

THE GOLDEN AGE CLASSIC OF SCIENCE FICTION!

THE SPECTRE GENERAL

BY THEODORE COGSWELL



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in Astounding
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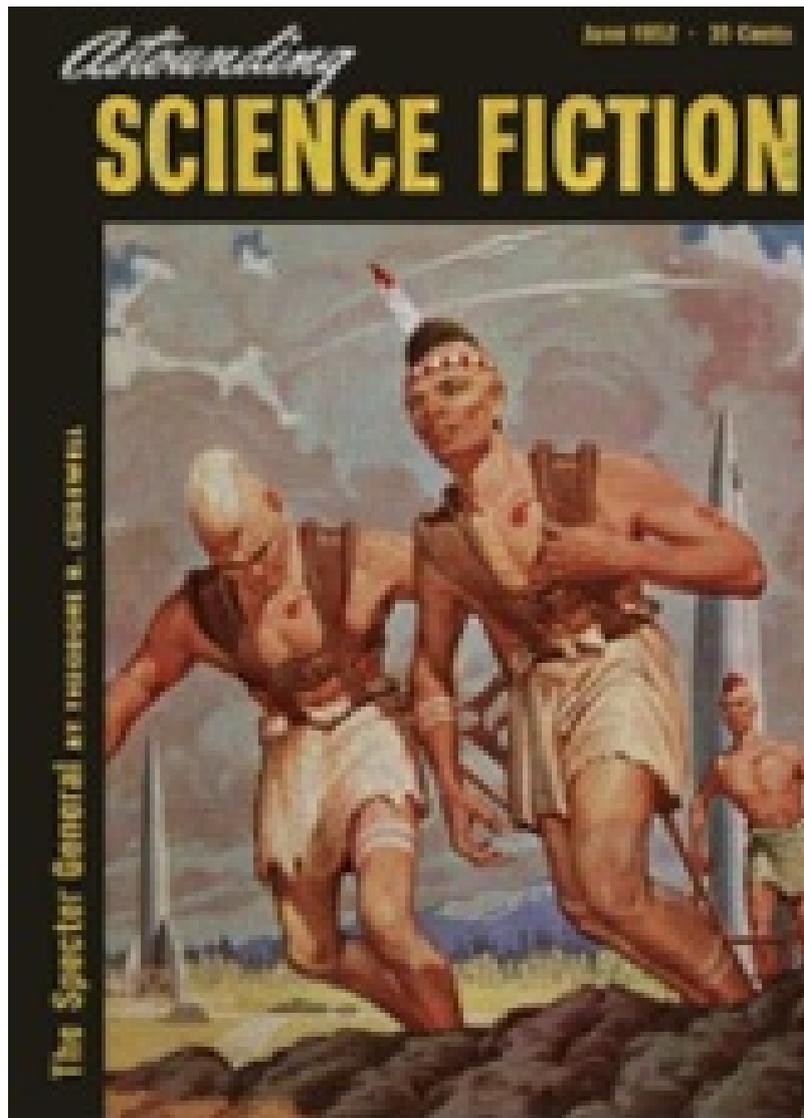
A NOTE FROM THE PUBLISHER

Theodore Rose Cogswell, (1918–1987), was an American science fiction author. He wrote nearly 400 science fiction stories, many in a lighthearted vein, and was co-author of the *Star Trek* novel, *Spock: Messiah!* (with Charles A. Spano, Jr.)

Cogswell also edited the long-running “fanzine for pros,” *Proceedings of the Institute for Twenty-First Century Studies*, a collection of which was published in 1993. In this, writers and editors discussed their and each other’s works.

During the Spanish Civil War, he served as an ambulance driver on the Republican side in the Abraham Lincoln Brigade.

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“The Spectre General”—Cogswell’s first published story—appeared in the June 1952 issue of *Astounding Science Fiction* magazine.

It was voted by the Science Fiction Writers of America as one of the finest novellas prior to the introduction of the Nebula Awards in 1965 and included in their anthology, *The Science Fiction Hall of Fame, Volume Two*.

Wildside Press will be reprinting all of Theodore Cogswell’s works in 2014-2015. *The Spectre General* is the first in the series.

THE SPECTRE GENERAL

by Theodore Cogswell

CHAPTER ONE

“Sergeant Dixon!”

Kurt stiffened. He knew *that* voice. Dropping the handles of the wooden plow, he gave a quick “res” to the private and a polite “by your leave, sir” to the lieutenant who were yoked together in double harness. They both sank gratefully to the ground as Kurt advanced to meet the approaching officer.

Marcus Harris, the commander of the 427th Light Maintenance Battalion of the Imperial Space Marines, was an imposing figure. The three silver eagle feathers of a full colonel rose proudly from his war bonnet, and the flaming-comet insignia of the Space Marines painted on his chest stood out starkly against his sun-blackened, leathery skin. As Kurt snapped to attention before him and saluted, the colonel surveyed the fresh-turned earth with an experienced eye.

“You plow a straight furrow, soldier!” His voice was hard and metallic, but it seemed to Kurt that there was a concealed glimmer of approval in those flinty eyes. Dixon flushed with pleasure and drew back his broad shoulders a little further.

The commander’s eyes flicked down to the battle-ax that rested snugly in its leather holster at Kurt’s side. “You keep a clean side-arm, too.”

Kurt uttered a silent prayer of thanksgiving that he had worked over his weapon before reveille the morning. Now its redwood handle had a satin gloss and its black obsidian head held the sheen of well-polished glass.

“In fact,” said Colonel Harris, “you’d be officer material if . . .” His voice trailed off.

“If what?” asked Kurt eagerly.

“If,” said the colonel with a note of paternal fondness in his voice that sent chills dancing down Kurt’s spine, “you weren’t the most completely unmanageable, undisciplined, overmuscled, and underbrained moron I’ve had the misfortune to have in my command. This last little unauthorized jaunt of yours indicates to me that you have as much right to sergeant’s stripes as I have to have *garmo* kittens. Report to me at ten-hundred tomorrow! I personally guarantee that when I’m through with you—if you live that long—you’ll have a bare forehead!”

