



Mr. President

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George Wong stood pale and silent by the video screen, listening to the election returns, a long-stemmed glass of champagne clutched forgotten in his trembling right hand.

The announcer droned on: "—latest returns from Venus, with half of the election districts reporting, give three billion four hundred and ninety-six million votes for Wong, against one billion, four hundred million for Thompson, one billion one hundred million for Miccio, and nine hundred million for Kau. These results, added to the almost complete returns from Earth and the first fragmentary reports from Mars, clearly indicate a landslide vote for Wong as the next President of the Solar Union. The two billion votes from Ganymede and Callisto, which will be received early tomorrow morning, cannot appreciably affect the results. The battle for the twenty-five Vice-Presidents is less clear. It is certain that Thompson, Miccio, Kau, Singh, and DuLavier will all be among those elected, but in what order is not yet... ."

Wong leaned over and snapped the video off. His shoulders sagged. He leaned against the console as though too tired to move, a slight, narrow-shouldered man with a very high forehead and thin receding black hair. His large, sad, almond-shaped eyes and yellow-tinted skin indicated that there was a good deal of Asiatic in the mixed blood that flowed through his veins.

"I'm sorry, truly sorry," Michael Thompson said sympathetically, placing a friendly arm across the narrow shoulders of the successful candidate. They were alone in the living room of the hotel suite in New Geneva, which they had shared for the campaign. "The people chose well. After the wonderful job you did in organizing the colonization of Io and Europa, you were the logical man. And then you do have the fantastic Responsibility Quotient of 9.6 out of 10. Anyway," he added with a weary shrug, "don't feel too bad—it looks as though I'll be First Vice-President."

A brief ghost of a smile crossed George Wong's face. "We who are about to die salute you," he said, lifting his glass in a bitter toast to the blank video screen.

Thompson, the man who was to be First Vice-President, silently joined him.

"At least," Wong sighed, putting his empty glass down on the video, "I don't have a family. Look at poor Kau. At Miccio. With wives and children, how they must have suffered when they learned they had been drafted by the conventions... . Well, I guess there's nothing else to do but

to go to bed and wait until they come for me in the morning. Good night, Michael."

"Good night, George," Michael Thompson said. He turned toward his own room. "I *am* sorry," he said again.

Wong had already eaten breakfast and was dressed in an inconspicuous tweed suit for the inauguration when the chimes sounded, telling him that they were at the door. Slowly, he walked to the door and opened it.

"Good morning, Mr. President," the man outside said cheerily, flashing his famous grin. George Wong immediately recognized Al Grimm, the man who had been personal secretary to sixty-three Presidents. He was one of the vast army of civil servants who kept the wheels of government turning smoothly until Presidents were able to make the decisions that would create policy.

"Good morning, Al," George Wong said. "I am afraid I'll have to place myself completely in your hands for these first few days. Do we go to the Executive Mansion for the inauguration now?"

"Yes, sir. Then, after your inauguration, to the office. Messages of condolence have been pouring in all night, but I don't think you want to bother with them. However, I am afraid we will have to bring up some of the problems that have arisen in the two weeks since President Reynolds left office."

"How is he?" Wong asked. "I knew him, you know. He taught at Venus University at the same time I did. He was a fine man."

"I'm afraid he's no better," Al said, shaking his head. "We're doing all we can for him, but he won't even speak to his wife. You know how difficult it is."

"Yes, I know," Wong said.

They rode downstairs in silence and walked to the Presidential Copter parked in the street in front of the house. A few guards loitered in the vicinity, but there were no crowds. They entered the plush copter, which rose smoothly under its whirling blades and carried them over the city, landing finally on the lawn of the Executive Mansion.

Chief Justice Herz met them, dressed in a blue business suit, and after they shook hands he administered the oath.

"Do you, George Wong," he asked, "swear to make every decision you are asked to make as President of the Solar Union for the benefit of the people of the Union and in accord with what you believe to be fair and

just, fully cognizant of the fact that the welfare of seventy-five billion citizens of the Union is dependent on you?"

"I do," George Wong said, through a painfully dry throat that would barely permit the words to come out.

They all shook hands again. Then Al Grimm led the President across the grassy lawn, into the mansion, and up to the office that had served over a thousand Presidents. Wong entered it nervously. It was a large plain room, severely decorated. Tentatively, he slid into the chair behind the huge steel desk, and began opening the drawers. He found them fully stocked with tapes, a recorder, all the other necessities. The desk and everything else in the room was brand new. There was no trace anywhere of his predecessors, and he was relieved to find it so. The Psychology Department at work, he thought.

