



Dead World
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... although the most recent star to die, RNAC 89778 in the distant Menelaus galaxy (common name, Menelaus XII), had eight inhabited planets, only some one thousand people of the fifth planet escaped and survived as a result of a computer error which miscalculated the exact time by two years. Due to basic psycho-philo maladjustments the refugees of Menelaus XII-5 are classified as anti-social-types-B-6 and must be considered unstable. All anti-social-types-B-6 are barred from responsible positions in United Galaxies by order of the Inter-Galactic Council.

—Short History of The United Galaxies

YUAN SALTARIO started it. He was serving in my Company and he was one of them. A Menelaus XII-5 "unstable," and don't ever call that damned little planet by its number if you meet one of them. They call it Nova-Maurania. But you won't meet one of them. Or maybe you will, maybe they did make it. I like to think they did.

There were a lot of them in the Companies in 3078. Restless men. The Companies were the logical place for them. We're still classified anti-social-B-6, too. Every year it's harder to get recruits, but we still have to be careful who we take in. We took Yuan Saltario. There was something about him from the very start.

"Why do you want to join a Free Company?" He was a short, humanoid type with deep black eyes and a thin, lipless mouth that never smiled.

"I'm an anti-social. I like to fight. I want to fight."

"A misfit joining the misfits? A grudge against the Council? It's not good enough, mister, we live on the Council. Try again."

Saltario's black eyes stared without a flicker. "You're Red Stone, Commander of the Red Company. You hate the Council and I hate the Council. You're the ... " Saltario stopped.

I said, "The Traitor of the Glorious War of Survival. You can say it, Saltario."

The lipless mouth was rigid. "I don't think of it that way. I think of a man with personal integrity," Saltario said.

I suppose I should have seen it then, the rock he carried deep inside him. It might have saved thirty thousand good men. But I was thinking of myself. Commander Red Stone of the Red Company, Earthmen. Only

we're not all Earthmen now, every year there are fewer recruits, and it won't be long before we die out and the Council will have the last laugh. Old Red Stone, the Traitor of the War of Survival, the little finger of my left hand still missing and telling the Universe I was a very old soldier of the outlawed Free Companies hanging onto life on a rocky planet of the distant Salaman galaxy. Back at the old stand because United Galaxies still need us. In a way it's a big joke. Two years after Rajay-Ben and I had a bellyfull of the Glorious War of Survival and they chased us all the way out here, they turned right around and made the peace. A joke on me, but sometimes I like to think that our runout was the thing that made them think and make peace. When you've been a soldier for thirty-five years you like to win battles, but you like to feel you helped bring peace, too.

I said, "Personal integrity. That sounds pretty good, doesn't it? So you like personal integrity? All right, Saltario, are you sure you know what you're getting into? We're 60 million light years from Galaxy Center, 10 million from the nearest United Galaxy city. We've got no comforts, no future, nothing to do but fight. A woman in her right mind won't look at us, if they see you in uniform they'll spit on you, if they catch you out of uniform they'll kill you."

Saltario shrugged. "I like to eat. I've got nowhere to go. All I've got is myself and a big piece of ice I called home."

I nodded. "Okay. We fight small wars for good profits. It's not Earth out here, but we've got four nice suns, plenty of Lukanian whisky Rajay-Ben taught the locals to make, and we're our own masters. The United Galaxies leaves us pretty much alone unless they need us. You do your job, and your job is what I tell you to do, period. You got that straight?"

Saltario very nearly smiled. "It sounds good to me, sir."

"I hope it'll sound good in a year, Saltario, because once you're in you don't get out except feet first. Is that clear? I have life and death rights over you. You owe allegiance to the Red Company and me and to no one else. Got that? Today your best friends are the men of Rajay-Ben's Lukanian Fourth Free Patrol, and your worst enemies are the men of Mandasiva's Sirian O Company. Tomorrow Rajay-Ben's boys may be your worst enemies, and Mandasiva's troops your best friends. It all depends on the contract. A Company on the same contract is a friend, a Company against the contract is an enemy. You'll drink with a man today, and kill him tomorrow. Got it? If you kill a Free Companion

without a contract you go to court-martial. If you kill a citizen of the United Galaxies except in a battle under contract I throw you to the wolves and that means you're finished. That's the way it is."

"Yes, sir." Saltario never moved a muscle. He was rigid.

