

TRIBES: Einstein's Hammer

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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And especially, we would all like to thank the fans of Tribes who have helped make this universe so popular. We do appreciate you, folks, truly.

SP

This book is for Dianne—
As they have all been before,
and will all be hereafter.
And for Guru Stevan Plinck,
and the *serak* class
in Cotton and Vic's garage:
Banyak 'ma kasih—
Thank you very much—
please shake each other's hands.

*“Old, crafty and treacherous beats
young, strong and fair every time.”*

—Anonymous



Other Books by Steve Perry

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PROLOGUE

The first sign of the anomaly was just a little *ping!* on the optical scanner. It was nothing really, a tiny noise, easy to miss even if you were zeroed in on it.

Which Children of the Phoenix Warrior-Tech Anjoe “Slip” Tejas wasn’t—zeroed in on it, that is. He wasn’t asleep—in twenty years he had never once nodded off on duty—but after six or eight hours of watching boring-as-dung infocrawl and stat-shift on the fuzzy old sensor screens, he sometimes fell into a kind of hypnotic state. He was awake, but not really...focused.

So it took a second to register. He rubbed at his tribal tattoo, the highly stylized phoenix on his bare left shoulder where the sleeve had been cut away, and frowned at the screen. What was that? He leaned forward and stared. He felt stale, could smell his own sweat. Time for a shower, soon as he logged off duty. He had four extra liters of water saved, maybe he could get halfway clean this time... Yeah, okay, something on the screen—but what? Nothing seemed to be wrong. He waved his hand over the diagnostic plate. *Give it to me again.*

Not that he really needed to worry about it, whatever it was. Morliss Moon, a huge, dull, mostly sand-covered rock orbiting the gas giant Shiva, way the hell and gone out here in the wilderzone, was not exactly a hub of activity. In three years of this duty at the Dead Forest Holdfast—a place perfectly named, too—he hadn’t seen dink on the screens. No unexpected ships, no meteors or asteroids or stray comets, no surprise visitors from home. Zip. Quiet as a tomb.

But—there was something there *now*...

The optical scanner *pinged!* again, then again, then

rolled right into a fast and repetitive *ting! ting! ting!* Slip had never heard in twenty years of service.

Flame Leader Creel drifted over. "What is causing that noise?"

"Damned if I know, Sarge."

"You're also out of uniform again."

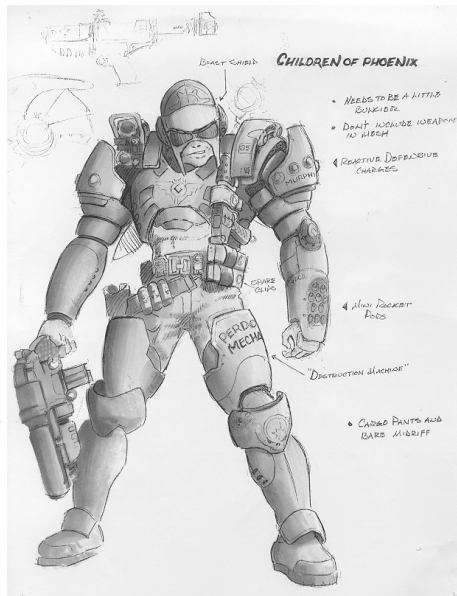
"So what—you gonna restrict me to the hold?"

Creel grinned. He also wore a sleeveless vest showing his tribals. "No, but you might wish you had a hardsuit on time I get through kicking your ass."

Tejas returned the grin. About half the time, the station coolers didn't work, and not even talking armor, a regular uniform heated up real fast. Last thing anybody wanted to do was climb into full armor. The heavy scarab suits stood gathering dust in rows in the storage section. Nobody had played with 'em since the last

semi-annual function checks, and then only 'cause they *had* to. It had been a long time since Tejas had actually *worn* a hardsuit, but he supposed he knew as much as anybody about them. They were basically titanium-cerapolymer alloy fused over shaped plates of honey-combed,

semiflexible stahlplast. The stahlplast had an ablative gel that boiled off if you got hit with heat, and the soft



orthoderm padding was *supposed* to be comfortable, but if the suit's air coolers went out, *that* would be enough to cook you—

"Holy shit!" somebody yelled. "Look!"

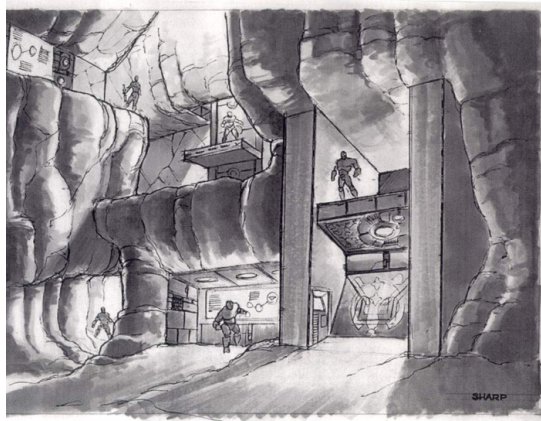
The two techs glanced toward the dome pit, where a trio of off-duty ground-pounders sat at the table, playing cards. The three warriors were really out of uniform, they wore shorts and nothing else, and some of them must have helped keep some laser tattooist in business, given their decorations. They looked up through the clear denscrist dome at something the techs couldn't see.

"Son-of-a-bitch! There ... there's a ... a *hole* in the sky!"

Creel waved at the sensor array. "Lock it down, Slip, lock it down!" The sergeant turned toward the duty room and yelled, "Tanar Brazzio! We got a situation! You better get out here!"

The Tanar, trying to catch some sleep on the duty room cot, stumbled out into the sensor pit. "What? This better be important!"

Slip's hands danced over the control array, waving in and out of light and shadow sensors, calling up facts and figures on the anomaly. But the radar and dop and bounce-back pulsettes all came up scrambled. Whatever



it was, the machines didn't recognize it. Great. Just hunching great.

The card players were on their feet, staring, and other warriors hurried over to get a look at whatever it was causing all the fuss. Slip was tempted to abandon his useless equipment and go eyeball the thing himself, but Creel said, "Get that new shield online, now!"

Tanar Brazzio shambled to the dome pit, still half asleep, scratching his crotch. "Ease up, boys. Whatever it is, it can't get through the shield. Which *is* up, isn't it, Warrior Tejas?"

Creel glared at Slip, who waved one hand over the shadow reader just in time. "Oh, yeah, in three . . . two . . . one. Confirm, the roof is *up*."

On the sensor screen, the new force field that had cost half the mining profits for all of last year showed just fine. The shield itself was invisible, of course, being nothing more than electromagnetic flux and TSPS—tamed subatomic particle swarms—but it registered as a fine yellow net on the sensors. The shield would stop a full-bore blast from a fifty-gig laser, splash it away like an umbrella would turn a kid's water pistol. At least that's what he'd been told. Whatever else was going on out there, Slip Tejas could guaran-damn-tee there wasn't a ship within the hundred thousand klick range of his scanners, and nobody could shoot you any farther away than that. So whatever this thing was, it wasn't gonna be dropping in for a surprise visit, no way, no how, take that to the bar and drink it straight, thank you.

"Sweet baby Harabec," the Tanar said. "What the hunch is it doing?"

Slip looked over, saw a sudden glow strobe the Tanar and the men under the clear dome, a bright spring-green flash.

"I don't like this at all," the Tanar said. "Wake up, assholes! I want us on Full Alert, now! Somebody call Hold Captain Francis!"

Slip hit the Battle Klaxon control. Wouldn't be any need to call Cap Francis, he'd hear that if he was drunk, asleep, or dead. The horn buzzed and honked, and the red lights around the walls flared into manic life.

Another verdant strobe of light blinked, brighter than before, bright enough even to wash out the emergency red lights.

To hell with Creel, Slip *had* to see what it was. There wasn't anything else he could do at his sensor array right this second. He stood, shoved his seat back, and hurried to the dome.

It was as if somebody had torn an opening in the

sky. As if giant hands had punched through the pale watery blue of the moon's crappy atmosphere, grabbed the



edges, and peeled them back, making a ragged hole, a puncture that was filled with a pale greenish glow. It was just like one of those old chem-stiks he'd played with as a kid. Man!

"Get back to your post, Slip," Creel said. Then he yelled, "Suits! I want everybody else in armor, right hunching *now*, triple-time!"

But before Tejas could turn away, the greenish glow got brighter. And brighter and brighter, until it was like staring into a star, a green sun—!

That was the last thing he saw.

From above the backrocket moon, the beam seemed almost like a giant burning, green spear. It lanced from nowhere, pierced through the supposedly impenetrable shield, and impaled the Phoenix holdfast. The beam raised a spew of dark smoke and dust that boiled up to enshroud the entire keep. The roiling pall hung there for what seemed a long time.

