

on summer holidays. 'If you go down to the woods today, you're in for a big surprise.' After the strains of the morning, Laria burst into laughter and knew that she couldn't fail to like Kincaid.

He advanced towards her, his thin, very pale face alight with pleasure that she'd identified the tune. He couldn't ever be called 'handsome', not the way Yoshuk was, but he was attractive, despite a ship pallor and a dry skin that gave him more facial wrinkles than he ought to have. She didn't think him older than Vanteer. Rangilly built but far too thin for the big bones of him, he held out to her a big blunt-fingered hand, palm sideways so she could merely brush it for the touch that Talents preferred as casual contact or shake it.

She was so glad to see him, a confirmed 'Dini person, a man who laughed easily and obviously had an outrageous sense of humour, that she grasped his hand and took full advantage - as he did after a moment's polite hesitation - of the complete contact. He was piney/green/oddly velvet, very very tired and, though he didn't try to hide the fact from her, she caught the hesitancy and realized that he was homosexuAl. If he made a good T-2, that wouldn't matter. It would almost be better if they were friends, as her grandmother and Afra had been, rather than lovers. Still 'The first thing you do, Kincaid dano of Altair, is get some extended rest,' she said briskly, twisting her

Go on ahead, Laria, and darken the room the best guest, Clarissia's left hers in a welter, ' said Vanteer, picking up one of the duffles that Kincaid had brought with him, 'you're to sleep!' Look, I'm here to help Laria Prime, I must You're in no state to be help in any form, Kincaid, Laria said firmly, in answer to both voiced and pathed messages, until you've had some rest.

You don't realize . . . He was insistent and gripped her hand to express his urgency.

A couple of hours won't make that much difference, will it? she asked, as if his admission of his sexuality would matter to her. Or maybe he didn't realize that his fatigue had made it very easy for her to reach to the more private areas of his mind. Even with my help you couldn't path beyond your nose.

After hours, rio, I guess riot. But, and he added aloud, Nil and Plus have to contact their Ours can manage that courtesy while you're grabbing a few hours' sleep, ' Laria said placatingly, dropping his hand as she pushed open the door out of the Tower.

Lionasha grabbed up the second duffle as they all manoeuvred the long man where they wanted him to go. Raising his arms in surrender, he allowed himself to be guided.

Laria marched straight to the nearest and largest guest bedroom,

comment from him.

Laria covered her mouth and her giggle.

`He's asleep?' whispered Lionasha.

`Out like a light!' The three left the room, Laria palming the lights off and carefully sliding the door shut.

`Not that I think a torpedo would wake him Laria said as they returned to the Tower complex.

Hallway down that corridor they could hear the excited `Dini voices. Their gang were already taking care of the arrivals.

`They can all have the day of i, Laria said as they entered the main complex. `Nothing's due in now.

`You're right, ' Lionasha said, glancing at the topmost way-bills on her desk. `None of Plrgtglm's shipments will arrive until tomorrow but here, ' she added, tearing a slip from the printer with a flourish, `are the coordinates you can send that misbegotten carrier to. ' She handed Laria the slip `Prayers have been answered all round today.

Rev

up the generators, please, Vanteer, ' Laria said, and settled herself in the nearest chair. `I have the oddest feeling I've already done a full day's work with only one catch and one send. This one is the bonus. ' Printout in hand, she concentrated and, catching the rhythm of the

Lionasha had taken Vanteer's query at face value and, being keen on history, explained the concept thoroughly while Laria listened. If this Kincaid fitted in with these two half as well as she rather thought he would, they were finally a real Tower Team. Vanteer was as hetero as she could wish - she could also wish for a bit more from Vanteer but there was no way she could initiate things, not with Van's personality and the fact that he liked spreading himself around, which inhibited her. There were several others in the growing human community who might find Kincaid companionable.

TLP, HGF, ALL OF YOU, PLEASE TAKE NPL AND PLS TO SEE CLARF. DO

NOT FORGET ANY OF THE SIGHTS THEY SHOULD SEE AM DO NOT WORRY ABOUT REPORTING UNTIL TOMORROW MORNING FOR WORK.

The darker pelted of Kincaid's two sable-coloured `Dinis turned most politely to Laria. `KNKD HAS TIRED WITH TOO MUCH STRAIN. YOU

WILL LET HIM SLEEP, LR LN?' UNTIL HE WAKES, MOST EXCELLENT NPL.

There was a moment of excitement between Nil and Plus for neither had been formally introduced to Laria and her being able to identify



dignified postures of `Dinis of reasonably high rank.

Laria Prime?

The summons must have been repeated on gradually increasing levels

of urgency before Laria woke, unable in her sleepiness to identify the caller.

who? She was surprised as well as slightly annoyed to have a deep slumber broken into.

Kincaid. I apologize but I am rested sufficiently now to make an extremely important and top secret report to Earth Prime. There was a hesitation that Laria interpreted as both embarrassment and necessity.

I am unable right now to make so long a `path and ask for your assistance.

What he did not say, and which alerted Laria as nothing else could have, was the fact that the secrecy of the communication was crucial.

None of the Tower staff must know of the `portation, the generator must not be used.

Kincaid might say he was sufficiently rested but Laria knew by the edge on the words he spoke that he was by no means as rested as he would like her to believe.

I'll collect you on my way to the Tower, she said, and slipped

excess of methody. Laria pointed to the couch which, she also noted, they would have to lengthen to fit his frame comfortably but he sank onto it now without a murmur.

Have you merged often enough to be comfortable with the procedure? she asked. There was a great deal she would need to learn about this man before they did many `portations.

More with other T-2s and T-3s than with a Prime .

It's as well you're still too tired to resist then, she said and firmly took control. Deep inside, she wondered again what the navy had been doing to the man to reduce him to this level of nearly total mental and physical exhaustion. Then she caught edges of anxieties, deep loss and disillusionments. So he'd had a rough emotional time on the Strongbow as well as overwork. Despite that, the merge was as easy

as slipping a hand into a perfectly fitting glove. More to admire in the man.

Laria id merge to Earth Prime, urgent.

I'm here and I've been expecting Kincaid's contact, Laria.

Just support him, will you?

That was surprise enough for Laria and she immediately assumed the secondary position of the merge, deft enough with all the practice

suspiciously like what had happened to her brother; no specific orders against an action which had disastrous consequences. Judging by what she had empathized of personal distress, even Kincaid's maturity and a wider scope of experience had not prevented a trauma with which he was

trying to cope.

I was asked to send the new designed plastic probes to those M-5 planets which we were passing when at a feasible distance for my ability. Captains Steve rice and Hsiang were most anxious to establish some reason for such by-passes. The first had once - and Kincaid paused significantly - been occupied by hivers for the colony ship was in orbit and sufficient of the now identifiable Hive buildings and agricultural workings were visible - though the world did not show the same concentration of effort that was visible on the Xh-33. No activity was observed during the forty-eight-hour parabolic surveillance. The second world examined was completely devoid of life or vegetation but there was a ring of debris which both Captains Steve rice and Hsiang decided was similar to the one observed by Squadron

B.

The third M-5 world was not yet dead but in such ecological imbalance that only immediate action could reverse the process. I have

certain this man is completely recovered before he is required to take his position in the Tower.

You can count on me, Earth Prime.

I know I can, dear child. Now both of you get back to your beds.

Especially you, Kincaid.

Laria, still merged with Kincaid, felt him starting to reach out with another sentence and deftly, and as painlessly as possible for even the merge had caused his mind distress, eased away `You heard my

grandfather. Enough is enough.

Kincaid had swung himself sideways on the couch, burying his head in his hands, body sagging.

`Glutton for punishment, aren't you?' she said, a trifle annoyed with such dedication even as every ounce of her heritage approved it.

`You realize how important the messages are.

`Yes, indeed. But, now, my friend and she paused just long enough to cause him to make eye contact at her use of the word. She smiled down into his tired eyes. Friend Kincaid dano of Altair, you're going to sleep yourself out.' Then, without asking, she gently `ported this long man friend back to the bed in his quarters, amused at her maternal attitude but keeping that amusement well screened. He made neither

nourishing meal which Laria and Lionasha had spent some time concocting.

Thanks whoc't'erse'it thk, he said when he had finished every scrap on the tray. He was asleep again before anyone working in the Tower could respond.

Whatever did they do to the poor guy?' Lionasha asked.

`More than a T-2 should be required to do, I'd say, Laria replied with some asperity.

`Like your brother, huh?' Vanteer asked.

Laria shook her head. `For one thing, Kincaid is a T-2 and didn't have the capacities either Thian or Rojer have, but he did a lot more than he should have. Pretty far off even for just normal catch and shove. ' Vanteer looked up at the tri-d galactic globe that was being updated almost monthly by the various squadrons, human and Mrdini, exploring in every direction. `Yeah, he would have been dangerously close to his limit, even with the generators those Galaxy class ships have.

Lionasha gave a sigh. `We are going to need his heist soon, Laria, ' she said, patting one sheaf of the heavier materials to be sent to the moon spaceyards. `Those are big daddies.

Laria had tested the state of Kincaid's sleeping mind and was

humans had moved to take up administrative or consultancy posts on Clarf, and on the two Moon bases. Close to three thousand humans, some

with varying degrees of Talent, though that was not a prerequisite, now formed a loose but agreeable social unit. Specialists came, integrated briefly, or stayed on as their work required them. The Tower facilities had been enlarged several times and into several levels to accommodate transients. A large tract of land, near the sea, had been allotted the more permanent human colony. Lately Lionasha had been seeing a young Denebian servo-mechanics engineer, Buzbeth Hawk.

While

he was a T-5, he was only just marginally empathic with humans.

Lionasha didn't mind: she got through to him with no trouble.

Vanteer preferred to 'mingle' as he put it, though he was already contributing to the support of two children from different mothers of minor Talents.

He was certain the girl was already a receiving telepath. Laria often wished that Vanteer would 'receive' a little more from her than he did.

But you don't force human relationships, especially among Talents.

She knew that much from the story of her father and mother.

said, passing him the coffee pot.

Appreciatively he sniffed the steaming aroma and grinned. 'It's real! The navy has some brew they insist is coffee but, believe me, it isn't!' 'We do have certain perks in this Tower that even the Fleet can't manage, ' Vanteer said, passing him over the dew-fresh fruit which 'Dini farmers regularly left at the Tower gates.

'Clarf is certainly an improvement. Then he gave a sudden jerk to his shoulders and looked about him frowning. 'Where are Nil and Plus?' 'Helping the others, ' Vanteer said, jerking his thumb over his shoulder toward the still shadowy Tower field. 'We got big daddies to move.

They've integrated so well you'd think they were the same colour. ' Kincaid looked immensely relieved and began to eat his breakfast.

'They've been well, they were incredibly understanding on our tour with Squadron C.

Lionasha leaned slightly across the table to Kincaid.

'Don't be surprised if they keep their poll eyes elevated a while.

They've been given heroes' welcomes. Their colour kin mobbed the complex the first morning and they've been out every night since. '

'They need to be with their own. Both are close to hibernating.

'Yes, we noticed and Plrgtgl made very prestigious arrangements for them, ' Laria said with a grin as she rose. 'Bring your coffee up

on `work' `You had no trouble merging, even dead on your feet, and that's the hardest part of Tower work. Some never get the knack. ' As she chatted to put him at his ease, she settled herself on the couch.

`Hey, this one's new, isn't it?' he asked, running fingers along the suede-like covering and noticing the length of it.

`Well, you'd hardly have fit on Clarissia's old one.

`Well, ' and he mimicked her tone exactly, `it's much appreciated, ' he said, sliding onto the couch and giving a sigh as his legs were supported beyond his long feet.

`With the stuff we'll have to shift today, Kincaid, comfort is as essential as placement. Lionasha, ' and she raised her voice, `what's first?' `The big daddy for the moon base - Laria pointed to the placement tri-d in the screens above the couches. `We've more inner system traffic than most Towers.

She saw Kincaid listening to the rising whine of the generators, then felt his mind touch hers.

`It's all of us today for one of these, Kincaid, ' she said and took first Lionasha and then Vanteer into the merge with the T-2 as back-up. The generators reached the required strength and Laria pushed  
the merge to port the cargo carrier deftly to the cradle awaiting it on



he fitted in but Laria could nevertheless feel their relief. Most before they knew it, they had swung the significant volume of outgoing traffic and were beginning to haul in the out-of-system. By the time Clarf's sun reached zenith Laria called a halt. Despite the air conditioning, the Tower room was becoming uncomfortable.

Hey, came the cheery voice of Yoshuk from Sef Tower, any time you want to send that guy here, he'd be welcome.

That goes for me, too, added Nesrun.

Don't either of you dare poach now I've got someone who fits in, Laria said firmly.

Yes, ma `am, no, sir Yoshuk replied so cockily she could see the grin on his face.

Kincaid was stretching and relieving the tension of muscles which had been automatically responding to the day's `lifts'. His mind had lost the morning's resilience and Laria hoped she hadn't pushed him too far.

`Lunch, and then with this sort of heat pushing down on us, we all take a siesta,' she said, certain that both Vanteer and Lionasha would fall in with her scheme.

`That gives the `Dinis time to rest, too. And don't look out on the bright of the day without glasses!' she added as Kincaid strolled

ate as lightly at midday as the `Dinis.

Nil and Plus needed some judicious eye care but when Kincaid would have performed it, the other six `Dinis pushed him out of the way and had a great time fussing over exactly how to effect the most result in the fastest time. The three long-term residents of Clarf Tower smiled proudly at the concerted effort.

`I've been away longer than I realized, ' Kincaid said, slowly peeling one of the meltingly sweet bog pears that the others had recommended.

`How long were you on that cruise?' Vanteer asked.

Kincaid paused, frowning before he answered.

`Nearly five years, I think. Basic `That long?' Laria tried to remember exactly how long Thian had been out but it was not five years.

`Oh, ' Kincaid said with a diffident flick of his fingers, `I'd been sent out with Squadron C long before those ion trails were discovered. We picked `em up in our quadrant. Then it was even more important for the squadron to have a Talent. ' `Were they trying to burn your mind out?' Vanteer demanded with heated indignation before Laria could speak.

`No, and they didn't, ' Kincaid replied though he began to rub his

managed a chuckle. 'Comes and goes.' 'Fine Prime I am,' she said, pushing back her chair and coming around behind him. She placed her fingers lightly, like a net, around his skull and gently supplied the inhibitors that would reduce both the ache and the minute swelling of the cerebral area which governed all psionic activity.

'I'll be fine, Laria, really I will,' he said, reaching up as if to disengage her fingers.

'Don't you dare,' Lionasha said, wagging a finger at him.

'Laria's one of the best at healing.

What Laria also felt, because Kincaid had no way to prevent it, was that his emotions were in a turmoil, more of the brew of hurt, loss, disappointment, and, yes, physical pain, that had not been resolved by the sleep and relief of bodily fatigue. His participation in today's merge had almost wiped out the remedial effect of several days' much-needed sleep. Considering his state, he'd been a real trooper.

'Headache gone now, friend?' she asked casually, removing her hands since she now knew more than he did about his condition.

He gave her as searching a stare as he could without calling attention to the exchange. Then his taut lips relaxed into a brief

`Right-o, Lionasha said.

`I want to check that ping I heard before I get my nap, ' Vanteer said, moving towards the stairs that led to the Tower's machine level.

And that was how Clarf Tower managed to deceive Kincaid until the worst of both the physical and mental fatigue began to heal.

When Rojer's profound emotional trauma began to ease, Isthia advised that he be allowed to enrol in an engineering programme which he had been so keenly interested in prior to the tragedy. He must learn to shift his concentration from his loss. She offered her beloved cottage, not so isolated any more as Deneb City was spreading ever closer to her lakeside retreat, and flattened arguments that too much solitude for the grieving boy might have an adverse effect.

And you think that one or another of us won't be subtly aware of his state of mind at all times, Damia? Isthia had snorted with disdain. We are always but a thought away, yours, mine, Afra's Jells, added Earth Prime.

The cottage worked for you and Afra, didn't it? Isthia went on, ignoring her son's interruption. We all know he needs to grieve. let him. right now companionship is not on his agenda. In fact, it would only serve to remind him of his loss. We've done as much metamorphically as we can. Now he needs to be diverted and, if its

went further and, after a long and useful discussion with Commander Metrios of the Genessee, developed a curriculum meticulously tailored to beguile young T-1 Rojer Lyon into studying himself out of grief. After a desultory and half-hearted start, Rojer began to respond to the cleverly devised study programme and to spend hours on the terminal, competing with himself on Engineering Teach. His progress was duly noted. If Xexo grinned fatuously as he tended the generators at Aurigae Tower and adopted a smug smile whenever Rojer was mentioned,

no-one contested him when he'd allude to Rojer's progress as one of his own better 'engineering' accomplishments.

Occasionally, his uncle Jeran, Deneb's Prime, called Rojer to assist in the Tower, 'to keep his hand in'. There he met cousins with varying degrees of Talent who were also pressed into service. Though he had never much liked his cousin Rhodri, he found himself drawn to the youngest of the Eagles, the shy and self-effacing Asia, who was also in the engineering programme.

He was constantly receiving invitations from the cluster of relatives, Eagles, Ravens, Sparrows, but he rejected all, with the excuse that he had to study, keep up the garden and keep down the fish population in the lake. At first he had railed at what he considered

there when something sharpened the pain of his loss. Damia was most often there or his father: once it was his grandmother, several times Elizara, particularly at the beginning, but mostly his grandmother Isthia or his aunt Besseva supplied the solace. Once he was sure it was Asia who reached him one very black night but then definitely the presence was his grandmother. He could not avoid knowing how deeply

they were willing to share his pain, his sense of loss - especially when their thoughts became inadvertently specific in their own personal experiences with loss and grief While he was left to himself to heal, he was never truly alone and that, all by itself was the greatest balm.

Then, about six weeks after his installation in the cottage, either Isthia or Besseva - both women insisted he drop the familial titles - started taking him out to dinner and an evening's company. At first he suspected some sort of `kind' conspiracy when he noticed no `Dinis present but his female relations, having so many homes to choose

from, adroitly picked those which had no Mrdini associations. He often rode with Asia to her house because she'd listen to him sounding off on engineering theories. She often had some very adroit suggestions.

`Why don't you speak out at the tutorials? Anyone would think you

remembering all too well how much of a bully Roddie had been: probably

the reason his sister wouldn't speak up for herself 'Would you care for a fish dinner? Say tomorrow night?' he asked her several weeks later.

'Only, ' and he grinned broadly at her, 'you have to catch your own fish. ' She had a rippling kind of laugh and, rather than send her scuttling back into herself he grinned back.

'I am, however, a very good cook so you don't have to cook it.

'I really ought to study the quantum's ' she said, already retreating from that moment of amusement.

'So ought I. We'll make it a work evening: catch fish, eat fish and discuss quantum's while we work. ' He knew Asia was a T-4 - she'd been tested - but it didn't hurt to reinforce her and he was deft enough to do so. Like 'so many Denebians, she was lackadaisical about

honing the ability she had. That made it all the easier for him to make a few adjustments, to help her think better of herself 'You do understand the quantum's better than I do, -' 'We'll find out whether or not I do tomorrow.

Right? Gotta get on home now, ' he said, as they came to her turn-off. He kicked his pony, Koto, into a lope and waved one hand in

Teach would let him.

When he and Asia shared tutorials, he realized that her grasp of the fundamentals was as firm as his own because she would volunteer answers if he was the only other student present.

Some days, when he had worked to total mental fugue, his grandmother would suddenly require some item of hers from the cottage and he'd have to ride Koto to wherever she was. He knew, and she knew

that he knew, that either of them could have `ported the item to her if she needed it urgently but they both knew he was the better for the exercise. He submitted to her careful bullying with good grace.

Isthia never had cause to call him a cocky boy and she approved of his friendship with Asia.

But, oh, in the night, how he missed the feel of warm `Dini bodies snuggled against his. And oh, how often he was about to ask Gil's opinion or share a wry notion with Kat. He'd still wake to find his pillow damp but Isthia insisted that tears were well spent.

I'm over five times your age, Rojer Lyon, and I still cry!

Isthia had told him rather forcefully the first time he protested that he was too old for weeping.

It gave him a headache but he'd usually feel better inside.



involvement.

Isthia had been right, Rojer decided on his return home. Time did heal. He recognized that he had taken one more large step out of mourning. He began to spend more time with Asia and had managed to teach her to fry her own fish without burning it.

Rojer? His uncle Jeran's voice was unmistakable. `Port yourself here.

Rojer had also learned over the last year not to expect explanations from Jeran so he saved the problem he was working on the

Engineering Teach and checked to see if his clothes were clean enough for a Tower appearance. He'd depilated his face that morning and had had a recent trim, though today's scrutiny in the mirror made him realize that the Gwyn silver lock seemed to have broadened.

Finger-combing it back from his forehead, he exhaled a deep breath and `ported himself to the plascrete apron at the foot of the Deneb City Tower.

As well he picked the spot he did, for there were quite a few vehicles parked just beyond him, and several of the ubiquitous Denebian ponies in the turn-out field.

There were six, back to back and arranged so no-one could see into the other. Asia was in the workstation opposite him. He gave her an encouraging grin because her complexion had an odd green tinge to it.

'Maybe he shouldn't have sprung the test on you so suddenly?' he whispered as he sat down.

'He knows how I'd fret,' Asia said, looking sicker than ever.

'You'll do grand, Asia. You're faster'n'me in jojunctions and quantumms.

She cast him a dire look. 'No-one's faster'n you at quantumms, -' NO TALKING!' Of any kind, Jeran added aloud.

'I'm the monitor.' Asia made a sorrowful grimace.

'Your stations will display the test questions in precisely one minute four seconds. Two hours are allowed for the first section, to be followed by a break of fifteen minutes during which you may move about or relieve yourselves. There are four papers, with a half-hour break for lunch. You may, of course, leave the test-station whenever a paper is finished.' A mixture of groans and guffaws met that statement.

Jeran permitted himself a small smile. 'It has been known to happen.

Is everyone prepared?' Deeper groans greeted that query.

The dark screen before Rojer suddenly lit and the initial page of

`tinkering' to encourage more optimism. `There wasn't a single problem we haven't gone over and you know all the structural ones because we've

gone over them together. So, we'll just wait and see if I failed, too. ' Shocked out of her self-denigration, her ripple of laugh bubbled up, slightly hysterical with disbeliefœ You? Fail? Rojer, you couldn't!' `Since I know as much as you know, then you couldn't either.

Or we both did. Pick your choose!' he added airily, grinning.

Somehow he could usually make her smile back at him. It was a tired and tentative effort on her part, but it was a smile.

He gave his head a shake to clear the tension of a long day's concentration and exhaled sharply. He really didn't think he'd done too badly so there was no way she had. Certainly not on the spatial equations and the jo-junctions. They'd been snaps. He'd seen Commander Metrios work them often enough while on the Genessee - -

He

pushed himself back from the workstation, compressing his lips. He hadn't thought of Gil or Kat all day - even at the lunchbreak when they'd all been exchanging complaints about the severity of the testing.

That is as well, Rojer, for you must move on now, he heard Jeran

`Rojer, ' Jeran went on, though he surely had heard the cynical remark, `Rami asked if you'd care to stop by before you leave the City.

Rojer grinned at the implied invitation to dinner.

Jeran's wife was an extremely good cook and tonight would be one when he'd appreciate having a meal he didn't have to prepare. He could

even put up with the proximity of his cousin Barry's `Dinis.

Jeran also caught that and nodded once again, his eyes, so like the Rowan's, brighter with approval.

`Not the fatted calf but that casserole you're so fond of' Jeran said, after the others had departed. He was closing down the station, switching the messaging system to his house unit.

`Can I help?' Rojer asked.

`This doesn't take long. Get a breath of fresh air, lad, ' Jeran said and gestured for his nephew to leave.

Just as Rojer reached the bottom of the stairs, he was astonished to hear the generators turn on.

Find yourself a carrier, Rojer, a voice told him. You have five minutes to gather up any things you need from the cottage.

Mother'll send on the leftovers under your bed.

Granddad?

Father, Jeran interjected, Roger's had an exhausting day.

And you know fairly well that we Primes can't bear proximity to Hiver metals. The reaction on a tired mind will be all the most intense. - Jeran, you fuss more than your grandmother over the boy.

And it's Rojer's choice. Care to come?

Suddenly mental fatigue vanished as the adrenalin of challenge swept through Rojer. Even the Moon Base had food dispensers. And sleep? At this moment?

I got honours, granddad? If he had, then Asia had.

High enough to make Xexo impossible, according to your mother, and certainly Earth Prime wants one of his own there to keep an eye on things. You won't be required to go 'in' the vessel: just manoeuvre lights and rescue those who step into Hiver tubes.

Rojer wasn't certain if it was making Xexo proud or the challenge of investigating, even at a remote distance, the undamaged Hive sphere, that was causing his elation.

Hell, granddad, I could even manage going inside it - if I didn't have to stay too long, Rojer replied.

Then move it, lad, or the post'll have to go to someone else.

granddad, did Asia Eagles pass?

remembering to snatch a carisak into which he dumped these belongings.

You'll need at least one change of clothing, lad, Jeran said with an amused snort and himself plucked several items of clothing from the cottage, more neatly folded than Rojer had left them. These were added to the carisak.

Closing it, Rojer sprinted for the nearest single personnel carrier. As he stretched himself out on the narrow couch inside, he reached out a long arm to haul the lid down. He heard a brief second thump and grinned that his uncle bothered to check that the latches had caught. So methody of him!

Please thank Raini for me, Jeran. I'm sure I won't eat as well &ad luck, Rojer, the brisk kindly voice of his grandmother cut in.

thanks for everything . . . and then Rojer felt the indefinable sensation that told the experienced travelling Talent that he was no longer where he had just been. He heard a chuckle.

Granddad? Now I'd call that cocky!

Would you? And his grandfather's chuckle renewed with a certain pleased edge to it.

`OK in there, sir?' a slightly less confident voice asked.

carisak over his shoulder and gestured for the rating to lead the way.

As he came round the carrier on his way to the airlock that joined the carrier depot with the gigantic Moon Base facility, he stopped abruptly. There, above him, half-lit by Sol, was the complete sphere of the refugee ship he was here to explore. She was appropriately equipped with regulation buoy lights.

'She's a beaut, sir, even for an alien craft, the rating said with an odd ring of pride in his voice. 'We were lucky to snag her to Mars Phobos Base even if now there's as many 'Dinis here as there would be if she'd been sent to one of theirs. ' "Dinis bother you?' Rojer asked, bridling at the hint of intolerance in the rating's tone.

'Me, sir? No, sir, ' was the almost startled reply as they entered the first of several lift shafts on the way to their destination.

'Cute little beggars, most of 'em.

Better manners n some I could name not too far from here. To starboard now, sir.

A quick scan of the rating's mind showed Rojer that the man was honest enough - so long as he was not required to be much in their company.

'Don't they keep that Hiver queen here?' The rating visibly flinched and shot Rojer a nervous look. 'No, she's down on Earth's

service's security measures.

As they traversed several corridors and took one more long ride upwards, Rojer wondered how soon he could wangle a chance to get down

to the Moon and observe her. If, as the experts were now fairly certain, the queens controlled all ship functions, he ought to see her for himself as well as the attendants and other varieties she had finally allowed to hatch. As far as he knew, his cousin Rhodri was still on duty there.

'Here you are, sir,' the rating said, stopping by a door and pointing to a palm-pad. 'If you'll just do the necessary.'

Rojer obliged by placing his hand on the pad and felt the tingle that registered the quarters to his imprint.

Then the door whooshed open on a good-sized, attractively furnished lounge area: a good few notches above the usual naval base interiors. Peering about, he saw that he also had separate sleeping and sanitary rooms. The rating was more concerned that he know how to

operate the internal comunit, where emergency life-support equipment was stored, and which numbers to dial for which services. He had no sooner finished this briefing than the comunit blinked a message light.



wrist unit to the local time, that as soon as he was settled' included attending to the rumbling in his guts. It was mid-morning here and he was far too hungry to wait till lunchtime.

The dispenser unit was standard navy; the menu that scrolled past Rojer's incredulous eyes was anything but. Delighted, Rojer watched long enough to discover many favorite and esoteric dishes before he ordered the most unusual item he saw - a high protein described as 'genuine beefalo steak', which tasted succulent enough to be genuine.

Then he contacted the Commandant's office that he was now settled in.

Donning the button which had been forwarded by pneumatic slot to him, he let it guide him through the maze of corridors and lifts. He knew that the Phobos Moon Base was as many levels deep in solid lunar

rock as above it and equally as wide. He figured by the upward progress on which the rating had led him that he was housed in 'executive territory' but he made another upwardly mobile short journey to an even more prestigious level, encountering more and more officers of high rank as he progressed - inward now, he thought.

Though he was an obvious civilian, he was more often accorded a salute than a smile. Then, as he turned to a set of wide double doors,

Damn, Rojer thought, he should have made some attempt to find out this Commandant's status in the table of Alliance organization.

He's not quite as important as Grandfather, said a very welcome voice, but he thinks he is.

Where are you, Thian? Rojer looked at the many doors leading off this foyer.

Come now, brother, surely that's elementary!

