

## ANNIHILATION FACTOR

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### I

Jundrak came as a bringer of uncertain news. The manner of his coming was far from uncertain. He came hurtling down the long-range spaceslip with tubes screaming; when still a couple of light-years from Smorn he cut the motors, to fall the remaining distance along the galactic causeway with transcendental velocity. Then, applying negative power, he came to an abrupt standstill.

His piloting was precise. He could now look down on Peredan's fifty-year-old encampment without needing to adjust his position by as much as a single yard. With startling clarity in the crystal bright air, the minute empire of the pretender prince was laid out a few hundred feet below.

It was everything he had expected: stiff, colorful, bustling. Brightly painted spaceships stood on the launching ground. Gay pavilions were arrayed in semicircles for close on ten miles, extending in a neat swirl to enclose quarters, barracks, and the extraordinary amount of equipment comprising the ever-operating defenses. Stacked to one side of the camp, rearing like huge city blocks covered with red plastic sheeting, were the precious stores of weapons, trackers, every kind of fighting paraphernalia—Peredan's reason for living.

The whole outfit was on its toes, waiting for the word that had never yet come.

Jundrak received a free demonstration of the camp's efficiency the moment his ship appeared over the base. Six warning missiles exploded around him: above, below and to each quarter. He was impressed but not surprised. Lingering for a few dangerous seconds, he settled at length to an unhurried landing on the edge of the launching field.

The missiles were not the only precaution. A peculiar *pressing* feeling assailed his body as he took his hands from the controls, together with an odd aching sensation across the bridge of his nose. He recognized it. A damper field had been thrown over his tiny bell-shaped vessel.

In that case, nothing in the ship would work. Experimentally he operated the port switch. Nothing. It would have to be opened manually.

Whatever happened, then, he was helpless. But no matter; he had come not so much as an enemy as an adviser.

He applied his hands to the port locks. Yielding easily, the side of the cabin swung down to give access to the ground. He stepped out, stretching his body and breathing in the invigorating, oxygen rich air. Now he could see his ship as an incongruously small, golden shape against the monstrous battle cruisers that reared beyond the camp. He had chosen the enigmatic bell craft purposely, knowing that it would seem a strange visitation to the rebels. They would be impressed and amazed that the tiny boat could make the same journeys as their giant battlewagons. Being isolated for fifty years, they almost certainly had not heard of the new means of propulsion using natural fault lines in space known as slipways, which enabled his frail-looking little bell craft to travel the galaxy.

Already two men waited to meet him, dressed in blouses and hose of shimmering black space silk, laser pistols swinging casually on their lean hips. Like all Peredan's officers, they carried no insignia.

"I am here to speak with Peredan," Jundrak said without preamble.

"*Prince* Peredan," the taller of the two answered, "does not interview every space tramp who comes jetting in here. What do you want, enlistment?"

Jundrak gazed steadily at the man. "Spare me the babble," he said in a firm voice. "I am Jundrak, of the family Sann—ancient friends of Peredan's fathers. Now take me to him."

The officer smiled wryly. "Many friends of old are not so friendly now. However, the prince will be told of your arrival. But first we must ask for your weapons."

Jundrak reached into his clothing and handed over a high frequency neutron beamer, a small dagger, and a hand version of the standard force rifle. The officer examined them, smiled again and politely handed back the last.

"You may keep this. A force gun will not work anywhere within the confines of this camp."

That was as Jundrak had already suspected. His senses, heightened by a long military training, told of numerous canceling energies vibrating through the air. He very much doubted if even the neutron beamer would prove fully effective—but the officers would not wish to reveal everything.

They kept silence during the walk to Peredan's tent.

Jundrak looked at the structure with interest. It was like a fairy palace of draped plastic, awnings, spires and domes standing in a rich, multicolored relationship. The plastic had been sprayed with some preparation to make it stiff and durable, and Jundrak did not doubt that the "tent" had the solidity of granite. The bivouac appearance of the encampment was an illusion.

"Wait here," said the tall officer, and went inside, leaving Jundrak in the care of his comrade.

After a wait of ten minutes he reappeared looking less self-assured than before. Wordlessly, he nodded and made a beckoning gesture. Jundrak followed him through the covered entrance and into the interior of the tent.

Now Jundrak's impressions were fully confirmed. They walked through large halls and enclosures which seemed to extend indefinitely, washed in a refreshing pale green light and worked in pastel shades of green, blue and yellow. The walls bore little in the way of ornament, but the furniture, tables, chairs and desks were of very fine workmanship, as were various items of equipment which Jundrak did not recognize but which he guessed to be communicators and data retrievers of some kind. Peredan had found time for luxury. Silk-garbed officers glanced up incuriously as he passed by, but the man at Jundrak's side ignored them.

Deeper in the tent the atmosphere was even quieter, even more cool, and almost deserted. For the first time Jundrak saw women: young women seated at large, expensive desks, apparently doing nothing in particular. Secretaries, he wondered? Mistresses? Or just ornaments?

At the end of a long foyer the officer stopped before a porchlike door. "Go in," he instructed.

Jundrak pushed at the panel. It seemed to collapse into glittering shards and withdraw itself away. Beyond it was Peredan's office.

He stepped through, the door coalescing behind him. Standing beside a polished table, his knuckles resting lightly on the varnished surface, was Peredan.

The two men gazed at one another, Jundrak avidly, Peredan with only cursory interest, as though part of his attention was elsewhere. Jundrak stripped off his black gloves and laid them on the table—a conciliatory gesture in military parleys, indicating that he carried no secret finger weapons.

"I confess it has long been an ambition of mine to get a look at this camp of yours," he said blandly, eyeing the other. He could remember having seen Prince Peredan when he was very young, when his father had taken him to the Royal Palace to be introduced to the court. For some reason Peredan's face had made a fixed impression on him, and he looked closely now to see if he could discern any change in it. The prince's features were still smooth and youthful, making him look more like a youngster of seventy than the three centuries he had actually lived. But on second glance the youthfulness was artificial. As Jundrak was later to find out, his face changed with circumstance and passing emotion, and sometimes one could be looking at a different man. Even now, a momentary shift of mood passed across the prince's features, turning him into something older, more careworn, the flesh around the eyes altering in color and texture.

"I am sure many military men have felt the same, for any of a number of reasons," Peredan snapped in a curiously weak voice. "Tell me why you are here."

Jundrak drew himself erect, clicked his heels and inclined his head in a stiff bow. "I am the accredited envoy of His Majesty King Maxim. His Majesty has instructed me to offer you and your followers a full amnesty, together with generous terms of resettlement, in return for your cooperation in a matter of grave importance."

"An *amnesty*?" the prince looked at him with incredulity and amusement. "Are you *serious*? Maxim won't get rid of me that easily!"

"Something ... has arisen," Jundrak said uneasily, wondering how to broach the subject. "Something that makes it imperative for us to settle our differences and unite against the common menace."

"Explain."

"The kingdom is threatened with annihilation!" Jundrak drew a deep breath, then went on. "The northeast sector has been entered by an unknown life form deadly to human life. All our defenses have

failed to hold it . . . We must make a common cause and fight as one!”

“So,” mused Peredan. “An alien invasion!” He seemed intrigued, scarcely surprised or alarmed at all.

“Not quite. At first we thought of it that way, but as far as we can make out the intruder is a single organism moving through space. Not even an organism, more a . . . well, they call it *the Patch*. At first the scientists did not even think of it as an entity, merely as a moving region of space of unusual characteristics. They’ve been forced to change their minds. Its size is indeterminate, but its movements suggest volition.”

“And?”

“It appears to feed off biological vitality. Planets that pass through it are left completely dead! Men, animals, even the vegetation! All dead!” A note of horror must have entered his voice, for Peredan frowned and looked somber. “My agents reported something unusual in the northeast, but I paid little attention to it. They certainly made no mention of anything like this.”

“All news media are, of course, rigorously censored, and rumor is dealt with severely throughout the kingdom these days. Outside of the affected worlds, few people know anything about it.”

“And how many worlds have perished so far?”

“Even fewer people know that. I would guess, not more than fifty.”

“*Not more than fifty!*” Peredan seemed stunned. “Maxim, of course, won’t become seriously worried until half of humanity has been wiped out. Typical!” The prince paced the room restlessly, his simple lilac robe flowing behind him. “But at least he admits his incompetence by sending you here. Tell me what has been done to deal with the menace so far.”

Briefly Jundrak made a frank list of the measures taken by the Royal Fighting Forces in their increasingly desperate attempts to deal with the unknown. The prolonged reaction bombs (continued nuclear explosions lasting a month), the monstrous gamma ray projectors (specially built at crippling cost). The Patch had taken it all without any detectable change in its inner state. Vast quantities of radioactive material dumped in its path had made no difference either. There was even a theory that the Patch *liked* these titillations.

Jundrak did not omit to tell of the armed spaceships it had engulfed. Peredan’s gaze dropped as he finished.

“There has never been anything like this before. What is it Maxim wants from me?”

“Surely I don’t need to answer that. Your resources here are known to be considerable. Apart from your armaments, weapons perhaps unknown to us, you have some of the best scientists in your entourage. The existence of the kingdom comes before political quarrels.”

“So Maxim thinks he will make use of it to swallow me up in a general crisis.” Peredan smiled wryly. “Tell him that if the safety of the kingdom is truly his main concern, to put his forces under my orders and I will direct operations.”

“He will hardly agree to that.”

“And neither will I agree to what amounts to the same thing.”

Deadlock. Jundrak had known it would come to this, had, in fact, counted on it. But he affected

shock. “Peace and security has always been *your* motto. How much is it worth, if you can stand by and watch whole systems annihilated?”

“It is Maxim who is the usurper, not I or my father.”

“But who knows? Perhaps in the confusion . . . you would find the opportunity to unseat Maxim and put your father back on the throne again.” Jundrak’s voice became caressing, almost sly.

“Perhaps! If I based my strategy on *perhaps*, I would not have sat here on Smorn for the past fifty years, far from the center of power.” He lifted his hand in a weary gesture, as if unwilling to expend the effort on it. “With what we have here I could challenge the kingdom even now. But I will not stake my resources, bringing civil war to the galaxy a second time, on anything less than the assurance of victory. Young man, I am in this game to *win*. So don’t imagine that I will fritter away my substance on other pursuits, however worthy, or that this organization will be used for any other purpose than the one for which it was created.”

He delivered the short speech in a quiet, almost conversational tone. But during it Jundrak gained his first firm impression of the man: an impression of hardness beneath the flaccid exterior, of an obdurate, almost despairing will. This was a man who would never admit that his cause was lost, and whose fanaticism infected those gathered around him with unswerving loyalty.

“In any case,” the pretender prince continued, “your suggestion seems hardly fitting to your role as Maxim’s envoy.”

“Forgive me, Your Highness. I was speaking not as an envoy but as an individual.”

At this, Peredan’s eyebrows rose slightly. He turned to a small panel in the wall behind him, opened it to extract two glasses and a flask. Motioning Jundrak to a chair, he poured a green fluid from the flask and added water. The liquid turned milky.

“*Pernod*,” he said. “An ancient beverage from thousands of years ago and a delightful addition to civilized living, I find. A colleague of mine—the duke of Returse—discovered the recipe shortly before our exile. As a result this encampment is the only place in the universe where one can obtain it.”

Jundrak sipped the drink. It had a pleasing, refreshing taste of aniseed.

“Now tell me what the people think of me in these dark years, those billions oppressed by Maxim.” Peredan seated himself opposite Jundrak, and did not try to sound anything less than sardonic.

“It is hard to read the public mind. The Royal Fighting Forces, of course, consider you a danger—but not an ultimate one. Officially they could mop you up, but they leave you in peace so as not to stir up dissent.”

“Propaganda. They have not come here because they would not dare. Tell me about the *people*.”

“I think you are slowly fading from memory.”

“Of course.” Peredan looked sad. “So be it. It was expected. But everything will change once I have vanquished the usurper and placed my own family on the throne again. You shall see, it will change. But tell me of yourself. You must have been no more than a boy at the time of the civil war. I remember your father. He died under the old king’s banner, a loyal duke. You, it seems, have become a duke under the new one. As far as I can recall, your loyalty to the new master in Unimm has never been doubted.”

“And yet . . . my feeling for the old order has not quite died.” Jundrak’s manner became uneasy.

He was aware of treading dangerous ground. “My family and yours were firm friends under the old monarchy, and I remember that.”

“Would you like to see that monarchy restored? Speak freely, Maxim cannot hear you here.”

Jundrak made no answer.

“Very well,” continued the other, unperturbed, “let us put it another way. Do you, as a loyal officer of the Royal Fighting Forces, wish to see me destroyed? Answer now. Sooner or later every man must turn one way or the other.”

“It is my duty to see you destroyed.”

“Well said!” replied Peredan bitterly.

“And yet . . . King Maxim is an upstart. His rule is a patchwork of expediencies, bringing economic confusion to thousands of planets. Against this your family offers the stability of a thousand year monarchy, as well as a legal title to the throne.”

“A stability so great that the entire kingdom cracked open.” Peredan almost sneered. “I wish you would stop trying to fence with me, young man. Let us deal in realities. You speak of legality? Maxim himself is of the nobility. His House of Grechen also puts forward a claim to the throne, based upon the marriage of his mother to my grandfather. He has a horde of lawyers trained in the subtle art of pitting this claim against our own. And as for stability, security—has not Maxim done his best to provide it? Strict measures against disorder, a powerful armed force, even a pruning of the oligarchic class and the dispensing of their territories to the poor.” He smiled sourly. “A wise move. Not a fraction of what he should have done, but a sop to keep the masses quiet for a while. In view of all this, is it not *I* who represents the threat to peace? I maintain a private army. *I* have the avowed intention of widespread insurrection. *I* await my chance to wreak havoc.”

He’s sounding me out, Jundrak thought. Playing the part of Maxim’s advocate to test my reaction.

“If that’s really how you feel,” he said insolently, “why don’t you change sides?”

The prince laughed. “A man like you can be useful to me. There is a wealth of intelligence which you, a high-ranking officer could give. The firepower of Maxim’s forces. What new weapons he has. More than that, what is the secret of the new space drive that brought you here? I am informed that your ship is quite unusual, remarkably small to make such a journey. In fact, the camp defense team was disconcerted by the speed of your approach. Your side regularly tries to slip a nuclear bomb under our umbrella, as you well know. You stood a good chance of being blown to bits on the edge of the system before we satisfied ourselves that you were unarmed.”

“Sorry.” Jundrak stood up and became stiff and formal again. “My sympathies for you do not affect my loyalty as an officer. I am not for sale.”

“I could have you put under arrest and your ship analyzed to the last plate.”

“That would be a gross breach of diplomatic immunity!” Jundrak protested indignantly. He did not think it necessary to mention that the bell-shaped vessel was wired to vaporize itself at the first hint of meddling, since he was sure that Peredan also was aware of this elementary precaution.

“His Majesty’s offer of amnesty remains open for three months. Perhaps we will meet again.”

He turned to go, but Peredan stopped him.

“Wait. There is something you can do for me.”

Jundrak eyed him suspiciously.

“Nothing sinister,” the pretender prince assured. “Do you know a man called Grame Liber?”

“The chronicler? He is sometimes seen at court.”

“Tell me, is he well?”

“I believe so. I know him only partly.”

“He is an old friend of mine. I have had little news of him these past fifty years. I would regard it as a great favor if you would look him up for me.”

“Yes, of course.”

“Merely tell him that I send my regards. I am sure I can trust you not to do anything that would harm the old man. As a matter of fact, you might get on well with him.”

Jundrak felt oddly moved. He hesitated, then suddenly made up his mind.

“There is something else I can do for you,” he said firmly. “Maxim would have me killed if he knew, so I hope that I, in turn, can rely on your discretion.”

Peredan nodded.

“I have strict instructions not to tell you this. The Patch is coming this way. You had better move your camp at once.”

Suddenly Peredan looked very, very old. “How long have we got?”

“Sometimes it moves fast, sometimes slowly.”

“This puts a different complexion on everything, even on Maxim’s motives. Thank you.” He looked at Jundrak sharply. “What in space was he thinking of when he chose you as his envoy?”

Jundrak shrugged. “He’s pretty careless about a lot of things. He needed somebody you might listen to for old time’s sake, somebody who belongs to an old, respected family like the House of Sann. You see, even Maxim is getting very nervous.”

He left Peredan sipping Pernod, brooding and thinking.

When Jundrak of Sann had taken off, Peredan touched one of a number of colored dots ingrained into the corner of the tabletop. Another part of the table surface went dull then changed to a color picture of a young woman with green-tinted hair.

“Get me General Drap,” he ordered.

“Yes, Your Highness.”

The girl’s eyes dropped to the controls before her. The picture faded, to be replaced by Drap’s brisk, bulbous face.

“Your Highness!”

“Drap,” Peredan said, “a young man from Unimm has just been here. I want to check on the

truth of something he told me. As soon as he is out of range send a battleship to the northeast sector ...”

He gave further details and dismissed Drap. An hour later warning gongs sounded. One of the huge battleships bulking beyond the array of tents lifted itself, takeoff signals hooting, and headed into deep space, heavily baffled to escape detection.

Meantime, Prince Peredan sat in his study, going through the familiar ritual of collecting his thoughts and analyzing his feelings.

As always, he fought to push aside the desolation of spirit that repeatedly came over him. All interviews such as the one he had just undergone left him with this feeling. Diplomacy, politics, maneuver, anything in the nature of a *game* in which human beings were the pieces was distasteful to him and far from his true bent. By inclination he was a scholar, and but for the unhappy course of recent history he would no doubt be spending his life in study, pursuing his ambition of analyzing the phenomenology of historical civilization.

But his loyalty to his family, the House of Lorenz, his feeling for ancient law and his hatred of Maxim’s tyrannous, ramshackle and power-mad rule had made it impossible for him to settle into such a life. Instead, circumstances had dictated that he should devote himself to deviousness, strategy and leadership. Ever since the House of Grechen had challenged his father’s ascension to the throne and the quarrel had blown up into kingdom wide civil war, he had been forced to spend his life playing just the kind of game that hitherto he had scorned.

After the initial defeat he had done well with what moves remained open to him. He had welded together the loyal remnants of the army into the most efficient, dedicated organization ever to exist. With time it had become a well-drilled machine of enormous power, a spear permanently pointed at the heart of the kingdom. Patiently he had awaited the right moment to send it on its way.

The behavior of his recent visitor confirmed his belief that Maxim’s regime was rotten within, shot through with false loyalties based only on convenience and personal advantage. Maxim must have a busy time shoring up the structure, he thought. One good kick and the whole outfit could come crashing down.

And yet such optimistic thinking was dangerous. Corrupt or not, Maxim could still call on the resources of the kingdom. Peredan’s chances of pulling off the *coup* he dreamed of were too slight for the game to be risked at this stage. Precipitous action would only unleash another bloody conflict in which he would be defeated—even though with difficulty—for the second time.

Where, he thought agonizingly, was the “Great Device,” the one irresistible move which would mean checkmate? In the next generation it would be too late. Too many billions would have transferred their allegiance. How many billions had already done so? Peredan did not know. News from the kingdom was getting ever harder to obtain these days.

## II

The Star Kingdom sprawled over roughly one fifth of the galaxy, from the Garlowe Clusters in the north to the Veils of Darkness—massive black curtains of dust and gas—in the south.

In all that immensity habitable planets were rare but still sufficient in number to add up to several tens of thousands. The exact number of worlds incorporated in the kingdom was a matter for catalogers: the average citizen did not concern himself with the size of the society he lived in, because to him the kingdom was the universe. There were no foreign kingdoms, and the citizen did not imagine any. He only knew that numerous ships plied the darkness connecting together the territories and provinces that were



scattered over thousands of light-years, all owing allegiance—in theory, at least—to the throne which circled blue white Rigel. There was no name for the realm. It was simply “the kingdom.”

Over much of the kingdom central authority was admittedly loose. To many systems, far from Maximilia—or Unimm, to give it its ancient title—the civil war was hardly more than a distant rumor, and the change in the ruling family occasioned little interest. For these worlds the obligatory taxes were token taxes only.

But here in Maximilia politics were of the essence. Jundrak knew that he must report to King Maxim as soon as his bellship landed in the Inner City of the town. Leaving the ship in the hands of special technicians sworn to secrecy, he went to his quarters to freshen up and then presented himself.

The king had already been informed of his arrival. Jundrak was conducted to a private room, where he found the monarch eager for news.

“Is it done?”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

“Good!” King Maxim chuckled, a jovial gleam in his lustrous brown eyes.

For all his cunning and duplicity, it had to be admitted that the king possessed a natural charm. His face, though basically mournful, easily expressed merriment. True, it was striking enough to be noticed anywhere, with a small, thin mouth, a prodigious bony nose and strong, wide apart eyes that seemed always to have the drop on one. In addition, he wore his hair at shoulder length, whereas close-cropped hair had been the firm fashion for several hundred years.

At times he seemed to go facially mad, puckering his lips, raising his eyebrows in an exaggerated grimace and glancing sidelong over his long, sharp nose. There were some who claimed that the king was mad. But to most he was merely a comic, a jolly monarch, an unintentional clown in whom the discerning might detect a basic melancholy.

“I offered Peredan an amnesty, Your Majesty, as you instructed. He refused, of course. He didn’t seem to suspect that the offer was only a cover for my visit.”

“Made him cocky for a bit, I expect. Eh, what? Was the track laid?”

“Everything went perfectly. I crossed the path of the Patch, then made my way from that direction through the slipways to Peredan’s camp on Smorn. The instruments verified that the slipways were sufficiently intensified.”

“Good! Good!”

Even Jundrak, hardened as he thought he was to the art of the double cross, had to admire Maxim for this particular piece of treachery. His scheme was grisly in the extreme. It had been found that the alien entity menacing the kingdom, designated the Patch by the investigating teams, used a principle of motion somewhat similar to that of the new slipway ships, moving faster than light along the natural fault lines of space. But there was a difference. Whereas the passage of the Patch left the sliplines unaltered, the passage of the ships intensified them. The Patch showed a preference for following these strengthened sliplines.

At first the investigating teams had tried to use this discovery to control the Patch, creating a path through the maze of galactic fault lines that would lead it away from occupied solar systems and out of the kingdom. But the Patch showed an obstinacy that was one of the chief proofs that it had some kind of

rudimentary mind: it hungered after inhabited planets. If the artificially strengthened slipway did not lead to one, it seemed to exercise discretion and take a different turning.

Thus the teams could choose the planets that were to be annihilated, but no more. Such a disconcerting fact had led to desperate haggling among nobles and industrialists whose vested interests were threatened. Then King Maxim had come up with his brilliant idea. By sending a slipway ship to visit Smorn, he could bring down the Patch on the head of his old enemy.

The king's voice rose to a whoop of laughter. "He'll never know what hit him! I'll move the Fourth and Fifth Fleets up there in case he gets wind of what's coming and tries to scoot. Either way, Peredan is finished!"

One small point interested Jundrak. "What would you have done if Peredan had accepted the amnesty, Your Majesty?"

The king shrugged. "If he's fool enough to send his ships into that *thing*, he deserves what he gets. Either way I can't lose. By the way ... er ... you didn't get a recording of your conversation, I suppose?"

"I'm afraid not, Your Majesty. The damper fields were very strong all over the camp. The recorder didn't work."

"Hm. Yes, of course." Maxim looked doubtful for a moment. Jundrak decided he had better steer the topic elsewhere.

"It's a marvelous stratagem, Your Majesty," he admired, "but the Patch still remains."

"I know," said the king gloomily, "but what can we do? We must accept our losses. Since the Patch is making a steady traversal, it will pass through the kingdom and we shall be safe again."

*So you hope, you old fool,* Jundrak thought.

He left the chamber high in the king's favor. His success gratified him, but he tried not to feel smug. It was easy to lie to two parties at the same time when they had no other contact with one another.

His motives in playing a double game were obscure, even to himself. Having been brought up in the turmoil of civil war, he found no particular reason to have faith in either party but, when facing Peredan, had felt an irrational impulse to give a fair chance to both sides. That was not all of it, of course. He had also decided that there was no advantage to him personally in the destruction of the rebels. He preferred a fluid situation where a talented young officer, already rising fast in influence, could seize his opportunities. Having given Peredan half a warning, he was now in collusion with both sides and stood to gain whatever the outcome.

Jundrak felt no prick of conscience over his actions. To him they seemed natural: a Machiavellian spirit ruled the time. Besides, he had become possessed of an intermittent ambition, which at times disappeared altogether, and at times, such as when he lay alone in his bed, reached a pitch of megalomania no less acute for having no well-defined object. Already he was reviewing how he might turn to his own use the development of the big slipway ships, a project on the other side of the planet over which the king had given him charge.

With a vague feeling of euphoria he crossed the central courtyard of the royal palace. The spires and graceful frontages of the vast building, tinted against the greenish evening sky, rose about him in fantastic arabesques. The coming evening was cool, rich in scents. Beyond the outlines of the palace reared the taller slabs, towers and arches of the Inner City, hemming in the seat of the monarchy and

keeping out the picturesque but less than graceful sight of the Old Town.

The reconstruction was almost complete. Only a few towers remained to be finished, lifting aloft their building grids for heights of up to three thousand feet. Maxim had not used atomics in his attack on the Inner City since he wanted it himself, but he had bombed it heavily with high explosives.

With a frown, Jundrak remembered his promise to the pretender, Prince Peredan. Look up Grame Liber, the chronicler. He remembered the old man vaguely, puttering about the palace with grubby reels of ancient documents from the palace library under his arm.

Possibly the request was no more than Peredan said it was, a sentimental communication between friends. More likely, to Jundrak's intrigue conscious mind, it was an attempt to ensnare Jundrak in rebel circles and maintain a communication between him and Smorn. At any rate, knowing Maxim's suspicious nature, it would not do to keep the promise for a few days yet. Tonight he had a far more delightful mission in mind.

Immediately Jundrak walked across the demarcation line into Maximilia's Old Town; he was in a different world.

He wore a long, soft cloak pulled tightly around him to hide his uniform. He felt out of place in it here in the Old Town, and besides it might attract hostility. One had to expect a certain amount of ignorance and brutishness among the lower orders.

The Inner City was separated from the Old Town by a continuous ring of tall buildings forming a circular wall with a number of wide arches for access. As the Inner City stood on a height, once outside the wall one gained a panoramic view of the Old Town which, though scorned by many, Jundrak found enjoyable.

The hill on which the Inner City stood had been leveled off to form a flat area. But in the Old Town the rise and fall of the land on which it was built was plainly visible. It was unplanned, more organic. Jundrak allowed his gaze to rove over the inchoate mass of buildings, mostly old and decrepit and ranging in height from two to only twenty stories, with the exception of a few housing projects, massive dull-colored lumps reaching twelve hundred feet and inhabited by ten thousand people apiece. To his left, the entire town slid away into a valley filled with smoke.

For miles the town stretched, well beyond the range of vision. Over it all hung a dusty haze, shining in the sunlight. Dust was, in fact, one of the Old Town's main features.

Jundrak set off down the hill. He had left his private car on the other side of the wall—it sported regimental insignia—and after a short walk he took the Old Town's ubiquitous public transport, large battered carriages running on electrified rails. For some miles he rode with the common folk, drinking in their resigned, knobbly faces and savoring the strangeness of it all. Then he left the vehicle, walked down a side street and turned into a narrow passage that brought him to a dingy courtyard ringed with tiers of tiny balconies, five stories of them. Brashly, he whistled a tune and waited.

He did not have to wait long. A window opened and Rondana leaned over the railing, grinning down at him.

Feeling his heart quicken, he grinned back. A minute later she appeared at the door on the ground floor and let him in. They went up a flight of rickety stairs to her room. She laughed as he sank down on the bed, gently pulling her down with him.

Rondana was young, with a pleasant, happy face and lively moods. To Jundrak, comparing her with the women of his own social standing, with their cosmetically perfect features and supercilious looks,

this lower class girl was a woman while they were painted dolls.

But now she sat up suddenly, her expression changing to one of concern.

“The old woman upstairs is very sick.”

“Is she?”

“Will *you* have a look at her?” Rondana pleaded.

“What can I do about it? I’m not a doctor.”

Rondana rose and went through the door as if she hadn’t heard him. Reluctantly he followed her up the stairway, one story, two stories, lit only by grimy windows. A couple of times she glanced back to see that he was still with her.

They entered Goodwoman Growoom’s apartment. It was wretched, squalid. Jundrak realized that it was identical to Rondana’s, but whereas hers had been made to look fairly comfortable, this had the stench of poverty.

The woman lay whimpering on a bed. She was old, very old. Jundrak ventured closer. Her face was discolored, almost green. She was in the grip of some fever, Jundrak did not know what. People of his own social class did not catch such diseases.

He gazed down at the barely conscious woman. She must be all of five or six hundred years—

Then he caught himself. She was not five hundred years old. She was probably not even one hundred. Jundrak felt suddenly uneasy, aware that Rondana was twenty while he, in all other respects fully as youthful as she, was eighty —about the same number of years as the woman on the bed. The vast disparity in medical services gave the lower masses their greatest cause for resentment, amounting as it did to a ratio of about four to one in the individual’s life span.

