

Man Kzin Wars 04a



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THE MAN WHO WOULD BE KZIN

Greg Bear Pat Stirling

"I am become overlord of a fleet of transports, supply ships, and wrecks!" Kfraksha-Admiral said.

"No wonder the First Fleet did not return; our Intelligence reports claimed these humans were leaf-eaters without a weapon to their name, and they have destroyed a fourth of our combat strength!"

He turned his face down to the

holographic display before him; it was set for exterior-visual, and showed only bright unwinking points of light and the schematics that indicated the hundreds of vessels of the Second Fleet. Here beyond the orbit of Neptune the humans' sun was just another star . . . we will eat you yet, he vowed silently. A spacer's eye could identify those suns whose worlds obeyed the Patriarch. More that did not, unvisited, or unconquered yet like the Pier in holdouts on Zeta Reticuli. Yes, you and all like you! So many suns, so many . . .

The kzin commander's tail was not lashing, he was beyond that, and the naked pink length of that organ now

stood out rigid as he paced the command deck of the Sons Contend With Bloody Fangs. The orange fur around his blunt muzzle bristled, and the reddish washcloth of his tongue kept sweeping up to moisten his black nostrils. The other kzinti on the bridge stayed prudently silent, forcing their batwing ears not to fold into the fur of their heads at the spicy scent of high status anger. The lower-ranked bent above the consoles and readouts of their duty stations, taking refuge in work; the immediate staff prostrated themselves around the central display tank, laying their facial fur flat. Aide-to-Commanders covered his nose with his hands in an excess of servility; irritated,

Kfraksha kicked him in the ribs as he went by. There was no satisfaction to the gesture, since they were all in space combat armor save for the unhinged helmets, but the subordinate went spinning a meter or so across the deck.

"Well? Advise me," the kzin admiral spat.

"Surely something can be learned from the loss of a squadron of Gut Tearer-class cruisers?"

Reawii-Intelligence-Analyst raised tufted eyebrows and fluttered his lips against his fangs.

"Frrrr. The ... rrrr, humans have devoted

great resources to the defense of the gas-giant moons, whose resources are crucial."

As Kfraksha-Admiral bared teeth, the Intelligence officer hurried on. Reawii's Homeworld accent irritated Kfraksha-Admiral at the best of times. His birth was better than his status, and it would not do to anger the supreme commander, who had risen from the ranks and was proud of it. He hurried beyond the obvious.

"Their laser cannon opened fire with uncanny accuracy. We were unprepared for weapons of this type because such large fixed installations are seldom tactically worthwhile; also, our

preliminary surveys did not indicate space defenses of any type. It is worth the risk to further fleet units to recover any possible Intelligence data from wreckage or survivors on appropriate trajectories."

Kfraksha-Admiral's facial pelt rippled in patterns equivalent to a human nod.

"Prepare summaries of projected operations for data and survivors," he said. Then he paused; now his tail did lash, sign of deep worry or concentration.. "Hrrr. It is time we stopped being surprised by the Earthmonkeys and started springing unseen from the long grass ourselves.

Bring me a transcript of all astronomical anomalies in this system."

The staff officers rose and left at his gesture, and Kfraksha-Admiral remained staring into the display tank; he keyed it to a close-in view of the arsenal planet. Blue and white, more ocean than Homeworld, slightly lighter gravity. A rich world. A soft world, or so the telepaths said, no weapons, a species that was so without shame that it deliberately shunned the honorable path of war. Thousands of thousands squared of the animals. Unconsciously, he licked his lips. All the more for the feeding.

The game was wary, though. He must throttle his leap, though it was like

squeezing his own throat in his claws.

“I must know before I fight,” he muttered. He was the perfect spy. He could also be the perfect saboteur. Lawrence Halloran was a strong projecting telepath.

He could read the minds of most people with ease. The remaining select few he could invade, with steady concentration, within a week or two. Using what he found in those minds, Halloran could appear to be anybody or anything.

He could also make suggestions, convincing his subjects or victims that they were undergoing some physical experience. In this, he relied in large

measure on auto-suggestion; sometimes it was enough to plant a subliminal hint and have the victims convince themselves that they actually experienced something. The problem was that the Earth of the twenty-fourth century had little use for spies or saboteurs. Earth had been at peace for three hundred years. Everyone was prosperous; many were rich. The planet was a little crowded, but those who strongly disliked that could leave. Psychists and autodocs saw that nobody was violent or angry or unhappy for long. Most people were only vaguely aware that things had ever been very different, and the ARM, the UN technological police, kept it that way,

ensuring that no revolutionary changes upset the comfortable status quo.

Lawrence Halloran had an unusual ability that seemed to be completely useless. He had first used his talents in a most undignified way, appearing as the headmaster of his private Pacific Grove secondary school, sans apparel, in the middle of the quad during an exercise break. The headmaster had come within a hairsbreadth of being relieved of duty; an airtight alibi, that he had in fact been in conference with five teachers across the campus, had saved his job and reputation. Halloran's secret had not been revealed. But Halloran had learned an important object lesson foolish use of

his talents could have grave consequences. He had been raised to feel strong guilt at any hint of aggression. Children who scuffled in the schoolyard were sick and needed treatment.

Human society was not so very different from an ant's nest, at the end of the Long Peace, a stick, inserted from an unexpected direction, could raise hell. And woe to the wielder if he stayed around long enough to let the ants crawl up the stick.

That Halloran had not manifested his ability as an infant not until his sixteenth year, in fact was something of a miracle. The talent had undoubtedly existed in some form, but had kept itself hidden

until five years after Halloran's first twinges of pubescence.

At first, such a wild talent had been exhilarating. After the headmaster fiasco, and several weirder if less immediately foolish manifestations (a dinosaur on a slidewalk at night, Christ in a sacristy), and string of romantic successes everyone else found bewildering, he had undergone what amounted to a religious conversion. Halloran came to realize that he could not use his talent without destroying himself, and those around him. The only thing it was good for was deception and domination.

He buried it. Studied music. Specialized in Haydn.

In his dreams, he became Haydn. It beat being himself.

When awake, he was merely Lawrence Halloran Tr., perpetual student: slightly raucous, highly intuitive (he could not keep his subconscious from exerting certain small forays) and generally regarded by his peers as someone to avoid. His only real friend was his cat. He knew that his cat loved him, because he fed her. Cats were neither altruists nor hypocrites, and nobody expected them to be noble. If he could not be Haydn, he would rather have been a cat.

Halloran resented his social standing. If only they knew how noble I am. He had a talent he could use to enslave people, and by sublimating it he became an irritating son of a bitch; that, he thought, was highly commendable self-sacrifice.

And they hate me for it, he realized. I don't much love them either. Lucky for them I'm an altruist.

Then the war had come; invaders from beyond human space. The kzinti: catlike aliens, carnivores, aggressive imperialists. Human society was turned upside down once again, although the process was swift only from a historical perspective. With the war eight years along, Halloran had grown sick of this

masquerade. Against his better judgment, he had made himself available to the UN Space Navy; UNSN, for short. Almost immediately, he had been sequestered and prepared for just such an eventuality as the capture of a kzinti vessel. In the second kzin attack on the Sol system, a cruiser named War Loot was chopped into several pieces by converted launch lasers and fell into human hands.

In this, Earth's most desperate hour, neither Halloran nor any of his commanding officers considered his life to be worth much in and of itself. Nobility of purpose . . .

And if Halloran's subconscious thought

differently

Halloran knew himself to be in control. Had he not sublimated the worst of his talent? Had he not let girls pour drinks on his head?

Halloran's job was to study the kzin. Then to become one, well enough to fool another kzin. After all, if he could convince humans he was a dinosaur which was obviously an impossibility why not fool aliens into seeing what they expected?

The first test of Halloran-Kzin was brief and simple. Halloran entered the laboratory where doctors struggled to keep two mangled kzin from the War

Loot alive. In the cool ice-blue maximum isolation ward, he approached the flotation bed with its forest of pipes and wires and tubing. Huddled beneath the apparatus, the kzin known to its fellows as Telepath dreamed away his final hours on drugs custom-designed for his physiology.

Telepaths were the most despised and yet valued of kzinti, something of an analogue to Halloran a mind reader. To kzinti, any kind of addiction was an unbearably shameful thing a weakness of discipline and concentration, a giving in to the body whose territorial impulses established so much of the rigid Kzinti social ritual. To be addicted was to be

less self-controlled than a kzin already was, and that was pushing things very close to the edge. And yet addiction to a drug was what produced kzinti telepaths.

This kzin would not have looked very good in the best of times, despite his two hundred and twenty centimeters of height and bull-gorilla bulk; now he was shrunken and pitiful, his ribs showing through matted fur, his limbs reduced to lumpy bone, lips pulled back from yellow teeth and stinking gums. Telepath had been without his fix for weeks. How much this lack, and the presence of anesthetics, had dulled his talents nobody could say, but his kind offered the greatest risk to the success of

Halloran's mission. The kzin had been wearing a supply of the telepath drug on a leather belt when captured. Administered to him now, it would allow him to reach into the mind of another, with considerable effort . . . Halloran-Kzin had to pass this test.

He signaled the doctors with a nod, and from behind their one-way glass they began altering the concentration of drugs in Telepath's blood. They added some of the kzinti drug. A monitor wheeped softly, pitifully, indicating that their kzin would soon be awake and that he would be in pain.

The kzin opened his eyes, rolled his head, and stared in surprise at Halloran-

Kzin. The dying Telepath concealed his pain well.

"I have been returned?" he said, in the hiss-spit-snarl of what his race called the Hero's Tongue.

"You have been returned," Halloran-Kzin replied.

"And am I too valuable to terminate?" the kzin asked sadly.

"You will die soon," Halloran-Kzin said, sensing that this would comfort him.

"Animals ... eaters of plants. I have had nightmares, dreams of being pursued by

herbivores. The shame. And no meat, or only cold rotten meat . . ."

"Are you still capable?" Halloran-Kzin asked. He had learned enough about kzinti social structure from the relatively undamaged prisoner designated Fixer-of-Weapons to understand that Telepath would have no position if he was not telepathic. Fixer was the persona he would assume. "Show me you are still capable."

The kzin had shielded himself against stray sensations from human minds. But now he closed his eyes and knotted his black, leathery hands into fists. With an intense effort, he reached out and tapped Halloran's thoughts. Telepath's eyes

widened until the rheumy circles around the wide pupils were clearly visible. His ears contracted into tight knots beneath the fur. Then he emitted a horrifying scream, like a jaguar in pain. Against all his restraints, he thrashed and twisted until he had torn loose the internal connections that kept him alive. Orange-red blood pooled around the flotation bed and the monitor began a steady, funereal tone.

Halloran left the ward. Colonel Butord Early waited for him outside; as usual, his case officer exuded an air of massive, unwilling patience..

"Just a minor problem, Halloran said,

shaken more than he wished the other man to know.

“Minor?”

“Telepath is dead. He saw my thoughts.”

“He thought you were a kzin?”

"Yes. He wouldn't have tried reading me if he thought I was human."

“What happened?”

"I drove him crazy," Halloran said. "He was close to the edge anyway . . . I pushed him over."

"How could you do that?" Colonel Early

asked, brow lowered incredulously.

“I had a salad for lunch,” Halloran replied.

Halloran knew better than to wake a kzin in the middle of a nightmare. Fixer-of-Weapons had not rested peacefully the last four sleeps, and no wonder, with Halloran testing so many hypotheses, hour by hour, on the captive.

