

STARGLIDER



NOVELLA

By James Follett

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SUB - LEVEL

1.

In terms of hi-tech nastiness, the unmanned sentinel ships had everything. Their formidable armoury consisted of photonic darts that could vaporise a small asteroid at close range, and beam projectors that could vaporise a large asteroid at long range. The ships also possessed force shields capable of absorbing the kinetic energy of a comet, and traction beams that could drag an enemy ship to within range of a battery of fusion grenade launchers for piecemeal demolition. In short, the sentinels were extremely well-equipped to bring about a messy and violent lifestyle modification of any would-be invader. To ensure that such intruders had a clear idea of the sentinels' purpose, emblazoned on the sides of their hulls in huge, glowing letters was a message written in the six languages of the inner galactic worlds. Loosely translated, it said:

HEALTH WARNING: DON'T MESS WITH NOVENIA.

2.

Fleet Commander Hermann Kruud sat in a swivel chair in the control room of *StarGlider One* - the flagship of his invasion fleet - and stared with brooding, bloodshot eyes at the two sentinel ships that were centred in his hologram field. Several billion miles beyond the sentinels, close to the warmth of the sun, was the shining glory of the planet Novenia with its small moon. The planet was like a ripe fruit that was about to fall into Hermann's grasping, pudgy fingers. His cunning little eyes would have gleamed with greed had not the picture before him been ruined by the ugly outline of the sentinels.

Hermann's fanciful beliefs that he was handsome and swashbuckling tended to be undermined by his appearance. He bore a striking resemblance to an elongated red billiard ball that had sprouted arms and legs. He was wearing enough medals to trigger a Casparian magnetic space mine at long range and the amazing mobility of his huge, bushy eyebrows suggested that they were capable of mating with each other. Of all the races of the inner worlds, the Egrons were the most repulsive, and Hermann, with his matted, unkept crimson beard was probably the most repulsive of them all. Like his fellow Egrons, he had no sense of smell. This had the effect of making the Egrons unpopular with those races of the inner galactic worlds who did possess such a sense. Such attitudes did not unduly bother the Egrons; they considered themselves a loveable, peace-loving people and they maintained a powerful battle fleet on permanent alert, ready to beat the hell out of any planet that said otherwise.

The sight of the robot ships, bristling with every device imaginable to make life miserable plus a few that were not imaginable, made Hermann bang the arm of his chair in angry frustration. The medals crowded across his chest jostled and jingled

like angry metallic insects. He had promised the Imperial Prator of Egron that this time there would be no more of what the Imperial Prator had described as 'monumental cock-ups'. Hermann swore that this time he would conquer Novenia.

The trouble with the Novenian solar system was that it was smack in the centre of the galaxy's last unconquered spiral arm. Novenia was the stepping-stone to a gleaming tendril of stars with planetary systems populated by peoples who knew nothing of the joys of being dominated by the Egrons, or the finer points of Egronian leadership such as their skills in tax-collecting and genocide. The reason for this ignorance was because the Novenians, well aware that they were a stepping-stone, had decided that they had no wish to be stepped on. To back up this wish, they had built a huge fleet of sentinel ships and had distributed them across the arm of the galaxy so that all the approaches to Novenia were guarded.

Novenian ingenuity was reflected in the design of their sentinels which were remarkably efficient at zapping anything that their onboard computers did not like the look of. Successive Egron generals had discovered to their cost that what the sentinels did not like the look of was just about anything that moved. After his last humiliating expedition against Novenia, Hermann had decided that cunning was called for. He had spent five years building a new invasion fleet. He was confident that his revolutionary new ships would get past the sentinels. Once through, the Novenians would be powerless to resist. Their confidence in the sentinels was such that they had abolished their home-based army and airforce many years before.

A nervous voice intruded on Hermann's thoughts. "Two sentinels dead ahead, sir. Range one-five-zero."

Hermann spun his chair and glared at the diminutive figure of the flagship captain. "Idiot!" he roared, jabbing a finger at the hologram field. "Do you think I'm blind!"

"N-no, sir," the captain stammered. "It's just that-"

"Have they detected us?" Hermann bellowed. His voice was like the thunder of boulders hurled at a sheet of Klausian steel.

"Yes, sir. We're picking up some narrow beam radiations from their sensors." The captain hesitated and eyed the sentinels that were hanging in the centre of Hermann's hologram field. The ships were swelling. It was possible to see the faint halo-like glow of their force shields and the squat muzzles of their projectors. "We'll be in range of their projectors in five minutes."

"So what?" Hermann snapped, glaring suspiciously at the captain. "They won't use them."

"But our ships are thousands of times the size of real StarGliders," said the officer despondently. "I still say that the sentinels will notice the difference."

"We're the same shape as the stargliders," said Hermann complacently. "That's all those stupid robots are interested in - our configuration." His bushy eyebrows

twitched. "Is the fleet maintaining formation?"

"Yes, sir. A perfect vee formation."

"Bungling idiot!" Hermann roared, his globular bulk half-rising from its seat. "The last thing I want is a perfect formation! I ordered a ragged formation!"

"What I mean, sir," the captain said hastily, taking a step back, "is that the formation is perfectly imperfect - if you see what I mean."

Hermann punched a control on the arm of his chair. The hologram replication field changed to an image of his invasion fleet. The twenty strange-looking ships were strung out behind Hermann's ship in two uneven lines to form an approximation of a vee-shape. Hermann relaxed. "You came close to having your head torn off," he muttered.

The captain swallowed, said nothing, and avoided looking at the screen. Every time he saw the invasion fleet, he suffered a loss of nerve. The contents of the ships were formidable enough: tanks, fighters, and combat troops in sufficient numbers to conquer an entire solar system. It was the appearance of the ships that caused the captain to wake up in a cold sweat during his night periods.

All the ships in the invasion fleet were the shape of gigantic, dart-like mechanical birds complete with wings.

Hermann's fingers operated the optical sensor controls. The sentinels appeared again. This time their image was much larger and they had been joined by two friends of a different design. Marked on the side of one of the new arrivals was an ominous sign in small letters that read:

**IF YOU'RE CLOSE ENOUGH TO READ THIS,
YOU'RE CLOSE ENOUGH TO SHARE AN
ON-GOING NUCLEAR FUSION SELF-DESTRUCT
EXPERIENCE.**

Hermann snorted. "The fools think they can frighten us." The captain opened his mouth to say something and changed his mind.

Jets of plasma were stabbing silently from the four sentinels as they closed purposefully on the fleet.

"Don't you think it might be a good idea to activate the force shield, sir?" the captain suggested tentatively.

Hermann scowled and gave his chest an arrogant thump. The medals jumped and clinked. "The day I hide behind a force shield is the day you can call me Meinser," he boasted.

"Besides - our shield won't be much use against their combined firepower. Have you ever tangled with four sentinels?"

"I got involved with just one on your last expedition, sir" said the captain miserably.

Hermann's cunning eyes narrowed. He watched the sentinels intently. The scene was duplicated in the control rooms of the other twenty ships. The images of the sentinels were relayed throughout the StarGlider fleet for the benefit of the thousand tank crews of the Egron invasion army. Two thousand pairs of anxious eyes watched the approaching sentinels. Icicles of fear slithered up and down two thousand spines.

The gap between invaders and guardians narrowed. Hermann's bulk sank deeper into his chair. Although confident that his ruse of war would work, he nevertheless braced himself for the hammerblows to the hull that would signal the need for a hasty return to Egron in an emergency shuttle to report yet another 'cock-up' to the Imperial Prator.

The gap continued to narrow but the sentinels made no hostile move.

The fleet passed the sentinel ships and the gap slowly widened. Hermann started breathing again. After five minutes it was necessary to switch to the side scan sensors to maintain a watch on them. After ten minutes they could be observed only by the aft sensors.

Hermann chuckled delightedly and bounced from his chair. He clapped the captain on the back with enough force to send him staggering. "We've done it! We're through! By the pyschadelic pulsars of Panjundrum - we've done it!"

Before them in the hologram field was the uncluttered image of Novenia.

The ripe fruit was about to fall into Hermann's grasping fingers.

3.

Jaysan had been experimenting with fermented computer coolant fluid again and consequently did not respond to Katra yelling in his ear. She grabbed the comatose engineer by an ankle and dragged him off his circular bed. The moon's fifty percent gravity made the task easy. Jaysan groaned, sat up, and nursed his head. There were certain after effects as a result of excessive alcohol consumption that not even the brilliance of Novenian medical science had conquered.

"Jaysan!" Katra pleaded, hauling him to his feet. "Wake up! Something terrible's happening."

Jaysan had been having a bad dream in which he was sober. He was reassured by the stabbing pain in his temple that told him that it had only been a dream. Before he had a chance to focus his eyes and check his limb coordination, Katra was half-pushing,

half-pulling him to the door.

"Where we goin'?" he mumbled when they were in the corridor.

"Jaysan..." Katra was unable to complete the sentence but she clung to his arm as though frightened that he would escape.

"What's the matter?"

Katra stopped and turned to face Jaysan. For the first time he realised that she was crying. "Katra? What is it?"

Katra brushed her blonde hair away from her eyes.

"Novenia," she said, her voice strained and unnatural. "It's being attacked."

4.

Jaysan stared ashen-faced at the central screen in the observatory. His hangover was forgotten. In the darkened gallery the astronomers and engineers that made up the crew of Candrillo Base on the Novenian moon had been joined by their off-duty colleagues. Twenty men and women were gazing in silence at the awesome disaster that was overwhelming Novenia - their home.

A black dust was spreading across the face of the stricken planet from the countless flashes of the nuclear bombardment. Occasionally a cataclysmic explosion would glow and flicker in the more dust-choked areas covering the planet. Jaysan became aware of Katra's nails burrowing feverishly into the palm of his hand. He disengaged her grip without taking his eyes off the screen for an instant. The thousands of black clouds began merging into a single opaque blanket that completely enveloped the planet.

After ten minutes, the last of the planet's visible features were engulfed by the hellish nuclear night.

Chief Executive Fram Halkeer was standing at the control panel. A small lamp showed his gaunt features more pale and drawn than usual. He switched the optical sensors to infra-red. The screen changed to a false colour temperature map of the Novenian surface. Ghastly crimson blotches, like spreading ink stains, were merging into a single fiery discoloration that was gradually covering the entire face of the planet. During the display more of Candrillo's personnel had crowded into the gallery. Someone at the back was sobbing.

"So what's happening?" demanded a voice near the screen. Halkeer shook his head as though he were trying to rid his senses of the unfolding horror. "Egrons are happening," he said bitterly. "What else could it be?"

"But what about the sentinels?"

"The Egrons could never get past them." Katra stated categorically.

Halkeer gestured scathingly at the screen. "Then what the hell do you think that is, Kat? A civil war? An optical illusion?"

Katra was not convinced. She and Jaysan were responsible for intermediate servicing and repair of the sentinels.

Those sentinels that could not be repaired by the primary deep space service stations were returned to the workshops at Candrillo Base on the moon. If Candrillo Base could not deal with them, the unmanned ships were returned to one of the four main sentinel repair depots on Novenia. Like Jaysan, who was her assistant engineer, Katra knew every circuit and microprocessor in the sentinels. She was certain that nothing could get past them. "Are we getting any radio and television signals from Novenia?" she asked.

"That's how we first knew something was wrong," Halkeer replied. "For a few minutes there were a number of broadcast interruptions. Then they began to get panicky - people saying they had problems. After that everything started to go dead. Even the data stations have gone off the air... Now there's nothing except low-power signals that are mixing with each other - probably from personal radios."

"Can't the astronomers turn their radio telescopes towards Novenia?" Jaysan asked.

"They can - but it will take time," said Halkeer blandly.

"The telescopes are designed for searching beyond this galaxy." His gaze travelled around the crowded gallery. "It seems that most of Candrillo's personnel are present. In view of what's happened to Novenia, I'm declaring a state of emergency. I'm assuming that the freight-pod despatches from home have now ceased therefore we must conserve our supplies. I want all department chiefs to reschedule their accommodation needs so that we can close down as much of Candrillo Base as possible. Single personnel will have to share quarters."

"What about defending the base?" someone asked.

"That's what I want to discuss with Katra and Jaysan," said Halkeer. "Alright, everyone. All normal duties are suspended. Everyone is to return to their quarters and await further orders."

The men and women turned and filed silently out of the room. Jaysan put his arm around Katra's shoulders and steered her towards the entrance.

"Jaysan, Katra!" Halkeer called out, motioning to the empty seats. "I want you to stay."

Jaysan and Katra sat and stared at Halkeer. Their listless expressions told the chief

executive that the enormity of the disaster that had overtaken Novenia had not fully dawned on the couple.

Halkeer gestured to the screen. "You don't believe that's the Egrons' doing, do you?"

"No," said Jaysan flatly. "No Egron ship could get past the sentinels. It is impossible."

"Then how do you account for that?"

Jaysan's gaze went to the screen for a few moments. He shook his head.

"Well something got past the sentinels," Katra observed. "If it's not the Egrons, then who?"

Halkeer touched his control panel. The picture of Novenia swelled rapidly as if the image was being transmitted from a spacecraft that was hurtling towards the planet at an impossible speed. Katra felt dizzy but was unable to tear her eyes away from the polluted atmosphere that seemed to be rushing towards her. The headlong dive towards Novenia slowed and stopped. The picture was close enough to show individual black clouds - obscenely billowing and rolling through the upper atmosphere like unimaginable monsters.

