

DUTY, HONOR, PLANET

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A story of love, honor, courage,
and the Strategic Defense Initiative...

Jan Pieter Heugens had been a hod carrier, a sailor, a revolutionary, and a hard working diplomat in his time. As he stood before his spacious office window and watched the rain sluice down on New York from leaden skies, he reviewed his checkered career with a mood that matched the gloom of the weather. In the last dozen years, he had seen famines, and floods, and revolutions aplenty -- all of which the UN had somehow weathered under his stewardship as Secretary-General. As he watched the rivulets of water cascading down the glass wall in front of him, he wondered if either he or the UN would last long enough for his term of office to reach a dozen and one years.

The oaken door behind him opened and his secretary ushered a ragged figure inside. Heugens took a deep breath and turned to face the man he was careful to think of only by his code name, "Bernard."

Bernard peeled off a threadbare raincoat and tossed it over the back of one of the leather chairs in front of the Secretary-General's desk.

"Did you have a good flight down?"

"Average good for a re-entry, Mr. Secretary-General. A little bumpy on final approach to the Cape," Bernard said, seating himself in the other chair. "I see by the *Times* that the Security Council has scheduled a vote for next Wednesday."

"Don't believe everything you read in the papers. Torres is not about to let it come to a vote. The Motion to Censure is dead. It just hasn't laid down yet."

"Then we go as planned?"

"We go as planned. Have you found your man?"

Bernard nodded. "Yes. Of course, a thousand things *could* go wrong."

"Such as?"

"Our intelligence could be faulty. Maybe Torres is on to our scheme and feeding us what he wants us to hear."

"In that event, Bernard, we'd better prepare for the firing squad."

"What about Warren? Can we trust him?"

"He *is* the President of the United States. If not him, who?"

Bernard's response was a rude noise.

"When can you get the ball rolling?" the S-G asked, tamping tobacco into his pipe. His doctor would not let him light it, but the act of holding it clenched between his teeth relaxed him.

"Forty-eight hours."

"Then we start operations two days from now. You put our plan into action."

"Order acknowledged, Mr. Secretary-General."

Heugens sighed. Now that the decision had finally been made, the burden on his shoulders felt lighter than it had in days.

"How about a glass of sherry before heading back?" asked his visitor.

"A whiskey'd go down better."

"Then whiskey it is!"

#

The Earth was a blue-white jewel poised against the jet-black canvas of open space. Occasionally a patch of brown or green, or gray would poke through the all-encompassing white bands of clouds that girded the globe and obscured the familiar outlines of the seas and continents.

Friedrich Stassel gazed absently at the viewscreen at one end of the mess hall and noted the trailing terminator was near the western salient of Africa. He hurriedly gulped down the last of his tea. Two quick bites finished off the last of his toast and peach marmalade. It was late and he was due on duty in a few minutes.

Unnoticed by Stassel, Major N'Gomo, the Station Executive Officer, stepped through the messhall hatch and surveyed the crowded room with sharp eyes. He spotted the young German and moved quickly through the clutter of tables and subdued conversation to stand beside him. Stassel looked up to see a set of flashing white teeth set in a face of darkest ebon.

"The Commandant would like to see you, Fred," the Ghanaian said.

"Yes sir," Stassel replied. He looked quizzically at N'Gomo, but the Exec's face was an aloof mask as always. No one could ever tell what went on behind those yellow tinged eyes. Stassel gathered up his tray, standing slowly to keep the cup and silverware in place in the one-third gravity of the space station, and headed for the main hatch. As he passed the disposal chute, he stuffed the utensils into its gaping maw with a clatter of steel on steel.

The Commandant's office was ninety degrees spinward around the Station's rim from the officer's mess. Stassel quick stepped his way around the rising curve of the Alpha Deck corridor, hurrying as fast as the in-station traffic laws would allow. He chewed his lower lip and wondered about the summons as he walked, mentally reviewing all of his activities for the last week. Had he committed an offense serious enough to warrant being called on the carpet by the Commandant himself? Offhand, he could not think of anything.

Of course, just because you did not know about it was no sure indication of a clear conscience as far as General Heinemann, the Commandant, was concerned. More than one officer had walked jauntily into Heinemann's office, only to emerge a whipped man. Rumor was that the Commandant could see through steel bulkheads up to a centimeter thick. Stassel had no reason to doubt it.

Outside the Commandant's office, Stassel stopped to check his uniform in the mirror provided for just that purpose. A blond young man with Heidelberg dueling scars around his scalp, a serious face, and soft blue eyes that ill befitted a soldier peered out of the mirror at him. The picture was completed by an asymmetric nose -- the result of ejecting from a burning plane at too high a speed in pilot training -- and a spotless black and silver uniform. He carefully brushed a couple of imagined wrinkles from his tunic and rubbed mirror-polished boots on pants legs for insurance.

Then he took a deep breath and knocked on the Commandant's door. A few seconds later he heard a muffled order to enter. Stassel marched to the front of the Commandant's desk, snapped to attention, and saluted. Heinemann was making notes on a yellow note pad and continued writing as Stassel held the salute.

After a few moments, he put down the pen and looked up, his steel gray eyes more tired than Stassel could remember having seen them before. The Commandant returned the salute and leaned back in his chair.

"Have a seat, Friedrich. Smoke if you like."

Stassel was momentarily startled by General Heinemann's use of his first name. He had not known that the Commandant knew it. He hesitantly took one of the gray UN issue chairs in front of the desk, politely declining a cigar from the Commandant's humidor.

"How is your dear mother? It's been almost five years since I've seen her," Heinemann said, puffing a stogie alight and blowing a blue cloud of smoke toward the ventilator shaft. "I'm afraid I have been derelict in not visiting since your father left the service."

"*Mutter* is fine, Herr General."

"I served under your father inboard *Graf Von Bismarck*. Did you know that? I was his Executive Officer and his friend."

"My father used to talk a great deal about his days in space aboard *Bismarck*, Herr General. He spoke of you often, and only with highest regard."

"I was sorry to hear of his death last year, Friedrich. An accident on the autobahn is a tragic end for a spaceman, no?"

"Yes sir. Most tragic."

