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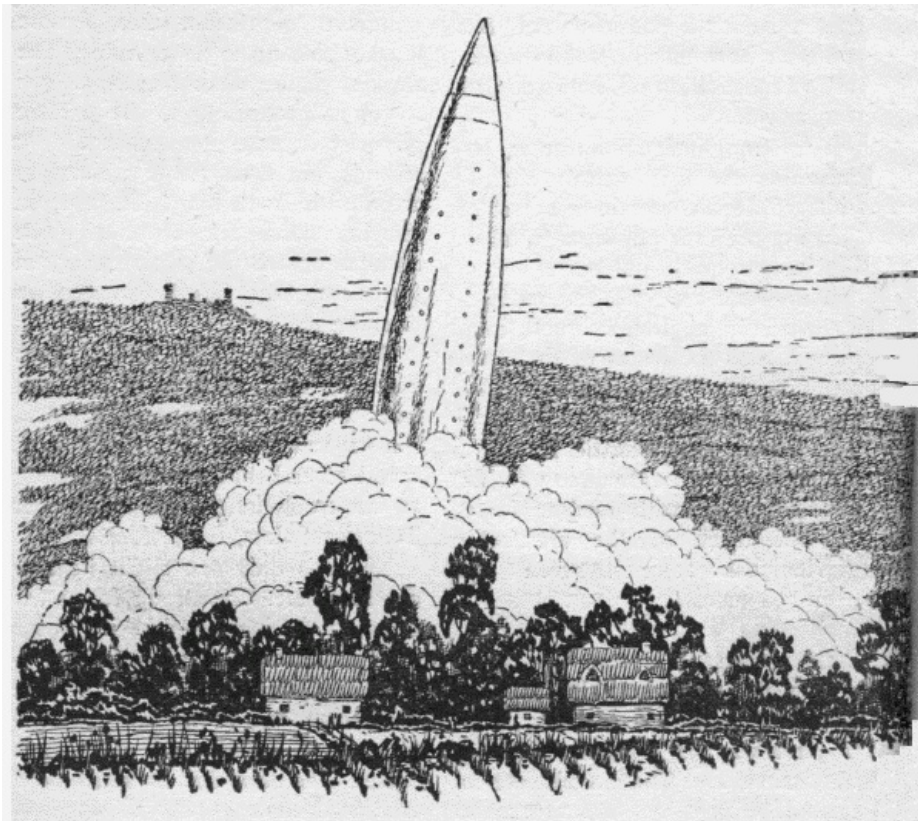
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE DESTROYERS ***

THE DESTROYERS



BY RANDALL GARRETT

Any war is made up of a horde of personal tragedies—but the greater picture is the tragedy of the death of a way of life. For a way of life—good, bad, or indifferent—exists because it is dearly loved....



Illustrated by van Dongen

Anketam stretched his arms out as though he were trying to embrace the whole world. He pushed himself up on his tiptoes, arched his back, and gave out with a prodigious yawn that somehow managed to express all the contentment and pleasure that filled his soul. He felt a faint twinge in his shoulders, and there was a dull ache in the small of his back, both of which reminded him that he was no longer the man he had been twenty years before, but he ignored them and stretched again.

He was still strong, Anketam thought; still strong enough to do his day's work for The Chief without being too tired to relax and enjoy himself afterwards. At forty-five, he had a good fifteen years more before he'd be retired to minor make-work jobs, doing the small chores as a sort of token in justification of his keep in his old age.

He settled his heels back to the ground and looked around at the fields of green shoots that surrounded him. That part of the job was done, at least. The sun's lower edge was just barely touching the western horizon, and all the seedlings were in. Anketam had kept his crew sweating to get them all in, but now the greenhouses were all empty and ready for seeding in the next crop while this one grew to maturity. But that could wait. By working just a little harder, for just a little longer each day, he and his crew had managed to get the transplanting done a good four days ahead of schedule, which meant four days of fishing or hunting or just plain loafing. The Chief didn't care how a man spent his time, so long as the work was done.

He thumbed his broad-brimmed hat back from his forehead and looked up at the sky. There were a few thin clouds overhead, but there was no threat of rain, which was good. In this part of Xedii, the spring rains sometimes hit hard and washed out the transplanted seedlings before they had a chance to take root properly. If rain would hold off for another ten days, Anketam thought, then it could fall all it wanted. Meanwhile, the irrigation reservoir was full to brimming, and that would supply all the water the young shoots needed to keep them from being burnt by the sun.

He lowered his eyes again, this time to look at the next section over toward the south, where Jacovik and his crew were still working. He could see their bent figures outlined against the horizon, just at the brow of the slope, and he grinned to himself. He had beaten Jacovik out again.

Anketam and Jacovik had had a friendly feud going for years, each trying to do a better, faster job than the other. None of the other supervisors on The Chief's land came even close to beating out Anketam or Jacovik, so it was always between the two of them, which one came out on top. Sometimes it was one, sometimes the other.

At the last harvest, Jacovik had been very pleased with himself when the tallies showed that he'd beaten out Anketam by a hundred kilos of cut leaves. But The Chief had taken him down a good bit when the report came through that Anketam's leaves had made more money because they were better quality.

He looked all around the horizon. From here, only Jacovik's section could be seen, and only Jacovik's men could be seen moving.

When Anketam's gaze touched the northern horizon, his gray eyes narrowed a little. There was a darkness there, a faint indication of cloud build-up. He hoped it didn't mean rain. Getting the transplants in early was all right, but it didn't count for anything if they were washed out.

He pushed the thought out of his mind. Rain or no rain, there was nothing could be done about it except put up shelters over the rows of plants. He'd just have to keep an eye on the northern horizon and hope for the best. He didn't want to put up the shelters unless he absolutely had to,

because the seedlings were invariably bruised in the process and that would cut the leaf yield way down. He remembered one year when Jacovik had gotten panicky and put up his shelters, and the storm had been a gentle thing that only lasted a few minutes before it blew over. Anketam had held off, ready to make his men work in the rain if necessary, and when the harvest had come, he'd beaten Jacovik hands down.

Anketam pulled his hat down again and turned to walk toward his house in the little village that he and his crew called home. He had warned his wife to have supper ready early. "I figure on being finished by sundown," he'd said. "You can tell the other women I said so. But don't say anything to them till after we've gone to the fields. I don't want those boys thinking about the fishing they're going to do tomorrow and then get behind in their work because they're daydreaming."

The other men were already gone; they'd headed back to the village as fast as they could move as soon as he'd told them the job was finished. Only he had stayed to look at the fields and see them all finished, each shoot casting long shadows in the ruddy light of the setting sun. He'd wanted to stand there, all by himself feeling the glow of pride and satisfaction that came over him, knowing that he was better than any other supervisor on The Chief's vast acreage.

