

BATTLECORPS

BLITZERNTÉ

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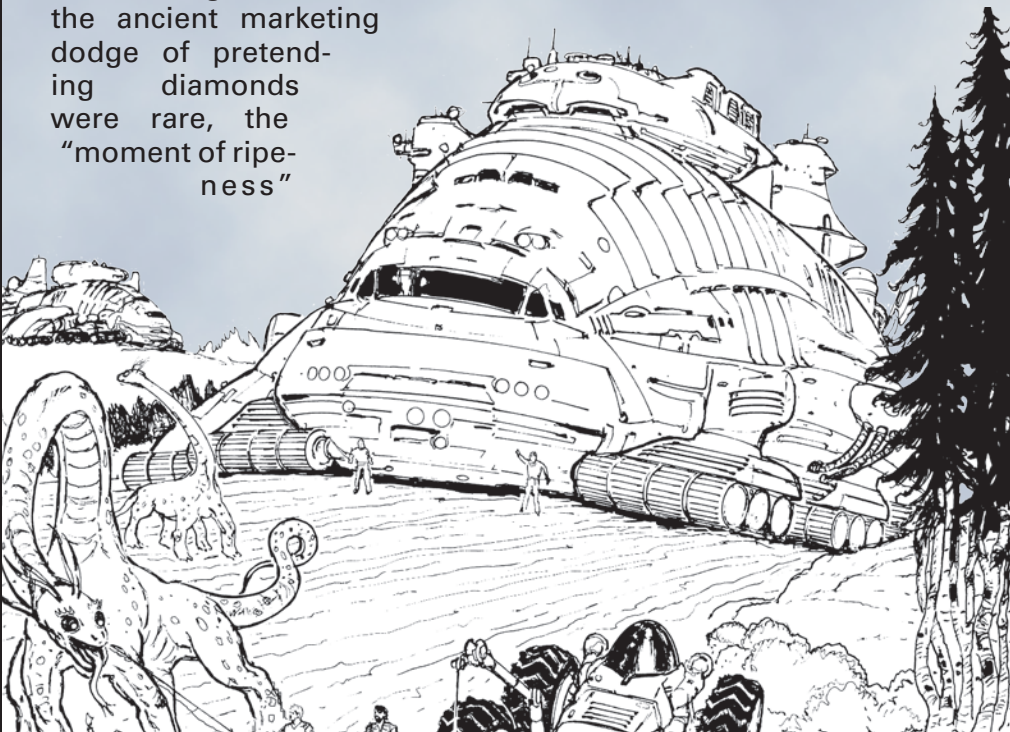
Alioth
Lyran Commonwealth
29 July 3039

Taggert stood atop his *Saturn* harvester, the tallest thing in a hundred kilometers, not counting the communications tower rising from the curving metal hull behind him, and ignored the glare of the UV-heavy sunlight hitting him from all sides. There was no good reason to stand on top of the massive mobile food processor, but Taggert enjoyed it. It gave him a sense of his place in the world.

It was hot. But hot with the heat of summer, not the hard radiation of the periodic flare storms. At the moment the white sun offered no danger beyond sunburn. In five decades it had weathered Taggert's hide a leathery chestnut.

Taggert pulled off his cap and wiped the sweat from his brow with his sleeve. The dense breeze tugged playfully at the few hairs remaining in the center of his scalp, but offered no relief from the heat. Perfect picking weather.

It was legend that sun guavas had to be harvested within an hour of full ripeness. Or more accurately, a marketing fable perpetrated by the Growers' Association centuries ago. However, like the ancient marketing dodge of pretending diamonds were rare, the "moment of ripeness"



myth had become self-perpetuating over the years. It was part of every major label's trademark in some form or other.

Truth was a week or more on either side of that mythical moment of perfect ripeness had little effect on the quality of the fruit. And, despite ad campaigns that evoked images of dedicated family farmers carefully inspecting each hand-picked sun guava, every label on the planet—with a few esoteric exceptions too small to affect the market—bought their sun guava products in multi-ton lots from the same automated harvesters.

But while the exact day of harvest was unimportant, sunlight was vital. A week of dry heat like this region had been having dehydrated the plants, boosting the sugar content. The extra four or five percent was not enough for the human palate to detect, but it was vital to the quality of both preserves and brandy.

Perfect picking weather and his harvesters weren't moving.

The sky above was pale blue, laced with white-grey clouds so high and thin it was difficult to see where each began and ended with the unaided eye.

He would have expected a conquered sky to look different somehow. There should have been some sign the Free World's League's DropShips had sliced downward through that clear blue-white. Some evidence of the Silver Hawks Irregulars crushing the Alioth Planetary Militia and seizing his home world.

But there was nothing. A hunting kestrel and a high circling kite and haze just thick enough to call itself clouds.

