Sunrise

by Jack McDevitt

Although the characters and circumstance are different, the following story is set in the same milieu as Jack McDevitt's "Dutchman" (February 1987). Mr. McDevitt tells us he loves the type of mystery which asks "What is really going on here?" and in "Sunrise" he is able to explore the scope that SF provides for this type of story

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Ilyanda had always seemed haunted.

There is something that broods over its misty seas and broken archipelagos, that breathes within its continental forests. You can feel it in the curious ruins that may, or may not, have been left by men. Or in the pungent ozone of the thunderstorms that strike Point Edward each night with a clocklike regularity that no one has yet explained. It is no accident that so many modern writers of supernatural fiction have set their stories on Ilyanda, beneath its cluster of brilliant white rings and racing moons.

To the planet's several thousand inhabitants, most of whom live at Point Edward on the northern tip of the smallest of that world's three continents, such notions are exaggerated. But to those of us who have arrived from more mundane locations, it is a place of fragile beauty, of voices not quite heard, of dark rivers draining the unknown.

I was never more aware of its supernal qualities than during the weeks following Gage's death. Against the advice of friends, I took the *Meredith* to sea, determined in the perverse way of people at such a time to touch once again a few of the things we'd shared in our first year, thereby sharpening the knife-edge of grief. And if, in some indefinable way, I expected to recapture a part of those lost days, it might have been from a sense that, in those phantom oceans, all things seemed possible.

I sailed into the southern hemisphere, and quickly lost myself among the Ten Thousand Islands.

It didn't help, of course. I curved round familiar coasts and anchored off rock formations that, silhouetted against other nights, had resembled freedivers and pensive women. But the images were gone now, driven to sea by relentless tides. I slept one evening on a sacrificial slab in a ruined temple that, on at least one occasion I could remember, had been put to far better use.

In the end, I realized he was not out there.

Point Edward is visible at sea from an extraordinary distance. Visitors to Ilyanda are struck by the phenomenon, and are usually told that the atmosphere possesses unusual reflective qualities. Climatologists maintain that the effect is due to an excess of water vapor. But I can tell you what it is: Point Edward is the only major source of artificial light in a world of dark seas and black coasts. In a sense, it is visible all over the planet.

On that last day at sea, I saw it in the eastern sky almost immediately after sundown. I adjusted my course a few degrees to port, and ran before the wind. The water was loud against the prow, and, I think, during those hours, I began to come to terms with my life. The broad avenues and glittering homes that commanded the series of ridges dominating the coastline gradually separated themselves from each

other. And I poured myself a generous glass of brissie and raised a toast to the old town.

The constellations floated on black water, and the radio below decks murmured softly, a newscast, something about the Ashiyyur. Like my former life, the war with the Mutes was very far away, out in a nebula across the Arm somewhere. It was hard to believe, in the peaceful climate of Ilyanda, that people—well, humans and the only other technological creatures we'd found—were actually killing one another.

A bell clanged solemnly against the dull roar of the surf. A white wake spread out behind the *Meredith*, and the sails filled with the night.

Point Edward had been built on the site of an ancient volcano. The cone, which had collapsed below the surrounding rock into the sea, provided an ideal harbor. A cruise along the coast, however, would quickly demonstrate there was no other place to land. The chain of peaks and escarpments ran almost the entire length of the continent. South of the city, they seemed preternaturally high, their snowcapped pinnacles lost in cumulus.

I approached from the north, steering under the security lights of the Marine Bank on Dixon Ridge and the Steel Mall, past the serene columns and arches of the municipal complex, and the hanging gardens of the University of Ilyanda. The air was cool and I felt good for the first time in months. But as I drew near the city, as the boulevards widened, and the lighted marquees became legible (I could see that the California holo *Flashpoint* had arrived at the Blackwood), a sense of apprehension stole over me. The wind and the waves grew very loud, and nothing moved in the channel, or along the waterfront. It was of course late, lacking only a bit more than an hour before midnight. Yet, there should have been something in the harbor, a skiff, a late steamer full of tourists, a patrol craft.

Something.

I tied up to my pier at the foot of Barbara Park. Yellow lights dangled over the planking, and the place looked bright and cheerful. It was good to be home.

I strolled casually toward the street, enjoying the loud clack of the boards underfoot. The boathouse was dark. I ducked behind it, came out on Seaway Boulevard, and hurried across against the traffic light. A large banner strung over the storefront window of Harbor Appliances announced an autumn sale. One of the appliances, a cleaner, lit up, started its routine, and shut off again as I passed. Across the street, a bank databoard flashed the weather: showers (of course), ending toward morning, a high of 19, and a low of 16. Another pleasant day coming up.

Control signals blinked and clicked. It had rained earlier: the streets were slick with water. They were also empty.

I was only a block from the Edwardian, our major hotel. Like many of the older structures in town, it was Toxicon Gothic. But it towered over the others, a colossus of ornate porticos and gray towers, of blunt arches and step-down galleries. Yellow light spilled from two cupolas atop the gambrel roof. (I had a few pleasant recollections from this place too, but they all predated my marriage.)

