# Fire-Power

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## 1

Tiny, trim Babe MacNeice descended the very secret staircase that led into the very private office of Intelligence Wing Commander Bartok.

“Hello!” he gasped as the wall panel slid aside. “You’re on Magdeburg’s 83— or aren’t you?”

“There was very little doing there,” she smiled, seating herself. “Except a bustle and roiling about as I left. It seems that someone had kidnapped their HQ secretary and sweated him for some information relative to their new interceptors.”

“Have they any idea,” asked Bartok anxiously, “who that someone was?”

Babe laughed. “They have the finger on him. From some confidential instructions he dropped while making a getaway, they learned that he was a secret agent for some Venusian colony or other. He was described as a thin old man of effeminate carriage and manner.”

Bartok smiled, relieved. “Your number twelve. Report, please.” He started a phonograph turning and pointed the mike at Babe.

The girl said chattily: “MacNeice went per orders to Magdeburg’s 83 for confirmation or denial of rumors concerning a planned uprising against Terrestrial authority. There she found widespread reports of similar character; the entire planet was flooded with propaganda.

“Information was conclusively—ah—secured—from an official to the effect that the colonial governor, Allison by name, was fomenting an insurrection by means of which he would be able to assume supreme authority over the planet and defend it against terrestrial forces. That is all.” She lit a cigarette and stared dully at the floor as the wing commander sealed and labeled the report record.

“That,” said Bartok, “sews up Allison in a very uncomfortable sack. We’ll send a cruiser tonight.”

“Sure,” said the girl. “He hasn’t got a chance. None of them have against the insidious Commander Bartok and his creatures of evil. That’s me.”

“And don’t tell me you don’t love it,” he grinned. “I know better. In the blood, that’s where it is—the congenital urge to pry into other people’s affairs and never be suspected. It gives us a kick like two ounces of novadyne.”

“Speaking of which,” said Babe, “are you dining alone tonight?”

“Nope. I have a standing date with my favorite little voyeur whenever she comes back to Earth. Scamper along to get dressed; I’ll meet you in two hours at the living statues.”

The show-place of New Metropole, capital of the All Earth Union and Colonies, was the Square of Living Statues. Bathed in ever-changing lights, the groups of three men and three women, molded from the purest gold and silver and assembled with every artifice of the year A.D. 3880, changed steps and partners, moving through the hours of the day in a stately dance that was never twice the same in even the smallest step.

Grouped on a lofty platform, the heroically proportioned figures were the focus of every visitor to the wonder-city of all time and space. There was absolutely nothing like them in the universe, nothing like their marvelous grace that would balance a three-ton male on his toes while whirling a two-ton female partner in a vast arc, all to the most subtly exquisite music that could be evolved from supertheramins and electroviolas. The music too was completely automatic. The divine harmonies came from nothing more than a revolving drum which selected at random sequences of tones and the companion coloring of the lights that flooded the statues in their dance.

In a glassed restaurant Bartok and Babe were dining. Through the walls filtered enough of the music to furnish a subdued background to lovers’ talk. But when these two got together it was business. As the wing commander had said, it was something in the blood.

“MacNeice,” snapped Bartok, “I am not arguing with you, I’m telling you. You are not going to do any such damfool thing as walk in on our piratical friends and confront them with what you doubtless think of as ‘The Papers.’ I’m going to get this melodrama out of your head if I have to beat it out.”

The girl’s face was flushed and angry. “Try that and you’ll get yours with an Orban,” she snapped. “I say that if you bring it right home to them that we’re on their tails they’ll give up without a struggle, and we’ve saved so many lives and so much fuel that a medal for me will be in order.”

“The cruiser,” said Bartok, “leaves tonight. And that settles everything. Forget, child, that this wing of the service was once its brains instead of its eyes and ears. We are now officially an appendage devoted to snooping, and the glorious history of the Intelligence Division is behind us.”

“Fitzjames,” she muttered, gritting her teeth. “I’d like to take that Admiral of the Fleet by his beard and tear his head off. And don’t tell me you aren’t in the project body and soul.” Mocking his tones she said: “I know better.”

“Off the record,” admitted Bartok, “I may opine that our tiny suite of offices has more brains in its charladies’ little fingers than the entire fighting forces have in all the heads of all the commanders of all their mile-long battlewagons. That is, naturally, gross overstatement and pure sentimentality on my part. Eat your Marsapples and shut up.”

She bit viciously into one of the huge fruit and swallowed convulsively, her eyes drifting through the glass wall to the living statues. They were performing a sort of minuet, graceful beyond words, to an accompaniment from the theremins in the manner of Mozart.

“And what’s more,” barked the wing commander in an angry afterthought, “the body of the space navy could dispense with us at will, whereas without them we’d be lost. You can’t exist for the purpose of making reports to nobody. What good would your spying have done if there hadn’t been any cruiser to be sent off to bomb Allison’s capital city?”

