

SHOTGUN WEDDING

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Stil Bek, Sector Controller of the Planetary Occupation Service, could tell a real mess when he saw one. With the impressions of jangling confusion still fresh in his mind, he clasped hands in the inner office with Kife, the Initial Penetration Commander. Stil noted Kife's feverish grip and glittering eye as Kife turned to point to a blond wood cabinet with a twenty-eight inch screen.

"With that," said Kife, "I will throw them into total chaos. When I get through, there won't be a sound mind or a stable government left on the planet. Watch."

Kife twisted a knob on the side of the cabinet. On the screen, floors and lighted rooms slid past, as if they looked into a building with one outside wall removed. Amidst a multitude of innocent scenes, Kife paused to show violent arguments, wild drinking parties, a group of people trading malicious gossip, and various couples who looked suspiciously as if they did not belong together.

Kife grinned, "Lies, backbiting, adultery, betrayal. Once a viewer sees these things on the screen, he'll watch them instead of anything else. And it's all *real*. The poison this device will spread will ruin the planet."

Stil felt his back hair prickle. "This is a scientifically advanced planet, Kife. Isn't this a dangerous device to release here? There isn't a world in the Galactic Combine where we'd dare to do this."

Kife didn't seem to hear him. "I've got the distribution problem whipped, too." He spread out a big map that showed the planet's western hemisphere surrounded by ocean, and ringed by selected parts of other continents. Large gray areas dotted in red and green were scattered over the map.

"The gray areas," said Kife, "are population centers. The green dots represent legitimate merchants. If the local governments block those, I've got black-market contacts set up—those are the red dots."

Stil felt the edge of the map with a finger to see if by any chance it wasn't all unfolded. "What about the rest of the planet?"

"I'll hit that later. First, I'll throw this western half into chaos and create a power vacuum. When the other bloc on the planet moves in to take over, there'll be confusion. Then I'll slip large numbers of the device into their territory. Since they work even more by secrecy and deceit, it will wreck them, too." He snapped his fingers. "Oh, yes, there's something else I wanted to show you."

He punched a button on his desk. The door flew open, and a quivering subordinate popped in. Kife scribbled on a pad, ripped off the top sheet, and thrust it out to the subordinate, who scurried out and was back shortly with a folded bundle of paper covered with printing.

"This," said Kife, "is what the locals call a 'newspaper.'" He snapped it open to a big ad headed:

ALL DOORS ARE OPEN

—WHEN YOU OWN AN RTV!

Beneath this was a picture of a family gathered reverently about an oversized screen that showed a circle

of men and women in formal clothes.

Stil, who had learned the language in a hurry as his ship hurtled him through space to this planet, understood only snatches of the main body of the ad. But he could read enough to get the idea:

". . . What will ordinary TV *do* for you? . . . Just the same old shows, endlessly repeated . . . But suppose you could touch the magic knob and go anywhere . . . view real life anywhere in the world, in all its surging passion and variety . . . Uncensored! . . . Now, by a miracle of modern science . . . the dream of the ages comes true . . . And better yet, once you own an RTV, it shields you so no outsider can snoop into *your* home . . . Free from prying . . . exercise your healthy urge for reality, unafraid . . . Low, low down payment . . . See us soon."

Stil took a deep breath. "How soon are you planning to distribute the device?"

A look of proud achievement appeared on Kife's face. When he spoke, the words rang in Stil's ears like a sentence of doom.

"I've done it," said Kife.

Stil got some more details from Kife, then left the room in a kind of stupor. A nervous orderly guided Stil to a windowless private room and bath. Stil locked the door and glanced around. He was realizing, as he had in tight spots before, what a fortunate thing it was that the Galactic Combine had means of fast and secret communication. It might be too late for him to do anything, but he could warn others, so the situation might yet be gotten under control. Stil snapped off the room light, and lay down on the bed. He relaxed, and gradually quieted his thoughts. As his mind became calm, the faint hiss of the implanted transceiver grew louder, till it was like the whistle of steam from a tea kettle in a quiet room. Within the whistle, he could hear faint variations, which gradually became more distinct, and then formed words:

"Hello? Stil? . . . Come in, please . . . "

Stil formed a reply in his mind, and heard the words as clearly as if he spoke. "Right here, Dinal."