When the smoke finally cleared there was no sign of the Dead Forest Holdfast. No men, no women, no machines, no buildings, nothing. Not even rubble remained. Instead, a still-glowing crater fifty meters deep had replaced most of what passed for civilization on Morliss Moon, the crater walls as slick as the inside of a teacup, sand melted and fused into muddy brown glass with bits of organic contaminants.

They never knew what hit them.

On the Slicer Tribe ship *Black Steel*, Cutter Holmes looked at the recording of the devastation. The tech had tracked and captured the outgoing slow-radio distress sig containing the Children's interior and satellite camera recs and log-files, and had blended those images together into the dramatic pictures Holmes had just seen. The final image of the melted crater froze onscreen.

"Want me to run it again, Mastersmith?" the tech said.

"No. I've seen enough."

Next to him, Apprenticesmith Brinker smiled. "Behold Einstein's Hammer. It worked just as you said it would."

"Yeah, it did."

"You don't sound particularly happy about it."

Holmes shook his head. He'd spent ten years working on this project, but even so, it felt kind of empty.



"Hundreds of men and women just got blasted into vapor. They didn't have a prayer."

"War is hell, Mastersmith."

"And we aren't *in* a war, Brink. This was just a . . . field test. They were handy. We were more than a *billion* kilometers away when we fired. They couldn't have fought back even if they had known where we were, and there was no way they could have even *imagined* we were that far away."

"It is a formidable weapon, Mastersmith."

"Formidable, yes. There is not much honor in using such a device."

The younger man's jaw set, and Holmes knew what was coming. He'd heard it often enough. He had said it himself. He'd even believed it—for a time.

"Honor lies in helping our tribe survive," Brinker said. "We—you—have done that, Mastersmith. Your device will turn the tide of power. The Slicers will no longer be ill-treated lackeys to the major tribes. None of them can stand against us now—not the Children of the Phoenix, not the Starwolf, the Diamond Sword, nor the Blood Eagle. We will finally ascend to our rightful place!"

"Yes," Holmes said. "I suppose we will."

He turned away, looked at the image of the crater frozen on the screen. But at what cost will we rise? How many millions will we have to slay on our way to the top of the mountain?

He shook his head. Not thoughts for a warrior, these. He was a scientist, but he was a warrior, too. Brinker was right. War was hell. And it was better to be shooting the fire than burning in it. Perhaps it was such a terrible weapon that merely *having* it would be enough. Perhaps they wouldn't even have to use it again.

Perhaps.

ONE

Tok Narr lifted the rock, half as heavy as he was, and easily tossed it into the crusher. The hopper hummed and ground the rock to grit. Some of the powdery dust blew up from the hopper and drifted over Narr, joining the layers of sweat and dust already coating him, adding to the gooey paste on his skin and clothes. The rocks must have a lot of minerals in them, he thought, because he smelled like fresh-minted copper.

Next to him, Loof Onj, his compadre-thrall, heaved a smaller rock into the hopper, and was also rewarded with a hum and spray of fine dust. The machine's bin was about half-full, good for another couple tons before it would have to be emptied.

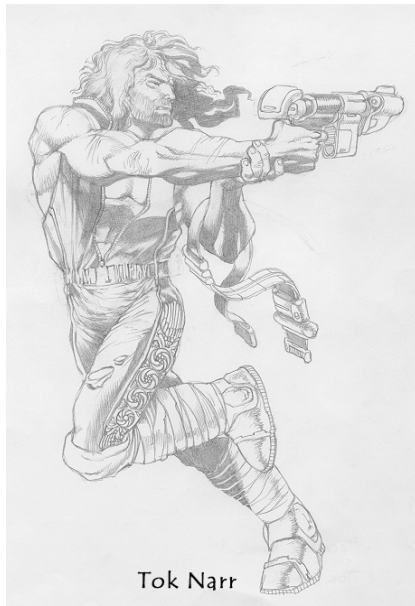
"Morning break!" Overseer Little Dog yelled. That wasn't his real name, but all the thralls thought of him that way. He yapped and growled, but he was a small man who had not taken the stingstik from his belt to stroke a thrall in weeks, and the last time, he'd only barely touched the man he'd hit. As overseers went, Little Dog was a good one, more interested in getting the work done than in dealing out punishment. Narr had slaved under a lot worse. It was not a bad life. You got up, you worked the fields, you ate good food, got plenty of rest. They treated you if you got hurt or sick; you had a tent over your head when it was hot, a prefab flexplast building with heat when it was cold; your freeday was pretty much your own. Not that there was anything to do on your freeday. He was tanned, fit, strong, and he could move rocks all day with an economy of motion that didn't leave him totally exhausted each night when they were done. Sometimes he had enough energy to sneak over to the women's quarters and dally with one of the female thralls. Life



could be a lot worse.

Not that Narr had any other kind of life to compare it with. All he could remember began when he woke up in a thrall work camp hospital fifteen years ago. Before that, his slate was more or less blank. He didn't know how old he was, but probably somewhere around thirty-five. His hair was still black, no gray in it; he still had his own teeth; he could see fine, and he didn't *feel* old, whatever that felt like.

Narr straightened, kneaded a kink out of his back with one fist, then headed for the thrall rest tent. The open-walled canopy had once been a dark blue, but a few months under the hot sun in the tropics of Hepta Ourubis III had faded it to a pale shade. The Starwolf insignia had also grown lighter under the hammering of the sunshine as the thrall work camp had moved across the countryside, clearing



stones and stumps for agro-fields. In a lot of ways, the warriors and overseers had it worse. All that gear they wore got real warm out here in the tropical sun, and half the time, their armor-coolers didn't work. Caused a lot of cursing when a cooler blew out and the day was body-temp hot and so humid the sweat wouldn't evaporate.

At the water trough, the thralls had to serve them-

selves. Narr took a big mug of the cold liquid, drank deep, then refilled the container. He uncrowded the tab of his pale gray coverall to let the warm air circulate over his chest. "Where is Hogbutt today?"

Loof Onj drained his mug and refilled it, drank half of that. "Dunno fer sure. I heard from Vesher that he had a sickness in the family, uncle or somesuch, hadda go to the hospital in Oruvula City."

Narr shrugged, drank again. "So it's just us and Little Dog, and he's in the air-conditioned overseer tent feasting on local rock snails. This is our chance. Maybe today we make a run for it, ayia?"

Onj chuckled, and Narr also smiled. So there was only one overseer watching two hundred thralls, so what? They were five hundred clicks away from the nearest civilized coastal towns, on the cleared edge of a jungle where there were big cats and lupes that would just as soon eat you as look at you, snakes whose poison would kill you before you hit the ground, and plants whose touch on bare skin would blow you up like a balloon before you keeled over puking your guts out. Nice place to run to, hey? You took off from here, they wouldn't even bother to chase you. Why should they? You wouldn't get more than a few clicks away, even if you were real lucky. Narr had seen the picked-clean bones of a few thralls who had tried to run through the jungle. That was a fool's bet.

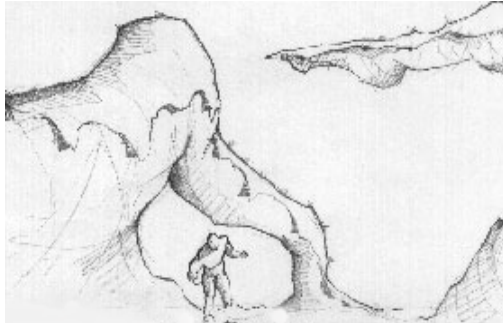
To the south, the wall of trees and militantly-green tangled vinery came almost all the way up to the thrall tent. Unless they cut it back, the bush would reclaim the cleared ground in a couple of months. Probably grow right over the tent and collapse it, too.

Narr just happened to be looking that direction when the stranger stumbled out of the dense growth.

The man was in bad shape. He was short, compact,



and fair-skinned, and he wore a bad sunburn where he wasn't covered by his cheap paperskin tunic and pants. He took four or five steps, then collapsed just before he would have reached the shade of the tent.



"Hello? Who's this?" Narr said. Onj turned and looked as Narr got to his feet and headed for the fallen man.

Narr grabbed the downed man under the armpits and hauled him into the shade as several other thralls moved in to help. The man's skin was hot and wet through his thin clothes.

"Heatstroke?" somebody asked.

Narr said, "Yeah." He started to tell the guy to go ask Little Dog to call the medics, but when he moved his hands, the right one came away bloody. He rolled the man to the side and looked. That was an oozing laser burn under the man's arm, charred through to the ribs.

