



# CHESSMEN

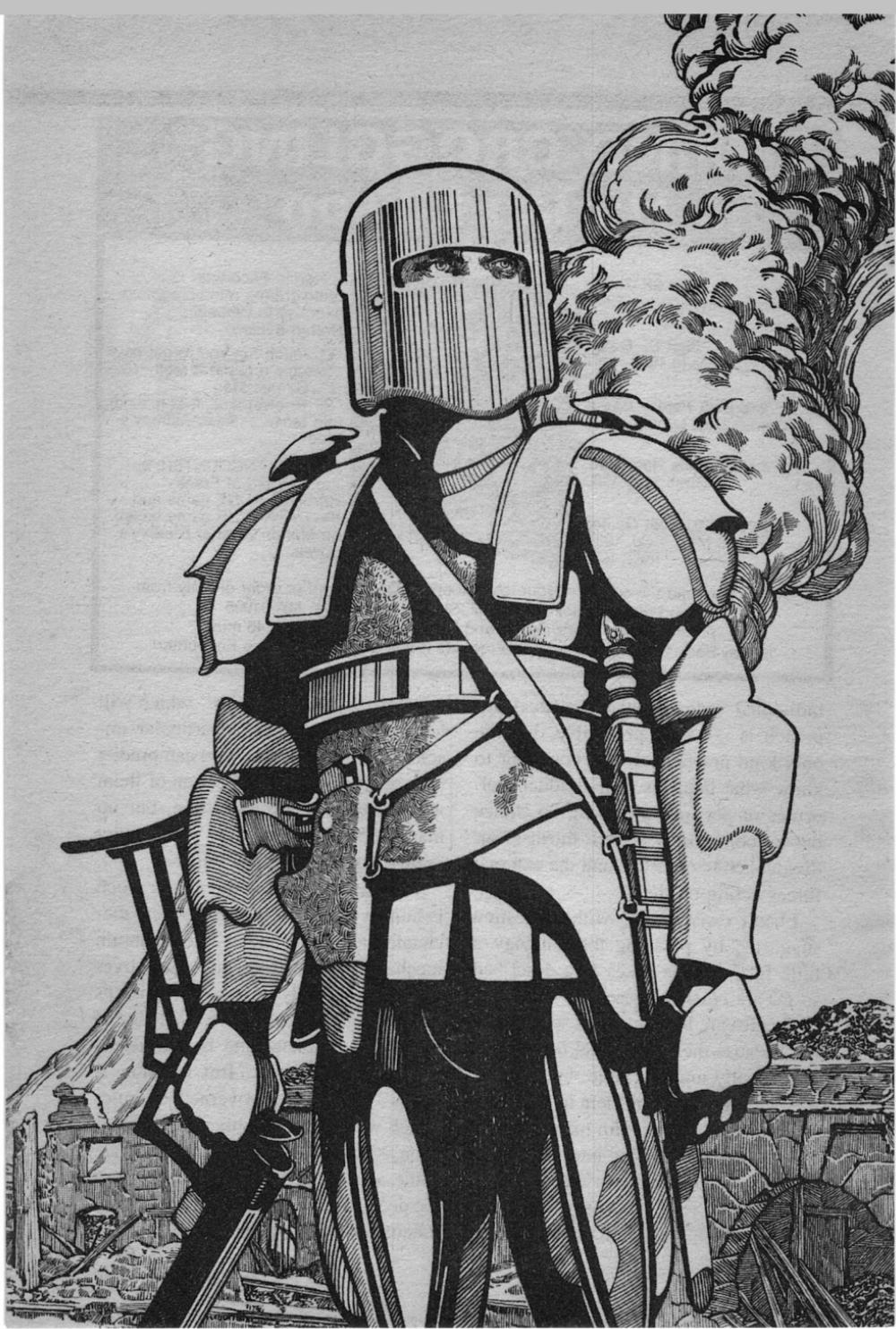
Joseph H. Delaney

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Words like  
"heroism" and "treason"  
are defined  
in terms of  
a familiar context.  
But with  
a truly  
alien enemy . . .

Bob McMahon





Feeling somewhat infirm, as might be expected of a man in his 130th year, Clifford Champ looked up from beneath the broad brim of his hat at the figure on the other side of the pond. From where Champ sat on the near bank, fishing pole dangling in the water, he had to squint into the morning sun; and consequently he could see little more than the silhouette:

Still, details were visible. The man was tall and lanky. He was not young. He moved slowly and deliberately as he bent to drink, as though he too was feeling the burden of years.

Champ had not seen another human being for several months, not since he'd settled into his motor home to lead the life of a vagabond across the length and breadth of Inverness. There were few people on this world, and most of them, like himself, were retirees, who after long lives of toil and frugality had finally found the means to go out to pasture and to do what pleased them.

Someday this would be a garden world with many more inhabitants —when other land masses had been cleared of unusuable, inedible native growth and sown with Terran plants that man and other Earthly animals could eat. For now, only this large island was ready.

Champ watched the man rise, look his way, then turn, ready to trudge off toward the east. Champ knew he could not let this happen. He could not let company escape him; he needed it too badly. He craved conversation almost as if it were a drug—and if that talk could be with a contemporary mind, stuffed with memories of what had once been, he would trade his very soul to

get it. He opened the creel which hung at his side to get the count of fish. There were six; six of the fattest, shiniest bass he'd ever caught. That would be enough.

The other man had taken a half-dozen steps by the time Champ acted. He laid his rod down on the bank and rose, cupping his mouth to shout, "Stop! Come back; talk a while. I have fresh fish to eat, and coffee. More than enough."

The figure turned, and for a moment seemed to hesitate, seemingly unsure whether or not to plod on into the rising sun, or to join Champ for breakfast. But after an intense moment of hesitation hunger apparently won out, and he began to take long measured steps around the shore.

As the man approached, Champ could see that he was indeed a contemporary, with weathered face and gnarled hands; that beneath the knit cap he wore, his hair was white as snow. The stranger wore a jumpsuit of some dun-colored synthetic. On his back there was a pack of a type very familiar to Champ: military issue, olive drab, complete with bayonet and entrenching tool. Champ was doubly pleased to note that; it meant another old soldier like himself. They would find things to talk about.

Squinting into the sun, Champ stood and greeted the stranger, rod in one hand, creel hanging by its strap in the other. "Good morning," he said, when the stranger was near enough to use ordinary conversational tones. "Join me for breakfast, won't you? I'm Clifford Champ." He switched the creel to his left hand, holding both it and the rod; an awkward arrangement for his old bones. He held out his right hand.

The other's hand came up to meet it,

and despite its knobby appearance, the grip was firm and powerful. "Al; call me Al. Bass, huh? Nice ones; ought to be right tasty. I'll help you clean them."

Al followed Champ up the gentle slope to his camp. He slid off his pack, and hung it carefully across the back of one of the folding camp chairs.

Champ dropped the creel on the table, opened its lid, and began lifting out the fish. One or two showed tenacious signs of life by flopping across the tabletop.