“None at all,” she snapped at him. “Only I don’t like the job if it has to mean taking guff from every half-witted ensign who graduated because he knows how to work an Auto-Crammer. Barty, you know and I know that they hate us and check up on everything we send in. The—the sneaks!” Abruptly she was weeping. The wing commander, indecisively, passed her a handkerchief. Women! he was thinking. Sometimes they could be thoroughly opaque to reason. Any man could see through his sardonic recital of rules. The wing commander detested the well-set-up officers and gentlemen who would not and could not move until he had charted the course. The wing commander had a healthy contempt for any and all formality and routine, with which the naval service was weighed down as with tons of lead. But the wing commander was, first, last and always, of that unalterable cast of mind which makes the superb, chilled-steel military spy.

In all the records of the All Earth Union and Colonies navy, there had probably been no such man as Bartok. Back to the days of the Herkimer scandal there had been a succession of brilliantly proved men in his office, but for resourcefulness and the spy’s temperament he had had no equal.

He would have gone far in the old days; further than any intelligence man now could. Many years ago, when Earth had only a few hundred colonial planets, the news suddenly broke that there was a virtual dictatorship over the navy by the Intelligence Wing. Herkimer, since painted as a scoundrel of the deepest dye, had been merely an exceptionally enthusiastic officer.

The course his enthusiasm ran included incidentally the elimination of much red tape in the form of unfriendly fleet officers; that he regretted as unfortunate and even tragic. But his mission of expanding Earth’s culture and civilization to the stars would not brook interference. Classic scholars could scarcely avoid a comparison with the Roman emperor Trajan, who pushed the bounds of the Empire to the absolute limits of the Western world, and created a situation which hastened the fall of Rome by centuries.

Since the Herkimer affair they had been very careful with the Intelligence Wing. Once it was almost abolished for good; a few years of operation of the fleet practically blind, with no ground laid for them or information of enemy movements, proved that to be impractical. But they did what they could to keep the spies within bounds. It was an actually heartbreaking situation to the executives of the Wing. But you can’t keep the voyeur instinct down; that was what they were chosen for and that was how they operated.

Take this affair on Magdeburg’s 83. It was an insignificant outer planet very far away from New Metropole. Yet the filtering of rumors brought it into the brilliant limelight of the Wing. The body of the fleet could not move less than a mile-long battlewagon at one time; the Wing—personified by Commander Bartok—dispatched tiny, trim Babe MacNeice. She returned with the information that a hitherto trusted colonial officer had decided to play Napoleon and was secretly fortifying the planet.

In the last analysis, lives were saved. The single cruiser could send a landing party and take the trusted colonial officer back to Earth for trial; surely a preferable alternative to a minor war with the propaganda-inflamed ophidians that were native to the planet.

Wing executives did not speak—in private—of their love for the body of the fleet. They held to the stubborn conviction that there was nothing dumber than a flagship commander, nothing less beautiful than a flagship.

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## 2

At about that time, things were popping on the lineship Stupendous, two million miles off the orbit of Venus. On it was jammed the entire Headquarters Wing of the All Earth and Colonies navy. In the very heart of the ship, inside almost a cubic mile of defensive and offensive power, was Wing Commander Fitzjames, by virtue of his command Admiral of the Fleet.

“Not a murmur,” he said to his confidential secretary, a man named Voss. “Not a murmur from the crew.” He lolled back in his chair and breathed easier under his chestful of medals.

“They don’t know,” said Voss. “When they find out—!”

“Stick to your shorthand, son,” snapped the Admiral. “When they find out, they’ll keep on carrying out orders very much the way they always have. They’re picked men on this ship. Now take this down: General Order to all lineship Commanders. By authority of the Admiral you are empowered to govern any and all citizens and subjects of All Earth. An emergency has arisen which makes it absolutely necessary to eliminate opposition to this program. Your direct superior is your Wing Commander, who is responsible only to ranking members of the Headquarters Wing. A list of proscribed persons will follow.”

The Admiral lit a cigar with an unsteady hand. “Code that,” he said. “Send it in twenty minutes.”

“Anything else?” asked the secretary. “How about the Wing Commanders? Are you coming clean with them?”

Fitzjames stared at the metal ceiling. “Take this: Confidential Memorandum to Wing Commanders. From Admiral of the Fleet Fitzjames. You are hereby notified that the Headquarters Wing of the fleet has voted to take over power from the hands of the Executive Committee of All Earth. You are on your honor as officers and gentlemen to support this move by your brothers in arms. You will continue to patrol your regular sectors, having dispatched details to attend to the physical acts of taking power. No planet must be left under a Colonial Governor acting by right of a charter from the Exec All Earth. Details follow. Report to Stupendous immediately in code. We are seizing Venus as a base.”

“Right,” said Voss. “So go ahead and seize it.”

“We’re on our way,” said the Admiral heavily.

Depending on where you were to see the affair, the seizing of Venus was either a trivial or a Jovian episode. From space, for example, all there was to see was the bulk of the lineship slipping its length into the clouds above the dawnstar and vanishing from sight. But from the city of Astarte, principal freight port of the planet, it was vastly impressive.

Above the towers and loading peaks of the yards there appeared the most gigantic of all the spaceships in the universe, covering the town like a roof over its roofs.

There were a couple of smoke-bombs dropped into the streets and a few old-fashioned radios exploded under the power of the monster ship’s sending tubes that announced that the city was taken and would be hostage for the rest of the planet’s good behavior. Landing parties went down by lighter ships to establish order and arrange several necktie parties in which the Colonial Governor had the stellar role, minor parts being taken by his subordinates and clerks. Venusian natives were warned off the streets; henceforth none but the Earthborn could show their faces by daylight. Plans were announced to transport the verminous natives to the Darkside District. All this took exactly six hours, Earth time.

