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For Every Man A Reason

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The thunder of the jets died away, the sound drifting wistfully off into the hills. The leaves that swirled in the air returned to the ground slowly, reluctantly.

The rocket had gone.

Aron Myers realized that he was looking at nothing. He noticed that his face was frozen into a meaningless smile. He let the smile slowly dissolve as he turned to look at his wife.

She was a small woman, and he realized for the first time how fragile she was. Her piquant face, framed by long brown, flowing hair, was an attractive jewel when set on the plush cushion of civilization. Now her face, set in god-forsaken wilderness, metamorphosed into the frightened mask of a small animal.

They were alone.

Two human beings alone on this wild, lonely planet. Aron's mind suddenly snapped from that frame of reference—his subjective view of their position—to the scale of galaxies. It was a big planet to them, but it was a marble in the galaxy that man had discovered and claimed, and was now fighting with himself to retain. This aggregate of millions of pebbles was wracked with the violence of war, where marbles were more expendable than the microbes that dwelt on them.

The two walked hand in hand away from the meadow where the ship had been. The feeble wind snuffled at the scraps of paper and trash, the relics of man's passing.

They walked up the hill to their station, the reason for their being on this wayside planet.

Aron thought about the scenery around them. The compact, utilitarian building that was the station did not seem out of place against the bleak landscape. The landscape did not clash or conform to its location—it just didn't give a damn whether there was a building there or not.

Aron and Martha, his wife, took their time. They had an abundance of that elusive quantity known as time at this lonely outpost. The trail

up to the station was rough, with rocks and weeds tearing at them. Aron resolved that that would be one of his first projects, to put in a good path to the meadow where the rocket would come for them—five years from now.

The sunset did nothing to enhance the countryside. There was not enough dust in the air to create any striking colors. As the shadows began to lap at the hill, they hurried the last few steps to the building.

That evening they were both nervous, justifiably so, for not only were they starting on the questionable adventure of sequestered watchdogs on the planet, they were starting the adventure of marriage.

Aron had met Martha on Tyros, a planetary trade center of some importance. She was a waitress.

Since he was marking time on Tyros, waiting for his assignment, he had a chance to cultivate her acquaintance. On their dates, what he had to tell her about his life was brief, impersonal.

Aron was in the Maintenance division of the Territorial Administration and his duties were to hold posts on various planets and act as an observer of that planet's caprices.

The rush of mankind from Earth, like a maddened swarm of bees from a hive, had carried it through the galaxy in a short time. On all the discovered planets that had to be reserved for future inhabitants, the Territorial Administration had set up observation stations. The men posted there were merely to record such fascinating information as meteorological and geographical conditions.

When the time came to expand, the frail little creatures with the large brains and larger egos would know the best havens for migration.

Another reason for these stations was the war. When man had flung himself madly at the galaxy, he had diffused himself thinly over a macroscopic area. Some almost isolated colonies had developed the inevitable thirst for independence.

From local but violent wars between colonies, some semblance of order had been wrought. Now there were two sprawling interstellar empires, the United Empire—Aron and Martha were citizens—and the People's Republic.

Since Aron's realm relied on industrial technology and agriculture and the People's Republic based its economy on mining and trade there seemed to be plenty of room for consolidation.

Unfortunately this consolidation, or even peaceful trading, was not possible, due to the fact that the two dominions had entirely different forms of government and religion. The result was, as always, war.

These were the general facts that both Aron and Martha knew. What Aron discussed with his fiancée were the effects of this macropolitical situation upon their personal lives. The previous posts that Aron had held in the TA were planets in the interior of the United Empire.

During his stay on Tyros, he received the assignment he expected. It was a post on the fringe of the empire, a planet called Kligor. These stations of the fringe served dual purposes, not only their usual function of planetary observation but as military outposts to warn and halt any attempted invasion.

When he heard this assignment, Aron proposed, holding up to Martha the prospect of comfortable living in civilization once the five year hitch on Kligor was over.

She consented—not really knowing if she loved him or not.

They had been married the day they left. The space ship was so crowded there was no chance for privacy, so the two had no honeymoon till they reached the station.

Aron and his bride arrived on Kligor in what was autumn on the planet, for the seasons were consistent in all hemispheres.

Aron planned to spend a week at the station with his wife and then begin a planetary check of the various automatic observation stations that compiled the meteorological and other data and relayed it by

radio to the main station. This check had to be completed before snow came to the planet.

In that week they learned about each other. Neither of them was young and both were mature and prosaic enough to develop the daily routine of a long-married couple. There were many free hours which they would spend talking about themselves.

