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Bliss

by David Rome

The Ship was divided into three huge sections within which two separate factions had survived the long voyage through interstellar space—but they were separated by the impenetrable section known as “The Ruins”...

An A\NN/A Preservation Edition. [Notes](#)

Chapter One

On those secret evenings when Joann and I would huddle together in the ruins of the disused lowerdeck transmitter, I would often talk about my family—and Jack was always largest in my mind. I could never remember a time when I had bested him. At seven he was twisting my arm up my back and making me shriek like a girl; at twelve he was smooth-limbed and tall, smiling and lording it over me; and at twenty, in a fit of temper, he tossed a heavy book across the cabin one night and sent me staggering.

Our cabin wasn't like the decaying lowerdeck nest where Joann's people lived. It was lavishly upperdeck, thickly carpeted and expensively furnished. Ion-gravity here was more efficient too. My father sat comfortably reading, knees crossed and body relaxed.

He didn't look up when Jack threw the book, but mother came fussing in, a tiny woman with a dimple-soft mouth. Shaking her head, she didn't say anything. She stooped to pick up the book, but Jack snatched it away and crossed to the shelves.

He slotted it neatly into place, smilingly arrogant. His eyes moved to father, bland face complacent.

Father had looked up sharply when mother bustled in. Now he turned to Jack, a tall man with dark, in-sucked cheeks. His lips were thin and pale, like a chalk line under big hooking nose.

“Curb your enthusiasm,” he said coldly.

I laughed softly, and Jack snapped a glance at me, eyes flashing. I gestured obscenely at him—an upthrusting motion with the fingers that I'd learned from the lowerdeck people.

His mouth—so like father's—went tight. He pivoted spotted a vase behind mother, lifted it and threw it hard and viciously, at chest height. I ducked aside and it shattered on the wall at my back; the pieces fell plopping into the carpet.

There was a silence—and mother scurried forward, snatching up the fragments as though their disappearance would lighten Jack's punishment.

But Jack had no intention of being punished. He was stabbing his fingers into the air, imitating my gesture. “He was doing this to me! He learnt it from the Plebs!”

None of my family knew of my close contact with the lower-deck peoples, but my father was a member of the Presidium and mention of Pleb influence on his son was enough to heat him to violence.

“Is this true?” said my father.

The truth was already a flush in my cheeks. He stepped forward slowly, his eyes dark with fury. I felt a rush of nausea and swallowed desperately. “I didn’t know what it meant—”

“Myles—please!” Mother’s hand was on his arm.

For an instant father’s eyes were close to mine, still black and smouldering. Then he gestured very obviously with his chin in the direction of my room, and mother bustled forward, anxious to get me out of his sight.

“You thank your lucky stars,” she said later.

“My what? What are stars?”

Her soft mouth was puckering.

“Go to sleep, boy.”

“What are stars?” I persisted.

“A saying, just a saying . . .”

And when she was gone I slept, dreaming. Somehow our ship crossed the unlit emptiness of space and reached Bliss during my generation; and the lowerdeck rose in revolt and the ruling Presidium was destroyed . . .

The next day there was to be a whipping and Removal in the Lower place, and father was up early, dressing in ceremonial black.

While he was twisting and turning in front of the mirrors, mother hurried Jack and me into our robes and out of the cabin. Father would be practising with the whips, and this was something even Jack—almost adult—wasn’t allowed to see.

As we turned into the passagetube leading to the avenue, Jack swung on me.

“The climb?” he said, smiling. “Or aren’t you in the mood?” His eyes were on mine, his lips curling.

I knew what he meant. For years now, Jack and I had shared a secret. At the end of our passagetube, no more than a yard from the avenue itself, there was a natural ladder—the corner of a window, the top of a door frame, another window, a crevice—and then the roof of the deck house. It was a dangerous climb and Jack knew I was afraid of it.

Now, though, with the memory of our clash the night before fresh in my mind, there was a strange tightness in my throat. I said very softly, “I’m in the mood,” and Jack saw this as the challenge it was, and his eyes sparked suddenly.

Together, then already jostling for first place, we followed the passagetube until we reached the point where it broke out into the avenue. We looked across the wide street, but it was deserted. Jack was a second faster than I was. He turned back into the tube, gripped the ledge of the window with expert ease. His feet found a hold and he flowed upward. I followed. I was shorter and thinner, and the climb was hard going for me. Jack had reached the roof and was laughing down at me while I was still clawing my way past the second window.

I looked up into his smooth, smiling face, and the hate surged inside me. Then it was gone and there was

only determination. I flexed my legs, groped with my fingers until I found the slight crevice that was the only aid to the summit at this point, and with one leg swinging dangerously over the thirty foot drop I literally flung myself at the roof.

And somehow I got over the edge. I had to strain with my palms flat on the steel and the corner of the roof cutting into my chest, but I made it. I came to my feet, shaking, and together Jack and I looked along the tops of a dozen other houses, all exactly the same height, forming a pathway that was only broken by the narrow passagetubes.

“Someday,” Jack breathed, “we’ll go all the way down that pathway, Dom. Right into the heart of the Presidium...”

I nodded shortly, because I knew we didn’t have much time. If we weren’t at the Lower Place, mother would get to hear of it—and she would mention it to father.

I tugged at Jack’s robe—and regretted it instantly. He took it as a sign of weakness, and he dawdled down the side of the building after I had reached the deck again. He made a show of fear at the bottom, mimicking me, and I turned away from him, going off down the avenue. He walked just behind me for a while, repeating the act, but finally, when I didn’t respond, he grew tired of this and he spurted a little, drawing level with me as we strolled together down the wide street, where the hydroponics were trimmed and neat, forming squares of colour in front of each deck house.

It was quiet out here, with only a few people making their way in the direction of the companionway. Overhead, the sunlights were burning down as they always did during daytime, diffused by the vastness of the ship.

None of us really knew how big the ship was. We knew that beyond the Pleb city where thousands lived now, and beyond the machine domes and the cultivated hydroponics, there were the Ruins—another city where other people had lived generations ago. But no one—not even members of the Presidium—ever went to the Ruins now. There were dangers—and stories of ghosts—there that none of us could understand.

We had reached the companionway now, and the Power Room was below us. Jack and I dawdled down the steel steps and reached the lower level. And now, approaching the viewports of the Power Room, we did a forbidden thing: we raised our eyes to the level of the ports, and looked in at the deserted bucket-seats and strange white dials. (Centuries ago the ancients of the ship had worshipped here—had paid homage to these instruments. Now the Presidium—Gods and Masters of the ship—forbade it.

As we stared, footsteps sounded on the companionway above. Jack breathed a warning and we ran. We rounded the Power Room and the companionway to the lowerdeck was ahead. We took the first dozen steps at full tilt, then slowed down. Below us now was Pleb City.

