

Paradiso Lost
by Albert E. Cowdrey

Albert Cowdrey introduced us to Robert Kohn in “The Tribes of Bela” (*&SF*, Aug. 2004) and then gave us another example of how he works in “Murder in the Flying Vatican” (Aug. 2007). Now he turns back the clock to recount an adventure from early in the colonel’s career.

We’re going to try to make “Tribes of Bela” available on our Website for one month only—look for it to go up at *www.fandsf.com* around May 1.

Dear Jesús son of Jesús!

I’ve been reading the letter you left on my omni. Yes, I knew your father well, and yes, he died far too soon. And I’ll be happy to tell you my memories of him, provided you’re ready to get an earful.

Looking at the hologram you sent along with the text, so many things come back to me. I see the guy I used to square off with in martial arts training at the Academy, when we were both ridiculously young. Also the guy I went into space with, on my first voyage out of our customary world and universe.

Well, I’m in my anecdotage now, and for the moment all alone and ready to talk. My wife Anna’s in China, seeing to some ancient relatives who need assistance. I’m left here at Manypalms Oasis in the Great American Desert—generally a good place to live, but not in August! Forty-eight bloody degrees outside, enough to fry a scorpion. Makes me think of Planet Bela in its summertime, though fortunately ours doesn’t last for half a century. When the housebot serves me a cool drink made with pears and mangoes, I say politely, “This is excellent, Tycho,” because it’s programmed to repeat actions it gets compliments on, and I need all the liquid intake it can provide.

So I’ll sip quietly and remember bygone adventures and talk into my omni, and you can read the result whenever you’re not too busy helping to govern Luna. I hear rumors that one day you’ll be a Councilor of State and a maker of history. Well, tuck this away in your memory, as a warning of how hard history can be on the innocent.

* * * *

The story really began before your Papa and I were born.

A cult had been launched by an Italian mystic who called himself Innocente, under the name Scala d’Amore, or Ladder of Love. Innocente taught that love can

rise from the gross and carnal to the sublime and universal. That made his doctrine a good vehicle for everything from orgies to sainthood, and brought in a nice wide spectrum of believers. For a little while the cult flourished like mushrooms after rain.

Its symbol was the DNA molecule (which *does* look a bit like a ladder, or maybe a double spiral staircase) inside a crystal sphere. All parts of the icon had prodigious meanings, if you chose to see them. The sphere meant unity, the crystal meant clarity, the molecule was the ladder of life and consequently of love. For a while, women wore them on charm bracelets and men hung them around their necks on chains. Temples sprouted in every city with the icon on top lighted up at night. Like God it was ubiquitous—or else omnipresent, I forget which.

Its popularity made it a lightning rod for controversy and even violence. Established religions did not fail to notice that it was taking believers away from them, and persecution followed in various parts of the world. The government (as its habit is) decided to blame the victims, and show trials followed, with some cult members accused of outlandish sexual practices and plotting sedition. Pontius Pilate would have grasped the situation in a flash.

That was when Innocente announced that he and a select group of followers called the Seven Hundred were leaving Earth to prepare a refuge for all true believers in the depths of space. Like other mystics he claimed paranormal powers—prevision and clairvoyance—and he foresaw wonderful things for his colony. Skeptics said he was taking his followers someplace where he could control them better. Not an unknown ploy for cult leaders, by the way!

Well, at that time the Council of State was promoting emigration for a number of reasons, one of which was to rid the Earth of potential troublemakers, including religious fanatics. (The kings of England had the same idea when they invited the Puritans to go the hell to America and stay there.) Innocente and his seven hundred disciples—actually 642; some had second thoughts and dropped out—were quickly granted visas and transported to a system identified as H2223Y in the New Catalog. They were deposited on the third or gamma planet, which Innocente hopefully renamed Paradiso, there to live or die by their own resources and a pile of supplies that were dumped with them.

The planet was not prime real estate. Prime real estate was reserved for mining and military colonies. Paradiso had no moon, and the system was meager—closer to the sun were two cinders called alpha and beta, and farther away two remote gasballs named delta and epsilon. Plus the usual ash and trash, some interesting comets that visited at intervals of centuries, and leftovers of

unconsolidated or destroyed planets that gave periodic meteor showers of uncommon brilliance.

The planet had almost the mass of Neptune, though as a solid body it was much smaller. The high gravity must have required some serious adaptations by local life forms, and cartoonists had a field day showing colonists shaped like bowlegged gnomes trying unsuccessfully to climb the Ladder of Love. While the believers were settling down, Innocente died of coronary artery disease (maybe related to the increase in gravity?) and was succeeded by his son, who also claimed to possess paranormal powers.

Then Earth lost contact, as a series of skirmishes began in the same general neighborhood with unknown but well-equipped assailants. Dignified by the title of the First Alien War, the fighting went on and off (mostly off) for forty-four standard years. You may recall from history classes that we didn't do too well, although we did manage to smash one of their ships with a faster-than-light missile, or FTLM. A boarding party spent enough time poking through the wreckage to bring back tissue samples which showed that the aliens weren't one species, they were at least five, and—unlike the so-called Cousins of Planet Bela—not even closely related.

Maybe they were all living in symbiotic harmony (the nice theory) or maybe four of them had been enslaved by the fifth (the nasty theory). Anyway, for lack of any idea what they might call themselves, hostile journalists called them collectively the Zoo, and cartoonists showed them as a cageful of bizarre monsters.

That capture was our sole achievement. In return we lost some very expensive ships and several hundred highly trained members of the Space Service. More cautious Councils of State then adopted a policy of Retrenchment—pulling back colonists from the dangerous region in order to strengthen closer and more defensible worlds. (This time it was the Emperor Hadrian who would have nodded his wise old head and muttered *Sic transit*, or something.) Ill-feeling toward the Ladder of Love had declined because, in the absence of its leader, the cult itself had withered on both Terra and Luna, and was no longer seen as a threat. So the Council dedicated a single starship (the big old *Zhukov*) to the task of relocating the folks on Paradiso, and preparations for the expedition began.

While all this history was going on, your Papa and I got ourselves born and grew into the kind of strong, adventurous, and dumb youngsters for whom the Services always have an appeal. Then as now, the Security Forces had their own troops to suppress rebellions, plus a police side to attack crime—sort of like the

old Russian Interior Ministry, only not quite as nasty. We chose the military side, and together completed basic and advanced officers' training and received our shoulder straps and the right to be saluted by serfs of our own calling. I was senior to him by nine minutes or so, because the roster at graduation was alphabetical and K for Kohn, Robert came before M for Morales, Jesús. We'd become friends while knocking each other around in martial arts classes and chasing women on leave, and that was a comfort because our first assignment looked to be a tough one.

The running of the *Zhukov* was the business of the Space Service, but overall command of the expedition had been vested in a Security Forces general, Colonel-General Schlacht. He was supposed to corral and ride herd on the colonists who, it was felt, might be somewhat unhappy over being uprooted from a place they'd lived for several generations. Schlacht had a reputation for eating junior officers alive, preferably after first dipping them in hot sauce, so Morales and I were less than thrilled when we were assigned to command the two infantry platoons that were going along to police the repatriated colonists.

"So young to die," sighed your Papa. Only of course he didn't quite say that. In training we'd learned that words are merely loose gravel until glued together by the mortar of obscenity. You should imagine him actually saying, "*#%&!! So *#%& young to *#%& die!"

I couldn't have agreed more.

We met the General on Orbital Station One, where many years later I had some interesting experiences. The Big Wheel, as everybody called it then, was in fine trim on that first visit, no monks as yet but lots of scientists—white lab coats instead of white habits—plus all sorts of people in transit from here to there. As usual, Basic English was everybody's second language, and the place resounded with a Babel of accents, including ours. We saw military types sporting flashy uniforms and civilians wearing a variety of dumb getups (balloon pants and formal T-shirts and lacquered wigs were in that year, for both men and women). We had time to gaze down at the blue ball of the Earth while getting a bite in the military canteen, and at the remainder of our very large universe over coffee in the Darkside Lounge. Then our omnis started squealing, and we were invited to haul our butts to the General's office soonest.

I didn't have much time to get to know Schlacht, for reasons I'll explain later, and I never developed any warmth of feeling for him. But I have to admit he was impressive—roughly two meters high and eighty centimeters wide, with a face resembling a water buffalo beset by biting flies, all frowns and snorts and

bristling mustaches. His hair was white, untidy, and too abundant—totally unmilitary—and sent the message that while scum like Morales and me had to worry about regs, he didn't. Same message from his shoulder straps. He was authorized seven stars but wore none, because he didn't need little bits of shiny metal to tell people how godawful important he was.

For what seemed like half an hour he sat in silence, gazing at us with evident loathing, and then spoke in a kind of hoarse bellow. "So you characters are supposed to be my platoon leaders."

While we were yelling, "Yes, sir!" in parade-ground style, he perused a printout and when quiet had been restored, grunted, "Morales and Kohn. Jesus and a Jew."

"Sir, my name is pronounced Hayzoose," said your Papa bravely.

"As far as I'm concerned, Mister, your name is pronounced Crap. That's *merda*, in case you have trouble with English."

After that the interview went rapidly downhill. About an hour later, Jesús and I were having several stiff drinks in the Officers' Lounge while waiting for our ears to stop burning.

"Well," he said at last, "I guess we know where we stand with the *#%& General."

I answered that it seemed we'd embarked on a rough voyage. Luckily, as yet neither of us had a clue just how rough.

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Via a lighter, we boarded the *Zhukov* a couple of days later. It belonged to what was called the *Alexander* class of starships, which were almost round only not quite, oblate spheroid I think is the term. All the vehicles were named for famous generals and admirals, so there was a *Sun Tzu* and a *Saladin* and a *Caesar* and a *Nelson* and I don't know who else. They were supposed to be virtually indestructible, with triple hulls of nuclear steel and all kinds of redundancies built in to make them "structurally impervious." A piece of humanchutzpah, I might add, properly punished when three of them were blown up by enemy FTLM's during the First Alien War.

Now the reconditioned *Zhukov* was being used to shuffle colonials around, mainly because it was so big you could crowd a lot of folks into it if you only

allowed them 1.5 cubic meters apiece, or about as much space as a large refrigerator. *Zhukov* was, by the way, still well armed, with four Alpha-class cold-fusion missiles and a particle-beam generator, because it was going into a dicey region where close encounters of the worst kind remained a possibility.

Schlacht granted Morales and me about twenty minutes to get settled in the cupboard euphemistically called our stateroom, and then ordered us to get to work and start harassing our underlings. He communicated with us through a small chromed sphere in the ceiling of our quarters that produced an incredible amount of noise for its size. We called it the Bitch Ball. So we were thundered at to get our backsides to the barracks compartment soonest, where our leader awaited us, along with his alter ego, a dwarf.

Yes, a dwarf. Big head, disproportionately long body, short bowed legs, small hands and tiny fingers. Probably spinal problems, the way he walked, lurching along. He wore some kind of nondescript clothes, had corrugated reddish skin and a pair of very intent dark eyes. On the rare occasions when Schlacht addressed him, he called him Cos, to rhyme with loss. As soon as the very odd pair departed, Morales named them Cos and the Boss; later on, when we *really* got to hate the general, he renamed them the Pig and the Pygmy.

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At first I thought that Schlacht traveled with his own court jester. But Cos didn't seem to make jokes or do pratfalls or anything of that kind. In fact, he hardly ever said a word, and yet whenever the Pig hove into view to make our lives a mite more difficult, there the Pygmy appeared also, giving us a fixed expressionless stare like a cuttlefish.

In their absence we settled down to work, getting to know the thirty-five guys of each platoon. There's some kind of unwritten rule in the services that one example of every human type must appear in every unit, however small. I had people so clean I couldn't catch them with dirt under their fingernails, and others so opposed to sanitation that their comrades had to throw them under a shower and scrub them down with brushes to deodorize them. I had guys and gals, I had homs and hets, I had thugs and sissies, I had drunks and dries, I had semi-morons and one offbeat Lawrence-of-Arabia type genius named Sosa who, for unknown reasons, preferred to live in the lower depths of the enlisted service, and turned down a promotion when I offered him one.

Morales's platoon was the same, only totally different. That's how the human animal is—all specimens different, all the same, sort of like snowflakes,

only not as pretty.

My sergeant was a big Irishman named O'Rourke, Morales's a small but dangerous kickboxer called Chulalongkorn. Vastly different physical types, but indistinguishable in courage, cleverness, and utter amorality. From them I learned that sergeants form a subspecies and that officers, especially ignorant shavetails like us, are damn lucky to have them around to tell us what to do.

While the *Zhukov* got under way—I didn't notice when we started to move; there was hardly a grunt or a quiver from the engines—we were spending our time in the Armory, a dimly lighted region that stank unmercifully of sweat, graphite, and machine oil. First we watched the sergeants guide the serfs in digging our weapons consignment out of packing cases, cleaning off the shipping gunk, assembling and disassembling and reassembling and polishing them up nice and pretty. Then we locked the weapons into racks, so that nobody could grab one to settle a conflict with a comrade over ownership of an interactive comic book or the favors of a "douche," meaning one of the several barracks whores who fattened their incomes by bartering sex for pay.

(Why were they called douches? Because "they get your tail wet." Military humor.)