The Edwardian was used extensively by tourists, and its Skyway Room also served as a popular rendezvous for revelers seven nights a week. The sidewalks should have been jammed. Where the hell was everybody?

There was something else. I could see the main library about halfway up a sharp rise west of town. It's a sleek modern place, designed by Orwell Mason, and done in late Terran. Set amid a scattering of

fountains and pools, its lines suggest a fourth dimension, an effect emphasized by nighttime illumination. A massive boulder, which is supposed to have been deposited by the ice fifteen thousand years ago, guards the main approach.

It was almost midnight.

The lamps should have been dimmed to the soft multi-colored ambience of the fountains, and the topological illusion consequently diminished. But the place was ablaze with light.

I looked at my watch again.

Only a handful of vehicles were parked on the library grounds. No movement was detectable, either inside or outside the building.

I was standing in the middle of Seaway Boulevard. It's a broad thoroughfare, the central artery, really, in Point Edward. To the north, it rises in a near straight line across a series of escarpments; to the south, it proceeds about another half-kilometer to Barracut Circle, the heart of the shopping district. Nowhere in all that stretch of blinking traffic signals and overhead arcs could I see a single moving car.

Or a pedestrian.

Even Tracy Park, usually full of moonstruck couples from the University, was deserted.

A sudden gust blew up a light chop, and drove a scattering of leaves and debris against the shops on the west side of the boulevard.

No one's ever accused me of having an active imagination, but I stood puzzled out there, listening to the city: the wind and the rain and the buoys and the water sucking at the piers and the suddenly audible hum of power beneath the pavement and the distant banging of a door swinging on its hinges and the Carolian beat of the automated electronic piano in the Edwardian. Something walked through it all on invisible feet.

I hurried into the shadows of the shops that lined the street. The needlepoint towers, the sequestered storefronts, the classical statuary in the parks: I had never noticed before, but they resembled the ruins I'd visited in the southern hemisphere. It was not difficult to imagine a far traveler strolling these weed-choked avenues, feeling the press of the centuries, and the eyes of the long dead, nodding knowingly at primitive architectural styles, and retreating at last, not without a measure of relief, to a boat moored in the harbor.

Well, there you are. I was standing in front of the Surf & Sand with my imagination running wild when the lights went out.

It was like somebody threw a switch.

My first impression was that the entire city had been plunged into darkness. But that wasn't quite the case: traffic signals still worked, streetlamps still burned, and Cory's Health Club was illuminated by security lights. In the opposite direction, the Edwardian showed no change whatever. But beyond it lay rows of darkened storefronts, and a few commercial establishments. Across the street, Captain Culpepper's Waterfront Restaurant, and the garden supply shop on the corner of Seaway and Delinor, also retained some lights. Most of the great bowl of the city spread out beyond and below that intersection: thousands of homes were dark. I couldn't be certain, but I would have sworn they had all, *all,* been brightly lit a moment before. The library had also vanished into the general gloom.

Along the piers, some of the strings of bulbs glowed brightly. Others had died.

I tried to imagine a sequence of events that would account for it. Had there been some sort of power breakdown, surely the failure would have occurred in a discernible pattern: blackout here, normal conditions there. But that wasn't the case. *My God, that wasn't the case.* Power interruption appeared to be purely arbitrary across the city. Had I not experienced the simultaneous shutdown, I would not have been aware anything unusual had happened. Point Edward looked more or less as it might be expected to look at midnight.

And I wondered what sort of hand had thrown the switch.

I started to walk again, trying to tread gently, to muffle my footsteps. Past the Keynote ("Musical Groups for all Occasions"), the Male Body (a clothing shop), Monny's Appliance Rental, and a three-story posh apartment complex. No light in any of them.

I stopped at the apartment building and pressed all the signals. Nothing happened, no one asked who was there, no light came on.

The Blue Lantern, where I usually ate lunch when I was downtown, looked open for business. Its sign blinked on and off. The window neons burned cheerfully, and a bright yellow glow crept over the transom. The tables were set with silverware, and soft music drifted into the street. But the candles were all out.

The door was bolted.

I pulled my jacket tightly about my shoulders and, for the second time that night, resisted the tug of fear.

The war, I thought. Somehow, it had to be the war.

But that made no sense. The war was very far, and Ilyanda wasn't even part of it. Anyhow, why would the Mutes spirit away twenty thousand people?

I crossed the street and hurried into the parking area. The lot was dark, and a heavy mist seemed to be setting in. I had to grope around a bit because I'd forgotten where I'd left the car. I found it finally after going full circle back to my starting point. It embarrasses me now to admit it, but I felt a hell of a lot better after I was inside, with the hatches locked. I switched on the radio.

Lach Keenan's familiar voice filled the interior, reassuringly discussing a proposed school bond issue with someone who had called in. Point Edward's other three stations were still on the air: everything seemed normal.

I waited for Keenan to give his code, and then punched it into the telecom. I got the tones that indicated a connection had been made, and then Keenan's voice.

"Hello," it said. "Thanks for calling *Late Night*. We're not broadcasting live this evening, but we'd be happy to hear from you next time. Good night."

