

# THE SCAPEGOAT

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## I

DeFranco sits across the table from the elf and he dreams for a moment, not a good dream, but recent truth: all part of what surrounds him now, a bit less than it was when it was happening, because it was gated in through human eyes and ears and a human notices much more and far less than what truly goes on in the world—

*—the ground comes up with a bone-penetrating thump and dirt showers down like rain, over and over again; and deFranco wriggles up to his knees with the clods rattling off his armor. He may be moving to a place where a crater will be in a moment, and the place where he is may become one in that same moment. There is no time to think about it. There is only one way off that exposed hillside, which is to go and keep going. DeFranco writhes and wriggles against the weight of the armor, blind for a moment as the breathing system fails to give him as much as he needs, but his throat is already raw with too much oxygen in three days out. He curses the rig, far more intimate a frustration than the enemy on this last long run to the shelter of the deep tunnels...*

He was going home, was John deFranco, if home was still there, and if the shells that had flattened their shield in this zone had not flattened it all along the line and wiped out the base.

The elves had finally learned where to hit them on this weapons system too, that was what; and deFranco cursed them one and all,

while the sweat ran in his eyes and the oxy-mix tore his throat and giddied his brain. On this side and that shells shocked the air and the ground and his bones; and not for the first time concussion flung him bodily through the air and slammed him to the churned ground bruised and battered (and but for the armor, dead and shrapnel-riddled). Immediately fragments of wood and metal rang off the hardsuit, and in their gravity-driven sequence clods of earth rained down in a patter mixed with impacts of rocks and larger chunks.

And then, not having been directly in the strike zone and dead, he got his sweating human limbs up again by heaving the armor-weight into its hydraulic joint-locks, and desperately hurled fifty kilos of unsupple ceramics and machinery and ninety of quaking human flesh into a waddling, exhausted run.

Run and fall and run and stagger into a walk when the dizziness got too much and never waste time dodging.

But somewhen the jolts stopped, and the shell-made earthquakes stopped, and deFranco, laboring along the hazard of the shell-cratered ground, became aware of the silence. His staggering steps slowed as he turned with the awkward foot-planting the armor imposed to take a look behind him. The whole smoky valley swung across the narrowed view of his visor, all lit up with ghostly green readout that flickered madly and told him his eyes were jerking in panic, calling up more than he wanted. He feared that he was deaf; it was that profound a silence to his shocked ears. He heard the hum of the fans and the ventilator in the suit, but there would be that sound forever, he heard it in his dreams; so it could be in his head and not coming from his ears. He hit the ceramic-shielded back of his hand against his ceramic-coated helmet and heard the thump, if distantly. So his hearing was all right. There was just the smoke and the desolate cratering of the landscape to show him where the shells had hit.

And suddenly one of those ghostly green readouts in his visor jumped and said **000** and started ticking off, so he lumbered about to get a look up, the viewplate compensating for the sky in a series of flickers and darkenings. The reading kept up, ticking away; and he could see nothing in the sky, but base was still there, it was transmitting, and he knew what was happening. The numbers reached **Critical** and he swung about again and looked toward the plain as the first strikes came in and the smoke went up anew.

He stood there on the hillcrest and watched the airstrike he had called down half an eternity ago pound hell out of the plains. He knew the devastation of the beams and the shells. And his first and immediate thought was that there would be no more penetrations of the screen and human lives were saved. He had outrun the chaos and covered his own mistake in getting damn near on top of the enemy installation trying to find it.

And his second thought, hard on the heels of triumph, was that there was too much noise in the world already, too much death to deal with, vastly too much, and he wanted to cry with the relief and the fear of being alive and moving. Good and proper. The base scout found the damn firepoint, tripped a trap and the whole damn airforce had to come pull him out of the fire with a damn million credits worth of shells laid down out there destroying ten billion credits' worth of somebody else's.

Congratulations, deFranco.

A shiver took him. He turned his back to the sight, cued his locator on, and began to walk, slowly, slowly, one foot in front of the other, and if he had not rested now and again, setting the limbs on his armor on lock, he would have fallen down. As it was he walked with his mouth open and his ears full of the harsh sound of his /Own breathing. He walked, lost and disoriented, till his unit picked up his locator signal and beacons in the Lost Boy they never hoped to get back.

“You did us great damage then,” says the elf. “It was the last effort we could make and we knew you would take out our last weapons. We knew that you would do it quickly and that then you would stop. We had learned to trust your habits even if we didn't understand them. When the shelling came, towers fell; and there were over a thousand of us dead in the city.”

“And you keep coming.”

“We will. Until it's over or until we're dead.”

DeFranco stares at the elf a moment. The room is a small and sterile place, showing no touches of habitation, but all those small signs of humanity—a quiet bedroom, done in yellow and green pastels. A table. Two chairs. An unused bed. They have faced each other over this table for hours. They have stopped talking theory and begun thinking only of the recent past. And deFranco finds himself lost in elvish thinking again. It never quite makes sense.

The assumptions between the lines are not human assumptions, though the elf's command of the language is quite thorough.

At last, defeated by logicless logic: "I went back to my base," says deFranco. "I called down the fire; but I just knew the shelling had stopped. We were alive. That was all we knew. Nothing personal."

There was a bath and there was a meal and a little extra ration of whiskey. HQ doled the whiskey out as special privilege and sanity-saver and the scarcity of it made the posts hoard it and ration it with down-to-the-gram precision. And he drank his three days' ration and his bonus drink one after the other when he had scrubbed his rig down and taken a long, long bath beneath the pipe. He took his three days' whiskey all at once because three days out was what he was recovering from, and he sat in his corner in his shorts, the regs going about their business, all of them recognizing a shaken man on a serious drunk and none of them rude or crazy enough to bother him now, not with congratulations for surviving, not with offers of bed, not with a stray glance. The regs were not in his command, he was not strictly anywhere in the chain of command they belonged to, being special ops and assigned there for the reg CO to use when he had to. He was 2nd Lt. John R. deFranco if anyone bothered and no one did hereabouts, in the bunkers. He was special ops and his orders presently came from the senior trooper captain who was the acting CO all along this section of the line, the major having got hisself lately dead, themselves waiting on a replacement, thank you, sir and ma'am; while higher brass kept themselves cool and dry and safe behind the shields on the ground a thousand miles away and up in orbit.

And John deFranco, special op and walking target, kept his silver world-and-moon pin and his blue beret and his field-browns all tucked up and out of the damp in his mold-proof plastic kit at the end of his bunk. The rig was his working uniform, the damned, cursed rig that found a new spot to rub raw every time he realigned it. And he sat now in his shorts and drank the first glass quickly, the next and the next and the next in slow sips, and blinked sometimes when he remembered to.

The regs, male and female, moved about the underground barracks in their shorts and their T's like khaki ghosts whose gender meant nothing to him or generally to each other. When bunks got double-filled it was friendship or boredom or outright desperation; all their talk was rough and getting rougher, and their

eyes when real pinned-down-for-days boredom set in were hell, because they had been out here and down here on this world for thirty-seven months by the tally on bunker 43's main entry wall; while the elves were still holding, still digging in, and still dying at unreasonable rates without surrender.

“Get prisoners,” HQ said in its blithe simplicity; but prisoners suicided. Elves checked out just by *wanting* to die.

“Establish a contact,” HQ said. “Talk *at* them—” meaning by any inventive means they could; but they had failed at that for years in space and they expected no better luck onworld. Talking to an elf meant coming into range with either drones or live bodies. Elves cheerfully shot at any target they could get. Elves had shot at the first human ship they had met twenty years ago and they had killed fifteen hundred men, women, and children at Corby Point for reasons no one ever understood. They kept on shooting at human ships in sporadic incidents that built to a crisis.

Then humanity—all three humanities, Union and Alliance and remote, sullen Earth—had decided there was no restraint possible with a species that persistently attacked modern human ships on sight, with equipage centuries less advanced—*Do we have to wait, Earth's consensus was, till they do get their hands on the advanced stuff? Till they hit a world?* Earth worried about such things obsessively, convinced of its paramount worldbound holiness and importance in the universe. The cradle of humankind. Union worried about other things—like breakdown of order, like its colonies slipping loose while it was busy: Union pushed for speed, Earth wanted to go back to its own convolute affairs, and Alliance wanted the territory, preferring to make haste slowly and not create permanent problems for itself on its flank. There were rumors of other things too, like Alliance picking up signals out this direction, of something other than elves. Real reason to worry. It was at least sure that the war was being pushed and pressed and shoved; and the elves shoved back. Elves died and died, their ships being no match for human-make once humans took after them in earnest and interdicted the jump-points that let them near human space. But elves never surrendered and never quit trying.

“Now what do we do?” the joint command asked themselves collectively and figuratively—because they were dealing out bloody, unpalatable slaughter against a doggedly determined and underequipped enemy, and Union and Earth wanted a quick

solution. But Union as usual took the Long View: and on this single point there was consensus. “If we take out every ship they put out here and they retreat, how long does it take before they come back at us with more advanced armaments? We’re dealing with lunatics.”

“Get through to them,” the word went out from HQ. “Take them out of our space and carry the war home to them. We’ve got to make the impression on them now—or take options no one wants later.”

Twenty years ago. Underestimating the tenacity of the elves. Removed from the shipping lanes and confined to a single world, the war had sunk away to a local difficulty; Alliance still put money and troops into it; Union still cooperated in a certain measure. Earth sent adventurers and enlistees that often were crazier than the elves: Base culled those in a hurry.

So for seventeen years the matter boiled on and on and elves went on dying and dying in their few and ill-equipped ships, until the joint command decided on a rougher course; quickly took out the elves’ pathetic little space station, dropped troops onto the elvish world, and fenced human bases about with antimissile screens to fight a limited and on-world war—while elvish weaponry slowly got more basic and more primitive and the troops drank their little measures of imported whiskey and went slowly crazy.

And humans closely tied to the elvish war adapted, in humanity’s own lunatic way. Well behind the lines that had come to exist on the elves’ own planet, humans settled in and built permanent structures and scientists came to study the elves and the threatened flora and fauna of a beautiful and earthlike world, while some elvish centers ignored the war, and the bombing went on and on in an inextricable mess, because neither elves nor humans knew how to quit, or knew the enemy enough to know how to disengage. Or figure out what the other wanted. And the war could go on and on—since presumably the computers and the records in those population centers still had the design of starships in them. And no enemy which had taken what the elves had taken by now was ever going to forget.

