

REVOLT IN THE STARS

By

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PROLOGUE

The winch on the truck wound inward, growling and snapping and groaning. Seaweed whipped and wound and unwound on the taut, protesting cables as they dragged an object toward the beach from under the sea.

The intensity of the watching group had no eye for the beauty of the scene; the soft purling of the small waves, the soothing whisper of the tropical wind, the distant clatter of a palm, the rich gold of sand and crystal aquamarine of water might as well have been a tourist poster in a waste basket.

The rigid cordon of Marines, facing outward, automatic weapons in hand, had fierce eyes against any threatened intrusion into the site. VIPs that must not be approached, an object that was top secret and a sergeant with a hangover increased their trigger-happy vigilance.

Several supercilious scientists gazed benignly at the water, tolerantly and learnedly waiting for the object to appear, hoping no one had penetrated the fact that they hadn't a clue.

Jedgar, the jut-jawed czar of all US police and security forces scowled with ferocity at the water.

God damn president, he ought to have his ass kicked, getting him out here for what. God damn hobby-happy bastard. So it's an historical find. So it may be from outer space. Sand fleas when he had an appointment at the race track with Bennie the Dip. \$30,000 payoff via the window. Damned junkie, he'd probably blow it or forget it. What the hell was he doing out here playing nursemaid to his nibs' crap hobby? Nursemaid, that's what he was. God damn president. Bennie better pay up. Jedgar glared at the water as though about to arrest it on suspicion.

On the other side of the groaning cables sat a disconsolate young man in a scuba

suit. He twisted his helmet and mask in his hands around and around. While he might have the nerve to face the monsters of the deep, what were those compared to US officials. Damned government. He ought to have kept his mouth shut. No breaks. He always lucked out. Here he'd made the find, personally and privately and even paid for his own bike gas and air. Well, an orphan is an orphan. Still, there was law about ownership. You couldn't give up just like that. One more try. If it didn't work...

The young man braced himself, got to his feet and wiped some of the sand off his pants. How would John Wayne handle this on the late-late show? One more try.

The young man ducked under the growling cables and walked up to Jedgar who gave him not a glance.

Now or never. "It's mine! I insist it's mine! I found it. If it weren't for me you wouldn't even know of its existence!"

Jedgar did not even take his eyes off the water. He put out an arm and brushed the young man sideways.

The leading scientist of the group found his own view obstructed. He never wore glasses despite needing them as they spoiled his image of the tawnymaned man of science. He peered at the young man. In his benign voice, reserved for assistants he intended to fire, he said, "You don't understand. Such finds as this belong to the world of science, to the museums, to the universities."

Having registered now that there was a dispute, Jedgar tore his eyes from the water and stabbed them at the young man. Reaching out with a sudden and practiced cop hand, he seized the front of the young man's scuba suit.

"You give me any more crap," Jedgar yanked the young man close to him, "and you'll be charged with conspiracy to steal archeological treasures. Section 896. Three

years in jail. Not one more word out of you. Not to the public! Not to your friends! Not to the press!" He hurled the young man from him violently so that he staggered and fell.

"This," pronounced Jedgar, "is a state matter."

The young man looked up from the ground, defeated. He looked out to where a government scuba diver was guiding in the cables. There was no sympathy there. He looked at the tense Marine backs. He looked at the scientists. He looked at Jedgar. He was totally, completely and utterly ignored. He had never felt more lonely.

He got up and unsteadily wandered across the sand. Head down, shuffling, he went out through the cordon and wandered away through the distant crowd.

The winch cables groaned on, coiling and twisting. The government scuba diver watched the cables. The group on the sand stared, waiting.

A greenish sea-coated metal object began to emerge.

It had no bolt studs, no apparent seams. It was many planed, symmetrical. First one, then two, then a the eight foot diameter of it came into full view.

"All right!" yelled Jedgar. "Let's get the thing loaded on a plane." Maybe he could still get to the race track.

Washington the fair, Washington the beautiful, home of the incorruptible politician and the shining knights of social justice, basked in the summer sun, owned, operated and controlled as usual by the bankers and their police.

The Institute sat on a low hill, securely backed by the printing plant that poured the newly printed money into the hands of the deserving few. As much summer sun as could get through the smog entered the windows of a large hall and fell upon the object.

All eight feet of it had been placed

against one wall. It had been polished up a bit – at least the sand had been removed. It had two small panels, oblong sealed rectangles, much like slitted eyes and these seemed to stare blindly into the hall facing it, waiting.

Several feet in front of it, Jedgar and the leading scientist stood. The President, who had just arrived with his usual escort, joined them.

Excitement agitated the President's eyes. Ever since he had been a little boy he had been interested in such things. It might be something from outer space, it might be some archeological wonder. He had strictly forbidden them to tinker with it. These scientists monkeyed so. Who knows but what it might be some discovery he could claim the patronage for and help his votes and show he was an intellectual. Maybe somebody would work out its secrets and make some great new weapon he could use as a big stick. Maybe it held secrets that would blow everything up. His background training for his hobby consisted of a chemistry set somebody had given him at the age of ten and which he had used mainly to make explosives.

The President took his eyes off the object and looked around. "And what have we guessed so far?"

The leading scientist swept back his tawny hair, which he hoped would come to look like Einstein's. It didn't much matter what he told the President so long as it added up to new grants for the Institute and new honors for himself. "Well, Mr. President, we're not at all sure what it is. It must have been imbedded in a cliff side and when that fell into the sea, it exposed itself. I'm having it analyzed now." And he pointed to the right of the object.

Beyond the object a table of instruments had been set up – those used in carbon half-life estimations of age, radiation

detection, electrical detonators – all strewn about in disorderly jury-rigs. White-coated and serious, the instrument man was searching through the scattered papers and getting them in some kind of order.

"All right," said the instrument technician, "I think I've got it." He frowned heavily at a note. "It's some kind of alloy we have never achieved."

The leading scientist nodded and said, "Yes," hoping it sounded as though he knew it already."

The instrument technician pulled a wad of tape out of the notes and, with some difficulty, stretched it out. "This is stretching our equipment, but I'd say that, according to the carbon age test, this thing is tens of millions of years old close to seventy-five million years old at an estimate."

The leading scientist's eyes flashed wider. Damn the technician. You never told laymen things that were likely to scare them off. You damped it down a bit.

But the heedless technician bored on. "It's also been subject to heavy radiation I think, but the count is too faint to tell. No longer dangerous. It doesn't appear to be explosive but there is some sort of energy charge in there."

The President nodded intellectually. "Well, why not get on with finding what it does, or something."

Jedgar scowled at the scientists, scowled at the machine and jutted his jaw at the President. Jedgar was in no pleasant mood. He had missed Bennie the Dip and 30 Gs. This bastard was just a kid playing with toys.

"Mr. President," said Jedgar in a respectful-sounding voice, "I know of your interest in such things and how this is a scientific age and so forth, but we ain't got any guarantee that that damned thing won't blow up. The Secret Service would insist"

The President waved him off with an

indolent hand and turned to the leading scientist. "Go ahead, Doctor. I am truly intrigued."

The two approached the object, leaving Jedgar standing alone in the center of the room.

The two front plates of the machine continued to stare blindly. The leading scientist poked a finger at the left hand one. "Jenkins says this one is apparently moveable. But there's no getting into it with drills. It just breaks the bits."

The President looked curiously at the plate. It had a number of raised dots and marks and he fingered them. First there were ten dots in a line, low and to the left. Then a circle about an inch and a half in diameter with a radius mark. Then a straight line at the level of the bottom of the circle and about as long as the circle was round. Then two dots at the end of the line but at a height level with the top of the circle. After that came a wide gap. And to the right of the gap were a group of dots arranged so that as dots they made up small individual groups of one to nine. Part of this last group was a square that was empty.

"Those," said the leading scientist, "appear to be meaningful, some sort of an equation perhaps." He coughed depreciatingly. "My assistant Jenkins says whoever possibly made this didn't want barbarians to open it and put a code on it that only an advanced civilization could resolve." Always feed the laymen the interesting bits even when one personally might discount them. And let assistants take the rap if they were challenged. "Isn't that what you said, Jenkins?"

Jenkins had come out of a hole somewhere and crept up on the group. He was short, poorly formed as a man, looking as if he had borrowed his white coat from an elephant. His glasses were three quarters of an inch thick which made his pupils look

like enlarged specimens. He was very, very nervous. Jenkins seldom got very brave, and today, finding himself in company with the President and the top cop of the country, he was having a hard time with his nerve. Nevertheless he braved up to it.

He spoke all in a rush. "When we couldn't make a dent in it with a sledge hammer, I guessed it might be some culture superior to ours. So..." He bogged down.

The leading scientist looked at him in contemptuous tolerance. "Well, well, come on."

Jenkins took a deep breath. "I think... begging your pardon Mr. President and all... I think that's "pi", the radius of a circle." He yanked a book, a table of logarithms out of his enormous jacket pocket and tremblingly opened it to where he had made a marker. God help him if he was looking smarter than his boss. That old bastard would put an assistant that looked like competition back on an instructor's post as quick as look at him.

The leading scientist said tolerantly, "Well, come on. No matter how silly it may be, we're quite receptive."

Appalled at his own bravery, Jenkins dived all the way in. "That first row of dots on the left must mean common base ten logarithms, the circle and line must mean pi – the circle is the same length as the line – I measured them – the two dots there must mean squared, the gap must mean equals and that group of dots on the right must mean one through nine and zero so you can punch in the answer if you figure it out."

He shakingly found a place in the book and held it close to his glasses. "The log of 3.14 is 0.4969 and the answer to that squared is 0.9938." He looked up, scared but brave. "The combination to that thing is 0.9938 he swallowed. "If you let me push the dots..."

The smile of the leading scientist had a certain amount of hydrochloric acid in it. Never a word in all that about how his boss had suggested... even if not true. An instructor's post in some desegregated school would certainly be in order.

"I think," said the leading scientist, "that I'm at least capable of pushing the buttons."

Without any great expectations of anything happening, he probed an index finger over the dot groups one by one. A common base log squared was not very advanced math in his opinion, although it is true that pi was a pretty good idea – communication was possible without arbitrary symbols. Now had they put a formula on it in quantum mechanics...

A flaring green light glared in the other panel.

The leading scientist and the President jumped back.

The green turned into a racing, flashing red that played over their startled faces.

A low whine began to ascend. It ended sharply with a loud snap. Jedgar went for his gun. The left hand plate ceased to flash and turned into a criss cross of white lines like a speaker grid.

In a saw-toothed, metallic voice, the object spoke. "Mark 92 Vocotranslator. All sound and information is now coming to you by thought concept and visual feedback so that you hear as though spoken in your own language."

The group looked at it wide-eyed. The voice continued. "You have activated the power charge. It will last for two years continuous running and many times that used intermittently. It will shut off automatically at the end of this use. Please step back at least two paces."

There was an earsplitting whine and a creak and a crash. The whole front face of the object below the panels flashed wide

open. It was very hard on their nerves and confirmed Jedgar's solid opinion, which was usually wrong, that it was a bomb after all. The gun in his hand shook but he couldn't see anything to shoot at except a deep wide cavity which had been disclosed by the opening doors.

"Please be seated," said the object politely.

The President was suddenly mindful of his traditional White House responsibilities. He rose to the crisis. "Clear the room! This may contain confidential information. It can talk!"

This more routine attitude served to clear Jedgar's scrambled wits. It was an order he could understand. He scowled around him. As he was still holding onto his gun, the leading scientist and all others in the room made haste to comply. By various doors they left.

Jedgar scurried around the hall and turned keys in locks, looked behind and under things with a very practiced eye, used his gun muzzle to see if a bug was anywhere in the potted palms and, satisfied, found two chairs and brought them back to the area in front of the object.

He seated the President and then, reversing his own chair and still holding his gun, sat down. It occurred to him that the damned thing seemed to know they weren't ready until they were and he glared at it.

The President continued to stare into the black cavity. It was quite wide and quite dark. He nervously hoped no monster would spring out of it or that it didn't turn on a sudden vacuum, suck them in and send them spinning off into space.

Jedgar looked around the room one final time to see if they were alone. The screen at the back of the cavity flickered, faltered and then turned on in full color.

CHAPTER ONE

The music was faintly oriental and the drums were sad.

A tattered and ripped up operations room showed the signs of battle.

The man at the desk was handsome, young, but his face was disfigured with a bandage around his forehead. The plain khaki blouse he wore was singed over the left shoulder. He looked vital, competent, alive.

He was holding a sheaf of papers in his hand, reports, notes, records.

"We assume," he said, "that as you have solved this capsule, your civilization has advanced to a high standard of technology – possibly nuclear fission, computers, even space flight – or at least you are capable of these things in your immediate future.

"You have a right to know the violent history of your planet. Some day when grass has grown again and the few pitiful survivors have multiplied into a culture, you will know what to do with this and understand it.

"My name is Mish, a Loyal Officer of the People of the Galactic Confederation."

He stretched his hand behind him to the wall. There a star map glittered and sparkled. "You may never have heard of the Galactic Confederation. It consisted of 21 stars and their 76 inhabited planets. You were one of those planets.

"Earth was a beautiful jewel then. It had vast cities, lovely forests and mountains and billions of inhabitants.

"But all was not calm. Things had happened, not just on Earth but all over the Confederation."

He propped up a screen up on his desk. A mob appeared on it, an angry mob carrying placards, surging and seething outside a building.

Mish continued, "Throughout the Galaxy symptoms of unrest, hitherto unknown

in the Confederation were occurring as you can see by these news clips.”

An old woman was being mugged on the street. She fell. One of the muggers snatched her purse, the other kicked her in the face.

”Crime was becoming commonplace.”

A littered street lined with broken shop windows appeared.

”When there was a power failure in a major city, thousands of people began a fury of looting and burning.”

A school yard appeared. A young girl was being attacked by a mob of thugs.

”All these conditions had begun in the past eight years.”

A horde of secret police in grey-green uniforms and riot dress were shown charging a mob.

”The popularity of the government had dropped to an all time low.”

A tank was shown attacked by a mob. They turned it over on its side.

A government building was shown. The huge sign ”Tax Office” was suddenly obscured by a blast of flame.

”The words ’idealism’ and ’patriotism’ had become meaningless throughout the 76 planets.”

A large array of assorted arms and explosives were being displayed by police, a cache discovered in a basement, enough material to fight a regiment.

”Gun running had become a highly profitable business.”

Trucks loaded with bales of drugs were being unloaded by police and tumbled into a huge bonfire.

”Organized crime was profiting as never before. To combat it hundreds of thousands of secret police were being recruited by the government.”

Long ranks of men in grey-green uniforms were shown drawn up.

A colored agitator, speaking from a

platform was shown haranguing a mob. A secret policeman lined the speaker up in the sights of a blast rifle and fired. The agitator was smashed backwards.

”But the government in its turn was using more and more force in an attempt to control the violence.”

A civilian sniper appeared on a parapet of a building. Beyond him a city spread out. The sniper fired down into the street.

”And reprisals were earning reprisals in their turn.”

Mish folded the screen. He looked at his notes and then up again.

”The Galactic Confederation was very old. It had endured for thousands and thousands of years. It had been happy, prosperous and peaceful.

”The planets were politically democratic. The people elected their own governors and civil officials and the entire Galaxy was governed by the Congress of Loyal Officers of the People. These were trained men, skilled in political and martial arts. When they were graduated from their academy they stood for election to the Congress and those chosen loyally served the people.

”There was also an executive branch headed by the Supreme Ruler, a man also elected by the people and responsible for the day to day running of the Confederation but under the laws and appropriations of Congress.”

Mish laid down his notes.

”The Congress of the Loyal Officers of the People met every ten years. Matters of state, finances and other concerns had been smooth and routine in the 2053rd Congress. Indeed there had been no upsets at all throughout the Galaxy.

”The Grey Invasion had occurred just before that. An invader had attempted a destruction of the Confederation, had sailed in in savage attack and had been effectively and efficiently destroyed. He had come

from another Galaxy. But he had found the Confederation prepared and alert and -that was the end of him.

"The Grey Invasion was shot out of space even before full mobilization could occur on Earth and our planets and the whole affair had become ancient history.

"The 2053rd Congress had done what was necessary to handle all that and it was finished. Thus it was with considerable concern that the Loyal Officers came to the 2054th Congress.

"Revolt was growing in the Stars.

"And it was in this atmosphere that the 2054th Congress met to decide what course to take. On Home Planet, many light years away from Earth, the Loyal Officers of the People were arriving from every part of the Galaxy."

CHAPTER TWO

The Announcer on his platform gazed across the vast spaceport of Home Planet. Behind him a military band in resplendent white and blue uniforms blared joyous music. Before him spread a tumultuous vista of arriving ships, surging crowds and whipping flags.

Two thousand planetary troops with their guidons, plumes and drummers lined both sides of the concourse facing inward, an honor guard.

Police cordons blocked tens of thousands of people safely away from the landing ships and the concourse.

The harried staff of the Announcer hectically tried to catch everything in their radio cameras, tried to spot everyone and write down the names of arrivals and data about them and pass the result to the Announcer.

Well aware that his voice was carrying across this whole vast assemblage through huge public address horns, not only across

and in almost every room of the limitless city beyond the field, but also across the stars to seventy-five other planets, the Announcer spoke in a rapid, impressive monologue, kept going by the slips passed to him by his staff.

He was apprehensive. Just two days ago these mobs had been surging through streets and burning. He had thirty-three staff here including his cameramen and this was a very visible platform, easily rushed. He had half a million credits in equipment strewn around here and one firebomb would take it all. He felt responsible as well. What he said was going to this crowd and huge viewscreens around the field as well as everyone else in the Galaxy. The regular announcer for such things had declined today and he had had to take over even though he was actually the producer. Soothe them, soothe them. Nervous business.

"Hope is a wonderful thing! Looking across the field of Home Planet today you would not think that half the inhabited worlds of the Galaxy were close to outright revolt. Such is the confidence of the people in the Congress. There isn't even a demonstration placard out there today." He reached urgently to his staff for another slip of paper.

Ship after ship was landing from a sky full of ships. As each one swooped down, a Loyal Officer would step out, promptly surrounded by guards, and stride toward the concourse.

"Ah, what a great day, a great day," said the Announcer, reaching beseechingly for more slips from his staff. "The most famous names of the entire Galactic Confederation are arriving on this field this afternoon. The two thousand and fifty-fourth Congress of the Loyal Officers is beginning auspiciously."

The high pitched whine of circling

ships, the roar of the crowd and the upsurge of the band as they began a new piece blotted his voice for a moment. He stepped closer to his dozen cube shaped mikes and his sound engineer frantically re-adjusted his levels.

"The Loyal Officers, the Loyal Officers of the People, heading 76 planets for the 21 star systems of the Confederation, one by one are coming up this concourse..." One of his staff got a piece of paper into his hand and he looked at it urgently and then smiled happily.

"Hah! Here is Rawl!"

The group which had entered the field end of the Concourse was larger than others, being joined by military officers in white and blue and some civilians. They were jostling one another, some of them trying to reach through and shake hands with the man at the center.

Rawl was smiling good-naturedly. He was a tall, athletic man, handsome in a blunt sort of way. He wore the plain khaki trousers, blouse and cap of a Loyal Officer.

The Announcer stood on tiptoe to see better over his mikes. "Rawl, the Loyal Officer in charge of Earth. Rawl, Speaker of the Congress! You have heard his name connected with every great deed and decency!"

A surge in the outer crowds became a cheer roaring up to blanket the whine of circling ships. Rawl was looking up around at the familiar faces, smiling, trying to shake each hand extended to him. His progress up the concourse was being slowed by the increasing pressure. He drew a long breath and then caught sight of a drummer boy in the ranks of the Ninth Army honor guard and winked at him. The drummer boy grinned happily and suddenly added to the din with a bursting roll upon his drum.

Just behind Rawl's group was another. Mish, the center of it, pushed forward,

trying to reach Rawl. The Announcer didn't need another slip. "And there is Mish! Mish, Loyal Officer in charge of the Outer Limits, Rawl's best friend! You know the story well of how these two stood off the entire fleet of the Grey Invader until our own battle fleet could arrive. And you know their daring rescue of the freighter Aldebaran..."

Mish finally struggled through the mass and tapped Rawl's shoulder. They gripped each other's hand and beamed, their greeting lost in the excited babble of the groups, the swelling roar of the crowd and the band suddenly tearing into "Grey Invader Victory".

The Announcer was staring down at a new sheet of paper jammed into his hand urgently. He looked at it, his pleasure evaporating, and followed the stabbing finger of an assistant. Several radio cameras whirled in that direction.

Standing like a naked sword, the black tower of the spaceport administration building stabbed at the sky and circling ships.

A balcony near its top was draped in somber green. A black wreath with twenty-one stars hung from the railing.

"Just now," said the Announcer in a much changed tone, "on the receiving balcony of the Administration tower there has appeared the party of the Supreme Ruler."

The Announcer made sure the radio cameras were centered on the balcony. "There he is, Xenu, the Supreme Ruler of the Galactic Confederation."

Xenu, bitter faced, sardonic, leaning heavily on a cane that was more like a club, limped forward to the front edge of the draped railing. He glared down at the stalled group on the concourse below and did not like what he saw. The dark somberness of his civilian suit, the darkness of his hair and face seemed to spread outward. The cheer-

ing below dimmed off to silence. The band faltered and died down.

The Announcer's voice was overly loud suddenly for only the whine of ships lay over the field. "He is accompanied today by Chi, the illustrious Minister of Police of the Galactic Confederation."

Chi, jut-jawed, bulldog faced, squat and as crudely built as his civilian suit was rumpled, was oblivious by any announcement. He stepped up to Xenu's side and looked belligerently down at the stalled groups on the concourse.

The Announcer was glad to get off the subject. He frantically waved to his cameramen to target the right side of the balcony. "And here is something of interest. He has brought with him today his new mistress, the Lady Min!"

Lady Min caught the cue from the PA and stepped forward to the balcony railing. She was a warm and smashingly lovely woman, splendidly gowned in gold. The band abruptly struck up a lively theater overture.

"As no one needs to be told, Lady Min is the foremost stage star of the Galaxy!"

With perfect poise, Lady Min curtsied. There was a spattering of applause, a few cheers. She spread her hands to receive the applause and it increased. She blew a kiss and the applause increased again.

The Announcer, although he knew she was unlikely to see him and didn't even know him, blew a kiss back at her in thanks for getting him out of that one. That crowd silence had scared him and he had no skill in handling riots.

Putting new forced vitality into his voice to swing the crowd's attention off dangerous ground, the Announcer shouted, "There seems to be a lam of the concourse.

No, that's Rawl!"

The radio cameras swiftly whipped to the concourse. Two cameramen pushed

through the ranks of the Honor Guard and added to the press and turmoil, trying to get their cameras high enough to shoot down over the milling heads.

Rawl and Mish were jammed in tight. A new group had come down from the administration building adding to the civilians, military officers, press and staff that surrounded them already. The group was pushing a big wreath of flowers over people's heads and struggling to get closer.

"Ah," said the Announcer, "Look at that. The city is trying to give Rawl a wreath of welcome and they can't even get to him."

The wreath, a bit frayed, finally made it by knocking Rawl's hat askew and bashing down on his shoulders. Rawl and everyone around him was laughing but their laughter was drowned by the rolling roar of cheers from the vast crowds when they saw on the screen boards the wreath had finally made it. City fathers, their own hats askew in the press, tried to shout, unheard, their speech of welcome.

Up on the balcony, Xenu and Chi beheld the scene.

"Well," said Xenu bitterly, "he seems to have lost none of his popularity."

Chi said, "Huh!" And it was eloquent.

