

The Last Victory

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The transport ship, bound for Capella with Outlander colonists from Earth and Frontier Guards from Arcturus, struck the hyperspace vortex without warning. It seized her, wrenching and twisting her, and flung her across its gigantic rim at thousands of times the speed of light. She emerged into normal space in an unknown region of the galaxy, broken and driveless, but near enough a planet that she could descend by means of her antigravity plates before the last of her air was gone.

It was sunset when she settled heavily to earth on a grassy slope beside a forest, leaning at a dangerous angle with only her failing antigravity plates to hold her from falling. The dead had been disposed of in space and the living filed out of her: fifty Outlander men, women and children, eighteen ship's crewmen, and ten Frontier Guards.

The Guard officer and ship's captain came last, of equal rank and already appraising each other with cold speculation.

The Howling things in the dark forest were coming closer. Thane listened as he watched Curry, the ship's captain, approach across the strip of land that separated the two camps; standing back from his fire as he waited, where he would make an uncertain target for an assassin's blaster.

No one could be seen near any of the fires in the two camps on the hill. Only the unarmed Outlanders, at their fires in the swale below, moved about without wariness. And it was not yet three hours from the landing of the ship.

Curry stopped before him, restrained anger on his arrogantly handsome face.

"You failed to report to me and turn your Frontier Guards over to my command as you were ordered," he said.

"Since your rank is no higher than mine I saw no reason to do so," Thane answered.

Curry smiled, very thinly. "Perhaps I can show you a reason."

"Perhaps. Let's have it."

"First, I want to remind you of our circumstances," Curry said. "The ship will never lift again

and we're marooned here for centuries to come. You know what the reaction of the Outlanders will be."

The Outlanders were the outcasts of a society that could not tolerate individuality. Two hundred years before the complexities of civilization had combined technocracy with integration and produced Technogration. Technogration had abolished race, creed and color, nations and borders, had welded all into a common mass and prohibited all individual pursuits that did not contribute to the Common Good. The Outlanders, refusing to come under Technograte domination, lived as best they could in the deserts, plateaus and jungles that Technogration could not use. The ones on the ship had been bound for Capella Five where men accustomed to wrestling a living from hostile environments were needed. Under such circumstances Outlanders were given certain rights and freedoms. Until they were no longer needed. Then, again, they became a people without a world....

"For two hundred years the Outlanders have hated Technogration and wanted a world where they could set up their own archaic form of society," Curry said. "Now, those down there will think their millenium has arrived and they can refuse to recognize Technograte authority."

"I see," Thane said. "And you want my cooperation so that Technogration won't fall by the wayside?"

"Your willingness to accept a subordinate position would give me an intact force of both crewmen and Guardsmen." Curry's lips thinned. "But there will be Technogration, with or without your support. There will be no retrogression back into the Outlanders' hallowed Dark Ages."

"There is no argument—we both want Technogration," Thane said. "We only disagree over who should be in command."

"There is a slight difference in our qualifications. Your present rank was gained by your ability to kill and not by loyalty to Technogration."

"Yes, of course," Thane agreed. "We'll say that I'm a materialistic opportunist while you're a noble idealist. But it's still the same identical whip that we're both going to reach for."

"As I said, I would prefer a peaceful transfer of your Guardsmen to my command. But my crewmen outnumber them almost two to one and they are expendable if necessary." The thin smile came back, almost mocking in its confidence. "You haven't much choice but to cooperate and accept a subordinate role, have you?"

The subordinate role would be very brief; it would end with a blaster beam in the back as

soon as the Guardsmen were transferred to Curry's command....

"Try again, Curry. I can't bite on that one."

The smile faded from Curry's face, leaving it icily cold. "That was the only opportunity you'll ever get."

The howling sounded again in the forest and Thane said:

"We understand each other, now. But the Outlanders are unarmed and it may require our full forces to hold off whatever is out there. I suggest a truce until morning."