There were no negotiations. Once, just once, humans had tried to approach one of the few neutral districts to negotiate and it simply and instantly joined the war. So after all the study and all the effort, humans lived on the elves’ world and had no idea what to

call them or what the world's real name was, because the damn elves had blown their own space station at the last and methodically destroyed every record the way they destroyed every hamlet before its fall and burned every record and every artifact. They died and they died and they died and sometimes (but seldom nowadays) they took humans with them, like the time when they were still in space and hit the base at Ticon with  $\frac{3}{4}$ -cee rocks and left nothing but dust. Thirty thousand dead and not a way in hell to find the pieces.

*That* was the incident after which the joint command decided to take the elves out of space.

And nowadays humanity invested cities they never planned to take and they tore up roads and took out all the elves' planes, and they tore up agriculture with non-nuclear bombs and shells, trying not to ruin the world beyond recovery, hoping eventually to wear the elves down. But the elves retaliated with gas and chemicals which humans had refrained from using. Humans interdicted supply and still the elves managed to come up with the wherewithal to strike through their base defense here as if supply were endless and they not starving and the world still green and undamaged.

DeFranco drank and drank with measured slowness, watching regs go to and fro in the slow dance of their own business. They were good, this Delta Company of the Eighth. They did faithfully what regs were supposed to do in this war, which was to hold a base and keep roads secure that humans used, and to build landing zones for supply and sometimes to go out and get killed inching humanity's way toward some goal the joint command understood and which from here looked only like some other damn shell-pocked hill. DeFranco's job was to locate such hills. And to find a prisoner to take (standing orders) and to figure out the enemy if he could.

Mostly just to find hills. And sometimes to get his company into taking one. And right now he was no more damn good, because they had gotten as close to this nameless city as there were hills and vantages to make it profitable, and after that they went onto the flat and did what?

Take the place inch by inch, street by street and discover every damn elf they met had suicided? The elves would do it on them, so in the villages south of here they had saved the elves the bother, and got nothing for their trouble but endless, measured carnage, and smoothskinned corpses that drew the small vermin and the

huge winged birds—(they’ve been careful with their ecology, the Science Bureau reckoned, in their endless reports, in some fool’s paper on large winged creatures’ chances of survival if a dominant species were not very careful of them—)

(—or the damn birds are bloody-minded mean and tougher than the elves, deFranco mused in his alcoholic fog, knowing that nothing was, in all space and creation, more bloody-minded than the elves.)

He had seen a young elf child holding another, both stone dead, baby locked in baby’s arms: they love, dammit, they love— And he had wept while he staggered away from the ruins of a little elvish town, seeing more and more such sights—because the elves had touched off bombs in their own town center, and turned it into a firestorm.

But the two babies had been lying there unburned and no one wanted to touch them or to look at them. Finally the birds came. And the regs shot at the birds until the CO stopped it, because it was a waste: it was killing a non-combatant life form and that (O God!) was against the rules. Most of all the CO stopped it because it was a fraying of human edges, because the birds always were there and the birds were the winners, every time. And the damn birds like the damn elves came again and again, no matter that shots blew them to puffs of feathers. Stubborn, like the elves. Crazy as everything else on the planet, human and elf. It was catching.

DeFranco nursed the last whiskey in the last glass, nursed it with hands going so numb he had to struggle to stay awake. He was a quiet drunk, never untidy. He neatly drank the last and fell over sideways limp as a corpse, and, tender mercy to a hill-finding branch of the service the hill-taking and road-building regs regarded as a sometime natural enemy—one of the women came and got the glass from his numbed fingers and pulled a blanket over him. They were still human here. They tried to be.

“There was nothing more to be done,” says the elf. “That was why. We knew that you were coming closer, and that our time was limited.” His long white fingers touch the table-surface, the white, plastic table in the ordinary little bedroom. “We died in great numbers, deFranco, and it was cruel that you showed us only slowly what you could do.”

“We could have taken you out from the first. You knew that.”



DeFranco's voice holds an edge of frustration. Of anguish. "Elf, couldn't you ever understand that?"

"You always gave us hope we could win. And so we fought, and so we still fight. Until the peace. My friend."

"Franc, Franc—" —it was a fierce low voice, and deFranco came out of it, in the dark, with his heart doubletiming and the instant realization it was Dibs talking to him in that low tone and wanting him out of that blanket, which meant wire-runners or worse, a night attack. But Dibs grabbed his arms to hold him still before he could flail about. "Franc, we got a move out there, Jake and Cat's headed out down the tunnel, the lieutenant's gone to M1 but M1's on the line, they want you out there, they want a spotter up on hill 24 doublequick.

"Uh." DeFranco rubbed his eyes. "Uh." Sitting upright was brutal. Standing was worse. He staggered two steps and caught the main shell of his armor off the rack, number 12 suit, the lousy stinking armor that always smelled of human or mud or the purge in the ducts and the awful sick-sweet cleaner they wiped it out with when they hung it up. He held the plastron against his body and Dibs started with the clips in the dim light of the single 5-watt they kept going to find the latrine at night— "Damn, damn, I gotta—" He eluded Dibs and got to the toilet, and by now the whole place was astir with shadow-figures like a scene out of a gold-lighted hell. He swigged the stinging mouthwash they had on the shelf by the toilet and did his business while Dibs caught him up from behind and finished the hooks on his left side. "Damn, get him going," the sergeant said, and: "Trying," Dibs said, as others hauled deFranco around and began hooking him up like a baby into his clothes, one piece and the other, the boots, leg and groin-pieces, the sleeves, the gloves, the belly clamp and the backpack and the power-on—his joints ached. He stood there swaying to one and another tug on his body and took the helmet into his hands when Dibs handed it to him.

"Go, go," the sergeant said, who had no more power to give a special op any specific orders than he could fly; but HQ was in a stew, they needed his talents out there, and deFranco let the regs shove him all they liked: it was his accommodation with these regs when there was no peace anywhere else in the world. And once a dozen of these same regs had come out into the heat after him, which he never quite forgot. So he let them hook his weapons-kit

on, then ducked his head down and put the damned helmet on and gave it the locking half-twist as he headed away from the safe light of the barracks pit into the long tunnel, splashing along the low spots on the plastic grid that kept heavy armored feet from sinking in the mud.

“Code: *Nightsight*,” he told the suit aloud, all wobbly and shivery from too little sleep; and it read his hoarse voice patterns and gave him a filmy image of the tunnel in front of him. “Code: *ID*,” he told it, and it started telling the two troopers somewhere up the tunnel that he was there, and on his way. He got readout back as Cat acknowledged, “**Ia-6yg-p30/30**,” the green numbers ghosted up in his visor, telling him Jake and Cat had elves and they had them quasi-solid in the distant-sensors which would have been tripped downland and they themselves were staying where they were and taking no chances on betraying the location of the tunnel. He cut the ID and Cat and Jake cut off too.

*They’ve got to us, deFranco thought. The damned elves got through our screen and now they’ve pushed through oil foot, and it’s going to be hell to pay—*

Back behind him the rest of the troops would be suiting up and making a more leisurely prep for a hard night to come. The elves rarely got as far as human bunkers. They tried. They were, at close range and with hand-weapons, deadly. The dying was not all on the elves’ side if they got to you.

A cold sweat had broken out under the suit. His head ached with a vengeance and the suit weighed on his knees and on his back when he bent and it stank with disinfectant that smelled like some damn tree from some damn forest on the world that had spawned every human born, he knew that, but it failed as perfume and failed at masking the stink of terror and of the tunnels in the cold wet breaths the suit took in when it was not on self-seal.

He knew nothing about Earth, only dimly remembered Pell, which had trained him and shipped him here by stages to a world no one bothered to give a name. Elfland, when High HQ was being whimsical. Neverneverland, the regs called it after some old fairy tale, because from it a soldier never never came home again. They had a song with as many verses as there were bitches of the things a soldier in Elfland never found.

*Where’s my discharge from this war?*

*Why, it's neverneverwhere, my friend.*

*Well, when's the next ship off this world?*

*Why, its neverneverwhen, my friend.*

*And times what we've got most of,*

*And time is what we spend,*

*And time is what we've got to do*

*In Nevereverland.*

He hummed this to himself, in a voice jolted and crazed by the exertion. He wanted to cry like a baby. He wanted someone to curse for the hour and his interrupted rest. Most of all he wanted a few days of quiet on this front, just a few days to put his nerves back together again and let his head stop aching...

*...Run and run and run, in a suit that keeps you from the gas and most of the shells the elves can throw—except for a few. Except for the joints and the visor, because the elves have been working for twenty years studying how to kill you. And air runs out and filters fail and every access you have to Elfland is a way for the elves to get at you.*

*Like the tunnel openings, like the airvents, like the power plant that keeps the whole base and strung-out tunnel systems functioning.*

*Troopers scatter to defend these points, and you run and run, belatedly questioning why troopers want a special op at a particular point, where the tunnel most nearly approaches the elves on their plain.*

*Why me, why here—because, fool, HQ wants close-up reconnaissance, which was what they wanted the last time they sent you out in the dark beyond the safe points—twice, now, and they expect you to go out and do it again because the elves missed you last time.*

*Damn them all. (With the thought that they will use you till the bone breaks and the flesh refuses. And then a two-week rest and out to the lines again.*

*They give you a medical as far as the field hospital; and there*

*they give you vitamins, two shots of antibiotic, a bottle of pills and send you out again. "We got worse," the meds say then.*

*There always are worse. Till you're dead.*

DeFranco looks at the elf across the table in the small room and remembers how it was, the smell of the tunnels, the taste of fear.

## II

*So what're the gals like on this world?*

*Why, you nevernevermind, my friend.*

*Well, what're the guys like on this world?*

*Well, you neverneverask, my friend.*

"They sent me out there," deFranco says to the elf, and the elf—a human might have nodded but elves have no such habit—stares gravely as they sit opposite each other, hands on the table.

"You always say 'they,'" says the elf. "We say 'we' decided. But you do things differently."

"Maybe it *is* we," deFranco says. "Maybe it is, at the bottom of things. We. Sometimes it doesn't look that way."

"I think even now you don't understand why we do what we do. I don't really understand why you came here or why you listen to me, or why you stay now— But we won't understand. I don't think we two will. Others maybe. You want what I want. That's what I trust most."

"You believe it'll work?"

"For us, yes. For elves. Absolutely. Even if it's a lie it will work."

