

Just Peace

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In its orbit about Jupiter, an artificial star flickered briefly, its essence oscillating between matter and energy. The complex disturbance generated by those pulsations spread out from the Solar System—in violation of several classical theories of simultaneity—at many times the speed of light.

Nineteen light-years away, a receiver on the second planet of the star delta Pavonis picked the signal out from the universal static of ultra-wave radiation and...

Chente felt a slight, though abrupt, lurch as gravity fell to New Canadian normal. That was the only sign that the transmission had been accomplished. The cage's lights didn't even flicker.

("We can't know, of course, the exact conditions which faced your predecessor. His report is eighteen months overdue, however, so that we must expect the worst")

Chente took a deep breath and stood, feeling for the moment exaltation: three times before he had sat in the transmission cage, and each time he had been disappointed.

("... Believe you are ready, Chente. What can I say to a man about to travel nineteen light-years in an instant? For that matter, what will I say to the man who remains behind?")

The exit was behind his chair. Chente hit the control plate, and the hatch slid silently into the wall. Beyond was the control cubby of a ramscoop starship. Chente scrambled through the opening and stood in the small space behind the control saddle. The displays were all computer driven, and rather quaint. Neat lettering above one of the consoles read: INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS MACHINES OF CANADA—the original Canada back on Earth. Chente had spent hundreds of hours working out in a mock-up of this famous control room, but the real thing was subtly different. Here the air felt completely dead, sterile. The mock-up on Earth had been occupied by occasional technicians, whereas no one but Chente's predecessor had been in this room for more than a century. And it had been more than three centuries since the robot craft had sailed out of the Solar System.

A monument to empires passed, Chente thought as he slipped onto the saddle.

"Who goes there?" a voice asked in English.

Chente looked at the computer's video pickup. He had had plenty of practice with a similar think-box on Earth: the mech was barely sentient, but the best mankind could produce in the old days. Chente's superiors had theorized that after three hundred twenty years such a brain would be more than a little irrational. The human responded Carefully, "Vicente Quintero y Jualeiro, agent of the Canadian Hegemony." He placed his ID before the pickup. Of course it was a fake—the Canadian Hegemony had ceased to exist one hundred years earlier. But the computer probably wouldn't accept any more recent authority.

"I have already received Vicente Quintero y Jualeiro."

It really is senile, thought Chente. "That is so. But another copy of Quintero remains on Earth, and was used for this latest transmission."

A long pause. "Very well, sir, I am at your disposal. I so rarely receive visitors, I—You require a situation report, of course." The vocoder's pleasant baritone assumed a singsong tone, as if repeating some long-considered excuse. "After my successful landing on delta Pavonis II, I sent Earth a favourable report on the planet—Sir, most pertinent criteria *were* favourable. I see now my mistake... but it would

have taken a new program to avoid making it. Shortly thereafter I received an initial transmission of fifteen hundred colonists together with enough ova and sperm to breed a colony. By 2220, the New Canada colony had a population of 8,250,000.

“Then... then the great planetary disturbance occurred.”

Chente held up his hand. “Please. The Hegemony received your reports through 2240. We’ve reestablished contact to find out what’s happened since then.”

“Yes, sir. But I must report all the truth first. I wish no one to say that I have failed. I warned of the core collapse several weeks before it occurred. Yet still, most of the colony was destroyed. The disruption was so great in fact, that the very continental outlines were changed.

“Sir, I have done my best to help the survivors, but their descendants have regressed terribly, have even formed warring nation-states. These groups covet every fragment of surviving technology. They stole my communication bombs so that I could no longer report to Earth. They have even attacked my own person, and attempted to cannibalize me. Fortunately my defences’are—” The’computer broke off, and remained silent.

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“What’s the matter?”

“A small party is now climbing the hill I stand upon.”

“Do they look hostile?”

“They are always hostile toward me, but this group is not armed. I suspect they saw the coronal discharge that accompanied your arrival. They probably drove here from Freetown.”

“A city?” said Chente.

“Yes, a city-state which has remained neutral in the current warfare. It’s built over the ruins of First-landing, the settlement I helped to found. Would you like to see our visitors?”

Chente leaned forward. “Of course!”

A large screen lit up to show a grass-covered slope. Coming up the hill toward the ship were twelve men and a woman. Beyond them, beyond the hill, the ocean stretched away unbroken to the horizon.

“*Madre de Dios!*” Chente gasped. On the old maps this hilltop was 3,500 kilometers inland. The continental outlines certainly had been changed by the catastrophe.

“Say again, sir?” said the computer.

“Never mind.” Chente ignored the view and concentrated on the people who would soon be questioning him.

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They made an interesting study in contrasts. To the left, a man and woman walked almost in lock step, though they remained discreetly apart. The man was dressed in simple black trousers and a short coat. His hat was stiff and wide-brimmed. The woman wore a long black dress that revealed nothing of her form below the neck. Her reddish hair was drawn back and tied with a black ribbon, and her grim face showed no sign of makeup. The two short men in the center wore jumpsuits, apparently modeled after

the original colonists' dress. To the right, eight nearly naked men bent beneath an elaborate litter carrying a young male. As the group stopped, the litter was lowered, and he stepped jauntily to earth. The fellow's upper body was heavily oiled. He wore skin-tight breeches with an enormous codpiece. The grimly dressed couple on the left looked straight ahead, trying to avoid the sight of their companion on the far right.

"You see the cultural fragmentation that has occurred here on New Canada," the computer remarked.

"How far are they now?"

"Twenty meters."

"I may as well meet them. Offload the equipment that came through with me."

"Yes, sir." A hatch slid open and he entered the air lock beyond. Seconds later he was standing ankle-deep in turquoise grass, beneath a pale, pale blue sky. A slow breeze pushed with remarkable force against his jumpsuit: sea level air pressure on New Canada was almost twice Earth's. He was about to greet his visitors when the somber woman spoke, her voice tense with surprise.

"Chente!"

Chente bowed. "You have the advantage of me, ma'am. I take it you know my predecessor."

"The past tense would be more appropriate, Freeman Quintero. Your twin was murdered more than a year ago," the fellow in the skintight pants said and smiled at the woman. Chente saw that in spite of his athletic build and flamboyant dress, the man was in his forties. The woman, on the other hand, seemed much younger than she had at a distance. Now she kept silent, but her companion said, "It was one *of your* ships he died on, you slave-holding animal." The shirtless dandy just shrugged.

"Please, gentlemen." The fat man in the center spoke up. "Recall that the condition of your presence here requires a certain mutual cordiality"—glares flickered back and forth between Shirtless and the puritans—"or at least courtesy. Mr. Quintero, I am Bretaign Flaggon, mayor of Freetown and governor of Wundlich Island. Welcome.

"The lady is Citizeness Martha Blount, ambassadress to Wundlich from the Commonwealth of New Providence, and," he rushed on as if trying to make both the introductions at once, "this gentleman is Bossman Pier Balquirth, Ambassador to Wundlich from the Ontarian Confederacy."

The woman seemed to have recovered from her initial surprise. Now she spoke with solemn formality. "New Providence regards you as our honoured guest and citizen. Our nation awaits your—"

"Not so fast, Mistress Blount," Bossman Pier interrupted. "You aren't the only people brimming over with hospitality. I believe Freeman Quintero would be much more comfortable in a society which does not condemn dancing and music as a crime against nature."

"*Please!*" Flaggon repeated, "let's not have propaganda spoil the arrival of a visitor from the Mother World. As mayor, I wish to offer you any assistance you require, Mr. Quintero. I, uh...*Ah!* will hold a banquet in your honour tonight. Of course, we will invite guests from both New Providence and Ontario." He sighed unhappily, recognizing the inevitable. "You can settle things then."

A faint hissing announced the opening of the freight port in the ship's hull. A lift slid down the ancient metal surface with Chente's "luggage."

"Mr. Quintero y Jualciro," the computer's vocoder boomed from a hidden speaker, "have you further

orders at this time?”

“No. I will keep in touch.”

“Beyond this hill I cannot protect you, sir.”

“I’ll survive.”

“Yes sir,” doubtfully.

“Damned machine,” Bossman Pier said softly. His perpetual grin had vanished. “It should be helping us. Instead it shoots at anyone trying to make entrance. We had to leave most of our boys at the base of the hill or we couldn’t have got this close. Can I help you with that equipment?”

Chente stepped between Balquirth’s servants and the freight lift.

“No thanks. I can carry it myself.”

The Ontarian smiled knowingly. “Perhaps you will survive, after all.”

As they walked down the hillside, Vicente kept silent. *So I died here*, he thought. Well, that was no great surprise. But that he had been killed by the very colonists he had been sent to help made his mission seem doubly difficult. What had happened on New Canada these last one hundred thirty years?

The lush grass on the hilltop thrived everywhere. He was no botanist, but it looked like some terrestrial type brought by the first colonists. Other vegetation was less familiar. Large ferns and broad-leafed plants stood in scattered clumps. The trees looked like giant flowers: their trunks rose straight and tall, with purple foliage sprouting from the top. Except for the grass, the land had a strong Permian aspect. Chente half expected a giant reptile to pop out of the bushes.

