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GLEN COOK



PASSAGE
AT ARMS

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**Instrumentalities of
the Night**

The Tyranny of the Night

Lord of the Silent Kingdom

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WELCOME ABOARD

The personnel carrier lurches through the ruins under a wounded sky. The night hangs overhead like a sadist's boot, stretching out the moment of terror before it falls. It's an indifferent brute full of violent color and spasms of light. It's an eternal moment on a long, frightening, infinite trail that loops back upon itself. I swear we've been around the track a couple of times before.

I decide that a planetary siege is like a woman undressing. Both present the most amazing wonders and astonishments the first time. Both are beautiful and deadly. Both baffle and mesmerize me, and both leave me wondering, What did I do to deserve this?

A twist of a lip or a quick chance fragment can shatter the enchantment in one lethal second.

I look at that sky and wonder at myself. Can I really see beauty in that?

Tonight's raids are really showy.

Moments ago the defensive satellites and enemy ships were stars in barely perceptible motion. You could play guessing games as to which were which. You could pretend you were an old-time sailor trying to get a fix and not being able because your damned stars wouldn't hold still.

Now those diamond tips are loci for burning spiders' silk. The stars were lying to us all along. They were really hot-bottomed arachnids with their legs tucked in, waiting to spin their deadly net. Gigawatt filaments of home-brew lightning come and go so swiftly that what I really see are afterimages scarred on my rods and cones.

Balls of light flare suddenly, fade more slowly. There is no way of knowing what they mean. You presume they are missiles being intercepted because neither side often penetrates the other's automated defenses. Occasional shooting stars claw the stratosphere as fragments of missile or satellite die a second death. Everything consumed in this holocaust will be replaced the moment the shooters disappear.

I try to pay attention to Westhause. He's telling me something, and to him it's important. "Your instruments are rather primitive, Lieutenant. We get around on a hunch and a prayer." He snickers. It's the sound boys make after telling dirty jokes.

I'm sorry I asked. I don't even remember the question now. I just wanted to get a feel of the man who will be our astrogator. I'm getting more than I bargained for. The fifty-pfennig tour.

That's one of the tricks of telling a good story, Waldo. Before you start talking you identify the parts that are important only to you and separate them from those everybody else wants to hear. Then you *leave out* the insignificant details only you care about. You hear me thinking at you, Waldo? I suppose not. There aren't many telepaths around.

Now I understand the sly smiles that slit the faces of the others when I started with Westhause. Took them off my hook and put me on the astrogator's.

I shuffle the mental paperwork I did on the officers. Waldo Westhause. Native Canaanite. Reserve officer. Math instructor before he was called to the colors. Twenty-four. An old man to be making ju

his second patrol. Deftly competent in his specialty, but not well-liked. Talks too much.

~~He has that eager-to-please look of the unpopular kid who hangs in there, trying. He's too cheerful, smiles too much, and tells too many jokes, all of them poorly. Usually muffs the punchline.~~

I don't know much of this by direct observation. This is the Old Man's report.

Experienced Climber officers are taut, dour, close-mouthed sphinxes who watch everything with hooded, feline eyes. They all have a little of the cat in them, the cat that sleeps with one cracked eye. They jump at odd sounds. They're constantly grooming. They make themselves obnoxious with their passion for cool, fresh air and clean surroundings. They've been known to maim slovenly wives and indifferent hotel housekeepers.

The carrier heaves. "Damn it! I'll need my spine rebuilt if this keeps on. They can use my tailbone for baby powder now."

Some closet Torquemada had pointed at this antique, crowed, "Personnel carrier!" and ordered it aboard. The damned thing bucks, jounces, and lurches like some clanking three-legged iron stegosaurus trying to shake off lice. The dusky sorceress driving keeps looking back, her face torn by a wide ivory grin. This particular louse has chosen himself a spot to bite if she's ever stupid enough to stop.

The ride has its positive side. I don't have to listen to Westhause all the time. I can't. I can't keep tabs on the raid, either.

Why must I chase these incredible stories?

I remember a story about bullriders I did before the war. On Tregorghar. Fool that I am, I feel compelled to live *that* whole experience, too. But then I could jump off the bull anytime I wanted.

I hear the Commander's chuckle and look his way. He's a dim, golden-haired silhouette against the moonlight. He's watching me. "They're only playing tonight," he says. "Drills, that's all. Just training drills." His laugh explodes like a thunderous fart.

Squinting doesn't help me make out his expression. In the flash and flicker it jerks like the action on an ancient kinescope, or some conjured demon unsure what form to manifest. It doesn't settle. The Teutonic shape fills with shadowed hollows. The eyes look mad. Is he playing a game? Sometimes it's hard to tell.

I survey the others, Lieutenant Yanevich and Ensign Bradley. They haven't spoken since we entered the main gate. They hang on to their seats and count the rivets in the bucking deck or recall the high points of their leaves or say prayers. There is no telling what's going on in their heads. Their faces give nothing away.

I feel strange. *I'm really doing it*. I feel alone and afraid, and fall into a baffled, what-the-hell-am-I-doing-here mood.

There is a big explosion up top. For an instant the ruins become an ink-line drawing of the bottommost floor of hell. Forests of broken brick pillars and rusty iron that present little resistance to the shock waves of the attackers' weapons. Every single one will tumble someday. Some just demand more attention.

The silent monument called Lieutenant Yanevich comes to life. "You should catch one of their big shows," he says. He cackles. It sounds forced, like a laugh given in charity to a bad joke. But maybe he's right to laugh. Maybe Climber men do have the True Vision. To them the war is one interminable shaggy-dog story. "You were too late for the latest Turbeyville Massacre."

Our driver swerves. Our right-side tracks climb a pile of rubble. We crank along at half speed, with a thirty-degree list on. A band of spacers are trudging along the same trail, lurching worse than the carrier, singing a grotesquely modified patriotic song. They are barely visible in their dress black

Only one man glances our way, his expression one of supreme disdain. His companions all hang on one another, fore and aft, hand to shoulder, skipping along in a bizarre bunny hop. They could be drunken dwarfs heading for the night shift in a surreal coal mine. They all carry sacks of fruits and vegetables. They vanish into our lightless wake.

“Methinks they be a tad drunk,” says Bradley, who is carrying no mean load himself.

“We looked Turbeyville over on our way here,” I say, and Yanevich nods. “I saw enough.”

The Fleet’s big on-planet headquarters is buried beneath Turbeyville. It gets the best of the most serious drops.

The Commander and I had looked around while the dust was settling from the latest. The moons had been in conjunction nadir the previous night. That weakens the defense matrix, so the boys upstairs jumped through the hole with a heavy boomer drop. They replowed several square kilometers of often turned rubble. They do it for the same reason a farmer plows a fallow field. It keeps the weeds from getting too tall.