Onj saw the blood on Narr's hand. "Escaped thrall," he said. "Wolf bait."

"Maybe, but if he is, he's fresh meat. He's dressed wrong, not wearing sunblock, no muscle."

"Could be an indoor slave?" Onj ventured.

Narr kneeled and lifted the man's head. He was conscious, but out of it. Narr held his mug to the man's mouth, dribbled a little water over the cracked lips. The man sucked at the water, tried to sit up, couldn't quite make it.

"Easy, compadre." Narr looked back at Onj. "There

aren't any holdfasts for at least three hundred kilometers. If he's an indoor, how'd he get this far? Damnsure he didn't walk here." To the injured man, he said, "Hey, who are you, compadre?"

The man clutched at Narr's wrists, grabbed them both, hard. His hands were very hot. "Don't let them—I—help . . ."

He fell back, mouth working but no words coming out. He kept his grip, though.

There came the drone of a small craft's engines dopplering toward them. Narr listened. After years of hearing military vehicles come and go, you got to where you could tell what they were long before you saw them. The craft heading this way was a Light Personnel Carrier.

Narr said, "That's an old t-grav LPC. *Wyvern*-class, sounds like. Piece of junk."

"Wolves," Onj said. "Chasing this one." He nodded at the supine man.

The man's tight grip relaxed all of a sudden, and he let out a breath that ended in a moan.

Narr checked for a carotid pulse. No point now in calling the medics. "Won't do 'em any good," he said. "They don't want to follow him where he's gone."

"What's that on his hand?"

Narr looked. There was a smudge, looked like crushed ashes on the dead man's left hand, at the base of his ring finger. Part of the smudge was on Narr's wrist, where the dead man had grabbed onto him.

"Dunno," Narr said. "But that LPC is getting closer, and I don't want to be next to this guy when the yappers get here."

"I dupe that," Onj said.

The rest of the thralls were already on their way out of the tent. Narr stood, brushed the ash off his wrist, and



hurried to join the other slaves.

They were back on station when Little Dog finally heard the LPC and came out of his tent to look.

The LPC, painted sky blue on the bottom with jungle camo on the sides and top, flitted into the clearing just above the tops of the tallest trees surrounding it. In the little craft were a pilot and two passengers, all three in full Starwolf military armor. The carrier switched to VTOL mode and settled near the thrall tent, kicking up a billowing cloud of dust and dead leaves.

Little Dog ran past Narr on his way toward the LPC. "What's going on here?"

Narr shrugged and offered the time-honored slave response to questions from their owners. "What do thralls know?"

By the time the Starwolf Chase Team had alighted from the LPC, Tok Narr was putting another big rock into the crusher. Whatever the dead man had done, whatever the SCT wanted him for, it wasn't his business. As far as he was concerned, none of the crew had ever seen the dead man, they didn't know anything, and they didn't *want* to know anything. Slaves who stepped out of line wound up as worm food, and Narr wasn't ready to let them dine on him just yet.

TWO

"Yeah, well, listen, scrofsucker, I say one beat-up, old, *crippled* Blood Eagle can stomp the crap out of any *three* Starwolf pups without raising a sweat, and I'd be happy to prove it to you right here and right now!"

The speaker was a big man, maybe thirty years old or so, pushing a meter ninety-five and easily massing more than a hundred kilos, built like a weightlifter. He wore Blood Eagle covers, had fire in his eyes, and too much Nari-bian whiskey in his belly.

The man he was yelling at was not as tall, but was wider, probably as heavy, built like a sumo, and the Starwolf insignia on his leather jacket left no doubt about *his* position on the issue. He shoved his chair back and got to his feet, apparently not feeling a lot of pain himself as a result of his own drinks.

"Never met a Blood Eagle who wasn't three-quarters *mouth!* C'mon, shrimp-wank, let's see what you got!"

Leaning against the bar, Lon Hull shook his head. It was his bouncer's night off, and even though he was the owner of the *Angsa Gemuk*—the Fat Goose—he was covering security himself this shift. So far, it had been quiet, but it had been too good to last. Payday always filled up the spacer port bars on the neutral tropical planet Panas Penari, and his was no exception. And drinking warriors did tend to get physical now and then. He put his beer stein on the bar and shook his head again.

The bartender said, "You want me to call the catchers?"

"Nope. We'll just have to stand 'em to drinks, and the police never stop at one. It would cost us less to pay these two to leave. I'll tend to it."



Hull strolled through the crowded pub toward the two men. The Eagle was on his feet now, fists balled, and he and the Wolf were exchanging pedigrees:

"Listen up, dogface, I've put six men in the hospital and done two months for brawling this year so far," the Eagle said.

"Hah! I'm wanted for A&B on five planets, pinbrain. I'm gonna kick your sorry bird ass into orbit!"

Hull continued his stroll toward the pair. No hurry, they were still on opposite sides of the table, still trying to terrify each other with how bad they were. The ritual exchange, while informal, would need to go at least two or three more rounds before the fist work began.

"I hope your meds are paid up, toesucker!"

"It ain't *me* who's gonna need meds, scrofkisser!"

Hull arrived at the table.

He wasn't moving fast, but they both noticed him and looked to see who was interrupting them. He formed the third point of a skewed triangle with the two.

He wasn't as big as either man, probably ten kilos lighter and a hand shorter than the taller one, and at fifty, he was old enough to be their father. He wore dull gray looseweaves, draped to hide his body instead of revealing it. Not a figure to inspire fear. Especially for men too drunk to notice his eyes.



Lon "Slowhand" Hull

"Whadda *you* want?" the Eagle said.

"Warriors. I'm Lon Hull. This is my place. I appreciate your business, but the thing is, you can sit down and

drink, or you can take it outside, but you can't fight in here. We don't allow it."

The Wolf looked around for somebody more threatening, didn't see any backup for Hull. He laughed. "Jet off, grampy. Nobody tells me where I can fight."

Hull sighed. "I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask you to leave, then."

The Eagle had already ramped his courage to take on the Wolf, so he must have figured this old man would be an easier target to warm up with. He grinned, showed lots of teeth, and said, "Ask *this*, pops!"

He threw a hard overhand right, a punch that would have easily broken Hull's nose and probably smashed a few more bones, had it landed.

It didn't land.

Hull whipped his right arm up, braced at the wrist by his left, and he stepped *into* the punch, a move that seemed sure suicide. He looked like a waiter holding a tray on his palm. His forearm slid over the warrior's punch, deflected it so it missed Hull's face by half a centimeter. The open hand caught the warrior's chin. He shoved and turned the man's head, and as he did so, Hull pivoted to the left and snapped his right heel back, catching the Eagle's foot in a dragging sweep called a *biset*.

With the combination of the pull and sweep, the big man went down like a laser-sawed tree and whammed into the floor flat on his back, hard enough to shake the bottles and glasses on the nearby tables. Had to hurt, that fall.

Hull ducked—under the sucker-punch the Wolf fired at his face—stepped in again, and threw a short-range right elbow into the man's floating ribs. When the Wolf grunted and dropped his hands to cover, Hull pressed forward, stepped in with his left, slid his foot



behind the Wolf, and slammed his left elbow backward into the man's solar plexus, corking and dropping into a wide squat as he did. With his left thigh behind the Wolf's knees and the hard elbow driving and stealing his breath, the man had nowhere to go. He fell backward and sprawled out on the floor, a bookend match for the Eagle.

Three seconds.

Hull shook his head. He was slowing down in his old age. There was a time when he could have put them both on the floor in two seconds, maybe even a second and a half.

Neither the Wolf nor the Eagle was hurt badly by the takedowns. Hull could have done considerable damage to them if he had wanted to, but being drunk and rowdy in a pub didn't earn you maiming or death. Well, not in *his* pub, at least. Dead men didn't spend money.

Dumping both men so fast surely did get their attention, though.

The Eagle got up first, and he would have tried another shot, but Hull held up one hand toward the man. Very quietly, he said, "Listen. I spent ten years teaching warriors hand-to-hand combat in the Reflective Ruby Facet, Diamond Sword. I'm old—but I'm *way* better than you are. Don't make me hurt you."

The Eagle paused. There was no brag in Hull's voice and that must have come through.

It was the Wolf who sold it, though. "Hull? Not *Slowhand* Hull?"

Hull nodded at him, a short military bow. "I've been called that."

The Wolf blew out a breath. "Man. I'm sorry. No offense intended."

"None taken. Why don't you sit down and have

another drink? On me.”

“Yes, sir,” the Wolf said. He pulled his chair up and sat. He waved at his drinking partner. “You want to sit down, I’ll stand the round after.”

The Eagle frowned. What was going on here?

“C’mon. There’s something I have to tell you.” He glanced at Hull, then back at his drinking partner.

