

PLANET BUSTERS

TOM COLE

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Part I

A few years ago, I wrote a letter to Harry Harrison urging him to write yet another novel in his classic *Deathworld* series as I was fascinated by his warlord character, Temuchin and his first person protagonist, Jason din Alt.

Unfortunately, my hopes for a fourth book in the series were dashed when it became clear that my letter had been lost in the mail by the USPS. This was made more than obvious by the fact that Harrison neither replied nor wrote another in the series.

At any rate, it so happened that some years before, still in my twenties, I had written Part I of a kind of *Deathworld* tribute novel. (I added Part II a few years later.) In the novel, I tried my hand at creating an adventure in rather the same vein as *Deathworld*. My Jason din Alt was Jenkins Basil Lai, and the Temuchin-like figure was Zallaham, the Warlord of Huria.

As *Planet Busters* is a tribute of sorts to *Deathworld*, there are some intentional similarities of a general nature between the books. Only one part of my book, however, really mirrors what Harrison wrote, and it can hardly be called a plagiarism as it is a cliché of such magnitude that I'm surprised that Harrison himself had the bad judgment to use it. I'm referring to the overcooked idea of introducing

gunpowder to the natives in order to get the action going.

Yes, I am guilty of of this hackwork just as was Harrison. In my defense, I might mention that in tidying up the text for this publication, I sought to find how I might alter the storyline so as to omit this banal literary gimmick.¹

Unfortunately, the gunpowder schtick was too deeply embedded to be excised—and so it remains. But if Harrison got away with it, I guess I can too—and the gunpowder part is still pretty interesting if you ask me.

I have to acknowledge authorship of parts of this book to my brother Stephen West Cole. At times when I am reading a chapter or a part of one, I don't recognize my own voice and I realize that it was he who wrote it. In fact, I believe wrote all of Chapter 23, the ending to Part I.

There is another author to whom I pay tribute. His name is Edgar Rice Burroughs. I've read perhaps fifty of his books and I did so not as much for the action as for the tour of scenery. As a reader, I enjoyed finding myself in surreal environs as I traveled through Burroughs' strange lands on Earth, on Mars and Venus, and in Pellucidar. Thus, I intended for

¹I have no evidence that Harrison ever considered this although it might have been something we could certainly have discussed in correspondence if, of course, my letter had not been lost in the mail.

the readers of *Planet Busters* to similarly enjoy their journey through the galaxy and across Tuukar and other planets.

My wish is fervent that you, dear reader may also find a laugh or two within these pages.

—Tom Cole July 15, 2018

Planet Busters Chapter 1

I must have been a trifle late when I arrived at the meeting. I shouldn't have been; I'd called together my ruffian friends myself and they weren't long on attention span. They'd already put together some kind of gambling operation, somehow involving mugs of brew and a half dozen Grangorian rabbits. I didn't pause to figure it out. I simply fired a round out of my newly-acquired hand cannon and put an end to the mischief.

The slug hit high on the wall, taking a large section of plaster with it, and flecking the boys with tiny, white fragments. Their interest was aroused, and I addressed them. "Fine fellows," I hailed. My profound apologies for my tardiness."

"Where the hell did you get that, Jenkins?" hollered Kale, the biggest a meanest of all them. The rest were on their feet, coming toward me with interest in their eyes. I lowered the barrel of the gun and aimed it at them menacingly. "Back!" I ordered. "I haven't adjourned the meeting yet."

They looked at the barrel of the old shooting iron I held, paused to consider the loud report they had just witnessed, and decided wisely to see what I was up to.

My being the leader of this pack of miscreants was a gift to me bestowed by Peso Jack, my predecessor. He faked his death and disappeared—but not before he left a dying request that I, Jenkins Basil Lai, take his place. That was the only thing that kept these apes from braining me over the head and tossing me out of the hideout and into the street.

"Financially we have been quite bad off of late," I said, keeping the gun leveled at the worst of them. "And as you know, it is the leader's responsibility to make decisions for the benefit of all concerned. I have at last decided what our next operation will be."

"I have a feeling of *déjà vu*," said Kale

"What do you mean?"

"I mean the last time you said that, two of us got thrown in the slammer."

"Do I detect a note of bitterness in your voice?" I asked. "I posted your bond, yours and Punky's too. And I even let you jump bail though I'd never get my bread back!" I gave the squinting Punky a friendly grin. "Isn't that right, Punky?"

Punky mumbled something about that being right.

"So how long do you think we can avoid rearrest?" complained Kale. "They'll track us down sooner than later."

"That is entirely up to your willingness to participate in our next enterprise."

Kale spat. "And what will that be? Land fraud maybe?"

My patience was wearing thin. The gun exploded in my hand and the slug shattered the mug Kale was lifting to his lips. A few feet beyond one of the rabbits dropped. "Wipe the beer off your face," I said. "Our next job will be far from dull. In fact, I'm a little uncertain about your ability to handle it. It's a gutsy one and you guys may not have what it takes."

That did it. If ever I needed a firm grip on that pistol, it was then. The room was filled instantly with a din of roars and oaths. Had they known the pistol held only four more shells, I might have been done for. They didn't, however, and the few that showed courage enough to charge me stopped short. They all swore the absence of fear against better than fifty-fifty odds, and I, taking in this stream of self commendation, saw the time to challenge them.

"Okay, big shots!" I cried. "I'm boss. You all crossed your hearts and swore to abide by that. So I say what goes and I'll stand for no argument." I took a deep breath. It was now or never. "We are now officially committed to the planet busting business."

There was a moment of shocked silence which I used to nonchalantly holster my pistol after giving it a quick polish with my shirtsleeve. Kale was first to protest. "Now wait a minute—" he began.

"Wait for what?" I asked, giving him a withering glare.

"I don't know if I like this."

"You are chicken, as I feared," I said. I didn't really mean that; I just said it. He sent one loose at me, and I ducked, not wishing to humiliate him with the pistol again. Fact was: I didn't think I could draw it fast enough to prevent his burning a hole through me with the laser he kept at his side. I was glad he didn't follow it up with a hook.

My head bobbed back up, looking serious. "Is this the way you took orders from Peso?"

Kale was shamed. "I'd just like to know the details, that's all," he said.

"You will," I soothed. "In fact, you're going to be in on making some important decisions with me." A diplomat to the last, was I. "Look at this." I tore open a package and unfolded its gleaming contents before them.

"What's that for?" Kale inquired

"This," I explained, "is a re-entry suit."

"I can see what it is," he growled. "I asked what it was for."

"A re-entry suit is used for entering the atmosphere of a planet from circular orbit. It enables one to parachute down onto said planet without the use of an expensive and cumbersome space vehicle."

"I'm aware of that. So what is one to me?"

"A great deal," I said. "I have purchased a number of these suits. Fourteen to be exact, twelve regular and two modified. We are going to use them to land on a third world planet, the name of which I will divulge at a later date."

"You're crazy," announced Kale. He turned to the others. "He is, isn't he?"

I held up my hand. "Before you respond, let me clear up an old myth about planet busting."

"Clear away," invited Kale, with skepticism.

"Contrary to popular belief, it is possible to bust planets without getting caught."

"Is that so!" he scoffed.

"It is indeed," I insisted.

"What the hell do you know of it? You can't even commit simple forgery in Rogrove without getting us all pinched!"

I looked him in the eye. "Only two were dumb enough to get pinched," I reminded, and watched his face twitch. Ah, that was cruel. "And on the contrary, I do know a thing or two about planet busting—in fact, a great deal more than most people. Its study has been a hobby of mine for many years now."

"Big deal."

"Well, it wouldn't be if I pursued my hobbies with the recklessness that some people do. You, for example, have an impulsive approach to playing cards." A chuckle sounded across the room. "And when you mix that with your easy-to-read poker face you are easily fleeced. To the tune of some 300 guilders, was it?"

He didn't lunge at me for that. This particular story had been out in the open for days now, and Kale had been sporting about the razzing directed at him concerning it.

"Others, however, take these pastimes more seriously. They are ever alert, and when they see the chance to apply their specialized knowledge, they are ready."

"So what do you know that makes planet busting so profitable all of a sudden?"

Kale believed the popular theory that only reckless fools ever planet busted. Yet every six or seven months the space-ways were besieged by a horde of news releases telling of how the noble Federation Task Force had frustrated yet another band of mercenaries. Obviously there were an awful lot of people doing it—so many that they couldn't all be crazy and the Feds couldn't catch them all.

I asked Kale how many crazies there could be in the galaxy.

"From the size of it, I'd say quite a few," he said.

"Not *that* many." I assured him. "It's just simple mathematics. For example, how many third worlds are there in the galaxy?"

"Oh, I've heard anywhere from fifty thousand to five-hundred thousand."

"Spread out from here to God alone knows where!"

"What are you saying?"

"That with either of those numbers the task force can't possibly be big enough to police them. They can't possibly catch everybody who's busting planets now. Not even close." I was still worked up over the subject. I had reason enough to be, though.

"If there are only a few planet busters, it can." Kale argued.

"But there *aren't* just a few!" I insisted. "I tell you, planet busting is going on now like it never has before."

"You're just guessing."

"That's what you think. Do you want to know who's doing it now?"

"I already do," Kale boasted, although he sounded less sure of himself. "Suicidal maniacs."

There was some laughter at this witticism.

"Wrong," I continued, unruffled. "I hope you're ready for this: most of the people

engaged in planet busting today are members of the task force itself!"

"What!"

"On my honor, it's true," I swore, making a little cross over my heart.

Kale looked at me more credulously. He was puzzled, of course, but more importantly his eyes showed that flicker of greedy interest I'd come to expect from him. Planet busting, after all, was a glorious occupation if it weren't blighted by imaginary federal soldiers. The vision of a quick death was slowly dissolving in his mind, and that suited me just fine.

"Why are the Feds busting planets?" he asked, apparently conceding the truth in what I had said.

"Because they're fascist, imperialist swine!" I growled, giving myself away.

Even the others in the room, thick-witted as they were, seemed to react to this. It was a tense moment for me. Kale started, frowning. "You're getting us into politics!" he accused. "You've got some lousy political axe you want us to grind for you."

"Not at all," I lied, as convincingly as possible. "True, I have strong feelings against the feds, as all of you do, but I'm not foolish enough to try to buck the government."

"Then why so hog wild about planet busting?"

"Because of our depleted funds. It is the most profitable enterprise I can think of."

"I can think of better ones," declared Uri, a gaunt swindler with a perpetual sneer. "Like for instance space freight robbery."

"We don't have the money to even begin an operation on that scale," I countered. "Quit dreaming. On the other hand," I continued, "we have everything we need to begin a successful pillaging of one of the third worlds. I have everything arranged, all bought and paid for."

Well, I had to tell them sometime.

They went wild, cursing and letting beer mugs sail in my direction. The rabbits scattered. I thought of taking out the pistol again, but fought back the impulse.

"You dirty bastard!" Kale shouted. "You put the last of our ready cash into some wild scheme?" He took a step toward me, menacingly.

"There's a little left," I confessed uneasily. "Enough to cover unforeseen expenses."

"Like medical bills!" said Kale, rolling up his sleeves.

"Wait," I replied shakily. "If you know what's good for you, you'll hear me out. I'm boss man and I'm holding all the cards whether you like it or not."

"Yeah, you're boss man because Peso Jack said so," affirmed Kale. "But Peso didn't say I

couldn't clean you for throwing all our money away."

"Touch me and I'll do two things," I warned. "One, break your face, and two, leave out the part of the plan that saves your hide from the law."

The first of these I wasn't so sure about. But the second was the only one that counted, and it made Kale stop in his tracks. He stood, fists clenched uncertainly. "Explain."

"Did you think I could leave you and Punky out of my plans? Crime is something King Caleb doesn't tolerate on his little planet." I forced more pleading into my voice. "The police have your passports but I have things arranged in such a way that you will not have to present one of our forgeries at customs and thereby suffer immediate arrest."

Kale chewed his lip thoughtfully. He knew how bad our electro-engraving had been. "Making a quiet exit is a problem," he mused. "You bet it is," I agreed. "Before you thank me, however, you should know that it is my intention to use the matter teleporter again."

"No!" he said firmly. "Once is enough for that crude and defective machine."

"It got you out of jail," I reminded him.

"A fact for which I am grateful, but not loyal. I have no reason to trust it again."

"I'm afraid you will have to," I told him. "There's simply no other way out of here."

"And I suppose that your keen faculty for operation of the machine would suffer from any beating you received?"

"Exactly the point I was about to make." I said, breathing more easily.

"Outline the plan," he said. "And it'd better be good."

I outlined the plan, and it was good. Most of what I said was a skillfully orated report on planet busting and its relative immunity from federal intervention. Once they were sold on that point, I moved stealthily to the topic of relative gain for ourselves. I tried to gloss over an important point or two, but they managed to ferret them out; no great testimony to their intellects; they were pretty big flaws.

"Hey," said Uri. "How do we get off this planet with the loot?" Good point. Since we were going to drop down in re-entry suits, there would be no way to lift out of there. I had my own plan for doing that, but wasn't disposed to tell them about it yet. I could, however, explain my shaky backup strategy.

"I will leave the matter teleporter in orbit around the planet," I explained. "When we have collected enough gold, I will put a portion of it in my pockets, don an entry suit and activate the machine via a radio transmitter. When the

suit, the gold, and I have reassembled in orbit, I will take a few readings, swallow a suspendo-capsule, and allow a personal N-photon propulsor unit to propel me gently to the nearest industrialized planet. There I will buy an inexpensive ship which I will use to transport you and the loot to safety."

"How long will that take?" sputtered Kale, unable to believe his own ears.

"On the lean side of six months."

"And assuming nothing goes wrong with this plan, which I tend to doubt, and that you don't simply abandon us, what do we do in the meantime?"

I smiled reassuringly. "By that time we will have already acquired quite comfortable living arrangements. You may not wish to leave at all. These third worlds can be very accommodating."

"They'd better be with a plan like yours," he complained, although I could tell his blood was up for the adventure. All of these small-time swindlers liked the sound of a job as flashy as this one.

"Honestly," I went on, "you're talking about complications that might arise months from now. Think of the work that has to be done before we can even think of leaving with the booty. We have to initiate reconnaissance missions, establish a beach head..."

"A beach head!" cried Kale incredulously.
"With twelve men?"

"We'll have a good many more than twelve, I assure you. There are armies of men on the third worlds which are as pliable as warm putty."

"Pliable or not, they bring up another flaw in your plan," Kale said. "What's to prevent them from marching all over us?"

"I prefer to look upon that not as a flaw, but as a calculated risk. I didn't say there were no hazards inherent in the planet busting vocation. To have done so would have been an insult to your intelligence. Instead, I gave you the straight, cold facts."

"The cold facts do not seem very promising," Kale maintained.

"Then I shall add another less promising one to your pitifully circumscribed store of information: your stay in this rat hole is of limited duration. The king's police are looking for you, and from what I hear they are very good at their job." I gave the others a cold eye. "The rest of you, with your past histories of lawlessness, will fall with Kale and Punky. I, on the other hand, have a clean record, and can easily escape any unpleasantness accompanying your arrests."

"Is that supposed to be a threat?" responded eleven voices in unison.

"In no way," I replied truthfully. "I am merely saying that if you don't want to be caught like rats in a trap, you will cooperate with the arrangements I have made, which, although not perfect, do offer escape as well as the chance for greater monetary gains than all your previous contrivances put together."

I paused to let this jell, then yawned with a decidedly forced lack of interest. I had them.

"But I grow weary of this extraneous chitter chatter," I said sleepily. "See to it that you all are present tomorrow at this time. Those who are not here will be left behind."

With that, I departed, feeling confident that all would fall together as planned.

Planet Busters Chapter 2

It was months earlier, late afternoon, and on the terraced veranda the air carried its usual scent of sea breeze and bougainvillea. I sat relaxed on a low-hanging divan, luxuriating in that delicious realm that lies somewhere between full consciousness and slumber. Perhaps there were chores to be performed today, a bit of business to attend, but the euphonious melody of sea and sun had seduced me.

The wind flirted gently around me, rustling the feathers on the broad-brimmed grass hat that shaded my eyes, while not far off the rumble of incoming surf lulled me further on to idleness. In my hand was a short, sweating glass of the sweet, local rum, and on my face was the fat, lost expression of an individual who has got it made.

I lifted the glass, took an easy pull, and felt my hat fly suddenly from my head. The divan jumped and the rum splashed a sobering cascade of iciness down the front of my flowered shirt. Another bump and I was thrown sprawling from the divan, groveling monkey-like on the freeboard patio, trying to regain my wits.

"Get up Jenkins, you lazy, no good bum!"
Lourdes, my wife.

"You called, my dear?" I asked without a hint of reproach. I would have to be gentle and understanding with her. She would not be herself for a time, I feared. It is not easy for one to adjust to utopia, particularly with Lourdes' background. She was brought up here on Marion as I was, and her early years were steeped in the traditions of the interstellar work ethic which helped to people the galaxy some millennia ago. Tragic. Our recent matrimony was marred only by differing outlooks on this very work ethic. While Lourdes viewed it as an ongoing tradition, I preferred to consider it a means toward an end, the end being the easy existence I had helped to make possible here on Marion.

Don't get me wrong; I had great respect for those early pioneers, but the work had already been done, the galaxy peopled, and Lourdes would have to get used to the fact that one toils not in Eden.

I rose to my feet and cast her an adoring gaze. I had to admit that the travail of her childhood had not blemished her physically. She stood straight and supple, and there was only a gracing layer of fat over those muscular limbs while the rest of her was athletic and fit. Her hair was black, falling to her brown shoulders and her eyes were dark and at the moment dangerously angry.

I struck the center of my forehead. "The mangoes, of course. I shall have them planted in an instant. What, after all, is paradise without mangoes?"

She responded with a scowl. "Mangoes my eye! You'll plant them tomorrow. You've got a board meeting in half an hour with the Federation Chief of Police at the Marion Hilton."

I permitted my eyebrows to rise in mild astonishment. "That galactic flatfoot is still here?" I asked.

"You know damn well he is. And he'll be gone tomorrow. So, I suggest you take him up on his offer this time since you have succeeded in dismantling every branch of our military: army, navy, air force, marines, space patrol..."

I raised my hand. "There is no need to list them all. I am well aware of which institutions suffered belt tightening to make way for the new order..."

"Belt tightening!" Lourdes exclaimed. "You mean annihilation. Thanks to you this entire planet is defenseless from within and without."

"Argument invalid. Marion is virtually free of internal strife, and all external interference is forbidden by federation law and avenged by federation guns—and that, my darling, applies even if we establish ourselves in third world status."

"Yes, if we go third world—join the ranks of the poverty stricken, without Federal trade and without a federal bailout should something go wrong."

I stepped forward to give her a reassuring embrace. "My dear..."

She stepped hurriedly away and stretched to reach a pair of silk dress slacks pinned to the veranda's clothesline.

"...nothing can go wrong. We have everything we need right here on Marion. Food, medicine, even spare parts for our small but sleek space flotilla—and everything manufactured by our own industrious citizenry. And trade with the other third worlds will bring us all the miscellaneous materials necessary for full and abundant life here on planet."

Lourdes pitched the now wadded pair of slacks into my arms, and stared at me with an expression that suggested the end to a long-lived toleration for those who fail to discern the obvious. It irritated me, but two years of marriage had taught me never to fight back.

"Other third worlds? So you have made up your mind at last. Made the final plunge to forever banish this planet from the rest of civilized humanity."

"But Lourdes," I protested, "we shall have an independent civilization; unshackled, free to

express itself in its own customs, its own Galactic View."

"*Your* view, you mean," Lourdes shouted. "What gives you the right to decide the future of 200 million people? Your inherited wealth? Your inherited position as prime chancellor?"

"Like my father before me, I was elected," I stated with the proper quiet reverence.

"Don't try to sound like some kind of holy messiah come back to cleanse the temple. Elected. So What? It was no contest with the cry for an encore after the death of your father. Even he wasn't elected in any fair sense of the word. How were fifty million ignorant savages supposed to make an intelligent decision about anything as complicated and foreign as interplanetary politics?"

"Those ignorant savages are now artists, engineers, starship pilots and a whole host of other things. They get as many square meals a day as they can stuff into their happy faces, and can top the evening off with a rest in front of their color television sets—three-D too, and with some of the best programming in this end of the galaxy. Do you think they voted unwisely?"

"I wonder sometimes. Look at what they have to look forward to. A fall from affluence and years or centuries spent lamenting over the good old days."

"No!" It was enough that my wife did not share my optimism, but to have her state such a grim prediction! "No!" I repeated heatedly. "Not years spent in lamentation, but years of continued independence and wealth, and the future filled with days spent reflecting upon the comparative insecurity of the early years. *That* is how it will be!"

I grasped her by the shoulders and forced her to look at me. She struggled briefly but I did not relinquish my hold. "Lourdes, listen. My father's only rule was this: stay away from the big boys. Let the people pull themselves up by their bootstraps if they can, and don't let some industrial revolution made possible by huge outside interests pump artificial prosperity into a failing economy. Let it boom and bust on its own. At most you'll hear an occasional pop as the happy burden of opulence shifts to adjust itself, and not the boisterous crash so commonly heard throughout history."

"You haven't the faintest grasp of your father's concepts."

"He refused to teach me."

"He refused because he knew a little knowledge was a dangerous thing—especially for you, impulsive as you are, so you remain untutored."

"Unfair. I was sent to the finest intragalactic universities.."

"Where you majored in linguistics, art, and everything but economics, business, or anything useful!"

"Are you questioning my qualifications as prime chancellor?" I asked haughtily.

"You're damn right I am." Lourdes snapped. "What about the security of Federal membership, the benefits. You probably haven't even looked closely at what the big boys have to offer us—or the lousy alternatives to playing their game."

"Haven't I? Benefits! What about the politics, and the Federation rules, regulations and laws ready-made for us? And inspectors, directors nosing in to make darn sure Marion is worthy to rub shoulders with the galactic elite. What kind of paradise is that?"

"Paradise again. Oh, brother!"

"To try for anything less is unethical."

"Jenkins, we'll be the only third world with starships."

"Darn good ones too."

"The Feds won't like it."

"The Feds? They don't have to like it!" I slavered angrily. "We'll trade with them all right—some time during the next century when we're big and strong enough to do so without trading our independence for the favor."

Lourdes looked horrified. "Those words, Jenkins. What you just said. That is what they won't like."

"Well, that is not what they are going to hear from me," I said. "I'm a bit more diplomatic than that—and craftier. The whole idea is to huddle beneath the Federation's own anti-interference laws, to grow strong and healthy using them as a shield as we rightly should."

"I suppose you believe in those laws—and in the moral intent of anything so big as the Federation?"

I ignored her contradiction. "They are not without their rude code of ethics," I admitted. "And although we do not trade with them, we shall take every opportunity to remind them of their own laws and to assure ourselves that they will stick to them."

"I don't trust them, Jenkins."

"But you want to join them."

It didn't surprise me when Lourdes' resolve suddenly broke down. It wasn't that she wanted to join the Feds. She was just afraid of what might happen if we didn't.

"It's not that I want to join the Feds, Jenkins," she said. "I'm just afraid of what might happen if we don't."

"I know, I know..." I said tenderly. "You worry too much. I'll make friends with the Feds. You'll see."

"I hope so," Lourdes said. "Get yourself ready to go."

I pulled on the slacks over my beach trunks, an action that Lourdes tried to ignore, and walked slowly to the tiny electric ground car at the side of the house. I got in and the engine buzzed to life, sending a faint, sweet smell of ozonic ions through the cab. I looked in the rear view mirror as I drove out, but Lourdes had already gone back into the house.

Planet Busters Chapter 3

It was a good thing I ran into these boys when I did. My own papers, although genuine, wouldn't stand the meticulous checking they would get if I applied for honest employment. This circumstance made crime the only source of livelihood for me. A happy fact was that Peso Jack, leader of the pack, so to speak, was an underground anti-gov too. He had a big strategy. One that seemed to be the only real hope of challenging the feds and their imperialistic policies.

Funny; fully half our scattered membership had been ex-citizens of various conquered worlds, victims of federal planet busting. Now, it seemed that to beat the Feds I'd have to meet them on their own grounds. The old fire against fire syndrome.

I used my unblemished credit, and impeccable papers to rent a Mercury Dynamics cruiser. It was a matter-of-course kind of transaction made possible by a great deal of bribery and other pay-offs, most of which Peso had set up himself. My business was printed on the form as Inspector of Bauxite Operations for some little planet nobody had ever heard of. The matter teleporter was allowed on board disassembled and was described on the inventory sheet as "various electronic devices

for the examination of bauxite and other minerals." The purpose of my trip was not even asked. After signing my responsibility for nine assistants, I left the spaceport and rendezvoused with the others.

I came in the door of our hideout carrying a pair of heavily wrapped packages. Everyone else was lounging around looking smug and confident as though in mulling over what I told them yesterday they'd grown to like the idea. "Kale and Punky, get over here," I ordered.

They ambled over, looking a little worried, though not terrified. That at least was good. To keep it that way I would carefully avoid detailing how they were to be transported aboard. No need to worry them too much. "Clip these on your wrists," I said, handing over a pair of intricately wired bracelets. They put them on without relish. "Now, remember what I told you the last time we used these. Take off those lasers. Stay away from anything solid, like that wall. If the teleporter is forced to attempt transportation of anything that heavy, it'll overload and the two of you will be transformed into a mound of veal-colored pulp."

"Good luck to you, too," Kale remonstrated.

"Luck has nothing to do with it," I told him. "Mess with my machine and you'll be sorry. Plain and simple." I clipped a bracelet on each

of the two packages as Kale eyed the supplies suspiciously.

"What goes first? The cargo or us?"

"You are on frequency A, Punky B, the boxes C and D. Teleportation will be alphabetical."

"How thoughtful," Kale said, touched it seemed.

"Not really," I deadpanned. "The teleporter has been known to make one or two false starts. I simply wish to insure that the cargo arrives safely."

They stepped back, horrified. I turned back to the others. "Do you have your passports?" They all nodded agreement. "Then if you're clean, we can go."

We said a hasty farewell to Kale and Punky who stood cheerless at the doorway. Then we all loaded into the ground car Punky had stolen a week ago. I set myself behind the wheel and started us on our way. I'd been using the city transport lately, but a quick ride in a hot car wasn't much of a risk, and I was willing to chance it for convenience.

Fifteen minutes later we paid for a month's parking space, and presented ourselves at the spaceport gate. The customs official gave our passports little more than a quick glance before scanning them electronically. As expected, no sirens went off and no burly royal police

charged triumphantly into the room to arrest us. The boys had first-rate forgeries, complete with false identities worked into the Central Heliox Computers. They had cost plenty, but the loss of capital was more than offset by our continued freedom.

The official waved us through, and moments later we were happily aboard. The matter teleporter was my first concern. I put it together from its dissembled parts and ran a quick series of tests. It appeared to be in perfect working order.

"Beam 'em aboard," Uri said. "You know how they hate the waiting."

I favored him an apologetic frown. "I'm afraid I can't do that."

"Why not?" Uri responded, surprised.

"For obvious reasons. The port is monitored to prevent smuggling."

"So was Rognove Prison, but it worked there."

"The authorities at Rognove Prison could not track us with radar and intercept our automobile with atomic missiles."

Uri understood this this, but his rage was mounting. "You are going to strand them?" he said angrily.

"No." Little drops of nervous perspiration dotted my forehead. "At an altitude of fifteen kilometers I shall attempt to get them aboard."

"Attempt!" everyone shouted at once. I knew I'd have trouble.

"That can't be done," announced Uri. "What with the main drive on, you couldn't get a radio beam through the static."

Perceptive, that was—at least for him. "Don't tell me my business," I snapped. "I plan to cut the drive out and beam them up. Timed right, the monitors will mistake the beam for the main drive."

"I don't like it."

"It's been done before."

"When?"

"I read about it once."

"The worst is, you didn't tell them how you were gonna do it," Uri whined. "You let them think you were going to transport them here. You didn't tell them!"

"Stop complaining. If I had told them, would they have agreed?"

"Of course not," said Uri. He was quite sure of that.

"Then what good would telling them have done?"

"None, evidently." He was beginning to see my side of it.

"Everybody strap down!" I commanded. "I'll drive. When I cut power, nobody do anything that might distract me. This'll go one, two, three—understood? I'm going to be busy with the

teleporter during free-fall, and I want no one underfoot. Just sit tight."

I turned the radio on and for a moment there was nothing but the white sound of static until the following cut in:

Caleb Starport information Charlie. Measured ceiling five five hundred. Visibility four. Smoke. Haze. Temperature eight seven. Wind one eight zero at one one. Altimeter two niner niner zero. ILS runway one seven in use. Landing and departing runways one three right and one three left, one seven and two two. All VFR, IFR, and starbound departures contact Caleb Clearance one two seven point six prior to taxi. Advise you have Charlie.

I picked up the microphone. "Caleb Clearance Delivery, Coaster 11452 at Mercury Dynamics. Star bound with Charlie."

"Coaster 452, squawk three six point zero one. Contact Caleb ground point niner."

"Roger."

I then started the secondaries—a simple pair of turbojets which were used only to position the craft and to do the fine maneuvering after re-entry. I fanned the engines, gave the ship a jab of power that brought the tail end around,

and taxied to the runway. A moment later, positioned before the metered launching strip, I brought the craft to a halt, set the breaks, and got clearance from the tower. Then I taxied into position and opened the throttle.

The ship plummeted down the runway effortlessly, left the ground and soared upward. When the angle of inclination was close to eighty degrees, I hit the main drive and felt the weight of acceleration press me backwards.

The altimeter climbed rapidly across the numbers. Six, seven, eight kilometers ... My hand touched the throttle ...nine.. ten.

"What's happening?" someone asked.

"Shut up!" I hissed. The needle read fifteen, near maximum range for the teleporter? I pulled off the power and put a heavy hand on the matter teleporter. A switch accidentally clicked and a crate of supplies crashed smoking into the room.

"You're transporting your precious boxes first!" someone yelled.

Whoever it was tried to speak again but was strangled to silence when the acceleration dropped. I hadn't counted on that delayed reaction, but we were in free-fall now, and our forward climb would last but a few moments. I threw the remaining switches one after the other, A-B-D, and heard the resulting explosions behind me. I was almost afraid to

look over my shoulder, but I did. Just before stabbing the power back to full again.

Kale and Punky had materialized within.

That was a relief. I had hoped that since the teleporter was moving along with us, it would transfer that forward motion to its cargo—a point of theory that could only be resolved by the experiment I had just made. It had worried me some. If they had appeared onboard at a standstill, they might have made two body-shaped holes in the aft bulkhead. But they hadn't, and my gamble paid off.

Of course, their successful materialization was not entirely comfortable. An instant after their appearance I was forced to jam the power on to save us all from plummeting to our deaths. The force of that action, applied to their unrestrained bodies had driven the two of them and the boxes backward to the accompaniment of a resounding crash. But they came out of it none the worse. The other rogues dug them out of the wreckage, and the two of them, dazed and bruised, stumbled half floating into their seats.

I could not help but notice, however, that big patches of their hair and clothing had not survived the transfer. I thought of what that would mean to my re-entry suit if I transported myself into orbit as planned. It was time to abandon that particular scheme, if I had ever

seriously considered it. No wonder those teleporters weren't used commercially!

We said goodbye to King Caleb's little industrialized world, Heliox, which was suspended before us like a great, brownish bulb. It was not a sad farewell. All of us were tired of the rough existence for even the most enterprising gangs. And after all, we had much to look forward to. We were off to regain the lost splendor of barbaric life on one of the third worlds!

Planet Busters Chapter 4

Saul Tillinghass, galactic big-shot and Federation chief of police for Sector 1140 was waiting for me in the rented conference room of the Marion Hilton.

He sat at the head of the briefing table, flanked on either side by sour-faced guards or diplomats—it was hard to determine which—and his fingers drummed on the tabletop as I gave him the welcome speech I had prepared.

The speech was a formalized little ritual, but it served to set the tone for the meeting, emphasizing as it did the words, "foreign envoy," "sovereign state," "cooperation between independent nations," "pals" and so forth. I thought the speech would be just the thing to clear the air and make these brass hats loosen up a bit, but when I had finished, the party of officials had not changed their businesslike demeanor one iota.

I sat at the opposite end of the table, directly across from Tillinghass where the two of us had an unavoidable bowling alley view of one another down thirty feet of polished domestic oak.

"You are Jenkins Basil Lai, Prime Chancellor of Marion?" Tillinghass asked.

"I am," I verified, "and you must be Saul Tillinghass, chief of police for Sector 1140.

Welcome to Marion. I trust you have found the accommodations to your liking?"

"Quite. Thank you." He had a kind of electronically activated folder on the table in front of him, and with a peremptory look in both directions and a sudden responsive alertness on the part of those around him, he placed his thumb in the center of the folder. The clasps sprang open as the microcircuits read his thumbprint and sent an okay to the magnetic tumblers in the binding.

I smiled and said: "You will find that security precautions of that kind are not necessary here. We have very little crime on Marion, and virtually no political intrigue."

"Standard procedure," answered Tillinghass, waving the matter aside. "No reflection on the state of your nation, which seems to be very good indeed." He cleared his throat and lifted the cover off the loose papers. "I have here a series of documents which, you will have guessed, contains forms for Federation membership. We know how your late father felt about membership and, if I may come to the point bluntly, we are anxious to know how you feel."

"You wish to know if I am simply an obliging incarnation of my father's policies?" I replied cynically.

"We know you aren't," Tillinghass said. "—or at least we doubt it. Your profile was so low during your father's administration that we couldn't help but wonder if there were any connection between the two of you at all—except a genetic one. Your mother—"

"Has been living in seclusion for many years."

"—and you hardly knew her—which is really none of our business but—" He paused in an unconvincing show of embarrassment.

"But what? Come on Tillinghass—do you honestly think I'm sensitive about having been a motherless child? I'm twenty-nine standard years old and have outgrown the effects of my stormy childhood. True, sometimes the other children used to make sport of me. Used to cry: hasn't got a mother! Hasn't got a mother! I never felt that I was ever really one of them. But that's all over now." I reached into my pocket, produced a handkerchief and blew my nose loudly.

The security guards looked uneasy—in fact, wary would be a better way to describe it. Tillinghass didn't even smile, just stared at me in disbelief. Finally he found his tongue. "The reason I mentioned your parents was to try to see how you came to power on Marion. The populous must have know how tentative the link between yourself and the popular

administration was—and yet you were elected to office by a landslide."

"I campaigned, said what the people liked the best, and was duly elected. Family ties, tentative though they were, were no hindrance. There was no *coup d'état* if that's what you're getting at."

"It wasn't—but that's good to know." Tillinghass sniffed.

"We know that the people of Marion recently voted on Federation membership, and the results were too close to call. We assume that you, as Prime Chancellor, are the tiebreaker."

"I am."

"Well?"

"First, I would like to say a few words about Marion, its people and customs. To begin with, we are a nation of rugged individualists—"

"As is the Federation," interrupted Tillinghass

"Of course." I paused, gathering attention and establishing right to the floor. Then went on: "Each individual has the right to a roof, three squares and medicine. If he wants to loaf he can leave it at that—some do and bless their hearts. The last count was twelve, but I think a couple of them started work last week so make it ten—anyway we offer the benefits of sturdy and wholesome socialism here. Lots of

entrepreneurs but everyone's also got a right to work in public projects. No one's income comes between him and his health and well being. Whatever people save is gravy. Investable gravy. People work hard for it, and automation takes care of the real menial work, so there are no sharply defined classes, although there are a few cliques."

"Sounds very effective."

"It is." I tried to keep the bravado out of my voice. I was proud of my people's accomplishments. "In fact, I think you will be surprised to learn that our standard of living is five to ten times higher on the average than that of any federally commissioned planet."

"Yes, we know that." Tillinghass did not seem to be the least embarrassed. "And frankly we find that very curious."

"How so?"

"Most capitalistic societies have a central core of the fabulously wealthy while the rest of the populace is divided into outer layers which peel off in increasing, then decreasing thicknesses."

"Well perhaps," I said. "I adhere to no visual constructs of that type. All I know is that our sturdy socialism with its accompanying dose of capitalism seems to work." I wasn't going to debate this guy. My wife was right; I didn't really know what I was talking about.

"That's nice." Tillinghass said quietly. He wanted badly to find out how the system on Marion worked—not because he had any use for it, but because such a smoothly running machine was a threat to the sputtering Federation mechanism. "Parts of the cross section I envision resemble that of an upper class capitalistic core or the privileged socialistic core for the simple reason that—" The words nearly choked him. "—that it is exactly what it represents—the upper class. You have somehow managed to create a planet of elite."

"That is a very accurate way of describing it. I'm sure that in the beginnings of your investigations of Marion you believed that your analysis was the way it was because of a combination of limitless resources and a small population. But as our population grew and no change for the worse happened, you must have realized that there was a directing mechanism that was far more efficient than any dictator or governing body."

Tillinghass merely nodded.

"So you found out the mechanism—a computer program that takes a few simple readings of economic indicators and puts forth, among other things, an order that each Marion dollar be worth a little more or less."

"More or less in relation to what?"

"In relation to that which supports its value, of course—gold."

"But that's arbitrary—and simply assigning a value to your dollar doesn't make it so ..."

"Apparently the computer disagrees."

"A simple method like that could not possibly produce the cross section we have seen."

"It isn't simple—and don't ask me to explain it—that was my father's doing, and he drew on the work of many others. All I know is that the program doesn't simply raise and lower the worth of currency. It has, in all, four actions, which represent a four dimensional view of economy. It's an ancient concept actually, dating back clean to the twentieth century. But so rarely have those in power stood to gain from its implementation that it never had much of a chance to catch on—until my father introduced it to Marion in secret. None of the computer's actions has anything to do with the rights of any citizen, and for this reason there is no popular uprising against the government. The system in short, puts a gentle check on four key points and the economy trundles along like a well oiled machine."

"We have no knowledge of the three other actions of the computer. This takes me by surprise. What are they?"

"I don't know." I told him. "I wouldn't tell you if I could, of course. It's enough to know that the computer has a means of incorporating its directives into the economy; it has a lot of relay stations and hookups to banks and other places. You could try to check on it, I guess, but I understand it would be tremendously difficult to do so without the whole system getting suspicious."

"The computer is, of course, programmed to detect prying eyes."

"Correct. Obviously the central programming of a planet's economy is a formula that will wink out of existence at the first sign of human curiosity."

"And you have the information stored elsewhere in case this happens accidentally?"

"Yes—and stop salivating: you can't get to that info either. Even if you located the very computer that contains the formula."

"Why not?"

"You know very well why not. A computer lock is as impenetrable as any ever made. Think of anything tremendously difficult to do—at random—to achieve escape velocity of a planet. Once even that, an unproven dream. But then the math worked out and it was deemed possible—not by all that much either—possible, but tremendously difficult. What if a computer had been in control of those

delicately balanced figures? It would have been easy to kick every number in the escape velocity equation a million decimal points to the right, and to introduce insurmountable difficulty to the task. That's what a computer lock does, and it can sit in your laboratory amid a thousand coaxing technicians for all eternity without opening up unless the exact conditions are met!"

Oh, what a liar I was. In reality, I actually believed that a computer was more accurately described as a sieve-like container that couldn't hide a thing from anybody who made the slightest attempt to try and break into it.

"Your computer program is still penetrable from the corpus of data that flows from it."

"Interesting. Yes the computer is a proverbial "black box" up until the time you see anything coming out of it—then it becomes more and more transparent. We can't hide the rise and fall of the assigned value of money, but that much knowledge won't help anybody to see what's inside the box. The other three functions must be hidden from view. And visas are not generally granted to people who seem to be interested in collecting such data—even though no one could possibly know where to begin to search. The computer has only four actions, but the three secret ones are concealed by a million bogus actions. The program covers its trail so

well that no investigator could ever hope to gather any useful data for analysis."

"But why?" pleaded Tillinghass apparently pretending to buy my dubious tale of ironclad security. "Why so selfishly keep this marvelous system secret? Think of the help you can give to struggling economies throughout the galaxy. Think of the greater good you can do mankind!"

"Don't make me laugh, Tillinghass," I said. "You know very well what the Federation would do to the program if it ever got a hold of it. You'd tear it up, burn it, and scatter the ashes from here to Tau Ceti. You'd have to. The tremendous bureaucracy would go to any length to protect itself from a system that presupposes its uselessness."

Tillinghass sat without expression, his face a bit flushed but not angry. He rearranged the papers before him and cleared his throat. "What you say is possibly, but not necessarily true," he half affirmed. "At any rate it is purely hypothetical. As you say, the computer lock will not permit us to get near the data—and you would never let us approach close enough for the system to threaten erasure."

"No, we wouldn't," I said. "Memory erasure would be a crisis for us—but only a momentary one—as I told you the programming can be quickly retrieved."

"I needn't bother asking just how that would be done?"

I smiled and fibbed some more: "It wouldn't matter if I did, you know. Another computer with another lock—where I won't say—can reprogram the economy—but only if certain stringent criteria are met. There are many people here who know just what those criteria are—but they are not things that can be reproduced at will by anyone other than those specified. So I believe our conversation is back where it started."

"Which was the question about Federation membership."

"We'd love to have the chance to trade with you." I told him. "And believe me, Marion has no desire to export anything but goods and services. We'll keep our economic system to ourselves and it will offer no threat to Federation politics—except perhaps as an embarrassing gem amid a sea of rubble, which I can do nothing about."

"You'll join us then?" Tillinghass asked happily.

"I said we'd like to trade with you, which I take it means joining the mutual benefit society of Federation membership—but Marion must remain totally independent."

"All the planets in the Federation have total autonomy—you know that."

"Generous of you to grant autonomy to an independent civilization."

Tillinghass threw his hands up in a show of helplessness. "We have only one plan for trade." He said. "It requires membership and provides autonomy. Surely the mutual benefits of trade will make a semantic squabble over the words autonomy and independence a trifling matter indeed. I assure you the reason for this small concession on the part of the joining nation is purely to streamline the process and make bookkeeping easier for both sides. The Federation has no desire to dominate the galaxy."

"There's nothing trifling about the difference between your version of autonomy and real independence. Furthermore, your bad bookkeeping, as you term it, is not our problem—its yours. Don't expect us to trade our independence just to help you keep your own house in order. Or to believe that the forfeiting of independence has in itself ever done your members any good. It hasn't. But I suspect it has helped the Federation to keep a short leash on its new charges."

I could tell that Tillinghass had had enough of this. He now started on Plan B, the last of his aces in the hole, which infallibly produced a subservient federation member from an independent but needy planet. He overlooked

one thing, however. Although Marion was independent, it was not needy; it was rich in its own right. So his last move, designed to terrify the bargaining member-hopeful and produce slobbering acquiescence served only to backfire on him.

With great deliberation and a grand show of grim finality, Tillinghass closed the folder whose clasps automatically resealed themselves with a sinister click and a low officious computer "boop!"

Tillinghass then looked at me with an expression of lordly concern, shook his head sadly and said: "I'm afraid, then, there is nothing more to discuss, Mr. Lai. I'm sorry; it's a darn shame."

"Suit yourself," I said without the slightest hesitation or show of concern, finding more interest, in fact, in a rough cuticle that had suddenly taken my notice. I chewed a little of it off and then huffed the shard onto the table.

Tillinghass had been blindsided. His words were supposed to make me scramble for terms—any terms, *his* terms, but I rose calmly, extending my hand to bid him *adieu*.

"I'd hoped you'd see the light, Mr. Lai," he sputtered. "There is still time to change your mind?" This wasn't supposed to happen! His bluff had been called.

"I'm afraid there is nothing more to discuss, Mr. Tillinghass." I said, cruelly using his own words. "It is, as you say, a shame. A *darned* one."

The chief then returned to his high stakes philosophy—he had nothing left after all and a threat had always worked before. "You understand, of course, that your decision is irrevocable? That no permission to apply for membership will again be granted to Marion?"

"Ha hah!" I sneered. "Untrue. You'll offer the same thing—or so you hope. But I have ways of making my own decision a final and binding one that will be in effect a century from now. I'm proud to say that it will be my last action as leader of Marion."

"Last action?" asked the police chief, wide-eyed. "What do you mean?"

I gave him an expression that suggested the answer couldn't be more obvious.

"I'm quitting." I said in a high voice of affected surprise.

"I've done my job of assuring this planet's happy future and I'm taking my leave. *¡Adiós!*
¡Y vete con viento fresco!"

Planet Busters Chapter 5

Those weeks spent flashing towards our destination were uneventful ones. We ate, slept and availed ourselves of the provisions the rented cruiser was supplied with. Toward the last lap of the journey, I broke open the packages and brought forth a few flasks of distilled liquor which my bored and restless companions used to console themselves. The cargo had come through in good condition. A few rounds of ammunition had exploded during transfer, but the re-entry suits were intact and the other gear had suffered only a slight scorching. What interested the others were the strange projectile weapons I supplied them with. Kale, to my distress, immediately saw a practical drawback associated with these tools.

"Where are the lasers?" he cried.

"I have chosen not to include any among the supplies," I informed him, "—and for good reason."

"What good reason can there be? How does one bust planets without using his technological superiority?" His voice had the indignant twang of a man betrayed. "Enough that we abandon a perfectly sound ship for obscure purposes, but to set down armed with these popguns—"

"The reason for abandoning this ship is far from obscure," I said. "I have explained the reason for that necessity on several occasions."

"Then explain it again," he snarled. "And then explain why we must use these crude relics as a means of self defense."

"The reasons are the same.;" I said tiredly. "The feds have watchdog devices orbiting most of these planets. A straight beam of light flashing through the atmosphere will trigger these devices as surely as the descent of any powered vessel. Every planet buster knows this and leaves his lasers at home."

"I thought you said the feds didn't catch planet busters." Uri chipped in. Bright he was not.

"They don't if you do the job right." I snatched a flask out of his hands and took a long, burning draught. "They aren't after planet busters," I continued, belching. "They're after excuses."

"Excuses?" Kale sounded perplexed. "What kind of excuses?"

"Excuses to set down with their guns blazing. I told you the task force was in the planet busting business." I took another swig out of the flask.

"You're not making sense."

"Of course I am. They present their readings to the local governments of the galaxy. Laser

activity, surreptitious landings and the like are all recorded, and viewed as a plea for help for the huddled masses of third worlders. And down come the feds with righteous indignation and slyly bust the planet for themselves."

"No kidding?" Kale was evidently impressed.

"No kidding," I chuckled, trying to keep things on this happy note. "You'll be glad to learn that while projectile weapons are not unknown on many third worlds, ours are vastly superior to theirs. Look at this one." I brandished aloft a heavy-looking piece which Kale seized with fascination. "Automatic," I added. "Fires eight heavy-caliber lead projectiles with surprising force."

"Good? He asked uncertainly.

"Beats anything they've got," I assured him. "We're using enough advanced technology to give us an edge. That's all any planeteer asks, isn't it?"

Uri knitted his brow. "Are these what the other independent busters use—I mean, the unfeds?"

"Absolutely." I gave him a pat on the head and began passing out the sidearms.

I knew the boys would be captivated by these sinister-looking weapons. Here were no sleekly effeminate lasers, but a nasty collection of long and short-snouted iron, in whose very

design was somehow manifested grim and uncompromising purpose. Man stuff. The boys loved it. It didn't take them long to familiarize themselves with the use of these weapons.

