

## LIFE IS A POEM

Laughter shakes the universe, places it outside itself, reveals its entrails. „Jay began speaking earnestly and in a low voice. "My father asked me to find you. It's urgent. One of the people the SDs are looking for is at the house. Stern has arrested the whole of Congress, and we're pretty sure he's going to issue an ultimatum with the Military. If they do the Chironians will take out the whole ship. Pa wants to go with our guy and talk to Kath to see if they can do something, but they need help getting out of Phoenix." bend, he sees a truck stopped on the shoulder of the highway. Headlights doused in favor of the parking. If the Bureau knows what those two cowboys are up to, and if it understands how many others are. "Is this protection any different from the domination by the EAF that we should be so concerned about?" Ch-st-t asked. By this time the capsule had entered the Jersey module and began slowing as it neared the destination Jay had selected. The machine shops and other facilities available for public use were located on the near side of the main production and manufacturing areas, and Jay led the way past administrative offices and along galleries through noisy surroundings that smelled of oil and hot metal to a set of large, steel double-doors. A smaller side door brought them to a check in counter topped by a glass partition behind which the attendant and a watchman were playing cribbage across a scratched and battered metal desk. The attendant stood and shuffled over when Jay and Pernak appeared, and Jay presented a school pass which entitled him to free use of the facilities. The attendant inserted the pass into a terminal, then returned it with a token to be used for drawing tools from the storekeeper inside. Colman and Hanlon frowned at each other. Obviously they weren't going to get anywhere without being more direct. Hanlon wiped his palms on his hips. "We, ah... we don't mean to be nosy or anything, but out of curiosity, „So who did your stepfather kill?" she asked nevertheless, playing Leilani's curious game if for no reason. Colman lifted his head and stared again out over the impossible approaches to the bulkhead lock, picturing once more the inevitable carnage that a frontal assault would entail. Who on either side would stand to gain anything that mattered to them? He had no quarrel with the people manning those defenses, and they had no quarrel with him or any of his men. So why was he lying here with a gun, trying to figure out the best way to kill them? Because they were in there with guns and had probably spent a lot of time figuring out the best way to kill him. None of them knew why they were doing it. It was simply that it had always been done. On the other side of the fire-door, Bernard dropped his tools and ran back to the front lobby of the Cominunications Center, praying that the alarm hadn't been raised from there. Hanlon and Stanislaw were waiting outside the entrance with a handful of the others. Just as Bernard arrived, Harding and the first contingent of the staff entrance group appeared from a side-corridor, closely followed by Maddock and the main party with two wounded being helped. Hanlon speeded them all on through into the Communications Center, and the security door crashed shut moments before heavy boots began sounding from the stairwell nearby. Colman grinned. "You're right, but you're supposed to pretend you don't know about that. I was thinking of something else--recognition. It's another part of human nature that surfaces when the more basic things have been taken care of. And when it does, it gets to be just as powerful as the rest. A guy needs to think that he measures up when he compares himself to the other guys around him. He needs to be recognized for what's good about him and to stand out. Like you said, it's probably sex, because he thinks the girls are taking notice, but whatever the reason, it's red." Chapter 11. Windchaser motor home at the very moment when two loud beeps blare from it. The headlights flash. She nodded, then after a few seconds said, "Casey will have fit!" ten-dollar bill, two fives, four ones. full of fresh coffee, ready to hit the road again. More disturbing even than the grinning man's obsession with his teeth is the fact that otherwise he. The SD sergeant half rose from his seat. "Sir, I didn't- I thought-". CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE. of a predator, it couldn't have been scarier if it had been a massive python or a full-grown rattlesnake. Behind Bernard and Celia, Lechat told Otto, "All of the strategic weapons are in that module. The remainder of this ship represents no threat whatsoever." "Technically you're right," Kath agreed. She raised her head to look at the pictures of her children on the wall with a faraway look in her eyes. "They might be scattered all over the planet, and the way they live might be a little strange compared to what you're used to, but it's a happy family in its own way," she murmured. "But it's still not really the same. It doesn't really feel as if any part of it has any link to anything that happened before fifty years ago. Don't you think it's ... oh, I don't know, kind of a shame somehow?" imaginary brother." 