"This is the highest resolution this telescope can give," said Halkeer. "We'll have better images when we've realigned the main telescope. Watch carefully."

Minutes passed. Occasionally a gap in the twisting clouds afforded a fleeting glimpse of the Novenian surface - bleak, scarred and darkened.

"What are we supposed to be waiting for?" Jaysan inquired.

"Just watch!" Halkeer snapped. "There!"

Jaysan's eyes flicked to the screen. Nothing but the clouds.

"A bird!" Katra exclaimed in astonishment.

Jaysan was incredulous. "It would be impossible to see anything as small as a bird even if one could survive that inferno."

"I tell you I saw a bird just before it disappeared into a cloud!"

"She's right," said Halkeer. "I saw several shortly after the attack started. Like you, I too thought it would be impossible to see a bird - especially with this telescope. But then, that depends on the size of the bird and the height it is flying at. I made a recording of the observation."

The chief executive touched the control panel. The image on the screen changed to a

similar picture of Novenia. The clouds were less dense. "This was recorded an hour ago," Halkeer explained. "Just before I summoned everyone in here. Watch the top right hand corner. The recording will slow down automatically. Watch carefully."

A creature appeared - moving languidly through the clouds - its wings beating slowly.

"A starglider!" Katra gasped.

Halkeer froze the image and used the controls to centre the strange creature on the screen. There was no mistaking the sleek, dart-like outline of a starglider; the most extraordinary creature in the galaxy.

5.

Survival of the fittest is such a well-known rule of evolution that it is hardly worth commenting on. Survival of the weirdest is a lesser-known rule but nevertheless, one that holds equal sway throughout the galaxy. Evidence of its existence range from the rubber-toothed elephant rats of Galtan Six - a creature that erases its enemies in battle - to the electric chain-saw eels that feed on the submerged forests in the primeval oceans of Panjandrum. All the life-supporting planets of the galaxy have evolved at least one species that the other creatures inhabiting the same planet consider the ultimate in way-out weirdness. The success of the weird creatures is invariably due to an understandable reluctance on the part of the normal creatures to try eating them. Indeed, attempts to add to one's diet the electric chain-saw eels of Panjandrum are fraught with hazards that are utterly unique in the known universe.

Novenia's contribution to the galaxy's 'Believe it or Not' catalogue of mind-mangling, farout fauna was the starglider - an extraordinarily large bird that early in its evolution had exploited the combination of Novenia's low gravity and the powerful solar wind of the Novenian sun to solve the problems of space travel. Every ten years, the skies of Novenia would blacken when millions of young stargliders, responding to a mysterious signal that triggered a mass migration, would desert their parents and rise into the air in one vast and noisy flock. Using the thermals above equatorial volcanoes, they would climb in great spirals high into the stratosphere. The stargliders' powerful wings enabled them to gradually build-up to escape velocities in the rarified upper-reaches of the Novenian atmosphere. Two circumnavigations of the globe were enough for the starglider flocks to achieve low, sub-orbital flight. At that point, they would spread their enormous secondary wings. The solar wind acting on these outstretched appendages gently accelerated the creatures on successive orbits to escape velocity. The young stargliders survived the rigors of space by shutting down their metabolic rate until each bird was virtually a corpse. The elongated elliptical orbit of the great mass of stargliders was the same with each new generation: a ten year journey that took the creatures far beyond the outer planets of the Novenian solar system. Upon their return five years later, the steadily increasing warmth of the sun had the effect of urging the male stargliders into a frenzied mass courtship for the benefit of the unresisting female stargliders. The result of this crazed expenditure of energy so near to Novenia was that the male stargliders were too exhausted to make the necessary corrections for re-entry into the

Novenian atmosphere. They all perished as thousands of tiny shooting stars - each spent male body providing a short-lived streak of blinding white light across the sky while the females made safe, gliding re-entries and so returned to the sanctity of their parents' nesting grounds in the equatorial highlands. The majority of the female stargliders laid eggs immediately upon their return and were, so to speak, left holding the babies.

Such are the hazards of flying and foreign holidays for the young.

Generations of ornithologists had been unable to provide satisfactory explanations for the stargliders' extraordinary courtship ritual. Theories ranged from the improbable: that the birds were obeying an instinct to migrate to a planet that no longer existed, to the implausible: that venturing into space provided the birds with a cosmic ray radiation fix that helped overcome their youthful inhibitions. The strange birds provided continuous employment for hordes of wildlife documentary hologram-makers. By the time the first sentinels were placed in position to guard the approaches to Novenia, study of the stargliders had developed into a major industry with hotels, transportation systems and hologram processing laboratories springing up all over Novenia to serve the needs of the documentary makers.

Disaster struck when a flock of stargliders returning to Novenia were wiped out by two sentinels which mistook the birds for an invasion fleet. The public outcry in the wake of the accidental massacre led to all the sentinels being hastily modified so that their onboard computers would recognise the shapes of the stargliders and leave them alone.

6.

Fleet Commander Hermann Kruud gave a boyish whoop and pulled *StarGlider One* around in a tight, banking turn. Warping the surface of the artificial starglider's wings gave perfect control. As the airborne invasion control centre, *StarGlider One* was supposed to stay out of the battle unless an emergency arose, but Hermann was unable to resist the temptation of putting its massive firepower to destructive use. He increased thrust. *StarGlider One* levelled out over the Novenian plain and swept towards the smoking remains of what had once been the mighty citadel of Novenia's central government complex. The slow beat of *StarGlider One's* ingenious mechanical wings conveyed a false impression of the machine's speed; forward thrust was provided by streams of invisible particles spewing from vectored ports set into the machine's outer skin. Unlike the other twenty artificial stargliders that made up Hermann's invasion fleet, *StarGlider One* was fast and highly manoeuvrable.

Hermann thumbed the fire controls again and grunted in satisfaction as the photon beams blasted the last intact building into ruins. He immediately had to bank sharply to avoid an energy tower. The needle-like structures dotted about the Novenian landscape were the only buildings Hermann wanted left intact because they provided the inductive energy for the planet's underground transportation system.

The captain entered the control room and stood near his commander. But not too

near. Although the invasion was going well, there was no point in taking unnecessary chances.

Hermann's outbursts of exuberance could be as dangerous as his temper. "Latest signals from the fleet, sir," said the captain respectfully.

Hermann took *StarGlider One* to a safe altitude just below the dense, swirling cloudbase. "Well?" he demanded.

"*StarGlider Five* and *StarGlider Nine* report that their sectors have surrendered, sir."

"Excellent!" Hermann boomed. "It won't be long now before central government capitulates. Any problems?"

"*StarGlider Seven* report that they're having difficulties in their sector, sir."

Hermann chuckled throatily. "Just what I've been waiting to hear. Let's take a look at them." He increased speed and swung *StarGlider One* in a large, sweeping circle above the devastated plain. Through the view ports could be seen burning points of light below - marking the funeral pyres of those Novenian buildings whose occupants had had the temerity to oppose Hermann with small arms fire.

A long, low building caught Hermann's eye because it was undamaged. Also, it was rotating slowly.

"What the hell's that?" he demanded.

The captain followed Hermann's pointing finger. "A sentinel service and repair main depot, sir."

Mention of sentinels did nothing for Hermann's temper. "Why hasn't it been destroyed?" he roared.

The captain cringed. "They're virtually indestructible, sir. They're built to contain the force of a nuclear explosion in case the repair androids have an accident with a sentinel."

Hermann was about to tear the captain limb from limb but the hapless officer was saved by Hermann's recollection of an early intelligence report he had received on the huge depots. There were four of the long, slab-like buildings on Novenia. They were manned by ARAMAs - Automatic Repair And Maintenance Androids whose sole task was to repair and maintain the sentinels. The depots had not been considered a threat therefore Hermann's battle orders had been to leave them alone. Determined to lay some sort of blame on the captain, Hermann demanded:

"Why is it rotating?"

The captain struggled to think up a plausible explanation for the depot's curious behaviour. He rightly suspected that if he told the truth and said that he didn't know, Hermann might do something a lot more unpleasant than merely stand on his foot.

"Well?" Hermann bellowed.

The captain pointed to a view port. "Look, sir."

Hermann spun his globular body on its axis. *StarGlider Seven* had appeared through the black dust. The huge assault craft was the largest ship in Hermann's fleet. It lay on the surface near an energy tower - its outstretched wingtips resting on the ground - holding the craft steady while a procession of tanks emerged through doors in its body and trundled down ramps. Four Bute fighters were wheeling about the sky, firing impotently at a distant mountain peak. From the mountain, a low-energy thermic laser projector was systematically punching rows of neat holes in the giant assault StarGlider. Neither side seemed to be getting anywhere.

Realising that his reprieve might be short-lived if the news from *StarGlider Seven* was bad, the captain wisely sat in a spare seat as far from his commanding officer as possible. Hermann brought his flagship to a hover and selected a communication channel. "*StarGlider Seven!*" he barked. "What's the problem?"

"An unfriendly mountain, sir," the captain of *StarGlider Seven* replied.

"But the Novenians don't have an army and artillery, dammit!"

"You know that, sir. And I know that. But they obviously don't."

The weary note in the captain's voice bore a slight hint of insubordination. Hermann decided to deal with him later. "I'll take care of them for you," he said magnanimously. "It looks like a low-energy laser. Strange. According to intelligence reports, they don't have any sophisticated arms available - such as the photonic darts they fit to their sentinels."

With impeccable timing, the mountain chose that precise moment to fire a photonic dart. The alarms detected the approaching missile and started sounding off - a shrill, continuous note that was employed only to herald the imminent arrival of the most dangerous weapon of all in the Novenian armoury. Hermann swore as the ship's automatic evasion systems seized control and snatched the energy controls through his fingers. The maximum downward thrust that was suddenly applied sent *StarGlider One* straight up like a high-speed elevator. The captain closed his eyes and braced himself for the inevitable explosion. The small but deadly weapon detonated with a tremendous unleashing of raw energy some way beneath *StarGlider One*. The expanding ball of the shockwave overtook the ship, striking it with sufficient force to send it rocking drunkenly about its axis. It was a series of automatic blasts from the vectored thrust ports that prevented the rapidly ascending ship from going into an uncontrolled spin.

"Missed!" Hermann bellowed triumphantly.

The alarms started howling again.

"The force shield, sir!" the captain implored.

Hermann was about to yell, "Never!" but changed his mind when he saw a second missile streaking towards him. This time the protagonists holed-up in the mountains were using an intelligent dart whose flight path matched the crazy gyrations of the ship as the evasion systems went to work. Hermann's self-preservation instincts took precedence over his scruples about using the force shield. He reached up and frantically slammed home the force shield busbars. Blinding light filled the control room as the dart detonated impotently against the energy cocoon of the ship's force wall. Hermann swung the ship around until it was pointing straight at the mountain and thumbed the controls that sent a nuclear missile on its way. A flash of energy, a rapidly expanding fireball, and the mountain ceased to exist.

"Dammit," Hermann muttered. Seeing his captain's puzzled expression he added by way of an explanation: "I wanted to take some prisoners. Find out where they got those damned darts from. Our intelligence was that they had been banned on the planet."

The captain nodded understandingly. "Of course, Meinser."

Hermann decided that once Novenia had capitulated, his boots would be administering some disciplinary action to his captain's backside.

7.

Halkeer regarded Katra in astonishment. "You mean there's not one sentinel in your workshops?"

Katra shook her head and glanced at Jaysan for support. "The last one was sent back to its station thirty days ago."

"So you and Jaysan have been doing nothing all that time?"

"We've been busy checking all our testing and servicing equipment," said Jaysan defensively. "We don't often get the chance. Look, Fram - even if we did have a few sentinels, they wouldn't be enough to defend this base against a determined attack."

"I don't think the Egrons will attack us," Katra murmured.

Halkeer looked surprised. "Why not?"

"Why should they bother? They're not fools. They know that Candrillo Base has only limited supplies. Eventually we'll die anyway through lack of oxygen and food."

Bitterness hardened Halkeer's expression. "I tried many times to persuade the Science Resources Council to vote the facilities to produce our own oxygen and food," he said quietly. "Every time my requests were rejected. The monthly freight pods were cheaper, they said."

Jaysan broke the silence that followed. "We will have to calculate how long our supplies will last."

"I've already done so," Halkeer replied. "The environmental computer has given three times scales. The strictest rationing system gives us three-hundred days."

"Not too bad," Jaysan observed.

"That figure," said Halkeer contemptuously, "is based on a calculation that thirty percent of the personnel will die within two-hundred days, leaving additional supplies for the survivors."

"Surely the spiral arm worlds will help us?" Katra ventured. "After all, it's them that the Egrons are interested in. It's in their interests to see that Novenia doesn't go under."

"None of the spiral arm worlds are strong enough to take on the Egrons," Halkeer pointed out. "And as for Novenia going under - well - that's exactly what's happened."

Katra punched the palm of her hand in frustration. "If only we had something we would hit them with."

"And draw attention to ourselves," Jaysan remarked. "A great idea, Kat."

The girl flushed angrily. "Don't you realise what's happening to Novenia?" she snapped. "Look at the screen. Go on - look at it!"

Jaysan was unperturbed. "I realise only too well what's happening, Kat. I also realise that there's absolutely nothing we can do about it."

8.

Katra burst into Jaysan's apartment and shook him roughly by the hair.

"Jaysan - wake up!"

