

# THE SEA'S FURTHEST END

by

Damien Broderick

*Mr. Broderick, a new Australian writer to the science fiction medium (but not, by any means, to literature in general) has taken as his theme the wish for Galactic unity, but, as on Earth today, the problem is mainly one of conflicting personalities—or chess pieces on a board. In this respect, someone has to lose.*

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## Proem

*Earth's Golden Age of Empire had come and gone, an exotic flower in the harsh environment of the Galaxy. The age-dark maw of space had waited patiently as Earth's seed exploded across the universe at the opening of the Bright Ages, had bided time while arrogant Man bridged the stars with lines of commerce and allegiance, had reaped satisfaction when the entropy of empire brought Man's dreams crashing into the dust of a million worlds. The universe had chuckled as the heirs of mighty Earth reverted on ten hundred thousand motes in space to primitive tribal civilizations. And again it waited with eternal amusement for the Hunger which would drive men out into the hostile dark between the stars.*

*The Empire had died of decadence and internecine strife. For basically, empire is an artificial system. Every planet was a self-contained unit, with its own gamut of resources. Certainly, highly organized interstellar trade made for more and cheaper luxury goods. Technique-traders enabled breakthrough discoveries on one planet to benefit the Galaxy. But peace came at the price of freedom, and the Empire fell. After the Wars of Annihilation, Man's spirit was broken and he renounced the stars in the despair common to all Dark Ages.*

*But the skies had cleared at last. A thousand years had*

*given forty generations time to yearn again for the stars. And this time the groping explorers did not find an empty universe to conquer—on every habitable planet, they met their forgotten brothers, seeded there from Mother Earth twenty thousand years before.*

*The reavers came, and the missionaries, and the traders, one men dreamed again of Empire...*

*The Player laughed, and carefully removed his Queen.*

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## **One**

Aylan lay on his back in the hush of the garden, his lean figure another shadow in the darkness. Eyes closed, he chewed the end of a grass stem and sucked the sweet juice into his mouth. The Palace was quiet, and the only sounds were the movements of small creatures in the leaves and the long gentle swell of the sea slapping in the distance against the breakwaters. The grass beneath him was soft and smooth, buoyant like the warm sea. Aylan opened his eyes to the sky, and sobbed. Sprinkled in a great blazing halo above his head were the stars Man had once renounced, which Man had now to win back. The sign of Cain was on Man's soul, the mark of war and conquest and bloody murder, and it drove him to empire. Aylan ground his knuckles into his eyes. For those cold shining points of light were his heritage. He was Crown Prince of Loren, son of the man who was gradually making himself Emperor of the Galaxy.

Suddenly the ground seemed uncomfortable beneath him, and Aylan got to his feet. He wandered blindly in the overpowering scent of the trees to the end of the vast garden, down a sandy path to the edge of the sea. The salty acrid smell filled his nostrils and drugged his mind and he crunched across the sand to the edge of the lapping water. The sea was black, an ocean of oil, of tears, and there was no moon. Stars sank from the sky to the end of the sea, out far on the horizon, and drowned in the black salt swell. Aylan had his fur shoes off, and his robe and shirt, before he realized what he was doing, but the lure of the sea was a siren's song, not to be denied. He threw his trousers after the other clothes and walked slowly into the water. It surrounded him, wetting his long hair, carrying him drifting towards the stars on the horizon.

He licked the salt water from his lips and with long powerful strokes

swam to the partially submerged breakwater and clambered up on to it. The air was cool after the warm water, and it cleared his head. Above him, the stars were cold as ever, placid, condemning. There was no way of knowing, by looking at them, that men were drowning in one another's blood out there to own them.

There were wars, and rumours of wars. The pounding starships had consolidated victory on the Rim for the Loren system in the days of Aylan's great-grandfather. Now they were pressing into the Centre, into territory where other monarchies and Federations were forming. There, in the more compact systems of Centre where the stars were strewn so close that night was almost brighter than day, the battles were waging between Loren and groups almost as powerful.

The Prince turned his eyes from the stars, and looked back at the glowing palace. In the dark it was hard to see the wild beauty of the stone tracery that was the Imperial Palace on this pleasure world of Nara. Most of the lights were out, for even with the Court retinue present the huge palace was practically empty. Aylan sought out the light of the Emperor's room, but it was not glowing. Probably he would be... Yes, Adriel's room was illuminated. The boy closed his eyes against the prick of angry tears. How he hated his father! Adriel... Violently, he shook his head against the impotent anger that raged inside him, and slid once more into the water.

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Veret was standing on the balustrade when Aylan reached the palace, outside the encircled cross that marked the chapel. He glanced shrewdly at the Prince as Aylan went by without acknowledging his presence, and ambled along beside the boy.

"Still silent, Aylan?" he commented in his quiet penetrating voice. "Our stay at Nara is almost over, you know, and your mood doesn't seem to have got any better."

Aylan stopped short, and looked with distraught eyes at the quiet brown-robed figure.

"You may be the Emperor's confessor, Father, but I scarcely see why my mood should affect you."

The priest raised one eyebrow and put his hand on Aylan's arm.

"His Majesty has been worried by your sulking and silence," he

grunted as he sat on the low marble wall that edged the cloister.

The Prince did not try to hide his bitterness; he flaunted it, gloried in it.

“If His Majesty the Holy Emperor of Loren worried more about his own soul and less about others’ the universe would be a happier place.” He turned to go, but the priest’s constraining hand was on his arm again.

“What is it, boy?” asked Veret, and he was all consolation and strength. “Is it... Adriel?”

And suddenly the youth was on his knees, his face buried in Veret’s robes, his arms around the priest’s legs. The old priest was not surprised at the emotional release. There was strong stuff in the boy but the Emperor had deliberately kept his son reliant on others, denied him the opportunity to stand on his own two feet. Aylan’s only trouble, he thought wryly, was emotional immaturity.

In the darkness, Aylan got to his feet again, and he was calmer than he had been for weeks. And colder. In a moment, his face lost its boyish petulance and the grim set of his jaw and mouth betrayed the change his fluid personality had undergone.

“I apologize, Father,” he said briskly, and strode rapidly away towards his rooms.

For a moment the old priest followed him with his eyes, startled despite himself by the boy’s sudden metamorphosis of character. Then with a grunt and swish of robes he moved back to the chapel, smiling to himself. “There’s one more the Emperor Malvara will have to watch out for,” he muttered thoughtfully.

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Aylan walked across the rich carpets without noticing the ornate beauty of the rooms around him. Here were the strivings and aspirations of men long dead, the beauty captured in straining stone and burning glass, the elegance and grace of a new renaissance. In this palace were represented the dreams and hopes of a hundred Visions, and they went unnoticed by Aylan, for there was death on his mind. He rode the grav-shaft to his floor and saw only the loveliness of Adriel of Corydon and felt only the hate no son should feel for his father.

The walls of his chambers were glowing as he came into them, and

he muttered in annoyance at the cleaner who must have left them on. And a quiet voice said, "Good evening, Aylan."

