

Watch the Sky

Uncle William Boles' war-battered old Geest gun gave the impression that at some stage of its construction it had been pulled out of shape and then hardened in that form. What remained of it was all of one piece. The scarred and pitted twin barrels were stubby and thick, and the vacant oblong in the frame behind them might have contained standard energy magazines. It was the stock which gave the alien weapon its curious appearance. Almost eighteen inches long, it curved abruptly to the right and was too thin, knobbed and indented to fit comfortably at any point in a human hand. Over half a century had passed since, with the webbed, boneless fingers of its original owner closed about it, it last spat deadly radiation at human foemen. Now it hung among Uncle William's other collected oddities on the wall above the living room fireplace.

And today, Phil Boles thought, squinting at the gun with reflectively narrowed eyes, some eight years after Uncle William's death, the old war souvenir would quietly become a key factor in the solution of a colonial planet's problems. He ran a finger over the dull, roughened frame, bent closer to study the neatly lettered inscription: GUNDERLAND BATTLE TROPHY, ANNO 2172, SGT. WILLIAM G. BOLES. Then, catching a familiar series of clicking noises from the hall, he straightened quickly and turned away. When Aunt Beulah's go-chair came rolling back into the room, Phil was sitting at the low tea table, his back to the fireplace.

The go-chair's wide flexible treads carried it smoothly down the three steps to the sunken section of the living room, Beulah sitting jauntily erect in it, for all the ninety-six years which had left her the last survivor of the original group of Earth settlers on the world of Roye. She tapped her fingers here and there on the chair's armrests, swinging it deftly about, and brought it to a stop beside the tea table.

"That was Susan Feeney calling," she reported. "And there is somebody else for you who thinks I have to be taken care of! Go ahead and finish the pie, Phil. Can't hurt a husky man like you. Got a couple more baking for you to take along."

Phil grinned. "That'd be worth the trip up from Fort Roye all by itself."

Beulah looked pleased. "Not much else I can do for my great-grand nephew nowadays, is there?"

Phil said, after a moment, "Have you given any further thought to—"

"Moving down to Fort Roye?" Beulah pursed her thin lips. "Goodness, Phil, I do hate to disappoint you again, but I'd be completely out of place in a town apartment."

"Dr. Fitzsimmons would be pleased," Phil remarked.

"Oh, him! Fitz is another old worry wart. What he wants is to get me into the hospital. Nothing doing!"

Phil shook his head helplessly, laughed. "After all, working a tupa ranch—"

"Nonsense. The ranch is just enough bother to be interesting. The appliances do everything anyway, and Susan is down here every morning for a chat and to make sure I'm still all right. She won't admit that, of course, but if she thinks something should be taken care of, the whole Feeney family shows up an hour later to do it. There's really no reason for you to be sending a dozen men up from Fort Roye every two months to harvest the tupa."

Phil shrugged. "No one's ever yet invented an easy way to dig up those roots. And the CLU's glad to furnish the men."

"Because you're its president?"

"Uh-huh."

"It really doesn't cost you anything?" Beulah asked doubtfully.

"Not a cent."

"Hm-m-m. Been meaning to ask you. What made you set up that . . . Colonial Labor Union?"

Phil nodded. "That's the official name."

"Why did you set it up in the first place?"

"That's easy to answer;" Phil said. "On the day the planetary population here touched the forty thousand mark, Roye became legally entitled to its labor union. Why not take advantage of it?"

"What's the advantage?"

"More Earth money coming in, for one thing. Of the twelve hundred CLU members we've got in Fort Roye now, seventy-six per cent were unemployed this month. We'll have a compensation check from the Territorial Office with the next ship coming in." He smiled at her expression.

"Sure, the boys could go back to the tupa ranches. But not everyone likes that life as well as you and the Feeneys."

"Earth government lets you get away with it?" Beulah asked curiously. "They used to be pretty tight-fisted."

"They still are—but it's the law. The Territorial Office also pays any CLU president's salary, incidentally. I don't draw too much at the moment, but that will go up automatically with the membership and my responsibilities."

"What responsibilities?"

"We've set up a skeleton organization," Phil explained. "Now, when Earth government decides eventually to establish a big military base here, they can run in a hundred thousand civilians in a couple of months and everyone will be fitted into the pattern on Roye without trouble or confusion. That's really the reason for all the generosity."

Beulah sniffed. "Big base, my eye! There hasn't been six months since I set foot here that somebody wasn't talking about Fort Roye being turned into a Class A military base pretty soon. It'll never happen, Phil. Roye's a farm planet, and that's what it's going to stay."

Phil's lips twitched. "Well, don't give up hope."

"I'm not anxious for any changes," Beulah said. "I like Roye the way it is."

She peered at a button on the go-chair's armrest which had just begun to put out small bright-blue flashes of light. "Pies are done," she announced. "Phil, are you sure you can't stay for dinner?"

