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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK OBERHEIM (VOICES): A CHRONICLE OF WAR ***

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OBERHEIM (Voices) a chronicle of War

Science Fiction,
Approx. 90,000 Words

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to Hemingway

ACT ONE

Andersen Sector
Months X through XII
International Year: 2410

OBERHEIM

The dawn came cool and pale. Looking down from the balcony he watched the white sun rise slowly, lighting the valleys and stalk forests below, the dark mountains behind. The only sound was that of transplanted birds in the distance, seeming unnatural in this altogether alien landscape. He heard his name called from within, but did not answer. Elonna came and stood in the glass doorway behind him, wrapped in a blanket.

"What's the matter, Eric?" He did not answer but only shook his head without turning. She stepped out onto the balcony beside him, opened the blanket with her arms and wrapped it about his shoulders. Her skin felt warm against him, but could not displace the emptiness and anxiety he felt.

"What's wrong?" she asked again, curling up against his chest.

"I don't know. It's too quiet." The girl turned her face to look out into the wind, her long hair flowing behind. She looked out at the sun, warm and sleepy-eyed, then drew back from him with a start.

"Eric, look!" Three black specks had just cleared the horizon, and were moving swiftly toward them. They flew in tight V formation, but their shapes could not yet be distinguished.

"Oh, damn. Elonna, get inside, down into the shelter. I'm going to try to contact the city."

She hurried inside. He looked back then moved to follow, but too late. A shaft of yellow light shot

down from one of the ships, now nearly overhead, and he slumped to the balcony floor. Then they were gone.

She cried out and rushed and knelt beside him, lifting his shoulders. "Eric, no! Don't leave me here." She wept and put his head to her neck and rocked him back and forth, but he only lay there unmoving.

From behind the mountains came a blinding flash, followed after several hushed breaths by a deep rumbling in the distance. Then all was quiet and the city, too, was gone. She knelt holding him still, trying to remember what he said to do if this happened, but for a time could only cry. She heard the sound of smaller ships approaching but it did not register. Suddenly she knew she was in danger and must act.

She ran inside, quickly zipped into a coverall, grabbed a flask of water as she passed out of the room. She ran down the stairs, was out the door and flying toward the forest while a part of her was still on the balcony.

She reached the first stubble-shoots, four to six feet high, their blue branches like thick hair at an angle toward the sun. Brushing past them, she was just entering the cover of the trees when a small troop-deploying ship landed amidst the cluster of houses from which she had fled. Screams broke out but they were cut short, one by one. Her eyes welled with tears and she stumbled many times but kept going.

After what seemed an eternity she came upon the narrow path, branching left and gradually rising toward an outlying spur of the hills. But by now she could go no further. She had just strength and wits enough left to move a short way off it and collapse into a long dry rill, overhung with bushes. There for a time, dizziness and fatigue pinned her. She was too physically spent to feel much sorrow, but at intervals the knowledge of her husband's death came back to her like a hollow blow in places she could not defend. At last grief wholly overcame her.

"Oh, Eric. What am I going to do without you?" She lay there weeping. Then slowly, like a memory, his words began to come back to her.

"If you get to the deep woods and I still haven't come, you've got to hide." I'M HIDDEN ERIC. "But that won't do for long. They'll be out with heat sensors, so you've got to get to the graves." She started to rise, then fell back. ERIC, I CAN'T. "You must."

She staggered to her feet, found the path, went forward and began looking for the cluster of gray stones which marked the turnoff. She found it just as she was ready to quit.

Leaving the path once more, she picked her way through vaguely familiar landmarks till she came to two bare oblong mounds of earth. THEY DO LOOK LIKE GRAVES. She fumbled about the edge of one till she found the handle. It took all her strength to lift it, and the thick red earth on top did not move. She slid her way into the opening and lay in the shallow hole, the lid thudding to above her.

She felt for the dead-blanket, covered the length of her body with it and shivered in the darkness. The cutting whir of a search-ship overhead sounded dully around her. She clutched together like a child, hardly daring to breathe. But the ship passed over and was gone.

She was alone.

*

The night had come and though she could not see it she could feel it. The air that tricked in from the breathing hole was cold and wet, chilling her. She turned and wrestled the dead-blanket from her, reached up and tried to push back the lid.

It would not move, and for a moment she panicked. Then placing both hands together, she pushed with everything she had. The earth above her buckled, cracked and gave way. She forced her way out. She stood up, brushed away the clay-like dirt, and looked around her.

All was dark and silent. There was no moon, but through scattered openings in the interlacing canopy a few stars shone dimly. Her eyes already accustomed to the dark, she worked her way slowly back to the path, then turned to the right. Still there was no sound and she walked, tentatively at first, and stopping to look around her many times, then with greater confidence on toward the hills. She picked a light, strong shaft from among the many that lay fallen by the way. Its curved length felt reassuring in her hands. She still felt great loss, but no longer any fear. The hours in the grave had not been wasted.

The grade became steeper, and she found she was topping the first shallow hill. The way led down from it and then up again, more steeply than before. The smooth stones became larger and more numerous.

At length she felt she must rest, and sitting on a cold stone, suddenly realized that for all her newfound courage, she had no clear idea where she was trying to go. Beyond vague references to 'people in the hills', Eric's instructions ended here. Through chattering teeth she hugged her shoulders, lowered her head and tried not to cry. ERIC.

Again she rose and looked about her, stamping her feet to try to keep warm. Nothing in sight. Wait. . . what was that? Either her eyes deceived her or there was a pale resonance, little more than a shadow of light, just beyond the hill in front of her. From where she stood the path hooked left to skirt its base before finding a narrow pass between ever larger foothills. But above and to her right came the soft, inviting sheen. Torn between fear and the need for shelter, she moved cautiously a short way into the brush.

The climb was not steep, but try as she might she could not make it noiselessly. More than once she missed her footing, stumbled, and fell through thick leaves with a muted sound like walking through corn. In truth the noise of her falling was not great, and except for a short gasp on one occasion no sound escaped her lips. But in that quiet of night she was sure that it carried.

Finally reaching the hilltop, she looked down on a slight recession, in the center of which lay a small, rounded clearing. A dim lantern was hung on a post at one end, seeming lost and forlorn in the wilderness. All around it there was nothing to be seen except a broad, flat bench on which a man might rest, and no sign that it was anything more than a traveler's light, left to mark a trail, that would go on glowing for years unattended.

Still she took nothing for granted. She approached the clearing and slowly, very slowly left the cover of the trees. She made her way silently to the post and examined it closely. She heard something step through the bushes to her left and her heart was in her throat. She whirled, relaxed and nearly fainted.

The man's face and hands were black.

"Thank God," she managed, swooning still. The man, perhaps fifty, clad in camouflaged cover-suit and jacket, remained at his distance. When she had recovered herself she saw that he regarded her kindly, but made no attempt to help her stand.

"What have we here?" he said in a dry voice, with just a corner of a smile. "Another ebony wanderer? And in the middle of the night. I was just getting ready to leave."

"I guess so." Now that she was no longer moving, the cold pierced her clothes and she shivered once more.

"Well, I guess we'd better get you out of it. Have you strength to walk?"

"Yes..... How do I know I can trust you?"

"You have no choice." He left the light as it was.

He led the way, and after hesitating she walked with him for several miles without speaking, climbing ever higher into the dark, bony hills. They rested then briefly, her breath coming hard from the steep grades they had already passed. But now, leaning dizzy and pallid against a stone, she felt a strange reluctance to speak of her condition. A harsh stubbornness had been growing inside her as they went, tightening ever harder as fatigue become unbearable. The feeling frightened her, but she kept it to herself. Instead she tried to satisfy another doubt.

"Who are you?"

"I am that which I am," he said. And he gave a short, bitter laugh.

"Why are you laughing?"

"Nothing to do with you," he said. "Just making a little joke to myself." She looked down at the ground beneath her feet. "But now you must be very tired. No need to push yourself all at once. Sit down on the ground and we'll rest."

She slid to the cold earth with her back against rough stone. It was quiet, too quiet, and through the darkness the memories..... She wept quietly.

"So softness wins out after all," he said flatly. She glared at him angrily, but he was not looking at

her. "Don't worry about it. Sometimes it wins in me too." He must think he's some kind of stern father, she thought. A stern, unfeeling bastard of a father.

They walked till the hills became sheer, then rested again, this time looking up at a dark face frowning down on them. "How much further?" she asked heavily.

"Not far."

"Truthfully?"

"Yes. Can you walk a little farther?"

"Yes. Just give me a minute to rest." He did, exactly. They set out again, skirting the rockface till they came to a gap between cliffs. They followed it up and in, moving through a narrow strip with high walls on either side. Finally it died into a meeting of stone.

"Where now?" she asked between gasps.

"Nowhere. We're here."

"But I don't see anything." A cold fear ran through her.

"Wouldn't be much of a hiding place if you could." He moved past her and flicked his finger between a crack in the rock. Almost at once a soft white light began to filter through a cave entrance not ten feet above them, a short distance to the right. Something like a smoky film was dissolving before it. He boosted her up to a narrow ledge that ran in front of it, and after a short, stepping climb she was there. He came behind her, gestured with his hand.

"Go on. I promise I won't bite you." Again, just a corner of a smile.

She entered the cave, found it warm and well lit. A thick, transparent tube along one wall provided the heat. Light came down from three very ordinary fixtures, hung from the ceiling some twelve feet above. This main chamber, neither large nor small, ran back into a narrow arch, the shadows of which did not seem to go much farther. There was a table, long and low, a wooden bench and two chairs. Several large packs, three strange instrument panels stood against the far wall. Something dark and small was huddled among them. To her surprise she saw that it was a child: a small boy, dressed in blue.

"Hello," she said. "What's your name?" He gave no answer, but studied her with dark, shining eyes.

"I'm afraid you won't get much out of that one. He's still a bit shook up." The man put down his pack, leaned his weapon against the edge of the table. "Found him away north this afternoon. His mother told him just to run and keep running. He did.... You want coffee?"

"Yes, please." He returned from the back a moment later with a steaming cup, and a plate of some synthesized food. "Thank you." He pulled a chair and sat down across from her, watching her eat.

"So what's YOUR name?" he said at length, and the kind older man was submerged.

"Elonna Dorsett."

"You're not all black, are you, Elonna?"

"No. My grandmother was white. Is that important?"

"Not necessarily." A pause. "So how many did you lose?"

She glared at him, then softened. "Only one. My husband."

He got up and paced, then stood squarely before her.

"So tell me this, Elonna Dorsett. What do you plan to do about it?" She hesitated.

"Anything I can." She had a strange sensation as she said the words: a sand castle on a beach, broken and swept away by the waves. But maybe if there was a stone in its center, hard and sharp and black....

"Well, at least you're no spy." He said it matter-of-factly, as if the question had been understood between them. "And you've a bit of spunk. Not much perhaps, but a bit." He winked at her halfheartedly, the graying father once more. "You must be tired."

"Yes."

He led her to the second chamber, gave her a thin mat against the hard floor, which he placed a short distance from his own. Then he fetched the boy out from between consoles, and set him on the mat beside her. He extinguished all but a soft bluish light, and lay down himself. He turned away.

"Who are you?" she asked quietly.

"I used to be a minister." Again the short, bitter laugh. "Now I don't know who I am. Just don't call me Moses."

He said no more, and they slept.

*

"How could they do such a thing?" They sat again on opposite sides of the table, drinking coffee and eating a meager breakfast. With the night passed and the boy off playing, she hoped she would find him more talkative.

"What, the great white hopefuls? Simple. There was no one to stop them."

"But why? when they brought us here in the first place?" He chewed a stale biscuit, and for a time did not answer.

"Don't ask me to explain the Minority Homestead Act. It was created by another government, and would take a week."

"But the killing—"

"Every expansionist power needs a hate-group within its own boundaries, someone to blame for their own fears and failures. Someone for the violent but inexperienced to cut their teeth on. Hating the Jews is no longer fashionable, and there aren't enough of them here. We were obvious, so they picked us instead."

"Surely it's not that simple."

"Of course not," he said irritably. "We represented old fears and religious prejudice, the 'mark of Cain' and all that brutal bullshit. We still had money and pride when their debt-based economy crashed..... This is pointless; figure it out for yourself. I don't want to know their reasons, only what I can do about it." He fell silent, hard and cold. She said no more.

At that moment the boy came running out of the back and climbed quickly onto the bench beside her. Tears were in his eyes, and she put her arm around him. He buried his head against her, peeped out at the man, then buried it again.

"Look after him, will you? I'm going out for a while." The man rose, switched off the shield and went to the entrance.

"Wait," she called after him. "I still don't know your name."

"My name is Lawrence." He was gone.

The boy drew back and looked up at her, no longer frightened but now tired and curious.

"Well that's better. You don't have to be afraid of me." He looked at her and chewed his finger. She returned his gaze and smiled. "What's your name?"

"Johnny Harris." His leg kicked gently out over the side. She patted him on the head, then went to look for some paper.

The man went down between the high walls of the gap, coming out at the twin faces of the cliffs. Turning right, he skirted the huge southern promontory till he came a scree hill, rising still higher toward the frozen peaks beyond. Here, some two hundred yards further up, a four foot tunnel, shaded by a boulder, led deep into the mountainside. Stooping to enter, he walked till he was weary and stiff with a sharp pain in his back, then walked much farther.

*

It was late evening, darkening to full night. Two men walked through the opening with the shield still dissipating. The familiar face came first, then to her dismay the woman saw that the stranger was white. He studied her as they approached, with the same hard cold gleam as the other.

"I don't know," he said, turning to the guerrilla. "She has the looks, but not much grit, seemingly. The face is much too soft."

Lawrence said nothing, hung his coat on a peg by the wall. She half expected him to draw out a hidden knife and bury it in the white man's back. But the two stood side by side, and she realized that she was the outsider, the one in question. The tall, fair-haired man stood looking her up and down like a slave at auction. She got angry.

"What am I, a piece of meat?"

"Shut up and get us some water," said the black man. She turned on him, furious.

"How dare you talk to me like that? How dare you? And if you think you're going to turn me over to this Nazi—" She ran to the wall and grabbed the laser rifle, pointed it right at him.

But the older man just laughed grimly, and the fantasy fell apart. "You see what I mean?" he said. "She has some grit. Put away the rifle, Elonna."

"All right, but you get your own water." He did, retiring to the back while the other placed his rifle on the table and sat down. Elonna faced him angrily. "You just watch how you look at me." Then she walked to the entrance, still unshielded, with the boy and went out.

The tall man watched her go, then turned to face his friend as he came out with a filled water bottle. The guerrilla handed it to him, reactivated the shield and returned to the table. They passed the water back and forth between them.

"She is very beautiful, Lawrence. But have we the right to ask her to do this?"

"We have the right to ask. But there will be no secrets among us. She will know who we are, and fully understand the danger before we ask her to do anything. There is no hurry. I haven't fully judged her character yet myself. This will take time to set up on your end, anyway. We may not even get the chance."

"I think we will, if we are patient." A pause. "I didn't mean to stare at her like that. It's just that it's hard to tell her features beneath that coverall."

"I know that, Morgan. Still, it's a fine couple of gentlemen we've become. Myself especially, for having thought of it. But if we could eliminate Hunter....."

"No, I think it's a good plan, as far as it goes. And if we've lost a bit of humanity, it only helps us understand their mentality. I was there when they drafted the plans for these raids. I've also had a glimpse of what they've got in store for the Laurian socialists. The only way to stop them, or at least hinder them until the rest of the quadrant wakes up, sees these bastards for what they are and sends out real armies to stop them, is to strike at all points, especially the top, and be just as cold and unfeeling as they are."

The other said nothing, stared soberly at the floor.

"You're right." He got up and paced across the room, his hands behind his back. The shield went down, and the girl reentered with the boy. She addressed herself to Morgan.

"I'm sorry I was short with you. I'm sure if you're with Lawrence you have your reasons. You just caught me off guard." The men exchanged glances, but did not reply. "I'm willing to do what I can..... You must be hungry."

"No. Thank you, I must be going. I apologize too. My name is Morgan. Keep in touch, Lawrence. This will take time, but there are other things you and I can do until then. Elonna." He rose and lifted the rifle and left the room. The boy approached Lawrence and punched him in the leg. The man looked down but did not smile.

"Why so grim?" she asked, not entirely able to keep the sarcasm from her voice.

"You don't know what we're up against."

"Finding my husband dead on the balcony, I think I have a pretty good idea..... And how many did you lose?"

"I didn't have to. My family was killed in a transport accident two years ago."

... "I'm sorry."

"Then don't speak of it again."

... "Are you hungry?"

"Yes. Yes, I'm hungry. Why don't you see if you can make us something that doesn't taste like tar. I'm going to lie down. Wake me if I fall asleep."

"All right."

She went to prepare a meal. The child followed. When the food was ready she called him and they ate without talking. The only sounds were the small sounds of the boy, tapping his tray with the utensil and humming softly to himself. Once he looked up at the woman and laughed: a piece of withered leaf was caught in her dark, flowing hair. The graying man watched them, and only wished he could smile.

Then night came again, and they slept.

*

Four days had passed, with Lawrence gone much of the time. He never said where he was going, or gave any indication that something unusual was at hand. But on the fifth day, as the sun sank and the shadows grew deep around them, he said simply,

"I've got something to do tonight."

He was, if possible, tighter than ever, and at the evening meal ate little. Then he rose, ruffled the boy's head, and disappeared into the second shallow chamber of the back.

He was gone a long time, and the girl took the boy outside, and when she returned he had still not come out. Then as she knelt on the ground, playing some game with the child, a man emerged from the back and she nearly collapsed from fear.

She ran to the wall, seized the rifle and would have shot. But a familiar voice stayed her.

"Put down the rifle, Elonna, or one of these times you really will shoot." The voice, she thought, came from the stranger, a square, Russian-looking man with dark eyes and a shaved head. He was clad in the blue and black of a Cantonese army officer, the emblem of the clenched white fist sewn to his breast, a small black cross in its center. His face wore the sharp look of command but his eyes, in that moment, seemed to contradict it.

"Who are you?" she demanded. "And what have you done with Lawrence?"

"I'm right here, Elonna." The officer opened his jacket and unfastened the garment beneath, pulling it open at the neck to reveal a dark collar and chest, with tight curls of hair like thorny bushes covering his breast.

"Lawrence!" One of her hands lost its grip on the rifle. "You scared me half to death."

"I'm sorry for that. I thought you had gone out."

At that moment she realized two things: that he was going into great danger, and that she cared for him very much.

"When must you go?"

"Very soon." He resealed the uniform.

"Be careful, will you?"

"Yes." He pulled a different weapon from among the equipment against the wall, examined it carefully. "I have to go." He started for the door. She stopped him halfway and embraced him, her eyes gleaming at the corners.

"Be careful."

"I will." He pulled away and stood in the entrance. He looked back at her strangely, hesitated as if wanting to say more, then turned and was gone. He did not return that night.

*

The next day the woman was genuinely concerned. She had just begun to lose hope, when the smoky film of the entrance dissolved and opened out onto the cleft. A man stepped through, but it was not Lawrence.

"Morgan? What's wrong, where's Lawrence?"

"He's dead."

Such an empty shock. "What? What happened?"

He was trying to sabotage a missile base, with several others. His papers were challenged and he was shot. I'm sorry."

"Dead," she stammered. "Dead. Will they kill us all, one by one?"
She began to weep.

"Unless we stop them."

"How, damn it! How?"

"A piece at a time."

"But you said you had a plan. For ME."

"I do."

"Well what is it? Stop treating me like a child!"

"Not now. I'll come back tomorrow after dark."

"All right. God." She could not believe it. He turned to go.

Without turning. "You'd best harden your heart, Elonna, or it will freeze inside you. I'm sorry about Lawrence.

He was gone.

*

The next day seemed endless, but at last he came. He looked over the equipment leaned against the wall, then came and sat across from her. He was at once both kinder and colder.

"I have a plan, Elonna, and there is a reasonable chance it will work. But it may be more than your mind is equipped to handle. Also. . .it is sexual in nature."

"You think I don't know that, the way you're always looking at me?"

"Listen first. Save your scorn for the enemy. You will need it all."

"I'm sorry. I'm not mad at you."

"Never, NEVER apologize. And don't ever feel pity for a man who's done you wrong. If you do at a critical time in this, we're lost."

"You're worse than he was."

"Yes, and I'm still alive." He stirred uncomfortably in the chair. "I didn't mean that. Have you got any water?"

"Yes." She sent the boy to get some.

"Try to understand, Elonna. As undersecretary to Hunter, I'm surrounded by them constantly. These guerrillas, even Lawrence, flit in and out of the fire."

"Lawrence did more than flit."

"Yes he did. And if I could change that, I would..... But I live in the midst of it. I can't afford the luxury of emotion. And I want desperately to bring them down. That they're my own people doesn't help."

She studied him more closely.

"You say they're your own people. What about us? Are we just pieces on the board?"

"Not a fair question. You don't know what we're up against." The boy handed him a filled cup.

"Lawrence was found of saying that, and he's dead."

"Yes, and I'm likely to end the same way."

"Then why do you do it?"

"Because they ARE my own people. Maybe you pity them, try to understand. I don't. There's no excuse for this, Elonna. None. It's all been played out a hundred times before.

"There lives are empty and harsh," he continued. "So they say it must be somebody's fault. Surely their God can't want them to suffer, apple of his eye as they're supposed to be. So it must be anti-God. And who is this? The blacks and other minorities, the corrupt and inept liberals, a benign socialist colony two systems away. For God's sake, we've been in Space for two hundred years, we should know better. They forget, or choose to ignore, all the lessons it's taught us: that we're only very small, and should help each other. They turn their backs on history and the simplest understanding, and still find some dark corner in which to masturbate their hatred. There's no excuse for it. None."

She was silent for a time, then spoke. "What do you want me to do?"

"Don't say yes until you've heard what it is. Lawrence cared a great deal for you, and if only for his sake, I must show some restraint."

"And what about you?"

"For myself, I would rather not ask a woman to do it. Also, it flushes me out of the inner circles for good."

"But you think it could work, and be worth it."

"Yes."

"You want me to sleep with someone and kill him." She had forgotten the boy. "Johnny, would you run off in the back and play? I'll be there in a few minutes."

"Yes, Miss Elonna." He walked reluctantly into the back.

"You want me to sleep with someone and kill him."

"Yes and no."

"What do you mean, yes and no?"

"You say it as if it's nothing. I'm not asking you to sleep with some soldier in a guardhouse and slit his throat. We're talking about Roland Hunter, the head of Internal Affairs."

"THE Hunter? The man who ordered the purges?"

"Ordered, planned and executed, and the man who makes sure there is no rebellion of conscience among the whites, no dissent of any kind. A big target, Elonna, and very wary." Again she was silent.

"Still. If you could arrange it.... I think I could do it."

"With what weapon, Elonna?"

"Well, what about a poison needle?"

"No good. You will be thoroughly searched. Thoroughly."

"All right, then. Stop turning it around. You're the one who's supposed to have a plan."

"Yes, though I'm not particularly proud of having thought of it."

"Morgan, you're forgetting what he's done to us."

"All right. Have you ever heard of Sanlen 12?"

"It's some kind of nerve poison, isn't it?"

"Yes, like's snake's venom: poison to the blood but not the stomach."

"What are you saying?"

He told her, in detail.

"But that's horrible. God, what a way to die. . .and to kill."

"You would have to want to kill him very badly, and not hesitate at the critical moment. That's why I've been such a harsh judge of your character. This is no game, and the stakes are life and death." She looked into his eyes, and knew he was in deepest earnest.

"I need time to think." The boy came back into the room.

"I'll be back tomorrow night. Think about it in the cold light of day. You must be very sure." He lifted his rifle.

"Before you go....."

"Yes."

"How would you set this up? How would you make him trust me?"

"Oh, he won't trust you, not for a minute. But he does trust me, as far as he trusts anyone. As for setting it up, that's fairly simple. Many of the cabinet ministers and high military men have taken mistresses, and not all of them white. If the Undersecretary of Affairs should happen to come across a beautiful black woman he fancies, a non-person with no rights, why shouldn't he keep her for himself? And if he's ruthless and full of ambition, as I'm supposed to be, why shouldn't he offer to share her with the Secretary, or even keep her discreetly hidden for his private use? I've been known to do such favors in the past."

"But if he hates us so much, why would he want me?"

"You don't understand men very well if you have to ask, at least not that kind of man. Power and domination are what he craves, sadism and total control. Do I have to say more?"

"No."

"I'll come back tomorrow if I can." He shouldered his weapon. "You see why it was so hard for Lawrence to ask of you. Toward the end, he had decided against it. Just so you know, the thought of sending you in with that monster..... I'm not that cold. Not yet. But they are. Good-night." He switched off the shield and left the cave.

"Good-night." She stared at the table.

*

Morgan returned two nights later. He looked tired and grim.

"Elonna. I'm sorry I couldn't make it yesterday. I almost couldn't come now. They're preparing the full offensive against Marcum-Lauries. I'm just sick thinking about it. The Laurians don't stand a chance. And they're good people." As he glanced at her briefly she saw something in his eyes that she had not expected. He looked away. "Hello, Johnny," he said absently. Without being asked, the boy ran into the back to get him some water.

"Sit down, Morgan. Don't worry about me, I'm all right. I'm even grateful for the extra day. I'm finally clear in my own mind."

"You know you don't have to do this."

"Yes. But I want to, Morgan." She handed him the cup and sat down. "Only. . .I can't do it by hating them. I've tried. I tried remembering my husband's death, but that only made me feel a terrible loss, not hatred. So I tried thinking about what they had done to Lawrence. Sometimes I think all he ever wanted was to live out his remaining years in peace. But he couldn't. They had taken even that away from him. He was no soldier, any more than Eric was. War was the last thing either wanted, and it killed them both—my husband quickly, and Lawrence slowly, from the inside. He tried to be hard and cold, but his faith in life had been shaken too deeply. Do you know what I'm saying?"

"Yes, though I think there was more to it than that."

"Maybe. I'm just trying to tell you how I feel."

Their eyes met. "Go on."

"I'm going to try to kill him, because I know something must be done. But it's not in my nature to be vindictive. I'll be as passive and yielding as I can, and then just do it."

Morgan took a deep breath. "You know there's the danger of being found out, or of being killed afterwards?"

"Yes. And I'm not just saying that."

... "Well. I admire your courage. And I'll do everything I can to protect you." He took a long, slow draught from the cup. "One thing, anyway. I won't have to be a part of their cancer anymore. I won't have to keep silent." He lowered his head in exhaustion. "Have you got anything stronger?"

"Yes. Lawrence kept some whiskey." She rose to get it.

They talked together far into the night. Then he said goodbye, and made his way stealthily back to the high-security apartment complex, and by a way known only to himself, entered the wide bedroom. The next night he returned with a dental surgeon, who implanted a small capsule filled with poison onto the bottom of her tongue, and sharpened to a cutting edge the canine tooth on the corresponding side of her mouth. They made arrangements for the boy, and set a tentative date for five days hence. That day, at least, she would come and live with him.

* * *

The flat was wide and spacious, divided into three sections. Coming through the front door, one entered the large living area, the room itself recessed to the right a foot lower than the polished hardwood walk-in. Deeply carpeted, it was furnished with long, pillowy couches and stiff upright chairs. Low tables of stainless steel and glass were spread among them. The in-wall, farthest from the walkway, consisted of a broad Earthstone hearth (a luxury), and was crowned above the mantle by a photograph of the First Minister, awarding the Medal of Valor to a tall, stern-faced soldier. A barrage of terraced and hanging plants surrounded the slanting, beamed windows of the western wall. Its opposing face was a wall-size entertainment screen, now projecting a tropical rainforest with a high, flowing waterfall in the background.

The bedroom opened off the walkway to the left, behind a thick double door of oak. The kitchen was straight ahead, and by a further passage, the workroom or den.

Elonna sat beside him on one of the couches, its deep-cushioned comfort belying the approaching danger. She moved closer, and quite unconsciously, put her head against his neck. Morgan put his arm around her and stared at nothing. She was clothed in mistress fashion, a long dress of sunburst silk and mesh.

"When will they be here, Morgan?"

"Soon, I think. Try not to worry."

"May I have another drink?"

"Sure." He started to rise.

"No, nevermind. Don't get up. I'll be all right; just don't get up."
He drew her closer, warmed her shoulder with his hands.

"Remember," he said, "don't worry about looking scared. You play the part of a refugee among enemies, saving yourself by being my mistress. Your natural reactions, whatever they are, will be all right."

"Well I'm glad of that. Oh Morgan, I wish it was over."

"So do I..... Oh, also. Don't be alarmed if he speaks of your past or your family. He'll have found all that out ahead of time."

"I'm scared."

A warning light lit above the doorway.

"They're in the building."

"How many?" she asked, fighting back a surge of fear.

"I don't know. I'll try to find out." He got up and went to an intercom by the door, moved his hand across it. "Lieutenant. How many have we got tonight?"

"Six, Undersecretary."

"Thank you, Walthrop." He switched it off. "Six."

"Why so many?"

"Probably to check the rooms. I don't think they'll stay." Several seconds later the door tone sounded. He turned to Elonna. "You okay?" She took a deep breath. He opened the door.

The Secretary entered, preceded by his two bodyguards. Two uniformed soldiers followed. Morgan addressed them sternly. Another soldier remained in the hallway.

"So this is the little lovely," said Hunter civilly, nodding towards her. He gave his long officer's coat to Morgan, and the two uniformed men began to sweep the room with hand-held detectors. Her eyes drawn to him by some morbid curiosity, Elonna studied the Secretary.

In his late forties or early fifties, he was a man of average height, blonde-gray and gaunt, still retaining a taut musculature that showed itself in the square shoulders and stiffly upright posture. He had a lean, hard face with prominent cheekbones and brow. But what held her attention most—Morgan opened a bedroom door for one of the soldiers—were his eyes. Steel gray and cold, they looked out restless and insatiable. And though they did not flit, as with lesser men, they nonetheless seemed unable to rest their gaze on anything for more than a short time, as if never satisfied with what they saw, angry and bitter because of it. But when they returned again to her, she knew it would be very hard. He followed the silk dress up the long length of her body, and into her eyes. Here was something he wanted.

But even as she looked away, she felt a new determination growing out of her despair. And though for a moment she had seen him with woman's eyes, sensing the underlying weakness and need, she felt no pity for him. His self-maligation and inner violence had cost thousands of lives already. If it were at all within her power, they would cost no more.

It was at this same time that she decided upon a strategy. Morgan's plan had been to lie and act as little as possible, and to decide at the time which of three contingent courses to adopt. In this way he hoped to avoid unnecessary risk. She glanced over at him quickly, looking broken and hurt, and both understood: she had been told of this ahead of time, and though no longer shocked or capable of much fear, she felt shamefully and bitterly betrayed. She sat down again dejectedly and hung her head, without having said a word. Then let a single tear trickle down her cheek, and wiped it away.

Had they known it, this was probably the best course they could have adopted. This was not what he wanted—a broken and dispirited prisoner. He wanted something still alive, desiring freedom and capable of struggle. At once he called the soldiers to him.

"That is all. Leave the one at the door and get below."

"He has a rifle in the study," said one.

"I know that as well as you. You have your orders."

They touched their chests with a closed right fist and were gone. He seated his guards in two chairs placed on either side of the bedroom doors.

"I would like a drink, Morgan. Bring one for yourself, and for the lady. Whatever she likes." When he had left the room, Hunter moved to sit in a high-backed chair across from her. She looked up at him, puzzled.

"Please, you must not be afraid of me. Your master is a hard man because he has to be. We are not ogres." It was suddenly important to him that Morgan had never had her. "No one is going to hurt you. Please, won't you trust me?" She said nothing, continued looking down. The tall man began to re-enter the room, but Hunter waved him off. "Has Morgan been treating you well?"

"Yes, very well." There were almost tears in her eyes. "But I thought

I was going to be his. I've been good."

"Of course you have." Now he let Morgan enter. On his tray were three drinks in narrow glasses. He gave one to the Secretary, who drew out a long stick (for sensing poison) and submerged it in the glass. He gave another to Elonna and took the third for himself, sitting in a chair at a small distance to one side.

"Please, drink up," said Hunter. "To your health, Elonna." She made the toast halfheartedly. "Let's have some music, Morgan. Do you have a Beethoven program?"

"Of course." He rose to put it on.

"You like Beethoven, don't you?" She nodded.

And so the time passed, with music, small talk and drinks. At intervals the Secretary asked simple questions about her health, promised she could stay here with Morgan, even hinted that the purges, ghastly but imperative, were now over, and that if she had any friends or relatives still in hiding, perhaps they could be given safe conduct off the planet.

Indeed, so much time had passed that she began to think nothing more would happen that night. But it was this very gleam of hope that he waited for.

"Will you allow us one more small inconvenience?" The tone of his voice seemed to imply that nothing more than a routine question was forthcoming, some sad necessity, painless and quickly over. But some deeper instinct warned her that the time had come.

"Yes, what is it?"

"Would you go back into the bedroom and take off your clothes? One of my guards will search you; he shouldn't be too rough. You see, I want to lie with you tonight."

Her mouth opened as if to speak, but no words would form. The final attack had come so softly and suddenly that she found she could not react. Through the liquor her blood went pale. She turned to Morgan, but he could not help her now. She had to gather herself. Somehow. Somehow. "Is that what you really want?"

"Yes, it is." She brushed back her face with her hands.

"All right." She got up slowly, did not collapse.

"Snipes."

"Yes, sir."

"Do it."

"Yes, sir." The guard took her by the arm and led her past the other, who held open the bedroom door.

"What's the matter, Morgan? Surely you knew I would want her?" Morgan said nothing. His eyes were cold and hard.

After several minutes, the Secretary got up and made his way to the bedroom. The guard, returning out of it with a nod, passed by him and shut the door. He resumed his seat beside the other and the two looked straight ahead. Several moments later the door opened again, from the inside, and Hunter's head appeared.

"Oh by the way," he said. "Don't let him into the study. You won't go anywhere will you, Morgan?" The doors closed for the last time. Morgan gripped the arms of the chair, burning up inside.

*

After several minutes he got up and began pacing back and forth, pulling angri-nervously at a heavy ring on his right hand. The guards watched him. Sounds still came from the bedroom at irregular intervals, horrible to hear. That they were muffled didn't help. At last he felt that he must make his move.

"May I go into the kitchen? I want another drink."

The guards exchanged glances. The larger of the two said, "Go with him." The other rose and followed him into the kitchen.

"You want one?" asked the Undersecretary gruffly.

"You know I can't."

"Of course." He looked past the standing man's shoulder. "Wait a minute. Sergeant, what's that?"

The guard half turned to look behind him. There was a flash of metal as Morgan brought the blade-tipped ring across his neck. The man staggered but made no sound, as the poison collapsed both lungs and heart. Morgan carried him by the armpits and set him down, dead, in a chair. He unclasped the pistol from the man's belt and peered out into the hallway.

At that moment there was a cry, suddenly stifled, from the bedroom. The voice belonged to a man. The bodyguard leapt up from his seat.

"Forget about it, Snipes."

"Morgan. What are you doing with that? Where's Bonnard?" Morgan fired two short bursts into his chest, then casting aside the body, broke open the door and entered the bedroom.

Elonna sat shaking on the edge of the bed, trying to dress herself. Hunter lay dead upon the floor, his face contorted wildly, his limbs drawn up like a shriveled spider. A trickle of blood could be seen at his crotch.

"Are you all right?" Morgan asked. He helped her into the coverall, swept back her tear stained hair. There was a sharp sound as the outer door was thrown open. A lone soldier rushed in, was killed by Morgan.

"Are you well enough to run?"

"Yes." She shook her head severely, trying to force herself back. "He was really very gentle at the beginning."

"Don't think about it. We've got to get you out. As soon as his pulse stopped the soldiers below knew it. Come on! We've got to get you out!"

He threw back the carpet beside the bed, lifted a trap door. They had just shut it behind them when four more soldiers burst into the room. With a shout their captain ran past the body, now half covered by the rug, and fired a laser burst into the lock. It fused and fell inward, but even as it did so the door was sealed from without by thick bars of treated steel. The captain tried to lift it, realized his mistake.

"Tarkin, Nemiah, get your men below and fan out. Block all exits." He lifted his hand-com, ordered the building and neighboring sections surrounded, called in air patrols to block the skies. He rolled back the carpet with his foot, looked with angry disgust upon the body of Hunter. Two men in white entered with a stretcher.

"Get him out of here." They lifted the body and took it away. The captain paced the floor.

*

The passage, after its beginnings beneath the trap door, was shallow and not wide, so shallow they had to lie flat and pull themselves along by staggered hand-holds above them. After perhaps a minute, though it seemed far longer, they came to the emergency ladder-tube, began to climb.

Reaching the roof, they saw the police ship and the man (one of their own) guarding it. He nodded to Morgan, ran toward the railing of converging walls as if alarmed by sounds from below. Morgan came behind and clubbed him unconscious with the butt of the rifle. He leapt up into the ship, where Elonna was already strapping herself in. Her hands would not stop shaking. He jammed the door shut, made ready to lift off. Six seconds later, they were in the air.

He started the small, fast ship forward just as the first of the air patrols drew near him. He fired twice and banked sharply left.

His shots went high and wide, and as he turned, the lead ship strafed his exposed underside. Smoke and trickling flame burst out within and the shields collapsed, but he kept the ship moving. Broken by the concussion, Elonna lay limp in her seat, only the harness keeping her in place. He steered the ship

low between a gap in the oncoming hills, as unseen emplacements opened fire on his pursuit.

*

Morgan stepped wearily through the entrance of the unfamiliar cave, trying to support his broken shoulder with the opposite hand. The boy broke free from the woman's grasp and came toward him. Seeing only the man, he broke into an angry despair.

"Where's Miss Elonna?" he cried.

Morgan tried to speak, but the boy ran up to him in tears, punching and kicking.

Then Elonna passed through the narrow arch.

"No, Johnny, don't. It's all right. I'm all right."

She wiped the tears and grime from her face and knelt and hugged him deeply. The child buried himself against her.

.....

STALAGMITE

The day was so dark that Dobrynin began to wonder if something wasn't seriously wrong. He stopped the pede-like cruiser at the foot of the great volcano, looked up through the glass at the warping sky. Black clouds continued to roil up from countless hollow, sharp-edged peaks all across the planet.

The satellite readout only confirmed what his eyes and instincts told him. Tremors and quakes shook the ground beneath him as a heavy static storm crackled white and spindly light through the poison atmosphere. Marcum-Lauries One was caught between the pull of its two suns, which happened roughly every three hundred years. But even so, internal pressures were much too high. It boded ill for the hopes of his people if the massive, ore-laden planet stopped producing.

"Damn." Molten silicates were running down the sides of the volcano's shattered peak. He re-engaged the flexing wheel pods and headed back toward the dome.

How he hated this war. Not just for the killing. Any fool knew that life was no great gift, and death no injury. One took care of his own, forged what meaning he could, then surrendered in the end to oblivion.

But this war. This stupid, wasteful war. How many times must the same story be told? Poverty and abuse on Canton leading to discontent, the fascists coming to power, spreading their hatred in the name of God and white supremacy. And of course a remote socialist settlement, theirs, had proved the ideal target for a tune-up campaign. If they hadn't gone straight for the Khrushchev colony he would probably have laughed. Fascism must inevitably fail, just as humanist Marxism would never die. The Cantons would surely be put down, but not before many things innocent and beautiful had been maimed forever. Fascists! In spite of all that he knew he could almost hate them without thinking.

And their own tentative alliance with Soviet Space. How long would that last if the gold, tungsten and osmo-alloys stopped coming? This planet was the key, and at the moment not a very sure bet. All he could do was go back to the safety (relative safety) of the dome and wait for Percy's report, and see if the Soviet astronomers had anything intelligent to say.

He suddenly realized as he crawled in segments across a gap in the high ridge. . .that he loved this place. Yes, loved it. The wide valley that opened before him, even in turmoil, was beautiful to the point of pain. Who could not feel the beauty of its raw vastness? His wife and colleagues on the tamer Lauries II had always thought him demented. THE STORMS, THE LONG NIGHTS, they would say. But he had never minded the storms or the dark. They merely seemed to him a metaphor for life. Yes, life was a storm; that thought heartened him. Perhaps this was just another, if more severe. No, he knew better. The fascists were real and the planet was in trouble. The flux of power among the Space giants now favored the United Commonwealth, which remained neutral but refused to allow the Soviets to intervene. And the German States, God damn them. For all their greatness and determination they still retained a stubborn streak of the Nazi mentality. There was little question who they would side with if it ever came to such a choice. It was all quite hopeless. His people were just pilgrims and this, too, would never be their home.

"Yes, yes, yes. But I do not give up!"

The dome was in sight and he was drawing closer. He was there. He guided the high-gravity cruiser between two of the eight supporting struts arcing down from the huge floor, the raised structure. He waited for the lift to be lowered, crawled up onto it. The airlock was opened, and the cruiser raised inside it. The doors were shut below him and breathable air whispered around him. He opened the hatch, climbed down and greeted his son.

"Leon. Any news?" The young man seemed troubled, though he was doing his best to conceal it.

"Yes, and none of it good. Salnikov is on the communicator. I'd better let him explain it."

They walked quickly to the high wall of the dock, rose in separate tubes to a curving corridor on the primary floor. From this they entered the meeting room. A large screen at the front of it showed the dispassionate face of Vladimir Salnikov, Soviet ambassador to Marcum-Lauries Independent. They pushed past the chairs of an oval table and went to the railing before it.

"Yes, Vladimir. What have you got?"

"I've been talking with Science Central," said the ambassador. "We know what the problem is, but are not yet certain what is causing it."

"Well are you going to tell me or do I have to guess it?" If all the stars in Space had suddenly gone out, it would never show on that face.

"Easy, Nicholai. I am on your side?" Dobrynin gave a reluctant nod. "Your planet is in serious trouble. She will not engage her second orbit. She only remains at the equilibrium point between the two, and loses almost six minutes each rotation. Internal pressures, as I am sure you know, are dangerously high. If something does not change soon, she will blow herself apart. You have perhaps ninety-eight hours."

... "Why, Vladimir? Why?"

"We cannot be sure, except to say there is no natural phenomenon that would explain it." A pause.

"Is there anything else you can tell me?"

"Not for the record."

"What about off it?"

"Go to scramble," said the Soviet. "Code 4."

His son made the necessary adjustments. Salnikov began again, the words no longer corresponding to the movement of his lips.

"Can you understand me?"

"Yes."

"Have you sent out your reconnaissance?"

"Yes, toward Cantos."

"Deviate course. There is nothing there."

"Where should we go instead?"

Salnikov gave a set of coordinates: a straight line out from the planet, directly opposed to its trajectory, as it sought to cross the intersection of its figure-eight orbit, and begin to move around the second sun.

"What should we look for?"

"An enormous station, over one hundred kilometers across. You won't pick it up on laser or visual, but if you send someone out you will see it clear enough."

"What is its function?"

"We don't know, and we are not about to go in and find out. But its location is suspicious. That is all I can say."

".....okay. Thank you, Vladimir."

"Good luck, Nicholai. I think that you will need it." The screen went blank.

"Leon. go down to the lower communication room and signal all bases. I want everyone off—everyone. These domes won't hold forever. I'm going to try and reach Percy."

Without further speech his son was gone. He leaned over the railing and tried, and after twenty minutes finally succeeded, in reaching the racing ship.

The planet had been evacuated. The heads of the geological and mining crews, along with military, scientific and governmental heads from the three colonies, were huddled together in a briefing room aboard the space station 'Lynx'. Dobrynin stood behind the podium and signaled for quiet, wanting desperately to get started. If only he could get his hands to work at something. He tapped the quiet buzzer impatiently.

"Gentlemen, please. We haven't much time." Those still standing were seated, and the last rustle of voices died away. All eyes went forward.

"I'm sure I don't have to tell you the spot we're in," he began. "You all know that ML One is in trouble. What you don't know is why. I have just learned myself, and it is hard to believe. But it's true. The orbit of Marcum-Lauries is being tampered with from outside. The problem is man-made."

Expressions of shock and disbelief. TIMID FOOLS, thought Dobrynin, THAT IS ALL FOR THE GOOD. THAT WE CAN DO SOMETHING ABOUT. But there were others who said nothing: the miners, the workers. They, too, only wanted to know what could be done.

He dimmed the lights and switched a graphic onto the wall-screen behind him: a binary system, the elliptical figure-eight of the planet's orbit encircling two nearly identical suns. He pointed to the lower right junction of the crossover point.

"Here is where she lies now. Every 304.62 earth years, she completes her orbit around the first sun, in this case Lauries, and passing the equilibrium point between the two, begins to circle the second in the opposite direction. There is a period of instability as she lies between the pull of both; but nothing like this. Then slowly the pull of the first sun grows less, she engages her second orbit, and geological activity becomes more stable. All quite simple. There are several examples of it just in the part of the galaxy we know."

"So how can a man change it?" came a voice.

"One man can't, obviously. But many men, with much planning and outside help, can and have."

He expanded the graphic, receding the orbit and two suns to a lower corner. Then tracing with the pointer a straight line away from the planet's trajectory, he projected near the center of the screen a miniature (but still too large for scale) image of the enemy station that Percy had photographed in ultraviolet and sent back to them. This he enlarged, until it filled all the screen.

Again expressions of dismay, and this time few kept silent. Its already ominous outline distorted by the ultraviolet, it looked like the huge, black and irregular hull of an ancient aircraft carrier, with something like an enormous radar dish mounted securely to the corrugated deck. As he rotated the image its high, central tower was pointed directly at them.

"This is the cause of our troubles." He resolved the image with the remote, turned it once more to show three similar but lesser tower structures spread across the bottom, an irregular tripod.

"The concept of a gravity or 'tractor' beam is nothing new. It has usually been used from ship to ship, or from static base to ship. Its principals to date have either been magnetic, the creation of artificial gravity, or kinetic, scrambling an object's own momentum to bring it down. What we have here is the first case, a gravity beam, though on a scale, and utilizing principles that are altogether new. The towers at the bottom of the structure are pointed at neighboring bodies, and serve only to hold the station in place. The central tower, the one doing all the damage, is pointed directly at Marcum-Lauries. That is why she won't engage her second orbit. That's why internal pressures are ready to blow her apart. She is being pulled by three sources at once, as well as by the thrust of her own rotation..... We have eighty-six hours at the most."

He re-lighted the room, and for a time there was silence. Then as the shock wore off, the questions began to come. He answered them with growing impatience.

"I don't know how it is possible, vice-minister, but it is..... The Soviets confirm our theories..... Where would they get the money and technology? Where do you think? No we cannot be sure. But if it isn't the German States then I don't know anything. No, the Commonwealth won't help us; why should they? The Soviets are powerless to intervene."

"But if the Commonwealth knew what the Cantons were doing—"

"They would applaud it. They are in the midst of a right wing resurgence themselves. And the propaganda sent out against us has been most convincing."

"They say we kill our babies," came a grim voice near the front.

"We let the seriously handicapped and terminal disorder cases die of their own affliction. It is an act of mercy." A doctor.

"I know that as well as you," said Dobrynin. "But to them we kill our babies, just as we are atheists who believe in nothing, because we discourage religious extremes. That is all meaningless now. They will think what they will. We have no time to change their minds."

"We are overlooking the obvious," said a general, standing. "What about military action, an attack on the base? Our forces beat them back from Khrushchev well enough."

This time another answered, Ambassador Salnikov, who had just entered.

"You beat them back because you knew they were coming weeks in advance, and because they did not send their full strength against you. Indeed, it could only have been a diversion, meant to give you false confidence. Do not think you will find the station lightly guarded, General Kopek. THEY (there was something peculiar in the way he said the word) play this game to win."

"What does an ambassador know of war?" retorted Kopek angrily.

"Much more than I care to. Put away your guns and your anger, general. They will not help you here." The old man sat down with a snort.

There was a long, defeated silence. Finally one man, a co-worker and friend, raised his hand.

"Yes, Lebedev."

"What can we do to fight this thing?"

Dobrynin felt the small spark inside him that he knew to be hope.

"Well I am glad someone asked. We are not beaten yet. Stein, you are chief scientist here. What flaws do you see in the Canton scheme?"

The tall man rose, bowed his head self-consciously. "Well, governor. As we discussed before, I see two problems for the station. First, if the tripod is indeed used as an anchor—and this seems likely—and if the gravity beam is as strong as it must be to do this thing, then the pull on the station itself must be tremendous. Doubtless it is well constructed, of the hardest alloys and banding fields, for this purpose. . .and there may be other forms of cohesion as well. But even so, I would have to say it cannot maintain that kind of stress for long. We are given eighty-six hours—though I must tell you that is only an estimate, it could happen much sooner. The Cantons must also know this. I do not think they have much longer."

"And the second?"

"The second flaw is what puzzles me, and I think that herein lies our hope. Any gravity beam, no matter how refined, can be at least partially disrupted by passing another object between the sending unit and the target. This particular beam, in order to travel such a distance and affect such a large, dense mass, is extraordinarily well honed. The solar flares of Marcum and Lauries have been only mildly affected. So. If we were able to pass a large mass, say an asteroid or small moon, between the planet and the station..... During the time of disruption, should it be successful, we would not only give the planet time to engage her second orbit, but also send a huge projectile plummeting directly at them. I'm sure they are prepared for this to some degree. But a very large, solid object would be quite difficult to destroy or turn aside. They would have no choice but to shut down completely, and very soon afterward at that. Unfortunately, as we discussed, there are no asteroids or other large objects, of sufficient size, close enough at hand to be moved into position in time. Still, something of this nature seems our only real chance."

"Thank you, Thomas."

"Then what can—what will we do?" asked many voices at once.

Dobrynin stood calm, until the murmur died away.

"We will make our own asteroid."

Silence.

"May I remind you, Governor, that you do not have the authority to exercise such a plan without the consent of the Council?" This last remark came from Franz Pecci, a slight, high-ranking member of the Leadership Council whom he had never liked.

"And may I remind you, Mr. Pecci, that as governor-general of the planet I have final say on any decision which affects mining and excavation. My jurisdiction is quite clear. And if you have a better plan, I would very much like to hear it."

"We could negotiate. It seems clear that the Cantons don't want to destroy us, only exact for themselves some future profit. We have not even tried—" Dobrynin was about to answer hotly, when Vladimir Salnikov lifted his hand and strode to the front of the room. He stood beside the speaker.

"Governor Dobrynin's plan has the backing of my government. I have spoken with them and they will stand behind it. And someday, Mr. Pecci, I would very much like to know how you can be so sure what it is the Cantons want." At this the man was silent.

"What say you, Vice-Minister? Has this plan your consent?"

The vice-minister rose. "Well. I am sure the Minister will want to know all the details, and I am sure he will question the risk. But for myself, you have my approval. And I think when the Minister is briefed in full, he will agree that we have little choice."

"Thank you, Peter," said Dobrynin. "I will see that he is given a full report, and that he is kept informed throughout." He turned back to the others. "Now, gentlemen, if you will excuse me. My engineers and I have much work to do. Doctor Stein, we could use your help as well."

With that Dobrynin left the room, followed by five others. Salnikov watched them go, then lowered his head, and returned to his ship.