To Martha, marriage was not new. She had experienced matrimony before. Her husband, a gambler, had killed himself after a bad loss, leaving her with an impossible burden of debt and a disillusioned mind.

Since then she had worked, gradually paying off his debts. When Aron had come along, she liked the big man and thought that the years on Kligor would give her respite from a demanding reality.

She did not picture herself as a tragic figure, but rather as merely competent and stable, not realizing that that attitude in itself is a sure sign of instability. A smile seldom found her face. She was slightly nervous with a tendency towards moodiness.

Aron's history was not so bitter. He was born in a large family and had formed an aloof, reserved nature to achieve a sense of individuality in the group. His life had been spent in government work and he had never tasted the variable brew of the nuptial cup till he met Martha.

He was not a deep man in emotion. His nature was such that he had to be constantly occupied with something—not the frenzied scurrying of insecure individuals—but a solid problem that he could work out. A project that he could carefully shape with a keen analytical mind or capable hands.

They did not think of each other in terms of these thumbnail sketches, but merely watched and observed—and adjusted to each other. Their marriage was almost one of convenience, with just enough affection involved to oil over any disputes.

The spell of the planet gradually lulled them into hypnotic acceptance of their sequestered lives. Their daily duties became the

only things worth thinking about.

Aron learned about the planet in the next two months on his tours of inspection. He used a small atmosphere flier to cover the various posts scattered over its surface.

The small blockhouses were automatic and hermetically sealed to preserve the instruments, but something could go wrong and then it was his job to fix it.

As for the military defense system of Kligor, that was also automatic but not Aron's responsibility. It was a series of artificial satellites on the rim of the planetary system, with long-range detecting and tracking systems that would activate and co-ordinate firing mechanisms to blast any ship from the void.

It was Aron's duty to de-activate them with a control in his station if he was signalled by a pre-arranged code from a friendly United Republic ship. That was all he had to, or could, do with them.

The planetary stations were all in good shape except for minor repairs, which Aron attended to with the quiet joy of a man who loves machinery. He was home sooner than expected and just in time. The next day it began to snow.

The weather had opposite effects on the people in the station. Aron, long used to such confinements, settled down and began reading some of the great mass of books which he had brought, or working painstakingly on hobbies.

Martha grew more distraught as the snowbound months went by. The wild enthusiasm of her youth had left her, but she was not stoic enough to take the long confinement and inactivity. She tried to pick arguments, but Aron wouldn't argue. She tried to get interested in some time-consuming hobby, but she lacked the patience.

Spring finally came. On the first nice day Martha went on a long walk to watch the few flowers that Kligor boasted push their fragile buds into the air. Aron spent the day working on the path and the clearing that was a spaceport.

When night came, he was alone at the station.

Aron waited up all night, knowing it would be futile to search in the dark, not knowing in which direction or how far she had gone on her stroll. Aron was not too worried, since there were no dangerous animals. She was probably lost or had a sprained ankle, in which case she would have the sense to find a sheltered place and be safe for the night.

When morning came he began searching. He used the atmosphere flier to cruise over the nearby country.

Up and down hillsides he flew the craft, gliding slowly at a low altitude. He stopped over clumps of bushes for a careful scan, occasionally roaring towards what looked like a piece of cloth, but always turned out to be a bright stone.

When he found her, he knew before he landed. She was sprawled at the bottom of a high cliff.

She was not pretty any more. She wasn't even a live animal, just dead flesh lying there, smeared with blood and covered with tattered clothes.

Aron remained in a stage of pre-shock, a state of cold clear rationality, until he had taken her back to the station, dug a grave and buried her. He wasn't sad, it was just a job to be done. This wasn't his wife he was burying.

It wasn't until that evening that the fact of her death penetrated and was accepted by his mind.

The next few days were spent in routine actions. Aron relied on his usual anodyne—work. The pathway and the meadow were filled with cement by the end of the fifth day.

He let his stunned mind become wrapped in the problem of completing this job—the weight of the shovel in his hand, the heat of the sun on his back—these were what he thought about. It was not a solution or even escape, just a stall.

The sixth day brought a visitor.

The shock of someone knocking at the door, walking in, introducing himself and sitting down to talk yanked Aron's mind into awareness.

The only way to achieve a landing would be for a friendly ship to signal him and have him de-activate the defenses—which definitely had not happened!

Therefore it was hallucination, a miracle, or at least an interesting trick that this man had appeared at his station. Aron took interest, demanding that the man start from the beginning again as he had missed the introductions due to slight surprise.

"I said I am Karl Rondwell, an agent and representative of the People's Republic, being a member of the Intelligence department of her imperial navy," the man replied.