"But if it's not a lie—"

"Can you make it true? *You* don't believe. That—I have to find words for this—but I don't understand that either. How you feel. What you do." The elf reaches across the table and slim white hands with overtint like oil on water catch at brown, matte-skinned fingers whose nails (the elf has none) are broken and rough. "It was no choice to you. It never was even a choice to you, to destroy us to the heart and the center. Perhaps it wasn't to stay. I have a deep feeling toward you, deFranco. I had this feeling toward you from when I saw you first; I knew that you were what I had come to find, but whether you were the helping or the damning force I

didn't know then, I only knew that what you did when you saw us was what humans had always done to us. And I believed you would show me why."

DeFranco moved and sat still a while by turns, in the dark, in the stink and the strictures of his rig; while somewhere two ridges away there were two nervous regs encamped in the entry to the tunnel, sweltering in their own hardsuits and not running their own pumps and fans any more than he was running his—because elvish hearing was legendary, the rigs made noise, and it was hard enough to move in one of the bastards without making a racket: someone in HQ suspected elves could pick up the running noises. Or had other senses.

But without those fans and pumps the below-the-neck part of the suit had no cooling and got warm even in the night. And the gloves and the helmets had to stay on constantly when anyone was outside, it was the rule: no elf ever got a look at a live human, except at places like the Eighth's Gamma Company. Perhaps not there either. Elves were generally thorough.

DeFranco had the kneejoints on lock at the moment, which let him have a solid prop to lean his weary knees and backside against. He leaned there easing the shivers and the quakes out of his lately-wakened and sleep-deprived limbs before he rattled in his armor and alerted a whole hillside full of elves. It was not a well-shielded position he had taken: it had little cover except the hill itself, and these hills had few enough trees that the fires and the shells had spared. But green did struggle up amid the soot and bushes grew on the line down on valley level that had been an elvish road three years ago. His nightsight scanned the brush in shadow-images.

Something touched the sensors as he rested there on watch, a curious whisper of a sound, and an amber readout ghosted up into his visor, dots rippling off in sequence in the direction the pickup came from. It was not the wind: the internal computer zeroed out the white sound of wind and suit-noise. It was anomalies it brought through and amplified; and what it amplified now had the curious regular pulse of engine-sound.

DeFranco ordered the lock off his limbs, slid lower on the hill, and moved on toward one with better vantage of the road as it came up from the west—carefully, pausing at irregular intervals as he worked round to get into position to spot that direction. He still

had his locator output off. So did everyone else back at the base. HQ had no idea now what sophistication the elves had gained at eavesdropping and homing in on the locators, and how much they could pick up with locators of their own. It was only sure that while some elvish armaments had gotten more primitive and patchwork, their computer tech had nothing at all wrong with it.

DeFranco settled again on a new hillside and listened, wishing he could scratch a dozen maddening itches, and wishing he were safe somewhere else: the whole thing had a disaster-feeling about it from the start, the elves doing something they had never done. He could only think about dead Gamma Company and what might have happened to them before the elves got to them and gassed the bunker and fought their way into it past the few that had almost gotten into their rigs in time—

Had the special op been out there watching too? Had the one at bunker 35 made a wrong choice and had it all started this way the night they died?

The engine-sound was definite. DeFranco edged higher up the new hill and got down flat, belly down on the ridge. He thumbed the magnification plate into the visor and got the handheld camera's snake-head optics over the ridge on the theory it was a smaller target and a preferable target than himself, with far better nightsight.

The filmy nightsight image came back of the road, while the sound persisted. It was distant, his ears and the readout advised him, distant yet, racing the first red edge of a murky dawn that showed far off across the plain and threatened daylight out here.

He still sent no transmission. The orders were stringent. The base either had to remain ignorant that there was a vehicle coming up the road or he had to go back personally to report it; and lose track of whatever-it-was out here just when it was getting near enough to do damage. Damn the lack of specials to team with out here in the hot spots, and damn the lead-footed regs; he had to go it alone, decide things alone, hoping Jake and Cat did the right thing in their spot and hoping the other regs stayed put. And he hated it.

He edged off this hill, keeping it between him and the ruined, shell-pocked road, and began to move to still a third point of vantage, stalking as silently as any man in armor could manage.

And fervently he hoped that the engine-sound was not a decoy

and that nothing was getting behind him. The elves were deceptive as well and they were canny enemies with extraordinary hearing. He hoped now that the engine-sound had deafened them—but no elf was really fool enough to be coming up the road like this, it was a decoy, it had to be, there was nothing else it could be; and he was going to fall into it nose-down if he was not careful.

He settled belly-down on the next slope and got the camera-snake over the top, froze the suit-joints and lay inert in that overheated ceramic shell, breathing hard through a throat abused by oxygen and whiskey, blinking against a hangover headache to end all headaches that the close focus of the visor readout only made worse. His nose itched. A place on his scalp itched behind his ear. He stopped cataloging the places he itched because it was driving him crazy. Instead he blinked and rolled his eyes, calling up readout on the passive systems, and concentrated on that.

Blink. Blink-blink. Numbers jumped. The computer had come up with a range as it got passive echo off some hill and checked it against the local topology programmed into its memory. Damn! Close. The computer handed him the velocity. 40 KPH with the 4 and the 0 wobbling back and forth into the 30's. DeFranco held his breath and checked his hand launcher, loading a set of armor-piercing rounds in, quiet, quiet as a man could move. The clamp went down as softly as long practice could lower it.

And at last a ridiculous open vehicle came jouncing and whining its way around potholes and shell craters and generally making a noisy and erratic progress. It was in a considerable hurry despite the potholes, and there were elves in it, four of them, all pale in their robes and one of them with the cold glitter of metal about his/her? Person, the one to the right of the driver. The car bounced and wove and zigged and zagged up the hilly road with no slackening of speed, inviting a shot for all it was worth.

Decoy?

Suicide?

They were crazy as elves could be, and that was completely. They were headed straight for the hidden bunker, and it was possible they had gas or a bomb in that car or that they just planned to get themselves shot in a straightforward way, whatever they had in mind, but they were going right where they could do the most damage.

DeFranco unlocked his ceramic limbs, which sagged under his weight until he was down on his belly; and he slowly brought his rifle up, and inched his way up on his belly so it was his vulnerable head over the ridge this time. He shook and he shivered and he reckoned there might be a crater where he was in fair short order if they had a launcher in that car and he gave them time to get it set his way.

But pushing and probing at elves was part of his job. And these were decidedly anomalous. He put a shot in front of the car and half expected elvish suicides on the spot.

The car swerved and jolted into a pothole as the shell hit. It careened to a stop; and he held himself where he was, his heart pounding away and himself not sure why he had put the shot in front and not into the middle of them like a sensible man in spite of HQ's orders.

But the elves recovered from their careening and the car was stopped; and instead of blowing themselves up immediately or going for a launcher of their own, one of the elves bailed out over the side while the helmet-sensor picked up the attempted motor-start. Cough-whine. The car lurched. The elvish driver made a wild turn, but the one who had gotten out just stood there—*stood*, staring up, and lifted his hands together.

DeFranco lay on his hill; and the elves who had gotten the car started swerved out of the pothole it had stuck itself in and lurched off in escape, not suicide—while the one elf in the robe with the metal border just stood there, the first live prisoner anyone had ever taken, staring up at him, self-offered.

“You damn well stand still,” he yelled down at the elf on outside com, and thought of the gas and the chemicals and thought that if elves had come up with a disease that also got to humans here was a way of delivering it that was cussed enough and crazy enough for them.

“Human,” a shrill voice called up to him. “Human!”

DeFranco was for the moment paralyzed. An elf knew what to call them: an elf *talked*. An elf stood there staring up at his hill in the beginnings of dawn and all of a sudden nothing was going the way it ever had between elves and humankind.

At least, if it had happened before, no human had ever lived to



tell about it.

“Human!” the same voice called—*uu-mann*, as best high elvish voices could manage it. The elf was not suiciding. The elf showed no sign of wanting to do that; and deFranco lay and shivered in his armor and felt a damnable urge to wipe his nose which he could not reach or to get up and run for his life, which was a fool’s act. Worse, his bladder suddenly told him it was full. Urgently. Taking his mind down to a ridiculous small matter in the midst of trying to get home alive.

The dawn was coming up the way it did across the plain, light spreading like a flood, so fast in the bizarre angle of the land here that it ran like water on the surface of the plain.

And the elf stood there while the light of dawn grew more, showing the elf more clearly than deFranco had ever seen one of the enemy alive, beautiful the way elves were, not in a human way, looking, in its robes, like some cross between man and something spindly and human-skinned and insectoid. The up-tilted ears never stopped moving, but the average of their direction was toward him. Nervous-like.

*What does he want, why does he stand there, why did they throw him out? A target? A distraction?*

Elvish cussedness. DeFranco waited, and waited, and the sun came up; while somewhere in the tunnels there would be troopers wondering and standing by their weapons, ready to go on self-seal against gas or whatever these lunatics had brought.

There was light enough now to make out the red of the robes that fluttered in the breeze. And light enough to see the elf’s hands, which looked—which looked, crazily enough, to be tied together.

The dawn came on. Water became an obsessive thought. DeFranco was thirsty from the whiskey and agonized between the desire for a drink from the tube near his mouth or the fear one more drop of water in his system would make it impossible to ignore his bladder; and he thought about it and thought about it, because it was a long wait and a long walk back, and relieving himself outside the suit was a bitch on the one hand and on the inside was damnable discomfort. But it did get worse. And while life and death tottered back and forth and his fingers clutched the launcher and he faced an elf who was surely up to something, that small decision was all he could think of clearly—it was easier to

think of than what wanted thinking out, like what to do and whether to shoot the elf outright, counter to every instruction and every order HQ had given, because he wanted to get out of this place.

But he did not—and finally he solved both problems: took his drink, laid the gun down on the ridge like it was still in his hands, performed the necessary maneuver to relieve himself outside the suit as he stayed as flat as he could. Then he put himself back together, collected his gun and lurched up to his feet with small whines of the assisting joint-locks.

The elf never moved in all of this, and deFranco motioned with the gun. “Get up here...” —not expecting the elf to understand either the motion or the shout. But the elf came, slowly, as if the hill was all his (it had been once) and he owned it. The elf stopped still on the slant, at a speaking distance, no more, and stood there with his hands tied (*his*, deFranco decided by the height of him). The elf’s white skin all but glowed in the early dawn, the bare skin of the face and arms against the dark, metal-edged red of his robe; and the large eyes were set on him and the ears twitched and quivered with small pulses.

“I am your prisoner,” the elf said, plain as any human; and deFranco stood there with his heart hammering away at his ribs.

“Why?” deFranco asked. He was mad, he was quite mad and somewhere he had fallen asleep on the hillside, or elvish gas had gotten to him through the open vents—he was a fool to have gone on open circulation; and he was dying back there somewhere and not talking at all.

