Space combat was what I'd been trained for.
I had wangled the job. Now all I had to do
was find out what I was supposed to combat.

FIGHTING

"GLAD TO have you aboard, Dykes." The
Officer of the Day
impaled my orders on his "pro-
cess" spike and gave me the
once-over.

The nameplate on his desk
read "Lieutenant Stephen Barlow,
ICC" — Interstellar Combat
Corps. His face was thin and his
eyes jumpy, as though habitually
searching for cover. He must have
been young, being only a lieu-
tenant, but his hair was almost
all gray.

He thumbed through the fac-
similograph of my service records.
"I see you've had duty in this
sector before."

"On Wellborne, the next sys-
tem rimward," I lied — to the
same extent that my records did.

"Which is also in the Wispie penetration area . . ." He left it hanging.

"That's right." It was all I could think of to say. And that was enough for a man who wouldn't recognize a Wispie if he met one face to face.

Let me fill you in on the details: How'd you like to go through training, get your bars as a combat lieutenant, then spend the next four years nursing a strategy calculator at Federation Nerve Center? Point two: If you had a bosom pal in Personnel Assignment, wouldn't you get him to fix your records and find you a spot where there was some fighting to be done?

I did and he did and so here I was checking in at the ICC Outpost on Darian Four.

Lieutenant Barlow closed the facsimilograph folder, rose, kicked the leg of his desk just for the hell of it, walked over to the window and stared out at the black, dripping sky.

"Dykes," he said, "you've just finished a tour of duty on Wellborne. Right?"

"Right."

"Fighting Wispies. Right?"

"Right."

FOR GOOD measure, he kicked a doorstop. "There are two hundred and sixty-three active fronts in this war. Right?"

I smiled. "If you don't count
the Battle of the Bureaus."

His face remained sober, lit up anew every few seconds by another bolt of lightning. From what I had gathered, there were more storms going on at any given second in the Darian sky than on any other planet.

"And," he went on, "even right now you could be checking in for a slice of duty Solarside. Right?"

I nodded. But my attention had suddenly become riveted on an ashtray that seemed to have gotten a bad case of jitters. Under its own power, it was clattering around on top of the desk.

"Then why in hell would a man like you decide, voluntarily, on another tour in the Wispie sector?" he demanded.

By now the tray was jumping up and down, spilling ashes all over everything. But Barlow ignored it.

"I guess I just wasn’t through fighting Wispies," I answered.

Which evidently wasn’t the right thing to say, for he looked at me as though I had messed up my orbit.

Across the room, an orderly watched the tray slam up and hit the ceiling. Then he went over and placed a small, white object on the desk. It looked like a piece of bone carved in the shape of a cross with legs. The ashtray quieted down.

"On the other hand, maybe we ought to be thankful you’re here." Barlow kicked out at the leg of a chair. "If you came through one hitch against the Wispies, you might be able to show us a thing or two about fighting ‘em."

He snatched up my orders and strode for the door. "I’ll have these rushed over to the Old Man. He’s waiting to welcome you aboard."

The orderly watched Barlow leave, then shrugged. "Don’t mind the lieutenant. He just volunteered for the PM Detail. Bet you had some damned good PMs on Wellborne."

"Pretty good." I had to keep up the deception. "Taut bunch — capable, efficient."

He grinned. "Real fighting spirit?"

"Best in the Corps."

He elbowed my ribs and roared, laughing. I had to smile too. If I didn’t, he might suspect I had no idea what a PM Detail was.

But just then the windows started shattering — pane after pane, left to right, top to bottom — until there wasn’t a square of glass left in the office.

The orderly choked down his laughter, swore, performed an odd ritual with gesturing hands and ducked down behind the desk.
STRIKING out across the drill field, I headed for the Skipper's office. There was a brisk wind and I stepped up the power of my rain shield to keep from getting drenched.

The word "miserable" would hardly do justice to Darian Four's weather. Take right now: Despite a downpour, the wind was screeching past the buildings. And whenever it managed to die down, it only moderated to a doleful moaning. The incessant lightning was something fierce and the thunder jarred your teeth out of their sockets.

Abruptly I found myself remembering the swastika-shaped bone the orderly had tossed beside the cantankerous ash tray. Then I realized why my thoughts had returned to that object: The buildings themselves were laid out in the form of a swastika, with a gas flare burning at each angle and end of the figure.

I wanted to ask the next man I saw what was the meaning of the symbolism — if that's what it was. But if Wellborne, the place I had allegedly just come from, was also in the Wispie sector, then maybe I was supposed to know about these things.

Anyway, the next person I saw was apparently in no position to answer questions. A noncom, he was hightailing it across the field, not even aware that he'd forgot-ten to turn his shield on and was getting drenched.