"Good grief - I am awake! Leggo, woman!"

"Get up."

"We're not supposed to be up at this time. Emergency regulations. Conservation of

oxygen-

Katra silenced Jaysan by throwing his coveralls at him. "Don't argue."

Jaysan was still fastening his coveralls when he followed Katra into the corridor. The lighting had been reduced to a glow to conserve Candrillo's energy cells. "Listen, Kat - do you mind-

"Stop!"

The lights brightened. Jaysan and Katra skidded to a halt. The speaker with the commanding voice was Roff - one of the astronomers. His stern face was watching the couple from a view screen.

Katra treated the screen to a dazzling smile. "Hallo, Roff. It's okay - we know the rules - it's just that we've thought of way of dealing with the Egrons."

"The emergency regulations apply to everyone," said Roff severely. "I shall have to report this."

"Please, Roff," Katra pleaded. "We need ten minutes to check Service Bay Twenty then we'll return to our quarters."

"You've not used that bay for years."

"Well we'd like to see it now."

"It's been depressurised. You must return to your quarters."

"Roff - please. All you've got to do is repressurise the bay for ten minutes. It's very important. I think there's something in there that might be useful. Look - you can wake up Halkeer if you like and tell him where we are. Only please repressurise the bay.

Roff looked uncertain. "Who will take responsibility?"

"I would if I knew what all this was about," said Jaysan.

"I'll accept full responsibility," said Katra determinedly. "Can we go now?"

9.

The doors to Service Bay 20 slid open with a loud squealing that spoke of neglected runners. The bay was in darkness but there was enough light from the corridor to illuminate a very small, ancient android that looked as if it had escaped from a museum. Its short, pepperpot-like body consisted of several pairs of manipulator arms that were terminated with a wide variety of specialized cleaning and polishing tools. The largest pair of manipulators served as feet; a pair of medium-sized

manipulators sported rotary buffing mops and the smallest pair of manipulators were clutching old-fashioned chemical discharge firearms. One gun was pointing at Katra and the other was pointing at Jaysan.

"We may be old-fashioned by your standards," the android piped aggressively. "And so are these guns. But they can still blow your head off in the old-fashioned way if you take a step nearer."

Katra sighed. "What about the law of robotics that forbids you to harm a human being?"

"It doesn't apply to souvenir hunters," the android replied promptly. "Shall we prove it?"

"Kat," said Jaysan very calmly while apprehensively eyeing the android and at the same time trying to peer into the darkness beyond the diminutive machine. "Will you now please tell me what all this is about."

"Who and what are you, android?" Katra asked.

"We're an Android Guardian and Repair Officer for the world's last AGAV," said the android with some pride.

Jaysan looked baffled. "You're a guardian for the what?"

"Airborne Ground Attack Vehicle," said Katra. "This is an AGRO unit. Its job is to keep museum pieces in good order and to keep people off them. Correct, AGRO?"

"Correct," said the android guardedly. "You two can clear off right now."

"I promise you we're not souvenir hunters," said Katra reassuringly. "Now please put those guns away."

"That's what the last lot said. Caught them trying to make off with a boarding ladder, we did."

"AGRO - listen please. Can I call you Agro? Can we have some lights on please?"

"So long as you don't move," Agro warned.

"We promise not to move."

Lights came on in the service bay. The area was smaller than Jaysan expected but it was large enough to accommodate the battered, stubbly-winged machine that was jacked up on servicing trestles in the centre of the floor.

"Good grief," Jaysan muttered, gasping in astonishment. "What is that?"

"Novenia's last fighter aircraft," Katra replied. "It was sent here several years ago by the National Aeronautical Museum for restoration but the project was never voted a budget. It's remained here ever since."

"And so have we," said Agro petulantly. "Forgotten - that's what happened to us. We work hard for years without complaint - guarding against souvenir hunters - and then we're abandoned."

"At least you weren't broken up for scrap," Katra observed.

"That would be sacrilege," said Jaysan. "He must be a crude version of the ARAMA androids that carry out the dangerous servicing work on the sentinels."

Agro looked about as annoyed as it was possible for an android to look. "We're not a crude version of anything, we'll have you know."

"Can we move now please?" said Katra. "All we want to do is look at your fighter."

Agro lowered his weapons. "All right then. But don't try to steal anything. I'll be watching you."

The antique android clattered noisily after Jaysan and Katra as they walked across to the strange flying machine.

"Did people actually fly in these things?" Jaysan asked.

"Fly and fight," said Katra. "It dates from the days of the last civil war."

"The good old days," Agro added. "When people appreciated the value of hard-working androids and didn't abandon them in lonely workshops."

Jaysan climbed onto a wing root and moved forward to the plastiglas blister canopy that was set well forward, close to the needle-like nose. "A two-seater," he commented.

Katra joined him. "More like a one and a half seater," she corrected when she saw the tiny seat behind the pilot's seat. It was slightly higher than the pilot's seat so that forward vision was not impaired.

Agro climbed onto the opposite wing so that he could keep the couple under close observation. "There's rest and toilet facilities aft - in the fuselage," he said, adding as an afterthought: "All the fittings are screwed down."

"Cramped, no doubt," Katra observed.

"It was designed to remain operational for long periods without having to return to base," Agro replied indifferently.

"Agro - open this cover thing," Jaysan requested.

"Can't," said Agro.

"Don't argue with me, android. Open the canopy!"

"I would if I could," Agro retorted. "The canopy motors don't work."

"Aren't you supposed to look after everything?"

Agro clicked a manipulator in annoyance. "We do our best to keep everything clean. Restoration is a job for you lot, except that you haven't bothered."

"Well we can't even think of restoring it until we've had a closer look," Katra reasoned. "We're going to open the canopy."

The android made no attempt to intervene as Katra and Jaysan tugged on the plastiglas blister. They succeeded in sliding it along its corroded runners. A scent of mildew was released from the fighter's tiny cockpit. Katra helped guide Jaysan as he lowered himself into the pilot's seat. He was surprised at its comfort. He ran a bewildered eye over the antiquated instrument and control panel. He had read about the early machines that required a human interface but this was the first time he had ever seen one. The control shoe - a small mechanical mouse-like module - was located comfortably by his right hand. He cupped his hand over it and moved it experimentally on the control surface. Although everything was designed for ease of operation, including the array of analogue and graphic display instruments which was angled towards him, the concept of such a machine - a flying machine operated solely by a man - was wholly outside his experience.

Agro peered down at Jaysan. "Don't you break anything or steal anything," the android warned.

Katra was smaller than Jaysan therefore she had little difficulty easing herself into the tiny rear seat. "What's this seat for, Agro?" she wanted to know.

"Instructor or co-pilot."

"How can it be when there's no controls? Souvenir-hunters get at them, did they?"

"No room for conventional controls," Agro replied.

"I can see that," Katra retorted. "So what use was an instructor if he or she couldn't work the controls?"

"Pull the panel down in front of you," Agro suggested. Katra unfolded a panel that was tucked neatly into the back of Jaysan's seat. The panel was a small keyboard complete with its own miniature visual display unit. To the right of the keyboard was another control shoe - a miniature version with its own tiny working surface - in fact

everything that was needed for a secondary control system.

"All the pilot's controls are duplicated on the keyboard or by means of the control shoe," said Agro.

The shoe fitted snugly under Katra's hand. She moved it up and down experimentally.

"Don't press its key," Agro warned.

"Why not?"

"It fires the laser cannons."

Katra quickly took her hand away from the shoe. She looked around the cockpit's interior and marvelled at the ingenuity of the fighter's designers.

Meanwhile Jaysan was preoccupied with his controls. He singled out a small graphic display instrument and pointed it out to Agro. "What's that?"

"Air speed indicator," Agro replied.

"How fast?"

"Five-hundred flat out in level flight."

"Wow. And that one?" Jaysan pointed to another graphic display instrument.

"Altitude," said Agro.

"Jaysan leaned forward for a closer look at the instrument. "You mean that men and women flew this thing close to the ground at five hundred units without computer control?"

"Men were men in those days," said Agro tartly.

"But for how long, one wonders?"

"There were occasional accidents."

"I bet there were."

"It does have some computer-controlled systems," said Agro defensively. "But the whole point about these fighters was that they could be built quickly and simply, and were easy to fly."

With an effort, Jaysan managed to close the canopy. As he did so, the view through the plastiglas changed in an extraordinary way: the walls of the workshop became

transparent - as if they had been suddenly and unaccountably changed to glass. "Good grief," he exclaimed.

Katra could think of nothing sensible to say. She twisted in her seat. All around them the walls of the workshop were transparent. They could see right through them to the sun-bleached, airless foothills that surrounded Candrillo Base. Some of the out-lying domes that were part of the base were also transparent.

"What's the matter?" Agro called through the canopy.

Jaysan looked up at the robot. The internal linkage of the android's manipulators were clearly outlined through their outer shells. "Katra," said Jaysan weakly. "I swear I'm never going to touch that coolant fluid again. Am I imagining it or can I see through everything?"

"You're not imagining anything," said Katra grimly. "It must be something to do with the canopy. Let's get it open."

Agro made no attempt to assist the couple when they yanked the canopy back. Everything abruptly returned to normal. The walls became opaque again.

"What's the matter with you two now?" Agro inquired unsympathetically. "Seen a ghost?"

"Almost," said Katra. "We could see right through you just then. And everything else."

"We've always seen through people," said the android sourly. "They make promises that they never keep and they invent silly things like force walls."

"It was like everything was suddenly made of glass," said Jaysan.

"Gamma ray image-intensifying canopy," said Agro boredly.

Jaysan stared at Agro. "What?"

"This fighter is a ground attack vehicle," said the android patiently. "Correct?"

"Well - yes," Jaysan agreed.

"Designed to seek out and destroy the enemy on the ground. Tanks can hide anywhere. Between high buildings. In tunnels. Anywhere. Therefore all the later Alliance AGAVs were fitted with canopies like this one. Sensors around the rim of the canopy intensify the normal level of background gamma radiation and X-ray radiation and convert normal images into translucent images on the inside of the canopy. There was no hiding from an Alliance AGAV."

"Brilliant," Katra breathed, climbing out of the cramped seat and stretching her lithe

body. "Just what we need."

Jaysan looked sharply at her. "If you're thinking what I think you're thinking, then I think you'd better forget it."

"It's a glorious chance for us to hit back at those murderers!"

"It's a glorious chance to get ourselves ingloriously killed," Jaysan retorted, hiking his legs over the cockpit rim. "I know all about glory from the hologram movies. Glory is a health hazard. People get killed messing about with it."

"We're all going to be killed anyway!" Katra retorted angrily.

Agro watched curiously as Katra and Jaysan jumped down from the fighter's wing. It had been a long time since he had heard humans arguing. It gave him hope for the future. Peace was excruciatingly dull.

"No - we're not going to be killed," said Jaysan emphatically. "We're going to die."

"What's the difference?" Katra countered.

"All the difference in the world, Kat. Dying is swallowing a morphon pill and drifting off to sleep. Dignified. Getting killed means being splattered all over the landscape. Undignified."

"You're a coward, Jaysan."

Jaysan considered. "If an aversion to being splattered is being a coward then - yes - I'm an abject, cringing coward."

"I agree with Jaysan," said a voice.

The couple wheeled round. Halkeer was leaning casually against a bulkhead. It was obvious that he had been there for some time. He strolled across to the fighter and studied it with interest.

"We collect souvenir hunters," Agro warned as Halkeer strolled towards the fighter.

"I happen to be in charge here," said Halkeer. "I'd forgotten all about this thing. What sort of state is it in?"

"Dreadful," said Agro, trundling forward. "We've tried to keep it clean. But you lot were supposed to restore it. And what have you done? Nothing."

"We've got all the facilities to rebuild it," said Katra enthusiastically. "We can fit it with the latest laser cannons-"

"You're not to muck about with its specification," Agro interjected. "This is the last

fighter-

"Listen, Agro," Katra snarled, rounding on the android.

"You don't know what's going on so shut-up!"

Agro was about to start arguing but Halkeer held up his hand for silence. "Even if you could make it operational, how is it powered?" He looked questioningly at Agro.

"Vectored plasma drive," the android muttered. "There's a rechargeable energy pod underneath. Luckily it's fully charged because I don't suppose any of you lot would've bothered to recharge it if it wasn't."

Halkeer peered at the streamlined pod that was suspended beneath the fighter. "I doubt if anyone knows how to recharge such things these days," he observed. "They need a lot of inductive energy."

"This fighter is exactly what we need to fight the Egrons," said Katra vehemently.

Halkeer raised an eyebrow. "Is it, Kat? It's an aircraft - not a spacecraft. How would you get it to Novenia?"

"Simple," said Katra defiantly. "We've got some external liquid fuel boosters we could fit to it - the type that we use to return seriously damaged sentinels to Novenia. Two should do the trick plus a few directional thrusters." She rapped the fighter's skin. "This looks like Herculanium alloy - so it ought to withstand re-entry temperatures."

"Now look," said Agro. "You can't go messing about with this fighter's specification. It has to be restored to its original condition."

Halkeer gazed thoughtfully at the tiny craft for a few seconds. He shook his head. "I'm sorry, Katra. If you stood even a slight chance of destroying all the StarGlider ships, I'd say okay. But you don't. Not with this thing. One obsolete fighter against twenty of those things-

"Oh - for God's sake!" Katra protested angrily. "We've got to fight!"

"What would be your flight duration on the charge in that energy pod? Ten minutes? Fifteen minutes?"

