

Stalemate in Space

by Charles L. Harness

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One

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At first there was only the voice, a monotonous murmur in her ears.

"Die now-- die now-- die now-- "

Evelyn Kane awoke, breathing slowly and painfully. The top of the cubicle was bulging inward on her chest, and it seemed likely that a rib or two was broken. How long ago? Years? Minutes? She had no way of knowing. Her slender right hand found the oxygen valve and turned it. For a long while she lay, hurting and breathing helplessly.

"Die now-- die now-- die now-- "

The votron had awakened her with its heart-breaking code message, and it was her duty to carry out its command. Nine years after the great battle globes had crunched together, the mentors had sealed her in this tiny cell, dormant, unawaking, to be livened only when it was certain her countrymen had either definitely won-- or lost.

The votron's telepathic dirge chronicled the latter fact. She had expected nothing else.

She had only to find the relay beside her cot, press the key that would set in motion gigantic prime movers in the heart of the great globe, and the conquerors would join the conquered in the wide and nameless grave of space.

But life, now doled out by the second, was too delicious to abandon immediately. Her mind, like that of a drowning person, raced hungrily over the memories of her past.

For twenty years, in company with her great father, she had watched The Defender grow from a vast metal skeleton into a planet-sized battle globe. But it had not grown fast enough, for when the Scythian globe, The Invader, sprang out of black space to enslave the budding Terran Confederacy, The Defender was unfinished, half-equipped, and undermanned.

The Terrans could only fight for time and hope for a miracle.

The Defender, commanded by her father, Gordon, Lord Kane, hurled itself from its orbit around Procyon and met The Invader with its giant fission torpedoes.

And then, in an intergalactic proton storm beyond the Lesser Magellanic Cloud, the globes lost their bearings and collided. Hordes of brute-men poured through the crushed outer armor of the stricken Defender.

The prone woman stirred uneasily. Here the images became unreal and terrible, with the recurrent

vision of death. It had taken the Scythians nine years to conquer The Defender's outer shell. Then had come that final interview with her father.

"In half an hour our last space port will be captured," he had telepathed curtly. "Only one more messenger ship can leave The Defender. Be on it."

"No. I shall die here."

His fine tired eyes had studied her face in enigmatic appraisal. "Then die usefully. The mentors are trying to develop a force what will destroy both globes in the moment of our inevitable defeat. If they are successful, you will have the task of pressing the final button of the battle."

"There's an off-chance you may survive," countered a mentor. "We're also working on a means for your escape-- not only because you are Gordon's daughter, but because this great proton storm will prevent radio contact with Terra for years, and we want someone to escape with our secret if and when our experiments prove successful."

"But you must expect to die," her father had warned with gentle finality.

She clenched her fingernails vehemently into her palms and wrenched herself back to the present.

That time had come.

With some effort she worked herself out of the crumpled bed and lay on the floor of her little cubicle, panting and holding her chest with both hands. The metal floor was very cold. Evidently the enemy torpedo fissionables had finally broken through to the center portions of the ship, letting in the icy breath of space. Small matter. Not by freezing would she die.

She reached out her hand, felt for the all-important key, and gasped in dismay. The mahogany box containing the key had burst its metal bonds and was lying on its side. The explosion that had crushed her cubicle had been terrific.

With a gurgle of horror she snapped on her wrist luminar and examined the interior of the box.

It was a shattered ruin.

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Once the fact was clear, she composed herself and lay there, breathing hard and thinking. She had no means to construct another key. At best, finding the rare tools and parts would take months, and during the interval the invaders would be cutting loose from the dead hulk that clutched their conquering battle globe in a metallic *rigor mortis*.

She gave herself six weeks to accomplish this stalemate.

Within that time she must know whether the prime movers were still intact, and whether she could safely enter the pile room herself, set the movers in motion, and draw the moderator columns. If it were unsafe, she must secure the unwitting assistance of her Scythian enemies.

Still prone, she found the first-aid kit and taped her chest expertly. The cold was beginning to make itself felt, so she flicked on the chaudiere she wore as an undergarment to her Scythian woman's uniform. Then she crawled on her elbows and stomach to the tiny door, spun the sealing gear, and was soon outside. Ignoring the pain and pulling on the side of the imitation rock that contained her cell, she got slowly to her feet. The air was thin indeed, and frigid. She turned the valve of her portable oxygen bottle almost subconsciously, while exploring the surrounding blackened forest as far as she could see. Mentally she was alert for roving alien minds. She had left her weapons inside the cubicle, except for the three things in the little leather bag dangling from her waist, for she knew that her greatest weapon in the struggle to come would be her apparent harmlessness.

Four hundred yards behind her she detected the mind of a low-born Scythe, of the Tharn sun group. Very quickly she established it as that of a tired, brutish corporal, taking a mop-up squad through the black stumps and forlorn branches of the small forest that for years had supplied oxygen to the defenders of this sector.

The corporal could not see her green Scythian uniform clearly, and evidently took her for a Terran woman. In his mind was the question: Should he shoot immediately, or should he capture her? It had been two months since he had seen a woman. But then, his orders were to shoot. Yes, he would shoot.

Evelyn turned in profile to the beam-gun and stretched luxuriously, hoping that her grimace of pain could not be detected. With satisfaction, she sensed a sudden change of determination in the mind of the Tharn. The gun was lowered, and the man was circling to creep up behind her. He did not bother to notify his men. He wanted her first. He had seen her uniform, but that deterred him not a whit. Afterwards, he would call up the squad. Finally, they would kill her and move on. Women auxiliaries had no business here, anyway.

Hips dipping, Evelyn sauntered into the shattered copse. The man moved faster, though still trying to approach quietly. Most of the radions in the mile-high ceiling had been destroyed, and the light was poor. He was not surprised when he lost track of his quarry. He tip-toed rapidly onward, picking his way through the charred and fallen branches, thinking that she must turn up again soon. He had not gone twenty yards in this manner when a howl of unbearable fury sounded in his mind, and the dull light in his brain went out.

Breathing deeply from her mental effort, the woman stepped from behind a great black tree trunk and hurried to the unconscious man. For I.Q.'s of 100 and less, telepathic cortical paralysis was quite effective. With cool efficiency and no trace of distaste she stripped the odorous uniform from the man, then took his weapon, turned the beam power down very low, and needled a neat slash across his throat. While he bled to death, she slipped deftly into the baggy suit, clasped the beam gun by the handle, and started up the sooty slope. For a time, at least, it would be safer to pass as a Tharn soldier than as any kind of a woman.

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Two

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The Inquisitor leaned forward, frowning at the girl before him.

"Name?"

"Evelyn Kane."