Jack led the way down the companionway, his back arching in excitement. Cold eyes touched us as our robes caught the momentary attention of the Plebs; but there were others from the upperdeck among them, and Jack and I threaded our way through the crowds until we reached those we knew.

Jack was loud and cheerful, slapping backs and smiling at the girls. I stood a little apart, searching the Plebs for Joann’s slim body and her copper coloured hair. But I couldn’t see her, and after a while my eyes were drawn to the cleared circle of the Lower Place, where the single steel pillar rose into the sky.

A man and a woman were out there—the man wearing upperdeck robes, the woman a Pleb. They were bound by the wrists, their legs spread wide and their bodies hugged close to each side of the pillar.

Behind them was the Presidium stand, filling quickly. These men were bright-robed, hard eyes already feeding on the woman at the pillar.

Now, as I stared at the captive man and woman, a dull rage was smouldering inside me. And mingled with the rage there was fear. Fear of my father's power, and fear of the Presidium he represented, because Joann had hinted one night that she thought an Informer had seen us together on the outskirts of Pleb City. And the Presidium forbade intimacy between upper and lower-deck peoples.

As the thought came to my mind, my eyes were drawn upward to the companionway above the Lower Place. And there at its head was my father. He was descending with other Whippers, and as they approached the central pillar a silence settled over the crowd and a voice spoke out from the Presidium Stand:

"This man and this woman..."

A pink-lipped upperdeck girl whispered loudly: "They bratted out of bounds!" And she blushed and squirmed with pleasure at her own crudity.

"... aware that our levels of society must be preserved..."

The pink-lipped girl was nuzzling closer to Jack, lips parting sensually as she listened to the intonation.

"... according to the dictates of our ancients, did wilfully commit copulation, and did in defiance of these laws permit conception to follow their act."

The Whippers stepped forward. The crowd drew in breath, and were silent. The whipping would come first; then the Public Removal, and finally the ritual of Sterilization.

The man's back was bared now, and his robes hung in a puff round his hips. The woman had pressed closer to the pillar, her pale shoulders arched, thin body trembling.

And now my eyes were fastened on my father, drawing his face closer; the cruel lips and cold, narrowed eyes. And soon—as the whip rose and fell—I found that my body was shaking and that Jack's cheeks were flushing with anger and shame as the others around us saw tears standing wet in my eyes...

Chapter Two

I don't know how long it was before a hand touched my arm. Jack had turned away violently, with an oath, and now the others had followed his lead. Then the hand, soft yet firm, touched my arm, and through the mask of blind hate for my father and Jack I saw dark eyes and pale face, and the hair, copper bright.

Joann whispered quickly, "Come away, Dom!" and I glanced once at Jack, afraid he would see her. But the Public Removal had begun and his hard eyes were lusting, his hands clutching the girl with the pink lips to his side.

I moved away silently, sliding through the crowd. Joann took my hand, almost running, and at last we were clear. I brushed one hand across my eyes, flushing now, because Joann had seen me crying like a child. The crowds were behind us; we were off down the street from the Lower Place. Here there were poky cabins in the cave-like Pleb buildings. The walkways were littered with refuse.

Joann and I walked hand in hand, knowing we were safe in this part of the city. My upperdeck robes would attract attention, but no one would challenge my right to be here among the Plebs. The spirit had gone out of these people; only the upperdeck descendants of ancient captains were alive now.

I turned to my right, leading Joann. Here the street widened, cutting out toward the hull of the ship. I knew where I was going. At the end of this street, almost buried under fallen steel cabins, was the derelict transmitter. Here we could sit together, absolutely hidden.

By the time we had reached it, walking now alongside deserted and decaying buildings, I was brighter again, and my shame had diminished. I eased my way through the debris to where the transmitter had once stood alone in a square surrounded by cabins, and I turned to help Joann to come through.

Then, when her fingers were curling in mine, and her face was thrusting out of the gloomy tunnel of debris, she stopped abruptly. Her fingers tightened suddenly, then drew back. She raised her forefinger, pointing beyond me. Then, very slowly she came out of the tunnel.

“Dom?” she said wonderingly. “Hasn’t something changed?”

I turned quickly, suddenly afraid. And in some indefinable way the transmitter did seem different, did seem changed.

Then, going forward cautiously across fallen steel, I knew why. A great central beam, which had always lain half across the doorway of the transmitter, had been removed. Somehow it had contrived to shift itself from the doorway to the deck beside the transmitter.

“Someone else?” said Joann nervously. “Meeting here, Dom?”

I shook my head. I didn’t know. I told Joann to stay where she was and I went forward—only two more paces—alone. Now I was directly outside the transmitter, looking in.

There was no one inside. The transmitters, whatever they had been used for in the past—and though we knew the name of these boxes, we didn’t know their purpose—hadn’t been designed to accommodate more than one adult at a time. Joann and I, both slim, were just able to fit in. We sat side by side now, on the metal slab that wasn’t steel or aluminium or any metal we knew.

With an effort I said, “All right now?”

But she wasn’t—and neither was I. Someone else knew the secret of the transmitter—someone else had been here. Joann and I were awkward with each other, aware of the difference but not speaking it aloud. At nineteen we weren’t lovers; but soon we would be. There was silence between us.

Finally I said, “Will tonight be better?”

We had come here to forget that whippings, removals and sterilization could exist. But it wasn’t working. Joann shivered faintly, as though this place would be fearful when the city was asleep.

I said gently, “Joann—”

And a terrifying thing happened!

Joann melted!

There is no other word for it. One instant we were together, and the next, Joann was gone.

I felt her go—actually felt her oiling into nothingness. Then I was sitting in the booth, my arms still clasped ridiculously, my back pressed hard against the steel wall.

And then, with a silent cry already tearing my throat, I was jammed against that wall until my ribs crackled, and an arm in rough-cloth robes was driving savagely into my face while a huge body writhed

in liquid-steel motion, threatening to crush me.

And I couldn't move.

Couldn't breathe...

I could hear a voice somewhere in the far distance, and I stirred. Now, as my eyes cleared, the speaker knelt beside me, a short, very thin man with hair like crayon streaks across his scalp.

"Just rest a couple of minutes. Get your breath back," he said. Then he turned to another, taller, man at his side. "The Gid sent him through. He must have been near the transmitter."

"Or in it," said the taller man. "But not on the hot-spot, like the girl, when we cleared the line. We should have known she wouldn't be alone."

Mention of Joann sparked a reaction in me. I didn't know how long I'd been lying here, unconscious. But the tall man, seeing my concern, nodded at me. "She's okay."

He was young—perhaps twenty-eight or nine—but he had an air of authority about him. He was tall, too; but there was a bigger man at his back. He saw me start, and he spoke again. "Don't let him worry you. He's a Gid, boy. He's harmless."

And now, very slowly, my fear was subsiding. Soon I began to ask wary, slow-phrased questions.

"Where is Joann?"

They seemed to treat me less like a child now. The younger man said again, "She's okay." Then, and somehow his voice was harsher, he said, "What were you doing around the transmitter?"