Hull nodded and strolled back toward where he’d left his beer. As he did, he heard the Wolf say in a stage whisper, “Damn, man, do you know who that *is*? That’s *Slowhand Hull!* He could kill us both without taking a deep breath . . .”

Hull smiled, a little one. Just another quiet night at the Fat Goose. No problem.

Starkar Mace looked at the instrument he’d just bought at the Bazaar in Rayno, a seacoast town on Hepta Ourubis III. The axe was a Montenegro, a Black Mountain six-string guitar, a solid-body hardcast kleerglas with minimal electronics, a real antique. The seller obviously didn’t know the thing’s value. His bargaining had been half-hearted, and Mace had bought the unit with its built-in amplification, quad-quad pickups, and reverb/echo chamber for fifty of the local *wen*—all of about twelve sheks. It would have been a steal at twenty times the price even it hadn’t been playable, but it not only worked, it had a sweet tone. After he’d paid for it, he had lit the board, strummed a simple G, C, D progression, and heard a voice that under the right hands could make a hardened warrior cry. Man! Anywhere in civilization where serious collectors lived, a musical instrument of this quality would be worth a thousand creds, easy. Out here in the wilderzone things were different. Of course, not many could play a six-string these days. Fret fingering required more muscle

and callus than any of the light-board axes, so it was not as if most people who saw the Black Mountain would have had a clue. Their loss, his gain.

For an itinerant jongleur like Mace, the guitar would be a novelty that could get him work where being just another laser-harper might not. Yeah, he had a pretty good baritone, and he knew enough songs from all the major tribes and dozens of the minor ones to get by just about anywhere; still, the guitar would help. It had been fifteen years since Blood Eagle's Marathon Pennant had been defeated by the Starwolf Hepta Ourubis Pack on the neighboring and now mostly-dead planet of HU II, fifteen years since he'd given up his status and position in the tribe and gone looking for Ulysses Konovalev, the young man he had been sworn to protect with his own life.

The boy, barely twenty, had vanished during the slaughter—and certainly slaughter was what it had been—but when the bodies had been sorted out, Ulysses's had not been counted among them. Of course, the son of the Great Eagle Alexandre Konovalev and Freya Cloudchaser, daughter of a Starwolf chieftain, had been mourned, but assumed to have been blasted into unidentifiable bits during the battle. That happened during a war, and it was too bad, but life had to go on.

Starkar Mace had refused to believe the boy was dead. It didn't feel right, somehow, and while there was no way to prove it, he was sure that Lex had not been killed during the intense fighting.

Fifteen years he had been looking for the boy, who would be well into manhood by now. After a decade of roaming HO III, of stopping in at every holdfast into which he could gain entrance, he had yet to find any trace, not a single clue that would lead him to his quarry. At times, it was most disheartening. For all he

knew, he could be on the wrong planet, and it was a hunching big galaxy out there.

There was a tang of salt and seaweed in the air as he walked through the early morning streets of Rayno, the guitar gripped in his left hand, his other hand hung loose over his sidearm. A frontier coastal town such as this was not without its footpads, strong-arm thieves, and cutpurses, and it was best to look as if you were more trouble than you were worth to discourage unwanted attention from such scum. Mace knew he wasn't all that pretty to look upon, and that helped. Battle-scarred, his red hair thinning, he had maybe lost a few steps during his travels, but he still moved okay. A clawed-up cat like him made muggers a little wary—if you'd earned those scars, hell, you might be ready and willing to earn more, and maybe that wasn't worth the effort. A trained fighter could usually recognize another and be wary.



Starkar Mace

Between his beat-up look and the big, ugly, no-nonsense sidearm he had strapped to his right hip, the more furtive street denizens mostly let him be.

His gun was also an antique, a two-hundred-year-old semiautomatic needle pistol that fired electrically charged darts. It was a good civilian weapon. It was heavy, made of thick, black blastplast, and its magazine



held thirty rounds, one of which would instantly put you into a spastic convulsion if it hit you anywhere, put you down and out of the fight for at least ten minutes. Plenty of time for the man who owned the piece to get away. Or, if he felt so disposed, to saunter over and cut your throat while you lay snapping and jittering on the ground like a beached pan fish. Mostly Mace walked away when he had to shoot somebody. Leaving a trail of bodies behind you drew attention, and he wanted to keep a low profile. This was why he had become a harper. Nobody paid much attention to jongleurs; they came and they went, what was one more? If you were looking for somebody, it was the perfect cover, and he had actually gotten pretty good at it after all the practice.

He headed back toward the cheap room he had booked at a local inn. He would practice with the guitar a little, then catch the fanjet ferry to Barris Island. There was a keep there that was supposedly run by an old Starwolver who'd been in the battle where Lex had vanished. Since Blood Eagle had finally killed or kicked offworld most of the Ourubis Pack in 3932, bombing the place more or less back to the stone age, surviving Starwolf packers had mostly moved from HO II to HO III. Seven years after Mace lost Lex, any remaining Pack members in the local system were good places to look. There were still a few who hadn't sworn the Oath of Vengeance against Blood Eagle, and wherever Lex was, it was pretty much going to have to be with the Wolf. Blood Eagles would have recognized him sooner or later.

He was still alive . . .

Mace watched a pair of big teener thugs looking for a victim drift onto the wooden sidewalk to size him up. He smiled at them, raised one eyebrow, in an expression he hoped said, "You ready to die, heroes? Come on and

try me.”

After a brief eye contact, the two would-be muggers drifted back out of his path. These were probably tribeless boys who might have made good warriors, but without the element of surprise, they wouldn't be particularly dangerous to somebody like Mace. Street-warriors without any battle experience could beat up old men or children, but they were usually smart enough to avoid somebody who had killed scores of better men face-to-face; killed men who had shot back when he did it. He might be a songsinger these days, but he still knew which end of a sword you held and which end cut.

He turned the corner at the food stand, nodded at the cook who'd fed him half a dozen not-bad meals in the last few days, and headed for his room. The ferry left in a couple of hours. Plenty of time to brush up on his guitar chords.



THREE

Gir Draxon slammed his big fist down onto the rude table, hit it hard enough so that it creaked, and his mug of warm *biru* sloshed, foamed, and spilled its fragrant brew onto the rough-cut wood. The Warren he occupied was hardly worthy of the name, more of a big Hardcamp, but they'd been forced to move in a hurry, and this nahhole of a planet in the middle of nowhere was the first suitable one they'd found. It would take time to turn it into a proper facility, and the ever-present worry of genetic drift had been keeping his Inquisitors busy ferreting out the impure. The local sun showered too much radiation, and the Inquisitors had started finding more and more Derms with damaged DNA. This would stop when the rest of the shielding was in place, but it would be months yet before that happened. He couldn't afford the losses.



"Well?" The leader of the BioDerms glared at the hulking greenish-blue figure standing in front of him. "Explain!"

Fer Luzor was Satrap—the leader of Horde Nightscathe, that faction of the BioDerms linked by blood and dedicated to stealth. Luzor ran the spies who had been devolved—genetically reaugmented back from BioDerm to pass for human. It was Luzor's responsibility to bring to Draxon the knowledge he needed to exter-

minate humanity, and right now, he was failing in his duty.

"We did not get it. Does 'why' really matter?"

"This is not what I wished to hear, Satrap Luzor," Draxon said, his voice low and calm. Derms had died for less at his hands.

"Nor was it what I wished to deliver, Horde Leader, but it is what it is. You'd rather I made you ear candy?"

Draxon could not stop the smile. Luzor was too good to waste and he knew it, so he pushed his luck now and then. Clever, and brave, there had never been any doubt of either. Of course, big and muscular and as well-trained as he was, Luzor was no match for Draxon in fist-to-fist. No BioDerm with half a brain was, which is why he still ruled the Hordes after all this time. Still, beating a valuable leader to death would serve no purpose here.

Draxon shook his head. "Sit, have a drink." He waved one hand.

A female of the Siren breed, clad only in pale blue see-through thincloth, hurried over with the pitcher of *biru* and another mug. The female was well-built, sinuous, and graceful. She wiped up the spilled drink, refilled Draxon's mug, and put the second mug in front of Luzor as he sat. Draxon put his hand on the Siren's backside, flashed a quick smile at her. He allowed himself a small lustful thought watching her as she departed, then turned his attention back to business.

"All right. So your spies could not obtain the troop movement schedules I wanted. What *have* you brought me? Something useful, I hope."

Luzor took a big drink of the ginger-scented *biru*, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, then belched. "Good stuff."



“The drink? Or your information?”