The eyes of the inquisitor widened. "So you admit to a Terran name. Well, Terran, you are charged with having stolen passage on a supply lorry, and you also seem to be wearing the uniform of an infantry corporal as well as that of a Scythian woman auxiliary. Incidentally, where is the corporal? Did you kill him?"

He was prepared for a last-ditch denial. He would cut it short, have the guards remove her, and execution would follow immediately. In a way, it was unfortunate. The woman was obviously of a high Terran class. No-- he couldn't consider that. His slender means couldn't afford another woman in his quarters, and besides, he wouldn't feel safe with this cool murderess.

"Do you not understand the master tongue? Why did you kill the corporal?" He leaned impatiently over his desk.

The woman stared frankly back at him with her clear blue eyes. The guards on either side of her dug their nails into her arms, as was their custom with recalcitrant prisoners, but she took no notice.

She had analyzed the minds of the three men. She could handle the inquisitor alone or the two guards alone, but not all three.

"If you aren't afraid of me, perhaps you'd be so kind as to send the guards out for a few minutes," she said, placing a hand on her hip. "I have interesting information."

So that was it. Buy her freedom by betraying fugitive Terrans. Well, he could take the information and then kill her. He nodded curtly to the guards, and they walked out of the hut, exchanging sly winks with one another.

Evelyn Kane crossed her arms across her chest and felt her broken rib gingerly. The inquisitor stared up at her in sadistic admiration. He would certainly be on hand for the execution. His anticipation was cut

short with a horrible realization. Under the paralyzing force of a mind greater than his own, he reached beneath the desk and switched off the recorder.

"Who is the Occupational Commandant for this Sector?" she asked tersely. This must be done swiftly before the guards returned.

"Perat, Viscount of Tharn," replied the man mechanically.

"What is the extent of his jurisdiction?"

"From the center of the Terran globe, outward four hundred miles radius."

"Good. Prepare for me the usual visa that a woman clerk needs for passage to the offices of the Occupational Commandant."

The inquisitor filled in blanks in a stiff sheet of paper and stamped a seal at its bottom.

"You will add in the portion reserved for 'comments,' the following: 'Capable clerk. Others will follow as they are found available.' "

The man's pen scratched away obediently.

Evelyn Kane smiled gently at the impotent, inwardly raging inquisitor. She took the paper, folded it, and placed it in a pocket in her blouse. "Call the guards," she ordered.

He pressed the button on his desk, and the guards re-entered.

"This person is no longer a prisoner," said the inquisitor woodenly. "She is to take the next transport to the Occupational Commandant of Zone One."

When the transport had left, neither inquisitor nor guards had any memory of the woman. However, in the due course of events, the recording was gathered up with many others like it, boxed carefully, and sent to the Office of the Occupational Commandant, Zone One, for auditing.

* * *

Evelyn was extremely careful with her mental probe as she descended from the transport. The Occupational Commandant would undoubtedly be high-born and telepathic. He must not have occasion to suspect a similar ability in a mere clerk.

Fighting had passed this way, too, and recently. Many of the buildings were still smoking, and many of the radions high above were either shot out or obscured by slowly drifting dust clouds. The acrid odor of radiation-remover was everywhere.

She caught the sound of spasmodic small-arms fire.

"What is that?" she asked the transport attendant.

"The Commandant is shooting prisoners," he replied laconically.

"Oh."

"Where did you want to go?"

"To the personnel office."

"That way." He pointed to the largest building of the group-- two stories high, reasonably intact.

She walked off down the gravel path, which was stained here and there with dark sticky red. She gave her visa to the guard at the door and was admitted to an improvised waiting room, where another guard eyed her stonily. The firing was much nearer. She recognized the obscene coughs of a Faeg pistol and began to feel sick.

A woman in the green uniform of the Scythe auxiliary came in, whispered something to the guard, and then told Evelyn to follow her.

In the anteroom a gray cat looked her over curiously, and Evelyn frowned. She might have to get rid of the cat if she stayed here. Under certain circumstances the animal could prove her deadliest enemy.

The next room field a foppish little man, evidently a supervisor of some sort, who was studying her visa.

"I'm very happy to have you here, S'ria-- ah -- " he looked at the visa suspiciously-- "S'ria Lyn. Do sit down. But as I was just remarking to S'ria Gerek, here"-- he nodded to the other woman, who smiled back-- "I wish the field officers would make up their august minds as to whether they want you or don't want you. Just why did they transfer you to H.Q.?"

She thought quickly. This pompous little ass would have to be given some answer that would keep him from checking with the inquisitor. It would have to be something personal. She looked at the false black in his eyebrows and sideburns, and the artificial way in which he had combed hair over his bald spot. She crossed her knees slowly, ignoring the narrowing eyes of S'ria Gerek, and smoothed the back of her braided yellow hair. He was studying her covertly.

"The men in the fighting zones are uncouth, S'rin Gorph," she said simply. "I was told that *you*, that is, I mean-- "

"Yes?" he was the soul of graciousness. S'ria Gerek began to dictate loudly into her mechanical transcriber.

Evelyn cleared her throat, averted her eyes, and with some effort, managed a delicate flush. "I meant to say, I thought I would be happier working for-- working here. So I asked for a transfer."

S'rin Gorph beamed. "Splendid. But the occupation isn't over, yet, you know. There'll be hard work here for several weeks yet, before we cut loose from the enemy globe. But you do your work well"--winking artfully-- "and I'll see that-- "

He stopped, and his face took on a hunted look of mingled fear and anxiety. He appeared to listen.

Evelyn tensed her mind to receive and deceive a mental probe. She was certain now that the Zone Commandant was high-born and telepathic. The chances were only fifty-fifty that she could delude him for any length of time if he became interested in her. He must be avoided if at all possible. It should not be too difficult. He undoubtedly had a dozen personal secretaries and/or concubines and would take small interest in the lowly employees that amused Gorph.

Gorph looked at her uncertainly. "Perat, Viscount of the Tharn Suns, sends you his compliments and wishes to see you on the balcony." He pointed to a hallway. All the way through there, across to the other wing."

As she left, she heard all sound in the room stop. The transcribing and calculating machines trailed off into a watchful silence, and she could feel the eyes of the men and women on her back. She noticed then that the Faeg had ceased firing.

* * *

Her heart was beating faster as she walked down the hall. She felt a very strong probe flooding over her brain casually, palping with mild interest the artificial memories she supplied: Escapades with officers in the combat areas. Reprimands. Demotion and transfer. Her deception of Gorph. Her anticipation of meeting a real Viscount and hoping he would let her dance for him.

The questing probe withdrew as idly as it had come, and she breathed a sigh of relief. She could not hope to deceive a suspicious telepath for long. Perat was merely amused at her "lie" to his under-supervisor. He had accepted her at her own face value, as supplied by her false memories.