They had reached the base of the hill when his expectation materialized. A meter-wide *something* flew low over their heads, then circled above a nearby ridge.

“A gretch,” Bretain Flaggon said. “They’re really quite common around here. That poor little fellow must have lost his mother.”

The “poor little fellow” looked like a cross between a pterodactyl and a buzzard. Chente grimaced. A nice place for a lifelong vacation. He’d never cared for paleontology. At the base of the hill they stopped by a large three-wheeled vehicle and a group of armed men with bicycles. The powered tricycle was driven from a bench above and behind the passenger compartment. A brass tank and a piston cylinder sat below the driver’s seat.

“Steamer?” Vicente asked, as he climbed into the cab.

“Quite right,” Balquirth said. He swung up onto his slave-powered litter and looked down at Quintero. “If you’re wise, you’ll use something time-tested.” He patted the satin pillows.

Flaggon and his driver climbed onto the upper bench, while Martha Blount and her aide got in with Chente. The armed bicyclists started down the road, and the auto got off with a jerk and a jump. The deep cushions could not disguise the absence of an adequate suspension, and acrid black smoke drifted from the fire box into the passenger compartment. Behind them, Bossman Pier’s bearers were having no trouble keeping pace.

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Minutes later the auto was puffing down a long slope that gave an overview of Freetown. The city was built around a crescent-shaped bay protected on the north by a huge granitic outcropping. Except for that headland the bay was open to the sea.

“Have many storms?” he said to Martha.

“Dreadful ones,” the woman answered, unsmiling. “But the tsunamis are worse—that’s why the ships you see are anchored so far out. They come in to port only for loading.”

The city rested on a sequence of terraces that climbed steeply up from the water’s edge. Each terrace was split down the middle by a narrow, copper-paved street, while steps and coppered ramps provided communication between one level and the next

Chente noticed that on the first three tiers the buildings were mostly warehouses and sheds. Nearly all these structures were made of wood and had a brand-new look. But above the third tier, the buildings were of massive stone construction, eroded and weatherbeaten. The most peculiar thing about the stone buildings was their long, narrow shape, their sharp, pointed ends. The prows of these stone arcs pointed uniformly out to sea.

Martha Blount followed his gaze. “The Freetowners use those wooden buildings for temporary storage of sea freight. They can count on everything in the first three terraces being leveled every two years or so. Beyond the third level, the tsunamis attenuate and the water breaks over the bows of the buildings.”

The auto turned onto the fourth tier’s main street, and slowed even further to get through the swarm of Freetowners moving to and from the stone-encased bazaars.

Chente shook his head in wonder. “You people certainly have managed to adapt.”

“Adapt!” The New Providencian ambadress turned toward him, for the first time showing an emotion: rage. “We were nearly wiped out in the Cataclysm. That computer-driven monster up there on the hill gave us a real prize. With an advanced technology a colony on this planet could get along, but with that technology lost the place is a Hell. Adapt? Look—” She pointed out of the cab. They were passing near the edge of the terrace now, by blocks of gray rubble, stumpy walls. “Life on New Canada is a constant struggle simply to maintain ourselves. And all the while we’re weighed down by those sybarites.” She waved her hand back toward Bossman Pier’s Utter, some fifteen meters away. “They drain our resources. They fight us at every turn...” Her voice trailed off and she sat looking at Chente. For a moment some new emotion flickered across her face, but then she became impassive. Chente suddenly realized the reason for her silence: it was the second time around for Martha. No doubt she had sat in this same vehicle eighteen months earlier, and had had the same conversation with his predecessor.

Martha’s hand moved toward him, then retreated. She said softly, “You really are Chente... alive again.” Her tone became businesslike. “Be more careful, this time, will you please? Your knowledge, your equipment... many people would kill to get them.” She was silent the rest of the way into town.

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At sunset the heavy layers of dust in New Canada’s atmosphere transformed the pale-blue sky into orange, red, and greenish brown. From where Chente sat within the Freetown banquet hall, the sky light shone through narrow, horizontal slits cut high up in the west wall to play gentle pastels of orange and green down upon the waiters and chattering guests. It was a most colorful tribute to volcanism.

The sky light faded slowly toward gray as the last unpleasant course of the meal was served. Above them, electric lamps mounted on large silver wheels were lit. Clusters of rubies and emeralds hung like

clouds of colored stars around the glowing filaments. Occasionally the earth trembled faintly, causing the wheels to sway as if a slight breeze had touched them.

The meal over, Bretainn Flaggon rose to deliver “a few words of welcome to our star-crossed [sic] visitor.” Chente couldn’t decide whether the phrase was a pun or a malaprop. The speech droned on and eventually the Earthman succeeded in ignoring it.

The hall's wide floor was covered from wall to wall with what could only be gold. The soft yellow metal behaved like some slow sea beneath the weight of the banquet tables and constant passage of human feet: tiny ripples barely a centimeter high stood frozen in its surface. New Canada, had everything the Spanish Conquistadors had ever dreamed of. But this virtue was symptomatic of a serious vice. Heavy metals were plentiful near the planet’s surface simply because New Canada’s interior was much more poorly differentiated than Earth’s. The starship’s computer had reported this fact to its makers on first landing here, but had failed to notice that the process of core formation was ongoing. The cataclysm that hit the colony one hundred fifty years earlier was evidence of this continuing process. The abundance of metallic salts on the surface meant that less than one percent of New Canada’s land area could be used for farming. And those same salts made the sea life uniformly poisonous. In contrast to the opulent banquet hall, the food served had been scarcely more than a spicy gruel.

“... Mr. Quintero.” Applause sounded as Flaggon finished talking. The mayor motioned for Chente to rise and speak. The Earthman stood and bowed briefly. The applause was equally enthusiastic from the three groups seated at the horseshoe banquet table. On his right sat the Ontarian delegation, consisting of Bossman Pier, three associates, and a crowd of scantily dressed odalisques—all ensconced on piles of wide, deep pillows. Chente had been placed at the middle of the horseshoe with the Freetowners, while Martha Blount and her people sat along the left leg of the horseshoe. All through the meal, while the Ontarian caroused and the Freetowners chattered, the New Providencian had kept silent.

Finally the applause died, and people waited. From above them the tiny lights burned fiercely, but the stark shadows they cast held abysmal gloom. Chente saw a certain measure of fear in their attentive silence. No doubt many of them had sat right here less than two years before, and watched a man identical to the one they saw now. Intellectually they might accept the idea of duplicative transport, but historians had assured Chente that without a lifetime of experience no one could really accept such a thing. To his audience Chente was a man come back from the dead. Perhaps he could take advantage of this fear.

“I will be brief, as most of you will have heard this speech before.” There was an uneasy movement and various exchanges of glances. Bossman Pier seemed the only one left with a smile on his face. “Your planet is undergoing a core collapse. A century ago a core tremor sank half a continent and virtually destroyed your civilization. Recently Earth has been able to reestablish communications with the starship on the hill behind Freetown. The link we have established is a tenuous one and you can’t expect material aid. But Earth does have knowledge it can place at your disposal. Ultimately the core collapse will proceed to completion, and about ten million ‘Cataclysms’ worth of energy will be released. If this happens all at once, no life above the microbe level will be left on the planet. But, if it happens uniformly over a million-year period, you would never even be aware of the change. From the frequency of earthquakes, you know that the latter possibility has already been ruled out. My mission is to discover where between these two extremes the truth lies. For it is entirely possible that a future Cataclysm will be powerful enough to wreck your civilization as it is now, yet mild enough so that with adequate forewarning and preparation you can survive.”

Flaggon bobbed his head. “We understand, sir. And, as we did with your predecessor, we will cooperate to the limit of our resources.”

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Chente decided to pounce on the double meaning in Flaggon's inept phrasing. "Yes, I've heard about the splendid help you gave my predecessor. He is dead, I've been told." He waved down Flaggon's stammered clarification. "Ladies and gentlemen, someone among you killed me. That was an act that threatened all of New Canada. If I am killed again, there may be no more replacements, and you will face the core collapse in ignorance." Chente wondered briefly if he hadn't just invited his assassination with that last threat, but it was too late to retract it.

The distressed Flaggon again pledged his help. Both Balquirth and Martha Blount chorused similar promises.

"Very well. I'll need transportation for an initial survey. From my discussion with the ship's computer before this banquet, I've decided that the best place to start is the islands that were formerly the peaks of the Heavenraker Mountains."

Martha Blount came to her feet. "Citizen Quintero, one of our Navy's finest dirigibles is tied down here at Freetown. We could be ready to go in twenty-two hours, and it won't take more than another day to reach the Heavenraker Islands." On the other side of the horseshoe, Balquirth cleared his throat noisily and stood up. Martha Blount rushed on. "Don't... don't make the same mistake the first Quintero did. He accepted Ontarian hospitality rather than ours, only to be on an Ontarian ship."

Chente looked at the Bossman.

"Her story is true, but misleading," Balquirth said easily. He had the air of someone telling a lie that he expected no one to believe—or else a self-evident truth that needed no earnest protestations to support itself. "The first Quintero had the good judgement to use Ontarian transportation. But his death occurred when the ship we assigned him was attacked by the forces of some other state." He looked innocently across the table at Martha Blount.