“She’s dying,” said Rondana.

“What shall we do?”

“She ought to have a doctor.”

“Well, get one. Send her to the hospital.” Jundrak felt unaccountably annoyed that he had been faced with a situation like this.

Rondana hesitated. “Will you pay for it?” she asked in a small voice.

“Yes, of course.” Jundrak smiled ruefully.

Rondana left to make a vidphone call to the hospital. While she was away he left the miserable apartment and returned to the cozier one down below. He felt as though his visit had been spoiled. He had come here for amusement, not to be chilled by social realities.

He sat down on Rondana’s bed, gazing through the window that overlooked the dusty courtyard. The political quarrels of the noble houses seemed to have faded momentarily to another, emptier universe. Was this the truth that lay beneath the intrigues, the endless manipulations for power? A woman dying miserably in a tumbledown tenement house, cut off even from the sunlight which flooded the planet?

Jundrak scowled, pushing away unwelcome thoughts. Even if true, nobody could do anything about it. Political science had proved how impossible it was to enrich the poor, had exploded centuries

ago the now seditious doctrine of social equality. The inexorable polarity of wealth and poverty was a natural law, unaffected by any amount of scientific progress.

An hour later, after he had made love to Rondana, an ambulance came to take away Goodwoman Growoom. Jundrak signed an undertaking in respect of the fee, an insignificant sum to him, but here in the Old Town the price of life itself.

With a shudder he wondered what the Old Town would look like if the Patch came this way.

### III

Far off in space, the Patch was due to encounter Jundrak's intensified slipline in about a month's time. Barely a fortnight elapsed, however, before the battleship dispatched by Prince Peredan returned to Smorn.

It had not in fact gone anywhere near the Patch; this had been unnecessary and risky in view of the activity of the investigating teams in the region. But by monitoring the reports beamed back by the research ships it had procured all the information it needed.

Peredan read the reports in cold fury. The Patch was not proceeding in Smorn's direction or anywhere remotely near it. It was, in fact, making an angle of a hundred and thirty degrees, as near as made no difference to the opposite direction.

"So that young pup was trying to trick me after all," he thought to himself. "More of Maxim's dirty work!"

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The meaning of the ploy was clear. While Peredan evacuated his camp in heed of Jundrak's warning, Maxim would take advantage of his temporary vulnerability to launch an attempted annihilation strike.

"So much for the House of Sann!" Peredan gave an ugly, bitter laugh.

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Chronicler Grame Liber's cottage nestled under the foliage of a giant, mutated oak tree in a corner of one of the landscaped parks scattered about the Inner City. One night, just around the same time as Peredan was reading the evidence of his treachery, Jundrak decided to visit it, making sure first, of course, that he wasn't being followed.

The park shone eerily in the light of the overhead moons and the surrounding city. Yard-wide oak leaves dipped toward him as he approached the cottage, framing it neatly and dappling the light from the curtained windows.

Jundrak pressed the doorbell. After a pause, the door opened into a small porch. Another pause, during which he guessed he was being viewed, and a second door opened at the other end.

Liber, a white-haired, dignified man approaching old age, sat at a table on which were spread papers and book rolls. The room was small and cozy, discreetly lit by a corner lamp and lined with shelves containing more rolls, even some with old-fashioned bound books. An air of peace and quiet reigned in the place.

Liber rose to greet him, friendly, civilized. “Not often I get a visitor these days. Please take a chair. Would you like a drink? Raneaul? Whiskey? Or a liqueur perhaps?”

“Thank you, whiskey will do.” Jundrak waited for him to bring the drink. His eye roved over the papers with which

Liber had been working. There were some holographs—old holographs, to judge by the color process. He recognized one of them as a picture of a famous collision between opposing battleships during the battle for Unimm. The others were from the civil war, too.

Liber had been using a letter scribe to write on an already fat roll of paper. By twisting his head slightly, Jundrak could read the neatly printed words.

“... the war was fought for the accession only, and for no other reason. Other factions who rebelled against their poor lot under the old monarchic reign and tried to look on the conflict as an opportunity for large-scale reform were suppressed ruthlessly by both sides.”

Jundrak averted his head as Liber turned round with the drinks.

For some time they chatted pleasantly. The old man turned out to be congenial company, as he consumed more whiskey Jundrak began to loosen up.

Liber did not even ask what his business was. Presumably he thought that if Jundrak had something to say he would come to it himself. Consequently nearly two hours passed before Jundrak said: “I have a message from Prince Peredan.”

The other’s eyebrows rose. “Indeed? What is it?”

“It’s not much. He is in good health, and ... he simply sends his regards.”

Liber seemed tickled. “Well, well! After all this time! He must be getting lonely. Can you get word back?”

“Unfortunately, no.” Jundrak leaned forward. “Does the message mean something to you?” he asked eagerly. “Is there anything I can do to help?”

The historian laughed out loud. “Young man, I thought you were here for some uninteresting purpose like that. If it does mean anything apart from what it says, I don’t know it. Perhaps Peredan imagines I have been working for him all these years. If so, he’s wrong.”

“Then you are loyal to King Maxim?” Jundrak suddenly grew worried. Perhaps he was betraying himself to this wily oldster.

Liber laughed again. “You people never give up!”

Discomfited, Jundrak bent his head and rubbed his chin.

With a sigh, Liber climbed to his feet. “Do you play chess?”

Jundrak shrugged. “Not much.”

“I used to, but now I’ve got a better game. Come and see.”

He led Jundrak into an adjoining room different in appearance from the first. A bench along one wall contained tidily arranged pieces of electronic apparatus in various stages of assembly. Shelves were stacked with premanufactured all-purpose units, and a row of cupboards, all neatly labeled, contained

yet more.

“Electronics is a hobby of mine,” Liber explained. “It helps to clear my head when I’m trying to sort out the tangle of human history.”

He showed Jundrak to a small, round table in the middle of the room, taking one of its two seats and motioning his guest to the other. The table was quite bare but Jundrak noticed that a cable ran from the foot of one of the legs to a nearby cupboard.

“Pull out the little drawer under the table,” Liber instructed, at the same time pulling out a similar drawer on his own side. They were sitting opposite one another, as though for a game of chess—except that there was no board and no pieces.

Jundrak’s drawer contained rows on rows of little buttons. “This is a sophisticated development of chess,” Liber told him. “More elaborate and more subtle. Whereas chess is played according to an artificial set of rules, I have taken the rules for this game from real life.”

He pressed a button. The tabletop came to life. Figures sprang up from it, a three-dimensional, full color holograph effect. On a mosaic chessboard floor were dozens of beautiful glowing little figures—most of them wearing royal robes!

Liber pressed another button. The figures moved, spoke, gestured.

“Masterly!” Jundrak breathed.

“It’s controlled by a computer. One of man’s four great inventions, by the way, alongside fire, the wheel and atomic energy. It creates the personages you see and guides their actions. It can handle hundreds at a time. But I disagree. The game’s the thing! Let’s build up from scratch.”

Operating the controls, he cleared the board and then inserted a single piece. It was the king in full regalia, gesturing this way and that. “There he is. The center, the nexus of it all! Monarch of all he surveys.”

Jundrak peered closer, trying to discern the face. Though it was simplified, like a wooden doll, its features were definite and characteristic. It was Maxim, surely!

But as the figure turned to look directly toward him, it changed. The king now bore an entirely different face. Liber was teasing him.

The chronicler laughed again. “As I said, you never stop! Don’t try to identify the pieces, they’re all fictitious. You won’t discover my political leanings that way.”

“I already have discovered your political leanings,” Jundrak answered, tight-lipped. “You are a radical, an anti-royalist.”

“Untrue, untrue. Don’t throw accusations around, you’ll frighten me. Let’s see what else we’ve got.”

A female piece took her place beside the king. “The queen! And adorned like one, naturally. Notice how she leans on the king’s arm. But we can be sure she looks after her own interests, too.”

Swiftly changing, the queen bore a dozen different faces and costumes in succession as Liber demonstrated the astonishing versatility of his machine. Jundrak watched in fascination as the historian then introduced a seemingly endless gallery of colorful characters. He even played out short dramas for Jundrak in the complex symbology of the game. They were a little hard to follow, but nevertheless

interesting and sometimes comic.

“Well, there it is,” Liber said at last, evidently pleased by Jundrak’s admiration. “You might call my games machine the Ideal Politician’s Sublimator. We could take sides on it and practice all our ambitions and intrigues without anybody getting hurt—unless you count the pieces, of course.”

“It’s fantastic! How do you play?”

Liber sighed. “That’s the snag. I understand the rules because I invented them. But everybody else seems to find them just a bit too complicated to follow. Hence no game. Usually I play against the computer, or sometimes I leave the pieces to play by themselves for a while. You’d be surprised how ingenious they can be!” He took his hands from the controls. The thirty-odd pieces on the board continued to gesture, fight, argue, form alliances of convenience. “Yes, it’s a whole little world down there, as near to ours as I can make it. There is a difference, though.”

“And what’s that?” Jundrak asked.

“I can change the rules for my holograph puppets if I like. But for us the rules are immutable. The game is absolute.”

“What in space are you driving at?” Jundrak demanded sharply. He had the feeling that Liber was trying to lecture him in some way, and he didn’t like it.

“Just that the world controls us, we can’t control the world. It’s all a game, and we are willy-nilly pieces whose lives are governed by the game. Each piece is driven by circumstances into the position it occupies at any time. So we have Peredan sitting on Smorn for the last fifty years, King Maxim sitting in his palace—and you and I sitting here.”

“I’m not at all sure that your philosophy is not seditious,” Jundrak said sourly.

“It probably seems so—to you! You came here trying to find out which side I’m on. But why should I be on anybody’s side? Why should I feel anything more for those cavorting pieces, the kings and statesmen of our world, than I feel for the cavorting pieces I put into my computer? Sorry, you won’t find me useful. I’m only a tired old scholar, I leave the scheming to others.”

Jundrak dismissed Liber’s outlook as meaningless and pessimistic. But when, a little later, he left the relaxing atmosphere of the cottage, he happened to glance up at the blaze of stars shining down from Maximilia’s sky. Momentarily the whole weight of the universe seemed to be pressing down at him, forcing him this way and that as through a maze.

#### IV

The investigating teams hovered nervously round the Patch like a swarm of gnats, maintaining themselves just beyond the reach of its malign influence as it roamed through space.

For all their efforts they still knew very little about it. It was a patch of pseudo-particles a light-year across. Its specific gravity was even less than that of the interstellar hydrogen through which it passed, but despite this, it was vaguely visible as a dim flickering of photons released by interactions among its strange, diffuse particles. The team believed that they were all virtual particles, a technical term meaning that they had no permanent existence but passed on their transient energy one to another in never-ending chains, vanishing as they did so. Even the light photons that reached the scientists were extraordinary. They did what normal photons never did: they decayed, producing ghostly phenomena in





The secret office of the Society of Death to Life was a smallish back room rented from a shop owner. Entering, Krakhno found three of his fellow conspirators, the nucleus of his revolutionary party, slumped across the table, where they had been sitting as they waited for him to arrive.

Closing the door behind him, Krakhno flicked his intense gaze around the room in an unspoken valediction, from the second table laden with crudely published literature to the desk-sized copier that had printed it to the locked cupboard where their tiny arms cache was stacked.

He was alone, then. None of his comrades had survived the cosmic assault.

He stepped across the room to the narrow window, accidentally brushing one of the bodies as he moved and sending it toppling to the floor, and stood for some minutes gazing down into the back yard, which was covered with a growth of weeds and ended in the brick wall of a factory which cut off any further view. He needed these few minutes seeing nothing but this restricted, depressing scene to take stock of himself and the incredible thing that had happened to him.

Castor Krakhno was a man slightly below medium height, with a frame that, though it tended marginally to stockiness, was amply endowed with energy and expressiveness. His age was forty (years of natural aging, that is, unprolonged by the medications available to the nobility) and his black hair was balding, while his florid face was fixed in a burning expression of perpetual ferocity. His deep brown eyes could glower steadily like an animal's, but at other times flicked shiftily this way and that, avoiding everything like those of an unsuccessful criminal.

And he was undisputed leader—or had been—of the doctrine of Death to Life.

Krakhno had lived all his life on Carole, having been born illegitimately to a factory girl in a slum town a few hundred miles away. He still remembered his mother, mainly as she looked returning exhausted from a day's work to their wretched single room in a twenty-story tenement block. He remembered her, however, without any feeling of compassion. At the age of fifteen, after watching her grow year by year thinner and more careworn, he had run away to wander for a time through the cities and farms of the planet before settling here in Kinn, the capital, where he devoted himself to the destruction of society and its replacement by anarchy.

There had always been anarchists; but Krakhno had given the movement new life, had turned its doctrine, long defeated by history, into one of action. His proudest exploit, the perpetrators of which were still undetected by the law, was the murder of an entire noble family by blowing up the Hadrcany Theater.

For some time he and his closest associates had lived off the proceeds of crime—not committed personally, as that would have been too risky, but through help given from Carole's extensive criminal underworld, which was in part sympathetic to their cause—and he had given their time to propagating the principles of Krakhno's brand of anarchy, the creed of nihilism:

*The destruction of everything existing*—meaning, for propaganda purposes, the annihilation of everything involved in the present order of society, of its classes, of its laws and institutions.

*Death to Life*—meaning, for purposes of propaganda, death to the style of life lived now, and death to the privileged prolonged life by which the nobility made the suffering of the lower orders seem even more acute.

But privately, in his inmost thoughts, these slogans had a deeper, second meaning connected with a hatred of life of any kind, a hatred which would not be quenched, a feeling that existence itself was somehow evil.

Never had that feeling been more poignant than it had twenty minutes ago.

To the population at large the *thing* had come without warning. Krakhno was certain, however, that a secret few *had* known of it, for it explained something that had puzzled him over the past few weeks. He had learned, partly from routine reports from spies and partly from occasional newscasts, that all the chief nobles and big industrial owners were leaving the planet one by one “on business trips.” What the newscasts never revealed was that they were taking their entire families with them. Until now he had been at a loss to know what significance to attach to this fact.

“They knew, all right,” he muttered to himself. “Just like them, the rats!”

And if they knew it was coming, they knew what it was and what it did, as Krakhno now knew from a much closer, more personal source. As a matter of fact it was still here, or, rather, it was just leaving. Krakhno could feel its presence, could feel the indescribable *change* in himself as it finally departed. From what he knew of it he guessed that it could travel very quickly through space, certainly faster than light.

And when it came upon life it absorbed the life force, awareness, individuality of all creatures. *It ate their souls*. Krakhno recalled with a sense of fascinated, almost delighted horror the engorging, the stealing of what was intangible and yet all that a person was—himself.

Mixed with his feeling of thrilled horror was a sort of snarling shame, a resentment that the invader had let him live. For during those stunning, bewildering minutes when his soul had been stripped, assaulted, raped and put through unimaginable processes, there had hammered on his consciousness a continuous and enormous negation—No-o-o-o-o ...

The feasting monster had *rejected* him. Spat him out from its very mouth!

To Krakhno, standing on a murdered world surrounded by hundreds of millions of dead, with his mind clearer and more trenchant than it had ever been in his life, the thought that the very stealer of life, surely the ultimate thief, had rejected *his* life was an unbearable humiliation and the summation of decades of frustration and lonely rejection. It seemed to him terribly unfair that all those millions, so many of whom he hated, were dead, had escaped, while he, who knew the values of life and death, was passed over.

A few tears of self-pity squeezed from his eyes and ran down his cheeks, but he quickly wiped them away and strode to the arms cupboard, unlocked it, and took out a long tubed neutron beamer. In the circumstances, there was no point in going anywhere unarmed. Without a further glance at his lifeless comrades, he left.

As he clattered down the stairs and into the street other facts were making themselves evident to him. For one thing, his senses were sharper, deeper. When he emerged on to Fressia Avenue it was like a scene in a visionary painting. For another, he suddenly realized how quickly he had accommodated himself to such a radical turn of events; and with that realization he felt a quickening of his vitality, a tremendous increase in the magnetism and power of his personality. Contact with the mind-monster had recharged his soul, raised him to a new level of energy.

In addition it had given him a subconscious reservoir of extraordinary ideas and insights, which he knew he could tap when the need arose and which would stand him in good stead in the career that, already, he could see stretching ahead.

He quickly found a serviceable vehicle and drove it to the spaceport on the edge of the city, bumping contemptuously over any bodies he found in his way. Once there, it was a matter of selecting a spacecraft he would be able to pilot to some nearby inhabited (and unmolested) system.

Never having handled a spaceship before, Krakhno might normally have considered the task beyond him. But with his new potential, which he felt to be almost superhuman, he did not flinch for a moment. Eventually he chose a small, racy spacer, a magnate's personal yacht, with a range of a hundred light-years. Applying himself assiduously to charts and pilot's manuals, he rapidly gained a smattering acquaintance with the techniques involved and, somewhat presumptuously, deemed himself competent to manage his escape.

He had already decided strictly against using space communicator equipment in an effort to call for help. His first space journey to the neighboring solar system was successful, but it merely took him to another world as thoroughly robbed of biological life as his own (as he had suspected it would). Thereafter his astrogational efforts went more and more astray. Eventually he took recourse to an emergency navigational beacon and was guided to a pick up by a commercial freighter to whose captain he told a garbled story of a malfunctioning computer. The captain, frightened by the bewildering events that were taking place in the area and bewildered by the stream of conflicting instructions that came from the authorities, paid him little attention. At the first landing Krakhno slipped from the ship, lost himself in the teeming immensity of a vast city and bent his efforts to obtaining passage to his true destination—the heart of the kingdom, Maximilia, the place where his instinct told him the first eruption of violent revolution could plausibly be engineered.

At about the same time that Castor Krakhno landed in Maximilia, immediately to bury himself in the Old Town, the Patch encountered Jundrak's treacherously laid slipline which led to Prince Peredan's encampment.

It paused. Sliplines stretched throughout the universe like an infinite spider's web, and having gorged itself in recent months it had no cause to hurry.

After resting at the junction for nearly a week, it began to amble slowly along the intensified slipline, still savoring the flavors of its recent intakes and digesting them fully. The unhurried journey was to last several months.

## V

His mission to Smorn completed, Jundrak of Sann returned to his regular duties as a full colonel in the Royal Fighting Forces.

Some of the time he spent pleasantly socializing in the capital, mixing in the exciting if artificial society of the Inner City and making occasional evening trips to Rondana in the Old Town. His command required that most of his time, however, should be spent on the other side of the planet, where a secret lift carried him into a system of huge underground caverns in the bowels of the continent.

Jundrak's main qualification for the Smorn double cross, apart from the fact that the king considered him "a likely young feller" willing to try any exploit, was that he was in charge of the development of the slipway drive. This itself was an indication of the value Maxim placed upon him, for, before the advent of the Patch, the king had counted on the new space engines to ensure a military victory over Prince Peredan's forces.

For Jundrak's part, he was certain that King Maxim's confidence in him was a miscalculation. He had his own ideas as to how the fabulous new ships could be used.

The hidden elevator in a rock cleft in a gorge, responding to his personal body odor—much more difficult to fake than a voiceprint, fingerprint or visual recognition—descended at high speed and

came to rest in the executive offices of the ship-building complex. Subcolonel Heen Sett, second-in-command and if the truth were known Jundrak's personal accomplice, was waiting to meet him.

The offices were set high in the wall of one of the largest caverns. Through wide, sloping windows could be seen the sight that currently thrilled Jundrak most: the hulls of twelve of the big slipway ships, stretching away in single file under the yellow glare of the overhead lights. The ships were monstrous, glowing with a golden sheen and making the construction men who swarmed over their sides look like ants.

The din of the cavern was muted to a murmur through the soundproofed windows. Excitement was mounting in Jundrak, had been mounting for weeks, because the slipway fleet was now close to being operational or at least to being ready to undertake its trials, which in Jundrak's plan amounted to the same thing. And he could hardly wait for those golden ships to ride up the shaft to the surface.

There was a principle involved in the slipway drive that decreased its effectiveness in proportion to the mass to be moved, no matter how powerful a drive unit was used. If a ship was small enough, like the tiny bell-shaped craft in which Jundrak had traveled to Smorn, it could hurtle through space at an almost unbelievable velocity; even the gigantic dreadnoughts in the cavern, however, had a decisive edge over any other warship in space, as well as a maneuverability—provided they were stationed on a spatial fault line—that nothing else could match. Even more significant, their range was unlimited.

"Good to see you, Heen," Jundrak said. "How goes it?"

The hard-eyed subcolonel glanced through the glass door of his office to make sure the design staff in the outer office were all busy at their work and not taking an impertinent interest in the conversation. Already he had rooted out one lipreading spy sent from the Inner City.

"Technically, fine. We're slap on schedule. As for the ... other thing, we shall have to watch ourselves."

"There's been trouble?"

"Depends how you look at it. Your idea of sealing off the base completely was a good one. Some of the watchers and agents in our ranks overplayed their hands when their regular channels to the outside were cut off. Consequently we know who they are—and there are more than we thought."

"What have you done with them?"

"Locked up one or two of the more obvious. As for the rest, they're still carrying out their cover duties and imagine they are safe. Later we can charge them with sabotage."

Jundrak pursed his lips in dry amusement. "It's a little disappointing. I thought Maxim placed more trust in me."

"Don't lose heart. He probably doesn't know just how much surveillance is going on. I'm pretty sure most of the spies here were infiltrated entirely by the Political Police. Others are probably from other departments that simply want to know what kind of work is going on here. Inter-department espionage is a natural consequence of Maxim's method of rule. There are scores of private bureaucratic empires, all jealous of one another and jockeying for power by any means possible."

Jundrak, who looked upon the slipway fleet as *his* private empire, understood Heen's point perfectly.

Heen took a large shot of a murky dark brown variety of whiskey, poured himself another and one for Jundrak. “Currently our real trouble is from loyalists making complaints about security and lack of palace control. These Maximites can be a pain in the neck. There’s a deputation outside wants to see you.”

“And when can the fleet ride?”

“In less than a month.” Heen spoke with triumph, downing his whiskey.

“That’s good enough. Let them in.”

Heen shrugged, touched a button on his desk and spoke into a communicator.

Of all the huge staff of the underground shipyard, only Heen Sett was truly privy to Jundrak’s private ambition, which was to make the slipway fleet effectively his own property. Already the shipyard had the atmosphere of a personal kingdom. For a long time he had been bringing in men of his own choice, easing out others whose allegiance seemed to him to lean too strongly toward the established order. He made sure that everybody who was locked in this claustrophobic world saw plenty of him, and he did his best to impress and inspire them by his presence. Many of the brother officers who administered the project were his personal friends. He felt he could depend on them. Unfortunately it had not been possible in the time available to insure that the entire staff was prejudiced in his favor, and some were now complaining about the seclusion from the outside world that he had forced upon them. The five thousand construction workers were incommunicado anyway, of course, but officers and designers with relatives influential in the social hierarchy resented the indignity.

Jundrak hoped that when he had completed the project and proved the fleet’s worth Maxim could be jollied into giving him command of it. In fact all his intrigues in the Inner City were currently directed toward supporting his case. His reasoning was this: King Maxim’s reign was ramshackle, jerry-built. It was anybody’s guess as to whether it would solidify into a permanent (though tyrannical) political structure or begin to break up. Nor did Jundrak altogether omit the rebel encampment from future calculations, although he felt that an outright victory for Prince Peredan would hardly serve his best interests, since a return to the old king would bring with it a return to firm, lawful government giving little scope for adventurous or irresponsible behavior—the spice of life to Jundrak. However, a restoration of the old monarchy was the least likely possibility to his way of thinking (especially in view of the Patch). No, what he looked for was some sort of fray, another civil conflict, anything of that sort, in which the slipway fleet would almost certainly tip the balance in favor of whatever faction Jundrak chose. The power accruing to the commander of such a fleet would be almost beyond imagining, and if, as had nearly happened once, the ages-old kingdom started breaking apart into permanent, separate hegemonies, then he would be able to carve out for himself the most delirious dream of all, his own kingdom.

Jundrak sipped his whiskey, reflecting that once ambition had taken root in a man’s soul, there was no purging it out.

The deputation of malcontented designers filed into the office under the cold stares of Jundrak and his second-in-command. He knew the type. They were of the sort who had backed the revolution and still supported Maxim, seeing in it some kind of social aim connected with halting what they imagined to be the decay of social morals and habits. Still incapable of seeing that Maxim had simply used them for his own purposes and that social life under him was even more dissolute and wanton than it had been before, they would be dutiful workers and either abstemious or monogamous in their sex lives.

They were conservatively dressed and their expressions were demure. Jundrak became uncomfortably aware of the contrast they made with himself and Heen, garbed in the aggressively military

uniforms whose bizarre touch suited so well the political climate of the time: shiny black jackboots reaching to the knee, tunics with short, slightly flared skirts especially stiffened and partially concealing exaggeratedly large, armored codpieces. In addition, the tunics incorporated harnesses carrying the devices and weapons that were also part of an officers' everyday wear. The peaked hats, which could be slotted down into the neck of the tunic to form fully battleworthy helms, each displayed the vivid symbol M for Maxim in jet black. The character's upright columns slanted dramatically and terminated in jagged, upended inflections that gave it a sinister, hooklike or splayed appearance and caused it to hover like an evil bird above all the other medals and insignia.

"You wished to see me?" Jundrak asked peremptorily.

"We did, colonel. First let us apologize for making demands on your valuable time."

Jundrak nodded curtly. The man before him looked ludicrous, he thought. His short-trimmed black hair was parted down the middle and brushed on either side in an oily gloss, and his hands were folded before him in an unctuous attitude of supplication. The hair style was common to the others, indeed to their whole cult. Jundrak vaguely recognized the man, name of Horrensott or something.

"Please continue and we may waste no more of it."

"We are all concerned," said the spokesman, "over our continued confinement here. It is a great hardship on us, as many of us have families—"

"Come, come," interrupted Jundrak smoothly. "You are perfectly well aware from the nature of your work here that there are excellent reasons for the tight security. Or perhaps you have not quite realized just how important this project is? Well, confidentially I will tell you that the future safety of the entire kingdom depends on it. You will be well rewarded for your sacrifices, I promise you that."

"If we could only write to our families, sir—" began another of the supplicants. Jundrak cut him off with a bleak shake of his head.

"A blackout is a blackout. No one, repeat no one, may pass information in or out of this base except myself."

They glanced meaningfully at one another. "With respect, sir," said the first speaker, "in another sense we hardly regard *that* as good security. There is a second ground to our questions, this time with regard to the well-being of the project. Without some measure of supervision, monitoring, surveillance, call it what you will, from higher organs in the government, how can it be guaranteed that the project will not go wrong *from within*?"

"Explain yourself." Jundrak shot dangerous flashes from his smoldering eyes.

"We feel there are grounds for concern over the numbers of doubtful individuals who appear to have been given the freedom of the project," Horrensott went on in sanctimonious tones. "Individuals outlandish in their dress and personal habits, decadent in their manners and outrageous in their morals. In short, individuals quite unsuited to the performance of services vital to the health of His Majesty."

Jundrak felt a vague, grim amusement at this summing up of his friends. "You have been away from the capital a long time," he told them. "Otherwise you would realize that far from being outlandish, they are the norm. In fact, they lag several seasons behind the fashion—due no doubt to their close attention to their work instead of to the life styles of their colleagues." His voice rose angrily on the last words.

Clearly Horrensott's speech had been prepared; the man was treading carefully, afraid to put the

matter as he really saw it, which was that something smelled but he didn't really know what. What he desperately wanted was a chance to get outside and do some checking up with higher authorities.

In a simulated fury Jundrak slammed his fist on Heen's desk. "You have the impudence to come in here and question *my* decisions, *my* loyalty. What can *you* know of the factors involved, you sitting at your desks designing tubes, valves, shunts—" He turned away in a display of disgust.

The others flushed. He had successfully needled them.

"We wonder whether the king knows what is going on down here," one burst out heatedly, "whether *he* knows how his subjects are being treated." The other three murmured approval.

"You *do*, eh? Then ask him!" Jundrak leaned over the desk to the communicator and jabbed a series of buttons.

The well-known whine of the Royal Palace's reception signal came from the speaker.

"Come, you may speak to the king. I will arrange it. I will clear you through the scrambler codes." He glared at them, daring them.

"The—king? Himself? Now?" Horrensott was stuttering with awe and fright. "But how is it possible?"

"Did I not tell you of the urgency of our work? The king himself is ready at any hour of the day or night to answer a communicator call from me. That is how he values the work here. He requires that every development here is made known to him immediately. It was he himself who ordered the security blackout and who gives personal approval to all major appointments." These latter barefaced lies slid easily off his tongue.

His indignant holier-than-thou tone, together with the sudden threat of instant confrontation with their monarch, had broken them, defeated them he saw. They stared stupefied at the vision screen, on which there currently appeared only the pretty, meaningless colors of the scrambler code.

"Do you still want that interview?"

Horrensott hook his head dumbly. With relief Jundrak, who could no more have whistled up King Maxim than he could have raised the dead, switched off the communicator. Both the vision screen and the reception signal died.

