

Clans of the Alphane Moon

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Extract

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ONE

Before entering the supreme council room, Gabriel Baines sent his Mans-made simulacrum clacking ahead to see if by chance it might be attacked. The simulacrum – artfully constructed to resemble Baines in every detail – did many things, since it had been made by the inventive clan of Manses, but Baines only cared to employ it in its manoeuvring for defence; defending himself was his sole orientation in life, his claim to membership in the Pare enclave of Adolfville at the north end of the moon.

Baines had of course been outside Adolfville many times, but he felt safe – or rather relatively safe – only here, within the stout walls of this, the Pare city. Which proved that his claim to membership in the Pare clan was not contrived, a mere simulated technique by which he could gain entry into the most solidly-built, sturdy and enduring urban area anywhere. Baines beyond doubt was sincere ... as if there could be any doubt of *him*.

For example, there was his visit to the incredibly degrading hovels of the Heebs. Recently he had been in search of escaped members of a work brigade; being Heebs they had perhaps straggled back to Gandhitown. The difficulty, however, was that all Heebs, to him at least, looked alike: dirty, stooped creatures in soiled clothing who giggled and could not concentrate on any complicated procedure. They were useful for mere manual labour, nothing more. But with the constant need for tinkering improvement of Adolfville's fortifications against the predations of the Manses, manual labour was currently at a premium. And no Pare would dirty his hands. Anyhow, among the dilapidated shacks of the Heeb he had felt pure terror, a sense of almost infinitely vast exposure among the most flimsy of human

constructs; it was an inhabited garbage dump of cardboard dwellings. The Heeb's however did not object. They dwelt among their own refuse in tranquil equilibrium.

Here today, at the twice yearly council meeting representing all the clans, the Heeb's would of course have a spokesman; speaking for the Pares he would find himself seated in the same room with an odious – literally so – Heeb. And this scarcely dignified his task. Probably it would be straggle-haired, fat Sarah Apostoles again this year.

But more ominous would be the Mans representative. Because, like every Pare, Baines was terrified of each and every Mans. Their reckless violence shocked him; he could not comprehend it, so purposeless was it. For years he had put Manses down as simply hostile. But that did not explain them. They *enjoyed* violence; it was a perverse delight in breaking things and intimidating others, especially Pares such as himself.

But knowing this did not fully help him; he still quailed at the anticipated confrontation with Howard Straw, the Mans delegate.

Wheezing asthmatically his simulacrum returned, a fixed smile on its Baines-like artificial countenance. 'All in order, sir. No deadly gas, no electrical discharge of a dangerous degree, no poison in the water pitcher, no peepholes for laser rifles, no concealed infernal machines. I would offer the suggestion that you can safely enter.' It clacked to a halt, became silent.

'No one approached you?' Baines asked cautiously.

The simulacrum said, 'No one is there yet. Except, of course, for the Heeb sweeping the floor.'

Baines, out of a lifetime of protective cunning, opened the door a crack for that which was essential: a momentary glimpse of the Heeb.

The Heeb, a male, swept in his slow, monotonous way, the usual silly Heeb expression on his face, as if his work amused him. He could probably keep it up for months without becoming bored; Heeb's could not tire of a task because they could not comprehend even the concept of diversity. Of course, Baines reflected, there was some virtue

in simplicity. He had for instance been impressed by the famous Heeb saint, Ignatz Ledebur, who radiated spirituality as he wandered from town to town, spreading the warmth of his harmless Heeb personality. This one certainly looked devoid of dangerousness. . . .

And the Heeb, at least, even their saints, did not try to convert people, as did the Skitz mystics. All the Heeb asked was to be let alone; they simply did not want to be bothered by life, and each year they shed more and more of the complexities of living. Returned, Baines reflected, to the mere vegetable, which, to a Heeb, was ideal.

Checking his laser pistol – it was in order – Baines decided that he could enter. So step by step he walked into the council room, took a chair, then abruptly changed to another; that one had been too close to the window: he presented too good a target to anyone outdoors.

