

The background is a vibrant red sky. In the lower portion, a dark, textured sea is depicted. On the horizon, a semi-circular teal area contains a stylized factory with several smokestacks. Scattered throughout the red sky are numerous small, dark, bat-like silhouettes. The title text is rendered in a bold, white, sans-serif font, appearing to be cut out of the red background.

THE SKY IS FILLED WITH SHIPS

by Richard C.
Meredith

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RICHARD C. MEREDITH

Singularity&Co.

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Save the SciFi!

As an employee of the Solar Trading Company, Major Janas had been on an intelligence patrol for ten years, gaining information for Altho Franken, his boss and President of STC.

And it had been worth it. Because Janas was bringing home vital and secret information about the strength of the forces brought together by General Kantralas, leader of the Alliance of Rebels, an alliance that had been formed over a period of forty years and had already had two major battles with the government of the galaxy—Earth's Federation.

The Solar Trading Company had been there to pick up the pieces—and STC was still there, not for the Alliance and not for the Federation, either. STC was still there—to keep civilization going after the governments had battled it out.

The information Janas was carrying was vital to the role STC would need to play in the coming conflict.

And suddenly he found no one would listen...

To my wife, Joy

Chapter I

He had never seen the Lunar terminals so crowded, nor had he ever seen the crowds so quiet. Here on Luna things still looked normal; there were no signs of bombing, the terminal staff and their automated equipment still functioned normally. There was, he noticed, an unusually large number of soldiers, though few were part of the sullen, milling crowd. Most stood armed and silent, dressed in Federation combat green, their backs against the wall, their faces impassive.

But the people—he could see it in their faces, fear just below the level of panic. Many of them were refugees, as he was in a sense, just come to Luna from the star worlds. They knew what was happening *Out There* and what could be happening here soon—and they were frightened.

He turned and looked out through the transparent bubble that covered this section of the huge, sprawling Lunar terminal. Stark, harsh shadows fell across the spaceport, slowly imperceptibly lengthening as Luna's backside swung toward the sun. Out there, in the near vacuum of the moon's surface, glittering in the brilliant late afternoon sunlight, lay the starship that had carried him from Odin back to Earth's companion. It lay quiet and still now, like some huge, metallic sea beast thrown up on this uninviting shore by a terrible storm, on the southern edge of Mare Serenitatis, this misnamed Sea of Serenity. He wondered if that great beast would ever again swim in the oceans of space, and he doubted it.

Captain Robert L. Janas of the Solar Trading Company, of late Acting Manager of the STC Odin Major Terminal, before that commander of the STCSS *President Regan*, Terran by birth, starman by occupation, looked up at the moon's pitch-black sky and saw the brilliant half of Earth hanging like a painted toy against star-spangled velvet.

She's been lucky so far, he told himself, but now her luck's run out. He muttered something that was halfway between a curse and a prayer and was about to turn away when a glint of climbing light caught his eye.

One following another until there were dozens of them, moving spots of reflected sunlight, a fleet, no, an armada of starships, rose into the Lunar sky from somewhere far across the flat plains of Mare Serenitatis. He knew what ships they were, and he knew their names and their purpose. A chill ran down his spine. He ticked off those names as they rose skyward, fell into orbit around Luna, and waited for their companions. Out there, moving starward now, were *Marathon* and *Belleau Wood*, *Bull Run* and *Agincourt*; one was *Salamis* and one was *Argonne Forest*, and there was *Pork Chop Hill* and *Waterloo* and others with names as vivid. Climbing away from Luna was the cream of the space fleets of the Terran Federation, the greatest of the heavy battle cruisers of the stars.

And soon, Janas knew, rendezvousing with them, lifting from other Lunar ports, would be the Federation's destroyer fleets, ships named *North Carolina* and *Revenge*, *Victory* and *Bismarck*, *Royal William* and *Hood*, *Yamato* and *Alabama*, and a hundred more.

Together they would meet in orbit around Luna, and with others they would climb away, moving starward, and somewhere in the darkness between stars, somewhere in the grayness of another universe, they would meet that other fleet, a fleet whose ships bore names like

their own, manned by men like themselves, and the battle would be joined; the Great Rebellion would reach its climax. And then?

Janas tore his eyes away from the sky, wondering what it would be like here a month from now. Would the Lunar terminals still be operating? Would they even exist? Whose ships would be in her dark sky? And what of Earth herself? Will she be green and blue still, or will her continents, like those of Antigonish, be shrouded in smoke and her oceans covered with steam?

Robert L. Janas, Captain, Solar Trading Company, was halfway between birth and death according to the actuary tables of this, the year 979 of the Federation, or the year 3483 of the old calendar. He was a tall man with a cafe au lait complexion, unusual for a person born in the section of North America from which he had come, but his mother's people had been bred by the mingled races of the plains of Asia, and her blood ran thick in his veins. His face was made of sharp angles and harsh lines, a quickly wrought sketch of a medieval knight; few women called him handsome but none had called him ugly. His eyes were deep-set and dark, the eyes of a man accustomed to peering into the endless depths of space, the eyes of a dreamer strangely set into the face of a warrior, and perhaps this is why something in his appearance harked back to the days of steel armor, broadswords and towering castles. The darkness of his hair was shot with a premature gray that made him look older than he was. When he walked there was a slight though noticeable limp; a scar and a transplanted trochanter were the only reminders of a fight on an alien world so far away and so long ago that he hardly remembered it. The blue and gold uniform he wore looked well on him, for Robert Janas was every inch a starship captain.

