

END GAME

by J. D. Bell



I woke before sunrise. The wind gently shifted the pines. It toyed with the burn dressings on my arm. Nothing else was moving but the river, water speckled with dead leaves. Above, the sky was innocent of clouds or contrails. The only air cover was a late night bird, sleepily returning to its roost. By my watch it was six hundred hours, the two-thousand five hundred and sixth day of World War III, my twenty-sixth birthday.

I went over to the laager and took a tin of hot afrika coffee from the fire. Then I climbed into the command hover. Jan was on watch, listening to three bands and catching the readouts on five more. I tapped her shoulder.

"Any luck?" She shook her head and returned to the screens.

Denys was strapped to a bunk nearby, in case we had to lift and run. We had taped his hands to keep him from picking the scabs in his sleep. His head was naked as an egg. There was a raw patch of grafted skin where his ear had been. When we stripped the comhelm off him, a lot of flesh had come with it.

Outside, Major Willovs squatted at the fire, warming flesh chilled by night recon. Her face was still striped with nightpaint. Her hair was greased into a long braid, wrapped into a plastic sheath. I sat beside her and finished my coffee.

"Anything stirring?"

"Nothing, colonel. Spent half the night sneaking up on a village about ten clicks this side of Viella. Nothing but corpses. Forty in the streets. No IR traces."

Absentmindedly she rubbed a sore on her cheek. It made me wonder how long we would last, camped out like this with

our wounds and our rad dosages, with food low and winter closing in.

"A standing village. Any fighting there?"

She shrugged. "A few signs. A wreck in the square. A few houses gutted."

The fire popped. I scratched a rash under my belt. "We ought to check it out. If there isn't a lot of rad or toxin, we could set up there till spring."

She shrugged. "Colonel, if you ask me, one grave is as good as the next."

That didn't sound like Willovs. Too much night recon, I thought.

"Pack it in, major. Sleep till noon."

"Yes, sir!" She lay down where she sat and was out like someone had drugged her.

I sat a little longer by the fire, listening to the familiar, little noises of the waking laager. I was thinking about our six years in the hovercraft, living in a six cubic meter can for weeks; watching friends disappear in eye-burning flashes; huddling in our cans at night with the MI around us, waiting for Alliance commandos to try to sneak in with their nightpaint and their mini-nukes; taking drugs to suppress hunger, sex, fatigue, shock, pain, hysteria . . . sometimes drugs to suppress drugs.

No one cares to remember just when it happened. The Federal Expeditionary Forces ran into more Alliance ogres and mechs than anyone had seen in six years. Six commands were vaporized in ninety minutes; then we broke. Out of a reinforced brigade, four hovercraft made it to a valley on the French side of the Pyrenees — Mateland, Borslov, Timmen, and myself.

There was no more rear, no headquarters, no one to report to. I established laser contact with the orbitals, and almost wished I hadn't. The Alliance had hit the Western Hemisphere with a classic strike over the Arctic, and hit the orbitals with something more innovative — reactor waste dumped in orbit. Men and electronics were dying. As they died, they were systematically blistering the Alliance homelands, firing by mapgrid. Here, in this little valley, I could see the north sky glow. I could hear the thunder rumble, and every rumble was a million human lives.

There was nowhere to appeal. L-5 was neutral. Asia was still glowing from the Alliance strike of Year Three. Africa was desert, savanna, and jungle, and blister-glass where orbitals had targeted the cities. There was no one left to see the show, no one who gave a damn about the death of the Federal army in Europe.

MI kept trickling into the laager, three men from a division, fourteen from a reserve company. The last group said they had seen Alliance mechs fighting an ogre. I shook my head. I didn't think the Federation had an ogre to its name anymore.

I wanted to leave the matter alone. But chance would not have it so.

First we heard the low-frequency thunder of an ogre, an unforgettable sound. I told Willovs to get the MI suited up. Soon, we could see the blue-white flare of hiveloc rounds, and hear the rain of glass pellets condensing from the contrails.

It was an Alliance MkV, chasing about

30 Alliance hovercraft. Helluva sight. It was battered, missiles gone or fused to the shell, sensors pocked with hits. It was methodically chopping up GEVs, like a bear fighting a pack of lapdogs.

"Christ!" said Borslov.

I said, "I don't see the dish." I fumbled with the binocs. There was blackened metal behind the ogre's main battery, where the dish should have been.