The chamber in which the kzin slept was roomy enough, five meters on a side and three meters high, the walls colored a soothing mottled green. The air was warm and dry; Halloran had chapped lips from spending hours and days in the hapless kzin's company.

Thinking of a kzin as hapless was difficult.. Fixer-of-Weapons had been Chief Weapons Engineer and Alien Technologies Officer aboard the invasion cruiser War Loot, a position demanding great strength and stamina even with the wartime dueling restrictions, for many other kzinti coveted such a billet.

War Loot had been on a mission to probe human defenses within the ecliptic, to that extent, the kzinti mission had succeeded. The cruiser had been disabled within the outer limits of the asteroid belt by converted propulsion beam lasers three weeks before, and against all odds, Fixer-of-Weapons and

two other kzin had been captured. The others had been severely injured, one almost cut in half by a shorn and warped bulkhead. The same bulkhead had sealed Fixer-of-Weapons in a cabin corner, equipped with a functional vent giving access to seven hours of trapped air. At the end of six and a half hours, Fixer-of-Weapons had passed out. Human investigators had cut him free . . .

And brought him to Ceres, largest of the asteroids, to be put in a cage with Halloran.

To Fixer-of-Weapons, in his more lucid moments, Halloran looked like a particularly clumsy and socially inept kzin. But Halloran was a California boy,

born and bred, a graduate of UCLA's revered school of music. Halloran did not look like a kzin unless he wanted to.

Four years past, to prove to himself that his life was not a complete waste, he had spent his time learning to differentiate one Haydn piano sonata or string quartet from another, not a terribly exciting task, but peaceful and rewarding. He had developed a great respect for Haydn, coming to love the richness and subtle invention of the eighteenth century composer's music.

To Earth-bound flatlanders, the war at the top of the solar system's gravity well, with fleets maneuvering over periods of

months and years, was a distant and dimly perceived threat. Halloran had hardly known how to feel about his own existence, much less the survival of the human race. Haydn suited him to a tee. Glory did not seem important. Nobody would appreciate him anyway.

Halloran's parents, and their fathers and mothers before them for two and a half centuries, had known an Earth of peace and relative prosperity. If any of them had desired glory and excitement, they could have volunteered for a decades-long journey by slowboat to new colonies. None had.

It was a Halloran tradition; careful study, avoidance of risk, lifetimes of

productive peace. The tradition had gained his grandfather a long and productive life one hundred and fifty years of it, and at least a century more to come. His father, Lawrence Halloran Sr., had made his fortune streamlining commodities distribution; a brilliant move into a neglected field, less crowded than information shunting. Lawrence Halloran Jr., after the death of his mother in an earthquake in Alaska, had bounced from school to school, promising to be a perpetual student, gadding from one subject to another, trying to lose himself . . . And then peace had ended. The kzinti not the first visitors from beyond the Solar System, but certainly the most aggressive- had

made their presence known. Presence, to a kzin, was tantamount to conquest. For hundreds of thousands of kzin warriors, serving their Patriarchy, Earth and the other human worlds represented advancement; many females, higher status, and lifetime sinecures, without competition.

Humans had been drawn into the war with no weapons as such. To defend themselves, all they had were the massive planet- and asteroid-mounted propulsion lasers and fusion drives that powered their starships. These technologies, some of them now converted to thoroughgoing weapons by Belters and UN engineers, provided

what little hope humans had . . .

And there was the bare likelihood unconfirmed as yet that humans were innately more clever than kzinti, or at least more measured and restrained. Human fusion drives were certainly more efficient but then, the kzinti had gravity polarisers, not unlike that found on the Pak ship piloted by Jack Brennan, and never understood. The Brennan polarizer still worked, but nobody knew how to control it or build another like it. Gradually, scientists and UNSN commanders were realising that capture of kzinti vessels, rather than complete destruction, could provide invaluable knowledge about such advanced

technology.

Gravity polarizers gave kzin ships the ability to travel at eight-tenths the speed of light, with rapid acceleration and artificial gravitation . . . The kzinti did not need super-efficient fusion drives.

Halloran waited patiently for the Fixer-of-Weapons to awaken. An hour passed. He rehearsed the personality he was constructing, and toned the image he presented for the kzin. He also studied, for the hundredth time, the black markings of fur in the kzin's face and along his back, contrasting with the brownish-red undercoat. The kzin's ears were ornately tattooed in patterns Halloran had learned symbolized the

intermeshed bones of kzinti enemies. This was how the kzinti recognized each other, beyond scent and gross physical features; failure to know and project such facial fur patterns and ear tattoos would mean discovery and death. The kzinti's own mind would supply the scent, given the visual clues; their noses were less sensitive than a dog's, much more so than a human's.

Another hour, and Halloran felt a touch of impatience. Kzinti were supposed to be light and short-term sleepers. Fixer-of-Weapons seemed to have joined his warrior ancestors; he barely breathed.

At last, the captive stirred and opened

his eyes, glazed nictitating membranes pulling back to reveal the large, gorgeous purple-rimmed golden eyes with their surprisingly humanlike round irises. Fixer-of-Weapons's wedge-shaped, blunt-muzzled face froze into a blank mask, as it always did when he confronted Halloran-Kzin, who stood on the opposite side of the containment room, tapping his elbow with one finger. Distance from the captive was imperative, even when he was "restrained" by imaginary bonds suggested by Halloran. A kzin did not give warning when he was about to attack, and Fixer-of-Weapons was being driven to emotional extremes.

The kzin laid back his ears in furious misery. "I have done nothing to deserve such treatment," he growled. He believed he was being detained on a kzinti fleet flagship. Halloran, had he truly been a kzin, would have preferred human capture to kzinti detention. I can't say I like the ratcat, he thought, with a twinge of guilt, quickly suppressed. But you've got to admit he's about as tough as he thinks he is.

"That is for your superiors to decide," Halloran-Kzin said. "You behaved with suspected cowardice, you allowed an invasion cruiser to be disabled and captured "

"I was not Kufcha-Captain! I cannot be

responsible for the incompetence of my commander." Fixer-of-Weapons rose to his full two hundred and twenty centimeters, short for a kzin, and flexed against the imaginary bonds. The muscles beneath the smooth-furred limbs and barrel chest were awesome, despite weight loss under weeks of captivity.. "This is a travesty! Why are you doing this to me?"

"You will tell us exactly what happened, step by step, and how you allowed animals plant-eaters to capture War Loot."

Fixer-of-Weapons slumped in abject despair. "I have told, again and again."

Halloran-Kzin showed no signs of relenting.. Fixer-of-Weapons lashed his lone pink rat-tail, sitting in a tight ball on the floor, swallowed hard and began his take again, and again Halloran used the familiar litany as a cover to probe the kzin's inner thoughts.

If Halloran was going to be a kzin, and think like one for days on end, then he had to have everything exactly right. His deception would be of the utmost delicacy. The smallest flaw could get him killed immediately.

Kzinti, unlike the UN Space Navy, did not take prisoners except for Intelligence and culinary purposes.

Fixer-of-Weapons finished his story. Halloran pulled back from the kzin's mind.

"If I have disgraced myself, then at least allow me to die," Fixer-of-Weapons said softly.

That s one wish you can be granted, Halloran thought. One way or another, the kzin would be dead soon; his species did not survive in captivity..

Halloran exited the cell and faced three men and two women in the antechamber. Two of the men wore the new uniform barely ten years old the UN Space Navy. The third man was a Belter cultural scientist, the only one in the group

actually native to Ceres, dressed in bright lab spotter orange. The two women Halloran had never seen before; they were also Belters, though their Belter tans had faded. All three wore the broad Belter Mohawk. The taller of the two offered Halloran her hand and introduced herself.

"I'm Kelly Ysyvry," she said. "Don't bother trying to spell it."

"Y-S-Y-V-R-Y," Halloran said, displaying the showoff mentality that had made his social life so difficult at times.

"Right," Ysyvry said, unflappable. "This," she nodded at her female companion, "is Henrietta Olsen."

Colonel Butord Early, the shortest and most muscular of the three men, nodded impatiently at the introductions, he was an Earther, coal-black and much older than he looked, something Ultra Secret in the ARM before the war. Early had recruited Halloran four years ago, trained him meticulously, and shown remarkable patience toward his peculiarities..

"When are you going to be ready?" he asked Halloran.

"Ready for what?" Halloran asked.

"Insertion."

Halloran, fully understanding the

Colonel's meaning, inspected the women roguishly.

"I'm confused," he said, smiling.

"What he means," Ysyvry said, "is that we're all impatient, and you've been the stumbling block throughout this mission."

"What is she?" Halloran asked Early.

"We are the plunger of your syringe," Henrietta Olsen answered. "We're Belter pilots. We've been getting special training in the kzinti hulk."

"Pleased to meet you," Halloran said. He glanced back at the hatch to the cell

airlock.

"Fixer-of-Weapons will be dead within a week. I can't learn any more from him. So . . . I'm ready for a test."

Early stared at him. Halloran knew the Colonel was restraining an urge to ask him, Are you sure?, after having displayed such impatience.

"How do you know Fixer-of-Weapons will die?" the black man said.

Halloran's smile stiffened. He disliked being challenged. "Because if I were him, and part of me is, I would have reached my limit."

"It hasn't been an easy assignment," the cultural scientist commented.

"Easier for us than Fixer-of-Weapons," Halloran said, smirking inwardly as the scientist winced.

There would be many problems, of course. Halloran would never be as strong as a kzin, and if there were any sort of combat, he would quickly lose . . .

Halloran, among the kzinti, thinking himself a kzin, would have to carefully preprogram himself to avoid such dangerous situations, to keep a low profile concomitant with his status, whatever that might be. That would be

difficult. A high-status kzin had retainers, sons, flunkies, to handle status-challenges; many of the retainers picked carefully for a combination of dim wits and excellent reflexes. An officer with recognized rank could not be challenged while on a warship, punishments for trying included blinding, castration, and execution of all descendants all more terrible than mere death to a kzin. Nameless ratings could duel as they pleased, provided they had a senior's permission ... and Halloran-Kzin would be outside the rank structure, with no protector.

Fixer-Halloran, when he returned to the kzinti fleet, would likely find all suitable

billets on other vessels filled. To regain his position and keep face among his fellows, he could not simply "fit in" and be docile. But there were more ways than open combat to gain social status.

The kzinti social structure was delicately tuned, though how delicately perhaps not even the kzinti understood. Halloran could wreak his own kind of havoc and none would suspect him of anything but overweening ambition.

All of this, he knew, would have to be accomplished in less than three hundred hours: just twelve days. His body would be worn out by that time. Bad diet all meat, and raw at that, though digestible, with little chance for supplements of the

vitamins a human needed and the life of a kzin did not produce; mental strain; luck running out. He did not expect to return.

Halloran's hope was that his death would come in the capture or destruction of one or more kzinti ships.

The chance for such a victory, however negligible it might be in the overall strategy of the war, was easily worth one's life, certainly his own life.

The truth was, Halloran thought he was a thorough shit, not of much use to anyone in the long run, a petty dilettante with an unlikely ability, more a handicap than an asset.

Self-sacrifice would give him a peculiar satisfaction: See, I'm not so bad. Nobility of purpose.

And something deeper: to actually be a kzin. A kzin could be all the things Halloran had trained himself not to be, and not feel guilty about it. Dominant. Vicious. Competitive. Kzinti were allowed to have fun.

The short broadcast good-byes to his friends and relatives on Earth, as yet unassailed by kzinti:

His father, now one hundred and twenty, he was able to say farewell to; but his grandfather, a Struldbrug and still one of the foremost collectors of Norman

Rockwell art and memorabilia, was unavailable.

