

## Peacekeeper

By

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“Will the meeting please come to order!”

Lianna Tors was convinced that no matter how many times the infinitely patient parliamentary orderbot said that, the distributed chaos she’d unleashed would not settle down. The meeting had been called to establish a new peacekeeping agency within the Center for Planetary Affairs, but unless it could figure out how to keep peace within itself, there was no chance it would be able to do the same for Earth and her planetary colonies.

Even before the United Nations was rendered irrelevant by the chaos that opened the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, the world had begun a slow process of political mutation. The big nations — US, Russia and China — soon broke into regions, some of which included portions of neighboring nations, while groups of small ones followed Europe’s lead and banded together. The result was a fairly balanced set of political units, at least as far as size goes. But then, size isn’t everything.

“Will the meeting...”

Most historians began the tale with the dissolution of the sovereignties that merged into United Europe, but Lianna preferred to think of it as having started with the earlier creation of the Euro. In 2040, the world’s new slate of sovereignties came together and agreed to abide by an Interregional Accord as a way to handle disputes. And now, in 2137, the world was once again ready to try creating a single global government. Lianna Tors was charged with establishing the final part of the plan, a global peacekeeping agency with the power and authority to have its way.

Wielding power and authority had been tried before, of course, but until now each attempt had eventually failed. Fortunately, she did have one more thing, and that was what had set off the firestorm currently rippling across the secure GovNet.

“Will the meeting...”

Peacekeeping was always a tricky business. The idea, after all, is to keep the peace, and that means taking action before the sides resort to violence. There are many ways to accomplish it, but most of them come down to a combination of public relations and diplomacy. The latter, unfortunately, has not always accomplished what it set out to, because it relies on the honesty and cooperation of all parties. PR, on the other hand, can be undermined by anyone on the ‘net. What Lianna just proposed got around all that, but there were certain caveats. The one that hijacked the meeting was that to succeed, the agency would simply have to play god.

The sheer volume of cross chatter instigated by her suggestion hopelessly overwhelmed the formal courtesies of control- and attention-sharing signaled by tones or visuals at each participant’s station. Members willfully disregarded all pretense of civility in their unrestrained descent into the subterranean implications of that act. Cultural, ethical and moral sanctions were dredged up and used as ammunition, and factions were beginning to coalesce within the group.

Tors was not one to take risks. Focusing on the emergent behavior of crowds, rather than on the actions of individuals, gave her a more useful perspective than she could get from siding with anyone involved. It also taught her how to intrude effectively. Smiling discretely, she reached over and switched off her camera, but left the connection intact, so her image at the other stations would be replaced by the bisected sunrise logo she’d selected, and waited.

“Will the meeting...”

At first, nothing happened. The dynamics of a chaotic social system weren’t that much different from any other kind. Random events caused random results, and there was a tendency to forge alliances of convenience. It wasn’t much, but the effect was to spawn an ever-changing tapestry of cliques of all sizes. In the world, that tendency built cities, regions and religions; here, it spawned politics. Both, however, required a place to start, some irregularity around which those cliques can build. And since everyone else was jabbering constantly, she did the opposite.

Slowly, and with increasing speed, the chatter subsided as members began to realize that they’d been arguing for their own case, rather than against the one Lianna had proposed. Finally, order began to return. Side discussions stopped, and one by one the members signaled that they had something to say to her, rather than to one another.

She flipped her image back on. “As I was saying, once we start meddling with the course of events in this way, there’s no going back. The Temporal Planning Commission becomes the guiding influence over the flow of events. When it does that, it will have the power to divert any attempt to remove that influence, the power to avoid any scandal. It will be up to us to set the course that humanity will follow, and to ensure that we are worthy of holding that power. Permanently.”

The virtual assembly was quiet this time. Lianna suspected that none of the members wanted to be the first to speak. Finally, a chime sounded, indicating that someone had chosen differently. The orderbot duly recognized the request, and shifted the ‘floor’ image accordingly.

The ruddy face of André Döbrin, the portly ambassador from the Central Siberian Region filled the frame reserved for whoever had the floor at the moment. “Madame Chair,” he said, “you still haven’t revealed how all of this was going to be accomplished. We assume that it’s based on some kind of algorithmic evaluation of events. If so, a number of us are strongly opposed!”

“You can rest assured, Mr. Ambassador,” Tors said carefully, “that our future will not be at the mercy of any algorithm. People, agents of the TPC, will always make those choices.”

Several lights flashed as members vied for the floor. The orderbot selected one and the image changed. “But who will pick those people?”

Another member appeared. “And how do we know they can be trusted?”

