

# A TIME TO DREAM

*by Dean Wesley Smith*

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Captain Brian Sable of the Earth Protection League could tell there would be a mission. Tonight was the night. The first mission in over a week. The border skirmish on the third moon of the Garland Star Cluster must have flared up again. Or something else threatened the security of Earth. The League was needed to stop the threat. He was needed, and he was ready.

Across the small nursing home room the old clock on the wooden dresser ticked, echoing in the small space and dim light, demanding his attention just as it did every night as he lay in his bed, awake, waiting. When he'd first arrived at the Shady Valley Nursing Home outside of Chicago six years earlier, that old clock had let him count down the seconds until he died. Long seconds, never-ending seconds that he had wished would go by faster.

Now the loud ticking of that old clock in the night counted the minutes until the next mission, until the time he could become young again. And the time waiting, getting older and closer to death went by too fast now.

Far too fast.

Now he wanted to stay alive, to stay with the missions and the Earth Protection League, to get the chance to be young enough to wear his Proton Stunners and fight the good fight against the enemies of Earth.

The clock ticked.

Time went by.

Down the dimly lit hall outside his room's door a nurse laughed at an unheard joke. Captain Brian Sable coughed, the sound weak and pitiful in the silence of the nursing home.

He glanced at the clock. He could barely see the hands in the light from the hall, but he could tell it was only a little after ten in the evening. It was still far too early for them to come for him.

He tried to roll his ninety-one-year-old body over on its side, but only succeeded in shifting the sheet slightly under him. He hadn't had the strength to pull himself out of bed for over two years, let alone roll over. And he couldn't remember the last time he'd walked across this small room on his own to the bathroom. A nurse's aide always had to carry him and plop him on the cold toilet, then carry him back to his

bed or wheelchair.

He laughed, and the laugh again turned into a rough cough that sent his old heart pounding. He forced himself to calm down and to not think about how he was at the moment. He hated thinking about how old he was, how frail his body had become, how dependent on others he now was. He reminded himself that none of that mattered like it used to.

Now he had the missions for the Earth Protection League. The missions gave his old life purpose, his continued liv-ing in this way station of the dying a valid reason. And even though there hadn't been a mission for almost a week, he knew tonight was the night.

He could tell.

It was all in the details. For example, the night nurse had left the rail on his bed down. The nurse never did that, except on mission nights.

They had also cleaned him up early and put him to bed. They never did that either unless there was a mission to run.

Of course, when he had first talked to them about the missions after his first one, they had all laughed at him. They had said there was no such thing as the Earth Protection League. They claimed that he had just had a strange dream.

But he knew better.

He'd gone on a mission, gotten young again. He had helped Earth defend itself against the evil scum of the galaxy. And since that night he'd gone on many, many more missions.

Tonight he was ready again.

Hell, he was always ready. There was nothing else for him to do.

The clock ticked the night away minute by minute, second by second. On the night of a mission, waiting was the hardest. Sometimes he wished he couldn't tell when a mission was. It would make sleep easier.

So he forced himself to think about other things. First he thought about his long-dead wife, Margaret. She would have laughed at him if she knew what he was doing. But she wouldn't have minded. She had always supported him in everything he did, one of the many things he had loved about her.

Their children, Strom and Claire, didn't have time for him much anymore. They had their own lives, their own jobs, their own kids to raise. He hadn't bothered to even hint to them about the missions. There would have been no point. They were part of his past, his life as a grocery store owner. None of that compared with his life now as a captain in the Earth Protection League.

He watched the clock as it ticked away the time.

At some point along the way, at least an hour after midnight, he dozed off.

“Captain Sable?” the young, male voice said.

Strong arms picked him up from the bed and moved quickly toward the sliding glass door that lead into the center court of the nursing home. “We need your help again, sir.”

“Always ready to help,” Sable said. His old vocal cords managed to barely choke out the words. Those were the same words he always said at the start of every mission.