I cruised slowly through the downtown area, and turned out University. The streets widened, and the commercial area gave way to shadowy stone houses with rock gardens and fountains. Gymnasiums and pools and community centers stood stark and empty. Out near Brandenthorn, on the edge of town, a black dog stopped in the middle of the street, looked at me, and walked on.

After a while, I turned around and, feeling less uncomfortable downtown, drove back to the waterfront. I stopped behind the Marine Bank. The tide surged over the rocks and threw spray up onto the windshield. I closed my eyes and tried to sleep, but I couldn't shake the feeling that something was creeping up on me. And yes, I felt ridiculous.

Eventually, I went back to the Edwardian.

The lobby was lighted, but no hosts walked among the potted fronds. No guests gathered before the gleaming clerks, whose screens all read *Good evening—May I help you?* in friendly gold script. In the Iron Pilot, I poured myself a drink. I don't remember what it was.

Distant thunder rumbled.

I walked into a commbooth, inserted my card, and punched in Quim Bordley's code. Quim was an old friend, an antique collector who I knew would be unhappy receiving a call at such an hour. But he stayed home a lot, and enough was enough.

No one answered.

Aias Weinstein, a sound expert at the Gallery, didn't answer.

The spaceport sequrity office, where Gage had worked didn't answer.

The police didn't answer.

I slumped against the back of the booth. My heart pounded, and the fronds and chairs and counters and clerks grew blurred and unreal. At the far end of the lobby, at the travel desk, an electronic sign urged patrons to charter a Blue Line cruise.

I consulted the directory for Albemarle, a small mining settlement across the continent, and tried the police there. A voice replied!

"Good evening," it said. "You have reached the police department. All operators are busy at the moment. Please remain on your link, and we will be right with you. If this is an emergency, enter the Q code for your area."

"Yes," I whispered into the receiver, cautious lest I be overheard. "My God, this is an emergency, but I don't have a Q code, not for Albemarle, I don't live there."

After a while the recording repeated.

I rode through the silent streets. At twenty-seven minutes past midnight, right on schedule, the storm struck and filled the night with water and electricity. I should have stopped, but I felt safer on the move.

Lights were on at Point Edward Hospital. I hurried through the emergency entrance, down long polished corridors. The beds were crumpled, sheets and blankets tossed aside. Most of the diagnostics were on. They had left in a hurry.

At Coastal Rescue, boats were tied to their moorings, and skimmers stood on their pads. I broke into the communication center, which is supposed to be manned twenty-seven hours a day, and sat down at the radio. There were weather reports from the satellites, and an update on maritime schedules. All recorded. Then I picked up a conversation:

"—Recommend approach at zero two seven mark three," a female voice said. "Navigation configuration Homer Four. Charlie, there is no traffic in your area. You are clear to proceed."

"Will comply," said Charlie. "It's good to be back." He sounded tired.

“We’re looking at a quick turn-around on the surface flight, Charlie. The manifest shows eleven passengers for Richardson. How about you and your crew?”

“Janet’s going down. She says she has a brother at the Point.” He snickered.

“Okay. Have them report to Fourteen. Lower level. We’re running a little late.”

It was clearly a communication between the Station and a ship. Richardson, of course, is the spaceport outside Point Edward.

I tried to call them, but the transmitter might not have had its directionals lined up, or something. At least, that’s what I thought then. Anyhow, somewhat relieved, I went back to the car. I considered going home. But in the end, I continued past my apartment and turned out the old Burnfield Road. When the shuttle came down I would be standing in the terminal.

There are two scheduled flights each day from the Station: one arrives in the late afternoon. The other is a redeye special that comes in at 0410, bringing tourists or businessmen mostly from the Golden Horn. For them it is still early evening.

The Captain William E. Richardson Spaceport is located twenty-two kilometers southwest of Point Edward. Since most of the traffic between the facility and the city is by skimmer, the surface road had been allowed to deteriorate. It is a rough ride.

As soon as I got up over Highgate, which is the ridge that encloses and supports most of Point Edward, I could see the Blue Tower. It was then the tallest artificial structure on the planet, an obelisk of stone and glass, not unlike the starships that send their passengers and cargo through her bays and docks.

A steady stream of water, silver and misted in the moonlight, plunged from a rooftop conduit and spumed into a marble pool at the base of the building.

Richardson is a combined facility, serving both civilian and naval operations. Probably two-thirds of it, in those troubled times, was reserved for the Navy.

The road rose and fell, curved past dark farmhouses and through satellite towns and across fields of ripening wheat. A new radio host was taking calls, people chattering about the visit to Ilyanda by Christopher Sim and his Dellacondan volunteers, and complaining about a construction project in the Maraclova area.

I glanced at my watch. The shuttle was about an hour and a half away.

Clusters of black clouds floated low on the horizon. They, and the stark landscape, were silvered by the rings, which were close to full phase. In the tense and awful silence of that night, the ancient gods of Ilyanda seemed close at hand.

In the darkness of the car, I managed a smile.

Early settlers around Point Edward had quickly come to believe in the literal existence of supernatural beings. The literature was rife with forest devils and phantoms and things of questionable deity.