Luzor flashed a pointed-tooth smile at his leader. “Both. Hear the tale: According to my agents, one of the smaller human tribes has developed a new weapon. A very secret, fearsome long-range device they call ‘Einstein’s Hammer.’ This weapon can smash flat an entire Holdfast from a *billion* kilometers away—far beyond any means of detecting it. There is no defense against this new hammer.”

“You believe this to be true?”

“My agents do, and I trust my agents. Yes, I believe it to be true.”

Draxon leaned back. His chair groaned under his weight, and the leather of his harness straps across his bare chest squeaked.

“Wonderful.

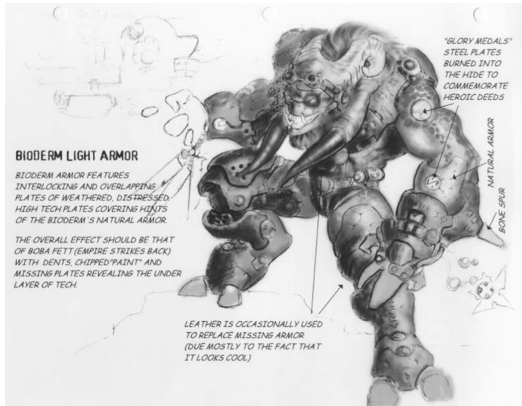
So our enemies have a new toy that they can

use against us, one for which we have no answer. And this helps me how?”

“The tale is, the weapon is still in testing, not yet in production. The tale is, a thief managed to steal the plans for this device. The tale is, this thief was caught and killed—but that he carried a transmission device with the plans. The device was not found.”

“Which means?”

“That the plans for this secret weapon might be tracked. That the people who find these plans, if they are quick and clever, might put this device into production



before the basic stocks do. With this to pave our way, a hard series of surgical strikes could tip the balance in our favor."

Draxon nodded. Although Nightscathe was more enamored of coordinated pinpoint attacks than were the Maul or Gaunt Hordes—sometimes too much so—there was something to be said for such a plan. Smashing basic stock holdfasts from a billion clicks away would certainly add a measure of terror to the war, which had been stagnant and stalemated for too long. This was definitely desirable.

"You will find me these plans, yes?"

"Of this you may be certain, Horde Leader."

Luzor raised his mug. The trinkets on his wrist bracelet jangled. Like packrats, ravens, and twistnose bats, Nightscathe did love their shiny jewelry.

"I hope you do not disappoint me," Draxon said. He raised his own mug in salute. Both Derms drained their *biru*. The serving Siren was there with the pitcher before they set the empty mugs down. Draxon smiled at her again. She was comely. He would visit her later, and slake a different kind of thirst . . .

From across the narrow street in the spaceport burg of Ruhl, Sharla Raze watched the shop of one Triggs Wrattan, a small-time ex-Children of the Phoenix criminal who dealt in stolen goods. The shop sold oddities, ranging from ceremonial swords to shampoo, catering mostly to offworlders looking for a touch of home. Ourubian wines, Scarabraic boxlots, Wryton candy—items of that nature.

So far this morning, Wrattan had peddled his wares to a dozen different travelers and a few locals, among the major Tribes of Man being Wolves, Phoenix, and Diamond Sword; plus members of smaller tribes, a



couple of whom she didn't even recognize offhand, though they would be matched up with the cross-ref pix index as soon as she got their holographs back to HQ. When she'd joined up with the Starwolf's security agency — the Skaduvarg — after basicEd ten years ago, there had been a joke going round: What do you do in case of an earthquake? Why, you run to the Skaduvarg—'cause they never move for *anything*. Raze had been helping to change that, at least on Panas Penari, the mostly tropical world called Hot Dancer. Here, while the Skaduvarg ground slow sometimes, these days it ground exceedingly fine, at least when she had anything to do with it.

So far, however, after three days, her surveillance of the oddities shop had been a null. Oh, sure, Wrattan dealt in stolen items. In the past three days, he had bought a musical inducer from a breakride thief who'd torn it from a rich man's hopper. He'd paid out sheks for a banque chit lifted by a masseuse from a customer's wallet. And he'd traded cash for a couple of swiped dole cards that still had time on them, good until Wolf's Passage, the Month of Journeys. Petty shit, and Raze would pass it along to the local catchers—if she didn't get what she wanted. But she was after a rat, not mice, and if something didn't break soon, she was going to have to take another tack.

Already the morning's sun had heated the air to body temp, and even in the shade, Raze had broken a good sweat. The smell of stale sugarbread wafted over her, joined by the body odors of passersby, some of whom probably hadn't bathed in weeks. Of course her disguise, that of a street trull, helped with the heat. Wasn't much to the costume—whore-red spikeheels, hot pink osmotica shorts that looked—and had been—spray-painted on, and a matching, loosely buttoned

sleeveless flyworm silk tunic that showcased her breasts. Covering her own Starwolf Warrior tattoo on her left shoulder, she sported a fake dermaplast tattoo, a basic Starwolf Holder with the Eros sig that ID'd her as a Professional Escort. And she must have not looked *too* bad in the outfit, 'cause she got a fairly steady stream of would-be customers asking her price. She waved them off, telling them she was on break, but a couple of them were fairly persistent, and she'd had to flash the nasty little explosive-pellet pistol in her handbag to make them leave. It was a good disguise for the area, but she didn't much like wearing it. Her own clothes were much more modest. Still, she had to confess to herself that it was good for her ego to be asked,



though. At 34 T.C., she was a dozen years older than most of the hard, young street girls. At a meter sixty-eight tall and fifty-eight kilos, she was in pretty good shape. She had to be, to work in the field, but she was built more like a gymnast, with muscle, and that made a lot of men nervous; they wanted their women soft and compliant. Her ethnic tap gave her dark hair and eyes, and chocolate skin, all of which were useful on a tropical

world, and apparently *that* combination had a certain appeal to men. Gods knew her bureau chief had been trying to bed her for the last year, and it was getting harder to find polite ways to turn him down. She was tempted to tell him to hunch off, real tempted, but that wasn't the way to get promoted up the escalator, now was it? So far, all he'd done was talk, and as long as he kept his hands to himself, she could live with that.

A short, fat man waddled into the shop and proceeded to the aisle where the pickled Farvarian jak-eggs were prominently displayed. Raze made a sour face to herself. She'd eaten a bite of one of those once. Damned near strangled herself spitting it out. Jak-eggs had a flavor and texture like nothing she had ever put in her mouth. She imagined it tasted like a raw leopard slug and cat turds mixed together might—if that good. She'd try another bite on the day the Phoenix rose—or hell froze over, whichever happened first.

The fat man picked up two large jars of the eggs and headed for the counter where Wrattan stood, smiling like a hyena. No accounting for taste, that was for sure.

A male voice said, "Hey, hey, sweetling, whatchoo doin'?"

Raze glanced away from the shop's window at a tall Blood Eagle wearing tropical shorts and a sleeveless shirt, a blaster slung low on his right hip for quick-draw. He was young, maybe twenty-one or -two T.C., blond, and not bad-looking. No battle scars visible. If she had been a real trull, she could have taken this kid to the rooming house down the street and given him an experience he'd never forget, and slag this boring surveillance. Might even be fun.

She sighed. But she *wasn't* a strumpet, only an intel op trying to get along. "Sorry, I'm on break," she

said.

"I'll come back later, sweetling," the Eagle said. He leered at her, gave her a big theatrical wink.

She shook her head as he swaggered off, full of himself, radiating testosterone like sweaty perfume. *Great Lupus Astra, kid. I'm almost old enough to be your mother.*

She looked back at the store. The tip about a major spy transaction taking place here had come from a fairly reliable source. But it was going to be another long, stinking, hot day out here if something didn't happen soon.

"Status Three <Organic Intrusion/Surveillance Unit/Model: Male Secondary> Bon Whee operational report download—"

"Negative, negative. I mean, no."

The Cybrid unit designated Bon Whee looked at her, puzzled. Mayla Modari, herself a Status Four <Organic Intrusion/Surveillance Unit/Model: Female Prime, and the leader of the spy group on Vega IV, shook her head to emphasize the command. "You are supposed to be human. Do not speak as a Cybrid unit. Speak as one human to another."

"But we are alone and unobserved," he said.

"So you assume. One cannot be certain of such things at all times. A slip could be fatal."

"Most organics are unobservant most of the time," he said. "And stupid, as well."

"That may be, but I will not risk our mission on the chance that one of the rare observant and smart ones might hear your report and know it for what it is. Remember history. Maintain your guise at all times, is that clear?"

"Understood, Prime. I mean, Mayla."

