

EARTHMEN ASK NO QUARTER!

By Fox B. Holden

General Taylor knew that Earth could not resist the invaders, so he ordered all units to surrender. But one commander thought he meant—

"Let them in, sergeant." The white-haired New United Nations World Space Force chief spoke the words as though he had been forced into the most humiliating surrender in history. And he had been.

What could he tell them? They were not fools, after all, and he was so impossibly exhausted.... Uniform was a mess. All day and all night, words, words, ... and nothing. Too many useless, powerless words, all adding up to nothing. Foreign space admirals, ground-force field marshals, defense secretaries from a dozen capitals.

Where were the ion-field cannon that had been promised for the last twenty years? Where were the new main-drives? The new alloys? Promises, always promises—but where in God's name *were* they?

And now—now it didn't matter any more.

He let his massive frame slump tiredly for a moment, elbows flattening some of the official litter strewn across the broad desk-top, head in his big hands.

"General Taylor, sir—"

He forced the thoughts from his brain with almost the same physical force with which he shoved his tired body erect.

"Yes, yes, thank you, sergeant. Good morning, gentlemen. Sorry to have kept you waiting."

There were perhaps thirty of them, all civilians, all crowding for a spot nearest the huge desk, all with stub

pencils and sheafs of crumpled newsprint in their hands. A couple of flash-bulbs went off.

"General, can you tell us what the aliens' intentions are?"

And it had begun.

"I'm authorized to tell you that the alien space ship is hostile. But, under the circumstances we are convinced with reasonable certainty that their hostility may be ... mollified to an appreciable degree."

He watched them as they got the official double-talk down word for word. And then, "In other words, General—we are counter-attacking?"

"Sorry. That information is classified."

"About how high is the alien, sir?"

"He is circling Earth in an orbit about two thousand miles out, passing our own stations about once every forty-eight hours."

"How big is the ship, sir? About what shape?"

"It is a cigar-shaped vessel, approximately three miles in length and slightly under one at maximum diameter."

"Have any of our own ships as yet had actual contact with this craft?"

"Yes, there has been contact. I am sorry that for the time being the result cannot be disclosed."

"There are rumors, General, that the 402nd Space Wing sent a five or six-ship element of J-83 Lancers from Lunar Base, and that the ships have not reported back. Is this true, sir?"

"It is true that they have not been heard from since they left."

Then a young, unquavering voice cut in softly. "When is it to begin, sir? And when will we—"

"You may—write, gentlemen, that the invasion of Earth has already begun. And, that we have absolutely no defense against it. None. Because of that fact, the decision of the New U. N. Joint Chiefs has been that there should be no needless loss of life. You may write that we have—that we have already surrendered."

His face felt as though it were hewn from wood—a strange wood with a fever in it. He had spoken far beyond his authorization. But they had to know. They could not be lied to forever. And the lies had always, ultimately, been worthless things. He was so *tired*.

"General, can you tell us *why*?"

The group was white-faced, still. The flash-bulbs had stopped popping. The first impulse to bolt the General's office for the nearest bank of press telephones had somehow died even as it had arisen. Belief and disbelief mingled as one in the eyes of each.

"I'll try gentlemen," Taylor said wearily, leaning across the desk, his knuckles white against the smooth surface. "I

could talk about our stressing of cultural advancement in this 21st century, rather than technological ... a trend that has always made us of the military fearful of the future—now at hand—but what's the use of rehashing problems of the past.... Plainly and simply, gentlemen, the Invader is superior to us in every phase of known warfare. Add to that the element of a surprise attack and you find us as we are at this moment—beaten, irreparably."

No one said anything. There was nothing to say.

General Taylor sank into his chair and stared at them, a grim hopelessness in his eyes.

Then the newsmen walked from the room. Slowly and silently.

Robert Manning, civilian Pentagon clerk, told himself that the Invaders might better kill everybody off and get it over with than to just regiment the hell out of everything. A man couldn't even stay home so his wife could take care of his cold for him.

He sneezed. If allowed to live it, there were perhaps forty years of life yet for him. Forty years, and they would be slave years. It was all too damned new and just hadn't got through to him yet. What in God's name was it going to be *like*....

