

Followers Have Neither Peace Nor Rest

By Michael A. Stackpole

*"Clinging to the deluded way of consciousness,
Students of the Way do not realize truth."
— Mumon Ekai*

Sheria Coreg squinted against the sun, hot in her dress uniform. She couldn't recall any of the three previous Junes being that warm, but she also didn't remember being this nervous before. Each summer prior she had been pushing herself, testing herself to see if she was a worthy candidate, and her very presence in the stadium now said she was. The time of testing, however, was over; and all they had simulated would become very real.

She applauded there in the stadium with her classmates and waited for the commencement speaker to take his place at the podium. The Colt-Burton Arms Military Academy at West Point's graduating class had swollen to half again its normal size. She'd been accepted a year before the Phobos disaster, and many of the cadets following her had entered an accelerated program so Earth's depleted military could be quickly reconstituted.

And then the advent of the Shi and the Quay had made producing soldiers so much more important. Sheria had actually been in the field on a night exercise when the Mumon Rift ripped through the sky like a fork of lightning. She'd been too far distant to see Seyal come through the rift with her naked eye, but there was no mistaking the glowing blue wound in the fabric of space/time.

She shivered again as she remembered seeing the night sky tear apart like that. Sheria had grown up on the North American west coast and remembered her first earthquake. Though young, she'd known instinctively that the Earth was not supposed to move like that. Up to that point her conception of the world had been based on how steady and solid the ground was. In an instant that idea had been shattered, and the rift's appearance similarly destroyed the world she'd known.

General Solomon Andromov came to the podium and rested his hands on either side. Sunlight burned from the ring on his right hand — the same sort of ring she would wear after graduation. Though not very tall, Andromov's thickly muscled build and hard, dark-eyed stare gave him a presence that she found chilling and riveting. He'd shaved his head and a white scar curled its way around from his left ear back — and the slice taken from that same ear somehow made him seem all that much more deadly.

He looked out at them and kept his voice low. "I have been where you are now. I remember sitting there, sweating and sweltering, looking forward to the future and fearing it utterly. Get used to that feeling, for it is our lot in life. We who place ourselves at the sword's edge, at the point of the spear, must ever be ready and anxious, fearless and fearful. If we cannot play those contradictions off and reach an accommodation between them, all we face will destroy us. It is not a question of balance, as the Gongen would suggest, but twin points of attack that we use to carry the day.

"When I was where you are, our course was simple. Thirty years ago the inhabitants of Mars declared independence. We knew there would be fighting and we knew we had to win for all of

humanity. The Gongen and the Mavericks are but rebellious children who have decided it is better to reign in the outer dark than to be part of the brotherhood that is humanity. In their vanity, the Gongen have claimed supremacy, suggesting that life originated on Mars and, with their return, has come full circle."

The man slowly shook his head and allowed his shoulders to slump ever so slightly. "Their claims are as transparent as they are foolish. You know this because you know you are heirs to a vast human tradition. It began when the first humans left the African womb and spread throughout the world. It was our destiny to rise and dominate the planet, taming it, shaping it with our will. Once we had learned how to do that, we moved on, leaving this solitary rock to spread through the stars. From the time we first looked up and made stories of the constellations, it was meant for us to dwell among these mythic heroes, becoming heroes ourselves."

A thrill ran through Sheria, for she had believed what General Andromov was saying since she was a young girl. Her uncle had been a spaceman — just a merchant shipper, but someone who had been to Mars and even the asteroid belt. He would tell her stories and give her bits and pieces of this planet or that. Somehow having those rocks — which she now supposed he could have gathered while walking to the house — made the stuff of stories real to her. They fueled her desire to leave Earth, but unlike the Gongen, she had no desire to abandon her humanity, or her obligation to humanity.

The sun gleamed from Andromov's shaved pate. "I do not believe in a vengeful God, but I can understand how some do. After rebelling against Earth, the outer reaches had their dreams of quiet independence shattered by the arrival of the Shi and Quay. Many have seen this as divine punishment for their revolt, but this is far too simple an idea. The Shi and the Quay did not arrive to punish the Gongen and Mavericks; they arrived to threaten *humanity*. We know this far better than our estranged brethren, and the duty of destroying this threat now falls to you.

