

Cyborg Assault



Book #4 of the Doom Star Series

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Cyborg Assault

(Book #4 of the Doom Star Series)

by Vaughn Heppner

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Prologue

The cramped chamber reeked of disinfectants and other, more sinister chemicals. The walls were white, and they shivered from the ongoing pulse of the ship's fusion engine.

The chamber contained three people: an arbiter, a technician and a wretched prisoner. The last was a naked woman strapped to an articulated frame. A dozen cables adhered to her bruised skin, some providing nutrients, other stimulants and the rest compelling obedience.

"She's too stubborn," the arbiter said. His name was Octagon. He wore a white uniform with red tabs on the shoulders and a double row of crimson buttons on the front of the jacket. He had narrow features and suspicious eyes, and like most Jovian men, he was bald.

"I suspect she's undergone sphinx therapy," the technician said. He was a small man in a blue gown and with a deferential manner.

Octagon scowled. "You know I detest technical jargon."

The technician grew pale, and he spoke quickly. "They must have tampered with her brain, Your Guidance. It's likely impossible for her to tell us what she knows."

Octagon studied the woman. She was young and pretty, even with her shaved head, contorted muscles and sweaty skin. It had been a pleasure watching the foul Secessionist squirm. Octagon pursed his lips, giving a small headshake. No. Pleasure had nothing to do with this. He must maintain decorum and remember the tenth article of the Dictates. He had a ship to purge, and this was the first lead he gotten that might allow him to crack into the higher circles.

"It's time for a braintap," Octagon murmured.

The technician looked up in alarm. "Your Guidance, Yakov will not approve of—"

"I am the Arbiter," Octagon snapped.

The technician nervously rubbed his hands, and he spoke with caution. "A braintap is a delicate operation."

Octagon swiveled his head to gaze at the technician. "Tell me now if it is beyond your capabilities."

"Rehabilitation is not always possible afterward, Your Guidance. Our... subject is pilot-rated second-class, meaning—"

"I know what it means," Octagon hissed.

The technician began to blink rapidly.

Octagon's eyes narrowed. How deep was the Secessionist hold on ship personnel? Had they broken the technician's loyalty?

Deftly, Octagon unclipped a spy-monitor from his belt. He adjusted the settings and swept it here and there. Then he aimed it at the medical equipment, searching for bugs.

"If I've angered you—"

"Silence," Octagon said.

The technician wilted, backing up a step.

Octagon changed settings, carefully watching the monitor. Finally, he eyed the technician. "Your index is in the ninety-fourth percentile."

"I am loyal to the Dictates," the technician whispered.

"What is your moon of origin?"

"Ganymede, Your Guidance."

“The same as Yakov’s,” Octagon said.

“I received my training on Callisto and had a first-class induction rating.”

“Your rapid speech indicates nervousness, which in turn implies guilt. What do you have to be guilty about, hm?”

“I serve the Dictates, Your Guidance.”

Octagon clipped the monitor back onto his belt beside his palm-pistol. “You will begin the braintap.”

“At once,” the technician said. He hurried to a trolley and pushed it beside the prisoner’s shaved head. In moments, a buzz emanated from a cranial saw. Like a barber, the technician ran it over her head, cutting away a portion of skull. Prying it free with core-pliers, he plopped the skull-bone into a green solution.

“We save the cut in case rehabilitation is required.”

“I’m more interested in unlocking her secrets,” Octagon said.

The technician nodded, and he began to work in earnest. Soon, a blue gel lay on the exposed part of the prisoner’s brain. There were yellow streaks in the gel, connected to a glassy black ball with tiny barbs dotted around it. The technician rolled a second trolley near the prisoner’s head. It held a bulbous device with a screen. He turned it on so it hummed. That caused a tiny glimmer to begin emanating from the various barbs on the ball.

The prisoner twitched.

Octagon avidly watched the proceedings, although his gaze kept slipping down to the prisoner’s breasts, which were perfectly shaped. It was a pity to ruin such a prime specimen of womanhood. But then, she shouldn’t have joined the Secessionists. It was her own fault, and pity was a useless emotion.

“I’ve bypassed the first layer of conditioning,” the technician said, who closely watched the screen. He tapped keys, seemed to hesitate and then he tapped faster.

Shimmers played upon the glassy ball’s barbs.

Octagon moved closer, examining the prisoner’s brain. Lines of light moved through the yellow streaks in the gel. They sank into the gray matter underneath.

“I’ve reordered her synaptic connections,” the technician said. “As expected, this rerouting will expunge certain memories.”

“No! I must know her secrets.”

“This is understood,” the technician said, his deference no longer in evidence. “What we attempt to do well, we attempt to foil sphinx therapy through new connectives. Naturally, this entails neuron loss. However, the core memories are stored in multiple areas and thus withstand the brainpurge to a greater degree than the sphinx-tampered connectives.”

“When can I question her?”

The technician glanced up and quickly returned his attention to the device. “If rehabilitation is required, we must proceed with delicacy.”

Octagon pursed his lips. “My primary need is knowledge.”

“If you would allow me to add a cautionary note?”

“Yes, yes, speak,” said Octagon.

The technician frowned. “The deeper the braintap, the more difficult it is to reconnect her synapses in the old order. Sometimes there is a brain-burn, bringing imbecility.”

“I’m willing to risk that,” Octagon said.

The technician hesitated before tapping keys. The prisoner groaned as her eyelids flickered.

“What’s happening?”

“This is strange,” the technician said.

“What?”

The prisoner’s eyes snapped open. They were blank. Then confusion filled her eyes. Her mouth hung slackly and drool dribbled down her chin.

“What did you do?” Octagon demanded.

A beep began to emit from the bulky device. The technician grew pale.

“You,” the prisoner whispered in a hoarse voice. She stared at Octagon.

He scowled and then leaned nearer. He had nothing to fear, as restraints held her. “You have deviated from the Dictates,” Octagon said. “You are a Secessionist.”

The prisoner groaned, and pain contorted her features.

Octagon looked up.

The technician wiped a sleeve across a suddenly moist forehead. He typed quickly on the keypad and he kept biting his lower lip. “This shouldn’t be happening,” he whispered.

“Fix it!” Octagon said.

“I’m trying.”

Octagon put a hand on the articulated frame. Heat radiated from the prisoner’s skin. He asked, “Do you belong to a triad?”

She was staring at him again. Her lips moved, and words bubbled from her throat. “Yes,” she admitted.

Octagon’s eyes glittered. “Are you the liaison to a higher circle?”

Her lips twisted as if she tried to keep from speaking. But she said, “I am the liaison.”