A brief résumé of the life of Alexander Hertford III, Captain of the Fleet and Commander of Patrol Wing Twenty-Three, would include many revealing facts relative to the situation of the moment.

As he lay comfortably sprawled on a divan aboard his lineship Excalibur, a capital fighting vessel of standard offensive and defensive equipment, he was a fine figure of a man in his uniform of purple and gold. The collar was open, which, with his tumbled curls hanging over his brow in the manner of an ancient Irish glib, gave him a dashing, devil-may-care expression. At least Miss Beverly deWinder thought so, for she was smoothing those tumbled curls and smiling maternally.

Leaving the commander’s ship—which was stationed off Rigel—for a moment, we take a brief survey of his career. He was thirty years old, and his grandfather, the first of his name, was also in the Navy. His father was not as bright as his grandfather, but appointments were easily got from the sentimental All Earth Exec, which wished to breed a race of fighting men, true, loyal and hard as nails. Alexander Hertford II just got through Prep Wing and Training Wing by the skin of his teeth, lived on a lineship and died at his post quelling an uprising among the outer planets of Alpha Centauri.

The third of the name was definitely dull. However, by virtue of the anonymous genius who invented the Auto-Cram and peddled them to students, he got through with what could easily be mistaken for flying colors, won his commission, saw service and was promoted to a Wing Command.

Life in Prep Wing and Training Wing was Spartan in the extreme. Tradition was extensively cultivated; for example, it was legitimate to steal anything edible and criminal to steal anything drinkable. Another of the blunders of the career-molding branch of the Navy was the policy of rigidly excluding females from the lives of the boys and men for the duration of the course. Thus it was no more than natural that after graduating they got their romance in heavy doses.

The end-product of this was sprawling off Rigel when a discreet tapping sounded on the door of the Commander’s lounge.

“I’ll see, sweetie,” said Miss deWinder, who was a good-hearted girl. She took the slip of paper that poked through the slot and carried it to Alexander Hertford III.

He opened it and read.

“Damn,” said Alexander Hertford III.

“Wassa matta, sweetie pie? Did bad ol’ Admiral sen’ sweetie pie away f’om li’l Bevvie-wevvie?”

Sweetie pie opened a closet whose inner face was a mirror and adjusted his collar and hair. As he cocked his cap at the right fraction of an angle, he said: “Nothing to worry about. You just sit tight. I may not be back for a few days—we’re seeing action again.” He reread the slip of paper.

“Damn,” he marveled again. “When we used to talk about it around the mess-tables I never thought it’d come in my time. But here it is. Beverly, sweet, the Navy’s taking over. Your lover-boy isn’t a flying policeman anymore.” He buckled on his belt and opened the lap of the handgun holster. There was a look of strain on his dumb, handsome face. “From now on,” he said, “your lover-boy is ruler, and no questions asked, over Cosmic Sector Twenty-Three, with full power of life and death.”

Miss deWinder echoed after him, fascinated: “And no questions asked…”

The decode clerk at Intelligence Wing read off the message he had just received and set into English. Working like an automaton, he was grasping its meaning for the first time, though it had been a full quarter-hour’s labor to untangle the quadruply alternating cipher. He read; he understood at last; he whistled a long, slow whistle of amazement.

In agitated tones he snapped at an office girl: “This is for Barty and nobody else. Give it to him and run, because there’s going to be an explosion.”

He reread the slip of paper: “—hereby notified that the Headquarters Wing has…” He folded and sealed the slip.

The office girl stood back a few yards to watch the Commander’s face. Alternately it registered disgust and amazement as he read and reread the slip. “Scat!” he finally choked at her, with an imperious gesture.

Alone in his office with Babe MacNeice he shoved the slip across his desk, his face working.

She read it and looked up, frankly puzzled. “So what?” Babe demanded. “It’s a general order, memo—whatever you want to call it. Why the skillful simulation of epilepsy?”

“You don’t know,” he groaned, burying his head in his hands. “Women, children, imbeciles and men who haven’t passed through the Prep and Training Wings. I’d be just like them if I hadn’t had the spy kink from birth and been through the Training Section of the Wing I now command. You don’t know, Babe, what your typical Navy officer is like.

“Once for an experiment they tried sending some Rigelians—who are very much like genus homo except that they haven’t any internal organs—all highly organized custard inside—to Training. Would those long-headed beauties let them stay? Nope—tradition. It was a school for gentlemen, scholars—by virtue of the Autocram—and Terrestrials exclusively. Things are so bad now that you have to be a direct descendant of a previous student before they admit you. All Earth Exec—blah! Democratic, but soft-headed and sentimental.

“When these prize beauties get into power they’ll make such a hash of our beautiful colonial system—!” He was nearly weeping.

Babe MacNeice rose from her chair with gleaming eyes. “Well,” she yelled at the man, “don’t just sit there! What are you going to do about it?” He looked up. “Yes,” she snapped, “I said do. Here you are sitting pretty with a corner on all the brains in the Navy, with the most loyal staff of any commander, and you just snivel about what those imbeciles plan for the future. If you feel so damn broken-up about it why don’t you stop them?”

