



Artwork by Howard Lyon

Mazer in Prison

by Orson Scott Card

Being the last best hope of humanity was a lousy job.

Sure, the pay was great, but it had to pile up in a bank back on Earth, because there was no place out here to shop.

There was no place to walk. When your official exercise program consisted of having your muscles electrically stimulated while you slept, then getting spun around in a centrifuge so your bones wouldn't dissolve, there wasn't much to look forward to in an average day.

To Mazer Rackham, it felt as though he was being punished for having won the last war.

After the defeat of the invading Formics -- or "Buggers," as they were commonly called -- the International Fleet learned everything they could from the alien technology. Then, as fast as they could build the newly designed starships, the IF launched them toward the Formic home world, and the other planets that had been identified as Formic colonies.

But they hadn't sent Mazer out with any of those ships. If they had, then he wouldn't be completely alone. There'd be other people to talk to -- fighter pilots, crew. Primates with faces and hands and voices and smells, was that asking so much?

No, he had a much more important mission.

He was supposed to command all the fleets in their attacks on all the Formic worlds. That meant he would need to be back in the Solar system, communicating with all the fleets by ansible.

Great. A cushy desk job. He was old enough to relish that.

Except for one hitch.

Since space travel could only approach but never quite reach three hundred million meters per second, it would take many years for the fleets to reach their target worlds. During those years of waiting back at International Fleet headquarters -- IF-COM -- Mazer would grow old and frail, physically and mentally.

So to keep him young enough to be useful, they shut him up in a near-lightspeed courier ship and launched him on a completely meaningless outbound journey. At some arbitrary point in space, they decreed, he would decelerate, turn around, and then return to Earth at the same speed, arriving home only a few years before the fleets arrived and all hell broke loose. He would have aged no more than five years during the voyage, even though decades would have passed on Earth.

A lot of good he'd do them as a commander, if he lost his mind during the voyage.

Sure, he had plenty of books in the onboard database. Millions of them. And announcements of new books were sent to him by ansible; any he wanted, he could ask for and have them in moments.

What he couldn't have was a conversation.

He had tried. After all, how different was the ansible from regular email over the nets? The problem was the time differential. To him, it seemed he sent out a message and it was answered immediately. But to the person on the other end, Mazer's message was spread out over days, coming in a bit at a time. Once his whole message had been received and assembled, the person could write an answer immediately. But to be received by the ansible on Mazer's little boat, the answer would be spaced out a bit at a time, as well.

The result was that for the person Mazer was conversing with, many days intervened between the parts of the conversation. It had to be like talking with somebody with such an incredible stammer that you could walk away, live your life for a week, and then come back before he had finally spit out whatever it was

he had to say.

A few people had tried, but by now, with Mazer nearing the point where he would decelerate to turn the ship around, his communications with IF-COM on the asteroid Eros were mostly limited to book and holo and movie requests, plus his daily blip -- the message he sent just to assure the I.F. that he wasn't dead.

He could even have automated the daily blip -- it's not as if Mazer didn't know how to get around their firewalls and reprogram the ship-board computer. But he dutifully composed a new and unique message every day that he knew would barely be glanced at back at IF-COM. As far as anyone there cared, he might as well be dead; they would all have retired or even died before he got back.

The problem of loneliness wasn't a surprise, of course. They had even suggested sending someone with him. Mazer himself had vetoed the idea, because it seemed to him to be stupid and cruel to tell a person that he was so completely useless to the fleet, to the whole war effort, that he could be sent out on Mazer's aimless voyage just to hold his hand. "What will your recruiting poster be next year?" Mazer had asked. "'Join the Fleet and spend a couple of years as a paid companion to an aging space captain!'"

To Mazer it was only going to be a few years. He was a private person who didn't mind being alone. He was sure he could handle it.

What he hadn't taken into account was how long two years of solitary confinement would be. They do this, he realized, to prisoners who've misbehaved, as the worst punishment they could give. Think of that -- to be completely alone for long periods of time is worse than having to keep company with the vilest, stupidest felons known to man.

We evolved to be social creatures; the Formics, by their hivemind nature, are never alone. They can travel this way with impunity. To a lone human, it's torture.

And of course there was the tiny matter of leaving his family behind. But he wouldn't think about that. He was making no greater sacrifice than any of the other warriors who took off in the fleets sent to destroy the enemy. Win or lose, none of them would see their families again. In this, at least, he was one with the men he would be commanding.

The real problem was one that only he recognized: He didn't have a clue how to save the human race, once he got back.

That was the part that nobody seemed to understand. He explained it to them, that he was not a particularly good commander, that he had won that crucial battle on a fluke, that there was no reason to think he could do such a thing again. His superior officers agreed that he might be right. They promised to recruit and train new officers while Mazer was gone, trying to find a better commander. But in case they didn't find one, Mazer was the guy who fired the single missile that ended the previous war. People believed in him. Even if he didn't believe in himself.