Yes, it was as he suspected. Finally, he was going to break into a higher circle. “Who is your operative?” Octagon asked.

There was a loud buzz from the technician’s device. Several motes glimmered from the glass barbs. The prisoner made a horribly deep groan as every muscle went rigid.

“What occurs?” Octagon demanded.

“No, no,” the technician said, his fingers flying across the keypad.

The prisoner sighed, and the rigidity left her muscles. She relaxed and then went limp.

“Talk!” shouted Octagon. “Tell me the operative’s name.” He grabbed her shoulders and shook her, which caused cables to jiggle.

The prisoner’s mouth sagged and more drool slid down her chin.

With his thumb, Octagon peeled back an eyelid. It was like peering into an animal’s eye, a brutal beast.

“How long will she remain in this state?” Octagon asked.

The technician had grown paler. His small fingers moved listlessly over the keypad.

“I asked you a question,” Octagon said, releasing the prisoner, straightening and then adjusting his uniform.

“Something odd occurred,” the technician whispered. “I must perform an autopsy. Maybe the technician implanted a mote into her cortex.”

Octagon frowned. “Explain yourself,” he said.

“Arbiter, I can’t explain it. I attempted a braintap. I followed the standard procedures. But by what I’m seeing, a brain-burn has occurred.”

“She’s become an imbecile?”

The technician shook his head. “The memories are there, but the connectives were irretrievably burned. We should eliminate her body as a last mercy.”

Octagon walked stiffly backward. His gaze kept flickering from the prisoner to the technician.

~~“I did my best, Your Guidance. But her memories are beyond us now. Perhaps—”~~

Octagon pressed a stud on his belt. The door to the operating chamber swished open. A squat man with long, dangling arms, heavily-muscular arms entered. He was a myrmidon, a gene-warped creature.

“Take him to my quarters,” Octagon said.

“Arbiter!” the technician cried. “I tried my best. You must believe me.”

The myrmidon moved fast, and his large hands proved irresistible. The technician cried out a second time, his arms twisted behind his back. Shoved by the myrmidon, the technician stumbled from the door.

“Please!” the small technician sobbed. “I tried.”

“Hm,” said Octagon. “We shall see. We shall see.”

The technician and myrmidon exited the operating chamber. The door slid shut.

Octagon regarded the inert prisoner. This was infuriating. He’d had a lead into a Secessionist trial one aboard a military vessel. The prisoner could have opened up everything for him. Octagon snarled in frustration, and he drew his palm-pistol. He should remain calm. He was an Arbiter after all. He lived by the Dictates and with decorum.

He aimed, squeezed the trigger and shot the drooling prisoner. Sight of the smoking hole in his forehead helped compose his features. He clipped the pistol back onto his belt. He must display serenity for the good of the crew. First, however, he was going to have a small chat with the technician. They would chat after he attached a shock collar to the bungler’s neck. The thought brought a tingle of pleasure to Octagon’s lower abdomen.

As the fusion engine pulsed, as the bulkheads around him shivered, Octagon headed for the door. Nothing must stand in the way of the continued implementation of the Dictates, the most perfect life-system devised by men. Certainly, this crew wasn’t going to defeat him. By Plato’s Bones, he was going to crack this nest of intriguers if he had to brain-burn the lot of them. Even Yakov might end up on the obedience frame. The thought brought a grin to Octagon’s lips. Then he exited the operating chamber, hurrying through a narrow corridor to his quarters.

In 2351, the Jupiter System thrived as one of the richest in resources. The population there swelled and their wealth grew, despite the intense radiation belts and the heavy gravity-well. The reason was the gas giant itself. Like Saturn, Uranus and Neptune, Jupiter's upper atmosphere contained massive quantities of deuterium and helium-3. These plentiful fuels drove the system's fusion economy.

Automated factories floating in Jupiter's upper atmosphere collected the deuterium and the most important helium-3, an isotope of helium. At scheduled intervals, heavy boosters lifted the fuels to the nearest moons, the Inner group, where vast storage facilities stood. In historical terms, the gas giants were like the Solar System's Persian Gulf, in the days when oil ran the Earth's economy.

Plentiful fusion power had allowed the first Deuterium Barons to turn the otherwise inhospitable moons into vast industrial basins. That in turn had enticed more colonists seeking escape from the nascent Social Unity Party. The vast exodus of wealthy, intellectual and daring people had been the driving force behind the increasingly harsh Anti-Emigration Laws of Inner Planets.

The growing wealthy class of the Jupiter System had turned toward intellectual pursuits. This held truest for the rich on Callisto, the fourth Galilean Moon. Many there had become absorbed with philosophy, and became particularly concerned with the examined life. This had inspired the Dictator to a codex of axioms that governed a neo-Socratic lifestyle.

Backed by fusion-powered heavy industry, the lords of Callisto had created the Guardian Fleet. For over one hundred years, the Fleet grew in political power until it ruled the system. Serving as a velvet-covered platinum fist, the Fleet had ensured Callisto's dominance over the rest of Jupiter's sixty-two moons.

If Social Unity propaganda was the measure, the Guardian Fleet was one of the strongest in the Solar System. Many claimed it was the reason for building the Doom Stars. Others said the lust for gain access to the deuterium and helium-3 rich gas giants was the real reason. Whatever the case, in 2351, the Jupiter System was awash in wealth, ships and inhabited moons.

"I'm not receiving any video, *Rousseau*," Marten said.

Marten sat at the controls of his shuttle, the *Mayflower*. He glanced at a note taped to the board: *Double-check everything*. The shuttle had originally been designed to transport eighty Highborn in comfort. With its modifications, the shuttle had proven roomy enough for Marten, Omi and Osadar.

As Marten waited for an answer, he leaned back and stared out of the polarized window. Visible through it was the vast gas giant, the largest planet in the Solar System. Its mass was two point five times as great as the rest of the planets combined. Presently, the Great Red Spot on Jupiter seethed with movement.

The *Mayflower* was in a medium orbit and outside of the worst of Jupiter's radioactive magnetosphere.

The gas giant's magnetic field was ten times as strong as Earth's field. The sun-side of the magnetosphere acted as a buffer that deflected the solar wind around Jupiter. The magnetic tail

reached almost as far as Saturn's orbital path.

Marten pressed more buttons, running a diagnostic, seeing if any high-intensity radio bursts might be interfering with the video-feed. The gas giant often gave off radio bursts at ten-meter wavelengths. Jupiter's violent upper atmosphere also created super-bolts of lighting. Those bolts gave off a million times more energy than a lightning bolt on Earth and often interfered with ship-to-ship transmission. Marten detected only minimal interference. What was causing the video blackout then?

