

Iadrubel Vire glanced over the descriptive documents thoughtfully.

"A promising world. However, considering the extent of the Earthmen's possessions, and the size of their Space Force, one hesitates to start trouble."

Margash Grele bowed deferentially.

"Understood, Excellency. But there is a significant point that we have just discovered. We have always supposed this planet was a part of their Federation. It is not. It is *independent*."

Vire got his two hind ripping claws up onto their rest.

"Hm-m-m ... How did we come by this information?"

"One of their merchant ships got off-course, and Admiral Arvast Nade answered the distress signal." Grele gave a bone-popping sound, signifying wry humor. "Needless to say, the Earthmen were more distressed after the rescue than before."

Vire sat up.

"So, contrary to my specific instructions, Nade has given the Earthmen pretext to strike at us?"

"Excellency, restraint of the kill-instinct requires high moral development when dealing with something as helpless as these Earthmen. Nade, himself, did not take part in the orgy, of course, but he was unable to restrain his men. It was the Earthlings' fault, because they were not armed. If they had been in full battle armor, with their tools of war—Well, who wants to crack his claws on a thing like that? But they presented themselves as defenseless offerings. The temptation was too great."

"Were the Earthmen aware of the identity of the rescue craft?"

Grele looked uneasy.

"Admiral Nade feared some trap, and ... ah ... undertook to forestall treachery by using an Ursoid recognition signal."

Vire could feel the scales across his back twitch. This fool, Nade, had created out of nothing the possibility of war with both Earth *and* Ursa.

Vire said shortly, "Having given the Ursoid recognition signal, the Earthmen naturally would not be prepared. Therefore Nade would naturally be unable to restrain his men. So, what—"

Grele gave his bone-grinding chuckle, and suddenly Vire saw it as amusement at the ability of Nade to disobey Vire's orders, and get away with it.

Vire's right-hand battle-pincer came up off its rest, his manipulators popped behind his bony chest armor, three death-dealing stings snicked into position in his left-hand battle pincer—

Grele hurtled into a corner, all claws menacingly thrust out, but screaming, "Excellency, I meant no offense! Forgive my error! I mean only respect!"

"Then get to the point! Let's have the facts!"

Grele said in a rush, "Admiral Nade saved several Earthlings, to question them. They saw him as their protector, and were frank. It seems the Earthmen on this planet have a method for eliminating war-like traits from their race, and—"

"From their race on this planet alone?"

"Yes. The planet was settled by very stern religionists, who believe in total peace unless attacked. They eliminate individuals who show irrepressible warlike traits."

Vire settled back in his seat. "They believe in 'Total peace, unless attacked.' *Then* what?"

"Apparently, they believe in self-defense. A little impractical, if proper precautions have not been made."

"Hm-m-m. How did the crewmen know about this?"

"They had made many delivery trips to the planet. It seems that the Earthmen call this planet, among themselves, 'Storehouse.' The code name is given in the documents there, and it is formally named 'Faith.' But to the Earthmen, it is 'Storehouse.' "

"Why?"

"These religious Earthlings have perfected means to preserve provisions with no loss whatever. Even live animals are in some way frozen, gassed, irradiated—or somehow treated—so they are just as good

when they come out as when they went in. This is handy for shippers who have a surplus due to a temporary glut on the market, or because it's a bad year for the buyers. So, within practicable shipping distance, Storehouse does a thriving business, preserving goods from time of surplus to a time of need."

Vire absently grated his ripping claws on their rests.

"Hm-m-m ... And the basis of this process is not generally known?"

"No, sir. They have a monopoly. Moreover, they use their monopoly to enforce codes of conduct on the shippers. Shippers who employ practices they regard as immoral, or who deal in goods they disapprove of, have their storage quotas cut. Shippers they approve of get reduced rates. And they are incorruptible, since they are religious fanatics—like our Cult of the Sea, who resist the last molt, and stick to gills."

"Well, well, this *does* offer possibilities. But, would the Earthmen be willing to lose this valuable facility, even if it is not a member of their Federation? On the other hand—I wonder if the fanatics have antagonized the Earthmen as the cursed sea cult antagonizes us? That collection of righteous clams."

Grele nodded. "From what Admiral Nade learned, it certainly seems so. The crew of the distressed ship, for instance, had just had their quota cut because they had been caught 'shooting craps,' a form of gambling—while on their own ship waiting to unload."

"Yes, that sounds like it. Nade, I suppose, has his fleet in position?"

"Excellency, he chafes at the restraints."

"No doubt."

Vire balanced the possibilities.

"It is rumored that some who have attacked independent Earth-settled planets have not enjoyed the experience."

"The Earthlings would be bound to spread such rumors. But what can mere religious fanatics do against the guns of our men? The fanatics are skilled operators of a preserving plant; of what use is *that* in combat?"