Of course, knowing the military mind, Mazer knew that they would completely screw up the search for a new commander. The only way they would take the search seriously was if they did not believe they had Mazer Rackham as their ace-in-the-hole.

Mazer sat in the confined space behind the pilot seat and extended his left leg, stretching it up, then bringing it behind his head. Not every man his age could do this. Definitely not every Maori, not those with the traditional bulk of the fully adult male. Of course, he was only half-Maori, but it wasn't as if people of European blood were known for their extraordinary physical flexibility.

The console speaker said, "Incoming message."

"I'm listening," said Mazer. "Make it voice and read it now."

"Male or female?" asked the computer.

"Who cares?" said Mazer.

"Male or female?" the computer repeated.

"Random," said Mazer.

So the message was read out to him in a female voice.

"Admiral Rackham, my name is Hyrum Graff. I've been assigned to head recruitment for Battle School, the first step in our training program for gifted young officers. My job is to scour the Earth looking for someone to head our forces during the coming conflict -- instead of you. I was told by everyone who bothered to answer me at all that the criterion was simple: Find someone just like Mazer Rackham."

Mazer found himself interested in what this guy was saying. They were actually looking for his replacement. This man was in charge of the search. To listen to him in a voice

of a different gender seemed mocking and disrespectful.

"Male voice," said Mazer.

Immediately the voice changed to a robust baritone. "The trouble I'm having, Admiral, is that when I ask them specifically what traits of yours I should try to identify for my recruits, everything becomes quite vague. The only conclusion I can reach is this: The attribute of yours that they want the new commander to have is 'victorious.' In vain do I point out that I need better guidelines than that.

"So I have turned to you for help. You know as well as I do that there was a certain component of luck involved in your victory. At the same time, you saw what no one else could see, and you acted -- against orders -- at exactly the right moment for your thrust to be unnoticed by the Hive Queen. Boldness, courage, iconoclasm -- maybe we can identify those traits. But how do we test for vision?

"There's a social component, too. The men in your crew trusted you enough to obey your disobedient orders and put their careers, if not their lives, in your hands.

"Your record of reprimands for insubordination suggests, also, that you are an experienced critic of incompetent commanders. So you must also have very clear ideas of what your future replacement should not be.

"Therefore I have obtained permission to use the ansible to query you about the attributes we need to look for -- or avoid -- in the recruits we find. In the hope that you will find this project more interesting than whatever it is you're doing out there in space, I eagerly await your reply."

Mazer sighed. This Graff sounded like exactly the kind of officer who should be put in charge of finding Mazer's replacement. But Mazer also knew enough about military bureaucracy to know that Graff would be chewed up and spit out the first time he actually tried to accomplish something. Getting permission to communicate by ansible with an old geezer who was effectively dead was easy enough.

"What was the sender's rank?" Mazer asked the console.

"Lieutenant."

Poor Lieutenant Graff had obviously under-

estimated the terror that incompetent officers feel in the presence of young, intelligent, energetic replacements.

At least it would be a conversation.

"Take down this answer, please," said Mazer. "Dear Lieutenant Graff, I'm sorry for the time you have to waste waiting for this message ... no, scratch that, why increase the wasted time by sending a message stuffed with useless chat?" Then again, doing a whole bunch of editing would delay the message just as long.

Mazer sighed, unwound himself from his stretch, and went to the console. "I'll type it in myself," said Mazer. "It'll go faster that way."

He found the words he had just dictated waiting for him on the screen of his message console, with the edge of Graff's message just behind it. He flipped that message to the front, read it again, and then picked up his own message where he had left off.

"I am not an expert in identifying the traits of leadership. Your message reveals that you have already thought more about it than I have. Much as I might hope your endeavor is successful, since it would relieve me of the burden of command upon my return, I cannot help you."

He toyed with adding "God could not help you," but decided to let the boy find out how the world worked without dire and useless warnings from Mazer.

Instead he said "Send" and the console replied, "Message sent by ansible."

And that, thought Mazer, is the end of that.

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The answer did not come for more than three hours. What was that, a month back on Earth?

"Who is it from?" asked Mazer, knowing perfectly well who it would turn out to be. So the boy had taken his time before pushing the matters. Time enough to learn how impossible his task was? Probably not.

Mazer was sitting on the toilet -- which, thanks to the Formics' gravitic technology, was a standard gravity-dependent chemical model. Mazer was one of the few still in the service who remembered the days of air-suction toilets in weightless spaceships, which worked about half the time. That was the era when ship captains would sometimes be

cashiered for wasting fuel by accelerating their ships just so they could take a dump that would actually get pulled away from their backside by something like gravity.

“Lieutenant Hyrum Graff.”

And now he had the pestiferous Hyrum Graff, who would probably be even more annoying than null-g toilets.

“Erase it.”

“I am not allowed to erase ansible communications,” said the female voice blandly. It was always bland, of course, but it felt particularly bland when saying irritating things.

I could make you erase it, if I wanted to go to the trouble of reprogramming you. But Mazer didn’t say it, in case it might alert the program safeguards in some way. “Read it.”

