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First Meetings

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First Meetings

IN THE ENDERVERSE

ORSON SCOTT CARD



A TOM DOHERTY ASSOCIATES BOOK
NEW YORK

*To Eugene England and Richard Cracroft.
two shepherds of LDS literature,
with respect and gratitude,
from one of the sheep*

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THE POLISH BOY

John Paul hated school. His Mother did her best, but how could she possibly teach anything to him when she had eight other children—six of them to teach, two of them to tend because they were mere babies?

What John Paul hated most was the way she kept teaching him things he already knew. She would assign him to make his letters, practicing them over and over while she taught interesting things to the older kids. So John Paul did his best to make sense of the jumble of information he caught from his conversations with them. Smatterings of geography—he learned the names of dozens of nations and their capitals but wasn't quite sure what a nation was. Bits of mathematics—she taught polynomials over and over to Anna because she didn't even seem to *try* to understand, but it enabled John Paul to learn the operation. But he learned it like a machine, having no notion what it actually meant.

Nor could he ask. When he tried, Mother would get impatient and tell him that he would learn the things in due time, but he should concentrate on his own lessons now.

His own lessons? He wasn't getting any lessons, just boring tasks that almost made him crazy with impatience. Didn't she realize that he could already read and write as well as any of his older siblings? She made him recite from a primer, when he was perfectly capable of reading any book in the house. He tried to tell her, "I can read *that* one, Mother." But she only answered, "John Paul, that's playing. I want you to learn *real* reading."

Maybe if he didn't turn the pages of the grown-up books so quickly, she would realize that he was actually reading. But when he was interested in a book, he couldn't bear to slow down just to impress Mother. What did his reading have to do with her? It was his own. The only part of school that he enjoyed.

"You're never going to stay up with your lessons," she said more than once, "if you keep spending your reading time with these big books. Look, they don't even have pictures, why do you insist on playing with them?"

"He's not playing," said Andrew, who was twelve. "He's reading."

"Yes, yes, I should be more patient and play along," said Mother, "but I don't have time to..." And then one of the babies cried and the conversation was over.

Outside on the street, other children walked to school wearing school uniforms, laughing and jostling each other. Andrew explained it to him. "They go to school in a big building. Hundreds of them in the same school."

John Paul was aghast. "Why don't their own mothers teach them? How can they learn anything with *hundreds*?"

"There's more than one teacher, silly. A teacher for every ten or fifteen of them. But they're all the same age, all learning the same thing in each class. So the teacher spends the whole day on the lessons instead of having to go from age to age."

John Paul thought a moment. "And every age has its own teacher?"

"And the teachers don't have to feed babies and change their diapers. They have time to *really* teach."

But what good would that have done for John Paul? They would have put him in a class with other five-year-olds and made him read stupid primers all day—and he wouldn't be able to listen to the teacher giving lessons to the ten- and twelve- and fourteen-year-olds, so he really would lose his mind.

"It's like heaven," said Andrew bitterly. "And if Father and Mother had had only two children, they could have gone there. But the minute Anna was born, we were cited for noncompliance."

John Paul was tired of hearing that word without understanding it. "What is noncompliance?"

"There's this great big war out in space," said Andrew. "Way above the sky."

"I know what space is," said John Paul impatiently.

"OK, well, big war and all, so all the countries of the world have to work together and pay to build hundreds and hundreds of starships, so they put somebody called the Hegemon in charge of the whole world. And the Hegemon says we can't afford the problems caused by overpopulation, so any marriage that has more than two children is noncompliant."

Andrew stopped as if he thought that made everything clear.

"But lots of families have more than two kids," said John Paul. Half their neighbors did.

"Because this is Poland," said Andrew, "and we're Catholic."

"What, does the priest give people extra babies?" John Paul couldn't see the connection.

"Catholics believe you should have as many children as God sends you. And no government has the right to tell you to reject God's gifts."

"What gifts?" said John Paul.

"You, dummy," said Andrew. "You're God's gift number seven in this house. And the babies are gift eight and gift nine."

"But what does it have to do with going to school?"

Andrew rolled his eyes. "You really *are* dumb," he said. "Schools are run by the government. The government has to enforce sanctions against noncompliance. And one of the sanctions is, only the first two children in a family have a right to go to school."

"But Peter and Catherine don't go to school," said John Paul.

"Because Father and Mother don't want them to learn all the anti-Catholic things the schools teach."

John Paul wanted to ask what "anti-Catholic" meant, but then he realized it must mean something like against-the-Catholics so it wasn't worth asking and having Andrew call him a dummy again.

Instead he thought and thought about it. How a war made it so all the nations gave power to one man, and that one man then told everybody how many children they could have, and all the extra children were kept out of school. That was actually a benefit, wasn't it? Not to go to school? How would John Paul have learned *anything*, if he hadn't been in the same room with Anna and Andrew and Peter and Catherine and Nicholas and Thomas, overhearing their lessons?

The most puzzling thing was the idea that the schools could teach anti-Catholic stuff. "Everybody Catholic, aren't they?" he asked Father once.

"In Poland, yes. Or they say they are. And it used to be true." Father's eyes were closed. His eyes were almost always closed, whenever he sat down. Even when he was eating, he always looked though he were about to fall over and sleep. That was because he worked two jobs, the legal one during the day and the illegal one at night. John Paul almost never saw him except in the morning, and then Father was too tired to talk and Mother would shush him.

She shushed him now, even though Father had already answered him. "Don't pester your father with questions, he has important things on his mind."

"I have nothing on my mind," said Father wearily. "I have no mind."

"Anyway," said Mother.

But John Paul had another question, and he had to ask it. "If everybody's Catholic, why do the schools teach anti-Catholic?"