Phil looked at his watch, shook his head. "I'd love to, but I really have to get back."

"Then I'll go wrap up the pies for you."

Beulah swung the go-chair around, sent it slithering up the stairs and out the door. Phil stood up quickly. He stepped over to the fireplace, opened his coat and detached a flexible, box-shaped object from the inner lining. He laid this object on the mantle, and turned one of three small knobs about its front edge to the right. The box promptly extruded a supporting leg from each of its four corners, pushed itself up from the mantle and became a miniature table. Phil glanced at the door through which Beulah had vanished, listened a moment, then took the Geest gun from the wall, laid it carefully on top of the device and twisted the second dial.

The odd-looking gun began to sink slowly down through the surface of Phil's instrument, like a rock disappearing in mud. Within seconds it vanished completely; then, a moment later, it began to emerge from the box's underside. Phil let the Geest gun drop into his hand, replaced it on the wall, turned the third knob. The box withdrew its supports and sank down to the mantle. Phil clipped it back inside his coat, closed the coat, and strolled over to the center of the room to wait for Aunt Beulah to return with the pies.

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It was curious, Phil Boles reflected as his aircar moved out over the craggy, plunging coastline to the north some while later, that a few bold minds could be all that was needed to change the fate of a world. A few minds with imagination enough to see how circumstances about them might be altered.

On his left, far below, was now the flat ribbon of the peninsula, almost at sea level, its tip widening

and lifting into the broad, rocky promontory on which stood Fort Roye—the only thing on the planet bigger and of more significance than the shabby backwoods settlements. And Fort Roye was neither very big nor very significant. A Class F military base around which, over the years, a straggling town had come into existence. Fort Roye was a space-age trading post linking Roye's population to the mighty mother planet, and a station from which the otherwise vacant and utterly unimportant 132nd Segment of the Space Territories was periodically and uneventfully patrolled. It was no more than that. Twice a month, an Earth ship settled down to the tiny port, bringing supplies, purchases, occasional groups of reassigned military and civilians—the latter suspected of being drawn as a rule from Earth's Undesirable classification. The ship would take off some days later, with a return load of the few local products for which there was outside demand, primarily the medically valuable tupa roots; and Fort Roye lay quiet again.

The planet was not at fault. Essentially, it had what was needed to become a thriving colony in every sense. At fault was the Geest War. The war had periods of flare-up and periods in which it seemed to be subsiding. During the past decade it had been subsiding again. One of the early flare-ups, one of the worst, and the one which brought the war closest to Earth itself, was the Gunderland Battle in which Uncle William Boles' trophy gun had been acquired. But the war never came near Roye. The action was all in the opposite section of the giant sphere of the Space Territories, and over the years the war drew steadily farther away.

And Earth's vast wealth—its manpower, materials and money—was pouring into space in the direction the Geest War was moving. Worlds not a tenth as naturally attractive as Roye, worlds where the basic conditions for human life were just above the unbearable point, were settled and held, equipped with everything needed and wanted to turn them into independent giant fortresses, with a population not too dissatisfied with its lot. When Earth government didn't count the expense, life could be made considerably better than bearable almost anywhere.

Those were the circumstances which condemned Roye to insignificance. Not everyone minded. Phil Boles, native son, did mind. His inclinations were those of an operator, and he was not being given an adequate opportunity to exercise them. Therefore, the circumstances would have to be changed, and the precise time to make the change was at hand. Phil himself was not aware of every factor involved, but he was aware of enough of them. Back on Earth, a certain political situation was edging towards a specific point of instability. As a result, an Earth ship which was not one of the regular freighters had put down at Fort Roye some days before. Among its passengers were Commissioner Sanford of the Territorial Office, a well-known politician, and a Mr. Ronald Black, the popular and enterprising owner of Earth's second largest news outlet system. They were on a joint fact-finding tour of the thinly scattered colonies in this remote section of the Territories, and had wound up eventually at the most remote of all—the 132nd Segment and Roye.

That was one factor. Just visible twenty thousand feet below Phil—almost directly beneath him now as the aircar made its third leisurely crossing of the central belt of the peninsula—was another. From here it looked like an irregular brown circle against the peninsula's nearly white ground. Lower down, it would have resembled nothing so much as the broken and half-decayed spirals of a gigantic snail shell, its base sunk deep in the ground and its shattered point rearing twelve stories above it. This structure, known popularly as "the ruins" in Fort Roye, was supposed to have been the last stronghold of a semi-intelligent race native to Roye, which might have become extinct barely a century before the Earthmen arrived. A factor associated with the ruins again was that their investigation was the passionately pursued hobby of First Lieutenant Norman Vaughn, Fort Roye's Science Officer.