"Right," I said, "get your gear, see the Adjutant and sign the agreement. I think you'll do."

Saltario left. I sat back in my chair and thought about how many non-Earthmen I was taking into the Company. Maybe I should have been thinking about this one single non-Earthman and the something he was carrying inside him, but I didn't, and it cost the Companies thirty thousand men we couldn't afford to lose. We can't afford to lose one man. There are only a hundred Companies now, twenty thousand men each, give or take a few thousand depending on how the last contract went. Life is good in the United Galaxies now that they've disarmed and outlawed all war again, and our breed is dying out faster than it did in the 500 years of peace before the War of Survival. Too many of the old Companions like me went west in the War of Survival. The Galactic Council know they need us, know that you can't change all living creatures into good Galactic citizens overnight, so they let us go on fighting for anyone in the Universe who wants to take something from someone else, or who thinks someone else wants to take something from him. And even the mighty United Galaxies needs guards for expeditions to the unexplored galaxies. But they don't like us and they don't want us. They don't cut off our little fingers anymore, but we have to wear our special black uniforms when we go into United territory under penalty of a quick death. Humane, of course, they just put us to sleep gently and for keeps. And they've got a stockpile of ionic bombs ready at all times in case we get out of hand. We don't have ionic weapons, that's part of the agreement and they watch us. They came close to using them down there in the frozen waste of Menelaus XII, but thirty thousand of us died without ionics. We killed each other. They liked that, even if they didn't like what happened.

Do you know what it means to be lost? Really lost? I'm lost, if that means I know I'll never go back to live on Earth. But I know that Earth is still there to go back to, and I can dream of going home. Yuan Saltario and the other refugees have no home to go back to. They can't even dream. They sat in that one ship that escaped and watched their planet turn into a lifeless ball of ice that would circle dead and frozen forever

around its burned-out star. A giant tomb that carried under its thick ice their homes and their fields and their loves. And they could not even hope and dream. Or I did not think they could.

Saltario had been with us a year when we got the contract to escort the survey mission to Nova-Maurania. A private Earth commercial mining firm looking for minerals under the frozen wastes of the dead planet. Rajay-Ben was in on the contract. We took two battalions, one from my Red Company, and one from Rajay-Ben's Lukanian Patrol. My Sub-Commander was Pete Colenso, old Mike Colenso's boy. It all went fine for a week or so, routine guard and patrol. The survey team wouldn't associate with us, of course, but we were used to that. We kept our eyes open and our mouths shut. That's our job, and we give value for money received. So we were alert and ready. But it wasn't the attack that nearly got us this time. It was the cold of the dead planet lost in absolute zero and absolute darkness.

Nova-Maurania was nearly 40 percent uranium, and who could resist that? A Centaurian trading unit did not resist the lure. The attack was quick and hard. A typical Lukanian Patrol attack. My Company was pinned down at the first volley from those damned smoky blasters of the Lukanians. All I could see was the same shimmering lights I had learned to know so well in the War of Survival against Lukania. Someday maybe I'll find out how to see a Lukan, Rajay-Ben has worked with me a long time to help, but when the attack came this time all I could do was eat ice and beam a help call to Rajay-Ben. That Centaurian trading unit was a cheap outfit, they had hired only one battalion of Arjay-Ben's Ninth Lukanian Free Patrol, and Rajay-Ben flanked them right off that planet. I got my boys on their feet and we chased Arjay's men half way back to Salaman with Rajay-Ben laughing like a hyena the whole way.

"Dip me in mud, Red boy, I'd give a prime contract for one gander at old Arjay-Ben's face. He's blowing a gasket!"

I said, "Nice flank job."

Rajay-Ben laughed so hard I could see his pattern of colored light shaking like a dancing rainbow. "I took two Sub-Commanders, wait'll I hit that bullet-head for ransom!"

Then we stopped laughing. We had won the battle, but Arjay-Ben was a crafty old soldier and his sabotage squad had wrecked our engines and our heating units. We were stuck on a frozen planet without heat.

Young Colenso turned white. "What do we do?"

I said, "Beam for help and pray we don't freeze first."

They had missed our small communications reactor unit. We sent out our call, and we all huddled around the small reactor. There might be enough heat out of it to let us live five hours. If we were lucky. It was the third hour when Yuan Saltario began to talk. Maybe it was the nearness of death.