Rojer chuckled and confidently turned to the righthand one of two double-doored entries. It opened to a huge, well-populated 'operations' area, dominated by screens wrapped round the walls, with horizontal plotting boards at various locations on the floor space, two transparent spheres, one of which was fitted out with some internal components. All around the room workstations were occupied and equations and displays flashed their messages to those seated before them. He spotted five with engineering configurations. The room was full of humans and Mrdini and no-one paid his arrival any attention whatever.

Hi, there, bra, said Thian, his voice buoyant with cheerful welcome. Did you like the beefalo? Smart of you to eat while you had the chance because the Admiral is unlikely to take into consideration that you've done a full day's work already.

collar. He also thought his brother looked a lot older than he had when they had last met. Whenever that was. Ah, yes, when Laria had come home for her birthday. There were subtle changes in his older brother's face and bearing.

Watch the one who's jabbering at me, Thian added as Rojer made his way across the cavernous room, although Thian gave every outward appearance of total concentration on what was being said to him by a shorter, black-haired man with a strangely taciturn face.

If Prtglm had had the sense to get human support to destroy Xh-33, Admiral Enarit del Falco, our Base Commandant, is the man who'd've given it and rejoiced. Del Falco is also extremely shrewd, intelligent and capable. There isn't a thing that happens on this base that he doesn't know about within seconds. He's got absolutely no Talent so we're safe to say all the things we want right in front of his face.

On the other hand, lie's got a natural shield as impregnable as a Hive sphere, which is very inconvenient. Even Granddad and Grandmother can't winkle in.

The admiral turned slightly just then and Rojer gave an inadvertent shudder at the closed face and took the final steps to his brother under the admiral's scrutiny.

without a chance for a day's rest - who's assigned along with me to help you penetrate the interior of the Refugee - That's her official designation, bra. Don't let his manner get under your skin, Roj. He tries that one on everybody, even Granddad and Grandmother. Got nowhere with them so u'e have to keep up the family tradition. He doesn't like Talents but he needs the help only we can give him.

Fortunately both you and I are independent of his authority even if we are assigned to help.

`Good to see you, bra. ' And Thian dropped his arm, smiling down at the admiral in his charismatic way, much as their grandfather might have done in a similar situation.

Having Thian in physical and mental support with so much coming at him all of a sudden made all the difference. So Rojer could smile, too, summoning up what Isthia had called the deplorable tendency of her male relatives to charm as easily as they breathed.

Adopting a casual confidence, he inclined his head courteously to del Falco. The commandant did not offer his hand to the young Talent.

Instead del Falco gave him such a piercing stare - he had the sort of large black eye that appears to see through to the soul - that Rojer was very glad of his brother's warning.

accessing your file right now. His eyes flicker when he's listening to it.

Updates on demand. Don't know why he isn't schizo. Oh, and our birth years are not given. Granddad's had dealings with this bird.

Just as well you don't look seventeen. That last was said in a rueful tone, acknowledging Rojer's bereavement and its tragic circumstances, and accompanied by an affectionate mental hug.

Steady

on. He's coming up with `the look'!

The Admiral was and, in spite of Thian's warning, Rojer very nearly rocked back on his heels at the intensity of that black and penetrating gaze. So he smiled as equably as he could until del Falco broke the eye contact, having evidently heard sufficient from his info-plant to place Rojer in the pertinent category.

`Dini coming up behind you, Roj! his brother said, his tone coloured with apprehension.

So Rojer had just enough warning to be prepared when a `Dini voice spoke.

RJR LN, YOU WILL NOT MIND TO WORK WITH GREYS?' One of the good guys, Thian added, smiling at the newcomer.

The memory of Prtglm, or its colour, no longer had the power to distress him. `WHAT NAME, PLEASE, IS ONE TO USE IN ADDRESS?' `THIS ONE

IS KNOWN AS GLMTML. ' `I'm glad that you two Primes have the chance to

meet Glmtml, ' the admiral said, observing the exchange.

`It leads the Mrdini team that's going to reveal Refugee's secrets for us. ' A smile that was not a smile but nearly a threat spread his lips just slightly. `Prime Lyon has just arrived, Glmtmi, so he hasn't been briefed `Not that Rojer needs it, ' Thian said in a bland tone and a shrug of his shoulders. `Straight transfers of carriers to the Refugee airlock, and then we act as guiding lights.

And we rescue when required. You know how many tubes a Hiver ship

has! Rojer nodded solemnly while the Admiral, unaccustomed to being interrupted, hesitated for one beat before smoothly continuing. `.

then there is no further need for delay, is there?' He turned to Glmtrnl.

`Your team is now assembled for transfer?' `All are, ' Glmtml said, deferentially switching to Basic since the Admiral apparently was not fluent in `Dini.

Thian said.

`Escort the Primes to their ready room, Ensign. ' `No need for such ceremony, Admiral, ' Thian replied. `I know where we're stationed, ' and he shot Rojer a mental picture of where they were going - a small room with three Tower couches. The room already had one occupant.

More surprises, Thian?

Thian grinned. This evaluation operation is going to take all three of us and wish we were more. lit's go. I love `porting away from him. He hates it and there's not a thing he can do about it since `porting expedites troop movement. `My compliments and best wishes, GImtml. ' Rojer had only time for a similar courtesy before his brother `ported away. He followed.

That admiral had better watch himself, said the very pretty occupant of the room as Rojer and Thian appeared. He has female officers. Why do I have to creep about the place like an anathema, Thian?

`I told you that you should flaunt your self Flavia.

This is, obviously, my brother, Rojer, who will remember his manners when he stops gawking at you. ' Completely surprised by the sight of such a lovely woman, Rojer willingly held out his hand to touch hers.

of the Refugee, there were three coloured globes: blue, green and yellow.

Concentrating briefly on that area, Rojer also sensed a large number of humans and `Dinis.

`Rojer, I'm supposedly in nominal charge of our part in this operation,' Thian said. `That board'll light up with each centimetre we cover so we'll know where we've been. I know you had a little look round the frige `Through a glass darkly, bra, since the inside was still fogged with gas `Since you're so full of engineering honours, you get to hunt for the engine room .

`I found it before - I think.

`In the southern hemisphere, yes? Good. My priority is the life-support system which the boffins think might surround the central axis.

`Are they suited up?' Rojer asked.

`No, the navy flooded the ship with enough oxygen to fill a volume of enclosed space equal to the size of the Great Sphere, and there's an auxiliary system as back-up stuck off in the corner of the hangar.

Plus, everyone's packing an emergency breather. The sooner we get the integral life-support system going, the better.

The other priority for you is finding out what sort of fuel the



`I was following orders when I found the larvae.' `Still comes down to baby-sitting, ' Rojer said with a spurious groan.

`I wouldn't let any of the marines hear you put it like that, Rojer, ' Flavia said in mock warning.

`Marines can break legs just like anyone else, ' Rojer replied flippantly.

`Not with this Admiral, ' Thian said tartly. `Everybody comfortable? Good, then, ' and he pointed to the red light blinking on the comunit, `the boffins are all loaded.

Let's hoist `em up there. ' Rojer turned his attention then to three large carriers, each filled with excited men and Mrdinis, cradled and waiting to be `ported up to the ship.

`OK?' Thian said, looking from one side to the other.

Flavia and Rojer both nodded and simultaneously the three Primes lifted the carriers and deposited them in a neat line on the Refugee's hangar deck where once the deadly Hiver scout ships had been housed.

What'n'ell is that? A smell or an emanation? The voice was female, the tone disgusted and uneasy.

`They've sent Talents up there?' Flavia asked in surprised indignation.

`Admiral doesn't believe in the stingg-pzzt, Thian said, `although

she can receive?' Rojer asked.

Commander Klooo?

Huh? who?

Prime Thian speaking. You are experiencing what we Talents call the `stingg-pzzt' of Hive metal.

That wasn't in my briefing. She sounded both relieved and annoyed.

I don't believe the admiral accepts this reaction as valid. As you are currently surrounded by Hive metal, you `ll be pleased to know that such a reaction confirms the possession of latent Talent.

Thanks! was the droll response.

Anyone else in your team seem afraid in a similar fashion?

So far I'm the only one complaining, Prime Lyon, and her tone was resigned.

Thian, please, me.

How'd you know my nickname? Nevermind. Of course, you would.

How do I get rid of this stinggpzzt sensation? Or reduce its effect somehow or other. It's rather . . . disconcerting.

It won't hurt you but continued exposure might make you rather short-tempered.

Ha! I've already got that reputation so now I've a good reason.

much lower than a T-5, Rome. Now, I've ignited my guide globe and, ri  
you `11 just have your group follow it, we'll begin Operation  
Illuminate on its way to the engine rooms.

I've got enough ladders to climb us back down to Mars. And hey,  
this beats staying on the combutton. Rojer could almost see her grin.

lit's move it, and by the additional depth to her tone, they knew  
she was speaking aloud to her detail. Follow the yellow-brick road  
right!

Forries, you take left, Maumu, take right and plant those cells  
whoops, just lost Maumu down a tube. Oh, hey, that's great!

Rojer retrieved the faller who was as shaken by the unexpected and  
almost instantaneous rescue as he was by an equally unexpected de-  
scent.

Well, slap a light beside the dam tied tube, sailor, was Rome's  
testy comment. And if you were stopped before you hit the bottom, be  
glad we've got the Talents on our tails. Beg pardon, lighting our way!

As the various teams proceeded, the sphere slowly filled with  
details. Oval tunnels of varying circumferences riddled the periphery  
and evidently provided access for Hiver specialist life-forms from one  
area to another. Few were comfortable for those exploring them but  
gradually, over the next week, a network in each quadrant and

oval tunnels. The engine room was not all that spacious either and seemed to be accessed by conduits much too small for either human or `Dini bodies.

`A combinant fuel, ' was one expert 5 immediate theory.

`Then why is the mixture apparently run over that large crystalline object so carefully bracketed in the housing?' Opaque pipes around the chamber suggested some sort of lighting: a theory that was supported by the fact that the various feed lines and coils were colour-coded.

To prove it correct, the sphere's power would need to be on.

`You'd have to be an acrobat to service this bloody affair, ' said a propulsion specialist from Earth. He was attempting to get on top of the main unit for a better perspective.

Several fascinating boards, of a control type, were discovered at floor level. They were segmented into different colours and were touch-controlled. Another few sections covered one of the lower ceilings of the large oval chamber. Judiciously removing some of the floor plates showed that these panels led directly either to the engine mass or the fuel tanks. Getting diagnostic machinery into the cramped engine room required both Rojer's assistance and the removal of nearly a dozen specialists. By `removing' them back to the main cargo bay

again,

controls were situated in awkward - for human and Mrdini - positions depending from ceilings, angled up from the floors and in the narrow ends of the oval-shaped quarters.

`No-one's found the starting button yet, ' Rojer remarked to his companions. He was halfway to cancelling a random thought as too ridiculous when his brother started to laugh.

`They may yet have to do just that, Roj. ' `Do what?' Flavia demanded, half turning her head in their direction while she kept most of her attention on her work.

We've got a queen, Thian said softly. Presumably she'd know how to start up - Flavia's eyes went round. lit her aboard that ship?

She can't take it anywhere but if all the king's horses and all the king's men can't figure out how to turn the power on --- Thian said and shrugged without adding the obvious conclusion.

`Oh!' Flavia mulled that problem over. `Surely someone `Hope so!' Rojer said but he couldn't be very encouraging as he watched his group clambering over the machinery, following coloured leads, attempting to fathom the unusual composition of the Hive drive. It was apparently much more efficient than it looked.

There were only so many viable forms of space drive, or so humans

and

when. The navy did need to discover exactly where to aim what sort of missiles to destroy a Hive ship, or render it helpless.

Thian had located the life-support area, just above the queens' level. The gas had destroyed whatever plant types generated oxygen although emergency supplies in tanks were carefully racked in adjacent storage space.

Thian's second find were the round cases of food stuffs: all colour-coded, though whatever glyphs the spheres bore were indecipherable. The semantic experts were delighted with this much to work on. The ship seemed oddly devoid of signs of any type, though illumination proved that certain colours must be recognizable to various queen workers, or why bother colouring anything?

One of the `Dini xenobiologists suggested that a sample of each of the food cases be sent to the Heinlein Base. The queen had been quiescent far too long and the theory was that she might be missing some vital nutritional elements. Surely that could be remedied by supplying her with home-grown sustenance.

On the main schematic board, tubes, halls, oval access conduits, pipes and tunnels were appropriately coloured to match the originals.

Save for the irising airlocks, hangar and cargo bays, there were

inexorable fatigue of nearly thirty hours of intense activity making itself felt in his mind and bones.

'I'm bushed. 'That is quite obvious, ' Flavia said, but she spoke with such kind concern that Rojer couldn't resent it.

She swung her legs to the side of her couch. 'They've more than enough to keep them going with the main objectives found. They have enough personnel to swap round but we don't have that option. I'm quite hungry!

Those sandwiches they sent up - oh, hours ago now have left a larger gap.

When contacted, the Admiral grunted and frowned.

'And what happens if there is an emergency requiring a Prime's abilities? Had you thought of that?' 'Indeed we have: Earth Prime has delegated a capable T-2 for such duty, ' and right on cue, someone rapped on the door. 'Here is Clancy Sparrow now.

Another cousin? Rojer asked in amazement just as the door to their ready room slid open.

'I know. I keep trying to live it down, ' Clancy replied with a grin which widened appreciatively when he turned to Flavia. Then he noticed the sphere and whistled. 'Boy, you guys lit the great white way!' He swallowed then, eyes rounding in concern. 'Let's just hope I

So much had happened that day that Rojer couldn't remember why Clancy would be congratulating him.

'Oh, yeah, thanks. How did Asia do?' Clancy grinned. 'I'll coz was only two points below you!' 'I told her she'd passed. Asia's not stupid!' 'Oh, hey, I know it,' Clancy said, recoiling from Rojer's fervent partisanship. 'We all know it back home on Deneb. We just can't seem to get her to know it.' 'Go to bed, Roj,' Thian said and Rojer wasted no more time, using the last of his energy to port himself to his quarters. He took time for a shower and a nutrient drink. When he gratefully stretched out on the excellent and comfortable bed, he had time for one guilty thought: he'd've had plenty of room for Gil and Kat in with him.

'Those are emergency repair ways and it's the scuttling critters that were used for 'em,' Thian was saying the next day when Rojer reported for duty. He was speaking on screen to a scowling, grizzled naval officer with commander tabs on his collar. 'If you've plumbed 'em with remotes, that's the best that's available. Doesn't that help?

Or do you want to borrow one of the scuttlers the queen hatched?'  
Hi, Roj! Boy, do you feel a hundred per cent better this afternoon.

You shouldn't have let me sleep so long.

You needed it and we need you alert.



spaces as mobile repair units. The wiring seems to be coded by an imbedded design since there wouldn't be sufficient light to see colour.

Since neither humans nor `Dini come in the appropriate size, it was just a suggestion!' `And totally unacceptable! Totally! You may be a Prime but you're here to do just one job. Now stick to that!' `As a Prime, let me remind you, sir, that I would be in complete control of the critter,' Thian replied and Rojer had no trouble `pathing how much Thian enjoyed the present exchange.

No-one's thrown the power switch, Flavia said, her mind alive with laughter though her expression was serenely polite. The navy's having knicker attacks. The `Dinis are sulking and it's all our fault.

Sipping from his third cup of really fine coffee, Roj sat on his couch to listen to both levels of Thian 5

conversation. Interesting that his brother had had much the same notion that had occurred to him. The only beings who could operate that ship were those for whom it was designed. For all the consultants, advisers, experts and technicians swarming about in the Refugee, not one of them had the shape, height or digital equipment that was required to power up the ship. Until then, no `complete' investigations could be essayed.

`Just forget that asinine suggestion, Prime, and I'll forget you

such bright ideas, use the proper channels. ' The screen went blank.

Flavia then doubled up with a fit of the giggles.

You were marvellous, Thian, she `pathed since she was physically incapable of speaking intelligibly through her laughter. Oh, Roj, that man `5 been impossible since we came on duty. To begin with, he doesn't like Talents and resents having to work with us. And the stupid things he wanted Clancy to do - - The only one on this watch with any sense is Rome Kloo. She thinks we should make a device like the palps of the queen and see if the board can't be activated by using those.

Pressure operated? A sequence needed? what? which?

Thian had turned away from the blank screen, his facial expression one of disgust and frustration.

`OK, engineer, you got any ideas? I sure would like us Primes to start up that bloody ship of theirs. Hell, we've done all the work on it so far, following it, capturing it, stealing it, and bringing it back. Lighting the whole damn thing up so they could see where they were going. And now we're supposed to turn it on.

They're the naval experts. We're just lousy T&Ts. ' Then Thian let out a long breath and apologized to them for sounding off.

`You got the right, bra, Rojer said and then cocked his head.

said, his eyes sparkling with sudden anger as he corrected his brother.

And you had enough smarts to recognize Big Trouble when you saw it. So did Gil and Kat.

The unexpected reminder brought tears to Rojer's eyes. This was the first time anyone in his family had spoken so bluntly about the incident. But Thian was wound up and Rojer forced himself to ignore that painful reminder and concentrate on what his brother was saying.

But I think we all have the same idea. Flavia? She nodded. I'll clear it with Granddad, Thian added. Besides, we'd need his help and Roddie's at the Observatory. But it could be done.

The navy'd have apoplexy, Rojer began, although the idea was taking firm root as the only way to many objectives, not the least of which was confounding people like Admiral del Falco who fundamentally did not like Talents and made their distrust and hatred as obvious as the commander had. OK, Thian, how would we go about it? Rojer asked.

Thian crossed his ankles, dangling them off the side of his couch, his hands clasped between his thighs. Well, it'd take a fair amount of timing. One, getting Roddie to falsify the records in the Observatory so no-one knows the queen is gone. Two, we gotta have the

and you were suddenly in a ship you could operate, wouldn't you try to escape? Thian asked.

I would, being a human, Flavia said.

A `Dini would, too, Rojer said. But would a Hive queen?

I think so, Roj, Thian said thoughtfully. You said they didn't waste any time scrambling from Refugee when they were threatened. I think survival is the highest priority of queens.

But if it takes twelve queens to crew a ship, Flavia put in, and that's what even our experts believe now So, if she just stands there as she's been doing, we won't have lost anything, will we? Thian said.

But look how survival oriented she is - hatching attendants to tend to her needs first, then the tiny ones she obviously hoped would be able to get out of the facility. She hasn't done a thing since they failed.

Common sense suggests she'd try.

And that's all we need her to do, isn't it? Try? Flavia said.

Show us how to start that wretched ship up. Then we can leave this installation and do something more appropriate to our rank and skills.

Thian and Rojer both regarded Flavia with surprise.

I'm tower-trained, Flavia said with a touch of asperity, and while

commander's attitude needs adjusting. ' He winked at Flavia and then Rojer. They'd been reasonably sure that their ready room conversations

were being recorded, a standard operating procedure. So, do we put this bright idea through the proper channels?

Granddad? what if he doesn't like it? Conflicting emotions which obviously didn't worry Thian at all besieged Rojer. But then Thian Rojer cancelled that line of thought.

So, we get our heads handed back to us by one more authority.

Thian shrugged. I think it'd be kind of fun to try! Hell's bells, Roj, it was your notion to begin with.

Yeah, but . . . Then Rojer stopped to ponder the ramifications.

Yeah but, and Thian dared him, if it's young Engineer Prime Lyon who shows the navy boffins just how easy it was to determine where to turn the power on . It'd shake a lot of people and `Dinis up and certainly give us Primes a minor triumph.

I'm game, Flavia said with a laugh, her eyes twinkling as she was caught up by both mischief and a possible triumph. Then her expression

sobered. Can we transport a Hiver?

We've never run across anything we couldn't `port, Thian said, and

lit me have it.

When Thian finished the explanation, all three young Primes held their breath throughout the seemingly endless silence from their superior.

As the naval operation seems stymied, obviously an unusual step must be taken to break the impasse. Yours makes more sense than any

others I've heard. And certainly poses no danger to anyone. Of course, the queen might not be docile once she realizes where she is.

Can you cope with that possibility and be able to restrain her?

All we'd have to do is `port her back to Roddie.

But should she start the ship up Sir, Rojer said, a ship this size takes time for its engines to warm up to take-off power. We'd have her back in her quarters before she'd get that far in a countdown.

Look, I'll hedge that possible problem with a little safety net of my own, Jeff Raven said. I'll contact Roddie myself to see how we organize the - ah. . . excursion from his end. I gather she's in one of her immobile states now.

Lieutenant Rhodri Eagles was only too happy to conspire to `loan' his prisoner to the scheme.

I've kilos of recordings I can set in place. But you are sure she

Sort of mean of us, though, isn't it? Giving her false hope?

Roddie added, showing an unexpected sympathy for the Hiver queen.

Hey, man, you need a change of duty if you're starting to think like that, Thian replied.

Well, you know, maybe I ought to apply for a transfer.

This duty was exciting - for a while. But the glamour has long since worn off Any chance of you guys speaking up for me? Roddie asked.

Sure thing. who to? Earth Prime or your CO? what sort of duty did you have in mind?

ANYTHING. I've even learned enough `Dini to get along with them!

We'll tell you when to switch tapes. Get one picked out and ready to substitute because we'll have to move fast when we do.

Getting a chance to speak privately with LieutenantCommander Semirame Kloo might have presented some problems but she solved that by

appearing at their table, tray in hand, during the next meal break.

They had chosen this end of the officers' mess-room because the next table was empty.

`Can I join you? Or are you off naval types?' `Why would we be?' Thian said, surprised at her query.

`Sure is. Whatcha got to say?' While her eyes began to sparkle with curiosity and her body tensed ever so slightly with anticipation, she started on her meal, acting in a perfectly normal manner. But remember to say something out loud so no-one'll wonder why this corner

of the room's gone silent. ' So Thian began one of the double-talking conversations he was becoming adept at. `Chow's good today and we sure

need the break. ' We have an idea that we could get the queen to show us how to power up the Refugee.

`Hmmm, so it is. ' And Rome chewed with evident relish. Tell me more, you delightfully dembus man!

All three Talents took turns explaining the plan, sprinkling innocuous comments now and then. When all was made clear, Rome looked wisfully down at her empty plate.

`I know that was a good meal but I've absolutely no recollection of what I ate `You nearly choked once his face straight with an effort.

`And had two coughing fits helpfully `But we can do it, ' Rome said. `Only it will have to be on the next watch. I'm on, so is



Refugee had racks of missiles but no launchers set in installations clearly awaiting them: yet another sign of how rushed the Hivers had been to leave their system and its decaying primary.

'Any time,' Thian said. 'See you around?' 'Yup!' and Semirame Kloo strode confidently towards the disposal slot, slipped in her tray and left the wardroom.

Slightly more than an hour later, Kloo gave a polite rap at the Talents' ready room door before she slipped quickly inside, a grin plastered on her face, as she flattened herself against the wall.

Got some tinkering for you to do with the duty roster. Gotta get it done in the next five minutes. Can you?

Throw it up in the air and I'll catch, Thian said without moving from his couch.

Rome hesitated a moment, shrugged and tossed a folded piece of film up in the air. It disappeared.

I can have everyone crucial to this operation of yours in position fifteen minutes before this watch ends. OK? she added.

Couldn't be OKer.

She was gone as smoothly as she'd arrived. Thian spread the film on his thigh and smiled.

Cover for me, will you, Roj, Flavia? I'll have to get myself into

things you've done?

Because then they wouldn't be the neat things, Flavia said unexpectedly. 'I do believe they have the life-support system on line,' she added out loud. 'D'you think sgit leaves will make a difference . . . to the quality of the oxygen, I mean?' 'They do on all the ships I've been on which added sgit leaves to their plant banks. And the `Dinis never have foul air.' 'In'trusting,' Flavia said, drawling. 'Well, it will save the drain on the Moon Base supplies, of course.

Because the Talents were more on a stand-by basis now that the Refugee's interior had been diagrammed, the rest of the watch seemed to drag almost interminably.

My crew's in place, Thian, Rome said. Then over the comunit, 'Ah, Prime Thian, this is LieutenantCommander Kloo. Can you stand by?

We're effecting a decontam drill.' 'We heard you, loud and clear, Commander. Work away.

Roger caught a shadow out of the corner of his eye and, turning to investigate, nearly fell off his couch.

Granddad's here, he tried to whisper to Thian.

Thian didn't turn his head but grinned broadly.

Your plan. Go ahead, Thian, Jeff Raven said, folding his arms and standing approximately where Rome had earlier in the watch.

Merge, Roj, Flavia, Thian said.

The three minds linked neatly, just as if this wasn't the first time they'd made such contact. With Thian in the lead, Rojer was more aware of the strength of both minds than he'd been during their more or less solo workings on the Refugee. He was also conscious of another potency which both bolstered and encouraged, yet was not a part of the triple merge.

`They' had no difficulty finding the Hiver queen where she nestled in her shavings bed, her attendants polishing her body parts and smoothing the fine hairs of her limbs. The stingg-pzzt from her was unbearably acute as the Thian merge made contact but the hesitation lasted only that brief second of surprise and then `they' neatly placed her in the now darkened queens quarters of the Refugee: in one of the larger chambers.

Somehow Rome had rigged `night' lighting which showed the watch-  
ers

the queen's form. She had been in a semi-recumbent position in her shavings, but the Merge had placed her upright and she had to adjust her limbs for the standing position. That done, she remained

front set to dance across the floor panels.

Instantly orangey lights came up around the room in the tubes that had been designated as Hiver lighting.

Next the panels lit, decorated with odd symbols and different shadings.

We got power all over the fucking place, Rome said, in choked amazement. I'm not sure I can explain this.

Don't bother.

Oh Lord, engine room's going crazy. Hey, I think this has gone far enough, Thian! Panic coloured Rome's tone.

Don't worry, Commander, Jeff Raven said. This ship's anchored so tight not even full speed forward could break her loose.

I know the sequence to turn the power on, Rojer said.

I've got the pattern of how she activated everything, Flavia said.

Sorry, gal, your parole just got cancelled, Thian said and the Merge replaced the queen in her prison.

what'd you guys do to her? Rhodri complained. She's going wild!

Can `t say I blame her, Jeff remarked placidly. I'd be a bit pissed off too, fil thought I'd just seen the way home and it disappeared.

Your decontam drill just finished, Rome, Thian told her.

Granddad!

'Admiral, it was a concerted effort,' Rojer repeated, an

edge to his voice now because he was growing weary of the barrage of naval doubts and, particularly, del Falco's aggressive interrogation. He was sorry that, as the engineer of the three Talents, he had volunteered to answer any technical questions. 'Any' had turned into an incredible 'many'. And none of his answers pleased xenophobic Baldwin who was as close to sulking as a grown man should

get. All three Talents had been particularly careful in answering his stabbing questions since his suspicions were so clearly 'heard' in his public mind. 'Given the height of the queen,' Rojer explained patiently, 'the positions of her manipulative limbs and her optics, the upper panel was the logical main control, while she received status information from the lower one. The three of us merely fiddled with variables until we hit the right combination. I think it was Flavia who actually got the lights turned on.' 'The queen's upper limbs have triangular-shaped palps,' Flavia said, her voice falling into a 'rote' pattern as she repeated her part of the explanation, 'so that was the

remember he didn't. A drill is s. o. p especially with a new installation. If he hadn't ordered it, he should have.

I don't know about you and Rojer, Thian, Flavia said with considerable vexation in her voice, but I find their attitudes suspicious, disagreeable, ungrateful and positively spiteful. what difference does it really make who found out how to turn on the power in that wretched old ship? It's never going anywhere. But it IS now powered up and I do not like being accused of 'going behind their backs for personal glory', or 'overstepping' the parameters of 'our assigned functions We kept their personnel safe and we made the ship just that bit more safe when we turned on its heating system. We've explained and explained and diagrammed as much as we know, so I think it's time to leave this merry-go-round.

With no brass ring. And I concur with your analysis, Flavia, Thian replied. I'm up with such a catechism. We have finished 'our assigned functions'. Therefore we can leave.

Rome, will our stalk irig out in indignation put you in jeopardy?

Don't know how you've stood it as long as you have. As I was busy overseeing a decontam drill and nowhere near the site of your crime, they can't even pin dereliction of duty on me. `Sides, del Falco's not after me. I'm crew. He's after you because you're not.

your theory, Rome supplied.

Thian rose, the signal for both Flavia and Rojer to follow his example.

`We chose that moment because the queens' chambers were empty and

we would not be jeopardizing anyone's safety in case we hit the wrong buttons,' Thian said. `Now you can turn the panels on and off at your discretion. The ship is thoroughly and safely explored, independently lit and supplied with oxygen so our assignment has been completed.

Earth Prime has just informed me that we must return immediately to the Blundell Cube. It has been our pleasure to assist in this project for the navy on Mars Phobos Moon Base, Admiral, Commander Baldwin, Commander Kloo, GImtmi, and sirs. ' Thian bowed to the panel of

human and Mrdinis that had been interrogating them for the past three hours, then he strode from the room.

The courtesies that Rojer and Flavia gave their inquisitors were as polite but briefer and then they were in the corridor.

It's blow this joint, Thian said.

They all heard the commotion inside and `ported to their quarters where they collected their possessions in deft sweeps of closets and

OK?