"He was a good German, your father. In your great grandfather's time, that was a term of derision, Friedrich. Did you know that? It has been men like Hans Erich Stassel who put some respect back into the word *Deutschlander*. Why as late as fifteen years ago, a Luftwaffe officer could never have worn black and silver. To do so would have been to invite comparison with Hitler and his maniac *Schutzstaffeln*, the dread SS. Do you understand what a handicap we have had to overcome, Friedrich? It was no easy thing to re-earn the respect of civilized folk after having lost it so thoroughly."

"Yes sir." Stassel wondered what the Commandant was getting at. The old martinet did not usually give himself over to reminiscing. It was a bad sign.

The Commandant cleared his throat, and snubbed out the burning cigar, attacking it as if it were an enemy. "I have orders, Hauptmann Stassel. You will report to the shuttle docking portal immediately after your meeting with the Briefing Officer. There you will take the in-orbit shuttle to Peace Control Satellite Alpha-Nine for duty until relieved. Your personal gear is already aboard."

"Alpha-Nine, Herr General? Robertson has Alpha-Nine on the duty roster next shift."

"Robertson is in the brig with Garcia. They got into a disagreement in the Lounge last watch and will be cooling off for the next ten days or so."

"Robertson and Garcia? I can't believe it. What started it?"

"What else?" the Commandant asked, staring idly at the blue and white UN flag that decorated one side of his office. His voice was weary with too much strain and work.

Stassel did not have to ask what he meant. Robertson was an American and Garcia a Mexican. Their fight had started over the border crisis, of course. They were too good friends to let anything other than women or politics come between them.

"It's getting bad, isn't it?" he asked.

Heinemann sighed. "Worse than you might think, Hauptmann. Even the ranks of the Peace Enforcers are not immune to these internecine squabbles that have broken out all over the face of the Earth. If it is not the North Americans against the South, then it is the Australians versus Indonesia, or Japan against China and West Russia. I tell you the whole world is going to Satan in a hand trolley." Heinemann glanced at the chronometer on the bulkhead behind Stassel. "The time is getting short, Hauptmann. You still need to be briefed."

"Yes sir."

"Before you go, Friedrich. Do you know why I am picking you for this assignment instead of the backup astronaut?"

"No sir."

"Because, like your father, you are a good German. And the world needs more of us. We know how to follow orders without question. Few other people do. It is a much-maligned trait, Friedrich. The Yankees and French are always making snide comments about blind Prussian obedience to orders. Do not let them faze you. In the current situation, blind obedience to orders is the only thing that is going to save us. I need men in orbit who can keep their heads and do their duty. Can you?"

"I think so, sir."

"So do I, Friedrich. You are your father's son. Now you had better see the Briefing Officer in Compartment One-Twelve. You are minus minutes for that shuttle launch. They'll hold it if you're late, but they won't like it."

"Thank you, Herr General."

Wing Commander Livingston was on detached service from the RAF. His powder blue uniform looked out of place next to Stassel's silver and black. Stassel sat in an aluminum chair and took notes as Livingston reeled off figures in his clipped, Oxford accent.

"... Your area of responsibility will include Longitudes 100 West to 120 West, Captain. Your satellite will be in an alternating synchronous orbit with Beta-Nine, of course, and you will have prime responsibility in the Northern Hemisphere during even watch periods and Southern Hemisphere during the odd. Luckily, south of the equator there is only empty ocean between 100 and 120 West, so you'll be able to get some rest.

"You are hereby directed to pay especially close attention to the situation around the US--Mexican border..." Livingston looked up, the podium light casting shadows on his face. "Watch your ass on that one, Fred. It is a tinderbox. The Mexicans are bound to try a raid between now and the Security Council vote on Friday."

"I thought the vote would be Wednesday," Stassel said.

"Wouldn't bet on it if I were you, chap. Besides, I have Friday afternoon in the pool. So I can hope."

"How do you think the Council will vote, Livingston?"

"I'd say they will turn the resolution down flat. Too many people do not like the Yanks for it to pass. They enjoy the sight of the Mex dwarf tweaking the Giant's nose, and they will vote against it just to keep the pot boiling. However, to make sure, you can bet the politicians in Mexico City will try to score another coup to intimidate the rest of the Council into voting their way. God knows it's easy enough to do."

"And if the Mexicans keep it up?"

"Then it'll come to war quick enough. With Warren in the White House, it is practically preordained. He barely scraped by last election with strong Ecocrat support. The Mex's are punching the Ecocrats right where it hurts. Warren is going to have to act quickly or else lose his base of power. And if it comes to war, you know what that will mean."

Stassel nodded.

It had started as an argument over import quotas on Mexican sugar beets. In the bad old days, nothing would have come of it. The Mexicans would have complained to Washington, only to be ignored. A storm of injured Latin pride would have boiled up in Mexico, but they would have been powerless to act.

However, the bad old days were long gone. Two things had occurred to permanently change the balance of power in the world, and not necessarily for the best as far as the current situation was concerned.

The first was the rise of the powerful Ecocrat lobby. Growing out of the environmental movement of the late twentieth century, they were a power in every democracy in the world. In the US particularly, they represented a large, powerful, and vocal voting bloc dedicated to the proposition that all things ecological were sacred. They were one-issue voters, ready to kick politicians out of office *en masse* for the slightest ideological impurity.

The second development was the formation of the UN Peace Enforcers following the twenty-day scare of the Misfire War. The Peace Enforcers were a multinational force with a single mission: To stop any aggressor who struck against any UN member state. Their unofficial motto was, "You start the war and we'll finish it!"

In theory, any act of aggression by one nation against another would be met instantly by the orbital lasers and Peace Enforcer fusion rockets. However, in practice there was a threshold level of violence, a tripwire effect, below which the cumbersome Security Council machinery would fail to respond.

These two facts were the natural precursors to the current crisis on the North American continent.

Lone Mexican Air Force planes -- officially piloted by bandits and renegade officers -- had struck north at a series of unusual targets designed to put intense pressure on the administration in Washington in the sugar beet dispute. Instead of hitting cities or centers of military and industrial power with the nuclear weapons Mexico was rumored to have, the planes struck against targets that the powerful Ecocrat lobby considered irreplaceable national treasures.

Carlsbad -- where a single smart bomb had penetrated the visitor center and elevator shaft to explode in the cavern below, causing massive destruction. And more importantly, sealing the caverns for a hundred years due to radioactive contamination by the Cobalt 60 powder that had cladded the

high explosive bomb.