To amuse himself while he waited for the others to arrive, he decided to bait the Heeb. ‘What’s your name?’ he demanded.

‘J-Jacob Simion,’ the Heeb said, sweeping with his standard silly grin unchanged; a Heeb never knew when he was being baited. Or if he did he did not care. Apathy toward everything: that was the Heeb way.

‘You like your work. Jacob?’ Baines asked, lighting a cigarette.

‘Sure,’ the Heeb said, and then giggled.

‘You’ve always spent your time sweeping floors?’

‘Huh?’ The Heeb did not appear able to comprehend the question.

The door opened and plump, pretty Annette Golding, the Poly delegate, appeared, purse under her arm, her round face flushed, her green eyes shining as she panted for breath. ‘I thought I was late.’

‘No,’ Baines said, rising to offer her a chair. He glanced professionally over her; no sign that she had brought her weapon. But she could be carrying feral spores in capsules secreted in a gum-pocket within her mouth; he made it a point, when he reseated himself, to select a chair at the far end of the big table. Distance . . . a highly valuable factor.

'It's warm in here,' Annette said, still perspiring. 'I ran all the way up the stairs.' She smiled at him in the artless way that some Polys had. She did seem attractive to him . . . if only she could lose a little weight. None the less he liked Annette and he took this opportunity to engage in light banter with her, tinged with overtones of the erotic.

'Annette,' he said, 'you're such a pleasant, comfortable person. A shame you don't marry. If you married me—'

'Yes, Gabe,' Annette said, smiling. 'I'd be protected. Litmus paper in every corner of the room, atmosphere analysers throbbing away, grounding equipment in case influence machines radiating—'

'Be serious,' Baines said, crossly. He wondered how old she was; certainly no more than twenty. And, like all Polys, she was childlike. The Polys hadn't grown up; they remained unfixed, and what was Polyism if not the lingering of plastic childhood? After all, their children, from every clan on the moon, were born Polys, went to their common, central school as Polys, did not become differentiated until perhaps their tenth or eleventh year. And some, like Annette, never became differentiated.

Opening her purse Annette got out a package of candy; she began to eat rapidly. 'I feel nervous,' she explained. 'So I have to eat.' She offered the bag to Baines, but he declined — after all, one never knew. Baines had preserved his life for thirty-five years now, and he did not intend to lose it due to a trivial impulse; everything had to be calculated, thought out in advance if he expected to live another thirty-five.

Annette said, 'I suppose Louis Manfredi will represent the Skitz clan again this year. I always enjoy him; he has such interesting things to tell, the visions he sees of primordial things. Beasts from the earth and the sky, monsters that battle under the ground . . .' She sucked on a piece of hard candy thoughtfully. 'Do you think the visions that Skitzes see are real, Gabe?'

'No,' Baines said, truthfully.

'Why do they ponder and talk about them all the time, then? They're real to them, anyhow.'

'Mysticism,' Baines said scornfully. He sniffed, now;

some unnatural odour had come to him, something sweet. It was, he realized, the scent of Annette's hair and he relaxed. Or was it supposed to make him think that? he thought suddenly, again alert. 'Nice perfume you have on,' he said disingenuously. 'What's it called?'

'*Night of Wildness*,' Annette said. 'I bought it from a pedlar here from Alpha II; it cost me ninety skins but it does smell wonderful, don't you think? A whole month's salary.' Her dark eyes looked sad.

'Marry me,' Baines began again, and then broke off.

The Dep representative had appeared; he stood in the doorway and his fear-haunted, concave face with its staring eyes seemed to pierce Baines to the heart. Good lord, he groaned, not knowing whether to feel compassion for the poor Dep or just outright contempt. After all, the man could buck up; all the Deps could buck up, if they had any courage. But courage was totally lacking in the Dep settlement to the south. This one palpably showed this lack; he hesitated at the door, afraid to come in, and yet so resigned to his fate that in a moment he would do so anyhow, would do the very thing he feared ... whereas an Ob-Com of course would simply count to twenty by twos, turn his back and flee.

'Please enter,' Annette coaxed pleasantly, indicating a chair.