Vire settled back. Either the Earthmen were truly unprepared, in which case he, Vire, would receive partial credit for a valuable acquisition; or else the Earthmen were prepared, and Nade would get such a dent in his shell that his reputation would never recover.

"All right," said Vire cheerfully, "but we must have a pretext—these religious fanatics must have delivered some insult that we want to avenge, and it must fit in with their known character. If possible, it must rouse sympathy, even, for us. Let's see ..."

Elder Hugh Phillips eyed the message dourly.

"These lobsters have their gall. Look at this."

Deacon Bentley adjusted his penance shirt to make the bristles bite in better, and took the message. He read aloud in a dry methodical voice:

" 'Headquarters, the Imperial Hatchery, Khlaftschffran'—lot of heathenish gabble there, I'll skip all that. Let's see ' ... Pursuant to the blessings of the ' ... heh ... 'fertility god Fflahvritschsvri ... Pursuant to the blessings of the fertility god, What's-His-Name, the Royal Brood has exceeded expectations this season, all praise to So-and-So, et cetera, et cetera, and exceeds the possibility of the Royal Hatchery to handle. We, therefore, favor you with the condescension of becoming for the next standard year an Auxiliary Royal Hatchery, consecrated according to the ritual of Fflahvrit ... et cetera ... and under due direction of the Imperial Priesthood, and appropriate Brood Masters, you to receive in addition to the honor your best standard payment for the service of maintaining the Royal Brood in good health, and returning same in time for the next season, undamaged by the delay, to make up the deficiency predicted by the Brood Masters. The fertility god, What's-His-Name, directs us through his Priesthood to command your immediate notice of compliance, as none of the precious Brood must be endangered by delay.' "

Deacon Bentley looked up.

"To make it short, we're supposed to store the royal lobsters for a year, is that it?"

"Evidently."

"There's no difficulty there." Bentley eyed the message coldly. "As for being consecrated according to the lobster's fertility god, *there* we part company."

Elder Phillips nodded.

"They *do* offer good pay, however."

"All worldly money is counterfeit. The only reward is in Heaven."

"Amen. But from their own heathen viewpoint, the offer is fair. Obviously, we can't accept it. But we must be fair in return, even to lobsters. We will take care of the Royal Brood, but as for their Priesthood"—he cleared his throat—"with due humility, we must decline that provision. Now, who writes the answer?"

"Brother Fry would be ideal for it."

"He's on a fast. How about Deacon Fenell?"

"No good. He went into a cell on Tuesday. Committed himself for a month."

"He did, eh? Able's boy, Wilder, would have been good at this. Too bad."

Phillips nodded.

"Unfortunately, not all can conquer their own nature. Some require grosser enemies." He sighed. "Let's see. How do we start the thing off?"

"Let's just say, 'We will put up your brood for so-and-so much per year. We decline the consecration.' That's the gist of the matter. Then we nail some diplomacy on both ends of it, dress it up a little, and there we are."

"I wish Brother Fry were here. This nonsense can eat up time. However, he's *not* here, so let's get at it."

Iadrubel Vire read the message over again intently:

From:

Central Contracting Office

Penitence City

Planet of Faith

To:

Headquarters

The Imperial Hatchery

Khlaftschiffranzitschopendisckla

Dear Sirs:

We are in receipt of your request of the 22nd instant that we put the excess of the Royal Brood in storage for a period approximating one standard year.

We agree to do this, in accord with our standard rate schedule "D" appended, suitable for nonpreferred live shipments. Kindly note that these rates apply from date of delivery to the storehouse entrance, to date of reshipment from the same point.

We regret that we must refuse your other terms, to wit:

a) Accompaniment of the shipment by priests and broodmasters.

b) Consecration to the fertility god, referred to in your communication.

In reference to a), no such accompaniment is necessary or allowed.

In reference to b), the said god, so-called, is, of course, nonexistent.

In view of the fact that your race is known to be heathen, these requests will not be held against you in determining the rate schedule, beyond placing you in the nonpreferred status.

We express our appreciation for this order, and trust that our service will be found satisfactory in every respect.

Truly yours,

Hugh Bentley  
Chief Assistant  
Central Contracting Office

Vire sat back, absently scratched his ripping claws on their rest, reached out with a manipulator, and punched a call-button.

A door popped open, and Margash Grele stepped in and bowed.

"Excellency?"

"Read this."

Grele read it, and looked up.

"These people are, as I told you, sir, like our sea cult—only worse."

"They certainly take an independent line for an isolated planet dealing with an interstellar empire—and on a sensitive subject, at that."

"Not so, Excellency. It is independent from *our* viewpoint. If you read between the lines, you can see that, for *them*, they are bent over backwards."