The charges had been laid. Two hundred kilometers beneath the surface, six old-style nuclear explosives had been set in a flat, star-shaped pattern—this, in the heart of a solidified iron and nickel flow one hundred and sixty kilometers across, rising directly from the planet's core. Ironically, the massive upheaval which caused it had occurred many thousand years before, during yet another violent passage of the planet's equilibrium point. If such a bullet could be launched at the station, it would indeed be hard to knock down, though the full effect on the planet itself could hardly be calculated. Between the force of the blast and the current instability, almost anything was possible. Dobrynin had no illusions about serious mining for at least a year—that things could ever again be the way they were before. But it had to be tried.

It has gone well enough so far, he thought. Five dead and seventeen wounded, but still, well enough. This is the hard part now. I don't mind dying, if I have to. But I don't want to.

MAYBE YOU WON'T DIE, said a voice. Yes, and maybe I will. I hope that my son understands. I hope he sees that I have no choice. BUT YOU HAVE A CHOICE. Do I? If there is a choice then I don't see it. Not without surrendering all that we have worked for. No. I cannot go back.

His son entered the room, followed by Stein and Alexander Dimitriev, his chief engineer. At his gesture they were seated at the table across from him.

"Thomas, Alexander. Now we are come to the hard part: how to detonate safely and accurately. As you know, in this, timing is everything. Everything. If we miss by only a few seconds, we doom the planet to extinction."

"Is it true that you intend to remain behind?" said Dimitriev, "and detonate the bombs yourself, from no greater distance than a thousand kilometers?"

"Father!" YOU MUST UNDERSTAND, LEON.

"Before I say yes or no, let us look at the alternatives. That is why you are here. I must know that you stand behind me."

"We could blow them by radio control." His son.

"No. With the static storms this heavy and unpredictable, they could detonate too soon, or not at all."

"What about a laser-triggered mechanism above ground?" asked Dimitriev. "A fast moving ship could activate it, then be gone." Dobrynin opened his hand toward Stein.

"I'm afraid that's not possible," he conceded. "To avoid cloud cover and volcanic discharge the ship would have to fly very high. And the way the upper atmosphere refracts light, even laser is not a sure thing. And also, there is the problem of the gravity beam itself, distorting the path of the ship."

Dimitriev turned away.

"Alexander, Leon. Listen to me. There is only one other chance that I see, and it is not a good one. We could build the laser-trigger upon a high tower, allowing me to activate it from the ground at a greater distance. But I am not sure we could construct such a tower in time. And also, it would cost more lives." He looked at his son. "Or I could detonate the bombs myself, safely and surely, by cable from Leopold Station. I wish there was another way."

"But why does it have to be you? You are needed—" His son broke off.

"Who would you have me send instead? I am most qualified, except perhaps for Stein. And this....." He spoke now with difficulty. "This is my home. It is everything I have worked for. If it is lost then I. . . I would not want to live. We have left the mainstream. I do not want to go back." The room was still, and no one spoke.

Finally Dimitriev rose and came toward him. He offered him his hand, and Dobrynin took it in both of his own.

"Good hunting, Nicholai. I am with you." He turned and left the room. Stein rose also.

"I will have an approximate time, and prep the computer, at Leopold before I go..... I think that it is possible."

"Thank you, Thomas."

The scientist bowed his head and was gone. For a moment father and son stood looking down, and

neither spoke.

"Why couldn't I do it in your place?"

"You have not the skill..... Your mother needs you."

"And not you? Will you leave her alone?"

"She has always been alone. Forgive me."

"Father." He was crying now, ashamed.

"Please, Leon." His throat was thick. "You must be strong now. I need you to be strong..... There is a chance I will not die." His son left the room.

Leopold Station. He sat with the button in front of him, on a console shelf amidst computers. He studied its scopes and readouts carefully: eight minutes.

He was glad that it was far away. It did not seem real. Almost—he was thinking in Russian now—he was not afraid. Perhaps he could reach the tube and down into the shelter in time. If that would help. I MUST CONCENTRATE. He breathed deeply, and watched the counter tick away his life. Seven minutes. Six.

He heard a sound behind him. At that moment the image on one of the screens shifted slightly.

"Turn around Dobrynin."

He whirled, startled, then returned quickly to the console, made the necessary adjustments. "What do you think you're doing?"

"Putting an end to your brave little noise." Dobrynin said nothing. "This gun fires nerve pellets as well as the other, Nicholai. I can paralyze you without killing you." Pecci's voice was calm, but there was fear beneath it.

"And I can press this button and kill us both. And if I die, how will you survive? Doctor Stein says the planet will not last another hour; do you not feel the quakes? You will perish along with it." As he spoke he watched and moved his hands across the console, all the while fighting the bitter urge to detonate now: too soon.

"You lie."

"No, Franz, in this I speak the truth. Your only chance is to get down to the shelter, now, and I will forget what has passed between us." Pecci said nothing. Dobrynin knew that he must buy more time.

"It doesn't matter, does it?"

"What?" He could feel the tension of the smaller man's mind.

"It doesn't matter that since I am twenty-five I have made no serious mistake, that myself and many beside me have worked hard for thirty years to make this place our home. It does not matter that we have broken from the current. Still, we are dependent on others. We are like the stalagmite, which must be fed from above. If anything comes between us and the source, we are cut off. We cannot grow. And any puny, so-called man with a putrid hammer, can come and chisel away at our roots!" He could not contain his anger.

"I could kill you now!" cried Pecci. He raised the gun and would have shot, but at that moment Dobrynin put a hand to his ear. A faint voice, mingled with crackling static, had come suddenly into his almost forgotten ear-piece.

"Governor, can. . .hear me?" It was Stein.

"Yes, Thomas. Try to speak louder. What is it?"

"....just received. . .information on the beam. We. . .incorrect by. . . minutes."

"How many minutes?"

"Four. Must be sooner. Thirty seconds. . .now."

"Thirty seconds!" he cried. And regretted it as soon as the words had left his mouth. He quickly punched twenty-five into the counter, forgetting all other instruments.

"Yes....." Then no more was heard.

"Turn around, Dobrynin!"

"Go muck yourself!" he growled. If he was going to die, then let it be like Trotsky.

14. 13. 12.

Pecci shot him in the back and killed him.

.....

ACT TWO

Andersen, Korchnoi and Larkspur Sectors
Months I through V
International Year: 2211

INVERSIONS

"There are various theories as to how insect life came to exist on Newman's Planet, named for its American discoverer. Most suggest that its seeds were somehow transported here from Earth, though there is little agreement as to how, naturally or otherwise, this was accomplished. Others state that it must have evolved here naturally. But this theory runs into equal difficulty. For the insects of Newman's world—and insects they are indeed, as like to our own physiologically as one mammal is to another—resemble much too closely specific genre already found on Earth.

"And yet there can be no denying that the four species known to exist (interesting in itself, that there should be so few), date back in their respective habitats roughly 95 million years. Fossil remains have been found, and their location and carbon dating signaled back to us. Unfortunately, no first-hand data is available, as the only two exploration parties ever to brave the hostile environs did not return.

"But from what they were able to gather and send back, we are given a picture both intriguing and disquieting. By far the most interesting news comes from the last report of the British expedition, only hours before all contact was lost. One of their young behavioral scientists, concentrating on the 'Stoors' of the equatorial regions (large, foraging creatures most nearly resembling the warrior ant, approximately 1.5 meters in length), was able to observe a gathering of several colonies around a single, great stone, possibly a meteorite, in the center of a deep cloven valley. He reports that the various groups, distinguished by dots and splotches of color on the head and abdomen, continued to stream in from all directions for nearly two hours, apparently taking no notice of his hovering cruiser. And when they had swelled to perhaps five thousand, they locked forelegs together into countless, concentric circles around the stone and began to chant, though by rights they should have been able to make no such sound. Mitchell Collins, the observer, reported that he was not sure whether it was, in fact, a physical sound, or one that came to him through his mind only. He further states that the precise movements and ritualistic nature of the gathering suggested some kind of primitive religious ceremony.

"This last observation, of course, remains purely subjective."

—Dr. Charles LeDoux, planetary biologist, to a meeting of the United French Scientists Guild.

I

Naik Shannon had never heard of Newman's world, or if he had, the memory lay buried too deeply. And at the moment, he had other things on his mind. The survivors of the Marcum-Lauries colonies, his present charge, were scattered and in disarray. His own ship was too badly damaged to lend assistance; he was running with a price on his head; and of his own forces perhaps a hundred still lived.

Shin, his second in command, had radioed that he was trying to gather sufficient escort from the remnants of the fleet to take the civilian ships to safety in Soviet Space. Where the others had turned in the wake of the dismal defeat he could not guess. His head was pounding and he felt old and though he wanted to it was hard to care. Never had he felt so helpless.

After the death of the ore-planet the Canton assault had been swift and overpowering. The Laurian wings had fought well enough, considering their numbers and outdated equipment. But they were no match for the grim machination thrown against them. He had seen almost at once how the battle would go. But while there was any chance at all.....

The red-brown planet loomed closer. It had a somewhat ominous look: the knotted lacing of deep-cut ravines, the jagged mountains, so massive their outlines were visible even from here.

THEY ALL LOOK STARK AND ALIEN AT FIRST. But this one was something peculiar, no denying. Almost it had an aura of strangeness. If he hadn't been so desperately short of oxygen he might have kept searching..... For a moment he had forgotten the Cantons.

Again he studied the star system readout on the ship's console, switched to the more detailed graphic of Centaurus III, Newman's Planet. Touching the fingerboard, he summoned all the relevant data his computer possessed. The cursor darted back and forth across the screen.

Centaurus III

diameter: 16,000 kil
gravity: .6 relative

Earth

atmos density: .4 relative Earth
CO2 72.1
O2 19.4
N 5.2
CH4 3.0
Trace .3
temp:
120 to 35F tropic
100 to 20F sub tropic
70 to -15F up mid latitude
30 to -90F polar sub pol
wind: 5 to 220 kph
humid: .15 to .02 relative

Earth

flora: positive
fauna: probable

He read the last line over, took a deep breath. There were some fears one never fully overcame.

Not that Fear stood large in his mind—seventy Earth years were enough to teach him how meaningless that word was in the end. Fear of death was not only something he had never known, but something he had never understood in others. His Cherokee blood, perhaps. He did not dread it. Now, more and more he almost welcomed death, so long as it was honorable and not cheap.

But this was pointless. He had to decide on an entry and find a place to land, and hope his breathing mask could make something of the strange planet's 'air'. Then take on as much oxygen as possible. Then. What?

GO BACK AND FIGHT THEM AGAIN. He was tired.

Simin crawled out from the heart of the stone, upwards through the long carven tunnel. Coming to a meeting of ways met a brother, touched antennae lightly—vibrations in the sky - yes brother I will

come. Followed twice left and right outward toward the canyon. The way grew wider, more brothers, out into the serrated caves opening far above the valley, came to the broad ledge. As one the heads of twenty mai rose to watch the yellow flame descending. Touch—as before—moved to look out from the rim of the ledge, front legs suspended in the air. The shell was landing in a wide plain among the hills beyond the valley, at the foot of the Mountains of Teeth.

Joining.

As before - down from the sky - bright flame, shell - two legs - I do not know brother. Summon queen, others - not yet I think. But we must - brought to us - gods - no, too small - perhaps this one is different. Must act as one - yes, as one - I think it is so. Yes brothers, I will go.

*

Shannon opened the hatch and looked out, long white hair pushed back as the wind swept past his hawk nose and weathered features. His face was red as brick. Intense, steel-gray eyes looked straight ahead.

Scattered patches of some yellow-brown foliage skirted the edges of red stone that rippled up in curving waves from the dark and rocky soil. Before him lay the rock-strewn plain, beyond it long low hills. He had purposely avoided the shadowy chasm beyond. The sky was pale gold, to auburn at the edges.

There had not been enough oxygen left for him to wait long inside the ship. The air-lock stood closed behind him. It was a naked feeling as he took those first breaths, sounding loudly through the intake bars of the mask. ALL RIGHT? It didn't taste just right, but the indicator on his sleeve showed green: sufficient oxygen, negligible poison. He felt restless. He crossed over the lip of the threshold, and descended the perforated steps.

Footing immediately around the landing site was difficult, as he moved out several paces to look back at the mountains unobstructed. The rising sun had just cleared a high gap between them, and its shadow of light crept slowly down their shoulders.

He felt emotion stir inside him. Like stark and stalwart horns they rose to their impossible heights, almost vertical. Of what stone they had been forged to so withstand the wind and weathering he could not guess. Like jagged pillars that would not die. The warrior's heart within him flamed.

Feeling some presence, he turned back to face the plain. Something was moving toward him. Distance defied close description; but the shape of the body and the nature of its movements did not at first imply intelligence. But he knew better than to form such judgments. It moved openly, tactlessly toward him. He felt no fear.

But as it drew steadily on, he felt the sudden shock of recognition. This was no slow, cumbersome oddity. It was an insect, nearly five feet long. Like but unlike a huge ant—it was flatter, more heavily armored, with creased edges and corners, not unlike the rock. Crisp, tight-folded wings. He turned back toward the ship, but there was stayed by the will of whatever it was that came forward. He felt a sudden shame at his desire to run, and whirled angrily to face it, the long knife (the only weapon he carried) in his hand. With this action the creature seemed pleased: it wholly released its grip on his mind. It continued to come on.

Stopping finally some eight meters in front of him, it raised its upper body and addressed him. He saw then the bright orange-yellow ring, darkly filled, on the underside of its thorax. He heard words in his mind, somehow in his native tongue.

"I am Simin. We must fight, you and I. I cannot let you live. For this is our world, and it is not our way. But your death need not be without honor. And if you fight well, it may be of greater worth than you know."

For a moment the man stood disbelieving, incongruous. Then,

"You will have to take me first!" he cried, feeling yet again the fire that was in him.

The drone gave way before him, moving to the more level ground a short distance to one side. Shannon wondered at this, since clearly it moved among the pebble-stones effortlessly, then realized also that his knife had grown, or at least appeared to grow. Its curved blade gleamed, two feet long. The creature was trying to even the odds. But it fully meant to kill him. That he knew with equal certainty.

The two circled, then the mai advanced. The man aimed a blow at the head, but Simin rolled away beneath it. Then rose and came closer.

*

The man had fought well. SO UNLIKE THE OTHERS. That he possessed the heart of a soldier Simin had known from the first brief mind scan. But never would have guessed the size of it. For it was easy to feel the vast deserts the man had already crossed, and the final defeat showed clearly in his eyes. But still he fought on, for no other reason than that his fierce spirit refused to be broken. Paused before moving onto the fallen body.

Came forward, touched antennae to his temples, and drank deeply from the streams of Shannon's life. Then engulfed the top of the skull with massive, bowed jaws and cracked, lifted away the cranium. Slowly ate the man's brain, taking with it the remainder of his memory.

Almost at once the change began to come over him. Tingling, he backed away slowly on his hind legs. At last the miracle had come. He lifted his head to the sky, and felt the transformation taking place. The hard shell of his face softened, yielding gradually to a new shape: hawk nose, burning eyes. White hair streamed back from the auburn face, hard-edged once more. The huge protruding jaws remained. His forward body was now nearly upright, like a mantis, but with stronger, more flexible arms. His mind was keen and sharp.

He turned back to face the mountains, felt the same fierce elation. And for a time he could not move or think for the wonder of it. How had he not felt it before. For a time he could not move or think....

At long length he turned and headed back to the place of his spawning —the Gorge. The brothers, now forty, saw him reappear atop the high precipice that loomed at the far side of the canyon. They detected some subtle change in him, though from that distance they could only descry a somewhat more elevated form. He did not come to them at once, but stood looking down upon the stepped vastness, alone, as if seeing it for the first time.

When at last he did spread his wings and fly closer they looked up at him amazed, not understanding. He landed on the ledge but remained at his distance, regarding them quietly. He addressed them, no longer needing to touch. His strange eyes shone and he did not move, as if overwhelmed from within. He spoke to their minds.

"My time has come. Summon the others."

They could not understand, but obeyed, dispersing to summon their queen, and all others that lived within the span of their own.

*

The sun tipped the horizon and dust was gathering and still the long files of mai continued to stream down. Already the central basin was nearly filled, and pushing back toward the stunted spires of the west wall. The moving shapes were dark in the lengthening shadows, and all looked up at him, perched silently atop the Carrier Stone. The first circle of seven queens, not touching, seemed to understand, as did the drones behind them. All others knew only that another Outsider had been killed. Waited patiently for the joining.

As the darkness deepened and the last movement ceased, all joined and were silent. The queens approached the Stone, the giver of life, and touched it.

From out of its crumpled iron surface arose a faint hum, the remainder of its strength. All lives were now fused, and the queens sent out their messages. Joined forelegs and antennae, bent all their thought toward Simin, so that now he probed the memory not with one mind but with many. And stimulated by the Carrier, its greatness began to come forth.

Slowly the streams of Shannon's life broke free and flowed in a gentle murmur through all, paced and given substance by the queens and drones. And slowly they took shape into music, a long, rhythmic chant. Then with gathering strength as a river fed by many tributaries, rose into song that filled all the valley, and echoed in the hearts of ten thousand mai. From birth to death, the long struggles of his life were played out, rising and falling like the seasons of the wind. Again and yet again he did battle, with hope or without it. The song grew within Simin, overpowering, so stark and beautiful that he thought he must die, but knew he could not yet.

Then all again was hushed, and stiffly the drone-that-was raised himself up. A voice rose out of his soul, but it was no longer his: a pulsing, soft white glow hovered in the air above him.

"They have called me a mercenary, but it is not so. I am a warrior. For be it my virtue or be it my curse, it has never been within me to yield to aggression, or to stand aside and let violence pass. Something has always risen inside me when persecution, in any form, is at hand. In this I claim no virtue, no heroism. This only will I say: that I have ever given my strength to those unable to defend themselves, the downtrodden, the weak, oppressed by the strong. But most bitter in my malice have always been those who kill in the name of God, some higher purpose. They are to me blindness and murder personified. Thus, I do not claim it.

"In twelve wars have I fought—in half as many victories. For in time my soldiering became no longer a conscious action, but an instinctive response.

"Well do I know my folly in choosing this bitter course. But if I am to live, then it will be as a man. And if by the loneliness that is my soul I can turn aside the sword of injustice, even for a short time, then so help me God I will do it."

The words ended and the glow receded. It lived no more. Again himself, alone, Simin lowered his head, so deeply moved that the water flowed freely from his eyes. The ruling queen approached him.

"Simin-that-was. Do you take this Quest?"

"I will take it, though I fear to falter."

"You will not."

The queen stepped back, and all proclaimed him.

"Si-mai, ungol, misch-naik!" AGAINST THE EVIL THAT WAS AND IS, WE SEND YOU. The joining was ended, and the gathering dispersed.

II

He had flown for many days into the growing cold. The sun was gone and the wind was rising as he searched the ground below him for a place to pass the night. It must be sheltered, not so much from the elements (though this too was important) as from the marauding bands of ground wasps that lived in these northern regions. There was still far to go and much danger ahead. He had no strength for useless battles.

At last as all light faded he came upon a towering pillar of stone in the midst of a vast wasteland, split at the top as if cloven by a giant axe. Reaching its heights, he descended slowly into its broad embrasure. Detecting some deeper shadow in the blackness of the eastern wall, he flew toward a narrow fissure in the rock. Landing silently on the lip of it, he tested the air for vibrations. All was still. He moved inside and huddled close together. He was empty and cold and weary to the point of exhaustion. He remained in quiet thought for many hours.

When he had taken the quest, he knew only that he must somehow continue the labors of Shannon's life—find some way to avenge the death of it. He had wandered alone for a period of days, remembering, until one morning, at the rising dust of a fiery dawn, he had felt the North calling to him. He felt it still, though less strongly, and he deemed that this was right. What he hoped to find there he could not say. He only knew that he must find it.

The most difficult aspect of his journey thus far had not been the long flight on short provisions. To the mai such things meant nothing. They lived to work and serve the greater need, that was all. No, it was more the feelings and emotions that the long pilgrimage evoked in him, seeming almost to rise from the vast loneliness of his world. For though the man's spirit had died or moved on, his sensations and experience had not. They lived on within Simin, and sometimes puzzled or even frightened him. He understood, and knew this was necessary; but the knowledge did not make it easier.

WHAT A TORTURED RACE THEY MUST BE, he thought. SO TORN BETWEEN DESIRE AND FEAR. THEY ARE GIVEN NO ROLE, NO CLEAR PLACE. THEY MUST FIND IT, AS WE MUST FIND MOISTURE IN AN ARID LAND.

It was this fear of frustration and fruitless searching that he felt most deeply, because it had for so long been a part of his own existence. Through all his twenty months he had sought after some

intangible, some elusive quality of being, with no more guide than a restless and smoldering hunger inside him. TO NOT KNOW, really not know who he was or where he was going.

This, he decided, must be the doom of humanity: to be born a burning question of itself, a paradox of beauty and destruction, love and loss. To take personally and introspectively the irresolvable conflict of life and desire over stillness and the void. Again, he felt it so deeply. That the struggle could also be beautiful he knew. But still, such a hard and lonely fate.....

When dawn came he crawled out of the niche and looked about him. The great crack was shadowed and still. He felt the presence of many creatures, but they were not yet near him. The rockface offered little resistance as he climbed, and soon he stood atop a hooked spire that sprang from the pillar's crumbling eastern shoulder, high above the plain. Two long lines of wingless wasps were mounting towards him. The first of their number touched the spire. He took one last taste of the dawn, then flew out beyond their reach.

He flew staunchly and steadily northward, now that he had some plan. For the clarity of first-sun had told him what he must do. Stopping to rest along the top of a shallow ridge, he ate part of a darkening bush-bulb, nearly as large as himself. Its taste was bitter, but it gave him strength. Then he set out again.

His mind had determined to search the farthest North. Shannon's memory told him what he might find there: great frozen wastes of ice and earth, underground hollows left from times when the water had been greater. Sometimes as he pondered these, at the edge of thought he would feel a sound, a sensation: deep throbbings in empty places beneath the ground, a golden light that drew him onward. But then it would vanish and leave him, wondering. He must find its source, if it were real.

Three days more he journeyed toward it, till on the fading edge of the third the wind forced him to land. It had been gathering strength since the morning of the spire, and now carried with it a bitter and biting cold that would not rest. His strength beginning at last to fail him, he determined to go on on foot, until he found some shelter, or a reason to stop. He felt the presence of no other creature, yet still he was uneasy. He had reached the edge of the mighty tundra that formed the cap of Newman's world.

Now more and more he reached into Shannon's past, trying to find the thing that had kept him going. Genuine physical weakness, other than simple hunger, thirst and fatigue, was something he had never known, and dealing with it frustrated all the lessons he had learned as a mai. Being alien to his experience, he had assumed that it did not exist—that there was only weakness of will, and that so long as his desire held, no barrier of the flesh would ever stop him. This lesson in perspective he accepted, though grudgingly. It seemed that everything he had known in three seasons of life must be relearned, altered to fit this new reality. But his will remained undaunted.

He traveled many hours into the darkness of night, until he found a small hollow of earth and root of stone at the base of a pummeled and wind torn boulder. A thin lacing of ground-snow, carried by the wind, swirled around him and whistled in its cracks, making a melancholy sound that he felt still deeper for the lassitude of his body. Here he rested, and tried not to think, until the coming of morning.

The morning was much the same as the night, with only a patchy gray light to tell him when the day had come. He moved out of the shelter and walked, across shallow hills, rising in monotonous rhythm through a bleak and barren landscape. The earth was a dull and frozen brown, broken now and again by rock, or gnarled scrub, or nothing. The thin snow blew over all, trailing and whirling about in long wisps like the twisting hands of witches. He continued on for many hours, until the wind relented just long enough for him to exhaust himself in flight. He landed again, and found the earth covered intermittently with thin patches of ice, sometimes deepening and joining together into shrunken, unmoving streams, or withered oak leaves of many fingers.

He continued and night came again but he did not stop. He had eaten what hard and knotted brush he could find, and there was now no lack of moisture; and though it was his mind he feared, denying it had not yet become unbearable. He rested a short time, went on the next day. And the next, walking because he could not fly, into the growing cold, and thicker snow, and ice that began to dominate the ground. Until he was alone.

Time passed.

*

He had reached the farthest North. The world was ice, layered with snow. The wind blew the white softness above into dunes, sometimes foaming against islands of rock, huddled together in groups or branching straight like disjointed coral reefs, while its gusting blasts wrapped veils over all, swirling

and howling in relentless defiance. The day lasted but four short hours, then all was swathed in darkness, so that the swirling sheets were blind and crashed over him like spray of drowning surf on the deck of a floundering ship. He was utterly alone.

Simin's strength was gone; he did not know what kept him going. Perhaps because he had never known defeat..... But surely it was more. Through the numb slowness of his near-frozen body a heart beat that carried no blood. He was dangerously crippled by the cold.

He had passed wide cracks in the ice, chasms and fissures that he knew must lead down: sometimes he could almost see, or sense, uncovered earth or the edges of rock far below. And this was what he sought. But always the feel of them was cold. He sought an entrance, which led to a passage. He must find it soon or perish.

On the seventh day since entering the tundra, an hour after the disappearing of light, a vast abyss opened before him, wider and emptier and deeper than any he had yet come across. Like a crushed cylinder of otherworldly proportions, it yawned directly in front of him, dropping deep into the earth. His forelegs hovered trembling above the void.

This must be the passage, or he would die. He no longer trusted his judgment; it had fallen in the snow many miles behind him. It could well be madness, but he felt a presence far below, some wild hope..... No. He must find shelter. Perhaps it was there. A shelter. If he could find it. MUST CONTINUE ON. NO, HERE. IT MUST BE HERE, OR I AM DYING. SO. . EASY TO SURRENDER. LIKE FALLING ASLEEP. LETTING GO. NO!

He turned his sinking body around, and forced it to descend: hooking and digging, scraping into ice, forelegs stretched to the limit, trying not to slip. To slip was death. Down. Down farther. A little farther. THE WIND IS LESS HERE. Here. KEEP MOVING. MUST KEEP MOVING. NO STRENGTH. . BUT WARMTH COMING BACK. YES, WARMTH. MOVE. FARTHER.

DON'T SLIP! DON'T SLIP. An overhang. CAREFUL. MUST STRUGGLE PAST SOMEHOW. SOME WAY. PAST. WARMTH. IT MUST BE WARMER. KEEP MOVING. IT WILL BE WARMER, OR I AM DYING. I AM DYING. IT IS WARMER.

After the long and grueling climb, stopping many times to marshal strength, he found himself at the bottom. The cylinder had narrowed, so that now it was scarcely thirty meters broad, a sharp cleft of stone, rising sheer into ice that overtook it for perhaps a thousand meters more. He rested there, his body pulsing, spent. The cold was not as intense, and the wind was less, and the movement had warmed his limbs.

But he was weak and near dead from hunger and exhaustion. He needed sustenance badly, soon. Or it was over. He moved to a tiny pool of snow that had formed from a trickle of the torrent above, and with his trembling foreclaw worked small bits of it into his mouth. All done in pitch darkness, and very little feeling left. Then moved to examine the corners of the cleft.

The first was blocked, solid stone. He turned about. He did not know he had reached the opposite wall until he passed through it, was inside. A cave had opened blindly and taken him in, narrow and not high, but a cave nonetheless. A passage. After a time he knew instinctively that he was underground, but was far too weary for the knowledge to have much effect. He continued forward. He must find some kind of sustenance. Sustenance. He thought of his foreclaw, but remembering the man..... No. Not yet.

He wandered on, stumbling, raising himself up to go on. Plodded forward, sinking ever deeper, and onward, until the air around him suddenly grew larger. A loosened rock rolled off another, and the echo did not return for some time. He moved to his right, sensing something, and stroked the tip of his claw against the slanting surface which met it. The surface was sometimes soft and not smooth; it was not part of the stone. He tried to break off a small piece. The layer was thin, and it crumbled. He tried again, brought the wretched substance—some kind of dried blood, or excrement—to his mouth. Its taste was bile and bitter and acid. Then swallowed. Throat burning, he repeated the motion perhaps a dozen times, then collapsed, half holding, to the floor. And lay unmoving.

*

Simin woke from his delirium many hours later, somewhat stronger, but still dizzy and confused. The little nourishment he had taken lifted his mind back to awareness, strong, if subtly altered by the thick aura of the place, and by the strange and pressing reality of his quest. He rose slowly, careful not to spend the wavering hope he had found, and looked around him.

Looked around him. There was a dim light in that place, that region of vastness. And whatever the source, though all before had been darkness, it was undeniable. The light was dim and surreal, softly yellow and fallow gold, but nonetheless afforded him a glimpse of this underground world, if it did not end, which he must now traverse. For here, more than ever, he sensed a presence that was greater than his own life, if distantly, not calling him but aware of his need.

Strangeness.

He was not alone in that ribbed, spine-ceilinged enclosure. Around a far turning he caught movement, and was sure as an ebb and flow motion of body and legs rounded the inward corner that was the edge of his sight. He was still too weak to fight, or to go on, as the many legged creature approached him blindly, unaware of his presence. It drew closer, then seemed to slow in its movements, coming gradually to a halt. Descendant of the centipede, it studied him from a distance of forty meters, its poisoned forward spikes twitching with unease.

Though the centipede was longer, its bulk and his were nearly equal. He had no strength for a fight, nor did he seek one. But perhaps his quivering opponent could be daunted, backed down. Yet as he continued to watch he felt no aggression, only puzzlement, coming from the other: He was not part of its food chain, nor was its territory threatened. It was only frightened, why so strongly he could not guess. He also knew, with sudden sureness, that it was one of many. Somehow he knew. He took a step forward, and it retreated swiftly along the way it had come, moving onto the wall, perhaps instinctively, where it felt a greater measure of safety. He followed it as best he could in the half light, the flexing striped-brown body, hoping to find the source of its food.

He passed the narrowing corner at the back of the high, curving chamber and descended a long, often twisting, downward tunnel that branched off from it. The other's speed was considerable, moving through the regions of its birth, and try as he might he could not keep up. He soon found himself alone in a roughly spherical vault, not large, with five knife-slash passages opening off it.

The light here was thicker, and in a swift moment of recognition he realized the reason for it. The soft glow was neither greater nor weaker anywhere around him: it did not have a true source, nor did it cast a single shadow. He felt a slight pulsing of moisture across his face, like a fine drizzle-rain touched by the wind. The light was in the mist itself. Also, there was the sensation of his flesh lightly touching, warming against the inner edges of his armor. His senses were heightened, and he was acutely aware of his hunger.

His antennae began to twitch, almost without his knowledge, turning him to the left. He followed to a shallow rift at the lowest point of the enclosure, where he found a tiny pool of dark water, sponged by a thick and brackish black algae. He immersed his jaws and tasted. Again. He filled his mouth, and painfully swallowed wave after wave of the wet and mud sustenance.

Then he backed away and lifted himself up, feeling alive once more. He moved to hide himself behind a jagged plate of rock, and waited for his strength to return.

III

Simin stood before the flat porous surface of a section of a wall of stone. The pale light which illuminated it was the same as ever, perhaps a little brighter, or his eyes had dulled in growing used to it. But through the worn blankness of his mind (though a fair measure of his physical strength had returned, yet having no will to drive it) he felt a spark of emotion, almost human, that held him there with a hollow aching in the center of his chest. He stood before a fading portrait, a mark left on the uncaring stone.

At his feet lay the scattered and broken armor, all that remained, of another who had tried. This melancholy work, drawn in the creature's own browning blood and severed foreclaw, had been its death-act of remembrance, its struggle still to forge some meaning from the emptiness of its failure. It had not been mai—he knew from the broken shell and the drawing—and this more than anything else, thundered shame at his growing feelings of surrender and despair. He remained silent, head down, wrapped in rage. At length he looked up to study the creature's last act of flesh.

It was the image, subtly changed, of a winged chivit, roaming insects living to the south of the mai. The outlines of its frame, like the edges of a fisherman's net, were opened at the center of the body and joined shut at the limbs and single arching wing. Its left foreleg and right hind (it had only four digits in all) extended from the main in almost Egyptian caricature, drawn with a trembling hand. The effect of the whole was that of a shriveled and shrunken Phoenix, macabrely adorning the tomb of some lost pharaoh. Subtly changed, like himself.... But the thing that held him—one strange detail. A smoky blur emanated outward from the body, like Spirit growing out of flesh. A fearful banshee image, or dying vision of the Life After? The long journey.

Aura.

Breaking away at last he continued downward, seeking the source of the light, finding passages as best he could. He tried to read what signs there were, the faint flux of incandescence, feeling called but never sure, taking what nourishment he could, for three days more. Always the strange tingling of flesh against his armor increased, as did internal body heat. And ever as he went he came across more of the striped-brown creatures, male centipedes, some running it seemed, from what he could not guess, all fearing him, all bearing the marks of battle. Yet none were ever wounded to the point of near-death, and all appeared strong of their kind. It was a puzzle he could not dissect. Their fear held his confidence, but drawing steadily downward, he felt a growing reluctance to trespass the source of their being. It seemed to contradict all fairness that the way which led to meaning, if it did, lay through a world of savage (of this he was also quite sure), sniveling insects, who had in no way raised themselves above the animal. They were mindless and ugly, and his distaste for them would not be abated. Fatigue, too, was becoming unbearable, as the invisible force that beat back on him, assaulting both mind and body, continued to grow with the light which was its sister sun.

On the fourth day, though time meant little in that place, passing only in the world outside, he discovered the reason for his revulsion. The dull, scraping sounds of armor against stone, of multitudes locked in battle, had caught first at the edge of hearing, seeming unreal, then steadied, held, and increased as he went on. Till coming to the fissure-like opening of yet another vast cavern, he looked down on a sight that twisted his spirit like rope and squeezed hard at the knots. Some twenty meters below him, as it were through a glassless window, he saw and understood at last the riddle of these pathetic creatures.

Newly hatched—the broken, swollen webs of multiple cocoons lay many layers deep all around them—they were locked into countless battling pairs. Each separate fight was to the death, the victor sometimes stopping to eat a part of the vanquished, gaining strength, then moved on to grapple with others who had yet survived. By such attrition their numbers had already been reduced from thousands to hundreds, to what end he could not imagine.

Then he saw the females. Huge and bloated, they sat complacently on raised vantage points at the margins of the battlefield, awaiting the final conquerors. These victors he knew, from the signs he had already seen, would mate with them and then be cast out, possibly eaten, left to die as they would, the reason for their brief, wretched lives extinguished.

He watched them in dull horror, growing to intense pity and disgust. For he knew that what he sought lay beyond them, and that its power, for good or ill, had nothing to do with them, and no influence whatever, either to elevate or corrupt. They were only here, and through some flaw of intelligence, or heart, or having no choice, they lived and died in a meaningless haste of reproduction.

He must past through them. He waited as long as his patience would hold, away from the window, not watching. When he looked in again many hours later, the number of fighting pairs had been reduced to perhaps sixteen. He crawled in through the high opening, moved carefully down the back-leaning arc of wall and onto a level with the combatants, all unnoticed. A narrow wrinkle in the chamber, nearly flat at the base, ran like a sunken path before him, dividing the battle in half. Having no choice, he began to walk the shallow gauntlet, moving stiffly, always ready for a fight.

First one pair and then another released their grip as they saw him, confused. Some, already on the verge of death, lay writhing and legless, fighting still. The four queens, each from its raised pedestal, looked on in disbelief: their sacred ritual had been disturbed. Simin moved steadily forward, staring down and backing off each male as he passed. He was nearly halfway through.

Finally one of the females raised up her forward body, and began moving it back and forth like an impatient cobra. The male closest to her—it seemed to Simin the largest he had seen—broke away and came forward, moving toward the dry canal where the intruder stood waiting.

Unlike the others it showed no outward fear. It advanced without hesitation, or thought, or much of anything except the blind mating aggression of its kind. It stopped only once, looking back at the

female from the lip of the sunken path, then came forward with only one impulse in its mind: Kill him.

Simin had only a short time to plan his fight. As the creature drew nearer he opened his wings instinctively and strafed the air with his foreclaws. His wings! In all the time since finding the abyss he had forgotten them, first from the weak amnesia of near-death, then from simple disuse. With no more time to marvel he moved in a quick half-circle to avoid the lumbering bulk, then flitted up behind it onto the slanting edge of the rift. These short bursts of flight he repeated several times (the thought that he could fly to safety and forget this fight never occurred to him), searching for a weakness. Though filled with a sullen rage, he knew there could be no mistakes. Rising higher, he hovered briefly above his baffled foe, then swept down onto its back, and in three quick motions of jaws and foreclaw, tore off its head and left it to die.

Still full of bitter and unused anger he landed again on the plain closest to the female, clawing the rock as if clinging to a rope, as his blurring wings drummed threateningly. Then letting go he flew directly over her, and left the sorry massacre behind.

With this action his patience expired. Landing as the far side of the chamber grew shallow, he walked on through a curving length of tunnel for some miles, until confronted by a three-directional branching of the passageway. He followed the right-hand way first, and for a short time made good progress. But then it doubled back on him and finally ended, died, into a narrowing of stone through which he could not pass. Furious, he worked his way back to the starting point, taking this time the central shaft, leading downward. The result was the same, though it took him much longer to realize. Returning again to the meeting of ways was now difficult, since in his haste he had been forced to take and re-take several turns in a compact but puzzling labyrinth, that he found in the end took him nowhere.

Coming again after many hours to the branching of paths, he tried to rest both mind and body, conceding the inevitable. His anger here was useless. It had only robbed him of strength and precious time, and he was no closer to a resolution of his bitter quest than he had ever been. And also, a peculiar yellow fear, such as he had seldom experienced in his life, was beginning to grow in him. At first he blamed himself, raging. But walking through the twisted tunnels of the labyrinth he had realized, suddenly, that it was not his fear alone. His body was still not right, if wrong in a way that was hard to define, and there could be but one explanation for it. The mist, the growing light, was affecting his altered physiology. He searched within himself, bewildered, till Shannon's memory put a name to it. RADIATION. A force that should not affect an insect, but which worked on those parts of his body that were yet human.

He rested for a time, but his rest was brief. The feelings of unease continued to grow in him; they would not be contained. The source of what he sought—he could now feel a faint throbbing in the stone around him—was a danger in itself, repulsing, even as it called to him. He must find it quickly, then be gone. For he knew that his time in those depths was limited. He gathered what courage and presence of mind he could, then pushed on, entering the left-hand passage.

He summoned now all his underground instincts, honed by the long delvings of his life among the mai. In those days, a constant stream unbroken by sleep, he had endlessly searched out tunnels untraveled or long forgotten, returning ever and again to those that went deepest, learning the mazes, delving deeper still. Though what he sought there he could not have said.

The left-hand way was subtle, as he passed onward through the narrow stone, with many turnings and side passages. He held mostly to the main shaft, learning its direction, following it on its slow, steady course downward. Many times it narrowed, till he was ready to despair. But always through perseverance and careful backtracking, he was able to find a way through.

The narrowing and tight touching of the walls began to frighten him. By this, more than any other token, he knew that the growing fear inside him was not solely his own. Far back in the journey he had realized that in taking the quest he must know, in part, what it was to be human. Perhaps the spirit of Shannon still lived more strongly than he knew. And perhaps there were others as well. Often he had thought with human voice, human words, till now it was impossible to separate the two. He had known, and been, emotions that were not his own.....

But THIS fear. Sometimes from the deeps of his mind he could hear a howling as of many tormented voices, rising out of him like a driven, heart-frozen wind.

He stopped. He himself was afraid, and he did not know why. He must master it and go on. He must master it and go on. Go on..... Resistance was thick around him, his body's weakness, till he felt that in standing still he walked against a current of water.

He hardened, and went forward. The passage began to open again, growing wider. Several more of

the branching ways, through a mesh of stone, and a straight, subtly rising tunnel lay before him. Far off in the distance he heard, unmistakably, a steady throbbing, echoing like a fall of water—the deep, rapid pulsing of a heart. He pushed on, harder, though the pulsing of yellow light grew stronger, pushing back on him, darkening to gold, an airless wind urging him back.

The passage seemed endless, and still it went on, with no indication..... Ahead of him, the tunnel opened out, almost beyond the edge of sight. He continued. Farther. He had reached it: the horn's spout. Over the lip, and in.....

*

The beginnings of the chamber greeted him like an opened book, lying on its bindings, leaning downward. The rock of that flattened wedge, angling slowly away from him, was ribbed and strangely symmetrical—smooth porous gray, but bathed in a strong golden light, inexplicably tinged dark crimson where it met a rise of stone. He was only vaguely aware that beyond this antechamber the ceiling warped high and huge, above a valley that dwarfed even the place of his birth. For here, as nowhere else beneath the surface of his world there were shadows, lengthening toward him to either side of the shallow, widening staircase. And for all the desperate haste of his journey, Simin could not yet go forward. He stood looking down at the two pillared sentinels in awe, the vast spherical expanse beyond. He little thought that he himself, standing before the rim of the long tunnel he had just traversed, his upper body and underside wreathed in red, formed an equally stunning and unlikely visage of life against the Void.

Assimilation.

Two stone sentinels stood in perfect symmetry, like Roman statues, atop the angling walls that rose to either side of the stairway's end. The sunken plain lay beyond. Whether these silent watchers had been carved by Nature or intelligence it was impossible to say: perhaps meant to connote angry, reptilian merman rising out of the stone, perhaps roughly shaped bodies whose accidental carving held no meaning at all. Here all boundary between the spiritual and the meaningless faded. They stood silent, faces outward, guarding the plain below. He descended slowly until he stood between them, on the ripple of stone looking down.

The plain lay before him like a massive wrinkled dish, bone-white and barren. He breathed deeply several times, not knowing why. His objective was as clear as the tolling of a bell.

A broad crater rested in the center of all, sinking out of sight, and from it came the deep tremor of sound, the slow throbbing of light that pervaded the underground vastness with its certain and unnerving presence. Everywhere the edges of floor and ceiling glowed red, as if from heat, and the brightness of yellow gold folded over and through him like a liquid current of sun and air, warming. Simin had not the heart to remain there long; he must descend now, or turn back in defeat. This place was the very nexus of his unspoken fears.

He descended into the Valley, and almost at once the wailing of human voices erupted in his ears, rising and falling in a discordant terror of mutilated passions, scales without notes or boundaries. He moved on, oblivious, physically incapable of dealing with this fear. His weakness cried out strange horrors; his strength was confused.

He continued, not knowing what else to do. The surface of that plain was cracked and uneven—warm, and unbearably long. The cacophony of human fears climbed and fell back, rising now as if engulfed in flame, then chilled, despairing.

HUMAN FEAR. At last he understood. He felt the presence of other minds so strongly that he wondered if Shannon were truly dead, and not merely the emissary of human suffering and grief. For this, surely, was an unearthly place of His world. The high ceiling, the infinite, trackless waste. The heat. Words raced through his beleaguered body, slowing, till with a dread he would not have thought possible..... The voice of a weary, tortured old man, his spirit broken in the end—a Jew, his lungs filled with poison—formed physically, undeniable, in his ears.

"Inferno."

He stopped, as if a razor had cloven him in two. It was there before him, all around. He could not go forward, or back. He was dying. Yes, dying in that place, where the river of his dreams, fallen to a trickle, had at last died into unconquerable sand. He stood frozen in terror. To breathe was a pointless misery. There was nothing—alone—in that hollow place but death.

He knew not where he got the strength, or desperation. He lifted the first of his walking legs, moved it forward. It touched the ground, a little farther ahead. He moved the next, and then the next. He staggered forward, feeling a will such as he had never known hardening out of his weakness and despair. He was terrified, in pain. Burning with fever. But he moved.

With this action the resistance seemed to falter, the wailing of human passions to subside. But only for a moment. They redoubled their assault—the current against him was physical—but broke against his stubborn movement like a wall of water against stone. He continued. The sand of many hours flowed past him.

He was nearing the crater, now certain he would die. If only by his death he could achieve for Shannon, and for the other..... He forced a foreclaw to shackle the edge of the crater, looking down. Determined. The dry heat of that place was unbearable; and still distance defied him. A silver-white core, cruel mockery of the Carrier stone, glowed at the center of the broken-rock pit. From within came the voices, the fever, the Heat. Yet this was his only quest. He must. . .TOUCH it..... Must.

He could not walk; his legs would no longer carry him. With a weak spasm of his hind and a pathetic flutter of wings, he pushed himself over the edge and slid, rolled across stones, folding his wings just in time, to tumble down a steep slope then land, legs folded beneath him gripping hot stones, perhaps a hundred yards from all his desire.

He welcomed now its death, if only he could move. If only he could go that distance farther, against the barrage. Of distance. But he was afraid. Afraid to die. To die! At last he had met the greatest human fear: the wakened animal, knowing it would live no more.

Oh, it was too much. He steeled the fire in his heart and went on, but would have screamed if he could. Fifty yards. Forty. It was too much. Too much. The stones beneath him rasped and hissed, speaking Death's name. Downward, into the final hole of death, the murderer of all his passions. It was too much. What kind of God would ask..... Too much.

His death reached out. He touched the stone.

*

He touched the stone. Slowly the feverish weakness left him, as if a violent storm fading at the last. The human flesh, the human trial, had left him. There was only Simin, and he was one.

The Stone, which had appeared to burn white-hot, was cool, and he experienced a sense of tranquility such as he had never known. He had done it. The spirit of Shannon was at peace.

His mind was calm, his own. He remained, outstretched foreclaws touching this new life, where death had been certain. His inner being was like the quiet surface of a pool. A tiny pebble fell into it, and as the ripples smoothed outward and the settled stone touched bottom, he understood.

"It is a strange truth that the path to beauty and meaning often lies through fear and ugliness." After a time another part of his being added this. "God may exist; at times I feel him. Yet we must walk dark paths alone, and endure."

He remained there in silent thought for some time, until at length he turned and made his way back toward the tunnels, knowing now with certainty what he must do. His mind possessed new powers, because it was one with the Unnamable. His armor was many times stronger.

He knew what he must do.

IV

It was irony, perhaps, but also a shrewd tactical maneuver on the part of Shin il Sung, that brought the Laurian refugees to Hegel V, the remote Canton mining planet. Limping toward Soviet Space with a patchwork of seventeen ships, Shannon's second-in-command had hoped at first that that the fascist

armada, which had paused for two weeks to regroup and consolidate its victory (whatever that might be, as the colonies they attacked had been largely destroyed), would at least allow them to escort the civilian carriers unharmed. But when the fanned out cluster of ships began to appear again on laser detection, mockingly unconcealed, he knew that he hoped in vain. Their enemies could leave no honest witness to the massacre.

Shin's own trail would be more difficult to follow, but he knew that in the end they would be found, long before the countless miles had been crossed. Sheer distance made this part of the galaxy anarchic.

There would be no help from beyond. The Soviets, with their usual pragmatism, had said a polite no to his request for protective escort, even hospital and civilian ships for the wounded, and the women and children. It was clear that they were taking a larger view of the conflict, hoping to turn it later to their own advantage, which made the lives of a few thousand refugees of but small concern. And there was no one else to turn to. His messages to the Commonwealth and Japanese outposts would not be received for weeks, not believe until long after they were dead.

Not that he was wholly unprepared. For many long nights he had puzzled over charts of this sector, trying to find a place where, if they must fight and die, at least it would be on solid ground. Space combat against such a force was less than futile. It was nothing short of murder, with no place to run, and no hope at all. The trick was to find a land base that could not (or would not) be attacked from the air.

The memory of the Hegel diamond mines had come to him as pure inspiration. The Cantons, gearing up for an expanded war effort, couldn't possibly afford to knock them out, especially after the unexpectedly severe break-up (explosion, really) of Marcum-Lauries One, the valuable ore planet, now lost. And this far out in neutral space, at a time when ships and men were needed elsewhere, he doubted that the mines were guarded by more than a token force. If he got there first, and caught them off guard..... Shannon had chosen his second well. Shin was tough as nails and twice as sharp, and with the same capacity for facing despair without letting it overwhelm him.

He had acted immediately on the impulse, whatever its source, putting the fleet on standby combat readiness, and jumping light-speed toward the target with five destroyers and two hundred of their combined army's best troops. No other Canton outpost lay within that vector. The closest neighboring system, Centaurus, was bleak and uninhabited. The rest of the fleet would come behind, arriving roughly forty-eight hours later. Then, if they had been able to subdue and take control of the mines, together they would prepare to meet the Armada.

*

"You have grown, Simin-that-was."

Returned to the land of his birth, he stood alone by the Carrier Stone with the aging queen who had given him life. A gentle wind sighed in the valley. Nothing else moved.

"I am Simin."

She considered this, listening to his unspoken thoughts.

"Yes, you are Simin. What will you do now?"

"I must go." It was not necessary, but still he signaled the words to her with a touching of the antennae. For he loved her. The queen bowed her head.

"The human's death was not wasted. That pleases me, for his spirit was great. Go now with all our thoughts."

Simin took his leave of her, flying slowly and circumspectly up out of the Gorge. These emotions were his alone. He flew to Shannon's ship, and entered it. Working the controls with melancholy ease, he left forever the place of his birth.

The Canton Fleet Marshall walked openly toward the three broad cave entrances held by the Laurians, tucked in and overhung with shadow at the base of a dry, tawny ridge several thousand feet

high, crowned with foliage. The precious diamond mines lay beyond.

Marshall Bota had not bothered with a signal of truce, or an escort—his hovering vehicle stood empty behind him. No doubt the mercenaries would be tempted to shoot; but he had no time for these games. Shin's move had been a clever aggravation, nothing more. Looking up at the wind-veined rock, the Canton told himself with mild amusement that he should drop it on their heads. The hostages meant nothing to him, and the mines could be re-dug.... But some of his soldiers might not understand. Wait until later in the war, once they'd had a taste of it.

Shin watched the approaching general through the glasses, searching for any sign of personal weakness. It was indeed their only hope. Recognizing him as the Fleet Marshall, a small voice inside did in fact tell him to shoot. But though bitterness rose strong against restraint, he knew that it would be pointless and dishonorable to kill him now. Though doubtless if the tables had been turned....

Bota was somewhat surprised to see the Korean's solid form emerge from the canopy of shadow, striding toward him. He had expected an older man. He stopped where he was and waited. A slight upgrade, and the two stood face to face.

The marshal unclasped his breathing mask and slipped it aside, though the dense atmosphere of that place was barely sustainable to human life. The Korean did the same.

"Commander Shin, I believe." Shannon's second was only mildly taken back by the use of his name and proper rank.

"Bota."

"MARSHAL Bota."

"You didn't come all this way to tell me...(he struggled for breath)... how many men you stabbed in the back! What do you want?"

"One would expect a cornered monkey to show more respect."

"A cornered MAN has nothing to live for. Speak your piece and get out."

"All right. I want the hostages. I want them now. Your civilian ships will be allowed. . .to whimper to Soviet Space. We won't stop them. It's your hides we're after."

"You'll let them go, just like that. Is that why you destroyed ALL our ships? Is that why your ground equipment is lined up against us?"

"Oh, yes. There is that. Well. We've had our little talk. Enjoy your moment of heroism. Lord knows. . .I'll enjoy ending it." He started to walk away, then turned. "Oh, about the hostages." Shin's glare was unchanging. "Cut off their heads, and throw them down into the mines. I'm going grind you to powder."