"While we are moving your effects into the living quarters, Mr. President," Al said from the doorway, "I wonder if we could start discussing the problem of the Gnii ... their Ambassadors have presented an ultimatum, and they demand an answer today."

So soon, President Wong thought. Couldn't he have just a few hours to get used to his office, to wander through the building, to explore the green garden that he could see from his barred window stretching out behind the mansion?

For a second, he almost rebelled; but even as he thought of answering no, he realized that he never would. The Psych Agents had measured his Responsibility Quotient at 9.6, and they didn't make mistakes.

"Of course," he answered with forced enthusiasm. "Who do you suggest I discuss the matter with? For that matter, who are the Gnii?"

"I have the Manager of Defense, the Manager of Trade, and the Manager of Foreign Affairs waiting in the anteroom. With your permission, I'll call them in and they'll explain the problem. But first, if you would sign this order ... it has already been approved by President Reynolds and by all of the Managers concerned."

President Wong took the paper. It was an order sending a space platoon, 5,000 warships and 500,000 men, to the system of Altair A, to place themselves under the command of the Grasvian fleet for an attack against the system of Altair D.

The President frowned. "What's the story behind this?"

"As you know," Al explained patiently, "there is an unwritten agreement throughout the Galaxy that if any system conquers too many other

systems, an intersystem police force is formed to cut the conqueror down. Since for all practical purposes, there is an infinity of systems in the Galaxy, and as each conqueror borders on more and more of them as he grows larger in three-dimensional expansion, unlike the one-dimensional conquests that used to occur on the surface of planets, conquest of the Galaxy is an obvious impossibility. However, the inhabitants of Altair D seem to have embarked on a policy of reckless expansion that could reach us in time."

"I see," President Wong said. "How far away are they?"

"It will take the platoon sixteen years to get to the rendezvous. They will remain for ten years, then return. Because of the distance, we are not expected to send more than this token force."

President Wong looked at the order. It had already been signed by President Reynolds, by the Managers of Defense and of Foreign Affairs. After all, even though forty-two years was a long period of time to chop out of a man's life, only 500,000 men were involved, and it was the duty of every citizen to give his life for his planet if required.

With an impatient motion, he rolled his thumbprint in the soft plastic signature space, and held it for a second as it hardened. Then he threw the order into a basket labeled outgoing correspondence.

His first official duty completed, he should have felt exhilarated; but instead, nagging thoughts of guilt tugged at his brain.

Who were the inhabitants of Altair D, anyway? How did he know that the police action was just? Shouldn't he get out the whole file and go over it?

But that would take days ... and there was the matter of the Gnii, whoever they were.

The three managers entered. President Wong stood up and shook hands with them. They didn't waste time on other preliminaries, but rushed straight into business.

"The Gnii," the Manager of Trade, a large, red-faced man said, "demand that we remove our trading planetoid from their system. They allege that the planetoid is a security risk, in that it could be used for remote-control bombing of any of their planets. They threaten that if we don't remove it voluntarily, they will attack it, and their Ambassadors are here in person to take our reply to their ultimatum."

There was nothing unusual in that, President Wong knew. Since both spaceships and any other known means of communication traveled at

the speed of light, it was now more common to send Ambassadors on important missions than to send messages.

"What do you think we should do?" President Wong asked the Manager of Trade.

"I think we should tell them to go to hell," the Manager of Trade replied, his heavy face turning redder. "After all, we have a million trading planetoids out in the Galaxy—if we retreat here, we set a dangerous precedent."

"I see," Wong said, frowning. "I don't recall any alien trading planetoids in *our* system."

"Of course not, Mr. President," said the Manager Of Foreign Affairs, a tall, lean, distinguished-looking gentleman with blue eyes and iron-gray hair. "We don't permit them, for much the same reason that the Gnii want them removed from their system. Trading planetoids are usually only tolerated in backward systems. Apparently the Gnii no longer desire to be considered backward. I, for one, think that we would be making a mistake not to accede to their request."

"Oh, that's very fine, decent, sporting and all that," the Manager of Trade said irritably. "But I have to worry about feeding this overpopulated system of ours, which would starve if it weren't for intersystem trade—a significant part of which is carried on through the planetoids."

"Can we protect the threatened planetoid?" President Wong asked the Manager of Defense, a short, slim black man with flaming red hair.

The Manager of Defense considered his reply carefully. "Not if they are willing to pay a terrific price to destroy it," he said finally. "After all, it's thirty-three years away. While we can send out a fleet immediately that would get there at the same time as the Ambassadors, and before they could mount an attack, we hardly could send reinforcements and replacements once the battle is joined. But from the best information available, I think that a small force of twenty or twenty-five thousand troops should be able to frighten the Gnii out of doing anything foolish. They aren't very far advanced."