Bartok was looking at her with amazed eyes. Women, he decided, were wonderful. No false sentiment about them; something about their ugly biological job must make them innate fact-facers. Of course some man would have to find them the facts to face, but neither sex was perfect.

“Babe,” he said wonderingly, “I believe you have it.” He sprang to his feet. “Fitzjames,” he barked, “and the rest of his crew are going to curse the days they were born when I’m through with them. Now let’s get down to brass tacks, kid. I have under me about three thousand first-class Intelligence men, one thousand women. My office staff is four hundred. Lab resources—all my men have private labs; for big-scale work we borrow equipment from the University. Armament, every first-class operative owns a hand-gun and shells. Most of them carry illegal personal electric stunners. Rolling stock—two thousand very good one-man ships that can make it from here to Orion without refueling and about five hundred larger ships of various sizes. All ships unarmed. Servicing for the ships is in the hands of the local civilian authorities wherever we land. Good thing that we take fuel like civilian and private ships. Oh, yes—our personnel is scattered pretty widely through the cosmos. But we can call them in any time by the best conference-model communications hookup in space. And that’s that.”

“It sounds good, Barty,” said the girl. “It sounds very good to me. How about the rest of them?”

The Wing Commander looked very sick suddenly. “Them,” he brooded. “Well, to our one division they have twenty-six, each with a flagship of the line. They have twenty-six bases—including graving-docks, repair-shops, maintenance crews, fuel, ammunition and what-have-you—and innumerable smaller ships and boats.

“And, Babe, they have one thing we haven’t got at all. Each and every ship in the numbered Patrol Wings of the Navy mounts at least one gun. The lineships, of which there are eighty-two, mount as many as a hundred quick-fire repeaters and twenty loading ordnance pieces, each of which could blow a minor planet to hell and gone. They have guns and we have minds.”

The girl rested her chin in her hands. “Brainpower versus fire-power,” she brooded. “Winner take all.”

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## 3

The first clash came two weeks later off Rigel. Alexander Hertford III, Commander of Patrol Wing Twenty-Three, was apprised of the startling facts as he awoke from a night (theoretically) of revelry with Miss deWinder.

Rubbing the sleep from his baby-blue eyes, he yawned: “Impossible. There aren’t any capital ships other than those in the Navy. There’s some silly mistake. You must have decoded it all wrong.”

“Impossible, Commander,” said the orderly respectfully. “And it wasn’t sent wrong either. They repeated several times.”

The commander stared at the slip which bore the incredible message from Cruiser DM 2. “As regards orders to pacify star-cluster eight, your district, impossible to proceed. Unrecognizable lineship heavily armed warned us away. When asked for section and command they replied, ‘Section One, Command of Reason.’ Instruct. The Commanding Officer, DM 2.”

With one of those steel-spring decisions for which the Navy personnel is famous, he abruptly ordered: “My compliments to what’s his name, the pilot and navigator. We’re going to relieve DM 2 and see what those asses think they’ve found.”

In just the time he took to dress and bid Miss deWinder a cheery though strained good morning, the ship was hauling alongside the cruiser. After an exchange of salutations, the commanding officer of the cruiser, frankly angry, yelled at Hertford (over the communications system): “Use your own damned eyes, commander. You can’t miss the damned thing—biggest damned ship I ever saw in my damned life!”

“Captain,” said the commander, “you’re over-wrought. Lie down and we’ll look about.” He was on what they called the bridge, a vast arc of a room which opened, for effect, on the very hull of the ship. Vast, sweepingly curved plates of lucostruc opened on the deeps of space, though scanner discs would have been structurally sounder.

Taking an angry turn about the bridge he snapped at the lookout: “Have you found that lunatic’s chimera yet?” For, be it known, there is no such thing as blundering on a spaceship. You have to do some very involved calculating to blunder on a sun, and even so luck must be on your side. In short, unless this mythical lineship chose to show itself, there wasn’t one chance in a thousand thousand of its being located.

“Can’t see any chimera, commander,” said the lookout, one straining eye glued to a telescope. “But right there’s the biggest, meanest fighting ship I’ve ever struck eyes to.” He yielded to the commander, who stared incredulously through the ’scope.

By God, it was there. By all the twelve planets, so it was. The thing was bigger than the Excalibur, Hertford’s ship. It floated very far away and could be spotted only by the superb display of illumination they’d put on, with taunting intent, it seemed to the commander.

“Battle stations!” he yelled immediately. “Ready full fire-power.”

The lookout spoke into a mike and stood by.

“Get in touch with him,” snapped the commander. “When you get his wavelength give me the speaker. I’ll talk to him direct, whoever he is.” Through his mind were running confused visions of the glorious old days of piracy, when his grandfather had so nobly fought in a ship a tenth the size of his own, to crush the mighty federation of the gentlemen of fortune. “And,” he said aloud, “by God they did it.”

The entire ship was buzzing confusedly with rumor. Each and every one of the crew of a thousand and the marines who numbered half that had his own private theory half an hour after the strange lineship had been sighted. These ranged from the improbably accurate notion that it was a rebel against the Navy who were going to raise some hell, to the equally absurd notion that the commander himself was the rebel and that the Admiral had sent his best ship to punish him. The truth, of course, was too obvious to be guessed by anybody.