Add to such things the reason Roye was not considered in need of a serious defensive effort by Earth's strategists—the vast distances between it and any troubled area, and so the utter improbability that a Geest ship might come close enough to discover that here was another world as well suited for its race as for human beings. And then a final factor: the instrument attached to the lining of Phil's coat—a very special "camera" which now carried the contact impressions made on it by Uncle William's souvenir gun. Put 'em all together, Phil thought cheerily, and they spelled out interesting developments on Roye in

the very near future.

He glanced at his watch again, swung the aircar about and started back inland. He passed presently high above Aunt Beulah's tupa ranch and that of the Feeney family two miles farther up the mountain, turned gradually to the east and twenty minutes later was edging back down the ranges to the coast. Here in a wild, unfarmed region, perched at the edge of a cliff dropping nearly nine hundred feet to the swirling tide, was a small, trim cabin which was the property of a small, trim Fort Roye lady named Celia Adams. Celia had been shipped out from Earth six years before, almost certainly as an Undesirable, though only the Territorial Office and Celia herself knew about that, the Botany Bay aspect of worlds like Roye being handled with some tact by Earth.

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Phil approached the cabin only as far as was necessary to make sure that the dark-green aircar parked before it was one belonging to Major Wayne Jackson, the Administration Officer and second in command at Fort Roye—another native son and an old acquaintance. He then turned away, dropped to the woods ten miles south and made a second inconspicuous approach under cover of the trees. There might be casual observers in the area, and while his meeting with Jackson and Celia Adams today revealed nothing in itself, it would be better if no one knew about it.

He grounded the car in the forest a few hundred yards from the Adams cabin, slung a rifle over his shoulder and set off along a game path. It was good hunting territory, and the rifle would explain his presence if he ran into somebody. When he came within view of the cabin, he discovered Celia and her visitor on the covered back patio, drinks standing before them. Jackson was in hunting clothes. Phil remained quietly back among the trees for some seconds watching the two, aware of something like a last-minute hesitancy. A number of things passed slowly through his mind.

What they planned to do was no small matter. It was a hoax which should have far-reaching results, on a gigantic scale. And if Earth government realized it had been hoaxed, the thing could become very unpleasant. That tough-minded central bureaucracy did not ordinarily bother to obtain proof against those it suspected. The suspicion was enough. Individuals and groups whom the shadow of doubt touched found themselves shunted unobtrusively into some backwater of existence and kept there. It was supposed to be very difficult to emerge from such a position again.

In the back of his mind, Phil had been conscious of that, but it had seemed an insignificant threat against the excitement arising from the grandiose impudence of the plan, the perhaps rather small-boyish delight at being able to put something over, profitably, on the greatest power of all. Even now it might have been only a natural wariness that brought the threat up for a final moment of reflection. He didn't, of course, want to incur Earth government's disapproval. But why believe that he might? On all Roye there would be only three who knew—Wayne Jackson, Celia Adams, and himself. All three would benefit, each in a different way, and all would be equally responsible for the hoax. No chance of indiscretion or belated qualms there. Their own interest ruled it out in each case.

And from the other men now involved there was as little danger of betrayal. Their gain would be vastly greater, but they had correspondingly more to lose. They would take every step required to insure their protection, and in doing that they would necessarily take the best of care of Phil Boles.

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"How did you ever get such a thing smuggled in to Roye?" Phil asked. He'd swallowed half the drink Celia offered him at a gulp and now, a few minutes later, he was experiencing what might have been under different circumstances a comfortable glow, but which didn't entirely erase the awareness of having committed himself at this hour to an irrevocable line of action.

Celia stroked a fluffy lock of red-brown hair back from her forehead and glanced over at him. She had a narrow, pretty face, marred only by a suggestion of hardness about the mouth—which was a little more than ordinarily noticeable just now. Phil decided she felt something like his own tensions, for identical reasons. He was less certain about Major Wayne Jackson, a big, loose-jointed man with an easy-going smile and a pleasantly self-assured voice. The voice might be veering a trifle too far to the hearty side; but that was all.

"I didn't," Celia said. "It belonged to Frank. How he got it shipped in with him—or after him—from Earth I don't know. He never told me. When he died a couple of years ago, I took it over."

Phil gazed reflectively at the row of unfamiliar instruments covering half the table beside her. The "camera" which had taken an imprint of the Geest gun in Aunt Beulah's living room went with that equipment and had become an interior section of the largest of the instruments. "What do you call it?" he asked.

Celia looked irritated. Jackson laughed, said, "Why not tell him? Phil's feeling like we do—this is the last chance to look everything over, make sure nobody's slipped up, that nothing can go wrong. Right, Phil?"

Phil nodded. "Something like that."

Celia chewed her lip. "All right," she said. "It doesn't matter, I suppose—compared with the other." She tapped one of the instruments. "The set's called a duplicator. This one's around sixty years old. They're classified as a forgery device, and it's decidedly illegal for a private person to build one, own one, or use one."

"Why is that?"

