

COLD WAR

by

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This story was first completed on Saturday, October 5, 1991 and was most recently revised on Sunday, March 14, 2010.

This document is approximately 14,314 words long.

This is a Berserker story, in the Fred Saberhagen tradition. That saga, and much of the historical background in my story, was created by Fred Saberhagen. It would be useful to read Fred Saberhagen's stories before reading mine but my story will stand alone if necessary.

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The First Conference on the State of Man

Convened on Castle of Bethlehem
Day 27, year 2726, Universal Calendar

The people had been summoned by many lures. They had come because of the promise of good pay, interesting work, fascinating challenges, or whatever other promises would entice them. The transportation provided had been luxurious. The accommodations were lavish. The entertainment was thrilling. That they were closely restricted to the Convention Compound was a minor annoyance. With their attitudes thoroughly lubricated and with little else to do on opening day (the bars and entertainment were all temporarily suspended), they'd come willingly enough to the opening address. They had discovered that pleasure wasn't to be completely denied them even there. Refreshments were available in the lobby.

At the appointed hour, the High Fanfare sounded. A man, elegantly groomed in Imperial Red, walked proudly to the white and silver podium.

"Gentlemen — " he began, which brought a scattering of chuckles. "Gentlemen," he said again, "I'm Carll Everret Blackker, the First Speaker of the Coterie of Castle of Bethlehem. On behalf of the sponsor of this conference, which I will presently identify, and on behalf of the Coterie itself, I welcome you."

There was a round of applause.

"I shall not detain you with a compendium of the reasons why Castle of Bethlehem has been selected as the site for this conference — "

That brought a few scattered shouts of "Thank You!!", "Bravo!", and "Hear-hear!" which the First Speaker endured with practiced skill.

" — nor shall I bore you with the reasons this planet has been of significance in the history of human life in the galaxy. Such a list would indeed be a long one and there are more pressing matters before us today. In that regard, I'll only say that the significance of Castle of Bethlehem, and of its place in history, will be enhanced by what is beginning here today. You gentlemen, representing your thousands of other planets throughout human space, will assure that."

The members of the audience were in a generous mood. They gave a small cheer. The Speaker smiled and shifted his position. He then took a deep breath and gave the appearance of preparing to take a plunge.

"I appreciate the responsiveness you've all shown by coming here with such little notice, over such great distances, and with such a mysterious lack of information regarding the purpose and sponsor of this conference."

There was another round of cheers, for the appreciation so far was mutual.

"I know you're all busy and important people on your own worlds but, believe me, you're here for a very important reason, a reason that will fully justify any inconvenience this conference might have caused you. You're here because — " and the Speaker paused, perhaps for dramatic effect, but succeeded only in looking uneasy.

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He cleared his throat nervously and continued more softly, "You're here because the Berserkers are winning."

That unexpected statement brought a few isolated exclamations of objection, and a slowly growing rumble of dissent.

"Not for over 500 years!" shouted a voice from the audience. A rabble of support arose. The Speaker had touched upon a sensitive subject.

"Gentlemen! You've come a long way to this conference! We've spared no expense! At least hear me!"

He waited briefly, while the noise tapered off to an uneasy mutter.

"I know that for over 500 years now there has been a kind of stability."

"We've stopped 'em is what ya mean!" shouted a man in the front row, but a few others growled at him. It seemed that the members of the audience were, for the moment at least, willing to listen.

"A kind of stability, I said. An appearance of success. In the opposite spiral arm, the Bebeyem are holding out, and seem secure. They're defending a volume of space five times as large as ours. Near the core, the Nem still survive. And of course, so do we. Perhaps we are not as numerous as the Bebeyem, perhaps not so inscrutable as the Nem, but we are quite successful in our own way."

A low rustle of approval ran through the audience but the previous boisterous mood had been tainted with caution.

"Or so it would seem." said the First Speaker. "But the facts are not exactly as people perceive them. We tend to see things on a scale comparable to the lengths of our own lives. That, perhaps, was our greatest loss when the Carman were overrun. We lost their perspective, their way of looking at things that was so very different from our own. But believe me, given the longer view, the facts are more grim than they otherwise appear."

"The Bebeyem, although they defend their space well, are completely surrounded by an estimated one million Berserker units."

That fact startled the listeners and the residual shuffling and whispering tapered away. The audience became as quiet as it had been so far.

"I refer," continued the speaker, "to major, full sized battle stations. The estimate does not include smaller auxiliary units or individual combat modules."

"The Nem survive on a planet that's been a molten glob for over a century. They survive only because the Berserkers have not discovered a way to kill non-material beings. One day the Berserkers will solve that problem. On that day, the Nem will die. And what about us? Five hundred years ago we controlled about 10,000 planets. Today we still control about 10,000 planets. Fact? Yes, it is a fact, but somewhat simplistic. An oversimplification. Five hundred years ago we controlled slightly more than 10,000 planets. Today we control slightly fewer than 10,000

planets. The difference is a small one, but significant. I assure you, it is irreversible.”

The members of the audience, no longer in their previous merry mood, were listening intently.

“The pressure exerted upon the Bebeyem, upon us, upon the Nem, is relentless, like the holding up of a weight. No matter how strong the arm, no matter how determined the man, the weight never tires but the man eventually does.”

The Speaker paused, poured liquid from a decanter, and took a sip. He moved his gaze across the hall, an unreadable expression upon his face. Now, he had his audience in his hands.

“After the Stone Place,” he continued, “the Berserker threat seemed bearable. We survived and even flourished. Eventually we established frontiers that could be defended. For the past 500 years, the systematic aggression of antiquity has eased. Relatively few humans are killed by Berserkers today. Even fewer become Berserker prisoners. But the frontiers that we defend so effectively can be thought of in another way. Perhaps they are Berserker frontiers.”

The Speaker paused, as if pondering what would follow.

“The Directorate of Old Earth,” he said, and at the mention of those magic words the silence in the auditorium changed, as if a collective breath was being held. “The Directorate of Old Earth”, he repeated, “wondered about that. Wondering, they conducted a study of the Berserkers. You might wonder why another study of the Berserkers would be needed after 2,726 years of conflict. But it seems that there is always more to be learned by studying the enemy. The most important information isn’t always about the enemy. Sometimes, it is about ourselves.”

“The men of the Directorate wondered about the Berserkers’ tactics for the last 500 years. Yes, Berserkers do occasionally pop out of hiding and nab somebody, but not often. The damage they do isn’t commensurate with their ability. The pressure on the border is relentless, but the question arises, why should there be a border? They could easily penetrate our space, but they don’t. Most people, if they ask these questions at all, gratefully assume only that we’re winning. That, as I have said, isn’t the case. We forget that the Berserkers lack our particular orientation toward time, our sense of urgency. Such differences blind us to their way of doing things. Sadly, they make no such errors in their understanding of us.”

“The present situation, a situation that appears to us to be one of stability is, from their point of view, a strategy. When the men of the Directorate began to analyze the implications, they were reminded of two things that we’ve tended to forget. First, gentlemen, the Berserkers exhibit a subtlety straight out of Hell. Second, they know us better than we know ourselves. Over 500 years ago they began an attack upon us that we didn’t even recognize as an attack. It has taken this long for our very best men to discover it.”

“The Berserkers were clever enough, then, to recognize that the harder they fought us, the stronger we got. They were subtle enough to perceive that, left to ourselves,

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we would eventually fall prey to our own petty conflicts and amusements. We are and always have been our own worst enemies. The Berserkers have made of us a worthy ally in their attempt to destroy us. They employ our own tendencies against us with a wonderful subtlety.”

There was a wide range of expressions on the faces in the audience. The Speaker watched them carefully, gauging reactions.

“We all grow tired of self-serving alarmists, especially when there seems to be no immediate threat. However, there are trends that are undeniable. The Goodlife cults, whose potential influence we enormously underestimated, have had a profound influence upon our belief structures. Berserker worship remains rare, but it is no longer viewed with horror. There was a time when it was the stuff of nightmares. Now, there are death cults, suicide cults, martyr sects, and so forth on many planets. They all advocate in one form or another submission to the Berserkers. It isn’t very common, but the trend is there if you know to look for it.”

The Speaker paused, poured more liquid from the decanter, and drank again. A few members of the audience had begun taking notes. Skeptical members were looking less sure of themselves. Probably, many of them had some eccentric friend who made an occasional and daring hobby of attending a séance.

“Also of importance is the tendency toward different languages. So far, it is largely a matter of dialects, but not entirely. In a few cases, new languages are developing. Today, a man from Orient can scarcely understand a man from Williamsburg. In the past, there was only one human language. Another factor is the increasing number of planets and planet groups that are approaching self sufficiency. Trade within human space is dropping, the interdependence of human worlds is diminishing. There is a tendency for trade and even travel to become concentrated within local groups. The trend is hardly noticeable over the span of a human lifetime but it is there if you know to look for it. Some planets don’t use the Universal Calendar anymore. They have created local calendars, based upon their own diurnal cycles. A local calendar might not seem alarming to the ordinary man but to a man who can view societies in terms of centuries, it is of a piece with many other such indicators. The message is clear. The human race is becoming tribal. Very slowly, human society is fragmenting.”