"How I dearly wish our brothers and sisters shared this view. They still fight against us even as they are threatened. We are forced to deal with them when we wish to be directly confronting these interlopers. These aliens seek to usurp our position in the solar system, and this we cannot allow, for our good, and the good of all humanity."

He opened his hands to encompass them all. "It is then to this duty, a *sacred* duty, I welcome you. To you falls the task of defending world, corporation and species. Through your efforts, those who hate us will perish, and the true destiny of Earth shall be realized."

Sheria smiled as Bren Geary entered her room and flopped down on the empty bunk opposite hers. He still wore his cadet uniform, but the green tunic had been unbuttoned and the grey mock-turtle had been pulled out at the waist. She knew from long experience that he could be presentable again inside fifteen seconds, but as graduates they were past spot inspections.

He glanced up at her, his brown eyes full of mischief and his brown hair, though short, somehow completely disordered. He laughed that little laugh she'd learned to find annoying. Usually she ignored him, refusing to give him the satisfaction, but when he started shaking his head and clucking his tongue, she couldn't let it slide.

"So what is it your single synapse is worrying about this time, Bren?"

"Your future, Lieutenant Coreg." Bren dropped his voice into a passable imitation of General Andromov. "Can I have an *Amen* for the future of humanity? Praise the vengeful God he doesn't believe in that soldiers like you will be out there saving us all."

Sheria finished folding a tunic, then tossed it into her open suitcase and turned on Bren. She fixed him with a hard stare, but bit back what she wanted to say. She'd have blasted him, but she caught the tall, slender silhouette of a classmate leaning against the doorjamb. "You want to poke fun, too, Thothmes?"

The ebony-skinned soldier shook his head. "I have learned, Sheria Coreg, that fighting you is never pleasant." He smiled, revealing a gold canine tooth — a replacement for one she'd knocked out during a martial arts class. "I came to see how long Bren lasted in needling you."

Bren snorted. "Longer than she will when I have to come hunt her down."

Sheria's blue eyes narrowed sharply. "What?"

The reclining man smiled. "I figure it's six months out there before you take off and become the prettiest pirate queen the tin-men have ever seen."

"Me? A Maverick?" She shook her head. "It doesn't track, Bren. I'm pure human, no mods, no piercings, no replacement parts."

"You are *now*, sure, but . . ."

Thothmes hissed from the doorway. "No more, Bren. Don't let the universe get the idea from you."

"The universe isn't getting anything from me. Sheria here had her pick of assignments. She could have been in the Venusian Rangers as easily as I was. She chose one of the Long Range Legions so she could go out and pick fights around Ganymede. That's nuts, and I just have to figure Andromov's evangelizing got to her. When the Reds or tin-men get a hold of her, they'll break her, turn her, and we'll have to deal with her."

Sheria forced her fists to open. "Uh huh, and you're going to get off your tiny butt, leave off guarding the yacht-works at Venus and come after me? That's not happening."

"I'm more likely to do that, Coreg, than you are to save humanity all by your lonesome." Geary pulled himself up and sat crosswise on the bed, with his back against the wall. "You're not the first person to head out of here all fired with the idea of bringing humanity back together, you know. Everyone who does that ends up in a slow spiral down into the sun. It's happened millions of times before, and circumstances now just mean it's going to happen faster."

Sheria forced herself to pick up another shirt and start folding it. "I appreciate the concern, Bren, and I'm going to take it the way it should be meant, not the way you're making it sound. I remember your sister, Constance. I was in her cadet company my plebe year, and I was sad when she died at Phobos. Not as sad as you, but I was sad. And we can argue if her death was stupid or not, but what we think doesn't matter, does it? It's just what Constance thought."

"What do you think it was she thought, Bren? Do you think she thought she wasted her life?"

Geary shrugged his shoulders and studied a nibbled thumbnail closely. "Doesn't matter what she thought, whether it was noble or not. It was wrong and she's dead."

Thothmes reached up and grasped the lintel. "You must not let your sister's fate color how you think of her, Bren. The Phobos campaign was a victory, and she helped make it a victory."

"Sure, a victory where we beat up a makeshift fleet, they carved ours up really good — so good that we couldn't take one lousy moon. We might have notched a victory, and it might have slowed the Reds down from raiding down-well, but it didn't get us anything. If we'd not gone off on that stupid expedition, we'd have our full fleet and we'd not have to be worrying about our new playmates."