I’ve read somewhere that superstition takes hold, even in a technological society, wherever the total human population on a planetary surface fails, within a given time, to rise above a minimum figure. It’s easy to believe.

The towns along the route showed no sign of life. Eberville, Kaisson, Walhalla: all looked deserted.

At Walhalla, I rounded a curve too fast, saw a shadow lying across the road, and bounced into a ditch. The cocoon exploded in my face, I hit myself in the jaw, and the car wound up in a foot of water.

I sat breathing hard for a few moments, and then discovered that the retractor was damaged. I had to climb out from under the cocoon, detach it manually, and drag it out of the front seat.

The thing I'd hit was a city carrier. It lay half off the highway, nosed into some trees, its hood raised, all doors open. Big and ungainly, it was not designed for country roads. It should have been making stops along Seaway Boulevard. But it had been pressed into service to take people out to Richardson. Why?

I looked again at the dismal sky, and I think I let go a little.

A half-hour later, cold, wet, desperate, I drove beneath Moonlock Gate into the spaceport. The wind blew through the small complex, and a service monorail vehicle edged out of one of the hangars. But no crewman was visible.

As I approached the Blue Tower, carriers, jitneys, and trucks became more numerous until they choked the road. Outside the Currency Exchange there'd been a major accident. Several vehicles were crushed and scorched, and the pavement had caved in. A wrecked skimmer had been pulled out of the tangle onto the lawn in an effort to clear the road. Behind the skimmer lay a freshly dug clay mound almost as long as the aircraft itself. Someone had pounded a wooden cross onto its topmost point.

When I could go no further, I turned the car around so I could get out in a hurry if I had to, and walked. The aprons were jammed with dropped luggage and overturned dollies. Food wrappers, beverage containers, and print editions of periodicals were driven against the dead convoy by occasional gusts.

There were bloodstains on one of the entry doors.

I went inside, into the cavernous reception area. (It had never before looked so large.) And I wandered past the ticket dispensers, and the souvenir shops and art marts, and the vehicle rental counters and security checkpoints.

Through the crystal walls, I could watch the monorail moving deliberately and mechanically among the service structures.

I went up to the second deck, took a seat on the observation terrace, checked the time, and settled in for the arrival of the shuttle.

Against the overcast sky, the redeye would not be visible much before it settled into its cradle. It would come in on silent magnetics, materializing out of the mist, black shell slick with rain, an apparition, a thing (on this spectral night) of slippery reality.

What cargo would it carry for Point Edward?

I turned on a holo, and watched two middle-aged men form and plunge into a heated discussion, though I cannot remember, and may never have been aware of, the nature of their disagreement. At least it was noise. But if it was at first reassuring, I quickly began to wonder whether it might draw attention. In the end, although I castigated myself for my fears, I shut it off, and found a seat sheltered from view.

I drank several cups of coffee from a mall restaurant.

And waited.

The scheduled time of arrival came and went. The heavy gray clouds were unbroken.

Fat round blobs of water ran down the windows.

After all these years, the growing terror of those moments remains bright. I knew, maybe somehow had known all along, that they would not come. That despite all the talk on the circuits, they would not come!

I stole away finally, beaten. It's curious how quickly one adapts: I had reached a state at which the deserted corridors, the silent shops, the utter emptiness of the sprawling complex and the city beyond, seemed the natural order of things. It was a natural order into which I intruded. Consequently, I did not stroll down the main passageways, broadcasting my presence. Nor did I consider using the public address system.

I had never before seen the security office empty. It was locked, and I had to break a glass panel to get in. One of the monitors was running, presenting views of loading areas, passageways, retailers.

Gage's desk was in an adjoining office. Nothing looked different from the days when he'd been here, other than the copy of the plaque which they'd given me when he died. It hung near the door, and it helped a little.

I collapsed onto a small couch in the corner of the office and tried to sleep. But I was afraid to close my eyes. So I sat there for almost an hour, watching the door, listening for sounds deep in the heart of the building. And of course hearing them, knowing all along they were not really there.

I remembered there was a laser pistol in the desk. It was locked and I had to pry it open, but the weapon was still there. I lifted it out, hefting it, feeling better for its cool metallic balance. I checked to see that it was charged. There was no convenient place to carry it, and I ended by pushing it down into my boot.

The communication center was located near the top of the Blue Tower. I took an elevator up until I could see the ocean, got out and walked through suites of offices, entered the operations section, and used the weapon to cut through a heavy door marked KEEP OUT. I'd been back there once or twice before, on guided tours for family members.

The transmitter had been left on.

Something was going out. I put it on the speaker. A short burst of bleeps filled the room. Telemetry! The spaceport was transmitting telemetry!

And that made no sense. I went back outside and looked to see if there were moving lights somewhere, something going up or coming down. But the gray heavy clouds were unbroken. At ground level, a light mist had begun to creep across the grass.

I went to an open channel and locked in on the Station. "Hello," I said. "This is Richardson. Where the hell is everybody?"

There was no answer.

I'm not sure precisely when I realized I wasn't alone. A footstep somewhere, perhaps. The sound of running water, possibly a subtle swirling of air currents. But I was suddenly alert, and conscious of my

own breathing.