"Thank heaven. Have you reached 26JB3?—'Earth', as its inhabitants call it?"

"I'm there right now."

"Is it as bad as we thought?"

"Worse. Kife has actually put the sets on the market. Better than eight hundred were sold before I got here, with heavy advance publicity. There are hundreds of thousands more in stores and warehouses scattered over half the planet. We can't squash this now."

There was a silence, then Dinal said, "We notified the Chief."

"What happened?"

"The worst. He didn't explode. He just sent out for the whole file. Meanwhile, he's had no lunch, and no dinner. He's just working through his files. About six hours from now, he'll have the whole picture. He'll also be in a foul mood. Then the heads will really fly."

Stil grunted.

Dinal said, "What are you planning to do?"

"I'm still worn out from that conference on Tikra IV. I got here by ultrafast spacer, under maximum

boost, and my control ship hasn't caught up yet. Until it does, I'm going to catch up on sleep."

"You must have iron nerves. Well, good luck."

"Thanks. Good luck to you."

The words faded into an unvarying whistle that died away to silence as Stil lay back, thinking.

In his mind's eye, he could see for a moment the great sweep of the Galactic Combine, holding its thousands of wide-flung planets in unified control. Stil saw his own sector as part of a huge pattern that constantly expanded as scout ships spotted new planets, and penetration teams moved in to study the local life forms, spot their weak points, and subtly introduce a new factor that would set the native populace at each other's throats and make the way easy for later exploitation and integration into the Combine.

Each planet, Stil thought, offered its own challenge. But planets of the type of this "Earth" were particularly tricky. Already split into hostile, scientifically alert factions, they were accustomed to stress, strain, and upheaval, as regular conditions of life. This meant that the disrupting factor had to be selected with care, and subtly introduced at just the right place and time. Otherwise, the planet might erupt into an outburst that would all but blow it to bits, thus losing it for the Combine. Or, the suspicion of outside interference might actually unify the warring factions overnight. All sorts of pitfalls lay in the path of the penetration teams on this type of planet. The strain on the penetration commander was particularly intense. Occasionally, a commander broke, lost contact with reality, slanted his reports according to his private delusions, and was not found out till the catastrophe happened. Then there was real trouble. Just as there was right now.

Stil decided there was no use thinking of it. He got up, washed, lay down again, and soon fell into an exhausted sleep.

Stil woke very early the next morning, the whistle loud in his head. As he held his attention on it, the voice grew clear, and he realized it was not Dinal this time, but Jad, his emergency controller. Jad's characteristic sourness came through clearly.

"Come in," said Jad. "Come in, Stil . . ."

"Right here. Where are you?"

"We've got the ship as close off planet as we can without being spotted. You want the first summaries now, or shall I wait till you come up?"

"Go ahead now." Stil blanked his mind.

Jad's voice said, "The history of the place seems about as we expected. Here's a reconstruction based on the data so far."

On the globe, light lines snaked over mountains and plains, to show the boundaries of nations and racial groups. As each boundary was completed, a voice spoke briefly, saying "Greece, Carthage, Rome, India." With each name Stil saw in a flash the characteristic national traits and habits, the more outstanding attitudes being symbolized by special shades of color, which gradually shifted over the globe as the armies marched and races migrated.

Brief flashes of light marked the inventions of new methods and devices, and Stil saw the effects of these in long-term processes that gradually gathered momentum.

The outward shifts of power now became more rapid, and accelerated into a series of violent upheavals that exploded and regathered till they locked into two huge power groups where the flow of colors brightened and intensified, and vast potential changes seemed to quiver on the verge of reality.

Stil held his breath, waiting. Then Jad's voice said, "At this point, Kife appeared on the scene. He found that one nation, the United States, had many immigrated minority groups still speaking the languages of their mother countries. Kife decided to carry out the initial language training in the United States, where living conditions were good, and where he'd have his men fairly well together. This worked, as far as language-teaching was concerned. Unfortunately, Kife's men also picked up the philosophy and attitudes of the place where they were living. Then Kife sent teams of them to places like the Soviet Union and China."