His own shadow grew long ahead of him as he walked back, his steps still brisk and springy, in spite of the day's hard work.

The sun had set and twilight had come by the time he reached his own home. He had glanced again toward the north, and had been relieved to see that the stars were visible near the horizon. The clouds couldn't be very thick.

Overhead, the great, glowing cloud of the Dragon Nebula shed its soft light. That's what made it possible to work after sundown in the spring; at that time of year, the Dragon Nebula was at its brightest during the early part of the evening. The tail of it didn't vanish beneath the horizon until well after midnight. In the autumn, it wasn't visible at all, and the nights were dark except for the stars.

Anketam pushed open the door of his home and noted with satisfaction that the warm smells of cooking filled the air, laving his nostrils and palate with fine promises. He stopped and frowned as he heard a man's voice speaking in low tones in the kitchen.

Then Memi's voice called out: "Is that you, Ank?"

"Yeah," he said, walking toward the kitchen. "It's me."

"We've got company," she said. "Guess who."

"I don't claim to be much good at guessing," said Anketam. "I'll have to peek."

He stopped at the door of the kitchen and grinned widely when he saw who the man was. "Russat! Well, by heaven, it's good to see you!"

There was a moment's hesitation, then a minute or two of handshaking and backslapping as the two brothers both tried to speak at the same time. Anketam heard himself repeating: "Yessir! By *heaven*, it's good to see you! Real good!"

And Russat was saying: "Same here, Ank! And, gee, you're looking great. I mean, real great! Tough as ever, eh, Ank?"

"Yeah, sure, tough as ever. Sit down, boy. Memi! Pour us something hot and get that bottle out of the cupboard!"

Anketam pushed his brother back towards the chair and made him sit down, but Russat was protesting: "Now, wait a minute! Now, just you hold on, Ank! Don't be getting out your bottle just yet. I brought some *real* stuff! I mean, *expensive*—stuff you can't get very easy. I brought it just for you, and you're going to have some of it before you say another word. Show him, Memi."

Memi was standing there, beaming, holding the bottle. Her blue eyes had faded slowly in the years since she and Anketam had married, but there was a sparkle in them now. Anketam looked at the bottle.

"Bedammed," he said softly. The bottle was beautiful just as it was. It was a work of art in itself, with designs cut all through it and pretty tracings of what looked like gold thread laced in and out of the surface. And it was full to the neck with a clear, red-brown liquid. Anketam thought of the bottle in his own cupboard—plain, translucent plastic, filled with the water-white liquor rationed out from the commissary—and he suddenly felt very backwards and countryish. He scratched thoughtfully at his beard and said: "Well, Well. I don't know, Russ—I don't know. You think a plain farmer like me can take anything that fancy?"

Russat laughed, a little embarrassed. "Sure you can. You mean to say you've never had brandy before? Why, down in Algia, our Chief—" He stopped.

Anketam didn't look at him. "Sure, Russ; sure. I'll bet Chief Samas gives a drink to his secretary, too, now and then." He turned around and winked. "But this stuff is for brain work, not farming."

He knew Russat was embarrassed. The boy was nearly ten years younger than Anketam, but Anketam knew that his younger brother had more brains and ability, as far as paper work went, than he, himself, would ever have. The boy (Anketam reminded himself that he shouldn't think of Russat as a boy—after all, he was thirty-six now) had worked as a special secretary for one of the important chiefs in Algia for five years now. Anketam noticed, without criticism, that Russat had grown soft with the years. His skin was almost pink, bleached from years of indoor work, and looked pale and sickly, even beside Memi's sun-browned skin—and Memi hadn't been out in the sun as much as her husband had.

Anketam reached out and took the bottle carefully from his wife's hands. Her eyes watched him searchingly; she had been aware of the subtleties of the exchange between her rough, hard-working, farmer husband and his younger, brighter, better-educated brother.

Anketam said: "If this is a present, I guess I'd better open it." He peeled off the seal, then carefully removed the glass stopper and sniffed at the open mouth of the beautiful bottle. "Hm-m-m! Say!" Then he set the bottle down carefully on the table. "You're the guest, Russ, so you can pour. That tea ready yet, Memi?"

"Coming right up," said his wife gratefully. "Coming right up."

Anketam watched Russat carefully pour brandy into the cups of hot, spicy tea that Memi set before them. Then he looked up, grinned at his wife, and said: "Pour yourself a cup, honey. This is an occasion. A big occasion."

She nodded quickly, very pleased, and went over to get another cup.

"What brings you up here, Russ?" Anketam asked. "I hope you didn't just decide to pick up a bottle of your Chief's brandy and then take off." He chuckled after he said it, but he was more serious than he let on. He actually worried about Russat at times. The boy might just take it in his head to do something silly.

Russat laughed and shook his head. "No, no. I'm not crazy, and I'm not stupid—at least, I think not. No; I got to go up to Chromdin. My Chief is sending word that he's ready to supply goods for the war."

Anketam frowned. He'd heard that there might be war, of course. There had been all kinds of rumors about how some of the Chiefs were all for fighting, but Anketam didn't pay much attention to these rumors. In the first place, he knew that it was none of his business; in the second place, he didn't think there would be any war. Why should anyone pick on Xedii?

What war would mean if it did come, Anketam had no idea, but he didn't think the Chiefs would get into a war they couldn't finish. And, he repeated to himself, he didn't believe there would be a war.

He said as much to Russat.

His brother looked up at him in surprise. "You mean you haven't heard?"

"Heard what?"

"Why, the war's already started. Sure. Five, six days ago. We're at war, Ank."

Anketam's frown grew deeper. He knew that there were other planets besides Xedii; he had heard that some of the stars in the sky were planets and suns. He didn't really understand how that could be, but even The Chief had said it was true, so Anketam accepted it as he did the truth about God. It was so, and that was enough for Anketam. Why should he bother himself with other people's business?

But—*war*?

Why?

"How'd it happen?" he asked.

Russat sipped at his hot drink before answering. Behind him, Memi moved slowly around the cooker, pretending to be finishing the meal, pretending not to be listening.

"Well, I don't have all the information," Russat said, pinching his little short beard between thumb and forefinger. "But I do know that the Chiefs didn't want the embassy in Chromdin."

"No," said Anketam. "I suppose not."

"I understand they have been making all kinds of threats," Russat said. "Trying to tell everybody what to do. They think they run all of Creation, I guess. Anyway, they were told to pull out right after the last harvest. They refused to do it, and for a while nobody did anything. Then, last week, the President ordered the Army to throw 'em out—bag and baggage. There was some fighting, I understand, but they got out finally. Now they've said they're going to smash us." He grinned.