The elf lifted his bound hands. “I came here to find you.”

It was not a perfect accent. It was what an elvish mouth could come up with. It had music in it. And deFranco stood and stared and finally motioned with the gun up the hill. “Move,” he said, “walk.”

Without demur his prisoner began to do that, in the direction he had indicated.

“What did I do that humans always do?” deFranco asks the elf, and the grave sea-colored eyes flicker with changes. Amusement, perhaps. Or distress.

“You fired at us,” says the elf in his soft, songlike voice. “And

then you stopped and didn't kill me."

"It was a warning."

"To stop. So simple."

"God, what else do you think?"

The elf's eyes flicker again. There is gold in their depths, and gray. And his ears flick nervously. "DeFranco, deFranco, you still don't know why we fight. And I don't truly know what you meant. Are you telling me the truth?"

"We never wanted to fight. It was a warning. Even animals, for God's sake—understand a warning shot."

The elf blinks. (And someone in another room stirs in a chair and curses his own blindness. Aggression and the birds. Different tropisms. All the way through the ecostructure.)

The elf spreads his hands. "I don't know what you mean. I never know. What can we know? That you were there for the same reason I was? Were you?"

"I don't know. I don't even know that. *We never wanted a war*. Do you understand that, at least?"

"You wanted us to stop. So we told you the same. We sent our ships to hold those places which were ours. And you kept coming to them."

"They were ours."

"Now they are." The elf's face is grave and still. "DeFranco, a mistake was made. A ship of ours fired on yours and this was a mistake. Perhaps it was me who fired. What's in this elf's mind? Fear when a ship will not go away? What's in this human's mind? Fear when we don't go away? It was a stupid thing. It was a mistake. It was our region. Our—"

"Territory. You think you owned the place."

"We were in it. We were there and this ship came. Say that I wasn't there and I heard how it happened. This was a frightened elf who made a stupid mistake. This elf was surprised by this ship and he didn't want to run and give up this jump-point. It was ours. You were in it. We wanted you to go. And you stayed."

"So you blew up an unarmed ship."

"Yes. I did it. I destroyed all the others. You destroyed ours. Our

space station. You killed thousands of us. I killed thousands of you.”

“Not me and not you, elf. That’s twenty years, dammit, and you weren’t there and I wasn’t there—”

“I did it. I say I did. And you killed thousands of us.”

“We weren’t coming to make a war. We were coming to straighten it out. Do you understand that?”

“We weren’t yet willing. Now things are different.”

“For God’s sake—why did you let so many die?”

“You never gave us defeat enough. You were cruel, deFranco. Not to let us know we couldn’t win—that was very cruel. It was very subtle. Even now I’m afraid of your cruelty.”

“Don’t you understand yet?”

“What do I understand? That you’ve died in thousands. That you make long war. I thought you would kill me on the hill, on the road, and when you called me I had both hope and fear. Hope that you would take me to higher authority. Fear—well, I am bone and nerve, deFranco. And I never knew whether you would be cruel.”

The elf walked and walked. He might have been on holiday, his hands tied in front of him, his red robes a-glitter with their gold borders in the dawn. He never tired. *He* carried no weight of armor; and deFranco went on self-seal and spoke through the mike when he had to give the elf directions.

Germ warfare?

Maybe the elf had a bomb in his gut?

But it began to settle into deFranco that he had done it, he had done it, after years of trying he had himself a live and willing prisoner, and his lower gut was queasy with outright panic and his knees felt like mush. *What’s he up to, what’s he doing, why’s he walk like that— Damn! They’ll shoot him on sight, somebody could see him first and shoot him and I can’t break silence—maybe that’s what I’m supposed to do, maybe that’s how they overran Gamma Company—*

But a prisoner, a prisoner speaking human language—

“Where’d you learn,” he asked the elf, “where’d you learn to talk human?”

The elf never turned, never stopped walking. “A prisoner.”

“Who? Still alive?”

“No.”

No. Slender and graceful as a reed and burning as a fire and white as beach sand. No. Placidly. Rage rose in deFranco, a blinding urge to put his rifle butt in that straight spine, to muddy and bloody the bastard and make him as dirty and as hurting as himself; but the professional rose up in him too, and the burned hillsides went on and on as they climbed and they walked, the elf just in front of him.

Until they were close to the tunnels and in imminent danger of a human misunderstanding.

He turned his ID and locator on; but they would pick up the elf on his sensors too, and that was no good. “It’s deFranco,” he said over the com. “I got a prisoner. Get HQ and get me a transport.”

Silence from the other end. He cut off the output, figuring they had it by now. “Stop,” he said to the elf on outside audio. And he stood and waited until two suited troopers showed up, walking carefully down the hillside from a direction that did not lead to any tunnel opening.

“Damn,” came Cat’s female voice over his pickup. “Da-amn.” In a tone of wonder. And deFranco at first thought it was admiration of him and what he had done, and then he knew with some disgust it was wonder at the elf, it was a human woman looking at the prettiest, cleanest thing she had seen in three long years, icy, fastidious Cat, who was picky what she slept with.

And maybe her partner Jake picked it up, because: “Huh,” he said in quite a different tone, but quiet, quiet, the way the elf looked at their faceless faces, as if he still owned the whole world and meant to take it back.

“It’s Franc,” Jake said then into the com, directed at the base. “And he’s right, he’s got a live one. Damn, you should see this bastard.”

### III

*So where’s the generals in this war?*

*Why, they’re neverneverhere, my friend.*

*Well, what’ll we do until they come?*

*Well, you neverneverask, my friend.*

“I was afraid too,” deFranco says. “I thought you might have a bomb or something. We were afraid you’d suicide if anyone touched you. That was why we kept you sitting all that time outside.”

“Ah,” says the elf with a delicate move of his hands. “Ah. I thought it was to make me angry. Like all the rest you did. But you sat with me. And this was hopeful. I was thirsty; I hoped for a drink. That was mostly what I thought about.”

“We think too much—elves and humans. We both think too much. *I’d have given you a drink of water, for God’s sake.* I guess no one even thought.”

“I wouldn’t have taken it.”

“Dammit, why?”

“Unless you drank with me. Unless you shared what you had. Do you see?”

“Fear of poison?”

“No.”

“You mean just my giving it.”

“Sharing it. Yes.”

“Is pride so much?”

Again the elf touches deFranco’s hand as it rests on the table, a nervous, delicate gesture. The elf’s ears twitch and collapse and lift again, trembling. “We always go off course here. I still fail to understand why you fight.”

“Dammit, I don’t understand why you can’t understand why a man’d give you a drink of water. Not to hurt you. Not to prove anything. For the love of God, *mercy*, you ever learn that word? Being decent, so’s everything decent doesn’t go to hell and we don’t act like damn animals!”

The elf stares long and soberly. His small mouth has few expressions. It forms its words carefully. “Is this why you pushed us so long? To show us your control?”

“No, dammit, to hang onto it! So we can find a place to stop this bloody war. It’s all we ever wanted.”

“Then why did you start?”

“Not to have you push *us!*”

A blink of sea-colored eyes. “Now, now, we’re understanding. We’re like each other.”

“But you won’t stop, dammit, you wouldn’t stop, you haven’t stopped yet! People are still dying out there on the front, throwing themselves away without a thing to win. Nothing. *That’s* not like us.”

“In starting war we’re alike. But not in ending it. You take years. Quickly we show what we can do. Then both sides know. So we make peace. You showed us long cruelty. And we wouldn’t give ourselves up to you. What could we expect?”

“Is it that easy?” DeFranco begins to shiver, clenches his hands together on the tabletop and leans there, arms folded. “You’re crazy, elf.”

“Angan. My personal name is Angan.”

“A hundred damn scientists out there trying to figure out how you work and it’s that damn simple?”

“I don’t think so. I think we maybe went off course again. But we came close. We at least see there was a mistake. That’s the important thing. That’s why I came.”

DeFranco looked desperately at his watch, at the minutes ticking away. He covers the face of it with his hand and looks up. His brown eyes show anguish. “The colonel said I’d have three hours. It’s going. It’s going too fast.”

“Yes. And we still haven’t found out why. I don’t think we ever will. Only you share with me now, deFranco. Here. In our little time.”

The elf sat, just sat quietly with his hands still tied, on the open hillside, because the acting CO had sent word no elf was setting foot inside the bunker system and no one was laying hands on him to search him.

But the troopers came out one by one in the long afternoon and had their look at him—one after another of them took the trouble to put on the faceless, uncomfortable armor just to come out and stand and stare at what they had been fighting for all these years.

“Damn,” was what most of them said, in private, on the com, their suits to his suit; “damn,” or variants on that theme.

“We got that transport coming in,” the reg lieutenant said when she came out and brought him his kit. Then, unlike herself: “Good job, Franc.”

“Thanks,” deFranco said, claiming nothing. And he sat calmly, beside his prisoner, on the barren, shell-pocked hill by a dead charcoal tree.

Don’t shake him, word had come from the CO. Keep him real happy—don’t change the situation and don’t threaten him and don’t touch him.

For fear of spontaneous suicide.

So no one came to lay official claim to the elf either, not even the captain came. But the word had gone out to Base and to HQ and up, deFranco did not doubt, to orbiting ships, because it was the best news a frontline post had had to report since the war started. Maybe it was dreams of leaving Elfland that brought the regs out here, on pilgrimage to see this wonder. And the lieutenant went away when she had stared at him so long.

Hope. DeFranco turned that over and over in his mind and probed at it like a tongue into a sore tooth. Promotion out of the field. No more mud. No more runs like yesterday. No more, no more, no more, the man who broke the Elfland war and cracked the elves and brought in the key—

—to let it all end. For good. *Winning*. Maybe, maybe—

He looked at the elf who sat there with his back straight and his eyes wandering to this and that, to the movement of wind in a forlorn last bit of grass, the drift of a cloud in Elfland’s blue sky, the horizons and the dead trees.

“You got a name?” He was careful asking anything. But the elf had talked before.

The elf looked at him. “Saitas,” he said.

“Saitas. Mine’s deFranco.”

The elf blinked. There was no fear in his face. They might have been sitting in the bunker passing the time of day together.

“Why’d they send you?” DeFranco grew bolder.

“I asked to come.”

“Why?”



“To stop the war.”

Inside his armor deFranco shivered. He blinked and he took a drink from the tube inside the helmet and he tried to think about something else, but the elf sat there staring blandly at him, with his hands tied, resting placidly in his lap. “How?” deFranco asked, “how will you stop the war?”