They glared at the sky and concourse as the Announcer's voice continued to roll over the PA system, to the city, to the planet, to seventy-five other inhabited worlds on carrier wave hyperspeed sound and picture.

"And still they come, the Loyal Officers of the People! Tomorrow they will meet in the long awaited two thousand and fifty-fourth Congress in the Galactic Capitol. From every quarter"

CHAPTER THREE

Rawl let the entrance door swing shut

behind him and gazed across the enormous hall.

Seventy-six great flags juttred out on poles high above, each one with the plaque of its planet in solid gold below it. The great arched windows spread a pattern of sun. Hundreds of Loyal Officers were at their seats already, talking tensely to one another. Many caught a glimpse of Rawl and shouted their greetings.

At the near end of the room a choir stood in ranks upon a raised balcony and before them the Archbishop of Home Planet stood, his tall, mitred cap flashing with jewels.

Rawl's eyes went to the rostrum at the distant end of the hall. On the first tier were the Ministers of the Executive Branch. At the wide desk above it, in a sombre black robe, backed by the glittering seal of the Confederation, sat Xenu, Supreme Ruler.

For a brief instant over that expanse, their eyes clashed. Then Rawl began to walk down the aisle. The click-click of the magnet-heeled space boots he habitually wore was sharp and punctuating in the room despite the babble of sound.

Chi, on Xenu's left, was following Rawl's progress down the long aisle with ferret eyes and a palm that itched for contact with his hidden blaster.

The calm strength of Rawl seemed to spread outward. He was giving little heed to the greetings beyond a preoccupied nod. He had spent the night with committees and, as speaker of the Congress, he knew what he had to do.

His seat was in the front rank of chairs with empty space between it and the rostrum. Mish was there already, smiling eagerly.

Rawl stopped and swept his eyes across the hall and back at the rostrum. That Chi was a nasty breed. And Xenu looked sardonic, contemptuously amused.

Rawl sat down.

An officer in the row behind him put a friendly hand on his shoulder. "Are we going to take up this police state thing right away?"

Rawl said, "Might as well."

Mish nodded rapidly. "Head on collision."

The officer behind them said, "Good boy," and sat back expectantly.

A huge round gong rested in a frame beside Xenu. He picked up a brass hammer and gave the gong a hard blow. Its long, doleful sound rolled in waves across the hall, carrying audience silence with it.

Xenu spoke. "Now that we seem to have gotten together somehow – if late – I, Xenu, duly elected Supreme Ruler by the Loyal Officers of the Galactic Confederation, do declare the two thousand and fifty-fourth Congress to be in session."

The choir lifted their voices into a hymn.

The hundreds of Loyal Officers rose to their feet, caps off and stood facing the front of the room.

The Archbishop stood, tall and solemn, bathed in the sound of the choir behind him.

As the hymn finished, the Archbishop raised his palms upward. His droning, sonorous voice spread through the hall:

"All blessings to Almighty God and the Galactic Confederation, upon its 21 stars, upon its 76 green planets, upon its trillions of population and upon the Loyal Officers, loyal to the people, to the Confederation and to God and upon this Congress. May peace and prosperity continue as it has for ages past."

The Loyal Officers resumed their seats.

A crier stepped forward from the end of the rostrum. "The Congress is now open for its first deliberations!"

Rawl stood. He looked around him calmly, at the Loyal Officers, the rostrum.

"This Congress," said Rawl, "meets in the shadow of possible planetary revolt." The last particle of noise vanished from the hall. Every eye gave him full, strained attention.

"Head on collision," Mish had said. Well here it was.

"In the ten years since the last Congress, certain orders have been issued by the Executive Branch which were not ratified by the 2053rd Congress."

Xenu went rigid. He had not thought they would dare. "While we do not wish to be critical," said Rawl, "and imagine there are reasons for these orders – no matter how much mistaken – it has been decided by the Congressional Committees that our first order of business should be to survey these changes, put them to a vote, and ratify them or not so that their legality or illegality is clearly established."

A rapid, electric buzz of approval spread through the hall.

Xenu braced himself, corrected his expression to one of political suavity.

"What changes?" said Xenu.

Mish instantly produced an ornate folder and passed it to Rawl who took it without glancing at it.

"Over the past two hundred years or so," said Rawl, "certain political ideas and innovations have been put forward from time to time. And each time they have been defeated. But now, beginning eight years ago, we find they have become executive orders!"

Xenu continued to keep a grip on himself. He was very sure of his own ground.

Rawl glanced at the folder he held. "These ideas are: personal income tax, credit records, fingerprinting all citizens, identity cards, passports."

An angry mutter swept through the hall.

Rawl dropped the folder. He lifted his

head. "For thousands of years we have done without these things and done well. Yet today, by executive order, we find them instituted and enforced on every planet of the Galactic Confederation.

Chi bent and whispered urgently into Xenu's ear.

Suavely Xenu smiled. "These are lawless times. It is the executive responsibility to keep the realm peaceful, prosperous and calm." He tented his fingers and assumed an attitude of stating a fact that everybody knew and only an idiot would disagree with. "By making it possible to identify every citizen swiftly we can catch criminals at once!"

In the back of the hall a grey-haired officer leaped to his feet. "If this identity system is so successful, then why is it that during the last eight years, crime throughout this Galaxy has multiplied five times?"

Rawl raised his hand in a signal.

The doors at the rear of the hall crashed open and six page-boys, each one pushing a wheeled table, raced in and rushed to the front of the room.

The tables, each one piled high with documents and reports were rapidly positioned before Rawl.

Rawl swept his hand indicating the tables.

"The Congressional Committees have not been idle," said Rawl. "Here, Your Excellency, are the crime records of all seventy-six planets for the past ten years. Here also are the complaints and petitions of those planets. Here, as well, are the financial records and appalling rate of inflation of the Galaxy."

He let the hall calm down a bit. He looked mild and persuasive. "Personal income tax and credit records carry with them a total invasion of privacy. Identity cards and passports put every citizen at the mercy of personal enemies as well as the

state.”

He picked up some of the petitions, long rolls with tens of thousands of names and, after glancing at them, sought to pass them via a page to Xenu. Xenu flattened his hands against them. He wanted no petitions.

Rawl continued, even more mild and more persuasive. ”Such measures are the mechanisms that make slaves of a people, that sap their initiative and fill them with fear.”

His gaze at Xenu leveled. His voice became very firm. ”These are the mechanisms of tyranny and oppression and no right-minded citizen would ever permit them. They are the tools of the sly slave-master and every one of these measures is a stench in the nostrils of free men.”

An abrupt rolling shout of approval burst from the hall.

He stood very straight. ”The executive branch is regarding populations as domestic cattle, to be milked for taxes and the payment of loans. You are ear-marking and branding them with enforced identity cards. You are even teaching them in schools that they are animals. You do NOT own them. They are NOT your herd, They are free human beings, not economic slaves or government property. And any government that violates this fact cannot end in anything but destruction of both itself and the people. This is NOT opinion! This is history!”

Cheers and applause rolled through the Congress.

Savagely Xenu cut into it. ”These measures were vital! He struck the gong hard for order. ”Here, I will call a witness!” He gestured behind him, and to the crier.

The crier stood. ”Master Lord Lieutenant Zel, chief of the secret police of Earth, appearing as witness for the Ministry of Police.”

The curtains parted and Zel came forth. He was dressed in a grey-green uniform, glittering with braid. He came to Xenu’s right and stood there, black eyes shifting, his weasel face suspicious.

”The only way to handle crime, ” said Zel, ”is to be able to lay your hands on any citizen at any time. Men are all basically criminal. Without identity cards, without the most detailed dossiers... ”

”For police blackmail, ” came a shout from the hall.

”... the most detailed dossiers, ” continued Zel,

”without passports to cut down criminal travel, police work would be utterly impossible.”

”You’re causing the revolt!” someone shouted.

Zel struggled on. ”You cannot handle a crime wave unless you consider every citizen a potential criminal. And you have to have fingerprints of everyone to identify missing persons and bodies... ” Laughter from the hall drowned out what he was saying.

He had not been prepared for this much opposition.

He looked sideways at Xenu, looked at the Congress and then, backward step by backward step, he got to the curtains and vanished.

Xenu was hard eyed. He clamorously struck the gong. He gestured urgently toward the curtains and the crier.

The crier caught his cue. ”Master Lord Chu, Executive President of the Galactic Interplanetary Bank, presenting testimony for the Treasury.”

The curtains slipped apart and a fat, pudgy man, very much like a pig, slid forward. His civilian clothes were quite plain but he wore four diamonds in his tie and a huge diamond on each hand.

He was very nervous and was twisting

the rings on his fingers. "I am very honored for the privilege to address the Congress of Loyal Officers. Doubtless," he repressed a giggle, "this slight misunderstanding can be cleared up. You see," and he didn't succeed in repressing the giggle this time, "You see, the Confederation is not solvent. It has," he paused and looked very pleased, "very bad debts. Er..."

A Loyal Officer leaped to his feet in the hall. "It was completely solvent at the time of the last Congress!"

Chu nodded energetically. "Well, yes, perhaps it was solvent then. But only on the surface. The bills for the Grey Invasion were not all counted up. And the Treasury was very empty. And so I... I mean the Treasury proposed a personal income tax. Oh, yes, it very much eased things."

Rawl looked at him, calm, assured. "These petitions show that personal income tax has caused wild inflation on every planet and has brought about economic stress. The government takes the money of individuals and companies before it can be invested or enter commerce. Wages and prices have had to be doubled, tripled, quadrupled to compensate for this loss of income. Inflation and increased public debt has followed."

With a flurry of ring twists and a wriggle, Chu said, "All the very best economists recommended it, I am sure. But this is a state matter. I am more concerned with any effort to abolish personal credit files and ratings. You see, a bank."

Back in the hall, a Loyal Officer was on his feet. "As Chairman of the Loyal Officer's Economic Committee, I wish to remind you that banks were perfectly capable of handling their loans and affairs and prospered well before this enforced individual credit file system was instituted. Your business is with your customers and depends on your judgment, not upon some

spider web espionage system that pries into the lives of every citizen's finances."

"Well," said Chu, "well, yes, I dare say you have a point... I... er... hasten to assure you that banks are not an official part of the government and... er... possibly have no right invading privacy." But he had his own point to make and he firmed up and shot it at them. "But when the government needs money, it always has to come to the bank!" And with this petty triumph he dived back through the curtains.

Xenu furiously banged on the gong to still the laughter.

"I suggest," said Xenu, "this Congress get about its proper business. The executive orders have been passed, they are in effect. They were undertaken under the authority of the emergency powers granted to the Executive in its last session. More police, better means of identification and more tax money are vital to suppress this growing revolt, these crime waves. This unruly, population must be gotten under CONTROL!" He smashed his clenched fist down on the desk. He recovered himself a bit. He was sure of his ground. He knew he was right, for one of his virtues was that he always knew he was right no matter what he did.

"They are legal orders. Personal income tax was necessary to replenish the Treasury. Identity cards and passports were vital to check crime. They exist as orders, they are legal and in force. Under the emergency powers..."

Rawl smiled tolerantly. "Not so hurried, Your Excellency. The law of the Galaxy is formed by this Congress. The situation is very plain. This evidence spread before me says very eloquently that inflation and crime have followed those orders."

He turned his back on the rostrum and addressed the hall. "The flaw in all those enormous personal files being gathered is

that they are obtained by newly active secret police. The credit and identity files of individuals are stuffed with false reports, lies that are never questioned. When the file of an individual has been so corrupted, he can no longer obtain work. He is ruined. A person with a false file has no choice but to turn outlaw and criminal. As you well know, the criminal ranks, hideouts and lairs are swelling out of control and directly as a result of these measures. The criminal does not have to show an identity card to the person he robs or kills. Only decent citizens are being regulated.

And as to inflation, other wiser methods and economies can be found to handle it.”

A mutter of agreement and applause came from the hall.

”The way to handle a possible revolt,” he continued, ”is NOT more oppression, more police. Revolts start with oppression and because of repression. The government frantically adds more repression and gets more revolt. And so it goes on until either the state or the people die. History has shown that the way to handle threatened revolt is to remove utterly, fully and completely all possible reasons for revolt at once. Laws of government that do not stem from the desires and wishes of the people cannot be enforced and must not exist.”

Rawl took a long breath. It was now or never. ”I therefore move that the emergency powers of the executive be cancelled and all executive orders be declared null and void.”

The shock wave of ayes and cheers hit Xenu like a blow. And as the bedlam continued he sank from bitterness into suppressed rage.

The crowd had been standing for hours on the outside steps of the Congress hall, waiting, waiting.

Suddenly the big PA horns blared. ”The motion has passed!”

For an instant the crowd was still. Then they exploded into a deafening roar of cheers. Some leaped in the air, others danced. An old lady just continued to stare at the PA horns and then sank down against the wall and began to cry tears of relief for it meant her two grandsons, imprisoned for not paying accurate tax, would be freed. The waves of cheering and dancing feet churned about her.

The factory cafeteria, where workers had been eating their evening meal, was suddenly struck to silence by the PA.

The lunchroom exploded into a frenzy of cheering. Plates, food and all, sailed into the air.

They jumped on tables and began to dance and shout.

A foreman raced up the curving stairs to the time keeper room and jabbed frantically at ”whistle”, ”siren” and ”fire alarm” buttons and out of the top of the factory, joined promptly by other towers in the industrial zone, came a shattering blast of joyous sound.

A priest as wide as he was tall raced into the bell loft of the great cathedral and began to yank on every bell rope he could reach.

The street had been impassably jammed with cars and people, waiting, waiting, all eyes riveted upon the huge view screens and PA horns.

The blared ”Motion has been passed” was like hitting a button for total commotion.

The people screamed with delight. Every driver hit his car horn.

Whatever else the PA might have said was totally inaudible in the din.

Three young men immediately reached into the back seat of their bus and ripped a blanket off a concealed, mounted automatic blast weapon and stripped the charge bolts out of it. Grinning at one another they

dumped the weapon into a street garbage can, abandoning it. They stood and added their voices to the din.

The newscaster in the Home Planet Interplanetary Broadcast Corporation tower held the first slip in his excitedly shaking hands and screamed at the operator, "Connect it up! Connect it up!"

The technician was urgently unsnarling cables that re-snarled in his haste and jamming plugs into the connector for each planet. He got the board green lighted and snapped a mike cable into the master after two misses.

The newscaster gripped the cubicle mike, started to talk, realized his signal was not green, hit the mike, got it green and yelled, "Alert, alert! All planetary newsrooms. Official, official! Galaxy wide. The 2054th Congress of Loyal Officers just cancelled the executive orders of personal income tax, identity cards and passports. Details to you as fast as they come in here!"

A door opened behind him. The distant shouts, horns, sirens of the city were heard for an instant.

The newscaster whirled. One of his reporters had just come in.

A huge fan of celebration fireworks exploded over the city and flashed through the control tower windows.

The newscaster stripped the paper from the reporter's hand. "Quick! Get Mol at the palace... we want details... color... background... interviews..." The reporter dived at a communication panel. "The palace the palace Mol. Get me Mol."

CHAPTER FOUR

Lady Min was close to being smashed up flat in the palace hallway.

Half a hundred newsmen and cameramen clamored before her, pounding her with

questions.

Beside her, Ap, her press agent, a flashily dressed young man, tried without much success to keep her from being knocked off her feet.

"Lady Min," shouted a reporter, "as the Supreme Ruler's mistress, would you say Xenu was pleased?"

Ap tried to field the question. "Lady Min is the greatest actress in the Galaxy. She does not meddle in politics. Gentlemen, would you please..."

Another newsman shouted, "Is it true Rawl accused Xenu of trying to stir the planets to revolt?"

And another, "Lady Min, would you say the women will be pleased..."

And yet another, "Did Xenu say he was planning a vacation on the summer satellite?"

Lady Min had edged backward and backward, trying to keep herself all in one piece. Her red evening gown was pulled askew on one shoulder. Her red, sparklestudded shoes had been stepped on. The jeweled flower in her hair had been pulled back of one ear.

The din was hard on her ears. "Ap," she shouted, "stars and spotlights, handle them!"

Ap groaned. "In ten years I never had to handle a wild animal act." Suddenly he saw that she had her back to an executive office door and her hand was already turning the latch to open it behind her. "Where are you going?"

Lady Min slid through the door and before any pressure could be put on it, banged it shut. Ap promptly stepped in front of it and held up one hand while he fished in his big-checked jacket for a sheaf of releases. A fanfare of hands began to grab at them.

Lady Min sagged back against the door. From the other side still came the mutter of the commotion in the hall. She was limp.

What had she gotten herself into? The commands of the Supreme Ruler in the past few years had become absolute. Three weeks ago he had simply sent an order to the theater that she was appointed his mistress. And why? He hated women, apparently couldn't stand to touch one. Had she said "No" there was no telling what would happen to her. The government lately had a way of ruining anyone who said "No." So, even though Ap beat his brains trying to find a way around it, here she was.

She looked about her. This was one of Xenu's executive offices. It was splendidly ornate in red velvet and gold. It had a bar, a black table in the room center with some sort of a computer panel in its top and a couch that faced the windows, its back to the room. It was the couch that caught her weary eye and she moved toward it.

One of her glittering red leather shoes came off, its strap broken in the "interviews" but she let it lie and limped on across the room. Exhausted she dropped down on the couch. The back blocked her view of the room, the wide windows gazed out on the evening

city. She started to light a cigarette and then let it fall back in the tray. She put a finger under the gold band at her throat and loosened it. Her eyes lingered on a bracelet that bore the enameled picture of the Supreme Ruler and then tore it off her wrist and dropped it on the floor. She stared at the ceiling and let out a long sigh.

What had she gotten herself into? In her many years on the stage, beginning when she was five, she had been in some commotions, some remarkable ones, but seldom anything even approaching this. The play had closed, mainly because she had had to leave the cast but partly because of public disturbance. The broadcast series she was going to do had been suspended due to her being ordered to the palace. And Xenu had,

in the underworld if not amongst the population, a very unsavory reputation, vague, whispered about, never specified. What crazy bent had caused him to suddenly order someone to become his mistress? Ah, well, tomorrow would tell. Evening was gradually turning into night. She turned on her side and stared out at the stars, dimmed by the celebrations and lights of the city, far from guessing that there lay her immediate destiny.

The latch of the door to Xenu's quarters rattled and the door swung open. Much in the way one would shoo a chicken, Xenu pushed Chu before him.

Xenu shoved the door shut with his cane and snapped on the lights by jabbing it at the switch. He looked at the bar, the table, the hall door. The back of the couch was toward him. Satisfied, he limped to the table and lowered himself into the chair before the computer.

Chu was in an uproar. He was twisting so hard at his rings that he appeared to be taking his fingers off.

"It's ruin!" said Chu. "It's ruin, I tell you. Ruin. Without personal credit files or identity papers, we will never be able to locate debtors and persuade them into paying."

Xenu showed no slightest sympathy. "Crush them into paying, blackmail them into paying, you mean."

Chu agitatedly gestured at a chair for permission to sit and then wriggled into it. "You promised..."

"I promise nothing," said Xenu sharply. Then he relaxed. "I brought you here, my piggy, little friend, to give orders, not to make promises."

With a sly lift of his eyebrows, Chu said, "Remember it was my ideas and suggestions that got all the money into the Treasury."

"Yes, and now it will have to be paid

back. And exactly how we make up the little commissions that were spread around amongst us is a problem. And don't forget that it was your idea because it was a bad one."

Chu began to sweat a bit in alarm. One could never tell about Xenu.

But Xenu was not there to engage in idle conversation. "We have business to do. The Congress has put over me and the whole executive branch a guard committee on finance. Without their authorization the government cannot spend a single credit. This was their method of paralyzing any secret action I might take. They could not remove me as every action I took was completely legal under the emergency powers. But there is an election next year."

Chu flinched.

"Precisely. We will all be retired to the scrapheap. And don't think that because you are a banker you will be overlooked. It is not beyond possibility that under a new Supreme Ruler, they will look into some of your loans and connections. They might even discover how you use billions of public funds to improve the surroundings of your private holdings. They might even find how much public money you had us spend to completely rehabilitate asteroids so that, you could put resort hotels on them and pocket..."

"No, no," said Chu nervously. "You don't have to push me into despair with it. My doctor..."

"Good," said Xenu. "Then we understand one another."

He promptly began to punch buttons on the table computer and view screen. It flared green and the green light, shining upward, glowed on their faces.

Xenu muttered as he pushed buttons. "About two billion for renegades... another four billion to secretly rehire the secret police."

Apprehension began to mount in Chu as he watched the dancing figures.

"The minimum amount," said Xenu, looking at Chu, "is one trillion Galactic credits."

Shock made Chu twist a ring so deeply it cut him.

"In private funds," said Xenu. "Untraceable."

Chu did not speak. He was incapable of it for the moment.

With a long, expert finger, Xenu began to punch buttons again and the figures again started to race across the computer, increasing the amount.

"No," said Chu. "No, no, no." He gathered his wits and gradually took on a sly, calculating attitude. "And my credit systems?"

"You'll get them back," said Xenu.

"And the use of public treasury to improve my private holdings?"

"Of course," said Xenu.

With well being slowly seeping through him, Chu said, "A trillion Galactic credits. Untraceable funds and accounts." He got up and minced to the door. He looked back at Xenu and, humming to himself, opened the door.

Chi came through it. A very gloomy, listless Chi. He closed the door after Chu and wandered over to the middle of the room.

Xenu pried himself erect with his cane and limped to the bar. He was smiling, more cheerful than he had been for days. He took down a bottle and began to prepare drinks.

Chi gloomily followed him to the bar. He let out a deep sigh, "We are crashed."

Xenu uttered a short vicious laugh and continued to pour drinks. "Not so, my friend. The game has not ended. It has only now begun!"

The handkerchief Chi was using to mop his face halted at the side of his jutting jaw.

He was not quite bright enough to take this in. He looked stunned.

"But it's only a matter of time until they depose you. Certainly within the year! And my files. They've ordered me to destroy my files and erase my computers!"

Xenu pushed a drink toward him and spoke casually. "There are other files you can destroy and plenty of useless computers you can erase. Chi, did it ever occur to you that you now have a file on every criminal, renegade and psychopath in this entire galaxy?" He sipped his drink lovingly. "And have you ever thought at one time or another what a splendid secret force they would make?"

Uncertainly Chi took hold of the drink. The concept finally got through to him, he raised his eyebrows and started to lift the glass in a toast but a horrible thought occurred to him.

"But this will take money. And all finances are cut off. Have you ever asked a renegade how much he..."

"Indeed I have," said Xenu. "But no target. We will have more than adequate funds, private, secret."

The illustrious Minister of Police stirred it around in his mind and then began to get the idea.

Xenu put down his glass, all business. "And so we reoccupy the bases destroyed and abandoned after the Grey Invasion. We recruit every renegade we can lay our hands on, we train and equip and on one certain day a few months hence we will..."

Chi hastily got out a pad and pencil and eagerly started to write these orders down. Xenu knocked the pad up. He began to move back to the black table leaving his drink behind him.

"No, no notes. This is totally secret. You will even have to develop your own codes and transmissions. You can trust only those on whom you have definite black-

mail." He sat down in his chair. "This will take very careful planning. A simultaneous strike coordinated on all planets..."

Under Xenu's finger the green computer face lighted up. "There will be no Loyal Officers left to object. And especially no Galactic Commander Rawl, especially no Rawl." This pleased him and he stabbed the buttons viciously. "They wanted a revolt! We'll give them a revolt. Did you know, Chi, that all revolts start from the top. It's an historical fact..."

Chi grabbed his arm. Xenu looked up in some annoyance and then followed the line of Chi's glare.