The Commander says it was a tease strike. Just something to keep the edge on their boys and let them know our upstairs neighbors may come to stay someday.

The abandoned surface city lay immobilized in winter’s tight grasp when we arrived. The iron skeletons of buildings creaked in bitter winds. All those mountains of broken brick lay beneath a rim of ice. In the moonlight they looked as though herds of migrating slugs had left their silvery trails upon them.

A handful of civilians prowled the wastes, hunting dreams of yesterday. The Old Man says the same ones come out after every raid, hoping something from the past will have worked to the surface. Poor Flying Dutchmen, trying to recapture annihilated dreams.

A billion dreams have already perished. This conflict, this furnace of doom, will consume a billion more. Maybe it feeds on them.

The carrier lurches. A track has missed its footing and we churn in a quarter-circle. Someone remarks listlessly, “We’re almost there.” I can’t tell who. No one else cares enough to comment.

What I see over the carrier’s armored flanks makes me wonder if the Old Man and I ever got out of Turbeyville. We might be *Fliegende Holländren* ourselves, pursuing that infinite path through the ruins.

The Pits are another popular target. The boys upstairs can’t resist. They’re the taproot of Climber Command’s logistics tree, the point where the strength of Canaan coalesces for transfer to the Fleet. The Pits spew men, stores, and materiel like a full-time geyser.

All they ever reclaim is leave-bound Climber people wearing the faces of concentration camp escapees.

I was planning to do an eyewitness account of the bold defenders of mankind. The plan needs revision. I haven’t encountered any of those. Climber people are scared all the time. They shy from shadows. The heroes are merely holonet fabrications. All *these* people want is to survive their next patrol. Their lives exist only within the mission’s parameters. My companions have left their pasts in storage. They look no farther ahead than coming home. And they won’t talk about that, for fear of jinxing it.

We’ve crossed some unmarked line. There’s a difference in the air. The smells are changing. Hard to recognize them amid this jouncing...

Ah. That’s the sea I smell. The sea and all the indignities unleashed upon it since the Pits were opened. The bay out there is the touchdown cushion for returning lifter pods. Maybe I’ll be able to watch one splash in.

Now I can feel the earth tremors generated by departing lifters. They leave at ten-second intervals around Canaan's twenty-two-hour and fifty-seven-minute clock. They come in varying sizes. Even the little ones are bigger than barns. They are simply gift boxes packed with goodies for the Fleet.

The Commander wants me. He's leaning toward me, wearing his mocking grin. "Three clicks to go. Think we'll make it?"

I ask if he's giving odds.

His blue eyes roll skyward. His colorless lips form a thin smile. The gentlemen of the other firm are playing with bigger firecrackers now. The flashes splatter his face, tattooing it with light and shadow.

He looks twice his chronological age. He's losing hair in front. His features are cragged and lined. It's hard to believe this came of the pink, plump cherub face I knew in Academy.

The gyrations of the brown girl's tracked rack bother him not at all. He seems to take some perverse pleasure in being slung around.

Something is going on upstairs. It makes me nervous. The aerial show is picking up. This isn't a drill. The interceptions are taking place in the troposphere now. Choirs of ground-based weapons are testing their voices. They sing in dull crackles and booms. The carrier's roar and rumble only partially drown them.

Halos of fire brand the night.

A violin-string tautness edges Yanevich's words as he observes, "Drop coming down."

Magic words. Ensign Bradley, the other new fish, sheds his harness and stands, knuckles whitening as he grips the side of the carrier. Our Torquemada wheel-woman decides this is the moment to show us what her chariot will do. Bradley plunges toward the gap left by the removal of a defective reloading ramp. He's so startled he doesn't yelp. Westhause and I snag fists full of jumper as he lunges past.

"Are you crazy?" Westhause demands. He sounds bewildered. I know what he's feeling. I feel the same way when I watch a parachute jump. Any damn fool ought to know better than that.

"I wanted to see..."

The Commander says, "Sit down, Mr. Bradley. You don't want to see so bad you get your ass retired before you start your first mission."

"Not to mention the inconvenience," Yanevich adds. "It's too late to come up with another Ship Services Officer."

I commiserate with Bradley. I want to see, too. "How long before the dropships arrive?"

I've seen the tapes. My seat harness feels like a straitjacket. Caught on the ground, in the open. The enemy coming. A Navy man's nightmare.

They don't bother with my question. Only the enemy knows what he's doing. That adds to my unease.

Marines, Planetary Defense soldiers, Guardsmen, they can handle the exposure. They're trained for it. They know what to do when a raider bottoms her drop run. I don't. We don't. Navy people need windowless walls, control panels, display tanks, in order to face their perils calmly.

Even Westhause has run out of things to say. We watch the sky and wait for that first hint of ablation glow.

Turbeyville boasted a downed dropship. It was a hundred meters of Stygian lifting body half-buried in rubble. There is a stop frame I'll carry a long time. A tableau. Steam escaping the cracked hull, colored by a vermilion dawn. Very picturesque.

That boat was pushing mach 2 when her crew lost her, yet she went in virtually intact. The real damage happened inside.

I decided to shoot some interiors. One look changed my mind. The shields and inertial fields that preserved the hull juiced its occupants. Couldn't tell they had been guys pretty much like us, only little taller and blue, with mothlike antennae instead of ears and noses. Ulantonids, from Ulant, the name for their homeworld. "Those chaps got an early out," the Commander told me. He sounded as if he envied them.

The sight left him in a thoughtful mood. After one or two false starts, he said, "Strange things happen. Patrol before last we raised a troop transport drifting in norm. One of ours. Not a thing wrong with her. Not a soul on board, either. You never know. Anything can happen."

"Looks like we'll get in ahead of them," Yanevich says.

I check the sky. I can't fathom the omens he's reading.

The surface batteries stop clearing their throats and begin singing in earnest. The Commander gives Yanevich a derisive glance. "Seems to be shit flying everywhere, First Officer."

"Make a liar out of me," the Lieutenant growls. He flings a ferocious scowl at the sky.

Eye-searing graser flashes illuminate the rusting bones of once-mighty buildings. In one surreal black-and-white, line-on-line instant I see an image which captures the sterile essence of this war. I swing my camera up and snap the picture, but too late to nail it.

Way up there, at least three stories, balanced on an I-beam, a couple were making it. Standing up. Holding on to nothing but each other.

The Commander saw them, too. "We're on our way."

I try to glimpse his facial response. He wears the same blank mask. "Is that a non sequitur, Commander?"