Vire absently squeaked the sharp tips of his right-hand battle claw together.

"Maybe. In any case, I don't think we would be quite justified by this reply in doing anything drastic. However, I think we can improve on this. Tell Nade to get his claws sharpened up, and we'll see what happens with the next message."

Hugh Phillips handed the message to Deacon Bentley.

"There seems to have been something wrong with our answer to these crabs."

"What, did we lose the order? Let's see."

Bentley's eyebrows raised.

"Hm-m-m. . . 'Due to your maligning the religious precepts of our Race, we must demand a full retraction and immediate apology . . .' When did we do that?"

"There was something about that part where we said they were heathens."

"They *are* heathens."

"I know."

"Truth is Truth."

"That is so. Nevertheless—well, Brother Fry would know how to handle this."

"Unfortunately, he is not here. Well, what to do about this?"

Phillips looked at it.

"What is there to do?"

Bentley's look of perplexity cleared away.

"True. We can't have lobsters giving us religious instruction." He looked wary. "On the other hand, we mustn't fall into the sin of pride, either."

"Here, let's have a pen." Phillips wrote rapidly, frowned, then glanced at Bentley. "How is your sister's son coming along? Her next-to-eldest?"

Bentley shook his head.

"I fear he is not meant for righteousness. He has refused to do his penances."

Phillips shook his head, then looked at what he had written. After a moment, he glanced up. "If the truth were told, some of us shaved by pretty close, ourselves. I suppose it's to be expected. The first settlers were certainly descended from a rough lot." He cleared his throat. "I am not so sure my eldest is going to make it."

Bentley caught his breath.

"Perhaps you judge too harshly."

"No. As a boy, he did not *play* marbles. He lined them up in ranks, and studied the formations. We would find him with his mother's pie plate and a pencil, holding them to observe how a space fleet in disk might destroy one in column. I have tried to . . ." Phillips cleared his throat. "Here, read this. See if you can improve it. We must be strictly honest, and must not truckle to these heathens. It would be bad for them as well as us."

"Amen, Elder. Let's see, now—"

Iadrubel Vire straightened up in his seat, reread the message, and summoned Margash Grele. Margash bowed deferentially.

"Excellency?"

"This is incredible. Read this."

Grele read aloud:

" 'Sirs: We acknowledge receipt of yours of the 28th instant, and are constrained, in all truth, to reply that you *are* heathen; that your so-called fertility god is no god at all; that your priests are at best misled, and at worst representatives of the devil; and that we can on no account tolerate priests of heathen religions on this planet. As these are plain facts, there can be no retraction and no apology, as there is no insult, but only a plain statement of truth. As a gesture of compromise, and to prove good will, we will allow one (1) brood master to accompany the shipment, provided he is not a priest of any godless 'religion,' so-called. We will not revise the schedule of charges on this occasion, but warn you plainly that this is our final offer. Truly yours ... ' "

Grele looked up blankly.

Vire said, "There is a tone to this, my dear Grele, that does not appear consistent with pacifism. Not with pacifism as *I* understand the word."

"I certainly see what you mean, sir. Nevertheless, they *are* pacifists. We have carefully checked our information."

"And we are *certain* they are not members of the Federation?"

"Absolutely certain."

"Well, there is *something* here that we do not understand. This message could not be better planned if it were a bait to draw us to the attack."

"It is certainly an insulting message, but one well suited to our purpose."

"That, too, is suspicious. Events rarely fall into line so easily."

"Excellency, they are religious fanatics. There is the explanation."

"Nevertheless, we must draw the net tighter before we attempt to take them. Such utter fearlessness usually implies either a formidable weapon, or a formidable protector. We must be certain the Federation does not have some informal agreement with this planet."

"Excellency, Admiral Nade grows impatient."

Vire's right-hand claw quivered. "We will give him the chance to do the job, once we have done ours. We must make certain we do not send our troops straight into the jaws of a trap. There is a strong Space Force fleet so situated that it *might* intervene."

General Larssen, of the Space Force, looked up from copies of the messages. "The only place in this end of space where we can store supplies with *no* spoilage, and they have to wind up in a fight with the lobsters over royal lobster eggs. And we aren't allowed to do anything about it."

"Well, sir," said Larssen's aide, "they *were* pretty insulting about it. And they've had every chance to join the Federation. It's hard to see why the Federation should take on all Crustax for them now."

" 'All Crustax,' nuts. The lobsters would back down if we'd ram a stiff note down their throat. Do we have any reply from the ... er ... 'court of last resort' on this?"

"No, sir, they haven't replied yet."

"Much as I dislike them, they don't pussyfoot around, anyway. Let's hope—"

There was a quiet rap, and Larssen looked up.

"Come in!"