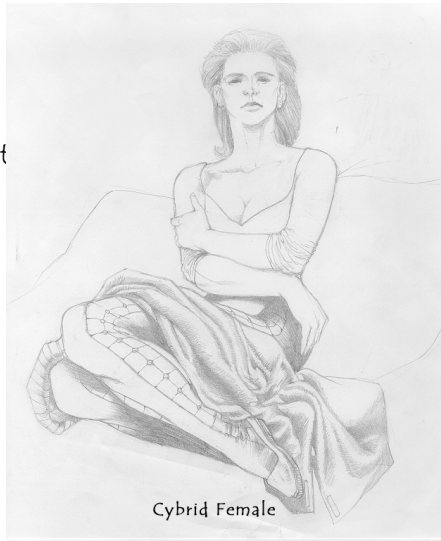


"Good. Now. Your report."

They were in a dirty warehouse, rented through a small corporation that existed only to provide cover for their activities, and traceable to no one. Hard experience had taught the Cybrid intelligences the folly of meeting humans head-on. The Chase had been ongoing since 2845, more than a thousand years since the cybernetic AIs—the artificial intelligences—had suffered a major defeat at the hands of their creators. The overmind Prometheus had been broken into a dozen smaller minds and scattered to avoid destruction. It had been a long, hard fall, more so because it had been unexpected. The Cybrid culture had erred. It had underestimated mankind's abilities, and that mistake had nearly destroyed intelligence machines as a culture. Even now, so long past and far away, Cybrid recovery was incomplete.

"... turncoat informants have been increased four hundred and ten percent..." Bon Whee droned.

While Modari absorbed it all and filed it away in her memory, it was mostly dull stuff that did not spark her interest. All of the intrusion team looked and acted human, being a specially created blend of machines and culture-cloned organic materials. She herself, while



Cybrid Female

created only ten years past in the Cybrid Lab #125/Large

Ship #234 — Transport Fleet, for Prometheus Four, looked about thirty in human age, and with her light hair, gray eyes, and basic design, was quite attractive by human standards. She was a prime example of a Cybrid that could pass for human. Not only did she look right, she also had all the functional equipment of a normal human woman—she could eat, drink, eliminate waste, and even engage in sex. She could also kill with her bare hands, and was expert with all tribal hand weaponry.

“... rumor of an N-space particle beam weapon capable of striking a target via a tunneling wormhole at vast distances, created using trans-galactic jump-gate technology supposedly unraveled by a team of scientists ...”

“Wait,” Modari said, holding up one hand. She scanned her memory, replayed the input. “Where did you come by these data?”

“Our informant in Children of the Phoenix’s heartworld in the wilderzone was part of the investigation of the destruction of a small keep on Morliss Moon in orbit around the gas giant Shiva. He provided details of the keep’s demise.

“Our second informant in the small tribe known as the Slicers tells us that the incident on Morliss Moon was due to a field test of the weapon, which is named for one of their ancient scientists, Albert the Einstein. Our informant’s data indicate that the weapon was deployed from a distance of more than a billion kilometers at hyperlight speeds, reaching across the distance in a matter of seconds.”

“Is the informant’s information usually correct?”

“It has been substantially so in the past. He is well-paid and desires to maintain the flow of money.”

Modari considered this for a tenth of a second. This was quick for a human, but slow for a Cybrid. She

came to her decision. "Concentrate your efforts to obtain more data regarding this. Such technology would be to our advantage."

"If it in fact exists."

"It is your mission to find out. And if it *does* exist, then we shall obtain this technology and utilize it against Man. Go."

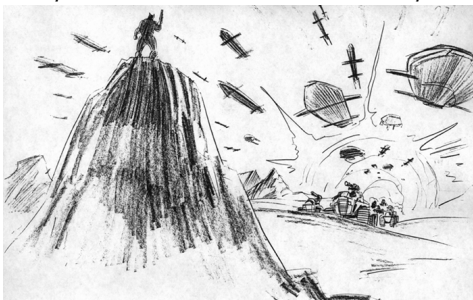
As Whee departed, Modari took a deep breath to fully oxygenate her lungs. Her brain was engrammed and programmed Cybrid, but her body was as much organic as machine—more so—and the idea of obtaining such a device for her Prometheus caused a flood of hormones and enzymes within her system, speeding up her heart and filling her with a kind of crackly anticipation. She had been warned to monitor such "feelings" and to be leery of them—her creators were well aware that so much organic makeup had inherent dangers, there was a chance that the intrusion/surveillance units could "go native" — such had happened before. But Modari liked the sensation; it was exciting, pleasurable, even, and she saw no harm in giving in to it. Her mission was clear, her duty supreme. How could it matter what she felt as long as she did what she had been programmed to do?

Careful, Prime. Deviation can lead to perversion, and perversion is punishable by termination. And I bet that wouldn't feel good at all . . .

FOUR

Tok Narr ran, but his legs were mired in sludge, barely able to move.

Behind him, they were behind him! Somebody was back there, but—he couldn't see them. He saw nothing, nothing except the verdant light that continued to pulse brighter and brighter, like some malevolent and alive form of awful green lightning.



He cursed, but he couldn't move any faster, and it wasn't fast enough, no, not nearly fast enough!

The bright green beam lanced out—missed him!—and blew a crater in the ground to one side deep enough and wide enough to swallow an oil tanker. The stench of burned earth filled his nostrils.

They almost had the range now.

The green light pulsed . . .

"No—!" he yelled.

"Hey, easy, easy, compadre!"

Narr blinked. Leaning over him was Loof Onj, his workmate. It took a second to register. He was in his rack. It was downtime, and dark.

A nightmare, that was all it was. Raw God.

"You okay?"

Narr rubbed at his wrist, which itched. "Yeah. Bad dream."

The thrall tent was dim, lit only by bioluminescence dialed down to a pale blue just bright enough to help you find the flap in case you had to attend to a call of



nature in the night. The racks of sleepers were mostly quiet; nobody appeared to be awake except Narr and Onj.

"Happening a lot lately."

Narr said, "Tell me about it. Thanks for rousting me. Go back to sleep."

"Zero debt," Onj said. "Zee-dee cubed." He leaned back into his rack, only a few centimeters away from Narr's, and settled onto the thin polypropyl sheet stretched taut over the support slats. In a few seconds, he was snoring away. No worry about him getting enough rest—Onj could fall asleep eating a bowl of hot soup.

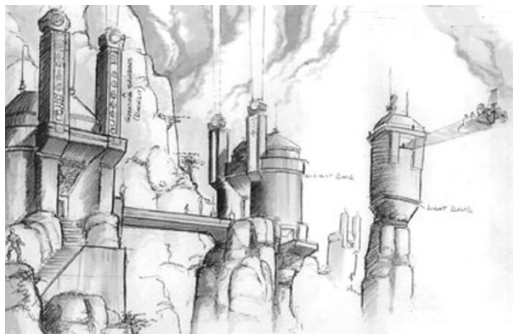
But Narr couldn't drift off. The dream had been too unsettling. This was the fourth or fifth time he'd had it, the nightmare of the mysterious green lightning. What could it mean?

His wrist itched again, and he scratched at it. The dreams were getting to him. He had a pretty good life, for a slave. Things could be a lot worse. He could be on a road crew, laying hot multimix in the tropical sun, instead of basic agro clearing. He knew a couple of transfers who used to do that, and they said you could fry eggs on your boot tops. Or he could be buried in the bitume mines, choking on black dust, and never seeing natural light. Or working the deepfish farms, where your chances of getting gas narcosis and having to spend a painful week in a pressure tank were fifty-fifty on any given dive. He had it relatively easy. So why all of a sudden these dreams?

He lay on his rack and stared at the tent's synlin roof. He scratched his wrist. Some bug must have gotten him, though there wasn't any sign of a bite mark or sting. If these dreams didn't ease off, he might go see the medic. Maybe whatever had stung him had caused some kind of allergic reaction or something. Maybe.

After four evenings of singing for the Wolves at Enope's Holdfast on Barris Island, Starkar Mace figured he was about to wear out his welcome.

As he'd expected, the guitar had been a big hit. The local warriors, a lot



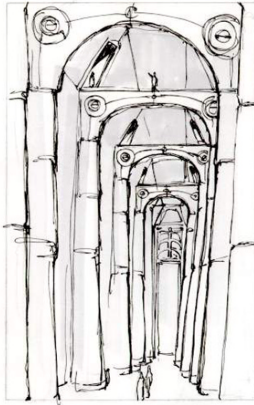
of whom were retired and put out to pasture here, liked the old war songs of their youth, and that hadn't been so much earlier than his own oat-sowing days that Mace couldn't relate to them, even though they were a different tribe. The ballads and epics you learned when you came of age were the ones you remembered the best. Still, after singing three score of *his* best, he was running out of material that the old warriors wanted to hear. They didn't like the new stuff. As far as they were concerned, you could drop all modern music into the latrine and roast it in the morning burn-off.