"My ... apologies, colonel," Horrensott said with self-conscious humility. "With your permission we will retire."

"Of course, of course." Jundrak held out his hand placatingly. "I would like you to know that despite your fears being entirely unfounded, your alertness is appreciated."

When the visitors had left, Heen broke into wicked laughter.

"You bastard!"

Jundrak shrugged and smirked, unashamedly pleased with himself. "People like that are the easiest to deal with. Fanatics."

"Should we take any further action?"

"No, the thing now is to keep things as tight as we can until the fleet's ready for action. When the time comes we shall have to play it by ear. I have to convince Maxim that the people I have put in are



necessary to run the fleet. I shall stress the need for experience and knowledge of the new engines, something like that. If any other elements look ready to make trouble, we shall have to arrange an explosion at the test bed to get rid of them.”

Heen poured out the last of the whiskey, looking up at him sardonically. “You’re cool, I’ll give you that. Aren’t you scared all this is going to backfire on you?”

“I don’t think so. Ever play chess? The thing is to cover your moves. Don’t do anything irreversible until the situation is irreversible. Well, the fleet will be ready to lift in a month, you say. The trials will be our chance to establish a base.”

“A base?”

“That’s right. We need an exigency plan, somewhere to operate from if need be. A few light-years from here there’s a group of ruffians holed up in some asteroids. According to my information they’ve hollowed out some of the big rocks and fitted them out pretty well. It’s just what we need. We can soon clear them out of there and start moving in everything we need to make it a real base for the fleet, putting in a skeleton staff to await future contingencies. And if we handle it right, no outsiders need know.”

“These people already there—who are they? Outlaws?”

“Oh, just space detritus. You know. Started out as a legitimate company mining the rocks, couldn’t make a go of it and soon turned into little more than a gang ready for anything. Trash.” He gave a hollow laugh. “Just like what’s happening to the kingdom, if you think about it.”

He gazed down at the titanic ships in the cavern below. Golden shapes, full of promise!

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Two hours before dawn and nearly three months after Jundrak’s visit, a chime sounded in Prince Peredan’s bedchamber. He woke instantly, rolled over, slipped off his couch and touched a button on the side table. A discreetly small vidscreen, nestling among flowers and jeweled boxes, bloomed into light and color.

“Yes?”

A robust young face, sporting a red, coarse-haired moustache and side-whiskers that made it look like the head of an eager young boar, stared glassily out of the screen.

“Message from the watcher ships, Your Highness. Enemy forces have taken up position at eight light-years distance. Looks like the Fourth Fleet.”

So it had happened!

“Only the Fourth?” he queried. “Never mind, there are probably others waiting outside range. Have you told Drap yet?”

“He is being informed now. Your Highness.”

“Tell him to join me in the command room immediately. By the way, the Fourth Fleet is stationary, isn’t it? Not moving toward us?”

“It is stationary, Your Highness!” barked the goggling face. Excitement had made the young major almost paralytic with military correctness.

“And what kind of drive are they using?”

“Conventional drive as far as could be ascertained, Your Highness. Heavily baffled, of course. Normally we would never have discovered them this far out.”

Peredan nodded with satisfaction and cut the connection. Then he tapped out a pattern on the coder, which also lay among the flowers on his bedside table, sounding a general alert.

Swiftly he dressed and splashed his face with treated, scented water, dabbing himself dry with a fleecy towel. At the same time he was running all the factors rapidly through his mind, going over them for the hundredth time and checking them from all possible angles. This was the news he had been waiting for.

Ever since uncovering the treachery of young Jundrak of Sann, he had placed a special watcher service outside Smorn’s solar system to survey the space beyond normal watchers’ range. He had been certain that Maxim, expecting him to evacuate his camp, would attempt to strike at his moment of greatest weakness and would hide forces in the darkness, unseen as he thought, to await their chance.

But Peredan was ready, not in the confusion of a mass transport, but in full battle order to undertake the first heavy engagement for many years. And he was eager and able to give Maxim a bloody nose.

Servants and aides hovered nervously round the door of his bedchamber. He brushed through them, strode at an easy pace toward the command room. Through the walls vibrated muffled noises from outside on the huge ground of the encampment: klaxons hooting, the low-pitched rumble of battleships lifting off into space.

General Drap was already waiting for him when he arrived in the command room. There too, were others of the general staff who had been roused from their beds: Emshaller, Koryd, Freer, Vourd. Also standing dutifully on the perimeter of the room were younger officers here to observe the proceedings, part of their training for assuming general staff duties when their time for such responsibility came.

The assembly clicked to attention at his entrance. With a wave of his hand he stood them at ease.

“Plan A seems suitable, Drap. Do you agree?” he said without preamble.

Drap nodded, his porky, red face serious. He glanced from beneath bushy eyebrows at the takeoff count on one of the many wall screens.

“None better. But we shall have to get there fast.”

“Six or seven hours should see us into the attack.”

As he spoke Peredan was also checking the takeoff count, feeding information into one of the many computer terminals mounted on pedestals. The command room staff took up their positions as the attack force formed in Smorn orbit, checking, relaying, computing.

Just preparing the launch of an attack this size was a major operation, rehearsed to perfection over the years. And during the hours between departure from orbit and arrival at the target area the work went on in the form of a continuous interplay between command center and the various battle centers, checking equipment, positions and procedures. By the time crisis point arrived, Peredan was satisfied that every man knew his function to perfection, and that every item of hardware was in condition purple, that is, that it was one hundred percent ready. Familiarity with even small details of battle equipment and

disposition was something Peredan insisted on for his general staff, and they had taken special courses in memory training for that very purpose.

The work was exacting, and hour by hour tension mounted in the command room. When the attack force was due to approach strike distance Peredan took his place on a throne-like chair, looking down on an expansive, circular table that occupied a central place in the room. General Drap took the only other chair, facing him across the table.

As Peredan touched one of the control tabs set in the arm of his chair, the mahogany-colored tabletop cleared and became a window into deep space scattered with stars like diamonds.

This big display screen was to be the main tool in directing the battle. It could give both visual and graphic display and could also be used to discuss alternative plans, for its computer was adept at converting spoken instructions into vid-interpreted prognostications. Tensely Peredan waited for the flagship to signal that it had reached potential strike distance.

Peredan touched another tab. A number of colored dots appeared on the tabletop showing the disposition of the Fourth Fleet as observed by the watcher ships. The royal fleet (the usurper fleet as Peredan thought of it) was bunched up in fairly tight formation, not expecting to meet action but waiting quietly to receive the word from its own spy probes in Smorn's solar system.

The coded message from the flagship came through in clipped, calm tones. Peredan pushed buttons, wiggled switches and the vision screen displayed a panorama of the opposing fleets. He and Drap bent studiously over the table as he began to issue orders.

In numbers and firepower the rebels were marginally superior to the Fourth Fleet sent by King Maxim. Prince Peredan, however, had always known that he could never hope to be able to depend on numerical superiority and in a possible struggle in the years ahead he hoped to rely on superior strategy, superior training and superior weapons. If the Fourth Fleet was all he had to face now, then he regarded the outcome as virtually certain. The rebel forces had already spread out over a wide area, forming a net which now closed in on the Fourth Fleet like a clenching fist and hurled a volley of atomic missiles into the enemy.

The advantage of surprise lasted only about ten minutes, but that was enough to rock the Fourth Fleet from end to end. Ship after ship vanished in the white flares of nuclear explosions, before the fleet rayed out to escape the deadliness of the bombardment. Then, as it met the encircling intruders, a period of confused, disconnected fighting began, each ship maneuvering independently with one or more combatants, delivering random thrusts and trying to avoid those leveled in return.

The chief weapons on both sides were atomic missiles of varying accuracy, which they fired back and forth singly or in volleys. If they hit, the missiles were instantly and totally destructive, but the evasive capability of the battling spacecraft was great and direct hits were uncommon, except in the case of accidental encounters with the thousands of untargeted weapons that soon littered the combat area. More common were near-misses, entailing messier and more bloody destruction with little hope of rescue. The ships' secondary armament consisted of intense gamma beams by means of which they tried to destroy each other's external mountings—missile launchers, guidance systems and tracking detectors—in order to render the enemy impotent or unable to evade missile thrusts.

Peredan let the fray continue for a while, holding a running conversation with Drap about this aspect or that of the developing battle. After a successful first strike there was always a period when even confused fighting told in favor of the attacker, until the other side regained its morale. The trick was to know at what point to break off and regroup.

Meantime the flashing, kaleidoscopic tabletop brought them pictures from all over the combat area. They saw ships junked, vaporized. They saw clouds of men spill into space, desperate men fleeing ships whose instruments told them they would be annihilated in the next few seconds, all defenses inoperable. Very few of these fugitives could escape the expanding fireballs, and if they did they would be lucky indeed to be picked up.

Judging the moment, Peredan issued an order which was relayed to the flagships several light-years away. As the call went out, all ships that were able to do so disengaged themselves and drove at top speed several million miles to the south, where they formed themselves into a far-flung but regular grid pattern. Under the direction of the flagship the grid then began selecting targets one by one and destroying them with concerted fire.

The Fourth Fleet's answering salvos struck weakly at the shifting, dancing grid. Much weaker now in numbers, there was obviously some uncertainty among its commanders about the next move. The alternatives, however, were clear: either to advance or flee. Peredan waited calmly to see which it would be, enjoying the sight of an enemy battleship first flaring into white-hot fury and then vanishing from view with every minute that passed.

Then the remnants of the Fourth Fleet began to withdraw, gathering speed to take the battered ships out of range of the rebel forces.

General Drap looked at Peredan expectantly, a question in his eyes. Should they give chase? Peredan hesitated. His reason, his training, his instinct, told him that the battle was not even half over, that to pursue would be to fall into a trap, to leave the fifty-year-old Smorn encampment wide open.

He shook his head, aware of the disappointment among the junior officers and even among some of the general staff—they at least, he told himself irritably, should have known better.

“Maintain position,” he ordered.

He pressed studs on the arm of his chair. The glowing dots that represented warships shrank suddenly to the center of the table as the scale covered by the screen expanded dizzily. There was a long, tense pause as they watched the mauled Fourth Fleet creep toward the edge of the table.

And then came the full vindication of Peredan's decision. A new cloud of dots edged on the perimeter of the table: the remainder of Maxim's expedition was entering the battle.

“Newcomers identified as the Royalist Fifth Fleet,” a businesslike voice said calmly.

Peredan frowned. Only the Fifth Fleet? He had expected Maxim to throw in everything he could spare, the Third and perhaps even the Eighth, though the latter, operating on the other side of the kingdom, probably could not be transferred. Had Maxim underestimated him? Or was the Third Fleet busy in some role of threat or suppression elsewhere in the galaxy?

A third possibility chilled him. What if the newly arrived Fifth Fleet was equipped with the new drive that had brought Jundrak of Sann to Smorn? A new mode of propulsion that left his own ships outclassed?

The coming action would provide the answer. The Fifth Fleet was advancing in the shape of a vast wheel, bunched up toward the center where the command ships were and raying out in spiral arms toward the perimeter, the whole rotating slowly.

The “galaxy formation,” as it was called, was a good one. It was impossible to get the command ships within range without coming close enough to expose oneself to concentrated fire from everywhere

in the disk.

“Implement Plan C,” Peredan said.

Aware that his former numerical advantage was now gone, he listened to his order being relayed in a stream of supplementary data and commands. Plan C was a fleeing tactic designed to provide for several contingencies at once. It called for a withdrawal back toward Smorn’s primary and a halt about one light-year above the plane of the ecliptic. This kept Smorn covered, gave time to regroup, and at the same time gave the enemy the uneasy feeling of being invited into a trap.

The royal ships followed hesitantly, then stopped a safe distance away, still maintaining formation and spinning gracefully. The remnants of the Fourth Fleet were trailing along after it to give added support.

“Tactic F,” Peredan rapped.

The grid formation collapsed and condensed into a slug-like mass. Even before the maneuver was complete the whole force was surging forward at the enemy.

The rate of acceleration was the very most the ships could take. Ahead of it, the hurtling mass sent a hot, deadly shaft of missiles and gamma beams that annihilated everything in its path. Then, like a solid bullet, the compacted squadrons tore through the comparatively thin wheel of ships at a point about two-thirds out toward the perimeter. Contact lasted only a few seconds, but in that time a gaping hole had been torn in the enemy formation as the slug fanned its fire on everything in range.

The momentum of the slug carried it light-years beyond its target. With a recklessness that made every engine smoke and scream, the formation reversed and sent itself plunging through the enemy for a second time from the opposite direction.

One fear of Peredan’s was already answered. The enemy fleet was not reacting quickly enough to indicate a new type of drive. If they had it, then it was only marginally better than the old type.

On the third attempt to send the deadly slug through their ranks, however, the enemy was ready for it. Abruptly the wheel contracted into a similar tight-packed mass, presenting the same easy target as the rebels—and also the same easy target for long-range weapons.

For a brief while a thick, almost palpable two-way beam of energy and nuclear missiles sprang up between the two wedges. Slowly both fleets spread out to avoid the unbearably intense shaft, at the same time edging closer to one another until they were engaged in the same chaotic nuclear brawl as before, with the overriding tendency being for ships to pair off and slug it out.

“Give me battle assessments,” Peredan said. Then the scene on the tabletop shook and went out; the collating ship had been hit.

“It’s a damn mess,” Drap commented in his brisk, gruff voice. “Oughtn’t we to do something? How about Tactic Y?”

Peredan glanced blearily at Drap’s bulbous face. “I don’t think so. Anything we can do we’ve already done. Nothing can be gained by any more integrated maneuvers, from now on it’s just hard slogging.”

While they spoke there had been nervous activity around them as subordinates tried to give the command room eyes again. With impressive speed an alternative data-collecting craft was set up in the battle area and the tabletop sprang to life once more.

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Four hours had already passed since the first strike, which with the time spent en route added up to ten hours of strain and tension. As the struggle continued, hour after hour, Peredan took nerve stimulants to keep himself alert.

Gradually, inexorably, the battle assessments showed victory edging on his side.

Eventually, with more than half Maxim's force destroyed, the survivors tried to withdraw. Peredan had already anticipated this move by transferring ships under heavy baffle to block their retreat: he wanted the heaviest possible damage to the enemy. The struggle became even more desperate, being waged by men no longer trying to win but to escape with their lives.

After a final, major lunge the tattered Fourth and Fifth Fleets broke through and headed home. It was calculated that about a third of the royal expedition would make it back to base.

As the tabletop vision screen showed the shattered formations edging off the battle area at top speed, leaving to their fate any stragglers with faulty drives, a wild cheer went up in the command room. But Peredan angrily cut off the jubilation. His face fraught, he was already listening in to the damage and casualty lists, even as his forces gathered themselves together and took stock. His concern was whether they could, now, if they had to, venture forth into the kingdom and fight the same battle again.

At this stage such a capability was largely a matter of opinion. Prince Peredan could not help but exult over the outcome of the battle, but as he bent studiously to receive the reports his face became more creased and careworn.

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A day after the victory the rebel encampment was still in its history's high spot of ebullience and confidence. At the celebratory dinner party Prince Peredan gave, he was bombarded by exultant demands to press the newly won advantage.

The party was, indeed, a crisis point in the mood and tone of Peredan's whole following. All members of those families still in his entourage were present, as were all officers above the rank of captain, except those on watch. Even the old king made a brief appearance to wild applause before retiring as usual to his private quarters. The expectancy of further action was a heavy pressure which Peredan found hard to resist.

"The kingdom's defenses are wide open!" declared a young major loudly. "We can choose the fields of battle ourselves, pick them off one by one until there's nothing left!"

The man had been drinking heavily, as had they all, and vigorous acclaim greeted his words. Only General Drap and a few other senior officers were silent. Drap sat with eyes downcast, his heavy florid face impassive.

They understand it, Peredan thought. The others are ready to gamble, to fling themselves into an adventure. For too long they've done nothing but drill, now they've tasted blood. But Drap knows what's on my mind.

The fact was that twenty-five percent of the ships he had sent into the fight had been destroyed. Another thirty percent needed extensive repairs which would take weeks or months, so for immediate dispatch he could count on only half what he had set out with.

Against this Maxim still had three fleets intact: the Third, the Eighth and the Tenth (the numbers

referred to the sequence of their founding, mostly centuries ago; gaps in the number sequence indicated fleets that were now extinct), each of these fleets being supported by numerous, roving back up squadrons. Even if these fleets were totally destroyed the fight would not be over. There would still be the arduous and difficult job of subjugating Maxim's land-based power on thousands of planets.

The damage had been only slightly more than Peredan had anticipated, and bearing in mind that Maxim's fleets were widely separated through the vast kingdom, and, in fact, were rarely stationed in one piece, the chances of running them down one by one or at least in a scattered state were good. But all in all Peredan did not reckon the probability of ultimate victory at more than fifty-fifty; in other words he could as easily lose all as win all.

For the young bloods around him this was enough. But for Prince Peredan it was not enough.

A female voice broke into his reverie.

"It would be *wonderful* to be back in Unimm again. I've missed it terribly!"

The woman was the duchess of Alavar, whose husband, the duke of Alavar, had been killed in the civil war. Peredan smiled in her direction.

"So have we all, madam. Unfortunately the affairs of state cannot be governed by personal feelings. It may yet be some time before we are reinstated to our rightful estate."

The duchess turned her cosmetically perfect face toward him quizzically. The officer who had spoken before interrupted their conversation with a look of alarm on his face.

"But Your Highness! Isn't this the time to strike the usurper his deathblow? We've never before had a chance like this!"

"I admit, major, that our present opportunity is unprecedented. But a careful analysis of the situation reveals that our time has not, in fact, come. We have proven our military efficiency, and for the time being that must be enough."

"But Your Highness, why?"

Peredan forgave the impertinence, aware that his words were affecting the meeting like a sudden blanket of disappointment. "Military decisions and political decisions are inextricably entwined," he said. "Not only must the military situation be *more* favorable than it is now, but the political position must be right also."

"And when will *that* be?" asked the duchess, a cool, acid note in her voice.

"At the present moment the usurper Maxim is badly frightened. In his blundering way he may take domestic action against the populace which will precipitate them into a fond remembrance of my father's rule. Meantime we shall carry out detailed analyses of the past battle which will enable us to do better next time."

"I hope so," the duchess responded in haughty, cultured tones. "In the past five decades our continental estates on Alavar have been simply *ruined* by those dirt-grubbing peasants Maxim has turned on to them. I am impatient to throw them back into their slums and get the land in decent condition again."

Peredan returned to his thoughts, ignoring the more muted behavior of those around him. In essence, the reasons he gave had been his real ones, but in his own mind they had been more detailed, more complex, harder to explain. For one thing there were too many unknowns in the equation. He was

still puzzled to know why Maxim had not thrown in the Third Fleet when he made up the expedition. It would be explicable if the fleet was needed to hold down civil disturbances somewhere, but the agents Peredan had in the kingdom had not reported anything of that kind.

Could it be that he was being overcautious, that he was tricking himself into demanding impossibly perfect conditions out of sheer funk? He did not think so. It would be a relief to risk all, as his companions urged, for if he lost he would be rid of this burden of responsibility.

No, he told himself firmly, driving away all despairing thoughts, when we strike it must be decisive, irrevocable and unbeatable. *Nothing less than checkmate will do.*

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Centuries away as light travels, the Patch quickened its pace slightly. It did not feel quite so bloated from its feasts now, and its appetite for living vitality was beginning to return. It did not know what lay at the end of this easy, tracklike fault line, but it sensed there would be something. Something tasty.

## VI

“Get lost, man. Don’t bother us.”

The voice from the speaker was frightened, but defiant. Jundrak smiled, looking across at his aide. An equally cruel smile appeared on the eaglelike face of Heen Sett.

The vidscreen was blank, the man in the asteroids below having refused to show himself visually. No doubt he had no wish to look afraid as well as sound afraid.

At first the inhabitants of the asteroid warren had refused to answer their calls at all, cowering in their cover like rabbits and pretending not to exist. But a few blasts on the sun-drenched rock from a high-tension gamma ray beamer had soon brought them to a transmitter. Now they were simply trying to argue the visitors away.

“I repeat, open your locks in the name of the king,” Jundrak intoned.

“F— the king!” yelled a high-pitched, desperate voice that pushed in front of the first. “If you want us, come and get us!”

“We’d like nothing better,” breathed Jundrak, and cut the connection.

The main part of the rabble’s hideout consisted of five largish asteroids which maintained a common course, correcting their relative deviations by means of small, automatically operated jets. Knowing the miners’ propensity for burrowing like moles, Jundrak guessed that there were a number of other excavations in this jumbled belt of rock girdling a reddish sun. They also would come in useful, but they would mostly be deserted and could be tracked down later.

The value to Jundrak of the asteroid belt lay in its relative density. It was made up of thousands upon thousands of jagged planetoids, the remnants of some planet that had exploded billions of years ago. Its present owners were easy game for a noble with the might of the kingdom behind him. They were miserably equipped, and, not expecting to be attacked, they had taken hardly any trouble to mask their emissions or the telltale traces of heat that betrayed their occupation of these particular asteroids—not that it would have helped them, since Jundrak knew their location beforehand. But to someone with the equipment to make proper installations, with the terrible armaments that Jundrak had at



his disposal, the asteroid belt was a well nigh impregnable fortress. And the necessary excavations having already been made for the most part, the base could be established quickly and unobtrusively, in short, secretly.

The whole slipway fleet was undergoing its trials and those trials fulfilled all Jundrak's expectations. True, it was small as compared with any of the grand fleets—merely fifty first line ships as against their hundreds—but with their speed, their maneuverability, their tremendously updated firepower, he was confident he could take on any one of those fleets and annihilate it.

Most of the fleet was light-years away, still carrying out the elaborate sequence of tests its designers had devised. That kind of power was hardly needed for the task in hand. Jundrak had detached two of the golden monsters from the main formation. The one from which he had just sent his ultimatum had edged through the belt of rubble to threaten the hideout below. The second waited outside; it was acting as a cargo ship and contained the installation crews, the equipment and stores that he would leave behind.

“What shall we do,” Heen Sett queried broodingly, “bake them where they sit? Or knock holes in their nests?”

Jundrak grinned. “That would mean too much trouble cleaning up later. We're going in—there might be some sport for us here.”

He made another connection and rapped out orders to the waiting combat teams. He and Sett moved to the far side of the room, where a panel slid open and their valets helped them into their combat suits. Jundrak glanced over at Sett, admiring the latter's terrifying, almost evil appearance behind the hoodlike faceplate.

The suits were finished in matt maroon to provide camouflage in the range of conditions a spaceman was likely to meet. Blazoned on breast and helmet was the jagged M in jet black.

Despite their armored bulk, the suits were built of a light, clinking metal that made movement easy. Jundrak, followed by Heen, walked down a gray corridor to the dispatch chambers.

A hundred men were drawn up in squads of ten by the exit chutes, one officer to each squad. Jundrak, as soon as he and Heen had taken their places, banged his fist on a plate on his chest. A booming gonglike note echoed from it, the signal to debouch.

They marched into the tubes, officers going last. As the locking plates clanged shut behind them a shimmering surface began to form on the walls of the tubes, like water. The men took hold of stanchion handles provided for the purpose. Then they were slid swiftly out into space.

As they were ejected, the watery surface sprang into the form of a viscous, transparent bubble, in appearance like a soap bubble, supported by a light, flimsy frame to which the holding handles were attached. The liquid bubble held air, so that even with a damaged spacesuit a man could live, and it also warded off sun glare and moderately harsh radiation.

Ten of the bubbles floated away from the broad side of the battleship and sped swiftly toward the largest of the nearby asteroids. Clinging to his stanchion, Jundrak surveyed the terrain keenly.

The asteroids of the belt were on the average a few tens of miles in diameter. The largest probably ran to about a hundred miles, but these were not among them. The one they were headed toward was perhaps thirty miles through, nearly all of which would still be solid rock with maybe a hole a mile deep hollowed out for living space. Or perhaps more—they would soon know. It was easy to spot the entrance ports, but Jundrak had his eyes on the rest of the surface. Somewhere, hidden under a lid of

rock, would be the onetime miners' spaceship, doubtless a tattered old scow barely spaceworthy. An argument would currently be going on inside the asteroid as to whether to try for a getaway in it, but bearing in mind that the population of the rock was probably much larger than what the ship could carry, the discussion would only end in angry and inconclusive brawls.

Jundrak was also watching for whatever they had in the way of defensive armament. There was bound to be something.

And there it was. Glints among the harsh rock as tubes and racks leveled on the swooping bubbles. Probably creaking beamers and a missile or two. They were madmen to try it, but then Jundrak already took it for granted in his mind that the denizens of the hideout must be madmen in any case.

In the same moment as he spotted the weapons, covering fire came from the battleship. Silently through the empty void, hot gamma beams flashed by them and blasted into the emplacements, creating rivulets of melted metal and explosions in which dust and rock particles glittered in the sunlight as they flew over the tiny, arid landscape.

But now they were down, landing in a circle round the cluster of entrance ports. As they touched ground the bubbles burst, winking out of existence while the skeletal frameworks collapsed into bag-sized boxes which adhered to the surface.

As they moved forward, continuous spurts of gas from the men's shoulders caught the sun. These were walk jets designed to hold them to the surface despite the asteroid's almost nonexistent gravity and so enable them to walk at a normal pace if need be.

There were three entrance ports in all, stuck clumsily into the asteroid apparently at different times in the hideout's history. Jundrak sent two men forward with a wave of his arm. They bounded toward the nearer port, cutting down the power of their walk jets, and taped demolition charges in place. Then they came leaping back and joined the others as they took cover behind the ubiquitous slabs of rock.

With a flat, tinlike roar that sounded up through the soles of their boots and a bright, smokeless flash the drum-like port was blasted away from its moorings. The squads converged on the gaping hole.

There was, however, no sudden *woosh* or sudden haze that would mean all the air was being whipped into space from the interior of the asteroid. Jundrak gazed down the tunnel they had uncovered and saw the safety bulkhead fifty yards below.

"They take good care of their air," he commented thoughtfully. "We may as well do the same. Put a canopy over."

The work took only minutes, cementing the ring of the canopy around the ruined entrance port, attaching to it the clothlike umbrella with its own feltlike air lock. At the moment it hung limp in drape folds, but when air broke into the shaft it would blow up into a shallow dome and prevent any from escaping.

Meanwhile smaller special explosives were taped to the bulkhead. When all was ready, Jundrak loosed the force rifle in its scabbard so he could draw it quickly, took a high frequency neutron beamer in his left hand and told the demolition sergeant to trigger the charge. With a furious magnesium type burning, that lasted for nearly a minute and seemed to confine itself to a radius of about ten feet, the charge withered away the bulkhead, leaving only hot, smoking metal around the edges.

Jundrak's squad was already in the shaft, where they were falling at the rate of about a foot a minute. If the denizens of this place used artificial gravity then it did not reach this far. They flattened

themselves against the walls. As soon as the bulkhead seemed to have burned away Jundrak loosed off a couple of shots through it, even though he couldn't see through the glare of the still burning charge.

He spoke into his helmet mike to which all the task force was tuned. "All right, we're going through."

He jetted down toward the opening, followed by the others. As he dropped through the gaping hole a neutron beam hummed past him, barely brushing his armor and making it glow cherry red. Somebody was using a depleted power pack, he told himself as his own weapon sent a much stronger beam in reply.

There was a scuffling noise ahead as the reception party retreated. Jundrak found that beyond the bulkhead the tunnel split into four. All the new tunnels were in darkness. From their lay-out, however, and from the direction in which he had heard the scuffling, he guessed down which one the main quarters lay.

A fierce beam shone down the tunnel from the region of his solar plexus, soon reinforced by the lights of the others around him. Jundrak sensed a trap, but confident of his superiority he ordered his men to advance, plunging recklessly into the darkness.

Sudden explosions sounded, before them and behind them. The tunnel became filled with dust and debris. Flashing his light this way and that, Jundrak ascertained that the tunnel had been laid with traps and both ways were blocked with masses of broken rock. Actually, he noticed, the passageways were quite crude, without any lining— just bare rock still bearing the rifled grooves of the boring machines.

The gravity of the asteroid was so weak that the dislodged rock could barely be said to fall. It simply hung in the air, forming a loose, compacted mass. Jundrak got through to Heen.

"We've had a look down the other passages," the sub-colonel told him. "They lead to storage rooms, air and food recyclers, things like that. There hasn't been much resistance. What was that noise I heard?"

"They've tried to trap us between rockfalls. It won't hold us long. Carry on exploring; there are probably other ways into wherever they're hiding."

"We've occupied their power room, too. We could put them all in the dark if you like."

"Don't bother, I like to be able to see what I'm shooting at." He drew his force rifle and spoke to his men. "Let's clear the tunnel."

With the pusher controls at wide fan, they all aimed their force rifles at the massed rock. The broken lumps grumbled and moved reluctantly as the combined force fields pressed at them. Pushed steadily back, the rocks and rubble at last spread out further down the passage and allowed them to pass.