I said slowly, "Where am I?" but nobody answered my question. Instead, the younger man gestured to the Gid, and the huge body shuffled forward. A word I didn't catch passed between them; then I was lifted. The Gid carried me without apparent effort, the others walking six-inches-smaller at his sides, and now I saw that there were no buildings here—just flat deck going off into a greenish-hazed distance. Behind us was the transmitter, set close to the curving steel wall of the hull. The wall arched upward until it was lost overhead; the sunlights were brighter, almost painful to the eyes.

As I squinted, staring up into the sky, the taller man laughed softly and said, "Your sunlights were as powerful as these a century ago, but they're running down now—there'll soon be darkness foward."

Foward. So I knew one thing—we were at the rear of the ship. And I thought I knew the purpose of the transmitters now. But where—where exactly—were we? Beyond the Ruins? Beyond the hydroponic farms? Were the giant Gids the ghosts that haunted the Ruins?

"Darkness...?" I was probing now, wanting to know more. "How can there be darkness foward, and no darkness here?"

Men and women were passing us at frequent intervals—Gids and others—but they didn't give us more than a cursory glance, until, quite suddenly, a man passing close caught sight of my upperdeck robes. He was a yard to one side of us, staring up at me; and suddenly he spoke my name: "Dominic Nicklaus!" His eyes were wide, incredulous.

I swung my head around and met his stare. But I didn't recognize him. He was shortish, lean and grey-haired. He was familiar—yes, I had seen him somewhere before—but I couldn't go further than that. He was already speaking quickly to the two men with the Gid, and I thought, but wasn't sure, that I

heard my father's name mentioned.

Then this man I knew, but didn't know, spoke up to me again. "Your're in the right hands, Dominic. You'll be all right here."

Then he was walking on—my questions were forgotten—and still I couldn't place him. Later I learned that there wasn't any particular reason why I should have been able to. He was from upperdeck—that was all. He knew my family and my name because he had been a member of an anti-Presidium group; it was well known in parts of the upper-deck that despite my father's position I had no love for the Presidium.

And now, as we walked on again, I noticed two things that had changed. Firstly, the landscape. Not flat any more, but broken by a low blister that had been invisible from any distance. It was from the side of this blister that men were coming and going. And secondly, the manner in which I was treated. The tall man spoke an order to the Gid, and instantly he set me on my feet; and the voices that spoke to me, though pleasant enough before, had real respect now, despite my age.

And as we entered the blister, going into what I was to discover was their transport system, I suddenly knew—and it was an almost physical shock—that I *was* in the right hands.

And for the first time in my life, with a sudden anticipation of action, I felt really alive.

The transport system must have been primitive by Earth standards, but to me, with no previous experience of such marvels, it was almost frightening.

We took our places in a tubular car, and I was strapped to an acceleration couch by the Gid. Slide doors closed, and the car began to move.

As we drew away I saw a transmitter cubicle set inside the entrance to the blister; but it was in poor condition, obviously inoperable. So these people weren't magicians. There were some things they couldn't repair.

As though he had been reading my thoughts, the tall man said, "This tube system once helped to join the whole ship together. The complement of the transmitters, you understand? We've got some of it back into order, but forrard it couldn't be done. The tube has collapsed; the entry blisters have caved in."

I was going to ask about Joann again, but the car had increased its speed, and now the need for the acceleration couches was obvious. I was pressed into it by a giant hand. For minutes I was held there, unable to speak. Then the pressure lessened sharply. The car ran in under another blister and halted silently.

"Joann?" I said, as I walked unsteadily beside them, leaving the car.

"The girl?" said the smaller man. "She's in good hands." Then suddenly he stopped, taking my arm. We were just inside the blister. "Look, Dominic. There's one thing you have to know..."

The taller man spoke. "Your way of life is over, Dom. You can never go back to it."

He was holding my eyes; and suddenly I felt strange facing this tall man, obviously a leader, who was so grave. Did I want to go back? I couldn't be sure. All I knew was that excitement was stirring inside me. Whatever was going on, I wanted to be a part of it. There was movement here—action. Not lethargy and decay.

Chapter Three

They seemed to understand my silence. We moved out of the blister into the glaring sunlight, and here—I actually stumbled in amazement—here there were no open spaces. Buildings rose high on all sides, gleaming metal and glass constructions that seemed to be lost in a haze of distance overhead.

I was staggered. I walked on, two more steps, and inexplicably the walkway was moving under my feet. We stood—merely stood—and we were carried along.

“This was the third city,” the smaller man was explaining, “abandoned generations ago when the first radiation from the Tube began to permeate the shielding.” He pointed with one hand, half turning. “Back there is the wild hydroponic belt, and beyond that the Ruins. Closer, at the edge of our own hydroponic farms, are our machine domes. We’ve worked on them, restored them. We’re getting full power now.”

“The Ruins were the second city,” the taller man told me. “In the panic, when people were dying, that was abandoned too. Now the radiation has dissipated; we’ve rebuilt City Three—rebuilt it over half a millennium—and now, very soon, our forces will be ready...”

We had entered a building. The giant Gid had gone his own way. Rapt, I hadn’t even noticed the distance we had covered. Now, as we stepped on to an oval platform that carried us upward, the tall man said, “Do the Plebs hate the Presidium, Dominic?”

I couldn’t see the point behind the question. The oval platform halted silently at a higher level and we stepped off. I said slowly, “Hate...? No, I don’t think so. They would hate, perhaps, if they had the life left in them to do it. But their apathy—”

The tall man was suddenly alive. His eyes flashed. “That’s our problem, Dom. I want you to understand it. We send out the Gids through the transmitters, and they bring us Plebs. But it isn’t violation, Dom! Understand that. The hate is there—the revolt is already in them. But we have to bring them here—waken them up, Dom—before they can recognize it!”

We were walking down a passageway with carpet underfoot. I said slowly, “My father is a member of the Presidium...” And in my mind I was hearing one word over and again: “*Revolt.*” Was it possible? Another race, living here at the stern of the ship, planning the destruction of a body that had ruled the ship since the beginning of time?

And the Gids? Who were the Gids?

“We know about your father—”

Suddenly I was remembering my dream—years ago? The Plebs in revolt, the Presidium destroyed. I said softly, “Who are you?”

The tall man said quietly, “There were groups, Dom. Anti-Presidium groups. Some of them were upperdeck, some lower—and they overcame the apathy, Dom. Years ago now—I was born in City Three—the groups united, broke away from the rule of the Presidium. They came here, knowing somehow that the radiation would no longer be lethal. They found the Gids—men who had survived and mutated—had become immune. Radiation hadn’t killed them. They were a new race.”

We had stopped now, and the tall man’s hand was lifting to open a door. “The rest was a matter of time, Dom. Machines were repaired, the city rebuilt. We found medical supplies, abandoned years before. We sent men into Pleb City, where the machines were running down and the sunlights were slowly dying out, and we were able to repair some of the transmitters. Now the Gids go out regularly to bring us Plebs.

