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DESCRIPTION: Prolog and first two chapters of the novel "Lord November: The Man-Spacething War."

Lord November: The Man-Spacething War

A Tale of the Continuing Time

Prolog: The Shepherds 2049 Gregorian

On Tuesday, October 5, 2049, a starship of the Zaradin Church exited Sol System's Second Gate.

Not just *any* starship; this was a Cathedral, one of nine to be found in the galaxy. Sol's Second Gate lies outside the orbit of Saturn, and far off the ecliptic; but had the Cathedral stayed at the Second Gate long enough, darkened though it was, humanity would have found it in time, through its gravitational disturbance upon the orbits of the other bodies in the System. It was *that* large.

The Dalmastran who crewed the Cathedral did not plan to stay long enough for that to happen. They had more important business than this minor matter, the collection of a species that had so recently begun to boast of its existence, pouring radio waves and television and lasers indiscriminately out into the interstellar darkness. They did not want their existence known to humanity-- not out of any concern for humanity's reaction, but because they did not want the sleem empire to know they had passed this way.

And as they had already observed, humans were distressingly disinclined to keep silent about themselves, or, the Dalmastran presumed, about those they met.

The Dalmastran's concern about the empire might have been over-cautious; some in the Church thought so. True, the sleem had been growing restless, had more than once recently interfered in the travel of the Church's emissaries. But it was a grand leap, to go from harassing the servants of the Church, to interfering with the business of one of the great Cathedrals.

The Dalmastran did not think that the empire would be so foolish--but the sleem had been disturbingly arrogant of late, and the Dalmastran had been taught, by the Zaradin themselves, to avoid confrontation over matters not involving theology.

They studied the Solar System for several days, its scattering of planets, moons and asteroids and comets; listened to the broadband echoes of radio and television and InfoNet, and came to their

decision.

A Missionary fell in toward the Sun.

Peter Janssen followed a Hoffman trajectory, heading down to an orbit some 125,000 kilometers above the cloudy surface of Jupiter. He was already 240,000 clicks above the clouds, and dropping; it put him well inside the orbit of all Jupiter's satellites except Amalthea. His target was an observation buoy he had dropped into Jupiter's atmosphere, with seven other buoys, a week past. This buoy was the only one to successfully blast itself back up into space, and unless Janssen snagged it on this pass, the buoy would drop helplessly back into Jupiter's lethal atmosphere, burning up on re-entry, losing its atmospheric samples and whatever data had not made it through via telemetry.

He had to pick up the buoy on his first pass because his margin of delta-V was close to nonexistent. His craft, a modified Chandler BlackSmith, had heavy radiation shielding to protect him from Jupiter's deadly and incessant radiation storms. (That was only one of the dozens of ways that Jupiter duty was different from the Earth-Luna runs of which Janssen, an ex-SpaceFarer, was a veteran. Bar the odd sunstorm, cis-Lunar space is largely free of radiation hazards. Around Earth-Luna, shielding is more a drawback than an asset. Most solar radiation passes straight through the human body without damaging it. Moderate shielding is actually worse than none; cascading secondary radiation from light shielding is worse for the human body than the primary solar radiation against which it is designed to protect.)

Because Peter Janssen's slipship was so heavily shielded, his delta-V was correspondingly reduced; his slipship massed half again what Chandler Industries had intended.

He whistled tunelessly as he made final approach to the buoy. They were awaiting him eagerly back at the settlement on Ganymede- -well, the research scientists were. Or rather, he corrected himself, the research scientists were eagerly awaiting his return of their buoy.

Whatever. At least *someone* was looking forward to seeing him.

He was not a popular man, Peter Janssen. His own moodiness and irritability contributed to it, he knew. While at St. Peter's CityState, he had missed Luna; and now that he was at Ganymede, he missed the CityState. He brooded at times that his life in the last few years had been a series of increasingly poor decisions, made increasingly at random. Most of those who knew him these days had never seen him smile.

Those same people would have been surprised to see the change that had come over him now. A grin played across his lips; his eyes drooped closed and he lay slackly in the webbed padding of the pilot's enclosure.

He *was* the slip.

The ship cameras were his eyes, fed video to his inskin, and he drifted alone inside a glowing cathedral of stars. For all he had learned to hate Jupiter, it had the loveliest sky in the System; Amalthea and Ganymede and Europa hung behind him in the view from his rear holocams, gray and white and reddish; in his fore holocams Jupiter covered most of the sky with swirling bands of scarlet orange. The rockets lay silent now, but soon they would come alive, pressing Janssen back into his webbing with a savagery a street racer a hundred years past would have appreciated.

For a brief while, submerged in the identity of his ship, Peter Janssen, one of only a dozen or so people of his time who had managed to get himself exiled from the SpaceFarer's Collective, was as content as he would ever be in his life.

Something beeped on his radar, almost exactly a hundred and eighty degrees away from the buoy that should have been the only large object in close. A frown passed like a ghost across Janssen's features. He danced commands into the inskin socketed at his temple, and the slip's rear holocams selected and telescoped in on the item causing the commotion.

Shining and black and silver came out of nowhere. Janssen had a brief fragmented impression of a spider web dropping on him from a great height--

Every instrument in the slipship, every powered system, died.

Terror clawed at Janssen, vast and mortal. The muscles in his stomach clenched painfully and he thought he would be sick inside his ship. A Presence touched his awareness, shuffled through his memories. The Presence withdrew, and for the merest instant Janssen was empty.

A wordless concept imprinted itself upon Peter Janssen's mind. He was caught instantly in a vast joy, in a certainty of *rightness* that he had never known before.

Then the aliens destroyed his ship.

"...Janssen? Damn it, Peter, are you there? Peter ... *Peter?*" After a long moment, Peaceforcer Evans leaned back in the chair, gazing blankly at the control panel, at the telemetry that still glowed on the screens before him.

A spacecraft had approached Janssen's slip at five percent of the speed of light--and had come to rest relative to the slip in less than a minute....

...and had destroyed Janssen's slip thirty seconds later.

Adrienne Gordeau, one of the Ganymean colony's two administrators, was a tall, almost cadaverously thin Frenchwoman; she could have passed for loonie. She looked at Evans with troubled eyes. "That's not a human ship, is it?"

Peaceforcer Evans shook his head once, and said quietly, "No, it's not."

From the diary of Father Michael Wellsmith, Friday October 8, 2049. The inscription on the inside cover is in his sister Jamie's handwriting: "In nomen Patris, et Filius, et spiritus Sancti. For Michael on his birthday, July 10, 2038."

The entry is:

"Tomorrow the aliens will receive us aboard their ship. My Lord, if You do indeed exist, then hear me now. There is pain within me.

"I hurt.

"This knowledge of pain is not a new thing, but it is no less easy to bear for its familiarity.

"I *hurt*.

"I do not think the pain shows. Surely to my people I must seem tranquil; confident in my faith; serene in the knowledge of my duty. Those who know me well-- Father O'Donnell, my sister Jamie--would see the uncertainty that has taken me; but with the exception of Bear Corona I am close to no one here, and Bear is not the sort to whom one unburdens oneself.

"Father Donnelly is at St. Peter's CityState in the Belt, Jamie is on Earth, and there is nobody on Ganymede to hear my confession.

"In three weeks, my Lord, I will observe the twentieth anniversary of my vows. And I hurt inside and I have always hurt.

"But until now I had always believed.

"If You do indeed exist, be with me tomorrow."

The voice from the other side of the screen said, "Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. It has been twenty-two years since my last confession."

"...Bear?"

"Yeah."

"Are you sure you want to do this?"

"I guess." A dry chuckle came from the other side of the screen. "You've been after me for most of a year."

"I had hoped for better circumstances."

Silence. "Yeah. Me too." Another chuckle, packed with cynicism. "You better get comfortable. This is gonna take a while."

Saturday, October 9, 2049:

The colony on Ganymede, like many other colonies throughout human history, exists because of politics.

By 2049 all but three of the Belt CityStates have declared independence from the Unification of

Earth. The White Russian CityStates are two of them; and St. Peter's is the third. At the moment the Unification's Space Force lacks the ability to prosecute a successful war against the breakaway CityStates; the CityStates have threatened to throw asteroids at Earth--and probably will if pushed to it.