She opened the door to the balcony and saw a man leaning moodily on the balustrade. He gave no immediate notice of her presence.

The five hundred and sixth heir of Tharn was of uncertain age, as were most of the men of both globes. Only the left side of his face could be seen. It was gaunt and leathery, and a deep thin scar lifted the corner of his mouth into a satanic smile. A faint paunch was gathering at his abdomen, as befitted a warrior turned to boring paper work. His closely cut black hair and the two sparkling red-gemmed rings-- apparently identical-- on his right hand seemed to denote a certain fastidiousness and unconscious superiority. To Evelyn the jeweled fingers bespoke an unnatural contrast to the past history of the man and were symptomatic of a personality that could find stimulation only in strange and cruel pleasures.

In alarm she suddenly realized that she had inadvertently let her appraisal penetrate her uncovered conscious mind, and that this probe was there awaiting it.

"You are right," he said coldly, still staring into the court below. "Now that the long battle is over, there is little left to divert me."

He pushed the Faeg across the coping toward her. "Take this."

He had not as yet looked at her.

She crossed the balcony, simultaneously grasping the pistol he offered her and looking down into the courtyard. There seemed to be nearly twenty Terrans lying about, in pools of their own blood.

Only one man-- a Terran officer of very high rank-- was left standing. His arms were folded somberly across his chest, and he studied the killer above him almost casually. But when the woman came out, their eyes met, and he started imperceptibly.

Evelyn Kane felt a horrid chill creeping over her. The man's hair was white, now, and his proud face lined with deep furrows, but there could be no mistake. It was Gordon, Lord Kane.

Her father.

The sweat continued to grow on her forehead, and she felt for a moment that she needed only to wish hard enough, and this would be a dream. A dream of a big, kind, dark-haired man with laugh-wrinkles about his eyes, who sat her on his knee when she was a little girl and read bedtime stories to her from a great book with many pictures.

An icy, amused voice came through: "Our orders are to kill all prisoners. It is entertaining to shoot down helpless men, isn't it? It warms me to know that I am cruel and wanton, and worthy of my trust."

Even in the midst of her horror, a cold, analytical part of her was explaining why the Commandant had called her to the balcony. Because all captured Terrans had to be killed, he hated his superiors, his own men, and especially the prisoners. A task so revolting he could not relegate to his own officers. He must do it himself, but he wanted his underlings to know he loathed them for it. She was merely a symbol of that contempt. His next words did not surprise her.

"It is even more stimulating to require a shuddering female to kill them. You are shuddering, you know?"

She nodded dumbly. Her palm was so wet that a drop of sweat dropped from it to the floor. She was thinking hard. She could kill the Commandant and save her father for a little while. But then the problem of detonating the pile remained, and it would not be solved more quickly by killing the man who controlled the pile area. On the contrary if she could get him interested in her--

"So far as our records indicate," murmured Perat, "the man down there is the last living Terran within The Defender. It occurred to me that our newest clerk would like to start off her duties with a bang. The Faeg is adjusted to a needlebeam. If you put a bolt between the man's eyes, you may dance for me tonight, and perhaps there will be other nights-- "

The woman seemed lost in thought for a long time. Slowly, she lifted the ugly little weapon. The doomed Terran looked up at her peacefully, without expression. She lowered the Faeg, her arm trembling.

Gordon, Lord Kane, frowned faintly, then closed his eyes. She raised the gun again, drew cross hairs with a nerveless wrist, and squeezed the trigger. There was a loud, hollow cough, but no recoil. The Terran officer, his eyes still closed and arms folded, sank to the ground, face up. Blood was running from a tiny hole in his forehead.

The man leaning on the balustrade turned and looked at Evelyn, at first with amused contempt, then with narrowing, questioning eyes.

"Come here," he ordered.

The Faeg dropped from her hand. With a titanic effort she activated her legs and walked toward him. He was studying her face very carefully.

She felt that she was going to be sick. Her knees were so weak that she had to lean on the coping.

With a forefinger he lifted up the mass of golden curls that hung over her right forehead and examined the scar hidden there, where the mentors had cut into her frontal lobe. The tiny doll they had created for her writhed uneasily in her waist purse, but Perat seemed to be thinking of something else, and missed the significance of the scar completely.

He dropped his hand. "I'm sorry," he said with a quiet weariness. "I shouldn't have asked you to kill the Terran. It was a sorry joke." Then: "Have you ever seen me before?"

"No," she whispered hoarsely. His mind was in hers, verifying the fact.

"Have you ever met my father, Phaen, the old Count of Tharn?"

"No."

"Do you have a son?"

"No."

His mind was out of hers again, and he had turned moodily back, surveying the courtyard and the dead. "Gorph will be wondering what happened to you. Come to my quarters at the eighth metron tonight."

Apparently he had suspected nothing.

Father. Father. I had to do it. But we'll all join you, soon. Soon.

* * *

Three

* * *

Perat lay on his couch, sipping cold purple *terif* and following the thinly-clad dancer with narrowed eyes. Music, soft and subtle, floated from his communications box, illegally tuned to an officers' club somewhere. Evelyn made the rhythm part of her as she swayed slowly on tiptoe.

For the last thirty "nights"-- the hours allotted to rest and sleep-- it had been thus. By "day" she probed furtively into the minds of the office staff, memorizing area designations, channels for official messages, and the names and authorizations of occupational field crews. By night she danced for Perat, who never took his eyes from her, nor his probe from her mind. While she danced it was not too difficult to elude the probe. There was an odd autohypnosis in dancing that blotted out memory and knowledge.

"Enough for now," he ordered. "Careful of your rib."

When he had first seen the bandages on her bare chest, that first night, she had been ready with a memory of dancing on a freshly waxed floor, and of falling.

Perat seemed to be debating with himself as she sat down on her own couch to rest. He got up, unlocked his desk, and drew out a tiny reel of metal wire, which Evelyn recognized as being feed for an amateur stereop projector. He placed the reel in a projector that had been installed in the wall, flicked off the table luminar, and both of them waited in the dark, breathing rather loudly.

Suddenly the center of the room was bright with a ball of light some two feet in diameter, and inside the luminous sphere were an old man, a woman, and a little boy of about four years. They were walking through a luxurious garden, and then they stopped, looked up, and waved gaily.

Evelyn studied the trio with growing wonder. The old man and the boy were complete strangers. *But the woman-- !*

"That is Phaen, my father," said Perat quietly. "He stayed at home because he hated war. And that is a path in our country estate on Tharn-R-VII. The little boy I fail to recognize, beyond a general resemblance to the Tharn line."

"But-- *can you deny that you are the woman?*"

The stereop snapped off, and she sat wordless in the dark.

"There seemed to be some similarity-- " she admitted. her throat was suddenly dry. Yet, why should she be alarmed? She really didn't know the woman.