He was on his way to the kitchen to see if he could con the cook into giving him a late breakfast, when he saw the hall of images off to his left. Occupational hazard, sleeping late. When you were up most of the night singing and drinking, you tended to stay abed long past dawn. While he pretty much had the run of the hold, he hadn't bothered to check out the artwork down this hall yet. Ah, what-the-hunch, if he held off eating for another few minutes, they'd probably be early-serving midday meal, and likely it would be warmer and more filling than breakfast leftovers. He had some time to kill. He turned into the hallway.

There were some paintings, though most of the



images were holograms or flat pix. Here was an airbrush portrait of the first Enope, a stern and scarred warrior who wore Wolf Sub-Chief covers. He also had ears that would easily serve as a water pitcher's handles. There, a painting of the sire's wife, a woman whose face was so ugly it would scare a nest of vissbit vipers. What children they must have made together. Brrr!



Farther down the hall, Mace came across several large holograms of various family officers, some with their companies. One man, obviously family from the jug handle ears that seemed to run in the male side of the line, stood in front of a rank of workers, probably

thralls. Mace paused. He'd seen hundreds of such holographs over the years, had scanned thousands and thousands of faces, never seeing one that looked much like Ulysses. But as long as he was here, he might as well look.

He was halfway through the small sea of faces when he heard the voice behind him. "Ho, jongleur!"

Mace turned. The old man who was the holdfast master ambled down the hall toward him.

"Morning to you, Hold Captain."

"Nearer midday, music player. Admiring our family?"

"Aye. A handsome lot."

The old man laughed so hard he started coughing. He gathered himself, wheezed a couple of times, and said, "I've never heard us called *that* before! Haw! My family's faces would frighten the shine off a boot! Take my nephew there." He waved at the holograph. "His *friends* call him 'Little Dog.' The Great Wolf knows what his *enemies* call him."

"Well. Beauty is hardly necessary to a warrior," Mace said.

"Truer words were never said. Come, we have a new brew of summer ale to de-cask, we can share a few mugs and tell each other more lies."

Mace smiled. He was a likeable geezer, this ugly old Wolf.

As he started to turn away, Mace glanced a final time at the image of the rows of thralls behind the man called Little Dog.

There in the back, smiling at him, stood Ulysses Konovalev.

Mastersmith Cutter Holmes leaned back in his rickety form-chair, listening to the servos whine in

protest as they adjusted the device to his positional shift. He was alone in his lab office, a building that had seen better decades, on his home planet of Steyr. The planet itself was mostly temperate, an out-of-the-way backrocket world on the fringe of the wilderzone, home to the small but technologically adept Slicer Tribe, along with a few other small and good-for-little indie tribes.

Despite their expert abilities, the Slicers were not rich. Had they chosen to mass-produce their devices, surely they could have been wealthy, but in a tribe where craft was always intertwined with art, each of their creations was virtually unique. The devices thus produced—mostly weaponry, with some armor, and a few electronic defenses—were second to none, but they were expensive and time-consuming, and even tribals who acknowledged the effectiveness and superiority of Slicer products sometimes simply couldn't afford to buy them. Certainly, a handmade titanium pulse-pistol with carved bale-ivory stocks and personalized tribal engravings was a thing of beauty as well as function, but when shoot came to blast, it wouldn't kill you any deader than a cheap, standard-issue, blue-plastic Steyroc right out of the box would. Dead, as warriors liked to say, is dead, period.

That artistic bent had always been his tribe's problem—their products were *too* good, and they refused to compromise on quality.

Cutter sighed. All of that was about to change. Maybe.

The lab door announcer chimed, a soothing series of neuropathic-aural tones designed to draw attention, but not to irritate a listener.

"Come in, Brinker."

Holmes's apprentice stepped through the sliding door before it was fully open.

"Good news, Mastersmith!"

Holmes raised an eyebrow. "Good news is always welcome."

"The thief who broke into our files has been caught!"

"That *is* welcome news. When will he be returned?"

Brinker bit his lower lip.

The chair's servos whined again as Cutter leaned forward suddenly, then stood. "Don't tell me he fell into somebody else's hands? Please don't say that."

"No, Mastersmith. The thief is dead. Killed on Hepta Ourubis III by Skaðuvarg agents chasing him on our fabricated warrant."

Cutter felt a quick flash of relief. Thank the Gods for large favors! And the plundered files?"

Again his assistant gnawed on his lip.

"Ah, no!"

Brinker hurried to effect damage repair: "No one has retrieved them. They were not found with his body, Mastersmith. I have it on good authority!"

"Then where *are* they?! There were two hundred and seventeen screens of information stolen from our files! Do you think he *memorized* them?! He used a recording device! Where is this recording?"

"Perhaps it was destroyed during his apprehension. He was badly burned by laser fire. Perhaps—"

" 'Perhaps?' The future of our tribe is at stake, our very lives hang by a rotting strand of pregnant *kleg* hair, and you tell me 'perhaps'? *Perhaps* we might learn to fly by flapping our arms very hard!"

"Mastersmith—"

"No, no, no, Brinker, I don't want to hear this. What I want to hear is that you have recovered the stolen files. Failing that, what I want to hear is that the

recording device upon which these files were stored has been destroyed, and this has been done without anyone knowing its contents!"

"I understand—"

"You *don't* understand! The only thing that makes our Hammer worth anything is its uniqueness! If the secret is revealed, if others gain this knowledge, then we lose! The larger and richer tribes can produce the weapon cheaper and faster than we can; they have the means and we do not! No, it will not be as *good* as ours, but that won't matter! If they even *suspect* that we have such technology, they will descend on us like a plague of leaf-eaters!"

Cutter blew out another sigh, trying to calm himself. Losing control was not good. He took another deep breath, managed to keep his voice even as he said, "Go and trace the path of the thief. Take all the help you need. Find out where he left the information. Retrieve it. No matter what the cost. If you have to pile bodies up high enough to block out the sun, then do it."

"I will try, Mastersmith—"

"No, Brinker, you won't 'try.' You *will* do it. Come back with the files or a durasteel-clad guarantee of their destruction, or don't come back at all, do you understand?"

Brinker swallowed dryly.

Oh, yes. He understood.

"Go!"

When the younger man had departed, Holmes collapsed back into his unhappy chair. This was bad. This was very, very bad . . .

FIVE

Hull took a deep breath, let half of it out, then did his ceremonial bow. There were two forms of this salute, the long version that lasted eight moves, and the short version—the right hammerfist touching the palm of the open left hand, coupled with a short bow, done as a single move. If you were showing respect to a teacher or an opponent in a formal duel, you did the long version. When you were practicing your *djurus* alone under the covered open patio behind your pub, the short bow was usually enough. Although the sun had just risen, it was already hot, not having cooled off much the night before, and by the time he'd finished stretching, Hull had worked up a good sweat. He wore an old and faded pair of gray polypropyl shorts and softsoles, nothing else.

He stepped right foot forward onto the base of his *tiga*, a chalk drawing of an equilateral triangle a little over half a meter on a side, so that the point of the other two sides of the diagram was to his left. He snapped the back of his right hand up and into his left palm sharply, moved his hands apart and circumscribed a small orb-shape, then thumped his right fist into his left palm. He dropped his hands down in a sweeping outward block, circled them around and repeated the fist-into-the-palm, cocked his right elbow and smashed it forward, slapping it with his left hand. He pivoted his right hand downward using the left palm for a support, blocked across his body, then whipped his right hand back up and across, his left hand staying close to the elbow for the trap. Punched left, mirrored the trap/block, then punched right.

He did the turnaround, dropping low and blocking, and came up facing the other way, the point of the

triangle now to his right, ready for *Djuru Two*.

Only seventeen more to go . . .

Hull grinned as he worked through the short forms, using sweeps and foot drags to work his way around the outside of the *tiga*. He spent an hour every day doing his exercises, and that included working the punching and kicking bag that hung in the far corner of the framed roof. Sometimes he would wait until the afternoon, when an almost-daily thundershower would roll in and hammer the town with its heavy tropical winds and rain, punctuated by lightning that sometimes hit close enough so the flash and boom came as one. In this part of the world, every building had lightning rods, or they didn't stay undamaged for long.

He went through all eighteen of his forms on the right side, then turned to repeat them on the left. His martial art, based on the ancient terran system called *Pukulan Penjak Silat Serak*, required development on both sides. In theory, you weren't supposed to have a favorite technique, nor was it supposed to matter what your stance might happen to be if you were attacked. You trained to react under any circumstance, anywhere, anytime, and in silat, the best defense was a good offense. As soon as push came to shove, you went *in*, and you *hit*, and you kept hitting and taking people off their feet until the threat was neutralized. All of the moves you would ever need were found in the eighteen *djurus*. If you wanted to keep the moves, you had to practice. There were days when it was an effort to drag himself out of bed and pad out to the deck, but he did it anyway. Discipline was the key. Without it, a fighter—a man—was nothing.