The Ganymede colony is Earth's last attempt to contain the growing might of the Belt CityStates. Earth and its billions have not been able to prevent the establishment of free Luna, cheek and jowl with Unification Luna; have lost Mars and the Belt to the CityStates; and seem all but helpless in dealing with the anarchistic SpaceFarer's Collective.

In February of 2048, the Unification made a last desperate bid to contain the growing strength of its enemies; the Ganymede colony is the result.

In late 2049, Ganymede is as far as humanity has penetrated into the deep. The colony is six hundred persons, a beachhead preparing the facilities that will house and protect the first wave of true colonists. The six hundred include engineers and physicists, an even dozen computerists, a dentist, several M.D.s (and two medbots), two administrators, and one counselor.

Of course, most of the those on Ganymede come from St. Peter's CityState; and their "counselor," so designated by ancient U.N. regulations, is in fact a priest of the Roman Catholic Church.

"They *what?*"

Sheila Moore lowered her voice. "Killed Janssen. That's what I heard. Blew his slip completely away."

From topside, the beachhead is not impressive. There is a small cluster of tiny, pressurized buildings. In an octagonal arrangement at the limits of the cluster, tall monoliths generate a heavy magnetic field that helps protect the inhabitants beneath from Jupiter's otherwise lethal radiation storms. It is only the first of an increasingly complex series of barriers designed to protect the colonists from that radiation.

An irony, this, and not a subtle one. Once the colony at Ganymede is no more, humans will not attempt to live near a gas giant comparable to Jupiter for over a hundred years. The incidental radiation at Jupiter is inconvenient to the point of frequent fatalities for humans constrained to work with tools no better than those of the mid-twenty-first century. Within another fifty years the problems will be nearing triviality; but by then the human race will have the tachyon star drive, and much better real estate than Jupiter to work with.

The irony? The next time humans will make an attempt similar to this one is in the mid-twenty-second century Gregorian, a world that orbits a barely subsolar planet named Prometheus.

The world is November.

The colony's surface is not impressive; but like the tip of an iceberg, like any Lunar city, the surface of the beachhead only hints at the labyrinths that stretch below. The analogy does not extend beyond that point: the Ganymean beachhead colonists are struggling against an environment that is colder and deadlier than Luna's, colder and *much* deadlier than that of an iceberg.

On that Sunday "morning" in October, the colony's routine has been disrupted by the presence of the Zaradin ship, some three hundred meters from the central surface airlock. They know it is a ship from its behavior, because it moved through space, because their telescopes watched it approach, and because the humans have with their own eyes watched it land atop the structures they have dug into the frozen ground. The ship resembles no vehicle that has ever been constructed by humans, and when they watch it too long it gives them headaches.

Tyrel November would have recognized the vehicle--though he might not have felt it necessary to be polite to the Dalmas Missionary inside.

That Sunday, on the door to Father Michael Wellsmith's makeshift church, there is a note.

The note says:

The ten and twelve o'clock services are canceled.

--Father Michael

"Bear."

Bear Corona looked up from his reading tablet at Father Michael's approach. He was a super-jumbo-sized man wearing jeans and a sweater that were almost as black as his beard. The nickname he bore gave him mild amusement; at least he hadn't been stuck with "Tiny." He was slightly surprised to find Father Michael up and about. "Little late for you, isn't it?" He glanced at his reading tablet, tapped for the time: "It's after three."

Father Michael Wellsmith shook his head. A tall, spare man with clear, pale gray eyes, at that moment he looked as tired as Bear had ever seen him. The faint wrinkles that were always visible around his eyes had grown deep. "Can't sleep. Aren't you *cold* in here?"

Bear glanced around at the lounge. About eighty meters on a side, it had only a few real (and therefore comfortable) chairs; the rest being made of memory plastic that withdrew into the floor when not needed. It was the closest thing to a social gathering place the colonists had available to them, though it lacked virtually every amenity such a place would have had on Earth, and most of those it would have had back at St. Peter's. Now, late at night, the glowpaint was dimmed to twilight gray, to help bring out the holofield Bear sat watching. Across one entire wall of the lounge, the holo of Ganymede's sky shone eerily real. The steady stars seemed improbably bright and numerous to a pair of men born and raised to adulthood deep inside Earth's atmospheric blanket. Jupiter covered a quarter of the sky, a dim swirl of red and orange and yellow.

Bear shook his head. "No. Is it really any colder here than in your quarters?"

Father Michael shivered. "It feels so."

Bear gestured to the large thermos resting beside his boots on the small table. "Get yourself a cup from the bar." Father Michael did; Bear poured for him. "Got no cream or sugar, unless you want to go down to the commissary."

Father Michael shook his head. "Black is fine." He seated himself in the foam chair nearest Bear, cradling the warm cup between his hands. The coffee wasn't Earth grown, he could smell that much; but at least it didn't have the acrid tang of Belt synth. Martian, most likely.

He looked up from his coffee and stared at the ship.

It squatted there in the center of the holo. Looking at it strained his eyes. Something like it might have been formed by spinning steel spider webs, fashioning it into the general shape that was desired, and melting it until most of the surfaces had fused together. Altogether it seemed not so much constructed as grown.

Father Michael said without looking away, "I understand our messages aren't getting through."

Bear shrugged. "Just a guess. I can't imagine how they're doing it, if they are. We aim lasers in System, but we're not getting any responses back. Not from St. Peter's, not from Earth. I wouldn't have believed it was possible if I wasn't seeing it. *Something's* stopping us getting through."

"No further word?"

"From the aliens? Not since you told them to go to Hell." Bear sipped at his coffee. "May not have been the wisest thing you could have done, Father."

Father Michael nodded wearily. "Yes...what are you reading?"

Bear took his time answering. He was the only avowed atheist on Ganymede; their chief engineer, and one of their two administrators, he was a refugee from Earth who had found status and security at St. Peter's CityState. He had claimed on occasion, although never in front of Peaceforcer Evans, to have been prominent in the American Johnny Rebs before leaving Earth; the implication being that his very prominence among those rebels had made the leaving necessary. A thing he did not boast of, but which Father Michael knew to be true, was that he was the younger brother of Neil Corona, one of the great American heroes from the final days of the Unification War. "Uhm," Bear said finally, "it's a religious text."

Father Michael did not smile. "Indeed."

"An old one."

The Nicene Creed:

I believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of Heaven and earth, and all things visible and invisible.

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of His Father before all worlds, Light of Light, Very God of Very God, Begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father; by Whom all things were made.

Who for us men, and for our salvation, came down from Heaven; and was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, and was made man.

And was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate; He suffered and was buried.

And the third day He rose again according to the Scriptures.

And ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of the Father.

And he shall come again with glory to judge both the quick and the dead; Whose kingdom shall have no end.

And I believe in the Holy Ghost, the Lord, the Giver of Life, who Proceedeth from the Father; Who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified; Who spake by the Prophets.

I believe in one Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church.

I acknowledge one Baptism for the remission of sins.

I look for the resurrection of the dead.

And for the life of the world to come.

Amen.

An hour later they had drunk all of Bear's coffee. Father Michael sat quietly in his chair, arms crossed across his chest, coat drawn tightly about himself.

"Yesterday," Bear began.

Father Michael nodded.

"When they blessed us--that vicious happy shit scares me worse than anything that's ever happened to me in my life."

Father Michael said quietly, "It scared me too. But it was just some form of electric ecstasy, I imagine."

"No. It--" Bear searched for words. "It wasn't electric ecstasy, Father. I tried juice on an induction helmet; it scared me and I didn't do it again, but it wasn't anything like this. The juice is impersonal, Father. It doesn't care about you. But that damn blessing...could almost make a man believe in God."

"Most of us *want* to believe, Bear. In Something. God the Father, or the Goddess, Allah or Jehovah or Krishna...you few who need to be convinced are true rarities."

"It wasn't electric ecstasy, Mike. Whatever it was..." Corona's voice took on a puzzled note. "It could make a man believe."

Father Michael nodded. In the last twenty-four hours he'd told people who asked him, more times now than he could remember, that the alien blessing had been some sort of broadcast electric ecstasy, certainly nothing more. But he did not believe it himself. He remembered that moment, would remember it until his death, the rolling, thunderous, lasting joy that had seized them all with the invocation of the alien god Haristi.