The Earthman didn't respond directly. "Mayor Flaggon, what's the weather like along the Heavenraker chain this time of year?"

The mayor looked to an aide, who said, "In late spring? Well, there are no hurricanes likely. Matter of fact, the Heavenrakers rarely get any bad storms. But the underground 'weather' is something else again. Freetown alone loses three or four ships a year out there—smashed by tsunamis as they sail close to shore."

"In that case I'd prefer to go by aircraft."

Balquirth shrugged amiably. "Then I must leave you to the clutches of Mistress Blount. I don't have a single flier in port, and Mayor Flaggon doesn't have a single flier in his state."

"Your concern is appreciated in any case, Bossman. Citizen Blount, I'd like to discuss my plans in more detail with your people."

"Tomorrow?" She seemed close to a triumphant smile.

"Fine." Vicente began to sit down, then straightened. "One more thing. According to the starship's computer, all nine communications bombs are missing from their storage racks up on the hill."

In order to generate ultrawave distortions matter must needs be annihilated. Chente referred to the specially constructed nuclear bombs whose detonation could be modulated to carry information at super-light speeds. Such devices lacked the "bandwidth" to transmit the pattern of a human

being—Earth’s government used the tiny star that orbited Jupiter where Callisto had once been for that job. Nevertheless, each of the communication bombs could be set to generate the equivalent of ten megatons of TNT, so they could do considerable damage if they were not hoisted into space prior to use.

The silence lengthened. Finally Chente said coldly, “I see. Your nation-states are playing strategic deterrence. That’s a dangerous game, you recall. It cost Earth more than three hundred million lives a few centuries back. Your colony is in enough trouble without it.”

His listeners nodded their agreement, but Chente saw—with a sick feeling—that his words were no more than platitudes to them.

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The New Providencian airship *Diligence* flew south for a day and a half before it reached the first of the Heavenrakers. Chente saw a small village and a few farms in a sheltered bay near the coast, but the rest of the island was naked black rock. This was the first stop on a tour that would take them over 2,700 kilometers to the East Fragge, the Greenland-sized island that had once been the eastern end of the largest New Canadian continent. Chente had chosen this course since he wanted a baseline of observations along the planet’s equator, and the Heavenrakers were the most convenient landmasses stretching along such a path. The survey went quickly, thanks to the help of the islanders, though they seemed happy only when the *Diligence* and its guns were preparing to depart.

Three days later the dirigible hung in the clear blue sky over the west coast of the Fragge. All around them thunder sounded. For hundreds of kilometers along the coast they could see tiny rivulets of cherry-colored molten rock dribbling off into the surf, converting the water into a low-lying fog beneath them. Looking inland at the extent of the frozen lava, Chente could see that the land-forming process had added thousands of square kilometers to the area.

Quintero turned to his companion at the railing. Martha Blount hadn’t really changed in these last four days, but she had been revealed in a new aspect. For one thing, she had traded her full-length dress for a gray jumpsuit that covered her but hinted at a lot more than the dress had. From their discussions on the journey out he had found her to have a quick and lively mind that belied her outward reserve and convinced him that she had earned her high position. At times he found her interest in his equipment and plans somewhat too intense, and her political views too rigid, but he knew better than to expect anything else under the circumstances. And the more he knew of her, the more certain he was that her presence here was not motivated strictly by political interest: there had been something between Martha and the first Chente.

He gestured at the red and black landscape shimmering in the superheated air below them. “Are you sure you still want to come down with my landing party?”

She nodded. “I certainly do. It’s not as dangerous as it looks. We’ll be going many kilometers inland before we set down. I’m—doing a little reconnaissance here myself. I’ve never been in this part of the world.”

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Further conversation became impossible as the nuclear jets lit up to angle the *Diligence* down toward the black ridges that thrust up between the rivulets of fire. The jets were just one of many anachronisms in the New Providencian military machine. Apparently they had been salvaged from one of the colony’s original helicopters. With them, the dirigible could make nearly fifty kilometers per hour in level flight.

The *Diligence* flew inland until the ground below was solid and cold. The airship descended rapidly, then leveled off just before its nose skid rasped across the jagged volcanic slag. Heavy grapnels were thrown out and the ship was drawn to Earth.

Vicente called to Ship's Captain Oswald, "Who'll be in charge of my ground party?"

"Flight Corporal Nord," the officer said, pointing to a tall, muscular man, who together with three other men was dragging explosives and equipment out of the *Diligence's* cramped hold. "We'll stay on the ground just long enough to drop you off, Citizen Quintero. We're at the mercy of every breeze down here. We'll come back for you in twenty-two hours, unless you signal us earlier." He glanced at Martha. "Citizen Blount, I suggest you forego this landing. The country is pretty rough."

Martha looked back at him, and seemed faintly annoyed. "No, I insist."

Oswald frowned, but did not press the matter. "Very well. See you in a day or so."

Nord and two of the riflemen were the first to hit ground. Martha followed them. Then came Vicente, loaded down with his own special equipment. Two more riflemen with the explosives brought up the rear.

The landing site was a flat area at the top of a narrow ridge. The seven of them clambered down the hillside as the huge aircraft's engines throttled up. By the time they reached the bottom of the ravine that followed the ridge, the *Diligence* was already floating five hundred meters over their heads.

"Let's follow this gorge inland a bit," said Quintero. "From what I could see before we landed, it should widen out to where we can do some blasting without risking an avalanche."

"Anything you say," Nord replied indifferently. Chente watched the man silently as the other moved on ahead. One way or another, this would not be a routine exploration.

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The New Providencians spent most of the afternoon setting off explosives in the slag. Their firecrackers were bulky and heavy, and the work went slowly. The bombs didn't amount to more than half a ton of TNT, a microscopically small charge to obtain any information about conditions within the planet. Fortunately Chente's instruments didn't measure mechanical vibrations as such, but considerably more subtle effects. Even so he had to rely on coincidence counters and considerable statistical analysis to derive a picture of what went on hundreds of kilometers below.

Toward evening the sky became overcast and it began to drizzle. Chente called off their work. In fact, his survey was now complete, and his grim conclusions were beyond doubt. A stiff breeze kept anyone from suggesting that they call down the *Diligence*. Even with perfect visibility, Oswald probably couldn't have brought the airship in against that wind.

By the time they set up camp in a deep hollow—almost a cave—beneath the cliff face, they were all thoroughly soaked. Nord put two of his men on watch at the entrance to the hollow, and the rest of the party took to their sleeping bags.

As the hours passed, the rain fell more heavily, and from the west the steady hissing of the lava masked nearly all other sounds. Abruptly, the cylinder that rested in Chente's hand vibrated against his palm: someone was tempering with his equipment. Chente raised his head and looked about the cave let. The darkness was complete. He couldn't even see the sleeping bag he lay in. But now the years of training paid off: Chente relaxed, suppressed all background noise and listened for nearby sounds. There! At least one person was standing in his immediate vicinity. The fellow's breathing was shallow, excited,

Farther away, toward the equipment cache, he could now hear even fainter sounds.

Quintero slipped quietly out of the sleeping bag which he had prudently left unbuttoned and moved toward the cavelet, entrance, lifting and lowering his feet precisely to avoid the irregularities he remembered in the rocky ground. He probably would have got clear anyway, as the distant hissing and the sound of rain covered whatever sounds he made. He didn't dare pick up any equipment, however; he was forced to settle on what he'd kept with him.

Twenty meters out into the rain, he turned and lay down behind a small, sharp hummock of lava. He drew his tiny pistol. Several minutes passed. These were the most cautious assassins he had ever seen. As if to rebut the thought, two of the guards' hand torches lit. Their yellow beams shone down upon his and Martha's sleeping bags. The two other guards held their rifles trained on the bags, ready to fusillade.

Before the riflemen could utter more than gasps of astonishment, Chente shouted, "Out here!" All but One of the men turned toward his voice. Chente raised his pistol and shot the one who still had his rifle pointed at the sleeping bags. There was no report or flash, but his target virtually exploded.

The hand torches were doused as everyone scrambled for cover. "Martha!" he shouted, "Get out. Run off to the side!"

He couldn't tell whether she had, but he kept up a steady covering fire, sending stone chips flying in all directions off the cavelet's entrance.

Then someone stuck one of the torches on a pole and hoisted it up.

The others moved briefly into the open to fire all at once down upon his exposed position. But the Earth-man got off one last shot—into the explosives.

The concussion smashed the ground up into his face, and he never heard the cliffside fall across the cavelet, entombing his enemies.

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Someone was shaking him, and he felt a nose and a forehead nestled against the back of his neck. "Chente, please don't die again, please," came Martha's voice.

Chente stirred and looked into the wet darkness. His ears were buzzing, and the left side of his head was one vast ache.

"You all right?" he asked Martha.

"Yes," she said. Her hands tightened momentarily against him, but her voice was much calmer. Now that he was conscious she retreated again into a shell of relative formality. "The others must be dead though. The whole overhang came down on them. I followed the edge of the landfall trying to find you. You were not more than a couple of meters beyond it."

"You knew about this plan beforehand?" Chente's soft question was almost a statement.