We've been building, Dom—a city, and a force. A new people, united in purpose: to overthrow the Presidium.”

The door opened then—and suddenly Joann was there, turning quickly as I stood for a moment, unmoving in the doorway.

“Dominic!”

And we were together again. When I turned, as a quiet sound caught my attention, I saw that the door had closed and that Joann and I were alone.

I spoke her name, and she said quickly, “Sit down, Dom...” She was nervous, was close to tears.

I just stared at her. Then I said awkwardly, “Are you all right”

It was crazy. We were like strangers. We sat down and talked, and I tried to calm her. I told her where we were, and how City Three had begun; and she was silent for a long time after that. Then, very slowly, she got to her feet, and her eyes were still troubled.

“I was left here alone,” she said. “I was able to look round this room...” She was crossing to a screen that was like a square white eye in the wall.

“I moved a switch, Dom...”

Her hand reached out. She touched a switch—and suddenly I was afraid. Then she pressed lightly, the switch clicked down, the screen changed.

A silent cry welled in my throat. I half rose, and fell back. The brightness that glared from the screen seemed to whirl around me in that room. I clawed at my eyes, twisting away from the pain of it—and then, abruptly, the door opened at our backs. The tall man stepped quickly past us, flicked the switch up—and the screen became blank.

“You take that in small doses,” he said.

I tried to speak, but my throat had constricted. The tall man was standing with his back to the screen, watching us now. When he spoke, his voice was soft and concerned. “I’m sorry about this...”

“*What is it?* ” said Joann.

He said slowly, “There’s no word for it that you could understand. It is space, and yet not space as you know it. We call it the Universe.”

“Space?” The panic was ebbing now. I said softly, “Space is nothingness. Space contains Earth and Bliss—there is nothing between.”

“No.” The tall man was shaking his head.

“Space is—”

“No, Dom. Space is what you saw on the screen.”

There was a desk in that room, and the tall man sat down. He looked at Joann, then at me. “I’m not asking you to accept it—I’m not even expecting you to. Not for a while. But I’ll tell you this—and you can listen. Not with belief, or disbelief, just with an open mind.” He leaned back in his chair.

“Somehow—at some time in the past—the vision screens”—and here he gestured at the square eye—“were overlooked; were forgotten, as the true purpose of the Power Room was forgotten. A failure, perhaps, that was never repaired. Now we’ve put this right at this end of the ship. We can use the screens for their original purpose—to *let us see into space!*”

He said softly, “Space isn’t empty. Space isn’t the void you think it is. Space is jam-packed with ‘stars’ and ‘planets’”—and now his voice was very quiet and he wasn’t looking at Joann. Only at me. “Bliss isn’t a world, Dom. Can you understand that? Bliss is only a name; and out there, out in the Universe, there are hundreds of worlds we could land on; hundreds of worlds we could colonize.”

Then his voice rose, and he finished with such emphasis that I knew—somehow I was sure—that this man was speaking the truth.

“The Power Room doesn’t house pagan gods! It’s a control-centre! It’s our means of setting the ship down—*of landing her, Dom!*”

After the first few days of walking around City Three—we stayed together but somehow our relationship was changed—there wasn’t much Joann or I could do. We were taken back to the wide, flat deck where the distance was green haze, and we were told to walk here each day. Just walk. This was how they combatted lethargy; strolling alone or in groups for hours each day.

It was a rule that couldn’t be broken. Even the Gids, with their shambling gait, were ordered to take the exercise.

On these occasions, when we were tired of walking, Joann and I would sit together, trying always to put our friendship back on its old footing.

Sometimes Joann’s eyes would wander toward the transmitter cubicle through which we’d come; and once I asked her, “Are you happy here?”

She didn’t answer immediately, but after a while she began to talk about her family, and I was surprised to find that there had been some degree of closeness between them. This was something almost unknown, even on upperdeck.

At other times—when we were approached by the curious—we would ask questions about City Three, and I learned among other things that the Tube, from which radiation had seeped years ago, was the connection between the habitable part of the ship and the Pile that would push the ship through space forever, providing endless power for the machine domes. The leak in the shielding had been sealed by the Gids, and now there was no danger.

After a week of this, I began to notice a change in Joann. Before, she had been moderately bright, answering my questions readily, smiling often, though with a strange, sad fear in her eyes. Now, as the days passed, and the plan to invade the forward section of the ship rolled on, she became withdrawn and uncommunicative. When we passed men with weapons in their hands her lips would quirk angrily, dark eyes snapping.

She even tried to get into the transmitter one afternoon, but a woman, walking nearby, spotted her in time and was able to pull her back.

After that—while I was caught up in the invasion training—a woman was detailed to watch Joann whenever she was in the transmitter area. Joann’s face became stony, and she refused to speak to me if I walked at her side.

She only broke this silence once in the final days. It was early morning and I had followed her out from City Three. I caught up with her as she strode along in cold rage, and she turned on me quickly, almost in tears, and said, “Why are there so many weapons? So many men?”

As calmly as I could, I told her what Brightan, the tall leader, had said. That he didn’t want fighting; that the only way to avoid this was to go in with a great number of armed men.

“The Plebs won’t be touched, Jo.”

She turned away, white-faced, and if I’d known what was going to happen, what was lying in store for both of us, I would have gone after her then, and stayed with her until her mood was over.

But I didn’t. The invasion would be beginning in a matter of hours; we were to advance through the hydroponics and the Ruins, striking at the Presidium in a rush from the Pleb city.

The Plebs wouldn’t resist—I knew that. But to gain control of the Power Room and land the ship on the closest world we would have to meet upperdeck weapons. Whatever Brightan said, there was going to be fighting; and I was eager—was actually impatient—for it to begin.

I didn’t even glance at Joann after she turned away. I made my way back to the blister, almost at a run, and rode the car into City Three.

I’d been given a room of my own, high up in one of the buildings, and here I stripped off my robes, stepped naked into the shower cubicle and turned on the cold water. For five minutes I let the needle sprays hammer down on my body, then I stepped out, turning off the water. I rubbed myself dry—and now my body was glowing—got out the green-and-grey uniform that had been issued to the invading force and put it on. In the loose-fitting fighting garb I felt hard and tough. I had filled out in the last few weeks, and I was heavier now, and tall. Walking each day had toughened my body and relaxed my mind.

As I tightened the fastenings of my rubber-soled boots, I thought for a moment of Jack, and it was in pity, not in anger. I was tougher than Jack; tougher than my father. If we fought, I would win.

And now, already dressed like a soldier, I picked up my rifle and balanced it in my hands, an ancient weapon Brightan had said, but an effective one. Then I began loading the metal shells into the magazine, as we’d been taught in hard nights of training.