Al reached for his pack, drawing the long bayonet from its scabbard, though it was not really an efficient tool for cleaning fish. But its edges were razor sharp and he made do, expertly beheading, then gutting one after another and stripping them into fillets. "Will you fry or roast them?" he asked.

"Roast them, I think," Champ replied. "Somehow, they always taste better flavored with smoke. I have a firepit over here. There should still be coals alight."

He added some fresh wood to the fire and fanned it until it flamed, while Al worked the fillets onto a spit. "I have coffee inside, Al. Would you like some now?"

"Please," the stranger replied. "It's been a while since I had any. Traveling afoot as I do has disadvantages. A man can carry so little."

Champ went into the vehicle and in a moment returned with two cups and a pot. He put them on the table and poured, delighted to see the stranger's hand fairly leap up to seize one as soon as he was finished.

"How long have you been on Inverness, Al?" Champ asked, taking a sip of his own coffee.

"Some years. In fact, almost thirty years. I came here before it was even open to settlement, to work on the conversion. I myself helped to stock the pond with the fish you caught." He smiled, then turned to Champ with a question of his own: "And yourself?"

"Seven months. Compared to you, I'm a tenderfoot, but I like it here very much." Champ reflected on what the other had just said. *Thirty years! We were still at war with the Sackers then, and this was on the outer edge of secure territory.* This island, he knew, had been initially reclaimed by using convict labor. He remembered reading that in the travel brochure which had brought him here.

For a while they simply stood there, each with his own thoughts, sipping coffee; and then the stranger turned to the fire, where the fish had started to brown and sizzle in the heat. The stranger turned the spit slowly, cooking the fish evenly, and a delicious aroma began to rise with the smoke.

Champ got plates and forks, set them on the table, and waited for Al to finish the cooking. When at last breakfast was done to perfection, he watched the stranger distribute the plates and lean the spit up against a tree to cool.

"More coffee, Al?"

"Please," the stranger replied, raising his cup.

As he poured, Champ studied that face—that face with no last name. He wondered what the reason was; why Al failed to give it. Champ took his time with the pouring, searching the features as if he expected to find something out of the ordinary, something familiar. They were strong features, prominent

and craggy, framing steel-blue eyes, but in themselves not that noteworthy among the millions Champ had seen in his long lifetime. He felt that vague wisp of recognition which had deceived him so often in the past. With more than a century of memory to search, this was a trick his mind had played on him many times before.

As he watched, the stranger ate; wolfishly, though at the same time delicately, and giving all his attention to the task at hand.

Champ tired of this; took his first bite. "Delicious," he remarked. "Nothing like eating out of doors, especially fresh-caught fish roasted on an open fire. But then I suppose that's nothing new to you. Me, I'm just getting started with this lifestyle, and I'm afraid I'm not much of a woodsman yet."

The stranger looked up at Champ's vehicle; surveyed it in the light of that remark. Thirty feet long, fully self contained and complete with air-conditioning and indoor plumbing, it was—though small—as plush and comfortable as many permanent homes. The luxury model, it traveled on an air cushion, sustained by powerful fans beneath the living quarters, these last fed by solar energy stored in plastic batteries in its outer skin. With this machine, and occasional visits to town to replenish supplies, a man might live in comfort in the wilderness for many years.

*Could that be envy I see on his face?* Champ asked himself. *Or is it disdain?* "I—uh—I guess you don't think much of my lifestyle, do you, Al?"

"It suits you. And it depends on the man, I guess. I myself couldn't afford that and don't think I'd want it if I could,

but I guess it's all right for those who can. I take what life gives me, because that's all there is."

He didn't say it as if he were envious. Champ found he could read no emotion at all into the words.

Al rose, gulped the last of his coffee, and paused to wipe those errant grounds from his tongue: the ones that inevitably find their way into even the most carefully brewed pot. "I'll help you clean up," he said. "Then I've got to be on my way."

He stopped, grabbed the plates and forks, and started for the pond.

"Wait," Champ called to him. "No need for that. I've got a dishwasher. Look; you're going east. So am I. Why don't you ride with me a while? I'm sure you could point out a lot of interesting things I'd like to see. And," he added; "two old soldiers could certainly find plenty to talk about."

The stranger stopped. He turned and faced Champ, striking a pose that jogged Champ's memory that millimeter or so it needed to achieve recognition and confirm that nagging itch that Champ had felt these last few minutes.

The stranger's face gave no sign, though Champ desperately searched for one. He had to know. "It is you, isn't it? It's Al St. Mary. You've changed; you were young then. How long has it been? Thirty years, thirty-five? You're still young. You can't be over sixty. That'd be about right. Only you're supposed to be dead."

The stranger returned to the table, put the dishes down, and reached for his pack. "I'm afraid you're mistaken, Old Man. I don't know you. We never met before. And I travel alone." He slid the

pack expertly upon rangy shoulders, turned on his heel, and strode out of Champ's camp.

"Sergeant St. Mary! Stop!" Champ's voice echoed around the pond unheeded by the other man, whose long legs carried him swiftly across the grass. "I know it's you. St. Mary—you owe me this. Stop!"

But the stranger didn't stop. He strode into the thick brush beyond the clearing and quickly became lost to sight.

Champ stood there transfixed, immobile. Having briefly rubbed shoulders with a ghost, old memories were suddenly rekindled; they carried him backward in time to another day, across light years to another place.

Champ could never have forgotten, had he lived a thousand years, the solemn appearance of the courts-martial convened in the wardroom of the carrier *Leyte*, the mightiest warship humanity had ever put into space.

He had himself come aboard from a tender at the summons of Admiral Dennis, whose flag the *Leyte* was, knowing only that a General Courts-Martial was being convened and that he—as senior Judge Advocate in the sector—would be defending the accused.

It had taken the admiral some time to get enough rank together to satisfy regulations, but he'd done it, drawing from all the other service branches in addition to the Space Forces.

Being a late arrival, Captain Champ had had no time to meet his client in advance. That had happened at the formal arraignment, a mostly perfunctory occurrence anyhow, designed to give the accused a chance to hear the charges

and plead—and incidently to allow the court thereafter to disburse for a time, and get back to their conduct of the war.

Champ had reason to remember the incident. It was the only case he'd ever handled where the death penalty had been requested by the prosecution. He remembered how terrible it sounded when the Charges and Specifications had been read to the court; how helpless he'd felt standing there, at attention with the lanky soldier who was so wooden, so unemotional throughout it all.

"Charges and Specifications," the prosecutor's voice rang out. "That on or about standard date 27 April, 2137, while on active duty status as First Sergeant, Company A, 589th Regimental Combat Team, 82nd Spaceborne Division, which unit was on station, as garrison, of the planet Agamemnon, and at which time a state of war existed by declaration of Congress between the Solar Combine and the Sacker Empire, and while his unit was engaged in combat with the enemy, the accused, Alvin St. Mary, Sergeant First Class, Service Number RSF 512-991-3747-1, contrary to Articles 99, 104, and 105 of the Articles for the Conduct of War, did, knowingly, intentionally and without regard to his oath of enlistment, misbehave before the enemy; as particularized in the following Specifications:

"Specification: That on or about said date, Sgt. St. Mary's unit was under attack by an enemy landing force . . ."