"Yes—I mean, *no*. There were rumors that our Special Weapons Group killed the first Chente in an unsuccessful attempt to take his communications bomb. I believed those rumors. We used one of our bombs in the Nuclear Exchange of Year 317. The Special Weapons people have devised new uses, new delivery systems for our two remaining bombs, but what they really need are more nukes. In the last few months, I've had reports that the Weapons people are more eager than ever to get another bomb, that they have some special need for it. When you arrived, I was sure that between the Ontarians and our

Weapons Group someone would try to kill you.“

Chente shook his head, trying to end the buzzing pain. The motion only made him want to be sick. Finally he said, “Their assassination attempt seems incredibly clumsy. Why didn’t they just do away with me once we were airborne?”

Now the Providencian ambassadress seemed completely in control of herself. She said quietly, “That was partly my doing. I knew the Weapons people were waiting for another agent to be sent from Earth. When you came through, I made sure you were assigned to an airship crewed by regular Navy men. I was sure it was safe. For years Oswald has been part of the Navy factions opposed to the Special Weapons Group. But somehow they must have got through to him, and at least a few of his crewmen. Their murder attempt was clumsy, but it was a lot more than I had expected, under the circumstances.”

Chente sat up and propped his head against his hands. This [??] of New Providencian intrigue was not completely unexpected, but it was ludicrous. Even if the conspirators could dig his bomb out of the avalanche, it could not be fused without a voice-code spoken by Chente himself. He saw now his mistake in not revealing that fact upon landing. He had thought that all his dire warnings about the colonists’ common peril would be enough to get cooperation. The situation was all the more ludicrous since he had seen how real the danger of core collapse was.

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“Martha, do you know what I discovered during my survey?”

“No.” She sounded faintly puzzled by this sudden-change in topic.

“In one hundred fifty years or so there will be another core tremor, about as serious as the one you call the Cataclysm. You people simply don’t have time to fight among yourselves. Your only option is to cooperate, to develop a technology advanced enough to ensure your survival.”

“I see... Then the Special Weapons Group are fools as well as murderers. We should be working together to win the Ontarian war, so we can put all our resources into preparing for the next Cataclysm.”

Chente wondered briefly if he were hallucinating. He tried again to explain. “I mean the war itself must be ended; not through victory, but simply through an end of hostilities. You need the Ontarians as much as they need you.”

She shook her head stubbornly. “Chente, you don’t realize what a ruthless, hedonistic crew the Ontarian rulers are. Until they’re eliminated, New Providence will go on bleeding, so that no steps can be taken to protect us from the next Cataclysm.”

Chente sighed, realizing that further argument would get him nowhere: he knew his own planet’s history too well. He changed the subject "Are there any settlements on the Fragge?"

“No cities, but there is at least one village about five hundred kilometers southeast of here. It’s in the single pocket of arable land that’s been discovered on the Fragge.”

“That doesn’t sound too bad. If we start out before dawn, we may be able to avoid Oswald’s—“

“Chente, between here and wherever that village is, there’s not a single plant or animal we can eat without poisoning ourselves.”

“You’d rather take your chance with Oswald?”

“Certainly. It’s obvious that not everyone aboard the *Diligence* was in on this.”

“Martha, I think we can make it through to that village.” He felt too dizzy to explain how. “Will you come along?”

Even in the darkness, he thought he felt a certain amount of amusement in her answer. “Very well... I could hardly return to the *Diligence* alone, anyway. It would give away the fact that you’re out here somewhere.” Her hand brushed briefly across his shoulder.

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They started inland at the morning’s first light, following along the bottom of one of the innumerable tiny ravines cut through the black rock. A temporary but good-sized stream ran down the middle so that they had to walk along the steep, rough ground near the side of the ravine. The buzzing was gone from Chente’s head, but some of the dizziness remained. He was beginning to think that his inner ear had been “tumbled” by the explosion, giving him a permanent, though mild, case of motion sickness.

Martha appeared to be in much better condition. Quintero noticed that since she had made up her mind to come along, she seemed to be doing her best to ignore the fact that they were without food, or a reliable means of navigation.

Toward noon they drank rain water from a shallow puddle in the rocks. Twice during the afternoon Chente thought he heard the engines of the *Diligence*, nearly masked by the volcanic thunder to the west. By late afternoon, he estimated they were twenty kilometers inland—excellent progress, considering the ground they were crossing. The ravine became steadily shallower, until finally they left the lava fields and crossed into a much older countryside. The cloud cover swept away and the westering sun shone down from an orange-red sky upon the savannah-like plain ahead of them. That plain was not covered by grass, but by low, multiple-rooted plants that rose like thick green spiders from the ground.

Chente glanced at the sun, and then at the girl who trudged doggedly on beside him. Her initial reserves of energy were gone now and her face was set in lines of fatigue. “Rest break,” he said, as they entered the greenery. They dropped down onto plants which, despite their disquieting appearance, felt soft and resilient—something like iceplant back on Earth. The abrupt movement made the world spin giddily around Chente’s head. He waited grimly until the wave of dizziness passed, then pulled an oblong case from a pocket and began fiddling. Finally Martha spoke, her tired voice devoid of sarcasm, “Some Earthside magic? You’re going to materialize some food?”

“Something like that.” A small screen flashed to life on the wide side of the oblong. He sharpened the image, but it was still no more than abstract art to the uninitiated: a mixed jumble of blue and green and brown. He didn’t look up as he said, “Martha, did you know that the star-ship left several satellites in orbit before it landed on New Canada?”

She leaned closer to him, looked down at the screen. “Yes. If you know where to look you can often see them at night.”

“They were put up for your colony’s use, and though you no longer have receiving equipment, they are still in working order.”

“And this thing—”

“... Is reading from a synchronous satellite some 40,000 kilometers up. This picture shows most of the Fragge.”

Martha's fatigue was forgotten. "We never dreamed the satellites could still work. I feel like God looking down on things this way. Now we can find that village easily."

"Yes—" Using the controls at the side of the display he began to follow the Fragge's coastline at medium resolution.

Martha spoke up again. "I think we're seeing the north coast now. At least, the part that isn't under cloud looks like the last map I saw. The village is to the southeast of us, so you're not going to find much of anything—"

Chente frowned, looked more closely at the screen, then increased the magnification. It was as if the camera had been dropped straight toward the ground. The tiny bay at the center of the screen swelled to fill the entire display. Now they were looking down through late afternoon haze at a large natural harbor. Chente identified thirty or forty piers and a number of ships. All along the waterfront buildings cast long, incriminating shadows. He pushed a button and five tiny red lights glowed over the image of one of those buildings.

Martha was silent for a long moment. She looked more closely at the picture, and finally she said, "Those ships, they're Ontarian. They have an entire naval base hidden away there. The scum! I can imagine what they're planning: to build up a large secret reserve, and then tempt us into a major battle. Why, Chente, this changes our entire naval situation. It—" Suddenly she seemed to realize that she was not sitting in some intelligence briefing, but was instead stranded thousands of kilometers from the people who could use this discovery.

Chente made no comment, but returned the magnification to its previous level. He followed the coastline all the way around to the south and eventually found two other settlements, both small villages.

"Now let's try to find some food," he said. "If I'm oriented properly, I've got the picture centered on our location." He stepped up the magnification. On the enlarged scale they could see individual hillocks and identify the small stream they had crossed half a kilometer back. Toward the top of the picture, a collection of spikelike shadows stretched several millimeters. He magnified the image still further.

"Animals," Chente said. "They look better than two meters long."

"Then they're buzzards."

"Buzzards?"

"Yes, herbivores. The next largest thing we know about on the Fragge is a predator not much more than a meter long."

Chente grinned at her. "I think I've materialized that food for you."

She looked dubious. "Only if I can acquire a taste for copper salts in my meat."

"Perhaps we can do something about that." He looked at the scale key that flickered near the bottom of the picture. "That herd isn't more than five thousand meters away. I hadn't expected luck this good. How long till sunset? Two hours?"

Martha glanced at the sun, which hung some thirty degrees off the stony ridges behind them. "More like ninety minutes."

"We'll have buzzard soup yet. Come on."

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The pace he set was a slow one, but in their present state it was about the best they could do. The spidery vegetation caught at their feet and the ground was not nearly as level as it looked. An hour and three quarters passed. Behind them the sun had set, and only the reddish sky-glow lighted their way. Chente touched Martha's elbow, motioned her to bend low. If they spooked the herd now, they would have a hungry night. They crawled over a broad hill crest, then lay down to scan the plain beyond. They had not been too cautious: the herd was some five hundred meters down the slope, near a waterhole. Chente almost laughed; buzzards, indeed! They certainly hadn't been named by the first-generation colonists. In this light the creatures might almost have been mistaken for tall men stooped over low against the ground. Their thin wings were clasped behind their backs as they walked slowly about.