My first impulse was to get out of the building. To get back to the car, and maybe back to the boat. But I held on, feeling the sweat trickle down my ribs.

I moved through the offices one by one, conscious of the weapon in my boot, but deliberately keeping my hands away from it. I was close to panic.

I'd stopped in a conference room dominated by a sculpted freediver. A holograph unit which someone had neglected to turn off blinked sporadically at the head of a carved table. A half-dozen chairs were in some disorder, and several abandoned coffee cups and light pads were scattered about. One would have thought the meeting had recently adjourned, and that the conferees would shortly return.

I activated the holo and some of the light pads. They'd been discussing motivational techniques.

As I turned away, somewhere, far off, glass shattered!

It was a sudden sharp report. Echoes rattled through the room, short pulses that gradually lengthened into each other, merged with the barely audible hum of power in the walls, and subsided at last into a petulant whisper.

Somewhere above. In the Tower Room, the rooftop restaurant.

I rode the elevator up one floor to the penthouse, stepped out into the gray night and walked quickly across an open patio.

In the fog, the Tower Room was little more than a gloomy presence: yellow-smeared round crossbarred windows punched into a shadowy stone exterior; rock columns supporting an arched doorway; a water-wheel; and an antique brass menu board whose lighting no longer worked.

Soft music leaked through the doors. I pulled one partway open and peered in at an interior illuminated by computerized candles flickering in smoked jars. The Tower Room in those days looked, and felt, like a sunken grotto. It was a hive of rocky vaults and dens, divided by watercourses, salad dispensers, mock boulders and shafts, and a long polished bar. Blue and white light sparkled against sandstone and silverware. Crystal streams poured from the mouths of stone nymphs and raced through narrow channels between rough-hewn bridges. Possibly, in another time, it might have been a relatively pedestrian place, one more restaurant in which the clientele and conversation were too heavy to sustain an architect's illusion. But on that evening, in the stillness that gripped the Blue Tower, the empty tables retreated into a void, until the glimmering lights in the smoked jars burned with the steady radiance of stars.

It was sufficiently cool that I had to pull my jacket about my shoulders. I wondered whether the heating system had given out.

I crossed a bridge, proceeded along the bar, and stopped to survey the lower level. Everything was neatly arranged, chairs in place, silver laid out on red cloth napkins, condiments and sauce bottles stacked side by side on the tables.

I could feel tears coming. I hooked my foot around a chair, dragged it away from the table, and sank into it.

There was an answering clatter, and a voice: "Who's there?"

I froze.

Footsteps. In the back somewhere. And then a man in a uniform.

"Hello," he called cheerfully. "Are you all right?"

I shook my head uncertainly. "Of course," I said. "What's going on? Where is everybody?"

"I'm back near the window," he said, turning away from me. "Have to stay there." He paused to be sure I was following, and then retreated the way he'd come.

His clothing was strange, but not unfamiliar. By the time I rejoined him, I'd placed it: it was the light and dark blue uniform of the Confederacy, the small group of frontier allies waging war against the Mutes.

He'd piled his table high with electronic equipment. A tangle of cables joined two or three computers, a bank of monitors, a generator, and God knew what else. He stood over it, a headphone clasped to one ear, apparently absorbed in the displays: schematics, trace scans, columns of digits and symbols.

He glanced in my direction without quite seeing me, pointed to a bottle of dark wine, produced a glass, and gestured for me to help myself. Then he smiled at something he had seen, laid the headset on the table, and dropped into a chair. "I'm Matt Olander," he said. "What the hell are you doing here?"

He was middle-aged, a thin blade of a man whose gray skin almost matched the color of the walls, marking him as an off-worlder. "I don't think I understand the question," I said.

"Why didn't you leave with everyone else?" He watched me intently, and I guess he saw that I was puzzled, and then *he* started to look puzzled. "They took everybody out," he said.

"*Who*?" I demanded. My voice went off the edge of the register. "*Who* took everybody *where*?"

He reacted as if it was a dumb question and reached for the bottle. "I guess we couldn't really expect to get one hundred percent. Where were you? In a mine somewhere? Out in the hills with no commlink?"

I told him and he sighed in a way that suggested I had committed an indiscretion. His uniform was open at the throat, and a light jacket that must have been nonregulation protected him from the chill. His hair was thin, and his features suggested more of the tradesman than the warrior. His voice turned soft. "What's your name?"

"Lee," I said. "Kindrel Lee."

"Well, Kindrel, we spent most of these two weeks evacuating Ilyanda. The last of them went up to the Station during the late morning yesterday. Far as I know, you and I are all that's left."

His interest wandered back to the monitor.

"Why?" I asked. I was feeling a mixture of relief and fear.

His expression wished me away. After a moment, he touched his keyboard. "I'll show you," he said.

One of the screens—I had to move the bottle to get a good look—dissolved to a concentric ring display, across which eight or nine trace lights blinked. "Ilyanda is at the center," he said. "Or rather the Station is. The range runs out to about a half billion kilometers. You're looking at a Mute fleet. Capital ships and battle cruisers." He took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

"What's happening, Miss Lee," he continued, "is that the Navy is about to blow hell out of the sons of bitches." His jaw tightened, and a splinter of light appeared in his eyes. "At last."