On the big globe, there flared into life here and there, a shade of color that contrasted glaringly with the color around it. Most of this new color was instantly snuffed out. But scattered fragments survived stubbornly. In the region called China, one began to enlarge like the vortex of a hurricane. It drew in and overpowered the color around it. It grew larger and larger. In the neighboring Soviet Union, the prevailing color wavered, then intensified. Bright lines arced out toward China. In a series of violent nuclear explosions, the transplanted color flared, broke into fragments, and finally died away. This same shade intensified sharply around the globe in the United States.

"That," said Jad, "was what they call 'the twenty-eight days' in China. The result has been to create terrific new tensions within each power bloc. At the same time both are shaken by the ferocity of what happened. This business seems to be what ruined Kife. A number of Kife's men, incidentally, were captured and brutally tortured. In the process, their implanted transceivers were found. The eastern bloc now thinks this means a fantastic scientific breakthrough by the western bloc. The eastern scientists are working on it day and night. At the same time, agents of the western bloc are reporting this to their superiors, who *know* the stuff wasn't theirs."

Stil drew in a deep breath. "Any reports on those sets Kife has distributed?"

"Not many. We've been concentrating on the background material I just showed you. But I think I can give you a few typical reactions."

The blue-and-green globe vanished. In quick succession, Stil saw a series of scenes: 1) A knot of wide-eyed men clutched beer cans as they huddled around a screen where a shapely woman slid a sweater over her head. 2) A group of tough but cheerful-looking men took copious notes as they watched bank officials methodically lock the vault for the day. 3) A poorly dressed man and woman shook their heads and grinned at each other as they watched an expensively dressed man and woman go through a savage quarrel on a big screen. 4) A man in a blue uniform with a microphone close by watched other men in blue fan out and approach the rear of a store adjoining a bank building. 5) A big cabinet sat with a blank screen by a bench, the works from inside the cabinet spread out on top of the bench with two men squinting at them, one of whom turned to the other and said, "Like hell we made it, Fred. And the Russkies didn't either."

The scenes faded out. Jad said, "We'll have a lot more for you later on. This seems to be typical for right now. The only other items of note are that several of these sets are on their way by fast plane to other nations, and the United States has slapped a ban on further sale of the sets in their own country. Whether the ban will last, I don't know."

Stil lay silent a moment, thinking. "How does it strike you this will develop from now on?"

"Like lightning."

"That's what I think. We may need force here, and plenty of it."

"There's a single shock group coming on the run. It's all we can expect till that business on Aret VI is stamped out."

Stil nodded. "Well, get in touch with me as soon as you have a good sampling of later reactions to the device. I'm going to stay till morning and get a first-hand impression of the atmosphere here. I'll be up shortly afterward."

Stil thought over what he'd learned, then went back to sleep. He was awakened shortly after sunrise by the tingling of his alarm watch. He washed, dressed quickly, and went out into the corridor.

He went into Kife's outer office, and found half the office staff trying to look busy, while the other half huddled in little groups over the reports, and quarreled about how to present them to Kife. The door to Kife's office was tightly shut. Stil took a look around, then left word that he was going back to his ship.

He entered one of the booths under the building, held his tab to the scanning slot in its wall, and waited. He had time for his usual twinge of dread at the thought of his body transmuted to electromagnetic waves, bounced from transmitter to relay to relay to receiver, and reassembled again far way. Then the walls of the booth seemed to jump slightly. Stil opened the door and stepped out in the sector control ship, *Co-ordinator*.

Stil walked down the corridor, glanced briefly into busy offices, nodded to hurrying aides, and turned in at a doorway marked "Emergency Control." Several minor officials sprang to attention, and ushered him through a huge room filled with screens, big three-dimensional charts, rows of uniformed men and women at desks and files, and a long curving bank of communications booths with people entering and leaving. In the center of this maze sat a long-limbed man in a swivel chair within a wide, ring-shaped desk. He wore a light headset and a pained look as he stabbed buttons of coded shapes and colors set in sloping banks atop the desk. He glanced up as Stil crossed the floor, and waved a hand in greeting. A section of the desk slid back, and Stil stepped through.