Chente chose a medium-sized animal that was browsing away from the main group. He silently took his pistol from his coverall and aimed. The beast screamed once, then ran fifteen meters, right into the water-hole, where it collapsed. The others didn't need two warnings. The herd stampeded off to Chente's right. The creatures didn't run or fly—they bounded, in long, wing-assisted leaps. The motion reminded Chente of the impalas he had seen in the San Joaquin valley. In fact, their ecological niche was probably similar. *In which case*, he thought, *we'd better watch out for whatever passes for lions around here.*

The humans picked themselves up, and walked slowly down toward the abandoned waterhole. Vicente waded cautiously into the shallow, acrid-smelling water. The top of the buzzard's head was blown off. It was probably dead, but he didn't take any chances with it. By the time he got the hundred-kilo carcass out of the pool the short twilight was nearly ended. Martha took over the butchering—though she remarked that buzzards didn't have much in common with the farm animals she was used to. Apparently she had not spent her whole life administrating. He watched her work in the gathering darkness, glad for her help and gladder for her presence.

When the beast was cut into small enough pieces, Chente took a short cylinder from his coveralls and fed some of the meat into it. There was a soft buzzing sound, and then he pressed a cup into Martha's hand. "Buzzard soup. Minus the heavy metal salts."

He could just make out her silhouette as she slowly raised the cup to her lips and drank. She gagged several times but got it all down. When Chente had his first taste he understood her reaction. The sludge didn't *taste* edible.

"This will keep us alive?" Martha asked hoarsely.

"For a number of weeks, anyway. Over a longer time we'd need dietary supplements." He continued feeding the buzzard to the processor, and bagging the resulting slop.

"Why hasn't Earth given us the secret of this device, Vicente? Only one percent of New Providence has soil free from metallic poisons, and Ontario is only three or four times better off. With your processor we could conquer this planet."

He shook his head. "I doubt it. The machine is a good deal more complicated than it looks. On Earth, the technology to build one has existed for less than thirty years. It's not enough to remove the heavy metals from the meat. The result would still be poisonous—or at least nonnutritious. This thing actually reassembles the protein molecules it rips apart. For the technique to be of any use to you, we'd have to ship a factory whole. You just—"

Chente heard a faint hiss above and behind him. Martha screamed. As he whirled and drew his pistol he was bowled over by something that had glided in on them in virtual silence. Chente and the birdlike

carnivore spun over in the spider-weed, the thing's beak searching for his face and throat but finding Chente's upthrust forearm instead. The claws and beak were like knives thrust into his chest and arm. He fired his pistol and the explosion sent the attacker into pieces all over him.

Chente rolled to a sitting position and played fire around the unseen landscape in case there were others waiting. But all he heard was vegetation and earth exploding as the water within them was brought violently to a boil.

The whole thing hadn't lasted more than ten seconds. Now the night was silent again. Chente had the impression that his attacker had been built more like a leopard than a bird. New Canada's dense atmosphere and low gravity made some peculiar things possible.

"Are you all right, Chente?"

The question made him aware of the slick flow of blood down his forearm, of the gashes across his ribs. He swore softly. "No bones broken, but I got slashed up. Are these creatures venomous?"

"No." He heard her move close.

"Good. The first-aid equipment I've got should be enough to keep me going, then. Let's get our stuff away from this waterhole or we'll be entertaining visitors all night long." He got stiffly to his feet.

They collected the bags of processed meat and then walked three hundred meters or so from the waterhole, where they settled down in the soft spider-weed. Chente took a pain killer, and for a while everything seemed hazy and pleasant. The night was mild, even warm. The humidity had dropped steadily during the afternoon, so that the ground felt dry. A heavy breeze pushed around them, but there were no identifiable animal sounds: New Canada had yet to invent insects, or their equivalent. The sky seemed clear, but the stars were not so numerous as in an earthly sky. Chente guessed that the upper-atmosphere haze cut out everything dimmer than magnitude three or four. He looked for Sol near the head of the Great Bear but he wasn't even sure he had spotted that constellation. More than anything else, this sky made him feel far from home.

He lay back, going over in his mind what he had discovered since his arrival. When his predecessor had failed to report, they had tried to prepare him more thoroughly for his return to New Canada. But none of the historians, none of the psychologists had guessed what an extreme social system had developed here. It must have begun as an attempt by the shattered colony to reform society after the Cataclysm, forging a fragile unity from zealous allegiance. But now it bled the warring nations dry, while blinding the people to the possibility of peace, and what was worse, to the absolute necessity for working together. By rights he should now be a hero among the New Canadians. By rights they should be taking the technical advice he could give to increase what small chances there might be to survive the next core tremor. Instead, he was marooned on this forlorn continent, and the only person who had any real desire to help him was just as much a hysterical nationalist as everyone else.

But his mission still remained, even if he couldn't get the locals to cooperate in saving themselves. In spite of its terrible problems, New Canada was a more viable colony than most. After four centuries of space flight, Earth knew how rare are habitable planets. Man's colonies were few. If those failed, there would be no hope for mankind ever to expand itself beyond the Solar System, and eventually the entire race would die of its own stagnation.

Somehow, he had to end this internecine fighting, or at least eliminate the possibility of nuclear war. Somehow he had to force the colonists to fight for survival. At the moment he could see only one possibility. It was a long shot and deception was its essence. How much deception, and of whom, he tried not to consider.

“Martha?”

“Yes?” She huddled tentatively against him, all reserve finally gone.

“We’re going to make for that Ontarian base rather than the villages south of here.”

She stiffened. “What? No! In spite of what some of my people tried to do to you, the Ontarians are still worse. Why—”

“Two reasons. First, that naval base is only two hundred fifty kilometers away, not five hundred. Second, I mean to stop this warfare between your two states. There must be peace.”

“A just peace? One where we won’t have our mines expropriated by the Ontarians? One where we get our fair share of the farmland? One where feudalism is outlawed?”

Chente sighed. “Yes.” *Something like that.*

“Then I’ll do anything to help you. But how can going to the Ontarians bring peace?”

“You remember those red blips on my display? Those were signals from the transponders that are on each of the communications bombs. If I’ve been keeping count properly, this means that the Ontarians have all their nuclear weapons stored at this base. If I tell them of New Providence’s treachery, and offer my services, I may eventually get a crack at those bombs.”

“It might work. Certainly, the world isn’t safe as long as those fanatics have the bomb, so perhaps it’s worth the risk.”

Quintero didn’t answer. He gave one quick glance around, saw no “leopards” in the pale starlight.

Then he drew Martha into his arms and kissed her, and wondered how many times he had kissed her before.

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Two hundred and fifty kilometers in five days would have been no burden for Chente if he had started fresh and uninjured. As it was, however, his dizziness and wounds slowed him down to the point where Martha could move as fast as he. Fortunately it didn’t rain again and the nights remained warm. Water-holes were easily detected from orbit, and when they ran out of food after three days they had no trouble getting more meat—this time without having to fight for it.

But by the morning of the fifth day, they were both near the limit of their resources. Through the haze of pain-killer drugs and motion-sickness pills, the landscape gradually became unreal to Chente. He knew that soon he would stop walking, and no effort of will would get him moving again.

Beside him, Martha occasionally staggered. She walked flat-footedly now, no longer trying to favor her blisters. He could imagine the state of her feet after five days of steady walking.

Ahead stretched a long hill, its crest some five thousand meters away. Chente stopped and studied his display. “Just over that hill and we’re home—”

Martha nodded, tried to smile. The news seemed to give them new strength and they reached the crest in less than ninety minutes. Below them lay the harbor they had discovered five days earlier on Chente’s display. It was separated from the sea by overlapping headlands some ten kilometers further north. South of the green and brown buildings were the unpoisoned farmlands which apparently supported the base.

They looked down on the base only briefly, then silently started toward it. The possibility that they might be shot out of hand had occurred to them, but now they were too tired to worry much about it.

They were picked up by a patrol before they reached the tilled fields. The soldiers didn't shoot, but it was obvious that the visitors were unwelcome. Chente was relieved of his hardware and he and Martha were hustled into an olive-drab car that performed much more efficiently than the buffer Mayor Flaggon drove. Apparently the Ontarians could make fairly good machinery, when ostentation didn't require otherwise. Their captors made no attempt to prevent them from looking about as they drove through the base toward the water's edge, and Chente forced his tired mind to take in all he could. They tooted over the brick-paved road past row after row of warehouses—a testament to Ontarian perseverance. To bring so much equipment and material must have taken many carefully planned voyages. And to avoid Providencian detection, the supply convoys would have had to be small and inconspicuous.

They turned parallel to the long stone quay and drove between huge earthen reservoirs—presumably filled with vegetable oils—and piles of kindling. Further along the quay they passed several cruisers and a battleship. New Canadian ships were noticeably smaller than their counterparts in the old-time navies of Earth. A battleship here might run eight thousand tons and mount six 25-centimeter guns. A fleet of airships sat on the mudflats across the bay. No wonder Balquirth had had no fliers to spare on Wundlich.

Finally they stopped before a long three-story building that looked a good deal more permanent than the wooden warehouses. The driver unlocked the door to the passenger compartment and said, "Out." Two soldiers covered them with what looked like four-barreled shotguns as they followed the driver up the steps to the building's wide doorway.

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The inside of the building was quite a contrast to the camouflaged exterior: deep-blue carpets covered the floor while paintings and tapestries were hung from the polished silver walls. Filament lamps glittered along the windowless hallway. They were led stumbling up two flights to a massive wooden door. One of the guards tapped lightly, and a muffled, though familiar, voice from beyond the door said, "Enter."