Anketam said: "What's so funny?"

"Oh, they won't do anything," said Russat. "They fume and fuss a lot, but they won't do anything."

"I hope not," said Anketam. He finished the last of his spiked tea, and Memi poured him another one. "I don't see how they have any right to tell us how to live or how to run our own homes. They ought to mind their own business and leave us alone."

"You two finish those drinks," said Memi, "and quit talking about wars. The food will be ready pretty quickly."

"Good," said Anketam. "I'm starved." And, he admitted to himself, the brandy and hot tea had gone to his head. A good meal would make him feel better.

Russat said: "I don't get much of a chance to eat Memi's cooking; I'll sure like this meal."

"You can stay for breakfast in the morning, can't you?" Anketam asked.

"Oh, I wouldn't want to put you to all that trouble. I have to be up to your Chief's house before sunrise."

"We get up before sunrise," Anketam said flatly. "You can stay for breakfast."

II

The spring planting did well. The rains didn't come until after the seedlings had taken root and anchored themselves well into the soil, and the rows showed no signs of heavy bruising. Anketam had been watching one section in particular, where young Basom had planted. Basom had a tendency to do a sloppy job, and if it had showed up as bruised or poorly planted seedlings, Anketam would have seen to it that Basom got what was coming to him.

But the section looked as good as anyone else's, so Anketam said nothing to Basom.

Russat had come back after twenty days and reported that there was an awful lot of fuss in Chromdin, but nothing was really developing. Then he had gone on back home.

As spring became summer, Anketam pushed the war out of his mind. Evidently, there wasn't going to be any real shooting. Except that two of The Chief's sons had gone off to join the Army, things remained the same as always. Life went on as it had.

The summer was hot and almost windless. Work became all but impossible, except during the early morning and late afternoon. Fortunately, there wasn't much that had to be done. At this stage of their growth, the plants pretty much took care of themselves.

Anketam spent most of his time fishing. He and Jacovik and some of the others would go down to the river and sit under the shade trees, out of the sun, and dangle their lines in the water. It really didn't matter if they caught much or not; the purpose of fishing was to loaf and get away from the heat, not to catch fish. Even so, they always managed to bring home enough for a good meal at the end of the day.

The day that the war intruded on Anketam's consciousness again had started off just like any other day. Anketam got his fishing gear together, including a lunch that Memi had packed for him, and gone over to pick up Blejjo.

Blejjo was the oldest man in the village. Some said he was over a hundred, but Blejjo himself only admitted to eighty. He'd been retired a long time back, and his only duties now were little odd jobs that were easy enough, even for an old man. Not that there was anything feeble about old Blejjo; he still looked and acted spry enough.

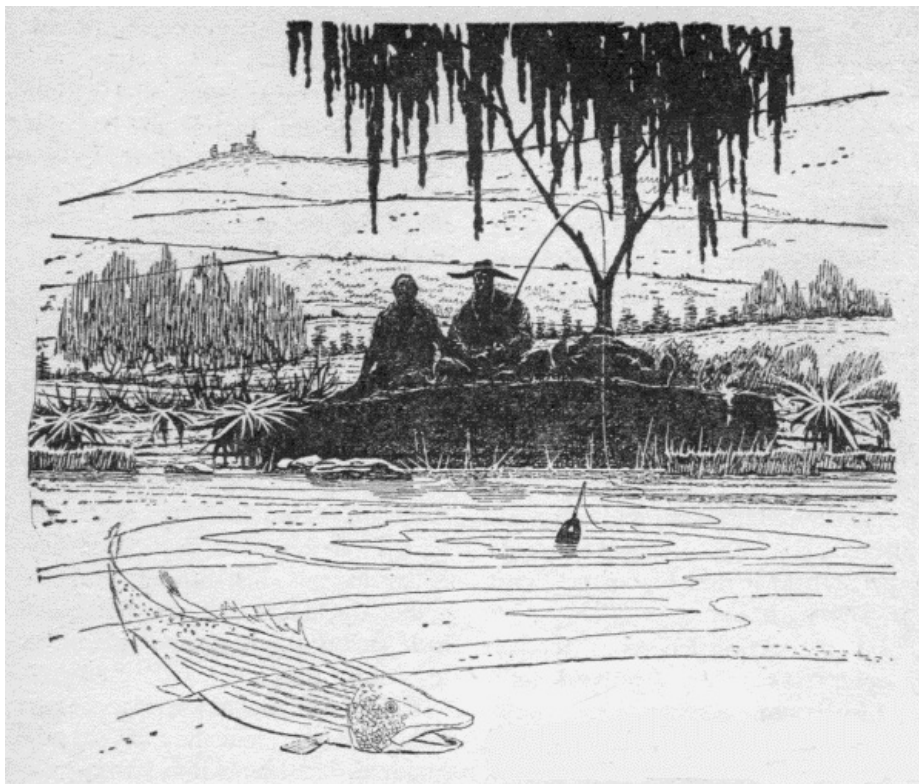
He was sitting on his front porch, talking to young Basom, when Anketam came up.

The old man grinned. "Hello, Ank. You figure on getting a few more fish today?"

"Why not? The river's full of 'em. Come along."

"Don't see why not," said Blejjo. "What do you think, Basom?"

The younger man smiled and shook his head. "I'll stay around home, I think. I'm too lazy today to go to all that effort."



"Too lazy to loaf," said Blejjo, laughing. "That's as lazy as I ever heard."

Anketam smiled, but he didn't say anything. Basom *was* lazy, but Anketam never mentioned it unless the boy didn't get his work done. Leave that sort of kidding up to the others; it wasn't good for a supervisor to ride his men unless it was necessary for discipline.

Basom was a powerful young man, tall and well-proportioned. If the truth were known, he probably had the ability to get a good job from The Chief—become a secretary or something, like Russat. But he was sloppy in his work, and, as Blejjo had said, lazy. His saving grace was the fact that he took things as they came; he never showed any resentment towards Anketam if he was rebuked for not doing his work well, and he honestly tried to do better—for a while, at least.

"Not too lazy to loaf," Basom said in self-defense. "Just too lazy to walk four miles to loaf when I can do it here."

Old Blejjo was taking his fishing gear down from the rack on the porch. Without looking around, he said: "Cooler down by the river."

"By the time I walked there," said Basom philosophically, "walking through all that sun, I'd be so hot it would take me two hours to cool down to where I am now, and another two hours to cool down any more. That's four hours wasted. Now—" He looked at Anketam with a sly grin. "Now, if you two wanted to carry me, I'd be much obliged. Anketam, you could carry me piggyback, while Blejjo goes over to fetch my pole. If you'd do that, I believe I could see my way clear to going fishing with you."