Jundrak sheathed his rifle and continued, edging clumsily between the slowly gyrating masses. Visibility now was very bad because the air was filled with suspended dust. The men cursed, bumping into rocks and each other.

However, there was light ahead. The tunnel was widening in a graceful curve, like the flowering stalks of some plants. Abruptly Jundrak broke through the clouded dust and could see.

*"Royalist bastards!"*

The cry was a shriek, an agonized wail of hatred that met the attack squad as they debouched at a crouch from the tunnel mouth. At the same time a maelstrom of weapon fire swept over them.

Jundrak's military-trained senses took in the scene at a glance. The cavern was a fairly large one with a low, domed roof from which depended light globes, casting a lurid, smoky yellow glare. All kinds of furniture littered the floor. Cut into the walls were alcoves, or additional apartments, and it was from these that most of the fire came. Just a few brave figures stood straddled in the center of the cavern, blazing away with the weapons they held.

Luckily there seemed to be only a few of the deadly and expensive force rifles. They were rarely met with outside the Royal Fighting Forces. But there were neutron beamers, heat masers, and judging by the rattling on Jundrak's armor which sent him staggering, old-fashioned, bullet-firing machine guns.

They met the onslaught unperturbed. Their suits, those marvelous suits that made any ground combat trooper ready to enter anywhere without fear, reacted instantly. Sheaves of thin armor plates slotted out from the suits to provide an interweaving mazelike structure around their bodies at distances of six inches to a foot. These protected the main bodies by a process of ablation so that to the opposition each man appeared to flare up under fire like a living torch. In this way valuable seconds of time were gained even under the most withering conditions.

And those seconds were all Jundrak and his men needed. The neutron beamer in his left hand spat death into the center of the cavern. In less than a second the force rifle was yanked from its scabbard and slipped as if by magic into the restraining slot on the inside of his outstretched right arm.

Used this way the force rifle had the advantage not only of irresistible power but of deadly accuracy. Using his gloved thumb on the pusher control to tighten the beam pencil thin, he had only to sight along his arm to hit whatever he saw. Broadening the beam, he could pound at anything in his path, pulverizing rock, metal, anything.

PHUT! PHUT! While he dealt death simultaneously from his right arm and left hand a grenade tube at the level of his waist was throwing high explosive grenades at the alcoves on the far side of the cavern. The grenades were aimed by the movements of his head. To eject them he had only to sight a target and squeeze in a certain manner a grip inside his left glove.

As were the other nine men in his squad, he was a terrifying fighting machine with formidable firepower. Most of the men around him were kneeling to present a smaller target as they delivered their barrage, offering a weird spectacle with their stiffened, outstretched right arms. In the heat of the moment, however, Jundrak scorned to follow this drill. After a few moments he called a halt.

His voice boomed over the suit's external speaker. "Surrender, scum, and maybe we will spare your lives!"

A silence followed his words, broken only by the groans of the wounded. Then there staggered into their field of view a man in tatters, trailing blood. He held up something in his hand from which a wire trailed back to the ruined alcove from which he had emerged.

"Then let's all go up together, you—"

Before he could get the next words out, he slumped and fell. From behind him the suited figure of Heen Sett strode forward out of the shadows, his right arm thrust forward as if in a bizarre salute. His squad marched behind him.

Reaching the body he had felled with his force rifle, he turned it over with his foot and kicked away the object the man had held in his hand. "It's a switch for a detonator," Jundrak heard him say

through his suit speaker. “These people used to be miners. They’ve probably got enough explosive stacked away to blast apart the whole damned asteroid, and us with it.”

“Then I’m glad you showed up,” Jundrak said.

Sett gave orders to his men to station themselves at intervals round the cavern, sheathed his rifle and joined Jundrak.

“You were right, these tunnels all link together like a maze.”

“Is this the largest cavity?”

“By no means. This is where they live, but there are others, much bigger, that are abandoned. It looks like we shall have plenty of room to dock our ships when the time comes.”

A few people were peeping out of the alcoves now, cowed and apprehensive. Jundrak flipped back his faceplate and inspected the cavern more closely.

The air had the cloying, unpleasant smell of long human habitation. The floor was an untidy maze of couches, beds, chairs, tables and other furniture in a broken down state— all of it no doubt fixed to the floor in some way, since otherwise the slightest knock would send it bounding away in the low gravity. Neither was the furniture confined to the floor. It also climbed up the walls and clustered under the ceiling in loosely tethered groups of platforms, beds, chairs and tables, so that the communal dwelling place had a three-dimensional effect.

Despite the dirt and decay there was an atmosphere of degenerate comfort here. In a seedy way, the cavern had a distinctly womblike feel to it.

“They’re living like animals!” Heen remarked in disgust, glancing about him distastefully.

Jundrak switched those combat men who doubled as medics to treat the wounded among the asteroid people. His voice boomed out again.

“Show yourselves! Come into the open; you have nothing more to fear!”

Slowly they came out. There were men, women and even children, all dressed in gaudy rags. As they came closer, he saw that the children’s faces were tear-stained and still showed traces of their recent terror, but they stared wide-eyed and wonderingly. Some of the adults were clearly terror stricken, too. But others, ruffian-looking characters, still had the brashness of desperadoes.

The asteroid people had perfected a method of walking in the near zero gravity that enabled them to glide swiftly along a couple of inches above the floor, propelling themselves by occasional flicks with their heels and toes. By comparison Jundrak’s men looked clumsy and slow, stomping in the full G simulated by their shoulder jets.

Many of the men seemed to have developed weird cosmetic fashions, adorning half-naked bodies with flowery tattoos. Jundrak walked toward one who was standing apart from the others staring at the two officers insolently.

As he came closer Jundrak saw that on the man’s breast was an obscene tattoo showing a couple performing a well-known sexual deviation. When the man’s muscles moved the couple writhed as if in frantic gratification. At Jundrak’s approach he opened his mouth in a wide, sneering grin to reveal teeth that were black and rotten. Never having seen bad teeth before, Jundrak was nauseated.

“Hello, aristocratic trash,” the man greeted, with a glance at the family coat of arms amongst the

other insignia on Jundrak's combat suit. "Why don't you crawl back to your palaces and leave us in peace."

"You are all my prisoners," Jundrak told him. "As you evidently fancy yourself as some sort of leader, tell your friends to surrender their arms peacefully and make no trouble."

"We have no leaders here, you . . ." The man launched into a series of insults almost impossible to ignore. "We are anarchists! We do as we please!"

Jundrak laughed. "From now on you will do as I please."

"Murderers like you always think a man is afraid to die." The man crouched and clenched and unclenched his fists as if about to pounce like a tiger. Jundrak held him at bay with his neutron beamer, gesturing for him to join the main throng.

Directed by Heen, the combat troops had brought in the prisoners taken elsewhere in the asteroid and now were adding to them the people in the cavern, removing their few weapons and, to the accompaniment of screams, struggles and cries of despair, taping their arms to their sides and herding them to the tunnel that led to the surface.

Jundrak shoved the troublemakers roughly toward a nearby soldier. Through his helmet mike he spoke to Heen. "Ship them up in the bubbles," he said. "We shall have to hold them in the base on Maximilia, I guess." He had entertained the idea of incorporating the asteroid occupants into his own staff, reckoning on their antiestablishment tendencies. But they were obviously too undisciplined to be of any use.

"Castor Krakhno will fix you!" howled the tattooed man desperately as he was hauled away. "You wait! Krakhno will fix you all!"

Jundrak scarcely heard his remark as he scanned the cavern and began planning out his command center.

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They cleared out the remaining four asteroids of the group without too much trouble. The stiffest resistance came from the last one, where the entrenched miners fought with explosives and old excavating machines. Jundrak lost five men.

As the last disheveled defenders were herded away something happened which caught Jundrak's attention. One of the men shuffling by him in the line suddenly straightened up, looked him disconcertingly in the eye, and said: "Don't worry, you long-living rat. All your medications won't help you when Castor Krakhno gets you."

"What was that?" Jundrak stepped forward angrily and gripped the man by the arm, yanking him out of the line. He resisted, but the officer's power-assisted strength was too much for him. Jundrak forced him to his knees and loomed over him, the motors of his suit humming slightly as he flexed his muscles.

"Who is this Krakhno?" he snapped.

"You'll find out," answered the prisoner in a surly tone. Jundrak saw through his ripped shirt that the man's body was tattooed with snakes, circling the neck and arms, their heads resting in the palms of his hands.

Heen, who had been close enough to overhear the exchange, stepped closer. "Answer the question, carrion," he growled, dragging the man further away from the moving column and throwing him

on his hands and knees. With a swift movement he bent down and ripped off his shirt. “If not, my nerve whip will soon make you more informative.”

The man glanced round fearfully at the short-handled whip Heen took out. Its long, thin strands had a glittery look. The electrical frequencies they carried were precisely timed to excite the nervous system to unbearable agony. Heen flicked the lash down.

His victim screamed, groveled and tried to roll away.

Heen brought his boot down to pin him behind one knee. “Speak!” He raised the whip again.

“Enough!” Jundrak interjected hastily. “Let him go.”

The subcolonel put up his whip, released the man and watched him stagger painfully away. “You have a conscience,” he remarked ruefully.

“I didn’t need the information that badly,” Jundrak said with no particular inflection.

“As a matter of fact I can probably answer your question anyway. I’ve heard that name a couple of times during this job. As far as I can make out, this individual Krakhno is some sort of agitator back on Maximilia—among the lower orders, that is. It seems there has been traffic between here and Maximilia recently. Look, I took this from one of the prisoners. Curious, isn’t it?”

He handed Jundrak a card about four inches square bearing a stereo design. In the foreground was a comely face, that of a girl or youth. But at second glance the flesh seemed to dissolve, to become transparent, revealing a discolored, grinning death’s head. Rolling in from the background, stretching out sinister fingers from an undefined depth, was a gray mist. As one moved the card, the words DEATH TO LIFE flashed from the card at all angles.

“Yes, curious . . .” For some reason, he didn’t know what, the mist made him think of the Patch, the great unknown quantity that could make nonsense of all their schemings.

“Some crank secret society devoted to overthrowing the aristocracy,” Heen continued. He laughed briefly. “Maybe I should join them.” Heen was not, strictly speaking, of the aristocracy, but a bastard son of a minor count. There were droves of such illegitimate offspring in the kingdom. Many sank into the lower orders or at best found intermediate managerial positions. A few, like Heen, managed to prove themselves in the officer corps or something similar.

“There are a lot of peculiar things happening in the Old Town,” Jundrak agreed absently. He fingered the card with its weird, incomprehensible message. Desperation, he decided. Desperation did it. Suddenly, and very briefly, he felt vaguely ashamed of what he was doing. He wondered how many more asteroid nests like this one were scattered about the kingdom, miserable refuges for those whom the social order had squeezed out altogether.

Not that it really mattered. The Patch might yet devour them all.

## VII

*No-o-o-o-o...*

Castor Krakhno woke howling.

He fell back on his pillow, breathing heavily. A form moved in the dim room, bending over him.

“Are you all right, Castor?”

“Yes, I’m all right,” the anarchist leader answered breathlessly. Horris Dagele, his personal lieutenant, had become used to these attacks and was not unduly alarmed.

Krakhno rose shakily from his bed, wiped cold sweat from his face with the sleeve of his nightshirt, and stumbled to the window where he drew back the blinds.

Dawn over the Old Town.

The emerging sun was sending its first brilliant searchlight beams over the sprawling conurbation, still leaving the numerous hollows and smoky valleys in predawn darkness. From these valley floors there floated up to Krakhno, atop the twenty-story apartment block where he lived, distant hootings that, down below, were ear-splitting blasts summoning tens of thousands to begin their day’s work. In the far left of his field of vision he could see a great eminence rising like a fairy mountain and sparkling and shining in the sun: the leveled off height of the Inner City.

His uncontrolled shivering subsided. The attacks always seemed to bring on this transient but violent fever, as if the life force was still in danger of being sucked out of him. He closed his eyes and gripped the lintel, trying to fight off the residue of the nightmare—if nightmare it was—and bring himself back to waking normality.

The rejection, the terrible, sneering rejection, was still like a bad taste in his mouth. He felt like an insect that had been trodden on and squashed. Whether it was only a memory, or whether it was that some part of the *Beast from Beyond the Galaxy* still lived within him, he could not accurately determine. It had occurred to him that there might be little difference between the two alternatives.

Ever since coming to Maximilia he had tried to find out more about the Beast through his espionage contacts. That many among the nobility knew about the Beast he had ascertained with little difficulty. But where it was now, where it had come from, what its nature was in scientific terms—all that was the most closely guarded secret in the kingdom. It could be, he reflected, that he already knew more about it than any other person living; to some extent it was still within him, vitalizing him, empowering him—and tormenting him.

“The Dawn Meeting is ready, Castor,” Dagele said quietly from behind him.

“Good. I’ll be down in five minutes.”

He dressed quickly, more himself now. Whether the Beast had a hold on him did not matter. It meant nothing to him to sell his soul if the price was right. What did matter was that he was himself, that latent powers had been released by his experience, and that he had an ability to move men which previously had come only in flashes.

With a last glance at the now burgeoning dawn, he left the apartment and made his way to the floor below it. The Dawn Meetings had become a stock ploy in the building up of the rapidly developing Death To Life movement. Used to recruit new members, they effectively sieved out those who at any other time of day would have attended out of curiosity or for some casual reason. Dawn was a time when things were starting to move but when nothing had actually happened, therefore, the meetings tended to escape the attentions of the police. Only trained agents managed to infiltrate the meetings, and Krakhno had a short way with those.

There were about twenty people in the small meeting hall, of both sexes, young and old. Most were working men and women wearing the drab, protective clothing in which they would proceed to their jobs afterward. A few were fresh-faced apprentices, still being trained for jobs. Krakhno never



ceased to marvel at the way the lower orders underestimated their abilities; in an age where automated processes could outbid even the cheapest of unskilled labor, the workers donated in return for their miserable wages a high level of craftsmanship and technological expertise. Many of the people Krakhno had met were almost geniuses in their own right, albeit in restricted fields, and certainly the dominant classes could not have gained such economic success without their inventiveness and ingenuity. Yet they consistently took their competence for granted, thought of themselves as crude and ignorant, and looked with awe on their masters, the managerialists and the aristocracy.

The people gathered here, however, had evidently begun to think differently. For that Krakhno proudly gave credit to his own agitation campaigns over the past few months. Now was the time to see if any of the newcomers had steel in them.

He marched on to the speaker's platform and immediately began to inspect his audience with an intense gaze, looking briefly into the eyes of each person in turn. Ever since his dreadful awakening on his home planet of Carole one glance had been enough to tell him all he needed to know about anyone.

One person deserved a slightly longer glance: a blond, young man sitting in the corner. As Krakhno's eyes met his the shock of unconscious recognition jarred them both, but the stranger would not of course know what it meant —except, perhaps, that it would make him feel slightly uneasy,

*Glad to see the Political Police are still on their toes,* Krakhno thought to himself. Though clad as a workman, the young man was without doubt an infiltrator.

Krakhno was not properly speaking a mind reader. But his unnaturally energized being enabled him to look right through a person, to see his essence. No one could fool him as to his or her intentions for more than a few seconds. Very soon King Maxim's Political Arm of the Palace Police would become tired of their inability to penetrate the almost mythical Society of Death to Life and resort to harsher methods. When that happened, Krakhno would be ready. But for the moment he pushed such thoughts from his mind and launched into his talk.

The moment he had entered the room he had been aware of the effect his presence had on the others. His contact with the Beast had somehow stirred up the powers within him to give him a magnetic personality, an inexplicable charisma that made strangers either his followers or his sworn enemies within minutes or even seconds. In the first stage of his work in Maximilia that personal force had made possible the welding together of the city's chaotic anarchist groups into a usable tool. Now it stood him in good stead in extending his operations into contact with the ordinary people of the planet to forge an instrument of insurrection that already was spreading feelers through the kingdom's vast, murky underground.

To the aura of fascination, persuasion and dread that at first sight had captivated his potential revolutionaries, Krakhno could add fact and argument. He contrasted the poverty, frustration and hopelessness of the Old Town with the opulence, ease and pleasures of the wealthy. He cited case after case of the arbitrary misuse of power, the helplessness of employees in the face of the law, the contemptuous overriding of individual values. All this was routine. He had a tiny but efficient bureau which spent its time doing nothing but collecting such examples. He contrasted the standard of life their earnings could buy with the rivers of wealth their productive labors turned out.

"But we have no machinery, plant or processes," a middle-aged man objected feebly. "Aren't the owners of the machinery and so on entitled to that wealth? They pay us for our work, that's a fair contract."

Either the man was very stupid or intelligent enough to be testing him. Krakhno waved his hand. He met this point of view often: it was a deeply implanted opinion resulting from centuries of indoctrination.

“Later you will all have the opportunity to study the Theory of Productive Defection which will prove to you that you are being robbed,” he said. “For the time being merely ask yourselves *who made the machines.*”

Next he turned to a matter always guaranteed to strike straight to the heart. “You,” he said aggressively, pointing to a young woman. “How old are you?”

“Twenty-five.” She stared at him, biting her lip.

“The duchess of Makine is ninety-four years, and as youthful as you. And you,” he said, pointing to a man, “how old are you?”

“Forty-six.”

“Any of the nobility in the same physical condition would be two to three hundred.”

His gaze swung round to the infiltrator sitting in the corner. “How old would you be, friend?”

“Thirty.” The other colored slightly.

In point of fact he was probably two or three decades older. If he worked well in the Political Bureau, was trusted and gained the right promotion, he would be able to afford medical treatment that would extend his life span to perhaps two centuries, or a little less.

A faint smile hovered on Krakhno’s lips. He enjoyed seeing the spy squirm.

“Thirty, eh? Well, so there it is.”

The sun shone strongly through the windows now. In little more than half an hour they were all expected to report for work or lose a day’s pay. But Krakhno had not finished with them yet.

“Once these valleys were filled with beautiful trees, flowers and grass. If the rich lived here they would still be beautiful and pleasant, and dotted here and there with graceful houses. That is how the rich live. There is plenty of such countryside on this planet, as on all habitable planets—much more than the rich can use. But you, because you are not rich, live among smoke, grit and sweat. You are herded here, constricted here by laws that are not of your making, born into situations where you cannot help yourselves, cannot help your children. While all the time, up there—” he gestured wildly to the window, through which a part of the vast glittering bulk of the Inner City loomed over the Old Town, “you can see the palaces of the very people who oppress you, who degrade you.”

The thrilling timbres of Krakhno’s voice seemed to set the atoms of the walls vibrating with meaning. “*All authority is repressive. Authority takes away your individuality. Authority prevents you from taking what nature offers. Authority forces you to work for a master, in filth, grime and depressing monotony. The state is the instrument of authority. The only path to freedom is to annihilate authority! Annihilate the state!*”

He let that sink in. This lecture was only a preliminary to the full force of his anarchic, nihilistic philosophy. They could not be expected to take it all at once. But looking around him, he saw that his message had gone home with most of them.

“Tomorrow there will be another meeting at the same time,” he finished. “As there is still a little time before you have to leave, have you any questions?”

A man who appeared to be in his sixties scratched his head and frowned quizzically. “What you say might have been true once, and is still partly true, of course, today,” he said in a slow, rambling voice,

“but things are better since King Maxim took over, aren’t they? You can get *land*, now, or at least some of us can. Not like under the old House of Lorenz.”

Krakhno looked at him with brooding eyes. “Do you really think anything is being given away?”

“Why, yes, whole planets have been distributed. Everybody knows that. My own son has been given a thousand acres to farm on the duke of Ambroid’s estate, was taken there at half fare and has no rent to pay. It’s hard work, of course, but it’s worth it to make something for yourself. Soon I may be able to join him. You can’t say that the Grechens don’t do something for the people.”

A horrible, malignant laughter swelled from Krakhno, a croaking parody of humor. “In sixty years or so your son will be dead. But the duke of Ambroid will still be alive for centuries yet. He charges the settlers no rent because he is using them to develop his land for nothing and to make it productive. He can afford to give lifelong, free leases, because he will still be here when those leases fall in. *Then* he will charge heavy rents to the settlers’ children, or else evict them. He is not giving you any new start in life. He is merely saving himself the expense of developing the property himself and arranging to suck the blood of your children and grandchildren!”

A sad, puzzled look came over the old man’s face. Curtly, Krakhno dismissed the meeting. But as he did so he made a cautioning gesture to Horris Dagele. There was the spy to be dealt with.

They intercepted him on the landing as the audience was taking the elevators to the ground. “A word with you, if you please,” Horris said.

“Why, I shall be late for work—”

“No need to keep you long.”

A sense of duty and a sense of menace tussled—visibly to Krakhno—in the spy’s mind. He became aware that the last of the members of the meeting were piling into the elevator and looked vaguely worried.

“Frisk him, Horris,” Krakhno said as soon as the elevator door closed.

As Horris closed in the other, who looked strong, moved to resist, but Krakhno nudged him with a laser pistol. Horris relieved him of a slim knife.

“That’s all, Castor.”

“Upstairs, friend.”

Glowing, the agent mounted the steps. “You won’t get anywhere with your little pantomime, you seditious scum,” he lashed out at Krakhno. “We have ways of dealing with insects like you.”

“And we with you,” murmured Krakhno. They stopped in his apartment. He opened the door to a small, bare room. “Inside please.”

As the prisoner stepped over the threshold he handed his laser pistol to Dagele. “This won’t take long,” he muttered. “He’s the vulnerable type.”

When Krakhno closed the door behind him the agent looked briefly surprised and then rushed him. With little visible effort the anarchist flung him away, so that the other appeared to bounce off his thickset, rubbery body. The agent did not attempt to overpower him again. He was physically stronger than Krakhno, but something else stopped him.

Krakhno's eyes.

There was an adult, powerful force in those eyes that made the man from the Inner City feel suddenly like a little child. He stood, blinking, with his back to the bare wall, alone in the presence of an older, wiser and in every way more authoritative mind.

"I just thought we would have a little talk about yourself," Krakhno said, propping himself against the door with one elbow.

And then it began. Gently at first, but with a cumulative violence that no physical violence could match.

Krakhno merely talked and questioned. But the manner of his talk and the personally intrusive nature of his questions were like physical objects that could not be ignored. At first the agent tried to maintain a dumb silence and not to hear Krakhno; but not to relate to his overpowering sense of presence was an impossibility. Skillfully, relentlessly, Krakhno prised open the cracks and brought into the open the things that every man thinks only he knows about himself.

In twenty minutes the agent was staring blindly at the wall, blushing and wishing he could disappear. But that was only the beginning. Krakhno, neatly bouncing his victim back into the firing line however he tried to twist and turn, proceeded to tear away the outer layers of the man's personality; then the inner layers; then, mercilessly, the inmost, closest, unseen layers essential to psychic functioning. It was a calculated assault on the ego, on the very foundation of a human being's existence.

In forty minutes the agent was in an advanced state of schizophrenia. In forty-five minutes, as Krakhno piled yet more emotional calamity upon him, he lost even his schizoid sense of identity and collapsed on the floor, slack mouthed and unseeing.

Gently, precisely, Krakhno brought him back to the point where he once more recognized his surroundings. At that point the man's mind made a last effort to assert itself.

"Leave me *alone*," he screamed, sobbing. "My God, leave me alone!"

Krakhno sprang forward and seized him by the shoulders. "Look at me!" he commanded. "Look at me, look at me, look at me, look at me. You know, don't you? You know, you know, you know, you know, you know!"

The nihilist put all of what he privately called his alien death power into those words, and into his eyes. The man went slack, his lower jaw trembling.

Krakhno released him, stepped to the door and opened it. Dagele stood outside.

"We've finished our little talk," Krakhno said amiably. "Our friend is leaving now."

Limply, the agent came out. Dagele handed him back his knife and helped him to put it away.

"Go, now," Krakhno said quietly. The agent looked at him despairingly, pleadingly, then, when he saw the stony expression on the anarchist's face, he turned away and left.

At no time had Krakhno mentioned to him the fact of his being an agent. The man now would perhaps wander round the Old Town for a while; perhaps he would go through the motions of returning to his cover role, in a factory or office; perhaps he would even return to the Inner City, but he would not give his superiors any useful account of what he had found. Within about six hours, probably much less, he would have killed himself, willfully and for no obvious reason.

There was nothing stable in his inner life that Krakhno had not destroyed. A normal human being might have been able to do it, if he had consummate insight, genius, and several months of undivided time. The fact that Krakhno could do it in about an hour was due entirely to his own psyche being peculiarly energized by something which had no human parallel. The Stealer of Life had taught him how to rob others of life.

Krakhno had shown the agent life: futile, pointless, without rhyme or reason. He had shown him what Krakhno saw all the time but, with the intensification and acceleration of psychic processes that the nihilist could achieve, the agent saw it unbearably clearly, with an intensity that wiped out all other interests or duties. No one (except perhaps Krakhno) could continue to exist like that for long. The death wish, once aroused, always triumphed in the end.

Krakhno could do it. Others had been to the point of death and lived to tell about it. But Krakhno had gone further. He had gone beyond death and come back. He knew what life was all about: nothing.

## VIII

Even before he entered the Inner City, Jundrak of Sann knew that something was up.

His aircar came hurtling into the late evening that covered the Northern Hemisphere. Approaching Maximilia City he phased down into subsonic. Ahead was the multicolored glow of the vast community blazing as usual into the night sky.

But warning bleeps came at him from the control board. This being a military vehicle, the nature of the signals told of a police radar net operating around the city. As he came closer he saw a tremendous glowing shaft aimed vertically from the Inner City into space. Up it there shot at frequent intervals blazing dots which he knew to be dispatch riders carrying instructions to the orbiting Class A Defense Stations.

Everything betokened a full emergency. Jundrak slowed to a glide and switched on his transceiver. The airwaves were jammed with a confusion of activity. He dialed through to the slipway base; after the brief flurry of the scrambler code Heen Sett appeared on the screen.

“Judging by the signs, there’s a flap on,” Jundrak said. “Have you heard anything?”

“We’ve just been told to stand by,” Sett answered. “It looks to me as if the whole kingdom’s been put on alert. Any idea what it’s about?”

“No. I’ll call you as soon as I find out.”

“Maybe you should head back here while there’s time.”

Jundrak considered it. “No,” he decided, “that would be premature. I’ll call you. But be ready to move quickly.”

Sett’s face disintegrated into the scrambler pattern as the screen died. Jundrak continued on toward the Inner City and was soon challenged by its electronics defenses. After he had flashed his code he was permitted to land at his destination, a courtyard in the graceful complex of the Royal Palace.

The occasion of his visit was a ball given by the king himself. To begin with, Jundrak made his way to the private room that had been reserved for him in the guests’ wing and carefully bedecked himself in the full dress uniform that had been immaculately prepared for him by his valet on the other side

of the planet. Then, plumed and decorated in fine flashing colors, he went for a stroll through the many halls, salons and concourses of the court to learn what he could.

Already the place thronged with the evening's guests; but much more than mere preparation for the ball was going on. An air of urgency permeated the febrile gaiety. Officers wearing harassed expressions strode swiftly about on unknown errands. Through the apartments there rang mysterious tones and gongs which did not fit with the usual ritual of social occasion, interspersed with the frequent paging of military leaders. No one had yet seen the king or any of his family.

Jundrak buttonholed a major who was known to him and who was on the palace staff. They sat down at an elegant table in an alcove. Jundrak beckoned a servant and told him to bring them drinks.

"The news came in a couple of hours ago," the officer told him in reply to his questions. "There's been a big battle outside Smorn. The Fourth and Fifth Fleets have been torn to ribbons—practically wiped out."

"The Fourth and Fifth? . . ." He left the question hanging in the air, momentarily thrown off balance.

The major twiddled his bushy moustachio, glancing about him worriedly. "Don't know what they were doing there. Must have been moved under Class One security. Damned funny business."

Jundrak's mind was backtracking at high speed, recalling the conversation he had had with the king after his return from Smorn. It dawned on him that Maxim had made a remark about moving up the Fourth and Fifth Fleets to cover Smorn in case Prince Peredan should learn of his impending engulfment by the Patch. Evidently the Prince had learned of the investment by the Royal Fighting Forces instead.

"The king's in an absolute rage," the major continued, muttering in a low, confidential tone. "Heads are rolling already. Personally I wish I were a thousand light-years away."

It was a strong thought in Jundrak's mind that a similar location might be far more healthy for him, too. "What's happened since the battle? Any more activity out of Smorn?"

"Not yet, but it's early days. It's obvious, isn't it? With the Fourth and the Fifth gone we're wide open. Peredan would be a damned fool not to make capital out of it. Things are humming, I can tell you."

Thoughtfully Jundrak sipped the liqueur the servant brought them. But for the unlikelihood of his being permitted to leave the palace he would have felt tempted to fly back to the slipway base right now.

Just then a musical trilling sounded, signaling that the ball was about to begin. Trying to stifle his apprehension, Jundrak joined the throng that drifted through the splendid frescoed archways to the big ballroom. Pleasant perfume and eye-catching colored vapors filled the air. Automatically he began to eye the women, on the lookout for a comely female to make his target. Under normal circumstances he would have been filled with a pleasurable glow of anticipation.