*

The Canton line advanced slowly from its distance of five kilometers, a visually odd procession of large flat vehicles, cat-tracked, with lightly armored ground troops hurrying behind, protected by the advancing shield wall of the Armadillos. Huge laser cannons projected from their slanting fronts, all trained upon the thick bar of shadow at the base of the oncoming ridge. Bota's machine led the subtle wedge, its magnetic-field disrupter already pulsing to try and weaken the Laurian's shields.

Shin barked out his orders rapidly, for all the good it would do. He stood with several of the men before the instrument-laden vision panel, simultaneously listening to analysis of the enemy advance, searching for a non-existent weakness, and trying to exude some measure of confidence and calm—which wasn't easy with only four big guns of his own, and his power-shields unstable. His headset buzzed with two and three voices at once. THERE HAD BEEN NO TIME TO LAY ARMADILLO MINES!

The civilians (those who would go) were huddled in groups of two- to five-hundred in the deepest recesses of the mines, along with the prisoners. He had no illusions about their safety. The rest, perhaps a thousand grim, forlorn men and women, stood resignedly behind them in the vast hollow that joined the three cave openings, bright arches that looked out on the light of day, watching a young officer try desperately to save them. And all the while Shin struggled to think what Shannon would do in his place, and what he would feel.

All at once the Canton lasers began to fire. The temperature in the enclosure rose noticeably, and the walls began to tremble from the pushed-back force of the shields. The soprano thump of their own guns

began to sound, as Shin fired his energy bursts in answer. They made a brave sight and sound, bright spheres whizzing through carefully timed openings in the shields, but seemed to have little effect on the grim machination set against them.

Feeling the trap close in, Shin strode from one battle station to the next, snarling his commands like an animal. Sections of rock crashed down from the ceiling to the sound of screams and deep pocks. A great fissure rose along one wall, widening, and he began to wonder if he had not murdered these people after all. One of the Laurian gunners was struck by a falling stone, and he ran to take his place.

As suddenly as it had begun, the Canton barrage ceased. The advancing machines stopped dead in their tracks. The Laurian shields, too, went down, and their guns would not fire. The clustered civilians, many locked in sheltering embraces, looked around and at each other. Medics ran to attend the wounded.

Bewildered, Commander Shin moved out from the largest of the cave openings to examine his shield projectors. To left and right they were intact. WHAT HAD HAPPENED?

He heard a soft roar as of a ship passing high overhead. He looked first at the halted Canton wedge, not trusting. They were little more than a kilometer away. The ground troops moved about in confusion as officers shouted, but the great Armadillos were silent and still.

Tentatively at first, the scattered shapes and tension-drawn faces of his own soldiers, intermixed with the Laurian refugees, stepped out from the dividing line of shadow. He thought to order them back, but did not. He, too, felt his eyes drawn to skyward. Against the dark, greenish dome, cloudless, an orange flame descended from out of the pale fire of the sun. It was not a large ship..... Shin tried to discipline his hope.

There could be no doubt. It was Shannon's ship.

The weathered vessel landed between the two armies. Shin wanted to run to it wildly, with tears in his eyes. But a voice spoke inside him, saying simply:

"Peace. Your master is dead."

The hatch of Bota's machine had been opened, and now he clambered out, his face red with rage. "Shannon!" he shouted, as if his voice could penetrate steel. "Whatever trick this is, it won't work!" He barked an order to one of his lieutenants, who threw him a weapon and assembled one full company behind him. The marshal clambered down the vehicle's tracks and leapt to the ground. Collecting himself he strode forward, with half his men behind him.

Shin looked on, puzzled, ordered his own people to stay back. As Bota drew to within fifty yards of the vessel, Simin opened the hatch. The Canton raised his rifle, then lowered it in sudden dismay.

Simin stepped out onto the threshold, and with a short burst of wings, stood on the ground beyond it. Again Shin heard a voice. "Remain. This is not your fight."

Those who did not know Shannon well could not have seen his imprint on the creature's stark, intimidating face. Shin had seen it, though unwillingly. The Force Marshall had not. Simin came to a level in front of him, then stopped. He said nothing, stared with an unreadable expression.

"What are you?" demanded Bota, trying not to be unnerved.

"What do you want?" Simin answered him without haste.

"I have come to fight you. To kill you if I can."

"WHAT?" Bota forced himself not to take a step back. "What quarrel have you with the Republic of Cantos?" Then seeing no change: "My men will burn you to ash."

Simin responded slowly, not to be dramatic, but because he wanted the exchange to mean something. He soon saw that it would not.

"No, your men are powerless." He paused. "You seem to have little respect for the one called Shannon. This I do not understand. Even as an enemy, could you not see the courage he possessed?" It was useless. "You think that you are stronger. You have only to fight as well as he, and his cause will be vanquished..... Prepare yourself!" He could not submerge his anger, knowing what Shannon had known, and reading the thoughts of this proud and willful man.

He stepped back, and the weapon in Bota's hands was changed to a long knife. Then, no longer an illusion, the marshal was given a physical prowess equal to his own. But remembering the Cherokee,

Simin gave him still greater advantage.

As Bota stood bewildered, a deep murmur grew in the air all around him, a rising chant, descending from the sky like a fall of cloud along the way the ship had come. Those of his soldiers who looked behind them saw the lesser ridge at its distance appear to grow, layered with the ghost image of a high, terraced precipice, with statued spires rising from its base.

The refugees saw these things as well, as the chant became mixed with the sound of drumming wings. And it seemed to them that their own numbers grew, or they were suddenly aware, of a vast multitude around them. The marshal looked about him and at Simin, as if slowly descending into Hell. The drone felt no pity for him.

"Fight for your life, if you are able!"

The mai began to circle with all the disciplined fire of his heart, and Bota had no choice but to submerge his fear. He fought. He swung his weapon tentatively at first, not believing it real. But this thought, too, was soon of little avail. He slashed and dove, summoning all the strength and endurance of his kind: the wakened animal, fearing death. As the sound closed around them like witness to every struggle of good and evil ever fought.

Their battle was even at first, with the Canton's fierce, desperate will so confronted. Their battle was even.

But after a time that will began to waver, and his fear to grow to a weakness inside him. Almost he sensed that the creature could not beat him, had not the strength. Yet his fear formed an equal voice, lamenting that its spirit fought on so, and would not be cowed. Both were cut and bloodied, and weary to the point of exhaustion.

Simin, his own being stretched to the limit, sensed the other's weakness and made it his island of hope. He continued.

And at the last, driven to a supreme and final effort, he drove his foe to the ground in a shallow depression, and with a trembling foreclaw, slashed his throat.

The man looked up with terror in his eyes, which slipped to sorrow, then to death. His body lay still, and the sound was gone. The landscape was as before.

Not only the Marshall, but all his men lay dead. The Armadillos were as shadows of a dark, machinated dream. His orbiting fleet, as well as the landing craft, stood emptied of life.

Simin crawled slowly out of the depression, and turned to Shin.

"Shannon's life has bought your freedom. Go, then find some way to fight them again."

His life and energies spent, his quest ended, Simin opened his foreclaws to the sky in a gesture of invocation. The body split apart, and his spirit flew toward the stars.

Battle Plan

THE STAGE IS SET FOR CONFRONTATION:

1) P-K4*

*Chess moves. For greater understanding, may be read in conjunction with a chess board.

The Belgian-Swiss Alliance had entered the movement on the side of the Cantons. Indeed, they had taken it over. Those of broader vision had suspected such a move was possible. That Cantos, a single planet-colony of sixty million inhabitants, could hope to make more than minor gains in that newly

settled quadrant was somewhat doubtful. The known galaxy was expanding, and the Cantons themselves had been little more than blind, eager puppets, fed and encouraged from outside, closely watched to see how far they could bend (or simply ignore) the precepts of International Law. Though the damage they did was all too real.

P-K4

As the inhabited regions of Space spread out and became more remote, so the rules and niceties which had guided earlier colonization grew thin and wore away. It was merely a question of how much aggression the reigning superpowers would allow. The Four were still a force to be reckoned with.

2) N-KB3

In the current balance the United Commonwealth held the greatest sway, its advanced technology and more plentiful resources always keeping it one step ahead of Soviet Space. The Americans had been the first to colonize, and first in deep-space exploration, the advantages of which were still paying off.

N-QB3

The New Japanese Republic—Empire, in everything but name—was strong, but surprisingly benevolent. For the first time in its modern history this serious, hard-working nation had the room and resources to keep its naturally overachieving peoples busy and content. There was no longer any reason for the underlying brutality of earlier Japanese culture, and in truth many of the more aggressive social and political stances had begun to lose favor among the masses. How long this relative inner calm would last none could say, and few thought to cross them. In romanticized histories of the second World War the saying, "Let sleeping dragons lie," had been used to refer to the United States. It now applied with equal and ironic aptness to the Japanese.

3) B-N5

But the fastest growing, and to many the most frightening of the Space giants, was the metal-churning monster known simply as 'The German States'. Their technology and industrial determination once more bringing them to the fore of the political arena, this born-again superpower, in the eyes of many, was the card on which the growing instability would turn. And the Germans themselves, for reasons not entirely clear, seemed to savor this new role, and to do everything possible to enhance it. Most had believed (not without cause) that it was they who encouraged the Cantons, and therefore they who would soon be making their presence felt in the outlying sectors. But when the time for such a move had come—the ruthless destruction by mercenaries of half the Canton fleet at Centaurus (so read the propaganda line)—they had shown no such inclination, choosing instead to remain neutral. True, their moneys and weapons were sometimes involved; but by all legitimate intelligence not a single German squadron or military adviser had been seen within the whole of Andersen sector during the dispute. There could be no denying, however, that their geological fleets had moved in quietly after the destruction of the Laurian ore-planet, recovering valuable mineral wastes that the Cantons could not. The mysterious 'gravity station' had also disappeared.

P-Q3

Historians and sociologists who studied the German peoples had found themselves in sudden demand among the politicians and media of the smaller, more skittish nations; and their separate conclusions had been nothing if not ambiguous. The general consensus among the most respected, however, had been that history's "romantic Huns" were as mysterious and unreadable a people as God ever put on the Earth. No one could know what the Germans were capable of, for good or ill, until they did it. In World War II they had played the part of heinous villains (and done so with terrifying cruelty); in the reshaping of Europe after the collapse of the Communist Bloc, they had acted as generous unifiers, and staunch defenders of the lesser democracies. That this latter posture had finally and decisively cut the political binds and military restrictions imposed by the Allies after the fall of the Third Reich, was a fact that some (though not all) tended to overlook. The one consistency throughout had been an aggressive and self-righteous pursuit of nationalistic goals, based partly, but not solely, on a continuing discomfort with Western humanitarian ideals. "The Germans don't want freedom," the 20th Century author had declared. "They don't understand it. What they want is a strong leader, and a cause worth fighting for." But here again, words could never quite capture the stubborn fiber of the German spirit.

And, of course, those who did not fit the negative stereotype—there were many—were human beings just like any other, complete with their share of artists, dissidents, dreamers, idealists and alternative politicians. That those in power continued to be for the most part conservative, flag waving

nationalists (as indeed had become the case in the United Commonwealth) did not mean that the Germans had no heart. Many quiet, everyday working people secretly hoped for the emergence of a more moderate geopolitical stance; and few would deny that a truly good German was as unselfish and compassionate an individual as one could ever hope to find. Unfortunately, fierce nationalism remained, and the end result was always the same: subtle but continuous expansionism.

4) P-Q4

But by all appearances this was not to be a (directly) German war.

B-Q2

Yet the shadow of her past, and continued arms build-up, bred little trust among her neighbors.

5) N-B3

There was nothing particularly unique about the Belgian-Swiss Alliance—the most integral of the 'intermediate' powers involved—although to themselves it seemed a thing of great importance, occupying countless hours of thought and preparation. Formed out of mutual colonial interest scarcely a dozen years before, it had since made substantial (if in the eyes of the affluent, still modest) gains in and around the Berlioz Quadrant, and was currently exploring the regions that lay beyond—the limits of man's domain in that direction.

Left behind by the sweeping, mechanized changes of the past two centuries, these proud and businesslike peoples, not wholly dissimilar, now seemed resolutely determined to improve their lot, to gain respectability, and to leave their mark on future histories of the era. Whatever that might mean.

P x P

The Belgian Empire of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had long since past into dust like the ruins of Ozymandias, leaving it a diminutive, unimportant nation of temporal and unstable affluence, subject to the whims and power-plays of its larger, more industrialized neighbors. Like the Germans of the late 1930's, their aggression began with a legitimate (if distorted) complaint. Glorious, upright Mother Belgium had been raped again and again. That these feelings of injury and lost wealth has survived for so many generations, provided a rather grim example of the dangers inherent in an inbred culture which shuts out change, clinging instead to a proud and class-conscious society.

In fairness, the pattern of outside domination and disrespect had continued until the all too recent past. Their bitterness was not wholly unjustified. That their own oppression of the Africans during the days of the ivory trade had been a major source of their one-time wealth, was not (like the skeletons in so many national closets) something they tended to weigh into the balance.

6) N x P

The descendants of Switzerland had reasons and motives that were more subtle, if equally implacable. Europe's perennial pacifist and bastion of neutrality had been left behind for purely economic reasons. Its stable and rigidly controlled economy was no longer needed by the rich and powerful as a safe deposit box for (often unscrupulously) accumulated wealth. Concurrently, its self-contained, standoffish political posture had become obsolete, almost laughable in the face of the growing opportunities of Space. Like so many other nations without an early Space program, the inhabitable and exploitable regions close at hand had been divided up without them. The modern-day Swiss accepted the consequences of this flux without bitterness, outwardly at least, but were now inexorably committed to improving upon Fate.

Still, the Swiss view of the coming campaign was somewhat different than their ally's, less zealous, and their actual dislike of their enemies and desire for battle were much less vehement. In their view the Belgians were to provide the fire, they the cool edge of professionalism. Between them they formed a somewhat inexperienced, but sullenly determined foe, not to be taken lightly by the smaller, or similarly stationed powers of the region.

THUS THE ATTACKERS, AND THOSE WHO WERE TO REMAIN NEUTRAL, IN THE DRAMA ABOUT TO BE PLAYED. HERE NOW THE DEFENDERS.

P-KN3

The former Eastern Bloc nations of Europe had remained closely linked economically after the

collapse of the Soviet Union, and surprisingly, as often as not, politically allied with their former oppressor.

The great "Decade of Change" which shook the Kremlin in the late twentieth century had forever changed the face of Marxism, and for nearly half a century the Russians had abandoned all thought of communism. But decades of poverty, organized crime and ever dwindling national importance, had brought about a socialist resurgence—non-violently, through elections this time—and the creation of the new Soviet States.

With the dismantling of the Eastern bloc, conditional at first, then with fewer and fewer strings, many had predicted a defiant break with the grim, iron-fisted oppressor—a label which unfortunately contained a good deal of truth—and a wild swing back to the West.

But in large part it had not occurred. Possible explanations for this 'non-schism' ranged from political and cultural isolation during the Cold War, to the eventual success of numbing Marxist propaganda. Even East Germany, which reunified with the West, had since divided into two groups, its easternmost peoples falling back on the old alliances.

For if there was a common thread in the weave of East Europeans, it was a quiet dedication to hard work, and a genuine, even natural unselfishness—a combination of qualities not highly valued in the Americanized west. And though to brand one half of a continent more concerned with the common good than the other is preposterous, there could be no denying that the two sides of the now extinct Iron Curtain remained stiffly uncomfortable with one another's professed doctrines and system of values. Fifty years under vastly divergent philosophies and spheres of influence could not be broken down in the years immediately following. And with the subsequent exodus into Space, learning to live with and understand each other had become largely unnecessary. In the purest sense of the analogy, Eastern Europe had taken one road, and the West another. The distances that separated their lives were now literal.

The nations and alliances resulting from the East-West split remained estranged, if no longer sharply opposed. And in a war that like so many others seemed to be drawing boundaries along lines of ideology, the possibility loomed of their coming together again not with overtures of peace and understanding, but on the battlefield.

AND FINALLY, THE WATCHERS ON THE MARGINS.

7) B-K3

The two major superpowers, still militarily head and shoulders above the rest, hardly added to the stability of the situation.

The politics of the United Commonwealth, formerly the United States of America, remained the politics of a child. The 'new Americans' continued to claim God, family, and self-righteous free enterprise (to their Republicans a god in itself) as the sole and irreproachable motive for all their actions. Thus everything they did in the realm of foreign affairs, usually only half understanding it themselves, must (in their eyes) inevitably be right, and for the good of all who followed the true path of capitalism and democracy—in that order.

Soviet Space, meanwhile, had become equally intransigent. The Soviets, in their turn, hailed as their banner the liberation, equality, and self-rule of the working classes. These, so the Party line claimed, had built civilization, but been denied the fruits of their achievement by the corrupt upper classes, who, like Narcissus, were blind and self-serving, inherently evil and doomed to fail, but not before sucking the blood of true humanity and preventing the dreams of Marx and Trotsky..... And so on, disturbingly similar to the old communist propaganda. And of course they made no mention of Stalin, the purges, and the brutal repression of the KGB.

B-N2

That these two irreconcilably opposed powers, directly or indirectly, held the lives of countless millions in their hands (whether through action or non-action) was disheartening, but not at all atypical. Contending governments and heads of state had managed to keep their peoples at odds, away from any sense of shared humanity and mutual need, from the beginning of history. In this sense at least, those who knew something of the nature of war could prepare themselves, if only for the worst.

"For as you lean," spoke the prophet, "so shall you fall."

8) Q-Q2

The United Commonwealth, under its present leadership, could best be compared to a wealthy adolescent, raised with the notion that the world owed it something, angry and sulking because the expected happiness had not yet been delivered.

It seemed that every time the Commonwealth's economy threatened to bring its standard of living closer to the rest of humanity, angry, illusioned people came forward, organized, made aggressive, patriotic noises, and persuaded the middle class (the real power in the electorate) to abandon the floundering liberals and elect a conservative, Republican President. Then, before hard-line conservative dogmas could be re-exposed for what they were—a pleasant excuse for big business to run wild—the ax was put to social programs, health and environmental concerns were put on the shelf, and 'survival of the fittest' became the unspoken ethic. Large stores of weapons were amassed (with the money saved by being less sensitive), some kept, others shipped throughout the galaxy to areas of instability where "freedom and self-determination" were threatened, meaning that the governments there already were, or showed signs of becoming, socialist. And all such militaristic actions taken with the expressed purpose of preventing bloodshed, and similar aggression on the part of Soviet Space (which required little prodding to respond in kind), resulted in quite the opposite result: endless carnage and civil war.

That this same pattern of mutual confrontation had brought the Earth to the brink of nuclear holocaust many times in the past, was apparently all but forgotten by a bulk society with a historical attention span of roughly five years. And every time, this cycle was repeated as if it were something new, unique, and wholly necessary, by a people who professed to be, and probably should have been, the most enlightened in the galaxy.

N-B3

Not that anyone really expected the Americans to fight. They were for the most part (deep down) morally opposed to violence, had not the stomach for it. And blind, self-serving sheep that they were, the middle class could only be deceived for so long.

Because this same, slow-thinking blob of humanity which elected and gave the presidents their power, also set the limits for its use. In a nation literally ruled by public opinion, they were like an anchor unsoundly planted. The ship was free to drift a certain distance to either side, but could never move too far in any one direction before the anchor finally caught on some solid objection, and the movement was brought to a halt. True, the angry seemed angrier this time, the aggressive less easily pacified, and the Christian right-wing (a contradiction of terms, for anyone the least familiar with Jesus' teachings) more implacable. But it had been nearly a hundred years since the Commonwealth had been directly involved in any kind of offensive (military) war. Most observers had come to think of this naive superpower as a big dog that liked to bark and throw its weight around, but wasn't really looking for a fight. The damage it did was more subtle and indirect—like stepping on flowers not yet open, and crushing creatures too small for it to see.

But as the saying went, "When you sleep in the same bed with a giant, you had better sleep lightly." The United Commonwealth was the most powerful nation-state in the history of mankind, the more so because it did not know its own strength.

9) P-B3

These are, of course, the bare facts, and like all generalization, subject to flaw. There were West Germans who loathed and rebelled against every hint of the Nazi mentality, Japanese who had never been violent, Belgians and Swiss who opposed the coming war, members of the Soviet leadership who cared, and Americans who saw the world clearly.

Unfortunately, as all too many times in the past, there did not seem enough who broke the mold, nor did they play an active enough role, to keep the wheels of ignorance and violence from churning. Because the study of war is the study of people in power and the masses they are able to persuade—of strife, twisted dreams and ambitions, and of human nature set in its darkest surroundings. For this reason the small and destructive characteristics of a people (of the aggressors, at the least) tend to surface, often riding on the back of what is truest and noblest in them, and individuals silently opposed to the politics of carnage don't seem to count for much.

The sad and simple truth remains that, to be prevented, nationalistic aggression must be resisted from within, either by large numbers of the population, or by those in positions of power who are willing and able to stop it. And so far throughout history, with very few exceptions and during wars uncounted, it had not been.

The battle room aboard the armed space station Mongoose was quietly tense and alert. The Czech and East German officers attended their various stations with well-drilled efficiency and outer calm, intermittently reading off coordinates and running hands across pulsating fingerboards, making adjustments and speaking by headset to the various squadron commanders of the close-hovering fleet. The defense grids—interlocking walls of energy which prevented the free and rapid movement of attacking ships—were in place and activated.

In the center of the room, behind a spherical plexiglass screen, a three-dimensional monitor projected tiny wavering shapes among the static lines of the grid, marking the approach of the Belgian-Swiss forces. A young lieutenant of average height and wiry build, with intelligent eyes and features, studied the projection and corresponding console before him with fascination and growing apprehension. He felt foolish and out of place: his first battle.

A taller man in his late fifties, stern and brown-eyed, a classic Czech soldier to the last detail, came up behind and put a hand on his shoulder.

"Courage, Brunner," he said in low harsh tones. "I need your judgment today." It was the closest thing to a compliment he had ever paid his young protegee.

"I'm sorry, Colonel. It's beginning to look very real."

Dubcek's dark features bored in on him in the familiar expression—down-thrust head and knitted brows, eyes looking up through them like a boxer's. It was a hard and intimidating face, though with a gleam of sharp and illusionless intelligence. Only Brunner seemed to suspect a deeper humanity beneath the facade, and he was far from certain.

"It is real, but not something to be feared. Real men will die this day, as all men must. It is the only way to stop them." At that moment the voice of the executive officer broke in on them.

10) B x N

"Colonel, enemy light cruiser 'red' engaging destroyer group B."

Dubcek nodded in acknowledgment. Brunner quickly adjusted and replaced his ear-piece, and the sounds of actual combat came to him for the first time. He heard: ships signaling one another, attacking, being attacked, some voices calm, others tense and on the verge of panic—explosions and bursts of pain within bridge compartments, engineers crying damage reports, men dying and signals going blank. The older man heard them too, studied the projection without haste, made several marks on the glass. Again the voice of the exec:

"Destroyer group B has succumbed—no surviving ships."

Brunner watched his commander's face, half expecting to see no change. But a change did come, if only for an instant: a cloud of pain and uncertainty flashed across it. The dark countenance grew darker still, and he muttered beneath his breath. "If he wants to trade, we'll trade."

P x B

"Advance robot battery 7," he said out loud. "Knock him out of the sky." The order was passed on, and several seconds later the blip that had been the enemy cruiser also vanished from the globe.

A yeoman entered, bringing news of the Coalition reinforcements. Dubcek acknowledged the message, gave one of his own, then turned to his young lieutenant as if in answer to his unspoken question. His eyes, like those of a bird of prey, had returned to their normal luster.

"We don't have to beat him, just hold him off till help arrives. That is why we are aligned defensively, ready to counter-punch, and take advantage of his mistakes." Both turned back to the projection, and to their own thoughts.

11) 0-0-0

Masaryk began to speak again, but Dubcek waved him off. "Here," he pointed. "He's moved his battle station behind the carrier, and brought the corresponding battleship to corridor five, trying to strengthen his position for a frontal assault."

Brunner hesitated, not wishing to overstep his bounds. "Does that surprise you?"

Dubcek almost smiled.

"No. He imagines he's being clever, showing me something I haven't seen. But I've played this game a few times before." To his exec: "Battleship A to corridor four." Masaryk nodded, and passed the order on. The main battle computer silently acknowledged the move.

R-K1

Again Dubcek turned to his lieutenant. "In a battle of this scale, and fought under the controlled conditions imposed by the grids, preparation is paramount. But once the real fighting begins, the book goes out the window. You may see me do things you question. If so, do not assume that you are wrong. Decisions made in the heat of it are based mostly on instinct, and instincts can go astray. Don't override me, but if you see anything unusual in either my strategy or his, I want your comments as soon as there is time."

Brunner was having trouble adjusting to this new intimacy, however strained. "Colonel. Won't the computer do that?"

"To hell with the computer. This is no damned field exercise. I'll ask for your comments, and those of my staff because I want input, not analysis. You'll be dead wrong most of the time." The expression changed slightly. "I need your inexperience, to remind me of things I might forget."

Dubcek moved back toward the place where his exec stood leaning over the main ship's console, one hand on the back of the First Technician's chair, the other pointing to the vision screen before her. Both looked up as their commander approached.

"Major," he said to the woman. "Would you excuse us for a moment?" Wessenberg rose, gave a quick bow and left them.

"Well," he said to Masaryk, who had been his second many times in the past. "What do you think of the way he has positioned himself?"

"He's done very well. If he does as well the rest of the way, we could catch it hot."

"Yes, but he won't. Everything up to this point has been done by the book—his computer could have done the same. Once the main engagement starts, he'll find himself hard pressed to sweep us away. We have reinforcements coming in six hours. He does not."

"Do you take that for granted?"

"What do you think?" The commander glared and Masaryk, who knew him well, adopted a more deferential tone.

"No, sir."

"I'm sorry, Rolf. As always, you see what troubles me. It makes no sense. Why do they divide their forces, and simultaneously attack the Dutch colonies at Larkspur? Half their fleet tied up hundreds of parsecs away, the rest barely more than what we have here. They may walk through the Dutch outposts—they have the hardware—but they will have no such easy time here."

"Could they have made an alliance we don't know about? the greater part of their force yet to arrive?"

"Yes, but with who? And how will they come in time? Our Coalition reconnaissance nets are thick and constantly monitored, yet we've heard of no unaccounted for ships anywhere in the vicinity. He has walked into this as if he knows no fear, and that troubles me. The Belgians might attempt such a thing, but never the Swiss."

"But doesn't the fact that they show no fear prove they are capable of anything? Ambition and inexperience often lead to such blunders."

"Yes. Let us hope that is it." He unconsciously turned toward Brunner with a wistful glance. "Still. . .this could be our last battle."

Masaryk looked up at him, stunned.

"Peace, my friend. I only meant that the times are changing, and we must prepare the young."

As Dubcek walked away, and gestured the technician back to her post, it suddenly occurred to Masaryk that in all their years together, he had never before called him friend.

Almost the instant Major Wessenberg sat down, she saw a movement so incredulous that at first she thought something must be wrong with the equipment. Not waiting for the exec:

"Colonel. He's brought his second cruiser straight at us."

Dubcek hurried back, stood on the other side of her, checking the screen. He turned back to Brunner, who said "Correct," in a voice suddenly full of optimism.

"By God, he is a fool. Light cruiser A, engage." Masaryk relayed the message, and the Czech/East German light weapons ship advanced.

B x B

"Now he's put his foot in it."

13) Q x B

"Enemy carrier to corridor one—light cruiser knocked out. Carrier fighters and torpedo ships releasing."

"Of course; he's got no choice. All forward guns at the ready. Battleship A to column four."

R-K4

As the Exec relayed these orders and the gunnery shields were rolled back, along with the steel plates that covered the huge battle room 'window,' those in the large, arcing chamber were given their first direct view of the battle among the stars. The massive Bel-Swiss carrier, of German States construction, loomed long and gray at its distance, fighters and missile ships hovering below it, but made no attempt to come closer, within the range of their guns. It had been brought forward without adequate support. Far to the right their own battle cruiser could be seen moving into place, along with the stationary first destroyer group and robot-repulsive ships, all perfectly positioned. And they knew also that their own carrier, every measure the equal of the enemy's, was not far off, ready to be brought into play at a moment's notice.

The twenty-odd officers and staff within the battle room, to that point largely somber and dutiful, trying to suppress anxiety and inner doubt, seemed to come suddenly to life. They attended their posts with greater enthusiasm, and unconsciously began to speak louder and faster, through the headsets and to each other. For the real fighting had begun; it was no longer left to dark imagining. They were doing it, with the clear and early advantage going to their own forces. Their commanding officer, a staid veteran who had been here before, grew in their eyes to something almost more than human, while the enemy's commanders had begun to show signs of impatience and inexperience. The oncoming fleet, which before had loomed so ominous, became mere ships once more, made of the same metal, and no greater than their own.

Dubcek seemed to sense this, and though he did not want to lower their confidence in him—this confidence, and the increased efficiency it brought, were a major reason for all that he did—he knew it was far too soon to be jubilant. Before giving his next order, he spoke to them directly.

"Communications. Give me an open channel to all vessels." In a louder voice. "I want the rest of you to listen to this also." The channel was opened, and his voice subtly amplified within the chamber.

"This is your commander speaking. Do not be premature in your enthusiasm. Our enemy has overextended himself and diminished his force without apparent gain, but that is all. While his actions may seem foolish, we do not know all the reasons they were taken. I have learned in my many years that things are not always as they first appear. If you believe everything you see, or must see confirmation of all you believe is happening, you will be misled. I have faith in your courage and your judgment. We still have a long way to go." Without further speech he moved away and stood by Brunner's tactical projection globe. The room became quieter, the faces more serious.

"Your observations, lieutenant."

"May I ask a question first?"

"Ask it."

"Do you suspect he has reinforcements coming? If not, I see no logical pattern to his later development. Why did he not move straight ahead with his robot batteries, try to weaken our forward wall?"

"War is seldom logical, Brunner, but it is a valid point. As for reinforcements, I wish I knew. I don't see how; but I must remember it is possible."

14) P-KN4

Masaryk's voice. "Enemy robot ship coming straight ahead, corridor two." Brunner suppressed an urge to look out through the wide portal.

Dubcek pointed to the globe, again made several marks on the glass. "You see. Now he's done it, but a step too late. Carry on." He strode back to the command station, nodding sternly to his second. "Bring our carrier to corridor three. Engage his if he's willing."

Q-KB1

Several minutes later the huge outline of the German/Czech carrier ship became visible, though still at a distance, as it took up its position beside and slightly ahead of them. The engagement, if it took place, would happen right before their eyes.

The fighters and larger torpedo ships of both vessels continued to stream out of launching chutes spread across their undersides, forming up into squadrons, attack groups and flotillas. The starboard guns of the Mongoose were activated, and Masaryk could be heard giving instructions to the captain of the second battle cruiser.

Brunner looked up to see Dubcek standing before the foot-thick plate glass of the battle room portal, headset on and hands clasped tightly behind his back, the one held by the other opening and closing sporadically. The huge 'window' began at his feet, rising and arching high above his head. For a moment Brunner's eyes lost their focus, and the aging commander seemed to stand among the stars: between two giants and their swarming offspring, trying to orchestrate, or at least influence, a battle between angry gods and their armies, wholly unaware, and indifferent to his presence.

The Belgian-Swiss carrier, which had the edge in tempo and preparation, came forward. Squadrons bolted forward, and both sides began to fire.

At first the more experienced German/Czech pilots seemed to be holding the enemy off, keeping his forces from linking up into an effective attacking thrust. But the sheer numbers of the ships pouring out at them (which they had no way of anticipating), and the equally surprising effectiveness of the carrier's supporting fire, began slowly but inexorably to turn the tide against them. Lasers and explosive torpedoes flashed. Ships burst silently into flame, or broke apart, or were disintegrated. The tortured voices that came to Brunner through his ear-piece were soon more than he could bear. Almost he wished that the gray goliath would turn its guns on them, that they might respond. But it was a wasted hope. Though tantalizingly close, the aggressor and all his forces were just out of range, and they knew it.

Brunner next became aware, to his dismay, that none of this seemed to alarm either Dubcek or his executive officer. The commander watched, but gave no order; and Masaryk continued to speak only to the captain of the corresponding battleship.

He suddenly realized what this meant, but a part of his mind refused to accept it. They were sacrificing their own carrier to set up and then destroy the other. Strategically it was sound—weakening the enemy's thrust, buying time for the reinforcements.

But what of the lives and humanity, the hundreds of men and women whom Dubcek had just spoken to about courage and judgment? What about their FAMILIES? Didn't he care? Didn't anyone care? And where was the God that he had reluctantly begun to believe in?

At that moment all he knew was hatred and grief. For perhaps a minute he ignored his instruments, glaring instead at Dubcek's back, silently daring him to turn around.

Suddenly a ship burst apart directly in front of them, not more than ten kilometers off. Out of the wreckage a tiny white projectile moved toward them, and others of similar shape were sent flying in all directions. To his horror Brunner recognized them as men. Too light an object to trigger their shields, the writhing body came straight at them, seeming to gather speed, and with a final orgasm of misery, crashed against the glass.

With a dull thud it bounced off and back into the emptiness of Space, leaving a wide splotch of blood on the glass at their commander's feet. If Brunner hated him then, the emotion changed when the man

finally did turn around. There were no tears, but something in his face spoke of a much deeper wound. His voice boomed across the room.

"If there is anyone here who does not yet know what war is, look with your eyes!" His arm jerked toward the stain. "It is blood! Blood and men dying."

As if cued by these words a blinding flash, followed in rapid succession by several others, lit the room. The enemy carrier, finally scoring a direct and unshielded hit, had sent its blackened counterpart to infinity.

Q x Q

As if regretting his outburst Dubcek stood very still, then descended the high step and strode quickly to the command station. He took off the headset, and gave his orders.

"Battle cruiser B: I want a full spread of anti-matter torpedoes, then move in and finish him off. All remaining fighters back to Scypion Base; those that can't make it, to Mongoose emergency docks. Destroyer group A, prepare to clean up enemy stragglers."

"And the torpedo ships, Colonel?"

"Keep firing at the carrier until there is no carrier to fire AT."

"But without escort—"

Dubcek's eyes flashed. Masaryk relayed the orders.

R x Q

The battle between the two vessels must have ensued—after several minutes the enemy carrier disappeared from the projection globe—but Brunner saw and heard none of it. He remained silent with his head down, palms leaning heavily on the console. Crying. The next thing he was aware of was Dubcek's steadied voice, once more amplified, once more, he assumed, on an open channel to all ships. He looked out of the portal, but there was no afterglow. Nothing. Dubcek's voice.

"All ships' personnel not engaged or on standby readiness, this is your commanding officer. The carrier J.S. Bach and all its crew have been lost." Pause. "There is nothing that can bring them back, or justify their death. They will be sorely missed.

"But know this: that they died not in any act of aggression, but defending their homes, and the ones they loved. It may be small consolation, but we have hurt our enemy badly. They no longer have the position or the firepower to seriously threaten us. I won't lie to you. More men and women will die before our reinforcements arrive. And there is no more fairness to who dies in battle than there is to who is struck down by fatal illness, and who is left to die of age..... We can only continue, and hope that our acts will one day be remembered, and our sorrows vindicated.

"My strategy from this point forward will be to engage the enemy as little as possible, which is only now a viable option. Take heart in the fact that this is now a fight he cannot win, unless he holds some card that is hidden from me. The colonies, the people you guard, are safe. And if we keep our courage and our wits about us, we will see him beaten before the day is passed."

Dubcek signaled the communications officer to shut him off, said to Masaryk, "I'll be in my quarters. I don't think he'll try to attack again soon, but call me if he does." And left the battle room.

Brunner gathered himself, sat down before the console and tried to think.

*

After perhaps fifteen minutes he got up and asked Commander Masaryk to be relieved, saying that he felt ill. The executive officer, who knew a thing or two, looked hard at him and said, "If you've got any sense, you'll be careful what you say to him."

Brunner nodded, and walked slowly out into the main corridor, then through several passages before reaching the short hallway that ran before his Commanding Officer's chamber.

Remaining a short distance from the doorway, he hesitated. He gathered his courage, turned the corner and entered the room.

"Sir, may I speak—" He stopped, seeing the older man sitting quietly at a wooden table, a bottle and

glass in front of him. "I'm sorry, sir..... Excuse me." So far as he (or anyone) knew, the Colonel never drank.

"No, no. Come in. You have not discovered a terrible secret. I have an artificial liver; didn't you know? I can turn it higher whenever I wish—the first sign of combat—and be sober in two minutes time. A waste of good liquor, really. Please. Sit down." Brunner approached hesitantly, sat in the wooden chair opposite.

"Besides," the man continued. "Didn't you know that all good field commanders were drunks? Take the famous Ulysses S. Grant. They say that on the day of a battle he was rarely sober by mid afternoon. Probably why he was so successful: he could send his men off to the slaughter without a second thought. Some even go so far as to say he tried to end all his battles in a single day, so that the next morning, when he was apt to be sick, he could sleep and give no orders. But you look surprised. Is all of this new to you?"

"I was never much on the American Civil War," said the young man evasively, not liking (or understanding) the tone of sarcasm in the older man's voice.

"Oh, really? That's too bad. It is filled with such irony. For example, the saying, 'War is hell.' Very true, but do you know who said it? The equally famous General Sherman. And he should know, since he did everything in his power to make it so—burned and pillaged like a regular barbarian. A nation of 'heroes'." He cleared his throat, continued.

"And these same, gentlemen soldiers—Grant (then President, no less), Sherman, Sheridan and Custer, next turned their expertise upon the pesky Native Americans, who had the gall to defend their land, their women and their children. Wasn't it Sheridan who said, 'The only good Indian is a dead Indian?' Massacred and starved an entire population into submission, innocents slaughtered without a second thought."

"Colonel....."

"But here, I'm boring you. What did you want to discuss—literature, fine art?" He took another drink from the glass, hurting his throat with too large a gulp, showing that he really was not a drinker, or not a practiced one.

"Two things," said Brunner stiffly. "First as an officer of the bridge. Then as a man."

"It sounds serious. Well. What is your report as my analysis officer?"

"Yes. I only wanted to reinforce what I said earlier: that the enemy's strategy, ever since the main engagement began, makes no sense. He had attained a strong attacking position; his weaponry is at least the equal of our own; and yet he attacks without design, and trades forces with no apparent gain. I know, from my studies (this last he added almost as an apology), that battles are often chaotic. Commanders become confused, lines of communication break down, soldiers and officers panic. But none of this, so far as I can see, has been the case here. For example, why accept the sacrifice of our carrier?" He reddened, forced himself to continue. "Just because we brought it forward, hardly forced him to attack. I wish I could believe that the enemy is really that foolish. But I can't. They have spent years of preparation, and nearly all their resources. . .for what? Only to let some impatient general throw it all away? The only explanation I can find is that they are trying to lull our sense of caution and weaken our defense, for another fleet that is yet to come. I know that by all current technology this is impossible. Yet I feel that it could happen."

At the words 'current technology' Dubcek stirred uncomfortably. The young man had sensed his darkest fear. He remained quiet for a moment, mulling this over.

"You have done what I asked," he said finally, "and done it well. Now. What do you have to say to me as a man?"

Now it was Brunner who could find no comfort in his chair.

"I wish to resign my commission," he said with an effort. "I do not think I was made to give orders."

"Do you hate me so much?"

Brunner winced. "No, Colonel. It is true, I hated you at first—"
He looked up, horrified at his own words.

"Come on. Out with it. It won't matter much if you resign." Dubcek's manner was unruffled, but the lieutenant thought he caught a gleam of pain, or something, in his dark eyes.

"There was a moment when I hated you—when I first realized you had sacrificed our carrier for theirs. But I don't feel that way now."

"Then why?"

"I just can't do it. I tried to put myself in your place. . .and I can't. This way of life, of thinking..... I can't."

"You think I send men to their death without feeling." It was not a question.

"No." But Brunner would say no more.

"No, but that was cruel of me. Young men are so much more, SENSITIVE. You think you could never send men to theirs, that you are not the right kind of man—cold, calculating. You think too much, feel too much, is that it?"

"No..... I don't know."

"Save war for lonely old men?"

Brunner looked hard at him, defiant. This time he was sure. There was something quietly desperate in his commander's eyes. It was fear. Not the fear of age or death, but that of a far greater hurt: the pain of life's final reckoning, of uselessness and barren seed. "Can I tell you something, 'as a man?'" Dubcek turned his eyes away, poured the bottle into the glass.

"Yes." Brunner too looked away.

"I wasn't always old, or alone, with no other calling." He breathed heavily through his nose. "But my wife died some years back, and we had no children. Some men can go on from such a thing: find another wife, start again. But I am not one of them. I had never loved before..... But that is beside the point." He drank the glass again.

"I found myself alone, in the military, with no real skill other than being a soldier, a good officer. My father had been a working man..... So I put all my energies into advancing my career, trying to fill the emptiness. Telling myself." He gave a short, disagreeable laugh. "Telling myself that if I could only rise high enough through the ranks, that I could SAVE lives. I was going to make certain the old war-mongers who ran the armies of the world did not subject innocent people to the kind of loss I'd known. I was going to see to it that no task force was ever advanced needlessly, no ship ever mindlessly sacrificed to gain a tactical advantage." He stopped, as some other emotion rose up in him.

"You say you hated me when you learned I had sacrificed a thousand men and women. What would you feel if we had lost, and left the colonies unprotected?" He rose in a rage, as Brunner stood and backed away. "How would you judge me while some Belgian officer was raping your pretty little wife?"

Brunner's eyes flashed murder at him, but he said nothing.

"Yes. And how would you have liked me when the political executions and imprisonments began? Forget your romantic notions! When it comes to occupying armies, there are no morals left to judge." He steadied himself, took a breath.

"Behind us lie the three planets of our people, our home. One hundred million inhabitants. Nothing else stands between them and us. And maybe our enemies don't even want them. Perhaps they would be just as happy to destroy the entire system, or even use radiation bombs: empty the inhabited planets of life without destroying the cities, the beautiful landscape. Do you think this is a fucking game?"

"You misunderstand. I am not judging you."

"And you misunderstand," said Dubcek bluntly. "Why do you think I take an interest in you? Why do you think you are here?"

"I don't KNOW!"

Dubcek waited. "Shall I tell you?"

Brunner turned his head painfully, faced the older man.

"You are here because this battle will not end the war. This war will not be the last our people know. Because if someone has to command and send young people into battle, I want it to be someone who still has some feeling left.... Because I respect you..... I have no son."

Brunner squeezed his temples with his hands, unable to stop the tears.
"But I CAN'T."

"You can, and you must..... I am not releasing you." Dubcek stalked out of the room.

The young lieutenant did not return to his post for several hours. The battle went on without him.

16) P-KR4 P-KR4

17) P x P N x P

18) KN-K2 R-R4

19) QR-N1 B-K3

20) P-R3 P-Q4

Brunner reentered the battle room with his head down, walking stiffly to the place where a subordinate stood manning his station. The man looked up, handed him the lightboard—showing how they had arrived at the present disposition—and with a quick bow started to leave.

"Wait," said Brunner quietly. The man turned. After an awkward silence. "How are we doing?" The man looked at him with mild curiosity.

"As you see."

"That's not what I mean." Their eyes met. "Have we truly engaged the enemy only when necessary."

"Yes, Lieutenant. But he does have a battle to fight. If I may say it, the old man has done very well. But here." He pointed again. "We'll know soon enough." Brunner turned his gaze back to the globe, and the man was gone.

Lieutenant Olaf Brunner would remember the rest of the battle as bits and pieces of a vague, impossible dream. Unable to bring himself to look out the portal at his fighting comrades, he watched the moving shapes as if entranced, as they swam amid the invisible sea of the globe. Masaryk's voice.

"Enemy first destroyer group to corridor two, column six."

Dubcek. "Engage."

21) N-N3 N x N

"Battle cruiser coming forward to intercept."

"Robot battery 5, attack enemy battery opposite."

22) R x N P x P

"He took the bait. Second destroyer group moving forward."

"Mongoose forward to column two. Starboard guns to standby alert."

23) N x P K-N2

"Still coming right at us, corridor one."

"Let him come. Light cruiser, heading C-four."

24) P-R5 B-B4

An unfamiliar voice. "Colonel. My instruments show a strange energy field materializing before the enemy battle station, bearing 00 to 04, F-six. Apparently a highly charged, extremely dense mass of negative ions."

Hearing this, Brunner's senses came suddenly, vividly to life. Some half remembered, theoretical principal of matter..... As the fear materialized in thought, he was filled with a dread such as he had seldom experienced.

Looking up, he saw that Dubcek too was unnerved. He turned toward the speaker as calmly as he could and said, "Link up with the main ship's computer. Keep me posted."

25) P-R6(ch)

Masaryk. "Robot battery still coming forward, moving into range."

"What?" replied Dubcek absently.

"The enemy battery, moving into range and preparing to fire. We've got to move back."

"Yes. Of course. Mongoose to corridor one, column one."

K-R1

For some reason these coordinates seemed to Brunner the final manifestation of an impending doom. Riveting the globe with his eyes, he understood the reason why. The enemy was perfectly positioned.....

"Colonel," he said. Dubcek glared at him, angry and agitated.

"Colonel, please." The commander left his post and came toward him.

"What is it?"

"Sir, if that's some kind of star gate—"

"It CAN'T be..... That is only a theory."

"But the American scientists are said to be coming close."

Dubcek did not wait to hear him out. He started toward the chief scientist.

At that moment a blinding silver halo split the sky, and through its inner darkness passed a ship far greater than any yet seen in battle. To his final, unyielding horror, Brunner saw the outline of an enormous carrier take shape inside the globe, in perfect position for the kill.

26) New queen appears, QB3. Check.

BECAUSE WAR IS NO GAME, AND NO ONE PLAYS BY ANY RULES.

At their posts, Masaryk and Wessenberg were struck dumb. Dubcek stood still in the middle of the room. The chief scientist had taken out his ear-piece and thrown it to the floor. All seemed incapable of movement. Finally Masaryk stirred, shook his head and cleared his throat.

"Colonel. A second enemy carrier has appeared. Bearing 01 to 02, F-six. He's staring right down our throat."

Dubcek, shaken to the bone, somehow managed a short laugh. He turned, walked toward his executive officer.

"Configuration?"

"Commonwealth Super-carrier. It's the Americans, Ivan."

Dubcek breathed out his final despair.

At that moment the communications officer turned toward him. "Sir. It's the Commonwealth commander with. . .terms for our surrender."

"Bastard," he muttered beneath his breath. Then. "Put him on the screen. And get me General Itjes with the Coalition reinforcements." He quickly checked the time. They were due to arrive in another hour.

The large main screen of the battle room came to life. And there in the midst of it, his face animated with tension, confidence and self-satisfaction, stood, in military uniform, General Charles William Hayes, Secretary of State for the United Commonwealth.

His fear submerged beneath a desperate, fey indifference, Dubcek turned to Masaryk with a rueful expression. "This just keeps getting better..... Yes, Mr. Hayes. What are your terms?"

"I want the immediate surrender of all your forces, and a complete shut-down of planetary defense systems. In return I'll see that your people, both military and civilian, are treated fairly and with respect."

"Oh, I have no doubt of that. Unfortunately, I do not have the authority to negotiate such a complete capitulation. I have contacted both our President and the Assembly (a necessary lie), and also the Coalition military representative. You will have an answer soon enough. One question, though, if I may ask it."

"What is it?"

"How do you plan to run the occupational government?" He looked at Brunner as he said these words, turned back to Hayes. "Who will be in charge?"

"The Belgians and Swiss."

"While you carry the crusade elsewhere?"

Hayes' voice was blunt, brutal. "You have five minutes."

"That should be sufficient. Thank you, Mr. Secretary." His face left the screen, and Dubcek immediately went to work.

"Brunner, Wessenberg, Kinsky and Schmidt, get to the evacuation ships. Gunnery and engineering high-officers to remain at their posts; everyone else off. First battleship and remaining cruiser to provide cover for their retreat, then get out themselves—link up with the reinforcements as soon as possible and put themselves under the command of General Itjes. Go on. Move!"

Masaryk relayed the orders with grim satisfaction. His commander was going to fight.

As the others filed past him with blank, scared faces, Brunner remained at his station. Dubcek looked over at him.

"Get out, fool!" But still he did not move. The aging commander strode quickly over to him.

"There is no time for this. If you want to be brave then hold on to your commission and fight them again."

"I don't want to leave—"

The voice of the communications officer broke him off. "General Itjes, sir. I've also contacted the colonies: all data being relayed."

"Good," said Dubcek. "Put him on and get below." He held out his hand to Brunner.

"Goodbye, Olaf. Go. Now!" His lieutenant turned and left the room.

Four officers remained in the chamber. "Anyone else who wishes to go, it must be now." None stirred. "Very well." He nodded, turned to Masaryk, then remembered General Itjes.

The chief scientist had moved to the communications board. He put him on the screen. The lined and wizened face of the German General stood before him.

"Yes, Ivan. I understand you're in trouble. Can you hold him off long enough for us to get around his flank?"

"Don't bother trying, General. He's got the ships and firepower to cut us both to pieces. The best thing you can do is guard the civilian retreat from Premislyde and Goethe. I'm afraid Athena must surrender."

Itjes sighed painfully. "All right, then. Agree to capitulate your forces along with it, and stall on the rest for as long as you can."

"I'm afraid I can't do that, sir."

"Why not?"

"He is not about to be detained, and I am not about to let him win this battle without the shedding of American blood."

"Ivan, this is no time—"

"This is bigger than both of us, General. They must know at the very beginning that they will be resisted every step of the way."

"Colonel, it is pointless to die like this."

"Sorry, Helmut. I have much work to do. Save as many as you can." He gestured to the chief scientist, and the screen went blank. He turned to Masaryk. "Is Hayes unloading yet?"

"Just starting now, sir." They both watched as perhaps a dozen of the monolithic carrier's twenty chutes were lowered and the first wave of fighters, mingled with other, larger ships, came streaming off. "If that's the Dreadnought....."

"It is."

"They say she holds over three hundred vessels—cruisers and battleships among them. Twice the size of our entire fleet."

"Are the evac ships off yet?"

"Checking. The last one is just clearing now."

"Give them thirty seconds to be off, then put the third robot battery in his face. I'm tired of looking at it."

Masaryk waited, gave the order.

P-B3

"Colonel, it's the Commonwealth commander." Dubcek shook his head.

27) N x P

"Bel-Swiss destroyer group engaging."

"Big surprise. Knock them out with battle cruiser two."

R x N

"Cat's out of the bag now," said Dubcek. "Hayes is making short work of our battleship. Poor bastards."

28) Q x R(ch)

"He'll be coming after us, next."

"I hope we didn't make him mad."

Masaryk smiled. Even as they spoke, the great ship, anticipated by a swarm of torpedo ships and fighter-bombers, began to come forward, gathering speed as if to ram them from the sky.

"Oh, Lord. Here they come."

"Bring us forward! All guns open fire!"

K-N2.....

.....

INTERLUDE

VOICES

"Morgan? Do you love me?"

He rolled away from her and onto his back, stared at the ceiling. The blanket was keeping him warm.