Father looked at him like he was crazy. "How old are you?"

He must not have understood what John Paul was asking, since it had nothing to do with ages. "I'm five, Father, don't you remember? But why do the schools teach anti-Catholic?"

Father turned to Mother. "He's only five, why are you teaching him this?"

“You taught him,” said Mother. “Always ranting about the government.”

“It’s not our government, it’s a military occupation. Just one more attempt to extinguish Poland.”

“Yes, keep talking, that’s how you’ll get cited again and you’ll lose your job and then what will you do?”

It was obvious John Paul wasn’t going to get any answer and he gave up, saving the question for later, when he got more information and could connect it together.

That was how life went on, the year John Paul was five: Mother working constantly, cooking meals and tending the babies even while she tried to run a school in the parlor, Father going away to work so early in the morning that the sun wasn’t even up, and all of the children awake so they could see the father at least once a day.

Until the day Father stayed home from work.

Mother and Father were both very quiet and tense at breakfast, and when Anna asked them why Father wasn’t dressed for work, Mother only snapped, “He’s not going today,” in a tone that said “Ask no more questions.”

With two teachers, lessons should have gone better that day. But Father was an impatient teacher and he made Anna and Catherine so upset they fled to their rooms, and he ended up going out into the garden to weed.

So when the knock came on the door, Mother had to send Andrew running out back to get Father. Moments later, Father came in, still brushing dirt from his hands. The knock had come twice more while he was coming, each time more insistent.

Father opened the door and stood in the frame, his large strong body filling the space. “What do you want?” he demanded. He said it in Common rather than Polish, so they knew it was a foreigner at the door.

The answer was quiet, but John Paul heard it clearly. It was a woman’s voice, and she said, “I’m from the International Fleet’s testing program. I understand you have three boys between the ages of six and twelve.”

“Our children are none of your business.”

“Actually, Mr. Wiczorek, the mandatory testing initiative is the law, and I’m here to fulfill my responsibilities under that law. If you prefer, I can have the military police come and explain it to you.” She said it so mildly that John Paul almost missed the fact that it wasn’t an offer she was making, it was a threat.



Father stepped back, his face grim. “What would you do, put me in jail? You’ve passed laws that forbid my wife from working, we have to teach our children at home, and now you’d deprive my family of any food at all.”

“I don’t make government policy,” said the woman as she surveyed the room full of children. “All I care about is testing children.”

Andrew spoke up. “Peter and Catherine already passed the government tests,” he said. “Only a month ago. They’re up to grade.”

“This isn’t about being up to grade,” said the woman. “I’m not from the schools or the Polish government—”

“There is no Polish government,” said Father. “Only an occupying army to enforce the dictatorship of the Hegemony.”

“I’m from the fleet,” said the woman. “By law we’re forbidden even to express opinions on Hegemony policy while we’re in uniform. The sooner I begin the testing, the sooner you can go back to your regular routines. They all speak Common?”

“Of course,” said Mother, a little pridefully. “At least as well as they speak Polish.”

“I watch the test,” said Father.

“I’m sorry, sir,” said the woman, “but you do not watch. You provide me with a room where I can be alone with each child, and if you have only one room in your dwelling, you take everyone outside or to a neighbor’s house. I *will* conduct these tests.”

Father tried to face her down, but he had no weapons for this battle, and he looked away. “It doesn’t matter if you test or not. Even if they pass, I’m not letting you take them.”

“Let’s cross that bridge when we come to it,” said the woman. She looked sad. And John Paul suddenly understood why: Because she knew that Father would have no choice about anything, but she didn’t want to embarrass him by pointing it out. She just wanted to do her job and go.

John Paul didn’t know how he knew these things, but sometimes they just came to him. It wasn’t like history facts or geography or mathematics, where you had to learn things before you knew them. He could just look at people and listen to them and suddenly he’d know things about them. About what they wanted or why they were doing the things they were doing. When his brothers and sisters quarreled, for instance. He usually got a clear idea of just what was causing the quarrel, and most of the time he knew, without even trying to think of it, just the right thing to say to make the quarrel stop. Sometimes he didn’t say it, because he didn’t mind if they quarreled. But when one of them was getting really angry—angry enough to hit—then John Paul would say the thing he needed to say, and the fight would stop, just like that.

With Peter, it was often something like, “Just do what he says, Peter’s the boss of everybody,” and then Peter’s face would turn red and he’d leave the room and the argument would stop, just like that. Because Peter hated having people say he thought he was boss. But that didn’t work with Anna, with her it took something like, “Your face is getting all red,” and then John Paul would laugh, and she would go outside and screech and then come back inside and storm around the house, but the quarrel itself was over. Because Anna hated to think she ever, ever looked funny or silly.

And even now, he knew that if he just said, “Papa, I’m scared,” Father would push the woman out of the house and then he would be in so much trouble. But if John Paul said, “Papa, can I take the test too?” Father would laugh and he wouldn’t look so ashamed and unhappy and angry.

So he said it.

Father laughed. “That’s John Paul, always wants to do more than he’s able.”

The woman looked at John Paul. “How old is he?”

“Not six yet,” said Mother sharply.

“Oh,” said the woman. “Well, then, I assume this is Nicholas, this is Thomas, and this is Andrew?”

“Why aren’t you testing me?” demanded Peter.

“I’m afraid you’re already too old,” she answered. “By the time the Fleet was able to gain access to noncompliant nations...” Her voice trailed off.

Peter got up and mournfully left the room.

“Why not girls?” said Catherine.

“Because girls don’t want to be soldiers,” said Anna.

