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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK MORAL EQUIVALENT ***



MORAL EQUIVALENT

By KRIS NEVILLE

Illustrated by DICK FRANCIS

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Why shouldn't a culture mimic another right down to the last little detail? Because the last detail may be just that—the final one!

The planet Lanit II had dwindled to a luminous speck. They were in clear space now, at Breakoff Point. Beliakoff held the ship in position while Kelly set dials for the jump into the hyperspatial drift opening, which deep-space men knew as the Slot.

Beliakoff cracked his bony knuckles nervously. "Now, Johnny," he said, "easy this time. *Real* easy. Gentle her into it. She's not a new ship. She resents being slammed into the Slot."

"She'll take it," Kelly said, with a boyish grin of almost suicidal abandon.

"Maybe she will, but how about us? You sort of creased the Slot getting us off Torriang. A little closer and—"

"I was still getting the touch. You ought to be glad I'm an instinctive astrogator."

He set the last dial with a rapid twirl and reached for the kissoff switch.

"You're out two decimal points," said Beliakoff, who worried about such trifles. "Enough to ionize us."

"I know, I know," Kelly grumbled, adjusting the dial. "I was just touching it for luck. Here we go!"

He depressed the kissoff switch. Beliakoff shut his eyes as the ship lurched Slotward, wishing that Kyne, their government-inspected, college-graduated astrogator was still aboard. Kyne had been an expert at the job. But then, three planets back, he had suddenly gone after a native stevedore with a micro-edge cleaver, screaming that no dirty alien would ever marry *his* daughter.

Kyne had no daughter.

Currently he was confined in Azolith, awaiting transportation Earthside, to a padded little homy room in the Spaceman's Snug Port.

"How about that?" Kelly asked proudly, once the ship was locked in hyperspace. "Superior intelligence and steel nerves do the trick every time."

"Poor devil, Kyne," Beliakoff sighed.

"A paranoid," Kelly diagnosed. "Did he ever tell you about the plot to keep him out of the Luna Military Academy?"

"He never talked to me much."

"That's because you're a cold, distant, unsympathetic type," Kelly said, with a complacent smile. "Me, he told everything. He applied to Luna every year. Studied all the textbooks on military organization, land tactics, sea tactics, space strategy, histories of warfare. Crammed his cabin with that junk. Knew it inside out. Fantastic memory!"

"Why didn't he get in?"

"Hemophilia. He couldn't pass the physical. He thought they were plotting against him. Still, I'm grateful for the chance at a little astrogation." With the barest hint of a smile, Kelly said, "I understand it's possible to bring a ship sidewise through the Slot at Terra."

"Please don't try," Beliakoff begged, shuddering. "I knew we should have waited for Kyne's replacement at Mala."

"We'd still be there, with a cargo of kvash turning sour."

"I was afraid it would sour anyhow," Beliakoff said, with a worrier's knack for finding trouble. "Mala is the slowest loading port this side of the Rift. I must admit, however, they didn't do badly this time."

"Noticed that, did you?" Kelly asked.

"Hm? Did you find a way of speeding them up?"

"Sure. Gave them Kyne's old dog-eared books. They're crazy about books. Really hustled for them."

Beliakoff said nothing for several seconds, but his long, sallow face became pale. "You what?"

"Gave 'em the books. Don't worry," Kelly said quickly. "Kyne gave them to me before they hauled him away."

"You gave the *warfare books* to the people on Mala?"



"You mean I shouldn't have? Why not? What's wrong with Mala?"

"Plenty." Beliakoff grimly did some quick figuring. "It'll be a year, their time, when we can get back. Kelly, take us out of hyperspace!"

"Now?" Kelly gasped. "Here?"

"At once!"

"But we might come out inside a star or—"

"That," Beliakoff said, his voice filled with righteousness, "simply cannot be helped. We must return at once to Mala!"

General Drak, Commander of the Forces of the Empress, Wearer of the Gold Star of Mala, sat at his desk in the Supreme Command Post, which had recently been converted from a hardware store. He was engaged in a fiery argument over the telephone with Nob, the Empress's right-hand man.

"But damn it all," General Drak shouted, "I must have it! I am the Supreme Commander, the General of All the Armies of the Dictatorship! Doesn't that mean anything?"

"Not under the circumstances," Nob answered.

Two soldiers, standing guard in the General's quarters, listened interestedly.

"Think he'll get it?" one asked.

"Not a chance," the other answered.

Drak glared them into silence, then returned to the argument. "Will you please attempt to understand my position?" he said hoarsely. "You put me in command. At my orders, the Armies of the Dictatorship move against the Allied Democracies. All the other generals obey me. *Me!* Correct?"

"He's got a point," one soldier said.

"He'll never get it," the other replied.

"Shut up, you two!" Drak roared. "Nob, aren't I right? It's the Earthly way, Nob. Authority must be recognized!"

"I'm sorry," Nob said. "Extremely sorry. Personally, I sympathize with you. But the *Book of Terran Rank Equivalentents* is quite specific. Seven shoulder stars are the most—the absolute most—that any general can wear. I absolutely cannot allow you to wear eight."

"But you gave Frix seven! And he's just Unit General!"