"I don't know." He was not sure, only that he had never felt this way before. Maybe once, long ago, as a child.

"Because I love you."

"How can you?" Now that the rush of sexual elation was over he felt wounded, and as hollow and empty as a man can feel.

"I don't know. But I do."

He took her hand and held it, against his leg. The motion was mechanical, without feeling.

"You sure it isn't something Freudian?"

"Don't be stupid, Morgan."

"I'm sorry. He looked straight at the nothing. But something stirred inside him. "I care for you very much."

She studied him in the half-light.

"Are those your own words?"

"No. I think Lawrence said them." Nothing. "You see what a waste I am."

"No. I don't think so. But I wish you would kiss me."

He rolled back toward her, felt her long and beautiful beside him. He began to kiss her, felt something warm at the corner of his eye.

"Why do you have to go? Haven't you done enough already?"

"Apparently not."

"Oh, of course. The Belgians and Swiss, and now the Commonwealth. That was your fault, too."

"You don't understand, Elonna."

"What am I supposed to understand? That your father was a racist bastard who didn't love you, or any one or anything else? That you don't know how to deal with your guilt? God damn it! Are you going to sacrifice everything we've found, just to satisfy your pride?"

He tried to glare at her, turned away and faced the window. "I'm so glad I could trust you."

"Don't you say that to me! Don't you dare pretend that you don't care about me. You didn't bring Johnny and I here just to satisfy your conscience and have an exotic fuck." He was silent.

"What do you want from me?"

"I want you to stop KILLING yourself." The emotions of a lifetime seemed to be trying to push their way through her throat, the back of her eyes. "DAMN you. Aren't there enough things out there to destroy us..... I want you to find another WAY to fight them." As he weakened she started to go to him, checked herself.

"Listen to me, Morgan. One more raid isn't going to make a difference in this war, one way or another. It's too big for that now. But if you're killed it will mean everything to you..... And to me."

They stood in silence.

*

Again they stood within their chambers beneath the transparent dome on the planet Alba: early night. Morgan was preparing to leave.

"Please don't go." The tears flowed freely down her face. "I could never forgive you." The boy, standing by her side, looked at him with an angry, puzzled expression.

He started for the doorway. Reaching it he stopped, and stood perfectly still. As the battle raged inside him.

"Morgan, please." He turned to face her. She was love and loss personified.

His shoulders went limp, and the rifle slid halfway down his arm. He had never felt so empty. Twenty seconds.

He lifted the strap of the rifle, leaned the weapon against the corner by the door. He walked past them and into the bedroom.

Un-shouldering his pack as they followed him in, he unfastened the flaps at the top and took something out of it. Steel hoops on a black chain shone silver. The man placed one cuff around his wrist, hooked the other to the metal bedpost. He took a set of keys from his pocket. . .and threw them across the room.

He slid to the floor, covered his face with his arm.

"Morgan," she said quietly. "What are you doing?"

"I love you." His sobs were audible.

.....

A WALK THROUGH THE NIGHT

THERE'S NO WAY YOU COULD POSSIBLY DESCRIBE THIS. One foot after the other. Rock walls rising black on either side, a chasm of stars. The road like a gray snake winding through cold air. Night.

WHEN YOU'RE READING A BOOK..... YOU'RE ALWAYS SAFE INSIDE YOUR MIND. THERE ARE WALLS AND WARMTH AROUND YOU. THERE'S NO WAY YOU CAN FEEL EXPOSED, LIKE THIS. The sound of shoes on pavement. A chill sweat. THIS WEAKNESS. IT PUTS YOU IN A DIFFERENT WORLD, MAKES YOUR MIND FEEL.....STRETCHED. This weakness. It puts you in a different world, makes your mind feel. . . stretched. Convulsed stride and a kind of shudder. DAMN.

WHY AM I ALWAYS EXPOSED LIKE THIS? ALL THOSE YEARS, DON'T THEY MEAN ANYTHING? Hunger and cold. MAYBE I COULD WRITE A STORY..... WOULD THAT MAKE IT ANY BETTER? A sound to my right. The same fear again.

YOU CAN'T KNOW UNTIL YOU'VE FELT THESE THINGS. I ALWAYS THOUGHT I WAS GOING SOMEWHERE. NOWHERE BUT THIS ROAD. Another shudder from the cold. Chills again. DAMN IT. DAMN IT!

"Save your strength."

I'VE STILL GOT A LONG WAY TO GO.

.....

KGB

Images sifted through his subconscious as he slept, and his mind put a story to them.

*

A villa just outside Berlin, in the narrow strip of West Germany surrounded by the communist East. A beautiful dark-eyed Russian woman, a defector, lived here beneath the shelter of trees.

She was not alone here. Other defectors. . .no, patriots. Bulgarians, Poles and others, who loathed their totalitarian masters and the brutality, without freedom, under which their peoples were forced to live, and work away their lives, like ants. Former high-ranking members of the government, military, and intelligence branches of the Eastern bloc and the Soviet Union. KGB. Here they lived in close communion, despite the danger, working sometimes with the West, sometimes without it, according to their skills, to undermine the iron grip of the communist leadership, to encourage and protect dissidents, and to publish their work both home and abroad. As well as other goals that were more immediately humane.

It was not a place loved by the Kremlin or the East German puppets, the loyal KGB. Many times assassins, head hunters had been sent, either to infiltrate or destroy the traitorous band. But so far as

could be told, under the watchful and knowing eyes of Sonya Semenov, herself a former agent, none had yet succeeded their aim. And those who had tried, the captured, sure of death, had not been executed, or even turned over to the west. Instead they were sent back unharmed, with no greater injury than the knowledge that a hated sect had shown them mercy, and (to some) disquieting questions about their own loyalty and courage.

For mistress Semenov, the former operative, used methods of testing that were quite unique. Those who arrived at the Villa under pretense of defection, always suspect, were kept alone in a basement cell, of drab cement, for two days and nights without food or water. Their only contact with the world outside was a tiny, barred window that looked out on a beautiful garden, filled with birds. This window was kept shuttered, blocking out all light and sound, but for five minute periods twice daily. At all other times the cell was dark, cool and silent. There was no bed, nor any comfort to be found.

On the third day a single cup of water was brought, and the steel shutters remained closed. At intervals, moving pictures were projected from a square opening onto the opposing wall of gray: scenes from the Holocaust, the American bombing of Hiroshima, the torture and later execution of a 'dissident' during the Stalin era. Grim portraits with no clear political message or theme, except that of human suffering. Always suffering.

After two more days of this an evening meal was brought, along with water and wine, by one of the women (or men) of the allegiance. A comfortable bed was made of a mattress against the hard floor. The window was opened and she (or he), the deliverer, remained for the night: kissing, massaging aching limbs, making love. The entire ritual was then repeated. Afterwards, the pledge was sent to a small cabin in the woods, given food, drink and writing materials, and told to return in three weeks time.

The final test, after the writing had been studied by. . .was making love to Sonya Semenov. . .the group..... Making love. . .and love. . . kissing, massaging..... Sonya Semenov.....

"Sonya."

The man stirred, but did not wake, in his sleep. The sensations, physical, of his love seemed to fade. They faded. And as he sank back the dream began again, at the beginning. But this time he was Sonya Semenov, a man, and a dark-haired Hungarian woman had come to them, escaped from the life of concubine to a ranking member of the Presidium, as she explained to the others. Wearing a deep melancholy, whose depth was still greater for the pain in her large eyes, which could hide nothing of what she felt, whom he trusted instantly, or would have, except that he was Sonya Semenov, and life had taught him not to trust.

She was put to the test, and every minute he hovered like an angel above her, seeing her pain, in the merciless concrete room, her great and caring heart that had been so maimed, and always wanting her, wanting to disband, destroy the test, because she was so beautiful and incapable of anything but truth. Wanting her, and loving her more and more. And when she went into the woods his spirit followed her, and the poetry she wrote, which spoke of suffering, the suffering of others, he felt because of her. And he loved her still more and she was everything that he had never found after an eternity. And after an eternity she returned from those woods, made magic by her presence, whose green leaves lifted for her in the wind and turned their light undersides like Spring, the dark green returning like deepest summer as she came back to them. The Villa. And those who questioned her he wanted to kill but mostly only wanted her and needed to be with her. Wanting her, and the time of their joining drew near and he knew she would make love to her, Sonya, and he prayed in his sleep that the dream would not fade.

And at the last she came to him. In the beautiful dying light of the day, she lifted away her garment and stood shimmering by the open door of the balcony, as the wind kissed her hair and rustled the leaves in the high branches and she trembled slightly. And he was a woman once more, in love and then a man, and they kissed as their breasts touched through long hair and they stood in glorious nakedness and nothing held back. And he led her to the bed and laid her down and made the sweetest, purest love, giving her everything so gently as she quietly groaned and still the pain was in her face but now a different kind of pain, and he loved her as he had never loved and would never love again, touch-kissing her breasts and pouring out his soul. And as the love consumed and soon would be incarnate he closed his eyes. He was Sonya, and his lover lifted something that gleamed a little and seemed so unnatural, and stabbed her throat.

And Sonya Semenov was dead, killed by a Russian assassin, in the year 1989.

*

Salnikov woke in a cold sweat, as his memory raced to put back the pieces of history and dream.

KGB. He shuddered, because he knew it was true.

.....

ACT THREE

Andromeda, Balthazar, Cerberus, Gorky and Larkspur Sectors
Months VI through XII
International Year: 2211

SAHARA OF SNOW

I

On June 6, 2211 (by Euro-American dating) an open letter was sent to the President and Congress of the United Commonwealth by Gen. Charles William Hayes, then acting as its Secretary of State. On June 12 it was read to a specially convened Joint Session by Defense Secretary Aaron Brown, himself a distinguished veteran. Copies of the transcript were then made available to the press. The President did not attend the reading.

My Fellow Americans:

We have embarked upon a Great Crusade. On May the 30th, under my direction and leadership, The Third Fleet, in conjunction with the forces of the Democratic Alliance of Belgium and Switzerland, engaged and defeated the combined fleets of the Communist Coalition before the star system commonly known as Tarkus Minor, thus achieving the liberation of its peoples, who have labored so long under the oppressive yoke of Marxism.

In the wake of its dictatorial regime we have established democracy: a provisional government under the auspices of the Belgians and Swiss. Though this outside hand in the political affairs of another nation is regrettable, it must be remembered that the inhabitants of these colonies, though proud and courageous, have been kept in the darkness of atheistic communist doctrines for many years, and that some will not at first be willing, over even able, to accept the blessings of true freedom. The freedom of thought, speech and worship which we enjoy, will at first seem strange and painful to them, just as dazzling sunlight is painful to the eyes of one long imprisoned beneath the ground. But just as the doctor's slap which startles the new-born child to life, though sudden and unexpected, is wholly necessary and the catalyst to a new life, so these first steps toward democracy, however painful, must be taken boldly and resolutely.

And this victory is but the beginning. For the first time in nearly three centuries, we are given the power to rid the cosmos forever of the spreading and malignant cancer of communism. Not since 1946 at Malta, when our predecessors, out of blindness and misguided compassion, declined to use the birth of nuclear weapons to rid Eastern Europe of the Soviets—Slavic hordes which would dominate her peoples to this day—have we been given the necessary tactical advantage to realize this great dream. Once again we have the capability to strike and overwhelm in the same motion.

It has been said that those who do not learn from the mistakes of history are doomed to repeat them. Never has there been a clearer or more urgent example. We must not let faltering spirit and moral weakness send us down that same cowardly and shameful road. We must not let this second opportunity pass! For God has delivered into our hands, and at the precise moment, a weapon which makes the defenses of our enemies useless, and his attempts to thwart our offensive thrusts, utterly futile.

I speak of the Clarke-Medvekian 'Star Gate' potential, perfected only recently by our gallant scientists at the Top Secret laboratories of Mobius VI. I speak of it openly now, since to our enemies it is no longer a fearful rumor, but deadly reality. With it we are able to move our omnipotent SuperCarriers (along with escort, if necessary) virtually anywhere in the galaxy, completely undetected, in less time than it takes to lace a boot. Distance is no longer a deterrent, and fuel consumption need only be calculated for the duration of the battle itself. The strongest defense shield is easily breached, since the Carrier does not pass 'through' it, but rather, emerges on the other side.

But do not misunderstand my words. Military secrets are the most fleeting of all, and we are far from

invincible. . .if we delay. An effective defense or tracking system will inevitably be devised, and our ability to strike without warning taken from us. For this reason, as well as others, there is need of haste. If we do not utilize this weapon now, it may well be used against us in the future.

And so, my fellow patriots, I ask you for the official power to execute this bold plan, this glorious, God given crusade, proved under Executive Order, and on the field of battle. Give to me your consensus—a formal Declaration of War on the remaining colonies of the Communist Coalition—and we will begin this first campaign in earnest.

I will not deceive you. Despite the advantages of superior weaponry, especially the stealth and mobility afforded us by Star Gate potential, men's lives will be lost in the cause of lasting peace. It will not be an easy road. But if we can again find in ourselves that which is courageous and noble—the fighting spirit that won our Independence and established the world's first true democracy, and later carried us through nearly two hundred years of patriotic wars without a defeat—ours will be hailed as the greatest era known by man, the Golden Age of Liberty. It will be remembered as a time when freedom loving peoples everywhere, their hearts aflame with the glory of the task, rose up to expel forever the totalitarian Marxists, and tear free from all the galaxy the shackles of dictatorial communism.

Lastly, let me apologize if my words are not fair, my manner of speech unsubtle. I am neither orator nor philosopher, but a plain thinking Christian general of Southern stock, born on the Earth, proud of my roots and my heritage.

But let none doubt my integrity and insight on this matter, which I have studied closely, and made my life's work. For God does not always choose the sophisticated or genteel to do His holy bidding. Like George Washington before me, I do not pretend to know all the subtleties of diplomacy and constitution which lie before us, only the true and unalterable road which our armies must follow to secure the liberty and prosperity of future generations.

With your blessing I will carry our proud banner to heights our forefathers could not have dreamed, and the God-given torch which they passed down to us shall not diminish, but shine from every corner of the galaxy, eternal beacon of peace and freedom.

I know in my heart that you will hear my entreaty, and grant me the moment for which I am destined.

God bless America!

Yours in Liberty,

Gen. Charles William Hayes
Secretary of State

Among the inaccuracies and half-truths contained in the Secretary's call to arms were the following, pointed out by some, but not generally regarded as important.

1) General Hayes referred to the 'Communist Coalition' as if it were a single nation. Its actual name was The Coalition of Independent Socialist States, and it was not a nation at all, but rather a military alliance, similar to NATO.

2) He spoke of having 'engaged and defeated the combined fleets' of the Coalition, when in fact he had only beaten the Tri-Colony Defense Force under Col. Ivan Dubcek, already weakened by the frontal assaults of the Belgians and Swiss. The Coalition First Command Fleet, under the command of Gen. Helmut Itjes, had engaged the enemy in defensive skirmishes only, holding its own while evacuating roughly one-third of the inhabitants of the planets Premislyde and Goethe. Athena II, because of its proximity to the American thrust, was wholly lost.

3) The Athena Star System had not been referred to as Tarkus Minor for nearly eighty years, since an earlier error in mapping had been corrected. Perhaps the reference to Athens was uncomfortable for Hayes—the fact that a 'dictatorial regime' had chosen not to alter the name—or perhaps it threatened his claim that the United States had been the first true democracy. The argument that Greek Athens was not wholly democratic because it relied on the use of slave labor made little difference, since 18th Century America also kept slaves.

4) Whether or not the Commonwealth Supercarriers were omnipotent remained to be seen, since not all functions had been tested under full combat conditions. The Soviets were also said to possess four very large and formidable carriers.

5) The metaphor comparing the use of star-gate potential to the lacing of a boot was a good one—the time required for the final passage was relatively slight—but it neglected one very important step. First one had to construct the boot. Star-gate potential was not some magician's trick. The commander of a fleet could not simply press a button and 'poof', make his ships appear in another part of the galaxy. The creation of the star-gate was a very real, and therefore complicated process. Reduced to layman's terms, it utilized principals of anti-matter similar to those found in the implosion of a star (thus forming a black hole), to forge a corridor between two given points in Space, thus cheating the normal laws of space and time. Preparing such a corridor could take days, away from any kind of supporting base, possibly weeks.

For this reason one had to be certain he could defeat his enemy upon arrival, and control the designated area (or be prepared to retreat by conventional means) before any attack could be considered. In short, as an offensive weapon it was virtually unstoppable; but it offered absolutely nothing in the way of defense.

6) The Secretary referred to the Soviets of the 1940's as 'Slavic hordes which would dominate Eastern Europe.....' In fact the Slavs had dominated it for some time, having settled there centuries before, and forming a large segment of the population. Coincidentally, the expression 'Slavic hordes' had first been popularized by Nazi German propagandists, just prior to the outbreak of World War II.

7) Hayes' reference to the Yalta Conference of 1945 was confused at best. While this historic meeting of Roosevelt, Churchill and Stalin may have anticipated (in Stalin's mind only) the Soviet occupation of eastern Europe at the end of World War II, work on the atomic bomb had not yet been completed, and the Western powers were in no position either to divine Stalin's ultimate goal, or to prevent it through the use of nuclear weapons.

8) According to protocol, only the President could ask Congress for a Declaration of War. Also, by attacking the colonies without a 'formal declaration', General Hayes had violated International Law.

*

That these distortions were not looked upon with gravity by the American public, can perhaps be attributed to the social conditions prevalent at the time. Largely a cultural island, despite its vast trade and high international standing, the United Commonwealth had developed national characteristics not wholly conducive to truth and perspective.

For example, if the average American saw a historical character (say Abraham Lincoln) portrayed in a popular movie or book, it became set in his or her mind that he/she now possessed a complete understanding of both the man himself, and the tempestuous events in which he took part. Thus, any subsequent input of contradictory facts or unclear morals was discounted. Because as a general rule what appeared visually or in print, larger (and often better) than life, seemed infinitely more real and comprehensible than the confusing puzzle of actual events. The fact that Hayes presented his version of the truth in a frank, straightforward manner (why would he lie?) also tended to work in his favor, lulling to sleep—they were barely awake to begin with—the deeper sensibilities of his countrymen.

And in truth very little was known about the Battle of Athena. The Commonwealth forces who had taken part in the mission were sworn to secrecy, denied direct communication, and there was no way to obtain more complete, unbiased information. Also, since it happened far away and no casualties were announced, it all seemed less a prelude to actual war than some vaguely exciting patriotic adventure and (to the press) the possibility of some first-rate news footage.

This is not to say that all Americans were this bland or naive. Very vocal opposition arose at once, along with equally vocal support. But here again, the popular opinion of the middle class was the real power in the Commonwealth, and for the most part this bulk society had not yet made up its mind. Most were still, at the core, opposed to bloodshed. But the economy WAS in difficult straits, which tended to make them angrier and more aggressive, and there WERE nasty rumors circulating about Soviet preparations for a military push in the quadrant. That military preparedness was standard Soviet policy, and that the grimmest predictions often came from Pentagon propagandists, was to many either unknown, or considered beside the point.

The puzzle, however, was why the President had not attended the reading, and for the time being refused all comment. A press conference had been scheduled for June 18, but beyond this Administration officials were maintaining an uncanny, and therefore disquieting silence. Some of the more astute political observers and high-ranking members of the government may have guessed what this mean, but if so they did not give voice to their conclusions.

Because if what they suspected was true, it pointed to a serious rift within the government, and a potential problem far more dangerous than the stealing of a few planets, give or take. (Almost no one believed that Hayes actually intended to take on the whole of socialism, especially Soviet Space —quiet of late, but still quite capable of fireworks of their own). In this, unfortunately, they underestimated the depths of the man's obsession, and gave him credit for a sense of moderation which he did not possess.

And so the issue was roundly debated by the public and the press, and everyone waited impatiently for the President to address the issue, if only to have a focal point for their anger or support.

*

The President, however, had received on June 5 a very different communication from his Secretary of State, and was in a quandary as to how to respond. Because the one outright lie of General Hayes' letter to Congress and the press, had been that he attacked the Czech/East German joint colonies under Executive Order. In fact, he had done it entirely on his own.

Still retaining his rank (an oddity in high political service) as a five-star general, and thus the most powerful man within the military establishment, Hayes was trying to use his popularity as a war hero, and his considerable influence among the Armed Forces, to blackmail the President into a military venture on which he had long vacillated. The doubly coded message read as follows.

*

Dear Mr. President:

The time for indecision has passed. The battle is won; star-gate potential is a reality; and the spirits of the men are high. Such times as these are rare, when patriotic fervor at home is matched by clear superiority in the field.

But I won't try to sway you with words. You know the pressing realities as well as I do. I ask you now to put aside our past differences, and give me your full support. We can annihilate the remaining communist holdings in Balthazar and Cerberus and proceed from there. But IT MUST BE NOW.

I am sorry to have to force the issue, attacking on my own. But as a man who loves my country and sees the future clearly, you left me no choice. With Bacon and Weiss (Presidential advisors) still squabbling, and your own will paralyzed, precious and irrecoverable time was slipping by. And as for securing appropriations from the liberal-controlled House without bringing tremendous political pressure to bear.....

But I won't banter. Nothing cuts through barriers or rouses the people like a successful military engagement. And as I have said before, our tactical advantage will not last. You may have backed the Russians down of late with tough talk, but they haven't been idle the past three years either. And unlike our attempts at rearmament, they aren't hindered by the need for Congressional approval, or any other such bleeding heart nonsense. The Star Gate is our edge, and it won't be long before the enemy either finds a defense, or masters the principle himself. I've ordered everyone directly involved with the project sent to Mobius and quarantined for a year, under the pretense of a possible epidemic. But that doesn't keep information from being smuggled out.

And please don't deceive yourself, Edgar. Once the Russians get this technology they'll use it. This is going to be a volatile and turbulent era, whether we choose to make the first move or not. Either we put this weapon to use, or it will be used against us.

But we've been through all this before. I will send my appeal to Congress and the people, then the choice will be yours. You can give me your full support, and be remembered for all times as a courageous and decisive leader, or you can disown me and face the consequences. There is no middle ground.

Give me your blessing! You are a great and proud American; your principles are high and your intentions unimpeachable. The only fault I have ever found with you is a continuing desire to be advised, and a deep hesitation to go against the grain of your advisers, even when they themselves are undecided. History does not wait for the whims of such men! One either takes the reins of Destiny, or they are taken from him.

You say you did not ascend to the presidency alone—that many men with many causes helped elect you. That is true, and your magnanimity is admirable. But you are still the President, and the most powerful man in the free world. I urge you now: use that power! Stand on your own and be counted.

Put your faith in me, and you shall never regret it.

Forgive me for speaking so plainly. These are convictions that run very deep in me. I ask only this: that you listen to your heart. You will see that I am right, and that God has chosen me to do His holy work.

Your Servant,

Charles William Hayes
Secretary of State

P.S.- I have spoken with the Joints Chiefs of Staff. They stand behind me.

*

And so the President, who was not fond of making difficult decisions —Hayes had been quite right in this assertion—was faced with the most difficult choice of his political career, if not his life. Though far from a genius, he clearly saw (and this in itself was unusual) that a true, life and death dilemma lay before him, and that his decision would directly affect the lives of millions of people. Did he give in to political blackmail, and condone self-righteous slaughter—a genuine war? Or did he call Hayes' bluff, and find out just how powerful the man had become? Either path presented equally grim scenarios. And for the first time in his illustrious presidency, Edgar J. Stone found himself in a position where advice was useless, and compromise impossible.

His political forte' to this point had been to make no rash decisions or statements to the press, and to defer to his advisers on the more serious matters of state. And through a combination of conservative dogma and hard-nosed pragmatism, he had heretofore been extraordinarily successful, getting most of his programs through Congress, avoiding embarrassment, and heading off political difficulty before it gained impetus. No matter what the circumstance, he always managed to appear calm and well informed, with just enough below-the-surface anger to let everyone know, especially the Soviets, that the Commonwealth was not to be made sport of or taken lightly (which of course appealed to the current patriotic mood of his countrymen).

He was neither smarter, shrewder, nor more capable than his recent predecessors. If anything, he was less qualified than most. But he did have one skill they lacked. He knew how to play the game, and he lied (to no one more than to himself) with great conviction.

Because in the Commonwealth politicians were judged not so much by what they did, as by the way they appeared to be doing it. Lincoln, Kennedy and Reagan were remembered as the greatest of men, though they seriously mishandled important matters of state, largely because, as the poetic put it, "They captured the spirit of their countrymen." More cynically, they gave good speeches. Edgar Stone, though considerably less moral than any but the third, understood this (or something like it), and with the aid of the power groups he represented, had modeled his administration accordingly.

He did this by surrounding himself with strong and intelligent men who understood the inner workings of government, economy and diplomacy, concentrating his own energies—with the help of various acting coaches and speech writers—on the subtleties of image and appearances. His was the mask worn by those who had elected him, and those who held real power. Not only did he fail to question the morality of the policies they had him put forward, but in truth, was not particularly interested. He had for nearly twenty years made his living as a front-man for conservative causes, knew his job and stuck to it. And having for so long been immersed in right wing-propaganda (it also appealed to his ego and warped sense of patriotism), he really did, or certainly appeared, to believe it himself. Thus the last and most important element of the facade fell into place: 'sincerity'.

Any seasoned political observer (who cared to look with his eyes) could see this, and yet few with any authority chose to attack the graven image. Why? Because he SEEMED to be doing a good job, and was (in the persona that had so been carefully been constructed) a pleasant, hard-working and respectable family man. The fact that he had changed professions (a former salesman), parties (a former Democrat), and wives (a divorcee), was routinely shouted down as liberal mud-slinging. The press was cowed by his popularity, the opposition by the power it gave him. The middle class LIKED Edgar Stone, and big business stood behind him. It was a formidable combination. No chink had yet been found in his armor, and the political sharks that arise within any system, democratic or otherwise, could not yet smell blood in the water.

But all that careful work and planning was now being swept away by a single, unforeseeable mistake. Over the years Stone had accumulated numerous political debts, especially to those who had kept him

going during the lean years of 'progressive humanism', one of which he had repaid by appointing a pompous, self-indulging and wholly unqualified 'hero' of the Nibian Wars (like Ulysses S. Grant, he had sent tens of thousands to their graves without blinking), and a man he personally disliked, as his Secretary of State. Charles William Hayes.

Like Douglas Macarthur before him, Hayes had given innumerable signs of the obsession he now sought to enact. But like so many other men of history who are not taken at their word (Adolph Hitler being perhaps the clearest, and most horrific example), people had always assumed that he took such a hard line against socialism (as Hitler had done against the Jews) simply to encourage those who could elevate him to power, and to tap into the volatile anger and frustration of his countrymen.

But the truly frightening thing about such men, Hayes included, was that THEY MEANT EVERY WORD THEY SAID. "Better dead than Red," an expression borrowed from the Cold War days of the mid twentieth century, was not just a slogan to him, but unwritten Holy Scripture, handed down to him by the righteous God who ruled the Universe and called men of courage and action to his service, in the unending war against this modern day Satan. Etc. In his mind, too simple or too stubborn to possess any clear sense of perspective, this same God directed his every footstep, living within him and guiding his thoughts. And anyone who stood in his way, or questioned his narrow vision, was either weak, blind, or the enemy. As he had intimated in his letter to Stone, so far as he was concerned, there was no 'middle ground' in anything.

And in classic Shakespearean form, the inevitably tragic events of his life had only served to bear out his convictions, and reinforce his Messianic image of himself. Indeed, given the power of his obsession and the unyielding pursuit of an aggressive, self-chosen destiny, they could hardly have done otherwise.

So Edgar Stone brooded, and listened to his advisers argue, and tried to think. While the winds of war swirled around him.

II

On the three socialist planets now occupied by the Belgians and Swiss, the process of political arrest, judgment and exile had already begun. The process was especially swift and unyielding on Athena, where nearly eighty percent of the inhabitants, considered either dangerous or unnecessary to the occupation, were to be transported to the newly constructed facilities of the Belgian prison planet, Dracus IIa.

True to their word, the arrests were made without violence. Families were kept together whenever possible (except where a father, husband or wife was needed to operate high-tech equipment, thought-controlled machinery or the like), and all were given suitable quarters while awaiting the transport ships that would take them to Dracus. They were told that upon arrival they would be given the resources to feed, clothe, and govern themselves, and that no harm would come to those who cooperated. The Alliance had no intention of turning public opinion against itself, or calling to anyone's mind (especially their own) the barbarities and prison-camp horrors of previous wars.

Their plan was simple. Send all undesirables and non-essential personnel to secretly located prison planets deep within their boundaries, give them the tools they needed to survive, cut off all communication, and simply leave them there. When the war was over there would be time to consider a more permanent solution.

And at the moment there were more pressing matters at hand. First they had to ascertain exactly who it was they were fighting, and why—since clearly they didn't share Hayes' obsession, and intended to act wholly independent of him.

Here were the facts as they saw them.

The Dutch Provinces, long coveted, were now in their possession, along with the Athena colonies. Their strength, especially monetary, had grown because of it. There was no substantial inter-galactic

outcry against them, their own activities being largely overshadowed by the possibility of a full-scale offensive push by the Commonwealth. And their losses to date, though somewhat more substantial than they had hoped, could not outweigh their ambition. Except for the German-made carrier, which they had not expected to lose, the fleet sent against Dubcek had been manned by robot crews only, the idea being to exchange hardware, which could be replaced, for the bounty of Athena. They had even taken a new, bi-national symbol, the pouncing leopard, and had it emblazoned on their ships, and on the sleeves of all their flyers.

But what they should have known, what every leopard does know, is that they were not the only, nor indeed the most powerful predator in the bush. The stir created by a kill may be tolerated once by the pride of lions living nearby. But soon both predator and prey are aware of their existence, ready to act upon it, and even the distraction of a rogue elephant, crashing blindly through the brush, can't hide its presence for long.

Their fight had only just begun.

III

The morning of June 17, on the eve of his scheduled press conference to address the issue, Edgar Stone sat behind his desk in the Oval Office, staring blankly at his fourth attempt to draft a reply to General Hayes. Dark circles pulled at his eyes and sinuses; his head felt like a warm stone that wouldn't think. Half an hour earlier, after listening to his top advisers swear at each other with the same arguments they had been postulating for months, he had done something he would not have dreamed of in other circumstances. He had told them all to "Shut up," and unceremoniously shown them the door.

For the first time in his presidency he was taking matters into his own hands, with more than a few regrets and second thoughts. He had slept badly or not at all for three nights running, and felt neither brave, nor noble, nor even competent to make such a choice. In his current frame of mind he was incapable of realizing the human or historical significance of the crisis that lay before him, and at the moment this was not what mattered. Unlike Hayes, he didn't give a damn what people thought once he was dead, or even out of office. What mattered now was that his tolerance for bullshit had been long since used up—that he was furious at being put in such a position.

And somewhere, very deep inside himself he knew, though he shrank from the knowledge, that something very wrong had happened, that the damage was far from over, and that he was partly to blame. And he knew one more thing, despite the rhetoric that he had spouted for two decades: offensive war, unduly considered, was the basest and most shameful of human endeavors, never justifiable, and rarely, in the end, accomplishing anything.

Because for all his faults, and these he possessed in abundance, Edgar Stone was not insane.

He bowed very low, crumpling the paper before him in both hands. Shook his head mournfully. He pushed the com-button on his desk and summoned a secretary, to whom he dictated his answer to Hayes.

*

The press conference was postponed without a future date being set, on the pretext that new information had just come to light, which must be relayed to the Secretary of State before further action could be taken. But even the impassable Bill Miller, Stone's Press Secretary, could not pull off this announcement without incurring a barrage of stupefied questions and dissatisfied remarks.

And when news of the postponement spread, along with the undercurrent of confusion and subdued alarm which accompanied it, even the dullest Americans began to sense that something was amiss—that real life had somehow crept onto the peaceful shores of their island. And nearly all were aware of a strange thrill of fear as their President finally stepped before the cameras on July 15, looking not at all like himself.

On June 24, the day that Hayes received the President's reply, the Third Fleet was once again preparing to go into action. The coordinates (and victim) of their next attack had already been decided upon, known only to the General Staff, and to the scientists in charge of constructing the star gate. All the myriad ships—destroyer groups, flotillas and task forces, still intact—were once more huddled within the massive body of the Supercarrier 'Dreadnought', itself nearly forty kilometers from stem to stern.

The mother vessel, with all its destructive children tucked up inside, and therefore vulnerable (relatively speaking) to sudden attack, had been positioned by her masters in the place that this was least likely to occur—a distant orbit around the sea planet Goethe, where Alliance ships moved constantly, ready to repel any attempt at a counter-stroke by the Coalition. The entrance to the star gate was being constructed outside the extremities of the system, far beyond the considerable pull of the massive star, Athena.

Though the two capitalist fleets remained in constant contact, it was understood that there would be no mutual effort or coordinated defense once the Dreadnought left the system. The two sides had gotten what they wanted: the Belgians and Swiss the riches of the colonies, as well as the threat of a powerful ally, and the Commonwealth, an easy victory with a minimum of casualties. Thus the thief and the bully would part.

Both sides, meanwhile, were concerned (at least Hayes pretended to be) by the external calm and relative inaction on the part of the Coalition, and the still more ominous silence of Soviet Space. In his more lucid moments the Secretary realized the strength of his ultimate foe: that a great bear waited for him deep in the woods, and that killing it, even with the full weight of the Commonwealth behind him, would be no easy task. But for now he feared nothing and no one.

ONE STEP AT A TIME, he told himself. One step at a time.

*

It was late afternoon, U.C. Earth time, though that measure seemed quite meaningless while circling a planet of turbulent seas two hundred times Earth's mass, dotted with tiny islands rising thousands of feet above the wrack, itself revolving around a sun not to be spoken in the same breath with our own.

Leif Janson felt this lapse of human significance acutely, as he paced back and forth in Communications Room One, waiting for the approaching message from the diminutive planet which had spawned him. Even aboard the Dreadnought, dwarfed as it was by everything around it, this feeling of smallness and mock importance would not leave him.

He recalled the words of Joseph Conrad, describing the way the primeval forests of Africa must have looked upon the coming of the white man to steal its ivory. "Fantastic invasion." And so it seemed to him now. How could man even pretend to dominate such a Universe, in which his unnoticed presence, lasting but the blink of an eye, could not begin to compare with the Infinity which his mind could not even comprehend? All that a man could ever hope to do was live in peace with himself, and understanding with his neighbors. And of late the Commonwealth had done a damned poor job of that. To find love, and to pass that love on to his children.....

"Major Janson." He turned. "Message coming in."

"Good. Get it recorded then go below. Lieutenant Frye, contact the Secretary and ask him to come down right away. Tell him the message is in, and that I've cleared the com room. Then report to your quarters and await further instructions."

"Yes sir."

Several minutes later Janson stood alone beside the main decoding computer, listening to the drum of approaching footsteps. General Hayes strode into the room with the same expression of confident, aggressive attention that he always wore, perhaps pulled a bit tighter about the cheekbones by tension and desire.

With him were two other men: Brigadier General Michael Calder, his right-hand man for the last twenty years, and Gen-Admiral Frank, commander of the Third Fleet, also a long-time associate. The Secretary, choosing for the moment to don civilian clothes, addressed the middle-aged (and therefore to his eyes, young) Communications Officer directly.

"Well, Major. Is the message fully recorded? Have you followed my instructions to the letter?"

"Yes sir. Shall I begin decoding?"

Janson held this important, sensitive post because of his high security clearance, his steady, if not outstanding career, and most of all, his ability not to speak of his work to anyone, anytime, under any circumstances. Frank, therefore, saw nothing unusual in the question. But Hayes looked hard at the man, as if searching for some tell-tale flaw.

"What is your security clearance, major?"

"1-A, to military level Five, sir."

"And how many years have you served with us?"

"Twenty-three, sir."

"Then you saw action in the Manxsome conflict?"

"Yes sir."

"Decorated?"

"No sir."

Hayes turned to the Fleet Commander.

"Can you vouch for this man?"

"Yes, General." Hayes gave the man a last, hard look, almost a threat.

Very well then, Major. Begin decoding."

Frightened and annoyed, Janson sealed the enclosure, shut down all outside terminal linkage, and programmed the series of computers for self-erase. There would be but a single copy of the transcript, printed on thin, white computer paper. He worked the fingerboards rapidly, knowing the codes and counter-codes by rote, until a soft blue light indicated that the signal had been translated and was ready to print.

And then he made the mistake of his life. Simply not thinking to do otherwise, he touched the print button, and the machine began to feed out paper. It stopped.

"Is that the reply from Stone?" asked Hayes severely. Janson, who had been walking towards him with the paper in hand, stopped suddenly, and his limbs were awash in adrenalin.

"Why, yes sir..... I never thought. That is. Anyone could have pushed the print button. I merely assumed..... I haven't read a word, Mr. Secretary, I swear it." Hayes lowered his head, assumed a more natural expression. Took the paper from him.

"Very well, major. That will be all."

Janson saluted and left the room. Hayes, inclining his head as a signal for his two subordinates to go stand by the door, sat down and began to read.

Secretary Hayes:

I have agonized over the wording of my response to you, though I knew right away what my answer should be. As you asked, though you may not believe it, I have silenced my advisers and listened to my own thoughts. Perhaps you don't think much of me as a leader, or even a man. But as you yourself said, I am the President, and I see now that a great deal depends on my dealings with you. It is also clear that I must carry the brunt of this responsibility myself. At such a time I feel very small and unprepared. But whatever else you may think of me, I am not a coward.

I have made my decision, Charles, and I ask in turn that you consider your next move very carefully. Much more depends on it than your ego or mine. AT THIS POINT HAYES SCOWLED, AND UNCONSCIOUSLY WORKED THE MUSCLES AT THE BACK OF HIS JAW. I have not revealed to the public any aspect of the rift between us, nor will I do so in the future, so long as we can now resolve our differences.

I'm trying to be diplomatic. But since I know you take that as a sign of weakness, I will come to the point.

You have overstepped your authority as Secretary of State, attacking on your own the colonies of two nations with whom we are not at war, and deliberately lied in the process, saying that you did so under my orders. To view the matter harshly, as you have done to others in the past, you have committed treason.

Damn it, Charles! The military forces of this nation are not your private army. Maybe you don't like the way I was elected; maybe you think your ends justify the means. Maybe you hate my guts. None of this is important now. What is important is the political survival of the United Commonwealth, and the sparing of further bloodshed.

Please, I'm asking you, DON'T DO ANYTHING RASH. Think the matter through. You have made veiled threats to me, which if realized, could result in civil war, or worse. Do you really want to stage this coup? Do you really want to denounce me, your President, and see how much of government and the military will stand behind you? It goes against all the principles of democracy that you profess so loudly.

I am neither historian nor moralist, as you well know, and I am trying not to lose my temper. But it seems to me that our forefathers, as you call them, set up their system of checks and balances specifically to prevent this kind of showdown, and personal grab for power. And they must have done something right, because our government has lasted, intact, for over four hundred years. Will you tear all that down because of your obsession with communism? Even your beloved George Washington turned down the chance to be a monarch, saying it was contrary to all that he had fought for.

There is nothing more I can say but to fully clarify my position, so that there will be no chance of further misunderstanding.

A) I will not ask Congress for a Declaration of War. I will say only that your attack on the colonies was the result of miscommunication between us, and then attempt to make reparation to the provinces of Democratic Germany and Greater Czechoslovakia. I am prepared to take full responsibility for this 'misunderstanding' myself, so long as your exploits stop now.

B) I will not disown you, as you suggest, nor call your bluff in public. I am not looking for a fight, nor will I back down from one. You will remain my Secretary of State, but immediately relinquish all military title and authority. I'll not have a maverick heading the armed forces of this nation.

C) My orders to you now, as your Commander-in-Chief, are to break off from any plans of further adventurism, and return with the Third Fleet to Commonwealth space at once.

THROUGH HIS RAGE, THE SECRETARY HAD SENSE ENOUGH TO REALIZE THAT THIS LIST OF DEMANDS COULD NOT HAVE BEEN PUT FORWARD BY STONE. FOR ONE THING, THE WORDING WAS MUCH TOO COGENT. AND IN FACT, IT WAS THE ONE PART OF THE LETTER NOT LARGELY INTACT FROM THE PRESIDENT'S ORIGINAL DICTATION. DESPAIRING AT HIS OWN IGNORANCE, AND NOT KNOWING WHOM TO TRUST, STONE HAD TURNED TO HIS VICE PRESIDENT, A CAPABLE MAN, WHO AFTER LONG AND SECRET CONSULTATION WITH SAM BACON, WHITE HOUSE CHIEF-OF-STAFF, HAD WRITTEN THE PARAGRAPH FOR HIM.

You may consider me a small and weak man. But I have the power of the Constitution behind me. And we will also see, should you choose to defy me, how the American people, including the military, will react when they find out they've been lied to, and committed murder on your behalf.

I ask you once again, to be reasonable.

Sincerely,

Edgar James Stone
President of the United Commonwealth.

General Hayes stood perfectly still for perhaps two minutes, holding the piece of paper in his tightly clenched hands, looking at the blank portion at the top of it with unfocused eyes. The two lesser generals, knowing better, did not interrupt his meditations, but remained silently by the door. Calder knew his master well enough to read the signs of rejection, and still greater determination, on his face. Frank could only stare at the man he both admired and feared, wondering.

At length the Secretary stirred.

"Your incinerator, Michael." Calder handed him the tiny device, and

Hayes vaporized the President's message. He rose.

"General Frank. Schedule a meeting of the Staff in ConRoom 16 for 2200 hours. I'll address all subcommanders by visual at 0600 tomorrow. Request your communications officer to remain in his quarters until I send for him. The attack will go on as scheduled."

Hayes, his thought rebuked, was now going on instinct. And his instincts always told him to attack. The three dispersed, and the First Communications crew, with the exception of Janson, returned to their posts.

There are perhaps three basic ways that the human mind reacts when its perception of reality, colored by hopes and dreams, is suddenly, forcibly confronted. The first is the way adopted by those who acknowledge their own humanity. This is to take a step back, question perspective, yield to some more profound influence, or simply admit that there may be some aspect of the situation not immediately understood. In short, it is the realization that life, for good or ill, is not going to change for them, and that their dreams and ambitions must be based on reality, or they simply cannot last.

The second reaction, just as common, may be viewed as the first step toward irrational thinking. Those who fall into this category, rather than relinquishing the illusion in question, cling the more fiercely to it, stubbornly blocking out all contradictory input, and, if necessary, delving into a world of pure fantasy.

The third reaction, by far the most dangerous, is centered around a belief that the more one's goals and ambitions are resisted, the truer and more indisputable the path taken, since clearly they are being resisted by evil. The Devil, and those who serve him, are to blame. Therefore the harder the subsequent struggle, the more righteous the cause. Such is the road taken by the political or religious fanatic.

Hayes, in his more rational moods, fell into the second category. When directly challenged, as he was now, he fell into the third.

The man remained seated in his quarters, brooding. All his thought had been bent so strongly, all his efforts geared so unshakably toward the realization of a single goal—riding the tide of patriotic fervor, with the whole of the Commonwealth behind him, into a grand and decisive campaign against galactic communism—that Stone's rejection had hit him like a physical blow. Why had his destiny been denied him? OR WAS IT A TRIAL OF FAITH?

And one more thing troubled him. He was still sane and noble enough (after a fashion) to see that it would indeed be wrong to usurp the duly-elected President, fool that he was, and try to seize power by a military coup. This, however, did not keep him from disregarding his current orders, which were clearly and dangerously wrong. Having been stripped of its pet fantasy, his mind now seized upon another.

HE WOULD DO IT ALL HIMSELF. With only the resources and undying loyalty of the Third Fleet, he would defeat Soviet Space alone, against orders—the greatest military feat of all time. Each disposition would have to be perfect, each soldier's skill and determination honed to a cutting edge of steel. AGAINST ALL ODDS! Or, at the very least, he would draw the Soviets into a full-scale war. . .and give his reluctant president no choice..... He got up and began to pace eagerly, shaking off age and fatigue.

YES, THAT'S IT. OF COURSE! HE THINKS HE'S MADE A CLEVER MOVE, CHEATED ME. WE'LL SEE HOW LONG THE SOVIETS REMAIN NEUTRAL WHEN I DEVASTATE THE COALITION FORCES, AND KNOCK OUT THE EAST GERMAN HOME PLANET. "MORE DEPENDS ON IT THAN YOUR EGO OR MINE," HE SAID TO ME. "TO VIEW THE MATTER HARSHLY. . .TREASON!" HE'LL 'CALL MY BLUFF', WILL HE? MY 'OBSESSION' WITH COMMUNISM. Hayes smashed a fist into his open hand. "RELINQUISH ALL MILITARY TITLES." "MAVERICK!." SO HELP ME GOD; IF THIS ACTION ISN'T ENOUGH TO CHANGE HIS MIND, I'LL DO IT. I'LL COME AFTER HIM! FOOL. BLIND FOOL.

At length he ceased his pacing and grew calmer. The meeting with General Staff was approaching, and he must decide what course to take with them:

The meeting would be held. He would address the sub-commanders as scheduled, as the mighty ship headed out toward the entrance of the star gate. Nothing had changed. Stone's actions had been a small annoyance, nothing more. He switched on the dictation machine, and began speaking rapidly and decisively.

Lt. Eric Muller had been in e-light warp for almost fifteen hours, barely outraced by the laser sounding-beam sent out ahead of him days before.

So far he had been lucky—he had not had to deviate course. He knew that once he did, leaving the path of the beam, he would have no warning at all before smashing into an unrecorded meteor, or bit of space debris. To come out of light-speed and fly by sight and instruments meant to expose himself to tracking, almost certain death while approaching enemy-controlled positions.

The small, blistering ship in which he flew had been designed with but a single purpose: to outrace tracking, come out of warp just long enough to aim the projectile, then split in two, the adjoining missile (hopefully) striking its target before the enemy could react, while the escape-ship ran for cover.

It was a desperate scheme, this squadron of forty missile-ships; but it remained theoretically possible, and therefore must be tried. The Coalition powers had not been idle since the attack on Athena, and the high command of the Provinces of Democratic (East) Germany, suspecting their inner planets to be a likely next target, were determined to show Hayes what they were made of—that it would be no easy fight—and that the Dreadnought was not impregnable.

Constant tension and near maniacal alertness had begun to take its toll on the young pilot, chosen, along with the others, because of his lightning reflexes and exceptional endurance. Two seconds of neglect were all that was needed to end his life. If for that brief period he did not watch the signal monitor and react instantaneously to its warning—the possible complexities of which were too vast even for an unassisted computer to judge—all was lost. He could not know it, since the speed at which he traveled made communication impossible, but eight of his comrades had already been killed, or forced to break off because of mechanical failure.

He reached back to massage his aching neck. Scarcely a moment had passed before he heard the warning tone—meteor particles directly ahead. With the thought control computer he veered left and down, then back again to the right. His reactions had been swift and correct, and he was able to readjust quickly and continue on toward the target.

But the beam was lost, so that now he flew blind. And after a time the real fear began to set in. Roughly two hours later his craft spun out of control and exploded, after striking a meteor-pellet six inches long. SubCaptain Schmidt was lost a few minutes after that, when he outraced his beam and tried to decelerate too quickly.

Twenty-four hours into the mission, only seven of the original forty remained, still at least eight hours away from their estimated time of intercept.

IV

Hayes was wakened at 0400. He felt upon first consciousness, as he often did after a short sleep, a vague and powerful sense of uneasiness, like a man walking steeply uphill, with death drawing nearer behind him. He sat bolt upright, his jaw set and eyes squinting fire, and slowly the feeling passed. He got out of bed, told the yeoman to send Calder to him at 0420, and stalked into the bathroom. Finishing his toilet he reentered the bedroom and immediately began his morning isometrics, running through his mind as he did so the business of the day, and recalling with disciplined satisfaction his performance of the night before. His words to the meeting of Staff:

"My fellow officers of the intrepid Third Fleet, your Commander-in-Chief asks much of you. As President, he understands as I do the urgent necessity of our great endeavor, and along with the Senate, stands squarely behind us. But his political enemies, the weak-hearted opposition who hold the majority in Congress, needing to make themselves feel important, have delayed a vote on the formal Declaration of War. They have attempted to sabotage the mechanisms of just vigilance and freedom. They SAY they need more proof." As he said this, and various officers scowled, he had looked over at Frank and nodded gravely, as if this was what had upset him in the President's reply.

"Fortunately, Edgar Stone is not the kind of man to let ignorance and cowardice stand in his way. They have said they need more proof, of the ruthless barbarity of the Coalition leaders against their own people, as well as the armed strength of our great nation—and he has assigned US to give it to them." Expressions of satisfaction and approval. "To us then falls the task of demonstrating the absolute superiority of the United Commonwealth of America, and the prowess of its men at arms. He knows that in this, we shall not fail him."

As he recalled this speech Hayes felt only one regret. In referring to Stone's (supposed) vote of confidence in the Third Fleet, and simultaneously expressing his own desires and expectations of it, he had unwittingly imparted into their image of the President a courage and forthrightness he did not possess, and which might later have to be altered, should matters force a showdown and the need arise to challenge his authority.

But this could not be helped, and already he felt his subconscious beginning to turn the necessary phrases of shock and disbelief at Stone's treachery and sudden reversal. He dressed briskly, and had only just begun to pace when Calder appeared at the portal. He turned to him at once.

"Have communications officer Janson report to me in SubCon 20 in half an hour, then tell the yeoman to have my breakfast sent there." His expression changed slightly as he looked into the unquestioning face of his loyal subaltern. "... Do you want to know what he really said?"

Calder stepped beyond the portal and turned the small handle that security-sealed the room, showing by this mute gesture that it did not matter to him, he would serve his General as he had always done, but that if Hayes wished to tell him he would be honored to listen. He was the one man who could have a softening effect on his master, though he would have been shocked to learn it. Hayes turned to face the wall.

"He tried to cut me off, Michael." He glanced over at him briefly, the smallest touch of melancholy, then back to the wall. "He said that my 'obsession' with the communist threat was based on pure fabrication, the result of an unbalance mind." For as he spoke, he truly believed that this was what Stone had done. "He said that to view the matter harshly, I had committed treason..... He ordered me to return home with my tail between my legs and maybe, MAYBE he would forgive me." Without turning he knew that Calder's face had assumed its characteristic frown of fierce devotion, the one that acknowledged tough measures were at hand, not wanted, but forced upon them by those enemies, unfathomable in their ignorance and baseness, who challenged and sought to sabotage his master's clear vision and irreproachable aims.

"He can't do that, sir." Hayes turned, rekindled, as always, by this soldier's undying spirit.

"No, he can't. Though it does my heart good to hear it." Their eyes met. "But you needed to know that things could get a little rough. The President of the United Commonwealth himself is no longer above suspicion."

"You know that I would do anything," stammered Calder. "Follow you anywhere."

"Yes, yes! That's the spirit we need to impart! It's entirely on our shoulders now. The Third Fleet must take up the sword alone." His temper had been quite restored. "But." He raised a stern finger. "One thing at a time, and not missing a single detail. That's how we've got to do it."

"The business of the day, sir?"

"Yes, we'll discuss it over breakfast." A rare honor. "Have you eaten yet today?" And Calder went off to do his master's bidding.