When everything had been racked up and locked away, Morales and I had about ten minutes to put on dress uniforms for the big social event of the day, dinner with the rest of the cadre. Except for the General and Jesús and me, who wore Security gray, all the officers showed up in the blue togs of the Space Service. As the highest ranker present, the Pig presided at the head of the table. The pilot, Colonel Delatour, sat at his right, the celestial navigator at his left, then the fire control officer, the chief engineer, the surgeon, and all the rest lined up in descending order of importance as defined by the Table of Ranks, down to Jesús and the Jew, with Cos the dwarf seated between us at the foot of the table.

Conversation was constrained, as you might suppose, because the General didn't converse, he issued communiqués, and the only person who dared to disagree with him was Colonel Delatour, a shrewd-looking fortyish Frenchwoman with short bleached hair who liked to tell him in the politest possible way what an ass he was. Thus, when he opined that Newton's third law of motion sounded like bullcrap to him, she murmured, "I'm sure you could make the universe operate in a much more plausible way than it does, General, if only you had the opportunity."

What did she care? The ship couldn't function without her, and anyway she

wore blue and was only on temporary duty under the roaring wind machine seated at her left.

So our ill-assorted little community rushed headlong into the void, as the human species has a habit of doing. Most of the ship was empty, of course, ready to absorb the colonists. But soon Schlacht started us exploring every cubic meter of it, because—I didn't know why at the time—he'd become convinced that we had a stowaway aboard.

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The chief engineer began the search by closing the hundreds of safety doors that subdivided the ship's interior to localize damage in case the hull was breached. Then we set out, walking like flies on sticky feet, because the coils of the pseudograv system ran through the decks which consequently were always "down."

Making little popping sounds at every step, we prowled the semidark compartments one by one, Morales and I and O'Rourke and Chulalongkorn and our nervous young charges, all of us looking for the Stowaway—we started capitalizing the word in our thoughts—or other unauthorized inhabitants.

Well, we didn't find any. But all the exploring at least gave us a picture of the *Zhukov* from inside. Christ, what a maze. Cavernous storage spaces near the hull, cold as hell, shadowy, vast. Scary in a way. Supplies shrouded in transplast covers, with Jack Frost patterns going jaggedly this way and that where moisture had gotten trapped inside and frozen. Then half-moon-shaped areas, barracks when the ship carried a full expeditionary force, with racks for bedding stacked four high and folded back against the bulkheads and locked in place. Empty latrines. Odd little rooms with drains in the floors—sickbays, I guessed. Connecting everything were narrow corridors, narrow ladders, narrow slider ramps, and small elevators sealed into tubes with locked doors at every level.

Running up the center of the ship from south pole to north pole was a nuclear-steel cylinder containing the standard-drive engines and the dark-energy generator and the life support machinery, all controlled from a mainframe computer sealed in a pod to which only the pilot, the celestial navigator, and the chief engineer had access. The heavy weapons occupied a sort of Arctic Circle—a doughnut-shaped region around the North Pole—with the topmost section of the central cylinder containing the particle-beam generator. Twenty steel silos lined the Arctic Circle's outer bulkhead, four of them containing the Alpha missiles, the others empty. Fire control was managed by a big gleaming chunk of artificial

intelligence also sealed into a pod, to which only the fire control officer had access.

That was the *Zhukov* as we came to know it. Enormous, enormously complex, insanely powerful, and absolutely barren. An image of the modern world, perhaps?

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At first I thought Schlacht would gradually calm down and start acting human. But in that I was wrong.

As day after day went by—I mean, of course, the alternations of lights-on and lights-out—without anybody discovering our Stowaway, he got madder and madder and roared louder and louder. The result was that Morales and I stopped being afraid of him. When a volcano erupts once, it's hard not to be impressed, but the three or four hundredth time, you figure *What, again?*

Once or twice he threatened us with his fists, and I quietly resolved that if he hit me, I'd deck him and screw the consequences. Your Papa wasn't nearly as big as me, but he had his black belt too, and he told me he'd already picked Schlacht's Adam's apple as his first target. I asked why.

"Even if I don't kill him, he'll have to shut up when I smash his *#%& vocal cords," Jesús explained.

The blowup we were all waiting for came one day when the General was observing a personal-weapons training session. One of my guys was field-stripping a shoulder-fired missile launcher when he developed butterfingers and dropped the pieces. They scattered all over the deck, clanging and tinkling, and the General stepped forward and slapped him so hard it made echoes.

Well, nobody was going to attack my people, especially not some son of a whore who knew they couldn't hit back. I stepped between them, right fist closed, murder in my heart, and he swung back the same hand to use it on me. And then didn't. We stood there, glaring and growling, and then to my surprise he lowered his hand, turned on his heel, and stomped away, followed by his shadow, Cos.

With that, some of the tension went out of the ship. Morales gave me a big *abrazo*. My platoon practically kissed my feet because I'd stood up for them and faced down the General doing it. Even Schlacht seemed to have learned something. That evening at dinner he treated me with minimal courtesy, and afterward he stayed more in his stateroom and yelled less when he was outside it. You never know how things will work out, do you?

A night or so later we got the inside story of the episode. I was in the canteen having a beer with Morales, when in lurched Cos. He looked especially small and lonely and rather lost. After all, he was odd man out on the ship, a civilian among all the uniforms, a little guy among all the big ones. Nobody really knew him except the General, so he had nobody to drink with, because Schlacht drank alone.

I invited Cos to join us, not just to be nice but because I was curious about what he was doing here. I waited until he'd poured a couple of half-liters of Pilsener into his inadequate body, then started asking him casually about himself. Turned out that, like most isolated people, he was bursting to talk. We got a barrage of information: about his physical condition (scientific name *achondroplasia*) and about the problems of growing up small. About how his parents had kept him at home to protect him from the big bad world; and how, when he was fifteen, he'd run away and joined a circus.

"A circus," I said in a neutral voice.

"It wasn't a freak show."

"That's not what I was thinking," I protested.

"That's *exactly* what you were thinking. But it's not true, I had my own act. Mind reading. My ESP rating is off the charts."

I asked him if that meant he heard everything everybody was thinking all the time. He said of course not.

"It's spotty, just like any other sensory system. You make judgments unconsciously, filter out things that don't seem important. And you get distracted and you get weary and you get confused. Still, all in all, I'm good at what I do. The general saw my act in New Vegas and hired me to sit in the next room while he was playing nine-card stud and tell him what the other players were seeing in their hands through a mike the size of a peppercorn he'd had installed in his inner ear. He won a lot of money, so he got me a clearance and put me on full retainer to do the same thing during staff meetings at Security HQ.

"Wow, did I get an earful! You'd be amazed, all those high-rankers, how much time they spend plotting against one another. I was really shocked."

"Why were you shocked?" asked Morales. "Everybody knows they're like that."

“You got to remember, Jesús, his parents protected him from the world,” I put in.

“Oh, yeah. I guess that would make anybody kind of naive. So what do you do for our maximum leader here on the *Zhukov*?”

“Same thing. He’s gotten in the habit of listening in on other people’s thoughts. Few days ago I warned him to back off that confrontation with you,” he said, nodding to me. “I told him you were ready to kill him. He’s not a coward, but he’s not a fool either. You’re as big as he is, and you’ve got forty years on him, so he backed off.

“And of course,” he added casually, “I’ve been telling him about the Stowaway.”

“The one we can’t find.”

“That really browns him off. There’s somebody aboard this ship who shouldn’t be here, and they’re hostile to him. Really hostile.”

“They meaning more than one?”

“They meaning either he or she, I don’t know which. It’s all this nuclear steel,” he complained. “It’s baffling. Even ordinary metal’s bad enough, it tends to short out whatever kind of frequency ESP exploits. Assuming it’s electromagnetic at all—the experts differ about that. But super-dense metals are even worse. Well,” he said, knocking back the last of his third beer and sliding off his bar stool, “see you guys later. Laughable as it sounds, I need my beauty sleep.”

When he’d gone, Morales and I just sat there, looking at each other, both of us thinking, *What have I gotten myself into?*

“A telepathic dwarf,” he said, starting to count our ship’s oddities. “A demented general officer. A hostile and apparently invisible Stowaway. Seventy enlisted people who include thugs, jack-offs, cretins, geniuses, sergeants, and whores. Armament enough to obliterate two or three civilizations. Have I missed anything?”

“Us,” I said.

“Oh yeah,” he said. “And us.”

* * * *

Well, Jesús, when two guys live as close as your Papa and I did, they start acting like a married couple. It's called bonding.

You get to know what your roommate's going to say before he says it. You hate the way he snorts and grunts in his sleep, and then one night when he's away you can't sleep at all, because he's not there snorting and grunting. You bicker over incredibly minor things. Morales almost drove me crazy speculating about the nature of pseudograv—was it electrostatic, or what? I was more like Sherlock Holmes, who didn't give a damn whether the Sun went around the Earth or the Earth went around the Sun, because it had nothing to do with his work. I told Jesús he wasn't qualified to speculate about technical stuff, or to understand it even if somebody explained it to him. He told me I was lucky to be free of intellectual curiosity.

"Some of nature's most successful creatures totally lack it," he pointed out. "Just think of the cockroach."

So, waking, sleeping, working, bickering, Jesús and I bonded, all the more so because we were doing basically the same job and saw each other during the day as well as afterward. We discussed our problems, our ambitions, our hopes and dreams, and we formed an alliance against threatening outsiders, notably the General. Quite soon after boarding the *Zhukov*, we began to discuss ways of killing him.

This wasn't just a matter of revenge, though we both wanted that. We'd gotten to like and respect the pilot, Colonel Delatour. She seemed to be brave and rational and certainly less disruptive to the mission than Schlacht was. The problem was how to rid ourselves of our seven-star nutcase in some way that would look like an accident. After our talk with Cos, we started skipping dinner with the cadre whenever possible, worried that the dwarf might pick up on our thoughts. Although, as Morales pointed out, by this time there was so much ill-feeling against Schlacht that even the general's little extrasensory snitch might find it difficult to decide where all the death wishes were coming from.

Then, one night when we were lying on our bunks—Morales had the upper, I had the lower—conspiring against our leader in low voices, there emerged from the Bitch Ball, not his stentorian tones, but the cultured accents of Colonel Delatour.

"Lieutenant Kohn? Lieutenant Morales? Could I ask you to come to the

bridge, please? It's rather urgent."

Morales leaned over the edge of his bunk and stared at me. I stared back. Since the politest words that had ever come from the gadget previously had been "*DROP YOUR COCKS AND GRAB YOUR SOCKS!!*" we knew, without being told, that something important must have happened.

On the bridge the whole cadre except for Schlacht had assembled, rubbing sleep from their eyes. Clothing was random and disordered, uniform coats over PJs, that kind of thing. A low background thrumming from the dark-energy generator meant that we were getting ready to enter that empty bubble universe we've all heard about, the place where good starships go when they exceed light speed.

At first I thought some kind of exotic technical foul-up must have occurred. But Colonel Delatour had a much more welcome and exciting message to deliver. In cool, bell-like tones, she greeted us with the words, "Good evening, gentlemen. General Schlacht has been murdered."

Morales and I stared at each other with, as a poet once put it, wild surmise. Each of us thinking, *You crazy bastard, did you do it without telling me?*

We were still standing there with mouths open when Delatour added, "I don't imagine that his loss will be much regretted, but the fact that we have a killer aboard has to be a matter of concern for all of us. Lieutenant Kohn, we need an acting security officer—will you please take on the job? Lieutenant Morales will assume command of your platoon as well as his own. Lieutenant Kohn, your first task will be to investigate General Schlacht's death."

You will notice that she didn't wait for me to agree to my new title and duties. When it comes to the military essentials, such as not giving a damn what your subordinates want so long as they do what you tell them, there is no difference between the Space Service and Security.

As for me, I took a deep breath, tried desperately to remember what I'd learned in the two or three criminal investigation courses I'd taken, and said in what I hoped was a calm, self-confident tone of voice, "Show me the body."

She led a parade into a crooked corridor that ended at the command suite. The corpus delicti was lying face down, fully uniformed, a few meters from its former stateroom door. Cos, like the faithful dog in sentimental stories, hunched over the body looking helpless and alone.

I tapped him on the shoulder and he moved dumbly aside. Our ex-leader appeared undamaged except for a vast pool of blood that had gushed from his nose and mouth. Ribbons of clotting had already appeared, so the corpse was not perfectly fresh. I tugged at one arm and it was supple, but the rictus on his face when it came partly into view suggested that incipient rigor had already begun. The time line was dubious, because different bodies act differently, and the interior of the ship was kept cool at ten degrees.

I called Morales and together we turned him over. His wide bemedalled front was sopping red. The surgeon—a doc named Gannett—peeled back his shirt, did some swabbing with a handful of paper towels, and revealed a neat little hole drilled through his breastbone.

The General had been shot by a small-caliber impact weapon, say a 3.8-mm—not a military size. The bullet hadn't been powerful enough to go completely through him, which explained why the usual gaping exit wound was absent. It had exploded inside, probably trashing a bunch of crucial organs plus the aorta. After he fell, a tsunami of blood had poured out through the largest available vents, squirting up the esophagus and windpipe.

“Well, I suppose I'll have to do a P.M.,” said Gannett, a large, glum man. “Although the cause of death is pretty obvious.” He sighed, perhaps yearning for a more interesting corpse to do his Y-incision on.