The ballroom was finely designed so that, though large, its proportions did not defeat the eye or make one feel lost and insignificant. It was based on a design that was neither rectilinear nor circular, but a series of curves of varying radii so as to form a cluster of enclaves around the main area. In these were seating areas, parlors and dining rooms. On the main ceiling was emblazoned a gigantic version of the crest of the House of Grechen. The orchestra sat, not on one level or on a platform, but vertically in a tier of little balconies that occupied the whole of a wall at the far end.

For the moment, the numerous servants lined the ballroom, standing to attention. The guests stood about on the perimeter of the main area, giving rise to a hum of conversation. Nothing could begin

until the king arrived. Jundrak, feeling an instinctive sense of safety in numbers, stood with a group of officers who had gathered together.

At last, with a thrilling, tremulous and flaring fanfare, the king and queen made their entrance on a green platform that appeared from a recess somewhere in the ceiling and floated down to the floor. It was a perfect example of the kind of fairy-tale pomp that King Maxim gloried in. They stood side by side, perfectly still, during the descent, holding hands, while in his free hand Maxim ostentatiously displayed a gorgeous flashing scepter. Maxim was wearing a long gown of overflowing full purple; on his head was the crown, to which the queen wore the smaller match, and in both of which were set dozens of the rarest gems in the universe—elluxes, electrically active so that they gave off a constant stream of rainbow light.

Queen Galatea was not an impressive figure beside her husband. She was small and slight. Though she had a superficial prettiness she tended to dissipate it by affecting a look of surly disinterest. In conversation she was empty-headed and flippant; altogether she behaved more like the king's property than his partner.

Nevertheless, tonight her couturiers had executed a work of consummate skill and creativity, transforming her into one of the most noticeable and enticing women in the Inner City. Her hair was cut short, like a boy's. The foaming material of her dress fell clingingly down her neck and shoulders and swept round her waist in diaphanous curves; through its folds the naked nipples of her small but excellently firm breasts peeped out, pink and pert. The dress ended in a filmy miniskirt which left her slender legs bare, and which was cleverly slit so that as she moved it revealed interesting glimpses of her pubic hair, prettily shaped and combed and dyed a pale lavender.

Stepping from the platform, the royal pair were relieved of their crowns and Maxim of his gown by attendants who came hurrying forward. Beneath the gown Maxim was wearing a more suitable attire: a dazzlingly brocaded, padded jerkin and puffed satin breeches with silver filigree.

Jundrak watched uneasily as the king stood in a grotesque posture and glared at the assembled company, his arms hanging apelike and his head thrust forward. Even from where he was standing Jundrak could feel the gale of his anger and the force of his offbeat charisma. He reminded himself that Maxim had not seized the throne without possessing extraordinary personal abilities, and that he was more than the erratic clown that many took him to be. Even if he was a lunatic, as some claimed, he was a lunatic to be reckoned with.

At the moment his rage certainly bordered on the paranoid. Catching sight of the military grouping, he came striding toward them, dragging Queen Galatea after him roughly.

"So! Our general staff!" he exclaimed in a loud, desperate voice. "The playboys we appointed to defend our realm!" Jundrak had noticed before that in moments of stress Maxim sometimes adopted the archaic royal plural, like a bad actor who suddenly remembered his role.

The military men stood to attention, faces wooden. An irresistible sexual aroma reached Jundrak's nostrils as Queen Galatea came closer, filling him with nearly uncontrollable desire and making him thankful that his elaborate uniform hid his body's automatic reaction. He knew that the others were feeling the same: it was due to an aphrodisiac perfume the queen often wore. The king liked other men to desire her, knowing that only he could possess her.

The king struck out at random, setting several officers rocking on their heels. "Understand one thing, pretty boys. *If we go down, you go down with us!*"

He rounded on the crowd of noblemen and noblewomen, raising both fists, while his erratic but

vibrant voice rang out sharp and clear. “Do not any of you imagine that we are endangered, or that the crown rests uneasily on our head. To the contrary, we are assuredly more deeply entrenched than ever! We are happy in the deep-seated love of our billions of subjects, in the immovable foundation of political power. Those responsible for this grievous blow to our peaceful realm will shortly receive the attentions of our specialist team devoted to the art of nerve excitation, all for the benefit of traitors, double agents and defeatists—and they are skilled, oh, how they are skilled!”

Not a murmur came from his stilled, frightened audience. Queen Galatea looked the other way, absently chewing a strawberry flavored mastic.

“And you, colonel!” Maxim suddenly turned and jabbed a finger at Jundrak. “Perhaps you, better than anyone, can explain how the rebels knew where to find my forces. Eh? How? *How?* *Who told them?*” His voice cracked on a high note.

“Not I, Your Majesty!” Jundrak gasped.

“Did we say it was you? Do we see guilt written on your face? Eh? Answer!”

“Perhaps we may suggest that Your Majesty’s deployment of the Fourth and Fifth Fleets was precipitous?” Jundrak said, aghast at his own temerity.

He spoke in a low tone so that only those nearest could hear him. But he could almost feel them trembling at the proposition that the disaster was the fault of the king himself.

Maxim half turned away, then froze in a disturbingly stark posture, hand raised with fingers outstretched oddly. He shot a sidelong glance at Jundrak. His thin lips were puckered in a smile of amusement, his purple hazel eyes smoldering.

“So ... ?” he said softly.

Then the moment of calm was gone and his ferocity was back.

“Come!” he bellowed, sweeping out his arm to herd the gathering like cattle. “Dance!”

Taking Queen Galatea by the arm he moved on to the dance floor, followed by scores of other couples. They all took up the “courteous” preliminary position. The music pulsed out and the dance began.

The music was loosely based on jazz and swing, very ancient art forms that had been unearthed by the palace’s political researchers. Blaring, sinuating brass accompanied a lilting but monotonous beat of unvarying pitch. A similar combination of monotony and liveliness characterized the dance movements themselves. They were stylized in the extreme: syncopated, stiff, interspersed every few beats with little jumps. And it was imperative that they be executed exactly and unerringly.

To an uninitiated observer the performance looked slightly ridiculous, which was as it would be. The dance was a political device designed to condition the nervous system to a greater conformity. The carefully stylized sequence of movements, specially tailored to nerve rhythms, were particularly effective in training those who practiced it in an automatic acceptance of authority. In these surroundings this meant a closer identification with the person of King Maxim, the charisma of his reign and the rightness of his aims. The dance was, in fact, a significant step toward harnessing everyone to the ritualistic dance of his rule, and Maxim had been insisting that it be danced more and more often of late.

Political dance instructors moved through the jerking couples, affirming that everyone did it right. Jundrak looked around for a partner, but at that moment a tap came on his shoulder.



“You will come with us, please, colonel.” Two uniformed sergeants of the Political Police were standing behind him.

“What in space—” he began, then broke off. The officers standing around him were edging away, avoiding his eyes and trying to look inconspicuous. One of the sergeants made a brief gesture for him to follow, then turned and strode off. Jundrak followed, feeling angry and humiliated. This was not how he had imagined the evening ending. He had planned to finish up with some nobleman’s wife or daughter in one of the many available boudoirs . . .

The policemen’s route took them up a flight of broad marble stairs and along a balcony running the length of the ballroom. Down below the prancing, jerking figures continued to turn and jump. Jundrak would have felt more reassured about the consequences of the dance and the future of the kingdom generally if the king himself did not practice it; he was becoming engulfed in his own fantasies, taking the kingdom with him.

On the other side of the ballroom Jundrak spotted Hinkin, the dance’s creator, looking on from a shadowed recess. A sinister figure dressed in tight-fitting black, he was small, lean and so bent as to be called a hunchback. The political scientist and nerve specialist—torture was said to be one of his hobbies—watched the dance with an evil smile on his knobby face. He did not dance himself, but his shoulders jerked obscenely to the rhythm of the music.

Once outside the ballroom the sounds of the ball faded. Jundrak was conducted along neutral gray corridors to the wing that harbored the offices of the Palace Police, Political Arm. An air of heaviness and menace permeated this part of the wing. Jundrak had been here before but never for interrogation.

They passed through a door, which closed behind them, into a long, softly carpeted anteroom, then through a similar door into an almost identical second anteroom. A deathly quiet reigned, despite the uniformed women secretaries (lesbians all—no other type of female was permitted to work for the Political Police) who staffed the rooms. Jundrak became aware that he was being ushered into some inner sanctum.

The last door the sergeants closed behind him without entering themselves. Facing Jundrak was a desk with a lamp on it, the only source of illumination in the room. Seated behind the desk, staring icily at him, was Grenesect, dreaded chief of the Political Arm.

Jundrak knew the police chief by sight only. Everyone had cause to fear him. He was a man of steel, a man who looked steely, looked strong, *was* strong. His gray, humorless eyes glinted in the light of the lamp as he beckoned to Jundrak and told him to sit.

“The king is displeased with you,” he said, in a mature but gray voice. “You are under suspicion.”

“But why?” Jundrak protested. “I serve the king loyally. I have carried out special assignments for him—” he broke off, slightly confused, not knowing to what extent Grenesect was privy to Maxim’s schemes and policies.

“You can speak freely,” Grenesect said with a wave of his hand, “I know all about your special duties and the reasons for them. Now, about your visit to Smorn . . .”

“I performed my task exactly as instructed,” Jundrak insisted hotly. “I am not to blame if the plan has gone wrong because of other factors.”

“You say you did, naturally. Only you know the truth of your assertions . . . at this moment in time, that is.”

“The defeated fleets were not moved up to Smorn until after I had left. I could not have told the rebels about them.”

“You visited the historian, Grame Liber, did you not?”

“Why, yes ... I did.”

“And why did you do that?”

“Prince Per—the *Pretender* Prince asked me to convey his regards,” Jundrak answered painfully. “That was all.”

Grenesect nodded curtly. “We know all about Historian Liber,” he said meaningfully. “So you have to admit that your relations with the House of Lorenz have not been entirely of an official nature? That you could have passed information back to Smorn?”

“Why should I do such a thing?” Jundrak burst out. “I have absolutely no reason to. What of the Patch? Did the plan fail altogether?”

“The Patch is on course to Smorn,” Grenesect agreed. “Whether Peredan will be there to meet it or whether he will be ten thousand light-years away unloading hydrogen bombs on the King’s possessions only time will tell.”

The situation was beginning to oppress Jundrak. The outlines of the room were almost invisible in the gloom. There was only the tiny island of light from the lamp, dimly illuminating Grenesect’s features on one side and his own on the other, while he sweated before the police chief’s calm, leisurely logic. Grenesect gave the impression of holding something back, of playing cat and mouse with him.

“Why did you not make a report of your visit to Liber?” Grenesect asked softly. “Why did you not report the request in the first place?”

Jundrak said nothing.

“Well, let us talk of something else. The slipway project. You have full charge of it, with the status of plenipotentiary. That is a remarkable responsibility for such a young man.”

“Then that in itself should tell you how much the king values my abilities,” Jundrak snapped, “as well as my trustworthiness.”

“Colonel Sann, you are being questioned, not the king. The base where the project is being carried out is under a total security seal, is it not?”

“Yes.”

“Is that not strange?”

“Why should it be? Since my mission, Peredan already knows of the existence of a new type of drive. He can reasonably be expected to exert efforts to find out more about it. I regard the security seal as entirely justified.”

“Even when it excludes my men?” Grenesect leaned forward, his granite face exuding the essence of tyranny. “No matter, if you are removed from the project, then the king has expressed himself as being agreeable to placing the project in the charge of my organization. There can be no question of defection then.”

“But that is preposterous!” Suddenly Jundrak decided to fight the issue. “I have supervised the

project since its inception and I mean to carry it through to the end!”

As if he did not hear, Grenesect turned to a file that lay on his desk. It had, Jundrak noticed, been newly printed out from a computer file, and it had his name on it.

He started to speak again, but Grenesect ignored him and opened the file, bending his head to study it. For nearly ten minutes he leafed through its pages, leaving Jundrak sitting in strained silence.

Suddenly the police chief rose, stretched himself, and turned away from his desk to pace up and down in the semigloom. “The king’s assessment of a man,” he explained expansively, “is instinctive. He looks, feels, senses and guesses. *My* method, however, is scientific. I observe a man and collect facts, habits, expressions and gestures. Then I analyze those facts until I know what is inside him.”

As Grenesect enlarged upon his theme, Jundrak could not help but notice the stature of the man, how huge was his broad back, gray clad and crossed by the double belts. “Naturally,” the police chief continued, “we have kept you under observation from time to time. You are not an unknown quantity to us.” He paused, touching something that went *click* on his desk. A new source of light made Jundrak look to his left. A vidscreen on the wall had sprung to life.

On the screen Jundrak was surprised to see himself in one of the palace’s concourses, talking with a fellow officer during one of his earlier visits to the Inner City. The spy camera’s lens panned in and out, catching postures, facial expressions and all the odd facial clues a man gives about himself without realizing it. Meanwhile the camera’s audio pickup captured every word of their conversation.

“Tell you what,” Grenesect said in a brighter tone, “let’s have a talk about things in general. For instance, what do you think about the plight of the poor?” He sat down, touching the desk control again. Jundrak had been about to frame some convincing but ideologically safe platitudes that added up to affected disinterest. But the next scene warned him of how careful he would have to be. He was in the Old Town, riding in one of the clattery electric tramcars and gazing with interest at the people he was crowded in with. A dozen transient half-felt emotions chased each other over his face—pity, disgust, admiration, amazement. They clearly betrayed the fact that his real feelings were not so simple to describe, and he wondered how extensively the Political Arm had the Old Town bugged.

“Properly speaking,” he began cautiously, “it’s a question for a political scientist.” The screen went abruptly dark for a few moments. Before it lit up again a preliminary noise of squeals, grunts and moans gave him a horrified premonition of what was coming in a second or two. Even as the knowledge formed, his fears were realized. He was looking into Rondana’s apartment where the two of them, naked, were making love in a violent rapture.

Enraged, he sprang to his feet and launched himself at Grenesect with a growl. The big man, coming to his feet also, merely pushed him back down again with one enormous and immensely powerful hand.

“Sit down, puppy, and don’t get excited. We watch who we like whenever we like.”

Jundrak sat down and gazed up into the bleak face, genuinely frightened by the show of strength. He had heard that the elite officers of the Political Arm underwent a session of nerve torture every day so as to maintain their toughness.

On the screen he had reached an enthralling, uninhibited climax and now was throwing himself on Rondana again to do things to her that made him blush. Grenesect turned his head and watched it all with evident enjoyment, a sardonic smile for the first time breaking the hard impassivity of his face.

*He’s a monster*, Jundrak thought, turning the other way and clenching his fists. *He should be*

*exterminated.*

“Spicy,” the police chief taunted, when the picture mercifully faded. “Don’t worry, colonel, that was the only time we planted a spy camera in your little slut’s bedroom. We don’t install our gadgets permanently—it would compromise our invisibility to leave them lying around.

“Now, tell me what you think about the plight of the poor ...”

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For several hours the tireless Grenesect talked with him “about things in general.” About politics, sex, social questions, about King Maxim and his little mopsy of a queen, about various personages known to them both. He discovered that Grenesect had absolutely no inhibitions about discussing anyone’s personal shortcomings, not even those of his master.

They talked about sport, religion and music. Grenesect asked him who he thought would win that year’s circumplanetary air race. In the musical sphere, the police chief showed himself to be passionately fond of the classical type of abstract, extremely intellectual composition that had reached its peak with the genius Skonorbal about a century previously.

And always, whatever they talked about, there were pictures of Jundrak unreeling on the vidscreen, ready in Grenesect’s expert eye to belie the opinions that he expressed. Jundrak found himself playing a game of wits in which his object was to mask his duplicity at all cost, to skate close to the truth without revealing it. He did not know how much of Grenesect’s claim to know a man by means of scientific analysis was true, but he had heard before of students of “body language,” the second, instinctive language by means of which men communicated unconsciously through gesture and posture, independently of the spoken tongue.

One or two of the recorded scenes from his past were a revelation to him, greatly to Grenesect’s amusement. One revealed that when he had played against the old Duke Bruorn at cards and lost a ten-thousand-mile square tract of land to him, the aged nobleman had cheated. Another embarrassed him by recording a night he had once spent in the bed of the wife of one of Grenesect’s own officers. “Does *he* know?” he asked.

Grenesect laughed like a drain. “Of course. He saw this tape the very next morning. Unfortunately Captain Harst does not share the fashionable ‘emancipated’ view of such things and wanted to kill you. I restrained him, naturally, in the interests of duty. But he extracted a promise from me that if we should ever have occasion to inflict nerve excitation on you the job would be his.”

He leaned back, laying his hands flat on the desk. “How would you like me to give you to Harst?”

Jundrak sighed deeply.

“There may be a chance for you to redeem yourself. To do that you must once more regain the king’s favor. You are, if not a habitue, at least a frequent visitor to the Old Town.”

“So?” Jundrak was puzzled.

“We need some information about a new movement there.” Grenesect waved his hand imperiously. “There are always crank political movements in such a place. However, in this case it appears that we have no agents suitably placed to gain a fruitful contact.”

“And you think I could do better?”

“As you say, you are a man of ability who has performed many services in the past. It so happens that your low class slut, the moppet Rondana Creele, has become involved, albeit marginally, with this movement. We know that from a chance report we received.”

“I didn’t know that,” Jundrak said quietly, ignoring the searing contempt for the lower classes that permeated Grenesect’s words. “What is this movement? Is it seditious?”

“It is called the Society of Death to Life.”

Jundrak fumbled in a pocket, opened a wallet and took out a card. “You mean this?”

The other examined it. “Yes. Curious, isn’t it? Where did you get it?”

Jundrak shrugged. “During combat maneuvers with the new ships one of my officers had occasion to clean out a nest of asteroid vermin. One of the killed had this card. My officer thought it amusing and gave it to me.”

Grenesect handed it back. “Perhaps it will help you in your investigations. You will accept the assignment, of course.”

“Naturally.”

At that moment there was the sound of voices from beyond the door, which opened suddenly. The lights came on in the room. King Maxim stood framed in the doorway, swaying slightly.

“Your Majesty!” Both Jundrak and Grenesect came to their feet and greeted the king in chorus.

Maxim stepped into the room, eyeing them both with a slightly drunken glaze.

“So you are still with us!” he said amiably, slapping Jundrak on the shoulder. “I thought our friend would have washed your remains down the drain by now!” He chuckled.

Despite his black humor, the king’s earlier rage seemed to have entirely dissipated. He was his jovial, unpredictable self.

In the bright light the police chief’s office looked altogether different. There was nothing luxurious or even unusual about it. It was a common clerk’s office, lined with shabby green cabinets. It was as if a nightmare had been dispelled by the touch of a switch.

But Grenesect himself was as impressive as ever. Though Jundrak was tall, his interrogator loomed above him, rock steady and unshakable. And beside him Maxim, always an unusually mobile and restless person, seemed small and undisciplined.

“Colonel Sann has expressed his willingness to undertake an investigation in the Old Town, Your Majesty,” the police chief said. “I recommend the appointment.”

The king looked at Jundrak, nodding and smiling. “It is a small thing, but one with which I will be pleased. Serve me well, my friend. I need your loyalty.”

“You never need doubt mine, Your Majesty!”

“Of that I am sure. Well, you had better get some rest, as had we all. It has been a strenuous night.”

Realizing he was being dismissed, Jundrak clicked his heels, saluted and left. When the door had closed behind him, King Maxim turned to his political hatchet man, shaking his head sadly.

“I should feel ashamed, throwing such a lamb to a wolf like you.”

“Your Majesty underestimates him.”

“Perhaps. How many men did you say you have lost to these lunatics in the Old Town?”

“Five have died mysteriously. We do not necessarily attribute their deaths to their assignment. More perturbing is that so many of our agents have come up against a blank wall.”

“Well, if Sann does no better, you can take over the slipway base as I promised.”

“Then I wish him the worst of luck. I would like nothing better. Unfortunately, I imagine his chances are rather good.”

## IX

Jundrak wisely decided not to let himself feel too much shaken by his experience with Grenesect. Such unpleasantness had to be expected in the game he was playing if he was not to lose sight of his ambitions. Risk and danger were all part of the play.

He tried, also, not to feel too insecure. Maxim and Grenesect, he felt sure, only meant to frighten him for safety's sake, as they wished to frighten everybody at this time of maximum threat. Neither of them seemed to have any concrete knowledge of his behind-the-scene activities. As for the destruction of the Fourth and Fifth Fleets, Jundrak had a genuine feeling of innocence toward the disaster which was quite inappropriate to his actual duplicity in the matter. The source of his feeling was that the calamity was as much a surprise to him as it was to the king; he had no idea how the rebels had known of the tactic, unless they had some new kind of detector.

He lost no time in endeavoring to discharge his new duties, upon the success of which he imagined depended his being permitted to retain charge of the slipway fleet. First he made a brief, guarded call to Heen Sett (he was almost certain that the Political Arm did not know the scrambler code, but it was as well to be on the safe side) and then made straight for the Old Town, divesting himself of his uniform and all finery and dressing himself in simple clothes that would not arouse comment. His vanity, however, would not let him descend to shabbiness. He instructed his tailor to make garments that were smart, of fairly good cloth and with just a suggestion of the exhibitionist flair which suited his character.

The ground door of the tenement block where Rondana lived was open. Jundrak climbed the stairs to her room, rapped briefly on the door and entered without waiting for a reply.

Her startled face swung round to meet him.

“Oh, it's you.”

She was sitting at a dressing table, apparently making up her face in preparation for going out. Her tone, he thought, sounded less relieved than sullen. He realized that he had not come to see her for nearly six weeks.

“Aren't you glad to see me?” he said brightly, in a manner that obviously expected nothing but a positive answer. But she shrugged and avoided his eye.

“I'm sorry, but I already have an appointment. You should have let me know you were coming.”

This wasn't like her. “You've been seeing another man!” he exploded indignantly.

“And why shouldn’t I? You come here or don’t come, just as you please. Do you think I’m simply going to sit here waiting?”

“But Rondana, I mean ... you and I...”

She rose, opened a cupboard and surveyed her small, inexpensive wardrobe. “I have to go now. Good-bye.”

Seizing her by the shoulders, he swung her round to face him. “Who is he? Where is he? Let’s see if he thinks enough of you to face me with blade or gun!”

Furiously she thrust his arms away. “Just like you! How proud it should make you feel, a trained soldier, to kill a workman who has never handled a weapon in his life! Murdering pig!”

The unaccustomed vituperation shocked him. “What’s happened to make you like this?” He fingered his moustache, frowning.

She sat down wearily on a chair, turned away from him. “What am I to you? I’m only your little whore down in the slums. I’m twenty, how old are you? Ninety? A hundred? I’ll bet you were having your fun with girls like me seventy years ago. Do you ever go and see them now they’re old women? Will you come and see me when I’m old and you’re still like you are now? It’s all as plain as day.”

Uncomfortably Jundrak coughed. There was no ready answer to what she said. The situation had no justice in it, that was true. He had not been brought up in a world of justice and had never looked for it or expected to find it. There was, for instance, little possibility of his marrying Rondana, introducing her to a higher class of society or arranging for her any of the things which that meant—such as a longer life. The fact that he dallied among the lower classes at all was a sort of daredevil activity with him and would have been severely frowned upon by most of the people he knew.

“If I knew a way to change the world, I would,” he said. “I’m not to blame for my birth, any more than you are for yours. The reason I come here is because I like you better than anyone up there.” He jerked his thumb contemptuously toward the Inner City.

“Well, *you* have got a better chance to change it than I have.”

“That’s not true. Nobody in the aristocracy can change anything. You’d have to live among them to know how impossible it is. Any change will have to come from down here, among the masses.”

“A duke preaching sedition now!” she said scornfully.

“Why not?” Stealthily he crept forward and put his hands on her shoulders, moving them caressingly down her arms. She did not resist.

“Tell me honestly,” he murmured, leaning toward her. “You like me better than this other fellow, don’t you? You can’t deny your feelings for me.”

“No,” she whispered, leaning back against him, closing her eyes and letting his caresses seep into her.

It took only minutes for the tide of blood to sweep over them both; then they were on the bed again, once more enjoying the breathless excitement of a man and a woman discovering each other.

At one point, he half sat up and studied the opposite wall, the vantage point from which he had earlier witnessed a similar scene. Any of a score of random dots could have been a spy camera. Grenesect had promised him it had been removed, but one could not, of course, trust Grenesect.

What did it matter? He applied himself to the quivering girl again, pushing the possibility from his mind. One had to accept these things.

It was all in the service of the king.

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Jundrak's rival turned out to be a young comrade in the Society of Death to Life whom Rondana had met in a drinking house frequented by members of the movement. It took two more days of gentle persuasion, wheedling and dissembling before he got Rondana to take him there without arousing her suspicions.

The *Duke of Freen* (Jundrak had been fascinated to learn how many of the Old Town's drinking houses were named after the nobility) was sandwiched between two massive factories. Its main accommodation consisted of a large, smoky cellar, and it was here that Jundrak got his first whiff of rebellion—real, old-fashioned rebellion, not the quarrels and maneuverings of aristocrats.

The talk was strange and incomprehensible to him. Young, shaggy-haired men discussing such terms as “the dialectic of oppression,” “the liberating of creative potentials” and “negating the negation” merely gave him the impression of having been dumped in the middle of a surrealist play.

He had, naturally enough, sworn Rondana not to reveal his identity, and eventually he decided to ignore the jargon of the movement and to base his image and expressed opinions on the emotional content—the resentment which smoldered beneath all the talk. It was in this guise that he inveigled himself into the attentions of certain persons he had already spotted as the movement's clandestine recruitment agents. In a fairly short time this netted him an invitation to a Dawn Meeting.

So far everything had been easy and Jundrak, not knowing that he was taking the same route that had already been taken by several of Grenesect's employees, was puzzled. Not until Horris Dagele's laser pistol nudged him in the ribs a few minutes after the meeting broke up did he realize that it was not quite so easy after all.

Dagele showed him into the same small, bare room where Krakhno had already received and destroyed five of Grenesect's trained penetrators. This time, however, there were two spindly chairs in it. The door closed behind Jundrak—reminding him of his confrontation with the police chief—and he was alone with the anarchist leader.

He had never heard of Castor Krakhno and had never seen him until now. Abandoning his workman pose, Jundrak stood erect, like an officer, and looked the strange little man in the eye.

Krakhno, who had been studying him intently both during the meeting and since his entrance into the interview room, burst into laughter.

Perturbed, Jundrak rashly decided to unmask himself. Even now, it was unthinkable to him that common slum dwellers would dare to harm a personage of his rank.

“I demand that you release me,” he said. “You will regret your high-handed actions once you know who I am.”

“You're certainly a trier,” Krakhno conceded, wiping tears from his eyes. “All right, who are you?”

“I am the duke of Sann.” Jundrak glared imperiously at his captor, expecting a look of consternation. But Krakhno only broke into fresh peals of laughter.



“At least! You would have to be!”

For the first time Jundrak’s confidence faltered. There was something disturbingly *solid* about this middle-sized, rubbery-faced man who apparently found him so funny. Not solid in the way normal men were, but somehow mobile and strong.

“My name is Krakhno, Castor Krakhno,” the other said. He held out his hand invitingly. “Won’t you be seated?”

Cautiously Jundrak sat down. Perhaps he had revealed himself too soon. “Just what do you find so amusing?” he snapped angrily.

“*You* are amusing. Grenesect sent you here, I suppose.”

“You appear to have the advantage of me,” Jundrak said slowly.

“In a sense. But so does Grenesect.”

Jundrak felt the electric shock, the soul-sucking power of the other’s personality, as Krakhno stared straight into his eyes. “You see, he correctly summed you up as a two-faced opportunist who is always trying to play both ends against the middle. That’s why he chose you for the job. Somehow he guessed or gauged intuitively that I am able to detect the agents he sends by their uncompromising, though hidden, attitude of enmity. That is why he has failed miserably to penetrate my organization. The secret intentions of his spies are so glaringly obvious to me that I either deflect them or kill them. He figures that you, on the other hand, might get through my screening by virtue of your incurably double-dealing mentality.”

“You can’t possibly know that much about me on a few seconds’ acquaintance.”

“Excuse me—I can. Oh, I can read human nature. To a limited degree, so can Grenesect.”

*The swine*, Jundrak thought. The anarchist’s assertions were so poised and so accurate that he did not for a moment dismiss them as fantasy or guesswork.

“All right—what now?”

Krakhno’s eyes seemed to bore into his innermost being. “As I said, your selfishness, your scheming, your duplicity—that is the central point of your character. It is only extraordinary that it takes a man like Grenesect to see it ... these aristocrats really are the most incredible fools ...” Krakhno seemed to go off into a daydream for a moment. “Recruits from the nobility are what I lack so far.”

“If you think I would join forces with you slum-bred rubble—” Jundrak was almost too disgusted to go on. “Shoot, you bastard, shoot!”

“Don’t be tiresome. You have your own interests at heart, do you not? We live in fluid times; at least I deduce we do, or the Political Arm would not be so concerned at my relatively modest activities. Your interests and mine may not be so far apart.”

