

The Sling And The Stone

By Michael Shaara

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On the morning of the first day, floating in the cold of space, they inflated the station. It puffed up tightly to a silvery doughnut, and four men whose names were Krylov, Mirkov, Stolyakhin and Davchenko went to live inside. There was no ceremony. Out of a motionless rocket which hung in space nearby, other men came, trailing long wires. All the long black afternoon of that day these men clustered on the skin of the doughnut, fixing curved weightless slabs of carbon-coated aluminum to the sides. And within the station, where there was air and therefore a blessed noise, the four men worked with fluttery movements, attaching wires and steel ribs, adjusting, connecting. After a while there was nothing more to do. The rocket pulled in its lines, gathered up its men. When they were all inside it turned over slightly and spat a silent flame, and began to fall, and fell, and was gone.

That was the first day.

The second day was filled with work, and watching, and a great awe.

The third day began to be lonely.

On the fourth day they had a visitor....

The mindless insanity, so carefully by-passed for so many years, reached out at last and drew him in. Diavilev awoke.

The room was very cold, Pyotr Diavilev struggled into his clothes, not sleepy at all, while the army man stood silently at the foot of

the bed. Outside the door, stolid and heavy-footed in the darkness, there were other army men, creaking the floorboards and chuckling.

And so it comes, Diavilev thought. There was nothing at all to say or do. He hitched his belt tightly and breathed for what seemed like the first time, and then he nodded to the army man.

He was taken away.

He sat in the dark, in the plush rear seat of a huge car being driven at great speed through the city. He was surprised; he had expected them to be more brutal. But they were never, ever, what you expected. In the darkness he strove to compose himself.

The army man asked him for a cigarette. When he struck the match Diavilev realized that he had forgotten his glasses.

"My glasses," he said humbly, "please, I have forgotten my glasses."

The army man surprisingly, seemed concerned. Then he said:

"Never mind. We will get them."

He leaned forward and spoke into a radio. There was a brief reply which Diavilev could not hear and the army man sat back comfortably, satisfied.

"Your glasses will be there," he said.

Diavilev thanked him. Because of the unexpected courtesy the level of his fear began to go down. *Perhaps it will not be so bad*, he thought. *Maybe after all it is only interrogation*. But again he thought that you never knew what to expect, that in all the long

years of yessing and bowing and applauding he had never understood them.

Well then, now was the time to understand.

I will say whatever they want me to say, I will not resist in the least. What does it matter? The world belongs to them, and if a man wishes to live he must be logical and agree. Let them do what they will, and I will applaud every step of the way.

He folded his hands in his lap.

After a long while the car stopped. The first army man gave him over to another army man whom he could not see in the darkness, and after many a salute he was conducted through a black iron gate. Within minutes he was aboard a plane with four more army men. No one would say anything. Pyotr Diavilev slept.

This of course he could not believe.

He saw the thing clearly in the late morning sun, rising in an enormous, shining tube from the hard-baked floor of the desert, but it was obviously impossible. He was taken on an elevator one hundred feet into the air and ushered through a door into the side of the thing, not believing any of it for an instant. He was told, rather kindly for once, that he was to be taken up in this thing and not to worry, because it had been tested. Many times. But he was so completely overwhelmed that he could not ask a question. There was nothing but army men now, one of whom conducted him to a foam rubber hammock and strapped him in. To his utter astonishment, the thing actually did take off.

There were some very bad minutes. For a while he weighed several tons and could not move, and then he weighed nothing at all and

was sick. Someone else unstrapped him and gave him pills, and then thoughtfully tied him to a handring on the wall. And at long last his mind began to accept it.

The incredible Soviet had succeeded. His Russian contemporaries had put a manned vessel in outer space.

Diavilev sat quietly stupefied.

That the spouting, unshaven, preposterous baboons with whom he had worked could have built this thing seemed to him blankly impossible. Being one himself, Pyotr Diavilev had no great respect for what Russian scientists the great many purges had left. But of course there the thing was. Built by Germans perhaps, with secrets stolen from the Americans while they haggled about peace; nevertheless, there the thing was.

And if he was going up now there could be only one place to go and therefore he was not a prisoner at all. The wonder and relief of it was too much at once. He surrendered himself to awe. When the time came to board the satellite he was poised and ready.

In the midst of a curving room hung and inset with a thousand shining gadgets, Pyotr Diavilev floated in the air. A black-browed man took his arm carefully and pulled him to the floor, placed magnetic-soled shoes on his feet. Diavilev could not help grinning delightedly. The dark man, whose name was Krylov, stood thoughtfully and absently scratching his cheek.