Anketam shook his head positively. "I'm afraid the sun would do you in, anyway."

"Maybe you'd like The Chief to carry you," said Blejjo. There was a bite in his voice.

"Now, wait," Basom said apprehensively, "I didn't say anything like that. I didn't mean it that way."

Blejjo pointed his fishing pole at the youth. "You ought to be thankful you've got Anketam for a supervisor. There's some supers who'd boot you good for a crack like that."

Basom cast appealing eyes at Anketam. "I *am* thankful! You know I am! Why, you're the best super in the barony! Everybody knows that. I was only kidding. You know that."

Before Anketam could say anything, the old man said: "You can bet your life that no other super in this barony would put up with your laziness!"

"Now, Blejjo," said Anketam, "leave the boy alone. He meant no harm. If he needs talking to, I'll do the talking."

Basom looked gratefully reprieved.

"Sorry, Ank," said Blejjo. "It's just that some of these young people have no respect for their elders." He looked at Basom and smiled. "Didn't mean to take it out on you, Bas. There's a lot worse than you." Then, changing his tone: "Sure you don't want to come with us?"

Basom looked apologetic, but he stuck to his guns. "No. Thanks again, but—" He grinned self-consciously. "To be honest, I was thinking of going over to see Zillia. Her dad said I could come."

Anketam grinned at the boy. "Well, now, that's an excuse I'll accept. Come on, Blejjo, this is not a sport for old men like us. Fishing is more our speed."

Chuckling, Blejjo shouldered his fishing pole, and the two men started down the dusty village street toward the road that led to the river.

They walked in silence for a while, trying to ignore the glaring sun that brought the sweat out on their skins, soaking the sweatbands of their broad-brimmed hats and running in little rivulets down their bodies.

"I kind of feel sorry for that boy," old Blejjo said at last.

"Oh?" said Anketam. "How so? He'll get along. He's improving. Why, he did as good a job of transplanting as any man this spring. Last year, he bruised the seedlings, but I gave him a good dressing down and he remembered it. He'll be all right."

"I'm not talking about that, Ank," said the old man, "I mean him and Zillia. He's really got a case on with that girl."

"Anything wrong with that? A young fellow's got a right to fall in love, hasn't he? And Zillia seems pretty keen on him, too. If her father doesn't object, everything ought to go along pretty smoothly."

"Her father might not object," said Blejjo, looking down at his feet as they paced off the dusty road. "But there's others who might object."

"Who, for instance?"

Blejjo was silent for several steps. Then he said: "Well, Kevenoe, for one."

Anketam thought that over in silence. Kevenoe was on The Chief's staff at the castle. Like many staff men—including, Anketam thought wryly, his own brother Russat, on occasion—he tended to lord it over the farmers who worked the land. "Kevenoe has an eye on Zillia?" he asked after a moment.

"I understand he's asked Chief Samas for her as soon as she's eighteen. That would be this fall, after harvest."

"I see," Anketam said thoughtfully. He didn't ask how the old man had come about his knowledge. Old Blejjo had little to do, and on the occasions that he had to do some work around The Chief's castle, he made it a point to pick up gossip. But he was careful with his information; he didn't go spreading it around for all to hear, and he made it a point to verify his information before he passed it on. Anketam respected the old man. He was the only one in the village who called him "Ank," outside of Memi.

"Do you think The Chief will give her to Kevenoe?" he asked.

Blejjo nodded. "Looks like it. He thinks a great deal of Kevenoe."

"No reason why he shouldn't," said Anketam. "Kevenoe's a good man."

"Oh, I know that," said the old man. "But Basom won't like it at all. And I don't think Zillia will, either."

"That's the way things happen," said Anketam. "A man can't expect to go through life having everything his own way. There's other girls around for Basom. If he can't have the prettiest, he'll have to be satisfied with someone else." He chuckled. "That's why I picked Memi. She's not beautiful and never was, but she's a wonderful wife."

"That's so," said Blejjo. "A wise man is one who only wants what he knows he can have. Right now"—he took off his hat and wiped his bald head—"all I want is a dip in that river."

"Swim first and then fish?"

"I think so, don't you? Basom was right about this hot sun."

"I'll go along with you," agreed Anketam.

They made their way to the river, to the shallow place at the bend where everyone swam. There were a dozen and more kids there, having a great time in the slow moving water, and several of the older people soaking themselves and keeping an eye on the kids to make sure they didn't wander out to where the water was deep and the current swift.

Anketam and Blejjo took off their clothes and cooled themselves in the water for a good half hour before they dressed again and went on upriver to a spot where Blejjo swore the fish were biting.

They were. In the next four hours, the two men had caught six fish apiece, and Blejjo was trying for his seventh. Here, near the river, there was a slight breeze, and it was fairly cool beneath the overhanging branches of the closely bunched trees.

Blejjo had spotted a big, red-and-yellow striped beauty loafing quietly in a back eddy, and he was

lowering his hook gently to a point just in front of the fish when both men heard the voice calling.

"Anketam! Anketam! Blejjo! Where you at?"

Blejjo went on with his careful work, knowing that Anketam would take care of whatever it was.

Anketam recognized the voice. He stood up and called: "Over here, Basom! What's the trouble?"

A minute later, Basom came running through the trees, his feet crashing through the underbrush.

Blejjo sat up abruptly, an angry look on his face. "Basom, you scared my fish away."

"Fish, nothing," said Basom. "I ran all the way here to tell you!" He was grinning widely and panting for breath at the same time.

"You suddenly got an awful lot of energy," Blejjo said sourly.

"What happened?" Anketam asked.

"The invasion!" Basom said between breaths. "Kevenoe himself came down to tell us! They've started the invasion! The war's on!"

"Than what are you looking so happy about?" Anketam snapped.

"That's what I came to tell you." Basom's grin didn't fade in the least. "They landed up in the Frozen Country, where our missiles couldn't get 'em, according to Kevenoe. Then they started marching down on one of the big towns. Tens of thousands of 'em! And we whipped 'em! Our army cut 'em to pieces and sent 'em running back to their base! We won! We *won!*"

III

The battle had been won, but the war wasn't won yet. The invaders had managed to establish a good-sized base up in the Frozen Country. They'd sneaked their ships in and had put up a defensive system that stopped any high-speed missiles. Not that Xedii had many missiles. Xedii was an agricultural planet; most manufactured articles were imported. It had never occurred to the government of Xedii that there would be any real need for implements of war.

The invaders seemed to be limiting their use of weapons, too. They wanted to control the planet, not destroy it. Through the summer and into the autumn, Anketam listened to the news as it filtered down from the battlegrounds. There were skirmishes here and there, but nothing decisive. Xedii seemed to be holding her own against the invaders.