Lake Mead -- where a specially developed film of evil smelling resin lay on the surface of the lake, killing fish by the millions, leaving their rotting bodies to wash ashore and provide graphic pictures for the television cameras.

The Tonto National Forest -- thirty percent destroyed in a firestorm started by Mexican incendiary bombs.

Such limited violence was primarily psychological in its impact and well below the tripwire level that would galvanize the Security Council to action. Instead of hard action to stop the raids, the Council had indulged in bombast and recriminations. Complicating the matter were a number of small nations who supported Mexico for reasons of their own. Supported her to the point where they refused to believe the irrefutable evidence provided by Peace Control Satellite cameras. When a Resolution of Censure was finally introduced, the small nation delegates had fallen to bickering over the placement of commas.

There the crisis stood, stalemated and explosive. But should the situation develop into a shooting war -- in other words, should the Americans attack -- Stassel had no doubt of the UN response.

The Peace Enforcers would be ordered in on the side of the 'innocents' being invaded. Weapons of mass destruction laboriously stockpiled in orbit would be ordered used. Every attacking missile and aircraft would be lasered out of the sky. Every ship would be destroyed at sea. If simple surgical destruction did not work -- and against the Americans, there was every reason to think it would not -- then the less selective weapons would be released. Fusion warheads that had slept in the bellies of Peace Enforcer ships for twenty years would be unleashed against the "aggressors."

To do otherwise would split the UN into a dozen squabbling factions. The majority had always held that no provocation could be great enough to go to war.

Except in this case, the 'aggressors' would be in the right and every man and woman aboard the space stations and satellites knew it. Worse, the Americans were not the minor league imperialists the PEs had been formed to stop. They had ground-based lasers of their own. The Peace Control Satellites were few in number and in fixed orbits. No one knew who would eventually win the fight, but one thing was certain. When the smoke cleared, the UN Peace Enforcers would be in no condition to continue their mission and war would have been unleashed once more upon the world.

"Maybe the Council will approve the Resolution of Censure," Stassel said, as the Briefing Officer struck a match and lit a cigarette.

"Care to back your opinion with cash?" the Englishman asked, grinning. "I hate to take advantage of a babe in the woods, but that is too good a chance at profit to pass up."

"Bet with you, Livingston? Do you think my mother raised stupid children?"

"Hmmm ... I'll not answer that." Livingston glanced at the chronometer on the wall. Its red glowing numerals read 08:31-- except one of the LED's had burned out and the numeral one was missing half its height. "You haven't got much time, Fred. The shuttle leaves in twelve minutes."

"Yes sir," Stassel said, gathering up his notes and a situation briefing tape to be studied on the trip to the satellite. He got up to leave.

"Not so fast," Livingston said, his bantering tone suddenly turned serious. "The guardian of our virtues wants to see you."

Stassel strained to keep his expression neutral as Livingston pressed a buzzer. Within a few seconds, the cabin door opened and a dumpy, hard-faced woman in the uniform of a UN Political Officer strode in. Stassel avoided looking at her. Colonel Irma Shetland was not one of his favorite people. She was a dour faced American with a nasty habit of delving into other people's confidential files. Stassel had spent an uncomfortable hour with her when he'd first come aboard the space station and he had not forgotten the experience. His face still turned red with anger when he thought about it.

"Good morning, Hauptmann Stassel," she said in her flat, emotionless voice.

"Colonel Shetland," he replied.

"I understand you are going into one of our hot spots. I am sure you will do well there."

He remained silent.

"It is my duty, however, Herr Hauptmann, to inform you of the penalty for violation of Peace Enforcer regulations should you decide to get involved without authorization."

"I have read the regulations, Colonel," he said.

"I hope you have. In addition, I hope you remember that thirty-five years in a UN prison is a long time. So stay out of it no matter what your personal biases."

"Should you fail us in this," she said, pausing to let the import of her words sink in. "I will order Alphas Eight and Ten to laser you out of the sky. Got that?"

"Yes, Colonel," he said aloud. Silently he let the word he never dared say in her presence float to the surface. *Gestapo!* It was the worst insult he could think of.

"Then get out. I have important things to do. Seems the UN is sending up another bigwig observer and I've got to hold his hand," she said.

Stassel hurried to a spoke entrance a hundred meters spinward from the briefing cubicle and punched for the lift. He frowned, considering Shetland's warning to him. He could see cautioning an American against taking sides. However, why talk to him about it? He was nominally neutral in the dispute. Was his psychological profile so clear that she could read his thoughts? Was her warning merely a precaution, or did she have hard information that he was not as disinterested as he pretended to be?

Did she know about Alicia? Stassel shuddered at the thought. How could she possibly know? He was nearly positive that his personnel file did not list her. Could the Political Office be investigating him for suspected disloyalty?

The lift whooshed him upward toward the station axis. The familiar, ever changing Coriolis force as he approached the axis clamped his stomach muscles in a familiar vise. At the zero gravity axis, Stassel kicked off and floated to the docking port at the north pole of the station and through a flexible tube to the shuttle.

The shuttle was a standard orbit-to-orbit supply bus -- three spherical sections assembled as though they had been skewered onto a shish-kabob sword with a hydrogen-fueled rocket at one end and the personnel cabin at the other. The shuttle was used to transfer personnel and consumables from the mid-Atlantic Space Station (and her mid-Pacific counterpart) to the orbiting Peace Control Satellites.

The station was in synchronous orbit 37,000 kilometers above the equator so that it hung perpetually over thirty degrees west longitude. The Peace Control Satellites also orbited 37,000 kilometers out, but

in two separate orbits, each inclined sixty degrees from the plane of the equator and from each other. Each satellite thus described a figure eight over a stationary strip of land, taking one day for the full traverse across the face of the planet. The satellites climbed to the latitude of Hudson's Bay in the north and dropped to the northern tip of Antarctica in the south. Spaced every ten degrees of longitude - or 7500 kilometers apart -- in their orbits, the satellites passed over every industrialized and developing nation on Earth four times daily. The seventy satellites and two space stations in orbit gave the UN's hundred gigawatt lasers overlapping fields of fire against any conceivable opponent. War was impossible.

At least, that was the theory.

#

"How you doing, Krauthead?" Smiley Burgess, the shuttle pilot greeted him as he floated into the cabin. Burgess spoke in a slow Texas drawl that Stassel found irritating. In fact, Burgess embodied most of the characteristics he found objectionable in Americans.