Only death itself could erase that memory of joy.

Monday, October 10, 2049: The suiting room was too small for the number of people that it held, and the ceiling glowpaint was too bright and too harsh.

Embedded in the east wall of the suiting room, a five-meter wide window looked out across the dead, cold Ganymean surface.

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.

It seemed more than a bit cliched; but there was comfort in the words, and he could not think of another psalm that was more appropriate. He could *see* the Bible in which those words were printed, Father Donnelly's cracked and faded red leather Bible; not the one which he held now, the black Bible

that he clutched, closed, in both hands.

He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.

"Final life support checks." Peaceforcer Evan's tone of voice was bored, the nothing-wrong-here drawl affected by pilots for more than a century. Evans himself, United Nations Peace Keeping Force Officer though he was, was a good Catholic who regularly failed to report his colleague's treasonable talk. Bear Corona suited up next to him, an Excalibur Series One slung across his back; Evans bore the same weapon himself. "Sheila, check Father Michael for me."

He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

Standing near the rear of the suiting room, Father Michael straightened at the sound of his name, and with easy self-control tucked the Bible that he had been holding into an outer pocket of his pressure suit. Breaking away from the others, Sheila Moore, a plump, rather plain molecular biologist with whom Father Wellsmith often played chess in the evenings, came back to check his vitals for him. She was with the party because she had taken a course in exobiology ten years prior: such as it was, that background made her the closest thing the colony had to an expert on aliens.

She found the Bible in the outer pocket, and scolded, "You forgot to seal the pocket. You want to be more careful." At Ganymean temperatures, even plastipaper grew fragile and shattered. She clipped his helmet photo diode to his earlobe, and turned it on; the vampire gauge paused a moment before flickering to life.

..mark Take text from Ecclesiastes.

She glanced quickly at the Bible before sealing the pocket; the bookmark was in *Ecclesiastes*. He would be reading the most depressing book in the damn Bible.

The voice from Control came across the outspaker: "Sergeant Evans, Bear, I've got some new stuff. The Zaradin transmitted a new message to us."

Yea, though I walk through the Valley of the Shadow of Death, I will fear no evil.

"Largely bad news. They're saying that we'd better bring out our--uh, defiler of truths is how the computer is translating it-- or we'll be sorry. They said they'd demonstrate how sorry we'd be. Nothing on that yet."

There was a brief pause before conversation resumed. Bear Corona said, "Pushy bastards, aren't--"

The landscape outside the window glared in a sudden wash of light.

Peaceforcer Evans said calmly, locking his gloves into place, "Control? What is it?"

--I think--I think they just blew Europa out of the sky."

The large airlock finished cycling. Peaceforcer Evans, Bear Corona, Sheila Moore, and Father Michael moved forward, onto the frozen ground, in slow, gliding steps. The stars above shone bright and hard. The cold sunlight glared down at them; their faceplates polarized away most of it.

In the southern portion of their sky, about ten degrees from Jupiter, hung a bright, slowly expanding cloud of debris.

Bear Corona moved next to Father Michael, and sketched "C4" on Father Michael's faceplate. Father Michael switched to the sideband.

"Father," he said, "been wondering what your plans are."

"I don't really know, Bear." Behind the polarized faceplate, drops of sweat gathered on Father Michael's forehead. The inside of his suit stank with the smell of all old pressure suits, of ancient human sweat and metallic, recycled air.

They moved forward inexorably toward the alien ship, ground gliding away beneath their feet.

Bear Corona said patiently, "Are you going to do what they want you to do? Or are you going to tell them to go to hell again?"

Father Michael did not take his eyes from the ship. Closer still. "I don't know. I don't know what they want me to do. Bear- -"

"Yes?"

"I suspect you of having made up some of the sins you confessed."

Bear laughed aloud. "This old fellow goes running into Church, ducks into a confessional, and says,

Father, Father, I just made love to a twenty-year old girl, committed adultery with her *twice*. And the priest recognizes his voice, says slowly, 'Abie...Abie Martin? Abie, you're not a member of my congregation--you're not even *Catholic*. Why are you telling me this?'"

Father Michael joined in with him on the punch line. "Telling *you*--I'm telling *everyone*."

"You know it."

"If it concerns priests, I've heard it. Usually from another priest. *Did* you make up those sins?"

Even through the paired layers of partially polarized faceplates, Father Michael could see Corona hesitate a moment; then Bear's bushy beard moving from side to side, and Corona said in a voice gone completely flat, "No."

"I thought you said the debris was going to miss us!"

"It was when we ran the first trajectories. They nudged one of the rocks." Adrienne Gordeau closed her eyes briefly, looked wearily around at the people waiting for her to tell them what to do, wishing that Bear, or Evans, or even the priest, were here to help her. Finally she said, "Father Michael is outside. I think we must decide who's going to give final confession."

They stood uncertainly before the ship, watching, waiting for the emergence of the Dalmas, a Missionary of the Zaradin Church, who had claimed to be inside.

The Dalmas did not emerge; instead the ship began to glow.

It began as a discreet thing, crawling like a viscous fluid along the interstices of the hip. Then it went hazy, and flowed down into the empty vacuum, fountained down like a wave of mist towards the seven waiting humans. The haze enveloped them, in a warm, golden fog that penetrated their pressure suits, penetrated even Peaceforcer Evans armored scalesuit.

"Thy rod and thy staff," whispered Father Michael, "they comfort me." The warm fog embraced him. "Thou preparest a table for me in the presence of mine enemies." The golden haze swirled around them, and a bulkhead broke apart before them. The Presence drew them forward, pulling them like puppets on a string. "Thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over." He shook violently, the words coming harshly, without rhythm or beauty. "Surely--"

Father Michael Wellsmith screamed suddenly, "God!"

For a brief cold second, the warm Presence was gone, and Father Michael stood straight and alone.

Then It flooded back upon him, smashed him down, and took him as It had taken the others.

Father Michael stumbled, found himself jerked back to his feet like a puppet, and he tumbled forward with the rest of them, half-falling, a clown in Ganymede's gentle gravity. It did not bother him; nothing bothered him, not the loss of his dignity or his freedom; not the trembling beneath his feet as the remnants of a smashed moon came hurtling down to the surface of Ganymede, nor the darkness in the ship's hold, nor the brief and improbably gentle acceleration as the alien ship lifted away from Ganymede's surface, took him and Bear and Sheila and Peaceforcer Evans away from everything they had ever known.

He was wholly at peace with himself; after more than forty years as a Catholic, Father Michael Wellsmith was going home.

Transcription of an Underground background interview with Neil Corona, 2090 Gregorian:

...Jamie Wellsmith and I had both lost family in the destruction of the Ganymede colony, back in '49; it's how we met one another. My younger brother Bear, and her older brother Michael, were members of the party, sent out from St. Peter's CityState, that was charged with establishing a beachhead on Ganymede.

Bear and I hadn't spoken in better than fifteen years at the time. Bear was pretty high up in the Johnny Rebs at one point; he kept after me to join through most of the late '20s and early '30s, in a series of increasingly bitter arguments. In '33 the Peaceforcers tossed me into a Detention Center for most of a year. I got the message; in '34 I left America, left Earth.

And went to Halfway. At the time there was no PFK presence to speak of in space; there were not quite two million people living off Earth at all, and the Peaceforcers were busy consolidating the Unification on Earth; they had no time to bother with an ex-U.S. Marine who had very obligingly left the planet.

My last conversation with Bear was so bitter that it took me a couple of years to forgive him. But Bear held grudges with a vengeance; even after I'd decided to try and patch things up, he never accepted my calls, and finally I simply stopped trying. Sometime in the mid- forties he left Earth himself--that or a firing squad, as I understood it--ended up at St. Peter's CityState, out in the Belt. Back in the forties there were still a couple of CityStates that were, putatively, loyal to the Unification; St. Peter's was one of them. (As I recall, it was the next-to-the-last of the CityStates to break away from the Unification, in '54. Only the White Russians held out longer; and by '56 even they could see that remaining as part of the Unification made no sense for the CityStates.)