The table luminar was on now, and Perat was prowling hungrily about the room, his scar twisting his otherwise handsome face into a snarling scowl.

"Similarity! Bah! That loop of hair over her right forehead hid a scar identical to yours. I have had the individual frames analyzed!"

Evelyn's hands knotted unconsciously. She forced her body to relax, but her mind was racing. This introduced another variable to be controlled in her plan for destruction. She *must* make it a known quantity.

"Did your father send it to you?" she asked.

"The day before you arrived here. It had been *en route* for months, of course."

"What did he say about it?"

"He said, 'Your widow and son send greetings. Be of good cheer, and accept our love.' What nonsense! He knows very well I'm not married and that-- well, if I have ever fathered any children, I don't know about them."

"Is that all he said?"

"That's all, except that he included this ring." He pulled one of the duplicate jewels from his right middle finger and tossed it to her. "It's identical to the one he had made for me when I entered on my majority. For a long time it was thought that it was the only stone of its kind on all the planets of the Tharn suns, a mineralogical freak, but I guess he found another. But why should I want two of them?"

Evelyn crossed the room and returned the ring.

"Existence is so full of mysteries, isn't it?" murmured Perat. "Sometimes it seems unfortunate that we must pass through a sentient phase on our way to death. This foolish, foolish war. Maybe the old count was right."

"You could be court martialed for that."

"Speaking of courts martial, I've got to attend one tonight-- an appeal from a death sentence." He arose, smoothed his hair and clothes, and poured another glass of *terif*. "Some fool inquisitor can't show proper disposition of a woman prisoner."

Evelyn's heart skipped a beat. "Indeed?"

"The wretch insists that he could remember if we would just let him alone. I suppose he took a bribe. You'll find one now and then who tries for a little extra profit."

She must absolutely not be seen by the condemned inquisitor. The stimulus would almost certainly make him remember.

"I'll wait for you," she said indifferently, thrusting her arms out in a languorous yawn.

"Very well." Perat stepped to the door, then turned and looked back at her. "On the other hand, I may need a clerk. It's way after hours, and the others have gone."

Beneath a gesture of wry protest, she swallowed rapidly.

"Perhaps you'd better come," insisted Perat.

She stood up, unloosened her waist purse, checked its contents swiftly, and then followed him out.

This might be a very close thing. From the purse she took a bottle of perfume and rubbed her ear lobes casually.

"Odd smell," commented Perat, wrinkling his nose.

"Odd scent," corrected Evelyn cryptically. She was thinking about the earnest faces of the mentors as they instructed her carefully in the use of the "perfume." The adrenalin glands, they had explained, provided a useful and powerful stimulant to a man in danger. Adrenalin slowed the heart and digestion, increased the systole and blood pressure, and increased perspiration to cool the skin. But there could be too much of a good thing. An overdose of adrenalin, they had pointed out, caused almost immediate edema. The lungs filled rapidly with the serum and the victim... drowned. The perfume she possessed overstimulated, in some unknown way, the adrenals of frightened persons. It had no effect on inactive adrenals.

The question remained-- who would be the more frightened, she or the condemned inquisitor?

She was perspiring freely, and the blonde hair on her arms and neck was standing stiffly when Perat opened the door for her and they entered the Zone Provost's chambers.

One glance at the trembling creature in the prisoner's chair reassured her. The ex-inquisitor, shorn of his insignia, shabby and stubble-bearded, sat huddled in his chair and from time to time swept his grave tormentors with glazed eyes. He looked a long while at Evelyn.

She got out her bottle of perfume idly and held it open in her warm hand. The officers and judge-provost were listening to the opening address of the prosecution and took no notice of her.

More and more frequently the condemned man turned his gaze to Evelyn. She poured a little of the scent on her handkerchief. The prisoner coughed and rubbed his chin, trying to think.

The charges were finally read, and the defense attorney began his opening statement. The prisoner, now coughing more frequently, was oblivious to all but the woman. Once she thought she saw a flicker of

recognition in his eyes, and she fanned herself hurriedly with her handkerchief.

The trial droned on to a close. It was a mere formality. The prosecutor summed up by proving that a Terran woman had been captured, possibly named Evelyn Kane, turned over to the defendant for registration and disposal, and that the defendant's weekly accounts failed to show a receipt for the release of the woman. Q.E.D., the death sentence must be affirmed.

The light in the prisoner's eyes was growing clearer, despite his bronchial difficulties. He began now to pay attention to what was said and to take notice of the other faces. It was as though he had finally found the weapon he wanted, and patiently awaited an opportunity to use it.

The defense was closing. Counsel for the prisoner declared that the latter might have been the innocent victim of the escapee, Evelyn Kane, possibly a telepathic Terran woman, because only a fool would have permitted a prisoner to escape without attempting to juggle the prison records, unless his mind had been under telepathic control. They ought to be looking for Evelyn Kane now, instead of wasting time with her victim. She might be anywhere. She might even be in this building. He bowed apologetically to Evelyn, she smiled at the faces suddenly looking at her with new interest.

The man in the prisoner's chair was peering at Evelyn through half-closed eyes, his arms crossed on his chest. He had stopped coughing, and the fingers of his right hand were tapping patiently on his sleeve.

If Perat should at this moment probe the prisoner's mind...

Evelyn, in turning to smile at Perat, knocked the bottle from the table to the floor, where it broke in a liquid tinkle. She put her hands to her mouth in contrite apology. The judge-provost frowned, and Perat eyed her curiously. The prisoner was seized with such a spasm of coughing that the provost, who had stood to pronounce sentence, paused in annoyance. The wracking ceased.

The provost picked up the Faeg lying before him.

"Have you anything to say before you die?" he asked coldly.

The ex-inquisitor stood and turned a triumphant face to him. "Excellency, you ask, where is the woman prisoner who escaped from me? Well, I can tell you..."

He clutched wildly at his throat, coughed horribly and bent in Evelyn Kane's direction.

"She..."

His lips, which were rapidly growing purple, moved without saying anything intelligible, and he suddenly crashed over the chair and to the floor.

The prison physician leaped to him, stethoscope out. After a few minutes, he stood up, puzzled and frowning, in the midst of a strained silence. "Odd, very odd," he muttered.

"Did the prisoner faint?" asked the judge-provost incuriously, lowering the Faeg.

"The prisoner's lungs are filled with liquid, apparently the result of hyperactive adrenals," commented the baffled physician. "He's dead, and don't ask me to explain why."

Evelyn smothered a series of hacking coughs in her handkerchief as the court broke up in excited groups. From the corner of her eye she saw that Perat was studying her thoughtfully.