"Because forgery is ordinarily all they're good for. Frank was one of the best of the boys in that line before he found he'd been put on an outtransfer list."

Phil frowned. "But if it can duplicate any manufactured object—"

"It can. At an average expense around fifty times higher than it would take to make an ordinary reproduction without it. A duplicator's no use unless you want a reproduction that's absolutely indistinguishable from the model."

"I see." Phil was silent a moment. "After sixty years—"

"Don't worry, Phil," Jackson said. "It's in perfect working condition. We checked that on a number of samples."

"How do you know the copies were really indistinguishable?"

Celia said impatiently, "Because that's the way the thing works. When the Geest gun passed through the model plate, it was analyzed down to its last little molecule. The duplicate is now being built up from that analysis. Every fraction of every element used in the original will show up again exactly. Why do you think the stuff's so expensive?"

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Phil grinned. "All right, I'm convinced. How do we get rid of the inscription?"

"The gadget will handle that," Jackson said. "Crack that edge off, treat the cracked surface to match the wear of the rest." He smiled. "Makes an Earth forger's life look easy, doesn't it?"

"It is till they hook you," Celia said shortly. She finished her drink, set it on the table, added, "We've a few questions, too, Phil."

"The original gun," Jackson said. "Mind you, there's no slightest reason to expect an investigation. But after this starts rolling, our necks will be out just a little until we've got rid of that particular bit of incriminating evidence."

Phil pursed his lips. "I wouldn't worry about it. Nobody but Beulah ever looks at Uncle William's collection of oddities. Most of it's complete trash. And probably only she and you and I know there's a Geest gun among the things—William's cronies all passed away before he did. But if the gun disappeared now, Beulah would miss it. And that—since Earth government's made it illegal to possess Geest artifacts—might create attention."

Jackson fingered his chin thoughtfully, said, "Of course, there's always a way to make sure Beulah didn't kick up a fuss."

Phil hesitated. "Dr. Fitzsimmons gives Beulah another three months at the most," he said. "If she can stay out of the hospital for even the next eight weeks, he'll consider it some kind of miracle. That should be early enough to take care of the gun."

"It should be," Jackson said. "However, if there does happen to be an investigation before that time—"

Phil looked at him, said evenly, "We'd do whatever was necessary. It wouldn't be very agreeable, but my neck's out just as far as yours."

Celia laughed. "That's the reason we can all feel pretty safe," she observed. "Every last one of us is completely selfish—and there's no more dependable kind of person than that."

Jackson flushed a little, glanced at Phil, smiled. Phil shrugged. Major Wayne Jackson, native son, Fort Roye's second in command, was scheduled for the number one spot and a string of promotions via the transfer of the current commander, Colonel Thayer. Their Earthside associates would arrange for that as soon as the decision to turn Fort Roye into a Class A military base was reached. Phil himself could get by with the guaranteed retention of the CLU presidency, and a membership moving up year by year to the half million mark and beyond—he could get by very, very comfortably, in fact. While Celia Adams would develop a discreetly firm hold on every upcoming minor racket, facilitated by iron-clad protection and an enforced lack of all competitors.

"We're all thinking of Roye's future, Celia," Phil said amiably, "each in his own way. And the future looks pretty bright. In fact, the only possible stumbling block I can still see is right here on Roye, and it's Honest Silas Thayer. If our colonel covers up the Geest gun find tomorrow—"

Jackson grinned, shook his head. "Leave that to me, my boy—and to our very distinguished visitors from Earth. Commissioner Sanford has arranged to be in Thayer's company on Territorial Office business all day tomorrow. Science Officer Vaughn is dizzy with delight because Ronald Black and most of the newsgathering troop will inspect his diggings in the ruins in the morning, with the promise of giving his theories about the vanished natives of Roye a nice spread on Earth. Black will happen to ask me to accompany the party. Between Black and Sanford—and myself—Colonel Silas Thayer won't have a chance to suppress the discovery of a Geest gun on Roye until the military has had a chance to look into it fully. And the only one he can possibly blame for that will be Science Officer Norm Vaughn—for whom, I'll admit, I feel just a little bit sorry!"

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First Lieutenant Norman Vaughn was an intense and frustrated young man whose unusually thick contact lenses and wide mouth gave him some resemblance to a melancholy frog. He suspected, correctly, that a good Science Officer would not have been transferred from Earth to Roye which was a planet deficient in scientific problems of any magnitude, and where requisitions for research purposes were infrequently and grudgingly granted.

The great spiraled ruin on the peninsula of Fort Roye had been Vaughn's one solace. Several similar deserted structures were known to be on the planet, but this was by far in the best condition and no doubt the most recently built. To him, if to no one else, it became clear that the construction had been carried out with conscious plan and purpose, and he gradually amassed great piles of notes to back up his theory that the vanished builders were of near-human intelligence. Unfortunately, their bodies appeared to have lacked hard and durable parts, since nothing that could be construed as their remains was found; and what Lieutenant Vaughn regarded as undeniable artifacts, on the level of very early Man's work, looked to others like chance shards and lumps of the tough, shell-like material of which the ruins were composed.