"I am fine, Mr. Burgess," he said. He noted the six empty couches around the pilot. "Where are the rest of your passengers?"

"You're it, Friedrich old pal." He pronounced the name "Fred-rick," completely mangling the final 'ish' sound. "I guess the *Hun* wants to get someone he can trust into Alpha-Nine ASAP. I made a special trip to Beta-Nine yesterday. Took off Powell and substituted that chink, Hsin Liu, in his place. Funny thing about it, the flanking satellites all have Europeans, or Africans, or Asians in them. Not a single American, north *orsouth*, to be seen."

Stassel nodded absently. The Hun was General Heinemann.

"Strap yourself in, boy. This is going to be the fastest change of plane maneuver you ever did see."

Stassel took a couch and fastened the safety strap across his chest. He ignored the undocking maneuver and preliminary bursts of the attitude jets. He inserted the briefing tape into the couch reader and tried to concentrate on the mission.

After five minutes of futile efforts, he snapped off the viewer in disgust. He cursed himself under his breath. What was the matter? He did not usually have trouble concentrating on a briefing. Why now? Maybe it was the irritation he felt with Burgess. Except he knew it was not. Burgess always irritated him. He was like a mosquito buzzing around in the blackness while you were trying to sleep. It wasn't the actual sting that kept you awake, but rather the anticipation. With Burgess, you waited, wondering what he was going to say to rub you the wrong way next. No, Smiley Burgess had never bothered him so much before that he could not concentrate on the mission at hand.

Colonel Shetland was the cause of his dry mouth, and sweaty palms, and inability to concentrate. Colonel Shetland and her not-so-stupid insinuations that his loyalty might not be completely with the *Vaterland* and the UN. In that instant of honesty, Stassel felt the memory that he had tried so hard to suppress boiling to the surface, plain for him to touch and feel, and smell.

It was the memory of Alicia.

#

Alicia Delgado. She of the raven hair and the piercing black eyes. The ready smile and the quick wit. The soft warmth, the quick passions, and the quicker temper.

There had been those who had laughed at them, the tall blond German and the short, dark Mexican girl. They had always looked upon Alicia and him as a joke -- two fighter pilots in helmets and flight suits walking across the hot tarmac hand in hand, chattering lovers' nonsense to each other.

However, Friedrich Stassel had not considered it a joke. Twice he had wiped smiles off the faces of fellow pilots -- one German and one American -- behind the Officer's Club after the Friday night dance. Mostly though, he felt the haughty laughing eyes on the back of his neck and burned with anger that he was the butt of their jokes.

Alicia just laughed back, comforting him until he had no room for anger within him.

Stassel chewed his lower lip and gazed out the shuttle viewport at the silver points of light that were the stars. His mind flowed back to those first days of advanced fighter training in the cloudless skies of Arizona.

He had been stationed at Luke Air Force Base a month when he had been invited to a party at the Base Commander's home. All the instructor pilots and foreign pilot-trainees had been invited. They made a sizable group since Luke was one of the focal training bases of the military assistance program of the United States. Halfway through the evening he'd found himself steered by a Major's fat wife to a group of young officers in civilian clothes, gathered in a tight clump around a pretty, black haired girl. He barely noticed the men as they introduced themselves. His attention was riveted on the girl.

"Friedrich Stassel," he had stammered, taking the warm softness of her hand in his.

"*Teniente* Alicia Delgado, Mexican Air Force," she had said in a voice dripping velvet.

"You ... a pilot?" he'd asked lamely. "I thought..."

"That I was a wife or girl friend?"

"Well, Uh."

"A whore perhaps? Imported for this party to entertain the troops?" She laughed, the gaiety of her tone taking the sting out of her words. "What's the matter, Leutnant? Don't you think a woman can fly a fighter plane as well as a man?"

It was then that all the bright young Yankees had first laughed. True, in retrospect he could see they were laughing with Alicia. However, at the time it had seemed they were laughing at him. He had beat a hasty retreat with his backbone locked ramrod straight and his ears turning bright crimson. Never again would he speak to the *verdamm*titch, he vowed.

A week later, they were lovers.

Stassel sighed as he watched the back of Burgess' head while the American was busy with the course computer checking over the next delta V burn. He tried to think about the mission, but the pull of Alicia was too strong. His thoughts were drawn to their last leave together.

It had been late spring, a time when the mercury began to climb dramatically on the deserts of Arizona. He and Alicia had managed a week's furlough from training. The occasion was an expedition to the Grand Canyon with two other officers and their wives. Captain Hardy, Stassel's instructor, had promised to show them Havasu Falls, one of the last unspoiled wonders of the world. Unspoiled because it was accessible only by backpacking or horseback.

Stassel remembered the hike down only as an uncomfortable four-hour walk. The heat was building by

the time they departed Hualapai Hilltop, a ledge carved out of the side of the canyon almost a thousand meters in elevation and 20 kilometers distance from the falls. The hike through dry creek beds became more miserable by the hour as the temperature soared.

Alicia did not seem to mind the heat at all. She wore shorts and a close fitting halter-top for comfort. Her dark brown skin quickly shone with a fine layer of perspiration as she stepped out quickly, her hiking boots crunching the loose gravel of the trail underfoot.

Fifteen kilometers down the trail they came to the Havasupai Indian settlement. A village of neatly painted frame houses set in a wide spot in the canyon, it was like stepping into a Garden of Eden from the wilderness. A cool creek bubbled through the village and soothed their hot, tired feet. Another five-kilometer walk brought them to the falls.

Stassel smiled as he remembered the falls. A white torrent of water rushed over a sculptured cliff in a drop that seemed unending. The water finally pounded down with a roar into a sparkling mist and a pool of azure-green. In the pool, built up over thousands of years, were limestone terraces over which the waters of Havasu Creek bubbled in a dozen cascades.

They stayed in the campground at the base of the falls for a week. He remembered the evening of the last day before starting the grueling hike back to civilization. It had been a Thursday and the campground was nearly deserted.

At dusk, he and Alicia had decided to go for one last swim in the pool at the base of the falls. They had staked out a secluded spot on the far side of the pool and stripped off their clothes, not bothering with suits. The few other swimmers were far away and predisposed to mind their own business.