Mateland raised his eyes from his zess-scope. "Most of the externals are gone, but it's destroying those hovers."

"Good!" said Borslov. "Their own demon should destroy them!" He laughed.

I said, "Mount the troop." And then, to explain, "It will be targeting us before long."

Mateland winced. "Right. MOUNT 'EM!" He kicked a pine bough off his turret.

I grabbed Willovs, pointed to a crest a hundred meters down the valley. "Get your apes . . ."

She nodded and they were gone, eating up meters with each bound. Impossible to tell the men from the women.

I ran to my hover and slammed the hatch behind me. Jan already had the turbines spinning.

"Seal her!" My ears popped with the sudden pressure.

"Let her go!" Again, the familiar, comforting vibration of a live hover. I looked at the screens. We were swinging in from behind, nine clicks from the ogre. At 200 KPH, we would be on top of it in one-sixty seconds. I wanted to fire at one-five seconds.

"Troop leader to all. Arm your hotshots. Set seekers for IR trace. I'll paint it with a laser. Fire on impulse. We'll all be dosed after the strike, so splash down in the river." I nudged the hover into the swamp the treads had created.

The secondaries started tracking us at five clicks. With a roar, the swamp ahead of us turned vertical. We drove into a cloud of water and muck. I glanced at the screens. Still four blips on our side. No hits, at that range.

Suddenly, I had visual again. The ogre was turning into us, bringing its primaries to bear.

Borslov broke channel, singing in his high tenor, "*Dies irae, dies illa . . .*"

Timmen kicked in his afterburner and dashed ahead. He started to jack and weave, laying down a roostertail of mud and debris to screen the rest of us. I could never have ordered anyone to do that.

"Unmask batteries." I heard the whine through my helm as our missiles rolled into the open. A glance assured me Borslov and Mateland were doing the same.

Timmen wasn't unmasking, for some reason.

"Timmen?"

Sudden blinding flash. A shock felt, not heard. A hiveloc round had hit the lead hover, ripping away a turbine, spinning the 15-ton craft like a tin can, venting the hydrogen tanks in a deadly white cloud.

"Timmen?"

Another hit left purple afterimages, and ignited the hydrogen. Flaming, the hover nosed in the muck, cartwheeled, flew to pieces.

"*Quantus tremor est futurus,*" sang Borslov, firing his guns at extreme range, the shells bouncing off the armor of the ogre. Nameless fragments of Timmen's hover danced among us. "*Quando iudex est venturus . . .*"

"Ten seconds, acknowledge!"

"On pipe!" Mateland.

"*Lacrimosa dies illa.*" Borslov.

"Yo!" Timmen, his voice in my head, not on the phones.

I painted the ogre, aiming for the blackened spot behind the primaries.

"*Qua resurgent ex favilla iudicandus homo reus, huic ergo parce Deus.*"

I hit the impulse. The missiles kicked off. When they hit, there'd be the equivalent of three thousand tons of TNT, a fireball hotter than the sun pricking the skin of the ogre. The transitory bottle effect of the implosion would direct most of the force downwards, in theory. But the spillover could kill us.

Borslov and I broke right, almost rolling the hovers like fighters. My board turned red as the airducts hit bottom. A hiveloc exploded in the muck in front of my machine. My board went dead. We hit a six meter splash of mud, rock, and water. I heard the engine rip itself apart, trying to digest rocks at 90,000 rpm, spraying steel fragments even-handedly through hardware, crew, and armor.

The hover spun completely around. I glimpsed the ogre, its secondaries elevated, futilely trying to destroy the incoming missiles. By reflex, I hit the trigger, pumping a round into the treads.

Then the missiles hit. The blast scattered ogre treads like dry leaves. A wave

of rock and water rose from the insulted earth, boiling, turning into superheated steam and white-hot fragments. Then the shock wave hit me.

I woke in the water, coughing. The blast had popped the crew compartment like a blister. Half-choking with water in my lungs, I scrambled through waist-deep mud, mixed with pieces of bulkhead, instrument boards, seat cushions. I almost brushed Jan aside. She was unconscious, lying half out of the muck, her helm black and shot with bubbles where a lick of fire had touched it. I dragged us both away from the burning hover.

A little, mindless eternity later, I came to realize that I was walking on dry land. Or dry enough. We were on a sand spit a few hundred meters from the hover. I sat us down and tried to estimate what was left of myself and the people who followed me.