"That was before we understood the rules completely. We thought there was no limit to the number of stars we could give and Frix was sulky. I'm sorry, General, you'll just have to be

satisfied with seven."

"Take one away from Frix, then."

"Can't. He'll resign."

"In that case, I resign."

"You aren't allowed to. The book, *Military Leadership*, specifically states that a Supreme Commander never resigns during hostilities. An Earthman would find the very thought inconceivable."

"All right!" Drak furiously slammed down the telephone.

The two soldiers exchanged winks.

"At attention, you two," Drak said. "You're supposed to be honor guards. Why can't you act like honor guards?"

"We haven't got weapons," one of the soldiers pointed out.

"Can't be helped. I sent what we had to the front."

"But we need them here," the soldier said earnestly. "It's bad for morale, us not having weapons, and morale is vital for victory."

Drak hated to be lectured, but he had to accept textbook truth when it was quoted at him.

"You may be right," he agreed. "I'll try to get some back."

He rubbed his eyes tiredly. Everything had happened so quickly!

Just a week ago, Nob had walked into his store and inquired, "Drak, how would you like to be a general?"

"I don't know," Drak had confessed honestly. "What is it and why do we need one?"

"War starting," Nob said. "You've heard of war, haven't you? Earth idea, *very* Earthly. I'll explain later how it works. What do you say?"

"All right. But do you really think I'm the right type?"

"Absolutely. Besides, your hardware store is perfectly situated for the Supreme Command Post."

But aside from the location of his hardware store, Drak had other qualifications for leadership. For one thing, he looked like an Earth general and this had loomed large in Nob's eyes. Drak was over six feet tall, strongly built, solidly muscled. His eyes were gray, deep-set and fierce; his nose was aquiline; his mouth was firm because he usually held nails in it when he was out on a repair job.

In his uniform, Drak looked every inch a general; as a matter of fact, he looked like several generals, for his cap came from the Earth-Mars war of '82, his tunic was a relic of the D'eereli Campaign, his belt was in the style of the Third Empire, his pants were a replica of the Southern Star Front, while his shoes reminded one of the hectic days of the Fanzani Rebellion.

But at least all his clothes were soldiers' clothes. His honor guard had to piece out their uniforms with personal articles. They had complained bitterly about the injustice of this, and had come close to deserting. But Drak, after some hasty reading in Smogget's *Leadership*, told them about the Terran doctrine of the Privileges of Rank.

In front of him now was a report from the Allani Battle Front. He wasn't sure what it said, since it was coded and he had neglected to write down the code. Was it ENEMY REPULSED US WITH HEAVY LOSSES or should it read US REPULSED ENEMY WITH HEAVY LOSSES?

He wished he knew. It made quite a difference.

The door burst open and a young corporal rushed in. "Hey, General, take a look out the window!"

Drak started to rise, then reconsidered. Rules were rules.

"Hey, what?" he demanded.

"Forgot," the corporal said. "Hey, *sir*, take a look out the window, huh?"

"Much better." Drak walked to the window and saw, in the distance, a mass of ascending black smoke.

"City of Chando," the corporal said proudly. "Boy, we smacked it today! Saturation bombing for ten hours. They can't use it for anything but a gravel pit now!"

"Sir," Drak reminded.

"Sir. The planes are fueled up and waiting. What shall we flatten next, huh, sir?"

"Let me see...." General Drak examined a wall map upon which the important enemy cities were circled in red. There were Alis and Dryn, Kys and Mos and Dlettire. Drak could think of no reason for leveling one more than another. After a moment's thought, he pushed a button on his desk.

"Yeah?" asked a voice over the loudspeaker.

"Which one, Ingif?"

"Kys, of course," said the cracked voice of his old hardware store assistant. "Fellow over there owes us money and won't pay up."

"Thanks, Ingif." Drak turned to the corporal. "Go to it, soldier!"

"Yes, sir!"

The corporal hurried out.

General Drak turned back to the reports on his desk, trying again to puzzle out what had happened at Allani. Repulsed Us? Us Repulsed? How should it read?

"Oh, well," Drak said resignedly. "In the long run, I don't suppose it really makes much difference."

Miles away, in no man's land, stood a bunker of reinforced concrete and steel. Within the bunker were two men. They sat on opposite sides of a plain wooden table and their faces were stern and impassive. Beside each man was a pad and pencil. Upon each pad were marks.

Upon the table between them was a coin.

"Your toss," said the man on the right.

The man on the left picked up the coin. "Call it."

"Heads."

It came up heads.

"Damn," said the flipper, passing the coin across the table and standing up.

The other man smiled faintly, but said nothing.

Kelly reached for the kissoff switch, then hesitated. "Look, Igor," he said, "do we have to come out now, without charts? It gets risky, you know. How can we tell what's out there in normal space?"

"It is a risk we have to take," Beliakoff said stonily.

"But why? What's wrong with the people of Mala having those books? Believe me, there's nothing dirty in them."

"Look," Beliakoff said patiently, "you know that Mala is a semi-restricted planet. Limited trading is allowed under control conditions. No articles are allowed on the planet except those on the approved list."

"Yeah," Kelly said vaguely. "Silly sort of rule."

