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**SCIENCE
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**ALL
STORIES
NEW**

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KANGAROO COURT

by Walter
Maneikis

The charges against Private Carroll were peculiar, to say the least: volunteering too much...failing to spit in the Corporal's eye...and similar offenses.

FIRST SERGEANT Ranke, a thick-necked man in his middle forties, rapped the gavel against the formulan table. "The court will come to order. The accused will stand."

Larry Carroll rose. A short fellow, he seemed to have no down on his chin and only a foggy notion what to do. "Yes, sir."

"Don't 'sir' me; I'm not an officer." Ranke's idea was to test a space soldier, but how far his animus toward this squirt of a pipsqueak motivated him, and how strongly he felt the urge to punish a junior he couldn't tell himself. This raw recruit had saluted right and picked up all the cigaret butts on the company street, but he was wrong anyway. The rookie was wrong because he did too much right. A real pro had to growl once in a while and pick a fight. Nobody who was unruffled when the cinder storms put scars into his cheeks could be normal.

"No, sergeant."

"You mean 'yes'."

"No. I mean 'yes'."

"You may sit down." Ranke was disgusted. He lifted up the charge sheet, prepared by the clerk that afternoon. "Lawrence Carroll, Private. Army Serial Number 218, 232, 264. Assigned to Galactic Survey Company 23. Age 22. No allowance for dependents. Length of service 18 months, 23 days—six months in basic infantry, 12 months in Survey Schools at Lexington, Virginia, and 23 days on a so-called asteroid."

"I object to everything," Biceps Olson shouted. An outspace corporal, with more pay than a Stateside major, he laughed hoarsely.

"You object to what?"

"To letting this little bum off." Olson chortled.

"We shall proceed with the charge and the specifications. The list of witnesses will come later." Ranke sighed. The accused had no spirit at all.

"The alleged soldier has volunteered too much." A technical sergeant, Forbes, squashed out a cigaret on the

formulan floor of the bunkhouse. "He ain't got a brain in his head."

"Quiet, please." Ranke grinned behind his beard and felt contempt for hairless Larry. Everybody else wore a spade or a beaver or a French dip. The personnel was stagnant in mind. They had to take their fun in growing whiskers and admiring pinups most of the time. The Wasps were only a vague threat. Everybody needed a jolt. The court might do it and release everybody's suppressions. "According to the 195th Article of War, the said soldier, unquote, committed the following offenses:

He did not, on July 1, the day of his arrival, spit in Cpl. Olson's left eye.

He, on July 12, did not disrobe before Pvt. Pickens' pinup of Toots La Shore, the nightingale of Galactic Surveys.

He, on July 23, did not fabricate a witch's image of Sgt. Ranke, with pins stuck through the stripes. Gentlemen, the said soldier is guilty of the charge and the three specifications."

"May I protest?" Larry arose.

"You are incompetent, irrelevant, and immaterial." Ranke pounded the gavel.

"I was just trying to understand the magic of 23 here." The accused sat down.

"That's simple, pipsqueak," Ranke said. "The question is not in order, but it is the duty of the court to be fair and impartial. The magic is that you are on 23rd year, have served, unquote, 23 days on this elegant piece of slag and cinder, and that if you last 23 months you'll be ready for the psychopathic ward in the Moon Locker."

"He's guilty as hell." Private Ulysses Pickens, the next in line to be corporal if anybody died, chewed his tobacco. After a week of use the quid had no power left.

"The court now pronounces Pvt.

Larry Carroll, ASN umpty-ump, guilty of the charge and the specifications." Ranke glared.

LARRY KNEW this was another survival test but decided to have some fun. "May it please the court. Can't I plead guilty to 'not guilty'?" He remembered an ancient saw used by tricky lawyers in divorce trials. "Did you stop beating your wife? Answer yes or no." The 195th was the garbage can article. It covered everything from writing complaints to a Congressman to using cigar coupons to trade with natives. On Outstation 23, no semblance of organic life had appeared.

"Guard, silence this man." Ranke kept a stern face.

One of the enlisted men near the center of the bunkhouse stepped up to gesture. Larry ignored him. "Don't I get a trial?"

"Well," Ranke growled. "It's irregular. Might set a bad precedent. You've been found guilty twice."