His frowning highlighted Marten's angular cheeks and his intense blue eyes as he watched the blank vidscreen. His blond buzz-cut matched his lean build. Because of the long trip, his worn silver suit was badly faded at the elbows and knees.

"Come on," Marten muttered, moving toggles. He expected the screen to waver, flicker and then he would see his first Jovian.

The warship *Rousseau* was a dark blot, several kilometers away. According to the specs Marten had been studying, it was an *Aristotle*-class dreadnaught. That made it the largest class of ship produced in the Jovian System. It was roughly spherical, a giant ball bearing with asteroid-like particle shields. It dwarfed the *Mayflower* and contained hundreds of crewmembers. Marten had read somewhere that *Aristotle*-class dreadnaughts had been built to operate and fight on their own, not just as part of a fleet.

"*Rousseau*—" Marten began to say.

"Prepare for a boarding inspection, *Mayflower*."

Marten opened a channel to Omi's room. "You'd better get up here," he said.

"I'm coming," Omi said.

Marten tapped the console. The free Martians had been beaming endless shots of the cyborgs that had died in the Mars System nearly a year ago. The Jovians must understand the cyborg danger. Marten grimaced. How was he supposed to explain Osadar to them?

"Is your communications equipment faulty?" Marten asked. "I'm not picking up any video images."

"There is a malfunction, yes," the *Rousseau*'s com-officer said.

Oh. "How many people are you sending?"

"One officer." A clanging noise occurred over the radio-link. "We have launched the pod *Mayflower*. Prepare for boarding in twenty minutes. *Rousseau* out."

Marten cut the link, and he stared out of the window at the dark blot of the warship. Yes, he could visually make out a flare, the pod's exhaust.

His heart rate quickened. Maybe he could hide Osadar and keep that little surprise for later. He knew he should have radioed ahead about her. He'd asked Osadar about it, since she'd grown up in the Jupiter System. She'd rejected the idea. When he'd asked her why, she had said that events would squash all their hopes. But why accelerate the day of doom?

The cyborg had reason for her pessimism, but Marten didn't share it. However, a long life of bitter surprises had taught him caution concerning authorities—any authorities.

Marten opened a channel to Osadar's room.

"The time has come," Osadar said in her strange voice, speaking before he could.

"You've been monitoring the conversation?"

"I have already armed myself," she said.

Marten unbuckled his straps, wondering if he should order Omi to hurry. They'd been avoiding each other for weeks. Cramped quarters for these endless months had put a strain between them. It was probably inevitable. It was human.

Marten glanced at the flaring engine again, signaling the approach of *Rousseau*'s pod. His g

twisted with nervousness. They'd reached a new system, a free system and a rich one. Would the people here accept Osadar's strange story?

Marten pushed for the hatch, floating in the weightlessness. It was time to meet his first Jovian.

Marten and Omi floated near the *Mayflower's* airlock. Omi seemed much like before with his muscled shoulders and bullet-shaped head. Each of them wore a Gauss needler. The metallic, sliver ammunition was ejected through magnetic impulse. The needlers were set on low so that the sliver would not puncture the shuttle's skin. Each of them had donned a vacc-suit, minus the helmet, as the suits were their cleanest garments.

"What do the Jovians look like?" Omi asked.

Marten unhooked a handscanner, which was keyed to the ship's computer. The computer controlled the video cameras outside the shuttle.

As Marten watched, the pod braked with hot exhaust. It was tear-dropped-shaped, and its polarized window was black, hiding the Jovian pilot. Slowly, the pod eased beside the *Mayflower*, which was many times larger than the pod.

"I don't see anyone yet," Marten said.

"I mean when they first hailed us," Omi said.

"Their com-equipment was faulty. It didn't show any vid-shots."

"That sounds suspicious," Omi said.

Marten shrugged as he studied his handscanner. Trust an ex-gang enforcer to be distrusting.

Omi leaned near and glanced at the tiny screen. That annoyed Marten, but he still moved the scanner, allowing Omi a better look.

"Their boarding tube's snaking out," Omi said.

Marten tilted the scanner back to him. Sure enough, a docking tube stretched between the pod and the *Mayflower's* outer hatch. That was quick work, seeing as how the pod had barely matched velocity with them. On the scanner, the pod seemed motionless, but both space vehicles moved in an orbit around Jupiter. Both ships thus had an appreciable speed. Usually, it took time for pilots to adjust velocities just right between two spaceships. The stretching tube was flexible, but it could only flex so much. That the pod's pilot already sent the docking tube... it spoke of extreme self-confidence.

"These Jovians are good," Omi said.

Marten nodded. The magnetized flex-tube made noise against the *Mayflower's* hull. He heard faint hissing sounds as the tube pressurized.

"See anyone moving?" Omi asked.

"The tube is dark."

Omi glanced at Marten.

Marten kept his eyes on the scanner. He'd gotten tired of looking at Omi several months ago.

"Seems like they're going to a lot of trouble to keep themselves from being seen," Omi said.

"I suppose," Marten said.

"Are Jovians usually this paranoid?"

By the movement in it, someone was already in the flex-tube, maybe more than one. Marten recalled that the *Rousseau's* com-officer had said one boarding-officer would inspect them. The first worm of doubt now seeped into his gut.

"How many sets of feet do you see?" Marten asked. He meant feet pressing against the flex-tube.

Omi studied the scanner. "Three," he said.

A *clang* outside the *Mayflower's* hull startled Marten. The outer hatch was opening. Why would the

com-officer have lied about the number of people boarding the shuttle?

“—Move!” Marten shouted.

Both ex-shock troopers propelled themselves away from the airlock. Omi jammed on his helmet sealing it. Marten was only seconds slower. Each squeezed through the nearest hatch. Omi turned and began to close it.

“Wait,” Marten said. Clamped onto the wall was a heavy plasma cannon. In Earth-like gravity, the cannon would need a tripod mount for a soldier to use. Because of weightlessness, it was possible for one man to wield it here.

The airlock began to open.

Marten chinned his visor shut and moved away from the hatch. Omi eased the hatch so it was almost closed. Both men stared at Marten’s upheld handscanner.

Instead of one, three tall beings stepped aboard the *Mayflower*. Their helmet visors were black. Each figure looked quickly around. One reached up and undid his helmet’s clamps.

Marten moistened his mouth as he activated the plasma cannon. He felt it vibrate and heard it hum. It was a wicked weapon, obviously not meant for such confined quarters. The cannon shot a superheated charge of plasma. Such a charge would destroy the airlock and open the *Mayflower* space.