"I was twenty-two. Portario was the leader on our planet. He found the error when we had one ship ready. We had three days. No time to get the other ships ready. He said we were lucky, the other planets didn't have even one ship ready. Not even time for United Galaxies to help. Portario chose a thousand of us to go. I was one. At first I felt very good, you know? I was really happy. Until I found out that my wife couldn't go. Not fit enough. United Galaxies had beamed the standards to us. Funny how you don't think about other people until something hurts you. I'd been married a year. I told them it was both of us or neither of us. I told Portario to tell United Galaxies they couldn't break up a family and to hell with their standards. They laughed at me. Not Portario, the Council. What did they care, they would just take another man. My wife begged me to go. She cried so much I had to agree to go. I loved her too much to be able to stay and see the look on her face as we both died when she knew I could have gone. On the ship before we took off I stood at a port and looked down at her. A small girl trying to smile at me. She waved once before they led her away from the rocket. All hell was shaking the planet already, had been for months, but all I saw was a small girl waving once, just once. She's still here, somewhere down there under the ice."

The cold was slowly creeping into us. It was hard to move my mouth, but I said, "She loved you, she wanted you to live."

"Without her, without my home, I'm as dead as the planet. I feel frozen. She's like that dead sun out there, and I'll circle around her until someone gets me and ends it." Saltario seemed to be seeing something. "I'm beginning to forget what she looked like. I don't want to forget! I can't forget her on this planet. The way it was! It was a beautiful place, perfect! I don't want to forget her!"

Colenso said, "You won't have long to remember."

But Colenso was wrong. My Third Battalion showed up when we had just less than an hour to live. They took us off. The Earth mining outfit haggled over the contract because the job had not been finished and I had to settle for two-third contract price. Rajay-Ben did better when he ransomed Arjay-Ben's two Sub-Commanders. It wasn't a bad deal and I would have been satisfied, except that something had happened to Yuan Saltario.

Maybe it made him realize that he did not want to die after all. Or maybe it turned him space-happy and he began to dream. A dream of his own born up there in the cold of his dead planet. A dream that nearly cost me my Company.

I did not know what that dream was until Saltario came into my office a year later. He had a job for the Company.

"How many men?" I asked.

"Our Company and Rajay-Ben's Patrol," Saltario said.

"Full strength?"

"Yes, sir."

"Price?"

"Standard, sir," Saltario said. "The party will pay."

"Just a trip to your old planet?"

"That's all," Saltario said. "A guard contract. The hiring party just don't want any interference with their project."

"Two full Companies? Forty thousand men? They must expect to need a lot of protecting."

"United Galaxies opposes the project. Or they will if they get wind of it."

I said, "United opposes a lot of things, what's special about this scheme?"

Saltario hesitated, then looked at me with those flat black eyes. "Ionics."

It's not a word you say, or hear, without a chill somewhere deep inside. Not even me and I know a man can survive ionic weapons. I know because I did once. Weapons so powerful I'm one of the last men alive who saw them in action. Mathematically the big ones could wipe out a Galaxy. I saw a small one destroy a star in ten seconds. I watched Saltario for a long time. It seemed a long time, anyway. It was probably twenty seconds. I was wondering if he had gone space-crazy for keeps.

And I was thinking of how I could find out what it was all about in time to stop it.

I said, "A hundred Companies won't be enough. Saltario, have you ever seen or heard what an ionic bomb can ... "

Saltario said, "Not weapons, peaceful power."

"Even that's out and you know it," I said. "United Galaxies won't even touch peaceful ionics, too dangerous to even use."

"You can take a look first."

"A good look," I said.

I alerted Rajay-Ben and we took two squads and a small ship and Saltario directed us to a tall mountain that jutted a hundred feet above the ice of Nova-Maurania. I was not surprised. In a way I think I knew from the moment Saltario walked into my office. Whatever it was Saltario was part of it. And I had a pretty good idea what it was. The only question was how. But I didn't have time to think it out any farther. In the Companies you learn to feel danger.

The first fire caught four of my men. Then I was down on the ice. They were easy to see. Black uniforms with white wedges. Pete O'Hara's White Wedge Company, Earthmen. I don't like fighting other Earthmen, but a job's a job and you don't ask questions in the Companies. It looked like a full battalion against our two squads. On the smooth ice surface there was no cover except the jutting mountain top off to the right. And no light in the absolute darkness of a dead star. But we could see through our viewers, and so could they. They outnumbered us ten to one. Rajay-Ben's voice came through the closed circuit.