At Rojer's mirthful shout and Flavia's giggle of acknowledgement, their minds merged and they propelled themselves off the Moon Base and

down to the headquarters of Federated Telepaths and Teleporters on Earth.

You're a cheeky lot, said Jeff Raven, but he, too, was chuckling.

Report to my office so you can repudiate the blast I'm getting from Admiral del Falco.

The man is not only ungrateful, Flavia said firmly, but unmannerly. He never so much as thanked us for solving his problem for him.

`Port right up to my office, kids, I've cleared the way for you, Jeff said as the lid of the corner was opened by the head expediter of Blundell facility.

`Boss wants you pronto, ' but he was grinning broadly.

Is the word out all over the world yet? Rojer asked Thian on a very thin line.

No, nor will it be, Jeff answered, having no trouble at all insinuating himself into his grandsons' link. Hurry up. The Admiral's



thought you kept more control on your people, Raven. You told us they were well trained, skilled and capable of the assignment. They walked out of a half finished debriefing with many questions unanswered. I don't mind telling you that I, Commander Baldwin here, and ` He turned to his left and his scowl deepened before he gave a snort of displeasure and faced directly into the comunit again. `We will not recommend that those three receive assignments from any navy unit again. ' `Oh, really?' Jeff said. `How odd. Because I've had twenty urgent requests - - and he lifted a pile of message flimsies from his desk to plain view of the Admiral' from naval exploration groups, Squadrons C and D, now refitting at Clarf and from Captains Osullivan, Ashiant, Cheseman, Quacho, Plr, a priority urgent one from Captain Spktn of the KLTS, and another top-security assignment which I don't believe you are cleared to know.

Hey, Granddad, that's a low blow, Thian said chuckling.

Hit `em again, harder, Rojer suggested, delighted.

Admiral del Falco glared and his impassive face settled into an even more threatening blandness. `They may change their minds when they see the report I shall insist be attached to their NE-440 forms.

`Really? That they prevented serious injury by rescuing

And don't go riffing out NE-440 forms on FT&T personnel: a waste of time as they're not under your jurisdiction. Thank you for your perceptions on this mission and good luck with your operational enemy ship. ' With a peremptory wave of his hand, Jeff blanked the screen.

`And that makes the Phobos Moon Base low man on FT&T job priorities. ' He rose from his chair, still taller than his grandsons, vigorous and obviously amused by recent events. `I don't think they gave you anything to eat during that three-hour grilling, did they?

Name your pleasure, ' he added, gesturing for them to take seats in the lounge area of his spacious office.

`My guts wouldn't've let me eat any more of their food anyhow, ' Rojer said and, turning his head to the dispenser, called out the elements of a sustaining meal.

Jeff chuckled at the choice, then urged Flavia to send her order.

Thian realized that his stomach was unknottling as well and shortly had as comprehensive a spread of dishes as his brother.

`Hope you haven't taken a dislike to navy life, Flavia, Jeff said when he had ordered a salad and all were sitting about the beautiful Altairian fruit wood table, now laden with succulent comestibles.

`No, sir. I had no trouble with the lifestyle, sir. Both Thian and Rojer have told me a little bit ` She shot Rojer an anxious glance

`Were you considering another naval assignment for me, sir?' she asked.

Watching Flavia delicately consuming a pasta dish, managing a neat twine of strands of hot cheese around her fork, Thian could well imagine the impression she'd make on any crew. Maybe he'd read more into Granddad's choice of her as a mission member than existed.

Except he knew Jeff Raven wanted his grandchildren to marry into Talented families to produce yet another generation of gifted children.

`Several situations have come up for T-1s so I'll spread the lot of them on the table, ' Jeff said. `Squadron C's been brought back for refitting and resupply, as well as a change of personnel. C's been out longer than D. ' `Then they're going to follow the other Hive ships to their destination?' Thian was excited as well as relieved. He hadn't liked the idea of that ship loose and preying on an unsuspecting planet.

`That's what I hear, ' and implicit in Jeff Raven's voice was the caution that what he had heard might be altered.

`Squadron A replaces elements of C and D and will continue the search with augmentation and would very much like you back, Thian, especially Captain Spktn.

the Hiver ships by-passed. The xenobiologist lobby is rabid to get to those damaged planets, as much to see what went wrong as to see if anything can be salvaged from Hiver occupation. I'm also not sending any T-1 on these long cruises without a personal support team, and with such augmented squadrons, I'd be happier to have two T-1s, or a T-1 and a good T-2 as back-up. There are also some shorter-term exploratory cruises, in the Xh-33 quadrant of space, if you don't care for the longer journeys.

Having Talents aboard has been of great assistance.

Don't know why I didn't think of it before, except that FT&T has been mainly planet-based. Think about your options. And there are always dirtside openings if you want a complete change. ' Then Jeff grinned. `One more matter, just before del Falco got on to me, I had word from Heinlein Base that the queen's been energized. ' He grinned, cocking one eyebrow, his deep blue eyes twinkling. `I don't know if it's the food you sent over from the Refugee or what, but Roddie reports that she's minutely re-examined every single one of the Great Sphere larvae that were sent there and she's done something to more of the eggs she herself laid - in between having a good munch-out on three

`Better for her.

`Samples of what's in those food containers have been sent to the Heinlein labs for analysis, haven't they?' Jeff asked.

`Sure did, ' Rojer said. `There were more than enough containers with the same markings to allow us to `port one each to every biology and xeno group active in Hiver study. That didn't even make a noticeable dent in the amount still in store in the cargo holds. `Good thinking, ' Jeff said, nodding approvingly.

`Wasn't me, sir. Roddie suggested it. He thought her own sort of food might contain basic elements she isn't getting in the diet they've provided her. ' Thian grinned broadly. `Now wouldn't the right food cause the queen to activate?' Jeff s grin was just as broad, with just the slightest hint of malicious delight about it. `I think that will certainly be the official position and supported by the resident xenobs. ' `Granddad, ' Rojer began, `backtrack a bit, would you? You mentioned M-5 type planets where the Hivers didn't make colonies work?'

`Ah yes, you wouldn't be up to date on that, would you?' Jeff said, tossing his napkin to the table before pushing his chair away. Cocking his knee against the edge of the table, he leaned back. `We'd a T-2, Kincaid dano. Name's not familiar? No matter. It was fortunate that

details emerged. Of the four planets investigated, two had obviously been colonized by Hivers because there were the ruins of the sort of installations the Xh-33 has. 'Ruins?' Thian asked.

'Ruins. Hive ruins. Including the same sort of space garbage around Xh-33 and, in one case, an orbiting sphere ship. Another planet is ecologically on the point of ruin, presumably because the Hiver extermination policy eliminated something vital to its ecosystem. The point is that there are more M-5 type worlds out there that the Hivers never bothered with. Why? is one of the questions asked. Do they have records of all the systems their species have colonized? Another question is, obviously, can one of the Alliance species use any of these abandoned worlds? And there're more out there - as we've always known there were - to be investigated. C Squadron is being recalled.

While the expanded Squadron A picks up where they left off, Squadron B will do evaluations of the abandoned colony worlds 'And knock out the inhabited one the way we did the Xh-33?' asked Thian with

a certain eagerness in his voice.

Jeff gave him a long look. 'I've no specific directions as yet.

I'd rather one of us didn't start another battle.

The navy feels that that's its prerogative. ' Then he grinned.

the remaining Hive hips?' Flavia asked.

'I repeat, that's the current, ' and he lightly emphasized the word, 'plan. These chasings off into unexplored regions of space keep lasting longer than anyone anticipated - - - 'A lot that's happened couldn't be anticipated, ' Thian said, thinking of the Great Sphere and the dead star that had once shone on the Hive home world.

'You can say that again, ' Rojer murmured, remembering the unexpected events in which he had taken part. 'Where are your 'Dinis, Thian?' he asked suddenly.

Thian shot him a glance, adding a mental touch blended of compassion, affection, pride and relief that the question had been asked. 'Hibernation. They should be out in another week.

'Oh! Mur and Dip would like a chance to see you, if that's all right with you, Roj. ' Thian turned to the Earth Prime. 'That is, if Granddad hasn't shipped us off to the different ends of the galaxy. ' 'Not in the next two weeks, ' Jeff said affably. 'Your parents have expressed a wish for your company, ' and his eyes twinkled as his mo-

bile

face suggested he couldn't understand why they would, 'and you all require leave after running those naval hazards. ' He turned to Flavia.

'My wife and I would be delighted to have you stay with us at

leaning back in his chair at an almost dangerous angle. Relaxing with his young relatives around him was a good way to get perspective on completely different problems.

'Give a think to the various assignments, Squadrons A and B, or a dirtside assignment, or one of the shorter exploratories. Talents don't have to ship out from a dock.' He grinned. 'Those who want you will welcome you all the more when you do get wherever you choose to go.' He set his chair back down on all four legs. 'I may have to make the final decisions but your preferences will be taken into consideration. I owe you that much, Talents.' Thian and Rojer exchanged surprised glances at his deference.

In line with that generosity, Jeff Raven persuaded in a manner as near to coercion as he ever came, to get the Raven-Lyons all home at the same time. He got David of Betelgeuse to release his T-1 son, Perry, to take charge of Clarf Tower, borrowing Yoshuk from the Sef Tower until Perry became comfortable with the peculiarities of the planet.

Perry has'n't dealt with enough Mrdini yet and he'll need to, Jeff told the Betelgeuse T-1. You won't let him have your damned tower until you're mouldy so he might as well have some variety in his hfr.

Jeff then made extravagant use of pressure to get Clancy Sparrow



How can you say that when all these young people will be `polling off to distant star systems and not see each other for years?

That doesn't matter if they are only a thought away from each other, does it, Jeff Raven!

Jeff grinned and firmed up all the private arrangements before he called in his administrative assistant, Gollee Gren, to see exactly which Talents suited which of the many other assignments he had to fill. At least, he thought gratefully, he had more available options than Peter Reidinger, his predecessor, had ever had, with all the new generation of kith and kin growing splendidly and strongly into their Talents. Now, if the High Council would get its joint act together, he'd know where he needed the heavyweights of his corps.

Once again he thanked the ghosts of all the Earth Primes who had managed to keep Federated Telepaths and Teleports autonomous and apolitical.

A-what? asked a laughing voice and Gollee Gren, his dark, close-cropped hair showing a sprinkling of silver, entered the spacious office.

'I always do what's best for my Talents,' Jeff said in a gruff voice, mimicking his predecessor, Peter Reidinger, so perfectly that Gollee grinned even more broadly.

moment the capsule arrived with the brothers and Flavia, she 'reached out' for Rojer. He was steeling himself but foremost in his mind was an eagerness to be home. No sooner was that carrier down, than Laria, Tip, Huf and Kincaid dano arrived. The dust in the Tower yard hadn't settled when Zara with Pal and Dis 'ported in.

Morag, Kaltia, Ewain and Petra, plus their 'Dinis, were dancing up and down with the excitement of having their 'famous' brothers and sisters back on Aurigae. Xexo and Keylarion were trying to keep order but the Tower yard was in minor chaos as the younger children kept running from one to the other older sibling, 'Dinis dizzy from following.

Like a hard knock on a painful bruise, Damia felt Rojer respond to energetic greetings from Kaltia's and Ewain's 'Dinis. They were so caught up in the general elation that none of them remembered to give Rojer the time or space to initiate contact. Damia was all set to abandon protocol and 'port down to intervene when she felt the sudden shift of emotion in his mind. Then he was lifting Petra up in his arms - Rojer had got taller all of a sudden and muscled up, Damia noted, testing the strength of him - while Big and Sil affectionately flapped against legs which surely had got longer. Any reluctance or hesitation

that Flavia and Kincaid dano were being introduced and as warmly welcomed. She hurried down the stairs to add hers.

Parental embraces were perhaps more restrained but just as heartfelt. Damia tried not to hug Rojer any harder or longer than she did Thian, Laria and Zara but she had to know.

I am all right, Mother, he said on a very thin line to her.

Really, coming home is going to work out. `GOOD TO SEE TRP AND FLK ONCE MORE. ' And Rojer bowed to his parents' `Dinis.

Surprising everyone, Trp and Flk bowed very low to Rojer, their poll eyes almost touching the ground. Then each held out one upper limb to him which he obediently grasped. Silently, as they began to lead him towards the path to the house, all the other `Dinis, even ùPetra's, fell into step behind.

ùI'm still all right, Mother, Rojer said so she turned to speak with Flavia and Kincaid, and introduce them to Xexo and Keylarion.

`Shall we all move up to the house then?' Damia said.

`Don't hang on your brother, Ewain. Yes, Petra, Zara can certainly see how much you've grown. C'mon now, all of you, we'll adjourn to the house.

`Noisy lot. No manners whatever, ' Afra said, staring hard at Kaltia and Morag who were determined to monopolize their oldest sister.

As T-2 to T-2. what Kincaid doesn't need is another brain-browsing TùOh? Were you a little clumsy, dear? asked her father.

`No, ' Laria continued aloud, `but we're suckers when someone asks us if Talents can do this or that, in just that tone of voice that forces us to prove we can.

Frankly, the labels "performing bear" or "packmule" are becoming more appropriate than ``stevedore". ' `Laria!' Damia exclaimed, halilaughing, half astounded by the comment. Then she frowned, glancing ahead at Rojer, being ù `herded', the term came to her mind, towards the house. And . . . She had a compelling urge to run forward, to be with Rojer. Then Zara caught her by the arm.

I feel it, too, Mother, Zara said. But it is not for us to be present what are you two talking about? Afra asked.

I'm not at all sure, Damia replied, trying to rationalize the `Dinis' odd actions with the growing sense that some extraordinary event was about to happen. This morning when I told Fok that everyone was coming, it asked if I meant Rojer also. Then it muttered about suitable reparation and an apology for the length of time it had taken.

Laria strode up beside her mother and Zara, her face twisted with concern, one hand absently rubbing her diaphragm as if to relieve a

the atmosphere was affecting them.

`There are moments when I wish I had a touch of prescience, ' Damia said, lengthening her strides just short of a run.

`And what the hell do you think this is, then?' Thian asked, grinning at his mother.

She shot him a reproving look. `It's too nebulous to be useful!' They were in sight of the front terrace of the house, Rojer already halfway up the steps, surrounded by various sizes of `Dinis. Then he halted.

A blast of totally unshielded astonished emotion stopped everyone midstep, but this was followed by such joy that everyone also broke into vicarious smiles, until Damia, Laria, Zara and Morag began to cry.

The four of them ran forward so that they could see what prompted such a cascade of feelings, followed by the remainder of the family and its guests.

The `Dinis had ranged themselves on the top step, their colours bright with their own joy. On the porch Rojer was on his knees, his arms about two `Dinis, clasping first one, then the other tightly to him, caressing each before snagging them together against him.

It's Gil and Kat come back to me! Mother! Dad! Everyone.

I've got my `Dinis back. Young still but they are Grl and Ktg!

Flk had done their best to explain.

`Like the amoeba, splitting apart, Mother, ' Zara said.

`Or, like a human placenta splitting in two to form fraternal twins in utero. Not quite like .

`Thank you, Zara, ' Damia said, but she patted her daughter's hand to apologize for stemming a xenobiological lecture. Zara didn't take offence.

The `time' problem had been taken up ;by the necessity of checking back through hibernatory records to discover which pairings had originally produced Grl and Ktg. They were not from the same `split' for a `split' only produced one new Mrdini. So that both sets of original parents had had to be contacted and brought to the Aurigaeon hibernatory at the appropriate time and a new `split' of the same elements as the original Grl and Ktg had to be `programmed' which, Flk said, was an intense form of meditation to `urge similar traits' to occur in the new form. With this sort of procreation, no worthwhile `persons' were totally lost, but could be retrieved by encouraging a `split' by the same two Mrdini which had produced the original. Those who had gone on the line to preserve their elders on long voyages were therefore not `lost' but their living deferred.

`Oh!' Laria said at one point during the explanations.

MRDINI ARE NOT WASTEFUL. ' `THEN THAT ALSO EXPLAINS  
WHY MRDINI CAN  
BE BRAVER THAN HUMANS AND MAKE THE SACRIFICE OF  
DEATH,' Thian added,  
nodding with relief at his comprehension of this facet. `MRDINIS DO  
NOT REALLY DIE. THEY CAN BE REPLICATED.  
`NOT REPLICATED,' Fik said firmly. `NOT THE SAME PROCESS.  
MRDINI  
LIVES ARE NOT REPLICATED. THEY ARE REPRODUCED.  
`WHATEVER!' Damia said with a shaky laugh. `BUT COULD NOT  
YOU  
HAVE TOLD RJR THAT HE HAD NOT LOST GRL AND KTG. HE HAS  
MOURNED THEM.  
THAT, TOO, IS NECESSARY,' Tri said without apology. `MRDINI  
MAKE  
A SPECIAL DISPENSATION FOR RJR. HONOUR REQUIRED IT.  
AND TIME. WHAT  
HAS BEEN SAID REMAINS WITHIN THIS FAMILY.  
`OF COURSE,' Afra answered, inclining his whole body forward in  
acceptance of that requirement. `A SIGNAL HONOUR FOR US ALL.  
TRULY AN

replied Pal, waving its forearms and wriggling its digits.

`This whole family is high!' Damia said with some asperity but her grin broke out again and, once more, she had to brush tears of joy from her eyes. Just seeing the radiant look on Rojer's face was enough to set her off again. `Now, let us all try for some decorum. ' Afra rose with an air of renewed vigour. `And resort to a few practical matters.

Hunters are needed to fill the pots for tonight's feast. Who'll go out?' They were all willing so Damia showed the guests to their rooms while her children found their own much as they had left them and changed into riding gear.

When all reassembled, Afra told them off into smaller groups, excusing Rojer so he could spend uninterrupted time with his `Dinis.

Thian chose Flavia to come with him, Ewain and Kaltia. Afra and Damia took Morag and Petra who proudly informed Kincaid that she was a crack shot with her sling-shot. That left Laria, Zara and Kincaid.

`Ever ridden?' Laria asked Kincaid.

`Ridden what?' Kincaid replied uncertainly.

`Ponies, small horses. ' `Oh, animal riding. Yes, somewhat, ' he said and Laria beckoned him to follow her to the stables.



miss it! And carul, Zara, `cause I know you can't resist a healing `look'. He was as near burned-out emotionally as I've ever touched.

what does the navy do to the empathic?

Emotional burn-out? Zara asked sharply, her healer's instinct alert Plus considerable strain on a T-2's abilities. I think he's healing but ri you could, at your deftest, slip in and check, I'd be relieved, Zar, Laria said gratefully. I'm speaking as Kincaid's Prime.

Zara nodded as she slipped the headpiece over her pony's ears while Laria found a saddle suitable for Kincaid's size. She found it very good indeed to be surrounded by ponies; grateful to see that the oldest were still vigorous and whinnied anxiously against being left behind. The entire complement was needed to mount the hunters, with three spares taken on lead ropes in high hopes of bringing back much game.

Kincaid eschewed sling-shot and bow and arrow, choosing a small-bore rifle and ammunition for it as if he knew what he was about.

Laria was rather surprised to see Flavia take bow and arrow. She also saw the grin on Thian's face.

As each hunting party was armed and mounted, they moved off in preferred directions. Laria decided on an eastern route, to the foothills. With only her parents, the four younger kids and the

same gait. A second, surreptitious glance showed her Kincaid, easily sitting into the canter and grinning with pleasure.

He was also a good shot, as he proved when their approach flushed a covey of avians from their hedges.

He got two brace of them, each neatly shot through the head. Zara had also chosen a rifle but she went after the scurriers, which broke cover when Kincaid's shots startled them. Laria got three rabbits, two scurriers and even one avian hen in that first stop.

'No-one's been hunting this way in a long while,' she said to her sister as they bagged their catch.

'When was the last time you were home?' asked Zara with a bit of a snort. 'This always was the route you preferred.' 'Yes, but you'd think someone would have tried to keep the game down all over the hills.' 'Do you always hunt for your table?' Kincaid asked, handing over the birds he had retrieved.

'Uhuh!' the sisters said in unison and all three laughed.

'When we were younger, we used to take our `Dinis with us . . .`'  
Zara began.

'They were small enough to ride pillion then Laria continued.

- ù And didn't consider it beneath their dignity to grab a stirrup leather to get up the hills.' 'Ah - - ' Kincaid began tentatively, 'what

might have belittled their brother's abilities. 'I admit that I like Clarf far more than I thought I would, even in the short time I've been at your Tower, Laria, but I haven't changed my mind about naval practices at all.' He looked down at the ground, at the pattern he was scuffing in the thick moss.

'You'll never know how grateful I was to be transferred back to the company of civilians!' Zara touched Laria's wrist, where the riding glove left her hand bare, and Laria 'heard' the message: This bears investigation. The problem 's festering. I'll do it when he sleeps.

'Grateful, are you?' Laria said with a light laugh. 'I haven't half worked you yet, Kincaid. You may wish to transfer back to the navy.' He looked her squarely in the eyes, his jaw set at an obstinate angle. 'No, I wouldn't. Not ever.' He turned and, with a respectable vault, was astride his pony. 'Have we got a large enough bag?' 'Only if you're feeling the saddle,' Laria said with a challenging grin.

The hunt's good for him, Zara said tightly.

'I'll feel the saddle tomorrow,' Kincaid said with a rueful grin as he kneed his pony forward to follow the nearly overgrown path, 'but let's get on with the hunt.

The hunt had been so enthusiastically pursued by all participants that Damia decided, as the 'Dinis helped them dress down the results,

on

his naval assignment.

-There turned out to be time enough for a quick swim before dinner and there was more aquatic rough stuff than energetic laps of the large pool.

By dinner, Rojer's joy had settled to a glow and the new Gil and Kat had acquired enough orientation, between his efforts and those of the other `Dinis, to appear quite comfortable at the large table. If, at first, they were clumsy with unfamiliar utensils, they learned with amazing speed and obviously enjoyed the meal.

Leaving children and guests to clear the table and cleanse the dishes, Damia and Afra settled in the lounge, to have a quiet liqueur, watch the sun set over the sea, and get a few words with their `Dinis.

`TELL US PLEASE, Damia asked Trp and Fik, `HOW MATURE ARE THE NEW

KTG AND GRL?' `OLDER THAN THE FIRST BECAUSE THE IMMATURE WOULD NOT BE

ABLE TO ACCOMPANY RJR USEFULLY `CAN YOU TELL US HOW THIS WAS

ACCOMPLISHED? WE DO NOT PRY Damia left the thought hanging.

Fik resettled itself right next to Damia, laying one upper hand on

CAN ABSORB NECESSARY DATA NOW THAT RJR IS OLDER TOO.

'DO YOU KNOW HOW MUCH THIS MEANS TO US AS WELL AS RJR?' Damia said

and, although she knew perfectly well there wasn't an ounce of telepathy in Mrdinis, she exuded gratitude and knew that Afra was, too.

'WE KNOW. ALL MRDINI KNOW. THE REGRET IS THAT TIME HAD TO GO SO

SLOWLY FOR RJR.

SUCCESS HAD TO BE ACHIEVED OR DISAPPOINTMENT WOULD MAR RJR FOR ALL

TIME. ' 'YES, ' Afra said slowly, 'TO HAVE RAISED HIS HOPES PREMATURELY

WOULD HAVE CAUSED MUCH MORE PAIN. YOU WERE WISE.

YES, WE WERE VERY WISE, ' Trp said with such a smug tone in its voice that both Damia and Afra burst out laughing at its uncharacteristic arrogance.

Then the chores were finished and Damia and Afra were joined by children, guests and `Dinis. It made for rather a full room, but a very happy one.

The next day, to shake out of the kinks caused by riding after a

ENOUGH.

Well, you would ask, Thian said when he saw the chagrined look on his sister's face from the brusque reply.

There was no harm in asking, she said with a sniff Otherwise how would I know that there is a limit to the knowledge they have of the process? They aren't offended.

No, they're not. They know us too well for that.

Thank goodness. Sometimes . and Laria halted, closing off her thought.

Thian nudged her. Hey, it's me, your brother.

Laria gave him a sideways look. If I could analogize the nebulous, I would, but I can't. when I can figure out the question I need to ask, I'll bring it to you, and Zara. There was a sad and perplexed tone to Laria's mental voice that Thian had never heard before from his practical, sensible sister.

Not Mother or Dad?

Laria gave a little laugh. when I know enough to ask, I might.

But I think you and Zara might know better.

I'm highly complimented. Thian tousled his sister's hair.

She was tall but he had centimetres on her.

'Hey, what gives you the right to mess me up?' she demanded in

place where they've fresh crustaceans I'll bet neither of our guests have ever had a chance to eat!' 'Gotcha!' 'I'd rather you didn't use that word around me, sis,' Thian said, having had to catch his breath at the shaft of remembered fear and terror the innocent vernacular phrase produced in him.

'Ooops, sorry, Thi,' and Laria was full of remorse.

Once again they inadvertently excluded their guests and smiled apologies.

'Maybe if you spoke of it to us who will understand as others can't?' Flavia asked, peering up into Thian's pale face.

Thian knew himself to be tempted by Flavia's obvious concern but he also caught the wariness in Kincaid, a rigid seizing of muscles in the man's body that made -him loath to add to whatever burden Kincaid already coped with. For Thian was as perceptive as Zara about the T-2.

So he made himself grin.

'You would understand, Flavia,' he said, lightly and briefly touching her shoulder, 'and so would dano, but at another time. Laria just caught me unawares.

They ate fish of all kinds as well as the fresh crustaceans and Laria put in an order for ten kilos of frozen shellfish to be sent on to Clarf.

bloomed.

`This is a pretty time of year, too, ' Laria said with a sigh.

She was now accustomed to Clarfs heat but the crisp air of Iota Aurigae IV and the softness of us primary's distant light were subtly soothing, relaxing. But then this was home and all that the term implied: familiar, safe, comforting, pleasant. Even Kincaid seemed easier in himself his attitude languid. Flavia, on the other hand, was eagerly absorbing all the views, glancing all around her, or peering down as they passed over some particularly lovely setting. Thian had a droll smile on his face as he watched the Altairian.

She is lovely, Laria said on a thin line.

No question of that, Thian replied easily and his smile broadened a trifle.

Grandfather?

I'd hate to surrender easily to his manipulations.

Is that fair on Flavia?

I don't know. She's pretty cool. I can't get past her public mind.

Have you tried?

Ethics are involved, Lar.

In love and war, all `s fair, isn't it?



As well as could be expected with someone as mentally fatigued as he is. But he's improving.

Laria had been skimming quite low and had set the sled's speed at almost a walking pace so that Flavia could enjoy the landscape. She was ascending a shrub-covered hill when all of a sudden a large flock of avians sprang up in front of the sled. In an effort to avoid unnecessary slaughter, Laria hauled the sled sideways but, in doing so, unbalanced her passengers so they slid to the portside. What with the sled's slow forward speed and the proximity of the hill, the imbalance tilted the sled out of control. The humans grabbed at the lighter `Dinis to keep them from tumbling overboard but they were, in turn, over-balanced and fell over the side. Laria caught Tip's arm, saw that Kincaid had fell, and had to leave Thian and Flavia to manage his `Dinis. They all `ported safely away as the sled ploughed its nose into the hillside.

Setting Tip down on its feet, Laria regarded the sled, its motor still running, with stunned surprise.

'I didn't think I was that out of practice, ' she said, shaking her head. 'After all, I do a great deal of sledding about on Clarf and Vanteer prefers me to drive him. ' The motor cut suddenly, with a loud discharge from its exhaust tubes which blew back a noxious smell.

Thian, followed by his `Dinis, walked over to the tilted sled, peering at the underside.

`How bad's the damage, Thi?' Laria asked, not quite sure of Kincaid's jest.

`You did a lot worse when you were learning to fly `thian Lyon, I never put a single Thian laughed and suddenly the sled backed out of the trench it had dug in the shrubs and soil and settled on as even a keel as the rough ground permitted. Flavia and Kincaid joined him so that Laria broke out of her outraged pose and sprinted the few metres to join them.

`Shouldn't've overbalanced like that, ' Thian said.

`No, this model isn't supposed to, is it?' Kincaid said

her mother generally kept them in, beside the tool

and opened the access panel.

`D'you think it'll restart?' Laria asked.

`Probably, ' Kincaid said, `but I think there's something wrong with the d lines or there wouldn't have been that backfire. ' `I'll check the intakes, ' Thian said and levered himself down for a good look at the hooded opening on the starboard side of the sled.

`What?' Laria asked, `and admit that we came a cropper?' `Any tools on board?' Kincaid asked, holding up a very greasy-looking object.

`I doubt it, ' Laria said. `This sled's only used for short hops.

The big sled has a full kit, of course. ' `No-one's using it today, are they?' Thian asked.

`I don't think so. ' Laria concentrated, `found' the mass of the big sled in its garage, `located' the tool kit, and `ported it to a spot by Kincaid's feet.

`Thanks, ' he said and, opening the metal locker, began to search for the tool he needed. `No rags?' he asked querulously.

`Here!' Laria dumped a pile, scavenged from the bin kit.

Flavia watched another moment and then, turning, leisurely began to venture from the scene of the crash to examine the clumps of little blooms.

`Any toxic plants I should be aware of?' she asked Laria.