My main preoccupation was in trying to keep any of those guns from going off aboard ship. I did a pretty good job of that. We had only one accident and in our cramped quarters it was the last of its kind. Punky had been practicing his fast draw with a forgotten cartridge in his weapon. The pistol went off and our ears didn't stop ringing for several hours afterwards. This incident served well the purpose of demonstrating the might of old-style weapons. We all gained a much needed respect for our new toys when we observed the damage that slug had done: it put a ragged series of punctures through six of our heavy backed seats, hit a metal panel on the control board, bounced off screaming, ricocheted again from some farther point, and returned to deliver a flesh wound to the man who had set it in motion.

"It serves you right," I told Punky as I supervised the stitching of his wounds. "The rest of you bear in mind that Punky's was one of the smaller bore pieces. I now propose that the guns be put away, or at least holstered until we are ready to disembark. That way no one

blows a hole in the wall of the ship and lets out all of our air."

"When and where do we disembark?" someone asked.

I knew they'd get curious about that sooner or later. It didn't really matter though. "The name of the planet is Tuukar," I told them, "and we will be there in a very short time."

"Never heard of Tuukar," Kale said.

"Well, I have, and now so have you." I would have liked to leave it at that, but the boys waited quietly to hear more about it, leaving me with an awkward silence I had to fill. "While I do not profess to be an expert on Tuukar, I have researched the planet as thoroughly as possible. That, you will say, couldn't be much considering our business in recent months. But I did find references to the place under several reliable sources and all the important advantages are present. First of all, the natives speak a slightly archaic form of your familiar Galactellano, which, although harsh to the ear, will be entirely comprehensible. The planet has two supercontinents and a single globe-encircling ocean—don't worry, I'll try to time our drop so we land on terra firma—"

"Any dinosaurs on Tuukar?" Interrupted Kale with unconcealed disapproval.

"None that I know of," I said ignoring his tone. "But we shall be working to outwit a far

more dangerous beast." I flared my nostrils, my most sober facial expression. "Gentlemen, the hide of this beast is made from the backbones of strong men. Its legs are the legs of running horses, its talons the lances of the cavalry soldier. The beast, comrades, is war."

"There's a *war* on Tuukar?" cried eleven voices at once.

"A war!" I mocked. "Why war is waged daily on Tuukar. It is won and lost by dinnertime and declared anew before breakfast."

"Are you mad?" Kale exclaimed. "Why did you choose Tuukar? Why not some pastoral world full of meditating gurus?"

"Because peaceful is poor."

"Say that again?"

"It is true," I stated, "War and violence is proportional to wealth on the third worlds. Those armies are battling over something, aren't they?" I gave a hurried glance over my shoulder as though I feared being overheard. "I personally think it's *gold*." The magic word, of course. They calmed down somewhat.

In reality I had my own reasons for picking a tough planet. If I were after money, I would just as soon go after some guru planet. Contrary to what I told Kale there were a multitude of peaceful worlds where wealth aplenty could be had. But a tough planet was the only kind that

suited my plans, and as an added bonus it was morally less objectionable to bust a world of bloodthirsty warriors. That's how Peso Jack had seen it, and I agreed with him.

What I planned was still criminal, of course. It was no use trying to tell myself that I was serving a higher purpose. I'd always hated the presumptuous politicians who spouted that kind of philosophy. I was a hypocrite, but the Tuukarians were game at least, and this served to ease my conscience.

It took some hours for the boys to get used to my descriptions of Tuukar. I knew they'd come around sooner or later, though. Ruffians like these didn't like surprises or operations that overwhelmed them at once. Therefore, I had let on to certain facts in a cold, calculating manner: one horror after another. And in getting them to accept a single horror at a time, I soon had them accepting all of them at once.

It helped a great deal when I explained who the mastermind of the plan was. The boys saw this as a patriotic duty to their fallen leader, and I knew I'd have no trouble with them again. They'd make good commandos. The gangs off the streets of Heliox were as tough as they came.

The cruiser had only one disposal chute. Smaller than the regular airlock, it had a pop-open type door that let the pressure differential

throw garbage and the like well away from the ship. It also could be rigged to jettison by means of simple timers aboard ship. I would have liked to use it; for some reason the jettisoning of men and gear like a magazine full of cartridges appealed to me. The old armies had done that before some semblance of galactic tranquility appeared, and like all adventurers, I longed for the more romantic years of the past. Trouble was, that kind of paratrooping had to be done with precision, in order that the troops didn't land on different continents. Our orbit around Tuukar represented great speed, and to assure that we'd be together give or take a few miles, it was necessary to leave the ship at the same time. The only way to do that was to take turns with the small airlock, assemble outside the ship, and let the suits' power packs push us down together.

We did this, hanging onto the supply packages which I had neatly enclosed in their own re-entry suits.

Parachuting from orbit to some may be the sport of all sports, but to the inexperienced planet buster it is a grueling ordeal. The wires in the suit start lacing around you at the first sign of atmospheric resistance. This is supposed to protect you from being rattled to jelly, but it really only serves to squeeze and tweeze you nearly to death and choke the air out of your

lungs. The suit puffs up with air to put a blanket of protection around you, but you still get rubbed raw and receive a brutal kind of massage that jars your bones and rearranges your internal organs.

I lost sight of the others a few minutes after the beginning of descent. The skin of the suit began to glow, and layers of it burned off with a fiery red trail, making it impossible to see much of anything. Above, or slightly below, however, I knew the others were burning downward as I was. The matter teleporter had been left in orbit to mollify the boys, and the cruiser by now was halfway out of the solar system, having been rigged to fly until empty of fuel. By the time anyone ever found it, we'd all have lived our lives and if by chance it was found sooner, the feds would be hard-pressed to discern where it had come from.

All was set.

My first sensation that the re-entry burn was nearing an end was a feeling of sideward motion. I opened my eyes, which had been pressed shut out of something I prefer to say was closer to excitement than fear, and saw a vast blackness. My visor—soot from the burning of re-entry covered it completely. There must have been some trick to keeping that from happening, but I was hardly to be expected to know of it: I'd never made a jump from orbit

before, and if I were lucky, I would not find opportunity to do so again.

I drew my sleeve across the plexiglass and cleared a small area. Below a great desolate wasteland appeared. Dark clouds hung above it, casting shadows which dipped into canyons and fissures and flattened out across the ragged plains. It was a big place down there.

Not all desert, perhaps. As I plummeted closer, a greenish smudge became visible over large areas. From such a height that sign of vegetation indicated that portions of Tuukar were covered with immense jungles, perhaps the kind that served as home for any manner of unwholesome creature: poisonous snakes, giant cat predators and the like.

A few more miles of descent rendered this speculation academic, however. It soon became obvious that my landing site would be in the approximate center of a huge stretch of barren land. Lifeless and upthrust, it looked like the far face of some forgotten moon. Instinctively I knew it would either be too hot or too cold.

A jerk, a loss of breath, and a shifting of the scene told me that the chutes had cut in. It seemed like only seconds later that the land came up with cold indifference and slammed the air out of my lungs. But I was down! I scrambled to my feet and was knocked flat by a burst of wind that caught the chutes. I

unhitched them, cursing, gathered them up, and secured them to the ground with the heaviest stones I could find. The time had come to get a feeling for the place, and that could not be done with my helmet screwed on my head.

I wrenched it loose and was tempted to put it back in place at once. The air that struck my face was like a basin of icy water thrown by insolent hands. Cold. Tuukar was cold as a witch's chest! But the most distinctive aspect was the smell. The heavy breeze brought with it a sharp odor of something absolutely rotten. Tuukar had its own character.

Above me three chutes billowed. The strong surface wind carried them some ways from me, but at their closest approach I could see that one had the squarish outline of a supply package, and the other two were obviously a couple of my fellows.

I detached the lines from my parachute, picked up my helmet and staggered after them, the wind heaving me forward. The entry suit was not designed for walking: the wires lacing around me cut and chafed, and the reinforcing of the joints made progress a slow, awkward process. The cold also took its toll. My ears were two ravaged things, tingling painfully at first, and then succumbing to the weather with complete numbness.

I put the helmet back on, shocked by the sudden silence that enveloped me, listening to the wheeze of my frozen lungs amplified within the suit. I nearly stumbled over Punky who had been making his way toward the chutes I had left behind me. Another of the boys, Henson Kelly was with him looking unruffled under the protection of his sealed suit. We stood looking at one another stupidly for a moment, and reluctantly I took off my helmet and watched the others' faces as they followed suit.

Henson said something, I think about the cold, but his words were neatly vacuumed away by the wind and scrambled among the dark stones around us. Punky just managed to get out the word, "Stink!" before jamming the helmet back in place and refusing to remove it again.

"Henson!" I cried. "Can you hear me?" My voice sounded thin and weak against the mounting blow. The wind raged on, but I could hear his reply all right: "Who wants to? Look at this place—just look at it!"

"The package!" I shouted "Where is the supply package?"

Henson tossed his hand indifferently toward the horizon. What was that? The last he had seen, the chutes had been dragging my provisions over the rocky ground at thirty or

forty miles an hour. "We've got to get it," I hollered.

Punky was sitting dejectedly on the cold, hard ground and I gave him a series of kicks that brought him to his feet. Henson didn't require measures of that sort, but he was not dramatically incensed to go after the supplies. I guessed the shock of landing in such a miserable locale had not worn off him yet, and the pressing need to get the supplies had not reached the point of urgency in his mind. Still, he trudged on with me, topping a low rise which revealed a sight that made me babble joyfully.

Down the sloping incline, not three-hundred yards away, were the ballooning chutes, gyrating like mad in the fierce wind. Astern of the chutes the lines met the pack, wedged amid a pile of boulders.

We ran. I jumped on the supplies as Henson drew in the chutes like a heavy net from water. Punky stumbled up behind us wordlessly.

Grainy particles of snow angled down. We stood grinning in the grotto of the boulders where there was some protection from the weather. There was little to do but wait out the storm, though for all we knew this was a lull in the perpetual storm of Tuukar. I wished I'd had the time to do some detailed study on the place, but it probably wouldn't have done much good.

I had no way of knowing exactly what part of the surface I would come down on, and the only thing I could do was put the most generalized equipment in the packs anyway. At the present, I was occupied with too many pressing concerns to worry over what might have been. Nine of our company were missing, we were in the midst of a storm that threatened to freeze us to death, and I was not even sure which of the packages I had recovered.

Henson helped me tear the modified re-entry suit from the box, and I ripped open the package with half desperate motions. Inside were pistols, ammunition, a little food, booze, clothing, and a folding shovel. I breathed a sigh of relief. Under the shovel I knew was another package. A small package upon which was hinged the success of everything I had set out to do. I got it out and began digging a shallow hole. Punky and Henson gave me a puzzled look, but did not detain themselves long after seeing the bottles of liquor. They were soon uncapping a liter container of the stuff. Henson took a long drag of the liquor, and without hesitation Punky braved the Tuukarian environment by taking off his helmet. In a moment they were happy as cats.

The soil was half frozen and it was hard going to get a good hollow made in it. A few minutes of concentrated effort, however, and I

was covering the little pack with loose dirt. I dragged a heavy, flat stone over the site and turned my attention to Henson and Punky. They were now eyeing me with suspicion.

"What are you hiding?" Henson wanted to know.

"Nothing that concerns any of us at the present time." I told him. Punky edged closer. Anything worth burying was worth seeing. "You have more bottles in the hole?" he asked.

"No. No food, no booze, and no guns."

"Then what's in the hole?"

"You ask too many questions," I said. "if there's none of those things in the hole, then it's a matter of total indifference to you."

Henson sported a jealous-looking frown. "I want to see it."

"I tell you, there's nothing—" I froze. Henson had the business end of a .44-caliber pistol pointed directly at my nose.

"You can be boss only by sharing equally whatever we've got." He kicked the shovel over. "Start digging."

"Very well," I said, leaning over for the shovel. "It's only fair to—" Henson gave a cry as the shovel rapped the gun from his hand. He gave a satisfying groan when I crowned him over the head with it an instant later. "Get the gun," I told Punky.

Terrier-like he retrieved it.

I looked down at Henson. He was kneeling in the dirt, holding his head and cursing. "Peso would have knocked your brains out," I said coolly. "If you must see what's buried here, you can do the digging, mister." I tossed the shovel at his feet and he made an eager scramble for it. I could tell what he was planning. I swung the gun over to cover him. "Dig first," I ordered. "Then if you have any ideas about revenge you can try your luck."

Henson spat, crawled to the hole and started unearthing the pack. He lifted it out and opened it. "What's this?" he demanded.

"Nothing worth a shovel on the head." By the murderous expression on his face I could see that he agreed. The little pack contained only a small battery hookup, and a few other electrical devices which he could not identify. "That is an O-X radio transmitter," I said. "Do you have the faintest idea of how to operate it?"

"No," admitted Henson.

"Then why do you find it so interesting?"

"I don't," he answered expressionlessly. "What do you want with it?"

"Ah, that is part of the plan we agreed upon, isn't it? I would send a signal to the matter teleporter in orbit, right?" Henson did not choose to answer. "Really, it's a good thing you reminded me of that plan," I said. "I'd completely forgotten to bury my re-entry suit

and power pack with the rest of the equipment." I laughed hollowly. "Little good it'd do me to transmit into orbit without it!" I peeled off the suit, refastened the helmet, and stuffed everything back into the hole. "You may now re-inter these things for safe keeping."

Henson shoveled the dirt back over the pack and pulled the stone back in place.

I had made it look pretty good I had to admit, but I was then shivering violently, dressed as I was in nothing but street clothes. Rummaging in the supplies I came up with a thick woven pair of trousers which fit over me loosely. A heavy, pullover sweater and a rough looking jacket completed my outfit. The monkey boots I had worn on Heliox would serve for walking over the rough terrain, but I knew it would take plenty of walking indeed to keep the chill out of my bones for long.

When I had finished dressing, the others were grinning at me. They evidently didn't think much of my wardrobe. "You two are going to be similarly dressed at the first sign of company." I promised them. "In getups like yours you'll likely be crucified as a matter of course. Warring nations have a distinct dislike for cultists in ceremonial garb."

"Planet busters have a distinct dislike of death by freezing," Henson parried.

"Oh, I don't know," I said, straightening my collar before an imaginary mirror. "I'm quite warm really." I was freezing my tail off.

"You're quite out of your mind is what you are," Henson said. He was shoveling little piles of dust around himself. Insulation of some kind was preferable to the wind, although the poor fool would probably lose more heat to conduction burying himself that way. Yet I was in no position to judge. My own new clothes held such little warmth that I was tempted to dig up my re-entry suit and join him.

A sight on the horizon changed all such plans. I looked once, blinked, looked twice. "Henson, Punky," I cried. "Get the suits off!" "What?" Henson sat up straight, raising a little cloud of reddish dust. Punky, fast asleep within his suit, did not hear me. He was contentedly snoring away the last of his meager oxygen supply, after which time he would probably enter a much deeper and more permanent slumber.

"Look at that," I gasped.

Henson looked. "Dust," he diagnosed with authority. "The wind must be—"

"Better change clothes," I interrupted. "That isn't dust."

Henson looked again, holding an arm up to keep the snow from stinging his eyes. He frowned, straining against the wind and

distance. It didn't take him long to see his mistake. "That's smoke," he said. He bent to shake Punky awake and returned to viewing the scene. "Volcanoes?"

"No." I turned to the pack and dug out a handgun and ammunition. "Not unless volcanoes on Tuukar appear in neat little strings of ten. That's an army encampment set up just over the horizon from us."

"Maybe they'll leave us alone." Punky said. He had been forced to remove the helmet of his suit permanently. The oxygen was quite used up by now.

"Don't count on it." I dumped a measure of ammo out of the pack and pushed it into the hands of the others. "It can't be more than a few miles from us now. And they'll send out scouts."

Henson grimaced. "So what do we do?" "We wait."

"For what?"

"For the scouts, of course. Ever run from a fight?"

"No!" he cried, honestly insulted.

"Neither have I," I said, lying. "But I don't fight somebody else's battle either, and that's exactly what I'll have to do if the scouts arrive while you're wired up in those clumsy suits. Get 'em off."

They stripped, and as if in response, the stinging snow changed to an icy, flat-tasting rain which the wind hammered down upon us.

Planet Busters Chapter 6

It was a day like any other on Marion, the scene pretty as a picture postcard as viewed from my beach retreat on the Paradise Coast. The sun shone, birds sang, clouds billowed, a fleet of fighter-bombers was wrecking havoc upon the Port of Paradise ten miles in the distance.

"What!" I screamed, falling off the hanging divan with one smoothly abrupt spasm. I leaped to my feet, my eyes alternately bulging, then blinking in disbelief as though trying to erase the scene from reality. The spectacle, however, did not dissolve—in fact, it worsened a bit as the sound of the destruction reached my ears, drum-like and clashing like the rhythm section of some incredibly bad orchestra. It couldn't be! But it was—and I stared dumbfounded.

A ship at anchor burst apart, the bright orange fingers of flame poignantly punctuating the blast and burning oily under a plume of black smoke that rolled and churned over the city. The raiders then made a roistering pass over the port—a timing run, in reality—and returned to zero in on the city's photovoltaic power station. The pride of Marion—but naked before the enemy's guns. I heard a click which signified the fighters' release of explosives and the whole plant went up in a spark-filled haze.

It took a few seconds for the sound of the demolition itself to roll in: a world-breaking crunch followed by what sounded like a million tons of gravel ripping through some colossal sieve.

"Lourdes!" I cried—but I need not have worried about her—she was way ahead of me and already had a few vital necessities packed up and was loading them in the ground car. As of yet, however, I did not understand her actions. "Why are you packing?" I asked. My throat was dry. It cracked. "Look what's happening! We have to—"

"We have to get out of here fast," Lourdes said. "You're still prime chancellor and whatever invading pirates have hit us are going to mop up any resistance in about twenty minutes. Then they'll come ferret you out of your hole and parade you around in front of the populous for political purposes. You know—the cooperative vanquished leader and all. Or maybe they'll blame the attack on you somehow and throw you to the angry mobs so the people can have someone else to vent their anger on—yes, that sounds more like it—look!"

Over the city the raiders were strafing the city dwellers, clearing the streets and putting a rocket in any window that showed a face in it.

"You've read history, Jenkins," Lourdes said. "What happens to the leaders of conquered nations?"

"We're not licked yet!" I shouted defiantly. "I'll call in the Marines, the Air Force, the Space Patrol!"

"You dismantled them."

"Let's see how these lightweights try to deal with General Grim!"

"You sacked him last week."

"Sacked? General Grimm? A lie! He was promoted."

"To what?"

"Heavy equipment coordinator for Cooley Construction Company—at twice his former pay. He grabbed it."

"Listen Jenkins," Lourdes said, speaking quickly and succinctly. "I've got a few weeks of concentrated food loaded in the car and a destination in mind. It's a cave out in the mountains where we can hole up until the search parties give us up. I was raised up in those hills and I know where people can and can't be found. In a month or so we can sneak out of hiding and contact someone trustworthy to get us off planet. It's our only chance."

"But—"

"Don't argue—just act! We don't have much
—"

There was a crash as the front door was smashed to splinters and heavy footfalls sounded from within the house. "Around back!" shouted a bad-tempered voice.

I grabbed Lourdes' arm and leaped off the veranda onto the dunes leading toward the beach while simultaneously the screen door behind me burst from its hinges.

I just had time to take two steps before a heavy body tackled me from behind, bearing me full force to the ground. The air whooshed out of my lungs and I let go of Lourdes' arm, looking up to see her make a break for it. She got about five steps out before a battle-clad commando of uncertain nationality leaped over my head and brought her to a halt.

A half dozen of these men, dressed in khaki and armed to the teeth swarmed over us. They worked with smooth efficiency and the two of us were quickly manacled, dragged to our feet, and alternately pushed and carried bodily over the dunes to the beach. One of the men—the leader, perhaps—held a walkie talkie over which he gave a couple of coded commands. In response, an incredibly fast airship cleared the horizon and halted hovering at the water's edge, its hatch thrown open.

We were tossed aboard unceremoniously and when the last commando had dived in after us and secured the portal, the ship streaked off,

pulling a couple of G's before the anti-gravs cut in.

Planet Busters Chapter 7

The long day continued with intermittent blasts of rain and hail. Henson and Punky bundled up in the loose clothing I had included among our supplies. They were no doubt unhappy about discarding the re-entry suits, but recognized the necessity to be prepared for whoever might come riding over the horizon. We watched for two or three hours without a sign that anyone was coming our way. The smoke from the encampment neither dwindled nor surged, and with such a lack of visible activity we grew confident that night would fall before a scout would chance upon us.

The storm abated somewhat and a couple of smallish moons rose in the sky, half visible through the thinning cloud cover and against the light of late afternoon. I became quite at ease, and joined the others in depleting our stock of alcoholic refreshment. A quiet and uplifting tingle had just commenced to envelope me when I felt a particularly annoying pressure against my back. Thinking that one of the others was up to some minor treachery, I struck backward with my elbow. I connected with nothing. Instead, the pressure increased suddenly and something sharp was driven swiftly into my back. Pain shot up my neck, and I turned with a shout, striking aside a

feathered lance, on the end of which was a gruff-faced cavalry warrior. Where the hell had he come from? No use even trying to guess.

It was enough that he was there, presenting a big, fat problem that needed to be dealt with. Henson and Punky wheeled at my shout, but the warrior paid little attention to that. He laughed uproariously and made a series of quick, little thrusts at me with the lance which set me to running about in circles.

My companions endured this humiliation of their leader with admirable restraint until two other warriors rode up out of nowhere and put them through the same antics. It didn't last long. Punky tired of it very quickly, and without warning blasted the three of them from their mounts with three, rapid-fire shots.

Just like that it was over.

"You killed them!" Henson was staring at the bodies with a mixture of joy and fascination. "You killed the three of the bastards—with three shots." He knelt by the nearest corpse and happily began rifling through its pockets.

I was not so happy. I wondered how much trouble we were in for having put to rest our very first Tuukarian acquaintances. It had all happened so fast! Well, we were still alive, and we hadn't been caught yet. That was something.

I stepped over to look at the riding beasts. They had simply sat down at the first shots and were now looking about sleepy-eyed and bored. Not horses these. No hair, and there was the suggestion of a clipped horn behind each scaly ear. They looked like a species of reptilian deer. Strange beasts. Why hadn't they run? They certainly weren't wildly reactional. I guessed that a few thousand years of natural breeding had made them insensitive to sudden changes of event, which wasn't surprising. This planet, when listed in descriptive atlases or annotated charts, was usually described as one of the toughest primitive war zones imaginable. That's what made it appealing to Peso Jack and me. Judging by their many scars, these beasts had probably lost riders before and weren't about to go into hysterics over it happening again. That was just fine as far as I was concerned. We had free transportation, which was very welcome under the circumstances.

The ease with which Punky had put those fellows away suggested that projectile weapons were unknown on Tuukar. The warriors had ridden up, judged us as unarmed, and then made the fatal error of toying with us before administering the *coup de grace*. Punky as it turned out was the only one of us who was armed when we were attacked. Henson and I had set our pistols aside, foolishly thinking we

would have time to grab them up before we were discovered.

The clothing of the warriors was perhaps the most valuable loot we found on the bodies. The men were dressed in great woolly parkas, hooded affairs that looked exceptionally warm. Punky tried one on after rubbing off the coagulating blood with a handful of sand. It fit loosely, but seemed to make him more comfortable. In that cold air one was not squeamish about robbing the dead. Henson and I quickly followed his example and found the weather of Tuukar to be suddenly bearable. Better yet, we were now quite well disguised and could possibly bluff our way out of certain unhappy circumstances by impersonating the scouts (although the latter were wildly bearded and, as per Heliox custom, we were clean shaven).

The warriors had few stores upon them, just some crude steel blades quite large enough to be called swords, and each a double-stringed bow and a quiver of arrows. It was obvious that these scouts were based at the encampment: no stores of food were to be found on them, nor did they carry as much as a blanket or ground cloth for a night alone in the wilds. They'd be expected back sometime, perhaps before sunset, which was another piece of reality which made

our run-in with these local toughs less contenting.

On the whole, however, it was a stroke of rare luck that we had been attacked. I had hoped for a break like the one we now had. My plans for this planet had to include two things: transportation, and contact with the warring natives. I now had both—although the contact had been broken off rather early. That wasn't important. Contact we would have again—only next time it would be planned in advance.

I hoped.

The only personal article we found on the warriors was a single wooden box. Upon its lid was neatly fire-engraved the likeness of a helmeted warrior, in profile, with a jagged mountain skyline set behind him. It was not quite large enough to cover the palm of Henson's hand, and contained some dried vegetable matter. It didn't take much guessing to realize that this was a vice of some kind or another. What virtue the stuff had would be hard to determine without a test. Henson was the man for that job. Back on Heliox, he'd been the practitioner of a variety of illegal substances—and if here was a new one to be sampled, I doubted that I could have held my half-loyal underling away from it.

He had a natural touch for experimentation of this sort. Giving the stuff a single sniff, he

ascertained the manner of ingestion (under the tongue), availed himself of the dry matter, and sat down on a convenient stone to enjoy its effects, which did not appear to be profound. Henson liked the latter fact. He said a vice a man could stay with was the vice of a man.

I suppose truer words were never spoken, but they hardly seemed relevant at the time. We had enough problems for the moment, not the least of which was the overabundance of incriminatingly dead bodies in our immediate vicinity. We spent the better part of two hours hacking into the frozen ground before we had a hole deep enough to cover the three of them.

By then it was nearly dark, and the three of us decided to chance a night's rest where we were. From our present position we could keep an eye on the horizon where the encampment gave off a faint, reddish light, low in the darkening sky. At dawn, if there had been no bothersome change out there, we could approach the native force cautiously and determine their numbers.

I had no thought of wasting time with a search for the others in our party. If we could not see them on this extensive tabletop plain, then they had landed some distance from us, and it wouldn't be wise to run ourselves ragged in a vain search for them. I regretted the decision, but it had to be made, and I had

business to attend to. Still, they were on my mind. They were out there somewhere; Kale, Uri, and the others. I hoped they hadn't landed in the midst of some war party, and of course they were probably thinking the same thing about us. After all, we had most of the liquor.

With the riding beasts hobbled, and an alternating man at watch, we passed the long hours of the night half-sleeping on the cold ground. Morning broke without incident and we could see once again the trail of smoke from the Tuukarians' camp. The wind had died almost completely and the rising red sun was not hidden by a single cloud. The day promised to be brisk, but there was no sign that another storm was approaching.

My first task was to triangulate our position. When I needed the buried pack, I would have to be able to find it again. I had no special equipment for the task, which was just as well. I did not doubt that electronic devices were viewed as real curiosities on third world planets, and that they had a way of getting lost or stolen. Therefore, I had to rely on cruder methods.

Out across the plain was a high standing rock formation, quite unlike anything nearby. Mentally I drew a straight line from the buried pack to meet it, then drew another at a right angle to the first. There—right on target—a

cloud?—hung just above the horizon. Transitory objects such as clouds, of course, were no good for this kind of position fixing, but wait—wasn't that dark jut underneath it the tip of a mountain? It was. More specifically, a volcano, whose escaping steam billowed above it. I now had two points, but for a triangle I needed three. I stood on the slab of stone which capped the hole containing my special package, facing dead center between the mountain and the pillar of stone. Good. Now, turning, I faced the opposite direction, hoping that luck would give me another landmark. Nothing. The plain rolled away before me, unbroken in its even rockiness. It seemed obvious that I would have to dig up the pack and start again. There was certainly no way to construct another landmark.

I had almost given myself up to this delay when I realized that the plain itself could be the third fix. I hadn't noticed before, but the land before me had an even bulge and the apex of that rising land was positioned on a straight line from the buried pack to a point smack in the center of the other two landmarks. Perfect. This triangle would give me a good start, and the lone pile of stones that had caught the parachuting pack would serve to make up for any inaccuracies. I was convinced I would be able to find my way back here from a long way off.

I made careful mental note of all the landmarks, and then turned my attention to my companions and our immediate problems. Henson was starting the morning with another pinch of material from the box. That put him in good enough spirits to be the first to mount one of the riding beasts. I had visions of Henson flying through the air, but nothing so dramatic took place. The beast allowed him to sit on its back, moved forward when booted in the ribs, and came to an obedient halt when the leather reins were sharply tugged.

Punky and I got out a few carbohydrate and protein bars, re-sealed the supply pack, and loaded it on the sturdiest-looking beast. The three of us then dressed up in our newly won weaponry and breakfasted as we rode parallel to the string of fires on the horizon.

"I trust you don't aim to ride right up and ask to see their leader," said Henson. We were moving slowly over a sandy area which held little clumps of straw-colored grass. Nearer the encampment the ground-cover thickened until it appeared as a uniformly yellow carpet.

"I don't think that would be a prudent course of action for the present," I assured him, "but we'll have to make contact with them sometime." I gave my Tuukarian steed a little kick to keep pace. "The most appealing procedure in my opinion would be to dismiss

the formal introductions entirely, ride up, and mix with the men at arms."

Henson reined his mount, bringing us to a sudden halt. "Are you planning to commit suicide?" he exclaimed. "What are the lookouts going to think of three beardless renegades who come careening over the horizon on three of their own broncos?"

"Nothing, providing we don't careen." I gave another kick that set the three of us on our way again. "Look at the size of that army! Do you think a straggler here and there is going to cause an undue disturbance? What we are doing now is determining whether those fires represent the flanks of the army or its head. In the case of the former we can assume that the army is smaller than if the latter is true. That is taking for granted that the head and tail will be narrower than either flank. It doesn't really matter—either way there is obviously a big enough crowd to get lost in, although for that reason they'll probably be on the lookout for spies."

"Whom they no doubt put to death."

"Perhaps. But we're fairly well disguised—" I lifted my lance. "This is genuine army hardware, and they'll recognize it as such. The only real problem is, as you say, our beards or rather our lack of them. To really fit the part we'd have to wait several weeks, which is

something I'm not disposed to do considering the fact that we have food for only a few more days. But the size of that army also says something about its makeup. It didn't get so big by turning away mercenaries, and that's exactly what we're going to tell them we are—mercenaries from some faraway tribe where the customs are different and beardless men are as common a sight as bearded women."

"And what if they're just plain overstocked with mercenaries and don't need to trust us?"

"You don't understand. We aren't asking for employment, we act as though we've already been accepted by whoever is chief. We blend in, telling our story only to whoever happens to be nosy."

Henson didn't like any of this, but had to admit that at this point we were pretty well committed. Punky, ever loyal in his indiscriminating way, did not offer a single complaint.

It took several hours and miles of riding to make sense out of the encampment. It was a larger army than I had imagined. By skirting the entire assembly, we determined that the smoke we had seen originally had not been on the flank. Therefore, it was either the head of the column or the tail. We wouldn't be able to ascertain which until the entire throng was mobilized.

We retraced our steps almost as far as to where we had spent the night, and waited for the force to move. If that line of smoke then proved to be the lead, we planned to hurry out of its way, let the column pass, and try to bring up the rear. If the opposite were the case, we would simply follow until we found ourselves riding among the troops.

It was late afternoon before we noticed a change on the skyline. One by one, the smudges of smoke were disappearing. We took this to mean that the Tuukarians were breaking camp and readying to march—either toward or away from us. It was at this time that Henson made a very significant observation.

"How do we know which way they're going when there is no longer any smoke to guide us?"

I had the perfect explanation. "When we see the warriors, we will know they are heading this way. If we don't see them after a reasonable space of time, we will begin pursuit as planned."

"But if they are coming this way and we see them, they will also be able to see us. At that point there will be trouble aplenty."

I hated to admit it, but he was absolutely right. There was nothing left to do but hope we would spot the Tuukarians before they spotted us. That shouldn't be too hard to do really.

Many thousands of warriors would be easier to see from a distance than three men and three large riding beasts. Henson's basic theory, however, was still quite sound, and we were all nervous and apprehensive until it seemed apparent that the Tuukarian legions had begun to march in the opposite direction.

We followed, cautiously at first, in case there had been an error. There hadn't been. Three hours passed without sign of the soldiers.

This worried me for another reason. It now looked as though the army would leave us in a cloud of smoke.

Silently I reflected upon a few basic military facts that made me wish I were wearing a pair of spurs: for one thing, third world armies know how to march. It is a simple and essential maneuver. Battles are won because the army of one tribe arrives somewhere fast and unexpectedly. An army of any description has to cover ground in time to surprise and destroy. If it can't do this, it isn't much of an army. Accordingly, I ordered Henson and Punky to speed up. We might have to ride our mounts into the ground, but we'd have a go at catching the Tuukarians.

Night fell before we caught sight of them again, and even when we did see them in was only by the light of an occasional torch flickering far ahead. The beasts labored on

tirelessly, but their constant rolling gait made riding far from comfortable. Punky and I occasionally traded tired glances that were just short of pitiful, but when we attempted these exchanges with Henson we found him uncommunicative, somehow not a kindred spirit in our misery. He rode upright, eyes wide, face taut. Why didn't he suffer? Then I understood. The box, Henson's new means of personal corruption. His new vice.

We halted and made him instruct us in the use of the drug. In minutes Punky and I could not remember the meaning of fatigue. We rode on, quite willing to circumnavigate the planet if necessary.

Through most of the night our way was illuminated dimly by the two Tuukarian moons. One of them glowed with a dull greenish sheen, which alone was not enough to see by, but the other reflected light quite well and made it possible to make out rough ground and holes close-by as well as boulders and gullies at a safe distance. Toward dawn both of these moons set, and the Tuukarian night reached its darkest phase.

We were making our way quietly over the level plain when I heard a noise to my right. It resembled a muffled cough or sneeze. A few moments afterward the fall of footsteps was clearly heard. We proceeded ahead until there

were sounds all around us: the grate of pebbles under hard boot leather, muttered curses, and the clank of arms. I gave a quick prayer of thanks for the darkness. It had allowed us to infiltrate the hindmost troops without being seen. Now we were in among them. Now we would merge warily until our place among these men at arms was secure and unquestioned.

I was just on the verge of congratulating the others when a voice, thick with suspicion barked out from the blackness on our right.

I froze, biting my lip to keep my off-world accent to myself. Henson and Punky arrogantly reigned to a halt and searched the darkness with unconcealed ire. That looked pretty good—just the way two innocent but temperamental warriors might have reacted. They did it on reflex, however, and I was afraid they might take a good thing too far by drawing their guns. "Hold your fire," I whispered. "I do the talking, and if there's fighting to be done, use your lances and swords."

Punky started unsheathing his blade, and I gave him a whack on the head with my lance that told him quite clearly that I would decide if battle were necessary. I hoped it wouldn't be. We didn't stand a chance among this crowd, guns or no.

The voice, heavily accented Galactellano, repeated: "Wulkin riders halt! Explain your presence at rear center." I was speechless. Wulkins? These beasts, of course, but what could I say?

My indecision did not appease the questioner; quite the contrary. My blood ran cold when I heard the next two barbarically pronounced words: "Ready, bowmen!"

Planet Busters Chapter 8

The ship into which Lourdes and I had been thrown lurched and shuddered despite the anti-gravs. I wondered what was bothering the pilot until I looked through the portal and caught a sideward glimpse of a fighter closing in on us. The floor beneath me seemed to take on some substance—as if power had been drained from the anti-gravs, and the pursuing fighter burst apart and fell into the sea below.

"Nice shot, Igor," one of the commandoes congratulated, indicating one of his fellows who held a sighting instrument to his eye, while in one hand reposed a black handle of some sort with a deadly-looking red button on it.

"Thanks," Igor replied. "Anymore of them feds come up here get the same."

This was all very confusing. Had the feds come to our rescue as always promised? Had they lost the battle to these men? Who were these men anyway? I put the question to my captors but they didn't even bother to as much as look at me.

There was a loud crackle and for a split second everything went blank. Then the dreamy tingle creeping along my skin told me that the anti-gravs had switched to ultra, that power

mode that propelled ships beyond even normal above-light speeds.

Ultradrive was strictly a luxury item, and only the finest government vessels could afford it. I was a bit more than surprised to find it here. It was most impressive. These invaders had some first class equipment.

"This is some little cruiser," I commented, forgetting momentarily my position as prisoner. "Light as an airplane—but a starship just the same. And ultradrive."

Igor had moved away from the weapons controls and was now observing me without the slightest hostility. In fact, he looked friendly. "Federal regulations specify mass ratios to weight for one reason: to slow down the private boats," he said.

To my surprise I found myself naively quoting what I had read in a Federal publication. "But studies have shown that the stresses put on a ship in ultradrive require compensating mass in the form of added structure. Such regulations are for the sake of safety, aren't they?"

Igor shrugged. "In part, I suppose. The Federation gets some bad press even when the private ships crash. But mass and safety are opposites in our business."

"Which is?"

"Outrunning federal ships."

"I see," I saw very well indeed. Or at least at this point I thought I did. Igor was a professional. A paid world conqueror who made it his business to frustrate the Federation's attempts to police the galaxy. Still, he did not look all that sinister, and I hadn't been dragged before a crowd of angry citizens—yet. So where were we going, anyway?

As if in response, the ultradrive cut out and the walls of the ship vibrated fiercely as we fell back into standard space.

Through the portal, I saw the beacon of some other ship. The light grew in size as we approached. It was a freighter (?), a tremendous old hulk, pitted and scored by a hundred years of meteoroids and interstellar dust. Its huge airlock was open, and a row of yellow lights outlined the boundaries of a landing pad within. The pilot aimed us at this, and the ship thumped down in the artificial gravity inside the freighter while the airlock behind us glided shut. When the pressure of the lock was restored, a crew of men came in to tie down the ship, refuel and otherwise service it.

The hatch of our cruiser was opened and Lourdes and I were led out onto the metal decking where our manacles were removed without explanation. Men approached, motions were made, and we went with a new escort

through the heavy metal door of the airlock and into the body of the ship.

It was far too late to do any resisting—we had nowhere to run in any event—so we walked quietly along gangplanks and through metal passageways until we came to a small, unobtrusive door like any of dozens we had already passed. One of our escorts knocked once and entered. The door closed, but was quickly reopened and we were directed inside.

The men who had accompanied us left.

We had cause to expect just about anything but what presented itself. Seated before us—or rising to greet us now—was an artist's characterization of a lower middle class accountant or clerk for some second rate business on any third rate federation world.

He was short, and bald on top with a smattering of hair around the sides, and the faintest suggestion of a mustache—just a thin, uneven line above his upper lip. He had a pencil behind one ear, and a dozen or more pens and pencils in a small, plastic case in his shirt pocket. The office file cabinet and other furniture around him was old and scratched from many years of heavy use, and everything—man and objects—seemed to point to a simple and obvious fact: that here was a middle aged, bespectacled, balding and slightly

impoverished clerk surrounded by the tools of an unostentatious trade.

"Welcome!" he said briskly. His eyes were bright and he seemed just short of laughter. "I'm Harry Cardip, and I am the executive director for all revolutionary and antigovernment activity in the Milky Way Galaxy."

Lourdes and I exchanged skeptical glances. I'd have to see that to believe it, I thought. Yet I couldn't deny he was here and that he seemed to be in charge.

"Just tell us what you want from us," Lourdes snapped angrily. "You've busted our planet and are no doubt slaving for our help in subduing the people politically."

Cardip looked us over, slowly and carefully. He seemed almost sad. "I can see that you are confused," he said quietly. Then, becoming more animated: "Be seated! Be seated! We have much to discuss."

He motioned toward a pair of sheet metal chairs which had seen better days, and we sat. Cardip himself plopped back into his own chair behind the desk, and toyed with a pencil or two before speaking. "We did not bust Marion," he said emphatically. "I want to say that first so you will at least speak to me. Now. Let me answer a few of the questions that must be troubling you. To begin with: where you are. You are aboard a transformed super-liner which

is the property of the Antigovernmental Agency of Sovereign Worlds, whose members are called "antigovs"—not a clever name or nickname either, but regrettably they both seem to have stuck."

"I've heard of you." I said.

"No, you haven't," Cardip denied. "Antigov" is also the title given any political malcontent, including the two-bit neurotics who lob bombs about indiscriminately to further their political, economic, or religious ends. Some of those people have legitimate grievances, of course, but we do not deal with them and therefore, they have no galaxy-wide representation. Only our agency encompasses that much area."

"Why are we here?" Lourdes asked.

"Patience," pleaded Cardip. "I haven't quite finished with *where* you are."

He paused to assure himself that my wife was willing to wait and went on: "The super-freighter is only a few light years from Marion. But don't worry—in the vastness of space even a hulk as big as this is comfortably invisible and completely secure."

"The ship we arrived in might have been followed," I offered.

Cardip snorted irreverently. "How?" he challenged. "You doubtlessly noticed the ultradrive. What could have kept pace with that ship?"

I shrugged. He was right, of course. Unless a faster ship had switched to ultradrive at the exact moment we had, it could not have even seen us, much less caught up. That was true even for standard warp drives.

"Your ship also made a hundred random turns in ultradrive before setting a course for the freighter. *That* just in case the feds have made some revolutionary advances in their tracing systems. Personally, I think that precaution is ridiculous but I suppose it's always nice to be sure."

Cardip smiled, revealing a mouthful of perfectly straight teeth, dentures or implants. "You know, people just don't realize the safety in space. It' so big that planets are comparatively deadly places to live—and vulnerable? Well!"

If you've finished with *where*, can you now answer *why*?" Lourdes interrupted irritably. "You chat on giddily and seem to forget that my husband and I have been bombed out, kidnapped and exiled within the hour."

I laid a restraining hand on her shoulder. "Lourdes ..."

"Quite all right," Cardip chipped, undisturbed. "Sorry—I've done this so often lately that I forget the strain that is put on our new members."

"Members? What are you talking about?" Lourdes asked him.

Cardip's tweediest appearance disappeared momentarily giving sign of the wolf under the sheepskin. Never judge from outward appearance, I reminded myself. Human beings are complex and surprising creatures—and what they look like has absolutely nothing to do with who they are or what they can do.

"Do you want Marion freed again?" Cardip snapped. "Do you wish to return there and continue your independent civilization? Do you believe in free enterprise? Do you like the Feds?"

"Yes—no!" answered Lourdes. "Oh, you know what I mean! How can we get Marion back?"

"By giving us money."

"We haven't got any," I stated matter of factly.

"Oh, yes you have!"

Cardip rose quickly from his desk and pulled open the drawer to his file cabinet. He rifled through the files for a moment, then extracted an eight-and-a-half by eleven-inch folder which he waved at us triumphantly. "This folder contains the bank records of every government official in the galaxy."

"That's quite a lot of info for one manila folder," I said unconvinced.

Cardip gave me an incredulous scowl. "Are you serious?" he asked. "Do you actually think I keep paper records?" He slammed the file cabinet shut with a bang. "This may be an ancient system He indicated the file cabinet with a wave of his hand and an indifferent snort. "—but bulky and old as it is, it weighs less than the standard sized manufactured contraption that is normally used to store, retrieve and project information. This ship has been stripped of its last superfluous lug nut. I use the desk model projector!"

He hauled it out—the projector, that is—from where it had been stored behind the cabinet. He removed the single, electro-engraved sheet from the folder and shoved it into the machine. A light on the projector came on, and Cardip punched a couple of keys. Familiar names were suddenly displayed across the wall. Cardip moved the projector and focussed the image so the records could be clearly read: Lai, Jenkins Basil and Lai, Lourdes Garza....

"Aha!" he accused, pointing a finger at the data that appeared beneath our names. "These figures show that you have to your credit over fifty million Marion dollars, which translate as nearly a billion in inflated Federation guilders. It's all sitting there waiting for you in a bank on Rigel IV."

"I know very well where it is, having deposited it myself," I responded. "I also know I have no way of retrieving it without a passport."

"You're lucky your money is not on Marion now," Cardip remarked. "Very lucky indeed. I must admit that while we're delighted that your bank account was spared plundering, we are somewhat at a loss as to why you chose to do your banking on Rigel IV. It would seem to me that you'd be partial to the domestic services on Marion."

"I went to school on Rigel IV, you must know," I told him, "and set up that account while I was there. They offered some attractive interest, so I deposited a goodly sum—everything I owned to be exact. The bank was fully insured of course, and quite reputable, but when the Marion banks started offering better interest, I decided to make a total withdrawal. I've been meaning to get around to it for over a month—only I can't find my bank card."

"Oh, that!" Cardip pulled open his desk drawer, reached in and handed me a rectangular sheet of silicon-impregnated celluloid. My bank card. "Here are your passports as well," he commented, handing them over. "You don't seem to have missed them, although you'll probably wind up wanting them later on. Most do."

"Now just a minute—" I sputtered, gaping at my documents.

"Most who?" Lourdes wanted to know.

"Most new members."

"What gives you the right to burglarize our house?" I asked, holding up my bank card and passport as evidence.

"Burglary involves stealing, which we would of course never consider doing—except in the most extreme cases." He stabbed his thumb at the projected chart on the wall. "I assure you that these are the very latest figures available. What you see here is what you own. I want you to know that with a bit of doctoring, we could have charged just about anything we wanted to your account. That we didn't, quite sufficiently vindicates us."

"No, you wouldn't steal," I said cynically. "But kidnapping is all right in your book I suppose."

"And we didn't say we'd join your organization," Lourdes said.

"But you will,"

"Wait a minute .." A sudden thought had just struck me. It was stupid of me not to have realized it sooner. I narrowed my eyes and looked squarely at Cardip. "Why did you steal our passports?"

"So you would have them now."

"Fiend! Yellow dog! Planet buster!" I cried, glowering at him in accusation.

"What in the hell are you talking about?" Cardip asked, eyes wide with surprised innocence.

In answer I directed a condemning finger at him, slavering as I spoke. "How could you have known we would need passports, bank cards, or a fast lift off planet? Yours was no chance rescue—"

"Of course it wasn't."

"—it was a planned operation, deviously conceived, premeditated, practiced in advance and—" I paused, blinking. "You admit it?"

"We plan everything we do."

"You busted Marion?" I cried, rising from my chair. "You dirty rat!"

"Sit down!" Cardip's voice cracked out at me. To hear that dorkish little fellow yell that way really took me by surprise, and I sat right back down.

Now it was his turn to stand. "I told you we didn't invade Marion," he said, his five-footish frame towering over us. "All you have managed to deduce is the rather obvious fact that we knew in advance that the feds were going to strike."

"Yet you did nothing," Lourdes said quietly.

"We got you out," Cardip replied. His emphasis on the 'you' was slightly distasteful.

"The feds invaded Marion?" I asked sheepishly.

"Well, it wasn't us!" Cardip answered, offended by the hint of skepticism. "You're here because we find no more loyal members than victims of Federal adventurism. We choose to provide asylum and membership to the rulers of conquered third worlds because once returned home they will stand the best chance of overthrowing the Federation's puppet governments. In addition, they almost invariably have sizable assets in easy-to-reach places. Such proved to be the case with you."

"And you expect us to just give you our money?" I asked.

"Not give," Cardip corrected. "We have something to sell—namely an inside line on the upcoming revolution, plus training and a stab at getting back Marion before it is sucked dry."

"Politics is a dirty business," Lourdes said. "Why should we stick our necks out?"

Cardip settled back into his chair. "Because you have little choice," he answered. "I don't think you want to go back to Marion at the moment. And the feds, angry at your escape, will make life pretty miserable—if not impossible—when you pop up elsewhere." He gave an exasperated sigh. "I can't believe I have to go through the same thing with every inductee... Well, they've turned out pretty darn

good just the same, so I guess I'm not wasting my time when I tell you that you've been sticking your neck out for years. Imagine—you two dreamers putting together your very own nation right in the center of the federally dominated galaxy. It's hard to believe you'd complain about taking chances now. You must have known that it would be just a matter of time before the feds got around to busting up your little party. Yet you just sat there and let the blow fall without doing anything about it."