Meanwhile I started asking questions. Politely—everybody except Cos was either Sir or Ma'am to me. Who'd found the body? Cos, naturally. He'd been asleep in his cubicle near the General's palatial quarters when a terrible scream woke him up. Since nobody else had heard anything, I figured the dwarf's talented subconscious had chosen this way to alert him that something was extremely wrong.

Attired only in his underpants, Cos stumbled into the corridor and fell over the body. Instead of calling for help, he went a bit berserk, wringing his hands and moaning and running up and down like a chicken with its head off, leaving tiny bloody bare footprints all over the deck. After a while he came back, hoping for some signs of life, but the General was still dead.

Then Cos sensed the Stowaway approaching. Scared now for his own hide, he ran back to his cubicle and hid under the bunk. Only when his private alarm system went quiet did he venture out again and wake the surgeon and lead him back to the body. More fooling around ensued, with the surgeon sending him for the pilot, the pilot sending him for the navigator, and then the rest of the senior

officers being awakened in order of rank. Sounded just like the arrangement at the dinner table. Of course Morales and I had been the last to know. Meanwhile, Cos—suddenly realizing that he was thinly clad and bloody—washed his feet and got dressed.

Summing up the situation with the quiet courtesy for which I am famous, I told the cadre, “You people are the biggest bunch of silver-plated, anatomical assholes I’ve come across in some time.”

No, I didn’t actually say that. Only thought it. Instead, I expressed regret that things had been so inefficiently handled, and asked the surgeon to take charge of the body and do any forensic tests that might still be possible, given the lapse of time and the corruption of the crime scene by all the people who ought to have known better than to tromp around in it. I sent Morales to bring O’Rourke, our oldest and nastiest sergeant, and have him and six armed guards of his choosing secure the area and start searching for the weapon—not that I expected to find it.

By this time everybody was looking relieved. They were rid of Schlacht, Delatour was in command, and the Space Service was where it belonged, running the expedition. As for us two grayback shavetails, we were now doing the only thing the Security Service was good for, investigating a crime. So they all felt better, erroneously believing that somebody trained for the job (me) had taken charge of the dirty work. Besides, the *Zhukov* was going into the Bubble within twelve hours, and they had work to do.

Everybody dispersed, some to bed and some to the bridge. Meantime I took Cos into the command suite, sat him down in one of the general’s comfortable chairs, and asked him quietly to tell me who’d done the killing. I mean, you got a telepath around, why not use him?

The guy was emotionally almost terminal, so before I could learn anything I had to find Schlacht’s supply of brandy—quite a supply, about 200 liters packed away in closets and cupboards, giving me a new insight into his peculiar behavior—and get Cos to swallow a finger or two of five-star in the bottom of a tumbler. He coughed and choked and I patted him on the back.

“Now come on, buddy,” I said, “tell me who killed the General.”

I would have been perfectly unsurprised if he’d named anybody on board, including me—after all, I’d had murder in my heart, and he knew it. Instead he gave me an anguished look and said, “Isn’t it obvious?”

Well, I couldn't bash a little guy only about as long as my leg. So, restraining myself, I said, "Not to me."

"I mean, look," he said querulously. "The blood was still pouring out of the General when I found him. So he'd just been shot. I had to get the others up, and I saw them all waking up, and they were really waking up, I'll swear to that. I could sense their conscious selves coming out of the fog of sleep. So they weren't involved. But when I was hiding from the Stowaway, I picked up his thoughts. Great Tao, they were scary! No words, just emotions—waves of rage and joy, a kind of ferocious ecstasy, like a predator that's just taken down its kill."

"So the Stowaway did it."

"Yes."

"The Stowaway we can't find."

"Yes."

"Did you get a look at him? I mean, clairvoyantly."

"No. If there was an exterior image, it was overwhelmed by the stuff coming from inside him. All I could sense was what he was feeling."

I suppose he was still too upset to read my mind, because if he had he would've heard me thinking along these lines: *There isn't any Stowaway. I know because I've looked for him. On the other hand, Cos found the body. Handling a three-point-eight is well within his physical capability, and he had time to hide the weapon because he took forever to rouse the ship. And when he was describing the Stowaway's mood after the killing, wasn't it so vivid because those emotions were really his own?*

True, motive was a problem. I couldn't think offhand of any reason for him to kill Schlacht. But who knew what kind of insults he'd had to endure—or for that matter, what kind of physical abuse? I didn't have enough on him to justify an arrest, but I had enough to make me very suspicious.

I'd learned in criminal investigation classes to be real, real nice to anybody I had my eye on—disarms them, you know? So I patted Cos on the shoulder, told him to visit the dispensary and get some tranquilizers, and tentatively put him at the top of my list of suspects. Further down the list was everyone else on board, except Jesús and me. I excluded myself only because I knew I hadn't done it, and

Morales only because he occupied the upper bunk and couldn't have left our stateroom without my hearing it.

That left nineteen officers and seventy enlisted. Any one of them might have acted alone, and almost any combination of them might have acted together. I was brooding about that when Sergeant O'Rourke hove into view. He was a thick-bodied man, so top-heavy he leaned forward when he walked, and his little gray eyes were gleaming with intelligence and ill-will toward Cos, whom he'd often described as "that *#%& Schlacht's *#%& housepet."

"Thought you'd be innerested in this, Lootenant," he growled. "Found it in the Pygmy's quarters, stuck with wax to a leg of his bunk."

He extended a ham-sized fist whose back was covered with reddish fur and dropped into my palm a small crystal sphere containing a model of the DNA molecule.

We looked at each other, then at the icon. Then back at each other. This was the first time I'd thought of the possibility that a Ladderite might have maneuvered himself aboard the *Zhukov* to help rescue the other disciples in space, and it gave me, as the French say, furiously to think.

I was just beginning to toy with the idea of true believer(s) on the ship, when a robot's cool tones instructed everybody aboard except the pilot and celestial navigator to return to their staterooms and strap themselves down. I handed the icon back to the sergeant.

"You know what to do with this?" I asked. He gave me a gold-toothed grin and said, "You go get buckled in, sir."

He ducked back into Cos's cabin to put the little crystal sphere back where he'd found it. No sense alarming my number one suspect unnecessarily.

* * * *

This was my first time going into the Bubble, and frankly, it was kind of scary. I was already belted down to my bunk when Morales arrived, looking breathless, and climbed past me onto his own rack.

As we lay there waiting, he started to complain. "This is exactly why I didn't join the Space Service, even though they get all the gravy and Security gets all the crap. I didn't want to leave my old familiar universe, you know? One universe is enough for anybody."

“I’m with you, pal. Oops, here we go.”

It felt exactly like going over the top on the hundred-meter slider ramp at an amusement park, except I didn’t have a bunch of hysterical people screaming in my ears. There was the same feeling that my internal organs had been left behind and might never catch up with the rest of me, and that the air formerly in my lungs had chased off somewhere in pursuit of my most recent meal.

The light from the ceiling fixture fractured as if a prism had passed in front of it. I had the bizarre sensation of seeing my surroundings somehow simultaneously red, green, blue, yellow, and a variety of colors I’d never seen before—greens that were also red, purples that were also black. Then everything steadied, my guts slid back into my abdominal cavity, air re-entered my lungs, and colors returned to more or less normal wavelengths. At the same time, everything stopped dead.

Absolute, total silence. The engines had shut off. The dark energy generator which had given us that extra push was silent. We’d literally gone ballistic, moving on pure inertia—not a vibration anywhere in that whole huge ship. We were traveling at some fantastic velocity relative to our own universe through a kind of space where velocity doesn’t exist, because you can only move relative to something else, and in the Bubble there *is* nothing else. To sum up, we were standing still while moving at maybe a thousand times the speed of light.

You go figure. I can’t.

My only injury from the experience was a nosebleed. Blood ran down both sides of my face, responding to the ship’s pseudograv. But the grav must have shut off for a second, because some drops that had drifted away as perfect crimson spherules suddenly got distorted and splattered down on the deck.

I heard Jesús groan and sit up. I made him aware of my injury, and he got me some ice and packed it in a towel that I held to my nose. While waiting for the bleeding to stop, I started reviewing evidence in my mind, and at some point quacked, “Y’ know, Haythooth, Uh been thinkin’.”

“That *is* unusual. So?”

I waited a bit longer, then put aside the bloody towel and said, “About the Stowaway. There are only two places on the *Zhukov* we haven’t searched.”

He meditated for a bit, and said, “The General’s quarters and what?”

See, great minds *do* think alike. What better place for Big S to hide away than the General's quarters, now vacant? He could easily have slipped in while Cos was hiding in his own closet.

"Let's start there. If we don't find anything, we'll try the other place."

Just in case the Stowaway might be under the old bastard's bed, 3.8-mm in hand, Morales called in Chulalongkorn—known to both of us by this time as Chu—a short, bowlegged guy with obsidian eyes and death in both feet and karate-hardened hands. We selected sidearms from the armory and began going through the General's quarters, cubic centimeter by cubic centimeter.

We learned a lot about our former boss, certainly more than I'd ever wanted to know. Besides the brandy, of which we all partook quite abundantly, we found a collection of memory cubes. Most were official stuff stored dustily away in boxes, but one was dustless and inserted in the general's big cabinet omni. It was labeled *Military Exercises*, and for no special reason I turned it on.

Well, I wouldn't call it porn. Not good old *porn*—friend of the friendless, comforter of the aged, delight of the afflicted. Calling the general's pleasures porn was like calling a night with the Inquisition due process. This stuff was something I'd heard about but never seen—scenes of actual torture, real rape, including the rape of children. All, of course, in living color and four glorious dimensions, including time. And this had been Schlacht's *relaxation*.

We stared at it goggle-eyed for maybe ten minutes; until one particularly unpleasant sequence involving a girl of maybe thirteen seemed to be heading for a climactic snuff scene. Then we shut it off by unanimous consent. Chu said, "I always knew he was a shit, *but*—" He took the cube into the bath and flushed it down the vacuum toilet.

Continuing to search, we made another totally unexpected find. An antique printed book tucked under the General's pillow (and showing signs of heavy use) contained the poems of a Christian mystic called John of the Cross. In one poem marked with a star, the stigmatized saint yearned for union with Christ and lamented his own inability to die. "I'm dying that I cannot die"—I remember those words.

Well, it was hard to miss the implications. The most improbable person aboard had yearned to escape his own vileness by climbing the ladder of love—without, in my opinion, ever reaching the first rung. No wonder he lived in a

drunken rage. He was his own prison, and couldn't get out.

That made two disciples that we knew about. How many more did we have on the *Zhukov*? I was brooding over this unanswerable query when Morales pointed out that we'd completed the search.

"No Stowaway here," Jesús said. "Where's the second place we haven't looked?"

I said, "We'll have to get what's-his-name, the fire control officer, up again. If we can't sleep, neither can he. We'll ask him politely to bring his keys, including the ones that unlock the elevator to the Arctic Circle. Then—"

"You do occasionally have a useful idea, Kohn," Morales admitted. "I see your point. We never checked inside those empty missile silos, did we?"

* * * *

The fire-control officer was a wrinkled gray man named Major Janesco. (The J in his name, unlike the one in yours and your Papa's, was pronounced like Y.)

We found him wearing baggy gray pajamas, and most unhappy to be awakened just as he'd gotten back to sleep after the double upheaval caused by the murder and going into the Bubble. He grumbled his way back into his clothes while we waited.

"Who says there's a goddamn Stowaway?"

"Schlacht made a big issue of it."

"Schlacht's dead."

"That," I pointed out, "may be one good reason for thinking he was right."

"It was the dwarf," Janesco said. "Had to be. He's the only one who wasn't asleep. Why the hell don't you arrest him, instead of waking me up?"

"Sir, I'm prepared to arrest Cos five minutes after we satisfy ourselves that there's no Stowaway aboard."

He combed his sparse hair with maddening deliberation, gargled mouthwash, and finally led us, still grumbling, down the corridor to one of the locked tubes containing an elevator. He shoved two fingers into the recognition

port and a flicker of intense light read the pattern of capillaries in his fingertips. Then he inserted the usual flat strip of an electronic key, and the curved door retracted and the three of us jammed into a small cylinder that quickly filled with the aroma of mouthwash.

Dim lights flicked on in the Arctic Circle as we stepped out. Arctic was a good name—the temp was, I would guess, about twenty degrees of frost. Our breath turned to cirrus clouds, and then to tiny ice crystals that settled to the deck as we went to work. Except for one service door, the particle-beam generator was solidly enclosed in its own cylindrical steel housing, and Janesco unlocked the door for me. It was even colder inside, but I made a quick circuit of the weapon, which looked like the projector in a planetarium. Nobody hiding there.

Then the missile silos. You may recall there were twenty, but only four in use. They were big nuke-steel cylinders more than two meters in diameter. We started to walk, clumping around the Arctic Circle on feet that were turning or had already turned to lumps of ice. Like the generator, each silo had a service port, and Janesco—who'd stopped cursing because, I suppose, even the warmest language froze in that icebox—opened them one by one. All but number twenty. One of the empties. Of course the suspicious silo couldn't have been number one, could it?

"Some moisture must've gotten in and sealed the gaskets," Janesco muttered.

That was the common-sense view, but common sense had never worked yet aboard the *Zhukov*, so I told Morales, "Lock and load."