The iciness remained on Curry's face and he did not reply at once. "Perhaps you are right. You will order your men to observe a truce for the rest of the night."

He turned back to his camp.

Thane made the rounds where his guards patrolled with their searchlights probing out into the darkness. All of Curry's men but two had been added to reinforce the guard ring around the Outlander camp; most of the crewmen along the east and south lines, leaving the more experienced Guardsmen to patrol the two lines facing the forest.

Guardsmen and crewmen patrolled in silence, watching one another with the calculating regard of men who knew they might soon be ordered to kill one another. Apparently it was obvious to all of them that two officers of equal rank was a situation that could not for long exist.

His return to his camp took him through the scattered camp fires of the Outlanders. There were not many men to be seen; most of the survivors were women and children whom the Outlander leader had ordered into the safer inner compartments when the ship began breaking up.

Thane met him at the second fire; a gaunt old man with a jutting gray beard and sharp blue eyes under bristling gray brows. He stepped out from the fire and spoke:

"Captain Thane—I'd like to ask a question."

Thane stopped. "What is it?"

"My name is Paul Kennedy and I speak for all of us," the old man said. "Captain Curry has locked up all arms from us—he's already starting the regimentation for a permanent Technograte colony here and making sure we can't object. For two hundred years

Technogration has failed on Earth except to turn men into robots. Here we could have a new chance and live like humans again.”

“The question,” Thane reminded him.

“You were in the Frontier Guards, where men still have to think for themselves to survive, and we were hoping you would understand why we don’t want to start another ant hill here.”

He could understand—but now, after thirty years of planning and fighting, he was only one step from the top.

“There will be Technogration,” he said.

“We thought you would say that.” Kennedy’s expression did not change. “We hoped we would be wrong.”

An ecstatic yelping sounded suddenly from nearby and something brown and white raced across the firelit ground with a laughing boy in pursuit. Thane stared.

It was a dog.

He had not seen one for thirty years. Technogration prohibited the owning of pets as an unnecessary drain upon the planned economy and as non-contributive to the Common Good.

“We knew about the regulations,” Kennedy said, “but children need pets to love and be loved by. She’s going to have pups—only she and Lornie’s kitten were left.” The old man’s eyes watched him closely, questioningly. “Surely, no one will object to them?”

The dog circled back and a dark haired young woman beyond another fire called to it: “Binkie—come here!”

The dog obeyed, its tail drooping a little, and the woman looked uncertainly in Thane’s direction before she disappeared back in the shadows, the dog close behind her. The boy followed, asking, “Why did you stop us, Blanche?”

Thane watched them go, the sight of the boy and dog bringing back with unwanted vividness the memory of another Outlander boy who had played with his dog, long ago; bringing back the past that necessity had forced him to forget....

He put the dangerous weakness from his mind and spoke to Kennedy:

“You Outlanders were bound for a Technorate world when you left Earth. You now stand on a Technorate world. You will do as you are ordered to do. As for your pets—you may have as many as you want so far as I’m concerned.”

He stepped past Kennedy and continued on through the camp. The conversation of the Outlanders froze as he drew near, letting him walk in a little sea of silence that moved along with him. It was the usual reaction to the presence of a Technorate officer.

A little girl was out beyond the last fire; her back turned to him as she knelt in the grass and worked at something. He came closer and saw she was trying to tie a white cord around the neck of a half grown kitten. It sat with resigned patience as she struggled with earnest, inexperienced fingers to tie a knot that would not fall apart. She was talking to it as she worked:

“—and maybe the things in the forest kill cats. So you’ll have to stay tied up, Tommy, and close to me because you’re the only kitten on this whole world—”

His shadow fell across her and she looked up. Black curls framed a startled little face and gray eyes went wide at the sight of his uniform. She seized the surprised kitten and held it protectively in her arms, the knot falling apart again on the ground.