He glanced at the old clock on the way out. Three-sixteen in the morning. He would be back shortly.

If he lived.

The sliding door to the outside was open and the Chicago night air was cold against his old skin. But the young soldier who carried him didn't even pause. He strode across to the center of the court and then tapped a badge on his wrist. A white beam of light from above lifted them quickly into the transport ship.

Sable knew that around the country the same thing had happened, or was happening, at least forty-one other times as his crew was gathered from their respective nursing homes and retirement apartments.

The young man with the strong arms quickly moved to a silver, coffin-shaped sleep chamber and laid Sable down slowly on the soft cushions.

“Any hints as to the fight?” Sable asked. “The nature of the mission?”

The young soldier smiled. “Couldn't tell you if I knew, sir,” he said. “But they never tell us grunts what's happening on this end. I just wish I could be there with you.”

Sable laughed. “I wish you could, too, son.”

But both of them knew that wasn't possible. The reason the ninety-one-year-old Sable was going instead of the young soldier was because of the problems with Trans-Galactic flight. Simply put, it regressed a human body. If that kid had come along, he'd be nothing more than a baby, if that, when they dropped out of Trans-Galactic flight.

And so far no one could figure out why it did that, or so he was told. He had heard all the explanations of relativity, the curved nature of space, and the different fixed states of matter, but it still had made no sense to him.

All he knew was that he was old when the flight started and young again when it ended. The farther and faster the ship flew, the greater the distance from Earth, the

younger he got. At times he wondered if the Earth Protection League had a group of middle-aged soldiers for shorter-range work, but he had never been in a position to ask anyone.

He was just glad space flight worked this way.

The young soldier patted his shoulder. "Have a good trip, sir." Then he closed the lid on the coffin and tapped it twice as a signal to Sable that it was secure. In this old body, it didn't matter. He wouldn't have been able to even push the lid open if he tried.

A moment later the rose-smelling gas filled the chamber and he drifted off into the sleep of the dead as the Trans-Galactic ship jumped out of Earth orbit and headed toward the center of the galaxy.

The top of the coffin snapped open with a hiss and cool oxygen bathed his face. Captain Brian Sable snapped his eyes open, then held his arms up to look at them. What he saw was the young skin and shapes of youth. He flexed his fingers and the muscles under the skin rippled.

It felt wonderful!

No pain, no aches. Just the sense of health and youth.

Yes! He had made it again.

With both hands he grabbed the sides of the sleep module and lifted himself out, kicking over the side without so much as a caught heel. The feeling of youth was simply wonderful.

He still wore his old man's nightgown, but he quickly pulled that off and tossed it back in the coffin. He'd need it for the return trip, if he lived through this coming fight. If not, they'd need it for his body. And tomorrow morning his kids would get a call that he had died peacefully in his sleep.

He flexed the muscles in his shoulders and neck. His body was one he barely remembered from his youth. Yet each time he went on a mission, this body returned, good as ever. Whatever the strange relative-matter-physics involved in Trans-Galactic travel, he loved this body.

Quickly he dressed in his uniform of the Earth Protection League. First the leather pants and high boots, then a silk blouse that flared under his arms and fit tight over his shoulders. Next he put on a leather vest over the blouse that had the EPL triangle symbol on the chest. Then he strapped on his twin Photon Stunners, one on each hip.

Brushing a hand through his full head of dark hair, he turned and glanced at the only mirror in the small room. The reflection that greeted him was one of his youth, control, and power. He couldn't be more than twenty-one or twenty-two. Only the

knowledge and memories inside the young body were of a ninety-one-year-old man who had, seemingly moments before, been asleep in a nursing home room just outside of Chicago.

He patted the Stunners on his hips, then with one more quick look in the mirror, he turned and strode out of the room, turning right toward the command center of the Galactic-Transport ship. He knew this ship like the back of his young hand. He'd been on board it for dozens of missions now, had flown it through some of the toughest space in this sector of the galaxy. It felt like home, far more than his home back in Chicago had ever done.