“Male voice?”

“Female,” snapped Mazer.

“Admiral Rackham, I’m not sure you understood the gravity of our situation. We have two possibilities: Either we will identify the best possible commanders for our war against the Formics, or we will have you as our commander. So either you will help us identify the traits that are most likely to be present in the ideal commander, or you will be the commander on whom all the responsibility rests.”

“I understand that, you little twit,” said Mazer. “I understood it before you were born.”

“Would you like me to take down your remarks as a reply?” asked the computer.

“Just read it and ignore my carping.”

The computer returned to the message from Lieutenant Graff. “I have located your wife and children. They are all in good health, and it may be that some or all of them might be glad of an opportunity to converse with you by ansible, if you so desire. I offer this, not as bribe for your cooperation, but as a reminder, perhaps, that more is at stake here than the importunities of an upstart lieutenant pestering an admiral and a war hero on a voyage into the future.”

Mazer roared out his answer. “As if I had need of reminders from you!”

“Would you like me to take down your remarks as --”

“I’d like you to shut yourself down and leave me in --”

“A reply?” finished the computer, ignoring his carping.

“Peace!” Mazer sighed. “Take down this answer: I’m divorced, and my ex-wife and children have made their lives without me. To them I’m dead. It’s despicable for you to attempt to raise me from the grave to burden their lives. When I tell you that I have nothing to tell you about command it’s because I truly do not know any answers that you could possibly implement.

“I’m desperate for you to find a replacement for me, but in all my experience in the military, I saw no example of the kind of commander that we need. So figure it out for yourself -- I haven’t any idea.”

For a moment he allowed his anger to flare. “And leave my family out of it, you contemptible ...”

Then he decided not to flame the poor git.

“Delete everything after ‘leave my family out of it.’”

“Do you wish me to read it back to you?”

“I’m on the toilet!”

Since his answer was nonresponsive, the computer repeated the question verbatim.

“No. Just send it. I don’t want to have the zealous Lieutenant Graff wait an extra hour or day just so I can turn my letter into a prize-winning school essay.”

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But Graff’s question nagged at him. What should they look for in a commander?

What did it matter? As soon as they developed a list of desirable traits, all the bureaucratic buttsniffs would immediately figure out how to fake having them, and they’d be right back where they started, with the best bureaucrats at the top of every military hierarchy, and all the genuinely brilliant leaders either discharged or demoralized.

The way I was demoralized, piloting a barely-armed supply ship in the rear echelons of our formation.

Which was in itself a mark of the stupidity of our commanders -- that fact that they thought there could be such a thing as a “rear echelon” during a war in three-dimensional space.

workspace There might have been dozens of men who could have seen what I saw -- the point of vulnerability in the Formics’ formation -- but they had long since left the service. The only reason I was there was because I couldn’t afford to quit before vesting in my pension. So I put up with spiteful commanders who would punish me for being a better officer than they would ever be. I took the abuse, the contempt, and so there I was piloting a ship with only two weapons -- slow missiles at that.

Turned out I only needed one.

But who could have predicted that I’d be there, that I’d see what I saw, and that I’d commit career suicide by firing my missiles against orders -- and then I’d turn out to be right? What process can test for that? Might as well resort to prayer -- either God is looking out for the human race or he doesn’t care. If he cares, then we’ll go on surviving despite our stupidity. If he doesn’t, then we won’t.

In a universe that works like that, any attempt to identify in advance the traits of great commanders is utterly wasted.

“Incoming visuals,” said the computer.

Mazer looked down at his desk screen, where he had jotted

Desperation

Intuition (test for that, sucker!)

Tolerance for the orders of fools.

Borderline-insane sense of personal mission.

Yeah, that’s the list Graff’s hoping I’ll send him.

And now the boy was sending him visuals. Who approved that?

But the head that flickered in the holospace above his desk wasn’t an eagerbeaver young lieutenant. It was a young woman with light-colored hair like her mother’s and only a few traces of her father’s part-Maori appearance. But the traces were there, and she was beautiful.

“Stop,” said Mazer.

“I am required to show you --”

“This is personal. This is an intrusion.”

“-- all ansible communications.”

“Later.”

“This is a visual and therefore has high priority. Sufficient ansible bandwidth for full motion visuals will only be used for communications of the --”

Mazer gave up. “Just play it.”

“Father,” said the young woman in the holo-space.

Mazer looked away from her, reflexively hiding his face, though of course she couldn't see him anyway. His daughter Pai Mahutanga. When he last saw her, she was a tree-climbing five-year-old. She used to have nightmares, but with her father always on duty with the fleet, there was no one to drive away the bad dreams.

“I brought your grandchildren with me,” she was saying. “Pahu Rangī hasn't found a woman yet who will let him reproduce.” She grinned wickedly at someone out of frame. Her brother. Mazer's son. Just a baby, conceived on his last leave before the final battle.