Omi cursed softly.

On the small screen of the handscanner, a cyborg swiveled its plasti-flesh features back and forth in tiny, machine-like jerks.

Marten and Omi traded startled glances. Marten nodded curtly. Omi only hesitated a moment, then he swung open the hatch. Marten dropped into position and aimed the plasma cannon at the cyborgs.

It was a frozen moment.

Then the cyborgs began to draw stubby tanglers. As fast as they were, Marten had time to think of *Tanglers*. They meant to capture us. Instead of curses, Marten pulled the trigger.

The heavy plasma cannon bucked as it spewed orange death. Marten had forgotten to set himself. The discharge applied Newton’s third law of motion. For every action, there was a reaction. The discharging cannon shoved Marten backward.

Omi clanged the hatch shut. Three splats against it told of tangle-balls hitting. Then the *Mayflower* shuddered gently.

Marten lifted the handscanner, staring at a fuzzy screen.

“Now what?” asked Omi.

“Cyborgs!” Marten hissed. “The cyborgs are in the Jupiter System.” His heart pounded with adrenaline. “All those months—”

“Cyborgs are in our ship,” Omi said, in his maddeningly calm way. “They’re beside us in our warship.”

Marten blinked rapidly as he clutched the plasma cannon. Cyborgs captured normal people and put them into horrible machines. That’s what Osadar had told them. They converted you into a cyborg. Death was preferable to capture.

“Marten?”

Marten kept blinking. Were the Jovians allied with the cyborgs?

“Marten?” Omi asked.

Marten quit blinking as he stared at Omi. “We have to kill the cyborgs in the pod,” he said. He was surprised at how calm he sounded.

“Any idea how?” asked Omi.

“Close the hatch behind us and then open this one,” Marten said, dipping the nozzle of the plasma cannon toward it.

“What if a cyborg survived?”

“Shut the hatch!” Marten hissed. “We don’t have time to jabber.”

Omi stared at Marten through his helmet’s faceplate and then he floated toward the rear hatch.

Marten raised the handscanner, using his thumb to click a keypad. “Osadar?” he said. “You’d better be ready.”

“I’m in the control room,” she said. They were using tight-link communications. “The *Rousseau* is hailing us, asking what happened.”

“You can’t answer because our communications are out,” Marten said. “Can you tell if the person hailing us is human or cyborg?”

“By the voice, human,” Osadar said.

“Ready,” Omi said beside Marten.

Marten took a deep breath. “Open it,” he whispered, “and then brace yourself for decompression.” Marten turned on his magnetic hooks, sealing his vacc-suit to the wall.

Omi opened the forward hatch. Escaping air smashed it open as the vacuum of space rushed in. In seconds, the air was gone from their chamber.

Marten shut off his hooks and drifted through the hatch. The wrecked airlock had a plasma hole that went straight through to space. Metal had melted and frozen in twisted globs. Three cyborgs drifted in the chamber. Two were missing part of their torsos and emitting blue sparks. The third lacked a head.

“The shuttle is secure,” Omi whispered over the tight-link.

“See if you can open the airlock,” Marten said.

“Are you sure that’s wise?”

“Listen to me,” Marten said. “Cyborgs do everything fast. We have no time to waste. Open the airlock now!”

Omi floated to the airlock as Marten checked the plasma cannon. This was bad. He only had two charges left. Then he’d have to hook it to a charging unit.

“The *Rousseau* has become insistent,” Osadar said over the tight-link.

“Keep them talking,” Marten said.

Omi cranked the damaged airlock wider, enough to allow a man to squeeze through.

Marten drifted nearer. They had to kill all the cyborgs in the pod. Their one stroke of good fortune was that the pod had maneuvered around the *Mayflower*, meaning that the airlock was aimed away from the *Rousseau*.

The long flex-tube detached from the *Mayflower*’s hull and retracted into the pod.

Cyborgs always move fast.

Marten clutched the heavy plasma cannon and eased into the airlock. While staying as far back as he could from the outer opening, he studied the tear-dropped-shaped pod. It was smooth, dark and had huge lettering on the side he couldn’t read. The black window by the front... was someone staring out of it and watching the airlock?

What should I do? If they send more cyborgs—

A hatch slid open on the pod. There was a flicker of movement. A humanoid shape jumped out of the hatch. Hydrogen spray trickled from its back. No, that was a thruster-pack. The cyborg might be cradling a weapon that Marten couldn’t see from here.

Marten swore softly as he knelt in the airlock. He brought up the plasma cannon. He knew he should wait until the cyborg was closer. But time was against them. He had to kill all the cyborgs.

the pod... and on the *Rousseau*. Clearly, that was impossible. But if he wanted to keep on living, Marten Kluge, he was going to have to achieve the impossible.

Marten braced himself against a wall, targeted the bastard, and squeezed off two shots of roiling orange plasma. The first glob missed. The second orange blob consumed the cyborg's midsection.

Marten made a strangled laugh. He hated cyborgs. He dreaded them. He watched the pod, waiting for some signal concerning its next move.

What are they thinking over there in the Rousseau?

"Marten," Osadar said over the tight-link.

Here it comes, he thought.

"A cyborg is on the com-link," she said. "It's demanding to know what has occurred. Do you have any idea what I should say?"

"Can you mimic a controlled cyborg?"

"Not efficiently," Osadar said. "There are too many variables that—"

"Open a channel and try to mimic a controlled cyborg the best you can. Tell them you have secured the ship. Then disconnect the com-unit. By then, I'll be there with you."

"They'll destroy us," Osadar said.

"We're dead anyway. This way... this way we might be able to hurt them before we die."

"I fail to—"

"Please, Osadar," Marten said. His mouth felt bone dry. It was hard to talk. "Just do it while they're still wondering what could have gone wrong."

"Understood," said Osadar. "I am complying."

On his way to the shuttle's control module, the answer came. Marten didn't like it, but it seemed like the only way to survive the cyborgs. Either the melded creatures possessed a Jovian warship with a skeleton number of humans left, or the cyborgs were allied to the Jovians who controlled it. Those Jovians would all have to die if he, Omi and Osadar were to survive. That was a grim thing, but he wasn't going to go soft now. He had clawed and fought his way out to Jupiter. He would claw and fight until he took his last breath, God willing.

Marten grimaced as he recalled his mother's most quoted saying. She'd died in the Ring-World Factory around Mercury. That seemed like a long time ago now. Political Harmony Corps had come for her then. As much as Marten hated PHC, it had still been composed of humans. The cyborgs—he was doing the humans aboard the *Rousseau* a favor killing them. If he could pull this off, that is.