He disliked his father, yet respected him, and loved his grandfather, but felt a kind of contempt for the man's sentimental passion.

His grandfather's answering service did not know where the oldest living Halloran was. That brought on a sharp tinge of disappointment, against which he quickly raised a shield of aloofness. For a moment, a very young Lawrence Larry had surfaced, wanting, desperately needing to see Grandpa. And there was no room for such active sub-personalities, not with Fixer-of-Weapons filling much of his cranium. Or

so he told himself, drowning the disappointment as an old farmer might have discarded a sack of unwanted kittens.

Halloran met his father on the family estate at the cap of Arcosanti Two in Arizona. The man barely looked fifty and was with his fifth wife, who was older than Halloran but only by five or ten years. The sky was gorgeous robin's egg at the horizon and lapis overhead and the green desert spread for ten kilometers around in a network of canals and recreational sluices. Arcosanti Two prided itself on its ecological balance, but in fact the city had taken a wide tract of Arizona desert and made it into

something else entirely, something in which bobbing lizards and roadrunners would soon go crazy or die. Halloran felt just as much out of place on the broad open-air portico at two kilometers above sea level. Infrared heaters kept the high autumn chill away.

"I'm volunteering for a slowboat," Halloran told his father.

"I thought they'd been suspended," said Rose Petal, the new wife, a very attractive natural blond with oriental features. "I mean, all that expense, and we're bound to lose them to the, mmm, outsiders . . ." She looked slightly embarrassed; even after nearly a decade, the words war and enemy still carried a

strong flavor of obscenity to most Earthers.

"There's one going out in a few weeks, a private venture. No announcements. Tacit government support; if we survive, they send more."

"That does not sound like my son," Halloran Sr. ventured.

When I tried to assert myself, you told me it was wrong. When I didn't, you despised me. Thanks, Dad.

"I think it is wonderful," Rose Petal said. "Whether characteristic or not."

"It's a way out from under family,"

Halloran Jr. said with a little smile.

"That sounds like my son. Though I'd be much more impressed if you were doing something to help your own people . . ."

"Colonization," Halloran Jr. interjected, leaving the word to stand on its own.

"More directly" Halloran Sr. finished.

"Can't keep all our eggs in one basket," his son continued, amused by arguing a case denied by his own actions. So tell him.

But that wasn't possible. Halloran Jr. knew his father too well; a fine entrepreneur, but no keeper of secrets. In

truth, his father, despite the aggressive attitude, was even more unsuited to a world of war and discipline than his son.

"That's not what you're doing," Halloran Sr. said. Rose Petal stood by, wisely keeping out from this point on.

"That's what I'm saying I'm doing."

His father gave him a peculiar look then, and Halloran Jr. felt a brief moment of camaraderie and shared secrets. He has a little bit of the touch too, doesn't he? He knows. Not consciously, but . . . He's proud.

Against his own expectations for the

meeting and farewell, Halloran left Arcosanti Two, his father, and Rose Petal, feeling he might have more to lose than he had guessed, and more to learn about things very close to him. He left feeling good.

He hadn't parted from his father with positive feelings in at least ten years.

There were no longer lovers or good friends to take leave of. He had stripped himself of these social accoutrements over the last five years. It was difficult to have friends who couldn't lie to you, and he always felt guilty with women. How could he know he hadn't influenced them subconsciously? Knowing this, as he returned to the port and took a shuttle

to orbit, brought back the necessary feeling of isolation. He would not be human much longer. Things would be easier if he had very little to regret losing.

Insertion. The hulk of the kzin cruiser, its gravity polarizer destroyed by the kzin crew to keep it out of human hands, was propelled by a NEO mass-driver down the solar gravity well to graze the orbital path of Venus, piloted by the two Belter women to the diffuse outer reaches of the asteroids, there set adrift with the bodies of Telepath and the other unknown kzin restored to the places where they would have died. The Belters would take a small cargo craft back home. Halloran

would ride an even smaller lifeboat from War Loot toward the kzin fleet. He might or might not be picked up, depending on how hungry the kzin strategists were for information about the loss.

The fleet might or might not be in a good position; it might be mounting another year-long attack against Saturn's moons, on the opposite side of the sun; it might be moving inward for a massive blow against Earth. With the gravity polarizer's, the kzin vessels were faster and far more maneuverable than any human ships. And there could be more than one Beet.

The confined interior of the cargo vessel

gave none of its three occupants much privacy. To compensate, they seldom spoke to each other. At the end of a week, Halloran began to get depressed, and it took him another week to express himself to his companions.

While Henrietta Olsen buried herself in reading when she wasn't tending the computers, Kelly Ysyvry spent much of her time apparently doing nothing. Eyes open, blinking every few seconds, she would stare at a bulkhead for hours at a stretch. This depressed Halloran further. Were all Belters so innerdirected? If they were, then what just God would place him in the company of Belters during his last few weeks as a human

being?

He finally approached Olsen with something more than polite words to punctuate the silence. A kzin wouldn't have to put up with this, he thought. Kzinti females were subsapient, morons incapable of speech. That would have its advantages, Halloran thought half jokingly.

Women frightened him. He knew too much about what they thought of him.

"I suppose lack of conversation is one way of staying sane," e said.

Olsen looked up from her page projector and blinked. "Flatlanders talk all the

time?"

"No," Halloran admitted. "But they talk."

"We talk," Olsen said, returning to her reading. "When we want to, or need to."

"I need to talk," Halloran said.

Olsen put her book down. Perversely guilty, Halloran asked what she had been reading.

"Montagu, *The Man Who Never Was*," she replied.

"What's it about?"

"It's ancient history," she said.

"Forbidden stuff. Twentieth century. During the Second World War remember that?"

"I'm educated," he said. As much as such obscene subjects had been taught in school. Pacific Grove had been progressive.

"The Allies dressed up a corpse in one of their uniforms and gave him a courier's bag with false information. Then they dumped him where he could be picked up by the Axis." Halloran gawped for a moment. "Sounds grim."

"I doubt the corpse minded."

"And I'm the corpse?"

Olsen grinned. "You don't fit the profile at all. You're not The Man Who Never Was. You're one of those soldiers trained to speak the enemy's language and dropped behind the lines in the enemy's uniforms to wreak havoc."

"Why are you so interested in World War Two?"

"Fits our times. This stuff used to be pornography or whatever the equivalent is for literature about violence and destruction, and they'd send you to the psychist if they caught you with it. Now it's available anywhere. Psychological refitting. Still, the thought of . . ." She shook her head. "Killing. Even thinking like one of them so ready to kill . . ."

Ysyvry broke her meditation by blinking three times in quick succession and turned pointedly to face Halloran.

"To the normal person of a few years ago, what you've become would be unspeakably disgusting."

"And what about now?"

"It's necessity," Ysyvry said. That word again. "We're no better than you. We're all soldiers now. Killers."

"So we're too ashamed to speak to each other?"

"We didn't know you wanted to talk,"

Olsen

said.

Throughout his life, even as insensitive as he had tried to become, he had been amazed at how others, especially women, could be so ignorant of their fellows. "I'll probably be dead in a month," he said.

"So you want sympathy?" Olsen said, wide-eyed "The Man Who Would be Kzin wants sympathy? Such bad technique . . ."

"Forget it," Halloran said, feeling his stomach twist

"We learned a lot about you,' Ysyvry continued "What you might do in a moment of weakness, how you had once been a troublemaker, using your abilities to fool people ... Belters value ingenuity and independence, but we also value respect. Simple politeness."

Halloran felt a deep void open up beneath him. "I was young when I did those things." His eyes filled with tears. "Tanjit, I'm sacrificing myself for my people, and you treat me as if I'm a bleeping dog turd!"

"Yeah,' Olsen said, turning away. "We don't like flatlanders, anyway, and . . . I suppose we're not used to this whole war thing. We've had friends die. We'd

just as soon it all went away. Even you.'

"So," Ysyvry said, taking a deep breath. "Tell us about yourself. You studied music?"

The turnabout startled him. He wiped his eyes with his sleeve. "Yes. Concentrating on Josef Haydn."

"Play us something," Olsen suggested, reaching into a hidden corner slot to pull out a portable music keyboard he hadn't known the ship carried. "Haydn Glenn Miller, Sting, anything classical."

For the merest instant, he had the impulse to become Halloran-Kzin. Instead, he took the keyboard and stared

at the black and white arrangement. Then he played the first movement of Sonata Number 40 in E Flat, a familiar piece for him. Ysyvry and Olsen listened intently.

As he lightly completed the last few bars, Halloran closed his eyes and imagined the portraits of Haydn, powdered wig and all. He glanced at the Belter pilots from the corners of his eyes.

Ysyvry flinched and Olsen released a small squeak of surprise. He lifted his fingers from the keyboard and rotated to face them.

“Stop that,” Olsen requested, obviously

impressed. Halloran dropped the illusion.

"That was beautiful," Ysyvry said.

"I'm human after all, even if I am a flatlander, no?"

"We'll give you that much," Olsen said. "You can look like anything you want to?"

"I'd rather talk about the music," Halloran said, adjusting tones on the musicomp to mimic harpsichord.

"We've never seen a kzin up close, for real," Ysyvry said. The expression on their faces was grimly anticipatory:

Come on, scare us.

"I'm not a freak."

"So we've already established that much," Olsen said. "But you're a bit of a show-off, aren't you?"

"And a mind-reader," Ysyvry said.

He had deliberately avoided looking into their thoughts. Nobility of purpose.

"Perfect companion for a long voyage," Olsen added. "You can be whatever, whomever you want to be." Their expressions had become almost salacious. Now Halloran was sorry he had ever initiated conversation. How

much of this was teasing, how much actual cruelty?

Or were they simply testing his stability before insertion?

"You'd like to see a kzin?" he asked quietly.

"We'd like to see Fixer-of-Weapons," Ysyvry affirmed. "We were told you'd need to test the illusion before we release the hulk and your lifeship."

"It's a bit early we still have two hundred hours." "All the more time to turn back if you don't convince us," Olsen said.

"It's not just a hat I can put on and take off." He glanced between them, finding little apparent sympathy. Belters were polite, individualistic, but not the most socially adept of people. No wonder their mainstay on long voyages was silence. "I won't wear Fixer-of-Weapons unless I become him."

"You won't consciously know you're human?"

Halloran shook his head. "I'd rather not have the dichotomy to deal with. I'll be too busy with other activities.""

"So the kzinti will think you're one of them, and . . . will you?"

"I will be Fixer-of-Weapons, or as close as I can become," Halloran said.

"Then you're worse than the fake soldiers in World War II," Olsen commented dryly.

"Show us," Ysyvry said, over her companion's words.

Halloran tapped his fingers on the edge of the keyboard for a few seconds. He could show them Halloran-Kzin the generic kzin he had manufactured from Fixer-of-Weapons's memories. That would not be difficult.

"No," he said. "You've implied that there's something wrong, somehow, in

what I'm going to do. And you're right. I only volunteered to do this sort of thing because we're desperate. But it's not a game. I'm no freak, and I'm not going to provide a sideshow for a couple of bored and crass Belters."

He tapped out the serenade from Haydn's string quartet Opus 3 number 5.

Ysyvry smiled: "All right, Mr. Halloran. Looks like the UNSN made a good choice-- not that they had much choice."

"I don't need your respect, either," Halloran said, a little surprised at how deeply he had been hurt. I thought I was way beyond that.