Colonel Harris turned smartly and stalked back across the dusty plateau toward the walled garrison at its far end. Kurt stared after him for a moment and then turned and let his eyes slip across the wide belt of lush green jungle that surrounded the high plateau. To the north rose a great range of snow-capped mountains, and his heart filled with longing as he thought of the strange and beautiful country he had found hidden behind them. Finally he plodded slowly back to the plow, his shoulders stooped and his head sagging. With an effort he recalled himself to the business at hand.

“Up on your aching feet, soldier!” he barked to the reclining private. “If you please, sir!” he said to the lieutenant. His calloused hands grasped the worn plow handles. “Giddyup!”

The two men strained against their collars, and with a creak of harness the wooden plow started to move slowly across the arid plateau.

CHAPTER TWO

Conrad Krogson, Supreme Director of War Base Three of Sector Seven of the Galactic Protectorate stood at quaking attention before the viewscreen of his space communicator. It was an unusual position for the director. He was accustomed to having people quake while *he* talked.

“The Lord Protector just received a tip that General Carr is still alive!” said the sector commander. “He’s yelling for blood, and if it’s a choice between yours and mine, you know whose it’s going to be!”

“But sir,” Krogson protested in a quavering voice, “I can’t do anything more than I *am* doing. I’ve had double security checks running since the last time there was an alert, and they haven’t turned up anything. And I’m so shorthanded now that if I pull another random purge, I won’t have enough techs left to work the base.”

“That’s your problem, not mine,” said the sector commander viciously, “because I’m giving you exactly ten days to produce something that is big enough to take the heat off me. If you don’t, I’ll break you, Krogson. If I’m sent to the uranium mines, you’ll be sweating right alongside me. That’s my promise!”

Krogson’s face blanched.

“Any questions?” snapped the sector commander.

“Yes,” said Krogson.

“Well, don’t bother me with them. I’ve got troubles of my own!” The screen went dark.

Krogson slumped into his chair and stared dully at the blank screen. Finally he roused himself with an effort and let out a bellow that rattled the lightpens in the cup atop his desk.

“Schankle! Get in here!”

A gnomelike little figure scuttled through the door and bobbed obsequiously. “Yes, Director?”

“I need advice,” said Krogson. “The Lord Protector has the shakes again, and his eyes are on us.”

“What is it this time?”

“General Carr!” said the director gloomily. “The ex-Number Two.”

“I thought he’d been reeducated.”

“So did I,” said Krogson, “but he must have slipped out some way. The Protector thinks he’s started up an underground.”

“He’d be a fool if he didn’t,” said the little man. “The Lord Protector isn’t as young as he once was, and his grip on the Protectorate is getting a little shaky.”

“Maybe so, but he’s still strong enough to get us before General Carr gets him. The sector commander just gave the word. We produce or else!”

“We?” said Schankle unhappily.

“Of course,” snapped Krogson. “We’re in this together. Now let’s get to work! If you were Carr, where would be the logical place for you to hide out?”

“Well,” said Schankle thoughtfully, “if I were as smart as Carr is supposed to be, I’d find myself a hideout right on Prime Base. Everything’s so fouled up there that they’d never find me.”

“That’s out for us,” said Krogson. “We can’t go rooting around the Lord Protector’s own backyard. What would Carr’s next best bet be?”

Schankle thought for a moment. “He might go out to one of the deserted systems,” he said slowly. “There must be half a hundred stars in our own base area that haven’t been visited since the old empire broke up. Our ships don’t get around the way they used to, and chances are slim that anybody would stumble onto him accidentally.”

“It’s a possibility,” said the director thoughtfully, “a bare possibility.” He pounded his desk in sudden resolution. “But by the Protectorate, at least it’s something! Alert the section heads for a staff meeting in half an hour. I want every scout sent on a quick check of every system in our area!”

“I beg your pardon, Director,” said Schankle, “but half our light ships are red-lined for essential maintenance and the other half should be. Anyway it would take months to check every possible hideout in this area, even if we used the whole fleet.”

“I know,” said Krogson, “but we’ll have to do what we can with what we have. At least I’ll be able to report to sector command that we’re doing *something*. Tell Astrogation to set up a series of search patterns. We won’t have to check every planet. A single quick sweep through each system will do the trick. Even Carr can’t run a base without power. Where there’s power, there’s flux leakage, and flux leakage can be detected a long way off. Put everyone on double shifts and have all detection gear double-checked.”

“Can’t do that either,” said Schankle. “There aren’t more than a dozen techs left. Most of them were transferred to Prime Base last week.”

Director Krogson threw up his hands. “How in the name of the Bloody Blue Pleiades am I supposed to keep a war base going without technicians? You tell me, Schankle, you always seem to know the answers.”

Schankle coughed modestly. “Well, sir,” he said, “as long as you have a situation where technicians are sent to the uranium mines for making mistakes, it’s going to be an unpopular vocation. And, as long as the Lord Protector of the moment is afraid that his subordinates have ideas about grabbing his job—which they generally do—he’s going to keep his fleet as strong as possible and theirs so weak they aren’t dangerous. The best way to do that is grabbing techs. If most of a base’s ships are sitting around waiting for repair, no commander will be able to act on any ambitions he may happen to have. Add that to the obvious fact that our whole technology has been on a downward spiral for the last three hundred years and you have your answer.”

Krogson nodded gloomily. “Sometimes I feel as if we were all on a dead ship falling into a dying sun,” he said. His voice suddenly altered. “But in the meantime we have our necks to save. Get going, Schankle!”

Schankle bobbed and darted out of the office.

CHAPTER THREE

It was exactly ten o'clock in the morning when Kurt Dixon of the Imperial Space Marines snapped to attention before his commanding officer.

"Sergeant Dixon reporting as ordered, sir!" His voice cracked a bit in spite of his best efforts to control it.

The colonel looked at him coldly. "Nice of you to drop in, Dixon," he said. "Shall we go ahead with our little chat?"

Kurt nodded nervously.

"I have here," said the colonel, shuffling a sheaf of papers, "a report of an unauthorized expedition made by you to *off limits* territory."

"Which one do you mean, sir?" asked Kurt without thinking.

"Then there have been more than one?" asked the colonel quietly.

Kurt started to stammer.

Colonel Harris silenced him with a quick gesture. "I'm talking about the country to the north, the tableland back of the Twin Peaks."