"The first question is, naturally," Aron said, "How the Hell did you get here?"

A slight smile. "Your much-vaunted defenses that are supposed to be able to snuff out the mightiest fleet, these defenses are easy to pass—for one man."

Aron could see that easily enough. "What is your purpose here then?"

"A deal, naturally!"

"I imagined so. You will have to persuade me, because you can't remove me and take over those defenses. Lack of knowledge of the proper code would trip you up when our United Empire ships came snooping around as they do so often."

"Since we understand the rules of the game," the enemy agent said, "let's proceed with it."

"Let me begin with a discussion of civilization. You may have forgotten something about it in your secluded life here."

The agent went on to speak of civilization, its comforts. Since he was a spy, he had spent a good deal of time in the United Republic. He spoke in terms of a man with money, the plush night spots, the beautiful girls that would be only too glad to be friendly with a wealthy

man.

"All right," Aron interrupted him. "That's clever oratory, but money isn't all I'll take to sell out my empire. What else have you to offer, and remember, I'm not buying—just looking."

The agent made his case stronger by comparing plush civilization to the futile hermit's existence of a TA observer, throwing in a few remarks about the brevity of one's life to be wasted in such a barren pastime as five years in solitary confinement.

When he began talking about a comfortable married life in a civilized community, he noticed Aron growing distraught.

"Why does talk of marriage so disturb you?" he asked.

Aron looked at him with a sneer in his eyes, "You must know, you check your victims before you begin your Judas acts."

With a rueful grin, the agent replied, "That is one place our agents can't penetrate, your Personnel Records Office. You, being a hard man to know, have made very few acquaintances that we could approach to get your history."

Silence. Then Aron said, "All right, here's a bone I'll toss you. You may use it, I don't give a damn!

"My wife died five days ago on this planet." He said it with vehemence, probably imagining by some twist of thought that he was shocking, hurting the enemy agent, whereas he actually was deliberately shocking himself. Masochism.

"Your wife?" the agent was amazed. "I didn't know your TA observers took wives with them."

"I'll bet you didn't know. Though, most of them don't, come to think of it."

The agent relaxed, lighted a cigarette—an ancient habit that cropped up in all eras.

"Men can take it," he began quietly. "Women are different. They can take it if they want to, but it's hard to find the right woman; and even then she must want to take it by being with the man she loves, or perhaps it is psychological—martyring themselves to gain a subtle

control of that man, which they all want to do.

"When you get a woman who can't, or doesn't want to take it, she can pull a beautiful crack-up. Without friends to appreciate her martyrdom, with a husband who refuses to acknowledge it, she sometimes uses the supreme martyrdom to gain recognition."

"Instinct tells me to slug you in the teeth," Aron said, "but apathy forbids me."

"Couldn't it be that you refuse to slug me because you want me to keep talking? Because you recognize the truth, that your wife committed suicide because of the loneliness and now your devotion to state has become meaningless? 'The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away' was the old maxim, but 'the State only taketh away' is the new."

There was more talk and some drinking, for the agent had conveniently brought some choice liquor.

The next morning, after they had arisen from where they had fallen asleep in a stupor, the agent proposed his plan. With the disgust and despair of the hangover, the agent's biting attack on his pride and his state, Aron listened. Later the agent was no longer the enemy, but a partner in a deal.

The next week the ships came. Twenty-seven proud cruisers of the People's Republic; also troop and supply ships. They landed in the broad valley on the main continent of Kligor, twenty miles from Aron's station.

The professional fighters emerged from their tools of war, the dull hulls of the ships and the dark uniforms lapping up the pleasant sunshine. The only reflection was from the polished bits of metal that hung at their sides, bits of metal that could spit destruction in ten different forms.

They looked at the planet but did not see it, it was just their newly gained base. They did not see the poignant beauty of the seemingly senescent hills covered with wisps of green and bathed in blazing

sunshine. They only saw strategic positions, avenues of approach and tactical advantages.

The pebble had become a pawn. War had come to Kligor. The slow, subtle weavings of individual threads of human psychology were ripped and snarled as the Mass Effort took over.

Conferences were held, land surveyed, machinery trundled from the cavernous holds of supply ships and the base was begun. To the cadence of barked orders, shuffling feet and grinding, pounding, thumping machinery, the buildings rose, the men moved in.

There was the usual bustle of a new military operation, the normal tension of a top-secret operation, the usual bungling and mix-up of supplies. But there was a slightly different attitude toward the gradually growing base. This was not a standard military location, one that had existed for years, or an enemy one that had been captured, or even a piece of ground that had been paid for in blasted hulks and smashed bodies.