“We've told the children all about you. I know you can't see them all at once, but if they each come into frame with me for just a few moments -- it's so generous of them to let me --

“But he said that you might not be happy to see me. Even if that's true, Father, I know you'll want to see your grandchildren. They'll still be alive when you return. I might even be. Please don't hide from us. We know that when you divorced Mother it was for her sake, and ours. We know that you never stopped loving us. See? Here's Kahui Kura. And Pao Pao Te Rangī. They also have English names, Mirth and Glad, but they're proud to be children of the Maori. Through you. But your grandson Mazer Taka Aho Howarth insists on using the name you went ... go by. And as for baby Struan Maeroero, he'll make the choice when he gets older.” She sighed. “I suppose he's our last child, if the New Zealand courts uphold the Hegemony's new population rules.”

As each of the children stepped into frame, shyly or boldly, depending on their personality, Mazer tried to feel something toward them. Two daughters first, shy, lovely. The little boy named for him. Finally the baby that someone held into the frame.

They were strangers, and before he ever met them they would be parents themselves. Perhaps grandparents. What was the point? I told

your mother that we had to be dead to each other. She had to think of me as a casualty of war, even if the paperwork said Divorce Decree instead of Killed in Action.

She was so angry she told me that she would rather I had died. She was going to tell our children that I was dead. Or that I just left them, without giving them any reason, so they'd hate me.

Now it turns out she turned my departure into a sentimental memory of sacrifice for God and country. Or at least for planet and species.

Mazer forced himself not to wonder if this meant that she had forgiven him. She was the one with children to raise -- what she decided to tell them was none of his business. Whatever helped her raise the children without a father.

He didn't marry and have children until he was already middle-aged -- he'd been afraid to start a family when he knew he'd be gone on voyages lasting years at a time. Then he met Kim, and all that rational process went out the window. He wanted -- his DNA wanted -- their children to exist, even if he couldn't be there to raise them. Pai Mahutanga and Pahu Rangī -- he wanted the children's lives to be stable and good, rich with opportunity, so he stayed in the service in order to earn the separation bonuses that would pay to put them through college.

Then he fought in the war to keep them safe. But he was going to retire when the war ended and go home to them at last, while they were still young enough to welcome a father. And then he got this assignment.

Why couldn't you just decide, you bastards? Decide you were going to replace me, and then let me go home and have my hero's welcome and then retire to Christchurch and listen to the ringing of the bells to tell me God's in his heaven and all's right with the world. You could have left me home with my family, to raise my children, to be there so I could talk Pai out of naming her firstborn son after me.

I could have given all the advice and training you wanted -- more than you'd ever use, that's for sure -- and then left the fleet and had some kind of life. But no, I had to leave everything and come out here in this miserable box while you dither.

Mazer noticed that Pai's face was frozen and she was making no sound. “You stopped the playback,” said Mazer.

“You weren't paying attention,” said the computer. “This is a visual ansible transmission, and you are required to --”

“I'm watching now,” said Mazer.

Pai's voice came again, and the visual moved again. “They're going to slow this down to transmit it to you. But you know all about time dilation. The bandwidth is expensive, too, so I guess I'm done with the visual part of this. I've written you a letter, and so have the kids. And Pahu swears that someday he'll learn to read and write.” She laughed again, looking at someone out of frame. It had to be his son, the baby he had never seen. Tantalizingly close, but not coming into frame. Someone was controlling that. Someone decided not to let him see his son. Graff? How closely was he manipulating this? Or was it Kim who decided? Or Pahu himself?

“Mother has written to you, too. Actually, quite a few letters. She wouldn't come, though. She doesn't want you to see her looking so old. But she's still beautiful, Father. More beautiful than ever, with white hair and -- she still loves you. She wants you to remember her younger. She told me once, ‘I was never beautiful, and when I met a man who thought I was, I married him over his most heartfelt objections.’”

Her imitation of her mother was so accurate that it stopped Mazer's breath for a moment. Could it truly be that Kim had refused to come because of some foolish vanity about how she looked? As if he would care!

But he would care. Because she would be old, and that would prove that it was true, that she would surely be dead before he made it back to Earth. And because of that, it would not be home he came back to. There was no such place.

“I love you, Father,” Pai was saying. “Not just because you saved the world. We honor you for that, of course. But we love you because you made Mother so happy. She would tell us stories about you. It's as if we knew you. And your old mates would visit sometimes, and then we knew that Mother wasn't exaggerating about you. Either that or they all were.” She laughed. “You have been part of our lives. We may be strangers to you, but you're not a stranger to us.”

The image flickered, and when it came back, she was not in quite the same position. There had been an edit. Perhaps because she didn't want him to see her cry. But he knew she had been about to, because her face still worked

before weeping the same way as when she was little. It had not been so very long, for him, since she was small. He remembered very well.

"You don't have to answer this," she said. "Lieutenant Graff told us that you might not welcome this transmission. Might even refuse to watch it. We don't want to make your voyage harder. But Father, when you come home -- when you come back to us -- you have a home. In our hearts. Even if I'm gone, even if only our children are here to meet you, our arms are open. Not to greet the conquering hero. But to welcome home our papa and grandpa, however old we are. I love you. We all do. All."