I don't know who was responsible for what happened, if anyone. At the time half the experts swore it was a natural disaster, tidal stress or something equally unlikely, that destroying Europa was beyond the technical capabilities of even the Unification; and the other half swore that from the little that remained afterward, it looked as though Europa had been done in by a monster nuke, perhaps anti-matter, and that it looked like a shaped charge.

I don't know. All I know is that on October 9, 2049, Europa blew and Ganymede caught a chunk of it.

After the colony got smashed, Jamie Wellsmith came looking for me.

I had no idea who she was. Her brother Michael had been the colony's priest, and apparently Bear and Michael Wellsmith had grown close. In Michael's last letter to Judith, he had written at length about his friend Bear, the atheist Father Michael was attempting to save. Jamie had looked me up for the sake of the ending to her brother's very last letter.

I've still got the hardcopy today:

--he's come to realize how his temper has damaged the people around him, how it's damaged his own life. I've been after him to come to confession, and I think he's very near agreeing. I'm not breaking the sanctity of the confessional by sharing this with you, since it was said to me while he and I drank together a few nights ago; apparently Bear's older brother is Neil Corona, the young man who surrendered at Yorktown. They've been estranged for fifteen years, and today Bear regrets their estrangement and feels that it was largely his fault. I tend to think he's right; in dealing with Bear, I must often hold my tongue. He takes offense too easily, realizes it slowly; and as a result spends much of his time apologizing for incidents that took place a day or a week or a month prior. In his brother's case he was deeply hurt (over what I am still not sure) and it has taken him all the years since to realize how deeply he, in turn, injured his brother. Bear is a proud man; today he thinks that, after fifteen years, his brother must be so offended at him that he would not appreciate Bear attempting to make contact again. I understand why Bear feels this way; it's how Bear would react in similar circumstances. I hope he's wrong. In any event, we will find out; when we return to St. Peter's next August, I think I will write to Mr. Neil Corona, and see what his feelings are toward his brother, and possibly arrange a reconciliation.

At times I think my calling is a fiction, Jamie; something I've invented to give my life some meaning.

And other times I know it is not.

I remain, your loving brother,

Michael.

I read it silently; when I was done, Jamie Wellsmith demanded with tears in her eyes, "Well? Was my brother right? Did you want to hear from him?"

She stared at me unwaveringly through her tears, and I said as steadily as I could, "I would have given ten years of my life to talk to Bear again. He was the last family I had. He was the last person I ever really let myself love."

Interlude: from There to Here 2049-2676 Inclusive

When the rescue ships arrived at Ganymede, weeks too late, there was nothing left of the beachhead, and little enough left of the former surface of Ganymede itself on the hemisphere where the fragments of Europa had struck. The Zaradin ship was gone; and the Peaceforcers and scientists who swarmed in their dozens over the wreckage of the first Ganymean settlement found nothing that would lead them to guess that such beings had ever existed.

The Cathedral left through Sol's First Gate; and six hundred and twenty-seven years passed.

It is not a large span of time, in the scheme of things. Only on the human scale does it become significant...a matter of generations, even for humans who live far longer than those of the twenty-first century Gregorian: more time separates Tyrel November from 2049 than separates 2049 from Christopher Columbus' first voyage to the New World.

The roll call of the Players, down through the centuries, is immense. The universe is too complex to be told of in any story, or any collection of stories, or in all stories. Everything is a summary and a lie. Perhaps I should tell you of the art of Tyrel November's time, or the technology, or the genetics or the politics; perhaps I should explain the path of the Exodus, map the routes humanity has taken through the spacelace tunnels, its small tentative footholds among the stars: a few thousands of planets settled, in a galaxy where the stars number a third of a trillion, in a universe where the Milky Way is one galaxy among hundreds of billions, when the Continuing Time itself is only one timeline among the half quadrillion that compose the Great Wheel of Existence.

We are small beyond understanding; but in the heritage of our people, in the naming of the Players whose dreams and memories live on within us, are the seeds of the only meaning we will ever find.

Across the span of the years, some things stand out:

It has been six hundred and twenty-seven years since the destruction of the Ganymede colony; six hundred and fourteen years since the black day in 2062 when the United Nations Peace Keeping Force, under the command of a man named Mohammed Vance, destroyed all but two of the Castanaveras telepaths. It has been five hundred and ninety-six years since Trent the Uncatchable died, and rose again, and vanished, perhaps forever; and five hundred and seventy-seven years since the *Dauntless*, the first tachyon starship in all of history, made its only voyage from Sol System.

It has been five hundred and forty-six years since the beginning of the War with the Sleem, the great conflict in which humanity was nearly exterminated; it has been five hundred and thirty years since the sleem empire was broken at the Battle of the Core, by an alliance of human and K'Ailla forces; and five hundred and twenty-seven years since Daniel November dropped the city of Starfall onto the surface of the planet November.

It has been four hundred and ninety-six years since the Platform *Rose from Earth* left Sol System with the Spollant Caravan, and began the Exodus from Earth. Trentists--members of the Church of His Return, more commonly called the Exodus Church- followed them out among the stars not long after.

It has been four hundred and eighty-four years since Lorn November published *The Protocols of Anarchy*; four hundred and eighty-one years since Lorn's brother, Richard, declared himself the first Lord of the House of November, and the House of November the planet's governing body. On November today there are courts and judges and taxes. And Anarchists. Lots of them.

It has been two hundred and eighty-seven years since the death of Kinderjim of November. The world he helped settle, Domain, is today, by virtue of Kinderjim's death, the only world in the explored Continuing Time where humans and K'Aillae live together in peace.

It has been one hundred and seventy-five years since Ola Blue died. She is more famous now than when alive, and she was well known then: *Our Lady of Nightways*, the deadliest human being who ever lived, or is ever likely to. It is said of Ola Blue that she was death itself, and sorrow: Ola Blue herself said

that if nightways had not existed, she would have created it.

It has been one hundred and thirty-seven years since Shelomin Serendip abolished the Regency of United Earth. Today Earth has no domestic government; no courts and no judges and no police. What it does have is United Earth Intelligence and its College, and both institutions are only tools of the Face of Night.

All of these figures--the mere thousands of years that human civilization itself has existed--are only small fractions of the near 65 millennia that have passed since the Zaradin ended the Time Wars, and disappeared; and the Continuing Time began.

The Continuing Time itself is young; the Time Wars raged for three and a half billion years; and there are events in history earlier than *that*.

BOOK ONE: THE MAN-SPACETHING WAR 2676-2681 Asimov

Summer 26, 2676 Asimov.

His heart beat like a drum.

He had attuned himself to the place, to the deliberate rhythm of the wilderness. Walking alone beneath the blue sky of alien Earth, through a forest vaster than any on November, Tyrel November had emptied his mind of analytical thought, and moved through the wilderness as one who belonged.

By dawn on his third day away from the College Tyrel knew himself followed.

It shook him out of his reverie, and he resented it near as much for that as for the danger it posed. He camped that night without a fire, in that part of the Great North Forest called Washington, not far south of Canada. He got himself high up in a spruce pine, gentled his breathing and his heart, cooled the surface of his skin to the ambient for the surrounding air, and waited for morning.

High summer, and a gentle wind that held scents whose names he did not know. On the first day of his trek he had seen a brown bear, but he had been upwind of it. He could pick out a few scents, here and there beneath the sharp overlay of the pine; deer and running water strong among them.

Humans could be found not two hundred and sixty clicks to the west, if Tyrel felt the need to go to them, clustered in small cities along the coast of the Pacific Ocean. With Earth's population down below four billion, people were perhaps rarer than they had once been--but by the standards of a man from November, a world where a quarter of Earth's population had spread itself across three times Earth's land surface, they were plentiful enough.

He did not feel the need to seek out human company. His follower, perhaps a night face, knew little woodcraft. It was a rare art on Earth; and if the forest through which Tyrel traveled was not the same forest in which he had been raised, well, it was not very different. Wilderness has its own reason, and the wilderness of November is, with rare notable exceptions, largely that of Earth, transplanted four hundred light years.

He knew himself followed, and it was enough.