"We didn't know the blow was coming," Lourdes shouted at him. "—but you did!"

Cardip turned a shade redder. "Sorry—I sometimes forget what an effective propaganda system the federation has. Let me phrase it another way: they fooled you. And admittedly we knew they were going to. But we're not strong enough to stop them—yet."

"When will you be able to?" I asked.

"Soon," Cardip assured me. His eyes misted happily at the thought. "The feds are not as strong as they appear. True, they have a tremendous fleet of warships—but we don't have to match that force to beat them."

"Why not?" Lourdes wanted to know.

"Because the firepower they parade around in public will never be used to put down a popular uprising."

"Why?" We both asked.

"Most of their hardware is simply too powerful. Those world-crushing battlewagons would turn the tide of popular opinion against them. And believe it or not, to an inept and incompetent government, popular opinion is still plenty important—so much so that the dissemination of propaganda has become the only job the federal government does with any proficiency at all."

"They could use that hardware to make a point even the most ignorant antigov would understand. If the feds are that bad, why couldn't they just blame the faults of the universe on some unsuspecting third world, do a negative propaganda job on them, and then nuke the entire planet?"

"You mean so that any groups harboring the desire to rebel would see the folly in opposing such power?"

"Exactly."

"I can think of any number of reasons why that couldn't happen. For one thing the public—gullible as it is—has nevertheless matured a bit over the last few centuries. Nowadays people demand a more convincing scenario before they're willing to suspend their disbelief. The galaxy has become so cosmopolitan that tales about the vicious, half human dogs of Planet X only serve to arouse public suspicions that the half human dogs are being misrepresented.

Furthermore, there are an awful lot of planets in the galaxy. The odds against any particular one being singled out for nuking are so great that no revolutionary is going to worry much about it. That same revolutionary knows the feds can't make a practice of vaporizing planets."

"So you go underground completely," I constructed. "And do what? Try to change the proclivities of that galaxy-spanning government? Sounds like a slow process."

"It would be if we did only that," Cardip admitted. "But we have other plans and—" he paused, an apologetic smile crossing his face. "—and I'm afraid those plans involve the use of force."

"Against whom?" Lourdes asked. "You just got done saying that the armament of the federation would not be used—"

"The vast bulk of it will never be used," Cardip affirmed.

"But who do you think busted Marion?"

"You said the feds did."

"Yes, but not the federation regulars." "Then who?"

"The elite, Special Task Force."

Planet Busters Chapter 9

A flood of desperate strategies raced through my brain. Nothing very good occurred to me, but there was no time to let that hold me back.

"Wait!" I cried. "Bowmen hold." Good as far as it went. My voice assumed a rough edge, coarse and vulgar. I had very little experience with Tuukarian dialects and hoped this feigned callousness would cover that fact. "We are scouts, and are trying to take up our positions after a skirmish with attacking tribesmen." I waited uncertainly to hear the reaction to this unlikely tale.

"There has been no attack," the voice accused. "Our army is never attacked when on the march. If it were, we would—"

"The army was *not* attacked," I interrupted before he could come to any damning conclusions. "I said we were scouts. We were patrolling the rear when a score of wulkin riders killed three of our party." I laughed raggedly. "And this is the reception we get."

A lengthy silence followed which worried me a great deal. I was about to continue when the voice barked: "That does not excuse your presence here when you should be in formation. If you are Hurian warriors you must know the orders about saboteurs."

Someone lighted a torch to get a better look at me. It blazed brightly, the whole area around it a vast blackness which my eyes could not penetrate.

I laughed again, a little more apologetically, and a lot less effectively. "Surely there are exceptions to the orders, and in any case we are not saboteurs."

"You are beardless," the voice observed. "A strange custom. Not a Hurian one either. Your words, also, are very strange. We know that our enemies the Jarovians speak strangely too. Like our allies the Gorf, but yours is not the sound of a Gorf speaking."

"Not at all," I agreed. "This is more like a Gorf," I said, taking on the thick, guttural drawls of Heliox.

"Yes, that is more like a Gorf. But what are you if you are neither Gorf nor Jarovian?"

"Why, don't you know?" I chided. "We are freemen, sworn by the Hurian chief to fight as mercenaries for the glory of battle and for whatever spoils may be divided out."

"What is the name of the Hurian warlord?"

Trouble, that question. "His name is death to his enemies!" I said in spirited tones.

Not good enough. An arrow whizzed past my ear, and I ducked just as another flew overhead. I swung recklessly with my lance and succeeded only in striking the torch to the

ground. From that point on I remember only a dark jumble of shouts, the sound of struggling, and a sickening pain to the back of my head that brought unconsciousness.

Coming out of my stupor was not easy. I awoke I think twice, and passed out again both times. On my third return to consciousness I stayed awake long enough to realize that I was being dragged on a litter over rough ground.

That bumpy ride was to say the least an unpleasant experience. I was acutely aware of every stone the litter bumped against, and each rhythmic stride of the pulling wulkin sent a skull-splitting bolt of agony through my head.

Once again blackness covered me.

My next awareness was the dreadful pain of my returning senses. I opened my eyes to broad daylight and saw around me the milling soldiers of the army now encamped anew. Next to me lay two limp and unconscious forms, blood-caked and unmoving except for the barely perceptible rise and fall of respiration. Henson and Punky. They hadn't passed the night any better than I had—worse in fact; I was at least conscious.

I tried to move, but my hands and feet were bound. Yet the effort had caused enough motion to force my aching ribcage against something solid and reassuring. My gun. It still was wedged securely under my belt and covered by

the woolly parka. We apparently had not been carefully searched.

A shadow crossed me suddenly. I looked up to see a great, hairy warrior raising his boot to give me a kick in the face. It was impossible to dodge, and a blaze of multicolored lights exploded before my eyes and swam lazily about for several seconds.

"The Hurian chief, whose name is death to his enemies, wishes to see you." There was no mistaking the tone of insolence, nor the voice. This was the same warrior who had called out the night before. "I am Isaias, and you shall do as I say." He bent and quickly cut my bonds. "Get up," he ordered, "and prepare to crawl in the dust before Zallaham, Warlord of Huria."

Well, at least I knew his name.

He prodded me absentmindedly with a dagger, and I hurried on along in front of him.

We wove our way through groups of rough looking soldiers who stood or sat about idly talking or filing their swords. They paid no attention to us whatever, and I wondered by what stroke of bad luck I had not been able to get lost in a crowd of this size.

At length we came to a string of rough canvas tents. In front of the largest of these, seated on a portable gilt throne, was an incredibly huge man.

I could not help but draw in a sharp breath. An aura of absolute power emanated from him as it would perhaps from anyone who even remotely looked as he did. He was bronze skinned and solidly built, sharp featured, with a heavy brow under which flashed a pair of jet brown eyes. His hair was a shock of black that fell well below his shoulders, and his nose had a strong outward curve that brought to mind centuries-old photos of the Indian chiefs of ancient Earth. Standing, he might have measured two and a quarter meters.

His face was somehow timeless, showing neither great age nor youth. His features were crisscrossed with the scars of many battles, but it was impossible to determine whether they had been fought a year ago or a thousand. At my best estimate I could not judge his age to be more than thirty, and at the next glance, less than one hundred.

I would not find it hard to crawl in the dust before the likes of him, I thought, and as if on cue I did just that, with the help of the prodding dagger in the hand of my escort.

"I have brought the outlander before you, Zallaham."

Zallaham rose from his throne and towered over me. "Only one?"

"The others are still unconscious," said Isaias. "They fought well, but were overcome by numbers."

Zallaham looked me over without reverence. He touched the hilt of a tremendous broadsword at his belt, reconsidered and simply spat in my direction. "Get up," he snorted.

I got up, distressed to say the least and wavered unsteadily as I stood waiting to see what was in store for me.

"You have at least proved that you are not a Jarovian, or a Gorf for that matter. Neither would prefer groveling to death at the hands of a warlord." He gave me a glare that would have roasted a Draconian water buffalo. "What are you?"

"You have never heard of my tribe," I answered, quaking somewhat. "We are from a faraway land and wish to serve among your men at arms."

Zallaham frowned deeply. "Why would you wish to serve?"

"For the same reason that your own men serve," I replied, "to do battle, march against the enemy, rout and subjugate him—"

"My warriors fight out of their loyalty to me. You did not even know my name when captured, and your enemies are not the enemies of the Hurian empire. Speak, and do not lie to me. Why do you wish to serve, and why were

you found creeping up the rear of the column in secret?"

"It is the way of my tribe—or, at least the way of my kind," I said nervously. "In our lands, far to the east of Huria—"

"To the east?" Zallaham grated in disbelief. "There is nothing to the east of Huria. Nothing but the wide waters and the end of the world." His eyes blazed angrily. "You lie!"

"No!" I cried, my mind working at lightning speed. "Wait. I am telling you the truth. Surely you have heard tales of men who cross the water in ships—floating vessels that move with the wind?"

"I have heard the tales," Zallaham grunted, "but I do not believe them. We have such vessels, but to cross the waters would mean death. The ships would plummet from the edge of the world and fall for eternity."

"That is what the men of my lands used to think until they sailed westward and found new land."

"You came in such a ship?" Zallaham did not sound convinced. He was observing me with the narrow-eyed look that a cat has before pouncing upon its prey. Yet it was too late to change my story, and I had to be consistent.

"Yes."

"How many came with you?" he snapped.

"Many, but only twelve survived. Our ship floundered on a reef. We were making good headway with a steady breeze when—"

"Enough!" said Zallaham with an impatient wave of his hand. "I do not believe you. But it is very strange. You didn't have to lie to me, and to lie to a warlord is death. Even you must know that much." He thought this over for a moment and came to a grudging decision. "I will forget that you lied to me—for the moment—because you still have not told me why you wish to fight for an army you know nothing about."

"I am a freeman—if I may so presume in your presence—and the freemen of the most eastern lands know no allegiance. They fight more often for gold than for ideals or out of loyalty. We have armies too, and such fighting men are welcome among them. They are allowed to come and go as they please, as long as they are present in time to do battle. And they share in the spoils."

"These armies must lose many battles by letting spies infiltrate their ranks," Zallaham replied doubtfully.

"Of what use is a spy?" I asked with feigned puzzlement. "Our war parties attack and destroy. The enemy knows as much. What more could a spy tell him?"

At this Zallaham laughed loudly, throwing back his head and drawing his sword. He raised the blade high over his head, seemingly to bring it down upon mine, but he stopped short of that, and returned it to its leather scabbard.

"Someday I will take my armies eastward," he said. "Over the waters. Those lands would be easy to conquer." He gave me a hard look. "It is at least true that you are not wise in the ways of this world. Or maybe you are making all this up. I do not know." He thumbed the handle of his sword, toying with the idea of taking my life it seemed. "I will let you live, I think," he said. "If you are lying, then it is a convincing lie because of the way you speak. If you are telling the truth, then you are ignorant and no more.

"I have sometimes thought that my own spies knew more of their art than was good for them. Maybe that is why they die so quickly. A stranger, or group of them speaking with your strange tongue might be able to deceive my enemies better than the finest of them." He paused a moment, apparently contemplating the decision he had just made. "Yes, you will do this for me. But don't expect gold in payment. The Jarovians will probably kill you, but if they don't, and you return with information I need, then I shall let you live."

I bowed low, practically bumping my forehead on the ground before me. "I shall be

glad to serve you in any way. But first I need to get a few facts straight. How many men do you have? How big an empire do they defend? How come you—"

Zallaham's sword jumped halfway out of its sheath. He flushed angrily and an unattractive frown cut across his face. Isaias grabbed the hood of my Hurian parka and twisted it around my throat, bringing a gurgling noise from deep within me. The three of us stood silently for a long three-count until Zallaham slapped his sword into its sheath and shoved his face into mine. "Your life will be measured in seconds if you choose ever again to worry information from me. It is not your place to interrogate. You are only to obey. Everything you know about my army and about my wants and needs will be what I choose to tell you. I don't intend to satisfy the curiosity of one who is very likely an enemy agent sent against me."

I forced my jaws tightly shut, afraid to speak again. Isaias let go of my parka and I took in a shallow breath of air. Zallaham turned and walked a short distance to a place where a blanket covered a pile of material. He drew the blanket back with a flourish, and looked at me narrowly. "What is this?" he demanded. The blanket had concealed our purloined supplies, guns, the glinting plastic of medical kits, ropes, ammunition...

"Gifts," I replied, bowing. "It is the freebooter's way."

Zallaham snorted and began disorganizing the pile with the toe of his boot. He seemed mistrustful of my supplies and unwilling to put himself in contact with them. Finally curiosity got the better of him and he stooped, gingerly removing a pistol from the pile which he looked over with distain. "There is nothing here but some obviously poisoned food, some unattractive garments and a few boobytrapped devices disguised as ornaments."

He faced me and used the pistol as a pointer to indicate me. I noted with alarm that his blunt forefinger was poked inside the trigger guard. "The people of the east must be very stupid to offer gifts to a leader of armies. Everyone knows the warlords are pursued by assassins who poison their food and who offer jewels which when worn slowly poison a man or send venom-tipped blades into his flesh."

"You should be careful with that," I said, flinching uncomfortably before the wavering muzzle of the old-style, double-action revolver. "It is a most dangerous—"

"Silence!" Zallaham roared. "You have been told to keep your tongue between your jaws, and yet you—"

The gun went off with a terrific bang and a vaporous cloud of sulfury-smelling smoke that

blurred my vision. The bullet hurtled past my left temple, struck something hard not far behind me, and sounded a high, mournful ricochet that angled away to silence.

Zallaham stood stupidly, mouth open, the gun held loosely in his hand. He came to his senses suddenly and flung away the pistol with wild desperation. His face changed from a sickly gray to an inflamed red, and his sword appeared in his hand as if by magic, cutting a speeding swath through the air toward my neck.

Perhaps it was my on the job training I received on Heliox that saved my life then. More likely it was some inbuilt mechanism for survival that allowed me to move far faster than I had ever moved in my life.

There was no time to think. No time for a charge of adrenaline to reach my tired muscles, no time even for my brain to send a hundred mile-an-hour signal the length of my body in time to make those muscles move. There was just a *click*, and I was under the sword stroke, a patch of my cranium shaved smooth.

But I was not saved yet. I had no faith that I could dodge another of those lightning-fast strokes, and had to rely solely on the hope that Zallaham's impulsiveness was at its end.

Life on Tuukar was obviously dependent upon impetuosity, fast reflexes, and a willingness to deal out death without hesitation.

With any of the army regulars I might not have stood a chance, but with Zallaham I hoped this would be different. To stay alive, a leader of men must be abrupt and lethal, but at the same time he must consider the consequences of his actions. He cannot on impulse throw his men into headlong battle and stay a leader long. Nor can he be brash enough to lob the head from every enemy he sees as much as he might like to do so. A monarch of war must be executioner, soldier, tactician, and diplomat, all of them at once. And all of these qualities must mingle together to make a leader, a warlord. I knew this. I only hoped Zallaham did too.

This speculation was not as lengthy as it seems. It came in a flash that gave me a brief hope for continued existence. But I have always believed that hope is a necessary ingredient for survival. Without it I might not have ducked fast enough. Without it Zallaham might not have paused as he did after the first stroke and given me time to distract him with words of reason.

"Wait," I said with a calmness I did not feel. "You are unhurt. The noisemaker is not an assassin's treachery, but a weapon that can destroy your enemies. I alone have the knowledge to make it work for you."

The sword suspended above my head crept slowly downward, threatening in an instant to

take on crushing speed if what I said did not convince the man who held it.

"I know many things, Zallaham, and I have brought with me strong medicine to aid you in your campaign against the Jarovians. If I may be permitted to—"

"You let the noisemaker bark without warning in my hands!" Zallaham's voice was like the roar of a lion.

"I tried to warn you, oh great and merciful Zallaham," I explained. A little flattery couldn't hurt, and at this point I needed all the help I could get.

Zallaham considered this briefly, his face losing some of its discoloration. He spat and to my surprise and considerable relief re-sheathed his sword without a word.

Zallaham turned to Isaias. "Gather up the noisemakers," he ordered. "If nothing else they seem to be made of good steel. I will have my forgers make a sword or two from them." He waved his hand at the pile. "Destroy everything else."

Isaias made a gesture and a group of soldiers stepped forward, rummaged through the pile for the pistols, and set what remained ablaze with an oily torch.

I got to my feet. "You can't do this!" I cried. "Don't you understand? The noisemakers are

weapons—they can win battles for you, Zallaham."

Zallaham looked at me with amazement in his eyes. The soldiers stopped in their tracks to see who dared tell their leader what he could or could not do. Once again fear crept up my spine as I met the warlord's gaze with a disarming smile.

I had a big mouth.

Incredibly, Zallaham did not draw his sword. He began a low rumbling laugh that rose in volume until it echoed throughout the encampment. Abruptly, however, his laughter stopped and he shot a penetrating scowl at me, his eyebrows bristling menacingly.

"You are either a very brave man or an idiot," he said with no attempt at flattering me. "Your mouth puts your life in peril before me twice, and when saved, you open it yet again. For some reason that is funny."

He lunged, taking up the front of my parka and lifting me from the ground with a singlehanded heave. He spoke in even tones: "Once more—only once more will I allow you to insult me. I do it because you made me laugh, and because your strange tongue might make you a fair spy—although that same tongue is a dangerously active one."

Without warning I was tossed to the ground.

"Leave my presence now, and do not expect to escape. You will find that leaving my throng will be more difficult than entering it. We deal harshly with deserters and for that reason have very few of them." As an afterthought he added: "I thought I had deserters two nights ago. Some scouts did not return from patrol. Of course, I know what happened to them now, and where you got your wulkins. Begone!"

I staggered off unescorted, cursing myself for the fool I had been. Zallaham was not some two-bit thug from the gutters of Heliox. He was the Warlord of Huria, and I would do well to keep that fact in mind before I goaded him into taking my head off at the third vertebra. I might be able to bully the other gang members with little fear of reprisals greater than a broken jaw, but Tuukar was not Heliox. Life was cheap here as testified by the fact that Zallaham had dismissed the deaths of three scouts without thought of vengeance. Yet when vengeance was dealt out I doubted it would be more merciful than death following torture by fire.

Henson and Punky were sitting up when I found them. They looked groggy and uncomfortable, but did not appear to have been seriously injured. Neither of them rose at my presence, but I was inclined to overlook this breach of protocol. I fell to the most

comfortable appearing part of ground I could see, and tried to let blissful sleep come.

Henson saddled over, voice eager. "What happened?"

"You're in the army," I grumbled. "I think."

From somewhere across the camp the sound of gunfire cackled. I started once, caught myself and lay back. The fire, of course, had just consumed the last of our ammunition. Great. Perhaps they would all come looking for me now, seeking to drag me from this restful bed of gravelly loam.

I was too tired to care.

Planet Busters Chapter 10

"The task force?" Lourdes exclaimed. "But they're the ones who are supposed to protect the third worlds from would-be conquerors."

Cardip sat back down in his chair. His expression of satisfaction indicated that he enjoyed Lourdes' reaction and had expected it. He flicked the data projector off and our bank figures faded from the wall. "That's the beauty of the system," he said. "The feds have got everything turned around backwards. Rather cynical of them, wouldn't you say? But if you'll try to put your surprise aside for a moment, you'll see that the task force has far more significance when viewed as a weakness than as a strength."

I thought back on the attack on the Port of Paradise, of the power unleashed by the fighters and the quick razing of a large, vital city. I had seen enough of the federation's so-called weakness, and I had left before I could witness whatever finale was in the making. And that was—what?—only an hour ago. Who could say what was happening back on Marion at this very moment?

"Explain this weakness."

Cardip saw the disbelief on my face and heard it in the tone of my voice. He got up and returned our bank records to the file cabinet, at

the same time removing another folder from within. The cabinet, slammed shut and Cardip plugged another sheet of celluloid into the projector.

This time when he threw the switch, a series of dark columns appeared on the wall, half-focused in the still lighted room. "These are smuggled copies of secret federation documents. Nothing much really—" Cardip sniffed nonchalantly. "—just a comprehensive compilation of the components of the armada."

"I've seen such a list before." I said. "The government prints a million copies a month to thrill the glass-eyed eggheads who wave the federal banner."

Cardip smiled broadly. "I like your way of putting that," he said admiringly. "You've the makings of a fine agent. I can see that now."

"You are too kind."

"Not at all. And you're right about the list; it's printed and distributed all over the galaxy. With one exception this list is identical to the one you've read. Look at the lower right." I looked and saw to the side, apart from the meticulous listing of heavy duty warships and other war paraphernalia, all of which were neatly numbered, a single, short column.

Blackhawk Stratostrafers	40
C-150 Transports	2
B-10 Coasters	52

"What does this represent?"

"That's it. The task force—all of it." Cardip beamed gleefully. He killed the projector and leaned on his elbows over the desk. "Ninety-four ships."

"But they must have more," Lourdes objected. "I've seen films with more than forty blackhawks on maneuvers."

"And I've seen more than fifty-two B-10's at one time," I told him. "On Rigel IV. They weren't heavily armed though."

"They weren't federal boats either," Cardip explained. "Those federation worlds are semi-autonomous and have their own standing armies. The feds have very little that they can call their own. Just some incredibly expensive world crunchers which they can't use for their own overkill, and a small planet busting force. The rest of what could be called "the federation" consists of a bunch of pea-brained paper-pushers who alone don't amount to a hill of beans."

"So you're arming against the task force alone."

Cardip grimaced. "Yes, but I'm afraid I've oversimplified things a bit. Ninety-four ships

may not sound like much, but the task force is a crack outfit. Those blackhawks, as you know carry a tremendous striking potential. The B-10s are fast and deadly, and can annihilate a city in a couple of passes—even without atomics. Every piece of equipment they use is of the utmost sophistication. And the transports each carry twelve thousand armored troops."

"The task force no longer sounds weak." Lourdes observed.

"It isn't. But it does have weaknesses which you will learn about later—after you are trained."

"You've mentioned training before," Lourdes said. "Training for what?"

"Training to become effective agents of the Antigovernmental Agency of Sovereign Worlds. And I must caution you that such training will be expensive."

"What else do we get for our money?"

"Possibly Marion back."

"And if we don't pay?" I asked.

"Then the possible becomes impossible. You'll never go home again."

Lourdes and I didn't have to think long about it. We just exchanged knowing glances.

"We'll join then," I said simply.

"I knew you would," Cardip replied.

Planet Busters Chapter 11

When I awoke it was night and a fine rain was sifting down from a starless sky. Throughout the encampment fires glowed dully, sending a thick whiff of smoldering fuel through the air. The temperature was comparatively balmy, well above the freezing point, but having lain inactive for hours, I felt frozen stiff.

I rose and made my way to the nearest fire where a dozen of Zallaham's men, including Henson and Punky, were sprawled sleeping. The embers were quite hot enough to vaporize the tiny droplets of rain, but for good measure I stoked the fire with a few sooty lumps of bituminous coal which lay in a pile to the side of the fire.

Above the coals, suspended by a rough wooden tripod, was an iron kettle out of which protruded the handle of a large, wooden ladle. My stomach leaped to life, churning with the sound of a plucked spring. It had been some time since I'd eaten, and hunger coursed over me like a living thing. Lifting the handle of the spoon, I raised a portion of the kettle's contents to my mouth and tasted.

A strong, gamy odor of animal fat filled my senses and an oily substance slicked over my

tongue. Pretty crude fare, this Tuukarian stew, but with luck I could keep the stuff down.

Ten minutes later I turned from the fire with an uneasy fullness in my gut. Henson lay at my feet, mummied up in some sleeping furs. I liberated the outermost covering from my sleeping comrade and lay down as close to the fire as possible, luxuriating in its steady warmth. Almost immediately I fell into a sound, dreamless sleep.

Dawn broke with alarming suddenness and there was a rush of activity through the camp. Fires were robbed of any unburned coal and stirred to nothingness, while all around materials were packed onto litters and men made ready to march. There was an air of excitement everywhere that made me very curious. But an unsatisfied curiosity is a sign of good health on Tuukar as I was soon to discover.

"What's happening? Where are we going?" I asked, stepping in front of a sizable warrior who was on his way to some appointed task. "Are we going to—akk!" I was knocked flat by the brute who broke his cocky stride only after having walked directly over me.

A handful of soldiers dropped what they were doing and looked on, waiting to see how the beardless newcomer would react to this

affront. "Up, you, stranger who asks questions," the warrior snarled.

"I, Kornuk, challenge you!"

"Who, me?" I asked, looking side to side to see what possible explanation there could be for all this.

"You!" The man was beside himself with rage. A short knife flashed in his hand and he took a heavy step forward.

"Kornuk!" a voice shouted. "Hands only. He has no blade."

Kornuk scowled, saw that what the other man said was true, and grinned, dropping his knife.

Then he was diving for me.

Without thinking, I reacted. I rolled out of his way and came up on my feet just as the other man recovered from his leap. We were suddenly face to face, circling in a low crouch.

I sized him up. Kornuk was a big man with a mouthful of ugly teeth and a crown of dirty black hair. His muscles bulged under the heavy skin clothing in a manner that seemed to prophesy my demise. There was no use kidding myself. Kornuk was an exceptionally strong man, hardened by years of marching and battle, and I was in a very tight spot. But strong as he was, he could not use his knife, and recalling how he had jumped to take advantage, I judged him as the kind of man who relied on such a

weapon. That might make things less hopeless for me. "Just stay out of his grasp," I told myself. "Let him come in and box because if he gets those big meathooks on you, you're dead."

Kornuk jumped, expecting me to lock horns with him, strength against strength. I let him think as much, voicing a battle cry as I rushed to meet him.

But Kornuk was disappointed. My cry was a feint. I turned suddenly out of his reach and flicked out a quick left jab that he only partially blocked. Kornuk spun bellowing, a good-sized mouse appearing under his right eye. He stopped, touched the lump with incredulous fingers, and lunged once more to the attack. Again I turned, this time to the right, struck, and got out once more untouched. By chance Kornuk blocked this one enough to prevent it from stunning him, but the deflected fist had met skin against bone and managed to open a cut that bled freely into his left eye.

The onlookers grunted in a togetherly way, but did not cheer. Apparently fisticuffs was something new here, although I couldn't have expected them to be impressed by that small cut and the limited measure of blood that flowed from it.

The wound did not go unnoticed to Kornuk, however. He roared in fury, somehow having the presence of mind to change his tactics. He

now came in swinging in the hope that his powerful arms would crash through any defense I could offer. A good plan. The only thing he overlooked was his inexperience.

Obviously the mode of weaponless combat around here relied heavily on brute strength and strangle holds. Boxing was not a fine art as evidenced by Kornuk's foolish right lead. A deadly error on his part. Blinded on one side, the defending arm witlessly thrown aside, his jaw presented a target I could not resist.

It was a blindingly fast punch, perfectly timed and savagely executed. The force of it was taken up by my whole body, but only a small part of Kornuk's. His head snapped with a spray of sweat and saliva, and his stocky body crashed to the ground with a beefy thud.

There was an appreciative roar from the onlookers, whom I turned to face. Kornuk was clearly unloved among this crowd. "Well," I said with a sniff, dusting off my hands. "Do I have to kill him, or is the fight over?"

"You'd better kill him, if he isn't dead already," someone shouted. "Kornuk will be in a bad way when he comes to."

I had to agree that for the sake of my own safety Kornuk's death would be extraordinarily convenient, but somehow I could not bring myself to raise a hand against the helpless man. If I had wanted to play on those terms, I would

have shot him outright, even though it meant losing the pistol to Zallaham or one of his cronies. Now perhaps I would pay for that act of mercy.

Kornuk was lying face down in the dirt and appeared to show little sign of life. Well, I thought, maybe he wouldn't get up. Maybe that shot on the jaw had proved just a bit too much for him. But, no, Kornuk stirred, commenced to groan, and after a few unsuccessful attempts managed to regain his feet. He stood tottering for a few moments before his eyes fastened on me.

"Well, cornshucks," I said offhandedly, "are you ready to answer a civil question when it is put to you, or would you rather have more of the same?"

He looked me over expressionlessly, and rubbed his chin. He hesitated a moment, looked fearfully at his comrades at arms, and returned his attention to me. "We march today," he grumbled. "Against the Jarovians. That is all any of us knows."

"That is all I asked," I said simply, and walked away amid a chorus of jeers directed at my vanquished foe. I'd won the first round, but I wasn't foolish enough to believe that Kornuk was through with me. At the first chance he would try to settle the score, probably by

cracking me over the head while I slept. I'd have to be very careful from now on.

Kornuk's information, so dearly won, did not even prove to be accurate, although I couldn't blame him for that. The attack was called off for some reason and we were allowed an extra day's rest. The excess time didn't hurt anyway. News of my prowess had the chance to spread, and the other warriors accorded me some semblance of respect. I got hold of a sword and was allowed to carry on my business without interference.

Henson and Punky put the time to good use as well. While I was snooping around the camp they banged some heads together and used their off-planet gambling expertise to lay the foundations of a very tidy monopoly on the army's drug trade. Starting with one half *teeko* of lamota, which Henson had taken from the scout, they increased their holdings one thousand fold with half the camp grumbling but unable to act for fear of losing whatever lamota they owned in the form of company stocks. It was a risky business for newcomers to be sure, but the big investors in the lamota trade were enough to assure the safety of the company's executives.

The following morning we marched off the plains and onto a land of low shrubbery and rolling hills. In the distance, great volcanoes

spouted smoke and flame, and the air was thick with the reek of sulfurous cinder which mixed with the normal stench of Tuukar.

I was soon to learn of at least one thing that added to the planet's ungodly smell: bats. At least they looked like bats. We passed cliffs and occasionally there were caves from which boiled clouds of flying creatures which to me seemed more mammal-like than bird-like.

Convergent evolution.

Surely Tuukar didn't have any indigenous mammals—only imports like the horses—but animals everywhere evolve similarly in similar conditions and from what I could judge from a distance, these creatures were bat-like to a flaw apart from not appearing to be nocturnal. Their cave guano added its pungent stench to air as we passed.

Their presence, of course, offered at the time nothing more important than a moment of personal reflection on my part. I never would have guessed the role these bat caves might later play in the mission I had taken on.

Zallaham rode at the head of the army, not on a wulkin, but a gloriously maned creature which I recognized from pictures I had seen. A horse. There were ten or fifteen of these, all at the lead, and all ridden by the higher ranking lieutenants of Zallaham's guard. After a few hours of marching, Isaias fell back from the

warlord's party and gave me orders. I was to march with a gaunt, filmy-toothed creature named Fulgor the Wise. No doubt some kind of preparation for the intelligence operation Zallaham wanted me to carry out.

Fulgor and I trudged silently onward for a mile or two until out of boredom and curiosity I introduced myself. "You don't say much, Fulgor," I said. "Tell me, if you are so wise, why are you walking?" Fulgor chuckled, a high, effeminate laugh, wormy and unsettling. He took a deep breath.

"The wise are few of words," he began. "Often it is said that the silent man is at a loss for words or knowledge. This is not necessarily so. He may be in contemplation, or thinking greater thoughts than he could adequately convey to his lesser fellows. More likely, he may know many truths that serve to still his tongue. Among such truths is the knowledge that most of what is said in this life is of little consequence. Would the constant wagging of his tongue serve any purpose? Nay. An enlightened individual knows that a single word can produce more fruit than the chatter of an entire nation. And he knows, too, that action is holier than words."

"I am impressed," I said, stifling an immediate impulse to upchuck.

"You should be," replied Fulgor, swelling visibly, "for this is your first lesson."

"Know you that as a spy it is words that will betray you—your own words—while actions, your own again, will save you. To say as little as possible while gaining as much information as needed is the task of all Zallaham's agents. Learn this well, outlander, and remember it."

"I will," I promised, "but you haven't told me why you are walking. Are the Wise Men feared by the mighty and deprived of rights? Surely your rank is high or you would not be trusted to train the chief's spies—but if this is so, why aren't you riding with Zallaham's lieutenants?"

Fulgor looked uncomfortable. He quickened his pace and gave a couple of sideward glances to see who was within earshot. "Perhaps I shouldn't answer that question." He bit his lip and said firmly: "No, I shan't."

I matched his pace, licking my lips thoughtfully. "I don't see what you have to lose," I told him. "I plan to do my spying on the Jarovians, not on you. And anyway I've got it worse than you any day of the Tuukarian calendar."

At this Fulgor became genuinely angry. He jerked to a momentary halt, but returned quickly to marching so not to attract attention. "You? You? More downtrodden than I?" he

hissed. "If you were not new in this army, I would take you for an imbecile. You say you are not spying against me, but what assurance do I have of this? Don't answer: I'll tell you. I saw your audience before the warlord. Zallaham couldn't have planned that to deceive me for lack of originality, and he didn't know I was watching. But I have been spied upon before, and will be again."

"Still," I protested, "my position is far from more attractive than yours."

"You are not spied upon. You are unimportant and unworthy of such expenditures of time and effort. You shall be sent to wrest information from the Jarovians and probably will be uncovered and slain and that will be the end of it. Never will the warlord's thoughts return to you."

"I guess sometimes a fellow doesn't really appreciate just how lucky he is," I replied, unconvinced.

"That is very true," Fulgor agreed, bitterness tinging his voice. "For me the situation is entirely different. Zallaham's thoughts will forever return to me. Whenever he requires the skill that I possess, whenever, for instance, his thoughts turn to his herds of horses on the plains, which through my knowledge of alchemy are kept as a pure strain."

He threw his hand toward the horizon of the army's head. There were admittedly some very fine animals out there. Strong, sleek and proud. Zallaham could be seen far ahead, mounted atop a magnificent palomino, whose fine, even lines gave the indication of both speed and grace.

"You are unquestionably admiring Zallaham's mount, are you not?" asked Fulgor.

"I am," I confessed. "A magnificent beast."

"I should know!" Fulgor boasted. "It was I who treated him against the sweep of plague. It was I who drugged the box-headed stallions so not to sire a box-headed colt for the Warlord of Huria."

"You did a fine job."

"Too fine," lamented Fulgor. "I know too much. Too much that is useful. It is I who drugs the horses, who mouths the holy incantations; it is I who deciphers the directives of the Hurian priests that Becerro may be won to our favor. There are too few who can conjure the meaning of the sacred runes, too few to do any of these things, so I am haunted in all seasons by demands with no hope of getting what a simple recruit can get by simply gaining status of a warrior."

"Fulgor, you old fraud, you." I looked him in the eye. "You're not a wise man. You're a child. Here you are up to your neck in woe and worry,

and all you can see fit to do is unload it on a complete stranger, whose interest in your comparatively trifling problems fluctuates between indifference and outright boredom. Wake up, my man—did it ever occur to you to phase yourself out, make yourself less useful? No, I don't suppose it did. That would mean giving up your position as top dog amid this pack of intellectual atavists, a dubious distinction to begin with."

"I see no reason to be insulting," Fulgor snorted, nettled.

"Then quit complaining. You said it yourself. Action, not words. Teach Zallaham to read the runes and he'll have one less reason to bother you."

"That task would be totally beyond his capacity. It takes years of study with the priests to unlock the secrets of the tablets. Even then it is not allowed for—"

"Then figure out something else, if you don't like it. Train some peasants to take care of the horses and do the other tasks."

After a pause Fulgor said: "What you suggest has already been done, in a way at least, but the men I train are few and do not assist me in any case. They are held in reserve, by the priests. None of them want the job as wise man in the legions, but in the event that I commit some treachery or die, they are bound

to take it. It is a dreary paradox I suppose to be essential and dispensable at the same time."

"I'll trade places with you, Fulgor." I put up a restraining hand. "No, don't argue it. You got it tough, I got it tough, okay? That a boy. Even Steven."

I tried to keep the conversation as natural-sounding as possible, playing on his oafish ego to supply certain information I wanted. "Yeah, Fulgor, it's a rough place, Tuukar. Are your priests much consolation? Frankly I don't know the first thing about Hurian religion. I hope that isn't a sin."

"It is," said Fulgor without hesitation. "A mortal one. You of all people had best repent."

"I shall," I lied. "Will it be necessary to meet with a priest?"

"What!" Fulgor cried. "How dare you suggest defiling the holy ones with your presence!"

"I'm sorry; I did not know."

"The priests are the holy mediums of Becerro, the one god. They are placed in this world for one purpose: to rule in all the affairs of man. They are not here to console the wretched or to bless the faithful. To approach one—lord on high!—to touch one would bring calamity upon the nation, blight the crops, sour the milk, make the teeth fall from the mouths of young—"

"Are you saying that they tell Zallaham what to do?" I asked, and tried to keep the disbelief from coloring my speech. Zallaham didn't look the sort to take orders from anybody. Not even Becerro himself.

Fulgor scoffed, contempt painting his ugly face. "Ah, he pretends to obey, but he doesn't. He is a heathen and an unbeliever and shall pay for his sins. I shall see to that!"

"Why, Fulgor!" I cried. "You surprise me. For a man of few words you say much indeed. Your mouth runneth over. You are talking rebellion."

"What of it?" Fulgor challenged. "Do you profess courage enough to tell Zallaham?"

"Why shouldn't I? He'd probably reward me handsomely."

Fulgor laughed. "That's what you think."

"Doesn't accept freelance work, eh?"

"I don't know what you mean, but one does not tattle to Zallaham and live. Not unless one has been asked to do such a thing. You were very lucky yesterday. Zallaham must have been in a good mood."

"But after my death he would come looking for you, wouldn't he?" I insisted.

"I hadn't considered that," admitted Fulgor, "But since your only reward for betraying me would be an exceedingly swift death, I see little need to worry myself unduly over such a

possibility. Truthfully, in such a case I doubt that he would have me touched. My replacements are ready, true, but they are far away, and he needs me. He might keep an eye on me for a time, however."

"Good points," I conceded, thoughtfully. "But enough of this. Aren't you suppose to train me for the task ahead?"

"That," said Fulgor, "is a problem."

"Why?"

"A spy is in God's hands," he explained. "Therefore he must be anointed in holy ceremony by a wise man in order to win favor with The Benevolent One. But a wise man can see in advance when a man's conversion would be nothing more than a ploy for personal gain. Such would be the case with you, and I cannot anoint a heathen. To do so would be to bring His wrath upon us. The sky would fall, the seas part. The mountains would spill scorching destruction across the land, and men would be cast into the fires like husks. All would perish."

"I can understand your concern, Fulgor," I said as respectfully as I could. "But you need not worry about anointing me. I'll take my chances without the appeasement of the Benevolent One. What I had in mind was, well—don't you have some kind of advice that's more on the practical side?"

Fulgor made no outward gesture at this, but I could see that I had struck another raw place in his gut. His pace quickened and his voice became lower pitched and viperous. "You are like Zallaham," he spat. "He too would have me abandon the path of righteousness. To speak of such things is testimony of such lack of faith that it is a wonder Becerro has let either of you live as long as you have. Yet since you ask for such counsel, I shall give it to you."

Fulgor paused as I inched closer, very interested. Fulgor grinned and said suddenly: "Lie! Lie to the heathen warlord!"

I stepped back, disappointed. "What good would that do me?"

"What good? You are a fool! It would prolong your life."

"How?" I said unconvinced but warming to his advice quickly.

"Go only to the fringe of the Jarovian army. Do not confront them and expect to be as lucky as you were with Zallaham. Instead observe. Observe and make an informed guess as to their next move. Then you can return unharmed and tell him what you may."

"A novel idea," I whispered. I was hardly impressed by this line of reasoning. Fulgor wasn't much of a tactician. But aside from this, I found myself wondering what motive he

could possibly have, so I pretended interest. "What's in this for you?"

"Zallaham can hardly be expected to profit from an arrangement like that, and where he finds defeat, I find glory."

"You are not being clear."

"That is because you don't understand the holy quest of a Wise Man. You couldn't."

"Try me."

"We are missionaries, not mercenaries," said Fulgor with an aloof raising of his horny nose. "Ah," he crooned, "to convert an entire nation of heretofore heathens. The fierce Jarovians! The thought is almost more than I can bear to ponder."

"Yeah, because you know you'll have trouble coaxing your own dead body to get up and do the converting. Tell me, wise man, how do you plan to survive Zallaham's downfall?"

"I have given that a great deal of prayer and thought," Fulgor explained with the fearlessness of the faithful, "and I have come to the conclusion that this one task is the true mission of my life. And since the Holy One alone grants us each his own destiny, He will also insure that mine is fulfilled. To put it simply: Becerro will protect me."

"That's all well and fine," I said, marveling at his deductive prowess and sparkling logic,

"but being a heathen, as you say, who will protect me?"

"Your lies will protect you, as the Great Lie of all the heathen protects its charges. But there will be enough truth in your information to make the warlord think that you are not to blame for his first defeats. You may even be able to make several trips before he becomes suspicious."

"And then?"

"Ah, then," Fulgor replied, licking his chops happily. "Then I will again enter the situation, with a serum to bring the truth from you, as is always done when treachery is suspected."

"You have a truth serum? One that works?"

It appeared that I had underestimated the technical advancement of this planet and its Wise Men.

"Indeed," affirmed Fulgor proudly. "Its use is foolproof. I simply promise the prisoner that it will no longer be administered when he has told the truth."

"I take it this "truth serum" has some painful side effects."

Fulgor answered with a grin.

Planet Busters Chapter 12

Harry Cardip led us courteously down a huge, ribbed chamber that connected various compartments of the ship. "What's the name of this liner anyway?" I asked. "A crate this big I must have heard of."

Cardip paused and smiled. "Indeed you have, my friend," he said. "And it occurs to me that I haven't properly welcomed you aboard." He stopped in the middle of the causeway and beamed with joy. The expression on his face was like that of a thief who had just pulled off a devilishly elegant jewel heist. "Welcome aboard the Seychelles!"

The Seychelles! I should have known. I could now picture in my memory the contours of that famous profile emerging from the rusty exterior. I looked at Cardip. "I believe it, I said, "but the Seychelles was a luxury liner wasn't it? And she was destroyed by terrorists!"

"Lies!" cried Cardip, his voice cracking. "We requisitioned her from the feds. Quite without their permission, naturally. And not one life was lost in the effort."

"But I read that over four thousand vacationing Grangorians were mercilessly slaughtered and the ship vaporized."

"Lies!" cried Cardip, his voice again striking that falsetto note. "Half those aboard were anti-

govs and of the remainder, four hundred defected, including the skipper and crew. The rest were placed aboard life boats and set adrift. The feds made them out to be survivors and concocted the rest of the story. They came after us later and strafed the exterior of the ship, but they had nothing within a hundred light years that was really capable of destroying a boat this size. Can you believe they took us on with Blackhawk Stratostrafers? We wiped them out and escaped with only a little hair mussing. Don't let the appearance of the Seychelles fool you. The damage is only cosmetic, paint burned off, chrome trim gone, couple of towers down... She's in mechanically perfect shape, with the original expert crew intact as I mentioned."

Again I was reminded that things are not necessarily as they appear. Harry Cardip, apparent dork, goofy-looking guy with horn-rimmed glasses, who at best resembled a certified public accountant, was commander of the rebel forces. And the fabulous Seychelles hid beneath a pitted metallic skin with gray primer paint and no chrome.

We arrived at a large door at the end of the chamber and Cardip entered it. As Lourdes and I followed we could see men sitting around a small table which was covered with papers. They rose respectfully as Harry Cardip, galactic nurd and rebel leader walked in.

It was a curious sight—augmented by the fact that these men dressed in khaki fatigues, sleeves rolled up, were definitely tough-looking hombres. Lourdes and I were introduced to them and when the introductions were over I made the mistake of being a little overly flippant.

It was a pardonable error in any other circumstance. But among these men it was a fairly unforgivable slap in the face.

"A pleasure to meet you all!" I said. And then with a bit too much bravado, "*Viva la causa!*"

Cardip stepped deftly aside as the biggest of them decked me.

I sat halfway up in a swirling haze. Through the misty fringes of consciousness I could see Lourdes with a look of disgust on her face, scowling down at me, but I also noticed that her right hand was warily knit into a hard, tight fist. Even though I was the one whose comment was offensive, she was not likely to suffer the same humiliation without loosening a few rebel teeth in the process.

Halfway out of the swirling haze I realized what my sin had been. I, a mere initiate, who up until a few hours ago had been lounging around on the beach, swilling rum, romancing my wife, indulging in practically every minor vice, free of the repression of the federation, had just tried

to breeze my way into the elite rebel forces. These men had been suffering for years on this and other galactic voyages, risking their lives, missing their families, doing without good food and booze, and in comes some ungrateful slob who smells like suntan lotion mouthing revolutionary slogans.

Harry Cardip smiled down at me.

"Your education is beginning already," he said happily.

"I'm learning fast," I replied. It hurt to move my jaw.

"No, you're not." said Cardip. "You're a long ways from knowing the first thing about fighting. Sergeant Golpes has only given you a sample of how tough this training can be. And we only have a few weeks."

"A few weeks? Have you something in mind for us to do already? I mean all figured out and planned?"

Cardip looked at me. "We like to keep organized from time to time," he said sarcastically. "And plans? We like to have them. It helps to have an idea of what you're doing.

"The way you have conducted your affairs with such gay abandon is a luxury we, as revolutionaries can't really afford. But don't worry. We know that to change the deep-seated kind of irresponsibility which has characterized your life is impossible. We won't try to change

you. But we will help you to overcome some of your infantile behavior for long enough stretches to make you useful. Get up."

Lourdes was giving me one of her bland looks. I never could figure out what that look meant but I had seen it often enough. I didn't have a clue as to what she was thinking when she wore that expression. The last time I saw it was when I caught the north end of the beach house on fire. I had been smoking in bed. We had a hell of a time putting it out and she wound up doing most of the work.

That fire wouldn't have done as much damage if I hadn't been so hopelessly drunk at the time. I kept falling down and spilling the buckets of sea water. I don't think she ever forgave me that one. I was on my feet now. Still a little wobbly. Sergeant Golpes' right jab had been a good one.

I found myself staring down at a lot of papers on the table. They looked like blueprints of some huge building complex.

"Have you ever been a prisoner?" asked Cardip.

"Well..." I began. Lourdes interrupted.

"He's been arrested by his own constables half dozen times. Mostly for being drunk and disorderly."

"So you have a drinking problem, Mr. Lai? You are an alcoholic?" Cardip asked.

"Oh, no!" I said. "Just a little social drinking...now. At one time I did used to over-indulge from time to time, however. I admit it. Openly. In fact, on Marion there is now one of the finest rehab programs in the galaxy. I started it. We deal in all kinds of rehabilitation: smoking, substance abuse, weight problems, mania, all kinds of things. Furthermore we..."

Cardip cut me off. "You have none of those programs on Marion now, Mr. Lai," he reminded me. He was looking in a folder which had my name on it. "This report tells a lot of things. But I am surprised—not anywhere does it say that you're a wino."

"A wino! Mr. Cardip! I'm reformed, believe me. I had a problem and now it's over. It was tough going too—after all, I'm part Indian."

Cardip looked at me with his eyebrows raised and then peered back into the folder. "This part of the report is definitely complete. Your genetic-ethno history. Let's see. Blood samples and DNA analysis indicate Mediterranean, Slavic, Norse and African ancestry, as well as a bit of Chinese, Vietnamese, and Burmese, but there is nothing here indicating any North American Indian ancestors. You seem to be a good deal of everything *but* Indian .."

Cardip looked back up out of the folder and clucked his tongue. "Shame on you, Mr. Lai.

Not only do you make racial slurs, but you use them for excuses. Your wife's profile indicates that she is almost a third aboriginal American: Yaqui, Aztec, Apache. Does she drink?"