My body felt reasonably intact. A few new burns, a few abrasions. Before the war, I would have been rushed to a hospital. Now, still fully equipped with limbs and organs, I rated myself active.

Willovs and her MI were still moving down the valley.

Borslov's hover had hit a clump of fir trees. It was burning like magnesium dropped into a wood stove. *Pie Iesu domine, dona eis requiem.* Mateland had splashed down too late. A little spot of bubbling water marked his hover.

A few kilometers downstream, at the base of a tower of steam and smoke, the ogre burned. Cracked open like a monstrous egg, it spewed its guts into the sky. I couldn't look at the fire within that cloud. My eyes ran. I brushed my face, and my hand came back bloody.

Gunfire. Someone was shooting. There was a hand sticking out of the water by Mateland's hover, clutching a sidearm. It emptied the clip into the air before I understood.

I hit the water. Getting a hold of him was hard. He struggled, and gasped horribly when I got his head out of the water.

It was Mateland. There was a bucket seat wrapped around his legs, folded as neatly as paper around a package. He



smelled of oil and river bottom and burnt flesh.

I hauled him out and unpeeled the bucket seat. He lay there and grinned at me. The pistol was still in his hand.

"Colonel, I went and pranged my hover." He pulled a steel fragment from the toe of his boot. "You think they'll accept this as evidence?"

"Most irregular. Charges will be drawn, Major. Consider yourself under arrest."

Somehow we were laughing. It was good to be alive.

Then, two things stopped at the same time — Jan's breathing and my laughter. Feeling a little guilty, I placed her body in a more comfortable position.

Then I looked around to see what was keeping Willows.

About a kilometer upstream, the last five Alliance hovercraft were grounded. The crews were dismounted. Some had simply collapsed. Some were clustered around the command hover in the center.

Willows was moving in on this pathetic scene. A by-the-book envelopment.

Mateland reloaded his pistol, as if it really mattered. "We going to hit them?"

"In a way. I'm going to ask for their surrender. Can you walk?"

He got up, cursing.

"Such language."

I managed to catch Willow's attention and waved her back. Together, with such dignity as we could present, Mateland and I limped into the Alliance camp.

The Alliance soldiers watched us come, most with blank indifference. They sat around their hovers, staring at the ogre burning downstream.

The command hover had been pranged. It looked like a tin can hit by a shotgun. Lying against the crumpled airskirts was a man in the uniform of a brigadier general. Kneeling beside him, a couple of medics were grimly trying to plug up a chest wound.

Around him were some people in black tunics; battlewebbing loaded with gear. Commandos. They held their weapons loosely, aiming at points between my navel and forehead. Last I heard of commandos, some two-star clerk had produced a liesheet saying they weren't on the Alliance TO, because in six years not one had been captured.

As I approached the general, one whirled and held a knife to my throat. Moving slowly, I glanced upslope, where Willows and her apes had planted themselves, covering us with automatic weapons and missile packs. The commando followed my glance and almost nicked me in surprise. Probably the first time anyone had got the drop on him.

Gently, I brushed aside the knife and

knelt beside the general.

"Colonel Rein, 53rd Federal Recon. I respectfully request your surrender."

He opened his eyes. They were white-pupiled, sightless. His whole face was blistered, up to a neat line on his brows where the helm had been.

A medic started to stick a needle in his arm. He brushed it off like a mosquito.

I swallowed. A word and the commandos would butcher me.

He was trying to say something. From between those blistered lips came a whisper of passable English.

"Did you . . . did you kill it?"

"Yes, sir. Split it open with MSC warheads. It's burning now."

"Good." He coughed. A couple of drops of blood came to his lips. Then the words flowed furiously. "Good . . . I wish . . . a mutiny, Colonel . . . damned mutiny . . . lost programmer . . . inhuman . . ."

There were no more words. He was



coughing badly. A punctured lung, I thought. The medic tried to needle him again, and this time succeeded.

I said, "Rest, General. We can talk later."

He lay back and looked at me. His complete calmness scared me. I had seen it before.

"There is no later . . . I surrender . . . forces . . . kill me another . . . Colonel . . . kill . . ." He coughed and the coughing became a spasm. One medic reached for an oxygen mask. The other prepared a needle. But it soon became apparent they were treating a corpse.

I stood up. "Who is senior here?"

The commando who had grabbed me earlier stood forward. "I am. Major Vogt. Special commando, assigned to the General Staff."