Stassel remembered the icy bite of the water as he dove in. Fed by a mountain stream, the chilled water of the pool momentarily took his breath away. Then there had been the warm touch of Alicia as they embraced and kissed. They had sunk beneath the surface of the pool, finally separating to gasp and sputter their way to the surface. Afterwards, he remembered the warmth of her as they lay together on a towel, shivering in the last light of day.

"This is paradise, Friedrich," she had said, propping herself up on one elbow, her face barely visible in the oncoming gloom. "Why not stay? No one would miss us. The world no longer has any need of soldiers. So why do we bother?"

"Because it is expected of us," he had replied.

"Oh, our duty then?" she asked.

He nodded. "Our duty."

"I hate that word," she said, scowling. "To whom do you owe your duty, my love?"

The question surprised him. He had not really considered it. Finally, after a moment of silence, he said, "My father, I guess. I come from a long line of military men. He would be disappointed with me if I were not a soldier, too. After my obligation to the *Luftwaffe* is over, I plan to try for space. My father commands a ship in space, and it is his dream that I follow him. How about you, my dark haired Adlerin?"

"Adlerin?"

"It means eagle. *Aguila* in Spanish, I think. Why have you taken up the male sport of war?"

"Because it was expected of me also. And because I am the first woman pilot in the history of the Mexican Air Force. There are those in Mexico City who would have our backward nation join the twenty-first century. I am their token for progress. As such, I dare not fail."

"And it means a lot to you?" he asked.

She shrugged. "I suppose. However, when I see this beautiful place around us, I sometimes wonder. Are all of mankind's concerns more important than a single minute spent in this paradise?"

"I don't know. Tell me if you ever find out."

"We should do something to memorialize this moment, *lieblich*."

He had raised his eyebrows in surprise, forgetting that she could not see them in the dusk. "Liebling, is it? You have been studying. I suppose I could carve our initials in a tree ... *Oof!*"

His ribs ached where she had punched him.

"*Monstruo!* You do and I'll carve my initials in you." She laughed, a high sparkling sound nearly drowned out by the roar of the falls. "Besides, I am getting cold. Perhaps we can think of something in our tent to celebrate the moment ... and to keep each other warm."

#

"What are you smiling at?" Smiley Burgess asked.

Stassel was suddenly pulled back to the present. The shuttle pilot had squirmed around in his seat to stare at his passenger. Stassel realized that he had been smiling and the expression quickly turned to a frown.

"A girl I'll bet."

"What?" Stassel asked.

"That expression on your face. I'll bet you were thinking about a girl."

Stassel nodded. "A girl I met while training in your homeland. She was a pilot, too."

"Love her?"

Stassel nodded again.

"Well then, why aren't you married to her?"

Stassel looked into his laughing eyes, seeing all the laughing eyes of his past. He suddenly felt a knot in the pit of his stomach, wishing that Burgess would go away. "She was killed two weeks before graduation in a crash. Her plane went down in a desert canyon and burned on impact."

Burgess' sneer was instantly gone. For the first time since he had known the shuttle pilot, Stassel thought he saw compassion in those eyes.

"Look, Fred, I didn't know. I'm sorry."

"That's all right. I should not burden you with my problems. Besides, it was a long time ago. Before I joined the UN."

The pilot cleared his throat. "Uh, get your things ready for transfer. We'll be coming up on Alpha-Nine in about twenty minutes."

Peace Control Satellite Alpha-Nine floated into view fifteen minutes later. Like all such, it was constructed in two pieces. The thirty-meter long cylinder that housed the hydrogen-fluorine gas dynamic laser and its fuel tanks was attached by a hundred meter long umbilical to a sphere painted in a haphazard pattern of light and dark checks. The ten-meter sphere was festooned with antennas, telescopes, and the more arcane paraphernalia of a dozen different kinds of information sensors and communications devices. The doghouse, as the sphere was called, was crammed solid with hardware that acted as the satellite's eyes and ears and brains. The umbilical -- floating limply in space as the shuttle moved in slowly for a hard dock -- connected the two halves of the satellite together and isolated the laser module with its sensitive aiming mechanisms from extraneous perturbations. For instance, the force of a hundred-ton shuttle coming to rest in the doghouse's docking collar, or the effect of the satellite commander doing his morning calisthenics.

The satellite living quarters were located at the end of the doghouse arbitrarily labeled 'top'. They were tiny, consisting of a control center, shower bath, and combination galley and recreation-bunk room. The crew quarters of a PCS did not have to be large. The satellite commander was the only crewmember. Even so, the UN had a perennial problem keeping seventy satellites manned with reliable people on a one-week rotation schedule. What the satellite commander lacked in numbers, he more than made up for in firepower. At his fingertips were the controls to a hundred-gigawatt laser, powerful enough to strike down any opponent. Moreover, if needed, he would be backed up by the power of the space fleet.

The shuttle nudged the satellite-docking collar with a dull thud followed by the hiss of compressed air being vented. Stassel unstrapped from the acceleration couch and floated to the locker where his vacsuit was stored. Burgess busied himself computing the return trip to the space station.

In ten minutes, Stassel was suited up, with helmet in hand. He stood beside the open hatch to the transfer tube. "Thanks for the ride, Smiley," he said, holding out his gloved hand to the pilot.

Burgess took it hesitantly. "Bye, Fred. See you next week." Burgess looked down at the deck, hesitant. "Look, I'm sorry if I said anything ... well, you know..."

"Forget it," Stassel said. "It was a long time ago. I'm over it now." He knew as he said it that it was a lie. Thinking about Alicia on the trip out had ripped open the emotional scab he had secured on the wound of losing her. All the old emotions were once more raging within as fresh as the day she had died.

He hoisted his helmet and snapped it down over the neck ring, twisting it into place until the vacuum seals engaged. The familiar dirty sock smell of his suit engulfed him. The vacsuit was merely a precaution. The tunnel to the satellite was pressurized.

Stassel kicked off up the tunnel, towing his personal effects behind him in a net bag. As he reached the other end, the hatch before him popped with a soft sighing sound as the pressure equalized.

Raj Bahmani, Indian Air Force, stood on the other side of the tiny airlock. He was suited up and anxious.

Stassel twisted off his helmet and lifted it free. "Hello, Raj," he said, shaking hands with the short brown officer.

"Hello, Fred," Bahmani said. His Cambridge accent was as incongruous as the turban he wore. "Where's Robertson?"

"Brig. I am his backup. Anything to report?"

"Have you heard about Sequoia National Park?"