The Prince turned, stunned, to the seat where Milenn was sitting. And then the two men were in one another's arms, clapping each other on the back in happy reunion. Aylan pushed his friend to arm's length and surveyed him. Milenn had changed. No longer was he the carefree debonair nobleman who had grown up with the Prince. Now his handsome face was burned black with the ultra-violet of hot suns. His right cheek was scarred with a needle-burn, and his brow was creased with responsibility. But his laugh was the same, the corners of his strong mouth lifted in happy greeting.

Milenn's survey was no less thorough. He saw a man, not the boy of twenty-two he had left in the Imperial Palace at Loren a year before. The Prince was slim as ever, but there was muscle under his patrician cloak, and new strength in his blue eyes.

They made a good pair, these two, both tall and slender, but with the resilience of sprung-steel boys. Two who held the destiny of a universe...

"When did you get back?" asked Aylan, as he punched the console for drinks. "I thought you were in Gaunilo at the Centre, under the Duke of Calais."

The service console purred and deposited two smoky-green glasses of a potent beverage from an obscure planet near Nara. Aylan handed one to his friend, extracted a pair of cigars from the pop-up, and sank into a seat opposite Milenn.

The other man was silent for a moment as he lit his cigar, and when he spoke his voice was serious.

"Unfortunately, I'm here as official representative to the Emperor from Jon of Calais. I've just spent two hours in session with His Majesty, and he's considering returning to Loren for a Council Conference. The situation Centreside is simply this: our forces have the Central groups in check, and they're suing for peace. Calais wants to refuse terms and crush them while we have the opportunity. The Emperor is tentatively of the same opinion, and the damned Council will probably agree." He drained his glass in a hasty motion and put his left hand over his eyes, against a pulsing headache.

Aylan sat in silence for a moment, wondering at his friend's upset.

“So, what’s wrong with that? It seems perfectly sensible. Don’t tell me your loyalties are drifting away from Loren.” But he smiled as he said it.

Milenn was not smiling when he looked up. He seemed upset by his friend’s comment. Carefully, he put his cigar down.

“Have you forgotten so soon, Aylan?” he said gently. “Do you remember how we talked, as boys, of history and ideologies, and men’s souls? You don’t win a man by beating the guts out of him when he’s down. These people are ready to admit that Loren is bigger than them. They’re almost ready to accept Federation, if they’re treated as men and not as animals. Calais will conquer them, yes, wipe out their fleets, but he’ll never win their respect and loyalty. Why do you think the last Empire failed? *Because it was built on force and hatred, not affection and loyalty!* We can’t let that happen again.”

He was silent, and Aylan stared in wonder at this man who saw the future so definitely. And Milenn was right, of course. He always was. The nights and days of their childhood together flooded Aylan’s mind, and always Milenn was there, guiding and helping, and always he was right.

“Is there something you want me to do?” Aylan was groping, uncertain of himself in the presence of this sure, confident man.

The sun-burnt warrior sat forward in his chair and examined his hands with elaborate thoroughness. When he spoke, his voice was strained.

“If you still believe in those old-fashioned ideals we used to dream and speak of, there is something. I want you to ask the Emperor to relieve Calais and place you in command of the forces.”

The Prince was swaying on his feet, the world ringing in his ears.

“You must be mad!” In a flood, he saw the stars as they had appeared earlier that night, a blazing, cruel, contemptuous halo. He saw the burnt, pocked, blood-stained ships that limped back from the Central theatres of war. He saw his father’s laughing, scolding face as he told Aylan that he was taking Adriel of Corydon as diplomatic mistress. He saw himself as a weak dreamer, and knew that he could never lead an army.

Deep in his seat, Milenn sat unmoving. He was prepared for this, had known what to expect. And softly, cutting like an exquisitely sharp knife through the chaos of Aylan’s mental turmoil, he spoke.

“Why? Once, you are right, I would have been mad to suggest such a thing. You were weak, for your father had made you so. But not now. Aylan, you are a man. I could tell that as soon as I saw you today. You’ll be Emperor one day; you have to learn to face responsibility. And the Centre *must* be saved from butchery.”

Aylan was at the console again, and with a flicker of fingers he plunged the room into darkness and set up the Galactic Lens. He was a giant, incredible, standing in nothingness with the suns of the Milky Way burning and flaming around him. Spiralling in a perfect simulacrum of the Galaxy, the Lens filled the room and illuminated it with a dim radiance. The Prince saw Milenn rise to his feet and came forward to the blazing luminescence of Centre.

“Here is the future. A united galaxy, Aylan. Can you imagine what that would mean?” His face shone with a vision, a dedication Aylan could not deny himself. “Federation—that’s the dream. Not harshly enforced Empire, but freely accepted peace. And then, who knows? There is intergalactic space, new riches, new technological achievement, perhaps mental and metaphysical evolution. But we must have peace first, and you are the vital key to it.”

The whorls of light fled through the darkness, and Aylan was the colossus whose will was to form their shape. He knew, then, that he would have to accept his destiny. Always it is easier to hide in one’s shell, to live in the past, to deny the future for the sake of present comforts and assurances, but he could no longer take the easy path. And Aylan felt refreshed, and strengthened.

He went to the console and flicked off the Lens. As the stars faded the walls flowed into life, and they shone in Aylan’s eyes as they had shone in his friend’s.

“I’ll do it,” he said, and gripped Milenn’s hand in a pact which spelt the end of a universe.

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## Two

The long carved oak table in the Royal Refectory was set for breakfast as delicately as ever, despite the fact that the Court retinue would eat only a very hasty meal preparatory to leaving the planet immediately for Loren.

Aylan came to the end of the table opposite the Emperor's place, as befitted the heir to the throne, and was glad to see that Milenn was sitting at his right hand. His father and his mistresses had not yet arrived, and Aylan was fidgety. He took the liberty of polarizing the great exterior wall. As the atoms aligned themselves in the field, the wall became one huge window to the gardens of the Palace. Far to the right, Nara's soft yellow sun was still surrounded with the crimson glory of the sunrise. The poet in Aylan was touched, and he was still gazing raptly at the gentle beauty of the morning when Malvara and his women came into the room.

The rough old man was clad in a synsilk crimson and gold toga that displayed his burly strength while lending him an air of respectability he would never really possess in himself. He gave his son a sardonic smile that recognized Aylan's presence, and the Prince returned the nod etiquette demanded. For him the charm of the beautiful morning was shattered and the hatred was gnawing at him again. For at Malvara's right hand sat Adriel of Corydon, diplomatic mistress and sharer of the Imperial bed.

Avian knew that Malvara was goading him. Since childhood, he had been the focus of a psychological war designed to teach him his subservient position. The Emperor needed an heir; he was afraid that an heir might not need him. So whenever the chance arose, Malvara crushed his son and topped off the lesson with the unspoken moral: *I'm on top, boy, and don't forget it!*

Adriel had been the last lesson, but Malvara had miscalculated. Aylan was not cowed. It was the last straw, and the fear and self-disgust turned to cold hatred. Aylan knew that he would have to kill his father.

Adriel was the lovely daughter of the ex-Tyrant of Corydon. The scientists of that Rim system had reached their finest achievement in her, for she was genetically, designed for beauty, intelligence, and... something else. Geneticists gave her a talent, a wildly improbable gift, and even they did not know what it would be.

She was an Emote.