In the last tenth of light, from his tree Tyrel had picked out the highest spot around, a bluff overlooking the river; in the last tenth of darkness he came down from the tree. He left both his knives, his backpack and his clothes, at the base of the tree, and covered them with brush and leaves. There was too much metal in the knives and backpack, and his skin was better camouflage than the brown hiking clothes. He doubted that his follower was using deep radar; on many worlds it might have gotten away with it, but not on Earth itself. The Citadel of the Regency is located in North America; anyone polluting the electromagnetic spectrum with military caliber radar would have the Face of Night to deal with, and promptly. But unlikely was not impossible, and Tyrel did not take unnecessary chances where his life was concerned.

He kept the rifle. Its polymer stock and monocrystal barrel were unlikely to show up even on deep radar; the maglev boost mechanism, and the projectiles themselves, had small amounts of metal in them, but it was a chance he would have to take. Without the rifle the night face, if it was a night face, would kill him.

His skin had been dark brown through most of the trek; it was the color Tyrel used socially. Now he let his skin and hair go black, as black as the night around him. He kept to the forest floor, beneath the trees, to cover that would help shield him from orbital observation. His follower was not tracking him by any ordinary means; it barely knew how to keep to cover itself. Tyrel's best guess was that somewhere in orbit, some commercial vehicle was watching him with very good optics. Infrared would do them no good, not now; Tyrel kept his body temperature at the ambient for his surroundings. But motion analysis is a powerful tool, and if they did not know where he was to within a kilometer at any given time Tyrel would have been surprised.

The tree growth grew denser as he approached the river, became a broad ceiling that blocked the sky. Tyrel took his time, working up the bluff, keeping to hard ground where possible; false dawn lit the sky to the east when he had finally reached his spot. He waited patiently for the light, until he could see the color of the bluff's stone clearly; a pale white, streaked here and there with the gray of granite. This next was a risk, but a risk he would have to take; he let his skin and hair go pale, holding his hand out in front of him until it came near to blending into the bluff. He kept his rifle, black and thereby far more visible from the sky than he was, beneath him, and crept out, slowly, over the space of a tenth, across the surface of the bluff until he had reached the spot he wanted, at the edge of a long stretch of stone, sloping away down toward a drop of some eighty meters over the river below. A good spot; he would see trouble coming from a distance.

Tyrel did not know the river's name; as the sun came up he saw that it ran broad, fast and shallow. Freshwater fish glittered beneath its surface, quick and silver in the water. Tyrel lay on his stomach on the cool stone, propped up on his elbows, with his rifle beneath him, hidden from the sky.

He slowed himself, brought his heart and breath down together until his heartbeat had reached ten per minute, and his breaths five.

The rifle spat slivers of magnetized ceramic which fragmented upon impact into something about the size of a man's fist. A hunting rifle; its variable speed maglev could be set for muzzle velocities low enough to pot small game, and high enough to knock down a grizzly with one shot. Some of the other students back at College had recommended Tyrel try a variable laser, but energy weapons are not common along November's Dragonback mountains; Tyrel had stuck with a weapon he understood. He had been raised among the poorest of November's people, the Dragonback Castille, and had been taught to hunt, with a rifle not much different from the one he held now, before he had been taught to read.

Now, two decades after he had first been shown how to hold a rifle without getting smacked in the face by it, the skill might well save his life.

The morning wore along slowly. The mist hung heavy in the air for the first brief while after sunrise. Sol was cooler than Lucifer, November's star, even at the equator, and this far north was cooler still; but it was warm enough to burn off the mist. Through the course of the long morning Tyrel waited patiently, Sol's gentle light falling down upon him, warming the air he breathed.

Tyrel wished briefly that he'd thought to bring along imaging binoculars, but pushed the thought away quickly. He had come to hike, to travel and learn the country; there had been no reason to expect combat, or any sort of trouble. And there was no use wishing for things to be other than they were.

Toward mid-day he saw the first flicker of movement. Just a flicker, and then gone, something brown and gray-green moving through the treeline, perhaps a kilometer downriver. It might have a bear or a wolf or a deer, wild animals Tyrel had been told were common to these parts--but wild mammals, at least, rarely use optical camouflage, and Tyrel, in the brief moment he had been able to see anything, had seen the patch of brown and gray-green *slide*, like oil on the water.

Assume the person following him was a night face. Tyrel had enough to go on for that assumption. If those who had hired his follower knew who he was, then they knew he had spent the last six years at the College of United Earth Intelligence, studying nightways; and they would hardly send someone less

skilled than himself to kill him.

And if they did not know who he was, it was not likely they they would be following him in the first place.

So a night face was probable. It would be in contact with the ship in orbit; which meant that it knew by now that the ship had lost track of Tyrel.

It would be cautious. Moving slowly. They had time, and the night face might know it; Tyrel would not be missed for several days, when he did not arrive at the first checkpoint on his itinerary.

Toward mid-afternoon Tyrel saw it again, the sliding patch of color moving through the trees toward him. Closer this time--four hundred and fifty or sixty meters distant, Tyrel judged. Close enough to take a shot if he got a good sighting.

The afternoon wore on and became evening, and night fell without Tyrel seeing anything further. He dozed briefly, came awake to the sounds of distant birds in the night. Around midnight a wind came up, and Tyrel had occasion to regret the spot he had chosen; the wind swept across the open face of the bluff, and even at the height of summer it was chill enough it left Tyrel cold and stiff.

Morning again.

The second day passed without any suspicious movement that Tyrel saw.

On Tyrel's third day on the bluff, his sixth day since leaving Seattle, an aircraft passed overhead, tracked across the high blue bowl of the sky for most of five minutes while Tyrel watched it. Too high up, and moving too fast; Tyrel could have unloaded the entire magazine of his rifle in its direction without being noticed. He was not considering leaving his position anyway; but again in the late afternoon he saw motion in the forest. Further away this time; about seven hundred meters upstream of his position. That was all he saw, motion; it might, this time, have been some wild creature.

The hunger was not bad; but by the end of his third day on the bluff Tyrel's thirst gnawed at him. He could smell water and see it, but he could not go get it. Even as greatly as he had slowed himself, some systems were beyond his control. His body fought to retain its fluids, but toxins built up regardless; before dawn of the fourth day Tyrel pushed his metabolism back up, and crept slowly back under the cover of the trees, letting his skin fade to black as he did so. He stood close to a tree and urinated against the bark, slowly and quietly, until his bladder was empty, and then made his way back out to his chosen spot before the sun had risen.

Tyrel knew himself well, and the systems of which he was composed, both those he could control and those he could not; despite his thirst his systolic fluid levels were acceptable. He was two or three days away yet from being unable to fight. He pushed back the first traces of real fear, and waited through the long fourth day on the rock.

The fifth and sixth days came and went and Tyrel found himself growing lightheaded and dizzy. His elbows throbbed where they rested against the stone, and his ribs, and the bones in his hips. At times he found himself coming back to awareness, knowing that time had passed but not knowing how much. Sol tracked slowly across the sky; Tyrel had time to appreciate the long line of genegineers, human and MI, whose work had left him resistant to sunburn.

Fog crawled in before dawn on the seventh day, white and misty. Luna hung overhead, nearly full, illuminating the banked wreaths of fog with an ethereal glow. Tyrel's skin grew damp; trickles of moisture ran down across the broad muscles in his back, joined together and pooled like sweat in the small of his back and the backs of his knees. The rock beneath him became slick. He imagined he saw shapes in the moonlit fog, found his finger tightening on the trigger of his rifle, and forced himself to relax. Tired as he was he found his skin tingling as though an electric current danced upon its surface. An absurd lightness touched him, as though he might at any moment float weightless off the surface of the rock, up into the cool night air. He could not feel the rifle in his hands, or the stone he lay upon, or himself.

...her eyes were as green as his own. He did not know her name, and had never met her before in his life; but he knew that he looked upon a lord of the House of November, a telepath like himself.

She sat on a roof, with two men, in the last light of day. Tyrel did not know the name of the city that surrounded them, stretching away in one direction as far as the eye could see; in another direction was a great ocean. She seemed young, Tyrel thought perhaps fifteen or sixteen; wearing a pair of white shorts and a thin white blouse, tinged orange by the setting sun.

The men with her were not much older, by appearance eighteen or twenty. Both were fit, one blond and the other dark; but Tyrel did not much notice them, for the girl was speaking; had been speaking.