And suddenly John Paul realized that this wasn’t like the regular government tests. This was a test

that Peter *wanted* to take, and Catherine was jealous that it couldn't be given to girls.

If this test was about becoming a soldier, it was dumb that Peter would be considered too old. He was the only one who had his man-height. What, did they think Andrew or Nicholas could carry a gun and kill people? Maybe Thomas could, but he was also kind of fat besides being tall and he didn't look like any soldier John Paul had seen.

"Whom do you want first?" asked Mother. "And can you do it in a bedroom so I can keep the lessons going?"

"Regulations require that I do it in a room with street access, with the door open," said the woman.

"Oh, for the love of—we aren't going to hurt you," said Father.

The woman only looked at him briefly, and then looked at Mother, and both of John Paul's parents seemed to give in. John Paul realized: Somebody must have been hurt giving this test. Somebody must have been taken into a back room and somebody hurt them. Or killed them. This was a dangerous business. Some people must be even angrier about the testing than Father and Mother.

Why would Father and Mother hate and fear something that Peter and Catherine wished they could have?

It proved impossible to have a regular school day in the girls' bedroom, even though it had the fewest beds, and soon Mother resorted to having a free-reading time while she nursed one of the babies.

And when John Paul asked if he could go read in the other room, she gave consent.

Of course, she assumed he meant the other bedroom, because whenever somebody in the family said "the other room" they meant the other bedroom. But John Paul had no intention of going in there. Instead he headed for the kitchen.

Father and Mother had forbidden the children to enter the parlor while the testing was going on, but that didn't prevent John Paul from sitting on the floor just outside the parlor, reading a book while he listened to the test.

Every now and then he was aware that the woman giving the test was glancing at him, but she never said anything to him and so he just kept reading. It was a book about the life of St. John Paul II, the great Polish pope that he had been named for, and John Paul was fascinated because he was finally getting answers to some of his questions about why Catholics were different and the Hegemon didn't like them.

Even as he read, he also listened to all of the testing. But it wasn't like the government tests, with questions about facts and seeing if they could figure out math answers or name parts of speech. Instead she asked each boy questions that didn't really have answers. About what he liked and didn't like, about why people did the things they did. Only after about fifteen minutes of those questions did she start the written test with more regular problems.

In fact, the first time, John Paul didn't think those questions were part of the test. Only when she asked each boy the exact same questions and then followed up on the differences in their answers did he realize this was definitely one of the main things she was here to do. And from the way she got so involved and tense asking those questions, John Paul gathered that she thought these questions were actually more important than the written part of the test.

John Paul wanted to answer the questions. He wanted to take the test. He liked to take tests. He always answered silently when the older children were taking tests, to see if he could answer as many questions as they did.

So when she was finishing up with Andrew, John Paul was just about to ask if he could take the test when the woman spoke to Mother. "How old is this one?"

"We told you," said Mother. "He's only five."

“Look what he’s reading.”

~~“He just turns the pages. It’s a game. He’s imitating the way he sees the older children read.”~~

“He’s reading,” said the woman.

“Oh, you’re here for a few hours and you know more about my children than I do, even though you teach them for hours every day?”

The woman did not argue. “What is his name?”

Mother didn’t want to answer.

“John Paul,” said John Paul.

Mother glared at him. So did Andrew.

“I want to take the test,” he said.

“You’re too young,” said Andrew, in Polish.

“I turn six in three weeks,” said John Paul. He spoke in Common. He wanted the woman to understand him.

The woman nodded. “I’m allowed to test him early,” she said.

“Allowed, but not required,” said Father, coming into the room. “What’s he doing in here?”

“He said he was going into the other room to read,” said Mother. “I thought he meant the other bedroom.”

“I’m in the kitchen,” said John Paul.

“He didn’t disturb anything,” said the woman.

“Too bad,” said Father.

“I’d like to test him,” the woman said.

“No,” said Father.

“Somebody will just have to come back in three weeks and do it then,” she said. “And disrupt your day one more time. Why not have done with it today?”

“He’s already heard the answers,” said Mother. “If he was sitting here listening.”

“The test isn’t like that,” said the woman. “It’s all right that he heard.”

John Paul could see already that Father and Mother were both going to give in, so he didn’t bother saying anything to try to influence them. He didn’t want to use his ability to say the right words to get his way often, or somebody would catch on, and it would stop working.

It took a few more minutes of conversation, but then John Paul was sitting on the couch beside the woman.

“I really was reading,” said John Paul.

“I know,” said the woman.

“How?” asked John Paul.

“Because you were turning the pages in a regular rhythm,” she said. “You read very fast, don’t you?”

John Paul nodded. “When it’s interesting.”

“And St. John Paul II is an interesting man?”

“He did what he thought was right,” said John Paul.

“You’re named after him,” she said.

“He was very brave,” said John Paul. “And he never did what bad people wanted him to do, if I thought it was important.”

“What bad people?”

“The Communists,” said John Paul.

“How do you know they were bad people? Does the book say so?”

Not in words, John Paul realized. “They were making people do things. They were trying to punish people for being Catholic.”

“And that’s bad?”

“God is Catholic,” said John Paul.

The woman smiled. “Muslims think that God is a Muslim.”

John Paul digested this. “Some people think God doesn’t exist.”

“That’s true,” said the woman.

“Which?” he asked.

She chuckled. “That some people think he doesn’t exist. I don’t know, myself. I don’t have a opinion on the subject.”

“That means you don’t believe there is a God,” said John Paul.

“Oh, does it?”

“St. John Paul II said so. That saying you don’t know or care about God is the same as saying you believe he doesn’t exist, because if you had even a hope that he existed, you would care very much.”

She laughed. “Just turning the pages, were you?”