With the next burst of lightning, I saw his face. And if I hadn't known ICC Corpsmen were supposed to be "stout-hearted, intrepid" (or so the videoposters say), I would have sworn he was near panic. He finally lunged into one of the buildings and slammed the door behind him.

I shrugged uncertainly, wondering whether I had done the right thing finagling duty on Darian.

There was a tap on my shoulder and I turned. But nobody was there. While I stared in that direction, there was a prodding finger dug into my other arm. Still nobody.

Frowning, I pushed on across the field. About the only thing I was looking forward to now was checking in at BOQ after paying my respects to the Old Man. Bachelor Officers Quarters, its windows ablaze with warmth and cheer, was like a welcoming beacon among the other decrepit buildings. And I felt thankful that, no matter what, the ICC always gave its officers the best accommodations possible.

Lieutenant Barlow stepped out of the Skipper's quarters just as I mounted the steps. He glanced at me, shook his head pityingly and started back for the OD's.
shack. I noticed he had his fingers crossed on both hands and there was a circular mirror dangling from a ribbon around his neck.

I watched him make his way across the field — kicking a stone, taking four or five steps to catch up with it, kicking it again.

Odd habit that Barlow had. And I wondered what was behind it. But then I remembered the orderly had explained it already with, "Don't mind the lieutenant; he just volunteered for the PM Detail."

THE Old Man, Colonel "Warhead" Mason, studied me with eyes of sad steel that seemed to be hiding the memory of happier days. He was a compact, wiry little guy whose nickname was a perfect fit. One more thing: He was the only Corpsman I'd seen on Darian who didn't have gray hair. There was a reason, though: He had none at all.

Warhead indicated a chair. "Damned happy to have you with us, Dykes." He jerked his head around and stared at the wall behind him. At first, I thought he had seen a Wispie.

"Nice to be with you, sir." I sniffed. There was a peculiar smell, but I couldn't identify it.

"I don't know what the situation is on Wellborne," he continued, "but we're having a hell of a time handling things here."

He pressed a stud and the far wall blazed with the features of a contour map.

"In the mountains north of here," he went on, glancing nervously over his shoulder again, "the enemy is trying to establish a foothold."

An arrow of illumination speared across the map to indicate the spot. "We've thrown them back six times. But they're damned tough."

Still crinkling my nose at the sharp odor, I took inventory of the room: two swastika emblems hanging on opposite walls, a pail of red liquid beside the desk, three circles and a hexagon drawn on the floor with chalk, a pile of dry soil on the Old Man's blotter. Outside of that, the office was pretty normal, unless you include the fifty or sixty mirrors of assorted sizes and shapes that decorated the walls.

Warhead spied a movement in one of the mirrors and almost jumped out of his boots. He caught a grip on himself, however, when he realized it was only his own reflection.

I wanted to ask him what all the gimmicks were for. But it was just possible that conditions on Darian and Wellborne were identical, and if I let anybody see I was confused by what I was running into here, they might
realize I had never been on Wellborne.

My best bet was to go on pretending familiarity with anything that happened and keeping my eyes open until I learned enough to get by on.

"AS I WAS saying," the Skipper resumed, "we're getting strong hyperterminal emanations up there. The Wispies should have all coordinates zeroed in for breakthrough by tomorrow. I'm going to send you out with Lieutenant Barlow, Captain Randell and a plug-up detail. I expect you to give them a lot of pointers on Wispie fighting."

The Old Man took another anxious look over his shoulder and I went back to aiming my nose here and there, sniffing, trying to pin down the pungent scent.

"Ever think of going PM?" he asked.

I hesitated. "What makes you ask?"

"After all, it's a logical step after a man's already had duty in the Wispie sector."

"I suppose it is."

"With your experience, you'd make a hell of a PM man."

"That's what I've been told."

"I'd sign up myself if I didn't have to hold things together around here."

I had an idea I was getting the soft sell. But several things happened in the next instant.

The lights flickered and dimmed, letting the erratic glow of flaring lightning flood in through the windows. There was a whistling moan in the far corner, as though a blast of wet wind had sneaked inside. And, somewhere near the groan, a dark shadow began swirling like a vortex.

Shouting, the Skipper lunged from his chair. "Frankson! Lassiter!"

He seized the end of a rope beside his desk and gave it a tug. The other end uncoiled from around the starter pulley of an auxiliary generator and the engine putt-putted to life.

"Frankson! Lassiter!" he roared again. "Damned PM Detail! Never around when you need them!"

The generator's output built up and the lights brightened again. Power returned to the sound-negation system, deadening the roar of thunder outside. At the same time, the cloud that was hovering at the far end of the room began swallowing itself up in its own vortex. But not before a nearby chair did a shuddering dance across the floor, then hurled itself to destruction against the side of the desk.