Stassel nodded. Sixty hours earlier, a Mexican jumbo freighter masquerading as a commercial airline flight had broken through the Pacific Air Defense Identification Zone. Their target had been the giant redwoods. A thousand tons of highly toxic herbicides were dumped on the ancient trees. Reports from the area indicated lethality had reached eighty percent in some stands of trees.

"I picked up some Ecocrat orator on my last pass over the States," Bahmani said. "He was haranguing the faithful, urging them to rise up and smite the greasers. Things won't hold together much longer, I'm afraid."

"I'll keep an eye on it," Stassel said. He snapped to attention, his boots held to the tetrahedral grid set in the deck by mechanical clamps. He saluted the Indian. "I relieve you, sir," he stated formally.

Bahmani did the same. "The station is yours to command, sir," he replied, completing the formula. "Good luck, Fred. You are going to need it."

Then he was gone head first down the transfer tube. Stassel shut the hatch behind him and began peeling off his suit. Minutes later, two metallic clicks and a muted clang announced the departure of the shuttle.

Stassel grabbed a sandwich from the galley and munched thoughtfully as he studied the tactical briefing tapes and the situation display Bahmani had left in the control center. The Indian was right. Things did not look good.

#

Stassel lay in the command couch of PCS Alpha-Nine and sipped tea from a hot squeeze bulb. The tea left a bitter aftertaste in his mouth. Before him were a dozen screens over which his eyes roamed ceaselessly. On the large central screen was a view of all of the Mexican State of Sonora and small patches of the Sea of Cortez and the southernmost region of Arizona.

Around the edge of the big screen were smaller screens, each with a different view. In one, he could see the long form of the satellite laser module, half in sun and half in dark, a semi-cylinder that appeared stationary against the ever-changing image of the planet. In other screens, he saw views transmitted from low orbiting reconnaissance satellites, zipping in a north-south orbit just beyond the limits of atmosphere. He glanced at the position map, noting that Alpha-Nine had just crossed the equator headed north. For the next four hours, Stassel would be over the crisis area and would be subjected to the awful strain that can come from harboring mixed loyalties.

On the one hand, he was an officer in the Peace Enforcers and sworn to uphold the peace and the rulings of the Security Council. On the other, what if the goals were mutually exclusive? The S.C. was impotent, a mere squabbling band of grasping politicians who were going to let everything he and so many others had worked for be flushed down the drain. Stassel liked Mexicans -- How could he help but like them? Alicia had been one -- and like most Europeans, he found Americans to be overbearing, brash, and insensitive boors. In fact, they were a nation of Smiley Burgesses.

Nevertheless, this was one time when they were the injured party and the underdogs were in the wrong. It was anti-Americanism in the Security Council that emasculated the Peace Enforcers. Stassel scanned his screens and shuddered at the thought of what he would do if the Mexicans chose the time when he orbited overhead to step up the pressure. What they were doing was wrong, and it stuck in his craw to have to sit back and let them get away with it. Better for everyone if the next Mexican raid

came during Hsin Liu's watch when Beta-Nine was in the Northern Hemisphere.

What about it, Alicia? Would you have destroyed Carlsbad over a sugar beet? Could you have brought yourself to follow orders and kill the thousand-year-old redwoods? How about Lake Mead? After all, it is a manmade lake rather than a natural one. Does that somehow make it right?

Alicia did not answer. In Stassel's opinion, she did not have to. She had loved the beauty of nature and to think she would have had anything to do with its destruction was ludicrous ... at least, to him.

An hour later he licked tongue over dry lips and watched a death duel take place ten thousand meters above the twin border towns of Nogales, Arizona and Nogales, Sonora. A dozen planes wheeled, and stooped, and dodged in a deadly dance of sputtering guns and sprinting missiles. Stassel watched the fight through the eyes of a low-level reconnaissance satellite. He followed the progress of the battle by means of an array of sensors ranging from infrared scanners to side looking radar. The quick thrusts and parries of the combatants were spelled out in glowing electronic symbols on the face of the main screen.

Stassel inhaled sharply as the tiny dot of a missile merged with the image of a plane. He tasted bile and smelled the stink of involuntary fear. His eyes burned from too little sleep and too much time spent in the command couch in the last seventy-two hours. On the screen, the wounded plane began its death dive Earthward as the missile exploded under one wing.

Stassel sighed heavily and released the couch armrest from his white-knuckle grip as he turned his attention away from the battle. Monitoring its progress was the job of specialists aboard the space station. He had another job to do.

As deadly as it was, the dogfight was a sideshow.

Pilots were fighting and dying down there in a militarily senseless engagement. Six Mexican fighters had crossed the border to attack a like number of American planes. They had no hope of success. Even now, the American reinforcements were swarming south to help their brethren. However, the men who had ordered the attack were not stupid. Their actions to date had been near brilliant in their reading of the international situation, as evidenced by the knots that they had managed to tie the Security Council into. Therefore, their purpose in initiating hostilities had to be something more than a straightforward provocation.

The dogfight was obviously a diversion. The Mexicans knew it, the Peace Enforcers knew it, and the Americans knew it. Peace Control Satellite Alpha-Nine, orbiting over 10 degrees north latitude, 110 degrees west longitude, scanned the battleground with powerful sensors. The electronic brain of the satellite sorted through a forest of information looking for that one telltale return that would indicate the presence of an unseen intruder. The bandit would be low and fast, and incorporate every concealment device possible. But it had to be there. No other explanation of the air battle raging below made sense,

Suddenly there it was in the lower right hand corner of the big screen. A flickering blue dot with a string of green symbols beside it. The raider was on the deck, hugging the ground as it screamed at Mach 1 through a series of mountain passes and dry river valleys. It followed a path that offered the maximum in concealment for a low flying airplane. In fact, Stassel noted with grim satisfaction, it was much the same course followed by two generations of aerial drug smugglers. Having spotted the raider, Stassel ordered the whole array of sensors onboard Alpha-Nine and the string of recon satellites to focus on the speeding dot of titanium and high alloy steel.

Then he sat back nervously to wait. The computers would record all the information they could glean from the mass of data being collected. From that information, they would be able to guess the raider's

armament, his probable future course, and with luck, his target.