But now, in this year 979 FE, standing on the surface of Luna and watching the fleets of the Federation move toward the stars, Janas felt little of the feline strength that resided in his slender body, felt little more than a cold apprehension. The end was near, the "Imperium" was about to die, mankind would be plunged into the darkest of dark ages, and there was nothing that could be done to stop it.

Shifting his attaché case from his left hand to his right, he walked away from the observation deck and back toward the center of the terminal dome. Rising from the tiled floor of the dome were the information and reservation desks, forming a circle around the reservation computer input station, which was strangely quiet and still as it had never been before. Above the input unit was a pedestal on which sat a 3-V tank, and in the depths of the tank was a pleasant-looking young man seated behind a broad desk. Before him were several sheets of paper that he shuffled, perhaps nervously; behind him on the wall was a Mercator projection of Earth, emblazoned with the combined letters "T" and "F" of the Federation. The young man was speaking.

"...after weeks of discussion. Citizen Herrera, Chairman of the Federation, announced within the hour that Citizen Altho Franken, President of the Solar Trading Company, had agreed to allow the use of STC ships and personnel in the defense of Federation territory against the rebel Kantralas."

The face of the young newscaster faded away to be replaced by the pudgy-faced, hairy-eyed image of the Chairman of the Terran Federation, Citizen Jonal Constantine Herrera. The word "prerecorded" appeared in the lower right hand corner of the 3-V tank. The image spoke the words heavily flavored with the east European dialect of his childhood: "The noble and

self-sacrificing action of Citizen Altho Franken will long be remembered by the peoples of the Federation. We all know the Solar Trading Company's long-standing neutrality in political affairs, and we can appreciate Citizen Franken's hesitation to break such a time-honored tradition. However, my fellow citizens, it well may be that Citizen Franken's actions of today will go down in history as the turning point of our long, hard battle to maintain the integrity of the Federation."

As Herrera's image faded the face and voice of the newscaster returned. "Chairman Herrera went on to say that..."

Violently Janas turned away from the 3-V tank, the sinking feeling in his stomach threatening to carry him to his knees. That fool, he yelled silently to himself, that goddamned fool!

He found a place to sit and collect his thoughts. Opening his attaché case, he took out typewritten copies of the reports that were his reason for being on Luna, his reason for coming across the long light-years to Earth—to deliver those reports about the star world and the rebel forces to Altho Franken. Franken, once Janas had informed him of the existence, had asked to see them, had asked Janas to return to Earth, to give his opinion about the war's probable outcome, and had said that he would make no final decision about the STC's stand during the imminent battles until he had seen the reports and talked with Janas. But now, after Janas had crossed light-years and stood some 384,000 kilometers from Earth, Franken had broken his promise and committed the future of the STC into the hands of the TF Chairman, Jonal Herrera. A few more hours, that was all he need have waited, and Janas could have spoken with him—and perhaps prevented the destruction of *all* civilization.

Janas slipped the papers back into the attaché case and angrily slammed it shut, wishing that the feeling in his stomach would go away.

"Paging Captain Robert Janas," said a voice from the ring of loudspeakers that decorated the 3-V's supporting column. "Captain Robert Janas, please come to the Solar Trading Company reservation desks in terminal dome A-3."

There was a moment of silence before the pleasantly feminine voice repeated the message.

With infinite weariness, Janas rose and crossed the tiled floor to the circle of desks. The girl sitting behind the desk he approached was wearing an unusually revealing dress, though by the cut and colors of it he knew it to be a regulation STC uniform. Apparently there had been some changes on Earth since he had last been there. The girl smiled.

"I'm Robert Janas."

"Good afternoon, Captain," she said. "There is an analogue call from Earth for you. Would you take it in booth twelve, please," and she pointed to the row of analogue communication booths near the corridor that connected this dome with the main terminal building.

"Thank you," Janas replied, and turned away toward the booths.

A few minutes later, sitting in a plush chair that faced a seemingly blank wall, Janas glanced briefly at the two small consoles that bracketed him. On his right was the communications unit, a handful of controls to adjust the "picture" and sound that would spring to life as soon as he waved his hand over a certain photocell. The console on his left was a

auto-bartender and was, at that moment, a welcome sight. Janas dropped a coin into the slot, punched a button, then waited until a panel slid aside and a tall, chilled glass of Braje whiskey rose to meet his hand. Thus fortified he covered the photocell with his palm.

He had not bothered to wonder who was calling him all the way from Earth. Enid did not know that he was coming in on this particular flight; only two people did know, and he did not think that one of them, Citizen Altho Franken, would feel any need to call him *now*.

The wall before him shimmered for a moment then became transparent. The effect was that of looking through into another room that seemed to be separated from his by only a thin sheet of paraglas. The other room was of approximately the same size, though more luxurious, and the opposite wall was emblazoned with a stylized representation of a solar disc and rays, the symbol of the Solar Trading Company.

Sitting two meters away, so Janas' eyes told him, was a short, stocky man, fair-skinned and carrot-haired, and perhaps a decade or so his junior. Only the light-speed delay betrayed the image's unreality.