“Please—Tommy won’t ever hurt anything—”

Two women and a man were watching him from beyond the fire with frozen-faced hatred. Technorate regulations required the immediate killing of any animals found smuggled aboard a ship....

“I won’t harm your kitten,” he said. He smiled sardonically at the Outlanders beyond the fire. “My horns aren’t quite that long yet.”

He met Curry when he was almost back to his camp. Curry had two bodyguards with him and passed without speaking.

The hours went by and the night was like a cold October night on Earth but for the strange constellations that crept across the sky. The Outlander fires burned lower and the things in the forest became silent, as though massing for a surprise attack. Twice the wind shifted, to bring the scents from the forest, and each time he heard the dog growl uneasily while the woman tried to quiet her.

He was going down the south guard line, the western horizon touched with the light of coming moonrise, when the monsters attacked the north line.

They broke suddenly from the forest with a demoniac howl of command from their leader, a boiling wave of them. They were green, hard to see against the green grass, racing low to the ground like giant tigers, their long, serpentine necks thrust forward and eyes blazing yellow in hyena faces.

The blaster fire of the Guardsmen met them, pale blue beams that blossomed into brief incandescence when they struck. Curry's guards added their fire, their reactions slower than those of the Guardsmen. The guards along the other three lines turned to help halt the attack, the south line guards firing across the Outlander camp.

The front rank of monsters went down, with them the leader. For an instant the onslaught slowed, leaderless and uncertain, then the monster that had been behind the leader gave the commanding howl and the others surged ahead again.

At that moment, when the attention of every guard in every guard line was on the north perimeter attack, the Outlander dog broke loose from whoever had been holding her. She ignored the attack from the north and was a blur as she went through the south guard line, screaming a snarl of warning and her leash whipping in the air behind her. She vanished behind the guard line and Thane swung his searchlight.

Five monsters were almost upon the backs of the unsuspecting guards, charging without sound.

His blaster beam raked at them and two went down. The others struck three guards with their bodies, knocking them to the ground before they could fire. Then the monsters passed on, to lurch a dozen steps and fall limply to the ground. They did not even twitch after they fell.

He saw, when he reached the first one, that it was dead. So were the other two.

Yet there was not a blaster mark on them.

Then he saw another thing. One of the monsters had fallen with its jaws slackly open and its teeth were visible. They were blunt and even.

Despite their ferocious appearance, the monsters were only herbivores.

The three fallen guards were getting to their feet, apparently unharmed. Along the north perimeter the attack was over as suddenly as it had begun; the leader of the monsters lying

dead against the guard line and all the others still alive fleeing wildly back into the forest. Quiet came, broken only by the growling of the dog out near the two monsters Thane had killed.

He turned his light on her, then went closer to make sure he had seen rightly.

She was fighting something on the ground, green-eyed with fury as she ripped and tore at it. But there was nothing there. Nothing.

“Binkie!”

The dark haired woman was coming toward them, wraithlike in a white sleeping garment. The dog turned away, with a last rip at the nothing it fought, and saw the three guards the monsters had knocked down. She froze, like as though she saw something she could not believe.

Then, deadly with menace, a growl vibrated in her throat and she crouched to attack them.

“Binkie—*don’t!*” The voice of the girl was shrill with urgency. “Come here—come here!”

The dog hesitated, then obeyed; going past the guards in a swift lope, her head turned to watch them and her teeth bared in a snarl. The girl seized the leash and girl and dog disappeared back into the Outlander camp, both of them running.

Curry loomed out of the darkness, his two bodyguards with him, and flashed his light over the fallen monsters.

“So you let three get through?” he said. He glanced to the north guard line where the searchlights of the guards showed only the dark, lifeless edge of the forest. “But no one was harmed and there’s no indication that they are going to attack again.”

He regarded Thane with cold thoughtfulness. “Apparently the camp is in no danger, after all.”

To Thane the implication of his words was obvious: if the monsters were not a menace his cooperation was no longer needed by Curry. The three guards were Curry men and Curry had two with him. He was outnumbered six to one....