St. Mary had not flinched at hearing the charges. He had stood superbly erect, at attention and motionless, the perfect example of a professional soldier.

Even at the time, while it was hap-

pening, Champ had had an overpowering feeling that it was somehow all wrong. He had himself seen limited action in a colonial unit before joining the regulars as a legal officer. He had seen good soldiers, even exceptional soldiers, before. But he could not at the time recall having seen, nor had he seen since, a chest with so much fruit salad as St. Mary's bore. It was all there: the Space Cross, in gold, with three star clusters; the Comet of Spica; the Holy Ring of Samar, with diamond splash; the commemorative jump medal of Kang-Kao-Tze; and dozens of other citations, both individual and unit, which Champ didn't recognize, much less name. And above them all the wings and rocket of his spaceborne badge gleamed in polished platinum.

Clear as a bell, as though it had happened thirty minutes instead of thirty years ago, the words droned on in Champ's memory. It had seemed that the list of specifications would never end. Dennis was throwing the book at St. Mary; the sergeant faced not one death penalty but three. Besides cowardice, he was charged with aiding the enemy and with misconduct as a prisoner, each of which carried the same punishment as cowardice: death, or such other punishment as a courts-martial might direct.

St. Mary had been a combination statue and sphinx throughout the arraignment and the subsequent trial. Only once, during the entire proceeding, had he spoken, and only then by necessity. To each of the charges and specifications he had uttered the words "not guilty" in a clear and powerful voice.

The trial which followed was a prosecution circus, completely one-sided and, thought Champ, completely unfair; though he had of course realized all along that this was the defendant's fault and not his. St. Mary had sat erect and motionless in his chair throughout it all, observing the process with outward disinterest. He would not take the stand. He refused to say so much as one word in his own defense, to do anything at all to assist Champ in defending him against the charges.

Yet there was an incongruous conflict between his stentorian declaration of "not guilty" and his actions. It was as though he was saying, "I am a faithful soldier of the Solar Combine. I am maligned; I am faultless. My unsupported word is proof enough of that."

If that was his theory, it had failed. Witness after witness marched to the stand, called from farflung battlefields by a vigorous and zealous prosecution. Some, like Captain (formerly First Lieutenant) Max Burnette, did so eagerly, thinly disguising their personal contempt. Others, like Corporal Willi Lind, made the prosecution drag the words out of them.

Champ had been able to muster only one reliable witness: the unit records officer, who made the most of St. Mary's splendid past.

It had not been enough. The verdict of the court was immediate and unanimous: guilty on all charges. The sentence: execution, at a time and place to be fixed by the Provost Marshal, should the verdict withstand the automatic appellate procedures.

And it had. Champ himself had started the case up the ladder, and when

that responsibility had passed to others he still kept track. Only when executive clemency was denied did Champ give up, and by that time there was no citizen of the Solar Combine anywhere in the universe who would have hesitated for an instant to serve on the firing squad which would end St. Mary's life.

In the meantime the war had gone on, desperately, but with a sudden turn of fortunes. Champ all but forgot St. Mary, his time consumed by his duties.

Then there was the magnificent victory at Stargate 101, where allied forces had found the enemy deployed for exactly the wrong kind of engagement and slaughtered them to the last shipload.

Exciting days followed. From then on they never lost the initiative. The pitch of battle rose, until on one historic day the Sacker home system was found and slagged. That had, of course, ended the war, except for mopping up far-flung enemy outposts, and that had taken a generation more.

St. Mary, whom Champ had thought long dead, was forgotten—until now.

Champ's mind made the startling transition from then to now, from comparative youth and vigor to fragility and old age. He stood, staring out into the bush, a dirty plate in each slack hand, chasing yesterday's enigma across the pristine plains of Inverness. *Yes, I will pursue him, he told himself; I must know.*

Hastily he broke camp, throwing the table and chairs haphazardly into the cargo bay beneath the living quarters, and dumping the remaining coffee into the smouldering ashes of the fire. Without bothering to strap anything down he

climbed into the driver's seat, switched on the fans, and pulled up his wheels as soon as the airskirt filled.

All day he cruised the bush, running a zig-zag pattern over the lands that lay to the east of the pond, scanning the bush for signs of St. Mary, and finding none.

He did not wonder at this; the bush was thickly overgrown and abounded with places in which a man on foot could hide, especially if he were a skilled woodsman. And St. Mary, he knew, would be. He was a man of strong will who would make do.

Early in the afternoon of Invernesse's thirty-one-hour day, Champ abandoned the useless quest and found himself a refuge for his thoughts, along a quiet stream. Again he made hasty camp and dropped a line into the water.

But he caught nothing. He got not so much as a nibble. It seemed as though his mood had run down the line and made the stream as somber as he was.

Darkness rode in on lengthening shadows and brought with it deer, who came to drink before the night's foraging. Champ watched them, trying to make up his mind whether or not fresh venison suited his taste, and half decided to get his rifle and take a shot.

*But no, he thought; it would be a waste; too much for me; I'd be eating nothing else for weeks.*

He went inside and pulled a packaged meal from the freezer, brushing frost from its plastic jacket onto the carpeted floor.

A voice boomed at him through the open door, startling him. He dropped the package and scrambled to look out. "Al?"

Al stood in the doorway, one foot on the sill. In his right hand he held a brace of fat cottontails. "A peace offering to you, Captain Champ. Very good roasted over an open fire, especially with beer. Do you have any beer?"

"Why, yes. I do." Champ answered, trying to remember if any of it was cold.

"Good. I'll dress these while you make a fire. Not too high a fire, please. We want embers, not a flame."

Champ gathered sticks, piling them neatly in a cone configuration within a circle of smooth stones gathered from the bed of the stream. By the time he had it blazing, Al had the rabbits skinned, dressed, and skewered on the same spit they had used that morning for the fish. As soon as the cone collapsed into coals and settled to a steady incandescent glow he mounted the spit on the uprights, turning it slowly to roast the meat evenly. He said nothing. He was as silent as he had been throughout his trial, but this time he appeared to be in deep thought.

Nor did Champ press him to speak. He had already decided that St. Mary was a deep man; that from those depths, in good time, the story would rise. He had to tell it now, to Champ; to the only human being other than himself to whom it seemed to matter anymore.

Champ waited patiently. The meat began to sizzle, dripping melted fat into the fire and causing the coals to erupt in brilliant but transitory blazes. From somewhere off in the night there came the bay of the coyote and the hoot of an owl: two of the hunters of the night with which the ecology of Inverness was finely tuned and balanced.

Al signalled for plates, which Champ

had on hand, and slid the crisp meat off the spit. The two men sat at the folding table in the firelight, licking dripping juices from half-burned fingers; chewing gobbets of sweet but stringy meat and chasing each bite with gulps of chilled, tangy beer.

When at last Al had finished his rabbit and wiped his mouth, he raised his bottle and said, "To the Solar Combine; and to the Space Forces; to Admiral Dennis and to the officers and men of the 589th, whom I still serve."