"Thirty-three years," President Wong said frowning. "That means a mixed crew with facilities for children. I am told that things often go wrong on that type of mission."

The Manager of Defense nodded. "They do," he agreed shortly. "However, I have analyzed that problem in detail in my report."

President Wong sighed. "If you gentlemen will leave your reports with me, I will make my decision by tomorrow morning."

Each of the Managers gave him several rolls of tape. Those of the Manager of Trade felt by far the heaviest. President Wong slipped them into the racks in his upper left-hand desk drawer.

"Ask the Gnii to come in," he said to Al.

Al pushed a button on the arm of his chair, and the door swung open. Four large spidery creatures entered the room, followed by a small bald man. Their round bodies were encased in plastic globes, in which a whitish translucent gas swirled. They walked over to the President's desk, and the leader extended a hairy leg.

With an effort, President Wong forced himself to take the leg with his hand and pump it up and down. He noticed that the creature withdrew the leg as soon as it was decently possible, and smiled a bit as he concluded that their aversion was mutual.

The Gnii stepped back and began waving his two front legs.

"He is asking for your reply to his ultimatum," the small bald man interpreted.

"Tell him I'll give him a definite decision tomorrow," President Wong said. "Apologize for my not being able to reply today, and point out that since it will take him thirty-three years to get home, one day will not make much difference."

The bald interpreter waved his hands. The four Gnii went into a small huddle, waving their spidery legs at each other. Then the leader turned to the interpreter again and "spoke."

"They say that they agree," the interpreter said. "But they want to emphasize that it is not because they fear the power of the Solar System."

The Gnii leader hesitated a moment, then extended his leg again. President Wong pumped it once. The Gnii dropped his hand and turned and left the room, with the three others and the interpreter filing after him.

"If you don't need me any more," the Manager of Trade said, glancing at his watch, "I'll go back to the Trade Bureau. I have a meeting with a number of the department heads."

President Wong nodded tiredly. "I have the tapes. I'll study all your positions tonight."

The Manager of Trade and the Manager of Foreign Affairs rose and left the room. The Manager of Defense stayed in his seat.

"If you feel up to it," Al said, "the Manager of Defense would appreciate it if you would present a Presidential citation to the remains of the Third Company. They were involved in a police action in the system of

Veganea, and their morale is shattered. As you know, the award is traditional, as is the speech. Here's the text—all you need do is read it."

"All right," President Wong said, taking the paper from Al's hand and scanning it. There was only one paragraph.

The door opened and four old men entered, followed by an honor guard of eight husky privates. They approached the desk and stood at attention. President Wong looked up from the speech and felt a wave of sudden nausea. For a second, he was afraid that he actually was going to be sick. None of their old lined faces was complete. The worst wounded had less than half a face, and that discolored by purple blotches of radiation scar-tissue. He was blind, and the others maneuvered him into position before the desk.

"For the heroic parts which you played in the Police Action against Veganea—" Wong stumbled over the name, then continued hastily—"I, the President of the Solar Union, hereby... ."

"Rot," said the blind one, through toothless gums in a voice that was only a hoarse whisper. "Tell me, do you know where Veganea is? Does anyone on Earth know where Veganea is, or care? How many men, Mr. President, how many men, young and healthy, left for that police action? Do you know?" His hoarse voice rose. "Four came back ... but can any of you gentlemen tell me *how many left*?"

"That's enough," the Manager of Defense said. At his signal, two of the honor guards gently took hold of the veteran's arms and walked him out of the room along with the others.

"I order that he not be punished," Wong said sharply.

"He won't be," the Manager of Defense said. "Do you take me for a barbarian? I had hoped, though, that your interest might change their attitude. As you can imagine, it's raising hell with the morale of the recruits."

"By the way," the President asked, "where is Veganea, and how many men *did* we send there?"

"It's about twenty-four years away, near Vega. The action started before my time and I don't know how many men were involved—probably not more than a few million. The Police Action ended successfully, but our ships were in the first wave and were wiped out."

The President sat down wearily. His hand strayed over to the order he had signed that morning for a police action, then drifted aimlessly away.

"What's next?" he asked Al. He slipped a few energy pills into his mouth as Al consulted his book.

"There's the matter of the conversion bomb," Al said. "The Manager of Scientific Research and the Manager of Defense would like you to make a decision about it."

"The conversion bomb?" President Wong said, puzzled. "I've never heard of it."

"It is highest level top secret," the Manager of Defense explained. "Instead of breaking down atoms and releasing some energy as in the standard fission weapons, it converts matter entirely into energy. Given the matter-energy equation, the energy released by a small amount of matter is fantastic."

