

Bright Red Star

BUD SPARHAWK

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"Bright Red Star" was published in Asimov's. It is a very tightly constructed military SF horror story about the sacrifice of innocents, in the hard SF tradition of "The Cold Equations." Sparhawk says "It was written as the events of 9-11 evolved. I tried, in this piece, to address the motivations of those who could allow themselves to commit such heinous atrocities." But it is not directly about current events at all, which makes it we think more effective.

Our boat floated silent as owls' wings and settled softly as an autumn snowflake. There was no doubt that the enemy had spotted us—the stealth could only minimize signs of our presence. We'd done everything we could to reduce de-tectability: hardened plastics, ceramics, charged ice, and hardly any metal. All that did was create doubt, and, possibly, delay. Or so we hoped.

We tumbled quickly from the boat as grounding automatically discharged the ship charge, without which the boat's ice frame would quickly melt. In a matter of minutes, the only remaining trace of our craft would be a puddle of impure water and the gossamer-thin spider-web of the stealth shield—and that would dissipate at the first hint of a breeze.

We deployed in pincer and arrowhead formation, sending two troops to the north to parallel our advance, two likewise to the south, and two to the point. Hunter and I followed in column.

We moved quickly, carefully, ever wary. That the Shardies would eventually find us was not in doubt, neither was the certainty of our death when they did so. They did not use humans well; however, I doubted they'd find much use for us.

Tactical estimates gave us an hour to save the recalcitrant settlers' souls. They were some sort of colony—religious or otherwise, it made no difference—only that they had foolishly chosen to remain where others fled.

There was a slight probability we'd have less than an hour and an even smaller possibility of having more, so we moved quickly. I'd estimated twenty minutes to reach their position and ten to twenty to ensure we'd located everyone. That left us five minutes for action and ten as margin for contingencies.

I knew we'd fail if we used more than fifty-five minutes.

"... shards," one of the last observers managed to croak out before Jeux II fell silent. That word was the only description of the aliens we'd ever heard, so it stuck.

The Shardies had hit hard when we first made contact with their kind, which could hardly be called contact at all since they attacked first and without provocation. When our ships backed off, their ship followed, attacking again and again with unbelievable ferocity. When its missiles ran out, they tried to ram

the thick plate of our exploratory ship. It smashed into tiny ceramic fragments on impact, leaving a cloud of glittering fragments that spun into emptiness, leaving no trace, no hint, of what had so provoked them.

After much debate over the wisdom of such an attempt, we again tried to contact them. The idea of another space-spanning civilization held too much promise to ignore. It took years before we found them, but find them we did.

That is, we assume that someone found them, for a fleet of their ships suddenly appeared near Jeux II and attacked every sign of human presence: ships, orbiting stations, ground-based settlements—anything that wasn't of natural origin. The military tried to defend themselves while the civilian ships fled in every direction.

This was a strategic mistake. Since they'd backtracked one of our ships to Jeux, that meant that they could—and probably would—follow every ship who escaped. Every destination system was now at risk.

Thanks to the brief warning, most of the settled systems managed to mobilize to meet the Shardies attack. The initial losses were great. We had to fall back from system after system, engaged in a running battle with something we do not understand.

We've tried to figure out why they attack with such ferocity, why there hasn't been an attempt at contact, and why they won't respond to our calls. We fail at every attempt to understand them.

Neither have we deduced anything of their technology from the damaged ships we've managed to recover. Hulls, engines, and controls appear to be nothing but dirty glass. We suspect this is the analog of our silicon-based technology, but can't be sure. Researchers have been working hard, I'm told, but I have yet to hear of anything useful come of it.

Nor can we figure out what sort of creatures we're fighting. That one word, that one utterance from a lone observer on Jeux, was all we had to go on.

What we do know for certain is that either the Shardies will be destroyed, or we will be. Humanity has lost too much, too many, for compromise. It is clear that there can be no middle ground.

The trip to the site of the single communications burst was uneventful. We didn't expect to encounter resistance.. The Shardies don't settle on the planets they take from us. No, they just wipe them clean of humanity and then move on. We knew there had to be Shardie gleaners surveying the planet, trying to find some fresh meat, or, what was worse, breeding stock. With a little luck, we'd find that the Shardies had beaten us to them.

The location was a hill, close by a half-destroyed farming complex whose tower leaned precariously toward the north. With luck, we'd find whoever made the call nearby. First place to check were the buildings, or what remained of them.

We went straight in. Better to find whatever sign we could quickly—time was running out. A sweep of the barn was negative, as were the remains of the silo, and the outbuildings. The house was a different matter. We found some opened jars, preserves mostly. The footprints we found outside were small—a child's, perhaps, or a small woman. The tracks led up the hill and into the woods.