Marten told the others his plan and they moved fast throughout the *Mayflower*. In six minutes, they met back at the airlock. Each of them had a hand-case and wore a vacc-suit with a helmet.

Osadar had already shrugged on a thruster-pack. Omi hooked tether lines between them.

"This will never work," Osadar said over the tight-link. Her facial features were as much plastic as human, as much a mask as a face.

"I enjoy useless gestures," Marten said.

Osadar stared at him.

"It's a joke," Marten said.

"Useless, yes," Osadar said. She floated to the open airlock and pushed off toward the *Rousseau* drifting pod.

Omi jumped next, and afterward Marten jumped. Using her former piloting skills, Osadar maneuvered toward the pod, keeping the *Mayflower* between them and the *Rousseau*.

As he floated behind Omi, Marten studied his handscanner. Using it, he initiated a specially coded

program aboard the *Mayflower's* computer. The shuttle's engine thrust particles from the exhaust. Gently, the shuttle eased toward the *Rousseau* in the distance.

Soon, Marten floated through the open hatch of the cyborg pod. This vessel had one-fifth the space as the *Mayflower*. They would not be making any intersystem journeys in it. They might not make any journeys whatsoever. Shortly after boarding, the three of them crammed into the pod's control room. Voices spoke out of the com-unit. The voices spoke in a high-speed chatter.

"Can you understand them?" Marten asked.

From within her helmet, Osadar nodded solemnly.

"Well?" Marten asked.

"They are getting ready to fire on the *Mayflower*."

"You have to tell them that everything is fine," Marten said. "Tell them the other cyborgs are piloting the vessel to the warship."

"They will never believe me," Osadar said.

"Do it anyway."

Osadar sat at the single pilot's chair. Omi had already shut the hatch and pressurized the cabin. Opening her visor, Osadar opened a channel to the *Rousseau*.

Marten tore off his vacc-suit gloves and ran his fingers over the handscanner, using its keypad to pilot the shuttle.

Osadar was having a deliberate and unimaginative conversation with the cyborgs. The enemy queries were getting closer to deducing that the assault had failed.

"Engage the pod's engines," Marten whispered to Osadar. "Get us out of here."

Her fingers flew over the pod's controls.

Marten slid onto the floor and braced his back against a bulkhead. Omi did likewise.

Through the tiny screen of the handscanner, Marten studied the *Rousseau*. The scanner picked up the feed from the *Mayflower's* forward cameras. The Jovian dreadnaught was similar in configuration to a Social Unity battleship, but with a more compact design. It was like a giant ball bearing with asteroid-like particle shields. One of them was locked open, revealing a hanger bay inside. The pod had no doubt come from there. If the bay was still open....

Marten watched the screen. He saw the hanger door lurch and begin to close. The *Mayflower* could fit through it. The heavy particle shield also began rotating into a defensive posture.

"Give us full thrust!" Marten shouted. His fingers typed over the keypad.

Over three kilometers away on the *Mayflower*, the warfare pod they had installed back in the Mars System activated. The shuttle possessed five Wasp 2000 missiles. Those missiles entered the launch tubes.

Several things happened at once then on the *Mayflower*. The engine engaged at full thrust, pushing the shuttle faster toward the much larger *Rousseau*. The Wasp 2000s ignited from the launch tubes leading the charge at the *Aristotle*-class dreadnaught. Almost immediately, the dreadnaught's point-defense cannons opened up. They targeted the missiles. A Wasp 2000 disintegrated. Another blew into a plume of light, while a third exploded in space, slightly damaging the *Mayflower* behind it. The fourth and fifth missiles slammed against the warship. One struck a particle shield, harmlessly blowing away asteroid-like rock. The last flew through the closing hanger door and exploded.

The hanger door froze.

The *Mayflower* closed with the *Rousseau*. The dreadnaught's point-defense cannons began to target the shuttle.

As growing G-forces pushed Marten against the pod's bulkhead, he pressed a button.

The accelerating *Mayflower* ignited its fusion engine, blowing the atomic pile in a nuclear explosion of obliterating power.

The Highborn Praetor commanded the *Thutmosis III*, and he was worried as his badly damaged missile-ship sped toward Jupiter.

The giant ship was a stealth vessel, painted with anti-sensor coating and colored as black as the void of space. Almost a year ago, they had circled the Sun gaining terrific velocity. Then they had broken Sun-orbit and shut off the ship's engines. Like a rock from a slingshot, they had sped silently toward Mars. At the right moment, the Praetor had launched a decisive salvo of missiles and drones. Unfortunately for the crew, they had one other mission to accomplish. Using teleoptic scopes and sensors, they'd passed Mars, the Praetor had relayed precious combat information to the Doom Stars.

It was then that Corporal Bess O'Connor of the former Phobos moon-station had logged a blip of lightguide message. With it, the SU commander of the former moon-station had launched hunter-killer missiles after the *Thutmosis III*. Phobos no longer existed. Highborn asteroid busters had destroyed the Martian moon during the battle. As a final quirk of fate, one of the deceased moon hunter-killers had struck the *Thutmosis III* long after Phobos' destruction. The strike had killed eight percent of the *Thutmosis III*'s crew and crippled the missile-ship.

For many harrowing months afterward, the Praetor and the last survivors had labored intensely for effect repairs. Their problems had nearly been unsolvable, as the *Thutmosis III* had sped from Mars under terrific velocity. The hunter-killer had struck the ship before it had begun deceleration.

With the horribly damaged engines, the *Thutmosis III* had been unable to decelerate. For everyone aboard ship, it had looked hopeless. Unable to brake, the ship would leave the Solar System like a bullet fired from an inter-solar rifle. The crew would die hundreds maybe even a thousand AUs out of the Solar System of old age, starvation or asphyxiation.

The Praetor had taken their one chance, repairing the damaged engines enough to dare nudge the ship in a path toward distant Uranus. During the journey there, they had labored around the clock taking stims to keep alert. Using the distant gas giant's gravity-well as a pivoting post and engaging the engines for a greater length of time, the Praetor had redirected the ship at an angle toward Jupiter. He had also managed to decelerate the vessel slightly.

The vast orbital paths of the Outer Planets gas giants and the extreme distances between them meant that a shallow curve could achieve this last hope.

Now the ship sped toward the largest planet in the Solar System. Unlike the *Mayflower* that had headed from the Inner Planets outward, the *Thutmosis III* headed from the Outer Planets inward. It was the reason why the much slower *Mayflower* had reached Jupiter before the much faster moving *Thutmosis III*.