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Four

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Two weeks later, very late at "night," Perat lay stretched gloomily on his sleeping couch. On the other side of the room, Evelyn was curled luxuriously on her own damasked lounge, her head propped high. She was scanning some of the miniature stereop reels that Perat had brought from his far-distant home planet.

"Those green trees and hedges... so far away," she mused. "Do you ever think about seeing them again?"

"Of late, I've been thinking about them quite a bit."

What did he mean by that?

"I understood it would be months before the field crews cut us loose from the Terran ship," she said.

"Indeed?"

"Well? Won't it?"

Perat turned his moody face toward her. "No, it won't. The field crews have been moving at breakneck speed, on account of some unfounded rumor or other that the Terran ship is going to explode. On orders from our High Command, we pull out of here by the end of the working day tomorrow. Within twenty metrons from now, our ship parts company with the enemy globe."

The scar on her forehead was throbbing violently. There was no time now to send the false orders to the field crew she had selected. She must think a bit.

"It seems, then, this is our last night together."

"It is."

She rose from her couch and walked the room like a caged beast.

"You can hardly take me, a commoner, back with you..."

With growing shock she realized that she was more than half sincere in her request.

"It is not done. It is unlike you to suggest it."

"Well, that's that, I suppose." She stopped and toyed idly with a box of chessmen on his table. "Would you care for a game of Terran chess? I'll try to play very intelligently, so that you won't be too terribly bored."

"If you like. But there are more interesting..."

"Do you think," she interrupted quickly, "that you could beat me without sight of the board or pieces?"

"What do you mean by that?"

"I just thought it would be more interesting for you. I'll take the board over to my bed, and you call out your moves and I'll tell you my replies. I'll see the board, but you won't."

"A curious variant."

"But you must promise to keep out of my mind; otherwise you would know my plans."

He smiled. "Set up the pieces. What color do you want?"

"I'll defend. Give me black."

She loosed her waist-purse, took a handkerchief from it, and set the purse on the deep carpet in the shadow of her table. She unfolded the chessboard in front of her on the couch and quickly placed the pieces. "I'm ready," she announced.

Indeed, everything was in readiness now except that she didn't know where the cat was. She regretted bitterly not having killed that innocent mouser weeks ago.

"Pawn to king four," announced Perat, gazing idly at the ceiling.

She made the move and replied, "Pawn to king three."

From the unlaced purse hidden on the floor a tiny head thrust itself out, followed soon by a pair of minuscule shoulders.

"Have you studied this Terran game?" queried Perat curiously, "or don't you know enough to seize the center on your first move?"

"Have I made an error already? Was that the wrong move?"

"It's the first move in a complete defensive system, but few people outside of Terrans understand it. Pawn to queen four."

She had blundered in attempting the French Defense, but it was not too late to convert to something that could be expected of a Scythian woman beginner. "Pawn to queen three."

The gray doll was out of the purse, sidling through the shadows to the door, which stood slightly ajar.

"So you don't know the book moves, after all. You would really have astonished me if you had moved your queen pawn two squares. I'll play pawn to king bishop four. Will you have some *terif*?"

He spun around upright and reached for the decanter, looking full at the door... and the tiny figure.

Evelyn was up at once, cutting off his line of vision. "Yes, I think I will have one."

Telepathically she ordered the little creature to dash through the crack in the doorway. She heard the faint rustle behind her as she picked up the glass Perat poured.

"You know," he said thoughtfully, "for a moment I thought I saw your little doll..."

She looked at him dubiously. "Really, Perat? It's in my purse."

He stepped lithely to the door and flung it open. Far down the hall there was the faintest suggestion of a scuffle.

"A mouse, I guess." He returned to his bed, but it was plain that he was unsatisfied.

* * *

The game wore on for half a metron. Perat's combinations were met with almost sufficient counter-combinations, so that the issue hung in doubt for move after move.

"You've improved considerably since yesterday," he admitted grudgingly.

"Not at all. It's your playing 'blind' that makes us even. No cheating! Keep out of my mind! It isn't fair to know what I'm planning."

Oh, by the merciful god of Galaxus, if he'll stay out of my mind and the cat out of the communications room for another five minutes!

"All right, all right. I'll win anyway," he muttered, as he concluded a combination that netted him the black queen. "You could gracefully resign right now."

Evelyn studied the position carefully. She had made a grave miscalculation-- the queen loss had definitely not been a part of the plan. She must contrive a delaying action that would invoke an oral argument.

"Bishop to queen rook eight," she murmured. Her telepathic probe, focused on the bit of nervous tissue that the mentors had cut from her frontal lobe and given to her mannikin as a brain, continued its tight control. In Gorph's office, far down the wing, the little creature was hopping painstakingly from one key to another of the dispatch printing machine.

"...takes priority over all other pending projects..."

"Your game is hopeless," scowled Perat. "I'm a queen and the exchange up on you."

"I always play the game out," replied Evelyn easily. "You never know what might happen. Your move."

"...five horizontal columns of metallic trans-scythium nine hundred xedars long will be found in a Terran storeroom, our area code..."

"All right, then. Queen takes pawn."

"Pawn to queen knight seven," replied Evelyn. It was her sole remaining pawn, and she hoped to use it in an odd way.

Perat checked with his queen at queen bishop four, and Evelyn's king slid to safety at queen knight eight. Perat moved his rook from queen knight five to queen five.

"Do you intend to mate with rook to queen's square next move?" asked Evelyn demurely.

"...under the strictest secrecy. Therefore you are ordered not to communicate..."

"Nothing can prevent it," observed the Viscount of Tharn somberly. He had already lost all interest in the game and was contemplating the ceiling tapestries. With a lurch she brought her telepathic probe to rest, ready to prepare a false front for his searching mind. She must keep him out a moment longer, or all was lost.

"But it's my move, and I have no move," she objected, focusing her probe again.

"...signed, Perat, Viscount of Tharn, Commandant, Occupation Zone One."

Through that distant fragment of her mind she sensed that something was watching the doll with feral interest.

The cat.

"So? No move? Then you lose," replied Perat.

"But my king isn't in check. You told me yourself that when my king was not in check, and I had no legal move, that I was stalemated, and the game was a draw."

In that other room, her telepathic contact guided the little figure down the table leg. Slowly now, don't excite the cat into pouncing. She had only seconds left, but it should suffice to place the dispatch in

Gorph's incoming box. The pompous little supervisor would send it by the first jet messenger without doubt or question, and the field crew would proceed to draw the five columns.

Pain daggered into her right leg!

* * *

The cat had seized her homunculus by the thigh; she knew the tiny bone had been crushed. She caught fleet, dizzy impressions of the animal striding off proudly with the little creature between its jaws. The letter lay where it had fallen, under the dispatch machine, almost invisible.

The doll ceased her blind writhing and drew a tiny black cylinder from her belt. The cat's right eye loomed huge above her.

