

OFFICE POLITICS

Ben Rome

Sam Houston Plaza, Houston
North America
Terra
13 March 3068

Bowie Industries' Director of Transportation Sebastian Reginald rubbed his eyes once more and stifled another yawn. Giving up, he pushed his chair away from the desk and stood, arching his back and hearing several satisfying pops.

The office was stuffy, thanks to another cooling unit on the fritz. The Texan heat was beginning early this year—one glance at his desk unit told him the temperature was already at 27 degrees Centigrade in the office.

Sebastian opened his office door and walked to the end of the hall, grabbed a paper cup and filled it from the water dispenser.

"Director! Have you heard?"

Startled, Sebastian spilled some water on his hand as he jerked the cup away. Straightening slowly, he quelled his desire to hyperventilate and then turned to face the newcomer. It was Sandra Yemeni, one of his departmental accountants. "No, Yemeni, I've not heard anything. I've been analyzing next year's flight trial budgets."

The excitement on her face was obvious. "Bryant down in Security told us—the EASA mirror's picked up a battle in orbit!"

He felt his stomach drop. "Really now? Who is it? More Dragoon nonsense?"

"Better! It's ComStar! We're heading down to the main command center on Level Four. Director Carr is splicing a feed from the Euro-Asian Space Agency network and putting it up for us to watch. They're already throwing a party down there!"

"By all means, then. Pass the word: all departmental employees may take an extended lunch break to watch the festivities. I'll join you all shortly," he replied, forcing a smile to his face. Inside, his guts roiled. *Is this it at long last?*

He watched one of his best accountants excitedly flit from one cubicle to another, spreading the news. Like a wave of bees en route to a new flower patch, the employees got up and hurried

to the elevator bank. Probably as many welcoming the change from monotony and a chance for air conditioning as those who truly wanted to see some space combat. *Though I doubt they'll see much of anything.*

Sebastian hurried back to his office and locked the door. He couldn't trust that everyone had left the floor—if someone walked in on him now he'd have a hard time explaining it. Pulling his personal datapad from his jacket pocket, he flipped through the addresses and tapped one with his stylus. Once the small screen opened, he began typing furiously on the small fold-out keyboard.

Using a secret code given to him several years ago—it was still valid as far as he knew—he entered a back door program built into the EASA mainframe. Careful to not trip any virtual alarms, he scanned several reports and video feeds. He was astonished at what he pulled up.

A massive fleet of Com Guard WarShips and attendant vessels had made it into Terran space, near the Moon. And they began to die...

The sheer amount of firepower the Word had brought to bear was astounding. Yet the EASA mirror did pick up something: several DropShips had managed to run the deadly blockade and were on a high-G descent towards Terra.

Sebastian backed out of the system the same way he'd gone in and directed his powerful palmtop to another site. He had to check. Logging into the Interplanetary Comms System, he switched to the frequency he had memorized during his training.

It was there. Everything, just as they had said it would be. The code phrase was correct...they were coming, all right. The only thing Sebastian needed to do was get the viral code from another agent in the company.

He logged into the Bowie server's automated help desk with a question; innocuous to anyone else, but phrased in such a way to elicit a particular response—the reply would direct him to the agent who would give him the viral code he needed to continue his mission.

He had his answer less than five minutes later. A small file blinked slowly on his datapad. He glanced at the response, sighing. He knew his partner didn't take things as seriously as he did. *How*

was it that Brent happened to be a highly-placed ComStar mole, unless it's all an act? And a good one at that... Sebastian shook his head. *No time to ponder it now.* He had to get that code.

Snapping closed his palmtop, he ejected the small datachip from the side port and pocketed it. As he stood up, the enormity of the situation suddenly pressed down on him.

They were coming.

They were coming!

The end was finally near!_

Sebastian took one last look around his office, grabbed his ID card, and ran to the elevator.

* * *

Noreen McGrady idly tapped her desk with the pad's stylus. Her boss was supposedly in conference at the moment, but one glance at the corner of her monitor told her otherwise. The small program window showed Brent Rothschild engaged in less-than-acceptable activities with Betty from the secretarial pool. *Honestly, I don't even know why he bothers to hide it. It's not like everyone doesn't know already...* She suppressed a surge of jealousy, wishing but for a moment to be the one lying on the couch beneath him...