The Praetor sat in his command chair on the bridge. It was one of the least damaged sections of the ship. The Praetor had become gaunt this last year. He had washed-out pink eyes, a wide face and a strange demeanor, which had been made stranger by a long and steady diet of stims. There was the tiniest tic now under his left eye.

The modules around him were empty and the bridge lights were dim. A constant whine sounded in the background. It came from deep inside the ship, from its tortured fusion engines. At times, the whine climbed an octave. Whenever that occurred, the tic under his left eye became more pronounced.

The Praetor pushed his big head against the rest of his command chair. Jupiter neared. Soon now he would retire to the acceleration couches. He would strap in. They would engage the engines and

hope the repairs held. If they didn't—

The Praetor shuddered and closed his eyes. That made the tic under his left eye more visible as he jerked the loose skin there. The Praetor had lost weight as concern had stolen his appetite. He would not face anyone or anything man-to-man or chest-to-chest. Nothing in the universe frightened him physically. Give him a foe to battle—

His eyes snapped open. Anger filled his face. Grand Admiral Cassius had given him this command post.

The Praetor's nostrils flared. "I won the Third Battle for Mars," he whispered. "It was my missiles that opened up the enemy to the Doom Star lasers."

His upper lip curled, and he gazed into some unseen distance. "You shall not steal my victory from me, Cassius. I'm coming back. You can count on that."

A strange laugh bubbled from his throat. He shivered, and he was unaware that he did so. When the *Thutmosis III* had hurdled out of the Solar System—

The Praetor closed his eyes again. He had never understood loneliness until then. The idea of his ship rocketing outside of the Solar System and into the emptiness of space—the void was a *thing*, a beast that had spread in his soul. It had smothered courage, smothered daring and intellect alike. Shooting outside the Solar System, alone, with no hope of seeing Earth again, with—

"Enough," the Praetor whispered.

He moistened his mouth and forced himself to study the faint holomap before him. His greatest enemy was velocity, speed. He had built up great speed while circling the Sun. Now he needed to shed that speed. A small part of him was tempted to aim directly at Jupiter and crash into it. That would end the agony. That would end the loneliness that he'd felt while hurtling toward Uranus, unsure whether the barely-repaired engines could slow them enough as they whipped past the gas giant.

If this didn't work—

"It will work," he rumbled. He lifted a fist and hit the arm of his command chair. In the past, he would have struck hard and forcefully. Now, it was a feeble gesture. The loneliness, the emptiness of deep space—

Why did such loneliness exist?

"Are you afraid?" he whispered at himself. "Are you a coward, Praetor? Or will you survive so you can spit in Grand Admiral Cassius's face?"

That was the antidote to his worries—anger, injustice and revenge. He must cling to them. No, he must gird himself with anger, with the sense of injustice committed against him and with thoughts of vengeance. He must buckle them like armor against the awfulness that lurked out there in the empty void of space.

Soon, he must engage the engines. He would have to time it right, letting Jupiter's vast gravity-well help slow them. The engines and gravity-well needed to slow the ship to less than Jupiter's escape velocity.

Could they do it? Could the badly damaged ship stand the strain? And if they did it, what awaited him in the Jupiter System?

That was the least of the Praetor's worries. He was Highborn. The pathetic Social Unity humans had joined with cyborgs. Those cyborgs had proven deadly. A Doom Star had died. But neither cyborgs nor Homo sapiens had proven tough enough to face the Highborn and survive.

The Praetor laughed as he pushed out of the command chair. If he could halt the *Thutmosis III*, he knew what he'd do in the Jupiter System. He would conquer it for the Highborn. He would show the ranking warriors of the Master Race that he was greater than Grand Admiral Cassius. With a crippled

ship, he would conquer a planetary system. What Highborn had ever achieved that?

The facial tic quivered as the background engine whine rose an octave. First, he needed to shed the ship's velocity. Soon, the survivors would strap onto the acceleration couches as they made their last attempt to survive in the Solar System.

If the engines failed, or if it looked as if they might fail, then he would aim the *Thutmosis III* at Jupiter. Or he would crash the ship into a human vessel or into an orbiting habitat. If he was about to die, he would try to kill as much of the universe as he could. Why he felt this way, he had no idea. He just knew it would make him feel better killing others if he himself wasn't going to be allowed to live.

When the *Mayflower* exploded, Marten, Omi and Osadar had already been moving away from it the stolen pod.

With their head start and by accelerating at full thrust, they outran any appreciable heat damage. Heat from a nuclear explosion in space had the shortest kill-radius of the three dangers. It also helped that the pod's exhaust nozzle was aimed at the blast. A heat shield between the exhaust and the inhabitable quarters of the pod dampened what might have otherwise proven fatal.

The EMP blast washed over the pod's electronics and fused several key functions, including life support. It also knocked out engine control, which didn't really matter as the most critical damage came from a piece of shrapnel. The size of an Old Earth penny, the jagged shrapnel sliced through the pod's exhaust. Then it sliced through the heat shield and the engine. Lastly, it ricocheted out of the pod, barely missing the command chamber.

The penny-sized piece of shrapnel damaged a heat coil, causing the engine overload. Luckily, although ship engine controls were fused, the emergency detachment sequence wasn't. It activated and began the procedure. With a shudder, the engine-half of the pod separated from the forward compartments, but both halves still possessed the same heading and velocity. Fortunately, the pod designers had considered that possibility.

A red strobe-light washed the command chamber as a klaxon wailed.

"Hang on!" shouted Osadar.

All three of them had already sealed their vacc-suits. Thus, they spoke via radio.

The command chamber shook as a non-lethal blast violently separated the pod. Emergency hydrogen-thrust now accelerated them away from the engine compartment. Fifty seconds later and through the polarized window, Marten caught a glimpse of a white flash.

They waited. The explosion had obviously created shrapnel, shrapnel that could possibly destroy their compartment.

After two minutes had elapsed, Marten said over their helmet radios, "It looks like we made it."

"Yes. Harmony has been achieved," Osadar said from the pilot's chair. "We are sealed in a speeding coffin, doomed to certain death."

Marten made a harsh sound. "I've been in worse situations. We're alive. We've escaped a wretched fate and now must rely on our wits to survive."

"Fate haunts you," Osadar said. "Whatever you do, you are doomed."

"You're wrong," Marten said. "Political Harmony Corps, Highborn, cyborgs, everyone has had their shot at me. I'm still alive and now we're in the Jupiter System, not lost between Mercury and Venus. We should be able to rig a distress beacon."