"...it's why God put us here. To make things better, so that the people who come after us have a better life than the people who came before." The girl sat up slowly; her eyes, unfocused and remote, met Tyrel's. She spoke in a voice distant and gentle:

"They come down out of the mountains, to where the circle of his fire is burning against the night. And you see the young man he *speaks* to them then, at the foot of the mountains while the living diamonds hunt them in the darkness, and tells them that the old promises will be fulfilled, the old dreams realized, the old wrongs made right. And then, *together*," the girl said, looking away from Tyrel and abruptly fixing one of her companions with a fierce gaze, "together they march back through the Traveling Waters, and go back together to the city on the hill and drive out the enemy."

The rooftop faded and vanished; and one of the girl's companions, the dark-haired man, vanished with it. Tyrel found himself on a mountainside at night, near what he recognized as the north end of the Dragonback; the vast bulk of Prometheus, November's primary, blotted out the stars above them.

The girl stood facing him, with the young blonde man at her side, and Tyrel knew who they had to be: Denice Castanaveras, dead near four centuries; and Trent the Uncatchable, who had vanished from the Continuing Time longer ago than that. Blue fire flickered across the girl's skin, pulsed around her skull.

Trent the Uncatchable spoke. "Where are we?"

"Watching," said Denice Castanaveras. "Watching the fire burning out. They forgot to bank Tyrel's fire when they all left together. It flickers and then the cold kills it, and all that's left is the--darkness."

In the first light, on the morning of the seventh day, the searchers came.

At first Tyrel was not certain they were not a hallucination. They moved slowly, covering roughly the centerline of the heading Tyrel had left on file at College: five cars, with the blue on black mandala of United Earth Intelligence emblazoned on them. He watched them coming, bringing his breathing and heartbeat back to normal, increasing the flow of blood to his extremities, and prepared to move.

Tyrel scaled the rifle down to its lowest setting, and when the nearest car was within range, pinged a shot off its side.

The reaction was what he had expected; the car veered off wildly, and the four flanking it dropped out of the sky like stones, down beneath the cover of the trees.

Tyrel waited patiently; if he had learned nothing else at College, he had learned patience. It is the first axiom of nightways that there are only necessary actions, and mistakes. By the reactions of those in the search vehicles he knew them for shivatad, night faces, and they would know his shot for what it had been, a warning of danger and not any serious attack.

He heard the first screams of approaching spacecraft only a few minutes after his warning shot. He let his skin go black, highlighting himself against the pale bluff; and then for much of the morning watched the spacecraft track back and forth across the sky above him. Finally, just before noon, one of the cars Tyrel had seen earlier made its way up the river, floating only a few meters above the surface of the running water, and came to a halt on the near bank. A night face Tyrel did not know got out of the car, looked up to where Tyrel lay on the bluff, and called up, "You can come down now."

The night faces searched with no success. Who or whatever had followed Tyrel was not to be found.

Tyrel consulted the Source. High on the plateau which also holds the centuries-old ruins of Mexico City, sits the College of United Earth Intelligence. Tyrel went to the Source's Place during late afternoon of the day he was rescued; he took time only to shower and to feed himself.

The Source's Place was a small, empty auditorium. The doorfield was of modern make; it did not

break apart at Tyrel's approach, but merely shimmered and softened slightly. Tyrel stepped through the field, and it dragged at him slightly, kept the hot air outside from entering with him.

Inside, in Mexico City's high summer, it was cooled to a temperature most humans, and Tyrel, found pleasant. Tyrel was tapped, but his tap was designed for November's net, not Sol System's Source; the Source's Place lacked the equipment to decode the signal from Tyrel's tap, and so, in consulting the Source, here in the Source's Place, it was required that Tyrel speak aloud.

The Source spoke Anglic with a Terran accent, in a neutral voice that might have been male or female. (On the rare occasions Tyrel had seen the Source assume a body, the body it chose was human, but genderless.)

Today the Source wore no body; it generated a holo as Tyrel entered the Place. The holo was of an attractive young man of Tyrel's apparent age; Tyrel wondered if the choice of gender and age were politeness on the Source's part. "Ser November."

"Source."

Unlike most humans, the Source wasted no time. "Forty-six commercial spacecraft, swept thoroughly by InSystem Security, orbited Earth during the entire period that you lay upon your rock. Another one hundred and four craft orbited Earth during some part of the last seven days. One hundred and eight are of Earth registry; the remainder are variously registered by the K'Aillae Protectorate, the Zardin Church, the House of November, the House of Domain, the Slissi Mutual Trade Protective Society, and the SpaceFarer's Collective. One ship of a human society that calls itself the Wu Li, applying to become an Earth protectorate, has been in geosynchronous orbit for the last twenty-one days. Finally, the Pristhill Caravan has been orbiting Earth at L-5 for the last forty-four days."

Tyrel was startled. "You let a Caravan that close to Earth?"

The Source said, "The Face of Night did. I recommended against it; but the Pristhill fought with humanity during the war with the sleem. They are one of only three Caravans that did. The Director consulted the Shivas, and the decision was made."

"One hundred and fifty spacecraft," said Tyrel, "and one Platformer Caravan. And any one of them might have been in communication with the being that followed me into the Great North Forest." He shook his head. "I don't like it."

"Nor would I," the Source observed, "in your skin."

"I'll want everything you have available. The InSystem Security reports; ship's logs where available--"

The Source said dryly, "They are *all* available. We would hardly let a craft exit either of Sol System's Gates if it would not let me scan its log."

Tyrel nodded. "Edit for me, then."

"I would in any regard," said the Source. "You do not process data quickly enough to assess the available data in any useful period of time."

Tyrel smiled without amusement. "Isn't that always the case?"

The Source said politely, "For humans."

A day later, Tyrel sat on the beach in Ensenada, watching the bright blue Pacific roll up onto the beach, and fall back. The days and nights on the rock had taken their toll; even now, relaxing in a beach chair with a bottle of brown beer in one hand, with the hot Mexican sun warming his muscles, Tyrel felt stiff and uncertain in his movements.

He did not much like Mexican beaches; they were too close to Mexico City, and the College, and got too many tourists. (Tourists from elsewhere InSystem, not Out; the Face of Night did not allow OutSystem tourists on Earth. When mere kilos of antimatter could devastate a world, the risk was too great.) But Tyrel was not in the mood for another trip, and Ensenada was the furthest beach north of Mexico City he could get to without crossing Southern California's Glass Desert.

(Elsewhere in the Continuing Time, humans speaking of "the war" generally mean the war with the sleem. InSystem, and particularly on Earth, this is not true. The sleem never hit Earth itself. Nearly six hundred years later, Terrans referring to "the war" usually mean the AI War, and the Revolution that followed it: humans and the creations of humans caused the vast Glass Deserts.)

Shiva Enherod, sitting in a beach chair next to Tyrel's, said, "Who hates you?"

Tyrel shrugged. "Wouldn't know."

Shiva Enherod nodded. Tyrel suspected the older man liked him--he had sought out Tyrel's company more than once during Tyrel's six years at College--but it was hard to tell with night faces. And Shiva Enherod was not *just* a night face; he was one of six living Shivas, of fourteen in the history of United Earth Intelligence. After a moment Enherod said politely, "Home politics?"

Tyrel felt no inclination to dignify the comment with an answer.

Enherod nodded as though Tyrel had. Despite his suspicion of and distaste for it, at times Tyrel appreciated the Source; unlike humans, it never belabored the obvious--

--Enherod said, "Whoever it was is still out there, Tyrel."

Into a place where nothing lived, and nothing stirred, and shadows dreamed of death, came a man.

Two thousand light years away from Earth and Tyrel November and the Face of Night...

...sixteen hundred light years away from November, at the other end of the twisting long tunnels that linked November to Eloise, and Eloise to Devnet...

...a human being named Bodhisatva brought his starship, the *Shivering Bastard*, out of Devnet System's First Gate. The *Shivering Bastard* entered real space moving at better than ninety-eight percent of light, the same speed at which she had entered the spacelace tunnel, back at the Eloisean planetary system.