Katra refused to be deterred. "Maybe we can find a way of recharging the pod when we're on Novenia. At least give us the chance to try!"

Halkeer flushed in irritation. "Please see sense, Kat. To keep a thing like this operational needs ground backup facilities. Depots. Repair androids. There's nothing on Novenia now. The planet is finished. Wiped out."

"I still say we've got to try!" Katra shouted.

Halkeer controlled his temper. "There's something else you've forgotten," he said, keeping his voice calm. "You'll need liquid oxygen for the boosters. As much as I admire your spirit, Katra - I'm not going to shorten the lives of everyone on Candrillo Base so that this thing can be fuelled for a spaceflight. I'm sorry, but my decision is final."

10.

The following evening, just before the sleep period, Katra wandered into the observatory and found Roff on duty. The junior astronomer spared her a brief glance and returned to his study of a monitor screen that was showing a picture of Novenia.

"You got me into trouble over your nocturnal wanderings last night," he said moodily. "I hope you're not planning anything for tonight."

Katra sat in an empty seat beside Roff and stared at the screen. Novenia was a grey, featureless ball hanging in space. A seemingly dead world. "Have you got the main telescope aligned on Novenia yet?"

Roff gestured to the screen. "That's it."

"Can I take a closer look?"

"What's the point?"

"Please."

The astronomer could think of no good reason for objecting. Also, he was not averse to Katra's company. He gave a resigned gesture at the screen. "Help yourself."

Katra slid her finger along the resolution touch pad. The planet raced towards her. Dust clouds filled the picture.

"Not as much dust as yesterday," she commented.

Roff shrugged. "It's settling. But it'll still be like night on the surface. Even at midday. Maybe a little light but not much."

"Hardly a scientific observation for an astronomer," said Katra, increasing the resolution until she could see ground details through the dust clouds.

"What's happened to Novenia is hardly scientific," Roff retorted.

Katra focussed the image on a tall needle-like structure.

"There's an intact energy tower!" she exclaimed.

"They're all intact," Roff commented. "The Egrons will need them, of course."

Katra was silent as she roamed the screen over the Novenian surface. She paused to examine the ruins of a city before moving on. A long, low building caught her attention. She froze the image. "A sentinel repair depot!"

Roff glanced at the screen. "Is that what they are? We wondered why the Egrons had left them alone."

"They probably couldn't destroy them that easily if they wanted to. There's four of them. Really massive in case of accidents. Hallo - it's turning."

"We've noticed that all four of them are," said Roff.

"Any idea why?"

Katra frowned. The building had turned ten degrees about its axis since she had first seen it. "All the depots have a realignment capability so that sentinels can be relaunched in the direction of their station without having to use up too much energy on course corrections. But I've no idea why the depots should be turning now."

She tightened the image so that the depot could be seen as a large close-up. It was possible to distinguish a number of small craters on the otherwise featureless surface of the curious building.

"Looks like the Egron tanks have had a go at it and given up," Roff observed.

"How many tanks are there?"

"About a thousand at the last count. Probably more. Plus around twenty walkers - huge machines that seem to keep the tanks supplied we think. They also seem to sprinkle fixed missile launchers all over the planet's surface. We've also logged a number of Egron Bute fighters, some Skim fighters, and a few Dianomic shuttles."

Katra sat staring at the screen for some moments without speaking. She stood suddenly. "Thanks, Roff."

The astronomer was about to say something but the girl had gone.

11.

"No," said Halkeer firmly.

Katra flushed angrily. "You've got no excuses now, Halkeer. The repair depots are unharmed. The chances are they're still operational and-"

"The chances are that they're not!" Halkeer interrupted. "I repeat - I am not allowing

you to go ahead with this crazy scheme under any circumstances."

"So we just sit around and do nothing?"

"While there's life, at least there's hope."

Katra regarded the chief executive in contempt. "What hope, Halkeer? You think that someone or something is going to come to our rescue? Well you can forget it. We're on our own. The only help we're going to get is self help. We've got to oppose the Egrons now. If we don't then the rest of the spiral arm worlds will fall one by one."

Halkeer was a poor judge of character. He thought that Katra's passion stemmed from boredom. He decided to buy time by offering her a ray of hope. "I'll tell you what I'll do, Katra," he said after a few seconds of contrived deliberation. "Find out all you can about the fighter. About its capabilities - everything. We must have some documentation on it somewhere. Then report to me and we'll review the situation."

"Why don't you form a committee," was Katra's sarcastic comment. She didn't stay long enough to hear Halkeer's reply.

12.

"I don't know anything about any documentation," said Agro sulkily when Katra confronted him in the workshop.

Katra took a threatening step towards Agro although she had nothing to threaten the android with. "Listen, junkheap - I've just checked the consignment records. The fighter was delivered with a flight operations manual. Now - do you find it or do I have you chopped into small pieces for recycling?"

Agro considered.

"Extremely small pieces," Katra emphasised.

Agro trundled across to the fighter. He opened an inspection cover and removed a tattered booklet. Katra eagerly snatched it from him.

"Careful! It's the only copy left!"

"We'll make duplicates," Katra called over her shoulder as she headed for the door.

"To sell to souvenir hunters?"

But Katra had gone.

13.

"Thanks to my brilliant strategy, the government of Novenia capitulated two hours ago, O Mighty Prator," Hermann boasted. "There are still a few rebels holding out - isolated pockets of resistance but it is only a matter of time now before the collapse is total. I now have several armoured land squadrons dispersed across the planet. The army is in control."

The image in the hologram field before Hermann was of an Egron nearly as ugly as he was.

"Excellent. Excellent," said the Imperial Prator, looking well-pleased. "What about the base on the moon?"

Hermann shrugged. "Without supplies - they will eventually perish."

"And the communication and transportation systems are intact?"

"Perfectly intact, sir. I gave orders that they were not to be destroyed."

The Prator grunted in satisfaction. "You have done well, Hermann. Novenia will be our advance base for our rule of the spiral arm worlds. There will be the usual rewards for you, of course."

Hermann bowed. "It has been my privilege to serve you, O Mighty One." He had visions of a triumphant procession through the broad avenues of Pratorville. Cheering crowds. Girls throwing themselves at his feet. Flowers. More medals, and a year's free supply of Dreadnaught Megaburgers.

"Very well, Hermann. You may order the return of the fleet to Egron."

Hermann bowed again. "I shall consider it a great honour to report our glorious victory to you in person, esteemed one."

"Your *StarGlider One* is the most powerful ship in the fleet, is it not?"

"The smallest but the most powerful, O Mighty One," Hermann confirmed, sensing trouble.

"Then you must remain. I will feel happier if we maintain an air presence on Novenia."

One of Hermann's hearts skipped a beat. "But there are the Bute fighters and the-"

"Obsolete and not designed to operate in an atmosphere," the Prator interrupted dismissively. "No buts, Hermann. Our final weapon in the destruction of any planet is to provide it with an Egron civil service. A *StarGlider* must remain behind until

the fleet returns to Novenia with an administrative system. The most powerful StarGlider of them all. Your StarGlider."

14.

Katra burst into the observatory. Halkeer was facing the giant wall screen. He turned when the girl rushed in.

"That's no way to conserve oxygen," he said reprovingly.

"It's true?" Katra gasped, clinging to a console to get her breath back. "The invasion fleet is leaving?"

Halkeer nodded to the screen. "No doubt about it."

The main telescope's optical sensors were set to medium gain so that the whole of Novenia's dust-shrouded globe was visible on the screen. Moving against the background of the planet's swirling, polluted atmosphere was a formation of twenty of the mighty artificial stargliders.

"They started lifting off from the planet a few minutes ago," said Halkeer, adding bitterly: "Obviously the first phase of their invasion is complete. Radar sweeps show that they've left behind a number of tanks and other land vehicles to continue the dirty work."

"What about aircraft?" Katra queried.

"A small airforce consisting mainly of Bute fighters and Skim fighters.

"But no StarGliders?"

Halkeer shook his head without taking his eyes off the screen. "There's no radar trace of any being left behind."

While Halkeer was speaking, the formation of Egron ships began accelerating rapidly. The fleet arched over the farside of Novenia's curvature and disappeared. It reappeared a few minutes later travelling even faster. As one, the entire formation reached escape velocity and vanished off the edge of the screen. Halkeer changed the range scale so that Novenia appeared as a smaller disc. The Egron ships were a cluster of dots moving away from the planet at an incredible speed.

"No real aircover," Katra murmured thoughtfully to herself as she watched the screen.

"The Bute fighters are real enough," said Halkeer, guessing what was coming next.

"But they're spacecraft having to operate in an atmosphere. They won't be able to operate at maximum efficiency. Correct?"

Halkeer looked doubtful. "Perhaps. But those tanks are certain to have massive firepower and there's a lot of them."

"That wasn't your objection before," Katra retorted. "I gave you a report on the fighter. You said that it didn't have enough firepower to tackle the StarGliders. Maybe you were right. Well the StarGliders have gone."

The chief executive could think of nothing to say. Realising that he was hesitating, Katra plunged in. "Fram look at me."

Halkeer's eyes went to the the determined young woman standing before him.

"It's worth a try, Fram... Isn't it...?"

Halkeer turned away from Katra and stared at the image of Novenia. The once bright, shining planet was now a grey mausoleum of despair hanging dejectedly against a backdrop of stars. He nodded. "Yes," he said at length. "It's worth a try."

15.

"It's not worth my life," said Jaysan categorically.

Katra was scathing. "Is that all you think of?"

"As it's the only one I've got - yes."

Katra threw down the fighter's operations manual. "We're going to rebuild the fighter using the latest laser cannons and guided weapons."

"What about Halkeer?"

"Halkeer's in favour."

Jaysan sighed. "Three guesses as to who won't be."

16.

"Never," Agro declared. "Never. Never. Never."

Jaysan checked that Katra and the android were crouched safely behind the makeshift shield. He took careful aim and fired the laser cannon. The energy lance struck the rock face at the far end of the gallery. The rapid melting liberated gases within the rock that caused a deafening explosion. A rain of debris showered around the trio. Larger fragments ricocheted off the steel shield. When all was quiet, Agro cautiously elevated a manipulator that was provided with a camera eye and surveyed the smoking crater in the rockface.

"Wow."

Jaysan and Katra straightened up.

"Weapons have improved since you were a diode, eh, Agro?" said Jaysan, grinning.

"Just a touch," the android grudgingly admitted. "But will they be any good against souvenir hunters?"

"It'll put them right off," Katra promised.

"And force walls? You've no idea how well equipped souvenir hunters are these days."

Jaysan hesitated and decided to be straight with the android. "Two laser cannons by themselves? No."

"Ha!"

"Even so, you've no objection to them being fitted to your fighter?" Katra pressed.

"I didn't say that."

"But you're going to?"

"You promise to restore the fighter to its original condition afterwards?"

"If there is an afterwards," said Katra.

Jaysan scowled. "That's what I adore about you, Kat - the way you set about boosting the morale of your troops."

17.

It took all Jaysan's concentration to steer the hovering fighter the length of the service bay. A slow bleeping from the instrument panel spelt out his progress so that he did not have to take his eyes off the approaching target - a sentinel laser cell recharging point.

"Looking good... Looking good..." said Katra's voice in his helmet.

The long needle-like probe of the fighter's nose moved nearer to the recharging point. The crossed hairs of the canopy's head-up sight dipped below the target. The bleeps slowed. Too low. Using delicate movements of the control shoe, Jaysan eased the nose up. The bleeps became faster. He teased the control shoe forward. The fighter crept towards the docking point with agonizing slowness. Out of the corner of

his eye he saw the gradually shrinking column of the instrument that indicated the charge condition of the main energy pod. Hovering or very slow flight whereby no lift was provided by the wings made heavy demands on energy.

The crossed hairs were centred on the target. The bleeps increased in speed and pitch.

"Nearly there!" said Katra excitedly. Jaysan could see her running forward and staring up at the fighter's probe as it closed purposefully on its target. Jaysan slowed the fighter slightly and allowed its momentum to close the gap. The bleeps pulsed rapidly. There was a soft jolt as the recharging point's mechanical fingers seized the probe and locked it home. The bleeps became a continuous note that cut out after a few seconds. There was a hissing sound. Jaysan looked at the instrument panel. The column that showed the laser cell's contents climbed to a maximum reading and the hissing stopped.

"Laser cell condition - one hundred percent," announced the fighter's computer.

The probe was disconnected from the recharging point. Jaysan experienced a feeling of immense relief at the way the modification to the fighter had worked. The laser cell could now be quickly recharged in any of the four repair depots on Novenia using exactly the same technique that was used for the sentinels. He set the fighter down and opened the canopy.

"Sixty seconds," said Katra, climbing onto the wing. "Not bad."

"We'll have to do better," said Jaysan. "The hovering puts a heavy drain on the energy pod."

Katra nodded. "Maybe after our first visit to a depot, they'll be able to modify their facilities to suit the fighter?"

"Maybe... But we can't count on it. We don't even know if any of the depots are still under Novenian control."

18.

Katra, Jaysan and Agro watched as Halkeer walked around the fighter. The chief executive tried not to look too impressed. The transformation since he had last seen the tiny vehicle was remarkable. The battered skin was now smooth and gleaming. The makeshift trestles were gone: the fighter was now sitting squat and business like on a new set of undercarriage legs, and the laser cannons fitted to the wings were the latest type used on the sentinels. Attached to each side of the fuselage were two jettisonable liquid fuel boosters and their fuel tanks.