"What she's saying," Olsen elaborated, "is that we were asked to isolate you, and harass you a little. See if you're as much of a show-off as your records indicate you might be."

"Fine," Halloran said. "Now it's back to the silence?"

"No," Ysyvry said. "The music is beautiful. We'd appreciate your playing more for us."

Halloran swore under his breath and shook his head.

"Nobody said it would be easy, being a hero . . . did they?" Ysyvry asked.

"I'm no hero," Halloran said.

"I think you have the makings for one," Olsen told him, regarding him steadily with her clear green eyes. "Whatever kind of bastard you were on Earth. Really."

Will a flatlander ever understand Belters k They were so mercurial, strong, and more than a little arrogant. Perhaps that was because space left so little room for niceties.

"If you accept it," Ysyvry said, "we've decided we'll make you an honorary Belter." Halloran stopped playing.

"Please accept," Olsen said, not

wheedling or even trying to placate; a simple, polite request.

“Okay,” Halloran said.

"Good," Ysyvry said. "I think you'll like the ceremony."

He did, though it made him realize even more deeply how much he had to lose . . .

And why do I have to die before people start treating me decently?

The Belter pilots dropped the hulk a hundred and three hours after his induction into the ranks. They cut loose the kzin lifeship, with Halloran inside,

five hours later, and then turned a shielded ion drive against their orbital path to drop inward and lose themselves in the Belt.

There were beacons on the lifeship, but no sensors. In the kzinti fleet, rescue of survivors was strictly at the discretion of the commanding officers. Halloran entered the digitized odor-signature and serial number of Fixer-of-Weapons into the beacon's transmitter and sat back to wait.

The lifeship had a month's supplies for an individual kzin. What few supplements he dared to carry, all consumable, would be gone in a week, and his time would start running out from

that moment.

Still, Halloran half hoped he would not be found. He almost preferred the thought of failure to the prospect of carrying out his mission. It would be an ordeal. The worst thing that had ever happened to him. His greatest challenge in a relatively peaceful lifetime.

For a few days, he nursed dark thoughts about manifest destiny, the possibility that the kzinti really were the destined rulers of interstellar space, and that he was simply blowing against a hurricane.

Then came a signal from the kzinti fleet. Fixer-of-Weapons was still of some value. He was going to be rescued.

"Bullshit," Halloran said, grinning and hugging his arms tightly around himself. "Bullshit, bullshit bullshit." Now he was really afraid.

Wherever you are, whether in the crowded asteroid belt or beyond the furthest reaches of Pluto, space appears the same. Facing away from the sun negligible anyway past the Belt the same vista of indecipherable immensity presents itself. You say, yes, I know those are stars, and those are galaxies, and nebulae; I know there is life out there, and strangeness, and incident and death and change. But to the eye, and the animal mind, the universe is a flat tapestry sprinkled with meaningless

points of fire. Nothing meaningful can emerge from such a tapestry.

The approach of a ship from the beautiful flat darkness and cold is itself a miracle of high order. The animal mind asks, Where did it come from?

Halloran, essentially two beings in one body, watched the kzinti dreadnought with two reactions. As Fixer-of-Weapons, now seating himself in the center of Halloran's mind, the ship a rough-textured spire with an X cross at the "bow" was both rescue and challenge. Fixer-of-Weapons had lost his status. He would have to struggle to regain his position, perhaps wheedle permission to challenge and supplant a

Chief Weapons Officer and Alien Technologies Officer. He hoped and Halloran prayed that the positions on the rescue ship were held by one kzin, not two.

The battleship would pick up his lifeship within an hour. In that time, Halloran adjusted the personality that would mask his own.

Halloran would exist in a preprogrammed slumber, to emerge only at certain key points of his plan. Fixer-of-Weapons would project continuously, aware and active, but with limitations; he would not challenge another kzin to physical combat, and he would flee at an

opportune moment (if any came) if so challenged.

Halloran did not have a kzin's shining black claws or vicious fangs. He could project images of these to other kzinti, but they had only a limited effectiveness in action. For a moment, a kzin might think himself slashed by Fixer-of-Weapons's claws (although Halloran did not know how strong the stigmata effect was with kzinti), but that moment would pass. Halloran did not think he could convince a kzin to die . . .

He had never done such a thing with people. Exploring those aspects of his abilities had been too horrifying to contemplate. If he was pushed to such a

test, and succeeded, he would destroy himself rather than return to Earth. Or so he thought, now . . .

Foolishness, Fixer-of-Weapons's persona grumbled. A weapon is a weapon.

Halloran shuddered.

The battleship communicated with the lifeship, first difficulty. The coughing growl and silky dissonance of the Hero's Tongue could not be readily mimicked, and Halloran could not project his illusion beyond a few miles; he did not respond by voice, but by coded signal. The signal was not challenged.

The kzinti could not conceive of an interloper invading their fold.

"Madness," he said as the ships closed. Humming the Haydn serenade, Lawrence Halloran Jr. slipped behind the scenes, and Fixer-of-Weapons came on center stage.

The interior of the Sons Contend With Bloody Fangs or any kzinti vessel, for that matter smelled of death. It aroused in a human the deepest and most primordial fears. Imagine a neolithic hunter, trapped in a tiger's cave, surrounded by the stench of big cats and dead, decaying prey and that was how the behindf-the-scenes Halloran felt.

Fixer-of-Weapons salivated at the smells of food, but trembled at the same time.

"You are not well?" the escorting Aide-to-Commanders asked hopefully; Fixer's presence on the battleship could mean much disruption. The kzin's thoughts were quite clear to fixer: Why did Kfraksha Admiral allow this one aboard? He smells of confinement... and ...

Fixer did not worry about these insights, which might be expected of a pitiful telepath; he would use whatever information was available to re-establish his rank and position. He lifted his lip at the subordinate, lowest of

ranks aboard the battleship, a servant and licker-of-others'-fur. Aide-to-Commanders shrank back spreading his ears and curling his thick, unscarred pink tail to signify non-aggression.

"Do not forget yourself," Fixer reminded him. "Kfraksha-Admiral is my ally. He chose to rescue me."

"So it is," Aide-to-Commanders acknowledged. He led Fixer down a steep corridor, with no corners for hiding would-be assailants, and straightened before the hatch to Kfraksha-Admiral's quarters. "I obey the instructions of the Dominant One.

That the commander did not allow Fixer

to groom or eat before debriefing signified in how little regard he was held. Any survivor of a warship lost to animals carried much if not all the disgrace that would adhere to a surviving commander.

Kfraksha-Admiral bade him enter and growled to Aide-to-Commanders that they would be alone. This was how the kzin commander maintained his position without losing respect, by never exhibiting weakness or fear. Loss of respect could mean constant challenge, once they were out of a combat zone with its restrictions. As a kzin without rank, Fixer might be especially volatile; perhaps deranged by long confinement in

a tiny lifeship, he might attack the commander in a foolish effort to regain and then better his status with one c o m b a t . But Kfraksha-Admiral apparently ignored all this, spider inviting spider into a very attractive parlor.

“Is your shame bearable?” Kfraksha-Admiral asked, a rhetorical question since Fixer was here, and not immediately contemplating suicide.

"I am not responsible for the actions of the commander of War Loot, Dominant One," Fixer replied.

"Yes, but you advised Kulcha-Captain of alien technologies, did you not?"

"I now advise you. Your advantage that I am here, and able to tell you what the animals can do."

Kfraksha-Admiral regarded Fixer with undisguised contempt and mild interest. "Animals destroyed your home. How did this happen?"

That is why I am aboard, Fixer thought. If Kfraksha-Admiral overcomes his disgust to learn things that will give him an edge.

"They did not engage War Loot or any of our sortie. There is still no evidence that they have armed their worlds, no signs of an industry preparing for manufacture of offensive weapons

“They defeated you without weapons?”

"They have laser-propulsion systems of enormous strength. You recall, in our first meetings, the animals used their fusion drives against our vessels "

"And allowed us to track their spoor back to their home worlds. The Patriarchy is grateful for such uneven exchanges. How might we balance this loss?"

Fixer puzzled over his reluctance to tell Kfraksha Admiral everything. Then: My knowledge * my life.

"I am of no use to the fleet," Fixer said, with the slightest undertone of menace.

He was gratified to feel but not see Kfraksha-Admiral tense his muscles. Fixer could measure the commander's resolve with ease.

"I do not believe that," Kfraksha-Admiral said. "But it is true that if you are no use to me, you are of no use to anybody . . . and not welcome." Fixer pretended to think this over, and then showed signs of submission. "I am without position," he said sadly. "I might as well be dead."

"You have position as long as you are useful to me," Kfraksha-Admiral said. "I will allow you to groom and feed . . . if you can demonstrate how useful you might

Fixer cocked his fan-shaped ears forward in reluctant obeisance. These maneuvers were delicate he could not concede too much, or Kfraksha-Admiral would come to believe he had no knowledge. "The humans must be skipping industrialization for offensive weapons. They are converting peaceful "

Kfraksha-Admiral showed irritation at that word, not commonly used by kzinti.

" propulsion systems into defensive weapons."

"This contradicts reports of their weakness," Kfraksha-Admiral said. "Our telepaths have reported the animals

are reluctant to fight."

"They are adaptable," Fixer said.

"So much can be deduced. Is this all that you know?"

"I learned the positions from which two of the propulsion beams were fired. It should be easy to calculate their present locations . . ."

Kfraksha-Admiral spread his fingers before him unsheathing long, black and highly polished claws. Now it was Fixer's turn to tense.

"You are my subordinate," the commander said. "You will pass these

facts on to me alone."

"What is my position?" Fixer asked.

"Fleet records of your accomplishments have been relayed to me. Your fitness for position is acceptable." The days when mere prowess in personal combat decided rank were long gone, of course, qualifications had to be met before challenges could be made. "You will replace the Alien Technologies Officer on this ship."

"By combat?" A commander could grant permission . . . which was tantamount to an order to fight. Another means of intimidating subordinates.

"By my command. There will be no combat. Your presence here will not be disruptive, so do not become too ambitious, or you will face me ... on unequal terms."

"And the present officer?"

"I have a new position he will not be unhappy with. That is not your concern. Now stand and receive my mark."

Halloran-Fixer could not anticipate what the commander intended quickly enough to respond with anything more than compliance. Kfraksha-Admiral lilted his powerful leg and swiftly, humiliatingly, peed on Halloran-Fixer, distinctly marking him as the commander's charge.

Then Kfraksha-Admiral sat on a broad curving bench and regarded him coldly.

Deeply ashamed but docile what else could he be? Fixer studied the commander intently. It would not be so difficult to . . . what?

That thought was swept away even before it took shape.

Fixer-of-Weapons had no physical post as such aboard the flagship. He carried a reader the size of a kzin hand slung over his shoulder with some difficulty, which did not immediately concern him and went from point to point on the ship to complete his tasks, which were many, and unusually firing.

The interior spaces of the Sons Contend With Bloody Fangs were strangely unfamiliar to him. Halloran had not had time (nor the capacity) to absorb all of his kzin subject's memories. He did not consciously realize he was giving himself a primary education in kzinti technology and naval architecture. His disorientation would have been an infuriating and goading sign of weakness to any inferior seeking his status, but he was marked by Kfraksha-Admiral physically marked with the commander's odor, like female or a litter and that warned aggressive subordinates away. They would have to combat Kfraksha-Admiral, not just Fixer.

And Fixer was proving himself useful to Kfraksha Admiral. This aspect of Halloran's mission had been carefully thought out by Colonel Early and the Intelligence Staff what could humans afford to have kzinti know about their technology? What would Fixer logically have deduced from his experience aboard the War Loot?