Bodhi had missed the Gate at Eloise, his first four tries at entry. At .98C the insertion beam had to sync the Gate perfectly on the first try. If he missed, the *Shivering Bastard* would be a hundred thousand kilometers past the Gate by the time the insertion beam could be resynchronized.

It did not seem to Bodhi that he was taking excessively long; time shrank as he approached lightspeed, and in his time only about ten hours passed as he accelerated to make his pass at the Gate, and another ten as he missed and decelerated to zero. But he knew it was not so; in the Continuing Time at large days passed with each approach, and with each deceleration.

There was a deadline to his attempts; one of the House of November's precious few tachyon starships, the *Reeny Ihr*, was en route to Devnet, and was due to arrive there in sixty-eight days.

It was not until Bodhi's fifth pass, twenty-seven days after beginning, that Eloise's Third Gate, entryway to the long tunnel to Devnet, opened at Bodhisatva's approach, and swallowed the *Shivering Bastard*.

When Devnet fell silent; when ship after ship of the November Guard failed to return after entering the long tunnel to Devnet; and when the famous, formidable Wizard refused for reasons of her own to try and find out what had gone wrong; then P'Rythan, recently Lord of the House of November, was forced to a choice she despised.

In truth she had no options. Though the universe is a dangerous place, the House of November is not prone to overreacting; but the Luciferean System, which contains November, is tunneled to Eloise, and Eloise is tunneled to Devnet; and danger only two Gates away was danger the House of November could not tolerate.

Had she been younger, or held a different post, P'Rythan might have gone herself; she was a woman of considerable talents. But she was also Lord of the House of November; and so, for only the sixth time since 2294, when it assumed control of the planet whose name it shared, the House of November sought outside aide. P'Rythan November sent an envoy to Sol, to Earth, to America, to California, to the city of Van Nuys, to the headquarters of a certain ancient organization; and there a Captain of the November Guard presented P'Rythan's request for the aid of Pinkerton Agent Bodhisatva.

In a time when some of the living had once been machines, and some machines had once lived, where the body a being wore might not have been the sex or the species it was born to, it was known that

Bodhisatva was a man in the old style; born human, male, genetically unreconstructed. He was of slightly below average height by modern standards; his eyes and skin were brown and his hair was black and it was said he could not change the color of any of them without help from dyes or lenses.

Some things were general knowledge; the Source would tell you, if you asked it. It was known that Bodhi had never had biosculpture; and that, though he maintained a form lean and muscular in the modern style, the maintenance took him an hour a day working out in high gee on the gravity jungle aboard his ship. There were a dozen fine immune management nanosystems Bodhi could have had installed that would have taken over the job of maintaining his muscles for him; but Bodhi, as he had explained in a rare public statement forty years prior, did not trust such systems and saw no reason to deprive himself of workouts he enjoyed.

It was assumed that he ran one of the better defensive immune systems; in his line of work it would be critical. But no one really knew.

Devnet System is notable for two things; and its small colony of Novembri is not one of them. There are twelve Gates at Devnet, twelve entry points into the web of spacelace tunnels that link the stars together. In 2677, over five hundred years after the end of the war with the sleem, humanity knows of only two larger clusters: the system in which the planet Domain is located has thirteen; and a black hole, near the Galactic Core, has thirty- one.

The other notable thing about Devnet is the tunnel its Third Gate opens upon. Its Third Gate opens on one of the four ridiculously long tunnels humanity knows of in the Continuing Time. Its transit time is eight years, and it connects Devnet System with a red dwarf on the other side of the Galactic Core, sixty thousand light years from Earth.

The *Shivering Bastard* broke into real space through Devnet System's First Gate. Bodhi, awaiting the event in the relative comfort of the *Bastard's* observation bubble, had an inhumanly brief impression of impossible glare, and then found himself enveloped by blackness. The impression of glare had not come from his organic eyes, but from the tap the *Shivering Bastard* used to feed him information.

WELL, said Bodhi, THAT WAS INTERESTING.

The *Shivering Bastard* said, YES. WE THINK--

The observation bubble cleared. Bodhi looked upon a universe shifted blue in one direction, red in another. Though different stars were visible, and odd patches of space glowed bright blue with the stepped-up infrared from warm dust clouds, it did not otherwise look much different from what he was used to; in the direction of his travel stellar radio waves shifted up into visible light, and stellar gamma radiation, chasing him from behind, dropped down into his visible spectrum.

--WE WERE HIT WITH A HELL OF A LASER. The *Bastard* paused, and then said, OR PERHAPS NOT.

Already two million clicks away from Devnet's First Gate, heading inSystem at near lightspeed, the *Shivering Bastard's* scopes peered backward. Bodhi examined their red-shifted image, transmitted via his tap directly into his forebrain, with interest.

Parabolic mirrors....nine of them; Bodhi had no way of guessing their size.

ABOUT FOUR HUNDRED KLICKS IN DIAMETER, said the *Bastard*. WE THINK WE KNOW WHAT HAPPENED TO THE SHIPS THE NOVEMBER GUARD SENT THROUGH.

At the focal points of the nine parabolic mirrors sat Devnet's First Gate; where the reflections of those mirrors met was a region hotter than the surface of most stars. A ship coming through the Gate at the usual velocity of only a few hundred kilometers per hour...Bodhi shivered at the thought.

The picture came clear slowly, Ship's scopes sought the positions of the other eleven Gates, and found eleven of the twelve basking in the warmth of Devnet's mirrored regard. Only one Gate was not so protected; and Bodhi's instant guess--the Third Gate, opening on the ridiculously long tunnel--was correct.

YES, said the *Bastard*, perhaps guessing Bodhi's guess; she knew him well. WHOEVER DID THIS CAME A LONG WAY FOR IT. THE OTHER SIDE OF THE GALAXY.

PERHAPS, said Bodhi. OR PERHAPS THEY JUST WANT US TO THINK SO. LET'S

PROCEED INSYSTEM FOR NOW. WE STILL DON'T KNOW WHAT'S HAPPENED TO UGLY.

InSystem, a small Marslike planet, Ugly-On-A-Ball, orbited Devnet itself at a distance of one hundred and sixty-five million kilometers. Three centuries of terraforming had not changed Ugly much. The air was breathable by humans, but just barely; the House of November had come to Devnet System for its Gates, not out of any interest in its real estate.

That he had found himself heading generally inSystem pleased Bodhi; the odds had been somewhat against it. The November Guard had been unable to tell Bodhi exactly what direction Devnet's First Gate faced; under ordinary circumstances, when craft entered or left the Gate at only a few hundred kilometers per hour, it was hardly relevant. (A desperate search through those ship's logs the House of November had been able to get hold of, of ships that had transited Devnet's First Gate in the last few decades, had produced nothing; it was not the sort of information that got recorded.)

Aside from the ninety-nine mirrors, the System might never have been visited by intelligence. The *Shivering Bastard* monitored no radio, no video, no net; saw no ships. Bodhi sat cross-legged in free fall, in loose clothing that drifted around him. In a crystal bubble, surrounded by a bright starry sky, he ghosted through a System gone silent.

Bodhisatva's thoughts were troubled. The tech necessary to mount mirrors of this size and number, across the full length of a solar system, in the brief time since Devnet had fallen silent, was beyond anything in his experience. He doubted the sleem, humanity's foes since its discovery of the tachyon star drive, could have done it. Once perhaps, at the height of their power-- but not today, broken and scattered as they were across the galaxy.

He consulted the *Alternities Catalog of Intelligent Spacegoing Species*, and came up with only a few possibilities; none he liked. The Zaradin Church perhaps had the capability--and Bodhi's distrust of the Zaradin Church ran deep--but it would be wildly out of character. Even if it did not drag them into a general war with humanity, an act like this would make human governments even more unfriendly to the Church than they already were, if that was possible. The Tamranni were a possibility of sorts--but there were Tamranni upon November itself, and while Bodhi presumed that the ancient Tamranni could have done such a thing as he saw before him, he doubted very much that they would have. One of the older and larger Platformer Caravans rounded out Bodhi's short list of possibles; and again he thought it unlikely. Though a given Caravan might have managed to set these mirrors, all the Caravans humanity had ever encountered, taken together, could not have survived war with the mighty House of November--
--and whoever did this, thought Bodhi with a certain grim weariness, *is going to have to*.