"Now as to why you are here," he said, and Diavilev tensed and waited. There were three other men in the room, but no one moved.

"You understand of course what this station is, and that the building of it places us, our people, in control of the world."

Diavilev nodded.

"Atomic missiles launched from this base may be guided exactly to any point on the surface of the Earth that we select, yet the station itself represents so small and distinct a target as to be virtually invulnerable. Russia, my friend, need fear no country on Earth. Not," he added quickly, "that she ever did, of course."

Diavilev, with the inbred habit of years, gave his congratulations. Krylov stood looking at him closely, half-smiling, rubbing again at his cheek. There was something infinitely chilling in the moment, but Diavilev was able to smile back.

"This station has been in existence," said Krylov, "for slightly more than a week. There are not fifty people in the entire world who know of it. You have become one. You are therefore most important."

Diavilev was becoming nervous.

"But you are important," Krylov went on slowly, "for other reasons. To be exact, you are perhaps as important at this moment as any man who ever lived."

Diavilev, dazed, struggled to digest that while Krylov held him with his eyes and the three other men spoke lowly among themselves.

"I am saying all this to impress upon you the vastness of the work with which you have been entrusted. I want you to understand clearly that the accuracy of your work could mean the collapse of all our enemies, of the entire capitalistic empire. Therefore you *will* be accurate."

There was a fixity to Krylov's face which was unsettling. Diavilev waited, uneasy and bewildered. The dark man smiled.

"You are a Russian," he stated powerfully. "We know that you will do your best."

"Of course," Diavilev said.

Krylov turned and pulled open a drawer. Out of the drawer he drew a chart and handed it to Diavilev.

"Do you recognize that?"

Diavilev stared.

"That is the plotted orbit," Krylov said carefully, "of a moon. It is not of course the moon with which you are familiar. But it is a moon circling the Earth, a *second* moon.

"It is a moon of which no one knows, excepting ourselves and the Kremlin. We discovered it shortly after we arrived, when it passed quite near the station. It is small and dark, too small and non-reflecting to be seen from Earth. It is approximately five miles wide.

"Do you understand?"

Diavilev who had had to digest a great many things in a very short while, was able to nod. Because this was, after all, Diavilev's field.

A second moon, he told Krylov, speaking with some excitement, had long been predicted by astrophysicists everywhere. Since the Earth had been attracting meteors for something like two billion years, it was inevitable that *some* at least should be captured as moons.

Krylov broke in, nodding with impatience.

"Exactly. And now as to your work. You will see this moon shortly, when it crosses our path again. At that time you will correct the orbit we have plotted. You will also give us the exact mass and speed of that moon. The instruments you will need are already here. Let me emphasize this: You will be accurate. Is that clear?"

Diavilev nodded.

"Do you have any questions?"

Diavilev had none. He wanted to ask why, of course, but he knew from long experience of army men that Krylov was not ready to tell him. He set himself, as always, to be patient. And now as well he wanted to think, he wanted to be alone. The magnificent fact of where he was had begun at last to envelope him. Now he wanted to *see*.

"Very well," said Krylov, "the moon will be here in three hours."

The interview ended. The army men moved away awkwardly, through the air. A young man named Stolyakhin, clearly showing his contempt for intellectuals and scientists, was left to show him around.

And for the Universe, for Creation, for the most magnificent sight that any man would ever see, Diavilev had three hours.

At three twenty-three in the black afternoon the moonlet came within radar range. The alarm claxon screamed. Pyotr Diavilev sat poised and ready, holding himself tightly, while the thing came by with a great curving rush. There was very little time, but Diavilev

worked with care and precision, and when he was done he looked into the television screen and saw the moonlet go by.

In that moment he felt the presence of God.

The thing was so huge, so incredibly immense, that Diavilev was terrified. Jagged, pitted, revolving slowly like a great rolling stone, the ball rushed by in the awful silence, blotting out the stars. To Diavilev there was never anything so cold, or dark, or ominous, never anything at all like it in all the history of man, or the world. *Like a stone*, Diavilev thought *from the sling of God*. It bore off into the west, reflecting dimly the cold yellow rays of the sun. It was gone in seconds.

Diavilev tried to relax. He put a cigarette into his mouth and lighted it, but as usual the heated gasses did not rise and the cigarette put itself out. Diavilev did not notice. Before he could think, before he could even begin to realize the thought that was forming in his mind, Krylov was beside him, speaking with restrained exultation.