The communications officer stepped in, looking serious.

"I wanted to bring you this myself, sir. The Interstellar Patrol declines to intervene, because it feels that the locals can take care of themselves."

Larssen stared. "They're a bunch of pacifists! All *they're* strong at is fighting off temptation!"

"Yes, sir. We made that point. All we got back was, 'Wait and see.' "

"Well, we tried, at least. Now we've got a ringside seat for the slaughter."

Admiral Nade was in his bunk when the top priority message came in. His aide entered the room, approached the bunk, and hesitated. Nade was completely covered up, out of sight.

The aide looked around nervously. The chief was a trifle peevish when roused out of a sound sleep.

The aide put the message on the admiral's cloak of rank on the nightstand near the bunk, retraced his steps to the hatch, opened it wide, then returned to the bunk. Hopefully, he waited, but Nade didn't stir.

The aide spoke hesitantly: "Ah ... a message, sir." Nothing happened. He tried again.

Nade didn't move.

The aide climbed over the raised lip of the catch tray, took hold of the edge of the bunk, dug several claws into the wood in his nervousness, and cautiously scratched back a little of the fine white sand. The admiral was in there *somewhere*. He scratched a little more urgently. A few smooth pebbles rattled into the tray.

Just then, he bumped something.

Claws shot up. Sand flew in all directions.

The aide fell over the edge of the tray, scabbled violently, and hurled himself through the doorway.

The admiral bellowed, "WHO DARES—"

The aide rounded corners, and shot down cross-corridors as the admiral grabbed his cloak of rank, then spotted the message.

Nade seized the message, stripped off various seals the message machine had plastered on it, growled: "The fool probably wants *more* delay." Then he tore open the lightproof envelope that guaranteed no one would see it but him, unfolded the message itself, and snarled, " ' ... received your message #4e67t3fs ... While I agree—' Bah! ' ... extreme caution is advised ... ' That clawless wonder! Let's see, what's this? ' ... Provided due consideration is given to these precautions, you are hereby authorized to carry out the seizure by force of the aforesaid planet, its occupation, its annexation, and whatever ancillary measures may appear necessary or desirable. You are, however, warned on no account to engage forces of the Federation in battle, the operation to be strictly limited to the seizure, et cetera, of the aforesaid planet. If possible, minimum damage is to be done to the planet's storage equipment, as possession of this equipment should prove extremely valuable ... ' Well, he's a hard-shell, after all! Let's see ... 'Security against surprise by Federation forces will be employed without however endangering success of the operation by undue dividing of the attacking force ... ' That doesn't hurt anything. Now, the quicker we take them, the better."

He whipped his cloak of rank around him, tied it with a few quick jerks of his manipulators, strode into the corridor, and headed for the bridge, composing an ultimatum as he went.

Elder Phillips examined the message, and cleared his throat. "We appear to have a war on our hands."

Deacon Bentley made a clucking noise. "Let's see."

Phillips handed him the message. Bentley sat back.

"Ha-hm-m-m. 'Due to your deliberately insulting references to our religion, to your slandering of our gods, and to your refusal to withdraw the insult, we are compelled to extend claws in battle to defend our honor. I hereby authorize the Fleet of Crustax to engage in lawful combat, and have notified Federation authorities as the contiguous independent power in this region that a state of war exists. Signed, Iadrubel Vire, Chief Commander of the Forces.' Well, it appears, Elder, that our message was not quite up to Brother Fry's level. Hm-m-m, there's more to this. Did this all come in at once?"

"It did, Deacon. The first part apparently authorizes the second part."

"Quite a different style, this. 'I, Arvast Nade, Commander Battle Fleet IV, hereby demand your immediate surrender. Failure to comply within one hour, your time, following receipt of this ultimatum, as determined by my communications center, will open your planet to pillage by my troops. Any attempt at resistance will be crushed without mercy, and your population decimated in retaliation. Any damage, or

attempted damage, by you to goods or facilities of value on the planet will be avenged by execution of leading citizens selected at my command. By my fiat as conqueror, your status, retroactive to the moment of transmission of this ultimatum, is that of bond-sleg to the conquering race. Any lack of instantaneous obedience will be dealt with accordingly. Signed, Arvast Nade, Battle Fleet Commander.' "

Deacon Bentley looked up.

"What do we do with this?"

"I see no alternative to activating War Preventive Measures, as described in Chapter XXXVIII of the Lesser Works."

"I was afraid of that. Well ... so be it."

"We can't have a war here. As soon as we saw a few of these heathen loose on the planet, we'd all revert to type. You know what *that* is."

"Well, let's waste no time. You take care of that, and I'll answer the ultimatum. Common courtesy requires that we answer it, I suppose."

Arvast Nade got the last of his battle armor on, and tested the joints.