And then, almost as an afterthought: "Please read our letters."

"I have letters for you," said the computer, as the holospace went empty.

"Save them," said Mazer. "I'll get to them."

"You are authorized to send a visual reply," said the computer.

"That will not happen," said Mazer. But even as he said it, he was wondering what he could possibly say, if he changed his mind and did send them his image. Some heroic speech about the nobility of sacrifice? Or an apology for accepting the assignment?

He would never show his face to them. Would never let Kim see that he was not changed.

He would read the letters. He would answer them. There were duties you owed to family, even if the reason they got involved was because of some meddling jerk of a lieutenant.

"My first letter," said Mazer, "will be to that git, Graff. It's very brief. 'Bugger off, gitling.' Sign it 'respectfully yours.'"

"'Bugger' is a noun. 'Git' is a substandard verb, and 'gitling' is not in any of my wordbases. I cannot spell or parse the message properly without explanation.... Do you mean 'Leave this place, alien enemy'?"

"I made gitling up, but it's an excellent word, so use it. And I can't believe they programmed you without 'bugger off' in the wordbase."

"I detect stress," said the computer. "Will you accept mild sedation?"

"The stress is being caused by your forcing me to view a message I did not want to see. You are causing my stress. So give me some time to myself to calm down."

"Incoming message." Mazer felt his stress levels rising even higher. So he sighed and sat back and said, "Read it. It's from Graff, right? Always use a male voice for the gitling."

"Admiral Rackham, I apologize for the intrusion," the computer baritone. "Once I broached the possibility of letting your family contact you, my superiors would not give up on the idea, even though I warned them it would be more likely to be counterproductive if you hadn't agreed in advance. Still, it was my idea and I take full responsibility for that, but it was also clumsily handled without waiting for your permission, and that was not my responsibility. Though it was completely predictable, because this is the military. There is no idea so stupid that it won't be seized upon and made the basis of policy, and no idea so wise that it won't be perceived as threatening by some paper pusher, who'll kill it if he can, or claim complete credit for it if it works. Am I describing the military you know?"

Clever boy, thought Mazer. Deflect my anger to the IF. Make me his friend.

"However, the decision was made to send you only those letters that you would find encouraging. You're being 'handled,' Admiral Rackham. But if you want all the letters, I'll make sure you get the whole picture. It won't make you happier, but at least you'll know I'm not trying to manipulate you."

"Oh, right," said Mazer.

"Or at least I'm not trying to trick you," said the computer. "I'm trying to persuade you by winning your trust, if I can, and then your cooperation. I will not lie to you or leave out information in order to deceive you. Tell me if you want all the letters or are content with the comfortable version of your family's life."

Mazer knew then that Graff had won -- Mazer would have no choice but to answer, and no choice but to request the omitted letters. Then he would be beholden to the gitling. Angry, but in debt.

The real question was this: Was Graff staging the whole thing? Was he the one who withheld the uncomfortable letters, only so he could gain points with Mazer for then releas-

ing them?

Or was Graff taking some kind of risk, scamming the system in order to send him the full set of letters?

Or did Graff, a mere lieutenant, have a degree of power that allowed him to openly flout the orders of his superiors with impunity?

"Don't send the bugger-off letter," said Mazer.

"I already sent it and receipt has been confirmed."

"I'm actually quite happy that you did that," said Mazer. "So here's my next message: Send the letters, gitling."

Within a few minutes, the reply came, and this time the number of letters was much higher.

And with nothing else to do, Mazer opened them and began to read them silently, in the order they were sent. Which means that the first hundred were all from Kim.

The progression of the early letters was predictable, but no less painful to read. She was hurt, angry, grief-stricken, resentful, filled with longing. She tried to hurt him with invective, or with guilt, or by tormenting him with sexually charged memories. Maybe she was tormenting herself.

Her letters, even the angry ones, were reminders of what he had lost, of the life he once had. It's not as if she invented her temper for this occasion. She had it all along, and he had been lashed by it before, and bore a few old scars. But now it all combined to make him miss her.

Her words hurt him, tantalized him, made him grieve, and often he had to stop reading and listen to something -- music, poetry, or the drones and clicks of subtle machinery in the seemingly motionless craft that was hurtling through space in, the physicists assured him, a wavelike way, though he could not detect any lack of solidity in any of the objects inside the ship. Except, of course, himself. He could dissolve at a word, if it was from her, and then be remade by another.

I was right to marry her, he thought again and again as he read. And wrong to leave her. I cheated her and myself and my children, and for what? So I could be trapped here in space while she grows old and dies, and then come back and watch some clever young lad take his rightful place as commander of all the

fleets, while I hover behind him, a relic of an old war, who lived out the wrong cliché. Instead of coming home in a bag for his family to bury, it was his family who grew old and died while he came back still ... still young. Young and utterly alone, purposeless except for the little matter of saving the human race, which wouldn't even be in his hands.