On the floor midway between the couch and the sofa lay a glittering red shoe.

Chi's hand darted to the hidden blaster under his coat.

Xenu restrained him and silently began to rise from his chair. He walked cat-footedly over to the back of the couch.

He looked down on Lady Min. Her eyes were closed as though asleep, but her breast was heaving a bit rapidly.

He reached down and suddenly grabbed her hair. With a savage wrench he yanked her to her feet.

She backed up toward the window. "I've been asleep!"

He curled his lip. "And by that you confess you heard every word!"

She got her hair loose and tried to run. She stumbled and crumpled into a heap. Xenu leaped after her. He yanked her to her feet.

"And I suppose your first thought is to contact Rawl! You corrupted bitch! You filthy whore!"

He shook her violently. "This is what I get for taking you in." His voice rose to a scream. "You were supposed to bring me popularity!"

Terror was giving away to anger in Lady Min. She gave him a level look,

"Popularity is earned, not bought!"

The cane came up and struck her.

She went sprawling into the corner back of the hallway door, knocked out.

The blaster was in Chi's hand, he made a gesture to Xenu to get him out of his line of fire. "Please move a bit your excellency so I can get a clear shot."

Xenu took his eyes off the crumpled figure. Slowly, he was gathering his wits, taking a competent estimate of the situation. "No. Mo, we don't want another scandal. The pigs of this galaxy have been fed enough."

He hobbled over to the table motioning to Chi to put away his gun. "Call Doctor Stug."

"Robotize her," said Chi.

Xenu nodded several times. "Depersonalize her with neurosurgery." The thought pleased him. "Drag her to her room, put her under guard." He laughed. "She might even be some fun."

CHAPTER FIVE

Lady Min's bedroom was a very ornate affair. It looked out across the sprawling night-lit city. Mirrors that could be adjusted to different angles reached from ceiling to floor all about the walls. One mirrored door led into the hallway, another into a large bathroom. A huge boudoir table, ornate with gold frames stood beside the bed. A full communications panel and screen glittered in the wall.

Lady Min lay sprawled upon the bed where they had thrown her.

She started to rise and winced. She felt gingerly at her head where the cane had struck her. Panic was rising in her but she steadied it down. This was no time to go to pieces. She had no illusions whatsoever about the trouble she was in or her possible fate. The rumors in the underworld about

Xenu could not be without foundation.

Unsteadily she removed her ruined gown and walked over to the wash basin at the boudoir table. She took a wet towel and began to sponge the bruised area above her ear.

The sharp knock at the door was followed at once by a key grinding harshly in the lock.

Doctor Stug opened the door.

In the hall behind him a nurse, a wheelchair and a guard were waiting.

Stug closed the door and advanced into the room. He was a tall man dressed in black civilian clothes. His pointed beard and ribboned eye glasses gave him a veneer of professionalism. As Xenu's private psychiatrist he had had a great deal of practice in deception. His left hand was held behind his back.

"I just came to see if you were all right," said Doctor Stug.

Lady Min laid down the towel and looked alertly at him.

The tilted mirror beside the door clearly showed his back.

It disclosed as well the narcotic pistol he was hiding, a pistol good for a hundred shots anything-up to ten feet which guaranteed a day or more of unconsciousness.

"These petty lover's quarrels!" said Doctor Stug. "Tch. Tch. I have known Xenu for a long, long time and he may get angry but he quickly forgives, quickly forgives. I wouldn't doubt that it will be all made up by bed time."

He began to move forward slowly, easily.

"Why, you seem to have a bruise on your cheek. Well, well, we can do something about that at least."

Lady Min looked at him and then pointed to her cheek. She winced and began to walk toward him unsteadily. "It is a bit

swollen, but really I feel very faint.”

She came close to him presenting her cheek. “Can you see if anything is broken?”

She stumbled and her left hand flew up as to balance herself.

Instinctively Stug reached for her with his free hand.

Lady Min’s right lashed around to his back.

She jerked the hidden gun outward so that it pointed at his side.

Her thumb depressed his finger on the trigger.

A tiny white puff hammered through the cloth of his coat.

Stug’s eyes flew wide, dazed. His mouth opened and he slowly slumped forward. His head hit the rug.

Lady Min knelt over him and disengaged the narcotic pistol. She fumbled with the slide and then got it cocked again.

Softly she said, “You’re not so different from any stagedoor jackass, Doctor Stug.”

She checked the slide, pulled his coat collar open and pressed the muzzle against his bare neck.

“Have a good day’s sleep, brain surgeon.” The muzzle jumped and a puff of white smoke eddied up from it.

She tossed an apprehensive look at the door. She knew there were guards there, not only the one who would come with Doctor Stug, but also door guards. Xenu would not neglect that.

She sped to her closet and yanked out a large flowing night robe. She threw it over Stug and quickly adjusted it to cover all of him and his shoes.

Moving fast, she went to the communications console. She knelt before it and hastily pushed buttons. It’s screen blurred and flashed. Urgency and some panic was catching up with her.

A long way away in the city Ap was

flopped over a bar in a honky-tonk, gripping a drink, listening languidly to a girl who sang soothingly in front of the band. A ragged buzz came from his pocket and with a bored sigh he took out a flat small communications unit with a tiny view screen. His calm vanished when he saw a disheveled Lady Min appear on it.

Her voice was sharp and tinny through the tiny receiver. “Ap! Where is Rawl?”

Ap blinked and got his mind into focus. “What a spectacular question. He left for planet Earth about sunset. The congress is over, you...”

“You’ve got to contact him!”

Ap’s hand on the receiver began to shake. “We got banner headline trouble, I can tell! He’ll take days in flight. That’s out. Look...”

“Ap. Get out to the spaceport fast and get my spaceyacht ready for instant take-off. Quick, quick!”

The honky-tonk music increased in volume. “But Lady Min, they just changed your pilot...”

There was a sharp click as the communications receiver went off.

Ap steadied himself against the bar. “Hot smoke, she rang off. Well here goes tomorrow’s headlines maybe.” He let out a shivering sigh, “Future Zero!” He jammed his communicator into his pocket. It seemed to him that the music was actually a shriek. He collected himself, threw a one credit note on the bar and tottered out toward the door.

In the bedroom Lady Min rose from the console. She stared at Stug on the floor and quieted her rapid breathing.

She rushed to the bathroom and turned on its light. She opened a faucet until the water roared.

She left the bathroom door a crack open and made sure lights could be seen from the room.

Narcotic pistol in hand, she sped over beside the main entrance door, positioning herself so that when it opened she would be behind it.

She was breathing rapidly and carefully steadied herself down. She pulled back the slide on the narcotic gun and hefted it. She took a deep breath. Slowly she unlatched the door and let it drift open a couple of inches.

She raised her chin and in a not too good imitation of Stug's voice called, "Nurse!"

With a clatter and a bang the door was shoved open from the outside by the wheeled stretcher, pushed by the nurse and flanked by the guard. They saw the covered body on the floor and pushed the stretcher on into the room.

The guard, dressed in the grey-green of the secret police, gripped his blast rifle at ready and looked about.

The nurse's head was covered with a white scarf, her shirt was blue-striped and white-cuffed and she wore a voluminous white skirt. She looked at the body on the floor and then at the partly opened bathroom door, noted the running water and smirked. "Have some fun for yourself first, Doc?" she said.

With her palm Lady Min swung the hall door shut.

At the sound of the latch the nurse started to turn.

With one step forward Lady Min pressed the muzzle of the narcotic gun against her neck and fired.

The secret police guard whirled and started to raise his blast rifle to firing position. He opened his mouth to shout.

Lady Min worked the slide of the pistol and jammed the narcotic gun in the direction of his open mouth.

She pulled the trigger and a white puff of smoke eddied around his suddenly slack

jaws as he crumpled.

She grabbed the blast rifle to keep it from clattering on the floor and eased it to the carpet.

She silently slid home the bolt on the bedroom door. She sagged against the wall, gasping with relief. "Stars and spot lights!" she breathed.

She realized she wasn't out of there yet, and it would only be a matter of minutes before the guards outside the door would begin to wonder what was going on.

She went to the peephole port in the door, uncovered it and looked at its lens.

There were two guards in the hall. One was standing indolently beside the door. The other was sitting in a chair across the hall, his blast rifle held between his knees while he fished in his pockets for a lighter, an unlit cigarette dangling from his lips. The rest of the hall was empty.

Lady Min closed the view port. She took the guard by the shoulders and with considerable effort dragged him into the bathroom. She went back and knelt besides the nurse. Laying the narcotic gun on the floor she urgently began to strip the nurse of her clothes, first the scarf then the skirt, then the shoes and finally the blouse. Dear God it was lucky the nurse was a trifle bigger than she was.

Working fast and frantically she shortly had the now naked nurse dumped in the bath tub, Stug – with exertion that was almost too much for her – laid out on the stretcher and the blast rifle under him. Dear God it was also lucky that he wasn't too big a man. She pulled the cover sheet over his form obscuring him utterly. She climbed into the nurse's clothes and then with two darting trips to look at the nurse's face she converted her own nose, mouth and hair line to a similarity.

She adjusted the nurse's scarf and looked at herself in the mirror. She in-

spected herself carefully and then nodded. She opened a drawer in the boudoir and grabbed a handful of rings and her wallet and stuffed them inside her shirt bosom.

She picked up the narcotic pistol and went into the bathroom. Working the slide rapidly she pumped an additional shot into the guard and another into the nurse.

She came back to the stretcher, picked a nightgown off the floor and threw it carelessly across the stretcher's foot.

She looked around the room, closed the bathroom door, locked it and sailed the key under the bed. Silently she unbolted the main entrance door.

She took one final look around the room, drew a long breath to steady herself and then with one hand on the bottom rail of the wheelstretcher she swung the door open.

With a hard yank she sent the stretcher sailing out into the hall, stepped after it and slammed the door. The guards stiffened.

The one nearest it, looked at the closed door and then at Lady Min. "Where's the other two?"

Lady Min looked at him sneeringly. She had heard the nurse speak and hoped her voice now sounded like it. "The fun they had made a little mess. They're cleaning it up so old Xenu won't notice. Phagh, Doctors!"

The guards leered and looked at the door.

Lady Min jabbed her finger authoritatively at one of the guards. "Call an ambulance to the south door." She glared authoritatively at the other one. "Give me a hand with this stretcher."

CHAPTER SIX

Standing beside the spaceyacht, his ears assailed with the whine of ships and rattling clatter of the hangar, Ap was gradually los-

ing seven years of his growth. The sweat ran damply down one side of his forehead and he dabbed it off with a gaudy handkerchief.

The spaceyacht designing was black with a white diagonal stripe and while it might have very nice appointments, it left a lot to be desired for long voyages. And just now it was only about an eighth full of fuel.

Ap stared out across the expanse of space port toward the administration tower. He didn't know what he was watching or waiting for and he expected the area to erupt with guards any instant.

The pilot was lounging under the stub wing of the craft, one foot indolently resting on the sloped landing ramp which extended from the side of the fuselage. He was a new pilot. He had just been assigned. Some of his time in the last twenty-four hours had been spent in wondering what happened to the man he replaced, what he had done to throw him out of favor.

"You say she's only going to the Summer Palace satellite," said the pilot. "That's no great flight.

Why do you want to top up all the fuel tanks and air?"

Ap carefully put on his most persuasive manner. "Well it's safest to have full fuel tanks. Go ahead. Fill her."

"Why!"

"They may want to take a grand tour, sightseeing amongst the satellites. Look, you're just new here. When you serve at this stellar level of command chain, take it from Ap, be prepared for anything."

Doubtfully the pilot moved over to the head of the ship and waved a lazy hand at a passing fuel and air truck.

Ap went on staring toward the administration building.

Chi prowled along the palace hall. One had to keep one's eye on everything these days. You couldn't trust anybody to do

anything. Also they didn't keep him informed the way they should. Only a few minutes ago he had heard that Lady Min had been taken away by ambulance, which was peculiar as there was a complete operating room right here in the palace specially installed by Xenu for exactly such emergencies. He looked at the guard outside Lady Min's door. "Why are you still on guard here? Haven't they gone?"

The guard started and straightened up stiffly. It made one nervous just to see Chi much less to be talked to by him. "Yuh Yuh. They took her out. But the brain-banger and one of my guys are still in there – straightening up."

Chi didn't like it. He stood for a moment and then suspiciously slid the door open.

There was nobody in there. He instantly drew his gun and stepped sidewise through the door.

Cat-footed he approached the bathroom door, flipped the knob, found it locked. He stepped back and crashed the flat of his foot against the door just beside the knob.

It flew open.

The guard lay sprawled on the floor.

The nurse lay naked in the tub.

The guard stood jaw open looking in and then something like terror came into his eyes as he shifted them to Chi. He had a very good idea what would happen to him now.

Chi thrust the guard violently aside and rushed out into the hall shouting.

Ap heard the siren before he saw the ambulance and for a sweating instant was certain that it must be a police car.

The white vehicle shot across the field, dived into the hangar and, siren dying, spun about and pointed its nose toward the hangar door. With a squeal it backed to the ramp.

On the run the driver and attendant raced back to the rear ambulance doors and flung them open.

Ap was hastily trying to put the pieces of this together. He saw a nurse step out and if she hadn't moved her hand toward him briefly, only in a way Lady Min would do, he wouldn't have known who it was.

The driver and attendant rolled the stretcher toward the bottom of the ramp and would have rolled it straight on up into the ship had it not been for the pilot barring the way.

The pilot frowned. "What the rockets is this?" He came on down the ramp to the bottom and reached for the cover at the top of the stretcher.

Lady Min chopped at his hand. "Why don't you call Xenu and find out?"

He frowned and again reached for the corner of the sheet.

This time Lady Min used the side edge of her hand on his wrist.

"I know all about little boys who can't keep their hands off unconscious girls. You pervert."

Ap had it now. He rushed forward. "Come on, come on. There's little time to lose."

And he gave the stretcher a perilous push up the ramp. If he hadn't jumped aside the pilot would have been knocked down. The driver and attendant pushed with a will and with a roar of wheels the stretcher flew on up the ramp and into the fuselage of the spaceyacht. Sullenly the pilot followed it.

Ap came to the spaceyacht door as the driver and attendant trotted back down the ramp. "Thank you fellows," Ap called after them. "Greatest drive in history pretty near. Xenu won't forget this!"

The ambulance men waved back to him, climbed into their vehicle and shot off.

The pilot pulled the ramp closed and

walked doubtfully to the pilot seat.

His eyes wide with unanswered questions, Ap looked at Lady Min. She shook her head at him and pushed the stretcher down the aisle of the ship toward a cabin at the tail.

Languidly the pilot was obtaining his clearance from the tower. He checked over the instrument panel and began to start the motors.

"Take off!" yelled Ap. "Get this thing spaceborne!" The ship lurched and began to roll forward slowly.

Lady Min got the stretcher fully inside the rear cabin and began to lash it to cleats in the wall. Ap banged the cabin door shut and lifted the sheet at the head of the stretcher.

He gulped.

"Stug!" He stared at Lady Min. "Why him? This is Stug, Xenu's chief brain-banger."

"Can this rust can get to Earth?"

"Earth! That's days away. No."

They were pushed back heavily as the ship leaped into take-off.

Chi flung himself out of the car and raced up the steps of the control tower, glancing sideways at the sky as he went.

The open air defense platform at the top of the tower was manned by blue and white uniformed soldiers, idling about. They were planetary troops and not in total agreement with keeping a constant alert since nothing had happened for a decade since the Grey Invasion. It seemed a waste of time. Their officer sat, bored, on the parapet. The snouts of four heavy caliber anti-spacecraft guns pointed motionless at the zenith.

Chi burst upon the platform, looked around for the officer and rushed at him, pointing at the sky.

"I am Chi, Minister of Police. That ship, that one there. A bank has just been

robbed and they are escaping on that ship. By police orders fire on it!" The officer looked through his viewer and then back at Chi. "But that's Lady Min's spaceyacht!"

"I know, I know, " screamed Chi. "She'll be furious. Start shooting. Start shooting before they get out of range!"

"Bank robbers?" The officer made up his mind and gestured at his sergeant, "Stop that ship!"

The four muzzles of the battery swept down into firing position, long streaks of red flame sped from them in a staccato roar.

Inside the ship Ap struggled forward up the aisle against the heavy acceleration. He tapped the pilot on the shoulder.

"If you'll just set a course... " He gaped as ribbons of flame shot by in front of the wind screen.

The pilot whipped his head around to the side window and looked back at the rapidly receding field. The red boom of gun fire flashed in his eyes. His face went grey.

Without a second thought, the pilot turned back to the control panel. His glance centered on "Pilot Eject". His hand stabbed hysterically at it.

The pilot seat and the panel beside it tilted violently over.

The white smoke of the ejection explosion puffed around the pilot.

In a long graceful arch the pilot sailed out into the atmosphere and began to tumble.

Ap screamed, "Come back here!"

The hurricane wind of the ship's passage was whipping into the cabin from the open ejection port. He reached and hurriedly snapped the panel shut.

Down below he could see the pilot's parachute opening.

Flame shots raced by between the parachute and the ship.

Ap stared at the maze of controls, the keyboards of buttons on the flashing spin-

ning navigation console. He threw up his hands in despair.

More shots flashed by the windscreen.

Lady Min was trying to inch forward from the tail. Her handkerchief and glasses were off and her hair was flying wildly.

Five flame shots zipped through the side of the ship directly in front of Lady Min. She flinched.

"I can't fly this thing!" wailed Ap.

"Neither can I!" shouted Lady Min.

He ripped open a drawer under the pilot's seat and scrambled in it. He brought out a manual "Mark 38 Navigation Console!" He shakingly yanked at its pages one by one.

A flame projectile went through the windscreen another hit the tail and the ship began to shake.

Trying to get the diagram to match up with the buttons, Ap hit "Accelerate" He huntingly hovered over other buttons.

He clenched his fist in indecision and despair.

"Future Zero!"

Abruptly he jabbed five buttons chosen at random all at once.

The ship abruptly changed course and vaulted skyward in a spinning spiral.

A final barrage of shots sped by under the ship converging on where it would have been.

Lady Min held on desperately in the aisle. Loose objects thudded and banged about the ship.

The passing hurricane velocity air made the small holes in the fuselage whistle and scream like maniacs.

Lady Min looked at the holes. She realized that when they hit space they would lose all their air.

She braced herself and pried open a locker. She brought out a roll of tape and dragged herself to the side of the ship. Stripping off chunks of the adhesive with

her teeth she began to patch the holes.

The ship, steadied out, continued its vertical headlong course for who knows where.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The ship rocked gently as its auto-pilot corrected against gravitic pulls. The aisle between the two couches was littered with empty food cans which clinked together as the ship moved. Crumpled wads of note paper littered the floor between the two couches.

Ap took one last look at the navigation manual and resumed staring at the ceiling, dropping the manual into the litter of the floor.

"Guy that wrote that navigation manual ought to get top billing as an idiot..."

Lady Min stirred on the opposite couch. She still wore the nurse's uniform but now it was rumpled and dirty. She took her eyes off the overhead and looked listlessly at Ap.

"No idea where we are?"

"Not being pulled into a flaming sun anyway – maybe."

"These weeks of this have been..." She was interrupted by a sudden tilt of the ship.

Ap sat up, startled. He stared through the window.

Covering a large portion of the sky beside the ship was a huge-black asteroid, its outline visible only because of the Milky Way beyond it; A patrol ship flashed by, close to.

The spaceyacht console speaker flashed red and from it came a loud official bass voice.

"Patrol A from Interceptor Base 62. Shut off your motors. You will be landed by remote control tractor beams. Anyone found armed on landing will be guilty of a felony. Do not jettison any cargo."

Lady Min sat up, ecstatic. "Interceptor Bases are commanded by Loyal Officers! We're saved! We can reach Rawl!"

The spaceyacht was slowly and inexorably pulled toward the satellite where large hangar doors were sliding open.

Two pilots in the hangar watched its approach. One of them took a closer look at it and then slid his blast pistol into its holster and buckled the flap, dismissing the situation. "Ah it's just some fool spaceyacht that lost its way."

The other dropped his chin on his speaker button inside his space helmet. "Dull, dull, dull. No excitement at all since the Congress. Crime doesn't pay anymore."

They turned and sauntered through the airlock door and shut it behind them.

The spaceyacht came to rest on the hangar floor. The big red lights which said "No air" began to flash. The hangar doors ground down and sealed themselves with a grating clank. The hangar warning light went green and flashed, "Safe atmosphere"; The landing ramp from the yacht fell into position with a crash.

A cleaning man and cleaning woman, old and not much surprised at anything, gathered their mops and buckets together and shuffled toward the ramp.

An officer in blue and white-fatigue uniform lounged up against the craft.

Lady Min and Ap, highly excited and urgent scrambled out of the ship and ran down the ramp. The Officer smiled tolerantly, thumbs hooked in his belt, cap on the back of his head. He negligently waved his hand to indicate the direction they should take and, leading off, escorted Ap and Lady Min into the now open airlock which led deeper into Asteroid Interceptor Base 62.

The cleaning couple watched them go and then shuffled up the ramp with their mops and bucket.

They paused at the port and gazed at

the littered wreck.

"Well, well, looks like they had quite a party," said the old woman. She chuckled to herself.

The cleaning man walked through the litter, kicking at it and approached the cabin doors at the rear of the ship. He tried to open a door and found it locked.

He sighed, reached to the key ring in his belt, laboriously sorted out a master key and finally got it unlocked.

Just as he was about to touch the knob it was twisted from within.

The door was yanked inward.

Doctor Stug, disheveled, savage, his professional calm left far behind him, loomed in the doorway. He glared around. When he saw the cleaning man and woman were the only occupants he quickly readjusted his expression. "Ah, thank you my good man."

Stug's eyes lighted on the communications console in the pilot compartment and he hastened up the aisle.

"Where are we?" he said to the cleaning woman as he passed. "Is this an Interceptor Station?"

The old woman chuckled. These people who used yachts certainly were something to laugh about. "Interceptor Station 62, close as you'll ever get to it." Laughing to herself she got busy with her broom sweeping the litter together.

Doctor Stug tensely and expertly punched a series of buttons on the communication console and then slid into the chair before it. He adjusted the hypersound dial for distance and then triggered the two buttons which turned on a scrambler.

The screen lighted up, was jagged for a moment, its lines snapping and smashing into each other. It cleared and a picture of Chi came on.

Chi glared at his own screen before him and then recognized who it was. He snarled

impatiently, "Stug! Where the crap have you been for a month?"

Stug pulled the mike toward him, looking deadly. "No time for tales. The lost ones are at Interceptor Space Station 62. Just arrived."

Shock spread over the face of Chi, "That's commanded by a Loyal Officer." He paused, his eyes darting about. Then he looked back at his own viewscreen and a cunning look which he thought was persuasive came over his face. "Stug, we have always counted on you."

"You're counting on me now to the tune of a hundred thousand credits. Right?"

"Right."

"I suggest you send a hyperspace interceptor here at once," said Stug. "Manned with a couple of reliable men, of course. I don't like asteroids."

"All right," said Chi. He added ferociously, "They must not talk!"

Stug smiled. "They won't talk," he said smoothly and consolingly.

The white doves, imported to decorate the chambered gardens of the otherwise bleak asteroid and also to fall dead if air pollution rose dangerously, flitted about from perch to perch, the whir of their wings mingling with the artificial waterfall. It was a beautiful garden but in the opinion of Lady Min and Ap was no place to spend two days of idle waiting.

They sat on a seat beside a heavily grilled door, very strong in the black rock.

True, they had been able to clean themselves up even though no changes of clothes had been offered them.

But two days of waiting, despite the urgent notes they had sent the Base Commander, was creating a mystery that depressed their spirits.