“I can answer all your questions,” he said.

“Before I ask them?”

“I wouldn’t hit him,” said John Paul, answering the question about what he would do if a friend tried to take away something of his. “Because then he wouldn’t be my friend. But I wouldn’t let him take the thing either.”

The follow-up to this answer had been, How would you stop him? So John Paul went right on without pausing. “The way I’d stop him is, I’d say, ‘You can have it. I give it to you, it’s yours now. Because I’d rather keep you as a friend than keep that thing.’”

“Where did you learn that?” asked the woman.

“That’s not one of the questions,” said John Paul.

She shook her head. “No, it’s not.”

“I think sometimes you have to hurt people,” said John Paul, answering the next question, which had been, Is there ever a time when you have a right to hurt somebody else?

He answered every question, including the follow-ups, without her having to ask any of them. He did it in the same order she had asked them of his brothers, and when he was done, he said, “Now the written part. I don’t know those questions cause I couldn’t see them and you didn’t say them.”

They were easier than he thought. They were about shapes and remembering things and picking out right sentences and doing numbers, things like that. She kept looking at her watch, so he hurried.

When it was all done, she just sat there looking at him.

“Did I do it right?” asked John Paul.

She nodded.

He studied her face, the way she sat, the way her hands didn’t move, the way she looked at him. The way she was breathing. He realized that she was very excited, trying hard to stay calm. That’s why she wasn’t speaking. She didn’t want him to know.

But he knew.

He was what she had come here looking for.

“Some people might say that this is why women can’t be used for testing,” said Col. Sillain.

“Then those people would be mentally deficient,” said Helena Rudolf.

“Too susceptible to a cute face,” said Sillain. “Too prone to go ‘Aw’ and give a kid the benefit of the doubt on everything.”

“Fortunately, you don’t harbor any such suspicions,” said Helena.

“No,” said Sillain. “That’s because I happen to know you have no heart.”

“There we are,” said Helena. “We finally understand each other.”

“And you say this Polish five-year-old is more than just precocious.”

“Heaven knows, that’s the main thing our tests identify—general precociousness.”

“There are better tests being developed. Very specific for military ability. And younger than you might think.”

“Too bad that it’s already almost too late.”

Col. Sillain shrugged. “There’s a theory that we don’t actually have to put them through a full course of training.”

“Yes, yes, I read all about how young Alexander was. It helped that he was the son of the king and that he fought unmotivated armies of mercenaries.”

“So you think the Buggers are motivated.”

“The Buggers are a commander’s dream,” said Helena. “They don’t question orders, they just do whatever.”

“Also a commander’s nightmare,” said Sillain. “They don’t think for themselves.”

“John Paul Wiczorek is the real thing,” said Helena. “And in thirty-five years, he’ll be forty. So the Alexander theory won’t have to be tested.”

“Now you’re talking as if you’re sure he’ll be the one.”

“I don’t know that,” said Helena. “But he’s something. The things he says.”

“I read your report.”

“When he said, ‘I’d rather keep you as a friend than keep that thing,’ I about lost it. I mean, he’s *five*.”

“And that didn’t set off your alarms? He sounds coached.”

“But he wasn’t. His parents didn’t want any of them tested, least of all him, being underage and all.”

“They *said* they didn’t want.”

“The father stayed home from work to try to stop me.”

“Or to make you *think* he wanted to stop you.”

“He can’t afford to lose a day’s pay. Noncompliant parents don’t get paid vacations.”

“I know,” said Sillain. “Wouldn’t it be ironic if this John Paul Whatever—”

“Wiczorek.”

“Yes, that’s the one. Wouldn’t it be ironic if, after all our stringent population control efforts—for the sake of the war, mind you—it turned out that the commander of the fleet turned out to be the seventh child of noncompliant parents?”

“Yes, very ironic.”

“I think one theory was that birth order predicts that only firstborns would have the personality for what we need.”

“All else being equal. Which it isn’t.”

“We’re so ahead of ourselves here, Captain Rudolf,” said Sillain. “The parents are not likely to say yes, are they?”

“No, not likely,” said Helena.

“So it’s all moot, isn’t it?”

“Not if...”

“Oh, that would be so wise, to make an international incident out of this.” He leaned back in his chair.

“I don’t think it would be an international incident.”

“The treaty with Poland has very strict parental-control provisions. Have to respect the family and all.”

“The Poles are very anxious to rejoin the rest of the world. They aren’t going to invoke that clause if we impress on them how important this boy is.”

“Is he?” asked Sillain. “That’s the question. If he’s worth the gamble of making a huge stink about it.”

“If it starts to stink, we can back off,” said Helena.

“Oh, I can see *you’ve* done a lot of public relations work.”

“Come see him yourself,” said Helena. “He’ll be six in a few days. Come see him. Then tell me whether he’s worth the risk of an international incident.”

This was not at all how John Paul wanted to spend his birthday. Mother had made candy all day with sugar she begged from neighbors, and John Paul wanted to suck on his, not chew it, so it would last and last. Instead Father told him either to spit it out into the garbage or swallow it, and so now it was swallowed and gone, all for these people from the International Fleet.

“We got some questionable results from the preliminary screening,” said the man. “Perhaps because the child had listened to three previous tests. We need to get accurate information, that’s all.”

He was lying—that was obvious, from the way he moved, the way he looked Father right in the eye unwaveringly. A liar who knew he was lying and was trying hard not to look like he was lying. The way Thomas always did. It fooled Father but never Mother, and never John Paul.

So if the man was lying, why? Why was he really coming to test John Paul again?

He remembered what he had thought right after the woman tested him three weeks ago, that she had found what she was looking for. But then nothing had happened and he figured he must have been wrong. Now she was back and the man who was with her was telling lies.