“What are you getting at?” Jundrak was intrigued now.

“Need we be so hostile? I get it, I have subjected you to rather threatening conditions. Let’s move to the next room. This place has unfriendly associations for me, too.”

He opened the door and led the way to a larger room, which was grossly untidy and appeared to serve the functions of bedroom, dining room and office all at the same time. The windows were closed,

penning in an animal smell that no doubt came from a combination of Krakhno's continual presence and an absence of fresh air.

Horris Dagele was already in the room. Krakhno settled himself comfortably into a big, leathery armchair. "Sit down somewhere," he said hospitably to Jundrak. "I'm sure Horris will get us something to drink."

The anarchist's lieutenant busied himself and brought them generous measures of whiskey in cracked cups.

Jundrak sipped the whiskey. "What's this about my interests?"

"Merely that Grenesect's reading of your character may have placed you in a more precarious position than you realize. You have been chosen not for your trustworthiness but for your untrustworthiness. In other words, you are safe while you remain useful. So why not cultivate revolutionary contacts and be useful to me, too, at the same time making out a case for yourself when the bloodbath of revolution arrives—which, in time, it will."

"You seem to know a surprising lot about Grenesect."

"I have never met him. But I know him through his methods, through others who have suffered under him. Oh, I know Grenesect. He is a man after my own heart, one without illusions, without softness, without heart. One who loves death more than life. Both of us understand human nature. That is why it is a pleasure to fence with him."

"He's a monster," Jundrak said broodingly. "He doesn't deserve to be called human."

"High praise, indeed!" Krakhno responded, with a twinkle in his eye. "I'll tell you a story. One of my people, one of the toughest, was arrested by the Political Arm. Unfortunately for him, he had little to betray; nevertheless, he was tortured mercilessly until he begged, pleaded and groveled to be allowed either to die or to be released. Grenesect was there. When the anarchist was reduced to the state of a hysterical child, he had him taken off the nerve rack and climbed on it himself. By his order, the operators gave him everything they had given the prisoner. Grenesect took it all and did no more than grit his teeth. When they had finished he climbed down and said 'That's how to be a man.' Then they let the prisoner go. True, Horris?"

His lieutenant, hovering in the background, nodded.

"Yes, Horris was the prisoner. He was only a rank and file Society member, then. And that has been my only direct message from Grenesect."

Jundrak was at a loss for an answer. The whiskey, the lived in surroundings and the anarchist's cordial manner were making him more relaxed. Also, he had to some extent come under the spell of Krakhno's presence. Everyone else seemed like a shadowy half being when he was in the room.

"You are suggesting I should become a double agent?" he said. "Your man in the Inner City?"

"Nothing so crude. As I said, Grenesect somehow guessed that I am able to detect his agents by a psychological method, namely by spotting that their avowed acceptance of my creed is a lie and that, in fact, they are totally opposed to it. So he tried the experiment of sending in someone with ambitions so devious that he could not properly be said to be opposed to anyone, only deeply committed to himself—namely, you. However, I have the drop on him because my insight is greater than he thinks it is. Your ambiguity is as plain to me as that wall. I've no objection to your going back to the palace and making reports on your progress as long as you keep them within bounds and don't raise too much

alarm. That way, Grenesect won't get desperate and do something violent. Also, it will prevent him from taking your nerves apart. And all I want for my part of the bargain is the chance to have a little chat with you now and then, like we are doing now. That will give me something which I currently lack: knowledge of how the aristocracy think and feel.

"So how about it? After all, you're not really on anybody's side and I'm sure you like to have as many irons in the fire as possible."

*His pet nobleman, Jundrak thought with a touch of self-loathing. Clever little bastard. He's right, though. And at some date in the future I could, if things turn that way, do myself a lot of good by blowing the whole conspiracy wide open.*

"And later you could earn yourself some medals by turning us all over to the authorities," Krakhno said triumphantly.

Jundrak looked up, startled. Krakhno laughed gently.

"No, I don't read minds. But at certain times I find it awfully easy to tell what people are thinking. By the way, I don't have much to fear from your attempting to turn us in. Our organization is too far advanced now. We can deal with all kinds of eventualities."

"You're all crazy," Jundrak told him. "Revolution, liberation, it's all daydreams. What in the galaxy do you think you can do?"

"It will take time, but it will come." *It may take centuries, Krakhno thought. I won't be here to see it: I don't live long enough. But some of you swine living now will be around for the day of reckoning.*

Jundrak stared at him soberly, trying to assert some of his inbred superiority against the other's raw, confident animalism. "Your theories seem somewhat confused to me," he said loftily, "and, anyway, they are certainly pretty onesided. All I heard about in your talk downstairs was destruction. You say you will annihilate the existing order. But what will you replace it with?"

"A free condition where all power is to the individual and none to the state or the law."

The nobleman snorted. "Ridiculous! And, in any case, it has been proved scientifically, mathematically, logically and historically, proved in every way, that the present structure of society is the only one which is possible in the long run. Even if it is forcibly changed in some way, it must revert within a certain period of time." It was hardly necessary to mention that this theorem was so deeply entrenched in authorized doctrine that Jundrak himself was breaking the law by even entering into argument about it.

"One cannot, of course, argue with science," Krakhno agreed sarcastically. "Even if I grant that what you say is true, then I am still implacably opposed to the class society. If hatred is all that remains, then let hatred be my god. If I must bring the world down in flames with nothing but desolation after it, then so be it."

Horris Dagele replenished Jundrak's dirty cup. Something in the anarchist's words thrilled him entirely against his will. "You're a strange one," he murmured, shaking his head. "But there's something I must know. You claimed to know all about me at a single glance, or almost. All right, I'm convinced. But how do you do it? Where did you learn it?"

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you," Krakhno said.

## X

Days, weeks and then months passed, and the expected invasion from the rebel encampment did not come. King Maxim and his entourage breathed a sigh of relief. But still the monarch refused to let up the pressure. He continued to lash about him in a torrent of accusations and persecutions as his anger and humiliation gave itself vent.

For most in Maximilia, and indeed all over the kingdom, the time rolled by lazily. But for a few, the few who were concerned or even suspected of being concerned in political matters, it was a wave of arrests and executions.

To Grame Liber the visitation was something he had never expected. He had been on the point of going to bed when the door chimed and four policemen walked in.

They were not ordinary city policemen. He knew from their badges that they were the special police taking their orders directly from the palace, and furthermore, they were of the most notorious arm of that organization.

“Political police!” he thought to himself wonderingly, blinking at the warrant they showed him.

“You will come with us, Historian Liber.”

They ignored his questions: he had no choice but to go.

They also took “evidence,” ransacking the house for books and writings, including the bulky roll of his half-finished *History of the Civil War*.

Later that night he was in the hands of an individual who referred to himself as a public prosecutor. The hawk-faced man glared down at him sneeringly.

“Where are your friends?”

“Friends?”

The interrogator gritted his teeth in a show of rage. “Do you deny that you are a member of the Historical Society?”

“Why no. Why should I?”

“I am asking the questions. Then you will also admit that you are an accomplice of Murnor Gelact, president of the Historical Society.”

“Accomplice is hardly the word I would choose. The Society is engaged in pure scientific research. We are non-partisan as a matter of principle.”

“Don’t try to blind me with your vapid liberalism. The time is close when any account of history that is not written by the Political Police will automatically be treason.” The interrogation spun a pair of reading pins on his desk. On them was the roll of Liber’s magnum opus. “Just look at this! Treason, sedition and slander of the king at every turn of the roll!”

“Untrue!” said Liber, honestly dismayed. “Nothing of the sort. I have tried to write an objective account of the war—”

“Don’t try my patience, you arrogant egghead! If you are so unbiased, why have Murnor Gelact and others of the Society gone into hiding? Could there be any plainer proof of treason?” He shot a look of hatred at the historian. Ever since the end of the war this man had been marked as a possible rebel

sympathizer because of his known friendship with Prince Peredan in the old days. In the prosecutor's opinion, he had only been tolerated at court in order to keep tabs on him, and in the past few weeks it had proved easy to pile up a damning amount of evidence on the seemingly innocent Historical Society.

"Neither Gelact nor any of the others have engaged in reprehensible activities to my knowledge," Liber said uncertainly. "If there is any substance to your allegations they must have formed a subgroup unknown to me. But in my personal opinion what you are implying is ridiculous. Murnor would not be silly enough to commit treason against the state."

"Yes, yes, babble as much as you like, you old fool."

The public prosecutor waved his hand contemptuously. "Unfortunately your friends have, for the moment, eluded us. No doubt you know where their hiding places are." He leaned insultingly close to Liber. "You will have to do much better than *this*, little man."

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Chief of Police Grenesect watched the exchange on a vidscreen in his office. Ranged around him were dozens of other screens, their audio circuits muted, supplying a faint background of screams, shrieks and groans from the terminal interrogation rooms in the palace's cellars and almost filling the air with the smell of King Maxim's new reign of terror.

The old scholar was interesting, Grenesect thought. Later, perhaps, he would enjoy himself with Liber personally.

A chime from his desk signaled that the king was calling. Grenesect opened the line immediately.

Maxim's face stared out at him avidly. "Have you started on that little toad yet?"

He referred to a recent arrestee: a spy working for the Lorenz rebels right in the Royal Palace.

"He is in the nerve room at this moment, Your Majesty."

"Let me see him! I want to see it!"

Grenesect made the necessary connections putting the monarch through to the nerve room. Still on the police chiefs screen, Maxim glared, sweating with eagerness, at the scene of the unfortunate agent stretched on the nerve rack. A low, bubbling sound of continuous agony came from him, while around him in the gloom stood the specialists who were applying the torture stage by stage.

The king licked his lips then shuddered slightly. As if the sight was suddenly too much for him, he reached out and switched off the screen that brought it to him, then turned to Grenesect again.

"Have you gotten anything out of him?"

"Yes, but we mean to drain him before we've finished. He may know things even he doesn't realize."

"Don't be in too much of a hurry. Draw it out *slowly*. Nothing's too bad for a rat like him."

"Your Majesty may depend on it."

"Good, I'll see you tonight at the dinner party. Enjoy yourself." The screen went blank.

Absently, Grenesect smiled to himself. The king's paranoid tendencies were becoming more pronounced of late. Grenesect regarded that as a good thing. In his opinion, the exercise of absolute

arbitrary power, the rigid control of populations, which was the system he most admired, was only one hundred percent effective if the ruler himself was a full-blown paranoid monomaniac. Only then could the bureaucrats immediately surrounding him exert their will unhindered. History was replete with examples.

He faded out Grame Liber's interrogation and turned to other matters. The young duke of Sann had made contact with the Society of Death to Life and had delivered some opening reports. They made interesting reading. For the first time Grenesect learned the name Castor Krakhno, the mastermind behind the society, and he sensed a worthy adversary. It was proving refreshing to be matching his wits with someone who demanded the full effort of his intellect.

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For Jundrak the next few weeks were exhilarating but at the same time nerve-racking.

They were exhilarating because Grenesect, after receiving his initial reports, entirely changed his manner toward him and seemed anxious to cultivate his friendship. He talked to Jundrak warmly about matters that interested him: music, about which he would ask Jundrak's opinions and listen attentively to his answers; literature, about which he proved to have a vast knowledge; and sociology, where his conversations became really fascinating. Several times he invited Jundrak to his home where they spent pleasant evenings listening to music. Jundrak was astonished to find that the police chief, feared throughout the kingdom, was a solid family man. He had a quiet capable wife, three well-mannered children and a modest home that exuded unpretentious comfort. Jundrak was flattered by this powerful and impressive man's attentions. He began to feel that for the first time he was entering an adult world where culture and social order mattered.

But alternating with these meetings were equally compelling ones, though different in quality, with Krakhno. When he was with one man, the influence he felt seemed to overshadow that of the other. He felt that he was being batted between two extraordinary minds like a shuttlecock.

As, indeed, he was. Grenesect was far from naive about Jundrak's true position in the Old Town. Both parties were using him as a probe.

Krakhno's interest, however, was different from what he pretended. He was not concerned to learn about the aristocratic mentality—that he treated with utmost contempt—but he hoped to gain from Jundrak information about something the knowledge of which each had so far concealed from the other—the Patch.

Aware that the presence of the Patch in the kingdom was a state secret, he first had to gain Jundrak's confidence. That was not difficult; there was a pleasing streak of ingenuousness in the young nobleman. Krakhno began to grow almost fond of Jundrak for his complete lack of doctrine or belief, his adherence to the purely pragmatic principle of personal gain.

There was another reason, other than the obvious one, for his efforts to find out about the Patch. It was not lost on him that his designs would only be made credible by the use of some extraordinary weapon or technique. Luckily, he was within sight of such a weapon. His immersion in the Patch had given him an inkling of how it drained off vitality and consciousness from living things. He believed the effect might be reproduced by subjecting various chemicals to electrical stresses. In countless cellars throughout the Old Town vats bubbled with smelly concoctions as he attempted to distill an "elixir of death."

According to his theories, the elixir would have excellent properties for annihilating the aristocracy and giving the universe to the poor. There would be no defense against it. Subtler than a gas, it would pass through any material. Not only that but Krakhno believed it could be made selective. The

Patch stole life by absorbing a being's experiences. Therefore, the elixir might be adaptable to people of a certain type.

Such as all those over a hundred years old.

So far success had eluded him. What Krakhno wanted was the results of the official research teams studies, which surely must have had the Patch—the Beast, as Krakhno thought of it—under investigation since its advent. Their reports might help him to fill in the gaps in his knowledge.

He chose his moment when he and Jundrak were drinking in one of the numerous secret dens that the anarchists had established throughout the Old Town. Jundrak felt his eyebrows rise when the nihilist described the alien phenomenon that had ravaged the kingdom.

“You are mistaken in your information,” he said airily. “No such thing exists.”

“Now come.” Krakhno warned, “Don't insult me. I have seen whole planets deprived of life, millions dead. I probably know more about the Beast than anyone living. How do you think I happened to come to Maximilia?” Without pause, he went on to describe his previous life on Carole, his climactic experience there and his subsequent journeyings.

“So you see,” he finished, “I know what is going on. I know that the slime worms who rule our lives are keeping quiet about it. And so you can see that I need to know more.”

“Yes ... I see,” Jundrak replied, astounded by the other's story. As Krakhno's gaze bored into his he seemed to go dizzy. His own personality seemed to become faint and paperlike.

“Yes ... I'll see what I can find out.”

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On far-off Smorn, Prince Peredan had decided to sleep for an hour or two.

He had been working quietly in his private apartments, studying reports from all sections. The repairs to the battleships damaged in the battle had been all but completed. Stocks had also been gathered to build new ships to replace those lost, but such a job strained the camp's resources. Peredan was considering as an alternative a raid on some relatively weak and remote naval base to capture ships. He had also received reports from agents dropped on populated planets, and these too lay on his desk.

The room was in a shaded half light. On a couch along one wall lay the sleeping prince.

Then, in the silence, he stirred uncomfortably. Something *ominous* was happening in Peredan's mind.

He had been having a violent and unpleasant dream. Then a *dragging* feeling had warned even his sleeping self that all was not well.

He forced himself awake and rolled off the couch. He felt dizzy, sick, but above all faint. As if his being was draining away.

Without having to reason about it he knew that he could easily go under now. Making a supreme effort to retain his consciousness, he brought the room into focus and forced himself to see its contents, forms and colors clearly and sharply. Gradually a glimmer of his sense of well-being returned.

But that was not all. He became aware that the room was shaking, vibrating. Objects dropped from shelves. He began to feel off balance.

Peredan stumbled out of his apartments into the bright outer offices. A rumbling was in the air, a distant sound of structures collapsing. The outer offices were littered with the unconscious forms of his secretaries, the young women who for years had shared his bed. Striding from body to body, he examined them. Some seemed to be moribund, others simply in a deep, drugged sleep.

He went further through the tent. Everywhere it was the same. All the women and most of the men were inert. A few men staggered about in varying degrees of self-control.

One, more alive than the others, clung to a pillar and called out to him. “Your Highness! It must be an attack!”

Peredan ignored him and hurried through the limpid greenness of the tent. Outside, he looked up at the sky.

There was nothing to be seen.

Few were on hand to help him. He was appalled at the sudden helplessness of his organization. Without warning, the whole camp had been incapacitated.

Still in a weakened condition, he found a runabout and drove nearly three miles to the main laboratory building. Forcing an entrance, he found some sign of life and industry. Many of the scientists had retained their ability to act and were carrying out hurried work.

“What’s it all about?” he shouted over the drone of a generator.

Not until then was he noticed. One of the scientists looked up and came over to him. Peredan saw that though his eyes were alive and knowing, he seemed to be fighting a constant battle with himself.

“It’s the life form from the northeast—the Patch. Why didn’t our agents warn us it was coming this way?”

Peredan ignored the question. He followed the scientist to a huge bank of instruments where his colleagues were busy adjusting instrument settings for standard experiments and connecting up other equipment they had dragged from another part of the laboratory.

“What are you doing?” he demanded.

“Trying to find out something about it. But every thought, every movement’s an effort. We’re all going under. We can’t hold out much longer.”

Nearby a white-coated scientist suddenly gave a little sigh and collapsed to the floor. His colleagues dragged him quickly out of the way and continued with their work.

“Why aren’t we dead already?” Peredan asked.

“We don’t know.”

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When the news came, King Maxim’s guffaws echoed loud and long.

“Swallowed up the lot of them! I knew it would work.”

Grenesect, standing nearby, inclined his bleak face. “Your Majesty is to be congratulated for possessing such extreme cunning.”



“Spare me the flattery, Grenesect, this is state business.” The king quaffed deeply from a silver green goblet then thrust it out for a maidservant to refill. “Ah, I just can’t believe it. The House of Lorenz annihilated at last!”

“Is there more detailed news?” Grenesect persisted.

“Of course not, you clod! The investigating teams, naturally, are light-years away. It’s almost impossible to make observations on a planet that’s inside the Patch anyway. It interferes with the radiation in some way. But you’ve seen what it does to any world it strikes. There can’t be any doubt.”

The police chief rubbed his hands together slowly, as if savoring something. “The only potential source of political opposition is gone. Now is the time, Your Majesty, for disciplining the kingdom and striking toward true political unity.”

“Well, you know what to do. Wait till young Sann hears of this. He’ll be delighted! I’ll give him a couple of planets for having pulled off that little job!”

Grenesect, who had been about to suggest that Jundrak be brought in for further questioning, was silent.

## XI

High clouds rolled over Maximilia, drifting through the greenish sky. Watching them through the window of his apartment, Castor Krakhno thought briefly of his home world, Carole. There the sky was a pale orange and the clouds lemon yellow.

“I suppose you know what you’re doing,” he said to Jundrak, “but I still feel like calling you a fool. Did I tell you that I’ve been having premonitions lately? The Mark of the Beast on me must be showing itself in new symptoms ... something strange is going to happen. I can feel it. You’d be safer with us.”

Minutes before, Krakhno had surprisingly suggested that Jundrak desert his post, relinquish all ties and let the anarchists take him into hiding. Jundrak found the idea laughable.

“It’s true I formed our liaison for my own advantage,” Krakhno agreed. “However, I feel that your usefulness is quickly coming to an end. And while I have no love for your class or upbringing, I am reluctant to deliver you up to Grenesect’s mincing machine.”

“Don’t worry,” Jundrak told him airily. “He and I are the best of friends.”

Krakhno snorted. “Grenesect has no friends. Even I, who have never met him, can tell you that much. Remember, he chose you for this double role because he knows of your natural double-dealing proclivities. He figures that you have learned more about my organization than you put in your reports, and he knows of one sure way to get it all out of you. Round about now he’s going to start calling in the cards.”

Admittedly, the good news from Smorn had not brought the relaxation in official policy which Jundrak had expected. Though mad with joy when the rebel camp disappeared into the Patch, Maxim had simply redoubled his enthusiasm for persecuting dissident elements and hunting down traitors, while the Political Police had intensified their vigilance. The whole apparatus of government was beginning to creak under the pressure of terror.

Nevertheless he did not fear Grenesect. “What, nerve rack someone who is as much in the king’s

eye as I am? He wouldn't dare!"

Krakhno looked at him sardonically. "I don't know why I bother with you. All right, be on your way."

The purple clouds were still scudding across the green sky when Jundrak crossed into the Inner City through one of great arches that separated it from the rest of Maximilia City. In a nearby lot was the car he always parked there during his visits in the Old Town. It skimmed along the broad white avenues at the regulation height of three feet until it entered the palace precincts, when he took it soaring upward to anchor it at a portal seven hundred feet up the face of one of the massive buildings.

Leaving the car by way of the portal and unlocking the security devices, Jundrak stepped into his small but comfortable office. Pouring himself a tumbler of clear, ice-cold water, he settled down to write his latest report.

He had been working for about two hours when the vidscreen jangled the *urgent* tone.

Immediately he flicked it on to be greeted by the brief flurry of the scramble pattern and then the angry face of Heen Sett.

"What is it, Heen?"

"The Political Police are here—*Action Branch*," the sub-colonel spat.

The *Action Branch* was a fast-growing department of the Political Arm: a fully equipped military force trained for combat in a variety of conditions. However, the emphasis of its training program had made Jundrak suspect for some time that it was aimed ultimately at operating against the Royal Fighting Forces in a disciplinary or antimutinous role.

"What do you mean, *here*?" he snapped. "Inside the base?"

"Yes."

"Well, how did they get in?"

"They blasted their way in! They say they're here to take over the base and the fleet. And they have an accusation that we finished our work here months ago and have failed to report it."

While that was substantially true—Jundrak had been awaiting the most favorable moment to present the news to the king—he doubted if it was more than a good guess on the Political Police's part. "Where are they now?"

"Still on Level One. I've been stalling them."

Before he could reply a rumbling sound from the sky distracted his attention. "Wait a minute," he said, and went to the window.

Peering upward, he saw faint flashes and glows, seeming to come from beyond the sky itself.

Frowning, he looked downward, glancing over as much of the Inner City as he could see from his vantage point. A faint vibration reached him. Parts of the City were rearranging themselves in a gigantic, smooth operation: some buildings slid underground, others moved on massive rollers and clustered together while the ground on which they had stood flowered open into a mass of sky-pointing weapons and missile launchers. Still more buildings seemed to unfold and refold themselves, transforming themselves into bristling fortresses with weapons aimed beyond the atmosphere.

Maximilia's emergency defense system was in operation.

His failure to receive notice of the attack he could only attribute to his not being officially on combat duty. Amazed and bewildered, he went back to the vidscreen.

"There's something going on. The City's under attack."

"*What? Who by?*"

"Space knows, but it looks serious."

"Well what do you want me to do about these bully boys here?"

Jundrak thought fast. His instinct told him that this was a decisive moment and no time to be timid.

"Shoot it out with them," he ordered savagely. "You should be able to dispose of the bastards. Then make ready for takeoff. I'll be down there just as soon as I can."

"Right!" answered Sett. He was smiling with pleasure at the thought of action. "Take care of yourself!"

Switching off the screen, Jundrak gazed about him wildly, wondering whether there was anything in the office he should take with him or destroy. In the back of his mind was the thought that if the attack, wherever it came from, should prove to be a false alarm or a minor incident he could still justify his actions. He hadn't done anything irreversible. *I can say we thought Grenesect's men entered the base as part of a well-organized coup*, he told himself. *I can still claim loyalty to the king.*

Then another thought: *What if it is a coup by Grenesect? Anyway, let's get away before someone gets careless with their weaponry.*

He was about to turn to the portal where his car was moored when the door crashed inward. A captain and a sergeant of the Political Arm burst in with laser pistols leveled.

"You are under arrest, colonel. Take his arms, sergeant."

Expertly the sergeant relieved him of his weapons. "That appears to be all, sir."

"So that's it!" Jundrak exclaimed. "A palace coup!"

"What?" The captain peered at him with a brief frown. "Just hold your tongue till we get you to the Political Wing. You'll get plenty of opportunity to talk there, I promise you."

Completely adrift now and sweating with apprehension, Jundrak allowed himself to be marched away down the endless corridors of the office block. The Political Arm was very much in evidence. The gray-uniformed men were everywhere, making arrests among the occupants of the offices—mostly officers of the Fighting Forces, like Jundrak. When Jundrak's party came to the elevators, however, they came to a bottleneck. All were in continuous use.

"There'll be a hell of a crush down below, anyway," the captain growled. "We'll take a car."

On the landing platform that jutted out from the other side of the building there was a similar rush. All the regular cabs were gone and those that landed took off again almost immediately. Jundrak's captors, however, evidently had priority. The captain took out a signaler and jabbed the button. A circling police car, displaying the sinister jagged M, detached itself from the crowd of vehicles that seemed to fill the air and settled close by them. Jundrak was pushed inside, and the three of them sped

toward the Political Arm's headquarters.

While he was being thus herded, Jundrak had an opportunity to observe the sudden beehive of activity that had overtaken the Inner City. The rumbles and faint flashes from beyond the clouds had come closer, so that occasionally the whole sky seemed to light up in a lingering flare, and the blasts sounded like thunder. The weapon emplacements in the City—some, he noticed, were also sited in the Old Town—were spitting beams and missiles at the invisible enemy in space. Their deployment meant that the orbital defenses had been broken.

An incredible chaos of traffic filled the air. Thousands of aircars were fleeing the capital like fleas leaving a drowning dog. And not only aircars. Among them flashed a long, wingless shape, a small spaceship which hurled itself away on a low trajectory with the intention of rocketing partway round the globe before roaring spaceward.

King Maxim and his family making a getaway while they could.

Down below, on the ground and in the buildings, Jundrak could imagine a scene almost of panic as everyone rushed for shelter. There would be real panic in the Old Town, too, where there was no planned protection against an atom blast.

Within minutes the police car had brought them to the headquarters of the Political Arm. Before Jundrak was taken inside he got one last glimpse of the outside that made nonsense of all his guesses about the situation; he saw the massive lump of a rebel battleship plummeting down to demand the surrender of Unimm.

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Grenesect, his face grim and hateful, was standing in a reception room twitching a baton as the prisoners were brought in. Among the arrestees were scores of notable personages whom Jundrak would never have thought the police chief could have the audacity to arrest.

“So we've got you, eh?” said Grenesect with a sneer when Jundrak was brought to him. “I never did trust the military.”

Jundrak looked into his face for some hint of the camaraderie it had previously displayed toward him. But it was all gone.

“What's going on?” Jundrak demanded. “Who is attacking?”

“As if you didn't know! But don't worry, you will pay for your treachery!”

Jundrak opened his mouth to protest, but Grenesect struck him across the face with the baton. Nerve currents thrilled from it, and he staggered back, throwing up his hands as his face was numbed with agony.

“It makes no difference, I was going to arrest you anyway. Put him in with his friend, the historian,” he ordered the others. “I'll get round to him shortly.”

Roughly, without any further explanation, Jundrak was pushed down passages which grew progressively narrower. When he was able to forget about the pain in his face he found himself in a small, simply furnished cell. Staring at him was Game Liber.

“Welcome to the club,” the academic said dryly.

Jundrak stared back, wondering if the other hand undergone nerve torture. “I did hear that you

had been arrested,” he said, “but there was nothing I could do about it... I hope you understand.”

“I do indeed. In any case, you owed me nothing. But why have you been arrested? I have had no news of the outside world for some time.”

It was certain that everything happening in these cells was automatically recorded, but Jundrak saw no reason not to bring the old man up to date. He described the major events since his incarceration: the luring of the Patch on to the rebel camp and the sudden surprise attack upon the city. Nevertheless, he carefully concealed any hint of the real conversation he had had with Prince Peredan.

“Extraordinary,” Liber murmured. “Who *is* attacking, do you think?”

“Well, the one battleship I saw had Lorenz markings on it.”

“But according to what you are saying an invasion from that quarter is impossible.”

“Yes, it is. Perhaps it’s a revenge attack by a few ships that were absent from Smorn when ...” He let the sentence tail off. “Or perhaps Grenesect is behind it all and is displaying a captured rebel battleship to create confusion. I don’t know.”

He coughed nervously. “By the way, have they ? ...”

“Tortured me? No, not yet. I think Grenesect only had me brought in for his own amusement. Surely he must know that I represent only an intellectual threat to this regime, not an activist one.”

The white-haired Liber sighed, as if immensely wearied. “I am really too old for this sort of nonsense. Grenesect is just a bad-mannered bully who should know better.”

After a few further remarks a lengthy silence ensued between them. Grenesect’s purpose in putting them together had obviously been to make use of anything they said to each other, and knowledge of this inhibited conversation. Just the same, Jundrak trembled at what might lie ahead. Even if the city fell to the unknown enemy it would not do so for some hours or days, giving the police chief plenty of time to work out his sadistic intentions on him.

About an hour passed before the cell door opened again. When it did so Jundrak shrank involuntarily against the wall, unashamed to show his fear before Liber.

But the men who entered the cell cast him barely a glance. They looked toward Liber, smiling.

“Greetings, Historian Liber. His Highness Prince Peredan has sent us to look for you. Are you well?”