"It's been a long time coming," he said. "They've been driving us before them for three years. But today belongs to us." He raised his empty glass in a jeering salute toward the ceiling.

"I'm glad you were able to get people away," I said into the stillness.

He tilted his head in my direction. "Sim wouldn't have had it any other way."

"I never thought the war would come here." Another blip appeared on the screen. "I don't understand it," I said. "Ilyanda's neutral. And I didn't think we were near the fighting."

"Kindrel, there are no neutrals in this war. You've just been letting others do your fighting for you." His voice was not entirely devoid of contempt.

"Ilyanda's at peace!" I shot back, though it seemed rather academic just then. I stared at him, into his eyes, expecting him to flinch. But I saw only annoyance. "Or at least it was," I continued. "Anyhow, thanks for coming." His eyes were puffy and red-rimmed.

He looked away from me. "It's all right."

He turned self-consciously toward the computers and absorbed himself in them. "They're only here," I said, "because you are, aren't they?"

"Yes."

"You've brought your war to us!"

He pushed himself forward in his chair, propped his chin on his fist, and laughed at me. "*You're* judging *us*! You know, you people are really impossible. The only reason you're not dead or in chains is because we've been dying to give you a chance to ride around in your goddam boat!"

"My God," I gasped, remembering the missing shuttle. "Is that why the redeye never got here?"

"Don't worry about it," he said. "It was never coming."

I shook my head. "You're wrong. I overheard some radio traffic shortly after midnight. They were still on schedule then."

"They were *never* coming," he repeated. "We've done everything we could to make this place, this entire world, appear normal."

"Why?" I asked.

"You have the consolation of knowing we are about to turn the war around. The Mutes are finally going to get hurt!" His eyes glowed, and I shuddered.

"You *led* them here," I said.

"Yes." He was on his feet now. "We led them here. We've led them into hell. They think Christopher Sim is on the space station. And they want him *very* badly." He refilled his glass. "Sim has never had the firepower to fight this war. He's been trying to hold off an armada with a few dozen light frigates and one battle cruiser." Olander's face brightened. "But he's done a job on the bastards. Anyone else would have been overwhelmed right at the start. But Sim: sometimes I wonder whether he's human."

Or you, I thought. My fingers brushed against the laser.

"Maybe it would be best if you left," he said tonelessly.

I made no move to go. "Why here? Why Ilyanda?"

"We tried to pick a system where the population was small enough to be moved."

I smothered an obscenity. "Did we get to vote on this? Or did Sim just ride in and issue orders?"

"Damn you," he whispered. "You haven't any idea at all what this is about, do you? A million people have died in this war so far. The Mutes have burned Cormoral and the City on the Crag and Far Mordaigne. They've overrun a dozen systems, and the entire frontier is on the edge of collapse." He wiped the back of his hand across his mouth. "They don't like human beings very much, Miss Lee. And I don't think they plan for any of us to be around when it's over."

"*We* started the war," I objected.

"That's easy to say. You don't know what was going on. But it doesn't matter now anyway. We're long past drawing fine lines. The killing won't stop until we've driven the bastards back where they came from." He switched displays to a status report. "They're closing on the Station now." His lips curled into a vindictive leer. "A sizable chunk of their fleet is already within range. And more arriving all the time." He smiled malevolently, and I can remember thinking that I had never before come face to face with anyone so completely evil. He was really enjoying himself.

"You said Sim doesn't have much firepower—"

"He doesn't."

"Then how—?"

A shadow crossed his face. He hesitated, and looked away toward the monitors. "The Station's shields have gone up," he said. "No, there's nothing up there of ours except a couple of destroyers. They're automated, and the Station's abandoned." The blinking lights on the battle display had increased to a dozen. Some had moved within the inner ring. "All they can see are the destroyers, and something they think is *Corsarius* in dock with its hull laid open. And the bastards are still keeping their distance. But it won't make any difference!"

"*Corsarius*!" I said. "Sim's ship?"

"It's a big moment for them. They're thinking right now they're going to take him and end the war." He squinted at the graphics.

I was beginning to suspect it was time to take his advice and make for the wharf, get the *Meredith*, and head back to the southern hemisphere. Until the dust settled.

"The destroyers are opening up," he said. "But they won't even slow the Mutes down."

"Why bother?"

"We had to give them some opposition. Keep them from thinking too much."

"Olander," I asked, "if you have no ships up there, what's this all about? How does Sim expect to destroy anything?"

"He won't. But you and I will, Kendril. You and I will inflict such a wound on the Mutes tonight that the sons of bitches will never forget!"

Two monitors went suddenly blank. The images returned, swirls of characters blinking frantically. He leaned forward and frowned. “The Station’s taken a hit.” He reached toward me, a friendly, soothing gesture, but I stayed away from him.

“And what are you and I going to do to them?” I asked.

“Kendril, we are going to stop the sunrise.”

I found that remark a bit murky, and I said so.