Therefore, while Vaughn was—as Jackson had pointed out—really dizzy with delight when Ronald Black, that giant of Earth's news media, first indicated an interest in the ruins and his theories about them, this feeling soon became mixed with acute anxiety. For such a chance surely would not come again if the visitors remained unconvinced by what he showed them, and what—actually—did he have to show? In the morning, when the party set out, Vaughn was in a noticeably nervous frame of mind.

Two hours later, he burst into the anteroom of the base commander's office in Fort Roye, where the warrant on duty almost failed to recognize him. Lieutenant Vaughn's eyes glittered through their thick lenses; his face was red and he was grinning from ear to ear. He pounded past the startled warrant, pulled open the door to the inner office where Colonel Thayer sat with the visiting Territorial

Commissioner, and plunged inside.

"Sir," the warrant heard him quaver breathlessly, "I have the proof—the undeniable proof! They *were* intelligent beings. They did *not* die of disease. They were exterminated in war! They were . . . but see for yourself!" There was a thud as he dropped something on the polished table top between the commissioner and Colonel Thayer. "*That* was dug up just now—among their own artifacts!"

Silas Thayer was on his feet, sucking in his breath for the blast that would hurl his blundering Science Officer back out of the office. What halted him was an odd, choked exclamation from Commissioner Sanford. The colonel's gaze flicked over to the visitor, then followed Sanford's stare to the object on the table.

For an instant, Colonel Thayer froze.

Vaughn was bubbling on. "And, sir, I . . ."

"Shut up!" Thayer snapped. He continued immediately, "You say this was found in the diggings in the ruins?"

"Yes, sir—just now! It's . . ."

Lieutenant Vaughn checked himself under the colonel's stare, some dawning comprehension of the enormous irregularities he'd committed showing in his flushed face. He licked his lips uncertainly.

"You will excuse me for a moment, sir," Thayer said to Commissioner Sanford. He picked the Geest gun up gingerly by its unmistakably curved shaft, took it over to the office safe, laid it inside and relocked the safe. He then left the office.

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In an adjoining room, Thayer rapped out Major Wayne Jackson's code number on a communicator. He heard a faint click as Jackson's wrist speaker switched on, and said quickly, "Wayne, are you in a position to speak?"

"I am at the moment," Jackson's voice replied cautiously.

Colonel Thayer said, "Norm Vaughn just crashed in here with something he claims was found in the diggings. Sanford saw it, and obviously recognized it. We might be able to keep him quiet. But now some questions. Was that item actually dug up just now?"

"Apparently it was," Jackson said. "I didn't see it happen—I was talking to Black at the moment. But there are over a dozen witnesses who claim they did see it happen, including five or six of the new agency men."

"And they knew what it was?"

"Enough of them did."

Thayer cursed softly. "No chance that one of them pitched the thing into the diggings for an Earthside sensation?"

"I'm afraid not," Jackson said. "It was lying in the sifter after most of the sand and dust had been blown away."

"Why didn't you call me at once?"

"I've been holding down something like a mutiny here, Silas. Vaughn got away before I could stop him, but I grounded the other aircars till you could decide what to do. Our visitors don't like that. Neither do they like the fact that I've put a guard over the section where the find was made, and haven't let them talk to Norm's work crew.

"Ronald Black and his staff have been fairly reasonable, but there's been considerable mention of military highhandedness made by the others. This is the first moment I've been free."

"You did the right thing," Thayer said, "but I doubt it will help much now. Can you get hold of Ronald Black?"

"Yes, he's over there. . . ."

"Colonel Thayer?" another voice inquired pleasantly a few seconds later.

"Mr. Black," the colonel said carefully, "what occurred in the diggings a short while ago may turn

out to be matter of great importance."

"That's quite obvious, sir."

"And that being the case," the colonel went on, "do you believe it would be possible to obtain a gentleman's agreement from all witnesses to make no mention of this apparent discovery until the information is released through the proper channels? I'm asking for your opinion."

"Colonel Thayer," Ronald Black's voice said, still pleasantly, "my opinion is that the only way you could keep the matter quiet is to arrest every civilian present, including myself, and hold us incommunicado. You have your duty, and we have ours. Ours does not include withholding information from the public which may signal the greatest shift in the conduct of the Geest War in the past two decades."

"I understand," Thayer said. He was silent for some seconds, and perhaps he, too, was gazing during that time at a Fort Roye of the future—a Class A military base under his command, with Earth's great war vessels lined up along the length of the peninsula.

"Mr. Black," he said, "please be so good as to give your colleagues this word from me. I shall make the most thorough possible investigation of what has occurred and forward a prompt report, along with any material evidence obtained, to my superiors on Earth. None of you will receive any other statement from me or from anyone under my command. An attempt to obtain such a statement will, in fact, result in the arrest of the person or persons involved. Is that clear?"