"That was Chief Holtsnider," Westhause says. How the hell does he know? He's sitting facing me. The coupling was going on over his left shoulder. "Leading Energy Gunner. Certifiable maniac. Says good-bye up there before every mission. A quick, slick patrol if he gets his nuts off. The same for her ship if she gets hers. She's a Second Class Fire Control Tech off Johnson's Climber." He gives me a sick grin. "You almost snapped a living legend of the Fleet."

Crew segregation by sex is an unpleasantness unique to the Climbers. I haven't been womanizing them much in integrated society, but I'm not looking forward to a period of enforced abstinence. There's something about having somebody else cut you off that does things to your mind.

The folks back home don't hear the disadvantages. The holonets concentrate on swaggering leavetakers and glory stuff that brings in the volunteers.

Climbers are the only Navy ship-type spacing without integrated crews. No other vessel produces the pressure like a Climber. Adding the volatile complication of sex is suicidal. They found that out early.

I can understand the reasons. They don't help me like it any better.

I met Commander Johnson and her officers in Turbeyville. They taught me that, under like pressure, women are as morally destitute as the worst of men, judged by peacetime standards.

What are peacetime standards worth these days? With them and a half-dozen Conmarks you can buy a cup of genuine Old Earth coffee. Price six Conmarks without—on the black market.

The first dropship whips in along the carrier's backtrail, taking us by surprise. Her sonic wake seizes the vehicle, gives it one tremendous shake, and deafens me momentarily. Somehow the others get their hands to their ears in time. The dropper becomes a glowing deltoid moth depositing her eggs on the sea.

"There's some new lifters that'll need to be built," Westhause says. "Let's hope what we lost weren't Citron Fours."

My harness is suddenly a trap. Panic hits me. How can I get away if I'm strapped down?

The Commander touches me gently. His touch has a surprisingly calming effect. “Almost there. A few hundred meters.”

The carrier stops almost immediately. “You’re a prophet.” It’s a strain, trying to sound settled. The damned open sky mocks our human vulnerability, throwing down great bolts of laughter at our puniness.

A second dropper cracks overhead and leaves her greetings. A lucky ground weapon has bitten a neat round hole from her flank. She trails smoke and glowing fragments. She wobbles. I missed covering my ears again. Yanevich and Bradley help me out of the carrier.

Bradley says, “Bad shields on that one.” He sounds about two kilometers away. Yanevich nods. “Wonder if they’ll ever get her back up.” The First Watch Officer commiserates with fellow professionals.

I stumble several times clambering through the ruins. The boom must have scrambled my equilibrium.

The entrance to the Pits is well hidden. It’s just another shadow among the piles, a man-sized hole leading into one of war’s middens. The rubble isn’t camouflage. Guards in full combat gear loiter inside, waiting to clear new debris when the last dropship finishes her run, hoping there’ll be no work to do.

We trudge through the poorly lit halls of a deep subbasement. Below them lie the Pits, a mix of limestone cavern and wartime construction far beneath the old city. We have to walk down four long, dead escalators before we find one still working. The constant pounding takes its toll. A series of escalators carries us another three hundred meters into Canaan’s skin.

My duffel, all my worldly possessions, is stuffed into one canvas bag. It masses exactly twenty-five kilos. I had to moan and whine and beg to get the extra ten for cameras and notebooks. The crew—including the Old Man—are allowed only fifteen.

The last escalator dumps us on a catwalk overlooking a cavern vaster than any dozen stadia. “This is chamber six,” Westhause says. “They call it the Big House. There are ten all told, and two more being excavated.”

The place is aswarm with frenetic activity. There are people everywhere, although most of them are doing nothing. The majority are sleeping, despite the industrial din. Housing remains a low priority in the war effort.

“I thought Luna Command was crowded.”

“Almost a million people down here. They can’t get them to move to the country.”

Half a hundred production and packaging lines chug along below us. Their operators work on a dozen tiers of steel grate. The cavern is one vast, insanely huge jungle gym, or perhaps the nest of a species of technological ant. The rattle, clatter, and clang are as dense as the ringing round the anvils of hell. Maybe it was in a place like this that the dwarfs of Norse mythology hammered out *their* magic weapons and armor.

Jury-rigged from salvaged machinery, ages obsolete, the plant is the least sophisticated one I’ve ever seen. Canaan became a fortress world by circumstance, not design. It suffered from a malady known as strategic location. It still hasn’t gotten the hang of the stronghold business.

“They make small metal and plastic parts here,” Westhause explains. “Machined parts, extrusions, moldings, castings. Some microchip assemblies. Stuff that can’t be manufactured on TerVeen.”

“This way,” the Commander says. “We’re running late. No time for sightseeing.”

The balcony enters a tunnel. The tunnel leads toward the sea, if I have my bearings. It debouches into a smaller, quieter cavern. “Red tape city,” Westhause says. The natives apparently don’t mind the

epithet. There's a big new sign proclaiming:

WELCOME TO
RED TAPE CITY
PLEASE DO NOT
EAT THE NATIVES

There's a list of department titles, each with its pointing arrow. The Commander heads toward Outbound Personnel Processing.

Westhause says, "The caverns you didn't see are mainly warehouses, or lifter repair and assembly, or loading facilities. Have to replace our losses." He grins. Why do I get the feeling he's setting me up? "The next phase is the dangerous one. No defenses on a lifter but energy screens. Can't even dodge. Shoots out of the silo like a bullet, right to TerVeen. The other firm always takes a couple potshots." "Then why have planetside leave? Why not stay on TerVeen?" The shuttling to and fro claims lives. It makes no military sense.

"Remember how crazy the Pregnant Dragon was? And that place was just for officers. TerVeen isn't big enough to take that from three or four squadrons. It's psychological. After a patrol people need a room to wind down."

"To get rid of soul pollution?"

"You religious? You'll get along with Fisherman, sure."

"No, I'm not." Who is, these days?

The check-in procedure is pleasantly abbreviated. The woman in charge is puzzled by me. She puts through my orders, points with her pen. I follow the others toward our launch silo where a crowd of men and women are waiting to board the lifter. The presence of officers does nothing to soften the exchange of insults and frank propositions.

The lifter is a dismal thing. One of the old, small ones. The Citron Four type Westhause wanted scrubbed. The passenger compartment is starkly functional. It contains nothing but a bio-support system and a hundred acceleration cocoons, each hanging like a sausage in some weird smoking frame, or a new variety of banana that loops between stalks. I prefer couches myself, but that luxury is not to be found aboard a troop transport.

"Go-powered coffin," the Commander says. "That's what ground people call the Citron Four."

"Shitron Four," Yanevich says.

Westhause explains. Explaining seems to be his purpose in life. Or maybe I'm the only man here who knows who listens, and he's cashing in while his chips are hot. "Planetary Defense gives all the cover they can, but losses still run one percent. They get their share of personnel lifters. Some months we lose more people here than on patrol."