`None, ' Laria replied absently, more interested in Kincaid, the mechanic, for he went about cleaning the component with a competent air.

Thian cleared all the intake openings.

`That's done, but I don't think that was the whole problem. Xexo

clear the line, ' Kincaid said.

`That's underneath, ' Laria said, pointing to the bottom of the sled.

`No problem!' The two men said it simultaneously, grinned at each other, and the sled slowly rose to a suitable height to allow them to work easily on its underside.

She could see Flavia off in the distance, picking wild flowers, occasionally holding a bloom up for inspection and smelling it for scent. Not many had any aroma but none that Laria could see in the immediate area were the stinkweeds which had a reek that could linger in nasal passages for days.

`I'll hold the sled up if that'll free you up to do the nitty-gritty, ' she offered, leaning comfortably against a boulder.

`Vanteer says that helps him no end.

`Oh, well, ' Thian said in reply to her offer, `if you want to feel part of the team She took over the `lift' and the men `removed' the bolts holding the panel, slipping it to one side where it hovered as a receptacle for the pieces they began to remove to get at the line.

`Can't you just "see" into it, Thian?' Laria asked.

`You've spent the last couple of weeks "looking" inside pipes and conduits, haven't you?' `Not quite the same thing, Laria, ' Thian said

Thian grimaced. 'I'd hate to interrupt him .

'Well, it's that or admit to Xexo we crashed, ' Laria said.

'What's wrong with that?' asked Flavia, returning.

Then she began to laugh. 'Xexo's a T-8. You could be in and out of his mind before he knew you were there. ' Laria and Thian exchanged thoughtful looks and then began to grin at each other. Thian chuckled and scratched his cheek with a dirty finger. 'Old habits suffice when you least expect them.

'You're not that old, Thian, ' Flavia remarked, thoroughly amused.

Holding the damaged hose by each end, Thian could be seen to concentrate on it briefly. Then a second length of similar but brand-new hose appeared.

Laria cheered, then said ruefully, 'I suppose it'll be my job to tell Xexo who messed up his inventory. ' 'Leave him a docket. That keeps everything in order. ' The sled was quickly repaired. Kincaid even straightened the ding in the prow. 'While we're about general repairs. ' They were all in good spirits on the way back, Laria giving Thian the drive since she wanted to name the blooms in Flavia's bouquet of wild flowers.

The first week passed very quickly in all kinds of leisure

Afterwards they told the dinner table that they might have made the service seem a bit too adventurous for some of the young people.

'Navy is actively recruiting,' Afra said. 'It's a good career if they don't fancy staying on here.'

Damia smiled fatuously at her mate, knowing the experiences with his own family which had generated such tolerance. What he did not ask

his sons was if they had decided which duty they would take on their return to work.

Flavia was included in an evening appearance when the exploration of the Hive ship was discussed with miners and engineers of both species, eager to have first-hand information on the matter. They also wanted to know if the great new long-cruise Nebula-class ship had been completed. Thian wasn't sure but said he suspected it would soon be launched. Its bulk had been noticeable in the working orbit it maintained about the Phobos Moon Base. No launch date had been mentioned and the disappointment of the men who had supplied the metals

to build it was palpable.

'Is it because this planet is so new,' Flavia asked Damia on the way back to the Lyon home, 'that everyone seems so so relaxed with

enjoyed!' 'I'm lucky I've had a chance to see it, ' Flavia said, her tone envious.

Damia laid a light finger on Flavia's arm. You would be welcome here any time. 'That is very kind of you. ' Flavia ducked her head so that her expression was obscured.

Don't! Afra said sternly to his wife.

Really, Afra! As if I'd ignore protocol with someone we barely know.

Someone I think you'd like to know better.

She could hear the teasing in his mental tone. Kincaid has shown more interest in her than Thian.

Kincaid is not interested in women, Damia. Or hadn't you caught that?

Damia managed not to gasp in surprise. She was rarely caught out.

And jaria She tried that the day he arrived but she likes him very much. That friendship already means a lot to him.

I must say the choice astonishes me. Surely Dad knew that about him Or' course he did, but Kincaid's worth salvaging and jaria's so stable that she'd do that and give him a breathing space.

Kincaid has more need of a real friend than a lover and she'd have the support personality she needs.

difficult enough assignment. He can relax at CThi", and heal - all the injured parts. Laria has her own soothing effect on people which is why Jeff tried such difficult ones as Stierlman and Clarissia at Clarf Tried? Damia shot a flash of anger at her father's manipulative ploys.

Afra laughed. I think your father understands and appreciates Laria far more than even we do.

That remark both annoyed and mollified Damia. So how long must Laria wait to fulfil herself. she asked with some traces of indignation.

I have a suspicion that Laria only needs to look a little closer to those she already knows.

Yoshuk?

Vanteer.

Really?

I'm guessing but you'll have noticed how often his name came up.

Damia thought about that on and off during the evening. She hadn't met the Clarf Tower engineer, although she would have preferred a higher Talent than 6 for Laria. But that hadn't, apparently, all that much to do with inheriting the genes that produced T-is in totally unexpected families. Like Flavia like the Rowan and Jeff Raven for that matter.



Rojer and Flavia, eased himself into the household and asked permission

to do some hunting if that was all right. Instantly he had Morag, Kaltia and Ewain begging their parents to be his guide. Permission was granted and the three younger Raven-Lyons swept their cousin to the stables.

Despite all the efforts of Damia, Laria and Afra to welcome and reassure Asia, she was stiff with uncertainty and so afraid to say or do something `wrong'.

She didn't even complain when half the household slithers decided to investigate her slender body where she sat, rigid on the stool on which she had seated herself eschewing a large number of more comfortable, empty chairs.

Petra regarded Asia for a moment and then briskly walked up to her and unwound all the slithers.

`Next time say that you don't like winding things crawling all over you, ' Petra said, rather disgusted that anyone would put up with such inconvenience. She ignored Asia's deep crimson blushing and, cocking her head, added: `D'you mind cats?' `Oh no, ' Asia hastily said.

`That's a relief What about darbul?' Asia gulped. `What are darbul?' she asked in such a low, meek voice that Petra gawked at her

complain properly. The first Talent I've ever met with that problem.

Petra's right. That one needs some major sorting out, Zara said to her mother, though her mental tone dripped with disgust for such abject self-effacement. Why on earth didn't she peel the slithers off their clinging was so abhorrent to her?

And why didn't we notice her distress before Petra did?

Damia responded, annoyed with herself that she had misinterpreted Asia's quietness for courtesy.

She's used to being ignored, isn't she? Zara said after a moment's thought.

Being the tenth of a big and noisy family that could produce Roddie would result in that posture, Damia said. And sighed. None of you allowed yourselves to be ignored for any length of time. Asia might be soothing company.

Zara gave her mother an odd glance to see if Damia was teasing, or serious.

A bit of both, dear.

She's pretty, too, Zara remarked, if you look at the bones of her, though that outfit is not the best style for someone with bones to show off. Well, that's follow the personality problem. However, she'd do a little something with herself You're right, she is pretty, though I

just take you along and do the introductions. You'll like Xexo, ' Rojer said as he hauled his reluctant victim beside him. `C'mon, now, Asia.

I don't want to hear a single moan of "oh, I can't do this" out of you, d'you hear me?' Stay out of this, Zara, Asia's mine! And, as he left the room with the girl, he shot a stern warning at his sister over Asia's head. And a second one at his mother. I know you two ladies too well! You keep away.

Berated from such an unusual source, Zara and Damia exchanged bemused glances and grinned as they `heard' Rojer telling Asia all about the puzzle and how many pieces he had part credit for fitting together when all the engineers on Alliance worlds were trying to reconstruct the Great Sphere.

`Of course, that was before we all snitched Refugee out from under the Hivers' noses. `Is our Rojer smitten?' Afra asked quietly of his womenfolk.

`I'm not quite sure . . . ` Damia replied.

`Well on the way to it, if you ask me, Zara said with a knowing sniff. `Deciding to protect someone who appears defenceless can lead to a meaningful relationship. Provided, of course, it doesn't lead to an unsuitable over-protectiveness that inhibits the less confident party.

Do as he says, Afra suggested, casting a mildly stern glance at wife and daughter.

Rhodri had changed into a very elegant leisure suit, remarking that it- was a relief to be out of uniform as he passed his host and hostess. He took Zara by the arm and insinuated them both neatly into the group comprised of Flavia, Laria, Thian, and Keylarion, the Tower expediter.

Later it was he who suggested they roll up the rugs and dance. If he danced more with Flavia than the Lyon girls, he also danced three times with Damia, two slow dances with Asia, one each with Morag and Kaltia and a boisterous polka with Petra, a dance which he insisted was well within the scope of the `Dinis and shortly had them cavorting as wildly as he and Petra.

And he's Asia's older brother? was Zara's enigmatic comment.

People come in all shapes and forms, Afra said, even mentally breathless from his exertions with Damia as his polka partner. Then he smiled broadly at Petra's prim curtsey when Rojer took her hand for a waltz, the next dance on the tape of assorted musics.

Was or was not Petra `porting half the time Rhodri was flinging her about? Damia asked, mopping her perspiring face with one hand while she worked a fan with the other.

Asia was not allowed to sit by herself. Either Rojer or Xexo, who had suddenly presented himself for the family evening - he was more often involved with ailing mechanical objects - sat or danced with her.

Apparently she didn't like the more exuberant dances and that preference was catered to. But, if she sat a dance out, Rojer, Xexo and one of the coonies - to keep the slithers away, so Petra had informed him - were with her.

Afra would have been delighted to dance with her for he, too, deplored her lack of self-esteem and confidence. He also had the thought that the rambunctiousness of his family might be too overpowering for her, being similar to what she contended with in her own home. He would have danced with her, as he had with Flavia,

Damia

and each of his daughters, but she reacted so negatively to his approach that he pretended to be winded and sat down beside her, emanating as much reassurance and kindness as he could without her awareness. But she was closed down too tightly even for his gentle persuasions.

The next morning, he and Damia attended to their Tower duties, though Keylarion moved carefully and admitted to aching muscles from

so

milk. Denebians were known to drink quantities of milk even in their mature years.

Clancy, Damia began on a tight line to the T-2, are you awake enough to talk about Asia?

Clancy gave his hostess a quick and not at all sleepy look before resuming that pose. There have been times when I've suspected that our

Asia puts on an act . .

That's no act, Clancy No, it's been borne in on me that it's for real. And how could I let such a thing happen to my sweetest cousin?

Clancy sighed, took another sip of coffee and smiled gratefully at Morag who presented him with a cooked breakfast of gargantuan proportions. It just happened. You know what Roddie `5 like - well, there were thirteen others in the house, too, and I suspect Aunt Alicia was relieved to have even one who was quiet and content to do things on

her own, and responsible enough not to need much supervision. Asia's always been responsible, and quiet, and self effidng. It's only after not seeing her for a while - and hearing how Roj has been going on about `negligence' and `deprivation' - that I realized that she was

killing me from all the dancing last night. ' His grin reassured Morag.

`Are you really my cousin?' she demanded, half of him and half of her parents.

`Second or third cousin, I believe, ' Clancy said, ploughing his way through the eggs, potatoes, beans, grilled tomatoes and flingi on his plate.

`And do you really have to report back to Blundell in just six more days?' Clancy, she's thirteen! Damia said on a tight line as she recognized the adolescent symptoms in her daughter.

Don't think I don't regret that, Damia. You've mothered a brood of heartbreakers, so you have, and it's not fair on poor mortals like us Denebian backwater boonies.

Backwater? Boonies? Then Damia burst out laughing, knowing that Clancy would handle Morag's crush gently, Don't ever let my father hear you say that!

It's your father I learned the words from, but I'd never have the gall to repeat them near your mother!

Roddie appeared next and it was his intention to swim off the exertions of the evening before and that seemed like such a good idea that the heated pool was crowded by the time the last Lyon arose.

`Thought you'd like to hear what else happened, ' Roddie said to

sends the scurriers out on all kinds of errands. Some of the new hatchings are the kind that would go down the conduits and pipe lines I understand connect the Refugee. And she's got a couple of big bruisers we couldn't quite figure out a need for. They're not true males so it isn't a mating she's after. She's also started planting . . . of all things - the seeds and pips she's saved from her food. Used her own dung to plant `em in. Got herself a trio to take care of the garden, too.

`What sort of things is she growing?' Flavia asked.

`Broad-leaf plants, ' said Roddie with a significant wink and nod.

`That's going to be one disappointed female, ' Thian said with a thin smile.

`Counting on hatched eggs isn't wise, ' Rojer said.

`No, no, you mean don't count on eggs until they're hatched, ' Thian said.

`Uhuh, ' Roddie put in, wagging an index finger.

`You've both got it wrong. It's putting all your eggs in one basket. ' `What are you talking about?' Laria asked, joining them.

Each one answered simultaneously. `Eggs!' `Chickens!'

`Expectations!' Rojer looked about him, concerned. `Where'd Asia get to?' When no-one knew, he went to the kitchen.



gestalt.

That fact gave Thian a certain glow of satisfaction probably about to be blasted by whatever his grandfather had in mind for him.

Thian Lyon, Rojer Lyon, Flavia Bastianmajani, Jeff Raven said, stating the official nature of the interview, I know I offered you choice in your next assignments but there have been some unusual developments. I heard that groan, Thian.

Yes, sir, so what's happened? They've cancelled the pursuit, and Thian felt a wave of almost prescient dread that that was what Jeff Raven would say and he knew that to discontinue the search right now could only have serious repercussions in future generations when the Hive imperative sent yet more Sphere ships forth from their colonial fastnesses, looking for more M-5 worlds to colonize.

The Washington The who? Thian thought he was familiar with the names of all the major Alliance ships. Rojer raised eyebrows and shoulders, puzzled, too.

The Washington is the Nebula class battle-wagon that the Alliance has built, mainly from Aungaeon metals, I might add, Jeff replied with a droll tone to his voice, and that's not yet to be public knowledge.

As I was saying, The Washington has been assigned as flagship, with an escort of six Galaxy class and four destroyers, all armed with

additional lightweight destroyer craft. The Genessee `5 got a new captain; there's a completely new complement on the AS KTTS, and Captain Brikowski of the Peking, plus whoever's sitting in the captain's chairs of the smaller craft.

Wow! Rojer said.

Sir, I'm ready to go to the Washington, ri they'll have me, Thian said with quiet reserve.

HAVE YOU, Thian lad? You're top of the list. Ashiant's been bumped up to command the Washington. Told that paper asshole of a base

commandant that Ashiant had asked particularly for you.

He did? Thian could not restrain his elation and had a foolish grin of utter delight on his face.

Captain Spktm also implied that it would not budge the KLTL out of orbit unless you're on the Washington as Prime.

Wow! Rojer repeated, amusement at his brother's reaction turning to respect.

I hope you can think of saying something more than `wow', Rojer, when I inform you that you are also to be part of the Prime team on the Washington.

Me, sir? After That's better. Yes, you, sir. Your conduct

with personnel. But the distances covered and the lengths of these current voyages as well as the need to maintain close contact require the services only Primes can offer the navy.

You will not be under naval authority and I have specified that a Prime on a navy ship has rank equal to the ship's captain.

We do? Rojer was delighted at that.

'Don't let it go to your head, Roj, ' Thian said aloud.

I won't, but it's nice to know.

They all heard a chuckle from Earth Prime. I didn't get as much argument as I thought I might. AND I expect you lot to be cognizant of the fact that you ARE to conduct yourselves at all times with the same probity and discretion a captain uses.

Yes, sir. Even Flavia's reply was suitably ingratiating.

I'm assigning the Pursuit Squadron two Primes because I am never going to leave my people open to the problems that you boys both faced.

Bearing on that problem and preventing any sort of a repetition, I want you to give me the names of support personnel, Talents by preference, whom you would like to have, either overtly or covertly on your staff There is always the possibility that you might have to mobilize additional support.

said she was `OK, and busy. Hoped he was, both. ' He was inordinately pleased that she had the initiative to extend her abilities. He'd have to tell her that, while he had kept his promise, she'd out manoeuvred him. He looked forward even more now to being on the same ship with her again.

I may send along some others who would have various duties but they will make themselves known to you. Thian, as the elder, you are nominally in charge but I believe that you two brothers work well together anyhow so I anticipate . . . and Jeff paused just briefly to emphasize his point no discord.

Now, Flavia, I would like you to undertake the Thadership of Talents in the Exploration Squadron. I know you have been in several Towers so you might know the specialists you `d like to have with you.

I'll do my best to reassign them to you for this mission - ri they're willing. Tower experience would be helpful, but Talents in biology, engineering and sociological fields would augment the specialists already slated to join that expedition.

I'd like Zara, Asia and You'd like Zara and Asia?

Thian and Rojer managed to suppress their glee that Flavia had totally surprised their grandsire.

Yes, Earth Prime. Zara has first-level therapy qualifications

Betelgeuse because she's got archaeological credits.

I didn't know that, and there was still a slightly bemused tone to Jeff Raven's voice.

That doesn't surprise me, considering her situation, and Flavia's tone was terse.

Your selections are excellent, well thought out, Flavia, and I don't think those appointments will cause much trouble. His mental tone held more than a tinge of amusement and satisfaction. The newly appointed captain of the Vadim which is Squadron B's flagship, is one Vestapia Soligen and, while her crew is as usual mixed, she requested

a

female Prime ri that was possible.

There are also two men of my acquaintance who would be most helpful, a T-3 and a T-6, Flavia said in a bland tone.

But her eyes sparkled at Thian and Rojer who were grinning broad encouragement at her.

Their names?

The T-3 is my brother, Mallen, and the T-6 is my cousin, Jesper Ornigo, who has `Dinis and is keenly interested in alien civilizations, though it has been more hobby than practice Understandably ù Both are Altairians, and currently in positions which could be filled by anyone

must be upheld no matter what the circumstances: your duties are strictly outlined in the FT&T Charter and you are definitely aboard as civilian specialists and non-combatants.

With the possible exception of launching the sort of surveillance probes Rojer used on Xh-33, you may give no more assistance than that

to any explorations or contact, no matter what the provocation, up to and including the saving of lives. Any 'projects' beyond the ordinary despatch of your duties must be discussed with me and I will answer the commanders involved.

You may not like it, but you will preserve your own skins first, although, as Thian was once instructed, you will do your best to rescue whichever other essential personnel are designated by the captains.

The navy is supposed to be able to fend for itself.

Flavia, all you Talents are to be escorted at all times while on a planetary suce. Special suiting has been developed for Talents that might reduce the stingg-pzzt of proximity to Hiver artefacts and I hope the material proves effective.

A final caution - the launch of the Washington has already taken place and she is well outside our system at this moment.

They were afraid of demonstrations, sir? Thian asked.

report for transport to your respective postings at 0800 Aungaeon time tomorrow. Enjoy your last day dirtside.

Before any of the three could even thank Jeff Raven, his contact was broken.

`That's just like him, too, Thian said with a grimace of chagrin.

`He plops exactly what you've dreamed of in your lap and bounces off before you can thank him.

`Maybe, ' Rojer suggested with unusual ambivalence, we won't thank him in the long run. That damned Operation Illuminate ought to have been a snap and it turned out to be a hang-over from the Spanish Inquisition.

`The what?' asked Flavia.

`I thought you knew all about saints, Flavia, ' Rojer replied, grinning. `And I want to thank you for wanting Zara and Asia along. I really didn't fancy them on a pursuit mission - - `I'll work their butts off;' Flavia said, being quite serious as she rose from her couch. Then she grinned.

`I thought it was worth a try, but I never believed Earth Prime would let me have them. And Mallen and Jes.

They're both in such stultifying jobs and I know they're capable of much more. And if that's nepotism, I really don't care!' She gave her

the steps three at a time, reached the ground level before she did.

Roger opened the door while Thian in his easy fashion. `Done your lesson? Let's all go waved Flavia through it with an exaggerated flourish of hand, arm and leg.

`Great Stars above!' Roger said, stopping so short that Flavia nearly bumped into him. `Whaddawe tell the parents?' `What's to tell?

Our leave of absence is over. Grandfather is having us report to Blundell Cube at 0800 tomorrow, ' Thian said in an airy tone and started down the outer Tower steps. `Hi, Asia, has Xexo let you get your hands oily yet?' `Yes, he did, ' the slender girl said with an air of startled delight on her face. `I greased and lubed one of the back-up turbines.

Xexo made me do it by myself. Though I had the manual open all the time!' `As you should when working with unfamiliar machinery, ' Roger said but grinned so proudly down at her that, for once, she didn't retreat into her usual shyness. `Which one? The 8-32-XR? Or the 184-QJ?' `The QJ, ' she said equably. `It's not that great a model but Xexo says it's given very good service with a minimum of trouble.

`That's all to the good when you don't have easy access to spare parts.

`You know very well that you'd have to make spare parts for the QJ, ' she said, tilting her head up to Roger with a grin for his forge



as departure preparations were undertaken, the newly gazetted trio managed to keep shields up and excitement down to an acceptable level.

There had been a bit of a flurry from Damia to know that Asia as well as Zara and Clancy were to report to Blundell. Rhodri was surprised but delighted to get orders from his superiors to report to the navy base for reassignment.

A last long ride at sunset brought what Afra jokingly called the 'Raven-Lyon cavalry' back with appetites capable of dealing with the masses of food that had been prepared. Even Petra was allowed a sip of

the sparkling wine that was served as a special accompaniment to the feast. The evening was so convivial that even Kincaid appeared totally relaxed and smiled more often. It was, of course, possible that Rojer filled Asia's glass more often than necessary but she, too, beamed happily about and laughed at every joke, even the ones she didn't quite understand which Rojer would then explain quietly in her ear.

During the week, her wish to relax the tight control she held over her mind had verified her T-4

status. Towards the end of the evening, though, as she realized this was the last night of such a marvellous holiday, she began to

Well, not obvious to her, at any rate, Flavia said with a ripple of laughter. Right now you're good for her - - And when she gets more confidence and finds' h&sell.

Rojer's tone held a cynical and sceptical note.

I know it's trite, but she'll only be a thought away. You certainly can reinforce your position. if the relationship is to grow, it will. And I personally think it will. She's already improved a hundred per cent since she came to Aungac.

As far as everyone was concerned, 0800 came earlier than usual to Iota Aurigae the next morning, but all the travellers were fed, packed and gathered at the personnel carriers minutes before the appointed time. And the generators were up to maximum.

Dad says he has something special in mind for you, Thian and Rojer, Damia said as her sons and Flavia made themselves comfortable

in

the carrier, the boys' `Dinis secure in their smaller slings.

He loves to have something special for us, Thian said with a resigned groan. if you're born into this family, you're likely to tour the galaxy.

You're only ever a thought away, Afra put in. Ready?

Steady! Go! Rojer couldn't resist saying, and heard his parents'

exploding on target but doing the massive hull no damage `because of its unusual construction and tough design which proved that it was advanced enough to go against even a Hive Sphere.

Adherents, trying to protect that launch, had been as numerous as the protesters and nearly as cunning in their attempts to protect the great state-of-the-art ship.

We managed quite a show for all when the Washington was duly christened by GkmtgInt and Admiral Mekturian, down to the firing of thrusters to disengage from the building gantries and then the inner rockets to begin its majestic voyage of pursuit.

Grandfather, I didn't know you were poetic!

I'm quoting, Thian, replied Jeff.

who staged the effects? Rojer wanted to know.

Everyone got in the act, Jeff said, slightly smug. Haven't had that much fun since your grandmother and I took on the Hiver scouts over Deneb more than a quarter of a century ago.

You'll like the Washington. Once you learn your way around her.

Your first task, however, is to get her the hell out to the poor destroyer the Maine who was left behind by C Squadron to keep on the Hiver's trail. D Squadron left her behind because the two Hiver ships split up. You'll have to bring the other ships of Squadron A in one at

`Permission to come aboard, Captain, ' Thian said, nudging Rojer sharply with his elbow, because he'd seen who was in the welcoming committee. Ashiant himself. Brother, are we getting the treatment!

`Permission to come aboard, Captain Ashiant, ' Rojer blurted out.

`Permission granted, Primes, and very glad to have you two aboard, ' Ashiant said, stepping forward as Thian and Rojer stood on the

deck. He then helped the `Dinis scramble out. `The rest of your team is reported on its way so we can get The Washington and there was great

satisfaction and pride in Ashiant's voice as he named his new command,

`out to where she's supposed to be most effective.

GREAT PLEASURE TO SERVE WITH YOU AGAIN, CAPTAIN SPKTM, ' both Rojer

and Thian said to the large `Dini to whom their friends were making proper obeisance.

THIS ONE ASKED FOR YOU, THN, RJR. WITH YOUR HELP WE WILL

OVERCOME, ' Captain Spktm replied, bending its poll eye in a complimentarily flattering fashion.

Ashiant welcomed him and Clancy's `Dinis made their courtesies to Spktn.

As Captain Ashiant nodded to ratings standing near by to handle the duffies of the new arrivals, he gestured for the Talents to follow him and Captain Spktn, Clancy bringing up the rear.

`You'll want to learn the intricacies of the Washington's many decks and facilities, Primes - ` and he gave Thian a long look.

`I was afraid you'd hold that against me for ever, Captain Ashiant, ' Thian said with a broad grin.

`Well, it made naval history, ' and Ashiant turned to Rojer. `Has your brother ever told you how much protocol he shattered the first hour he was aboard my old command?' `Sir, you should have heard what

Dad had to say about it, and he's not even navy, ' Rojer said mendaciously but with a broad smile.

`It's good to know you will not try to outdo him.

`Me, sir, no, sir. That's not what I do best. ' `And what do you do best, Prime Rojer?' `Classified, sir. ' Ashiant regarded Rojer with the same cynical look he had once levelled at Thian.

`I see that this trip is going to be instructive - - - for all of us, ' and there was warning in that mild remark.

Ashiant nodded and placed his palm on the pad as well. 'I appreciate the courtesy.

Then Thian pressed once again and the double doors slid apart.

With considerably more poise than they were inwardly feeling, the young men walked into a large lounge, the captains following.

'This is sinfully luxurious,' Thian said, glancing around at the appointments of the room. Doors, slightly ajar on either side of the lounge, showed sleeping accommodations but there were two doors in front of them that were not open, and one set cater-cornered on the left-hand side.

Now Ashiant strode across the lounge. 'This, - and he opened it with a palm pressed to the door's pad, 'is your Washington Tower, if you will, and this,' he opened the second room, 'a ready room, while that,' and now he pointed to the cater-cornered one, 'is the access corridor to the bridge. So you're right on top of everything.' 'This is all much more than we had any right to expect, Captain,' Thian said, making a bow of appreciation.

'Earth Prime's orders,' Ashiant replied with an expressionless face which altered to a smiling one. 'No more than you deserve for the services you supply an entire fleet. If you'll assemble the rest of

course. ' He pointed to the screen. 'When you've the chance, check the roster. I brought as many of my officers with me as I could. ' Captain Spktn followed Ashiant, murmuring that it would join its own ship when the Primes were free to `port it there.

`Rojer can oblige you right now, sir, as I imagine you'd prefer to be on the KLTL on her jump, ' Thian said, giving his first order in his new position.

`Sure can, Captain, if you will be good enough to return to the hangar and your carrier, ' Rojer said and strode to the Tower room.

Boy, have we landed in gravy, bra?

WHAT? And Thian `ported in beside Rojer, peering around the place.

Enough nonsense! said Earth Prime, his tone slightly peevish.

Rojer slid on to the couch beside him, which happened to have been made to his height so he settled comfortably in it. Clancy and Thian took two of the remaining six couches and settled themselves.

As soon as Rojer had `ported the Mrdini captain to its Constellation class ship, Thian took him into the merge, then Clancy, and announced the merge's readiness to proceed.

First came Jeff Raven, assuming the focus position while the Rowan slipped in right beside him. Sublimated in her mind Thian recognized

a long-drawn breath to where the tiny mote of the Maine patiently followed the strong ion traces of a Hive sphere's course.

Then one by one the other vessels - two Constellation class, four of the Galaxy and four destroyers - were `ported fluently to take their assigned positions in the fleet. Despite the restrictions of the merge, Thian activated the forward screens in their Tower room and saw,

no longer quite a mote, but decidedly small in comparison, the lean shape of the Maine. He wondered if her crew were aware of their mighty

neighbours but he was too integral to the merge to enquire.

Abruptly, most of the merge, having acquitted their part of this gargantuan transportation, disengaged. Only the Earth-Callisto element remained.

Thian, you can tell the Maine now, that merge said, that they are relieved of their duty. The merge was amused.

Captain's name is Bremerton.

Still elated by the contact with so many energies, Thian had no trouble making the contact. Bremerton's mind was wide open with the relief he was experiencing at the arrival of his replacements.

Eleven ships at once? was Bremerton's half-stunned, half-exultant



Despite a crisply neat shipsuit, the tired face of a relatively young captain was visible on the ùWashington's main comscreen, saluting smartly.

‘Clark Bremerton, Captain Ashiant, and my respects.

ùHis face developed a broad smile comprised of respect, awe and amazement. ‘I’m sending my log over for your records but I can’t say that anything unusual has happened, sir. No deviation is noted in the ion trail since the split-up three weeks ago and the Hiver we’re ùfollowing hasn’t altered speed.’ ‘Good work, Captain. I won’t keep you as I imagine both you, the crew and the Maine are looking forward to home.’ ù‘Indeed we are, sir,’ was the heartfelt response.