"Quite clear, Colonel Thayer," Ronald Black said softly. "And entirely satisfactory."

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"We have known for the past eight weeks," the man named Cranehart said, "that this was not what it appears to be . . . that is, a section of a Geest weapon."

He shoved the object in question across the desk towards Commissioner Sanford and Ronald Black. Neither of the two attempted to pick it up; they glanced at it, then returned their eyes attentively to Cranehart's face.

"It is, of course, an excellent copy," Cranehart went on, "produced with a professional forger's equipment. As I imagine you're aware, that should have made it impossible to distinguish from the original weapon. However . . . there's no real harm in telling you this now . . . Geest technology has taken somewhat different turns than our own. In their weapons they employ traces of certain elements which we are only beginning to learn to maintain in stable form. That is a matter your government has kept from public knowledge because we don't wish the Geests to learn from human prisoners how much information we are gaining from them.

"The instrument which made this copy naturally did not have such elements at its disposal. So it employed their lower homologues and in that manner successfully produced an almost identical model. In fact, the only significant difference is that such a gun, if it had been a complete model, could not possibly have been fired." He smiled briefly. "But that, I think you will agree, *is* a significant difference! We knew as soon as the so-called Geest gun was examined that it could only have been made by human beings."

"Then," Commissioner Sanford said soberly, "its apparent discovery on Roye during our visit was a deliberate hoax—"

Cranehart nodded. "Of course."

Ronald Black said, "I fail to see why you've kept this quiet. You needn't have given away any secrets. Meanwhile the wave of public criticism at the government's seeming hesitancy to take action on the discovery—that is, to rush protection to the threatened Territorial Segments—has reached almost alarming proportions. You could have stopped it before it began two months ago with a single announcement."

"Well, yes," Cranehart said. "There were other considerations. Incidentally, Mr. Black, we are not unappreciative of the fact that the news media under your own control exercised a generous restraint in the matter."

"For which," Black said dryly, "I am now very thankful."

"As for the others," Cranehart went on, "the government has survived periods of criticism before. That is not important. The important thing is that the Geest War has been with us for more than a human life span now . . . and it becomes difficult for many to bear in mind that until its conclusion no acts that might reduce our ability to prosecute it can be tolerated."

Ronald Black said slowly, "So you've been delaying the announcement until you could find out who was responsible for the hoax."

"We were interested," Cranehart said, "only in the important men—the dangerous men. We don't care much who else is guilty of what. This, you see, is a matter of expediency, not of justice." He looked for a moment at the politely questioning, somewhat puzzled faces across the desk, went on, "When you leave this room, each of you will be conducted to an office where you will be given certain papers to sign. That is the first step."

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There was silence for some seconds. Ronald Black took a cigarette from a platinum case, tapped it gently on the desk, put it to his mouth and lit it. Cranehart went on, "It would have been impossible to unravel this particular conspiracy if the forgery had been immediately exposed. At that time, no one had taken any obvious action. Then, within a few days—with the discovery apparently confirmed by our silence—normal maneuverings in industry and finance were observed to be under way. If a major shift in war policy was pending, if one or more key bases were to be established in Territorial Segments previously considered beyond the range of Geest reconnaissance and therefore secure from attack, this would be to somebody's benefit on Earth."

"Isn't it always?" Black murmured.

"Of course. It's a normal procedure, ordinarily of no concern to government. It can be predicted with considerable accuracy to what group or groups the ultimate advantage in such a situation will go. But in these past weeks, it became apparent that somebody else was winning out . . . somebody who could have won out only on the basis of careful and extensive preparation for this very situation.

"That was abnormal, and it was the appearance of an abnormal pattern for which we had been waiting. We find there are seven men involved. These men will be deprived of the advantage they have gained."

Ronald Black shook his head, said, "You're making a mistake, Cranehart. I'm signing no papers."

"Nor I," Sanford said thickly.

Cranehart rubbed the side of his nose with a fingertip, said meditatively, "You won't be forced to. Not directly." He nodded at the window. "On the landing flange out there is an aircar. It is possible that this aircar will be found wrecked in the mountains some four hundred miles north of here early tomorrow morning. Naturally, we have a satisfactory story prepared to cover such an eventuality."

Sanford whitened slowly. He said, "So you'd resort to murder!"

Cranehart was silent for a few seconds. "Mr. Sanford," he said then, "you, as a member of the Territorial Office, know very well that the Geest War has consumed over four hundred million human lives to date. That is the circumstance which obliges your government to insist on your co-operation. I advise you to give it."

"But you have no proof! You have nothing but surmises—"

"Consider this," Cranehart said. "A conspiracy of the type I have described constitutes a capital offense under present conditions. Are you certain that you would prefer us to continue to look for proof?"