The door opened and a white-coated servant entered carrying a tray. He walked over to them and set his burden down.

Lady Min caught at his sleeve as he turned to leave. "Wait!"

"Listen," said Ap, "we've been waiting two days to see the Base Commander. He can't be that busy!"

The servant shrugged and went out closing and barring the door behind him.

"I guess you get that way on an asteroid base!" said Ap.

Lady Min stared at the barred door. "Ap, something must be wrong! I feel it. Why should a Loyal Officer keep us waiting?"

"I sent him messages that you were the greatest actress in the universe and had vital data." He looked defensive. "Maybe I'm flopping as a press agent! Probably."

They sank back hopelessly ignoring the luncheon tray.

Some hours later the bolts grated and the door opened. An officer uniformed in blue and white entered, followed closely by a uniformed guard who held his blast rifle at ready.

Coolly the officer said, "The Base Commander will see you now."

Ap looked at the guard, the blast rifle held at ready, its safety lock off. "Future Zero!" he whispered to himself.

The officer escorted them through the long tunnels and ramps which led up through the light gravity of the asteroid.

The Base Commander's office was spacious even for an asteroid base. Behind the desk was a large illuminated chart of the home planet system with small patrol craft on pins. The kidney-shaped desk was long but very narrow. The Base Commander was young, guileless, with the optimism of youth and a bit bored. He was uniformed in Loyal Officer khaki but his collar was open. A holstered blast pistol was belted about his waist, but his hands folded behind his head as he leaned back in his chair showed that he considered the whole thing rather

dull, not even really amusing.

On his right sat Doctor Stug, smiling, smooth. Beside Doctor Stug and standing against the wall were two toughs in the green-grey and kepis of the secret police.

The corridor door burst in and Lady Min, Ap and their escort entered.

The scene was so different from anything she had been anticipating that Lady Min stopped in shock. Ap tried to back hurriedly out of the doorway but was shoved forward by the guard's rifle.

Doctor Stug smiled professionally and affably, "Ah, come in, come in my dear. Don't be frightened. These people won't hurt you." He turned to the Commander, "It's certainly a relief to know they can be taken back for the treatment they need, poor things."

The Base Commander nodded absently.

Lady Min advanced to the edge of the desk, "Don't listen to him." She jerked her head towards Stug. "I am the Lady Min. I must talk to you and quickly. Alone!"

The Base Commander gazed at her languidly.

"As I said, poor girl," said Stug. "She's always had these paranoid hallucinations. Somebody after her. Messages of vast importance. I thought she had been cured and, well, there you are." He began to rise.

"So we'll put them back in the institution. Very sorry to have..."

"Don't listen to him! I am the Lady Min!"

With a bored smile the Base Commander reached down to a waste basket and pulled out a newspaper. Spreading it on his desk he revealed a front page picture of Lady Min. The caption said, "Lady Min gives charity ball. Yesterday Lady Min was hostess to three thousand notables at a ball for Charity to Stray Children."

The photograph was a very touched up press photo showing Lady Min with a huge

head of hair and coronet.

The Base Commander's finger traced along the newspaper's date. "Then how is it Lady Min was on the Capital Planet three days ago and you are here?" He tossed the newspaper aside and reclined back in his chair. "She doesn't even look like you."

Lady Min was getting furious with frustration.

"That's a wig, you idiot. And that's a fake paper."

Stug again started to rise. "Well, we'd better be going. She does bear some slight resemblance. Trades on it too."

Both Stug and the Base Commander were on their feet. The Base Commander leaned forward with his knuckles on the desk. "Well I suppose these things happen. Glad to be of assistance..."

Lady Min put out her hand to stop him. "Wait, I'll prove to you that I'm a stage actress. Look! What is that doing under your belt?"

Dear God, let this thing work. With her left hand she made a pass over his belt buckle and then, gracefully, with her right hand appeared to pull a dove out from behind the belt buckle on the Commander's stomach.

The dove began to fly away in a mad flutter of wings.

Her darting left hand flipped his holster open and then in a fraction of a second had transferred his blast pistol to her left thigh, snapping her garter down on it and flipping her voluminous skirt over it.

All eyes were on the dove which pounded the air, veered off from Stug and finally came to rest on a desk light.

Stug rapidly interrupted anything the Base Commander was about to say, "Yes, she always amused other patients with that trick." He gestured at the secret policeman who promptly took hold of Lady Min and Ap and pushed them toward the door.

"I'm certainly pleased with your cooperation, Commander," said Stug. "With your permission, we'll be taking off now for Home Planet." He shook the Base Commander's hand.

"Say, by the way, " said the Base Commander, "I thought the Secret Central Police had been disbanded."

"Oh, those, " said Stug. "I think they're finding them other jobs as fast as they can. Poor devils. Soon they'll be out of work, the economy being as it is. Well, good-bye and thank you."

"The Base Commander glanced at the dove and then back at Stug. "You sure have some interesting patients. Well, have a safe trip."

A few minutes later, in the hangar, the green sign "Safe Atmosphere" began to go on and off as the huge side ports exhausted and salvaged the hangar air. The red sign "No Air" flashed on. The hangar door began to grind open.

The Police spaceship interior was grey-green, like any prison. One secret policeman was at the controls while the other finished fastening the ramp lugs from inside.

Stug shoved Ap and Lady Min back down the aisle and slammed them into the two hard seats at the back of the ship. Partial bulkheads were on either side of the seat and it was ordinarily enclosed with a strong wire door.

Shoulder-height thick straps were fixed to the seat back. Stug, with no gentle hands, snapped the strap shut across Ap's chest and then turned to Lady Min. She was shorter than the usual prisoner and the wide belt barely enclosed her shoulders. Stug tightened it with abrupt ferocity.

"That will do until we get you trouble-makers on an operating table, " said Stug.

The ship surged forward with an ascending whine and zoomed out of the hangar into space.

Stug steadied himself and then reached for the cage door, stepping outside the enclosure.

Lady Min looked up to her right into an area hidden from view from the forward part of the ship. An expression of shocked horror and terror spread over her face.

She screamed.

"My God, " shrieked Lady Min. "A time Bomb!"

The pilot sprang up from his controls and whirled to come back down the aisle. The other guard froze in paranoid horror. They very well knew their own service and they had no slightest doubt that it was often in the State interest that prisoners not arrive alive.

"A time bomb!" screamed Lady Min. "They never intended us to reach there alive! Let me out!"

Both guards were now rushing towards the back of the ship.

Stug had ceased to close the cage door, He threw it open, fumbling with the lock, and then thrust his head into the compartment looking up toward the hidden spot.

Lady Min hitched the strap up to the level of her throat. Her hand darted to her skirt and yanked it up, All in one motion she threw the safety catch of the blast pistol and drew it from under her garter.

Green violent flame hammered at Stug's stomach pounding him back from the door with a massive blow.

He went down.

The nearest secret policeman skidded to a halt. He clawed at his holster.

Lady Min fired. The shot took him on the left shoulder and spun him toplike, his blast pistol flying up the aisle.

The second secret policeman reached frantically for the bulkhead gunrack and yanked down a blast rifle.

He brought it to his shoulder, aiming.

Lady Min fired.

Her shot slammed into the muzzle of the blast rifle. Fragments of the weapon disintegrated the guard's head and shoulders in a great gout of green flame.

Smoke drifted and eddied along the floor and through the cabin of the police craft.

The three bodies lay inert, pounded and charred out of recognition.

Lady Min stood up shakily.

Tendrils of smoke spiraled up toward the air circulators and purifiers.

Lady Min gradually wound down.

Ap, with a considerable struggle, got out of his strap and stood up, steadying himself against the partial partition. He coughed in the green fumes.

The ship's motors continued in an accelerating whine. Its nose bored relentlessly outward into the vast emptiness of outer space.

Ap sighed, "So now what do we do for navigation?"

CHAPTER EIGHT

Rawl stood alone on the parade ground of Galactic Base Earth.

The brisk wind from the deep blue sea snapped and rustled in the flags. The parade ground was paved with white marble and surrounded by a gilded and ornate balustrade. In the far distance stood a volcano, the wind pushing its plume of smoke into a horizontal banner. Ner, the black mountain which contained the barracks, vast hangars and work shops, reared above the parade ground, its face honeycombed with hangar doors from which could spring a multitude of defense and attack ships as well as transports.

On the parade ground a band, brightly uniformed in blue and white, played a military air.

The wind rippled Rawl's khaki. He

looked toward the two groups approaching him, a faint smile on his lips and a trifle of unfriendliness in his eyes.

The first group was composed of the high ranking officers who had headed the Earth Secret Police Organization. They were uniformed in grey-green with much gold braid.

Zell, head of the Earth Secret Police, advanced with outstretched hand.

"Well, it's farewell Earth for us," said Zell as he shook hands.

Rawl's eyes were watchful. "So you're leaving us to return to the Home Planet. Departing today?"

"Within the hour." He looked around and sighed. "All in all we of the Secret Police have not been too unhappy here on Earth," he sighed. "And on arrival home we'll be disbanded."

"Fortunes of war," said Rawl.

The Secret Police Chief could not quite keep the viciousness out of his voice. "Yes, well, that Congress of yours finished us. But it's all for the best, of course. Our eight regiments will be getting spaceborne right now. So, fortunes of war, eh?"

One by one the Secret Police executives shook Rawl's hand. All in all, Rawl thought, they were a seedy lot for all their gold braid. They bore the mark of their profession, a bit craven, shifty-eyed, and debauched.

Rawl looked toward the second group. These were civilians, the heads of the Personal Tax Collector Units.

Their chief shook his hand. "The tax clerks and staff all bid you farewell Commander Rawl. No more personal tax, hah, hah."

Rawl took his limp sweaty hand and shook it. "Are all your clerks and investigators leaving as well?"

"Yes, we've pulled every one of them out of the two thousand cities of Earth."

He gestured toward the looming base. "It's back to Home Planet and unemployment for all of us."

The five civilian chiefs after him one by one shook Rawl's hand and followed the Secret Police executives toward the entrances and ramps of the base.

But the tax chief could not resist a final jibe. He turned when some distance off. "Watch your privacy doesn't get invaded."

Rawl stood for some time watching them go, his eyes narrow, speculative. The band ceased playing, its drummer boys began to beat a march and it moved off.

Rawl walked over and leaned against the gilded balustrade, his eyes still on the cliff face.

The transports began to eject from the hangars one by one then two by two then four by four.

At length Rawl gestured toward a communicator "Bring me a communications cart!"

The cart rolled forward, equipped with compact panels and a view screen. The communicator was pushing buttons on it, bringing it to life as he wheeled it forward. Rawl picked up a cubicle mike.

"Get me Solar System Interceptor Combined Headquarters on Uranus. Commander Mish."

The communicator reached across the cart, pulled a lever and hit a red button.

While he waited Rawl gazed at the panorama of departing ships. Their sound was punctuated with small explosions as they ejected from the hangars, pulled up steeply and cracked the sound barrier. The more distant ones flashed pinpoints of light as they cracked the light barrier after leaving atmosphere. Rawl gave his attention to the cart. "Hello, Mish."

The view screen was a trifle sun-glared and the communicator adjusted its hood. Mish's face went clear. He was smiling. His

collar was unbuttoned, his cap was off and he was drinking from a steaming cup. He was very glad to hear from Rawl.

"Hello, Rawl. How's the good planet Earth?"

"The Secret Police and income tax people," Rawl said into the mike. "They're leaving the planet. About one hundred and fifty thousand of them."

"Well, hip hurrah for them," said Mish sarcastically.

"I'll show you." He turned the mike toward the cliff face.

Mish stared intently at his own view screen, "That's sure a lot of transport."

"That's the point. They're taking every transport we've got. But why didn't some of them stay here? They're being disbanded. Earth's a good planet."

"Ah"

Rawl looked at the cliff's face again and the long extended parade of ships. "They took it too tame, too cheerful in fact. Mish, I wish to smoke I had some reliable intelligence from Home Planet. It's too quiet. I'm getting nothing from there and haven't for a couple of months."

"You want me to run a patrol?"

"No, that would tell us nothing. What I want you to do is order every Solar System Station you have stock up on ammunition, fuel, food and spare parts. Got it?"

"Good. The day you can trust Xenu will never dawn." Rawl hung the mike on the communications cart.

The wind whipped at the flags. The long parade of departing ships made a line across the sky that was black and ominous.

Rawl didn't like it. Not one bit. He settled his cap against the tugging wind and continued to look at the sky.

CHAPTER NINE

Through the windscreen of the Police

interceptor ship Ap stared hopelessly at the onrushing planet.

A thunder and lightning storm was raging in the lower atmosphere. They were approaching it awfully fast.

"I can't figure out what planet it is. We're a long way from the solar system. Whatever star this planet belongs to, it's got atmosphere, maybe even oxygen. Maybe."

The atmospheric flaps of the police ship were down, bent and buckling. The tips of the flaps were glowing incandescent.

The tips began to burn and the flickering light of the flame sputtered through the cockpit punctuated by the flashing of lightning in the storm they were now entering.

Lady Min was crouched down in her seat, her head turned away from Ap. She was crying quietly to herself.

They were out of food, out of water and their air tanks indicator was flashing danger red.

"Nothing about the Secret Police was right including their mucked up ships. There's no eject" He stabbed again at the red "Emergency Decelerate" button.

He rocked the manual controls again. They were limp. The auto pilot had evidently jammed in, engaged.

"Buckle yourself in tighter. On the bottom side of this lightning storm is a crash!" He looked sideways and saw that Lady Min was crumpled up in despair. He reached over and tightened her straps.

The piercing shriek of the air rushing by made his nerves feel as though they were tearing apart.

Belatedly deceleration cut in. The storm was all about them, the lightning cutting jagged blades of blue and yellow. A flame from their burning wing tips danced in reflection across the windscreen.

The air appeared to be solid water as they struck into the torrents under the

clouds.

Ahead of them Ap could see an expanse of watersaturated jungle.

A huge tree was rushing up at them.

It struck in an explosion of leaves and limbs.

The striking ship made an enormous geyser of mud.

He had no recollection of how he got out of the ship. A short time later he came to himself crouching beside a jungle path that was running torrents of water. Lady Min was on the ground where he had placed her. The drenching iciness of the rain brought him out of it. He had no idea whatsoever how he had gotten her out of the ship.

He bent over her, felt for her pulse and looked in growing panic at her bloodless lips and white face.

A searing flash of red flame was followed with a hammer blow of concussion as the police ship exploded some distance from them.

He looked dazedly about him. Jungle, jungle, jungle. Jungle and rain.

He stared at the torrent of water going by them and realized at length that it was a cart track, turned into a creek by the storm. Thunder rumbled. The distance he could see grew slightly greater as the torrent lessened. But still there was nothing but jungle, jungle, jungle.

He gently picked up Lady Min and started down the cart track, expecting at any instant to be pounced upon by wild beasts or snakes.

He walked along a river bank, his shoes collecting great globs of mud. He found another track, a broader one and trudged down it.

The thunder muttered in the far distance.

Soaked, exhausted and stumbling, he did not see the wall until he collided with it

directly. He backed up and stared at it. Yes, it was a wall, green-grown and slimy but made out of rocks. It was very high, so high he could not see the top of it. It reached from his left and from his right beyond any visibility.

Then he saw that the cart track had ended at a small square door, itself almost obscured with vines.

He staggered toward it and fumbled for its latch.

"Future Zero, " he sighed and pushed the door inward.

It was a room of rough stone, littered with odds and ends of metal. There was a huge block of stone which served as a work bench or desk and sitting at it was a hulking man in a filthy undershirt. The man did not look up. Ap swept some pieces of metal out of his way and placed Lady Min gently in the corner. He shut the outside door.

The man still had not looked up but continued to work on the bent barrel of a blast rifle which lay in pieces on the table before him.

"Are you the guys that crashed out there a while ago?" He pushed the gun back in disgust, stretched and yawned.

Ap crossed over to the table. Might as well try. "What place is this?, what planet?"

The man finished his yawn and rubbed his arms before looking up. "This planet? This is the crummiest, louseforgotten, steam-beamed, ball of mud..." He swept a lazy arm. "Welcome to Altec, pearl of the Southern Galaxy. Welcome to Stip, gun-running capital of the Confederation, haven of the..."

Suddenly, he got angry. Half-rising from his seat, he shook a grimy, grease-smearred finger at Ap. "You know what happened? When that Congress ripped up them oppress orders, this place got to be a condemned, rip-blasted graveyard, that's

what."

To Ap's relief, the other man's anger faded. The man sat back in his chair with a deep sigh, despair written on his face. "No crime means no guns. No explosives. We're broke, finished. Some of the best outlaws in the Galaxy quit us and went back to honest work." He shook his head sorrowfully.

Rallying, he banged a fist on the table, sending gun parts scattering and Ap's alarm level up to a high pitch. "Bird dung!" he snorted.

The man flung an angry glare at Ap and went back to fiddling with his gun. "Well, what the blast do you care?"

Ap shuffled his feet uncomfortably. If only he were back home, safe. Man looked nasty. "Who's in charge here?"

"I am, " he muttered, still working on his gun, "but in charge of what? Fourteen thousand broken-down crooks and ten busted-up ships."

He stabbed viciously at the gun, then swung his arm in a wide arc. "You see before you the great outlaw leader, Sna, Lord of Stip. But don't, " he added, red eyes suspicious and tool jabbed toward Ap for emphasis, "ask for a job. We're so dead we stink."

Losing interest, Sna returned to his gun. "Get out of here. Go on into town." He waved the tool over his shoulder to indicate a back door. Boring, boring, boring. Nothing ever happened anymore, and who gives a damn anyway?

Giving up, Ap turned back to Lady Min. better check the town out. If there even is a town, maybe.

Kneeling down, Ap anxiously checked Lady Min's pulse. Its unsteady beat alarmed him, as did the dead white of her face. He looked back over his shoulder at Sna and almost asked where a doctor could be found, but decided against it. The man was ignoring him so pointedly, he probably

wouldn't have answered anyway.

He eased Lady Min into his arms and stood up carefully. Picking his way across the smoky room, he reached the door and went through it, shutting it sharply behind him.

Outside, the rain had stopped but the main street of Stip before him was a narrow, curving river of mud. Ap grimaced in dismay, he'd had enough of mud. He looked around to get his bearings. The buildings were decayed, obviously having passed their prime a long, long time ago. Crooked signs poked out from dilapidated shops. A couple of drunks were lying, lost in stuporous slumber, on a flat stone slab that fronted a sleazy bar. Wolf-like and heavily fanged, a dog was walking up the street toward Ap. It stopped to sniff a drunk, then moved on.

Ap shuddered. Friendly place, but where to now? He studied the various signs and was thankful to see one that announced a "Dr. Ax" and next to it, a "Drug Emporium"

Gently tightening his arms around Lady Min, he made for the Doctor's house.

The door was partially open, nearly falling off its hinges. Ap knocked and settled himself against the casing to wait. Inside, some bedsprings creaked. Shuffling footsteps approached, bringing a gaunt, grizzled man with them.

"Go 'way," grumbled Dr. Ax as he unsuccessfully tried to close the door. Pausing, he peered at his callers. "You got money?"

Ap nodded and fished in his pocket. The doctor peered more closely at Lady Min. Fine gal, could do with more flesh on her bones. Looks pale, though... Catching sight of a bill in Ap's hands, Dr. Ax abandoned his trail of thought and seized the money. Ten Galactic credits! He jumped up and down, hardly able to contain his ex-

citement.

"Dregomine," he proclaimed breathlessly, "is vitally necessary." He shoved the bill somewhere in his jacket and pushed past Ap, heading for the Drug Emporium.

"Take her to the Grand Hotel," he called back over his shoulder. "I'll be right there."

Ap glanced down the street to where it turned. Some hotel. Its sign had fallen off to lie in the debris beside some filthy steps. Warily, Ap trudged toward it, at least it would be warmer inside. Hopefully.

The lobby had once been a fancy place. Now, it sagged sadly in advanced disarray. A man lounged on a divan, busying himself with a bottle, not looking over as Ap entered.

"You got a room?"

The man just stared at the ceiling. "Do I have a room?" He laughed derisively. "When those income tax laws were in effect, you couldn't get a room. Two hundred millionaires in this town to escape tax. Wine, women, money everywhere. Then they cancel the law. The millionaires all go back home. They don't need a tax haven anymore." He shook his head and took a gulp from the bottle.

Annoyed, Ap repeated his question. "Do you have a room?"

Eyes still on the ceiling, the man, waved the bottle. "Take any you can find. Want to buy a hotel?"

Ap grunted and gazed around the lobby. Place sure was run-down, he observed, even the elevators were out of order. Casting a final glare at the hotel proprietor, he proceeded up the stairs.

Picking a random door, Ap entered a room. Despite the smothering dust, it still clung to an air of cheaply imitated luxury. Twisted drapes flanked a window that looked out over cloudy skies, rooftops and stone battlements. An unmade bed leaned

against a peeling wall.

Ap straightened out the covers, laid the still unconscious Lady Min down on the bed and began to loosen her soaked, ice-cold clothes.

Dr. Ax, having tracked Ap's muddy footprints, waltzed into the room and threw his tattered bag down on the bedside table.

Humming to himself, the doctor produced a package from somewhere on his person and ripped it open to reveal a syringe filled with a clear fluid. He rolled up his sleeve and plunged the needle into his arm.

Ap raised an eyebrow as the doctor pushed down the plunger and drew the needle out with a convulsive shudder.

Smiling brightly, the doctor tossed the syringe aside. "Now that the preliminaries are attended to, let's have a look at the little lady."

After a long examination of Lady Min, accompanied by much bandaging and tuneless whistling, Dr. Ax signaled for Ap to follow him out of the room.

In the hallway, Ap closed the door behind them, patiently watching the doctor set his bag to rights.

"She's got concussion, three broken ribs and a torn ligament in her arm and that will be another ten credits," the doctor announced, all in the same tone of voice.

Ap glanced back at the door and fished a bill out, jerking it back teasingly as the doctor tried to snatch it. "And how long will she be laid up?"

"Two or three months," Dr. Ap replied, attempting to grab the bill.

"And if you give her your very best medical attention...?"

"Two months."

"... And if you had a regular supply of your Dregomine?"

Leaping high, the doctor grabbed the note. "Six weeks!" holding it lovingly, he

fairly drooled over the bill. "Six weeks," he whispered again.

"If these hold out," he added, a shadow of doubt crossing his wizened face.

Ap pulled out another ten credit bill. "Five weeks," he said, holding on tightly as the doctor tugged frantically at the bill. "Five weeks!" echoed Ax with a vigorous nod.

The note released, Dr. Ax scuttled off.

Re-entering the room, Ap crossed over to the window and leaned on the sill. Weeks! Five of 'em! And in the middle of nowhere. That man, Sna, was right. This is a steam-beamed ball of... oh damn!

CHAPTER TEN

The music was awful. Broken for a long time, the juke box skipped and fumbled its way through the musical phrases. No one listened anyway.

Early yet, the hotel's barroom-cum-nightclub had few occupants. Some bunged-up, one-eyed, -armed or -legged outlaws lounged around. The bartender leaned on his counter, chin propped in hand. A black-outfitted pilot sat alone in an alcove, listlessly fingering a handful of darts. Staring blankly at the wall before him, the pilot spun the occasional dart at it, bringing down flakes of plaster and insects.

Near the mezzanine stairs, a group sat playing dice. The bulk of the square chips spilled over beside Ap.

The other players were having less luck, their own meager piles of chips proved it. Greedily eyeing the pot, they tensely waited for Ap to throw.

Disinterestedly rattling three of the eight-sided dice, Ap had his mind elsewhere. A worried frown marked his brow as he turned to the doctor. "Doc, you said five weeks."