“We’re going to catch them all,” he said. “Everything they’ve got here, everything out to the half-billion kilometer ring, will be incinerated. Beyond that, if they see right away what’s happening and get a running start, they have a chance.” He glanced toward the computer. A red lamp glowed on the keyboard. “We have an old Tyrolean freighter, loaded with antimatter. It’s balanced in hyper, and it’s waiting for a command from me.”

“To do what?”

His eyes slid shut, and I could no longer read his expression. “To materialize inside your sun.” He hung each word in the still air. “We are going to insert it at the sun’s core.” A bead of sweat rolled down his chin. “The result, we think, will be—” he paused and grinned, “—moderately explosive.”

I could almost have believed there was no world beyond that bar. We’d retreated into the dark, Olander and I and the monitors and the background music and the stone nymphs. All of us.

“A nova?” I asked. My voice must have been barely audible. “You’re trying to induce a nova?”

“No. Not a true nova.”

“But the effect—”

“—Will be the same.” He drew his right hand across his lips. “It’s a revolutionary technique. Involves some major breakthroughs in navigation. It isn’t easy, you know, to maintain a relatively static position in hyper. Even tougher than in linear space. The freighter has a tendency to drift.” His fingers moved swiftly over the keys, producing technical displays. “Look,” he said, pointing first at one, and then at another. “And here…” I could not begin to follow. He dropped into a monotone and started to talk about gamma rays and hydrogen atoms. I didn’t let him get very far.

“Come on, Olander,” I exploded, “you can’t expect me to believe that a guy sitting in a bar can blow up a sun!”

“I’m sorry.” His eyes changed, and he looked startled, as though he’d forgotten where he was. “You may be right,” he said. “It hasn’t been tested, so they really don’t know. Too expensive to run a test.”

I tried to imagine Point Edward engulfed in fire, amid boiling seas and burning forests. It was Gage’s city, where we’d explored narrow streets and old bookstores, and pursued each other across rainswept beaches and through candle-lit pubs. And from where we’d first gone to sea. I’d never forgot how it had looked the first time we’d come home, bright and diamond hard against the horizon. Home. Always it would be home.

And I watched Olander through eyes grown suddenly damp, perhaps conscious for the first time that I had come back with the intention to leave Ilyanda, and knowing now that I never would, would never wish to.

"Olander, they left *you* to do this?"

"No." He shook his head vigorously. "It was supposed to happen automatically when the Mutes got close. The trigger was tied in to the sensors on the Station. But the Mutes have had some success at disrupting command and control functions. We couldn't be sure…"

"Then they *did* leave you!"

"No! Sim would never have allowed it if he'd known. He has confidence in the scanners and computers. Those of us who know a little more about such things do not. So I stayed, and disconnected it, and brought it down here."

"My God, and you're really going to *do* it?"

"It works out better this way. We can catch the bastards at the most opportune moment. You need a human to make that judgment. A machine isn't good enough to do it right."

"Olander, you're talking about destroying a *world*!"

"I know." His voice shook. "I know." His eyes found mine at last. The irises were blue, and I could see white all round their edges. "No one *wanted* this to happen. But we're driven to the wall. If we can't make this work, here, there may be no future for anyone."

I had a hard time finding my voice. "If the danger is so clear, where are Rimway and Toxicon? And Earth? A lot of people think the Mutes are open to reason." I was just talking now, my attention riveted to the computer keyboard, to the EXECUTE key, which was longer than the others, and slightly concave.

The laser was cool and hard against my leg.

"Well," he continued, "what the hell. It doesn't matter anymore anyway. A lot of blood has been spilled, and I don't think anybody's much open to reason now. And the only thing that does matter is that they'll kill all of us. If we allow it." He drained the last of his wine, and flung the glass out into the dark. It shattered. "Ciao," he said.

"The nova," I murmured, thinking about the broad southern seas and the trackless forests that no one would ever penetrate and the enigmatic ruins. And the thousands of people to whom, like me, Ilyanda was home. Who would remember when it was gone? "What's the difference between you and the Mutes?"

"I know how you feel, Kindrel."

"You have no idea how I feel—"

"I know *exactly* how you feel. I was on Melisandra when the Mutes burned the City on the Crag. I watched them make an example of the Pelian worlds. Do you know what Cormoral looks like now? Nothing will live there for ten thousand years."

Somebody's chair, his, mine, I don't know, scraped the floor, and the sound echoed round the bar.

"Cormoral and the Pelians were destroyed by their *enemies*!" I was enraged, frightened, terrified. Out of sight under the table, my fingers traced the outline of the weapon. "Has it occurred to you," I asked, as reasonably as I could, "what's going to happen when they go home, and we go back to squabbling among ourselves?"

He nodded. “I know,” he said. “There’s a lot of risk involved.”

“Risk?” I pointed a trembling finger at the stack of equipment. “That thing is more dangerous than a half-dozen invasions. For God’s sake, we’ll survive the Mutes. We survived the ice ages and the nuclear age and the colonial wars and we will sure as hell take care of those sons of bitches if there’s no other way.

“But that thing you have in front of you—Matt, don’t do this. Whatever you hope to accomplish, the price is too high.”