Warhead stood there with
perspiration on his forehead. He fished a little white sack from under his blouse and jiggled it at the end of its string. And now I was almost choking with the scent I couldn't identify before.

"Concentrated garlic extract," he explained. "We find it works better than anything else. What are you using?"

"I — that is — nothing at the moment."

He started. "Nothing! Nothing at all?"

"I mean — well, I just haven't had a chance to get squared away yet and —"

"You get down to Supply on the double and check out the full works! I won't have any man in my command unnecessarily exposed — no matter how brave he thinks he is!"

The supply clerk was a cocky old bird. He was a fourstriper, meaning only four reenlistments, but the lines on his face looked like dozens of years of tough service.

I watched the mound of Federation Issue grow on the counter as he added to it, item by item: a carton of candles sprinkled with silver dust, three bags of garlic extract, a box of mud, a jar of dirty water with larvae flipping around in it, two swastika medallions, an assortment of mirrors, mounted and unmounted.

He produced a gunny sack and began shoving the stuff inside.

"While I'm here," I interrupted, "I'd like to check out a proton pistol, some anti-personnel grenades and a Mark XIV rifle." The idea was to beef up my modest arsenal of one beta-zip hand gun, which I had brought along from Solarside.

The noncom reared back. "Very funny, sir." He handed me the sack and turned.

"You have armament, don't you?"

He slapped a rapid-fire somni-dart caster in my hand. This was more than I could tolerate. On one of the hottest fronts in a war that stretched a tenth of the way across the local galactic arm, he had give me something that only produced pleasant dreams for a couple of hours!

The noncom's rigid expression changed slightly. "I can see you're new here, Lieutenant. We got the heavy stuff, all right, but it's for those who's shipping out — or in case anybody decides to go PM."

Obviously, the PM bunch was the only ones who could count on adequate self-protection. I shouldered the gunny and paused in the doorway to adjust my environment-control belt:

Rain shield, full capacity; anti-lightning field, maximum negativity; capsular light projection range, fifteen feet (night
had gotten a good grip on the base by now); noise dampener, plus eighty-decibel setting to keep the thunder from turning my ears into kettle drums.

Without exaggeration, I think it might be said that my environment regulators were fairly humming with activity as I plunged back outside.

I had covered only half the distance to the brilliantly glowing Bachelor Officers Quarters when the entire base was suddenly flooded with light. It came from two sources: Someone had turned up the gas flares, and an entire row of maintenance shacks was on fire.

I switched off my capsular light generator and watched base personnel running all over the place. Some were converging on a man who lay writhing near the center of the drill field.

“General Quarters! General Quarters!” the public address system blared. “Man all posts! Unassigned personnel take cover! Garlic and mirrors are the order of the day!”

I followed a major and a sergeant who were racing for the injured man. By the time I arrived there, the sergeant was kneeling beside him and a dozen other men were crowding around.

The sergeant swore, “Another casualty!”

“That makes the third one today,” the major said angrily. “There’ll be more before this raid’s over.”

The victim lay on his back, lifeless eyes boring skyward, his face glistening with raindrops. And I found new resolve to bag myself a bunch of Wispies. Sneak attacks were being pulled off on one or two of the more remote, primitive fronts. But, for the most part, fighting was on an honest, out-in-the-open basis. I liked it that way — not like this.

“How’d it happen?” I asked.

The sergeant peeled back the collar and exposed red marks left by powerful fingers that had choked the life out of the victim. Two other noncoms hoisted the casualty on a stretcher and bore him off.

“Poor old Fowler,” the sergeant mumbled. “I told him he should have gone PM.”

“Guess he would have,” the major said, “if he’d known he was going to get it like this.”

I was left alone on the field, hail-sized drops testing the strength of my shield and thunder making the night seem like a stomping ground for invisible giants.

Darkness pressed in on me, until I remembered I had turned off my light projector. I flicked it on again. The wind moaned close to my ear but I ignored it
— till I realized that, for a change, there was no wind blowing.

I moved off toward BOQ and something cold and sticky slapped me across the neck. When I turned, nothing was there. I went faster and ran into a tangle of dry cobwebs. *Dry* cobwebs — in this weather?

Lurching through the invisible barrier, I plunged on to BOQ and took the steps two at a time, hurling myself against the door. It opened easily and I was in a vast room that didn’t at all resemble a conventional Bachelor Officers Quarters layout. Steel bars sliced the space into cubicles that were furnished with satin-canopied beds, contour chairs and piled carpets.

Each cell contained a tall, lean, fur-covered thing with a sad, naked face full of wrinkles. They were bipeds and had prehensile hands.

