

## THE TEDDY BEARS' PICNIC

SLOWLY GATHERING MY feet beneath me, I stood. Lucille still lay unconscious on the deck. Whatever might happen, I would never abandon her.

"That is right, Corporal," Sermander soothed. Holding the little girl's neck in a vise-like grip, he reached up with his gun-hand to peel his suit mask down to his chest. It was foolish, but made good politics.

"Come join me, Whitey. There is no responsible alternative. I have discovered—employing the startling powers that these Confederates have been naive enough to bestow upon me—that they have not felt it necessary, as yet, to notify the remainder of their vast fleet about Vespucci."

Elsie squirmed, "Let me go, you big mammoth-turd!"

He looked down at her almost benevolently, "Is that any way for a child to talk? At home, we would teach you better manners, would we not, Whitey?" He shook his head, "Indiscipline is chronic among these people. It is a sickness, a contagion, a plague. It deserves only death."

He looked up again at me: "It is a great pity that we cannot send a warning home. But we can buy our beloved nation time. What do you say, Corporal?"

"I say that they need more than time, sir. They need that warning—every last bit of the information that you alone can give them, now."

Glancing sidewise at the hole that had been cut in the ship's hull, I could just make out the motion of fingertips clinging to the ragged lower edge. Someone had adjusted his smartsuit to give visual impressions from the ends of those digits, a sort of periscope effect.

With overly dramatic sadness: "It is we who have no time left. It is required of both of us that we give our lives, unremembered, unsung—the ultimate sacrifice for which our beings were shaped at their incep—"

"Let me go!"

Renewing her struggles, Elsie flailed her arms as Sermander held her by the rubbery nape of her smartsuit. Almost negligently, he slapped the side of her head a second time with his heavy military pistol.

A third.

The little girl went limp.

"At long last," he sighed, "blessed silence."

I drew my own gun, pointed it at his face. "If you have hurt her ... Let her go now, Sermander, there is something wrong about your implant. This insanity has gone far enough if it means hurting little girls."

Big ones, too. I did not know if Lucille was still alive.

He laughed. "So they finally got to you after all. I thought that might be the case. How many little girls, do you suppose, perished in the Final War? Yet can you deny that it was a war that had to be fought? Sentimentalism will not alter what has to be done, even now, Corporal."

Carefully, Sermander transferred his weapon to the hand that also held the now-unconscious little girl. Stooping down, he stretched to reach to the glowing control panel of the atomic bomb between his knees.

"Enough debate. So long, Corporal, it has been—"

Firming my two-handed grip on the Dardick, I shouted "I am not fooling around with you, Sermander, let her go now! Get away from there!"

Chuckling at me, Sermander lifted poor Elsie like a coat on a hanger, until her quiet, unmoving form shielded his body from head to knees.

"Are you aware how foolish you appear, Corporal, using a mere pistol to threaten an individual who is prepared to blow himself up with—"

*"AAAGHHH!"*

Elsie twisted the dagger she had slid beneath Sermander's kneecap. In an agony of pure reflex, he tossed the little girl savagely away. With a horrible noise, her tiny body crashed among a mountain of stowage. A barrel burst around her with the impact. Sermander plucked feebly at the knife-hilt where it projected from his ruined joint, looked at me, a sickly smile on his face, then reached again for the bomb.

I pulled the trigger. The ship's hold lit briefly with the muzzle-flash.

Sermander's headless body pitched forward, spewing gore.

Belatedly, Rogers' shot roared through the space where Sermander's head had been only a fraction of a second earlier. His bolt of plasma blew yet another hole, in the opposite side-wall of the *Amybo Kiidetz*.

Unconcerned about anything else, I whirled, knelt, gathered Lucille in my arms. I was cradling her motionless body when they found me.



THE PEOPLE OF *Tom Paine Maru* filled Lucille's stateroom with flowers.

MacDougall Olson-Bear turned out to be a decent enough fellow, after all. A great deal taller than I was—he was perhaps a full two meters tall—he possessed a thick mop of reddish-blond hair, his mother's sea-green eyes, along with muscles on his muscles on his muscles.

Under the circumstances, I did not think to ask him very much about himself. A fighter-pilot, someone had said. Whatever it might have been, it