“Sir—”

It was one of the three guards; Bellam, the ship’s pharmacist. He hurried up to Curry, the other two close behind him.

Curry swung on him, impatiently. "What is it?"

"We must combine our forces to fight a new danger. This camp is infected with rabies."

"Rabies?"

"Yes, sir," Bellam answered. "The Outlander's dog had a convulsion beyond the guard line and then almost attacked the three of us. That dog is mad."

"How do you know it was a convulsion?" Thane asked.

"You saw it, yourself," Bellam answered.

He turned his head to face Thane as he spoke and Thane saw his eyes for the first time.

They were the lifeless, staring eyes of a dead man.

He flicked his light over the faces of the other two guards. They were the same; all three were like walking dead.

"Did the monsters harm you?" he asked Bellam.

Bellam hesitated, seeming to tense with suspicion. "No." The dead eyes stared into his. "What makes you ask?"

He saw that Curry had noticed nothing different about the three guards. It was typical of Curry; to him subordinates were only automatons to carry out his orders.

"We were discussing a mad dog, Thane," Curry said. "Not the health of my men." He spoke to Bellam. "As I recall, rabies was a pre-Technogration plague, often fatal."

"The bite of a rabid animal is invariably fatal, the death prolonged and painful," Bellam said. "There is no preventative or cure among the medical supplies on the ship. The dog must be killed at once, together with all other animals in the Outlander camp."

"If the dog was mad, why hasn't it bitten any of the Outlanders," Thane asked Curry. "I suggest we keep it on a leash until we know for sure."

"The dog was smuggled aboard the ship in defiance of regulations," Curry said. "It would have been destroyed before had I known about it."

He turned to Bellam, ignoring Thane. “The three of you will search the Outlander camp from end to end. Kill all animals and report to me the names of the owners.”

The three departed, to begin the search at the nearer end of the camp. Thane made no further objection. He knew the Outlanders well enough to know that they would have overheard the discussion on the hill and slipped the dog out through the guard lines before that discussion ended. Outlanders could be very clever in such matters—the searchers would find no dog.

There was satisfaction on Curry’s face as he turned and with his two bodyguards started back up the hill to his camp. Thane watched him go, smiling a little. Curry was making the mistake that had been fatal for so many before him; he was taking it for granted too soon that he had won.

A man came hurrying from the north guard line before Curry had gone far. He called to Curry:

“Sir, there is something you ought to know—”

Thane saw, with almost disbelief, that it was one of his own men: Gorman.

Curry waited and when Gorman reached him he said:

“When I was helping inspect the Outlander section of the ship for hidden weapons this evening I saw some small animals in storage compartment Thirteen. I think they were very young kittens. I would like to volunteer to go and kill them.”

Curry said something that a vagrant breeze made inaudible then his words came clear:

“—I’ll send a detail to the ship as soon as the camp is searched. You will report to my guards now for orders and help them hunt for the dog.”

Gorman started back to meet the guards and Curry stood for a little while before he went on his way. Thane could imagine his feeling of pleased surprise and triumph.

Thane called to Gorman as he passed some distance in front of him.

“Were you injured in the attack?” he asked.

“No,” Gorman said. Then, with the same tense suspicion that Bellam had had he asked the same question: “Why do you ask?”

“Why did you report to Curry instead of me?”

The answer came quickly, mechanically, “The animals are in his ship and they must be killed. They may be mad.”

“Go help Curry’s men,” he said and watched Gorman go, trying to fit together the incidents that did not make sense.

Herbivores had attacked without reason. Three had fallen dead, without a blaster mark on them. The Outlander dog had fought nothing and almost attacked the guards. One of his own men had gone over to the other side. And there was a sudden strange urgency to kill all animals in camp.