Soft music played and scores of entertainment screens sent their flickering light out in all directions. A Medical Corps captain went from cell to cell passing out fruit from a silver bowl.

He reached where I was standing and said, “You’re the new man from Wellborne, aren’t you?”

I only continued staring at the hairy things.

“Got to keep ’em satisfied, you know,” he said, nodding toward his charges.

“Damned right,” I said, wondering what they were.

The medical officer satisfied my curiosity. “I think it may be safely said that I keep the happiest compound of Wispies in this entire sector. How do these facilities compare with those on Wellborne?”

“Why — no comparison at all.”

It was an ambiguous answer, but not to him. He took it with a proud grin.

The door opened and an elderly but rugged-looking civilian in a trenchcoat barged in and stood shaking the water off his sleeves. An arm band identified him as a member of the Press Corps.

“All right, Doc,” he said, “I’ve got a portable translator. *Now* how’s about me interviewing that latest batch of prisoners?”

“Not on your life,” the captain answered. “They’re in the best of spirit. I want them to stay that way.”

The correspondent swore, looked at me for sympathy, then smiled. “You the guy from Wellborne?”

I recognized him. “You’re Starhop Stanton.”

“That’s right, Dykes. Maybe I can squeeze some copy out of you. How’s about it?”

I wasn’t quite sure whether he
rated a handshake or a stiff boot to his posterior. You see, he was partly responsible for my being on Darian.

His clustercasts usually rang with emotion, sure to raise the fighting spirit in any man. I can even remember the particular 'cast — his first from Darian — that had set me on fire. All about "a real man's front" where the "most courageous warriors in the noble history of mankind" face the "severest challenge imaginable."

Technically, it wasn't a good videogcast. Too much interstellar interference and signal fading. But one bit came through clear enough to raise goosebumps and send me out waving the flag. It was something about "the Federation's bravest heroes" being "hunted relentlessly by the most treacherous foe we have ever known."

"I said I'd like to try to milk some copy out of you," he repeated. "The folks back home, you know, are eager to hear — "

"I'm going out on patrol tomorrow. Maybe right after I get back — "

"Fine! I'll corner you then."

**OUTSIDE**, someone grabbed my arm. "Thought I saw you duck in there. I'm Randell — Rusty Randell."

Projecting a blaze of capsular illumination, he was stockily built and had a pleasant face. The three small mirrors and two sacks of garlic extract that were strung around his neck almost hid his captain's bars.

"I'm going out with you and Barlow in the morning," he explained.

"You suppose we'll get us any Wispies?" I asked.

"They'll be there to get, all right. I was wondering — maybe you can tell me something about powdered snails."

We headed for a smaller, darkened building off to the left.

"Powdered what?"

"Snails — crushed, dried — instead of garlic. I hear you fellows did wonders with it over on Wellborne."

"Oh, not too bad." The "oh" signified disappointment, real disappointment. I had just been trying to decide whether to tell him I had never been on Wellborne. He looked friendly enough to take me under his wing until I got my feet on the ground.

But now he was saying, "Damn! Am I ever glad to draw an old veteran of Wispie warfare like you! Dykes, I feel safe now for the first time since I got here."

Supper in Officers' Mess was almost uneventful. Randell and I had the place to ourselves, practically, since I had been delayed checking in.
Near the end of the meal, a bowl half full of soup floated off a tray as it was being carried back to the galley. The mess boy ducked, but not in time. He came up with the bowl inverted on his head and its contents dripping down his face.

Later, four chairs in a corner started a thumping dance that didn't end until one of the tables shot up to the ceiling and slammed down on top of them.

Randell took it all with an occasional wince or dodge, whenever appropriate, but offered no comment.

I was beginning to figure out some of the answers for myself. Suppose, for instance, the Wispies had some way of exerting force over a distance. Get what I mean? They could play hell with our morale.

Old Warhead Mason must have been really sold on this idea of teaming me with Randell and Barlow. When we finally reached BOQ, I found he had given the three of us bunks together in one corner of the (I started to say "room," but I'd better use the more appropriate word) building.

No individual rooms with all the latest gimmicks and conveniences. Instead, the barnlike quarters had stud-bare walls with black building paper showing between the two-by-fours and siding. The floor sagged and buckets placed here and there took care of the roof leaks.

Randell cuffed me on the shoulder and said, "I'll bet you didn't have anything like this on Wellborne, eh, Dykes?" The suggestion was that I ought to be thankful for the improvement. He was dead serious, too.

EIGHT or ten other officers were already asleep when Randell and I crawled into our sacks. Just then Barlow came in.

He kicked one of the pails and showered us with rain water. Then he propped his foot on my bunk and began unzipping his jacket. "So here's the guy who's going to show us how to fight Wispies."