After the first news of the big victory, things settled back pretty much to normal.

The harvest was good that year, but after the leaves were shredded and dried, they went into storage warehouses. The invaders had set up a patrol system around Xedii which prevented the slow cargo ships from taking off or landing. A few adventurous space officers managed to get a ship out now and then, but those few flights could hardly be called regular trade shipments.

The cool of winter had come when Chief Samas did something he had never done before. He called all the men in the barony to assemble before the main gate of the castle enclosure. He had a speech to make.

For the first time, Anketam felt a touch of apprehension. He got his crew together, and they walked to the castle in silence, wondering what it was that The Chief had to say.

All the men of the barony, except those who couldn't be spared from their jobs, were assembled in front of Chief Samas' baronial castle.

The castle itself was not a single building. Inside the four-foot-high thorn hedge that surrounded the two-acre area, there were a dozen buildings of hard, iridescent plastic shining in the sun. They all looked soft and pleasant and comfortable. Even the thorn hedge, filled as it was by the lacy leaves that concealed the hard, sharp thorns, looked soft and inviting.

Anketam listened to the soft murmur of whispered conversation from the men around him. They stood quietly outside the main gate that led into the castle area, waiting for The Chief to appear, and wondering among themselves what it was that The Chief had to say.

"You think the invaders have won?"

Anketam recognized the hoarse whisper from the man behind him. He turned to face the dark, squat, hard-looking man who had spoken. "It couldn't be, Jacovik. It couldn't be."

The other supervisor looked down at his big, knuckle-scarred hands instead of looking at Anketam. He was not a handsome man, Jacovik; his great, beaklike nose was canted to one side from a break that had come in his teens; his left eye was squinted almost closed by the scar tissue that surrounded it, and the right only looked better by comparison. His eyebrows, his beard, and the fringe of hair that outlined his bald head made an incongruous pale yellow pattern against the sunburnt darkness of his face. In his youth, Jacovik had been almost pathologically devoted to boxing—even to the point of picking fights with others in his village for no reason at all, except to fight. Twice, he had been brought up before The Chief's court because of the severe beating he had given to men bigger than he, and he had finally killed a man with his fists.

Chief Samas had given him Special Punishment for that, and a final warning that the next fight would be punished by death.

Anketam didn't know whether it was that threat, or the emotional reaction Jacovik had suffered from killing a man, or simply that he had had some sense beaten into his head, but from that moment on Jacovik was a different man. He had changed from a thug into a determined, ambitious man. In twenty-two years, he had not used his fists except to discipline one of his crew, and that had only happened four times that Anketam knew of. Jacovik had shown that he had ability as well as strength, that he could control men by words as well as by force, and The Chief had made him a supervisor. He had proved himself worthy of the job; next to Anketam, he was the best supervisor in the barony.

Anketam had a great deal of respect for the little, wide-shouldered, barrel-chested man who stood there looking at the scars on the backs of his hands.

Jacovik turned his hands over and looked at the calloused palms. "How do we know? Maybe the Council of Chiefs has given up. Maybe they've authorized the President to surrender. After all, we're not fighters; we're farmers. The invaders outnumber us. They've got us cut off by a blockade, to keep us from sending out the harvest. They've got machines and weapons." He looked up suddenly, his bright blue eyes looking straight into Anketam's. "How do we know?"

Anketam's grin was hard. "Look, Jac; the invaders have said that they intend to smash our whole society, haven't they? Haven't they?"

Jacovik nodded.

"And they want to break up the baronies—take everything away from the Chiefs—force us farmers to give up the security we've worked all our lives for. That's what they've said, isn't it?"

Jacovik nodded again.

"Well, then," Anketam continued remorselessly, "do you think the Chiefs would give up easily? Are they going to simply smile and shake hands with the invaders and say: 'Go ahead, take all our property, reduce us to poverty, smash the whole civilization we've built up, destroy the security and peace of mind of millions of human beings, and then send your troops in to rule us by martial law.' Are they going to do that? Are they?"

Jacovik spread his big, hard hands. "I don't know. I'm not a Chief. I don't know how their minds work. Do you? Maybe they'll think surrender would be better than having all of Xedii destroyed inch by inch."

Anketam shook his head. "Never. The Chiefs will fight to the very end. And they'll win in the long run because right is on their side. The invaders have no right to change our way of living; they have no right to impose their way of doing things on us. No, Jac—the Chiefs will never give up. They haven't surrendered yet, and they never will. They'll win. The invaders will be destroyed."

Jacovik frowned, completely closing his left eye. "You've always been better at thinking things out than I, Ank." He paused and looked down at his hands again. "I hope you're right, Ank. I hope you're right."

In spite of his personal conviction that he was right, Anketam had to admit that Jacovik had reason for his own opinion. He knew that many of the farmers were uncertain about the ultimate outcome of the war.

Anketam looked around him at the several hundred men who made up the farming force of the barony. His own crew were standing nearby, mixing with Jacovik's crew and talking in low voices. In the cool winter air, Anketam could still detect the aroma of human bodies, the smell of sweat that always arose when a crowd of people were grouped closely together. And he thought he could detect a faint scent of fear and apprehension in that atmosphere.

Or was that just his imagination, brought on by Jacovik's pessimism?

He opened his lips to say something to Jacovik, but his words died unborn. The sudden silence in the throng around him, the abrupt cessation of whispering, told him, more definitely than a chorus of trumpets could have done, that The Chief had appeared.

He turned around quickly, to face the Main Gate again.

The Main Gate was no higher than the thorn-bush hedge that it pierced. It was a heavily built, intricately decorated piece of polished goldwood, four feet high and eight feet across, set in a sturdy goldwood frame. The arch above the gate reached a good ten feet, giving The Chief plenty of room to stand.

He was just climbing up to stand on the gate itself as Anketam turned.

Chief Samas was a tall man, lean of face and wide of brow. His smooth-shaven chin was long and angular, and his dark eyes were deeply imbedded beneath heavy, bushy eyebrows.

And he was dressed in clothing cut in a manner that Anketam had never seen before.

He stood there, tall and proud, a half smile on his face. It was several seconds before he spoke. During that time, there was no sound from the assembled farmers.

"Men," he said at last, "I think that none of you have seen this uniform before. I look odd in it, do I not?"

The men recognized The Chief's remark as a joke, and a ripple of laughter ran through the crowd.

The Chief's smile broadened. "Odd indeed. Yes. And do you perceive the golden emblems, here at my throat? They, and the uniform, indicate that I have been chosen to help lead the armed forces—a portion of them, I should say."