"Chameleon-like" was the inevitable adjective, but it wasn't accurate. Adriel could control her Emoting. It was a defence-mechanism, but it was more. It was a talent, and she could use it at will.

Of course, everybody loved her. In a fraternal, helping fashion. Her subconscious knew better than to Emote in a sexually attractive manner. She had no desire to be raped by every male who came within her Emotive



range. But for Aylan, the quiet son of her father's conqueror, she had felt the stirrings of love.

They had been like children, in their new discovery. Their love was sunrise and the scent of roses and the soft breath in the sheets. She drew the beginnings of manhood from the frightened adolescent who was Aylan, and their love was a burgeoning flower.

For Malvara, it was unthinkable that his son should have such a victory. So Adriel became his diplomatic mistress. She could, of course, have used her Emotive talent to breed horror, or disgust, or terror of her in Malvara's mind, but the Emperor was not a fool and there were ten heavy cruisers in orbit around each planet in the Corydon system.

So Aylan sat at the end of a long table, his fist clenched hard on the fork at the sight of the veiled nun-like form at his father's right hand. Feed a hatred enough fuel for long enough, and hold it under pressure, and one day it will destroy either the hater or the hated. Aylan toyed with food he could not eat, and knew that he would not be the one to die.

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Council was in session when the Court returned to the Imperial City at Loren. His Majesty, the Holy Emperor Malvara, Lord Master of Loren and the Galaxy, came into the vast arching monument which was the Council Chambers and took his place on the levitated throne six feet above the marble floor. The Council stood until he was seated, then found their places in silence. Malvara rarely called on the Council for advice in policy decisions.

The grizzled old man looked even more like a gorilla in his luminously white cloak. Dismissing the trivia of formalities, Malvara came straight to the point.

"My lords of Loren. In the long and bloody war we have been waging with the Central alliances, we have ever sought to bring them to allegiance with our glorious empire. Now, through the brilliant spatial and planetside command of Jon of Calais, Loren has the major powers begging for terms of peace. Calais has sent to me in the able hands of Count Milenn of Danak a request for permission to reject all terms and wipe out the enemy while they are in this weakened condition. Of course, this would result in antagonism towards Loren for some generations, but the question which must be resolved today is: would this course of action best serve the interests of the Empire of Loren, or should we accept terms and run the risk

of new revolt in the near future?”

His glance ranged the floor of the Chambers, and there was a moment of silence before the low hum of discussion began among the Members. These oldsters were still barbaric in their thinking, but they were shrewd enough to realize that here was a decision of overwhelming importance for the future of the Galaxy.

Malvara waited restlessly on his floating throne for ten minutes while the Members conferred hastily with one another, and then called for the first Speaker in Consultation to take the rostrum.

Even as the first Speaker came forward, there was a stir near the Family Entrance, and Aylan entered the Chambers. Garbed in the iridescent purple and white fur of the Imperial House he was a striking figure, and the maturity of purpose in the set of his jaw startled Malvara considerably. From his lofty position the Emperor watched the unprecedented entry of his son into the Council and for the first time he felt afraid.

Craning necks and furtive whispers showed that the Members of Council in Consultation were surprised too. The first Speaker took another step towards the rostrum, hesitated, and then waited for further developments, a ludicrously unhappy figure in the aisle.

The trim figure of the Prince continued straight to the limits of the Protection-field surrounding the Emperor, and made ceremonial obeisance directly before Malvara.

“I crave the pardon of the Emperor and his Council,” he began, still facing Malvara, “for this intrusion, and I beg leave to take advantage of my right as Royal Family to address the topic.”

There was nothing Malvara could legally do to prevent Aylan speaking, so he gave his consent as graciously as he could. As he watched his son mount the rostrum, his mind whirled in a crazy turmoil. For twenty-two years he had been pressuring Aylan, nudging, kicking, hurting, pushing him, with the express purpose of making it psychologically impossible for the Prince to take the kind of action he was taking now. The sweat of fear dribbled down Malvara’s back, and it took a conscious effort to restore his normal sardonic calm.

“Truth is more than an attitude of mind,” Alan was saying. “Federation is our goal. Empire is the means of getting there, but it is not an end in

itself. We all know what happened to Man in the Galaxy last time Empire turned from a temporary tool to an encrusted system. Oh, I know it sounds like treason, and even to some, heresy, but the Empire is only a waystation to a bigger dream.”

He paused, and he felt the strength of conviction running through him. The Emperor, he noticed, was stock-still in his throne, perhaps hearing his death-knell. Nowhere was there a sound or a movement; the clock of time had slowed.

“You cannot destroy a man’s family and expect him to love you. This is a truism, and it isn’t important when you’re dealing with Empire. Love has no essential place in an Imperial world. But in a galaxy where men are free and really equal, in the Federation which I hope to God is the dream of all of us, love is *the* essential. We cannot afford to alienate the Centre by brutal mass-murder. For the dream is closer than we could ever have hoped. As the Emperor has told you, the Central states have sued for peace. Here is our chance for peaceful Empire, and eventually for peaceful Federation.”

Blood racing at his own audacity, Aylan stepped from the rostrum and moved through the deadly silence of the Chamber until he was before his father’s throne again.

“My father, Emperor Malvara. You have heard what I have said. I have spoken of theory. Now I ask you to let me put theory to the test. Transfer command of Central operations from Calais to myself. Let me go to the rulers of the Hub with peace, and I swear that the Empire will not suffer the tragedies which will inevitably befall it if Jon of Calais is allowed his bloody way.”

In the vast chiaroscuro of the room, the moment of timelessness stretched on and on. The tall, slim figure of the Prince was a flare that burned to the Emperor’s feet. Malvara was a cold angry statue, his lips pressed into a thin white scar, his thick black-haired hands gripped in a death lock on the ornate throne. And then the timelessness was gone, with a great croak of a laugh from the Emperor. His head went back, and the laughter rang through the hall. Mocking, amazed, angry. Aylan went limp, for he knew that he had failed and now he must do what he did not want to do.

Malvara’s face was a mask of hate and his voice was all sarcasm.

“Were you not my son, dear Aylan, you would surely die for what you have spoken. Your noble sentiments have indeed turned to treason in your

addled brain. And you want the command! I would rather give it to the fool who amuses my court. My poor little boy! From the company of women and children you would venture into the domains of men?" He spat, a great gout that landed at Aylan's feet. "Now go home and forget that this unfortunate incident ever happened."

He raised his eyes to the Council, the numb group of men who were trapped in a drama that was too big for them to understand. Without pausing, completely ignoring the Prince, he spoke to the white-haired men in the ranked levels.

"I have decided. Calais is to go ahead—the Central kings shall die, for the Empire can brook no competition."

With a flourish, Malvara wrapped his robes around himself and brought the huge throne to the floor. Aylan stood like a dummy, a clay doll, as the Emperor walked past him to the Family Entrance. As the Entrance slid open, life suddenly surged into him, and he spun round towards the Emperor.

"Wait!" His roar rang down the hall, and Malvara made an elaborate show of halting on one foot and turning slowly with a sardonic expression on his face.

"Aylan," he said, almost gently, "I have told you to go home."

But the Prince was striding forward now, and he was cold with fear for the moment of death had come.