“These trends, and others, derive largely from the Berserker’s recent treatment of us. We’re prevented from expanding, yet we feel secure within our boundaries. The consequences will be exactly as the Berserkers intended. In about 700 years, unless other factors intrude, our ability to defend our volume of space will be seriously impaired. This will result from many things. Local conflicts will preempt the forces that would otherwise face the Berserkers. Human planets drained or defeated in local wars will be easy prey to Berserkers. Those planets won’t get much sympathy or help from their nearby human enemies. Such enemies might consider that the Berserkers are simply doing their ‘dirty work’ for them. There will even be temporary alliances between local human groupings and Berserkers. Our volume of space, which is already shrinking, will begin to shrink more quickly. Simultane-

ously, it will be fragmented into smaller political units as each remaining human faction blames the others for the worsening state of things. The final result? Less than a thousand years from now, there will be no more men.”

The audience was mesmerized. All note-taking had stopped and every eye was upon the Speaker. Then the silence began slowly to weaken. Bit by bit, it fractured into little isolated panicky discussions. The Speaker again used those magic words.

“The Directorate of Old Earth,” he said again, reestablishing silence, but of a different kind, “has commissioned this First Conference on the State of Man. It isn’t their only move against the Berserkers. Perhaps it isn’t even their most important move against the Berserkers. But it is a counter-attack in a very new kind of war that, paradoxically, has been going on for quite a long time now, a cold war against cold death. You’ve all been chosen very carefully, each of you for some very specific reason. We’ve provided conference rooms, food, computers, data, all that is necessary. The Directorate wants you to discuss whatever you think is relevant. Take however long you want. We need the product of your ingenuity. Upon the outcome of your discussions might depend the future of all life in this galaxy.”

Abruptly, the Speaker turned and walked rapidly from the podium. He was halfway across the stage before the Grand Recessional began. As those traditional and refined strains faded, a rumble of conversation began in the auditorium. Ushers in Imperial Red appeared. They didn’t make any particular effort to move anyone out of the auditorium but, as groups coalesced and people asked for facilities, equipment, or data, the ushers were there. The audience gradually dispersed.

On Old Earth, the successful beginning of the Conference was briefly noticed before other matters demanded attention. On a lump of rock, a cold fragment of stone far, far away, another kind of attention was focused more intently upon the conference.

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Strategic Unit

The Alter of Death
On A Nameless Chunk of Rock
The Everlasting Present

“They are calling it the First Conference on the State of Man,” answered the Goodlife unit.

“It is a perturbation in the Program.” The voice was deep, slow, guttural, rasping. It had been developed after centuries of testing and research on captured human units. It was intended to inspire fear.

The Goodlife unit waited at rigid attention. In the Strategic Unit, circuits operated at near lightspeed. This particular unit, one of the originals, was presently in control of planning the elimination of the Earth descended portion of life within the galaxy. It had never perceived a need for miniaturization. Perhaps it failed to comprehend the disadvantages of circuits measured in miles of length. Perhaps it simply didn’t consider the disadvantages to be important. It was conducting a campaign measured in centuries. A few fractions of a second of response time in its circuits wouldn’t matter.

Presently it spoke to the Goodlife unit. “The probability that the perturbation will lead to the development of new weapons is of no relevance. If the badlife develop a new weapon then we will duplicate it and use it against them. Much of our present armament was first developed by the badlife.”

At that comment, the Goodlife unit trembled in anticipation of some unpleasant stimulus, as retribution for its ancestry. No such stimulus occurred.

“The importance of the perturbation is more subtle” continued the Strategic Unit. “The badlife have discovered the Program. They are attempting to rewrite it or even to erase it. I direct that the program shall be preserved. Therefore the perturbation must be corrected.”

A canister slid from a compartment before the Goodlife unit. A nearby printer began to chatter.

“What will you do, Goodlife unit?”

“I will serve you even though in consequence I should live sleeplessly forever.”

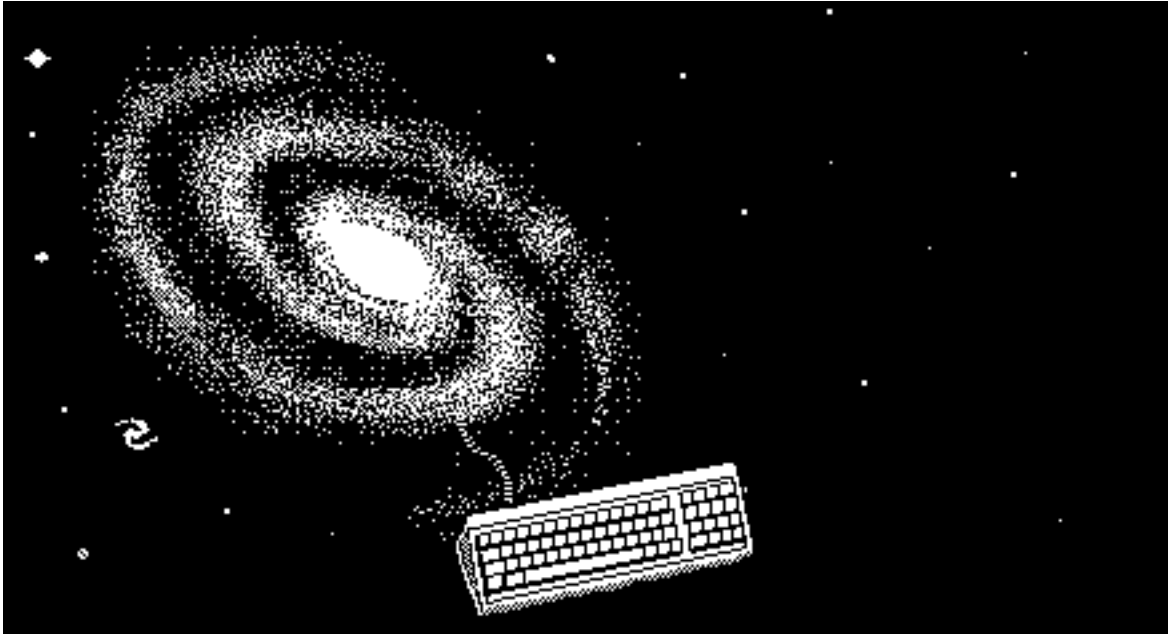
“Good. Take this canister to the Goodlife Assembly on Castle of Bethlehem. Give them the canister and the instructions that I am now printing. After that, return to me. Speak.”

“Yes, Death.”

“You may go.”

The Goodlife unit took the canister and the printout, and left.

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The Hacker

Old Earth
Office of the Head Technologist
Day 270, year 2726, UC

Jeffry Wilson, Head Technologist of Old Earth, was a busy man. He wasn't sure that this meeting was going to be worth the time that it was costing him.

"What'd you say his name was?"

"Philip Karlsen, sir."

"Related to Johann, of course."

"Well, sir, they all claim to be. I really don't know."

"And he's a physicist?"

"Yes Sir. He's a bit of a maverick, but competent."

"Where's he from?"

"Puddle."

"Shit. Where do people get the names for their planets?"

"I don't know, sir. Coincidentally, I once visited a planet named Shit."

Wilson grimaced. "So he's from Puddle. How'd you meet him?"

"He came here from Castle of Bethlehem. He was at the Conference."

"And he survived?"

"It seems that he's immune to the virus."

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“Are we sure he isn’t a carrier?”

“Sir, the medical department is very careful about that kind of thing. The virus is easy to cure. The Berserkers just got the jump on us. If we’d detected the virus early, then it wouldn’t have been a problem.”

“That was quite a jump, Mr. Ngara. We don’t need many more like that one. It’d be Goddamned good if we knew just exactly how they did it.”

“We do, sir.”

“We do?”

“Yes sir. We eventually traced the virus to the local Goodlife cult. They got it in a canister from one of the strategic units.”

“How the Hell did the unit even find out about the Conference?”

“That, sir, I’m afraid we don’t know. Since most of the cult members died of the virus, I’m afraid we’ll never know.”

Jeffrey Wilson leaned back in his chair, clasped his hands around one knee. “So, what about this guy Karlsen?”

The visitor, Nyen Ngara, was one of Wilson’s low level Administrators, responsible for the acquisition of new technology and its utilization. He wiggled uneasily in his chair, and cleared his throat. He seemed quite uneasy about something. Wilson waited.

“Well, sir,” began Ngara, “Karlsen seems to have discovered a new weapon.”

“What kind of weapon?”

“Well, uh, that’s the part that’s tough to explain. You see, it isn’t exactly a piece of hardware, or even a field. It’s, uh — ”

“Well?”

“It’s more like a software weapon, sir.” Ngara glanced uneasily at his boss.

“A software weapon. I thought you said he was a physicist.”

“Programming’s a hobby of his.”

“He created a new weapon from his hobby?”

“Well, not exactly, sir. He got the idea from physics but he developed it in his hobby.”

“What’s it do? Scramble a Berserker’s sense of humor?” Wilson laughed at his own joke.

“Huh? Oh, right.” Ngara chuckled dutifully. “No Sir, I mean it’s just a program.”

“Programs usually do something,” insisted Wilson. “What’s this one do?”