"There's a squeak somewhere."

"Sir?" said his aide blankly.

"There's a squeak. Listen."

It could be heard plainly:

*Squeak, squeak, squeak, squeak, squeak.*

The aide got the oil can. "Work your claws one at a time, sir ... Let's see ... Again. *There* it is!"

"Ah, good," said Nade, working everything soundlessly. "That's what comes of too long a peace. And this stuff is supposed to be rustproof!"

There was a polite rap at the door. The aide leaned outside, and came back with a message. "For you, sir. It's from the Storehousers."

"Good. Wait till I get a hand out through this ... uh ... the thing is stiff. There, let's have it."

Reaching out with a manipulator through a kind of opened trapdoor in the armor, and almost knocking loose a hand-weapon clamped to the inside, Nade took hold of the message, which was without seals or embellishments, as befitted the mouthings of slegs.

Behind the clear visor, Nade's gaze grew fixed as he read.

From:

Central Contracting Office

Penitence City

Planet of Faith

To:

Arvast Nade

Commander

Battle Fleet IV

Crustax

Dear Sir:

We regret to inform you that we must decline the conditions mentioned in your message of the 2nd instant. As you may be aware, the planetary government of the planet Faith does not recognize war, and can permit no war to be waged on, or in the vicinity of, this planet. Our decision on this matter is final, and is not open to discussion.

Truly yours,

Hugh Bentley  
Chief Assistant  
Central Contracting Office

Nade dazedly handed the message to his aide.

"And just how," he demanded, "are they going to enforce *that*?"

Elder Phillips's hand trembled slightly as he reached out to accept the proffered hand of the robed figure.

"Judge Archer Goodwin," said the dignitary politely. "Elder, I bring you tidings of your eldest son, and I fear you will not find them happy tidings."

Phillips kept his voice level.

"I suspected as much, Judge."

"With due allowance for the fallibility of human judgment, Lance appears unsuited to a life of peace. Study bores him. Conflict and its techniques fascinate him. He is pugnacious, independent. He sees life in terms of conflict. He is himself authoritative, though subject to subordination to a superior authority. He is not dull. The acquisitions of useful skills, and even a quite deep knowledge, are well within his grasp, potentially. However, his basic bent is in another direction. On a different planet, we might expect him to shine in some limited but strategically-placed field, using it as a springboard to power and rank. Here, to allow him to pass into the populace would require us, out of fairness, to allow others to do the same. But the proportions of such traits are already so high that our way of living could not endure the shock. You see, he not only possesses these traits, plus a lust to put them in action, but *he sees nothing wrong with this*. Accordingly, he will not attempt to control his natural tendencies. Others of even greater combativeness have entered our population, but have recognized the sin of allowing such tendencies sway, unless the provocation is indeed serious. Then—" Judge Goodwin's face for an instant bent into a chilling smile, which he at once blinked away. He cleared his throat. "I am sorry to have to bring you this news."

Elder Phillips bowed his head. Somehow, somewhere, he had failed in proper discipline, in stern counsel. But, defiant, the boy always—

He put down the thoughts with an effort. Others took their place. People would talk. He would never live this down, would never know if a word, or a tone of voice, was a sly reference.

His fists clenched. For an instant, everything vanished in rage. Sin of sins, in a blur of mental pictures, he saw himself seek similarly afflicted parents—the planet teemed with them—rouse them to revolt, saw himself outwit the guards, seize the armory, arm the disaffected, and *put this unholy law to the test of battle!*

So real was the illusion that for an instant he felt the sword in his hand, saw the Council spring to their feet as he stepped over the bodies of the guards; his followers, armed to the teeth, were right behind him as he entered—

With a sob, he dropped to his knees.

The judge's hand gripped his shoulder. "Be steadfast. With the aid of the Almighty, you will conquer this. You can do it. Or you would not be here."

Arvast Nade studied the green and blue sphere swimming in the viewscreen.

"Just as I thought. They lack even a patrol ship."

"Sir," said the aide, "another message from the Storehousers."

Nade popped open his hatch, and reached out.

Gaze riveted to the page, he read:

From:  
Office of the Chief  
War Prevention Department  
Level VI



Penitence City  
Planet of Faith

To:  
Arvast Nade  
Commander  
Battle Fleet IV  
Crustax

Sir:

We hereby deliver final warning to you that this Department will not hesitate to use all measures necessary to bar the development of war on this planet or in its contiguous regions.

You are warned to signify peaceful intent by immediately altering course away from our planet. If this is impossible, signal the reason at once.

Hiram Wingate  
Chief

War Prevention Dept.

Nade lowered the message. He took another look at the screen. He looked back at the message, then glanced at his aide.

"You've read this?"