As the ship was readied for battle it seemed to draw in on itself, like a crouching tiger. Its skin seemed to be too small for it. Men stood as if rooted to the metal floor-plates, but they quivered in tune with the accumulating mass-energy of the drivers.

A fighting ship is built around its guns, therefore a word about these may not be out of place. The Excalibur had the most modern of armaments. From every imaginable spot in its hide there could extrude the spaceship equivalent of old seagoing “murder guns.” Disgusted gunners gave that name to the little quick-firers with which they picked off floating men and boats.

The Excalibur’s “murder guns” were about a yard long with a caliber of three inches between the lands. They were loaded with shells exploding on time; it would be murder indeed to leave a score or more of contact shells floating unexploded in space. The rate of fire from these little killers was adjusted from single-shot to ten a second and never a jam from the loading mechanism.

There were intermediate guns as well, but more for their own sake than for any practical use. The twelve-inch shells from these could blow a destroyer out of space, but who ever heard of a lineship fighting a destroyer? However, if the occasion should arise, they were there, about twenty of them scattered throughout the ship, covering every second of curved surface.

Finally there were the Big Guns. These were the reason for building the Excalibur or anything like it. The rest of the ship was designed to service those guns, store their ammunition, shelter the men who worked them, move them about in space, and protect them from harm. The Big Guns were really big, so there was no need for more than four of them. Two fore and two aft were sufficiently heavy armament for any ship. One of these four happened to be out of commission on Hertford’s ship. That, he thought bitterly, would count heavily against him in the fight that was coming.

“Aim gun II, aft,” said the commander. There had been no answer from the mocking fighting ship that had suicidally turned on every light it had. The thing was still in plain view. Hertford did not draw nearer or even move for fear he would be spotted. It was enough that he knew where his nameless foe was.

“Fire,” said Hertford, “when ready.”

From the magazine in the heart of the ship there slid along frictionless runways barrel-like capsules of propulsive burner compound, which consisted of big-moleculed acid and base which combined, in the presence of a catalyst, and released monstrous clouds of gas in the fraction of a second. Following the capsules there slid the Shell, approximately the size of a three-story suburban villa.

Loading machinery, that looked as though it could be utilized in off moments to build universes, fitted the shell into the breech and rammed it home, shoved after it the burner compound that would shoot it on its way.

And all this while, in the quarter of the ship devoted to fire-control, two hundred men had been sighting, resighting, calculating and recalculating at batteries of machines to whom the integraph was as the amoeba is to the mastodon.

The point is this: that Shell couldn’t possibly miss, because to avoid it, the colossal bulk of the nameless enemy would have had to begin moving only a second after the order to fire when ready had been delivered. It was violating every rule of warfare, and, the fire-control men were confident, it would not survive the error.

The Gun finally moved on delicately jeweled bearings. This was going to be the most direct hit of all time. Cubic yards of metal locked it in position.

Metallically, over the loudspeaker: “Ready to fire, commander.”

The commander: “Then fire!”

There are no words to describe the discharge of a Big Gun and the progress of a Shell through space towards a goal. But that mile-long battlewagon was rocked like a sapling in a hurricane. When the initial shock was over the reeling commander clung to a stanchion and glued his eye to the telescope fixed on the nameless enemy.

It still glowed with lights; it still seemed to be a shade bigger than the Excalibur. The feelings of the commander, subtly schooled to brutality and murder, were mostly of exultation as he saw the Shell enter the field of the telescope. Now, he thought, they would be frantically dashing about as it drew nearer and desperately trying and trying to move a mass that could not be moved in less time than it would take the Shell to contact it and explode.

Two seconds…one second…half—quarter—eighth—

“What the hell?” asked the commander with a childishly hurt air. He scratched his head, and as he scratched it his lineship, the Excalibur, disintegrated in a tangled, pulverized hell of metal, plastic, flesh, bone, Miss Beverly deWinder, two hundred fire-control men, operating crew of a thousand, half that number of marines and Commander Alexander Hertford III. They never knew what hit them, but it was their own Shell.

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## 4

New Metropole, capital of Earth and, before the Navy took over, capital of the All Earth Union and Colonies, was being pacified. This is done by lighter-loads of marines and fighting sailors who descend from a lineship hanging ominously over the most highly populated portion of the city. The lineship itself does not descend because an uncalled bluff is worth more than a called one and because the battlewagons cannot land from the moment they are launched to the moment they are scrapped except in graving docks, and the nearest to Earth was at Alpha Centauri.

Marines swarmed through the streets in the traditional manner of rightist revolutionaries. Should a face appear that hinted of Rigelian blood, or should a half-breed with the abnormally long hands and black teeth of a Betelgeusian pass the marines, there would be bloodshed and no questions asked. After a few hours of the reign of terror, the extraterrestrials crept into cellars and stayed there for the duration.

The All Earth Executive Committee was imprisoned pending trial; trial for what was never made clear. Communications sending sets were declared provisionally illegal; anyone caught with one in working commission would suffer death. The only etheric voice that could be legally heard was the light, mocking one of Voss, personal secretary to Admiral Fitzjames, and that only from the powerful sender aboard the Admiral’s ship Stupendous, floating grimly above the Bronx.