Al had risen and gone to the door. He returned with an old, gray-haired, stoop-shouldered man. The President recognized the famous Manager of Research.

The Manager launched immediately into his argument without preliminaries. "Mr. President, while my department has finally found a way to convert matter directly into energy, I believe that any use of this process would be disastrous. First, there is absolutely no safeguard that could prevent a matter-conversion powered machine, used for peaceful purposes, from being changed into a lethal weapon by the simplest of alterations. And as a weapon, the conversion bomb, unlike atomic bombs, could not only destroy planets but stars with their entire systems. We all know that the law of the Galaxy is to prevent its domination by any one system—and given the distances and populations involved, that domination is obviously impossible. But if we began to construct conversion bombs, and if word of it got out, the whole Galaxy would rise against us, all the way to the Edge."

"But, Mr. President," the Manager of Defense said calmly. "We are not a unique people. If we do not produce the conversion bomb, you may rest assured that someone else will. Maybe even our friends, the Gnii. No system has ever saved itself by refusing to manufacture the best weapons available to it. As for the Galaxy rising against us—if we have the conversion bomb, let them! We will be able to defend ourselves against any or all of them and blast their suns into novae."

"Until *they* have the bomb," the Manager of Scientific Research interrupted. "As you say, we are not a unique people."

"Gentlemen," the President said, standing up suddenly. "I feel tired and dizzy. The idea of a bomb that can wipe out systems is new to me. If

you will leave your tapes, I will study your arguments tonight, and we can resume this discussion tomorrow."

The two Managers rose immediately, shook hands with the President, and left. They did not speak to each other as they went through the door.

"Mr. President," Al said, "it's seven o'clock. Will you join me for dinner, sir?"

President Wong slumped back into his seat and stared dully at Al, only half noticing his friendly grin. "What would you do about the Gnii, Al, if you were in my place?" he asked.

"I'm sorry, sir," Al said, "but I really don't know. Better come along for some dinner. You've had a hard day, and you have a harder one ahead of you tomorrow. We saved a number of difficult problems that we didn't want to throw at you on your first day in office."

A ghost of a smile crept over the President's face, then disappeared quickly. "It's all right, Al. Go ahead and eat. I think I'll just stay here and go over these tapes."

As Al left, President Wong saw the order for the police action on his desk. He picked it up to call Al to take it with him, but his eyes caught the words *500,000 men ... sixteen years*, and a picture of the terribly wounded veterans flashed before his eyes. Really, he would have to go through the files and find out if the expedition was necessary... .

He opened the left-hand desk drawer and stared at the Gnii tapes, but he didn't take any of them out. It seemed like too much of an effort.

And then, the conversion bomb was so much more important.

He closed the first drawer and opened the one with the conversion bomb tapes.

But the Gnii had to be answered tomorrow—the bomb could wait. He slammed the drawer shut.

"Gnii," he muttered to himself, and opened the other drawer.

Then he noticed that he had put the police action order back into his outgoing basket. He slammed the drawer with the Gnii tapes shut again and opened the drawer below it and pushed the order inside, so that it wouldn't be picked up by mistake before he could check on it.

"Five hundred thousand men in here," he said as he closed the drawer. "Going to—"

Where were they supposed to go? He couldn't remember. He opened the drawer again and looked at the order. To Altair D. The name had no meaning for him.

Now, let's see ... oh, yes, the conversion bomb tape.

He opened the drawer to take out the tapes, and remembered that the Gnii ultimatum had to be answered by tomorrow.

"Gnii, Gnu, Gnuts," he said, opening a drawer. It was the wrong one, and the tapes weren't there. Which tapes?

The door opened, and President Wong looked up to see Al's smiling face peering in.

"I was passing by, sir," Al said, "and I wondered if I couldn't talk you into supper—"

"*Get out!*" the President shouted.

The door closed softly.

Now where was he?... Oh, yes, the conversion bomb. Conversion, conversion, conversation, bomb, bomb, boom, *BOOM*. But that wasn't it either—it was the Gnii, they had to be answered by tomorrow... . Gnii, Gnii, Gnu, Gnuts, now in what drawer had he put the gnats? And why order a police action against Gnats? Just convert every one of them into spiders... .

Al walked slowly down the hall, his grin gone, his face looking washed out. He turned into his own little office and snapped on the communications video.

"First Vice-President Michael Thompson," he said to the operator.

In a moment Thompson appeared on the screen.

"Mr. First Vice-President," Al said in a tired voice, "may I suggest that you remain in the Capital for the next few weeks?"

Even though he knew that it was not polite, Al snapped off the set without waiting for a reply—but not before he caught the white and frightened look on Thompson's face.

—STEPHEN ARR

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