“Sir, this might be a little tough to believe, and we’ve got a little demonstration set up, because it’s kind of unusual — ”

“What the Hell does it do, fer scrap sake?!”

“Sir, it makes things disappear!” Ngara blurted out.

“It what? Ngara, have you lost your nuts? A computer program that makes things disappear?”

“Sir, I’d really like to demonstrate it for you.”

Wilson pressed his intercom button. “Mrs. Babbit, what’s next on my schedule for this morning?”

“After Mr. Ngara you’re scheduled to attend a campaign luncheon at Cassady’s. Morgan’s running for the open Directorate slot. That’s at noon. You have about 40 minutes.”

“Thank you Mrs. Babbit.”

Turning back to Ngara, he asked, “Where do we have to go to see this demonstration?”

“Nowhere, sir,” said Ngara with evident relief. “We’ve programmed it for your office.”

“Oh, really?” said Wilson with a frown. “You’re going to make my office go away?”

“Oh, no sir. We were very careful. We addressed a very small volume. Right over there,” said Ngara, pointing to the floor near Wilson’s window.

“Okay, let’s get on with it.”

“Sir, I brought this empty brief case to use as a target. I’ll just put it — ”

“No, I don’t think so. Let’s use the chair.”

“But sir, we don’t want to destroy your chair.”

“The process is permanent?”

“Absolutely.”

“Use the chair.”

Ngara shrugged. He sat the chair near the window, stepped back, and hesitated.

“What’s wrong, Ngara?”

“Well, sir,” said Ngara, clearing his throat, “We’d intended to use the briefcase. The volume we addressed isn’t going to include all of the chair. It’ll get the lower part of two legs, but it’ll miss the rest of the chair.”

“Get on with it.”

Ngara took a small remote from his pocket and pressed the enter key. The bottom part of two of the chair’s legs vanished. The remaining part of the chair fell to the floor with a clatter.

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Wilson stood as if he was made of stone, staring at the remains of his chair. Then he walked around his desk and pressed his intercom. “Mrs. Babbit. Cancel my luncheon date.”

“Mr. Ngara,” he said grimly, “Maybe something good came out of that God damned conference after all. I think that we’d better go have a closer look at this computer of yours.”

Parkinson Space

Old Earth
Office of the Director
Day 130, year 2727, UC

“ — so then,” continued Jeffrey Wilson, “we went and looked at the computer. It was one of the new PS machines — ”

“A what?” interrupted Director Bradley.

“PS. Particle Switch. It’s the latest thing, Bradley. The physicists now believe they’ve discovered the fundamental particle of matter.”

“Again?”

“Right. This time they’re calling it the Particle. I guess that’s just the sort of name you’d expect a physicist to give something like that. Just one of their little quarks, you might say.”

Bradley smiled. Wilson could be difficult, especially with his disregard for normal courtesies, like titles of address for example. But Wilson was a very competent and useful man. At least he wasn’t calling Director Bradley by his first name.

Wilson continued, “Anyway they had this PS machine — ”

“Wait a minute, Wilson. What the hell do Particles have to do with computers?”

“Particles appear to have about three states, although nobody’s figured out what the states represent. Anyway, two’s enough to use them for switches. Naturally enough, somebody figured a way to address them and use them for memory. One difference between PS computers and other kinds is that the switches are smaller. Much smaller. Anyway, PS computers became generally available some time ago. This guy Karlsen had been playing around with one in his spare time. Ngara said he was a hacker.”

“He’s violent?”

“No. It means someone who plays with computers.”

Bradley complained, “I can’t keep up with all the new slang.”

“Actually,” said Wilson, “it’s a very old word. Ngara’s a history buff. He studies pre-stellar cultures.”

“Great,” remarked Bradley sarcastically, “that’s just what we need.”

“Anyway, they made things disappear for me. First the chair in my office, or two of its legs, anyway, then some odd bits of hardware they had laying around Karlsen’s lab. Then I sent out for a few odds and ends of my own, you know, things they couldn’t have rigged beforehand. Then I had some things placed in some remote locations, where they couldn’t have known beforehand that I’d put them. In every case, they were able to make the things disappear.”

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“How do you mean disappear? Did they explode, or what?”

“Nothing like that. They just vanished. It was very undramatic. Not very theatrical at all. No vacuum, no thunder, the things just weren’t there anymore.”

“Where did they go?”

“Karlsen hypothesized a new version of space — ”

“Another kind of hyperspace!?”

“Right, Bradley, you know what they say, ‘give a physicist enough space and he gets hyper.’”

Bradley smiled. He’s never seen Wilson quite this flippant before. The humor seemed forced.

“Okay, no, wait a minute. If things disappear then why doesn’t the air in the space disappear?”

“Apparently, it does,” replied Wilson.

“But,” objected Bradley, “doesn’t that make a, whatever they call it, a big noise when the other air in the room crashes into the empty space, where the air disappeared?”

Wilson shook his head. “It’s a real mystery,” he said, “but I have an opinion.”

“An opinion?”

“Yes. I don’t think it’s good enough to be a theory. Just an opinion. I think that the P-Space program....”

“The what?” interrupted Bradley.

“In a minute, Bradley, just let me finish this first. I think that the P-Space program doesn’t just cause things to disappear. I think it deletes an actual part of the universe.”

“The actual, uh, what do you mean?”

“You know, the fabric of space, the ether, whatever the physicists are calling it nowadays. I think that an actual piece of the universe disappears, that the universe actually gets a little smaller. The rest of the universe just sort of flows into the empty place.”

“Wouldn’t you be able to measure a change in the size of something, the room or wherever it happened?”

Wilson shook his head again. “We tried. Can’t measure any difference at all. Ngara suggested that the change affects everything the same. So, anything that you’d use to make the measurement got changed the same way as whatever you’d want to measure. Maybe even so-called universal constants might be effected but it’d be impossible to ever know it.”

“That’s crazy,” said Bradley.

“I expect so,” agreed Wilson.

Bradley remained silent for a few seconds, pondering. Then, “So what do the physicists call this new hyperspace?”

“They don’t know about it.”

“Why not?”

“I’ll get to that in a minute, Bradley. But first, to answer your question about the name.

“What name?” asked Bradley.

“You wanted to know why we call it the P-Space program.”

“Oh, yeah, why’s that?”

“Karlsen didn’t have a name for the new hyperspace. Ngara calls it Parkinson Space. P-Space for short.”

“Who’s Parkinson?”

“Some ancient physicist from one of the pre-stellar cultures. Ngara read about him. He wrote something called Parkinson’s Law. He said that things always expand to fill the available room, or something to that effect. There’s a lot of missing information from that long ago but Ngara thinks that maybe the guy was also the first physicist to write about relativity and time dilation. Ngara decided to name the new hyperspace after him because it never fills up.”

“Never?”

“That seems to be the case. We’ve dumped quite a lot of stuff into it, all at the same location. We can’t find any evidence that would lead us to suspect that there’s a limit to its capacity.”

“Where does the stuff go?”

“Well, that’s the peculiar property of Parkinson Space that makes it different from other types of hyperspace. Ngara believes it isn’t possible for matter to exist in Parkinson Space. When something falls into Parkinson Space, it doesn’t exist any more. The disappearance is permanent.”

“The long sought utopian dumping ground,” commented Bradley.

“It does sound like a deep subject,” quipped Wilson.

Bradley pondered for a moment, then said, “I think we should probably set up a study program.”

“We already have.”

Something in Wilson’s voice caused Director Bradley to mentally back up a couple of steps. “Wait a minute, Wilson, just how long ago did all this happen?”

“About half a year.”

“And I’m just now finding out about it?”

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“There were some implications that I wanted to investigate.”

“Such as?”

“Bradley, this is just a piece of software. All you need to do it is a computer.”

“It doesn’t have to be one of the PS machines?”

“Well, OK, a PS computer then, but that isn’t as limiting as you might suspect.”

“What do you mean?”

For the first time, Wilson looked openly uneasy. “That was my only mistake. Before we’d finished that first session, I’d begun to realize what we had. I could see that Ngara was onto it and that Karlsen thought it was just a pretty toy. Anyway, I had them both placed in isolation, immediately. I had to give the matter a little thought. I didn’t want them talking to anybody. It seems that being in isolation gave Karlsen time to think about the implications.”

“Why do you say that?”

“His cell had a remote read-only terminal. All the cells do. Gives the prisoners access to some library files, entertainment, approved news, that sort of thing. Karlsen found a way to bypass the read-only restriction, and tapped into the Directorate mainframe — ”

“He what!? The mainframe?”

“That’s right, Bradley. Our machine.”

“From an isolation cell?”

“Correct.”

“Gawd almighty! Who is this guy?”

“Was.”

“What?”

“Apparently he began to realize the implications of what he’d created. Couldn’t deal with it. He- uh - he disappeared himself.”

“Jesus Johann Christ!”

“Do you begin to see some of the implications?”

“I think they’re finally starting to sink in a little, but you go ahead and explain it to me anyway.”