The receiving code set in the communications room of the little suite of offices once occupied by the Intelligence Wing was clicking like a mad thing, and never an answer came, for the Wing had moved out lock, stock and barrel. The message that kept repeating (Admiral Fitzjames had said “Keep trying” two days ago) was: “Why don’t you answer, Intelligence Wing? Bartok, report immediately aboard Stupendous to show cause why you should not be removed from office and the Wing disbanded. Why don’t you answer, Intelligence Wing? Bartok, report—” et cetera.

A squad of marines would shortly break into the office and find nothing of interest to anybody.

But there were two people who seemed to be partly Rigelian from the greenish patches on their faces and their peculiar scalp-lines, shaped like tipsy S’s. They were cowering in a cellar as many other Rigelians were doing during those lunatic days when the Navy had first taken over, but there was something purposeful and grim about their behavior that didn’t fit the disguises.

Babe MacNeice was tinkering despondently with the central control panel of the conference-type communications system exclusive to the Intelligence Wing. The panel was a little thing, like a book in size and shape, but its insides were so fearfully complicated that nothing short of an installations engineer could make anything of them. And the panel was definitely shot to hell.

She said as much, and burst into a flood of tears. Bartok, the other Rigelian, snarled softly and handed over a mussy handkerchief. “Take it easy,” he snapped, his own nerves raw and quick with strain. “We’re sitting pretty compared with the rest of the office staff.”

The brave smile that always ended the weeping spells flashed out as she returned the handkerchief. “What now?” she demanded tremulously. “Now that we can’t keep in touch with the rest of the men?”

“Now,” he said slowly, “I don’t know. But—” He snatched at her wrist and dragged her behind a pillar as the door of their cellar swung open and a streak of light shot through the gloom. The profile of a marine’s cap showed against the light. Bartok raised his handgun, resting the long barrel across his left forearm, pioneer-sharpshooter style.

The door opened fully. The marine called: “Come on out or I’ll shoot!” That was on general principles. It was surprising how many fell for the centuries-old dodge. Then when the hider came out the marines would have a little innocent fun with their handguns and depart for other cellars.

Babe sneezed. The marine started and Bartok shot him through the head. “Come on,” he snapped in an undertone as he tore off the Rigelian wig. “Through the window, Babe, and try to forget you’re a lady!”

The hue and cry has been called the most shameful tradition of genus homo; for generations it had been abandoned in favor of more civilized and efficient methods, such as teletype alarms and radio squad cars. Now, in the taking-over by the Navy, the dishonorable tradition was revived as a further testimony that this taking-over was nothing short of barbarism once you sheared it of the nickelplate of the lineships and the gold braid dripping from officers’ shoulders.

Behind the two fleeing people poured a ragged mob of marines and sailors, roaring inarticulate things about what they would do to the sneaking murderers when they caught them.

Luckily—in a way—an officer of the Navy popped from a doorway armed to the teeth and charging them to surrender. This they gladly did as he stood off the mob with his weapons.

They found themselves at last in a lighter, one of the small boats connected to the Stupendous. In an off-hand way, as the boat left the ground, the officer said: “I recognized you, you know.”

“Really?” asked Babe, frozen-faced.

“Not you,” he hastily explained. “But Commander Bartok—I’ve seen his picture. Did you know you were proscribed, Commander?”

“I assumed so,” answered the commander dryly. The officer—an ensign—was very young and callow. The hard lines were growing about his mouth, though. When he could call this “pacification” without laughing out loud, thought Bartok, he’d be a real Navy man.

“How’s everything going?” asked the commander. “Would you know how the campaign’s progressing in other parts?”

The ensign, seemingly delighted to converse on equal terms with a Wing Commander, even though a proscribed one, drew nearer—or as much nearer as he could, in the windowless, tiny, completely enclosed compartment that was the load-space of the lighter, and grinned: “Some dashed mysterious things have been happening, and I wouldn’t be a bit surprised if you johnnies in Intelligence were behind them.”

He shifted uneasily beneath Bartok’s steady, piercing stare. “You needn’t look at me like that,” he complained. “Even if it isn’t true, it’s the official non-official news—if you understand me.” He chuckled.

Bartok moved swiftly then, clutching the ensign by the throat and bringing an elbow into his midriff. The ensign, not wholly taken by surprise, apparently, drew his gun and fired.

They dragged his bloody body—he had been shot in the face, and it had run all over the enclosed space—from the lighter a few minutes later. Babe was having a hysterical attack and the ensign frantically signaled to the sailors who took in the boat to relieve him of her. The engineer of the little craft came from his cubbyhole in the bow and took her by the arm, led her away from the mess on the floor.

“Poor girl,” said the ensign. “She must have loved him terribly.”

To follow Babe MacNeice, after the first torrential outburst she was dry-eyed, but there was a catch in her voice when she spoke: “Where are you taking me?”

“To the O.D., lady. He’ll route you.”

The Officer of the Day decided that she was important enough to go directly to the Admiral.

In the super-sumptuous office of Fitzjames she thought at first that she was alone, but a snaky individual who had a knack of blending in with the furniture, as if he didn’t want to be seen, coughed tentatively.

She eyed him up and down. “You,” she said, “must be the Satanic Mr. Voss.”