The family was banished to other rooms. It was evening, time for Father to go to his second job, but only he couldn’t go while these people were here or they’d know, or guess, or wonder what he was doing, hour after hour during the evening. So the longer this took, the less money Father would earn tonight, and therefore the less food they’d be able to eat, the less clothing they’d have to wear.

The man even sent the woman out of the room. That annoyed John Paul. He liked the woman.

He didn’t like at all the way the man looked at their house. At the other children. At Mother and Father. As if he thought himself better than they were.

The man asked a question.

John Paul answered in Polish instead of Common.

The man looked at him blankly. He called out, “I thought he spoke Common!”

The woman stuck her head back into the room. Apparently she had only gone to the kitchen. “He does, fluently,” said the woman.

The man looked back at John Paul, and the disdainful look was gone. “So what game are you playing?”

In Polish, John Paul said, “The only reason we’re poor is because the Hegemon punishes Catholics for obeying God.”

“In Common, please,” said the man.

“The language is called English,” said John Paul in Polish, “and why should I talk to you at all?”

The man sighed. “Sorry to waste your time.” He got up.

The woman came back into the room. They thought they were whispering soft enough, but like most adults, they thought that children didn’t understand adult conversations so they weren’t all that careful about being quiet.

“He’s defying you,” said the woman.

“Yes, I guessed that,” said the man testily.

“So if you go, he wins.”

Good one, thought John Paul. This woman wasn't stupid. She knew what to say to make this man do what she wanted.

"Or somebody does."

She walked over to John Paul. "Colonel Sillain thinks I was lying when I said you did so well on the tests."

In Common, John Paul said, "How well *did* I do?"

The woman only got a little smile on her face and glanced back at Col. Sillain.

Sillain sat back down. "All right then. Are you ready?"



In Polish, John Paul said, "I'm ready if you speak Polish."

Impatiently, Sillain turned back to the woman. "What does he want?"

In Common, John Paul said to the woman, "Tell him I don't want to be tested by a man who thinks my family is scum."

"In the first place," said the man, "I don't think that."

"Liar," said John Paul in Polish.

He turned to the woman. She shrugged helplessly. "I don't speak Polish either."

John Paul said to her, in Common, "You rule over us but you don't bother to learn our language. Instead we have to learn yours."

She laughed. "It's not *my* language. *Or* his. Common is just a universalized dialect of English, and I'm German." She pointed at Sillain. "He's Finnish. Nobody speaks *his* language anymore. Not even the Finns."

"Listen," said Sillain, turning to John Paul. "I'm not going to play around anymore. You speak Common, and I don't speak Polish, so answer my questions in Common."

"What are you going to do?" asked John Paul in Polish, "put me in jail?"

It was fun watching Sillain turn redder and redder, but then Father came into the room, looking very weary. "John Paul," he said. "Do what the man asks."

"They want to take me away from you," said John Paul in Common.

"Nothing of the kind," said the man.

"He's lying," said John Paul.

The man turned slightly red.

"And he hates us. He thinks we're poor and that it's disgusting to have so many children."

"That is not true," said Sillain.

Father ignored him. "We are poor, John Paul."

"Only because of the Hegemony," said John Paul.

"Don't preach my own sermons back at me," said Father. But he switched to Polish to say it. "If you don't do what they want, then they can punish your mother and me."

Father sometimes knew exactly the right words to say, too.

John Paul turned back to Sillain. "I don't want to be alone with you. I want *her* to be here for the test."

“Part of the test,” said Sillain, “is seeing how well you obey orders.”

“Then I fail,” said John Paul.

Both the woman and Father laughed.

Sillain did not. “It’s obvious that this child has been trained to be noncooperative, Captain Rudolf. Let’s go.”

“He has not been trained,” said Father.

John Paul could see that he looked worried.

“Nobody trained me,” said John Paul.

“The mother didn’t even know he could read at college level,” said the woman softly.

College level? John Paul thought that was ridiculous. Once you knew the letters, reading was reading. How could there be levels?

“She wanted *you* to think she didn’t know,” said Sillain.

“My mother doesn’t lie,” said John Paul.

“No, no, of course not,” said Sillain. “I didn’t mean to imply—”

Now he was revealing the truth: That he was frightened. Afraid that John Paul might not take his test. His fear meant that John Paul had power in this situation. Even more than he had thought.

“I’ll answer your questions,” said John Paul, “if the lady stays here.”

This time, he knew, Sillain would say yes.

.....

They gathered with a dozen experts and military leaders in a conference room in Berlin. Everyone had already seen Col. Sillain’s and Helena’s reports. They had seen John Paul’s test scores. They had watched the vid of Sillain’s conversation with John Paul Wiczorek before, during, and after the test.

Helena enjoyed how much Sillain hated having to watch this six-year-old Polish boy manipulate him. It hadn’t been so obvious at the time, of course, but after you watched the vid over and over, it became painfully obvious. And, while everyone at the table was polite, there were a few raised eyebrows, a nod, a couple of half-smiles when John Paul said, “Then I fail.”

At the end of the vid, a Russian general from the office of the Strategos said, “Was he bluffing?”

“He’s six,” said the young Indian representing the Polemarch.

“That’s what’s so terrifying,” said the teacher who was there for the Battle School. “About all the children at Battle School, actually. Most people live their whole lives without ever meeting a single child like this one.”

“So, Captain Graff,” said the Indian, “are you saying he’s nothing special?”

“They’re all special,” said Graff. “But this one—his tests are good, top range. Not the very best we’ve seen, but the tests aren’t as predictive as we’d like. It’s his negotiating skill that impresses me.”

