

Envoy Extraordinary

by Albert E. Cowdrey

Albert Cowdrey knows a bit about how diplomacy works—he used to head the Conventional War Studies Branch at the US Army Center of Military History in Washington, DC. His new story shows that in addition to understanding diplomacy, he also has a keen understanding of how things work throughout the galaxies and a gift for spinning out stories.

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Blazing in the gold uniform of UNIDIP—the Universal Diplomatic Service—Vincent Khartoum emerged onto the pad of Malakatha’s ugly little shuttleport.

A ragged serfboy followed, sweating under a small hillock of luggage.

Lined up at ramrod attention, an honor guard of gleaming bots presented nine-point-four impact weapons as Vincent lumbered past, pushing his broad bemedaled frontage before him like a galleon’s prow. At the end of the file an armored limousine opened its multi-leaved passenger door like an unfolding chrysanthemum.

Vincent threw back his head and stared down his nose, a trick that made him seem even taller than his two-meters-one.

“Why,” he demanded, “must I endure the tedium of wheeled transport instead of the royal flyer with guardian drones that is my due?”

He spoke in a degenerate dialect called Low Vexish, the common language of Malakatha. In reply the driver—a black box—buzzed, “A temporary halt to air traffic has been ordered since a traitor attempted to bomb His Supremacy’s palace.”

“Why doesn’t he get rid of his rebels, eh?”

“He will do so almost immediately. They are but a few malcontents. He will erase them with his frown. Most Honored Sir, pray honor this wretched slave by entering. We have before us a lengthy drive to the Zot.”

Puffing and grumbling, Vincent did so. Like his gut, his rump was impressive, and took some time to settle among the purple faux-velour cushions. At last the massive door closed, and the motor purred into

activity. As the car began to move, he was thinking: The Zot, the Zot—what did my infopacket say about the Zot?

Ah, yes. He remembered now. *A vast marshland inhabited by giant leeches, carnivorous glongbars, poison-footed blids, and King Drax.*

Why the monarch chose to hide from his subjects in the middle of a primeval swamp became clear as the scenery of Malakatha unfolded.

Roadside villages featured decaying huts, ragged peasants climbing around on garbage heaps, and impaled bodies gazing blindly at the sky like speared frogs. The fields grew crops only of gibbets and gallows, all occupied. The sole large buildings were prisons where bemedaled officers saluted the king's limo while grim-looking guards presented arms and chain gangs prostrated themselves.

Viewing the wretched scene, Vincent found himself thinking: Good Lord—this place is worse than Peoria!

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Though he concealed the fact as much as possible, he had indeed been born in Peoria, a big ramshackle city set like a navel ring in the middle of the Dark Continent of North America.

After the second-to-last war had erased all the Earth's capitals, places previously of little importance became vast centers of population: Sarajevo; Minsk; Moosejaw; Jongking; and Peoria. Vincent had been born thirty-six years ago to poor, hard-working parents who, along with 32,691 others, inhabited a huge tenement called the Peoria Honeycomb. Urine-fouled hallways, air shafts piled with rubbish to the third story, and perpetual smells of cooking SAPS (Stewed and Processed Scraps, the chief food of the poor) made life in the Honeycomb anything but sweet.

Amid these grim conditions the young Vincent had dreamed of freeing the oppressed. He disfigured his school notebooks with drawings of himself bearing a sword in one hand (to liberate) and a torch in the other (to enlighten). In his high school's senior play he took the part of Macduff and enacted the final sword fight so vigorously that the boy impersonating the tyrant Macbeth required plastic surgery.

Then Vincent grew up. Like many another child of poverty, he embarked on a lifelong struggle to escape the company of the oppressed forever. On scholarship he entered the vast university center at Minsk,

surviving the bitter Belarussian winters on a diet of SAPS and blini. After four years of struggle, he emerged with a *Summa cum laude* in History and Languages, copped a clerkship at UNIDIP, and moved to the lush African surroundings of New Great Zimbabwe, the Capital of All Humankind.