Her letters calmed down after a while. They became monthly reports on the family. As if he had become a sort of diary for her. A place where she could wonder if she was doing the right thing in her raising of the children -- too stern, too strict, too indulgent. If her decisions could have a wrong outcome or a wrong motive, then she wondered constantly if she should have done it differently. That, too, was the woman he had known and loved and reassured endlessly.

How did she hold together without him? Apparently she remembered the conversations they used to have, or imagined new ones. She inserted his side of the conversation into the letters. "I know you'd tell me that I did the right thing ... that I had no choice ... of course you'd say ... you always told me ... I'm still doing the same old ..."

The things that a widow would tell herself about her dead husband.

But widows could still love their husbands. She has forgiven me.

And finally, in a letter written not so long ago -- last week; half a year ago -- she said it outright. "I hope you have forgiven me for being so angry with you when you divorced me. I know you had no choice but to go, and you were trying to be kind by cutting all ties so I could go on with life. And I have gone on, exactly as you said I should. Let us please forgive one another."

The words hit him like three-g acceleration. He gasped and wept and the computer became concerned. "What's wrong?" the computer asked. "Sedation seems necessary."

"I'm reading a letter from my wife," he said. "I'm fine. No sedation."

But he wasn't fine. Because he knew what Graff and the IF could not have known when they let this message go through. Graff had lied to him. He had withheld information.

For what Mazer had told his wife was that she should go on with life and marry again.

That's what she was telling him. Somebody

had forbidden them to say or write anything that would tell him that Kim had married another man and probably had more children -- but he knew, because that's the only thing she could mean when she said, "I have gone on, exactly as you said I should." That had been the crux of the argument. She insisting that divorce only made sense if she intended to remarry, him saying that of course she didn't think of remarrying now, but later, when she finally realized that he would never come back as long as she lived, she wouldn't have to write and ask him for a divorce, it would already be done and she could go ahead, knowing that she had his blessing -- and she had slapped him and burst into tears because he thought so little of her and her love for him that he thought she could forget and marry someone else ...

But she had, and it was breaking his heart, because even though he had been noble about insisting on the divorce, he had believed her when she said she could never love any other man.

She did love another man. He was gone only a year, and she ...

No, he had been gone three decades now. Maybe it took her ten years before she found another man. Maybe ...

"I will have to report this physical response," said the computer.

"You do whatever you have to," said Mazer. "What are they going to do, send me to the hospital? Or -- I know -- they could cancel the mission!"

He calmed down, though -- barking at the computer made him feel marginally better. Even though his thoughts raced far beyond the words he was reading, he did read all the other letters, and now he could see hints and overtones. A lot of unexplained references to "we" and "us" in the letters. She wanted him to know.

"Send this to Graff. Tell him I know he broke his word almost as soon as he gave it."

The answer came back in a moment. "Do you think I don't know exactly what I sent?"

Did he know? Or had he only just now realized that Kim had slipped a message through, and now Graff was pretending that he knew it all along ...

Another message from Graff: "Just heard from your computer that you have had a

strong emotional response to the letters. I'm deeply sorry for that. It must be a challenge, to live in the presence of a computer that reports everything you do to us, and then a team of shrinks try to figure out how to respond in order to get the desired result. My own feeling is that if we intend to trust the future of the human race to this man, maybe we ought to tell him everything we know and converse with him like an adult. But my own letters have to be passed through the same panel of shrinks. For instance, they're letting me tell you about them because they hope that you will come to trust me more by knowing that I don't like what they do. They're even letting me tell you this as a further attempt to allow the building of trust through recursive confession of trickery and deception. I bet it's working, too. You can't possibly read any secret meanings into this letter."

What game is he playing? Which parts of his letters are true? The panel of shrinks made sense. The military mind: Find a way to negate your own assets so they fail even before you begin to use them. But if Graff really did let Kim's admission that she had remarried sneak through, knowing that the shrinks would miss it, then did that mean he was on Mazer's side? Or that he was merely better than the shrinks at figuring out how to manipulate him?

"You can't possibly read any secret meanings into this letter," Graff had said. Did that mean that there was a secret meaning? Mazer read it over again, and now what he said in the third sentence took on another possible meaning. "To live in the presence of a computer that reports everything you do to us." At first he had read it as if it meant "reports to us everything you do." But what if he literally meant that the computer would report everything Mazer did to them.

That would mean they had detected his undetectable reprogramming of the computer.

Which would explain the panel of shrinks and the sudden new urgency about finding a replacement for Mazer as commander.

So the cat was out of the bag. But they weren't going to tell him they knew what he had done, because he was the volatile one who had done something insane and so they couldn't believe he had a rational purpose and speak to him openly.

He had to let them see him and realize that he was not insane. He had to get control of this situation. And in order to accomplish that, he

had to trust Graff to be what he so obviously wanted Mazer to think he was: An ally in the effort to find the best possible commander for the IF when the final campaign finally began. Mazer looked in the mirror and debated whether to clean up his appearance. There were plenty of insane people who tried, pathetically, to look saner by dressing like regular people. Then again, he had let himself get awfully tangle-haired and he was naked all the time. At least he could wash and dress and try to look like the kind of person that military people could regard with respect.