I listened to him breathe. An old love song was running on the sound system. “I have no choice,” he said in a dull monotone. He glanced at his display. “They’ve begun to withdraw. That means they know the Station’s empty, and they suspect either a diversion or a trap.”

“You *do* have a choice!” I screamed at him.

“No!” He pushed his hands into his jacket pockets as though to keep them away from the keyboard. “I do not.”

Suddenly I was holding the laser, pointing it at the computers. “I’m not going to allow it.”

“There’s no way you can stop it.” He stepped out of the line of fire. “But you’re welcome to try.”

I backed up a few paces and held the weapon straight out. It was a curious remark, and I played it again. Olander’s face was awash with emotions I couldn’t begin to put a name to. And I realized what was happening. “If I interrupt the power supply,” I said, “it’ll trigger. Right?”

His face gave him away.

“Get well away from it.” I swung the weapon toward *him*. “We’ll just sit here awhile.”

He didn’t move.

“Back off,” I said.

“For God’s sake, Kindrel.” He held out his hands. “Don’t do this. There’s no one here but you and me.”

“There’s a living *world* here, Matt. And if that’s not enough, there’s a precedent to be set.”

He took a step toward the trigger.

“Don’t, Matt,” I said. “I’ll kill you if I have to.”

The moment stretched out. “Please, Kindrel,” he said at last.

So we remained, facing each other. He read my eyes, and the color drained from him. I held the laser well out where he could see it, aimed at his chest.

The eastern sky was beginning to lighten.

A nerve quivered in his throat. “I should have left it alone,” he said, measuring the distance to the keyboard.

Tears were running down my cheeks, and I could hear my voice loud and afraid as though it were coming from outside me. And the entire world squeezed down to the pressure of the trigger against my

right index finger. “You didn’t *have* to stay,” I screamed at him. “It has nothing to do with heroics. You’ve been in the war too long, Matt. You hate too well.”

He took a second step, tentatively, gradually transferring his weight from one foot to the other, watching me, his eyes pleading.

“You were enjoying this, until I came by.”

“No,” he said. “That’s not so.”

His muscles tensed. And I saw what he was going to do and I shook my head no and whimpered and he told me to just put the gun down and I stood there looking at the little bead of light at the base of his throat where the bolt would hit and saying no no no…

When at last he moved, not toward the computer but toward me, he was far too slow and I killed him.

* * *

My first reaction was to get out of there, to leave the body where it had dropped and take the elevator down and run—

I wish to God I had.

The sun was on the horizon. The clouds scattered into the west, and another cool autumn day began.

Matt Olander’s body lay twisted beneath the table, a tiny black hole burned through the throat, and a trickle of blood welling out onto the stone floor. His chair lay on its side, and his jacket was open. A pistol, black and lethal and ready to hand, jutted from an inside pocket.

I had never considered the possibility he might be armed. He could have killed me at any time.

What kind of men fight for this Christopher Sim?

This one would have burned Ilyanda, but he could not bring himself to take my life.

What kind of man? I have no answer to that question. Then or now.

I stood a long time over him, staring at him, and at the silently blinking transmitter, with its cold red eye, while the white lights fled toward the outer ring.

And a terrible fear crept through me: I could still carry out his intention, and I wondered whether I didn’t owe it to him, to someone, to reach out and strike the blow they had prepared. But in the end I walked away from it, into the dawn.

The black ships that escaped at Ilyanda went on to take a heavy toll. For almost three more years, men and ships died. Christopher Sim performed his more legendary exploits, his Dellacondans held on until Rimway and Earth intervened, and, in the heat of battle, the modern Confederacy was born.

The sun weapon itself was never heard from. Whether, in the end, it wouldn’t work, or Sim was unable to lure a large enough force again within range of a suitable target, I don’t know.

For most, the war is now something remote, a subject for debate by historians, a thing of vivid memories only for the very old. The Mutes have long since retreated into their sullen worlds. Sim rests with his heroes, and his secrets, lost off Rigel. And Ilyanda still entrances tourists with her misty seas, and

researchers with her curious ruins.

Matt Olander lies in a hero's grave at Richardson. I cut his name into a stone, and added the phrase "No Stranger to Valor." When the Dellacondans found it they were puzzled. The epitaph led to a tradition that Olander died defending Point Edward against the Ashiyyur, and that *they* honored his gallantry by erecting the marker. Today, of course, he stands high in the Confederacy's pantheon.

And I: I hid when the Dellacondans came back to find out what had happened. And so I spent three years in a city pursued by an army of ghosts which grew daily in number. All slain by my hand. And when the Ilyandans returned at the end of the war, I was waiting.

They chose not to believe me. It may have been politics. They may have preferred to forget. And so I am denied even the consolation of public judgment. There is none to damn me. Or to forgive.

I have no doubt I did the right thing.

Despite the carnage, and the fire, I was *right*.

In my more objective moments, in the daylight, I know that. But I know also that whoever reads this document, after my death, will understand that I need more than a correct philosophical stance.

For now, for me, in the dark of Ilyanda's hurtling moons, the war never ends.

The End.

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