There was nothing he could do for the time being but wait for further developments so he waited. The moon came up, so swift in its retrograde orbit that its speed was visible and so near that it had the brilliance of a dozen Earth moons. When it had lifted clear of the horizon it flooded the land with a cold silver light that made the searchlights of the guards unnecessary and revealed the camp with metallic light-and-shadow clarity.

The search party was halfway through the camp, Gorman with them and Bellam in command. They were ransacking the possessions and temporary shelters of the Outlanders with swift efficiency, ignoring the protests of the women and their blasters leveled warningly on the men.

They found the little girl.

She was carrying her kitten ahead of them, a small, silent shadow in the moonlight, when Gorman saw her. He spoke to Bellam and Bellam’s head jerked up. Then the two of them advanced on her.

She tried to run when she realized they had seen the kitten, hugging it in her arms with the white cord trailing behind her. Bellam overtook her and caught her by the shoulder, jerking her to a halt. He tore the kitten from her arms and flung it hard to the ground. It made a thin little scream of pain and the girl fought to reach it, her cry sobbing and frantic:

“Don’t hurt him—”

Gorman’s blaster hissed and blue flame leaped from it. Incandescence enveloped the kitten and then there was nothing where it had been but a small black hole in the ground.

Bellam and Gorman wheeled back, like mechanical men, to resume the search. The girl stood a moment, staring before her, saying something very low that sounded like, “*Tommy ... Tommy...*” Then she stumbled to the little black hole and dropped to her knees beside it as though she hoped that somehow she might still find her kitten there.

He looked away, strangely disturbed. He drummed his fingers restlessly on the butt of his holstered blaster then he turned again to go down into the Outlander camp.

The moon was up and it was time he found the dog. Something had come out of the night with the monsters and perhaps she could tell him what it was. He could not yet believe she was mad.

The dark haired woman stood by the fire, watching the little girl and the searchers with bitter, smouldering hatred. She faced him, her breath coming fast in her anger.

“Her parents and her brother—when the ship broke up—she lost them all. Only her kitten was left to her.”

“Where is the dog?” he asked.

“Find her!”

“The dog—where is she?”

“Find her,” she challenged again. “Find her and kill her—if you can!”

He stepped past her and went on his way. She had told him what he wanted to know: despite her attempts not to do so she had been unable to keep from glancing toward the ship.

His route took him by the little girl. She was standing by the hole, small and bare-footed in the grass, her hands holding the white cord that was black and charred on one end. She was crying, silently, as though too proud to let him see her break.

After he had passed her the vision went with him for a little way; the terrible, helpless hatred and hurt in her eyes and the moonlight gleaming coldly on her tears.

He looked back when he reached the ship. Gorman was coming, running, and the other

three were turning back from the far end of the camp to hurry after Gorman.

He looked toward Curry's camp and saw Curry watching him. Curry and his men moved toward him and there were six to make a rendezvous with him.

The truce was over.

He found the dog behind the farthest tail fin, leashed to a thorny bush and almost invisible in the shadows.

She watched him as he stopped before her, her ears forward questioningly and her tail moving a little with tentative friendliness. He spoke to her and her reply was a low bark, her tail whipping with delight. She thought he had come to release her....

He had known dogs well as a boy and he knew the one before him was not mad.

He heard Gorman's feet plodding fast through the grass and he waited with his blaster in his hand.

Gorman came around the tail fin, panting, his own blaster in his hand. The dog went rigid at the sight of him, the growl in her throat, and Gorman's blaster swung toward her.

"Hold it!" he ordered.

Gorman paused, and the dead eyes looked into his. "There the mad dog is—we must kill it."

"We can kill it later if it's mad. We'll watch it a while, first."

The suspicion became like something almost tangible about Gorman and his blaster started the first movement toward Thane.

"Why?"

"I think it can see something—"

Gorman fired, so swiftly that he felt the heat of the beam even though he had been expecting it. He shot for the heart and Gorman collapsed before he could fire again. He lay still on the ground, the eyes that stared up into the sky no deader than when he had been alive.