"Not much," I admitted. I was blushing hotly. I had always guessed that those stories my uncle Charlie had told me about the family past were lies. He was always a bull-thrower. But his stories always seemed a fair explanation as to why I used to find myself being thrown in the drunk tank at nine o'clock some Wednesday mornings.

I noticed that Cardip was studying me intently. "Mr. Lai," he said, "we take a dim view of racism around here." All his peppiness was gone. He was really serious. I was appalled.

"A racist!?" I stuttered. "Me?"

"It's contrary to the revolutionary spirit, don't you know," said Cardip. "Causes hatefulness, bloodshed, makes people think that they are somehow better than others. Have you ever heard the expression Grank?" He didn't give me time to answer. "Your more recent profile says you're part Grangorian. Did you ever live on Grangor?"

"No," I answered. "And I'm not a racist. Sure, I have prejudices like everyone else; can't help it. But I know the difference between right and wrong and I try to understand and rise

above my primitive deficiencies like any one with a conscience and a modern galactic view. That crack about Indians was unfair, I understand that. I've been using that as a defense mechanism for years. I didn't mean it to be racist."

"I don't think you did either," Cardip replied. "But you're going to have to learn to stop being stupid—stop making excuses. Excuses are something you will never hear from any of these men, ever. If they fail they each know that that failure was only in spite of their own best efforts. Under such conditions excuses are never needed, ever. I have no illusions about you. Your background is too hopelessly undisciplined and self-indulgent. But I think despite this we can make you somewhat useful and stop you from blaming the Indians every time you get drunk."

Lourdes beamed. She was enjoying this, every minute of it. It was exactly the kind of dressing down she had always wanted to give me but never could. She had her own weaknesses, couldn't express herself as well as Cardip anyway. She'd always lose control just when she was getting to me and start raising her voice. That's how I was always able to win. She'd tire out after a while, and if I just ignored her, I wouldn't start yelling myself. Then I'd stop and look at her condescendingly and say,

"Now dear, obviously you have lost control of your senses. Perhaps we can discuss it at a later date." It never got either of us anywhere except that it kept me from having to face up to my flaws of character.

But Harry Cardip was dealing with me on a different level. Unlike myself, and I guess Lourdes to some extent, Harry Cardip was an adult. He had an air about him despite his outward appearance which projected confidence and authority, not to mention no nonsense.

"Let's talk about your other arrests," he said. "What were the offenses? It seems that as Prime Chancellor of Marion, you would be immune to any kind of arrest at all."

"No one is above the law on Marion," I said proudly. "Even the Prime Chancellor. I made that *into* the law. I was subject to all the rules governing my subjects. It could be no other way and remain a free society. Naturally I had friends who kept things hushed up when I was thrown in the slammer."

"Outside of public drunkenness, what were the other offenses you were arrested for?" he repeated.

"There were only two non-alcohol related arrests," I said.

"Go ahead," he said, impatiently.

"Well, one was for causing a disturbance—you know, disturbing the peace. Lourdes and I were having a little spat."

Cardip looked at Lourdes, surprised. He had already formed an opinion of her I guess.

"You might add that I wasn't even there," she replied. Cardip seemed relieved.

"I was going to mention that," I said. "I didn't *know* you weren't there. And I did apologize to the Petersons."

Cardip looked at me questioningly.

"The neighbors," I explained. "They complained to the police. I'm afraid I did make such a fool of myself. You see I'm so deeply in love with my wife." I looked adoringly at Lourdes. She rolled her eyes.

"I've listened to enough of this sophomoric mush!" cried Cardip. "What was the other arrest for?"

"The other was nothing," I assured him. "I was taken into house arrest for my own protection. We had some union trouble for a while there, but I cleared it right up. Everyone was mad at the time, but I made things right."

"So that is the extent of your criminal behavior?" asked Cardip.

"Every bit of it," I promised.

"That's too bad," he said. "You could use more experience. Take a look at these blueprints," he said. "This is Rogrove Prison on

the planet Heliox. It's going to be your home for a while.'

"You're going to throw me in jail?" I gasped.

"Exactly. Unless of course you want to go back and live on Marion with all your buddies from the federation, and your grateful subjects."

"I think I'll wait a while for the situation there to stabilize," I answered. "Not that my subjects wouldn't be happy to see me—anytime!" I added defensively. "But what is my being thrown into jail going to do for the revolution?"

Cardip explained the plan and one of the biggest problems facing the anti-govs. Although there was an overabundance of dissatisfied, oppressed peoples throughout the galaxy willing to do almost anything to defeat the Federation and liberate the galaxy, there were few revolutionaries to carry out the actual fighting, the raw bone-crunching, skull-splitting, man-to-man combat still needed to win battles on a hundred planets. As I had recently learned, the federations' technological power was dispersed over the galaxy so thinly that rebel forces had already been able to win battles using only the most primitive, nontechnical means. Soldiers armed only with knives and clubs had already been able to overrun and destroy poorly financed, ill-protected strongholds on scores of planets. The

losses were great for the anti-govs but so many strikes across the galaxy on so many planets had left the feds confused. Chaos would suddenly erupt on one planet, just as the Federation was sending ships on a long journey to quell an outbreak on another. They couldn't keep up with it. While they defended the front door, hordes of soldiers were breaking down the back, and others climbing in the windows. Slowly, but surely, the Federation's power had been wearing down. But now the tide was turning in favor of the Federation.

So many men had been killed on the rebel side that their advantages weren't as great. To compound this there were few new recruits. In this antiseptic galaxy there were only so many men hard enough to serve as fighting men. To save the galaxy from the oppression of the fascist federation swine, men were needed, thousands of men. Men who were already soldiers. And not just soldiers, but soldiers who loved to fight—lived, to fight.

Cardip knew just where to get them. It seemed a simple matter at the time for me to go pick up and deliver. Then the Federation would be smothered with a million soldiers crawling all over its back like ants. And the theory went that as the feds slapped and cursed and busied themselves with such an impossible and annoying situation, the rebels would gather

their technological resources and concentrate on their more technologically advanced strongholds.

The scheme seemed to have been effective up until a few months ago when the numbers of battle-worthy infantry soldiers and commandos had diminished. Too many of the best fighters had been killed. The rebel forces couldn't afford to lose any more of these men. They were needed for the more sophisticated and cleverly orchestrated attacks: the slick infiltration, the quiet but deadly night attacks in the very bosom of the Federation.

The commandoes were the saber, the soldiers the club. I was thrilled to be a part of it, although I must admit I liked the sneakier and classier flavor of the commando forces. This job was reserved for another guy, however. His name was Peso Jack.

Planet Busters Chapter 13

The army marched routinely until the sun was low in the sky. The land flattened again, but did not return to the barren desert of the days before; stout bushes studded the land and between them grew a wiry tangle of yellow grass which grasped and pulled at man and beast alike. The air was quiet although still icy, and the sun beat down sharply enough to burn the skin while at the same time refusing to bring any relief from the cold.

The acres of soldiers were halted by some undetermined signal, and a ritual of calls was passed from front to rear. There was an uneven surge as men and wulkins loped forward while others withdrew. Within minutes a war party of selected combatants stood in readiness at the lead.

"Go forward!"

I turned to see Fulgor motioning at me. I had taken my own pace hours before and thought I had left him a good ways behind. He must have labored to reach me for the last few hours.

"Go forward," he repeated, arriving at my side puffing angrily. "This attack is but a means of confusion to give the spies cover."

"So soon?" I asked, apprehension rising blackly within me. Now that the time had come, I realized that I was not looking forward to

losing the protection of the army. No sir. It was one thing to take one's chances among many thousands of soldiers and quite another to go alone into hostile territory after a surprise attack and try to win friends. I'd had enough of that kind of thing for the time being.

"I think I'll stick around, Fulgor," I said. "Those boys ahead look like they mean business, and I have a hunch it won't be long before the Jarovians will have lost all patience with strangers who come slinking out of the dust."

"As you wish," Fulgor replied, "but Zallaham will not be pleased when he learns you have refused to do his bidding."

"You would tell him? I cried, reproachfully.

"I would," Fulgor stated without apology. "And you would die."

I thought this over for a moment, quickly becoming unhinged. "There is no other way?"

"None."

I looked hard at Fulgor then, a quick, sudden glower that I had always reserved for times when it was imperative that I knew the truth. When a liar saw that look on my face, he faltered, his nose or eye twitched, a shoulder would drop, any of a hundred telling things would happen and I would know the truth. The suddenness and intentness of the glare did not conceal its purpose—nor was it meant to.

Indeed, the beauty of this art, which I had honed razor sharp over the years, was in its frankness. A guilty man saw plainly what was expected of him, and so skewered was helpless but to give me what I wanted.

An innocent man would laugh.

Alas, Fulgor laughed. More of a chuckle than a real guffaw, but enough to convince me that he wasn't lying. I had been beaten and Fulgor knew it.

"Don't forget what I told you," he called as I hurried forward.

Having sealed my own fate, my thoughts returned to Henson and Punky. Where had they gotten to? Zallaham would want them on this mission as well, and if they remained behind, they might find trouble with him.

There were so many men. Thousands of them. But the other two couldn't have gotten far, and with only a three-day growth of beard they wouldn't be hard to spot. There! Over by that giant fellow. Henson—and at his side the silent, yet treacherous Punky.

I rushed to them.

"Henson, Punky!" I hollered. "All spies are expected to report immediately to the front lines. It's time for action."

Henson refused to absorb the wildness I was trying to impart to him. He seemed somewhat pleased to see me, but disinterested in any

action of the kind I referred to. "Jenkins," he said ceremoniously. "I'd like you to meet our bodyguard." He gestured flamboyantly to the hulking Goliath standing next to him. "Meet Gode."

"Charmed," I said, craning my neck to give a polite nod. "Let's get going. Zallaham wants the spies to fall in behind the war party."

"Gode's seven feet tall," said Punky, who had always admired great height, a condition he had once hoped to attain himself, but failed.

"He can crack a man's skull with one hand, can't you Gode?" Henson added, slapping him boyishly in the back. "Did it once too, didn't you?"

Gode grinned like a yokel.

"Fine," I screeched. "But time is money, as well as our life's blood!"

"Relax." Henson patted Gode's arm. "We don't worry much with the friends we've got. Listen, Jenkins. Punky and I have kind of been kicking around the idea of making Gode here a partner. A minor one at first, of course. Business is booming already, and I've got a feeling we'll need a few good men, what with the other boys scattered from pole to pole as they are. "What do you think?"

"I think you better listen up and fast," I replied. "You'll have your share of trouble when

Zallaham finds out you went AWOL on your first assignment."

I explained the situation as quickly as possible, making sure they understood it. Henson's happy expression soured as his predicament became clear, but he didn't take long to make his decision.

"The attack is a smoke screen? That doesn't make much sense. It's like setting the spies afire so they won't be noticed. It stinks."

"So does Zallaham's policy of beheading his recalcitrant subjects, but that's how it is."

"I ain't going," he said stubbornly. "I couldn't if I wanted to. I've got business to attend to. There's another 500 *teekos* of lamota hanging in the balance."

"Punky?"

Usually subservient and willing to comply with anything, Punky folded his arms and shook his head with exaggerated stubbornness.

I realized then the drawback of my control over the other gang members. My methods of persuasion were not as immediate as Peso's had been. Punishment for insubordination under his reign had been swift and sure. Also painful. He didn't do a lot of talking. He just got the job done. My methods on the other hand, were a bit slower to blossom, if as effective. With the subtle, wordy kind of deceit I practiced, I

needed time to bend the wills of men. And at the moment, time was in short supply.

"Listen to reason," I pleaded in last ditch desperation. "Do you want to be dead?"

"No," Henson said irritably. "That's why I'm not going." He put up a hand to silence me. "You listen. I thought the original plan was good enough. Blend in, right? Don't make your presence known. Zallaham didn't ask me for anything, and that's good enough for me. So here I stay, fat, happy, and growing richer, which is what we came here for."

I looked from Henson to Punky, whose arms were still folded obstinately. Then back to Henson. He looked un-budgeable. There was no time to argue. I heard orders being barked not far ahead, and although I couldn't pick out the exact words, I had a pretty good idea as to their meaning. The attack was about to begin. Without another word I turned and headed for the front at a dead run. I arrived in the nick of time. A strident voice hollered:

"Charge!" and a scramble of sword-wielding warriors bellowed a battle cry and rushed forward. Ahead, a thick line of wulkins and their riders thundered over the rise that concealed the rest of the army from what lay beyond. The foot soldiers, five-hundred strong, ran as quickly as they could, hoping to keep the element of surprise in their favor. But those in

the lead were forced to slow somewhat to negotiate the steep terrain after the rise, and their sprinting comrades surged into them from behind.

Instantly wild confusion broke loose. At the lip of the rise a surging throng of humanity swelled for an instant, then buckled and broke as the crowd fought forward. The unlucky ones were knocked off their feet as the masses charged, and were simultaneously rolled and trampled down the long extent of the rise.

But that was the last slackening of pace. The war party, me with it, now verily seemed to fly into the valley below, where in the distance the first bloodletters had already reached the enemy.

The Jarovians stood unprepared at the bottom of the valley. There were about a thousand of them, a small force, but bigger than the five-hundred-odd interlopers. The Hurians had the advantage, however; the Jarovian animals were half unpacked, and it appeared that the surprised Jarovians had barely decided on this site when the war party struck. No scouts had had time to give warning, and the Jarovian defenders fought in frantic disarray.

The wulkins encircled the camp, galloping about it at a rate that belied their stocky constitution. Arrows darted out of the Jarovian ranks, but for every one that felled a Hurian

rider five from the attacking force found their targets within the hastily fashioned defense. Lances dipped and rose bloody as the cavalry chopped gaps in the perimeter. And then the infantry swarmed over the camp and the riders broke for home.

For a moment it was slaughter. The air echoed with the clanging of swords and the strident cries of the inundated defenders. There was no question that they would be killed to a man. There was no other possible outcome. The Jarovians were overwhelmed. But then, as swiftly as it had begun, the attack broke off as the Hurian foot soldiers stampeded out of the valley voicing a riotous victory cheer.

At the very edge of what a moment before had been the front line, I stood alone. What had happened? Why in creation did the Hurians retreat when total victory had been theirs? Then I knew—of course; no survivors, no spies.

Off some hundred yards—another Hurian spy?—fell prone and crept stealthily toward the Jarovians. He was going to face the angry survivors alone? I watched him for a moment, admiring his courage until, with mounting alarm, I became aware of my own vulnerability. I was the only upright figure for a great distance. Even the dazed and beaten Jarovians had not regained their feet. I dropped down. No

use calling attention to myself before I found out what was going on.

A thought crossed my mind. How did I know that man creeping forward was a Hurian spy? He was, of course; that much was plain from his position and his actions. Aside from that, however, there was no way to distinguish him from his enemies. All of these warriors, Jarovian and Hurian alike wore the same mismatched garments. Neither did there seem to be a difference in weaponry. There was something very wrong about this. Something that didn't fit in with what one would normally expect from human beings. Then I realized. Uniforms.

It might seem plausible that an outsider would fail to discern the difference between two primitive cultures both based upon the same subsistence. Since the available materials for clothing were the same for both, they might indeed look very similar—especially if environmental conditions made certain practical styles necessary for both cultures. But two armies? Here at least I should have seen some differences. Any kind of nationalistic pride would give way to banners, totems, and a wide range of tribal insignias which would be carved boldly into every conceivable artifact—particularly weapons. But there was none. I had no explanation.

In the distance the Hurian spy crept to the side of a fallen Jarovian and began a show of administering aid to him. This went on for several minutes until, abandoning his ruse, he rose and waved to the others. In moments there were eight or nine burly Jarovians standing about him and gesturing with none-too-friendly motions.

The discussion did not tarry long. There ensued an apparent argument which the lone Hurian proved unprepared to cope with. He gave the nearest Jarovian a shove that sent him reeling, kicked another to the ground, and turned to flee. But his flight had just barely begun when it was arrested by three lances that pierced his body back to front. He fell to the ground writhing, then lay still.

Fulgor had given some sound advice. Furtively, I inched backward, snaking my way through the grass. I had no desire to meet the fate of my brave colleague for whatever good it would do. I kept an eye on the Jarovians, then froze as they scanned the valley with suspicious eyes.

I tried my best to imitate some of the road kill I had seen on Heliox, my mouth slung wide, tongue lolling. This tactic apparently worked, for in a moment their attention turned back to their wounded, and I was able to move back with imperceptible slowness. This slow

creep took agonizing concentration. I doubt that I moved more than a half dozen yards in an hour. Yet each backward gain I made took me farther from the Jarovians, and as dusk fell those extra yards were valuable. I soon lay in the half-lighted gloom of early evening beyond their vision.

I crept more quickly then, daring soon to get up. I made cautious but easy progress. When night fell I had made my way out of the valley and was looking down at the battered camp when the main Jarovian force arrived. The ground quaked as a dark contour of 20,000 men and beasts trundled up the valley and merged amoeba-like with the scant survivors.

There were a few shouts of explanation and then a chorus of outraged cries from the new arrivals. Torches blazed, and scouts shot up the surrounding hills, none of them near enough to notice me. From the mob below a bloodlust chant was taken up, filling the valley and spilling over its crest with volume enough to reach the ears of Zallaham himself were he anywhere within miles.

Where the men of war march
The heart of the land beats
The wind that brings with it
Thunder to our side
We kill the enemy

As thunder kills trees
Kill the enemy
Kill him as thunder kills trees

More light verse than poetry, I thought—but what did it matter? When the song had degenerated into a pulsing *kill...kill...kill* I moved off the rise, met the plain and walked aimlessly away.

An hour later, I stumbled upon a thatched, weather-beaten hut. Half of the roof had been torn away by some bygone storm, and a fair portion of one wall now rested amid the dry limbs of a bush some hundred feet away. Abandoned, of course, and I entered without pause.

The acrid scent of burning grass told me that I had been mistaken. At the far end of the hut there was a fearful rustle of bedding, then stillness followed by a quavering voice.

"Who is there? What do you want? I have paid two armies in the last month. One hundred and fifty rock hogs."

"Relax," I said quietly. "I am but a wandering vagabond who has lost his way."

"That is what they all say," the voice replied with a submissive sigh. "Then they shake me for every crumb of food I have, which isn't much. Here—" he rose, stepping forward, a half-empty sack clasped in his extended hand.

"Take what I have and begone. There are rock hogs about outside. Take what you will, but leave a few that I may go on living."

"I do not wish to rob you," I argued. "I wish only a place to rest for the night."

The man displayed no surprise at these words. I guessed he had heard every line possible to get him off his guard. From what I could make out in the darkness he was a short but stout fellow, with the hunched frame of a man whose daily work was toil of the most backbreaking kind.

Another rustle of bedding behind him disclosed the presence of others in the hut. A woman and a child I determined as my eyes adjusted to the dim light.

"The grain is yours," the man said. "For leaving us in peace. Take it."

His hand came forward and he cringed humbly. There was such an expression of servility and fear upon his face that I almost failed to recognize it for the guise it was—did fail to do so until a flash of metal winked behind the sack and I found myself grappling with the man and twisting him to the floor.

He proved a strong fighter, but a sloppy one. He gave too much attention to slashing with the knife which I controlled with a grip about his wrist. An easy hip throw brought him down,

and the half nelson that followed made him most cooperative.

I added enough pressure to make him yelp and drop the knife within my reach, and picking it up, I held the blade beside his throat wondering what to do next. Before I could make up my mind, his woman was on me like a tigress, pounding me about the head and neck. It was most painful. She packed quite a punch, and I would have fared poorly had I not been in a position to bargain.

"Ease up," I warned. "Or I'll cut his throat."

The hail of fists and elbows ebbed, then stopped, and the woman ran for her child, picked him up in her arms, and sank into a dark corner of the hut and sobbed.

Now what? I knew it'd be a brisk day in hell before I'd trust the likes of this treacherous rock hog dealer. I could kill him, of course. By the reaction of his mate that seemed par for the course here on Tuukar. But it seemed a bit drastic at the time—and this was a family man after all. Well, there were some things I wanted to know.

I pressed the knife closer. "Tell me about the Jarovians," I ordered. "Where do they come from? How many soldiers do they have in all?"

The man sank limply, resigned to death, but I kept a firm hold on him.

"Tell me!"

"Just kill me and have it over with," he choked.

"You are loyal to the Jarovians?"

There was a muffled scoff which I choked to silence on reflex. I relaxed my grip and the scoff emerged where it had left off.

"Loyal to my own, I am," said the man. "To the Jarovians?" he spat bitterly. "Why should I be loyal to any army?"

"You refuse to speak."

"I do not wish to prolong my life a few minutes or hours to answer your questions. I would rather die now."

"You need not die," I tried to reassure him. "Answer my questions and I'll leave and never return."

"Sure. Kill me, man. Have it done! Do you seek to torture me with your lies?"

How was I to deal with a lifetime of treachery? There was only one thing I could think of. "I can see it will be hard to convince you of my friendly intentions and continue with this distressing stalemate." I released him and stood ready. There was nothing else left to do, and maybe his tongue would feel freer without the prospect of a severed jugular imminent.

I drew my sword as I stepped back and must have presented a formidable pose, dagger in one hand, doubled-edged saber in the other, for the man did not attempt to charge me. He

backed into the corner with the woman and child, looking less afraid, but confused. I felt very sure that no self-respecting Tuukarian would give quarter of the kind I had granted him. I wondered what thoughts were turning around in that thick skull of his.

"See?" I said, with a reassuring smile. "I say what I mean."

"Then leave."

"Of course, but first you must fulfill your part of the agreement." I spoke in unhurried tones, sharpening the blades against one another. "Tell me something interesting. What have the Jarovians been up to lately? Do they seem to have any special routes they follow? Seem to have attack on their minds—hmmm?"

In his less perilous position the rock hog dealer was not about to return to pleading for death—not when life after all might be the reward for a little conversation.

"The armies are all the same. I learn their names only when they are hungry—and I live to be robbed again because they know they might need food another day."

"How many are there?"

"Three last year. Two already this."

"I mean in all."

A desperate expression crossed his face. "You are not fair! How could I possibly know how many armies there are in this wide world?"

"Cool off," I said quietly, fanning him symbolically with both blades, "and answer my question. Just armies around here will do. And just the big ones if you like. A general idea is all."

"They come and go. There are, of course, the three empire strongholds: Gorfdom, Huria, and Paladon, with the Jarovians fortifying to become a fourth—" He broke off then and frowned, perplexed. "Well—go on What's the matter?"

The man had trouble explaining what his problem was. His mouth dropped open, then shut several times before he could formulate a sentence. "I do not understand you. I do not understand your questions."

"They seem simple enough to me."

The man shook his head. "Perhaps it is that I don't understand what you are."

"What do you think I am?"

"I no longer know."

"No longer? All right. Tell me what you used to think I was."

"A spy naturally. Hurian, Jarovian, they are all the same to me. But you ask questions that no spy would ask. Questions any spy would already know. I do not understand this."

"Then let me clear things up for you," I said. "I am a man from a faraway land who has traveled perhaps too far. I know little of this

westward land, its people and customs. No doubt I seem rude or crude to you, but rest assured that I am a man of impeccable breeding who is acting correctly according to the customs of his own kind. Now speak up or I'll chop you to little pieces and feed you to the rock hogs."

The fact that rock hogs (as I later learned) were strictly herbivorous did not seem to have a tranquilizing effect on the man. He spoke with fluency and at length about a number of topics.

Huria as he saw it was as strong as any of the empires, and rapidly developing. Paladon was its only equal adversary as the Gorfs had allied themselves with the Hurians. The Paladon empire lay somewhere to the far northwest and major battles between it and Huria were few for the distance that separated the two cultures. But yearly Zallaham's hordes were penetrating deeper into the continent, eating up land, and consolidating a host of smaller city-states whose armies were no match for the oversized forces at Zallaham's command.

The purpose of all this fighting, of course, was to see who would rule the world—or this half of it; from what I learned, it seemed nobody had a clue as to Tuukar's dual continental nature. The priests were at the bottom of all this. Not just Hurian ones, but an

assortment of lesser holies whose conversion to the faith of the conquerors was swift and unabashed. Whosoever won the battles, of course, was obviously blessed by whatever Gods there were. This was strong evidence that the religious thinking of the despoilers was a step closer to the truth. Naturally the nastiest cultures proved strongest, and their correspondingly nasty religions were adopted and revised as still nastier armies displaced them. This process of natural selection gave birth to a continent-wide philosophy, which though ever-changing, universally dwelled upon death and practiced bloody rituals, the details of which I will not elaborate on. Suffice it to say that human sacrifice was not taboo anywhere near here.

The lack of uniforms was not clearly explained. Spies, as I learned, had to get in and out of the armies, and an uncharacteristically friendly agreement had been accepted everywhere. No totems or special banners, just standard arms and dress, and no nationalism. The soldiers were allowed to idolize their chief, that much was plain, but there was no fanfare for the fatherland, and the only real difference between Hurians, Gorfs and Jarovians were slight dialectical variations which themselves were dying out through repeated linguistic contact.

Very strange. And somehow unwholesome. The world view here was incomplete, or at least it seemed so to me. What was to prevent some enterprising Napoleon, Hitler, or Zolt from upsetting the entire applecart by declaring his nation supreme, donning brass buttons and making a sham out of this apparently farcical spy system?

The priests. It was clear that they had some special control over all these nations. I would have to find out the nature of that control if this planet were to be properly busted. But try as I could I couldn't make sense out of the story this man was telling me. Either he didn't have the answers, or I was asking the wrong questions.

At any rate, it was growing late and I had to start thinking about moving on. Already I was fighting off yawns, and if by some carelessness I dozed, even momentarily, I had no assurance that this man would not try another stab at subduing me again.

"I have enjoyed this little chat," I said suddenly, with a nonchalant backward step. "—and now good-bye!.

I stepped swiftly through the ragged doorway, turned along the side of the hut and walked quietly into the darkness. I stopped in sight of the hut, and crouched listening. A few moments later I heard someone leave the hut,

and a dark form appeared at its side just visible against the night sky.

I waited silently as the man stood unmoving, his gaze fastened on the darkness. Ten minutes later, he moved back into the hut. I gave him plenty of time to forget the idea of tracking me down across his familiar land before I rose and started walking in the direction of where Zallaham's men had left me. How I would locate them I did not know, but I had already formulated the story I would tell them at that time. It was consistent with Fulgor's advice and would also serve to get the process of planet busting into full swing.

Planet Busters Chapter 14

Getting thrown into Rognove prison is a lead pipe cinch. The only problem, a minor one, is overdoing your crime and getting shot for your pains. I thought of writing some nasty things on the walls of Rognove—things about the king, whose name I learned was Caleb and who was a puppet of the federation. He liked to exercise his own particular style of law enforcement. The penalty for writing on walls didn't even take into account what was written. It was a mandatory execution by firing squad no matter what you wrote. Fortunately Peso Jack made a daring break from the prison the day after I arrived, liberating eleven chums during a food riot he started himself. I was happy not to have to be a convict and start right in on the plan. Peso Jack was to be my teacher for a while and then would leave me in charge of his crew of galactic cutthroats and chisellers while he went off to manage the commandos on other missions.

During the second week of preparations on Heliox, Peso Jack called me aside. He had a problem. We sat on metal and plastic chairs and spoke across the kitchen table. It was hot and all the windows of the house were open. Peso poured us each a glass of wine made from the grapes of the scruffy vineyards which covered

the low hills of Rognove. The wine was icy cold and dark purple, almost black. Peso and I had hit it off well despite our unequal status of instructor and pupil. I guess dealing with the crude scoundrels of Heliox had made him hungry for intelligent conversation. We had become drinking buddies.

"They don't like you," Peso said, mincing no words. "In fact, I don't think any of them would think twice about killing you if they thought they could get away with it."

I was shocked. "The boys? My men? My future comrades at arms?" I had always thought we got along famously. How could this be? I had done everything to keep our relations friendly. "How? Why?" I asked.

"They don't respect you and they think you're a punk," replied Peso with a sigh.

He looked down and tilted his drink. The black wine stained the glass. "You've become too familiar with them. And so now they'll never do anything you ask them to do. Didn't they teach you anything but boxing on the Seychelles? Hells bells, man, how in hell do you expect to control that mob when I'm not around?"

Just then the door opened and Kale Soldat stuck his head in.

"Hey boss..." he began.

Peso Jack hurled the thick, stoneware wine jug at the doorway. Soldat, quick as a rat, blocked it with the door. It shattered into a hundred shards, splattering the whole wall with wine and dislodging particles of plaster from the ceiling. Soldat's face appeared through a small crack in the door. On it was an expression of honest fear.

Peso's voice was as black and icy as the wine. "If you ever open that door again without knocking, I'll reach down your throat and pull out your stomach!" He growled.

The crack in the door quickly closed. Peso turned back to me as if nothing had happened and as he poured from another jug (fortunately the good stuff), he continued with his little lecture as gloomily as before.

"You've got to learn to manipulate these dumb bastards, Jenkins. You've got to make them respect you, fear you. You've got to make them think that you'll kill them. It's a simple thing. Are you not smarter than they?"

"I tried to keep on friendly terms," I mumbled, ashamed. I was failing in my assignment. Leading a group of mercenaries was definitely different from keeping good PR with the public back on Marion.

"Friendly?" rasped Peso. "Would you befriend mad dogs? Would you try to organize a pack of wolverines by telling them how much

you miss your wife and letting them all bum cigarettes off you? Honestly Jenkins, just what the hell do you think you're doing?"

I looked at my shoes.

"You've got to slap them around. Tell them you hate their guts. Punch them in the stomach. And then"—Peso leveled his finger at me expressively—"then they will love you and do anything that you tell them."

I didn't say anything.

"Take that Kale Soldat," Peso mused. "He's a good man. The best of the bunch, with brains too, and meaner than hell. But he'll never hear that from me. And just look at him. I've got him eating out of my hand like a squirrel."

He tossed off his wine and poured himself another glass. He frowned grimly. "There are pitifully few ways to undo the damage you've done, and believe me when I say that I accept part of the blame. I should have paid closer attention to you. Unfortunately, I was busy and made the mistake of assuming that you were a leader of men because you had a whole planet buffaloed into thinking you were a competent Prime Chancellor."

I didn't like that too much; after all, Marion was one of the most successful planets because of my clever dealings, but I kept quiet and listened. Peso Jack was a man you listened to.

"It's easy to loosen things up once you've started out hard, but tightening things up once they're loose—well that's different. There are a couple of ways to make that happen, and believe me when I tell you if you don't begin to get some respect out of these guys, they'll probably wind up cutting your throat or worse. Hells bells, they're already walking all over you now. One way out is to take on a complete personality change so huge and unfathomable that they'll know you're crazy and will bash in their skulls if they so much as look at you sideways. This would no doubt involve killing at least one of them and wounding most of the rest, amid a lot of screaming and cussing. I think you could get some respect that way. Unfortunately, you are going to need all these men just to raise the money to start your assignment. Remember Cardip isn't giving you any dough. He doesn't have it."

I thought about my bank card and the duplicate which Cardip now held in his hot little hands. I wondered how much was left. But I had to admit to myself that Cardip was extremely low on funds and he was certainly welcome to any of mine. I just hoped he left enough in the bank to keep the account open.

Peso took another swallow of wine and continued: "Another option is for you to disappear for a few months and return sporting

a new beard, some fresh facial scars perhaps and a brand new disposition. These cretins are not very intelligent, except Kale maybe, and they will have practically forgotten you by then. You could start reintroducing yourself by beating the hell out of them the minute they try to bum smokes. This is also impractical because I have to leave you in command here in exactly four days. Can you see what a mess you've made of things?"

"What are we going to do then?" I asked.

"Just listen," he said. "I probably shouldn't be telling you this, but even Cardip has faith in you. He thinks your audacity is somehow an asset. Don't ask me why. According to his assessment, since you did such an exceptional job of impersonating a Prime Chancellor, you should be able to wing it as a tough guy."

"Thank you," I said, not knowing whether I appreciated the compliment.

Peso was annoyed. "I don't like the plan but I think it will work. All we have to do is arrange a little creative dramatics."

I clapped my hands. "You're going to let me beat you up!" I shouted happily. "That should impress the boys!"

Peso looked at me. "They are stupid," he said. "But not stupid enough to think you could beat me up."

"So what's the plan?" I asked.

Peso grinned despite himself. "What happens here during the beginning of each double full moon phase?" he asked.

"Why the rival gangs of indigenous descent usually go crazy and attack our hideout. Kale and Punky and the rest of us hide in here and you go out and get rid of them."

I looked outside at the street. It was still littered with a lot of debris from the last attack: pieces of brick, broken bottles, the remains of Molotov cocktails. Peso was looking out the window too.

"Things will be a little different next time," he said.

Planet Busters Chapter 15

The sound of galloping wulkins awoke me. I was stretched out under a squat leafless bush suddenly awake and scrambling to untangle myself from the branches. I tumbled free just as the riders surrounded me.

"We are Hurians. What are you? *Pflicht!*"

"What?" I managed to sputter.

"*Pflicht!* Repeat." A rider trotted forward, sword raised.

"Pflicht!"

"Speak Galactellano!"

"You have one more chance to answer," the rider warned. "If you do not, you will be deemed hostile and slain."

"Pflicht! Pflicht!" they all cried.

I swallowed hard. Things did not look good for me. Not good at all. It was suddenly plain to me what "pflicht" was all about: it was a shibboleth, one of those tricky words that friends can pronounce, but foes stumble all over. But how could there be shibboleths when everyone spoke the same language? I didn't ponder this inconsistency for long. The sword looked ready to slash down on me at any moment, and the least I could do was try my luck with their silly word.

"Flicked!" I cried with what must have been the worst possible pronunciation. "But I'm Hurian anyway!"

"You look it, fuzz face," said the rider, and his sword swept down.

I ducked the first stroke and had my own blade out in time to ward off the second, but I couldn't hope to last much longer. Not with the whole band of them moving in for the kill.

There was a splangling of metal as I tried frantically to keep them off balance, striking out blindly, then ducking under their mounts for cover and coming up unexpectedly from different sides. The wulkins didn't know what to make of this, and to be on the discrete side, a couple of them bucked their riders and moved off to view the scene from a safe distance.

It would have made excellent exercise if it hadn't been such a deadly business. The men who had been thrown from their mounts were on their feet and coming at me with a justified vengeance, and inwardly I hoped some kind of change in the status quo was pending.

Surprisingly one was.

"Wait!" one of the riders shouted. "Do not kill him." He trotted forward and put his lance between me and the other swords. "I know this man."

Isaias! I could almost forgive him for that boot in the chops. Now I was in friendly hands.

"I have information for the warlord, Zallaham," I told him.

"You have returned very early." Isaias said doubtfully. "We shall see." He motioned to the others. "Tie him."

I knew enough by now not to argue, and waited docilely as a stick was shoved flat against my back and my arms thrown over it to be tied. A rope was secured around my neck and its free end tied to an unused litter harness on one of the wulkins. Then the party moved off at good pace.

Luckily it was not a long trip or I might have been dragged bodily for a good piece of it. A thirty minute job brought me sweat-drenched to the encampment and beside the largest and most ornate of all the Hurian tents. Zallaham's, no doubt, and a shiver of fear passed through me. Well, I could only do my best.

Isaias dismounted and threw wide the hanging tent door, disappearing inside. "A spy has returned from yesterday's planting," I heard him announce.

"Returned?" rumbled Zallaham. "My agents do not return for the morning's repast. Why haven't you killed him?"

"He says he has information."

"Bah!" Zallaham thundered. "So say all the deserters. Who is he? Not that cur whose information nearly bought us doom in the

Valley of Two Eagles—I should have killed him then—when I get my hands—"

"It is the outlander. The one with the strange voice and the still stranger ways of behaving before a leader of armies," Isaias reminded.

"Alive? Zallaham asked with no little amount of surprise.

"He knows not our secret words, so perhaps he can voice others."

Damn that Isaias! He was making me out as a double agent. There was a long wait and the muttering of a third voice could be heard from within along with some unconciliatory snorting from Zallaham. Finally Zallaham's voice returned with full volume. "Bah! Bring him to me!"

Isaias exited, cut my bonds and pushed me through the opening of the tent ahead of him. Zallaham stood at the center of the enclosure, face livid, staring down at none other than Fulgor the Wise, who sat with a wood-framed tablet of clay across his knees and an expression of smug aloofness on his face.

At my appearance Zallaham gestured and I was tossed into a corner, where I sat on the bare, earthen floor. Isaias left.

"You say I must do this, and that I must do that," Zallaham ranted, "but no words speak to me from your muddy chicken scratchings. And how do I know you are not lying?"

Fulgor looked up and with condescending tones replied: "I am a messenger of Becerro, and He does not lie."

"Agh!" Zallaham grated. "I've had enough of you and your Becerro for one day. Get out!"

Fulgor didn't even flinch. "And your reply to the Holy of Holies?"

"Tell them to—" Zallaham faltered, reconsidered. A painful grimace came to his battle-scarred countenance and his words came with great effort and ritualized evenness. "Tell them I comply as always to the dictates of the Holy Ones."

Fulgor turned the tablet over to reveal a second side troweled smooth with a fresh layer of clay. He held the tablet steady with his left hand while in his right a wooden stylus flicked over the clay, recording the message. Having finished, he rose. "New counsel will arrive tomorrow by rider," he informed. "Yet another change in the secret words of battle and espionage."

"Get out," Zallaham ordered, "and give that layer of wulkin shit to your runner. May it arrive fresh into the hands of the holy ones."

Fulgor departed angrily, and with hardly a pause the warlord turned and riveted his eyes on me. "You!" he thundered. From his antagonistic expression and the powerful clenching and unclenching of his fists, I

ascertained that my originally conceived story would not be quite enough to fend him off. Not while he was in his present frame of mind. Without giving myself much time to plan, I started on another track. "I am a reader of runes," I told him flatly.

That stopped him, cold. He paused, befuddled, then came awake as reason prevailed and the impossibility of my claim became patent.

"Liar!" he bellowed "What nonsense is this? You—a Wise Man? You dare to lie to me?"

I rose, a tolerant smile playing about the corners of my mouth.

"I am no more a member of the priestly class than you are. Glad of it. But I am a rune reader, and I can unlock the mystery of Fulgor's tablets as easily as tie my own boot laces."

"Lies!" Zallaham insisted. "The runes are the work of Becerro—the priests have said so—and only the chosen may interpret them."

I grew bolder. "Let's be frank with one another, Zallaham. You don't believe in any of the holy rantings and ravings of Fulgor and his kind, and neither do I. But the holy boys are giving you a first class headache and you need somebody to help you cut them down to size. I am that somebody."

I allowed myself a brief pause. Not to overheat that temper of his.

Zallaham's fists now were permanently clenched, and his face was a curious vermillion. "Go on," he said in a low tone that was like distant thunder, "before I kill you, I want you to go on."

"Certainly. Are those some more of Fulgor's sacred mud pies?" I strolled casually over to a rough-hewn trestle table at one of the canvas walls and picked up a tablet. It was the first time I had had a chance to see this art form first hand and up close.

The symbols were dazzlingly beautiful, a collection of painstakingly imprinted cuneiforms, filling the entire wide expanse of dry, unfired clay. Every bit of it undecipherable.

"Read it," Zallaham commanded.

"So this is the work of the mighty Becerro!" I dodged. "I look at it, I laugh."

"Tell me what it says, rune reader."

"Of course," I stalled, "but first a short history lesson on these things—if you don't mind. You will not understand what comes later if you don't know about the true origin of the tablets."

"You speak in riddles, and I think you are afraid to read."

"Please, all will be clear in a moment. If you will permit me to explain?"

Zallaham frowned, then nodded impatiently.

I had him hooked. Fulgor's tablets must have been preying on his mind for years now, and he probably blamed their directives for many a lost battle. He didn't like them, and he didn't like to be bossed around. So I knew he would be willing to put up with me a little longer in exchange for some elucidation.

"Once long ago a horse breeder and an aristocrat had a dispute over monies paid and merchandise received. The aristocrat could not remember owing for any horses, while the breeder recalled having sold twice as many as he really had. Needless to say there was no happy resolution to the dispute. There couldn't have been. To keep the flow of trade going, the aristocrat doled out a token payment, but both men left the transaction feeling cheated."

"What does this have to do with Fulgor's tablets?"

"I was just coming to that part—if you please. The aristocrat one day was in need of another horse and went to the breeder again. The breeder, wary of being cheated, picked up a handful of moist clay—they were standing by the bank of a river, you see—and on its surface he etched the detailed likeness of a horse. He warned the aristocrat that if he forgot he owed again, the piece of clay would serve to refresh his memory. Well, the aristocrat forgot, the clay

picture reminded, and the system was a success."

Nothing. My story was not getting across to the warlord. Its only effect seemed to produce a slightly more carmine hue to the man's face, which indicated nothing more than mounting irritation.

"Don't you see?" I said nervously. "The clay spoke to him! The clay picture said: "You owe me for one horse."

"There are no pictures of horses on Fulgor's tablets."

"Of course there aren't. When the aristocrat wanted twenty horses do you think there was time or clay enough to make twenty portraits? The breeder simplified the picture, and to make the going easier and more consistent he used a flattened stick to poke wedge-shaped impressions in the clay. In a short time the stylized symbol for "horse" could be executed with two or three fast strokes, and nobody but a reader of runes could interpret it."

"What happened to these men?"

"They died in time, as all men do. But before that, the aristocrat invented symbols for other things. He dealt in more than horses, after all. His system became so complex that it was impossible to teach it to his lower-caste business associates, so he kept it to himself and a few trusted cronies for record keeping. This

made them highly efficient, and very rich. Also powerful. So powerful that when the next generation of tablet scholars got religion, they won out over the other hopefuls. They were the only ones able to present the magic tablets as proof of their divine authority."

That did it. I could tell I was getting through to old Zallaham. By the look on his face a lot of things were adding up for him.

"How do you know these things?"

"I guessed," I admitted. "But that doesn't mean my story isn't true. I told you what must have happened, and what no doubt did. A few little things may have happened differently; the horses might have been wulkins, for example, or bales of hay for that matter—yet the basic sequence of events is sound enough for my story to be at least an acceptable theory. I think you'll agree it makes more sense than the story you've been getting that Becerro created the holy symbols."

"You say that he did not," said Zallaham cautiously.

"I can do better than that. I can prove he didn't."

"Do so!" he snapped.

"Very well." I was beginning to enjoy this. I stretched with an air of confidence that was not entirely assumed. As long as Zallaham was

curious I was safe, and my next act would make me indispensable for quite a time to come.

Things were looking up.

"I don't know much about Becerro, but I can guess a few things about him in the same way I guessed about the tablets. Becerro is all-powerful, true?"

Zallaham nodded.

"Becerro is all-knowing, all-seeing. He has existed from the beginning of time and will exist forever. More importantly, Becerro does not change. He's perfect after all and one does not improve on perfection, does one?"

"One does not," Zallaham snorted. "Get to the point."

"Well, the point is that Becerro, being perfect, did not do anything in the past that he could improve upon today. That is, he has no reforms planned for his past creations."

"Of course not."

"Then he couldn't have invented the holy writing."

"Why not?" Zallaham asked irritably, his fists beginning to clench and unclench again.

"Because there is a better, simpler, and more efficient way of accomplishing what these tablets accomplish—just as there was a simpler and more sensible explanation for their origin. Look!"

I knelt, picking up a loose stone. "Let's say that instead of using stylized representations of various objects and ideas, we let each symbol represent a particular sound. For instance, the following symbol could be used to represent the "uh" or schwa sound so common in our language."

I scratched a phonetic symbol on the floor of the quarters. "Uh," I canted, patting the symbol. I gave Zallaham an admonishing glare. "Uh! Uh!"

"Uh," Zallaham grumbled.

"Very good. Now. This other sign might stand for the lateral liquid sound you hear at the beginning of words like lamota and love, or in the middle or at the end of words like pillow and hurl respectively." I drew the symbol "L" in front of the schwa. "I think you can see what is going to happen. The symbols will truly talk, silently to be sure, but they make the work of Becerro look like the scribblings of a moron. These symbols, together, say, "luh!"

"So you are smarter than Becerro?" The warlord seemed bent on finding some flaw in my lecture.

"You have to realize that my answer will be severely compromised by the fact that I do not believe that Becerro exists."

"Perhaps he doesn't. Who cares? I still have little use for the word 'luh.'"

"Patience," I pleaded. "The art of reading and writing is not learned in an afternoon."

I then proceeded with the task of explaining four more symbols. He seemed to understand them, but I reviewed them all once more afterwards for good measure. Then came the acid test. I wrote a fairly long word across the floor and motioned to Zallaham. "What does it say?" I asked.

Zallaham grunted, sat on his haunches and scrutinized the word. His heavy brow knitted as he began the laborious process of sounding out the word.

I had used simplified phonetic script so there were no inconsistencies in spelling so common in standard Galactellano, and it gave me a measure of pride to be bringing both literacy and spelling reform to the natives. The only thing that could have presented a problem would have been some inability of his to make use of the abstract. But fortunately this did not prove to be the case. Zallaham, with a minimum amount of grunting and straining, was able to read the word.

"Z-Zal...Zallaham!" he exclaimed, astonishment sweeping across his face. He leaped up. "The symbols...they spoke through me!"

"Bravo!" I shouted, applauding openly.

"They spoke my name," he said wonderingly. Then: "Zallaham is mighty! Zallaham is supreme! Zallaham—"

"Don't let it go to your head," I cautioned. "I can write anybody's name with the symbols—even Fulgor's."

That knocked some sense into him, and also revived his habitual crustiness. He looked at me out of the corners of his eyes as memory of the reason for my visit flooded back. His hand tapped against the hilt of his sword restlessly and he spoke in the deadly low tones that revealed his anger at having been stalled for so long.

"You had information, deserter. Information you say you received overnight in the Jarovian camp. What is it?"

"Noisemakers," I told him. "Big ones that send flying death. I saw these weapons as I approached the encampment and knew I must return at once to tell you."

Zallaham accepted this in an academic fashion.

"I have never heard that story," he mused, "and I have heard many a good tale from deserting spies."

"But it's the truth I say—"

"Noisemakers? Flying death?" His sword whipped out of its sheath and he took a fast step in my direction. I had trouble with the warlord

again—and after things had been going so well. Well, that was nothing new.

"If I did not want to learn more of your symbols I—" his unreleased anger choked him to silence. "Isaias!"

Almost immediately the tent door parted and Isaias stepped inside.

"Guard the outlander. Don't let him get killed until I call for him again."

Until.

Isaias led me out—roughly—and made me accompany him around the camp as he bullied and threatened the enlisted men. At midday we ate from a slightly rancid concoction of rock hog stew which was nevertheless better than what I had tasted earlier—and when the sun set I was allowed a place close to the fire to sleep. Isaias chose a place nearby where he could keep an eye on me, but it wasn't necessary. I had nothing planned except for a little mischief in my head.

I lay awake for some time that night trying to form some sensible interpretation out of shibboleths, tablets, priests, and all the rest. Until I did so, Tuukar would remain very difficult to bust, if not impossible.

Understanding was the key to this planeteering. I could have foregone a good deal of the above and replaced it by sheer firepower as all the other independent world conquerors

had always done, but today the presence of the task force and its sneaky watchdog devices orbiting somewhere above made that quite impossible. I didn't want the feds rocketing down into our midst before I was through setting up things down here. Unwillfully I envisioned how I would rout them, pursue and blast the federation ships into gleaming fragments. A dream so far. But a dream that might become reality. After Tuukar the corrupt federation might really fall and be replaced by a better system with enough checks and balances to make forever impossible the wholesale destruction of independent civilization.