Kfraksha-Admiral, luckily, expected Fixer to draw out his revelations for maximum advantage. The small lumps of information deemed reasonable and said past locations of two Belter laser projectors that had since burned out their mirrors and lasing field coils, now abandoned and useless except as scrap

could be meted out parsimoniously.

Fixer could limp and cavil, and nobody would find it strange. He had, after all, been defeated by animals and lost all status. His current status was bound to be temporary. Kfraksha-Admiral would coax the important facts from him, and then

So Fixer was not harassed. He studied his library, with some difficulty deciphering the enigmatic commas-and-dots script and mathematical symbologies. Unconsciously, he tapped the understanding of his fellows to buttress his knowledge.

And that was how he attracted the

attention of somebody far more valuable than he, and of even lower status Kfraksha-Admiral's personal telepath.

Kzinti preferred to eat alone, unless they had killed a large animal by common endeavor. The sight of another eating was likely to arouse deep-seated jealousies not conducive to good digestion; the quality of one's food aboard the flagship with rank, and rank was a smoothly ascending scale. Thus, the officers could not eat together safely, because there were no officers at the same level, and if there was no difference in the food, differences could be imagined. No. It was simply better to eat alone.

This suited Fixer. He had little satisfaction from his meals. He received his chunks of reconstituted meat substitute heated to blood temperature common low-status battle rations from the commissary officer, and retired to his quarters with the sealed container to open it and feed. His head hurt after eating the apparent raw slabs of gristle, bone and meager muscle; he preferred the simulated vegetable intestinal contents and soft organs, which were the kzinti equivalent of dessert. A kzin could bolt chunks the size of paired fists . . . But none of it actually pleased him. What he did not eat, he disposed of rapidly: pitiful, barely chewed-fragments it would have shamed a kzin

to leave behind. Fixer did not notice the few pills he took afterwards, from a pouch seemingly beneath his chest muscles.

After receiving a foil-wrapped meal, he traversed the broad central hall of the dining area and encountered the worst-looking kzin he had ever seen. Fur matted, tail actually kinked in two places, expression sickly-sycophantic, ears recoiled as if permanently afraid of being attacked. Telepath scrambled from Fixer's path, as might be expected, and then Addressed him from behind.

“We are alike, in some respects are we not?”

Fixer spun around and snarled furiously. One did not address a superior, or even an equal, from behind.

"No anger necessary," Telepath said, curling obeisantly, hands extended to show all claws sheathed. "There is an odd sound about you . . . it makes me curious. I have not permission to read you, but you are strong. You send. You leak."

Halloran-Fixer felt his fury redouble, for reasons besides the obvious impertinence. "You will stand clear of me and not address me, Addict," he spat.

"Not offending, but the sound is interesting, whatever it is. Does it come

from time spent in solitude?"

Fixer quelled his rage and bounded down the Hall or so it appeared to Telepath. The mind reader dropped his chin to his neck and resumed his halfhearted attempts to exercise and groom, his thoughts obviously lingering on his next session with the drug that gave him his abilities.

Fixer could easily tell what the commander and crew were up to, if not what they actually thought at any given moment. But Telepath was a blank slate. Nothing "leaked."

He returned to his private space, near the commander's quarters, and settled in

for more sessions in the library. There was something that puzzled him greatly, and might be very important something called a ghost star. The few mentions in the library files were unrevealing; whatever it was, it appeared to be somewhere about ten system radii outside the planetary orbits. It seemed that a ghost star was nothing surprising, and therefore not clearly explicated; this worried Fixer, for he did not know what a ghost star was.

Kzinti aboard spaceships underwent constant training, self-imposed and otherwise. There were no recreation areas as such aboard the flagship, there were four exercise and mock-combat

rooms, however, for the four rough gradations of rank from executive officers to servants. When kzinti entered a mock-combat room, they doffed all markings of rank, wearing masks to disguise their facial characteristics and strong mesh gloves over their claws to prevent unsheathing and lethal damage. Few kzinti were actually killed in mock-combat exercise, but severe injury was not uncommon. The ship's autodocs could take care of most of it, and kzinti considered scars ornamental. Anonymity also prevented ordinary sparring from affecting rank; even if the combatants knew the other's identity, it could be ignored through social fiction.

Fixer, in his unusual position of commander's charge, did not receive the challenges to mock-combat common among officers. But there was nothing in the rules, written or otherwise, that prevented subordinates from challenging each other, unless their officers interfered. Such combats were rare because most crewkzin knew their relative strengths, and who would be clearly outmatched.

Telepath, the lowest-ranked and most despised kzin aboard the flagship, challenged Fixer to mock-combat four day-cycles after his arrival. Fixer could not refuse; not even the commander's protection would have prevented his

complete ostracization had he done so. His existence would have been an insult to the whole kzinti species. A simple command not to fight would have spared him but the commander did not imagine that even the despised Fixer would face much of a fight from Telepath. And Fixer could not afford to be shunned; ostensibly, he had his position to regain.

So it was that Halloran faced a kzin in mock-combat. Fixer the kzin persona did not fall by the wayside, because Fixer could more easily handle the notion of combat. But Halloran did not remain completely in the background. For while Fixer was "fighting" Telepath, Halloran had to convince any observers including

Telepath that he was winning.

Fixer's advantages were several. First, both combatants could emerge unharmed from the fray without raising undue suspicions. Second, there would be no remote observers no broadcasts of the fight.

The major disadvantage was that of all the kzinti, a telepath should be most aware of having psychic tricks played on him.

The exercise chambers were cylindrical, gravitation oriented along one flat surface at Kzin normal, or higher for more strenuous regimens. The walls were sand-colored and a constant hot

dry wind blew through hidden vents, conditions deemed comfortable in the culture that had dominated Kzin when the species achieved spaceflight. The floor was sprinkled with a flaked fluid-absorbing material. Kzinti rules for combat were few, and did not include prohibitions against surprise targeting of eye-stinging urine. The flakes were more generally soaked with blood, however. The rooms were foul with the odors of fear and exertion and injury.

Telepath was puny for a kzin. He weighed only a hundred and fifty kilograms and stood only two hundred and five centimeters from crown to toes, reduced somewhat by a compliant stoop.

He was not in good shape, but he had little difficulty bending the smallest of the ten steel bars adjacent to his assigned half of the combat area a little gesture legally mandated to give a referee some idea how the combatants were matched in sheer strength. This smallest bar was two centimeters in diameter.

Halloran-Fixer made as if to bend the next bar up and then ostentatiously re-bent it straight, hoping nobody would examine it closely and find the metal completely unmarked. Probably nobody would; kzinti were less given to idle curiosity than humans.

Telepath screamed and leaped, arms

spread wide. The image of Fixer was a bare ten centimeters to one side of his true position, and that allowed one of the kzin's feet to pass a hair's-breadth to one side of Halloran's head. Halloran convinced Telepath he had received a glancing blow across one arm. Telepath recovered somewhat sloppily, for a kzin, and sized up the situation.

There were only the mandated two observers in the antechamber. This fight was regarded as little more than comedy, and comedy, to kzinti, was shameful and demeaning. The observers' attentions were not sharply focused. Halloran-Fixer took advantage of that to dull their perceptions further. This

allowed him to concentrate on Telepath.

Fixer did not crouch or make any overt signs of impending attack. He hardly breathed. Telepath circled at the outside of the combat area, nonchalant apparently faintly amused.

Halloran had little experience with fighting. Fortunately, Fixer-of-Weapons had been an old hand at all kinds of combat, including the mortal kind that had quickly moved him up in rank while the fleet was in base, and much of that information had become lodged in the Fixer persona. Halloran waited for Telepath to make another energy-wasting move.

Kzinti combat was a matter of slight advantages. Possibly Telepath knew this, and sensed something not right about Fixer. Something weak . . .

But Telepath could not read Fixer's thoughts in any concentrated fashion; that required a great effort for the kzin, and debilitating physical weakness afterward. Halloran's powers were much more efficient and much less draining.

Fixer snarled and feigned a jump. Telepath leaped to one side, but Fixer had not completed his attack. He stood with tail twitching furiously several meters from the kzin, needle teeth bared in a hideous grin.

Telepath had good reason to be puzzled. It was rare for a threatened attack to be aborted, from a kzin so much larger and stronger than his opponent. Now the miserable kzin was truly angry, and afraid. Several times he rushed Fixer, but Fixer was never quite where he appeared to be. Several times, Halloran came near to having his head crushed by a passing swipe of the weak kzin's gloved hand, but managed to avoid the blow by centimeters. Something was goading Telepath beyond the usual emotions aroused by mock combat.

"Fight, you sexless female!" Telepath shrieked. A deeply obscene curse, and

the observers did some of their own growling now. Telepath had done nothing to increase their esteem.

Fixer used the kzin's anger to his own advantage. The fight would have to end quickly he was tiring rapidly, far faster than his puny opponent. Fixer seemed to run to a curved wall, leaping and rebounding, crossing the chamber in a flash and bypassing Telepath without a blow. Telepath screamed with rage and tried to remove his gloves, but they were locked, and only the observers had the keys.

While Telepath was yowling fury and frustration, Fixer-Halloran delivered a bolt of suggestion that staggered the kzin,

sending him to all fours with an apparent cuff to the jaw. The position was not as dangerous for a kzin they could run more quickly on fours than erect but Halloran-Kzin's image loomed over the stunned Telepath and kicked downward. The observers did not see the maneuver precisely, and Telepath was on the floor writhing in pain, his ear and the side of his head swelling with auto-suggestion injury.

Fixer offered his gloves to the observers and they were unlocked. He had not harmed Telepath, and had not received so much as a scratch himself. Fixer had acquitted himself; he still wore Kfraksha-Admiral's stink, but he was not

the lowest of the kzinti on Sons Contend With Bloody Fangs.

"The humans obviously have a way of tracking our ships, yet they do not have the gravity polarizer . . ." Kfraksha-Admiral sat on his curved bench, legs raised, black-leather fingers clasped behind his thick neck, seeming quite casual and relaxed. "What is our weakness, that they spy on us and can aim their miserable adapted weapons upon us?"

Fixer's turmoil was not apparent. He knew the answer but of course he could not give it. He had to maneuver this conversation to determine if the commander was asking a rhetorical

question, or testing him in some way.

“By our drives,” he suggested.

"Yes, of course, but not by spectral signatures or flare temperatures, for in fact we do not use our fusion drives when we enter the system. And without polarizer technology, gravitational gradient warps cannot be detected ... short of system wide detectors, which these animals do not have, correct?" Fixer rippled his fur in agreement.

"No. They detect not the effects of our drives, but the power sources themselves. It is obvious they have discovered magnetic monopoles. I have suspected as much for years, but now

plans are taking shape . . ."

Fixer-Halloran was relieved, and horrified, at once. This was indeed how kzinti ships were tracked, in fact, it was a little slow of the enemy not to have thought of it before. The cultural scientists back on Ceres had been puzzled as well; the kzinti had a science and technology more advanced than the human, but they seemed curiously inept at pure research. Almost as if the knowledge had been pasted onto a prescientific culture . . .

Every Belter prospector had monopole detection equipment; mining the super-massive particles was a major source of income for individual Belters, and for

huge Belt corporations. Known monopole storage centers and power stations were automatically compensated for in even the cheapest detector. In an emergency, a detector could be used to determine position in the Belt or anywhere else in the solar system by triangulation from those known sources. An unknown or kzinti monopole source set detectors off throughout the solar system. And the newly converted propulsion lasers could then be locked onto their targets . . .