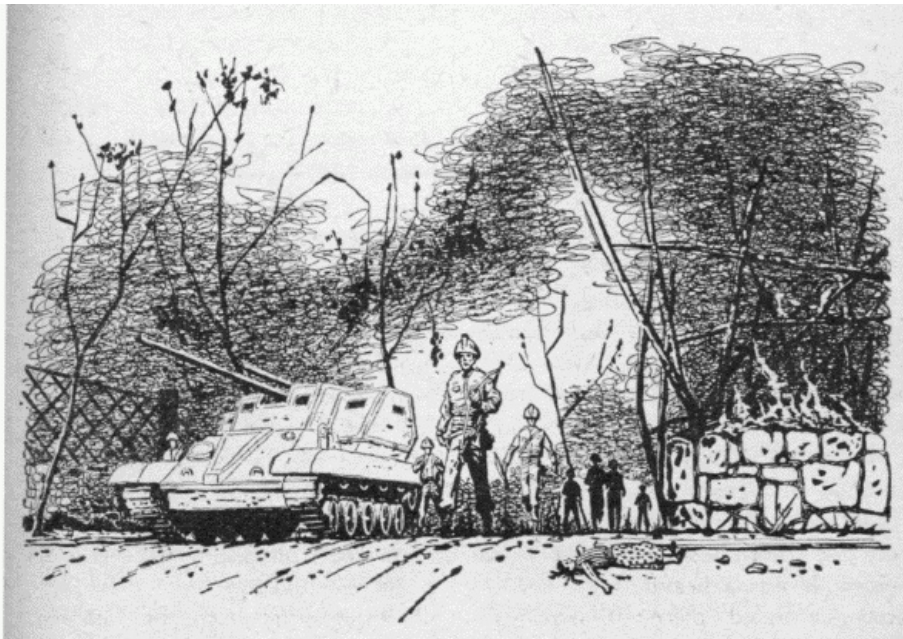
He smiled around at the men. "The Council of Chiefs has authorized the President to appoint me a Colonel of Light Tank. I am expected to lead our armored forces into battle against the damned Invaders."

A cheer came from the farmers, loud and long. Anketam found himself yelling as loud as anyone. The pronunciation and the idiom of the speech of the Chiefs was subtly different from those of the farmers, but Anketam could recognize the emphasis that his Chief was putting on the words of his speech. "Invaders." With a capital "I."

The Chief held up his hands, and the cheering died. At the same time, the face of Chief Samas lost its smile.

"I will be gone for some time," he said somberly. "The Council feels that it will be two or three years before we have finally driven the Invaders from our planet. This will not be a simple war, nor an easy one. The blockade of orbital ships which encircle Xedii keep us from making proper contact with any friends that we may have outside the circle of influence of the damned Invaders. We are, at the moment, fighting alone. And yet, in spite of that—in *spite* of that, I say—we have thus far held the enemy at a standstill. And, in the long run, we shall win."

He took a deep breath then, and his baritone voice thundered out when he spoke.



"*Shall* win? No! We *must* win! None of you want to become slaves in the factories of the Invaders. I know that, and you know it. Who among you would slave your life away in the sweatshops of the Invaders, knowing that those for whom you worked might, at any time, simply deprive you of your livelihood at their own whim, since they feel no sense of responsibility toward you as individuals?"

Again The Chief stopped, and his eyes sought out each man in turn.

"If there are any such among you, I renounce you at this moment. If there are any such, I ask ... nay, I plead ... I *order* ... I order you to go immediately to the Invaders."

Another deep breath. No one moved.

"You have all heard the propaganda of the Invaders. You know that they have offered you—well, what? Freedom? Yes, that's the way they term it. Freedom." Another pause. "Freedom. *Hah!*"

He put his hands on his hips. "None of you have ever seen a really regimented society—and I'm thankful that you haven't. I hope that you never will."

Chief Samas twisted his lips into an expression of hatred. "Freedom? Freedom from *what!* Freedom to *do* what?"

"I'll tell you. Freedom to work in their factories for twelve hours a day! Freedom to work until you are no longer of any use to them, and then be turned out to die—with no home, and no food to

support you. Freedom to live by yourselves, with every man's hand against you, with every pittance that you earn taxed to support a government that has no thought for the individual!

"Is that what you want? Is that what you've worked for all your lives?"

A visual chorus of shaken heads accompanied the verbal chorus of "No."

Chief Samas dropped his hands to his sides. "I thought not. But I will repeat: If any of you want to go to the Invaders, you may do so now."

Anketam noticed a faint movement to his right, but it stopped before it became decisive. He glanced over, and he noticed that young Basom was standing there, half poised, as though unable to make up his mind.

Then The Chief's voice bellowed out again. "Very well. You are with me. I will leave the work of the barony in your hands. I ask that you produce as much as you can. Next year—next spring—we will not plant *cataca*."

There was a low intake of breath from the assembled men. Not plant *cataca*? That was the crop that they had grown since—well, since *ever*: Anketam felt as though someone had jerked a rug from beneath him.

"There is a reason for this," The Chief went on. "Because of the blockade that surrounds Xedii, we are unable to export *cataca* leaves. The rest of the galaxy will have to do without the drug that is extracted from the leaves. The incident of cancer will rise to the level it reached before the discovery of *cataca*. When they understand that we cannot ship out because of the Invader's blockade, they will force the Invader to stop his attack on us. What we need now is not *cataca*, but food. So, next spring, you will plant food crops.

"Save aside the *cataca* seed until the war is over. The seedlings now in the greenhouses will have to be destroyed, but that cannot be helped."

He stopped for a moment, and when he began again his voice took on a note of sadness.

"I will be away from you until the war is won. While I am gone, the barony will be run by my wife. You will obey her as you would me. The finances of the barony will be taken care of by my trusted man, Kevenoe." He gestured to one side, and Kevenoe, who was standing there, smiled quickly and then looked grim again.

"As for the actual running of the barony—as far as labor is concerned—I think I can leave that in the hands of one of my most capable men."

He raised his finger and pointed. There was a smile on his face.

Anketam felt as though he had been struck an actual blow; the finger was pointed directly at him.

"Anketam," said The Chief, "I'm leaving the barony in your hands until I return. You will supervise the labor of all the men here. Is that understood?"

"Yes, sir," said Anketam weakly. "Yes, sir. I understand."

IV

Never, for the rest of his life, would the sharp outlines of that moment fade from his memory. He knew that the men of the barony were all looking at him; he knew that The Chief went on talking afterwards. But those things impressed themselves but lightly on his mind, and they blurred soon afterwards. Twenty years later, in retelling the story, he would swear that The Chief had ended his speech at that point. He would swear that it was only seconds later that The Chief had jumped down from the gate and motioned for him to come over; his memory simply didn't register anything between those two points.