There he mastered both human and alien tongues, from Amharic to Low Vexish to Xlu. He studied the mysteries of Protocol until he knew exactly why an Assistant Deputy outranked a Deputy Assistant. He attended seminars on Deception, where he learned how to promise everything and nothing in the same breath. He joined a debating society and practiced the tricks of Rhetoric—often called the “science of flimflam”—on every possible occasion. He found a patron in Maxim Balabanov, the Second Secretary, became an Area Specialist in Most Remote Space, and began to win promotions—first to Deputy Assistant, then to Assistant Deputy.

By this time the idealistic schoolboy and the hard-working university student both had evaporated and been replaced by a portly, oldish young man noted for his glossy exterior and his profound ability to mask his true thoughts. He married an absolutely appropriate woman, a thin, elegant Franco-Cambodian whose very name (Marie-Elysée de Phnompenh) exuded an antique elegance. The couple rented a palazzo on an alley off the Souk and entertained to the limit of Vincent’s now substantial salary.

Many a formal dinner gave him increasing gravitas—about ninety-nine kilos of it—and his personality evolved in tandem with his physical presence. At home he lost interest in sex and became pompous, stuffy, and exasperating, and Marie responded by starting an affair with (appropriately) a chargé d’affaires. But away from home, his career flourished.

He joined the diplomatic team that negotiated an end to the First Alien War, exhibiting to great effect his mastery of Xlu—a very difficult tongue with only one vowel (a sort of grunt, represented in textbooks by the letter u) but six hundred consonants, some of which he needed a prosthesis to enunciate. His combination of fluency, adept lying, and the sheer intimidation of his size (the average Xluan stood only 1.1 meters tall and weighed about twenty kilos) were credited with gaining many of the unfair advantages the human species reaped from the treaty.

By this time Peoria had sunk far beneath Vincent’s mental horizon. He’d entirely ceased to communicate with his parents, or even to acknowledge that he had any. Whenever their neighbors in the Honeycomb asked his father what had happened to Little Vince, the old man would spit

and reply, “We dunno and we duhwanna know.”

By 10275 of the Absolute Calendar (which had replaced the myth-based calendars of the past) Vincent Khartoum felt ready for an ambassadorship. Imagine his astonishment and chagrin when he learned that he was to be dispatched (on a mere military transport) to negotiate with the contemptible tyrant of Malakatha!

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Second Secretary Balabanov was a grossly handsome man who wore a vast tawny wig like a lion’s mane. His lifestyle was extravagant, his mind devious. He liked to say that Baron Talleyrand (Napoleon’s foreign minister, who betrayed everybody and profited handsomely thereby) was the greatest man in history.

Balabanov aimed to become First Secretary, then arrange the death of some elderly Minister of State in order to take his place. He proclaimed over and over, to the point of tedium, that to succeed in life one had to plan ahead. Vincent found him both admirable (the man knew how to climb the bureaucratic ladder) and repugnant (he was such a piece of *#ulupu-!pu*, or “walking excrement” as a Xlu phrase pungently expressed it).

After delivering the bad news about Vincent’s new appointment, Balabanov made an effort to butter up his subordinate.

“You will, of course, go to Malakatha as Envoy Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary. ‘Plenipotentiary’ means you’ll have full power,” he explained.

“I’m familiar with the term,” Vincent murmured, his face smooth and resolutely pleasant. Inwardly, he was raging.

“It’s a nasty little rock, from all I’ve heard, and King Drax is a foul sort of creature. Well, it takes all kinds to make a galaxy.”

“May I record that phrase?” Vincent asked. “Your Excellency’s philosophical insight never ceases to astonish me.”

“Save your brown-nosing for King Drax,” replied Balabanov severely. “You may need it. What he does on his own world is deplorable but no business of ours. However, we’ve learned that he’s preparing a fleet of armed vessels to engage in piracy. What affects the spaceways—especially the exit of the trans-Aran wormhole, less than a

microparsec from his lair—is our business.”

“So I’m to negotiate the liquidation of his fleet. What can I offer in return?”