Cpl. Olson, fond of throwing blocks of cinder or slag in the low gravity like a shotputter on Earth, was the strong man. "Let's convict him three times. I'll be the TJA."

"The trial judge advocate is appointed." Ranke rapped with the gavel again. "Pvt. Pickens?"

Goldtooth, a boy from Georgia, raised his hand. "Ah believes in the rights of all democratic citizens. I volunteer for the defense—Ah mean ah."

"So appointed." Ranke looked sour. "The folly will start."

"Don't I have the choice of my own lawyer?" Larry looked dim and uncertain. "I've read..."

"Objection overruled."

On the immediate scene, the underground bunkhouse held the enlisted station complement. Facing Ranke, they moved their cots into semicircle around him and listened to the fractures of logic. They all floated about 300,000 miles from Pluto. Outstation

23, largely an enclosed dome protecting a wing of space scouts and a refueling station, was their home. From there scooters periodically departed to inspect the planet and flash back word about the Wasps, rumored creatures of the Outer Depths, who might want to invade Earth.

In the popular mind these unknown entities flew rocket funnels and distorted disks, looking for tender spots. Earth folklore, reinforced by billions of dollars yearly, had it that the Wasps were angels of death created by Mephisto to punish—not sloth or pride or vanity—but ignorance. Since ignorance was vast, it was the more formidable, excused and magnified by TV shows that exhibited a valiant hero who rescued the fair heroine in her tizzy and found a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow on Deneb. With the cash a happy ending was inevitable, but not for the Survey Companies.

“What happens if I’m guilty?” The recruit knew the answer. “Two hours’ oxygen on a three-hour orbit over 23? Then you rescue me with five minutes to go.”

“Now how did you hear such tripe?” Ranke laughed. “I recommend that the court give the accused a month of company punishment after the primary sentence. You can dig a hole a day and fill it up.”

“Who is the court?” Larry asked in innocence.

“I am.” A crooked smile touched Ranke’s face. “For you the court will cut the margin to fifty-five seconds.”

Olson lifted up his arm and came out with an extension of the charge and the specifications. He gestured while Larry drew an instrument like a compass out of his tunic and put it on the floor at his feet.

“You like reversals, kangaroo court style,” he murmured wearily. “Let’s see what happens.” The two little needles revolved in opposite directions at fantastic speed. “The accused is guilty on

any plea. Let’s see the character of the accusers.” He twirled the gadget toward Pvt. Ulysses Pickens.

THE AMBITIOUS spokesman for himself regretted his gold tooth. Somebody had knocked it out with a club—that crud of a railroad dick.

“I always wanted to be a first sergeant. Boy, them guys have it made. Who kin make it? I kin! Ah’m just a Georgia Cracker boy with six brothers and sisters, but ah knows this here space service. Then you get up in grade, an’ all you gotta do is sit tight and let everybody else talk. Then you pick the best of the talk and make a decision. Ah’m gonna be a first sergeant if it kills me.”

Pickens’ mind veered to his desire to justify his existence. The Army was the place for the poor boys. Hell, the chow was better than at home. He forgot the name of his youngest sister, the one who’d died from pellagra.

“Ah could be almost satisfied without a woman.” He thought of his furloughs in Canalport on Mars and Uranium City on Venus. “Not too bad, but them gals tried to pick mah pockets. Ah knocked one of ’em off’n a bar stool.”

A year earlier, Earth time, he’d had a chance to be transferred to a Hospital Train. A milk run. “All them trains do is take the wounded to a base hospital. They got it made.” On each train there were four medical officers and six nurses. The two highest-ranking non-coms had a chance. “Maybe ah might find a Southern gal among ’em. As first sergeant I could take my pick of two little chickens. With space pay. I didn’t join. Ah’d been washin’ bedpans. Not enough stripes.”

The shadow of gloom hit his cortices. His fierce desire to prove himself came from a record of petty crime. He had enlisted under a false name. It was a good thing the county courthouse had burned with his birth record. Intelligence couldn’t prove a thing, even that

he had been born. "Paw couldn't support the kids." As a boy he had stolen cars and rolled drunks in Athens and Rome, Georgia. That was all over. The Army information and Education Bureau had educated him to believe that any man—what did they call it? had a large potential. The idea was a bit fuzzy. Anyway, it was a good thing the fire destroyed his early official history.