But The Chief's words after the speech—the words spoken to him privately—were bright and clear in his mind.

The Chief was a good three inches shorter than Anketam, but Anketam never noticed that. He just stood there in front of The Chief, wondering what more his Chief had to say.

"You've shown yourself to be a good farmer, Anketam," Chief Samas said in a low voice. "Let's see—you're of Skebbin stock, I think?"

Anketam nodded. "Yes, sir."

"The Skebbin family has always produced good men. You're a credit to the Skebbins, Anketam."

"Thank you, sir."

"You've got a hard job ahead of you," said The Chief. "Don't fail me. Plant plenty of staple crops, make sure there's enough food for everyone. If you think it's profitable, add more to the animal stock. I've authorized Kevenoe to allow money for the purchase of breeding stock. You can draw whatever you need for that purpose.

"This war shouldn't last too long. Another year, at the very most, and we'll have forced the Invaders off Xedii. When I come back, I expect to find the barony in good shape, d'you hear?"

"Yes, sir. It will be."

"I think it will," said The Chief. "Good luck to you, Anketam."

As The Chief turned away, Anketam said: "Thank you, sir—and good luck to you, sir."

Chief Samas turned back again. "By the way," he said, "there's one more thing. I know that men don't always agree on everything. If there is any dispute between you and Kevenoe, submit the question to my wife for arbitration." He hesitated. "However, I trust that there will not be many such disputes. A woman shouldn't be bothered with such things any more than is absolutely necessary. It upsets them. Understand?"

Anketam nodded. "Yes, sir."

"Very well. Good-bye, Anketam. I hope to see you again before the next harvest." And with that, he turned and walked through the gate, toward the woman who was standing anxiously on the porch of his home.

Anketam turned away and started towards his own village. Most of the others had already begun the trek back. But Jacovik, Blejjo, and Basom were waiting for him. They fell into step beside him.

After a while, Jacovik broke the silence. "Well, Ank, it looks like you've got a big job on your hands."

"That's for sure," said Anketam. He knew that Jacovik envied him the job; he knew that Jacovik had only missed the appointment by a narrow margin.

"Jac," he said, "have you got a man on your crew that you can trust to take over your job?"

"Madders could do it, I think," Jacovik said cautiously. "Why?"

"This is too big a job for one man," said Anketam quietly. "I'll need help. I want you to help me, Jac."

There was a long silence while the men walked six paces. Then Jacovik said: "I'll do whatever I can, Ank. Whatever I can." There was honest warmth in his voice.

Again there was a silence.

"Blejjo," Anketam said after a time, "do you mind coming out of retirement for a while?"

"Not if you need me, Ank," said the old man.

"It won't be hard work," Anketam said. "I just want you to take care of the village when I'm not there. Settle arguments, assign the village work, give out punishment if necessary—things like that. As far as the village is concerned, you'll be supervisor."

"What about the field work, Ank?" Blejjo asked. "I'm too old to handle that. Come spring, and—"

"I said, as far as the village is concerned," Anketam said. "I've got another man in mind for the field work."

And no one was more surprised than Basom when Anketam said: "Basom, do you think you could handle the crew in the field?"

Basom couldn't even find his tongue for several more paces. When he discovered at last that it was still in his mouth, where he'd left it, he said: "I ... I'll try, Ank. I sure will try, if you want me to. But ... well ... I mean, why pick *me*?"

Old Blejjo chuckled knowingly. Jacovik, who hardly knew the boy, just looked puzzled.

"Why not you?" Anketam countered.

"Well ... you've always said I was lazy. And I am, I guess."

"Sure you are," said Anketam. "So am I. Always have been. But a smart lazy man can figure out things that a hard worker might overlook. He can find the easy, fast way to get a job done properly. And he doesn't overwork his men because he knows that when he's tired, the others are, too. You want to try it, Basom?"

"I'll try," said Basom earnestly. "I'll try real hard." Then, after a moment's hesitation. "Just one thing, Anketam—"

"What's that?"

"Kevenoe. I don't want him coming around me. Not at all. If he ever said one word to me, I'd probably break his neck right there."

Anketam nodded. The Chief had given Zillia to Kevenoe only two months before, and the only one who liked the situation was Kevenoe himself.

"I'll deal with Kevenoe, Basom," Anketam said. "Don't you worry about that."

"All right, then," Basom said. "I'll do my best, Anketam."

"You'd better," said Anketam. "If you don't, I'll just have to give the job to someone else. You hear?"

"I hear," said Basom.

V

The war dragged on. In the spring of the following year, over a hundred thousand Invader troops landed on the seacoast a hundred miles from Chromdin and began a march on the capital. But somebody had forgotten to tell the Invader general that it rained in that area in the spring and that the mud was like glue. The Invader army bogged down, and, floundering their way toward Chromdin, they found themselves opposed by an army of nearly a hundred thousand Xedii troops under General Jojon, and the invasion came to a standstill at that point.

Farther to the west, another group of forty thousand Invader troops came down from the Frozen Country, and a Xedii general named Oljek trounced them with a mere seventeen thousand men.

All in all, the Invaders were getting nowhere, but they seemed determined to keep on plugging.

The news only filtered slowly into the areas which were situated well away from the front. A thousand miles to the west of Chief Samas' barony, the Invaders began cutting deeply into Xedii territory, but they were nowhere near the capital, so no one was really worried.

Anketam worked hard at keeping the barony going during the absence of The Chief. Instead of *cataca*, he and Jacovik planted food crops, doing on a larger scale just what they had always done in the selected sections around the villages. They had always grown their own food, and now they were doing it on a grand scale.

No news came from off-planet, except for unreliable rumors. What the rest of the galaxy was doing about the war on Xedii, no one knew.

Young Basom proved to be a reasonably competent supervisor. He was nowhere near as good as Anketam or Jacovik, but there were worse supers in the barony.

Anketam found that the biggest worry was not in the handling of the farmers, but in obtaining manufactured goods. The staff physician complained to Kevenoe that drugs were getting scarce. Shoes and clothing were almost impossible to obtain. Rumor had it that arms and ammunition were running short in the Xedii armies. For two centuries, Xedii had depended on other planets to provide manufactured goods for her, and now those supplies were cut off, except for a miserably slow trickle that came in via the daring space officers who managed to evade the orbital forts that the Invaders had set up around the planet.

Even so, Anketam's faith in the power of Xedii remained constant. The invading armies were still being held off from Chromdin, weren't they? The capital would not fall, of that he was sure.

What Anketam did not and could not know was the fact that the Invaders were growing tired of pussy-footing around. Instead of fighting Xedii on Xedii's terms, the Invaders decided to fight it on their own.