Taggart pulled his eyes down from the heavens and surveyed the world at his level. To his left and right were arraigned the four other harvesters that made up Team One of Taggart's Itinerant.

Normally the huge *Saturns* would go for months without sighting each other—linked as a team electronically and by the phalanx of service and transport trucks that ensured they never ran out of supplies or storage space or had to garage for repair and refurbish. There was something elemental about the hulking terrapin shapes of the arrayed machines, idling as they awaited the go ahead. If eight hundred and seventy-five tons of fusion-powered metal could be considered a force of nature.

From his vantage Taggart could only see the two outer beam tractor pods nearly fourteen meters below. A pod housed four giant treads, each driven by an electric motor big enough to out-pull a land tug.

Eight pods carried the self-contained agricultural processing plant over the earth, its one hundred and seventy-five tons distributed for best mechanical efficiency and least damage to the soil.

Carried them through water, too, over or under as the job demanded. Taggert didn't like long sea journeys, though, and didn't think the major islands large enough to justify the risk. Taggert Itinerant ceded the Oceana plantations and the South Continent to its competitors.

Still, owning the largest fleet of *Saturns* on Alioth, he considered himself one of the most powerful un-titled men in the world. And now he stood stalled out in the middle of nowhere for bureaucratic reasons beyond his control.

Taggert would have spat, but he didn't want to waste the water.

Behind the line of *Saturns* stretched parallel rows of neatly pruned sun guava trees, mulched with the chips of branches and leaves trimmed even as the fruit had been picked for processing. Any wildlife unfortunate enough to have sought shelter in the orchard was now finely ground and blended with the topsoil, their constituent nutrients paying ahead for the next generation's nests and burrows among the trees.

Another orchard stretched before the harvester, bands of trees precisely spaced in rows that aligned with the intakes—not surprising, since almost all cash crops on the planet had been planted by *Saturns*. To his practiced eye, these trees were well into their second century, with another eighty to a hundred years of good harvests ahead of them. Except...

He couldn't put his finger on it from this distant vantage, but there was something different about the trees ahead. They seemed less full, scrawnier. No signs of disease, but this orchard wasn't as robust as most. Not a regular customer and not really his problem. Or not his problem under most circumstances. This was definitely not most circumstances.

The obvious boundary demarking the line between one orchard and the next was the hard-packed service road, wide enough to accommodate a *Saturn*, but rutted with the tracks of smaller vehicles. However, the boundary that mattered to the machine beneath him was a set of geolocator coordinates. Until Taggert Itinerant had clearance from the Ministry of Agriculture satellite network, his *Saturn's* control computers would not harvest.

The problem was, Taggert couldn't get the clearance. That he had no idea who owned the land was not unusual. What had his harvesters idling beneath the summer sun was the inability of the Min Ag's central registry to find the deed holder. The fate of the planet was in the hands of an absentee owner who hadn't bothered to register up-to-date contact information.

"Why don't we just roll through this farm and clip the next?"

Taggert squinted against the glare of sunlight on metal to find Blair's head. A firm believer in sunscreens and keeping covered, Blair had the pallor of a dome dweller, not the accomplished harvester jockey she was. Now her pale features were a cool shadow in the blaze of sunlight and polished metal atop the *Saturn*.

"Because we don't know if there's enough guava between here and Warrinzer to get a full load even with this farm," he told her. "And anything less than a full load ain't gonna cut it."

Blair brought her shoulders up through the hatch. Resting one forearm along the hull, she propped her chin on the other fist. The multiple reflections of the metal gave her pale skin an inhuman glow—the blonde spikes of her hair were electric.

"Speaking of cutting it," she said, "I've been thinking. We should reset the choppers to process livestock."

The *Saturn*'s automated harvesting blades and product processing hardware could be reconfigured from harvesting sun guavas to slaughtering cattle and packaging beef products in less than an hour. Thorough removal of agricultural residue and sanitizing all components—jobs that had to be done by hand and triple-checked—took at least twelve. Most of that could be done on the fly, as they covered the five hundred kilometers to the cattle ranches along the coast. But...

"What good would that do?" he asked against his better judgment.

"We could disconnect the safety protocols and run over the Leaguer troops," the young woman said as though explaining the obvious. "Think about it. You've got your steaks, your variety meats, bone meal, leather..."

"We could package the lot and sell it back to Free Worlde's quartermaster. Maybe turn a nice profit."

Straightening, Blair laced her fingers in front of her and batted her eyes.

Taggart regarded her for a long moment.

"You are not dating my son," he said finally. "Don't even ask."

"No fear of that," Blair grinned.