"Malvara," cried Aylan in a voice that chilled the Members of the Council with its lack of all humanity, "as heir-apparent, under the Law of Yusten the First-emperor, I plead fair cause and call you out to the Duel."

And here, thought Malvara with a sudden weariness, is my life and its meaning.

"I accept, of course," said the thick grizzled man and, turning his back on the Prince, left the Chambers.

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*The Player studied his Board, the billions of pieces, the vast shifting complexity of it, and saw that his King was in danger. Carefully, he shifted his Queen and sat back. The Game was*

*nearing its end.*

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Yusten had been a legend in his own time, and in the spreading Loren Empire his name had grown in proportion to the number of years which had passed since his death. His life had followed the classic pattern of a popular hero. Born amid the turmoil of the resurging empires, he had risen in the ranks of the soldiery until he had control of the Loren system. Tall and good-looking like Aylan, thickly muscled like his son Malvara, and with the profound insight given only to a few, he had been a popular hero who had made Loren into the potential Empire Malvara had inherited on his death.

Barbaric, cultured, man of the sword, legalist—this strange and powerful figure had left behind him as his towering monument the Laws of Yusten. Prime among these were considerations concerning the internal politics of the Imperial Family. In a primitive fusion of law and blood, he had instituted the Judicial Duel. And for the first time since its legal inception, the trial by duel was to determine whether father or son should rule the Empire.

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Milenn sat back in the luxurious comfort of a pneumo-couch and chewed his thumb worriedly. One of the paradoxes he had discovered in his strange odyssey was that violence is often the necessary path to peace. He watched Aylan checking his weapons for the duel, and knew that his strange destiny was coming to its fruition.

“The thing that has me worried,” grunted Aylan, as he strapped his mini-load force shield under his cloak, “is the fact that my father has had live-duel experience. It could be the factor which wins him the Duel.”

The automatic doorkeep buzzed, and a moment later a valet came into the room with a positron blaster freshly energized. With a word of thanks, Aylan took it from him, and weighed the weapon in his hand. Then, satisfied, he placed it in the jewel-encrusted holster strapped across his stomach. He looked at his watch and saw that there were only eighteen minutes left before the Duel.

“Come on,” he said to his friend. “I want to test this damned thing out again in the Range before I go.”

Together, they walked down the wide carpeted corridor to the

Firing-range. The weight of metal in Milenn's pocket bounced against his thigh, and he was in an agony of indecision as to whether he ought to take it out and give it to Aylan. It would mean deception in the Duel, but there were more important things involved than honesty with a man one was trying to kill.

The door to the Range slid open as they approached it. Aylan went in first and walked on to the floor of the vast room, while Milenn raised a heavy-power force shield around himself.

"Are you safely covered?" asked Aylan, and when Milenn nodded, the Prince activated the Range. Immediately the room went pitch-black; a perfect simulacrum of the real Duel Hall. For a moment, Aylan's force-shield flared into life, a violet nimbus that illuminated him in the darkness. And with a *hish*, a long bolt of energy snapped at him. His reaction had been fast; as soon as his shield had come on, he had thrown himself to the ground and rolled feet away from where he had been. The energy bolt thrown at him by the robot Enemy hissed past him, and before the Enemy had time to fire again he had snapped a shot of his own at the source of the bolt. There was no chime from the Strike-Indicator, so obviously he too had missed. His shield flickered out, and he was unprotected again.

Cautiously in the dark, as silently as he could, he crept towards the other end of the Range. Suddenly the nimbus of the Enemy's shield flickered on, and Aylan's bolt hissed towards the android. His aim was poor, and he missed by feet. And then a shot caught him with a jolt that threw him off his feet. Simultaneously, the Indicator chimed loudly, and the lights went on.

Dropping the heavy shield, Milenn went out on to the Range and helped Aylan to his feet. The Prince had dropped his gun, and as he got up he picked up the weapon.

"That," he said smiling ruefully, "would have been that, if the robot had had a real power gun. I only hope the Emperor has slowed up a bit on his reactions since he programmed for that robot."

Milenn's mind was made up. When he had seen Aylan caught by the bolt, he had realized that he could afford to leave nothing to chance. Quickly, he drew a small, heavy tube of anodized metal from his pocket, and handed it to Aylan.

"Look, Aylan," he said gravely, "the Galaxy can't afford to have you

killed today. We're just going to have to use a little duplicity."

The tube was cold in Aylan's hand, and he looked at it in puzzlement. It was like nothing he had ever seen before. He raised his eyes in question at Milenn.

"It's an Old Empire weapon," said the Count, grimly. "It's called a stasis gun, and it was probably the most powerful weapon the Ancients ever developed. I'm not sure how it works, but I can assure you it does work most effectively. Somehow it brings everything in its range into minimal stasis, so that all the constituent atoms are brought to the one energy level. You'll have to use it if you want to come out of this duel alive."

As he spoke, he took the tube from Aylan's numb hands and inserted it skilfully under the energy pack of the positron blaster. Its weight balanced out nicely, and Milenn handed the gun gingerly back to the Prince.

"Use the blaster as you ordinarily would, and for God's sake don't get shot before you have a chance to use it. The field is big enough to ensure that your enemy is destroyed even if you only have his general location."

He looked at his watch. There were three minutes left before the Duel. Aylan was still looking dumbly at the blaster.

"*An Old Empire weapon?*" He was shaking his head. "Where did you get it? It must be a thousand years old."

"It is, and there's a long story connected to it. But at the moment, you have a duel to win."

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Candles flickered in the chapel and bathed the altar in a roseate glow. Veret finished the Mass, blessed the two combatants, and rose to give the sermon. His aged face was worn with worry, and as he spoke the tears ran unashamedly down his face. To him at least, the Duel carried a more transcendental aspect than the future of the Empire. Today, a father would kill a son, or a son would claim his father's life.

Finally, the service was over, and the retinue moved from their pews, out of the incense-laden air to the clean freshness of the garden cloister. Sombrely, the procession moved to the Duelling Range, Malvara and Aylan leading the way. For Aylan, it was like walking through thick glutinous treacle. His breath was coming hard, and his heart was pounding with a

frightening intensity. Death was no terror to him, not any longer. Rather it was the fear of the unnatural that gripped his limbs and tried to hold him back. His hatred for his father was gone now, in the face of patricide. Of course, he could not lose. Nothing manufactured in these barbarian days could withstand an Old Empire weapon. Sweat beaded his face, and then the retinue was in the Duelling Range.

All except Aylan and the Emperor moved behind the heavy-power shields at the side of the range, and the two were left facing one another. For a heart-choking moment Aylan wanted to cry out, to put a stop to the Duel. The old craggy face of his father swam in his eyes, and he opened his mouth and...

The lights were gone. Alone. It hadn't been like this on the robot Range. Here he could be killed. Dead. Surcease. He swallowed, and seemed to hear the dry *gulp* echo down the Range. He was surprised to find that he had crept noiselessly along the wall to the right. Heavy in his arms, the blaster was a reassurance. Now there was the waiting game, the gamble. Whose shield would come on first? If it was his, he would dive forward, and to the left, roll forward and to the right. If it was his father's, he would fire straight at the after image. That is, if Milenn was right. If the stasis beam was wide. What if the bloody old thing blew up? Too late to worry about that now.