But the elf said nothing and deFranco knew he had gone further with that question than HQ was going to like, not wanting their subject told anything about human wants and intentions before they had a chance to study the matter and study the elf and hold their conferences.

“They came,” says deFranco in that small room, “to know what you looked like.”

“You never let us see your faces,” says the elf.

“You never let us see yours.”

“You knew everything. Far more than we. You knew our world. We had no idea of yours.”

“Pride again.”

“Don’t you know how hard it was to let you lay hands on me? That was the worst thing. You did it again. Like the gunfire. You touch with violence and then expect quiet. But I let this happen. It was what I came to do. And when you spoke to the others for me, that gave me hope.”

In time the transport came skimming in low over the hills, and deFranco got to his feet to wave it in. The elf stood up too, graceful and still placid. And waited while the transport sat down and the blades stopped beating.

“Get in,” deFranco said then, picking up his scant baggage, putting the gun on safety.

The elf quietly bowed his head and followed instructions, going where he was told. DeFranco never laid a hand on him, until inside, when they had climbed into the dark belly of the transport and guards were waiting there— “Keep your damn guns down,” deFranco said on outside com, because they were light-armed and helmetless. “What are you going to do if he moves, shoot him? Let me handle him. He speaks real good.” And to the elf: “Sit down there. I’m going to put a strap across. Just so you don’t fall.”

The elf sat without objection, and deFranco got a cargo strap and hooked it to the rail on one side and the other, so there was no way the elf was going to stir or use his hands.

And he sat down himself as the guards took their places and the transport lifted off and carried them away from the elvish city and the frontline base of the hundreds of such bases in the world. It began to fly high and fast when it got to safe airspace, behind the defense humans had made about themselves.

There was never fear in the elf. Only placidity. His eyes traveled over the inside of the transport, the dark utilitarian hold, the few benches, the cargo nets, the two guards.

Learning, deFranco thought, still learning everything there was to learn about his enemies.

“Then I was truly afraid,” says the elf. “I was most afraid that they would want to talk to me and learn from me. And I would have to die then to no good. For nothing.”

“How do you do that?”

“What?”

“Die. Just by wanting to.”

“Wanting is the way. I could stop my heart now. Many things stop the heart. When you stop trying to live, when you stop going ahead— it’s very easy.”

“You mean if you quit trying to live you die. That’s crazy.”

The elf spreads delicate fingers. “Children can’t. Children’s hearts can’t be stopped that way. You have the hearts of children. Without control. But the older you are the easier and easier it is. Until someday it’s easier to stop than to go on. When I learned your language, I learned from a man named Tomas. He couldn’t die. He and I talked—oh, every day. And one day we brought him a woman we took. She called him a damn traitor. That was what she said. Damn traitor. Then Tomas wanted to die and he couldn’t. He told me so. It was the only thing he ever asked of me. Like the water, you see. Because I felt sorry for him I gave him the cup. And to her. Because I had no use for her. But Tomas hated me. He hated me every day. He talked to me because I was all he had to talk to, he would say. Nothing stopped his heart. Until the woman called him traitor. And then his heart stopped, though it went on beating. I only helped. He thanked me. And damned me to hell. And wished

me health with his drink.

“Dammit, elf.”

“I tried to ask him what hell was. I think it means being still and trapped. So we fight.”

“He’s very good with words,” someone elsewhere says, leaning over near the monitor. “He’s trying to communicate something, but the words aren’t equivalent. He’s playing on what he does have.”)

“For God’s sake,” says deFranco then, “is that why they fling themselves on the barriers? Is that why they go on dying? Like birds at cage bars?”

The elf flinches. Perhaps it is the image. Perhaps it is a thought. “Fear stops the heart, when fear has nowhere to go. We still have one impulse left. There is still our anger. Everything else has gone. At the last even our children will fight you. So I fight for my children by coming here. I don’t want to talk about Tomas any more. The birds have him. *You* are what I was looking for.”

“Why?” DeFranco’s voice shakes. “Saitas—Angan—I’m scared as hell.”

“So am I. Think of all the soldiers. Think of things important to you. I think about my home.”

“I think I never had one. —This is crazy. It won’t work.”

“Don’t.” The elf reaches and holds a brown wrist. “Don’t leave me now, deFranco.”

“There’s still fifteen minutes. Quarter of an hour.”

“That’s a very long time... here. Shall we shorten it?”

“No,” deFranco says and draws a deep breath. “Let’s use it.” At the base where the on-world authorities and the scientists did their time, there were real buildings, real ground-site buildings, which humans had made. When the transport touched down on a rooftop landing pad, guards took the elf one way and deFranco another. It was debriefing: that he expected. They let him get a shower first with hot water out of real plumbing, in a prefabbed bathroom. And he got into his proper uniform for the first time in half a year, shaved and proper in his blue beret and his brown uniform, fresh and clean and thinking all the while that if a special could get his field promotion it was scented towels every day and soft beds to sleep on and a life expectancy in the decades. He was anxious,

because there were ways of snatching credit for a thing and he wanted the credit for this one, wanted it because a body could get killed out there on hillsides where he had been for three years and no desk-sitting officer was going to fail to mention him in the report.

“Sit down,” the specials major said, and took him through it all; and that afternoon they let him tell it to a reg colonel and lieutenant general; and again that afternoon they had him tell it to a tableful of scientists and answer questions and questions and questions until he was hoarse and they forgot to feed him lunch. But he answered on and on until his voice cracked and the science staff took pity on him.

He slept then, in clean sheets in a clean bed and lost touch with the war so that he waked terrified and lost in the middle of the night in the dark and had to get his heart calmed down before he realized he was not crazy and that he really had gotten into a place like this and he really had done what he remembered.

He tucked down babylike into a knot and thought good thoughts all the way back to sleep until a buzzer waked him and told him it was day in this windowless place, and he had an hour to dress again—for more questions, he supposed; and he thought only a little about his elf, *his* elf, who was handed on to the scientists and the generals and the AlSec people, and stopped being his personal business.

“Then,” says the elf, “I knew you were the only one I met I could understand. Then I sent for you.”

“I still don’t know why.”

“I said it then. We’re both soldiers.”

“You’re more than that.”

“Say that I made one of the great mistakes.”

“You mean at the beginning? I don’t believe it.”

“It could have been. Say that I commanded the attacking ship. Say that I struck your people on the world. Say that you destroyed our station and our cities. We are the makers of mistakes. Say this of ourselves.”

“I,” the elf said, his image on the screen much the same as he had looked on the hillside, straight-spined, red-robed—only the

ropes elves had put on him had left purpling marks on his wrists, on the opalescing white of his skin, "I'm clear enough, aren't I?" The trooper accent was strange coming from a delicate elvish mouth. The elf's lips were less mobile. His voice had modulations, like singing, and occasionally failed to keep its tones flat.

"It's very good," the scientist said, the man in the white coveralls, who sat at a small desk opposite the elf in a sterile white room and had his hands laced before him. The camera took both of them in, elf and swarthy Science Bureau xenologist. "I understand you learned from prisoners."

The elf seemed to gaze into infinity. "We don't want to fight anymore."

"Neither do we. Is this why you came?"

A moment the elf studied the scientist, and said nothing at all.

"What's your people's name?" the scientist asked.

"You call us elves."

"But we want to know what you call yourselves. What you call this world."

"Why would you want to know that?"

"To respect you. Do you know that word, respect?"

"I don't understand it."

"Because what you call this world and what you call yourselves *is* the name, the right name, and we want to call you right. Does that make sense?"

"It makes sense. But what you call us is right too, isn't it?"

"Elves is a made-up word, from our homeworld. A myth. Do you know *myth*? A story. A thing not true."

"Now it's true, isn't it?"

"Do you call your world Earth? Most people do."

"What you call it is its name."

"We call it Elfland."

"That's fine. It doesn't matter."

"Why doesn't it matter?"

"I've said that."

“You learned our language very well. But we don’t know anything of yours.”

“Yes.”

“Well, we’d like to learn. We’d like to be able to talk to you your way. It seems to us this is only polite. Do you know *polite*?”

“No.”

A prolonged silence. The scientist’s face remained bland as the elf’s. “You say you don’t want to fight anymore. Can you tell us how to stop the war?”

“Yes. But first I want to know what your peace is like. What, for instance, will you do about the damage you’ve caused us?”

“You mean reparations.”

“What’s that mean?”

“Payment.”

“What do you mean by it?”

The scientist drew a deep breath. “Tell me. Why did your people give you to one of our soldiers? Why didn’t they just call on the radio and say they wanted to talk?”

“This is what you’d do.”

“It’s easier, isn’t it? And safer.”

The elf blinked. No more than that.

“There was a ship a long time ago,” the scientist said after a moment. “It was a human ship minding its own business in a human lane, and elves came and destroyed it and killed everyone on it. Why?”

“What do you want for this ship?”

“So you do understand about payment. Payment’s giving something for something.”

“I understand.” The elvish face was guileless, masklike, the long eyes like the eyes of a pearl-skinned Buddha. A saint. “What will you ask? And how will peace with you be? What do you call peace?”

“You mean you don’t think our word for it is like your word for it?”

“That’s right.”

“Well, that’s an important thing to understand, isn’t it? Before we make agreements. Peace means no fighting.”

“That’s not enough.”

“Well, it means being safe from your enemies.”

“That’s not enough.”

“What is enough?”

The pale face contemplated the floor, something elsewhere.

“What *is* enough, Saitas?”

The elf only stared at the floor, far, far away from the questioner. “I need to talk to deFranco.”

“Who?”

“DeFranco.” The elf looked up. “DeFranco brought me here. He’s a soldier; he’ll understand me better than you. Is he still here?”

The colonel reached and cut the tape off. She was SurTac. Agnes Finn was the name on her desk. She could cut your throat a dozen ways, and do sabotage and mayhem from the refinements of computer theft to the gross tactics of explosives; she would speak a dozen languages, know every culture she had ever dealt with from the inside out, integrating the Science Bureau and the military. And more, she was a SurTac *colonel*, which sent the wind up deFranco’s back. It was not a branch of the service that had many high officers; you had to survive more than ten field missions to get your promotion beyond the ubiquitous and courtesy-titled lieutenantancy. And this one had. This was Officer with a capital O, and whatever the politics in HQ were, this was a rock around which a lot of other bodies orbited: *this* probably took her orders from the joint command, which was months and months away in its closest manifestation. And that meant next to no orders and wide discretion, which was what SurTacs did. Wild card. Joker in the deck. There were the regs; there was special ops, loosely attached; there were the spacers, Union and Alliance, and Union regs were part of that; beyond and above, there was AlSec and Union intelligence; and that was this large-boned, red-haired woman who probably had a scant handful of humans and no knowing what else in her direct command, a handful of SurTacs loose in Elfland, and all of them independent operators and as much trouble to the elves as a reg base could be.