Leif Janson, meanwhile, dressed himself in a state of anxiety such as he had seldom experienced. He had no grounds for this feeling; he had been summoned at odd hours by high personages before. But remembering his blunder the day before, so innocent, and yet looked upon with such gravity, he felt in his gut that a dark cloud hung over him, and wondered only at the severity of the coming storm.

He had never liked Hayes, liked him still less for their meeting; but this could not alter the fact, much as it galled him, that he was terrified of the man. STUPID, he admonished himself. THIS ISN'T NAZI GERMANY. He tried to shave, cut himself, realized that this would look bad, placed a skin pad over the area, forgetting to wipe away the blood first, ripped it off, toweled his face and did it again. By now his agitation was so acute that he began to get angry. But his experience in government service told him that if he gave in to his instincts (fought back), not only would things not get better, they could get considerably worse.

And so, passing through the corridor and up through an elevator tube, he entered after two lefts and

a right, the hallway that led to SubCon 20. He checked his watch. Two minutes early. He stopped, knowing by reputation Hayes' fanaticism concerning time. Needing something to occupy his mind, he mused for perhaps the thousandth time that everything in the military was capital letters and even numbers: black and white. He paced a little, and looking up, saw to his dismay that the hall camera followed his every movement. He checked his watch. Thirty seconds to go. TO HELL WITH THIS, he thought. He entered the chamber.

Hayes looked up from the table as he saluted, nodded placidly, and finished his breakfast without haste. Calder, standing against the adjacent wall, gazed at him with the blank, somewhat hostile expression of an off-duty drill sergeant. Hayes placed the tray in the wall-slot, brushed stray crumbs from the table with his uniform sleeve, and without rising, addressed him.

"Major Leif Janson, I believe. Well, Major. Since yesterday I've checked your record, and I believe you can be trusted."

"Thank you, sir." He wondered why this vote of confidence did not comfort him. "I'm sorry for my blunder, sir. It was inexcusable."

Hayes' words belied his expression. "A momentary lapse, nothing more." He placed a strange emphasis on 'lapse.' "You've been trained for high-speed craft, is that correct?"

"Yes, sir," Janson said stiffly, maintaining with difficulty his rigid posture and straight-ahead gaze. It had been twelve years, but this was hardly the time.....

"I want you to run a very special errand for me, Major. I want you to take some particularly sensitive data back to President Stone, and deliver it to him personally. I'm having a Clipper specially prepared. She'll fly mainly on auto-pilot, with extra speed built in. I need this material in the President's hands by July 16—he'll know you're coming. Do you think you can do it?"

"Yes, sir. Of course, sir." But this was absurd. Bullet-pouches were three times faster, and with self-destruct, an infinitely better security risk.

"Good, Major. That's what I wanted to hear. Report to Shuttle Dock 36 at 1400 sharp. You're to remain in your quarters till then, and speak of this to no one. I'll have the flight-suit brought to you there. The materials will be turned over to you by special courier aboard ships. Any questions?"

Janson glanced at him quickly. There were no questions.

"That will be all then, Major. Dismissed." Janson saluted and showed himself the door. As his footsteps receded down the hallway, Hayes turned to Calder.

"You know what to do?" His second nodded sternly and went out.

TOO BAD ABOUT THAT ONE, mused the Secretary briefly. THEY SAY HE HAD A FAMILY. Rising, he left the small conference room and moved with swift steps toward the Main Intercommunications studio to prepare his pre-battle address to the subcommanders. NO, ON SECOND THOUGHT I'D BETTER MAKE IT THE ENTIRE CREW. WE'VE GOT TO FIGHT LIKE THE THREE HUNDRED SPARTANS TOMORROW. And pleased with this metaphor, trying to think how to work it into his speech, he continued on his way.

*

Squadron-leader Dorfman was approaching his thirtieth hour in light-warp, and was less than sixteen hours away from his projected time of Intercept. His was one of only five missile-ships that remained on course and on target.

There is a certain level of endurance beyond which even the strongest minds cannot go without some loss of rationality. Dorfman, a seasoned veteran, had been on tough, grueling missions before, but this—he could no longer deceive himself—was undoubtedly the cruelest.

He had been able to remain calmly alert and rest his eyes for brief intervals, trusting somewhat to fate, for the first eighteen hours or so, and this had bought him time. A product of East German military training and thinking, his own life or death was now secondary to the success or failure of the mission and, truly believing this, his fears had not been able to engulf him. His life had been full: his wife was a soldier's wife, and his son was now fourteen and able to look after her. But it was not necessary for him, as it was for some men, to discount his own death through such a progression of thought. He knew what his country was up against, and accepted his duty without reservation.

But even through so many well-laid defenses, the exhaustion and mental strain had begun to do their work on him. Fatigue became a constant torture. To keep his eyes open and on anything, let alone the bulbous, softly glowing scope before him, was next to impossible. But to take a stimulant, he knew, would be worse. He could ill afford to compound the demands on mind and body. Muscle tremors and adrenalin surges would make him useless if ever. . .WHEN he reached his target. Having no choice, he stayed where he was, his eyes fastened on the scope.

Being a thoroughly disciplined man, it was perhaps more difficult for him to deal with the violent, primal images and emotions that now thrashed about inside him. Visions of tearing Stone's throat out, and of sexual violence toward nameless, faceless women were particularly prevalent, but not nearly so painful as the occasional outbursts of groundless hatred toward his wife and son. He knew these for what they were, distorted by-products of the subconscious, and reminded himself as their intensity grew that they could not physically hurt him. But secretly he was upset, and wished they would go away.

Finally he had to make a decision. It was either rest his eyes and neck for a moment, possibly get up and stretch, or smash his fist against the screen. He stood up and put his hands together behind him, craning both neck and back, then pumped his ribs twice with his biceps. He sat back down after an elapse of two minutes and drank some water. Then returned to his vigil.

* * *

It was nearing 6:00 AM, United Commonwealth Earth time, 0600 by the military clock. On the dark side of Goethe there was no time, only the slow indifferent turning of the dark skied, sea-laden monster.

Hayes had decided to do the broadcast live. He sat before the tiny camera fixtures cool and alert, with a partial script before him. Added to the natural intensity of his features was the hard, predatory gleam that always rimmed his eyes before a battle. No matter that the rapid-black passage through the star gate, and the fighting sure to follow, would not occur until the next morning. He would not eat or sleep until then, concentrating all his energies and attention on the slightest details of preparation. By seven o'clock the next morning he would be transformed into the atavistic frame of mind where decisions were not tainted by conscience or emotion but were ruthless, correct in their unhesitating aggression, and sharp as razor steel. In battle as in life, he told himself, there was no substitute for hardness and sheer force of will. The subtle throb and hum of the giant ship felt strong and reassuring around him, as it headed toward the limits of the system.

The red light of the studio came on: twenty seconds. Ten. The man in the booth signaled him, and he began to speak.

"My fellow soldiers of the dauntless Third Fleet. We stand on the eve of a great battle. At stake is nothing less....."

Nine minutes later the first of the East German scat-ships came out of warp. In the five seconds allotted him, SubCaptain Hessler located the target, aimed and fired his missile, and broke off again into e-light. The automated batteries aboard the Dreadnought picked up and analyzed his presence, aimed a ruby laser and fired: too late. Also too late were the bursts it fired at the lightning-fast projectile, sent in a curved trajectory at its more vulnerable underside.

The neonuclear explosive hit home with a violence that even the emptiness of Space could not diffuse, penetrating seven of the Carrier's sixteen layered shields.

Within the ship there was a sudden, jarring concussion, and the corridors of every vessel inside it resounded with the drone of a battle-stations alert. For the briefest instant the lights of the studio went out; and when they returned Hayes saw that his speech was ruined. A pitcher of water had spilled across it, and the liquid inside blurred ink and paper together into an unrecognizable wrinkle of smeared sheaves. The man in the booth made a quizzical motion, in the form of a question drawing his finger across his throat. But Hayes shook him off angrily.

"All men to your posts," he barked gruffly. "Maybe now you'll see that this is no game." He himself hastened to the uppermost bridge, furious at this sneak attack, and even more at his own men for having allowed it to happen.

"Damage report!" he shouted, entering the circle of men and equipment that scrambled with sudden activity like an ant-hill beaten with a stick. "How many ships!"

"Damage report coming," said a voice, calm and professional.

"Just the one," came another.

"It only slowed to sub-light long enough to fire the projectile, then broke off again just as fast." This last belonged to Gen-Admiral Frank, commander of the Fleet.

"Why didn't the robot-guns get him?"

"They weren't set for full kill intercept. With so many Alliance ships in the vicinity, they had to analyze—"

"I hope you've corrected THAT blunder."

"Yes, General. And I've warned the Alliance pilots—"

"Tell those French faggots to stay the hell away from us." Hayes had taken to calling the Belgians 'French', and the Swiss 'Krauts'. "If they want to play soldier, let them do it somewhere else."

"Damage report," came the first voice.

"So what the hell are you waiting for?"

"Nothing, sir. Outer seven shield-projectors damaged but reparable. Several of the discharging chutes and one of the lower batteries out for twelve to twenty-four hours. No significant damage to interior vessel or launch ships."

At this Hayes grew calmer, mastered his wrath. NO SIGNIFICAN DAMAGE. Then perhaps it was for the best after all. . .so long as no more of them got through. And he liked the unruffled manner of the officer who had given him the report.

"Very well, Captain. Admiral Frank, have we got a fix on where he came from?" The Fleet Commander was immediately aware of the change in his superior's voice.

"Yes, General. It came from the direction of East German Cerberus. We've trained the First and Fourth Robot Artillery toward that vector, since it's unlikely they've had time....."

"Correct, Admiral. But see to it that the others aren't napping, either." THE JERRIES ARE NO FOOLS, THOUGH. THEY KNOW WE'RE COMING AFTER THEM. "Let's go up into the bubble for a moment, shall we? Gentlemen, keep us posted."

Entering the 'bubble' through the elevator, a small, Officers' Security Chamber at the top of the uppermost bridge, the Secretary turned to Frank, and unexpectedly put his arm around his smaller compatriot's shoulder. Though incapable of self-reproach, he knew he had been a bit hard on this man, whose loyalty he could ill afford to lose.

Confused at this sudden gesture, Frank tried to clarify his position with words. "I'm sorry, General. Not going into full Intercept was a stupid oversight. I'd just not had experience with this type of craft."

"No, Donald, that's all right. It's a sign of desperation on their part, turning to guerilla warfare so soon." He motioned the Admiral to a chair, remained standing himself. "It may even be to our advantage in the long run. Sometimes there's nothing better for a cocky fighter than to take a solid right to the jaw—let's him know he's in a real fight. Coffee?" Frank shook his head, and Hayes continued his oration.

"The upcoming battle isn't going to be as easy as the last one, though this time we'll be more experienced. Obviously word has leaked out that we plan to go after the D.G. Provinces. They can't know where we plan to hit them, of course (the last three digits of the attack coordinates were only now being relayed to the engineers at the Gate), but we could still run across the greater part of the Coalition forces before we're through. And who knows? It might not end there."

"What do you mean?" Frank's look was puzzled.

"I mean that Congress and the liberal press are giving Stone a tougher time on this than I first let on. He's got the authority and resources to supply the Third Fleet, but when the House will come around with full appropriations is another question."

"But surely after this attack the Soviets will intervene? Why. . .we can't take on Soviet Space with just the Third Fleet." For a moment Hayes stopped his pacing, and unconsciously ground his teeth. He did

this with his back to the admiral, but realized that it might still look odd. He continued.

"All the same, I want to hold back as many of our ships as possible, keep losses to a minimum. And that means the launch-pilots, and our own gunners, are going to have to fight like hell."

Frank was silent. Hayes took a deep breath and half sighed. "Well, maybe we'll get reinforcements sooner. One battle at a time! For now we've got the best men, the best equipment, AND the best leadership." He winked with his eyelid only. "Well. Let's go back and see if the Germans have any more surprises for us."

The man rose, shook the hand Hayes offered, and both returned to the bridge.

"Got him, sir!" came a young voice, almost playful. "Knocked him out before he could fire; beat the damn computer, too." The man, facing the controls of Auxiliary Laser Deployment, had obviously not seen the two generals re-enter.

"And just exactly what have you GOT?" said Frank disparagingly. The soldier whirled in his chair, and for a moment his face registered alarm. But very quickly the look of boyish confidence returned.

"One of those German torpedo-ships, Admiral. Neutralized the missile, too."

"Correct sir," added the main gunnery officer. Frank started to say something, but Hayes lightly touched his arm.

"That's very good shooting, gunner. But what would have happened if another 'torpedo ship' came out of warp while you were celebrating? I assure you, you'll have no time for games tomorrow. And to be sure that I make my point, I'm going to assign you a quota. Knock out twelve more targets tomorrow, and you might even retain your present rank. Do I make myself quite clear?"

The young man looked confused, turned to the gunnery officer as for support. But aware of Frank's eyes upon him, this older man nodded sternly, and the gunner had no choice.

"Yes, Mr. Secretary." Angry, humiliated, he turned back to his station. I'LL GET MORE THAN TWELVE, YOU OVERSTUFFED SON OF A BITCH. Such were his thoughts all that morning, and the thoughts that carried over, and were turned to hatred in the midst of the next day's fighting.

Returning after a time to the Intercom Studio, Hayes addressed the assembly again, this time in different tone and with stronger words. And like pondering horses to the whip, they responded.

But not all of them alike.

*

Squadron-leader Heinrich Dorfman, in the last of three German ships to complete the mission, had held himself back on purpose, hoping to arrive last and unexpectedly—to do real, rather than symbolic damage. And when his lead signal bounced back to him the image of Goethe, still some distance away, along with the outward-bound trail of the supercarrier, he set his course. He did this carefully, staying just above tracking speed, in a wide arc, hoping to come upon the Dreadnought in a time and place not as thoroughly guarded.

And like the two younger pilots who had come so far, his mind had long since crossed the line of rational human endurance. Now, when he closed his eyes he saw the gray, rotted-meat faces of old men crawling with maggots. He saw random sexual parts horribly distorted: almost physical the effect of their ugliness upon him. His spirit had given up all hope of survival: strange voices. His tortured neck and back fused with the paroxysms of a migraine to form the single and inescapable sensation of concrete and iron, bent-forward pain. He felt he no longer had eyes, but that the image of the scope shot straight through the empty skull-sockets and into his brain. The last remnants of heart and courage despaired.

But now, on the verge of his thirtieth hour, with the target in reach, it was almost as though his mind were no longer attached to the body. Numb fatigue had shaken it off like the parting soul shakes off flesh. Nothing remained but his mission and his will.

He was ready. He would do it. He tried to rouse himself mentally for the last decisive seconds. He began to slow out of light speed.

The time was now. Not too fast.....

:00- The ship in sight, minor adjustment.
:01- Locked on.
:02- Fire. WHAT THE HELL IS WRONG?
:03- Indicator light. PROJECTILE NON-FUNCTIONAL
:04- DAMN IT! Manual disengage, back to—
:05- Warp. Robot batteries aboard Dreadnought destroy the
cast-off projectile. Fan-burst of ruby lasers miss the second target,
fire again.

:57- Dorfman breaks his hand against the ceiling of the inner hull. He had
failed. "Damn it! GOD DAMN IT!"

21:12- The squadron leader slows his tiny ship and continues to steer toward the sun, Athena.
Slowing further still, he places himself directly in line with sun and planet, close enough to Athena to
distort tracking. Sends out his sounding beam.

34:29- Dorfman continues to wait for his signal to proceed him to Goethe. The time arrives. With the
last of his e-light capacity and deep-space fuel, he fires toward the distant speck of blue-green ocean
world.

49:50- The third echo of his signal tells him he is drawing near. Slows to sub-light and raises entry
shields, makes other preparations to enter atmosphere.

1:13:30- Entry halfway completed: elevation 1200 Kilometers. The buffeting of atmosphere increases.
Aware that he is being tracked and pursued by Alliance fighters, he makes jerking motions with the
vessel, simulating (and nearly causing) atmospheric destruction.

1:31:37- Alliance fighters draw within firing range. Dorfman mimics a lifeless crash-landing into the
dark, heaving waters. The pursuit ships hover for a time. Sixty foot waves show only scattered debris,
no signs of life. They break off.

1:55:24- Czech submarin-guerilla vessel picks up coded recovery signal, makes toward the jettisoned
escape pod, small and coffin-shaped.

3:27:02- Submarin vessel recovers German pilot, returns to a safer depth and
slinks carefully back to guerilla base.

5:56:00- A large underwater door, thoroughly camouflaged, opens in the root of tower-like Manta
Island. Vessel enters, continues forward, then slowly rises to the surface of a vast, underground hollow.
Heinrich Dorfman begins his exile, which will last until the end of the war.

* * *

At 1440 hours, a bay door was opened aboard the Dreadnought, and a small speed-shuttle emerged.
Major Janson brought her to a safe distance from the mother ship, double-checked coordinates, and
took a deep breath. Slowly he engaged the main engines, preparing for light-speed.

"God help us..... At least I'll get to see Jenny and the kids."

He achieved the necessary momentum, switched on to full power, and turned the controls over to the
computer. Seven minutes later the bomb detonated, and the ship burst into a thousand fragments.

His Christian God did nothing to save him.

.....

V

At 0700 the following day the Dreadnought approached the Star Gate, whose hexagonal frame gleamed coldly among the stars like the blue-black barrel of a gun, surrounded by the vessels of its makers.

Linear skeletons, huge anti-matter projectors lay dormant within, their task completed. A soft-glistening sheet of silver, like a fine spray of undulating mist, shrouded the multiplied blackness beyond. This protective film began to grow vague as the rounded monolith of the Carrier, here and there ribbed or jagged, continued to advance patiently, with measured speed.

This silent Gate to Cerberus, newest tool of Armageddon, like those before it showed not the slightest emotion at its use, only cold, mechanical efficiency. The curving prow of Dreadnought, insane metallic smile, pushed forward at the mark, and was wrapped in a clear sheen of brilliance.

To a suddenly humbled engineering vessel that viewed this passage from the side (though itself a work of successive human genius), it appeared indeed a magician's trick: the monstrous vessel was reduced by small fractions. Length was seduced, and did not reappear. And then the thrusting phallus was gone. The framework was all that remained.

Aboard the carrier the rush of scintillating motion had begun. Even those crews aboard ships within the great ship, their minds bent forward in preparation for combat, could feel the sudden thrill of weightless, bodiless movement, and taste the ghoulish hum that began at low, convulsive pitch, then rose through noteless octaves, whirling, then whining high and unbearable, then gone beyond the range of hearing.

Aboard the vessel only Hayes seemed unmoved by the lightless passage, like falling down a colossal well to the heart of a venomous, robotoid planet. All ship's power was lost, and in that phantom black those who did not already grip at chair and support-beam bent to their knees as if in prayer for deliverance.

But not Hayes. In his mind, he descended into Hell like the crucified Christ, whose lanced breast had flowed blood and water of forgiveness. Except that Hayes did not forgive. For soon he would rise again, invincible.

True to the hollow-world metaphor, the ship, upon reaching the center of its plunge, passed through and slowed gradually, and sensation became more bearable. The witch-sound returned with its screeching whine; but soon the worst was passed. And like the short-lived fright of the daring child, who has pumped and pulled the playground swing to its highest arc and is suddenly weightless, cast loose from the normal laws of earth, feels a moment's fear, but then with the rush of downward motion again feels himself a conqueror, who has faced the darkness unafraid, so the men of the Third Fleet, once more surviving the nightmare world, felt themselves strong and hard, little boys afraid of nothing, marching boldly toward their moment of destiny and schoolyard fight.

And all at once their power returned. On the re-lighted bridge men quickly assumed martial attitudes, and those whose functions allowed it watched the screens. Another silvery sheet appeared before them.

Soon this, too, was parted. Stars returned to the sky, along with the gold-orangish hue of a nearby planet. And behind and to one side of them, though still far off, a detachment of the Coalition Fleet whirled about and began to pursue. From the orbit of the planet as well, rose a small and desperate defense.

Hayes' voice boomed on the intercom, superceding sectarian commanders. "All vessels prepare to attack. Chutes one through twelve lower and discharge. Enemy at five o'clock, bearing 3 - 4 Mark. Outward batteries key on planetary forces. Give 'em hell boys; this one's for real!"

Within minutes over two hundred fighters, cruisers and destroyers had emerged from the death-womb of the Carrier, formed into squadrons and flotillas, turned to face the enemy and begun to move forward. That number again, including the four titanic battleships, were held in reserve.

The straggle of fighters and destroyers from the planet's last line of defense the launched ships ignored altogether, these being handled easily by the multitude of blazing turrets aboard the Dreadnought. One or two handfuls managed to elude fire long enough to harry the rear of the advancing ranks; but these were little more than beetles biting at the legs of wolves. A single heavy cruiser would turn its guns in their direction, and end forever the one-sided argument.

The ships that advanced to meet them were more formidable. Suspecting a move of this kind (but needing to suspect a dozen other possibilities as well), the Coalition had detached eighty vessels, nearly a quarter of its strength, to patrol the area, and defend Friedrich Schiller, the beloved and irreplaceable East German home planet. And when the time came, though sleep had been scarce and tension high, they were ready to fight. Consisting mainly of German forces, they needed no high-sounding words to give blood in defense of their homeland.

In open Space battles of this kind, where there was no constricting lattice of energy fields to hinder movement (as at the Battle of Athena), the aggressor held the decided advantage. For here there was no barricades or tactically advantageous points, only a three dimensional sea of emptiness in all directions, here and there pricked by planet islands, themselves destructible and a hindrance to mobility. For this reason both sides had attempted to charge, and the resulting collision of forces at once split the conflagration into a dissipated struggle without borders, boundaries or points of reference.

And for the Coalition pilots and vessel commanders, this proved to be fatal. Outnumbered nearly three to one by more modern, swifter craft, needing to be watchful of every quarter at once, aware that soon the Dreadnought would add its considerable firepower to the fray, and thus needing an early knockout. . .it was impossible. They fought with courage and intensity, but so did the Americans. And though they knew it was no game (some of the Americans did also), and though they fought for home and family, this could not make them react quicker or shoot straighter than their more youthful counterparts, whose duel ambition—to stay alive and cover themselves with glory—combined with simply better equipment to give them the clear and early upper hand.

There would be no repeat of the Battle of Britain.

After ninety minutes of butchery, the bravest socialist pilots had had enough. Those who could, turned and fled into warp. Those who could not, were cut to pieces by the Dreadnought.

There were no prisoners taken.

*

While at the conclusion of this skirmish some faces among the ranks of the Commonwealth force beamed with confidence and victory, Hayes' was not one of them. He allowed his men roughly three minutes to exchange war hoops and congratulations, then ordered his next deployment. And he ordered his new Communications Officer, stationed on the bridge, to make contact with Schiller, which now lay exposed.

At first the planet refused to acknowledge the attempt, feigning interference. It was obvious they were trying to buy time. But when the Dreadnought, which continued to advance, began to lower its four great battleships, and Hayes, on an uncoded channel ordered them, once deployed, to take up pseudo-orbital positions around it and begin planetary destruct sequence, the East German leadership dropped its futile ploy. On the large central screen of the bridge, the erect figure of the Prime Minister appeared, seated at the head of a long table surrounded by military advisors. His face was gray and stern. Though his English was good, he chose for the moment to make it harsh and clipped.

"Yes, Mr. Secretary."

"Good morning, Schultz. I won't banter. I want your planetary shields lowered, and your orbiting Artillery Stations—yes, I know about them—silenced and evacuated. They will be destroyed in one hour's time. Also, I want you to relay my signal to General Itjes."

"First let me be sure I understand you. Are you offering terms for our surrender?"

"I'm doing nothing of the kind and you know it. Your planet and your people are, for the moment, my hostage. I will reestablish contact in one hour and ten minutes. At that time I will expect a patch-through to Itjes. In the meantime my ships will continue to take up positions around you. If they are fired upon, even once, I'll turn the battleships loose on the cities." He signaled his Com Officer to end the transmission.

The Third Fleet, three quarters of which was now discharged from the carrier, began to form up into fully operational task forces, each with a battleship in its center, and to move into place in a wide belt encircling the planet, then turned facing outward like a bristle of spears. Or more aptly, since the guns of the battleships faced inward as well, like a crown of thorns.

Hayes' plan was cruelly simple: to put a gun to the head of Schiller, and force General Itjes and the

remainder of the Coalition fleet into a fight they couldn't win. His deepest concern was for the passage of time, which might bring enemies and forces unlooked-for. By recent intelligence the nearest significant Soviet presence was at least a week distant. But how many of the smaller nations of the Coalition might be willing to risk their own national forces, it was impossible to say. But here Hayes held to the confidence of the bully, believing that each would be more concerned with their own personal survival, and thus bring them all into peril.

The allotted time passed. The task forces stood at the ready. Itjes continued to move swiftly toward the system, and the entire planet scrambled into plans of evacuation that few had believed would ever be used.

And when they received news of the plight of fully half their space-bound population, and of their dearest home save earth, the East German forces of other Coalition patrols, near and far, with leave or without it, broke off and began to converge on Schiller. Were it not for the time factor—the majority of these would not arrive (or even receive the message) for days—Hayes might have had a problem.

And even in the coming duel with Itjes' divided force, the scales might have been more evenly balanced, but for the simple disparity in the weapons-systems of a wealthy superpower, and those of a group of nations which had to live, buy, and protect within their means. The four Commonwealth battleships were of a class possessed by only three Powers in the galaxy—themselves, the Soviet Space Republics (which didn't deal them out), and the German States, who had no apparent love for their sundered countrymen. Also added to the equation:

The two remaining Coalition carriers, ten years old and of a lesser Soviet series, could fit together inside the Dreadnought, and had not one-third the long-range firepower. Neither was capable of extended warp; and needless to say, they had no star gate, and thus no surprise capability. They were built for defense, and the Coalition defenses had been breached. How Hayes (or anyone else) could take pleasure in the prospect of a battle at such clearly unequal odds, remained a mystery.

He was connected to Helmut Itjes.

"Yes, General Hayes. You have our people by the throat; what do you want?" Itjes had lived too long.....

At this point Hayes blanked out his own visual transmission. He then wrote out his replies on paper, to be read by the Communications Officer. He was going to leave the enemy no proof of the conversation about to follow. A short pause, then the young man read:

"I want you, General Itjes. If the First Combat Fleet will engage us, to the death, the civilians may go free—afterwards."

"And if we refuse?"

"I will blanket the planet with microwaves. It would be a shame to destroy. . .such beautiful architecture."

"What kind of animal are you?" snapped Itjes. He now saw, beyond all doubt, that he was dealing with a madman. The written notes, read by a young voice without malice or understanding, had sent a chill straight through him. They reminded him strangely, uncannily, of the techniques employed by Adolph Eichmann and the Hitler S.S.

... "The one who's going to see you in Hell."

"I will attack when the Dresden detachment joins us. Then God HELP you."

"You have twelve hours, Helmut."

"My name is ITJES!"

The screen went blank.

* * *

The Coalition First Combat Fleet, both detachments, stood fast at a safe distance from the hornet's nest that surrounded Schiller, and formed into a single front to face them.

Itjes stood among his officers and technicians on the bridge of the carrier 'Smolensk', staring at the

blank communications screen. Five minutes before he had told Hayes flatly that there would be no engagement without his recordable promise—both visual and vocal—of the free evacuation of the planet, regardless of the outcome of the battle. This helpless waiting, for a reply so paramount, and yet so utterly beyond his control, was an agony of the human spirit.

The request was perfectly reasonable, and Hayes had every intention of granting it. He merely wanted the extra time to study his opponent's weaponry and deployment. There was something to be learned even from the loser of a given confrontation, and Itjes had the reputation of being a tough and resourceful foe. So he watched, and made mental notes: two-hundred and sixty lesser craft against his three-hundred deployed, and the superior guns of the Dreadnought. This should teach his boys to fight.

The Commonwealth forces began to move forward. Hayes appeared on the screen, flanked by Admiral Frank. "You have your promise, General. Win or lose, utterly, and the population goes free."

Utterly.

Itjes bit his lip till it bled, ordered his forces to attack.

*

The main battle went much the same as the skirmish which had preceded it. The Coalition's flyers were, on the whole more experienced, more disciplined, in some ways better trained; and for a time they did fairly well. They kept their forces together, found cracks in the fences of their enemies, and were able to weed out and destroy the greener of the American combatants.

But soon the blows were raining hard and heavy upon them, and coming from every direction at once. Squadrons and formations were broken up, strategies broken down. And after a time, good and lesser soldiers alike, veterans and younger men, husbands, heroes and cowards, were killed by shots that did not discriminate. No magical God-force protected the just and perseverant; no hand of Providence reached down. Men and women died, adding their silent numbers to the ancient mass of corpses piled in an endless grave in the name of War, because men had not yet learned that name was foul.

The Coalition forces kept fighting for five hours, fighting and dying, waiting for an order to retreat that never came, fighting and dying and waiting for an order to retreat that never came, then a surrender that never came, fighting and dying and waiting for an order to retreat and then a surrender, and an end to the carnage that never came, fighting and dying and waiting for an order to retreat and then a surrender and an end to the carnage, and some kind of sanity that never came, fighting and dying and waiting for an order to retreat and then a surrender and some kind of sanity, then simple deliverance, that never came—except in death.

The Commonwealth lost eighty ships, mostly fighters and destroyers, in annihilating the entire Coalition Fleet. Ten hours later the last evacuation vessels left the planet, though many inhabitants remained behind of their own volition. The four Battleships took up their equidistant points about the equator of the Friedrich Schiller, firing a long and continuous heat and shock laser burst into its core. The planet's surface writhed and convulsed with earthquakes and eruptions for perhaps two hours, till the outer crust was broken into crumbling islands in a molten sea, and what was left of the face fell apart. The Battleships ceased their barrage, leaving it to die its final death of fire, lava and smoke. The Secretary chose to leave it thus, rather than blow it apart, to further anger the Soviets and goad them into reprisals. That such a decision might have other consequences he knew, but at that moment his mind was driven by a single impulse only. He wanted, with all his soul, a full-scale World War.

Several hours later in prearranged rendezvous, the Third Fleet's engineering vessels followed the earlier course of the Dreadnought through the star gate. Immediately upon arrival (and finding that things had gone their way), they turned about and began to construct a second entrance, leading back the way they had come. Since the corridor itself was already in existence, needing only a return inlet, this took less than forty-eight hours. Then, all Commonwealth vessels tucked up safe inside the mother, the Third Fleet returned to the limits of the Athena system, destroying the further gate, dismantling the nearer, behind them. The Dreadnought then proceeded, at just above tracking speed, to a new and untraceable location.

Hayes had won again.

VI

News of the Battle of Schiller did not reach Earth (those portions controlled by the United Commonwealth) until July 3, one week after the fact, and one day before the annual celebration of the nation's Independence. The President received from Hayes at that time a three line, uncoded message:

THE COALITION FIRST COMBAT FLEET IS NEUTRALIZED AND THE PLANET SCHILLER DESTROYED. THE PUPPET GOVERNMENTS OF THE POST-EUROPEAN COMMUNIST PACT ARE COWED AND IN DISARRAY. WE HAVE DEALT ANOTHER SERIOUS BLOW TO SOVIET HOPES OF EXPANSIONISM.

In the same pouch came Admiral Frank's report to the Joint Chiefs of Staff, giving a detailed account of the battle, and of the performance of the Third Fleet. For the first time a list of casualties was included.

The third item contained within the high-speed bullet-pouch, was a carefully edited audio-visual program intended for consumption by the public and the press. This two-hour propaganda masterpiece consisted of selected scenes from the confrontation, a supposed eyewitness account of East German atrocities, and a visual 'letter' from a young Texas pilot to his wife and baby son. Sitting on his bunk aboard the Dreadnought, his handsome face, drawling voice and simple, straightforward manner were an enchantment of rugged innocence and male American charm.

*

"Donna, Jimmy. I just wanted to tell you that I love you and I miss you, and I think of you every day. I also wanted you to know that I believe in what we're fighting for way out here, and that someday I hope to make you as proud of me, as I am proud to be a part of this great cause.

"Because ya know, truth and freedom may sound like just words, to some folks who don't appreciate what they have, or don't feel the emptiness and suffering of those forced to live without them. But being out here, and seeing what I've seen, you come to realize that not everyone's as lucky as we are in America. You learn that there are governments who so fear God's truth, that they'll subject their own brothers to a police-state existence, just to insure that the Christian message of freedom and hope is never heard.

"Now I'm not pretending to know everything there is to know about life or politics, and it's a terrible tragedy to have to go to war just to give back to people rights and dignities that never should have been taken away from them. And I won't lie to you, Donna. Despite the advantages God's given us, in weaponry and leadership, I may be hurt, or even killed, before the fighting is over.

"But if that's so then I'll die proud, knowing that I served my country as well as any man could, whether some faint-hearted politicians in Washington stood behind me or not. And Jimmy, if something should happen and you have to grow up without a papa, I can only hope that someday, God willing, you'll have the same chance that I do now, to fly and fight for the greatest nation in the galaxy, the United Commonwealth of America.

"Well, I guess that's all for now. Give my love to Mama, and God bless."

This bullet-pouch was not, however, the first word that Stone had heard of the massacre. The day before he had received a tele-communication from Soviet Premier Denisov, short and to the point.

"Mr. President. Is it war you want?"

At this point Stone motioned in his Vice-President, Jordan Plant, who was standing by the door. The visual screens of both powers remained blank.

"No, Premier Denisov. That's the last thing I want."

"Then why does your Secretary of State continue to murder in your name? I am sure you have heard what happened in East German Cerberus?"

Stone turned a helpless look toward Plant, who first lifted his hands (he didn't know), then moved

closer and whispered in his ear: "Whatever Hayes has done, now more than ever we have to tell him."

Stone took a deep breath.

"Secretary Hayes is no longer acting under my orders. And I did not order the attack on Athena."

There was no pause on the part of Denisov. "Now you must tell me something I do not already know. But I ask you plainly, Mr. Stone. What do you plan to do about it?"

Plant quickly wrote a reply on his note-board and handed it to the president, who read it with all the gravity he could muster.

"I have not yet given up hope that General Hayes can be peacefully dissuaded from his present course. But be assured, one way or the other, he will be brought to justice."

"And let me assure YOU, Mr. President, that our patience is at an end. You have thirteen days to return me a better answer, or the Soviet Space Republics will deal with the Third Fleet ourselves."

Stone paused, but the words were his own. "You know I can't let you do that."

Whether these last words were heard or not, there was no reply. The channel was closed. Luther Bacon, White House Chief-of-Staff, was then brought in and apprised of the situation.

The next day, after receiving Hayes' bullet and trying (unsuccessfully) to keep its contents from the press, the three held their council. Bacon paced thoughtfully. Plant, seated, touched his fingertips lightly together while Stone, disconsolate, felt the walls crumbling around him. Half an hour before, despite all their efforts, he had received a phone call from a member of the New York Press Corps friendly to the administration, informing him that a duplicate pouch had been received by its members, and that the news was spreading like wildfire.

Finally the President exploded. "What are we going to DO? We have less than two weeks to answer the Russians, and it will take nearly that long to send and receive one more message from Hayes."

"Quite right," said Plant, the unspoken leader of the three. "Luther, if you'll come with me to my office, we'll begin work on our reply to General Hayes. I'm afraid it's time to take strong measures against him."

"That son of a bitch!" fumed Stone, hurling a vase at the wall. "That son of a BITCH."

"That won't help this time," said Bacon. "Believe me."

"Gentlemen," said Plant seriously. "I suggest we get to work. Try to calm yourself, Edgar. We'll meet here again in an hour's time."

When the two men returned to the Oval Office with the drafted document, they found Stone in an attitude of despair. He listened blankly as Bacon read the finished product, signed it where and when he was asked.

"Just words," he said listlessly. "Like all the words I've been spouting for twenty years, they don't mean a thing. Hayes does his talking with a gun, and soon Denisov will do the same. What now, Jordan? What of the Joint Chiefs—will they betray us, too?"

"I don't know," said Plant levelly. "But as to your first question, I'd say we have to send our communication to the Secretary, then prepare a full statement to the press. We've got to get this thing out in the open. We've got to tell the truth, then let the people decide."

"Of course you're right." Stone paused, then said simply. "Should I resign, Jordan? You're much more qualified to handle this—"

Plant stood up and waved his hands in desperate denial. For though his life's whole ambition could there be suddenly realized, he saw in the sharp clarity of his mind, heightened and given truer perspective by the crisis which hung thick all around them, that it would be wrong, and possibly disastrous, to assume the Presidency now. And though much that was good in him lay fallen by the way, discarded and forgotten among the endless compromises needed to keep him on the road to his one desire, he too had a line he would not cross.

TOO MANY FAIRY TALES AS A CHILD, he told himself. But once made, his decision was final. He could not sell all that he was, for any price.

"No, Edgar. Don't resign. The last thing we need now is added instability. We may find ourselves in the midst of a Constitutional crisis soon..... Don't you see?" He felt a strange passion rising inside him. "It's not just you or I that are under attack, but the whole system. The work of Jefferson and Adams, and so many others, is receiving probably the toughest challenge it's ever faced. But it's never cracked before, and believe me, there've been plenty of chances. You," he said slowly, emphatically, "are the duly elected President of the United Commonwealth. Hayes is no more than a crazed demagogue with a gun. We've got to hold on to that. We've got to hold on....."

And then suddenly, incredulously, he laughed. And in that momentary freeing of the heart, so long caged and disciplined toward a single end, he felt a childish joy, and release so pure that warm tears started at his eyes. Stone looked at him, bewildered.

"Don't you see it, Edgar? Don't you really? The only difference between us is that you never let yourself play the hero in schoolyard games, thinking you weren't good enough, or just being bitter about your father, or some other damned thing. You're no worse than I am, believe me." Slowly he mastered his mirth, though the feeling of defiant freedom lingered. "We're neither one of us heroes, my friend; but it seems we're all we've got. You need more illusions, Edgar—they keep you longer from the void. Try on the mask of virtue next. It may save our asses yet."

"But what about the Soviets? What can we possibly do in thirteen days?"

"We'll cross that bridge when we come to it."

"Or find it washed out."

"Maybe. But for now we've got to deal with Hayes. 'Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof.'"

Stone thought for a moment. "Who said that, Jordan?"

"Jesus Christ."

"I didn't know you were a believer."

"I'm not."

The three summoned in Press Secretary Miller, who could no longer be fed bits and pieces of the truth. Robert Weiss, Stone's other top adviser (and firmly in General Hayes' camp) continued to demand to see the President. Bacon continued to deny the request.

The message was sent to Hayes, who now made no secret of his whereabouts: ten days from the limits of Soviet Space. Unreachable by stealth, yet tantalizingly close.

The pieces continued to move across the board. The middle-game, which wasn't a game at all, had begun.

VII

The trouble and damage caused by the rift within the Commonwealth, and the subsequent break in relations with Moscow, were in no way limited to the lesser and intermediate socialist powers that came under Soviet influence, nor did they wholly end with the eventual cessations of those hostilities.

The growing instability of a dozen far-reaching theatres, had first cautiously, and then more freely, burst into expansionist violence. It was almost as if the perpetrators of these lesser conflicts had simultaneously realized that Law along the frontiers was diminished, and waited only long enough to be sure they were not caught alone in the looting and thievery. And a riot, once begun, is very difficult to bring under control.

Choose a metaphor. The Marshall of an Old West mining community gunned down, and the town taken over by outlaws. The blackout of a large metropolis, with bands of looters roaming the streets. The sudden collapse of an Empire, or the death of an heirless king. By any name the resulting darkness, the anarchy of violence, remained the same. With this exception only. The Law was not wholly

diminished, as two of the four Superpowers remained largely unaffected. And the chief pirateers were now nations, and there were, therefore, (supposedly) higher motives, and diplomatic niceties involved.

Because respectable governments, if they want to stay in power, don't call themselves outlaws; and to their collective mind the words 'occupation' and 'theft', 'war' and 'murder', are not interchangeable. Though the difference might have been hard to explain to those on the wrong side of the gun.

That the Belgians and Swiss struck again, and first, was perhaps not surprising. That the Arabs and Israelis had yet one more go at each other, perhaps little more so. That the German States continued to sell arms to nearly anyone with the money to buy—they had taken that job over from the Americans and Soviets—was, after all, only to be expected. And if the Dutch lost nearly all they had in the outlying sectors, bitter and friendless but for help from Sweden which arrived too late, it was not, to some, considered a lasting tragedy.

In fact it was quite extraordinary how the moral judgments of those not directly involved (and not wanting trouble themselves) were able to bend to accommodate the bloodshed all around them. Not that some didn't mourn, and all weren't scared and angry. But at such times the Neville Chamberlains and Arthur Vandenberg's of the world are always found in great abundance; and when was the last time YOU tried to break up a fight while others watched, or came to the aid of a lesser acquaintance clearly wronged?

Man's new life among the cold, distant stars, whatever other effects it might have had upon humanity, had not, as the romantic had hoped at the dawn of the Space Age, brought people closer together, or taught us once and for all the need for brotherhood, peace, and mutual understanding. For human nature is nothing if not stubborn, and where there is a will to be ignorant, somehow a way will be found.

Like a tiny blaze of ignorance, prejudice and Fear: fanned by the wind, the fire had spread.

VIII

Edgar Stone strode down the aisle of the House of Representatives, the papers of the speech rolled into a tight scroll in his hand. The applause customary at such an entrance struck him now as feeble, and utterly beside the point.

He was not the only one to feel this. There was an odd note of hollowness and uncertainty in the sound, and those who clapped could not have said themselves why they did so. Had Stone come to ask for a Declaration of War? Against whom? What was the meaning of this gathering, with legislators of both House and Senate alike standing tense and erect, and cameras poking this way and that? The very wood of that chamber seemed suddenly old and darkling, and in the air a thick tension brooded like the coming of a storm. All talk and speculation lay dead and in the past. The gathering was seated with a rustling sound that echoed dully and impatiently.

Stone reached the podium and paused, looking frightened. Surely the pretense of enlightenment and self-importance in which he characteristically wrapped his 'fellow Americans' would ring false in those halls, sullen and filled with ghosts.

He laid down his papers, despairing to speak. Never before had he felt himself so plainly laid out on the surgeon's table, under the unblinking eye of the camera, waiting for the knife. He wrestled back the lump in his throat. He spoke.

"You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." These words were spoken long ago by the man whom many of us profess to be the Son of God. His ideals were ever kept in the minds of those who shaped this nation, who lived and died—" He nearly sobbed, though he could not have said why. "Who fought for this country in its darkest hours..... It is in His name that we are now asked to go to war." His voice grew stronger, though again he could not have said why.

"And yet this same truth He spoke of, and that many so-called patriots now trumpet so loudly, has been denied us, buried beneath a flood of half-truths and propaganda. You..... WE have been deceived, and made to commit murder in the name of the things we hold most dear."

A murmur of astonishment ran through the crowd, and those who watched from every corner of the Commonwealth, whether live or distance delayed, felt strange and conflicting emotions stir inside them.

"This very night, July 15, the time of our self-deception, our imagined safety, is over. A dreadful choice lies before us." Again the murmur started, but Stone cut it short, fearing at any moment to lose his courage.

"The Secretary of State of the United Commonwealth, Charles William Hayes, has attempted to blackmail his President, and force us all into a war that can only result in the loss of millions of lives, if not the utter collapse of galactic civilization as we know it." He forced himself to go on. "And there are some within the military establishment. . .within this very room, who may stand behind him in the attempt....."

"I did not order the attack on Athena. I did not authorize, and flatly condemn, the ruthless slaughter at the Battle of Schiller."

At this point Stone grew angry, and felt a deep swelling of the heart that astonished him: the throb of genuine righteousness. Or so it seemed to him then. He glared at the assembly, placed his hands firmly on the lip of the podium, and continued in a voice he could hardly believe was his own.

"This - is - the UNITED COMMONWEALTH OF AMERICA, created by some of the ablest minds in history, founded in courage, and dedicated to the dream of freedom for ALL. This - is - MY HOME! This is NOT Nazi Germany. And so help me God, I will not let it become a slaughter-house for the obsessions of a madman! This is not a nation run by generals, or ruled at the point of a gun." He realized he had strayed from the speech, and he felt himself waver. But stubbornly he pushed on.

"The Constitution established three branches of government, to insure a system of check and balances: to insure that no man, or group of men, became so powerful as to override all others, and manipulate or destroy the common decency of the people.

"And yet FORMER General Hayes would change all that, to say that if the President was not to his liking, or the Congress would not give him what he wanted, he could break away, and make war on his own. He has done it. And to be sure that we will follow him, he has struck the Soviets across the face, and challenged them to a duel to the death.

"Even now I cannot tell you how events will turn....." He paused, looked down at the speech before him. Ten pages at least remained. But his passion and energies were spent. He wondered then briefly if he had done the right thing. He told himself the question was irrelevant: he had done all he could.

"My Vice President will now tell you the details, and how we plan to deal with this crisis." He stepped down, and strode out of the silent room.

Plant, stunned but not yet daunted, stepped down from his seat beside the Speaker of the House, and took up the papers left for him. Omitting the passages and emotional phrases now rendered superfluous by Stone's barrage, he read evenly, and after a time, calmly and clearly. He relayed the pertinent facts behind the rift, including, in full, the letters of Hayes to the President. He also spoke, as dispassionately as he could, of the threat of war with the Soviets, hoping this added danger would not tip the scales against them. He concluded with the following:

"It seems to me that the last line of our National Anthem is especially relevant now. For its undying question, asks not only IF we stand, but how we stand, and why. To that we MUST answer yes: our flag still waves, over the land of the FREE, and the home of the BRAVE. And not just brave enough to die in a war that accomplishes nothing, but to face up to our mistakes, and put an end to the bloodshed that neither side wants. We must have the courage to cast aside folly and reckless pride, and say NO to a would-be dictator, who would leave us no such choice.

"As of this moment, and by direct order of the President and Commander-in-Chief, Charles William Hayes is no longer Secretary of State. He is no longer a member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, nor a ranking member of the military establishment. He is hereby ordered to return at once with the forces he has commandeered; and any who choose to further defy the Constitution of the United Commonwealth, Mr. Hayes included, will be brought to trial for treason."

Here he felt the same trepidation that Stone had experienced. Had they gone too far? Or would this forced reasoning break through?

"We regret the necessity for this order, and that we have not been able to be more forthcoming until now. But quite obviously, matters of the gravest national security are involved. We must deal with

former Secretary Hayes at once, then turn our attention to Moscow. We will continue to seek a peaceful means of ending both disputes. But let no one doubt our resolve.

"May God be with us in this just endeavor. Thank you."

Plant left the chamber, to the same, deafening silence.

IX

On the morning of the day after, Stone, Plant and Bacon sat at a curved table facing a viewscreen connected by direct phone-link to the Kremlin. For their own part they sent a visual projection. After exchanging terse formalities, Denisov did the same. His square face with its black hair and thick eyebrows appeared, the dark clear eyes beneath, scrutinizing each face carefully. On one side of him sat the Chairman of the Presidium, on the other, the Minister of Defense. Denisov did not wait to be asked.

"A pretty speech, to be sure, and an eloquent letter to our ambassador in Washington. It is too bad that General Hayes will never hear of it. He might have made an even prettier speech in return."

"And why shouldn't he hear of it?" asked Stone, unwisely. "The broadcast and letter of dismissal have been relayed to him."

"Mr. President. You have your Star Gate, for now, but it seems that your communications networks are grossly inferior to our own. Or perhaps your intelligence services have wavered in their loyalties, and are no longer reliable. The Third Fleet has not been at its last stated position for days." At this Stone shot a quick glance at Plant, who remained impassive. "Your bird has flown the cage. Can you promise me it will not land again to our detriment?"

The President scowled and would have switched off the visual, but Plant put a hand to his wrist. His manner was calm and unruffled.

"Premier Denisov. You are known as a man of many facets, and once again you hide your true intentions. That Hayes has gone is neither surprising, nor wholly unexpected. But you play a dangerous game when you speak of military capabilities, and imagined weaknesses. I cannot believe that you really want a full-scale confrontation. You know as well as I do, such a war would be disastrous to us both."

Now it was Denisov who scowled, and began to speak roughly. But Plant interrupted him firmly.

"Let's cut to the chase. You want to turn the current instability to your own advantage. You want to seize new territories. But before you do, I'd advise you to look at the larger picture. Hayes is out of control, and until we stop him, millions of innocents are in peril. You have your interests and we have ours; but I cannot believe so many human lives do not concern you. I'm asking you to put aside our differences, and help us make things right again. Help us bring Hayes to justice, peacefully, and with a minimum of bloodshed."

"Help you?" scoffed Denisov. "Help YOU? We could have put an end to this nonsense before it began! Or have you forgotten the Cantons, the little play-toy Nazis who started it all? You made another pretty speech then, about non-interference, and the self-determination of free peoples. And yet again when the Belgians and Swiss openly declared themselves. We could have crushed them like the pitiful insects they are! But again you tied our hands. You may take little pleasure in the fact, but whatever our dealings with you, one more attack from that quarter and we will end their puny noise forever. Help YOU!"

Plant stuck to his guns, though with difficulty. How did one dispute facts that were essentially correct, however twisted for personal gain?

"NONE of this, Premier Denisov, NONE of it, is relevant now. We have admitted our mistakes, and extended to you the hand of reconciliation. Do you take it? Make your purpose clear."

"Very well, Mr. VICE-president. I will tell you exactly where the peoples of the Soviet Space Republics stand." He paused, as if calling to mind a prepared speech.

"We are not yet at full-scale war with you. But we have no intention of letting Hayes run loose, or of having our hands tied anywhere in the galaxy, in dealing with the crisis as we see fit. And should we encounter ANY hostile force within Soviet space or that of our allies, we shall deal with them as declared enemies. If you should reach the Third Fleet before us, and bring it under your firm control, so be it. But if we come upon Hayes first we will not be gentle, or stop to negotiate.

"As a further sign of our firm resolve in this matter, we are recalling our ambassador from Washington and breaking off formal relations with you. If you have anything to say to us in future, that is worth hearing, you may reach me directly, here. That is all."

The screen went blank. The transmission ended. Stone, Plant and Bacon were silent.

*

The following day Stone met with the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and had them each swear a further oath of allegiance to him, their Commander-in-Chief, to serve no other, and to have no secret dealings with Hayes. He then appointed new heads of the Army and Space Navy, and those who would not submit were dismissed.

There was angry shouting, and much hard feeling, but no violence in the transition.

X

Isograph: 7/20 to 12/30

Not on the socialist and pioneer alone did the hammer-stroke fall. Nor was the sword always wielded by those without a cause, to the detriment of the noble and just. This struggle, this convulsion of wills, was a human reality, and therefore complex.

Like and yet unlike so many wars before it, this conflict, neither large nor glorious, was fought on a myriad of battlefields, where reasons were often lost, and morals obscured. The constraints of civilization had been removed, freeing men, both good and evil, to commune once more with their darker nature. That was all. And that was more than enough.

There was but a single unifying link among the sprawl of planets and peoples caught up, involved, willingly or not, in this unraveling: all those who transgressed were filled with the desire to take, at the expense and death of others, and those who were transgressed upon, fought with all they had not to yield up the pebbles of home, seeds of family, and grains of meaning they had found. And whether right or wrong, wise, brave or foolish, they bled.