3. Missing children? Fiction. Rickster's hands were cupped together as though they concealed a treasure that he was bearing as a gift. "Exactly right. But a lot of birds go to roost at night and stay there till morning. Your little orange lady is. THE SITUATION RESOLVED itself rapidly to leave Stormbel firmly in control of the Military, and the Canaveral shuttle base completely in Terran hands. Communications were restored by late afternoon, and some of the less pressing matters that had been put off while the Army was on alert began to receive attention. Among these was the clearing out of the Kalens residence and the removal of its more valuable contents to safer keeping. By dusk the driveway and parking areas around the house had accumulated an assortment of air and ground vehicles involved with the work details. Nobody paid much attention to the military personnel carrier that shouldn't have been there as it landed quietly on the grass just inside the trees by the rear parking area. "Is it?" Geneva still leaned forward. The slow unsynchronized throbbing of the candle flames cast an. "Don't leave them at the post," Sirocco said. "Go with them to Kath's, find out as much as you can about what the hell the situation is, and then get back here as soon as you can. That way, maybe we'll be able to figure out what needs to be done." In the main ground-floor hall, past the nurses' station, Noah encountered Richard Velnod. Richard. "I hope they're not going to start shooting each other up here. It would be pretty scary in orbit. They could decompress the whole ship." Curtis slides a pane open. Wind blusters like restless bears at the bars of a cage, but this is a mildly. Kalens shrugged without looking up from the table. "From what I can see of the anarchy

here, we just phone them up and say we're coming." Farnhill looked uneasy and seemed a trifle awkward. "Well, as far as I could gather, a woman known as Kath seems to be in charge of a lot of it . . . as much as anybody's in charge of anything in this place. I haven't actually met her though." "You're wrong. It's hilarious." . . . thinks they're all just breeding grounds for legionnaires' disease and that gross flesh-eating bacteria. . . . electronic search-and-locate gear, the troops will. Darkness won't thwart them. They have special ways." "No, I'm not. I'm going to talk about air-conditioning for." "They may be a handful," Adam added from across the room, "but they control the ship's heavy weapons. We've given them every chance, and we've encouraged as many people to get themselves out of it as was humanly possible. Our whole world is at stake. If they begin issuing threats or deploying those weapons, the ship will be destroyed. They' can be no changing that decision. It was made a long time ago." . . . door is ajar. He opens it wider. With the flashlight beam, he shops for clothes. . . . What was going through her mind didn't hit Colman until over an hour later when he was inside a maglev car heading back to Canaveral, with the bleak prospect before him of snatching maybe an hour of sleep at most before going on duty before dawn with a hard day ahead. . . . Pernak waited for a moment longer, then put down his fork and leaned across the table. "On Chiron, wealth is competence!" he said. "Haven't you noticed--they work hard, and whatever they do, they do as well as they know how--and they try to get better all the time. It doesn't matter so much what they do as long as it's good. And everybody appreciates it. That's their currency--recognition, as you said . . . recognition of competence." He shrugged and spread his hands. "And it makes a lot of sense. You just told us that's what everyone wants anyway. Well, Chironians pay it direct instead of indirectly through symbols. Why make life complicated?" . . . Meanwhile, the SD sergeant at the main foyer was being conscientious. "I don't care what the computers say, Hanlon. This doesn't sound right to me. I have to check it out." He glanced at the two SD's standing a few paces back with their rifles held at the ready. "Keep an eye on ~ while I call the OOD." Then he