"Ignore him, Dykes," Randell told me. "He's naturally cynical."

Barlow kicked out at the leg of my bed. "I hear he doesn't put much stock in garlic and mirrors. Tell us why, Dykes."

"I — "

Randell came to my rescue. "Simple, Barlow. Nothing to it. If we keep our eyes and ears open instead of our mouths, we might learn something."

Dropping his boots on the floor, the lieutenant kicked them into the corner. "Well, he'll have to show me."

"Barlow just signed up for the PM Detail," Randell offered, by
way of explaining Barlow’s ill temper.

This took Barlow’s attention off me. “Just had my P-I session.”

“How’d it go?” the captain asked.

“Checked in with a point two rating and came out with a PM quotient of eighty-three point six.”

“Is that good?”

“Good? Watch.” Barlow pinched his nose and the covers on his bed folded back all by themselves. The pillow rose, fluffed itself and floated down again.

“Of course,” he added, “I won’t be able to use more than a fraction of the potential until I get squared away in full PM status.”

I always figured that if you pay attention and keep at it, you can dope out almost anything. A lot of this PM stuff, for instance, was starting to make sense.

When you’re up against an enemy that can exert force over a distance, wouldn’t you try to duplicate that talent among your own men?

If this PM deal gave you that sort of training, it sounded like pretty good duty. Maybe I’d even have a shot at it myself — after I brought down a few Wispies the orthodox way.

Randell dug an elbow into his pillow and made a prop for his chin. “You get rated on Wellborne, Dykes?”

I nodded. “Point three five.”

“That’s pretty damned good!” Barlow crawled into bed and sounded off with a skeptical grunt. “What difference does it make? He’ll never go PM.”

“That’s what you think,” the captain shot back. “I got it straight from Warhead that Dykes might join the detail.”

Evidently the Skipper had put words into my mouth.

“What about it, Dykes?” Barlow challenged. “My money says you’ll never stick your neck out for that detail.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” I said. “I just might at that.”

“Real brave guy, huh?”

But Randell gave me a respectful glance. “Well, PM’s not for me. I want to get home again when this is all over.”

Abruptly a crackling sound came from the decibel dampener on the far wall. As smoke curled up out of the box, the sonic shield gave way and the tireless, roaring thunder crashed in on us.

One of the beds began bouncing around, hopping first on two legs, then on the other two. It spilled its startled occupant and slammed half through the wall, wedging itself among the studs and splintered weatherboards.
Barlow lunged up and threw a switch. Somewhere outside a siren immediately began wailing into the storm.

Now BOQ was a bedlam, with everyone scurrying around trying to escape entanglement in the sheets and blankets that were flying through the air.

Confounded, I sat up and watched — until I realized my own bed was swaying ominously. I gripped the springs and held on as the floor shot away below. I did a poor job of dodging a rafter in the way of my head.

When I came to, things seemed to have quieted down somewhat. But the room was still a beehive. Two of the officers, each with a bowl of dirty water, were rushing around sprinkling the corners and walls. A third was embedding two crossed candles in their own melted wax on the table. Another lay on the floor rolling from side to side and groaning while a Medical Corpsman applied a splint to his leg.

In the center of the room, an officer and a group of enlisted men were swinging mirrors and using spray guns to fill the air with a fog that stank of garlic. A PM Detail, no doubt. I gathered that much because their efforts seemed to be directed toward a patch of greenish-white haze that lurked in the shadows.
up there among the rafters.

"You okay, Dykes?" Barlow bent over my caved-in bed and looked down at me.

I rubbed my head. "I doubt if my helmet will fit for a while."

The special detail officer turned toward Randell. "That's the best we can do for you tonight."

"Think we'll have any more trouble?"

"Not much chance of it. We've got the place pretty well roped off and stunk up."

They sprayed a bit longer, then left.

We all hit the sack, but I didn't do much sleeping. Instead, I spent the rest of the night assuring myself that the greenish-white shadow wasn't coming any closer.

EARLY the next morning we rode a negativized floater up through the storm, broke out of the basic overcast at fifteen thousand feet and headed for a towering slope whose peak was hidden in a still higher cloud layer. It was dry, though, and there was no snow or ice.

Randell steered the floater down to a barren slope, cluttered with boulders, crags and scrub growth and sliced by ravines and crevasses.

We landed next to a group of men gathered around a field-piece that looked formidable enough to hurl a planetbuster into orbit. I felt relieved. Here, finally, was evidence that we did go after Wispies with something more lethal than a somnildart caster.

Randell led one squad off the floater and Barlow took another. I followed, looking disdainfully down at my dart caster in its holster and feeling more satisfied with the bulge of the beta-zip hand gun under my jacket.

We reached the fieldpiece and everybody crowded around the captain.