Ronald Black said in a harsh voice, "And what would the outcome be if we did choose to co-operate?"

"Well, we can't afford to leave men of your type in a position of influence, Mr. Black," Cranehart said amiably. "And you understand, I'm sure, that it would be entirely too difficult to keep you under proper surveillance on Earth—"

* * *

Celia Adams said from outside the cabin door, "I think it is them, Phil. Both cars have started to circle."

Phil Boles came to the door behind her and looked up. It was early evening—Roye's sun just down, and a few stars out. The sky above the sea was still light. After a moment, he made out the two aircars moving in a wide, slow arc far overhead. He glanced at his watch.

"Twenty minutes late," he remarked. "But it couldn't be anyone else. And if they hadn't all come along, they wouldn't have needed two cars." He hesitated. "We can't tell how they're going to take this, Celia, but they may have decided already that they could make out better without us." He nodded towards the edge of the cliff. "Short way over there, and a long drop to the water! So don't let them surprise you."

She said coldly, "I won't. And I've used guns before this."

"Wouldn't doubt it." Phil reached back behind the door, picked up a flarelight standing beside a heavy machine rifle, and came outside. He pointed the light at the cars and touched the flash button briefly three times. After a moment, there were two answering flashes from the leading car.

"So Wayne Jackson's in the front car," Phil said. "Now let's see what they do." He returned the light to its place behind the door and came out again, standing about twelve feet to one side of Celia. The aircars vanished inland, came back at treetop level a few minutes later. One settled down quietly between the cabin and the edge of the cliff, the other following but dropping to the ground a hundred yards away, where it stopped. Phil glanced over at Celia, said softly, "Watch that one!" She nodded almost imperceptibly, right hand buried in her jacket pocket.

The near door of the car before them opened. Major Wayne Jackson, hatless and in hunting clothes, climbed out, staring at them. He said, "Anyone else here?"

"Just Celia and myself," Phil said.

Jackson turned, spoke into the car and two men, similarly dressed, came out behind him. Phil recognized Ronald Black and Sanford. The three started over to the cabin, stopped a dozen feet away.

Jackson said sardonically, "Our five other previous Earthside partners are in the second car. In spite of your insistence to meet the whole group, they don't want you and Celia to see their faces. They don't wish to be identifiable." He touched his coat lapel. "They'll hear what we're saying over this communicator and they could talk to you, but won't unless they feel it's necessary. You'll have to take my word for it that we're all present."

"That's good enough," Phil said.

"All right," Jackson went on, "now what did you mean by forcing us to take this chance? Let me make it plain. Colonel Thayer hasn't been accused of collaborating in the Roye gun hoax, but he got a black eye out of the affair just the same. And don't forget that a planet with colonial status is technically under martial law, which includes the civilians. If Silas Thayer can get his hands on the guilty persons, the situation will become a lot more unpleasant than it already is."

* * *

Phil addressed Ronald Black, "Then how about you two? When you showed up here again on a transfer list, Thayer must have guessed why."

Black shook his head. "Both of us exercised the privilege of changing our names just prior to the outtransfer. He doesn't know we're on Roye. We don't intend to let him find out."

Phil asked, "Did you make any arrangements to get out of Roye again?"

"Before leaving Earth?" Black showed his teeth in a humorless smile. "Boles, you have no idea of how abruptly and completely the government men cut us off from our every resource! We were given no opportunity to draw up plans to escape from exile, believe me."

Phil glanced over at Celia. "In that case," he said, a little thickly, "we'd better see if we can't draw some up together immediately."

Jackson asked, staring, "What are you talking about, Phil? Don't think for a moment Silas Thayer isn't doing what he can to find out who put that trick over on him. I'm not at all sure he doesn't suspect

me. And if he can tie it to us, it's our neck. If you have some crazy idea of getting off the planet now, let me tell you that for the next few years we can't risk making a single move! If we stay quiet, we're safe. We—"

"I don't think we'd be safe," Phil said.

On his right, Celia Adams added sharply, "The gentleman in the other car who's just started to lower that window had better raise it again! If he's got good eyesight, he'll see I have a gun pointed at him. Yes, that's much better! Go on, Phil."

"Have you both gone out of your minds?" Jackson demanded.

"No," Celia said. She laughed with a sudden shakiness in her tone, added, "Though I don't know why we haven't! We've thought of the possibility that the rest of you might feel it would be better if Phil and I weren't around any more, Wayne."

"That's nonsense!" Jackson said.

"Maybe. Anyway, don't try it. You wouldn't be doing yourselves a favor even if it worked. Better listen now."

"Listen to what?" Jackson demanded exasperatedly. "I'm telling you it will be all right, if we just don't make any mistakes. The only real pieces of evidence were your duplicator and the original gun. Since we're rid of those—"

"We're not rid of the gun, Wayne," Phil said. "I still have it. I haven't dared get rid of it."