"Not at all. Mala is a mirror culture. They consider Earth and its ways to be absolute perfection. They copy everything of Earth's they can find."

"Seems like a good idea. We *have* got a real good culture."

"Sure, but we developed into it. The Malans simply copy what they see, with no underlying tradition or rationale. Since they don't know why they're doing any particular thing, they can easily misinterpret it, warp it into something harmful."

"They'll learn," Kelly said.

"Of course they will. But in the meantime, the results can be devastating. They always are when a primitive race tries to ape the culture of a more advanced people. Look at what happened to the South Sea Islanders. All they picked up was the worst of French, British and American culture. You hardly see any more South Sea Islanders, do you? Same with the American Indians, with the Hottentots, and plenty of others."

"I still think you're making too much of a fuss about it," Kelly said. "All right, I gave them a lot of books on warfare and political organization. So what? What in blazes can they do with them?"

"The Malans," Beliakoff said grimly, "have never had a war."

Kelly gulped. "Never?"

"Never. They're a completely cooperative society. Or were, before they started reading those warfare books."

"But they wouldn't start a war just because they've got some books on it, and know that Earth people do it, and—yeah, I guess they would." Quickly he set the dials. "You're right, buddy. We have an absolute moral obligation to return and straighten out that mess."

"I knew you'd see it that way," Beliakoff said approvingly. "And there is the additional fact that the Galactic Council could hold us responsible for any deaths traceable to the books. It could mean Ran-hachi Prison for a hundred years or so."

"Why didn't you say that in the first place?" Kelly flipped the kissoff switch. The ship came out in normal space. Fortunately, there was no sun or planet in its path.

"Hang on," Kelly said, "we're going where we're going in a great big rush!"

"I just hope we'll be in time to salvage something," Beliakoff said, watching as their freighter plowed its way through the sea of space toward the unchanging stars.

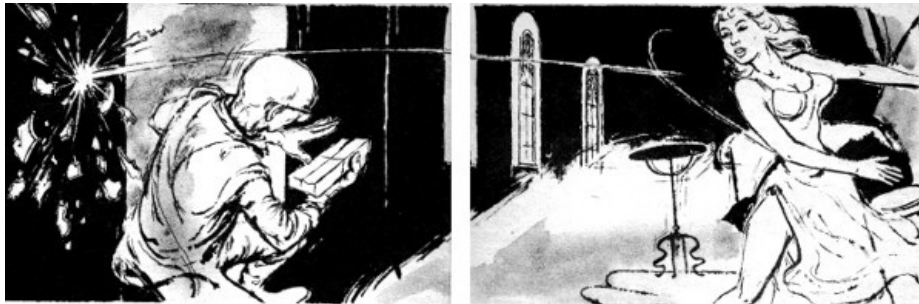
With evident nervousness, Nob walked down a long, dim corridor toward the imperial chambers, carrying a small package in both hands. The Prime Minister of the Dictatorship was a small bald man with a great bulging forehead and small, glittering black eyes, made smaller by steel-rimmed spectacles. He looked the very incarnation of an evil genius, which was why he had been chosen as the Power Behind the Throne.

In point of fact, however, Nob was a mild, near-sighted, well-meaning little man, a lawyer by occupation, known throughout Mala for his prize rose gardens and his collection of Earth stamps. In spite of a temperamental handicap, he didn't find his new job too difficult. The Earth books were there and Nob simply interpreted them as literally as possible. Whenever a problem came up, Nob thought: how would they solve it on Earth? Then he would do the same, or as near the same as possible.

But dealing with the Empress presented problems of a unique nature. Nob couldn't find a book entitled *Ways and Means of Placating Royalty*. If such a book were obtainable, Nob would have paid any price for it.

He took a deep breath, knocked and opened the door into the Royal Chambers.

Instantly he ducked. A vase shattered against the wall behind him. Not so good, he thought, calculating the distance by which it had missed him. The Empress Jusa's aim was improving.



"Nob, you dirty swine!" the Empress shrieked.

"At your service, Majesty," Nob answered, bowing low.

"Where are the pearls, you insolent dolt?"

"Here, Majesty," Nob said, handing over the package. "It strained the exchequer, buying them for you. The Minister of the Treasury threatened to desert to the enemy. He may still. The people are muttering about extravagance in high places. But the pearls are yours, Majesty."

"Of course." Jusa opened the package and looked at the lustrous gems. "Can I keep them?" she asked, in a very small voice.

"Of course not."

"I didn't think so," Jusa said sadly. She had been just another Malan girl, but had been chosen as Empress on the basis of her looks, which were heartbreakingly lovely. It was axiomatic that an Empress should be heartbreakingly lovely. The Malans had seen enough Earth films to know that.

But an Empress should also be cold, calculating, cruel, as well as gracious, headstrong and generous to a fault. She should care nothing for her people, while, simultaneously, all she cared for was the people. She should act in a manner calculated to make her subjects love her in spite of and because of herself.

Jusa was a girl of considerable intelligence and she wanted to be as Earthly as the next. But the contradictions in her role baffled her.

"Can't I keep them just for a little while?" she pleaded, holding a single pearl up to the light.