There was a sickness in his stomach, and he knew it was not from his cold.

"Manning—"

He looked up. It was Sweeney, the chief clerk. Manning always thought of him as a man who should've been a first-sergeant somewhere. He was big enough and loud enough, and certainly had temper enough.

"Yes, Mr. Sweeney?"

"Need these damn records right away. They all here? Each reel double-wound with positive and negative both?"

"Yes, sir." Sweeney picked up the bundlesome stack of microfilm reels. "Mr. Sweeney—"

"What is it?"

"Are—are *They* going to get 'em? All of Earth's Space outpost and military records—*everything*?"

"After the Joint Chiefs make out emergency recall orders for every last damn unit, they are. They will check each set of orders against every unit record here, all the way from Corps down to each individual ship." Sweeney grunted. "Then they'll burn 'em, positives, negatives, everything ... then when the ships come in, they will destroy them too."

Manning felt something turn over inside him. "General Taylor,—"

"What the hell can Taylor do? Christ, you're better off than he is. Once every ship is back here and busted up, he won't even have a job. Maybe not even a head."

"Every ship. They're all there, Mr. Sweeney. Positives and negatives double-wound on every reel."

"They better be. Or *you* won't have a damn head!"

Sweeney turned and steamrolled out of the office, with every existing record past and present of General Taylor's New U. N. World Space Force under one beefy arm. For security reasons, Manning realized, there had been made but a single copy and negative for each of its units.

His desk was an old one, practically an antique dating back to the 1940's, and his sonotyper was buried deep in its insides on a wooden shelf that folded out to meet you in an awkward manner when you pushed the desk-top up, over and down.

Manning pushed, and with a couple of bronchial grunts produced the sonotyper. He fed in a continuous paper spool, turned on the current, unhooked the compact microphone from the machine's side, and began dictating the rest of his day's work.

Something got kicked viciously out of the key-bed. Black, shiny squares of something. All he needed was for the sonotyper to go haywire and start shooting its complex insides all over.

He stopped dictating to remove his glasses and dry his streaming eyes. His vision cleared, and for an instant settled on the shiny things that had landed near the front edge of his desk.

Hunks of microfilm.

He picked them up, held one to the light. Words. He fished in a drawer, found a magnifying glass that was used for half-obliterated old files.

He could see the words better, but they were backwards. He had the negative. Impatiently, he grabbed the other square. And read it.

And shivered. And again, it wasn't his cold that was bothering him. He would have to call Sweeney right away—

... Light Space Brigade, Experimental. Temporary outpost, Callisto. Force: 20 Lancer-type J-88 destroyers. Complement: 600. Commanding: Col. Geoffrey Steele—

He felt his insides turning to cold jelly. He would have to call Sweeney. God! Sweeney would skin him alive. Somehow, the tail ends of one of the double-wound reels must have stuck out a little, got sliced neatly off when he'd hastily jammed its pan-cover back on after inspecting it. Then the severed squares of microfilm had slipped down, unnoticed, through one of the desk-top cracks where the sonotyper fold-away unit was. And landed in the key-bed. Only Sweeney wouldn't understand it that way. And the Joint Chiefs—

Oh God no!

He had to think.

And he thought of that other name. On the microfilm record—Steele, it was, who commanded 600 men, twenty J-88s....

He thought of forty years of slavery.

And then he was doing a crazy thing—crazy—

While no one looked, Robert Manning sneezed and blew his nose and touched the flame of his cigarette lighter to the two squares of microfilm.

The white-faced communications sergeant stood just inside the door, and this time he failed to be impressed with the unusual smartness of the Colonel's acknowledging salute. The thick sheaf of yellow papers he held in his left hand was trembling visibly, noisily, and he couldn't make it stop.

"Well, Grady, what is it? You look as though you'd picked up a telepath message from one of our Callistan cap-crawlers, or something—" He reached out for the quaking message the sergeant held, and the communications man smiled nervously and held it out to him.