I consider the obsolete bio-support system, glance at the fitting they implanted in my forearm back at the Academy, a thousand years ago. Can this antique really keep my system cleansed and healthy?

"You and the support system make prayer look attractive."

The Commander chuckles. "The Big Man wouldn't be listening. Why should he worry about a gimble-legged war correspondent making a scat fly from one pimple on the universe's ass to another? He's got a big crapshoot going on over in the Sombrero."

"Thanks."

"You asked for it."

"One of these days I'll learn to keep my balls from overloading my brain."

For the others the launch is routine. Even the first mission people have been up this ladder before during training. They jack in and turn off. I live out several little eternities. It doesn't get any easier when our pilot says, "We punched up through a dropship pair, boys and girls. Should have seen them

tap dancing to get out of the way.”

~~My laugh must sound crazy. A dozen nearby cocoons twist. Disembodied faces give me strange almost compassionate looks. Then their eyes begin closing. What’s happening?~~

The bio-support system, into which we have jacked for the journey, is slipping us mickeys. Curious. Coming in to Canaan I didn’t need a thing.

My lights go out.

I have trouble understanding these people. They’ve reduced their language to euphemism and their lives to ritual. Their superstitions are marvelous. Their cant is unique. They are so silent and unresponsive that at first glance they appear insensitive.

The opposite is true. The peculiar nature of their service oversensitizes them. They refuse to show. They are afraid to do so because caring opens chinks in the armor they have forged so their *selves* can survive.

The boomer drop was rough for me. I could *see* and *hear* Death on my backtrail. It was personal. Those droppers were after *me*.

Navy people seldom see the whites of enemy eyes. Line ships are toe to toe at 100,000 clicks. The men are extending the psychology of distancing.

Climbers sometimes do go in to hand-to-hand range. Close enough to blaze away with small arms if anyone wanted to step outside.

The Climber lexicon is adapted to depersonification, and to de-emotionalizing contact with the enemy. Language often substitutes for physical distance.

These people never fight the enemy. Instead, they compete with the other firm, or any of several similar euphemisms. Common euphemisms for *enemy* are the boys upstairs (when on Canaan), the gentlemen of the other firm, the traveling salesmen (I suppose because they’re going from world to world knocking on our doors), and a family of related notions. Nobody gets killed here. They leave the company, do any number of variations on a theme of early retirement, or borrow Hecate’s Horse. Nobody knows the etymology of the latter expression.

I’m trying to adopt the cant myself. Protective coloration. I try to be a colloquial chameleon. In a few days I’ll sound like a native—and become as nervous as they do when someone speaks without circumlocution.

The Commander says the TerVeen go was a holiday junket. Like taking a ferry across a river. The gentlemen of the other firm were busy covering their dropships.

TerVeen isn’t a genuine moon. It’s a captive asteroid that has been pushed into a more circular orbit. It’s 283 kilometers long and an average 100 in diameter. Its shape is roughly that of a fat sausage. It isn’t that huge as asteroids go.

The support system wakened us when the lifter entered TerVeen’s defensive umbrella. There’re no viewscreens in our compartment, but I’ve seen tapes. The lifter will enter one of the access ports which give the little moon’s surface a Swiss cheese look. The planetoid serves not only as a Climber fleet base, but also as a factory and mine. The human worms inside are devouring its substance. Or, like a great big space apple, infested at the heart.

The process began before the war. Someone had the bright idea of hollowing TerVeen and using it as an industrial habitat. When completed, it was supposed to cruise the Canaan system preying on other asteroids. One more dream down the tubes.

The address system begins hurrying us up before everyone is completely awake. I spill out of my

cocoon and windmill around, banging into a half-dozen people before I grab something solid. Almost zero gravity. There's no spin on the asteroid. They didn't warn me.

I don't get a chance to complain. Yanevich tows me outside, down a ladder, and into an alcove separated from the docking bay by its own airlock. Yanevich will be our First Watch Officer. He checks names against an assignment roster as our people join us. There are a lot of obscene exchanges between our men and the ladies mustering along the way. These boys' mothers would be shocked by their sons' behavior. The mothers of the girls would disown their daughters.

I'm amazed by how young they all look. Especially the women. They shouldn't know what men are for, yet... Christ! Are they *that* young or am I getting that old?

I ask one of my questions. "Why doesn't the other firm bring in a Main Battle Fleet? It shouldn't be that hard to scrub Canaan and a couple of moons."

Yanevich ignores me. The Commander is studying faces and showing his own. Bradley is scooting around like a kid during his first day on a new playground. Westhause has the volunteer mouth again.

"They're stretched too thin trying to blitz the Inner Worlds. The guys bothering us are trainees. They hang out here a couple of months, getting blooded, before they take on the big time. When we get out there it'll be a different story. The reps on those routes are pros. There's one Squadron Leader they call the Executioner. He's the worst news since the Black Death."

I'm getting tired of Westhause's voice. It takes on a pedantic note when he knows you're listening.

"Suppose they committed that MBF? It would have to come from inside. That would stall the offensive. If we carved it up, they'd lose the initiative. And we might cut them good. Climbers grow mean when they're cornered." A hint of pride has crept in here.

"Meaning they can't afford to take time out to knock us off, but they can't afford to leave us alone either?"

The Commander scowls my way. I'm not using approved phraseology.

"Yeah. Containment. That's the name of their game."

"The holonets say we're hurting them."

"Damned right we are. We're the only reason the Inner Worlds are holding out. They're going to do something...." Westhause reddens under the Commander's stony gaze. He has become too direct, too frank, and too enthusiastic. The Commander doesn't approve of enthusiasm in the broader sense, only in enthusiasm for one's job. And there it should be a subtle, low-key competence, not a rodeo holler.

"The statistics. They're learning. Making it harder and harder. The easy days are over. The glory days. But we're still building Climbers faster than they're retiring them. New squadron gets commissioned next month."

He leaves me to go exchange greetings with a small, very dark Lieutenant. There are few non-Caucasians in our crew. That would be because so many are native Canaanites. "Ito Piniash," Westhause says after the man departs. "Weapons Officer and Second Watch Officer. Good man. Doesn't get along well, but very competent." Just what the Old Man had to say. "Where was I?"

I hear Yanevich murmur, "Flushing the tunnel with hot air." Westhause doesn't catch his remark.

"Oh. Yeah. Time. That's what it's all about. We're all racing the hourglass of attrition."

"Jesus," the Commander mutters. "You write speeches for Fearless Fred?" I glance at him. He's pretending an intense interest in the women down the way. "Enough is enough."

"Our firm is starting to pull ahead," Westhause declares. The Commander looks dubious. We've all heard it before. High Command started seeing the light at the end of the tunnel the second week of the war. The glimmer hasn't shone my way yet.