And the nimbus was around him. He didn't move. Not for a split second, and that was long enough. Even as he dived, Malvara's energy stream streaked at him and caught the violet nimbus. The shock was ten times as great as the token jolt of the robot Range, and if the mini-shield hadn't been there the positron stream would have torn him apart. As it was, he was hurled backwards and he lost his grip on the blaster. It clattered away across the floor.

The neuronic blast of the feedback as the field neutralized the positron stream held him crippled. Desperately he wanted to retch, and desperately he controlled himself, for the slightest noise would invite another blast from Malvara. Shaking uncontrollably, he got to his hands and knees and searched around for the blaster. His hand touched something hard and cold, and he had the blaster in his hands again. Relief and reaction swept over him, and he sat on the floor cradling the blaster, as nerveless as a rag doll. Malvara's nimbus flickered on, and Aylan still sat on the floor hugging the weapon to himself.

As the Emperor hurled himself to one side, Aylan straightened up in the darkness and aimed his blaster. Before he could fire, the violet flame



was gone. Without any thought at all, he extrapolated the direction of his father's leap, and pressed the activator of his blaster.

For a moment the room was brighter than day. A great funnel of light leapt from Aylan down the room, surrounding the fallen Malvara and bathing the back wall. Then the light was gone, but the Emperor was blazing like a torch, and a circle of the wall and floor behind him was red-hot. Slowly, his features melted into a ghastly caricature of his normal sardonic expression. With a gentle sighing sound, his body collapsed into a slag of hot liquid which mingled with the material of the floor and walls which had been caught in the field. Through the new hole in the wall, a calm breeze wafted in and carried to Aylan the scent of sweet flowers and burnt flesh. And there was no reason any more to control his retching.

\* \* \* \*

### Three

Aylan walked in a sack-cloth robe down the gaunt pillared solitude of the cathedral, and he was lost in a drift of years and incense. Alone he walked, tall and strong in the century-old beauty of the vast cathedral, until he stood in the arc of the altar's great stone tracery. Here there was hope, though death and hatred had preceded it and would surely return again in the future. But there was no hatred here, only a tired age and a silent mighty blessing in stone, and somewhere waiting for him, Adriel.

Above him flamed the colours of the stained glass windows, and before him were the Archpriest and his lace-robed acolytes. With measured care, Aylan stepped forward to the lowest level of the altar, and prostrated himself on the floor. The voice of the Archpriest came through a haze of unreality and the acolytes were the whole world chanting.

"Is this the man Aylan, heir-apparent, who claims the crown?"

*"Aye, this is the man."*

"Is he cleansed of the evils of pride and avarice, worthy to receive the Imperial dignity?"

*"Aye, though he is the dust of the earth, the crown must be his."*

"Then stand, Aylan, and ascend to the altar of God."

It is difficult to rise from a prostrate position with dignity, but Aylan had been trained for this moment for years. He dipped his hands into the bowl of clear oil an acolyte held, and the Archpriest carefully cleaned them again with a white cloth. Then he gently unfastened the clasps on the ugly dun robe Aylan had been wearing. One of the priests took the robe from his shoulders, and the Prince stood like one transformed before the altar. Glistening white, flaming with precious stones, his tunic did justice to the office he was assuming.

He took his place on the great throne, and the Archpriest turned to the people.

“Here is Aylan of Loren.” The crown was in his gnarled old hands, a miracle of beauty in metal and the glowing nimbus of a force shield. Slowly and majestically, he placed it on Aylan’s head.

“In the name of God and the Christus, I name him Emperor. Do ye give him love and allegiance.”

But, though his words were amplified through the cathedral, no one heard them. The roars and cheers of the crowd drowned everything in a spontaneous outburst of approval that sent tears coursing down Aylan’s face, and he knew that he had not been wrong in accepting his destiny.

\* \* \* \*

The scent-drenched garden of the Imperial Palace was no less enchanting than the one Aylan had wept in at Nara. How could it be less for there Aylan had not had Adriel beside him, laughing with her hand in his. He stopped and looked at her, drinking in the beauty of her face. In the golden afternoon, she was a rose-petal, delicate, desirable beyond words. And without words he enfolded her in his arms, savouring her lips, and their love was a soaring joy that held them wondering at the universe. They lay down on the grass, and night came in gold and red and twilight blue. There was the scent of leaves, and night came wonderfully, among the throng of dark trees.

“Can we do it?” whispered Aylan, and Adriel followed his gaze to the sprinkling sky. “Can we make a Federation from them? It seems an impossible dream, and yet—Milenn has gone.”

“When he comes back, we will know.” She looked at his face, and kissed away his frown. “No, he does not have to come back. I know now. You can do it.”

Her simple faith was touching, and contagious. Aylan's hand ruffled her hair, and he closed his eyes.

"Of course we can, dearest," he said drowsily, "of course we can..."

\* \* \* \*

The sub-radio cracked viciously with the flux of the terrible energies that raged between the stars. But it carried Milenn's voice, unmistakable, and he was angry.

"Calais' power has gone to his head." The Count's voice dipped and roared in the Communications-room. "He refuses to hand over command, and he is already making advanced preparations to planet-bomb the two largest Central systems." His voice faded completely, and technicians twisted knobs frantically to hold the carrier wave. Sub-space transmission was always a risky proposition, and Milenn's ship was still almost five thousand parsecs away.

Aylan paced furiously up and down in the small room, as angry as Milenn to see his dreams close to destruction because of mutiny within his own ranks.

"... only one thing to do," came in Milenn's voice. "Fit up the Imperial Guard force with stasis weapons and hightail it in here to Centre before Jon wipes out all hope of peaceful Federation."

"But good God, man," roared Aylan, "you say you hardly know the principle of the stasis field yourself. How could we possibly crack the idea in time?"

There was a time lag of some seconds, and Milenn's voice crackled back through the strange universe of sub-space.

"... my rooms in the Palace, there are blueprints of the device. Like... pire devices, it's extremely simple in design, getting its potency from total conversion of energy. You could have the projectors made in the ship's workshops on your way in here. I'll meet the Guard at Leith in two days, so you'll have to snap straight to it."

Aylan felt no resentment at the way his friend had taken control of the situation. Certainly, Milenn knew more about the position Centreside, and he spoke with a new authority that the Emperor did not think to question.

“Very well.” His voice travelled almost instantaneously to the hurtling Ambassador ship. “Although I doubt whether we will be in time...”

“Good luck, Aylan.” Milenn’s voice had softened. “You just have to get here,” but he did not sound as convinced of success as Adriel had the previous night.

\* \* \* \*

Hanging in orbit above the Imperial planet, the Emperor’s special Guard was *the* crack unit of the Loren Navy. Two heavy cruisers, mile-long monoliths whose fields could withstand a nova-bomb, and whose armament could wipe out a system, but whose relatively limited velocity made them defensive rather than tactical. More immediately valuable, the light cruisers and the two-man attack minnows. Now, five hours after Milenn’s dramatic message, the ships’ drives were idling hot while Aylan made his last preparations in connection with the stasis projectors. Without them, such a light task force would be little use against Calais’ huge war Navy, and the best engineers on Loren were gradually going crazy trying to apply millennium-old diagrams to lathe and metal. The tiny heavy projector which had won Aylan his duel was X-rayed and dissected and put together again for four hours until finally the engineers solved the diagrams. From then on, there was only the sheer mechanical work of devising efficient and rapid ways of constructing heavy-duty projectors en route to Leith.