Throughout the ship his men would be awaking, dressing, getting ready for whatever faced them tonight. He didn't wait for them, but instead strode directly to the empty command center and dropped down into the captain's chair.

His chair.

Around him there was only one other station on his left, with a high-backed chair like his and view screens above it showing the blackness of space.

In front of him a small screen on the panel flared to light and the smiling face of General Datson Meyers filled it. He had deep blue eyes, white hair, and more wrinkles than almost any human Sable had ever seen. Yet the face was one that seemed comfortable with command. "Glad you made it, Captain Sable."

"Glad to be here, sir," Sable said. "What's happening?"

The smile cleared from the face of the general, making some of the wrinkles vanish instantly. "The Dogs have broken through."

"What?" Sable said, stunned. The Dogs, as everyone in EPL called them, were a race of ugly aliens that occupied the territory along one of the EPL's borders. They looked like a bad cross between a huge slug and a ten-legged poodle. They were the meanest damn things Sable had ever fought, and he had fought them often along that border.

Unlike the dogs on Earth, humans and alien Dogs hated each other with a passion that didn't allow any type of agreement beyond fighting.

The general went on. "They broke through our outer defenses yesterday. Our allies in the League and border patrols couldn't stop them."

"That bad, huh?" Sable asked. A feeling of dread was quickly replacing the wonderful feel of being young again.

The General nodded. "This morning we got data that leads us to believe that they are headed to Earth to destroy the center of the League once and for all."

Sable looked intently at the general, not letting the worry filling his chest show. "How

many ships did they send?"

"Over five hundred got through the border and are headed for your position at a slow Trans-Galactic speed," the general said. "Your job is to try to slow them down even more, give us time behind you to form a second and third line of defense."

"Understood," Sable said. "We'll slow them down. Maybe knock their numbers down a few. You can count on that."

The general nodded. "I knew I could depend on you, Captain."

The screen went blank.

Sable sat there in the command chair, stunned. This would be the last mission. He would die young and in deep space, just as he had always hoped he would. Better than in his sleep in the nursing home back on Earth. He just hadn't expected this last mission to be so soon.

But Earth and the League needed him. He would not let them down!

He took a deep breath, shoved the fear aside, and got to work.

Quickly he ran his fingers over the controls in front of him. It showed that there were eleven other League ships in formation beside his. And each ship was manned with forty-two people like him and carried forty single-man fighters. One of the big transport ships might be a match for a single Dog Warcraft, but a single-man fighter wasn't. It would be like sending a mosquito after a real dog back on Earth.

"What are we up against this time, Captain?" a cheery voice asked behind him.

He glanced over his shoulder at his second-in-command, Carl Turner. Carl lived in a nursing home in northern California and was gaining on one hundred years of age. At the moment he was a brown-haired man who looked like he was in his middle twenties. He had a spring in his step and a smile that could light up a room, and often did. They had worked dozens of missions together before and had become best friends.

"The Dogs broke out of their fence," Sable said. "We're supposed to try to slow them down until the League can mount a decent defense behind us."

"Shit," Carl said as he dropped down into the chair beside Sable and stared at the screen. "How many?"

"Five hundred of their warships. Twelve of us."

"The League have any idea how we're supposed to do this?" Carl asked.

"Nope," Sable said, smiling at his friend. "They left it up to our ancient wisdom to come up with something."

“I hate it when they do that,” Carl said.

“Yeah. Me, too,” Sable said, laughing. “You work on finding out how much time we have until they get here, what speed they’re moving, and so on, while I brief the rest of the crew.”

He pushed himself easily to his feet and strode across the command center toward the crew area. He could have done this task from his command chair, but he wanted to feel young again, walk quickly again, just one more time.