This gain was by treason.

Naturally then, the men felt contempt for the operation and their contempt was manifested in sloppiness. The commanding officers would ordinarily have become raging martinets at such lax discipline and slovenliness, but the taint and contempt of treasonous gain was upon them also.

This contempt was displayed openly whenever the Traitor came to the base. Weak egos must be flattered by derision of others. They would have killed him as a matter of course, if he hadn't been clever enough to refuse to relinquish the secret codes which allowed the friendly ships to pass. Torture was obsolete, for hypnosis allowed a victim to die before he could reveal secret information.

He came every week to get free supplies and have conferences with the Intelligence men. The Traitor would walk the freshly-laid sidewalk boldly, his head up, his eyes flashing about to take in every new building.

The soldiers hazed him, spitting at him, bumping into him, glaring

and swearing at him; but he always reciprocated with such a withering look of contempt that they soon grew tired of the sport.

The worst day for the Traitor, alias Aron Myers, was when he went into the Soldier's Club to quench his thirst of a hot day. Since it was a week-end and there was nowhere to go on what few week-end passes were given, the Club was packed.

In the dimmed-light atmosphere, the black uniforms made the place seem filled with vagrant and ominous shadows with white faces. The noise was almost unbearable and Aron had a mind to leave.

He was confronted by a group of these shadows. They were all the same, indistinguishable in their identical uniforms, crew-cuts and young, arrogant faces.

"Hello Mr. Myers," one of them said. "Won't you join us in a drink?"

When he started to demur, they interrupted, "But we insist, Mr. Myers." One took him by an arm and led him to a table.

"After all," they said as the drinks came up, "We owe you at least a drink for giving us such a nice new base and everything, now don't we." It was sarcasm, and hammy sarcasm at that, Aron thought.

He recognized the situation as another case of hazing, but this time by a group of soldiers made even more obnoxious and bellicose by the liquor in their guts.

"You don't owe me anything," Aron said, "I gave it to you for my own reasons and not for money." Sure enough, they even came out with the corny laughter.

He let them play out their little satire without protest. Their grandiose courtesy towards him, the toasts drunk in his honor. That is, until one of them, more drunk than the others, said, "Mr. Myers, I hope you don't mind my telling you, but you are a—." The epithet was a new slang word but its vileness stemmed from prehistoric days.

Aron replied with blazing eyes. "I can't insult you back and you know it. I don't want to be killed that badly. All I can say is:

"Who are you to judge me? You are blind little men in a cage trying

to judge someone on the outside.

"Your hearts and minds have been forged in the crucible of duty and battle. You live for your uniforms and the distinction those uniforms bring you. You live to fight and die, to spend your spare time in dank, noisy holes like this. Drinking and lying to each other about your adventures and love-life.

"Then you try to judge galactic politics and the decisions of a man caught up in the rip tides of these politics, when all you know is your own vicious lives. You are traitors as much as any man, for you have sacrificed your normal lives to dedicate yourself to the violent dead-end of a soldier of space.

"Yes, you know what I am talking about, the Fermi radiations! The hard radiations of space that make every person who stays in space any length of time a sure candidate for an early grave.

"You're young now, so terribly young, only twenty or so years old in a possible life-span of a hundred years.

"You are traitors to yourselves by rejecting this life-span for a few brief years of glory as a soldier, then a slow decay for ten years till you are in a grave at thirty or forty.

"Your motto ought to be, 'live fast, fight hard, die young and have a radiation-rotted corpse'.

"And yet you condemn a man because he tries to seek a few comforts from an uncomfortable, implacable universe."

They didn't get it. They never get it, he thought ruefully. They continued in their cat and mouse game until they realized the mouse refused to be terrified, then they let him go.

During the next few weeks, someone started the rumor that the Traitor was actually a native of the People's Republic who had been trained and then planted in the United Empire's TA to do this job for Intelligence. The soldiers quickly believed it and almost came to respect the Traitor.

From the way that the Intelligence officers freely talked about

classified information with him in his weekly visits, Aron was aware that they would probably kill him once his usefulness was over. He was devising ways, though, to get around that at the last minute.

From this knowledge that had been blatantly tossed in front of him, he knew how strategic Kligor was in the stalemated war between the empires.

The People's Republic now had a fair-sized striking force based there, so that when an all-out offensive, which was scheduled in a few weeks, started, this hidden force could attack United Republic's squadrons from the rear and be doubly effective because of surprise.