ù‘Your log’s been transferred. On your way, Maine.

Ashiant saluted smartly and it was being returned by an obviously grateful Bremerton when his image on the ùforward screen faded.

‘Your turn, Primes,’ Ashiant said into the chair com.

And about time, Thian heard the unmistakable voice of his grandmother Rowan, all this naval pomp and ùcircumstance is time-consuming.

Thian felt the pressure of the merge in his mind and the Maine disappeared. So did the constriction of the merge. Beside him, Rojer

`Far, far away from every star we know and recognize,' was Clancy's thoughtful comment.

All three were startled at a discreet rap on the door `Come in. ' Lieutenant Senior Grade Greevy reporting for duty, Primes, and I've taken the liberty of ordering peppers for you. Alison-Anne was appropriately solemn-faced as she advanced with the tray of tall drinks which she presented first to Thian, managing a sly wink before she served his brother and Clancy.

`Good thinking, Lieutenant, and congratulations, ' Thian said formally, then grinned. `Alison's taken courses in `Dini health-care, Rojer, Clancy .

`Yes, while waiting for you to perform your first duties, ' Gravy said, still very much in a dignified naval attitude, `I've had the chance to meet all your `Dinis.

So has Commander Kloo .

`Rome's here?' Rojer cried and, careful not to slop the drink from his glass, he made his way to the lounge where Semirame Kloo snapped

him a salute before her face broke into a proud and grateful grin.

`I can't thank you guys enough. Del Falco turned piss ant with a vengeance when you skived off' she said, `which made him difficult

again.

Still grinning, she pulled her tunic straight because she was wearing the same formal uniform that the medic was.

`Then you've already been on the Washington a week?' Thian asked.

When she nodded, still grinning, he asked who else Ashiant had brought of his Vadim officers.

`I haven't met even half my own watch yet, ' Rome said, `but I know for sure he brought his engineering officer, Yuri Tikele, Ailsah Vandermeer is first officer and Commander Fadh Ah Minas weapons, plus

quite a few of the Vadim's chief petty officers, too.

`Not his number one? Commander Germys?' Rome grinned. `He got booted up to captain on the Genessee.

`Commander Exeter's here in sick bay, ' Alison Greevy said, `and we've a Mrdini unit because this is a mixed crew and I'm liaison. ' She added that with a grin of pride.

I always said you were cleverer than you knew, Gravy, Thian said.

And you kept your promise.

Only because you added an element that made it absolutely possible.

With due ceremony, Rome then handed a disk to Thian. `I'm told

contact.

A code word for all Talents to open their minds to you has been set up throughout the Fleet. That's in the orders, too, and every one of us has been primed to respond, though Earth Prime told me that we don't know what the word is.

`On an open frequency, the code word, "Saki", will alert us to be on guard, for you and whoever else is named after that code.' `Now, ' and Alison took a step forward, `pepper notwithstanding, Mistery Prime, or is that Prime Mistery, or what?' `I'm not a Prime, Clancy said with a grin.

`In here, we're informal, but if you've got to use titles, Prime'll do, ' Thian said.

Alison cocked her head slightly. `I heard - scuttlebutt, mind you - that you got captain's rank. ' `I, ' Thian responded with a broad smirk, `was told that, humble civilian though all Talents are, T-is are considered as holding a rank similar to that of a ship's captain. ' `But that doesn't mean we're captains, ' Rojer said, finishing the explanation.

`So a T-2 like me would be equal to a lieutenant commander?' Clancy asked.

Thian shrugged. `Why not?' `You did well - Clarence, ' Semirame

`We're fine, ' Rojer said negligently.

`That's because you've never been to a captain's captains' dinner, coz, ' said Clancy and glanced around at the half-open doors. `Which is mine?' Rome shrugged. `Whichever - since you're informal here. ' `Haven't you - - -` and Clancy stopped, gesturing vaguely at the room doors.

She shook her head. `I'm quartered near by but Alison's down in sick-bay. Now, you guys sack out!

C'mon or they'll never stop talking. ' Gravy managed one more sly wink at Thian as the door slid shut behind her.

`Eeney, meeneey, miney mo!' and Rojer's finger ended up pointing at the middle door on the portside of the lounge.

Thian grabbed his duffle and made for the top room on the other side as Clancy made for the nearest starboard one.

Thian noted with approval that this was a proper bedroom, though there were storage units under the double bed, and wardrobes, as well as private shower and toilet. He didn't feel fatigued at all until he had dutifully lain down. Almost as if there'd been a subliminal command, he fell instantly and deeply asleep.

The captain's captains' dinner was every bit as formal as Thian, Rojer and Clancy dreaded. Captain Ashiant made good use of their

Roger was across from his brother with the `Dini Galaxy class Commander Ktpl of the KLTS on one side and AS LSTS's first officer, Tipi, on the other. All four -`Dinis were quite conversable so there was no problem for the brothers. They both `pathed messages of encouragement to Clancy who was seated at the bottom of the table between the `Dini destroyer captain and a Galaxy class number one.

But

Clancy was also seated across from one of the three women, a very attractive commander. The captain of the destroyer Athene was seated beyond Roger and the third woman, another first officer, was beyond Thian by two places. Clancy quipped back that he was better off than they.

The food was good and each species treated to specialities designed to satisfy different palates. The wines were excellent and Spktm obviously relished the yellow beverage it was served, though the first officer, Tipi, drank only water.

The dinner went on and on, with numerous courses, and much conversational time between each. Then Thian began to appreciate the ulterior motive of such a lengthy and seemingly formal affair. By the end of it, every one of the top ranking officers had had a chance to assess each other, and the Primes, either by direct conversation or by

lull to inspect the new facilities aboard the Washington personally. I know that the two Constellation class ships have had the new weapons systems installed and so has the Solidarity but we must all be aware of how these missiles can be effectively used. if we need to employ them. ' WHY HAVE THEM IF NOT TO USE THEM?' Ktpl asked bluntly.

Ashiant levelled a glance at Ktpl. `OUR ORDERS ARE WRITTEN SO THERE IS ONLY ONE MEANING, CAPTAIN KTPL. ' He glanced around to be sure

that all the humans had understood his `Dini reply. While Thian noted that Ashiant's command of the `Dini language had improved in accent and

fluency, he wasn't surprised when the captain continued in slow and well enunciated Basic. `The Alliance High Council has spoken in these orders and guides us all in the performance of the objectives of this mission. We have the greatest fleet ever to set out across this galaxy. We will accomplish its aim: to be sure the remaining Hive spheres do not destroy life-forms, do not begin two new colonies. When that is done, as you all know, this fleet is to separate and investigate other G-type star systems with M-5 planets that have been by-passed. And establish their condition. Five years have been allotted to these tasks. Let us drink to success, captains, Primes and

me

to your quarters for breakfast tomorrow morning, Thian? Raven said you'd know me well enough to find me wherever I am on a ship, even

the

size of this one. ' Thian bent his head, appearing to smooth down his hair as he murmured his reply. 'I can if you really require such security, sir. ' This once, I do. ' Ashiant immediately drifted away, raising his voice to address Captain Cheseman of the Solidarity.

Thian was still puzzling over that request when Clancy wandered up to him to say that they could politely leave any time now that two of the captains had bid Ashiant a polite farewell.

Thian 'told' Clancy about Ashiant's request. 'Why should a captain, a fleet admiral, have to resort to such tactics, Clancy?'

Thian asked, uneasy about subwrfiige.

'Doubtless he'll tell us tomorrow morning at breakfast, ' Clancy said, not at all perturbed. 'And that's going to come soon enough, ' he added, glancing at the digital which flashed 0235 at them. 'At 0645.

'I'll just secure this door, ' Rojer said, waving his hand across the inner door pad. 'I never knew a dinner could last this long and everyone - well, nearly everyone still be stone cold sober. ' Having set his internal alarm, Thian was awake at precisely 0630, showered and



Clancy dismissed that accusation with a wave of his hand. `Thian, time!' Clancy said as the digital went from 0644 to 0645.

Thian easily located Captain Ashiant, whose quarters were on the same deck and not far away, but the man had had no warning to set down

the cup he'd been drinking from when Thian transported him. He glanced

quickly to be sure the liquid hadn't spilled from the cup and seemed mildly astonished that it showed no ripple of its recent transplantation.

`Damned smooth, Thian lad, damned smooth, ' he said and then gestured for Clancy to stand down from attention. `In these quarters, Sparrow, Talents don't stand on ceremony.

`Thank you, sir, ' Clancy said with one of his irrepressible grins, `have some more breakfast, Captain?' Simultaneously, a chair was pulled

back from the table and covers whisked off the hot food they had concealed.

`Humph, ' Ashiant remarked with a wry smile for each of the young men, `breakfast in here could get to be a pleasant habit. ' `Any time, sir, ' Thian and Rojer chorused.

`You don't like it, lad, and Ashiant included Rojer and Clancy in his quick glance round the table, `and I don't like to have to ask you to do it, but you know the trouble we had with the Washington launch.

If it hadn't been a hologram, some of those missiles would have inflicted sufficient damage to keep her from being launched. ' Thian hadn't known that but Clancy nodded complete understanding.

`There are dissidents aboard then?' Thian asked, beginning to appreciate the need for Talented surveillance.

Ashiant gave him a sardonic grin. `We know who most of them are.

It's the ones we didn't or couldn't identi - the sleepers - and we have to assume that there are some. You wouldn't have had any reason

to know that the subversive elements have tried to sabotage the Washington from the moment her keel plate was laid - as much as you can

lay anything in space. She was built in sections, you know, as if she were four smaller ships of a revolutionary new design. ' Ashiant grinned.

`By the time we had those sections connected, we could then mount the sort of security so that her outfitting could be completed without too much risk of implanted remotes.

`Dini ships, that would help, too.

`You're expecting trouble from our Allies?' Thian asked, since the `Dinis were the last ones he'd expect to sabotage the expedition.

Ashiant nodded once, not looking at Rojer. `We don't want a repetition of the Xh-33 either, Prime. ' `No, sir, Captain Ashiant, ' Rojer said with more vehemence than he intended, `we don't!' `I don't expect any problems immediately. This is likely to be a long, long journey. That's why I felt that now was the most appropriate time for me to make you aware of this aspect of your duties. Even in this, you are non-combatants and, as your boss'll tell you, it is compatible, in this instance, with Talent ethics. I'll have more of that toast, if you please, Sparrow. ' As he buttered it, he added, `The more often you're seen beginning today - in all parts of the Washington, and on the other ships, either singly or as a group, the sooner that sort of habit will become so established no-one will find it odd. Rojer, you'll find immense puzzles on one ùor another cargo deck on the six human ships. We're having intership contests of all sorts, including VR endurance rides, ' and he grinned briefly at their surprise.

`The other excuse Jeff Raven concocted was that every ùcrewman or woman has the right to send a private message home. ' When Rojer rolled

rescue in the unlikely event of an emergency?' 'Me, ' Ashiapt said with an amused snort. 'Contrary to naval history, the captains of every vessel, especially and including the 'Dinis, plus as many first officers as possible, any Talents 5 and above, your 'Dinis, Commander Tikele and Commander Yngocelen 'Where's he?' Rojer interrupted, remembering Yngie with affection.

'On the Genessee and he'll be delighted to see you, Lyon. So, as one of your first duties, figure out which each of you'll be responsible for. As you know, the Washington carries six scouts 'But there're only three of us, ' Rojer said in some consternation.

'There are also three other T-2s whom you've yet to meet, Primes, so count them in your calculations.

Scouts can accommodate fifteen easily, twenty cramped.

Most of the Washington pods are built for fifty persons each: for one hundred on the family decks. Constellation pods thirty 'We'll take care of the disposition, sir, ' Thian said, noting the time on the digital.

'We'll have the usual drills, ' Ashiant said, rising then.

'You can practise then. ' He nodded to Thian.

'Sir?' and Rojer solemnly handed him the cup he had come with.

'Good lad!' Cup in hand, a friendly and amused grin on his face,

`I thought I was keyed in to that pad.

`Rojer, I told you we didn't need to enable an inner lock on the Washington, ' Thian said with a hint of pique in his voice.

`Sorry about that, Rome. Coffee?' the culprit asked, holding up the thermal pot.

Thus began the first of many long days on the way to their distant and unknown goals.

Flavia, with her team - Asia, Zara, Mallen and Jes arrived at Clarf Tower for a conference with Kincaid.

Flavia had checked with Laria whether or not Kincaid (1) would object or (2) could expand on his initial report.

He certainly doesn't object, Flavia, was Laria's reply, and I don't know whether he doesn't want to expand on the reports or it's the time when he wrote those reports that bothers him.

We don't have to No, and Laria's negative came out as a slow mental drawl, I think it might do him the world of good to have to speak of those days. He's much easier in himself now, you know.

That's good to hear. He's a very likeable person.

I know. Laria's brief comment had echoes that set Flavia wondering about Laria's feelings about Kincaid.

I caught that, Flavia Bastianmajani, and I'm his friend. I really

extend to her oldest sister and that, in Flavia's mind, would be totally improper. Flavia's opinion of Laria was quite high and, whatever her relationship was with Kincaid, it was a very private matter. As all such matters should be.

\* \* \* `This is cool?' Flavia asked Lionasha, her forehead beaded with sweat from the short walk up to Clarf Tower in the crepuscular dawn light. Behind her, Zara, Asia, Jes and Mallen were also finding the closeness of the sultry air uncomfortable.

`Yes, rather, ' Lionasha said with the cheerfulness of someone thoroughly accustomed to the vagaries of the local climate. `When are you joining your expedition?' `More or less as soon as we've had a chance to confirm details with Kincaid. ' Lionasha nodded. `He really enjoyed himself at Aurigae, ' the tawny woman said.

`We all had a great time, ' Zara said, ending in a sigh.

`It'll be months, years maybe, before we'll get back. ' `Homesick already?' Mallen Bastianmajani asked in a teasing `elder brother' tone.

`I've never been homesick in my life, ' Zara replied smartly, `but I miss the things I can do there that you don't have anywhere else in the Alliance. ' `That's part of homesickness, ' Mallen said, shooting a glance at his older sister to see if he was laying it on a bit thick.

He enjoyed teasing Zara Raven-Lyon: she gave back as good as she

renewing the acquaintances established on Aurigae while Flavia introduced Mallen and Jesper.

`This way, ' Laria said, taking charge and, with a nod for Lionasha to assume the Tower watch, led her guests into the living quarters.

Refreshments awaited them there and the `Dinis served them cooling drinks and finger foods before they settled into the comfortable chairs and couches.

`I don't know if you're aware that this scientifically based expedition does not have full support of the Council, ' Flavia said.

`That may be luckier than you know, Laria replied.

`There is great curiosity here on Clarf, especially if some of the planets can be cleared for our colonization. ' She grinned. `Any disruptive problems?' `Not for us, ' Zara said crisply and wrinkling her nose with disgust. `But some crew members got mauled when the list of

ships in Squadron B was posted' Asia sort of squinched herself down in the couch corner she had chosen and stopped eating her snack.

`So we began our duties, ' Flavia said with a rueful grin, `by `porting sailors out of brawls and safely aboard. ' `Their families had to be sent to protected enclaves, Asia added.

As that was the first information Asia had ever volunteered in her

resentment which was then turned on perfectly innocent targets: the nearest being crews of the second squadron. The dissenters got bilked out of blowing up the Washington, ' Mallen said with a grimace for such folly.

`And even that was only a hologram, ' Zara added.

`Biggest one ever attempted. ' `So's the Washington. Ship, that is, ' said Mallen who'd been impressed by the cover operation as well as the immensity of the newest Fleet addition.

`So, what can I do to help your. . . ah. . . scientific venture?'

Kincaid said with a wry smile, looking from one expedition member to the next, his glance sliding quickly away from the shy Asia. `I'd've thought the probe files would be sufficient. ' `They show what you saw, Kincaid, ' Flavia said slowly. `But everything we see we interpret from our own experience. As you're telepathic, did you have further reactions that wouldn't have been taped?' Kincaid regarded her for a moment with a very blank expression, but then tension left his long frame and he smiled ruefully.

`There isn't any empathy possible between humans and the Hivers, and little between humans and `Dinis, no matter how close we are to our `Dini friends. ' His Nil and Plus were busy talking to the visiting `Dinis, their low voices an almost melodic descant to the human



quite as extensive as I understand it was on Xh-33, and I think I was surprised that there wasn't more. He paused and regarded Flavia. 'Is this what you mean?' 'Yes, yes, exactly.' 'Why?' 'I don't know,' she answered honestly. 'It just seems sensible to gather as much information as possible from available sources.'

'You're it,' Zara said, grinning.

'I wasn't the only Talent in the merge that searched,' Kincaid said in a voice gone suddenly harsh.

'But you're down as the only T-2 and the merge focus' Zara began. 'Surely I can only give you my impressions,' Kincaid interrupted her.

Leave it, Zara, Laria said on a tight line to her sister as she spoke aloud. 'Even those would give some insights . . . For instance, you've never mentioned any any detritus in the buildings you scanned.' 'Detritus?' Kincaid gave a snort. 'You mean bodies?'

Not on Marengo. Too old. 'That's another fact I needed to know,' Flavia said, grinning with relief 'So many people assume - and that's a major problem with the dissenters who are sure our interference" is going to make them the next victims - that ALL Hive colonies have been successful, ipso facto.' 'We have to find out why those that failed, failed,' Zara said. 'And why Hive Central didn't know? Or didn't

from Marengo. Had the Marengo group merely switched to the Waterloo planet? 'We don't have all that much substantiating detail,' Mallen said, 'but the Dini do maintain that the Hivers haven't changed their modus operandi in centuries.'

Comparing the installations on Xh-33 with those on Marengo and Waterloo show that they use the same general structures and agricultural schemes - at least on those three planets. 'And on the other two I probed,' Kincaid said, relaxed enough now to lean forward, elbows on his knees, hands clasped together. 'They pick sites well inland, as if they don't like, or maybe are even afraid of large bodies of water.'

'They irrigate fields à Zara put in.'

'I want to see what sort of hydra pumping units they have' Asia put in. 'Did you see any?' Kincaid smiled at her. 'Asia, I wouldn't know a pump unless it had a big sign written all over it - Pump!

But where agricultural activity had been started, there were irrigation ditches which I can recognize. On the ecologically poor planet, the third one, Talavera, these were just straight gutters of some material, full of leaves or dirt and sand. Very sad to see.

Very desolate. 'But nothing to show why the planet was

`That's the plan, ' Flavia said.

He leaned forward more urgently. `But that system's very close to the one the Hivers are active on. ' `Don't worry, Kincaid, ' Flavia replied with a confident smile, sending him a mental reassurance as well.

With an impatient gesture, he waved that off `That planet's dangerous. They've a ship. And you'd be in range of their scouts.

`Squadron B's armed with the new missiles, Kincaid, ' Mallen said, though he did not dismiss Kincaid's obvious alarm. `And the comple-  
ment

includes one of the fast `Dini destroyers.

`What bothered you so about that planet, Kincaid?' Laria asked in a conversational tone.

He glanced over at her, took a long breath and expelled it.

Flavia was empathic enough to pick up his rising anxiety, and to know that Laria was deftly calming him and carefully shielding his reaction. A quick touch at Zara and Flavia realized that the highly empathic young therapist had been diverted. Zara would mean no harm,

but Kincaid had not completely recovered from whatever had depleted both mental and physical resources.

almost accusingly, at Laria when she began to laugh.

‘No-one would have known to tell you, dear friend, Laria said, briefly laying her hand on his shoulder, ‘but all Talents get a curious reaction from proximity to Hivers and especially Hive metals and artefacts. We named it "stingg-pzzt" because that’s the way it echoes in our heads. It leaves a nasty, an unmistakably metallic taste in the back of the throat and tends to make Talents very irritable!’ To everyone’s surprise, Laria then tousled his hair, laughing with relief ‘Going through all those Hive buildings and ending up on an active Hive world, you had a massive overdose of it. ‘Stingg-pzzt?’ Apparently oblivious to the hairmussing, Kincaid repeated the term in a witless fashion, obviously trying to relate it to his experiences. ‘The taste I had ruined anything I ate, which was bad enough to start with . . .

and I was certainly - irritable - - -’ ‘And a good bit beyond mere "irritable", I’d say,’ Laria remarked. ‘What a stupid I’ve been not to have seen what’s been bothering you. You must have thought you were going mad with the reactions.’ ‘Yes,’ and both Kincaid’s expression

and

his tone echoed his amazement, ‘yes, I did think I was going insane.’ He looked at the other Talents. ‘And you’ve all experienced the same reactions?’ ‘Not me,’ said Jes and Mallen shook his head, but both Zara

been supplied with some protective clothing that's supposed to reduce the stinging-pzzt effect on Talents. We'll tell you how well it works. ' 'I could just kick myself, ' Laria was saying, wallowing in remorse about such an oversight on her part. 'Small wonder you had such a miserable time of it, Kincaid. ' Don't overdo it, sis, Zara said on a thin line to her older sister. But it's sure taking the angst out of him. A deep one is your Kincaid.

He's not my Kincaid, Zara, and never likely to be.

More's the pity, sis. He's got a real nice aura. But Vanteer, for all he's a rover, is more your style.

Vanteer? Zara Raven-Lyon, you stop therapizing me, right this instant! D'you understand me?

Before Zara realized how angry she had made her sister, she found herself out in the dawn heat by the multiple carrier.

I can take a hint, she said apologetically. Laria? I'm sorry.

Really I am. And I'm going to be gone for ages.

&ad, was the unequivocal reply. Oh, all right. Iforgive you but don't try that sort of stunt around me again.

Understand?

Yes.

You don't do meekness well. The others are coming.

Then the capsule was ported to join the Second Expeditionary Force and Squadron B which hurtled on its way to Talavera, third planet of the Tau Ceti VI system.

When the generators wound down from thrusting the large carrier to the point where David of Betelgeuse and his son, Perry, could port it the rest of the way, Kincaid sat up and slid his feet to the floor.

Keenly aware that Zara's revelation about the stingg-pzzt had been a breakthrough point for her Tower partner, Laria pushed herself upright and faced him.

'There should have been some sort of announcement about such a reaction to Hiver stuff, shouldn't there, Laria?' he asked in a reasonable tone of voice.

Behind that, Laria could almost hear his mind shouting with relief a boiling anger that he hadn't been briefed on that one very important detail and a roiling of other ancillary regrets and recriminations he might never vocalize.

'The stingg-pzzt Mild words to describe the effect the damned stuff has on the unsuspecting! His mental tone was savage.

Shut up and listen, 'Kincaid, ' and Laria ended up speaking aloud in the tone of a teacher whose pupil continually interrupts. Kincaid gritted his teeth and glared at her. ' has been until very recently

was

diverted to follow one of the outbound spheres. It wasn't anticipated that you would be asked to probe Hiver-occupied planets and the Fleet still doesn't half-believe stingg-pzzt is valid. Then there was so much going on what with the Great Sphere being found, then the queen pod - when, it is true . . . ` She held up her hand when he had a cogent interruption to make. ` more people became aware of this reaction but not anyone directly in touch with Squadron C. Granted?' He nodded, his anger slowly subsiding, but not, Laria noticed, some of his other conflised and roiling emotions. `Then the Xh-33

happened and the focus was off Squadron C until Earth Prime reassigned you here.

`When you arrived, you were in no condition for any debriefing, so it never occurred to me you didn't know, hadn't taken into consideration, the good al' stingg-pzzt that gives every Talent the willies. ' `I thought I was going crazy as well as everything else, ' he said, holding their eye contact.

`I'm not just your Tower chirr, Kincaid. I'm your friend. So are Lionasha and Vanteer because we're already a team. Much more so than

we were with those two misfits my grandfather thought I'd be able to

ous

with his matchmaking. ' Kincaid sat straight up in protest. 'He knows I'm homo?' Laria laughed. 'Sure he does. We all do, but he wanted Flavia paired with Thian and I could have told him she was far more interested in Jesper Ornigo.

Wry humour caught the edges of Kincaid's thin lips.

'I figured she already had calculated on someone other than Thian. ' 'Flavia's calculating?' Kincaid grinned at her surprise. 'In a nice quiet way, Flavia Bastianmajani knows exactly what she wants and she'll find the best way to achieve it. But you'd want that in a 'I need it in my T-2, Kincaid dano. Do I have it?

Will you give me the friendly support I need to do my job on this stinking hot planet amid aliens I mostly admire and sometimes fear, because sometimes their alienness overwhelms the human in me? Will

you

grab me and shake me out of doing something stupid? Will you be my good friend?' Kincaid rose to his feet, held out his hands to her and lifted her to her feet. As he looked down at her, Laria saw flickering emotions, incredulity, surprise, gratitude and something less definable but which made her feel grateful and quite humble.

'I can be your friend, Laria, ' he said, oddly sad, 'and I could



She tightened one arm about his shoulders and, with the other, pressed his head into her cheek. She doubted even Elizara, for all her skill, could completely heal Kincaid's wounded and tormented psyche.

But she was here and he was wide open so she could try! And did.

They released each other by degrees for the rapport had been a complete sharing.

`Vanteer may be a rover, Laria, and love many women fervently, but not for ever. But he would come back to you time and again because you

would never hold him. Now, if humans could do a `Dini split and produce a male you, it would be the best of all conclusions, ' Kincaid went on, finally slipping his fingers out of hers, `but we haven't even figured out how to clone so I will continue to admire, respect, and love you as my very good friend.

The generators began to spin, recalling them to the day's duties.

`Damned stingg-pzzt!' Kincaid muttered as he stretched out again on the couch.

`It really is the most appalling nuisance, ' Laria idly agreed, aware of the new tranquillity in her partner and much relieved to know that he was finding balance.

One Constellation, two Galaxy and two speedy destroyers now

mony.

The Columbia's captain was not what Flavia had half-expected, considering her request for female Primes. Flavia told herself to find out why at some convenient moment. Now she found herself instantly liking the woman: Soligen's face was unlined and pleasant though certainly not a pretty one. She had wide-spaced light eyes which seemed to alter between blue or green, under sharply arched dark brows.

Her figure in the ubiquitous shipsuit was trim and athletic without losing essential femininity. Flavia recognized behind the 'pleasant' expression a strong personality and a shrewd mind. She grinned, without showing her teeth, as she acknowledged the introductions to Asia and Zara, Rhodri Eagles, Mallen Bastianmajani and

Jesper Ornigo.

'Glad to have you aboard, ladies, gentlemen, Lieutenant. Let me introduce my science officer, Mr Wayla Gegarian: she's also my official 'Dini interpreter. I've never been able to advance from garble to greeting - 'Captain, ' Zara said instantly, her hands on the sloping shoulders of Pal and Dis, 'my 'Dinis are topnotch tutors. There's nothing they like better than a real challenge to their abilities. ' 'We

But I'm determined to try. There's' Flavia caught her about to say something else and veto it.

There's plenty of time, despite the almighty push we got out this far, for me to learn a few phrases and understand more. ' Then the tall lean man who had been rocking limpatiently from side to side shoved a hand at Flavia, which she gracefully ignored by dropping her carisak which he graciously retrieved from the deck and handed to a yeoman, obviously on hand to manage impedimenta.

`I'm Dr Tru Blairik, team biologist. This is my assistant who's the team archivist as well, Mialla Evshenk. ' I keep telling Tru that Talents don't make casual physical contacts, Mialla said as she smiled and bowed slightly from the waist to acknowledge the introduction.

`There are more of us, but you'll have plenty of time to get to know which is who. We're delighted to have Talents to help. `Not that I'm likely to be much but I thought I'd see :f you can hear me. I'm not strong.

Strong enough, and greetings, Mialla, Flavia responded.

`Nice to meet you, Evshenk.

`There'll be drinks in my quarters this evening at 1930, Primes, gentlemen, ' the captain was announcing.

`Wayla'll take you to your quarters. ' `We could . - . ` Blairik

suggestion.

Leave it, Zara, Flavia said. `In any case, locators should be available for use on any planetary excursions.

`Indeed they will, considering the number of experts and guards needed to do any significant exploration, ' Captain Soligen said briskly, `the distances to be covered and the fact that your Talents, ' and she smiled to show she was making a play on the word, `cannot be spread too thin. ' There was a brief silence, while Zara coped with the embarrassment of her gaffe, which Asia broke.

`I'm a qualified engineer, ' she said in such a timorous voice that Dr Blairik regarded her with surprise, `and, if it wouldn't upset anything, I might be able to help with the fabrication. ' `Your help would be very welcome, Prime .

`I'm not Prime, only a 4, ' Asia corrected Wayla Gegarian in her apologetic way.

`Four, three, five or six, the chief will welcome a qualified engineer, ' Gegarian replied heartily.

`So I'll leave you in Mr Gegarian's capable hands then, ' the captain said and departed in a brisk fashion.

`Sakers, Perley, ' Wayla said, gesturing towards the luggage which was quickly gathered up even as Wayla led the party from the hangar

indignation that came out as a blast from the science officer. The emotions were quickly controlled before Wayla Gegarian answered calmly

enough.