When he was ready, he rotated into position and told the computer to begin recording his visual for later transmission. He suspected, though, that there would be no point in editing it -- the raw recording was what the computer would transmit, since it had obviously reported his earlier reprogramming.

"I have reason to believe that you already know of the change I made in the onboard computer's programming. Apparently I could take the computer's navigational system out of your control, but couldn't keep it from reporting the fact to you. Which suggests that you meant this box to be a prison, but you weren't very good at it.

"So I will now tell you exactly what you need to know. You -- or, by now, your predecessors -- refused to believe me when I told them that I was not the right man to command the International Fleet during the final campaign. I was told that there would be a search for an adequate replacement, but I knew better.

"I knew that any 'search' would be perfunctory or illusory. You were betting everything on me. However, I also know how the military works. Those who made the decision to rely on me would be long since retired before I came back. And the closer we got to the time of my return, the more the new bureaucracy would dread my arrival. When I got there, I would find myself at the head of a completely unfit military organization whose primary purpose was to prevent me from doing anything that might cost somebody his job. Thus I would be powerless, even if I was retained as a figurehead. And all the pilots who gave up everything they knew and loved on Earth in order to go out and confront the Formics in their own space would be under the actual command of the usual gang of bureaucratic climbers.

"It always takes six months of war and a few dreadful defeats to clear out the deadwood. But we don't have time for that in this war, any more than we did in the last one. My

insubordination fortunately ended things abruptly. This time, though, if we lose any battle then we have lost the war. We will have no second chance. We have no margin of error. We can't afford to waste time getting rid of you -- you, the idiots who are watching me right now, the idiots who are going to let the human race be destroyed in order to preserve your pathetic bureaucratic jobs.

"So I reprogrammed my ship's navigational program so that I have complete control over it. You can't override my decision. And my decision is this: I am not coming back. I will not decelerate and turn around. I will keep going on and on.

"My plan was simple. Without me to count on as your future commander, you would have no choice but to search for a new one. Not go through the motions, but really search.

"And I think you must have guessed that this was my plan, because you started letting me get messages from Lieutenant Graff.

"So now I have the problem of trying to make sense of what you're doing. My guess is that Graff is trained as a shrink. Perhaps he works as an intelligence analyst. My guess is that he is actually very bright and innovative and has got spectacular results at ... at something. So you decided to see if he could get me back on track. Only he is exactly the kind of wild man that terrifies you. He's smarter than you, and so you have to make sure you keep him from getting the power to do anything that looks to you like it might be dangerous. And since everything remotely effective will frighten you, his main project has been figuring out how to get around you in order to establish honest communication between him and me.

"So here we are, at something of an impasse. And all the power is in your hands at this moment. So let me tell you your choices. There are only two of them.

"The first choice is the hard one. It will make your skin crawl. Some of you will go home and sleep for three days in fetal position with your thumbs in your mouths. But there's no negotiation. This is what you'll do:

"You'll give Lieutenant Graff real power. Don't give him a high rank and a desk and a bureaucracy. Give him genuine authority. Everything he wants, he gets. Because the whole reason he is alive will be this: To find the best possible commander for the fleets that will decide the future of the human race.

"To do this he first has to find out how to

identify those with the best potential. You'll give him all the help he asks for. All the people he asks for, regardless of their rank, training, or how much some idiot admiral hates or loves them.

"Then Graff will figure out how to train the candidates he identifies. Again, you'll do whatever he wants. Nothing is too expensive. Nothing is too difficult. Nothing requires a single committee meeting to agree. Everybody in the IF and everybody in the government is Graff's servant, and all they should ever ask him is to clarify his instructions.

"What I require of Graff is that he work on nothing but the identification and training of my replacement as battle commander of the International Fleet. If he starts bureaucratic kingdom building -- in other words, if he turns out to be just another idiot -- I'll know it, and I'll stop talking to him.

"In exchange for your giving Graff this authority is that once I'm satisfied he has it and is using it correctly, then I'll turn this ship around immediately. I'll get home a few years earlier than the original plan. I'll be part of training whatever commander you have. I'll evaluate Graff's work. I'll help choose among the candidates for the job, if you have more than one that might potentially do the job.

"And all along the way, Graff will communicate with me constantly by ansible, so that everything he does will be done with my counsel and approval. Thus, through Graff, I am taking command of the search for our war leader now.

"But if you act like the idiots who led the fleet during the war I won, and try to obfuscate and prevaricate and procrastinate and misdirect and manipulate and lie your way out of letting Graff and me control the choice and training of the battle commander, then I won't turn this ship around, ever.

"I'll just sail on out into oblivion. Our campaign will fail. The Buggers will come back to Earth and they'll finish the job this time. And I, in this ship, will be the last living human being. But it won't be my fault. It will be yours, because you did not have the decency and intelligence to step aside and let the people who know how to do the job of saving the human race do it.