Mentally, Perat studied the chessboard position with growing interest.

"Idiotic Terran game," he growled. "Only a Terran would conceive of the idea of calling a crushing defeat a drawn battle. I'm sorry I taught you the game. It's really quite-- *what was that?*"

"Sounded like the cat, didn't it?" responded Evelyn.

Her tiny *alter ego* had dropped from those destructive jaws and was dragging itself slowly back to the dispatch. It found the message and picked it up.

"Do you think something could have hurt it?" asked Evelyn.

The doll struggled toward Gorph's desk, leaving behind a thin red trail.

Then several things happened. Hot swords sizzled in Evelyn's back, and she knew the enraged feline had broken the spinal column of the doll. With throbbing intuition she collapsed her telepathic tentacle.

Too late.

Perat's probe was already in her mind, and she knew that he had caught the full impact of her swift telepathic return. She lay there limply. Her rib, now almost healed, began to ache dully.

The man continued to lie motionless, staring heavy-lidded at the ceiling. Gradually, his mind withdrew itself from hers.

"So you're high-born," he mused aloud. "I should have known, but then you concealed it very adroitly, didn't you?"

She sat up against the wall. Her heart was pounding almost audibly.

He was relentless. "No Scythian would play chess the way you did. Only a Terran would play for a draw after total defeat."

"I play chess well, so I am a Terran?" she whispered through a dry throat.

Perat turned his handsome gray eyes from the ceiling and smiled at her. His mouth lifted venomously as he watched her begin to tremble.

"Pour me a *terif*," he ordered.

She arose, feeling that she must certainly collapse the next instant. She forced her legs to move, step by step, to the table by his couch. There she picked up the *terif* decanter and tipped it to fill his glass. The dry clatter of bottle on glass betrayed her shaking hands.

"One for you, too, my dear Lyn."

She held the decanter several inches above her glass to avoid that horrible clatter, and managed to spill quite a bit on the table.

Perat held his glass up to touch hers. "A toast," he smiled, "to a mysterious and beautiful lady!"

He drank prone, she standing. She knew she would spill her drink if she tried to recross to her couch.

"So you're a Terran? Then why did you kill the Terran officer on the balcony?"

She was so relieved that she sank limply to the floor beside him.

"Why should I tell you? You wouldn't believe anything I told you now, or that you found in my mind." She smiled up at him.

"True, true. quite a dilemma. Should I shoot you now and possibly bring the rage of a noble Scythian house down about my ears, or should I submit you to mechanical telepathic analysis?"

"I am yours, Viscount," she laughed. "Shoot me. Analyze me. Whatever you wish."

She knew her gaiety was forced, and that it had struck a false note. The iron gate of doubt had

clanged shut between them. From now on he would contain her mind in the mental prison of his own. The dispatch beside Gorph's desk could have no further aid from her. Anyway, the cat had undoubtedly carried off the doll.

"What a strange woman you are," he murmured. A brief shadow crossed his face. "With you, for a little while, I have been happy. But in a few metrons, of course, you will depart under close arrest for the psych center, and I'll be on my way back to the Tharn suns."

Within half a metron the office force would begin straggling into the Administration offices and her letter would be found and given to a puzzled Gorph, who would then query Perat as to whether it should not be in the incoming box for urgent matters. But what would Gorph do if his superior refused to communicate with him or anyone else for a full metron? The first messenger jet left very soon, and there was no other for four metrons. Would Gorph send it on the first jet, or would he wait? It was a chance she'd have to take.

She got up from the floor and sat down on the couch beside the Viscount of Tharn. "Perat," she began hesitantly, "I know you must send me away. I'm sorry, because I don't want to leave you so soon, and you do not want me to leave you until the last moment, either. Anything else that I would tell you, you might doubt, so I say nothing more. I would like to dance for you. When I dance, I tell the truth."

"Yes, dance, but take care of your rib," assented the man moodily.

She filled his glass again with a sure hand and replaced it on the table. Then she unloosed the combs in her hair and let it fall in a profusion of curls about her shoulders, where it scintillated in a myriad sparkling semicircles in the soft light of the table lumina.

She shook her shoulders to scatter her hair, and unhurriedly released the clasp of her outer lounging gown. The heavy robe fell about her feet, leaving her clad only in a thin, flowing undergarment, which she smoothed languidly while she kicked off her slippers. Her mouth was now half-parted, her eyes drooping and slumberous. Perat was still staring at the ceiling, but she knew his mind was flowing unceasingly over her body.

"I must have music," she whispered. The man made no protest when she pressed the controls on his communications box to receive the slow and haunting dance music from the officers' club in the next zone.

The main avenue of access to Perat was now cut. And Gorph was a bolder man than she thought if he dared knock on the door of his chief while she was inside.

She began to sway and to chant. "*The Song of Karos, the Great God of Scythe, Father of Tharn folk, Dweller in Darkness...*"

Perat's glass halted, then proceeded slowly to his lips. Of course, no educated nobleman admitted a belief in the ancient religion of the Scythes, but how good it was to hear it sung and danced again! Not since his boyhood, when his mother had dragged him to the temple by main force... He placed one palm behind his head and continued to sip and to think, as this strange, lovely woman unraveled with undulant body and husky voice the long, satisfying story of his god.

As she postured sinuously, Evelyn breathed a silent prayer of thanks to the dead mentors who had crammed her to bursting with Scythe folklore.

The luminous metron dial revolved with infinite slowness.

* * *

Five

* * *

One metron had passed when Perat laid his empty glass on the table, without releasing it.

"Enough of dancing," he murmured with cold languor, cutting his communications box back to its authorized channel. "Come her, my dear. I wish you to kiss me."

Evelyn glided instantly to the silken couch, tossing her hair back over her shoulders and ignoring the fact that her rib was alive with pain. She knelt over the reclining man and kissed him on the mouth, running her fingers lightly down his right arm. He relinquished his glass at her touch, and she refilled it absently.

Only then did she notice that something was wrong.

His left hand was no longer beneath his head, but was concealed in the mass of cushions that overflowed his couch in a mute, glittering cascade.

Perat swirled his glass silently, apparently watching only the tiny flashes of iridescence flowing from his jeweled right hand.

Evelyn thought: What made him suspicious? There's something in his left hand. If I only dared probe... But he'd know I was afraid, and I'm not supposed to be afraid. Anyway, in a little while it won't matter. If the field crew has started pulling the columns, they should be through in half a metron. If they haven't started, they never will, and nothing will matter then, anyway.

The man's face was inscrutable when he finally spoke. "You couldn't have gone on much longer, anyway, on account of your rib."

"It was becoming a little painful."

"Twice you nearly fainted."

So he had noticed that.