So the weeks trotted by, the soldiers' camp expanding daily as the Traitor let the supply ships through the barrier. There are moods in war just as in people. This was a crucial point, the People's Republic had gained a slight edge by its gain on Kligor. So the usual pitch of anticipation was infused with the higher excitement of a sure victory.

The days were slipping furtively away as the Kligor garrison gathered itself together, crouched and got ready to spring into blind, violent action on the big day.

The laughter of the soldiers was tinged with nervous hysteria, but when they thought of that grim array of defense satellites, with its all-seeing eyes, its electronic brain, its steel guts and large parcel of hell in its fist, all this United Empire strength protecting them, their laughter grew louder and more sincere.

Aron thanked providence that Kligor didn't have any moons. This particular night called for every ebony patch of darkness that he could find.

He was on a nocturnal visit to the base, not using his flier. He knew there were guards posted near his station that would notify the camp when this craft was used. Slipping out the night before and avoiding the guards, Aron had begun the twenty mile hike to the base.

As he neared the base his precautions increased, his speed

decreasing proportionately. Avoiding the outer ring of guards was easy, as they were spaced far apart. Moving in undetected, through the tighter nets of guards around the camp, required the skill and patience of a feline.

That this base should have foot soldiers patrolling the ground around it seemed absurd on the face of it, especially to the men who had to do it. The planet was uninhabited and their only worry was from the skies above where the TA satellites defended them.

The Intelligence officers knew better. They knew how easily one man could slip through these defences. One man at a time, for several weeks, and a sizable ground force could be built up in some remote spot on Kligor. It was a long shot probability, but it was their duty to protect against such a probability destroying what they had achieved.

There was also a traitor, one of those fluctuating spineless things, loose on the planet—a clever man who couldn't be trusted by anyone.

This lack of trust was justified as Aron crawled and inched his way through the last circle of sentries. His whole body was a detecting device, listening for footsteps, watching for dim figures in the dark, even his nose was waiting to detect the odor of a cigarette.

According to the paper he had been lucky enough to read in the Intelligence offices when they weren't looking, he knew the Captain of the guards should be making an inspection about then. The seconds hung suspended, reluctant to pass, and Aron waited.

The Captain finally showed up, walking briskly, a smile on his face. This smile was rudely erased and all future occasions for smiles removed by a swiftly moving figure that plunged a knife into his throat before his mind could translate the shock into a cry of alarm.

More movement on the path and a new Captain of the guards emerged, walking just as briskly, but in a new direction.

The People's Republic's base occupied the narrow end of the valley, with a canyon entrance serving as the apex of the triangle it covered. Near this apex were the buildings, the dozens of barracks

and administrative buildings, all dwarfed by the massive concrete warehouses set around them against the hills. In these warehouses were the fuel, food and munitions of the enemy.

Below these buildings were the ships, first the rows of the 27 warships and then the 40 or so cargo and troop ships. These supply ships made up the base of the triangle. From the air these ships looked like a tiny forest of needles stuck upright in the ground, but from close range on the ground, where Aron walked in the captain's uniform, they were mammoth towers of steel—again, a matter of scale.

He emerged from the sentry lines near the cargo ships. These were all sealed and unoccupied and he passed the rows of them without a glance. It was a long walk, for the ships were hundreds of feet apart. The open field where they rested had the rough ground of a meadow, making his attempted military stride more of a burlesque jerky gait while he tried not to stumble.

There was a guard outside the airlock of each of the warships, for the crews remained aboard constantly. These guards were standing around talking to friends or moving restlessly about.

The sentries saluted Aron as he marched by, for they could see the brass on his uniform gleaming in the dark. He found what he wanted, a group of four guards talking by one airlock. They snapped to attention as he approached.

The base had expanded so rapidly, with new units and men being shifted constantly, that Aron counted on the men not knowing exactly who the Captain of the guards should be. All the sentries knew was the insignia of the Captain was before them and the man who wore them was to be obeyed.

His orders sent a chill of alarm through them. He said he had received a report of someone slipping through the guards and moving among the cargo ships. Since the soldiers were needed to patrol, he wanted these men to gather all the warship guards together and search the area of the cargo ships.

In answer to the question in their eyes, he said he knew the warships would be unguarded but he was ordering a special detail to replace them immediately.

The four dispersed and, in a few minutes, all of the lock guards had left their posts and were moving down to the cargo ships.

Time was the critical element now. Aron had taken a terrific chance by donning the Captain's uniform, but he had pulled off the bluff and now he had to capitalize on it—fast!

While the ship sentries were on their futile search, he ran from ship to ship, jumped into the open airlocks and worked quickly with pliers and a screwdriver. It was a little trick that he had learned from a talkative spaceman in a bar many years ago. It worked on any ship. Disconnect a tiny spring, cut a wire, and it was impossible to close the massive airlock door.