"There's six nurses. Maybe if I make a good show in this here court martial an' somebody gets killed, I'll get two stripes. It's a start. I saw one of them nurses. Boy!

"This is a crud's-afire cinder. Why wasn't ah assigned to 17? I swear ah ain't gonna crack, but this here place dries the guts outten a man.

"Goldtooth's a nasty name. I flipped a boxcar, an' some railroad dick clobbered me. Some day maybe ah'll ketch up with 'im. People laugh at the gold tooth. It sticks right out like the rear end of a hound dawg." His mind trailed off into incoherencies, including the wish he could be consistent in the use of either *I* or *ah*. Army service had changed his accent, even some of his ideas.

LARRY POINTED the instrument at Cpl. Everett Olson, a squat man with a cauliflower ear. Once he had held the All-Army light-heavyweight free style wrestling championship.

"What the hell am I doing up here?" Now nearly bald, he was afraid of his childhood memories. "Goldilocks. A sissy," he whispered with a shudder. Olson's parents had told him never to fight. He saw other children in grade school pluck and push at one another, but the first time his father saw him hit a boy, young Everett had received the beating of his life.

After the first six grades he'd taken up weightlifting. His mother still made him wear his hair long until one of his schoolmates yelled, "A fairy! Hah!" He'd knocked the brat down and quit

Junior Polytech. "I'm gonna drive a truck and buy a convertible." He'd had a girl. "What was her name?" He worked at odd jobs for a year and bought a bicycle. When she married a butcher, he enlisted in the Luna Quartermasters. Plenty of time up there for weight juggling and wrestling.

"I'm the strongest man around here. I can crack anybody wide open, even Ranke.

"Bernice promised to wait for me. She didn't. That's why I re-enlisted." He tried to remember whether she had been the fourth or fifth girl who'd found somebody else. "I'm fed up now. This is a putrid Army. Lord, don't let me foul up; maybe Grace'll stick with me. She's true blue. Maybe she's a bitch like the rest of 'em. Maybe not. I gave her a diamond ring, but I don't write. I don't know how to say things.

"Who was that dope who called me names in Venus City? I got fined two hundred occupation credits for knocking him flat. The jerk led with a roundhouse right. What a goof!"

In the stream of consciousness Larry had tapped, Olson showed his fear of doing something wrong, maybe spending the rest of his days in the Moon Locker, drilling till exhaustion in the penal colony and waiting for death. He'd heard that five years was the maximum survival period. He shaved his head once a week so not even one leftover hair would show.

"Aw, the hell with it. I'll work my squad till it falls apart. Those poor, misbegotten goons. What made 'em volunteer to come out here on a floating cinder? What made me? I've looked for the Wasps on every telescope and radar on the station. In my two years on this fouled up stinkball I've done my duty. Maybe I might enlist again if they give me another stripe. None of my boys is gonna take the trip to jail. I won't let 'em make a mistake. They don't belong with the crooked politicians who've been found out. Don't make a mistake.

"My squad's a nice bunch. Specially selected. I don't know. We gotta have discipline or the Wasps'll get us.

"My Pittsburg gal might stick with me. Grace is worth three of anybody. I wish I'd saved the money I threw over the bars in the slimy joints from hell to breakfast. This kid, this Larry, isn't so bad, but I got to give him the needle. He served in some NCO school. Must've flunked. Why is this young punk on this lousy cinder?"

"I don't know what's next. Maybe my girl will marry me if I ditch the service. This is the last for me. I've had it. What? Loyalty oaths—extra special ones for outspace personnel. Iron rations. Stale air. On a wide band of cinder. Just a damned cinder without a single plant. I used to love flowers, and now I'm here. How low can a guy get?"

Olson looked spitefully at Pickens. "Who's this Georgia boy? If he kept any money, I'd wrestle him for it. He gets a bundle on payday but sends most of it back home. He's a second dealer in poker and likes his own deck against these kids. A complete louse. Every time I wake up I wonder if my girl would go for him. Women like the lean type. She might be running around with some safeway government clerk. I wonder what makes Ranke tick."

T IRED OF the paranoia, Larry slid his left foot a few inches to aim the instrument toward the first sergeant. The little needles revolved, halted to summarize, and dashed on toward the next perception.