“Subsidies to fifty trillion sols if he agrees—war if he does not. As I said: full power. We trust your competence absolutely.” After a moment’s thought he added, “Start by offering him forty and see what happens. And pick up a nice medal—say a Grand Order of the Plenum—from the heraldry office. If he’s a good swine, award it to him.”

Seductively he went on, “When you’ve brought this business to a successful conclusion, I’ve got a nice ambassadorship waiting for you. On a Xlu world, where your famous fluency can serve humanity best.”

“*Uu knu* !ulthth u} zwuq,*” Vincent replied with a bow, knowing well that Balabanov didn’t understand a word of Xlu. Considering what he was inviting the Second Secretary to do, that was just as well.

“You leave in fifteen days,” Balabanov finished. “You’ll start out-processing at once.” Rising, he lifted one hand in farewell, declaring grandly, “Your return will be the signal for peace—or war.”

As the door to Balabanov’s palatial office whispered shut behind him, Vincent was wondering: Why don’t I believe him?

Out-processing meant a tedious trek from one division of UNIDIP to another, getting his records checked and cleared in case he perished by some mishap in Deep Space.

He encountered all the usual annoyances. The Bursar found that he owed nineteen sols and a demilune because a line-item in his budget had been disallowed. The Chief Librarian at Infocenter charged him eleven lunes fine for failing to return a virtual-reality game called *Sex All Possible Ways* that he certainly hadn’t charged out. In Medcheck, bots zapped him with sixteen different injections, leaving his shoulders and upper arms black and blue. “The disease environment of Malakatha is really quite exciting,” enthused the Chief Medical Officer, who then ordered an incipient hernia corrected even though Vincent protested that he felt fine.

For minor surgery, the operation was quite sufficiently annoying. The wound was glued, of course, so that Vincent had no stitches or staples to be removed, as in the dark ages of medicine. Still, he had to take painkillers for a week, and his tailor had to let out his uniforms in the waist and crotch

before he again felt comfortable in them. While waiting, he visited the Heraldry Office and picked up a Grand Order of the Plenum. The medal was the size of a soup plate, with a golden chain and a jeweled clasp. It was so big and hung so low on the recipient that it was known unofficially as “the ninny protector.”

“It’s exactly the sort of thing the little toad ought to find irresistible,” said the Chief of Heraldry. “Just don’t break the plastic envelope until you’re ready for the presentation. The gold’s only two microns thick, and it’ll rub off if you look at it.”

“In short,” groused Vincent, “I’m to cross Deep Space to present a fake medal to a sleazy tyrant as a reward for accepting an enormous bribe not to become a pirate.”

“That’s diplomacy,” shrugged the Chief of Heraldry.

Vincent’s mood was not improved by his wife’s obvious eagerness to see him go. “I’ll help you pack,” was the limit of Marie-Elysée’s concern.

“Do you realize that I’m being sent to a miserable backwoods planet ruled by a homicidal maniac?” Vincent demanded.

“I’m sure it’ll be terribly interesting,” she said, tossing his newly altered and ironed dress uniform all anyhow into a portmanteau. “Balabanov is very high on you.”

“Balabanov is high only on Balabanov. I’m suspicious of this whole business. There’s some deep, devious plot underway, I’m sure of it.”

“My dear, that’s the way things are at UNIDIP. It’s a bottle of scorpions, as you very well know.”

“‘UNIDIP’ is a very undignified slang expression,” Vincent intoned in his most pompous manner.

“Even Balabanov uses it in unbuttoned moments,” Marie-Elysée replied, and Vincent was too concerned over the way she was wrinkling his dress uniform to wonder where she had seen Balabanov unbuttoned.

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Following an unsatisfactory departure, Vincent had to endure the crashing boredom of interstellar travel.

Traversing the Trans-Aran Wormhole turned out to be rather like taking the subway from Peoria to Minsk. Against the ports pressed ebon nothingness—an updated version of the ancient satirist Mark Twain’s “firmament of black cats.” Vince, lying on a hard bunk in his stateroom, brooded: To think that idiots used to call this mankind’s ultimate adventure!

