



The Outbreak of Peace
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It was a great pity, Space Marshal Wilbur Hennings reflected, as he gazed through the one-way glass of the balcony door, that the local citizens had insisted upon decorating the square before their capitol with the hulk of the first spaceship ever to have landed on Pollux V.

A hundred and fifty years probably seemed impressive to them, amid the explosive spread of Terran colonies and federations. Actually, in the marshal's opinion, it was merely long enough to reveal such symbols as more than antiquated but less than historically precious.

"I presume you plan to have me march past that heap!" he complained, tugging at the extremely "historical" sword that completed the effect of his dazzling white and gold uniform.

Commodore Miller, his aide, stiffened nervously.

"Around to the right of it, sir," he gestured. "As you see, the local military are already keeping the route clear of onlookers. We thought it would be most impressive if your party were to descend the outer stairway from the palace balcony here ... to heighten the importance of—"

"To draw out the pomp and circumstance of opening the conference?"

"Well, sir ... and then across the square to the conference hall of the capitol, outside which you will pause for a few gracious words to the crowd—"

"And that will probably be my last opportunity to enjoy the morning sunlight. Oh, well, it seems much too bright here in any case."

The commodore absently reached out to adjust a fold of his chief's sky-blue sash, and the marshal as absently parried the gesture.

"I shall be hardly less than half an hour crossing the square," he predicted sourly. "With the cheering throngs they have undoubtedly arranged, and the sunlight reflecting from all that imitation marble, it will be no place to collect one's thoughts."

He turned back to the huge chamber constituting the "office" of the suite supplied by his Polluxian hosts. The skeleton staff of men and women remaining occupied chairs and benches along only one wall, since the bulk of the delegation had been sent out to make themselves popular with the local populace.

Hennings presumed the bulk of the local populace to consist of Polluxians assigned to making themselves popular with his Ursan Federation delegation. His people would be listening politely to myriad reasons why the Polluxians had a natural right to occupy all the star systems from here to Castor, a dozen light-years farther from Terra. No one

would mention the true motive—their illogical choice in naming themselves the Twin Empire.

"Well, now!" he said crisply. "Once more over the main points of the situation! No, commodore, not the schedule of experts that will accompany me to the table; I rely upon you to have perfected that. But have there been any unforeseen developments in the actual fighting?"

A cluster of aides, mostly in uniform but including a few in discreetly elegant civilian attire, moved forward. Each was somehow followed within arm's reach by an aide of his own, so that the advance presented overtones of a small sortie.

Hennings first nodded to the first, a youngish man whose air suggested technical competence more than the assurance of great authority. The officer placed his brief case upon the glistening surface of a large table and touched a switch on the flap.

"It's as well to be sure, sir," the commodore approved. "Our men have been unable to detect any devices, but the walls may have ears."

"They won't scan through this scrambler, sir," asserted the young officer.

Hennings accepted a seat at the table and looked up to one of the others.

"Mirelli's Star," an older officer reported briskly. "The same situation prevails, with both sides having landed surface troops in force on Mirelli II, Mirelli III, and Mirelli V, the fourth planet being inhabited by a partly civilized, nonhuman race protected under the Terran Convention."

"Recent engagements?"

"No, sir. Maneuvering continues, but actual encounters have declined in frequency. Casualties are modest and evenly matched. General Nilssen on Mirelli III continues to receive Polluxian agents seeking his defection."

"I never thought to ask," murmured Hennings. "Is he really a distant connection of the Polluxian Nilssen family?"

"It is improbable, sir, but they are polite enough to accept the pretense. Of course, he rejects every offer in a very high-minded manner, and seems to be making an adequate impression of chivalry."

He stepped back at Henning's nod, to be replaced by another officer.

"One minor space skirmish in the Agohki system to report, sir. The admiral in command appears to have recouped after the error of two days ago, when that Polluxian detachment was so badly mauled. He arranged the capture of three of our cruisers."

"Was that not a trifle rash?" demanded Hennings.

"Intelligence is inclined to think not, sir. The ships were armed only with weapons listed as general knowledge items. The crews were not only trained in prisoner-of-war tactics, but also well supplied with small luxuries. The Polluxian fleet in that system is known to have been in space for several months, so a friendly effect is anticipated."

Hennings considered the condensed report proffered for his perusal. He noted that the Polluxians had been quite gentlemanly about notifying Ursan headquarters of the capture and of the complete lack of casualties. He also saw that while the message was ostensibly directed to the Federation flagship, it had been beamed in such fashion as to be conveniently intercepted at the secret Ursan Federation headquarters on Agohki VII.

"That was a bit rude of them," he commented. "We have never dragged their secrets into the open."

"On the other hand, sir," the commodore suggested, "it may be an almost sophisticated method of permitting us to enjoy our superior finesse."

"I am just as pleased to have the reminder," said Hennings. "It will serve to alert us all the more when we sit down with them over there."

An elegant civilian, a large man with patient, drooping features, stated that nothing had occurred to change the economic situation. Another reported that unofficial channels of information were holding up as well as could be expected. A uniformed officer summarized the battle situation in two more star systems.

"Those are positions we actually desire to hold, are they not?" Hennings asked. "Is action to be taken there?"

"Plans call for local civilian riots at the height of the conference, sir."

"But ... can we lay no groundwork sooner than that? Sometime in the foreseeable future, at least! Take it up with Propaganda, Blauvelt! It seems to me that the briefing mentioned an indigenous race on one of these planets—"

Blauvelt dropped his eyes momentarily, equivalent in that gathering to a blush of intense embarrassment. Hennings coughed apologetically.

"Well, now, I should not pry into arrangements I must later be able to deny convincingly with a clear conscience. I can only plead, my dear Blauvelt, the tenseness of the past several days."

The officer murmured inaudibly, fumbled with his papers, and edged to the rear rank. Someone, at Commodore Miller's fluttering, obtained a vacuum jug of ice water and a glass for the marshal, but Hennings chose instead to produce a long cigar from a pocket concealed beneath his resplendent collection of medals.

"My apologies to all of you," he said thoughtfully. "I fear that any of you who may expect contact with the local population had better see Dr. Ibn Talal about the hypnosis necessary to counteract my little indiscretion. And now—what remains?"

"Nothing but the prisoner exchange, sir," Commodore Miller announced after collecting the eyes of the principal officers.

Hennings got his cigar going. He listened to confirmation of a previous report that a massive exchange of "sick and wounded" prisoners had been accomplished, and learned that the Ursans now suspected that they had accepted unknowingly about as many secret agents as they had sent the Polluxians.

"Oh, well!" he sighed. "As long as the amenities were preserved! We must be as friendly as possible about that sort of thing, or run the risk of antagonizing them."

Seeing that the commodore was tense with impatience, the marshal rose to his feet. An aide deftly received the cigar for disposal, and the party drifted expectantly toward the balcony doors.

From among that part of the staff which would remain to man headquarters, an officer was dispatched to alert the Polluxian honor guard.

One more touch before the die is cast, thought the marshal, as two young officers opened the balcony doors to admit the blare of trumpets.

Cheers rolled successively across the square, rising like distant waves from somewhere beneath the gigantic banner that draped the capitol opposite with fiery letters spelling out "PEACE CONFERENCE."

With a dramatic gesture, Hennings held up the sheaf of reports they had just reviewed. Smiles disappeared in response to his own serious mien.

"So much for the hostilities!" he snapped. He tossed the reports to the officer who would remain in charge. "*Now for the actual war!*"

Pivoting on his heel, he led them smartly out to the ornate balcony stairway that curved down into the sea of cheering Polluxians.

THE END

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