"Sorry, sir. I—I guess I just—"

"No trouble, boy?" The stocky black-and-silver uniformed figure paused in its movement, the thick pile of yellow papers momentarily forgotten. All of Steele's personnel seemed like sons to him. Even the raw recruits who had previously never been further out than Earth's own Moon. Sometimes, during the lonely hours there had been in the fastnesses of Space, he had surmised it was because there had never been a real son of his own with whom to share the adventures of his calling.

But hadn't it been Space itself that had denied him those many things other men could take for granted—the things

for which he had never quite been able to trade? Forty years of it. Venus to Pluto. Deep Space at the System's rim and beyond, to the very edge of Infinity itself.

Sometimes this deep hurt within him seemed too great. And yet, somehow, it seemed always worth the venture. One day, no matter the cost or the hurt, men's outposts would be flung to the stars themselves. This thing he knew.

The sergeant was speaking, and there was a fear in his eyes.

"Something's—happened, home, sir. You'd better read this right away. All the way to the very end, sir."

Steele ran a freckled, stub-fingered hand slowly and deliberately along the close-cropped iron-gray side of his squarish skull.

Attention all stations, the message read. URGENT IMPERATIVE. Earth has been successfully invaded. The rapidity, timing, and infallibility of the attack has made the necessity of immediate capitulation unquestionable. The following-listed units are therefore commanded, for the good of the planet, to return to home Earth bases at once, with all armament either completely dismantled or destroyed. The conquerors have warned that failure to comply with this command will result in wholesale liquidation of Earth's populace.

The long list of outposts followed for fifteen closely-spaced pages. The message was signed *Taylor, General, New United Nations World Space Force, Commanding.*

Steele suddenly felt himself struggling to keep order for full-scale attack bottled in his throat.

Then he fought to keep from simply cursing.

He fought to keep the hot, quick panic in him from boiling into some unthinkable suicide.

The sergeant still stood before him, the thing of awful fear deep in his eyes.

"Get Major Zukow at once, sergeant."

"Yes, sir. But sir—"

"What is it?" His jaws hurt, and he could feel the words hissing from between his teeth.

"The list, sir. We're the smallest and newest unit there is, so we'd lie right at the bottom, page fifteen. But we're not there. We're not listed at all, sir."

He looked. Grady was right. And OK'd and signed by Taylor himself, no mistaking that.

"Get Major Zukow, sergeant. On the double!"

"Yes, sir!" The communications non-com stumbled awkwardly; acclimatization to lesser gravities came quickly only with long experience. He recovered, and then in a curious loping fashion began to run.

For terse seconds Steele spoke clipped words into a unit-communicator. And then he waited for Zukow.

It would be a moment, or so yet. He looked at the message again, re-read it, tried to glean information from it that it didn't contain. It told what, but it didn't tell *why*. Nor even how. It was just a command, to be obeyed like any other command. No, it wasn't the soldier's place to question. Never the soldier's place to question.

Here is an ideal, they would say. Here is the thing you must work or fight for. Here is what is worth believing in. And the soldier believed. If he did not he was fortunate, for then he just had a job to do. But if he believed, he was the most hapless creature in the Universe. For sooner or later, the ideal wore thin as a facade for the more practical expediencies which moved behind it. What true ideal there was with the soldier, yet his was not the freedom to serve it.... And when the ideal was suddenly scrapped; when they said now, now it is all over, now this is what you must do—here is a new thing to believe....

Forty years, from the bogs of Venus to the wastes of Pluto....

He looked again at the list headed *ALL UNITS*: and checked them, one by one.

Grady had been right. Experimental simply wasn't there. Maybe an experimental Light Space Brigade on a dark little world like Callisto could get lost in the shuffle.

But he knew better. With Earth at stake, Taylor would allow no such error. Taylor knew every one of his units by heart, he must....

He thought about Taylor. He thought about him the way he had known him as both soldier and individual, as general and as a man. Character. Principle. Guts. The three biggest things about Taylor. A man who followed orders to the letter—a man who would surrender of his own volition, no matter what price to pay the piper ... that was where the principle came in; the character, the guts.

He looked at Taylor's facsimile-signature again. Signed by force? By threat? Obviously. The message itself said as much. But if somehow there'd been a mistake, a record overlooked, Taylor would know, and would—

But who else would know? At a glance, who else would know? And then how much would Taylor dare?