"It isn't possible," Nob said. "We need guns, tanks, planes. Therefore you sell your jewelry. There are many Terran precedents."

"But why did I have to insist upon the pearls in the first place?" Jusa asked.

"I explained! As Empress, you must be flighty, must possess a whim of iron, must have no regard

for anyone else's feelings, must lust for expensive baubles."

"All right," Jusa said.

"All right, what?"

"All right, swine."

"That's better," Nob said. "You're learning, Jusa, you really are. If you could just fluctuate your moods more consistently—"

"I really will try," promised the Empress. "I'll learn, Nob. You'll be proud of me yet."

"Good. Now there are some problems of state which you must decide upon. Prisoners of war, for one thing. We have several possible means for disposing of them. First, we could—"

"You take care of it."

"Now, now," Nob chided. "Mustn't shirk your duty."

"I'm not. I am simply being arbitrary and dictatorial. *You* solve it, pig. And bring me diamonds."

"Yes, Excellency," Nob said, bowing low. "Diamonds. But the people—"

"I love the people. But to hell with them!" she cried, fire in her eyes.

"Fine, fine," Nob said, and bowed his way out of the room.

Jusa stood for a few moments in thought, then picked up a vase and shattered it on the floor. She made a mental note to order several dozen more.

Then she flung herself upon the royal couch and began to weep bitterly.

She was quite a young Empress and she had the feeling of being in beyond her depth. The problems of the war and of royalty had completely ended her social life.

She resented it; any girl would.

Nob, meanwhile, left the palace and went home in his armored car. The car had been ordered to protect him against assassins, who, according to the Earth books, aimed a good deal of their plots at Prime Ministers. Nob could see no reason for this, since if he weren't Prime Minister, any one of a thousand men could do the job with equal efficiency. But he supposed it had a certain symbolic meaning.

He reached his home and his wife kissed him on the cheek. "Hard day at the palace, dear?" she asked.

"Quite hard," Nob said. "Lots of work for after supper."

"It just isn't fair," complained his wife. She was a plump, pleasant little person and she worried continually about her husband's health. "They shouldn't make you work so hard."

"But of course they should!" said Nob, a little astonished. "Don't you remember what I told you? All the books say that during a war, a Prime Minister is a harried, harassed individual, weighed down by the enormous burden of state, unable to relax, tense with the numerous strains of high office."

"It isn't fair," his wife repeated.

"No one said it was. But it's extremely Earthlike."

His wife shrugged her shoulders. "Well, of course, if it's Earthlike, it must be right. Come eat supper, dear."

After eating, Nob attacked his mounds of paperwork. But soon he was yawning and his eyes burned. He turned to his wife, who was just finishing the dishes.

"My dear," he said, "do you suppose you could help me?"

"Is it proper?" she asked.

"Oh, absolutely. The books state that the Prime Minister's wife tries in every way possible to relieve her husband of the burden of power."

"In that case, I'll be happy to try." She sat down in front of the great pile of papers. "But, dear, I don't know anything about these matters."

"Rely on instinct," Nob answered, yawning. "That's what I do."

Flattered by the importance of her task, she set to work with a will.

Several hours later, she awakened her husband, who was slumbering on the couch.

"I've got them all finished except these," she said. "In this one, I'm afraid I don't understand that word."

Nob glanced at the paper. "Oh, propaganda. That means giving the people the facts, whether true or false. It's very important in any war."

"I don't see why."

"It's obvious. To have a genuine Earth-style war, you need ideological differences. That's why we chose a dictatorship and the other continent chose a democracy. The job of propaganda is to keep us different."

"I see," she said dubiously. "Well, this other paper is from General Heglm of Security. He asks what you are doing about the spy situation. He says it's very serious."

"I had forgotten about that. He's right, it's reached a crisis point." He put the paper in his pocket. "I'm going to take care of that personally, first thing in the morning."

In the last few hours, his wife had made no less than eight Major Policy Decisions, twenty Codifications, eight Unifications, and three Clarifications. Nob didn't bother to read them over. He trusted his wife's good judgment and common sense.

He went to bed that night with the feeling of a job well done. And before he fell asleep, he figured out exactly what he would do about the spy situation.

The next morning, Nob's orders went out by all means of communication. The results were gratifyingly swift, since the people of the dictatorship were completely behind the war and dutifully loved and hated their Empress, in whose name the order was signed.

A typical scene took place in the clubcar of the Char-Xil express. The occupants of the car, twenty-three commuting businessmen, sealed the doors as soon as they received Nob's order. The best-read among them, a salesman by the name of Thrang, was elected spokesman for the group.

"Boys," said Thrang, "I guess I don't have to tell you anything about the importance of this order. We all know what war is by now, don't we?"

"We sure do!"

"War is hell!"

"The war that the enemy thrust on us!"

"The war to start all wars!"

"That's right," Thrang said. "And I guess we've all felt the pinch since the war started. Eh, boys?"

"I've done my part," said a man named Draxil. "When the Prime Minister called for a cigarette shortage, I dumped twenty carloads of tobacco in the Hunto River. Now we got cigarette rationing!"