When Janas keyed the analogue transmitter, half a hundred scanners had recorded three-dimensional images of him and the room in which he sat. Those images, electronically integrated and coded, were carried by a wide-band maser signal away from Luna at a speed just under 300,000 kilometers per second. Crossing from Luna to Earth took almost one and three-tenths seconds. It took that much more time for a returning signal to reach him from Earth. A little over two and one half seconds had passed, therefore, when the analogue image smiled and spoke. "Hello, Bob."

"Hello, Jarl."

Jarl Emmett, Operations Supervisor of STC Central, shifted in his chair, pulled a cigar from his coat pocket and puffed it alight.

"Have you heard, Bob?" Emmett asked, blowing a puff of smoke that billowed against the pseudo-wall that separated them.

"I've heard," Janas answered. While waiting for the signal to cross to Earth and its reply to come, he took a drink from the glass in his hand.

"Altho just couldn't wait," Emmett said angrily. "He didn't tell us anything before he did. The first I heard of it was on a newscast less than an hour ago."

Janas nodded, but did not speak.

"Hell, Bob, I don't know how to react," Emmett said. "Maybe you can still talk to him, though I doubt it. He's committed himself, and I don't think he could back down now even if he wanted to."

"What about a board meeting?" Janas asked when Emmett paused. "He is an *electe* official."

"Elected, hell," Emmett snorted after the delay. "I'm sorry, Bob, but have you ever heard of a Franken being removed from the presidency?"

Janas shook his head slowly.

"And even if we thought we could we don't have that much strength on the board. Most of its members have been trying to get him to do this for months anyway."

"We can't give up now," Janas said coldly. "We've got to try everything possible."

Emmett looked around himself suddenly, as if fearful that someone might be listening in, though there would be no way of detecting a signal tap if there were anyone who wished to tap an analogue signal and had the proper equipment to do it—and both the Federation and Altho Franken had such equipment.

“You’re right,” Emmett said at last. “We’ll talk about it when you get here. How soon does your ferry leave?”

Janas glanced at his wrist. “About an hour and a half.”

“Okay,” Emmett said after the light-speed delay had passed. “I’ll meet you at the spaceport when you get there. Is there anything else?”

For a moment Janas was silent, then shook his head.

“Have a good trip, Bob,” Emmett’s image said as his hand moved toward the control console on his right.

Janas smiled back but did not speak.

The wall before him flickered and then returned to opacity, and for a long while Janas did not move.

At last, as if under a great weight, he lifted the glass to his mouth and downed the remainder of the Brajen whiskey. Savagely wiping his mouth with the back of his hand he rose, picked up his attaché case, and left the booth.

Chapter II

About seven and a half parsecs from Sol and her third planet, Earth, capital and founder of the Terran Federation, out in the direction of the constellation Aquila, far, far beyond the bright Altair, lay a line of picket ships and unmanned scanners, each decorated with the "TF" of the Federation, alert for the enormous enemy fleet that reports said was now on its way toward ancient Earth, sweeping in from the worlds of the Rim.

One such picket ship, the TFSS *Douglas MacArthur*, lying in the void light years from any star, tended one of its half dozen automated Non-space scanners. When the *MacArthur*'s technicians had completed their check-out of the huge metallic globe, it was cast back into space and carried away from the *MacArthur* by chemical rockets. When the scanner designated MAC-5, had moved some five hundred kilometers from its mothership, it halted. For a long time it sat motionless as its energy banks accumulated power, while Jump Unit inside it reached potential.

When a sufficient energy potential had been accumulated within the device, a shimmering light grew up in space around it. To human eyes, had any been close enough to see it, space around the globe would have taken on an appearance similar to the shimmering of air above heated pavement during a hot summer day on Earth. A force that simulated a tremendous gravitational field held in very close confines—though, of course, it was actually something radically different, but within the fabric of space-time that did not matter—grew up around the scanner; subtly at first, then with a stronger force, it began to warp the space around it, began to rip a hole in the very substance of the universe.

Then suddenly, the normal universe could no longer accept the presence of this thing that had no business being there, and violently spit out the globe. There was a tremendous energy discharge—not unlike lightning in a planet's atmosphere, though far greater than any lightning Earth had ever seen—and the scanner was gone, was no longer within the space-time continuum.

To say that Non-space is "beside" the normal space-time universe is a weak analogy but better than none at all. Some had explained it this way: imagine two-dimensional universes stacked atop one another like sheets of paper, not quite, but almost touching; imagine further that the two-dimensional creatures, intelligences if you will, of one universe are unable to "see" the next universe beside theirs, though the actual three-dimensional space separation might be but centimeters; imagine now that *they* develop some means of passing across that space, of "jumping" through the intervening centimeters. Thus it was with mankind and his "three-dimensional" universe called "space-time" and that *other* continuum called, for want of a better name, Non-space.

And thus it was with the scanning device MAC-5 from the TF starship *Douglas MacArthur*. Spit violently from the three-dimensional macrocosm of mankind, it crossed the "four-(five-dimensional)" space between and found itself in a second continuum.

The scanning device entered this suitcase cosmos, this matchbox universe that was, in size, a mere fraction of space-time. Non-space existed in its own right, independent of space-time, a complete universe, though lacking in the wealth of stars and dust that characterize space-time.