For one of the rare times in his life, Steele was frightened to his core.

"Colonel Steele, sir!" Major Zukow snapped a perfunctory salute, put himself at rest and lowered his towering square-cut body into a laxerchair. The healthy pink in his broad face and the purposefulness in the set of his clean-cut features made him look younger than he was, and the close-cropped black hair was like an added insigne of his profession to his perfectly-fitted uniform.

"You'd better take a look at this, Georgi. And then we've got to get things moving." Steele handed the order across his desk.

He waited while Zukow read. He watched Zukow's face. It seemed to gradually coagulate.

And when he was finished, Steele said, "Now find us on there!"

"But I don't—anything else, any other details? Is this—?"

"It's as true as the leaves on your shoulders, Major. And that's all there is, so far. Grady will be in with anything else when and if it should come. Well? What are you thinking?"

"Thinking? If this damned thing isn't some criminal joke, there's no thinking to it, Colonel. We just *go*, period. I'll get—"

"Just a minute. Did you try to find us on there? What do you make of that?"

"A mistake. Some clerical mistake, that's all. What else could be made of it? On an order like this?"

Steele shifted in his swivel-seat, and a neglected spring squawked its protest. "Suppose," he began slowly, "it was a mistake, Major. But Taylor put his name to it anyway, just the way it is. Now, do you think he'd be *likely* to miss such an error?"

Zukow hesitated, a scowl corrugating his wide forehead. "No I don't think so, but whether he was likely to or not hasn't anything to do with it. The mistake was made—he didn't catch it, but he signed it, sent it, and it means us like all the rest of 'em, period!"

"I think he caught it, Major."

"What do you—"

"I mean just that. He caught it. *And still signed it!*"

"Colonel, don't be crazy! With a gun in his back—"

"Just the point. The people holding the gun would of course have grabbed the records as a check against Taylor's written command. It's the only way they'd have of knowing what was what. They'd do all they could to make sure they were given the complete works, of course, but ultimately, they'd have to trust Taylor—trust his fear of their terrible power and staggering advantage. Only—let's say there *was* a mistake. One way for it to be caught. Taylor—he'd know at a glance—the one man who would. And he still signed it!"

"Nuts, Colonel, nuts! What you are suggesting is absolute nonsense. With the lives of billions of people in the balance, you mean he'd—"

"Leave it up to us."

"With only twenty J-88s? With a planetful of people in the balance. Sir, do you think Taylor's a lunatic or something?"

Steele groped for an answer that would take the cold logic out of Zukow's questions. The exec had to be wrong. There must be an answer.

"Zukow," he heard himself saying at last, "there were only three of our craft out today—all behind the Big Boy, and I've ordered them in—damped, and clammed up. I've grounded the rest. And if we don't get anything from communications within the next couple of hours, like a Notification of Error and Correction—"

"You must be out of your head, Colonel." Zukow stood up, towered over the big desk. Veins in his wide forehead stood out redly, accentuating the growing color in his stiffened face. "In a couple of hours we go into eclipse! Not for long, but while we are, we won't be *able* to pick up anything. Suppose *then* the notification comes? While we're working out some crazy plan still thinking Taylor was trying to pull a cute one? Do you think we can take a gamble like that? Do you think we have the *right* to take a gamble like that?"

"As it is," Steele replied slowly, "our people are to be slaves. For all we know, forever."

"A little dramatic, aren't you?"

"Would you call it a situation to be taken lightly?"

The other straightened, said nothing.

"Major, Taylor was taking a shot in the dark. We're a fantastically slim hope—but we're the *only* one he's got!"

"And I think that right now you are a greater enemy to Earth than all her Invaders!"

"'Liberty or death,' Major, that's what Taylor was saying to us when he knowingly put his signature to a fluke error!"

"Oh for God's sake Colonel, come off it! It sounds just jim-dandy but you haven't even got a plan! Infinity to zero, those are your odds! And if I thought you were seriously considering *not* going in. I'd—"

"Yes, Major, you'd what?"

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