Five hours and seventeen minutes after the message, the new Emperor was lifting in a shuttle to the flagship of the Guard. With him were three engineers, a multitude of diagrams and a good-as-new Old Empire stasis blaster.

Normally, sub-space jumping is a boring business, but the two-day trip to Leith was scarcely time enough for the machine-shops in the light cruisers to turn high-tensile steel into the long innocent-looking tubes which, when coupled to heavy-power fields, would be capable of destroying an armada of ships. And would have to.

Leith was growing into a verdant globe in the viewscreen when word came to the flagship that the last of the projectors had been installed. The Guard had re-entered normal space on the rim of the Leith system and were flashing towards the rendezvous planet on solar drive. In the control-room of the flagship *Ascaux*, Thony Lord Hardt lit Aylan’s cigar with a steady hand, and watched in quiet amusement as his Emperor proceeded to chew the end of the cigar to shreds.

“Sit down, Excellency,” he suggested. “There’s at least an hour to planet-fall, and pacing up and down like a caged puma will only wear you out.” He was a giant of a man, this Commander of the Emperor’s Guard, and a great black beard covered most of his craggy face. He had not been unhappy to hear of Malvara’s death, for he had never liked the cruel, hard Emperor, and this earnest young man appealed to him. The thought of the imminent civil war troubled him, but in the two days out to Leith Aylan had managed to transmit some of his tremendous enthusiasm for the necessity of peaceful Federation to everyone with whom he had come in contact. Lord Hardt repressed his smile and scratched the black thatch of his head instead.

Aylan released a ragged sigh and collapsed into a seat. He had lost a considerable amount of weight in the two-day nip, transmuted into the nervous energy he so liberally expended.

“Why is it, Thony, that the path of peace must run with blood?” There was agony on his finely featured face. “Why, when self-preservation is so obviously one of the primal urges in Man, must he be ever trying to commit racial suicide? Perhaps there is indeed some Original Sin that drives social man to self-slaughter.”

“I’m no great philosopher, Excellency,” said the bearded Commander, “but I’m sure you’re wrong. Look at history. There has always been a predominant current towards peace. I think you’ll find that the war-mongering element is limited to a very few malcontents, though God knows they’re usually powerful enough.” He stubbed out the butt of his cigar. “And there are the great mass of soldiery who, like myself, have no love for war yet fight to protect themselves and other peacelovers. Maybe ‘the meek shall inherit the earth’, but unfortunately it’ll only be after they’ve destroyed all the violent ones.”

He chuckled and heaved his giant frame from the chair.

“I suggest that we get on to the sub-radio and find out if Count Milenn has anything new which will set your mind at ease.”

\* \* \* \*

Leithside, Milenn knew nothing fresh, but expressed his opinion that Calais’ preparation for wholesale massacre must be nearly completed. By the time the Guard ships reached the green globe of Leith, Aylan was almost physically ill with strain. Lord Hardt was visibly relieved when the tiny silver

needle of the Ambassador ship intercepted with the fleet, and Milenn came aboard the flagship. The presence of Aylan's tall space-burnt friend calmed the Emperor considerably, and he was able to settle down to the complex business of planning his approach to Calais.

"The rebel forces are obviously in a poor political position," mused Milenn. He, Aylan, and Thony sat at the conference table in the Emperor's small luxurious stateroom. "Aylan is a popular figure at the moment, as Calais' spies must have ascertained by now. He must be banking on a *coup d'état*, so we can at least hope that he will have diverted his forces temporarily from the problem of exterminating the Central systems to the more pressing matter of removing Aylan."

"That's true." Hardt was doodling absently on a sheet of paper, but his mind was as sharply concentrated on the problem as an electronic computer. "Duke Jon may be a megalomaniac but he's no fool. He won't be expending forces in wiping out any of the Central systems if doing so leaves him at a disadvantage in facing us. If he destroys us now, cleaning up the Centre will be no harder for him later than it is now. Whereas, if he wipes out the Central groups now and gets killed by our fleet as a result, his orgy of destruction will have brought him no gain."

"I think you're forgetting two things," warned Aylan. He sat back in his seat and looked grimly at first one man and then the other. "First, Calais has a pretty vast army out there, and since he doesn't know about our secret weapon, the Guard won't appear as much of a challenge to him. He has enough ships to be able to divert twice our number to deal with us while still going ahead with the general massacre."

There was a moment when the only sound was the hum of the air-purifiers; his point had struck home.

"Second, Calais is a bitter man, and as you said, Thony, a megalomaniac. If he does realize that his destruction is inevitable, he may indulge in a widespread slaughter as a kind of insane revenge."

Through the featureless dark of sub-space, the task-force sped at a fantastic multiple of the speed of light, in a race with time to cross a quarter of a galaxy. And inside the *Ascaux*, three men struggled to solve a problem on whose solution hung the destiny of a race, and though they were not aware of it, the destiny of a universe.

\* \* \* \*

*The Board was a billion scintillating lights, a trillion moving pieces. Again, the King was in danger, and the Queen was in no position to help. The Player moved his Pawns. The Game was nearly over.*

\* \* \* \*

Across the heart of the Galaxy, the Imperial fleet of Loren hung like a fine-spun net, holding impotent the forces of the Central systems. Anani, Kiel, Ghatos, Blucher, Menai, the proud young systems of the Hub, held under the iron hand of Jon of Calais.

In the fleet's flagship, *Loren*, the iron hand of Jon of Calais was wrapped solidly around a glass of an infamous high-proof beverage. The Duke was a hard, bitter man, and alcohol was the only weakness he permitted himself. He had reason for his basic misanthropy; in one of Nature's whimsical jests, he had been born with no legs. He had never forgiven the rest of mankind for having two more limbs than he, and it was almost inevitable that with his brilliant strategic mind he would turn to that profession where he could legally take bloody revenge on mankind *en masse*.

He sat hunched on the plastic-padded grav-plate that served him for legs, a black hawk in his form-fitting Navy overalls. The liquor burned down his throat and added fire to his hatred for the young upstart who was trying to ruin his plans. In the viewscreen that covered half the wall the stars of the Hub blazed like an inferno of jewels. Calais unconsciously licked his lips as he looked at them, and his grip tightened on the goblet.

There was a chime from the video, and its bland screen dissolved into the head and shoulders of his Chief of Staff.

"Sir, we've just received a message missile from one of your agents on Loren. The new Emperor left Loren three days ago with the Imperial Guard, with the intention of forcing you to relinquish command. The task-force with the Emperor on board should probably arrive here within a day or so."

"With the Guard, hey?" Calais looked more than ever like a great brooding bird of prey, peering down his long nose. "Now what could he expect to accomplish with such a token force against what I've got here. I've got to have time to think about this. Suspend activity on the preparations for planet-bombing for the moment; we may need those ships

for a more immediate purpose. Thank you, Admiral, I'll get in touch with you." He flicked off the screen and it faded again into translucence.