Part, the First

The breast of woman is the very temple of Nature
Transporting the mind and body of Man
 To other places,
Other times, where beings struggled
In endless rhythm with the forces
 that seek to drag us back to earth.
Mystical, beautiful, oh Woman
You are the crown of creation:
The pure and holy vessel of new life.
Oh, glory of this world

Keep me forever young!

—unnamed Irish poet

The Irish planet-colony of New Belfast was rich and fertile. The air was infinitely breathable and sustaining, the vegetation lush, with roots that went deep into the ground. It was a land and sea that men could be proud to die for, a place where family could mean something, and women grow old without feeling lost. To watch a young maid walk here among the fields, to see the depths in her eyes that reflected the melancholy of her soul, and hear the Gaelic accent touch lightly on the stones of moss-covered walls, was to know that God gave love to Man. Life flowed in its every vein, and the minor modes of Baroque ballads seemed to form a living chain to many pasts.

It was also a place coveted by the French Elite, who knew all that the Irish knew of love and land and harvest, but knew it better, and therefore contrived to take from these coarse, uncultured folk what could more fruitfully be employed by themselves.

And so a siege was laid, in which the Free French took no part, and even loudly decried. But due to a peculiar Dual Constitution enacted late in the twenty-first century—at which time the French, desiring to show their independence, frank difference, and superiority to the rest of the world, had created a political structure wholly new and untried—their approval was not needed for a military venture utilizing French Elite forces.

New Belfast was surrounded and cut off. And as the Irish had only one other major holding, the green homeland of Earth, and few outposts close at hand, it was unlikely that sufficient help would arrive before the colonists were overthrown and new, foreign defenses erected—new, foreign erections defended.

And United Ireland* as well, for reasons no foreigner could quite comprehend, had established few ties or alliances with the vast expanse beyond its islands, except for a continuing dialogue with their many descendants living in the Commonwealth, which they had always, until now, considered protection enough.

.....

*The province of Northern Ireland had been restored in time by the British not because the mindless violence of the IRA had succeeded, but because it had failed. The bitter cycle of hatred had finally, toward the mid 22nd Century, diffused, and both sides forgotten their indisputable righteousness long enough to come to the bargaining table, where a mutually acceptable agreement had been reached.

.....

But at the moment the Americans had other things on their minds. Hayes was still on the loose, the Soviets were brewing mischief of their own, and Stone had been assassinated.

The protective shields and outer defenses of the planet were strong, as were the staunch will of both soldier and civilian who manned and supported them. But the offensive capabilities of the French were not to be underestimated. Not for nothing had they ruled most of Europe under Bonaparte (though they seemed better at taking territory than holding it). Who would prevail?

The United British Kingdoms kept a consulate and Consul-general on New Belfast (though he was seldom petitioned or asked for advice), and on the morning of October 10, a fortnight after the siege and assault had begun, he appeared at the residence of the Planetary Governor with a proposal from British Prime Minister Blackwood, and tentatively approved by Parliament, to lend military assistance in the crisis. He was received with the stiff politeness characteristic of modern English-Irish relations, and conducted to a polished oak drawing room to wait.

After a short time the Governor entered with an assistant, looking haggard and worn, and skeptical as to the meaning of his visit. A butler came when called, and brought them brandy. Consul Witherspoon spoke first, intending to address the issue at once.

"Governor Gale," he began, unable yet to relinquish the formality of his profession. "I know you have many things on your mind and that your time is short, so I shall come directly to the point."

"Please do."

"Very well. The assault brought upon you by the French is both formidable and determined, and though your defenses are strong and your men fight bravely, you cannot hope to withstand them much longer. Your shields won't absorb the pounding forever, and you've not the resources for a serious counter-attack on the adversarial fleets."

"You said you'd be coming to the point."

"And I intend to do just that. Your help from outer-Earth will not arrive for several weeks at least, and when it does New Belfast may no longer be yours to defend." Gale grumbled something about 'pointless' and 'salt in our wounds', but Witherspoon pushed forward.

"Prime Minister Blackwood, then, has sent me to make the following proposal. The United Kingdoms have a strength of three hundred ships stationed at Drake Outpost, which could be brought to your aid within—"

"Oh, I dare say. And what, pray, shall good Minister Blackthorne (for some reason Gale always called him this) and the noble English receive in return?"

"I won't lie to you, Governor. That's not why I've come. We are not acting entirely unselfishly, of course. That is not the point."

"Then what is the point? And first I'd be pleased to know what it is you're after."

"The point is survival, Governor, the lessons of which..... Nevermind. As for Britain's further intentions, I can only say that we want nothing from the Irish of New Belfast, except perhaps a posture more open to diplomacy and trade."

"And now you'll be telling us how to survive," stole Gale gruffly.

"There are many kinds of survival, Governor, and many threats to them all, as we both know. There is undoubtedly a kind of survival that the English could learn from you: faith in life, perhaps, or the freeing of caged emotions." Witherspoon was himself aware that his tone had grown more confidential, and that he was violating the learned rules of diplomacy.

But he let it happen. He loved this place and its people, if not always understanding them, and instinct, or something deeper, told him that calm indifference would get him nowhere. "If I may say this much, man to man, I would advise you. . .ask you. . .to accept help where and how you find it. We were in a similar position once ourselves, not so very long ago. During the Blitzkrieg our need was every bit as desperate. We had to relearn a good deal that we thought we knew, and reassess what was truly strong in ourselves."

"That was an entirely different matter." With this Gale's assistant tapped his watch, as if to remind him of something.

"You will excuse me, Consul."

"Yes, Governor. I will return tomorrow and we may discuss it further. I'll leave the full proposal here for you to study, if you wish." Witherspoon reached into a leather briefcase, pulled forth a bound manuscript. "Is two o'clock agreeable?"

"Of course."

They shook hands at parting, and Gale could not help noticing, almost in spite of himself, that the Englishman's grip was firm, and that he looked him straight in the eye.

*

The next day at (precisely) two o'clock he returned. The same haggard look on Gale's wrinkled face, the same deep oak paneling, the same brandy. Only this time, Witherspoon noted, the Governor drank considerably more of it. Also, there was no assistant.

"I have been reading Blackthorne's proposal, Consul, so that now I know the details of what you're offering, though little more of what you intend." He looked up searchingly, surprisingly, into the other's eyes. "Listen to me, John. Man to man, as you said before, I NEED TO KNOW WHAT HE'S AFTER."

Witherspoon felt a spark of hope.

"I honestly don't know, Governor. I suspect it has more to do with hurting the French than helping you. Blackwood is, in fact, a throwback of sorts: an adventurer, an aggressive doer. But whatever his reasons, you have to believe me: I wouldn't be here, speaking to you like this, if I thought they were to your detriment. And it is help unlooked-for in an hour of need. Won't you take it?"

This did not satisfy the Irishman, and as if to further voice his doubts, or play them once more through his mind, he returned to an earlier, seemingly irrelevant point.

"You said yesterday that England under the Blitz was similar to our plight now, and that if you hadn't swallowed your pride long enough to take help from the Yanks you'd have gone under, and we'd all be speaking German."

"You read more than I in—"

"No, John. I read WHAT you intend. Forget your English arrogance, and give me credit for half a brain at least." The consul nodded. "That, as I'm telling you, was an entirely different matter. The Brits had their empire then, their corruption, and oppression of peoples they thought less of than themselves." His eyes glinted. "Imperial Destiny, and a lot of other high-sounding rot. Well. You were only paying your dues for taking more than was given you, and reaping your own bitter harvest."

"If you'll forgive my frankness, Governor, that's a lot of stuff and your know it. Whether our leaders did right or wrong in ruling the Empire, the PEOPLE of Britain were hardly to blame. As if cause and effect, or God's justice, had anything to do with it." He spoke now with a passion that was strange for the Irishman to see.

"We were buckled to our knees, with all we thought strong and everlasting crumbling around us. V-2 missiles, wave after wave of the Luftwaffe, propeller bombs falling silently and unexpectedly. . .our fleets and supply convoys decimated by U-boats, bad news, and the word of loved ones lost coming in every day.

"And if we fell, Governor, who would have guarded the rest of Europe? or even the thick-headed Irish, that the Germans were so fond of? The Americans? It took the loss of half their Pacific fleet at Pearl Harbor before most of them even knew there was a war on. Churchill wept the day it happened, because he knew that they had finally been roused. You're a hard and shrewd old father, Gale, but you leave the path of wisdom when you speak lightly of England's part in that Debate."

"Yes," put in the other, trying to be indignant. "But at least the Americans didn't rub it in your face."

"So now we're talking about pride, are we?" Without realizing it, Witherspoon had begun to speak (and think) in the way of the natives. He had lived there for seven years, from the time he was thirty.

"If you think we liked being in their debt, both literally and figuratively, you're mistaken. But we had to survive. We had to hang on, so we did what we had to do. Don't you see, it's not a question of principles, or faith, or anything else at all. It's reality; it's war; and the extinction of lives and irreplaceable treasures is final. Didn't we learn that all too well?"

"And what did we get in return for our heroic stand? We took all the early pounding, along with the Russians, absorbed the enemy's worst blows, only to have the Yanks come charging in late in the game, and take all the credit for final victory. Financially we'd have been better off to declare war on the Americans ourselves, and then lose. They went in afterward like good Samaritans and rebuilt the factories of Germany and Japan, and set them well on their feet for a run at the modern age. And what was left for England, not so very long before the most powerful nation on Earth? Naught but a mountain of debt, a crumbled economy, and the laughter of the world for the aging lion, no longer able even to hold its own among the shifting tides of fate.

"You say we were only paying our dues. Well if that's so then we paid them in full, and not an ha'penny short. Not that the Irish wasted any tears on our behalf." Now it was his eyes that glowered.

The Irishman drained his snifter and let it fall wearily to the woven rug. He looked now truly old and weather beaten, proud still, but with very little hope left. Witherspoon had time to recover himself.

"Please, Bryan. Won't you at least pass the message on to your approaching fleets?" He knew their Commander's name and (complete) authority, even his current location; but this was no time to flaunt the thoroughness of British intelligence. "I love New Belfast as much as anyone. You don't know what it's given me. If it goes down to the bloody French Elite, a part of me will die as well."

Gale looked up, and saw to his astonishment that there were standing tears in the younger man's eyes. He lowered his head again, shook it, and said finally, heavily. "I'll think about it."

"Do this one thing for me, Bryan, I beg. Don't think too long. Or there will be nothing left to defend." He rose and left the room.

The next day, Gale relayed Blackwood's proposal to Commander Donovan, venturing to suggest that the way things were—desperate—perhaps it could be considered as a fall-back position. After the necessary signal delay (and not two minutes later) he received the following reply, an audio/visual recording.

"Have you lost your mind, man? I'd sooner make a pact with the Devil. You just do your job and hold 'em off until we get there, or I'll replace you with someone of stouter fiber and longer memory. Help from the English, indeed!" And that was the end of it.

New Belfast fell to the enemy, and could not be retaken.

Here, at least, was a clear moral for anyone to read. By facing the darkness alone and stubbornly, refusing all help, by not using unsparingly all the resources at their disposal, and by placing beliefs in constraining patterns upon a world where no such narrow order existed, the frontier Irish were swept away. And all their heart, courage and past, all their faith in life and beauty of soul were rendered meaningless, and in the end amounted to naught, because of it.

But for one disturbing question. What was Blackwood really after?

Part, the Second

The wind, she blows extreme
My mind would scream
But for the discipline
That empty years have taught it.

Richard Dark, a denaturalized American citizen, had risen swiftly through the ranks of the (People's Republic of) Chinese Army, and because of his technical understanding and combat experience, along with the marked favor of vice-Chairman Tam, had been put in charge of the Outer Fences of the two settled planets of the Tsingtao system, now under attack by Soviet-backed Cuban forces.

Viewed mockingly by some, since they were not accompanied by a powerful Space Navy, these unique defenses were nonetheless a highly effective form of planetary cover. Invented by Dark himself, in conjunction with the exiled physicist Tolstoy (both men had chosen not to reveal the full discovery to their native governments, and were therefore outcast), they were based on a combined series of shields and orbiting Artillery Stations, similar to, but more highly integrated than those of the East Germans, in that the shields themselves were wrapped about the great mace-shapes of the Stations like nets of energy strung between harbor mines.

But what made them effective was the source of their power. Not only did they feed off the sun, but also used the very energy of assaulting blasts to strengthen the fields, and channel the drawn-off power into a reverse stroke by the corresponding station—like an aimed mirror of aggression. The harder an opponent struck, the harder was the blow returned.

Though much of the final figuring had been Tolstoy's, the inspiration and early experiments all belonged to Dark. The idea had first come to him during one of his many visits to the Taoist monastery near his home in Manchuria, where he had been raised by his father, a stern U.C. Army Captain stationed there. Of all the things he had learned (the Shao-lin had let him ask all the questions he liked, though they seldom answered directly or in full), one precept of the Kung Fu style of fighting had always intrigued him most deeply:

If a man, in hand-to-hand combat with another, could turn the force of his opponent's assault back upon him, adding to it the strength of his own spirit, why couldn't a machine, or even a defense field, do

the same? He had carried this thought through all the years of his scientific and worldly education, and while serving in the Commonwealth Space Navy during the Manxsome conflict, had seen first-hand the need for such a defense: a way for the weak to hold off the strong.

He had also been severely wounded, and nearly died, when his ship's own force-shields had been broken, and the exposed vessel riven with agonizing heat. The next four years had been spent in hospitals and operating rooms where, remarkably, he had slowly recovered with no permanent (physical) damage.

In fact, though his life totaled only twenty-nine Earth years, they had been lived with such intensity and trauma, through no conscious choice of his own, that while he was considerably younger than most of the officers under him, he was, in his way, more experienced, time-worn (and weary of life) than nearly all of them. If hope, despair, and nearness to death are the great teachers of this existence, then here was a student who knew the lists by rote.

He stood now in the engineering room of Power Station One, at the heart of the Fences surrounding the planet Ten Hsiao-p'ang, examining damage reports. The Cubans, after trying for a week to storm the defenses of both planets at once, had decided to concentrate their forces upon Teng alone, believing, correctly, that once it fell, the power of the other would be diminished as well. Though Dark's shields still held, the outlook was not bright. For even a mirror may be destroyed by a well aimed and determined laser; and the colonies had to hold out for another month at least.

"I don't know why I try," he muttered to himself. He switched off the last tracer diagram, leaned on the railing heavily.

IT'S FUNNY, REALLY. LIKE A STUPID GAME I CAN'T POSSIBLY WIN. I JUST PLAY IT BECAUSE I DON'T KNOW WHAT ELSE TO DO. This assault had become a symbol, and more than a symbol to him. If these planets fell, crushing forever his last dreams of a home, then the efforts of a lifetime had been wasted.

Here he had resolved to make his final stand. No more running: fleeing from his body's weakness, and before the haunting loneliness, the creeping paralysis of a life without love, companionship, or the simplest human feeling of attachment. Here he would stand, until he was either conquered or set free, or surrendered in death the slender sinews that knitted his soul to flesh. A defeatist's attitude, some might say, but for this important difference. He had spent a lifetime learning how not to surrender, and he did not intend to lose.

An under-officer, the closest thing to a friend he had, approached him.

"Richard. Commander Chang says his station can hold them no longer. They've singled him out and are pounding it apart. The fields are overloaded and the power can't be channeled back fast enough."

"Tell him he HAS to hold them. I'll release the Harrier Squadrons as soon as they're massed and I know it's safe. Then we'll try to rotate him in; but no promises."

Kim looked dispirited, started to walk away. Dark clasped the thick of his sleeve.

"Tell him I haven't forgotten them. It will just be a while longer."

When the time came, he released the Harriers. Their mission was successful, and the more damaged stations were rotated back into the inner circle, replaced by those that had not yet faced the enemy eye to eye. But a dozen ships were lost and that tactic, by its very use, had been rendered less effective. The adversary knew it now, and would watch for signs of its reuse.

The progression slowly passed before the designated hours of his sleep—he needed only eight in thirty-six—and the Cuban fleets withdrew to regroup. He remained on the bridge until he was sure it was not a feint, then sought out his own quarters, leaving message to wake him if they tried anything new or unexpected.

Safe again within the darkness of his room he lay on his back, unable to sleep. After a time he reached for the microphone beside the bed and began a supplemental Log entry, which doubled as his personal diary. He knew that his enemies might one day use it against him; but he did not care. He spoke slowly, not letting the words run away with him, pausing often, thinking out loud. This was the only way he had found of drawing the real knowledge of internal warfare from himself, and of rising above the constrictive circle of day-to-day thoughts and concerns. A part of what he said is recorded here.

"God they're giving us a hell of a pounding. How do I tell them? How do I tell my own men that they

have to hang on?

"When you're under attack. . .and all the things that you believed in, or wanted. . .and all your hopes, your reasons for continuing, seem to disappear. Or seem to be cut off behind you. And you're left out there. . . can't find any reason for the suffering, it makes no sense. It's impossible to remember the other parts of your existence: all you know is that. . .you're struggling, you're under attack. . .and there's not a damn thing you can do but to hold on. Try to deal with it.

"Maybe I could write something out in the order of the day, if that wouldn't be resented. Go back to Chinese history, and show that their ancestors, when under attack or political repression. . .the thing they all had in common were the things I mentioned earlier. The struggle to endure without knowing why, and stubbornly. . .when the logical thing to do, would have been to despair. And somehow. You know, what Prince Andrei was going through: the way he. . .was just numbed and overpowered by it all. And he couldn't find any reason or meaning anywhere. How it went beyond words or thought so that, in his heart, in the very fiber of his being, he disbelieved in all semblance of hope.

"Going through the motions. . .never believing that you really have a chance for life or happiness."

He massaged his brow, the fingertips out of habit stroking the rough straggle of his eyebrows. That had been the one area where the plastic surgeons had been unable to restore living hair and skin—the forehead and cranial cap. The new stuff looked real enough, but felt, especially the hair, coarse and unnatural.

Flashing back, he saw in memory the thick gut of blue flame rush toward him as the ship tore apart—closing his eyes in sudden, brittle shock, striking the flames from his forehead with wild slaps of his hands..... Not that such memories retained much terror for his waking mind. It was in sleep, in the subconscious worlds beyond his control, that such images were deadly.

He remembered also the first grim reawakening, the grotesque nightmare of ruinous skin and flesh before the surgeons had begun their work. The days of fever, the endless crises. He had not, like Prince Andrei near death, felt a comforting presence calling his soul from this life..... Though now at these memories he felt it shrink back, yet again, from human existence. And seek escape in his work.

"And the desire to strike back, too soon, that the younger commanders are always advocating. Urging attacks that can only end in ruin..... But the impulse. Haven't I felt it? Lying there in that bed."

"The helpless, trapped feeling. . .the rage that rises inside you, tearing through your fatigue. And you're just so tired. . .so worn out physically. . . that some desperate instinct takes over, telling you to attack. Half crazy from the constant pounding. So that you want. . .not even want. . .that you're forced into this thing. Like your will is being pushed out through the top of your skull. Something. And saying no to that urge. . .almost sexual . . .seems so unfair, and beyond the strength of any man.

"But it's wrong, an irretrievable mistake, and you know it. A fatal error that you're just not allowed in that situation.

"Internal warfare. . .and its relation to....." At last the weariness of true sleep was coming over him. But one more thought remained unspoken.

"And the hardest thing, unlike before. It's not just my own life that's at stake, but those of all my men..... My men. How did I ever get into all of this? This power and responsibility. I never wanted it. Just my own piece of mind..... Aahh."

Tomorrow was another day. Maybe in the morning things would look brighter. Morning. How meaningless the pilgrimage from Earth had made that word. There would be no dawn, no rising of the sun, only a different angle facing it.

'YET DAWN IS EVER THE HOPE OF MEN.' TOLKIEN, THE TRENCHES, WORLD WAR I. BULLETS POPPING IN THE MUD..... He rolled over onto the side on which he slept, the microphone still in his hand. "Trench fever. The veterans hospitals. Feeling he would never get well....." FEVER. . .NEVER GET WELL. COLD FEVER. NEVER GET WELL..... NEVER. . .FEELING. With that he fell asleep. And the next day, he rose again to face the onslaught.

Part, the Last

When the Zionists took Israel,
Land of their deepest fathers
With just cause, and more than that
It raised the hopes of many, that empty, horrible
Holocaust
Would not be utterly meaningless.

Writers, artists, and musicians
Jew and Gentile, belief and disbelieving
Flocked to this new human banner
In tribute to this triumph of the soul—
'Exodus' it was called—
Imparting unto the new inhabitants, the more so
Because the darkness still remained

Blank checks of righteousness.
Even Wouk, who walked with honesty and selflessness
through two-thousand pages
Rightly. Hoping perhaps, to help the prophesy fulfill
Even he, at the end, made this mistake.

For it is not enough to be right
The heart must also remain true.

"Goyim kill Goyim,
and they come to hang the Jews."*

*Menachim Begin, Prime Minister of Israel, when questioned whether his troops had allowed Lebanese Christian militia to massacre more than a hundred men, women and children in a Palestinian refugee camp.

The Palestinians still had no homeland, after two-hundred and forty years. The ill-conceived and ill-fated PLO had long since self-destructed. Its thoughtless acts of terrorism could hardly have done less to loosen Israel's grip on the West Bank of the Jordan river, or to win favor and sympathy abroad. And the Israelis themselves (or so their actions would seem to indicate) had never for a single instant intended to return either Jerusalem to the Moslems, or even to make it an international city, such as the Vatican, or Palestine to those who had inhabited it for centuries.

The Arab nations (excepting Egypt and Jordan), which had continually used the Palestinian question as an excuse for violence and religious hatred, yet had not loved their orphaned brothers enough to take them permanently into their own lands—either Earth nations, or the settled colonies of Space. Ironically, bitterly, the Palestinians had become the 'wandering Jews' of the post-modern era, living here and there in scattered clumps, always vowing vengeance, always being promised future acts of restoration: of home, family, and self-respect.

Finally, in the year 2167, the United Commonwealth had felt a pang of conscience (or fashion, or something), and decided to do these poor unfortunates a long overdue, and much deserved kind turn. So a small, tillable planet was given to them, along with transports, to bring together in this new life all those who wished to go. The Egyptians had then contributed materials for building, the Japanese had added factories and technicians, and the British and Australians, teachers and universities to bring the less educated up to date. The Free French had provided defense systems, and the French Elite a modest fleet (later to be supplemented by the more sophisticated weapons of Soviet Space, never far in the background at the birth of a nation they hoped to seduce). All in all, the contributing powers had looked upon the venture as a success, and the Salvation Army humor of the Commonwealth was much restored.

But now, forty years later, the numbers of the Palestinians had grown great enough, and their force of arms respectable enough, to raise the hopes of the embittered and illusioned one last time. Bolstered yet again by the warlike teachings of the prophet Mohammad, which state that to die in a Holy War is to ensure the soul's salvation, the stubborn and simple among them had seized power from the more educated and enlightened moderates, and prepared, in secret, a last attempt at true retribution.

To accomplish their aims, the radicals (supported by most within the country, strongly challenged by

none), would have to violate all the sanctions of the civilized world, including the Green Earth Pact, and the unspoken, though severely understood, international policy of non-violence upon the Earth itself. But what of that? GOD was with them.

For they did not intend merely to hurt the Israelis symbolically, or to steal from them some distant and less guarded settlement, but to return in triumph to their true home, and the land of their most ancient fathers. Given to them by Allah himself.....

Palestine!

The Green Earth Pact, as it was called, had been enacted (and unanimously approved) by the United Nations, to insure the peace and neutrality of the beloved home planet of all humanity, which had so narrowly escaped war's destruction and environmental catastrophe during the Nuclear Age. Among other clauses designed to protect the fragile environment, so long and senselessly abused, it specified that no more than one-hundred military vessels of any given nation, and these of limited size and destructive capability, were to enter the parochial Solar System at any one time, and that no more than half that number could engage an Earth orbit or rest upon the Moon. And except in sudden crisis of defense, absolutely none were allowed to pierce the upper atmosphere.

And so one hundred Palestinian vessels were sent, mostly fighters, manned not by the best trained pilots and soldiers, but by the most fervent believers, and those with the deepest grudge. Under the pretext of diplomatic and training purposes they came, believing against all Satan's whisperings that if once, by their own actions they could retake that sacred land, some miracle of God would allow them to keep it.

Half remained at the legal distance, the other half locking in around the Earth. After visiting with the Soviets, the Syrians, and the Saudis, betraying their true purpose to none, the fifty vessels broke suddenly from orbit and rushed down upon the tiny speck of land known as modern Israel —before that Palestine, before that Judea, and so on back into the dawn of history, when it had been little more than a forbidding desert, endlessly fought over by tribes and Empires until it was hard to say (and still harder to care) who had been there first, or why.

In one sense at least, the modern Israelis had not changed from the turbulent and close-knit times of the 1950's and 60's. When it came to defense, they took nothing for granted. At the instant the first Palestinian fighters began to dive, they had released their own fifty, more sophisticated craft, and in conjunction with the best ground batteries on the planet Earth, cut short the brave but foolish attack. No prisoners were taken.

For the next several days, in Western publications circulated throughout the settled galaxy, the headlines, columns and editorial pages all expressed the same outrage, decrying the viciousness and small-mindedness of the Palestinian attack; and the Israelis were freed once more to expound upon the necessities of their hard-nosed, aggressive, and completely intransigent foreign policies. They also took it upon themselves to retaliate, destroying the remaining forces and outer defenses of the exiled Arab planet, 'inadvertently' killing thousands of civilians in the process.

The moral? Pointless insanity on all sides, that had gone on for three centuries. BECAUSE IT HAD GONE UNCHALLENGED.

* * *

"The next time you start to get angry, count to ten."

ELEVEN

"Did it never strike you as just a trifle odd that the Cantons destroyed the Laurian ore planet, instead of just taking the colonies by force? They had the machinery."

"I don't know. I suppose I always thought that tactic psychological. The whole affair with the gravity beam was quite impressive."

"Yes, and that was the lure of it. But think. Who stood to gain by such an expensive side show? Who paid the bill, and why?"

"The German States? I don't understand. I thought they sided with the Cantons out of principle." Dubcek looked at him like all the fools that had ever been born.

"Horse-shit. They did it because they had the equipment to move in and salvage ninety percent of the planet's high-grade ore—the Cantons didn't—and because they could use the station again for other purposes. The move was purely economic: they got their original investment back three times over, and flexed their muscles a little in the process. And (so you know you weren't completely wrong) there is this. So long as people believe the West Germans are still Nazis at heart, it gives them a tremendous psychological weapon: the aura of ruthlessness."

The young man stood bewildered, turned his head from side to side as if trying to see something through a fog. He paused, frozen it seemed, and then spoke.

"But the Canton fleets. Who supplied them? Not the German States. That would make them direct accomplices, and—"

"Now you are beginning to think like a socialist. The ships were, in fact, of GS build, but they didn't just give them away. First they were sold to the Belgian-Swiss—along with the arsenal that's headed here—then passed on. The Alliance needed someone to test the waters, and the Cantons were used for that purpose. The German States could not care less. Any instability only allows them greater opportunity for profit and expansion. Play both sides against the middle, then pick up the pieces; that is their game. Whether the fascists win or lose, they will get their cut." The young man looked incredulous, opened his mouth as if to speak.

"I know, I know—the ideologies. Ideology always seems the great motive to the young, the reason that nations rise and fall. It is time you learned that no one, except perhaps a few misguided knights, or here and there a religious fanatic, ever made war for anything other than personal gain. Though they may have told themselves otherwise." He relit his pipe, looking thoughtful. BUT DUBCEK DIDN'T SMOKE.

"I remember when I was young, the great heroes and villains of history seemed to play out their parts as emissaries—the Churchills and Hitlers—instruments of good and evil upon the Earth. This was central to all my illusions. It gave my life as a soldier meaning, and drummed me full of patriotism, and a lot of other high-sounding excrement. But the hard truth is, Brunner, men make war because they think they can get something out of it, whether money or glory, it hardly matters. They hope to take something by force, that is otherwise denied to them.

"Because when you reach my age you come to realize, as they have, that there are no rules. . .except survival of the fittest. The great aggressors of history, from the Greeks to the Roman to whoever, took what they took because no one could stop them. It is very difficult to explain unless you have lived through it.....

"MEN rule the galaxy, Brunner. Men. There are no unseen forces at work, shaping our destinies to some more perfect end. You must learn to be cynical: it is the key to all truth. Forget your fairy-tale notions. We live or die by our own devices."

A lull.

"Then what..... What keeps you going?" The aging colonel rose and went to a dark window.

"Life is a game of chess. And I don't like to lose."

Brunner struggled beneath the coverings, feeling smothered. Suddenly he burst forward, eyes open.

"But you lost! You LOST. You lost....." His temples throbbed and he could not remember where he was. For he was not yet awake. His dream had played on him the cruelest trick of all. Thinking to escape from the nightmare world, he had jolted himself insufficiently, and only dreamed of waking. It was all right now. But no. There was something wrong with the room. Though incredibly lifelike, it was not quite square—the walls leaned and corners were uneven.

And then they were coming. Outside the dark window there was a sudden, blinding flash. THEY'RE COMING. His wife ran through the wall and disappeared. "Ara!"

COMING. The Americans. Nowhere to hide.....

His head shook violently. And finally, he was awake.

He lay on his back, his underclothes drenched with sweat. As if to reassure himself, he rolled over to embrace his wife and drive away the darkness. But she was not there: that much of the nightmare was real.

And then he remembered. He was not home on Athena II. Nor was he in his quarters aboard the Mongoose, waiting sleeplessly for the approach of the Alliance fleet. He was alone and on a Czech destroyer, one of several, escorted by a Soviet cruiser. Heading into Belgian space. To search for the prisoners, taken from the colonies. Dubcek was dead.

He cried softly, hugging his knees, hating himself for his weakness. "God damn the Americans for ever helping them. I wish I was dead." He pushed his forehead hard against his knees.

It will be all right, he told himself. The Alliance has gone too far and now the Soviets will help us. The colonies will be retaken. Schiller is gone, but Athena remains. My wife is alive. I will find her and we can go home again. She is alive. She must be alive!

He got up and checked the passage of time. It was still an hour yet before what men called dawn—little brackets put around life to give it meaning and a mean understanding.

This was not what he wanted: four hours of sleep was not enough for him now, and his mind was dark again. Battle could come any day now—he was spoiling, and being eaten by the spoiling, for a fight. And yet his energies continued to desert him. His strength grew less each day: no sleep. Not enough sleep. No appetite. Anxiety. HE MUST PRESERVE HIS MENTAL ENDURANCE! He was the second officer of the first destroyer, and the man taken into the confidence of Soviet Colonel Joyce, Commander of the Leningrad. Leningrad. He was the go-between, the link between unlike and alien worlds, that now must work together.

He lifted the picture of his wife from the bedstead, kissed the cold glass that kept him from her. His mind was calm again, his emotions flat and worn out. And he shivered, realizing unexpectedly that it was cold in the room. He felt his brow: burning, always burning. The wet underclothes he peeled off and flung away, went into the bathroom, released a stream of clear, watery urine, turned the heat on high and took a steaming shower.

Dried and warm but already sweating and a little chilled he returned to the room and sat down at a desk, and touched a button, and began studying charts of that quadrant. TRANSPORTS HAD BEEN REPORTED MOVING..... A WEEK AFTER THE TRANSPORTS BEARING THE PRISONERS..... His wife was not on Athena. LATEST INTELLIGENCE. SOMETHING CALLED DRACUS.....

It all ran together in his mind, into a crater-pool of formless gray mud, edged with hard dark flecks. They were making for the Morannon system. They would be there in seventy. . .eight hours. Others must do the thinking now, he was tired. Too tired. He lay down again and forced himself to remain there until he fell asleep.

He woke two hours later, feeling better but for a slight headache. He recalled briefly as he rose the half-dream from which his consciousness had climbed. He was lying on the floor of a public bar, asleep, when a large rough man had seized him by the shoulders of his jacket and lifted him rudely, shook him, and told him to be gone. At first it seemed just another foolish night episode, until he remembered that the initial feeling of the strong, angry hands upon him had been pleasurable.

He wondered lamely if this were some sign of latent homosexuality—he often feared what might be revealed to him of his subconscious through dream—but the thought could not seriously upset him. A new day was at hand and he felt a little better. He dressed himself, performed the morning rituals of the bathroom and made his way to the bridge, feeling as he walked only a slight hollowness and queasiness of the stomach. Captain Mandlik greeted him flatly, the small black eyes in their fleshy face neither kind nor cruel.

"You are up late this morning."

"Yes, forgive me. I didn't sleep well last night."

"You don't look well. Have you been to see the doctor?"

"No, there is nothing wrong with me. There is nothing he could do."

"Very well, but look after yourself. We cannot have you fading out on us." The captain looked more

deeply into his face. "Colonel Joyce has been asking for you. He seems to take a special interest in you—believes you have some potential or understanding the rest of us lack."

"Yes. It seems my curse to have lonely old men confide in me."

"Listen to me Brunner," said the captain sternly. "Don't be that way. We need him. We need his firepower. Whether you like it or not, we need you to listen to his every word, and learn what you can from him. Account yourself as befits the situation! We are in enemy Space now, and the Soviet detection screens won't hide us forever."

"Captain. They are not going to turn and leave us now."

"You must not count on that! And I am still your commanding officer, however vague the current status. Remember that."

"Yes, sir."

He performed officiously the duties of a long day, with growing impatience, but simultaneously fearing for the time to pass. For at least now he still had hope. He could still imagine the happy reunion with Ara, still picture the moment of finding her: the tearful embrace and releasing of pent-up, brutalized emotions—the lonely hours of anguish, always fearing the worst, listening to the battle rage inside him.

And yet in the end came the thought, the realization, that he NEEDED TO KNOW. Sixty odd hours, then the battle. Then the landing on Dracus.

When his shift was over he went to the officer's mess and partook, what little he ate of it, of the evening meal. He sat alone at an empty table and spoke to no one, but the others were used to this. With different words they all realized that he had sunk very deep into himself, and did not wish to be disturbed in his reverie. And they were right. Almost he feared to take comfort in the company of other men, as if this might somehow lessen the prayerful necessity of finding his wife.

He returned again to his room. Taking out a pen and pad of paper he made some notes for the following day, then picked up his copy of A PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AS A YOUNG MAN, and began to read. Dragged down after a time by its minute detail and understated hopelessness, he placed a marker in the book and set it down, scrawling idly some verses that came to him then. Weary and lethargic he lay back on the bed, though he did not yet wish to sleep.

Nevertheless he felt his eyelids drooping heavily. To block it out. . .to shut off the day..... Even for a little while. But he could not sleep now, or he would be unable later.

He tried thinking of his mother and brother, grateful that she had escaped from the destruction of Schiller, and that he, still in training, would not see combat for some time. But he was forced to admit that these meant little to him. His brother's life (until very recently, when he had joined the space navy after the fall of Athena), had taken a different path. Tomas was an artist, he a soldier. They were no longer close, as in childhood. And his mother, too, was like a distant figure, his affection for her a dying ember that the fearful walls of her religion kept any living breeze from ever fanning. He cared for nothing and no one, but Ara.

The thought came to him again of his own existence without her. His stomach crawled. He got up and paced back and forth in nervous agitation. This restlessness was maddening! His mind raced, but could seize hold of nothing concrete to calm it. At length, the mock energy expended, he lay down again and covered his eyes, not caring.....

He woke two hours later, feeling stifled in his clothes. And checking the clock he saw that deep night was only just beginning. And knew that he would not be able to sleep for many hours. He sat on the edge of the bed and took off his shirt. His arm started for the light switch, but something drew back the hand. Moved by what he could not say, he reached instead into the drawer of his dressing cabinet and pulled out from it the thick tallow candle, brass capped, that had been given him by his wife. Taking out also the metal igniter, he touched a flame to the wick and set it before him.

For a long time he did not look at his reflected image in the closet mirror, holding his head in his hands, incapable of purity of thought or emotion. He felt little outside his own fatigue, but also a slow strange stirring of the soul.

He looked up, studied his features in the soft, forgiving light of his lover. The face that he had never associated with himself..... His eyes were drawn downward to the wiry muscles that reached from his chest to his arm. Always slender and taut, they now looked almost famished, layered rope wrapped

stranding and twine after strand into nothingness. What were they for? And the rage inside him. Could he tear down the walls? Could he dive through the mirror and come to the place where his wife lay needing him, distraught, possibly frightened and in torment?

And suddenly the image changed, becoming sinister and spectral. The remembrance was almost audible.

"And how would you judge me while a Belgian officer was raping your wife?"

Caught in a trap of near despair, simultaneously hit by a rush of dizzy sickness—a lethal virus had, in fact, attacked his stomach—his mind and courage reeled in a half physical, half emotional torment. Snatches of conversations with Dubcek came back to him, echoed and enforced, made indisputable by the darkness that hung thick and menacing around him. They dove and swirled like insane, angry birds. His spirit palled before them.

"You must learn to be cynical"

"Some day you will be hurt very badly"

"It is the key to all truth"

"Forget your fairy-tale notions"

"While a Belgian officer was raping your wife"

"You will be hurt"

"Very badly"

"Raping your wife"

"Raping your wife"

"Raping your wife—"

"Stop it!" he cried in answer. "Get away from me!"

A foul nausea engulfed him as he staggered toward the bathroom, falling to his knees and retching violently into the toilet. Hardly able to breathe, feeling the very soul torn out his throat, he fell back against the wall and tile as wave after wave of hot sweat dizziness broke over. Finally, as if the agony that raped him had expended itself he was left, a forlorn and shivering ball on the floor, hopeless and friendless and lost.

But now the cold truth of it was clear, needing no help from the physical assault. She was gone from him forever. She had been too beautiful, too spirited. At best she was the unwilling mistress of a bastard animal. At worst she was dead. Dubcek was right. There was no unseen God to protect her, no Comforter to see him now and ease his pain. He had been a fool, and now he would pay for it. He should have told her to evacuate. They should never have come here. Fool! Fool! Fool!

He wept no tears and shivered and struck the wall weakly with the side of his fist.

"Dear God don't let it be. Don't leave her! Don't leave me here....."

He sobbed. "Don't leave me."

Not much like a prayer that his mother might have taught him, but still he spoke it with all his soul. A young ensign, hearing his cries, came in from the hallway and found him there. Putting his head through Brunner's crooked arm, he lifted him and took him to the Infirmary.

The doctor had to be wakened, and did not come at once, so that he was left in a half-lying sit in a bed behind a wrap-around screen, given time, as it were, to gather himself. He felt nothing but weakness and a blank mental stupor. That things had gone too far he knew, but to whom should he address this complaint? He felt as low, though less bitter and sharp-edged, as he had ever been in his life.

He had prayed, and not in the moment of fear and anguish, but in their afterglow. This in itself was enough to show him that Dubcek had not won a convert, though he was still probably right. But this sense of wrongness and self-deprecation began to bring back bitterness. He shut it off.

I'm sorry, Ivan, he said to himself. You're a good man and I know you tried to keep me from being hurt. But I can't see the world through your eyes, or I despair..... And I cannot do that yet. Not while

there is any hope.

With this a ghost inside him seemed to rest more easily. Or something. The doctor drew back the screen and with a sleepy, objective and infinitely forgettable manner began to examine him and ask him questions, mildly rebuking him for not coming sooner.

"It is obvious that you are suffering from acute anxiety as well as the virus, and that the two feeding off one another have brought you to this state. I have been told you are here searching for your wife and that is all fine and good, but you must take better care of yourself or you will be of no use to anyone. I am going to give you an injection for the virus and prescribe lozenges to help you sleep. Yes, yes I know you do not like to take drugs into your body and if you sleep on your own you will not need them. I want you to have them anyway. You are to spend this night in hospital and the next two days off duty then you may do as you like but if you have any sense you will put from your mind what is beyond your control and guard your health more closely. You are not the only one with problems and concerns in this time of unrest, and though you are young....."

When she left Brunner turned his head to one side against the hard pillow, still half upright, and let his thoughts and feeling sink down like stirred silt in a stream. NILEMUD AND CROCODILES. He remembered the phrase from "Portrait." What the hell did Nilemud have to do with anything? And why was Joyce always writing about himself? Did he imagine he was the only one who suffered? And why call Ireland a sow that eats its fodder? Like murdering a sick patient.

Joyce. That was the Colonel's name as well. He wondered if they were related, or how a Joyce had come to settle in Leningrad. THE Leningrad. He compared his perceptions of the two.

Thus his mind vomited what his body could not, passing time in words, until he started to feel dizzy again and another rush of anguish folded over him. He endured it, and with almost unselfish reserve except for the thought, again, that it was too much. Any one of the things he had felt in the past months, heightened now by nearness, might have been bearable singly, or even in bunches of two and three. But all at once and one after another was like an endless trap, with no escape from the steady flow of consciousness. But for sleep, which of late had become a fickle and untrustworthy ally.

Unbroken flow of consciousness. Perhaps that was what Joyce had been after (he suspected the thought was not original). Certainly his self-endowed character Stephen had been trapped, feeling rare moments of freedom and longing for the sky, but always coming back to himself in a dirty world. More trapped in the human shell than in Dublin. Did he ever truly fly? Certainly the rambling phrases were incoherent.....

And so at long length his thoughts become more natural and sleep came back to him, and shutting his eyes and heart, he passed through a thick black night without dream.

*

The next morning after some time alone and a second examination, he returned to his rooms. Someone had extinguished the candle for him but it was still there, the igniter beside it. He resisted the urge to contact Mandlik and ask him how many hours, or had they yet been discovered. There was no reason, he knew, to go looking for a fight. It would come to him. He had had time to work things through, and believed he now possessed a clearer understanding.

The first few moments in that place were difficult, for all his renewed spirit of resolve. To be left here in this state, weakened and sick..... He still feared for the future, which he knew stalked him inexorably. At stake, no more and no less than his spiritual life and death. It was no use trying to prepare himself against all contingencies. If his wife was not there, or was dead or unaccounted-for, a part of himself would die forever, and the tiny flame of faith to which he clung would be lost beyond recall. Even now it flickered feebly in that dark place, shivered by the cold winds of doubt.

He mastered his trepid nature as best he could, and stayed there. He lay down and read for many hours, somewhat heartened by his mind's endurance, and by the sudden turn from hopelessness he perceived in Joyce's work. 'Exiles.' It filled all his mind with true thought and carried him for a time from himself, and he loved in those moments both the medium and the man, so beyond his understanding.

Moved as it were to make some account of himself he rose, wrapped the robe about him, went to the desk-table and, without looking at the verses he had scrawled the day before, wrote a simple, passionate poem to his wife.

But the feelings went too deep and he could not yet read back what he had written.

He called and a nurse brought him a soft and frugal meal, and before she left he looked into her face and said sincerely, "Thank you," for she had reminded him that other lives existed outside his own.

After he ate for a time he was unwell, and lay down in the bed and waited for the aching nausea to pass. Weariness and exhaustion came over him when the other left, and having little choice, yet also wanting to trust, he surrendered. And after a further time he slept.

He did not wake until late in the evening. Without looking or even thinking about the clock he went to his writing desk and flipped over the written pages of the pad. A thought had come to him, whether in dream or rising from it he could not recall, nor did it matter. He had his answer. He wrote on a blank sheet of paper with a quiet warm peace inside him:

If you believe in too much, or nothing at all, either way you will be hurt.

With this he became calm and thoughtful. What was the use of despair, or endless worry? Running around wildly, trying by one's own efforts to turn back an imagined tide of evil and malicious fate, or believing, at the most, that life was nothing but a primal struggle without order or lasting hope. If there truly was nothing beyond man and the grave, then what was the use of trying at all? when the bravest and most determined lives must eventually end in ruin and death? In this sense even the existentialists were wiser than the proponents of human will and self-made destiny.

And on the other side of the coin, were those who put their faith and trust in Gods and religions they did not understand, accepting without trial or common sense the narrow dogmas of fearful (or even wise) old men. MEN. What made their observations and conclusions more enlightened than his own, or those of anyone who sought with both heart and mind, using Nature and experience as a guide?

It was all so obvious and clear; how could anyone not see it? Yet now he, Olaf Augustine Brunner, must take this lesson and apply it to that Universe, often cold and unreasoning, OUT THERE. He did not know if he was equal to the task. He only knew that he must try.

His mind and confidence thus piqued, he turned back to the poems written earlier, hoping, perhaps, to find some further sign of his own understanding—something to set against the huge, dark uncertainty beyond his window. There were the two from the previous night, as well as the poem to his wife.

NIGHT

Sipping sadness, from the young girl
So afraid to go unnoticed

Young man, stalking forests in his dreams
Heightens all his senses
to you.

Madman, racing knives across a windstorm
Searching
For the blood that he will spill.

.....

EVIL

Rising slowly
hideous figure
cast aside
Black with bitter
twisted passions
seeking only

The murder of a child.

.....
And the last, to his wife:

PLIGHTED TROTH

Ara
What is my life without you?
To be your knight
 to fight for you
Is all that holds my will together
Unraveled, and dispossessed
 by Distance, time and empty suffering

Now you are taken from me,
One comfort only can I find:
That I loved you then, not less than now
And thanked dear Heaven
 you were mine.

.....
A year, a month, a day ago he might have cried; but this was not the time. Emotion and sentiment would not bring her back to him, nor would dashing his heart upon the rocks. The mind was the stronger instrument now, a bit cold, but maybe that was best. He gave it free rein to pursue its ends.

The poems showed him that indeed, both elements, love and hatred, yielding and aggression, lived inside him. And both were needed. Hadn't he felt them? Hadn't their constant battle for use and mastery tormented him? Yes! That was what had made him so miserable. Fool! It was simply (or merely) a question of knowing which to listen to at a given moment—exerting supreme effort when called for, and having enough faith in God, or life, to accept the consequences of what was beyond human will to affect. Faith and disillusion, professed as different creeds, were one and the same, either half without the other like a man trying to stand on one leg.

With that he became calm again, knowing he must save his strength. Later that night he lit the candle and set it beside the picture of his wife, and prayed a short, fervent prayer to Whom he did not know. His own image was no longer important. He vowed to find his wife, however long it took, and to do what he could in the war, though he detested violence and a part of his prayer was that it would soon end.

The next day, the second of his confinement, passed without serious (personal) incident. That night he took one of the lozenges, knowing he would be unable to sleep without it. For the Morannon system, code-named Dracus by the Belgians, would be reached the following day, and they no longer moved in secret. The Alliance, apparently piercing their detection shields, had detached a fighter-destroyer group to intercept them. As near as anyone could tell, battle would be joined somewhere within the system itself.

In the morning he rose, and reported to the bridge, and with a hard bitter determination that grew out of and suppressed his anxiety, prepared himself for the fight. Because for all his introspection and self-doubt, there was another side of him, as yet only half realized.

Not for nothing had Dubcek made him his pupil; and not for nothing was he second officer to Mandlik. His military and psychological testing had revealed that whatever other characteristics he might possess, when cornered and left no option, he responded with a resourcefulness and tenacity that were almost off the scale. This fact was so striking in one of his (outwardly) skittish nature, that more than one of the military leaders who reviewed it (including Dubcek) went back to the examining psychologist to ask for an explanation.

The psychologist had told them simply, "It's no mistake. In ordinary circumstances he is much like Hamlet—wavering, indecisive, introspective to a fault. But when pushed to the final need, somehow he raises himself to another level, and reacts with a courage and cunning that are. . .remarkable."

And that was well, because the fight came, hard and long, and in it the upper bridge was wracked by internal explosion, killing Mandlik and half his officers. Without the Soviet cruiser, which the Belgian-Swiss had not detected, the battle would almost certainly have gone against them. Brunner's first order, upon assuming command, was to stay near, and protect the planet's prison complex, which in

their late desperation he feared the Alliance commanders might try to destroy. And he was right.

* * *

The browning, grapple wrist, raised stiffly before him like a manikin, or a marionette, preceded the old man from the chamber. The entire body moved with it in stiff, convulsive strides, out onto the porch of the Parthenon, between the pillars and onto the marble steps.

One not of that place might have been shocked by his appearance, distorted as it was by bony growths, the jaw torn to one side by a madman's rock. Some half-buried sense had drawn him—sight it might be called—to stand there and watch the night sky.

Distant lightnings played before his eyes, soft bursts of light and almost, a pool fancied, distant sounds. Perhaps Mars had come at last, to liberate and destroy them. Through the dull horror of his marrowmind, twisted like the frame, he recalled verses from a book long ago, that set his knife-tattered soul on edge.

From Olympus mighty thunderbolts rain down
As futile, Titans reach to steal the crown
Of He whose strength and glory forged the lands
For greater power, rests within His hands.

His broken mouth produced a strange, pitiful utterance, as an unbearable anguish of hope came over him.

* * *

As the last Alliance vessels retreated, or were caught and subdued by the tractor beams of the Leningrad, Brunner's thoughts returned quickly to the planet below. Though his battle fury was still running hot—his own vessel was badly damaged, and there were wounded to look after—his mind would think of nothing else. He started to assign damage and medical crews, but found the work was already being done. And their primary mission was, in fact, the release and rescue of the prisoners.

But with the main bridge knocked out and the lower malfunctioning, he could gather no news of the inhabitants of the prison-domes on the planet's surface. "Getting very confused readings," his scanning officer told him.

"Signs of life?" A momentary panic.

"Yes, Lieutenant, but they cannot be right."

"Why?"

"Well, sir, Intelligence reports over two million inhabitants were shipped here, and the internal structures are certainly large enough to house that number. But I register less than two hundred life-forms."

"WHAT?"

"It's got to be the equipment, sir: they don't even register as human. The calcium content is much too high." Even as he spoke the console went dead with a smell of burned fiber and sparks.

"Communications Officer." He could not remember her name. "Have you contacted Colonel Joyce?"

"Yes, Lieutenant. The viewscreens are out, but we still have audio."

"Very well. Put me through."

She handed him a headset.

"Colonel Joyce. Brunner. Do you still intend to call for Soviet reinforcements?"

"They are on the way."

"Will they be here soon enough to secure the area?"

"Yes."

"And will you provide transports for the prisoners?"

"That will not..... One thing at a time, Olaf."

"What do you mean? Those people have been separated from their families for months. What the hell are you waiting for?"

... "Is your scanning equipment working?"

"No, the upper bridge was destroyed. That's why I contacted you."

"And Mandlik?"

"Dead."

"You have assumed command?"

"Yes."

"Then I think you should organize a landing party and come to the Leningrad. Have you an operational shuttle?" Brunner turned to one of his officers, who nodded.

"Yes. For God's sake, what is happening?"

"I will tell you when you come."

"Sergei. My wife....."

"Not like this. Gather your party and come."

Brunner ordered the landing party assembled, and met it at the shuttle dock. Among those he found there was the nurse, the only medical persona that could be spared, whom he had been so aware of two days before. He tried not to look at her. With a knotting throat and a rising anxiety he could not contain, he guided the ship himself into the open receiving dock of the Leningrad.

One other shuttle craft entered behind them, landing also on the dull white metal floor, but no more. The bay doors were closed slowly and the dock began to repressurize. But in his drunken state the very sound of it was like her name hissed by witches.