The head of the enlisted men began to record his own character. "Pickens is a hog-and-hominy boy. Olson is mama's chattel. His mother kept him in curlers too long. What a life—but no worse than suffering through poverty and misery as Pickens did." Ranke, as an old hat in the service, prided himself on knowing everything of importance about everybody above and below him. He had a mental dossier on every man of the station com-

plement. "This Cracker boy found a home in the Army. Olson does his job, but he's a mixed cookie. All right. If enough people die, I'll promote them both. The captain trusts my judgment. He should. I've been around more corners of the solar system.

"That wooden head: The other day he said I had the intelligence to go to Officers' Candidate School. Why didn't I? I'll match my Classification Score against his any time. The trouble is he won't look at the personnel records. If he did, this punk Larry wouldn't be here on this post.

"Of course, I have to admire Pickens and Olson. They volunteered. To an old pro like me that means something. I hate the jackasses who get free education from the government and then cry because the big brass pulls them in for a short hitch on some improbable mote of dust. Lt. Johns had a free medical education and crabbed about spending two years here to pay back the government. I'm glad he's gone. Always accusing me of leniency. He had a head like a block of mush.

"I'm almost forty-seven. This Johns complained that he was too old to be pulled in. Too old at thirty. A laugh with no chuckle."

The old professional, Ranke, who had sacrificed friends and family for the service, yawned in recollection. He wasn't indifferent. He wished the relief ship would come for the men who'd spent two years on this heap of slag. Something had to happen, or the amateurs would bust a gut.

He especially disliked the amateur reserve officers invested by some oblique act of Congress. Most of them had no knowledge of military law or administration—rocket specialists head shrinkers, or computers. When their spleen was up, they charged soldiers twice their experience before a general court. In the outstations the lowest sentence was four years on the Moon. On the drifting hunks of rock and slag the wartime regulations obtained. On

Earth an enlisted man might strike an officer and get off with three years in Leavenworth. On a space fragment away from home he might get life or death—life in a mine or death by hanging. The Army hadn't abandoned its primitive methods since MacArthur's day.

"I love my kids, but this Larry is too eager. I need an integrated outfit that won't scare. Maybe there are Wasps." In his own slow mental suspension the first sergeant was afraid Larry would push the wrong button and attack their own scout ships or send out a selenium interceptor against a supply float, maybe against the relief ship. One man could destroy a base, and the best possible choice was this kid with no real whiskers. The eager beavers usually fell apart in an emergency.

RANKE COULD never forget the major on Venus, a chaplain of the Withholders. What they held back he never learned, but the officer had been a member of one of the 240 sects accredited to supply spiritual help to turn people toward the right path, whatever that was. The Withholders disbelieved in everything—sex, drink, and smoke—and the first sergeant had invoked the ire of his Holy Joe in a salvage battalion. "What happens to the human race if there is no indulgence of carnal appetites?"

The major, Stringent or Stringy by name, had glared.

The next time Ranke was too full of dry Venusians to turn out the company, the chaplain had awakened him after reveille and broken him down to buck private. The next eight years, while he earned his stripes back on Venus and Mars, under eight or nine other CO's, were a ratrace. A real pro had to take a lot—serve in Gas Treatment and Itchy-Fly Control to get back where he could have his own quarters and run an outfit the way it should be.

"Yappy son of a jackass had to

break me because I drank and he didn't." Ranke had a vivid satisfaction from knowing, through the grapevine, that the Withholder had been caught with a colonel's wife in a forbidden area.

With a wry smile, Ranke remembered that he had graduated from the Mapping and Coordinates School and held a degree as high as one given to most ministers. In fact, his outspace pay was higher than a Stateside colonel's.

"Now on my last leg," he murmured. "I might be broken again. I might dislike this kid. I don't know. But if he fouls' up, I might be reduced again. Maybe to staff. Why the hell do I have to get these rookies? Lt. Johns screamed when he thought he saw a whirligig spouting fire. I was blamed because I hadn't told him about the false aurora plutonisis. How can I tell a company officer what to do unless he listens?"

Ranke wished for his pension and no worries about the chances of a Wasp gun platform appearing around his post. If he'd had half the sense he owned at birth, he could have been a rich merchant instead of a servant of a corps dominated by swivel chair generals.