I should have known then, with the weapon in my hands, that this equipment was for something more than overcoming the rule of the Presidium. But had I known—and had the Plebs who had joined us known—what was waiting for us in the ruins of Second City, we would have stripped off our uniforms and stayed where we were, and the ship, under the Presidium rule, could have plunged on for ever toward Bliss.

Which was precisely why Brightan hadn’t told us.

Chapter Four

It wasn’t until late afternoon that I discovered Joann had disappeared. The city was at fever pitch, the streets and walkways alive with uniformed men. All day, through the audio system, Brightan and the other leaders had been giving us our marshalling instructions.

While the main body pushed in through the Ruins, flanking movement would be carried out by means of the operable transmitters. The three fingers of the attacking force would be in contact with one another, and the two small groups going through the transmitters would angle in at an order from the central

commander, forming a tripod thrust at any upperdeck resistance.

And now, with these instructions ringing in my ears, I suddenly knew that I had to see Joann before I left. It was as though I had already glimpsed something deeper and more dangerous ahead of us that night, and as I hurried out into the street I realized for the first time that I was afraid.

I got on to a crowded walkway, which failed because of its load before it had gone more than a dozen yards. We all stood for a while, just waiting stupidly for the thing to start moving again, but it never did. After a while I got off and ran the two blocks down the static pavement to Joann's apartment.

She had been allotted a room in a building for single girls, and most of the rooms were empty and unfurnished. The whole place rang emptily as I rode the vator to an upper floor and hurried down the passageway. When I reached Joann's door I knocked once and went straight in. But she wasn't there.

It wasn't really a surprise. All the way up on the vator I'd been telling myself that she might be out walking somewhere. But now, as I stood in that empty apartment, I felt the first inexplicable chill of unease.

Something was wrong. I could feel it.

I walked through into the bedroom, on my toes now, for no reason. I touched the contour couch with the palm of my hand, bouncing it, then I turned to the mirror and the array of accessories on the tiny metal shelf. Nothing here.

I returned to the central room, looking around carefully now. And as soon as my eyes touched the little table with its display of flowering ponics I saw the note...

I picked it up. And read it :

I'm sorry, Dom, but this isn't my home...

Anger welled inside me. The fool! There was only one way she could get home—the transmitters were barred to her—and that was through the wild hydroponics and the Ruins!

And suddenly I was afraid for her. I couldn't help myself. Joann was a child. Just a child. Now, somewhere out there, armed with nothing more than a torch, she was running through the dying afternoon, struggling through the ponics. By dark she would be among the Ruins.

The old superstitious fear of the Ruins still clung to me. Even as I spun around, almost running to the door—and actually running once I got into the passageway—I was drawing phantom shapes in my mind.

But I think this spurred me on rather than checked me. I rode downward on the vator, and for the first time the oval disc seemed nightmarishly slow. When I reached street-level I turned in the direction of the closest transport dome without an instant's hesitation.

Running toward the blister, I never considered the rights or the wrongs of what I was doing. I suppose I was deserting Brightan, but I never thought of it in that way. I merely realized—and the realization had shocked me into action—that Joann still meant a great deal to me.

I didn't even look back at the city as I got off the tube car on the fringe of the hydroponic farms. I was hoping that Joann hadn't taken the car—that she had followed the walkways on foot and hadn't got too far ahead. I wondered if any of the leathery-skinned farmgirls on the car would report that I'd made off into the ponics. I didn't think so. They weren't given to thinking, and in any case it was common enough for soldiers to be sent on scouting missions alone.

I was off the pathway now, walking in ankle deep growth. Over to my right, small with distance, were the white machine domes. My evertorch was swinging from my belt, but looking up at the sunlights I judged that I wouldn't need it for another few hours.

And now, as I began to push my way into the deeper tangle of wild ponics, I put everything out of my mind that wasn't concerned with finding Joann. I moved as rapidly as I could, using the parallel rows of sunlights overhead to keep myself oriented. The ponics were papery and brittle—breaking a passage through them wasn't difficult. Often I stopped, remaining perfectly still for a full minute at a time, listening for Joann. And once, after two hours, with the sweat running down my body and thighs, I stood stock still, caught for an instant in momentary indecision. What kind of a fool was I? What hope was there of finding her here in a seven-mile wilderness?

But no, with the sunlights already beginning to die and and four of those seven miles behind me, there was nothing I could do but go on. I had to reach the Ruins before dark, and now, conversely, I was hoping that Joann was well ahead; that she would be clear of the hydroponics and into the Ruins before nightfall.

In the final hour of daylight, racing against time now, I covered what must have been almost three miles. When I was at last forced to turn on my torch, I could already see the crumbling outline of the Ruins against the dying lights; and before the darkness was complete, I was picking my way through the overgrown debris of what had once been living-cabins.

It was very quiet here as the night settled down, and the torch beam, cutting its white path through the blackness, seemed brittle and cold. Not like a light at all.

I was walking very slowly now, listening for sounds of Joann. On either side, seemingly ready to topple, were buildings with socket eyes watching. The whole place had a smell of decay and the narrow streets were often blocked by debris. Twice I had to retrace my steps, following the tunnels of darkness around whole buildings that had sunk inward, thrusting jagged steel hands across my path.

Now, with the torchlight shining straight ahead, I was on a wider, clearer road that seemed to run in the right direction. I called Joann's name, twice, then I moved forward—and now, for a reason I couldn't explain, I was carrying my rifle just a shade higher. I still held it in one hand, and I wouldn't admit even to myself that I was afraid. But the ghosts of the Ruins were doing their work well. I was breathing faster, walking slower.

“Joannnn!”

No answer. Only the empty voice echoing in empty buildings. I walked on. Three more steps. Then:

“Joannnn!”

And this time—faintly, very faintly, from somewhere off to my left—I thought I heard an answering cry.

I whirled, torchlight flashing. I shouted again, but there was no answer; and now I began to run, breaking through ponic growth that had somehow penetrated this far, scrambling on hands and knees over high-piled debris.

I can't describe the sound I heard as I entered that final street. Perhaps a shuffle. I flashed the torch eagerly, and a corner of light caught movement. Joann's name was in my throat before I realized that it wasn't Joann.

Above me now—startlingly clear—I could hear her calling my name. *Above me!* Not here in this street.

Very slowly, with a fist of fear closing huge in my stomach, I swept the torch beam along the crooked

steel sides of the buildings. Very slowly, with my feet groping blindly amongst refuse and my weapon at the ready, I advanced down the street.

To my right now was the entrance to the building where Joann must be. It was almost blocked. To get through into the building I would have to turn my back on the street and wriggle through, face-down, blind and helpless for the sixty seconds it would take me to get over the debris.

Did I have the courage? Whatever had moved in the street was large, I knew that. I thought of animals from the ponics—there were stories of such things in Pleb folklore; and then I heard Joann call my name again, and there was empty fear in her voice. The fear of a person without hope. Somehow it affected me more than the unknown quantity that hung back on the edge of darkness. Joann was calling my name endlessly, without reason or purpose. Numbly I realized that she didn't even know I was here in this street.