Aron wanted very badly to have those doors stay open.

Twenty-seven ships, hundreds of feet apart. He was on his last five when the search was abandoned and the sentries began returning. He hoped they would react normally, taking their time, dragging their feet and talking to each other in disgust about the wild goose chase.

On the last two ships he had to use different tactics. The sentinels had returned. When he walked up to them, they came to attention sullenly, waiting the chance to deride the usual stupidity of the soldiers and their Captain.

Instead, they had their throats cut.

Finishing the last airlock, Aron then walked through the post. Right up the main street he strode, his heart in his throat but his step and demeanor firm. The time of night helped him, for there were few soldiers about that might recognize him, and what few patches of light were thrown out from windows and doors were quickly swallowed by the black maw of darkness.

Up the main street, past the barracks, towards the last warehouse at the head of the valley. The two pillars of rock that marked the opening of the canyon served as a background for the massive blank

walls of this warehouse.

At the little door set in the center of the front wall there was a sentry. He was grumbling to himself about having to do such a damn-fool thing as guard a warehouse when there wasn't an enemy within light years of the building.

He was wrong. And the enemy killed him.

Inside the warehouse, there being no lock on the door, Aron groped about in the stuffy, pitch blackness till he came to a little fire station set against a wall. There was a locker containing an insulated suit, hatchet and other fire-fighting equipment, at this station.

He donned the fire-fighting suit and helmet and went to one end of the building that was walled-off. In this separate room was the emergency power supply for the base. There was a turbine with a fuel supply and tiers of high-voltage storage batteries. There was also a fire hose on one wall because of the presence of the combustible turbine fuel.

Aron had to pause for a minute to gather his thoughts. He had come so far, so fast through the first steps of his plan and now he was ready for the final action.

What Aron now needed for success was three things. Sulphuric acid and salt water in large quantities and the right wind.

The first two had been thoughtfully provided by the People's Republic. The third was a matter of waiting. The land on Kligor was dry. What little water supplies were available weren't enough to maintain a base the size the garrison had built. Since the ocean was only fifteen miles from the valley where the base was located, it was a simple matter to pipe in water.

One of the mammoth cargo ships had been loaded with six inch flexible hose, tougher than steel, wound on drums. It was a matter of a day's work to fly the ship slowly from the ocean to the base, laying out fifteen miles of this flexible pipe on the ground.

It was salt water, then, that was received at the base. Most of it was

filtered through a chemical plant in the valley to make fresh water, but it was salt water that was available to the fire hoses for the needed quantity and pressure.

The emergency power supply and the fire hoses were only normal safety precautions, but now, in the hands of the Traitor, they became deadly weapons.

By pushing the lever that removed the lids from the storage batteries automatically for inspection he had sulphuric acid—for the law of conservation of energy said that man had achieved the highest efficiency of electro-chemical conversion, in practical form, in the lead acid storage battery.

After finding the light switch and flipping it on, Aron found this lever and released it. Now all he needed was wind, and he had that, blowing a cool ten miles an hour down the canyon and over the valley. He had to consult the weather maps at his station for weeks to determine the probability of this wind occurring and the weather conditions that produced it. One small breeze to chart, when his recording instruments gave hourly descriptions of the whole planet's climate. It wasn't too hard a job.

Yet that breeze had to be at the right time, at night and on the night he wanted. Close enough to the attack date to be effective yet not too soon. Last night his instruments recorded the data that would produce this wind, so he was making his strike tonight.

He could not stand and gloat exultantly over his success. There were dead sentries and sprung airlocks that might be discovered.

With a twist of a nozzle, the fire hose came to life, throwing a pulsing stream of water on the batteries.

What Aron had done by ingenuity, luck, daring and careful planning was finished. It was now nature's turn.

The next night after his one man attack on the base, Aron had a visitor at his weather station. The visitor was in sad shape. His clothing was disheveled, his face dirty and unshaven, his eyes

bloodshot and he seemed to be on the verge of a mental collapse with a frantic gleam to his eye.

But he held a pistol in his hand and Aron didn't.

He was an officer of the Intelligence Corps of the People's Republic. It was not the officer who had first visited Aron, but one of the others that Aron had come vaguely to know, like picking out sheep from a flock.

He had been away from the base on a planetary reconnaissance mission the night before. Since then he had gone through a nightmare ordeal.

He had returned to his base to find sixty ships of the People's Republic about to fall into enemy hands without a struggle, because 200,000 men were dead or dying of chlorine gas poisoning.