Unlike planets, Gates are relatively stationary with respect to the stars to which they are anchored; by a quirk of timing, Ugly's orbit had taken it to the side of Devnet almost directly opposite its First Gate. The *Shivering Bastard* climbed up above the ecliptic and aimed its telescopes in the direction of Ugly. It took the *Bastard* a moment to find the planet, even knowing where it was supposed to be; Devnet's First Gate is 8.3 light hours distant from Devnet itself, nine billion kilometers distant.

Ugly was a molten rock.

Bodhi exhaled slowly. That he had expected it did not make seeing it any easier. At the distance, all that was visible was the planet's heat signature, but that was sufficient; the planet radiated into space at a temperature of 2,500 degrees Centigrade. It had never had much of an atmosphere, and now had none.

Ugly it might have been; but within the last ninety days, less than a quarter past, thirty-four million Novembri, human and otherwise, had been alive upon its surface.

WE'VE BEEN NOTICED, the *Bastard* announced.

Bodhi did not stir; the image from the scope still trained upon the unguarded Third Gate came alive in his awareness. Five craft, of a design unfamiliar to Bodhi, boosted from the Third Gate, chasing the *Shivering Bastard*. The Third Gate was six light minutes distant from the First, off to one side of the *Shivering Bastard's* inbound vector. Bodhi ran the numbers quickly: ...the *Shivering Bastard's* light, leaving the First Gate, arrives at the Third Gate six minutes later. Automated equipment at the Third Gate establishes a vector and launches intercept craft...seven minutes later the image of their launch reaches us...

It took the *Bastard* a moment to calculate vectors--THEY'LL HAVE A HARD TIME CATCHING US, said the *Bastard*. A STERN CHASE IS A LONG CHASE. BUT WE THINK THEY KNOW THAT. WE THINK THEY'RE TRYING TO MAKE SURE WE DON'T REACH ONE OF THE GATES. The *Bastard* paused, analyzing. WE THINK WE'LL MAKE THE SIXTH GATE, BEYOND UGLY. IF CIRCUMSTANCES ALLOW, WE'LL DECELERATE BEFORE MAKING OUR PASS AT THE GATE. IF WE MISS THE GATE WE'RE FUCKED. WE'LL HEAD OUT INTO INTERSTELLAR SPACE, AND THEY'LL SEND MISSILES AFTER US, AND ONE OF THEM WILL GET US. The *Bastard* paused. OKAY. WE HAVE A VECTOR FOR THEM. THEY'RE BOOSTING AT 232 GRAVITIES. THEORETICAL MAX FOR GRAVITY COMPENSATION, FOR SHIPS OF THEIR ESTIMATED MASS, IS 216 GEES. IF THEIR GRAVITY COMPENSATION IS PERFECTLY IMPLEMENTED, THEY'RE BOOSTING UNDER SIXTEEN GEES. ASSUMING THEIR COMPENSATION IS IMPERFECT, BUT BETTER THAN OURS--LIKELY--THEIR COMPENSATION IS PERHAPS 195 TO 200 GEES, WHICH MEANS THEY'RE BOOSTING AT THIRTY-TWO TO THIRTY-SEVEN GRAVITIES.

The conclusion was obvious; nothing biological could have survived such acceleration. THOSE SHIPS ARE BEING PILOTED BY A MACHINE INTELLIGENCE.

THE REACTION TIME ALONE MADE THAT CLEAR; THEY BOOSTED AFTER US WITHIN TWELVE SECONDS OF CATCHING OUR LIGHT. THE INTERESTING THING IS THAT THEIR HARDWARE IS *CONSIDERABLY* BETTER THAN OURS, said the *Bastard* pointedly. AT THIRTY-TWO GEES SUSTAINED ACCELERATION, SEVERAL OF THE *SHIVERING BASTARD'S* SYSTEMS WOULD SUFFER NOTICEABLE DEGRADATION.

IF YOU CAN TELL ME WHERE TO BUY HARDWARE LIKE THEIRS, said Bodhi mildly, I'LL GET IT FOR YOU.

Suggestion of a smile; she went so far as to tell a joke, an old one. WE'LL KEEP OUR EYE OPEN.

The Eye That Never Sleeps is the symbol of the Pinkerton Security Agency, the source of the ancient phrase "private eye."

The Eye itself was displayed on the *Shivering Bastard's* hull.

Neither of them mentioned Ugly even once.

Subjectively, it took the *Shivering Bastard* twenty-two minutes to cross the System. In the outer world, ten hours passed. Bodhi kept a telescope on the alien craft that followed him, but aside from that paid them no attention; their tech might be better than his, but physical law is the same for everyone, and unless he missed the Sixth Gate on his first approach, they had no chance of catching him.

He scanned the records for Imhota instead. It was the System that Devnet's Sixth Gate led to; the Sixth Gate opened on a long tunnel that ran 812 light years, at nearly right angles to the galactic plane. The tunnel itself was a twenty-two day transit. Imhota looked like nothing spectacular; a small human colony, allied to the House of November and dependent upon it for protection, though not a November colony proper as Devnet had been. Bodhi hoped they were still there, and doubted they would be; Ugly looked like the opening act of war to him. Imhota had three Gates, all well off the ecliptic; Devnet's Sixth Gate linked to Imhota's Second. Bodhi accessed records, and was pleased; most of Imhota's shipping ran through its First and Third Gates, which were nodes on a minor Platformer Caravan circuit. It meant that there would probably be relatively few spacecraft around the Second Gate; which meant that if the *Shivering Bastard* came blasting out of the Second Gate at near lightspeed, she would probably survive.

And if we do hit something, Bodhi thought, at least we'll never know it.

From Imhota, assuming transit of Imhota System went well-- assuming they got out of Devnet System alive--Bodhi would need to transit six Gates, five Tunnels and one long tunnel, to reach November again.

It would take him forty-three days.

There were mirrors focused upon Devnet's Sixth Gate, as upon all gates except its Third. The *Shivering Bastard* sent missiles running ahead of her as she decelerated. The mirrors were designed to collect Devnet's light; they could not be expected to withstand the onslaught of half a dozen anti-matter missiles.

They did not. When the shock waves of the explosions had passed they saw that only two of the mirrors still stood. The *Shivering Bastard* decelerated to the extent that she dared; she could transit the Gate at a much reduced velocity now, and still survive the heat of the mirrors. They hit the Gate at .38C--

--and what had taken four tries back at Eloise, took one at Devnet. They made entry on the first pass and the spacelace tunnel opened up and swallowed them.

The tunnel's walls pressed in upon the *Shivering Bastard*, surrounding her like an organic thing. Had Bodhi cleared the observation bubble for viewing, he would have seen a seething gray storm of lines and spheres enclosing his starship.

He kept the bubble opaque; he had seen it before, and it was vaguely disturbing.

The *Shivering Bastard* had dinner with him in the observation bubble; Bodhi dined on wild rice, sautéed with mushrooms and almonds in a spiced wine sauce, and drank two bottles--actual bottles made of glass--of a black beer brewed long ago, on a world that was today as much a cinder as Ugly. The *Shivering Bastard* animated the body of a young human woman whom Bodhi found attractive; for the evening she spoke in the first person, and answered to the name of Beyta Arcadia, and pretended to be someone Bodhi had never met before. If he had known the *Bastard* had taken the personality from an ancient novel, it would have lessened his enjoyment in her company, and so she sensibly did not burden him with the information.

She had no particular reaction to the half hour, subjective time, that they had spent in the Devnet System. They had beaten the odds once again; some day, she knew with a cold, inhuman certainty, the odds would beat them.

As for Bodhi himself--well, she observed that he relaxed noticeably during his second beer. He did not offer to discuss the near-certain war that would come of the slaughter at Ugly, or speculate on the identity of those responsible; the *Bastard* did not bring it up.

She did not hold Bodhi's reaction against him; he was human, with human strengths and human weaknesses, including a fear of death. It did not seem to affect his functioning in a crisis; as Bodhi himself had once put it to a client, "I'm professionally incapable of being rattled, my friend." The *Shivering Bastard* knew that he often told clients that; it seemed to reassure them. "I am, by damn, a Pinkerton Man."