"What's the situation?" Randell asked.

"We're getting peak readings from between those two boulders," a sergeant reported, pointing. "Breakthrough ought to come in ten or fifteen minutes."

Something tugged at my leg and I kicked out in reflex. But nothing was there. One of the enlisted men, too, was having a little trouble. He kept slapping his face as though trying to swat an invisible fly. A corporal finally handed him a mirror and he stood staring at his reflection and radiating relief.

"We have with us," Randell announced, "Lieutenant Kenneth Dykes, fresh from mixing it up with Wispies on Wellborne."

All eyes turned respectfully toward me.
“A real hero,” Barlow added scathingly out of the side of his mouth. His foot lashed idly out at a rock and it went clattering down the slope.

“Since we have a few minutes before deploying,” Randell went on, “the lieutenant will give us a few pointers on taking care of Wispies.”

I squinted at the big gun’s control board and saw there were no conventional knobs and levers — only a few toggles and a score of calibrated dials. Evidently it wasn’t a fieldpiece at all, but some kind of detecting instrument!

“Lieutenant Dykes,” Randell prompted.

I started. “I — ah, that is — yes?”

“I said you were going to give us some pointers.”

“Oh, sure. The first thing to remember is — no, wait — suppose you go ahead and take care of this breakthrough as usual. We’ll have an evaluation session afterward and I’ll tell you how we would have done it on Wellborne.”

“Sounds like a good idea,” Randell commented.

SOMETHING slimy stung me across the face and I staggered back, tripped and fell. I rolled down the slope, checked my momentum and tried to get up. But I was suddenly choking in a swirling cloud of moist dust that was going into orbit about my head.

Round and round it went, trailing a streamer of haze that fell against my neck, loop after loop. The coils tightened and I couldn’t breathe. On one knee, I tore at my collar, coughing.

Then somebody was sprinkling dirty brown water in my face and several other medics were dangling garlic bags all around my head.

“What the hell, Dykes!” Randell said. “Aren’t you using anything?”

“Of course not.” Barlow folded his arms and glowered down at me. “He left his security gear in his locker. You did, didn’t you, Dykes?”

I feigned a few unnecessary coughs to keep from having to answer.

“What would a fearless veteran of Wispie warfare need with security gear?” Barlow mocked.

Someone slipped a garlic bag around my neck. “You’d better use this, sir.”

The indicator that looked like a fieldpiece started buzzing.

“Breakthrough!” snapped the sergeant.

“Into squads — form!” Randell ordered. “Dykes, you stick with Barlow and his men. I’ll be
floating around from squad to squad."

Barlow held up a clenched fist and his men formed around him. "We'll take up positions behind that outcropping over there. Come on, Dykes, let's go; we'll see what you can do."

I had to hand it to him — he had guts, all right. He moved off leisurely, kicked a rock, followed it, kicked it again and went after it once more. When we reached the outcropping, the rest of his squad had already taken cover. Somnidity casters drawn, they faced the clearing between the two boulders and stiffened.

A tiny point of violet light, suspended in the air, was rapidly expanding into a sphere. When it reached twenty feet in diameter, the first Wispie came through. His dark brown fur contrasting the sparkling color of the sphere, he carried a tubular weapon and dived for cover in a fissure.

I tensed, but Barlow laid a hand on my arm. "We always let a few of them through before we cut loose. Wait for the captain's signal."

For once I had forgotten all my other difficulties. I wasn't even concerned that the invisible something was back again, tugging at my boot this time. All that mattered was that at last I was in a man's war, ready to start bringing down my share of Wispies.

Eight more furry things poured out of the sphere and dashed for cover. Barlow drew his somnidity caster, apparently expecting Randell's signal, and centered one of the running figures in his sights.

I fumbled under my jacket, found the beta-zip gun and lunged out from behind the outcropping. I dropped to one knee and took aim.

"Hey, Dykes!" cried Barlow. "What the hell are you doing?"

He hit me with a shoulder block and we both went tumbling down the slope.

Between rolls, he grunted, "You trying — to hurt — one of those — things?"

THEN the ground was boiling and smoking as fierce lances of white light exploded all around us. We came to rest against another outcropping and I saw that the Wispies streaming out of the sphere were cutting loose with all the firepower they had.

Barlow pulled me behind a slanting slab while the air sang with both the gentle woosh of darts and the crack of enemy weapons. Wispies were falling all over the place. But so were some of our own men.

By this time I had my dart
gun out too, since I'd lost my beta-zip somewhere on the slope. But I couldn't see if I was scoring any hits.

A few minutes later Randell came scurrying up to us. "What happened over here?"

"This veteran," Barlow said, jerking a thumb in my direction, "tried to crack down on a Wispie with a beta-zip."