Their uniform was that of the Lorenz rebels.

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He was to learn later that Prince Peredan’s unexpectedly swift conquest of Maximilia (presumably it was already Unimm again by now) had been accomplished by a combination of surprise, tactics and technology. Smashing the defensive umbrella on the fringes of the atmosphere, Peredan’s ships had swooped down toward the capital. And, where normal military experience would have led one to expect a long and bloody fight or else total annihilation by nuclear weapons, in this case it was not acceptable to either side owing to the status of the city.

But during the years they had spent on Smorn, Peredan’s scientists had carried out original research and come up with surprising results. One of them was a weapon of dreadful effectiveness for

short-range work. The rebel ships were able to project beams of hydrogen ions in controlled nuclear fusion. In effect the weapon directed the energy of a hydrogen bomb into a tightly controlled ray:

The idea of a nuclear fusion beam was an old one in military science, but for technical reasons it had long been deemed impossible. Peredan's exiles had achieved the impossible. To clear landing space for itself the invading fleet had spitefully vaporized whole groups of buildings which had been erected in King Maxim's reign, including the block containing Jundrak's office.

The experience of seeing skyscrapers selectively vanish, to be replaced by the ships that had enchanted them away, was a profound lesson to everyone in the Inner City. The city had capitulated, and the occupation was accepted without a murmur. Thus Grenesect, who had relished the thought of enacting a compressed, grim reign of terror in the midst of a bloody conflict, was robbed of his pleasure.

But to Jundrak, pacing his cell and trying to find some explanation for the turn of events, all of this was as yet unclear. Nearly three hours passed before the door of the cell opened again and two of Peredan's lime-green-garbed soldiers beckoned to him to come out.

As he was conducted through the palace he could see that the rebels had arrived in force. Green uniforms were everywhere. The palace bore some signs of fighting, but not as much as he would have expected. Some walls were scorched, furniture burned. Drapes had been torn down, burned or were bloodstained. For the most part the fires that might have raged through the palace seemed to have been contained. Only a few of the spacious apartments were gutted; and only here or there were piles of rubble to be seen.

At length he found himself in a cloistered part of the palace which he knew had been King Maxim's own living quarters. Now, apparently, Peredan had made them his own headquarters. Jundrak was made to wait for a few minutes in a sumptuous room furnished entirely with famous art treasures. Then exquisitely paneled doors swung open, and he was ushered into a smaller, more modest room where Peredan stood imperiously.

Already this room was Peredan's personal domain. His personal possessions adorned it: figurines, statuettes, pictures and wall designs. As Jundrak entered some workmen left after having fitted some scroll cabinets and shelves filled with old-fashioned books. All these signs of his personal tastes Peredan had had carried from his flagship immediately on securing the palace. He could not work well except in surroundings that he understood.

In pride of place on the far wall hung a large color tri-di, moving portrait of Peredan's father, the old king. Jundrak stared in fascination, reviving a boyhood memory of when he had been brought to court and presented to that same king.

The Lorenzian monarch was that rare genetic throwback that was known to be recessive in his lineage—a full-blooded Zulu. Tall, slender, lank and ebon. But he was old, very old: all of six hundred years. His skin was dry and wrinkled, his crinkly hair white. In the portrait he went through an endless permutation of tiny natural-seeming motions, breathing, blinking, and smiling gently, tolerantly.

There was a mathematical formula to express how frequently, or rather how rarely, there arose pure examples of all the ancient races that long ago had merged together into the modern homogenous population. Prince Peredan bore only traces of his father's negroid characteristics: a faint crinkling of the hair, a slight broadening of the nose; but his skin was pale, his eyes blue and his lips thin.

"There is your new monarch," he said, noticing Jundrak's attentions. "If you accept him."

Jundrak made an attempt to smile engagingly. "I am pleased to meet you again in more

satisfactory circumstances, Your Highness.”

“I shall require proof of your words.”

For the first time Jundrak noticed that Grame Liber was also in the room, hovering by the bookshelves and glancing at the titles. The historian seemed displeased, he thought.

“I see that you took my warning seriously,” he said hesitantly.

“You mean your warning concerning the Patch? Yes, Grame and I have just been discussing that.” His tone was dangerously sarcastic.

Liber snorted. “It’s a real comedy, isn’t it? A real farce! We may as well put you in the picture, Sann, to stop you making a fool of yourself. The Prince knows now that the real object of your visit to Smorn was to lure the Patch down on him. For reasons of self-interest, it seems that at the same time you gave him a warning—or at least half a warning. What you *don’t* know is that after your departure he checked on your information and found that the Patch was at that time proceeding in the opposite direction, from which he inferred that you were lying and attempting to trick him. Consequently the Patch arrived at Smorn completely unexpectedly.”

Jundrak licked his lips. “It did? Then what happened? Why aren’t you all dead?”

Peredan gazed at him intensely for a moment. “Many of us are. There was no warning. But one thing saved us.”

He paused, glancing at Liber before continuing. “Our encampment was protected by the greatest concentration of damper fields in the galaxy. Somehow this held the death field of the Patch at bay for a while. Strengthening the fields even further decreased the death drag on our minds, and for a time we were able to think and act fairly clearly.”

“I see ...” Jundrak murmured wonderingly. “That was a very lucky break.”

“Yes. During the time we gained in this way—which was only temporary for we knew that the Patch would break down our canceling wave fronts eventually—we found ourselves in the unique position of being deep within the field of the Patch yet still alive.”

“So you used that time in which to evacuate and then launched your attack?”

“No, that would not have been possible. Our screening was not all that effective.” Peredan glanced down and fingered a statuette. He seemed reluctant to go on.

“Tell him!” Liber said with a disagreeable expression on his face and reddening slightly. “You will be making a public announcement soon so there’s no point in being shy now.”

The Prince nodded in agreement. “Thanks to the excellence of my Scientific Arm, we were able to take advantage of our unprecedented situation. My scientists succeeded in finding out something about the nature of the Patch, what it does, what it wants. Further than that, we established communication with it.”

“You *talked* to it?” Jundrak was incredulous.

“In a sense. The Patch cannot properly be said to be sentient, not in the way we understand. But it does have a mentality of a kind, primitive, alien, but enough so that, with the appropriate techniques, it can be conversed with and agreements made. We offered it a bargain, to which it proved to be amenable. That is why I chose this moment to launch my counteroffensive against the House of Grechen,

for it is unthinkable now that I should lose. *I* hold the power to dispense life and death to the galaxy.”

“You mean you have tamed it? You will threaten populations with annihilation if they don’t submit to you?” Perhaps, Jundrak was thinking to himself, Maxim hadn’t been so bad after all.

“Not quite. We could do that, of course. It was partly by using the Patch’s services that we managed to get so close to Unimm without raising the alarm. But we would be loath to rule by such threats. No, I come to the kingdom as a savior, not to threaten. The Patch searches for food. But its food is of a peculiar kind. It feeds off the *individuality* of organic beings, the mysterious essence that makes each man, woman and animal a conscious entity subtly different from any other. When this is absorbed by the Patch, individuality is lost; death ensues and the body decomposes into its chemical constituents.

“This is interesting enough, except for its too close applicability to ourselves, but it was more or less what we already knew. Everyone had assumed, however, that the Patch was merely wandering accidentally and in a random manner through human inhabited space and would, in due course, wander out of it again, leaving the survivors safe. Imagine how horrified we were to learn that the Patch was aware of the size of the kingdom and did not intend to leave until it had devoured all of it.”

Liber was mumbling in the background. “Mankind eaten alive,” he muttered.

Peredan ignored him. “A few days later, further research brought us the hint of a way out. Part of what the Patch enjoys in the creatures it absorbs is their experiences. But that is only the spice, the piquant flavors that improve its diet. The body of its food is simply *being*, the fact of being *alive*. For that, an individual need not be full-grown. Any stage of development will do.”

The direction of the argument puzzled Jundrak. “What are you getting at? That we offer it our newborn children?”

“Hardly. The Patch can derive both sustenance and satisfaction from much earlier phases of the life cycle. To come to the point, it can derive them even from newly fertilized ova. Hence our solution, to which every subject of the kingdom will have to contribute: from the women, we shall need a proportion of their unfertilized ova, and from the men, regular donations of sperm. Ova and sperm cells will be brought together in the presence of the Patch, billions at a time, and induced to unite. You will appreciate that every time a sperm cell fertilizes an ova, theoretically a new individual is conceived. To the Patch this is not theory but fact; it will eat, absorbing the equivalent of billions of human individuals. It has already agreed to accept this arrangement once every month in return for an unmolested populace. In addition—” Peredan waved his hand negligently, “we shall occasionally give it batches of full-grown adults as a delicacy. Thousands are sentenced to death in the kingdom every year, so they can die usefully and there need be no problem there.”

Jundrak was aghast. “But every fertilized egg cell is a developing human being, a potential person. You said so yourself!”

“Merely a zygote. A single-celled creature in which, to our sensibilities, scarcely anything human can be discerned. But you are right, this is a tax which will be hard to levy. There will be trouble.”

“Why not use animals?”

“The Patch would not be satisfied. It likes human beings best. Their individuality, though a substance strange and mysterious to us, is more delicious to it than the essence of any lesser creatures.”

Suddenly Jundrak was reminded of an ancient legend he had heard about a people who every year had been forced to offer up a proportion of their children to a monster. “What man or woman would give up his seed for a purpose like that?” he protested. “It’s repulsive!”



“Yes, it is repulsive,” Peredan agreed, “but unfortunately there is no alternative apart from racial death. Look at it logically: what could be more expendable than the reproductive cells? They are spawned in trillions merely to be thrown away. And of the one in millions that meets a partner and forms a zygote, fewer still reach maturity.”

“Put it whatever way you like,” Jundrak said with a bravado he would not normally have used, “I still don’t like it, and I don’t mean to do it.”

“*No one* will be exempt,” said Peredan in a harder tone, “except the king. Come, come, Sann. I believe I have read your character correctly. You are not a man to be swayed by maudlin sentimentalism; you are a realist. I can use your abilities. I have sent for you to offer you a commission in the reconstituted Royal Fighting Forces, and I am ready to hear your new oath of allegiance now.”

Jundrak looked pleadingly at Liber, but the old man seemed embarrassed and mostly looked the other way. Normally he would have jumped at the offer. In truth, he did not really know what was holding him back, except that part of him still could scarcely believe he had grasped the prince’s scheme. Something in him revolted against it despite all his better judgement.

“What if I should refuse?” he asked.

A deep frown of displeasure appeared on the other’s weary face. “Refuse? But what reasonable choice is there? The very fact that I can stave off the Patch takes all power away from the House of Grechen. Where can Maxim and his minions hide? On whom can they call? The kingdom must turn to me or perish.” He looked sharply at Jundrak. “You must understand one thing. This moment in time is crucial, vital, to the success of my mission. The reorganization of the kingdom involves unpleasant decisions. I mean to stamp on dissension and to stamp on it hard. Be careful you don’t become a candidate to join the thousands who are being executed hourly.”

Jundrak nodded, believing he understood. “In that respect, at least, I’m on your side,” he said. “I’m glad to hear that Grenesect and his evil pack have already received their deserts.”

As he spoke these words Liber glared at him meaningfully. But it was more the look in the prince’s face that told him he had said something wrong.

“Don’t tell me you let them get away!”

“They are safely under lock and key.”

Liber broke into their conversation with a dry, bitter laugh. “Grenesect and his staff are the most expert political police in existence,” he explained to Jundrak. “And they know the kingdom inside out. It would take years to bring a replacement organization up to their standard.”

For a moment Jundrak was unable to speak. “You— you’re going to use them yourself,” he said in a flat, disbelieving voice.

“But of course,” the prince told him. “The apparatus of power is the same no matter in whose hands it lies.”

It seemed to Jundrak, as he listened to Peredan’s words, that all his life he had lived in a world of palpable evil in which nothing good ever happened. It seemed ludicrous to him that he had never seen that evil for what it was. “*I’m glad I’m not you,*” he gasped, white faced. “You’re even worse than Maxim. At least he has the excuse of being insane!”

The prince’s young-old face sagged; then he threw back his head and laughed, a long,

unpleasant, despairing laugh.

“I must have misjudged you after all! I took you for a man of ambition, a man of reality. But you reveal yourself to be full of nothing but muddleheaded idealism! Well, situations such as these are bound to separate the men from the boys!”

“Forgive me, Your Highness, if I prefer freedom, even if only spiritual freedom, to the service you offer me—”

“You fool, there is no freedom,” Peredan chuckled. “The material universe is a trap whose meshes we cannot escape, however much we try. Throughout history men have held such ideas as you have belatedly discovered, due to some fastidious aversion you appear to have. But the universe always mocks at these ideas. It always has something more strange, more monstrous than we can deal with—such as the Patch.”

As Jundrak gave no answer, he gestured with agitation to the rows of books that surrounded him, both old-fashioned leaf and modern scroll type, his finger traversing the racks. “Do you think I enjoy the role that has been thrust upon me? It is not my wish to be involved in politics. It is only my duty to my father, my house and the kingdom which one day must be mine. In truth I would rather be at my studies, trying to find some other meaning to life. See these volumes: Games Theory. Cabbalah. Scientology—once described as the science of life! Psycho-kinetics. Theories of Motivation. There is an interesting one: Decision-making and the Structure of the Nervous System. And yet do you know what my studies of past and present doctrines have shown me? That we have no choice but to play the game that circumstance offers us. I am in this game to win, and now I have the unbeatable move. *Checkmate.*”

“So that is what it all means to you,” Jundrak rejoindered dully. “Personal victory.”

“You are sealing your fate, duke.”

At this point Grame Liber interrupted. “I am afraid I agree with Sann,” he said regretfully. “Peredan, a few minutes ago you were asking me to write an official history doctored to your requirements. Even Maxim, madman that he was, allowed me to work in peace and write accounts that were objective even when they didn’t flatter him very much. Perhaps he did it *because* he’s a madman. At any rate, in spite of our past relationship, I must refuse. I won’t work for you.”

“And I refuse your commission,” Jundrak joined in, already aware that he was signing his own death warrant. “And neither will I feed your monster with my sperm.”

“Foolish, foolish.” Peredan turned to Grame Liber. “It grieves me to pronounce sentence of death on a friend. But in many ways I am not a man, who can allow himself normal feelings. I am a future king. The necessity of the state comes before everything and will brook no opposition.”

He gestured to the guards standing to attention by the door. “Take them back to their cell. See to it that they are comfortable during their last hours.”

As they were taken away, Jundrak noticed that the prince refused to look at Liber. He had turned away, his head bowed, leaning with one hand on the table. His body was shaking.

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“Do you think he will really have us shot?” Jundrak asked when they were seated once more in the cell. “There seems little reason for it in your case.”

“I fear he will. He sees no alternative.” The chronicler sighed. “Ah, it is a terrible thing to be a monarch. It warps the mind and deranges the senses.”

“That is little comfort to me.” Yet strangely, Jundrak did not regret his outburst in the audience room, even though he could easily have saved himself by complying with Peredan’s wishes. He did not take his pending death philosophically, as Liber appeared to do; he had simply decided that he would crawl no more, whatever the consequences.

Was it possible, he wondered, that his outlook had been influenced by the hard individualism of Castor Krakhno?

“And then you must understand that he is in a terrible position,” Liber ruminated. “He has to organize the Zygote Tax on a large scale in a very short period of time, otherwise the Patch might become restless and swallow up a few more billion people. Imagine what that means, trying to make the population understand what has to be done! Things are going to be very tough for the next few months. I am not the only close friend of his who will finish up as a corpse.”

“My heart bleeds for him,” Jundrak said irritably, as he paced up and down the cell.

After about an hour of moody imprisonment he heard thumping noises from the corridor outside. He put his ear to the door in an attempt to hear better, then sprang away as it opened.

“Sir?”

Jundrak goggled. Outside, peering into the cell, were three disheveled combat troopers, still wearing the uniform of the Royal Fighting Forces. He did not need to see their regimental insignia to know them: they were familiar to him as life-serving soldiers of the regiment he himself commanded, the Royal Armageddon Regiment.

“Well, I’ll be damned. What in space are you doing here?”

The corporal glanced up and down the corridor. “Better get out of here fast, sir.”

“You’re damned right we had.” Jundrak flicked his fingers to Liber. “Come on, old man, we’re leaving.”

“You go ahead. I’m too tired to struggle.”

“Unluckily for you, I like you better alive than dead.” Jundrak seized the old man by the arm and yanked him from the cell. On the floor of the corridor lay two green-uniformed guards. The stiff, feathered berets which all Peredan’s noncoms wore, had rolled from their heads and lay in the pools of blood that oozed from the bodies.

“Where to from here?”

The soldiers led them hurriedly down to the end of the corridor, round a sharp bend and then through an opening in the wall. Once through, a panel slid quietly into place behind them.

“We’re in the cellars of the Political Wing,” the corporal told them. “They’re a maze of secret passages.”

“Right,” Jundrak said firmly, “now explain what you’re doing here.”

“The whole regiment knows of your arrest, sir. When the fighting was going on in the city, the Political Police went crazy, arresting practically everybody in uniform. That’s how we got down here. Of

course, quite a few officers from the regiment have been arrested recently, as you know.”

Jundrak, who had had little contact with the regiment in the past few months, did not know. Nevertheless, he nodded.

“Things were a bit chaotic when the rebels took over the cell blocks,” the corporal continued. “We managed to grab one of the Politicals, a lieutenant. He looked tough, but he turned out to be as soft as water. He gave us the low-down on these passages. Well, naturally, we weren’t going to leave you behind, sir.”

Jundrak’s heart felt warm. There was still such a thing as loyalty.

“Where do these passages lead?” he asked.

The troopers were studying a cryptic code script on the wall of the tunnel. “Well, it seems they radiate all through the Inner City. Mostly they come up in secret entrances in official buildings, sometimes in the streets.”

Jundrak was thinking fast. “Hmm. The rebels will have the Inner City pretty well sewn up by now. If we can get to the Old Town, I know where we can go to be safe.”

“That would be like trying to go through a steel wall, sir. The rebels will be guarding everything, especially the exits. And here we are still in uniform!”

“If we can get to my cottage in Oak Tree Park I may be able to help,” Liber said.

“How?” Jundrak demanded.

“As I told you, electronics is my hobby. I have certain gadgets that should help us through any checkpoints.”

“Well, we can get to the park,” the corporal affirmed, frowning at the diagram. “Do we go, sir?”

Jundrak nodded. “We’ll take a chance on it. Come on, move.”

The corporal gave Jundrak a hand neutron beamer he had taken from one of the dead rebels. They set off through the branching metal-lined tunnels, consulting the directory diagrams which were reproduced at intervals. Jundrak could imagine that hundreds, if not thousands, of prisoners had come this way. The underground network enabled the Political Arm to make arrests and whisk its victims from public view almost as if by magic.

Shortly they mounted a spiral staircase. The corporal cautiously lifted a hatch and peered out, then beckoned on the others. They clambered up to find themselves in the quiet and calm of Oak Tree Park.

There was no one about. Liber guided them through groves of the enormous, mutated oaks until they came to his cottage beneath the spread branches of one of the trees. Jundrak and his men drew their weapons, but the cottage appeared to be deserted.

“Peredan won’t have got round to ransacking my papers yet,” Liber grumbled, opening the door. “Anyway, he wouldn’t need to go any further than Grenesect’s files.”

The inside of the cottage was exactly as Jundrak remembered it: homely, neat and clean. The old man locked the door behind them, then went into the next room. Through the open door they could see him rummaging in cupboards and chests, throwing out heaps of unfamiliar, fascinating apparatus.

“In a way, I hate to leave all this behind,” Liber said. “I’ve put in a lot of work on this stuff—ah, here we are.”

He came up with a handful of black straps to which were fixed shiny, disk-shaped prisms at intervals, four to a strap. “Luckily when I invent anything as simple as this I make at least a dozen—I have an automatic assembler for that kind of thing, you know—so there are enough for us all. Each of you strap one round your head.”

“What is it?” Jundrak asked suspiciously, fingering the headband Liber handed to him.

“It will allow you to walk past the guards at the city wall unnoticed.”

The others immediately began to fit them on. Jundrak, however, was not satisfied.

“I’ll feel better about it once you explain.”

“The gadget itself is really very simple. The theory behind it is a bit more sophisticated but still not hard to follow. The perceptual areas in the brain work by recognizing familiar forms and patterns in the environment. The prisms on these headbands are projectors working on the holograph principle and, when switched on, will engulf the body in a mask of low-toned light, forms and patterns that will change continuously. However, the patterns are carefully designed so as to bear absolutely no resemblance to anything in ordinary experience. Their geometry is of a type that simply does not occur in the natural world.” Liber shrugged and smiled. “That part of it, of course, was beyond my competence. I had to make use of the palace computers to devise the holograph strips. Anyway, the outcome is that anyone looking your way simply cannot see you. Since their perceptual apparatus can make nothing of the images it receives, they see nothing.”

“You mean these will make us invisible?” Jundrak was doubtful.

“In effect, yes. The guards might get an uneasy feeling, but they won’t notice anything for several minutes, that being the time it will take their concept-forming areas to sift out the repetitious elements in the new patterns and make something meaningful of them.”

“Sir, I don’t understand a word of that,” the corporal said, “but I’m willing to give it a try.”

“Well, I suppose we must.” Jundrak strapped on the headband and looked at Liber. “Are you ready to leave?”

“Yes. We will switch on the headbands when we leave the park. The switch is that little button there. But before we go, there’s just one more thing.”

He stepped over to a music player, pulled it away from the wall and, apparently, pulled a switch there.

The room, the whole cottage, vanished. Jundrak and his troopers were standing in the center of a weird, multicolored maze, with corridors stretching interminably in all directions, twisting and turning with logic-defying ingenuity.

Of Grame Liber there was no sign.

“What the—” Jundrak began angrily. But he broke off as Liber reappeared, seemingly emerging from a nearby wall.

“Don’t be alarmed,” he said reassuringly. “It is only a joke to confuse the people Peredan will be sending to search my cottage.”

Jundrak looked about him in the apparently solid, frightening labyrinth. “More holographs?”

“That’s right, the whole labyrinth is an illusion projected from the walls and ceiling. In reality, we are standing in the front room of my cottage.”

“It looks pretty real,” one of the troopers muttered.

“The advantage of a well-made holograph is that it is indistinguishable from the real thing,” Liber answered. “I must say that this device is one of which I am particularly proud. The maze is cunningly designed so that one could never find one’s way out in a systematic way. There are some rather clever visual tricks which make one appear to have walked miles while actually having walked round in circles in the space of a few yards. The walls of the maze are images, of course, not solid, so one could walk through them; but then one would merely find himself in another part of the labyrinth. The only way of actually getting out is to close one’s eyes and feel one’s way along the cottage’s solid walls. We, however, don’t have to go that far. Just follow me.”

Staring straight ahead, he walked slantwise through the nearest “wall.” Steeling himself, Jundrak followed.

The next few moments were madness. As he passed through the holograph images a flurry of impossible impressions met his eyes. His instinct was to turn this way or that, in a direction that offered sanity. Only by keeping his eye on the retreating back of the historian was he able to keep to a straight line and emerge into the open air beyond the door of the cottage.

The corporal and one of the other troopers appeared right after him. The third, however, did not. Smiling, Liber poked his arm through the door (which offered to the eye an innocent-looking hallway) fished through a matted wall and pulled the lost soldier through.

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As prearranged, Jundrak removed his headband and switched it off when he reached an emporium well down the slope into the Old Town.

He was the first one there. But within five minutes the other four appeared one by one, as if springing out of thin air.

The experience had been a peculiar one. Jundrak had been completely unable to see his companions. Not that he had been able to see *through* them, exactly; it was more as if he didn’t quite know what he saw.

Yet, as it happened, he had spent little time trying. He had been more interested in the changed appearance of the Inner City. The place was aswarm with uniformed rebels. Many of the splendid buildings had simply vanished and where they had been, great, gray battleships pointed skyward. As Jundrak did not yet know of the existence of the nuclear fusion beam, he was impressed and a little shaken.

“Well, chronicler,” he said when Liber appeared, “now I know why you don’t take sides. Any side that had you on it couldn’t lose.”

“You flatter me. However, the next move is up to you.”

The streets were unusually quiet. From several points in the town smoke rose in thick columns. The sound of an explosion reached them from somewhere in one of the adjacent valleys.

Either it was the work of looters and street gangs—or else Krakhno and his band had been busy.

Though they saw some signs of disorder, no one interfered with them for the rest of the way to the hideout where Jundrak thought he might find the nihilist. To his surprise the subterranean den was almost deserted and bore signs of a hasty evacuation. Its only occupant was a bearded, aggressive young man in his thirties, who was burning a pile of documents in the center of the room.

He snatched up a neutron rifle as they entered, then recognized Jundrak and lowered it.

“Oh, it’s you. In your true colors for once, I see.”

“Where’s Krakhno, Pieret?” Jundrak demanded. “We need help.”

“Down at the line station with the others. We’re getting out. If I were you, I’d go too.”

Jundrak frowned. “Will you take us?”

“Take yourself, there’s no problem. We’ve taken the station over. We could take the whole damned town over, too, but what’s the use?”

Hurriedly, they left. The electric rail car service wasn’t running, and the big magnetic line station was over three miles away. It took them nearly an hour to reach it, once skirting a dangerous-looking mob which was pulling down a statue of King Maxim in a square.

The station was guarded by ruffianly looking anarchists who let them through after a brief and mutually insulting argument. Inside, the big sheds were a scene of chaotic but purposeful activity.

The magnetic railway network was a planetwide form of transport that was mainly used for freight but also, to some extent, by the working classes and even, in somewhat more luxurious coaches, by lower managerials. Riding suspended above the track on a magnetic cushion, the trains could at best achieve speeds of around two thousand miles per hour, which placed the furthest destinations, if one traveled nonstop, about six hours away.

Two big trains were being readied for departure by members of Krakhno’s organization. The normal staff had been sent packing. Jundrak eventually tracked down the nihilist leader in the large glass-covered controller’s office that looked down over the main shed. Krakhno was sweating, nervous, but otherwise in control of himself and managing the operation smoothly.

“Hello, colonel, I thought you’d had it. Still, glad to see you. Who are your friends?”

Jundrak introduced Liber but ignored the troopers, who stood stiffly to attention.

“I’ve heard of you, chronicler,” Krakhno greeted. “I would look forward to a talk with you when there’s time.”

“Why the move, Castor?” Jundrak asked.

“I hadn’t reckoned on an invasion by the prince,” the nihilist grumbled. “He’ll tear this city apart stone by stone. You won’t even be able to fart without being arrested. We’re relocating ourselves in one of the provincial cities where things will be quieter. In Endecaur, to be precise.”

“Can you do that? It’s a long journey—what if the junction controllers down the line refuse to switch you through?”

“They won’t. We send our instructions ahead. They know what will happen if they disobey us.”

Jundrak played his pitch without further delay. He apprised Krakhno of the existence of the slipway base and proposed that he should make that his destination instead of Endecaur, afterward

joining forces with the renegades in the asteroid refuge. Krakhno listened without visible surprise, nodding his understanding every now and then.

“And how far away is the base from the nearest magline station?” he asked.

“About a hundred miles. My second-in-command could pick us up from there if the fleet hasn’t left already. It all depends on my getting in touch with him first.”

“We can arrange that.” Krakhno snapped his fingers, summoning a nearby helper. “I want you to set up a vidscreen link. Colonel Sann here will give you the frequency.”

His ragged technicians got to work. Meanwhile Krakhno glanced at Liber and, noticing his weariness, offered to let him use his private magline coach in which to rest.

“Thank you,” the historian answered gratefully. “The last few hours . . . have been tiring . . .”

At this point Jundrak deigned to notice his troopers also. He sent them down below to help with the work of loading, ordering them to board the train when the expedition was ready to leave.

When they had gone Krakhno, who during the conversation had maintained an air of careful composure, seemed to crack suddenly. He glared at Jundrak with an unnatural expression and clutched the officer’s sleeve. He was sweating.

“*It’s here, Jundrak, it’s here,*” he said in a low, trembling voice.

“What?” Jundrak was puzzled.

“The Patch!”

He stepped back, snatching his arm away from the nihilist’s grip.

“By Space,” he muttered.

“I can *feel* it. It’s in my brain, in my bones, in my *soul*. Like a bad smell, like a migraine—” Krakhno rose to his feet but staggered and leaned with his hands on the desk. “It’s unbearable! But I can’t understand why everybody’s still alive!”

Jundrak looked at him with pity. “I think there’s something you should know . . .” he said slowly.

He recounted his recent conversation with Prince Peredan. Once again Krakhno, regaining his self-control, listened without a blink.

“But I didn’t know he’d brought the Patch with him,”

Jundrak finished. He shivered slightly. “That’s really weird. We’re right inside it!”

The other shook his head wonderingly. Then he gave Jundrak a sidelong leer. “A zygote tax!” That’s the wildest thing I ever heard of!“ Suddenly he let out a cruel, raucous laugh. ”What’s the matter with you, anyway? You’re not shrinking from a little thing like a monthly sperm donation, are you? You’d only give it to the sheets otherwise!“

“Maybe it surprises you,” Jundrak retorted irritably. “To tell the truth it surprises me, too. But I’ve drawn the line. I’m not taking it.”