I had to get to her, and there was only one way to do it. I began to back toward the entrance and for an instant the torch beam wavered. Immediately, there was a stir of movement to my right. I flashed the torch in that direction—and now I was against the debris, stumbling. Now I would have to turn, climb, expose myself. I moved the torch a fraction more to the right.

My scream was soundless, but it tore my throat. I fired, the weapon kicking in my hands. I fired three times and the huge figure stumbled forward into the torchlight, bellowing and thrashing as it fell at my feet.

I whirled, flung myself at the pile of debris, kicking with my feet and working, working, with my elbows. And somehow I got through. I still had the rifle and the torch. It was swinging wildly on my belt now as I came to my feet.

As I turned in a slow circle I saw that the windows here were blocked by huge steel shutters, and the debris at the entrance was packed solid. There was only room for a slim man or boy to squirm through between the top of the doorway and the rubble.

I moved across the ground floor, threading my way cautiously through the strange conical shapes that littered the vast room. I could still hear Joann calling my name from somewhere overhead, but I knew it would be useless to answer her.

I only paused once in that slow advance toward what must be a companionway ahead, and that was when the light from my torch brushed a wall of the building and shone for a moment on one of the cones. I stopped, turning the light on to it, and instantly I became aware of a peculiar rustling noise that continued until I swung the light away.

Around me now, as I moved on, other rustlings began; but I continued toward the companionway, picking out the steel steps with my torch and climbing quickly upward now, not stopping to account for the strange sounds.

The companionway seemed to go on for ever, but finally, with the breath burning in my throat, I reached the higher floor. I ran along the passageway, sent the torch beam probing into first one room, then another; and at my third try I found Joann.

Chapter Five

I talked to her softly, urgently, for long minutes before she could begin to understand that I really was here with her; but when the realization finally came she recovered quickly. She clasped my hands, drew me closer, and spoke my name with meaning.

I let her cry after that, just kneeling beside her while she quivered in my arms; and she was calmer after a few moments, and she drew away from me a little, as though angry with herself. But she didn't say anything about her break from City Three. Instead, she looked at me closely, and with a trace of fear in her voice asked, "Did you see them?"

"I think I killed one," I said.

"Killed?"

I told her then how I had shot at the huge figure in the street outside; how it had fallen, thrashing in agony. When I finished, Joann stared at me in a way I couldn't understand.

"The cones. Dom? Haven't you seen them?"

With a stir of uneasiness I remembered the rustling sound that had accompanied my passage across the vast floor below.

"Cones? They are lifeless, Joann."

She said softly, "It was still light when I came here. I was afraid—perhaps of the ghosts in the Ruins—and I found this building with its shutters and its safety."

"The Giants—" I began.

"I haven't seen them. I saw the cones. They came here at dusk. I heard the noise, and I went downstairs, and they were inside the building. They weren't cones at first; they were taller, almost like plants. They folded, became motionless as it got dark."

With an effort I sought to hold on to reality. "The entrance is blocked—"

"I know, Dom. But they came in."

"How?"

She was shaking her head. "I don't know—" And suddenly, in that room, I knew why Brightan had waited so long—why so many men had been marshalled for the attack. Brightan knew. Brightan and the others—the leaders—knew that there were strange forces to be overcome in the Ruins. Mutants, like the Gids? They had to be mutants. Living here in the rubble of Second City.

The ship wouldn't be won until the Ruins were cleared. Brightan knew that. And now, like a spark breathed upon, there was a glimmer of hope. How long would it be before Brightan and his men came thrusting into the Ruins?

Joann spoke again now. "When they were coming in, Dom, they seemed to rise—to grow—through the floor."

I was staring at her, considering this, when the noise began outside. A steady, rhythmic, *bloom! bloom!* against the wall of the building.

I was on my feet already in reflex action, my thoughts leaping back to Brightan. I swung toward the source of the noise, found it, and ran forward out of the room, Joann at my back, her own torch flashing now.

Outside in the passageway there were windows that looked down from height on to the street. Once this place had been some kind of storeroom—the vast floor below protected from looters by the shutters. Up

here there had been offices; the windows were uncovered.

Now Joann and I reached the windows, and I shone my torch downward but saw nothing. I ran it along to the left, fruitlessly, then to the right. And this time, in the white light, we saw a heaving steel beam—saw the obscene figures and giant, muscled arms that thrust and battered it against the side of the building.

I killed the light, caught Joann's arm and dragged her away from the windows. The whole building seemed to be vibrating now, and I knew that the wall wouldn't stand against the ram for long.

My fear had communicated itself to Joann now, and almost at a run, stumbling in the darkness, we somehow got down the companionway to the ground floor. We didn't switch on our torches—we seemed to know instinctively that the Cones would react to the light. Already the rustling was beginning again, as though they were stirring.

I checked Joann with a hand on her wrist; then I went forward alone. Now I did turn on my torch, but I smothered the beam with my hand so that it came out weakly red. I held the spot of light a foot in front of me, following it carefully as it picked out the path through the Cones.

Ahead now, a dozen paces away, was the entrance. I turned off the torch when I reached it. By touch, forcing myself higher an inch at a time, I worked my way up the slope of the rubble. When I judged I was near the top, I groped under my body for the torch on its belt strap, dragging it free. I turned it on, shining the beam through my finger. When I had positioned myself at the gap so that no light would get back into storeroom, I drew my hand away and let the white light flare out into the darkness.

Instantly, there was writhing movement and I glimpsed the giant shapes for a moment. They retreated to the edge of the light, stirring there in jagged shadows. I cut off the light.

I retreated, sliding down the rubble, still shielding the torch. There would be no way out here.

As I picked my way toward the place where I had left Joann there was a different note to the sound of the battering ram against the wall. The wall was weakening. Soon the ram would smash its way through and the Giants would swarm in.

I almost ran those last interminable yards; and when I did reach the companionway at last, Joann was gone. The shock stopped me dead. My hand slipped off the torch and the light flashed suddenly bright across the floor of the store. I saw Joann then—she was half-turned, staring at me. She had picked her way across the floor with her own torch shielded. There was a dozen yards between us now.

And at the same moment, close behind me, there was a movement. I whirled, and the torch was still on. It spotlighted the Cone that had begun to move, glistening on the side of the thing. The combination of the light and sound was disturbing them, bringing them awake. Now, around the first, there were others coming alive, wavering from side to side as they lost their conical shapes and became plantlike—grotesque.

I switched off the torch, and at the instant when darkness slammed in, the Giants broke through the wall of the store. I heard the thundering crash of falling steel, then the cries of triumph as they leapt through the breach.