Everyone on Chief Samas' barony and the others around it expected trouble to come from the north, from the Frozen Country, if and when it came. They didn't look to the west, where the real trouble was brewing.

Anketam was shocked when he heard the news that the Invaders had reached Tana L'At, having cut down through the center of the continent, dividing the inhabited part of Xedii into two almost equal parts. They knocked out Tana L'At with a heavy shelling of paralysis gas, evacuated the inhabitants, and dusted the city with radioactive powder to make it uninhabitable for several years.

Then they began to march eastward.

VI

For the first time in his life, Anketam was feeling genuine fear. He had feared for his life before, yes. And he had feared for his family. But now he feared for his world, which was vaster by far.

He blinked at the tall, gangling Kevenoe, who was still out of breath from running. "Say that again."

"I said that the Invader troops are crossing Benner Creek," Kevenoe said angrily. "They'll be at the castle within an hour. We've got to do something."

"What?" Anketam asked dazedly.

"Fight them? With what? We have no weapons."

"I don't know," Kevenoe admitted. "I just don't know. I thought maybe you'd know. Maybe you could think of something. What about Lady Samas?"

"What about her?" Anketam still couldn't force his mind to function.

"Haven't you heard? The Invaders have been looting and burning every castle in their path! And the women—"

Lady Samas in danger! Something crystallized in Anketam's mind. He pointed in the direction of the castle. "Get back there!" he snapped. "Get everyone out of the castle! Save all the valuables you can! Get everyone down to the river and tell them to hide in the brush at the Big Swamp. The Invaders won't go there. Move!"

Kevenoe didn't even pause to answer. He ran back toward the saddle animal he had tethered at the edge of the village.

Anketam was running in the opposite direction, toward Basom's quarters.

He didn't bother to knock. He flung open the door and yelled, "*Basom!*"

Basom, who had been relaxing on his bed, leaped to his feet. "What is it?"

Anketam told him rapidly. Then he said: "Get moving! You're a fast runner. Spread the news. Tell everyone to get to the Swamp. We have less than an hour, so run for all you're worth!"

Basom, like Kevenoe, didn't bother to ask questions. He went outside and started running toward the south.

"That's right!" Anketam called after him. "Tell Jacovik first! And get more runners to spread the word!"

And then Anketam headed for his own home. Memi had to be told. On the way, he pounded on the doors of the houses, shouting the news and telling the others to get to the Big Swamp.

By the time the Invader troops came, they found the entire Samas barony empty. Not a single soul opposed their march; there was no voice to object when they leveled their beam projectors and melted the castle and the villages into shapeless masses of blackened plastic.

VII

The wooden shelter wasn't much of a home, but it was all Anketam could provide. It had been difficult to cut down the trees and make a shack of them, but at least there were four walls and a roof.

Anketam stood at the door of the rude hut, looking blindly at the ruins of the village a hundred yards away. In the past few months, weeds had grown up around the charred blobs that had once been the homes of Anketam's crew. Anketam stared, not at, but past and through them, seeing the ghosts of the houses that had once been there.

Behind him, Memi was speaking in soft tones to Lady Samas.

"Now you go ahead and eat, Lady. You can't starve yourself to death. Things won't always be this bad, you'll see. When that oldest boy of yours comes back, he'll fix the barony right back up like it was. Just you see. Now, here; try some of this soup."

Lady Samas said nothing. She seemed to be entirely oblivious of her surroundings these days. Nothing mattered to her any more. Word had come back that Chief Samas had accompanied General Eeler in the fatal expedition towards the Invader base, and The Chief had been buried there in the Frozen Country.

Lady Samas had nowhere else to stay. Kevenoe was dead, his skull crushed by—by someone. Anketam refused, in his own mind, to see any connection between Kevenoe's death and the fact that Basom and Zillia had disappeared the same day, probably to give themselves over to the Invader troops.

A movement at the corner of his eye caught Anketam's attention. He turned his head to look. Then he spun on his heel and went into the hut.

"Lady Samas," he said quickly, "they're coming. There's a ground-car coming down the road with four Invaders in it."

Lady Samas looked up at him, her fine old face calm and emotionless. "Let them come," she said. "We can't stop them, Anketam. And we have nothing to lose."

Three minutes later, the ground-car pulled up in front of the hut. Anketam watched silently as one of the men got out. The other three stayed in the car, their handguns ready.

The officer, very tall and straight in his blue uniform, strode up to the door of the hut. He stopped and addressed Anketam. "I understand Lady Samas is living here."

"That's right," Anketam said.

"Would you tell her that Colonel Fayder would like to speak to her."

Before Anketam could say anything, Lady Samas spoke. "Tell the colonel to come in, Anketam."

Anketam stepped aside to let the officer enter.

"Lady Samas?" he asked.

She nodded. "I am."

The colonel removed his hat. "Madam, I am Colonel Jamik Fayder, of the Union army. You are the owner of this land?"

"Until my son returns, yes," said Lady Samas evenly.

"I understand." The colonel licked his lips nervously. He was obviously ill at ease in the presence of the Lady Samas. "Madam," he said, "it would be useless for me to apologize for the destructions of war. Apologies are mere words."

"They are," said Lady Samas. "None the less, I accept them."

"Thank you. I have come to inform you that the Xedii armies formally surrendered near Chromdin early this morning. The war is over."

"I'm glad," said Lady Samas.

"So am I," said the colonel. "It has not been a pleasant war. Xedii was—and still is—the most backward planet in the galaxy. Your Council of Chiefs steadfastly refused to allow the"—he glanced at Anketam—"workers of Xedii to govern their own lives. They have lived and died without proper education, without the medical care that would save and lengthen their lives, and without the comforts of life that any human being deserves. That situation will be changed now, but I am heartily sorry it took a war to do it."

Anketam looked at the man. What was he talking about? He and his kind had burned and dusted cities and villages, and had smashed the lives of millions of human beings on the pretense that they were trying to help. What sort of insanity was that?

The colonel took a sheaf of papers from his pocket.

"I have been ordered to read to you the proclamation of the Union President."

He looked down at the papers and began to read:

"Henceforth, all the peoples of Xedii shall be free and equal. They shall have the right to change their work at will, to be paid in lawful money instead of—"

Anketam just stood there, his mind glazed. He had worked hard all his life for the security of retirement, and now all that was gone. What was he to do? Where was he to go? If he had to be paid in money, who would do it? Lady Samas? She had nothing. Besides, Anketam knew nothing about the handling of money. He knew nothing about how to get along in a society like that.

He stood there in silence as his world dissolved around him. He could hear, dimly, the voice of the blue-clad Union officer as he read off the death warrant for Xedii. And for Anketam.

THE END



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