"You guys coming? Or should we pick you up on our way home?" Only Yanevich, who is speaking

and the Commander remain. The rest of our lot have disappeared.

“Yes sir.” Westhause glides into a naked shaft. It seems to plunge toward the planetoids’ heart. He floats upon nothing and grabs a descending cable. He controls his duffel with his other hand. He vanishes with the down-pop of a fast prairie dog. Yanevich follows him.

“Your turn.”

I take one look and say, “Not even without gravity.”

The Commander grins. It’s the nastiest damned grin I’ve ever seen. He sticks me with a straight-arm. “Grab the cable.”

I stop flailing and grab. The cable jerks me down the narrow, polished tube. There isn’t enough light to see much but an oily sheen as the walls speed by. The cable itself has optical fiber wound in. The shaft sheds what little light there is.

This is a claustrophobic setting. The shaft is only slightly more than a meter in diameter.

I can just make out Yanevich below me. If I look up I can see the Commander’s grin coming after me. He has rolled so he’s coming along facedown. He’s laughing at some hilarious joke, and I’m afraid the joke is me. He shouts, “You puke in here and I’ll make you walk home from three lights out. Get ready to change cables. Damn it! Don’t look at me. Watch where you’re going.”

I look down as Yanevich begins heaving himself along. He pumps the cable, falls free, pumps the cable again, gaining speed. He seizes the faster cable and pulls away into the darkness.

I survive the exchange through the intercession of a tapered idiot fitting. It strips my death grip from the slow cable and transfers it to the faster one. The faster cable gives me a big yank and nearly turns me facedown. Now I know why Yanevich speeded himself up.

“Damned dangerous,” I shout up the shaft. The Commander grins.

From below, the First Watch Officer shouts, “Grab your balls. We’ll be hauling ass in a couple minutes.”

I picture myself hurtling down this tube like a too-small ball in an ancient muzzle-loader, rickety, rickety from wall to wall. I feel an intense urge to scream, but I’m not going to satisfy their sadism. I have a suspicion that’s what they’re waiting for. It would make their day.

I suddenly realize that getting tangled in the cable is the real danger here. Envisioning that peril helps silence the howling ape’s instinctive fear of falling.

“Shift coming up.”

I try to imitate Yanevich this time. My effort earns its inevitable reward: I manage to get myself turned sideways. I can’t find the cable again.

“Whoa!” the Commander shouts. “Don’t flail around.” He shoves down on the top of my head, mashing my cap. Yanevich slides up out of the darkness and snags my right ankle. They turn me. “Grab a hold. Carefully.”

The real trick is to avoid getting excited. I feel cocky when we hit bottom. I’ve figured it out. I can keep up with the best of them. “There must be a better way.”

The Commander’s grin is bigger than ever. “There is. But it’s no fun. All you do is climb onto a bus and ride down. And that’s so boring.” He indicated cars unloading passengers along a wall a hundred meters away. People and bags are floating around like drunken pigeons. Some are our men, some the women who shared our lifter.

“You prime son of a bitch.”

“Now, now. You said you wanted to see it *all*.” He’s still grinning. I want to crack him one and push that grin around sideways. Bet they pull this one on all the new meat. He explains that the cable system is a carryover from TerVeen’s industrial days. Back then the cables carried high-speed freight

capsules.

I can't pop a superior in the snout locker, so I try stomping angrily instead. The result is predictable. There is no gravity. Of course. I flail around for a handhold, which only makes matters worse. In a few seconds I put on an admirable combination of pitch, roll, and yaw.

"Thought you said he was a veteran," Yanevich observes laconically. Embarrassed, I get hold of myself.

"See, you haven't forgotten everything," the Commander says.

"I'll get it back. Am I in for the whole new-fish routine?"

"Not after we're aboard. There's no horseplay aboard a Climber." He's dreadfully serious. Almost comically so. There'll be no chance to get even. Grimacing, I let him tug me down so we can begin the next phase of our odyssey.

Westhause continues to explain. "What they did was drill the tunnels parallel to TerVeen's long axis. They were cutting the third one when the war started. They were supposed to mine outward from the middle when that was finished. The living quarters were tapped in back then, too. For the miners. It was all big news when I was a kid. Eventually they would've mined the thing hollow and put some spin on for gravity. They didn't make it. This tunnel became a wetdock. A Climber returns from patrol, they bring her inside for inspections and repairs. They build the new ones in the other tunnels. Some regular ships too. It has a bigger diameter."

In Navy parlance a wetdock is any place where a ship can be taken out of vacuum and surrounded by atmosphere so repair people don't have to work in suits. A wetdock allows faster, more efficient, and more reliable repairwork.

"Uhm." I'm more interested in looking than listening.

"Takes a month to run a Climber through the inspections and preventive maintenance. These guys do a right job."

Which is why the crews get so much leave between missions. They aren't permitted to make their own repairs, even when so inclined.

Westhause divines my thoughts. "We can stretch a leave if we work it right. Command always deploys the whole squadron at once. But we can come in as soon as we've used our missiles, if we have the fuel. So we get our month plus however long it takes the last ship to get home."

Within limits, I'm sure. Command wouldn't keep eleven ships out of action waiting for a twelfth making a prolonged patrol. "Incentive?"

"It helps."

The Old Man says, "Too much incentive, sometimes." For a minute it seems he's finished. Then he decides to go ahead. "Take Talmidge's Climber. Gone now. Tried to fight the hunter-killers so he could use his missiles and be first ship back. No law against it, of course." He falls silent again. Yanevich picks up the thread when it becomes obvious he'll say nothing more.

"Good encounter, too. He got three confirmed. But the rest crawled all over him. Kept him up so long half his people came back with baked brains. They set the record for staying up."

The story sounds exaggerated. I don't pursue it. They don't want to talk about it. Even Westhause observes a moment of silence.

We climb aboard an electric bus. It takes its power from a whip running on a track clinging to the tunnel wall.

"Only the finest for the heroes of the Climber Fleet," the Old Man says, taking the control seat.

The bus surges forward. I try to watch the work going on out in the big tunnel. So many ships! More

of them are not Climbers at all. Half the defense force seems to be in for repairs. A hundred workers on tethers float around every vessel. No lie-in-the-corner refugees up here. Everybody works. And the Pits keep firing away, sending up the supplies.

I think of the Lilliputians binding Gulliver, looking at all those people on lines. And of baby Kröhler's spiders playing at little trial flights around Mom. Said creature is a vaguely arachnid beast native to New Earth. It nests and nurses its young on its back. It's warm-blooded, endoskeletal and mammalian—a pseudo-marsupial, really—but it has a lot of legs and a magnificently extrudable whip of a tail, so the spider image sticks.