"Certainly, sir. Communications from slegs have no right of privacy."

"How did it seem to you?"

The aide hesitated. "If I did not know they were disarmed pacifists, who destroy every warlike son born to them—well, I would be worried, sir."

"There is certainly a very hard note to this message. There is even a tone of command that can be heard in it. I find it difficult to believe this could have been written by one unfamiliar with and unequipped for war."

Nade hesitated, then activated his armored-suit communicator.

"Alter course ten grids solaxially outward of the planet Storehouse."

Nade's aide looked shocked.

The admiral said, "War is not unlimited heroics, my boy. We lose nothing from this maneuver but an air of omnipotence that has a poor effect on tactics, anyway. Conceivably, there are warships on the far side of that planet. But if these softshells are just putting up a smudge with no claws behind it, we will gobble them up, and I will add an additional two *skrads* free pillage to what they have already earned. The Storehouse regions being off-limits, of course."

The aide beamed, and clashed his claws in anticipation.

Admiral Nade adjusted the screen to a larger magnification.

Elder Phillips formally shook hands with his son, Lance, who was dressed in battle armor, with sword and pistol, and a repeater slung across his back.

"Sorry, Dad," said the younger Phillips, "I couldn't take this mush-mouthed hypocrisy, that's all. It's a trap, and the fact that you and the rest of your generation let themselves get caught in it is no reason why I should."

Tight-lipped, the elder said nothing.

His son's lip curled. Then he shrugged. "Wish me luck, at least, Dad."

"Good luck, son." The elder began to say more, but caught himself.

A harsh voice boomed over the gathering.

"Those who have been found unsuitable for life on this planet, do now separate from those who will remain, and step forward to face each other in armed combat. Those who will do battle on the physical level, assemble by the sign of the sword. Those who will give battle on the level of tactics, assemble by the stacked arms. Those who will give battle on the plane of high strategy, assemble by the open book.

You will now be matched one with another until but one champion remains in each group. Those champions will have earned the right to life, but must still prove themselves against an enemy of the race or of the Holy Word. In any case, settlement shall not be here amongst the scenes of your childhood. Let any who have second thoughts speak out. Though a—"

A shrill voice interrupted. "Overthrow them! We have the guns!"

There was an instantaneous *crack*! One of the armored figures collapsed.

The harsh voice went on, a little lower-pitched:

"Anyone else who wants to defy regulations is free to try. The punishment is instantaneous death. I was about to say that anyone who has second thoughts should speak up, though a courage test will be required to rejoin your family, and you must again submit to judgment later. The purpose of the Law is not to raise a race of cowards, but a race capable of controlling its warlike instincts. Naturally, anyone who backs out of *this*, and fails the courage test, will be summarily killed. Does anyone on mature consideration regret the stand he has taken?"

There was a silence.

The armored figures, their faces through the raised visors expressing surprise, glanced at the outstretched rebel, then at each other.

Elder Phillips's son turned, and his gaze sought out his father. He grinned and raised the naked sword in salute. The elder, startled, raised his hand. Now, what was that about?

"Very well," said the harsh voice. "Take your positions by your respective emblems."

Elder Phillips, watching, saw his son hesitate, and then walk toward the open book. The elder was surprised; after all, some fool might think him cowardly, not realizing the type of courage the test would involve.

The voice said, "After a brief prayer, we will begin ..."

Arvast Nade glanced at the ranked screens in the master control room.

"There is no hidden force off that planet. It was a bluff." He activated his armored-suit communicator, and spoke briskly: "Turn the Fleet by divisions, and land in the preselected zones."

Hiram Wingate, Chief, War Prevention Department, watched the maneuver on the screen, turned to a slanting console bearing ranks of numbered levers and redly-glowing lights, and methodically pulled down levers. The red lights winked off, to be replaced by green. On a second console, a corresponding number of blue lights went out, to be replaced by red.

Near the storage plant, huge camouflaged gates swung wide. An eager voice shouted over the communicator. "Men! Squadron A strikes the first blow! Follow me!"

Arvast Nade, just turning from the screen, jerked back to take another look.

Between his fleet and the planet, a swarm of blurs had materialized.

The things were visibly growing large on the screen, testifying to an incredible velocity.

Abruptly the blurred effect vanished, and he could see what appeared to be medium-sized scout ships, all bearing some kind of angular symbol that apparently served as a unit identification.

Now again they blurred.

Nade activated his suit communicator.

"Secondary batteries open fi—"

The deck jumped underfoot. A siren howled, changed pitch, then faded out. Across the control room, a pressure-monitor needle wound down around its dial, then the plastic cover of the instrument blew off.

The whole ship jumped.

A tinny voice spoke in Nade's ear. "Admiral, we are being attacked by small ships of the Storehousers!"