"To call more cyborgs onto us," Osadar said.

"Do cyborgs control the entire system?" Omi asked.

"You'd think we would have picked that up on our radio during the journey here," Marten said. "There would have been fighting. But we've heard nothing about that."

"Yet they are in the Jupiter System," said Osadar. "They possess Jovian warships."

"One less than before," Marten said, with a curl to his lip.

"Never fear. More will come. It is inevitable."

Marten squinted at Osadar. Listening to her, he hardened his resolve to do something. He began to

examine the tiny command chamber. Soon, he'd torn off half the panels to see if he could find something. They needed to recycle the air in their vacc-suits, to find a way to open the hatch—the crazy pod didn't have manual override. What ship designer had left that out? What did that say about the Jovians? Had some of them really allied with cyborgs?

A sea of stars glittered outside the speeding coffin, as Osadar had called it. Jupiter was behind them. Marten could no longer see the gas giant. Sixty-three different asteroids and large moons made up this system, all orbiting Jupiter.

There. Marten could make out a yellow moon. It had to be Io, the one that spewed sulfur dioxide into space.

During the trip here, he'd studied the *Mayflower's* computer files, reading what it had on the Jupiter System. He'd also questioned Osadar.

Jupiter had a Confederation made up of unequal members. Of the four Galilean moons—the biggest moons in the system—Io orbited the gas giant the closest. Io received massive doses of radiation. A unshielded person would receive 3,600 rems a day. Five hundred rems over a few days brought death.

Jupiter spewed radiation and heat, twice as much heat as it received from the Sun. Anyone living on Io needed constant protection. Jupiter's massive gravitation and proximity and the gravity from nearby Europa and Ganymede pulled and pushed at Io. The planetary body constantly stretched like a rubber band. That friction heated the insides of Io enough to create the most active volcanoes in the Solar System. It also created permanent lava lakes. Those lakes were Io's prized possession. Fissionable materials spewed up from the moon's core. Those fissionables helped feed the system's reactors. It meant that lava miners on floating platforms and under harsh radioactive conditions made up the majority of Io's population.

The second Galilean moon—Europa—also received massive amounts of radiation, five hundred and forty rems a day. Ice one-hundred kilometers thick covered the surface, with liquid water below. The ice mantle made Europa the smoothest planetary body in the Solar System.

While staring at Io, Marten wondered if the pod had enough radiation shielding. He shook his head. How did it help him worrying about that now? He had to fix the air-recycler first, attach water and waste tubes to their vacc-suits. If he failed, they would die in less than a day.

Marten went back to the panels and began to work.

Three days later, Marten sat back in despair. They had air, but no extra water and their suit disposal systems were near their limit. His stomach growled. He was hungry and tired. According to his best estimate, they had traveled at least twenty-one thousand kilometers from the cyborg-infested dreadnaught.

Omi floated near the sealed hatch. Osadar sat in the pilot's chair, staring out of the window.

Marten picked up a calibrating wrench. He had to keep trying.

"What's that?" Osadar whispered.

It took Marten several seconds to respond. "What do you see?"

Osadar pointed at the window.

"Stars?" asked Marten.

Osadar swiveled in the pilot's chair. Behind her helmet's visor, she had an elongated face that suited her elongated body. Her arms and legs were titanium girders with hydraulic joints, presently hidden by her vacc-suit. Silver sockets cupped black plastic eyes, with tiny red dots for pupils.

Marten recalled that cyborgs had enhanced vision.

Osadar faced the window again. "There is a flare of light. A vessel is braking, likely matching

velocities with us. That means the cyborgs have found us.”

With his heart beating faster, Marten floated toward the window. He saw nothing but stars. Wait far in the distance, one of the stars pulsed the slightest bit.

“Do you wish me to kill you?” Osadar asked.

“Listen to her,” Omi said hoarsely.

“I entered the conversion machine,” Osadar told him. “It peels off your skin, removes organs—”

“No!” Marten said. “We keep fighting.”

“Once you’re on the conveyer,” said Osadar, “you will wish you had chosen otherwise.”

“If it comes to that, Omi can shoot me.”

“You are mere humans,” said Osadar, “with pathetic human reflexes. Once you decide to shoot each other, you will already be tangled and on your way to conversion.”

“You’re depressed,” Marten said. “You know what helps me get out of my depression?”

“Yes, your inability to correctly assess reality.”

“I get angry. I get angry with people or cyborgs trying to use me. I’ve learned you have to be sometimes. You do it, waiting for your one opportunity to strike back.”

“Bravado is useless against the cyborgs,” said Osadar.

“The cyborgs lost on Mars,” Marten said.

“That was a minor setback,” Osadar said. “Social Unity and the Highborn are even more doomed now than before the Battle for Mars.”

“That’s an odd way to look at it.”

Osadar shook her head. “I believe the Highborn have frightened the Neptunian Web-Mind. That will make it even more ruthless than before.”

“How could that be possible?” Marten asked.

Osadar stared into space.

Marten glanced back at Omi. Omi shrugged. Marten studied the dot. It seemed brighter than before, making his gut twist. More cyborgs—he had no idea how to defeat them this time.

Osadar spoke again. “I do not know how, Marten Kluge. But I know that whatever the cyborgs have decided to do, it will be to destroy the Highborn. A sense of fear will compel them.”

“Can computers fear?”

“They are not computers, but symbiotic creatures of flesh and machine. Beings of any kind are always more dangerous when they fear their enemy, for then they fight with the ruthlessness of terror.”

Fear bit into Marten as the bloom of starry brightness began to turn into a spaceship. How could he defeat the cyborgs a second time? He had no idea.

The ship was a small asteroid or a large meteor. To Marten, staring out of the pod's window, seemed as if someone had magnetized the inter-solar rock. Then that someone had brushed it over planetary junkyard. Pipes, tanks, tubes, missile-clusters, engine-exhausts, globes and other assorted junk stuck to it. He suspected that the life-supporting chambers were buried in the center of the meteor. Instead of adding particle shields to a regular ship, the builders had started with a tiny asteroid and added to it.

Using his handscanner, he studied the ship's dimensions. It was smaller than the *Rousseau* had been.

"A *Thales*-class vessel," Osadar said. "They were being phased out before the war with Soci Unity thirteen years ago. The near total annihilation of the Jovian expeditionary fleet returned them favor."

"That makes it a military vessel."

"And therefore the probability is ninety percent that it is under cyborg control," Osadar said.

Marten bit his lip as his gut curled. They had nothing to fight with but two Gauss needlers. He hated the helpless feeling. He should have recharged the portable plasma cannon.