But I was getting ahead of myself. Best to list the enigmas at hand: Tablets. I explained to Zallaham what I knew of these. One small mystery. What had Fulgor said? "Yet another change in the secret words of battle and espionage." How were these recorded without a phonetic system? Answer: The same as everything else. Encoded cuneiforms, each corresponding to a certain known shibboleth. Next. Shibboleths. How? With a common language planet-wide, one would not expect to encounter shibboleths at all—for the simple reason that everyone could pronounce them equally well, which would quite effectively nullify their usefulness. Answer: the only one possible; linguistic training from childhood. A

grown human being cannot generally learn perfect pronunciation of foreign words—especially exotic ones—not without modern lingua-imprinters, which obviously were in short supply here. But it is certainly possible to train a child, whose linguistic patterns have not yet fossilized. And the shibboleth I had heard was not the Latin-based Galactellano used here, but a concoction of ancient Germanic sounds.

How?

No, wait—not how—that was just detail. Why? Why shibboleths anyway? Simple passwords would do as well, although they wouldn't be secure. And they could be easily taught to the conquered armies whose services you have enlisted. Easily. Yes, anyone could do it. That was why. That was it. The principle inconsistency. Explain it and you have explained all, Jenkins Basil Lai. No, don't sit up; lie still, think. Control the shibboleths and control the armies. The Gorf's have allied themselves with the Hurians. They fight on the same side. But the shibboleths? How again? Common Shibboleths. There are some that everyone has in common. There have to be. That's it!

Fulgor was a sly dog, but he hadn't fooled me. Becerro would protect him, indeed. I chuckled as I drifted off to sleep. The shibboleths: Jarovian, Hurian, Paladon, Gorf—

There are ones they all have in common, you
crafty priests and holy rollies.

And you know them all.

Planet Busters Chapter 16

Kale Soldat had just drawn another spade and I had him figured for a flush. They were the only spades showing. Punky, reckless as ever, jumped in with a bet of five guilders. Soldat grinned and raised him ten. He had that flush. I knew how Soldat played. He was the only one smart enough to win at this game and others weren't smart enough to stop playing him. A wolf among sheep. I was trying to make up my mind whether to stay in or not. Through the open window shone two bright moons, full and dirty, shining their madness across the face of Heliox.

I dropped my cards on the table.

"I'm out," I said.

I couldn't concentrate. There was trouble brewing outside somewhere. I could feel it. I knew the rival gangs were waiting. It was only a matter of minutes before they would attack, crazed by lunar madness, do a little Saint Vitus dance around the house, throw rocks, shoot the place up etc. Then Peso and I would put in effect our plan, the plan we had devised to make for a smooth transition of power and assure me a measure of respect and obedience from the troops.

My mind wandered back to the game and all those red and blue chips on the table. Ducking

out of that round was a smart move. I would have had to have drawn some pretty unlikely cards to beat Kale's flush. Now he was whooping with pleasure, embracing the little mountain of chips and drawing it toward him. At that moment a brick sailed silently through one open window and out the other. Nobody noticed it but Peso and I. We exchanged knowing glances.

The real reason Peso had been able to dispatch these visitors before with such little difficulty was actually no great testimony to his prowess (although there probably was no one on the whole planet as tough). The fact was that the effects of the double moons were such that those affected with the mania were not at their best organization-wise. In fact, the way they ran around shooting and throwing things, they were more likely to do injury to themselves than to anyone else. Peso would merely walk out among them, knock their heads together or chase them away. It was easy for, as I mentioned their judgment, and to a great degree their vision, was severely impaired.

"Hit the deck!" I screamed as a barrage of brick and stones put an end to Kale's poker game. He fumbled around under the table stuffing chips into his pockets. There was a pause amid this pandemonium as Kale discovered an associate, Punky, under the table

grasping and stuffing chips into his own pockets. Since Punky had been in the process of soliciting an advance from Uri at the beginning of this outbreak, Kale took about one second to recognize this as some form of embezzlement. He was about to take action against Punky (after all most of the chips were his) when a blue flash, harsh and blinding, like an arch welder's torch lit the room. Laser.

Peso and I swung into action. "All you guys in the cellar!" Peso ordered. "Jenkins and I will handle this!" They scurried like rats down the stairs. Kale paused at the door of the cellar.

"Hey Boss, hows come Jenkins don't have to come down here with us?"

It wasn't that the boys were chicken. Peso made them go down there during any urban attack. They were too prone to looting and running amuck. Getting lost in the scuffle. On full moon nights Peso liked these boys on a short leash. Otherwise they'd surely get loose and party. The whole city was hopping these full moon nights, one big fiesta.

"Get back in there!" Peso threatened. "They're using lasers out there and I need someone who has the guts to help me. I sure as hell don't need you."

A hurt look came across Kale's face for a moment and then changed into an expression of confusion. He looked like he was about to say

something but then thought better of it and went back into the cellar and closed the door. I slipped down and shut the latch.

Fortunately the attack was almost over. A lucky break was that the hostile gangs had forgotten our little syndicate this night. The bricks and the lasers had all been directed at the house next door. We were merely hit in the confusion.

I looked outside to see a motorcycle which was smoldering in the front yard suddenly erupt into flames. The whole neighborhood was dazzled with light as the twin fuel tanks exploded sending saffron clouds of blazing gasoline billowing across the street. The side car, trailing little snatches of metallic debris, vaulted over the house and into the back yard where it somehow caused another bigger explosion. I was enthralled by this spectacle of fire and noise mixed with the occasional stabbing flashes of laser fire some blocks away. Heliox was a lively little planet tonight.

My thoughts were interrupted by Peso's gruff voice. "Jenkins, stop watching the fireworks and get that meat outta the refrigerator. I hope you realize I'm doing all this as a favor. I don't like pulling stunts like this one bit and it's all your fault, so hurry up!"

When the boys climbed back up out of the basement, grumbling and blinking an

extraordinary sight met them in the bright light of the kitchen. At the same time their nostrils were assaulted by a burning stench all of them were familiar with—like burnt feathers mixed with ozone—the distinctive scent of a mortal laser wound. Sprawled grandly on the tiled floor, beneath the formica table lay a fallen Peso Jack. Even I was surprised by the tears which sprang from their eyes.

"Closer," croaked Peso, as I lifted his awful head from the floor allowing them to hear his dying request that I succeed him as leader of the gang.

Planet Busters Chapter 17

Zallaham called for me early the next morning and ordered another session of private tutoring. I was glad to see that the value of reading and writing was not lost on him; indeed, there was plenty he could do with it and he knew it.

Principally he could undermine the system of the priests by sending messages to trusted cronies within Huria, and thus destroy the communications monopoly that had existed for centuries. And although he soon understood he could not learn to read the tablets themselves, he found it within himself not to fly into a rage over it. What the priests wanted was of little consequence. He learned of their orders only too soon and was not really in need of breaking any codes other than the one I was teaching him.

Ironically, the priests themselves had provided ample leisure time during which Zallaham could learn. He had wanted all-out attack as soon as possible, but the priests had ordered a ceasefire which did nothing more than allow the Jarovians to shore up their defenses and conscript and train more warriors. The allied Gorfs were now positioned far away, sent by the priests on a whim to pulverize some

backwoods tribe that seemed somehow in need of pulverization.

I didn't know what the priests had planned, but I did know that the match between the Hurians and the Jarovians was growing more and more even, a fact that Zallaham could not be expected to appreciate. He needed an equalizer, that much was plain, but I had so far failed miserably in winning his faith in 20th century weapons technology, so I waited for an opportune moment to broach the subject to him again.

My chance came after a particularly frustrating lesson in which Zallaham displayed some frightening signs of dyslexia. At the end, however, he snapped out of it and made good progress with encoding his thoughts to scratches on the floor of the tent, and his newly won proficiency put him in good spirits. We stood, and Zallaham clapped his hands and cried, "Lamota!"

A servant-guard soon entered with a measure of the stuff which was held out before us on a sheet of leather. I followed Zallaham's example helping myself to a pinch between cheek and gum—but I palmed two thirds of it and poked it under my parka to the pocket of the trousers I wore beneath. In doing so, my hand bumped against the butt of the pistol still concealed there, and I wondered how long it

could remain stuffed under my belt before it left a permanent impression on the skin of my abdomen. Perhaps not much longer, I thought grimly, but I could put an end to the problem of its concealment.

"We will now talk of noisemakers," I announced, perhaps taking on a bit more authority than I really possessed. The drug was working on me evidently, but Zallaham seemed to understand as much and made allowances. He guffawed once or twice and gave me a bone-jarring slap on the shoulder that nearly brought me down.

"You are foolish to remind me of your fibbing, Jenkins outlander. I had nearly forgotten. But I like a good joke—and a brave man—unless he dares to think he's a match for me, which I'm sure that you do not."

"I admit that I don't," I replied, rubbing my shoulder.

"There is none," Zallaham said confidently. "None that could pit his strength and skill against mine and emerge the victor. But there are those who would plot against me, and so I do not enjoy talk of such trickery as your noisemakers." He spat thickly and greenly. "We will enjoy our lamota and discuss something else."

Buoyed up by the euphoria of the drug I was surprised to hear my frank answer to the

warlord's stated wishes. "We shall discuss noisemakers," I insisted arrogantly. "I have one here." And without a thought to the possible consequences, I looked him in the eye and drew out the pistol.

Zallaham, himself made indifferent by the drug, simply observed me cautiously. He did not draw back, and he did not show sign that he suspected treachery from his teacher.

"Noisemakers are extremely dangerous toys," I told him with a drug-induced authority that introduced an affected toughness to my voice, a he-man's set to the jaw. "There is much a warlord should know about them."

"I know enough to say that noise alone does not kill," replied Zallaham, "and so I shall not again touch the noisemaker, lest its poison affect me."

"That's where you're missing the point. It is neither noise, nor poison that makes a noisemaker deadly, but a heavy piece of metal that flies from its mouth far faster than an arrow flies from the bow of the strongest archer. See that iron kettle over there?" I waved the gun towards the trestle table. "It's cast iron I believe—and a quarter inch thick at least. How strong a warrior would it take to thrust his sword straight through it?"

Zallaham considered this briefly. "A strong one indeed to put a sword thrust through it—

although any of my men could slash it into halves."

"No—slashing's against the rules. And it won't do to brace the kettle on the ground or against some stationary object. In fact—yes—the kettle must be hung from a string before the attempt is made."

"From a string?" Zallaham exclaimed. "The kettle would simply be struck forward. What is this talk? Do you challenge me to try this foolish game? I do not wish to file a new point on my sword."

"Sword? Noisemaker."

"We were discussing swords."

"Sorry; noisemakers. I introduced swords for the purpose of comparison only."

"Noisemakers then," agreed Zallaham angrily. "Your noisemaker can do this?"

"Anytime you want."

"Do it now," Zallaham ordered, caught up by the challenge. "There " he pointed to the far side of the enclosure near the tent wall. 'A spool of cord for bowstrings. Tie the kettle to that cross brace above your head."

I used my saber to cut off an eight-foot length of the cord and threw a loop of it over the brace. A clinch knot and series of carefully applied tugs brought the string halfway to my knees and I tied the kettle and trimmed the

supporting cord so that the target hung at about chest level in the center of the tent.

Zallaham drew his sword, made a few aborted thrusts at the kettle, and re-sheathed his weapon with a grunt. "It would be as I said. The kettle would move. I might puncture it. I might also ding the point of my sword."

"I agree. But noisemakers have some advantages as you will see." I stepped over to get a clear shot at the kettle. It hung with an almost imperceptible pendulous movement in the still air of the tent, dark gray and looking very heavy. I hoped I hadn't overestimated the power of the pistol. It had a large .44-caliber bore—but it might just spin the kettle for a loop if I didn't place the shot in its direct center. "There will be an explosion—quite loud," I cautioned.

Zallaham nodded.

I took careful aim and squeezed the trigger.

The results were more than I had gambled for. The kettle shot to the ceiling of the tent, hit the supporting brace on the far wall, and rebounded ringing like a bell. The cord, spitting with tension, directed the falling kettle in a descending, then ascending arch at the outermost limit of which I stood just barely able to move away in time.

It might have been better to let the kettle strike me, for in avoiding it, I crashed face first

into the warlord, which was somewhat akin to running into a mountain of stone. The gun sprang from my grasp and I fell half-stunned to the floor.

When the fog in my mind cleared, I looked up to see Zallaham scowling down at me, unmindful of the guards who had stormed the tent swords drawn. At least I was able to direct the attention from myself. I regained my feet and pointed to the kettle. It was oscillating slowly, still tied to the string, and displaying the noisemaker's work. On one side was a squarish puncture, the size of a thumbprint, while the spinning motion alternately revealed the projectile's route of exit: a jagged hole as large as a man's hand.

Zallaham's stood still as his eyes took in the wholesale destruction of the kettle. They bulged wide for an instant, turned greedy, then sly. The guards were quickly ordered outside.

"I think now that a noisemaker is not such a bad thing after all," said Zallaham, making no apologies. "You will now reveal to me its secret."

"Gladly."

"And since the only others I know of have been melted into slag, we shall make plans for constructing new ones."

Too good to be true. "Just one thing about the numbers—"

"They will be few in number, but large in size," Zallaham said. "I cannot afford to equip each troop with a laboriously constructed weapon like your noisemaker, so I shall have fifty or one-hundred big noisemakers constructed in the heart of Huria which can quickly be transported here."

"Fifty or one-hundred!" I shouted happily.

"Yes. What is wrong?" Zallaham asked, misunderstanding. "There should be no problem. What is your noisemaker but a pipe, a handle and a secret? You will tell me the secret. The bigger the noisemaker, the more roughly hewn, the simpler, the louder. Am I not correct?"

"On all points," I affirmed. This man was either a genius, or a mind reader. "I will tell you all you need to know and more if you like. To begin with, big noisemakers are called cannon."

Planet Busters Chapter 18

The OX radio crackled and spit. I sat alone in the basement of our hideout. The boys were conveniently on an errand. I picked up several radio stations playing music and advertising soft drinks and beer before I got it tuned in correctly to the secret channel.

Finally I heard Cardip's voice. It was so garbled I could barely understand him, but a simple squelch adjustment produced reception with bell-like clarity. Cardip's voice seemed impatient, as if he had other things on his mind.

"I hear you've got some things in order over there," he said.

"How is your money holding out?"

"Not too badly," I said. "We increased it a little bit lately actually. Heliox is a poor place to turn a buck but we've managed to be enterprising to a certain degree. Managed a few business ventures to raise some capital and to get the men used to working as a team."

"How about your men? I hear you have some hard-to-manage ones. Are they behaving well?"

"Some of them are a little limited mentally, but they'll do," I said. "One, a guy by the name of Soldat, seems to be just going through the motions, but I think I can count on them all."

"Have you got yourself organized?"

"Yeah. Everything is planned out to the last detail."

Well, I had to at least sound confident. To be truthful, the whole business was so risky I wasn't convinced we'd come out of it alive. I wondered how many other suckers were being dumped on third worlds. The more Cardip sent, the better his chances were for getting what he wanted.

Cardip sounded encouraged. "Remember," he said, "These third worlds are tough little places, especially the one you've chosen. I've given you a lot of freedom in developing your own plan, because you know your men and abilities better than I. Still, allow me to give you some advice."

For a moment the only sound on the speaker was a faint white sound. Then Cardip continued:

"I have a few thumbnail rules for successful subterfuge on primitive worlds. First: work from the inside and place yourself in an indispensable position with whoever's running the show. A third world leader is always useful and I mean that quite literally. This may surprise you but his abilities are very valuable to us. Don't let his primitive appearance fool you. He has found the secret of leading men—the very men we need to use on the Federation's more distant outposts. Underestimating one is

as big a mistake as overestimating the barbarians they command. He'll only need a little enlightenment. He may be stubborn at first, but you'll be amazed at how quickly he'll catch on. He isn't the leader of a nation because he's stupid. More likely he's a brilliant, hostile guy who understands things. Get him interested in bigger and better things! After all, he's the only one we know who can manage the soldiers we want working for us.

"Second, exercise your technological supremacy. Although I'm sure I needn't remind you of that. Always remember that without it you are no different from any man on any planet. Use your advantages but don't overdo it. Even a slight edge like the discovery of the wheel can put you on top. Dazzle them with a miracle or two. You might even try a religious angle but experience shows that that is fraught with hazards. Use your own discretion. You've a whole bag of tricks. Open it up and see what's inside. Then put it to use.

"Next, don't confide in any of your men. Your reports indicate that they are without the ability to make abstractions. Politics is something they won't understand. Hunger, greed, sex, things like that appeal to them, so keep them thinking that they're pursuing those ends. Talk a lot about treasure, women, things like that. It may be a bit of a lonely job for you

but I'm sure you'll have no trouble convincing them that planet busting is nothing more than a flashy form of shoplifting. You'll be surprised at how quickly they take to it."

There was another long pause. I guessed Cardip had finished. It was impossible to restrain myself. "Is Lourdes there?" I asked. "Could I talk to her?"

I hadn't heard from her since I left the battleship. Word had it that she had landed a secretarial job within the rebel forces that involved a bit of translating.

"Lourdes?" asked Cardip. "Why yes," he said. And then, "Oh, no she isn't. I just remembered. She's gone out for lunch." My heart sank like the Titanic, a great black cloud seemed to drizzle over my head. Then a miracle! Lourdes' voice came across the speaker.

"Jenkins, darling," she said. Cardip, his playful side having got the better of him, could not help playing this cruel joke.

Planet Busters Chapter 19

"There is a secret formula that must be prepared before any cannon you build can be of use."

It was a week after my demonstration with the pistol and I was back in Zallaham's tent for the umpteenth time, teaching Freshman Galactellano and discussing various plans for upgrading the armament of the Hurian hordes. The army hadn't budged in all that time and the men were growing restless, not least among whom was Zallaham, who would have killed me a half dozen times but for my fast talking. He now sat, an attendant at his side with a plate of lamota within his easy reach. The floor around the warlord was stained green with spittle.

Zallaham's thick thumb and forefinger dipped into the lamota and secured a great, bushy pinch which was deposited under his lower lip where it added a pouting moue to his already unhappy expression.

He ignored my comment.

"Our project is behind schedule," he complained. "Nothing has been done to start the forging of the cannon, and the army grows soft under the restraining hand of the priests."

"You are wrong, oh immaculate leader," I contradicted, noting the warlord's deepening

frown without much concern. "True, the priests are a pain, but you have learned to read and write—and that is a giant leap toward the completion of the project. It will aid us greatly."

"How?" Zallaham spat, the thick wad of spittle a mouselike blob with a spinning tail. "Do I write the word "cannon", count to seven and one will appear ready to arm and fire?"

"Obviously the answer to that is no. You can, however, write orders for the construction of cannon and send them to the forgers in Huria. This would free you from on-the-spot supervision. It would also keep the cannon-making process from being stolen and deciphered in route. Our writing is not known to the priests."

"You would have me write the directions?" Zallaham snorted.

"I who knows not the method himself?"

"I would have you approve the plans that I draw up. Your knowledge of written Galactellano is indispensable. It insures that you and I will trust one another. I cannot deceive you with the writing because you can read what I write."

"Who," Zallaham wanted to know, "will read these orders in Huria? Will you have to teach the craftsmen our secret? I do not like that idea. Only the few can be trusted to keep the system secret."

"I agree. Let's keep writing a secret for a while. But aren't you overlooking the obvious? I can be your contact in Huria. I can read your orders, supervise construction and send back progress reports and information on the doings of the priests, who, by the way, seem bent on destroying the morale of your men while at the same time letting the enemy grow stronger."

Zallaham grew broody at this. He dismissed the attendant with a rough shove that sent that worthy out of the tent with haste. He then sat with arms folded before him, brow knotted in thought. After a long silence he spat, rose from his place and picked up the bullet-holed kettle, tracing its contorted outlines with his large, muscular hands. He turned, the kettle held before him.

"Your friends—I have not forgotten them—they have caused something to happen in the camp. I do not know whether it is good or bad. The men grumble, but they are happy. I think that your friends know much. I think that they, too, know the secret of our writing." He paused and stared at me. I said nothing. "This thing that I think about them is one of many troubles I have had since you came here. Much of what worries me is the result of what the priests have done. I cannot combat them—yet. But these other things can be changed. Can your companions write as we do?"

I felt suddenly uneasy. "I haven't tried to hide that from you, Zallaham. Writing is no secret where we come from."

"They may reveal the secret to others."

"I will warn them not to."

"They could take what I have learned and do much—tell the priests, teach the priests, interpret my orders. I have plans. I cannot permit them to live and tell!"

"It doesn't matter."

"What? You say that you care not if the secret is let out?"

"For the time being it would be wise to keep things as they are. But the best kept secrets never remain secrets for long, Zallaham. The priests have only been able to keep their own system a secret because of its inherent clumsiness and difficulty. We have to go under the assumption that many will learn our method of writing—but we do not have to worry about that because we can invent codes at any time which will make your orders as secure as you'll ever need them to be."

"What are codes?"

"A method of concealing within a known framework. It's simple.

You simply make a list which says that an "A" is really a "B", a "Z" is really an "E", and write and decipher messages using this key. Whoever has the key can read the message.

Whoever doesn't can't. It's that simple—and the code can be changed if the key ever falls into the wrong hands."

Zallaham smiled, understanding at once. His face darkened at a sudden conclusion. "I will not have to kill them then."

"Of course not. Instead, you could put them to good use by sending them to Huria to act as your agents."

Zallaham shook his head. "No," he said. "I have done much to trust even one outlander. That is enough. You will go if anyone does. Your companions can prepare the formula for the cannon we build."

"Uh, I'd rather take care of that myself, if you don't mind. The formula is from an ancient family recipe which the others do not know. It won't take long to make in any case. I'll mix up a big batch before I head for Huria." I had no intention of putting Henson and Punky in charge of explosives.

"What do you need?"

"Three things, two of which you are probably familiar with. Charcoal—you know—that black stuff that is left after wood has burned without enough air."

"We can make that in abundance." Zallaham commented. "It is often used in Huria for forging, although coal is in better supply." "Good. Have your men gather wood and make

as much of it as they can. Coal won't work in the cannon." The second material is sulfur, which shouldn't be hard to find. The stench of the stuff has been trying to overpower me these last few days. It's leaking out of a hundred volcanoes all around us."

Zallaham sniffed the air. "I don't know what you're talking about." he said.

Zallaham couldn't smell it. The entire planet was blanketed in such a stench that with time individual odors got lost in the muck and remained unnoticed. I sniffed. The reek of sulfur was barely noticeable now, although the air seemed heavy and rank. I was acclimating fast. "Don't worry," I said, "we'll get enough sulfur."

"What is the third ingredient?"

"Saltpeter," I said. "And I think I know where we can find it."

"Where?"

"In a place that smells even worse than the sulfur," I answered.

I then told Zallaham about the bat caves I had seen and he said that the "bats" were called *rorcas*. Apparently, they were considered sacred animals and the well-placed in holy circles knew the whereabouts of all the caves and periodically left burnt offerings at the entrance to each.

Well, that was some unexpected luck for a change. I now had lots of good information and I knew just where to go with it.

"Am I permitted to leave now?" I asked. "So that I can work to prepare the formula?"

"Go," Zallaham said simply with a dismissing wave of his hand.

I retreated backwards, bowing and salaaming out the door of the tent. I didn't have to do that, but I had grown used to a show of respect. I found that it made Zallaham happy, and a happy warlord is the best kind of warlord for all concerned.

Outside the men at arms went about their tasks of keeping the camp in order, caring for the horses and wulkins, and keeping their weapons in readiness. Many of the tasks had been done and redone time and again—but until Zallaham had permission to move his army, that was the way things would have to be.

I found Fulgor sitting alone with his writing materials. He seemed in a pensive mood and had obviously been composing when I interrupted.

"I need to locate some of those sacred caves you're in charge of managing," I told him. "You know, the ones with all of the bats—those *rorcas*—flying in and out of them.

"What?" Fulgor asked. "I know nothing of such places. Begone! I write in communion with our creator."

"You know very well what places I'm talking about. They're the caves of the Spirit of Becerro's Divine Rorcas or some such silly name I'm sure. That's where you've been laying burnt offerings for most of your life."

"Who told you?" he screamed. "Sacrilege! Sacrilege to spy upon a Wise Man and to learn of his Holy Duties. You will be judged, Jenkins—you will be punished along with he who dared tell the secrets of the holy order—"

"Zallaham told me, Fulgor. Try that on for style. Now, I want to visit these caves pronto or I should say, Zallaham does, and by pronto I mean immediately, so you'd better start talking."

"Never!" Fulgor shouted. "A Wise Man's knowledge of the sites of holy oblation are not his. They belong to Becerro himself and are held in trust."

"Fulgor, I think I've learned a thing or two about how things work around here. You may get away with murder when you're delivering speeches from the priests—but you are still subject to Zallaham's orders. He now orders you to cough up the location of those caves—every one of them—and I think it is within his authority to have you pulled slowly apart if you

refuse. Shall I tell him right now that you are unwilling to cooperate?"

"No—" Fulgor said, his resolve ebbing away quickly. "The caves are quite easy to find—not really a secret at all. In fact, they are there for any man to visit."

"Where are they?"

"Many places—near here. That mountain—" He waved his hand towards a range of mountains some thirty miles distant. "Those dark places along the side are rorca caves."

"Good. We'll organize an expedition and you and I will travel out there as soon as possible."

"What?" cried Fulgor. "I've told you where to look. Why must I accompany you?"

"Because you're presumably good at finding the these caves, and I don't want to waste time. Now don't run off anywhere, just be a good boy and sit tight while I go talk to the chief. I'll be back shortly and don't be surprised if Zallaham is with me. He is very interested in potassium nitrate."

Fulgor leaped to his feet. "Blasphemy!" He shrieked. "How can it be? You utter the holiest and most secret of words!" Fulgor eyed me with a new and fearful respect. "Who are you, Jenkins outlander? Where are you from? I have heard the lies you tell Zallaham. Something else is the reality. You perhaps have been sent by the

priests—why? To test my loyalty? To judge me fit or unfit for some mission?"

"It is written that one day all things will become clear," I said enigmatically. I didn't know for sure whether such a thing had been written on some ancient tablet, but it was trite enough to be a good bet—and if it had been, I figured Fulgor would know about it. By the way his eyes swelled out of his head I'd say I had hit right on the button. I left without elaborating further.

The words potassium nitrate were no doubt holy because the priests were the remnants of some scientific community stranded here ages ago and which had regressed to this present state of barbarism. Apparently, they remembered the name but perhaps not any of its uses although for all I knew they were curing sausage with it.

Historians loved to study these worlds; and such studies were economic successes as they made for good popular reading—but as far as I knew nobody had ever done any work on Tuukar—which didn't concern me much. It was enough to know that while the priests remembered a few Latin names, the science of chemistry had reverted to the alchemic stage, not even producing gunpowder, although I was confident some nasty poisons had been developed.

The best of all this was that Fulgor was now inclined to look upon me as a superior, which might prove useful at some later date.

I returned to Zallaham's tent to get things ready for the expedition. Zallaham was eager to ride on any pretense and in a short time I found myself mounted astride a wulkin, Fulgor at my side—allowed for the moment to ride—and Zallaham in the lead, his palomino trotting briskly over the bleak landscape.

The air grew progressively heavier as we approached the volcano. Even the vegetation thinned out as if in deference to the power of the mountain. In reality the foliage had been poisoned by ash and fumes and had been blown away by the freezing winds. Soon there was not even grass to be seen, just red and black volcanic ash and fields of basaltic boulders. Our party made its way over this slowly, traversing the heavier lava flows that had cooled and hardened to form a jagged and upthrusting barrier.

It wasn't long before we got to the first of the bat caves which was conveniently located on the way. My hunch had been correct and the walls inside it were glazed with a milky substance. There was plenty of what we needed on the walls and in the bat droppings themselves. Fulgor just needed to do a little mining work.

The bat guano caves of ancient earth were similarly quarried for saltpeter. The chemical collected on the walls and one simply soaked the guano in water for a while to harvest the saltpeter that crystalized out of it.

We left Fulgor with a handful of warriors to bag and pack the stuff for transport. Zallaham and I had more work to do ahead, and while I didn't relish what had to be done, I comforted myself by reflecting that it was perhaps the ugliest chore to be performed before we had working cannon.

It was a long ride to the base of the volcano. The climb to the summit was hard on man and beast. We made our own switchbacks and zigzagged up the cindery face of the mountain, being careful to go slowly and to take no chances. It was still a dangerous operation and one of the wulkins fell, sliding down the steep incline. Its rider saved himself by leaping free and digging his feet into the cinder which brought him to a skin removing halt some hundreds of feet below. He waved to us, but Zallaham ignored him and continued upward.

The mouth of the crater seemed quiet enough when we reached it. It gasped a bit and emitted a continuous draft, furnace-hot and stifling, but no one was blown off the mountain as we peered down.

"Tie this rope around one of your men," I told Zallaham. "We will lower him over the edge and he will scrape sulfur off the volcano's inner wall and fill this bag with it."

I handed Zallaham a canvas bag, one of those we had brought to transport the sulfur, and a coil of rope—the strongest and longest I had been able to find in the camp. He handed back the bag and made a noose at the end of the rope, which he tossed over me casually.

"What are you doing?" I yelped.

"Tying the rope around one of my men," Zallaham explained. "It is your idea to have someone lowered into Becerro's Orifice. If it is a good idea, you will want to do it yourself."

The men around him broke into a rough laughter. They did not fear the task, but were nonetheless happy to be spared some extra dirty work. I should have known Zallaham would favor his men over me and have no hesitation to risk my life to reinforce their loyalty.

"All right. I will be lowered into Becerro's Orifice," I agreed reluctantly. "But I want your undivided attention and at least five men on the rope at all times." I stretched a length of the cord taut, then flicked it with my free hand. "I'm going to be plucking the rope continuously to show that I am alive and well. If the plucking stops for over ten seconds it will mean that I have been overcome by heat and gas. Pull me

up immediately. Also, two rapid plucks means up please—three means down. One—stop. A series of frantic tugs could mean just about anything so pull me up at once. Now, someone hand me a couple of three other bags because I want this done in as few trips as possible."

I tightened the rope, disliked what I saw, untied it and put together a kind of improvised harness that I thought would hold me more safely. Someone pushed three extra bags into my hands and these were secured to the harness by means of their own leather drawstrings.

"I'm ready," I told them. "Let's get this over with."

It was a cindery incline that led to the drop-off into the crater. The men kept the rope taut enough, however, and when I stumbled, sliding downward on the loose surface, they arrested my fall before I went over the edge.

Once at the brink it was a voluntary descent into hell. I tried to keep my feet against the wall—to stand outward from it, but the sheerness of the inner cliff made that impossible. I just hung as dead weight as the warriors lowered me down the shaft. I plucked the rope with a regular rhythm.

Thirty feet down I saw a tinge of yellow streaking up the wall. I plucked the rope once, hard, but my descent continued. I shouted and the rope jerked to a halt. I then examined the

wall, scraping the yellowish film with a fingernail. Sulfur all right—but hardly enough for a box of cartridges, much less a cannon load.

"Down!" I shouted. Abruptly the descent continued.

A man trusts a short rope more than he does a long one. This is a fact I was just learning to appreciate. As fifty feet were paid out, I realized that the increasing length of the cord represented a greater surface, a greater area to contain some fatal flaw. I had checked the rope carefully, of course, but the farther I was lowered into the mouth of the crater—the farther I found myself from the salvation of the crater's rim—the more difficult it was to do my job with the efficient reserve of the fearless planet buster. And the heat itself was an enemy to be fought against. Sweat poured out of my body, sopping my heavy clothing which itself threatened to catch fire. I worried about the effect of heat on the rope, then drove such depressing thoughts out of my mind. I had a job to do first, and worrying wouldn't lower the temperature inside the pit.

The yellow tinge spread across the wall. The crust itself, however, did not thicken, and I did not call for another halt. At sixty feet, the light from above had died to a dim glitter and the inside wall of the shaft took on a ruddy glow

from the fires below. The sulfur crust was thickening considerably, and I was about to call for a stop when my feet struck a yielding barrier that crunched and crumbled beneath my boots. Sulfur—a whole ledge of it. Enough to equip a hundred armies. I shouted for the men to hold the rope tight and bent to fill the bags.

On the edge of the cliff a quarter hour later I gave the bulging bags an affectionate pat and then collapsed face first over them. The soft powder cushioned my fall and when I came to seconds later, I lay still across them, almost luxuriating. The heat and effort in the shaft had badly dehydrated me, and a week of lamota and rock hog stew, not to mention a thirty-mile ride after a week-old beating, was enough to weaken even the best of men.

"More sulfur!" I cried with breathless dedication. "It's a gold mine, Zallaham—so let's be greedy. The Jarovians won't know what hit them."

Zallaham nodded and threw a heavy skin of water into my hands. The water was flat and metallic-tasting, but I drank voraciously, trying to get my bodily tissues back to their proper level of hydration.

When I finished drinking, I looked up to see the men already hard at work lowering a bag-laden warrior over the rim of the crater, and I

realized happily that the wheels of an infernal machine had at last been set into motion.

Planet Busters Chapter 20

The empire of Huria lay some one-hundred and fifty miles southeast of the encampment. It was a simple matter to find troops willing to form a party to escort me there. The men were dispirited from long confinement in the camp and were quite happy to ride off for home. I was not allowed a voice in their selection, however, and was somewhat displeased to see my old friend Kornuk among the party, jaw still slightly swollen, ego still more than slightly deflated. He looked surly as hell. Isaias, no staunch ally either, was nonetheless under orders to deliver me safely to Huria, and had been appointed commander of the party.

"If you want to communicate with me, you don't have to use clay the way Fulgor does," I told Zallaham privately as our party of wulkins and horses were readying to leave. "Use a sheet of canvas, or some other smooth material, and write with a sharpened stick that has been dipped in blood or coated with coal tar. I'll do the same in Huria to advise you, if you'll tell me who the courier will be."

"Isaias will carry back your message," Zallaham said. "I will send another rider out to you in reply."

There was nothing more to be said. I mounted a wulkin and in a short time our party

moved across the plain. The trip itself was uneventful. The sun rose wanly before us, reached zenith, and fell to our rear without noticeably affecting the temperature, which hovered around zero degrees. About halfway to Huria we stopped and made rude camp. Two archers set off for game and returned shortly with a pair of big-headed grazers, which were promptly butchered. The roasted meat was rank and stringy, but Zallaham's men tore into it with gusto. Unfastidious after my diet of rock hog, I consumed a fair portion of the meat myself, although I couldn't imitate the relish of the warriors.

We slept without covering on the bare ground and in the morning rose early and started on again. The last march was a trial in itself. We left the plain and met a great stretch of rolling hills which we climbed and descended for hours. At last these gave way to a mile or so of flatter land littered with white limestone boulders and ending at the edge of an enormous, red-walled canyon. Below, set fast in the cliffs and impervious to attack, was the city state Huria. It stretched the length of the visible canyon so there was no way to judge its true size. What I saw, however, was grand enough. Giant stone images of unheard of beasts could be seen guarding the hollows under the cliffs. Perhaps more spectacular—a great stone lintel

had been carved the length of the facing cliff. Five-hundred feet high, it capped the upper stories of a thousand stone quarries which, chipped from the living rock, served as quarters for the citizenry, soldiery, and religious royalty of the Hurian empire. At the valley floor the green of the nation's crop rolled from either side of the canyon, broken only by the river which coursed through its center like a heavy metal ribbon. The river was spanned by stone bridges over which could be seen the lightly dressed Hurians transporting the harvest and moving stone.

The weather below was evidently far milder than that on the edge of the cliff. It was at most autumn down there, I thought. Indeed, peculiar to look down upon such a scene from this freezing perspective. But there was little time to be spent admiring the view. Isaias ordered us to descend the cliff. The horsemen, Isaias among them, stayed back as eight or ten warriors dismounted wulkins and made careful leaps. They didn't fall very far. I urged my wulkin forward and saw from the edge a drop of only ten feet which halted at a cut section of rock protruding just under the lintel that crowned our side of the canyon. It was only a few feet wide, a narrow ledge beyond which appeared a straight drop to the canyon floor. Cautiously I turned the animal's head and moved back. Some

nomadic looking men appeared to take charge of the abandoned wulkins. One of them stood for a moment at the side of my mount, waiting expectantly. Isaias frowned at me, and I dismounted following the remaining wulkin riders to the very brink. The men went over immediately, landed cat-like and walked in single file along the ledge. I balked, but Isaias wanted no nonsense. "Jump!" he said sternly.

I did, banging my knees painfully, but at least falling no farther than intended. The other men had made their way along the cliff to where the walkway ended. The end of another ledge protruded from below. It offered a small area upon which to alight. A stab of acrophobia pierced me for a moment, but I managed to take my turn jumping to the lower level.

The ledge I landed on pointed out to empty space so I turned and passed under the shade of the upper walkway before coming to another dead end. Below, another protruding ledge provided a way still further down. I soon caught on to the system. The ledges were set one above the other and from any of them there was but one place to descend farther—always at the opposite side from the previous "step." This arrangement demanded that one weave back and forth across the cliff to arrive at the canyon floor. Moreover, it required the infantrymen of any invading army to arrive singularly at only

one end of each ledge, open target for any arrow. This unusual stairway could also be effectively blocked with a few stout spikes at the landing point of each tier.

I made my way down the face of the cliff as did the others. No problem—or so it seemed. We took turns jumping to each consecutively lower ledge and the process, repeated so often, soon became routine. It was on one of the last tiers of descent, however, that the unexpected occurred. I was making ready to jump to the next lower level, positioning myself and making sure I would not misjudge and overshoot the short projection of stone below. I heard a grumble behind me and the sounds of pushing as though there were some dispute over one's place in line. Nothing to be concerned about, of course. Just one big happy family. And I did not even turn to look, but made my jump.

A mistake.

I had just cleared the ledge when an arm shot out from the group behind me, striking me in the center of the back. At that moment I felt the bleak horror that inevitably comes with the sudden loss of control at a critical point. The shove was designed to propel me beyond the intended landing place, and thus deposit me at the foot of the cliff. The force of it, however, had made contact just below my center of

gravity. The visual result from my point of view was a wheeling panorama of gray sky and rusty cliffs. Luckily this view was fleeting. I had not been pushed outward as much as simply spun in mid air. An instant later the world crashed back into perspective as I collided with the jutting shelf of stone below. Despite the bright, piercing pain that shot through my shoulder, I got up at once. Whoever had pushed me need not see that I had been hurt. Instinctively I had taken the blow on the shoulder, which served to make the impact of the fall less severe. But there is a limit to what the body can bear in any configuration and I had exceeded it. As a result my clavicle had given way. A green stick fracture—I hoped. I'd have to wait to know for sure.

I had no doubts at all about who had tried to kill me. Kornuk was trying to even the score. And nearly had. He'd be back at it again face to face if he knew I was hurt, but for the time being I was safe.

The men dispersed when we reached the floor of the canyon. Kornuk himself seemed to evaporate the instant his feet touched the ground, which was fine with me. I'd fix his wagon later, if I could beat him to the draw.

From far above I heard the clatter of hooves and looked up to see Isaias's buckskin stallion leap from the cliff. The beast landed easily on

the first ledge and the warrior, still mounted, snapped a command. In response the steed trotted to the first step and took it without a pause. These Hurian horses had been exceptionally trained.

When Isaias had descended the cliff, I was led down the canyon. I removed my parka as I walked and trussed up the shirt I wore beneath to form an improvised sling to keep the weight of my arm from being supported by the broken bone. Isaias did not dismount, but kept the pace slow enough for me to keep up with him.

We covered several miles before the carved cliff city began to fall in magnificence. In one place a thousand workmen hauled ropes and raised whips against laboring beasts as the curving wall of this part of the canyon was slowly being cut sheer.

Beyond this construction site, a great mountain of stone plugged the canyon. Beneath it the river flowed sullenly through an arch of stone. Here, I thought, was a weak point in the canyon's defense. Plenty of room was offered a floating army to enter the arching tunnel below the stone barricade. Moreover, the river flowed in, not out, blessing the potential hordes with free transportation through the open galleries of Huria. Perhaps the Hurians were not so clever after all.

My evaluation was premature. I soon learned that the tunnel was barred inside and filled wickedly with a variety of sharp lancing bronze blades designed to catch and impale. Having neared the arch, I could see the spearpoints cutting the water as far out as a hundred yards from the opening.

"Go with these men into the canyon wall and wait for me," Isaias said. We were standing in front of a kind of fissure in the limestone cliff. A handful of young Hurians were loitering about the opening. "I go now to stable my horse and will return soon. You are to meet the master of arms as Zallaham has bade me."

The others started toward the fissure, and I followed. The fissure walls were irregular but the floor was level. No light was provided for a good length of the tunnel within, but soon I could see a glow of daylight entering ahead. Emerging, I was half blinded by the sun's reflection off a dozen square miles of white stone. We had entered an immense open quarry.

"Recruits," a gruff voice muttered. "Green as midseason wheat, and about as stout. Hi! Out of the tunnel! Straighten up! Out of there I say—"

I looked up blinking and gazed upon a huge hairy man whose only visible human attribute was bilateral symmetry—though he pushed the definition of even that. He was misshapen, lumpy and scar-covered, albeit clearly healthy

and manifestly strong. There was a brutish intelligence behind his big, bugging eyes that was in no way equal to that of Zallaham's but was nonetheless noteworthy against the backdrop of that hairy carcass.

He gave the lot of us a fast once over, his sloping brow lined in concentration as he sized us up. There was plenty of slack in that face to accommodate a wide range of emotions. I sensed an impulsive man with a violent nature—though perhaps possessing just enough brains and self control to keep him a high-ranking chieftain instead of an infantry man—or a corpse for that matter. In a gravelly voice he let us know who he was and how he was to be addressed.

He was master of arms Horp and the men in training called him "master" for short and anything else at the expense of their lives. He didn't like me much, I feared. "What's this?" he accused, taking a piece of my trussed-up shirt between a grimy thumb and forefinger. I winced in pain as he gave it a few careless jerks.

"A sling," I gasped.

Horp was unmoved. "Take it off," he ordered.

I complied and Horp viewed my shoulder without sympathy. The area around the bent clavicle was a deep purple, and a few yellowish

blemishes added a sporting dash to the general discoloration. My shoulder drooped like a broken wing, and I held my elbow to keep some of the pressure off it.

"Why am I sent a wounded man? Broken bones this fresh are not permitted here. Fresh gut wounds perhaps—but a man needs his arms to lift a sword—or a hammer."

I could see now that the area behind Horp, a great open training ground, had been gouged out by hand from the thick strata that formed the canyon wall. The surface of the natural stone was weather-stained red, but broken open it was a dirty white. Loose boulders lay scattered everywhere. Nearby, soldiers parried with weighted practice swords and wrestled on the gravelly floor while others broke more rock with heavy sledgehammers. That pile of stone I had seen blocking the canyon had probably come from here. I could see nowhere else the excavated rock could have been discarded.

The quarry presumably served the double purpose of toughening up the recruits while simultaneously expanding the protected holdings of the empire. The beginnings of a housing project was evidenced by a long series of windows set in rows along a far face of the man-forged cliffs. And this new Hurian annex was just as secure as the natural one. More so perhaps. The cliffs within the dig were as sheer

as any carved by the river and less easily scaled without the specially-cut ledges.

"He is to lift no hammer, nor be trained for battle." Isaias had come back from stabling his horse. He approached Horp with an easy assurance that showed he handily outranked the master of arms. "It is Zallaham whom I speak for. This man is to have what he needs to build what he so desires. And with the help of whoever will make the work most speedy. The priests shall not know of it. It is Zallaham who speaks these words. It is Zallaham who himself will kill whoever does not obey them."

Meaning you, Horp, I thought. It was nice to have friends in high places.

In two days I had most of the timetable worked out for cannon construction. The needed technology was not hard to find. Bell casters and forgers, blacksmiths and the like abounded here and they were more than happy to have extra business.

Horp paid them out of the empire's defense budget, spending not approved by the priests, of course—but extortion went without saying in Zallaham's orders. The only hitch was that bell makers stood one notch above the other tradesmen in the local pecking order. The making of bells was considered a hallowed *modus operandi* accompanied by a lot of pagan mumbo jumbo. A goat was tossed into the

molten metal. Prayers and self flagellation followed.

These rituals tripled the time spent in forging, and to make matters worse the bell makers were loathe to work along side the other tradesmen. Horp fixed all this. He simply mentioned that in addition to his duties as Master of Arms, he also chaired the local draft board. At this, things fell into place rather smoothly, although as with all business transactions there was bargaining and Horp had to concede the goat.

It was during the final forging of the cannon that a messenger arrived. He was led to me between two guards, and was still panting and gasping. Horp accompanied the guards. "This man insists that he has communication from Zallaham but when pressed he seems not to know what it is."

The runner still gasping said, "He wanted only for me to deliver this." He handed over a strip of leather upon which was scrawled Zallaham's message. It was simple and direct—almost an afterthought, and written in blood, of course. It read, "Make sure our cannon are bigger than those of the enemy."

For a moment I felt almost guilty for deceiving the warlord. But I knew he would have to forgo vengeance if he found out there were no Jarovian artillery. I was sure he'd figure

that out sooner or later. And I was now indispensable and he knew it. Besides, the fact that the Jarovians were unarmed would be such music to Zallaham's ears I doubted he'd even be angered by my deceit. After all, I'd only lied to save my hide and strengthen the Hurian Army.

My reply was sent on the opposite side of Zallaham's strip of leather and left immediately with the same messenger who was provided a fresh wulkin. It read: "Your cannons larger. Jenkins."

Planet Busters Chapter 21

One hundred cannons lined the rise overlooking the valley where the Hurian infantry made ready to battle. To the west at the far end of the lower land lay another rise behind which waited the Jarovian army. Setting up the cannons was harder than I'd imagined, although the invention of the wheel helped. It took a hundred men to drag each into position—and a hundred hours to train the crews of each. Azimuths, sighting and loading procedures were tough to explain to these men. Zallaham rode the perimeter of the cannons. He was obviously immensely pleased but when he dismounted to confer with me his voice sounded worried.

"Are you sure our cannons are bigger, more powerful than those of the enemy?" he asked.

"They are undoubtably larger," I said. "The cannons I observed before completing my spying mission were in poor repair. I wouldn't be surprised if they fail to get them to work at all."

Zallaham took no cheer from these words. "I have yet to see our cannons fired," he complained. "What assurance do I have that they will work?"

"Zallaham," I said as if chiding a child. "Why is it you worry so much? You know the

reason for not having test fired the cannons—the advantage of surprise. We'll never get a chance like this again. And after today the Jarovians will be as nervous as rabbits and harder to catch. The ones who are still alive, that is. We've got them where we want them, the perfect setup. They're sitting ducks and you still complain."

The warlord turned to survey the formations of soldiers who waited on the lower land. "The scouts have sighted no movement of the Jarovians. And the Jarovians have no doubt observed the same of us. Each awaits the other. It will be a grand battle. We will begin fire on my command, then pound them with our guns until they are routed. The soldiers can take care of those who remain alive to fight. See first that all is ready. I want no foolish mistake to take away the advantage."

I hurried along the rows of cannons, checking to see if anything was amiss. Each gun had been loaded and aimed according to my instructions. Beside each was a neat stack of cannon balls and bags of heavy-gage grape shot.

The cannon crew leaders held torches ready to ignite the short, reed fuses which jutted out of the back of each gun. When I had assured myself that all was in order, I walked back to Zallaham's side.

The warlord raised his hand before the line of cannons and the men manning the guns tensed ready.

