

## WONDERING ABOUT GULLINDER

Arlen, striding in past the twisted metal faces of his doorway, read Mentrius' broad, map-lined face, seeing downturns of disappointment at corners of mouth and eyes. This man had always been a good general: patient, thoughtful, well-organized, abruptly incisive when it served him. And loyal.

Mystifying. Why did Mentrius stay through the vicious politics and turmoil? He would have served well under any governmental command, maybe even risen to his own regional leadership. But Arlen paid well, and gave him trust; and regional politics were just as bad as ArCorp's, or worse.

"Mentrius, I want to cut through into the Complex just the way the rebels did. What options do we have?"

Mentrius nodded at Trenzil. "I'll show you. Screen." The screen rose, nearly shutting off one side of the chamber. The walls dimmed, and he spoke in his grating deep voice. "The rebels used the containment vent hatches here, and here, and in these spots." A South Power Complex holomap leaped up in front of the screen, and tiny sparks blinked where Mentrius pointed. "They were let in or broke in to the lower control levels. A stiletto-in-the-heart tactic. After we nearly chopped them up in the streets, they knew there was no facing us down with strength. The stoneshapers they stole saved them. And they used N-disruptor grenades, inside the Complex."

Mentrius scowled, then raised his shoulders as if shrugging his coverall uniform into a more comfortable fit. "We've still got a few eyes inside — they filed this report. They're in touch, but it's sporadic. We've verified Rhin's people as the most likely ones who let the rebels in."

"Any names?" Arlen studied the diagram. Too bad he couldn't give the turncoats to Turiosten now. But that would wait. How had the rebels gotten the neural disruptors? Another conundrum.

"No names, yet. For my part, I think we can hit here, here, and here." Three prongs of pale-green light appeared in the holo as Mentrius moved his fingers through it. "The militia and the regional forces have already made limited room for us there in accordance with our agreements. We should be able to put some extra force in there without being noticed, once things heat up."

“We’ll get help from the aliens in all this.” Arlen admired Mentrius’ choices. The man seemed to see right to the heart of the tactical problems.

Mentrius looked Arlen in the eye, and his voice took on a stiffer, more formal cadence. “They’re busy right now, I’m told.” He shook his head. “You know I don’t like working with them. They’re uncontrollable after a certain point, and that’s bad for a military operation.”

“You’ve made that point before. I intend to use them as a distraction, throw their chaos at the rebels and make the rebels deal with it, not me.”

“Where do you want to use them?” Mentrius held a hand up toward the holomap.

“Up here, out of the way of the critical reactor parts.” Arlen flicked his index fingers; the display reacted with two burning red dots flanking the highest of Mentrius’ marks. “We’ll start the real assault a few turns later, down here, when the rebels engage and shift force up to meet the attack.” Four blue sparks burned now at the base of the Complex.

Mentrius drew staggered green lines from deep in the City to the Complex base. “Stoneshapers will help down there. We’ll have to move them in along the streets to keep their signature out of any detectors.”

“I’ve stockpiled the same grenades they used, the N-disruptors,” Arlen said. “I want to use them if necessary.”

“Not if you want to keep Gullinder’s shaft out of your lower bowel,” Mentrius said, his husky voice gaining a sharp edge.

Arlen stiffened. Mentrius reacted so quickly, strongly, whenever any question about Gullinder’s interference came up. But Mentrius had a point. “Gullinder won’t say anything if the weapons are traced to the rebels.”

“Can you guarantee that?” Mentrius persisted.

“That’s my problem, not yours,” Arlen said. “Your people won’t be using them, and won’t even be near them. I’m just giving you advance notice, so we don’t get units crossed up and stepping in each other’s way.”

Mentrius frowned. “So you’re using your Internals.” Arlen’s Internal Security group, his own guard, stood rival to the ArCorp paramilitary, under Mentrius, and the corporate police. Security, police, paramilitary: Arlen’s triad of contenders. Always have at least two strong subordinates, three if possible. And with his

personal squad of deeply-loyal Argazindari martials, proficient at infiltration and assassination, Arlen had four.

“Yes, I’m putting mine in two places: here, and here.” Arlen lit violet circles below the base of the Complex. No need to tell Mentrius more. “Just keep the regulars out of these areas. We’ll launch this whole thing after you’ve had a chance to work out the next levels of detail. Report back to me when you’re ready. I need your report in two hours.”

Mentrius nodded and turned to leave. Arlen watched his broad back and shoulders nearly span the doorway. Mentrius. Gullinder. Maybe Mentrius’s loyalty had its own independent purpose.