Taggart was satisfied until he wondered if she'd meant no fear of her dating his son or no fear of her asking first. He dismissed the question—more easily than he dismissed her macabre image of using harvesters against Free Worlds League infantry. His son was half a continent away with Team Three and probably safe for the moment.

"Get me your comm headset," he said instead. "I need to kick somebody's ass or we're not going to make deadline."

The harvester's driver dropped out of sight and Taggart was left alone to consider his world in peace.

Blair was a good harvester jockey—and had already proven her worth as a repair tech. If Taggart weren't aboard, she'd be in charge of this *Saturn*. Had been before he'd shown up to oversee this *blizernte* of the North Continent's entire guava crop. Another six or seven years of seasoning and she'd make a good team chief.

A dust cloud approaching through the orchard ahead caught his eye.

Squinting against the sunlight and the glare reflecting off the metal, Taggart made out a tractor pulling some sort of trailer. He'd never seen this particular high-wheeled farm machine before, but from the brown-black diesel smoke belching from its stack and its general air of fatigue he guessed it was very old. The trailer was an ancient fruit picker's gondola, narrow and high-sided, that had been pressed into service to haul a half dozen people.

Taggart realized why the Ministry hadn't been able to locate the owners, and why he'd never seen this orchard before, and why the trees were stunted. For a moment he considered Blair's suggestion to reset the harvester to butchering livestock, but gave the idea up. Holoovid horror shows aside, the *Saturn's* safety interlocks wouldn't let it process anything remotely human.

Which pretty much described the newcomers. They were at the edge of the damn Exituri commune. He wished the simple-lifers had stayed home on Shiloh rather than try to spread their back-to-the-earth beliefs here. Fortunately Alioth was an agricultural world, a real

one. Folks here knew enough about the bottom line of a working farm to realize what the Exituri offered wasn't simplicity but suicide.

With a muttered curse, Taggert dropped through the hatch, descending the ladder in a fireman's slide. He counted on Blair's quick reflexes to keep her out of his way as he crossed the control room and headed for the stairs. Somewhere between the package printer and grain separator he heard her fall in step behind him, but didn't turn his head.

Randolph was taking advantage of the harvester's idleness to change the heads on one of the threshers. Taggert nodded his approval in passing.

By the time they'd reached the ground, the tractor had turned around so the rear of the fruit gondola faced the harvesters. The tailgate was down and a group of what Taggert assumed were Exituri elders had descended the makeshift ramp. One—the eldest elder, Taggert guessed—stood a little ahead of the others.

"Why do you threaten our land?" the apparent leader asked without greeting.

"You mean to tell me you don't know what your buddies in the Silver Hawk Coalition are doing to Alioth?" Taggert demanded.

"You know well we brought our message and our way to Alioth when Shiloh was a sister world in the Lyran Commonwealth," the lead elder said. "We have no association with our brothers beyond Alioth."

Taggert knew no such thing, but let it pass.

"Do you understand the situation we're in?" he asked. "All of us, together?"

The elder or whatever his title was regarded Taggert levelly, neither confirming nor denying knowledge of the invasion. Taggert took that as an admission of ignorance.

"Free World League forces have captured the planet," he said. "They have threatened general destruction unless a levy of precious metals, technology, and resources is paid. We don't have enough of any of those things to meet their price. We are preparing a counter-offer."

"What has this to do with violating our beliefs and ravaging our land?"

"Your sun guavas are part of the counter-offer," Taggert fought to keep from sounding exasperated. "You will be compensated at fair market value. We're sorry about your beliefs and have no intention of ravaging your land—but lives are at stake."

"To preserve life, you are welcome to our sun guavas," the elder said. Before Taggert could breathe easy he added: "But to preserve the dignity and harmony of the land, they must be harvested by hand."

Taggert gaped.

"That would take many days," Blair spoke for the first time. Taggert was amazed she sounded as though she was having a reasonable discussion with rational people. "Many lives will be lost."

The elder did not turn to look at the assembled group at his back, but Taggert couldn't shake the feeling some sort of consultation took place.

"It is a hard thing," he said at last, "to consider the destruction of our orchard."

"What?" Taggert followed the Exituri's eyes to the trees visible beyond the bulk of the *Saturns*, trimmed to their central trunks. "Those trees aren't destroyed. They've been pruned."

"Pruning must be done by hand," the elder said solemnly. "Each branch must be considered."

Which is probably why your orchard looks like hell, Taggert thought. Now that he was looking at them from ground level, he could see they bore less than half the fruit of properly maintained—*Saturn* maintained—trees.

"What if we lock out the pruning function?" Blair asked. "The machines will pick the sun guavas, but will neither prune, mulch, nor fertilize. Some branches will be broken, that can't be helped, but..."

"We understand," the elder cut her off. "A gesture of consideration for our beliefs within your limited understanding."