Imagine the two sheets of paper separated by centimeters. Imagine one sheet—call “space-time”—as being large, and the other, “Non-space,” as being on a much smaller scale, a tenth the size of “space-time,” let us say. Now, pick a spot on the sheet called “space-time” and pick a corresponding spot on the sheet called “Non-space.” Let us call them A and A¹. Now, pick another spot on “space time” and call it B and the corresponding spot, to scale, on “Non-space,” B¹. The distance from A to B on “space-time” is, let us say, ten centimeters, but on the sheet called “Non-space,” the scale of A¹ to B¹ is but one centimeter. Moving from A to B at a fixed rate of speed, for example, one centimeter per hour, would take, of course, ten hours—but at the same speed, we can move from A¹ to B¹ in only one hour—and yet the two sets of points are spatially equivalent!

This again is a weak analogy, but the idea is there. From Sol to Altair at the speed of light—a 5.06 year trip in space-time; in Non-space, light would take only a little over an hour and a half!

MAC-5 came to life, dozens of instruments began to scan the formless grayness of Non-space, while energy, not unlike St. Elmo's Fire, sparkled on the surface of the globe, dissipating into the hungry void of Non-space. The instruments ignored the dwindling sparkle and probed deeply into the expressways of the galaxy, searching for the approaching warships of General Henri Kantralas and the rebels of the Alliance of Independent Worlds which he led.

A scanner's minimum stay in Non-space was five hours, for it took that long for its Jump Units to reach sufficient potential to return to normal space and report to its motherships where it had seen. That time had almost passed for MAC-5 when its laser-radar picked up something, detected movement far off in the grayness. Its computer analyzed the returning signal, found how much the signal had dopplered, determined the speed and distance of the approaching craft, then fed that information into memory banks. The laser-radar continued its scan, discovered other moving craft, and, sweep by sweep, determined something of the size of the approaching force. When the five hours had passed, automatic relays closed in the Jump Unit, potentials became actual, and MAC-5 passed out of Non-space back into the black and starry universe where the starship *Douglas MacArthur* waited.

MAC-5 immediately established contact with the computer aboard its mothership and, through the ultra-high-speed chatter of such machines, relayed the information it had gathered. The mothership, at a much slower pace, the *MacArthur's* computer relayed that information to its human crew.

The captain of the *MacArthur* read out the information that came to him on a long ribbon of paper, printed out by the computer in terms that could easily be read by humans. The rebels were coming in force, the report said, though exactly how great that force MAC-5 had not determined. The enemy was at least as strong as the fleet that was on its way from Earth and perhaps stronger. In another hour MAC-6 would return from Non-space, if the rebels did not detect and destroy it, and would probably be able to give more detailed information. The *MacArthur's* captain did not have time to wait; the information he had would be sent at once to the fleet coming from Earth.

Deep within the *MacArthur*, a crew was standing ready with a portable Jump Unit and three message capsules. The captain gave the crew the message tapes to place within the capsules, and moments later the Jump Unit was rolled out through the air locks and cast into

space. Rockets carried it as far from the starship as the scanner had gone, and it too passed out of normal space.

Once in Non-space, the capsules released their hold on the Jump Unit and fired the plasma jets. With an acceleration that would have destroyed human flesh and bone, despite Contra-grav, the capsules moved away, spewing behind them stripped atoms that were quickly lost to the energy-hungry fabric of Non-space.

The three capsules were programmed to search for the fleet that came from Earth and to inform them of the rebel's approach. The first to find the fleet would inform its fellows of its success, and the remaining capsules would drive toward their secondary goal, Earth itself, so that the Federation's capital might know.

Then the starship *Douglas MacArthur* waited, waited for MAC-6 to complete its scan of Non-space and return with further information, waited for the approaching enemy to discover the scanners and then enter normal space to find their source, waited for the enemy and its death.

The captain of the *MacArthur* stood on the bridge, peering out at the vastness of space and there was a cold sweat on his brow. His crew was ready. Energy cannon were manned. Missiles were primed. But he knew; he knew. That was the job of the pickets. They were not even the first line of defense; their only job was to look, to search, to find—and to be found. Then their job was done and they could die, but die fighting.

The captain of the *MacArthur* felt a chill down his back, but he did not show his fear to his crew.

Chapter III

The trip from Luna to Earth could be as short as five hours or as long as fifteen, depending on a number of factors. Janas and a handful of other passengers had elected to take the express ferry down to Flagstaff; it left an hour after the luxury boat but would reach the sprawling human habitations and spaceship facilities some six hours sooner.

The landscape below lay in darkness when the Luna-Earth ferry slipped into the terrestrial atmosphere and plummeted down toward the huge, sprawling complexes of southwest North America. Through the scuttling, moonlit clouds Janas could see the lights that marked the long ribbon city of Phoenix-Tucson, a string of glittering gems laid across the rugged countryside. To the north and slightly to the east of the cluster of lights that was Phoenix proper was another, though dimmer, sparkle. Dwarfed by the brilliance of Phoenix-Tucson, these lights were also those of a metropolis, the spaceport city of Flagstaff perched on the Colorado Plateau.

The ferry slowed its plunge, braked as it passed through a thin, high-altitude layer of clouds, and was moving quite slowly when the lights of the spaceport broke apart into distinct spots of illumination. Moments later it touched the surface of the concrete and steel landing facility with all the velocity of a feather.

As light blinked on inside the ferry's main cabin, Robert Janas unsnapped the belt that held his waist. He rose to his feet, picked up his attaché case and followed the other passengers out, through the con-tube and into the hoverbus that waited to take them to the terminal buildings some seven kilometers away.