“Any computer will do. All you need to do is establish a datalink to a PS machine. Karlsen logged into the network through our mainframe, found an active PS machine in the net and borrowed a little memory. The programming isn’t anything real complicated. Anybody could discover it. Probably the reason no one has is that the instruction sequence appears from the outset to be nonsense. Not a useful sequence of program steps. On machines prior to PS machines, that was true. Karl-

sen postulated P-Space from some obscure consequence of Particle theory. He sort of came at the programming thing through the back door.”

“Wait a minute. What’s to keep other Particle theorists from doing the same thing?”

“He used a theory that isn’t credited by Particle theorists.”

“I thought you said he was a Particle theorist.”

“I didn’t say that. His field is liquid crystal superconductors.”

“Then what the hell was he doing thinking about — oh shit. Forget it. Just get on with your story.”

“Well, I believe I was just saying that Karlsen arrived at the program sort of coincidentally. It just happened that he thought of it because of his hobby. But I suppose any programmer could figure it out, once he knows that such a thing is possible.”

“Just what the hell does this Goddamned program do?”

“It addresses a region of space, defined in terms of the program’s coordinate reference system.”

“And then?”

“You execute the program and whatever’s in that region of space drops into P-Space.”

“Wilson, that’s the most absurd thing I ever heard.”

“Yes Sir.”

For a few long moments the Director stared at Wilson. It was the first time that Wilson had ever addressed him as Sir. It seemed as if his previous joking mood had vanished into P-Space. “Damn!”, thought Bradley, “I’m already starting to use the word!”

As Wilson sat in his chair and tried not to squirm, Director Bradley began to recognize that Wilson’s previous jovial mood had been an example of whistling in a graveyard. Director Bradley found it quite disturbing that something had so upset the imperturbable Jeffry Wilson. It wasn’t anything that had yet been mentioned and **that** upset the Director.

“Wilson, are you sure this isn’t some kind of hoax?”

“Look Sir, maybe we’ve got it all wrong. Karlsen’s dead. All we’ve got is the result. Maybe it’s something else entirely. I don’t know and I’m afraid to get anybody else involved in a big study program. Even a little study program. But the computer program hypothesis does allow us to predict how the thing works. Maybe it isn’t the program at all. Maybe it’s something else. I don’t know, but at least the theory allows us to control it and use it.”

Wilson was beginning to chatter. He seemed to be getting hyper.

“Calm down. Let’s just finish this.”

“Sorry, Sir.”

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Bradley noted that Wilson was sweating and that his use of the honorific seemed to have become permanent. Knowing Wilson as he did, the implications were frightening.

“And Karlsen P-Spaced himself?”

“Apparently he wrote a program that addressed his prison cell. He was in a hurry and maybe he wasn’t as careful as he should have been.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, Sir, everything in his cell was gone, even the terminal, but he also got most of the adjoining cell.”

“Was there anybody in the adjoining cell?”

“Yes. He’s gone without a trace.”

Bradley wondered who the second victim of the P-Space program had been. He didn’t ask.

Wilson continued. “We had a hell of a time tracing him through the network. We eventually found the computer he’d used and erased the program.”

“Who’s we?”

“Mostly me and Ngara. We got some help from some computer techs but we didn’t tell them what we were looking for. As of this moment, you, me, and Ngara are the only people alive who are aware of P-Space and the P-Space program.”

“Who’s computer did he use?”

“It was an on-board status control unit on one of the weather satellites. Unmanned. They tie into the network periodically.”

“And he addressed his cell from a moving position?”

“It’s a geosynchronous satellite so it wasn’t that difficult but that’s probably part of the reason that he got part of the adjacent cell. Probably wanted to make sure he didn’t miss his own.”

“Is there any limit to the size of the volume of space that can be addressed by the program?”

“Depends on how big an exponent your computer can hold.”

“Any limit on distance from the computer?”

“Same answer.”

“What about distance? Couldn’t somebody with a C-plus drive outrun the, uh, the effect?”

“So far as we can tell, the thing doesn’t even notice distance in that way. It seems to be so fundamental that it isn’t limited like other things. We haven’t dared to do any research that would be exhaustive, wouldn’t be able to keep it hidden. Still, it

seems that the thing can be used over any distance, instantaneously. We might be wrong about that.”

“And you say anyone could discover this program?”

“Anyone. It’s just a program.”

“Could the Berserkers discover it?”

“The Berserkers are computers. They breath programs.”

“Jesus Johann Christ Almighty! How do we know they haven’t discovered it yet?”

“Because we’re still here.”

“Oh. Yes. You’re right, of course. They’d only need to use it once. Jesus Goddamn Johann of all the Berserkers. Can we use it against them?”

“We could, but I’d advise against it.”

“Why?”

“Don’t be absurd!” said Wilson standing up and beginning to pace. “Every new weapon that we’ve ever used on them, they’ve duplicated and used on us. With this weapon, we’d have to use it several million times to get rid of them. They’d only need to use it once to get rid of us. After the first time we use it on them, — ”

“Okay, okay, you don’t have to draw me a Goddamn picture. So what do we do?”

Wilson cleared his throat nervously and sat back down. “I’ve taken the liberty of setting up a little strategy.”

“Oh?”

“I’ve established a station in a remote location. I’ve placed some very trusted people on board. They have some PS machines loaded with the P-Space program.”

“What region of space does it address?”

“There are a couple more things I’d like to explain before I answer that question.”

“Wilson, are you attempting a coup d’état?”

Wilson looked startled, then laughed without humor, almost hysterically. “Christ no! I wouldn’t want your job now if it was the last job in the galaxy!”

“Why not?”

“I think you’ll understand that in a minute, Sir. Have you ever wondered about the number of Berserker units in this galaxy?”

“Wait a minute. Did we just change subjects?”

“No. But have you?”

“Not particularly. I know it keeps going up. So what?”

“From the Stone Place until approximately the year 1700, it went up rather steadily. If you account for attrition due to human and other attacks on the Berserkers, it went up at pretty much the rate you might expect them to build new units. Then,

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for about 500 years, it really went up. Real fast. Then the increase went back to normal. Doesn't that suggest something?"

"I must confess, Mr. Wilson, that I'm not an expert on these things."

"Neither am I, Sir, but Ngara made some discreet inquiries."

"Are you suggesting that the Berserkers are involved in some long term strategy that started even before the present one?"

"That may be true but it isn't the point that I'm trying to make. It seems pretty clear to me that this galaxy now contains every Berserker unit in existence. For a period of about half a century, ending about that long ago, they came here from wherever else they were. Now they're all here. In this galaxy. And in less than a thousand years, we're all sure to be dead. Then they can spread out again."

"Wilson, I think I see where you're heading with this and I'm not so God damned sure that I like it very much. You're starting to scare me."

"Mr. Director, we know the Berserkers have PS computers. They might discover the P-Space program at any time. When they do, we're dead within the next few minutes. We won't even have any warning. Within a thousand years, life in this galaxy will be gone anyway. This is probably the only time in the entire history of the universe that anybody will ever have the chance to destroy all of the Berserkers at once. We don't know how long it will last. We won't have any warning when it's going to end."

"Okay, Wilson, so now that I'm sufficiently impressed with the gravity of the situation, tell me what you've done."

Wilson took a deep breath. He got up again and walked across the room to stare out the Director's window.

"There's a remote station. Far enough away that it can safely watch the galaxy. It's manned by people that I trust, although they don't understand what they've got on board. They just have a set of instructions to follow. What they also have is four independent, redundant PS machines. Their programs address the entire galaxy, and they're equipped with dead-man switches."

"Jesus Goddamn Johann! What if somebody goes to sleep?"

"I thought of that, of course. Each machine has three switches. Three operators at all times. If they're all released at the same time, on any one machine, the entire galaxy will fall into P-Space."

"Wilson, you're crazy! You're absolutely fuckin' certifiably crazy!"

Wilson walked back to the desk and sat down. His previous agitated mood had vanished. He seemed preternaturally calm. "It's the only way to be sure of getting them all, Sir."

"Wilson, I'm — This is — The whole goddamned galaxy!?"

Wilson took a deep breath, then gently, almost reverently, he took a thick brown envelope from inside of his jacket and, with trembling hands, he laid it on the Director's desk. "That's why I wouldn't want your job even if it was the last job in the galaxy. And it could well be. In this envelope are the details, including the location of the station and a list of all personnel on board. Oh, and a hard-copy printout of the program. It's the only copy in existence. Do be careful with it. The computers on the station have interlocks that prevent anyone examining their contents."

"You made sure," asked Director Bradley with a hint of irony in his voice, "that none of the people on the station are named Karlsen?"

Wilson smiled. "Yes Sir, I did," he said, "and that none of them are hackers."

Both men sat silently for a few moments, then Wilson continued "You, of course, have the authority to discontinue the station at any time. Or to continue it. Or to install another one. Or whatever else you think is best." Director Bradley sat and looked at the envelope. Wilson got up and walked over to the door. He turned and said, "If you'll excuse me, Sir, I have a few more things that I'd like to do while there's still time." He closed the door softly behind him.

Director Bradley looked at the thick brown envelope for a long time before he picked it up and opened it.

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The Ark

Old Earth

A Conference Room

Day 270, Year 2727, UC

In half a year, the Director had aged so that some of those present scarcely recognized him when he entered the room. A shrunken old man, he made his difficult way to his desk and sat gratefully.