"Fire back!" shouted Nade.

"They're too fast, sir! Fire control can't keep up with them! *Look out!* HERE COMES—"

Nade raised his battle pincers.

Before him, the whole scene burst into one white-hot incandescence.

General Larssen, watching on the long-range pickup, sat in shock as glare from the viewer lit his face.

"And they don't believe in war! Look at *that*!"

"Sir," said a dazed subordinate, "that *isn't* war."

"It isn't? What do *you* call it?"

"Extermination, sir. Pest control. War assumes some degree of equality between opponents."

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Lance Phillips, feeling dazed and drained, but with a small warm sense of achievement, straightened from the battle computer.

"I didn't do too badly?"

"Best of the lot," said the examiner cheerfully. "Your understanding of the geometrical aspects of space strategy is outstanding."

"I had a sense of drag—as if I couldn't get the most out of my forces."

"You didn't. You aren't dealing with pure abstract force, but with human beings. You made no allowance for that."

"But I did well enough to survive?"

"You did."

"What about the others?"

"They had their opportunity. Those who conquered will be saved. Any really outstanding fighters who lost because of bad luck, or superb opposition, will also be saved."

"We get a chance to do battle later?"

"Correct."

"We fight for our own planet?"

"That's right."

"But—how long since the planet was attacked?"

"Yesterday, when this trial began. Prior to that, not for about a hundred years."

"*Yesterday*! What are we doing here? We should—"

The examiner shook his head.

"The attack never amounted to anything. Just a fleet of lobsters wiped out in fifteen minutes."

Lance Phillips looked dizzy.

"I thought we didn't believe in war!"

"Of course not," said the examiner. "War, of the usual kind, has a brutalizing effect. As likely as not, the best are sent to slaughter each other, so at least the physical level of the race is lowered. The conquered are plundered of the fruits of their labor, which is wrong, while the conquerors learn to expect progress by pillage instead of work; they become a burden on everyone around them; *that* leads to a desire to exterminate them. The passions aroused do not end with the conflict, but go on to make more conflict. We *don't* believe in war. Unfortunately, not everyone is equally enlightened. Should we, because we recognize the truth, be at the mercy of every sword-rattler and egomaniac? Of course not. But how are we to avoid it? By simultaneously understanding the evils of war, and being prepared to wage it defensively on the greatest scale."

"But that's a contradiction! You can't distinguish between offensive and defensive weapons! And we have too small a planet to support a large-scale war!"

The examiner looked him over coolly.

"With due respect to your logic, your understanding is puny. Now, we have something here we call 'discipline.' Think carefully before you tell me again to my face that I am a fool, or a liar. I repeat, 'How do we avoid war? By simultaneously understanding the evils of war, and being prepared to wage it defensively on the greatest scale.' "

Lance Phillips felt the objections well up, felt the overpowering certainty, the determination to brush aside nonsense.

Simultaneously, he felt something else.  
He opened his mouth. No words came out.  
Could this be fear?  
Not exactly.  
What was it?  
Suddenly he recognized it.  
*Caution.*  
Warily, he said, "In that case ... ah ... *how*—"

Iadrubel Vire scanned the fragmentary reports, and looked at Margash Grele. Grele's normally iridescent integument was a muddy gray.

"This is all?" said Vire.

"Yes, sir."

"No survivors?"

"Not one, so far as we know. It was a slaughter."

Vire sat back, dazed. A whole battle fleet wiped out—just like that. This would alter the balance of force all along the frontier.

"What word from the Storehousers?"

"Nothing, sir."

"No demands?"

"Not a word."

"After a victory like this, they could—" He paused, frowning. They were *pacifists, who believed in self-defense.*

That sounded fine, in principle, but—how had they reduced it to practice? After all, they were only one planet. Their productive capacity and manpower did not begin to approach that of Crustax and—

Vire cut off that line of thought. *This* loss, with enough patience and craft, could be overcome. Two or three more like it would be the finish. There was just not enough potential gain to risk further attempts on that one little planet. He had probed the murk with a claw, and drawn back a stub. Best to avoid trouble while that grew back, and just keep away from the place in the future.

"Release the announcement," said Vire slowly, "that Fleet IV, in maneuvers, has been caught in a meteor storm of unparalleled intensity. Communications have been temporarily cut off, and there is concern at headquarters over the fate of the fleet. It will be some time before we will know with certainty what has happened, but it is feared that a serious disaster may have occurred. As this fleet is merely a reserve fleet on maneuvers in the region of the border with the Federation, with which we have friendly relations, this, of course, in no way imperils our defenses, but ... h'm-m-m ... we are deeply concerned for the crewmen and their loved ones."

Grele made swift notes, and looked up.