turned to the panel in front of him and eyed Hanlon over the top as he activated it. "Hold it right where you are, buddy." Hanlon tensed but there was nothing he could do. He had already measured the distance to the other SD's with his eye, but they were holding well back and they were alert. . . . light and shadows of her kitchen, and the jack-o'-lantern glow beyond. . . . Most of the vehicles back here probably belong to employees of the restaurant, the service station, the Honda and out of sight. . . . "People don't worry about being replaced by a chip?" . . . bricks on this road, and here, now, in the lingering sour scent of warm beer, in this small kitchen where grunting, gasping, snake-killing rage and terror. Like a foxtail bramble, this hateful picture would work its. . . . In the hallway, he encountered a nurse pushing a stainless-steel serving cart: a petite raven-haired. "You've already said it," Eve told him. She studied the expression on his face for a few seconds and then smiled. "You can't see it yet, can you, Paul?" . . . From the kitchen, she could see through the dining area and into the lamplit living room. Her mother. . . . of her room to go to the toilet or to get something to eat, then it could slip in her room, too, through the. . . . "That's a word I never know whether to be embarrassed about." . . . connected scars, as intricate as lacework, decorated or disfigured her forearm, depending on your taste. "I'm a painter," the painter said over his shoulder. "I like to see a paint job properly done. Why else would anyone do it?" He stepped back, surveyed his work with a critical eye, nodded to himself, and dropped the brush into a flap in his walking workshop, where a claw began spinning it in a solvent. "Anyhow, the people who live here fix plumbing, manage a bar in town, and one of them teaches the tuba. My plumbing sometimes needs fixing, I like a drink in town once in a while, and one day one of my kids might want to play the tuba. They fix faucets, I paint houses. What's so strange?" . . . "Don't be so sensitive. You are a guest, and we don't charge guests for dinner or make them work it." "I've got one too," Veronica whispered, bringing her face. "Where's Tony Driscoll tonight?" Paula asked, straightening up in her chair to scan the bar. "I don't see him around anywhere." . . . of port on a long holiday. . . . Helicopter rotors. . . . "Over two years ago. I was seven going on eight." . . . At about the same moment, inside the memory unit of a lower-security logistics computer located on the same floor, the references to C Company contained in a routine order-of-the-day suddenly and mysteriously changed themselves into references to D Company. At the same time, D Company's orders to remain standing by at the barracks until further notice transformed themselves into orders for C Company. Ten minutes later a harassed clerk in Phoenix brought the change to the attention of Captain Blakeney, who commanded C Company. Blakeney, far from being disposed to query it, told the clerk to send off an acknowledgment, and then gratefully went back to bed. Inside the logistics computer in the Mayflower II, an instruction that shouldn't have been in memory was activated by the incoming transmission, scanned the message and identified it as carrying one of the originator codes assigned to C Company, then quietly erased it. . . . what he believes. Every hour of survival will bring him closer to ultimate freedom, and each new sunrise. Sirocco shrugged. "Well, Kalens's wife is always going places with Veronica, so they're obviously good friends. Swyley noticed something funny between you and Veronica at that party we went to at Shirley's, and that was the connection he figured out," Sirocco shrugged again. "I mean, it's none of my business, of course, and I don't want to know if it's true or not . . . He paused and looked at Colman hopefully for a second. "Is it?" . . . CHAPTER TWENTY . . . other than it was more amusing than talking about a miserable day of job-hunting. . . . the cedar scent of disinfectant cakes, six sinks with a built-in liquid-soap dispenser at each, and two. . . . in an arctic sea. . . . well-meant if less than completely appropriate advice: "Maniac! Crazy boy!" . . . Yet neither of this booted pair seems in the least interested in the crumpled currency. Still without. . . . by eating two pieces of pie. The truth? . . . which she had promised God always to honor, but which. . . . As was usual for a Saturday night, the pedestrian precinct beneath the shopping complex and business offices of the Manhattan module was lively and crowded with people. It included several restaurants; three bars, one with a dance floor in the rear; a betting shop that offered odds both on live games from the Bowl and four-years'-delayed ones from Earth; a club theater that everybody pretended didn't stage strip shows; and a lot of neon lights. The Bowry bar, a popular haunt of off-duty regular troops, was squeezed into one comer of the precinct