When we had two impact weapons trained on the service port, I whispered, "one, two, three!" and together we roared, "OPEN UP! OPEN UP!"

No answer. I was getting colder and colder, and by now wanted to find out if we had the Stowaway cornered as quick as possible, just so we could get the hell out of the Arctic Circle. That was possibly why I made a truly lousy decision.

"Sir, I presume the silos are capped on the outside?"

"Obviously."

"Then," I yelled, "*open the cap on number twenty!*"

I really thought that threat would bring the Stowaway out, assuming there was a Stowaway, and not just some hoarfrost sealing the door. But nothing happened; the silence was total.

Janesco clumped to the command console and said the scientific-age equivalent of “Open, sesame.” The console had a heating element inside; and after the cover lifted he stood there warming his hands like a guy in front of a stove on a chilly night. Then he leaned over and started muttering code, while the little round monitor screen flickered back at him.

“Open?” he asked me.

“Please, sir.”

I wasn’t prepared for the scream. In fact, I’d about decided Janesco had been right, that the silo was empty, that the Stowaway was a figment dreamed up by Cos to give him a scapegoat for whenever he decided to kill Schlacht. And then from inside the silo came suddenly this unearthly howl that went tailing off into a thin attenuated shriek. And then to nothing.

We all looked at each other. For a moment no smoke came out of our mouths, so I assume we’d all stopped breathing. In the silence the realization dawned that I’d just cracked my first case, at the price of killing the one and only person who could have told us why the murder happened—the Stowaway himself.

“Well,” I muttered as we jammed ourselves back into the elevator, “I guess I won’t arrest Cos after all.”

* * * *

After that we all went back to bed.

Ridiculous end to the most exciting night of my life up to that time, but I was tired, Jesús was tired, Janesco was tired. Schlacht was silent, permanently, and the Stowaway would be taking no more pot shots with his little gun. So what else was there to do?

I think we all slept a long, long time—I know I did.

Late next morning I reported to Colonel Delatour regarding the events of the night, then joined the remaining cadre at brunch. The enlisted people had already eaten, so we gave them the rest of the day off, since there really wasn’t a damn thing for them to do anyway, and soon dice were rattling merrily on the deck of their quarters.

About the fifth cup of coffee, my brain finally began to function, and I asked Colonel Delatour, “Ma’am, how cold is it outside? I mean, is the Bubble’s absolute zero absolute than ours?”

She said no. Some things appeared to be common to both our universe and this one—Newton’s third law, for one thing, much abused by the general. The absoluteness of zero Kelvin, for another.

“Only,” she added, “it’s easier to reach in the Bubble, because you don’t have subatomic particles obstinately maintaining their harmonic oscillations, no matter how chilly they get. The exterior hull of the ship is considerably warmer, of course, maybe 20 Kelvin. Why?”

“With your permission. I have a great urge to get a look at whatever’s left of the Stowaway.”

Why? I wasn’t sure. I doubted whether the corpse could tell me anything. Forensic studies would obviously be impossible. And yet ... I just had to see. You know curiosity killed the cat, and in this case it came quite close to killing the Lieutenant as well. Colonel Delatour eyed me with what might have been concern, or maybe even compassion.

“Dying won’t bring the fellow back, you know,” she said quietly. “You didn’t murder him. He could have surrendered.”

“I don’t intend to die,” I assured her. “To take a risk, yeah.” She nodded, even smiled a little. Maybe she liked risk takers.

“Since *Zhukov*’s the only gravitating mass around, he’ll presumably be following us,” she said thoughtfully. “Maybe rotating around us, like our own little dead moon.”

Morales seemed to get really twitchy when I reported this dialogue to him. “This is so *#%& weird!” he grouched.

Nevertheless, he bravely volunteered to take the first spacewalk in the Bubble. Of course I said no. It was my show and my adventure. I knew that if the heater in my suit froze up, I’d be one more piece of debris circling the *Zhukov*, but I was young enough not to believe anything like that could actually happen to *me*. A lot of heroism, you know, is basically stupidity.

So a couple of hours later, I found myself being clamped into a device for which the term “space suit” was absolutely inadequate. It was actually a sort of

steel keg where I sat cross legged, watching the world outside on a semi-cylindrical monitor screen and operating the limbs (you could have up to four legs and four arms attached) by fiddling with joysticks mounted on what looked like a miniature organ keyboard. I spent three, maybe four days practicing with the thing, up in the Arctic Circle, banging off walls and the particle-gun housing and turning myself every way but loose.

Then it was time to walk.

They put me out through the airlock, and I have to say that when push came to shove, I wasn't scared—I was terrified. Once when I was a kid, vacationing with my family on the southern rim of the Great American Desert, we took a side trip down into an immense cave. The place was a tourist attraction, had been for centuries, and it was all nicely lighted and the chambers equipped with phony names like Aladdin's Castle and the Seas of Europa and so on. Then, when we were really deep inside, the guide turned out the lights. That was the first time I'd ever experienced the totality of total darkness, and my throat got dry and my hands got clammy and I thought, *Is this what death is like?*

All that came back to me in the moment when my four mechanical feet clamped onto the hull and the airlock's outer door closed behind me. This was *it*. Would I drift away from the ship? Was there such a thing as magnetism out here? Did gravitation exist out here? Did *anything* exist out here?

Well, I stayed attached to the ship, and after a few seconds the bad feelings lessened, if only because it was obviously too late for second thoughts. Then a row of external lights, loading lights I suppose, went on, and I remembered to switch on a spotlight I carried on one of my many limbs. At first I thought it wasn't working because there was no ray, no beam, but then I saw the circle of light where the photons bounced off the ship. And off something else, too—a cylinder about twice the size of one of the internal missile silos. I couldn't think of anything it might be, except an FTLM that had its own exterior housing, because it was too big to go inside the ship.

Like some ungainly mechanical spider I crawled along *Zhukov's* curving frigid hull. Though my heater was whirring faster and faster, the air inside kept getting colder and colder. I picked up the percussion of my steel feet, uneasily aware that this was the only sound and the only heat and the only motion—I was moving relative to the ship—indeed the only anything in an entire goddamn vacant *universe*.

And then something else moved.

It was rising beyond the curved horizon of the hull with an infinitely slow yet observable movement, like the minute hand of an antique clock. Rising until it reflected a ghostly patch of light, just like the moon that Colonel Delatour had talked about. Only instead of a moon, it was a shapeless rigid bundle. It made me think of the fragile ash left by burned hardcopy that stays intact, even to the letters black against the brown pages, yet turns to powder at the first puff of wind. After maybe half a minute I realized that the bundle consisted of all the coats and blankets and whatnot the Stowaway had wrapped up in to survive the cold of the Arctic Circle. I turned my spot on it, and saw—set into the bundle, looking small and white—a rigid porcelain face.

For a little while I forgot the insidious cold creeping through my defenses of armor and artificial heat. Then made some kind of strangled sound, because the Stowaway had been a girl, a girl with a face that was thin and elegant. She'd frozen so deep so fast that her tissues had had no time to explode in the catastrophic loss of pressure that accompanied her ejection into the void. *And I recognized her face.*

I stretched out one of my mechanical arms and touched her, and her face turned to a fine crystalline dust. Then the whole bundle of what had been body and wrappings fell apart too, and the trail of debris very slowly passed like a thin comet of ice and ash out of my light and into the perfect darkness beyond.

* * * *

Back inside the *Zhukov*, it took three people to extract me from the suit. I couldn't move my legs, and I spent a week in the dispensary being treated for pale, waxy spots denoting frostbite had developed on my fingers and toes and thighs and buttocks during my space walk.

That was lucky in a way, because I really needed the down time, not only to heal some frozen appendages, but to put my nerves back together. Every once in a while would-be heroes overestimate their own toughness. I'd badly overestimated mine.

Colonel Delatour took to visiting me. She avoided the usual dumb how're-you-feeling-soldier chat favored by superior officers for injured subordinates. We talked about a lot of things. At first I was inclined to look on her as a kind of female Methuselah because she was *over forty*. But exactly for that reason I could talk to her about matters I probably wouldn't have discussed with a woman my own age. Especially my feelings of guilt about the death of the

Stowaway. That porcelain face haunted my dreams.

“So you’d actually seen her before,” she marveled. “*Quel miracle.*”

“Yeah. On a memory cube in the general’s quarters. And then I saw her again, out there in the middle of nothing, a few years older but perfectly recognizable, and I touched her and she turned to dust and ice crystals and drifted away. What’s left is still out there, orbiting around us.”

She shook her head, and kind of absentmindedly took my left hand, I suppose because it was shaking, and held it with both of hers.

“You know,” she said, speaking very quietly, “the Space Service keeps a lot of old naval traditions alive. We—oh, what’s the English for *faire des sottises*—we go through a lot of foolishness about dress uniforms and being piped aboard and whatnot. I’m surprised we aren’t issued cutlasses, just in case of pirates. We keep some of the old naval superstitions, too—for example, about lucky and unlucky ships. I’m beginning to think *Zhukov*’s unlucky, the things that have happened.”

I was lying on a bunk at the time, wearing one of those dumb paper outfits they put on you, plus slip-on elastoplast tubes over my frostbitten digits. At some point, I don’t remember exactly when, we’d agreed to be Robert (pronounced Robair) and Marie to each other, at least when we were alone.

Marie was sitting on a chair next to the bunk, close enough so I could detect a faint indefinable fragrance that I was pretty sure was not standard for Space Service officers. She was the first woman I’d been this close to in quite a while, except for my enlisted women, whom I was very properly forbidden to touch. Considering the automatic reactions taking place lower down my anatomy, I was glad a sheet covered me to the waist.

But I wasn’t ready just yet to try my luck with a superior officer. I really had to ask a question that had been waking me up at 0230 every morning when, in the dim nightlight, my sterilized surroundings looked especially blank and uncommunicative. I asked Marie if she could explain why the Stowaway hadn’t answered when we were beating on her door, especially when she knew the silo was about to be opened and she was about to be blown into the void.

“Well, I can tell you what I think.”

“*S’il vous plaît,*” I said, using one of the three French phrases I knew.

“I think she’d done what she came aboard to do. Was she very young when

you first saw her?”

I cleared my throat. “Terribly young.”

“Then I suppose she’d been a child prostitute. *C’est abominable*, but it happens. So she tracked the general, who might have been one of her customers, maybe even her first customer, the one who paid a premium for the thrill of breaking her in. When she’d killed him, her work was done and she wanted to die. That’s why you shouldn’t blame yourself. You know, when somebody wants to die, it’s entirely personal. If their mind’s made up, nobody can stop them, and maybe nobody should try.”

I was still thinking that over when she said, “You need to get warm.”

She stood up and began to take off her uniform jacket. “We’ll have to be discreet, of course,” she added.

“Suppose somebody comes in?”

“Oh, I posted a bot as guard outside. There are advantages to being in command.” She smiled. She finished undressing and threw back the sheet and lay down beside me.

* * * *

So began my first liaison with a mythical creature I’d often heard about but never experienced—an Older Woman.

It was kind of a shipboard romance, you know, where the impermanence provides half the joy and all the poignance. After doing our separate duties all day, we had quiet nights together. Good sex. For me, a learning experience, as they say. Learning to take things slower. Learning to play the mouth organ properly. Learning some neat tricks I’d heard about but never tried before. *Ligotage*—the French have a word for it.

“The bindings, dearest, must *always* leave a mark,” she instructed me.

But it wasn’t all fun and games. Your boss doesn’t cease to be your boss just because you’re in bed with her. I had to endure Mama-knows-best comments like, “Sometimes, my darling, you are just a *tiny little boy*.” (This was not a reference to my physical endowments, which have always been adequate. She was talking about my emotional immaturity, which in those days was a lot more than just adequate.)

I also heard a lot about the problems of a woman in what was still, after centuries of effort, mostly a man's world. Things I'd never imagined until then.

"A woman in command," she said, "has to be at least three times as tough as a man. Any hint of weakness is fatal. A male commander can be kind and forbearing, and everybody says, 'An officer and a gentleman!' A woman does the same thing, they think, 'Just another cunt,' and try to take advantage of her. A man can sleep around, or not; if he doesn't, he's got ethics, and if he does, he's a hell of a guy. But if a woman officer sleeps around they call her a whore, and if she doesn't they call her a lesbian."

She taught me some useful things about courage. "I remember one 'orrible little *pustule* I knew in officer training. He used to say, 'I'll hold a pot for the commander to piss in, but the instant his foot slips I'll empty it over his head.' Well, that awful little man lasted until the first real emergency, and then he was out. A bit of conniving is essential in our line of work, but it's no substitute for courage. After all, when you put on a uniform, you're proposing to live with danger."

"And then you need courage."

"And logic. In times of danger, only courage is logical."

I'd never looked at it that way before. Yet it's true—losing your head is no way to save your hide. Neither, she reminded me, is forgetting your comrades. "*Sauve qui peut*—every man for himself—is the prelude to annihilation. When everyone's trying to save himself, discipline collapses and everyone dies."

So I learned from her, things I enjoyed, things I needed to know, things I didn't especially want to know but learned anyway. There were also things I wanted to find out, but didn't. Once I mentioned seeing the FTLM housing on the hull and asked why we were carrying such a stupendous weapon on such a banal mission. She just said there were things she couldn't discuss, period. And that was that.