Champ raised his own bottle to his lips. He could add nothing to the toast. He took a symbolic sip and set the bottle down on the tabletop. "Why, Al? Why now, when it doesn't matter? Why not at the trial? You really weren't guilty, were you?"

Al's eyes dropped to his hands, now folded in front of him behind the beer bottle. "No, I wasn't guilty; still, the verdict of the courts-martial was the correct one. It did, and it does matter. It was the only thing that ever mattered. And it mattered very, very much."

"But you were right this morning when you said I owed you. I do. We have shared food and beer today; why not a secret, too?"

"Why not?" Champ replied. "And clear up a mystery, too. I've talked to officers who witnessed your execution; honest men worthy of trust, who wouldn't lie to me. They saw blaster bolts strike and destroy you."

"No, not me; an android. Long before that I was already here, on Inverness."

"Then the High Command was in on it—they helped you?"

"Yes."

"Someone might have told me."

"No. That was part of the bargain. No one was to know. Even today, after all these years have passed, I break an oath by telling you, but it is better than killing you. Those are my orders, should I ever be recognized."

Champ stared back at the man. He knew he had been fortunate. Sergeant St. Mary could not have endured what he had, had he been prone to break such oaths lightly. "I appreciate how difficult the choice must have been; but please go on."

"I hardly know where to begin, Captain Champ," Al said, sounding strangely formal. It was almost as though he were beginning an official report. "Perhaps I should start by asking a question. How much do you know about the Sacker Empire?"

"As much as any man who fought against it, I guess. They were the only alien race we ever met which approached our technological level. They were called Sackers because they came from the direction of the Coal Sack, and they don't exist anymore because we exterminated them. We exterminated them because we couldn't find any way to make peace with them."

"It, Captain."

"What?"

"I'll explain later. Please go on."

Champ finished off his beer, swallowing slowly, pursing his lips in an effort to taste the last drop. St. Mary's strange remark intrigued him, though the implications were anything but clear, but having waited so long to break his silence, the sergeant was entitled to indulgence. "Well, let's see," Champ began. "First contacts: about 2115 out

in the near clockwise arm. It was the Uleatha sector, I think."

"Kang-Kao-Tze, Captain."

"Yes—the scorched world. The first we knew of them, and no one believed it."

"That was a substantial handicap to us in that war, Captain. It happened so far away that it wasn't real to our population, except the ones in the combat zones. But, I interrupted you; I'm sorry."

"The Sackers were observed attacking Kang-Kao-Tze by the cutter *Orpheus*, and *Orpheus* herself was pursued. She escaped though, all the way to Faraway, and played her logtapes for authorities there. They sent her out again to warn Sol, and right after she left the Sackers smashed Faraway too. We had no forces nearer than Wolfingham; light forces, at that. But when these forces fought back the Sackers turned."

"Do you see any clues in that, Captain?"

"No. I assume the Sackers found themselves out-gunned and retreated rather than face destruction."

"That wasn't it, Captain." St. Mary's gaze was confident, and the look on his face was wise.

"Why, then?"

"Because what we did was not rational."

"I don't understand."

"Few did. It was a common failing and it cost us many lives."

"You promised me an explanation, Al, but you speak in riddles."

"Ah, yes, you are right; I do. But this is not an easy thing to understand. Perhaps we can get back to that part a little later."

"Agamemnon might be a good place to begin."

"Agamemnon was the end, Captain. Even though the war went on for years afterward, the Sackers lost it there."

"They lost it to you, didn't they, Al? And that's why you weren't executed. They don't execute heroes, do they?"

Al ignored the last remark and responded to the first. "Yes, in a manner of speaking, I guess they did."

"An insignificant place to lose a war."

"Only if you are impressed by the physical. Agamemnon was not a pleasant world. It had minerals we needed. That's why the miners were there. And the miners naturally took their families with them. The High Command didn't have enough muscle to go around, so there was only token protection: a parts depot and fuel dump, and us. Agamemnon wasn't considered a target risk; nobody expected a Sacker raid on it, and most of us considered it to be a punishment station. Nobody liked it."

"They said at the trial that 'A' Company had been pulled out of the line for R & R."

"Only half right, Captain; 'A' Company was an eightball outfit. It had all the goldbricks and goof-offs nobody else wanted. They pulled them out of other units and stuck them in 'A' Company, then sent it there, where it would be out of their way."

"What was a man like you doing in it then, Al?"

"I was part of its original cadre, along with Lieutenant Burnette and Sergeants Grow and Mineau. We didn't have much choice. But Burnette belonged there. He was dangerous."

"You didn't like each other, did you, Al? That showed up clearly in his testimony."

"No. We didn't."

"Yet because of what happened to you Burnette's career got a boost, and he retired as a brigadier."

"I heard about that. But you'll note he did it from a desk, in a staff position where he couldn't get anybody hurt. He never held another combat command. Burnette was incompetent for command; what's worse, he was temperamentally unfit for it. He couldn't handle power, though he craved it. He wanted to be God."

"Those are strong words, Al. You sound bitter."

"I suppose I am, Captain. After all, had I not done what I did, Burnette would have died; so would the rest of the garrison, and the miners, and the rest of the civilians. I saved Burnette's career for him, in spite of myself."

"I never heard your side of it, you know. I never expected I ever would."

"It was a long time ago, Captain."

He was right, thought Champ. *It is an impossible burden to place on the memory. How is it, then, that I recall it so clearly? It might have been yesterday.*

Al seemed to agree. He started his narrative the way he would have begun an official report.

"'A' Company was a reinforced company: two blaster platoons and a heavy weapons platoon, plus headquarters squad. We were heavy on NCOs and short on officers, which is why Burnette was doubled up in the field command. He had personal charge of

the second platoon, to which I was also attached.

"When the Sackers landed we were conducting a company exercise in the foothills about fifty kilometers north-northwest of the mines. They were down before we knew it. They took the Space Port without a fight, and from there they moved on to the depot, where the depot commander, Colonel Merthens, had organized his people into blaster squads at the sight of the enemy ship, and was putting up stiff resistance. That was the first knowledge we had that we were under enemy attack.

"Merthens beat off a couple of infantry charges, but then the enemy laid in half a dozen missiles and destroyed the depot. In the meantime, Burnette . . ."

It was coming back to Champ. Thirty-five years of yesterdays were swept away. It was today, and he sat at the trial table watching the prosecution tear his client to pieces. The prosecutor was Thomas Vincent, a young Space Force captain who, though he stuttered, had managed to control his handicap to the point where he was very, very effective. Burnette was on the stand.

"Now, Lieutenant Burnette: you say at the time you received the call from Colonel Merthens the enemy was unaware of your presence?"

"Yes sir. The Sackers definitely did not know we were there."

"Were your forces in a position to offer resistance?"

"Absolutely; we were training with live ammunition. We had substantially all our transport with us. We had four days' rations; we knew the terrain; we

had an opportunity to occupy positions between the enemy ground force and the Sacker ship; and the size of my force was substantially equal to the enemy's."