"What the hell. Let it go. I don't know the answers. Meanwhile, let's see what this kid's made of." He started to lift the gavel, but it froze in his hands.

Mars, Uranium City, Goldbrick Gulch—all nothing in his mind. "I just want to get my pension."

LARRY CARROLL flicked a hand to his tunic and set out a twin to the first whirling circle. This he set behind him so that other enlisted men could feel it. Nobody said anything. Cpl. Olson stood with his right arm poised in midair, suggesting the charge and the specifications. His ranting voice was lost in the echo chambers of his own mind as he registered the final tableau.

The accused spoke in a turgid voice. "Prepare for this and forget. One of your officers, Lt. Johns, has been shipped out." For effect he spoke in short sentences. "He left in the sky-drone that brought me here. I was sent to investigate morale. The poison from above can seep down to destroy the real workers. You are the real workers." He paused and repeated.

In objective time morning had come, but on this outstation only the chief NCO could rouse the men with his whistle. His hands were numb.

"In fifteen minutes, Sgt. Ranke, you will blow the whistle. Five minutes later you will ask the CO to transfer me to Station 17, on the grounds of incompetence. It is an easier post for recruits."

"Why sure." Ranke's voice was vague but his smile soft. "The skipper has his faults, but he does what I ask."

Nobody else in the room stirred.

"You will forget what has happened since Sgt. Ranke appeared with the charge sheet. You will forget the charge sheet." The whirring of the little compasses rode to a crescendo. "You will forget. You will forget."

Larry picked up the two stroboscopic analyzers and put them into opposite pockets of his black tunic. Just to make sure, he listened to the summary of the tickings. He smiled. It was the same old pattern. In the outstations, whether a few cubic miles of cinder or planetoids of nickel alloy, space fear rode minds. In their loneliness their frustrations, sometimes those apes but submerged by the conditioning of the service, broke out into animal noises.

"All right," Ranke grumbled sleepily.

"You deserve an explanation which no one else will hear." Larry held up his hands and let them fall softly. He was astonished that the first sergeant had a mind strong enough to break through the hypnosis. He made a mental note to recommend him for

training to Psych 1. Somewhere in his past a hiatus had deprived him of superior command. The reasons should be interesting to Plover 14, the code name of the chief head shrinker of all.

"Who are you?" Ranke growled. "I'll really prefer charges next time."

"You must understand—then forget—the real purpose of my visitation," Larry said. "I am here to check on morale and smooth out the rough spots. These little gadgets of mine are able to translate brain waves into thought patterns. The repetitions stay put—anger, malice, doubt, pride, and the urge to survive. They stay put in the sense that the under needle stays with your dominant thought all the time."

"How?" Ranke nodded in his chair. "I guess it's technical. I guess I was wrong about you. I'll transfer you out. You're a—a hazard anyway."

"My amplifier makes a synthesis loud enough or me to hear—alone."

"I'm sleepy." Ranke's head fell over his clasped hands.

"No one remembers anything but fantasy. No one remembers anything but health." Larry glanced backward at Sgt. Forbes, who sat on his bunk in an attitude of prayer. "Health. Peace of mind." Larry thudded his heels against the floor.

Olson's arm came down. "I charge the accused..." He paused to blush. "What am I doing up here—posing for pictures?"

"We just had a little party to congratulate Pvt. Carroll on his being transferred off this double-damned cinder heap. I don't know how you did it, kid." Ranke shook his head, trying to whirl the sleep out of his eyes.

"The lucky son," somebody yelled from the back.

The situation was normal. The false antagonisms rose again. Men bickered about the dimensions of their pin-up girls. Cpl. Olson challenged Pickens to an Indian wrestling contest. The card games began, and everybody tried to

remember who owed what. Pvt. Griggs claimed Cpl. Ort owed him \$400,000. "Let's cut for double or nothing."

Col. Lawrence A. Carroll packed his footlocker and wondered about Station 17. Presumably he'd be tried after 17 days' service there. Two more visita-

tions would entitle him to leave, and then he could spend a year at desk work before getting his own pension. He would forego another rejuvenation and settle on his Ozark farm, with his wife, his half-pay, and his own gold tooth, but that was in the rear, where nobody could see it.