The military unit traveling on the transport were replacements for the garrison guarding the wormhole’s exit. The commander tried to keep his people busy, setting up a dense schedule of Lectures, Hand-to-Hand Combat, Happy Hours, and Orgy Groups to fill the timeless time on shipboard.

Vincent skipped most of these dubious pleasures, but did attend a lecture on New and Improved Weaponry. Here he learned about the wonderful progress being made in the technology of warfare: particle-beam generators, meson-bond disintegrators, and atomlasers were being deployed, along with a new munition called Obliterol that combined the convenience of plastic explosive with the punch of cold fusion. Sensing a bargaining chip in these fearsome weapons, Vincent hastily jotted the information down on the cuff of his left sleeve.

And yet....

Back in his tiny stateroom, lying on his hard bunk, he found all his doubts about his mission returning. The new weapons—which Balabanov surely must know about—made the business of bribing Drax harder than ever to understand. Couldn’t the heavy cruisers protect the wormhole exit? A king of France once commented that Paris was well worth a Mass. Was Malakatha—poor, dismal, remote, harried by a lunatic ruler—really worth fifty trillion or a war?

Baffled, Vincent signed out a machine and played over and over his memory cube on Malakatha. It didn’t make pleasant listening. On that benighted planet, it seemed, the exquisite tedium of life was relieved only by the agonizing methods of inflicting death.

“Torture is much cultivated as an art, a science, and a recreation,” the cube remarked with mechanical sang-froid. “The usual punishment for displeasing King Drax is to be boiled, boned, diced, and scattered. Simple impalement is customary for lesser offenses, such as failing to genuflect when his name is mentioned.”

Beautiful.

When at last the ship dropped out of the wormhole, Vincent was torn between relief that most of the journey lay behind him and anxiety over what might lie ahead. Standing on the ship's bridge behind the Celestial Navigator's chair, he watched a binary star system emerge from the night like a pair of baleful eyes. A nearby pinpoint of light grew to a tiny crescent; the crescent enlarged to the semblance of Luna.

"Malakatha," said the navigator, turning to him. "Have fun."

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So far he wasn't having much.

The landscape of prisons and filthy villages ended at a barren shoreline where the limo rolled onto a seemingly endless causeway. To left and right, leaden water glimmered with the reflections of a large sun, a small sun, and an errant moon. As the journey stretched out interminably, Vincent tried to chat with the black box in order to polish up his Low Vexish. He found it hard going.

"Malakatha is a place of exceptional beauty," he began, with the veracity of a true diplomat.

"Beauty is a highly subjective concept," the box opined. "No doubt what some consider beautiful, others consider drab. And," it added after lengthy meditation, "vice-versa."

Vincent tried again. "Am I correct in believing that the weather is somewhat warm for this time of year?"

"Warmth exists only with reference to cold," mused the box. "Thus I am unable to reply to Your Excellency's astute observation."

"King Drax has the reputation of being beloved by all the people of Malakatha."

"Men and women are, I believe, classed as animate beings. If we suppose that 'animate' refers to organisms capable of irritability and reproduction, I am capable of neither; therefore, in attempting to comment on the thoughts of such beings, my judgment would inevitably be skewed."

"My friend, you and not I should be the Envoy Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary."

“Alas, this modest and primitive device would be incapable of so exalted an endeavor.”

Vincent gave up. The rest of the trip lasted either a standard hour or two weeks, depending on one’s viewpoint. Then low greenish-bluish-purplish banks took form along the horizon, and a reedy landscape of muted colors surfaced like the iridescent carcass of a dead whale.

The limo left the causeway and rolled down a highway of fused silicon pebbles between gloomy, vine-entangled trees. It passed through enormous fortified gates watched over by batteries of autocannon and past another execution ground decorated with more stakes and bodies, some of which were still twitching. At last—at very, very long last—the vehicle halted before King Drax’s palace.

Emerging stiffly, Vincent gazed glumly at beetling towers, walls clad in bile-colored vine, enormous sealed and draped windows reflecting a sky filled with ecru clouds. The air had the greasy feel of marshland vapors everywhere, somehow chilly and oppressive at the same time. The oxygen level was tolerable, but a fractional increase in gravity did nothing to lighten his considerable weight.