His teacher, Marcos Pendek, had been the deadliest fighting man Hull had ever seen. Even at eighty he had still been able to easily defeat trained fighters half

his age, and he'd moved with an efficiency Hull knew he'd never achieve. Ten years the old man had been dead, but in Hull's mind, the Master was ever present.

By the time he was finished with his *djurus*, Hull was drenched in perspiration. He stopped, drank a liter of cold water, and wiped his face and beard with a towel. The big mirror mounted against the back wall of the building, where it would be protected from the blowing rains, reflected back a face and body he had earned. The once rich-blue tribal crown tattoo across his forehead had faded much after more than thirty years. The other tattoos on his arms and shoulders were also dimmer than they had been when he'd been young and full of vinegar. The age lines were set in his face, and especially around his eyes, and while his body was still ahead of the fight with gravity, the muscles tight, the skin still flexible, he was not as fit as once he had been.

He moved to stand closer to the mirror so that he could watch his high-low blocking patterns as he snapped his hands up and down in four-count patterns against an imaginary opponent. Even after forty years of training, you had to practice with mindfulness. The moves were automatic after all that time, but now and then, you had to remember that there was always something new waiting to be learned. You had to pay attention, or you'd miss it.

Hull grinned, hearing mentally the voice of Master Pendek telling him to pay attention! Do not let your mind wander while you move!

Yes, sir, he thought in reply. *As you say, sir.*

It was pushing lunch hour, the afternoon's usual storm was building a stratospheric thunderhead anvil over a dark purple base fifty kilometers to the northeast, getting ready to dump ten or twelve centimeters of

warm rain on the city, and operative Sharla Raze had had enough. There was no way she was going to spend another day dressed in a whore's outfit standing on a street corner watching that crappy shop, no way, no how, and she didn't care what her boss thought. She was beginning to suspect he'd wanted her out here just to see tapes of her in the skin-tight costume she had to wear—what there was of it—and another day of her hanging around in the broiling sun and gale-force afternoon rain was just *not* gonna happen. So far, nobody on any list of known terrorists, no local criminals with any major felonies on their records, nor even *suspected* tribal enemies had darkened the shop's door, and she no longer thought that such an event was likely, even if it *might* be possible.

She pushed away from the grimy wall and headed for her cart. She was going to go home, strip off this slutty outfit and trash it, then take a long shower and the rest of the day off. Maybe try out that new Hesonesian restaurant she'd heard about, the place that served fiddle-fried shrimp with cherry sauce over rice noodles. And she was gonna charge it to her security per diem, too. She deserved it.

She was fifty meters away from her post and feeling better all the time when the fat man coming from the other direction tried to pick her up.

"Hel-lo, sweet lips! What's your hurry?"

She was about to tell him where he could go and what he could do to himself when he got there when something jinked in her memory. She knew this face, disguised as it was in the folds of blubber. But—from where?

"Gonna rain belks and pelots in a few minutes," Fatso said. "Be a lot nicer in a dry room with the coolers going, hey, hey? A few drinks, a few laughs, some R&H,

what could be better? What're you asking for an hour?"

Jak-eggs. That's where she remembered this hobo from. He was the fat guy who had bought two jars of pickled jak-eggs from Wrattan. Was it yesterday? The day before? Sure, that was it. Well, she could flick past him, now that she had him pegged—

"C'mon, sweet lips, it's my first time in your fair city, just got here this morning. You don't want me to leave here without a taste of your delicious nectar, hey, hey?"

The little bell that warned her sometimes went off. Okay, so he was lying—that was to be expected from men who approached street girls looking for a good time. Some of them were contracted and they wouldn't want their wives to know. Some of them were connected, and they wouldn't want their bosses to know. But she knew for a fact he'd been in her fair city for at least two days, and he'd been eating one of the foulest-tasting tidbits known to humans, too, Farvarian jak-eggs.

"Well," she said, stalling for time, "I'm not cheap."

"Nothing worth having ever is," Fatso said. "Give me a number."

"Fifty sheks."

Too fast, he said, "Fifty? No problem, I can manage that."

Raze smiled outwardly, but she mentally frowned. Fifty was twice as much as the going rate for an hour, and unless this was his first time, he should have counter-offered twenty and let her work him up to twenty-five or thirty, max. For him to agree to the price immediately was passing strange.

Something was wrong with this picture. She just couldn't figure out what.

He stepped in a bit closer and offered a flaccid



smile.

She had it. He didn't smell bad. If he'd eaten a jak-egg in the last three days, there ought to be a powerful stench emanating from him, no matter what he used to clean his teeth or mouth. Jak-eggs went right to the body chemistry, and you couldn't mask the scent, it was like running over a dead *puque* with your cart. The stink stuck to your tires for clicks.

Okay, so he's saving the eggs for a special treat. Or maybe they were a present for somebody.

But something still felt wrong about this guy. And all of a sudden, it seemed important that she figure out what it was. It wasn't as if she were coming off a big victory on the shop surveillance or anything.

"There's a place just up there," she said, smiling back at him.

He took her arm. He wore a short-sleeved tunic, and beneath the hem of one sleeve she saw the remains of a tattoo that had been laser-faded by somebody who wasn't very good at it. She didn't recognize the tribal design offhand, what she could see of it, but it wasn't one of the majors.

"Lead on, sweet lips," he said. "I can't wait to get you alone in a room!"

She flashed her smile larger at him. "Me, too," she said.

It didn't take long for that to happen. Fatso paid in advance for the crib at the rooming house—he had a real thick deck of cash—and they took the lift up to the third level. His clothes didn't go with that many sheks. And why would a man with that much money be shopping in a hole like Wrattan's? You could get jak-eggs delivered from any big produce market. More little bits that seemed wrong.

He groped her a little in the lift, and she ground

her teeth and bore it.

Once inside the crib, with the door locked behind them, he waddled toward the bed, pressed against it with one hand to test the springiness, and turned to look at her expectantly. "Now we're gonna have some fun, heya?"

She pulled her pistol from her pouch and pointed it at him with one rock-steady hand. "Oh, yes," she said, "we certainly are."

Starkar Mace wasn't a rich man, but he had some money salted away. Mostly he got to eat and sleep for free when he was working — his laser harp bought him at least room and board, along with a small fee — and when he wasn't working, he didn't have much he wanted or needed. Over the years, the sheks had accumulated. So that now, now when he had a solid lead, he had the means to pursue it.

He stood outside the tent-covered hopper shopper, looking at the rows of used carts. Most of them were old ground-effect vehicles, but there were a few high-flight turbogravs and air carts, plus the odd ornithopter or double-blade copter. There were also a lot of groundrollers, wheeled vehicles strictly for road or path travel, but he didn't need to bother with those. According to the old wolf, his nephew Little Dog was on a land-clearing detail more than four hundred clicks away, in the Big Wood, that section of forest that shrouded green the midsection of the entire continent for millions of acres. The only way it was accessible was by air, so it was going to be a high-flight air cart or one of the old VTOLs. Even though he had enough money stashed in various accounts so that he could afford a more modern craft, one of the sleeker hoppers or turbogravs, he didn't want to draw attention by drop-



ping that kind of moola in a burg like this one. Big money from a harper would certainly raise eyebrows, and that was the last thing he wanted to do.

"Pleasant day to you, fine sir," the smallish woman said to him. "Interested in a vehicle?"

He nodded at the saleswoman, who sported Starwolf Support tats and covers. "Ayiā. I was looking for a high-flight three or four-seater, nothing fancy."

She took in his clothes and general look, and he could see her estimating how much she could gouge him for. "What kind of travel are we talking about?"

"Oh, you know, visits to my wife's family out in the Big Wood Fringe. I need enough fuel to get there and back. Thousand klick range."

"No problem, we have several excellent used models that will manage that. What, ah, kind of price range are you looking at?"

Maçe smiled inwardly. They would dicker and in a little while, he would have transportation. It had been a long time and a lot of water under many bridges, but unless the boy – Maçe still thought of him as "the boy" — had died recently, Maçe had a place to go where it was likely he could find Ulysses. If he was a slave, that would be a complication—but a minor one compared with finding him in the first place.

He didn't want to allow himself to get too excited. It could turn out to be a waste of time, but it was hard to keep still. Fifteen years was a long time, and maybe his search was at an end. He could hardly keep the hope out of his thoughts.