"It's a beautiful place!" Kurt burst out. "It's . . . it's like Imperial Headquarters must be. Dozens of streams full of fish, trees heavy with fruit, small game so slow and stupid that they can be knocked over with a club. Why, the battalion could live there without hardly lifting a finger!"

"I've no doubt that they could," said the colonel.

"Think of it, sir!" Kurt said. "No more plowing details, no more hunting details, no more nothing but taking it easy!"

"You might add to your list no more tech schools," said Colonel Harris. "I'm quite aware that this place is all you say it is, Sergeant. As a result, I'm placing all information that pertains to it in a 'Top Secret' category. That applies to what's inside your skull as well."

"But sir!" protested Kurt. "If you could only see the place—"

"I have," broke in the colonel, "thirty years ago."

Kurt stared at him in amazement. "Then why are we still on the plateau?"

"Because my commanding officer did just what I've done, and then he gave me thirty days of extra detail on the plows. *After* he took my stripes away, that is." Colonel Harris rose slowly to his feet. "Dixon," he said softly, "it's not every man who can be a noncommissioned officer in the Space Marines. Sometimes we guess wrong. When we do, we do something about it!" His voice held the crackle of distant summer lightning. He roared, "Wipe those chevrons off!"

Kurt looked at him in mute protest.

"You heard me!" the colonel thundered.

"Y-yes, sir!" Kurt stammered. Reluctantly he drew his arm across his forehead and wiped off the three triangles of white grease-paint that marked his rank. Quivering with shame, he took a tight grip on his temper and choked back angry protests.

"Maybe," suggested the colonel, "you'd like to make a complaint to the I.G. He's due in a few days and he might reverse my decision. It has happened before, you know."

"No, sir," said Kurt woodenly.

"Why not?" demanded Harris.

"When I was sent out as a scout for the hunting parties, I was given direct orders not to range farther than twenty kilometers to the north. I went sixty." And then his forced composure broke. "I couldn't stop myself, sir," he said. "There was something behind those peaks that kept pulling me and pulling

me and—” He shrugged helplessly. “You know the rest.”

A sudden change came over the colonel’s face. A warm, human smile swept across it, and he laughed, a distant look in his eye. “It’s a hell of a feeling, isn’t it, son? You know you shouldn’t, but at the same time there’s something inside you that says you’ve got to know what’s behind those peaks and valleys. When you get a few more years under your belt you’ll find that it isn’t just mountains that make you feel like that. Here, boy, have a seat.” He gestured toward the woven wicker chair by his desk.

Kurt shifted uneasily from one foot to the other, stunned by the colonel’s unexpected shift in attitude and embarrassed by the request. “Excuse me, sir,” he said, “but we aren’t out on work detail, and . . .”

The colonel laughed again. “And enlisted men not on work detail don’t sit in the presence of officers. Doesn’t the way we do things ever strike you as odd, Dixon? On one hand you’d see nothing strange about being yoked to the plow with a major, and on the other, you’d never dream of sitting in my presence off duty.”

Kurt looked puzzled. “Work details are different,” he said. “We all have to work if we’re going to eat. But in the garrison, officers are officers and enlisted men are enlisted men and that’s the way it always been.”

Still smiling, the colonel reached into his desk drawer, fished something out, and tossed it to Kurt. “Stick this in your scalp lock,” he said.

Kurt looked at it, stunned. It was a golden feather crossed with a single black bar, the insignia of a rank for a second lieutenant of the Imperial Space Marines. The room swirled before his eyes.

“Now,” said the colonel, “sit down!”

Kurt slowly lowered himself into the chair and looked up at his commander in confusion.

“Stop gawking!” said Colonel Harris. “You’re an officer now! When a man gets too big for his sandals, we give him a new pair—after we make him sweat!” He grew serious. “Now that you’re one of the family, you have a right to know why I’m hushing up the matter of the tableland to the north. What I have to say won’t make much sense at first. Later I’m hoping it will. Tell me,” he said suddenly, “where did the battalion come from?”

“We’ve always been here, I guess,” said Kurt. “When I was a recruit, Granddad used to tell me stories about us being brought from someplace else a long time ago by an iron bird, but it stands to reason that something that heavy couldn’t fly.”

A far away look came into the colonel’s eyes. “Six generations,” he mused, “and history becomes legend. Another six and the legends themselves become tales for children. Yes, Kurt,” he said softly, “it stands to reason that something that heavy couldn’t fly, so we’ll forget it for a while. We did come from someplace else, though. Once there was a great empire, so great that all the stars you see at night were only part of it. And then, as things do when age rests too heavily on them, it began to crumble. Commanders fell to fighting among themselves and the Emperor grew weak. The battalion was sent here to operate a forward maintenance station for his ships. We waited, but no ships came. For five hundred years,” said the colonel somberly, “no ships have come. Perhaps they tried to relieve us and couldn’t, or perhaps the Empire fell with such a crash that we were lost in the wreckage. There are a thousand perhapses that a man can tick off in his mind when the nights are long and sleep comes hard. Lost . . . forgotten . . . who knows?”

Kurt started at him with a blank expression on his face. Most of what the colonel had said made no sense at all. Wherever Imperial Headquarters was, it hadn’t forgotten them. The I.G. still made his inspection every year or so.

The colonel continued as if talking to himself. “But our operational orders said that we would stand by to give all necessary maintenance to Imperial warcraft until properly relieved, and stand by with

have.” The old officer’s voice seemed to be coming from a place far distant in time and space.

“I’m sorry, sir,” said Kurt, “but I don’t follow you. If all these things did happen, it was so long ago that they mean nothing to us now.”

“But they do!” said Colonel Harris. His eyes focused on Kurt once more. “It’s because of them things like your rediscovery of the tableland to the north have to be suppressed for the good of the battalion. Here on the plateau the living is hard. Our work in the fields and the meat brought in by our hunting parties give us just enough to get by. But here we have the garrison and the tech schools and vague as it has become, a reason for remaining together as the battalion. Out there where the living is easy we’d lose that. We almost did once before. A wise commander stopped it before it went too far. There are still a few signs of that time left—left deliberately as reminders of what can happen. Commanding officers forget why we’re here.”