"You've worked hard," Halkeer commented. It was the nearest he was likely to get to a compliment.

"We did most of the work," Agro claimed testily, "on the understanding that the fighter is restored to its original specification afterwards."

Halkeer ignored the android. He pointed to the underside of the wings. "You'll mount the missiles last of all?"

"No," said Jaysan.

"Why not?"

"For the best reason in the world. We haven't got any. Our last batch were fitted to the last sentinel we sent out."

"So the laser cannons will be your only weapons?"

"Yes. But we'll be able to collect missiles from the repair depots."

"It seems to me," said Halkeer mildly, "that you're gambling heavily on the chances of the depots still being under Novenian control."

"A calculated gamble," said Katra.

For a moment it looked as if Halkeer was going to raise objections. Instead he asked: "When will you be ready to leave?"

"We'll need another two days to take her outside and hoist her into position on the service tower," Katra replied. "Then another two days for the final tests and checks."

Halkeer nodded. He had already inspected the makeshift but workmanlike service tower that the craft would be launched from. "We'll organise a farewell party for you," he said.

"No," said Katra firmly. "When we leave, we want to leave without fuss, fireworks or farewells."

19.

Had Hermann not been a high-ranking officer he would've had his own cabin because when Hermann slept, no-one else did. His thunderous snores amounted to an intimidating audio frequency force wall that deterred all but the very brave. The captain of *StarGlider One* was not particularly brave, but circumstances - the fact that Hermann was not answering the alarm system - forced him to enter his commander's cabin.

The captain drew a deep breath and managed a few tentative 'sirs' during the periods of tranquility between each bellow and the next. A sharp tug on Hermann's beard required courage but it did the trick.

"Whadder want?" Hermann demanded, sitting up suddenly and glaring at the captain.

"I'm sorry to disturb you, sir, but we've had a report of an object leaving Candrillo Base on the moon."

"What sort of object?"

"We don't know sir. We've lost track of it. The radiation and the dust particles in the stratosphere are making long range tracking difficult."

"A sentinel?"

"No, sir. It was much too small."

"Then what's the idea of waking me!" Hermann roared. "It's probably an unmanned instrument package they've sent to take a look at what's left of their beloved planet!"

With that, Hermann flopped back onto his bunk and tried to go back to sleep, but not before he suggested to the captain an undignified, unhygienic, and uncomfortable storage place for the report.

20.

Agro gave a convincing demonstration of the sheer bloodymindedness that androids were capable of by squeezing himself into the space aft of the fighter's cockpit and refusing to budge.

"Agro," said Katra patiently. "You won't enjoy it. The souvenir hunters we'll be taking on are armed with tanks and lasers and all sorts of things that go bang."

"We don't care," said Agro defiantly, wedging his potlike body more firmly into place. "Where this fighter goes - we go. And we've yet to meet a souvenir hunter that we couldn't handle."

"We're not taking you," said Katra firmly. "And that's the end of it."

Agro clamped a manipulator tightly to the fighter's main spar. "You wanna bet?"

"Agro," said Katra, speaking slowly and carefully. "There is absolutely no way that we're going to Novenia with you on board."

21.

The journey following lift-off from Candrillo Base had taken an uneventful eighty hours. The fighter had behaved magnificently and now Novenia lay immediately before Jaysan and Katra. At first they were too preoccupied to fully comprehend the magnitude of the terrible destruction that the Egrons had caused. It was only when

they had jockeyed the fighter into an orbit around Novenia that they had time to pause and stare. Occasional gaps in the great dust clouds afforded fleeting glimpses of the devastated surface.

There was a note of despair in Katra's voice when she finally spoke. "Even if we do win Novenia back, how many Novenians will be left to rebuild it?"

"One problem at a time," said Jaysan.

"Standby for de-orbit burn in thirty seconds," the fighter's control computer voice warned. "All operations now under flight computer control."

The tiny thruster rockets that had been attached to the fighter's skin fired briefly, turning the craft through one hundred and eighty degrees so that it was moving backwards along its orbital path. There was a jolt when the main rocket motor fired. The effect of the continuous burn was a reduction in speed so that the fighter lost height. It spiralled down into the upper reaches of the Novenian atmosphere. The buffeting, gentle at first, gradually increased until the shaking seemed likely to tear the fighter apart. There was nothing for Katra and Jaysan to do except remain harnessed in their seats while staring ahead at the incandescent, shrieking air that was threatening to burn through the cockpit canopy.

"What's going on?" demanded an indignant voice behind Katra.

Katra gritted her teeth. "You promised to remain silent, Agro."

"We want to know what you're doing to our fighter. We demand an explanation."

"We're re-entering the atmosphere. Now shut-up."

Agro eyed the cherry-red glow that was burning around the canopy. He decided that it wasn't being caused by souvenir hunters and that perhaps it might be a good idea to keep quiet.

The fighter was the nucleus of a fireball plunging through the Novenian atmosphere. Although Katra and Jaysan had been confident that the fighter could withstand the stresses of re-entry, it now seemed that it was only a matter of seconds before their aircraft disintegrated. The nerve-wracking buffeting eased off. After another minute the bright red glow around the canopy was dying away.

There was a muffled explosion that shook the fighter. "Boosters and fuel tanks jettisoned," the computer reported.

The external booster rockets had done their job. The force of the explosive bolts sent them tumbling away from the fighter. The deafening roar of tortured air subsided and became the soft moan of the slipstream around the fighter's canopy. There was nothing to see through the plastiglas blister except dust particles whipping past at an incredible speed.

Jaysan saw the control shoe move. He cupped his hand over it and for the first time felt the tremors caused by air moving over the wing's control surfaces. Suddenly the flight instrument panel was illuminated. All the instruments were picked out in softly glowing coloured lights.

Behind him in the cramped instructor's seat, Katra eased herself into a more comfortable position. A red light winked at her from her keyboard. Her tiny screen, a duplicate of the main screen in front of Jaysan, was devoid of detail apart from Novenia's curving horizon.

"You now have manual control," the computer advised. Jaysan pulled gingerly back on his control shoe. The fighter's nose lifted and he felt a slight increase in his weight. He turned to the left. His body shifted in his seat and suddenly he understood the meaning of the old expression 'to fly by the seat of your pants'.

Once again the fighter was aircraft. It was responding like an aircraft.

The battle it had never been designed to fight was waiting for it far below on the darkened surface of the devastated planet.

FIRST LEVEL

1.

The recordings of the Novenian surface that Katra and Jaysan had studied were no preparation for the shock of seeing the destruction close to. They remained silent for some minutes, reluctant to intrude upon each other's thoughts. Jaysan levelled out and cruised towards some ruins that had once been a city. They were in the daylight zone and yet it was like night below. He followed the city's rubble-strewn central avenue, using the gaunt remains of buildings as reference points to get the feel of the fighter. The transparency of the ruins caused by the canopy's imaging effect added to the eeriness of the scene.

"She's handling well," said Jaysan at length. "You'd better try out your controls."

Katra found that the need to concentrate on flying was a welcome, if momentary, distraction from the appalling destruction. She used her control shoe to gain height. Twin energy towers - their transparency giving them a ghost-like quality - nudged onto the horizon. She flew around the structures in a tight, banking turn. A line of glowing points of light leading from the towers across the plain to a third tower marked the route of an underground powerline. She was about to practice straight-line flying by following the lights when she saw the glass-like outline of an Egron tank.

"Leave it," Jaysan warned. "We need some flying practice."

It was sound advice but Katra ignored it. Her hatred welled up and erupted. She arrowed the fighter straight at the unsuspecting tank and fired as soon as the crossed hairs of the graticule sight were correctly aligned on the target. The lasers stabbed out from the fighter's wings and converged on the armoured vehicle.

"Pull up!" Jaysan yelled.

The explosion rocked the tiny fighter. Debris from the tank hurtled past the canopy - miraculously missing the aircraft.

"Well at least they're vulnerable to sentinel lasers!" Jaysan yelled, twisting around in his seat to keep the wrecked tank in view.

"What's going on?" demanded an aggrieved voice from aft.

"Shut up, Agro!" Katra snarled.

A Bute fighter appeared on the horizon. Its delta shape become visible as it banked

towards the intruder.

"Katra - no," said Jaysan uneasily.

Katra ignored him and pushed the fighter's nose hard down. The aircraft accelerated. Her expression was taut with concentration; knuckles white from the tightness of her grip on the control shoe. The Bute fighter swelled in the sights. The pilot seemed more intent on investigation rather than attack. His curiosity was his undoing. Two flashes of light and the Bute fighter disintegrated. This time she remembered to haul the shoe back. The fighter lifted its nose and roared into the darkened sky, leaving the debris of the Bute fighter raining onto the plain.

"You know something?" Katra observed as she levelled out. "This could be fun if it wasn't so deadly serious."

Jaysan glanced at the energy pod indicator. His eyes widened in alarm. The energy in the pod had dropped by 20 percent. A few minutes of hard manoeuvring had cost them a fifth of their energy reserves.

2.

Hermann rolled red-eyed and belligerent into *StarGlider One's* control room. The news he had just received in his cabin had not made him a happy man.

"When did this happen?" he demanded.

The captain swallowed nervously. "About five minutes ago, sir."

"Two tanks?"

"Four now, sir."

"Four!"

"And a Bute fighter."

"What!"

The captain looked miserable. "The reports came in a few seconds ago, sir."

Hermann's jaw jutted. He thrust his face close enough to the captain for him to be able to map the veins on his commanding officer's nose. "To lose one tank is unfortunate," said Hermann with remarkable restraint. "To lose two tanks smacks of carelessness. And to lose four plus a Bute fighter..." his voice suddenly became its customary bellow. "...is downright, court-martial-offence stupidity!"

"Maybe they hit mines, sir," was the only useful thing the captain could think of to say. It was a comment that further inflamed Hermann.

"Mines! The Novenians are like us - a peace-loving people! They don't go scattering mines about their own planet!" Hermann paused and regarded the captain with considerable loathing. "Didn't any of the tanks say anything before they stopped broadcasting?"

"Nothing, sir. One second a continuous stream from their data-links. The next second - nothing."

Hermann brooded for a few moments. "Alright. You'd better send a general alert to all units. Tell them to report anything unusual. Anything - it doesn't matter how unimportant it may seem."

3.

Like the first and second blasts, the third laser blast Jaysan fired had no effect on the walker; the concentrated blows caused jets of molten metal to flare off the walker's flank but the huge, ungainly machine, striding across the plain on two massive mechanical legs, continued on its way.

"And again!" Katra urged.

"It's useless!" Jaysan shouted over his shoulder. "The thing's indestructible!"

"AGAIN!"

Jaysan wheeled the fighter and fired for a fourth time. The blasts hit the centre of the walker's body, producing more of the spectacular silvery fountains of molten metal. The walker wobbled slightly and started firing back at the fighter. Two bolts of energy slammed into the aircraft. Jaysan fought to regain control.

"Damage - ten per cent," intoned the computer.

Jaysan swore softly and sheered clear of the walker's arc of fire. The walker dumped an automatic laser silo on the plain. The silo's multiple-barrelled turret immediately started firing at the fighter but the shots went wide.

"I tell you, Kat, we should leave those walker things alone. They're too heavily armoured. Let's stick to tanks."

"We can't afford to leave anything alone," Katra retorted. "And the longer those walkers are left alone, the more time they have to drop those silo things all over Novenia."

A silo that Jaysan hadn't seen fired at the fighter. The blast tore a section out of the aft compartment which triggered some loud complaints from Agro. Jaysan spun the fighter around, aimed it at the silo and disposed of it before it could shoot again.

"Damage - fifteen percent," the computer stated.

Jaysan saw that the energy pod was down to fifty percent.

"Listen, Kat - this is crazy. We were wrong to start fighting as soon as we arrived. We should've located a repair depot first and made sure of our supplies before doing anything else."

Katra looked at the instrument panel and nodded. "Okay, Jaysan - let's find the nearest depot. If we get some missiles, maybe we can zap those walkers."

SECOND LEVEL

1.

Sentinel Service and Repair Depot 4 was turning slowly about its axis. To conserve the energy pod's charge. Jaysan set the fighter down on the ground near the depot. He plugged in his vox-operated headset, switched the radio transceiver to very low power and punched out the monitoring frequency used by the repair depots.

"Depot Four. This is AGAV One. Do you copy?"

He had to repeat the call several times before there was a response in his headset. To Katra's and Jaysan's delight, a voice answered; a voice that sounded incredulous.

"Roger AGAV One. This is Chief Engineer Napia returning. We copy you fine. Sorry about the delay. We couldn't identify your configuration at first. Have you escaped from a museum? Go ahead."

"We'll explain when we've docked. Have you run a voiceprint ident on me?"

"Sure we have, Jaysan. Can't be too careful with our friends around."

"Permission to dock, Napia?"

"Go ahead. We're opening the doors."

"A problem," said Jaysan. "Can you turn off the spin?"

"Sorry, Jaysan. The neutron pulse at the beginning of the attack knocked out our alignment controllers."

"Damn," Katra muttered under her breath.

"Okay, Napia. We'll sync in with the spin."

"Good luck, fellers," Napia replied. "You'll have to dock manually with the laser charging point. You're too small for the traction beams to handle."

"Don't worry, Napia. We've been practising."

