



Betrayal

In my hands the little cloth bag seems tiny, so small that it almost slips my grasp ... my gnarled fingers are no longer able to quite completely close around it, as they did so easily many years ago. That first time I held it I barely noticed the measure of its substance, now it seems much heavier than when it was originally placed in my hands. And I wonder, will the time inevitably arrive when its weight becomes too much for me to lift? Will I forget how he looked at me? The weariness ... the hurt ... the love ... in his eyes? Or, will there be answers to my questions? Finally, for me, an ending to ... or, better, the reason for ... this story?

"So, when'd you get back?"

"Four days ago ... but you already know that! Just as you're fully aware that I've three weeks post-mission rest time coming, due me per Agency regulations. Furthermore, as I'm sure you would have learned if you had ever taken the time to read the field manuals, I've ..."

"Enough, Agent Daniel!"

I was upset, to say the least, but I recognized an order when one was given to me. Then again, I never was much for protocol, "... I've barely had time to flush the language transfer from my memory. I don't suppose you can recall what that headache is like?"

He leaned back in the oversized stuffed chair that so perfectly accommodated his rather wide bottom, a look of anger flashing across his face. I worried for a moment that I had pushed him too far, the tarnished plaques and dust covered awards hanging on the walls of his office clearly attested to the experience that had earned him his credentials. Then, as quickly as it had come, the grimace disappeared. He slowly relaxed and that famous ... or infamous, depending on your point of view ... smile crossed his face. "Sit down, Agent Daniel," he softly requested, "Please, Danny ... please sit down."

I sighed, another battle not even begun lost, as it had been every other time I tried to fight it, and I collapsed onto the couch next to his desk, "Is it okay if I at least get comfortable?"

He got up from his chair and walked over to the serving robot built into the wall. "By all means, settle yourself in. This'll take awhile. Would you like something to drink? A brandy? Perhaps a fine Antarian wine? Oh, that's right ... you don't touch the stuff. I remember now. How long has it been? Ten ... twelve years?"

"Fourteen, if it makes any difference. It's ancient history now. Anyhow, it was a rather useless and completely uninhabited planet, and, if I you recall, I even received a rather fancy commendation for helping to keep the spaceways clear ... or some nonsense like that."

He chuckled, for he, too, had had his moments. "Okay ... okay! Truce! So, how did the assignment turn out?"

I settled back into the plushly padded cushions, "A point nine seven probability rating, a full six percent above what the Analysis people predicted ... but you already know that since it was only yesterday that you reviewed my debriefing

and evaluation report. Get to the point ..." he scowled at me, "... Sir! Why am I here? No, that's obvious. When ... where ... what ... who? You might as well tell me."

He handed me a ceramic mug of hot coffee ... black, strong, and fresh-brewed, just as I preferred. Walking to where he could stare out the office window at the twin suns just beginning to set behind distant mountain peaks, he reached over and plucked a red folder from the cluttered surface of his desk. Without facing me he opened it and began to speak in a very low voice.

"The observation people discovered it just a short while ago. It's a CIO-LIO situation located ..."

"A Category Ten that's also Level Ten? I'm one of the most tenured in the Agency and I've never heard of that happening. Is it even possible?"

"... as I was saying, they found a CIO-LIO. Yes, it's possible, and, no, it's never happened before. May I continue?"

"Sorry, Boss, go ahead."

"The question is, how did we miss this? All the normal schedules have been followed. In fact, a full cross cultural analysis was done only two cycles ago and there was no indication at the time that things were headed in this direction. None."

"How good was that assessment? After all, you and I both know that in previous administrations when the budgets were tight the department would often ..."

"... my predecessor did the work himself, and I'm sure you know how good my father was!"

All I could say was, "Oh." After all, he was right. I did know.

"According to theory, what's happened is totally improbable. In fact, the computers are telling us there isn't much likelihood of it happening again during

the remaining time that the universe is going to exist. A lot of good that does us ... we're stuck with the situation."

I was still stunned. "A CIO-LIO! Damn, it's ... it's unbelievable! What about the Prime Directive? Couldn't we just leave them alone ... you know, simply allow things to take their natural course and let whatever is going to take place to happen without our intervening?"

"We could. I'd like to. I'm sure you're going to end up wishing that we had. But you must also recall the Prime Modifier? I don't have to remind you of that ... do I?"