"I'm picking up something on my headphones," Omi said. "They're asking if anyone is alive."

"Do not answer," Osadar said.

"Should we just sit here and die until our vacc-suits give out?" Marten asked. "Answer them."

"You will regret it," Osadar said.

Marten fiddled with his helmet radio, hearing nothing but static. The EMP blast from the *Mayflower* had damaged it. He was unable to pick up anything from the ship outside. It was hard enough understanding Omi and Osadar.

"They've acknowledged," said Omi.

In seeming despair, Osadar bent forward and rested her helmeted forehead on the control panel.

"We'll kill the first ones," Marten told her.

Osadar said nothing.

Marten watched the meteor-ship. A piece of the junkyard fired jets, detaching itself from the small asteroid. It was a black globe, probably the same size as their original pod.

Here we go again.

As Marten watched the globe ease toward them, a headache spiked a point between his eyes. Did cyborgs control the *Thales*-class warship? Or were Jovians allied with cyborgs? None of this made any sense.

Forty-six harrowing minutes later, Marten set his Gauss needler at high velocity. Then he waited with a tripping heart as the red flare of a slowly moving laser-torch cut open their tomb. Omi stood beside him, with his own needler out.

Marten clunked his helmet against Omi's as he chinned off his radio. They would speak through the metal of their helmets. "If it looks like they're going to capture us..." Marten said.

"Yeah," Omi said, his voice sounding tinny and faraway, "in the heart."

"In the heart," Marten agreed.

The laser-torch cut its last section of bulkhead. Someone with a clamp on the other side removed

the section. The being poked its head in, and stopped short.

Marten's tongue felt raspy and his heart hammered as he knelt to the side. He aimed his needler at the enemy faceplate. He liked that his hand was steady and that his voice didn't crack.

"The last people were cyborgs," he said over the radio. "So let's get a look at you, friend, before I riddle you with needles."

For a moment, nothing happened.

Goodbye, my friend, Marten thought, on the verge of bellowing with rage and shooting Omi.

Then the staring visor went from black to clear. A pale, frightened man regarded him. The man had a round face, a small nose and a small mouth.

Marten's stomach relaxed a fraction, and he eased pressure from the trigger. "Are cyborgs on your ship?"

The man blinked rapidly almost as if trying to comprehend the question. Finally, he asked in a strange, clipped accent, "Cyborgs? Do you mean like the creatures they've been broadcasting about from Mars?"

"That's right," Marten said, trying to determine if the man was faking ignorance.

"What's wrong?" a woman asked over the crackling radio-link. "Is anyone hurt in there? If there are, we need to get them out fast."

A vacc-suited hand pushed the pale, blinking man deeper into the chamber. Then another helmet poked in. That person stopped suddenly.

"You have a weapon," she said.

"We're nervous," Marten said. His needler pointed rock-steady at her faceplate. "I'd like to see your features, if you don't mind."

"What does that have to do with—"

"Just do it," the pale-faced man pleaded, clutching her suited arm.

The woman hesitated and then her visor became clear. It showed a pretty female with small features and a round head.

"We ran into cyborgs earlier," Marten explained.

Her features changed into something like a person facing a crazed killer high on stimulants.

"Cyborgs... yes, I understand," she said, pasting on a tremulous smile. "We don't have any aboard the *Descartes*. Please, put away your weapon. And-and you can come with us."

Her look did it for Marten—that talk of cyborgs was crazy.

"It-it would be better if... if you gave me your weapon," she said.

Marten holstered the needler and shook his head.

"Ship protocol—"

"Will have to take a back seat today," he said, patting his holster.

She nodded quickly, and said, "If you'll follow me then. And just to let you know... the Force Leader will want to know how you managed to become trapped in one of the *Rousseau*'s pods. I do not wish to insult you, but you don't seem like a Jovian guardian."

"I'm not. I'm Marten Kluge. My friends and I just arrived from Mars."

The ride to the meteor-ship was short and uneventful. They docked with a hiss, a clang and a jolt that threw Marten against his restraints. Then he unbuckled himself and he and his friends floated after the two who had cut them out of the sealed pod.

They entered an airlock. There was more hissing and Marten felt the air-pressure grow around him. The inner lock rotated open and they entered a narrow corridor lit by a diffuse glow. A flexible membrane covered what had the bumpy outline of asteroid rock.

Marten realized they were inside the meteor, and this membrane likely helped seal in the atmosphere. Some rock was porous and would allow air to escape.

The two Jovians unsealed their helmets, cradling them in their arms. The woman had short, brown hair like fuzz, and the roundness of her head was even more pronounced than before. She looked back at them, waiting for them.

Marten unsealed his helmet, twisted it off and left it hanging from the back of his neck. He tasted the ship's air. It was recycled from renewers, no doubt. It had a hint of oil and burnt electrical gear. Were they having technical problems aboard ship? Or was it more ominous than that?

Behind him, Omi removed his helmet. Osadar made no move to take off hers, which seemed like a wise precaution.

"There's something you should know," Marten began.

The pretty woman frowned, maybe hearing trouble in Marten's voice.

"Ah..." Marten had been thinking about this the entire trip to the ship. "We came from the Mars System. I know I told you that, but—"

"I'm an artisan," the woman said, interrupting, "a mechanic. You should save your explanations for the Force-Leader or for the Arbiter and his myrmidons."

"Excuse me?"

Before the artisan-mechanic could explain, she gasped in horror, staring past Marten.

Marten turned. Osadar had removed her helmet. Her cyborg forehead gleamed, with the stamped letters and numerals OD12 on them. The plastic features and the strange eyes—Marten tried to visualize what the Jovians saw. Osadar had a space-zombie's features, like one of the living dead that someone had only half-resurrected from Suspend or from a battlefield corpse-pile.

"Quick," the artisan-mechanic gasped. "Go! Alert the ship-guardians."

The small man Marten had first aimed his needler at moaned in dread.

"If you'll just listen for a moment," Marten tried to say.

Marten's voice galvanized the small Jovian. He sprang from the chamber and scraped against the membrane of the narrow corridor. He curled his legs and shoved off again. Then he sailed out of sight down a bend in the corridor.

"There's no need for alarm," Marten said.

"Emergency!" the pale-faced woman shouted into a com-unit.

Omi shoved against Marten's shoulder and twisted past him.

The pale-faced woman squeaked. And she lowered the com-unit as she stared at Omi's needler. It was an inch from her forehead. A tinny voice squawked out of the com-unit.

"Tell them everything is fine," Omi whispered.

The woman stared at the needler, too terrified to move.

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