I whirled and ran. I heard Joann screaming and I ran in her direction. I blundered head on into a softly vegetable Cone, toppling it over. Even as I recoiled there was a roar of sound behind me and a flare of light. Flames burst upward and heat exploded across the room. Instantly the place was filled with a gagging odour and I turned, saw huge figures in the shadows at the edge of the fire. Then a second Cone

caught alight—and now I knew that the Giants were attacking them. I could see Joann clearly as I ran again. I reached her and she seized my arm, pointing.

“Look! Down there, Dom!”

There was a hole in the floor of the storeroom, going down into blackness. And now I remembered how Joann had said that the Cones seemed to rise from the floor. Was this their way in?

The question was soon answered. Already there was a score of them lumbering towards us—toward their escape route. This was war. The Giants hadn’t broken in to get at us; they were intent on destroying the Cones. The Giants were night creatures. Did the Cones hunt by day? Was this some terrible revenge on the sleeping animal-plants for a scourge they inflicted during the hours when the Giants slept?

But now, with two more of the creatures on fire, and still more of them making in our direction, there were only seconds left in which to make a decision.

A group of Cones—helpless when darkness fell—had chosen this sealed storeroom in which to conceal themselves. Now, for Joann and me, there were only two ways out: through the hole that the Giants had torn in the wall, or down into the pit.

Hesitating only for an instant, I seized Joann’s arm, flashed the torch downward and saw the bottom of the pit no more than ten feet below us. Then we jumped. We struck the steel floor almost together, rolled, and I came to my feet. Flashing the light in all directions, I saw that this place had once been part of the ship’s transport system. The roof above the tunnel had fallen in, and there was an abandoned tubecar down here, crushed by the weight of debris that had fallen long ago. To our left, though, there was a clear length of tunnel, and I helped Joann to her feet, even as the first of the Cones reached the edge of the hole over our heads.

As we sprang clear the thing let itself fall, and another followed. I fired twice, then Joann and I backed away. The Cones were moving in our direction and now I could see their true form as they closed the distance between us with frightening speed. They seemed unaware of us, but when we turned and broke in to a run they increased their pace. I thought the light might be attracting them, but we couldn’t move at speed without it. I tried flicking it off at intervals, picking a clear path for us beforehand. But this slowed us down, and the Cones gained precious yards. I fired at them again, the bullets whining along the tunnel; but two or three direct hits were needed to bring a Cone down. While I was stopping four of them a dozen advanced to within yards of us.

We ran again. The tunnel seemed to go on for ever. There were no branches to right or left. We tried a short, hard sprint to get well ahead of the Cones, but they didn’t slacken their speed and we tired too quickly.

Joann was already stumbling, and I had to hold her, helping her along. There was fire in my lungs and throat, and I was drawing the stale air into my chest with tremendous, convulsive gasps. There were no faults in the tunnel wall—no cracks or crevices wide enough to take our bodies. We were both slowing down now, and ahead the air would be worse. Already, in the terrifying closeness of the tunnel, my vision was beginning to blur as the pressure of blood built up behind my eyes.

We had to stop. If we went on we would suffocate. I swung Joann around, almost throwing her off her feet. She fought me, panic-stricken, struggling to get away from me. But I held her. I levelled my rifle and began firing; and as the Cones lumbered closer and their frenzied rustling seemed to roar in the narrow tunnel I pumped the trigger while the weapon leapt in my hands until there was only a click on bare metal and I knew that my ammunition was gone.

I threw the rifle down then, forced Joann to one side of the tunnel and pressed her hard against the curving wall. Then, protecting her with my own body, feeling the warm panting fear in her heaving breasts, I turned off the torch...

And we waited.

Long, endless moments went by. The Cones were closer now, moving at speed, and I felt Joann stiffen as they drew nearer. There was no light now. We were blind. I cursed myself silently for not keeping the rifle to use as a club; and for an instant I half turned away from Joann, beginning to stoop, groping for the weapon. Then, in that same moment, there was an explosion of sound that jerked me erect. A rifle! Fired twice!

I jerked a hand downward, seized the torch, flicked it on. And in the flare of light I saw—and I could scarcely believe it—that the Cones were milling helplessly, caught by the rifle fire that was thundering out of the tunnel. Two of them rushed at the light, and Joann screamed. But I flung myself forward, snatching up the empty rifle and wielding it savagely. The Cones fell back, recoiling with the others; and now the rifle fire from the far end of the tunnel was increasing. Bullets whined off the walls close beside us, and I shouted then, cupping my hands and warning Brightan—it had to be Brightan—that we were here.

Moments later, torch flashing, he came out of the shadows, picking a way through the fallen Cones. He moved easily and confidently, and as Joann and I went toward him I knew that he had taken Second City—that the fire in the storeroom had led him to us—and the ship had been won as far as the Ruins.

Now we would face the Presidium.

Chapter Six

When we got back to the surface, Brightan's army was already reforming. All over the city now there were fires that marked the destruction of the mutant Cones. Many of the Giants, resisting fiercely, had also been killed. Others were being herded together now, the fight gone out of them. Brightan's Pleb force had done its work well—they and the Gids had suffered only slight casualties.

Now, as the force was regrouping I told Brightan how Joann had thought the weight of arms and men was to be deployed against the Plebs. His tough face grew concerned as he listened to my account of our flight through the tunnel, and when I finished, he accompanied Joann to the rear of the column, ordered a Gid to look after her, and was subdued and unsmiling as he gave us the signal to begin our advance.

Leaving a token force behind us in the Ruins, we moved on toward Pleb City. Brightan was in contact with the flanking attacks now, as they began to flow through the transmitters, forming twin spearheads that would angle in from left and right.

For a time we met little resistance; but as we broke out of the wild ponics and began to cross cultivated ground we were checked momentarily by a hastily formed upperdeck militia. They fought without heart though, and in the beginning dawn they were ludicrously conspicuous in multicoloured robes. Our pincer attack snuffed them quickly and we moved on.

When we broke into Pleb City there were Presidium snipers already stationed in the higher buildings. A dozen of our men fell before the last of these was weeded out, but we were moving onward in a rush now, penetrating to the Lower Place itself, where the steel pillar—reminder of Presidium rule—stabbed upward into the lightening sky. Ahead was the companionway leading to the Power Room, and here Brightan signalled me forward—I was familiar with this section of the ship—and at a crouch, splitting into two groups now, we rushed the Power Room, fighting hand to hand until we had control, then advancing up the second companionway while one group took rearguard positions.

As we fanned out across the avenue, moving down the wide street, a stillness seemed to have settled over the ship. We passed fearful groups of upperdeck people, huddled unarmed in the narrower passagetubes. We walked slowly, weapons at the ready, and now, as we approached the heart of the Presidium itself I could feel the first heat of triumph flushing into my cheeks. Nothing could stop us now. We were going to break through...