Dr. Ax shrugged. "You got a day left."

His frown more pronounced, Ap threw the dice, reached out, and pulled in the pot. "I think I had better go up and see if she's conscious yet."

The hotel proprietor half-rose in protest as Ap began to push his chair back. "Hey, no! You can't quit a winner like that!"

Sna laughed. "He's going to wind up the richest man in Stip!" He turned his leering face to Ap. "Want to buy a gun-running base?"

Suddenly reaching out and grabbing Ap's sleeve, Dr. Ax's face was split in a wide grin as he pointed to the mezzanine stairs.

Following the doctor's direction, Ap saw Lady Min there. Thin, face pale against her gauzy red dress, she steadied herself against the bannister as she carefully negotiated the steps downwards. A little triumphant over her accomplishment, she smiled shyly at Ap and the others.

Ap let out a long breath of relief. Starting to rise again, he stopped to look at his chips. To the doctor's shocked surprise, Ap shoved them at him, then he upped and raced for the stairs.

Ecstatic, Ap reached Lady Min's side. He couldn't talk, was afraid to touch her. Not knowing what else to do, he whooped in delight and hugged the bannister.

The late afternoon crowds had drifted in. Brokendown outlaws smoked, drank and argued among themselves. The bartender was kept busy sloshing gut-rotting liquor into ever-emptying glasses. The dog Ap had seen weeks ago was there too, lying beside the door.

Just off the dance floor, Ap was hammering out a tune that had been popular in pro-Congress days on a beat-up electric piano.

Looking fully recovered and stunning in a golden gown, Lady Min was seated on the

piano, mike in hand.

The song was one of longing to go places far away. Singing it with feeling, Lady Min directed frequent, meaningful glances across the room to where the pilot sat in his alcove.

But Pilot Tring ignored the song. Keeping his rapt attention on the roach-covered wall before him, he flipped a dart. Skewered right through the middle, a cockroach scrambled its feet helplessly, then expired as silently as it had lived. Smiling to himself, Tring settled back leisurely and raised a glass to his lips.

A burst of applause followed the song's conclusion. Lady Min gracefully slid off the piano and bowed to her audience. Keeping her demeanor professionally charming, she vented some of her pique in an aside to Ap. "I don't believe he's human!"

Ap, poker-faced, hardly moved his lips as he replied. "Human or not he's the only pilot here that has a spaceship that can get us to Earth. If it's still there."

Blowing a last kiss to the cheering men, Lady Min set down the mike and weaved her way through the overturned chairs to the end alcove.

Paying no attention whatsoever to the approaching vision, the pilot just flipped a dart as Lady Min perched provocatively on his table. She leaned over and spoke softly to him. "Changed your mind about the charter?"

Tring still didn't look up. "Politics I hate" he stated, flipping a dart.

"Galactic Confederation I hate." Flip.

He paused to consider a moving target on the wall. "Women I hate," he added, flinging the dart.

Nonchalantly, Lady Min pulled a joined string of glittering jewels from her bosom to dangle them in the pilot's face. "Jewels," she said soothingly, "are cur-

rency in any galaxy.”

No response. She sighed in discouragement and put the jewels away. Getting to her feet, she began to move back to the piano, when the door across the room was burst violently open.

Sna entered, knocking the yelping dog flying. A strip of paper waving in his trembling hand. ”Hey, hey listen!” he shouted. ”We’ve been saved!”

The room went very still. Only the dog, barking in outrage, made any movement.

Overcome with jubilation, Sna barrelled forward to stand imposingly in the center of the dance floor. ”I got a special secret message from the Minister of Police. We been recruited. Every able-bodied man on this base has been made a special agent. And every ship we got has been put into Confederation service!”

The hush in the room ceased abruptly. Outlaws leapt to their feet and surged forward, calling to friends and foe alike, exchanging heated opinions and speculations.

A few people, however, were not pleased, one being Tring who stood up, wide-eyed, tense. Clenching his fists in anger and trepidation, he hissed furiously. ”That’s just one ship- mine.”

Meanwhile, Lady Min threw an agnized glance at Ap. Racking her brains, she signalled her hastily construed plans to him. He rolled his eyes. ”Future zero!” Turning, he moved to unobtrusively follow Sna as the man ploughed through the surging throng toward the pilot’s alcove.

”There you are, Pilot Tring, ” Sna boomed, all bonhomie. ”Just the man I wanted to see.”

Tring stared at Sna, hands fiddling nervously with his holster flap. Rip-blasted phony; who’d he think he was. Not going to fork over my ship. No way! ”You what?”

”Here’s the message. Just came in.” Sna brandished the paper under the pilot’s nose.” ”The whole blasted base, every outlaw recruited in the service of the Ministry of Police. High ranks, high pay! And every ship taken into service...”

The pilot convulsively clutched the table. ”There’s just one ship here – mine!”

Unnoticed by either man, Ap slipped behind the pilot as Tring’s voice rose to a scream.

”I wouldn’t work for the condemned blasted Confederation for anything!”

Unperturbed, for he had an overwhelming faith in his ability to get what he wanted, Sna laid a pacifying hand on Tring’s arm. ”Ah, now, now, now. Not for a thousand credits a week?”

Easing a pistol from under his jacket, Ap pressed it lightly into the pilot’s back. Tring kept his eyes riveted on Sna who, unaware, continued his persuasions.

”This is your chance. This is all our chances. Why, man, they’ll make you a general or something...”

By now, Ar, had picked up the pilot’s jacket and was draping it over his arm and gun.

Sna shook the paper vigorously. ”All charges forgotten, look. Look at the message!”

Still, Tring had made no move. Ap, having completed the masking of the gun, glanced up at the mezzanine where Lady Min stood. She nodded at him, a wad of coats over her arm and two grip cases in her hand.

Ap turned back to face Sna and spoke convincingly in the pilot’s ear. ”Pilot Tring, it sounds pretty unreasonable, I know, but look, Tring. This is your chance!”

The pilot made no reply. Just slitted his eyes as the gun jabbed him slightly in the back.

”Tring, ” continued Ap, ”as an old

friend, please tell Sna you'll do him this favor."

Swallowing spasmodically, the pilot managed to choke out an "All right."

"In fact," Ap jabbed the gun again, "I'll help Pilot Tring get his ship ready. You'll need it for transport. Let's go!"

Beaming, overjoyed, Sna stepped back to let them pass.

Steering the pilot over to the exit, Ap began trembling with relief. Stage one of the escape plan done... maybe.

Fortunately, the spaceport was deserted.

Lady Min was standing anxiously in the boarding door of Tring's craft. The coats and cases lay in a heap beside her. She chewed a fingernail, dear God let them come!

Hearing running footsteps, she looked down to see the pilot and Ap running across the landing field. She beckoned urgently to them as they raced up the stairs to the flight platform, and stepped back as the two men crowded through the door.

Tring hurried up the aisle and scrambled into the pilot's seat, hands reaching for the controls. Ap came to stand behind him, gun now held openly.

Through the windshield, the blue of the late afternoon sky was pierced by the occasional spire. The tangible silence was broken only by the whine of the ship's starting motors.

With a lurch, they took off, the acceleration pressing the ship's passengers down and back, forcing Ap to grab the co-pilot's seat in order to keep his gun trained on the pilot.

Suddenly, the pilot began to laugh. Loud, extravagant, the sound mingled with the rising shriek of engines.

Banking the ship again, Tring tried to still his laughter. Without looking back, he

finally managed to speak. "You can put that gun away. You didn't even need it. You did me a huge favor getting me out of there. They would have killed me for my ship."

Startled, Lady Min and Ap stared at the pilot, roundeyed in amazement. Then they too burst into laughter.

Ap looked at his gun and put it away. Reaching over, he clapped the pilot on the back. Guy must be all right, take us to Earth, maybe.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Surrounded by huge trees, Xenu's secret base on Home Planet was dominated by a single domed building.

Low and ominous, military drums beat a deadly rhythm. Rank upon rank of grey-green uniformed secret police, fully armed, lined the parade ground in military formations. Over by the operations dome, an ill-dressed mob of renegades stood watching.

An inspections party walked through the ranks, headed by Xenu and Chi. With them were tough looking renegade guards, several high ranking officers of the secret police, Zel the ex-Chief of Secret Police Earth and Sty the chief psychiatrist.

Xenu curiously inspected the troops as he passed them by. He turned to the sweating Chi to bark a query. "Are you sure this base is still secret and secure?"

Chi mopped his brow with a soaked handkerchief. Fool idea, this inspection. Too hot for it. Damned question anyway, Xenu already knew his orders on security had been carried out to the letter. "We've shot anyone who comes close to it."

Xenu nodded. "Then we're almost ready."

"Indeed we are," Chi agreed, noting thankfully that Xenu was starting to head for the operations building.

Stopping before the band of renegades,

Xenu banged his cane to catch the regard of one of the two slouching Chiefs of the Renegades. "And those men?"

The Renegade Chief smiled evilly, displaying a broken row of yellow teeth. "Those are my finest renegades, sir. The finest and best criminals in the Galaxy, fit for deviltry. And thousands more ready on every planet."

Again, Xenu nodded and moved on.

Halting abruptly, Xenu turned back to the Renegade Chief. "Get them in white coveralls. They look like something from a sewer."

Obedying Xenu's next signal to follow him, the Chief sauntered along behind the rest of the party. He scowled at Xenu's retreating back, scowled at his deputy chief beside him.

Steam-beamed maniac. Must have a loose screw in his finicky head – lily-white coveralls? Nuts!

Ignoring the outbreak of ragged cheering among the renegade mob, Xenu led the way up the stairs and through the arched doors of the operations building.

The actual operations office was located in the dome of the building. The sloped walls, painted with stars and planets, served as an operations map and were studded with abundant miniature spaceships and flags. Crouching below, a huge table was flanked on one side with three large rollers. On the other side, by a rack stacked high with papers.

Xenu entered the room, banging the door wide as he came, and limped across to the table. The two secret police clerks, standing rigidly to attention, were waved brusquely aside.

Putting his cane down, Xenu picked up a hooked stick and turned to face his officers. Slap-slapping the hook in his palm, he regarded his officers for a moment.

Blackguards, the lot of them, but they

had their uses, oh yes they had their uses.

The men returned Xenu's regard, alert and expectant, though the animosity was mutual.

Finally, Xenu began his address. "This is your last and final briefing. Listen carefully."

He reached out with his stick and hooked it into the ring of the lowermost roller. "This is a Phase One of the galactic-wide action." With a savage yank, he pulled out a chart from the roller that spread itself out, flat, on the table.

He rapped the stick on the first pile of papers on the rack. "And those are the detailed orders ready to issue.

"The objective of Phase One," Xenu continued, his voice losing all trace of its surface urbanity, "is the slaughter of every Loyal Officer in the Galaxy."

Grim and silent, his men nodded.

Reaching forward, Xenu engaged the second roller with his hooked stick. "Phase two: The destruction of the main galactic defense base on every planet."

Brutally, he yanked out the second chart so that it covered the first. He rapped the second stack of papers. "And the detailed orders."

With a nasty, irritating screech, the third chart was unfurled. Xenu struck the last stack of papers. "Phase Three: The removal of all minority and unwanted populations in the Galaxy to the planet Earth and their extermination."

A slow smile crossed his face. "I think you will find this solves all problems of overpopulation, crime and finance in the Galaxy as well as preventing our being deposed. Before Minister Chi issues the detailed orders, are there any comments?"

The momentary silence was broken by a sardonic Renegade Chief. "You're the paymaster," he sneered, running a hand through his hair.

Xenu glared the other down. And you – you’re a prime bastard. Indicating for Chi to take over, Xenu retrieved his cane and stalked from the room, favoring his bad leg.

On the parade ground, the miscellaneous groups were breaking up.

Regiments of secret police and bands of renegades marched purposefully towards assigned destinations. Drums quickening in pace, the military ensemble also took their leave.

Soon, only the litter remained to bear the wind and the scattered guards company.

Chi was standing on the roof, silhouetted against the stars.

His left hand held a radio transmitter. In his right, the dial of a stopwatch was illuminated by an electric lantern.

In his mind, he reviewed the injunctions that Xenu had given him concerning Phase One. Missed anything? Didn’t seem that way, but still... he glanced down at the stopwatch. With maddening slowness, the secondhand approached the appointed hour. Too late anyhow!

He clicked the stem of the timepiece and spoke into the radio. "Phase One!"

Paring his nails with a deeply notched knife, one of the Renegade Chiefs sat in his dark, unkempt office.

A speaker near his head crackled to life. "Phase One!"

The Chief lifted his chin to a nearby flunky.

The aide disentangled himself from his chair and began to shuffle out the room.

Vexed at the man’s dawdling, the Chief threw his knife between the other’s feet. "Get going," he snapped.

The second Renegade Chief stood in the Intergalactic Control Center, outlined against the lighted curve of a communications panel. Beside him bristled a battery of microphones. Surrounding him was a tangle of wires.

The panel itself was a maze of jack-plugs and the brightly lit names of the Galactic Confederation member stars: Sirius, Canopus, Alpha Centauri, Vega, Capella, Arcturus, Rigel, Procyon, Achernar, Beta Centauri, Altair, Betelgeuse, Acrux, Aldebaran, Pollux, Spica, Antares, Fomalhaut, Deneb, Regulus and Sol.

Whistling tonelessly, the renegade checked to ensure all stars were connected up to the mikes. They were. He flicked a switch and spoke. "All systems, all planets. Phase One!"

Car headlamps swung across the front of a suburban house, coming to rest aimed at the garage as the vehicle entered the driveway.

A Loyal Officer in his khaki coat and cap cut the engines and stepped out of the car. Startled, he looked up as a spotlight suddenly stabbed at him from the dark.

Two blast guns fired.

Hit, the Officer slammed back against the car and crumpled to the ground.

Two men in white coveralls ran over to him. One stretched out a booted foot and lifted the Officer’s shoulder to see if he was dead.

He was.

A Loyal Officer trotted up the broad white stairs leading up to a governmental building.

Rifles blasted, taking his arm off at the shoulder.

Leaving a trail of red, he rolled slowly, inexorably, back down the steps.

Frowning over some despatch, a Loyal Officer never noticed as two white-coverall’ed men entered his office.

Raising their blast guns, they aimed and fired, pounding the Officer to the wall behind him, then down to the floor. His body charred, blackened, lifeless.

The two men turned and fled from the room.

A small scout craft landed. A Loyal Officer jumped down onto the spaceport pavement, removed his helmet. He looked up, alert, as a grenade-like object hurtled by to strike the ship's side.

A flash of fire erupted and leapt for the skies.

Shortly, the conflagration died down enough to reveal the dismembered craft, and beside it, a shriveled form.

In his darkened office, the first Renegade Chief was biting the end of a pencil. A stack of papers lay on the desk before him, the top list entitled: Loyal Officers Capella System.

The radio spoke. "Planet Chellis. Lieutenant Dahn."

The Chief hunted for and found the name. Crossing it out, he looked back up at the speaker.

"Captain Sten."

With a grandiose sweep of his hand, the Chief drew a long mark through the name, ripping the paper slightly. Fixed him! Son of a space-hound had the gall to arrest me once.

The speaker crackled again...

Three Loyal Officers tore down a smoke-filled corridor, weapons held at the ready.

A heavy caliber blast gun blazed, swirling forth a ball of green flame to lace around the officers.

They fell forward, guns clattered to and skittering across the polished floor.

All was quiet in the barracks – until the whole damned place blew up in unmitigated finality.

A couple of secret police left the scene in a hurry, sprinting out the gate and under a placard that read: Loyal Officer Quarters, Betelgeuse System.

Holding a rifle, a white-clad arm inched through a crack in the cautiously opening door.

Asleep in his bed, jacket and cap hanging on the post, a Loyal Officer muttered in his sleep.

The renegade froze, listening. Reassured, he sighted and jerked the trigger once, twice.

Green smoke and flame engulfed the bed.

Hunched over the Phase One chart, face eerily lit from below, Chi gripped a large marking pen in his slippery fist.

A legion of speaker-units babbled in the background. Names of stars and Loyal Officers occasionally flashed up on console screens.

A uniformed orderly stood by Chi's chair, holding a sheaf of papers. "Planets of Altair," he reported, "Phase One, All Clear."

Chi nodded and drew a circle on the already much circled chart. Laying down his marking pen, he wiped his hands on his pant legs. Business could go on all night. He glanced at a clock. Business was going on all night.

He sighed in resignation and ordered some coffee.

A person, half-visible in the shadows, approached the table and handed a slip of paper to the orderly. The orderly checked it over and read it aloud to Chi. "Marcab System. Phase One. All Clear."

Chi mopped at his hands again, picked the pen up and added another circle to the chart.

Five Loyal Officers strained against the rope- that bound them to a white picket fence. Reflected in their perspiration were the spotlights that illuminated the scene.

A renegade finished securing the last Officer and scuttled off into the clear.

Automatic blasters let loose, tearing asunder the Officers, fence and all.

Burning brightly, scores of votive candles lit the cathedral altar. There, head

bowed in prayer, knelt a Loyal Officer. His eyes flew open in shock as a rifle burst hammered him down.

Dislodged in the furor, a candle rolled to the floor. A vagrant current of air snuffed the momentarily flaring wick, to send a thin spiral of smoke curling upwards to the gods.

"Major Tonlin," buzzed the speaker.

The Chief popped a benny and gulped it down before crossing the name from his list.

It had been a long night. The Chief was tired, irritated. He added another butt to the overflowing ashtray. At last that wrapped up the list for the Polaris System.

Daylight, filtering through from somewhere, encroached upon Chi's red-rimmed eyes.

The room was quiet now that the garrulous speaker-units were silenced.

The exhausted orderly, wearily gripping his enormously grown sheaf of papers, made a report: "Polaris System, Phase One, All Clear."

In a final, flourishing manner, Chi drew a large circle. Scratching his neck, he regarded his handiwork of circles on the chart. He grunted and turned to push a button on a console.

Xenu, sitting tense and rigid at his desk, staring off into nowhere, appeared on the screen.

Chi cleared his throat a couple of times and pressed the buzzer to draw Xenu's attention.

Finally, Xenu shook himself out of his reverie and fixed a steely eye on his screen.

"All going according to your plans," said Chi with an inky thumbs-up sign.

"How many left?"

Chi waved his hand loftily. "Only a few on outlying Interceptor Bases. And only those in the planetary Galactic Bases themselves."

Xenu relaxed somewhat. "We'll get the Galactic Bases in Phase Two so that's no worry. Keep a news blackout going and put busy signals on all Loyal Officer networks. And keep working on those Interceptor Bases."

He switched off the circuit and rubbed his jaw, chuckling to himself.

Soon, soon. Victory was in sight. He chuckled again, and resumed his reverie.

CHAPTER TWELVE

In outer space hung the black asteroid that was the interceptor Control Center Solar System.

Mish stood on a glassed-in balcony appended to the asteroid's side. He completed a sweep of the star-studded voids and lowered the long-range viewing instrument. He felt vaguely uneasy, disturbed – by what, he didn't know.

Unexpectedly, the door-way behind him filled with intermittent green flashes. Mish whirled around and dropped the viewer to grab his gun.

Moving inside, he was brought up short by the tableau posed within. A junior Loyal Officer stood frozen in aftershock, his blast rifle still smoking in his hands. Over by the main entrance, two renegades were sprawled over the doorsill, a mist of green wisps rising from their bodies. A pistol lay where it had fallen, just beyond the renegade's outstretched arms.

The junior Officer unsteadily downed his rifle and pivoted around to face Mish, his voice breaking as he spoke. "These two were in that small ship that said it was in trouble."

Mish continued to stare in dismay at the bodies, hardly hearing as the junior Officer went on speaking: "They came in here with drawn guns."

Rousing himself, as if from a nightmare,

Mish strode over to the communications panel, elbowing the communicator there out of the way.

Rapidly jabbing buttons, Mish cursed. Blast! Nothing but hell-fired busy signals. He banged his fist down in frustration, gritting his teeth as he said: "Home Planet network still busy."

The junior Officer joined him at the console. "I've been trying all day. Only a couple of our Interceptor Bases are answering up."

Exasperated, Mish punched another button. "I'll try Earth."

Rawl appeared on the screen. "Galactic Base Earth..." He began in a clipped voice, then seeing who was calling, he continued in a friendlier tone. "Oh, hello, Mish."

Mish made an effort to calm himself. Thank God at least this circuit was operational. He leaned closer to the video scanner. "There's something going on," he said. "I can't get in touch with Home Planet on the Loyal Office circuit."

Rawl shrugged "It's happened before."

Mish slammed his hand on the console and swore. "Not at the same time as an attempt on my life!"

Taken aback, Rawl blinked. "I'll try it on the Galactic circuit."

Cutting the line, Rawl gestured to his communicator who proceeded to make the connection. Busy signal.

Seeing the communicator was only getting jammed lines, Rawl ordered another line be tried. "Get Xenu on Home Planet. The Supreme Ruler emergency lines ought to be open"

Xenu's face flashed onto the screen, smiling suavely. "Ah, Rawl. Glad to hear from you. What can I do for you?"

Rawl gazed at Xenu's image briefly, a wave of acute dislike for the man passing through him. "There are a lot of communication channels that don't seem to be work-

ing. Busy. Thought you might know."

Xenu raised his eyebrows in innocent surprise. "Is that so?"

Impatiently indicating an affirmative, Rawl raised his voice in vexation at the other's playacting. "I wanted to be sure this wasn't another Grey Invasion."

"I've heard nothing like that," soothed Xenu, with an air of offended worthiness. "I did hear there was some trouble with some new equipment that had just been installed. We're having to economize, you know..." unable to resist a dig, his voice hardened, "since the personal income tax was abolished."

Thinking fast, Xenu saw a possible advantage. Schooling himself back into pleasant urbanity, he resumed speaking. "But if you're worried, I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll schedule space fleet maneuvers in your area over the next few days just to make sure."

Sharply breaking the connection, Xenu swiveled his chair around to snarl at Zel and Chi seated by his massive desk. "Rawl and possibly other Planet Base Commanders are getting suspicious."

Acutely uncomfortable, as always in Xenu's presence, Chi stared down at his hands and muttered something inaudible.

Ignoring his Minister of Police, Xenu forgot his displeasure. Gloating for an interval, he then exalted in his next words.

"Launch Phase Two."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Intensely, Tring studied a radar screen. He didn't like what he saw there. Not one bit.

Ap, bored and unaware of the conflicts raging in the pilot's mind, sat flopped back on a settee. Next to him, Lady Min was doing her nails as best she could, dabbing hit and miss with the polish as the craft rocked and shook.

"The screen here," said Tring hoarsely, "seems to indicate a lot of heavy spaceships over Earth, Galactic ships. Thicker than cockroaches."

He leaned back and turned to present a white face to his passengers. "I'm not going in there!"

Lady Min and Ap stared, appalled, at the pilot. He couldn't fail them – not now!

Tring waxed persuasive. "This Galaxy is getting too hot. Gone to buzzard bait. Listen, I've got a cache of fuel, food and air out on an asteroid. I'm going out there and fuel up and make the long jump to another galaxy." He raised a hand in mute appeal. "You're a couple of nice guys. There's all blazes about to break loose. I can feel it. Those jewels you got will serve as currency. How about it?"

Lady Min had gone rigid. "We've got to get to Rawl," she insisted. "How do we get down?"

Shrugging, Tring squared himself around and got back to flying. He'd done his best. "All right if you want to get burned," he called back over his shoulder. "There's oxygen masks and parachutes under that seat. Put them on and get into the airlock. I'll spill you into the stratosphere over the base, and even that's risky."