He was absorbing these sensations when coarse gravel crunched underfoot and a gleaming personage approached with stately stride—either an expensive bot or a human bot-impersonator wearing chrome armor.

“King Drax,” he or it announced in ringing tones, “Third Sun of the Planet Malakatha and Father of His People, bids you welcome. Pray allow this unworthy slave to direct you to your accommodations.”

Vincent inclined his head very slightly and followed the unworthy slave up a mountainous stone staircase that had his unathletic lungs laboring long before he reached the top. He and his guide passed through a massive vaultlike door watched over by a grim-looking bot carrying the usual nine-point-four. The door had two electronic locks, and the majordomo produced one key, the guard the other. Behind them the door was doubly relocked, giving Vincent the feeling that he was being interred in King Drax’s private mausoleum.

The feeling intensified as he trekked through kilometers of dim-lit hallways. On every wall the monarch appeared in holographic images as a near-angelic presence triumphing over the forces of evil. The pictures were

activated by movement, humming with flashing swords and gasping dragons as Vincent and the majordomo passed by, then lapsing into immobility behind them.

“King Drax hopes that his modest dwelling is acceptable to you,” intoned the majordomo.

“Never in a hundred worlds have I been awed by such magnificence,” Vincent replied automatically.

His mind was elsewhere. On Earth, Drax had appeared merely contemptible. Here at the center of his immense stone web he was an altogether more threatening figure. Vincent was beginning to wonder if he would leave this place alive.

Was that what Balabanov was up to? Getting King Drax to kill him, so that the Second Secretary could—could—could what? At UNIDIP one usually assassinated one’s superior, in hopes of taking his place. What was the point of killing a subordinate? For some reason the word “unbuttoned” drifted across Vincent’s mind, only to vanish into the limbo of inadmissible thoughts.

“Your Excellency’s chamber,” intoned the majordomo, unlocking and throwing open another massive door. “One prays that its modesty does not grate upon your refined sensibilities.”

Vincent stepped into a room so vast it could have been used as an arena for indoor polo. Attached was a bath in which the whole garrison of the Trans-Aran Wormhole Exit could have scrubbed down. On a bed resembling a quilted grandstand his luggage awaited him, guarded by a valet bot.

“His Majesty will greet you at Seventeen,” intoned the majordomo. The door closed, and was audibly locked twice.

As the bot unpacked him, laying out his faux-silk undersuits, his lounging attire, his dress uniform—even flashier than the one he was wearing—Vincent found himself wondering if being boiled, boned, diced and scattered would hurt very much. He rather thought it would.

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Immaculate in his fanciest uniform, massive in his gravitas, a worthy representative of the government he served, Vincent followed with slow

deliberate steps the gleaming majordomo into the King's presence, silently repeating to himself the first thing he'd learned at UNIDIP: the Diplomatic Decalogue.

- I. Never shalt thou tell the truth, even as a last resort.*
- II. Thou shalt trust no one.*
- III. Never shalt thou concede a point without first gaining two.*
- IV. Always shalt thou seem to be that which thou art not.*
- V. Always shalt thou wear a face of marble, not of flesh.*
- VI. When gazing at Defeat, thou shalt envision Victory.*
- VII. When most helpless, thou shalt put on thy boldest front.*
- VIII. Ever shalt thou make a major issue of minor points, so that by conceding them thou mayest gain that which thou dost really desire.*
- IX. Ever shalt thou remember that whatever one side gains, the other side must lose.*
- X. Never shalt thou forget that diplomacy is the continuation of war by other means.*

So true, he reflected. Ah, so true.

The audience room was predictably enormous. The real non-digital tyrant of Malakatha sat at the far end of it—a small, ill-favored man with bloodshot eyes, a scraggly pointed beard, and large knobby hands and knees. He wore a scarlet cape many sizes too big for him and sat on a vast golden throne. To Vincent, Drax looked like a small, old, nasty child wrapped in an adult's garment and sitting in his father's chair.