The first blast of the heat weapon struck a dozen yards to to my left and twenty men were killed instantly. The second cut a swathe through the line only feet away to my right. Brightan was hit and badly burnt, but he didn't die. He didn't even fall. His uniform was on fire and one arm was useless, but he was bellowing orders, blasting us out of the line of fire with his tongue. He ran with us, tearing the upper half of his uniform away. The skin of his arm was black; his face was scorched, the hair gone. We hit a passagetube together, throwing ourselves clear of the heat ray as it lashed out again.

There were others here with us, some wounded, some shocked. The smell of burning flesh was everywhere. I didn't waste time. I wriggled closer to Brightan, gripped his good arm; and he turned, teeth clenched tight against pain. Outside, the avenue had been cleared. A quarter of our force was gone.

"Give me five men!" I thrust my face close to Brightan's. "I know the way. I could get a small force through to that gun!"

Brightan was already shaking his head. He wouldn't give an order that might kill others. And now I knew what I had to do. The Presidium's murder weapon couldn't be taken by an army. But one man could do it. Brightan was out of his senses with pain. He tried to pin me down as I pushed myself erect, loaded weapon in my hands. I shook him free, moved forward two slow paces, and eased myself round the corner of the building.

My back was pressed hard against the steel wall. With the sweat rolling down my body I edged along the side of that building, burnt ponics under my feet. My eyes were on a point that seemed beyond reach—the entrance to a passage-tube I knew well.

All the way along that steel wall I was expecting the heat weapon to fire again. But it never did. I got to the passage-tube, swung round the corner, and was safe. Now, rifle levelled, I pushed my way through unarmed upperdeck people. I turned to my left, running now with my rubber-soled boots silent on the steel deck. The passagetube ahead was deserted. The lighting was poor here, but now the doors on either side were familiar. I slowed to a walk, passed one door, then another. Then I stopped.

For one moment I stood outside the place that had once been my home. Then, twisting the lock back, kicking once at the door and swinging it open, I went forward into the cabin.

My rifle was up high, trained on Jack before he could turn. To one side, my mother was wide-eyed and fearful, hands lifting in reflex action. My father wasn't here.

I didn't say anything. I took two quick paces toward Jack—a pale and frightened Jack—chopped him across the throat with the edge of my hand, and caught him as he fell. I handled him roughly. Mother rushed at me, but I set her gently aside. I forced Jack's arm up his back and drove him forward. He shrieked like a girl as the pain leapt into his shoulder, and suddenly I was remembering my own pain, years ago, when he had done this to me.

Savagely, toughened in soul by Brightan's training, I forced him out into the tube, swinging him to the right, going back the way we had come. We met upperdeck men, and I shoved them aside. Jack fought me briefly then, but I held him, and no one moved in to take him away from me. Now, as I took him closer to the avenue Jack began to whimper and plead for himself. I heard the roar of the heat weapon as it fired again, and I knew a tentative advance had been stopped. Jack squirmed desperately in my arms

as we felt the backlash of the ray.

But we didn't move out into the line of fire. We came to a halt a yard from the end of the tube, and now, close beside us, was the natural ladder Jack and I knew so well. The corner of a window, the top of a door frame, another window, a crevice—and then the roof of the deck house.

“Up there!” I told him now.

He didn't hesitate. The muzzle of the rifle was hard in his back as he began to climb. He gripped the ledge of the window, pulled himself upward until his scrabbling feet found a hold and he was able to balance, reaching high for the door frame. I swung up after him, hanging by one hand as I gestured savagely at the upperdeck men below us, waving them back. Then, following Jack, I climbed to the roof; and here, as I eased myself over the edge, Jack made his last attempt to fight me. He swung with his foot and caught me in the shoulder, but he was too late and I was balanced now. I came up fast, rising with the rifle in my hands. Jack backed away, the fear written into his face. But I didn't fire. I needed him.

I pushed him forward again, silently; and together we crossed those rooftops, leaping over narrow passagetubes, moving toward the head of the avenue.

Up here we were hidden from the men who were operating the heat gun, and now, as we drew closer, I pressed a hand to Jack's shoulder, forcing him to his knees. We crawled along the final roof—and now each sound from a boot or a knee scuffing over steel set the hair prickling at the back of my neck.

For a moment, when we reached the edge of the roof, we lay motionless; and my eyes were close to Jack's as he twisted toward me. He knew we were going down, and he was sweating faintly now, as the fear took hold of him. Below us was another passagetube—and this one would take us to the gun itself. But we didn't know the climb. There were thirty dangerous feet below us now, and Jack would be leading the way.

I grinned at him then—actually enjoying this. He could betray us now. A single shout. A wave. But he would die as agonizingly as I would, swept to oblivion in the heat ray. So he didn't shout or wave. He moved forward, let himself slide over the edge of the building, white fingers gripping the roof for a frantic moment until his feet found a hold. Then he started down, and I followed.

I climbed smoothly, feeling the quiet strength in my arms and legs. Brightan had trained us well. Inactivity had weakened men like Jack, but I was tough and confident, and the pumping fear in me was almost exhilarating.

As Jack reached the deck, I let myself drop. I landed noiselessly on rubber soles, crouched now, rifle levelled. I stabbed a hand out and held Jack in against the steel wall. Then I went forward—two slow paces—and looked around the edge of the building.

There were four men—four Presidium members—operating the heat gun. It was shielded around its barrel—a deadly, armoured weapon that even Brightan hadn't known existed—but its sides were open. It was set at the end of the avenue, behind the strip of ponc lawn that marked the beginning of the Presidium's sanctuary. At its rear were the private chambers of the committee, where the handful of top men, my father among them, would be cowering from the invasion forces.

I had seen enough. The heat gun was fluidly mounted—it could be trained on me and fired in an instant. But there was one person who could prevent this happening. Jack was the elder son of a Presidium member. No one would kill him without a moment of hesitation.

And a moment was all I needed.

I turned quick then, the decision made. I jerked Jack toward me, pivoted, and was behind him. I jammed the rifle into his back and flung him out of the passagetube.

I was a yard behind him, and he knew he was dead if he tried to break away. I was down low, and already the big heat gun was swinging in our direction. They could see me and they could see Jack, and it was Jack who stopped them.

They didn't fire. They waited an instant too long. And even when the rifle began pumping in my hands and the men at the gun began to fall, no one depressed the button that would kill an heir to the Presidium.

I went forward in a rush then, flinging Jack to one side; and already, down the avenue, men were breaking cover. I whirled, raised one arm, and the invasion force closed in quickly. Brightan was at their head, one arm dangling, his burnt face grotesque under the sunlights.

There was no more firing. The two men still alive at the heat gun flung their hands high. Jack lay where he had fallen, pale face buried in his hands. And now we advanced on the sacrosanct quarters. Brightan and I, side by side. We fired together and the lock burst apart. We went on into the inner chambers...

The great ship that had travelled so far fell through white clouds to a blue world of promise. A man and a woman stepped from the ship, hand in hand, and named this world Bliss.

The End.

Notes and proofing history

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