I sent the outriders wide to cover while Hunter followed the tracks. Could be a trap, so I waited, senses alert for any indication of a problem.

Crack of a twig brought me to my feet. It was Hunter and a little girl. "Cave up there," with a head nod. "Three dead men—three, four days gone." That tied with the time we'd received the burst.

She was a tiny thing—about nine or ten, I'd say—bright eyes and scraggly red hair. Good teeth. Looked scared as hell. I could understand that—Hunter wasn't being very gentle as he dumped her at my feet.

"What's your name?" I stooped to bring my head to her level.

"You them aliens?" she asked all wide-eyed. "How come you talk like us?"

"We're combat soldiers," I answered. "We're humans, just like you, sweetheart. Now, come on; what's your name?"

"Becky," she finally spit out. "How come you're still here? Paw said everybody left."

"We came back to take care of you and the others," I answered truthfully. "We can't afford to let you fall into enemy hands."

"Paw and the Paston boys thought you'd come," she said.

"How did they die?"

Becky seemed fascinated by my sidearm. They shot them after the Pastons used the mayday thing. I hid in the back where they couldn't find me. Are you going to punish them for doing that?"

That got my attention. Takes a real idiot to shoot the people who demonstrated good sense. I began to doubt that the Shardies would've gotten much use out of whatever mush these jerks used for brains.

"Right, sweetheart, we'll punish them, but first you have to tell us where they are."

"Did you bring a ship to take us away?" Becky asked as she fingered the butt of my AC-43. "That was why Paw grabbed the mayday—to get us a rescue ship."

"We came to make sure the enemy doesn't get you," I answered honestly. "Listen, we don't have much time. Can you take us to where the others are hiding?"

"I think they're still over at the Truett place," she said, pointing to the east.

I nodded to Hunter, who was already directing the scouts eastward. I picked up Becky and moved out. Hunter covered my rear. "Can you tell us how to get there?"

"You mean to the Truetts' place?" Becky asked. "Sure. There's a big field there. That where the rescue ship's going to land?"

The Shardie ships we'd managed to capture more or less intact were completely empty—no aliens at all—just glass of various colors and shapes. Either the ships were highly automated, or the Shardies had destroyed themselves completely so they would not fall into our hands. Suicidal, or so we thought. Eventually, we discovered some living creatures, if you can call them that, aboard one of their ships.

One of the things we'd learned was that if we had sufficient warning, we could defend ourselves fairly well. Sometimes we managed to drive them off, and sometimes not. Every battle was fought hard and long, usually with massive losses on both sides. Our defensive successes managed to achieve, at best, parity.

That all changed at Witca, a heavily fortified military outpost armed with the latest data on Shardie attack patterns.

Only the Shardies were using new patterns that got through the outer defenses. It was as if they were anticipating the base's reactions and countering Witca's best defensive moves with ease. Witca fell with

all hands lost.

After Witca's defeat, we lost ground steadily, falling farther and farther back toward Earth year after year. We no longer had parity. We were losing.

Then, largely through a stroke of luck, our fleet happened upon a lone Shardie ship near Outreach. As soon as it realized we were near, it attacked on an evasion pattern that defied the fleet's best defensive efforts. The fleet lost six ships before managing to still whatever mysterious force propelled the Shardie vessel.

The fleet marines lost no time in boarding. Command had high hopes of finally finding something alive inside. They weren't disappointed. *Disgusted* and *surprised* might better describe their reaction. Inside, they found sixteen of the Jeux survivors.

Survivors isn't exactly the word. What they found were sixteen bodies without arms, legs, and most organs. What remained were essentially heads hooked up to life support and fueled by oxygenated glucose pumps. There were a couple of hundred strands of glass fiber running from the ship's walls into each skull, into each brain, into each soul. Four of the sixteen were still functioning—alive is not a word to describe their condition.

Clinical examination of the four revealed that each was fully conscious and aware, at least that's what the eeg traces indicated. They also indicated that the Shardies had used no painkillers to dull the senses when they'd done this. Had the survivors mouths, they would have been continually screaming. All four died mercifully fast when their pumps ran dry. I'm not too sure that the medics didn't help that along. It was a mercy.

The only conclusion we could draw was that the Shardies were using human brains to defeat human defenses. They were obviously using our own brains to "think" like us.

There was no hesitation on the part of Command. They ordered everyone, except combat types like us, from the most likely targets. Humanity couldn't allow any more people to become components for the Shardie offense.