"The hell he did!" Randell's eyes bulged. "You out of your mind, Dykes?"

"I only tried — "

SOMEBODY blew a whistle across the way.

"We got 'em contained!" the captain exclaimed, scampering off. "Spread out and start mopping up."

"We're lucky this time," Barlow shot back. "Not a single casualty — so far."

He must have been blind. From where I stood I could count four men dead and three wounded. There were Wispies lying all over the battlefield. But, after the dart juice wore off, they'd be all right.

"Stay here and keep out of trouble." Barlow trotted away. "We'll pick you up later."

Then, in the next instant, I was fighting off a net of coarse, sticky cobwebs that I couldn't even see. A swirling cloud of shadows a few feet off to my left began growing darker and inching closer.

I clutched the garlic bag and jiggled it desperately in front of my face. But something had me by the leg and was dragging me off down the slope. I didn't even look to see what it was because I knew it wouldn't be there.

Shouting, I anchored myself to a rock and tried to kick my leg free. But my left foot was caught up in another invisible grip and I hung there, half suspended above the ground, with my legs spread wide and my arms outstretched to hold on to the rock. The swirling shadow bored closer, whistling and groaning all the time.

With a frenzied kick, I wrenched my legs loose and scurried back up the slope. When I cut around a boulder, however, I practically ran over three Wispies who were firing on an advancing squad of Corpsmen.

I bowled two of them over, knocking them loose from their weapons, as the third whirled and fired a blast just past my head. I scrambled to one side and my hand struck one of their guns. I came up with it and brought it around in a parrying thrust. But the thing went off and its shaft of white light bored a hole through the chest of the still-armed Wispie. With the tube spitting out a steady stream of
fiery hell, I turned it on the other two furry things before they could reach me.

Then darts were singing through the air from all directions. One of them got me in the shoulder and I crumpled where I stood.

“Damn it!” I heard Barlow’s voice, fading fast. “He got some Wispies after all!”

“Maybe they aren’t dead yet,” Randall said hopefully, just before I passed out. “Call the medics! Get an ambulance sled!”

“From the edge of wakefulness, I was again aware of voices on either side of me.

“He’s all right, sir,” Lieutenant Barlow said crisply. “I had to put him out with a dart.”

“I don’t understand.” I recognized Colonel Mason’s voice. The Old Man added, “He should know more about combat techniques than any of us — he’s fresh off Wellborne.”

This time it was Captain Randell who spoke, in a grating whisper that was full of alarm. “He plugged three Wispies!”

“Dead?”

I flicked an eyelid open in time to see Randell and Barlow, on one side of my bed, nodding.

“Oh, no!” Old Warhead exploded. “That does it! Those are the casualties that’ll break our back!”

“We lost seven men out of the plug-up detail,” Randell said, “and brought back six wounded.”

But Colonel Mason only held his head in his hands. “Three Wispie casualties! Of all the rotten luck! Call out the PM volunteers! Let’s get things rolling before we’re knocked on our butts!”

He glanced down and saw I was awake and sputtered. “Dykes! You’re supposed to be an experienced man from Wellborne. What in hell ever possessed you?”

Either I had to carry out my bluff even more convincingly than before, or I had to confess that my orders had been rigged. But if I made a clean breast of everything, then I’d spend the rest of the war on a prison planet, and my friend in Personnel would be right there with me.

Barlow sneered. “Maybe he just got reckless. Or maybe he decided to go PM.”

It was only a straw, but I grabbed it. “That’s right, Skipper. The whole idea was to get on the PM Detail.”

Warhead backed off, eyed me skeptically, then broke out in a smile. “Oh-ho! Now I see why you did it. Dykes, my hat’s off to you.” He turned to Randell. “How about that? The boy’s got real fighting spirit, hasn’t he?”
The captain nodded in awe. "I've never seen anything like it."
"You realize of course, Dykes, that once you take the P-I treatment you can't back down," the Old Man reminded me soberly. "We couldn't afford the waste."

I answered with an indifferent shrug. "A soldier's duty transcends everything else, sir."

There was respect even in Barlow's stare. "Guess I had you figured wrong, Dykes. But, I don't know — " he shuddered " — killing three Wispies . . . ."

He glanced down at a wad of paper on the floor, kicked it toward the door, overtook it, kicked it into the hall, caught up with it again, and booted it down the corridor.

Warhead gripped my arm. "If there's anything, anything at all, I can do for you, just let me know — in time, I mean."

He leaned out into the hall and shouted, "Orderly! Come take Lieutenant Dykes down to Psyche Intensification. He's going PM."

I WAS somewhat disappointed in the P-I Lab. A medical major said something about "strengthening hell" out of my psyche and making it as "razor-sharp, artificially, as any Wispie's is naturally." Then he stabbed me in the arm.