“What things?” Kurt asked curiously.

“Well, son,” said the colonel, picking up his great war bonnet from the desk and gazing at Kurt quizzically, “I don’t think you’re quite ready for that information yet. Now take off and strut your feathers. I’ve got work to do.”

CHAPTER FOUR

At War Base Three, nobody was happy. Ships supposed to be light-months away carrying on the carefully planned search for General Carr's hideout were fluttering down out of the sky like falling leaves, disabled by blown jets, jammed computers, and all the other natural ills that worn-out and poorly serviced equipment is heir to. Technical maintenance was quietly going mad. Director Krogson was being noisy about it.

"Schankle!" he screamed. "Isn't anything happening anywhere?"

"Nothing yet, sir," said the little man.

"Well, *make* something happen!" He hoisted his immaculately polished black boots onto the desk and called up the holographic map of his sector. Tiny stars winked into existence. "How are the others doing?"

"No better than we are," said Schankle. "Director Storch of Sector Six tried to set himself up as a hero, but didn't get away with it. He sent his troops to a plantation planet at the edge of the Belt and had them hypno the whole population. By the time they were through, they had fifteen million greenies running around yelling, 'Up with General Carr!' 'Down with the Lord Protector!' 'Long Live the People's Revolution!' and things like that. Storch even gave them a few interplanetary missile launchers to make the threat look more realistic. Then he sent in his whole fleet, tipped off the press at Prime Base, and waited. Guess what the Bureau of Essential Information finally sent him?"

"What?" said Director Krogson.

"One lousy cub reporter. Storch couldn't back out by then, so he had to go ahead and blast the planet down to bedrock. This morning he got a three-line notice in *Space* and a citation as Third Rank Protector of the People's Space Ways, Eighth Grade."

"That's better than the nothing we've got so far!"

"Not when the press notice is buried on the next to last page, right below the column on 'Our Feathered Comrades,'" said Schankle, "and not when the citation is posthumous. They even misspelled his name; it came out Stooch!"

CHAPTER FIVE

As Kurt turned to go, there was a sharp knock on Colonel Harris's door.

"Come in!" called the colonel.

Lieutenant Colonel Bannerman, the battalion executive officer, entered with an arrogant stride and threw his commander a slovenly salute. For a moment he didn't notice Kurt standing at attention beside the door.

"Listen, Harris," he snarled. "What's the idea of pulling that clean-up detail out of my quarters?"

"There are no servants in this battalion, Bannerman," the older man said quietly. "The men are tired when they come in from work detail at night. They've earned a rest, and as long as I'm C.O. they're going to get it. If you have dirty work that has to be done, do it yourself. You're better able to do that than some poor devil who's been dragging a plow all day. I suggest you check pertinent regulations."

"Regulations!" growled Bannerman. "What do you expect me to do, scrub my own floors?"

"I do," said the colonel dryly, "when my wife is too busy to get to it. I haven't noticed that either my dignity or my efficiency have suffered. I might add," he continued, "that staff officers are supposed to set a good example for their juniors. I don't believe Lieutenant Dixon should be encouraged to emulate either your tone or your manner." He gestured toward Kurt, and Bannerman whirled.

"*Lieutenant Dixon!*" he said in an incredulous voice. "By whose authority?"

"Mine," said the colonel mildly. "In case you've forgotten, I *am* still commanding officer of this battalion."

"I protest!" said Bannerman. "Commissions have always been awarded by decision of the entire staff."

"Which you now control," replied the colonel.

Kurt coughed nervously. "Excuse me, sir," he said, "but I think I'd better leave."

Colonel Harris shook his head. "You're one of our official family now, son, and you might as well get used to our squabbles. This particular one has been going on between Colonel Bannerman and me for years. He has no patience with some of our old customs." He turned to Bannerman. "Have you anything to say, Colonel?"

"You're right, I haven't!" said Bannerman. "And that's why I'm going to change some of them as soon as I get the chance. The faster we stop this tech school nonsense and put the recruits to work in the fields where they belong, the better off we'll all be. Why should a plowman or a hunter have to know how to read wiring diagrams or set microchips? It's nonsense, superstitious nonsense. You!" he said, stabbing his finger into the chest of the startled lieutenant. "You! Dixon! You spent fourteen years in the tech schools, just like I did when I was a recruit. What for?"

"To learn maintenance, of course," said Kurt.

"What's maintenance?" demanded Bannerman.

"Taking stuff apart and putting it back together and polishing jet bores with microplanes and putting the plates in alignment and checking the meters when we're through to see the job was done right. That's all there's class work in Direc calculus and subelectronics and—"

"That's enough!" Bannerman said. "And now that you've learned all that, what can you do with it?"

Kurt looked at him in surprise. "Do with it?" He echoed. "You don't *do* anything with it. You just learn it because regulations say you should."

"And this," said Bannerman, turning to Colonel Harris, "is one of your prize products. Fourteen years of his best years wasted, and he doesn't even know what for!" He paused and then said in an arrogant voice, "I'm here for a showdown, Harris!"

“Yes?” said the Colonel.

“I demand that the tech schools be closed at once, and the older recruits released for work details. you want to keep your command, you’ll issue that order. The staff is behind me on this!”

Colonel Harris rose slowly. Kurt waited for the thunder to roll, but strangely enough, it didn’t. almost seemed to him that an expression of concealed amusement played across the colonel’s face.

“Some day, just for once,” he said, “I wish somebody around here would do something that hasn’t been done before.”

“What do you mean by that?” demanded Bannerman.

“Nothing,” said the colonel. “You know, a long time ago I walked into my C.O.’s office and made the same demands and the same threats that you’re making now. I didn’t get very far, though—just as you aren’t going to—because I had overlooked the little matter of the Inspector General’s annual visit. He’s due in from Imperial Headquarters Saturday night, isn’t he, Bannerman?”

“You know he is!” growled the other.

“Aren’t worried, are you? It occurs to me that the I.G. might take a dim view of your new order.”

“I don’t think he’ll mind,” said Bannerman with a nasty grin. “Now, will you issue the order to close the tech schools, or won’t you?”

“Of course not!” said the colonel.

“That’s final?”

Colonel Harris just nodded.