My temper flared, which I'm sure is what he intended. "No, you don't. 'We must intervene in the historical development of any planetary culture if there is an extremely high probability that for us not to do so would allow said culture to inevitably pose a clear threat to others.' How'd I do?"

A look of sadness crossed his face, an expression I'd recently begun to notice in the mirror while I was shaving. "There are times I hate this job! Sometimes I think we're nowhere's near as smart as we think we are. Other times I'm sure we're much too smart for our own good."

He glanced out the window in time to see the twin flashes of blue which marked the end of the day. Then, as the sky slowly darkened and the stars began to appear, he looked down and began to read, "Case summary Folder 271. Standard Date 1345-Cycle 434.23. Analysis indicates that what was previously evaluated as a normally developing Type C global culture has, in the space of two cycles, mutated into a Type R pre-technological pattern that is focused into a Category IO unification mode while at the same time exhibiting all the violent characteristics of Level IO behavior."

He read to himself for a moment, then continued, "... all the predictions are for total self-destruction within one-half cycle. But, should such outcome be delayed by as little a factor as fifty percent, space travel will most likely be developed and, before four cycles have run, sterilization procedures will be required of

all planetary systems within sub-light speed travel distance of the culture. Should faster-than-light speed space travel be developed, for which occurrence a probability assessment cannot be made, then sterilization procedures will be completely impossible."

"Sterilization completely ..."

"... impossible! Yes. End of assessment ... end of Agency ... end of everything!"

I closed my eyes for a moment, knowing it was probably the last rest I would get for a long time, then asked, "Okay, so what do you want me to do?"

I didn't feel so bad after I'd finished reading the analysis and intervention recommendation. "Whew! It's a weird situation, all right. But the planned action seems to be relatively simple. A simple language transfer, a month or so of behavior training, then maybe a week of cosmetic surgery. Not bad, not bad at all. And it looks like the entire process, from injection to retrieval, shouldn't very long. I substitute for this guy, act in his place for six or seven days, then I'm out of there. Simple! Not that I like to flatter myself ..."

"... which I'm sure you'd never do, Danny!" he laughed.

"... but I'm not sure why you need me. This almost looks like an Apprentice's assignment, if you know what I mean?"

"You're right, I could assign any Agent to the job ... if it was something just anyone could do. But I need you. Take a close look at the mission parameters ... ah, page twenty-seven, I believe."

I flipped through the papers until I found what he was referring to. "Let me see ... hmmm ... the outline is fairly cut and dried. I pretty much follow the script given to me by the Analysis guys, just like any other case. Sometimes I wonder why you don't just go out and hire actors for these jobs, after all, they ..."

"Look closely at the last three days of the mission, Danny."

It was only then that I saw it, or more accurately, didn't see it. No script. No outline. No guidelines. Three days marked simply 'React & Improve.'

"Whew ... that's a long time completely on my own. I've done a full day before, and several times I've spent a month without a script while observing a culture. But this is a full intervention!" I glanced down at the mission description once more, "Has any Agent ever gone three full days?"

"Yes ... but only once."

"What happened?"

"We don't know. She never returned, and before we could investigate the culture she was working in totally destroyed itself ... and three neighboring star systems. That's all classified, by the way."

"Oh." And I suddenly understood why he'd never discussed the unexpected supernova of Altar B.

"So, as you can see, it's a simple assignment. We snatch this guy, you take his place. As it is, you can almost pass for him to the point I'm not sure you'll need any cosmetic surgery. The language and customs are rather primitive, you should be able to learn them in your sleep. Then, you're in. A little less than a week or so of scripted behavior, concluding with three days during which you've but one simple task to perform. A quick recovery and you're out. And this time you'll get your leave ... plus a rather hefty bonus ... you've my promise on that!"

"What about the guy I'm replacing? I know the rules allow it, but you're not going to ..."

"No, that's one of the funny things about the mission parameters given us by the Analysis section. We don't send him back ... he just disappears. If he can handle it, we'll see if he wants a job in the Agency." He looked me straight in the eyes, I could almost swear he was able to make his twinkle at will, "After all, it isn't like we haven't recruited some pretty good Agents that way!"

I smiled back at him, "So what if he can't deal with the whole thing, unlike those superior types to whom you're referring?"

"Well, then we'll zap his short-term memory and drop him back where we picked him up. No big deal."

"So ... when do I begin?"

"You noticed how your coffee's gotten cold?"

"Yea."