When I came to, there were no after-effects. In a casual tone, I asked: "Does this make me a full-fledged PM?"

The major slapped me on the back and guffawed. "Boy! What a joker! Does that make him a full-fledged PM! What nonchalance!"

When he finished laughing, he said, "See if you can pick me up."

I grabbed him around the waist.

"No, no." He started laughing again. "The other way."

This time I understood. I pinched the bridge of my nose and, through slotted eyelids, watched him shoot toward the ceiling as though caught up in a cyclone.

"Enough!" he cried.

And I let him down gently.

"Dykes," he said, "you've really got it! You're going to do a slam-bang job when all the distractions are cut off. The Skipper wants to see you on the field in front of his office. They're going to activate the new PM Detail right away. We've got some Wispie-Bs to take care of, you know."

For once it wasn't raining outside. Oh, the sky was as dismal as ever, with great rolling black clouds dogging one another from horizon to horizon, but the lightning and thunder seemed to have retreated momentarily, leaving
a drill field with its puddles peacefully reflecting the light of the gas flares.

Colonel Mason had the base complement drawn up in block formation and standing at parade rest — commissioned officers on his right and noncoms and enlisted men on his left.

It appeared to be a solemn occasion, for the men were uncovered and had their heads bowed — all except a squad that stood by itself off to one side.

I started across the field to join them, but was overtaken by a slim figure in a trenchcoat. It was Starhop Stanton, the war correspondent.

"Just heard about your going PM," he said, falling in step. "Congratulations. You got a lot of guts."

I was beginning to feel better about volunteering for the special detail. It certainly seemed to carry prestige with it.

"I've got you to thank for my being over here in the first place," I explained. "If it hadn't been for your clustercast about the 'Federation's bravest heroes' being 'hunted relentlessly by the most treacherous foe,' I might not have risen to the challenge."

He paused in midstride, confused and frowning.

I went ahead, covering the remaining distance on the double, and drew up before the Old Man with a brisk salute.

He returned it and asked, "You ready, Dykes?"

"Yes, sir," I assured him. "We're going to activate the new PM Detail?"

"Right, son. We can't gamble away any more time."

He turned to face the men, almost stumbled over a rock, regained his balance and shouted, "Company, 'ten-shun!'"

They snapped to and I wondered what I was supposed to do.

"PM volunteers, front and center!" Mason ordered.

Barlow and a sublieutenant came forward, together with three candidates from the enlisted men's ranks. They lined up abreast of me and drew erect.

"Men," Mason said, "it would be impossible for me to adequately express the appreciation of this base and the entire Federation for what you are about to do."

SOMEWHERE in the distance a drum began rolling softly. Starhop Stanton stood in the background, looking at me. His arms were folded and he was shaking his head slowly.

And I noticed the sublieutenant next to me was fidgeting and sweating.

"Actually," Colonel Mason went on, "we hadn't planned on
activating this new PM Detail just yet. But there were those three Wispie casualties — "

He laughed and glanced at me — "which Lieutenant Dykes here arranged, I’m sure, as a personal challenge to himself — "

He became sober again — "and two more Wispies managed to commit suicide. So I don’t have to spell out the absolute necessity."

The sublieutenant screamed, "I won’t do it! I changed my mind!"

He broke and tried to run. But there were two guards waiting behind him. They grabbed his arms and held him.

Mason stared pityingly at the man. "Son, you can’t change your mind. It’s too late."

Starhop Stanton drew up behind me. "About that cluster-cast," he explained, "I didn’t say our heroes were being ‘hunted relentlessly.’ If you’d been on Wellborne, you’d have known that I said they were being ‘haunted relentlessly.’"

Before I could turn, the colonel signaled for silence. "We’d best get this over with in a hurry." He was still looking sympathetically at the sublieutenant. "Lieutenant Barlow, I believe you have the first honor."

The drum rolled more urgently and Barlow took five steps to the side and three forward. There were several sharp, metallic clicks — like gun bolts being drawn — and I jerked my head toward the squad that was off to itself. They were armed with Mark XIV rifles!

Just as I turned, confounded, back toward Barlow, the eight weapons went off and Barlow collapsed.

Colonel Mason produced a small ledger and an electro-scriber from his pocket. He touched the electrode to his tongue so it would conduct a stronger charge, then inscribed a single check mark on the paper.

"Lieutenant Stephen Barlow, ICC," he announced, "officially and permanently transferred to the Post-Mortem Detail."

Then he gazed into the distance and saluted. "Good counter-haunting, Barlow."

And the rock Mason had stumbled over earlier hurled itself forward ten paces, came to rest, waited, hurled itself forward another ten paces and came to rest again.

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