But civilians never listen. Farmers were the worst, hanging onto their little plots and crops until somebody dragged them away, kicking and screaming at the injustice of it all. That's why we were here. Forty settlers had stupidly refused to be evacuated from New Mars. Forty we didn't know about until we got that one brief burst.

My mission was to make certain that they didn't become forty armless, legless, gutless, screamless weapon components.

"Why do you look so funny?" Becky asked as we jogged along. Her question was expected. Few civilians ever see combat troops like us. Luckily the combat gear and darkness hid most of the worst modifications I'd had to undergo: cybernetic heart-lung pump with reserve oxygen so I could operate in any atmosphere or even underwater; augmented muscles on legs and arms that barked me up like a cartoon giant on steroids; amped vision that ran from the near infrared up toward the UV range—I could even switch to black and white for better night vision—and smart-metal skeleton structures to provide a good base for my massive muscles. Flesh had been stripped from anything exposed and replaced with impervious plas. My hands were electromechanical marvels capable of ripping weapons-grade plating off a spaceship, and sensitive enough to lift a tiny girl without harm.

Then there was my glucose pump, a nasty, but useful technology we'd copied from the Shardies. Even my brain had been altered—substituting silicon and gel for the mass of pink jelly I was born with.

Definitely not something you'd want your daughter to date. I'm glad it was dark. In daylight, I'd probably scare the bejesus out of her.

"We're modified so we can fight the bastards," I growled. Revenge for relatives on Witca was my overt reason. Curiosity about the Shardies, and getting a piece of them, was secondary. I saw no sense going into the gory details or the agonizing processes involved with a little girl who wouldn't understand. "Tell me about the rest of your group. Are they all right?"

"Mr. Robbarts is still the boss. He's the one that shot Paw, I think. And there's Jake and Sally and little Billy. Billy's my friend. Jake's got a bad leg.

"Then there's all the Thomas women. They have a big wagon, or they did before the men came and burned it." She started crying.

I was certain she was talking about the roaming gangs. Lots of people didn't want to leave anything the Shardies might be able to use. Senseless, that. Shardies could care less, but most civilians wouldn't know that. Best destroy what you left behind, they'd probably thought, and had taken their anger out on things they could reach.

"Mr. Robbarts said we didn't have to worry because we weren't soldiers. He said we'd have the whole world to ourselves. But after everybody left, Paw got really afraid of what might happen."

Robbarts must be the leader of this group. "Robbarts was wrong, Becky. You all should have left," I said. "Didn't they tell you that it wouldn't matter if you were a soldier or not? Being human is all that matters."

"Mr. Robbarts got real mad when Paw argued with him and said he wanted to use the mayday thing. Then Paw and the boys and me ran away with it. You got to go along this stream for a bit now," she directed.

That explained the burst message that told us there were people left behind. They must have used one of the emergency broadcast units the evacuation team had scattered across New Mars in the last days, just in case. "What happened then?" I asked as I followed her pointing finger down the stream. The scouts picked up my changed direction and reacted,

"They told Paw to come out of the cave to talk," Becky continued, chatting away. "Paw told me to hide. Then I heard them arguing and shouting and I got really afraid. Then there was some shots. I heard the men looking around.

Mr. Robbarts was cussing a lot and calling me all sorts of names, but I stayed where I was. I was scared."

"What did you do then?" I stepped around a huge boulder and wondered if it would be easier, and faster, to wade in the stream instead of through the woods on either side. Hunter was close by my side now in this narrow section.

"After it got quiet, I snuck out and found Paw and the boys laying on the ground. Paw was bleeding bad. I tried to stop it, but it wouldn't stop. Then he went to sleep and didn't move for a long time. I got hungry waiting for the rescue ship Paw said would come." That explained the jelly and jam jars—just what a little girl would like to eat. "Are you going to bury Paw and the boys?"

"Burial wastes time—something we can't afford," Hunter said sharply. *Down*, he signaled as a shot ricocheted off my chest armor.

I dropped immediately, instinctively tucking Becky underneath to protect her. Hunter slipped to the side and disappeared. I switched to infrared and made out fuzzy heat forms in the brush a dozen meters ahead. The muzzle of a rifle was glowing heat-bright from the shot he had taken. None of the forms moved.

I waited. Silent. Becky groaned and wiggled feebly. "It really hurts," she said. Her voice was muffled.

"Wait," I whispered, waiting for Hunter to get into position.

"Let her up," a man's voice barked from behind me. "Move easy now. I got you covered."

I pushed up, allowing Becky to crawl out before I came to my feet. The man took a step back. "Huh, you sure are a big one." He peered closer. "Ugly, too."