"That's the spirit," Thrang said. "I know for a fact that others among you have done the same with sugar, canned goods, butter, meat and a hundred items. Everything's rationed now; everyone feels the pinch. But, boys, there's still more we have to do. Now a spy situation has come up and it calls for quick action."

"Haven't we done enough?" groaned a clothing-store owner.

"It's never enough! In time of war, Earth people give till it hurts—then give some more! They know that no sacrifice is too much, that nothing counts but the proper prosecution of the war."

The clothing-store owner nodded vehemently. "If it's Earthly, it's good enough for me. So what can we do about this spy situation?"

"That is for us to decide here and now," Thrang said. "According to the Prime Minister, our dictatorship cannot boast a single act of espionage or sabotage done to it since the beginning of the war. The Chief of Security is alarmed. It's his job to keep all spies under surveillance. Since there are none, his department has lost all morale, which, in turn, affects the other departments."

"Do we really need spies?"

"They serve a vital purpose," Thrang explained. "All the books agree on this. Spies keep a country alert, on its toes, eternally vigilant. Through sabotage, they cut down on arms production, which otherwise would grow absurdly large, since it has priority over everything else. They supply Security with subjects for Interrogation, Confession, Brainwashing and Re-indoctrination. This in turn supplies data for the enemy propaganda machine, which in turn supplies material for our counter-propaganda machine."

Draxil looked awed. "I didn't know it was so complicated."

"That's the beauty of the Earth War," Thrang said. "Stupendous yet delicate complications, completely interrelated. Leave out one seemingly unimportant detail and the whole structure collapses."

"Those Terrans!" Draxil said, shaking his head in admiration.

"Now to work. Boys, I'm calling for volunteers. Who'll be a spy?"

No one responded.

"Really now!" said Thrang. "That's no attitude to take. Come on, some of you must be harboring treasonous thoughts. Don't be ashamed of it. Remember, it takes all kinds to make a war."

Little Herg, a zipper salesman from Xcoth, cleared his throat. "I have a cousin who's Minister of War for the Allies."

"An excellent motive for subversion!" Thrang cried.

"I rather thought it was," the zipper salesman said, pleased. "Yes, I believe I can handle the job."

"Splendid!" Thrang said.

By then, the train had arrived at the station. The doors were unsealed, allowing the commuters to leave for their jobs. Thrang watched the zipper salesman depart, then hurried into the crowd. In a moment, he found a tall man wearing a slouch hat and dark glasses. On his lapel was a silver badge which read *Secret Police*.

"See that man?" Thrang asked, pointing to the zipper salesman.

"You bet," the Secret Policeman said.

"He's a spy! A dirty spy! Quick, after him!"

"He's being watched," said the Secret Policeman laconically.

"I just wanted to make sure," Thrang said, and started to walk off.

He felt a heavy hand on his shoulder. He turned. The Secret Policeman had been joined by two tall men in slouch hats and dark glasses. They wore badges that said *Storm Troopers*.

"You're under arrest," said the Secret Policeman.

"Why? What have I done?"

"Not a thing, as far as we know," said a Storm Trooper. "Not a single solitary thing. That's why we're arresting you."

"Arbitrary police powers," the Secret Policeman explained. "Suspension of search warrants and habeas corpus. Invasion of privacy. War, you know. Come along quietly, sir. You have a special and very important part to play in the war effort."

"What's that?"

"You have been arbitrarily selected as Martyr," said the Secret Policeman.

Head held high, Thrang marched proudly to his destiny.

The whole of Mala took to war with a will. Soon books began to appear on the stalls: *War and You* for the masses, *The Erotic Release of War* for the elite, *The Inherent Will to Destroy* for philosophers, and *War and Civilization* for scholars. Volumes of personal experiences sold well. Among them was an account of daring sabotage by a former zipper salesman, and the dramatic story of the Martyrdom of Thrang.

War eliminated a thousand old institutions and unburdened the people of the heavy hand of tradition. War demonstrated clearly that everything was as temporary as a match-flash except Art and Man, because cities, buildings, parks, vehicles, hills, museums, monuments were as whispers of dust after the bombers had gone.

Among the proletariat, the prevailing opinion was voiced by Zun, who was quoted as saying at a war plant party, "Well, there ain't nothin' in the stores I can buy. But I never made so much money in my life!"

In the universities, professors boned up on the subject in order to fit themselves for Chairs of War that were sure to be endowed. All they had to do was wait until the recent crop of war profiteers were taxed into becoming philanthropists, or driven to it by the sense of guilt that the books assured them they would feel.

Armies grew. Soldiers learned to paint, salute, curse, appreciate home cooking, play poker, and fit themselves in every way for the post-war civilian life. They broadened themselves with travel and got a welcome vacation from home and hearth.

War, the Malans agreed, was certainly one of the cleverest of Earth institutions and as educational as it was entertaining.

"Nope," Beliakoff was saying, "you wouldn't like Ran-hachi Prison, not one little bit. It's on Mercury, you know, in the twilight zone. You blister by day and you freeze by night. Only two men have escaped from Ran-hachi in the last hundred years, and one of them figured his curve wrong and flipped into Sol."

"What about the other one?" Kelly asked, perspiring lightly.