The dog was lunging against her leash, trying to get to him. Thane stepped closer and watched the grass beside Gorman's head. A patch of it the size of his hand suddenly bent

down, as from an unseen weight, and then something struck his knee.

He slapped at it as it darted up his leg and knocked it off; something that felt like a mass of cold, rubbery tentacles. He knew, then.

He stepped back, his blaster swinging aimlessly. The thing would leap again, to reach his head as it had done with Gorman, and it was invisible. There was nothing but the moonlit grass to be seen. Perhaps it was behind him, already preparing to spring....

The dog's snarling was a frenzied scream as she fought against her leash. He swung his blaster and its blue beam cut the leash in two.

She flashed toward him, then up, her ears laid back, her eyes blazing slits and her teeth slashing at his throat. His blaster was in line with her chest and for a brief instant he had only to press the firing stud.

He did something he had not done for thirty years; he trusted his life to another being and did not fire.

Cold tentacles whipped against his face and her teeth closed together beside his cheek with a vicious snap and gust of hot breath. She rebounded and held the thing on the ground between her paws as she tore at it; gagging a little, whining and snarling in fury and triumph.

He squatted beside her and laid his hand on her, speaking to her soothingly. She calmed a little, though her chest still pounded with the beating of her heart, and he saw the thing she had killed.

It was dead and slowly becoming visible as it changed to a color like pale milk. It resembled a huge, hairless spider.

It was a parasite; a highly intelligent parasite that could take over the mind of its host as well as the body. The parasites had had only the forest monsters as hosts, before, but with the coming of the humans they had the opportunity for hosts of a far higher order. They possessed a means of locomotion but apparently it was limited in its duration or else they would not have needed to control the leaders of the monster bands and stage the attack that would carry them to the guard lines.

The dog, with the acute sixth sense of some animals, could sense the hostile alienness of the things. She could see them—apparently the vision range of dogs went a little farther beyond that of humans. So also would that of cats but the kitten had had no chance to show by its actions what it had seen.

The dog had hated the changed men because they were alien things, no longer human. The thing that had been Bellam had used the knowledge stored in Bellam's mind to claim there was rabies in the camp and thereby enlist the support of the humans in killing their only means of detecting the parasites.

There was a pounding of feet beyond the ship as the zombies came. On the slope above him Curry was striding toward him, his bodyguards flanking him and the moonlight bright on his face.

He stood with the dog beside him and watched them come to kill him. Only he and the dog knew of the parasites; if they were killed the way would be open for the parasites to infiltrate the camp. In the end the new world would hold only the walking dead, down to the last Outlander child.

"Curry," he called.

He did not have to speak loudly in the still night air for Curry to hear him but Curry came on, his face hard, arrogant metal in the moonlight.

"Give me one minute, Curry, to tell you what I found."

Curry's reply was the order to his men.

"The dog is with him. Kill them both."

His blaster swung up as he spoke.

Thane dropped, firing as he went down. Curry's arrogant face dissolved into nothing and his blaster flamed aimlessly into the ground at his feet. The blaster of the swiftest guard sent its beam hissing like a snake over Thane's head, then he went down as Curry had done, the other guard falling beside him with his first and only shot licking off into the moonlight.

Then the zombies came around the tail fin, in a quick rush with their dead eyes staring and their blasters making a curtain of blue fire before them.

The dog lunged at them and a blaster beam dipped down to meet her. Bellam—his headless body was falling forward as Thane killed the zombie beside him. The blaster of the third one ripped its beam like a white-hot iron along Thane's ribs as he died. Then, within two heartbeats, it was over and the night was quiet again.

He returned his blaster to its holster. The dog was limping from one zombie to the other, searching for parasites, her shoulder red with blood and staining the grass.

She found none and he called her to him to look at her shoulder. It was not a serious wound but it was painful and bleeding fast and should be cared for. He took her around the ship, where the Outlander camp lay in view below. He looked again at the wound and she whimpered a little from the pain, gentle though his touch had been, then licked his hand in quick apology.