He stood for a moment, looking to the middle distance. Taggert couldn't tell if he was thinking or praying—not that the two were mutually exclusive.

"Proceed."

With no other word or gesture, the lead elder led his entourage of follower elders back into the fruit gondola. Somehow the Exituri managed to not look as though they were standing in a cargo trailer as the tractor pulled off, jerking and bouncing them between the trees back the way they had come.

"Not prune?" Taggert asked his driver.

"Give me ten minutes with the computer net," Blair promised.



Taggert had been ordered to take the North-South Highway into the city. The Duke wanted to make the presentation in the central park, beside the reflecting pool.

He had not bothered to point out a parade of one hundred and seventy-five ton *Saturns* would have destroyed the road. Instead he lead them in a staggered line through the pasture land beside the highway. An ancient battlefield, the earth beneath their treads had not recovered enough to support more than grass and dairy cattle.

Through the tinted glass of the control center's window, Taggert could see a dozen Mao-heng Charioteer police cruisers keeping pace along the road with their lights blazing and sirens blaring. Apparently this was the Duke's idea of an escort. Taggert hoped the cops driving the cars were sharp enough to realize how silly they looked.

The Silver Hawk Irregulars helped them with that particular enlightenment by lining a demi-company of 'Mechs across the approach to the city. Apparently the Duke had figured out machines that didn't fit on the road wouldn't fit in the city, either.

One of the BattleMechs, looking like an angry Easter egg, stood a little ahead of the others.

"That's a *Flashman*, seventy-five tons," Blair supplied. "That's Zuritas."

Taggert grunted. The leader of the invaders.

The Silver Hawk leader's *Flashman* was dwarfed by the harvesters bearing down on it, but any inferences one might draw from their relative sizes would have been wrong. The *Saturns* were hollow—frames to carry a variety of processing equipment and

supplies and holds filled with harvested crops covered over with an outer shell just thick enough to protect everything from the elements. In contrast, the BattleMech was densely packed heavy metal and weapons, cramming a lot of mass into a compact volume. Its lasers could carve his harvesters like a knife through cheese.

That thought was still with him when he descended the final steps to the turf between the harvester and the BattleMech. He was used to being master of all he surveyed, but all he surveyed was usually acres of crops. The woman in the cooling vest waiting by Duke Florence was nothing of the kind.

As he got closer he realized Colonel Martha Zuritas had classic features, like the faces on the plates his wife had liked to collect. He'd never cared for them, but he still had a wall of them at their house on the coast—the house that had been theirs. They reminded him of Helen. And Zuritas reminded him of Helen's plates. Not Greek or Roman—his mind searched for the term—Etruscan, that was it. Zuritas had Etruscan features, strangely still and unlined.

She's had reconstructive surgery, Taggert realized. Then came to himself quickly enough to not be caught staring. He hoped.

"Your Duke tells me you have a proposal," Zuritas said without greeting.

Taggert ignored the lack of greeting—no one was being courteous today—and the fact Duke Florence had left it to him to make the deal.

Well, it was my idea.

"How much does a fresh sun guava cost back home, Colonel?" he asked. "Two C-notes? Three?"

Zuritas regarded him levelly for a moment, then took a deep breath and expelled it through her nose. Not quite a sigh. Taggert was startled by how far her cooling vest rose and fell, but kept his eyes firmly locked on hers. Nothing still about them; they looked like dark grey storm clouds held in check.

"What has that to do with us here and now?" she asked.

Taggert knew the Silver Hawk commander was no idiot. She knew exactly what was coming. Probably had when Duke Florence had suggested she meet Taggert and his harvesters. Taggert wondered for a moment how the Duke had gone about that. But he didn't waste any more time on build up.

"Behind me is the entire sun guava harvest for this region," he said. "Nearly one hundred and fifty tons total. We've got whole fruit and sliced, vacuum packed to stay fresh for decades. Preserves, jellies, jams, salads, all packaged with premium labels and all guaranteed of the highest quality. We've even got ten tons of syrup in wooden casks which will—if you leave it alone for sixteen standard months—become the finest in pure sun guava brandy.

"We don't have the levy you asked for," Taggert finished. "We're offering you something worth a whole lot more. Managed right, the sale of these will buy you ten times anything you'd hope to gain militarily."

Zuritas raised her strangely expressionless face to survey the row of looming harvesters behind Taggert for a moment. She favored Duke Florence with one sideways glance before meeting Taggert's gaze again.

He thought he saw a spark of something in her eyes.

"Sun guava marmalade?" she asked.

Taggert pulled the noteputer from his belt to be sure he had the numbers right.

"Four point two tons," he answered.

Zuritas repeated her through-the-nose sigh, her eyes flicking to the harvester and back. Then she nodded.

"Throw in toasted crumpets," she said, "and you've got a deal."