Shaking his head, he snorted sadly. "Patriotism!" Well, he'd tried. Pity. Banking the ship, he took it downwards.

Rawl was standing in his office, gazing up at the overhead. A heavy rumble of ship's motors filling his ears. Something was going on, he was sure of it. But what?

Faces echoing Rawl's apprehension, two orderlies and a communicator were standing nearby. Rawl swung round and spoke to the communicator. "Maneuvers! Have you got any answer yet to why Earth ships were not invited to take part?"

The man shook his head, perplexed. Hadn't been able to raise the damned ships,

let alone get an answer!

Rawl pointed at one of the orderlies. "Pass the order to get my ship ready for immediate blast-off. I'm going to do a flyby and look this over."

The orderly up and raced off. Rawl glanced back up at the ceiling. Can't figure this out...

He frowned, pounding an agitated fist into his palm. Moonshine! He wasn't achieving anything by moping around his office. He strode over to a wall hook and took down his flight coat. Going out the door, he paused to call a command back to the remaining orderly. "Sound a base alert just in case."

Base alert was sounded. Klaxon horns rent the air with an insistent note. Several troops, uniformed in blue and white, ran across the parade ground towards their various stations. Hatches in the looming cliff face, cranked open to reveal dozens of snub-nosed anti-spacecraft guns. Officers yelled directions to their crews.

Unobserved in the flurry, two parachutes, one hanging higher than the other in the blue sky, swung down from upwind towards the parade ground.

Lady Min landed first, rolling awkwardly to absorb her fall's impact. Scrambled to her feet, she ripped off her oxygen mask and, grabbing the chest release buckle, yanked hard. Her parachute and harness went sailing away.

She ran a hand through her disheveled hair and stared round-eyed at all the commotion. Jumping forward, she gripped the arm of a passing soldier. He skidded to a halt in obvious impatience.

"Where is Commander Rawl?" she asked, breathless.

He pointed to the cliffed hill and dashed off before she could speak again.

Now landed and rid of his parachute, Ap came to stand by Lady Min. He raised

an inquiring eyebrow.

She tugged at his sleeve. "Rawl's up at the hangars. Come on!" She turned and raced off, Ap close behind, muttering to himself between his ragged breaths.

Some orderlies looked up in surprise as Lady Min and Ap barged into Rawl's cliff-side office.

"Where's Commander Rawl?"

An orderly indicated one of the other doors. "He's about to blast off."

Lady Min looked at him beseechingly, wringing her hands in desperation. Oh no! They couldn't be so close yet too late. "This is urgent," she wailed. "Urgent!"

The orderly was puzzled. He didn't know who or what this lady was, but some of her agitation had been communicated to him. Decisively, he waved an arm for them to follow and raced out the room.

Rawl slid into his Interceptor's Pilot seat and strapped himself in. The ship's motors roared as he touched the starter.

Eyes and hands roaming across the control panel, Rawl readied the ship for take-off while speaking into his radio-mike. "Control. Interceptor One immediate launch."

Suddenly, the boarding door was flung open. Rawl turned and was amazed to see Lady Min and Ap sprawl into the aisle of his craft. "Lady Min!"

The mass of Galactic bombers swooped low over the base. A bay opened in the belly of one of them, and a single bomb was released.

It hung there, motionless, for an instant, then plummeted downward, an angel of death.

Rawl shot a glance through the wind-screen. Good, the hangar door was beginning to open. His radio crackled as Control gave launching clearance. Assured he could blast off at any moment, he swung back to face the aisle.

Lady Min had picked herself up, and was scrambling towards him. "I've got data for you," she gasped. "Urgent data..."

Rawl motioned her in brusquely. "You can tell me as soon as we blast off."

The hangar door was now opened all the way. Rawl pulled back on a lever and the Interceptor lurched forward to soar gracefully up into the cerulean heavens.

The bomb hit the base with an incandescent atomic blast.

Hurling debris and smoke swept tumultuously across what had previously been a parade ground. The whole cliff buckled, collapsed. Turning into a roaring avalanche it slid down to disappear into the sea.

In other words, the entire base blew up.

Savagely working the controls, Rawl fought to steady his spinning ship.

Lady Min and Ap, trying desperately to hold on, were knocked about violently as the craft bucked and shook.

Gaining the upper hand, Rawl rocketed the ship upwards. Soaring a glance at the holocaust below, he grimaced. So that was what Xenu was up to. A sharp lurch brought his attention back to the controls. They weren't out of it yet. Not by a long shot...

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Night was spreading her dark wings over the secret base on Home Planet.

Shady figures milled around the gloomily lit interior of the operations room – guards, the two Renegade Chiefs and several bearded psychiatrists among them.

At the table was Chi, holding a felt pen. He was sweating profusely because Xenu was also there.

Xenu, intent on the spreading Phase Two chart, listened with half an ear to Chi as his Minister called out stars and planets

in a quavering, singsong voice.

"All Galactic bases Vega System, " chanted Chi, putting a cross-mark on the chart.

He continued his litany.

"All bases Spica." Made a cross.

"All Galactic bases Altair." Made another cross.

Then the speaker box piped up. "Galactic base Earth totally destroyed."

Cheered by this news, Chi exchanged a look of satisfaction with Xenu and drew an exaggeratedly large cross on the chart. A travesty of a smile curving his mouth, he glanced back up at his boss. "End Phase Two. "Now all opposition is removed, what are your next orders?"

Thoroughly enjoying himself, Xenu stretched, stood up and stretched some more. So this was what it felt like to be Supreme Ruler in full sweet fact.

He searched for his cane, couldn't find it, and hobbled over to the center of the room anyway. Assuming a splendiferously majestic pose, conscious that all eyes were on him, he spoke, savoring each word to the fullest. "Issue an all-Galactic proclamation. 'Due to crime wave, martial law is established on all planets.'"

He raised a pompous hand. "Gentlemen, we begin Phase Three. We are regaining political control of all planets. Even at this moment our planted agents will be seizing all governmental centers. But this is not enough!" He made a chopping gesture. "As you well know, minorities and people who might object, which is to say independent thinkers, protest a perfectly functioning police state, the ideal form of government. Furthermore, our planets are overpopulated. Phase Three consists of rounding up such people on every planet, transporting them to Earth and exterminating them."

A murmur of agreement spread through

the listening group.

One of the Renegade Chiefs, seeking an advantageous opening in these affairs, regarded Xenu through slitted eyes. "If my men are to do this, they have to be within the law."

Chi was as happy as he could ever get, especially when he was in such close proximity with Xenu. He butted in with a rush of words. "All worked out. We are creating the Confederate Bureau of Investigation under the newly formed Justice Department.

Every one of your renegades are as of this moment appointed government agents G-men – with full official powers." So saying, he grinned like a wolf, albeit with a trace of bulldog.

The Renegade Chief replied with a wolfish grin of his own. He knew opportunity when he saw it.

Xenu stamped his good foot for attention. Getting it, he continued speaking. "The selection of these minorities is already determined. However, certain scientific judgement is required concerning others. For this reason, we have appointed you, the top leaders of the psychiatric profession..."

The bearded men, the psychiatrists, in the group leaned forward expectantly, hanging on Xenu's every word.

"... to handle the ultimate fate of minorities and to decide who should be exterminated." Xenu paused theatrically, then added a magnanimity. "I know you will do so in a fully scientific and dedicated manner."

Gravely, seriously, the psychiatrists nodded in unison. Sty, top dog amongst this elite cream the noble profession of psychiatry, nodded with particular emphasis, pleased with this arrangement. His long-sought lucky break at last.

Xenu's surface urbanity slipped. "They must, " he screamed, "never trouble

us again!"

Checking himself, he got his mask back in place, continued in a more subdued pitch. "The gathering from every planet shall begin. The extermination site is Earth."

He drew himself up to his full, if inconsiderable height. "Gentlemen, I officially announce the beginning of Phase Three."

As if by prearranged signal, several orderlies entered, bearing trays laden with bottle and glass. Someone had switched on a stereo, and soothing music filled the room. Drinks were passed around.

Xenu raised his glass. "And now, a toast..."

A family was seated at their midday meal. They started in shock as a gun butt banged loudly, three times, against their door, followed by a booted foot kicking it open. Two uniformed men entered on the run.

Obeying the signalling blast rifle, the family rose shakily. With rising terror, they were impelled out of the room.

The youngest, a little girl, screamed and clutched her mother's skirts. A vicious blow on the head silenced her.

Sobbing aloud, the mother picked up her child, and was thrust onwards.

A street, lined with three-storied houses, was a pandemonium of panicking people.

Secret policemen herded struggling men, women, and children out through exits and down into the street.

A little to the side, a psychiatrist stood, looking on, a loud hailer in his hand.

Protesting and bewildered blacks were being gathered from the shops and homes of their neighborhood by a group of bellowing secret police.

A second group of grey-green uniformed men who were in the center of the street, received the people passed to them. They held order with violent bashings and

sweeps of their rifles.

In a white, middle-class suburb, a column of despairing yet striving individuals were being force-marched down an avenue.

The laugh of a young secret police officer could be heard above the din. The object of his amusement being an old woman, eyes shut tight and grasping a cross, being dragged along, legs trailing and bloody on the tarmac.

A white-coated psychiatrist sat in front of the flashing boards of the Intergalactic Network Communications control tower.

Professionally unemotional, he was speaking into a mike. "These are the determinations for the Procyon planet populations..."

He consulted the list in his hand. "All motion picture producers, all editors, writers and newscasters, all blacks, members of the government employees union..."

The sign, "Daily Post," hung limply, half-blasted apart, from the front of the building.

Resisting employees of the newspaper were being driven down the steps and piled into a line of parked vans.

A thousand and more marched wearily down a long, dusty road. In between their shuffling legs, a child was being yanked along. She herself was pulling her doll along.

Tears ran down her face. Her sobs were muffled by the sounds of bootbeats and dragging steps.

One of the Renegade Chiefs joined the psychiatrist at the panel in the Intergalactic Network Communications control tower.

Bored, the Chief fiddled with his rifle, absentmindedly listening to the psychiatrist's droning voice broadcast a set of determinations.

"Vega System exterminations list: Religious leaders, athletes, musicians, teachers, salesmen. All the Ninth Terrestrial Army. All actors. All unemployed. All members of

the... ”

Trapped in a gully, the mob screamed frenziedly as white-jacketed men moved among them.

These men, the white-jackets, were but recently trained in the use of their hypodermic needles, having been pressed hastily into the service of the psychiatrists. They brandished their hypos ferociously. The syringes contained a smoky, gaseous drug that induced instant unconsciousness for long, indeterminate periods of time.

Secret policemen knocked down or held individuals for the white-jackets to inject – in arms, legs, whatever.

Moaning, a woman struggled to rise and collapsed as a smoking needle was injected into her back.

White-jackets moved through a crowded garbage dump. In their wake, they left inert, motionless bodies to lie in heaps.

A constant stream of captives flooded through the gates at the far end of the stadium. Moving fast to keep pace with the flow, white-jackets competently wielded their hypos.

A public address system squawked. ”Trucks will be here in three hours.”

A white-jacket glanced over at one of his fellows. Would this river of bat-brained crackpots ever end?

A multitude of weaponless soldiers attired in the Loyal Corp’s blue and white, were being wrestled into submission by grim, sweat-faced secret police.

The first of them was knocked down and then put out by a white-jacket’s smoky needle.

And thus the Ninth Terrestrial Army was overthrown.

Muttering secret police loaded the unconscious into a convoy of trucks.

The bodies were landing haphazardly, just tossed in as if they were so much cordwood.

It was night again. The Renegade Chief had moved to stand by one of the tower’s windows. He flicked an ash on the floor, too tired to fetch an ashtray. Loosening his collar further, he leaned back against the sill to watch the psychiatrist.

Disinterested, but asked all the same, he spoke to the psych. ”How many millions is it so far?”

Himself exhausted and unusually untidy for a member of his exalted vocation, the psychiatrist shrugged. ”The Betelgeuse System has not reported yet.”

The Chief looked back out the window and took a drag of his cigarette. Slippery fish, these nut-crackers. Never can get straight answers out of them. Probably as buggy as their so-called patients, anyway. He spat on the wall.

In innumerable spaceports across that Galaxy, a similar scene was occurring. Long lines of transport vans drove up beside space-freighters. Rumpled secret police transferred inanimate forms from the trucks into the receiving arms of renegades whose job it was to stack the bodies in the ships.

The little girl, now drugged into insensibility but still hugging her doll close, was dragged out of a truck and dumped into a freighter.

The renegade who had stacked her turned to his assistant and cracked a joke about child-girls. The assistant sniggered and swung his boot at the piteous figure.

Operation round-up was nearing its conclusion. The last few ”undesirables” were hunted down, knocked flat, and drugged up.

The space-freighters, loaded over and above maximum capacity, were ready for blast-off.

Chi peered up at his boss. Seeing Xenu sitting there peacefully, delicately sipping a drink, Chi dared to begin humming a little tune to himself as he made cross-marks on

the Phase Three chart.

Pondering over the recent events, Chi was suffused with a sense of well-being. Hadn't expected things to work out so well. He hummed a little louder.

The transportation stage of Phase Three was gotten underway.

On every planet, the freighters blazed upward, destination: Earth.

On one ship, the renegade co-pilot's ceaseless, senseless chatter fell on the bothered ears of the pilot. "Last time I was on Earth," babbled the co-pilot, "I bought this young girl – oh, a peach she was. When I got her clothes off I found..."

In a spaceport control tower, a secret policeman was acting as Controller. He gave launching clearance to yet another ship. "Control to ship Nine Three Four A. Proceed to Earth by filed plan."

A light-year away, another Controller was having a bit more difficulty. "Bast it!" he yelled into a mike. "If you don't know the route to Earth, then fly in company with Seven Six Five Eight N!"

In an Altair System spaceport, the freighters were still grounded, for there had been some delays. A renegade and a psychiatrist stood on the control tower's observation platform, looking out over the landing field.

The psychiatrist checked over a list. "That completes this planet," he announced. "As soon as your ships are ready, I suppose you can tell your pilots to proceed to Earth."

The renegade sneered. "You sure you got 'em all?"

The psychiatrist gave him a frosty regard. "My dear fellow, medical science never makes mistakes."

Bleary-eyed and rumped, the Renegade Chief struggled to stay awake. Had to rivet his attention to what the speaker was saying – "Planet Three Alpha Centauri to

Home Planet Control. Planet Three Alpha..."

With a flash of irritation, the Renegade Chief cut in. "Yeah, yeah. Gimme the hot crap."

The speaker spluttered. "All cargoes spaceborne here and proceeding to Earth."

The Chief turned down the volume knob and rubbed his eyes. These late nights, he just wasn't up to them anymore. He popped a benny and ordered a cup of coffee.

Xenu had taken time out to shower and dress with care.

Just as he arrived back at his desk, a call was put through from his Minister of Police.

"All seventy-five planets clear," reported Chi, "spaceborne and heading for Earth. Right on time."

Xenu's eyes narrowed with cruel pleasure. "Good, good. Proceed as ordered."

Shutting off the video-phone, he turned to stare out his window. Just as planned, Like clockwork...

He snickered softly to himself.

A wind roamed mournfully across the shattered pavement of what had been, of late, the proud parade ground of Galactic Base Earth. Blackened balustrades and broken flagpoles silhouetted themselves against the empty sky.

But not empty for long.

The whine of their engines growing into a steady roar, a multitude of ships began to mass across the heavens till the skies were literally filled with freighters of every size, shape and description.

Over a wide, barren plain, a cliff face watched as the cargoes arrived.

Using no runways – there were no runways to use – the ships simply landed in place, covering the entire field from end to end.

A harried Controller darted a frantic

gaze through each of the many windows of his hastily rigged control tower. Some fuse-brained idiot sure fouled up royally! Fudged it totally. Too many ships, not enough landing space.

He barked some orders into his tightly gripped mike. "Earth Control Post Number One to Squadron Leader Eight Seven Nine. Divert to Earth Northern Sector Twelve..."

"Earth Control Post Number One to Squadron Leader Two Six Five. Divert cargo to Earth Continent Three Control Post Sixteen..."

Down on a field, a truck drew up alongside a grounded freighter. The ship's boarding door banged down to form a ramp, disclosing two renegades in creased and filthy coveralls.

Carrying sheafs of paper, three secret policemen hastily approached, gesturing as they came for unloading to commence.

Stepping back, the renegades started to lug out the drugged bodies to take them down the ramp for placement in the truck.

Across the landing space, a stream of vans were moving toward the ships.

At a nearby ship, the disembarkation was also beginning. One of the captives, a black man, was recovering consciousness. Raising himself up, he opened his eyes to stare, horror-stricken, at the booted foot of a secret policeman as it swung at him, to catch him square on the jaw.

And he collapsed.

Several other landing fields on Earth were similarly occupied.

One, near Mount Shasta, was unloading in haste, as their cargoes were groggily coming to.

The little girl still clutched her doll. Dazed, she struggled awake and sat up.

A secret policeman jerked her to her feet and gave her a shove. So directed, she began to follow her companion victims up the sharply increasing slope of the volcano.

Mt. Etna, Mt. Fuji. The new arrivals were tumbled out of the freighters and forced to clamber up the volcanoes' sides.

An old man, baffled and dismayed, plucked the sleeve of a guard. His questions were cut short as he was cuffed viciously back.

The survivors of the Ninth Army were unloaded at the base of Mount Washington.

Hands behind their backs, uniforms in shreds, they held their heads as proudly as they could as they marched up the slope.

A drummer boy, once a friend of Rawl's, stopped and turned to look back down the incline.

His drum straps hung from his shoulder, the broken top of a drum still clinging to them.

A soldier behind him was pushed forward. They collided, forcing the boy to move on upward.

Set on a rocky island and centered in a rolling ocean of blue, a volcano's side crawled with a struggling line of humanity.

By the top edge of its cone, a renegade crew fought to hold down their helicopter as the fierce wind threatened to blow it away.

An engineer had just finished connecting a radio wire to a curious cylindrical object. Words painted imposingly in red on its sides proclaimed it to be an atom bomb.

Shouting above the rushing gale, the engineer summoned over an assistant technician.

Together they tied a rope securely around the bomb and commenced lowering it into the crater mouth.

Another engineer peered over the edge, watching the bomb descend slowly towards the pools of bright lava, moving and red, below.

A third engineer was paying out wire from a large coil in his hand. It snaked out and down the cone – to serve as the link

between the signal and the detonation.

The waiting Controller stood anxiously to one side. A worried frown creasing his brow as he looked through the window at the landing field. The ships under his authority were all sitting out there, grounded and idle. Sons of dogs! When were they going to let us get the hell out of here?

By the panel, the Renegade Chief was snarling into a mike. "This is Earth Control Post Number One to Volcano Crew Seventeen. Advise when atomic charges have been placed."

Tossing the mike away from him, the Chief spun around to face the controller. "Damned bastards. They're the last ones to report atomic charges in place in the volcanoes.

But the nervous Controller couldn't care less about that. He waved his hand at the field. "It's going to take several hours to get all these ships spaceborne and out of this."

The Chief gave a snort of laughter. "Don't get your pants wet. Our people will all be of Earth before we push the button."

The Controller hesitated, not too sure. He looked down at his hands fidgeting with some crumpled up papers.

Relenting, the Chief shrugged a shoulder. "Ah, you can tell them to refuel and get back to their planets as soon as the secret police are aboard and my men recovered."

Relieved, the Controller let out his pent up breath. Maybe this whoreson wasn't such a whoreson after all.

Leaning into the wind, the first engineer reached up a black gloved hand to rub his grimy face. Raising his other hand, he placed his receiver-mike to his mouth and pressed the transmit button. "Earth Control One, come in."

He depressed the receive button and put the instrument to his ear, only to remove it a ways as the Renegade Chief's

voice blazed through. "What the blasters kept you bastards?"

The engineer gave the radio a withering look and swore silently to himself. But he knew better than to reply in kind, so he collected his ragged temper and spoke calmly. "Volcano Seventeen fully charged and complete. In fact it's got two atomic bombs in it. Rope broke."

"Good. Scramble out of there, get back to the field and take off. I'm spaceborne now."

Thankfully, the engineer put the radio away and signalled a let's-go to his men.

An exhausted group eddied to a halt and turned to watch, bewildered, as their persecutors began to race downhill, leaving them behind.

Reaching the trucks in the valley, the renegades and secret police piled in and drove off.

Soon, every operational ship had left Earth, having taken on the renegades and secret police and blasted for home.

Zel, former Chief of Secret Police Earth, was piloting the communications plane as it hovered above Earth. Too close for his liking, but orders were orders. He chewed his lip in trepidation.

In the co-pilot's seat, the Chief was on the air to Chi. "No trouble. The secret police have been evacuated. My renegades also. Been some mobs and riots amongst the planetary population, but what the hell."

Chi's visage on the screen was replaced by another's as Xenu shoved him aside. "Are you ready?" asked Xenu.

The Chief gave him a lazy salute. "Oh, yes."

An anticipatory gleam leapt into Xenu's eyes. "Turn one of your cameras on it."

Nodding, the Chief yelled back to a technician. "Get two or three cameras on it, different depths."

The Chief turned back to the video and nodded again.

Xenu passed his tongue over dry, cracked lips. "You can proceed when ready." With that, he shut down the circuit.

Moving into a more comfortable position, the Chief grunted. "What some people will do for power!"

Zel gave him a sideways glance. "Including you."

The Chief flinched a little then grinned wickedly, presenting Zel with the full benefit of his yellowed teeth. "You're talking!"

Meanwhile, on the face of Earth, hundreds of thousands of hungry, hopeless people sat bemused on the slopes where they had been left.

The dispirited and ravaged Ninth Army soldiers were too dejected to move. Only one of them was attempting to free his hands of their binding.

And the little girl was down on her knees, rocking her doll. Bruised and dirty, tears coursed silently down her face.

She looked upward at the sky, saw nothing there.

Hugging her doll closer, she began to whimper, not understanding where she was, or why.

The Chief lightly held the electronic box. Its red lights glowed softly, hypnotically.

Face expressionless, he moved his right hand toward the box. Finger poised, he hesitated only a moment, then smoothly, gracefully even, he depressed the center button.

Simultaneously, the planted charges erupted.

Atomic blasts ballooned from the craters of Loa, Vesuvius, Shasta, Washington, Fujiyama, Etna, and many, many others.

Arching higher and higher, up and outwards, towering clouds mushroomed, shot through with flashes of flame, waste and fission.

Great winds raced tumultuously across the face of Earth, spreading tales of destruction.

Debris-studded, and sickly yellow, the atomic clouds followed close on the heels of the winds. Their bowshaped fronts encroached inexorably upon forest, city and mankind, they delivered their gifts of death and radiation.

A skyscraper, tall and arrow-straight, bent over to form a question mark to the very idea of humanity before crumbling into the screaming city below.

People standing, racked by the hurricanes, on a street looked up horrified at a descending atomic cloud. Making a futile attempt at escape, they were dropped in their tracks, exterminated like so many pestilent flies.

Molten lava poured, chaotic, down volcanic slopes, obliterating all trace of the people that had been huddled there.

A mountainous tidal wave engulfed a once thriving seaport, leaving only a few of the taller building tops showing over the swirling waters. A second wave formed, preparing to finish what the first had left undone.

Areas of rioting vegetation and forest became barren plains, inhabited only now by the screaming winds.

The fair jewel, Earth, had been brutally murdered.

Casually, the Chief still held the electronic box. His craft rocked a little, as if echoing the passing violence below.

Through the windshield, he looked down at Earth, its cloud formations now a reddish, uneven swirl.

Also observing this view, by way of a dozen screens propped up around his office, was Xenu.