“Are you sure? It might be a matter of taking it or *being* taken by the Patch. Peredan has the ultimate weapon at his disposal now—provided he can control it, which I doubt—and skunks like him



will do anything for power.”

As he finished speaking, the vidscreen link was completed. Jundrak moved to the screen, which was sending out an alerting signal on the base’s frequency. After nearly two minutes, Heen Sett’s agitated face appeared.

“Jundrak! Where the hell have you been? What’s wrong with your scrambler?”

“I don’t have one anymore,” Jundrak told him. If anyone was monitoring the frequency, it would be just too bad. “I’ve been in trouble. What’s been happening down your end?”

Heen smiled wickedly. “We soon took care of Grenesect’s bully boys. But then we got a call from about five light-years out. King Maxim, in person, ordering us to take off and follow him. We sat tight naturally. Can we still expect you?”

“Yes, but I won’t be alone. I’ve picked up some friends, two trainloads to be precise. We’ll be arriving by magline sometime during the night. Do you know the freight junction about a hundred miles north of you? I’d appreciate it if you detailed an aircar to watch for our coming.”

Sett accepted his instructions without question. Jundrak cut the connection, then turned to watch the activity on the floor of the shed, which was visible through the sloping glass panels of the office. There was much noise and clamor and the anarchists’ methods seemed disorganized and slapdash. But for all that, they were vigorous and efficient. Weapons and items of equipment Jundrak did not recognize disappeared constantly into the big freight cars.

“We won’t leave until dark,” Krakhno said. “That will lessen the chances of our being spotted by Peredan’s aerial patrols or orbital surveillance; and it will still give us nearly twelve hours of darkness to get to the base.”

Jundrak pointed to a number of sealed, vatlike containers which were being trundled toward Krakhno’s train.

“What are those?”

“Oh, those.” Krakhno smiled. Jundrak did not know about the planned Elixir of Death. “Just a little hobby of mine.”

He added: “We had hoped to leave a hydrogen bomb behind us timed to detonate after our departure. But—” he shrugged, “it could not be assembled in time.”

## XII

With time on his hands, Jundrak attended to something that had been pricking his conscience. Finding a runabout, he went to pick up Rondana. He found her in her room, where she stubbornly resisted his pleas for her to come with him and the anarchists. But when he showed himself ready to use force, she complied readily enough.

When he returned with her, it was twilight and the expedition was ready to move. The two trains had a weird appearance: artillery pieces (space knew where Krakhno had gotten them) had been welded to the roofs of several of the carriages, where they were protected by streamlined cowlings.

Jundrak found space for himself and Rondana in one of the comfortable coaches which comprised Krakhno’s personal suite in the entourage. There was a rising shriek of power as the trains

rose off the steel rails. With a blast of whistle, the last order to board went out. Men and women came running from all over the station, shouting and whooping with excitement as they leaped and scrambled aboard the now moving carriages.

Slowly they moved out of the massive shed, Krakhno's train in the lead, then glided smoothly through the vast marshaling yards. In the dusk the squalor of the Old Town slid by with accelerating swiftness past the coach windows, lit up here and there by billowing fires. To their roar, set on a height, the Inner City still shone like a golden crown in the last rays of the setting sun.

They were on their way.

In the open countryside the train surged forward, building up easily to its top speed. Rondana had her nose pressed against the window. Jundrak, who had never traveled by train before, was also enjoying it.

"We're going!" Rondana said wonderingly. "Where will it end?"

After a while, he left her and went to explore. Most of the train consisted not of passenger coaches but of freight cars; into these the anarchists had cheerfully jammed themselves and were intent on spending the journey in one big, riotous party.

For all their boisterousness, he found to his surprise that the anarchists were not outwardly aggressive. There was no fighting and no serious arguments—a very different situation to what would have obtained, in similar circumstances, among the noncoms of his own regiment. Among the anarchists aggressiveness, it seemed, was turned inward. They had a habit of egging one another on to suicidal exploits, and the noisy laughter and bawled songs were occasionally punctuated by the sound of gunfire as the result of some lethal game or drunken exhibition.

Slightly drunk, Jundrak returned a couple of hours later to find Grame Liber standing alone in the corridor, leaning on a rail and staring pensively out of the window. One of Maximilia's moons was out, casting a ghostly silver glow over the landscape which was sweeping past them in a blur of motion. The historian greeted him humorlessly.

"Hello there," Jundrak said. "Krakhno's company too much for you?"

"I have just had quite a long talk with him," Liber admitted. "Perhaps that's so."

"He's a weird fellow all right. Do you know he's the only man to be spat out alive by the Patch?"

"Yes I do. And I also know why."

"Oh?" Jundrak frowned. The scholar was taking him more seriously than he had intended.

"Thanatophilia: a morbid love of death. The condition is known clinically, though it is very rare. That's why the Patch rejected him. It loves life, it subsists on life. Love of life and the experiences of life are the food it savors in its victims. Krakhno has such a death wish that the Patch found him unpalatable."

Sobering up somewhat, Jundrak rubbed his chin. "It figures. The destruction of everything existing. Death to Life. The whole nihilist thing. How is he?"

"In a bad way. He had a sort of fit, was groaning like a maniac. He feels he has a personal relationship with the Patch—in fact he must have, he alone knows it's here. He can't stand its presence. It refuses to absorb him, you see, condemns him to live, as it were. For him, that's pretty ghastly."

Jundrak nodded slowly. "Thanks for the rundown. I think I'll see if we're on schedule."

Stepping past Liber, he opened the door to Krakhno's lounge.

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In the slipway base Subcolonel Heen Sett had called a general meeting. Officers and men, engineers and technicians, gathered in the hall where Jundrak himself had so often made speeches in the course of the project. Sett weighed the mood of the assembly confidently. The greater part of them were already behind him, being committed renegades. He and Jundrak had long made strenuous efforts to secure that majority.

"By now we all know that rebel forces led by Prince Peredan of Lorenz have invaded the kingdom and seized the capital," he began. "The king has fled. The situation is confused, but at this juncture we must take events into our own hands and decide our own future.

"If we decide to fight, on whatever side, we merely expend ourselves in yet another futile conflict. If we take what we have worked all these years to create, we may yet gain some reward for our labors!"

The men whom he and Jundrak had virtually welded into a private army cheered him wildly. Holding up his arms for silence he continued: "We are going to commandeer the slipway fleet and set up an independent base that has already been prepared. No one will be coerced, and no one will be harmed who does not want to come with us. Anyone who wishes may leave for the surface now."

An officer, one of the few monarchists whom Jundrak had not been able to eliminate from the military administration, jumped up.

"Traitor! If we moved our ships on Maximilia now, we could keep the city for the king!"

Scattered groups of civilians added their voices to his in shocked tones. Sett motioned to a group of armed guards.

"Put Major Fuil under arrest, take him topside and then release him. You all heard what I said. Anyone who doesn't like the situation may leave without hurt or hindrance. For the rest, go to the yards and prepare for takeoff!"

Of the six thousand who manned the base, only slightly over one thousand took the elevators to the surface.

When Jundrak entered the compartment, Krakhno was sitting at a table with his head in his hands. Horris Dagele and others among his lieutenants lounged nearby, casting him occasional glances.

"Are we on time?" Jundrak asked, addressing the room in general.

Dagele nodded absently. Jundrak joined Krakhno at the table, staring with concern at the shivering nihilist.

Slowly Krakhno lifted his face a few inches from his hands. "Give me your pistol," he muttered in a barely audible voice.

"What?"

"*Give me your pistol.*" Krakhno spoke in a hissing whisper.

Puzzled, Jundrak took his laser pistol from its holster. But Dagele stepped smartly over and stayed his hand. "No you don't, colonel. We've already taken Castor's weapons away. He keeps trying to kill himself."

Krakhno showed no reaction, merely mumbled: “Don’t worry. I’ll be all right once we’re away from Rigel, away from that damned Beast.”

At that moment a livid glare illuminated for a split second the night outside the coach. The train swayed slightly.

Krakhno’s head snapped up, his eyes blazing. From the direction of the roof came the quick *zip zip* of missile guns and the low roar of gamma artillery.

“What’s going on?” Krakhno barked savagely into a jury-rigged microphone on the table.

A tiny loudspeaker answered in a tinny voice. “Atmospheric attack plane. We got him, though. He went down like a bird!”

“So the rebels know about us,” Jundrak said.

“Not necessarily,” Krakhno supplied. “They are bound to have a few atmospheric fighters roaming around, and this one was probably joyriding. Wrecking a magline train for kicks.”

The loudspeaker spoke again. “More blips on the screen. Looks like that rascal had three buddies.”

The train rocked to a number of short, sharp explosions but did not falter. Jundrak remembered that atmospheric fighters carried rocket racks designed to spray a wide area rather than attack a specific target.

The fighters were no doubt astonished at the reception they elicited. The train reverberated as the roof-mounted defenders let loose in a minute long cacophony. But before the racket ceased, there was a fierce jerk and the occupants of the compartment were hurled against the forward wall as the train went into a long, savage deceleration.

Eventually, the pressure eased, and Jundrak climbed painfully to his feet again. Horris Dagele was white faced. “We’re on emergency power—riding on the rails,” he gasped.

“Can we do that?” Jundrak asked in surprise.

“Yes, when the main power fails, but it’s no way to travel; we can’t make better than two hundred miles per hour.”

The loudspeaker crackled. “That was sure some party. But we downed them, all three of them.” A pause. “Eh, do you know what? Number two train isn’t following us anymore.”

Dagele seized another microphone connected to the driving cabin in the rear of the train. “Number two’s been hit. Backtrack.” This time the deceleration was less savage; soon they were coasting gently backward.

*They’re crazy, Jundrak thought to himself. These atmospheric fighters are just toys. What if the rebels send in a cruiser, or even an orbital attack platform? We’ll be obliterated.*

But that probably wouldn’t happen. For the moment they were a minute detail to any rebel control officer, and the rebels didn’t have overmuch fighting hardware to spare on details. By the same token, however, it would be foolish for Heen Sett to send a slipway ship round the planet looking for them: such a move would certainly be noticed and would elicit comparable firepower in response. In the ensuing action the magline trains would be annihilated in the excess of destructive energy battleships released when they met in combat.

And yet, Jundrak told himself dolefully, it would take days to reach the slipway base at two hundred miles per hour.

As the backtracking train squealed to a stop dozens of doors opened and crowds of people jumped out to see what had happened. Light from the two trains streamed out over the darkened countryside. About a mile away was the blazing pyre of one of the fighter planes.

The following train of the expedition looked like a horribly injured insect. Its third coach had been completely destroyed by a direct hit, but presumably the main power had already failed when the missile struck—for eight of its twelve lengthy carriages were miraculously still on the rails; they had, however, telescoped into one another and were crumpled together like a bunched up caterpillar, while the derailed coaches reeled drunkenly, the searchlights of the leading coach stabbing the darkness at a grotesque angle.

Screams and groans floated over the night air. The anarchists streamed toward the crippled train and began to go through it systematically, rescuing the trapped, shooting the seriously injured, helping those who weren't critically hurt to the shelter of the other train. Jundrak scowled when he saw a child being carried on an improvised stretcher. "It's madness to bring children on a jaunt like this," he complained to Krakhno.

"Children?" the other responded gloomily, "there are no such people as children. They are only adults who haven't lived very long, the lucky swine."

Jundrak followed him into the leading train's driving cab. Two engineers conferred in low, urgent tones.

"I take it we've been switched off at the main supply," the nihilist said flatly.

"Apparently not. A transformer substation has blown a few hundred miles down the line. Probably hit by a missile from the attack planes."

Krakhno snorted. "Good news for once! Can it be repaired?"

"We won't know till we get there and inspect it."

They left the cab and returned to Krakhno's coach. Half an hour later they were on their way again. Without its magnetic cushion the train traveled with a singing, perceptibility vibrating motion that was soothing.

As soon as they were settled, however, Krakhno took a hand neutron beamer from his pocket and laid it on the table with a smile, his palm resting on the butt.

Jundrak made a quick move to appropriate it, but quick as a flash the gun was in Krakhno's hand and pointing at his chest.

Dagele loomed up, the others hovering behind him. "Give me the gun, Castor," he said in weary tones.

"Damn your souls," the nihilist growled, "I said I would see you through to the end, didn't I? And so I will. I won't let you down. But I have to know that I can die if I want to."

"He must have got it from someone during the stop," a man standing behind Dagele said.

Dagele sighed wearily, then nodded to Jundrak. "All right, let him keep it."

Jundrak spent the rest of the journey watching Krakhno for signs of imminent suicide.

It took them an hour and a half to reach the substation. After a hasty inspection the engineers reported that its main function could be restored in about five hours. The night wore on tensely while the work was carried through. The lack of any further rebel investigations, Jundrak decided, could be due to their having discovered the wrecked train and presuming it to be the only one involved.

At last the repairs were completed. The train rose on its magnetic cushion and surged forward. Krakhno lay slumped on his table, barely conscious, while the rest of them worried about reaching their destination ahead of the dawn.

And it was just dawn when they slowed in sight of the freight sheds. In the gray light the huge structures loomed, glistening with dew. Jundrak peered anxiously through the windows for some sight of a slipway battleship.

But instead a disk-shaped object came slanting down toward them, speeding over the emerging globe of the rising sun. Jundrak let out a wild yell. It was an orbiting firing platform, designed to swoop down through the atmosphere, deluge a target with firepower and just as swiftly swing back into orbit again. Krakhno came awake in an instant, took one glance through the window and then was shouting into the microphone.

“Open fire, you bastards! Get it before—”

Ragged, ineffectual fire was already spitting upward from the train. But that was not what saved them. The sun glinted on a tall, golden column which followed the flying platform round the curve of the planet. From it flashed out a shimmering ray; the orbital attack craft exploded into a rain of slag.

Yet a second golden shape floated in the wake of the first. Heen Sett had arrived as promised. They were safe.

### XIII

A year had passed.

A year in which the slipway fleet had ensconced itself in the nearly impregnable environment of the asteroid belt; in which the cavernous warrens had been extended, refurnished and electronically integrated for purposes of defense. No intruding enemy could tell now which of those tumbling balls of rock was innocently deserted and which was a deadly fortress. Prince Peredan knew that to his cost. He had already lost two fleet commanders in expensive attempts to exterminate the renegades.

That his efforts to destroy this den of erring subjects were so strenuous was due not to intransigence on his part but to the fact that the rebels' opposition to his rule was too vocal and too effective. For nearly a year the asteroid refuge had been putting out a high-powered television campaign designed by Krakhno's propagandists to vilify the House of Lorenz, the character of Prince Peredan's rule and, in particular, the zygote tax, which it was easy to make appear ridiculous and humiliating. Through this campaign the difficulties the prince had encountered in implementing the tax were enormously increased. Jundrak's transmitters had a range of several thousand light-years, and despite efficient jamming in many sectors and a law strictly forbidding the reception of the illegal wavelength, it was estimated that the program was watched by some billions of subjects daily.

In return the inhabitants of the refuge had been watching some interesting television themselves. As soon as Peredan's new reign got into swing they were able to witness —though many refused

to—what all ordinary subjects were forced to watch by law: the public execution of the ex-king Maxim and his entire family, including a nephew and a niece both under the age of five, by the method of slow strangulation.

By these and other daily signs of a steadily tightening consolidation of power, it was clear that Grenesect and his intact Political Arm were working for their new master with a zealotry they had not exhibited even under Maxim. Jundrak was sickened. Only Grame Liber seemed able to watch the development of events with equanimity. He merely shook his head sadly when he heard Jundrak's indignant curses.

"It merely demonstrates what I told you about the nature of power. To be the absolute ruler of so many billions of people cannot leave a man's mind untouched. Already Prince Peredan must be on the road to insanity; not perceptibly of course, but well along the initial steps." He sighed. "I have come to the conclusion that the only hope for mankind is for the kingdom to break up into numerous separate states. Its present size puts too much pressure on any single brain. Why, the imagination can hardly contain it."

Liber was not present, however, when a tight beam transmission relayed from Rigel probed the asteroid belt looking for a transceiver. The "alert crew" for that day quickly identified the beam, phased it down from the instantaneous carrier wave which had conveyed it on its journey of light-years and decoded it.

It was a highly secret communication from the prince himself.

Jundrak stared at the image in his vidscreen. In the past year the prince had definitely changed. The youthful calm had been replaced by a kind of stony immovability. Peredan gazed back at him with a look of haughty self-righteousness.

"I am honored to be deemed worth speaking to by the monster himself," Jundrak sneered. "Or should I say the monster's pet?"

"I will not demand the formal modes of address since to expect civilized behavior from barbarians and traitors is a lost game," the prince said unflinchingly. "I am giving you this much attention as a mark of my clemency, to give you a final warning and a last chance to surrender yourselves to my mercy."

"I seem to remember that my first words to you on Smorn were something along the same lines," Jundrak said with a faint smile.

"Our positions are indeed reversed, except that you are weaker than I was, and I am stronger than any man has ever been."

"You certainly are. I can smell you all the way from Unimm." Jundrak let his disgust show on his face and felt tempted to switch off the transceiver.

"Don't waste my time with insults. I am calling to tell you that we are now in a position to destroy you and your followers."

"You tried all that before. We're still here. Our position is impregnable."

"Indeed. I cannot shift you, but I can still kill you."

Jundrak felt an intimation of what was coming. "Go on."

"Unless you surrender I shall arrange for the Patch to move into your region of space and feed on

you.”

“We discussed this possibility long ago,” Jundrak said slowly after a heavy pause. On a terminal beneath the vidscreen he tapped out signals summoning Krakhno, Liber and Heen Sett to join in the conversation. “We decided it wasn’t feasible. You may have staved off the Patch with your monthly payments but it’s far too risky to try to make it dance for you. It might get greedy again and abrogate the agreement.”

“Your reasoning is sound but out of date. In the past year we have made progress in our relations with the Patch. My scientists tell me that to guide it to any region with limited permission to eat is now a feasibility. Slightly risky but not much.”

“We’re not surrendering,” Jundrak answered woodenly. “We’ll leave.”

“But don’t you understand?” The prince seemed exasperated. “There’s nowhere you can go! There’s nowhere in the whole kingdom where I can’t get you!”

“Then we’ll leave the kingdom,” said Jundrak.

It had, after all, been decided long ago.

#### XIV

The worst had happened. In his heart Jundrak had always known it would come to this.

The migrant fleet hurtled along the spaceslip with tubes screaming. Behind them, as the fleet sailed toward more distant galaxies, the stars of the home lens were already beginning to coalesce into an iridescent curtain of light made up of billions of suns and a haze of glowing gas. The sight cowed them all, for even at this distance the whole of the kingdom, stretching from the Garlowe Clusters to the Veils of Darkness, was within the span of the naked eye.

The fleet, which comprised the substance of Jundrak’s agreement with Prince Peredan, was a motley collection of hundreds of ships into which were crammed almost half a million people; passenger liners, derelict battleships, cargo scows; anything that could be converted to its new role and could be fitted with units of the slipway drive which had hastily been turned out in the kingdom’s factories.

Jundrak’s first offer to quit the kingdom had been accepted with alacrity by the prince. But he had wanted more: not merely to exile them to another part of the galaxy, as Jundrak had proposed, but to exile them into the outer darkness beyond the galaxy from which the anarchists were never to return. In return Jundrak had demanded a much larger expedition and a chance for a few of the kingdom’s billions to build a new human civilization elsewhere.

To this also the prince had agreed. Thus Jundrak, quite against his will, found himself once again engaged in the game of plot and counterplot, this time with himself as a nearly helpless partner. For it was not hard to deduce that Peredan saw the agreement as an opportunity to get rid of several problems at once. Not only was he rid once and for all of the troublesome anarchist hideout, but it was plain from the numbers which swelled the migrant fleet that those who answered Jundrak’s television appeals willingly were being complemented by thousands of political malcontents whom Grenesect’s police stamped as fitting material for transportation.

The third package in Peredan’s bargain gave more cause for concern. Jundrak thought it more than likely that the prince planned to use the intensified slipline the fleet would leave in its wake as bait in



an effort to lure the Patch out of the kingdom forever, much as Jundrak had once brought the menace down on Peredan.

This likelihood had caused fervent debate. Grame Liber had pleaded passionately for the project to be continued whatever the outcome; the sacrifice of their lives was a small price if humanity at large could be rescued from its bondage to the alien monster. Jundrak, in part, had agreed with him. Eventually he had clinched the argument: “We have little choice in any case. If we stay we die; if we go we may live. So far as we know the Patch is relatively slow moving. Our ships are capable of ten times its average velocity, therefore it will never be able to catch up with us. In any case we cannot be sure that Peredan’s scientists will succeed in luring it away from its safe feeding ground.”

“Why else would he want us to take half a million people?” Heen Sett had muttered sulkily. Only he had steadfastly opposed Jundrak’s decision. Sett had been for splitting up and making a fight of it in a final blaze of glory. But Jundrak had preemptorily overruled him.

Now the moment of truth was here.

On the flagship’s bridge the banks of instruments and guidance monitors clicked and hummed into a strained silence. “We could increase our velocity by a further eight percent,” Jundrak said calmly to Sett and Krakhno who were on the bridge with him. “But that’s danger level. We run the risk of damaging the tubes, and some ships will inevitably fall behind.”

The Patch *was* following them. And once beyond the galactic perimeter its speed had increased prodigiously.

Krakhno sweated. “Pull the stops out,” Sett growled, “we’re finished in any case.”

Jundrak nodded and gave the order to the whole fleet on the master command panel. The metal of the ship thrummed faintly as the slipway drive vibrated at the limit of its power.

It made no difference. The Patch continued to close the gap minute by minute.

“Well,” Jundrak said, turning to the others and trying to still the pounding of his blood, “this is it.”

Something on one of the screens caught his attention. He had withheld the news of their predicament from the fleet until now, but somehow the facts must have leaked out or been guessed. The fleet was fleeing the main route in panic, radiating out into the surrounding space. But once off the spatial fault line their slipway engines were slow and clumsy; they could not possibly escape in time.

Already an electric tingling could be felt by those on the bridge. They gave one another stricken looks. *I was in a trap from the very beginning . . . Too many powerful players in the game . . . From the very start it was all leading to this . . .*

The thoughts went through Jundrak’s brain of their own accord. “I’m sorry, Castor,” he said, “we won’t build that society with equality between men now.”

“And power to the individual,” Krakhno corrected him. He smiled grotesquely, fighting his fear. “I’ve never really believed such a society is possible. Man isn’t made that way.”

Jundrak thought: “I must go and see Rondana before—”

The last thing he heard was Krakhno’s scream.

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It was like the air whipping out of a room into the void.

It was a clap of thunder followed by silence and darkness.

It was voices in the void.

COME, COME, COME, COME, COME ... NO, NO, NO, NO, NO, NO ... SEPARATE, SEPARATE, SEPARATE, SEPARATE, SEPARATE, SEPARATE, SEPARATE....

Explosions in the psyche.

Wrenching of body from mind.

Rape of the soul.

The cacophony of pseudo-energies impinged on half a million dying nervous systems in the form of ghostly shrieks and howls; alien sounds impossible to describe hurled themselves from the infinite distances, trailing clouds of transient particles that flickered in and out of existence according to mystic laws of their own.

The half-million souls in the migrant fleet were aware of all this only as dying men may be aware of fleeting memories from the past. In seconds, though it seemed like centuries, the unbearable assault built up to a tumescent climax and their agony came to an end like the dropping of a curtain.

Oblivion.

It was death.

It was life.

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It was life. Yet it was death. It was a mystery that defied thought.

Jundrak sat on a clump of grass watching rainbow-colored fish jump in the river. Occasionally he looked out over the meadows, woods and streams or glanced at the sky.

A cry from behind him made him turn to see Rondana Creele and Grame Liber walking over the brow of the hill. He rose, meeting Rondana's delighted grin with one of his own.

"So here you are at last!" she said. "We heard you were living around here."

"I looked for you," he told her apologetically, "but I couldn't find you. It's all so big ..."

"You should have kept trying," Liber admonished him. "Everybody emerged within a fairly well defined area and within reasonable distance of one another. That appears to be one of characteristics of the way the Patch eats."

Jundrak pointed to the cottage he had built further up the slope. "Come inside."

At the door of the cottage Liber paused, looking over the incredible world around them. There was sky. There was land, in the form of rolling meadows and winding rivers, trees and shrubs. But there was no horizon. The far distance simply seemed to compound itself into itself until one could see nothing definite.

He followed Jundrak and Rondana inside. Jundrak laid a bowl of fruit on a wooden table and provided some cups and a jug of a fluid with a sharp tang.

“It took me quite a while to produce all this stuff,” he said. He sat down and banged a cup on the table. “*You* explain it to me,” he asked Liber. “We should be dead. We *are* dead. And yet we’re alive. We have bodies, we live in a substantial material world—or at any rate it’s like the old material world in many respects. And yet I know that we’re inside the Patch and that the Patch is all empty space.”

Liber sighed, fingering Jundrak’s fruit. “It’s funny how we always thought of the Patch as something evil and fearful. The truth is that it’s life itself, pure mentality; rudimentary and scarcely sentient itself, yet a receptacle for any other mentality it encounters. That’s how it maintains itself, by absorbing other life into itself intact.”

“But the *solidity*. Everything’s so real.”

“Call it illusion if you like. When the Patch absorbs beings a suitable environment springs into existence for them. And yet it may not be illusion at all, in the proper sense. True, observed scientifically the Patch is only a mysterious chain of energy processes occupying an area of largely empty space. But the Patch has more to it than our observations showed; it has dimensions of its own, mental dimensions. We inhabit those dimensions, and the world we live in is ‘mental matter,’ so to speak. But if you want to insist that it’s illusory, that it doesn’t exist, then by the same token you would have to admit that the world we have come from is also illusory.”

In some ways, Jundrak reminded himself, the laws of matter, motion and distance were not quite the same in this new world as they were in the old. By an effort of will, though one strenuous enough to discourage it being applied to satisfy a whim, it was even possible to create new matter.

He sipped his slightly alcoholic beverage. “The Patch is nearly a light-year across,” he commented. “That’s a pretty big world.”

“It’s even bigger. We’re not in normal spatial extensions. The Patch creates mental space of any size as it needs it. Potentially it’s as big as the whole physical universe.”

Jundrak put down his cup and stared at him, stunned.

“We’ll never know just how big it actually is,” Liber went on. “Every creature it ever absorbed is here somewhere, and every type of creature has an environment to match; some of them so strange as to be barely conceivable to us. There are even some new environments not existing outside, I believe.

“Neither do I imagine this is the only example of its species,” the chronicler ruminated. “Rather, I think there must be a large number of them—perhaps an infinite number—roving about the universe, using the spatial fault lines as a sort of cosmic latticework. I image they are the primary life form of the universe. Organic beings like us are secondary, acting as food for them.”

Rondana shuddered, but Liber added: “There’s just one thing more. In here you never die.”

There was a silence.

“Well, Rondana,” Jundrak said eventually, “I won’t outlive you now.”

She blushed and looked embarrassed, then said: “What happened to that horrible friend of yours, Heen Sett? Does he live here as well?”

“When I passed over from the other side,” Jundrak answered with a smile, “he was the only person near me. But he’s gone now. He rounded up some of our men and went adventuring. We heard there was a war of some sort a long way from here.”

“And then there’s that fellow Krakhno,” Liber put in. “I wonder what happened to him?”

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NO, NO, NO, NO, no, no, no ...

Groaning and whimpering, his emotions a mixture of self-pity and self-loathing, Castor Krakhno opened his eyes.

He was lying on the deck of the bridge. Everything appeared to be functioning normally. The instrument boards flickered coldly; an intermittent hum of hidden control mechanisms broke the silence every few seconds. Only the corpses littering the area betrayed any sign of abnormality.

It was unfair to have to go through that twice. No man should be called upon to go through that ...

Gradually the maudlin thoughts subsided. Some of his strength returned, and he climbed to his feet and turned over some of the bodies. Duke-Colonel Jundrak of Sann, Subcolonel Heen Sett, half a dozen or so junior officers.

There would be thousands more bodies in the ship. He was going to have trouble with those bodies.

Suddenly Krakhno was violently sick.

When he had finished retching, long after he had thrown up everything in his stomach, he staggered to one of the instrument boards and tried to make sense of the readings. The Patch was well ahead of the fleet and traveling swiftly toward the distant alien galaxy at the end of the slipline. Apparently it had forgotten the easy grazing grounds of the kingdom.

Krakhno, however, had not forgotten. He felt new powers, new hatreds coursing through him. Even more than before he knew that he could bend men to his will.

He roared with ugly, despairing laughter. Then he began to consider how to turn the ship round and head back to his old enemies.

[version history and scanner's info]

Version 1.0—scanned, OCR'd and spell-checked from dead-tree by BW-SciFi.

Version 2.0—September 21, 2003—proofread and corrected by The\_Ghiti. If you find errors, please fix, increment version number by 0.1 and re-post.