"Were you successful?"

Diavilev looked up shakily.

"Yes."

"You will check your figures, of course."

"They are accurate."

"Doubtless. But you will check them. When you are certain that there is no possibility of error, you will be given your final work. I will not tell you that until you have finished here, since what we

plan may affect the clarity of your thinking. That must not happen."

Diavilev could not stop the question.

"What are you going to do?"

"You will know when there is a need. Your figures must be accurate."

Krylov was gone.

Diavilev sat for a long time without thinking, then he reached up slowly and turned off the television, and the Earth and the stars were gone. Now he must begin to think; now, really, he must try to understand. Twenty-four hours ago he had been in his bed in his home, sleeping, and now he was in outer space. It was too much for him.

He could not understand why they had brought him here and before the stupendous fact of what was *outside* he was helpless even to think. He had only a fear, a cold growing fear deep inside, because this station was the most potent military weapon the world had ever known, and because there was no hope now for the rest of the world. Always before he had thought, as a matter of course, that the army men would never last, would be swallowed eventually in the Russian soil just as had all the other conquerors before them. But now he saw that there was no chance, and the power of these men, their overwhelming power, was a fact he could not deny.

Yet the habit of obedience was great, and this thing too Diavilev could forget. For in the end what mattered was only this: Diavilev was outside.

No more time to think.

He reached back up, turned on the screen. He surrendered himself with awe to watch the shining movements.

And the moonlet was forgotten.

There were many, many things which the moonlet would end, and Pyotr Diavilev was one of them, but of this of course he could not know, and so he continued to watch while the moonlet swung out over Russia, Denmark, and the northern tip of England. Just as it had been passing, silently, for a hundred million years. Just as it would pass, still silently, for a few more days....

The moonlet came round twice more, and each time Pyotr Diavilev carefully checked his figures. They were true. The thing was roughly circular, something less than five miles in diameter, had an orbital speed approaching that of the station. Because of its weight Diavilev was certain that it was virtually solid nickel iron. A cold whirling mass of iron, five miles thick, come out of eternity and the endless reaches of space.

It occurred to Diavilev, with fascination, that no one as yet had boarded the thing. He was about to ask when Krylov came up, but now the end came, and he had no time.

Krylov wanted to know if he was now certain. Diavilev said yes.

"Good. Now we may begin."

Krylov looked into the television screen, again rubbing his face with thick hairy hands. They were just passing over the northwestern coast of America; Diavilev waited.

"If you were to take a pail of water," Krylov said calmly, "and whirl it around over your head, what would happen to the water?"

Diavilev looked at him queerly.

"It would remain in the pail," Krylov said, smiling.

"If you were swinging it fast enough."

"Exactly."

Krylov turned back to stare at the screen. Below them was the pale gleaming blue of the Pacific.

"But if you were to slow it down, comrade," Krylov said gently.

"What would happen then?"

"It would fall." And then, all of a sudden, Diavilev understood.

Time stopped. Diavilev began to feel sick.

Krylov laughed at his amazement.

"Now take the case of this moon. If we were to slow it down, would it not fall?"

"But how...?"

"Would it not?"

"Yes."

"Ha!" Krylov laughed delightedly. "It was my own idea, you know. Although I am not a scientific man, this I could do myself. Are you amazed? I see that you are."

He clapped a rough hand on Diavilev's knee. Diavilev strove to keep the horror from his face.

"Now one thing more. The moon, or moonlet, as you say, passes along a definite line over certain areas of the Earth. If we were able to slow it down when and where we wanted, the moon could be made to fall at a predetermined point along that line. That is obvious.

"You have already computed that path, along with all the necessary data. We, my friend, have picked the target. Your further work, therefore, is this: you will determine the point and the time at which the moonlet must be slowed in order to fall upon the target. It is a simple question of trajectory. And that is your mission, your trust."

Diavilev could not speak. This man was clearly mad.

Krylov was laughing again, his teeth bared into Diavilev's eyes.

"Can you conceive it, comrade? Can you imagine it? The hand of God! They will call it the hand of God!"

He leaned back and roared almost upsetting himself in the weightless air. The other crewmen heard him laugh and turned to look. They were all grinning.

Diavilev felt his clothes becoming sodden. Krylov was serious. More than that, they were all serious. The Leader himself must know of all this and must have approved, or Diavilev would not be here.

But they cannot have fallen this far, Diavilev told himself, not in so little a time.

But they would do it. Observing Krylov, Diavilev understood at last that they would, and a great wave of despair cut through him.