"Well, there's not much sense in warming it up."

He was right, the language lesson was a breeze. Truth is, I think I could have learned it the old fashioned way if the assignment had allowed me a typical observation period. Customs were crude ... another reason why off duty Agents rarely complain about anything. And he was right, I was able to avoid visiting the sadists in Surgical Prep ... something that didn't bother me in the least.

It was a short ride in ... I was surprised at how local the system was, another reason why the Agency considered the situation so serious ... followed by a dark-of-the-night landing and a precisely time rendezvous with the snatch team. All in all, I don't recall every having an easier preparation or making such a simple insertion.

The scripted part of the assignment turned out to be shorter than predicted, only five days ... nothing complicated. How could it have been? The guy was single, without any real friends or family, and pretty much an isolate. Even the subversive group he was a member of treated him like a loner, making my job much easier.

As for that last few days of the mission ... well, those brief hours will haunt me forever. Not having a script I could do nothing but wait, carefully biding my time until the moment was right for the action my entire intervention had been planned around. It was during that time I began to get close to my target, one of the primary dangers of any unscripted interaction. I became aware of his reasons

for behaving as he was. I discovered that he'd had his doubts, but that at the center of his belief structure he had found what he was convinced to be the Truth. I started to like him ... in fact, I began to agree with him. In essence, it seemed to me that he was presenting the concept of a morally and ethically structured society at least the equal of my own ... at least.

I became thoroughly confused. I had never heard such an uncultivated aborigine so clearly define the philosophical and behavioral postulates that are integral to the foundation of any advanced civilization. Funny thing is, he never argued with me or tried to prove his point. He just spoke clearly and unpretentiously to those who surrounded him. He would often use simple stories to illustrate something he was saying, after which he'd ask his listeners to provide for themselves the concepts he was trying to present. Rarely did I see him become frustrated or angry, even when he was so often confronted by those who so evidently found him upsetting and unsettling.

In the end, it made perfect sense that this particular assignment had been given to me. An Agent with less experience than I might have lost sight of the mission parameters. Even then, towards the end, I'm not quite sure how I managed to maintain my professional integrity. But I did, barely, and, when all is said and done, perhaps that's why the job had to be mine.

The moment came suddenly ... as I've said, it was a totally unscripted situation. I stood next to him, knowing what it was I supposed to do, yet, I will admit to you now, I hesitated. My training and experience counted for nothing. I just stood there, looking at him, wondering ... and I will never, ever, be sure of what would have happened if he hadn't ...

... if he hadn't reached out to me. I'll never forget how quiet it was, how gentle his hand felt upon my cheek. Nor the softness in his eyes, as he gazed deep into my soul, "Go ahead my good friend, cry. It's as it should be. This is the part you have to play ... so go ahead, do it. Quickly, do what you must do."

And then it was over. I'd like to tell you the last impression I had of him as the authorities lead him away, but I was too confused and ashamed to watch. I'm not clear how, but I made my escape. Within a few hours the recovery team picked me up, per the prearranged plan. Unwilling, or unable, to change who he was, the subject I'd impersonated was inserted back into his own life ... minus a few days of his memory. I've no clue what became of him. I know what happened to the man I betrayed, although all the years since I've tried so hard to forget ... without any luck. In that sense, the mission was a perfect success. I try not to think about it. I do honest ... I try.

Perhaps it was because of my reputation in the Agency, for even though my request was a clear violation of more than a few regulations Debriefing let me keep the bag and its contents. Then again, maybe they felt sorry for me. When I got back I had 'The Look.' The Recovery Team was first, but it wasn't long before everyone knew. Even I, for the first time I gazed into a mirror I remembered the times I'd seen the same expression on the faces of a returning Agents ... and of how I'd never really understood what had happened to them.

Every now and then I empty the contents of the bag into my hands. I shuffle the the little metal tokens back and forth. Counting them over and over, thinking that if even one time their number should come up different then everything would change. But it doesn't. It's always the same. Thirty ... never more, never less. A handful of small silver coins. And I will never forget how he looked at me as he spoke, "... do it ... do what you must do." As if, somehow, in some way I am just beginning to comprehend, all along he had known what had been planned for him ... and that he understood. And, although, as I told you, I didn't look, I'll always remember the words he called back to me as the soldiers hauled him away. Softly, so softly, his voice still rings in my ears, "It was done well, go in peace. You are forgiven ... Daniel!"