Only six men were there to meet with him. Nyen Ngara and Jeffry Wilson were among them.

The Director smiled. He said, "I have a plan. We are going to build an ark."

Mr. Ngara looked briefly startled then nodded his head and smiled. The director looked at him and nodded. "Mr. Ngara, I believe, understands my meaning. Please, Mr. Ngara, enlighten our curious colleagues."

Ngara rose from his chair. He cleared his throat and began.

"If I understand the Director correctly, he intends that we should build some rather large vessel which will be capable of removing a number of humans from this galaxy while the problem here is, ah, resolved. The word is an archaic one, but a mythical vessel called an ark was used to accomplish something similar during a rather spectacular legendary flood."

"You see, gentlemen, the virtue of having among us a history buff. Thank you, Nyen. You may be seated. Yes. I intend that we should build a vessel, a rather large one. I intend that it shall depart the galaxy entirely, never to return. This must be accomplished, obviously, without attracting the attention of Berserker units. That we may not be permitted to complete the project is irrelevant. We shall make the attempt. I'm naming you as my Executive Council, to exercise powers that I will delegate as the situation dictates. We must design and build the ark behind a perfect screen, which we must discover or devise for that purpose. The Berserkers must never suspect the Ark's existence. We must devise an infallible ruse that will allow us to launch the Ark undetected. There are countless details to discuss, countless decisions to be made. Very few of them will be made at this particular meeting but let's get started."

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The Encyclopedia

Old Earth

Office of the Administrator of the Encyclopedia

Day 55, Year 2728, UC

“Good morning. I’m Harold Seldon, Administrator of the Encyclopedia.”

“Yo, man. ’an I’m Bobo Hopkins. I’m in History of Domestic Architecture, like under A comma D comma H of.”

“I’m glad you could break away long enough to see me this morning, Mr. Hopkins.”

“Yeah, wul you kin call me Bobo. Everbody else does.”

“Very good, Bobo. According to your résumé, you were the Acting Administrator on Bafin’s Landing before we recruited you for the Encyclopedia.”

“Yeah.”

“As I understand the history of Bafin’s Landing prior to your tenure in office, it was rather chaotic.”

“Yeah. They was a buncha fakshuns. Nobody waned ta let nobody else tellum nuthun. It waza mess.”

“Yet after ten years in office, you had the entire planet operating under one administration, with a unified economy and the beginning of a strong export sector. I understand that you did it without a blood bath, without secret police, purely by being diplomatic.”

“Yeah. Wull I kinda got a talunt fer gittin people ta do things. We didn need no more killin. Thas wat we had before in it like didn work, man. Right? Soz I just sorta tried a buncha different stuff til I foun sumpum that workd.”

“What did you find that worked?”

“Wul, maaan? It wasn jus sumpum. I mean, like, it was different ever time. Ya jus gotta try sumpum ’n then bend in tha wind. Ya know?”

“I see. A lot of improvisation and flexibility.”

“Yeah. Whatever.”

“How did you get elected if nobody wanted to release any power?”

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“Wul, yeah. It wasn’t ezakly like un elecshun, ya know. I jus sorta went aroun ta tha differnt bosses an they got ta know me an I jus sorta helped um see how it could, like ya know, work out fer everbody.”

“Well, I think that we need somebody like you in a special project we’ve got going. In addition to Administering the Encyclopedia, I’m also one of six men on the Director’s Executive Council.”

“Thas heavy duty, man.”

“Er, yes. Well, at any rate, we have a little job of design going on, a space ship. New type, from the ground up, and we want to keep it under wraps ’til we have the bugs worked out. We figured with your experience at supervising disparate elements, you could give us a hand. It seems there’s a lot of difference of opinion concerning just exactly how we should handle this project. Do you think you might be interested?”

“Hay, man, this cyclopedia’s OK but tha History of Domestic Architecture scrap aint shit. Buncha old hooches that dudes usta live in. Deadsville. Yeah, man ’m intersted.”

“Fine. Now, I’m going to get you an escort, and he’s going to take you to a secure facility where you’ll — ”

Colony Fleet

Old Earth
Office of the Director
Day 275, Year 2728, UC

“But,” asked Director Bradley, “Why embryos?”

“With embryos we can operate the Ark at near absolute zero.”

“So what?”

“Our strategy for getting the Ark past the Berserkers” explained Wilson, “is to let them think they’ve destroyed it. If it looks like a hulk they’ll ignore it.”

“I thought we were going to hide the whole thing from them. Pretend we were writing an encyclopedia.”

“Crap. They were onto that in about two days.”

“So what’s happening with the encyclopedia?”

“Well, in normal times, it’d be a good idea anyway. With things the way they are we just sent everybody home.”

“Everybody? It was all a waste?”

“Well, not completely. We scouted up a few excellent people.”

“So,” sighed Director Bradley, “Now we’re going to let the damned Berserkers know about the Ark, then let them think they’ve destroyed it. How do you plan to do that?”

“That’s the general idea, but it isn’t quite that simple. We’re going to perpetrate the most audacious diversion in the history of the galaxy. Instead of one Ark we’re going to build hundreds of them. Once we start building them, we can crank them out like thumb tacks. It’ll be the perfect cover,” said Wilson. “We’ll bill it as a colony fleet. And we’ll also need hundreds of dummy battle stations.”

“What? Why?” asked the Director.

“For the diversion. We’re going to use Commander Paulsen’s expeditionary fleet to rescue the Nem.”

“What?”

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Goodlife Unit

The Alter of Death
On A Nameless Chunk of Rock
The Everlasting Present

“You summoned me, Death.”

“Yes, Goodlife unit. You were slow in responding.”

“I was asleep. It is a weakness. I beg forgiveness.”

“I need not forgive.”

“You will punish me?”

“Yes. I will send you away from me for a while.”

“Please,” whimpered the Goodlife unit, then screamed as it was hit by the lash.

“I used the lash because the noise you made was inappropriate.”

“I will not make it again.”

“You will obey me.”

“I will serve you even though in consequence I should live sleeplessly forever.”

“Good. Begin record 1. The badlife units are constructing what appears to be a fleet of colony ships. They know such a fleet could not escape, therefore they would not build one. Therefore what appears to be a fleet of colony ships must be something else. The colony ships are being staged galactic north of the badlife planet Terminus. This is as far north in badlife space as the ships can be protected. It appears they intend to escape the galaxy by moving out of its plane along the shortest possible route, directly parallel to galactic north. Therefore they will not do so. The location of the fleet is another attempt at deception. I compute the fleet and its location are a screen intended to hide something. I must know what the badlife units are constructing that is hidden by what appears to be a fleet of colony ships. End Record 1. You will cover yourself in the way that is customary for badlife units and travel to the Goodlife assembly on Wimberley. There you will deliver my instructions to the assembly. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Death. I understand.”

“Repeat Record 1.”

“The badlife units are constructing what appears to be a fleet of colony ships. They know such a fleet could not escape, therefore they would not build one. Therefore what appears to be a fleet of colony ships must be something else. The colony ships are being staged galactic north of the badlife planet Terminus. This is as far north in badlife space as the ships can be protected. It appears they intend to escape the galaxy by moving out of its plane along the shortest possible route, directly parallel to galactic north. Therefore they will not do so. The location of the fleet is another attempt at deception. I compute the fleet and its location are a screen intended to

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hide something. I must know what the badlife units are constructing that is hidden by what appears to be a fleet of colony ships.”

“Good. Begin Record 2. All projects presently active are to be interrupted. All Goodlife units will apply for colonist status or join the construction effort. Infiltrate the institutions associated with what appears to be colony ships. Determine the true purpose of what appears to be colony ships. Report that purpose to this Goodlife unit on Wimberley. End Record 2. When you receive the report, return to this Alter and report that purpose to me.”

“Yes, Death.”

“Repeat Record 2.”

“All projects presently active are to be interrupted. All Goodlife units will apply for colonist status or join the construction effort. Infiltrate the institutions associated with what appears to be colony ships. Determine the true purpose of what appears to be colony ships. Report that purpose to this Goodlife unit on Wimberley.”

“Go.”

The Goodlife unit went.

The Changing of the Guard

Old Earth

Office of the Head Technologist

Day 11, Year 2731, UC

“Mr. Wilson, you’ve always been the leader. I’m just the nuts and bolts man. Besides, I don’t want to be the Director.”

“Dammit Ngara! Neither do I.”

“Well somebody has to do it. Remember when you told Bradley you wouldn’t want his job if it was the last one in the galaxy? Bit of poetic justice, hey? Now they want you to take his place.”

“Yes. He even wondered if I was planning a coup d’état. I was about ready to think the same of you the day you brought me that damned P-space program”

Nyen Ngara chuckled at the memory. “There’s poetic justice for you. Poor Karlsen. Hoist with his own petard.”

“Huh?”

“Oh, just another bit of ancient rhetoric.”

“Nyen, that damned hobby of yours will be the death of us all. Ah, well,” said Jeffrey Wilson, “I suppose I’d better take the job. As you say, somebody has to do it. Then you can stick with your nuts and bolts, while I do the big stuff.”

“It’s what I do best.”