"His gyros fused. He was bound straight for the Coal Sack. Take him a couple of thousand years to get there, at his speed," Beliakoff finished dreamily. "No, Johnny, you wouldn't like Ran-hachi."

"Okay, okay," Kelly said. "The death penalty would be better."

"They give that only as a measure of extreme clemency," Beliakoff said with gloomy Slavic satisfaction.

"Enough! We'll straighten out Mala." There was more hope than conviction in Kelly's voice. "Thar she lies, off to starboard."

Mala was a tiny blue and brown sphere, suddenly growing larger in their screens.

Their radio blared on the emergency channel.

Kelly swore. "That's the Galactic patrol boat from Azolith. What's he doing here?"

"Blockade," said Beliakoff. "Standard practice to quarantine a planet at war. We can't touch down legally until the war's declared over."

"Nuts. We're going down." Kelly touched the controls and the freighter began to descend into the interdicted area.

"Attention, freighter!" the radio blasted. "This is the interditory ship *Moth*. Heave to and identify yourself."

Beliakoff answered promptly in the Propendium language. "Let's see 'em unscramble *that*," he said to Kelly. They continued their descent.

After a while, a voice from the patrol boat said in Propendium, "Attention, freighter! You are entering an interdicted area. Heave to at once and prepare to be boarded."

"I can't understand your vile North Propendium accent," Beliakoff bellowed, in a broad South Propendium dialect. "If you people can't speak a man's language, don't clutter up the ether with your ridiculous chatter. I know you long-haul trampers and I'll be damned if I'll give you any air, water, food, or anything else. If you can't stock that stuff like any normal, decent—"

"This area is interdicted," the patrol boat broke in, speaking now with a broad South Propendium accent.

"Hell," Beliakoff grumbled. "They've got themselves a robot linguist."

"—under direct orders from the patrol boat *Moth*. Heave to at once, freighter, and prepare to be boarded and inspected."

Beliakoff glanced at the planet looming large beneath them. He gestured at the power control to Kelly and said, "Hello! Hello! Do you read me? Your message is not coming across. Do you read me?"

"Stop or we'll fire!"

Beliakoff nodded. Kelly kicked in all the jets and they plummeted toward the surface. With his pilot's sixth sense, Kelly changed course abruptly. A blast seared past them, sealing a starboard tube for good. Then they were in the atmosphere, traveling too fast, the hull glowing red with friction. The heavy cruiser, built only for spatial maneuvering, broke off its pursuit curve.

"All right, freighter. This means your license. You gotta leave sometime."

Beliakoff shut off the radio. Kelly fired the braking jets and began to spiral in for a landing.

As they circled, Beliakoff saw the shattered rubble and ruin where cities had been. He saw highways filled with military columns, and, at the distant edge of the horizon, a fleet of military planes winging their way to a fresh target.

"What a mess!" he said. Kelly nodded glumly.

They touched down and opened the hatches. Already a crowd of Malans had gathered. A few artists had set up their easels and were busy painting the freighter, not because it was lovely, but because it was Terran, which was better.

A Malan stepped forward, grinning. "Well," he asked, "what do you think of it?"

"Of what?"

"Our war, of course. You must have noticed!"

"Oh, yes, we noticed," Beliakoff said.

"A real intercontinental war complete with ideological differences," the man stated proudly. "Just like the civilized planets have. You must admit it's Earthlike."

"Exceedingly Earthlike," Kelly said. "Now take us to whoever's in charge—quick!"

The conference with Nob at the Imperial Palace began well. The Prime Minister was overjoyed that real Earthmen had come to witness their war. He knew very well that, by Earth standards, it was a pretty small war. A beginner's war, really. But they were trying. Some day, with more know-how, with better equipment, they would be able to produce a war that would match anyone's.

"We were hampered from the start," Nob apologized, "by not knowing how to produce atomic fission."

"That must have been confining," Kelly said, and Beliakoff winced.

"It was. Dynamite and nitroglycerin just don't have the same grandeur and finality. The scale of demolition seems insignificant. But if you will come with me, gentlemen, I have something here which may interest you."

Nob ushered the Earthmen ahead of him so he could copy their loose-jointed, rolling walk.

"Here!" he said, darting ahead and opening a door. "Behold!"

The Earthmen saw, upon an ivory pedestal, a small model of an atomic bomb.

"We worked until we mastered it at last," Nob said proudly. "With any luck, we'll be in production within the month and using them within the year. Now I think I can safely say that Mala has come of age!"

Beliakoff said, "No."

"No, what?"

"No atom bombs."

"But it's Earthlike to use atomic bombs. Why—"

"This war has to end at once," Kelly said.

"You're joking!" protested Nob, looking intently at the Earthmen. But he saw at once that they were deadly serious. He groaned and sat down.

Nob was faced with a moral dilemma of fearful proportions. On the one hand, war was a typical Terran institution, an extremely important one, an institution clearly worthy of emulation by the people of Mala. But on the other hand, this Terran institution was being refuted, denied, in fact, by two typical Terrans.

The problem was insoluble for him. And Nob remembered that, when an ultimate crisis is at hand, that is the moment for the supreme authority to step in.

"We must discuss this with the Empress," he said.

He led them to Jusa's chambers, knocked and opened the door. Half a dozen vases shattered around them.