"The cannon will fire at the count of seven," Zallaham said. "One!" And then in an aside to me: "You had better hope they work."

"They will, Zallaham." The warning did not seem serious, but this was a turning point for me and I felt my hands shake. As Zallaham continued the count, I realized that I wanted very much that there be nothing wrong with the machinery I had put into effect. And that desire had nothing to do with any retaliation that Zallaham might dish out. I had worked pretty hard here and could only hope that what I had done would bear fruit. And the effect of my labors on the unsuspecting Jarovians? I tried not to think about that.

"Four!" Zallaham cried.

This was the big moment. All across the ridge torches were raised, trailing oily smoke in the cold, dry wind.

"Six!" There was a thudding sound in the distance. At first I thought one of our cannons at the far end of the ridge had gone off prematurely, but the sound was followed by a dozen other thuds and then a sound like sail cloth ripping in a hurricane.

I couldn't believe my ears. "Incoming!" I screamed and hit the dirt.

"Seven!" Zallaham boomed.

The Hurian cannons roared, filling the air with clouds of alabaster smoke and removing the uppermost two feet of earth from the facing ridge. At the same time, a series of explosions rocked and roared through the Hurian ranks, scattering men and wulkins and catapulting two of our cannon and crews twenty feet into the air. "Bring her up a notch." I shouted. What was this? The Jarovians had cannon after all? How? I was totally stunned.

Zallaham, expecting something like this, was undaunted. He stood unmoving, observing the scene with resolute indifference as cannon shot filled the air and smoking chunks of shrapnel whistled all around. The cannon crew had not heard my directions—too much noise and confusion—but it was just as well. In an instant the situation had changed.

The Hurian cannons boomed once again and when the volley reached the ridge, a thousand Jarovian infantrymen had just begun to swarm over it. There was a succession of echoing crashes as the artillery found its mark and the Jarovian warriors vanished under a surging cloud of brown dirt and silt.

"Nice shooting guys," I shouted. "Now, odd cannons a notch or two higher, even guns use that grapeshot against the ridge. Let go another salvo!"

The crew bent to the task and in a moment the guns exploded, and the ridge was pelleted by a whistling storm of knuckle-sized projectiles. The surviving Jarovians did not loiter on the exposed face of the hilly rise. They retreated—hastily—as the odd-numbered cannon lobbed the heavier balls after them.

"I will give the orders here," Zallaham reminded, frowning down at me.

"Sorry, must have been the excitement."

I got up and dusted myself off, looking across a land of turmoil and destruction. The sky was divided in smoky layers that cast patches of shade over the ground and the air was filled with the unceasing rumble of field guns.

It was safe enough to stand now. Most of the unfriendly fire was now directed at another division of the Hurian army positioned almost at the valley floor below us. In the confusion the Jarovians had lost their bearings on our guns—but their fire pummeled the Hurian foot soldiers who quickly learned to dig in or die.

In the meantime, our own artillery continued the bombardment, raising the sights on half of the cannons so that the muzzles pointed almost vertically. From these guns the grapeshot was propelled to its maximum altitude of some thousands of feet whereupon it followed the rule of Newtonian physics, turned earthward,

and rained down upon the Jarovians hidden behind the ridge.

"Their cannons appear nearly as big as ours," Zallaham observed unhappily, "and we have lost the advantage of surprise. I will have the foot soldiers attack. Perhaps they are enough to overrun the enemy guns."

The order was given and passed along by Isaias, whose job was to make himself handy during battles. In a few minutes the infantrymen could be seen moving silently up the rolling incline toward the crest of the hill. The first to arrive waited, letting the others gather themselves into position. Then, with a sudden rush, they stormed over the summit shouting, swords raised and spears thrust forward.

Unfortunately for them there was no one there to engage them. The Jarovians, realizing the futility of charging the ridge, had apparently drawn their forces far down its opposite side. The area clear of their own men, they hoped to be able to inflict upon the Hurians what had been meted out to them. And they did just that. There was an earsplitting din as the Jarovian artillery decimated the Hurian foot soldiers, turning the high edge of the rise to a calder of smoke, shrapnel and flying bodies. The only ones to survive had not yet made their way over the ridge.

Zallaham frowned. "We will have to try another way," he said simply.

But there was no other way. Just come over the rise and the cannons mowed you down. The ridge was too long to circumvent, and the cannon-firing Jarovians were too strong to meet at the disadvantage the ridge itself presented.

Under different circumstances Zallaham would have rushed the hill, taken his casualties and overpowered the smaller army. But this could no longer be done. The cannons had introduced a new and unchanging constant into the equation of strategy. Now there was not merely a bloody nose to be exchanged for total victory, but a walloping loss of forces and no assurance that victory would result. The battle was locked in a stalemate, but it took Zallaham a long time to concede this fact. To save ammunition he finally ordered a partial ceasefire, allowing only an occasional volley to harass the enemy and keep things interesting for his own men.

"Have my quarters set up," Zallaham grumbled to Isaias. He waved his hand at the cannons. "Away from all this noise. I need to think."

The occasional crunch of mortar fire mingled with the pounding of tent stakes and the slap of canvas unrolled in the wind. The tent was erected in minutes and the warlord went

inside before as much as a chair was brought in. I followed close behind.

"Zallaham, there is a way..."

A noisy commotion sounded outside. The tent door parted and Isaias stepped in, leading the way for two other chieftains who pushed forward a bound and beaten warrior.

"What—" Zallaham began.

"A scout," explained Isaias. "Jarovian. Captured at a northern section of the high downs. He had this with him." Isaias held out a very ordinary-looking pair of field glasses. "We do not know what it is."

"Then remove it from my tent until you do," Zallaham snapped, still wary of the unknown. "Leave the prisoner here and fetch Fulgor. Tell him I want the truth from a man and to bring what is needed."

The prisoner was dumped unceremoniously on the ground where he lay still, eyes fastened upward, hatred painting his face. Zallaham ignored him, paced the unfurnished quarters.

"There is a better..."

"No! You speak of mercy, and you are weak, Jenkins. We will have the advantage," Zallaham vowed. "If I have to break this man's bones myself to get it."

"And then?" I asked.

The answer was simple and direct, as if nothing else in the world mattered.

"Victory."

"There can be no victory for you Zallaham," I informed him, using all my courage. "Not here anyway."

"What? You say that my army has been defeated? Defeated simply because a smaller nation has cannons and we cannot advance?" His eyes burned down at me. "It was you who promised their arms would be no match for ours."

"I did not know, Zallaham," I said truthfully. "But it is not cannons that will forever rob your army of conquest, but a mechanism devised long ago and over it you have no control."

"You are speaking of the priests," Zallaham said, quick to understand. "Tell me now what they have to do with this!"

I looked at the Jarovian warrior, then at Zallaham. "How much is a man like this worth to you?"

The Jarovian lay on one side. The hatred on his face was only a thin mask over pure desperation—and terror. He strained against the bindings that held his arms and legs. He could not hope to escape, yet he had a duty to himself to try, for he knew what awaited him.

"I will not know his worth until I learn what information he has."

Fulgor came through the doorway. He carried a small, sagging bag and an assortment

of steel instruments—most of them glinting with cutting edges, some hollow and pointed.

"What would be the value of a man with all possible knowledge of the enemy—a man ever at your disposal, who could communicate over vast distances and in secret?"

"A spy so gifted would be worth all our cannons. But he would not last long. All soldiers must repeatedly pass trial by word of mouth. It is our way."

"You mean by mouthing words like flicked?"

"*Pflicht*," Zallaham corrected. "Yes. You have heard the men practice this custom."

"And if the spy knew all such words?"

I could not help but direct my attention at Fulgor who was now quietly making his way toward the door. His exit was arrested in mid step as Zallaham, not even stepping forward, shot out a seemingly impossibly long arm and grasped the Wise Man by the scruff of his neck.

"I think I know who you mean," the warlord said. He tossed Fulgor onto the floor and the Wise Man, spirit broken, lay groveling in fear.

"How many such words do you know, Zallaham?" I asked. The warlord was leveling a deadly stare at Fulgor.

"I have never counted." He shrugged his shoulders. "One hundred, perhaps."

"And you never thought it strange that at the direction of the priests you could ally yourself with the Gorfs?"

"It was said to be Becerro's will, although I did not believe it. I complied because however bad my luck ran while following the directives of the priests, it worsened when I went against them. And the Gorfs are able to utter the same words."

"Only some of the same," I told him, "And like you they use whatever words the priests demand—in this case the ones you have in common."

"Why?" asked Zallaham, though he must have known the answer already. "To move among the armies at will. To let certain nations grow rich for plunder while others loot them. To rule you."

The warlord stiffened, looked at Fulgor and slowly drew his sword. He dropped his arm and held the weapon at his side. Then it was as though a part of his spirit had left suddenly. His shoulders stooped as if each hand carried a heavy weight. He raised the sword.

"No—" I stepped in front of the warlord. "He too is a servant and has also been used. Killing Fulgor will accomplish nothing good. The priests will hear of it soon enough, and will send all the armies against you. Not even you can stand against them all combined."

Zallaham did not lower his sword. "I believe they will do so whether this worm dies or not."

I paused a moment. "I think that is probably correct," I admitted, "but there is no reason to kill him. I know a way to give you the power you have never had. The proof of it lies buried on the plain two day's ride from here. Spare Fulgor and I will take you there."

Zallaham scowled. "You risk much to make demands and haggle with me over the life of a traitor."

"He is no more than what you are, a servant of the same master. Let him go."

Zallaham stood silently for a long moment, then lowered his sword. He chuckled half-heartedly. "You have power, Jenkins. The power of persuasion at the very least. Whether you can give any other kind of power to me remains to be seen." He re-sheathed his weapon and turned away from Fulgor. "I believe you know far more than you have ever told me. And I wish to learn."

"You will come with me, then?"

"My army engages the enemy."

"Your army sits idle, unable to win or lose. And I can make sure the Jarovians don't try anything desperate while we're away." "How?"

"I'll start by interrogating the prisoner." I said.

Zallaham snorted and swept his hand toward the Jarovian who was following our conversation with more than casual interest. "Go ahead. I think you will find him harder to persuade."

"I don't need much information." When I turned to address the Jarovian, I saw that Fulgor had done a disappearing act while Zallaham had been distracted. Good for him. I never liked the wise man, but was glad my revelations hadn't cost him his life. "You," I addressed the prisoner as insultingly as possible. "Your leader is a womanish, fish-faced piece of wulkin dung!"

"Stay your tongue, dog," cried the warrior defiantly, "He is Kale of Heliox, conqueror of nations and wielder of miracles!"

"I thought so," I replied. Who else could it have been but Soldat? I guessed it almost at once, but had to make sure. "Thanks, pal. That'll be all I need. We'll let this one go too, Zallaham—with a written message for the Jarovian Warlord."

Zallaham found it immensely difficult to understand how I knew Kale, but I gave him an abridged version of the truth which somehow seemed plausible enough for him to accept. The presupposition that Kale could read was explained along with all the rest, and I soon

stood outside the tent watching the grateful Jarovian carry my message out of the camp.

Two hours later the reply came in. It was carried by a young and understandably nervous Jarovian messenger who was allowed to leave the way he had come. When I unfolded the wide sheet of canvas inside the tent, Zallaham looked over my shoulder.

"He adds letters where none are needed and omits others that should be there. It looks like the message you sent to him."

"I know, but you can read it too."

The message said:

Jenkins:

I wondered about those cannons. I'd have had you! I agree to sit tight if you do. Can't think of much else to do anyway. Any suggestions? Ha ha. Send another message when you come back. But make no mistake; I intend to win the battles I fight.

Kale

P. S. Peso Jack alive? So what else is new?

Kale was as smart as we had always guessed.

"He's staying put, Zallaham," I said. "Are you ready?"

"Tell the men to bring my horse," replied the warlord.

I left the tent. The scene outside resembled an encampment more than a battle theater. Only the infrequent boom of cannons broke the silence. Tents had been set up all along the slanting land and Hurians strolled casually about, weapons sheathed. I passed between a row of tents to where the horses were being stabled. I did not know I was being followed until I heard a shout.

"He wears now a blade!"

I wheeled just in time.

Kornuk! A knife—I had his wrist. Not now! I thought. After everything, not now!

Kornuk's eyes were wild, the whites showing, and his face convulsed in rage as he fought to overpower me. I knew that in a moment the warrior's strength would tell and he would pull free and stab. I could only hold on to the deadly knife hand and hope, even though the outcome was a foregone conclusion.

It happened even sooner than I expected. A sudden jerk and Kornuk's right hand was free, his knife already swinging upward in a vicious arch that my outstretched hands could not possibly stop.

A single impacting blow clapped in front of me. Kornuk fell in a heap, his skull oddly round on one side, flatter on the other. Grinning stupidly and examining his raised fist with pride, stood Gode.

"Boss men leave me in charge of bodyguarding you," he said. "They out on business." He looked admiringly at his own fist, then to the body of Kornuk—establishing the cause and effect aspects. "One hand."

"I'll be sure to let them know," I said numbly. "Thanks, Gode."

Planet Busters Chapter 22

"There is nothing here but rock," Zallaham said, looking out across the seemingly endless, moonlit plain. "What possibly could be here of value to our army? Is there no end to your riddles?"

I didn't answer him at once. For a moment there was nothing but the sound of our steeds' hooves on the rocky soil of the plain.

"I have never meant to make riddles with you, Zallaham," I answered.

"Then why will you not tell me the purpose of this journey? I never thought I'd live to see the day when I would brook such nonsense. Who is leader of Huria?" He was exasperated. "You?"

"You are, Zallaham. But what I have to show you will make even our cannon and writing seem small by comparison."

Zallaham gave a fatalistic sigh and reached into his pocket for lamota. He had obviously resigned himself to the fact that he would have to wait for an answer. He wrapped the reins around one arm, freeing his hands, and opened the box. "We will camp here," he said suddenly.

We reined our animals and dismounted. I took several large pieces of charcoal from the saddle bags and then scouted the vicinity for chunks of brush. I arranged the charcoal in a

small pile and constructed a teepee of gnarled twigs over it. The fire burned easily in the cold, still air.

"Tomorrow we will travel over that rise," I told Zallaham, "and a little beyond. Over there lies that which I wish to show you." Zallaham grumbled, but refrained from asking for any more details. "I do not like that Isaias is tending the men..." he muttered.

The effects of lamota made the night seem even more pristine. The starry sky was colder and clearer than I had ever seen it. The two Tuukarian moons were icy circles moving slowly across the heavens.

"Zallaham," I said. "Have you ever wondered about the stars?"

"I have always thought," he said slowly, "that they are suns like ours. Suns so far away their warmth cannot reach us. I have also thought that they are suns which shine on other worlds."

I was not prepared for such an answer and felt suddenly ashamed. I had been expecting some superstitious answer, an ignorant answer. The answer of a barbarian. Zallaham looked at me across the fire, and from his expression I knew he understood what I was thinking. I also knew I would never underestimate his intelligence again.

"Go to sleep now," he said "Tomorrow you will show me what it is you wish me to see. I hope that it is not a tablet saying that there are other worlds. Of other worlds I have always known—not from ancient writings or from men like you, but because I have imagined them myself."

Planet Busters Chapter 23

When I awoke Zallaham was already astride his horse. The wind was blowing hard and the warlord was in a bad mood. Obviously a little hung over from the lamota.

"Get up," he said unpleasantly. "Let us begone from this place."

I stood up and my head swam. "Yeah, yeah," I said crankily.

The hangover I had was as bad as his.

"Watch your tongue, Jenkins," warned Zallaham. "Perhaps you've gotten other ideas, but it would be wise to remind yourself that this is still my world and I am still your master."

I got on my wulkin, blinking. The glare of the morning sun was giving me one hell of a headache. I kicked the wulkin in the ribs and trotted along after Zallaham jolting my aching bones with every step. "I haven't forgotten, Zallaham."

It was hard to keep up with the warlord's swift steed and after several minutes Zallaham stopped and called back. "Make haste, Jenkins. I do not wish to waste time because of your weakness. I want to see what it is you have to show me. If it is of value like the cannon and writing, I can put it to use. If it is treachery, I want to dispose of you quickly and return to my men."

I rode up to Zallaham and what came from my mouth surprised both of us. "Listen Zallaham. I've worked hard to help you. I've risked my life and brought to you many valuable things. What I have to show you is not treachery. It is something that will give you great power. I've admired you and tried to serve you, and have not once been given a simple thank you. Instead you threaten me. No—don't say anything. My feelings are hurt. And not because I want gratitude from you, but because you, as great a man as you are, do not understand that there is wisdom in treating even a lesser man as an equal."

To my surprise Zallaham said nothing. He just rode ahead silently without looking back.

Large cumulous clouds, some dark and heavy with rain, filled the eastern sky and rolled in front of the rising sun. Beneath them lightning crackled and sheets of rain fell on the distant mountains. I reviewed in my mind the landmarks I remembered, but nothing appeared the same save the small smoking volcano to the west. I began to worry that triangulating my position might be far less accurate than I had ever imagined. This was a huge place and we could have been miles from our destination. It was disheartening, but I realized now that it might take days of wandering before we located a second landmark.

"There is nothing here," Zallaham announced. "Nothing but rocks and weathered bones."

It was true. I halted my wulkin and stared out at the bleak, lifeless land, an endless jumble of red rocks, small shrubs, and a few white bones scattered about.

Zallaham dipped into his box of lamota, secured a hefty pinch, put it under his lip, and at the same time gave me a long, hard look. He was getting impatient. His next remark did not denote great powers of observation. "You are lost," he said dryly.

"Temporarily displaced might be a better way to phrase it," I replied. "I'm looking for a certain outcropping of rock, but I haven't found it yet."

"Well, at least we are not the first to be lost in this wilderness."

"What do you mean?"

"The bones," Zallaham said, leveling a blunt finger at the ground. "The bones of other lost fools."

I looked down at the bones, one of which my wulkin was stepping on. The animal moved forward and it snapped in half. A femur. Up until now I had thought they were the bones of dead cattle. It took a moment for me to realize what they meant. I knew these bones. They

were the bones of three Hurian scouts buried here long ago.

My luck was changing.

Although wild animals had scattered the remains a great distance, it was not hard to follow the trail back to the gravesite. From there I found the cache easily, without even using the landmarks I had once surveyed so carefully.

Zallaham watched from his horse as I dug. Having already been broken, the earth was loosely packed and easy to shovel. In only a few minutes I had unearthed the pack.

Zallaham was trying to conceal his interest but couldn't quite manage it.

"Open it! Open the treasure," he said anxiously.

I was glad to oblige and soon had its contents spilled before Zallaham's eyes.

The warlord was equally unsuccessful in hiding his disappointment at the clutter of unglamorous objects before him: some dirty clothes, what was left of a re-entry suit, and an unimpressive OX radio transmitter, complete with battery hook-up. What I displayed so proudly resembled nothing more than a small heap of junk.

Zallaham had finally reached the limit of his patience. He lurched off his horse and began to scream and curse at having been led into the

wilderness in order to uncover a pitiful little tangle of trash.

His rage ebbed quickly as the strange electronic squealings I was coaxing from the radio caught his attention. Zallaham sat down next to me without a word.

"Here is the power I promised you, Zallaham," I said. "The other worlds we talked about last night are waiting. I am now going to tell you what I know of them. Then we will talk with the stars."

Riding back across the cold plain, Zallaham was silent. I left him to his thoughts. What he had learned the night before was no less than a soul-shaking revelation to him. But as Cardip had suggested, men like this could grasp things readily. I was still surprised at how quickly things fell into place for him. He accepted this newly revealed universe in an academic fashion, without doubting any of it. It all made much too much sense for him not to accept. Now I imagined he was assessing his possibilities in this universe. But perhaps something else was preying on his mind.

"This man Cardip," he finally said. "He does not sound like a warrior. His voice is weak, like Fulgor's."

"I know what you mean, Zallaham. He even looks like a weakling. But his spirit is strong

and I assure you that he is one of the most powerful men in the galaxy because of it."

The warlord again lapsed into silence.

"Will you join in the enterprise?" I asked. "It will give you the power to conquer entire worlds."

"What is this 'peace' Cardip speaks of? In Huria, this word is the same as 'death.' Explain to me why one must strive to achieve death."

"The word is different on other worlds," I told him. "It simply means the absence of war." I knew that this might be the hardest thing for Zallaham to understand. "We are seeking to achieve a condition wherein people can live without all the bloodshed and fighting."

Zallaham's eyebrows jumped up. "Do you believe such a condition can exist?" He looked on the verge of laughter.

"Yes," I answered. "It has existed for many years, but now we must fight to win it back. And not just peace, but peace without oppression. One cannot go without the other."

"And you expect to achieve this peace by waging war?" Zallaham seemed incredulous. "How?"

"By killing all the men who are causing the trouble," I explained not so eloquently. "Don't you ever want to have some peace and quiet for a change?"

Zallaham thought it over.

"I do love battle," he said. "But there are times when it might be good to rest without my back against the wall guarding against treachery. Yes," he admitted, "Such a thing might be good. Someday."

"Would such a condition be worth fighting for? I guarantee that despite the way things work here, peace can be achieved on other worlds."

"It would," Zallaham said slowly, "be far better than the peace we fight for in Huria."

"Will your men follow you?"

Zallaham looked at me. "My men will go where I tell them."

Night was falling and we pitched camp under a large rock overhang. I went out to collect firewood as Zallaham rubbed down his horse.

Darkness came quickly and with it the inevitable Tuukarian cold. An eddy of wind swirled into the grotto, brightening the burning charcoal. We squatted at the fire, our faces bathed in the orange glow. Zallaham brought out his box of lamota and opened it. He looked at it for a while uneasily, a troubled expression on his battled-scarred face.

"There is only a little left," he said. "I think we shall..." he stopped as if searching for a word. "I think we shall...share it," he said.

Part II

On July 14, 1983 in Flagstaff, Arizona, I began to write Part II of *Planet Busters* longhand using the wood and metal clipboard that I have kept in use since 1961 when I was in the fifth grade. I still have the written sheets and they are still stored on the clipboard when it's not in use.

I remember spending a few days in the woods furiously writing, pleased with the thoughts that flowed from my pencil. I also remember setting aside the project for what would turn out to be a few years.

I returned to the story sometime after 1984 when our office acquired the first 128-K Macintosh with its 400-K single-density, single-sided, three-and-a-half-inch floppies. I was fascinated by the machine, but couldn't afford one at the time and instead bought my own Apple II knock-off, the Laser 128. I then carried on with the project, which grew finally to novella size raising the word count for the entire book to nearly 85,000.

The reader will note that Part I consists of alternating chapters, each dealing with events in the story that take place in two differing time sequences—one being a flashback. The chapters in which Jenkins' wife Lourdes appears are in the flashbacks alone, and to

allow her to join the action throughout Part II, its chapters reflect a single chronological sequence.

I also continued with what I hoped would please any readers who (like me) appreciate a tour of scenery: there are cities to visit, new planets to explore, trains and spaceships to ride in, and trails to tramp.

I added a worthy antagonist, one George Seek, a sanctimonious yet murderous religious fanatic whose access to apocalyptic weaponry mirrors the ghastly then-and-now fears of A-bombs falling into the hands of the overly faithful. And, as the blurb on the back cover of the book notes, I include some mysterious, super-intelligent aliens.

Part I was originally written in its entirety on a heavy manual Royal typewriter with elite type that I had purchased specifically for the task. My mother very kindly re-typed Part I for me on her IBM Selectric and so when I recently acquired some decent OCR software, I was able to scan her pages into my word processor for editing and publication. Part II could simply be pasted in at the end, and it was.

It starts on the next page.

Planet Busters Chapter 24

The whole operation had taken only five minutes. No risk really—unless I was caught in the act. I'd pack up and be off planet within the hour.

I left the evidence at the scene of the crime, at first recapping the paint can and laying the brushes neatly at its side, then reconsidering and dashing the remaining paint across the wall. That action was really beneath my dignity, but I had special reasons to treat this house differently.

I left the mesh ladder pinned up there on the wall.

Saul Tillinghass, galactic flatfoot and bourgeois enemy of the masses, would be mad as a hornet come sun-up. Even now by starlight my handiwork could be seen clearly for some distance. I chuckled as I admired the yard-high letters so neatly done in gothic style—a first-rate piece of professional vandalism that read:

Extreme Scum

That caper gave me some measure of satisfaction, but in all I was not happy with my work. The first thing I did when the shuttle pilot put me aboard the Seychelles was to knock twice hard on the director's door and walk in.

Harry Cardip sat at his desk, head down absorbed in some paperwork. All I could see of him was the top of his bald head, his hunched shoulders, and horn-rimmed glasses under which his pencil thin mustache danced as he silently counted out figures. I tapped my foot, cleared my throat, and at length Cardip looked up from his papers and said: "Good work, Jenkins. The report came in just after your assignment had been completed. "Nearly flawless."

"Nearly?" I asked. I knew Cardip. "Nearly" was bad news by his standards. Cardip rose from his chair, motioned at me with one hand. "Close the door, please," he said. "Yes, nearly. You forgot the slogan we assigned you."

The door banged metallically as it shut. I turned and looked at Cardip. "Didn't forget." Wrote my own. You know, special case."

"I know how special this case was," Cardip said, flopping back into his chair with a crashing symphony of ancient springs. "Have a seat, now. I want to talk to you. Important."

"That's good," I replied, sitting. "I came to talk to you about something anyway. I hate my job. I think I quit. Lousy pay and no chance for advancement—in fact, I've been demoted—from revolutionary planet buster first class to some kind of raspberry expert specializing in

crank telephone calls, petty vandalism, and other lightweight stuff. What gives?"

"You are valuable to us."

"And you don't want me killed?"

"Exactly."

I threw my hands up. "Oh, brother! Now I've heard it all. My last assignment was practically a suicide mission. You put me up to it too, Cardip. You've got hundreds of agents with more training than I, and they're out risking their necks all over the galaxy. Now you tell me that you can't afford to have me killed?"

"You seem awfully eager to be," observed Cardip. "Are you?"

"Not really—in fact, the thought terrifies me—and my poor wife would carry on so—I think. But I don't appreciate the assignments I'm getting, and I want to know why you're giving them to me."

"I've already told you."

"Come off it!" I snapped.

Cardip merely grinned. "I mean it," he said. "You mentioned hundreds of other agents. You know that I used to have many hundreds more."

"So what?"

"So they were killed trying to complete the same assignment you had some months ago."

"And hundreds succeeded as I did. What does that prove?"

Cardip thought for a moment, pulled open his desk drawer, and extracted a sheet of paper. He looked it over quickly and handed it to me. "What does that prove?" he parroted.

The sheet was simply a list of numbers:

156,487
16,333
4055.00
482 etc.

"I don't even know what it is," I answered.

"Surely you do," Cardip laughed. "It's a list of mercenaries obtained in our special recruitment program. Each figure represents the number of men conscripted by each agent."

"And?" I asked irritably.

"And you top the list!" he congratulated, extending his hand.

I frowned, shook his hand across the desktop warily. "So where's my commission?"

"We don't award commissions, as you well know. Only rank. That's how you moved from private to staff sergeant in a single bound."

I snorted. "And how thrilling it was. There's just something about that uniform."

"Which you never wear," Cardip reminded.

"And look like a fed?" I sneered. I lowered my eyes. "Where's your dance set anyway, general?"

"I outrank every general in the Agency and therefore dress as I choose," he said matter of factly. "You may, too. Actually, uniforms and even rank itself are optional. We've found that promotion in title is a good work incentive for many of our soldiers, however."

"Not for me," I said.

"But that's what makes you so special to us, my friend."

"I'm special because I brought you back more recruits than anyone else. Your affection is purely mercenary, excuse the pun."

"Perhaps," he confessed. "But you haven't examined the list closely enough."

"What's to examine? A list of numbers, from largest to smallest—"

"But the spread—" Cardip was getting impatient. "Here, here," he muttered irritably, pulling the sheet from my hands. "Don't be so dense. Yes, 156,487 is the top of the list. The next highest is only 16,133. The difference is substantial—no, remarkable—especially remarkable when you see the dozens of pitifully smaller numbers below."

"I picked a good planet," I explained. "The people there are aggressive, like to fight, easy to enlist."

"Easier to anger," Cardip countered. "Yet you survived. You produced. And there's more—yes, there's much more. From nothing you

became Prime Chancellor of Marion, the most successful non-federal world the galaxy has ever produced. And the feds still can't figure out its success—even though they conquered it."

"All my late father's doing," I reminded, becoming wary of this praise.

"But you helped—you helped!" Cardip maintained, waving me to silence. He seemed unwilling to consider any facts to contradict whatever theory he was developing. Irrational at best but flattering—and he was right. I *had* been elected as Prime Chancellor of Marion. I *had* busted the planet Tuukar and simultaneously converted over 150,000 stone-age savages to our revolutionary cause.

"You were saying?"

"Things like that simply do not take place by chance. It takes a special gift."

I swelled.

"I think I understand what that gift is now," he continued. "At least I think I do." He hesitated a moment and then said in a sober tone that nobody could ever have faked: "You were born lucky."

"Huh?"

"So I knew your worth! The only thing left to determine was loyalty and..."

"Loyalty!"

Cardip stood from his chair and pointed a finger at my nose. "Because of your promising

background, I for one am sorry to find that you are sadly lacking in that aspect of service!"

"I—"

"Shut up!" Cardip exploded. "You had your orders! You were to write a scientifically-researched and specially-composed slogan. Where is it?" He rummaged through a pile of papers on his desk. "Where—ah, here: Proletariats of the World, Unite. That slogan cost 5,000 man hours to develop. What did you write?"

"Something quite different," I admitted. "A description of the dwelling's inhabitant."

Cardip scowled, and nodded accusingly. "You mean Saul Tillinghass?"

"You know who I mean," I told him.

"Just because he bombed your planet to smithereens and exiled you, you would hold a grudge?"

"I'm like that."

"Insubordinate. Are you like that?" Cardip slammed his fist on the table. "You get orders, and you interpret them to carry out your own vendettas! I don't require blind obedience, Jenkins. But restraint and professionalism—those I *do* require!"

I leaned back in my chair. "I thought it might be something like that," I said. "It really couldn't have been very many other things. Not loyalty. Professionalism—interesting."

Cardip gaped. "What are you saying?"

I laughed in his face. "When you assigned me Saul Tillinghass's personal residence for vandalizing, did you think for one minute I wouldn't wonder why? I knew I was being tested!"

"You did? So why did you deliberately fail the test?"

"I passed with flying colors. Look!" I reached into my pocket, produced a heavy adjustable gas grenade, and tossed it in the center of Cardip's desk. It landed with a thump and rolled to one side, its yellow lettered dial setting within Cardip's view. "I had this on me when I painted the wall."

Cardip looked down at the army green lump of iron on his desk. "Lord!" he breathed.

"I wanted to write something personal to Tillinghass of course—not just a slogan—but I wanted much more to flip that old fashioned dial-o-matic through his window. I also wanted to pass your test. That's why I brought the grenade in the first place. If it was restraint or professionalism you were testing, I have passed. The grenade stayed in my pocket. You can also see that I have exactly the kind of keen if twisted mind you need for some of your more challenging operations. You shouldn't be so niggling just because I got in a harmless bite

against an arch enemy of mine while carrying out your orders."

"But you changed the words," Cardip argued "And as I said over 5,000 man hours—"

"Were never ever needed for your dopey slogan," I interrupted. "I looked it up myself in the Encyclopedia Universal. Proletariats of the World, Unite—a witless chant taken up by practitioners of an ancient and ridiculous social system called communism, which professed that people should give everything they own to the feds while the feds repay them by dictating what color socks they wear—red ones if I understood the article.

"I passed your test, Cardip. Now, what happens after graduation?"

Cardip blanched, picked up the gas grenade, and shook it in my face. "You should be grateful that you are part of an organization that detests slogans. We've never taught you any and haven't used any to recruit. The organization that does falls only too quickly into brainwashing and its members take on a glazed, fish-like quality. But this!" He opened his palm to let the gas grenade lie in more complete view. "This is where your professionalism flew out the window. You took a wide-range gas grenade onto a federal planet?"

"I said I did."

"Jenkins, you know why we gave you some unassuming duties down there. If you got nabbed defacing a wall, our lawyers would present it as a prank, not a crime. You'd be out of jail in two hours. Couldn't even extradite you. The grenade, however—"

"Is a dial-o-matic, as you can see," I interjected. "Set on the harmless rotten egg mode."

"But this grenade has other settings," Cardip insisted. "From simple smoke signals to a city-destroying nerve gas."

I shook my head. "Incorrect. Look again. That small tab next to the dial."

Cardip turned the grenade over, inclined his head to peer through his bifocals. "A weld!"

"And the whole pineapple frozen as a simple stink bomb."

Cardip dropped the grenade on the desk. "Not good enough, Jenkins. The prosecution would argue that this device could be rearmed by simply breaking the weld. You'd pull fifteen years, federal pen, minimum."

"I rather doubt that. Antigov lawyers are top flight. Covalent dipole weld. Couldn't break it with a jackhammer. Stink bomb. Prank. Out of jail in two hours." I smiled at the director. "Come on, Cardip. Concede defeat. I'm better at this kind of infighting than you are. That's why you hired me—for that and my money! Now

tell me all about the new assignment you've planned out for me."

"Assignment?"

"Please. Your character test was given for a reason. You've got something lined up for me. Something big. I can almost taste it. Don't rush. Tell me about it slowly; I want to savor each detail."

Planet Busters Chapter 25

The man's dossier was enough to qualify him for Cardip's position, probably much more than enough. It was a thick, aluminum-bound collection of documents describing the life and works of one late George Seek, Colonel, espionage expert, and top-rated battle commando. I flipped to the last page, closed the dossier, and handed it across the desk to Cardip.

"Impressed?" Cardip asked.

"As impressed as I ever am when I read about a dead man I never heard of."

Cardip frowned, nothing more. He knew it was my nature to be difficult when information was trickled out to me in this way. "That part of the report was, of course, falsified. Seek is quite alive and at work on deeds quite in keeping with the grandness of his dossier." Without elaborating further, Cardip slid some blueprints across the desk. "Recognize these?"

I scanned the papers and said: "P-657, battle sled, world cruncher. One of those huge ships the feds have."

Correct," Cardip said. "So huge that the typical blueprint page contains a scale of miles."

"And so huge that the feds do not dare use them for the effect it would have on public opinion." I added. "Why are you showing me

these things? If battleships that size were used, the federal state would have revolution on a thousand worlds that presently wave their banner. Don't tell me we're worried about them now."

"We have to be," Cardip said abruptly. "George Seek has requisitioned one!"

For a moment I just stared. Then, I couldn't help but grin. Cardip kept a deadpan face, but I didn't recognize it for what it meant. "A P-657?" I finally blurted out, wanting to laugh. I could hardly believe it. "This is great news! The federal police will be scared out of their wits, and the Special Task Force, those planet-busting hoodlums, will be outgunned by us antigovs! I can go back to Marion! Yay!"

"Stop it!" Cardip snarled. "Do you think we would ever try to commandeer a thing like that? This was not a sanctioned operation. Colonel Seek did it all on his own."

"Even so," I replied. "You couldn't really blame him if the opportunity presented itself."

Cardip snorted. "I'll blame him all right." He muttered heatedly. "He made his own opportunity. A goddamned one-man army. Thought he knew how to run things better than his superiors. You may have wondered why I've been so touchy about subordinates doing things their way instead of the way they are told."

"I noticed," I said, for some reason feeling nervous. "But I was a step ahead of you, if you remember. No harm done. I knew your graffiti assignments were a test and not important to the cause."

"You did? Well, then you're mighty presumptuous. Since when is it your place to decide what is good for anything? You follow orders!"

"Well, yes sir!" I cried, throwing him a crisp salute. "What happened to the comradely state of semi-equality that made this underground revolution business tolerable?"

"It's right where it always has been. You obey orders because you agree to. If you deviate, it throws everything out of whack. Cooperation helps one and all." Cardip took off his glasses and looked directly at me. "Administration sticks in my craw. This agency may be the only example in history where the administrators weren't the moral and intellectual dregs of an organization. I made sure of that by sending anyone with administrative ambition to the front lines. That kind of artificial selection may someday help to purify the human race. In the meantime, however, I have to live with my own duties—some of which are pretty tough—like sending those pathetic dolts with pretensions of an administrative nature to dangerous places."

"Did they ever guess why they were winding up as cannon fodder?"

"Hell, I told them up front!"

"And they went along with it?"

Cardip stared at me. "Are you kidding? They quit to the last man. And good riddance!"

"I didn't think it was like you to have anybody eliminated. Not so cold-bloodedly, at any rate."

"I may yet," said Cardip. "At least when I think about people like Seek."

"I'll bet your wrath will be tempered somewhat by the sight of that battlewagon. It's one heck of a bargaining chip."

Cardip put his glasses back on, took a deep breath, and let the air escape. He shook his head as he observed me with what seemed to be pity. "Jenkins Basil Lai," he intoned. "You may be a very smooth-tongued and capable if lucky man, but you have no grasp of interplanetary politics."

"I never professed to be an administrator," I countered, looking directly at him.

"Just a huckster?"

"Perhaps."

Again a sigh. "A battle sled is a problem, Jenkins—not an asset. It represents a responsibility no one in his right mind wants or needs."

"But—"

"But' nothing! If the feds are afraid to use one of those monsters, then what the hell am I going to do with one? Picture yourself as a discontented yet placated Federal Worlder. The government makes life dull, but if you tow the line, you and the members of your family are left alone. You can even advance to a certain stage before your path to a higher-paying job is blocked by federal nepotism. You probably don't approve of the fact that the government is stomping the devil out of defenseless thirdworlders—but those thirdworlders don't join the glorious federation, so that's the way they want it, right?"

"Wrong!"

"I know it's wrong, and you know it's wrong—but what does your average federal world inhabitant know?"

"Not much."

"He knows nothing!" Cardip affirmed with conviction. "—and he's the one we'd like to convince of our sincerity and decency. For all the information he gets, his government hasn't done anything drastic without the most severe provocation. Nobody sane loves those world crunchers, yet it's an historical fact that the feds haven't so much as killed a mosquito with one in over four-hundred years. The Federation's half-loyal subjects have noted that fact. What condition do you think their nerves will be in

when they learn that some mad revolutionary group has stolen the means to lay planets to waste at will?"

"Frazzled, I should think."

"And they'll demand that the government do anything and everything possible to reestablish the status quo—including..."

Cardip broke off and looked at me with a pained expression.

"Including what?" I asked irritably. "Don't tell me you are straying onto a classified topic."

"No," he said. "I just hate talking about it—or even thinking about it. Including the use of L-80 proximity bombs directed at the Seychelles herself."

This caught me by surprise. "The Seychelles?" I sputtered. "They know about us?"

"Of course," Cardip said with an indifferent cough. "They always have, you know. We've avoided trouble by playing hide and seek. Our crew simply punches the ship into ultra drive and makes random turns on our way to any particular destination. The feds can't catch us that way, but they often can guess our general location."

"But they can't just detonate L-80 proximity bombs. I've read about them. Not bombs, really; a field, rather, which when activated, appears anywhere in the galaxy, instantly

destroying all matter within one to two parsecs. And the aim is haywire. To get us, they'd have to risk punching holes through shipping lanes and knocking out worlds and worldlets all over the galaxy."

Cardip shrugged and smiled wryly. "Drastic circumstances require drastic measures," he said simply. "Which would you rather have: a calculated risk or a madman doing the unexpected? I'll answer for you: you'd pick the known evil over the unknown, and you'd be right. Just as the feds would be right in destroying us."

"Destroy us?" I gasped. Yet I knew exactly what Harry Cardip meant. One does much to trust a government duly elected. A dictatorship? Never. Revolutionaries? They could be trusted in troubled times, reluctantly. But who could be trusted with such power? Nobody. That was the problem since the first atom bomb.

Cardip seemed to have read my thoughts. "The feds should have destroyed the P-657s centuries ago. They preferred instead to parade those hideous engines of destruction around for political purposes, underscoring the glorious achievements of the Federation. I honestly believe that in recent times they have all but forgotten that those lethal machines are weapons. The ships became more like symbols of technological accomplishment. Now I

believe the feds have finally seen them for what they are and regret very much that they exist—as I do."

"But this is our chance!" I shouted. "We can at least destroy one of them. Pack it full of explosives. You can publicize the event. The galaxy made safer—and all in the name of the Antigovernmental Agency of Sovereign Worlds!"

"I can't."

"What?" I thought he must not have been listening. "Why the hell not?"

"Because George Seek will not surrender the ship. He's giving the feds all kinds of ultimatums and threatening to blow up half the galaxy—all, as you say, in our name."

Planet Busters Chapter 26

It was six days later, and I had the beginnings of a plan worked out in my head. I had succeeded rather spectacularly before by relying on a certain caliber of man to aid me, and what had worked then just might do so again. Cardip had pulled out all stops, and each agent was expected to drop everything and go after Colonel Seek with as he put it, "Whatever resources are possessed." Well, it just so happened that there were some resources I needed. The Director was not enthusiastic about my plan, however.

"Heliox?" Cardip exclaimed. "Why in the hell would you want to go back there?"

"I have my own good reasons," I told him.

"Reasons? What reasons?" he railed. "Are you crazy? George Seek is not on Heliox. How do you expect to stop him by going where he isn't? Go where he is for God's sake!"

"Where is he?" I challenged.

"He's—well, out there somewhere else. Go get him!"

I winked and stared down at him slouched in his chair. "Mind if I sit, Chief?"

"Since when did you ever ask permission to do anything you felt like?"

"Thank you." I sat, crossed my legs, and lighted a cigarette. Cardip reached under his

desk and flipped a switch. There was a whirling sound just above my head. I exhaled and watched the cone-shaped cloud disintegrate and vanish almost instantly. The smoke emanating from the tip of the cigarette was a perfectly vertical thread, web-like and rising. Even some of my hair was standing up. Evidently, Cardip had installed some new equipment after my last visit. But I pretended not to notice. "I intend to 'get him' as you say, but only in the way that I think is best. It's my neck after all."

"I thought you had given up that filthy habit," Cardip complained, wrinkling his nose in my direction with displeasure.

"I did. I started again. The custom is still quite in vogue on Heliox, you know."

"Which shows what an intellectual hinterland the place is. But that would appeal to you. Now, answer my question: "Why are you going there?"

"I like that," I said. "'Why are you?'" not 'Why do you want to?' It shows that you have resigned yourself to the fact of my going and —"

"Answer my question!" Cardip stormed. His face was red and laced with tiny blue blood veins which contrasted nicely with the large ones on either side of his neck. Those stood out prominently. I thought of the vessels unseen

within his cranium and decided to cooperate a bit. I preferred him flustered, not dead.

"I need men for the job, Harry," I explained simply.

The Director's face cleared somewhat, and he swallowed almost gratefully before he spoke. "Men? I told you I would supply you with men. I'll give you a veritable army of them. When do you want them? Just say when, and you'll have them. Then, you will go out after Colonel Seek and never come back to bother me!"

"I want them now, if you please," I answered. "And I have a list of them right here for your convenience." I handed the list to him, and he tilted his head, peered through his bifocals, and immediately gave it back.

"You can't have those guys, and you know it," he said.

"Why not? I worked with them before and we practically conquered the planet Tuukar together."

"They are under different leadership now." Cardip told me. "I believe you can guess whose."

"Peso Jack's, right?"

"Correct," he affirmed. "And you ought to agree that it's only fair since he recruited them himself."

"But who trained them——"

"He did."

"Yeah, but who gave them the real field experience that they needed? Answer me that."

Cardip sighed. "I'll admit that you did. Now it's your turn to admit that those men were only under your command as a loaner. Peso recruited every one of them."

I mulled this over for a moment, then had inspiration. "Every one?" I cried. "Not quite, my friend. That list was alphabetical. Whose name appeared last?"

A cough escaped Cardip. It had nothing to do with my cigarette, which I had butted out on the arm of my chair. I lighted another one. "You can't mean Zallaham?" he sputtered. "The Warlord of Huria himself?" The Director snorted derisively.

"What's so funny?" I protested. "He's mine. I found him. I got him. I brought him to you!"

Cardip grinned. "Zallaham yours?" he asked sarcastically.

"In a word, yes. Mine!"

"You had better hope he doesn't hear you saying that, you know," Cardip warned nervously. He seemed to be fighting back the impulse to look over his shoulder. "For Pete's sake, even Peso has to keep up his guard with that powerhouse around."

"So you won't give him back to me?" I fumed. "I risk my neck to bring you a one-in-a-

million stone-age military genius and muscleman. And you think he's just too plain good for me and give him to somebody else."

"You know he's too good for you, Jenkins," said Cardip, mincing no words. "But I didn't say I wouldn't give him back to you. He's yours. Go tell him."

I stood up and leaned over his desk, pushing my face close to his. "Listen, you. You're not going to wiggle away that easily. You assigned Zallaham to Peso, and you'll personally assign him back to me or I'll know the reason why."

Cardip was leaning way back in his chair now, anxious to be away from my face and cigarette halitosis. "Agreed," he said quickly. "Just sit the hell back down."

I sat smiling. "That's nice. That's very nice. It's also too easy. What's the catch?"

Cardip shrugged. "None," he replied. "You have no right to ask for the others on the list, of course. They are simply out of the question. To Zallaham, however, I agree you have some tenuous claim."

"So you'll order him to report back to me?"

"I'll ask him," said Cardip. "One does not give orders to the likes of him, as you must already know."

"Good enough." I got up and shook Cardip's hand. "I'll collect him when I get back."

"From Heliox, I presume?"

"Of course. I know that the soldiers you would offer me are nothing more than company climbers in permanent high gear. They're ambitious and will resent any directions I give them."

"Can't stand the competition, eh?"

"I can stand it all right, thank you." I told him. "But I hardly think it's useful. An operation needs only one operator to run at all. And with your guys, let's face it: we'd practically be peers."

"I don't know whether they would appreciate being characterized as such," Cardip parried. "But if that's your only complaint, I think I can offer a solution to your dilemma. There is still a virtual multitude of Zallaham's Tuukarian infantrymen whom I would be more than happy to assign to you. I can promise you that they will not be overly ambitious."

"Nor overly bright either." I countered. "I, of all people, don't think much of those who degrade the natives of third world planets, but I think it's fair to note that Peso's boys from Heliox made chumps out of the lot of them. Took them for what little wealth they possessed using the most transparent bait and switch schemes imaginable. I think I'll pass."

"So it's off to Heliox, then?"

"That's right. I don't need competitive intellectual equals, and I don't need

unambitious morons. I'll tell you what I need. I need savvy bastards who were just plain born to lose. Men with street brains but no higher intelligence—and no pretensions. The classical criminal type. And, by God, Heliox is one place I can find them!"

* * *

I left Cardip to his devices and walked through the open galleries of the Seychelles. It was a way I had of unwinding. There was something in the raw utilitarian rusticity of the ship that relaxed me. Once, it had been perhaps the greatest luxury liner ever built. It had grown older but never obsolete. Passengers clamored to get tickets aboard. But the Federation overplayed its hand trying to dip into the coffers, the result being an uprising that played a part in Antigov history. Our organization was on hand to aid the aggrieved crew, and the organizers of the rebellion were more than happy to fall in with our cause. For one thing, the Federation's penalty for mutiny was harsh indeed and the rebels needed our sanctuary. Now, the fabulous Seychelles had been requisitioned and souped up. It had also been stripped down to its bare rivets and fleeced of its finery. The ship was simply a shell of what it had once been.