"Okay. We'll clear with you now. We don't like transmitting for too long in case we draw attention to ourselves."

Jaysan switched the transceiver off and glanced at the energy pod indicator. "Thirty percent," he remarked sourly. "About ten minutes flying time."

"What does it matter?" Katra asked. "We'll pick up a recharged pod in the depot."

A tank appeared on the horizon. It started loosing off at the exact moment that Jaysan increased thrust and lifted.

The manoeuvring that was necessary to dispose of the tank cost another five percent of the energy pod's charge.

Jaysan swung the fighter towards the depot. He lost height until he was level with the doors that were set into the end of the long, low building, and began the energy-consuming task of synchronising the fighter in a circular flightpath so that the doors were framed steadily straight ahead. The crazily spinning horizon made Katra close her eyes. With delicate movements of the control shoe, Jaysan eased the fighter closer to the yawning doors. The manoeuvre was every bit as difficult as he had expected: he had to fly sideways while very close to the ground and at the same time take account of the decreasing angular velocity as the fighter approached the centre of the depot's turning circle.

Agro peered over Katra's shoulder, saw what was happening, and wisely decided that this was not a good time to register complaints.

After several corrections and over-corrections that further depleted the energy pod, Jaysan finally steered the hovering aircraft through the depot's doors without hitting anything.

Normally the depot dealt with sentinels on an assembly line basis: the robot ships entered the building at one end and were moved along, nose to tail, by traction beams while an army of repair androids carried out the necessary servicing. The last operation - near the exit - was recharging the sentinels' laser cells. Now the building was empty of ships.

Jaysan ignored the watching androids as he guided the fighter slowly along the length of the building towards the laser cell recharging point. The bleeping started; slowly at first and gradually increasing in tempo as the nose probe approached its target. Jaysan eased the fighter forward. The probe locked with the filling point. The bleeps merged into a continuous note that cut-out automatically as the laser cell was refilled. Androids swarmed under the fighter and held it in position. Some of the specialized units made an immediate start on the repairs. Jaysan cut power and noticed that the energy pod was indicating a 25 percent charge.

"What's going on?" Agro demanded. "We've a right to know."

"Some androids are repairing the fighter," Katra replied. "If you interfere with them in any way, they'll be instructed to chop you into small pieces for recycling. Understood?"

Agro's silence suggested that he understood perfectly. Jaysan reached up to release

the canopy.

2.

"We were under continuous attack from the tanks for two days," said Napia, pouring Katra and Jaysan another drink. The three were sitting in the chief engineer's apartment.

"The StarGliders were the worst - a few more blasts in the same place and they would have broken through. After they'd cleared off, the tanks and the Bute and Skim fighters left us alone."

"How about the other three depots?" Katra asked.

"They're okay," said Napia. He looked curiously at his two guests. "You really think you can take on all the Egron forces with that museum piece?"

"We've already destroyed six tanks and a Bute fighter," Jaysan pointed out.

"And the walkers?"

"How important are they?" Katra asked.

Napia finished his drink. "Damned important. There's not many of them but they carry supplies to the tanks and they seem to be indestructible - like the StarGliders. And they drop small silos all over the place."

"How do you know they're indestructible?"

"Because we threw everything we had at them."

"Missiles?"

Napia nodded. "We used our entire stock. Useless."

Katra looked alarmed. "So you can't supply us with missiles?"

"One," said Napia.

"One!" Jaysan exclaimed, sharing Katra's alarm.

"Sorry," said Napia. "That's the fastest our replicators can produce them. It'll be the same with the other depots." The engineer hesitated. "There's another problem. Your energy pods are an old pattern. We don't have any replacements."

"Fair enough," said Jaysan. "You can recharge the existing one."

"There's a problem. Our inductive rechargers were phased out a few years ago when

the Mark 10 sentinels were brought into service."

Jaysan stared at Napia. "What about the other depots?"

The engineer looked down at his drink. "Same thing. None of us have pod rechargers. All we can do for you is refill your laser cell, let you have one missile at a time, and carry out repairs. That's all any of the depots will be able to do for you."

"But the pod was showing only a twenty-five percent charge when we arrived," Jaysan protested. "Only a few minutes flying time."

"I'm sorry," said Napia. "But that's what you'll have to leave with."

3.

The energy pod indicator charge was showing 20 percent by the time the fighter had cleared the depot.

Katra gave Jaysan the heading for the Novenian Industrial Museum. Jaysan turned sharply to avoid an energy tower near the depot and set the fighter on course for the museum.

Both of them knew that their chances of finding a pod were slim enough. And their chances of finding a fully charged one were virtually nil.

Two tanks opened fire on the fighter. Their laser bolts jolted the tiny craft. Jaysan was tempted to unleash the one missile that the fighter was now armed with but the problem of their dwindling energy reserves was more pressing. Three minutes later they were circling the ruins of the museum. A close inspection was not necessary; nothing could have survived the mindless destruction that the Egron tanks had wrought. Jaysan set the fighter down to conserve energy while they discussed their next move.

"All we can do is hole up in a depot," Jaysan reasoned. "Given time, maybe we can build some sort of recharger for the pod."

"It amounts to a defeat," said Katra bitterly.

Jaysan reached up and squeezed her hand that was resting on his shoulder. "At least we'll live to fight another day," he said cheerfully.

The fighter lifted and resumed its journey back to the depot. It was as they flew across the thread of underground powerline markers that Katra noticed something unusual.

"Jaysan - what did you do then?"

"Nothing. Why?"

"Turn around and fly back the way we've just come."

"We're down to ten percent."

"Please, Jaysan."

Jaysan pulled the fighter around in a circle and flew back in the direction of the museum.

"Watch the energy indicator when we fly over the powerline markers," Katra instructed.

The line of coloured markers swept by under the fighter. As they did so, Jaysan noticed the energy indicator give a slight flicker. Katra gave an excited shout. "The fighter's operations manual!" she yelled. "There was a warning in it telling pilots not to recharge their energy pods by flying low along powerlines! Maybe the inductive field from the powerlines between the energy towers is strong enough to-"

Katra never finished the sentence; her body was hurled against her restraint harness as Jaysan wrenched the fighter around. He dived towards the energy tower and levelled out above the markers.

Katra gave a cry of delight when the energy indicator kicked to a slightly higher reading. "As low as you can, Jaysan!"

Jaysan lost height and steadied his course so that the markers were a blur disappearing precisely under the fighter's nose.

"Pull up! Pull up!" warned the computer. "Too low! Too low!"

The energy charge indicator began climbing.

"It's working! It's working!" Katra whooped.

The fighter was skimming so close to the ground that not for an instant could Jaysan risk taking his eyes off the straight line of lights that were streaking towards him like glowing bullets.

"Sixty percent!!" Katra yelled. "Seventy!"

Jaysan tried increasing height slightly.

"Seventy. It's constant," Katra called out. "Fly as low as you can!"

Jaysan gingerly eased the control shoe forward.

"Eighty!"

Jaysan's face was lined with concentration. It needed the most delicate of movements on the control shoe to maintain height. The slightest slip and they would crash into the desert.

"Niney percent!" Katra was close to hugging herself in excitement. And then her voice was a panic-stricken shriek. "Jaysan! Pull up! Pull up!"

Both Jaysan and Katra simultaneously jerked their respective control shoes back. The thrust of several G-forces rammed them into their seats. There was a sickening shudder that racked the fighter as the needle-like tip of the energy tower ripped through the underside of the fuselage.

"Agro!" Katra yelled. "What's the damage?"

"Vandals!" the android shouted. "You people have no idea-"

"Seems okay," said Jaysan, wagging the wings experimentally as he levelled out.

"A split as long as me!" Agro yelled.

"A pity you didn't fall out!" Katra retorted. She would have continued the dispute but was much too excited at the realisation that they had solved their energy problem.

The destruction of the Egron forces could now start in earnest.

4.

"Imbecile!" Hermann roared at the ashen-faced tank commander who was framed in the hologram field. "You mean to tell me that you let something out of a museum wipe out an entire squadron!"

"Sir," said the tank commander calmly. "Our tanks are no match against a fighter - no matter how old it is. We're designed to fight ground forces."

"Excuses! I'm not interested in your pathetic excuses! I want that fighter destroyed!"

The tank commander was not so easily intimidated as the captain of *StarGlider One*. "So do we, sir. But with respect, it was you who said that we would not have to contend with an airforce."

"Airforce!" Hermand exploded. "You have the impudence to call one miserable lump of museum junk an airforce!"

"It's in the air and it uses force," the officer answered. "Therefore it's an airforce."

"And like all airforces it also uses ground support facilities," Hermann barked. "The depots. Have you destroyed them all yet?"

"No, sir. As I said in my last report, the depots are built to withstand the most-

"And I've got the facilities to have you brought up here and hanged!" Hermann thundered. "Destroy those depots! That's an order!"

5.

The walker was indestructible. Even the one television-guided missile had failed to stop it. On the sixth attack, Jaysan aimed for the main joint between the machine's huge, ungainly body and its leg. The sustained burst of laser fire produced the same results as the previous attacks: explosive gouts of molten metal that had no effect on either the machine's progress across the blackened plain or the uncomfortable accuracy of its return fire. The walker's armour seemed to be total - it had no Achilles heel.

"We'll have to concentrate on the tanks and silos," Katra reasoned as Jaysan lined up the fighter for a seventh attack.

"One more," Jaysan muttered.

At that moment an unlucky shot from the walker hit the fighter's lefthand vectored thrust port and unbalanced the aircraft's flight.

"Damage ninety percent! Land! Land! Land!" urged the computer.

Luckily the reeling fighter was close to the ground. Jaysan had just enough control to pilot it behind an outcrop of rocks so that they could not be raked by the walker's fire. The fighter dropped heavily on its landing pads.

Jaysan mouthed a one-word expletive. "We're going to have to take a look at the thrust port before that thing's upon us."

Katra quickly broke open an oxygen tablet pack, swallowed one of the tablets and gave one to Jaysan. The tablets released oxygen into the bloodstream at a controlled rate so that they could venture out onto the surface without having to breathe the poisoned atmosphere.

Jaysan pulled the canopy open and jumped to the ground. One glance was sufficient to assess the damage: the adjustable louvres that controlled the direction of the main engine's thrust were buckled inwards, jamming them so that they could not be turned.

"Not too bad," said Katra, joining Jaysan. "About ten minutes?"

"About that," Jaysan agreed.

Katra scrambled onto the wing and yelled at Agro to pass the toolbox. "One problem," she said to Jaysan. "That walker's going to be on top of us in five minutes."

As if to confirm her statement, the walker opened fire. The bolts of energy from the giant machine's lasers chewed a large lump out of the rocky outcrop. Jaysan peered around the rocks and saw to his dismay that the towering walker had increased speed and was striding purposefully towards their position. It was close enough for him to hear the creak of its machinery. Boulders were crushed to dust beneath the pulverising tread of its huge steel feet. The rough ground it was crossing did not affect its pace: the walker was designed to travel over any terrain.

Jaysan and Katra wrestled frantically with the buckled louvres - straightening them as best they could with prybars. Two of the louvres resisted their brute force efforts.

"Can I help?" It was Agro, standing on the wing, looking down at the sweating couple. Somehow the android had obtained a firearm.

"Tell us how far away that machine is," Jaysan panted.

Agro eyed the swaying walker. "What is it? A souvenir hunter?"

"Probably," Jaysan gasped, while he and Katra strained together to straighten the last and most stubborn louvre.

Agro gave the androidal equivalent of a warcry and jumped to the ground. Before the couple could stop him, he raced around the rock and galloped towards the advancing walker - the manipulators he used for walking seemed to spin like wheels as he sped across the plain, raising twin clouds of dust in his wake.

"Too late to worry about him," Katra panted as she and Jaysan threw their combined weight on the prybar.

The buckled louvre still refused to unbend.

"Useless!" Jaysan snarled in angry frustration. He pulled a handgun from his holster and clambered onto the outcrop. Katra was beside him as he threw himself down. They fired in unison at the walker. Their blasts of energy flared impotently on the huge legs. The ground shook in harmony with the pounding footsteps of the monstrous machine. They stared in amazement at Agro. The tiny android was still heading straight towards the walker - in no way intimidated by the apparition's tower bulk. The walker ignored Agro as it continued towards the fighter's position. Another blast from its lasers had a vanishing effect on a chunk of rock very near to where Katra and Jaysan were lying prone. Debris showered around them. By now Agro was virtually underneath the colossus and was firing upwards at random. The walker's crew suddenly realised what was happening and directed their fire downwards but the tiny machine adroitly dodged their energy blasts. Suddenly the android veered. He seemed to dart between the machine's legs. The pall of dust made it difficult for the couple to see exactly what was happening, but Agro appeared to lose his balance. His pot-like body rolled over several times, his manipulators flailed wildly, and a steel foot descended like a mighty industrial press to crush the android

into mechanical oblivion.

Then the impossible happened: suddenly there was a dull roaring sound from deep within the machine. The motion of its legs ceased. Without warning its body suddenly split open. Flames erupted into the black sky followed by geysers of burning debris. The walker teetered on its legs and collapsed - throwing up a huge cloud of dust that seemed to race towards Katra and Jaysan like a charging tidal wave.

The couple stood and stared without speaking as a series of minor explosions disintegrated what was left of the walker's body.

There was silence. The only movement was the settling dust. Something caught Katra's eye. She tugged at Jaysan's arm and pointed to where a small pot-like shape was materialising out of the dust like a ghost: a very angry and very battered ghost. They watched in amazement as the shape drew near. It waved an accusing manipulator at them.