DeFranco knew. He had tried that route once. He knew more than most what kind it took to survive that training, let alone the requisite ten missions to get promoted out of the field, and he knew the wit behind the weathered face and knew it ate special ops lieutenants for appetizers.

“How did you make such an impression on him, Lieutenant?”

“I didn’t try to,” deFranco said carefully. “Ma’am, I just tried to keep him calm and get in with him alive the way they said. But I was the only one who dealt with him out there, we thought that was safest; maybe he thinks I’m more than I am.”

“I compliment you on the job.” There was a certain irony in that, he was sure. No SurTac had pulled off what he had, and he felt the slight tension there.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Yes, *ma’am*. There’s always the chance, you understand, that you’ve brought us an absolute lunatic. Or the elves are going an unusual route to lead us into a trap. Or this is an elf who’s not too pleased about being tied up and dumped on us, and he wants to get even. Those things occur to me.”

“Yes, ma’am.” DeFranco thought all those things, face to face with the colonel and trying to be easy as the colonel had told him to be. But the colonel’s thin face was sealed and forbidding as the elf’s.

“You know what they’re doing out there right now? Massive attacks. Hitting that front near 45 with everything they’ve got. The Eighth’s pinned. We’re throwing air in. and they’ve got somewhere over two thousand casualties out there and air-strikes don’t stop all of them. Delta took a head-on assault and turned it. There were casualties. Trooper named Herse. Your unit.”

*Dibs*. O God. “Dead?”

“Dead.” The colonel’s eyes were bleak and expressionless. “Word came in. I know it’s more than a stat to you. But that’s what’s going on. We’ve got two signals coming from the elves. And we don’t know which one’s valid. We have ourselves an alien who claims credentials—and comes with considerable effort from the same site as the attack.”

*Dibs. Dead*. There seemed a chill in the air, in this safe, remote place far from the real world, the mud, the bunkers. Dibs had stopped living yesterday. This morning. Sometime. Dibs had gone



and the world never noticed.

“Other things occur to the science people,” the colonel said. “One which galls the hell out of them, deFranco, is what the alien just said. *DeFranco can understand me better*. Are you with me, Lieutenant?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“So the Bureau went to the secretary, the secretary went to the major general on the com; all this at fifteen hundred yesterday; and *they* hauled me in on it at two this morning. You know how many noses you’ve got out of joint, Lieutenant? And what the level of concern is about that mess out there on the front?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“I’m sure you hoped for a commendation and maybe better, wouldn’t that be it? Wouldn’t blame you. Well, I got my hands into this, and I’ve opted you under my orders, Lieutenant, because I can do that and high command’s just real worried the Bureau’s going to poke and prod and that elf’s going to leave us on the sudden for elvish heaven. So let’s just keep him moderately happy. He wants to talk to you. What the Bureau wants to tell you, but I told them *I’d* make it clear, because they’ll talk tech at you and I want to be sure you’ve got it—it’s just real simple: you’re dealing with an alien; and you’ll have noticed what he says doesn’t always make sense.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Don’t yes ma’am me, Lieutenant, dammit; just talk to me and look me in the eye. We’re talking about communication here.”

“Yes—” He stopped short of the ma’am.

“You’ve got a brain, deFranco, it’s all in your record. You almost went Special Services yourself, that was your real ambition, wasn’t it? But you had this damn psychotic fear of taking ultimate responsibility. And a wholesome fear of ending up with a commendation, posthumous. Didn’t you? It washed you out, so you went special ops where you could take orders from someone else and still play bloody hero and prove something to yourself—am I right? I ought to be; I’ve got your psych record over there. Now I’ve insulted you and you’re sitting there turning red. But I want to know what I’m dealing with. We’re in a damn bind. We’ve got casualties happening out there. Are you and I going to have trouble?”

“No. I understand.”

“Good. Very good. Do you think you can go into a room with that elf and talk the truth out of him? More to the point, can you make a decision, can you go in there knowing how much is riding on your back?”

“I’m not a—”

“I don’t care what you *are*, deFranco. What I want to know is whether *negotiate* is even in that elf’s vocabulary. I’m assigning you to guard over there. In the process I want you to sit down with him one to one and just talk away. That’s all you’ve got to do. And because of your background maybe you’ll do it with some sense. But maybe if you just talk for John deFranco and try to get that elf to deal, that’s the best thing. You know when a government sends out a negotiator—or anything like—that individual’s not average. That individual’s probably the smartest, canniest, hardest-nosed bastard they’ve got, and he probably cheats at dice. We don’t know what this bastard’s up to or what he thinks like, and when you sit down with him, you’re talking to a mind that knows a lot more about humanity than we know about elves. You’re talking to an elvish expert who’s here playing games with us. Who’s giving us a real good look-over. You understand that? What do you say about it?”

“I’m scared of this.”

“That’s real good. You know we’re not sending in the brightest, most experienced human on two feet. And that’s exactly what that rather canny elf has arranged for us to do. You understand that? He’s playing us like a keyboard this far. And how do you cope with that, Lieutenant deFranco?”

“I just ask him questions and answer as little as I can.”

“Wrong. You let him talk. You be real *careful* what you ask him. What you ask is as dead a giveaway as what you tell him. Everything you do and say is cultural. If he’s good, he’ll drain you like a sponge.” The colonel bit her lips. “Damn, you’re *not* going to be able to handle that, are you?”

“I understand what you’re warning me about, Colonel. I’m not sure I can do it, but I’ll try.”

“Not sure you can do it. *Peace* may hang on this. And several billion lives. Your company, out there on the line. Put it on that level. And you’re scared and you’re showing it, Lieutenant; you’re

too damned open, no wonder they washed you out. Got no hard center to you, no place to go to when I embarrass the hell out of you, and *I'm* on your side. You're probably a damn good special op, brave as hell, I know, you've got commendations in the field. And that shell-shyness of yours probably makes you drive real hard when you're in trouble. Good man. Honest. If the elf wants a human specimen, we could do worse. You just go in there, son, and you talk to him and you be your nice self, and that's all you've got to do."

"We'll be bugged." DeFranco stared at the colonel deliberately, trying to dredge up some self-defense, give the impression he was no complete fool.

"Damn sure you'll be bugged. Guards right outside if you want them. But if you startle that elf I'll fry you."

"That isn't what I meant. I meant—I meant if I could get him to talk there'd be an accurate record."

"Ah. Well. Yes. There will be, absolutely. And yes, I'm a bastard, Lieutenant, same as that elf is, beyond a doubt. And because I'm on your side I want you as prepared as I can get you. But I'm going to give you all the backing you need—you want anything, you just tell that staff and they better jump to do it. I'm giving you *carte blanche* over there in the Science Wing. Their complaints can come to this desk. You just be yourself with him, watch yourself a little, don't get taken and don't set him off."

"Yes, ma'am."

Another slow, consuming stare and a nod.

He was dismissed.

#### IV

*So where's the hole we're digging end?*

*Why, it's neverneverdone, my friend.*

*Well, why's it warm at the other end?*

*Well, hell's neverneverfar, my friend.*

"This colonel," says the elf, "it's her soldiers outside."

"That's the one," says deFranco.

"It's not the highest rank."

“No. It’s not. Not even on this world.” DeFranco’s hands open and close on each other, white-knuckled. His voice stays calm. “But it’s a lot of power. She won’t be alone. There are others she’s acting for. They sent me here. I’ve figured that now.”

“Your dealing confuses me.”

“Politics. It’s all politics. Higher-ups covering their—” DeFranco rechooses his words. “Some things they have to abide by. They have to do. Like if they don’t take a peace offer—that would be trouble back home. Human space is big. But a war—humans want it stopped. I know that. With humans, you can’t quiet a mistake down. We’ve got too many separate interests... We got scientists, and a half dozen different commands—”

“Will they all stop fighting?”

“Yes. My side will. I know they will.” DeFranco clenches his hands tighter as if the chill has gotten to his bones. “If we can give them something, some solution. You have to understand what they’re thinking of. If there’s a trouble anywhere, it can grow. There might be others out there, you ever think of that? What if some other species just—wanders through? It’s happened. And what if our little war disturbs them? We live in a big house, you know that yet? You’re young, you, with your ships, you’re a young power out in space. God help us, we’ve made mistakes, but this time the first one wasn’t ours. We’ve been trying to stop this. All along, we’ve been trying to stop this.”

“You’re what I trust,” says the elf. “Not your colonel. Not your treaty words. Not your peace. You. Words aren’t the belief. What you do—that’s the belief. What you do will show us.”

“I can’t!”

“I can. It’s important enough to me and not to you. *Our little war*. I can’t understand how you think that way.”

“Look at that!” DeFranco waves a desperate hand at the room, the world. Up. “It’s so big! Can’t you see that? And one planet, one ball of rock. It’s a little war. Is it worth it all? Is it worth such damn stubbornness? Is it worth dying in?”

“Yes,” the elf says simply, and the sea-green eyes and the white face have neither anger nor blame for him.

DeFranco saluted and got out and waited until the colonel’s orderly caught him in the hall and gave his escort the necessary

authorizations, because *no one* wandered this base without an escort. (But the elves are two hundred clicks out *there*, deFranco thought; and who're we fighting anyway?) In the halls he saw the black of Union elite and the blue of Alliance spacers and the plain drab of the line troop officers, and the white and pale blue of the two Science Bureaus; while everywhere he felt the tenuous peace—damn, maybe we *need* this war, it's keeping humanity talking to each other, they're all fat and sleek and mud never touched them back here— But there was haste in the hallways. But there were tense looks on faces of people headed purposefully to one place and the other, the look of a place with something on its collective mind, with silent, secret emergencies passing about him— *The attack on the lines*, he thought, and remembered another time that attack had started on one front and spread rapidly to a dozen; and missiles had gone. And towns had died.

And the elvish kids, the babies in each others' arms and the birds fluttering down; and Dibs—Dibs lying in his armor like a broken piece of machinery—when a shot got you, it got the visor and you had no face and never knew it; or it got the joints and you bled to death trapped in the failed shell, you just lay there and bled: he had heard men and women die like that, still in contact on the com, talking to their buddies and going out alone, alone in that damn armor that cut off the sky and the air——

They brought him down tunnels that were poured and cast and hard overnight, *that* kind of construction, which they never got out on the Line. There were bright lights and there were dry floors for the fine officers to walk on; there was, at the end, a new set of doors where guards stood with weapons ready—

—against *us*? DeFranco got that sense of unreality again, blinked as he had to show his tags and IDs to get past even with the colonel's orders directing his escort.