Helena wanted to say, “Or Colonel Sillain’s lack of it.” But she knew that wasn’t fair. Sillain had tried a bluff, and the boy had called it. Who knew a child would have the wit to do that?

“Well,” said the Indian, “it certainly shows the wisdom of opening Battle School to noncompliant nations.”

“There’s only one problem, Captain Chamrajnagar,” said Graff. “In all these documents, on this vid, in our conversation, no one has even suggested that the boy is willing to go.”

There was silence around the table.

“Well, no, of course not,” said Col. Sillain. “This meeting came first. There is some hostility from the parents—the father stayed home from work when Helena—Captain Rudolf went to test three of the older brothers. I think there may be trouble. We needed to assess, before the conversation, just how much leverage I’m to be given.”

“You mean,” said Graff, “leverage to coerce the family?”

“Or entice,” said Sillain.

“Poles are stubborn people,” said the Russian general. “It’s in the Slavic character.”

“We’re so close,” said Graff, “to tests that are well over ninety percent accurate in predicting military ability.”

“Do you have a test to measure leadership?” asked Chamrajnagar.

“That’s one of the components,” said Graff.

“Because this boy has it, off the charts,” said Chamrajnagar. “I’ve never even seen the charts, and I don’t know that.”

“The real training ground for leadership is in the game,” said Graff. “But yes, I think this boy would do well at it.”

“If he goes,” said the Russian.

“I think,” said Chamrajnagar, “that Colonel Sillain should not carry out the next step.”

This left Sillain sputtering. Helena wanted to smile, but instead she said, “Colonel Sillain is the team leader, and according to protocol...”

“He has already been compromised,” said Chamrajnagar. “I make no criticism of Colonel Sillain, please. I don’t know which of us would have fared any better. But the boy made him back down, and I don’t think there is a helpful relationship.”

Sillain was careerist enough to know how to hand them his head, when asked for it. “Whatever is the best to accomplish the mission, of course.” Helena knew how he had to be seething at Chamrajnagar, but he showed no sign of it.

“The question Colonel Sillain asked still remains,” said Graff. “What authority will the negotiator be given?”

“All the authority he needs,” said the Russian general.

“But that’s precisely what we don’t know,” said Graff.

Chamrajnagar answered. “I think my colleague from the Strategos’s office is saying that whatever inducement the negotiator feels is appropriate will be supported by the Strategos. Certainly the Polemarch’s office has the same view.”

“I don’t think the boy is that important,” said Graff. “Battle School exists because of the need to begin military training during childhood in order to build appropriate habits of thought and movement. But there has been enough data to suggest—”

“We know this story,” said the Russian general.

“Let’s not begin this argument again here,” said Chamrajnagar.

“There is a definite fall-off in outcomes after the trainees reach adulthood,” said Graff. “That’s a fact, however much we may not like the implications.”

“They know more, but do worse?” said Chamrajnagar. “It sounds wrong. It is hard to believe, and even if we believe it, it is hard to interpret.”

“It means that we don’t have to have this boy, because we won’t have to wait for a child to grow up to adulthood.”

The Russian general was scornful. “Put our war in the hands of children? I hope we are never that desperate.”

There was a long silence, and then Chamrajnagar spoke. Apparently he had been receiving instructions through his earpiece. “The office of the Polemarch believes that because this data Captain Graff speaks of is incomplete, prudence suggests we act as if we do, in fact, have to have this boy. Time is growing short, and it is impossible to know whether he might be our last best chance.”

“The Strategos concurs,” said the Russian general.

“Yes,” said Graff. “As I said, the results are not final.”

“So,” said Col. Sillain. “Full authority. For whoever it is who negotiates.”

“I think,” said Chamrajnagar, “that the director of Battle School has already demonstrated whom I

has the most confidence in right now, planetside.”

All eyes went to Capt. Graff. “I would be glad to have Captain Rudolf accompany me. I believe you have it on record that this Polish boy prefers to have her present.”

This time when the Fleet people came, Father and Mother were prepared. Their friend Magda was a lawyer, and even though she was forbidden, as a noncompliant, to practice law, she sat between them on the sofa.



John Paul was not in the room, however. “Don’t let them bully the child,” Magda had said, and that was it. Mother and Father immediately banned him from the room, so he didn’t even get to see the boy come in.

He could listen, however, from the kitchen. He realized at once that the man he didn’t like, the colonel, was not there, though the woman was. A new man was with her now. His voice didn’t have the sound of lying in it. Captain Graff, he was called.

After the polite things were said—the sitting down, the offering of drinks—Graff got down to business quickly. “I see that you do not wish me to see the child.”

Magda answered, quite imperiously, “His parents felt it best for him not to be present.”

Silence for a long moment.

“Magdalena Teczlo,” said Graff softly, “these good people may invite a friend over to sit with them today. But I’d hate to think you might be acting as their attorney.”

If Magda answered, John Paul couldn’t hear.

“I would like to see the boy now,” said Graff.

Father started explaining that that would never happen, so if that’s all he wanted, he might as well give up and go home.

Another long silence. There was no sound of Captain Graff getting up from the chair, an operation that could not be performed silently. So he must be sitting there, saying nothing—not leaving, but not trying to persuade them.

That was a shame, because John Paul wanted to see what he would say to get them to do what he

wanted. The way he silenced Magda was intriguing. John Paul wanted to see what was happening. He stepped from behind the dividing wall and watched.

Graff was doing nothing. There was no threat on his face, no attempt to outface them. He gazed pleasantly at Mother, and then at Father, and then at Mother again, skipping right over Magda's face. It was as if she didn't exist—even her own body seemed to say, "Don't notice me, I'm not real here."