Less than five minutes later, Janas stepped out of the hoverbus and walked into the terminal, glancing anxiously around for the familiar face of Jarl Emmett. He was not there, at least not at the gate.

Janas had walked only a few meters into the crowded terminal when a boy, dressed in the uniform of a messenger service, hesitantly approached him.

"Are you Captain Robert Janas, sir?" the boy asked.

"Yes, I am," Janas told him.

"I have a message for you, sir," he said. "Please sign here."

Janas scrawled his signature across the pad, thumb-printed it, accepted the offered envelope, and dropped a tiny gold coin into the boy's waiting hand.

"Thank you, sir."

As the messenger boy turned and vanished into the crowd, Janas opened the envelope. Inside was a single slip of paper on which were written only two words: "Eddie's. Jarl."

Odd, Janas thought, but I suppose he has his reasons.

Taking an express slidewalk across the crowded terminal complex, Janas hailed a taxi. He hardly noticed the man who quietly, expressionlessly followed him.

Janas took the hovercab into downtown Flagstaff, but decided to get out before he reached his destination. He had a sudden desire to walk in the night air, to see and hear the sights and sounds, for he was again on Earth after a long absence and wished a few moments alone on his homeworld before plunging into the problems that awaited him.

It was autumn in the northern hemisphere when Robert Janas returned to Earth, and there was a chill in the air despite the heat that rose from the city streets. His uniform had been designed for a warmer world than Earth, but he found the coolness pleasant after the artificial environment in which he had lived since leaving Odin. The air in the mountain city was clean and clear, for the city fathers of Flagstaff were strict and cautious about what impurities they allowed to escape into the atmosphere. The lights of the city hid the stars, masking them by their perpetual glow so that the whole sky seemed to be a leaden gray, though that did not bother Janas. Earth's night sky was one of her less spectacular beauties, especially after one had seen the night skies of Odin.

Even though the hour was late, the streets of Flagstaff were filled with people, for Earth was a planet whose inhabitants had nearly forgotten the diurnal rotation of their home planet.

Little attention was paid to Janas' uniform: the blue and gold of an STC starship captain was not an uncommon sight in this spaceport city of the western hemisphere. Janas found the clothing of the inhabitants of Flagstaff far stranger than they found his.

During his absence from his homeworld the endless wheel of fashion had turned through half its cycle. When he last saw Earth—was it really a decade ago?—women had covered themselves demurely—high collars, long sleeves, long skirts, rather sober and conservative colors. Now all that was gone. Young girls in the streets of Flagstaff wore the briefest of costumes, ignoring the air's autumn chill. Brightly colored blouses, sometimes of shimmering changing colors, sometimes all but transparent or consisting of no more than billowing sleeves and low-cut backs, showing supple, attractive young bodies, arrogantly exposing their firm breasts to the world. Skirts, as brightly colored, were frequently just long enough to justify their name. Necklaces of glittering beads and metallic disks, bracelets and anklets of shimmering plastics, threw back dancing sparkles of light, bright against pink flesh. Piled high above their heads they wore elaborate mountains of hair, often of colors never evolved by terrestrial mammals.

Men's clothing had undergone a similar change. No longer were the men of Earth satisfied with loose-fitting, somber-colored jackets and trousers. Billowing, silken shirts and skin-tight pants, often decorated with brilliant stripes and patterns, here and there sporting elaborate fringes and lace, gave men the appearance of medieval jesters and harlequins, renaissance dandies. To Janas the most disconcerting aspect of the new masculine fashions were the grotesquely padded, dashingy colored codpieces worn by most of the men.

Janas did not approve of the present fashions, though he had seen more sensual and revealing costumes—or lack of them—on other worlds. But this is Earth, he thought. These are the people who set the trends for mankind, who establish humanity's concepts of taste. Still, he reminded himself, it's none of my business.

There were more changes in Flagstaff than the flashy, sensual costumes. The lights of the city were brighter and gaudier than he remembered them; Flagstaff had more the appearance of a spaceport city on Orpheus or Loki than one would have expected to find in the chief port

city of the capital of the Federation. Cheap bars and taverns, lewd show clubs and disguised houses of prostitution had sprung up where, ten years before, there had been unspectacular shops catering to the tourist trade. The streets were filled with a rougher sort of people than he remembered, swaggering braves and their painted girls, soldiers, mercenaries now in mufti, brought from half a thousand worlds to defend the Federation. The laughter was too loud, the happiness too forced. There was, even here, a sense of despair, decay, even fear. What was happening Out There, light year upon light year away, was having its effect on Earth, just the beginning of its effect.

Flagstaff had changed and with it Earth, and Robert Janas, born within a thousand kilometers of that city, was a stranger there.

An uneasy sensation ruffled the short hair on the back of his neck. He stopped suddenly in the middle of the crowded street and looked behind him. He thought that he saw a man turn away quickly and appear to be looking into a shop window, but whether the man had actually been following him he could not know for sure.

Why would anyone want to follow me, he asked himself, and he knew the answer almost before the question was framed in his mind. His reason for coming to Earth was still as real as it had been; the goal had not changed though the methods of implementing it might be modified—and modified in what manner Janas did not yet know. Yes, he told himself, there *might* be a good reason for someone to be following.

He walked on and soon saw the lights of his destination.