"How will you slow it down?"

Krylov waved a fat hand smoothly.

"By a series of hydrogen bomb explosions, placed at intervals along the leading face. We have already begun. The bombs are here comrade. The thrust of each bomb is known, each will slow the moonlet to a certain extent. The last one, which you will time, will slow it too much and it will begin to fall. And then," Krylov grinned, "the hand of God."

Diavilev removed his glasses, wiped them slowly. Futile to fight, futile to oppose. The thing would work, he thought, and this hairy, itching maniac knew it. Futile to tell him anything. But he had to say something.

"Have you any idea of the explosive power the moonlet will have?"

"Some," Krylov said calmly, turning to watch him now with rock-like eyes. "At the speed with which it will hit it can have no tensile strength. Therefore the kinetic energy will be transformed into an explosive energy. The thing will blow up. It will devastate an area several hundred miles wide. It will kill quite a few million people." Krylov chuckled. "And it can never be traced to us. It will be an act of Providence."

Krylov roared again, waving his arms. "Think of the reaction, consider the necessary psychology! At this most crucial point in the history of the world, at this time when the enemy is preparing for a 'holy war', suddenly a meteor will fall on the center of their

land. A meteor like none that has ever been dreamed of, and it will be so great a coincidence that it should fall at this time, in this place, that they will be forced to their knees. The fools—the fat, weak, superstitious fools!—will say that it is God's will!"

Krylov roared again. And then he reminded Diavilev that it was his own idea.

There was more. Krylov even suggested that the moonlet would be humane. It was, after all, only a bomb. And if there was a war there would be many bombs. But now the Americans would not dream of bombs. There need not be a war at all.

Diavilev sat very still, yessing the rain of incredible logic. It was clear to him only that this man was not human at all, that none of them were, and that the destruction of civilization was the most inevitable thing that ever was.

Krylov said that he knew Diavilev was overwhelmed, that he should rest before he completed the final figures. He clapped Diavilev on the shoulder and, before leaving, gave him the name of the target area. Accuracy, after all, was not so important. If the moonlet hit within a few hundred miles that would be enough.

Krylov went off and Diavilev was alone.

The light of the room was electric and undying. There was no blessed darkness to come. Diavilev sat in the glare until he could not endure it, and then found relief at the screen. With the Universe spread out before him, Diavilev made his decision.

For out of the crumbling insanity, up from the measureless ignorance which was his home, his nation, and his time, Diavilev had risen into the only peace and order he had ever known. There

down below him was the beautiful Earth and off to his right was the Moon, and above him there was nothing for ever and ever, nothing on out to infinity, the utter open nothing of deep space. He could never go back to the great sickness below. He realized that with great clarity, and a deep calm peace came over him. The decision was simple. To everything there is an end.

He thought about it for a long while, and then he smiled and it was done.

There was very little time. In the few moments that there were he went to the telescope. Maybe after all, with no atmosphere to hinder, he could really see the canals on Mars....

Pyotr Diavilev handed in his figures. The blasting was done in the daytime, so that there was little chance of it being seen from Earth. Bit by bit, the moonlet slowed. After a while there was only one more bomb to go.

With Krylov, in the waning moments, Diavilev rode out with the timing equipment. In one of the small, light shuttle craft they went from the station to the main rocket from Earth, which was following the moonlet along its shortening curve. There was one more hour.

"Very soon now, eh?" smiled Krylov, looking quite deep into Diavilev's eyes.

"Yes," said Diavilev.

"We will see it go all the way down. I have arranged for a picture to be relayed to a television screen on the rocket. You will have the seat of honor."

"Thank you," said Diavilev.

"Yes, you will have the seat of honor." Krylov was still staring at him.

Diavilev looked away. Outside the moonlet seemed stationary in space, huge and black and permanent. Diavilev could see the men on one face of her, setting the final bomb, which Diavilev would detonate with a radio signal. There was one more thing which Diavilev wanted to do.

"Krylov," he said suddenly.

When he turned back he saw that Krylov's eyes were still on him.

"Yes?" Krylov asked.

"I wonder—would you mind if I went aboard the moonlet? I would like to see what it is like, really, up close. No scientist has ever had a chance like this. Perhaps I might learn something. Would you mind?"

Krylov frowned, lowered his eyes slightly.

"Is there time?"

"There is an hour."

Krylov thought for a long moment. Then he straightened, smiling.

"Of course. You will go. We will both go."

Diavilev stepped out onto the surface of the moonlet. That Krylov was with him did not matter. He had set foot on an alien world.

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