Sparks fly in mayfly swarms as people cut and weld and rivet. Machines pound out a thunderous industrial symphony. Several vessels are so far dismantled that they scarcely resemble ships. One has its belly laid open and half its skin gone. A carcass about ready for the retail butcher. What sort of creature feeds on roasts off the flanks of attack destroyers?

Gnatlike clouds of little gas-jet tugs nudge machinery and hull sections here and there. How the devils do they keep track of what they're doing? Why don't they get mixed up and start shoving destroyer parts into Climbers?

A Climber appears. It looks clean. Very little micrometeorite scoring, even. "Doesn't look like there's anything wrong with that one."

"Those are the tricky bastards," the Old Man muses. I assume he'll award me another cautionary tale. Instead, he resumes staring straight ahead, playing the vehicle's controls, leaving the talking to Westhause.

"The critical heat-sensitive stuff gets replaced after every patrol. The laser weaponry, too. Takes too long to break it down and scan each part. Somebody back down the tube will get ours. We'll get something that belonged to somebody who's on patrol already."

"Pass them around like the clap," Yanevich says.

The Old Man snorts. He doesn't approve of officers' displaying crudity in public.

Westhause says, "Everything has to be perfect."

I reflect on what I've seen of Climber people and ask myself, What about the crew? It looks like the Command's attitude toward personnel is the opposite of its attitude toward ships. If they can still see their names and crawl, and don't scream too much going through the hatch, send them out again.

The bus suddenly wrenches itself off the main track. The passengers howl. The Old Man ignores them. He wants to see something. For several minutes we study a Climber with the hull number 8. The Commander stares as if trying to divine some critical secret.

Hull number 8. Eight without an alphabetical suffix, meaning she's the original Climber Number, not a replacement for a ship lost in action. The *Eight Ball*. I've heard some of the legends. Luck of the *Eight*. Over forty missions. Nearly two hundred confirmed kills, mainly back at the beginning. Never lost a man. Any spacer in the Climbers will sell his soul to get on her crew. She's had a good run of Commanders.

Westhause whispers, "She was his first duty assignment in Climbers."

I wonder if he's trying to steal her luck.

"Living on borrowed time," the Old Man declares, and slams the bus into movement. Full speed ahead now, and pedestrians be ready to jump.

The odds against a Climber's surviving forty patrols are astronomical. No pun intended. There are just too many things that can go wrong. Most don't survive a quarter that many. Only a few Climber people make their ten-mission limit. They drift from ship to ship, in accordance with bill of requirements, and hope the big computer is shuffling them along a magical pathway. I think the odds

would improve if the crews stayed together.

Climber duty is a guaranteed path to advancement. Survivors move up fast. There're always ships to be replaced, and new vessels need cadres.

"Isn't there a morale problem, the way people get shuffled?"

Westhause has to think about that one, as though he's familiar with emotion and morale only from textbook examples. "Some. The jobs are the same in every ship, though."

"I wouldn't like getting moved every time I made new friends."

"I suppose. It's not so bad for officers. Especially Engineers. But they only take people who can handle it. Loners."

"Sociopaths," the Commander says softly. Only I hear him. He makes a habit of commenting without elucidating.

"You're a call-up, aren't you?"

"Only to the Fleet. I volunteered for Climbers."

"How are Engineers different?" Navy is a conservative organization. Engineers don't do much engineering. They don't have engines to tinker with. Aboard line ships they still have boatswain's mates. There's no logical continuity from old-time surface navies.

"They stay with one ship after three apprentice missions. They're all physicists. A ship always has an apprentice aboard."

"The more I hear, the more I wish I'd kept my mouth shut. This looks bleaker all the time."

"One mission? With the Old Man? With CliRon Six? Shit. A cakewalk." He's whispering. The Commander isn't supposed to hear. The set of the Old Man's shoulders says he has. "You can do it. Standing on your head. You're in the ace survivor squadron. We graduate more people than anybody else. Hell, we'll be back groundside before the end of the month."

"Graduate?"

"Make ten. Guys make their ten with us. Hell, we're at the bay already. There she is. In the nice spot."

A whole, combat-ready Climber looks like an antique spoked automobile wheel and tire with a ten-liter cylindrical canister where the hub belongs. Its exterior is fletched with antennae, humps, bumpers, tubes, turrets, and one huge globe riding high on a tall, leaning vane reminiscent of the vertical stabilizer on supersonic atmosphere craft. Every surface is anodized a Stygian black.

There are twelve Climbers in the squadron. They cling to a larger vessel like a bunch of ticks. The larger vessel looks like the frame and plumbing of a skyscraper after the walls and floors are removed. This is the mother, the command and control ship. She'll carry her chicks into the patrol sector and scatter them, then pick up any patrolling vessels that have expended their missiles and need ride home.

Though a Climber can space for half a year and few patrols last longer than a month, the Commander wants no range sacrificed getting to the zone, nor any stores expended. Stores are a Climber's biggest headache, her Achilles' heel. By their nature the vessels pack a lot of hardware into tightly limited space. There's little room left for crew or consumables.

"Awful lot of ornamentation," I say.

The Commander snorts. "And most of it useless. They're always tinkering. Always adding something. Always upping our dead mass and cutting our comforts. Patrols are getting shorter and shorter, aren't they? This time it's a goddamned magnetic cannon that shoots ball bearings. Just a test run, they say. Shit. Six months from now every ship in the Fleet will have one. Can't think of a damned thing more useless, can you?"

He's steamed. He hasn't said this much, in one lump, since I arrived. I'd better prod while the prodding is good. ~~"Maybe there's a use. Might find it in the mission orders. Something new to try."~~

"Shit." He folds up again. I know better than to go after him. That just makes him stay closed longer.

I study the mother and Climbers. Nine slot. That one will be my home.... For how long? Quiet patrol? I hope so. These men would be hard to endure over a prolonged mission.

CANAAN

I stepped off the courier ship, dropped my gear, looked around. "This is a world at war?"

The courier had dropped us in the middle of a grassy plain that stretched unbroken to every horizon. That vista would have scared the shit out of someone less accustomed to open spaces. I confess mild wobbles of my own. Service people don't spend much time out of doors.

In the near distance, a vast herd of beef cattle decided we were harmless and resumed grazing. Shadowing them were a few outriders. Kick out cattle and horsemen and there'd have been no evidence that this was an inhabited world.

"Cowboys? For Christ's sake." They weren't Wild West cowboys, but not that different, either. The nature of a profession often defines its garb and gear.

The courier joined me. "Picturesque, isn't it?"

"After that ride coming in... What the hell was all the jumping about?" A courier boat has no room for observers on its bridge. I'd gone through the approach blind.

"Destroyer. Old scow." He snapped his fingers and grinned. "Shook her like that."