`Whole thing was stupid and badly handled - by the shore police, too. Good thing we have marines. We'd only minor injuries and the families who had come to see us off got the worst of it. Despicable, useless sort of violence. Didn't change our leaving, though I devoutly hope they'll be gladder to see us return! Here we are.

Just down this corridor. ' The odours of fresh paint and the dyes of new carpeting were unmistakable.

`Is blue the captain's favorite colour?' Zara asked, her ebullience returned.

`Actually, green, Wayla said with a grin, `but blue's traditional for officer territory. Here we are, ' and she had all of them register their handprints on the door pad.

`We haven't taken someone else's place, have we?' asked Asia uneasily.

`Not at all, ' Wayla said so promptly that Asia's uncertainty was set to rest. `Like I said, the ship was refitted, with this expedition in mind, so shielded quarters were arranged. Maybe not as roomy as

`I think everything in here is self-explanatory but you do have a meal dispenser behind this panel, ' Wayla said, indicating the opaque dark brown panel. `Just settle in and use the door call panel if you need any assistance. ' She glanced at Rhodri who grinned back.

`What they don't know, I'll teach `em, ' he said and her smile lingered on him as she took one final backward look as the door panel closed behind her.

`Made a conquest already, have you, Rhodri?' Rhodri shrugged and winked at Jes and Mallen. `Hell, we've just got aboard, coz. And there're two other human ships we haven't even cased. If no-one minds,

I'll take this one, ' he said and, grabbing his duffle from those the yeomen had stacked inside, mumbled a cheerful tune as he settled in.

Flavia realized quickly enough that her sojourn on the Genessee had been no prelude to this voyage. Not only did the Talents have message and courier services to perform, they had to sit in on long briefings and lectures with the expedition teams, satisfied' the marine commander, Kwan Keiser-Tau, that they were physically fit and were knowledgeable about handweapons. He'd been a trifle put out when all six Talents showed arms proficiency in the Master class.

`You guys using Talent?' he said, jutting out his head and jaw in

girl on several occasions.

‘And I come from Deneb,’ Asia said, enough aware of the discreet support to take advantage of it from time to time.

‘Let me reassure you, Major, you need not concern yourselves with our safety,’ Mallen continued with a slightly conciliatory smile. ‘The dedicated scientists aboard, however, are seldom aware of externals and

can be quite focused on their enthusiams. Feel free to call on our support to maintain their safety whenever necessary ‘My orders are to guard the lot of you, 1 and Major Keiser-Tau did not much relish these orders.

‘Well, then, now that you’ve checked us out,’ Zara said, ‘work the others and let us get on Watch your manners, Zara, Flavia said.

with our duties,’ she finished with no perceptible pause. ‘I must meet with my ‘Dinis who are tutoring Captain Soligen,’ she added and, making a careful show of snapping the safety on the weapon she was holding, stowed it in the correct rack. Frankly, I think she’s language deaf When Squadron B was close enough to the beacon left by

Squadron C, Flavia suggested to the captain that they could speed the voyage up by several weeks if they tried a merge.

moment. 'Why put Zara on the KVS?

Wouldn't she be needed on one of the larger vessels?' 'I think it is wiser to place Zara and her 'Dinis on a ship that is so ready and eager - to meet opposition,' Flavia said. 'Zara could stop Kimi's ship cold. Asia's told her how.

Soligen chuckled. 'So Kimi's . . . attitude hadn't escaped you?' 'Captain Kimi's attitude was noted by Lieutenant Eagles on his first meeting. He's reasonably sure that the moment the system is in range, the KVS will detour.

He thinks it's had private orders to that effect. There hasn't been a real Mrdini strike against a live Hiver in far too long to promote any colour to prominence. 'Run that last statement past me again, Flavia?' 'You will have noted that 'Dini hides are many different shades. The colour denotes a clan relationship.

All 'Dinis in a colour, therefore, gain prestige if one of their colour achieves merit. 'In this instance, blowing up a Hiver sphere even if they go with it?' 'That's about it. 'I guess we should be glad that the ethnic groups in human history that considered suicide for whatever cause they espoused an honourable end have now been thoroughly

integrated,' the captain said in a tart voice, 'or isolated on worlds



crew, rating and officer, is younger than on most ships of this class?'

'I had.' As much because Asia was suddenly developing poise and the self-confidence that comes from being popular with her peers.

'No matter how we conduct this Hiver campaign, Prime, we're going to have to learn new techniques and some will prove fatal. Maybe not as suicidal as what the KVS might have in mind, but certainly more daring than the usual tactics.

'Maybe the Columbia's in the wrong squadron if that's your thinking, ma'am.' The captain's eyes were ice-green as she gave the Talent a long look.

'Where do you - personally - stand on that ground?' 'I come from a planet that is barely settled. I'm used to hunting to feed my family.

There are times when aggression is required, but certainly not courted.

However, I would feel privileged to serve with you on one that might test my theories, too.

'Theories?' The captain leaned forward with obvious interest.

Flavia smiled and dismissed the question. 'Right now, let us pass the immediate danger point, keeping the KVS with the squadron. I am obliged to inform you that this sort of manoeuvre is not specifically mentioned in the parameters of my assignment to Squadron B.' 'I didn't

mind.

So, the captain had entertained the same notions Rhodri had voiced.

`The sooner the better!

Transferring the Talents to their designated ships, revving generators to their highest effective performance level and alerting every Talent on the human ships was all done within the specified hour.

First, Flavia sent her mind ahead to locate the identifiable pulsations and small mass of the beacon.

Then she called for each of her Talents to gather the lesser ones into the individual merges before she integrated first Rhodri, then Jesper, Mallen, Asia and finally the fine strong blaze of Talent that was Zara.

Let's get there! Flavia said, seizing the exact peak of the generated power for the gestalt.

We've got here! was Zara's exultant response a second later.

When Zara was `ported back on the Columbia, she made straight for Vestapia's ready room and requested an interview `Ma'am, Captain Kin

definitely would've defected.

It's a bit upset at being where it never expected to arrive in the

yours.

`In that, Prime, you demonstrate an astute understanding of a classified situation. Do I make myself clear?' `You do, Captain. ' `See that it remains classified. And, by the way, Flavia has seen the matter clearly but I would rather the others do not. ' `They already may but they won't talk about it.

`We should make an appropriate orbit in three days max. I shall require Captain Kimi to make the initial landing, hopefully deflusing a lot of pent-up resentment. I don't think there's a chance there're any Hivers left alive down there but you never know. And since Kimi is so eager to meet the enemy, let us give him first go.

Zara hesitated, then grinned. `You did know that your marines would prefer to claim that distinction?' `They can gain ancestral merit by guarding the scientists everywhere they need to go.

`Yes, ma'am. Did you wish me to convey your orders to Captain Kimi?' `Please, since I can barely manage "good morning and do you require supplies" but even that much is progress for me.

`Dis and Pal remark most favourably on your progress.

`Well, they're the only ones. You know. I'd've sworn Mrdinis were pessimists. ' `Only those raised on Clarf Can I leave now?' `Yes, but if your `Dinis can, keep in touch with our wily Captain Kinil. '

smiled. `Keiser-Tau will keep his thoughts to himself - fortunately.

He is not looking forward to keeping tabs on scientists. ' `Oh, I'm supposed to be down testing those locator buttons with Asia and Lieutenant Ismail, ' Flavia said. `If you'll excuse me - -` and she departed without waiting for penflisslon.

`Talking `Dini makes my throat very dry, the captain said, rising from her desk and going to the dispenser.

`Mine, too, ' Rhodri said, in the circumstances not above confirming the reason behind her hospitality.

Zara reported hearing the major swear by several god figures she didn't know existed in Alliance space but he desisted the moment he was

aware of her presence in the repairs shop.

`He's been briefing his men with every single tape available in the Columbia's library on what they might expect, landing on a Hiver planet, ' she went on.

Rhodri grinned. `That was predictable, ' was all he said.

`Captain said he doesn't like escorting scientists about. They tend to get themselves lost or in dangerous situations which "sensible" people would avoid. ' `We'll have locator buttons, ' Asia said with quiet pride.

with such a sly look that Rhodri unaccountably flushed, causing Zara to demand whom he fancied.

'None of your damned business, 1 he said and, going into his room, slammed the automatic door forcefully across the opening.

No speculations at this time, Flavia told Zara firmly.

'When will we get these locator buttons, Asia?' 'They're being distributed now to everyone who's to be landed,' Asia said, having retreated to her customary unassuming behaviour.

'Well, it'll be a relief to get on with what we were sent here for.' Flavia said and no-one in the lounge disagreed.

The actual landing was something of an anti-climax, although the state of the planet caused immediate uproar in the scientific corps.

Sensor readings had indicated that the ozone layer was undamaged, which had been a major concern to the ecologists and added to the puzzle of its barrenness. Rivers and lakes, as well as several large seas, seemed to be in good order, life-forms visible if unidentifiable.

There was still top soil but, unless plants could be coaxed to grow, it would sift away in the winds. On the higher ground, erosion was already obvious.

Avidly watched on remote relays, the 'Dinis landed in smart array and 'secured' the main Hive installation.

smaller building ten kilometres from the original, and probably headquarters, building.

Between the two there were signs of attempts to cultivate the land: even plastic-lined reservoirs for water and several hundred metres of irrigation channel.

When Captain Kimi was satisfied that no living enemy was apparent, it allowed 'others', meaning the humans, to come down. Despite Flavia's offers of teleportation, multi-purpose shuttles were used as these would provide ground transport, not best accomplished by 'portation which tended to go from Point A to any designated Point B.

The Talents were asked to 'port down sensitive instrumentation once the base camp was established.

Where the Talents were undeniably indispensable was to see if the panels in the queens' quarters which Kimi had located were still operational. Flavia, Rhodri and Zara slid down the connecting links in the main building while Asia, assiduously accompanied by Lieutenant Ismail and a detachment of marines, went off to the second building.

Mallen and Jesper Ornigo went with whichever group thought they might require Talented help.

enough for the power source to be found, and the 'They really don't alter their structures much, ' Flavia said when the three Talents

noW?' 'Try to start it up: that panel's the same and I brought mock-ups, ' Rhodri said, removing from his thigh pocket a handful of triangular-tipped wands which approximated the shape of a queen's palps. He handed some to Flavia and Zara.

'I'm not damned tall enough, ' Zara muttered.

'Nor am I, ' Flavia said with some disgust.

'There're plenty of boxes the right size ' and Rhodri pilfered rigid crates from the supply depot for the two women.

'D'you remember the sequence that started the ship, Flavia?'

'Engraved on my retina, ' Flavia said, arranging three wands in her fingers on each hand in a triangular pattern. When she got them right, by using a light application for telekinesis, she inserted them in the apertures in the sequence she remembered.

A flickering illumination started - and also a near riot from the unprepared 'Dini crewmen still exploring the facility. The light, if one could call it that, lasted long desiccated remains of one queen and nine attendants.

When the corpses had been examined - such pieces as permitted examination of any kind because most disintegrated into dust at the lightest touch - the generally accepted opinion was that death was caused by starvation. Then the arguments began: had only one queen

tunnels connected with what appeared to be large spaces where harvests

were processed and stored. Egg tubes opened into each of the queens quarters.

`Work, work, work, work, Zara muttered under her breath when the xeno Yakamasura went into a long explanation of the possible societal structure of the Hivers. `No other ethic but work.

`And conquest, Rhodri murmured back. `Don't forget conquest!' `A change is as good as a rest!

Continuing an orderly investigation, the scientists sampled and examined everything from the dust, to the underlying layers of clay and stone, to the desiccated fragments of vegetation that were found and brought in. Then they moved farther away from the now sizeable base camp, inspecting the dying vegetation, tree-like as well as ground-cover. Bushes, shrubs, hedges, plants, large vines, grassoids: all were dead or dying right up to the snow level on the mountain ranges of the continental mass. It was on the higher slopes that scattered piles of skeletal, the remains of various species, were found, as if the creatures - whatever they had been - had sought sanctuary in the highest place away from the predators, and whatever means was used to destroy the planet's indigenous lifeforms.



`All right, so the land's dead, but what about the seas?' Captain Soligen asked during an evening session which had consisted of too many

Mordmann dirges and nothing of a positive nature whatsoever.

`The seas?' Mordmann regarded her with utter astonishment. `It's the land that the Hivers infest, ma am.

`And it's the seas they never bother with, ' Zara reminded him.

`Nor any water. We're drinking river water although there's a rather noxious sulphuric aftertaste `The seas - - . the waters ` Without a single backward glance at the meeting he was precipitously leaving, Mordmann departed and very shortly all heard an airsled taking off `I kept trying to tell him, ' the xeno, Yakamasura, said sorrowfully, `but he said it was the land that mattered. ' `It is so possible to miss the obvious, ' Flavia said soothingly.

Hope for the revivification of Talavera improved considerably when it was found that the waters - seas, rivers, lakes, streams - were by no means as ecologically reduced as the land, though poor in quantity and quality. Mordmann pronounced that the planet's balance could be restored and they would immediately initiate several combinations that might suit. Whatever creatures had lived here before had had different requirements for there were significant basic elements lacking in the

pontifical as his group settled into the shuttle, carrying them back to the ship.

'And what is that?' Captain Vestapia asked, knowing what she might be letting them all in for.

'That the Hiver policy of fumigation of all life-forms -from the planets they wish to colonize often results in more short-term benefits than they anticipate. I suspect they lose half the planets they find to just such a pyrrhic programme. ' Then, looking excessively pleased with himself he folded his hands on his incipient paunch and said nothing more on the short voyage back to the

Columbia.

The installations on the second former colony, Marengo, were more numerous, extending in all directions towards the mountain ranges. The fields had been assiduously cultivated for a substantial number of decades. Analysis of the dirt once again showed the lack of certain rare earths, minerals: chitin, Vitamin A and E, most of the rare earths and selenium, although sulphur was present in quantity. Whatever indigenous life-forms had lived on Marengo had disappeared without trace, though its vegetation, lush and vigorous on the highlands the

might be able to pull the same trick here as we did with Xh-33. '

'Trick? Blow the orbiting ship up?' The captain snorted.

'No, steal it,' Flavia said. 'We don't, of course, know if the ship is occupied. The one at Xh-33 certainly wasn't. If it is, we can also use Hiver tactics and gas the maintenance crew.'

'As I remember the report,' Vestapia said in what Rhodri now privately termed her 'captain's tone', 'the gas was so corrosive, it took the entire voyage back to Phobos Moon Base to clear the stuff. ' 'There are other gases available 'You know that Kimi's out for Hiver blood -' 'What would be on the ship would be the specialist types, maintaining cables and conduits and such like.

Only queens control the ship. It's a queen Kiml wants to fight, not her workers. ' 'I doubt we can supply Kiml a queen,' Vestapia said sourly, 'but I sure wish we could and end that problem.

I didn't realize - No matter,' and she broke off what she'd started to say with a dismissive wave.

Rhodri 'heard' what she didn't say because her mind had been vivid with it - 'how bloodthirsty Mrdinis really are'. Quick contact with Flavia told him she'd caught that, too.

'Kimi,' Vestapia continued, 'will get another first, the chance to invade a Hiver ship, and that ought to give its colour some sort of

ship. Kimi can do whatever it likes to what might be on board and that'd be another coup. Then we steal it. The Waterloo Hivers will be stuck on that planet and we can take care of them when when it's been decided what's to be done with Hiver colonies. ' Vestapia spent one more

moment looking at Flavia 5

elegant features before she started to laugh.

'Think of the honour Kimi's colour would gain by bringing back a Hiver ship under its own power.

'Could they do that?' 'If there's enough fuel on board and with a little instruction on how to manipulate the instrument panel from us, yes, ' Rhodri said, beaming because he found Flavia's idea as outrageous

as the captain did. 'Only we'd better have a chance to splash 'Dini insignia all over the ship, if we don't want it fired on during its way back. If you wish, ma'am, I'll explain all this to Captain Hptm on the KMTM. It's most anxious that the KVS does not go off half-cocked.

It'd have to rescue it if it could. And the captain's mortally afraid of putting us, as well as its colour, in jeopardy over Kimi's dreams of bravura.

'So, we take a page out of the Genessee's log?' 'It worked. ' The

green as Rhodri'd ever seen them.

`That'll be great, ' he remarked later in their quarters, rubbing his hands together in anticipation.

`I'll get Jeff Raven's permission, ' Flavia said and left the two together. Which was exactly what both Rhodri and the captain wanted

at

that moment. Impending action had the fringe benefit of arousing other basic instincts as well.

\* \* \* Flavia's contact with Jeff received the necessary permission to duplicate - with the exercise of all due caution as far as the Talents were concerned - the successful tactics of the Genessee.

`That's no flax, ' Zara complained. `We'll be observers - as always.

`Yes, but I'll beat cousin Clancy into action, ' Rhodri said, delighted with that fact.

`Action?' `All right, close encounter because, brat, we're much closer to our objective - `We're weeks away, ' she corrected him.

`But mere weeks instead of more months like the main attack units. ' `We may have received permission, ' Flavia said, `but who

knows

if Kim'll buy the plan? It's one frustrated Mrdini and all of us

said quickly.

'So what did you sense?' Flavia considered this for a long moment.

'Triumph, I think.' 'Damn!' Rhodri said. 'They may be moving in for the kill before we can get to Waterloo.' 'Unlikely, because I've already located the Waterloo beacon Kincaid so kindly set in place.' She smiled as her team reacted with jubilation. Except for Asia.

'I don't see why everyone is so happy to be pulling primary school tricks on the Hivers. Especially you, Zara.

Zara flushed. 'I'll never live that moment down, will I? But you saw what Hivers did t9 Talavera ruined a perfectly good planet. And damned near ruined Marengo the same way. They don't deserve to colonize their backyards.' 'Which went nova!' Asia said but her expression was less vehement. 'They must be good for something.

Everyone and everything I know is.

'Try as I will,' Flavia said after a long pause, 'I cannot find "good" in a life-form that deliberately annihilates all other life-forms so that it can dominate a world for the sole purpose of multiplying itself to the point where it must find yet another world to fumigate and repeat the process.' Asia was so quiet and exuded such a depression that Zara approached her, delicately smoothing the fine hair back from her face.

and their modus operandi. It does seem a pity, though, that we can't communicate and form a collaborative effort. ' `That'll be the day!'

Zara managed the last words.

The weeks had moved into months as the main Fleet continued to follow the increasingly strong ion trail of the Hiver 2. Squadron D plodded along after Hiver 3

which had diverted spatially down and towards the `arm of the Milky Way.

Clancy Sparrow proved to have many inventive ways to keep boredom

at bay, such as a lottery to guess the particle strength of the trail at the end of each week. It also gave him and Rojer the chance to meet most of the other Talents, covert and open, on the Washington.

`We've got quite a few T-3s on board, ' they told Thian and ran down their mental lists, with descriptions.

`All'll answer to the code word now' said Rojer who had done most of the implanting.

`One way or another, ' Clancy said and grinned.

Another notion was to give names to the G-type systems which the Hiver ignored. An official name was `drawn' later from those that had

one hip on the corner of a worktop and eyeing cakes the chef was icing with deft movements of his spatula.

'I never cut myself' and he paused to regard his handiwork, 'fat never spatters on me. I've never dropped a hot pan or baking tray and I've handled plenty without so much as a bum blister. That's why they call me Lucky Louie.

Amused and intrigued, Rojer leaned back against the counter behind him. 'Anything else?' 'Well, I've never broken a bone, ' and the roundfaced man grinned, 'lost a fight or a card game. I don't play them no more. Didn't think it was fair if I always won.

Rojer took that opportunity to grip the man's shoulder in an expression of approval for such probity, and caught the unmistakable touch of Lucky Louie's mind so that he could bring him to a merge should that be necessary.

'His souffls and cakes never fall either, muttered another galley crewman as Rojer left, but the tone was good-naturedly envious.

On the destroyer Athene, Semirame Kloo 'discovered' an unexpected -Talent in one of the electricians who had an extraordinary record of avoiding accidents in a somewhat dangerous job. Chief Petty Officer Lea Day had always chalked that up to the fact that she was careful and never attempted a repair unless she'd thoroughly looked over any



nodded. Then she leaned towards Rome Kioo and whispered. 'Who was that?' 'Prime Thian Raven-Lyon.' 'But he's on the Washington!' 'He's also a T-1 and made me hear him, too. Now, Chief, with a kinetic Talent like yours, we may need to contact you for help real soon.

'What kind of help?' The chief was dubious as well as anxious.

'Nothing beyond your abilities, Chief, but if Prime Thian calls you, put down whatever you're doing and just let yourself go.' 'Go? How?' Kioo relaxed her entire body, hands draped on her thighs, shoulders and chest collapsed.

'That's all I gotta do?' 'That's right. Your being relaxed helps Thian tap your kinetic energy.

'That's what I got? Kinetic energy?' 'Which is why you've been able to turn aside electrical jolts that would have injured you.

'But how'd I know how to do it?' Kioo was getting very good at proving her next point.

She sprang at Lea Day who immediately assumed a defensive stance.

'Like that, basically,' Kioo said, stepping back. 'A basic survival instinct. Only your brain clicks in with its kinetic whammy.'

She rose and shook hands with the chief who had a good strong grip with

Hiver advance, too? The sceptics thought this area of space far too remote to have received much Hiver attention.

Others argued that the very fact the Hive ship was going so far from its original home world proved it had investigated all the intervening systems and either occupied them or found them useless.

To settle some of these arguments - which often proved agitated Captain Ashiant initiated a programme for the fast scout ships which the Washington carried. Whenever an M-5 system was observed, the scouts - using a different crew each time - left their mother ship for quick discreet surveys.

For these, Ashiant asked the assistance of the Talents who were as glad to have some excitement as any other crew member. Thian always

took LieutenantCommander Alison Greevy with him; Rojer favoured a T-3

ensign from Engineering, Cyra Charteris; while Clancy needed to have two to augment his T-2 abilities.

Invariably he chose Semirame Kioo and the only other T-3, one of the gunnery officers, Targia Upland. An attractive girl, her nickname of 'Target' was respect for her professional competence and a knowledge of antique and archaic weapons.

had been invaded, when they had no intersystem communications and their

planet-based sensors had, as shown by the Xh-33, limited range?

'Let us not assume what has not been established beyond doubt,' Captain Ashiant reminded those captains and first officers who attended his weekly updates.

'There are still panels on the Refugee whose function is unknown.' That was the standard warning every scout captain impressed on his or her crew before the scout departed on an exploratory nussion.

Every week the star charts were upgraded by such side-trips and new primaries, including an unusual binary-sun system that fascinated all the astronomy buffs.

After the second Hiver occupation was discovered, the Vadim's new captain, Pat Shepherd, brought up the suggestion that a multi-tasked beacon be set up near the heliopause of Hiver systems: to warn any passing Alliance ship of Hivers; to record any outgoings in which case a message capsule would be released to speed back to Alliance space where any Prime would soon 'hear' its shriek and retrieve it. After the Denebian penetration, every Alliance system had installed a device that could identify the Hiver stingg-pzzt and emit a warning.

A contest to design such a device was circulated through the Fleet

Uninhabited M-5 planets were examined in more detail: one had an indigenous life-form which was abe;idy using primitive tools and had controlled fires.

That system was duly put off-limits. Several planets, despite appropriate atmospheres and distribution of land mass to sea, did not appear viable for human or Mrdini occupation, showing high levels of radiation, too much seismic activity or other anomalies.

`Well, such conditions would account for some of the by-passes, ' Captain Ashiant said at one of the weekly `brass' meetings which included the Talents. `One thing puzzles me. How did the Hivers know which to by-pass? If we have probes, what do the Hivers use to obtain the same information, because they surely must? Did anyone ever discover if Deneb had been probed by a Hiver mechanism?' He turned to Clancy.

`Sir, the Denebian penetration happened long before my birth. My uncle who lived through those days never mentioned a probe but then Deneb was pretty primitive in those days. And who was expecting visitors from outer space?' `But did you not as a youngling on Deneb recover quantities of Hiver materials?' asked Captain Spktm.

`Yes sir, indeed, we all did, ' and Clancy indicated Thian and

unconfirmed opinion that the planet was deficient in some element or elements which are vital to Hive survival. So, if they do use a probe, it doesn't tell them all they need to know.

'So there are discrepancies in their colonial programme,' Captain Germys of the Genessee remarked in his dry fashion. 'That's encouraging.' 'And they avoid some planets that are fine for us.' 'But if that colony failed, what sort of information do the Hiver probes seek?' asked Germys' first officer, Beckin Watusa, a very tall and very dark-skinned man.

'Well, one we saw was mainly islands, some good sized, but no large land masses,' said Selig Derynic of the destroyer, Comanche.

'So

perhaps that's one of their criteria-large continents.' 'They probe for suitable atmospheres as well, since two they've by-passed showed hydrogen-nitrogen imbalances,' Vandermeer said.

'No,' Captain Prim of the KLTL said emphatically, its usually smooth fur ruffling, a sign of agitation, 'the probe finds out how much and what kind of life had to be "fumigated" 'Then let us be thankful for whatever limitations their probes, if they use them, report,' Ashiant said briskly.

'We can at least propose a few colonial sites for the 'So far

everyone touching it.

`That is the purpose of this squadron, Captain, Ashiant said as resolutely. `And, especially, the reason the Washington was conceived and built!' `And the Hivers built their Great Sphere to establish a new homeworld, ' Thian said. `Could it be in all the volume of space they, and we, have explored, they have not yet found a similar one? And that's why they have ranged so far, and looked in as many directions as they have?' `You give the Hivers credit for emotions which they do not have, ' Spktn said, its poll eye swivelling to give Thian the full glare.

`Now, a moment, Spktn, ' Ashiant said, raising one hand, `the Prime has a valid point. Wouldn't Mrdinis, deprived of Clarf, search for one as near to what they'd lost as could be found?' Spktn's flir ruffled firther, and so did Prim's and the other two `Dini captains seated around the table. Thian inwardly groaned at his tactless remark.

Exuding as much pacifying empathy as he could, he followed Ashiant's lead.

MRDINIS HAVE LONG HISTORICAL KNOWLEDGE THAT HIVERS FOLLOW INSTINCT

WHICH HAS NOT CHANGED, HONOURED SIR, AND THAT IS, ABOVE ALL, SURVIVAL

SPKTM.

The `Dini captain's fur began to settle, and so did PrIm's. Thian felt the wave of relief from his fellow humans that the Mrdinis were mollified by his explanation.

`So they haven't found it. And, by my honour, I hope they don't, ' Cheseman of the Solidarity said, `but, give us a little hope, Captain Spktm, do we even know what their primary's spectrum was like before it

went nova?' Spktm and Thian, who had reached the area where the dead

star was still cooling, shook their heads.

`Bluntly, no, ' Thian said.

`We've got a helluva lot of space to check out, Cheseman said, made gloomy by the sheer magnitude of the task facing them. `Five years won't be long enough!' `But a lustrum makes a start, gentlemen, ' Ashiant said, adopting a firmly positive tone, `and let us not discount what we have managed to accomplish in the past two years. We may have

been forced by circumstances to explore firther than any previous programme for either of our species but we have already discovered enough new worlds to support members of the Alliance for thousands of

type they're hunting, not just any G-type system with M-5 planets.

Even the Mrdinis saw the merit of that suggestion and the meeting ended with considerably more enthusiasm and purpose than it initially had. Ashiant later confided to Thian that there'd been some very tricky moments but he was positive they were on to a line of investigation that was going to prove invaluable.

`Certainly it's giving us another purpose while we're tracking that damned sphere to wherever it's going.

What odds would you take that it has a definite primary objective?' Thian regarded Ashiant for a moment before letting out a startled guffaw. For one moment, Ashiant glared at him and then, realizing what he had said, joined Thian in a much-needed laugh.

`In line with that, sir, ' Thian said, still shaking with laughter, `maybe I ought to contact Flavia. Squadron B's been to quite a few systems now, too. Maybe they can throw some light on the matter.

`Light on the matter?' Ashiant echoed and enjoyed another chuckle.

`I needed that, Lyon. That was a hairy moment there .

`You mean, of course, when all the `Dini fiir started to ruffle up?' That set them both off again until Ashiant, huffing and coughing, pulled himself back to sobriety, but his eyes still twinkled and he continued to grin.



some

interesting items.

The first being that they, too, have devised a beacon to be set outside any Hive suspect M-5 system: to warn vessels off and to send a message back to the nearest Prime to warn of any outgoing sphere. '

'Great minds, huh?' 'I've received specs, sir. Captain Soligen thought you might like to glance over them in case they have modifications we could use. ' Thian handed over the hard copy and the software. 'Or the other way round, ' he added tactfully.

'Indeed and we will, ' Ashiant replied as he glanced through the material. 'Though the one your brother and Tikele designed seems to

be

similar. ' 'Flavia also informed me that, with Earth Prime's express permission, they are going to approach the Hive-occupied planet. ' Ashiant gave him a hard stare.

'There are good reasons to take the chance, ' and Thian grinned, 'the main of them being to give the KVS under Captain Kiml the opportunity to puf the Genessee ploy. ' 'Steal another Hiver ship?' Ashiant said, almost exploding. 'Whatever do we need with another one?' do so under the ship's power. We were able to establish Thian chuckled, as much at the captain's reaction, as the one which would

heard the phrase, ' Thian replied, not remembering where or in what connection.