There was an ugly look on Bannerman’s face as he barked, “Kane! Simmons! Arnett! The rest of you! Get in here!”

The door to Harris’s office swung slowly open. A group of officers stood sheepishly in the anteroom.

“Come in, gentlemen,” said Colonel Harris.

They came forward slowly and grouped themselves just inside the door.

“I’m taking over!” said Bannerman. “This garrison needs a housecleaning, and I’m just the man to do it!”

“How about the rest of you?” asked the colonel.

“Begging your pardon, sir,” said one hesitantly, “but we think Colonel Bannerman’s probably right. I’m afraid we’re going to have to confine you for a few days. Just until after the I.G.’s visit,” he added apologetically.

“And what do you think the I.G. will say to all this?”

“Colonel Bannerman says we don’t have to worry about that,” said the officer. “He’s going to take care of everything.”

A look of anxiety crossed Harris’s face. For the first time he seemed on the verge of losing his composure.

“How?” he demanded.

“He didn’t say, sir,” the other replied. Harris relaxed visibly.

“All right,” said Bannerman. “Let’s get moving!” He walked behind the desk and plumped into the colonel’s chair. Hoisting his feet onto the desk, he gave his first command:

“Take him away!”

There was a sudden roar from the far corner of the room. “No you don’t!” shouted Kurt. Pulling his battle-ax, he leaped in front of Colonel Harris, his muscular body taut, his gray eyes flashing defiance.

Bannerman jumped to his feet. “Disarm that man!” he commanded.

There was a certain amount of scuffling as the officers closest to Kurt tried to move to the rear and those behind resolutely defended their more protected positions.

Bannerman's face purpled; he seemed on the verge of apoplexy. "Major Kane," he demanded, "placate that man under restraint!"

Kane advanced toward Kurt with a noticeable lack of enthusiasm. Keeping a cautious eye on the glittering ax head, he said in what he obviously hoped to be a placating voice, "Come now, Dixon. Can't have this sort of thing, you know." He stretched out his hand hesitantly. "Why don't you give me your ax and we'll forget this incident ever occurred?"

Kurt's ax leaped toward the major's head. Kane stood petrified as death whizzed toward him. At the last instant Kurt gave a practiced twist to his wrist and the ax jumped up, cutting the air over the major's head with a vicious whistle. The top half of Kane's silver staff-plume drifted slowly to the floor.

"You want my weapon—" roared Kurt, his ax flicking back and forth like a snake's tongue, "—you come and get it! That goes for the rest of you, too!"

The little knot of officers retreated still farther. Colonel Harris whooped. "Give it to 'em, son!"

"This has gone far enough." Bannerman looked contemptuously at his staff as he slowly drew his own ax. Colonel Harris abruptly stopped laughing. "Wait a minute, Bannerman!" he said. "This has gone far enough." He turned to Kurt. "Give them your ax, son."

Kurt looked at him with an expression of hurt bewilderment in his eyes, hesitated for a moment, and then glumly surrendered his ax to the major.

"Now," snarled Bannerman, "take that insolent puppy out and feed him to the lizards!"

Kurt drew himself up in injured dignity. "That is no way to refer to a brother officer," he said.

The vein in Bannerman's forehead started to pulse again. "Get him out of here before I tear him to shreds!" There was silence for a moment as he fought to regain control of himself. Finally he succeeded. "Lock him up," he continued in an approximation of his normal voice. "Tell the provost sergeant I'll send down the charges as soon as I can think up enough."

Kurt resented it, but let Major Kane seize his arm and lead him from the room. Behind him, he heard Bannerman saying, "The rest of you clear out. I want to talk with Colonel Harris about the I.G."

CHAPTER SIX

There was a saying in the Protectorate that when the Lord Protector was angry, stars and heads fell. Director Krogson felt his head wobbling. The far-sweeping scouts he'd dispatched had been sending back nothing but reports of equipment failure, and the sector commander had coldly informed him that morning that his name lay securely at the bottom of the achievement list. It looked as if War Base Three would shortly have a new Supreme Director.

"Look, Schankle," he said in desperation, "even if we can't give them anything, couldn't we make a promise that would look good enough to take some of the heat off us?"

Schankle looked dubious.

"Maybe a new five-year plan?" suggested Krogson.

The little man shook his head. "That's a subject we'd better avoid entirely," he said. "They're still asking nasty questions about what happened to the last one. Mainly on the matter of our transport quota. I took the liberty of passing the blame to Logistics. Several of them have been, eh, *removed* as a consequence."

"Serves them right!" snorted Krogson. "They got me into that mess with their 'if a freighter and a half flew a light-year and a half in a month and a half, ten freighters can fly ten light-years in ten months!' I knew there was something fishy about it at the time, but I couldn't put my finger on it."

"It's always darkest before the storm," said Schankle helpfully.

CHAPTER SEVEN

“Take off your war bonnet and make yourself comfortable,” said Colonel Harris hospitably.

Bannerman grunted. “This thing is sort of heavy,” he said. “I think I’ll change uniform regulations while I’m at it.”

“There was something you wanted to tell me?” suggested the colonel.

“Yeah,” said Bannerman. “I figure that you figure the I.G.’s going to bail you out of this. Right?”

“I wouldn’t be surprised.”

“I would,” said Bannerman. “I was looking around the armory last week. There was something there that started me doing some heavy thinking. Do you know what it was?”

“I can guess,” said the colonel.

“As I looked at it, it suddenly occurred to me what a happy coincidence it is that the Inspector General always arrives just when you happen to need him.”

“It is odd, come to think of it.”

“Something else occurred to me, too. I got to thinking that if I were C.O. and wanted to keep the troops whipped into line, the easiest way to do it would be to have a visible symbol of Imperial Headquarters appear in person once in a while.”

“That makes sense,” admitted Harris, “especially since the chaplain has started preaching that Imperial Headquarters is where good marines go when they die—if they follow regulations while they’re alive. But how would you manage it?”

“Just the way you did. I’d take one of the old battle suits, wait until it was good and dark, and then slip out the back way and climb up two or three thousand meters. Then I’d switch on my landing lights and drift slowly down to the parade field to review the troops.” Bannerman grinned triumphantly.