When she and I were a couple of months into our relationship, and the command suite had become as familiar to me as my cubicle had been, I asked her a question I'd been hesitating to voice ever since the night of our first coupling. It was a quiet, casual evening, when—as usual in the Bubble—nothing was going on. She was lacquering her fingernails at the time.

"Marie."

“Yes? Oh, I see. You’ve something weighty on your mind.”

“I’ve been wondering, uh ... for some time now, uh ... how the Stowaway got herself into the *Zhukov*. Into the Arctic Circle. How she managed to move around the ship at night, with all the locked doors.”

“Well,” said Marie, “I assume she must have had an ally in the cadre.”

I waited. Her hands didn’t shake, didn’t even quiver. Since she obviously wasn’t going to elaborate, I had to stumble on.

“I’d like to know who her accomplice ... her ally ... was.”

“Perhaps you don’t want to know,” she said. The lacquer went on with perfect smoothness. The color was no color—standard issue transparent.

“I don’t?”

“No,” she said.

Being young, I was about to say something else, when she raised her eyes from the job she was doing and stabbed me with a look that resembled a long, chilly steel dagger.

“You’re right,” I said hastily. “I don’t.”

* * * *

Despite our efforts to be discreet, Jesús was not fooled about what was going on. Neither, it turned out, was anybody else. I’m pretty sure the romance between Marie and me was known to every human being on board within, say, eight hours of our first lovemaking. Once I asked Jesús what people were saying.

“The enlisted guys think it’s great,” he said. “They figure you’ve got an inside track with the commander, and what benefits you benefits them all. The blue-suiters aren’t worried about you jumping over their heads for promotion or anything, because you’re not Space Service, you’re on a different totem pole. I’m delighted to have our stateroom all to myself, much as I used to enjoy listening to you snore and fart. So everybody’s happy, including, I hope, you.”

He grinned and punched me lightly on the shoulder. “Everybody likes you, Kohn, and they like her, and they like having the two of you to gossip about. Life in

the Bubble is pretty dull, you know.”

Marie’s own attitude was cool and practical. When I mentioned the gossip mill to her, she said, “Bah, who cares? I’m the commander, and subject to regulations I do what I please. Still, it’s nice to know that our shipmates find us entertaining.”

She was right, of course. Life in the Bubble—your Papa’s phrase—did tend toward tedium. There we were, eighty-nine sailors marooned together on, or rather in, a metal island surrounded by absolutely nothing. For recreation the enlisted guys had gambling, sex, liquor, and a few legal drugs like kif. For self-improvement they had classes on “Knowing Your Weapons,” “Security Forces—Front and Center!” and other such rubbish. For training they practiced marksmanship in a simulator—*beep zap, beep zap, beep zap, bing!* All of us took karate lessons from Chu to keep in practice—*thump, thump*, “Kick him! Kick him!”

Officers and enlisted, we relaxed at meditation sessions with bowed heads, everybody breathing like tortoises. There were also formal religious services—I didn’t attend, but in the corridors I’d see people fingering rosaries, though whether Christian, Muslim, or Buddhist, I didn’t know. In the evening, before lights-out, I’d check the barracks a last time and find the guys sitting in darkness and watching feelies—the laser projectors humming, the virtual actors making love and war in four dimensions and looking a lot realer than the rest of us. “*Darling, I shall always remember you, even on the far side of the stars!*” Music, the end. Tough guys wiping away tears. The artless seduced by the illusion of art.

Since we were out of murder mysteries, I resumed command of my platoon, just to have something to fill the days. I joined them in the mornings for P.T., glad of a chance to use my muscles and keep fat at bay. In the shadowy and frigid storage spaces we practiced small-unit tactics, at which they were already fairly proficient. I never got chummy with them, that’s not my style, but I was intrigued to see that Morales was able to become a pal to his people without losing control. Swapping foul jokes, drinking with them at the enlisted Happy Hour—you’d think he’d have forfeited their respect. But he didn’t.

When I asked him about it, he told me, “My guys who speak Spanish call me *Tío*, Uncle. Your guys call you *Dios*, God. They know they can trust you, and yet you’re out of reach. They think that’s what God is like.”

“You do talk a lot of crap, Morales.”

“We’re like the two American generals in the war with Mexico. The soldiers

called one Old Fuss and Feathers because he always played by the book. They called the other Old Rough and Ready because he dressed like a peasant and paid no attention to the book. Both won their battles. The point is, either way can work if it's natural for you."

I'd never heard about a war between America and Mexico. "Who won?" I asked.

"Oh, the Americans did. Later on we got back at them, but it took us a couple of hundred years."

"Mexico conquered America?"

"In a way. Yes. In a way."

From Schlacht I inherited Cos. He needed somebody to attach himself to, and soon began bringing me tidbits of information.

"Sergeant Chu—did you know he comes from a criminal family? They're all pirates, except for him."

"*Pirates?*"

"In the Malacca Strait. They've been pirates there for centuries. They use a skimboat that goes hundreds of clicks an hour just above the waves. The Security Forces tried to stamp them out, but they've got good political connections in the world capital at New Angkor, so Security had to let them go and even return their boat."

"What do Chu's relatives think about him joining the Forces?"

"He's the black sheep of the family. He can never go home."

"Who told you all this?"

"Nobody told me. I just know."

One day Cos warned me about an impending fight in my platoon over one of the most popular douches. Just to test him, I showed up in the barracks compartment at midnight, routed out O'Rourke, and held a shakedown. In the laundry bags of two guys we found enough brass knucks and knives to start a minor war.

Of course both claimed they were only keeping the contraband for self-protection, but I figured it was time they learned that Old Fuss and Feathers went by the book. So I invited O'Rourke to consider the fact that these idiots could have cost him all his hard-earned stripes, and suggested he take them to one of the empty compartments for a fatherly chat. When he'd finished, their comrades carried them to the dispensary, where Doc Gannett patched them up. Then I issued them plastic teaspoons and set them to work cleaning out grease traps and stopped-up latrines.

I ran into Gannett a few days later, and he told me the culprits insisted that their injuries resulted from tripping and falling down. "They," he said with what I assumed was irony, "are the clumsiest guys I've ever come across."

By tipping me off, Cos had probably saved a life or two, and he'd certainly saved me a ton of trouble and embarrassment. So I got in the habit of meeting him for a few beers in the evening, and letting him fill my ears with whatever tidbits he'd picked out of the air that day.

It *was* addictive, listening in on other peoples' thoughts, and only the fear of turning into Schlacht II made me stop him from digging into the minds of Marie and Morales. In fact I flatly forbade him to repeat anything he learned from either one, to me or anybody else. I wouldn't spy on the inner life of a lover or a friend, but aside from that I listened greedily to everything the little snitch had to offer. After we left the Bubble, I was glad I did.

* * * *

Because we did eventually return to our own universe.

The Bubble had no such thing as time, yet clocks were still running on shipboard, and in due course our eternity of boredom came to an end. Reentry to our own universe was chronometric, and an error of a microsecond could put us almost anyplace, including the center of a star. I for one was seriously anxious, and even Marie showed strain.

"I've done this twenty-eight times," she said one night, seeking comfort in the thicket of chest hair I sprouted back in those days. Somewhat muffled, her voice continued, "But I'll never get used to it. It's all up to the computers, and there's no way for mere humans like us to control our fate."

"What does the celestial navigator do during reentry?"

"Usually gets drunk. It's all he *can* do."

Actually, when it happened, I found it less distressing than the last time. Similar phenomena occurred, but I was expecting them. The process went fast, and within seconds it was clear that we weren't in the core, convective zone, or corona of anything hot. After a while Marie's quiet tones informed the whole ship that we were just about where we were supposed to be. Indeed, reentry had been a smashing success—system H2223Y was already visible, its sun appearing to be about the size of Jupiter as seen from Terra, only colored like Mars.

It was wonderful how people brightened at the news. In the upbeat mood of the moment, I took the Dumb Duo off their shit details and instructed O'Rourke that punishment was now over. Everybody was happy, including me. During a session of afternoon love, Marie tied me up and gave me a present so long, slow, and marvelous that I remember it today—remember it as well as you *can* remember something transcendent.

I was still wearing a silly grin that evening when Cos joined me in the officer's canteen for our usual session. His face was my first indication that the happy times were over.

"What's the matter with you?"

"Nothing."

"Something wrong with the others, then?"

"No. I've never felt such good vibes on the *Zhukov*. Everybody's happy." For some reason, that seemed to depress him more than anything else.

"Come on, little buddy. Spit it out."

"I saw that star we're headed for on a monitor."

"So?"

"I've been getting some ... I guess I'd say ... some tremors. From Paradiso. From humans. They're eerie, coming out of the void like that. Thousands of people must all be feeling basically the same thing, that's why it reaches so far. That and the fact that telepathy doesn't seem to be subject to the inverse-square law. Anyway, something terrible's happening in that system, or maybe is just about to happen, I'm not sure which."

I looked at his big face and his little hands holding the beer stein and his

dark, mournful cuttlefish eyes, and I had a sudden impulse to grab him and push him out through the airlock. Logic or no logic, we all want to kill the messenger of bad news. Especially when he lays it on us just when we're feeling great.

Instead, after taking a deep breath, I thanked him. He was doing his job, after all. Later on I told Marie about Cos's singular talent, about the evidence I'd seen that his gift was real, and about his warning. She didn't take it any better than I had.

"Exactly what do you expect me to do about this dwarf's silly notion?"

You ever notice how, when somebody has a physical disability, everyone carefully avoids mentioning it until they get mad with him, and then it's the first thing they bring up?

I said somewhat stiffly, "You're in command here, and I don't *expect* you to do anything. I'm *advising* you to take this seriously and use full precautions to make sure we carry out our mission. Okay?"

She thought that over, and said, "*Pardonnez-moi.*" A little later she added, "Of course, it may be the aliens. *Le zoo.* It's only reasonable to treat this as a military operation. Before we risk the ship, Lieutenant Morales will lead an armed reconnaissance to check things out."

I just looked at her. Very unwillingly, she said, "Okay, I can't let you off the hook just because I sleep with you. You're the senior, so you'll lead it. Are you satisfied?"

"No," I said, "but I hope to be."

After we'd relaxed a while and had a few shots of five-star brandy, I gave her a little present I'd been planning all day. When we were done, and having a shower in the command suite's opulent bathroom, I leaned through clouds of steam and whispered in her rosy ear, "Now, don't say I never did anything for you."

She smiled. "Oh, I'd never say that."

* * * *

Suddenly everybody was in a fever of anticipation. Because we didn't know what was going on down there, *Zhukov* maintained radio silence until such time as we found out. Janesco spent long days in the Arctic Circle with a crew of combat

bots that had been in storage up to this point, but now needed activation and testing and being hooked up to the fire-control computer and so on. He'd been in the Alien War, and had scores to settle. He was an efficient guy, and personally I wouldn't have wanted to be on the bullseye of any of his missiles, especially the big one in its housing outside on the hull.

For us too the training tempo picked up. A lot of the work was intrinsically boring, but when your life is soon going to depend on your gadgets, you develop a passionate interest in things like nuts and bolts and pins and gauges. There was no end to checking and rechecking our weapons. I remember watching in something like awe as one of our dumber peons, blindfolded, field-stripped and reassembled in about thirty seconds a launcher that by any objective estimate was a lot smarter than he was.

The mainframe computer had to run diagnostic checks on all systems, and that was fine. But when it came to the *Zhukov's* two SDVs or suborbital descent vehicles (shuttles, if you don't speak in military acronyms), Morales and I manually made damn sure the airfoils would deploy when needed. I also decided to give each platoon its own symbol. Instead of the Roman or Greek alphabets, which were kind of overused already, I chose the Hebrew and called our platoons Aleph (') and Beth (b) and had the symbols stenciled on all the equipment and the shuttles. We planned to use both craft, in case an enemy destroyed one on the way down.

Once we arrived on Paradiso, we needed to be able to exit the little ships fast, fast, fast, in case something mean was waiting for us—and enter them again just as fast, in case we had to get away quick. “Get in, buckle up—buckle off, get out! Move, goddamn it!” O'Rourke explained to our platoon, and emphasized his remarks by whacking laggards with his belt.

Insofar as there's any secret to training people for battle, endless repetition is it. Soldiers don't need a lot of brains—they need to be rote-trained and obedient to orders and not have too many nerve endings. Above all, they need to trust their leaders and their comrades and be trustworthy in return. That's what *esprit de corps* means, and as we readied for action it was fascinating to watch it develop among our people, including the two who'd recently been ready to knife each other over the favors of a douche.

Morales and I had as many butterflies as anybody else, plus those extra ones a young officer gets before his first action. It's one thing to face combat and take orders. It's something else to face combat and give them, knowing you may give the wrong ones and take down a bunch of people besides yourself. More

than ever, we depended on our sergeants, and they understood and called us *sir* while quietly telling us what to do next.

Evenings I sat in the canteen and listened to Cos, and the closer we got to our objective the more depressing he became. The local sun had attained about the size of Luna, a dull red Luna newly risen through haze. Across the disc moved a tiny dark object—Paradiso. I'd sit there watching on a monitor the transit of what looked like a cinder, at the same time listening to Cos tell me how those we'd come to save were expecting ruin and desolation.