Then they let him through, and further, to another hall with more guards. AlSec MPs. Alliance Security. The intelligence and Special Services. The very air here had a chill about it, with only those uniforms in sight. *They* had the elf. Of course they did. He was diplomatic property and the regs and the generals had nothing to do with it. He was in Finn's territory. Security and the Surface Tactical command, that the reg command only controlled from the top, not inside the structure. Finn had a leash, but she took no

orders from sideways in the structure. Not even from AlSec. Check and balance in a joint command structure too many light-years from home to risk petty dictatorships. He had just crossed a line and might as well have been on another planet.

And evidently a call had come ahead of him, because there were surly Science Bureau types here too, and the one who passed him through hardly glanced at his ID. It was his face the man looked at, long and hard; and it was the Xenbureau interviewer who had been on the tape.

“Good luck,” the man said. And a SurTac major arrived, dour-faced, a black man in the SurTac’s khaki, who did not look like an office-type. *He* took the folder of authorizations and looked at it and at deFranco with a dark-eyed stare and a set of a square, well-muscled jaw. “Colonel’s given you three hours, Lieutenant. Use it.”

“We’re more than one government,” says deFranco to the elf, quietly, desperately. “We’ve fought in the past. We had wars. We made peace and we work together. We may fight again but everyone hopes not and it’s less and less likely. War’s expensive. It’s too damn open out here, that’s what I’m trying to tell you. You start a war and you don’t know what else might be listening.”

The elf leans back in his chair, one arm on the back of it. His face is solemn as ever as he looks at deFranco. “You and I, you-and-I. The world was whole until you found us. How can people do things that don’t make sense? The *whole* thing makes sense, the parts of the thing are crazy. You can’t put part of one thing into another, leaves won’t be feathers, and your mind can’t be our mind. I see our mistakes. I want to take them away. Then elves won’t have theirs and you won’t have yours. But you call it a little war. The lives are only a few. You have so many. You like your mistake. You’ll keep it. You’ll hold it in your arms. And you’ll meet these others with it. But they’ll see it, won’t they, when they look at you?”

“It’s crazy!”

“When we met you in it, we assumed *we*. That was our first great mistake. But it’s yours too.”

DeFranco walked into the room where they kept the elf, a luxurious room, a groundling civ’s kind of room, with a bed and a table and two chairs, and some kind of green and yellow pattern on the bedclothes, which were ground-style, free-hanging. And amid

this riot of life-colors the elf sat cross-legged on the bed, placid, not caring that the door opened or someone came in—until a flicker of recognition seemed to take hold and grow. It was the first humanlike expression, virtually the only expression, the elf had ever used in deFranco's sight. Of course there were cameras recording it, recording everything. The colonel had said so and probably the elf knew it too.

“Saitas. You wanted to see me.”

“DeFranco.” The elf's face settled again to inscrutability.

“Shall I sit down?”

There was no answer. DeFranco waited for an uncertain moment, then settled into one chair at the table and leaned his elbows on the white plastic surface.

“They treating you all right?” deFranco asked, for the cameras, deliberately, for the colonel— (*Damn you, I'm not a fool, I can play your damn game, Colonel, I did what your SurTacs failed at, didn't I? So watch me.*)

“Yes,” the elf said. His hands rested loosely in his red-robed lap. He looked down at them and up again.

“I tried to treat you all right. I thought I did.”

“Yes.”

“Why'd you ask for me?”

“I'm a soldier,” the elf said, and put his legs over the side of the bed and stood up. “I know that you are. I think you understand me more.”

“I don't know about that. But I'll listen.” The thought crossed his mind of being held hostage, of some irrational violent behavior, but he pretended it away and waved a hand at the other chair. “You want to sit down? You want something to drink? They'll get it for you.”

“I'll sit with you.” The elf came and took the other chair, and leaned his elbows on the table. The bruises on his wrists showed plainly under the light. “I thought you might have gone back to the front by now.”

“They give me a little time. I mean, there's—”

(Don't talk to him, the colonel had said. Let him talk.)

“—three hours. A while. You had a reason you wanted to see me. Something you wanted? Or just to talk. I’ll do that too.”

“Yes,” the elf said slowly, in his lilting lisp. And gazed at him with sea-green eyes. “Are you young, deFranco? You make me think of a young man.”

It set him off his balance. “I’m not all that young.”

“I have a son and a daughter. Have you?”

“No.”

“Parents?”

“Why do you want to know?”

“Have you parents?”

“A mother. Long way from here.” He resented the questioning. Letters were all Nadya deFranco got, and not enough of them, and thank God she had closer sons. DeFranco sat staring at the elf who had gotten past his guard in two quick questions and managed to hit a sore spot; and he remembered what Finn had warned him. “You, elf?”

“Living parents. Yes. A lot of relatives?”

Damn, what trooper had they stripped getting that part of human language? Whose soul had they gotten into?

“What are you, Saitas? Why’d they hand you over like that?”

“To make peace. So the Saitas always does.”

“Tied up like that?”

“I came to be your prisoner. You understand that.”

“Well, it worked. I might have shot you; I don’t say I would’ve, but I might, except for that. It was a smart move, I guess it was. But hell, you could have called ahead. You come up on us in the dark—you looked to get your head blown off. Why didn’t you use the radio?”

A blink of sea-green eyes. “Others ask me that. Would you have come then?”

“Well, someone would. Listen, you speak at them in human language and they’d listen and they’d arrange something a lot safer.”

The elf stared, full of his own obscurities.



“Come on, they throw you out of there? They your enemies?”

“Who?”

“The ones who left you out there on the hill.”

“No.”

“Friends, huh? *Friends* let you out there?”

“They agreed with me. I agreed to be there. I was most afraid you’d shoot them. But you let them go.”

“Hell, look, I just follow orders.”

“And orders led you to let them go?”

“No. They say to talk if I ever got the chance. Look, me, personally, I never wanted to kill you guys. I wouldn’t, if I had the choice.”

“But you do.”

“Dammit, you took out our ships. Maybe that wasn’t personal on your side either, but we sure as hell can’t have you doing it as a habit. All you ever damn well had to do was go away and let us alone. You hit a world, elf. Maybe not much of one, but you killed more than a thousand people on that first ship. Thirty thousand at that base, good God, don’t sit there looking at me like that!”

“It was a mistake.”

“Mistake.” DeFranco found his hands shaking. No. Don’t raise the voice. Don’t lose it. (Be your own nice self, boy. Patronizingly. The colonel knew he was far out of his depth. And he knew.) “Aren’t most wars mistakes?”

“Do you think so?”

“If it is, can’t we stop it?” He felt the attention of unseen listeners, diplomats, scientists—himself, special ops, talking to an elvish negotiator and making a mess of it all, losing everything. (Be your own nice self— The colonel was crazy, the elf was, the war and the world were and he lumbered ahead desperately, attempting subtlety, attempting a caricatured simplicity toward a diplomat and knowing the one as transparent as the other.) “You know all you have to do is say quit and there’s ways to stop the shooting right off, ways to close it all down and then start talking about how we settle this. You say that’s what you came to do. You’re in the right place. All you have to do is get your side to stop. They’re killing

each other out there, do you know that? You come in here to talk peace. And they're coming at us all up and down the front. I just got word I lost a friend of mine out there. God knows what by now. It's no damn sense. If you can stop it, then let's stop it."

"I'll tell you what our peace will be." The elf lifted his face placidly, spread his hands. "There is a camera, isn't there? At least a microphone. They do listen."

"Yes. They've got camera and mike. I know they will."

"But your face is what I see. Your face is all human faces to me. They can listen, but I talk to you. Only to you. And this is our peace. The fighting will stop, and we'll build ships again and we'll go into space, and we won't be enemies. The mistake won't exist. That's the peace I want."

"So how do we do that?" (Be your own nice self, boy— DeFranco abandoned himself. Don't see the skin, don't see the face alien-like, just talk, talk like to a human, don't worry about protocols. *Do it, boy.*) "How do we get the fighting stopped?"

"I've said it. They've heard."

"Yes. They have."

"They have two days to make this peace."

DeFranco's palms sweated. He clenched his hands on the chair. "Then what happens?"

"I'll die. The war will go on."

(God, now what do I do, what do I say? How far can I go?) "Listen, you don't understand how long it takes us to make up our minds. We need more than any two days. They're dying out there, your people are killing themselves against our lines, and it's all for nothing. Stop it now. Talk to them. Tell them we're going to talk. Shut it down."

The slitted eyes blinked, remained in their buddha-like abstraction, looking askance into infinity. "DeFranco, there has to be payment."

(Think, deFranco, think. Ask the right things.)

"What payment? Just exactly who are you talking for? All of you? A city? A district?"

"One peace will be enough for you—won't it? You'll go away."

You'll leave and we won't see each other until we've built our ships again. You'll begin to go—as soon as my peace is done.”

“Build the ships, for God's sake. And come after us again?”

“No. The war is a mistake. There won't be another war. This is enough.”

“But would everyone agree?”

“Everyone does agree. I'll tell you my real name. It's Angan. Angan Anassidi. I'm forty-one years old. I have a son named Agaita; a daughter named Siadi; I was born in a town named Daogisshi, but it's burned now. My wife is Llaothai Sohail, and she was born in the city where we live now. I'm my wife's only husband. My son is aged twelve, my daughter is nine. They live in the city with my wife alone now and her parents and mine.” The elvish voice acquired a subtle music on the names that lingered to obscure his other speech. “I've written—I told them I would write everything for them. I write in your language.”

“Told who?”

“The humans who asked me. I wrote it all.”

DeFranco stared at the elf, at a face immaculate and distant as a statue. “I don't think I follow you. I don't understand. We're talking about the front. We're talking about maybe that wife and those kids being in danger, aren't we? About maybe my friends getting killed out there. About shells falling and people getting blown up. Can we do anything about it?”

“I'm here to make the peace. Saitas is what I am. A gift to you. I'm the payment.”

DeFranco blinked and shook his head. “Payment? I'm not sure I follow that.”

For a long moment there was quiet. “Kill me,” the elf said. “That's why I came. To be the last dead. The saitas. To carry the mistake away.”

“Hell, no. No. We don't shoot you. Look, elf—all we want is to stop the fighting. We don't want your life. Nobody wants to kill you.”

“DeFranco, we haven't any more resources. We want a peace.”