She growled savagely. *One does not succumb to the base desires of the heretic. Purity of thought, Noreen.* She clenched and unclenched her hands, forcing the debasing thoughts from her mind. Taking a deep breath, she returned to her task at hand.

Well, the fact was that everyone *did* know about Brent's playboy ways. Noreen smiled. *The bigger question is, does he know that I know about his other secret?*

She finished keying in her report and then encrypted it, swapping out another translation chip as she had been taught. It was all so easy, thanks to her superior's heads-up regarding the secret white noise generator Brent kept in his office. If he only knew it was really a transmitter...

That was the thing about corporate higher-ups: they thought since they had the money and the power, they could do anything, even play spy games, without being caught. Bitch of it was, ROM always knew. *Always.*

"Even in the quiet, do not mock, or you will be judged and your secrets revealed to all," Noreen whispered. It was a phrase she'd memorized during her training so many years ago.

She glanced up at the sound of the elevator doors opening and noted Director Reginald heading at a brisk pace down the hallway. His stride quick, stuttered; not his usual lackadaisical stroll. Something was up and it most likely had to do with the news she'd picked up an hour ago. Seeing her boss still otherwise occupied, she stood to intercept the Director, if only to throw him off-kilter. She did enjoy antagonizing him so.

* * *

Sebastian quickened his pace, his soft-soled loafers snicking quietly along the polished marble floor. He barely stopped to gaze at the ancient statue that adorned the center of the covered courtyard of Five Bowie Place, which bespoke volumes of the urgency of his mission.

He fidgeted in the elevator, trying to suppress the tremors in his hands. He fairly leaped out of his skin when the elevator dinged his arrival. It was all he could do not to sprint to the double doors at the end.

He nodded curtly at Noreen, whose vampirish frame blocked the entrance to the suite of the Vice President of Logistics. "I need to see Brent, now."

She stood resolute. "Absolutely not. You don't have an appointment. And he's currently in conference."

He stared at her. "It's a matter of the future of this company!"

"No."

The issue was decided before Sebastian could work up the courage to shoulder his way past the thin, frail woman. The door to the suite opened and Brent Rothschild, VP of Logistics of Bowie, Interstellar stuck his head out. "Noreen, what in blazes..." He looked at Sebastian and threw the door open wide. "Basty! What a pleasant surprise! Come in! I was about finished anyway," he said, motioning his friend in.

Secretly relieved to have dodged the impending confrontation, Sebastian avoided Noreen's dagger-like stare as he stepped past her into Brent's inner sanctum. He was momentarily distracted,

however, as a young lady scooped up her bag from the large oak desk. She hurriedly tucked her shirt into the back of her skirt as she exited, furtively glancing back at the two men. Though she missed the piercing glare of Brent's assistant, Sebastian caught it. He shivered at the brutality that momentarily passed over her face.

The vision was cut off as the door swung shut. Sebastian shook the image from his mind and focused on the task at hand.

"Conference, eh?" Sebastian shook his head as he moved to the large glass window overlooking the Bowie, Interstellar corporate facility.

"We were... doing some dictation. Nothing I can't get to later." he smiled. "Drink?" Brent offered, going to his private bar near the massive picture window.

Sebastian nodded, admiring the view of the distant megopolis that abutted Bowie's massive aerofighter plant. The darkening sky blazed a mixture of golds and oranges .

"Never gets old, does it?" Brent handed Sebastian a glass of something coppery. It smelled divine.

"No." Sebastian paused for a moment, savoring the distinct taste of Cormerac whiskey. He took the opportunity to calm his nerves and slow his breathing. It was all happening too fast. He drained the glass, then set it on the table. Turning to his friend, he whispered fiercely, "Brent! It's finally happening."

"What's that, Basty?"

"The answer to our prayers. You know, what we were trained for all those years ago?"

Brent stared at his friend in a mixture of wonder and elation. "You're sure? They transmitted the proper codes?"

Sebastian walked over to Brent's desk and snapped a small disc into the embedded player. "Listen for yourself."

The Bowie executive reached over and punched a button. "Wait a minute, first." He pressed another button. "Noreen? Would you go to the file room and get me the new transshipment logs for the last month? Thanks." He then stepped around to the credenza behind his desk and palmed a lockpad. A small drawer clicked open, from which Brent retrieved a tiny pyramid.