"How come you're such a pale shade, then?" My shipmate of the past few weeks was a black subLieutenant whose main pleasure was the witty ethnic insult. He didn't argue that one. It'd been a tight squeeze.

"They'll be along any minute. Said they were sending somebody."

"Why out here? Why not straight into Turbeyville?" He hadn't revealed his landing plan beforehand.

"We'd have got smoked. Planetary Defense doesn't waste time shitting around with Fleet courier. They're busy covering the lifter pipe from the Pits. They don't want to hear from home anyhow." He patted the case chained to his wrist. Odd I thought, that it should be so huge. Suitcase size. Big suitcase. "They'll cuss me for two weeks."

I studied the chain. "Damn. I'll have to cut your hand now."

"That isn't funny." The poor bastards. They get so they won't turn their backs on their own mothers.

The chain was long. He put the case down and sat on it. He said, "Just open them baby blues and turn yourself a slow circle, Lieutenant."

I did. The plains. The grass. The cowboys, who showed no interest in the boat.

"What do you see?"

"Not a whole lot."

"You've seen it all. Change your plans. Come on home with me."

"There's more to it than this."

"Well, sure. Trees, mountains, some busted-up cities. Big deal. Look at those bastards. Hunkin' around on horses. And they're the lucky ones. They don't live in caves. No boomer drops on cows."

"I fought too hard to get here. I'll see it through."

"Fool." He grinned. "Climbers, yet. Here it comes." He pointed. A skimmer wove a sinuous path

across the green, a small, dark boat chopping through a breezy sea.

It rumbled up to us, downwash whipping torn grass against our legs. “Still not too late, Lieutenant. Go hide in the boat.”

I smiled my holo-hero smile. “Let’s go.”

It’s easy to grin when the fiercest monster in sight is a cow. I’d ridden the killer bulls of Tregorgart. I was ready for anything.

The skimmer driver waved impatiently. “Not the wide-open-spaces type,” the courier guessed.

We boarded. Our steed surged forward, arcing past the herd, leaving a long, dull snail track of smashed grass. Cows and cowboys watched with equally indifferent eyes. Our driver had little to say. She was the surly type. You know, “My feelings are hurt just by being here with you.”

The subLieutenant stage-whispered, “You’re an offworlder, they figure you’re a High Command spy. They hate High Command.”

“Can’t blame them.” Canaan had been under soft blockade for years. It made life difficult.

Back when, the other side hadn’t thought Canaan worth occupation. Big mistake. It was a tough nut now. The senior officer in the region, Admiral Tannian, had assembled scattered, defeated, ragtag units for a dramatic last stand. The Ulantonids disappointed him. So he dug in and began gnawing on their supply lines. Now they are too heavily committed elsewhere to give him the squashing he wanted.

Great stuff, Fortress Canaan, High Command decided. They sent Tannian the first Climber squadron into service. He saw their potential instantly. He created his own industrial base.

You couldn’t question the Admiral’s energy, dedication, or tenacity. Canaan, an agricultural world sparsely settled, overnight became a feisty fortress and shipbuilding center. A loose frontier society became a tight warfare state with a solitary purpose: the construction and manning of Climbers. Admiral Tannian demanded of the Inner Worlds was a trickle of trained personnel to cadre his locally raised legions. A bargain. High Command gladly obliged. To the sorrow of many ranking officers with ambitions or personal axes to grind.

Admiral Frederick Minh-Tannian became proconsul of Canaan’s system and absolute master of humanity’s last bastion in this end of space. Down the line, on the Inner Worlds, he was considered one of the great heroes of the war.

It was an hour’s run to the nearest Guards’ outpost. The place fit the Wild West image. Adobe walls surrounded scores of hump-backed bunkers. Most of those boasted obsolete but effective detection antennae. There were barracks for several hundred soldiers, and a dozen armed floaters.

My companion said, “I usually put down here. One company. It patrols more area than France on Old Earth. Six regular soldiers. The Captain, a Lieutenant, and four Sergeants. The rest are locals. Serve three months a year and chase cows the rest. Or dig turnips. They bring their families if they have them.”

“I was wondering about the kids.” It was the most unmilitary installation I’d ever seen. Looked like a way station three years into a *Völkerwanderung*. It would’ve given Marine sergeants apoplexy.

The Captain wasted little time on us. He spoke with the courier briefly. The courier opened that huge case and passed over a kilo canister. The Captain handed him some greasy Conmarks. They were old bills, pre-war pink instead of today’s lilac gray. The courier shoved them inside his tunic, grinned at me, and went outside.

“Coffee,” he explained. And, “A man has to make hay while the sun shines. A local proverb.”

My glimpse inside the case had shown me maybe forty more canisters.

It was an old, old game with Fleet couriers. The brass knew about it. Only their pets received couriers.

assignment. Sometimes there were kickbacks. My companion didn't look like a man whose business was that big.

"I see."

"Sometimes tobacco, too. They don't raise it here. And chocolate, when I can make the contacts back home."

"You should've loaded the boat." I didn't resent his running luxuries. Guess I'm a laissez-faire capitalist at heart.

He grinned. "I did. Can't deal with the Captain, though. After a while one of the sergeants will notice that nobody has patrolled that part of the plain lately. He'll make the sweep himself, just to keep his hand in. And I'll find a bale of Conmarks when I get back." He hoisted his case. "This's for special people. I sell it practically at cost."

"Conmarks ought to be drying up out here."

"They're getting harder to come by. I'm not the only courier on the Canaan run." He brightened. "But, shit. There had to be billions floating around before the war. It'll come out. Just got to keep refusing military scrip."

"I wish you luck, my friend." I was thinking of a few items in my own luggage, meant to sweeten the contacts I hoped to make.

The subLieutenant kicked a floater. "Looks as good as any of them. Throw your stuff in and let's go."

We had to cross two-thirds of a continent. A quarter of the way round Canaan's southern hemisphere I slept twice. We stopped for fuel several times. The subLieutenant kept the floater screaming all the time he was at the controls. My turns, I kept it down to a steady 250 kph.

He wakened me once to show me a city. "They called it Mecklenburg. After some city on Old Earth. Population a hundred thousand. Biggest town for a thousand clicks."

Mecklenburg lay in ruins. Threads of campfire smoke drifted up. "Old folks with deep roots, I guess. They wouldn't pull out. They're safe now. Nothing left to blast." He kicked the floater into motion.

Later, he asked, "What's the name of that town where you want off?"

"Kent."

He punched up something on the floater's little info screen. "It's still there. Must not be much."

"I don't know. Never been there."

"Well, it can't be shit, that close to T-ville and still standing. Hell, you'd think they'd take it out just for spite."

"The way our boys do?"

"I guess." He sounded sour. "This war is a big pain in the ass."

That was the one time I didn't like my companion. He didn't say that the way the grunts and spooks do. He was pissed because the war had disturbed his social life.