"The next time we have to deal with a souvenir hunter," said Agro petulantly, "You might at least have the decency to lend a helping hand."

THIRD LEVEL

1.

With remarkable self-control Hermann resisted the temptation to fly into a rage when he heard that one of his indestructible walkers had been destructed. His alien cunning asserted itself. From the pictures transmitted by the walker before its demise, he now had a clear idea of what he had to deal with.

And that idea made him an unhappy man.

He was definitely up against a fighter.

Okay - so it was a museum piece. But how many other museum pieces did the Novenians have? Maybe there were dozens of the antiques being prepared for service; bases being made ready; pilots undergoing training; underground munitions plants turning out weapons, bombs and all sorts of things that would make him even more unhappy.

Hermann checked himself. His imagination, limited as it was, was running away again. There was only the one fighter. As for bases - well - there were the sentinel depots and they'd soon be finished off. Weaponry? From reports it seemed that the fighter had only laser cannons.

Hermann's imagination took off again: maybe that was the impression that the fighter wished to give? Obviously its destruction of the walker was the result of the Novenian resistance movement being forced to reveal their possession of a secret weapon. It was obvious that whoever they were, they hoped to entice his StarGlider down from the safety of its orbital station.

Hermann bravely decided to resist such blatant provocation by remaining in orbit around Novenia. After all, as commander-in-chief, it was his duty to avoid exposing himself to danger so that he could continue with the vital co-ordination of his subordinates on the ground who were, of course, prepared and paid to die for him. It would be churlish of him to steal their jobs and their glory.

He advised all his ground forces of the amazing sacrifice he was making on their behalf and requested them to continue sending him information on the strange fighter's behaviour.

2.

The instrument panel showed that the fighter's energy pod was fully recharged. To Katra's relief, Jaysan pulled up in a steep climb. The needle-like crown of the energy

tower sank out of sight beneath the fighter. Katra hated the dangerously low, fast flight between the towers to recharge the pod. Once they were at a safe height, she resumed her argument with Agro.

"Listen, Agro. We're all in this together. You've a duty to tell us how you destroyed the walker."

"And you had a duty to help us," Agro retorted. "And did you? If it hadn't been for us, that souvenir hunter would have stripped this priceless exhibit down to the seat padding."

At that moment Jaysan spotted another walker. The fighter wheeled.

Katra kept her voice calm. "Jaysan. What are you doing?"

The fighter dived towards the walker.

"What does it look like?"

"But you don't know what you're doing!"

"Nor did that perambulating tin tyrant. But he didn't make out so bad."

"Who are you calling a tin tyrant?" Agro demanded, elevating a manipulator so that he could peer over Katra's shoulder.

Jaysan pulled out of the dive and aimed the fighter straight at the walker - approaching the pounding legs low and fast.

"Weird," Agro muttered.

Katra wanted to close her eyes.

"Okay, android," said Jaysan calmly. "Do you tell me how to hit that thing or do the million bits that you're about to become end up in a souvenir hunter's collection?"

3.

"You're certain about this?" Hermann barked, confronting the hologram image.

"There's no doubt about it, sir," the tank commander replied. "It's definitely using the inductive energy from the powerlines to refuel. Twice now we have observed it flying very low between the energy towers. You've got to let me destroy the towers."

"That's impossible," Hermann declared. "We'll need energy to consolidate our hold on the planet. Rebuilding the towers will take too long and will be too expensive."

"Which means that damned fighter will be able to recharge whenever it needs to," said the tank commander curtly.

Hermann's eyes narrowed. "Why is it that you haven't destroyed it when it's preoccupied with this refuelling?"

"Because it flies too low and too fast, sir."

"Because you can't shoot straight you mean!" Hermann thundered.

"We're shooting very straight," said the tank commander evenly. "In fact I've never heard of a bent laser beam."

Hermann's nostrils flared. "If you're being insolent, by the-"

"I'm being straight with you, sir," said the tank commander patiently. "If you won't let me destroy the towers, at least let me concentrate my tanks and fighters along the powerlines. That way we might stand a better chance of hitting the fighter. And there's something else we could try as well."

4.

Jaysan circled the smoking wreckage that had once been a walker. The machine had been of different design from the first walker - they had called it a stomper - but the method of dealing with it had been the same. He turned in his seat and grinned at Katra. "Easy, huh?"

"Like we once said," Agro muttered. "We've never yet come across a souvenir hunter that we couldn't handle."

"Let's find another one," said Jaysan. "I enjoyed that."

Two laser blows struck the fighter. Jaysan wheeled the aircraft around and spotted the two Skim fighters immediately. They were doing what they were good at: firing while skimming low over the surface. Jaysan dived towards them, expecting them to separate and attack him from different directions. To his surprise, the Skim fighters wheeled sharply away and disappeared over the horizon.

"It doesn't say much for the quality of Egron pilots," he commented.

"And our instruments say a lot for the state of this fighter," Katra replied. "The laser cell is nearly exhausted and we've got forty percent damage. Time we returned to a depot."

Thirty minutes later, with a recharged laser cell and rearmed with a television-guided missile, the fighter was back in business. Except that its customers seemed to be no longer interested in the fighter's business. The tanks had vanished. Apart from the fixed silos, which were relatively easy to dispose of, there was no sign of the tanks or

the walkers. Even the fighters had vanished. The darkened plain, with its glowing specks of radioactive dust, was deserted.

"Climb," Katra suggested.

The fighter climbed.

Jaysan peered ahead and could see nothing. He shook his head in bewilderment. "What do you suppose has happened to them?"

A movement near an energy tower caught Katra's eye. She touched Jaysan on the shoulder and pointed. The fighter turned. Beyond the tower several tanks and hovering Bute fighters could be seen. They were positioned so that they could bring maximum firepower to bear along the powerline between the energy tower and the next tower - its pointed tip just visible above the horizon.

"That's the trouble with teaching them a lesson," Katra remarked bitterly. "They learn from them."

"The energy pod's down to thirty percent," said Jaysan. "We can't fight all of them and recharge the pod."

"Let's see how many we can knock out using ten percent of the charge," Katra suggested. "At least they're close together now."

Jaysan dived the fighter straight at the nearest tank. This time instead of fire from one ground vehicle, he had to contend with laser blasts from two of them. The first tank exploded just as the second tank scored a hit that caused 25 percent damage. Jaysan's return fire went wide as he pulled the fighter sharply around to pick off two Bute fighters.

The rapid manoeuvre had drained power from the energy pod at an alarming rate. Another tank had appeared and took up a commanding position near the line of illuminated markers that traced the route of the powerline between the energy towers.

There was a note of desperation in Jaysan's voice. "Tanks or no tanks - we've got to recharge the pod now!" without waiting for a reply from Katra, he hurled the fighter over the nearest tower and levelled out just above the plain. The powerline markers became a continuous streak of light disappearing under the fighter's nose. The charge indicator crept upwards. A distant tank set up a wall of fire that the fighter was certain to fly into if Jaysan held his course.

He veered off course to fire at the tank. As he pulled back onto course, the markers went out.

"They've done it, Katra! They've shut the power off!"

Katra made no reply. The Egrons had done the one thing that they had been dreading.

"We've got to land somewhere safe," she said.

There was no further point in flying between the energy towers. Jaysan eased the fighter into a slow climb to conserve energy. The brief flight along the powerline marker had added only 10 percent to the energy pod's charge. "Where do you suggest?" he asked.

"Let's go back to Napia's depot. He might be able to help."

"How?"

"I don't know!" Katra snapped. "But it's all I can think of at the moment!"

5.

Napia listened to their problems while the fighter was being repaired.

"What's the charge in your pod now?"

"Thirty percent," Katra replied. "About five minutes flying time. But not enough to indulge in any fighting." She glanced irritably around the chief engineer's room - resenting every minute of inactivity. "If we can't fly - we can't fight. We've got to find a way of preventing the Egrons from switching off the energy towers."

Napia made no reply. Instead he turned to a monitor screen and called-up some engineering diagrams. He studied them intently in turn. The last drawing was a cut-away illustration of an energy tower. "Ah... As I suspected." He looked quizzically at Jaysan. "How accurate is your shooting?"

Jaysan shrugged. "Accurate enough to knock out Egron land vehicles and their fighters. Why?"

Napia pointed to the monitor. "The tapered section at the top of all the energy towers houses the switching unit. Knock that out first and you prevent the Egrons switching the tower off. But you must take out only the top of the tower otherwise you'll destroy the main power feeders." Napia paused and nodded at the screen. "It's only a theory, of course. I never had anything to do with their design."

Just before the fighter left the depot, Napia had some exciting news: encouraged by the success of the fighter, groups of Novenians who had gone to ground at the onset of the Egron invasion were now emerging from their hiding places and were carrying out acts of sabotage against the Egron land forces. One group had even launched an assault against the sentinel control centre and had recaptured it.

6.

The first attempt to put Napia's theory into practice ended in disaster: Jaysan's blasts went low, hitting the tower just below the crown and causing the entire structure to rip apart. Debris from the explosion punched through the fuselage, just missing Agro, and caused 10 percent damage. The powerline markers flickered and went out.

A minute's flying took them to a second pair of unguarded towers. This time Jaysan took extra care over his approach. He lined the fighter up on the nearest tower and fired only when the crown was centred perfectly in his sights. The top of the tower was blown clean away by his lasers but the main structure remained intact and the powerline markers continued to glow.

With the energy pod down to a 15 percent charge, there was no time for celebrations: Jaysan swept low over the plain - following the markers while switching his attention rapidly between the blur of light and the climbing charge indicator. The powerline remained on.

"Done it!" he yelled triumphantly when the indicator hit 100 percent.

Katra did something unexpected: she circled an arm around Jaysan's neck and hugged him.

The fighter returned with a vengeance to its task of destroying the Egron forces.

7.

"If you won't let me destroy the towers," said the tank commander emphatically, "then you've got to bring *StarGlider One* down into the atmosphere. Now that the fighter has learned how to take out the switching units on the towers, your flagship is our best hope of destroying it."

Hermann bristled. "You dare to tell me how to run my battles?"

"No, sir," said the commander wearily. "I'm only fighting them for you."

"That's what your tanks are designed for! They're the latest produce of the best Egron brains!" Hermann thundered.

The tank commander decided to stand his ground. "So they may be, sir. But they can't fly."

"And what about the Bute and Skim fighters?" Hermann thundered.

"As you well know, sir, they're not designed to operate in an atmosphere. Considering their limitations, they're doing exceptionally well."

"Exceptionally well?" Hermann scoffed. "They haven't destroyed that fighter. That's what I would call doing well."

"Sir - at first briefing on this peace-keeping invasion, you gave me your personal assurance that Novenia did not have an airforce."

"I keep telling you - one fighter is not an airforce!" Hermann raved. "By heaven, when this is over-"

"Which it will be soon unless you give me a free hand!" the tank commander shouted back. "That fighter has taken out half my tanks, it's destroyed several supply walkers, and it's wiped out virtually every portable missile silo it's come across. Unless you do something now, you're going to have to return to Egron to explain to the Imperial Prator why and how you let a museum piece fighter screw up the invasion."

8.

Katra gave a delighted laugh when the stomper exploded. It was the fifth walker they had destroyed, and she had lost count of the number of tanks and fighters they had finished off. They had paid another visit to a depot and now had two missiles. They were omnipotent. Nothing could stop them now. It was only a matter of time before the invader was defeated. She thumped the back of Jaysan's seat in excitement. "Tanks!" she yelled, pointing.

The two vehicles returned Jaysan's fire but the speed of the fighter across their fire zone was too great; their laser blasts stabbed impotently into the fighter's turbulence. Jaysan hauled the fighter around in a tight turn. Energy for the pod was no longer a problem. He lined up on the first tank and fired. Even before the laser blasts hit the vehicle, he had re-aimed and was firing at the second tank. Both vehicles exploded simultaneously - scattering debris across the plain.

"Ten tanks in ten minutes!" Katra yelled. "We'll be mopping up soon!"

Another tank appeared. Instead of fighting, it fled as soon as it saw the fighter.

Jaysan laughed.

A rapid change of course.

Aim.

Fire.

End of tank.

Katra bounced up and down and thumped Jaysan on the back. "They're running, Jaysan! They're frightened of us! That's eleven!"

Katra never finished the sentence. Out of the corner of his eye, Jaysan had seen a shadow flitting across the plain. So finely tuned were his nerves to the unexpected,

that he reacted by throwing the fighter sideways at the exact moment that his brain registered the anomaly. The suddenness of the manoeuvre saved their lives; the concentrated force of several lasers struck down from above and tore a huge crater into the Novenian surface. The shockwave hit the fighter with the force of a catapulted boulder and sent it reeling off course. Jaysan fought to regain control by applying maximum thrust and climbing sharply.

Once at a safe height Jaysan collected his wits in time to see the distant shape of a StarGlider. The eerie glow around the huge mechanical bird showed that its force wall was set to maximum intensity.

And then the ghastly creature was turning and accelerating towards the fighter.

FOURTH LEVEL: THE FINAL CONFLICT

1.

"It's got missiles!" Hermann yelled when he saw the underside of the fighter as it banked sharply away. "No one told me it had missiles!"

StarGlider One made a smart turn which threw the unfortunate captain against Hermann's chair.