As a double-line of Soviet personnel—in breathing suits and armed—emerged from an opened passage and made their way to the two large landing vessels, one of them a hospital ship, he opened the hatch of his own vehicle and moved weakly down the steps.

Colonel Joyce approached him with another, as if for support. Brunner recognized him from an earlier visit—Chief Scientist Stoltzyn. He had no patience left.

"Why only two Coalition parties? Didn't you contact the other ships?"

"Two will be enough. . .to represent your peoples."

"Represent? What the HELL IS GOING ON?" Some of the Soviet technicians within the enclosure—there were perhaps two dozen, wheeling in odd gear, among its contents special breathing masks for the Czechs—looked over in surprise to hear a Soviet Colonel addressed in this way.

But none were more taken back than Joyce himself. He seemed unable to look Brunner in the eye or speak the words he had to speak, a thing which he had never experienced. Finally it was Stoltzyn who spoke.

"There's been some kind of plague."

Brunner felt his heart heave, then fall in upon itself like collapsing leprous flesh. His voice a fainting whisper.

"What? Sergei?"

Joyce finally master himself and spoke, though slowly. "Of the two million inhabitants, perhaps two

hundred still live. Five of the six domes are emptied of life. You will be going to the sixth. But I . . . want you to be prepared."

"Tell me."

Joyce strode back and forth a few times, irritated, agitated, then faced Brunner almost angrily.

"Stoltzyn will tell you the rest. I am sorry, Olaf. I can say no more." He turned and left the enclosure.

The chief scientist was more composed. "There will be many corpses. Also, those who still live may be gruesome to look upon, and almost certainly will not be rational. Something in the atmosphere has caused the rapid growth and multiplication of bone cells and calcium deposits....."

Stoltzyn would have continued but the young German lieutenant had lost consciousness and slithered to the floor.

When Brunner came to he found the nurse, the one he did not wish to think about, looking into his face full of concern. All this took only a short time, so that as she and another helped him to his feet, the Soviet and Czech chief scientists (the latter with considerably less detachment) had only begun to discuss the dangers and consequences of such a landing.

"No," said the Russian. "There is no threat of contagion or epidemic. It is not a disease we are dealing with but a bodily reaction to impure atmosphere. We are safe so long as we retain the breathing gear, and probably without it for short periods, though we will not take that chance."

"And if the survivors are mad and beyond healing, as you suggest? What do we do then?"

"That is the purpose of this expedition—to determine."

"Do the others know?" The Czech made a gesture with his head and left shoulder, taking in the other shuttle but implying all the remaining Coalition forces.

"They know what their equipment has told them, and will be briefed by the rest of us as soon as we know ourselves. Lieutenant Brunner, if you are unwell perhaps you should remain behind."

"His wife may be down there, you idiot."

... "I am sorry, Brunner, I did not know. Please don't think me cruel. It is not the first time such a thing has happened, and we may have a very difficult decision to make. Democratic German representation will also be needed—"

"Why didn't the domes protect them?" he said in a savage whisper.

"I believe they were meant to. Apparently they were breached. That is all I can say now. Please outfit yourselves accordingly and come to the first landing vessel when you are ready."

*

The two landing craft emerged from the whiteness of the Soviet vessel into the blackness of Space, then shortly again into the curved daylight of the desolate planet, reflecting back in a brown haze of impure atmosphere its yellow sun.

The domes drew nearer—six humps of clearish white spread unevenly across the flat desert floor, standing up from it like supported blisters of the planet itself.

But the blisters had been pierced. Fissure-holes and cracks, some larger, some smaller, were spread across them. The land too, upon closer inspection, was pocked with craters, and littered with ugly shapes of pocked and polished iron.

"Meteors," muttered a voice. Brunner turned to see Second Lieutenant Shellenback seated behind him, head hunched and eyes close, chewing mournfully at his hands, remembered vaguely that he was not the only German to have come looking for family. The faces of the Czech flyers were grave as well. Yes—he was not alone in his plight. Yet there was little comfort in the fact.

"Why weren't the domes protected?" came an angry voice. But even as his mind registered the sound, Brunner saw the huge black tower that stood amidst the growing bubbles, the meteor-repulsive cannon at the top of it. Stoltzyn, who stood near the front of the windowed fuselage like a stewardess, responded.

"They were, but insufficiently. The Alliance must have assumed that the meteors that speckle the surface had arrived singly or in small groups, which is not the case. Apparently they knew very little about the planet before choosing it as a prison site, since it is also prone to violent earthquakes." He went on to explain some phenomenon that occurred there every twelve years, something to do with the planet's dual orb, coming into line and affecting the magnetic field.....

But it hardly mattered. Nothing mattered. His wife was dead and a strange voice inside him told him he was glad. This slow awakening of all the wrong sentiments was too painful so he shut it off, closing his eyes and waiting sickly for the ship to land.

There was a slight delay while the craft relayed back exact measurements, and waited for the Leningrad to punch a safe and adequate hole in the final dome. For some reason it bore only smallish cracks in one or two places near the bottom. Then the ship passed through and set down in the midst of a courtyard or wide street.

Then the ship passed through and set down in the midst of a courtyard or wide street. Brunner opened his eyes. Stoltzyn was standing before them as before, giving final instructions as the Soviet crew members examined the breathing gear of the others. Brunner shook off the private who leaned over him, but the man persisted until the facemask was tested and in place. Just as the hatch was opened Stoltzyn remembered something and began to explain what the plastic pouches set at the chin were for. But this seemed to upset one of the Czechs because he pushed him aside and sprang down the steps.

Brunner was one of the last to exit, feeling numb and at the same time torn to pieces. Clearing the final step he became aware that here and there in the street suited men—they must be of the landing party—were doubled over on their knees, holding their stomachs. He supposed this did not surprise him except that among those kneeling and right in front of him was the Soviet chief scientist, who had torn aside the mask and kept repeating to no one in particular,

"How could this happen?"

The East German raised his eyes to look around them. Yes, there were many corpses, quite hideous. Most were facing downward with spines that looked like dinosaurs, but there were those who faced upwards as well. It was all gruesome enough, the skulls and chests swollen and distorted, the skin stretched thin and pink to accommodate, or punctured outright by bony growths, all mottled, discolored, in various stages of decomposition. Eyes mashed and half hidden. Horrible.

But Brunner felt in that moment that nothing could hurt him because he was already dead. Sunk this deep into the nightmare without waking why should he care? The thought came dully that his mind and heart were like the flesh and organs of the diseased: crushed and cut by flat or jagged bone, until they simply surrendered and died.

"The peace that surpasseth all understanding."

But the black humor of despair could not last. Movement on a side street—was there a sound as well?—drew his eyes from the dead and back to the living. The dead had not been able to rouse any feeling of true pity inside him. At least their suffering was over. But to see the twisted and bulging figures walk in flesh.....

Two bodies stood there that had not yet surrendered. One of them must at one time have been a woman: long dark hair straggled from the dried blood of a knotted forehead—

LONG DARK HAIR. Like a thunderclap the reason for his journey came back to him. Where was his wife? Was Ara here? Dear God! Dear God! She had often worn such a coverall.

He started toward the street between the buildings. But the female gave an almost-shriek and the two pogo-shuffled pitifully away.

He felt something grasp his arm. He turned in fear and involuntary loathing, but it was only the nurse (the one he did not wish to think about). She was crying and shaking like a leaf. She was not what narrow men might call pretty. . .but to see her there with her hair and eyes and skin unblemished was like water at a last dying need. A breath of the free air beyond that place came back to him, and with it, like a sob, a final desperate hope of courage and the need to act.

He remembered they were wearing masks; how would they..... But seeing the hoop at her ear brought it back. He embraced her quickly and said through the microphone. "I am searching for my wife. Will you help me?"

She nodded rapidly and clung to his arm. They began to move. Some member of the party called to them but they walked slowly down the street toward a large square, where a whitestone marble building at the farther end was built like the Parthenon Library at Athena. Why it had been built and by whom (by the Alliance, to show their humane and considerate treatment of the prisoners) he did not know or care. If it was also a library then perhaps there would be records. It was a feeble thought, but it drew him on because he had no other.

As his heart pounded unbearably he heard the same prayer repeated over and over inside him. DEAR GOD FORGIVE ME I KNOW I AM SELFISH BUT PLEASE DEAR GOOD PLEASE IF I MEAN ANYTHING TO YOU DON'T LET HER BE HERE. I WILL DO ANYTHING JUST DON'T LET HER BE HERE. Then almost against his will the post script, BUT IF SHE IS HERE MAY SHE PLEASE PLEASE PLEASE NOT HAVE BEEN TORTURED AND AT LEAST BE DEAD NOW.

"No, no!" Almost he started to run, but the weight at his arm checked him fiercely. The girl stood still with terror in her eyes, and pointed to a figure at the top of the marble steps.

An old man with graying hair, not so horrible as the rest but still dreadful to look upon, stood by another who lay sprawled at his feet on the steps. Something red stood out clearly against the marble and Brunner saw that it was blood, coming from an open wound in the prostrate man. There was blood also on the knife the old man clutched awkwardly in his left hand. If the two had still been human, the scene might have been tragic—something from the epics of Homer. But as it was it was ghastly and brutal, the afterglow of a vicious reptilian death struggle. The standing man's jaw was torn to one side, exposing teeth the size of walnuts.

The woman would have fled, but Brunner watched the old man intently. He saw the weapon in the hand of the other as well—it had not been outright murder. And also the man did not run, but returned his gaze with troubled curiosity. At last some form of recognition seemed to come over him, because with a twisting gesture of the right arm which he could not lower, he beckoned them towards him.

"Come on," he said to the nurse.

She shook her head. "Make him drop the knife."

"All right." He lowered his mask. "My friend. . .we mean you no harm. As a gesture that you don't either, will you drop the knife?" The other looked puzzled. "Will you please drop the knife?"

At this he seemed to understand. He shook the arm with the knife in it, but would not let it go. "Why doesn't he drop it?"

Brunner advance slowly. "He can't. The bones have fused around it."

She came reluctantly behind and they made a semi-circle past the body, and stood at a small distance from him on the unshaded portion of the terrace.

"I would like to check your records," said the German slowly, pointing to the entrance. But at this the other's manner seemed to grow hostile. Brunner took a step toward the high door, and then was certain. The old man tried to cut them off, waving the arm with the knife. A terrible conflict of doubt seemed to be taking place inside him, as if in his ravaged mind he could not seize upon the memory he sought. Brunner walked slowly back into the sunlight. Something had to be done.

"Stay here," he said to the nurse. "I've got to talk to him."

"NO! Be careful."

He approached slowly, and the creature did not draw away. He drew very close. Then for all the pain it cost him, and the torment of his soul, Brunner put a hand on his shoulder, and looked him full in the face. He was certain. The old man wished them no harm, but was trying desperately to remember some last purpose he clung to.

"My friend," he said gently, cursing himself again for his weakness and tears. "I am trying to find my wife..... I have to know if she was here. May I please go inside and check your records?"

His words were only half understood; the greater impact was made by the passion in his tearing eyes. A cloud seemed to lift from the old man's mind, and in some last pool of consciousness he remembered. He was a librarian. Guarding to the last the books and documents entrusted..... In case anyone came. . .to search for proofs..... Of the Holocaust. A gleam of something enduring and undefeatable came into his half-buried eye. This man was not deformed.

He raised his head and arms above the elbow in a gesture almost of triumph, and his throat made a

sobbing sound..... As Brunner stepped back the man made a pushing motion with the forefinger of his right hand, then moved the head forward as if to study the place he had fingered. He repeated the gesture, then turned to face the doors.

"What's he saying?" The nurse.

"There's a computer terminal inside." Again Brunner felt his heart pump wildly. He took the girl's hand and started for the door, yet again the old man cut them off.

But there was no longer fear of War in his eyes; he only had one more thing he wished to communicate. He tapped his hip with the knife-arm, pointed to Brunner, then shook his forearm back toward his chest.

Now it was Olaf who didn't understand. The woman pointed at the pellet-pistol, forgotten, at his hip.

"I think. He wants you to shoot him." Again the movements of confirmation. Though this time, if it were possible to interpret such gestures, he moved the limbs more slowly, with great sadness.

Brunner unclasped the pistol, and with a shaking hand, pointed it at his chest. "Is this what you want?" The same gesture.

The one unbroken eye remained in sunlight, filled with tears that could not escape the well of tortured flesh around it. A low gurgling noise sounded in his throat. Brunner closed his eyes and shot.

The body fell partially across the entrance, so that they were obliged to move it. "This one at least, we bury." The words resounded with the hollowness of hell. They pushed past the right-hand door, and went inside.

After a time of searching for light and the terminal, Brunner at last sat before the fingerboard and smallish screen, trying to summon forth what was wanted, praying to the point of distraction for his wife, and for himself. He had asked the nurse to be alone for a time and she consented, was off looking elsewhere for any hard-copy documents that might be useful.

The man knew enough about computers to read the instruction codes and key out the information wanted, but the terminal kept fighting him. Several times he had entered, OCCUPATIONAL RECORDS OF RELOCATED PERSONNEL, sub-heading, DEMOCRATIC GERMAN, NON-MILITARY. But each time he did so the screen would read 'Pending', then flash one line at a time, at a reading pace, a dialogue from the Nuremburg Trials of 1945-46, and lock up at any attempt to clear it. He tried to bypass, used different keywords, but always the result was the same: he got the dialogues, or nothing at all. Close to frenzy he threw off the chair and paced wildly back and forth.

"I know all about the Holocaust and the Nuremburg trials! They have been required reading at the Academy for two hundred years!" He gradually calmed himself, if such words may be used, realizing there was nothing else for it. He set right the chair and keyed in the initial combination, only wishing that he could strap himself in place, denied all movement and all choice. The screen began again its silent dissertation, waiting after each six lines for him to verbally acknowledge.

Olaf Brunner read the following, trying to suppress the gasoline in his veins, the endless ache of his affliction, and the unnatural swelling of the diaphragm that made it difficult to remain still and digest the excrement before him.

COL. AMEN: You speak English pretty well.

VON RIBBENTROP: I spoke it well in the past and I think I speak it passably well today.

Col. Amen: Almost as well as you speak German?

VON RIBBENTROP: No, I would not say that, but in the past I spoke it nearly as well as German, although I have naturally forgotten a great deal in the course of the years and now it is more difficult for me.

COL. AMEN: Do you know what is meant by a 'yes man' in English?

VON RIBBENTROP: A 'yes man'—per se. A man who says yes even when he himself..... It is somewhat difficult to define. In any case I do not know what you mean by it in English. In German I should define him as a man who obeys orders and is obedient and loyal.

COL AMEN: As a matter of fact, you were a 'yes man' for Hitler, isn't that correct?

VON RIBBENTROP: I was always loyal to Hitler, carried through his orders, differed frequently in opinion from him, repeatedly tendered my resignation. But when Hitler gave an order, I always carried out his instructions in accordance with the principles of our authoritarian state.

At the conclusion of this there was a pause, then the following.

VON RIBBENTROP: Without ever taking any steps or doing anything myself in the SS, yes, that is correct.

SIR DAVID MAXWELL-FYFE: Just look. It is a document.....GB-294. The correspondence is 744B. That is your application with all the particulars. I just want to ask you one or two things about it. You asked to join, did you not, the 'Totenkopf', the Death's-Head division of the SS?

VON RIBBENTROP: No, that cannot be true.

SIR DAVID MAXWELL-FYFE: Don't you remember getting a special Death's-Head ring and dagger from Hitler for your services? Don't you?

VON RIBBENTROP: No, I do not remember. I never belonged to a Death's-Head Division.

SIR DAVID MAXWELL-FYFE: And the ring, too. Here is a letter dated the 5 November 1935, to the Personnel Office of the Reichsfurher-SS: "In reply to your question, I have to inform you that Brigadefurher von Ribbentrop's ring size is 17....." Do you remember getting that?

VON RIBBENTROP:I do not remember precisely. No doubt it is true.

And that was all. The screen then showed an old and dusting black and white photograph, with letters in white across the bottom:

A MOTHER AND CHILD EXECUTED IN THE UKRAINE

The computer waited for him to acknowledge, but the young East German stood mute. Twenty times that day he had thought he could be brought no lower. And yet the picture froze his heart.

The woman, dark-haired and young, stood clutching her child in the attitude of a protective Madonna. But for the field, the German soldier, and the mother and child, there was nothing to be seen. A moment frozen in time. The soldier, legs spread and planted in perfect firing form, without the slightest sign of hesitation, had aimed his rifle and fired at her head. He must have fired because the woman's bare feet were lifted an inch or two above the ground. The woman still shielded the tiny child..... Apparently he had opted not to try to kill them both with a single bullet, though it might have been done with a shot through her back. This way was surer.

Brunner looked closer. Was there a hint of doubt in the soldier's face? No. He had only closed his eyes in reflex to the gun's recoil. Equivocation, splitting hairs. It didn't matter in the least. The terror and death of the innocents were the same.

He began to feel sick again, and his task was not yet completed. "Acknowledge," he said, almost swooning. The terminal read clearly:

DEMOCRATIC GERMAN NON-MILITARY PERSONNEL

Enter

There was no horror left inside him, and yet still the prayer was heard, repeating its endless cadence. NOT HER, OR IF IT MUST BE HER THAT SOMEHOW SHE DIED QUICKLY. NO PLEASE, TAKE ME INSTEAD. Till in his delirium he spoke to the soldier, and pleaded with him not to shoot.

He had to hold one hand with the other to make it work, but on his third attempt punched in correctly: Ara Heidi Brunner, DOB 12/10/89. The networked computers responded.

CC#: 320-557-877-666
Sex: Female
Eyes: Blue
Hair: Black
Height: 5'6"
Weight: 110 lbs

Born BadenberG JCFv Schiller Educated Berlin University
Masters Degree Environmental Science Married Olaf
Augustine Brunner 6/20/10 Residence Black Forest
Province Currently Assigned NorthWest Geological
Title Agricultural Technician Current Status *

Having thus filled the display box the lighted asterisk began to flash, waiting for the signal to advance. Here Brunner hesitated, as his lips tried to mumble some words.

"You have to be alive, I won't let you." Or was it, "Our father full of grace if I mean anything to you dear God if my efforts mean anything."

He pushed the continuity icon.

Detained Non-Essential Personnel Designated Prison
Planet Dracus Iia Late Change Retained Under Order
Gen. (Classified) Current Location (Classified)

And it was indeed his lucky day. For whether she lived or died, she was not there.

"Lieutenant," came a voice through thick layers. "Lieutenant. I've found a boy and he's unhurt. I don't know why but he's unhurt."

And turning, he saw there was in fact a boy, perhaps eleven years old, physically unscathed but for a look of bitter hopelessness in his dark eyes that went far beyond his years.

It seemed from the nurse's expression that he should say something so he pronounced, What is your name?

"Elie." WIESEL, he thought. SEVEN TIMES CURSED AND SEVEN TIMES SEALED.

Then Night fell completely in his soul, and he felt no more.

.....

ACT FOUR

Ardennes, Balthazar and Scimitar Sectors
Months I through IV
International Year: 2212

REVERSAL

I

The Chinese colonies, the fences of Dark, endured. Though pressed to their last utmost need, many

times beyond despair, the Chinese could not be broken. Help arrived as all courage failed, and the Enemy was driven back.

The assassination of Stone did not, if that had been its purpose, intensify the Constitutional crisis under which the Commonwealth labored. Its citizens, for the most part, knew Plant to be an intelligent and experienced politician. And if anything, after the disillusioning of recent events, and slow reawakening of the national conscience (though still riddled with blind-spots), most felt that their dilemma now rested in more competent hands.

But more than that, some intangible quality of the people themselves, indefinable, led the Americans at such times of crisis to rally around their leaders, united and prepared to act. Ironically, bitterly (to those who still remembered the evils of World War II), this was a German trait as well.

The entire military and intelligence-gathering forces of the nation were now mobilized to head off Hayes' disastrous charge, which had left such horrors in its wake. For now a full account of the Dracus incident had been received, and those with any conscience at all, realized that they had been party to a catastrophe that could never be set right, and whose wounds would fully never heal. And while the Americans were no more eager than any other nation to admit such atrocities—the slave trade, and the genocide of the Native Americans spring to mind—truth IS a naked sword, and its hard won freedom of the press made it impossible to deny. But the rogue (war criminal, psychopath) had not been caught, and the Pandora's Box of chaos and violence which he (along with others) had opened, was far from contained.

II

Somehow Hayes had kept the fantasy together. Though there were stirrings of discontent among his men, and an ever diminishing number were free of a doubt that bordered on bewilderment, no word of their true position had yet reached them. And though the destructive force of the Third Fleet had not grown, neither had it sufficiently diminished. And the wounded predator is by far the most dangerous. Hayes was desperate.

After six months of running, engaging only in minor skirmishes which could hardly be colored as 'the forward lance of democracy', of getting his information only from Hayes, Admiral Frank was tormented by uncertainty. Why was Congress still squabbling? When would reinforcements arrive? It was clear that the Soviets were astir, and what was worse, by the look of it were coming directly after them.

But more troublesome than all of this, to a loyal soldier who did not scare easily, was the thought that perhaps Hayes was not telling the whole truth—that they were being used for some scheme of his which did not entirely align with the wishes of the President.

Why did Hayes continue to deny even the most basic military communications? They had had literally no sight or sound of their fellow soldiers in five full months. Granted they fought their battles along the frontiers, where lines of communication were stretched thin, and often erased altogether by the time factor. But to be so totally isolated, to feel cut off from one's own compatriots.....

That it took Frank so long to entertain even these simple doubts, showed just how deep his military training had gone. As intended, he was no longer an individual, no longer a thinking, questioning being, but merely an instrument, a cog in a runaway machine. But despite all efforts to the contrary, even a cog has a mind.

Finally he could bear it no longer. He secured an audience with the man alone, difficult enough just that, and told him in no uncertain terms of the Fleet's need for fuel, repairs, and additional vessels to replace those lost in the fighting. He had also intended to demand access to direct communications; but the forbidding glare aroused in the hawkish face as he approached the subject, made him back off. Insisting on a link-up with one of the American outposts would have to cover it. If something were truly amiss, surely they would find out there.

But Hayes' cunning was not yet expired. He had foreseen this. Already he had his next move planned.

"Very well, Admiral. In truth I'd been thinking along the same lines myself. There are two outposts in Scimitar, are there not? The nearer being Westmoreland station, is that correct?"

"Yes, General. Shall I alter our course in that direction?"

"By all means. Only not too straight or too fast. I want to send a Detachment there first to make sure everything is on the level. The

Russians have been getting a little too close for comfort, eh?" With this his face broke into an unnatural smile.

"I know, my friend. This cannot go on much longer: radio silence, little or no action on appropriations. If we don't learn something more useful at Westmoreland, I think we may just head for home. Maybe I can get to the bottom of this myself, rattle a few cages back in Washington. Stone must be beside himself. Election year or not, they've got no right to play politics with the lives of the Third Fleet."

He rose, patted Frank on the arm, and started to leave. Then turning in the portal, he added. "Sorry if I've been a bit of a dry fist lately. Trying to carry the weight of all this had made me..... Well, you see how it is. Do you forgive me?"

"Yes, of course. That is. . .there is nothing to forgive. I was only concerned....."

"Yes, I know. You were concerned for the Fleet, as is your duty, and your character. You're a good man in a hard place, Donald. Don't ever think I take your loyalty for granted. Well. Enough said." He smiled again the strange half-smile, and disappeared into the corridor.

*

Like Bonaparte (and other self-appointed monarchs) before him, Hayes too had his personal Guard, a elite corps of two-thousand pilots and fighting men, specially trained and chosen, fearless, loyal to him and no other. This he had been able to create, in the midst of a democracy which discouraged internal militarism, because of his forty years in the service, most of it spent as a distinguished veteran of high rank and favor, his ten years as the only five-star general in the land, and finally, his three years as Secretary of State. His remaining capacity for harm was not to be underestimated. His own part in the conspiracy to murder Stone was not yet clear, though the twelve officers and Secret Service men implicated had all been close associates, or men who shared his personal beliefs.

So he detached his elite unit, consisting almost entirely of Blue Angel flyers and Special Forces assault troops, to Westmoreland Station. Calder himself was to lead them: two light cruisers, sixteen destroyers and fighter escort. He was given the following instructions.

"When you come within clear tracking range, make contact and identify yourself as the 21st Airborne of the Sixth Fleet. Here are the counter-codes. Tell them you've been detached to patrol the area. Don't say why.

"Request permission to come aboard to refuel, and to gather the latest news of developments at home. The station is far enough out that they may not yet have heard of the death of Stone, or the search for the Third Fleet. Ask specifically if there is any message for you from Gen-Admiral Hesse. If they act the least bit suspicious at the mention of his name, or say he's been arrested, etc., act shocked and ask to hear the whole story when you arrive.

"Continue to advance, and if they raise their shields or become defensive, break down resistance and board. Try to avoid damaging the fuel cylinders, but don't worry about other signs of battle. We can always blame it on the Russians, and say you drove them back. Needless to say, in that event we can't have any witnesses."

Calder had nodded sternly, assembled and given an in-flight briefing (no more truthful than necessary) to his forces, and made for Westmoreland.

But Plant was no fool. The farther outposts were among the first he contacted. They knew in full (as far as the two month time-delay permitted) every aspect of the situation, and were prepared for just such a move. Two experienced (and loyal) CIA men had been dispatched to Westmoreland. And when Calder, calling himself Brig. General Adam Winslow, established contact and made his pitch, they conferred quickly with the Base Commander, then decided on and executed the following plan.

The commander of Westmoreland 'station', a mere rock of a moon, floating with others of its kind about a semi-gaseous giant similar Saturn, responded to his inquiries that they'd had no news of Earth in months, were glad of the company, and asked, What was the situation with all the Soviet scouting ships about?

Upon hearing this, Calder, who shared Hayes' way of thinking but not his shrewd intelligence, felt that all was well, and that he could write his own ticket. But to be certain, he brought his force in several vessels at a time, to be serviced while he himself went to speak with Col. Billings, the officer in charge, of whom he knew vaguely from his years at West Point.

While the two discussed Calder's version of recent events, including the fact that he had encountered the Third Fleet not far off, which was said to be running low on fuel and supplies (Huckleberry Finn in a dress had been more convincing), the two Intelligence men set to work.

Posing as members of the ground crew, they implanted small aluminum tubes, canisters, on the landing gear of three fighters. On the synthetic caps which bound them were written these words, superimposed over an imprint of the Presidential Seal:

"You are hereby authorized by the President of the United Commonwealth to view these contents in private, and to act upon them as you see fit." If these proved ineffective, the two planned to involve themselves more directly when the Third Fleet came in for fuel and supplies.

Word was also sent in all directions that Hayes was in the vicinity, and that the Soviets were not far behind.

III

Captain Olaf Brunner, newly promoted, was scarcely recognizable as the same human being who had once been so unsure of his military role, and stood in trepidation at the approach of the Alliance Fleet.

He had not relinquished command of the Czech destroyer upon coming to again in its infirmary. Rather, against doctor's orders he had remained there for one day only, then thrown himself into his duties with such vehemence that all in the ship became afraid of him, and some wondered if the blow to his humanity had not been fatal.

Realizing this, realizing also that the people around him were not to blame if his life was ended, he became less harsh in his attitude towards them, and turned the full weight of his broken malice instead toward repairing the ship, notifying next of kin, and getting them all back safely into Coalition space, where he intended to request (demand) a German command of his own. Though his health had not improved, and though the medicines he once shunned were now habitual, this no longer seemed an important point. His new-found callousness lent itself even to physical insensitivity.

In the rare moments he allowed himself to meditate, he thought almost exclusively of Dubcek and the tortured old man. How well he now understood them both: Dubcek, upon the death of his wife, throwing himself into his military career, trying to scrape some pitiful meaning from the ruins of an empty life. And the librarian, clinging desperately to one last purpose, one last reason to live.

Wasn't he doing the same? Only the thought, cruel as it was, that somehow Ara still lived and still needed him, kept him from ending his own life. Or maybe he was just a coward..... And one other impulse drove him, foreign as it might have seemed to his nature not so very long before. He wanted to kill as many of the enemy as possible—just KILL them. The soul was dead inside him.

The Belgian and Swiss forces, true cowards, made no further appearance at Dracus.

Escorted by the increased Soviet contingent, the Czech vessels made their way slowly out of Cerberus, where they met at length with the refurbished and reunited Coalition forces.

Here in neutral Space they held their parley, and deliberated upon a new course of action. No longer was any thought given to hiding and retreat. For now the Soviets backed them fully, if having their own battles to fight as well. Now Hayes was an outcast, and the abashed nations that had not come to the aid of Schiller (whether or not it would have made a difference) emptied their outposts for a counter-attack against the Alliance, and if necessary, against Hayes himself. The murderous horse-crap had gone far enough.

Brunner's temporary promotion was made permanent, and he was given command of a German destroyer group. This was partly due to his tenacity in liberating Dracus, partly to Dubcek's, and therefore Itjes', posthumous influence. And partly because they knew of his desperate search for his wife, and did not undervalue such a motive.

But if any were concerned about his qualifications and competence, his ability to handle his personal torment, they need not have worried. For what he lacked in experience, he more than made up for in latent determination, and at times, utter fearlessness. Death held literally no meaning for him. And in aggressive, retaliatory war, this could be a powerful weapon.

Hayes tapped the aluminum canister angrily against the counter-shelf of his quarters, watching the enclosed microvideo play back in its entirety the assassinated Stone's July address to Congress, concluded by then Vice-President Plant. Next came footage, along with the New York Press commentary, of the Presidential funeral, and the later trial of Admiral Hesse. This was followed in turn by Plant's exigent inauguration, and lastly, by Bacon being sworn in as the new Secretary of State, vowing to check the spread of anarchy and military adventurism, and bring the traitor Hayes to justice. Calder stood like a rueful statue just inside the doorway.

"Idiot!" screamed Hayes when all was over. Calder closed his eyes, crumpled in shame, but the exhortation had not been directed against him alone. "Now he's left me no choice." He got up and waved a threatening finger at the other. "No choice!"

It was not clear whom this 'he' might represent, since Stone was dead and buried, and Plant and Bacon two separate beings. Perhaps it was merely meant in the military sense—the pronoun replacing, both verbally and psychologically, that mass of humanity opposed to one's aims, who therefore must be killed. The enemy, which in Hayes' mind continued to multiply all around him.

At length he became calmer. "You're sure there were only two of these planted at Westmoreland? No mistakes this time." His lackey began to answer, but he interrupted him. "Nevermind. We can't take that for granted."

Almost tearfully. "What. . . what will we do now?"

"NOW?" What I should have done a long time ago. I'm not out of aces yet! No sir, not by a damn sight! Pull yourself together, and report back to me at 0450."

The 'ace' that Hayes referred to was simply this, hitherto, and to the sane mind still, unthinkable. He would construct a star gate straight to Earth, overthrow Plant and install himself as President, simultaneously eliminating the Soviet Union from the face of the globe. Then they would HAVE to rally behind him: the Fourth and decisive Great War. The dream wasn't ended, just pressed to its last, supreme effort and need. His only mistake to date had been that he underestimated the greatness of God! Ruthless, that was the way of Heaven. The way it must be, by damn!

If he had been tireless, aggressive and energetic before, that was nothing to the way he now threw himself, and his men, into action. Construction of the final Gate was begun immediately, and every vessel that could still fly or fire a shot, along with the Dreadnought itself, was issued to defend it. Let the red bastards come! It would take twice his own number to defeat him now. His men were battle trained and battle hardened, and what was more, they were desperate. (He continued to find it impossible to separate his own emotions from those of his men).

But. . . ONE THING AT A TIME, AND NOT MISSING A SINGLE DETAIL. That had been his motto, and he stuck to it for all the current frenzy. He detached the mythical '21st Airborne' once more to Westmoreland, this time not to talk, but to fight.

Along with it, and all in the same vessel, went the ground crews that had serviced and realigned the Detachment upon their return from the first encounter, including the man who had brought him the two canisters. These possible witness/subversives must not live to tell their tale.

Hayes no longer cared if the fuel cells were lost. Who needed them, or anyone or anything else? They would find all the supplies they needed on Earth. Enough of this mucking around! He was going home in bloody triumph, and good-night sweet prince to anyone who stood in his way.

He decided also, on one of the many sleepless nights spent waiting for the star gate, to tell his men the truth—at least that was how it then appeared in his mind. YES, OF COURSE. One thought followed another in rapid succession.

STONE HAD BEEN MURDERED, BUT NOT BY THE ARCH-CONSERVATIVES. NO! BY THE SNAKE'S BELLY LIBERALS. AND BY THE COMMUNISTS AND THEIR SYMPATHIZERS, WHO FEARED THE SWORD HE HAD PUT IN HIS GENERAL'S HAND. PLANT WAS A MERE PUPPET. OF COURSE! HE HAD NO CHOICE BUT TO USURP HIM, AND DEAL THE AVENGING BLOW TO SOVIET SPACE. He could even use the footage of Stone's funeral, to commentary written by himself.....

He dressed quickly, took out of its locked drawer the remaining microvideo, and made his way impatiently to the InterCommunications Studio, where he spent the rest of the night alone, cutting and

editing, then in a late flurry, recording and polishing his own address. Age and fatigue tried to rankle, but he was not let them. The Gate was nearly completed and the Russian threat, unseen but strongly felt, grew nearer each day. Surely by now they had secured a lock on his position, and dispatched their Armada.....

There was no time to lose.

IV

The Coalition had decided to attack the Belgians and Swiss at the place they were now weakest—the occupied Dutch holdings at Larkspur. There were several other considerations behind this choice.

For one thing, it was unexpected. For another, it placed the field of battle on neutral ground, where if the assault was beaten back, or the fighting became intense, there could be no reprisals, or increased danger to the civilian populations. Lastly, and of no small importance, the Soviets insisted upon it. Apparently something had developed in their search for Hayes and they could not, so they said, spare sufficient force to insure victory at the tri-colonies of Athena. At least not yet.

After their most recent assault against Joint Africa, at the heart of the Kurtz quadrant—the one that had triggered, or at least legitimized the Soviet response—the Alliance had drawn themselves into a more defensive posture. But they were still, by all reconnaissance, overextended. Their expected help from the German States, both in weapons systems and personnel, had not materialized, and upon last contact with Hayes, himself now a renegade, he had told them flatly to, "Go play soldier in a barn."

At the outset of the conflict, the relative strengths of the Alliance and the Coalition had been approximately equal. After the Schiller debacle and concurrent destruction of the Coalition First Combat Fleet, the scales had for a time been heavily tipped in favor of the Belgians and Swiss. But with Soviet Space now backing their rival, the (legitimate) American forces now hostile because of Hayes' earlier complicity with them, and the German States coolly indifferent, they found themselves in a position where not only was offense impossible, but defense became equally precarious. The overall anarchy which they had counted on to cover their tracks, was now on the wane, as United Nations peace-keeping forces—mostly Japanese, British and Australian, along with the implicit aid and cooperation of the Commonwealth—were dispatched to patrol the troubled areas.

The prowling leopard was caught in its tree, alone, surrounded by foes.

But a treed cat is far from a dead one. Teeth and claws and sinew it still possessed, along with the added ferocity of desperation. And not all of those on the ground below it were unified, or come with the same purpose.

The fight was far from over.

V

For all his medicines and reckless determination, by the time the Coalition/Soviet fleet came within striking distance of Dutch Larkspur, Captain Brunner was a physical and psychological time-bomb.

He knew this, did not know how to change it, and for all his efforts at callousness, could not keep creeping fears from sprouting in his mind. He was like a man on a tight-rope through dense fogs of desolation. Did hope lie forward, or back? It might have been easy but for thoughts of Ara that still came to him in his despair. If only she would come and kneel beside his deathbed, kiss his brow and say it was all right. Then he could surrender his spirit and be at peace. But she did not come, and because of it, the tiniest part of him still held on.

Four days out from Dutch Rembrandt/van Gogh, his mind and body together reached an impasse. His intestines throbbed with a dull ache that pervaded all with weakness and chills. The sleep lozenges he counted on to end the horror of each day had begun to show side-effects, and he could hardly take one in mid-afternoon. So he struggled on, eyes wincing yellow weakness as he stirred uncomfortably in his Group Leader's chair, amid the upper bridge of the first destroyer. Whatever that might mean. Until a

surge of liquid anguish overpowered him, and he knew he could not go on.

So that was the way of it. At the bitter last his pride was broken, and his will rendered useless.

He got up from the chair, leaning one arm heavily on the padded rest, and waited for the tiny squares to pass from before his eyes. Then mumbled something to his exec about IN MY QUARTERS, CALL ME IF THERE IS ANY NEED. And turned and walked weakly, sweatily from the enclosure.

As he made his way down the long corridor to the elevator leading downwards, he tried dully to reckon the number of lozenges it would take to end his life. He had perhaps fifteen. That would have to cover it. . .only. . . the convulsions would be unpleasant if he failed. He stepped into the wide double cylinder, mumbled "Six," and felt the world fall away beneath him.

That he was not thinking clearly he knew. That his death was at hand he also knew, but could not make the words form into any kind of meaningful pattern in his mind. All was dark, blank, and unintelligible. Not the slightest emotion stirred inside him. Stepping once more into a formless corridor, he walked past floating gray shapes he imagined must be men, and came to the portal of his latest hell. The door opened silently before him.

Looking into room he saw upon his dresser the vial, the photograph, and the nearly empty glass of water. He studied the trinity for a time before entering. Almost it would have seemed poetic, something from the epics..... Coming closer he looked first at the one, then at the other, then back again. To the photograph. . .of his lover. Why was she so damned beautiful? Even now.

Through countless layers of dust, his heart throbbed a single pang of pain and remorse, causing in its turn the irritation of a parched corner of one eye. From some unseen source, where he had been sure that no moisture lay, there came a gurgling bubble of mud, followed by a tiny flow of water. A desert spring in the midst of choking sands. He lifted the frame, brought it gently, then crushed it to his chest, and let out a sob of life that told him he could not yet die.

He drank the water in the glass, down to the bitter and confused sediment. Then with tears, real tears in his eyes, he heard as if from far below the ground his own voice, set loose this utterance.

"I cannot do it. It is not for me to say when all is lost. Dear God, please help me hold on."

He set down the empty glass, looked around him, tried to think. Then made his way to the Infirmary.

*

The new doctor examined him thoroughly, including a scope of his intestines that the first had considered unnecessary. He sighed to himself as he studied the computer screen.

"What is it?" asked Brunner impatiently.

"You no doubt had an intestinal virus, but that only exacerbated the more serious problem."

"Which is?"

... "Crohn's disease."

"What? What is that?"

"An inflammation of the intestines: similar to arthritis, and that the body incorrectly identifies a part of itself as an alien invader, and sends out anti-bodies to attack it.

Brunner felt the breath catch at his throat. "Am I going to die?"

The doctor shook his head firmly. "No. The disease, though incurable, need not be fatal. There are some fairly effective medicines, and at final need, surgery. But until we can reduce the swelling, you must avoid all further stress."

He started to reply that this was impossible, but checked himself, fighting off his fears at the unknown malady, and trying to reverse the negative mind-set in which he found himself immersed. Somehow he must find a way. If not for himself, then for Ara.

Being Commander of a Battle Group was not the same as commanding a single vessel. The ship had its own captain as well, and he was not needed for day-to-day functions. So he thanked the doctor, received the new medication and withdrew.

He gave temporary command to his Executive Officer, saying he would return in three days—his doctor had advised two weeks—went to his quarters and slept, hard as it was, avoiding drugs and self-pity when possible. He spent time in the library reading, or (on his cabin's viewscreen) observing quietly and without interference the interaction of his staff upon the bridge—learning, letting life take its course as it led them into battle. So effortlessly.

Occasionally he spoke with Joyce, still leader of the Soviet presence, though he detected a new coolness in the Russian's tone and manner, which increased as they drew nearer their objective. He thought he had an idea what this might mean, but it was not for him to act or pass judgment upon. Four hundred lives were now entrusted to his care, as well as some small part in the eventual overthrow of the Alliance, and subsequent liberation of his home. He had no illusions about being on the side of good, but only being caught up in the insanity of war—the pinnacle of man's inhumanity to man.

If this overthrow and liberation could be accomplished, if she was still there on Athena, he would build his life on new foundations. If only she was there.

And he could survive until then.

.....

HEARTS OF FIRE

The battle of Rembrandt/van Gogh saw the most bitter fighting of the entire war. Even at Schiller, where the Coalition pilots were forced to continue a battle they could not win, after perhaps the first three hours came the grim realization, the last human outlet, that death awaited them. Here there was no such comfort, nor did the torment end after five hours only.

Here the collision of forces and opposing wills was so even—the determination of the Coalition fighters to liberate, avenge and overthrow, the determination of the Belgians and Swiss to survive, and not be enslaved by the Soviets—that the conviction of the one and the desperation of the other crashed together time and time again without any clear result. And added to the white-hot intensity of their struggle, was the question that for thirty-six hours could not by either side be answered: was victory still possible?

If one is cold and hard enough to perceive it, he will see that in a truly fatalistic world there is a limit to the terror of the wretched souls caught inside it. Always death is there as a final end to all. But where death is not an alternative, because hope remains, where the questions: "Will I survive? Can I still live and find peace? Or is my very struggle in the world of flesh ended forever?" remain unanswered, tipping first one way and then the other on the blind scales of Justice, or Fate, or some damnable, unnamable thing..... Here, there is horror.

The world which the existentialists present to us—where all is meaningless, nothing is lasting, and death and mutilation of dreams inevitable—was here, as in countless battles of flesh and blood, rendered empty and false. For where is the terror in such a predetermined world? Let the man who sees the black truth, end his life and have done. As if the multitude of Life and Universe around us could be supported by some trick of cruel gods!

The true intensity of Man's existence—real, physical, undeniable—lies in the fact that success and victory are possible, if like everything else in our finite lives and understanding, limited and passing. Health, happiness and love (in varying degrees, and depending largely on outlook) are too many times evident in those around us to merely to say, THERE IS NO HOPE, THERE IS NO CHANCE, THERE IS NO GOD. The man dying of terminal disease, or imprisoned without hope of escape in a living hell not of his own creation, has the right when pain and fear become unbearable, to give in to despair. We have not. Because for the rest of us, the fact remains that victory and success (if the goal is just, and based on reality) ARE possible, however terrible the price, or the roads which lead to it.

A man is forced to ask himself, as he is borne down the swift water-gap of crisis, toward the razor knifing across his path, CAN I SURVIVE THE VERY TIP OF THAT BLADE, AND PASS THROUGH? IS MY RAFT OF FLESH STRONG ENOUGH, MY SHIELD OF WILL AND UNDERSTANDING SUFFICIENT? And while caught on that blade, how multiplied the anguish by the fact that his hope never leaves him. "Hope springs eternal in the human breast."

But even this would not make the struggle so overpowering, if it were a false hope, and we knew it. But all around us there is the rumor of triumph (and tragedy), of those who have survived personal hells, accomplished the impossible, and stand now on a more permanent footing, if only in posterity. How then can we, caught in the midst of the fray, despair, and surrender our dreams? We cannot.

Age approaches us, inevitable death, suffering that cannot be avoided. And yet there is also the eternal Spring of youth inside us, that hope, that yearning, if not for peace in this world, then at least for some last accomplishment before release into the great unknown: some reason for having been here.

For this Battle is not fiction. It is not words, nor one man's opinion. It is life: LIFE, the beautiful and terrible.

How can a man survive?

*

Olaf Brunner experienced more physical, emotional, and spiritual torment in those thirty-six hours than he would have thought possible for any man to bear, let alone himself, and in his weakened state. The physical anguish came from sickness and fatigue, and from the intolerable heat upon the wounded bridge, the emotional, from the loss of ships and lives that had been given him to protect, and the spiritual, from the Godless red carnage that lashed back and forth like a writhing, bloodied serpent: the death and mutilation he saw with his eyes and heard through the earpiece. And from the Goddamnable and agonizing question of whether or not they could still break through.

The dual colonies having no substantial defense shields or stations (those of the Dutch had been destroyed in conquest, and not sufficiently rebuilt), the Bel-Swiss had chosen to counter-attack, and to make their stand in the open Space around them. Meanwhile the Soviets, epitomizing their policy of conditional help, held their own forces back, lending only long-distance firepower in times of greatest need.

After the first twenty-four hours, Brunner had realized grimly that his poor physical health and personal trauma were no longer a deterrent—that many men with strength and good fortune he did not possess, would have faded and given up long before. And he knew also, for all his introspection, that he BELONGED on that bridge, in that fight. HE WAS NOT A QUITTER OR A LOSER! Like a savage wolf defending its fallen mate he remained there, as rationality slipped farther and farther from sight, till in the end he truly was a wolf, as the hyenas around him lunged ravening about the helpless form of his wife, which he alone defended.

And this feeling of desperate and unyielding righteousness communicated itself not to him alone, or to the men who served under him. In those late hours all the Coalition felt it, and the more unattainable victory seemed, the more bitterly they steeled themselves to attain it. The Belgians and Swiss began to waver, and at last the Soviet battleships moved in.

The question had finally been answered. The field of battle and the Islands beyond, belonged to those who had wanted them more desperately.

*

When the matter was clearly in hand, and those Alliance vessels which could not flee had surrendered, Captain Brunner turned the helm back over to his subordinates, placed his destroyer group (what remained of it) under the command of Col. Liebenstein, and retired to his quarters. Taking a sleeping lozenge he collapsed onto the bed, where his limbs trembled slightly and his eyes moved feebly in their sockets, until it began to take effect. Then at last his eyelids closed, and he knew nothing more for three hours.

He was jolted back to life by a young officer tugging urgently at his arm. "Commander Brunner. Commander."

He rose suddenly and, between the still pronounced effect of the drug and the liquid-shock state of his nerves, felt certain that something terrible had happened.

"What? What is it?" The victory of so few hours before seemed not at all a sure memory. "Have the bastards broken through?"

The officer, himself as taut and fatigued as a violin-string on which some mad symphony had been played, had no trouble interpreting his words. "No, Commander. It's your wife."

These words did not at first make any impression on him, since he was sure there was some mistake. If the man had told him that the stars had all turned black, his mind could have accepted it more easily. But slowly his eyes narrowed upon the serious face of the adjutant.

"Where?" He had not the courage to ask in what condition. And besides, it could not possibly.....

"At the former headquarters of the Alliance High Command." These words not seeming to make an impression, he added, "On Rembrandt. Our envoy went to negotiate terms of surrender."

"Ara Heidi Brunner?" He pronounced the words slowly, with rising and uncontrollable emotion. "You're sure?"

"Yes, sir. She asked for you specifically, if you would be allowed—"

"I've got to go to her!" He rose and started for the door, but lost his balance and stumbled down on one knee. He pushed away the adjutant, who was leaning over him.

"It's the sleeping pill. Tell the doctor I need a stimulant, and find out about a landing craft." He waved his arm vaguely.

"Colonel Liebenstein has said to meet him aboard the Kythera in half an hour. They will be sending a party to the capitol at that time."

"Have we a functioning shuttle?" The *deja-vu* was almost too powerful.

"Yes, Commander."

"Go. Go." The young man left the room as he strained to right himself and recover some semblance of calm. Realizing the latter was impossible, and that the stimulant would make it worse, being so far beyond any choice..... He sat helpless on the edge of the bed, and gave himself up to the Sea which had dashed him so mercilessly, yet now was bearing him, heedless, toward all his desire. "If only she is all right!" His head dipped again beneath the drowning swells, and he struggled for breath.

A medic entered with a syringe and a distracted, irritated look on his face. "Are you sure this is a good idea?" Brunner said nothing, rolled up the sleeve and pointed to his upper arm. Shortly afterward the adjutant returned. No longer shunning his help, he leaned heavily against him, and after the first mad adrenalin rush, made his way as in a three-legged race to the shuttledock.

"Can you fly a shuttle?" he asked as they entered. But seeing a pilot already at the helm, he asked instead, "Can you be spared from your duties?"

"Yes, sir. If you wish—"

"I do." A complex series of emotions, such as only real life can provide, made him not want to be parted from this lad, so very little more than a boy.

The shuttle made its way to the Kythera, from which her summons had come. Upon arrival he and the boy boarded the larger landing craft, which then made for the soft and flowing hues of Dutch Rembrandt. Brunner's last rational thought of that voyage was that planets had been misnamed, since van Gogh at its distance was all of gold and black.

*

The vessel touched down before the vast, geodesic Headquarters building, after first passing through the airlock of the encircling dome. It took some time before the soldiers in the broad entranceway could be made to understand what was wanted of them in relation to the strange, grizzled and begrimed Captain. The detachment to escort the prisoners they expected, and Liebenstein's name they knew..... Finally after several attempts on the com-line, during which a voice on the other side could be heard to utter clearly, "There must be some mistake," a sympathetic looking officer of indistinguishable rank

emerged from an elevator and said:

"Group Commander Brunner? Please come with me."

He followed lifeless, along with the boy. They went up in the sealed capsule, and then across and then, for some reason, down again. The motioned stopped. Two doors slid apart.

They walked down a short hallway, and entered a room. There were three people in it. A military policeman, a Belgian officer, and a woman with dark hair.

That the woman was his wife he slowly realized, because she came up and embraced him gently. But his mind was so uncertain, and his body so weak that he wondered if he were awake, or it was all a trick, or..... She looked up at him with shining eyes, kissed his unmoving lips, and said: "Olaf, are you all right?"

"Who is the man?" he said, as to a stranger. And at this some kind of life began to revive inside him. But it was not love. An ember caught to flame and, smoldering, began to rise.

The man in question rose, looking apologetic and unsure. He came nearer and offered his hand, which Brunner left dangling. Then with a heavy accent and sudden coldness he said. "I am the man who brought your wife here. I am General....." and his mouth produced some name.

WHILE A BELGIAN OFFICER WAS RAPING YOUR WIFE. RAPING YOU WHILE A BELGIAN OFFICER WAS RAPING YOUR WIFE. RAPING YOUR WIFE, was all that his mind and last instinct understood.

Something savage took hold of him. He struck the man with such a sudden, vicious blow that even in his weakened state it nearly broke both jaw and hand, as the general staggered and fell back.

The MP came towards him and his wife caught his arm, which was raised to strike again. "Olaf, what are you doing?" she pleaded. But he could not perceive what was happening and shook free of her grasp, and with starvation violence moved toward his foe again. But the MP stood between them.

His wife turned his numb and again lifeless form toward her, and with tears in her eyes, said words that almost made it through to his mind.

"Olaf, please. He never touched me."

And then in a simple, childlike sob he said her name.

"Ara?"

"Yes, it's me. It's me, it's all right."

And again she embraced him, instinctively and with all the love she could muster massaging his back, the taut muscles of his neck. He stepped back after a time and held her arms, confused.

"Then why....."

"To be a governess for his children, and to keep me from the prison colonies."

"To protect you? Why?"

"Because I'm pregnant."

"I thought you said he never....." It was all too much. He looked hard at her figure, perhaps a little fuller, tried to reckon the months. All useless. He did not understand. He did not understand. Then it was his eyes that pleaded, and he felt himself beginning to pass out.

"Ara?" His last hope. "What is happening?"

"I had the child, Olaf. A son. YOUR SON."