"How is it?" said Stil.

"Terrible," said Jad. "Here, take a look." He handed Stil another headset. As Stil slid it on, he found himself looking at several men in a small room with a couple of flags standing against the wall. Two of the men were standing tensely beside chairs, one was at the edge of the desk, and the other was standing with his head tilted slightly forward, his left hand at his chin. This man looked up, and nodded.

"All right. Go ahead. There's a certain risk involved, but we'll have to take it." The room emptied in a rush.

Stil took off the headset. "What was that?"

Jad looked up. "The President of the United States deciding to lift the ban on RTV sets. Did that look like chaos or panic to you?"

Stil shook his head gloomily. "Any other developments?"

"Well, if there's a technical nation on this planet that hasn't got several of the sets apart by now, I don't know where it is."

"Any disorders?"

"A number of fist fights, so far. A few minor shooting incidents. Nothing big. The trouble is, the local

police departments got the sets, too, so they're in a position to break up most of the big trouble before it has a chance to get started."

Stil nodded. "The way it's turning out, I can't see anything to do but wait and hope. We might get the kind of chaos we can use. But I don't expect it."

"Me either. This is going to be a job for the troops."

A few moments later, Stil went to his own office, had breakfast sent in, and got started on the accumulated problems of Sector government. Shortly before lunch, he caught the faint varying inward whistle that told him someone was trying to reach him.

"Hello, Stil?"

"Right here, Dinal."

"Where are you?"

"Back on the ship."

"Anything new?"

"The situation's getting more out of hand, as we expected. But it's too soon to be sure what will happen next."

"What are you planning to do?"

"We're going to wait. It's all we can do. Kife's distribution of the sets seems to be going smoothly. There's still a remote chance things will work out as he predicts. If we were to pull him out now, there would be a lapse in authority down there that might ruin what little chance remains. If worst comes to worst . . . well, we've got troops coming."

Dinal was silent a moment. Then he said, "I hope it works out. This business, right on the heels of that mess on Aret VI, over in Noral's sector, has the Chief in quite a state."

Stil shook his head. They gloomily wished each other luck, then Stil sent out for lunch, and turned to a report from Jad: "Here's the latest, such as it is: Abortive riot in New York, First Privacy League being formed in Boston. Stupefaction in Moscow over design of the set. Peiping warns it has established a no-viewing boundary thirty miles offshore. By actual count, incidentally, there are at this moment seven hundred eighty-two sets focused on China, and several of these sets are in Moscow. This latest survey still shows no tendency that might develop into anything useful to us."

This feeling lasted from one day to the next as the situation on the planet wavered, but refused to collapse into chaos. He immersed himself in routine work punctuated by brief reports from Jad. Among the many reports, some stood out:

"So far, eighty-six murders, one hundred seventeen holdups, eight suicides, and nine hundred sixty-five arrests traceable to RTV sets."

"Uproar in the United Nations over American display of sets focused on Hungary, Tibet, a prison in Moscow, and assorted horrors inside China. Soviet Union Purchasing Commission is now shipping sets home in wholesale lots.

"American display of sets in Moscow showing typical United States workers' homes. Rival Russian

display of massed sets across the street focused on assortment of United States slums, ghost towns, and economically-depressed areas—also labeled 'typical United States workers' homes.'

"Scattered acts of assault due to overexcitement on part of viewers. Various ineffectual bills in national legislatures to restrict use of sets."

Stil now received word of a new outbreak on Aret VI. The shock group racing toward Earth was turned around and sent rushing back in the opposite direction. Stil fired off angry messages to no avail, then called Jad.

"I know," said Jad. "By the time they get back to Aret, the trouble will be over. After all that time under full boost, the shock group will be right back where it started from. Next, new orders will come down for them to rush here under all possible boost. The troops will get here one hundred per cent overdue and so worn out they'll be worthless. The staff orders men around as if the central matter transform network were already stretched out over the whole universe."

"What's Kife doing now?"

"Getting ready to release a damper attachment that will cut out interference. Then people will be able to view other people even if those others have sets installed. Without the troops to back us up, it looks to me like our last chance; but I don't have any great hopes for it."