"On your knees, pigs!" Jusa shrieked. "You, Nob, have you brought the diamonds?"

"I knew I forgot something."

"Forgot them! Then how dare you show your face?" Jusa stamped her small foot. "And these peasants—who are they? I've a good mind to lock them up, especially that grinning red-headed ape."

Kelly's grin became a trifle strained.

"These are *Earthmen*, Your Majesty," Nob said. "Genuine Earthmen!"

"Really?" breathed Jusa.

"Really," said Nob.

"Oh, golly," Jusa said, losing all her painfully acquired imperial pose and becoming a frightened, albeit lovely, young girl.

"Your Majesty—" Beliakoff began.

"Just call me Jusa. My gosh! Real Earthmen! I never met a real Earthman before. I wish you had let me know in advance. My hair—"

"Is beautiful, just like yourself," Kelly said.

"I'm so glad. I think *your* hair is beautiful, too."

Kelly turned brick-red. "You're not supposed to say that, you know."

"I *didn't* know," Jusa said. "But I'm willing to learn. What should I have—"

"Excuse me," Beliakoff broke in sourly. "Your Majesty, we've come to ask you to stop the war."

"You don't mean it!" Jusa turned bewilderedly to Kelly.

"Have to do it, honey," Kelly said softly. "You folks just aren't ready for a war yet."

Jusa's eyes flashed and she began to regain a little of her imperial pose. "But of course we are! Look at what we've done. Go over our battlefields, look at our cities, interrogate our refugees. You'll find that everything has been done in strict accordance with the rules. We're as ready for war as anyone!"

"I'm sorry, you'll have to stop it," Beliakoff said, and Kelly nodded his agreement.

Jusa gave Nob a beseeching look, but the Prime Minister averted his eyes. The dilemma was there again, enormous, insurmountable, and squarely on Jusa's shoulders. To stop the war now

would be Unearthlike; to refuse the Earthmen was unthinkable.

"I just don't know," Jusa said. She looked at Kelly, who wore the guilty expression of a man caught murdering a fawn. Then she burst into tears and collapsed on a couch.

Nob and the Earthmen looked at each other, made several helpless gestures, and left.

"What now?" Beliakoff asked, in the corridor. "Do you think she'll stop the war?"

Nob shrugged his shoulders. "Who knows? It's a problem without a solution."

"But she has to make up her mind," Kelly said. "That's one of the duties of authority."

"The Empress is aware of that. And she *will* make up her mind, though it could take a year or more. Unless she fails completely under the strain."

"Poor kid," Kelly said. "She needs a man to help her out."

"Indeed she does," Nob agreed hastily. "A strong man, a wise man, a man who could guide her and be as adviser and husband to her."

Kelly blinked, then laughed nervously. "Don't look at me! I mean she's a cute kid, nice girl, make some man a wonderful wife, but I'm not the marrying kind, you know what I mean?"

"Johnny," said Beliakoff, "I'd like to have a serious talk with you."

Nob led them to a vacant room and left discreetly.

"I won't do it!" Kelly declared bluntly.

"You have to," Beliakoff said. "You got us into this mess. Now you can marry us out."

"No!"

"She'd make a wonderful wife," Beliakoff quoted Kelly's words back at him. "Docile, pretty, but spirited. What more could you ask?"

"Freedom of choice," Kelly said grimly.

"That's for adolescents."

"Speaking."

"She'll never be able to make up her mind to stop the war unless you marry her. Until the war ends, that interdictory ship is going to sit in orbit, waiting for us. You haven't anything to lose," Beliakoff added.

"I haven't?"

"Not a thing. It's a big galaxy and our freighter is always waiting."

"That's true..." Kelly admitted.

Ten minutes later, Beliakoff dragged him into the corridor. They were joined by Nob, who ushered them back to the Empress's chambers.

"It's okay by me if it's okay by you, kid," Kelly blurted out, in a tone that made Beliakoff shudder and made Nob smile in outright hero-worship.

"What is all right?" Jusa asked.

"Marriage," Kelly said. "What d'ya say?"

Jusa studied his face for several seconds. "But do you love me?"

"Give it time, kid! Give it time!"

Jusa must have seen something in his expression, something behind the embarrassment and anger. Very softly she said, "I will be most happy to marry you."

It was a double-ring ceremony and authentically Terran. Beliakoff produced a Bible from the freighter and the ancient words of the Earth ceremony were read. When it was over, Kelly, grinning, perspiring, nervously rubbing his hands together, turned to his bride.



"Now stop the war, honey."

"Yes, dear," Jusa said dutifully. She heaved a great sigh.

"What's wrong?" Kelly asked.

"I just tremble to think of our cities being bombed out of existence and us not able to do anything about it because we've stopped fighting."

"What are you talking about? If we stop fighting—"

"*They* won't!" she said. "Why should they? It's Earthlike to continue conquering, and if we quit fighting, there'll be nothing to stop them from conquering us completely."

"Nob!" Kelly shouted. "Igor! What can we do about this?"

Nob said, "There would appear to be only one certain solution. I can arrange a meeting for you—" he turned to Beliakoff—"with Lanvi, the President of the Allies."