"They're running," he added, "but they're running from something they know they can't escape."

"You can sense all this from way out here?"

"As I told you, ESP isn't subject to the inverse-square law. That's one of the most baffling things about it. You know those ancient drawings by Dürer, where a mountain five miles away is in perfect perspective—tiny, about the size of a thumbnail—and yet just as clear and sharp as the big figures in the foreground? That's the kind of message I'm getting. It's small, it's distant, but it's perfectly clear. There's no loss of definition, no fuzzing out. I'm not making this up."

Goddamn him, I thought, *he probably isn't, either*. Cos was an expert on his own singular gift, and I couldn't argue with him, much as I wanted to.

Every day the sun got bigger and bigger. I checked out a cube from the ship's library and did some reading—even got interested in Universal History, which used to cause me terminal boredom in school. System H2223Y had first been identified as a possible residence for humans by the ancients, meaning those fairly recent ancients who lived only a few centuries back, during the time of the Warring States.

All the wars delayed space exploration, but on the other hand the stimulus of fighting brought tremendous technical advances. Especially working out the nature of dark energy—natural antigravity—and finding in it at last the secret for exceeding the speed of light. So when we finally started starward we went better equipped and also had better theoretical understanding of our complicated multiverse. All of which was kind of neat to know, even though it told me absolutely nothing of practical value.

Otherwise I went on with life, doing P. T. with my guys, checking weapons, and attending formal dinners with the cadre, where Marie sat at the head of the

table and I still sat at the foot, because the Table of Ranks had no slot for a commander's lover. Drinking with Cos in the evenings, listening to him tell me that whatever was threatening Paradiso was drawing closer to it by the day, only he couldn't tell me what it was, because it was "dark."

"Think of it as a stealth object," he suggested over his third beer one night.

"It is an *object* then?"

"I don't know what it is. It's dark."

"Like an alien ship?"

"Might be. If the Zoo's inside a nuke-steel egg, I couldn't pick up their thoughts, you know. The object would be, yeah, dark."

One night I woke up from a nightmare about a pit full of monsters with human faces—woke with a shuddering cry that brought Marie groggily back to consciousness.

"What's wrong?" she mumbled.

"The thing that's threatening Paradiso," I said, wiping sweat from my face. "Could it be us? I mean, we're coming to kidnap them and...."

"*Mon cher*, stop brooding. It's quite pointless. We've got our orders and we're going to obey them, that's all. There's no turning back."

She was right, so I went back to sleep, and a few days later we entered orbit around the world that poor old Innocente had dreamed of turning into a new Eden.

* * * *

Stepping out the first time on a planet of another star is something few humans have ever done. Or ever will, I guess. The memory of Paradiso remains today one of my life's unforgettable firsts.

We debarked on an undulating plain covered with long coarse grass, or anyway something slim-leaved that looked like grass. The sun was about forty-five degrees above the horizon, looking like the red eye of some cosmic beast that was eyeing us for lunch. The redness tinged and transmuted everything, giving the sky a purplish aura, turning blue-green leaves black, giving a perpetual sundown look

to everything from pools of water to reflections in our facemasks.

We weren't on breathing apparatus, by the way—no need for that. The air had too much oxygen if anything, and inhaling was like downing a flute of champagne. On the other hand, our combat boots suddenly seemed to be made of lead. The ancients had been able to spot *Paradiso* with their orbital telescopes because it was big—a hard-shelled Earth-type planet, of course, not a gas giant—but big of its kind. Suddenly I weighed something like a hundred-ten kilos instead of my Earthside eighty-seven. As we lined up, all of us were moving like divers in weighted suits, and Morales and I agreed on ten minutes rest every hour until we adapted. I ordered the autopilots running the shuttles to close them up and use the lasers on anything that looked threatening, and it was time to start.

Aleph moved first, O'Rourke leading, me at the rear to keep everybody closed up. Morales's Beth platoon fell in behind us. We topped a low ridge and saw the town founded by Papa Innocente. We didn't know its name, so we called it O-1, Objective One. It was a pretty place, the small massive houses square-built of white stone with red or brown tile roofs, facing a little bay backed by low ridges that gradually grew higher until they turned into distant violet mountains. No tall buildings in the town, but one broad and deep structure with a shallow white dome, just faintly pink in the light. Through my helmet I heard Morales say, "Behold the temple," and he turned out to be right.

I wasn't sure of Cos's physical ability to keep up, so I'd left him on the *Zhukov*. Nevertheless, I wanted to keep contact with him. We were streaming images from our helmet-mounted cameras, and pretty soon I heard his unmistakable voice say, "Kohn, I'm not getting a reading from the town. It's all quiet. I don't sense the colonists at all, either there or anywhere else."

"How do you explain that?"

"I don't."

"You could sense them from space, and now you can't even sense them from orbit?"

"I said I can't explain it."

We approached O-1 with leaden legs and labored breathing. We tipped back our masks, and despite the open furnace of the sun, the air felt mild, almost cool on our overheated faces. Little black animals with too many legs—hexapod rabbits?—scuttled through the grass at our approach. An animal somewhat like a

hyena (heavy up front, small at the rear) loped out of a patch of blackish-greenish woods to the right, made a wide circle, and disappeared again. It ran with a rocking-horse motion, front-back, front-back. A flying creature with wide triangular wings dipped and hovered and flapped away clumsily. Its body looked tiny in proportion to its enormous wingspan.

In the distance low clouds had formed, red above, purple in the middle, blue-black underneath. Apparently a summer shower was on the way. To confirm my guess, lightning flickered—reddish lightning.

We entered the town. Unnerving silence. There's a special emptiness to places where people ought to be, but aren't. Signals from the ship told us which way to go, sending Morales up one crooked street, me up another. My platoon split, squads one and two to the right, three and four to the left. Hug the walls, guys. I found my own reactions interesting—nerves tight as catgut in a string orchestra, yet no feeling of fear. Just a very tense alertness. My senses seemed to have sharpened. Another small hexapod of some sort went scuttling around a corner, and I followed the sound of its many claws long after it had disappeared.

The buildings engraved themselves on my memory—every stone, every shadow. The only sounds between the growls of thunder were our boots scuffing and our equipment clinking and clanking. Streets didn't meet at right angles—they and the intersecting alleys ran every which way, like braided channels in desert arroyos. The only shop signs were painted on the walls, like in Pompeii—*Fud mart, Vin so ekselent, 20 booties in hous*. The last one an ad for a brothel or a shoe store? No idea. The language had been changing in the mouths of colonists, just as it always does.

Marie spoke in my ear, then Cos. They agreed: still no sign of anybody in the town except us. Yet when a rooftile fell off and broke on the stones, everyone, including me, jumped. We emerged into an irregular open space surrounded by shops, all of them empty. *Flesch Mart*—butcher shop or slave market? By the look of it, butcher shop. A computer's atonal voice spoke in my ear: "Lieutenant Kohn, right twenty degrees, enter broad street, see temple twenty-four o'clock."

Nice to have guidance from the sky. And yes, there was the temple with its broad shallow dome, suddenly etched by a flicker of lightning against the backdrop of gunmetal clouds. We circled the plaza, sliding along walls as before. O'Rourke sent one guy to search every building as we passed. Chu was doing the same with his platoon. A private yelled in a high, strained voice from a second-floor window, "Nuttin' ain't here, Sarge!" and O'Rourke replied with a burst of profanity that broke the tension and left everybody chuckling.

We met under the portico of the temple. Morales and I panted up the steps and high-fived each other. The temple was round, with an outer and an inner circle of columns, and cool wind from the approaching storm whistled through it. The inside was a sort of Greek or Roman amphitheater, with stone bleachers meant to seat maybe two thousand people funneling down to a round central stage lit by a skylight in the dome. Embedded in a solid transplast column about six meters high and visible from every seat in the building hung a gleaming chrome model of DNA that seemed to seize and concentrate every bit of available light.

I felt awed and out of place, like an unbeliever gazing at the Ka'aba. One of the dumber peons asked loudly, "What *is* that *#@! thing?" But the others spoke in hushed voices, as people tend to do in temples, including those dedicated to gods they don't believe in.

Absent, besides all the people, was any sign of danger. Through my helmet-mounted omni I summoned the shuttles, ordering them to move into the plaza just outside and lock up as before. Then we began settling down for the night. We had plenty of room to stretch out, because there were only seventy-two of us in all that vast space. People started turning on pocket glow lights and breaking out cold rations. Everybody carried food for three days, and the sergeants started circulating to make sure that nobody was fool enough to eat everything at the first meal. Morales and I stood by a column, watching the twinkle of little lights in the vast and steadily darkening space. The DNA model caught and reflected them all, and I guess a poet could have made something out of the scene. But we had no poets present, at least none I knew about.

"Before we start noshing," Jesús said quietly, "there's something I want to show you. We spotted it crossing the plaza. It's not far."

The shuttles were arriving as we set out. They settled down on the stones with all the usual racket and neatly parked themselves with airfoils almost touching. A little light rain began to patter and strengthened as we made our way to a low, windowless building with an industrial look to it. Next door stood another windowless building with the words *Hir Ly Gretlie Luvved Ded* chiseled on the lintel over the door.

"We can skip the first one," said Morales. "It's just a crematorium. We'll need our lights in the mausoleum. There's artificial lighting inside, but nothing's turned on."

We took out our pocket torches and gave them a twist and stepped inside.

Our little cold puddles of light showed walls honeycombed with small square niches. Piled neatly on the floor were ceramic tiles that once had sealed the openings, and every one had the familiar Ladderite logo baked into it, plus a name in the colonists' odd, awkward spelling system.

"God," I whispered. "They even took away their *dead*. Were they that afraid of us?"

"I don't see how they could've known we were coming.... Oh wait, their seer. They've got their own Cos. So they could've known."

There was something wrong with that explanation, but offhand I couldn't think what it was. We walked on, raising hollow echoes. Corridors branched off to either side, and all the walls without exception were empty honeycombs. Then thunder boomed and echoed down the aisles, and Morales and I turned and headed for the entrance.

Outside, the rain was heavier and the wind colder and the darkness darker. We broke into a trot and came up under the roof of the temple, gasping for air. Just in time, too—the rain had started coming down in three-meter cubes. We settled on the second tier, smelling like wet dogs, and started eating concentrated whatnot from our mealpacks. A private from Beth Platoon came by carrying six or seven canteens and asked if we'd like to have ours filled, too. "There's lots of water," he pointed out needlessly. We handed over our canteens and when the guy returned, swallowed gulps of cold stony-tasting water to wash down our rations. A simple meal, yeah, but it tasted like a feast.

"Pity the poor Ladderites," said Morales. "Here we are scarfing up rations in their nice dry temple, and they're out there in the wild wet woods. They must be eating cold food because if they tried to cook anything, *Zhukov's* scanners would detect the heat and give us directions and we'd go out tomorrow and take them away at gunpoint."

"Sometimes," I said, "you have to destroy a civilization to save a civilization."

After that bit of rather commonplace sarcasm, we posted guards and appointed Chu the Charge of Quarters for the night. Morales said *buenas noches* and rejoined his people. Somebody began singing—not the obscene ditty I'd have expected, but a sentimental tune called "Good-bye, Young Soldier." The temple's perfect acoustics carried every word to my ears, despite the storm raging outside, and I fell asleep listening to a strangely pure and haunting girl's voice, like a reed

instrument, asking, "What'll I do/When my guy/Is far beyond the sky?"

I never heard what she decided. I was exhausted, and fell asleep in about two minutes. And there I stayed until my helmet started squealing at me.

* * * *

I vaguely remember rolling over, uttering an incoherent curse or two. Found my helmet, pulled it closer, and muttered the magic word, "Say."

"Robair," said Marie's voice, though we'd agreed always to speak formally anyplace we might be overheard. That and her tone alerted me that something was very, very wrong and the sleep emptied out of my head with magical speed.

"Yes, ma'am."

"You have sixteen minutes to clear your command from that town and get as far away as you can."

"We're being attacked?"

"You're about to be hit by a chunk of flying rubbish roughly twice the size of Mount Vesuvius. It must have entered Paradiso's atmosphere on the far side of the planet, and it's headed for an impact zone just offshore. Janesco tried to get it with a missile as it crossed the terminator, but missed. He hit it with the particle beam, but there wasn't enough energy to deflect it. So move. *Now.*"

I let out a roar and the echoes went careening around the temple. Even if I did sound like Schlacht, there's a time for a leader to be a loudmouth, and this was it.

We had to abandon a lot of gear, but in twelve minutes all of us were jammed into the two shuttles and strapped down and they were moving. As we lifted off, I thanked whatever gods may be for the sang-froid of machinery, which is impossible to frighten. For an instant I was certain that our nose was going to impact the dome, but it didn't, and below us the pale temple and the dark town flowed back and away.

For the first time I checked my watch. It said 0404. The storm was mostly over, and the clouds had scattered in time for a coldly brilliant moon to break through. Only it wasn't a moon, it was the mother of all asteroids, and it flashed to the east, lighting up the little houses of the town. Below I could see neat patchwork fields and dark woods and the face of a ridge of high land topped with

a brushy growth of ebony forest. The impact was going to be tremendous, so I ordered both Aleph and Beth platoons to shelter behind the ridge.