"I hear what you're saying, Bren, but I remember your sister really well." Sheria smoothed the shirt and set it down before turning. "She knew leadership wasn't an accident or a by-product of personality. It was work, and the citation she got for the action around Phobos points out how good she was."

"Yeah, a citation she got *posthumously*." He shook his head. "I go home and my mom has that in a little corner of Connie's room. She has votive candles. It's a shrine. My mom doesn't talk about her like she'd dead, but as if she's just waiting to come home. I see the pride in her eyes when she talks of Connie, and the fear in them when she talks to me."

Sheria caught the tone of his words and felt her anger begin to fade. "Look, you know we don't think you're wrong in taking the Venus appointment." She glanced at Thothmes and he nodded. "I may find you insufferable, but I don't doubt your courage. Your posting is a combat posting. There *are* raids in-system. You'll see your share of action."

The black man in the doorway nodded again. "Far more than I will as part of the militia here."

"The two of you don't get it, do you?" Geary snorted, then looked away toward the wall. "All this stuff we're told about our destiny, it's designed to ignite our pride and make us charge out there. But to do what? The Reds and the tin-men don't want to be part of us. The Shi and the Quay want to kill us all, which makes fighting them make a heck of a lot more sense, but that look in my mom's eyes says it all. You can wrap fighting up in honor and tradition, destiny and divine missions, but what it all boils down to is making sure you rip the other guy limb from limb before he does that to you. It's the same as when we were trying to beat saber-toothed lions. Well, in Darwinian terms, the Shi are the biggest, baddest cats on the savannah, and the Quay are just a damned force of nature. The only thing that is destined is that *Homo sapiens* go the way of the Neanderthal and every other almost-human species we beat out on our way to the top of the food chain."

"You're wrong, Bren."

He looked up at her, defiance on his face. "Am I? Enlighten me, but spare the honor and tradition crap."

"Fine, I will." She walked over and leaned down, getting her face mere millimeters from his. "It's not about ripping the other guy apart before he does you. It's about ripping him apart before he

does your mom, or my little sister, or Thothmes' city, or some L-5 station. Darwin was fine, but he didn't take into account the fact that we don't have to fight just for ourselves. We *can* fight for others; we *must* fight for others, especially those who can't fight for themselves. Every second we stop someone from destroying our species is another second we get closer to guaranteeing our survival."

Sheria straightened up and posted her fists on her hips. "Your sister knew that. General Andromov knew that. You think his speech today was for us? Sure, maybe it was a little bit, but it was mostly for our parents and friends. It was something he left them with so when we go off to *our* Phobos they'll think they know why. Instead of thinking of us broken and dead, they'll remember us tall and healthy, smiling because we've made it. That was our eulogy, Bren, and our duty is to push ourselves so we outlive those who heard it delivered."

Geary levered himself up into a sitting position, then slowly clapped, mocking her. "Oh, Coreg, he got to you. You're a believer. You'll go far — not your career, because it'll be too short. You're the one they'll send deep against the enemy, one of those volunteers-only missions. There won't be enough left of you to do DNA identification."

She stepped back. "Yeah? Could be. That might actually worry me except for one thing."

"What's that?"

"Once you realize you can't insulate your mom from life, you'll be right there with me." Sheria shook her head. "You aren't going to have to chase me down as a pirate queen, Geary, you're just going to have to hustle to catch up with me as I chase down pirate queens, Gongen samurai and God only knows what the Shi and Quay toss at us. You might have your doubts, but we all do. If you hadn't conquered them, you'd never have stuck through the training."

Geary stopped clapping and rubbed a hand over his jaw. "You might have a point there."

"I do, and you know it. Moreover, if you didn't know it, and didn't have steel in your spine, you'd never have come here to argue the point."

Thothmes chuckled. "Game, set, match."

"Game. Maybe even set." Geary stood. "Not sure about the match. The fate of humanity is a big burden. We ride herd on errant children and fend off creatures that can squirt a whole world through a gash in space/time? I don't really recall that being all spelled out in any course curriculum here."

Sheria smiled, shaking her head. "It wasn't. Today we stopped reading the books. Tomorrow we start writing them. The stars *are* our destiny. Now's the time to earn what's truly ours."