Entering Eddie's, allegedly the oldest bar in Flagstaff, Janas immediately located the men's toilet and entered. Locking the door of the small cubicle behind him, he quickly undressed. The man who had appeared to be following him gave him an uneasy feeling that he would not be able to dispel until he was certain of some facts.

Standing almost nude in the center of the small room, Janas opened his attaché case, took out a small, pen-shaped object, and began to carefully explore his clothing, holding the object several centimeters from the cloth. When he came to the back of the uniform coat, just below the collar, the device emitted a barely audible "beep," and a red jeweled light in its tip began to glow. Peering closely at the folds of the cloth, Janas saw the object of his search. A centimeter or so in diameter, fixed with two small barbs to hold it in place, it was a tiny radio transmitter. Janas pulled it from the coat, dropped it to the floor and, kneeling above it, carefully pounded it to dust with the heel of his shoe.

He continued his search, covering every square centimeter of his clothing and his attaché case, and only when he had finished was he satisfied that no more electronic "bugs" had been placed on him.

Who had placed the "bug" on his coat, or when, he did not know. It could have been on any one of a dozen occasions since his arrival on Luna or even since he reached Earth. He could only be sure that he would be more cautious in the future.

Relieved that he had not been imagining things, he dressed and left the room.

Chapter IV

With an acceleration that would have produced a force of something over sixty G's had not been for Contra-grav, the armada from Terra's moon reached approximately the orbit of Saturn. Orders had been given to the commanders of the starships, orders of Jump Sequence, orders of assembly in Non-space, orders of battle when the rebels were met.

Some 1,419,000,000 kilometers from Sol, final Jump orders were issued by the flagship the TFSS *Shilo*. Great shimmering fields of potential energy grew up around each starship, exactly matching the potential required to warp space sufficiently to force just that ship's mass out of normal space. The potential spheres flickered and shimmered and awaited the final command.

Grand Admiral Abli Juliene himself gave that order, speaking into his throat mic as he sat strapped in a Jump seat on the flagship's bridge. At his command, the potentials became actual, the fabric of the universe was twisted, transformed, burst, and the great mass of starships was spit like seeds out of the rear continuum.

With the passing of an unbelievably sustained heartbeat, the armada moved into a second universe, a grayness, a virtual nothingness.

The starships formed, regrouped and accelerated toward the spot where bright Altair stood in a coexistent universe, toward Altair and beyond.

The Terran Federation starship *Salamis*, heavy battle cruiser, was the fifth and mightiest to carry that name. She came from Earth, launched on her maiden voyage, moving toward the enemy fleet that menaced the heartland of the Federation. She led the fleet, and behind her came the other battle cruisers and signal ships, their instruments scanning the grayness before them, searching to find, to engage, to destroy the enemy. The flagship of the mightiest armada ever put into space by the Federation, the heavy battle cruiser *Shilo*, followed in the pack, maintaining constant communications within the fleet.

Behind the battle cruisers came the destroyers, smaller, lighter craft, but no less deadly with their awesome weaponry. The destroyers swept through Non-space, spread out like an inverted cone, led by the famed *North Carolina*.

Following the cruisers and destroyers were the huge behemoths of space, the interceptors, carriers, great spherical ships filled with small, fast, deadly interceptors. Out of Earth came the carriers, came the *Republic of Genoa* and the *Kingdom of France*, the *Commonwealth of South Asia* and the *United States of America*, and two dozen others named for the ancient states of Earth. Trailing behind the armada came the tenders and tugs, the repair and hospital ships, the great flotilla that kept a war fleet moving.

Outward went the armada, out to meet the enemy and determine the future of mankind.

Chapter V

Refusing to hand his attaché case over to the hat check girl, Janas quickly told the head waiter that he was to meet Citizen Jarl Emmett there. That worthy smiled politely, bowed, and said, “Certainly, Captain Janas, Citizen Emmett is expecting you,” and led him across the crowded floor to a dark corner where sat Jarl Emmett and three other men.

Off in the distance, moving among the tables, followed by a spot of illumination that seemed to have no place of origin other than herself, was a singer. She was wearing a bit of fog, sparkling as though diamonds hung within it. The mist clung to the rich contours of her body, not quite revealing but never actually concealing, either. Her greenish-white hair, as long as she was tall, climbed conically above her head, reached a peak perhaps half a meter high, then broke and spilled down across her shoulders, cascaded down her back, mingling with the mist that half-clothed her. A small stringed instrument, something like a harp, was in her hands, and she plucked its strings as she walked. The song she sang was one that Janas had heard before, sometime, somewhere, long ago and far away.

*“We be among the dwindling stars,
And Earth is far behind us;
We jump across the universe,
But none will do us kindness;
We ply the trades and wares of space,
And cry from pain and blindness.
We have given you tomorrow,
And given up ourselves...”*

Janas thought he recognized two of the three men with Emmett, though he could not remember their names at once. They looked up, smiled, and Emmett spoke.

“It’s good to see you, Bob,” he said, rising and extending his hand, “in the flesh, I mean.”

Incongruously enough, Janas momentarily felt like laughing. There was something almost funny about the four darkly-clad men who sat around the small, oval table. Each had a partially empty glass before him and three were smoking. In the center of the table, virtually the only source of light in that corner, was an ancient, wax-encrusted wine bottle holding a burning candle. For an instant Janas was reminded of a scene from a 3-V production about bearded revolutionaries during the Crazy Years of the twentieth century, old style, but he did not laugh. Perhaps the analogy was too close for comfort.

