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A Complete Short Novel



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"They are a warlike race, used to a major conflict at least once every generation"



THE SPARK

By MACK REYNOLDS

The High Council of Five takes up the problem of Terra!

BY THIS time the High Council of Five had given up hope—it could be observed in their attitude—but the conference was one which had taken years of preparation, so it continued.

The Presidor said wearily, "Comrades, we will now hear the report of Ethnologist Chhan."

Chhan entered through the heavy portal and saluted the five councilors with the respect consistent with their rank. He was elderly, bent with his years of study, and his expression indicated that his message was not one of hope.

The Presidor returned the salutation and said, "Ethnologist Chhan, you were to investigate the possibilities of establishing peaceable relationship with the inhabitants of Terra."

"Councilors," the old man said sadly, "there can be no peace with the inhabitants of the planet Terra. They are a young race, still in their ethical infancy in spite of their rapid advance in the sciences. I—"

One of the five interrupted him. "A previous report to the High Council recommended that we attempt to contact the Terrans and request permission to migrate to their planet until we have found means to reach the nearer stars. When science had progressed to the point where migration to some planet beyond the solar system became practical, we would resume our way, leaving them in sole possession of this system."

"It was suggested," the Presidor added hopefully, "that in some respects our science is in advance of Terra's and

that in return for their hospitality we could teach them—"

Chhan gestured in negation. "Councilors, the recommendation of which you speak is obviously the most reasonable solution to our problem, but it would be impossible to make such an agreement with the Terrans."

"But why?"

"In spite of their progress in so many lines of endeavor, they are as savages in others. For instance, Councilors, they are divided into races, into nations, into classes, into religious groups, that are continually at odds with each other. Not one year goes by but hundreds of thousands, or even millions, are killed because of these divisions.

"If they are capable of springing at each other's throats because of a difference in skin coloring, or a difference in their religious beliefs, do you think we could safely remain among them for a period of any length at all? No, Councilors, I am convinced that the day the Terrans discovered there was another intelligent life form in the solar system, that day they would begin their preparations to destroy us.

"We of Mars, as they call our planet, are mature enough to conduct a peaceful relationship with an alien life form," he concluded, "but the Terrans cannot even remain at peace among themselves."

AFTER Chhan had left, the High Council of Five sat in silence for a long period.

Finally the Presidor said, "After all, Comrades, we had already suspected the truth before Ethnologist Chhan's report. Let us proceed. We will now hear the eminent Physicist Burl."

The physicist's face held the same lack of hope that the Five had become used to as the conference had progressed. He came immediately to the point.

"Councilors," he reported, "the Terrans are on the verge of attaining space travel. Within the past few years their experiments have progressed unbelievably. You will recall that it was

during their recent war that we first noted the use of rockets, and, toward the end of that conflict the development of explosives based on nuclear fission.

"Now several of the Terran nations are rushing experiments that will have space stations—artificial satellites—circling their planet in a matter of months," he went on. "Already at least one nation has sent experimental rockets beyond the Earth's atmosphere, and we can expect an attempt on their part to reach Luna in a few years at most. I need not remark upon the significance of these advances of theirs. Once they reach Luna, they will be capable of progressing to our own planet."

The scientist cleared his throat before finishing his report. "Councilors, my prediction is that the inhabitants of Terra can be expected to land on Mars within five years."

With that, he bowed and departed the council chamber.

"We have but one more report, Comrades," the Presidor told his colleagues. "It is almost unnecessary to hear it, but for the sake of the records I shall now call upon our—" his facial expression was wry "—our military authority, Specialist Kaden."

The newcomer was young and erect of bearing, but even he reflected the age of a race that had grown old before Earth's Mesozoic period. He saluted the councilors gravely and waited for their command.

"As you know, Specialist Kaden," the Presidor said, "this conference has been called to consider a double problem. First our race must leave this dying planet if it is to survive. Every year that passes sees new necessity for cutting down our population, for placing ever tighter restrictions on those that are left. We must find means to leave or soon our life form will be lost.

"The second problem is that of the Terrans, who are on the verge of space travel. The conference has concluded that peace with the Terrans is impossible, and that as soon as this aggressive race discovers our presence in the solar system they will attack.

"It is obvious that our two problems are related. We of Mars have not as yet reached a point where we are capable of traveling to a different solar system. If we are to migrate, it can only be to a sister planet. The only practical one, of course, is Terra."

The Presidor hesitated a moment before saying, "You are to report on the possibilities of a conflict between Terra and Mars."

The younger man gestured negatively, almost contemptuously.

"Councilors," he said, "the situation is almost laughable! War with Terra? Conflict between this dying planet and that young one? Forgive me, I am wrong. The situation is tragic, not humorous!

"Very briefly, Councilors, Terra has a military potential a thousand times as great as ours," he explained. "Their population numbers at least two billions, ours approximately half a million. Their industrial machine is tremendous, unbelievably so. Our planet cannot even provide the metals and fuels necessary for our own uses, not to speak of devoting them to war.

"One of their most recent weapons is based on nuclear fission, and at least two of their nations have accumulated stockpiles of these terrible bombs. But if we devoted all of our resources to the effort, we could build only *one* of these. We know how, Councilors, but we do not possess the raw materials.

"In some respects our science is beyond theirs and possibly we could devise some weapon that would wreak havoc among them. But when they turned back our attack and countered—" Specialist Kaden made the Martian gesture of negation again. "It is fantastic! Either of their major nations could defeat us—it would not even take a united Terra.

"Above all, Councilors," he added, "they are a warlike race, used to a ma-

jor conflict at least once every generation. And we? We have not had warfare on Mars in ten thousand years. It would be difficult, I am afraid, for us to learn the ways of slaughter. They are already familiar with them."

KADEN fell silent and stood watching them. Finally, the Presidor said heavily, "Then there is no possibility of preservation of our race?"

"I did not say that."

The five looked at him in surprise.

"I don't believe we understand you," the Presidor said, frowning.

"There is one possibility," the younger Martian said.

For the first time, fire gleamed in his eyes. The members of the High Council leaned forward slightly. "We are listening," the Presidor snapped.

"Councilors," Kaden explained, "according to the radio emanations from Terra, and according to the spy craft we have flown about their planet, there exists a situation which may be to our advantage. Terra is divided today into two camps. The two dominant nations, which occupy different hemispheres, are in a *cold war* as they call it. Each, with its allies, is preparing feverishly for possible conflict. Each has prepared weapons beyond description in their terribleness. Each waits for an overt act on the part of the other. Such an act would have them at each other's throats."

The Presidor frowned. "I do not seem to see the connection with our predicament."

"Councilors, we have the materials to build one fission bomb," Kaden said. "That is all we will need. I suggest we build it and, secretly, drop it on one of Terra's major cities. Any city. It makes no difference. "When they have destroyed each other, as they will, we of Mars will be able to land!"