“So do we. Look, we just make a treaty—you understand *treaty*?”

“I’m the treaty.”

“A treaty, man, a treaty’s a piece of paper. We promise peace to each other and not to attack us, we promise not to attack you, we settle our borders, and you just go home to that wife and kids. And I go home and that’s it. No more dying. No more killing.”

“No.” The elf’s eyes glistened within the pale mask. “No, deFranco, no paper.”

“We make peace with a paper and ink. We write peace out and we make agreements and it’s good enough; we do what we say we’ll do.”

“Then write it in your language.”

“You have to sign it. Write your name on it. And keep the terms. That’s all, you understand that?”

“Two days. I’ll sign your paper. I’ll make your peace. It’s nothing. Our peace is in me. And I’m here to give it.”

“Dammit, we don’t kill people for treaties.”

The sea-colored eyes blinked. “Is one so hard and millions so easy?”

“It’s different.”

“Why?”

“Because—because—look, war’s for killing; peace is for staying alive.”

“I don’t understand why you fight. Nothing you do makes sense to us. But I think we almost understand. We talk to each other. We use the same words. DeFranco, don’t go on killing us.”

“Just you. Just you, is that it? Dammit, that’s crazy!”

“A cup would do. Or a gun. Whatever you like. DeFranco, have you never shot us before?”

“God, it’s not the same!”

“You say paper’s enough for you. That paper will take away all your mistakes and make the peace. But paper’s not enough for us. I’d never trust it. You have to make my peace too. So both sides will know it’s true. But there has to be a saitas for humans. Someone has to come to be a saitas for humans. Someone has to come to us.”

DeFranco sat there with his hands locked together. “You mean

just go to your side and get killed.”

“The last dying.”

“Dammit, you are crazy. You’ll wait a long time for that, elf.”

“You don’t understand.”

“You’re damn right I don’t understand. Damn bloody-minded lunatics!” DeFranco shoved his hands down, needing to get up, to get away from that infinitely patient and not human face, that face that had somehow acquired subtle expressions, that voice which made him forget where the words had first come from. And then he remembered the listeners, the listeners taking notes, the colonel staring at him across the table. Information. Winning was not the issue. Questions were. Finding out what they could. Peace was no longer the game. They were dealing with the insane, with minds there was no peace with. Elves that died to spite their enemies. That suicided for a whim and thought nothing about wiping out someone else’s life.

He stayed in his chair. He drew another breath. He collected his wits and thought of something else worth learning. “What’d you do with the prisoners you learned the language from, huh? Tell me that?”

“Dead. We gave them the cup. One at a time they wanted it.”

“Did they.”

Again the spread of hands, of graceful fingers. “I’m here for all the mistakes. Whatever will be enough for them.”

“Dammit, elf!”

“Don’t call me that.” The voice acquired a faint music. “Remember my name. Remember my name. DeFranco—”

He had to get up. He had to get up and get clear of the alien, get away from that stare. He thrust himself back from the table and looked back, found the elf had turned. Saitas-Angan smelled of something dry and musky, like spice. The eyes never opened wide, citrine slits. They followed him.

“Talk to me,” the elf said. “Talk to me, deFranco.”

“About what? About handing one of us to you? It won’t happen. It bloody won’t happen. We’re not crazy.”

“Then the war won’t stop.”

“You’ll bloody die, every damn last one of you!”

“If that’s your intention,” the elf said, “yes. We don’t believe you want peace. We haven’t any more hope. So I come here. And the rest of us begin to die. Not the quiet dying. Our hearts won’t stop. We’ll fight.”

“Out there on the lines, you mean.”

“I’ll die as long as you want, here. I won’t stop my heart. The saitas can’t.”

“Dammit, that’s not what we’re after! That’s not what we want.”

“Neither can you stop yours. I know that. We’re not cruel. I still have hope in you. I still hope.”

“It won’t work. *We can’t do it*, do you understand me? It’s against our law. Do you understand law?”

“Law.”

“Right from wrong. Morality. For God’s sake, killing’s wrong.”

“Then you’ve done a lot of wrong. You have your mistake too. DeFranco. You’re a soldier like me. You know what your life’s value is.”

“You’re damn right I know. And I’m still alive.”

“We go off the course. We lose ourselves. You’ll die for war but not for peace. I don’t understand.”

“I don’t understand. You think we’re just going to pick some poor sod and send him to you.”

“You, deFranco. I’m asking you to make the peace.”

“Hell.” He shook his head, walked away to the door, colonel-be-hanged, listeners-be-hanged. His hand shook on the switch and he was afraid it showed. End the war. “The hell you say.”

The door shot open. He expected guards. Expected—

—It was open corridor, clean prefab, tiled floor. On the tiles lay a dark, round object, with the peculiar symmetry and ugliness of things meant to kill. Grenade. Intact.

His heart jolted. He felt the doorframe against his side and the sweat ran cold on his skin, his bowels went to water. He hung there looking at it and it did not go away. He began to shake all over as if

it were already armed.

“Colonel Finn.” He turned around in the doorway and yelled at the unseen monitors. “Colonel Finn—get me out of here!”

No one answered. No door opened. The elf sat there staring at him in the closest thing to distress he had yet showed.

“Colonel! *Colonel, damn you!*”

More of silence. The elf rose to his feet and stood there staring at him in seeming perplexity, as if he suspected he witnessed some human madness.

“They left us a present,” deFranco said. His voice shook and he tried to stop it. “They left us a damn present, elf. And they locked us in.”

The elf stared at him; and deFranco went out into the hall, bent and gathered up the deadly black cylinder—held it up. “It’s one of yours, elf.”

The elf stood there in the doorway. His eyes looking down were the eyes of a carved saint; and looking up they showed color against his white skin. A long nailless hand touched the doorframe as the elf contemplated him and human treachery.

“Is this their way?”

“It’s not mine.” He closed his hand tightly on the cylinder, in its deadliness like and unlike every weapon he had ever handled. “It’s damn well not mine.”

“You can’t get out.”

The shock had robbed him of wits. For a moment he was not thinking. And then he walked down the hall to the main door and tried it. “Locked,” he called back to the elf, who had joined him in his possession of the hall. The two of them together. DeFranco walked back again, trying doors as he went. He felt strangely numb. The hall became surreal, his elvish companion belonging like him, elsewhere. “Dammit, what have you got in their minds?”

“They’ve agreed,” the elf said. “They’ve agreed, deFranco.”

“They’re out of their minds.”

“One door still closes, doesn’t it? You can protect your life.”

“You still bent on suicide?”

“You’ll be safe.”

“Damn them!”

The elf gathered his arms about him as if he too felt the chill. “The colonel gave us a time. Is it past?”

“Not bloody yet.”

“Come sit with me. Sit and talk. My friend.”

“Is it time?” asks the elf, as deFranco looks at his watch again. And deFranco looks up.

“Five minutes. Almost.” DeFranco’s voice is hoarse.

The elf has a bit of paper in hand. He offers it. A pen lies on the table between them. Along with the grenade. “I’ve written your peace. I’ve put my name below it. Put yours.”

“I’m nobody. I can’t sign a treaty, for God’s sake.” DeFranco’s face is white. His lips tremble. “What did you write?”

“Peace,” said the elf. “I just wrote peace. Does there have to be more?”

DeFranco takes it. Looks at it. And suddenly he picks up the pen and signs it too, a furious scribble. And lays the pen down. “There,” he says. “There, they’ll have my name on it.” And after a moment: “If I could do the other—O God, I’m scared. I’m *scared!*”

“You don’t have to go to my city,” says the elf, softly. His voice wavers like deFranco’s. “DeFranco—here, here they record everything. Go with me. Now. The record will last. We have our peace, you and I, we make it together, here, now. The last dying. Don’t leave me. And we can end this war.”

DeFranco sits a moment. Takes the grenade from the middle of the table, extends his hand with it across the center. He looks nowhere but at the elf. “Pin’s yours,” he says. “Go on. You pull it, I’ll hold it steady.”

The elf reaches out his hand, takes the pin and pulls it, quickly.

DeFranco lays the grenade down on the table between them, and his mouth moves in silent counting. But then he looks up at the elf and the elf looks at him. DeFranco manages a smile. “You got the count on this thing?”

The screen breaks up.

The staffer reached out her hand and cut the monitor, and Agnes Finn stared past the occupants of the office for a time. Tears came



seldom to her eyes. They were there now, and she chose not to look at the board of inquiry who had gathered there.

“There’s a mandatory inquiry,” the man from the reg command said. “We’ll take testimony from the major this afternoon.”

“Responsibility’s mine,” Finn said.

It was agreed on the staff. It was pre-arranged, the interview, the formalities.

Someone had to take the direct hit. It might have been a SurTac. She would have ordered that too, if things had gone differently. High command might cover her. Records might be wiped. A tape might be classified. The major general who had handed her the mess and turned his back had done it all through subordinates. And he was clear.

“The paper, Colonel.”

She looked at them, slid the simple piece of paper back across the desk. The board member collected it and put it into the folder. Carefully.

“It’s more than evidence,” she said. “That’s a treaty. The indigenes know it is.”

They left her office, less than comfortable in their official search for blame and where, officially, to put it.

She was already packed. Going back on the same ship with an elvish corpse, all the way to Pell and Downbelow. There would be a grave there onworld.

It had surprised no one when the broadcast tape got an elvish response. Hopes rose when it got the fighting stopped and brought an elvish delegation to the front; but there was a bit of confusion when the elves viewed both bodies and wanted deFranco’s. Only deFranco’s.

And they made him a stone grave there on the shell-pocked plain, a stone monument; and they wrote everything they knew about him. *I was John Rand deFranco, a graven plaque said. I was born on a space station twenty light-years away. I left my mother and my brothers. The friends I had were soldiers and many of them died before me. I came to fight and I died for the peace, even when mine was the winning side. I died at the hand of Angan Anassidi, and he died at mine, for the peace; and we were friends at the end of our*

*lives.*

Elves—*suilti* was one name they called themselves—came to this place and laid gifts of silk ribbons and bunches of flowers—flowers, in all that desolation; and in their thousands they mourned and they wept in their own tearless, expressionless way.

For their enemy.

One of their own was on his way to humankind. For humankind to cry for. *I was Angan Anassidi*, his grave would say; and all the right things. Possibly no human would shed a tear. Except the veterans of Elfland, when they came home, if they got down to the world—they might, like Agnes Finn, in their own way and for their own dead, in front of an alien shrine.

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[scanned anonymously in a galaxy far far away]

[A Hugo Project release - v1, html]

[March 06, 2006]