I said nothing. The attitude is common among those who see little or no combat. He viewed the brush coming in as part of a gentleman's game, a passage of arms in a knight's spring jousts.

We roared into Kent in midafternoon. Kent was a sleepy village that might have been teleported whole from Old Earth's past. A few scruffy Guards represented the present. They looked like locals combining military responsibilities with their normal routine.

"You know the address, I could drop you off, Lieutenant."

"That's all right. They said ask the Guards. Somebody will pick me up. Right here is fine. Thanks for the lift."

"Suit yourself." He gave me a long look after I dropped into the unpaved street. "Lieutenant. You've got balls. *Climbers*. Good luck." He slammed the hatch and lurched away. The last I saw, he

was a streak heading toward Turbeyville like a moth to flame.

Good luck, he said. Like I'd damned well need it. Well, good luck to you too, courier. May you become wealthy on the Canaan run.

That was when I started wondering if maybe I hadn't wangled my way into a *hexenkessel*.

I spoke with a Guardswoman. She made a call. Ten minutes later a woman eased a strange, rattling contraption up to me. It was a locally produced vehicle of venerable years, propelled by internal combustion. My nose couldn't decide if the fuel was alcohol or of petroleum derivation. We'd use both in the floater.

"Jump in, Lieutenant. I'm Marie. He was taking a shower, so I came. Be a nice surprise."

"Didn't they tell him I was coming?"

"He wasn't expecting you till tomorrow."

It took ten minutes to reach the house among the trees. Pines, I think they were. Imported and genetically spliced with something local so they could slide into the ecology. Marie never shut up, and never said a word that interested me. She must have decided I was a sullen, sour old fart.

My friend wasn't surprised. He ambushed me at the door, enveloped me in a huge bear hug. "Back to harness, eh? And looking good, too. See they bumped you to Lieutenant." He didn't mention my leg. He sensed that that was *verboten*.

I'm touchy about the injury. It destroyed my career.

"Boat get in early?"

"I don't know. The courier always went full out. Maybe so."

"Little private business on the side?" He grinned. He was older than I remembered him, and older than I expected. The grin took off ten years. "So let's have a drink and confound Marie with lies about Academy."

He meant what he said, and yet... There was a hollowness to his words, as though he had to strain to put them together in the acceptable forms. He acted like a man who'd been out of circulation so long he'd forgotten his social devices. I found that intriguing.

I grew more intrigued during the following few days. I was soon aware that an old friend had become a stranger, that this man only wore the weathered husk of the friend I'd known in Academy. And he realized that he had few points of congruency left with me. Those were a sad few days. We tried hard and the harder we tried the more obvious it became.

Canaan was his homeworld. He'd requested duty there. His request had been granted, with an assignment to Climbers. He'd been home for slightly under two years, done seven Climb missions and now had his own ship. He'd been executive officer aboard an attack destroyer before his transfer. He'd worked his way back up.

He wouldn't talk about that side of his life, and that disturbed me. He was never a talker but had always been willing to share his experiences if you asked the right questions. Now there were no right questions. He wanted to pretend that his military life didn't exist.

Just a few short years since we'd last met. And in the interim they'd peeled his skin and stuffed somebody else inside.

He and Marie fought like animals. I could detect no positive feelings between them. She'd scream and yell and throw things almost every time the both of them were out of sight. As if I had no ears. As if my not seeing kept it from being real. Sometimes the screeching lasted half the night. He didn't fight back, insofar as I could tell. I never heard his voice raised. Once, in my presence, while we walked through the pines, he muttered, "She doesn't know any better. She's just an Old Earth whore."

I asked no questions and he didn't explain. I supposed she was one of the sluts they'd grabbed ear

and had scattered around for the morale of the men, and had found unnecessary in a mixed-service. All heart, our do-good leaders. They'd dropped the women where they were.

Maybe Marie had a right to be hostile.

Three days of unpleasantness. Then, well ahead of schedule, my friend told me, "Time to go. Pick the things you want to take. We'll leave after dark. West of here it's better to travel at night." The quarreling had become too much for him. He wanted out.

He didn't admit that. He simply made his announcement. When Marie got the word, the gloves came off. She no longer kept the vitriol private.

I didn't blame him for running.

A young Guardswoman brought us a Navy floater after sundown. We boarded under Marie's fierce barrage yet. My friend never looked back.

After we dropped the Guardswoman at her headquarters, I asked, "Why don't you throw her out? You don't owe her anything."

He didn't respond for a long time. Instead, he lit his pipe and puffed his way through. Midway, he said, "We'll pick up our First Watch Officer and a new kid. Going to start him off in Ship's Services Academy boy. Don't get many of those anymore."

Later still, in snatches, he told me what he thought of our ship's officers. He didn't say a lot. Thumbnail sketches. He didn't want to talk about his command. He responded to my earlier question just before we collected his First Watch Officer.

"Somebody owes her. They put the hose to her. She'll never get off this rock. Might as well use my place."

What can you say to that? Call him a sucker for strays? I don't think so. I'd call it a case of one man's using otherwise unimportant resources to rectify one of this universe's countless injustices. I think that's the way he pictured it. I don't think thumbscrews would have forced him to admit it.

The First Watch Officer was Stefan Yanevich. Lieutenant. Another Canaan native. A long, lanky man with ginger hair and eyes that sometimes looked gray, sometimes pale blue. Thin, sharp features and sleepy eyes. A soft drawl when he spoke, which was seldom. He was as reticent as my friend the Commander.

He was waiting outside his quarters, alone, and looked eager to go. But there was no eagerness in the way he slung his duffel aboard.

He had long, slim fingers that moved while he gave me his biography. Twenty-five. His Academy class had been two behind ours. He'd volunteered for Canaan because it was his homeworld. This would be his sixth mission.

The Commander thought well of him. He would have his own ship next mission.

He accepted me without question. I supposed the Commander had vouched for me. He didn't seem interested in why I was here, or who I used to be. Again, I assumed the Commander had filled him in.

The Old Man said, "Next stop, the kid."

Yanevich became interested. "Met him yet? What's he like?"

"Came up last week. Squared away. Shows promise. We'll like him." There was an edge to his voice. It said it didn't matter if anyone liked the new man, but it would be a nice bonus if he turned out okay.

Ensign Bradley was as quiet as the others, but more naturally so. He wasn't hiding from anything. When he did speak, he successfully downplayed his own lack of experience. He drew both the Commander and First Watch Officer out more skillfully than I had. I pegged him as a very bright and personable young man—when he turned himself on. He wasn't a Canaanite. In an aside to me, he said, "I flipped a coin when I got my bars. Heads or tails, Fleet or Climbers. Came up heads. The Fleet." He

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