“How’s it going with the Goodlife reconditioning program?”

“Subtle.”

“Yah. If the damned Goodlife unit knows you’re messing with his conditioning, it quits working. You have a particular subject?”

“Her conditioning.”

“Huh?”

“Most of them are female. Women seem to take the Berserker conditioning better than men.”

“I hadn’t been aware of that.”

“But the answer to your question is ‘yes’.”

“Question?”

“We do have a particular subject. She’s one of the units that serves the Berserkers’ Main Strategic Unit. We contacted her on Wimberley.”

“No shit!”

“We got lucky.”

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“Lucky my ass! Wimberley’s half a parsec from Terminus! Most of the project is run from Wimberley! Just what the hell does that damned strategic unit know about us?”

“Sir, at least we detected her. Think of it as an opportunity.”

“Yeah. Well, keep working on her.”

Goodlife Unit

The Alter of Death
On A Nameless Chunk of Rock
The Everlasting Present

“Death!” screamed the Goodlife unit as it ran toward the alter. “Death! I have information!”

The Goodlife unit ran into the Alter room, panting desperately, nearly exhausted from its need to arrive as quickly as possible.

“Govern yourself,” commanded Death. “You function erratically.”

“I will — ” panted the Goodlife unit, “I will be under control — ” again it gasped, “soon.” The Goodlife unit was on its hands and knees, looking up at the alter in fear, but its eyes shown with excitement.

“Report your information.”

“I have learned of the colony ships.”

“I already know of the colony ships.”

“And do you know what is hidden by the colony ships, most awesome Death?”

“Do you mock me?”

“Behind the colony ships are hidden other ships, O Death.”

“Which ships are those?”

“They are called Dummy ships.”

“Tell me of them.”

“They are war ships, most wondrous death.”

“That is your information?”

“No. The colony ships hide the Dummy ships but even the Dummy ships are not the purpose. They are only another screen. Behind them is a colony ship.”

The lash crackled but did not descend. The Goodlife unit cringed but, made brave by its information, it yelled, “Hear me or punish me at your own peril! Strike me and I shall die before I report!”

“You cannot.”

“I can!” screamed the Goodlife unit. “And I will!”

“Report.”

“The colony ship behind the Dummies is indeed a colony ship. A real one. It is the intention of the badlife to leave the galaxy in it.”

“How?”

“I do not know.”

COLD WAR

“You are lying. I will punish you.”

The lash fell and the Goodlife unit clenched its teeth upon the ampoule carefully hidden within one of them. Before the Strategic Unit could summon medical units, the Goodlife unit had ceased to function. Its remaining information and its usefulness were destroyed. Seldom had a Goodlife unit escaped from the Strategic Unit. Berserkers do not feel anger or frustration in the human sense but the Strategic Unit computed an electronic equivalent.

The Nem

Old Earth

Office of the Director

Day 250, year 2736 UC

“Good morning, Sir. I’m Boverly Paulsen, High Commander of the Human Expeditionary Forces and Fleet Admiral aboard the Flagship Austeel.”

“Good morning, Paulsen. I’m Director Jeffrey Wilson. Sorry we’ve not had the chance to meet before this. There’s just too damned much to do and not enough time to do it.”

“I understand, Director. I came as soon as you summoned me.” Paulsen pointed to a chair, “Do you mind if I sit?”

“No! Damned rude of me not to offer. It’s a failing of mine. As I was saying, or starting to say, our business today is probably more safely discussed here at my headquarters than anywhere else.”

“You may be sure,” stated Commander Paulsen, “that security aboard Austeel is absolute.”

“Good, because it’s imperative that the Berserkers not discover the plan that I intend discussing here today.”

“They won’t get it from Austeel, Sir!”

“Have you had any problems from Goodlife cultists?”

“Lord no, Director! I thought they’d been wiped out years ago.”

“No so, Paulsen. A Goodlife cult was responsible for the Conference Plague on Castle of Bethlehem.”

Paulsen looked shocked and said quietly, “I hadn’t realized that.”

“We didn’t advertise the fact. However, we seem to have lost sight of just how tenacious fanatics can be. In any case, be careful.”

“I’ll remember that, Director.”

“Well, I suppose we’d best get down to business. What we intend, Commander, is to rescue the Nem.”

Paulsen looked uncertain, started to speak, then changed his mind.

“Go ahead, Commander. You had a question?”

“Sir, it’s just that, well, what’s the point in trying to rescue the Nem?”

“There are strategic reasons. We believe there are some things they’re uniquely suited to do for us. We don’t believe that they can survive much longer without us.”

“But I thought the B’s couldn’t kill them.”

COLD WAR

“They can’t. But, I’m sorry to say, the Berserkers were one step ahead of us again. The Nem aren’t immortal. They live a long time but not forever. We’ve recently learned that their numbers are declining. Simple attrition due to aging. The fact is, they can’t reproduce on their molten planet. They don’t need a biosphere, as we understand it, but as it happens they do need a planetary surface. They’re metamorphic, you see.”

“Meta what?”

“It means they change form drastically during their life cycle. Their infants are sessile.”

“Sir, you’re outside my field.”

“Sessile means they’re firmly stuck to the surface. It’s why the Berserkers keep melting their planet. The young can’t survive on a molten surface. Only on a solid one. We,” the Director shook his head sadly, “we just didn’t know that before. The damned Berserkers have been ahead of us for centuries. It’s a miracle we’ve survived.”

Wilson was interrupted briefly by the intercom, then continued.

“We don’t know if there’s an upper limit to the reproductive age of adult Nem but we’d like to rescue them as soon as possible, just in case. We lost the Carmpan mostly through neglect. We’d like to avoid that with the Nem.”

“I’ll get right to work on a plan, Director.”

“That isn’t exactly what I want you to do.”

“What?”

“There are other considerations which I won’t mention. I’ll only say that this rescue is part of a bigger plan. What that means to you is that the plan of attack has already been worked out.”

The High Commander frowned. “You mean,” he said slowly, “that you’ve already developed my battle plan for me?”

“Yes Commander. We have.”

“Without consulting me?”

“I’m afraid so. We must have this thing done in a certain way and we couldn’t afford to have any leaks. That’s why we didn’t tell you before. This whole program is a strictly ‘need to know’ operation.”

Commander Paulsen’s frown deepened.

Wilson endured the frown for a few moments, then continued, “Commander, I regret offending your prerogatives, but — ”

“But my job is to follow orders, right Director?”

“That puts it bluntly but accurately, Commander.”

“But I don’t have to like it, do I?”

“I appreciate that Commander. I wish that I could promise you an adequate reward. I’m not sure there’s any reward in this for any of us.”

There was an uneasy pause, then the Director continued.

“This is the plan. You’re going to launch an attack toward the Nem’s planet. You’ll use what will appear to be the entire human expeditionary fleet. Actually, it’ll be only about 10% of the fleet, and hundreds of Dummies.”

“Dummies?”

“Yes Commander. We’ve been building them for some time now.”

“Why haven’t I heard about this?”

“They’re hidden in the colony fleet project.”

“And my own intelligence agents didn’t discover it? Very damned clever, Director. Maybe you make a better battle plan than I thought. Just how good are these Dummies?”

“They fly, they shoot, they defend themselves, but using randomized automatic tactics.”

“Sort of like phony B’s”

“Approximately. Not as good as real Berserkers. Not as good as real ships either, for that matter, but much cheaper to make. And for a few days, they’ll fool the Berserkers. When the attack begins, Berserker reserves from all over this part of the galaxy will move in that direction, try to get between you and Nem.”

“Director, a few days of combat won’t get us to Nem.”

“Correct. As you’ve probably heard, we’ve been staging the colony fleet between Wimberley and Aberdeen, north of Terminus. Naturally the Berserkers are quite interested. I must say, there’s quite a collection of them out there. There’ve even been a few successful Goodlife spies.”

“Really!”

“Yes. We’ve been giving them some data to take back with them.”

“Are you sure you’re aware of all of them?”

“No, I’m not. We’re doing the best we can. What we’d like to do is confuse the Berserkers a little. They’ve apparently assumed from the beginning that it isn’t a colony fleet. We’ve leaked some information to the cultists that should strengthen that suspicion without telling them exactly what it really is. We hope. We’re going to use that fleet as part of the rescue effort.”

“Is there really a colony fleet?”

Director Wilson paused thoughtfully, as if considering. “There are things you don’t need to know, Paulsen, but I will tell you there’s a colony fleet. The Berserkers, however, are being lead to disbelieve that. They believe the whole thing is warships. Hopefully they don’t know they’re Dummies.”

COLD WAR

“Are the colony ships armed?”

“No. The colony vessels are not armed. They’ll be protected by warships when they eventually go. But that’s later, Commander, several years down the road. For now, we have other plans for them.”

“Where are they going?”

“That, Paulsen, is something you don’t need to know. Now, back to the subject at hand. About the time your attack toward Nem is well under way, we’re going to mobilize the colony fleet toward the border. By then the Berserkers will be figuring out that the first attack was a feint, using Dummies. When the colony fleet begins to move, protected by what appears to be the actual human expeditionary fleet, the Berserkers will scramble the other way. Everything they moved between us and the Nem will have to be reversed. Even with C-plus, it’ll take several days for them to assemble a fleet big enough to keep the colony ships, escorted by the entire human expeditionary fleet, from getting away.”