They did so and found Pier Balquirth surrounded by aides and a pair of curvaceous secretaries. "Freeman Quintero! I should have guessed it was you. And the lovely, though girdle-bound, Miss Blount. Indeed, no longer girdle-bound—?" He raised his eyebrows. "Sit down, please. I have the feeling you may fall down if you don't. I apologize that I don't give you a chance to rest before talking, but a decent regard for Machiavelli demands that I ask some questions while your defences are down. Whatever happened to Captain Oswald and his gallant crew?"

Chente brought the Ontarian up to date. As he spoke, Balquirth removed a cigar from his desk and lit up. He drew in several puffs and exhaled green smoke. Finally he waved his hand in amusement. "That's pretty sloppy work for the Special Weapons Group, but I suppose they were trying to make your death seem an accident. I hope this opens your eyes, Freeman. Though the Special Weapons Group is the most ruthless bureaucracy within the tight little totalitarian state that calls itself New Providence, the other Groups aren't much better. New Providence may be slightly ahead of the Ontarian Confederation technologically, but they use their advantage simply to make life unbearable for their 'Citizens', and to spread misery to other folk as well."

Martha glared dully at Balquirth but kept silent. Chente recalled Balquirth's casual, almost reckless attitude back in Freetown. He came close to smiling. A dandy and a fool are not necessarily the same thing. "You know, I think you drove me into the arms of New Providence just to create this situation."

Balquirth looked faintly embarrassed. "That's close to the truth. I stuck my neck way out to get your

predecessor on one of my vessels. The first Quintero completed his survey, and told me his discoveries—I'm sure you've made these same discoveries by now—but he wouldn't believe that a loose confederation like Ontario could handle the preparations for this core tremor. He kept insisting that both New Providence and Ontario must somehow unite and work together. These are nice sentiments, but he just didn't realize how intolerant and uncompromising Miss Blount's friends can be. When the New Providencians killed him, my government—and myself in particular—were the goats.

“This time I thought I'd let you go with the Providencians. They'd try to kill you and steal your gadgets, but I knew that without your active cooperation they wouldn't get much use out of them. And I knew you were too stubborn to let them cajole you over to their side. If you were killed, then they would look bad. If by some quirk they didn't manage to kill you, I was pretty sure that you would realize what an unpleasant bunch they are.

“I am truly pleased that you survived, however. Can we depend on your help, or are you even more stubborn than I had guessed?”

Chente didn't answer immediately. “Are you in charge here?”

Pier chuckled. “As those things go in the Ontarian Confederacy—yes. We've got men and material from four major bossdoms here, and their chiefs are at each other's throats half the time. But the base was my idea, and the Bossmanic Council in Toronto has appointed me temporarily superior to the three other bossmen involved.”

The answer gave Chente a moment to think. In his way, the Ontarian was just as likable and just as much the capable fanatic as Martha. The only difference was that by accident of birth, one was supporting a loose feudal confederation and the other a more industrialized, more centralized regime. And both were so in love with their systems that they put national survival before the survival of the entire colony. Finally he said, “Your plan has convinced me—hell, it practically killed me. If you'll bring in the things they confiscated, I may be able to show you something you can use.” Beside him, Martha's expression became steadily darker, though she still maintained her silence.

The bossman turned to one of his secretaries: “Darlene, go out and have Gruzinsky bring in any equipment he's holding. The rest of you leave, too—except Maclen, Trudeau, and our guests,” he gestured at Chente and Martha. Chente glanced at his companion, wondered why Balquirth had permitted her to remain. Then he realized that the Ontarian had guessed his involvement with Martha and was gauging his truthfulness by the exhausted woman's reactions.

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A soldier brought in the various items taken from Chente and Martha, and placed them on the low table that sat before Balquirth's em-pillowed throne. The bossman picked up Chente's weapon. It looked vaguely like a large-caliber pistol, except that the bore was filled with a glassy substance.

“This does what I think it does?” Bossman Pier asked.

“Yes. It's an energy weapon—but the radiation is in the submillimeter range, so there isn't much ionization along the beam path, and your target can't see where your fire is coming from. But you'll find this more interesting.” He pulled the satellite display toward himself and pushed the green button on its side. The tiny screen lit up to show a section of coast and ocean. Balquirth was silent for several seconds. “Very pretty,” he said finally, but the banter was gone from his voice. “I never guessed the satellites were still working.”

“The colonial planners built them to last. They didn't expect you would be able to go up and repair

them.”

“Hm-m-m. Too bad they didn’t build our ground receivers the same way. What’s that?” Balquirth interrupted himself to point at a tiny white “vee” set in the open ocean between two wide cumulous cloud banks.

“A ship of some kind. Let’s have a closer look.” Chente stepped up the magnification. The craft was clearly visible, its white wake streaming out far behind it.

“Why, that’s the *Ram!*” one of the Ontarian officers exclaimed. “This is incredible! That ship left thirty-three hours ago. She must be hundreds of kilometers out, and yet we can see her as if we were flying over in an airship. When was this picture taken?”

“Less man a second ago. The coverage is live.”

“What area can be observed with this gadget?”

“Everything except the poles, though high resolution pictures are available only up to latitude 45 degrees.”

“Hm-m-m, we could reconnoiter the entire Inner Ocean.” Pier touched one of the knobs. Now that Chente had activated the device it responded to the Ontarian’s direction. The *Ram’s* image dwindled, slid to one side, and they looked down on an expanse of cloud-stippled ocean. Chente started. Almost off the left side of the screen was a cluster of wake “vees”. Balquirth increased the magnification until the formation filled the screen.

“Those aren’t ours,” one of the officers said finally.

“Clearly,” said Balquirth. “It’s equally clear that this is a New Providencian fleet, Colonel Maclen. And their wakes point our way.”

“Looks like four Jacob class battleships, half a dozen cruisers, and twenty destroyers,” said the second, older officer. “But what are those ships in the trailing squadron?” His eyes narrowed. “They’re troop transports!”

“Now, I wonder what an invasion force would be doing in this innocent part of the world,” said Pier.

The older officer didn’t smile at the flippancy. “From their wake angles I estimate they’re making thirty kilometers an hour, Bossman. If I read the key on the screen right, that means we have less than forty-four hours.”

Chente glanced across at Martha, saw her eyes staring back at him. Now he knew why the Special Weapons people had wanted another bomb. Pier noticed their exchange of looks.

“Any idea why this invasion should coincide with your arrival, Freeman Quintero?”

“Yes. My guess is that certain Providencian groups discovered your base here some months ago, but deferred attack until they could get still another nuclear bomb—namely the one I brought—for their pile.”

The bossman nodded, then seemed to put the matter aside. “Admiral Trudeau, I intend to meet them at sea. We have neither the shore batteries nor the garrison to take them on at the harbor entrance.”

The officer nodded, looking unhappy. “But even with this much warning,” he nodded at the screen, “they’ve still caught us with our pants down. I only have three cruisers, two battleships, and a handful of escort craft in port. We can’t stop four Jacob class battlewagons and a half dozen cruisers with that,

Bossman.”

“We have the bombs, sir,” Colonel Maclen broke in.

“You Army sorts are all alike, Colonel,” Admiral Trudeau snapped. “The only time you ever used a bomb, it was smuggled into New Providencian territory and exploded on the ground. On the open sea we need at least twenty kilometers clearance between our fleet and the target. It’s mighty hard to sneak a dirigible, or a torpedo boat, across a gap that wide.”

Maclen had no answer to the criticism. Chente suddenly saw an opportunity to get at the Ontarian bombs and perhaps to destroy the Providencian nuclear capability in the bargain. He said, “But those comm bombs were mounted on drive units powerful enough to boost them out of the atmosphere. Why don’t you alter the drive program and let them deliver themselves?” The three Ontarians looked at him open-mouthed. Beside him he heard Martha gasp.

Balquirth said, “You can make such alterations?” Chente nodded. “As long as we know the target’s position, I’ll have no problem.”

Martha gave an inarticulate cry of rage as she lunged across the table, picked up the recon display and flung it to the floor. Maclen and Trudeau grabbed her, forced her away from the table. Balquirth retrieved the display. The picture on the screen still glowed crisp and true. He shook his head sadly at Martha. “That’s it, then. Trudeau, sound general alarm. I want some kind of fleet ready to sail in twenty-two hours.”

The Navy man left without a word. Balquirth turned back to the Earthman. “You’re wondering why I don’t keep the fleet here, and lob the bomb out to sea when the enemy comes in range?”

Chente considered wearily. “That would be the prudent thing to do—if you trusted me.”

“Right. Unfortunately, I don’t trust you that far. I’ll let you decide which bomb you want, and let you supervise the launch, but I’d rather not risk this base on the possibility of a change in your heart. We may not have many ships here yet, but the physical plant we’ve developed makes this one of the best naval bases in our confederation—whether it remains secret or not.”

Chente nodded. Martha murmured something; Balquirth turned to her and bowed almost graciously. “You may come along, too, if you wish, Miss Blount.”