"How long would it have taken you to mount your attack?"

"We could have been in position in a matter of hours. Four hours, five at the most, to get our heavy weapons within range of the Sacker ship."

"Was the ship your primary target?"

"Yes sir. Without the ship, the enemy would have been deprived of any means of retreat. He would have lost a substantial portion of his communications capability and heavy weapons, and his landing force could not have been resupplied."

"How many ships did the Sackers have on Agamemnon?"

"Just one; the one that landed. We scanned near space. There wasn't anything in orbit."

"So, in your judgment, was an attack on the landing force indicated?"

"Definitely. And, in my judgment, such an attack would have been successful. We had the advantage of surprise; we could match them in firepower; we could even have chosen the battle-ground, since at that point the enemy had not yet occupied the town."

"You were prevented from attacking, were you not, Lieutenant Burnette?"

"Yes sir."

"How."

"By treachery. Sergeant . . ."

Champ had objected violently at the prosecution's use of that adjective, and his objection had been sustained. The prosecution warned against repetition of inflammatory tactics, and the slaughter had continued. After all, the members

of the court were military men too, and Champ knew that they would have thought the word into Burnette's testimony even if he had never uttered it.

The prosecutor repeated the question. "What prevented you from carrying out your attack?"

This time, Burnette was more careful with his answer. "My senior NCO deserted; defected to the enemy. His defection so changed the tactical situation that an attack no longer had any chance of success."

"What was the tactical situation at the time this defection was discovered?"

"Very bad. I had ordered Lieutenant Caesario's heavy weapons platoon mounted on its transport. They moved out, screened by two squads of infantry, in advance of the main force, to take up positions behind the Sacker ship. Since the range of their weapons was substantially less than that of the enemy ship's guns, it was necessary that they advance to within thirty kilometers and dig in deeply. They didn't make it; they were caught in the open when the Sackers attacked prematurely.

"In the meantime, I started the remainder of my forces, consisting of my first platoon, commanded by Lieutenant Hanson, and two blaster squads from the second platoon, to interdict the enemy forces which I believed intended to occupy the town. In the meantime it was my intention to deploy my headquarters squad on hill 139, from which I could coordinate the attack."

"Did you reach your objective?"

"Yes sir; I set up my command post immediately, finishing shortly after dark, and established micro-wave contact with

my other units. This was my first opportunity to coordinate the movement, since we had been maintaining radio silence."

"What duties were assigned to Sergeant St. Mary?"

"Well, at first I was tempted to keep him with me at headquarters, where he'd ordinarily be stationed. I wish I had. Instead, I placed him in command of my short platoon, the one I ordinarily commanded. I felt that the presence of an experienced NCO would benefit the unit's morale, and I could then keep my experienced platoon sergeants with their own units."

"When did you first learn that Sergeant St. Mary was gone?"

"When I contacted his unit to get his report. Corporal Lind answered, and he told me that St. Mary had left him in charge."

"He was gone then?"

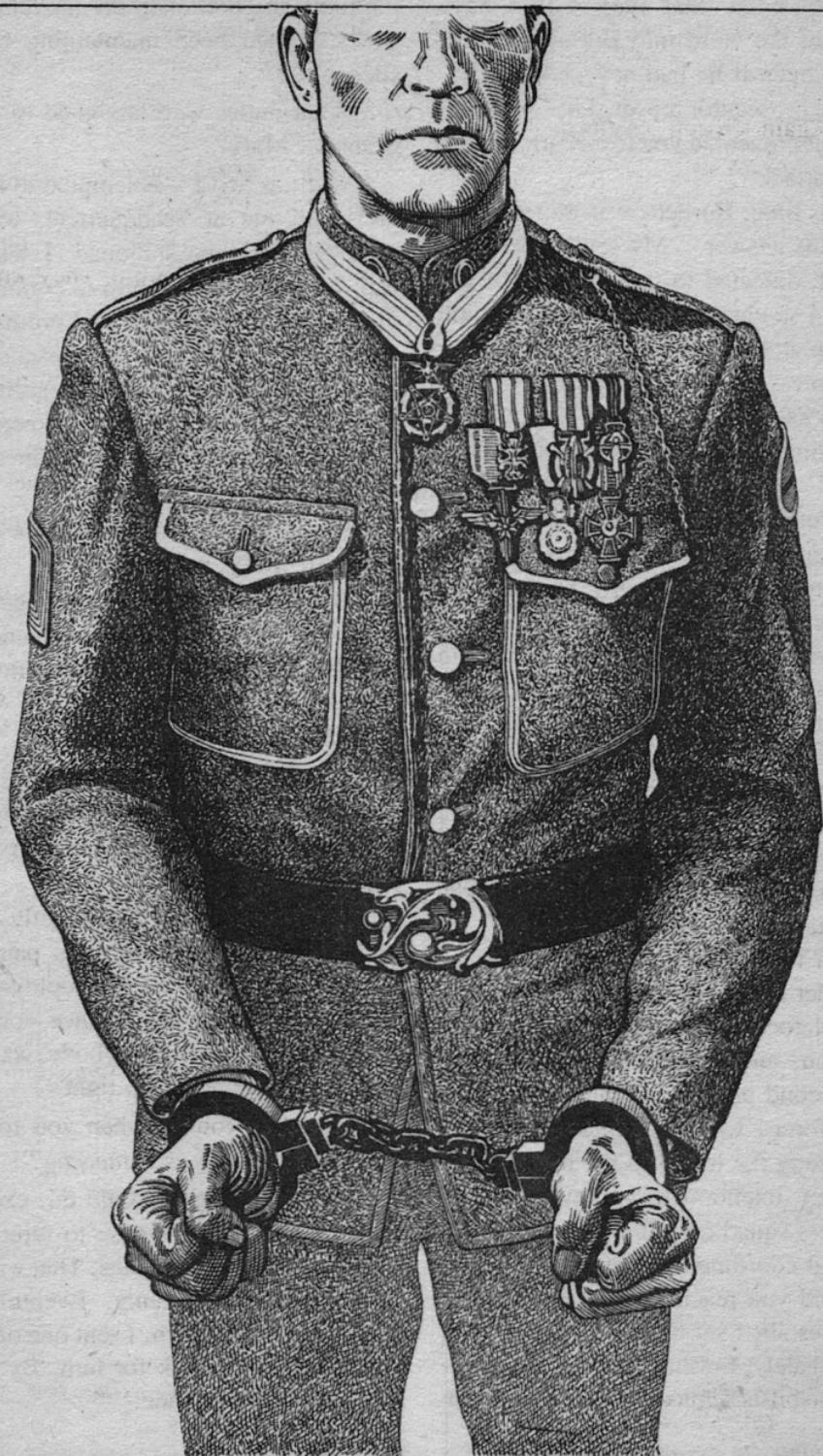
"Yes. Lind told me that St. Mary had taken a jeep and gone out to reconnoiter."

"Had you ordered any such reconnaissance?"