We descended and hovered close to the ground, turning on landing lights whose cold glare etched oddball trees without leaves but with spiral fronds coiling upward around the trunks. Eyes flickered in the light, little creatures and big, eyes green or yellow or red, a whole swarming ecology we'd never know anything about, because at that moment the sky lit up. The shock wave hit, first as a wall of compressed air and then as a tremor that shook the hills. The ground *surged*—I'd never seen anything like it, though I'd heard of earth imitating water during earthquakes.

By now a gale like seven cyclones was howling and a lot of the town was flying over, fragments of houses and trees and everything else. Even in the lee of the ridge, waves of turbulence scoured the valley and made the flyers bounce around like sticks in a torrent. At that time I'd had no training in flying at all, so I had to trust the autopilot, which fortunately didn't need any human coaching to retract the airfoils to minimum extension and rev up the engine to max power. We seemed to have lived through the worst, and I was almost ready to breathe again, when a freakish blast of wind came howling down the valley and swept both shuttles up into the fury above.

I'd heard stories of people being sucked up into tornados and living, and of course we had a solid transorbital ship to huddle in, but that's essentially what we were doing anyway, we and rags of flying clouds and the endless torrent of spinning debris. As we tumbled over and over, I had fragmentary glimpses of things happening below, of glistening bare sea bottom, of a gigantic wall of water moving with a kind of majestic deliberation toward the shore, of fields and hillsides stripped bare, of wind-driven flames spreading horizontally in sheets. One thing I didn't see was the other shuttle—it had vanished in the storm.

Then all I had time for was surviving, while our autopilot's little mechanical brain fought to regain control of the flyer, end the tumbling, ride the gale, climb to quieter air above. We were essentially helpless, at the mercy of the machinery and every second expecting to run head-on against mountain heights that lightning flashes showed advancing with daunting speed from the west. Wind velocity? Three hundred and three-point-five clicks, according to our instruments. Now that's *wind*.

At last we rose above the turbulence, the air thinned out, and the bucking and groaning stopped, except of course the bucking and groaning of all the guys, including me, who'd been shaken like peppercorns and now were throwing up

half-digested rations all over ourselves and one another.

Our flight steadied. We were approaching the limit of the atmosphere. We flickered out of the planet's shadow and seemingly headed straight for the huge red eye of the sun. Then I noticed that something else had taken control, that we were beginning to turn, that a small but bright star in the distance was no star at all, it was the *Zhukov*. We were foul and stinking and disoriented and terrorized, but we were alive and under the control of the mother ship, and I figured I'd take a lot of airsickness and bad smells for that.

The welcoming committee seemed to feel the same way. The whole cadre was waiting for us and broke into cheers as one by one we crawled up through the hatchway out of the shuttle, looking and smelling like rats from a particularly unsanitary sewer. Marie hugged me without regard to smell or protocol, then clasped the hand of each and every member of Platoon Aleph as they filed past, from O'Rourke down to the yardbirds, with a special warm word for every one of them. "Thank God you're safe.... Welcome home.... You're a true hero," and so forth.

Then they were off to scrub down and, where necessary, get patched up by Doc Gannett. No one turned out to have any injury more serious than abrasions and contusions and an occasional egg-sized lump on the noggin, which was either the most improbable good luck or else direct intervention by the god of fools and spacemen.

Heading for the command suite to do my own more luxurious cleaning up, I asked Marie quietly if she had any news about Morales and his people. She shook her head.

"We can't find them," she admitted. "Fires are spreading everywhere, so you can't see anything. Close to the surface the ionization is impenetrable, so the scanners are useless, unless Morales can rise above the turbulence as you did. That was very brave and very intelligent of you," she added, and I accepted manfully the praise that rightfully belonged to nothing but a smart autopilot and plain dumb luck.

Near the entry to the bridge, Cos intercepted us and said, "I'm sorry, Kohn. I knew something bad was coming, but I didn't know what it was."

"The object was dark."

"Yes, it was dark."

About the other platoon he was at least moderately encouraging. “I think your friend is still alive. When somebody I know dies, it’s like being jabbed with a needle. I haven’t felt that yet.”

“So it wasn’t us the colonists were afraid of?”

He seemed perplexed. “Us? No, they were never afraid of us. What gave you that idea? Somehow they knew this thing was coming. Maybe their prophet *is* clairvoyant after all, and he must be better than I am. They didn’t think they could escape it, and yet—somehow—they seem to have done just that.”

Then it was shower time, followed by some unpleasant patchwork from Gannett, including sewing back a partially detached left ear. I hadn’t even noticed the injury—it had bled all over me, but in the general mess, who could tell?—until hot soapy water hit it in the shower, when I almost went through the nearest bulkhead. After Gannett left me with six stitches and a shot of painkiller, I and my bandaged ear went to bed, to be wrapped up in clean sheets and comforted by Marie.

I suppose you think we made love. Actually, I was asleep in about twenty seconds, and thoughts of romance had to wait for tomorrow.

* * * *

The next few days would have been wonderful, except for our anxiety over Morales and his people in Platoon Beth.

Views of the planet were grim. The whole thing was now submerged in clouds that whirled this way and that, random streams of energy colliding with each other and forming cyclones or anticyclones, depending on latitude. After the initial inferno of forest and grass fires, there was evidence of a steadily dropping surface temperature because the red sunlight had been almost totally blocked out.

“Conditions,” said a computer voice, summing up the situation for several of us on the bridge, “have become severe and inimical to life.”

“Thank you so much,” I muttered, but Marie said, “My dear, it’s only a machine, of course it’s banal. It’s *supposed* to be banal.”

Cos kept insisting that our people were probably alive, or at any rate that he hadn’t received any definite notice of their death. The second or third day, I forget which, he was finally able to indicate a general area where he thought they were—about three hundred clicks from where I’d lost contact with them. He

added that their shuttle was damaged and they were pinned down by the storms, and were hungry. He figured they might have tried to escape the planet, only to be hit by a downdraft and crash again.

I wanted to take the surviving shuttle and go look for them, but Marie vetoed the idea without hesitation. “Thirty-six people in imminent danger are quite enough,” she said. “To say nothing of the colonists, wherever they may be.”

Now *that* was truly baffling. Our scanners and Cos wore out their various exotic senses, and simply couldn’t find any indication of them. Yet thousands of people—even if they were somehow managing to live in areas remote from the impact crater, without electronic communications and even without fire—at least had to be thinking and feeling, and Cos should pick up on that. And if they’d all been killed, Cos said he should have received the psychic “tsunami of despair” the mind hurls out at the moment of death. But except for the faint signals from our own people, he’d heard nothing.

As the days went by, Marie came as close to being distraught as I ever saw her. Finally she chose dinnertime, when the surviving cadre were together—effectively a staff meeting, though it wasn’t called that—to announce her decision.

“We’re going to take the *Zhukov* in,” she said. “All the way down to the surface.”

Everybody gave a muted gasp, then sat silent, figuring what that might mean. She began to speak quietly, in the kind of sure, still tone that comes from someone who’s made a tough decision and means to stick by it.

Of course, she said, superficially her plan was nonsense, first refusing to risk thirty-six people in the surviving shuttle and then risking the ship and all aboard. But the *Zhukov* wasn’t just a big transorbital. It was made of nuclear steel and it had almost limitless supplies of energy at its disposal.

She admitted that regulations forbade bringing spacecraft into a planet’s atmosphere for a variety of good reasons—corrosive effects on the ship, release of toxic emissions into the planet’s environment, and so forth. But the regs also allowed commanders to violate standard operating procedures under emergency conditions, the only proviso being that they’d damn well better be able to justify their action later on. She thought she could.

“Anyway, this is what we’ll do,” she finished. “If anybody wants to file a

protest, they're welcome to do so."

Nobody said anything.

"Then let's get on with it," she said. "When we go in, all personnel will be at battle stations. All safety doors will be closed and sealed. All personnel will wear survival suits. I don't think anything down there can breach a compartment, but if something does and a group becomes isolated, they'll have to survive on their own for an unpredictable length of time until we can reach them. Mr. Cos will guide us until more standard scanning methods pick up signals from the ground. *Bonne chance.*"

Wine had been served, and we solemnly raised our glasses and wished her and each other luck.

I spent the next twelve hours with my platoon, working out exact procedures if we had to exit the *Zhukov* and help collect Morales and his people. Instead of retreating closer to the core of the ship, like the others, we were to occupy the compartment nearest the shuttle hatch. Everybody suited up, and O'Rourke and I began checking them over and over and over again, to make sure that all the seals were tight and the heating and breathing units were functional. I figured we'd need to take our air with us, because the planetary atmosphere had become a sandstorm of dust and ashes and toxic byproducts of burning. We'd need our helmet lights. We'd need nylon lines connecting us like mountain climbers, so we wouldn't get lost or blown away. We'd need old-fashioned basket litters to haul the injured. We'd need every goddamn thing.

As we were reaching the end of our preparations, I got a squawk from the bridge. My presence was demanded soonest. I left O'Rourke to do his very competent best and hastened past retracted safety doors through a corridor that would soon, I expected, be chopped up into segments like a snake that ran afoul of an autoplow in a wheat field. As I trotted along, the doors began to be tested, sliding closed with a sigh and whisper and a terminal clank, then opening again.

I popped out onto the bridge to find Marie looking stormy, Cos looking obstinate, and the celestial navigator (what was the guy's name—Sajnovich? I can't remember) looking at the planet in the big monitor that hung over the bridge and whistling softly and tunelessly to himself. Marie gestured at Cos, one of those very French gestures, as if she was throwing away a piece of food that had begun to smell bad.

"*Écoutez!*" she snapped. "Listen to this!"

Cos, still looking mulish, said, “Well, what d’you want me to say? I’m telling you what I’m getting, or not getting, and if it interrupts all your wonderful plans, I can’t help that.”

I touched his shoulder. “Just tell me,” I said.

“I’ve lost Morales and that bunch. They don’t seem to be there anymore.”

“You mean they’re dead?”

“I don’t think so. They’re just gone, that’s all.”

Another goddamn mystery disappearance. When I relayed to O’Rourke the news that all our preparations had been wasted, he looked as rebellious as I ever saw him. Then he shrugged and said, “*#%&,” ten or twenty times, and told the guys to take off their survival suits and go back to their barracks compartment.

Zhukov stayed in orbit, bombarding *Paradiso*’s infernal surface with every form of radiant energy it had, looking for somebody—anybody, in fact. Hours went by, and we were still at it when the sensors started screaming. Not because they’d found our people, but because a chunk of metal instantly identifiable as a VNO, or vehicle of nonhuman origin, had emerged from behind the planet and was crossing the terminator into the dim red light of the sun.

* * * *

Sirens added to the prevailing racket and robot voices intoned, “Battle stations, battle stations.”

Suddenly everybody was grabbing for personal weapons and running like hell for assigned areas around the central core of the ship. Thirty seconds later the safety doors started closing, and if you got isolated in an outer compartment, that was tough, you stayed there until the All Clear went off and the doors opened. Or until an enemy missile whacked the hull, in which case you died of the explosion if it penetrated and the concussion if it didn’t.

Somehow O’Rourke got all our people to the designated inner compartments. Those who’d been showering were buck naked, but when you’re at war, you don’t worry about trivia like that.

I stayed on the bridge, not because I was useful but because nobody had sent me away, and I wanted to see what was happening. I strapped into the chair

usually occupied by the celestial navigator, who'd taken off to a secure compartment on the other side of the core that contained a duplicate guidance system. That way there'd be somebody to maneuver the ship if the bridge got destroyed.

Seated in the commander's chair, Marie donned one of those virtual-reality headpieces. I donned the navigator's headset and listened to her issuing orders with the aplomb of a chef instructing a sous-chef exactly how to construct a chocolate soufflé. The delicate fingers that had played such tunes on my body were now resting on keypads that gave her the power to override any and all systems. Somebody's voice said, "Real bastard, ain't she?" in tones of pure admiration.

So I watched my first combat in space—hell, my first real combat *anywhere*—unfold in the monitor. Banks of lasers crisscrossed a big shadowbox, and when the bridge lights were doused, we were all projected into that virtual space. I don't think I felt any fear at all, it was too exciting, and if an enemy FTLM suddenly materialized in the center of the *Zhukov* there was nothing to worry about anyway, because we'd all turn to quarks in a nanosecond. So I could get an almost esthetic delight out of the cloud-drenched planet, the red orb rising behind it, and the background of hard crystalline stars.

The one thing I couldn't see was the alien ship—the bogey—that was causing all the upheaval. Then a blue circle appeared in the monitor, locating it for me. Columns of numbers that probably meant something to the Space Service types popped up along the margins of the image. A human voice said incredulously, "Velocity *zero*?" which I took to mean that the bogey had stopped moving.

Janesco's voice reported that the lids were off the missile silos. He seemed to be waiting for Marie to say the modern equivalent of "You may fire when ready, Gridley," but all she said was, "Deploy PBG," meaning the particle beam generator.

"Ready."

"Auto response on all systems."

"Auto response."

That meant the ship would respond to any detected hostile action without further command. At the same time I heard the main drive engines and even the

dark energy generator revving up. Trying to apply what I knew of ground combat to space, I figured she was getting ready to dodge behind *Paradiso*, and if the bogey followed, hit him hard as he came into view. Sort of like defending a reverse slope in mountain warfare, where you let the other guy show up against the sky, then whack him. These were the thoughts going through my head at the exact moment when the image of Jesús Morales, big and holographically precise, appeared between the laser banks, blocking out the planet and the sun and everything else except the spatter of stars above him.