"This much is now obvious. It explains our losses. Do you concur?"

"This is a fact," Fixer said.

"And how do you know it is a fact?" Kfraksha-Admiral challenged.

"The lifeship from War Loot is not powered by monopoles. I survived. Animals would not distinguish monopole sources by the size of the vessel they would attack all sources."

Kfraksha-Admiral pressed his lips tight together and twitched whiskers with satisfaction. "Precisely so. We must have patience in our strategies, then. We cannot enter the system using our monopole-powered gravity polarizer's. But there is the ghost star . . . if we enter the system without monopoles, and without approaching the gas-giant planets, where we might be expected . . .

We can enter from an apparently empty region of space, unexpectedly, and destroy the animal populations of many worlds and asteroids. This plan's success is my sinecure. Many females, much territory glory. We are moving outward now to pass around the ghost star and gain momentum."

Fixer-Halloran again felt a chill. Truly, without the monopoles, the kzinti ships would be difficult to detect.

Fixer pressed his hands together before his chest, a sign of deep respect. Kfraksha-Admiral nodded in condescending fashion.

"You have proven valuable, in your own

reluctant, rankless way," he acknowledged, staring at him with irises reduced to pinpoints in the wide golden eyes. "You have endured humiliation with surprising fortitude. Some, our more enlightened and patient warriors, might call it courage." The commander drew a rag soaked in some pale liquid from a bucket behind his bench. He threw it at Fixer, who caught it.

The rag had been soaked in diluted acetic acid vinegar. "You may remove my mark," Kfraksha-Admiral said. "Henceforth, you have the status of full officer, on my formal staff, and you will be in charge of interpreting the alien technologies we capture. Your combat

with Telepath .. . has been reported to me. It was not strictly honorable, but your forbearance was remarkable. In part, this earns you a position."

Fixer now had status. He could not relax his vigilance, for he would no longer be under the commander's protection, but he could assume the armor of a true billet; separate quarters, specific duties, a place in the ritual of the kzinti flagship. Presumably the commander would not grant permission for many challenges, and as a direct subordinate he would count as one of the commander's faction, who would retaliate for any unprovoked attack.

The Sons Contend With Bloody Fangs

had pulled its way out of the sun's gravity well at a prodigious four-tenths of the speed of light, faster than was safe within a planetary system, and was racing for the ghost star a hundred billion kilometers from the sun. Sol was now an anonymous point of light in the vastness of the Sagittarius arm of the galaxy; the outer limits of the solar system were almost as far behind.

The commander's plans for the whiplash trip around the ghost star were secret to all but a few. Fixer was still not even certain what the ghost star was it was not listed under that name in the libraries, and there was obviously a concept he was not connecting with. But

it was fairly easy to calculate that to accomplish the orbital maneuvers the commander proposed, the ghost star would have to be of at least one-half solar mass. Nothing that size had ever been detected from Earth; it was therefore dark and absolutely cold. There would be no perturbed orbits to give it away; its distance was too great.

So for the time being, Fixer assumed they were approaching a rendezvous with either a dark, dead hulk of a star, or perhaps a black hole.

A hundred billion kilometers was still close to the solar neighborhood, as far as interstellar distances were concerned. That kzinti knew more about these

regions than humans worried the sublimated Halloran. What other advantages would they gain?

The time had come for Halloran to examine what he had found. With his personality split in half, and locked into a kzin mentality, he might easily overlook something crucial to his mission.

In his quarters, with the door securely bolted, Halloran came to the surface. Seven days in the kzinti flagship had taken a terrible toll on him; in a small mirror, he saw himself almost cadaverous, his face deeply lined. Kzinti did not use water to groom themselves,

and there were no taps in his private quarters the aliens were descended from a pack-hunting desert carnivore, and had efficient metabolisms so his skin and clothing would remain dirty. He took a medicinal towelette, used to treat minor scratches received during combats, and wiped as much of his face and hands clean as he could. The astringent solution in the towelette served to sharpen his wits. After so long in Fixer's charge, there seemed little brilliance and fire left in Halloran himself. And Fixer is just not very bright, he thought sourly. Think, monkey, think!

He looked old.

"Bleep that," he murmured, and picked

up the library pack. As Fixer, he had subliminally marked interesting passages in the kzinti records. Now he set out to learn what the ghost star was, and what he might expect in the next few hours, as they approached and parabolically orbited. A half-hour of inquiry, his eyes reddening under the strain of reading the kzinti script without Fixer's intercession, brought no substantial progress.

"Ghost," he muttered. "Specter. Spirit. Ancestors. A star known to ancestors? Not likely they would have come on into the solar system and destroyed or enslaved us centuries ago . . . what the tanj is a ghost star?"

He queried the library on all concepts incorporating the words ghost, specter, ancestor, and other synonyms in the Hero's Tongue. Another half-hour of concentrated and fruitless study, and he was ready to give up, when the projector displayed an entry. Specter Mass.

He cued the entry. A flagged warning came up; the symbol for shame-and-disgrace, a Patriarchal equivalent of Most Secret.

Fixer recoiled; Halloran had to intervene instantly to stop his hand before it halted the search. Curiosity was not a powerful drive for a kzin, and shame was a very effective deterrent.

A basic definition flashed up. "That mass created during the first instants of the universe, separated from kzinti space-time and detectable only by weak gravitational interaction. No light or other communication possible between the domain of specter mass and kzinti space-time. " Halloran grinned for the first time in seven days. Now he had it he could feel the solution coming. He cued more detail.

"Stellar masses of specter matter have been detected, but are rare. None has been found in living memory. These masses, in the specter domain, must be enormous, on the order of hundreds of masses of the sun" the star of Kzin, more

massive and a little cooler than Sol 'for their gravitational influence is on the order of .6 [base 8] Kzin suns. The physics of the specter domain must differ widely from our own. Legends warn against searching for ghost stars, though details are lost or forbidden by the Patriarchy."

Not a black hole or a dark star, but a star in a counter-universe. Human physicists had discovered the possible existence of shadow mass in the late twentieth century Halloran remembered that much from his physics classes. The enormously powerful superstring theory of particles implied shadow mass pretty much as the kzinti entry described it.

None had been detected . . .

Who would have thought the Earth was so near to a ghost star?

And now, Kfraksha-Admiral was recommending what the kzinti had heretofore forbidden close approach to a ghost star to gain a gravitational advantage. The kzinti ships would appear, to human monopole detectors, to be leaving the system retreating, although slowly. Then the fleet would decelerate and discard its monopoles, sending them on the same outward course, and swing around the ghost star, gaining speed from the star's angular momentum. No fusion drives would be used, so as not to alarm human sentries.

Slowly, the fleet would swing back into the solar system, and within a kzinti year, attack the worlds of men. Undetected, unsuspected, the kzinti fleet could end the war then and there. The monopoles would be within retrieval distance. And all it would require was a little kzinti patience, a rare virtue indeed.

Someone scratched softly at the ID plate on his hatch. Halloran did not assume the Fixer persona, but projected the Fixer image, before answering. The hatch opened a safe crack, and Halloran saw the baleful, rheumy eye of Telepath peering in.

"I have bested you already," the Fixer image growled. "You wish to challenge for a shameful rematch?" Not something Fixer need grant in any case, now that his status was established.

"I have a problem which I must soon bring to the attention of Kfraksha-Admiral," Telepath said, with the edge of a despicable whimper.

"Why come to me?"

"You are the problem. I hear sounds from you. I remember things from you. And I have dreams in which you appear, but not as you are now . . . sometimes I am you. I am the lowest, but I am important to this fleet, especially with

the death of War Loot's Telepath. I am the last Telepath in the fleet. My health is important "

"Yes, yes! What do you want?"

"Have you been taking the telepath drug?"

"No."

"I can tell ... you speak truth, yet you hide something."

The kzin could not now deeply read Halloran without making an effort, but Halloran was "leaking." Just as he had never been able to quell his "intuition," he could not stop this basic hemorrhage

of mental contents. The ladies drug-weakened mind was there to receive, perhaps more vulnerable because the subconscious trickle of sensation and memory was alien to it.

"I hide nothing. Go away," the Fixer-image demanded harshly.

"Questions first. What is an 'Esterhazy'? What are these sounds I hear, and what is a 'Haydn'? Why do I feel emotions which have no names?"

The kzin's pronunciation was not precise, but it was close enough. "I do not know. Go away."

Halloran began to close the door, but

Telepath wailed and stuck his leathery digits into the crack. Halloran instinctively stopped the hatch to prevent damage. A kzin would not have . . .

"I cannot see Kfraksha-Admiral. I am the lowest . . . but I feel danger! We are approaching very great danger. My shields are weakening and my sensitivity increases even with lower doses of the drug . . . Do you know where we are going? I can feel this danger deep, in a place my addiction has only lightly touched ... Others feel it too. There is restlessness. I must report what I feel! Tell the commander "

Cringing, Halloran pressed the lever and the door continued to close. Telepath

screamed and pulled out his digits in time to avoid loosing more than a tip and one sheathed claw.

That did it. Halloran began to shake uncontrollably. Sobbing, he buried his face in his hands. Death seemed very immediate, and pain, and brutality. He had stepped into the lion's den. The lions were closing in, and he was weakening. He had never faced anything so horrible before. The kzinti were insane. They had no softer feelings, nothing but war and destruction and conquest . . .

And yet, within him there were fragments of Fixer-of-Weapons to tell him differently. There was courage,

incredible strength, great vitality.

"Not enough," he whispered, removing his face from his hands. Not enough to redeem them, certainly, and not enough to make him feel any less revulsion. If he could, he would wipe all kzinti out of existence. If he could just expand his mind enough, reach out across time and space to the distant homeworld of kzin, touch them with a deadliness . . .

The main problem with a talent like Halloran's was hubris. Aspiring to god-like ascendancy over others, even kzinti. That way lay more certain madness.

A kzin would'nt think that way, Halloran knew. A kzin would scream and leap

upon a tool of power like that. "Kzin have it easier," he muttered.

Time to marshal his resources. How long could he stay alive on the kzinti flagship?

If he assumed the Fixer persona, no more than three days. They would still be rounding the ghost star . . .

If he somehow managed to take control of the ship and could be Halloran all the time, he might last much longer. And to what end?

To bring the Sons Contend With Bloody Fangs back to human space? That would be useful, but not terribly important the

kzinti would have discarded their gravity polarizer's. Human engineers had already studied the hulk of War Loot, not substantially different from Sons Contend.

But he wanted to survive. On that Halloran and Fixer-Halloran were agreed. He could feel survival as a clean, metallic necessity, cutting him off from all other considerations. The Belter pilots and their initiation . . . Coming to an understanding of sorts with his father. Early's wish-list. What he knew about kzinti . . .

That could be transmitted back. He did not need to survive to deliver that. But such a transmission would take time, a

debriefing of weeks would be invaluable. Survival Simple life. To win.

Thorough shit or not, Halloran valued his miserable life.

Perhaps I'm weak, like Telepath. Sympathetic. Particularly towards myself:

But the summing up was clear and unavoidable. The best thing he could do would be to find some way to inactivate at least this ship, and perhaps the whole kzinti fleet. Grandiose scheme. At the very top of Early's wish-list. All else by the wayside.

And he could not do it by going on a rampage. He had to be smarter than the kzinti; he had to show how humans, with all their love of life and self-sympathy, could beat the self-confident, savage invaders.