The *Fearsome*, Admiral Trudeau’s flagship, displaced seventy-three hundred tons and could run at better than forty kilometers per hour. She was doing at least that now. Chente stood on the bridge and looked out over the foredeck. After being treated by Ontarian medics, he had slept most of the preceding day. He felt almost normal now, except for a stiffness in his arm and side and occasional attacks of vertigo.

He had studied naval types of the Twentieth Century quite thoroughly back home, and in many ways the *Fearsome* was a familiar craft. But there were differences. The Ontarian construction had a faintly crude, misshapen appearance. Standardized production techniques were only beginning to appear in the Confederacy. And without petroleum resources or coal, the nations of New Canada were forced to use vegetable oils or wood to fire their boilers—the greasy black smoke that spouted from the *Fearsome*’s stacks was enough to cause, a queasy stomach even if his inner ear and the rolling sea were not. The ship had a huge crew. Apparently its auxiliary devices were not connected to the central power plant. Even the big deck guns needed work squads to turn and angle them. In a sense the *Fearsome* was a cross between a Roman galley and a 1910 battleship.

So far Chente's jury-rigged plans had gone much more smoothly than he had dared to hope. At Balquirth's direction, Colonel Maclen had shown him the maximum security storage bunker where Ontario's five nuclear weapons were located. Only one was needed for this mission, but the Earthman had been allowed to check the missiles' drive units in making his selection. Apparently, neither Maclen or Balquirth realized that a simple adjustment of the drive unit could render the bomb itself permanently unusable. It had taken Chente only a moment to so adjust four of the five weapons.

Now the hastily formed Ontarian fleet was under full steam, with the bomb launch less than an hour away. In addition to the *Fearsome*, the fleet contained the battleship *Covenant* and two large cruisers—essentially as protection for that one bomb. When they were within missile range of the Providencians the Ontarian fleet would turn away, and Balquirth and Chente would take the bomb aboard the motorized boat which now sat near the *Fearsome's* stem. Not until then would Chente be allowed to touch the bomb's trigger.

Chente looked down at Martha, who sat beside him on the bridge gazing fixedly out at the ocean. Her wrists had been manacled, but when the sea got choppy Admiral Trudeau had removed the cuffs so that she could more easily keep her balance. She had not spoken a single word for the last three hours, had seemed almost like a disinterested spectator. Chente touched her shoulder, but she continued to ignore him.

The starboard hatch opened Balquirth, dressed now in utility coveralls and a slicker, stepped onto the bridge. He spoke briefly with Trudeau, then approached the Earthman. "We've got problems, Freeman. This storm has kicked up a bit faster than the weather people predicted. We can't spot our fleet on the display, and the New Providencian force will be under cloud cover in another fifteen minutes."

Chente shrugged, and the gesture brought a sharp pain to his side. "No matter. That satellite we're reading from was also intended for navigation. It's got radar powerful enough to scan the ocean. We'll be able to keep track of the other fleet almost as easily as if there were no storm at all."

"Ah, good. Let's go below and take a look at the display, then. You said we could launch the missile from twenty-five kilometers out?"

"That's the effective range. Actually the bomb's drive unit could push it much farther, but it wasn't designed as a weapon, so it would be terrifically inaccurate at greater ranges."

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Chente and Balquirth left the bridge and went carefully down the steep ladderway to the charthouse. The sky was completely overcast now, and a gathering squall obscured the horizon. He could barely make out the forms of the escort craft, far off to the side. The hard cold wind that sleeted across the *Fearsome* presaged the storm's arrival.

The charthouse was hidden from the direct blast of the wind by several armoured buttresses and a gun turret. Five armed seamen stood at the entrance; once they recognized Balquirth, there was no trouble getting inside. The charthouse itself was well insulated from the outside, as the instruments it housed required better care than men did. Balquirth had had all of Chente's equipment stowed here, along with the communications bomb, a two-meter-long cylinder of black plastic that rested in a case of native velvet near the cabin's interior bulkhead. .

Maclen sat beside some bulky and primitive wireless equipment. The young colonel held a repeating slug gun at the ready position. He was the room's only occupant Apparently Pier trusted only his top aides with this Pandora's box of Earthly artifacts.

“All secure, sir,” Maclen said. “I let the navigator take some charts but no one else has been by.”

“Very good, Colonel,” said Balquirth. “All right, Freeman, it’s all yours.”

Chente approached the brass chart table and the satellite receiver. He fiddled briefly with the controls, and the screen turned gray. A tiny point of light moved slowly from left to right across the top of the screen, then returned to the left margin and started across again. “That’s the scanning trace from the satellite. It’s illuminating a square kilometer as it moves across the ocean. The satellite’s maser isn’t powerful enough to light up a larger area, so the picture must be built up from a sequence of scans.” The tiny blip of light shifted down about a millimeter with each scan, but still nothing showed in its track. Finally, two golden blips appeared, and in the scan below that, another blip.

“The Providencians,” Balquirth said, almost to himself.

Chente nodded. “At this resolution, it’s difficult to see individual ships, but you get the idea of their formation.”

“What’s that red blip?” Bossman Pier pointed to the newest apparition.

“That must be a transponder on one of the Providencian bombs. All the communications bombs transmit a uhf signal in response to microwave from the satellite. I suppose, that originally the gimmick was used to find dud bombs that fell back to the surface without detonating.”

“So they really thought they were going to wipe us out,” said Pier. “This is even better than I had hoped.”

The scanning dot moved relentlessly across the screen, shifting down with each pass to reveal more and more of the Providencian fleet. Finally they could see the echelon structure of the enemy forces. For ten more scans, no new blips appeared. Then a single red blip showed up far south of the enemy fleet. Chente caught his breath,

Balquirth looked across the table at him. “How far is that bomb from us?” he said quietly.

Chente held up his hand, and watched the scanning dot continue across the screen. He remembered Martha’s remarks about the Providencians having special delivery systems. Then the scanning dot showed the leading elements of the Ontarian fleet—just six lines below the red dot. “Less than ten kilometers, Bossman.”

Balquirth didn’t reply. He looked at the display’s key, then rattled off some instructions into a speaking tube. General quarters sounded. Seconds later Chente heard the *Fearsome’s* big deck guns fire.

Finally Balquirth spoke to Chente. His voice was calm, almost as if their peril were someone else’s. “How do you suppose they detected our fleet?”-

“There are a number of ways. Martha said the Providencians were experimenting with a lot of gadgets of their own design. In fact they may not have detected us. That bomb is probably aboard a small, unmanned boat. They may just keep it thirty or forty kilometers ahead of their fleet. Then if it hears the sounds of propellers nearby it detonates.”

“Ah, yes. Research and development—isn’t it wonderful.”

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They stood waiting in silence. Ten kilometers away, a barrage of heavy artillery was arcing down on the cause of that innocuous red blip. Any second now they would discover just how cleverly the New

Providencians had designed their delivery system.

From outside the windowless charthouse came screams. No other sounds, just screams. Chente smelled fire, noticed the insulation around the closed hatch was beginning to smoke. He and Balquirth hit the deck, and Maclen was not far behind. The bomb's searing flash had crossed the ten kilometers separating them at the speed of light, but they would have to wait almost seven seconds for the water-borne shock wave to arrive.

Chente heard a monstrously loud ripping sound, felt the deck smash into his chest and head. He was not conscious when the air-borne shock wave did its job, peeling back the charthouse bulkhead and part of the deck above them.

Chente woke with rain in his face, and the muffled sound of exploding ammunition and burning fuel all around. Behind all these sounds, and nearly as insistent, was a steady roar—the last direct evidence of the nuclear explosion.

The Earthman rolled over, cursing as he felt the stitches the Ontarian doctors had put in his side come apart. His head rang, his nose was bleeding, and his ears felt stuffed with cotton. But as he shook the rain out of his eyes he saw that the others in the charthouse had not fared so well. On the other side of the cabin, Maclen's body was sprawled, headless. Nearer, Balquirth lay unmoving, a pool of blood spreading from his mouth.

For a few moments Chente sat looking stupidly at the scene, wondering why he was alive. Then he began to think. His plans to destroy the Providencian bombs were ruined now that the Ontarian fleet had been destroyed. Or were they? Suddenly he realized that this turn of events might give him hope of completing his mission and still escaping both groups. Chente struggled to his feet, and noticed the deck was listing—or was it only his sense of balance gone awry again? He recovered the recon display and his pistol, then picked the communications bomb from its case. The bomb didn't mass more than fifteen kilograms, but it was an awkward burden.

Outside the charthouse the mutilated guards' bodies lay amid twisted metal. The ship's paint was scorched and curling even in the rain. The after part of the ship was swallowed by flame, and the few people he saw alive were too busy to notice him.

Martha. The thought brought him up short, and he reconsidered the possibilities. Then he turned and started toward the bridge. He could see the gaping holes where the glass had been blown out of the bridge's ports. Anybody standing by those ports would be dead now.

Then he saw her, crawling along the gangway above. The deck listed a full ten degrees as he pulled himself up a ladderway to reach her. "Let's get off this thing!" he shouted over the explosions and the fire. He caught her arm and helped her to her feet.

"What-?" She shook her head. A trickle of blood ran from one ear down her neck. Her face was smeared with grime and blood.