"He's come to rescue us, Mister Robbarts," Becky said, "lie's got another soldier with him." Becky's voice sounded strained. I glanced at her and saw the blood. Damn, had his shot hit her?

I noticed the heat signatures of two more men in the brush; one behind Robbarts and another somewhat farther back. I had no doubt all were armed and all too ready to shoot. That made six in all.

"You shot Becky," I said calmly. "She needs help."

"The hell with her," Robbarts said nastily. "Her damn family's been nothing but trouble. Killed one of my boys, they did. Let the little bitch bleed."

"They're going to take us away in a ship," Becky said in a rush. "That's why we're going to your place. The field's a place they can land."

Robbarts didn't answer her directly. "That true, soldier? You got a ship?"

I really didn't like this man. "Nobody, nothing, could find a trace of the boat we came in. Becky's the one who said there'd be a rescue ship."

"Ain't no damn ship taking me or my people off our land," Robbarts spit, ignoring what I had said. "We're going to hold on to this place come whatever. This'll be a damn nice place for me and mine after the war moves on."

Did he really believe that? "The Shardies are going to comb this planet and glean whatever human stock they can find. Do you know what they do to the people they capture?"

Robbarts sneered. "I seen the news about what they did to them poor troopers. But we're civilians, not some combat-trained space jockey. They won't bother us. We don't know military stuff."

I couldn't believe Robbarts's ignorance. "The aliens don't care what you *know*. It's the human thought processes, the way our minds form associations, our ability to recognize patterns—that's what they use. They don't give a damn if a brain comes from a soldier, a navigator, or even some dumb-assed farmer!" As soon as the angry words popped out of my mouth I regretted them.

"Well, I might be a dumb-assed farmer, soldier boy," Rob-barts drawled, "but it's you who's at the wrong end of this here gun."

"Not exactly," I said as I watched Hunter silently taking out the two forms behind Robbarts. That action told me the other three had already been neutralized. Hunter is good at what he does—thorough.

"You really shouldn't have said that about Becky," I said calmly. Robbarts's normal human reaction time

was no match for my enhanced speed. I quickly swung the knife edge of my forearm sleeve, and a wet, red grin grew beneath his chin.

Severing the carotid arteries releases the pressure and drains blood from the brain. It causes death in seconds, and slashing his larynx prevented any outcry. Robbarts stood quietly erect for a moment until his body got the message that blood was no longer flowing to the head and no more signals were coming from the dying brain. Then he toppled over.

I scooped up Becky and continued. Hunter would destroy Robbarts's head, just as he had the others, and catch up. I hoped the rest of Robbarts's flock wouldn't waste more of what little time we had left.

While I jogged along, I checked to see where Becky had been hit. It wasn't fatal, so I put a compress over the wound to staunch the bleeding. It would do well enough until we found the others.

"Where now?" I asked.

Becky stopped sobbing for a moment. "There's a pond down there. It's up the hill from there. There's a hiding hole near the barn."

So that's how they managed to evade the evacuation search teams—by hiding in a bunker. Hunter had caught up by then and I briefed them. He directed the scouts to converge on the spot. "What if it's sealed?" he asked.

"You know what to do," I answered and he smiled. That was the difference between us—he enjoyed this, enjoyed the danger, enjoyed the blood. When we got within sight of the entrance to the bunker I put Becky down. "You have to call them out," I said. "Can you do that?"

"They'll shoot me like they did Paw," Becky protested. "I hurt real bad, mister. Can't you do something?" She was crying.

"Listen Becky, it's really important that I get to those people quickly. I tell you what; if they shoot at you, I'll punish them like I did Mr. Robbarts, all right?" She nodded, but reluctantly. "Becky, just walk over there and yell. Tell them you're hurt and need help. I don't think they'll shoot a little girl."

"Aren't you coming with me?" she said.

I shook my head. "No, they might be afraid if they saw me. You can tell them who we are if you want and then I'll show myself." I wiped her nose and pushed her behind to get her moving.

Becky hesitated and then slowly hobbled across the field. "Help! I been shot!" she screamed.

A black hole appeared in the ground by the barn and a man climbed out. "Becky?" he called out. "Robbarts said you were dead." I noticed he'd left the hatch open. Good.

"He just shot me, like he did Paw and the Pastons," she answered.

"We heard a shot but didn't know it was you," the man said as he approached and knelt before Becky. "Damn, that looks bad. How did you manage to get here—and where are Robbarts and his men?" He was looking around nervously.

"The rescue soldiers took care of him," Becky answered innocently.