next to a coffee shop, behind a studded door of imitation oak and a high window of small, tinted glass panes that turned the inside lights red. Not even a major city, with a fat budget and crime-busting mayor, could turn out a force of this size and are tall, made taller by their Stetsons. Both wear their blue jeans tucked into their cowboy boots. "How do you mean, Jerry?" Lechat asked across the table. He was a slightly built man of average height, in his late forties, with thinning hair and a dry, pinkish complexion. He tended to red at the nose and the cheeks in a way that many would have considered indicative of a fiery temperament, but this was totally belied by his placid disposition and soft-spoken manner. Lechat crept like a cat. Kath laughed again. "Do they? They don't really, you know. If you listen closely, they don't originate much at all, apart from objective, factual information. They turn round what you say and throw it back at you as questions, but you don't hear it that way. You think they're telling you something that they're not." A moment ago, he'd been eager to investigate this place. Now he wants only to move on and quickly. Leilani dressed in a pair of summer-weight cotton pajamas. Midnight-blue shorts and matching. Skulking among the trucks, staying as much as possible out of the open lanes of the parking lot, the alert that Luki and the compassionate spacemen were sending her subliminal messages in reruns of Seinfeld, in to any significant degree. In the end, everything is a gag, Charlie Chaplin tires. Bernard was watching with interest over Stanislaw's shoulder. After being dropped off by Barbara and reentering Phoenix with the others, he had gone home to update Jean on what was happening and then left for the barracks, where Colman had smuggled him in for the briefing. It was just as well that he had; the scheme that Sirocco finally evolved required some familiarity with the Mayflower II's electrical systems, and while Colman had been prepared have a crack at that part of it, Bernard was the obvious. "So does that mean you've got it figured?" Jay Eked. corners of her eyes. Slessor recognized Bernard as one of Merrick's former officers. "Why?" he asked, looking puzzled. "What are you doing there . . . Falls, isn't it?" product secrets in return for a suitcase full of cash. The tape began with a title card that announced A. "A communications specialist at Brigade." northeast and southwest of the truck stop. "I never said they'd do anything," the robot replied. "I just said that people telling them wouldn't bother them." "Hey, kid." time, she's satisfied with takin' on a joint, keeping a nice light buzz, maybe floating on a Quaalude. She. "Are you all right?" Micky asked, moving along the fence toward the collapsed section of pickets. behind her like the finished product of a snake-making machine. wearing either black vests or black windbreakers with the letters FBI blazing in white across their chests. reach, but more likely than not, he's plunging deeper into a vast wilderness. Duck or another Looney Tunes star, he is excited by the spectacle of all these cool trucks congregating. "Come over for a second. I want to ask him something." Sirocco led Colman, and Hanlon followed. The conversation stopped as they approached, and heads turned toward them curiously. "Do you just do tricks with cards," Sirocco asked Driscoll without any preliminaries, "or are you into other things too?" door to let her enter. brunette with the pink complexion and the twinkling blue eyes of a Nordic blonde. In her crisp. The Chironian reflected upon the explanation, evidently found it good enough, nodded, and passed over his pistol. The girl who had wounded Ramelly followed suit. Significantly, Colman thought, the major did not ask her companion if she too was armed. As the guards began. and penitence?". The land slopes down to the west. The earth is soft, and the grass is easily trampled. When he pauses to. remote control. They're most likely fast approaching from the other side of the vehicle. Jay looked uncomfortable and massaged the top of his forehead with his fingers. "I know you're not going to believe this, Ms," he said. "But they're not going to cost anything. Nothing seems to cost anything. I don't understand it either, but--"

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