Three minutes of data collection confirmed his worst fears. The intruder was trailing a minuscule wake of ionized particles. In itself, it meant little, but knowing that the situation was getting as desperate in Mexico City as Washington, he had little doubt as to the cause. Having trained in similar fighters, he could picture the red tipped missile slung at the midpoint of each wing, its high explosive warhead clad with radioisotopes harvested from commercial power plant waste. A sheath of metal that would become deadly radioactive shrapnel fragments when the missile exploded. If the raider managed to launch his weapons, the resulting explosion would contaminate an area five hundred meters in radius and the contamination would remain dangerous for decades. Any spot where the explosion occurred would be effectively defiled for the remainder of the lives of everyone living.

Stassel broke into a cold sweat at the thought. To use such a weapon at Carlsbad had been bad enough. However, a cavern did contain the fallout. Most of the non-American-press had gone to great lengths to point that out in their stories on the raid. Third Worlders had used the point with telling effect in their defense of the Mexicans in the Security Council. However, to use an isotope warhead in the open air was something else again. World opinion would never forgive them for it.

Stassel punched a communicator key with shaking hand. "Hello, Control, this is Alpha-Nine. I have a bandit at grid Bravo-Gamma-Three-One-Eight. He is hot. I repeat, he is hot!"

"We have him, Alpha-Nine," the Combat Center Operator aboard the space station replied. Stassel thought he detected a tense undertone in the man's voice. It was nothing like the bored acknowledgment he usually got from the CCO. *He must realize that this may be the spark that puts Civilization to the torch*, Stassel thought.

A fan-shaped area shaded in blue flashed on the screen, with its apex at the blinking blue spot that was the raider. The satellite brain had computed the probable flight path of the bandit. Spotted across the face of the big screen was a scattering of red dots with tiny vector arrows pointed down. These represented the position and course of American planes drawn out by the dogfight over Nogales. The intruder continued his zigzagging northern course. The Americans were seemingly unaware of his presence as yet. Their positions showed they were in rough search formation rather than having shifted to the more purposeful attack order. With the establishment of the Peace Enforcers, the UN had taken control of all the surveillance devices beyond the atmosphere. It put the various nations at more than a small disadvantage.

Stassel extended the probable flight path of the raider. As he did so, a white ellipse formed on the face of the screen. This was the computer's estimate of the target area, based on the raider's speed and fuel situation. The ellipse was centered on the Grand Canyon National Park.

Stassel cursed the depths of stupidity to which human beings could be driven by injured pride. He reached for the transmit button. "He's after the Grand Canyon, Control," he said with a quaver in his voice. *Gott im Himmel, let me be wrong!* He thought as he punched for a list of possible targets in the Grand Canyon.

The list was displayed on one of the auxiliary screens and was relatively short. The Grand Canyon was a huge place, a fact that had been drilled into him that long ago day when he had hiked down from Hualapai Hilltop. It was far too large an object to be held hostage in this game of environmental blackmail. Even a full-fledged nuclear weapon would have had trouble leaving its mark. Therefore, an aircraft armed with an isotope warhead would be aimed at a smaller target, an enclave within the greater National Park. First on the list of probable targets, just as he knew it would be, was Havasu Falls.

Stassel cursed the day he had decided to follow in his father's footsteps. He cursed the father of that unseen, misguided patriot who was being bounced around by wicked thermals and wind shears 37,000 kilometers below him. Most of all he cursed the Security Council and the UN in general for letting him get into this situation.

They were not after some picture in a travel brochure this time, a place he had never been and would never miss. They were after Alicia's place! The beautiful azure-green pool with its indescribable waterfall would become the deadly center of a radioactive cloud within minutes. No more would lovers swim in the icy water of Havasu Creek, to lie in the gathering dark and compete with the roar of the falls as they talked of the future. Possibly, the last place on Earth that had yet to see a parking lot would be no more.

And he had orders to let it happen.

Take no action without orders... Wait for the Security Council to vote Censure before we move ... It is your duty to obey your superiors, Friedrich. You keep that in mind. (Yes, Father) ... I need men in orbit who can keep their heads and do their duty. Can you? ... (I think so, Herr General.)

All the authority figures he had ever known poured out of Stassel's memory. There had been his father, the proud spaceman. There had been his science teacher in die gymnasium ("Excel at everything you do, young man"). There had been his first unit commander after he had returned to Germany from training in America. Major Von Brandt had helped put him back on the track after Alicia's death. It had been Von Brandt who had steered him toward the Peace Enforcers.

However, all of these stern images were suddenly overshadowed by a quiet, black-eyed face that stared up at him as she had done in life. *"It is wrong, Friedrich. Don't let the misguided fools do it."*

He made his decision and punched to energize the manual controls for the laser.

The long cylinder that was the laser module rotated on an auxiliary screen as raw, unfiltered sunlight flashed brilliantly from its flanks. On the main situation screen, a tiny black cross inside an aiming circle appeared and moved toward the blue dot of the raider. It had traversed half the distance to the bandit when the emergency communicator alarm erupted in his ears. He hurriedly shut off the alarm with his left hand while still controlling the motion of the laser with his right.

Colonel Shetland's angry face appeared on one of the small screens. "What the hell do you think you are doing, Stassel?"

"What, Colonel?" he asked, not taking his eyes off the target.

"Why have you activated your laser?"

"Activated my laser? You have to be kidding. All my dials show normal here," he said. In spite of himself, he could not help grinning at the thought of Colonel Shetland's face turning red with rage. He stole a quick glance at the screen and gasped. She had passed the red stage and was well on her way to purple.

"By God, Stassel, shut that damned thing down!"

He suddenly gave up trying to bluff her. She had too many readouts that told her what was going on to be fooled by his denials. *Damned Gestapo and her spy cameras!* He thought.

"Why should I, Colonel?"

The cross was centered on the raider's image on the big screen. He locked the laser on target and set the pumps into operation. He imagined he could hear their high-pitched whine in the laser module as they precharged the combustion chamber with fuel. Of course, he was wrong. The umbilical that held the two halves of the satellite together did not transmit sound.

"Because it is a direct order from a superior officer!" she screamed.

"Not good enough, Colonel. Think up some other reason."

"Because you will be starting World War III."

Suddenly indecision swept over him. Did he alone have the right to make such a decision? Could he risk the world just to save a bit of natural beauty that happened to have personal significance? What about all the people who had never seen Havasu Falls and could care less? Didn't they deserve a vote too?