Stil nodded, then went back to work. He had the sensations of a man fighting a fire in his own back yard, and seeing the fire equipment rush directly past and vanish into the distance. As the days passed, new reports increased his uneasiness:

"Sets now widespread, sold all over the western bloc nations, and imported in huge quantities into the eastern bloc, largely to disrupt western reception."

"Kife is now marketing his interference damper in hopes people will be infuriated by sight of others invading their privacy."

"Extensive snooping has now convinced each big power bloc that the other did not originate the viewer. Both are now trying to find out who did."

"Damper is not having its expected effect. There is widespread anger over loss of privacy, but most violence is directed at sellers of dampers. As people using viewers are not generally interested in viewing other people using viewers, little trouble comes from that. Worse yet, there seems to be a considerable sprinkling of people who go their way regardless of viewers. The evident peace of mind of these people is starting to generate a certain amount of imitation, which is extremely bad from our viewpoint."

"A number of American and Russian viewers are now talking direct to each other on damper-equipped sets, using signs or interpreters to trade views, and meanwhile picking up each other's languages. Many violent disagreements; but what I don't like is, they are finding too many common interests. Too much mutual admiration is going on. If the leaders of the western and eastern blocs should stop being afraid of each other and start looking around for a new enemy, then we'll have the galloping nightmare after us."

Stil wiped his brow. He went to see Jad, and found him looking exceptionally sour.

"Listen," said Stil, "where are those troops now?"

"Just starting out again from Aret VI. Naturally, they won't get here in time."

"There are so many research groups and private individuals working on sets down there that we can't

monitor them all. One of them has evidently discovered a built-in block in the sets. Now the block is a block no more. It used to jam reception, to keep Kife's underground headquarters out of view. But now we discover no less than eight sets tuned in on Kife and his headquarters. Pretty soon, they'll spot his various local branches, too."

Stil took a deep breath. "That ends it. Order Kife to evacuate."

"Kife has cracked up."

"Then put someone else in charge and bundle Kife out of there."

Jad shrugged and held out a spare headset. "Here, take a look."

Stil frowned, and settled the set on his head. A scene flared up before him. He recognized Kife's outer office, the screens untended, the office staff reeling around with half-empty bottles, or huddled around blankets to rattle little cups from which small, black-dotted white cubes shot out.

Stil took off the headset and said angrily, "We've *got* to get them and their records out of there. We'll have to use the ship's crew and guards, and we'd better get together as many volunteers as we can lay hands on."

Stil watched the forced evacuation on a big screen that showed Kife's headquarters in cross-section. The situation was made tense by the arrival aboveground of a monster earth auger on a huge truck trailer, followed by a motorized convoy bristling with American troops. While Stil tensely watched his men hustle Kife and his drunken crew into the matter transmitters, the gigantic auger rose up into drilling position.

Stil watched the auger eat into the ground. He stared at the discharged dirt piling up rapidly, and raised his microphone. "Never mind carrying out these files," he ordered. "Slag everything room by room and get out."

The men went from door to door, using guns on wide beam to destroy files and equipment.

The auger ate a big hole down to the top of the building with uncanny accuracy, then pulled out of the way. Two trucks trundled over carrying a metal frame between them, and stopped so the frame was right over the hole. From the frame, ropes and chain ladders with pipe crosspieces dropped into the hole, along with a cable bearing electric-light bulbs at intervals. Several long lines of troops wound over to the hole and started down, the lightly armed ones dropping fast down the ropes, the heavily-laden ones using the ladders.

Stil mopped his forehead. While his men were finishing up on the bottom floor, Earth troops were dropping in on the top floor. The end came in an exchange of ricocheting bullets and searing lines of light. An instant after Stil's men were through the matter transmitters, explosive packets were sent back the other way and blew the transmitters to pieces. But despite Stil's hardest effort, he was too late in reaching some of Kife's local branches.

When it was all over, Stil felt drugged from nervous strain and fatigue.

An aide now hurried over. "A call at Communications Booth I, sir."