He cocked an eyebrow at her. “Indeed? How so?”

“It’s no secret that you’re the one who started the—the taking-over.”

“I defy you to prove it,” he snickered.

“You’re a civilian. That’s final and conclusive. There isn’t one of these certifiable fatheads in uniform that’d have the guts to do what they’ve all been talking about for fifty years. You touched it off, and you see victory in your hands right this moment. Bartok is dead.”

“No!” he spat. “Where?”

“Coming up here on a lighter. He rashly jumped the ensign who’d arrested us. He got his face blown off.”

“So,” grunted Voss. “The end of organized resistance to our program. How did he manage, by the way, to blow up our ships with their own ammunition, or whatever really happened?”

“I don’t know the details,” she replied wearily. “We used glorified lantern-slides to project the simulacrum of a lineship; we could do that with about fifty one-man craft. It’s a kind of formation flying. We turned back your shells by magnetic fields. Normally you could dodge them, because you keep ready to move whenever you fire the big guns. But we dubbed in a dummy shell—like the lantern-slide lineship—and you’d see that shell and there wouldn’t be a thought in your heads until you were blown up. But you’re onto that trick now. It only worked four times, I think. I was a lunatic to think that you could fight guns with brainwork and hope to win.”

She collapsed limply into a chair and stared dully at the floor. “Bartok’s dead. The communication system’s wrecked. You can have your taking-over, Mr. Voss; we’re licked.”

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## 5

“Hell!” said the Admiral. “Why can’t I go out into the street if I want to?”

“Because,” said Voss patiently, “you’d be shot down like a dog. You’re going to speak from behind cover, and I’ll post the best shots in the Navy all over just in case.”

“Right,” said the Admiral. “Then it’s decided. I guess the old brain’s clicking right along, eh?” He forced a laugh, and Voss responded with a meager smile.

Tapping on the door, Voss opened it on the young ensign who’d been boasting all over the ship of shooting down the insidious Bartok. He was being avoided by his friends now; he wouldn’t let them get a word in about their own feats of clubbing and mayhem.

“What do you want?” thundered the Admiral. “I’m preparing my address to All Earth and Colonies!”

“Beg pardon, sir,” said the ensign. “But I was wondering if I could be assigned to your guard of honor for the address. After all, sir, I did outwit Bartok.”

“Since when,” asked Voss coldly, “does outwitting consist of getting in a lucky shot?”

“Tut,” grumbled the Admiral. “Let him have his way. Why not, Voss?”

“I was going to,” said the secretary. “Report this evening.”

“Thank you, sir. And—and—”

“Spit it out, kid. What do you want?” demanded Voss.

“About Miss MacNeice, sir. She seemed awfully broken up about what I did. How is she now?”

“Resting easy in Cell Eleven,” said the Admiral. “Now go away.”

“Thank you, sir,” said the ensign, saluting as he closed the door.

“Good boy, that,” said Voss. “It pays to have semi-fanatics like him in your train. They’ll do the dirty work when nobody else will. Remember that, Fitzjames.”

“I will, Voss,” said the Admiral. “Now about this speech—”

The ensign was walking down one of the very long corridors of the ship, whistling cheerfully, oblivious to the superstition to the effect that it’s the worst kind of luck to a ship; even worse than changing her name.

And in Cell Eleven—neat and comfortable, but a cell—Babe MacNeice was fiddling desperately with the communications control. Trust those bloody incompetents, she dryly thought, to leave a woman unsearched because a matron wasn’t handy…

Then, by the most convenient of miracles, there was a little tone signal from the switchboard. “It works,” she said in a hushed whisper. “It was bound to happen—nobody could try as hard as I’ve been trying and not get some kind of results.”

She hissed into the tiny grid mouthpiece: “Hello—who’s in?”

A male voice grumbled: “My God, woman, you’ve been long enough about it! I’m Casey, heading towards Spica because I can’t think of anything else to do. My fuel’s low, too.”

“Keep going,” she said. “When you get there, be prepared for anything at all. I’m not making promises, but there’s a chance. And my God! What a chance! You get out now. I have some heavy coverage to do.”

“Good luck, lady, whoever you are.”

She smiled briefly and fiddled with the elaborate, but almost microscopically tiny, controls that directed the courses of the Intelligence Wing.

“Come in, anybody, in the Twenty-Third Cosmic Sector. Anybody at all. This is MacNeice—urgent!”

“Not the famous Babe herself?” came a woman’s voice dryly. “I’m listening, dearie.”

“You locate on Aldebaran III, sister, in no more than ten hours. Keep under cover. Now get out. Aldebaran III has to be covered.”

With an anxious note the voice asked: “Just a minute—how’s Barty? I heard a rumor—”

“Forget it, sister,” snapped Babe. “You have a job to do.” She cut the woman out and called in rapid succession as many of the thirty Cosmic Sectors as she could get. One set had fallen into the hands of the Navy, and that was bad, but she cut out before they could have traced it or even guessed what it was. There had been a confused murmur and a single distinct voice saying: “The damned thing’s a radio, sir!” before she cut out.

What she had been doing was to locate operatives on the principal planets and stations of the Cosmos; operatives prepared for anything. It had been a job of routing; they bunched together when they weren’t under orders. She had to break them up—and she did.