“Colonel,” he said, his voice somewhat gruff but perfectly audible, “we’re aboard an alien ship. Those guys from the Zoo came in and saved us. All of us, including the colonists. Do you copy?”

Contrary to what my wife Anna likes to say, I am never, or almost never, vulgar. But I do believe there were a lot of spotty underpants on the bridge of the *Zhukov* at that instant.

There was also a stunned silence, in the middle of which I heard my own voice—and yeah, I was a lieutenant and therefore the lowest life-form present, but what the hell, Morales was my friend not theirs—say loudly into the navigator’s mike, “Jesús, we copy.”

“*If I may,*” said Marie icily, and I immediately stopped my runaway tongue by clamping it between my teeth.

“What do they propose to do with you?” she demanded.

“Send us to the *Zhukov* by shuttle. I think it’s meant to be a diplomatic gesture, now that the war’s over and we’re withdrawing from this sector of space. They’re thinking of peaceful trade and things like that in the future.”

“Are all of you there?”

“Seventeen of us from Beth platoon. My other people died. We have six injured.”

“We’ll be ready for you. What about the colonists?”

“The colonists have voted to join the Zoo—become another associated species—and not return to Terra. They seem to have a kind of natural belief in symbiosis, see it as an aspect of love. Also, they don’t trust their fellow humans.”

“I wonder why,” I said. No I didn’t, because I was still biting my tongue.

Anyway, sarcasm wouldn't have been welcomed, not even by me. I was too excited to see Morales alive, and I didn't really give a rat's ass what the Ladderites chose to do or not do.

But Marie wasn't happy. "We have orders to return those people to a region under human control."

"The aliens aren't subject to our orders," Morales pointed out.

"Quite so. Am I permitted to speak to their prophet?"

"He was an old man. He died during their flight from the impact area. For the first time they don't have anybody with good strong ESP to lead them and they're probably making bad, or at any rate uninformed, decisions."

"Well, that's their problem. Convey my agreement to the Z—to whoever's in command there. We won't fire on the shuttle, and Gannett will be waiting for the injured."

She then issued three orders. First, she told Gannett and me to meet the shuttle and remove our people. Second, she told Janesco to maintain the auto response order but instruct the heavy weapons control computer not to fire on the shuttle. Third, she told all other personnel to remain at their battle stations.

Janesco was angry with her. His voice came down hoarse and tough from the Arctic Circle. "Commander, it's a trick. Even that fool Schlacht would have known it's a trick."

"Of course it's a trick," she snapped. "But what trick? Will the shuttle blow up the instant it gets alongside the *Zhukov*? Have our people been infected with some lethal disease or parasite? Or is this essentially a diplomatic ploy, as Lieutenant Morales thinks?"

There was an impromptu staff meeting going on when I left the bridge. For the moment I was under Gannett's command, and I'd hardly reached the airlock when he had me encased in an elastoplast suit like one he was wearing. Just in case the ploy was to get some deadly bug past the *Zhukov*'s defenses, we'd meet our guys in these rigs, breathing through electrostatic filters with little fans roaring in our ears. He'd also brought along six medbots that looked like enormous crabs, scuttling around on jointed legs and waving exaggeratedly long arms. While we waited, they brought in and stacked the basket litters I'd been planning to take on our aborted return to Paradiso.

The alien shuttle approached. The docking procedure was interesting. I hadn't been able to figure how they could get a tight air seal when *Zhukov's* airlock wasn't configured to receive them. But the problem turned out to be no problem for our late enemies. While we watched through a port in the inner doors of the lock, they extruded a flexible tube—an umbilical, the doc called it—which expanded like the business end of a trumpet. We opened the outer airlock doors, and the trumpet entered and sealed itself to the bulkheads.

Then we opened our inner doors, they opened theirs at far end of the tube, air howled into the umbilical—higher pressure on our side—and a few minutes later here came Jesús Morales himself, staggering through the tube against the gale and looking thin and battered, but totally alive. The medbots had him suited up before I could touch him, but then we swapped a real *abrazo* through the plastic, and he joined in helping the walking injured aboard and laying the badly busted guys in the litters. In a few minutes everybody was wrapped up like party gifts and sprayed down with some kind of antiseptic gunk.

Gannett told me to close the inner airlock doors. As I turned to obey the order, I caught just a glimpse of the only Zoo denizens I ever saw. Something with a head vaguely like a seahorse—rather stiff, bluish, with mild bulging eyes and some sort of breathing apparatus on the end of its long snout—stared back at me while something else with many arms moved around in the background.

I had just stretched out my hand toward the button to close the doors when something ran under my arm and leaped into the umbilical. From inside the tube Cos turned and looked back at me with those large dark eyes, raised one small hand and waved and shouted, “They’re my people, Kohn! I have to save them!”

“Get that man back!” shouted Gannett. Instead I hit the button and the doors began to slide shut. I had an instantaneous flash of the end of the umbilical folding in upon itself and looking, in fact, exactly like a king-size navel.

“Sorry, sir,” I told the surgeon, “but you didn’t countermand your first order.”

Thought I was smart. Didn’t realize I’d just killed Cos, poor little bastard, or he’d killed himself, however you chose to look at it. My second unintended homicide of the trip.

Through the port I watched the shuttle seal itself up and drift away, hang a U and head back. It hadn’t blown up. And I may as well tell you now that after

exhaustive tests Gannett found that our people hadn't been infected with anything, either. If there had been a ploy, we never found out what it was, and personally I think Jesús probably had it right from the start. Our late enemies had been making a conciliatory gesture—that was all.

While Gannett and his bots were bedding everybody down in the now overflowing sickbay, I took off the plastic suit and returned to the bridge to report the successful recovery of our people. But nobody was interested in anything I had to say.

They were staring as if hypnotized at the monitor, at two converging blue circles, one marking the alien shuttle, the other marking the bogey. Marie sat in her commander's chair like an alabaster statue. The two circles merged, and the slender fingers of her left hand, with the transparent lacquer on the nails, made a tiny movement, tapping the left keypad that gave her command of all our firepower.

My mouth, I think, formed the word *don't*, but no sound came out, or none that I heard, anyway. Suddenly the *Zhukov* moved, the acceleration slamming me painfully against the deck. We began to slide behind what had become Planet Inferno, but not before the alien ship erupted in a huge fireball, its fragments flying out in that strangely leisured way that things seem to move in space.

The bridge came alive then, all the Space Service types cheering at once, because they'd just won the last battle of the Alien War. Which wasn't all that hard, considering the other guys, poor bastards, hadn't known that the war was still going on.

* * * *

When Marie returned to the command suite, I was there waiting for her, somewhat bruised, a hen's egg taking form on the back of my head. But thoroughly conscious, and in a state of cold rage.

"I had to do it," she said quickly. "My orders contain a secret protocol obliging me to destroy any alien ship we encounter."

I didn't say anything. So she started arguing with what I hadn't said.

"Suppose I'd accepted their terms, disobeyed my orders, gone back without the colonists—what would my enemies at HQ have said? That I'd failed at my mission, violated my instructions, consorted with our enemies and allowed them to kidnap our people. I'd have been court-martialed."

I finally found my voice. “So to prevent that, you killed several thousand intelligent creatures, most of them human. Including Cos.”

“Pardon me if I don’t cry over him. He’d picked up our plans with that damned intuition of his and he was ready to, how do you say it, *jaser*—blab—to our enemies. You’re such a child, Robair. You haven’t yet learned to accept the difficult things that your choice of a military career entails. You’ve no idea what it’s like to be in command. You’ll toughen up in time.”

“Not to this extent.”

“Bah, what’s the use of arguing? You need to grow up, that’s all. You haven’t really understood much about the inner history of this voyage, have you? Not much at all. It was dismaying to my service when the Council of State insisted on putting a Security officer in charge. How could one of those dreary policemen understand our need to defeat the enemy and recover our honor? But of course that was the real point—he was supposed to keep the rest of us under control.

“Fortunately, Security HQ wanted to get rid of Schlacht, whose sexual peculiarities had become notorious, so they gave the job to him. Our intelligence people had very little trouble locating a young woman who, for excellent reasons, wanted to kill him. They armed her and put her aboard and I saw to her survival here. That little wretch Cos almost queered the whole thing—I never really forgave him for telling the General we had a stowaway. When I made you Security officer I assumed you’d arrest Cos and get him out of my hair. Well, you didn’t do what I expected, but in a way you did better. After our stowaway took her revenge, I was at a loss as to what to do with her, until you quite innocently solved *that* problem. And then Cos, while trying to save his fellow Ladderites, eliminated himself. So you see, everything worked out perfectly.”

The minute that followed this speech was the longest and chilliest I’d experienced up to that time. Then I said, “If you don’t object, Ma’am, I think I’ll move back into my old quarters. When he gets out of sickbay, Morales can join me.”

“Suit yourself. I hope you’ll be very happy together.”

I came to attention, saluted, did a right-about-face, and walked out. That was how my shipboard romance ended.

* * * *

So, Jesús son of Jesús, now you know how the Zoo, by saving your father's life and returning him to us, made it possible for him to meet and marry your mother a few years later and for you to be begotten and born. Remember the nameless creatures of that nameless ship with gratitude; for their atoms have long since been dispersed, and they've left no memorial behind except you.

After we returned to Terra, I read Marie's report. It was a fine work of fiction. It told how the aliens had already slaughtered the colonists when we arrived, and in revenge we then engaged and destroyed their ship. The public loved it. The news of our belated victory over an enemy who'd beat us handily in the war sent a thrill all across the far-flung outposts of humanity. The *Zhukov's* Space Service officers loyally supported their commander's version of events, and were duly rewarded a few years later when the Council of State made her the first woman Commandant of the service. She died quite recently, and her ashes lie entombed in Paris at the Invalides, near the dust of Napoleon.

Morales and I turned in reports to Security HQ giving the facts, which of course were ignored because we were only lieutenants. Though we didn't stay so for long. We were both promoted to captain on the basis of our service in "the epic voyage of the *Zhukov*" (as the Council called it)—"a mission to save humanity that became a mission to avenge humanity." That sounds pretty good, doesn't it? Words are so much handier than realities. Meanwhile, all that your Papa and I really had done and endured vanished into the category of nonevents.

There was another and fatal epilogue to this story. Nobody knows for sure the reason for the outbreak of the Second Alien War, but personally I've always believed the creatures of the Zoo were seeking revenge for the treacherous destruction of their ship. By then the Trans-Aran Wormhole had been discovered and mapped, and there was that terrible battle near the exit where we lost so many ships and so many thousands of our best people, including your father, who was commanding a landing party aboard the old *Sun-Tzu* when an FTLM vaporized it.

That was how I learned that regardless of our smarts or our rank, we're all the serfs and peons of history. But I also decided that I didn't have to surrender my soul, as Marie had done. I decided to knuckle under when I had to, but keep a lifelong obligation to tell the truth whenever that became possible. It's possible now, and I'm laying it on you, hoping that in the future when great power comes into your hands, you'll know how not to use it.

In my new condition of humility, I also started to look up my old enlisted people—my fellow peons, you might say. I began meeting annually with O'Rourke

and Chu and as many of our people as wanted and were able to come. Like veterans everywhere, we met to lift some brews together and reminisce, and I learned a lot from talking with them. Once when he was drunk, O'Rourke told me in a friendly way that he'd always regarded me as "a *#%& fool, but a *#%& fool with possibilities." I thought that was a real compliment, coming from such a fathomless well of cynicism.

Chu admitted to me that sometimes he wished he'd followed his family tradition and become a pirate instead of a soldier. "The danger's the same," he said, "but the profits are much greater. Like you, I must have some ethics squirreled away somewhere." He looked embarrassed saying that, and I think he must have been drunk, too, at the time.

I was able to follow the lives of some of our guys long after the old *Zhukov* had gone to Europa to be scrapped. One of the wildest of our douches quit the service and succumbed to respectability. She's now married to a Councilor of State—and I won't tell you his name, so don't ask. Another quit and got rich running a brothel in the capital at New Angkor.

Our baffling genius Soza told me that the events on Paradiso had scared him so badly, he'd finally realized that hiding from responsibility in the enlisted service was even more dangerous than living in the real world outside it. So, instead of re-upping when his tour was over, he quit and worked his way through a minor college, won a scholarship to a major medical school, and the last I heard of him was a neurosurgeon doing great work on reconstructing damaged spinal cords. There always are some people who beat the odds, right?

Still, most of our guys remained simple soldiers. I found talking with them something of a chore because they totally lacked the ability to generalize—they never summed up, they just remembered with numbing precision exactly this place or that place, exactly what words exactly what person had said and when he or she had said them. "D'you remember, sir," one said, "when we went into O-1, how we come around that corner with the little white house with the blue sign about twenty booties painted on it? Wasn't that a laugh?"

They often spoke about Marie. "You remember, sir, when we got back to the ship and the commander herself told us how great we were?" said another guy. "I was covered with blood and puke, and yet she shook my hand anyhow and said I was a hero. Gawd, that was amazing. And now she's a big wheel, I seen her last week in the feelies. Think about that. Gawd, I'll never forget her."

Nor will I.