Why would Ay lan send such a token force indeed? Of course, the bulk of the fleet was out here at Centre, but had Aylan wanted he could have brought the whole of the defence force. Hmm. The new Emperor was, of course, a moral weakling, thanks to his father's careful training. Did he then expect the forces to be handed over to him just because of a personal appearance? It seemed hardly possible, but the milk-sop Aylan was naive in the ways of real men.

The Duke made his decision, and flicked on the video again.

"Admiral, hold developments here as they are at the moment. I think I'll take a small task-force vessel to deal with our impetuous young Emperor."

Jon of Calais smiled to himself. Events were turning out better than he could ever have hoped. Rid himself of Aylan now, beat the Central fools to their knees, and then...

The stars blazing in the viewscreen were a song of worship to his name.

\* \* \* \*

All Aylan's questions were resolved ten hours later when, still in sub-space, the ship's detectors revealed a fleet of unknown size approaching from the direction of Calais' base of operations. Thony advised against the sub-radio communication with the other fleet until they broke radio silence first.

"If Calais is with them," said Milenn, as the three men stared in semi-darkness at the green traces on the detector screens, "and knowing his power complex he's sure to want to be in on the kill, we can try negotiations first, and if he isn't interested we'll have to use the stasis fields."

Lord Hardt's practised eye studied the screen intently for a moment, and he voiced his opinion that the other fleet was only two or three times as big as the Guard.

"Then probably the rest of the war-force is maintaining the *status-quo* Centreside." Aylan looked across to Milenn. "If we destroy Calais, will the rest of the fleet come back under Imperial command?"



His friend gave a short snort that could have been a chuckle, but there was no humour in it.

“Most of them are unaware of their rebel status. It is the high-ranking officers who have fallen under Jon’s spell that we must watch. But I think that with Calais gone they will lick your feet as though nothing ever happened.”

A speaker squawked, and an adjutant’s voice informed the Emperor that the approaching ships had made sub-radio contact with the Guard.

The communications-room was humming with the static of deep space when the trio arrived to take the message from Calais’ ship. Lights flickered from banks of meters as the ship’s cryotronic computer struggled to hold the carrier wave that was propagating across the strange not-world of sub-space. Five hours and over three thousand light-years apart, the two fleets were connected by a magic not understood properly even by those who used it.

For the first time since his adolescence, Aylan heard the deep handsome voice of Duke Jon of Calais. Torn and distorted though it was by the static of sub-space, the compelling voice conjured up pictures of a clear-eyed golden-haired god, a cord-muscled, beneficent Grecian deity. Here, thought Aylan, is the secret of his power over men, and it was incredibly hard to substitute the image of a hawk-faced maniac for that of the glowing god.

“You realize, of course,” the golden voice was saying, “that I cannot accept you as Emperor. I have had no word from the Council, and I am left with the inevitable conclusion that you have murdered your royal father and seized the reins of power illegally.”

Aylan glanced helplessly at Milenn, and the Count took the microphone from him.

“Listen, Calais,” he grated. “I came to you as authorized legate of both your Emperor Aylan of the line of Yusten, and the Council, and I left with you documents which ordered you to relinquish your command at the Centre to the new Emperor. If you continue in this insane mutiny you can expect only execution, and dishonour to your name. If, even at this late hour, you acquiesce in the Emperor’s orders your name will be cleared as acting in good faith. Make up your mind; the time has passed for childish lies.”

The handsome voice was cold now, with a hard, cruel edge, like a god admonishing his creatures.

“True enough,” it said, “the time is past for games. I have with me a force three times as large as your own, and behind me I have the whole Imperial offence-force. I intend to rule the Galaxy, *Emperor*, and unless you turn and run home like the scared mouse you are, I’m afraid I will have to kill you myself.”

White and shaking with anger, Aylan snatched the microphone from Milenn’s hand and roared his fury across the light-years.

“I return your ultimatum to you, carrion, and formally remove from you your command, your Imperial rank and privileges, and your right to life. Come, rebel, and discover what death is like at first hand.” There was a loud click as he broke contact with the on-coming ships in one violent sweep of his hand.

\* \* \* \*

Five hours and eleven minutes later the two fleets intercepted, and after the hours of tension the battle was almost terrifyingly anti-climactic. The Guard flipped out into real space in a half-moon formation, the horns towards Galactic Centre. They were near the centre of a globular cluster, and the stars hung coldly about them like a million teardrops, a million celestial diamonds. Seconds later the larger task-force from Centre precipitated into space in a sphere-formation. Jon’s ship hung in the centre of the sphere, a heavily-armed cruiser sitting in the safest position.

Aylan’s flagship sat on one of the horns and inside her control-room three men sat watching the other fleet, hoping against all reason that there would be no need to use the stasis fields. A green flare silently flashed from the rebel fleet, and engulfed one of the Guard ships in a titanic incandescence of energy. The ship’s lights dimmed as the force-shield struggled to neutralize the flare, the momentarily under-powered stabilizers tossed the ship crazily, and then the lights came on again. The shield had held. In the control-room of the *Ascaux*, Aylan realized that the fleet could not withstand such a one-sided battle for long. Reluctantly, he gave the order to activate the stasis projectors.

Space was a vast white glare, a ghastly effulgence of death. For an eternal instant. Then there was only the star-filled darkness, and sixty pink glowing drops of molten metal, plastic, flesh...

The whole encounter had taken less than twenty seconds.

\* \* \* \*

## Four

Of all the Ancients' wondrous works, the most awesome and permanent was Prima. The Old Imperial planet, a world—to look at it—dedicated to loveliness, where the grandeur of Nature under the restraining guidance of Man sang an everlasting hymn of praise to beauty. Lifted in an unimaginable engineering feat from a cold dark sun which had held it trapped in the death of night for aeons, it had been placed in orbit around the barren white sun which stood like a virgin Queen in the centre of the Galaxy. And under the inspiring genius of the hand of Man, Prima had flowered, her oceans had foamed again, her mountains had learned anew to cry at a living sun.

A monument to beauty, to Man. But this was as nothing compared with the reality which lay beneath the skin of the planet. For twenty, thirty miles beneath the surface, Prima was honey-combed with the nests of men. Here had been the administrative centre of the Galactic Empire. Here was the Imperial Palace, in the planet that men had placed at the centre of the Galaxy. And here, in tiers of metal and superfluid helium, was the Computer that girdled the circumference of Prima.

But now the Computer was dead, the cryotronic dance of its memory banks stilled a millennium before in the shock of the civil war which had shaken the Galaxy back to barbarism. Most of the vast area of office- and living-space, where once had teemed a planetary population of bureaucrats, had crashed and fallen in that cataclysmic war, but the Old Council Hall had been miraculously untouched, and the king of the new Monarchy of Kiel had made it his own. And relinquished it to his conquerors from Loren.

Milenn felt a heart-clutching sense of foreboding as he stood beside his Emperor and Empress in the garden of Nature that stretched to the horizon in waves of green and yellow. In a few short minutes, they would descend the grav-shaft to the Council Hall, and if everything went well, the Galaxy would see for the first time—Federation! The wild elation that was obviously gripping Aylan had completely left Milenn, and he was swamped with a nightmare conviction of unreality. It was as though the blackness before his eyes was really there, the singing in his ears, the head-pounding blood...