He could barely hear her voice, and realized the explosion must have deafened them all. He held onto her and shouted again into her good ear. For a moment she relaxed against him, then pulled back, and he saw her lips mouth: "Not with... traitor!"

"But I was never going to use that bomb on your people. It was just a trick to get at the Ontarian bombs." It was the biggest lie he'd told her yet, but he knew she wanted to believe it.

He pointed toward the *Fearsome's* stern, and shouted, "To the launch!" She nodded and they staggered

across the tilting, twisted deck, toward the flames and the sound of explosions. Everyone they met was going in the opposite direction, and seemed in no mood to stop and talk.

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Now there was only one narrow path free of flames, and the heat from either side was so intense it blistered their skin even as they ran through it. Then they were beyond the flames, on the relatively undamaged stern. Chente saw that the motor launch had been torn loose from its after mooring cable, and now its stern hung down, splashing crazily in the water. Several bodies lay unmoving on the scorched deck, but no one else was visible. They crawled down to where the bow of the launch stuck up over the railing. Chente had almost concluded they were alone on the stern, when Balquirth stepped from behind the wreckage next to the launch's moorings.

The Ontarian swayed drunkenly, one hand grasping the jagged and twisted metal for support. His other hand held a slug gun. The lower part of his face was covered with blood. Chente staggered toward him, and shouted, "Thought you were dead. We're going ahead with your plan."

Through the blood, Pier almost seemed to smile. He gestured at Martha. "No... Quintero," his voice came faintly over the sounds of rain and fire, "... think you've turned your coat..."

He raised the pistol, but Chente was close to him now. The Earthman lunged, knocking the gun aside with his bomb, and drove his fist hard into Pier's stomach. The other crumpled. Chente staggered back, clinging to the rail for support. It struck him that the fight must have looked like a contest between drunks.

He turned to Martha, and waved at the launch, "We'll have to jump for it, before that other cable breaks."

She nodded, her face pale with cold and fear. They were cut off from the rest of the ship by spreading fire, and even as he spoke the *Fearsome* tilted another five or ten degrees. He climbed over the rail and jumped. The drop was only three meters, but his target was moving and he was holding the bomb. He hit hard on his bad side and rolled down the launch's steeply sloping deck.

Gasping for breath he dragged himself back up the deck and waved to Martha above him. She stood motionless, her fists tightly clenched about the railing. For a moment, Chente thought she would balk, but she slipped over the railing and jumped, her arms outstretched. He managed to break her fall and they both went sprawling. They crawled clumsily down the bobbing deck toward the craft's cockpit. Martha struggled through the tiny hatch, and Chente pushed the bomb after her. Then he turned and fired at the remaining mooring cable.

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The launch knifed into the water and for a moment submerged completely, but somehow Chente managed to keep being washed away. The boat bobbed back to the surface, and he scrambled into the cockpit.

From his talks with Balquirth, Quintero knew the boat had a steam-electric power plant—it was ordinarily used for espionage work. Looking over the control panel, Chente decided that this was the most advanced Ontarian mechanism he had encountered—just the kind of luck they needed. He depressed the largest switch of the board and felt a faint humming beneath his feet. He eased the "throttle forward. As the launch pulled slowly away from the foundering *Fearsome*, he thought he heard the whine and snick of small fire caroming off the boat's hull; apparently Balquirth was not easily put out of action. But now it was too late to stop their escape. The *Fearsome* was soon lost to sight- amid the deep swells

and pounding rain. The last Chente saw and heard of the Ontarian fleet was a pale orange glow through the storm followed by a sound that might have been thunder. Then they were alone with the storm.

The storm was bad enough in itself. The tiny cabin spun like a compass needle, and several times Chente was afraid the boat would capsize. Somehow Martha managed to tie down the equipment and dig a couple of life jackets out of a storage cubby.

Chente fastened the recon screen to the control board, and inspected the radar display. On high resolution he could distinguish every vessel in the area. Even his motor launch showed—or at least the transponder on his communications bomb did. They would have no trouble navigating through this storm, if they didn't sink. He briefly thanked heaven that the comm bombs were about as clean as anything that energetic can be: nearly all the energy was radiated as soft X rays. At least they didn't have to worry that the rain was drenching them in radioactive poisons.

“Now what?” Martha shouted finally. She had wedged herself in the corner, trying to keep her balance.

Chente hesitated. He had three choices. He could flee the scene immediately; he could use his bomb to destroy the Providencians and their remaining bomb—just as he and Balquirth had planned; or he could indulge in more treachery. The first option would leave the Providencians with a bomb, and an enormous advantage in the world. The second option would be difficult to execute; at this point Martha might be stronger than he was. He might have to kill her. Besides, if he exploded his bomb, he would have no way to make his report to Earth.

That left treachery. “We're going to try to get picked up by one of the ships in the Providencian fleet.”

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Twenty minutes passed. At the top of the screen the launch's blip moved closer and closer to the red dot that represented the last Providencian bomb. He kept the screen angled so that Martha didn't have a clear view of it.

They should be able to see the ship before much longer. He leaned his head close to Martha and said, “Do you know any signals that would keep them from shooting us out of hand?” He pointed at the electric arc lamp mounted in the windscreen.

Her voice came back faintly over the wind. “I know some diplomatic codes. We update them every fifteen days—they just might respect them.”

“We'll have to chance it.” Chente helped her light the arc lamp. But there was nothing to see except storm. Chente guided the launch so that its image on the screen approached the other. As they swung over the top of a swell, they saw a long gray shadow not more than two hundred meters ahead. It appeared to be an auxiliary craft, probably a converted cargo ship.

Chente reached across the panel and tapped new instructions into the display. Now the machine was reading the transponder's position from its internal direction finders. Beside him at the control panel, Martha awkwardly closed and opened the signaler's shutter. For nearly thirty seconds there was no reply. Chente held his breath. He expected that this particular ship would be manned by Special Weapons people, who might well be trigger-happy and extremely suspicious. On the other hand, depending on what they expected of the Ontarians, the weapons people might be cocksure and careless.

Finally a light high on one of the ship's masts blinked irregularly. “They acknowledge. They want us to move in closer.”

Chente worked the electric boat closer and closer to the ship. Martha continued sending. They were about fifty meters out now, and they could make out the details of the other vessel. Quintero looked closely at his display, then scanned the ship's fore-deck. He noticed a shrouded boat lashed down near the bow. Its position agreed with the location of the blip on his display. This was better than he had hoped. That was the twin of the robot boat that had nearly destroyed the Ontarian fleet. He took one hand from the wheel, drew his pistol and fired a single low-power bolt. The thick windscreen shattered, throwing slivers of glass all around. He stepped the pistol's power to full and aimed at the other vessel's bow.

"No!" Martha screamed as she rammed him against the bulkhead. She was tall and strong and she fought desperately. They careened wildly about the cabin for several seconds before Chente got a solid, close-fisted blow to her solar plexus. She collapsed without a sound, and the Earthman whirled back to face the deadlier enemy.

The ship's main guns were turned toward him, but he was below them now. He sprayed fire all along the vessel, concentrating on the smaller deck guns and the shrouded boat. Clouds of steam quickly obscured the glowing craters his pistol gouged in the ship's hull, and then the fuel supply aboard the robot boat exploded in a ball of orange-red flame hot enough to melt the controls of the bomb within.

There was the sparkle of automatic fire from up in the ship's masts, and the cockpit seemed to shred around him. He fired upward blindly and the sparkling ceased. Chente grabbed the wheel and turned about. The seconds passed but there was no more Providencian gunfire. The sounds of the burning ship quickly faded behind them and they were alone.

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They drove steadily west for three hours. The seas fell. Just as the sun set, the clouds cover in the far west moved aside so that the sun shone red and gold through the narrow band between horizon and cloud.

His reconnaissance screen showed no sign of pursuit. More importantly, there was only one transponder blip glowing on Chente's display—his own.

The tiny launch was slowing, and finally Chente decided to try to fire its boiler. He eased the throttle back to null, and the boat sat bobbing almost gently in the sea the sun turned gold.

"Martha?" No response. "I had to do it."

"Had to?" Her tone showed despair and unbelieving indignation. She looked briefly up at him through her rain-plastered hair. "How many Providencians did you kill today?"

Chente didn't answer. The rationalizations that men use for killing other men stuck in his throat, at least for the moment. Finally he said, "I told you, I told the Ontarians: Unless you work together you will all be wiped out. But it didn't do any good just to say it. Now, Ontario and New Providence have a mutual enemy: me. I have the only nuclear weapon left, and I have means to deliver it. Soon I will control territory, too. Your nations will spend their energies to develop the technology to defeat me, and in the end you may be good enough to meet your real peril."

But Martha had resumed her study of the deck, and made no reply.

Chente sighed, and began to pull back the deck plates that should cover the boiler.

The sun set and the first stars of twilight shone through the gap between the clouds and the horizon.

Nineteen light-years away, his likeness must still be awaiting his report. In a few weeks, Chente would make that report, using the Ontarian communications bomb. But the people of the New Canada would never know it, for that bomb was the lever he would use to take over some small Ontarian fiefdom. Already he must begin casting the net of schemes and machinations that would stretch one hundred years into this miserable planet's future. It was small consolation to hope that his likeness would live to see other worlds.

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