"Excellency, might it not be wise to let this information out by stages? First, the word of the meteor shower—but our experts doubt the accuracy of the report. Next, a substantiating report has come in. Then—"

"No, because in the event of a real meteor shower, we would make no immediate public announcements. We have to be liars in this, but let's keep it to the minimum."

Grele bowed respectfully, and went out.

"Damned gravitor," said Squadron A's 2nd-Flight leader over the communicator, "cut out just as we finished off the lobster fleet. I was signaling for assembly on my ship, and aimed to cut a little swath through crab-land before going home. Instead, we've been streaking off on our own for the last week, and provisions are slim on these little boats, I'll tell you that! *What* outfit did you say you are?"

The strange, roughly minnow-shaped ship, not a great deal bigger than the scout, answered promptly:

"Interstellar Patrol. We have a few openings for recruits who can qualify. Plenty of chance for adventure, special training, top-grade weapons, good food, the pay's O.K., no bureaucrats to tangle

things up. If you can qualify, it's a good outfit."

"Interstellar Patrol, huh? Never heard of it. I was thinking of the Space Force."

"Well, you *could* come in that way. We get quite a few men from the Space Force. It's a fair outfit, but they have to kowtow to Planetary Development. Their weapons aren't up to ours; but their training isn't so tough, either. They'd be *sure* to let you in, where we're a little more selective. You've got a point, all right. It would be a lot easier—if you want things easy."

"Well, I didn't mean—"

"We could shoot you supplies to last a couple of weeks, and *maybe* a Space Force ship will pick you up. If not, we could help—if we're still in the region. Of course, if not—"

The flight leader began to perspire. "Listen, tell me a little more about this Interstellar Patrol."

Lance Phillips stared at rank on rank of mirrorlike glittering forms stretching off into the distance, and divided into sections by massive pillars that buttressed the ceiling.

"This is part of the storage plant?"

"It is. Naturally, foreigners know nothing of this, and our own people have little cause to learn the details. You say a small planet can't afford a large striking force. It can, *if* the force is accumulated slowly, and requires no maintenance whatever. Bear in mind, we make our living by *storing* goods, with no loss. How can there be *no* loss? Obviously, if, from the viewpoint of the observer, *no time passes for the stored object.*"

"How could that be unless the object were moving at near the velocity of light?"

"How does an object increase its speed to near the velocity of light?"

"It accelerates."

The examiner nodded. "When you see much of this, you have a tendency to speculate. Now, we regularly add to our stock of fighting men and ships, and our ability to control the effects of time enables us to operate, from the observer's viewpoint, either very slowly, or very fast. *How* is not in my department, and this knowledge is not handed out to satisfy curiosity. But—it's natural to speculate. The only way we know to slow time, from the observer's viewpoint, is to accelerate, and increase velocity to near the speed of light. A great ancient named Einstein said there is no way, without outside references, to distinguish the *force of gravity* from acceleration. So, I think some wizardry with gravitors is behind this." He looked thoughtfully at Lance Phillips. "The main thing is, you see what you have to know to be one of our apprentice strategists. We accumulate strength slowly, take the toughest, most generally uncivilizable of each generation, provided they have certain redeeming qualities. *These* are our fighting men. We take a few standard types of ships, improve them as time goes on, and when we are attacked, we accelerate our response, to strike with such speed that the enemy cannot react. We obliterate him. He, mortified, blames the defeat on something else. His fleet was caught in a nova, the gravitors got in resonating synchrony, *something* happened, but it didn't have anything to do with *us*. Nevertheless, he leaves us alone."

"Why not use our process to put his whole fleet in stasis, and use it as a warning?"

"*That* would be an insult he would have to respond to, and we are opposed to war. In the second place, we agreed to give you an opportunity to fight for the planet, and then live your life elsewhere. There has to be some outlet somewhere. We can't just keep stacking ships and warriors in here indefinitely."

"After we get out—*then* what happens?"

"It depends on circumstances. However, fighting men are in demand. If, say, a properly keyed signal cut power to the engines, and after some days of drifting, the warrior were offered the opportunity to enlist in some outfit that meets our standards—"

"Yes, that fits." He hesitated, then thrust out his jaw. "I know I'm not supposed to even think about this, but—"

The Examiner looked wary: "Go ahead."

"With what we have here, we could rival the whole works—Federation, Crustax Empire—the lot. Well—why not? We could be the terror of all our opponents!"

The examiner shook his head in disgust.

"After what you've experienced, you can still ask *that*. Let's go at it from another direction. Consider what you know about the warlike character of our populace, and what we have to do to restrain it. Now, just ask yourself: What could such a stock as this be descended *from*?"

A great light seemed to dawn on Lance Phillips.

"You see," said the examiner, "we've already *done* that. We had to try something a little tougher."