He tapped his fingers in time with the soft, gentle symphony his office stereo was playing and took a delighted sip of his long,

cool drink.

It was over.

The charred remains of the little girl's doll bobbed on a choppy sea, lamented only by a low, moaning breeze.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

An orchestra was playing loud, foolishly gay music. The hall was all decorated for a party.

Chattering and laughing throngs milled around the room. A few degraded, half-naked women were hanging on the arms of the top leaders of state, also there.

Off in a secluded corner, Chi has his head together with the banker Chu.

"So you are sure I will get all my money back?" the banker asked, nervously twisting the diamond rings on his sausage fingers.

"With interest, with interest," replied Chi. "In addition to the Confederate Bureau of Investigation I am forming an income tax police in Treasury." He made a wringing motion with his hands, as if wringing out towel. "And they'll extract every last possible penny from the populace."

Chu cheered up for a moment, then turned doubtful again. "This cost is a terrible lot of money."

Chi rolled his eyes in some exasperation. How could a banker be so stupid? "Master Chu, the people are a bottomless pit for taxes. It can go on forever. A bottomless pit."

Sniffing superiorly, he favored the banker with an arch look. "Providing of course you back it up with a heavily manned police force – with a secret police and Treasury police, and of course psychiatrists to take care of any people who object."

Chuckling, he gave Chu a reassuring pat on his chubby back. "Police states never go

broke. The populace maybe, but not us, not us."

Slightly mollified, but not convinced, the banker giggled in reply.

Across the hall, an orderly placed a silver tray on a table occupied by Xenu and some of his top men.

Zel reached out and took the bottle from the tray. He popped the cork and began pouring the amber liquid into glasses. "I'd say," said he, pompously, "it was successful beyond any possible hopes I had. Our men in charge of the government on every planet, planetary armies still obedient to us, no large bases left to bother us..." – his hand slipped, spilling a quantity of liqueur, "... and no Congress to bother us."

They raised their crystal goblets, aqua vitae twinkling, in a toast.

At that moment a tiny, shrill sound became audible above the music and social buzzing. Like a diving plane, the noise swelled a trifle.

Curious, but not too concerned, Chi and his piggy friend ceased their talk and looked upward, listening.

Renegade men in the hall also looked up, listening. As alert professionals, vigilant at all times, they grew perturbed at the rising whine.

Zel lowered his goblet uncertainly and stared at the ceiling. Xenu started too, his glass dribbling as it tilted, unnoticed, in his rigid hand.

Rising to an almost unbearable pitch, the sound reverberated across the room. Then, with a thunderous crash, a spear-like object burst through the ceiling to bury its arrowhead into the wooden floor.

The note of the bomber's engines changed abruptly as it revved and pulled out of its dive. The canister, poised erect there on the dance floor, began to vibrate. But few, if any, of the crowd noticed this. Galvanized into action the instant the cyl-

inder had hit the floor, they were already surging – men yelling, women screaming – from the confines of the room, each intent on being the first out.

A more courageous renegade raced across to the object. Grasping it, he yanked it loose. "It's not a bomb," he shouted, examining it. "The force field above the palace would have detonated it if it was. It's a message tube."

He removed the screw-cap top and brought out a scroll and a piece of paper. Taking the scroll first, he read it out to the small group who had gathered around, curious.

"Proclamation. The Congress of the Loyal Officers of the People hereby deposes Xenu as Supreme Ruler... 'What the bloody blastick is this?' The renegade glanced briefly up at Xenu who's face was going ominously black, then continued to read the scroll. "... and orders him to surrender for MASS MURDER.' What the... ? It's signed by Mish and Rawl!"

Fingers fumbling, he grasped the second sheet of paper. Voice growing hoarse, he read that, too, aloud. "Xenu, copies of this proclamation are being dropped on streets of every planet. I advise you to surrender peacefully... 'Hey, what's this nut Rawl think he's doing?"

Horrified, the renegade gaped around wildly, as if expecting Rawl to leap out from somewhere and shoot him down. "He's dead. Every Loyal Officer is dead!"

The assembly began to mutter. Xenu stalked over to Chi in a cold fury. Grabbing the latter's coat lapels, he yanked them hard and spat into his face. "How many Interceptor Bases did you leave untouched?" He yanked again.

Chi, nearly choking, his body turned into a lump of quivering jelly, could only stammer. "O-only... only Mish. Th... there was a sh... ship seen leaving the Earth b...

base as it bl... blew up." He made a frantic attempt to lose Xenu's hands. "O-only those."

Releasing his Minister, Xenu burst into laughter. Still laughing, he turned to face the startled crowd and held his hands up in a calming reassuring gesture.

"Purest bluff," he announced. "Two men against millions of secret police, against seventy-five totally secured planets, against all our planes and armies!"

Taking the papers from the limp grip of the renegade, he laughed again, then began to rip the papers to shreds. "Well, good luck to them," he finished sarcastically, dropping the strips to the floor with exaggerated contempt.

His audience let out a sigh of relief, then they also broke into laughter.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Very alone, very small against the vast reaches of the Galaxy, a single Interceptor hung suspended. In its fuselage, four people were in various stages of getting into space garments. Oxygen masks and parachutes were to hand, ready to be donned.

Rawl paused and looked up. "you don't have to do this, Lady Min. You've already done enough – we'd never have known what this was all about without you."

She kept right on getting dressed, her soft mouth set into a line of determination as she pulled a safe-seal suit over her khaki outfit.

Ap, already dressed for space and scared stiff of the action ahead, stared at Lady Min. If only she wasn't going, then he wouldn't have to go either. Oh lord!

Continuing to buckle his parachute straps, Rawl smiled approvingly. He glanced out through a port. "Well, here it is. We're over Alpha Centauri Planet Two,

Cronjin. It's the least populated and a long way from Home Planet." He laughed derisively. "The idiots took out all the Galactic bases including this one so there's no chance of being bombed – they've got no bombers we can't handle. We're going to parachute in on the night side while our pilot flies cover."

Finishing the last buckle, he reached out and took a rifle from a wall peg. "Keep together," he instructed, checking the blaster's load, "guide in on me closely."

Up to the aisle, the pilot called back to Mish. "About thirty-five seconds to target."

Mish gave the pilot a thumbs-up sign. "When we're gone, keep alert to cover us. If we make it, we'll radio you where to land." He stepped forward into the airlock, waving an arm for the rest to follow.

Rawl sealed the door behind them and glanced at the safety board. The red light had turned green. He opened the outer door and spun off into space.

Ap was the last to jump. Hanging back at the threshold, he stared down in awe-struck horror. With much misgiving, he squeezed his eyes shut, pulled himself together, and stepped out.

The four landed in rapid succession on the spaceport pavement. In the distance, a mass of lights denoted a city. To their immediate left, a building bristled with antennae and red beacons – the Communications Center for the planet.

Rawl ripped open his harness buckle and, unslinging his rifle as he went, made a dash towards the building. Reaching the stairs, he took them two at a time. He was halfway up them before Mish started up behind him.

Inside, a secret policeman was flopped down in a chair reading a girlie magazine.

Hearing footsteps coming up the stairs, he jumped to his feet and spun around. His

hand dived for his gun, but too late. Before he could even draw it, a green ribbon of flame cut into him. He staggered, eyes wide, and crumpled to the floor.

Rawl propped his rifle up against the wall and, eyes rapidly studying the console, began removing his space suit.

Behind him, Mish had stopped in the doorway, rifle held ready, standing sentinel over the staircase. Breathless from the run, Lady Min and Ap brushed past Mish and entered the room.

Typically female, Lady Min produced a compact mirror and fluffed out her hair. Critically appraising her reflection, she got out her lipstick.

Having seen the dead secret policeman, Ap was in no mood for seeing to his own appearance. He eyed the body queasily, and decided to put it out of sight and mind.

Holding his heaving stomach in check, he picked up the dead man's feet and dragged him off into a corner.

Meanwhile, Rawl had completed the removal of his space garments. Pulling his cap from his pocket, he put it on and moved over to the panel board. Naming them as he went, he threw a number of levers. "Planetary News Media, home television interrupt, Planetary Army Headquarters, radio emergency interrupt, all Planet Alert System, theater screens..."

The circuits clicked and whirred as they went open. A regiment of TV monitor screens leapt to life with Rawl's image.

Making a conscious effort to calm himself, he drew a deep breath. He was on the air. Putting a cubical mike into position, he commenced speaking. "People of Cronjin, I am Rawl, Speaker of the Congress of Loyal Officers of the People, the ruling body of the Galactic Confederation..."

Lounging in a downtown bar, the Cronjin Secret Police General visibly jumped when Rawl appeared on the TV behind the

counter. Slamming down his drink, heedless of the slopping alcohol, he snatched a portable radio from his coat pocket.

"... Xenu has been deposed," continued Rawl's voice from the TV, "the secret police disbanded. Xenu is being sought for trial for the destruction of the Planet Earth, murder of populations..."

The Secret Police General barked into his radio. "All police! Go to Cronjin Planetary Communications Center, airfield. At once!" Casting a last venomous glare at the TV, he swung about and stalked from the barroom.

A couple of teenagers were watching what they called the boob-tube. The programs had been so boring lately, nothing but lectures and "dramas" of militaristic nature. Half-dozing, they jerked awake when Rawl came on. One of them beckoned urgently for the rest of his friends and family to come over to the screen. Clustered around the set, they listened avidly to their long-term hero.

"Many of your own people were recently rounded up. They were transported to Earth and murdered there by atomic fire. You have been told that recent measures were taken to combat a crime wave. That crime wave was Xenu!..."

Flanked by his staff officers, hastily summoned and still buttoning on their blue and white jackets, the Commanding General of the Cronjin Planetary Army stood tensely watching his office TV set. Rawl's words were filling the room.

"In addition to the entire population of Planet Earth, Xenu also rounded up and had murdered the entire Ninth Army because it sought to carry out the lawful orders of Congress and resisted the formation of a police state..."

The Commanding General's face hardened as he nodded grimly. He knew it. "So that's why they don't answer up," he mut-

tered to himself. He turned and shouted "Orderly!"

An orderly came running up. The staff Officers began pulling transceivers from their belts and leapt into action as their Commanding General issued a stream of decisive orders.

On a sidewalk, a crowd had gathered. Staring up at a public address system speaker, they were intent on what Rawl was saying.

"Your own bomber base did not blow up because of terrorists as you were told..Xenu blew it up and every other Galactic base in an effort to destroy the power of the Loyal Officers and Congress. You are safe, therefore, from any retaliation from Home Planet. The sky above you is guarded by us..."

The crowd in the street shifted, angry.

"... by the authority of the Congress I therefore call on you to rise, smash the secret police and restore lawful government to this planet!"

At Rawl's last words, the crowd surged forward, snarling. One of them, ordinarily a peaceful citizen but now a ferocious mob leader inflamed by what he had heard, leaped up onto a balustrade and began shouting directions.

Listening to the wailing sirens, Mish braced himself against the door. A fleet of secret police cars were coming, hurtling across the airfield.

Rawl glanced out the window. Curtly signalling Ap over to him, he spoke again into the mike. "You can and must win!"

Shoving the mike into Ap's resistive hands, Rawl grabbed his rifle, dashed through the door and along the outside platform. He dropped down to use the parapet for cover and raised his gun over the edge.

Shivering uncontrollably, Ap tried to gather his scattered wits. All he wanted to be was a thousand miles away. Steeling

himself bravely, he stepped into the path of the television scanner and raised the mike. "Ladies and gentlemen, people of Cronjin, you have just heard an emergency announcement by Commander Rawl..."

Outside, the first of the armored cars had skidded to a halt, and secret policemen were leaping out. Rawl aimed and fired..., Ap jumped as the blast echoed through the room.

Desperately telling himself that he was perfectly safe, and that he was, after all, a publicity agent and so should be able to do something as simple as talk on the radio, he forced himself to continue. "... Loyal Officer, Speaker of Congress. And if you're going to do anything," he swallowed a gulp, "you better do it now and fast. The secret police are piling into this airfield like an avalanche..."

The burst of flame from Rawl's rifle hit the car. Chock-full of ammunition, the vehicle was a deadly weapon.

This same attribute was also its only Achilles' heel. It detonated in a scintillating flash of white and scarlet. Caught flat-footed, its crew went up with the car.

Jerking his head down, Ap wailed. "People of Cronjin, where are you? We need help!"

The second of the cars pulled up short. Jumping out, the Secret Police General surveyed the scene. Hell! One unit lost already. He about-faced and started directing the arriving forces into combat positions.

Ap stole a glance out the window and turned sickly pale. He could count two, five – no, ten trucks! And all unloading secret police. "Future zero!"

A flatbed truck with a mounted artillery piece, joined the crowd. Its gun crew started training the gun on the dome of the Center.

The Secret Police General elbowed his way through his rushing men and jumped

up onto the flatbed. "No, no!" He was shouting, motioning for the men to desist. "Don't destroy the Communications Center. We'll need it in a few minutes to tell the population they are dead and we are in control!"

He sprang off the truck and ran to direct a small arms attack. At his command, lines of secret policemen threw themselves down and commenced discharging arcs of flame towards the Center.

Lying prone over the doorsill, enemy fire chewing the frame above him, Mish returned his own staccato shots of fire.

Ducked down, Lady Min crawled over to where Ap valiantly continued his address to the populace. "This field," he was saying, "is swarming with secret police." He closed his eyes and muttered a short prayer. "Right now we're going to find out if the people of Cronjin are friends of murderers and oppressors!"

As he spoke, two vanloads of renegade forces arrived. By far more deadly than the secret police. Scrambling out, the renegades hit the ground at dead runs and made for the staircase leading to the control room.

Noticing Lady Min's frantic gestures, he gave in to her plea. "And so I give you Lady Min, eyewitness to the planning of Xenu and destruction of Earth." And he thankfully handed her the mike.

The first of the renegades were pounding up the stairs. Mish, ready for it, let them come to within a few feet of him before cutting loose with his blast gun. The leading renegades fell back, smashing into the ones behind, creating a confused tangle of falling and thrashing men.

Lady Min glanced back at the door. Spotlights! Composing herself, she turned back to the mike. "People of Cronjin, this may be your last chance to attain freedom," she began, close to tears. Dear God – where were the people of Cronjin?

Rawl cursed as his gun clicked empty. He thrust the last charge he had into the breech and resumed firing. If the cavalry don't come soon, they wouldn't stand a chance. Not a damned chance. He should never have let Lady Min come either. Gritting his teeth he smashed down another renegade with a sharp burst of flare.

By the flatbed, the determined Secret Police General looked on through slitted eyes. Hearing a throbbing from behind, he whirled around. Seeing nothing, he hit a switch on the truck's side and a spotlight stabbed out into the dark.

The General froze in shock as the light revealed four blue and white army tanks rumbling towards him, gun snouts depressing into firing positions as they came.

Fanned out behind the tanks, a flock of carrier trucks were pulling up, soldiers pouring over their sides.

A ragged battle cry reached the General's ears. "Remember the Ninth Army! Remember the Ninth Army!"

Stationed in a tank turret, the Commanding General of the Cronjin Planetary Army glared at the secret police maneuvers ahead. His face set into harsh lines, his voice severe, he snapped an order into a radio unit. "Fire low so as not to hit the Communications Center. Attack at once!"

Together, the tanks fired huge sprays of blue-white flame.

A secret police car, hit, leaped into the air. A group of trucks vanished as such, becoming blazing pyres instead. The flatbed truck burst asunder.

As yet unaware of the ravages behind them, the front lines of secret policemen still exchanged shot with the Center. Then, a few seemed to sense that all was not well. As they rose to turn back, a wave of soldiers hit them, screaming "Remember the Ninth Army!"

Hearing the stepped up turmoil out-

side, Lady Min risked a peek over the windowsill. Seeing the change of circumstances, she jumped to her feet, face radiant. Thank the stars! "Victory!" she cried. "People of Cronjin, you are free, free, free!"

Rawl and Mish grinned at each other. Dangling their rifles, they went to stand by the shredded door to greet the approaching Army General and his officers.

Catching sight of Rawl, the Army General rushed forward and firmly shook his hand. "So I finally get to meet the famous Rawl!"

Mish gestured, "Shall we go inside?" They did so, Ap clearing some battered chairs out of their way.

Lady Min had stopped speaking and held the mike toward the conferring group, volume up.

A sudden commotion at the door made them turn. A group of officers with a shackled civilian in their midst crowded in.

One of the officers gently pushed the civilian forward. "Look what we have here!"

The man was middle-aged, he held his head up proudly as another officer tried out various keys on his shackled wrists. The officer who had spoken explained further, noting Rawl's raised eyebrow. "We got him out of the police barracks' dungeon. The Civil Governor of Cronjin!"

One of his hands successfully unshackled, the Governor extended it to Rawl.

Shaking his hand, Rawl studied the man, liking what he saw. "Can I count on you and the General here to get this planet mopped up and in order?"

The Governor and Army General beamed with enthusiasm. "Indeed so!" they chorused.

Mish and Ap had gone over to the console behind Lady Min. Looking as if he were about to faint, Ap collapsed against the panel and wiped his face on his sleeve. "That was tombstone close!"

Mish shrugged. "One down and seventy-four planets to go."

Ap was horrified. "Seventy-four more like these?"

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Through the Interceptor's windscreen, the stars seemed like a chain of diamonds against a backdrop of black velvet.

In the pilot seat, mike in hand, Rawl broadcasted a rallying message.

"People of the Galactic Confederation, fight on! We have wrested thirty planets from the unlawful control of Xenu. Everywhere populations are in revolt. The measures of personal income tax, enforced identification, illegal entries and violations of privacy by the secret police have inflamed peoples everywhere.

"Xenu in his stronghold on Home Planet receives little news to cheer him..."

And revolt they did.

Anchar: The Personal Income Tax Bureau headquarters was particularly hated. A band of civilian saboteurs slipped in by night and planted charges in key locations. And it was blown ski-high.

Betelgeuse: A secret policeman was standing at the identity computers, feeding in the unverified data. He didn't care what it said, just so long as there was stuff there. He had heard rumors about an impending revolt – no problem. The secret police could handle.

Then, three civilians, armed with automatic blast guns burst in, their leader shouting "To hell with your false reports!" And the policeman, computers and all, vanished in a flash of fire.

Pollux: An angry pack of rebels were dragging a secret policeman along by his foot. They had a kangaroo court ready and waiting for him and the renegade they had captured and whom they had stumbling

along behind, rope round his neck in preparation for his predetermined execution.

Spica: The mob had a bearded psychiatrist down on the floor. One of them jabbed him repeatedly with a hypo, yelling: "Let's see how you like it!"

Beta Centauri: A dead secret policeman was sprawled across the console in the communications center of Planet Two, a butcher knife in his back. Beside him, a wounded renegade screamed into a mike. "Home Planet, Home Planet. The people of Beta Centauri Two have risen in revolt. We are pinned down, outnumbered..." His scream rose even higher as the room exploded with a deafening, sonorous crash of thunder.

Insurrection against the oppressors spread like wildfire across the Galaxy.

Bit by bit, the secret police, renegade forces and officials loyal to Xenu were beaten down and crushed, their headquarters smashed.

And the mutineers revelled in each victory, spurred on to greater acts of rebellion by each success.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

A chart was spread across an aisle table in Rawl's Interceptor. Consulting it was Rawl himself, Mish, Lady Min and Ap.

Rawl slapped down his pencil and stretched his cramped limbs. "Sooner or later they will get their wits working and start to use the Home Planet bombers to retaliate."

Intent on oiling his pistol, Mish nodded absently. He'd discussed this with Rawl last night.

Ap darted his gaze from Rawl to Mish, then back to Rawl again. Bombers! What this meant he didn't know, but it must be bad news.

"I propose to attack that base," Rawl tapped an area of Home Planet on the chart, "and then move right on in on the Home Planet without waiting for other planets. They're doing all right."

Mish nodded again. "Looks safest."

Ap gasped. Had he heard that right? "Safest?"

Rawl smiled. "This is an outer space atomic Interceptor," he explained patiently, "made to combat enemy space battleships. Using it in an atmosphere makes it dead easy against planetary ships. I doubt if there are any renegades that can even fly one."

Ap was unconvinced. "Like a tiger fighting a puppy, huh?"

Rawl laughed. "You can man the tail gun."

Clutching at the table, Ap moaned, "Do you have any heart medicine aboard?"

A young girl was being shoved around like a rag doll. The renegades, seated in a circle, laughed at her terror, pushing her from one to the next of them with her clothes tearing further at each jolt.

In the background, the Home Planet bomber base's fleet of ships sat idle and poorly cared for. For sure, the renegades who manned the base had better things to do, like what they were doing now.

One of the renegades loosened up his collar. "I didn't think it would be so much fun to be an agent of the Confederate Bureau of Investigation."

Another man gave a leer and turned to the girl. "Come on, sweetheart, let's investigate further."

The girl was tossed at him. He caught her and ripped a garment further. She fell to his feet, inert, eyes wide open.

He shook her a little. No movement. "Hell! She's dead!"

A renegade to his left reached out. "Good, hand her over, that's the way I like

'em."

One of the group had grown bored. He got to his feet and yawned. "I better get a squadron airborne to relieve the Home Planet patrol." He began to slouch off.

The renegade holding the girl pitched her into the arms of the renegade to his left, and called out after the departing man, "Yeah, you do that."

And he returned his attention to the sport.

Up in patrol, the renegade co-pilot punched a transmit button. "When are you dog lovers coming up to relieve us?"

The radio uttered an uncouthness in reply.

Starting to put the mike back on its hook, a blip on the radar caught the co-pilot's eye.

He cast a searching glance out through the windscreen and yelped in fright.

He frantically shook the dozing pilot's arm and pointed outside, bringing the mike back to his mouth with his other hand. His voice cracked as he practically squeaked: "A Loyal Officer Interceptor!"

Rawl threw his Interceptor into a dive. Between his craft and the base below, six renegade patrol ships were flying in sloppy formation.

Back in the tail, Ap sat in the gunner seat wrestling the gun with clumsy hands. Looking out through his viewport, he flinched. "Six Interceptors!"

Alarm sirens sounded at ground level. Aroused from their various and nefarious activities, renegades scrambled toward their stations.

Holding the dive, Rawl signalled Mish to hold fire as the latter readied a firing control. Mish shot a grin back, and nodded.

Ap checked the port again. "Six more taking off!" He began muttering a prayer, hoping that somewhere some kind god would listen and transport him instantly to

some other place. Anywhere but here!

Firing tracer shot, the patrol rose to meet Rawl's ship.

Flashing downwards to pass right through the enemy formation, Mish closed the firing control just as his own ship passed the first of the renegade Interceptors, leaving behind a pattern of black balls strewn between the patrol ships.

Then, the black balls exploded, knocking four of the renegade craft from the skies.

Ap at his tail gun was intent on mopping up the remaining two. Firing wildly, he managed to score a direct hit on one of them. Belching greasy black smoke, it fell.

Letting loose a whoop of delight, Ap turned his blazing gun, prayers forgotten, on the last ship as it pivoted around and began to fire at him.

A curtain of swirling red engulfed Ap's turret. In the cockpit, Rawl swore and jerked at the controls to steady his Interceptor.

But the hit was only glancing, not, much damage done. Ap, a trifle singed, yelled triumphantly as his next shot caught his opponent right on the nose.

Rawl held the dive. Mish pointed down at six more ships shooting vertically up towards them. "Second squadron!

Being twice the speed as well as twice the size of the renegade craft, Rawl's ship had flashed by them before they could even change course to fire on him.

Nearly grazing the ground, Rawl pulled out of the dive and took the Interceptor, engines shrieking, up and under the patrol.

Shooting right through the squadron, Mish again closed the firing switch, and the six ships were blasted to fragments.