The gas that had come pouring out of the warehouse at the head of the valley last night. It had billowed down the valley, its streamers and tentacles pushed by the gentle wind bringing the sleeping men awake coughing and gasping only to fall asleep again—permanently.

It had seeped through the barracks, the warehouses and into the open airlocks of ships, while dying men tried frantically to close those locks. They wouldn't close though, and the spacemen died puzzled as to why not.

In galactic warfare, with the emphasis on speed, maneuverability, range and power of space cannon, et cetera, everyone had forgotten an archaic weapon—gas. Aron hadn't.

After the horror of this discovery, the Intelligence officer had taken a flier to Aron's station.

He was feeling justifiably sorry for himself and his empire's thwarted plans for conquest, now completely impossible since the United Empire had been notified of the impending attack, and since the most strategic part of that attack, the Kligor task force, had been destroyed.

His military mind refused to admit that one man, the Traitor, Aron, could have caused this tragic defeat. He was willing, however, to vent

his desire for revenge on this one man.

Aron was unmoved by his threats and denunciations. The Intelligence man was going to kill him, certainly, but the officer wanted to make him suffer first, to make him squirm.

When one man has defeated and completely made fools of a galactic empire, killing is too simple.

"We weren't stupid enough to try to coerce you with pure logic," the agent was saying to Aron. "We knew you must have a large amount of patriotism to even take such a thankless job as this Kligor post."

"There had to be something else, some stronger reason to make you reject your empire."

Aron watched him warily. He could tell by the malevolent gleam of the Intelligence man's eye and the sneer that he was playing a trump, that he had a choice bit of information he thought would hurt Aron. All Aron could do was listen.

"You came here happily married and full of patriotic zeal," the armed man said. "That way you were no prospect for us.

"We changed those conditions by a very simple act.

"We killed your wife."

The officer watched him like a hungry animal, waiting for the reaction.

The reaction was a pitying smile and the following words.

"Why don't you sit down. I know you are going to kill me, there's nothing I can do about it and, actually, I don't object. But I would like to say several things first and you might as well be comfortable while I'm talking.

"I want to speak my piece mostly to clarify my ideas before death, but also so that you, who will continue to live, will be able to think about them in the future."

While the agent sat down with a puzzled look, Aron continued, "That is why, when there is combat between men, it will always be in doubt. Even though one side may be outnumbered, outmaneuvered and have all the military laws of advantage against it, that side can

still win.

"You have made the one mistake, the perpetual mistake, of combat. You forgot about the psychological factor. The force that can make a man surrender when the odds are with him, or fight like a demon when it is hopeless.

"So long as there is war, this psychological factor will make it an even, undecided combat despite all laws of logic.

"The psychological factor in this case, the one you overlooked, was that I love my empire more than my wife. She was merely a companion. You wouldn't know that, or the reasons for it, unless you knew my whole life—and not just the events of my life, my whole psychological life."

"Of course we couldn't know that," the enemy agent said, "but we could go on general rules of human behavior, and those rules deny the fact that a man can love a state more than a woman."

"Good God!" Aron exclaimed. "What training do you Snooper boys get? You don't even know the rudiments of psychology. Intelligence men—ha! All you know how to do is steal papers, kill in the dark and be suspicious of everyone all the time."

In a quieter tone, Aron went on, "It is easy to love a state like a woman, because a State is a woman.

"A love for State fulfills all emotional needs. The censorship of yourself by your super-ego, manifested in a desire for repentance or masochism, this need is effected by dedication such as my lonely watch here.

"Your destructive tendencies, half of the love-hate primary drive of life, can be expressed by fighting and destroying an enemy. You can't destroy your wife because of laws, yet everyone wants to.

"The other half of the ambivalent drive, your love desire can be committed in a platonic admiration or a patriotic zeal as you call it.

"Sure, the State is a woman. It'll kick you around, neglect you and abuse you; but when she rewards you, she does so lavishly. And this, plus the self-satisfaction of having protected her from her enemies

and helping her to survive—this is all the consummation of a love affair that a man could want.

"I know, what about the physical love? If all your other emotional needs are so well satisfied, you can be happy without that, especially if you're used to it—"

The agent interrupted. Aron knew he was not comprehending what he was saying, the man was still in a state of shock. But Aron knew the words were there, in the man's brain till he died. He could reason them out later.

"All right, all right," the agent said, "I am not here to argue philosophy. I just want to know why our plans failed."

"Since your wife's death didn't make you disillusioned enough to be receptive to treason, weren't you at least impressed with our offers of fabulous wealth and release from this prison?"