Janas seated himself in the single empty chair, seeing, as he did so, out of the corner of his eye, the man whom he had suspected of following him on the street. He sat so that he could watch the stranger.

The smoke-clad singer had shifted to another song, a mysterious, free-verse thing with a melody that was not quite music to human ears:

*“The grass was brown as winter wind could make it.
The trees were a blunt gray-green against the bitter sky.
The remains of a snowfall littered the earth’s face,
And the air was a crisp, crackling cold when it stirred—
As the cold air stirred against his face and I listened,
And I heard the world whistle as it turned.”*

“You remember Hal Danser, don’t you?” Emmett, who was dressed in a less gaudy edition of current terrestrial fashions, asked him.

“Hello, Hal,” Janas said, shaking his hand across the table. “You’re in operations too, aren’t you?”

“I’m Jarl’s assistant now,” Danser said. “It’s good to meet you again, sir.” Slightly overweight, Danser’s yellow and orange costume made Janas think of a huge, partially deflated beach ball.

Janas turned to the short, thin man on his right.

“Juan Kai,” the other said. “Operations Chief Engineer.”

“I’ve heard a lot about you, Citizen Kai,” Janas said.

Kai flashed a quick, toothy smile. “I hope it wasn’t all bad, Captain.”

“Quite the contrary,” Janas answered, then turned to greet the soberly clad man on his left. “Mr. Paul D’Lugan, isn’t it?” Even though he wore civilian clothes, there was a harsh, military cut to them.

A darkness crossed the face of the short, stocky, curly-haired young man. He nodded.

“You were first mate of the STCSS *City of Florence*,” Janas said. “You brought two of her lifeboats back to Isis after the Battle of ‘77. You were something of a Celebrity.”

D’Lugan nodded again. “Not much heroism in that, captain. Federation ships claimed they mistook us for rebels. Cut us down before we had a chance to respond. Twenty-eight of us got out.”

“I know,” Janas said. “It was a terrible accident.”

D’Lugan smiled coldly, seeming to question the accidental nature of the event, but did not speak.

The singer had vanished and now light began to glow at one end of the large room, gradually coming up to illuminate a low stage backed by a shimmering, golden curtain. When the white light had reached its maximum, casting a soft, shadowless radiance across the stage, a hidden band began to play a melody unknown to Janas. A small man dressed in a bright red and gold harlequin’s costume pushed the curtains aside and stepped out onto the stage.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he said as a hush fell over the crowd, “Eddie’s is proud to have with us tonight one of the most exciting dance teams in the known galaxy.” He paused dramatically. “Straight from Odin itself—let’s give them a big hand—Rinni and Gray, the

Moondog Dancers.”

After an appropriate amount of applause the golden curtains opened to reveal a crude imitation—to Janas, at least—of the rugged, starkly beautiful Odinese Craterlands. The backdrop of myriads of bright, glittering stars was a fair replica of Odin’s night sky, all the brilliance of the Cluster. The hidden band played louder still, swinging into a much modified version of one of the traditional songs of the rebellious, unconventional Odinese Moondoggers. A few moments later a troupe of a dozen nearly nude girls, wearing just enough to give an impression of the unorthodox costumes of the Moondoggers, danced onto the stage and began an elaborate routine that had little to do with the planet Odin—now or ever.

Janas looked back at the men seated at the table. The three with Jarl Emmett were fellow “conspirators,” and he distrusted them for it, as he unconsciously, unwillingly distrusted most of the men whom Emmett had recruited in his campaign to maintain STC neutrality, though Janas knew very few of them personally. Oh, of course, he told himself, I’m one of them too—I started it—but, dammit, I still can’t trust them, not until I know their motives. There are always too many men running around, ready to join any kind of revolutionary movement, men who feel that they could do better if the old way were destroyed and a new one established—oh, how rarely they were right!

Jarl’s an excellent judge of men, though, he told himself. There’s a good chance that these fellows are not innate revolutionaries but men who coldly and rationally understand that this is the only way that we can hope for anything to survive.

Janas glanced again at the man who sat a few tables away and seemed to be observing them in only the most casual, impersonal way. Who, what did *he* represent?

Seeming to sense Janas’ uneasiness, Emmett opened his coat and briefly showed him a small, rectangular box suspended by a leather band under his arm. Janas recognized the device, called a *noiser*, an electronic scrambler designed to disrupt listening equipment that the stranger, or anyone else, might have trained on the five men at the table. Janas nodded.

“What’s this all about, Jarl?” he asked after a waiter had taken his order and returned with a chilled glass of Brajen whiskey.

Emmett cleared his throat, looked around uncomfortably, then spoke: “Everything’s changed, Bob,” he said. “Now that Franken’s committed the STC to the Federation without waiting for your reports, we’ve got to decide what we’re going to do. That’s why I wanted you to come here. I wanted you to meet the top men in the ‘Committee’ so that we can try to make some preliminary plans.” Emmett paused for a moment, took a sip from his own glass, then looked at the others.

“I’m still more or less the chairman of the ‘Committee,’” he said, then looked at Danser on his right. “Hal’s my assistant in this as well as just about everything else. He’s also our chief liaison man between Operations and the other departments.” He gestured toward Kai. “Juan is in charge of keeping track of what’s going on in space. As of this afternoon he’s responsible for knowing where *all* STC ships are, how quickly they can aid the Federation, and how quickly we can contact them if we can get a countermanding order to Franken’s commitment.”