“It might work,” admitted Colonel Harris, “but I was under the impression that those rigs were so heavy that a man couldn’t even walk in one, let alone fly.”

Bannerman’s grin broadened. “Not if the suit was powered. If a man were to go up into the tower of the arsenal and pick the lock on a door labeled DANGER: ABSOLUTELY NO ADMITTANCE, he might find a whole stack of shiny little cubes that look suspiciously like the illustrations of power packs in the tech manuals.”

“That he might,” agreed the colonel.

Bannerman shifted back in his chair. “Aren’t worried, are you?”

Colonel Harris shook his head. “I was for a moment when I thought you’d told the rest of the staff but I’m not now.”

“You should be! When the I.G. arrives this time, I’m going to be inside that suit. There’s going to be a new order around here, and he’s just what I need to put the stamp of approval on it. When the Inspector General talks, nobody questions!”

He looked at Harris expectantly, waiting for a look of consternation to sweep across his face. The colonel just laughed.

“Bannerman,” he said, “you’re in for a big surprise!”

“What do you mean?” said the other suspiciously.

“Simply that I know you better than you know yourself. You wouldn’t be executive officer if you didn’t. I’ve got a hunch that the battalion is going to change the man more than the man is going to change the battalion. And now if you’ll excuse me—” He started for the door. Bannerman rose and moved to intercept him.

“Don’t trouble yourself,” the colonel said, “I can find my own way to the cell block. Besides, you’ve

got work to do.”

~~There was a look of bewilderment on Bannerman’s face as the colonel went out the door. “I don’t understand,” he said to himself. “I just don’t understand.”~~

CHAPTER EIGHT

Flight Officer Ozaki was unhappy. Trouble had started two hours after he lifted his battered scout ship off War Base Three, and it showed no signs of letting up. He sat glumly at his controls and enumerated his woes. First there was the matter of the air recycler, which had acquired an odd little hum and now discharged oxygen redolent with the rich, ripe odor of rotting fish. Secondly, something had happened to the complex insides of his food synthesizer so that no matter what buttons he punched, quivering slabs of undercooked protein-base smeared with a raspberry-flavored goo emerged from the ejector.

Not last, but worst of all, the ship's fuel converter had become erratic. Instead of a slow, steady feed of plutonite ribbon into the combustion chamber, the mechanism would sometimes falter and then leap ahead. The extra tape would send a tremendous flare of energy through the rear jets, and though the pulse only lasted a fraction of a second, the acceleration to six or seven gravs still knocked him around the cabin. Unless he happened to be strapped down in the pilot's seat, he'd find himself even more bruised and battered.

What made Ozaki unhappiest was his inability to do anything about his problems. Pilots who wanted to stay alive didn't tinker with their ship.

Dejectedly, he pulled out another red-bordered IMMEDIATE MAINTENANCE card from the rack and began to fill it in.

Description of item requiring maintenance: "Shower thermostat, M7, Small Standard."

Nature of malfunction: "Shower will deliver only boiling water."

Justification for immediate maintenance: Slowly in large, block letters Ozaki bitterly inked "Haven't had a bath since I left base!" and tossed the card into the already overflowing gripe box with a feeling of helpless anger.

CHAPTER NINE

It was a roomy cell as cells go, but Kurt wasn't happy there. And his continual striding up and down had begun to get on Colonel Harris's nerves.

"Relax, son," he said gently, "you'll just exhaust yourself."

Kurt turned to face the colonel, who had stretched out comfortably on his cot. "Sir," he said in conspiratorial whisper, "we've got to break out of here."

"What for?" asked Harris. "This is the first decent rest I've had in years."

"You aren't going to let Bannerman get away with it, are you?" demanded Kurt in a shocked voice.

"Why not?" said the colonel. "He's the exec, isn't he? If something happened to me, he'd have to take over command anyway. He's just going through the impatient stage, that's all. A few days behind my desk will settle him down. In two weeks he'll be so sick of the job he'll be down on his knees begging me to take over again."

Kurt decided to try a new tack. "But sir, he's going to shut down the tech schools!"

"A little vacation won't hurt the kids," said the colonel indulgently. "After a week or so all the mothers will get so sick of having them underfoot all day that they'll turn on him. Bannerman has sickened the kids himself, and I've a hunch his wife won't be any happier than the rest. She can be a very determined woman, Kurt, a very determined woman!"

Kurt had a feeling he was getting no place rapidly. "Please, sir," he said earnestly, "I've got a plan."

"Yes?"

"Just before the guard makes his evening check, stretch out on the bed and start moaning. I'll yell that you're dying and when he comes in to see, I'll jump him."

"You'll do no such thing!" said the colonel sternly. "Sergeant Wetzel is an old friend of mine. Can you get it through your thick head that I don't *want* to escape? When you've held command as long as I have, you'll welcome a chance for a little peace and quiet. I know Bannerman inside out, and I'm not worried about him. But if you've got your heart set on escaping, I suppose there's no particular reason why you shouldn't. Do it the easy way, though. Like this." He stood and moved to the bars that fronted the cell, bellowing, "Sergeant Wetzel! Sergeant Wetzel!"

"Coming, sir!" called a voice from down the corridor. There was a shuffle of running feet and a gray, scalp-locked and extremely portly sergeant puffed into view.

"What will it be, sir?" he asked.

"Colonel Bannerman or any of the staff around?" "No, sir," said the sergeant. "They're all upstairs celebrating."

"Good!" said Harris. "Unlock the door, will you?"

"Anything you say, colonel," said the old man agreeably. He produced a large key from his pocket and fitted it into the lock. There was a slight creaking and the door swung open.

"Young Dixon here wants to escape," said the colonel.

"It's all right by me," replied the sergeant, "though it's going to be awkward when Colonel Bannerman asks what happened to him."

"The lieutenant has a plan," confided the colonel. "He's going to overpower you."

"There's more to it than just that!" said Kurt. "I'm figuring on swapping uniforms with you. That way I can walk right out through the front gate without anybody being the wiser."

"That," said the sergeant, slowly looking down at his own enormous waist, "will take some doing. You're welcome to try, though."

"Let's get on with it, then," said Kurt, winding up a roundhouse swing.