'Go on. Tell me how this `Dini plans to gain prestige so I'll know how to prevent it in this squadron. ' `First, Flavia got Earth Prime's permission. And I assure you, as Flavia did me, that Captain Soligen would not contemplate such a move unless she was very sure of success. ' `Well, ' and Ashiant simmered down, `Vesta's one helluva fine captain, even if she does have some odd ideas of opting for young and virtually untried crew. I assume all you Primes are restricted by the same rules?' `Yes, sir!' `Then let me know the outcome of the. . . what did you call it. `The Genessee ploy. ' `Osullivan must be pleased by that. Too bad he's stuck at a desk now. And how is Captain Kiml intending to get its prize back to our occupied space?' `Flavia seemed to feel the captain would be able to the disposition of certain controls on the panel. She's known them. And we know what file! is used `That's fine until the damned thing gets in more travelled space Thian nodded, grinning. `I believe the plan is to decorate the sphere with `Dini designs to let all and sundry know who is bringing this one in. ' `Do ask your Prime to send out an all-ship warning.

Wouldn't do to have a trigger-happy missile crew trying out the

an hour, he traded off with Rojer. Clancy was about to have to take a turn when Jeff Raven decided his T1 and T-2 staff had better things to do with their time than mentally transfer such complex data. So the rest of the material from human astronomical files was `ported out.

Laria `ported even more from the Mrdini libraries.

Everyone's pretty excited about the theory here, she told her brother. You sound in good form, Thi. Things going wellwellfare you, Roj and Clancy?

why? D'you miss us? he asked teasingly.

Oddly enough, I think I do, she said.

How's Kincaid?

Kincaid is in fine form, also, brother! Then there was a ripple in her mental tone that signified a giggle. Vanteu, too. Then she signed off, leaving him to digest that information just as the cargo officer announced the arival of a small pod from Clarf Tower.

The comparative analysis of G-type stars continued until a special board had to be set up for that information alone. Each ship in the Fleet wanted to access files to support their own theories and constant, lengthy shipto-ship conversations were interfering with necessary operational messages.

Over the next few weeks, although neither Thian nor Ashiant had

picked up readings that suggested the Hiver they were pursuing had sent

out its scouts.

The target was a G-type sun which the Alliance had first thought the Hiver would, once more, pass by since its spectra-analysis didn't seem that promising.

Instantly, crews were scrambled to the Washington's fast scouts and, Thian ordered Rojer to accompany the Revere, commanded by Lieutenant Vergoin.

You'll get yourself in a pod the moment there's trouble, Thian told his brother.

Aw, Thi. . . Rojer began and then, remembering his grandfather's stern warnings, subsided. Yeah, I will but what about the destroyers?

who's going to keep Prl and Ktpl in check when they get close to the Hiver?

Captain Spktm. It's transferred its command to its first officer and is on board the KLTS.

Spktm does mean business.

We all mean business!

Thian sent Clancy, with a similar reminder about saving his Talented skin, to one of the two humancrewed destroyers. All four

they think they're totally invulnerable?

Until they came to Deneb, they were, Thian remarked drolly. Have the astronomers come up with any more data on the primary?

Checking sun-spot activity and mning another one on uvl and irl emissions, and naturally probes have been released on orbital sweeps.

Lots of lush vegetation is reported and some clearly visible seismic activity, g9ad blue seas and a chain of large lakes across the main continental mass we've already identified on the night side.

Smallish ice-covered polar regions but that's normal - so's the ozone layer.

Can't find any signs of civilization, no large habitations, no fires apart from a forest fire raging in the midwest. Ah, but indigenous critters, running straight for the nearest body of water.

Least that's what the science officer says such a cloud of dust could mean.

Could the fire have been set by the Hivers? Thian asked.

Doubt it! Their scouts are just about inside the orbit of the fifth planet, your typical ringed giant.

`Your brother's reporting in?' Ashiant asked from the seat he had taken behind Thian's couch.

Thian gestured for the captain to come around. He hated reporting

`I'd hazard the guess that they might just need to replenish supplies.

They haven't stopped anywhere He bent over the comunit. `Ailsah, based on the examination of the supplies stored on Refugee and the estimated size of those Hiver crews that the `Dinis extrapolated, tell me if they'd be running close to empty?' `You suspect this might be only a supply run?' `It's a possibility but I'll need the figures first.' Ashiant grinned, rubbing his hands together in anticipation.

`How long before the main Fleet can intercept the sphere?' `Seven hours, sir, but she appears to be slowing down.

That would be consonant with a resupply action. We know Hiver scout ships have plenty of range but they may also want to conserve fuel - if they're still in search mode. The KSTS just confirmed that speed reduction and has asked for battle dispositions of the destroyers.

Thian could hear just the minute pulse of excitement in the First Officer's calm voice.

`First, order all ships to be alert for any sign that the Hiver has detected our approach. I've never quite believed the `Dini report on Hiver sensor range. Anyway, Prime, ask your brother to pass my order on to Captain Vergoin to release low-level probes. We might as

question, Thian smiled reassuringly.

`I don't think "let" is operational, sir, but it'll be a triumph for us all. We'll have reduced by one more ship their chance of finding that new homeworld they're desperate to have: that new base from which they can multiply the problems we've already got in containing them. Then there's only the one ship Squadron D's following and then we really will have reduced Hiver threat to manageable proportions.

Ashiant gave a short bark of a laugh. `Manageable, Prime?' He laughed sardonically again. `When we're discovering that one in five of the M-5 planets on our way out here has a Hiver colony on it?' Ashiant threw out his hands in exasperation.

`Even that's a good deal more than we knew before `Dinis ran across those three Hivers. ' `Damn!' And Ashiant rammed one fist into the other palm. `I'd feel it more of an accomplishment if this system was the one the Hivers have been so desperately searching for. ' `Put it this way, sir, it's one more they won't occupy, even briefly!' `Goodpoint, Prime. I could almost feel sorry for our prey.

`I won't tell anyone I heard you say that, Captain, ' Thian said with a grin as he prepared to `path the new orders to his brother as well as a warning of the Hiver's slowing.

two yeomen stuffing me and my `Dinis in here as soon as we began closing with the Hivers. Rojer sounded far more indignant than scared.

Main screen's magnified to show the blasts. Any damage?

Minor's all I can tell. I've got the pod's comunit on but I'm not catching all the . . . Wait a minute Rojer? ROJER?

Don't bother me now, brother. I've work to do!

Thian kept bothering Rojer with constant demands for answers. In between those, he `pathed Clancy who was no more available to his requests for information than Rojer. Infiltrated with a disobedience that amounted to downright mutiny, he charged on to the Washington's bridge where the intense atmosphere reminded him that he might be intruding and he had half-turned to leave. Then he saw that the main screen of the bridge gave far larger, clearer details of the battle than the one above his couch. What he saw also made him realize exactly what essential work Rojer and Clancy were doing in deflecting a virtual onslaught of Hiver missiles. Definitely he could tell Earth Prime that this was self-defence: if the Revere took a mortal blow, the Hiver scouts could pick off the pods one by one before the evacuees could get out of range. Rojer had shown good sense with his deflection policy!

The main batteries of the sphere began to open up on the seven



opinion that the detonation of those missiles could cause shockwaves almost as dangerous to scout-ship hulls as a direct hit. ' `My compliments to Ensign Upland, Ashiant said, nodding his head briefly in acknowledgement of the information. Then, under his breath, he muttered: `When I get those two Talents, I'll skin `em, I'll keelhaul them. ' Thian and the nearer bridge officers heard him.

`But they are managing to deflect incoming rockets.

Tikele, how soon before we are in range of the sphere?'

`Twenty-two minutes.

`Why doesn't Spktn use the ones it's got on the KLTS?' `I believe the captain's manoeuvring her into position now, sir, ' Tikele responded. `And two of our scouts are protecting her. She's got to be on target, on those fuel tanks, and in range. . she's. . she's fired both, sir.

Unbelievably one of the Hiver's scouts managed to get between the sphere and the missiles, which penetrated it, sticking out port and starboard.

`Like a scurrer skewered on arrows, Thian murmured.

Then the blast occurred, an orange-red eruption of force which hurtled the KLTS backward like a leaf in a storm. Somehow the flanking scouts had peeled away and, although they were scudded further from

did when the Hiver attacked Deneb.

Not the same at all, Rojer! CLANCY?

I can hear you, I can hear you. Over the ringing in my ears.

Were we ever lucky? Kloos's a damned fine pilot.

'Thian?' Ashiant called urgently. 'Can you get in touch with either of your Talents and ask them to check the status of the KLTS?

The other destroyers must hold their positions to contain the sphere. ' 'Yes, sir. ' Rojer, you've 'Dinis. Ashiant's ordering Veigoin and the You do the Clancy's ship bette are moving in for the more That that was what the two doing was obvious while the three medium-sized missiles on the two remain scouts, all the time inching closer to the sphere. - 'We've just reached the maximum range of the new missiles, Captain, ' Vandermeer announced.

'Signal the Galaxy class ships to assume Formation C and begin firing as soon as they are in maximum range.

The sphere must be distracted from the destroyers. ' She's some mother this one, Thian distinctly heard someone say. It could have been anyone on the bridge, even Ashiant, dropping his mind shields in the excitement of battle.

The first of the new missiles the Washington launched was not that far off its target but exploded on contact with a large fragment of the

The KLTL peeled off to follow one Hiver scout and the Franklin went after the other.

With ordinary communications opened again now the enemy was routed, Captain Spktn was able to send its regards to the Washington.

Its voice was shaky but proud of being aboard the ship that had fired the first missile against the enemy. The KLTS had taken a lot of damage from the blast concussion: many Dinis were dead and injured.

Some compartments had had to be closed against the vacuum without knowing if they had been occupied.

Thian did not have time to find either Rojer or Clancy to give them the dressing-down they so richly deserved for disobeying orders in spite of the life-saving success of that violation. By the time he spotted them, some of his anger had dissipated. They were across the Washington cargo hold which had been turned into an auxiliary `Dini sick-bay, doing much the same sort of emergency use of telekinesis he was: `lifting' the injured into beds, onto gurneys. Rojer was helping Medic Sblipk among the injured `Dinis, with Gil and Kat rushing about on errands. Clancy was working among the human wounded.

We'll all have a little talk later, Rojer, Clancy, Thian said in cold voice.

Sure thing, bra. when there's a little more free time .

ignore.

If he'd had to tell his mother and father that Rojer had - - 'Hey, Thi, said a soft voice in his ear, and he felt a touch on his shoulder, 'you need rest, honey. ' Gravy looked up at him, her blue eyes anxious, though her face was as tired as his. He and his 'Dinis had been working with her, using kinesis to help her use her healing skills.

'if I rest, you do, too, Lieutenant Senior Grade, ' he said sternly.

She glanced over the now orderly ward, where 'Dinis were immersed in tubs of restorative fluids, or wrapped in bandages of various colours, repairing damaged tissues, wounds, burns, and breaks. 'Dinis endured discomfort better than humans did, Thian thought, and wondered

if that was a species differentiation, rather than stoicism.

'Ah, here comes the new watch, Gravy said with relief that came out close to a sob.

Thian leaned back against the nearest support and 'listened' for his brother. Rojer was asleep - Thian couldn't tell where - and so was Clancy. He'd get them both tomorrow . . . when he'd had enough sleep.

'Thian, ' and Gravy caught him by the hand and pulled him around the corner. 'You got enough energy left to 'port us to my room?' He

Thian said, glaring at his brother.

He had read the riot act to both Rojer and Clancy for 'endangering' their lives which were far too valuable to be risked. He could also point to the minor cuts and contusions which both had suffered when their respective ships had manoeuvred abruptly or suffered concussive buffeting: those could as easily have been mortal wounds.

'I'm not that slow, Thian,' Rojer replied indignantly, even if I didn't manage to keep my balance through all the bumps and grinds the Revere did. But you should have seen some of the others. I 'ported when I could. 'I got most of mine, and Clancy fingered the long pro-skin dressing down one side of his face, the splint on his left arm, the sealed wound on the right, and managed a benevolent expression, 'buffering someone else's impact. ' 'Besides which, big brother,' Rojer said, hands on his belt and an intense frown on his face, 'if either of us had made use of the escape pods, you'd really have had bad news to send home. It only occurred to me when I was stuck in it, that the damned pod was the most dangerous place to be! I was at Xh-33, remember, and I watched the queens' pods get blown out of the sky the way we'd pick off avians! Any one of the Hiver scouts

both Spktn and Ashiant are mentioning our defensive action as the main

reason casualties were minimal. although I do now appreciate why the Mrdinis had to consider suicide attacks! There can't be much room on those scouts with all those heavy missiles they fire off. And that sphere wasn't going to give up short of total destruction!' Thian could never stay angry long, not in the presence of Clancy, though he continued to feel an irritable frustration, especially as the two young heroes tossed off their actions as nothing out of the ordinary for Talents of their abilities. That almost annoyed Thian more.

`I think, ' Gravy told him when they met for a quiet meal in the medics' mess-room, `that you're a little jealous maybe, Thian, that you weren't in on the action?' `Me? Jealous?' He regarded Alison-Anne, startled.

He'd never thought of himself as a jealous person for any reason.

Her blue eyes twinkled up at him. `Jealous of things or people, no, Thian. But jealous, a little perhaps, of prestige. `Are you sure you're still T-5?' I`Probably not, ' she said airily with a delighted sigh, `but I am an empath and very empathic for you. ' She reached across the small table and stroked the back of his hand lightly, a

on, teasing him, 'you saw action long before they did, on the Great Sphere.' Thian made a face at her. "That little fracas was not against live Hivers. 'The difference is immaterial, Thian. And it was far more dangerous than what your brother and cousin did.' Thian faithfully forwarded Captain Ashiant's detailed report of the encounter and decided, when he could not help but 'feel' Jeff Raven's furious reaction to the heroism of Rojer and Clancy, that he could safely leave any further discipline to Earth Prime, and Callisto Prime, and possibly both Aurigaeon Primes. Righteous anger often ripened with waiting.

Thian was called back by Earth Prime later to receive the official commendations and replies from the Alliance and High Council as well as new orders.

The Fleet was now to join Squadron D, using all available Talent to make the `portation, and track down the third sphere with all possible speed. There was great weight being given to the theory that the three spheres had been looking for a particular G-type star, as close a replica to the one which had turned nova as possible.

The High Council did not care to wait until the remaining sphere found such a star and a new homeworld planet.

Once that Hive sphere had been dealt with, the Fleet was to

decoys?' Thian threw out as a possible solution.

'I think this "know your enemy and you can defeat him easier" is going a bit too far. ' `Perhaps I misinterpreted, sir, ' Thian said, running over the wording in his mind. `Disabling the Hiver colonies could merely mean making certain they had no further space capabilities. Shall I reconfirm?' `Please do.

I doubt the High Council meant to bring more spheres back, Jeff Raven said but his tone was uncertain. But with `Dinis you'd never know, would you? I'll get back to you.

When he did, he was chuckling. Seems the `dinis would like to have an intact sphere for each of their colonial worlds as trophies.

Admiral Mekturian pointed out that the two operational ones presently in our possession could be displayed wherever necessary. I will never understand `Dini logic or honour. The Admiral is more sensible and repeats that the Fleet is to destroy Hiver space-travel capabilities until other remedies can be effected to prevent their colonial aggrandizement.

Other remedies?

That's what's being discussed. There's a poive4\4I lobby that would prevent the Alliance, and not just the human element, from doing unto the Hivers as they have done to others. why reduce ourselves to



of action.

If we've to stop and investigate every bloody M-5 system on the way back, sir, Thian began By then some form of common sense might have

resulted from the current shambles. Once more I am relieved that FT&T is involved only in the mechanics, rather than the politics, of this issue. And, there was definite amusement in Jeff Raven's tone, as a messenger, I am too far removed from those I deliver them to, to ster the fate often meted out to the bearers of adverse replies. So, Grandson, I say unto you, bring back as much information as you possibly can, about the bright new worlds that have not been Hiverized and can give the hot-blooded another focus for their energies.

Wouldn't a colonial explosion be following Hiver tactics?

Really, Thian, your sense of proportion is slightly skewed by distance. Humans and `Dinis respect other lifeforms and any planet bearing identifiable sentients is to be scratched off the list.

Oh, but put up one of those warning beacons that'll inform the Alliance of incoming Hive traffic. There're still a lot of those damned spheres loose in this galaxy.

The official segments of that long exchange were duly reported to Captain Ashiant and then repeated to the other captains and first

Thian knew that the science officers would be busy at every available station, recording whatever scrap of surface information could be learned during the circumnavigation. Probes had returned with samples which would be analysed and assayed. He watched as the planet

turned under him even as the Washington turned round the planet to the original sight he had had - - - had it only been two days before? The forest fire had gone out, doused by a rain system which, unfortunately, resulted in smoke obscuring that area so the cause of the conflagration remained a mystery. The creatures which had fled the fire were now browsing by the lake which had saved them and, though none appeared to

be more than a variety of large ruminants, grazers, and several equally big predators, none acted with any sentience.

'And not a single creature will ever know, or care about the fate we saved them from,' Gravy said softly from the open door to his room.

When she had come off duty the night before, they'd done some private celebrating. All her patients would recover and she was no longer fearful for the progress of several of the `Dini burn victims.

Thian held out his arm and she came across on bare feet to stand in under it. She liked the fact that she fitted just there. He closed

at

her, 'I'd rather stop playing hide-and-seek 'Thian, you know perfectly that your folks will have someone better in mind for you than a T-5 empath who's - Thian put one finger across her lips. 'Don't you poor-mouth yourself in my hearing, Lieutenant Senior Grade, sir, ma'am!' 'Look, you were a raw kid - - -' I'm no raw kid now, Alison-Anne Greevy, Thian said, turning to pull her full against him and pushing her head up to catch her lovely blue eyes, and I have far more need of a comfortable T-5 empath whom I happen to love, respect and admire

for

certain earthy and caring qualities I haven't found anywhere else.

If we can still stand each other's company at the end of this mission, I'd say we had a good chance of enjoying a good life together.

And I'll probably opt for full service as a naval Prime. I'd be the first . I can talk Granddad into creating the position.

Alison could and often did shield her thoughts from him but not the wisful hope in her eyes.

'If you're thinking of Flavia Bastianmajani, don't, he said and kissed her, loving her with mind, heart and soul. 'She had other ideas even when we first met. ' 'She did?' Thian threw his head back, laughing at her indignation. 'She's probably as assiduously pursuing her own

agreed

though the other two ships comprising the squadron were to be sent back

to be refitted.

I'm told there's an adequate bng on board the Valparaiso so you can send those dissidents back and rid yourself of unnecessary baggage,

Earth Prime added.

Thian had not liked that aspect of his responsibilities but it was now no secret that several attempts had been made to tamper with the Washington's missiles' guidance systems. Suspects had been interrogated by the NI officers, with Thian watching in a covert observation booth. In all but one case his Talent wasn't needed and, in that one, he had felt both distress and pity that the ensign, a young woman of otherwise inpeccable record in her duties in the engine complex of the Washington, felt it her duty to humankind to destroy the first of the Nebula class design because a ship that huge and powerful was against the wishes of the God her native planet revered.

How she had slipped through the careful screening of any candidate to the Space Academy became the subject of a dedicated search of both

All the Fleet elements were now making their majestic way out of the system so blithely unaware of its escape from annihilation. One day a developing sentient species might wonder about the ring of debris about the outer moon.

In their ready room, Thian, Rojer and Clancy were toting up the potential power they could access to `port the Fleet to Squadron D's present location.

`Well, it's not that far, ' Rojer was saying in an attempt to encourage himself. Gil and Kat were lounging on the couch beside him, playing one of the finger games with a piece of coloured string that often absorbed them.

`With ninety T-2s and 3s to spread out, plus the sixty 4s - and don't forget they're mainly kinetics, too strategically placed `There's none on any of the `Dini ships, ' Clancy reminded them.

`So we haul them over last `That wouldn't sit well, ' Rojer said.

`Look, Thian, you and Clancy haul the Washington. Give me ten 2s and twenty 3s and I'll `port Spktm. It's the mass of the Washington that's going to be the worst to `port. Even Constellations are easy after that.

`Or, I stay here in the Washington and send to you. ' `Who's the T-2 on Squadron D?' Clancy asked.

buffer the new ones who'll never have had a chance to merge.

`Then why don't you do a drill merge first?' Kloo said with a wicked grin at Thian in memory of a certain mock drill she'd pulled.

`Who? How? What?' Thian asked although he mindtouched his approval of her suggestion.

She tapped out a sequence on the terminal and a spatial view of the disposition of the Fleet came on screen. She sniffed and tapped at the destroyers in flank positions. `Change `em over. Switch the Athene with the Comanche. Just as an exercise. ' Then she chuckled mischievously. `See how long it takes the crews to figure out what happened. Could be a bit of fun. ' `I think, ' Thian said, standing up, `I'd better check such a fleet manoeuvre with Captain Ashiant. ' He was grinning with sheer devilment as he asked Ashiant for an immediate interview `More trouble, Thian?' Ashiant demanded, striding into the Talents' ready room almost as soon as he had broken off the call.

`No, sir, not trouble, just sorting out how to make the jump to join Squadron D with most efficient use of the Talents we've got. I'd like to have a trial merge and, say, switch the Athene with the Comanche. ' `And see how long it takes them to realize they've been moved, ' Rojer couldn't resist adding.

Ashiant looked from brother to brother, his broad face

`Just the code word. Ready when you are, Rojer.

Three, two, one, SAKI, the brothers broadcast and instantly felt the response of Talents: scrambling a little to obey the unexpected and unusual summons.

Switch!

Captain Ashiant, Commander Kloo, Lieutenant SG Greevy, and T-2 Clancy Sparrow stared at the display on the screen.

`Caught it!' Ashiant cried in triumph, clapping his hands together. `No more than a ripple. Now, let's see how `Captain Ashiant, there's been a fluctuation of some kind around the Athene and `Vandermeer's voice broke off. `Sir, would you come to the bridge, please?' `On my way, First. ' He turned back to the Talents just as the bridge door swooshed open, twisted his thumb upwards in an approving gesture and unexpectedly winked.

`Captain, it's very odd, and I don't know how it could have happened, ' the Talents heard a perplexed Vandermeer saying, `but I could have sworn the Athene was in the starboard flank position . .

`Incoming message from the Athene, sir. . . ` the com officer announced.

`Full marks to the Athene bridge crew, First, ' Ashiant said in a calm voice, rippling with an undertone that the Talents had no problems

positive they have no intercolonial communications of a nature we have yet to understand. Yours is the conn, First. ' Ashiant returned to the Talent ready room. Once inside and the door closed, he enjoyed a hearty chuckle.

'I think that's a drill that's proved more efficacious than most I've ordered, ' he said, coughing a bit into his hand as he finished his laugh. 'Did it prove conclusive for you as well, Primes?' 'Yes, indeed, ' Rojer and Thian chorused.

'With a little more practice none of `em will hesitate, Thian added. 'Now, sir, our problem becomes more a matter of protocol: which

captain's ship goes first of the bigger ones. We've just proved we can swap destroyers with only their indigenous Talent merging.

'It's the mass that's the problem?' 'Not as much as whose nose'll be out of joint by being left to last.

'That's no problem at all, Primes, ' Ashiant said. 'I'll give the orders and they'll be followed. Captain Spktn on the KSTS goes first, then Captain Germys and the Genessee. I'd want all the destroyers next, then the rest of the Galaxies, and the Washington last. How does that sound?' 'Fine, sir. We'll need to rearrange some Talents to more critical positions 'Any way you need `em `And it'll take two days to



personnel. That'll take the rest of today. ' Ashiant nodded and returned to his bridge, leaving the Talents gazing at each other in puzzlement.

' I don't think he really understands what's involved, Alison-Anne said thoughtfully.

' I'm not all that sure I do, either, ' Thian said. He gave himself a shake and briskly started compiling lists of which key Talents would have to be moved and to which ship.

When Thian made contact, the mind of T-2 Stierlman on board Squadron D's Galaxy class ship, the Valparaiso, exhibited such surprise and consternation for the task to be performed that Thian immediately deleted the man from his range of key links. Stierlman's job at his end only required holding a firm mental tone as a beacon. The very mention of the proposed merge weakened Stierlman's touch to the tentativeness of a Tower novice. Thian's sister, Petra, would have been more use. How had Laria stood the man's indecisiveness for as long as she had?

The distance, Prime, it's the distances involved, Stierlman rabbited on. They keep getting longer and longer. We've no right to intrude so far from our homeworlds. We really don't.

They're so far away.

But how will we get back? We're such a long way out.

Oh, no problem, Stierlman. This fleet's Talent heavy, which wasn't accurate even though Thian felt that he'd reassigned the right people to the right positions. We'll be with you tomorrow. what's your current time?

Ah oh - - 1635.

Inform Captain Halstead that the Constellation Class AS KSTS, Captain Spkrm, will be `ported to join you at 0800 your time tomorrow.

what do I have to do? A thin line of barely contained fear trembled in the mental voice.

Nothing, Stierlman, Thian said kindly. You `re already there and we've only to join you.

Two days later `we've only' was a choice of words that Thian with any of the `portations but it had been a draining process for the T-1s and T-2s who bore the brunt of each merge.

The fact that each merge had different components also added to the strain on the merge focus. The second day, after a hasty conference, Thian `ported back specially selected 3s and 4s from those whose ships had already joined Squadron D. Rojer had gone to the

KSTS

to strengthen future links since Stierlman was useless.

Now, anyone wakes either Roj or myself any reason short of a Hiverfleet materializing in front of us, I'll kill `im.

So help me, I Thian sighed with immense relief as his heavy, hurting head touched the softness of his pillow and he was immediately asleep.

Though Alison-Anne swore herself blind that Thian had slept fourteen hours without moving, that his `Dinis had been up and about and eaten and were giving their usual tutorials, Thian was positive he had only just put his head to the pillow when she shook him awake.

`I am sorry, Thian, honey, but Rojer says you've got to talk to Earth Prime, too. It's real urgent. ' She separated the last two words to emphasize them, her face so bad-news blank that he didn't want to `look' in his present half-conscious state. He drank the stimulant beverage she handed him, grateful that it was cool enough to drink off quickly.

He grabbed the clean ship suit she handed him and, slipping his feet into the soft-soled shoes he preferred, strode across the lounge to the ready room. He had worked the kinks out of his shoulders and his neck by the time the door opened for him. Both Rojer and Clancy were on their couches; Semirame Klooloo leaned against the wall, arms crossed on her chest, watching their faces which were blank with

Prime, aware of his entry into the discussion. Briefly, I'll repeat what I've detailed to Rojer and Clancy. Those warning beacons the squadrons have been setting in the heliopause of Hive-occupied worlds are going off one after another. Captain Soligen informs us that Squadron B is in pursuit of two and worried about another one or two coming up behind them. With only two Galaxy class and two destroyers,

one of them minus significant numbers of its ordinary complement, she is not really equipped to tackle two or more Hivers and their complement of over-armed scouts. Nor does she have the new Hive-hull piercing missiles.

Did that mad `Dini captain set off in the captured sphere?

Thian thought with a groan. Did Captain Kimi have any armament?

Did Flavia tell it where we figured the missile controls were?

Easy, Thian. Flavia and the others `ported Klml into CThrf space a week ago. Laria says it arrived, scared the short hairs off half the `Dini population, but let's deal with your current situation. Thian had never heard quite that tone of voice from his grandfather before and concentrated on this briefing. With alarms going off all over the Alliance, the High Council is reluctant to send additional units to

reacted. I'm also afraid that the theory that Hivers do not have communications just got knocked down a worm-hole.

amazement. The High Council is going to be scared shitless.

Not as badly as I am, sir. This Fleet set beacons, too, you know, and Commander Kloo just handed me a note which confirms that those four

beacons have gone off With the two or three Captain Soligen can account

for, we can now add another four, AND the one we're chasing.

Seven, possibly eight? And they can communicate with each other? why now? Jeff sounded exasperated.

I think, sir, we've made the mistake of tpresuming' too much about the Hivers.

Obviously. Let's get back to this homeworld theory.

The Hivers' homeworld sun went nova. They sent out the three Hive spheres to find the right sort of primary with an M-5 planet to replace what they'd lost. The way we're seeing it now is that the original three spheres the `dinis came across were an advance group, spreading

out to look for just the right primary which is why they by-passed so many likely colonial M-5s. The Great Sphere was following with

ùOr all of them!

Oh! There was a pause while Jeff Raven assimilated that information. Well, we - the Alliance - certainly can't let them establish a new home base. look, inform Captain Ashiant of the situation within the Alliance. Assure him that we will supply whatever new missiles and material you can `port out there but he's got to make do with the two Fleet elements in that quadrant. The High Council is adamant that all other Fleet units remain deployed within the Alliance to counteract any Hive intrusions. I'll do all I can, personally and professionally, to help you, Thian.

Thank you, sir.

Damn it, boy, I didn't think I was letting you, any of you, in for a WAR! Jeff sounded more indignant than alarmed for their sakes.

Sir, we won't let you down!

Remember this, Primes, and Clancy, and I've said this to Flavia, you Talents are to preserve yourselves!

That we will, you may be sure of it. Thian put a good deal of strength in that assurance.