"You are my prisoner." I held out my hand for his weapon. Hesitantly, he gave it to me. Good.

"Muster your troops. Report numbers and condition."

"Yes, sir."

I waited for the salute. It came. And he didn't knife me when I turned by back. Another good sign.

An Alliance tech was bandaging Mateland's foot. Another was holding his gun for him. Both of these techs were female. Plainly, Mateland was himself again.

I took the gun from the tech and threw it into Mateland's gut, hard. He oofed.

"How are you feeling?"

"Topline, until you targeted me."

"Don't frat with the prisoners, not until you're sure who is whose." I felt a little sorry about the gun. Only a little. "Get your boot back on. Go tell Willows to bring in her apes. We're going to lift out of here."

Mateland saluted. "Damn, Colonel, I'm in the army again."

Vogt came to a brace in front of me.

"Reporting."

"Proceed."

"35 effectives, 12 wounded. 20 of the effectives are tech or service. 15 are commando or liftpanzer."

"What's the passenger rating on the hovers?"

"Except for the command hover, what we have left are hover-trucks, which can hold 15 passengers each."

"Hmm, some of the MI are going to have to ride on top. Get ready to lift."

Vogt barked something in his own language. Suddenly, everyone was busy. Four liftpanzer ratings clambered into their seats, while their buddies did the outside check. The medics did some last-minute work on the wounded, before they were bundled for travel.

In the middle of this bustle, I stood there, examining the weapon Vogt had given me. A 10mm machine pistol with nightscope and flash suppressor, and a clip full of explosive rounds. Nasty thing.

"Sir?" said Vogt.

"Mmmn?"

"May I inquire my status?"

Yes, it was time to settle that. I held the weapon to him, butt first.

"In contravention of the Geneva Accords, I am offering you a commission as captain in the Federal Armed Forces. Do you accept?"

He smiled. "What conditions?"

"None, but a commission will remove you from the protection of the POW accords. If I have to shoot you, it will be legal."

He lost his smile. I could see he was considering the possibilities. What resources did the Federation have left? Just how dead was the Alliance? Did it have a chance of regaining control of the ogres? Would it be safer to stay a POW?

In the end, he said, "Colonel, you are

absolutely insane.”

But he took the weapon.

We lifted.

Most of the Alliance people had been assigned to staff. The general had seen the ogres' electronic minds changing under the effects of radiation, and had gotten his people out. The Alliance General Staff was left without transportation when the mutiny broke.

I shook my head. What a story! And no one to tell it to. I made a mental note to keep our comm bands open. L-5 was sure to send someone to salvage the orbitals, sooner or later.

Among the things I inherited from the general was a box of maps, each stamped TOP SECRET. The terrain was shaded with bright colors – yellow, red and purple – to indicate areas of contamination by toxin, rad and virus. To my surprise, there were quite a few green areas. Blessed by chance, some places had not seen a war since the 17th Century. There

was one in particular I wanted to look at, not too far away . . .

As our little company cleared the lip of the valley, someone broke channel.

“Ogre!”

“All units, halt!”

I went to the screen. There was an ogre about 25 clicks behind us. It was moving into the radiation zone. Probably didn't see us. I raised hatch and had a look at the thing with the scope.

A MkIV. It had stopped about half a kilometer from the dead ogre. Drones hovered above. There were also some kind of vehicles down there. I turned up the gain on the scope.

There were hover transport and some civvie trucks. Little figures were getting out and going to work on the dead ogre with torches, hack saws and bolt cutters. Under the bright orange POW jumpers were the uniforms of Alliance liftpanzer, Federal droptroops, reservists, naval ratings, and others. I felt sick.

Mateland lifted hatch nearby. “What's up?”

“See for yourself.”

I got Vogt and let him have a look, too. Neither of them said anything.

Wilovs came bounding back from the lead hover. “What's going on down there?”

“Slave labor. They're using prisoners for salvage work. In a rad zone.”

Wilovs half raised her weapon. “What are we going to do?”

“Nothing.”

“WHAT?”

Everyone was looking at me.

“We're going to sit here and watch while they kill those people. Watch and learn.

“When we're stronger, we'll pick the time and the place and we'll kill one. Then another. And another, until we slag the last of those demons or they fry us.

“Get under cover. Shut down all systems. We're going to wait for a while.”

I whispered to myself, “But only for a while.”

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