Sebastian looked on, curious. *Well now, maybe he really is competent enough to be a mole. They don't just give those out to anyone...*

Brent grinned at his friend and tapped one side of the pyramid, placing it on the desk. "Now, we can talk. I have my suspicions—best to be cautious."

Sebastian nodded, then tapped the desk player. A burst of static erupted from the desk's speakers, then a babble of voices that faded to leave one transmission.

"General Cipher 4-4-Mark. Gamma sequence. Code words: Jedburgh. Jedburgh. Jedburgh. Upsilon sequence. Code words: Jedburgh. Jedburgh—"

Brent stood, staring out at the deepening sky. The sky had turned scarlet, with blood-red clouds streaming from the west. The distant buildings looked to be on fire. Of course, it was only a trick of light.

"That's it, then. When did this start?"

"When I heard of the battle, I pulled some data from the EASA satellite mirror station. Seems several DropShips made it through the Word's blockade up there. I then scanned the IPC channels and picked this up on the band I was briefed on."

"Trap?"

"No. Brent, this is real. We've waited nearly ten years for this."

"Indeed." He glanced at his wristwatch. "You should go. I've downloaded the program to your datachip. Send the signal and prepare to activate Plan Kappa."

"What about Noreen? You know she abhors any changes to your schedule."

Brent laughed. "I'll handle her. She's only a glorified secretary, after all. You go and get things rolling. I suspect it'll get hot fast."

"Most likely. Once they land, I'm sure we'll have our own problems here."

Rothschild nodded. "Go. I've got plans in place. I'll get things rolling for the facility. Bowie will welcome the Guards as the saviors they are."

Sebastian quickly turned and left the office, barely missing Brent's assistant with the door. Unperturbed, she stuck her head into the suite.

"Got those files, sir. Anything else?" She stepped into the room.

Brent stood by the window, staring thoughtfully into the darkening sky. Already Venus was out, a baleful eye over the city. He turned to Noreen. "No, thanks. You can take the rest of the..." His voice trailed away as he took in the needler in her delicate hands.

"Day off? On this glorious day? No, I think rather, it's time for you to retire."

"Really now."

"Yes." She stepped over to his credenza, palming open the secret drawer and pulling out the pyramid Brent had only recently put away.

"You knew?"

"You never know exactly where these toys come from. You see, that's actually my *recorder*."

He couldn't hide the shock from his face. "Recorder? You mean, all this..." With a sudden awareness, he realized all the activities he'd done with that device present. All the plans set up. Accounts settled. Meetings conducted...

He could barely whisper. "A mole. All along. Right here."

"Did you really think the board would give so much freedom to their underlings?"

Brent turned from the window and went to the bar. "Mind if I get you a drink?"

Noreen grinned. "Go ahead. The holdout pistol you keep there isn't loaded."

He forced a laugh, his hands dropping to his sides. "I guess you're smarter than I thought." He shook his head sadly, then stepped up to the bar and poured himself another slug of whiskey.

"True. After all, you are a heretic. Such obvious disdain for those of us of the faith is rather simple to manipulate. Shall I help you understand?"

He nodded, meekly. His eyes were on the floor and she saw the sweat break out on his forehead.

"Simpletons like you serve a function. For instance, we know you've diverted millions of C-bills of assets to resistance efforts in the Chaos March."

Brent's glass stopped halfway to his mouth.

"Oh yes. Clever, trying to hide small shipment diversions through misdirected shipping records and quintuple-blind accounts. We almost didn't catch it. You are to be commended for that. But alas, Blake willed us to find out, and we did. And we used that information to pinpoint activities of those who would oppose Blake's Light and had them...taken care of."

"You mean murdered them." Rothschild slammed back the rest of his whiskey. "So what now? You're holding all the cards. But we both know that the Word can't possibly hold back—"

The pistol coughed twice. The first shot punctured the front of Rothschild's designer suit, mixing expensive Parmi wool with flesh, blood, and bits of organs. The second shot hammered into the large picture window behind him, a myriad of spider webs emanating from a fist-sized hole where the bulk of the flechettes hit. The nighttime view of the distant city was transformed into a tormented landscape of jagged glass and angles.