Graff turned his head and looked right at John Paul.

John Paul thought he might say something to get him in trouble, but Graff gazed at him only a moment and then turned back to Mother and Father. "You understand, of course," he began.

"No, I don't understand," said Father. "You aren't going to see the boy unless we decide you'll see him, and for that you have to meet our terms."

Graff looked blandly back at him. "He isn't your breadwinner. What possible hardship can you claim?"

"We don't want a handout," said Father furiously. "We aren't looking for compensation."

"All I want," said Graff, "is to converse with the boy."

"Not alone," said Father.

"With us here," said Mother.

"That's fine with me," said Graff. "But I think Magdalena is sitting in the boy's place."

Magda, after a moment's hesitation, got up and left the house. The door banged shut just a little louder than usual.

Graff beckoned to John Paul.

He came in and sat on the couch between his parents.

Graff began to explain to him about Battle School. That he would go up into space in order to study how to be a soldier so he could help fight against the Buggers when they came back with the next invasion. "You might lead fleets into battle someday," said Graff. "Or lead marines as they blast the way through an enemy ship."

"I can't go," said John Paul.

"Why not?" asked Graff.

"I'd miss my lessons," he said. "My mother teaches us, here in this room."

Graff didn't answer, just studied John Paul's face. It made John Paul uncomfortable.

The Fleet lady spoke up. "But you'll have teachers there. In Battle School."

John Paul did not look at her. It was Graff he had to watch. Graff was the one with all the power today.

Finally Graff spoke. "You think it would be unfair for you to be in Battle School while your family still struggles here."

John Paul had not thought of that. But now that Graff had suggested it...

"Nine of us," said John Paul. "It's very hard for my mother to teach us all at once."

"What if the Fleet can persuade the government of Poland—"

"Poland has no government," said John Paul, and then he smiled up at his father, who beamed down at him.

"The current rulers of Poland," said Graff cheerfully enough. "What if we can persuade them to lift the sanctions on your brothers and sisters."

John Paul thought about this for a moment. He tried to imagine what it would be like, if they could all go to school. Easier for Mother. That would be good.

He looked up at his father.

Father blinked. John Paul knew that face. Father was trying to keep from showing that he was disappointed. So there was something wrong.

Of course. There were sanctions on Father, too. Andrew had explained to him once that Father wasn't allowed to work at his real job, which should have been teaching at a university. Instead Father had to do a clerical job all day, sitting at a computer, and then manual labor by night, odd jobs off the books in the Catholic underground. If they would lift the sanctions on the children, why not on the parents?

"Why can't they change all the stupid rules?" said John Paul.

Graff looked at Capt. Rudolf, then at John Paul's parents. "Even if we could," he said to them, "should we?"

Mother rubbed John Paul's back a little. "John Paul means well, but of course we can't. Not even the sanctions against the children's schooling."

John Paul was instantly furious. What did she mean, "of course?" If they had only bothered to explain things to him then he wouldn't be making mistakes, but no, even after these people from the Fleet came to prove that John Paul wasn't just a stupid kid, they treated him like a stupid kid.

But he did not show his anger. That never got good results from Father, and it made Mother anxious so she didn't think well.

The only answer he made was to say, with wide-eyed innocence, "Why not?"

"You'll understand when you're older," said Mother.

He wanted to say, "And when will *you* understand anything about *me*? Even after you realized you could read, you still think I don't know anything."

But then, he apparently didn't know everything he needed to, or he'd see what was obvious to all these adults.

If his parents wouldn't tell him, maybe this captain would.

John Paul looked expectantly at Graff.

And Graff gave the explanation he needed.

"All of your parents' friends are noncompliant Catholics. If your brothers and sisters suddenly got to go to school, if your father suddenly gets to go back to the university, what will they think?"

So this was about the neighborhood. John Paul could hardly believe that his parents would sacrifice their children, even themselves, just so the neighbors wouldn't resent them.

"We could move," said John Paul.

"Where?" asked Father. "There are noncompliance like us, and there are people who gave up the faith. There's only the two groups, and I'd rather go on as we are than to cross that line. It's not about the neighbors, John Paul. It's about our own integrity. It's about faith."

It wasn't going to work, John Paul could see that now. He had thought that his Battle School idea could be turned to help his family. He would have gone into space for that, gone away and not come home for years, if it would have helped his family.

"You can still come," said Graff. "Even if your family doesn't want to be free of these sanctions."

Father erupted then, not shouting, but his voice hot and intense. "We want to be free of the sanctions, you fool. We just don't want to be the only ones free of them! We want the Hegemony to stop telling Catholics they have to commit mortal sin, to repudiate the Church. We want the Hegemony to stop forcing Poles to act like...like *Germans*."

But John Paul knew this rant, and knew that his father usually ended that sentence by saying "forcing Poles to act like Jews and atheists and Germans." The omission told him that Father did not want the results that would come from talking in front of these Fleet people the way he talked in front of other Poles. John Paul had read enough history to know why. And it occurred to him that even though Father suffered greatly under the sanctions, maybe in his anger and resentment he had become a man who no longer belonged at the university. Father knew another set of rules and chose not to live by them. But Father also did not want educated foreigners to know that he did not live by those rules.

He did not want them to know that he blamed things on Jews and atheists. But to blame them on Germans, that was all right.

Suddenly John Paul wanted nothing more than to leave home. To go to a school where he wouldn't have to listen in on someone else's lessons.

The only problem was, John Paul had no interest in war. When he read history, he skimmed those parts. And yet it was called Battle School. He would have to study war a lot, he was sure of it. And in the end, if he didn't fail, he would have to serve in the Fleet. Take orders from men and women like these Fleet officers. To do other people's bidding all his life.