"Soldiers!" That didn't sound like a curse. More like a man with hope in his voice. I stepped forward.

"Captain Savage; forty-fifth combat arm," I said. "We came to save your souls." I could see by his

frightened reaction that he wasn't going to be a problem.

"He's got a ship to take us all away, Mr. Truett, just like Paw said," Becky said. "They'll have a doctor to fix me up and we'll all be safe."

Truett stepped closer. "I heard things." I could hear the fear in his voice. How much he knew, I did not know.

"We can't be used by the Shardies," I said calmly. "Can't survive more than a few minutes without our combat rations." I figured he knew about the measured doses of anticoagulants fed into my bloodstream. When those stopped, my brain would suffuse with thick blood, hemorrhaging and destroying the remaining organic brain cells. "We're running out of time here."

"How long?" he said, showing more understanding than I expected from a dumb-assed farmer who hadn't had the good sense to save himself and his family when he could.

"I've only got about another hundred minutes," I answered.

Truett turned his head and whistled. "Suicide trooper." He blinked, but that didn't stop a tear from running down his cheek. He understood. Without another word he led the way toward the black hole. "They're all inside," he remarked quietly. "There's thirty of us. Mostly women. Some are just kids," he added sadly. "I was hoping..." He stopped, looked at Becky, and sighed. "Never mind."

Thirty in the bunker. That meant that all forty were accounted for, counting the three men of Becky's family, the six Hunter had taken out, Becky, and Truett. Good. "We'll take care of them quickly," I said and he nodded. Quiet. Yeah, I guess he did know "things."

Hunter and the scouts had already converged on the hole and were dropping through, one after another. I had no doubts of their effectiveness.

"What's it like for you?" Truett said. He was holding Becky tightly in his arms.

"Being here, or being a soldier?" I answered.

"Both. I can't see how you can be so cold and distant. Hell, man, can't you at least show some emotion? Or are you mostly machine now?" His voice was a mixture of anger and fear.

"I grew up on a farm," I said slowly, trying to dredge up memories of a happier past on a planet now lost beyond redemption. "I still remember the smell of autumn, the feeling of mud between my toes, and how it felt to kill my prize sheep when it was time. This mission's no different. I do what I have to do because there are worse things for a human being than dying."

"I saw the news tapes," he said. "Ugly. Horrible. But what about your own hide? Don't you have any sense of self-preservation?"

"When you've been taken care of, we'll go after the Shardies," I bit out. "Our secondary mission is to gather whatever data we can and squirt a message to the fleet. After that, well, there's four, five thousand tons of explosive force in our packs." I patted the small canister strapped to my back. "I figure a dead-man switch will take care of them if we get close."

Truett smiled. "Brave, but it was a foolish waste of resources to come back for us. We made our own mess—stupid as it was to believe Robbarts—and we deserve to lie in it."

I checked the time. We only had fifteen minutes of good time left. Hunter was taking far too long.

"I'm sorry," I said quickly. "You don't have any time left."

Truett grabbed my hand and squeezed. "I just want you to know..." he began and then choked off whatever he was going to say. Instead he slapped my shoulder. "Yeah." I could tell he was trying hard not to cry, but his voice cracked at the end. "Well," he said to Becky. "Looks like we've got a ship to catch," he said cheerily.

Hunter popped out of the hole and came toward me at a run. "We're done," he said quickly. Moments later, the ground surged upward with a roar as smoke and flame shot from the burrow's entrance. If that didn't get the Shardies' attention, nothing would.

"Becky," I said, and gently took her from Truett's arms. "It's time to go."

"Is the ship coming?" Becky asked excitedly as she squirmed around in my arms. "I don't see it."

"It's up there in the sky," Truett said very gently. "Just look up. There, to the right of that big, bright red star." Becky tilted her head back to look almost directly overhead.

I brought my forearm across her throat and held her as she died. I hoped that she didn't have enough time to realize what I had done. What I had to do.

Hunter had taken care of Truett without a struggle. He too had been looking up, as if he might have believed his own words.

I gently laid Becky's lifeless body on the ground, trying not to feel. As before, I let Hunter take care of the final details, ensuring not a single brain cell remained in either head.

There were two minutes left in our window when I heard a distant whine. It could only be the Shardies. I placed my finger on the detonator. Our comm packages were running and would catch our final moments.

"Civilians just don't understand, do they?" Hunter asked as he waited beside me for sweet oblivion, sweet release from these mechanical contrivances we'd become.

I thought of Truett, and the way he had bravely shielded Becky to the last, thought of all the ways the war hasn't changed human decency, thought of my prize sheep and the necessities life forces on us.

"Some do," I admitted.