Tors quietly requested the floor back and waited for the speakers queue to clear. She let the silence hang briefly for effect. “We’ll do it just like we’ll manage the course of events, using the same technology. It’s no different from what the TPC will face in the world at large, just on a smaller scale.” She poked a control, and the image of a small box appeared in everyone’s ‘exhibits’ frame. “And we’ll be doing it with this.”

Every floor-request light but one was quickly cancelled. It was the distributed equivalent of leaving a crowd speechless. Except for Ambassador Döbrin, that is. “How exactly, does it work?” he asked after a prolonged pause.

It seemed that Tors finally had everyone’s attention, which is what she’d wanted. “This device,” she said, “takes advantage of an unexpected synergy between the effects of the military’s Magnetic Resonance psychic shielding system and a recently developed technology that destabilizes the quantum coherence of mass-energy in a small area of space. With it, a trained observer can actually see the flow of events. It would be like poking your head into a special chamber and seeing smoke or water trails. Patterns in that flow reflect chains of events. In other words, with this device, agents of the TPC will be able to see which events affect things, and which don’t.”

Döbrin’s face appeared again. “And then?”

“And then,” Tors said quietly, “we encourage the events we prefer, the ones that do not lead to needless conflict, to bloodshed and to war. That is how we keep the peace.”

Even Döbrin was silent this time. In fact, the general sense of the assembly was that the membership needed time to consider the matter, so the session was adjourned, pending resumption at a later date.

Relieved, she cleared the conference setup and went for a walk.

What Dr. Tors hadn’t mentioned was that she was not only the designated head of the CPA’s new peacekeeping agency; she was also the genius behind its technology. If the meeting did one thing, it was to confirm her feelings about permitting the agency to be controlled by any political organization, even a committee of the Center for Planetary Affairs or the Global Directorate that it intended to create. The TPC had to be answerable only to the figurehead. Any other arrangement would eventually lead to it being diverted from its objective of keeping the peace to enhance the fortunes of someone in the assembly. It galled her that they were so concerned about the character of her potential staff that they completely ignored the questionable nature of their own.

When she returned from her walk, Lianna resolved to fix the problem in exactly the same way she would do it were the conflict to arise outside of the CPA, or even the GD if it came to that: with the Synergizer she’d showed them.

That night, she returned to her office for some uninterrupted ‘research’. She locked the door and activated the security system, just to be on the safe side. Because it was still a prototype, the controls were completely adjustable, and that meant it was possible for it to accidentally kill her. Field versions would obviously have to be somewhat different. But that would come later. At the moment, she had some work to do.

Until now, all of her sessions with the device were just science experiments. They were performed under carefully controlled circumstances, and the changes she made had no further repercussions. The throw of a die or the spin of a wheel, in and of themselves, were safe to tamper with. They were without risk. They were comfortable. But what would be the effect on people who had bet on that die or that wheel? Change the outcome and you might trigger an event cascade of indeterminable outcome. Like dropping a grain of sand on a hillside perched at the critical state, you might set off an avalanche, or nothing at all might happen. What Lianna Tors intended to do wasn’t so much fortune telling as it was fortune choosing. Mystics had long claimed that we create our own realities; what she wanted was to create everyone else’s as well.

It took a half-minute after she switched it on for the field effects to take hold. First, the MR shielding stabilized. The feeling was like someone dialing down your awareness of the ambience around you. It got quiet, just not the kind of quiet that sounds can shatter. More like the kind of quiet you might experience alone on a cliff overlooking a deserted stretch of beach under a cloudless starry sky: an internal kind of quiet.

Then the destabilizer kicked in, and she suddenly had the feeling of simultaneously waking into, and out of, a dream.

When used alone, this still-classified tech loosened the grip that quantum effects develop over mass-energy nodes, the grip that causes those nodes to present the appearance, in our 3-dimensional space, of hadrons and leptons, the fundamental building blocks of the cosmos. In the affected area, mass-energy loses some of its resolution, in a manner of speaking; the distinction among the many guises in which it appears softens a bit. Interpenetration becomes possible. So does massive destruction.

Used together, though, something entirely different happens. The MR shielding effectively contains the area affected by the destabilizer, and anything inside this odd bubble of unreality becomes translucent. The synergy between the two also does one other thing, and that was the key to Lianna Tors’ plan for enforcing permanent world peace. Although anyone outside of the bubble simply sees its contents do what looks like a cheap magic trick, the person inside sees a different kind of reality layered over the usual one.