'What's the use of this conversation?' the Dep said, and entered slowly, sagging with despair. 'We'll just tear each other apart; I see no point in convening for these fracasas.' However, resignedly, he seated himself, sat with bowed head, hands clenched futilely together.

'I'm Annette Golding,' Annette said, 'and this is Gabriel Baines, the Pare. I'm the Poly. You're Dep, aren't you? I can tell by the way you stare at the floor.' She laughed, but with sympathy.

The Dep said nothing; he did not even give his name. Talking for a Dep, Baines knew, was difficult; it was hard for them to summon the energy. This Dep had probably come early out of a fear of being late; over-compensation, typical of them. Baines did not like them. They were useless

to themselves and the other clans; why didn't they die? And, unlike the Heeb, they could not even function as labourers; they lay down on the ground and stared sightlessly up at the sky, devoid of hope.

Leaning toward Baines, Annette said softly, 'Cheer him up.'

'The hell I will,' Baines said. 'What do I care? It's his own fault he's the way he is; he could change if he wanted. He could believe good things if he made the effort. His lot's no worse than the rest of ours, maybe even better; after all, they work at a snail's pace . . . I wish I could get away with doing as little work in a year as the average Dep.'

Now, through the open door, walked a tall, middle-aged woman in a long grey coat. This was Ingrid Hibbler, the Ob-Com; counting silently to herself she passed around and around the table, tapping each chair in turn. Baines and Annette waited; the Heeb sweeping the floor glanced up and giggled. The Dep continued to stare sightlessly down. At last Miss Hibbler found a chair whose numerology satisfied her; she drew it back, seated herself rigidly, her hands pressed tightly together, fingers working at great speed, as if knitting an invisible garment of protectiveness.

'I ran into Straw on the parking lot,' she said, and counted silently to herself. 'Our Mans. Ugh, he's an awful person; he almost ran over me with his wheel. I had to—'

She broke off. 'Never mind. But it's hard to rid yourself of his aura, once it infects you.' She shivered.

Annette said, to no one in particular, 'This year if Man-freti is the Skitz again he'll probably come in through the window instead of by the door.' She laughed merrily. The Heeb, sweeping, joined her. 'And of course we're waiting for the Heeb,' Annette said.

'I'm the d-delegate from Gandhitown,' the Heeb, Jacob Simion, said, pushing his broom in his monotonous way. 'I j-just thought I'd do this while I w-waited.' He smiled guilelessly around at all of them.

Baines sighed. The Heeb representative, a janitor. But of course; they *all* were, potentially if not actually. Then that left only the Skitz and the Mans, Howard Straw, who

would be in as soon as he finished darting about the parking lot, scaring the other delegates as they arrived. Baines thought. He better not try to intimidate me. Because the laser pistol at Baines' waist was not simulated. And there was always his sim, waiting outside in the hall, to call on.

'What's this meeting about?' Miss Hibbler the Ob-Com asked, and counted rapidly, her eyes shut, fingers dangling. 'One, two. One, two.'

Annette said, 'There's a rumour. A strange ship has been sighted and it's not traders from Alpha II; we're reasonably sure of that.' She went on eating candy; Baines saw, with grim amusement, that she had devoured almost the entire bagful by now. Annette, as he well knew, had a dienecephalic disturbance, an overvalent idea in the gluttony-syndrome area. And whenever she became tense or worried it became worse.

'A ship,' the Dep said, stirring into life. 'Maybe it can get us out of our mess.'

'What mess?' Miss Hibbler asked.

Stirring, the Dep said, 'You know.' That was all he could summon up; he became inarticulate once more, lapsed into his coma of gloom. To a Dep things were always a mess. And yet, of course, the Deps feared change, too. Baines' contempt grew as he pondered this. But - a ship. His contempt for the Dep turned to alarm. Was this true?

Straw, the Mans, would know. At Da Vinci Heights the Manses had elaborate technical devices for sighting incoming traffic; probably the original word had come from Da Vinci Heights ... unless of course a Skitz mystic had foreseen it in a vision.