“Then the orders *have* gone out?” Janas asked.

“A little while after I talked to you,” Emmett told him. “I did everything I could to stop the

or hold them up but it wasn't any use."

"Did you talk with Altho?" Janas asked.

Emmett shook his head. "I could only get as far as his personal secretary, a young sn named Milt Anchor. Anchor ran me around Robin Hood's barn and then gave me a stor about Franken being in conference and would call me when he got finished."

"And he never called," Janas said, only half a question.

"Never," Emmett answered, shaking his head again.

"He won't, either," Paul D'Lugan said.

When Janas turned to face him the younger man returned his gaze, stare for stare.

"I'm head of the action department, Captain, rough and tumble stuff," D'Lugan said answer to Janas' unspoken question. "I'm the black sheep of the outfit. I'm not too popul with my friends here."

"That isn't so, Paul," Danser said quickly.

"Yes, it is," D'Lugan responded. "I'm advocating force, Captain," he said to Janas. "Franken won't listen to reason, and he's shown no indication of doing so thus far, I figur we're going to have to shove a gun in his belly and make him listen."

There was a moment of awkward silence. It was obvious to Janas that the others did n agree with D'Lugan, nor did he, not if he could help it.

Turning his head, Janas glanced at the stage to see that a new couple had appeared an the twelve chorus girls had retreated to the background. He assumed that the newcomers bathed in a cold, blue light, surrounded by dissipating mists, were the headliners of the show Rinni and Gray, the Odinese Moondoggers. They *could* have been from Odin—or any othe planet in the Spiral Arm—for they did not wear enough clothing to identify their place of origin.

Rinni was a tall, long-limbed blonde, graceful and very pretty in the exotic way of so man of the star worlds. Her long yellow-white hair swirled around her bare shoulders, across h naked breasts, billowed out behind her as she leaped and spun in a sensual dance with h partner. Gray was as handsome as Rinni was pretty—young, dark, muscular. Each wor nothing but a pale blue breechcloth decorated with a symbol in darker blue. Janas identifie the sign as being something significant to the Moondog cult but could not remember its exa meaning.

Emmett's voice brought his attention back to the table.

"There's one more person I wanted you to meet," he was saying. "Syble Dian. She's o lawyer and head of our 'legal department,' if you want to call it that." Janas nodded. "Sh couldn't make it tonight," Emmett went on, "but she wants to meet you as soon as she ca She's something of an admirer of yours."

"Oh," Janas said, attempting a smile.

Emmett did not seem to hear his reply. His mind had gone on to something else, somethin that brought a dark scowl with it.

"An agent of the rebels contacted me this afternoon," he said at last.

"What did he want?" Janas asked.

"It was a *she*," Emmett said. "Called me on 3-V but had the visual blanked out so I dor

know what she looked like. Anyway, they have a 'cell' here in Flagstaff. She offered me the help."

"Help?" Janas wondered aloud.

"Offered to help us in whatever we decide to do," Emmett explained.

"What did you tell her?"

"Nothing."

"Good," Janas said. "We'd do better if we stayed clear of them. Their motives aren't the same as ours. We'll have enough problems without the 'help' of an outside group."

"That's what I figured," Emmett replied. "This is a family matter for the STC alone. We take care of our own." There was an almost sinister sound to his last words—and Paul D'Lugan smiled at them.

Emmett was silent for a moment, as if thinking carefully before he spoke again. "Bob," he said at last, "will you tell them exactly why you're here?" His gesture included the other three men at the table.

After taking a sip of his Brajen whiskey, Janas said: "I've brought two reports to show you Altho Franken. They're both on computer tapes, and typewritten. One is an analysis of the damage done to Federation worlds over the past decade or so."

"Don't you think that Chairman Herrera has informed him of the situation?" Hal Danser asked.

"No, not really," Janas said. "I doubt that Herrera told him any more than he was forced to if he really expected to get STC help, which he's gotten. I don't believe that Altho has any idea how bad things are out there or, at least, didn't know it when he agreed to let the Federation use STC ships and men."

"How bad is it?" Danser asked softly.

"Real damned bad!" D'Lugan snapped.

Janas glanced at D'Lugan. "Far worse for the Federation than they've been willing to admit. The rebels all but control the Rim. Federation forces always were spread too thin out there to really be effective. The Cluster's split wide open. The rebels certainly don't control it, but neither does the Federation. Right now the Cluster is fair game for anyone strong enough to hold it."

"What's left of it," D'Lugan added darkly.

Janas nodded. "The Cluster isn't the same place it was ten years ago. I hardly recognize myself. Several planets that were inhabited aren't any longer."

"Antigone," D'Lugan said as if the word were almost sacred.

"That's one." Janas did not want to think of Antigone as he had last seen her, burning forests, seared plains, smoldering cities, all but wiped clean of life. "There are several others. I was on Odin for three years and I still find it hard to believe what's happened there. Earth and the Solar planets are the only ones that have escaped major destruction so far."

D'Lugan did not speak again but Janas saw a great depth of pain and sorrow in his eyes. He did not ask the younger man's reason for his grief. Danser sat quietly peering into the murkiness of his drink. Juan Kai fumbled another cigarette into his mouth while Emmett

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