Now that the Synergizer was fully engaged, Lianna took a moment to examine the ghostly reality that now enclosed her. In a way, it was like floating in the midst of a vast sea of some kind of fluid. She could see trails of smoke, for lack of a better metaphor, drifting through this space. Through lengthy experimentation and analysis, she had determined that the current she experienced here reflected the course of events back in the real world. And as if that weren’t startling enough, she had also discovered that it was possible to reach across this space and glimpse events in the recent past or immanent future --- or futures, to be more precise, because in this place one possible future was as real as another.

There were limitations, of course. For one thing, she couldn’t reach very far into time, so all she could learn so far was about the immediate effects of some choice or

random event. She was certain that this could be overcome, but for now it was certainly a good enough place to start. After all, with nothing more than this, it was possible to explore the immediate effects of taking one path or another, and then make choices based on that knowledge. Even under those restrictions, she had the means to select an action based on whether it led to conflict or resolution.

For Lianna, peace was simply the absence of war. So using this technology to satisfy the CPA's objective of keeping the world and her colonies at peace was simply a matter of taking public relations to an entirely different dimension. Which brought her back to the problem at hand: dealing with the horde of bureaucrats she found herself saddled with. At the moment, her conflict was with them, and her problem was finding a way to quell that conflict, so she took a closer look at the smoky material surrounding her.

Upstream was the past, downstream the possible futures. As she watched, her imagination fleshed out a metaphorical solution to the imagery, and it began to feel like she was drifting along with the breeze in a hot air balloon. The difference was that here she could see the whorls and eddies that caressed her face and tousled her hair, not just far-off cloud islands. Ahead lay the jumble of possible futures caused by all the myriad choices that might affect her. Most were inconsequential, causing momentary wafts this way or that, but some were different. These were visible here in a way that resembled the pattern of waves in a stream. Where the water would soon be split by an obstruction, a standing wave cast a shadow before it in time. Like the bow wave of a boat, it seemed to hang motionless just ahead of the split, yet the water itself was not the wave. Such splits in the current of events were the mark of important choices, of conflicts that might lead to who knew what. Those that started event cascades created something like a crosscurrent or undertow, a pathway through this space that interpenetrated others. Here, it was possible for breezes to pass through one another, like waves at sea, without affecting either one.

The standing wave before her, she knew, was the sign of a choice that she would soon be making. The obstruction beyond was the root of the choice, the reason for a change of course, the people in her way. She reached towards that insubstantial rock and felt around for a glimpse of the reason. One face filled her mind: Döbrin.

That he had been gaining influence was obvious even by conventional means. Here, though, it became clear that his voice would be a major factor in the future course of events. How those events turned out was still unknown, but the Synergizer gave Lianna the ability to know more about how they would begin than anyone. And the most important thing right now was to avoid turnings that would give any measure of control over the TPC to him. That helped to narrow the field to actions directing the flow of events in a particular direction, but she wanted to be certain. And that meant reaching still further downstream to see where those choices would lead. A small difference now could unleash a maelstrom later on, and she was determined to make the best possible choice at the outset.

The effect she had achieved by balancing shield and destabilizer was perched on the knife-edge of a different kind of critical state. It enabled her to float just at the margin of transition, held fast to the current moment in space-time, while intruding just far enough into the TimeStream to offer a view of that realm. But it was also possible to loosen that connection, to float free of this moment in time, and move across the face of

the TimeStream. The shield's effect would create a bubble of reality in that place, and minor adjustments would give her some measure of control over direction. She had experimented before with the possibility, but had only gone as far as learning how to maintain her location in the real world against a tendency to drift that she did not yet understand. Now she was contemplating a short trip, and the chance of returning to not quite the same place she had left.

Taking a deep breath, Lianna gently touched a control, and the image of the current subtly became more tangible, while that of her office seemed a bit more dreamlike. A bit further and the office walls faded beneath the increasingly substantial reality of the currents around her. She slowly drifted past both standing wave and obstruction to see what lay beyond. From where she floated, she could see a vast array of interpenetrating currents branching out from that one event. Clearly, the choice she faced would have massive effects. It was the trigger for an avalanche of event chains no matter what happened. She couldn't prevent it, but she could choose which direction that avalanche fell. Doing that entailed learning something of what would happen in several directions, then choosing one and backtracking to the incident that would set it in motion. Knowing that, she could return to her office and start planning the peaceful future of the world.

Looking was simply a matter of nudging the balance back just enough to phase partway into reality. The first time she picked a point downstream to look in on, she found herself in an in-the-flesh argument with Döbrin.

"You are in no position to carry out any kind of oversight!" Seeing herself uncharacteristically livid was instantly disorienting, and only heightened the dreamlike sensation.