Vincent bowed, and the king nodded infinitesimally.

"I SUPPOSE YOU HAVE DOCUMENTS," a voice boomed, startling as a crash of thunder from an empty sky. "GIVE THEM TO THE SLAVE."

For the first time Vincent realized that Drax was seated behind a shield of bullet-and-laser-proof transplast that bisected the room. His amplified voice issued from button-sized speakers that lined the crown moldings of the walls.

Vincent gave up his documents and waited while the majordomo took the packet away, presumably to be tested for poison. After ten interminable minutes, it entered Drax's end of the throne room through a gilded door and handed them over. While Drax was reading, it returned to the anteroom with a chair whose seat was studded with sharp golden tacks.

“I prefer to stand,” said Vincent hastily.

“King Drax desires you to sit,” said the majordomo. “Very few enjoy the privilege of sitting in his presence.”

“His Supremacy is too kind,” Vincent murmured, lowering his broad backside onto what was clearly one of the lesser implements in Drax’s arsenal of torments.

“FORTY TRILLION??” the thunder demanded. “THEY INSULT ME WITH AN OFFER OF FORTY TRILLION??”

Quite suddenly, and in spite of his fundamental discomfort, Vincent took a deep breath and relaxed.

King Drax’s words were—as the celebrated revolutionary V. I. Lenin once had expressed it—the flash of lighting that illuminates reality. Vincent saw now that Drax had begun building his fleet, not to play the dangerous game of piracy, but in hopes of extracting a payoff to stop. So they could do business. And if Vincent became Drax’s means of getting a huge bribe, then his life would be (relatively speaking) safe.

He reached another conclusion: for all his pretense of being Talleyrand, Balabanov was a fool. The Second Secretary was playing Drax’s game. Maybe he never would become First Secretary after all.

Naturally, Vincent’s face showed nothing of what he was thinking. Instead he put on a solemn and mournful mien and intoned, “Alas, Your Supremacy, the expenses of the late alien war have rendered anything more a simple impossibility.”

From that point on, the fencing followed a predictable path. Drax varied explicit threats against the Trans-Aran Wormhole with long, boring disquisitions on his own military genius. In return, Vincent invited Drax to contemplate the improved armament of the cruisers guarding the Wormhole. “No doubt Your Supremacy will sleep sounder, knowing that so powerful a friend is permanently stationed *so ... very ... close ... at hand.*” He lingered over the final phrase like an organist fondling the bass key in a Bach fugue.

Either Drax didn’t understand or else possessed a true poker face, for the minuet of threat and counterthreat continued for another standard hour. Vincent’s bottom suffered accordingly, and yet he refused to be

rushed. Not for nothing were senior negotiators awarded the enviable title of *Culs de Pierre*, or Stonebutts. With infinite reluctance he allowed Drax to bargain him up to fifty trillion in return for admitting inspectors onto Malakatha to check on the demolition of the fleet.

“DO THE WRETCHED BUREAUCRATS OF UNIDIP NOT TRUST MY WORD?” Drax thundered.

“More than we trust the movement of the eternal stars,” Vincent replied *avec suavité*. “But the Senate of the Worlds will insist on inspection before they vote the money, so we might as well include it in the treaty now. Renegotiation,” he added, “would create so many uncertainties.”

“YESSSSS,” exhaled Drax, and Vincent drew a deep breath, like a man on the rack who sees his tormentors preparing to knock off for lunch.

“YOU WILL JOIN ME TONIGHT AT A FEAST CELEBRATING FRIENDSHIP, PEACE, AND LOVE,” the little monster roared. “AFTERWARD, WE WILL SIGN THE TREATY.”

The majordomo reentered. Vincent rose stiffly, suffering new pangs as pinched-off blood vessels began to throb. As he left the antechamber on stiff limbs, the king was stroking his scraggly beard to hide a smile—the smile of a man who had successfully swindled the Universal Government out of fifty trillion sols.