"Think about it as long as you want. I've got all the time in the world. But keep this in mind: Whoever tries to take control of this situation and set up committees to study your

response to this vid -- those are the people you need to assign to remote desk jobs and get them out of the IF right now. They are the allies of the Buggers -- they're the ones who will end up getting us all killed. I have already designated the only possible leader for this program: Lieutenant Graff. There's no compromise. No maneuvering. Make him a captain, give him more actual authority than any other living human, stand ready to do whatever he tells you to do, and let him and me get to work.

"Do I believe you'll actually do this? No. That's why I reprogrammed my ship. Just remember that I am the guy who saved the human race, and I did it because I was able to see exactly how the Buggers' military system worked and find its weak spot. I have also seen how the human military system works, and I know the weak spot, and I know how to fix it. I've just told you how. Either you'll do it or you won't. Now make your decisions and don't bother me again unless you've made the right one."

Mazer turned back to the desk and selected save and send.

When he was sure the message was sent, he returned to his sleeping space and let himself think again about Kim and Pai and Pahu, about his grandchildren, about his wife's new husband and what children they might have. What he did not let himself think about was the possibility of returning to Earth to meet these babies as adults and try to find a place among them as if he were still alive, as if there were anyone left on Earth for him to know and love.

*

The answer did not come for a full twelve hours. Mazer imagined with amusement the struggles that must be going on. People fighting for their jobs. Filing reports proving that Mazer was insane and therefore should not be listened to. Struggling to neutralize Graff -- or suck up to him, or get themselves assigned as his immediate supervisor. Trying to figure out a way to fool Mazer into thinking they had complied without actually having to do it.

The answer, when it came, was from Graff. It was a visual. Mazer was pleased to see that while Graff was, in fact, young, he wore the uniform in a slovenly way that suggested that looking like an officer wasn't a particularly high priority for him.

He wore a captain's insignia and a serious expression that was only a split second away

from a smile.

"Once again, Admiral Rackham, with only one weapon in your arsenal, you knew right where to aim it."

"I had two missiles the first time," said Mazer. "Do you wish me to record --" began the computer.

"Shut up and continue the message," growled Mazer.

"You should know that your former wife, Kim Arnsbrach Rackham Summers -- and yes, she does keep your name as part of her legal name -- was instrumental in making this happen. Because whenever somebody came up with a plan for how to fool you and me into thinking they were in compliance with your orders, I would bring her to the meeting. Whenever they said, 'We'll get Admiral Rackham to believe' some lie or other, she would laugh. And the discussion would pretty much end there.

"I can't tell you how long it will last, but at this point, the IF seems to be ready to comply fully. You should know that has involved about two hundred early retirements and nearly a thousand reassignments, including forty officers of flag rank. You still know how to blow things up.

"There are things I already know about selection and training, and over the next few years we'll talk constantly. But I can't wait to take actions until you and I have conferred on everything, simply because there's no time to waste and time dilation adds weeks to all our conversations.

"However, if I do something wrong, tell me and I'll change it. I'll never tell you that we've already done this or that as if that were a reason not to do it the right way after all. I will show you that you have not made a mistake in trusting this to me.

"The thing that puzzles me, though, is how you decided to trust me. My communications to you were full of lies or I couldn't have written to you at all. I didn't know you and had no clue how to tell you the truth in a way that would get past the committees that had to approve everything. The worst thing is that in fact I'm very good at the bureaucratic game or I couldn't have got to the position to communicate directly with you in the first place.

"So let me tell you -- now that no one will be censoring my messages -- that yes, I think the highest priority is finding the right replacement for you as battle commander of the

International Fleet. But once we've done that -- and I know that's a big if -- I have plans of my own.

"Because winning this particular war against this particular enemy is important, of course. But I want to win all future wars the only way we can -- by getting the human race off this one planet and out of this one star system. The Formics already figured it out -- you have to disperse. You have to spread out until you're unkillable.

"I hope they turn out to have failed. I hope we can destroy them so thoroughly they can't challenge us for a thousand years.

"But by the end of that thousand years, when another Bugger fleet comes back for vengeance, I want them to discover that humans have spread to a thousand worlds and there is no hope of finding us all.

"I guess I'm just a big-picture guy, Admiral Rackham. But whatever my long-range goals are, this much is certain: If we don't have the right commander and win this war, it won't matter what other plans anybody has.

"And you are that commander, sir. Not the battle commander, but the commander who found a way to get the military to reshape itself in order to find the right battle commander without wasting the lives of countless soldiers in meaningless defeats in order to find him.

"Sir, I will not address this topic again. But I have come to know your family in the past few weeks. I know now something of what you gave up in order to be in the position you're in now. And I promise you, sir, that I will do everything in my power to make your sacrifices and theirs worth the cost."

Graff saluted, and then disappeared from the holospace.

And even though he could not be seen by anybody, Mazer Rackham saluted him back.

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