At this he let out a piteous groan, as the lance pierced his heart. And he stumbled, then collapsed into a corner, weeping uncontrollably, oblivious of his wife's caressing hands.

II

The next two days he spent in a hospital on Rembrandt, then moved with his wife and baby son, to temporary quarters aboard the largely undamaged Kythera. With the vessels of his former destroyer

group either crippled, destroyed outright, or reassigned to new contingents, his next command remained uncertain.

He was offered, if he wanted it, a two month leave of absence. But in his present state, and with the uncertainty of war all around him—his own sense of duty, and the desire to find the safest haven for his young family—he simply could not decide. Also, with the issue still very much in doubt, and the slow realization that he was good at what he did, he did not know if he wished to trust the future to strangers: if his place was not, after all, on the bridge of a Coalition destroyer.

He could not decide, and only asked for more time.

That night aboard the cruiser, the first they had spent together after the long separation, it was understood between them without any word or sign, that they should not yet try to make love. Instead they lay quietly in the bed, with the newborn in the crib beside them, talking, kissing, and gently touching in the subdued light and near darkness of the room. They spoke in the way that couples do, who have not yet taken their troth for granted, understanding with fewer words what the other meant, but still trying to read the deeper meaning of what was said, and to reaffirm their own commitment by expressions of special tenderness and love.

"But tell me the truth," he continued. "That he never touched you I can believe. It shows in his eyes. But why does a conquering General in the midst of an war, a widower, take a beautiful young woman from a detention center? Only to protect her, and to be a governess for his children? Forgive me, Ara, but no one is that noble."

"Yes. I think deep down he always hoped that I would fall in love with him, with his children, and become his wife or mistress." Her fingers gently reassured his throbbing chest. Then, as if embarrassed and needing to change the subject, she added. "But really, I'm not as attractive as all that. It is only in your eyes that I'm beautiful."

"Then the rest of the world is blind.... But how could he think to keep you forever, or that you would abandon your own home, your own family?" From these words she understood that he had accepted her faithfulness, and as far as this was possible, dismissed jealousy, which would only wound them both.

"You have to remember how it must have seemed to them at the time. Our colonies had been taken, along with the Dutch. And shortly afterward, Schiller was destroyed. . .and the Coalition thrown into confusion. The blindness of the conqueror, I suppose. They had known nothing but victory, didn't seem to realize the men that they had killed, and the lives they had torn apart—"

"I'm glad I hit him. BASTARDS. I wish they could have seen their handiwork at Dracus."

She rose on her elbow and looked down at him, trying to understand the change. He would never have said (or done) such a thing a year ago. He turned toward her, with the changed eyes and soul of all innocent young, thrust into war and forced to grow up too quickly. Then all at once her eyes clouded with pain, as she seemed to realize that she too had been unaware of the suffering caused by such men. And her own anguish and grief, that she had had to discipline for so long, for her unborn child's sake, spilled over. She hid herself against him.

"He was always telling me that the Coalition was finished, that you were probably dead...."

And he felt too what she must have endured, and the veil was lifted between them. They had both suffered, both changed, though their love for each other had not. Or if it had, had only deepened and grown stronger. But with the almost masculine resolve that he knew so well in her, she still her tears and pushed forward, determined to finish the thought—to face the hard truth.

"But I never lost hope. I knew you would find me. Somehow I knew." But she could not maintain this control any longer. Nor did she wish to. She set her face to his chest and wept silently as he comforted her.

"My beautiful Ara. Forgive me. I was so wrapped up in my own loss, I had forgotten how it must have been for you."

She became quieter, shook her head against him "I was all right. And with the baby inside me. . .I wasn't alone somehow. But I was so terribly worried for all of us. I knew how hard you would take our separation, not knowing."

He released a breath, felt once more his own dependence. "How can you love me?" he said mournfully. "I am such a weak and timid fool."

She put a finger to his lips.

"Do you know what Colonel Liebenstein told me on Rembrandt?" He shook his head, eyes closed.

"He told me that he was recommending you for a Medal of Valor—that you held together a destroyer group consisting of twelve ships, in which nine were knocked out or severely damaged. . .and held your position against an attacking force nearly twice your strength, for thirty-six hours without relief or reinforcement. Do you know what else he told me?" He could only release a troubled breath, that seemed to have been caged inside him for years. "He said that you defended Dracus with equal tenacity, and landing, kept your head when more experienced men couldn't. He said that you've been sick and hurting throughout, but all the while have been an exemplary officer." He felt hot tears flow down both sides of his face. "It's true, isn't it?"

"Yes..... But I wish I didn't cry so much. It makes me feel weak, and I think that in your eyes——" Again the finger touched his lips.

"Stop, Olaf." She kissed him, then snuggled close. "It takes so much more courage to admit your feelings than to deny them. Why do you think I fell in love with you?"

He turned toward her as he had longed to do from the first night of their separation, and buried his face in the soft hair about her neck.

"Dear God, I love you." And in that moment he could not bear to hear his son cry, because he knew that he was nothing more, and never would be, than the helpless creature beside them.

As his wife rose to nurse the child he recovered himself, and like Ara, continued the thought.

SUCH IS THE LOT OF HUMANITY. And who nourished and protected them, the children who had grown? Was there a God, or was Man truly alone in his walk through the world of flesh? In all that he had lived through these past months, he could not begin to answer that question. There had to be something—he had only his own experience to go by—because..... As close as he had come to death and despair, they had never been able to completely overwhelm him. But had he, and Ara, survived because of something outside, or inside? And was that something God? Was God internal, some invisible undercurrent of Life and Nature, or external, some being or beings who watched it all from without? And where to find the answers? If there was an answer.

He remembered the words to Johann Schiller's 'Ode to Joy,' set to angelic chorus by Beethoven. "For surely, beyond the stars there dwells a loving father. Seek Him there, beyond the stars." And this seemed particularly relevant and true, until he remembered that Schiller had been unmade by the hands of men.

And he remembered the horror of Dracus, which had made him see, and feel, all others.

And these continual barriers to faith and serenity were just what was so maddening. How could one believe in anything after knowing the rape of war? Or disbelieve after finding his wife (and himself) still alive against such odds? No matter how much of life one experienced, no matter how much knowledge he acquired or how 'wise' he became—he wondered seriously if such a word held any real meaning—there was always one more piece of information to take in, one more tragedy to rationalize, and try to find some reason for. And until this new, confounded fact was taken in and digested, it upset and unraveled all the others, and would not let a man with half a conscience rest.

Through this long chain of reasoning, and especially this last thought, he finally unearthed what was bothering him, and poisoning the recuperative peace that he should have been experiencing. He started to rebel against what he found there, but knew he would be unable.

What was troubling him was simply this. In the earlier days of his acquaintance with Col. Joyce, and for reasons known only to himself, the Russian had confided probably more than he should have about Soviet intentions during the war. Perhaps it was the need to express and justify his thoughts to a younger man not yet so cynical, so certain and so weary of life. In any event he had told him, and Brunner now knew why they had insisted that the Coalition strike Dutch Larkspur first, and why they were now being instructed to withdraw.

The new orders had arrived that very day. They were to return to the fringes of Cerberus, there to reform with heavy Russian reinforcements, for the inevitable assault on the Athena colonies—the campaign to liberate and reclaim his home.

That was all fine, and how it should be. Incredibly tempting, except that in the meantime they were to leave Rembrandt and Van Gogh in the hands of the Soviets. And he could no longer pretend ignorance as to what would happen next: one more SSR possession, one less home for the Dutch. And one more subjugated people, for those who would not, or could not leave. It was 1946 all over again.

DAMN IT!

He had seen too much suffering and loss, been spared from final annihilation too many times to feel no responsibility, or to take such news easily. It was so unfair. What remained of the Dutch forces, along with their Swedish allies, had been contacted and told of the colonies' liberation. They were on their way, with deepest gratitude, to re-occupy their homes, and rebuild their lives.

And what would they find upon arrival? The Soviets firmly entrenched, regretfully explaining that for strategic purposes they must maintain, for the time being, a provisional government and strong military presence there. But not to worry, they would say, so soon as the conflict was ended and peace assured, all would again be set right.

THE BLOOD LEECHES, FEEDING OF THE MISERY OF OTHERS TO EXPAND THEIR DOMAIN. But what could he possibly do about it? He was only one man, and had his own family to think of first.... No. Though the excuse to turn his back was ready-made, he knew he could not yield. For this was what his ancestors had done under Hitler: in the name of loving and protecting their own, disregarding the lives and humanity of all who opposed them. It was WRONG, the seed and heart of all betrayal.

He watched his wife with the baby at her breast, knew there were other wives and children, other husbands like himself. All had lives, and all deserved to live them freely.

He resolved then and there to request a larger command, to speak to Liebenstein, and take it from there. He refused to allow the anguish and death of the battle just three days prior. . .to amount to nothing more than another senseless tragedy. His comrades had fought too long and too hard, and too many died. . .for that. And the fire that burned suddenly, inexorably inside him, consumed all doubt.

*

The next morning he asked for, and received, command of a light cruiser whose Captain had been severely wounded, along with such escort as could be assembled from the decimated ranks of other destroyer groups such as his own. He then went to speak to Col. Liebenstein, who upon the death of Gen. Tarkanean had become Fleet Commander. He found the man seated at his desk.

The Colonel, a decent man but with many concerns, heard what he had to say, listening darkly and looking up at him with an ever deeper frown of discontent. But whether this frown was directed at the Soviets, the result of his own feelings of regret, or anger at the willful young Captain, it became harder and harder to discern. Brunner grew more reluctant to lay out his full intentions before him, and finally stopped altogether. Liebenstein looked hard at him for what seemed a long time, then spoke.

"What, exactly, are you proposing we do?" The younger man's intent, suffering eyes did have a way of making one feel uncomfortable.

"Resist them. Delay, object. For Christ's sake, the Dutch will be here in ninety-six—"

"NO."

Brunner lowered his face, red with rage and shame. "But how can we just...." He could not finish for the lump in his throat. Liebenstein became angry.

"I said, NO. And if you disobey me in this, or follow up with any scheme of your own, your next command will be of a cell-block. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir." Brunner saluted brusquely, and started to leave. The Colonel called him back.

"You have something more you want to say to me? You are still one of my officers; I won't have it festering inside."

"Yes, Colonel." His hesitated, his voice shaking with emotion. "I have to write nearly two hundred letters to next of kin. When I contact the families of the deceased. . .what the hell am I supposed to say they died for?" Without waiting for an answer he stalked out of the room, leaving a shadow behind him.

Liebenstein could not help feeling rueful, though he tried to justify his position, musing darkly that the same qualities of stubborn righteousness that inspired men to follow such a leader, often led to the destruction of all. But still there was a shadow in the room.

*

The first thing that Brunner did upon assuming command of the Icarus (he found the name somehow appropriate) was to transfer and surround himself with as many of his former comrades as he could. A bond had been formed between them in those thirty-six hours that could never be broken, and he wanted them there if..... He also knew they would remain loyal, and understand his purpose.

He asked his wife to remain about the Kythera until the issue was resolved, but she refused. And it was no use trying to dissuade her once she set her mind to something. Again the qualities he prized about all others showed through in her—loyalty, and courage in time of need.

For there comes a time in every man's life when he must put it all on the line, and take a dangerous chance. Brunner had felt himself fighting for so long, without knowing why, that even the reunion with his wife, and the unexpected birth of his son, had not been enough to pacify his need to KNOW. In fact, they had intensified it.

He had brought a new life into the world, and the responsibility he felt both for that act, and for the fusing of his life with Ara's, set against a background of war and death, all but overwhelmed him. Without knowing if mortal life were ultimately just, or inherently sinister and cruel, they crushed him utterly.

Upon coming to the morning after the Dracus landing, one thought only would take shape in his mind, and hammered at him relentlessly. "What kind of a world is this? What kind of a world?"

And now he had to answer that question not only for himself, but for his son as well. And thoughts of death's separation from Ara, who was years younger, and infinitely healthier than himself, unhinged him with equal strength. Did he have the right..... WAS THERE ANYTHING BEYOND THE CRADLE AND THE GRAVE? For him, now, it was all reduced to the same ancient question, which for the sake of his soul he could not put off any longer. WAS THERE GOD? And of equal and inseparable importance, the manifestations of which he saw clearly before him: COULD ONE MAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE? Could he stand up for what he believed, resist what he knew to be evil, and still survive?

To find these answers was to him worth risking all. He had not forced the issue, nor was it due to some flaw in his character that he saw it as it was. It had come to him of itself, inevitable, and now he would find out. A part of him wished that he could somehow send away his wife and son. But she would not hear of it, and that, too, was probably as it should be. Better no life than half life. The child remained on Kythera.

The withdrawal had begun. The Soviet ships remained at a distant semi-circle beyond Rembrandt, broken into two groups with a wide corridor between. Through this channel passed slowly, as if in solemn changing of the guard, the scorched and battle-marked Coalition fleet.

This much Liebenstein had insisted upon, meaning for the Russians to get a good hard look at those who had truly fought and won the battle. The young Captain's words were not wholly without effect, though the Colonel, as a proud man must when his mind is swayed by another and he is forced to act, told himself that the sentiments behind the move were his own. In fact, he had all but put Brunner from his mind. It was only from oversight that he allowed his contingent to be the last to pass through.

Only they did not pass through.

Seeing the tardy vessels in his rear viewscreen, the Colonel thought at first there must be some mistake, or mechanical problem, and so was not overly concerned. Until looking back in horror and sudden understanding, he recognized the call letters of the light cruiser, and remembered under whose command..... And saw the accompanying destroyers fanning out to either side of it—BLOCKING THE SOVIETS' PATH.

And there they stayed, facing down two battleships and escort, twenty times their own strength.

"HUMBOLT," he ejaculated to his communications officer. "Get me the bridge of the Icarus. . quickly!" The com officer did as he was told, hailing the vessel several times. "WELL?" After a moment.

"Sorry, sir. There's nothing wrong with the equipment..... She just won't respond." The colonel was livid.

"Then get me number one. . .number TWO destroyer. ANY of them!"

"Still trying..... No response, sir."

The reason there was no response was that the destroyers had shut down all but channeled communications between themselves and their immediate Commander. And the voice and com-screen of the Icarus were otherwise engaged. Its outgoing signal, however, was neither coded, nor directed toward the Soviet battleship only. The whole of both fleets were free to listen, and to judge.

Brunner stood in the sunken middle of the flying bridge—his wife stood beside him—gazing with surprising composure into the angry features on the screen before him: Colonel Joyce, the man with the power to end his life.

"Colonel. Thank you for speaking with me. I don't believe you've met my—" The voice that cut him off was cold and cruel.

"What the hell do you think you're doing, Brunner?"

"I am experiencing difficulty with my ship's retreat mechanism: she doesn't seem to be able to leave the colonies just yet."

"And how long do you think that will last?" A threat more than a question. The two understood one another perfectly.

"I'd say, roughly of course, about forty-eight hours. Just about the time the Dutch return to—"

"Now listen to me, you pathetic little worm. If you don't get out of the way, and I mean RIGHT now, I'll blow you and your little band of heroes to bloody shrapnel. Don't think I won't!"

Brunner's voice shook with subdued passion, but not fear.

"I don't think you won't. I know it. Because to do that you'd have to brutally attack, and murder your own allies. And have to explain to the Coalition, the Japanese, and everybody else, how you had no choice but to desecrate our victory, and steal the home planets—" Joyce tried to interrupt, but he would not let him. "And it's NOT going to happen." Again the other tried— "You want me? Then come and TAKE me!"

"I'll give you thirty seconds." Joyce turned to his gunnery officer, who nodded his understanding. "Starting now."

Brunner waited till the count was down to six. His voice was the ice of Infinity.

"Get the fuck out of here."

"BRUNNER!" A single shot was fired, impacting upon, and with a round and outward glow lighting up the forward shields of the Icarus. In the ensuing concussion his wife was thrown down with a start, and small fires broke out on the bridge.

This was too much for Liebenstein. He started to send a signal to Joyce, but saw that the human miracle was taking place without him. Where before there had been ten destroyers in the breach, now there were fourteen, one so badly damaged that it could barely thread its way through the staggered ranks of the Soviets.

The renegade ships were German.

Then, without any order being given, first one Coalition vessel and then another began to break formation and move back to defend their comrades. Brunner had his answer, though he was too strangled by tears to take it in. Liebenstein's battleship at last joined the others, and turned to face the Enemy.

No more shots were fired. The Dutch returned to their homes.

.....

THE ABYSS

The final star gate was completed, and by all the signs, not a day too soon. Swift-moving Soviet reconnaissance vessels moved with increased frequency and boldness just out of firing range, marking the numbers and combat readiness of the Third Fleet, and even, if they knew what to look for, the progress of the Gate itself. Nothing else trackable moved within the vicinity; but Hayes' knew this meant nothing. The Russian anti-detection screens, as demonstrated by earlier encounters, were vastly improved, and their four Supercarriers (by the latest intelligence) were capable of full e-light warp from well outside the arc of his surveillance. And at that speed.....

The Dreadnought remained still while her troubled mites hurried back inside the womb, hopeful of escape. As if literally animal young, they seemed to sense for the first time in their half-wakened minds the presence of a shark, or some other dreadful creature, that shared those depths with them, wishing them harm, and more powerful even than the mother, who from time of first consciousness had been the very symbol and embodiment of strength. Now into their dark hole she would crawl, and emerge again far, far away.

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The last chute was raised, and the goliath moved slowly forward, gathering speed, eradicating the trivial miles which separated her from the Gate, and from the possible undoing of the civilized world. Earth! The hexagon was now clearly visible as it loomed larger and nearer, surrounded once more by the dwarfed engineering vessels which had shaped it, and with its might, burned out the hollow darkness beyond. What would become of these, since the frame had been mined, with orders to destroy it upon the passage of the Dreadnought, none could say.

Hayes leaned forward in martial attitude against the rail before the screen, his lower jaw locking tight, then releasing, like a vise-grips. Frank stood at his short distance from him, churning with emotion. They were drawing closer. As so many times before they would pass through. But this time, on the other side would be.....

A succession of brilliant white lasers leapt out of nowhere and converged upon the cold blue Frame, which in turn glowed sullenly from within, convulsed, blew outward and came apart. The Gate was shattered, and would no longer serve.

"Reverse thrust!" someone shouted. The engineering vessels, of their own volition, had begun to scatter in all directions. Two seemed partially crippled, and one moved not at all.

Hayes let out a sound more bestial than human, after which he bawled, "Where did those shots come from!" A technician turned towards him as if to answer, but his face was deathly white.

Hayes strode toward him with his arm raised, as for a blow. "OUT with it!"

"From the Dreadnought, sir."

"From WHERE on the Dreadnought!"

The man hesitated, and Hayes really did strike him. He wiped the blood from his mouth, and with his eyes to the floor said numbly,

"Auxiliary Laser Deployment."

As if cued by these words, the young officer that Hayes had berated on the eve of the Schiller conquest rose and came forward.

"I did it, you dirty old son of a bitch. You're not going to destroy MY home." He whirled to address his stupefied compatriots, who had turned from their stations to face him. "It's all been a lie! Stone didn't order any of this, and Plant didn't kill him. It was THAT bastard," pointing, "and Hesse that—"

He never finished the sentence. Hayes, purple with rage and every vein of his forehead bulging, struck him a savage blow across the head with a conduit wrench, the first object that came to hand. The man fell limply forward, not quite unconscious, emitting a weak groan of pain.

At that moment two MP's rushed into the room, and Hayes ordered them to lift him by the arms and turn him around. The pistol that he always carried at his hip he raised and held at arm's length. It was clear that he meant to shoot the man.

"Stop it!" cried Frank suddenly, rushing between them. "You can't just kill a man without a trial. . .for

doing what he thought was right." It was equally clear that Frank himself was unsure of the truth, and had been unnerved by the youth's allegations.

"Who the HELL do you think you are?" bellowed the other. "Giving ME orders! Stand aside or I'll kill you both."

This was too much for the MP's. Who was their rightful commander? What was happening? They looked at each other in confusion, continued to hold the gunnery officer, though less firmly. Indecision reigned upon the bridge.

It was at this moment that Chaos played her final trick.

"Admiral," spoke an officer, who had turned back to face his station. "Two enormous Carriers have just come out of warp. Super-Soviet configuration. Bearing 00, 666.

"It's the Russians, sir."

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"It's the Russians, sir."

"Now look what you've done!" cried Hayes in his fury, unable to realize that all Frank had DONE was to keep him from killing a man untried. "Get him out of here."

The MP's looked again at each other, then at Frank, not knowing who was meant or what should be done. The latter inclined his head swiftly, and they took the young officer away. As they left it, Calder entered the enclosure.

Hayes whirled in fuming circles, ordering the chutes to be lowered and the attack-ships discharged. The officers at their stations either carried out his instructions or turned to Frank, who with a gesture of weary despair raised his arms as if to say, "What else can we do?"

"We've got to move away from the gate, General," came the timid voice of the deployment officer.

"Then do it, ass! Take us back and to port." And Hayes rattled off some meaningless coordinates. Like a gored lion he stalked back and forth, out of control, breathing too deeply and at intervals releasing desperate, maddened execrations. Another hesitant voice.

"They've..... They've begun to discharge and form ranks."

"Of COURSE they have! They didn't come here to talk!"

In his earlier, false-confident musing, Hayes had said that it would take twice the Fleet's strength to overmatch him. And that was exactly what he now confronted—two Soviet Supercarriers, each nearly equal in girth and firepower to the Dreadnought queen, and each bearing a greater number of swarming killer bees.

The Russians did not attack immediately, but remained at some distance, waiting perhaps for all their vessels to be deployed, or to be sure that Hayes was alone and the fight would go their way. Nor did the Americans make the first move, intimidated and dismayed by the sudden change in their fortunes, staring across the void at the ever widening fence of the opposing Armada.

An army used to winning, rarely knows how to face defeat.

The Dreadnought had drawn back and away from the remains of the broken Gate, so that now it lay ahead of them and far to the left. The out-ships as well, low on fuel and tentative, spread outward so that two almost parallel walls were formed, filled with eyes. The would-be combatants faced each other across the margin that they themselves created: the empty distance of war's chasm, that unholy no-man's land wherein, once entered, frightened men kill frightened men until one side has had enough.

"Shall I try to contact them?" asked the young com officer pitifully. But at that moment the Russians started forward.

But at that moment something else occurred as well. A patch of silvery sheen became visible at a distance to the Commonwealth right, almost at a direct line between the armies from the broken and still dark-smoldering gate upon their left. The advancing Soviet forces came to a halt, confused. But Hayes became suddenly calm, and a vengeful smile played about the corners of his mouth. But he must play this new card correctly.

"What is it?" asked a voice. And even as the words were spoken a fourth Goliath appeared, for an instant gleaming white, then graying once more as it passed through the pierced screen of silver. Hayes was not the only one with a star gate. The American Seventh Fleet, entombed within the carrier Eisenhower, was at hand.

Quickly taking stock of the situation, Commanding Admiral Robeson moved to join the re-heartened Third, attempted to make contact with both parties, and reluctantly, since he did not know how things would turn, began to discharge and align his own forces. The parallel planes still existed, only now they were closer and more equal, a colossal gathering of some fourteen hundred ships, prepared for a confrontation that even the mythic battles of the Bhagavad-Gita could not match.

And this was no fable of gods and clouds and chariots, decrying the illusions of the physical world, but hard and deadly reality. And if the two sides of fire-breathing metal, like ghastly cymbals of Death, were brought together with a crash, the awful sound would shatter the uneasy stillness and continue to be heard, would ripple far, far in all directions, and the peace that good men prayed for would be lost. Hayes would have his Great War, after all.

"General Hayes," said the Dreadnought com officer. "Admiral Robeson is requesting to speak with Admiral Frank."

"Cut him off," was Hayes' dispassionate reply.

"WHAT?" cried Frank hotly. "Why shouldn't I speak to him?"

Again the general's voice was calm. "It's some trick of the Soviets'. John Robeson no longer commands the Seventh Fleet."

"But sir," began the com officer. "He's on the coded frequency, and the voice match—"

"I SAID, cut him off."

.....

And then Frank did it. He uttered the simple (and often just) word that no subordinate, any time, anywhere, in any army of men, is ever allowed to speak.

"No."

"What the hell do you mean, NO!" And suddenly all Hayes' former fury returned. His face distorted wildly, and the veins of his skull and neck stood out further still.

"I've known John Robeson for thirty years. There's no way he would do anything..... It's YOU I don't trust. No more running. No more hiding from the truth." He turned to the terrified young man, whose eyes moved back and forth between them. "Soldier, open that channel."

"You, traitorous, DOG!" screamed Hayes, and began to rush at him, heedless.

But all at once he stopped, and stood perfectly still. His right eyebrow twitched strangely, and the whole face began to work in comic spasms.

He collapsed to the floor, where Calder caught him up, and rested the beloved head on his knee. The general's trembling jaw uttered sounds but could not, as it struggled so desperately to do, create intelligible speech. Charles William Hayes had suffered a massive stroke, and lay dying in his soldier's arms.

"Get a doctor in here, quickly," ordered Frank, once again his own master. Then turning to the com-man, "Put Robeson on visual, apprise him of our status, and tell him I'll be with him as soon as I can."

At that moment the only son of William and Charlotte Hayes gave up his spirit, trying to tell his only friend that he loved him.

"You can't....." blubbered Calder. "No, please, no." Their foreheads met, and he wept.

Frank approached him, and put a sympathetic hand on his shoulder. "I'm sorry, Michael. I truly am. But he would have led us all to ruin."

"You!" shocked Calder through his tears. "YOU killed him..... He was going to save us!" And in a sudden fury of determination like that of his dead idol, he seized the pistol and Hayes' hip. And as the other moved away, waving NO with his hands in front of him, shot Frank in the chest and killed him.

Calder lowered his master's body gently. Then rising, holding the weapon still, looked about him and brandished it fiercely. His second shot destroyed the motor-drive to the bridge's double doors, sealing them shut. After another threatening wave at the benumbed circle of men, he turned to the astonished face of Robeson on the screen.

"Calder, what in God's name?"

But the man's senses were gone. All that remained were hatred and death, wrenched forward through bitter tears.

"You, NIGGER!" The word was terrible to hear. "You killed him too!" And he shot the screen as well.

"Now listen to me, all of you! We're going to fight those red bastards if we have to do it alone. Move the ship forward, battle speed One!" He aimed the pistol at the hesitating officer, who feeling himself cast into Hell, obeyed.

*

What the Soviet commanders aboard the carriers Lenin and Brezhnev heard, was Robeson telling them that Hayes was dead and the bridge of the Dreadnought in chaos—imploing them not to begin what couldn't later be stopped, and might lead to galactic holocaust. But what they saw was the prow of the behemoth coming towards them and starting to fire. Their instructions had been to eliminate Hayes, and if necessary, the entire Third Fleet.

The Dreadnought continued to move forward; it was nearly at the midpoint between two armies. And now the Eisenhower moved forward as well. That this was caused by Robeson putting a tractor beam on his ship's counterpart, and trying unsuccessfully to check its advance they could not know, because they had stopped listening. And so, very naturally, they began to fire back.

But then a very different kind of 'miracle' occurred.

From out of the rent and improperly sealed Gate on the Commonwealth left, and from the outlet of the distant Gate to their right, whose silvery sheet now fluttered as in a haunted breeze, the horrible black anti-matter of Nothingness began to seep out like an inky cloud. Perhaps drawn each to the other, perhaps triggered by the living metal that now stood equidistant between them, like ill-shaped hands it oozed slowly together, a darkness that would envelope the stars.

And with it came a sound: a silence so awful, a death so complete and eternal, that Time itself seemed to ripple like a black wave between the two armies.

Instinctively they drew back, unnerved and unhinged. But the Dreadnought remained perfectly still, immobilized, while the hands of Unmaking drew nearer.....

And then they met. The solid-huge metal of that once proud and fearless sword, swayed in layers of impossible fluidity, faded, and was gone.

The Hands joined and began to pull together their distant shoulders. The armies fled, and no more death (by them) could be wrought.

From out of somewhere brilliant white globes began to appear, and to fence off the Darkness with glittering webs.

.....

UPON THE MOUNTAINTOP

Several months had passed and much had changed for the increased and solidified Coalition Fleet. As they drew nearer the tri-colonies of his home, Brunner stood upon the bridge of the Kythera now only as an observer. He had been relieved of command after the incident at Rembrandt, and his case had not yet been tried.

But this was only a formality. In the light of recent events, the resulting loss of the Soviets as an ally was now of relatively small importance, while from the standpoint of pride and independence, much had been gained.

Though he had never wanted it, and told himself it meant nothing to him, Brunner had become a national hero. And to the Dutch, so often stoic and reserved, his defiant stand aboard the Icarus had become something of a legend. He found it all exceedingly strange, rather too much of a contrast to the isolation and despair which he had felt such a short time before. And he wondered how many other 'heroes' of the past were simply men who had done what they had to do at the time, thinking (and caring) not at all about posterity.

But such thoughts were very far from him now. He was concerned about the approaching battle; and not at all in the way he always had been before. For one thing his younger brother, who had joined the space navy after the fall of Athena, would be present. He had done what he could to protect him, getting him assigned to a friend's destroyer group, but the added worry was not lessened because of it. Fighter escorts were always in danger, and though Tomas was a good pilot, he had never before flown in combat, and seemed overly determined to make his mark before the war ended.

There was little enough doubt as to who would prevail. The Belgians and Swiss, now bearing the brunt of the U.N. and Commonwealth peace-keeping efforts (nothing like a pang of conscience), had drawn off most of their forces to defend what remained of their original possessions. Word had also been received that the French Elite, under tremendous pressure both home and abroad, had withdrawn from Irish New Belfast, and left it to its original keepers.

What troubled him now was that men on both sides would be killed, to settle a dispute which every day became more academic. The Alliance had been beaten, and yet their pride would not let them surrender without a fight, what had never been theirs. The Coalition was vindicated, but still bitter at its wounds, remained set upon claiming the debt in full. He found both motives equally abhorrent, and had retained enough humanity not to think of himself as East German first, last and always. The words 'us' and 'them' still left an aftertaste.

His one consolation, and it was not a substantial one, was that he himself would play no part in it. His supposed aptitude for (and curiosity about) the ways of war had been more than quenched. If it were humanly possible, he intended to resign from the military immediately after his hearing, and never fight again. His earlier revulsion to bloodshed had returned, redoubled in strength by experience.

It was not easy to put such a past behind him, and the images of victims and violence that had burned indelibly into his memory, still troubled his thoughts of the future. And as he watched his son continue to grow, his one prayer was that Man would finally, finally come to his senses, and have done forever with cooperative mass-murder.

That it was normal for a father to want to spare his son from the pain he himself had experienced, he knew. That in some respects it was impossible, and wrong to try, he also realized. But THIS pain, this Hell, he wished with every ounce of his being could be spared from all the children of men from now until the end of time. His one regret was that there wasn't more he could do to work in that direction. He was no politician, could not even take them seriously.....

"Enemy ships approaching, Colonel. Ninety-six vessels, mostly fighters, fighter-bombers and destroyers, clustered about four light cruisers."

These words, and the ensuing battle-tension on the faces around him, brought him sharply back reality. He moved to stand before the wide sweep of glass and look out at the sea of Space before him. He studied the relatively small force approaching their own, nearly three times as strong.

And beyond them, he saw with love and sudden longing the rose and aqua hues of Athena. His home. And beyond all, the white, crystalline stars: perfect, pure and untouchable, untainted by the follies of men.

"Not much of a force," said Liebenstein to his exec. "And why give battle so far beyond the grids?"

"Perhaps it's only a feint," replied the other.

"Forgive me, Colonel," put in Brunner, turning. "But I believe they mean to give only mock battle and

then fire out into warp. It would also explain....."

"Thank you, Captain, that will be more than enough." Liebenstein knew this as well as he, but had wanted to keep the edge of hardness and keen attention among his officers. "Very well, Muller. Order the fleet to spread out, and engage if he's willing."

Seeing with his now practiced eye what was unfolding before him, Brunner felt real hope rise inside him as it had not done for many months. Could it be this easy? Had his long trials at last been rewarded: to retake his home with so little bloodshed?

Then the journey had brought him full circle. It was not far from here that Dubcek (the remembrance saddened him, but he pushed on) had stood before the glass, not so long ago that they had been startled and undone by an Enemy that seemed so strong and unassailable, their own chances against it, so desperate and hopeless. Yet somehow they had found a way. And now.....

His assumptions had been correct. After scarcely twelve minutes of half-hearted fighting, the Alliance vessels began to move off and fire into light-speed. And he sensed also that this was not at all what their High Command had intended. Some Belgian or Swiss general had mercifully disobeyed orders, and given up the colonies with only mock resistance. He looked up again at Athena, and now nothing stood between him and that beautiful orb, filled with life. His HOME

There came the sound of cheering and fraternal congratulation all around him, but he heard none of it. He was completely isolated within his own emotions.

At first he could feel nothing but child-like joy, and a blissful release from care and tension. This feeling grew, and deepened, until he felt himself to be standing atop a high pinnacle, looking down on a vast panorama of mountain, clouds and snow, at other peaks, and other conquerors like himself. But in that moment none stood so high as he, and his heart swelled to bursting with pride and gratitude, and love for all men.

He was home! It was over. He had WON.

But then as this elation, almost sexual, faded, he grew thoughtful and more deeply introspective. And though he tried to stop them, or at least soften them with thoughts of his present happiness, memories began to come back to him of the sorrow and suffering he had seen, and of his comrades who had not survived. And from this same lofty pinnacle, he saw with new and vivid bitterness the full insanity of war.

After all that—all the fighting, the hanging on, the despair and true heroism, hearts breaking and breaking through..... This plethora of human passions, pushed to their utmost limit, had not worked miracles of unification and achievement, or even brought men to a new understanding. There was nothing positive in any of it. All the battles, death and anguish, had not paid their awful price for good, but merely to resist an evil, and restore things to the way they had already been.

How could anyone rejoice and claim victory? He saw then with melancholy and absolute certainty that no nation anywhere, ever, gained anything lasting from such a war. And though a personal victory might be won, on any national or international scale this was impossible. Human nature was not changed, and the seeds and roots of the scattered weeds were not eradicated, but merely remained beneath the surface, awaiting their chance to rise and reek havoc again.

And the spiritual quota was not even returned to its original starting point. Hundreds of thousands of men, women and children were dead, many more wounded, maimed, bereft or displaced. And for WHAT?

Nothing had changed.

Nothing had been accomplished.

And nothing was the same.

He felt a hand on his shoulder, whirled angrily. Seeing before him the familiar face of Eric Dobler, a destroyer captain formerly under his command, he tried to relax his features and his mind. But seeing the restive sorrow in the other's face, he suddenly felt a new sense of care and alarm.

"What is it, Eric? What's wrong?"

... "Your brother is dead. He kept asking for you, but there was no time."

Brunner's mouth worked, but no sounds would emerge.

"He asked me to give you a message. To say..... He tried to be like you. That he was sorry. Sorry he had failed..... He couldn't hold them off."

Brunner hung his head in agony and shame. And the words of Joseph Conrad sprang, so easily to his mind, seeming to sum up perfectly this brutal sham of Man's creation. DEAR GOD.

"The horror! The horror!"

And the tears that his wife was so fond of, trickled bitterly down his cheek.

.....

EPILOGUE

NIEMAN

Nieman stood leaning over the main ship's console, the sharp lines of its blues, greens and whites reflected in his face. His lean, strong body was wrapped in celluloid black. The face too was hard and sharp, aged beyond illusion but not desire, eyes taut like those of a man with a squadron behind him and no fear of death ahead, but only a smoldering anger that had displaced all other emotion. And emptiness. A fleet of robot ships—that was enough.

Omega V was gone. Without reason, without warning, an entire system. A synthetic sun that was supposed to last a billion years. While he was away fighting for the lives of others..... He had never trusted the Guardians, though the soft and protected Commonwealth did; and now he would ram it down their throats. Spirit beings! The space they occupied was real enough—the silver threads like a massive, geometrical spider's web encircling the Hole in Space, the white globes pulsing across them. Hole in Space. That was what THEY called it. An immense dark clot in the sky, so black, with no stars behind it. He would see how untouchable they were.

His hatred had had four long years to smolder. The year of isolation had been longest, training himself to feel nothing, in the face of danger. Even the fourteen odd months of pirating had crawled—the killing of his crew had been a sad necessity. Then the slow, meticulous construction of the fleet. Human minds were worthless here; they would only be read and turned to jelly with strange fears and false images. Only a close-knit, automatic response to telepathic command, forty fast-black robot ships, were of any use. Why he had chosen black he couldn't say, unless perhaps it was a gut feeling they didn't like it. But the Hole was black..... STOP THESE USELESS THOUGHTS! NEXT YOU'LL BE THINKING OF MARIA.

It was not possible they weren't aware of his opposition. But they seemed to allow such things. . .or perhaps they couldn't stop them. No, that was too much to ask himself to believe. Certainly no one had stopped the fascist uprising, the snowballing of events which had led to interworld war, the slaughter,

the death camps. True the Commonwealth had eventually come to grips. But the destruction, the loss of life, could never be justified. So much for Divine intervention.

He had to start closing down his mind, as he had taught himself through the years of emptiness. He wasn't sure how greatly distance mattered, but he was getting close. Already the shimmering outline could be seen on the monitor, the bright specks of racing white. From here the blackness beyond did not seem so dark. But soon it would be Darkness itself, enveloping the sky. It was for the heart of the blackness he aimed. Perhaps it was their only vulnerable point, they guarded it so well. He looked up at the wide portal, and as he expected the visions had begun. A long chute, a cylindrical spiraling of gray and glossy skulls.

He looked away, then remembered. Shook his head sardonically and tightened his face. The images weren't outside, they were inside. He stood atop a geyser of emerald fire. But they couldn't stop his thoughts. "Central computer, phase three," he just managed. Now unless his commands were coded and specific the ships would not respond. He felt his own surge forward, felt the sharp jolt of electric current as for a moment his wired throat cleared the images away.

"Bastards!" He could see them now, closer, breaking away from the strands and coming at him like miniature suns. He felt them probing the mechanized brain. "One-nine three-nine!" And the unreal minds all functioned in a different key. He managed to fire three burst from the left wing before his fingers turned to lizards and were gone.

"AAHH!" Another shock, stronger, and he could see again. He was closer still, the web becoming an expanding grid pocked with dark and geometric holes. His ships crossed and interwove, fired a massive burst. The globes hovered and sometimes blinded him with light, but either could not or would not attack the ships. Their shields were up, but how much that mattered.....

Then his fleet was gone, as if it had never been, and the globes receded. A harder jolt, but somehow he knew this was no illusion. All false images faded. He was himself, without pain, in his own vessel. And the grid was still larger, the growing blackness like wet and physical night behind it. His hands were back on the console and he fired seven bursts, at the racing globes or at the shafts themselves. But each time he fired into nothingness: the lines of brilliance were no longer there. Above, to the side, but not there. And this too was no illusion. He hurled his rage at nothing and no one.

Suddenly a huge black hexagon was before him.

Fear.

His mind began to signal reverse thrust, and only a supreme effort of will overrode it. The blackness he headed toward..... Why did it terrify him so? It was as Fear itself. And suddenly the looming shaft above him appeared not as a barrier, but as the strand of a protective net which covered a great abyss, a hole in living Space. And he was falling through.

"No!" He could not turn back now! This was why he had come. He would destroy them. Somehow! This had to be the key. But they no longer seemed an enemy and this silent, screaming void was no friend. Was it yet too late.....

"NO!" He was inside.

*

It was cold in that place, through the ship and through the celluloid, and the last thing he saw as he looked back through the monitor was a tightening circle of black, like a swirl of inky cloud, enveloping the Guardians' web.

Then all was dark, but for a sickly and sporadic flashing of the console. He felt a kind of dull dread, a physical weakness, but not yet fear. He had pierced all barriers, and stood at the heart of the nightmare.

Only he could not remember why he had come. No, he remembered. But it did not seem like much of a reason. "Guardians!" His rage would not fire in that place, and the screaming hurt his throat. As the silence hurt his ears.

The ship's momentum had begun to deteriorate, as if such principles did not apply here. This did not startle him. It seemed almost doubly familiar. But then the outer hull began to deteriorate as well—he could feel it. "It isn't possible." The shields were down, this he knew, but the vessel's outer skin was of pure platinated osmodidium, seven times descended from stainless steel. It resisted heat, friction,

impact and atmosphere. But in that cold wet nothing it tinged and flaked as if with rust, was pocked and threw out buds like a face torn by a shotgun. It broke down, came apart, and fell away all around him, leaving him naked and without a ship.

He stood alone in the black without protection. The celluloid and wires were all that remained—why he couldn't say. For a time his body was suspended, and his feet danced like those of a marionette trying to find the stage. Then they touched bottom on something very hard and smooth. A wide stair. He began to feel suffocated, knew there was no oxygen but this wasn't why. He took a step forward, up another, and the feeling eased, if only slightly. He was as a shark that could never sleep. Unless it kept moving, he would die.

He continued to climb, as the steps got steeper, which was very soon. They were taller, progressing, and he labored on and it was harder and harder to breathe. Finally the stairs were eight feet high and he could go no further. He was almost weeping, feeling lost, when he went to lean against the obstructing wall before him. But it was gone, and he fell forward into grey mists.

He stumbled to the rocky ground—the rocks were red—and he found himself in a deep chasm lit and shadowed by a pale sun in a purple sky. Looking up he saw an ancient and abandoned stone fortress upon the heights to his left, with tattered streams of white flying distended circles about it and a sound like the wind wailing but there was no wind. The air was thin and weak.

He suddenly felt exposed there, and sought shelter from the wraiths above among the overhung shadows of the left-hand wall. He hunched to a leaning sit and tried to think very carefully.

He understood. This was his past, and he knew what must be done. A beautiful and wistful woman was imprisoned there, in that place, and he would have her as his own at all costs. And for the first time he felt his aggression not as a flaw, a defense against the void, but as a rightness and a strength, because he knew she needed him. So he stayed very still and waited for the darkness of night. Not that this would blind their sight but because he felt safer in the dark, though not the black. So as the sky lost red and reached its deepest blue, he set out.

He moved out from the overhang to a narrow vertical slit, a long scar in the rockface. He climbed slowly and determinedly, sure of each step and never making a sound. He reached and sweated and pulled, till he was nearly halfway up.

Then suddenly the wraiths were aware of him and streaked down from the high walls with a shrieking wail that was horrible to hear. They reached him, swirled about him and gnashed their sharp teeth from mouths that were like bats' mouths and screamed their terrible scream. He reached with one arm to ward them off, nearly fell. He found his grip and seized a stone and hurled it at the nearest. It went clean through, and he nearly fell again.

But then, as he hung by one hand, vulnerable, the screaming increased and they came closer but did not finish him. Then he realized that they could not. They were as fear, and could not physically harm him, but only make him do the things to harm himself. So he cautiously recovered himself, stood firmly on the tiny ledge, and put them from his mind. There might be other obstacles to reach her, but these he would not fear.

He reached up and continued to climb as the noise died away and only a ghost image of the wraiths remained frozen in the air. Climbing steadily, he had almost reached a level with the first buttress—one last knot of stone—when a low studded door burst open from the darkness of the wall to the extreme right, and four black wolves poured out and rushed headlong toward the place where he would emerge above the cliffs, and he was hard pressed to reach it before they did.

These were no illusion. He leapt to his feet and pulled the long knife from its sheath as the first was upon him. One back-slash with the blade as he dropped to a knee and it fell dying before him, its throat cut. The others closed as he rose again and they snarled and tore as he kicked and slashed, and after a time two more were dead but his legs were badly marked and it was hard to stand, and he fell to the ground.

Then the last, the largest, which had bided its time was upon him, going for his throat. The knife had fallen away and he reached up with his hands to grab it around the neck and try to pull it off. He succeeded partially, raising himself halfway; but it was soon at him again, tearing at the side of his face. Driven by an overpowering rage, he seized it just below the ear and dragged it away until he had its neck firmly in his two hands, and squeezed and kicked until the wolf moved no more. He let it fall to the ground as he rose, and sullenly brushed the dirt from him and strained his eyes to focus on the dark castle before him.

There was only one entrance, near to the small door which had emitted the wolves, locked tight upon

their demise. There it was: a vast arch guarded by a spiked portcullis. To his amazement as he came forward he saw that the grid was raised, the way open.

He stepped toward it cautiously, came to it, looked about him for some kind of trap. But he found none, passed through and entered a long corridor, which led in time to a double-door upon his right. He entered a broad chamber of half-light, knowing he had reached the heart of the Castle. He entered.

A lone figure sat in a heavy throne at its head, a circled fire to one side, an enormous leopard chained to an iron ring on the other. Six doors stood silent at the back of the chamber.

"Hello Nieman," said the bald figure from its throne. The firelight distorted his features, but the fat and sneering visage would have been ugly in any light. He wore a mantle of crimson, edged in gold.

"Where is she?" he demanded.

"Not so fast," spoke the other calmly. "I am not a person to offend."

"I'm not afraid of you."

The mouth gave a dry, humorless laugh. "Do you know who I am?" He twisted a ring around his fat finger with the opposite hand.

"I know what you're called," retorted Nieman, his anger growing. "The ancients called you daemon. Religious fools say you're the Devil."

"And what do you say?" It turned the ring more quickly.

"That you don't exist. I am talking to myself." He looked to the row of doors, tried to feel her presence among the stone. He stepped toward the second in line.

"Stop!" cried the visage, which he ignored. He pulled open the door as the great cat broke free of its chains and came after him. It rushed and leapt full in his face. But he had turned; he caught it in mid-air and hurled it against the wall. It gave a cry of pain and alarm, crashed to the floor senseless, where he left it. He was tired of killing.

"Fool!" cried the god. "Do you still doubt me?"

"The servant is real but the master a dream." He paid no further attention as the visage dissolved into excrement. But the fire remained.

The way before him was too dark to see, so he went back to the entrance and pulled a torch from its mount just inside the arch. He returned to the door, and looked inside.

He entered a shallow stone hallway which ended in a tight spiral of stairs, leading downward. His torch was the only light. He descended slowly, the way cramped and his legs tight and bleeding, and after perhaps three hundred steps came upon a long catacomb, which he entered from a recessed hole in its side. The way was thick with webs which he brushed aside with his free hand, as he stepped out silently into the endless row of tombs.

She had to be there, somewhere: the way the shadows played upon the walls, the branching crypts and long row of stone caskets. The way his shadow-self stalked behind him, so tall.

He walked a long way, silent but for the sounds of his moving, then heard something like a faint groan of pain, unmistakably feminine, to his left and a short way ahead. He moved towards it, thrust the torch ahead of him and into a high, wide antechamber like a small cathedral, several caskets deep. He heard the sound again, this time a cry of terror and alarm, and strained his eyes to see. He moved closer, wedged the torch between two caskets and looked to the front of the chamber.

And there she was, the love of his life: above an altar, mounted halfway up the wall behind it, spread like a crucifix, arms and legs bound by iron shackles, garment torn, a hideous mask covering her face and spreading out in huge lizard's fins an arm's length wide. Only her eyes were visible, wide with terror, pleading against the act sure to come.

"Please, no. No. . .God. Please, I beg you. Please." And she lost all control and wept bitterly. He lowered his head, his heart torn apart.

"Don't cry, I won't hurt you." He stumbled for words, inadequate. "I haven't come to hurt you, I swear it.... By everything that is and isn't sacred I make this vow: that I will be to you whatever you need me to be, that I will never leave you, and that the day I knowingly cause you pain I will be the instrument of my own destruction. Please, don't cry."

He felt the tears pushing at his eyes, but would not leave her there a moment longer. He shook off emotion, climbed onto the altar and lifted the heavy mask from its hook above her head, set it quietly beside him.

Her deep, gentle face looked out at him with disbelieving gratitude and love. It was cut in several places from the short spikes which lined the inside of the mask; but as she had remained very still the damage was not deep. He found an iron bar leaned against the ground, remounted the altar and began to pry away the rusted bands. It was not possible to do so without hurting her, but she bit her lip and endured the pain.

And as the last shackle came off her wrist she slid into his arms. And suddenly she knew him, and trusted him, and he embraced her heavily, weeping. She returned the affection weakly, touching the back of his neck with her fingers. He had never felt this way, nor ever thought he could. The tears would not stop.

"I'm so glad I found you," he stammered. "Dear God, I'm glad. What if..... What if I had never found you?" He stepped back, and an incomprehensible horror engulfed him.

The words echoed all around him, down the row of tombs, endless.

"Never found you. Never found you. Never found....." And with a sudden fearful burst like the realization of death, he remembered. Remembered where he was, and understood. Dear God, he understood.

She slipped back out of his grasp as darkness poured into the room. Like reverse action she was back upon the wall, the iron hoops replacing themselves. The mask was up and she was crying. Her blood flowed gently down the spikes.

"NO!"

But the room began to spin, to break into fragments, and she was gone. He floated again in the cold wet nothing, the world without order or hope. He shrank into a weeping ball and clutched his head with his hands, lost as he had never been lost.

But then to his bewilderment, he began to feel a weight of substance around him, a materializing structure: his ship was coming back. A floor, walls, then the hull returned, and he knelt in the familiar control room, looking up at the monitor. The inky black was patching, broke, and he could see the outline of a vast web. This time he did not fight as the ship drew closer, and closer still. A great silver shaft was above him. . .and he emerged once more into the present, living, and unchangeable world.

*

At a distance of two hundred miles he turned his ship around, back to face the Guardians. There the vessel stood still in Space, as a single globe approached him from out of the glowing network. It came very close, filling all the screen, but was silent. Thinking it a messenger, he addressed it with words.

"All right," he said, broken at the last. "All right, you helped me find her. The one miracle of my life. I am grateful." The white sphere did not react. "But if you have that power, then you could have saved her life..... No. I left her." The realization staggered him. "I..... But now I have learned. I respect you. Bring her back. Please. . .bring her back." He began to sob without tears.

"PLEASE."

At that moment the sphere glowed with a blinding light. It might have been an unreadable message. It might have been a warning, or a gesture of peace. But whatever it was or was not, it remained beyond human understanding. It could not change the past or help him now.

As the globe receded he turned the ship again, bewildered, and flew toward unfamiliar stars.

The End

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Christopher Leadem was born in Arlington, Virginia in 1956, the second son of an Air Force Intelligence officer and a schoolteacher. Shortly after his birth, his father transferred to the Central Intelligence Agency, and the young family moved frequently.

Leadem's primary education was in Catholic schools, where he earned the reputation of a gifted student. Attending public high school in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, the birthplace of James Michener, he displayed a talent for writing, and a love of history and science. At the age of fourteen, he saw a short film by Ray Bradbury about the life of a writer, which galvanized his desire to be an author himself.

Burned out by a stifling high school environment, he did not immediately attend college, but launched headlong into his writing. This began with a spiritual novel, "In Search of the Evermore," whose length and sweeping scope proved too difficult for a first attempt.

He then attended Penn State and the University of Colorado, excelling at English Literature. He resumed his writing career and completed his first novel, "Within a Crimson Circle," at the age of 22. He has since completed five other novels, five volumes of poetry and nine screenplays. Three other novels are in progress.

He currently lives in Colorado with his three children.

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