Back in his room, Vincent—disrobing with the aid of the valet bot—discovered that every piece of clothing he wore was soaked with sweat, while the broad seat of his undersuit was additionally spotted with blood. As he entered the bathroom for a long hot soak he was muttering, “*Wuk u !nu’uun ~kuk!*”

Meaning in Xlu, “What a lousy day!”

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The Feast of Friendship, Peace, and Love took place in a hall with floorspace enough for a small battle.

At least Vincent’s new chair was comfortable. Little else in the room pleased him. The holographic wall images were in constant distracting motion, while on the floor the spotted skins of slaughtered blids and glongbars made crepitant noises whenever Vincent moved his feet. A creature resembling a feathered monkey sat on the back of Drax’s throne,

gazing across the table at Vincent with garnet eyes.

It, Drax, and Vincent were the only living creatures present. The thirty other guests at the table were polished display bots that conversed in atonal voices while pretending to eat from empty plates. After tasting the food that emerged from His Supremacy's kitchen, Vincent rather envied them.

"It is my pleasure," Drax remarked—minus his amplifiers, his voice was unpleasantly squeaky—to begin each meal by recalling the fate of some former enemy."

He contemplated a cube of meat stuck on the end of his fork. "I remember this guy. A good, loyal servant. But he didn't love me—he obeyed me only because he had to."

He inserted the gobbet into his mouth and chewed slowly. "That wasn't good enough. Matter of fact, it still isn't."

Drax turned his head and spat out the morsel. The feathered monkey leaped down and devoured it, then returned to its perch. The meal ground on, course after course after course of golden dishes filled with unidentifiable remnants of birds, beasts, and (probably) humans.

!Uuu Idmu—squ'un duk, thought Vincent, meaning, "I hope this meal is subtracted from my time in hell."

At last the table was cleared by busbots, and the majordomo spread out two copies of the draft treaty for signing. With a pen that emitted dry purple ink, Vincent changed "forty" to "fifty" and he and King Drax initialed the number. Then, as recorded trumpet blasts greeted their action, they signed the documents for the Universal Government and for Malakatha.

The majordomo brought glasses of very tolerable wine, and Vincent and the king toasted each other again and again. Vincent's toasts were fulsome, Drax's condescending. Recorded trumpet blasts repeatedly drowned both of them out, so what they said probably didn't matter anyway.

Then it was time to award the Grand Order of the Plenum.

Opening the glittering box, Vincent broke the seal, peeled off the plastic envelope, and lifted out the medal, with its golden chain and jeweled catch, from the froth of faux silk where it lay. He would have decorated Drax himself, but the king halted him with a gesture.

“Give it to the slave,” he squeaked.

The majordomo received the medal with its left hand and passed its right over it. Clearly, its palm contained a scanner. For a few long seconds the ceremony halted while it processed the information—very long seconds for Vincent, who suddenly realized that Balabanov, simply by having a dollop of poison or an explosive pellet embedded in the medal, could cause Drax to destroy him.

“It is without foreign substances, O Sun of Our Lives and Our World,” intoned the flashy bot. Vincent took a quiet but deep breath.

“Then give it to me,” cried Drax, suddenly greedy as a spoiled child eyeing a new toy.

The majordomo circled the table, placed the golden chain around Drax’s neck, and snapped shut the jeweled catch.

The flash that followed was visible from as far away as the shuttle port; the bang would have rattled windows in a thousand peasant villages, if the peasants of Malakatha had possessed any windows to rattle.

The towering walls of the palace dissolved into a dust storm, armies of shining bots into a barrage of molten metallic gobbets. Vast stores of munitions beneath the palace contributed a long series of secondary blasts to the initial thunder. The shattered ruins were quickly inundated by the waters of the Zot, and the surviving giant leeches, poison-footed blids, and carnivorous glongbars resumed their ancient sway over the interminable marshland.

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When the news from Malakatha reached Earth—Drax’s vaporization, the revolution that followed, the planet-wide carnival during which his torturers were each boiled, boned, diced, and scattered, to the cheers of the multitude—Balabanov and Marie-Elysée had a new topic for their pillow talk.