"All we needed was the code name. We know Focht had several contingencies planned," she said to her dying victim. His hands went to his stomach, trying to stop the flow of blood. Noreen took three quick steps towards him, grabbing his head and pulling it towards her lips in a crushing kiss.

He coughed, blood wetting his lips. She pulled back, gazed into his horror-filled eyes. "It's too bad. I could've shown you the full delights of Blake's Will. Alas, you're just—" She grabbed him by the throat.

"—a stupid—"

She suddenly kissed him once again, savoring the taste of blood, sweat, and fear.

Then with sudden force, she threw him back into the fractured window behind him. The weakened glass gave way with the barrest hesitation.

“—heretic,” she finished, watching her former boss fall from his lofty perch.

Noreen stepped away from the view and pulled a small communicator from her skirt pocket. “Commence phase two. Coordinates inbound.” She stepped behind Brent’s desk, tapped in a series of keystrokes. Thanks to the watcher virus she’d installed months ago, she knew exactly where to look and pulled up an encrypted file marked JEDBURGH. Overriding his code with a viral key, she sent the file off, straightened her jacket, and left the office, locking it.

There was a party going on downstairs she had to get to.

* * *

Sebastian hurried to the elevator, a cold sweat breaking out on his forehead. He felt nauseated and elated at the same time —*finally, free of the Blakists!* He stepped into the crowded car, trying desperately to keep from fidgeting.

So much to do, so little time! The code words used with the two sequences meant that both primary landing quadrants were still active—one located near the old Houston aerodrome, now Bowie’s main test flight facility. The other was somewhere else, but that wasn’t his concern.

What mattered was prepping the facility to receive their liberators.

It would be easy. The site had been selected over the last several years for its proximity to both the Houston and Dallas megopolises and its defensibility as a forward base. The base defenses only needed a certain viral code inserted to convert the incoming DropShip IFF codes to friendly and allow them to ground safely.

Sebastian pushed through the crowd in the main lobby, making quick progress toward the communications suite. There was an uplink system there he could insert the code chip ...

He slowed as he saw the lone TerraSec guard by the suite’s door step towards him. “Afternoon, Director. You have business here today?”

Sebastian smiled, trying to appear relaxed. “That’s right, Cody. Need the latest hockey scores from Asia. Gotta make sure my fantasy team’s kicking butt.”

The guard smiled. "Sure thing, sir. Of course, you know the drill."

"Of course." Sebastian held out his arms and allowed the guard to wave a small pad over his body. He stared absently at the man's TerraSec badge clipped to his chest pocket.

Cody keyed the palm lock. "Go ahead, sir." The officer smiled as he waved him through.

Sebastian nodded back, already focused on the task at hand. He made his way to a door labeled UPLINK 1A and entered. Seating himself at the first terminal under the larger wall monitor, he keyed in the commands for a remote vid feed to the company's facility and then brought up the uplink screen. He put the chip into the correct slot as he tapped into the system. He knew on the roof, the satellite dishes were orienting and establishing the link to the distant airbase.

The monitor beeped as the small room's door slid open. Sebastian didn't look up as he quickly tapped in several commands on the uplink keypad.

"That doesn't look like hockey to me." Cody's voice was soft, startling Sebastian.

"Uh, no. Yeah, trying to get this thing to cooperate, you know?" Sebastian's hand froze when the pistol's barrel pressed against his head.

"Try using the *Rites of Satellus* next time. Though I'm sorry to say, Director, there won't be one."

Sebastian looked at the monitor. Already, four small plumes of fire had appeared in the night sky above the facility. All he needed to do was push the ENTER button...

His neck twitched slightly just as the pistol discharged.

* * *

Pulling the body off the console, Cody wiped the monitor of brain bits and studied both it and the uplink command window. Satisfied with what he saw, he turned his head slightly and spoke into his collar mic. "Gamma neutralized. Condition green."

He listened for a moment, then smiled. Tapping in a command on the gore-soaked keyboard, he stepped back to take in the whole feed on the monitor.

The four plumes continued plunging downward. Below them, the facility's air defense turrets came to life, rotating around and upward, the covers on the massive capital missile ripple launchers swinging open. Then, as one, they vomited dark lances on plumes of fire, arrowing up at breakneck speed toward the descending DropShips.

Blake provides everything, thought Cody as he admired the explosions on the screen. *Even fireworks for an impromptu holiday...*