"You . . . what do you mean?"

"I was with Beulah in the Fort Roye hospital when she died," Phil said. He added to Ronald Black, "That was two days after the ship brought the seven of you in."

Black nodded, his eyes alert. "Major Jackson informed me."

"She was very weak, of course, but quite lucid," Phil went on. "She talked a good deal—reminiscing, and in a rather happy vein. She finally mentioned the Geest gun, and how Uncle William used to keep us boys . . . Wayne and me . . . spellbound with stories about the Gunderland Battle, and how he'd picked the gun up there."

Jackson began, "And what does—"

"He didn't get the gun there," Phil said. "Beulah said Uncle William came in from Earth with the first shipment of settlers and was never off Roye again in his life."

"He . . . then—"

Phil said, "Don't you get it? He found the gun right here on Roye. Beulah thought it was awfully funny. William was an old fool, she said, but the best liar she'd ever known. He came in with the thing one day after he'd been traipsing around the back country, and said it looked 'sort of' like pictures of Geest guns he'd seen, and that he was going to put the inscription on it and have some fun now and then." Phil took a deep breath. "Uncle William found it lying in a pile of ashes where someone had made camp a few days before. He figured it would have been a planetary speedster some rich sportsmen from Earth had brought in for a taste of outworld hunting on Roye, and that one of them had dumped the broken oddball gun into the fire to get rid of it."

"That was thirty-six years ago. Beulah remembered it happened a year before I was born."

There was silence for some seconds. Then Ronald Black said evenly, "And what do you conclude, Boles?"

Phil looked at him. "I'd conclude that Norm Vaughn was right about there having been some fairly intelligent creatures here once. The Geests ran into them and exterminated them as they usually do. That might have been a couple of centuries back. Then, thirty-six years ago, one of their scouts slipped in here without being spotted, found human beings on the planet, looked around a little and left again."

He took the Geest gun from his pocket, hefted it in his hand. "We have the evidence here," he said. "We had it all the time and didn't know it."

Ronald Black said dryly, "We may have the evidence. But we have no slightest proof at all now that

that's what it is."

"I know it," Phil said. "Now Beulah's gone . . . well, we couldn't even prove that William Boles never left the planet, for that matter. There weren't any records to speak of being kept in the early days." He was silent a moment. "Supposing," he said, "we went ahead anyway. We hand the gun in, with the story I just told you—"

Jackson made a harsh, laughing sound. "That would hang us fast, Phil!"

"And nothing else?"

"Nothing else," Black said with finality. "Why should anyone believe the story now? There are a hundred more likely ways in which a Geest gun could have got to Roye. The gun is tangible evidence of the hoax, but that's all."

Phil asked, "Does anybody, including the cautious gentlemen in the car over there . . . disagree with that?"

There was silence again. Phil shrugged, turned towards the cliff edge, drew his arm back and hurled the Geest gun far up and out above the sea. Still without speaking, the others turned their heads to watch it fall towards the water, then looked back at him.

"I didn't think very much of that possibility myself," Phil said unsteadily "But one of you might have. All right—we know the Geests know we're here. But we won't be able to convince anyone else of it. And, these last few years, the war seems to have been slowing down again. In the past, that's always meant the Geests were preparing a big new surprise operation."

"So the other thing now—the business of getting off Roye. It can't be done unless some of you have made prior arrangements for it Earthside. If it had been possible in any other way, I'd have been out of this place ten years ago."

Ronald Black said carefully, "Very unfortunately, Boles, no such arrangements have been made."

"Then there it is," Phil said. "I suppose you see now why I thought this group should get together. The ten masterminds! Well, we've hoaxed ourselves into a massive jam. Now let's find out if there's any possible way—*any possibility at all!*—of getting out of it again."

A voice spoke tinnily from Jackson's lapel communicator. "Major Jackson?"

"Yes?" Jackson said.

"Please persuade Miss Adams that it is no longer necessary to point her gun at this car. In view of the stated emergency, we feel we had better come out now—and join the conference."

* * *

FROM THE RECORDS OF THE TERRITORIAL OFFICE, 2345 A.D.

. . . It is generally acknowledged that the Campaign of the 132nd Segment marked the turning point of the Geest War. Following the retransfer of Colonel Silas Thayer to Earth, the inspired leadership of Major Wayne Jackson and his indefatigable and exceptionally able assistants, notably CLU President Boles, transformed the technically unfortified and thinly settled key world of Roye within twelve years into a virtual death trap for any invading force. Almost half of the Geest fleet which eventually arrived there was destroyed in the first week subsequent to the landing, and few of the remaining ships were sufficiently undamaged to be able to lift again. The enemy relief fleet, comprising an estimated forty per cent of the surviving Geest space power, was intercepted in the 134th Segment by the combined Earth forces under Admiral McKenna's command and virtually annihilated.

In the following two years . . .

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