Aron rose from his chair and walked to the window. He didn't notice the agent and his menacing gun. He didn't care.

He looked out at the lifeless sunset of the world that sported the bare minimum of vegetation so it couldn't be insulted with the word "barren".

"Just another case of Intelligence men's stupidity," Aron said so quietly that the other man had to lean forward to hear. "Don't you know anything about your own territorial administration or ours? Do you know how they choose their men for these stations?"

"No, that isn't our department," was the answer.

Aron turned from the window and looked at him, seeming surprised to see him and hear him.

"Well, what sort of men would they choose? Where could they get men with the intelligence and ability required to operate one of these stations and cope with situations such as I've faced here? Where would they get such men to renounce the brilliant careers they could have amongst civilization with such capabilities?"

"Damn it! Stop playing games. Spill what you've got to say!"

Aron looked at him coldly, searchingly, "Since you are attached to

the Navy I imagine you've clocked many hours in space." When the agent nodded, Aron said, "Then, if you are lucky and show enough sense, you will become a TA man."

Slowly, comprehension came to the Intelligence man. The gun clutched in his hand lowered, his whole body slumped as he caught on to the fact they had overlooked. The fact that caused the failure of their plans. The fact that was his grim future.

"Fermi radiations!" Aron barked. "They rot your cells, weaken the blood, ruin the body. A man can spend about five years as a spaceman, about twenty months of which is spent in actual space. Twenty months and the man is doomed."

"If the man is smart he can become a space officer, then when he retires at twenty-five, he can land a good job with the TA. He doesn't want anything to do with civilization. That five years has made him love space, love isolation. So, they are willing to take these jobs, to be put out to pasture on wayward planets until they die at thirty-five." It was said with all the bitterness of a condemned man.

"What use would I have of your offers, even if they were true. When I finish, or rather, if I had finished my stay on Kligor, I'd only have a few months till I die. Your pleasant little cries of adventure, luxury, women, meant nothing."

"I just wanted to be alone to die."

Now it was the enemy agent's turn to speak bitterly. "Then you planned it all along. You led our men on, pretending you were going to aid us while you were in our midst learning everything about us to destroy us."

"You finally found the method, God knows where you dug up that fiendish idea of sulphuric gas, but you planned and watched. I'll never know how you were so lucky—and it was pure luck, but you did it. You destroyed our base."

With a smile, "Yes, I was lucky, I had a chance to end my life in a final battle and victory. That's all a man can ask for."

Aron was still smiling when the blast of the Intelligence man's gun

blew his head off.

As he left the station, all the agent could think of was one phrase he had heard many times jokingly; but now it became a grim accompaniment for his footsteps. Though he didn't want to hear it, it kept whispering through his mind every few seconds.

"Live fast, fight hard, die young—and have a radiation-rotted corpse."

Two hours later the United Empire fleet landed on Kligor. They came to claim the sixty ships lying waiting—waiting—in the peaceful valley that was still tainted with the smell of chlorine.

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Welcome to the fractured future, at the dusk of the twenty-first century. Earth has a population of roughly a billion hominids. For the most part, they are happy with their lot, living in a preserve at the bottom of a gravity well. Those who are unhappy have emigrated, joining one or another of the swarming densethinker clades that fog the inner solar system with a dust of molecular machinery so thick that it obscures the sun. Except for the solitary lighthouse beam that perpetually tracks the Earth in its orbit, the system from outside resembles a spherical fogbank radiating in the infrared spectrum; a matrioshka brain, nested Dyson orbitals built from the dismantled bones of

moons and planets.

The splintery metaconsciousness of the solar-system has largely sworn off its pre-post-human cousins dirtside, but its minds sometimes wander nostalgically. When that happens, it casually spams Earth's RF spectrum with plans for cataclysmically disruptive technologies that emulsify whole industries, cultures, and spiritual systems.

A sane species would ignore these get-evolved-quick schemes, but there's always someone who'll take a bite from the forbidden Cox Pippin. There's always someone whom evolution has failed to breed the let's-lick-the-frozen-fencepost instinct out of. There's always a fucking geek who'll do it because it's a historical goddamned technical fucking imperative.

Whether the enlightened, occulting smartcloud sends out its missives as pranks, poison or care-packages is up for debate. Asking it to explain its motives is roughly as painful as negotiating with an ant colony to get it to abandon your kitchen. Whatever the motive, humanity would be much better off if the Cloud would evolve into something so smart as to be uninterested in communicating with meatpeople.

But until that happy day, there's the tech jury service: defending the earth from the scum of the post-singularity patent office.

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