No more being Fixer. Time to use Fixer as a front, and be a complete, fully aware Halloran.

Telepath whimpered in his sleep. There was no one near to hear him in this corridor; disgust could be as effective as status and fear in securing privacy.

Hands were lifting him. Huge hands, tearing him away from Mother's side. His own hands were tiny, so tiny as he

clung with all four limbs to Mother's fur.

She was growling, screaming at the males with the Y-shaped poles who pinned her to the wicker mats, lashing out at them as they laughed and dodged. Hate and fury stank through the dark air of the hut.

“Maaaa!” he screamed. “Maaaa!”

The hands bore him up, crushed him against a muscular side that smelled of leather and metal and kzintosh, male kzin.

They will eat me, they will eat me! cried instinct. He lashed out with needle-sharp baby claws, and the booming voice

above him laughed and swore, holding the wriggling bundle out at arm's length.

"This one has spirit," the Voice said.

"Puny," another replied dismissively. "I will not rear it. Send it to the creche."

They carried him out into the bright sunlight, and he blinked against the pain of it. Fangs loomed above him, and he hissed and spat; a hand pushed meat into his mouth. It was good, warm and bloody; he tore loose chunks and bolted them, ears still folded down. From the other enclosures came the growls and screams of females frightened by the scent of loss, and behind him his mother gave one howl of grief after another.

Telepath half-woke, grunting and starting, pink batears flaring wide as he took in the familiar subliminal noises of pumps and ventilators.

He was laughing, walking across the quadrangle. Faces turned toward him, naked faces? Mouths turning to round O shapes of shock. Flat mouths? Flat teeth

Students and teachers were turning toward him, and he knew they saw the headmaster, buck-naked and piriapically erect. He laughed and waved again, thinking how Old Man Velasquez would explain this

Telepath struggled. Something struck him on the nose and he started upright,

pink tongue reflexively washing at the source of the welcome, welcome pain. The horror of the nightmare slipped away, too alien to comprehend with the waking mind.

"Silence, sthondat-sucker!" Third Gunner snarled, aiming a kick that thudded drumlike on Telepath's ribs. Another harness-buckle was in one hand, ready to throw. "Stop screaming in your sleep!"

Telepath widened his ears and flattened his fur in propitiation as he crouched; Third Gunner was not a great intellect, but he was enormous and touchy even for a young kzin. After a moment the hulking shape turned and padded off

down the corridor to his own doss, grumbling and twitching his whiskers. The smaller kzin sank down again to his thin pallet, curling into a fetal ball and covering his nose with his hands, wrapping his tail around the whole bundle of misery. He quivered, his matted fur wrinkling in odd patterns, and forced his eyes to close.

I must sleep, he thought. His fingers twitched toward the pouch with his drug, but that only made things worse. I must sleep; my health is important to the fleet. Unless he was rested he could not read minds on command. Without that, he was useless and therefore dead, and Telepath did not want to die.

But if he slept, he dreamed. For the last four sleeps the dreams of his kittenhood had been almost welcome. Eerie combinations of sound plucked at the corners of his mind as he dozed, as precise as mathematics but carrying overtones of feelings that were not his

He jerked awake again. Mother, he thought, through a haze of fatigue. I want my mother.

The alienness of the dreams no longer frightened him so much.

What was really terrifying was the feeling he was beginning to understand them . . .

Halloran flexed and raised his hands, crouching and growling. Technician's-Assistant stepped aside at the junction of the two corridors, but Fire-Control Technician retracted his ears and snarled, dropping his lower jaw toward his chest. Aide-to-Commanders had gone down on his belly, crawling aside. Beside the disguised human Chief-Operations-Officer bulked out his fur and responded in kind.

Sure looks different without Fixer, Halloran thought as he sidled around the confrontation.

The kzinti were almost muzzle-to-muzzle, roaring at each other in tones that set the metal around them to

vibrating in sympathy; thin black lips curled back from wet half-inch fangs, and the ruffled fur turned their bodies into bristling sausage shapes. The black-leather shapes of their four-fingered hands were almost skeletal, the long claws shining like curves of liquid jet. Dim orange-red light made Halloran squint and peer. The walls here in this section of officer country were covered with holographic murals; a necessity, since Kzinti were very vulnerable to sensory deprivation. Twisted thorny orange vegetation crawled across shattered rock under a lowering sky the color of powdered brick dust, and in the foreground two Kzinti had overturned something that looked like a giant spiked

turtle with a bone club for a tail. They were burying their muzzles in its belly, ripping out long stretches of intestine.

Abruptly, the two high-ranking kzin stepped back and let their fur fall into normal position, walking past each other as if nothing had happened.

Nothing did, a ghost of Fixer said at the back of Halloran's head; the thin psychic voice was mildly puzzled. Normal courtesy. Passing by without playing at challenge would be an insult, showing contempt for one not worthy of interest. Real challenge would be against regulations, now.

Chief-Operations-Officer scratched at

the ID plate on the commander's door, releasing Kfraksha-Admiral's coded scent. A muffled growl answered.

Kfraksha-Admiral was seated at his desk, worrying the flesh off a heavy bone held down with his hands. A long shred of tendon came off as he snapped his head back and forth, and his jaws made a wet clop sound as he bolted it.

"Is all proceeding according to plan?" he asked.

"Yes, Dominant One," Chief-Operations-Officer said humbly.

"Then why are you taking up my valuable time?" Kfraksha-Admiral

screamed, extending his claws.

"Abasement," Chief-Operations-Officer said. He flattened to the floor in formal mode; the others joined him. "The jettisoning of the monopoles and gravity polarizer components has proceeded according to your plans. There are problems."

"Describe them."

"A much higher than normal rate of replacement for all solid-state electronic components, Kfraksha-Admiral," the engineer said. "Computers and control systems particularly. Increasing as a function of our approach to the ghost star. Also personnel problems."

Kfraksha-Admiral's whiskers and fur moved in patterns that meant lively curiosity; discipline was the problem any Kzin commander would anticipate, although perhaps not so soon.

"Mutiny?" he said almost eagerly.

"No. Increased rates of impromptu dueling, sometimes against regulations. Allegations of murderous intent unsupported by evidence. Superstitions. Several cases of catatonia and insanity leading to liquidation by superiors. Suicides. Also rumors."

"Herr!" Kfraksha-Admiral said. Suicide was an admission of cowardice, and very rare. Time to fish or be bait,

Halloran decided.

Gently, he probed at the consciousness of the kzin, feeling the three-things-at-once sensation of indecision. Kfraksha-Admiral knew something of why the Patriarchy forbade mention of phenomenon; because the Conservors of the Ancestral Past couldn't figure out what was involved. Inexplicable and repeated bad luck, usually; the kzin was feeling his fur try to bristle. Kzinti believed in hick, as firmly as they believed in games theory. Eternal shame for Kfraksha-Admiral if he turned back now. His cunning suggested aborting the mission; an unwary male would never have become a fleet commander. Gut

feeling warred with it; even for a kzin, Kfraksha-Admiral was aggressive; otherwise he could never have achieved or held his position.

Shame, Halloran whispered, ever so gently. It was not difficult. Easier than it had ever been before, and now he felt justified.

Eternal disgrace for retreating, his mind intruded softly. Two years of futility already. Defeat By planteaters. Sickening images of unpointed grinding teeth chewing roots. Endless challenges. A commander turned cautious had a line of potential rivals lightyears long, waiting for stand-down from Active Status. Kzin were extremely territorial;

modern kzin had transferred the instinct from physical position to rank.

Glory if we win. More glory for great dangers overcome. Conquest Hero Kfraksha-Admiral no Kfraksha-Tchee, a full name, unimaginable wealth, planetary systems of slaves with a fully industrialized society. Many sons. Generations to worship my memory.

The commander's ears unfolded as he relaxed, decisions made. "This is a perilous course. Notify Flashing Claws" a Swift Hunter-class courier, lightly armed but lavishly equipped with drive and fuels "to stand by on constant datalink." The Patriarchy would know

what happened. "The fleet will proceed as planned. Slingshot formation, with Sons Contend With Bloody Fangs occupying the innermost trajectory."

That would put the flagship at the point of the roughly conical formation the fleet was to assume, the troopships with their loads of infantry would be at the rear. "Redouble training schedules. Increase rations." Well-fed kzin were more amenable to discipline. And "Rumors of what?"

"That we approach the Darkstar of III-Omen, Dominant One."

Kfialcsha-Adminal leaned forward, his claws prickling at the files of printout on

his desk. "That was confidential information!" He glared steadily at Chief-Operations-Officer, extreme discourtesy among carnivores. The subordinate extended hands and ears, with an aura of sullenness.

"I have told no one of the nature of the object we approach," he said. Few kzinti would trouble to prod and poke for information not immediately useful, either. "The ship and squadron commanders have been informed, so have the senior staff."

"Hrrr. Chirrru. You " a jerk of the tail towards Aide-to-Commanders. "Fetch me Telepath."

Halloran slumped down on the mat in his quarters, head cradled in his hands, fighting to control his nausea. Murphy, don't tell me I'm developing an allergy to kzin, he thought, holding his shaking hands out before him. The mottled spots were probably some deficiency disease, or his immune system might be giving up under the strain of ingesting all these not quite earthlike proteins. He belched acid, swallowed past a painfully dry throat, remembering his last meeting with his father. A kzin ship was like the real Arizona desert, and it was sucking the moisture out of his tissues, no matter how much he drank. A dry cold, though. It held down the soupy smell of dried rancid sweat that surrounded him; that

had nearly given him away half a dozen times.

A sharp pain thrilled up one finger. Halloran looked down and found he had been absently stropping nonexistent claws on the panel of corklike material set next to the pallet. A broken fingernail was bent back halfway. He prodded it back into place, shuddering, tied one of the antiseptic pads around it and secured it with a strip of cloth before he lowered himself with painful slowness to his back. Slow salt heavy tears filled the corners of his eyes and ran painfully down the chapped skin of his face.

It was easier to be Fixer. Fixer did not hurt. Fixer was not lonely. Fixer did not

feel guilt; shame, perhaps, but never guilt.

Fixer doesn't exist. I am Lawrence Halloran Jr. He closed his eyes and tried to let his breathing sink into a regular rhythm. It was difficult for more reasons than the pain; every time he began to drop off, he would jerk awake again with unreasoning dread. Not of the nightmares, just dread of something.

Intuition. Halloran had always believed in intuition. Or maybe just the trickle of fear from the crew, but he should not be that sensitive, even with fatigue and weakness wearing down his shields. His talent should be weaker, not stronger.

Enough. "My status is that of a complete shit, but my health is important to the mission," he mumbled sardonically to himself. Sleep was like falling and the others were chasing him again, through the corridors of the creche. Pain shot in under his ribs as he bounded along four-footed, and his tongue lolled dry and grainy. They were all bigger than him, and there were a double handful of them! Bright light stabbed at his eyes as he ran out into the exercise yard, up the tumbled rocks of the pile in the center, gritty ocher sandstone under his hands and feet. Nowhere to run but the highest . . .

Fear cut through his fatigue as he came erect on the central spire. He was above

them! The high-status kits would think he was challenging them!

Squalls of rage confirmed it as the orange-and-spotted tide boiled out of the doorway and into the vast quadrangle of scrub and sand. Tails went rigid, claws raked toward him; he stood and screamed back, but he could hear the quaver in it, and the impulse to grovel and spread his ears was almost irresistible. Hate flowed over him with the scent of burning ginger, varied only by the individual smells of the other children. Rocks flew around him as they poured up the miniature crags; something struck him over one eye. Vision blurred as the nictitating membranes swept

down, and blood poured over one. The smell of it was like death, but the others screeched louder as they caught the waft.