Ambassador Döbrin's glare punctuated two short breaths. "The whole point of the Unity Committee, Dr. Tors, is that only a supraregional body, such as the proposed Global Directorate, can dictate policy to its members. Oversight is unavoidable!"

Lianna retreated into the TimeStream. This was the kind of thing she'd expected Döbrin to try. His usual behavior was to wait until his adversary attempted to lead, and then grab control before the group finished realigning itself. She'd watched him enough to know his tactics. Shifting to a different part of the divergence of flows, she tried again.

This time, she was in her office alone, but talking with someone onscreen, someone she didn't recognize.

"I understand that you have been modeling the dynamics of event space," this version of Lianna said.

The man nodded, his anachronistic pipe bobbing loosely between his lips. "Not with the support of Renewal University's facilities, mind you, so it's been slow going. Why do you ask?"

"Well, Professor Josephs," she said calmly, "I think my own work dovetails with yours, and I believe we can both benefit from a collaboration of sorts."

"What did you have in mind?"

Lianna watched herself settle back in her chair. Her body language was all about unthreatening control and unconscious manipulation. She could tell already that this was a far better starting point than that blow-up with Döbrin. Still, she wanted a large enough sample to eliminate the trap of following a promising lead into a dead-end. But after several more tries, she was still convinced that this was the one to use. She already knew

the man's name and where he worked, so it wouldn't be necessary to locate whatever critical event had set off the chain.

Reorienting herself to return to her own moment in time, however, wasn't as easy as she'd hoped. Subjective time had elapsed, after all, since she had begun this exercise, which meant that she wouldn't be returning to exactly the same place in the flow. And just like floating down a stream on a raft, she had no rudder, either. Unfortunately, it was beginning to appear that the direction she needed to go wasn't merely upstream, but across another direction that she was not familiar with. She considered the problem for a moment, and concluded that this might be some kind of probability axis. Her motion across it must have been due to the fact that she had taken this trip in the first place. She hadn't planned for this, and that lapse of insight had begun to gnaw at her confidence.

Lianna was just about to attempt the return when she felt something jostle her protective bubble. It rocked a few times, and then stabilized, as if a wave had passed her position in event space. But what could have caused something like that? The mystery reinforced her decision to track down this Professor Josephs and pick his brain about some theoretical matters. First, of course, she had to get back to her office.

Then the second wave hit, and her bubble distorted from the impact. While venting her frustration in a stream of profanity, she struggled to keep the shield effect from shattering. What control she could muster over her position wasn't enough to combat the turbulence she found herself in. The best she could manage was to keep her bubble turned generally towards the place she'd started, but it was still erratically drifting in directions she couldn't fathom.

When the disturbance finally subsided, she steeled herself and tweaked the controls for a glimpse of what lay on the other side. Relieved to see her office again, she snapped the device off and returned fully to normal space. A moment later, there was a loud pop, and smoke started to spill out of the fried guts of the synergizer. She grimaced at the cost to her plans. Equipment like that was not easy to come by. She wouldn't be taking another trip any time soon.

Thankfully, according to the calendar, she'd actually backtracked a bit, so she wouldn't yet have told the committee what she had in mind. After the problems that mistake in judgment had caused, she wasn't about to try it again. But then, she wouldn't have to. After all, she knew that things would work out much better if she contacted this Josephs person, and he wouldn't be hard to locate.

As it turned out, that would be far easier than she'd anticipated, because a call was just coming in, and it was from Professor Josephs. Confused, she took a seat.

"Good to see you again, Lianna," he said jovially. "I wanted to check a few last things with you before you got on that flight."

Lianna struggled to conceal her confusion. "Flight?" she said, hastily glancing around the room. Her worst fears had been realized, both of them. She'd returned to a present not quite her own, and the event cascade had already begun.

Josephs laughed. "Surely you haven't forgotten about your new position? I've been telling my colleagues about your research, and they're all eager to meet you."

"Position?" she echoed weakly. Wherever the avalanche was headed, all she could do now was to survive. With the synergizer fried, she'd be trapped here indefinitely, unless she could build another.

He raised his eyebrows. "Don't tell me you're already bucking for a raise, because the department can't afford more than I've already offered. An assistantship is —."

"No, no," she cut him off, "the pay's fine." Whatever it is, she thought, at least I'll be in a position to try again. "I was just surprised that..."

Elsewhere, a meeting was just coming to order.

"Ladies and gentleman," the orderbot intoned, "all of the votes have been tallied. The Speaker for this session of the CPA's Unity Committee will be Ambassador André Döbrin, of the Central Siberian Region. Ambassador, you have the floor."

Döbrin looked pleased with himself. "Our final task," he said, "is to establish the basis for the CPA's peacekeeping arm..."

The End