Rawl yanked at the controls and dove downwards again, for the base itself. In the tail Ap was raring to go, ready to roll. Hunting for something to fire at, he found nothing, and slumped back in disappoint-

ment.

An anti-spacecraft gunner crew concentrated ribbons of shot at the plummeting Interceptor. No use – the ship just kept diving toward them. They ceased fire and ducked futilely for cover.

Mish once more had his hand on the firing control, waiting for the word...

"Now!" yelled Rawl, and Mish snapped his thumb down.

Rawl banked his ship and sped for safety as the base went up in a cloud of atomic particles.

Flying left-handed, Rawl cruised his Interceptor above Home Planet. He held a mike in his other hand, and frowned slightly as he spoke. "Calling Commanding General Arn, Commanding Planetary Army Home Planet. Calling Commanding General Arn, Commanding Planetary Army Home Planet..."

A voice spluttered in over the receiver. "I'll get him, I'll get him."

Having answered the call, a communications clerk signalled urgently to the Commanding General across the room. He ducked down to avoid a red slash of fire that laced above him. Many others in the room did the same, for the Planetary army was engaged in a pitched battle.

Soldiers, in the blue and white uniforms, were at the windows, firing intermittently at the enemy outside. A line of wounded lay against the far wall, growing longer by the minute.

General Arn, a dignified, grey-headed man, answered the clerk's summons. Cap off and collar open he ran, keeping his head down, over to the radio.

The clerk handed Arn the mike, shaking his head incredulously. "It sounds like Rawl!"

The clerk hit a video button and the General stared, jaw agape, at the screen. "Rawl!"

He drew a breath of relief, then spoke very seriously. "Don't try to come in here. We're pinned down! They seized our tanks. Secret police and renegades are out there in thousands all around our base."

"Are you at Central Base Three?"

The General looked a little suspicious. The guy would have to be crazy to come in here! With reservation, he answered "Yes."

Rawl gave a short laugh. "Keep the heads of your men down when you hear a ship!"

"Rawl..." the General began, to be silenced by the audible click as Rawl cut the circuit.

Looking around him in some amazement, he spoke to no one in particular. "He's coming in here!" Then, hastily buttoning his collar and jamming his cap on his head, he

turned and shouted to his men. "Increase your fire!"

High above Central Base Three, Rawl and Mish surveyed the scene below. The base was a fortress-like building surrounded on three sides by open parade ground and backed on the fourth by a winding river. Some twenty tanks were ranged around the building, spouting gushes of flame. Masses of secret police in battle formations were keeping up continuous fire at the building where army soldiers at the windows only shot back sporadically.

Rawl pulled a lever and his ship swooped downward. "Use fire," he told Mish. "Don't hit the building."

Mish grinned back at Rawl and gave him an OK sign.

Zel, a bit removed from his men, was seated in a camp chair, observing the battle in satisfaction. Just a few more hours, and he'd probably get a medal or something. Deserved it too – no one would ever know that this really wasn't his plan, but what the hell. He was the senior officer here

anyway.

The note of an alien engine intruded upon his ruminations. He looked up, consternated and dumbfounded to see a diving Interceptor. Jumping up, he ran for the cover of some nearby trees.

As the ship's shadow raced over the tanks and men on the parade grounds, Mish jerked on the firing control, letting loose a blanket of raging flame.

Army soldiers crowded, wounded and all, to the windows, cheering as the tanks blew up one by one.

Those still alive in the ranks of secret police nearest the army building had about-faced to stare, awe-struck, at the burning wreckage. They didn't see as the soldiers leapt over their window embrasures to charge headlong at them.

Then, hearing the battle cry "Remember the Ninth Army!" the secret police whirled around to be knocked flat by the wave of blue and white uniformed men.

"Remember the Ninth Army!"

In the Interceptor, Lady Min and Ap had come to stand behind the pilot seats in the Cockpit, looking eagerly through the windshield.

Ap clutched Mish's arm and howled in delight. "We've won!"

Laughing, Mish disengaged Ap's hands and reached across to lightly punch Rawl's shoulder. "Hey, pardner. We've done it again!"

Seeking an avenue of release for his high spirits, Ap grabbed Lady Min and waltzed her down the fuselage, to her own and the others' amusement.

But below, Zel was making good his escape. He clambered into an armored car and kicked it into gear. Hatless and scorched, he careened off madly, intent only on getting away.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

The heads of state were holed up in the palace. Renegade troops, scattered strategically around the walls, kept up a barrage of small arms fire.

Out in the street, a crowd of affronted civilians were held back by barricades and panes of anti-shot glass.

In the square, facing the palace, were several armored vehicles and a blue and white tank. Next to the tank, General Arn, Mish and Rawl were conferring.

"They're in there all right," observed Arn. "The lot of them, like rats in a hole."

Mish slammed a fist against the tank's side. Blast! He spoke gruffly in his frustration. "You can't bomb the place. It's force screen detonates anything you drop on them."

Rawl leaned back on the tank and shook his head. "No, no. We've got to take them alive." He beckoned to a civilian police captain who held a loud-hailer.

Stooping low to avoid ricocheting shot, the captain ran over to the tank, trailing the hailer's cord behind him.

Rawl jabbed a thumb over his shoulder. "Isn't there any way we can get them out of there?"

The captain shrugged. "We could storm the place. Cost an awful lot of men."

"Call them again," sighed Rawl. "We want to take them alive."

A man in the forefront of the watching crowds turned to his neighbor, marveling at what he had just heard. "Rawl just said they want to take them alive!"

Pleased with the idea, his eyes lit up fanatically. Cupping his hands to his mouth, he shouted to Rawl: "Take them alive!"

Those around the man stared at him, astonished. Then they too took up the cry.

"Take them alive!" the din grew as more and more joined in.

The captain glanced back at the people behind the barricades, a small smile crossing his face. Turning again to confront the palace, he switched on the hailer. "You are called upon to surrender peacefully. All renegades in the palace will be granted amnesty and transported out of the Galaxy. All officials will be arraigned for trial. Come out without weapons and your hands above your head."

In a window, a renegade was turning the captain's words over in his mind. He listened for a moment to the mob's chanting – "Take them alive!"

Sighing, he worked the slide of his rifle and pulled the trigger. It gave an empty click. He regarded the street again, then withdrew from the window in defeat.

One of the palace doors opened a crack. Several blast rifles slithered out to clatter down the broad front steps. The door opened wider, and a ragged bunch of powder-burned renegades straggled out, hands held high.

An officer signalled to his blue and white uniformed men. "Hold your fire!"

The men who had capitulated were frisked and loaded into an open-sided truck.

Suddenly, a burst of fire from the palace knocked three of the renegades down.

A civilian police officer dropped to his knees and raised his rifle to shoot back.

Holding his smoking rifle, the secret police executive tarried a second too long at the window before drawing back. The demoniac snarl on his face changed to one of agony as the shot from below caught him in the abdomen. Loosing an involuntary burst from his gun, he pitched forward and fell to the pavement below.

Viewing this exchange, Rawl's frown deepened. He looked over at Arn; "Still a lot of fanatics in there."

Arn, scowling at the palace, nodded absently.

Rawl drew his pistol and checked its load. Jerking his head towards Mish, he moved off in the direction of the palace. "Come on, Mish."

Aroused from his meditations, Arn made a grab at Rawl in alarm; "No!"

But they were off, crouching low. Creeping alongside of them was a driverless armored car, pushed by a couple of civilian police, to protect them from fire. A splatter of red glanced off the top of the car without doing harm.

Deciding the least he could do was keep the enemy busy, Arn shouted to his men: "All troops, rapid fire at palace windows!"

Pulled up in front of the building's arched portals, Rawl and Mish knelt in back of the car's fenders. Keeping his eyes on Mish's face, Rawl drew a coin from his pocket and flipped it.

"Heads," chose Mish.

Rawl didn't even look at the coin or show it to Mish. "I lost," he stated, cutting short Mish's protests by sprinting off towards the palace steps. Red streaks of flame ripped at the cement around him, but still he ran on.

Mish swore. Seeing someone about to shoot at Rawl from a window, he rapidly aimed and fired. The man's gun, hit, exploded in his hands.

Mish turned anxiously back to watch Rawl dart through the palace doors. Hell! He wasn't going to let Rawl go in there alone! He upped and dashed off to catch up with Rawl.

Inside, Rawl paused to spray the hall with shot. Spotting a shadowy figure on a balcony, he brought his gun to bear and fired.

He started as someone raced past him and made for the stairs. Seeing it was Mish, he smiled – not surprised. Staying below to cover him, Rawl waited until Mish had reached the head of the staircase before

dashing up them himself.

Their backs to the hallway on the left of the bannister, neither saw an office door surreptitiously open. Nor did they see a grey-green uniformed man sneak out and take aim.

The shot caught Mish on the side of his head. A look of amazement on his face, he jerked once and, weapon flying into the air, he fell backwards rolling over and over as he toppled down the stairs.

Rawl's face went white as stunned, he watched Mish fall. Then, whirling around, he saw a door down the corridor bang shut.

Running furiously towards it, he cut loose a blast of fire and the door buckled inward. Kicking the smoking door aside, he entered the room, gun held ready. He swept his eyes across the room. Cowering by the desk were two secret policemen. A third was getting to his feet, having been knocked down by the door, and was bringing his rifle around.

Though Rawl was still in shock from the loss of Mish, his reflexes were lightning quick. Instinctively almost, he blasted the man with the rifle down and turned his blazing gun on the other two men. And he kept on firing long after the secret policemen were dead.

He checked himself, the fury clearing from his mind. Stepping out into the hallway, he looked down over the bannister at the crumpled form lying at the bottom of the stairs.

For a moment only he allowed grief to tear through him. Mish had been his best friend. Damn, damn, damn! Then, grimly determined, he moved down the corridor.

In the street, Lady Min had joined General Arn by the tank. Her face white with strain, she stared at the palace, clasping and unclasping her hands in nervous tension. Oh lord! Let him come out alive...

Bootbeats echoing, Rawl strode down

the hall. He passed door after door until he arrived at the last one, slightly more ornamental than the rest, its plaque announced it to be Xenu's office.

He reached out his hand, tentatively touched the doorknob, he turned it. Then, he savagely kicked the door open and lunged through.

At first glance, the room seemed bare. Red velvet drapes hung askew, red carpet littered with paper and discarded weapons, the massive black desk was smothered in scatters of files.

Rawl took this all in in a flash, then brought his gaze to rest on the floor under the window. There slumped down, were five men. Rawl walked slowly, cautiously even, towards them.

Stopping before them, Rawl regarded the five men with contempt. Zel was white-faced with fear; Chi was panting – his hand raised to ward off imagined horrors; Sty lay stiffly as if he were one of his own patients, or victims rather; Chu the banker would not meet Rawl's eyes, concentrating as he was on not vomiting from total shattering terror; and lastly, Xenu – he was slightly more composed than the rest.

Rawl's lip curled. Well here they were. The kingpins. Not so brave now, but weren't all criminals basically cowards at heart?

Praying Rawl wouldn't notice, Xenu obliquely eyed the floor by his right hand. A blast pistol lay there invitingly. He crept his hand toward it, keeping a close watch on Rawl as he frisked down the other four.

Closer and closer crept Xenu's hand. Still Rawl hadn't noticed...

With a sudden movement, Xenu grabbed the pistol. Out of the corner of his eye, Rawl saw this and spun around, swinging his foot at the same time.

Jamming the gun against his right temple, Xenu squeezed the trigger...

Just as Rawl's boot connected with his hand, sending the pistol spinning up into the air, it discharged harmlessly.

Scooping it up from where it bounced back onto the floor, Rawl tossed the pistol to the far end of the room.

His attempted suicide foiled, and all weapons removed from his vicinity, Xenu flopped down in despair. 'Whoresons! He was lost, lost, lost.

Casting a withering glance at Xenu, Rawl moved over to the window and shattered the glass with his pistol butt.

Reversing his gun so as to keep his prisoners covered, Rawl leaned out the window and waved his cap to the people below. "They're alive!"

The crowd roared in approval. Lady Min, tears of relief streaming down her otherwise glowingly beautiful face, waved back frantically, trying to catch Rawl's eye.

Car horns and church bells joined in the uproar. Rejoicing spread through the city at the news of victory. As one, the crowds burst through the barricades and surged, yelling in jubilation, towards the palace.

The joy of the moment was infectious. Rawl smiled to himself as he looked down at the tumult below. Seeing Lady Min there, his grin widened and he blew her a kiss.

CHAPTER TWENTY

General Arn was talking with Rawl in his office. Nearby, flashy in his loud new clothes, Ap was fidgeting. Lady Min, beautifully groomed and poised, gazed adoringly up at Rawl through long lashes.

Rawl put a hand on the General's arm. "There's a lot to be done. Can you nominate some of your people as Loyal Officers?"

"Yes," the General affirmed. "And if I were you I would take the two top classes of the Loyal Officer Academy, commission

them at once and put them up for election by the people.”

Rawl nodded, then a frown marked his face. ”It won’t,” he added gloomily, ”be the same operating without Mish.”

As he spoke, the door flew open and Mish, heavily bandaged and grinning madly, entered on crutches. ”That,” he laughed, ”is one problem you won’t have to feed into the computer!”

Rawl looked as if he was seeing an apparition. Mish? Alive? Recovering from the initial shock, he whooped in delight and rushed over to clap him on his good arm. ”You’ll never know, pardner,” he said, ”how pleased I am to see you!”

Lady Min and Ap also swooped down on Mish trying to hug him and be careful of his wounds at the same time.

”Hey, watch it!” exclaimed Mish in mock protest.

The Congressional Hall echoed as the black-robed judge, seated in the place once occupied by Xenu, rapped his gavel!

Two other judges flanked him. Many more were seated below him in a long tier.

The vast rows of chairs were empty, save those occupied by a stern-faced Rawl, a black-veiled Lady Min and a bandaged Mish.

Heavily guarded, Xenu, Chi, Zel, Sty and Chu faced their tribune, awaiting sentence.

Broadcasting the trial, a newsman and an audio assistant rolled the TV camera around on its crane support.

The chief judge looked down gravely on the criminals before him. ”Having been duly and carefully tried under the authority of Congress, the following persons are found guilty of attempting to form a police state, extorting personal taxes, of instigating revolt, high treason against the state, willful and malicious mass murder of populations and the destruction of the people and all

things on planet Earth:

”Zel – former Chief of Secret Police Earth, Sty head of the Psychiatric Associations, Chi – former head of the Department of Justice, Chu – former head of the Galactic Bank, and Xenu – deposed Supreme Ruler...”

The judge paused for breath, then continued, his voice taking on an even more somber tone. ”... are hereby sentenced to be exhibited on every planet to the populations of each planet and then imprisoned in a mountain sustained for eons by life-supports.

”Such is the judgement of this court, of the Congress, of the offended peoples of the great Confederation and the moral natures of all decent men.

”Is there anything the felons would care to say?”

His question was met by silence. The banker’s nervous giggle didn’t count.

The Judge, with some asperity, rapped his gavel to silence the banker. He frowned severely. ”Such is the fate of those who would form a police state and such it has ever been.”

He rapped his gavel three more times to signal the conclusion of the proceedings.

The sentence was carried out meticulously.

The criminals were displayed in glass encased locomotives that travelled the face of every planet in the Confederation.

At each station, the trains would halt, met by angry, indignant crowds. Among the bands of citizens were some more bold than the rest. These displayed their hatred and utter contempt for the felons with tangible expressions in the form of eggs, tomatoes and other such objects, pelted pell-mell at the carriages.

The prisoners reacted in various ways. Chi merely stared out the windows, eyes wide and vacant as he slowly went insane.

Sty took to muttering Freudian style phrases to himself in an attempt to occupy himself with things other than his horror of the fate in store for him. Chu lost a great deal of weight, becoming less piggy, but still maintaining his habit of twist-twisting his rings. Zel became a manic-depressive, and indulged in paroxysms of deep melancholia followed by fits of glee.

And Xenu – Xenu just sat and sagged, head in his hands.

Their grand tour over at last, they were taken to a solitary mountain that brooded over a barren plain.

A cluster of blue and white trucks were parked around a tunnel entrance that led into the heart of the mountain. Nearby, a milling crowd of civilians and soldiers were scattered about. A military band played funeralistic music, slow in beat and low in pitch.

Accompanied by his TV and radio broadcasting equipment, a newsman was keeping up a steady commentary. "We are standing here on the desolate slopes of Mount Xenu on Planet Tawn. This is the mountain named for him in the days of unholy power when he planned his criminal course of destruction. It was designated, possibly with bitterness, as the final place of imprisonment. Officers of the Court are completing..."

Inside the mountain was a grotto carved out of the living stone. A blue-overalled electrician was connecting up sheets of copper plating that lined the room. Alert guards stood about. Cables and wires lay in heaps on the copper sheathed floor. Several white-coated doctors and their attendants worked busily around a semicircle of hospital-style tables on which the prisoners, strapped down, were lying.

Xenu was staring dully upwards as one doctor fastened tubes to his wrists and another fastened them to his ankles. The first

doctor, having finished the wrists, began to put two prongs around Xenu's throat.

Wetting his dry, cracked lips, Xenu looked up at the doctor, some terror showing in his glazed eyes. "These devices keep one alive forever?"

"Don't talk," snapped the doctor.

A guard stepped forward. "Don't talk to the prisoner!"

Despairing, Xenu rolled his eyes. "How long is forever?"

No one answered, no one knew.

Completing their tasks, the doctors began to pull out. Guards moved away from the tables. They filed out one by one, leaving only the electrician and one guard in company with the prisoners.

Rapidly, the remaining two gave the tables and wirings a final check. The prisoners lay inert but awake. The banker and psychiatrist stared wretchedly at the exit, small and more desirable than life, at the end of the long tunnel. Zel started to laugh hysterically. Chi looked around, vacant-eyed. And Xenu gazed blankly, torment-torn, at the ceiling.

Satisfied all was in order, the electrician and guard also began to depart. Swinging the copper-grated door shut behind them, they walked the length of the tunnel.

Reaching the final exit, the electrician switched the lights off, and the guards banged the heavy steel door shut.

Inside, the prisoners were bathed in darkness. And the screaming began...

The newscaster buttonholed the electrician. "How long," he asked, thrusting the mike forward, "will the power last to continue their life-supports?"

Turning in some impatience, the electrician shrugged. "About seventy-four million years, I think, possibly more. Long enough."

Piqued at this laconic reply, the newscaster looked around for another prospec-

tive interviewee.

Bulldozers moved up and began shoveling dirt to cover up the tunnel entrance. An engineering officer spoke to one of the drivers. "Make sure there's no trace of that tunnel entrance."

The driver grinned and gave him a salute.

Finally, the people had drifted away, the band was gone.

Mount Xenu once more stood alone. No sign left of the tunnel. No sign of anything.

A sullen breeze moaned monotonously over the plain, tumbling a few dried weeds before it.

A faint scream sounded. Perhaps a sudden gust of air, perhaps...

Just the lonely wind.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Earth. A murky yellow mist swirled about some shattered tree stumps that spotted a promontory.

A white helicopter was hovering there as it lowered an angular, cylindrical object. It was a large capsule, shiny green in color. Its surface was smooth but for the panels set in its nose.

A few people were standing on the promontory. All wore anti-radiation suits over their normal clothing; Mish, watching the lowering capsule, guided it down with hand signals.

Ap, not doing anything much as usual but there anyway, looked around at the desolated landscape. He found it a little bit spooky. "This sure is," he commented to the air as no one was listening to him, "the end of Planet Earth! Future zero!"

Off to one side, Lady Min and Rawl had their heads together, talking quietly.

Lady Min looked up at Rawl a trifle uncertainly. "I never was his mistress, that

was just his idea of a way to become popular. He hated women."

Rawl smiled, a little surprised but pleased all the same.

"I used to keep news clips of you," she went on as she lowered her gaze, embarrassed. "Kept them under my pillow when I was a teenager. Silly, huh?"

Rawl's eyes flew wide open. "You kept clips of me?" It was his turn to look embarrassed. "I used to keep photos of you in my wallet."

They looked at each other in sudden understanding. Their hands reached out and touched.

Meanwhile, the capsule grounded, the helicopter had landed. Mish disengaged the cable and together with Ap, wrestled the cylinder into position.

Unhooking one of the panels, Mish switched on a camera unit and recorder. He turned to signal Rawl. "You're on," he hissed.

Gently, Rawl took his hand from Lady Min's and softly touched a finger to her mouth. Her eyes were brilliant as she smiled at him.

Stepping into line with the capsule's camera lens, Rawl braced himself to speak. "A few of us labored together to make this capsule so that those who may follow will know how your planet was murdered and why."

He swept his arm to indicate the devastated terrain.

"This desolation was the result of forming a police state. When populations are restless, unwise governments seek to oppress. And the more they oppress the closer they bring a revolution. Foolish governments seek to prevent revolution with more oppression. And they die.

"But part of the fault for this must be shared by the Congress. Congress let an executive branch grow bigger and bigger and

let it act to antagonize and alienate the people. To that degree Congress betrayed the people who elected and trusted them.”

He looked down and raised a hand to tick off a finger as he made each point. ”Before the other planets are also destroyed, Congress has got to reform the school system so -they stop teaching kids they are animals. Then it has to get the police to realize they are responsible for public safety, not just nabbing people they don’t like. Congress will have to pass a bill abolishing the whole evil fraud of psychiatry. Congress has to eradicate the executive branch as it is and organize one with far less power.”

Rawl gazed intensely into the camera lens, as if willing a result of duplication and action to occur if, when, Earth ever was re-born, re-civilized.

”Do not attempt to form another police state for then your planet will die again.

”The mistakes of the past were ours. The future is yours.”

With that, Rawl essayed an easy salute.

A stray wind blew a wisp of yellow fog between Rawl and the capsule and the screen went blank.

EPILOGUE

Stunned, the president and his head cop could only stare at the blank screen as the capsule’s panel doors slowly swung shut.

Through the window, the sun was setting on Washington the fair, Washington the beautiful.

And still they just sat. The head of National Police vacant-eyed; the president pensive, trying to gather his scattered wits.

The president considered the consequences of this capsule’s contents became public knowledge. He shuddered at the idea. All his plans, all his power... he shook his head to disband such awful notions.

After a time, he stood up. Seeing his boss rise, Jedgar also got to his feet, thankful to get going. He knew this business was terribly important, and that much was at stake – but all he could think of was his dinner and the race tonight. And he had a mighty big bone to pick with that Benny the Dip...

Thoughtfully, the president walked towards the locked doors that led from the room, Jedgar trailing behind, anxious to be gone.

On the steps outside the science building, a cluster of newsmen and photographers had gathered. They had been waiting an awfully long time.

As the huge portals opened, their desultory talk ceased abruptly. They looked up expectantly as the president and his sidekick, czar of all US police, appeared to be instantly hit by a barrage of clamorous questions and popping flashbulbs.

”What was it?” yelled a reporter.

”Mr. President...” began another.

And another reporter ”Was it some ancient civilization?”

Loud and clear above the others, one reporter could be heard. ”Was it a time capsule?”

The president looked down at the reporters. They were obviously awaiting some kind of answer. Well, he’d give ’em one. He smiled slowly, eyes veiling.

Waving his hands for silence, he spoke in a jocular tone of voice. ”Sorry to disappoint. It was just a piece of old World War II junk. Just scrap metal, gentlemen. Just scrap metal.”

Turning his head a little, the president exchanged a sly, conspiratorial glance with his Chief of National Police.

Jedgar, catching on and approving whole-heartedly, smiled back – a bit evilly, slightly twisted.

No one would ever know...

Just scrap metal.

THE END