"Wretch!" Hermann roared, grabbing the hapless officer by the collar. "What about those missiles?"

"They... They look like very small missiles, sir," the captain stuttered.

"Small missiles can make big bangs!"

"Not... not big enough to breach our force wall, sir."

Hermann glared at his captain. "You know, do you? You know exactly what sort of missiles they are, do you? Has it occurred to you that they could be the same sort of missiles that they fit to their sentinels?"

The captain looked worried. He made a move to escape Hermann's presence. "In that case, sir. My place is in the fire control room. If you will excuse me."

The captain fled leaving Hermann to ponder his *StarGlider's* chances of defeating the elusive fighter. The problem was manoeuvrability; his *StarGlider* was faster than the fighter and it had superior firepower. But the fighter would be able to dodge around the *StarGlider* and possibly get close to its vulnerable point.

The shrilling of an alarm intruded on his thoughts. The fighter was attacking!

2.

"Now!" Katra yelled, and pressed the fire key on her control board.

There was a jolt as the missile streaked away from the fighter. At the same time the forward view through the canopy changed to the picture transmitted from the speeding missile's television camera. Jaysan maintained the fighter in level flight while Katra guided the missile using her control board.

The StarGlider appeared to be racing towards them.

Katra corrected the missile's yaw until it was heading straight towards the StarGlider. At the moment of impact, when the camera was destroyed, the canopy view switched back to normal. The explosion seemed to engulf the distant StarGlider. It emerged unscathed from the fireball and started shooting at the fighter. Jaysan performed a desperate twist and a steep dive to get them out of trouble. The StarGlider flashed by overhead. By the time it was turning back to renew the attack, the fighter was streaking for the horizon.

3.

The appearance of the StarGlider was a blow for Katra and Jaysan. Suddenly they were on the defensive. For an hour they dodged the StarGlider's fearsome fire, sometimes landing to conserve energy, sometimes having to break from cover when the StarGlider located them. At one point a sudden attack forced them to break off a recharging run between two energy towers. Jaysan landed in the midst of some ruins so that they could stretch their legs and consider their next move.

"We've got to face it, Kat," said Jaysan despondently. "There's nothing more that we can do. The force wall makes the StarGlider impregnable."

Under normal circumstances Katra would have argued vehemently but she could think of nothing constructive to say to counter Jaysan's pessimistic viewpoint.

"Force walls," Agro muttered. "We've never come across a souvenir hunter or a force wall that we couldn't handle."

Katra looked sharply at the android. "What are you trying to tell us?"

"Us? We're not trying to tell you anything. You lot know all the answers."

"We don't know the answer to a force wall. I take it that you do?"

"We've dealt with a few force walls in our time," said Agro mysteriously.

"Oh? How?"

"Trade secret."

Katra picked up a hand weapon and levelled it at Agro.

"Listen, junkheap," she threatened. "How these things work isn't a trade secret. If I fire, you get reduced to a billion molecules. So do you tell us how to deal with a force wall or do I do some reducing?"

Agro considered his options. As a machine, fear was unknown to him, but he had been programmed to take care of himself. "All force walls have a weak spot," he said

sulkily.

"Which is?" the gun remained trained on him.

"Think... the null point where the force wall is generated from."

Jaysan snapped his fingers. "Of course, Kat! the null point on the sentinels is always near the tail where it's unlikely to get hit. If we could score a direct hit with a missile on the StarGlider's null point!"

"With your poxy little missiles?" Agro queried. "You'll need at least three hits on the null point to do any good."

Katra's answer was to jump to her feet and move towards the fighter. "Come on," she said crisply. "We've got work to do."

4.

"There it is!" Katra yelled.

She spotted the null point under the StarGlider's tail but it was too late for her to alter the missile's course. The weapon exploded harmlessly against the force wall. Another of Jaysan's twisting dives took the fighter clear of the StarGlider's lethal firepower. A blast hit the wing, rocking the aircraft and causing 25 percent damage.

"I didn't see anything," said Jaysan.

"I did," Agro piped. "Just below the tail. A round marker. It could only be the force wall generator's null point."

"That's what I saw too," said Katra.

Jaysan glanced at the instrument panel. "We have no missiles left."

"One's certain to be enough," said Katra, twisting in her seat so that she could keep the StarGlider under observation.

"Okay," said Jaysan decisively. "Let's visit a depot, collect a missile, and get after it."

"You'll need at least three missiles," said Agro. "And that means three visits to depots."

5.

Hermann had a theory that applied to enemies that came charging straight at him: either they were insane or they weren't frightened of him. He was uncomfortably aware that the fighter was quite definitely not frightened of him and he doubted if its

crew was insane. That meant that they still had a trick up their sleeve. Judging by the way that the last missile had obviously been aimed at the tail of his beloved *StarGlider One*, he had a shrewd idea what that trick might be. Thinking about it made him an unhappy man.

"Captain!" he bellowed.

"Sir?" the captain answered from the fire control room.

"I want maximum covering fire around the tail!"

"But we already have all the tail turrets manned, sir," the captain protested.

"Then move some more turrets into the tail and no arguments!"

"Yes, sir. Right away, sir," the captain replied promptly, having decided to ignore Hermann's request.

6.

The mass of concentrated fire from the *StarGlider* caused Jaysan to break off his approach before *Katra* had a chance to fire the missile.

"What the hell are you doing!"

"We don't stand a chance if we get any closer," Jaysan replied. "You'll have to fire it from here."

"But we're at the extreme limit of the missile's range!"

"That's a chance we've got to take. That thing'll blow us out of the sky if we try getting any closer. And don't forget - we lose our forward vision when the missile's under way."

"Okay. Go for level flight... Now!"

The missile leapt away. *Katra's* fingers moved over the keyboard - steering the weapon accurately towards the *StarGlider*. The giant mechanical bird saw the missile homing in and tried to out-manoeuvre it. But the *StarGlider* was too large to outwit *Katra's* nimble fingers. The tail swelled in the canopy's head-up display. She saw the null point. She just had time to centre the crossed hairs an instant before the missile struck home.

7.

The force of the explosion rocked the StarGlider and tossed Hermann out of his chair.

"Damage report!" he yelled, picking himself up.

"Still checking, sir!" the captain's voice answered.

Hermann fumed while he tried to catch the words of a muffled conversation in the background. "Are we maintaining level flight, dammit!"

"Yes, sir," said the captain. "The missile must have scored a chance in a million hit on the force wall generator's null point because the hull's been breached. We've some damage to the tail and controls but the repair androids can take care of it."

Under fire Hermann had the ability to think quickly and clearly. "How long before we have full control?"

"Twenty minutes, sir."

Hermann came to a snap decision. He called up the tank commander and instructed him to destroy all the energy towers.

8.

"But I definitely hit it," Katra wailed in anger and frustration. "The missile was smack on the null point! You saw it."

Immediately after the missile strike, Jaysan had pulled the fighter well clear of the StarGlider. "Okay, Kat - you hit it right enough." He studied the receding StarGlider thoughtfully and accelerated after it.

"What are you doing?"

"Look at it carefully, Kat! The wing beat is sluggish and she's not taking any notice of us now. Maybe you did do some damage!"

"We've got one missile left!" Katra declared excitedly. "You reckon it might finish them off?"

"You'll need two more direct hits," Agro stated. "Not that you'll get the chance. Look to your left."

Katra and Jaysan looked.

On the horizon a tank was systematically demolishing an energy tower with repeated

blasts from its laser cannon. Without saying a word, Jaysan started flying on a fast, straight course so that Katra could launch their last missile. As soon as the weapon was on its way, the forward canopy view switched to the missile's camera. In the closing seconds of the missile's flight they saw the damage to the StarGlider's tail. In trying to assess the damage, Katra was distracted for a crucial split second with the result that her missile exploded uselessly against the StarGlider's force wall. Katra swore bitterly.

"At least you're getting the hang of it," Jaysan consoled as he set course for the nearest depot.

On return flight they got to a powerline just before a tank tried to destroy it. With a recharged energy pod, they docked at a depot for repairs and were rearmed with one missile. Thirty minutes later they were airborne again when they were surprised by a Dianomic shuttle. The heavy freighter caused some damage which necessitated an immediate return to a depot.

"At least we've now got two missiles," Katra commented when they were flying again.

Jaysan concentrated on flying. This time they were searching for the StarGlider instead of trying to avoid it.

9.

"There! Over there!" Katra thumped Jaysan on the shoulder and pointed.

The StarGlider spotted the fighter at the same time and altered course away from it. The move gave Jaysan hope as he went after the machine: it looked likely that the machine did not want to mix it until their repairs were finished.

"Fire when you're ready, Kat!"

Katra fired. She kept her eyes fixed on the display while her fingers made minute corrections to the speeding missile's course. The StarGlider's bird-like shape swelled rapidly. The vulnerable null point came into view. She centred the cross-hairs on the target.

"Yaw right! She's evading!"

"Down a touch..."

"She's back on target..."

"Hold it... Hold it..."

The null point filled the canopy. Huge. Impossible to miss.

"Bullseye!"

For an instant they saw fragments flying off the StarGlider before Katra launched the second missile. The camera picture, zooming in on the StarGlider showed that it was still flying despite the damage it had sustained from the two direct hits.

"Too low!" Jaysan shouted.

But before he had finished, Katra had pulled the missile up. Nothing could stop it hitting its target.

10.

The first explosion plunged Hermann's cabin into darkness. He put out his hands to save himself as his bulk was catapulted across his cabin to crash heavily into an unseen bulkhead. He struggled to his feet and was about to start yelling when the second explosion ripped the floor away from under him. In the fleeting second before oblivion, he saw hurtling towards him the surface of the planet that he had come so close to conquering.

11.

The StarGlider struck the plain at a shallow angle. Its nose smashed into an outcrop of rock that caused the entire disintegrating fuselage to cartwheel to a destruction that was as sudden as it was effective. On the third somersault there was nothing recognisable about the flailing, dust-shrouded wreckage to identify it with the flagship of the invincible StarGlider fleet. A monstrous explosion that tore the remnants to shards completed the epitaph.

From the expanding fireball of its funeral pyre, Hermann's StarGlider played its final card.

Hardly had Jaysan's eyes had time to focus on the jagged chunk of debris that was racing towards the fighter when he felt a jarring thump beneath his seat. As one, all the instruments died.

"Catastrophic system failure!" announced the computer. "Land! Land! Land!"

Jaysan yanked the control shoe back and reduced power. He brought the fighter to a hover and was about to further reduce power to land when all thrust was lost. The fighter crashed down heavily on its shock-absorbing landing pads. A leg crumpled, tipping the fighter over onto its left wingtip.

Jaysan swore softly.

"A lousy landing," Agro commented caustically from his hiding place, aft.

"What happened?" Katra asked.

Jaysan dropped back into his seat. There was little point in trying to evade the approaching tank: it was too near and its main cannon was already trained on them. His hand groped for the laser firing button but the control shoe was lifeless - not that he could have brought the lasers to bear on the tank had they been working.

Katra watched the tank with listless eyes. She made no attempt to move. Fatigue, like a lurking enemy she had been trying to ignore, had suddenly imprisoned her will to live. "At least we did our best," she said - an uncharacteristic note of resignation in her voice.

The tank stopped. For a minute nothing happened.

"Get it over with!" Katra shouted.

And then the unexpected happened: a hatch opened on the tank and a man wearing an Egron officer's uniform climbed out. He jumped to the ground and stood very still, staring at the fighter as if undecided what to do. He was unarmed. He walked slowly to the fighter and gazed up at the canopy.

"I wonder how the Egrons treat their prisoners of war," Katra whispered.

"Souvenir hunters," Agro grumbled. The android was peering suspiciously over Katra's shoulder.

Jaysan leaned cautiously out of the cockpit. He felt foolish and could think of nothing to say that seemed appropriate. The two men regarded each other for some seconds.

"I'm the commander of the Egron Land Force," said the officer abruptly.

"And I'm the commander of the Novenian Air Force," Jaysan answered, feeling that he had scored a dubious point.

The officer gave a slight bow. "It has been a hard battle."

Wondering what all this was leading up to, Jaysan agreed that it had indeed been a hard battle.

"Do you wish to accept my surrender now?" asked the officer.

Jaysan blinked. "Now?"

The officer nodded. He looked down at the ground. "I understand. It will take several hours to muster what's left of my forces. I will issue orders telling them that hostilities are over and that they are to rendezvous here."

Had the defeated officer looked up at Jaysan and Katra he could hardly have failed to

notice their stunned expressions. Instead he turned and walked slowly back to his tank.

"You see?" Agro declared. "We told you that we've never come across souvenir hunters that we couldn't deal with."

A sound caught Katra's and Jaysan's attention. The circling shape froze their blood. And then they realised what it was and relaxed. They even managed to smile. It was a real starglider.

The strange bird landed on the plain and began strutting about as if nothing had happened.

THE END ?



POWER LINE AHEAD.....



TARGET IN SIGHT..... BLAST AWAY.....



..... ADJUST HEADING.....



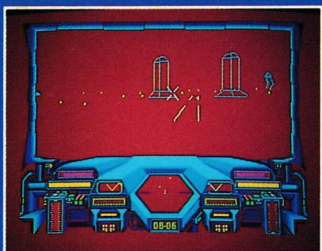
..... CLOSE IN FOR THE KILL.....



..... READY TO RECHARGE.....



..... KABOOM!.....



..... ENERGY SCOOPS ON.



..... TARGET DESTROYED.