"What would I say to him?" asked Beliakoff.

"To her," Nob corrected. "You can say, I suppose, the same sort of thing your friend said."

Beliakoff, ashy pale, started to back away. Kelly caught him in one meaty fist. "Okay, Mr. Fixer. Your duty is plain. Marry us out of trouble."

"But I've got a girl friend in Minsk—"

"She forgot you years ago. Stop squirming, buddy."

"What does she look like?" Beliakoff queried in apprehension.

"*Very* pretty," Nob said.

During the double-ring ceremony, Beliakoff peered at his bride with cautious approval. Lanvi was indeed a pretty girl and she seemed to possess the Malan virtues of obedience, patience and fire.

As soon as the final words were spoken, the war was declared officially over. Peace, an authentic Earth custom, was proclaimed.

"Now the real work begins," Beliakoff said. "First, we'll need a list of the casualties."

"The what?" Nob asked.

"Casualties."

"I'm not sure I understand," said the Prime Minister.

"Casualties! The number of people killed in the warfare."

"Now wait a moment," Nob said, his voice trembling. "Do I understand you correctly? Are you trying to tell me that civilized people kill people in their wars? *Do you mean that they leave people in the cities they bomb?*"

Kelly looked at Beliakoff. Beliakoff looked at Kelly.

"Lord, Lord," murmured Kelly.

Beliakoff merely gulped.

"Is it possible?" asked Nob. "Do civilized people really—"

"Of course not," said Beliakoff.

"Never," Kelly said.

Nob pursed his lips. "I've been wanting to ask a real authority, a genuine Earthman, some questions on the subject. Our texts were by no means complete and some parts we couldn't understand at all. Like the matter of determining victories. That's something we couldn't figure out. We decided you must use a complicated system of umpires. It was too much for us, so we built a bunker in no man's land and put a man from each side in it. They tossed coins to determine whose turn it was. The winning side would bomb an enemy city. After the occupants had been evacuated, of course."

"Of course," said Beliakoff.

"It worked out rather well with the coins," Nob said. "Law of averages, in fact."

"Substantially our system," said Kelly.

"Just the way we do it," Beliakoff added.

"A few more questions, if you please," Nob said. "Jusa, would you bring in the big *War Encyclopedia*?"

Jusa and Lanvi had been gossiping on the other side of the room. They hurried out and returned with the great book.

"Now here," Nob said, opening the volume, "it seems to imply—"

"Wait," Beliakoff broke in. He took the book from Nob's hands and flipped through it rapidly, then turned to Kelly. In a whisper, he said in Propendium, "It looks as though Kyne blotted out all references to killing."

"Sure!" exclaimed Kelly, brightening. "I told you he was a hemophiliac—a bleeder. Naturally, he'd cut out every single mention of bloodshed!"

"This point—" Nob began.

"Later," Beliakoff said. "Right now, we'd like to get a few articles from our spaceship." He winked at Kelly, who winked back. "It won't take a moment and then we'll be only too happy to—"

"Oh, dear," said Nob. "You mean you *wanted* the spaceship?"

"What?"

"Well, I assumed that you'd have no further use for it. Metal is hard to get nowadays and it seemed only proper to erect heroic statues to both of you, the men who brought the institution of peace to Mala. Did I do something wrong?"

"Not at all, not at all," Kelly said. "Oh, not at all. Perfectly delighted. Not at—"

"Johnny!" said Beliakoff.

"Sorry," Kelly apologized, a broken man.

The brides stepped forward to claim their husbands.

Peace and prosperity came to Mala, under the deft guidance of their Terran leaders. In time, spaceships arrived and departed, but neither man showed any particular desire to board one, for their wives—docile, patient, yet fiery—proved more appealing than the lonely far reaches of space.

Beliakoff sometimes pondered the opportune melting down of their freighter. He was never able to discover who had signed the order. But all Mala knew the saying, "An Earthman is easy to catch, but hard to hold." He wondered whether that had been the true reason behind the order to scrap the ship.

By this time, of course, he didn't really care; if his wife or Kelly's had been responsible, it was all the more reason to feel appreciated.

Nob knew the answer, but he had other things on his mind. He lay awake, restless, until his wife asked worriedly what was wrong.

"I've been wondering," he said. "Those war books that the Earthmen had us turn in—I never did understand why all those deletions were made. You know, the ones that made us figure out a way of deciding which side won."

"But the Earthmen said they used the very same system," she reminded him. "And they wouldn't lie, would they?"

"They would, if it was for our good. That's what is known as diplomacy, dear. Statesmanship. Or

politics. Interchangeable terms."

She looked impressed. "Oh. And?"

"I've tried to question the crews of ships that land here. The answers are so evasive that I can't help thinking—"

"Yes, dear?" she prompted.

"—that civilized people actually *kill* each other in wars."

She turned a shocked face toward him. "How can you think such a thing? What would be the advantage?"

"Advantage?" he repeated. Then his expression cleared and he fell back on his pillow, completely relaxed. "I hadn't thought of that, dear. None, of course. It would really be *too* much, wouldn't it?"

"No question of it, dear," she said. "Now that that's settled, can you go to sleep?"

There was no answer. He was already snoring peacefully.

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