Hands and feet gripped him as he slumped down on the hard rock, clawing and yanking hair and lifting, and then he was flying. Instinct rotated his head down, but he was already too stunned to get his hands and feet well under him; he landed sprawling across an edge of sandstone and felt ribs crack. Then the others were on him, mauling, and he curled into a protective ball but two of them had his tail, they were stretching it out and raising rocks in their free hands and crack and crack

Halloran woke, shuddering and wincing

at pain in an organ he did not possess. Several corridors away, Telepath screamed until the ratings dossed near him lost all patience and broke open an arms locker to get a stunner.

"Dreams? Explain yourself, kshat," Kfraksha growled.

Telepath ventured a nervous lick of his nose, eyes darting around, too genuinely terrified to resent being called the kzin equivalent of a rabbit.

"Nothing. I said nothing of dreams," he said, then shrieked as the commander's claws raked along the side of his muzzle.

"You dare to contradict me?"

"I abase myself "

"Silence! You distinctly said 'dreams' when I asked you to determine the leakage of secret information."

"Leaks. First Fixer-of-Weapons was leaking. He is strong. He leaks. It from him but I cannot hide in sleep. Such shame. Now more are leaking. The officers dream of the Ghost Star. Ancestors who died without honor haunt it ... their hands reach up to drag us down to nameless rot. One feels it. All feel it "

"Silence! Silence!" Kfraksha-Admiral roared, striking open-handed. Even then he retained enough control not to use his

claws; this thing was the last Telepath in the fleet, after all, even if insanity was reducing its usefulness.

And even such a sorry excuse for a kzin shouldn't be much harmed by being beaten unconscious.

"You find time to groom?" Kfraksha-Admiral asked sullenly.

Finagle, Halloran swore inwardly, drawing the Fixer persona more tightly around him. The last sleep-cycle had seen a drastic deterioration in everyone's grooming, except his memorized projection. The commander's pelt was not quite matted; it would be a long time before he looked as miserable

as Telepath Finagle alone knew what Telepath looked like now, he seemed to have vanished but he was definitely scruffy. The entire bridge crew looked peaked, and several were absent, their places taken by younger, less scarred understudies. Some of those understudies had new bandages, evidence that their superiors' usefulness had deteriorated to the point where the commander would allow self-promotion. The human's talent told him the dark cavern of the command deck smelled of fear and throttled rage and bewilderment; the skin crawled down his spine as he sensed it.

Kzinti did not respond well to

frustration. They also did not expect answers to rhetorical questions.

Kfraksha-Admiral turned to Chrung-Fleet-Communications Officer.
"Summarize."

"Herr's Lair still does not report," that kzin said dully. That was the first of the troop transports, going in on a trajectory that would leave them "behind" the cruisers, dreadnoughts, and stingship carriers when the fleet finally made its out-of-elliptic slingshot approach to Earth. Kfraksha-Admiral had calculated that Earth was probably the softest major human target, and less likely to be alert. Go in undetected, take out major defenses and space-industrial centers,

land the surface-troops; the witless hordes of humankind's fifteen billions would be hostages against counterattack.

If things go well, Halloran thought, easing a delicate tendril into the commander's consciousness. Murphy rules the kzin, as well as humans. Wearily When do things ever go wells

and the long silky grass blew in the dry cool wind that was infinitely clean and empty. His Sire and the other grown males were grouped around the carcass, replete, lapping at drinks in shallow, beautifully fashioned silver cups. He and the other kits were round stomached and content, play-sparring lazily, and he lay

on his back batting at the bright-winged insect that hovered over his nose, until Sire put a hand on his chest and leaned over to rasp a roughly loving tongue across his ears

"It is well, it is well," Kfraksha-Admiral crooned softly, almost inaudibly. Then he came to himself with a start, looking around as heads turned toward him.

Finagle, I set him off on a memor4-fugue! Halloran thought, feeling the kzin's panic and rising anger, the tinge of suspicion beneath that.

All must admire Kfraksha-Admiral's strategic sense," Halloran-Fixer said hastily. "Light losses, for a strategic gain

of the size this operation promises."

Kfraksha-Admiral signed curt assent, turning his attention from the worthless sycophant. Behind Fixer's mask, Halloran's human face contorted in a savage grin. Manipulating Kfraksha-Admiral's subconscious was more fun than haunting the other kzin. Even for a ratcat, he's a son-of-a ... pussy, I suppose. Single minded, too. Relatively easy to keep from wondering what was causing all this I wish I knew and tightly, tightly focus on getting through the next few hours. Closest approach soon. And it was all so easy. He was unstoppable .

..

Scabs broke and he tasted the salt of

blood. I'm not going to make it. He ground his jaws and felt the Loosening teeth wobble in their sockets. Death was a bitterness, no glory in it, only this foul decay. Maybe I shouldn't make it. I'm too dangerous. His face had been pockmarked with open sores, the last time he looked. Maybe that was how he looked inside.

So easy, sucking the kzinti crews down into a cycle of waking nightmare. As if they were doing it to themselves. Fixer howled laughter from within his soul.

"I have the information by the throat, but I still do not understand," Physicist said, staring around wildly. He was making

the chirau-chiruu sounds of kzinti distress. Dealer-With-Very-Small-and-Large was a better translation of his name/title. "I do not understand!"

Most of the bridge equipment was closed down. Ventilation still functioned, internal fields, all based on simple feedback systems. Computers, weapons, communications, all had grown too erratic to trust. A few lasers still linked the functioning units of the fleet.

Outside, the stars shone with jeering brightness. Of the Ghost Star there was no trace; no visible light, no occlusion of the background . . . and instruments more sophisticated had given out hours ago.

Many of the bridge crew still stayed at their posts, but their scent had soured; the steel wtsai knives at their belts attracted fingers like unconscious lures.

“Explain,” Kfraksha-Admiral rasped.

“The values, the records just say that physical law in the shadow-matter realm is unlike kzinti timespace ... and there is crossover this close! The effect increases exponentially as we approach the center of mass; we must be within the radius the object occupies in the other continuum. The cosmological constants are varying. Quantum effects. The U/R threshold of quantum probability functions itself is increasing, that is why

all electronic equipment becomes unreliable probability cascades are approaching the macrocosmic level."

Kfraksha-Admiral's tail was quivering-rigid, and he panted until thin threads of spittle drooled down from the corners of his mouth.

"Then we shall win! We are nearly at point of closest approach. Our course is purely ballistic. Systems will regain their integrity as we recede from the area of singularity."

Murphy wins again, Halloran thought wearily slumping back against the metal wall. His body was shaking, and he felt a warm trickle down one leg. He s right.

The irony of it was enough to make him laugh except that that would have hurt too much. Halloran had done the noble thing. He had put everything into controlling Kfraksha-Admiral, blinding him to the voices of prudence . . . And the bleeping ratcat was right after an.

His shields frayed as the human despaired. Frayed more strongly than he had ever felt, even drunk or coming, until he felt/was Kfraksha-Admiral's ferocious triumph, Physicist's jumble of shifting equations, Telepath's hand pressing the ampule of his last drug capsule against his throat in massive overdose, why have the kzinti disintegrated like this

Halloran would never have understood it. He lacked the knowledge of physics the ARM had spent centuries discouraging that but Physicist was next to him, and the datalink was strong. No Kzinti could have understood it; they were simply not introspective enough. Halloran-Fixer knew, with the whole-argument suddenness of revelation; knew as a composite creature that had experienced the inwardness of Kzin and Man together.

The conscious brain is a computer, but one of a very special kind. Not anything like a digital system; that was one reason why true Artificial Intelligence had taken so long to achieve, and had proven so

worthless once found. Consciousness does not operate on mathematical algorithms, with their prefixed structures. It is a quantum process, indeterminate in the most literal sense. Thoughts became conscious decision was taken, will exercised when the nervous system amplified them past the one-graviton threshold level. So was insight, a direct contact with the paramathematical frame of reality.

They couldn't know, Halloran realised. Kzinti physics was excellent but their biological sciences primitive by human standards.

And I know what's driving them crazy, he realized. Telepathy was another

threshold effect. Any conscious creature possessed some ability. The Ghost Star was amplifying it to a terrifying level, even as it disabled the computers by turning their off/on synapses to off and on. Humans might be able to endure it; Man is a gregarious species.

Not the kzinti. Not those hard, stoic, isolated killer souls. Forever guarded, forever wary, disgusted by the very thought of such an involuntary sharing . . . whose only glimpse of telepathy was creatures like Telepath. Utter horror, to feel the boundaries of their personalities fraying, merging, becoming not-self.

Halloran knew what he had to do. It's the

right thing. Fixer-of-Weapons stirred exultantly in his tomb of flesh. Die like a Hero! he battle-screeched. Letting go was like thinning out, like dying, like being free for the first time in all his life. Halloran's awareness flared out, free of the constraints of distance, touching lightly at the raw newly-forged connections between thousands of minds in the Ghost Sun's grip. I get to be omnipotent just before the end, he thought in some distant corner. To his involuntary audience MEET EACH OTHER.

The shock of the steel was almost irrelevant, the reflex that wrenched him around to face Telepath automatic.

Undeceived at last, the kzin's drug-dilated eyes met the human's. Halloran slumped forward opening his mouth, but there was no sound or breath as he-

"Get out of my dreams!" the human fell, released

"Shit," Halloran murmured. His heels drummed on the deck. Mom.

The roar from Colonel Buford Early's office was enough to bring his aide-de-camp's head through the door. One glance at his Earther superior was enough to send it back through the hatch.

Early swore again, more quietly but with a scatological invention that showed

both his inventiveness and his age; it had been many generations since some of those Anglo-Saxon monosyllables had been in common use.

Then he played the audio again, without correction, but listening carefully for the rhythm of the phrasing under the accent imposed by a vocal system and palate very unlike that of Homo sapiens sapiens:

'so you see" it sounded more like no urn thee "it's not really relevant whether I'm Halloran or whether he's dead and I'm a kzinti with delusions. Halloran's . . . memories were more used to having an alien in his head than Telepath's were, poor bleeping bastard. The Fleet won't

be giving you any trouble, the few that are still alive will be pretty thoroughly insane.

"On the other hand," the harsh nonhuman voice continued, "remembering what happened to Fixer I really don't think it would be all that advisable to come back. And you know what? I've decided that I really don't owe any of you that much. Died for the cause already, haven't I?"

A rasping sound, something between a growl and a purr kzinti laughter. "I'm seeing a lot of things more clearly now. Amazing what a different set of nerves and hormones can do. My talent's almost

as strong now as it was . . . before, and I've got a lot less in the way of inhibitions. It's the Patriarchy that ought to be worried, but of course they'll never know."

Then a hesitation: "Tell my Sire . . . tell Dad I died a Hero, would you, Colonel?" EPILOGUE

The kzin finished grooming his pelt to a lustrous shine before he followed Medical-Technician to the deepsleep chamber of the Swift Hunter courier Flashing Claws. His face was expressionless as the cover lowered above him, and then his ears wrinkled with glee; there would be nobody to see until they arrived in the Alpha Centauri

system a decade from now.

The Patriarchy had never had a Telepath who earned a full name before. Too risky! Telepath wailed.

Kshat, Fixer thought with contempt.

Shut up both of you, Halloran replied. Or I U start thinking about salads again. All of them understood the grin that showed his/their fangs.

The Patriarchy had never had one like Halloran before, either.