Stil went to the booth, stepped in, and shut the door. The booth darkened, and a full-length screen flared to life. Directly before him stood a man in a neat dark suit, who now spoke in a low, hoarse voice.

"Every move you have made in the last hour, I have watched."

Stil forced himself to say, "Yes, sir."

"The net result of this operation is a disaster."

"Yes, sir."

"You may be interested to know what happened to the officer who sent Shock Group 68 back and forth through space to no purpose."

The screen flickered. Directly before Stil, a body hung on a rope.

The screen flickered again. Stil stiffened his knees. The low rough voice said, "Intelligent work is rewarded. Incompetence is punished."

"Yes, sir."

The screen went blank.

Stil swallowed. He mopped his brow and drew a deep breath. He stepped out of the booth, and the presence of people hustling about normally in the room surprised him. He stopped at Jad's desk. Jad had a screen set up before him, and motioned to Stil to take a look.

The screen was divided to show two scenes, each of a man in a laboratory jacket, standing before another screen with a disassembled viewer before him. Each man appeared on the other's screen. One held up a wire leading into a maze of circuits. The other nodded, drew rapidly on a pad, and held it up. The first man beamed, and pointed to part of another disassembled set.

Stil said, "What's *that*?"

"A couple of Earth's leading scientists in happy collaboration. They don't talk the same language—but nevertheless, they just got an idea to extend the range of these sets. I was hoping they wouldn't hit on that technique for a hundred years."

"Extend the range?" said Stil. "Extend it *how far*?"

"They can reach from here almost to Aret VI, if they gang enough of those sets together."

Stil stood motionless as the meaning of this sank in.

Jad said, "If they set up relays at intervals, as we do, there is no theoretical limit. But even without that, they can reach a long, long distance."

"And transmission is practically instantaneous?"

"Yeah."

Stil nodded wearily, "Meanwhile, they have a heavily-populated planet geared for maximum production, already verging on space flight, requiring only a common enemy to channel their efforts, and a little more technical know-how to make them deadly. This place could make Aret VI look like a vacation. How long till those troops get here?"

"About fifteen days. They'll be in bad shape, of course, because they'll have traveled, all-told, a total of twice the distance under maximum boost, with hardly any rest at all."

"Any chance of reinforcements?"

"If Aret VI doesn't erupt again—which is problematical—we might get some from there. From anywhere else, the transportation problem is pretty tough."

"All right," said Stil. "Tell me if what I say is true. If we try to suppress this planet in its present state, using a comparative handful of worn-out troops, all we'll do is unite them permanently, and set them going on feverish preparation for interstellar war."

"Right."

"On the other hand, if we stay here and do nothing, they'll complete their long-range sets, spot us, go over our ship from one end to the other, record everything they see, and finish up with enough technical knowledge to build a fleet of their own."

"Right again. In fact, it will take so long for us to get out of range, that they'll probably do that."

"And then they'll be in a position to send shiploads of troops and viewers to Aret VI, for instance, and create a horrible situation.

"Or, if, to keep them from learning our secrets we blow this ship and everything in it, including ourselves, to little bits, that will temporarily unhinge the government of the whole sector, because all the plans, records, and strands of control are centered in this ship."

Jad nodded sourly. "Yeah. And with the unrest resulting from this Aret business, a lapse in sector government right now could be deadly. What is there left to do?"

Stil said sourly, "Practice smiling."

It was a week later that the big tender from the giant control ship landed on the planet. As the ramp slid down, and Stil stepped out, the cheering crowds waved and threw their hats in the air. A big loudspeaker boomed out a continuous commentary, of which Stil was able to make out occasional fragments:

". . . Our galactic friends . . . wise and beneficent elder race from beyond the stars . . . bearer of wonderful gifts of science . . . partners . . . despite temporary unfortunate misunderstanding . . . one-hundred year trade treaty and mutual non-aggression pact . . . "

Stil beamed with determined friendliness as the leader of United Earth pumped his hand.

It seemed to Stil that the Earth leader ought decently to have waited a little longer before thrusting out his pen for Stil to sign the trade treaty.

But Stil was careful to smile and sign with no delay.

After all, a lot of eyes were watching him.