I didn't agonize over that as some people did. Cardip had once confided that he had hidden the great oak banisters, the gleaming chandeliers, and all the rest of what was truly the Seychelles in some unheard-of place. When the revolution was over, he planned to put a great team of craftsmen and artisans to work restoring the ship. After that would follow one whale of a celebration on board.

When I got back to my quarters, Lourdes was not in. I noticed that she had put up some extra pictures: seascapes, virgin dunes, and an exquisite panorama of Marion's Norsano Desert. Perhaps that was her way of dealing with her lost home, but I wished she hadn't done that. It just made me homesick for my beach retreat on the Paradise Coast.

"Like them, Jenkins?" It was Lourdes. She had come in so quietly that I hadn't even heard her.

"Lovely, indeed!" I had to humor her. "Soon we'll be back there soaking up that sun, not a care in the world, an honest day's work only a hateful memory."

Lourdes stepped over and straightened a seascape. "Have you been following the news about Colonel Seek?" she asked. "The Federation Broadcasting Network is making real hay of the whole debacle. It's a smart move

on their part. They know that that man could ruin us in about ten seconds flat."

"He could," I agreed. "But don't call him Colonel. I think a more proper title would be "lunatic." At any rate, I plan to catch him, drag him back here, and strip off his medals along with as much of his hide as happens to come off with them."

"Don't work yourself up," Lourdes warned, frowning. "You know how you get. All puffed up and not a wink of sleep for a week."

"I always get that way before a major assignment." I told her.

Lourdes scowled. "Always?" she asked. "You've had exactly one to date, and it was I who lost sleep in the end. I was never so surprised in my life when you came back alive from that awful planet Tuukar."

"It was awful, I'll have you know. And to tell you the truth, I was a bit surprised to get away with some of the stunts I pulled myself. I just hope you weren't disappointed."

"I wasn't. Just surprised. Grateful too. The Federation in taking over Marion made us involuntary citizens, and as such we are subject to its antiquated laws—whenever we decide to start obeying them, that is. The Federation is not a community property state, and in addition it exacts a hefty inheritance-type tax on the

property of a deceased spouse. A widow today I would not like to be."

"I knew it was only my half of the estate that you cared about..."

Lourdes looked at me sternly. "Tell me the truth. You were joking just now when you said you were going after Colonel Seek, weren't you?"

For a moment I thought of lying, but at the last second I thought better of it. Lying to Lourdes was madness, suicide. She always found out and then there was literal hell to pay. I plopped down on the bed. I had to admit it; there was no other way.

Lourdes didn't take the truth well. I almost wished I had lied after all—or maybe just fibbed a little. She was adamant: I would leave her a widow, I would ruin her life, I would do this and that..... "But Lourdes," I tried to explain. "Everyone who is anyone is going out to have a crack at Seek. We have to. If that psychopathic fruitcake pushes the wrong button, it's the end of our revolution. We would just have to pack it in and wait another four-hundred years for our time to get ripe again."

"And what about me, then?" Lourdes asked. "I just sit in our quarters aboard ship and wait and worry? You say everyone's going. Well, fine. I've had every bit as much training as you, haven't I?"

"Well, yes." I snorted. "More so in fact."

"Well?"

"You want to come with me?" I asked in surprise.

"It's better than waiting around here and trying to manage your harebrained business enterprises, ninety percent of which fail miserably."

"Ninety percent of everything does," I reminded her. "It's the ten percent that's the charm," I said. "But I didn't know you wanted to go."

"What else is there for me to do?" she asked. "I hated every minute of waiting the last time you were out. And if I have to stay aboard this glorified flying trash can this time, I'll go absolutely crazy. What's more, I never liked that bible-thumping George Seek anyway. It'd be a pleasure to haul him back kicking and screaming. I'll hold him and you can kick. We'll leave the screaming to him."

"You know the rat?"

"Not personally. However, when you were out tromping across the frozen plains of Tuukar with your felons at large and your legions of bad-tempered eskimos, I attended a few presentations aboard ship. One was given by Seek. It was the last I attended. Couldn't stomach the topic."

"What was it? Military strategy? Weapons deployment?"

"It started out dealing with similar themes, but soon regressed into something less attractive. Colonel Seek, it seems, believes in a supreme being."

"No!"

"I'm afraid so, Jenkins. He went on and on about woman evolving from the rib of a man and a galaxy-wide intrusion of hydrogen and oxygen in a two-to-one solution that killed all life in its path. It was real scary and I left."

I shook my head. "Well, if that don't beat all."

"Now," said Lourdes. "Am I going with you, or do I go after the bum myself?"

I protested, of course. I said everything that a concerned husband would say. She would get hurt. Heliox, combat, deep space—*bad* for woman! But my heart wasn't really in it. The fact was, I wanted her to go. I hated being without her to the point that it had almost jeopardized my last mission. And it wasn't as though she couldn't take care of herself. For her size she was at least as tough as any man. To tell the truth, I felt pretty sure she could beat me up if she really put her mind to it.

I didn't express to her directly how I felt, of course. When I left her, I made it clear in no uncertain terms that a mere woman would

never accompany me on an assignment, but Lourdes knew that I did not mean it. The belief in male superiority was an aberration of the stone age. And what kind of woman would marry a man who believed in such a thing? (Woman evolving from a rib indeed!) In reality, with her willing to go, I had an entirely new outlook on the undertaking.

It didn't take long to find out I had made the right decision. I ran into Cardip about an hour later. "Good news," he said. "I talked to both Zallaham and Peso Jack. Zallaham has been reassigned to you ."

"Good. You work fast Chief," I responded.

Cardip started to walk away, then did a little double-take and spun on his heel. "Er, there's just one problem," he said offhandedly.

"What's that?"

"Zallaham refuses to have anything to do with you, and Peso says he's going to knock you around some the next time he sees you."

Planet Busters Chapter 27

I heard the commotion inside the room even before I opened the door. I took a deep breath, turned the knob, and strolled in casually. The noise did not abate for even a moment, and that did not bode well for me. My appearance there was unexpected and should have produced a communal gasp and a scrambling rush of activity to conceal the mischief followed by sheepish grins and a chorus of ingratiating if affected salutations.

Instead, the boys from Heliox ignored me altogether. They shouted the foulest obscenities at one another and continued to make boisterous side bets on the outcome of something truly disgusting.

In the center of the formica table was a foot-long plank upon which sat a floppy-eared creature known as a Grangorian rabbit. Biffer, a thin whiplash of a chiseler, was directing some sort of ray at the animal's head while his companions roared with excitement, sheaves of the inflated paper currency of Heliox clutched tightly in their hands.

There was a long trough of liquid in front of the rabbit and just beyond it was a spindle upon which was impaled a rather moldy potato. An

uncapped jug beneath the table read: 25M H_2SO_4 .

It didn't take me long to figure out the game. The trough, of course, contained sulphuric acid, and the ray that Biffer was dutifully administering to the creature's cranium was undoubtably designed to stimulate the hunger center of the lagomorph's brain. When the ray had worked up a colossal appetite within the rabbit, the luckless animal would leap with uncharacteristic voracity toward the potato. And, of course, land directly in the acid. A stopwatch would click and those having correctly predicted the time of the event would divide the pot.

Of course, they could have played without the acid.

There was a sudden splash followed by an enormous mishmash of outcries. The throaty groans and curses of those who had lost were all but drowned out by the ear-splitting whoops of pleasure from the winners.

Biffer was fast at work at the trough with a smoking fork with which he first skimmed the fur off the top of the acid, then fished out the bleached and disintegrating skeleton.

Things were plainly getting out of hand. I had simply started out too loose with these boys. Now came the unpleasant business of tightening things up. "Who's the big winner

here today?" I said cheerfully, putting on a greasy, almost lewd smile that this crowd understood only too well—or thought they did.

Kroin, the biggest and ugliest of the bunch stepped forward, eager to claim the honor. Perfect. I had been hoping it would be him.

"Me," he said stupidly, and motioned to a cage against the wall. "Win more later, too. Got ten rabbits left."

"One of them's getting away," I told him and when he looked to see, I punched him directly in the teeth.

Kroin screamed gagging in pain and staggered about the room in circles. The rest of the company gaped in surprise, then grinned in anticipation as Kroin regained his senses and turned his attention from his splintered teeth to me. "Ahrgg!" he screeched and bounded toward me.

I stood firm, feet planted well apart. It didn't take a genius to foresee his intentions. Kroin halted about two paces from me and kicked with with all the savage intensity he possessed in his rage. The man's heavy number-twelve boot caught me directly in the groin, the force of it practically lifting me from the ground. To the surprise of the onlookers, however, it was Kroin, not I, who fell squalling in agony.

I knew the kind of ruffian I would be dealing with here on Heliox and had made

preparations in the form of a stainless steel scrotal cup. I also took my precautions a bit beyond the ordinary by taking this protective garment to the Seychelles metal shop where I welded on a two-inch dock spike where it would do the most good. Now the cup not only protected the wearer, but also quite effectively punished the offender. I was surprised at how well it worked.

Kroin lay groaning in pain, dividing his attentions between the ruins of his teeth and his punctured metatarsus. In the top center of his right boot was a quarter-inch hole from which oozed a thin trickle of blood. Around the fallen giant lay a scattering of red-backed federal guilders. I scooped these up with a sudden, aggressive motion and Kroin cringed quickly in alarm.

I peeled off a couple of bills and tossed them at him. "Here's a hundred bucks," I said. "I recommend J. Patrick Gambles. He's a dentist." But I hadn't finished. I smiled sarcastically at the others, then began to kick Kroin where he lay. He yelped in pain and scrambled frantically around the room. I pursued him doggedly until he was finally able to escape through an open doorway.

From the hallway echoed the desperate and uneven clomping sound of his new and unaccustomed stumbling gait.

"He'll be beating time with that good left pin for at least a month," I snorted with just the correct mixture of amusement and contempt. "Anyone else here bet I can't do the same to them?"

I made a fast move in their direction and the lot of them shrank backward, mouths forming little O's, wrists clutched to their breasts. "Good. I'll be back in an hour and when I am, this room had better be immaculate. I want this whole place licked clean."

* * *

I could not help but laugh when I related what happened to Lourdes. She didn't find my description of the day's events particularly humorous. I had to explain that I had merely inflicted pain and had done so for a very good reason. True, Kroin's smile had suffered somewhat, but he never smiled much anyway. And modern dentistry could undo what I had done, though why anyone would want to restore any part of Kroin's ape-like visage would be unfathomable. Frankly, I felt my pummeling had improved his appearance to a degree, although it would certainly have been Kroin's right to disagree with me on that point. However, far from unwarranted and inexcusable, my preemptive assault was a

necessary, sane, and in some ways humane action. Punishment under the rules of Heliox's roughnecks was most often far worse. In perspective, Kroin had gotten off lightly. And I had no choice in the matter anyway. I knew the men I was dealing with, and I knew a fate far worse than Kroin's was awaiting me if I failed to gain their respect.

Lourdes seemed to understand me better when I told her what happened to the Grangorian rabbit. She was hardly a bleeding heart, but like anyone else knew there was something fundamentally wrong with people who torture animals or other people to death for money. She tried to lump me in with their ilk, but I hastily pointed out that I hadn't actually killed Kroin—just badly wounded him, and no tender had changed hands.

Now she was interested in the immediate future. The house I had rented on Heliox was a dilapidated two-story vermin run, and my wife seemed eager to move out of it. I rather liked it because I had reserved the entire second floor for Lourdes and me. We'd fixed it up a bit and it was livable. Downstairs, the ruffians had been allowed to swagger however they liked, which had only spoiled them. The recent public thrashing of Kroin had ended all that. And there were other changes soon to come. Yet Lourdes was impatient. "Look, Jenkins," she complained

as we sat at our upstairs dinner table. We had finished a nice cut of steak and were enjoying a cup or two of coffee. "You did all right I suppose in getting Kale Soldat, your old buddy from your Tuukar days, to give you a list of ex-felons and two-time losers whom you could contact on Heliox. You've collected about thirty of the bums here simply by offering them the unfamiliar luxury of a roof over their worthless heads. Those few who are of more account have been offered the most ludicrous and unlikely rewards for throwing in with you. In the meantime, George Seek has disappeared from sight and may decide at any moment to demolish the greater part of the galaxy. If I may be so bold; just what in the hell do you think you're doing?"

"I have an answer to that question," I said. "And part of it has to do with those materials I asked you to review for me today."

"I reviewed them," she said. "But I don't know why. Only one item seemed to have any bearing on Seek and his whereabouts."

She set her coffee mug down, got up, and took some papers from the nearby desk. I noticed the computer on-off light still glowing redly. So did Lourdes. She snapped it off and sat back down at the table and perused the papers. "These are the print-outs from the data you gave me. That little Marion-made computer

works pretty well, although I still can't understand how you got it through spaceport customs. Heliox is famed for its hard line on imported technology."

Not all of my talents were lost on my wife, I could see. "Heliox is a federal planet," I explained. "Its limited autonomy is assured provided that the populace behaves. If they don't, out goes good ole King Caleb, usurped by a genuine Federation lackey. Caleb wouldn't like that. So he's as careful as he is brutal. Computers can make the work of rebellion easier, and like all such tools, they are strictly regulated here. But the more rules imposed, the more people become set on circumventing them. Most of those people in the end are officials, and officials of corrupt governments everywhere practice a common trade: *la mordida*."

"La what?"

"*La mordida*, the bribe," I replied. "The one and only cooperative interchange between official and common citizen on such worlds. Both are victims of the government, and in a mutually helpful spirit both benefit by thwarting the desires of the greater enemy, the despot himself—in this case King Caleb."

"Okay," Lourdes sighed. "So you greased a palm or two to get the computer in, and you are grateful. But you know very well that the

official is usually committing extortion when he demands a bribe—so enough for your cooperative spirit nonsense. What language is "*mordida*?"

"Spanglo," I said, as though the answer couldn't have been more obvious. "I'm surprised you don't know it, Lulu Crane."

Lourdes looked at me. "Please?"

"It's your name; it's Spanglo! Lourdes Garza means Lulu Crane."

"That's nice. Is there some reason why I should care?"

"Because if my hunch is right, where we're going, your name will fit right in. Mine won't, so I'll have to change it. How does Jaime Loro sound?"

"Asinine," she said bluntly. "I don't think I'm going to like that language. But don't tell me; I can see that you think that our friend Colonel Seek is at this very moment lurking on some planet where Spanglo is the official tongue."

"I do, indeed."

"And the reason for your belief has to do with the information that I processed and analyzed for you?"

"Yes," I replied. "I need a second opinion to be sure that the theory I have formulated merits investigation. You haven't told me what you discovered yet, so I'd like your analysis. You

said that there was one item that could pertain to his location."

"There was one—and only one; I didn't know what the rest of the data were all about," Lourdes said. "Anyway, the battleship that Seek filched from the Federation was one that hadn't been fueled in one-hundred years or so. Both its propulsion and armament systems operate at only thirty percent power."

"That information, of course, was not expressly stated in the six million pages of public relations information included in the data I gave you."

"No, but it is a fact as deduced from the discrimination software in the Marion computer."

"The Federation did not try very hard to conceal that particular datum, did it?" I noted.

"Why should they have? What was someone supposed to do with that kind of information—use it to steal a world cruncher?"

"Seek may have," I remarked.

"Yes," said Lourdes. "But you wanted to know how this could relate to his whereabouts. Frankly, the link is not particularly tantalizing. It is only this: if Seek were so inclined, he might take steps to acquire fuel to develop full power for his engines and arms. He'd have a problem, of course; those super-sized fighters are ancient things and some of their technology

was hopelessly antiquated even at the time they were built."

"They're powered with simple 20th century atomics." I said.

Lourdes nodded. "Yes, so gassing up a ship like that is no simple matter; the Federation itself waits fifty to one-hundred years to bother with it. And Seek knows full well that the feds will be keeping a wary eye on their fuel dumps. To conclude, the analysis tells us that he might possibly be mining fissionable material. Somewhere."

"That's it," I exclaimed. I poured us each an extra cup of coffee. "That's what he is doing. He has to. He must mine."

Lourdes sipped her coffee and frowned. "Has to? Must?" She questioned. "That is not my conclusion. My conclusion is that he will *not* mine. Why should he? He can run that P-657 for another hundred years and demolish a dozen planets a day every day. That should satisfy him."

"It won't," I stated flatly. "That is the mistake that the Federation and the Agency are both making. They assume that he is moderately content with something less than a full-blown world cruncher. I contend that he is not."

Lourdes set down her mug. "Content he may have to be. Mining the fuel would be a

tremendously complicated and unpleasant business. It would certainly also compromise his security to wait around instead of striking while the advantage was his. Producing fuel for a ship like that from raw materials would take forever. Jenkins, he just won't do it."

"Six months," I disagreed. "With machinery in place now, it could take even less. There is a library aboard that ship. Seek won't be bored. He's the type that could happily spend that time just rubbing his hands together and laughing maniacally."

"It's a long shot..."

"No, it's not. And the argument is simpler than that," I said. "Either he will mine that fuel or he won't; those are the only two possibilities."

"And I say he won't." Lourdes said stubbornly.

"Fine," I scoffed. "And by limiting your thinking in that way, you, like the Federation and the Agency, stop dead in your tracks without a clue as to where the criminal might be. If, on the other hand, you had embarked on a different train of thought—one based upon the opposite assumption—you would inevitably have been led to the same corpus of facts and circumstantial evidence that has revealed to me his intentions as well as his location."

"What information could possibly give you all that?" Lourdes asked disbelievingly.

I only grinned and stirred my coffee sagely. "I can sum up that body of evidence with two words: Armageddon and carnotite." She started to protest, but I raised my hand and waved her to silence. "Yes, I know you have never heard of the former. It's an obscure reference. Armageddon refers to the upheaval that Colonel Seek's benevolent supreme being has planned for everyone who isn't exactly as mentally unhinged as he. Fire, brimstone, gnashing of teeth, bloody horse flesh on the highways, that sort of thing. Don't laugh, now. This doctrine has actually been written down, and Seek believes it. I checked. Carnotite is...."

"A rather complex yellow mineral which contains uranium," Lourdes said quickly. "I could recognize it in the field when I was ten, so don't assume it's also something new to me. I thought you gave me the job of analyzing data on that and other minerals because you were a lousy chemist—which you are. Now, I see that you are just double-checking your own conclusions again."

"Nothing wrong with being thorough, is there?" I asked.

"No, but what you gave me on carnotite makes no sense," she answered. "I can see that

you are developing some theory that Seek will try to mine fuel from carnotite."

"He will. I'm almost sure of that."

"But that's ridiculous," she objected. "Carnotite is comparatively poor for such a purpose. There are much better and more plentiful ores for the uranium he needs."

"I had already surmised that when I gave you the data," I responded. "That's why I asked you to establish the location of a place where large deposits of carnotite are present in conjunction with rich natural reserves of more usable uranium ore."

"I did so. There are three worlds that stand out above thousands of others."

"Which of the three has the most carnotite?"

"Ancho."

"I knew it!" I shouted. "That's where we're going, Lulu."

I then told Lourdes the facts uncovered in an investigation that I had conducted even before leaving the Seychelles for Heliox. My study concerned the character of the man, George Seek. I went over his academic transcripts and found a Ph.d. in physics from Syrius Tech, no slouch degree that. But his post doctorate publication record was spotty. Just some uninspiring papers in the journals on carnotite and its affinity to other minerals on various worlds—actually a subject well outside his

field. On a hunch, I did a computer scan of unrelated publications. I was checking to see whether he had strayed even farther afield. I had guessed right, and what I found was chilling. His name appeared predominantly in the most obscure sectarian publications: magazines with titles like *Sweltering Disciple*, *Holy Infarction*, and *Blessed Gazette*. Again, the subject was carnotite, but his treatment of the topic had taken a bizarre theological turn, relating the "music of the spheres" and a supreme being with the chemical properties of carnotite and its associated minerals.

That may sound silly, but Seek was deadly serious. He did rather inaccurate studies of the decay of radioactive isotopes in Carnotite, attempting to prove that the fossils so often associated with the mineral were recent relics of an intragalactic deluge referred to somewhere in written dogma. It was his opinion that carnotite had been placed in the universe as evidence for the great design of the supreme being.

His presentation was always kind of oblique and fuzzy and left out the most blatantly obvious and pertinent facts that would destroy his arguments in an instant. But it was fascinating reading because it went beyond most of the other articles in these publications.

The other magazine pieces relied heavily on the same tactics of omission and slight of hand. But they were composed by mental midgets, who were much too demented to see their own self deception even as they passed their delusions on to their readers. These contributors reveled in using block-long words that they didn't really understand, and the subscribers, most of whom would have to consult a dictionary to spell the word "cat" were, of course, none the wiser.

Seek, on the other hand, was in earnest. His constructs and dichotomies seemed directed straight from the subconscious. His typical reader was simply an intellectual chucklehead or suffering from moderate to rather severe mental illness. Seek, however, was truly psychotic.

This had dawned on me as I read in the Seychelles library some weeks earlier. And I almost recoiled at the revelation when it struck because I knew that George Seek was capable of anything, and that his vision of Armageddon could very well be a prophesy which he intended to fulfill himself.

It was obvious that for a proper doomsday he would feel absolutely compelled to get the ship up to full power. He would mine that fuel, all right. And he would use as much carnotite as he possibly could.

I could read him like a book.

Planet Busters Chapter 28

Both Lourdes and I recognized the necessity of ridding ourselves of better than half the roughnecks I had gathered together. Many of them fell short in the intelligence category, while others simply could not be trusted under any circumstances. We only needed about eight of them, but we figured with the group we had, we would have to take on ten. If we took any fewer, long standing buddies and cronies would be parted, and these partnerships were important in maintaining morale.

As for the purpose of the trip, I at first considered concocting some story of gold and looting on Ancho. That would keep the boys interested and loyal enough. But it would also involve a lot of interruptions and lawbreaking along the way, neither of which was particularly desirable. In addition, sneaking up on Seek on some third world planet without his getting suspicious would be hard enough without the constant pressure of maintaining the trappings of a farcical mission. Instead, I decided to pay them outright, with added bonuses in cash for meritorious service as well as promised shares of whatever treasure or booty was to be divvied out.

No, I wouldn't stop talking about looting or racketeering around this group. They were

pirates and would only be happy if pirating were a part of the activities to come. But if they asked what I was doing on Ancho, they would be told to mind their own business. In exchange for money, I felt sure they would lose their curiosity.

That I was paying cash would not sour them on the project either. And it was fine with me. Cardip had opened the Seychelles vaults and every penny requested was being granted for the purpose of apprehending Colonel Seek. I had enough money to finance just about anything and didn't feel guilty about it either; after all, a tremendous amount of that wealth was actually mine.

Lourdes reviewed my analysis of Seek's wild-eyed publication record and agreed with me that Ancho was the place to look for him. She had another concern, however.

We were in our upstairs apartment packing, which was not a difficult job. The computer would simply be abandoned and the kind of clothes we would need for Ancho would have to be bought elsewhere. Most of what I was putting in my suitcase was money.

"Jenkins," Lourdes said seriously. "I assume you have notified the agency of this Ancho business. After thinking about it, I have to admit that it is not as completely crazy a notion as I first thought."

"I've had that feeling all along," I told her. "For that reason, I went directly to Cardip himself before we even came here and showed him everything I had on Seek."

"And?"

"He didn't agree with me," I said. "It's that simple."

"But surely this is better than the hit-and-miss strategy the Agency is pursuing now. We at least have some reasons for believing Seek could be on Ancho. What is the Agency's game plan? All I see now is an organization with an army of mavericks chasing down leads with no direction at all."

"I'm not sure," I replied. "Cardip wouldn't tell me. There is an Agency strategy, however; I know that for a fact. Cardip didn't want me in on it. He let me know in no uncertain terms that I was to have nothing to do with it."

Lourdes let out a sigh. "The evidence we have is not strong," she said after a pause. "But it is interesting. It's smart to look into it. And Cardip is too smart to ignore it."

"Oh, but he's not ignoring it," I stated, trying to clarify. "He's got me—and now you—on the project. Get this: we're to report in by O-X radio, apparently the only restriction on us. I've got an O-X packed in some of the luggage we haven't bothered to open."

"Cardip offered just the radio and no personnel?"

"I tried to get Agency back-up logistical support, but he scoffed. Others high up didn't think much of my ideas either, though they were less derisive."

"So for manpower we've got nothing but your gorillas."

"Yeah," I said. "These guys are perfect. They know how to run from a fight without making it look like running. Yet, they are also quite willing and able to slug it out if they have to. Their most important asset, however, is their look."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"Simply that if and when we run into the Ancho version of the Heliox hooligan, the two groups will instantly recognize their off-world counterparts. Instead of an outright attack, there will be a bit of he-buck strutting and positioning and raised hair—it's the same on every world. Usually harmless enough. Some head-butting at the least and maybe a little knife-play, but the heat will be off you and me whatever happens. That's important; Ancho is a rough world in many places, and I intend to do some traveling right out in the open."

"That's good as far as it goes," said Lourdes. "But I wish we had some Agency support. I still can't understand the administration's inability to

anticipate Seek. Can't they see what that schizo is likely to do?"

"Perhaps they would be able to if not for the religious element," I offered. "They come from modern worlds where one does not see much of the old-style fundamentalist zeal."

"That could explain it," Lourdes admitted. "Now, however, you and I are stuck with the job of going to Ancho. We'd better keep our fingers crossed."

"That Seek is or is not there?" I asked.

"I haven't decided that," she answered.

* * *

Dumping the twenty-odd ruffians whom I didn't need was child's play. I began by telling them that I intended to ditch the others. Then, I pulled a switcheroo. I'll never forget their faces as they watched the shuttle bus to the starport rumble by without them. They stood stupidly at the curbside, bags in hand, gaping at the twelve grinning faces pressed against the windows of the bus. I tossed them the tiniest wave just before the shuttle rounded the corner out of sight.

Among the ten from Heliox were: Biffer, the wiry thin huckster with a face so evil that his own mother must have feared him; Marlow, a transplanted Grangorian who was on Heliox

simply to escape his creditors; Nils, a tall blondish chap whose penchant for liquor made him fairly unusable for stretches of time; Hardiman, good with engines and better with his fists—a temper to match, too; and a variety of other more featureless alleycats among whom was the giant Kroin, who bore me no malice for the thrashing I had given him; he was more like a dog whose master has beaten it and relented: all waggy-tail and eager to please. Kroin had not taken my advice and consulted a dentist and could now spit and whistle simultaneously through the new gap in the front of his mouth, a fact that seemed to give him joy. It is easy to amuse a simple mind. He still possessed the limp I had predicted, and I hoped that that wouldn't prove to be a problem; I planned to do some hiking before we saw the last of Ancho.

When the twelve of us boarded the commercial liner to Draconis, we looked more like nursery school conventioners than anything else. I had instructed the boys in how to dress. They were spiffed up in the latest three-piece suits, complete with diamond cufflinks and gold tie clasps. We had some very expensive forged passports that could pass muster anywhere, but I wanted no overly officious customs officer to have any reason to give us as much as a second glance. There was

no telling what crimes these gentlemen were presently wanted for. And aiding and abetting a criminal on Heliox was just as bad as committing the crime yourself. I mean that quite literally. King Caleb had blurred the distinctions normally made among differing crimes on most civilized worlds. The penalty for shoplifting, for instance, was the same as that for first degree murder. It was mandatory execution by firing squad whether you lifted a pack of cigarettes or assassinated the local magistrate.

The liner was nothing like the cruisers that low level businessmen could rent. It was strictly first class and was equipped with ultradrive. In other words, it got us where we wanted to go in a couple of days instead of a few weeks. The ship was also comfortably furnished. Each of us had a tiny sleeper. During waking hours there was room to move about and there was even a quiet lounge where the lot of us would retire daily for a drink or two. I was surprised at how the roughnecks held their liquor and refrained from bullying or arguing with the other passengers. These boys were barely housebroken, but with those expensive suits, no one would have suspected it.

Draconis was a hub world. Flights to a large number of little-known planets originated here. Ancho was one such destination. In the urban

areas surrounding the starport were hundreds of different commercial neighborhoods, each vying to the indigene of a particular planet. Our party headed for "Little Ancho." It was a place of rank smells and urban squalor. Ear-splitting blasts from the horns of busses and ground-cars sounded everywhere. Vendors hawked their wares screeching with strident voices, while in hundreds of street-side cafes, busy short-order chefs grilled, boiled, and fried an amazing assortment of items, some not generally considered edible elsewhere.

Here, the litter bag was an invention of the distant future. Smoke from the cooking fires rolled over the shops and diners, and rumbling diesel-powered busses pumped out petroleum fumes into the streets. And as the traffic passed, discarded wrappers and papers whirled in the dusty alleyways, settled, and whirled again.

It would not be a comfortable place to live, but we didn't mind visiting at all.

For a reasonable price, we got outfitted in the latest Ancho fashions, which were pretty primitive. For men, the attire consisted of a pair of old-fashioned trousers and an unpressed white shirt. These items were effectively concealed by a large multicolored blanket with a hole cut in its center. The wearer's head protruded from the hole. We were told by the salesman that it was customary to use the

sarape, as this garment was called, as one might use a regular blanket for sleeping in the wilds.

For shoes we were offered *huaraches*, a kind of jury-rigged sandal with tire tread as a sole. They were not particularly comfortable, but I doubted that we'd wear them out in a hurry.

Hats also came with the package. They were large and round and woven of straw with a single dingleball hanging from the rear brim of each. They would also be quite useful; Ancho was known to be a hot world.

Lourdes did not at first fare as well as the men in our party. She quickly found herself wearing a hideous black and banana yellow dress with razor sharp pleats over every inch of it. It was a sartorial nightmare. A series of solidly starched petticoats rustled noisily underneath and flared the garment out like some huge open umbrella. And the shoes she was given were high-heels, which made her look as though she were trying to climb out of the dress—which I guess she was. "Don't say a word," she warned frostily, her raised fist clenched in my face. "If you so much as open your mouth, I'll kill you with my bare hands."

I bit my lip. It took a tremendous effort not to laugh, but somehow I managed it. Soon Lourdes was being fitted for something a bit—well different. It was a low-cut, deep maroon

dress which barely covered her knees and clung to her like honey. The high heels remained a part of the ensemble and were adorned by a pair of black nylon stockings that glistened like silk. The effect of this against the backdrop of her black hair and dark brown eyes was striking.

"That's a definite improvement," I said with a hungry leer. "But there's a name for the kind of woman you look like now, sweetie."

We didn't have to change her attire much to fix things; I confess that I didn't really want to change it all that much. We simply added a ladies' version of the sarape which concealed enough of the dress to keep the wolf whistles under control.

The purpose of the clothing was to thwart any arrangements Colonel Seek might have made to intercept Federal or Agency busybodies. The last thing I wanted was for us to show up in some dusty port on Ancho decked out in those three-piece suits. If Seek had effected surveillance of the major points of ingress to Ancho, which he might very well have done, twelve well-dressed off-world strangers would be exceedingly conspicuous. I wanted us to look like a gang of backwoods Anchoan entrepreneurs who had been moderately successful in something or other and were well-to-do enough to be taking the occasional interstellar flight.

The only problem was a linguistic one; none of us spoke Spanglo well enough to pass as native. In the University of Rigel IV, I had studied the language along with a half dozen others for an undergraduate degree. I spoke it fluently enough, yet my accent, while not bad, would never fool anyone. Aside from that one problem, however, I thought we fit the part well enough to proceed.

We outfitted ourselves with a few Ancho-made knapsacks. Afterwards, we rented rooms in a medium-priced hotel in Little Ancho. The boys from Heliox went out to carouse around the town while Lourdes and I stayed in the hotel and caught up on some long neglected true gravity sleep.

In the morning, I visited the public library. They had a pretty good one here on Draconis, and it was close enough to Ancho to have some current data on the place. I wasn't really sure of what I was looking for. Things had progressed so rapidly on the Seychelles and on Heliox, that I never really had the chance to do the background work that was needed.

There was quite a lot on Ancho in the library: tourist brochures, coffee table books, and histories. I needed up-to-date geological surveys, and there were plenty of them as well. They gave me a pretty good idea of where Seek might want to mine.

His ship, of course, would not be visible. Miles across, the battle sled could never hide behind anything smaller than a planet or large asteroid. For this reason, it possessed cloaking devices that would make it completely invisible. I believed that somewhere on Ancho that great ship sat, its mining tubes buried in the earth beneath it, digging, tunneling, and processing, and concealing the project from all the world. I knew that a magnetic survey or even mass detectors would not reveal the presence of the ship; its stealth technology was too far advanced to permit that. But I also felt that there had to be a way to pinpoint its location.

I evaluated everything I could on the geology of Ancho and found the planet so loaded with likely carnotite mining sites that to investigate them all would take a lifetime. Just the same, I continued research in the library, waiting for inspiration to strike. It did, but only after two days of reading and thinking.

I had made my way through half the important historical works on Ancho when I picked up one of the coffee table volumes for a little break. It was a lavishly illustrated tome which dealt with the popular sport of small craft aviation on Ancho. I perused in relaxation, my mission and the revolution completely

forgotten, and suddenly it dawned on me how I could locate George Seek.

Five days later, we were already aboard a slow cruiser to Ancho.

Planet Busters Chapter 29

It was a large ship but definitely a budget spaceliner. Most of the passengers were small-time Anchoan businessmen who dressed and cursed like nineteenth century shepherders and quarreled in loud voices over trifles. They tried to direct some of their complaints to us, but after Biffer gave them an evil stare that was full of menace, they confined their reproaches to members of their own party.

Taking these boys along was already beginning to pay off.

We had more room to move around on this ship, but the week-and-a-half journey to Ancho under standard drive seemed twice as long.

The starport was in a large city called Tecolote. It was one of half a dozen cities with interstellar commerce, but I chose it because I had reasons to believe it might be closest to George Seek. On arrival at Ancho Starport III, we breezed through the crowds and found a cheap hotel where we could all stretch out and relax.

The rooms were clean enough but only because they were hosed out after each vacancy. The floors were cement and each room possessed a drain to aid in mopping up or in the event of accidental flooding. When I looked at the plumbing fixtures, I realized why

things were set up this way. Each hose-bib, inside and out of the building, was caked with rust and dripped and drizzled away unchecked. This condition was by no means restricted to our low class lodgings; even the swankest hotels were stained red by the oxidizing iron of dilapidated air conditioners and leaky swamp boxes. The faucets in our bathroom were no different. They sat in the centers of large, rusty rings and resembled two lumps of pumice. And when I ran a test on the water in the pipes, I rushed to warn even the iron-stomached Helioxians.

But it wasn't just the plumbing that was substandard. Each time a bus passed on the street below, the entire building quaked and the bedsprings groaned—and the food and service were atrocious. I found the whole place fascinating; the entire city seemed stricken by the same malady. High and low class alike shared most aspects of this squalor: the unsanitary streets, the crumbling sidewalks, the polluted air, the noise, and the general disorder. Ancho was much like its facsimile on Draconis.

The real thing, however, was bigger and dirtier, and in addition there were many brown-uniformed police in the streets. This, of course, was very much an unsettling difference. The cops gave us the once over whenever we passed, and I felt that they were looking for

some pretext to extort some of our cash. Lourdes and I conjectured that we were perhaps too well-dressed for such treatment. Our clothes, though plain, were quite new, and the slightly higher class usually enjoyed some kind of privilege on planets like this.

Lourdes and I took in most of what sights interested us in about two hours and then returned to our room. I hung my hat on the rack inside the door and began unpacking some papers, which I spread out on the floor. Lourdes came over and kneeled down with me on the cement.

"This," I said, "is the reason we have come to Ancho via Starport III here in Tecolote."

What lay before me was a series of weather maps printed on nearly transparent onion skin paper so that the daily changing isoglosses could be viewed.

It was an odd weather pattern for Ancho. What seemed to be a solid low pressure area had remained over the same geographical area ever since Colonel Seek had disappeared from sight. "This could be the battle sled," I told Lourdes, indicating a roughly circular area some three-hundred miles in diameter. It was an impressively illustrated collection of papers with plenty of overlapping colors and numbers. I had jazzed it up some on the library's color graphics computer.

Lourdes simply leafed through the papers frowning. I did not have the impression that she was deeply impressed. Finally, she sighed, turned the last page, and looked up at me. "It's clear why you insisted on waiting to show me this," she stated tiredly. "I could easily find anomalies more convincing than these. Of course, they would be equally meaningless. About all these papers prove is that you have found a stationary low that is roughly the size of Seek's ship."

"You forget that I have found this anomaly on Ancho," I responded. "And I've found it above a rich layer of carnotite overlying a deposit of the hottest uranium ore on the planet."

Lourdes was not overawed. "If it is the hottest deposit, then it is merely a coincidence," she said, undaunted. "I don't dismiss your ideas without cause; there is a compelling reason to doubt the significance of your observations. It is this: Seek would disguise any weather that could reveal his presence to anyone."

"Would he?" I asked. "I folded my papers up and tucked them back in my suitcase. "Do you honestly think anyone would attribute a stubborn low pressure zone to the presence of a P-657?"

"Yes," Lourdes answered, with a smile. "You would. So, there's your answer. Seek would

leave no traces of his position. Why would he if he didn't have to?"

I took a folder from the suitcase and opened it. It contained several pages photocopied from the coffee table volume on small aircraft. I handed it to her. She looked at the documents for a few moments without joy and handed them back. "Tell," she finally replied.

"What do you remember about the weather maps you just viewed?" I inquired. I motioned toward my suitcase. "Tell me from a small aircraft pilot's point of view."

Lourdes began counting off on her fingers. "Winds 55 knots, with conditions prime for airframe icing, not to mention carburetor ice. Instrument flight rules every inch of the way, wind shear, too, and the density altitude around that low would give a small plane all the flying characteristics of a grand piano. In all, I'd say really delightful."

"Fine. What would happen if a private airplane tried to navigate through weather like that on Marion? Assuming, of course, that private aviation is still permitted under the present Federal occupation." I asked.

Lourdes shrugged, obviously getting bored. "It could easily turn up missing. A civil patrol would be sent out to investigate. The regular full investigation would ensue."

"Aha!" I shouted. "That's exactly what George Seek would want, isn't it?"

"Don't be sarcastic," Lourdes replied, annoyed. Clearly, that is the exact opposite of what he would want—but that won't happen because..." She broke off, realizing what she was about to say.

I grinned. "If you don't mind, I'll finish that: because no pilot in his right mind would fly into such a mess." I put the photocopies in the suitcase with the other papers. "Seek has made himself vulnerable in a way that no one could ever have foreseen. A battleship like his is usually highly mobile. If someone comes by, it simply moves somewhere else. That makes the ship next to impossible to locate. With his mining project in operation, however, Seek is rooted solid, and his presence open to betrayal in the most inadvertent and uncomplicated way: someone could run into him!"

I knew the dimensions of Seek's ship. It was roughly saucer-shaped and one hundred and fifty miles in radius. If reduced to the size of a coin, it would be an almost wafer-thin disk, but on Ancho, its uppermost point would still top 15,000 feet and perhaps be covered with a thick layer of snow. It would present a terrible navigation hazard for aircraft of any kind. The presence of that huge ship would also directly affect the weather, and George Seek could

make any alterations he felt were necessary to discourage flight through the area. He could even, I imagined, quietly blow an errant aviator out of the vicinity by creating headwinds too strong for a plane to drive against.

At the same time, I knew that a man or party of men could walk beneath the ship unobstructed. I had read the specs on the mining equipment Seek possessed and knew the ship would be supported (figuratively only) by a single column jutting from its hub. This column contained mining tubes, drills, and refining equipment and was anchored in the earth.

I don't think Lourdes was sold, but at least she didn't find my ideas completely idiotic. I radioed Cardip that evening and told him what we were doing. He was very businesslike and simply said to keep him posted. I was somewhat disappointed that he didn't seem as excited about my hunches as I was, but I knew he had a lot more on his mind than what I had to say.

The O-X radio itself was a miracle to say nothing more. Its transmissions were instantaneous and secure and only wealthy governments could afford them. The tiny transmitter I carried with me was not expensive, of course, but the receiving equipment aboard the Seychelles put the Agency at an even par

with the Feds communications-wise. It just so happened that an O-X master unit was being transported aboard the Seychelles when the Agency requisitioned her. Without that bit of luck, the Agency would be fighting for unsecured subspace channels along with every third world inhabitant of the galaxy—and waiting anywhere from ten minutes to an hour between transmissions.

The O-X was tiny as well; I'd have no problem packing it into any place I wanted to go. Other supplies, however, were not so readily available on Ancho as I would have liked. There were no outfitter's stores specializing in what I needed, so I was forced to put together our provisions piecemeal. I kept things as simple as I could: first, a better pair of shoes for Lourdes and canteens all around. A good coffee pot, coffee and sugar. There were a lot of smaller items that I needed to buy and pack: flashlights, matches, water purification tablets, rope, a good camp knife and compass. We wouldn't need to carry much food; it was simple for me to plot a course that crossed through tiny peasant settlements where we could barter for our evening meal. The line on my map didn't even zigzag much. Just the same, the less hiking the better. I had the twelve of us board a single diesel-powered bus to the train station. We'd take the train, get off at a

place called "Desbocado," and travel over land by foot after that.

The station was located in the direct center of Tecolote, not far from Starport III. I made sure we arrived in plenty of time to pick up the tickets before they were sold out. Things didn't work out very well however, for although I was the very first in line and had my money and the correct words in Spanglo ready, I was not able to get a single ticket. The people crowding in behind me, arms outstretched and faces straining with insistence were simply served the tickets over my shoulders and head until the last seat on the train had been taken. I hollered and bleated red-faced while this was happening—but it made no difference. I was thoroughly outclassed by this street-smart mob.

It was already dark when I came back with the rest of the crew. I didn't intend to be culturally sensitive. I needed those tickets. There was another train arriving in fifteen minutes and there was not much time to get them. If I lacked the necessary assertiveness, I doubted these apes from Heliox did.

Lourdes and I pushed our way to the front of the line—or mob; it really wasn't any kind of line you'd ever seen. Biffer and Nils came up behind, and turned, arms folded, facing backward. The crowd was taken aback by this and showed the desired signs of intimidation.

Old habits die hard, however, and when the ticket window rattled open, there was an eager surge and an attempt by some to squeeze in front of Lourdes and me.

Nils would have none of it. He gave the first to reach him a powerful block that set the interloper back on his heels. Many of the others also took a step backward. Nils was not as big as Kroin, who stood nearby, but he was certainly a head taller and a hand width broader than anybody else in the crowd. He was now leveling an ugly stare at the people before him.

I turned to the window with my money. The cashier appeared at first somewhat mystified. He must never have seen a quiet face alone in the window. He had also likely never seen money over the counter that was not clutched in a waving half fist—much less money on the counter laid out in twelve neat piles. "*Doce boletos a Desbocado.*" I told him.

There was a long beat as the cashier tried to make sense out of what he was seeing. Then, he came awake and handed over the tickets. Nodding, with a smile, I said, "*Mil gracias, cuñado.*" I turned to the others "*¡Vámanos muchachos!*"

But that was not the end of it. Biffer, guarding the left flank, was set upon by a tall man who was not very much like the others in the crowd. This was what one might call in

Spanglo *un pachuco*. He wore a kind of flat, low-lying hat with only the tiniest visor in place of the sun-blocking brims the rest of us wore. Dark glasses covered his eyes. His face was lined with deep creases that may not have been worry lines but real scars and his build was wiry like Biffer's. He looked dangerous.

Biffer did not possess the simple imposing bulk that Nils did. He was shorter even than I. Now he was being challenged by the approaching Anchoan.

Nils himself was a good three paces away.

"I've got the tickets, boys." I said loudly. "Side step him, Biffer. No need to get rough."

Biffer tried once to obey. Yet while stepping around the other, he was shouldered once hard. There was nothing I could do. Biffer reacted as expected: he returned the man's offense with a forceful open-handed push. "*¡Pendejo!*" he hissed. Spanglo—interesting, I thought.

Nils acted then, too late, taking the beginnings of a step to back up Biffer. But the Anchoan had already pulled out a weapon. It was a black spring-loaded folding knife that snapped suddenly open to reveal a gleaming six-inch blade. Biffer only sneered, whipped out a bone handled straight razor and cut open the man's head in a curving incision following the scalp-line from widow's peak to ear.

It was a painful wound. I knew this by the horrific screams of agony that escaped the Anchoan. He clutched his head as blood spurted between his fingers and over the knife that he held forgotten in his hand. Nils was on hand then to act—and he did so prudently; instead of beating the man over the head, he only snatched the knife and pocketed it. The wounded *pachuco* was now kneeling on the train station floor, still holding his head.

"¡No se muevan!"

I turned to see an approaching constable. He was a brown-uniformed policeman, muddled-aged and overweight. At his side he carried an immense silver-plated automatic, which he was desperately tugging from its holster.

"Beautiful," Lourdes snarled. "Just beautiful."

"¡No se muevan!" the cop repeated, puffing mightily as he trotted belaboring toward us. The pistol was halfway out of the holster now. *"¡Manos arriba, o cuelgo los pellejos en.....uhn!"*

Nils had moved faster this time. The policeman lay unconscious on the floor, his nose bleeding slightly and one eye socket rapidly swelling shut. Nils stooped to pick up the pistol and looked up at the now gaping crowd. Evidently they irritated him. "Get outta here!" he snapped ferociously, waving the pistol

in their faces. The crowd vanished—instantly; one minute they were there and the next they were just gone.

"Get his ammunition belt, while you're at it," I told Nils.

Lourdes glowered at me. "Now what, bigshot?"

I pointed toward the platform. "The train."

Lourdes grasped my arm fiercely. "Are you completely out of your mind? The police will simply be waiting for us in Desbocado."

"Let 'em wait," I answered, as I took the pistol and ammunition from Nils and stuffed them in my pack.

There was an approaching rumble followed by a high-pitch screech of brakes and a drawn-out wheezing hiss that ended with the single blast of a locomotive's horn. "Come on!" I yelled.

In the distance, at the platform, the train waited silently.

We ran to the platform. The conductor appeared to be nothing more than mildly puzzled at the relatively small number of boarders. He took one last look down the station walkway, saw nothing more than what appeared to be a couple of drunks lying in stupor, shrugged his shoulders, and cried "*¡Viajeros al tren!*"

As I passed, he remarked happily in Spanglo, "Tonight we arrive early in Despocado!"

I did not understand his joy. I had heard about planets like this one, and the conductor must have known as well as I that the train would simply continue to make its rounds for the next week or so, arriving a little earlier at every stop each day until finally it would be late again as usual.

Inside, Lourdes slumped into a vacant seat with a moan. The train lurched once and then rolled into motion, picking up speed. "Oh, brother are we in for it now." She took off her back pack and set it on the seat next to her.

I sat behind her, leaned forward and said, "You worry too much."

Lourdes glanced back. She looked more tired than angry. "Bringing your Heliox roughnecks has really begun to pay off."

"Hey, we got the tickets, didn't we?"

"Yeah, except they are now stamped with the words, 'Free Passage to Ancho Federal Prison.' I'm sure that'll be delightful."

"Nobody's going to prison." I assured her. "Desbocado is not the only town on Ancho. I have plenty of alternate routes."

"Great," Lourdes muttered. "Tell that to the police when you step off the train in Desbocado and they pounce on you."

I sighed. "Lourdes, do you honestly think that I'm going to show up within fifty miles of Desbocado? I'm going to avoid that burg like the plague."

"This train is an express. Plan to jump out the window?"

I smiled. "Is that all that's bothering you? Yes, this train is an express. It also just so happens that it has a whistle-stop in thirty minutes. The place is called Ratón, and it's too small and poor to have any paying customers. There's an inspection station there manned by a couple of bookish clerks who will hardly be inclined to rumble with the Helioxans. A highway runs along the tracks and turns north at Ratón. We'll catch a bus to Aguas Podridas. From there we'll go over land as planned."