Shetland saw the indecision on his face and knew that she had won. Her manner was suddenly calm, her voice soothing. "Come on, Fred. Shut down. You are minus on your sleep. If you were thinking clearly you would never even consider this."

The big screen suddenly blurred in front of him as tears welled up in his eyes. "But they are after Alicia's place," he pleaded. "I can't just let them destroy it without doing anything to save it."

Shetland looked perplexed, running his service record over in her brain. Then recognition showed in her eyes. "Oh, the incident during your training. The girl who was killed in the accident," she said, her eyebrows furled in bewilderment. "Is that what this is all about?" She threw back her head and laughed. It was the first time Stassel had ever heard the sound issue from between her lips. "Don't tell me you are ready to blow up the world because of some long dead girl friend?"

"Do you know a better reason?" he screamed, a red rage blocking out all else as his finger stabbed at the firing stud.

An invisible pulse of light erupted from the end of the laser module. And 37,000 kilometers below, a pencil beam of light sheared through the tail surfaces of an aircraft skimming the surface of a dry desert arroyo. There was no time for the unsuspecting pilot to react. Before he could comprehend what was happening, he was the center of a cartwheeling mass of scrap metal and flame and a towering cloud of dry, brown dust.

Stassel leaned back in his couch and shivered, his hands shaking out of control. There would be no turning back now. If the world wanted to blow itself up, he had just given it a good excuse. He turned to Colonel Shetland, still staring out of the screen at him, horror on her face.

"You've just killed us all," she whispered, unable to find her voice

"Maybe," he replied, feeling washed out and listless, but at peace with himself for the first time in years. "But maybe I just saved us, too. You can come get me anytime, Colonel. I'll surrender peacefully."

#

Jan Pieter Heugens sat once more behind his desk and watched storm clouds gather over the New York skyline. This storm seemed somehow less gloomy than the one a week before. It was suddenly a bright new day. That morning he had caught himself whistling in front of the bathroom mirror while shaving. It had been years since he'd done that. Not since Katrina had died, in fact. The intercom on his desk buzzed.

"General Heinemann is here to see you," his secretary said. "And President Warren is reported to be in the building."

"Fine, send the General in now."

The door opened and a man with close cropped, graying hair stepped through into the office. He wore the black and silver uniform of the Luftwaffe and the blue beret of the UN Peace Enforcers.

"Good to see you again, Willy," Heugens said.

"No more 'Bernard', Mr. Secretary-General?" Heinemann asked.

"I think Mr. Bernard can safely die now, don't you'?"

"What is the purpose of this meeting? I have urgent duties aboard Atlantic Station. As you may well guess, things are a bit unsettled right now."

"It won't take long, Willy. In fact..."

The intercom buzzed again. "The President is here, sir."

"Send him in, Miss Callahan."

Heugens stood and crossed to the door as a photogenic middle aged man entered. Heugens thrust out his hand to have it grasped in a firm grip. "How are you, Mr. President?"

"Well. And you, Mr. Secretary-General?" Heugens noted with amusement that Warren stood half turned for the benefit of the television cameras in the outer office. Then the door closed, cutting off the glare of the media lights, and the pose was suddenly gone. "Kind of public for a meeting of a cabal, isn't it?"

"Don't worry," Heugens replied. "I am also meeting with Ambassador Torres this morning. We are going to discuss 'the international situation', as it is called. Mr. President,

I would like to present General Heinemann of the Peace Enforcers."

"The man we have to thank for this happy state of affairs?"

Heinemann stood to attention and clicked his heels. "Not I entirely, sir."

"Ah yes," the President said. "Where is the young Captain who fired the shot heard round the world? I wanted especially to meet him."

General Heinemann shifted nervously from foot to foot. "I'm afraid that is impossible, Mr. President. Colonel Shetland has him locked up aboard Atlantic Station. She is bound and determined to see him shot."

The President frowned. "You aren't going to let that happen, are you?"

"No, we are not," Heugens said. "I'm afraid Hauptmann Stassel's career in the Peace Enforcers is ended, but we will not waste him. He's too valuable a man for that."

"Good. He should be rewarded beyond his wildest dreams. Without him, the Council would still be stalemated. By the way, when is the vote?"

"This afternoon," Heugens said. "Torres is so incensed that he demanded it with no delay. Of course, he

does not know that four of the delegates who have been making noises of sympathy at him are my agents. So he will be greatly surprised by the vote."

"You are sure we will win?"

"Positive, Mr. President. When it came out that the Mexicans were using isotope warheads, their goose was cooked. It's all over but the shouting."

Warren nodded, a half smile on his lips. "That's great. Tell me something, Mr. Secretary-General. Just how did you do it?"

Heugens turned to the General. "Want to tell him, Willy?"

The General nodded. "I've known Stassel's family for years, Mr. President. I served with his father aboard a German cruiser before the UN took over the national space navies. Stassel's father was something of a ... how do you say it? ... A maverick. He was the type of man who did his duty as he saw it and worried about following orders later.

"I figured that Stassel had a lot of his father in him. So, I called him into my office and gave him my Good-Germans-always-follow-orders speech. It bothered him. I could see it in the way he squirmed in his chair. Meanwhile, the S-G infiltrated one of his spies into the Mexican hierarchy and suggested the attack on your national monument that had the most meaning to Stassel. From there on, nature took its course."

The President looked doubtful. "Come on, General. I have seen the tapes. There was a moment there when this Colonel Shetland of yours had him on the ropes."

Heinemann laughed. "Poor, Irma. She is one of those who see conspiracies everywhere she looks. Come to think of it, all UN Political Officers are like that. When she saw that Stassel had activated his laser, she conjured up visions of some huge international conspiracy."

Heugens chuckled. "She was more right than wrong, too. Otherwise the three of us wouldn't be here."

The General nodded. "True, but Stassel didn't know that. So, Shetland got him calmed down at the last second and found out that he was ready to shoot, not because of a conspiracy, but for this girl he once loved. The incongruity of it was too much for her. She burst into an explosion of laughter ... almost an attack of relief. It was exactly the wrong thing to do. Stassel's psychological profile shows he has an unreasoning fear of being laughed at. When Irma broke down, it was just like thrusting a dagger into him. He fired that laser in angry reflex, without thinking."

Warren smiled. "Remind me to send Colonel Shetland a thank you note in about twenty years."

Heugens shook his head slowly from side to side. "I don't think she would appreciate that, Mr. President."