“Aylan,” he cried, in a terror that was almost childlike. For a moment the world spun around him, and then he was leaning on the solid assurance of his friend’s arm.

“Aylan,” he said with a tired weariness, “I have a story to tell you.”

\* \* \* \*

Once, the universe must have been young, an emptiness filled with fiery gases and slowly-spinning new-born suns. And even then, the Player must have been preparing the Board for his game.

Milenn first saw the light of day on a smoking, roaring world of shaggy beast-men and thudding hairy animals. It was a world on the Rim of the Galaxy, with a feeble yellow star and a single pock-marked moon.

It was the only world that ever produced sentient life, and its children were destined to seed the Galaxy.

For the Game. For the Player’s inscrutable purpose.

Milenn, the shaggy beast-man, possessed no more than the limited awareness of his fellows. Later, though, they called him Prometheus. He did not discover fire, but as elder of his tribe he saved from death the man who did. He caused a priesthood to be set up, and his tribe worshipped fire, and conquered their world.

And he was punished with eternal life, to come again and again as a child and to remember and to die and to come again... Of course, he learned. Memories of his previous life returned to him at puberty, and each life wrote new wonders on the tablet of experience. For a time he rebelled. He refused to be the Player’s instrument, refused to pass his knowledge on. And there was no retribution, save in his soul. He could not live with the sloughing beasts he was born among. Frantically, he tried the life of the hermit, and he was driven back by loneliness to human companionship.

So, finally, he became the Civilizer.

He was Gilgamesh, Odin, Ra, Indra, Zeus, Tonactechtli, Moses, Gandhi, Hammarskjold, Holden-Smith, Porter, and Andreas. In the mud of the Nile he trod water and straw; his statue was carried before the tallow candles in Tenochtitlan; he advised the Great One in Tibet while the wind whistled through his thin bones; he thundered in the Terran Planetary Parliament; he laboured on alien worlds, muscles twisting to hammer wood

and steel into homes for his fellows. And everywhere, he remembered. Peace was his goal, for no man can go through a million years' odyssey without learning compassion and humanity.

“The years have fled,” Milenn said quietly, “and I have lived as your grandfather Yusten, as an adviser to the Monarch of Kiel, as a singer of ballads in the halls of Blucher, and now I am your friend, you who are about to bring about the widespread peace I have laboured aeons to achieve. And I am afraid of the Player.”

In the great garden that was Prima, the birds continued their singing unconcernedly, and a gentle breeze tossed the leaves and grasses as it had done for centuries, but the breath of age was strong now, an age greater than the ancient Council Hall below, greater than the dreams of men. Milenn stood with his friends in the quiet afternoon, strong, young, and his mind encompassed a universe of history.

Aylan's eyes were focused on a horizon beyond the azure sky of Prima, and when he turned to Milenn his face was shining with a great vision. He took Adriel's hand, and said in a strange forced voice, “Come. We have destiny to meet.”

The grav-tube was waiting, and the three floated gently down towards the Council Hall.

\* \* \* \*

In the vast hall sat the rulers and representatives of the Galaxy. They were restless, waiting to hear the terms desired by the young Emperor whose father had conquered them. Aylan looked at their faces and there was resentment and bitterness everywhere. These were men beaten by virtue of Loren's technological strength—there was no lack of spirit among them. The Emperor was glad, for he wanted strong men, capable men with the vision to see beyond their own pettiness.

The three were the last to enter the Hall. Bitter the conquered leaders might be, but they had no wish to antagonize their new master. Aylan squeezed Adriel's cool lovely hand, and when he rose to speak there was silence throughout the hall.

“My friends,” he began. There was a discernible brightening of some of the faces—a hostile dictator would hardly call his victims “friends”. “Although you are unaware of the fact, the capital planets of your systems were almost nova-bombed by my forces less than a week ago.”

He paused, and glanced sideways at Adriel. Her eyes were closed, and he could feel the waves of apprehension she was directing out into the audience before him.

“My commander of forces mutinied against Loren and was endeavouring to set himself up as Emperor. At personal danger to myself, I took a fleet out and destroyed him and sixty of my own naval vessels.”

Puzzlement, dawning awareness. Aylan’s head was held high, and his words were intense, his eyes bright.

“I did this because I had your interests at heart. I could easily have been killed, but I considered the risk worth taking if I could in this way convince you that I am not seeking my own aggrandizement.” A wave of relief, and a warmth towards the young man before them. Adriel did not have to engender the emotion; she merely intensified it.

Aylan’s speech had been semantically designed to elicit the desired emotional response from the audience. Beside him, the beautiful Emote sent wave after crashing wave of complementary emotion out into the Hall, judging, balancing, dancing in an emotional control that was practically instinctive. They were on the edges of their chairs now, breathing the glory of the vision Aylan was painting. Memories fled through Aylan’s mind: childhood days, talking to Milenn, nights of anguished mental conflict, the evening at Nara with the Galactic Lens burning around him and Milenn’s words setting his mind on fire with a towering hope for the future. And now, in the huge ancient Hall, the leaders of the Galaxy were sharing this dream, guided by his words and the Emotive control of a slim lovely girl.

Finally, Aylan was silent, and Adriel played a last crashing crescendo of trust, enthusiasm, and accord. Without prompting, the audience who half an hour before had stared with bitter, angry eyes at the young Emperor rose to their feet in wild applause. Their shout was a mighty *Fiat* to peace, a cry that rocked the walls...

Literally. Milenn came to his feet, and the terror was black on him again. In numb horror he saw the walls of the Council Hall fold in like a freckled banana, and the roof gaped wide as the whole planet seemed to peel open. Around him, the other figures of the Game screamed and ran amok, tearing, howling like animals. The noise somehow faded away, and the ruined planet bubbled with spurting boiling magma that ran around Milenn but could not touch him. He realized that he was screaming too, for the stars were whirling in a mad kaleidoscope of light and they were falling

on him, globes of roaring fire, tiny marbles of cold luminescence, a spraying spiral of light. He was huge beyond belief, the pinpoints of light were stars, galaxies, and the universe was fading, eddying, insubstantial, and he was screaming at the Player why, why, why... ?

\* \* \* \*

*Alone. Darkness, bodiless, infinite. All the questions answered and the tears wept. The Immortal wondered at the memory, and knew the reason. There was no Player. There was only himself, alone, eternally lonely. Infinity is a quiet place, eternity a lonely time. The Immortal remembered himself as Milenn, and forever the memory satisfied him. But forever is a short while, and memory is no cure for loneliness. Only participation, and forgetfulness.*

*The Tasks had been a good idea, but they had ended. The problem he had set himself: a universe, a race of naturally belligerent sapients, a goal of peace, freely accepted by them. And three times he had succeeded. Planetary government, Galactic empire, Galactic Federation. Himself eternal, not knowing the reason, only aware of the compulsion.*

*An Immortal Child grows lonely in the dark of eternity, and he knew that there was forgetfulness in the Game. So again in the deep of himself he uttered the Words.*

*“Let there be light!”*

*And, yet again, there was light.*