"No sir. In fact, I had strictly forbidden anything beyond point patrols. I already knew the enemy's deployment and I didn't want any chance contact upsetting the plan. Everybody was to get to his station and sit tight."

"What did you do when you found Sergeant St. Mary was missing?"

"There was little I could do, except hope he had enough sense to return. I couldn't break radio silence. That would have alerted the enemy. Eventually, when he did not return, I sent one of the squad leaders to look for him. By that time he was long gone."



"Did you later learn where he had gone?"

"Yes sir. He had gone into the town for the purpose of contacting the enemy."

Again Champ had made violent objection, based on the impossibility of Burnette's knowing what St. Mary's intention had been in going to the town. Again the objection had been sustained, but it was a useless triumph. Champ had known all along that other witnesses would testify that, once in town, St. Mary committed his acts of treason.

"What happened next, Lieutenant?"

"I ordered both my columns to continue their advance toward their objectives, since I was at that time ignorant of what the accused was doing. Second platoon had approached within about fifteen kilometers of Daileyville—the town—and the weapons platoon, which had much farther to go, was nearing its fire station. The ship was just beyond range of their guns when the enemy opened fire on them."

"Please go on, Lieutenant."

"We observed the fire at headquarters, and I immediately signalled my other units that contact had been made. I ordered them to halt."

"Why?"

"Because the operation's success depended on destruction of the Sacker ship. Until that part of the mission had been completed I couldn't risk my infantry."

"What orders did you give Lieutenant Caesario?"

"He was to disperse his guns. Dig them in, if necessary, and wait until such time as he could move them up. In the meantime, he was to equip his

infantry squads with satchel charges, advance on the enemy ship, and try to disable it that way."

"Did he attempt to carry out these orders?"

"Yes sir."

"With what result?"

"His force was wiped out by Sacker infantry deployed around the ship. They were waiting for him. They knew he was coming."

Champ had objected to that last remark, and the court had ordered it stricken from the record.

"Did you subsequently order your remaining forces to retire, Lieutenant?"

"I did. First and second platoons were ordered to take up positions in the hills north of the town. I made rendezvous with them there later that evening, and Lieutenant Caesario's unit reached our station just after dawn the next day. But he had had to abandon his guns, which left us with nothing but company mortars. Our effectiveness against the enemy was ended."

"I can see why Burnette would have been bitter, Al. He'd been in a position to slaughter the Sackers and you aced him out of it."

"No, Captain. That's just it; he wasn't. A successful campaign would have meant the destruction of Agamemnon."

"You were already in the Sacker camp at that time?"

"Yes. And I'd already established communication with it."

"You keep saying 'it,' Al. Don't you mean 'them'?"

"No. But I'll get to that part. It'll be

easier if you just bear with me. Remember the woman—what was her name?"

Again, Champ did. He remembered her testimony as vividly as he had Burnette's. He considered it especially destructive, since she was a civilian and presumably had no personal axe to grind.

"State your name, for the record."

"Clara Kropinski."

"Is it 'Miss' or 'Mrs.'?"

"Mrs. Uh—I'm widowed."

"What was your husband's name, and when did he die?"

"His name was Alexander Kropinski. He was killed on April 27, 2137."

"Did that happen on the planet Agamemnon?"

"Yes, sir. Alex was a miner."

"Was Agamemnon your home too?"

"I lived there. I went where Alex went."

"Now: on that date, April 27, 2137, the town where you lived came under attack by Sacker forces; is that correct?"

"Yes, sir. They just came out of nowhere."

"Was your husband, Alex, also a municipal official, Mrs. Kropinski?"

"He was the town mayor."

"What did he do when he learned of the invasion?"

"He went to his office down the street from our house to organize the civil defense system."

"Did you go with him?"

"Yes. I wanted to help."

"What was happening when you arrived there?"

"Well, when I got there we had just learned the depot had been destroyed. Some of the people who'd managed to

get away were straggling in. Some of them were soldiers. They were all wounded; walking wounded, they called them. Colonel Mertens sent them out when the Sackers started shooting the missiles. Most of the civilians were already in town."

"Was the town itself under attack at that time?"

"No. Not while I was there."

"You left?"

"Yes. Our civil defense plan called for evacuation into the mines. We had stores of food and water there. I went with the last group, just after they took my husband away."

"Who took him away?"

"Some Sackers, and that—that man over there."

"If it please the court," said the prosecutor, "let the record reflect that the witness is pointing to the accused, Sergeant St. Mary."

The court had so ordered.

"Did you ever see Alexander Kropinski alive after that?"

"No."

"Did you have an opportunity to observe Sergeant St. Mary's behavior in the presence of the Sackers?"

"Yes sir. He was helping them; like he was one of them."

That remark had met with violent objection and it had been overruled.

"Go on, Mrs. Kropinski."

"Well, he went through the crowd there at the City Hall, and he helped them pick people out, and all the while those things had guns pointed at us. One of them shot a wounded soldier who tried to help Alex. Then, right after that, they left."

"They didn't try to stop the rest of you from going to the mines?"

"No. They just left. After they left, we left. There were only about a dozen of us still in town then. A couple of days later he sent for me, and told me Alex had died. I went with him to claim the body, and it was all cut up." She started crying at that point. "They'd cut him open and taken him apart, and then stuffed everything back in and sewed him shut. . . ."

That had ended Mrs. Kropinski's testimony, but others with equally damning stories had later mounted the stand, and driven nail after nail into St. Mary's coffin.

Champ had cross-examined very sparingly, knowing that Al would not utter a word in his own defense. He did not wish to amplify anything the court heard from the witness stand. This strategy was theoretically the correct one, but it certainly didn't make the job any easier.

"They said 400 people died that day, Al, and that you were responsible for killing every one of them." Even now, Champ found that hard to justify. He hoped Al would be able to do it, though to himself he confessed that that would take some work. Laywers are used to representing the guilty. A good one can divorce his own emotions and prejudices from the situation and concentrate on insuring that his client get effective representation of counsel. Champ had been a good one; hoped he still was. *But there is something immeasurably difficult about keeping faith at times, he thought, even though I know the High Command believed Al was innocent.*

"I was. I never claimed to be innocent of all crime, Captain. Only that I was not guilty of the crimes charged. I did take life that day, many, many times; and in the days that followed I took still more. But the alternatives were much worse. I could have lost all of them if I'd gone by the book. As it was, the fact that I had to choose who would live and who would die took me close to the breaking point. I sacrificed companions in arms, with whom I'd lived and fought. Some of them, like Mineau and Grow and Caesario, I chose for that very reason, and because they were the strongest. Burnette survived principally because he was weak."

"I still don't understand, Al. The surrender; I can see how you might have gained a greater insight into the circumstances than Burnette had, because you'd reconnoitered. If surrender to a superior force saved the bulk of the company, and insured the safety of the civil population . . ."

"It wasn't a superior force, Captain. Remember Corporal Lind's testimony?"

Champ did. Lind was the only one who hadn't screamed for Al's blood. He didn't like the business of this court. He had spoken only because it was his duty to obey the court; because he was a good soldier.