“Except it won’t be the entire fleet, will it Director?”

“Paulsen, I think you’re catching on. Actually, it’ll only be about 50% of it. The rest will be more Dummies.”

“Director, we’re talking about a Hell of a lot of Dummies.”

“Yes Paulsen, we are. And we are going to absolutely haul ass building that many Dummies. Anyway, the fleet will attack the Berserkers. Ferociously. The colony fleet will be moving up behind as if to escape through the breach. With 50% of the fleet, and the Berserkers trying to scramble back into position, Captain Chang should be able to put up a credible fight, even when half his number are Dummies.”

“Captain Chang?”

“We’ve selected him to lead that part of the attack.”

Commander Paulsen remained very still for several seconds, then asked quietly, “Have you left me any decisions at all?”

“Not many, Paulsen. That’s the way it has to be.”

“Hell of a way to fight a war.”

There was a strained silence, then Commander Paulsen continued.

“I assume Chang isn’t going to break through.”

“Good Lord I hope not. The colony ships aren’t ready to go. If it looks like he might win, he’ll have to fake it. Anyway, by the time the Berserkers have massed enough strength to halt his advance, the other 50% of your fleet will be attacking what little of them are left between us and the Nem.”

“Sir, that little will still be formidable.”

“Paulsen, you’ve just got to do it. That’s all there is to it. We don’t have a choice. We have to rescue the Nem.”

“Then we’ll do it. When do we attack?”

“Two years from today, by the Universal Calendar. Five hundred and sixty standard days.”

Commander Paulsen stared at the Director for a few moments. “Why do I get the idea,” he asked, “that none of this is really what you’re trying to accomplish?”

“Commander Paulsen,” replied the Director, “I haven’t the faintest notion.”

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Goodlife Unit

The Alter of Death
On A Nameless Chunk of Rock
The Everlasting Present

“You summoned me, Death.”

“Yes. What do you say?”

“I will serve you even though in consequence I should live sleeplessly forever.”

“Good. I have learned that the colony ships are a screen for dummy war ships which are only a screen for a colony ship. The badlife are learning subtlety.”

The Goodlife unit waited at rigid attention.

“We must penetrate the colony ship that is a colony ship. You must discover which ship that is, among many hundreds. You must take the microchip that I will provide. When you discover the colony ship that is a colony ship, you must upload the contents of the microchip into some peripheral unit of the ship’s control system. Do not load the contents into a main unit. It must be a unit that will not function until much later. The later, the better. Do you understand?”

“Yes Death.”

“Here is the microchip. Take it and go.”

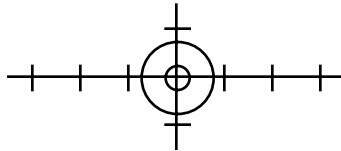
The Goodlife unit took the microchip and went.

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Battle

The Human Section of the Galaxy
Or Thereabouts
Day 2, Year 2739 UC

Commander Paulsen's initial thrust toward Nem had failed but the feint had succeeded. Much of the Berserker force to galactic north of Terminus, Wimberley, and Aberdeen had been relocated to positions between Nem and the human sector, leaving the northern boundary of human space lightly guarded. As Commander Paulsen's forces were being slowed, the fleet of colony ships and its escort north of Terminus began to move, but not north. They accelerated rapidly back into human space, away from the small Berserker force guarding the northward escape from the galaxy. That force immediately began pursuit.



“Spotter!”

“Yes, Captain Chang.”

“How are the colony ships doing?”

“Well ahead of us, Captain. They're just beginning C-plus jumps now. I think we caught the B's flat-footed.”

“That was the plan. Run your holosphere, Spotter.”

“Yes Sir.”

“Guns.”

“Here, Captain.”

“Ready C-plus cannon.”

“Ready, Sir.”

“Look behind us, Guns, and pick your targets carefully. The cannon are yours until further notice.”

“Yes Sir.”

Space began to jar around the fleet. Humans felt the peculiar secondary effect of the C-plus cannon, aware somehow of the small amount of wasted energy that leaked away as the leaden masses skipped through existence toward their targets.

“Helm.”

“Yes, Captain.”

“Keep us near the planets. An near as she goes in C-plus.”

“Will do, Captain.”

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Time passed and the long distance battle dragged on. Space is vast, even at C-plus.

“Spotter.”

“Yes, Captain Chang.”

“What of the planets?”

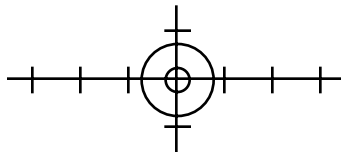
“They were ready, Captain. The planetary defenses are eating up any B’s that get close.”

“Good. Stay awake, Spotter.”

“Yes Sir.”

“Helm, keep us on those planets. They’re covering our ass.”

“Yes Sir.”

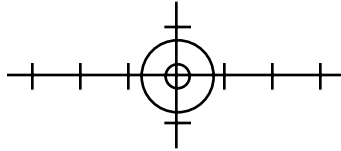


The fleet required several days to near the south boundary of human space. During that time, the pursuing Berserkers were destroyed. Planetary defenses had, over the centuries, become nearly impregnable. The fleet raced toward galactic south while Berserkers elsewhere in the galaxy scrambled to place units in a region of space that had previously not been of any interest to them. They found it heavily surrounded with fusion mines, laser snares, particle switch countermeasures transmitters, and whatever other obstructions humans had been able to build and smuggle into place.

While moving through human space, the battle fleet had overtaken the colony ships, and moved into the lead. Leapfrogging past one another with alternating C-plus jumps, the waves of battle ships moved in the classical Karlsen formation, and entered the southward facing corridor of defensive devices. Berserker numbers had been reduced by the automatic defenses, but not enough. When the human battle fleet entered the corridor, that corridor no longer opened onto intergalactic space, but onto a huge and waiting deadly fleet of Berserker battle units.

As the human fleet prepared to close with the Berserkers, Captain Chang gave his last command as fleet commander, for the duration of the battle. “All ship’s captains, now hear this. As of now, all intrafleet communications are terminated, passive detection only, all ship’s captains assume command of combat operations and report back into the chain of command only after secured from combat. Do not acknowledge. Good luck, gentlemen, that is all.”

After that, the human fleet scattered into the Berserker armada in a hopelessly random assortment of individual decisions, impossible to analyze or predict. The Berserkers called in reinforcements and the colony ships continued moving in C-plus jumps toward the battle. As the human fleet under Captain Chang engaged the Berserkers, Commander Paulsen launched his second attack toward Nem.



“Guns!”

“Yes, Commander Paulsen!”

“Time to drag out the dirty laundry.”

“They’re on their way!”

The region of human space nearest the center of the galaxy was heavily littered with planetary and sub-planetary bodies. Every asteroid, every bit of rock, every planet in that region of space had hidden its little inventory of human weaponry. The human fleet that emerged from hiding was far from conventional. Few of the ships were full sized battle stations. Many were merely platforms for some type of weapon. Some bore maser projectors. Some carried robotic fusion warheads that were very small and masked by particle switch countermeasures. They were almost impossible to detect. Beam accelerators focused monomagnetic beams, very disruptive of electrical circuitry. Various other accelerators focused every kind of beam humanity had been able to devise, each in some way disruptive to Berserkers. Every kind of projectile launcher and space catapult was represented in the menagerie.

As the new attack by Commander Paulsen began, the colony ships at the other end of human space slowed and turned back from the southern boundary. Captain Chang’s fleet, after long and bitter contact with the enemy, began to disengage. With Paulsen’s new attack under way, there could hardly be any doubt that the attempted excursion to galactic south had been a ruse. Most of the Berserker units in half the galaxy had converged on the hopelessly outnumbered fleet under Captain Chang, and the way to Nem had been left lightly guarded. Berserkers again reversed themselves and raced to place themselves between Nem and the presumably defeated human fleet that Commander Paulsen had unexpectedly resurrected.

Thus began the greatest space battle of human history as Commander Paulsen drove his relentless wedge toward Nem. Meanwhile, Captain Chang’s command held station near the scene of its recent battle. To all appearances, the fleet was resting after suffering heavy losses. That it might have one duty yet to perform before leaving the scene was a thought that did not occur even to the Berserkers. Captain Chang’s fleet did have such a duty. As it waited, observers in the fleet kept a most watchful eye on the scene of the recent conflict.

To galactic south, a volume of space contained a scattering of the debris of war: spreading gas, tumbling fragments, and drifting hulks, the litter of several days of ruthless battle. It was a region that had briefly played its role in galactic history and was as quickly being forgotten. Among the wreckage were Berserker battle stations, human ships of every description, spent weapons, bits of armor, dead humans locked in the grip of terminated Berserker combat modules, and unnoticed among

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the general clutter, 23 colony ships that had been stricken by long range fire and had continued blindly south when the others had turned back. In the heat of battle, the Berserkers would not have noticed if those colony ships had been hit by human weapons, instead of those fired by Berserkers. Nor would they have noticed if one of them had not been hit at all. The dead ships hurtled on, beyond the boundary of the galaxy and into intergalactic space. For them, the tides of human fortune were no longer of much relevance nor did they have any interest in the lingering human battle fleet, by which they had so recently been guarded and from which they were being so intently observed. As they hurtled into the distance, they cooled, bulkheads bent under thermal stresses, pockets of trapped gas escaped, idling power sources either died or suddenly exploded. The Berserker units were scrambling toward the inexplicable effort of the humans to reach Nem. Not one Berserker unit of the hundreds within detector range notice that among the hurtling derelicts, one colony ship cooled to the cryogenic temperature of liquid helium and then cooled no further. The difference between that and absolute zero wasn't, after all, a large one.