“If it’s all the same with you, lieutenant,” said the old sergeant, eyeing Kurt’s rocklike face nervously, “I’d rather have the colonel do any overpowering that’s got to be done.”

Colonel Harris grinned and walked over to Wetzel.

“Ready?”

“Ready!”

Harris’s fist travelled a bare five inches and tapped Wetzel lightly on the chin.

“Oof!” grunted the sergeant cooperatively as he staggered back to a point where he could collapse on the softest of the two cots.

The exchange of clothes was quickly effected. Except for the pants (which persisted in drooping down to Kurt’s ankles) and the war bonnet (which kept sliding down over his ears), Kurt was ready to go. The pants problem he solved easily by stuffing a pillow inside them. This, Kurt fondly believed, made him look more like the rotund sergeant than ever. The garrison bonnet presented a more difficult problem, but he finally achieved a partial solution. By holding it up with his left hand and keeping his palm tightly pressed against his forehead, it should appear to the casual observer that he was walking engrossed in deep thought.

The first two hundred yards were easy. The corridor lay deserted and he plodded confidently along, the great war bonnet wobbling sedately on his head in spite of his best efforts to keep it steady. When he finally reached the exit gate, he knocked firmly and called to the duty sergeant.

“Open up! It’s Wetzel!”

Unfortunately, just then he grew careless and let go of his headgear. As the door swung open, the great war bonnet swooped down over his ears and came to rest on his shoulders, resulting in a mess of weaving feathers where his face normally should have been.

The duty sergeant merely said, “Very funny, Wetzel,” and slammed the door in Kurt’s face. Kurt heard the bolt click locked.

Disentangling himself from the head-dress with some difficulty, Kurt pelted back down the corridor. He wandered back into the cell with a disappointed look on his face.

Colonel Harris and the old sergeant were so deeply engrossed in a game of Rockets High that they didn’t even see him at first. Kurt finally coughed and the colonel looked up.

“Change your mind?”

“No, sir,” said Kurt. “Something slipped.”

“What?” asked the colonel.

“Sergeant Wetzel’s war bonnet. I’d rather not talk about it.” He sank down on his bunk and buried his head in his hands.

“Excuse me,” said the sergeant apologetically, “but if the lieutenant’s through with my pants I’d like to have them back. There’s a draft in here.”

Kurt silently returned the clothes, then walked over to the barred window and stood looking moodily outward.

“Why not go upstairs to officers’ country and escape that way?” suggested the sergeant. “If you can get to the front gate without one of the staff spotting you, you can walk right through. The sentry never notices faces, he just checks for insignia.”

Kurt grabbed Sergeant Wetzel’s plump hand and wrung it warmly. “I don’t know how to thank you,” he said.

“Then it’s about time you learned,” said the colonel. “The usual practice in civilized battalions is to say, ‘thank you.’”

“Thank you!” said Kurt.

“Quite all right,” said the sergeant. “Take the first stairway to your left. When you get to the top, turn left again and the corridor will take you straight to the exit.”

Kurt hurried out and found the stairs. When he’d climbed to the next floor, he turned left as the sergeant had instructed, following the corridor to where it split. There he hesitated a second, not knowing which branch to take. Finally he turned left again.

Fifty meters on, the passage dead-ended in an anteroom. Two torches flared beside the great bronze doors that brooded across the far wall. A sign on the door said, DO NOT ENTER—AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY. He’d taken the wrong fork, he realized.

Turning, he started to retrace his steps. He had almost reached the main corridor when he heard angry voices. Cautiously he eased forward and peeked around the corner. Two officers were arguing vehemently. Neither looked too sober, and the captain obviously wasn’t giving the major the respect that a field officer usually commanded.

“I don’t care what she said!” the captain shouted. “I saw her first!”

The major grabbed him by the shoulder and pushed him back against the wall. “It doesn’t matter who saw her first. You keep away from her or there’s going to be trouble!”

The captain flushed. With a snarl he tore off the major’s war bonnet and struck him in the face with it.

The major’s face grew hard and cold. He stepped back, clicked his calloused heels together, and bowed slightly.

“Axes or fists?”

“Axes,” snapped the captain.

“May I suggest the armory anteroom?” said the major formally. “We won’t be disturbed there.”

“As you wish, sir,” said the captain with equal formality. “Your bonnet, sir.” The major donned it with dignity and they started down the corridor. Kurt turned and fled before them, back way he’d just come. In a second he reached the anteroom with its two torches. Unless he did something quickly, he’d be found.

As flickering pools of shadow chased each other across the worn stone floor, Kurt cast about desperately for some exit he’d missed. He found none. The only possible escape lay through the bronze doors, with their sign forbidding entry.

The voices behind him grew louder, quarreling again. Kurt didn’t hesitate. He ran forward, grabbed one the right door’s handle, and pulled. It creaked open, and with a sigh of relief Kurt slipped inside.

There were no torches here. The great hall stood in near darkness, the glow of stars and moonlight through the skylight in the arched ceiling the only illumination. Kurt stood for a moment in awe, impressed in spite of himself by the strange, unfamiliar shapes looming before him. Then the sound of voices in the anteroom suddenly brought him back to reality.

“Hey! The armory door’s open!”

“So what? That place is off limits to everybody but the C.O.”

“Bannerman won’t care. Let’s fight in there. There should be more room. Get the torches for light.”

Kurt quickly scanned the hall for a safe hiding place. At the far end stood what looked like a great bronze statue, its burnished surface gleaming dimly. As he listened to the officers prying the anteroom’s torches from their holders, he darted to the statue. It looked like a coffin with feet, he thought, but shadows pooled to its sides. He pressed himself close against the cold metal.

As he did, his hip pressed a slight protrusion. With a clicking sound, a hinged middle section of the metallic figure swung open, exposing a dark cavity. The thing was hollow!

Kurt had an idea. They’d never think of looking inside this thing! he thought.

With some difficulty he wriggled inside and pulled the hatch shut after him. There were legs to the statue—his own fit snugly into them—but no arms.

Then the door creaked open and the two officers entered. They stood for a second and looked around the great hall wonderingly, then set their torches into wall brackets and squared off. Kurt gave a sigh of relief. They weren't going to spot him, he thought.