"I ask you," the prosecutor had demanded, "if on Standard Date 5 May 2137 you had occasion to have a conversation with Sergeant St. Mary?"

"Yes sir."

"Where did this conversation take place?"

"In the woods north of Daileyville,

when the patrol I was leading was captured.''

"Do you mean captured by the Sackers?"'

"No sir. I was captured by Sackers and Sergeant St. Mary."

"Do you mean to say Sergeant St. Mary was operating with the enemy forces?"'

"Yes sir."

"And, as a matter of fact, did he not appear to be in command of the Sacker patrol?"'

"Yes sir."

"How many men did you have?"'

"Four."

"What happened to them?"'

"They were all killed. I was the only survivor."

"How were they killed?"'

"Two were killed by a grenade triggered by a trip wire. The third was shot by a Sacker soldier."

"Were you also wounded?"'

"Yes sir."

"Were you also knocked unconscious?"'

"Yes sir."

"And is this how you came to be taken captive?"'

"Yes sir."

"And disarmed while unconscious?"'

"Yes sir."

"Now then, after you regained consciousness, you had a conversation with Sergeant St. Mary?"'

"Yes sir."

"After which you were released, with instructions to report the substance of that conversation to Lieutenant Burnette?"'

"Yes sir."

And he had. Champ recalled the

words very clearly. He repeated them from memory even now, almost verbatim, over thirty years later.

"Corporal Lind, repeat the report of this conversation which you gave to Lieutenant Burnette."

"Yes sir. I told Lieutenant Burnette what had happened to my patrol, and how it was that I survived. And then I told him that Sergeant St. Mary had said that further resistance was useless, that we would be overwhelmed if we attacked the Sackers, and that the Sackers would then kill all the civilians unless we surrendered immediately."

"To your knowledge, were any civilians in fact killed?"'

"Yes sir."

"How many were killed, and when were they killed?"'

"Later that day we received a call on the radio from Sergeant St. Mary. He directed our attention to a field within view of our bivouac. We could see ten civilians lined up in a row. A few minutes later these ten were killed by a Sacker firing squad."

"What did Lieutenant Burnette do after that?"'

"He surrendered the garrison to Sergeant St. Mary."

"Don't you mean to the Sackers?"'

"No sir. I mean to Sergeant St. Mary."

"You had a really loyal friend there, Al. Even after what he saw he didn't want to tell on you."

"I know. I was sorry to hear he'd killed himself after my trial. Willi deserved a medal."

"Just how large was the Sacker force, Al?"'

"One hundred two Units, Captain."

"Units?"

"Units. It has to do with something you asked me about before. I'll get back to that a little later.

"What I'm about to tell you would make no sense whatever to the general populace, Captain. There isn't one in ten thousand who'd swallow the story. This is the main reason for this elaborate cover-up; this is why I am regarded as the greatest traitor of all time.

"You see, there was a strangeness in the Sackers from the very beginning of our contact with them. They seemed absolutely paranoid. They never made an attempt to contact us; they never responded to our attempts to contact them. When battles were fought they never surrendered; no Sacker ship or base was ever captured; no Sacker body survived disabling wounds intact. They took no human prisoners. Anybody who tried to surrender to them was obliterated.

"In short, there was no communication of any kind between belligerents, and in all of human history that had never before happened. Not once in any human war had an enemy charged forth to kill or be killed, without making some kind of excuse or some kind of demand. Always before, even with our enemies, we had some common ground. The Sackers were different.

"And that's why, Captain, when that ship landed on Agamemnon, it represented one of the turning points in racial history. It was the first time since they'd known of our existence that they'd set foot on the same planet without shooting at us or incinerating themselves.

"I didn't know why it had happened, but I realized that it represented an op-

portunity we'd never hoped to get, and I couldn't let Burnette screw it up. I knew he would, too. Burnette was that kind of a guy."

"Most of what you've said so far I already knew, Al. It was common knowledge. But I'll concede that the landing was unusual. Tell me, weren't you taking a pretty big risk in walking in on them?"

"No more so than if I'd let Burnette shoot it out with them. At the time I didn't know the Sacker ship's planet-buster weapons were on the fritz. If they hadn't been they simply would have zapped us from space. Instead they came down to polish us off dirtside, which is a little bit outside their ordinary routine."

"Land engagements had taken place before, Al."

"Yes, I know. But in every case where that happened the system was strategically located. The Sackers wanted it, and they wanted it intact. And every time they wanted something that badly they got it, because they'd pack in reinforcements until we were simply overwhelmed. That wasn't the case with Agamemnon. Agamemnon represented a rare and possibly unique thing: an undetected, defective Sacker unit; a mutation, so to speak.

"It had to be protected; preserved. It had to be used to end the war."

"How did you manage to make contact?"

"I simply walked up to the nearest bunch I found and told them I was taking command, that I was their ally."

"What!"

"That's right. Talk about shock value; bold action seems to do it every time."

"They understood you?"

"Certainly. Every Sacker on Agamemnon spoke and understood English."

Champ could not believe his own ears. "You mean, the Sacker landing force learned the language before the attack, planned it that closely?"

"No, nothing of the sort. They were born with the knowledge, so to speak, though the term 'born' is entirely inappropriate. The Sacker troopers behaved with absolute logic, like a computer would."

"That's why they fought with such suicidal determination; why they didn't ordinarily bother to take prisoners, though they must have done that on at least one occasion so they could learn the language. It also accounts for certain other tactics they employed against us. I fought them for a long time, Captain; I noticed things. So did many others. And one of the really strange things we observed was that it was impossible to interrupt the continuity of their command. In a human fleet, for instance, command usually reposes in the biggest, strongest, most well protected vessel in the force, because if anything happens to the commander it's devastating to combat efficiency."

"Also, Sacker forces never attacked a superior human force; they always waited until they had numerical superiority, even if this also meant passing up a strategic opportunity. They were playing a long game. I mean that literally."

"A game?"

"Exactly. That was what this war represented to the Sacker, Captain; a kind of cosmic chess. It was playing a

game it had learned uncounted millennia ago when its kind were alive."

"Were alive!" Champ's face was twisted into a grimace as he responded. "We were fighting some kind of ghosts?"

"In a way, that's exactly what they were: ghosts. The race hadn't had any real existence for millennia. In fact, we believe there was only one individual specimen surviving at the time all this was happening, and it was clearly mad; one deranged being, Captain, sole heir to a gigantic automated technology. The Sacker troopers were its creation. They were androids."

Champ was wide-eyed. He half believed that Al had made it up; that he too was mad. But no; there had to be some sense to it. The High Command had believed him, and they had not been fools.

"I'm trying very hard to understand you, Al, and I'm having trouble. The thing I'm having the most trouble with is why it was necessary to kill so many people and why, in the end, you let the ship escape. But even that might have been justified if you'd only come out with it at your trial."

"I had good reasons, Captain, not the least of which was that the Sacker conceived us not as individuals but as another player. No doubt it pictured some human equivalent of itself sitting on its home planet manipulating its own forces across the board."