“How clever of you,” she murmured, drowsy in the afterglow of love-making. Harsh African sunlight vibrated against carved fretwork screens, but did not penetrate the cool shadows of the private lair that Balabanov called his Lion Chamber.

“To have thin sheets of this Obliterol stuff folded into Vince’s big belly,” she went on. “Why, it’s as if that great gross hairy egg of his had been made just for the purpose of holding a bomb. Where exactly did the surgeons put the stuff?”

“Between the greater and lesser omentum,” said Balabanov, “wherever that is. Also a microdetonator.”

“And closing the catch on the medal sent the signal that touched off the explosion! How very, very clever of you. I’m sure after this coup you’ll be First Secretary in no time. Hard on Vince, of course.”

“I was sorry to lose the pompous oaf,” mused the Second Secretary. “I’ve got nobody talks Xlu half so well. But what was he, after all? Just a rat from the Peoria slums. Well, by wiping out Drax he rid me of a nuisance and you of a husband. I reported that he sacrificed himself voluntarily, so in addition to his estate you’ll get a posthumous medal and his pension.”

“Send the pension to his parents,” said Marie-Elysee with uncharacteristic generosity, kindled perhaps by the afterglow. “I believe they’re quite poor. After all, dearest, I have you. Send them the medal, too. I certainly don’t want the damn thing.”

“I exist,” murmured Balabanov, taking a firm grip on Vincent’s widow’s thin and elegant body, “only to serve you.”

And he did, too—over and over and over. In that as in so many other things, he resembled his hero Talleyrand.

At first Vincent’s parents were not much grieved by the news of his demise. He’d so thoroughly neglected them that his death seemed the end of somebody who was more than half a stranger.

All that changed when they learned that he’d blown himself up to free a whole world from the grip of a tyrant. Now they recalled the ideals of his childhood, his long-forgotten yearnings to liberate and uplift. Mrs. Khartoum found one of his school notebooks in some rubbish at the bottom of a cupboard, and for a long time she and her husband sat together, staring at a picture he’d drawn of himself with sword and torch.

“Imagine!” whispered his mother, beginning to weep. “All that time. Working himself up at UNIDIP, getting himself sent to Mala-whatever, just so he could carry out his dream of liberating oppressed humanity!”

“And I used to think,” muttered Vincent’s father in an agony of contrition, “that he was such a—such a—well, you know. Turd.”

When the pension (fattened by Vincent’s hero bonus) began arriving, they had another reason to bless him. At last they were able to move out of the Peoria Honeycomb and into a comfortable suburban villa, where at night the soft radioactive glow of Chicago illuminated the northern horizon.

In their new home they set up a kind of altar in a corner of the living room, displaying Vincent’s portrait in his diplomatic uniform, along with his medal (Hero of Humanity, Second Class) and a scroll from the Office of Heraldry attesting to his sacrifice.

Their new neighbors were deeply impressed; the Khartoums achieved high status and became quite boring as they recounted over and over (with improvements) words of wisdom that supposedly had issued from the mouth of the young Vincent. Of the years between his childhood and his death—since they knew practically nothing about them—they said little.

“He wanted us to forget him,” sobbed his mother, “so that we wouldn’t grieve when he died. But of course, we never did.”

This too became part of Vincent’s legend, a legend that his parents, even though they’d made up most of it, deeply believed.

Their greatest honor came when the Xluan ambassador arrived, all the way from the embassy at New Great Zimbabwe, to lay a wreath before Vincent’s portrait. He and his entourage—squat tripeds, cerise in color, with garlands of tentacles waving around the place where their necks would have been (if they’d had necks)—made an exotic show in the burbs of North Peoria and drew a gaping crowd.

The ambassador laid the wreath; then, addressing Mr. and Mrs. Khartoum, he declared, “*!!U nyuknyuk ^zu u|du.*”

He’d been studying a recent Xluan translation of Shakespeare, and had chosen for Vincent an appropriate epitaph from *Macbeth*: “Nothing in his life became him like the leaving it.”

“I dunno what you said,” replied Mr. Khartoum, “but you can say that again.”