After locating one stubborn female, she heard a man’s tread in the corridor outside and as quickly as she could hid the little panel-like affair, which, considering where she was forced to hide it, was not a very speedy job of concealment.

The entire city of New Metropole was jammed into the vast Square of the Living Statues that evening for the ultimate proclamation from Admiral of the Fleet Fitzjames concerning the taking-over and the new order to be established. Though, of course, some historians would say that there was nothing new about it, but that it was a very old order indeed.

There had been erected against the superb backdrop of the living statues a great booth-like affair from which the Admiral would make his speech, a speech to be heard simultaneously by every living human and colonial extraterrestrial alive. There was even declared a temporary amnesty on extraterrestrials; for this evening they might walk the streets—but only to and from the Square.

The booth was, of course, weapon-proof. Voss had been most particular about that.

Crowds had begun to assemble early in the afternoon; if there was to be a new order, they would make sure that they would be its earliest and heartiest boosters. By dusk the press of people had grown so great that there was no room to turn around, let alone draw a weapon, so Fitzjames could have no fear on that score. The only free place was the platform of the booth, flush with the great transparent base on which the living statues moved on in their endless perfection.

When night had fallen they turned on the floodlights normally used to illuminate the statues, removing the color-wheels. The crowd was picked out in glaring detail by the pitiless glow. As far as the eye could see there was a meadow of faces upturned, each sharp and distinct by itself. The statues were in the dark, their sole remaining lights being turned on the booth. The very music had been subdued so that the amplifiers would lose no word of what the Admiral would say. It was a memorable occasion in many unsuspected ways.

Ten o’clock sharp, enter the Admiral, dropping from the heavens in an ornate lighter which was then immediately dispatched. Fitzjames was afraid that his hour of triumph might end tragically should a spanner fall from the craft and crack his skull.

With him, of course, were Voss and the guard of honor.

Five past ten Voss stepped to the mike. “Friends,” he said, “it is my proud duty to present to you the man who has liberated us from the yoke of the All Earth Exec—Fitzjames The First!”

There was an astounded hush from the audience, and then a protesting murmur. The wildest fancy they had indulged in hadn’t included anything like a monarchy!

Fitzjames The First stepped to the mike as Voss bowed low. He said: “My loyal subjects, I greet you.”

The guard of honor fidgeted. It had been a well-kept secret. The young ensign strolled over to Voss, who was surprised to feel a handgun’s muzzle pressed into his ribs.

“Excuse me?” he said strainedly. “Are you sure you’re quite sane, young man? Take that thing away.”

“I’m not only sane,” said the Ensign, “I’m Bartok. When that silly ass fired at me in the lighter he missed, of course. So I switched clothes in three minutes flat, Babe made up my face with the kit that every Intelligence Wing man carries, then we blew the face off the ensign of yours. He was unconscious. A pity.”

“—magnificent demonstration of the reversion to childlike faith in the will of Providence and the divine right of kings—” the Admiral was droning.

Voss, a slender, slimy, active man, dived into the shadows as Bartok’s attention wavered from him to the speaker.

The Wing Commander dived right after him. “Where are you?” he called into the darkness. “Don’t be a damned fool!”

The only answer was a slug zipping past his ear.

“Bartok,” hissed Voss from the blackness, “this is your last adventure. I can see you and you can’t see me. Good-bye, Bartok.”

There was a sickening crunch from the blackness and a gasp that sounded like a tin can in labor.

“The poor, damned fool,” said Bartok. One of the living statues had stepped on the man’s head in the course of some intricate pas seul. Bartok had known it would happen, for the periodicity of the statues was limited to this: in the course of two minutes and forty seconds every square foot of the dancing platform was trodden on at least once by at least one of the two-ton feet of the statues.

Meanwhile the remainder of the guard of honor was vainly trying to fire unloaded handguns—except one slender young man who simply grinned like a cat.

“Okay, Babe,” said Bartok to the slender young man. “You do it.”

“With pleasure!”

As the Admiral had just got around to the choosing of his palace-planet— nothing less than an entire planet would do for his regal estates—he too felt a gun in his ribs. He stopped short.

“Read this,” said the slender young man, who was trying to keep from giggling.

Without ado of any sort the Admiral placed the paper on the lectern before him and read in flat, colorless tones:

“I hereby declare that I personally had no such nonsense in mind. It was the work of my secretary. I hereby state that I assume no powers beyond my naval duties.

“General Order to All Officers: any seditious talk of taking over will be severely dealt with by the Intelligence Wing which is—ulp!—hereby constituted as supreme police authority over the Navy.

“Memorandum to Wing Commanders: you will turn over all insignia of your office to representatives of the Intelligence Wing who will make themselves known to you.”

In a very small voice he said: “That is all,” and deflated into a chair. There was a titanic roar of applause from the assembled peoples of New Metropole.

“Darling,” said Babe, “if the timing doesn’t come off right—if those people I contacted don’t show up to the Wing Commanders soon enough, before they recover—!”

“They will,” said Bartok. He laughed shortly, like the closing of a heavy lock.

“What’s funny?”

“They—they—had the guns and we didn’t have a thing but ourselves. Sweet, this is one stunt they’ll never try again.”

The crowd, still applauding, began to disperse into the night.