I timed our passage with my wristwatch. Time seemed to drag. I wondered if they'd radio the engineer and call some train security team to manacle us before we reached Desbocado. It seemed doubtful. Why should they bother? By now a call had undoubtedly already been made ahead of us and the police in Desbocado were surely licking their chops in anticipation of our arrival.

Lourdes and I waited patiently, noted when the thirty-minutes had passed, and watched in sudden dismay as the few lights of Ratón

flashed by the window and disappeared in the darkness.

The train had not even slowed down.

Lourdes stared at me in consternation. Her eyes were questioning. I touched the sleeve of a passing conductor. "*¿Por qué no paramos en Ratón?*" I asked.

"The conductor gave me a surprised glance. He shook his head. "*Esto no es un tren de carga,*" he said and walked on.

"Only the freight trains have to stop in Ratón," I told Lourdes. "But don't worry; I still have another plan, slightly more drastic—" And in mid-sentence I stood up and grasped the emergency brake line. I gave it a terrific jerk, and the train lurched once mightily and then seemed to gain momentum. I looked down at my hand to see that the frayed cord had been pulled completely free of its mounting. Cheap construction.

"Try the other side," Lourdes suggested, resigned to her fate.

I spun. There—above the opposite row of windows—another cord.

To the right, I could also see the conductor charging furiously between the seats directly at me. He evidently did not appreciate what I doing and looked ready to kill me. He never got the chance, however; Hardiman stuck a foot out in the aisle and he fell on his face.

I got hold of the cord and yanked, hard—but not hard enough to break anything.

This time the train really jumped. There was a tremendous bang! and everyone was thrown practically to the ceiling. The car seemed filled with bodies and flying luggage. The screams of fear and pain were hardly heard over the shrieking wheels—wheels which were trying to fuse to the very tracks they rode upon but couldn't for the sheer power of a one-hundred mile-an-hour velocity multiplied by one half the mass squared of a one-hundred-car passenger train. Outside the windows, the air was thick with a shower of blinding white sparks.

"Wow," I managed to say in a nervous croak.

The car in front of ours began an explosive bucking, and I looked in astonishment as the doors connecting the two cars ripped completely away revealing the departing front three quarters of the train.

Somehow our brakes were still holding while the rest of the train had broken free and surged forward. The locomotive horn sounded once long and eerily far ahead of us as the better part of the train rumbled away in the shadowy distance.

Meanwhile, those of us left behind continued our high speed deceleration. It didn't take much longer. For a few moments the wheels screeched and squealed deafeningly

against the tracks raising a solid curtain of brilliant sparks, and then we came to a shuddering halt. I looked at Lourdes, who was picking herself up from the floor. She didn't appear to be hurt. She was giving me one of her looks.

"I had no idea that train was going so fast," I explained quickly and apologetically.

"You might have guessed that the safety devices on an Anchoan train were nothing to fool with."

I nodded wryly. "I wonder if the engineer even noticed what happened. He's now happily driving on to Desbocado pulling half a train."

"Who can say?" Lourdes shrugged. "He knew enough to blow the horn."

The lights inside the car had flickered out and it was difficult to locate our gear. It was hard to see, but I took a quick head count and found all twelve of us to be present. The other passengers still seemed dazed and (luckily) unsure of whom to blame for the accident. None was badly hurt.

We found all our packs, and Lourdes, myself, and the Helioxans stepped off the train into the twilighted countryside.

On the tracks, there was a pronounced hush—a stark contrast to the pandemonium we had just witnessed. The only thing to disturb the quiet was the stir of a hot wind blowing along

the tracks. The air smelled of coal tar from the railroad's cross ties.

I motioned to the others and we started out across the bush-studded land. We would head north for a time and then turn east hoping to meet the highway to Aguas Podridas.

Planet Busters Chapter 30

We walked the better part of the night before we dozed fitfully under our sarapes. We had gone north for a few miles and then made an eastward turn to intercept the highway. That was the long leg of the journey. It would be early afternoon before we reached the highway itself. By that time the day had grown fairly hot. We sat under the shade of a spiny, narrow-leaved tree at the side of the road and watched the occasional small truck roll by.

Another hour passed before a bus appeared. It was an ancient vehicle, much of it painted by hand in a variety of gaudy colors, with a chrome horse as a hood ornament. This coach had obviously been designed for city transit; its bench seats and sturdy unstreamlined design were not well suited for long passages or very high speed, but none of us was going to complain; it was a relief just to be aboard looking out the windows at a landscape of gently rolling green hills overlain by a multitude of squat, dark trees.

Aquas Podridas was not much to look at. It had perhaps 5000 inhabitants and was in essence a miniature version of Tecolote. The bus pulled up to a crumbling brick building—the station—and we disembarked.

Everyone wanted to grab a room in whatever fleabag motel we could find, but I forbade it. When the police in Desbocado failed to find their fugitives aboard the train, there would be some disappointed frowns all around and a measure of collective befuddlement and unhappy brow-knitting. Investigation would eventually disclose the fact that a goodly part of the train and its other passengers had not arrived either. Then, it would occur to someone to backtrack and the balance of the cars and riders would be found minus the twelve passengers originally sought. This would further vex the police, and the search would widen to towns and cities along the highway. A call would go out to Aguas Podridas, hotel registers would be examined, and if the quarry were still not found, there would be other searches made in cities farther along. Then, the frustrated police would lose interest and forget about it completely.

I saw no need to wait for things to cool off. There would never be any heat in the tiny villages where there was little traffic and possibly no organized local law enforcement. And that is where I intended to go without so much as a pause in Aguas Podridas.

Hardiman took exception to this. "I been walking half the night and most of the day," he declared. "Now, there's a chance to put my dogs

up on a footstool an' maybe have a drink, and you say I gotta keep walking."

"There will be time to rest your feet and have that drink," I assured him. "But I suspect that there are few footstools in the local pokey and no liquor at all."

"How far are we goin'?" he wanted to know.

"It's a ways in that direction," I admitted, pointing west. "But griping doesn't make any sense. You can't stay in this town, so you should be happy that I'm paying you to leave it—pretty good wages, too. And all just for getting some exercise and taking in the sights."

The others also grumbled, but obediently followed Lourdes and me as we walked out of town, crossing the single stone bridge that spanned a slow flowing red river. A sign on the bridge said, Arroyo del Muerto—Deadman Creek. That did not seem auspicious, and I did not translate it for Lourdes.

The town I sought, Chiquitito, was obscure and isolated to the extreme. Only by primitive footpaths could it be reached from outlying unpaved roads—roads which themselves did not really seem to connect to any true highways. I doubted that we needed to fear the police in such a place—at least not for the simple battery Biffer and Nils had committed in Tecolote. I assumed that the brown-suited patrolmen did not work out there. I wondered

what kind of constabulary existed in the rural areas. Perhaps a kindly marshal—or a gang of hooligans. I looked over at my sour-faced escort. I was ready for hooligans.

The Helioxans were a sight. Kroin, hardly limping anymore, was too dumb to have any complaints and Biffer seemed somewhat smug and content; he, after all, had tasted blood within recent memory. But an aura of bad humor seemed to radiate from the rest. These men were not cut out to be the hardy campers that I had hoped they might be. I'd have to remember to loosen the leash a bit when we got to Chiquitito. I just hoped they wouldn't attempt a sacking of the town and turn the populous against us.

The dirt road which we followed veered north and we had to take to some primitive trails to maintain our westward heading. The trails were winding and it was only by constantly checking my compass that I could determine that we were headed in the right general direction. The sky darkened and there began a fairly heavy and constant drizzle. We now traveled parallel to the river, whose tortuous course had intercepted us some miles ago. The rain-pelleted Del Muerto lay to the east and the trail alternately followed its bank and drifted well off its floodplain before returning again to the water's edge. We wore

our sarapes and covered them with waterproof plastic.

We finally viewed Chiquitito in the dark of night. It was a town of dirt streets and crumbling squalor. The windows of the buildings shone with the oily yellow light of kerosene lamps and, indeed, the very austerity of the place made even the plain flashlights that had illuminated our way along the path seem out of place technologically.

In the shadows, leaning against the wall, was a figure. I trained my light on it to reveal a thin, hungry-looking man dressed in khaki. He had an ammunition belt wrapped across his chest. He also shouldered a heavy bolt-action carbine. "*Viva la causa*," he said quietly with a toothless grin. "*Viva la revolución*."

"Good evening," I said in Spanglo.

The soldier grinned and replied: "You look for the posada, no? A place to stay on a rainy night. There are few soldiers in Chiquitito tonight."

"Where is the posada?"

"I walk with you, mano, and show you," was the reply. He hefted his gun and motioned with one hand. "This way."

We followed a bit cautiously. When an armed stranger is showing the way, one tends to be cautious.

The town itself seemed peaceful enough. The local villagers were out in small numbers, walking along the unlighted cobble and dirt streets and standing in small groups chatting in dimly lit doorways and other gathering spots.

The posada was a large, unadorned building, and there appeared to be no charge for staying there. A proprietor simply led us inside and showed us a large barracks-like room and a number of smaller sparsely-furnished alcoves. In addition to our escort, there were only two rather scrawny men staying in the barracks. They, too, were dressed in khaki and observed us with a decided lack of curiosity.

"Lourdes and I are going to take one of the upstairs rooms and get some rest," I told the Helioxans. "Hardiman, it's time for that drink you wanted. Check out the local nightlife. Have fun. But stay out of trouble. We'll be leaving early tomorrow morning."

Lourdes and I were awakened in the pitch black hours of early morning by the obnoxious voices of ten drunken cons from Heliox. There was some unmelodious singing and protracted oaths and boasting and finally a dearly bought silence as the inebriated men fell unconscious on their bunks downstairs.

So, there was a nightlife in Chiquitito.

The next morning, their high spirits were abridged somewhat by nagging, twelfth-

magnitude hangovers. Most of the boys wandered back to the drinking hall to pick up some more of the liquid that had corrupted them the night before. They needed something to kill the pain, and the hair of the dog that had bitten them was the only thing available.

The drink was a milky fluid called *pulque* and had the potency of a strong ale. I tried a little myself—just a taste. I knew I'd be tempted to take the day off if I had any more than that. I was somewhat a connoisseur of fermented beverages, but knew my limitations—or at least I knew them when I did not drink. When I did, I could be a holy terror.

"Stay away from that," Lourdes scolded. I was standing in the barracks leaning over a wooden shelf protruding from the plaster wall. Biffer stood at my side measuring out a portion of the pulque into a cup from a gourd pitcher. "You can drink after the revolution is over for whatever good it'll do you."

"Over?" came a loud voice in fluent Galactellano. "That kind of talk is not appreciated here."

Behind us stood a man in his early forties wearing a red bandana and a necklace with various symbols and talismans hanging from it. He wore no uniform, but was dressed in a plain white shirt and dark trousers. He stuck out his hand. "Al Rawson," he said.

I shook the hand. "Jaime Loro."

The other man smirked. He didn't believe for a minute that that was my name. It was ill-advised of me to use it, particularly while speaking Galactellano, but I had no other name ready except my own, which for some time I had been reluctant to use even under the best of circumstances.

"I don't take your group to be one of Guglielmo's detachments," he said, the benign smirk still on his face. "Nor one of Baldonado's."

"We're neither," I affirmed wondering just who in the hell Guglielmo and Baldonado were. "We are.... free merchants, here to assess the marketing conditions for interplanetary commer...."

"That's crap and you know it," he interrupted.

I was learning slowly. This Rawson fellow wasn't buying anything I said, a sensible policy since I was doing my best to lie through my teeth. My problem was getting caught at it.

"If there is anything like a free agent on Ancho, I'm him," he said, poking his thumb into his breastbone arrogantly. He leaned close. "You guys stand out like a whore in a church. You crazy? What in the hell are you doing here?"

I thought for a moment, and realized I had no story to tell him but the truth, which I wasn't about to talk about. I think he took my silence for surliness.

"Speak Spanglo?" he asked, puffing on a cigarette. He offered one to me, and I took it. Lourdes frowned.

"Some," I replied, accepting a light and taking what I hoped looked like an unconcerned pull at the white, filterless tube.

"That's good. It's also bad if you use that language to say the revolution will ever end. Someone could overhear you. Hell, around here that's heresy. Revolution is all these people have got; it's what makes the place run."

"I was referring to our own revolution," Lourdes interjected.

Rawson looked at Lourdes, nodded, and turned back to me. "Oh, you have your very own, do you? Funny; you don't look the type—none of you do. Listen, there is only one revolution in Ancho and it goes on all the time. Here in el campo, you're either in it or you just aren't here at all."

"So you're in it?"

"Up to my ears." He tossed the cigarette to the ground, and lighted another while waiting for a man in khaki who was passing to move out of earshot. "See that guy?" he said. "He's a bum. I mean really. That's no soldier. He just

dresses that way. Bullets are fakes. The gun doesn't even shoot or he wouldn't be allowed to carry it around. Someone would just take it away from him. Probably hit him over the head with it, too. Chiquitito is hardly a boom town, so what else does he have to do but play soldier and maybe get enough crumbs from their table to make life a bit more comfortable?"

"I notice you don't want him to overhear you."

"Perhaps he can get some choice crumbs if he tells someone what he hears," replied Rawson. "I don't know. But that should concern you more than it does me."

I just stared and took another drag off the cigarette. Rawson motioned to us all to move outside. We followed him into the street.

Outside he began his lecture again with more fervor. It was clear we didn't know enough about Anchoan history.

It seemed that some forty years ago the Anchoan federal government and the rebels got tired of fighting. All the feds wanted was a hefty tribute in the form of agricultural goods. All the rebels wanted, in reality, was to be the ones in power over *los campesinos*, the peasants. The rebels made a two-party system: the groups of soldiers under the leadership of Generalísimos Baldonado and Guglielmo. They only pretended to duke it out. The fiction of a

continuing struggle kept the revolutionary zeal alive—even though they pretended to fight each other instead of the state.

Lourdes said, "I take it we were not to have been in there with the soldiers."

"God, no," Rawson said, wincing. "And you weren't; there were nothing but bums in there last night.

"That's the truth," Lourdes replied, looking at me.

"I'm Grangorian. I'd rather not say just why I left Grangor. But I know exactly what you're doing here, so I don't mind telling you why I'm here; your knowing is the least of my problems." He took a long drag off his cigarette. "The Anchoan feds have to be paid to let the revolutionaries rule here in el campo. The *campesinos* carry their tribute up to the highways and load it onto trucks right out of the bush. There ain't but dirt for roads connecting the two sides now."

"What's the tribute?"

"Dope. What else?"

"So where do you fit in?"

"That's simple. I've arranged for the truckers to bump."

"Ah," I said, eyebrows raised knowingly. "They alter the cargo manifest for you," I said. "Part of the difference is your cut."

Rawson slowly shook his head, with a wry smile. "You catch on fast," he said. He took another slow pull from his cigarette. "There is a slight problem, though. My little business undermines the very essence of the social order here. Should the Anchoan government become discontent with the way the tribute is being doled out, it could decide to reestablish itself as the controlling body. Los señores Baldonado and Guglielmo would not like that."

I whistled. "Brother, you've got your nerve to tell me how to conduct my affairs. You're living right on the edge yourself."

"That's true," Rawson admitted, seeming to become slightly nervous at the thought. "But a well greased palm is a poor instrument for strangulation, as I've always said. I've done my best to apply the grease widely and liberally. And I still think I can offer you some worthwhile advice."

"Please do," Lourdes said.

"All right. Get the hell out of here. That's simple enough, isn't it? Just go back the way you came and abandon any little dope smuggling project you had planned out here."

"Dope smuggling!" Lourdes blurted out. "You're the big drug dealer and you said so yourself."

"Wrong! My trade is strictly graft. Wholesome and virtuous. Do I look suicidal?"

"What makes you think we're interested in narco-bucks?" I asked.

"Don't make me laugh. Everyone is. And I've seen enough of you small-time offworlders come in here for a piece of the pie. I'll tell you something else, too: I never saw any of them leave, either. Not in a healthy live condition anyway." He stared at me. "Christ! I just can't stand it. "Look at those dingleballs hanging there. No *campesino* would be caught dead wearing that."

"You don't look much like a Anchoan yourself," I returned.

"You are missing the point," said Rawson. "You want those khaki-clad dopers to take you for a city slicker? The urbanites and the *campesinos* are supposed to be isolated. When it even looks like they are mixing, people, get uncomfortable—*very* uncomfortable. Hell, I look fine compared to you. I sound fine, too. Got a real off-world growl when I speak Spanglo."

"What would you do if you were us?" I was digging in my pocket for my jackknife. I was going to cut off that dingleball.

"Friend, if I were you, I would be somewhere else—probably having my head examined." He glanced at the dingleball that now lay on the floor. His face looked pained. "Oh, I just can't bear it! For God's sake, throw

the whole damned hat away, and if you insist on staying here, then at least keep clear of the posadas and soldiers."

"How?"

"For starters you could stay out of the towns entirely. If you need provisions, send in a pair who can keep their mouths shut, get what is needed and get out—" He glanced over at the Helioxans who were vociferously arguing over the portioning out of pulque. Hardiman was standing with his face about an inch from Biffer's. Both looked ready to go for their blades. "Well...." he continued, "with the crowd you've got, you might have to take care of that yourself. Which direction are you headed—or have you even decided that?"

"Directly west."

Rawson rubbed his chin. "Might not be so bad to the west." He paused a moment and then went on, "Don't take any high traffic paths. Usually, there are several running in more or less the same direction. Take the least used of these—you'll meet fewer soldiers that way."

"What happens if we do meet the soldiers?"

"If I were you, I'd drop the *campesino* ruse like a bad habit. It just won't wash. Tell 'em you are here from off planet to visit your grandmother—anything!—and use your worst Spanglo when you do it. Also—" He broke off,

listening intently with a wave at me to remain silent. "Soldiers coming. I hear their boots."

He directed us across the street. "Now here's some advice I hope you will take. There's no percentage in staying here. If I were you I would leave. Just split."

I wasn't going to argue. The Helioxans were in no condition to fight anybody today. A loud noise would destroy them, and the idea of any kind of fracas was unthinkable. They retrieved their packs and we started out of town.

"Go on up the butte there," Rawson suggested. "Good path. Soldiers never take it. Plenty of cover."

"How about you?" I asked.

"Rawson grinned nervously. "Another day, another palm to grease. Don't worry about me. I probably know the guys. If not—" He patted his wallet.

Rawson had been right about the path going up the hill. The plants overgrowing it made it practically a tunnel. We reached the top of the butte in a matter of minutes and sat at the summit well hidden in tall grass. The soldiers had arrived in the street in front of the posada . I wondered what they were doing. "Lourdes, where's that pair of field glasses?"

"In your pack."

I dug into my knapsack and found the binoculars. They were no bigger than a pair of

opera glasses, but had advanced optics and were powerful. I trained them on the scene below. I could see clearly all that was taking place. In a moment, I put the binoculars away. I motioned to the others to follow me over the summit and down the butte's opposite side.

I said nothing as we made our way to the west. But I was careful to take deep breaths and concentrate on not being sick. I hadn't told the others that I had seen Al Rawson through the binoculars with a bayonet sticking into his chest.

Planet Busters Chapter 31

I enforced a four-day march straight to the west. We had little in the way of provisions. Lourdes and I took Rawson's advice and risked entering a village by day and securing some salted meat, dried beans, and parched corn. These foods were compact enough to last us a while and the piquant spices that were sold along with them made the resulting meals fairly palatable.

The Helioxans were not pleased with the general turn of events, however. I was forced to brighten their spirits some by offering bonuses from the plentiful supply of money I carried with me. I did a lot of "This'll break me, you bastards" just in case they took it into their heads that I had more than was good for me.

On the fifth day, the sun was only a dully glaring orb through a dreary thousand-foot ceiling. The overcast sky and cloud-cowled sun would be an convenient illusion for someone in Seek's position; it would be easy to manufacture and maintain and would fit in well with the weather consistent with a low pressure zone.

It wasn't long before I could see some signs that suggested we had begun to walk beneath Seek's ship. The P-657 was a cloud-shrouded metal mushroom and we were moving in its

shadow on the way to meet its stem: the mining hub planted in the ground. There was no sun to be seen above and any light we had was diffused and scattered from different directions.

It was then that I began to do some fine tuning with my compass. Night would fall in a few hours and I would have no stars to navigate by, so the best I could do at that time would be to follow the adjusted westerly magnetic heading exactly as I did in the day.

I wished I had been more careful before; the roughness of the trails we followed did not lend themselves to a well-tracked course. Up to now, any inaccuracies were small enough to be insignificant for my purposes. All I needed to do was to meet the central hub of the P-657 to verify its existence. That column standing in the earth was several miles in circumference, yet I knew I could still miss it. I had no sectional map at all and my dead-reckoning was crude to say the least.

We were once again in a land of rolling green hills interspersed with short, heavy trees. We had practically forgotten the danger of the soldiers; this area was much too wild and off the beaten tract to worry unduly about them.

We set up camp and waited for night, and as expected no star pierced the gray clouds above. When night fell, it was just cool enough for us to really need the sarapes. I was sleeping

soundly, Lourdes at my side, when I awakened without apparent cause. Then I heard it—or rather I both felt and heard it—or thought I did. It was the faintest rumbling sound mixed with an almost imperceptible high-pitched hum. I didn't know if I was imagining these sounds.

BOOM! Now, I was really awake. So were the others. There was a burst of nervous chatter: "What the hell was that?" "Who took my knife?" "I'll get you for that, Kroin!"

"Quiet!" I hissed. "You dopes want to give yourselves away? That's probably the army—or a dinosaur with very large feet—so shut up."

"Where did that noise come from?" whispered Hardiman from the darkness some yards away. Then, a bit too eagerly: "If you don't know how to use that pistol, I can...."

I threw a handful of dirt in his direction. There was a cough and some spitting, then the sound of someone lurching to his feet. "You..."

"I've got the pistol all right," I said quickly. "And I'm sitting to the west of you with the barrel pointed east. How do you like that? Sit down, hot shot."

I heard a curse and the sound of Hardiman sitting down. Everyone knew that I had got the jump on Kroin, and I was sure they all imagined they could fare better if tested against me. But Hardiman wasn't going to argue with a gun.

"That's better," I said soothingly. "You've earned another bonus—cash money in return for a little dirt in the face plus a bit more for the insult." I was overdoing the bonuses.

Lourdes said, "Will you throw anything if I ask a question?"

"I would never dream of...."

"Shut up, yourself, then," she said acidly. "This time I want to know exactly what you plan to do. I don't intend to follow around blindly while you walk right into Colonel Seek's clutches. Can't you recognize that sound?"

I didn't want to admit that I couldn't. "It will take but a moment to clear my head of cobwebs. Then, I shall surely...."

"Think! The Brine River on Marion."

"The Brine?"

"Yes, of course! Your very own gravel works under the employ of Cooley Construction Company."

It was Seek. There was no longer any doubt in my mind. "He's cracking pebbles," I said quietly. "The guy is mining on the flood plain of the Arroyo del Muerto." The sound was diagnostic. There was nothing quite like the crashing explosion of a hundred tons of shattering river boulders. Seek was processing a lot of dirt, and the boulders were getting sucked in with all the rest. The battleship was old, and

like the equipment we had used on Marion, his machines combined the hardness of thick steel and the power of hydraulics with the force of good old gravity to break even the most durable quartzite megaliths into fragments. The result was invariably gravel and noise—and plenty of both.

"I think you had better call Cardip—now," Lourdes said emphatically.

It took only a few seconds to pull the O-X from my pack and begin to set it up.

A light stabbed across the camp and I shouted, "Turn that damned thing off, you!" The flashlight glowed orangely under a sarape and then went out. I connected the thin wire leads to the battery hook-up and put the headset in place. The single green indicator light twinkled and I heard the electronic squeal of the O-X.

There was no return signal from the master unit aboard the Seychelles. I didn't even have to try again; I knew what had happened. The O-X was working perfectly. And Seek was blocking the transmission.

I waited for a few moments before telling Lourdes my plan. There was nothing left for me to do. It was obvious that Seek was here and didn't care if we knew it. He could easily have muted the sound of his work but chose not to. And that he had blocked the O-X transmission

plainly showed that he would not let us simply return the way we had come.

He was waiting for us.

Lourdes agreed with me. That is not to say that she was happy. No one likes to be caught in a trap. But the fact remained that there was little for us to do except go and see what Seek wanted.

We packed and waited for sunrise. It never came. The hours of the night passed and if the sun had indeed risen, it was so shrouded under the cover of clouds real or manufactured that it was as dark as night. Twice more during this time we heard the characteristic crash of stone. The Helioxans were somewhat unnerved by this and I had nothing to comfort them with. I had overdone the bonus business and they were forced to solace themselves by bickering. I broke up two fist fights before I ordered a westward march in the darkness.

I no longer had any compunctions about using the flashlights. Seek appeared to be well aware of us now anyway—and I didn't particularly like the idea of accidentally falling over some cliff in the dark. I mused somewhat unhappily that I preferred to walk over one in broad daylight and on purpose. You were born lucky! Cardip had said. Sure, just look at me now.

The occasional crashing boom of the mining operation was a far better navigational aid than any compass. We walked in single file across the rolling land for an hour or more and heard the sound of disintegrating stone every fifteen minutes. It was getting louder. Then, there was a half hour break in the pattern. When we next heard the sound, it was as though it were taking place in our heads. The Helioxans fell prone, holding their palms to their ears. I fell, too—to my knees, but quickly rose and walked forward. I collided with a thump against something unseen. I knew I had reached the hub.

"Lourdes," I whispered.

Lourdes came to my side and grasped my arm. With her free hand she reached forward and touched the slightly curving wall of the mining tube. "The ship," was all she said.

The Helioxans regained their feet and also collided with the wall. They fell back, perplexed and uncertain.

I pointed my flashlight before me and saw a dizzying void. The beam was powerful, but could not reveal the opposite side of the tube. What it did reveal was a vast blackness that extended deep down into the earth of Ancho. Almost instinctively we all drew back a step. It is virtually impossible for a person to stand at the brink of such an abyss even with the

knowledge that an invisible metal wall stands between him and the depths.

The sudden ear-splitting burst of noise that sounded now was even louder than the last. The sight of the gaping crater had awoken a primordial fear of heights in all of us. This, coupled with a terror of the unknown and punctuated by the nerve-shattering explosion, completely unhinged the Helioxans. A couple of them broke and ran, and I directed the beam of my flashlight at them. "Come back here, you chicken livered, no good...." They stopped—but not voluntarily; they had crashed headlong into something unyielding. At first they fell back hollering. But in an instant they were back on their feet and trying to get past whatever was blocking their way.

It was no use. Seek had put a second wall around us—this one made not of invisible metal but of some simple invisible force through which nothing could pass. The men combatting this force did not let up, however. They screamed and clawed against it even as it began to push them—inward toward Lourdes and me and the edge of the void.

Now, they were really screaming. They thought they were going over the side. They didn't. They were bulldozed to no more than ten feet from the edge where Lourdes and I stood.

We were ringed in.

There was still another BOOM! But by now our nerves were so shot that we hardly noticed. The next thing we knew the whole world came ablaze with light. I nearly closed my eyes then, for I could now clearly see the size of the hole in front of us. It was miles across, capped by a crown of river sediments, and layered below with thick Anchoan strata: limestone, sandstone, and and rock injected with sills and dikes of basalt and ancient pegmatite surrounded by marbled bands of gneiss and schist.

It was at least a mile in depth.

Planet Busters Chapter 32

The vast, incredible vista before us began to blur. The banded walls on the far side of the pit became less distinct and finally invisible in a haze. The haze itself began to resolve and take shape, at first as a misty column in the direct center of our vision. The column then, too, misted and was obscured as angular mechanical shapes took form about it.

"The tube is becoming visible," Lourdes said.

The result was mesmerizing. The P-657 mining tube was bursting into view from the center out. We stood enthralled as one unfolding cross section after another appeared to materialize. And from our vantage point we would see it all, layer by layer: the bulkheads and walkways, cooling tubes, engine houses and mile-long transmission boxes. There were forests of cables and relays and storage rooms filled with supplies and vast drums loaded with ore. It was hard to believe that there was time in the universe to rivet together such a huge structure.

"Just once I'd like to see the whole ship come into view like this." Lourdes said.

There was a moment of shock when the closer parts of the machine began to appear. It gave the terrifying illusion of a million tons of

machinery rushing directly toward us. The effect was so convincing that the Helioxans broke and ran once more. The force field stopped them from getting anywhere.

The onrushing walls and machines seemed so unstoppable that I was fairly rattled myself. But I wasn't going to miss the last of this. I stood directly where I was, my nose only a few inches from the tube itself.

The vision came to a silent halt, but it was impossible not to flinch as the final beams of the support structure and layers of insulation rushed in my face. Of course, nothing hit me. The final wall of the tube merely appeared and a layer of gray primer spread across it. A split second later, a final coat of thick black paint snapped into view.

More than just a wall had appeared. And I realized now why the tube was made visible: Seek knew that we had to be able to see the door before us before we could be coaxed to enter it.

"Paid to keep my mouth shut," Hardiman growled. "I know what you've been planning. I'll tell you right now that I want nothing to do with sticking the feds. That's no locally-made contraption up there—it's a damned P-657!"

The others groaned. They still couldn't see the ship. The top of the column was lost in the swirling cirrus clouds above us. The tube itself,

however, was too big to be a part of anything else. That much was obvious even to the Helioxans.

The door in the wall of the tube was open and the interior glowed with a stark electric brilliance. It was not inviting. "Let's see what he wants," I told Lourdes. She nodded unhappily and the two of us stepped inside.

"It isn't a 'he,'" Biffer hollered after us. "It's a 'them,'—the feds. I've heard they are fond of torture."

I stuck my head out. "I'll tell you about the feds," I told him. "They're fascist pigs and they've outlawed torture. When they kill you, they make it quick; I've seen 'em. Does that make you feel better?"

"No."

"Well, get in here!"

"I'll wait for you here," Biffer said. "See you later. So long."

Hardiman added: "I, too, will stand guard here and—akk!"

We were all inside now. The force field had quickly contracted around the men and thrown them inside. The door slammed, and that was that.

"Change your minds?" I asked, grinning.

"Shut up!" Hardiman roared.

A series of rungs led upward to a metal staircase. We took turns clambering up it. The stairs themselves were wide enough to scale as a group. After only a few flights, we came to another door. It opened into what was clearly a freight elevator. "Are we going to argue about going in there?" I asked the men.

Hardiman shrugged, somewhat indifferently, an action which seemed to sum up the attitude of the others as well. They had given up the idea of resisting.

We all filed into the elevator.

ENTER! came a terrific booming voice.
ENTER! AND BE SPARED THE WRATH OF
THE BENEVOLENT ONE!

I looked at Lourdes and she nodded. "It's him. I recognize the pomposity as well as the voice."

We all glanced around for the speakers but saw none.

The door slammed violently and the elevator lurched upward.

MANY WHO SEEK ANSWERS ASK
HOW ONE MAY RECONCILE THE
SPIRITUAL AND THE CONCRETE. I
SHALL EXPLAIN.....

"My god, he *is* going to torture us," Lourdes said.

.....MANY SCIENTISTS ARE
BEGINNING TO WITNESS AND GIVE

FREELY THEIR MARVELOUS
TESTIMONY.....

"Name one that doesn't make bubbles when he talks," I replied to myself gloomily.

Evidently I was overheard and the elevator lurched once again, this time viciously. It was a nine-G take-off. Straight up.

THE FOLLOWING SUBJECTS ARE NOW DEEMED NULL AND VOID: PHYSICS AND THE TEACHINGS OF THE HERETIC EINSTEIN; GEOLOGY AND ITS BASTARD SONS SEDIMENTOLOGY, MINERALOGY, AND PALEONTOLOGY; ALL OF CHEMISTRY ALONG WITH ITS TALK OF LONG-DECAYING ISOTOPES; BIOLOGY AND THE DEVIL-SPAWNED TWIN DEMONS OF ORGANIC EVOLUTION AND EVOLUTIONARY GENETICS. IN PLACE THERE HAVE BEEN ORDAINED TRUE SCIENCES YET TO BE ELUCIDATED.

"It's all that damned elucidation that makes science so frustratingly difficult," I grumbled. My head was pressed to the floor and already cracking like a coconut. But after my remark, Seek added a little boost in acceleration that made me feel like my brains were oozing out my ears.

"Why don't you keep your mouth shut just once, Jenkins?" Lourdes gritted in cold fury.

I shut up, but by that time I really had no choice. I was redding out.

My next awareness came with abrupt and surprising clear-headedness. The ascent was suddenly arrested and the twelve of us vaulted halfway to the roof before landing in a heap. The door slid open with a swish and I crawled for the opening, feeling the pain of what I hoped were nothing more than simple bruises.

In the hallway outside was no sign of activity. All was quiet except for the normal faint hum of shipboard air conditioning. I rose to my feet and motioned to the others to follow me.

We walked. The hallway was long and wide. Regularly spaced doors lined the passage. They were windowless and, we soon found, locked. After a moment, the large door to a barracks broke the pattern. We stopped, and Lourdes pushed gently against it. The door swung open soundlessly.

I dug into my pack and pulled out the automatic. "Let me look first," I said.

Lourdes nodded. The others stood unashamedly behind. They had heard stories of the troops aboard P-657s.

Such soldiers were infamous for sheer brutality—brutality that was perhaps to be expected from the type of man chosen for such duty. The job was for life, and the man who was

so conscripted was destined to serve as one of the most luckless pariahs of history—perhaps a fitting role for one whose personality qualified him for the post.

They were also exceptionally trained. No one could be expected to believe that the simple projectile weapon I held would prove effective against such a soldier—much less a whole room full of them.

But I had to look.

Nothing stirred inside. The room was large and lined with the expected large number of bunks, each neatly draped with white linen. There was something else: a cloying smell that seemed oddly alarming. I stepped further inside and noticed a sharp drop in temperature. It was near zero degrees within the barracks. I felt a twinge of fear. The bunks ahead loomed strangely. I took only a step more before I started in horror. I understood: formaldehyde. That was the smell. But there was more than that. The linen in each bed was a shroud. And visible within each from shoulders up was a soldier whose peaceful repose might have been mistaken for slumber if not for the fixed, sallow mask of death upon the face.

The others caught me outside the door where I had literally run into them. Biffer was twisting my wrist to free the pistol still gripped

tightly in my hand. Lourdes had me by the backpack. Nils clutched my hair.

I felt suddenly drained. I slumped to the floor. The automatic clattered across the hall.

"What was it?" Lourdes gasped reluctantly. She didn't seem really to want to know.

"Tell us!" Hardiman cried.

I looked up at them. "Bad case of necromania."

"He killed them?" Lourdes whispered.

"In a word: yes. They're dead."

"How many?" asked Hardiman.

"I don't know," I answered.

Lourdes said: "Each P-657 carries one hundred and fifty thousand armored troops."

THE SPIRIT DOES NOT DIE. came Seek's voice. THESE MEN WILL AWAKE AND WALK AGAIN. I MYSELF HAVE DONE SO.

"But why?" I managed to ask.

COME. I SHALL EXPLAIN AND MINISTER TO THE ONE MOST IN NEED.

He meant me, and he was not making a request.

Planet Busters Chapter 33

Seek did not wait for me to oblige. A field behind me propelled me down the corridor and around the place where it curved into an adjacent hallway.

There, another open elevator waited. I was pushed inside whereupon the doors crashed immediately shut and the compartment shot upwards. It was a very short ride. The elevator screeched to a halt and another jolt from behind slammed me into the doors before they had completely opened. Eager to see me, Seek? I thought.

I fell into the hallway, staggered to my feet, and was promptly bulldozed before one more open doorway. The force field then departed, and left me standing on my own, seemingly free to go forward or flee.

Seek was playing games. I knew very well that if I went anywhere but directly through that door, I could expect to be shoved again from behind. But I waited a few moments and caught my breath before I went inside.

The room was well-lighted and furnished like an expensive suite. The walls were wood-paneled and decorated with original pieces of art. The floor was carpeted.

George Seek sat stiffly behind an executive desk. He was a monstrosously fat man, a fact

which somehow surprised me. His face was porcine and his eyes bulged slightly. He was dressed not in a military style, but in the simple fashion of the common man: his shirt was white and unpressed, its buttonless collar flat against the shoulders. On the desktop his large, doughy hands were clasped as if he were making a prayer.

"Welcome to my temple," he said in a low voice. "It is also your temple, and I sit before you humbly to explain and console you, help you see the light."

My fear of him ebbed and vanished, yet it was replaced with a kind of dread. The words. They were somehow not entirely his. Oh, he composed them all right; I'd read enough of his hackwork to recognize the author. But I knew somehow this single fat man was not in control here.

"It's a tomb," I said.

"What?"

"A tomb," I repeated. "Your temple. Isn't that what it really is?"

There was a pause and then Seek moved in his chair.

"Should the chosen be so blessed to rise from a crypt, so that crypt becomes a temple," he said slowly.

"Blah, blah," I thought to myself, but I said, "That doesn't make much sense, but I suppose it's been written somewhere?"

"Not written," answered Seek. "But do you doubt it?"

"Yes."

Seek grinned. Involuntarily I moved backward. That smile was not one of Seek's inventions. Another had composed it. The grin was the whites-showing kind, histrionic and so poorly acted that anyone could see that it had been designed to appeal to a primitive fear of the supernatural. Yet, this theater was so bad that I knew that Seek was not a part of it. I did not fear the bad acting; I feared whoever was directing it.

Seek rose from his seat slowly, and with that motion the air in the room stirred and brought to me once again the faint scent of formaldehyde. His pudgy hands reached for his waist, clutched the tucked-in shirt, and tugged. The shirt came free. His immense belly rolled outward.

The hands now held more than the shirt. Seek now also grasped a heavy white mound of abdominal flesh, which when raised revealed itself as the wedged flap of a huge and wicked V-shaped incision. From the cavity underneath wafted, as if gasped outward, the deathly odor of formaldehyde. Within that opening could be

seen the pink of his insides. Except there were no insides.

Seek had been disemboweled.

I simply stared. The man was dead and I did not fear him. And I did not grieve.

For a moment the exaggerated grin clung fast to Seek's face. In a moment, the slightest vestige of a pained grimace began to overlie it. Seek stiffened once, as if struggling against some internal antagonist, and the grin disappeared to be replaced by his own intimate and aloof expression of false piety. Then, he collapsed backward, toppling the chair as he fell.

Explosions sounded from within the ship. I left the room and made my way to the elevator. Inside, I could hear the cracking blast of Z-pistols and the muffled pop of small arms.

The elevator controls gleamed to life. I ignored the numbers and pressed the control marked "Former Floor." In a moment I was in the hallway branching from the one where I had left Lourdes and the others.

The corridor was alive with noise. Guns roared in the adjoining rooms and hallways and armed men shouted orders as they ran past. They ignored me utterly.

Hardiman, Kroin, and Biffer were sprinting towards me from well down the hall.

They weren't stopping.

"Where's Lourdes?" I shouted.

"Aliens! Aliens!" They all screamed, and, indeed, behind them I could see white, semi-humanoid forms flying at the level of the ceiling.

The flying beings moved at great speed which they might well have been expected to do, for they were not attacking the Helioxans but fleeing the pursuit a dozen armored soldiers.

Hardiman had just reached me when the first of the flyers overtook him. A gunshot cracked once loudly behind him, and the being smashed against a wall and tumbled fluttering down the hallway.

The Helioxans fell to the floor as bullets and Z-rays tore into the aliens overhead. One of them landed hard on the floor in front of me. It was half the size of a man and equipped with a pair of undersized feathered wings on the ends of which protruded grasping, bat-like hands. From one hand grew a long, curving nail, razor sharp along its length and serrated at the tip. An ugly piece of work.

The face, however, was entirely different. It was startlingly human-like—too human. My God, I thought. It was a child's face. A sweet face, the face of a cherub.

As I observed it, the wounded creature made a vicious slash at me with its knife-like talon,

missed, and was blown to pieces by a soldier's Z-ray.

Another soldier in a powered suit stood a few feet from me. He held the tiny transmitter to his mouth and said, "Group one. We got all ours."

I looked and saw the crumpled forms of the aliens lying scattered along the length of the corridor. One thing was clear. Those tiny wings didn't do the flying.

The soldier stepped over to me. "Get up," he said gruffly. He was a huge man made to look larger still by the heavy armor.

I rose, and he pulled off his helmet and face mask.

"Zallaham!" I exclaimed.

The warlord's thick black hair was still shoulder length, but he had shaved the sides of his head about an inch above each ear. I could also see that he wore the insignia of a field commander. Pretty good for a third-world barbarian—but he was not just any barbarian.

Zallaham chuckled. "I thought I would find you alive," he said. "Cardip has told me that you think I am under your command. I laugh. He has also told me to inform you that your wife is safe."

I breathed a sigh of relief. Zallaham gave a couple of coded orders over the radio and

added: "The aliens were good fighters. It was not easy to beat them. Your wife killed three."

"What? How?"

"Noisemaker. Projectile weapon." He reached into a pocket and pulled out the automatic.

"Where did you get that?"

"I liked it. She gave it to me," said Zallaham. "Wait!—" Zallaham touched his ear. He was getting something on the radio.

"Put it on PA," I told him.

Zallaham frowned and flipped a switch on his suit.

This is Group Four to Central. There are more of them in the shuttle holds on the port side.

There are? Well, blast your way in!

We're trying, sir. It'll take a minute.

This is Group Eight to Central and Group Four. We've got 'em trapped, in the Shuttle hangars starboard. Blasting away.

"Is that Harry Cardip talking from Central?" I asked.

Zallaham nodded.

This is Central. The bay doors are opening both port and starboard and an alien ship has exited from each. We'll catch them on the wing.

Group Four roger.

Group Eight wilco.

The aliens got away.

Planet Busters Chapter 34

Harry Cardip stared at me with his usual irritated scowl. He didn't have much to be irritated about; in fact, this was an occasion to celebrate. About fifty guests had met in the Seychelles Number 6 Lab to hoist a few glasses and toast our success. We'd pulled the P-657 out of the ground and had her off Ancho before the feds even knew what had happened. The rebels had suffered only moderate casualties. A staggering victory and cause enough for me to take a short hop off the wagon.

True, the two alien ships had escaped—but that was nothing. The galaxy was safe from a madman.

No mistaking it, though; Cardip was not pleased. He just sat at the lab console in front of a monitor and gave me the fish eye. He hadn't even touched the drink we left there for him.

"Do you honestly think that you deserve to be privy to every facet of the agency's operations?" he asked crankily.

"I only wanted to know—"

"You wanted to know whether you're running this revolution. Well, you're not. I am!"

"I think his feelings are hurt, Harry," said Lourdes.

I ignored her. "I am aware that I am not in command here," I said, unruffled. "Still, if facts are kept from me—"

"If facts are kept from you, we can get something done!" snapped the director. "What the blazes is it to you if we didn't include you in planning the actual assault on the battleship? Hell, we had to wait for you to find it before we could plan anything. And why should you know the exact extent of our stealth technology?"

"To answer your first question: I would have been saved several years of worry-induced aging had I known the Agency stood in readiness to support me. I would also have proceeded with greater alacrity and—"

"Baloney! You would have bullheaded your way across Ancho stomping your feet, working your big yap, and taking all kinds of risks."

"He would have," agreed Lourdes.

I gave Cardip a long sideways glower. "You didn't seem to care about my taking risks on Tuukar."

"No, I didn't. You were only putting yourself in danger on Tuukar," said Cardip. "Not the entire galaxy. In addition, I knew that whatever it is that makes you fall in the sewer and come up with diamonds is something I was simply not going to interfere with. You were born lucky, and I intended to take advantage of that."

Now, I was beginning to steam. "Perhaps, Harry, just once you could give me credit where credit is due." I told him. "You might consider the very real possibility that it is what I have up here—" I tapped my forehead "—and not blind chance that has once again put the revolution back on its feet."

"All right, all right," the director conceded. "I'll admit that your hunches may have some cerebral merit. And I suppose you could call it at worse serendipitous insight that led you to see where Seek might be hiding. But look at the situation I was in. I knew you were onto something. I also knew that I had only two tools at my disposal: secret stealth technology and your—" I thought he would choke on the words "—your...unusual abilities."

"Thank you," I said. "And with respect to the stealth, it is not my argument that I should have known every detail. I think, however, that just a little hint if nothing more was in order."

"A little hint? Would you like it better if we were the sort of organization that gave out little hints for no good reason? It was *top secret* for crying out loud."

"But I paid for it!" I yelled. I pointed at him. "I've heard the scuttlebutt about how you finance things. Armament and stealth purchases have been financed exclusively from my bank account. What's worse, you've been feeding me

some line about punching the Seychelles into Ultra and making random turns to escape detection. I've actually told people that I believed this. You're not only ruining my reputation but my military education."

"You want an education on evasive maneuvers? Look at this screen."

I looked and saw that what rocketed out of the shuttle bays were craft the likes of which no one had seen. They were perhaps no faster than the agency ships, although there was no way to be sure of that. The quality that distinguished them from both federal and rebel vessels was simply defensive maneuver.

They came out of the holds pinwheeling, gyrating, and turning at right angles and indeed reversing upon themselves as a ship might do were its controls set on random and its throttle at full. But no ship I had ever heard of could turn back on itself without a full stop or even losing velocity. Cardip said that our understanding of physics would deem such motion as impossible. He also explained that the movement was hardly random.

"I've run an exhaustive analysis of their actions from our gunsight videos. The alien craft were reacting instantaneously to any move we made. How they could do any of this is something we simply do not understand. Of these aliens we know absolutely nothing." He

pointed at the screen. "Take a look. See? The two ships have met in the center of the screen. Now, they are moving wildly but in unison. Now, they're disappearing. There!"

"What?"

"I've played it over and over again. I can't tell. Neither can the computers."

"Can't tell what?"

Cardip paused and looked up. "I saw a shimmer. Some other lights. A *lot* of other lights."

"Lighten up, Harry. You can sort it out later. "Isn't it enough for now that we don't have to worry about George Seek anymore?"

Lourdes said: "George Seek never stood a chance against the aliens. He was never our real problem."

"I'm not so sure about that," I responded. "Oh, I think they controlled him zombie-like in the end. The little interview with me was for the aliens' benefit; they were trying to find out more about us, about our reactions to things in general. Maybe how to scare us. But Seek had already willfully allied himself with them against us."

Lourdes frowned. "Then, you don't know. You haven't made the connection. You of all people."

"What connection?"

"I said that he never had a chance against them. It wasn't willful. Not really. He was powerless to resist them. He met them somehow—somewhere. It was only by the most ridiculous coincidence that they encountered the person most vulnerable to them."

"Vulnerable? Why was Seek especially vulnerable?"

"You saw them. What do you think?"

"Sweetie pies with built-in switchblades."

"And wings, white wings."

"So?"

"Angels," Lourdes explained.

Cardip interrupted her irritably.

"Forget Seek! We have other work to consider!"

"Work?" I mouthed the word with distain. I punched Cardip in the shoulder. "Drink up, Chief. I've already planned what to do with the P-657, if that's what's bothering you. We pack her with explosives and blow her up on prime time TV. The galaxy made safer—and all in the name of the Antigovernmental Agency of Sovereign Worlds!"

Cardip just turned back to the screen and stared at the flickering white lights against a backdrop of brightly shining stars. "I wouldn't blow up the ship right away," he said.

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