“Your job is over for now,” he said. He motioned toward the camp below, where the dark haired woman was waiting. “Home, girl—go home.”

She left him and went running and limping down the hill where her hurts would be cared for.

His side was burning and blood was like a warm, wet sheet down it. He made a temporary bandage of his shirt and then leaned wearily against the tail fin.

It was all over. The nature of the parasites was known and everyone could be fitted with a thin metal helmet until they were completely eliminated. They did not seem to be numerous—apparently there had been no more than ten or twelve among the scores of monsters. The dog would watch, and warn them if any more were in the vicinity.

It was all over, with Curry a motionless spot on the hillside above him and no one left to challenge him. He had come a long way from the Outlander boy on the high, cold prairie who had hated Technogration. He had been nineteen before he finally realized the futility of hating the unassailable power of Technogration and realized he must accept it and adapt to it. And then carve out a niche for himself with a ruthlessness greater than any of those around him. So he had fought his way up, trampling those who would have trampled him had they been a little stronger, each step another victory in his conquest of the system that had condemned him.

And now—the last victory. There was no one to challenge him; there could be no one under the rigid discipline of Technogration.

The last victory. The security of Power to the end of his life.

That was Technogration.

Dawn touched the sky, softening the moon's hard light. As though the coming of day was a signal, the ship trembled and there was the whisper of dislodged soil as the tail fin lifted a fraction of an inch. The antigravity plates were almost exhausted—the ship would fall within minutes.

Down in the Outlander camp the children were gathering around the dog as the dark haired woman bandaged her shoulder. A voice came to him, treble and joyous, “Binkie is back—Binkie is back...”

The little girl sat to one side, so small and alone that he almost failed to see her. She watched the children crowd up to pet their dog but she did not move to join them. Only her hands moved, caressing the white cord that was charred on one end.

He felt the triumph and satisfaction become like something turned bitter around the edges and draining away.

Technogration was planning and fighting and killing until at last a man reached the top and no one dared oppose him; Technogration was control of a world and the seeds of an empire.

And Technogration was a child crying in the cold moonlight, was a little black hole where a kitten had screamed out with pain, with a little girl's heart that had nothing left to hold but harsh and poignant memories and a piece of burnt cord.

He ran to the boarding ramp, feeling the fiery lash of pain and hot flow of blood as the wound reopened, telling himself he was a fool who would probably die in the falling ship and would deserve it.

He stood by the gray ashes of his fire, the Guardsman's combat helmet under his arm, and watched the little girl come alone up the hill. Someone had washed the tear-stains from her face and she stopped before him with her head held high and defiant, trying not to let him see she was afraid of him and almost succeeding.

“I sent for you, Lornie, to tell you I'm sorry about last night.”

He saw she did not believe him. Her face was like a little carving of cold, unforgiving stone and she did not answer him.

He set the helmet down in the grass before her. Six tiny kittens lay inside it, red and white and gray fluffs of fur, their pink mouths questing hungrily.

Her eyes widened with incredulous wonder.

“Oh!”

Then the suspicion came back and she stopped the quick forward step she had taken.

“They haven’t any mother and they’re hungry,” he said.

She did not move.

“They’re yours, Lornie. To keep.”

“They’re—mine?” Then the doubt fled from her and she ran forward to gather them in her arms.

He left her with her head bent down over the kittens in her lap, making soft little sounds of endearment to them, her face so radiant that there was no room left for hurt or hatred on it.

Kennedy was coming, not yet knowing why he had been summoned nor that Technogration had died at dawn. He would not relinquish all his authority, of course. And he would have to remember to tell Kennedy that they were going to give him one of Binkie’s pups.

The companionship of an understanding dog might be comforting in the years to come, whenever he recalled the morning he had owned a world and a bare-footed girl had taken it away from him.

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