Moonlight glittered wickedly on ax-heads as weapons leaped to hand. The two officers stood frozen for a moment in a murderous tableau, and then the captain's ax hummed toward his opponent's head in a vicious slash. The major parried, striking sparks, and then with a quick twist he sent his own weapon looping toward the captain's midriff. The other pulled his ax down, but the blow raked his ribs. He grunted; blood trickled darkly in the moonlight.

As Kurt watched, he began to feel the first faint stirrings of claustrophobia. The Imperial designers had planned their battle armor for efficiency rather than comfort, and for someone used to living outdoors like Kurt, it felt as though he were locked away in a cramped closet. Then he realized the men left might very well lock the door behind them when they left, and his uneasiness grew. Abruptly he decided to change his hiding place. The two officers seemed too intent on killing one another to notice, and their torches gave little enough illumination. When clouds obscured the glow of the moon through the skylight, and Kurt could barely make the pirouetting forms at the far end of the hall, it seemed the perfect chance. If he could slip down the darkened side of the hall before the moon appeared again, he might be able to escape unobserved.

He pushed against the hatch through which he had entered. It refused to open. A feeling of trapped panic started to roll over him, but he fought it back. *There must be some way to open it from inside,* he thought.

As his fingers wandered over the dark interior of the suit looking for a release lever, he encountered a bank of keys set just below his chest. He pressed experimentally. A quiet hum filled the armor, and suddenly a feeling of weightlessness came over him. He stiffened in fright. As he did so one of his steel shod feet pushed lightly backwards against the floor.

That was enough. Slowly, like a child's balloon caught in a draft, he drifted toward the center of the hall. He struggled violently, but since he was now several inches above the floor and rising, it did him no good.

The fight was progressing splendidly. Both men were master axmen, and in spite of being slightly drunk, they were putting on a brilliant exhibition. Each bled from a dozen minor slashes, but neither had been seriously axed as yet. Their flashing strokes and counters were masterful, so masterful that Kurt slowly forgot his increasingly awkward situation as he became more and more absorbed in the fight before him. The blond captain was slightly the better axman, but the major compensated for it by occasionally whistling in cuts that to Kurt's experienced eye seemed perilously close to fouls. He grew steadily more partisan in his feeling until one particularly unscrupulous attack broke down his restraint altogether.

"Pull down your guard!" he screamed to the captain. "He's trying to cut you below the belt!" His voice reverberated within the battle suit and boomed out with strange metallic overtones.

Both men whirled in the direction of the sound. They could see nothing for a moment. And then the major caught sight of the strangely menacing figure looming above him in the murky darkness.

Dropping his ax, he dashed frantically for the exit, shrieking: "It's the Inspector General!"

The captain's reflexes were a second slower. Before he could take off, Kurt poked his head out of the open faceport and shouted down, "It's only me, Kurt Dixon! Get me out of here, will you?"

The captain stared up at him goggle-eyed. "What kind of a contraption is that?" he demanded. "An

what are you doing in it?"

Kurt was by now floating a good three meters off the floor. He had visions of spending the night on the ceiling and he wasn't happy about it. "Get me down now," he pleaded. "We can talk after I get out of this thing."

The captain gave a leap upwards and tried to grab the suit's ankle. His jump fell short, and his outstretched fingers gave the weightless armor a slight shove that sent it bobbing up another meter.

He cocked his head back and called, "I can't reach you now. We'll have to try something else. How did you get into that thing in the first place?"

"The middle section is hinged," said Kurt. "When I pulled it shut, it clicked."

"Well, unclick it!"

"I tried that. That's why I'm up here now."

"Try again," said the man on the floor. "If you can open the hatch, you can drop down and I'll catch you."

"Here I come!" said Kurt, fingers selecting a stud at random. He pushed.

A terrible blast of flame jetted from the armor's shoulders, and Kurt screamed skywards on a pillar of fire. When he reached the skylight microseconds later, glass shattered. He raced upward, free of the building.

At two thousand meters the air pressure dropped to the point where automatics took over. The faceplate clicked shut. Kurt didn't notice; he was out like a light. At eight thousand meters the suit heaters cut in. Forty seconds later he was in free space. Things could have been worse, though; he still had enough air for two more hours.

CHAPTER TEN

Flight Officer Ozaki was taking a catnap when the alarm on the flux leakage detector went off. Dashing the sleep from his eyes, he slipped into the control seat and cut off the gong. His fingers danced over the controls. Swiftly the viewscreen shifted until the little green dot indicating a source of radiant energy was firmly centered. Next he switched on the pulse analyzer and watched carefully as it broke the incoming signal into components and sent them surging across the scope. The sharp-toothed sine waves had an odd peak, a strength and sharpness which he had never seen before.

“Doesn’t look familiar,” he muttered to himself, “but I’d better check to make certain.”

He punched the comparison button, and while the analyzer checked the incoming trace against known patterns stored up in its compact little memory bank, he turned again to the viewscreen. He switched to high magnification and watched space rush toward him. The star expanded from a single pinpoint of light into a distinct planetary system. At its center a red giant star expanded like a bloodshot eye. As he watched the green dot move appreciably, a thin red line stretching out behind it to indicate its course. Ozaki’s finger moved over the controls. With careful adjustments he steered his scope toward that power source.

It looked as if he might have something, he thought tensely as he neared. He gave a whoop of excitement at the thought of winning the bonus thirty-day leave and six months’ pay for discovering General Carr’s headquarters. He waited impatiently for the pulse analyzer to clear.

Home! he thought ecstatically. Home and unplugged plumbing!

With a final whir of relays, the analyzer clucked and dropped an identity card out of its slot. Ozaki grabbed it and scanned it eagerly. At the top was printed in red: **IDENTITY: UNKNOWN**, and below in smaller letters: **CHECK TRACE PATTERN ON BASE ANALYZER**. He gave a whistle as his eyes caught the energy utilization index: 92.7! That was fifteen points higher than it had any right to be. The best tech in the Protectorate considered himself lucky if he could tune a propulsion unit so that it delivered a thrust of seventy-five percent of rated maximum. Whatever was out there, it was hot—to hot for one man to handle alone. With quick decision he punched the transmission key of the space communicator and sent a message winging back to War Base Three.

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