'It's probably a trick,' Baines said aloud.

Everyone in the room, including the gloomy Dep, gazed at him; the Heeb momentarily even ceased sweeping.

'Those Manses,' Baines explained, 'they'll try anything. This is their way of getting an advantage over the rest of us, paying us back.'

'For what?' Miss Hibbler said.

'You know the Manses hate all of us,' Baines said. 'Because they're crude, barbaric roughnecks, unwashed storm-

troopers who reach for their gun when they hear the word "culture." It's in their metabolism; it's the old Gothic.' And yet that did not really state it; to be perfectly honest he did not know why the Manses were so intent on hurting everyone else, unless, as his theory went, it was out of sheer delight in inflicting pain. No, he thought, *there must be more than that*. Malice and envy; they must envy us, know we're culturally superior. As diverse as Da Vinci Heights is, there's no order, no aesthetic unity to it; it's a hodgepodge of incomplete so-called 'creative' projects, started out but never finished.

Annette said slowly, 'Straw is a little unpolished, I admit. Even typically the reckless sort. But why would he report a foreign ship if one hadn't been sighted? You haven't given any clear reason.'

'But I know,' Baines said stubbornly, 'that the Manses and especially Howard Straw are against us; we should act to protect ourselves from —' He ceased, because the door had opened and Straw strode brusquely into the room.

Red-haired, big and brawny, he was grinning. The appearance of an alien ship on their minute moon did not bother *him*.

It remained now only for the Skitz to arrive and, as usual he might be an hour late; he would be wandering in a trance somewhere, lost in his clouded visions of an archetypal reality, of cosmic proto-forces underlying the temporal universe, his perpetual view of the so-called *Urwelt*.

We might as well make ourselves comfortable, Baines decided. As much so as possible, given Straw's presence among us. And Miss Hibbler's; he did not much care for her either. In fact, he did not care for any of them with perhaps the exception of Annette: she of the inordinate, conspicuous bosom. And he was getting nowhere with her. As usual.

But that was not his fault; all the Polys were like that — no one ever knew which way they'd jump. They were contrary on purpose, opposed to the dictates of logic. And yet they were not moths, as were the Skitzes, nor debrained machines like the Heebis. They were abundantly *alive*; that

was what he enjoyed so about Annette – her quality of animation, freshness.

In fact she made him feel rigid and metallic, encased in thick steel like some archaic weapon of a useless, ancient war. She was twenty, he was thirty-five, perhaps that explained it. But he did not believe so. And then he thought, I'll bet she wants me to feel this way; she's deliberately trying to make me feel bad.

And, in response, all at once he felt icy, carefully-reasoned Pare hatred for her.

Annette, simulating obliviousness, continued to devour the remnants of her bag of candy.

The Skitz delegate to the bi-annual get-together at Adolfville, Omar Diamond, gazed over the landscape of the world and saw, beneath it and upon it, the twin dragons, red and white, of death and life; the dragons, locked in battle, made the plain tremble, and, overhead, the sky split and a wizened decaying grey sun cast little if any comfort in a world fast losing its meagre store of the vital.

'Halt,' Omar said, raising his hand and addressing the dragons.

A man and wavy-haired girl, walking along the sidewalk of Adolfville's downtown district toward him, halted. The girl said, 'What's the matter with him? He's doing something.' Repugnance.

'Just a Skitz,' the man said, amused. 'Lost in visions.'

Omar said, 'The eternal war has broken out afresh. The powers of life are on the wane. Can no man make the fatal decision, renounce his own life in an act of sacrifice to restore them?'

The man, with a wink at his wife, said, 'You know, sometimes you can ask these fellows a question and get an interesting answer. Go ahead, ask him something – make it big and general, like, "What is the meaning of existence?" Not, "Where's the scissors I lost yesterday?"' He urged her forward.

With caution the woman addressed Omar. 'Excuse me, but I've always wondered – is there life after death?'