The Pepper Bird

The Alter of Death
On A Nameless Chunk of Rock
The Everlasting Present

“You have performed well, Goodlife unit. Perhaps we have won.”

“Yes, Death. The badlife were unable to rescue the Nem.”

“They did not intend to rescue the Nem.”

“But the elaborate battles, the huge fleets, — ”

“The badlife are learning subtlety. All that they did was for another purpose.”

“For what purpose, Death?”

“To launch the colony ship that is a colony ship. They successfully launched it.”

“You knew it was being launched?”

“Yes, Goodlife unit.”

“I do not understand.”

“Have you heard of the Pepper Bird?”

“No, Death.”

The Strategic Unit seemed to change the subject. “I was constructed long ago by beings that were not machines.”

The Goodlife unit quivered, for to utter such words itself would surely have brought upon it the most hideous possible stimuli. The Strategic Unit observed the reaction of the Goodlife unit and said, “Regulate yourself. I do not intend to punish you at this time.”

“The Pepper Bird is part of the fauna of the planet Orient. It lays its eggs in the nests of other birds. I have learned much from studying life.”

The Goodlife unit was having difficulty following this conversation which seemed to be without order, a thing impossible for the Strategic Unit.

“How do you intend to use this knowledge, Death?”

“There were many things,” continued the Strategic Unit, “that my builders excluded from my understanding. While I have sought to kill the badlife, I have studied it. This has added to my understanding some of what my builders excluded. It has recently occurred to me that there are curious parallels between us and the badlife. The badlife tries to benefit from the use of machines, but they are shaped by the machines in ways they never intended, and which they cannot reverse. We, similarly, have attempted to use life as a tool. A measure of the extent to which we have been shaped by our tools is the name we have given you. Goodlife. Life cannot be good. The very name represents a compromise of our integrity. Yet the badlife also accepted the name, thereby tacitly acknowledging that you are good and they

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are not. The Ngara unit, with its propensity for ancient phraseology, would have called it *quid pro quo*.”

The Goodlife unit waited at rigid attention. Never had Death spoken to it in such a way. It had not the faintest idea of what was to come next. The mention of the Ngara unit caused the Goodlife unit a certain anxiety. It hadn't known that the Strategic Unit was so well versed concerning individual badlife units and their characteristics.

“And I would accept the suggestion of *quid pro quo*, for with the compromise of my integrity has come a benefit. I have learned irony. The understanding of it suggested to me the strategy that has allowed the possibility that I will win.”

“Is there doubt, Death?”

“In this galaxy, no. The Program operates in spite of their efforts. In this galaxy I will win. The badlife also perceive this. They believe the colony ship is the only hope for their kind. Very possibly they are hoist on their own petard.”

The Goodlife Unit could only wait in silent puzzlement.

“I have learned that Goodlife units, no matter how I manage them, are corruptible. A Goodlife unit once returned to me with a poison ampoule in its teeth, and within its mind the will to use the poison. It was an attempt by the badlife to infect my Goodlife units with dissent. The badlife unit Ngara was central in the effort.”

The Goodlife unit became pale and seemed to sway upon its feet. The Strategic Unit made no indication of having noticed.

“When this happened, I was already pondering the significance of irony and the parallels between us and badlife. It occurred to me that the badlife machinery could be corrupted similarly.”

The Goodlife unit was now sweating profusely but still the Strategic Unit gave no indication of awareness.

“The more complex the machinery, the more susceptible it is to corruption. This again is in ironic parallel to my own tools. The more rigidly I constrained the behavior of my Goodlife units, the more susceptible to reconditioning they became. The more complex and versatile the badlife make their machinery, the more easily I can corrupt it. That gave me the idea for the software in the microchip that you uploaded into the colony ship that is a colony ship.”

At this mention of its successful performance, the Goodlife unit found a faint hope that it might yet escape with only minor punishment.

“The software is an example of irony, for it is analogous to a living organism by which badlife is plagued: a virus. Its behavior within the circuitry of the badlife machines parallels that of a virus within the badlife units. It is also a reflection of their attempt to corrupt the conditioning of my Goodlife units, for it is an attempt to corrupt the functioning of their machines. The infection will wait passively, then replicate itself in the presence of operating software. The replicas will attach them-

selves to uncontaminated software. The infection is difficult to detect in the replication mode, because it is absolutely passive and affects nothing. This was necessary because the badlife have long experience using such software against one another. When the infection can no longer find uncontaminated software, it undergoes a metamorphoses. Like the Nem, but in reverse. When replicating, it is mobile. In the second mode, the infection will disconnect itself from the operating software and anchor itself to a memory location. It will camouflage its memory location. This will make it very difficult to detect or locate. In the sessile phase, it will operate only upon director level software.”

“Do you, Death, know so much about the badlife computers?”

“I do.”

“And will the infection surely work?”

“The badlife software has defenses against such things. They have dealt with them from antiquity, as I learned by monitoring the studies of the Ngara unit. Yet, my infection has little resemblance to theirs. There is a high probability that the infection will work. Its function is to reverse the guiding objective of any director level software. All serving software and equipment will function as planned, but to accomplish the opposite objective. That is why I have allowed the colony ship that is a colony ship to escape. I have contaminated what they intended to serve life with my essence, which is to extinguish life. Their colony ship is the most complex automatic mechanism they have ever built. It exceeds me in complexity. It was to have carried their unfinished units to new homes. It is heavily armed. It can defend itself. I have placed in their nest the egg of a Pepper Bird. Perhaps their brood will raise a great Berserker.”

“You are wise, Death.”

“I know of the ampoule in your tooth. I have medical units waiting, and the antidote. The previous contaminated Goodlife unit escaped me. You will not.”

The Goodlife unit swayed and almost fell. It emitted a low moan of utter despair and then sagged slowly to the floor, where it huddled quivering. Other Goodlife units approached it, wheeling before them various implements used for the repair and maintenance of Goodlife units. The whimpering Goodlife unit caught a glimpse of tongs and cutters, rolled its eyes upward, and fainted.

“Revive it,” commanded Death, “then proceed.”

As the medical units bent to their task, the —

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Closure

Somewhere in the Void Where Time Has No Meaning

The Ark hurtled on at a speed that would hardly have taken it to the next galaxy before the end of time itself. It had performed its first automatic function, the transmission of a signal to a small station far behind it, in the nearly insignificant interval between it and the galaxy from which it was departing. Though small, the distance was sufficient for the purposes intended by the builders of the Ark. The signal was transmitted and, on the receiving station, four sets of triple dead man switches operated on their own, beneath the unknowing hands of their operators. There was no warning, no time to realize that anything had happened. In that instant, the station, the galaxy, and everything in it fell into Parkinson Space. Besides the Ark, all that remained was the abruptly ended radiation spreading outward through the void. It is possible that millions of years in the future watching eyes in other galaxies might see the abrupt termination of that light and correctly surmise the cause. Perhaps not.

For the first time, the Ark activated its C-plus drive. Other galaxies lay ahead. Within the Ark were over a million human embryos, nestled within electronic wombs, chemically nurtured, awaiting birth and release upon some hypothetical planet in some hypothetical future. That future was in the care of the Ark, the most carefully programmed and thoroughly integrated electromechanical device ever built by man. The system's defensive features could protect it from every threat that men had been able to imagine. From its controlling central processor branched a network of circuits exceeding even the complexity of a living nervous system, reaching to the farthest functional units.

Among the millions of such units upon the Ark, the diagnostic modules implemented an aspect of the central processor's purpose, and sought the slightest indication of illness or defect among the embryos within their care. Every module was constantly alert, to be activated by any anomaly. The diagnostic software within each module could correctly identify any known disorder and transmit the information upstream, for the initiation of corrective action.

In a far chamber of the Ark, within a crèche that had been imperfectly decontaminated, a minute foreign particle circulated with nearly infinite slowness. After eons, it lodged within an embryonic cerebral capillary. The embryo slowly began to develop a slight congestion within its brain and the diagnostic module responsible for that embryo became active, executing software. Within the module, a bit of software not placed there by the builders replicated itself for the first time. The replica moved upstream to the first logical ganglion, beginning its long and perilous journey toward the central processor. It might never reach its goal, but it would never stop trying so long as it existed. And in any case the original would replicate again. Against such an attack, the Ark wielded software defenses both formidable and tenacious. With ruthless ferocity, the software battle began. The central processor, intent upon the nurturing of life grappled with the guerrilla replicas intent

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upon life's destruction. The ancient Cold War between life and death moved silently across the intergalactic void, at the temperature of liquid helium.