It was halfway through the briefing with the forty members of his gathered crew that Captain Brian Sable came up with the plan that just might save them. And Earth.

He sprinted back to the command center of the ship and dropped back into his chair. “How long?”

“Five hundred Dog Warships will be on our front steps in exactly thirty-five minutes.”

“Perfect,” Sable said. “Have our ships get ready to match their Trans-Galactic speed.”

Carl glanced over at him. “Perfect if you like getting your butt kicked by slug-looking poodles.”

“How old are you, Carl?” Sable asked, his fingers working on the board as he talked.

“Six months short of the big one hundred,” Carl said.

“And how long did it take us to get from Earth to this position?”

“From what measuring point?” Carl asked.

“Earth time?”

“Forty or so years,” Carl said.

“Shipboard time?”

“Six days, ten hours, and a few odd minutes.”

“And it will take us that long to get back?” Sable asked, “Right?” He finished the work on the command board and turned to Carl.

“Shipboard time,” Carl said. “They’ll speed up the ship slightly on the return voyage and we’ll end up back in our beds less than thirty minutes after we left, Earth time that is. You know that.”

“So how are the Dogs handling the same matter/ relativity problem on their flight toward Earth?”

“How the hell would I-”

Suddenly Carl stopped and smiled at Sable. “I see where you’re headed, Captain. Their life-spans are shorter than ours, right?”

“Exactly,” Sable said. “Which is why they are moving at a slow Trans-Galactic speed, because they don’t dare go any faster or they would end up Dog-pups by the time they reach Earth.”

“Which means they have to be damn old Dogs right now,” Carl said, “at the beginning of their flight.”

“Exactly,” Sable said. “And you and I both know how well old Dogs like us move.”

Carl laughed. “We’re young, they’re old. You’re right! Perfect!”

“I’d say it’s time to kick some wrinkled butt, wouldn’t you?” Sable asked. He punched the communications link to all his men and the other ships. Quickly he explained what he had figured out and how they were going to fight the Dogs.

“Keep the single-man fighters on full thrust and constantly turning, diving, retreating. We’ll break into units of twenty fighters with each twenty ship unit attacking one Dog ship, then moving on. Keep moving as fast as you can, all the time. They’re slow and old, just as we all were a few short hours ago. Remember that, and they won’t stand a chance.”

Twenty minutes later they launched the single-man fighters. Only Carl and Sable remained in the Command Ship, since it only took the two of them to run the ship. Everyone else was needed in the fighters.

A few minutes later the Dog Warships appeared on the view screens. They were ugly, sausage-looking ships, with slick-looking hulls and protruding weapons systems and thrusters. The fighters had been ordered to stay away from in front of the weapons and target the thrusters. Their mission was to slow them down and, as Carl said, there was no better way to do that than shoot a Dog Warship in the ass.

“You know how to override the autopilot on this ship?” Sable asked, turning to Carl as the fighters broke into groups and swarmed toward the oncoming Dog Warships.

“I think I could do it,” Carl replied. “Why?”

“I’m just wondering,” Sable said, “what would happen if we plowed right through the middle of that fleet at full Trans-Galactic speed?”

“Besides destroy us?”

“Won’t hurt us,” Sable said. “At full Trans-Galactic speed we’re on complete screens, big enough to knock just about anything out of the way. Remember?”

Carl stared at Sable for a moment, then laughed. “Bowling for Dogs. I love it!”



Carl set to work on taking the autopilot off the Trans-Galactic controls.

On the screen the fighters were having some luck. The Dog Warships were firing, but not really hitting anything. The fighters were picking at the thrusters of the ships like a kid picked at a scab. Two Dog ships were already dead in space, left behind by the fleet. But there were already four single-man fighters destroyed. Four men who wouldn't be returning alive to their nursing home rooms tonight on Earth.

Sable wondered if any of them would be at this point.

“Got it!” Carl said.