Omar said, 'There is no death.' He was amazed at the question; it was based on enormous ignorance. 'What you see that you call "death" is only the stage of germination in which the new life form lies dormant, awaiting the call to assume its next incarnation.' He lifted his arms, pointing. 'See? The dragon of life cannot be slain; even as his blood runs red in the meadow, new versions of him spring up at all sides. The seed buried in the earth rises again.' He passed on, then, leaving the man and woman behind.

I must go to the six-storey stone building, Omar said to himself. They wait there, the council. Howard Straw the barbarian. Miss Hibbler the crabbed one, beset by numbers. Annette Golding, the embodiment of life itself, plunging into everything that lets her *become*. Gabriel Baines, the one who is compelled to think up ways of defending himself against that which does not attack. The simple one with the broom who is nearer to God than any of us. And the sad one who never looks up, the man even without a name. What shall I call him? Perhaps Otto. No, I think I'll make it Dino. Dino Watters. He awaits death, not knowing that he lives in anticipation of an empty phantom; even death cannot protect him from his own self.

Standing at the base of the great six-storey building, the largest in the Pare settlement of Adolfville, he levitated; he bobbed against the proper window, scratched at the glass with his fingernail until at last a person within came to open it for him.

'Mr. Manfredi isn't coming?' Annette asked.

'He cannot be reached this year,' Omar explained. 'He has passed into another realm and simply sits; he must be force-fed through the nose.'

'Ugh,' Annette said, and shuddered. 'Catatonia.'

'Kill him,' Straw said harshly, 'and be done with it. Those cat-Skitzes are worse than useless; they're a drain on Joan d'Arc's resources. No wonder your settlement's so poor.'

'Poor materially,' Omar agreed, 'but rich in eternal values.'

He kept far away from Straw; he did not care for him at

all. Straw, despite his name, was a breaker. He enjoyed smashing and grinding; he was cruel for the love of it, not the need of it. Evil was gratuitous with Straw.

On the other hand, there sat Gabe Baines. Baines, like all Pares, could be cruel, too, but he was compelled to, in his own defence; he was so committed to protecting himself from harm that he naturally did wrong. One could not castigate him, as one could Straw.

Taking his seat Omar said, 'Bless this assembly. And let's hear news of life-giving properties, rather than of the activities of the dragon of harm.' He turned to Straw. 'What is the information, Howard?'

'An armed ship,' Straw said, with a wide, leering grim smile; he was enjoying their collective anxiety. 'Not a trader from Alpha II but from another system entirely; we used a teep to pick up their thoughts. Not on any sort of trading mission but here to —' He broke off, deliberately not finishing his sentence. He wanted to see them squirm.

'We'll have to defend ourselves,' Baines said. Miss Hibler nodded and so, with reluctance, did Annette. Even the Heeb had ceased to giggle and now looked uneasy. 'We at Adolfville,' Baines said, 'will of course organize the defence. We'll look to your people, Straw, for the technological devices; we expect a lot from you. This is one time we expect you to throw in your lot for the common good.'

'The "common good,"' Straw mimicked. 'You mean for *our* good.'

'My god,' Annette said, 'do you always have to be so irresponsible, Straw? Can't you take note of the consequences for once? At least think of our children. We *must* protect them, if not ourselves.'

To himself, Omar Diamond prayed. 'Let the forces of life rise up and triumph on the plain of battle. Let the white dragon escape the red stain of seeming death; let the womb of protection descend on this small land and guard it from those who stand in the camp of the unholy.' And, all at once, he remembered a sight he had seen on his trip here, by foot, a harbinger of the arrival of the enemy. A stream of water had turned to blood as he stepped over it. Now he

knew what the sign meant. War and death, and perhaps the destruction of the Seven Clans and their seven cities – six, if you did not count the garbage dump which was the living space of the Heeb.

Dino Watters, the Dep, muttered hoarsely, 'We're doomed.'

Everyone glared at him, even Jacob Simion the Heeb. How like a Dep.

'Forgive him,' Omar whispered. And somewhere, in the invisible empery, the spirit of life heard, responded, forgave the half-dying creature who was Dino Watters of the Dep settlement, Cotton Mather Estates.