"That may have been how all this started. Perhaps long ago there were other players; perhaps the Sacker eliminated the others. I talked to many knowledgeable people after it happened. A large part of my first year of

'imprisonment' was devoted to debriefing. I endured weeks of hypnotic probing, during which every detail of my experience was explored. I met with not one note of dissent. All agreed that what I had done was correct under the circumstances, that the Sacker had made a tactical error which humanity could exploit—*must* exploit, if it was to win."

"Why did we have to win, Al? If we then had the means to contact the Sacker and explain, why could we not have made peace with it?"

"Because the concept of peace has no function in a game, Captain. The game contemplates one of three results: victory, defeat, or stalemate. Defeat, of course, meant the end of humanity. Stalemate was no better; it meant only the renewal of the contest. It had to be victory."

"I see."

"No, Captain, I don't think you do. Like most of us, your picture of life is composed of relationships between individuals. This obscures life's realities to some extent. That level of thinking was far too lofty to be contemplated by the Sacker. It understood concrete terms; its thinking was largely positional. It operated on the supposition that sooner or later, if it was persistent, its pieces could overcome and replace its opponent's pieces. That, after all, was the principal rule of the game."

"What I did was to alter the rules slightly. By doing what I did I confused the Sacker; demonstrated to it that variations could occur, variations which could shortcut its regular strategy. These variations had to be explained; otherwise the Sacker's units would not have accepted them. The method used was

to reveal the differences in 'construction' between our 'pieces' and theirs; to suggest that 'construction' differences meant behavioral differences too.

"My appearance, for instance, was so irrational that the Sacker units couldn't handle it. Hostile pieces didn't behave in that way, therefore I was not a hostile piece. If I was not a hostile piece I was friendly; I had the same objective; therefore my directives were worth following."

"Again I demonstrated this—by subduing the opposing pieces. They did not understand the methods I used, but they understood that the result was the occupation of the position which they had come there to take."

"Again, logically, if these methods worked, they should be incorporated into the strategy of the game. To do that, these units had to restore communication with the rest of the Sacker units, therefore I had to allow the ship to leave."

"By the time they left they had, of course, been completely reprogrammed. I spent days drilling them in all the classical tactical mistakes committed by commanders in humanity's past conflicts. They took it as gospel; they expected nothing less than winning strategy from a unit which had demonstrated so clearly that such strategy existed, and that it worked on humans."

"Nor did they hesitate to leave Agamemnon in my charge. I had conquered it for them; I was a friendly piece; therefore Agamemnon's position on the Sacker's board was secure. It did not matter that at that time I was also in possession of navigational data which

eventually led to our discovery of the Sacker's home world.

"The rest you know. The Sacker began to utilize the tactics I had taught it, faithfully repeating all our past mistakes—mistakes we could easily recognize and exploit, and *did* exploit, successfully, until at last we occupied the positions we needed to end the game."

Champ went to the refrigerator and got two more beers. He handed one to Al, who grimaced while he popped the top open. "So you see, Captain, I was not guilty, after all. I was not a coward nor, technically, was I a murderer. The people who died died as soldiers; they were casualties in the same sense that Colonel Merthen's command was."

Champ took a pull on his beer. He did understand, he decided. And he could see at last why St. Mary had acted as he did. But he did not understand the behavior of Al's superiors. That explanation eluded him, and he wondered if even Al knew. "Why," he asked, "weren't the people told?"

"Because, being human, they would have insisted on deliberating our course of action. There was some of that tendency even within the High Command. Fortunately these people were soldiers, and in the end they yielded to the wisdom of the arguments in favor of secrecy.

"No one knew for sure how the people would have felt if they'd known the truth. There was already enough resistance to the war, because it was all happening so far away it wasn't real to the people. How would they have reacted had they known so much blood and

treasure was being expended to smash machines, just to win a game?"

"But it was only a game to the Sacker. Our people really died."

"That is an important observation, Captain. It was another use the High Command had for me. My exploits were much publicized. I became the villain, instead of the Sackers. People could tolerate atrocities from the enemy, because the enemy was expected to behave that way. In his ignorance they could forgive him. But they could not forgive one of their own kind. And if I defected, would not others also do the same?"

"So the High Command used this to fan up emotion in favor of its policy of unrelentingly pressing the offensive. Thousands of copies of the tapes of my trial were made, and shown to audiences all over the Combine. They took the survivors of the Agamemnon incident on tour; real people who had not only seen with their own eyes what the Sackers and I had done, but who had surreptitiously photographed the results. For the first time humanity looked on the face of his enemy, and the enemy was me."

"But the war is over, Al. Is there any reason now why you should still be so reviled? Haven't you ever yearned to clear your name, straighten out the record?"

Al's eyes turned somberly downward to his hands, which tightly gripped the beer can, looking as though at any moment their muscles would tighten in frustration and crush it. "Many times, Captain. But I can't. It would undo all the good that came of it. The sacrifice would be too great."

"Again, Al, I don't understand. How can it make any difference now?"

"Ever hear the story about the little boy who cried 'wolf'?"

"Of course."

"No one ever believed him after that, did they?"

"It's only a story, Al."

"No, Captain. It's more than a story; it's an emotion, and it lies at the heart of the human psyche. Emotion is at once man's greatest strength and his most grievous weakness. To man, what is real does not matter nearly so much as what he thinks is real. We have occupied a substantial portion of this spiral arm, Captain. The size of the Solar Combine increases by the day. In all of this expansion we have never met our equal, but the people think we met one who came close."

"Our luck cannot hold forever. Sooner or later we *will* encounter that equal. It may well be that we will not get along with them. If we were to reveal the truth—that the Sacker War was nothing more than a game—can we ever again expect them to fight a real war?"

Champ nodded. He found himself in agreement. Al was right in his assessment of man's makeup. He himself was torn between the joy of vindication and the logic of the lie. Al had suffered and would suffer, because it was necessary to the welfare of his kind.

Al buried Champ on the knoll that overlooked the stream, taking special

pains to conceal the grave behind a stand of bushes. It might be a long time before anyone else passed this way; perhaps as much as a century. If so, that would be so much the better, because it would mean the memory would be dimmer yet.

As he threw that last shovelful of dirt onto the mound he thought perhaps he might yet carve a marker, one that would at least identify this old man as the last casualty of the Sacker War.

He did not do this. It would have been contrary to his orders, and the order had been specific: "You will take all measures required, however drastic, to preserve the secret of your continued existence."

Al had. He had not in truth broken his oath, though the price of obedience had been almost too much for him. He would remember that. Never again, he resolved, would such tragedy recur.

An hour later, in another part of the valley where the quiet pools of the little stream became first rapids and then a torrent, where they coursed through a deep gorge and finally fell a hundred meters over a cataract, there was a rumble, followed closely by a ball of fire. A puff of oily smoke rose from the gorge.

It signalled more than the destruction of the old man's camper. It was a monument to both of them: two chess pieces, swept from the board. But the race lived on, perhaps prepared a little better to meet its destiny, whatever that destiny might be. It was all part of the game.



● Do not do unto others as you would they should do unto you. Their tastes may not be the same.

George Bernard Shaw