He continued mercilessly. "Why were you so anxious to keep me shut up for a whole metron?"

"I wanted to amuse you. We have so little time left, now."

"So I thought, until your rib began to trouble you. The reaction of an ordinary woman would have been to stop."

"Am I an ordinary woman?"

"Decidedly not. That's why the situation has become so interesting."

"I don't understand, Perat." She sat down beside him, forcing him to move his legs so that his left hand was jammed under the cushion.

"A little while ago, I decided to contact Gorph's mind." He took a sip. "It seems he had been trying to reach me through the communications box."

"He had?" She pictured Gorph's old-womanish anxiety. He had found the sealed message, then, but hadn't been able to verify it because his chief had been listening to a tale of gods. Had he or had he not sent the message by the early jet? It had to be! Possibly all five of the columns had been drawn by now, but she couldn't assume it. The strain-pile would not erupt for a full Terran hour after the fifth column had been drawn. From now until death, of one sort or another, she must delay, delay, delay.

Her blue eyes were widely innocent and puzzled, but the nerves of her arms were going dead with over-tension. Perhaps if she threw the *terif* in his eyes with her left hand and crushed the numbing supraclavicular nerve with her thumb...

Perat turned his head for the first time and looked her full in the face.

"Gorph says he sent the message," he said tonelessly.

She looked at him blankly, then casually removed her hand from his knee and dropped it in her lap. He must absolutely not be alarmed until she knew more. "Apparently I'm supposed to know what you're talking about."

He turned back to the ceiling. "Gorph says someone prepared a priority dispatch with my signature, and he sent it out. I don't suppose you have any idea who did it?"

Time! Time!

"When I was Gorph's assistant, there was a young officer-- I can't remember his name-- who sometimes forged your signature to urgent actions when Gorph was out. This is true, Perat. My mind is open to you."

He fastened his luminous gray eyes on her. "I presume you're lying, but..." His mental probe skimmed rapidly over her cortical association centers. Her skill was strained to the utmost, setting up false memories of each of thousands of synaptic groups just ahead of Perat's probe. On some of the groups she knew she had made blunders, but apparently she preserved the general impression by strengthened

verification in subsequent nets. She wove a brief tale of a young officer in charge of metals salvage who had sent an order to a field group to recover some sort of metal, and since Gorph had been out, and H.Q. needed the metal urgently, the officer did not wait for official authorization. His probe then searched her visual lobe thoroughly, but with growing skepticism. She offered him only indistinct memories of the dead officer's identity.

"Who was the man?" asked Perat as a matter of form, sipping his *terif* absently.

"Sub-leader Galen, I think." That would give him pause. He knew she had offered no visual memory of Galen. He would wonder why she was lying.

"Are you sure?"

She wanted to look at the time-dial on the wall, but dared not. From the corner of her eye she saw Perat's left arm tense, then relax warily. His mental probe had fastened grimly to her mind again, though he must know it would be effort wasted. She conjured up an image of Sub-leader Galen in the act of telling her he was handling a very urgent matter and that he'd tell the Viscount later what he'd done. Then the face of the young officer changed to another of the staff, then another, then still another. Then back to Galen.

"No, I'm not sure."

Perat smiled thinly. "You wished to gain time, and I wished to idle it away. I suppose we have both been fairly successful."

The communication box beside the bed jangled.

"Yes?" cried Perat, all alert.

As his mouth was forming the word, his probe was collapsing within her mind, and her own flashed briefly into his mind. The hand under the pillow held a Faeg, aimed at her chest. But the safety catch was still on.

"Excellency?" came Gorph's tinny voice.

"Yes, Gorph? Have you replaced the columns?"

"Replaced" ...? That seemed to indicate that the field crew had followed her forged order, then returned the columns by Perat's countercommand, relayed telepathically through Gorph. But once all the great rods were drawn, replacing them did not halt the strain pile. The negative potential would keep on increasing geometrically with time, as planned, to the final goal of joint catastrophe and stalemate.

Some sort of knowledge was drumming silently at her threshold of consciousness. Something she couldn't quite grasp. About the woman in the stereop? Possibly. It would come to her soon.

Ignoring Perat's gloating smile, she looked casually at the metron dial, and her heart leaped with elation, for the dial had ceased revolving. Electrons must be flowing from the center of the ship through the walls, outward toward the surface two thousand miles away, and the massive currents were probably jamming all the wall circuits.

Within minutes, *finis*.

Could she really rest, now? She was beginning to feel very tired, almost sleepy. Her duty had been done, and nothing could ever be important again.

Gorph was answering his master over the speaker: "Yes, Your Excellency, we got them back, that is to say, excepting that one of the five is only half-way out of its cradle"

Life was good, life was beautiful. She almost yawned. Most certainly all of the columns had been pulled out, and then four had been replaced and something had broken down with the fifth. But they had all been out, and that was the only thing that mattered.

"What happened, Gorph?" asked Perat, sipping at his *terif* again. His eyes were fastened on his mistress.

She knew that he had pulled the safety catch on the Faeg.

"When the crew took the rods out, the prime mover broke down on the fifth one, when it was only half-way out. They brought in another mover and got the other four rods back in, and now they're trying to repair the first mover and push the fifth rod back."

(The fifth rod had not been completely drawn. Oh Almighty Heaven!)

"Very well, Gorph. I need not repeat that none of the rods are to be moved out again, unless I appear

to you personally. I'll talk to you later."

The box went dead.

Perat, now taking no notice of Evelyn, finished his *terif* leisurely. She sat at his side, breathing woodenly. She had done all that she could do. All five rods had not been withdrawn, and they never would be, now.

"If all Terran women are like you," he began slowly, "I cannot understand how you Terrans lost this battle." He did not expect an answer, and did not wait for one. His hard eyes seemed softened somewhat by a curious admiration. "Only your own gods know what you have endured in your attempt to start the pile."

She looked up wretchedly.

He went on: "Yes, we learned in the nick of time, didn't we? Our physicists told Gorph that the great rods were the core of a pile that could have converted both ships into pure energy, with not a shred of matter left over-- something that all the fission piles in the two galaxies couldn't do. It seems that the pile, if activated, would have introduced sufficient energy into the low-packing-fraction atoms, from iron on down to helium, to transform them completely from matter into radiation.

"Unpleasant thought! Now the Scythian plan will be modified slightly. We shall wait until we tear our globe away from yours, far away, and then prime movers left behind in your ship here can pull the columns again, all five, this time. Our globe then proceeds into the Terran Confederacy, and the war will be over. But of course, you'll know nothing about that."

He regarded her wearily. "I'm sorry, Lyn-- or is it 'Evelyn Kane'?" If you had been of Tharn-blood, or even of the Scythian federacy, I would have married you."