Sable carefully set the Trans-Galactic drive for only a sixteen-second burst. That would take them through the Dog Warship fleet and some distance beyond, but not too far. Too far and they'd be too young to get the ship back into position.

Quickly he informed the other transport captains of what he was going to try to do, then turned to Carl. “Ready to lose a little time?”

“And with luck, a few Dog Warships in the process,” Carl said.

Sable eased the transport directly at a mass of the Dog Warships, then said, “Do it!”

Carl flicked the switch and for the first time in all the missions, Sable saw what space looked like at full Trans-Galactic speed.

It was a blur of black-and-white streaks.

Nothing more. Not even pretty.

Then, as quickly as it started, it ended and the stars were back, solid in space. There was no sign of the Dog Warships, or the rest of the League transport fleet.

“We've gone almost to the Dog Border and we're four weeks younger than a few seconds ago,” Carl said.

“I knew I felt better,” Sable said. “Don't you just love how this relativity and mass stuff works?”

“Yeah,” Carl said. “Just wish I understood it.”

“I hear you there,” Sable said.

Sable flipped the ship over and with a quick run of his fingers over the board reset the controls to return them to just a few seconds after they had left.

“Do it,” he said.

“Firing for the return!” Carl said.

Again the view screens showed black-and-white streaks for a long six seconds, then

normal space returned.

“Holy cow!” Carl said. “I think we got a strike.”

“Maybe two,” Sable said, staring at the damage they had done. They had punched not just one, but two holes in the fleet of Dog Warships, damaging and destroying at least thirty of them.

And the single-man fighters were taking advantage of the confusion to cause even more damage.

“Tell the other transport captains exactly what we did and then let’s go again,” Sable said.

“They’re going to come up with a terrible name for this, you know,” Carl said.

Sable had already reset the Trans-Galactic drive for another six second burst and aimed the nose of the ship at a mass of the Dog Warships. “And what would that be?”

“The Sable Yo-Yo Maneuver,” Carl said.

“Sounds good to me,” Sable said, laughing as he punched them back into full Trans-Galactic speed once again. And for a few seconds, he got even younger again.

The fresh-faced soldier carried the frail frame of Captain Brian Sable out of the cold of the Chicago night air and into the warmth of the small nursing home room, then laid him carefully on the bed.

Sable glanced at the clock. Three thirty-seven in the morning. He’d only been gone just a little over twenty minutes Earth time, yet for his memory it had been much, much longer.

It had taken him and the other eleven transport ships six more punches through the Dog Warship fleet before the Dogs finally gave up and turned back.

They had chased them, snapping at their tails the entire way.

He had lost seven fighters and seven very brave men in the fight. The entire casualty list for all twelve transports was just under sixty. The general was stunned at their success and extremely pleased, to say the least. He couldn’t believe that twelve transport ships with single-man fighters could turn back a five-hundred-strong fleet of Dog Warships.

Actually, neither could Sable. But they had done it. They had saved Earth and the League.

For the next twenty-four hours, the general had let them all party in their young bodies. As the general said, *You men all deserve it.*

Sable couldn't have agreed more. He had relished every minute of it.

Sable looked around the dim, nursing home room. It was a room he hoped he would never die in. If he died, he wanted it to be in space, fighting for the League and Earth.

Then he laughed, not hard enough to task his old lungs, but enough to relax him a little.

Now he had one task. He had to stay alive until the next mission.

"Anything I can get for you, Captain?" the young soldier asked as he pulled the thin blanket up over Sable's frail body.

"No, thank you, son," Sable said, smiling.

"You did a great job out there, sir," the young man said. "It's an honor knowing you." He snapped to attention, saluted, and then turned for the door.

In a moment the night sounds were shut out and the small nursing home room was silent except for the ticking of the clock.

To the empty room and no one in particular Captain Brian Sable of the Earth Protection League said, "Thank you," very softly. "The honor was all mine."