He was only six, but he already knew that he hated it when he had to do what other people wanted even when he knew that they were wrong. He didn't want to be a soldier. He didn't want to kill. He didn't want to die. He didn't want to obey stupid people.

At the same time, he didn't want to stay in this situation, either. Crowded into their apartment most of the day. Mother always so tired. None of them learning all they could. Never quite enough to eat, nothing but shabby threadbare clothing, never warm enough in winter, always sweltering in summer.

They all think we're being heroes, like St. John Paul II under the Nazis and the Communists. Standing up for the faith against the lies and evils of the world, the way St. John Paul II did as pope.

But what if we're just being stubborn and stupid? What if everybody else is right, and we shouldn't have had more than two children in our family?

Then I wouldn't have been born.

Am I really here because God wants me to be? Maybe God wanted all kinds of children to be born and all the rest of the world was blocking them from coming by their sins, because of the Hegemon's laws. Maybe it was like the story of Abraham and Sodom, where God would be willing to save the city from destructions if twenty righteous people could be found, or even ten. Maybe we're the righteous people who save the world just by existing, just by serving God and refusing to bow to the Hegemon.

But existing is not all I want, thought John Paul. I want to do something. I want to learn everything and know everything and do every good thing. To have choices. And I want my brothers and sisters to have those choices too. I will never have power like this again, to change the world around me. The moment these people from the Fleet decide they don't want me anymore, I'll never have another chance. I have to do something now.

"I don't want to stay here," said John Paul.

He could feel Father's body stiffen on the couch next to him, and Mother gasped just the tiniest gasps inside her throat.

"But I don't want to go into space," said John Paul.

Graff did not move. But he blinked.

"I've never been to a school. I don't know if I'll like it," said John Paul. "Everybody I know is Polish and Catholic. I don't know what it's like to be with people who aren't."

"If you don't go into the Battle School program," said Graff, "there's nothing we can do about that, rest."

"Can't we go somewhere and try it out?" asked John Paul. "Can't we all go somewhere that we can go to school and nobody will care that we're Catholics and there are nine of us children?"

"There's nowhere in the world like that," said Father bitterly.

John Paul looked at Graff questioningly.

"Your father is partly right," said Graff. "A family with nine children will always be resented, no matter where you go. And here, because there are so many other noncompliant families, you sustain each other. There's solidarity. In some ways it would be worse if you left Poland."

"In every way," said Father.

"But we could set you up in a large city, and then send no more than two of your brothers and sisters

to any one school. That way, if they are careful, no one will know that their family is noncompliant.”

“If they become liars, you mean,” said Mother.

“Oh,” said Graff, “forgive me. I didn’t know that your family never, ever told a lie to protect your family’s interests.”

“You’re trying to seduce us,” said Mother. “To divide the family. To get our children into school that will teach them to deny the faith, to despise the Church.”

“Ma’am,” said Graff, “I’m trying to get a very promising boy to agree to come to Battle School because the world faces a terrible enemy.”

“Does it?” said Mother. “I keep hearing about this terrible enemy, these Buggers, these monsters from space, but where are they?”

“The reason you don’t see them,” said Graff patiently, “is because we defeated their first two invasions. And if you ever do see them, it will be because we lost the third time. And even then you won’t see them, because they will do such terrible things to the surface of the Earth that there will be no humans alive when the first of the Buggers sets foot here. We want your son to help us prevent that.”

“If God sends these monsters to kill us, maybe it’s as it was in the days of Noah,” said Mother. “Maybe the world is so wicked it needs to be destroyed.”

“Well, if that’s so,” said Graff, “then we’ll lose the war, no matter what we do, and that’s that. But what if God wants us to win, so we have more time to repent of our wickedness? Don’t you think you ought to leave that possibility open?”

“Don’t argue theology with us,” said Father coldly, “as if you were a believer.”

“You don’t know what I believe,” said Graff. “All you know is this: We will go to great lengths to get your son into Battle School, because we believe he is extraordinary, and we believe that in this house he has been and will continue to be frustrated. Wasted.”

Mother lurched forward and Father bounded to his feet. “How dare you!” cried Father.

Graff also stood, and in his anger he looked dangerous and terrible. “I thought you were the one who didn’t like lying!”

There was a momentary silence, Father and Graff facing each other across the room.

“I said his life was being wasted and that’s the simple truth,” said Graff quietly. “You didn’t even know that he was really reading. Do you understand what this boy was doing? He was reading with excellent comprehension, books that your college students would have had trouble with, Professor Wiecezorek. And *you didn’t know it*. He did it in front of you, he told you he was doing it, and you still refused to know it because it didn’t fit into your picture of reality. And *this* is the home where a miracle like his is going to be educated? In your list of sins, doesn’t that count as perhaps a tiny little venial sin? To take this gift from God and waste it? Didn’t Jesus say something disparaging about casting pearls before swine?”

At this, Father could not stand it. He lunged forward to strike a blow at Graff.

But Graff was a soldier, and blocked the blow easily. He did not strike back, but used only as much force as was needed to stop Father until he could calm himself. Even so, Father ended up on the floor in pain, with Mother kneeling over him, crying.

John Paul knew, however, what Graff was doing. That Graff had deliberately chosen words that would cause Father to get angry and lose control of himself.

But why? What was Graff trying to accomplish?

Then he realized: Graff wanted to show John Paul this scene. Father humiliated, beaten down, and Mother reduced to weeping over him.

Graff spoke, as he gazed intensely into John Paul’s eyes. “The war is a desperate struggle, John Paul. They nearly broke us. They nearly won. It was only because we had a genius, a command

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