She listened to him with only half a mind. Some strange, inaudible thing was trying to reach her. Something she couldn't grasp, but ought to grasp. What had the mentors told her to be ready for? Exhaustion lay like a paralyzing blanket over her inert mind.

"You killed your countryman that day," he intoned, "just to ingratiate yourself with me. He was very generous to you. When he saw that you wouldn't shoot him with his eyes open, he closed them. Who was he?"

"Gordon, Lord Kane. My father."

The *terif* glass shook, and the man's face became perceptibly paler. He breathed stridently for a while before speaking again.

This time he seemed to be calling with earnest finality to the forbidding deity of his own warlike homeland, announcing a newcomer at the dark portals of the god: "*This woman... !*"

* * *

Evelyn Kane did not shriek when the Faeg-bolt tore through her rib and lungs. Even when she sank to the floor, the pain-lines in her own face were much better controlled than those in Perat's.

Then as she lay quietly on the thick, gilded carpet, with consciousness rapidly fading and returning with the regularity of her heart beats, she realized what had been calling to her. The piezo crystal in her waist pouch, still hidden in the shadows of her table, had been activated, and had brought into focus within the room the dim, transparent outlines of a small space ship.

Perat saw it too, and his eyes widened as they traced it quickly from wall to wall.

"It's real..." whispered Evelyn between clenched lips. "Mentors wanted me... return in it... to Terra... secret of pile..."

A strange light was growing over Perat's face. "Of course! So that's why your father tried so hard at the last to break through our blockade and get a ship through! If the secret of the strain-pile had ever reached Terra, all the Tharn suns-- indeed, the whole Scythe federation-- would be novae by now! By Karos, it was a narrow thing!"

There was a soft gurgling in Evelyn's throat.

He flung his pistol away and sat down beside her, lifting her head to his chest. "I'll call the physician," he rasped through contorted lips.

She slid a cold palm over his hot cheek, caressing it lightly. "No... we die..."

He stiffened. "*We?*"

She continued to stroke his cheek dreamily. "Die with you..."

He shook her. "What are you talking about!" he cried. "The pile isn't going to erupt!"

"Crystal focuses... ship... only when pile..."

His face blanched.

She whispered again, so softly that he had to bend his ear to her lips. "*You escape... get in ship...*"

He stared at her incredulously. "You'd let me get away with the pile secret!"

She relaxed in his arms, smiling sleepily, while the tiny red trickle from the corner of her mouth grew wider. "Stupid of me."

She shivered. "...cold..."

The Viscount of the Tharn Suns, the greatest star-cluster in the Scythe federation, knotted his jaw muscles feverishly and gnawed at his lower lip. Somehow or other the strain-pile had been energized. Probably the terrific proton storm that had hidden both ships for years had compensated for the unrealized potential of the undrawn fifth rod. It was his duty to the federation to throw this woman to the floor and take refuge between the shadowy, shimmering walls of the escape ship. He must carry the secret of the pile to safety with him. He had only seconds.

He looked down distractedly at the small creature who was destroying the proud ships that two great civilizations had spent a generation in building. She seemed to be in a deep, peaceful sleep. The only sign of life was a faint pulse in her throat.

She was the only woman that he had ever found whose companionship he could have... enjoyed hour after hour. He almost thought, "could have loved."

The room was growing quite warm. The tremendous currents coursing through the walls were swiftly growing stronger.

Another thought occurred to him: How had those Terran mentors planned for their escape ship to avoid the holocaust? Any matter within millions of miles would be destroyed. It was evident, then, that wherever the ship was, it was not within the danger zone.

Suddenly he understood everything.

With a queer smile, in which ribald surmise and tenderness fought for supremacy, he picked the woman up, carried her into the phantom vessel, placed her on the pilot's lounge, and strapped her in. From his waist-pouch he took a hypodermic syringe, removed the sheath from the needle, and thrust it into her arm. Her face twinged briefly, but she did not waken. He threw a blanket over her and then strode quickly to the controls. They were fairly simple, and he had no difficulty in switching the automatic drive to the general direction of the Tharn sun cluster. He wrote a hasty note on the pilot's navigation pad, and then turned again to the woman. He removed one of his duplicate jeweled rings and slipped it on her finger. His father would recognize it and would believe her.

Then he bent over her and kissed her lightly on the lips.

"Perhaps I love you too, my dearest enemy," he whispered gently. "Educate our son-to-be in the ways of peace."

Again outside the ship, he spun the space lock that sealed her in. The ship's walls were now growing opaque and he could no longer see inside.

His communications box was jangling furiously in a dozen different keys, and anxious, querulous voices were pouring through it into the room. He snapped it off, loosened his collar, filled his glass to overflowing with the last of the *terif*, and cut off the table lumina. His stereop projector next had his attention.

He lay on his couch in the darkness of his death cell, studying with the keenest satisfaction his wife, son, and father, while they waved at him happily from the radiant stereop sphere.

Those Terran mentors had planned well. The escape ship would not be affected by the nearing cataclysm, because it was really in a different time plane-- at least five years in the past. The catastrophe would simply release it to its original continuum, whence it would proceed with its precious cargo to the Tharn suns.

Odd effect, that time shift. He wished now he'd read more of the theories of that ancient Terran, Einstein, who claimed that simultaneity was an illusion-- that "now" here could be altogether different from "now" in other steric areas. His son, unborn as yet "here," was more than four years old "there"-- on the planet Tharn-R-VII, where the lad played in his grandfather's gardens.

And then there was the mystery of the rings. The old count had not had another ring made, of course. The ring the count had sent with the stereop coils must have been the same one that Perat had just placed on the finger of his bride. The ring sent with the stereops was merely his original ring brought back in the relooping of a time-line. In his "now" there was only one ring-- the one he was wearing. In Evelyn's "now" there was the same ring, but that was logical, because her "now" would soon be five years earlier than his. Owing to this five-year relooping of time, it had been possible for the ring to exist in duplicate for six weeks. But very soon, in his "now," it would be destroyed for good.

He pressed the repeat button on the stereop and started the coil again. The boy had an engaging grin, rather like his own (he would indulge a final vanity), but without the scar. He hoped there would never be another war to disfigure or kill his son. It was up to the next generation.

As he swirled his *terif*, he smiled and thought of the note he had left on the pilot's pad: *Name him after your father-- Gordon.*

* * *

"...failed to find any survivors, or for that matter, any trace whatever of either globe, if one excepts the supernova that appeared for a quarter metron some thirty yeas ago at the far margin of the proton storm. We of the Armistice Commission therefore unanimously urge that further hostilities by either side would necessarily be indecisive..."

-- Scythe-Terran Armistice, History and Tentative Provisions (excerpts):

Gordon of Tharn, Editor-in-Chief and Primary Scythian Delegate.