I'd better be, was Jeff Raven's final word.

Roger and Clancy regarded Thian with sardonic expressions as they all sat at the end of that `pathing.

All we have to do is get close enough. And not all that close either.

Semirame Kloo was actually the first to perceive what Thian was thinking and stared at him with an awed expression. 'That's no way to fight a war, Thian Raven-Lyon!' 'Who was it said that all's fair in love and war! Hell's bells, Rome, why should more than the enemy die in a war they started?' 'The 'Dini won't look at it quite the same way, Clancy reminded him. 'They achieve honour destroying Hiver ships.

Thian dismissed that. 'They still have the scouts to take out.

That'll give them glory enough. If I knew the insides of a scout as well as I do a sphere, we might be able to work out something inside 'em, too.

'D'you think Ashiant will go along with this bright plan of yours?' Kloo asked sceptically.

'Well, I think it'd be best if we let them all steam a bit. It wouldn't be for me to act, as Grandmother says, like a cocky kid. But didn't the 'Dinis approach us to form a mutual protection Alliance because we managed to defeat the sphere with no casualties on our side?' 'What was it you said to Granddad, Thi?' Rojer asked, cocking his head at his brother. 'About presuming something we don't know for sure?' 'For one thing, Thian, ' Clancy put in, 'using our kinesis to

amount of lives!' Ashiant heard the report with a blank expression but the way his eyes blinked rapidly from time to time and the way they moved over items on his desk told Thian, who knew him the best, that he

was already mulling over available options. At the point where Thian said that the High Council was keeping all additional units in Alliance space, he grimaced and `hmmmd' deep in his throat.

`I can understand that,' he said, allowing the words to emerge on a long expelled breath. `We shall first take Earth Prime up on his offer to send us more missiles and whatever other supplies the Fleet needs topping up.' He tapped the connection to the bridge. `Mr Wasiq, please call a red emergency session of all captains, first officers, gunnery and commissary personnel. The Primes will be standing by to `port carriers to the Washington. Mr Vandermeer, clear the landing bay and be ready to receive human and `Dini visitors appropriately.' Having given the necessary preliminary orders, Ashiant sat very still, not even steepling his fingers as he sometimes did, his eyes unfocused but, if Thian couldn't read the thoughts, he was aware of intense mental activity ùAbruptly Ashiant rose and, with an odd explosion of breath from his slightly opened mouth, pulled the blouse of his shipsuit down.

`We have quite a job of work ahead of us, don't we?' Thian nodded.



specific on that point, sir.

Ashiant nodded. `Theri tell her, Rojer, and, as tactfully as possible, ask her to refrain from taking direct action. I think we have presumed too much from too little substantiated information -` Ashiant missed the look Thian received from the others, `... but from all the `Dinis know, a sphere does not initiate space attacks.

Let us hope they are, as has been their custom, singleminded in their current mission.

Ashiant began to pace then, hands behind his back.

`We don't yet know if their comparable primary has been discovered, do we? How far ahead could you `port a scout, Prime?' `Using the mass of Sphere Three as one reference point, we could possibly send it that much further beyond as the distance between our current position and the sphere's. ' We've never done anything like that, Thian, Rojer said, his mind tone aghast with consternation.

I think we may have to do a lot of things that haven't been done before, Roj. But I know we could manage that.

The exchange was so brief that Thian did not miss Ashiant's reply.

`We might be in a tactically superior position if we could establish exactly where the sphere is headed.

I know I would feel a considerable relief if that could be

Gentlemen, this is Operation Number Three. So, Number Three will undoubtedly have to make a course correction at some point. If advance

scouts - we'd best deploy all we have` and he paused to look queringly at Thian who nodded with more energy than he felt for such a project.

`We will be in a better position to cover possible objectives.

Kloo, you'll command the Revere and, when you assemble your crew, include Lieutenant-Commander Langio. She's the best astrogator, and whatever other personnel might be useful in that aspect. I'll have to let other captains have their byte on selections but you're mine.

Kloo looked briefly towards Clancy but caught Thian's quick head shake and, saluting, retired from the room.

The comunit buzzed then. `Sir, ' said the com officer, Eki Wasiq, `we've replies from everyone and most are ready to lift on the "go" from the Primes. ' Ashiant nodded to the three Talents. `I'll want all three of you at this strategy conference, too. ' Do we know what we `re getting ourselves in for, bra? Rojer asked, echoing the sentiments Clancy held clear to be seen as the three jogged back to their ready room.

No, but we've done pretty well so far, handling matters as they come, haven't we? Thian said with a grin as he swung his feet up on

`Ah, well, Spktn, Prim and Ktpl sound awful eager `Is there a `Dini officer available to greet them properly?' `Aye, sir. ' Take `em in order, Thian said to Rojer and Clancy and reached out to grasp the `Dini carrier from the Constellation KSTS.

`All in neatly, Thian, ' Wasiq said, a note of relief in his voice.

`Next are Captains Shepherd, Cheseman and Germys. ' All were on board within fifteen minutes and, as the Talents rose from their couches, Alison-Anne appeared with a tray of high-protein bars and more stimulants.

`I told Commander Exeter that you'd need watching, she said, glaring at the three, `and you will! Even your `Dinis know something big's up. ' They don't know the half of it, do they? Thian said grinning as he grabbed up some of the bars and deposited them in his thigh pockets and drained the beverage. Rojer and Clancy followed his example.

`Gravy, ' he added, grasping her elbow, so she'd at least get an empathic reading of the urgency of the day, `get in touch with all T-2s and T-3s and have them alert and ready for unexpected duties. ' Do I use the code?

wanted to know from Captain Soligen.

Right. It won't take long. I don't want to miss a moment of this meeting.

Roger arrived with that information and gave it to Captain Ashiant just as Thian began repeating the message pathed to him by Earth Prime,

along with Captain Soligen's situation. The three Primes settled back then, to wait until the initial reaction was over and Captain Ashiant called for comments on appropriate tactics. As Thian listened to opinions, options and, more importantly, the almost over-confident optimism of humans, he was half sorry that the recent skirmish with the second sphere and its scouts had ended so successfully. Everyone had recovered from the original scare.

Confidence was useful - in moderation. Presumption, and the Mrdini commanders were the worst in that area, could lead to disaster.

'Prime Thian!' His name jolted him out of his contemplation.

'Sir?' and he swivelled in his chair to face Captain Shepherd of the Vadim.

'Did you identify any communications facility on the control board of the Refugee?' 'No, sir, but there was a lot of sort of end-of-the-row positions whose function had not been identified at the

question, ' the older man said, his prominent eyebrows nearly touching over the bridge of his nose as he fumed quietly over a delay.

I`Indeed it is, sir, and I'm certain High Council has the Phobos Base working all the hours of a day to discover what and how. ' `What good would that do, Shepherd?' Cheseman laskedlunfly. `We wouldn't have the foggiest what they were saying even if we did access their communications frequency?' Shepherd considered that but refused to concede.

`We'd at least know when they were contacting each other, and, if we could determine the direction, be warned from what other quadrants we might expect additional units to join Number Three. I'll be candid, Cheseman, Ashiant, one sphere posed enough problems. We may have the

state-of-the-art missiles which have now proven effective, but the possibility of eight - or more such ships, plus twenty-four of those over-kill scouts makes a formidable adversary. ' `We have reinforcements

`Germys began, pausing to frown at the ensign who entered as discreetly

as possible to give Ashiant a note.

Shepherd took advantage of that pause and sprang in with: ` Who

its full height, `what the Hivers do now has never been seen in the two hundreds of years that we have been opposing them. We Mrdini find ourselves in accord with the theory that the three spheres and the Great Sphere went in search of a homeworld to replace the one that was

burned up. It is regrettable that the specific nature of that primary is unknown - Ashiant rose, bowing apologies to Spktm for an interruption in its peroration. `As to that, honoured Captain, the specific nature of the Hive primary is known. ' He smiled as everyone eagerly awaited his next words and waved the note in his hand. `As you know, we've been examining the systems which the Hivers have by-passed,

but one of our bright young astronomically inclined ensigns, Cyra Charteris, hit on the notion of examining tapes from the astronomical files of the Hive quadrant and comparing them with those taken by your good seW Spktm, while at the nova site. We now know that primary's spectrum signature!' His ringing voice echoed in the brief silence.

Then everyone began to talk at once.

`Then I see no bar at all to sending the scouts out to home in on that star before Number Three can, ' Shepherd said, almost shouting to be heard.

Thian said, suddenly rising to attract everyone's attention, '-if they're put where they will do the most damage and that is a Talent we possess!' That momentary silence was broken by a burst of laughter from

Commander Yngocelen of the Vadim.

'Thian Lyon, you have made my day!' And he gave a triumphant whoop

of delight, jumping to his feet.

'Don't you all see what the Prime proposes? I mean, with that technique, it doesn't matter a hoot in hell how many spheres come after us, they get a missile where it'll do the most good and boom!' He clapped his hands together and then extended his arms outward.

'This is the Genessee ploy in a new guise. And it means we don't even have to get in range of any sphere to destroy it. We'll only need to know where it is! Thian, Rojer and Clancy here plant the missile hey, it doesn't even have to be a missile 'Which actually wouldn't fit in a sphere engine room - Rojer remarked, grinning at Yngocelen's enthusiasm.

- Whatever, ' and Yngie flicked that minor detail away with one long-fingered hand. 'The package can be delivered and the sphere is

NO LOSS OF LIFE AMONG US. NO HUMAN BLOOD WAS SPILT.  
TOO MUCH MRDINI  
BLOOD HAS BEEN SPILT IN TWO HUNDREDS OF YEARS. NOW IS  
THE TIME TO END  
THAT WASTE OF COLOUR'S BLOOD AND SPEND YOUR TIME  
FINDING NEW WORLDS ON  
WHICH TO LIVE AT PEACE. YOU SOMETIMES FIND OUR CAUTION  
COWARDLY - . A  
rumble of protest from as many human throats as Mrdini briefly  
interrupted him. `BUT WE HUMANS DO NOT RE-CREATE AS  
MRDINIS MAY SO WE  
ARE CAREFUL OF THE ONE LIFE WE HAVE. ' Thian wondered  
whether he had  
overstepped the bounds to inteiject that fact but he had to assume all  
Mrdinis of Spktn's, and probably Prim's, status would know of the  
re-creation of Kat and Gil. `THERE WILL BE FIGHTING ENOUGH TO  
SATISFY  
HONOUR BUT FEWER DEATHS TO CAUSE GRIEF. LET US  
HUMANS DO WHAT YOU  
SOUGHT US OUT TO DO - DESTROY THE HIVER THREAT WITH  
THE LEAST POSSIBLE



I'm with you, Lyon, was Kloos's enthusiastic acknowledgement.

This is supposed to be a high-level top-secret strategy meeting but, Kloos, kiss that ensign of yours who had the wits to compare astronomical tapes!

Not quite. I'll leave that for you or Rojer!

Ashiant rose and banged the gavel to restore order.

'I observe that most of us here are in accord with Prime Lyon's excellent suggestions, although I'm sure he'll be the first to admit that we haven't solved all the tactical problems facing us. But our priorities are now clearly defined. Yngocelen, figure out what sort of payload would be needed to destroy a sphere if `ported into the engine room.

'I'd need a few details but, considering the fuel Hive ships use, a rather compact package of the right stuff would set off a fuel reaction nothing could stop.' The gunnery officer was unable to stop grinning at such a satisfactory prospect.

'Do we have the requisite components on board?' 'Sir, I believe we do.' 'That's all well. Our Talents need to reserve their energies for exportation rather than importations.

Ashiant's little witticism took a moment to sink in but Rojer caught it and gave a laugh which he tried to smother behind both hands.

the diy 'The diy, Prime?' 'Yes, sir, the destroy-it-yourself. . .

Captain Soligen

it's missing here. So what's this variant on the Genessee

will be very anxious to deal with those three spheres as soon as possible and she should. Who knows how many more we'll have to deal

with! She's got the Talent to get the ah exportations A flicker of a smile crossed Ashiant's face. 'By all means, inform her of the strategy, Prime. And also inform Earth Prime. Some of those anxious boots back in Alliance territory can take the byte and use it themselves to good advantage. ' 'I'll ask about communications, too, sir.

Ashiant flicked his hand to speed Thian on his message round.

Stay, Rojer, Clancy, and keep our end up!

Thian made contact with Flavia on the Columbia.

Didn't Rojer give you the course headings? We'll let you know the moment they alter, Flavia began, somewhat startled to have two contacts

in such a brief time.

No, and Vesta's closing the gap daily. I once thought Klml was rnger-happy, but sight of two strong ion trails have altered not only Hptml until its poll eye's gonefuchsia, but Captains Steverice and Hsiang are nearly as bloodthirsty. They want those spheres worse than Klml wanted the one it got. And I'll bet that's one bad-tempered `Dini in Cia thinking of what gambit?

When Thian had explained, he could hear her startled exclamation and possibly an echo from Captain Soligen. And the relief that flooded her mind. She'd been trying to sound so cool and composed. Now he realized that she'd been as scared as he had been until he figured out the advantage Talent was giving both elements of the Fleet. Indeed, the entire Alliance.

what did you just say to Flavia, Thian? Zara demanded.

She's sounding like she's in pain but she's grinning as if you proposed or something.

I didn't propose marriage, little sister, but listen.

By the time he had explained the stratagem, her mind was focusing tight on his words.

Thian, that's marvellous news, Flavia said. You can't hear how everyone is cheering.

Now, let's not celebrate prematurely. I don't want anyone

replied.

None of us know what medium they use for communication.

The queen made sounds, Zara said, an odd note in her mental tone.

There were tapes and tapes made of her clicks and stutters and glottal stops. I know I'm in a minority, but I still feel sorry for that one and I'm not ashamed of myself for it.

Nor should you be ashamed of a genuine act of empathic kindness, Thian replied firmly, sensing Zara's curious ambivalence. She had, after all, saved the queen once without ever understanding how she knew

why she felt so compelled to act. Did anyone ever make any sense out of those sounds, Zara? Thian asked kindly.

Noooo, Zara admitted in a melancholic tone, then more briskly, Have any of you bright boys figured out the frequency on which they communicate?

Thian chuckled. I'll bet they're swarming the Refugee right now trying to figure that out. Probably going over the one Klml brought back to Clarf. Look, I've got to tell Granddad all this, and get him off the hook, with the Alliance in a state of utter panic. One of us will get back to you as soon as Commander Yngocelen's figured out the specifications of the surprise package.

Well, there're more minds to merge this time round.

By the Cluster, Thian, against how many spheres? Flavia sounded aghast at that prospect. It's just as well there re more sensible alternatives available!

She broke off contact then and her final indignant remark left him chuckling. He wasn't chuckling by the time his grandfather, very much Earth Prime throughout the lengthy interview, had winkled every scrap of all the conversations Thian had overheard in the Washington's ready room, and had Thian repeat his reply to Spktm - a rhetoric which made Thian squirm on the couch as he recited it. Verbatim it sounded more pompous and impassioned than it had when the phrases and ideas had just formed in his mind and issued from his mouth.

Then there was that long pause before Jeff spoke again, more Granddad than Prime.

I concur with Flavia, Thian lad. There has been a remarkable inevitability, starting at Deneb years ago, that leads inexorably to this confrontation. Perhaps the Hivers had had warning as far back as Deneb that their sun would turn nova.

You may be sure the High Council will be relieved to hear of this turn of events. Not to mention every other fngfrned citizen of this

No more than you ever did, sir. But I'm here.

And I - ù ù am here for you, Thian.

Thian never knew until much later who decided the deployment of the Washington's scouts, but the three Talents, with a little help from three T-2s brought in to the ready room for this mass `portation, got the six scouts into their assigned positions.

None of the Talents liked using Number Three as the reference point - they all caught the heavy stinggzst - but they got the scouts safely past that obstacle without alerting the sphere to their passage.

Yngocelen had the help of every other munitions expert in the Fleet. Late that night, when he came to the Tower ready room so he could be present while Thian passed the requisite instructions to Captain Soligen, he told the Talents that it took more time to hear everyone 5 theories than it did to make up sufficient `surprise packages' `We made a lot more than I hope we'll ever need, ' Yngocelen

said, shrugging his bony shoulders and grinning. `But hell, once we got started, we kinda just continued. They're compact, handy little mothers!' He grinned again and then yawned.

`Don't do that, ' Thian said, answering yawn with yawn as he slipped onto the couch.

neat little dealie. We've got everything on board, too. Ah, Captain just arrived. I'll see if she has any queries.

Oh, Thian, will this work? Flavia was trying very hard to maintain her usual composure.

These men know what they're doing with explosives. And we know how to deliver. Remember where there're all those connecting pipes in Refugee's engine room, Flavia?

Yes, yes, I do.

That's where you plant it. Detonation can be set just before you report it. Yngie suggests no more than five seconds because it just might be noticed. They see better in the dark than we do.

I've got that. Captain Sohgen sends you her most profound thanks and Lieutenant-Commander Searles says it's neat, easily assembled and

he's just left to do it. Vesta says she's going to do the ones behind us first. She says it makes her nervous having those things rolling up our backsides.

I'd agree. Clancy's taking the first watch so let him know what happens.

There was a brief pause when Thian knew that Flavia had not yet broken the contact.

Flavia, with assists from Rhodri and her brother - Zara flatly refused to have anything to do with the `portations - delivered the packages.

`She said, ' Clancy reported to Thian over breakfast, `that everyone joined the countdowns and saw the distant bursts that marked the destruction. Captain Soligen reports all four spheres removed and she's running at top speed to join us. Flavia said that Earth Prime was delighted. ' He waited a beat, ducking his head, his expression full of chagrin. `I thought we should have waited until you were awake and could do the honours. Rojer spoke out, too, but once Yngie had assembled the bombs, Spktn couldn't wait to see if they'd work so Captain Ashiant ordered us to despatch em.

`What're you looking like that for, then, coz? You didn't muff the job, did you?' `Hell, no!' Clancy said on a nervous laugh, but I really think it was totally unfair for you not to be able to plant one.

Thian gave Clancy an affectionate clout on the shoulder. `So long as you left Number Three for me - and he fixed his cousin with a stern stare.

Clancy raised his hands and recoiled slightly at the thought of such perfidy.

`OK, then! Relax. So long as Number Three's mine!' `Only because Captain Ashiant wants to be sure, said Rojer, joining them then, `it



'Maybe she did,' Clancy said. 'Wasiq had been running through D's log tapes and found that they had lost the trail for about three weeks and had to trawl around to pick it up again.' 'Stierlman never mentioned that.' 'Well, it's in the official log.' 'Bet Ashiant was furious,' Thian said, cursing Stierlman.

'With Captain Halstead, not Stierlman. At least they found the ion trail again.

Thian sighed. 'How far behind Number Three are we hanging?' 'Far enough so there's no chance of any known sensors picking us up on Number Three.

'But, if they do have communications 'Look, bra, the spheres that got blown up wouldn't have had time to send a click, clack or clatter!' 'A lack of communications from ships known to have been operable and following Number Three would make the rest of them suspicious,' Thian said, running an impatient hand through his hair, and hauling back into place the white lock that was always falling in his eyes.

'Ashiant feels the same way,' Clancy said and then shrugged. 'But they won't know what took 'em out. I'd say Great-Uncle is making sure none leave Alliance space. Ashiant ordered the KLTR and the Comanche to hang back and sweep for any late arrivals.' 'So, it's a waiting game

Number Three's destination: a youngish G-type star, matching the original Hiver primary within .0378 disparity in its spectrum which the astrogators considered close enough. It had eleven planets, two of them with the suitable atmospheres and the correct proportion of land mass to sea that Hivers preferred, in the M-5 and M-6 positions.

The sphere would shortly have to make a course alteration if this were, indeed, the primary it sought.

Tension mounted in the Fleet while reports from Captain Soligen that she had `surprised' another sphere coming up behind her added to the dismay of those wanting to reach confrontation.

Captain Ashiant broadcast ship-wide that as soon as Number Three made that course correction to approach the heliopause of that system, they would intercept it.

As a precaution, he asked Thian to arrange the `portation of Captain Spktn and the KSTS and two Galaxy class, the KLTL and the Vadim, and the destroyers KLTS and the Comanche, in case Number

Three

sent her three scouts out ahead of her to confirm the suitability of the system. He recalled the furthest ranging scouts but let the Franklin and the Revere remain with the task force.

Jeff Raven reported phenomenal success with the Genessee ploy and

space. Asia and Mallen Bastianmajani were transferred to the KMTM and

Rhodri and Jes to the Valparaiso: the two Galaxy class ships hung slightly back of the Columbia's centre and she was guarded by the two destroyers as she maintained her course following the ion trail of Number Three, the main Fleet ahead of her.

Only one more sphere ship met its end by their method but, to the chagrin of the main Fleet, it gave Squadron B an impressive total without a single casualty.

'Number Three's slowed, ' Ashiant said over the comunit to the Talents. 'She's hanging outside the heliopause. Ah, now she's deploying her scouts. Could she have sensor readings of our forward elements?' 'Whether she has or not, sir, will it make any difference now when she receives the package?' Thian asked, striding towards his couch. This one's mine, remember!

Gee, can't we watdi? Rojer asked in a pesky kidbrother voice.

'Commander Yngocelen, here, Prime Thian, package is ready to go.

'Thank you, Commander. ' Thian settled himself, caught the gestalt of the generators, 'found' the explosive package where it sat on the floor of the landing bay, sent his mind ahead to the darkness of Number Three's engine room, the macaroni junction of tubes and pipes and

showed the vivid blossoming of the distant explosion, tiny though it was at this distance.

The screen cleared more rapidly than perhaps the watchers could wish at this moment of ultimate triumph, but the after-image of that dramatic climax to a long search would be remembered often in the mind's eye. No-one felt like cheering, but there were sighs of relief to be heard around the bridge and thoughtful expressions on every face.

`Mr Wasiq, check with the KSTS to see if the scouts got away, ' Ashiant said, breaking the silence. Other muted sounds on the bridge indicated the resumption of normal duties.

`Sir, Captain Spktn and the other ships have engaged two of the scouts, the third was caught in the blast destroying Number Three. The captain believes that the scouts received some damage `With no Minds to

guide them, of course they have, Thian murmured.

and the Vadim and the KLTS have launched a barrage. Sir, Captain Spktn reports the demolition of both remaining scouts.

`Operation Number Three completed, Ashiant said quietly.

As Thian lay on the couch, readying himself to report Captain Ashiant's words to Earth Prime, he felt none of the sense of triumph he had anticipated. Relief was the dominant emotion, relief from tension,

mind. Though I'm sure you could pick whatever Prime opportunity you choose.

You know Number Three's gone?

I read that. I also perceived your state of mind and on that you have my most sincere compliments. You are a credit to our calling and to your family. A war where only the enemy dies!

Thian was startled to hear his own phrase repeated, though the thought would have occurred to more than one person who disliked unnecessary violence.

We have won this part of the war, Thian lad, but only this part.

if it gives your mind any ease, a great many people, wise and simple, are trying to find out how to control the population pressure on Hive worlds, in that way reducing the species' need to colonize, eliminating their aggressiveness.

Either is preferable to their solution for hfr on other planets, Thian said.

War-weary, are you?

Weary, yes, sir.

How about finding new worlds humans and `Dinis can live on, either together or by the species?

There are a couple of hot-sun worlds the `dinis can have all to

Fleet has amassed to see if we can't come up with a solution to containing, but not necessarily restricting, Hivers to their current colonies.

Zara would like that part especially.

There was a beat of a pause. Yes, I suspect with her ambivalence, she would and she may join them in that research, especially if she's a burden on Captain Sohgen and Flavia.

You might, sir, transfer Rojer to the Columbia if you reassign Zara to a research situation.

The little Asia enters into that suggestion?

She does.

Well, the degree of ousinship is not a detriment, and Thian thought his grandfather sounded mildly pleased and surprised. Hmmm.

Both squadrons will now be assigned colonial explorations but I see no reason to put the boy through any more emotional stress than he's already had. He likes Asia that much?

Sir, he's very protective of her. Either a steady dose will cure him or consolidate his current interest.

You don't like Asia? This was definitely Grandfather talking.

She's sweet and engaging and, when she's out of shy mode, she can be fun but She's not your type.

Then how the hell does Grandfather know about AlisonAnne?

Roger shrugged. 'How the hell does Grandfather know half of what he does? He just does and what did he just tell you? Thanks, maybe?' Don't be cocky, boy, Thian said, with a grin and a punch on his brother's arm as he passed him on his way to Captain Ashiant's ready room down the hall.

Well, give us a clue, wontcha? Clancy added his complaint to Roger's.

Thian heaved a sigh as he knocked politely on the captain's door.

just listen in. I get so tired of having to repeat things - ù

'Captain Ashiant, the compliments of Earth Prime who forwards the deep

thanks and appreciation of the High Council and all Alliance citizens for the speedy settlement of this threat to our civilizations. ' Ashiant regarded Thian for a long moment.

'Is that really what he said they said?' 'Well, sir, if not, that's how it should have been phrased. Earth Prime is deeply relieved that, as he did say, this is a war where only the enemy died. ' 'Not quite, but near enough to make it a valid comment, ' Ashiant said, nodding acceptance.

Then Thian grinned broadly. 'I've also the happy duty to inform

family, your colour and everyone serving under you.

`If you don't mind, Prime, I think we had best wait until this has been officially confirmed, but I thank you for apprising me of it. '

There was another polite tap on the door but First Officer Vandermeer did not even wait for Ashiant's response before she entered, holding out the usual documents corner.

`This just `ported in, sir, and it's addressed to "Admiral Ashiant"! Sir!' Face wreathed with a broad and happy smile, she handed him the narrow carrier with her left hand while snapping him one definitely high-class salute.

`Well, ' Ashiant said, uncapping the cylinder and taking out the tightly rolled official document, `well, ' and he unrolled it, `well, and so it says. ' `May I be the first to congratulate you, Admiral Ashiant?' Vandermeer said, tears of pride in the corners of her eyes.

`Why, that's splendid news, Admiral Ashiant, ' Thian said quickly, stepping forward and holding out his hand.

`I'm honoured to be present on such a felicitous occasion. My sincerest congratulations, Admiral Ashiant, for a well-deserved promotion!' Ashiant cocked a sardonic eyebrow at the Prime but there was no way Thian would have deflated Vandermeer's moment.

The news was -all over the ship before Thian finished the further



had little time to do.

‘We signed up for a five-year mission,’ Thian reminded him.

‘That could have some dangerous moments, too,’ Clancy said in a hopeful tone. ‘But Cousin Raven’s correct. There’s a lot more to be done to see if we can’t alter the Hivers sufficiently to reduce the threat they pose.’

‘Did those boffins at Phobos Base discover how to communicate with the spheres?’ Rojer asked, remembering that unresolved line of endeavour.

‘Who knows? We destroyed all the spheres they could have talked to. But there’s got to be some way to establish contact.’

Communication might even explain to them - in a much nicer way that what they’re doing isn’t currently acceptable social behaviour,’ Clancy said facetiously. ‘That would settle the problem and we’ll divvy the available M-5 worlds equally among us.’

‘Only the Hivers would want to be more equal than the rest of us,’ Rojer said. ‘They breed faster.’ By evening, everyone knew of Ashiant’s promotion and he had to tour the messes on all the nearby ships to take the toasts due his new rank. When Alison-Anne got off duty, Rojer insisted that he could as easily ‘port the Admiral wherever

deny him.

‘But does he realize that without you Primes, ’ and she included Clancy in her gaze and rattled her fingers at Rojer in the ready room, he'd be in deep kimchee right now with spheres doing billiard balls, with him the 8 ball. ’ ‘Honey, ’ and Thian's voice raised above her unexpected championship of Talents. He patted the chair beside him for

her to take. ‘We're all in the same boat, win or lose. We did win, if that's what killing all your enemy is about. ’ With a deft snake of his arm, he pulled her to his lap though her body resisted him, tense and unrepentant. He kissed the nape of her neck and felt her give just a little. ‘Look at it from my point of view, han. I'm just not supposed to be a combatant at all. I'm supposed to ‘port and ‘path and that's all I did. ’ ‘Yes, but that's what won the war for Ashiant and all of us, love. And that's the only time in my life I hope I'll have to do that! Don't you?’ He tried to turn her head towards him so he could look her in the eye. And then, those tactics unsuccessful, he tried another one.

I've asked Grandfather to send Rojer to the Columbia and Asia.

He's really missing her ù ‘Oh, did you, Thian darling!’ She was suddenly supple in his arms again and twisted to put hers around his

lovingly to end the unprofitable conversation, but isn't it nice to be able to talk together the way we are and still be able to kiss?

Hmmmm, was her response as he picked her up in his arms and, deftly managing to maintain firm contact on her mouth, carried her towards their room.

grandfather also approves of us, you know, he said.

She broke the kiss and stared at him, wide blue eyes incredulous.

'The Prime of Earth approves of meeee?' With reference to your complaint about who should get the credit for all this, as long as I have you, Alison-Anne Greevy, I won't complain.

I guess, she said in a dreamy contemplative voice as he laid her gently on the bed, maybe I did have just the tiniest bit of precog when I first met you Did you now? And what did your precognitive Talent tell you?

That I'd be doing this with you a long time!

THE END