"Bad show, Red, they got our pants down!"

"You call it," I answered.

"Break silence!"

Surrender. When a Company breaks silence in a battle it means surrender. There was no other way. And I had a pretty good idea that the Council itself was behind O'Hara on this job. If it was ionics involved, they wouldn't ransom us. The Council had waited a long time to catch Red Stone in an execution offense. They wouldn't miss.

But forty of our men were down already.

"Okay," I beamed over the circuit, "break silence. We've had it Rajay."

"Council offense, Red."

"Yeah."

Well, I'd had a lot of good years. Maybe I'd been a soldier too long. I was thinking just like that when the sudden flank attack started. From the right. Heavy fire from the cover of the solitary mountain top. O'Hara's men were dropping. I stared through my viewer. On that mountain I counted the uniforms of twenty-two different Companies. That was very wrong. Whoever Saltario was fronting for could not have the power or the gold to hire twenty-four Companies including mine and Rajay-Ben's. And the fire was heavy but not that heavy. But whoever they were they were very welcome. We had a chance now. And I was making my plans when the tall old man stood up on the small, jutting top of that mountain. The tall old man stood up and a translating machine boomed out.

"All of you! O'Hara's men! Look at this!"

I saw it. In a beam of light on the top of that mountain it looked like a small neutron-source machine. But it wasn't. It was an ionic beam projector.

The old man said, "Go home."

They went. They went fast and silent. And I knew where they were going. Not to Salaman. O'Hara would have taken one look at that machine and be half way to United Galaxy Center before he had stopped seeing it. I felt like taking that trip myself. But I had agreed to look and I would look. If we were lucky we would have forty-eight hours to look and run.

I fell in what was left of my Company behind the men that had saved us. More Company uniforms than I had ever seen in one place. They said nothing. Just walked into a hole in that mountain. Into a cave. And in the cave, at the far end, a door opened. An elevator. We followed the tall old man into the elevator and it began to descend. The elevator car went down for a long time. At last I could see a faint glow far below. The glow grew brighter and the car stopped. Far below the glow was still brighter. We all stepped out into a long corridor cut from solid rock. I estimated that we were at least two hundred miles down and the glow was hundreds of miles deeper. We went through three sealed doors and emerged into a vast room. A room bright with light and filled with more men in Company uniforms, civilians, even women. At least a thousand. And I saw it. The thousand refugees, all of them. Gathered from all the Companies, from wherever they had been in the Galaxies. Gathered here in a room two hundred miles into the heart of their dead planet. A room

filled with giant machines. Ionic machines. Highly advanced ionic power reactors.

The old man stood in front of his people and spoke. "I am Jason Portario, I thank you for coming."

I broke in, "Ionic power is an execution offense. You know that. How the hell did you get all this ... "

"I know the offense, Commander," Portario said, "and I know you. You're a fair man. You're a brave man. It doesn't matter where we got the power, many men are dead to get it, but we have it, and we will keep it. We have a job to do."

I said, "After that stunt out there you've about as much chance as a snowball in hell. O'Hara's half way to Galaxy Center. Look, with a little luck we get you out to Salaman. If you leave all this equipment I might be able to hide you until it blows over."

The old man shrugged. "I would have preferred not to show our hand, but we had to save you. I was aware that the Council would find us out sooner or later, they missed the ionic material a month ago. But that is unimportant. The important matter is will you take our job? All we need is another two days, perhaps three. Can you hold off an attack for that long?"

"Why?" I asked.

Portario smiled. "All right, Commander, you should know all we plan. Sit down, and let me finish before you speak."

I sat. Rajay-Ben sat. The agitation of his colored lights showed that he was as disturbed as I was. The thousand Nova-Mauranians stood there in the room and watched us. Yuan Saltario stood with his friends. I could feel his eyes on me. Hot eyes. As if something inside that lost man was burning again. Portario lighted a pipe. I had not seen a pipe since I was a child. The habit was classified as ancient usage in the United Galaxies. Portario saw me staring. He held his pipe and looked at it.

"In a way, Commander," the old man said, "this pipe is my story. On Nova-Maurania we liked a pipe. We liked a lot of the old habits. Maybe we should have died with all the others. You know, I was the one who found the error. Sometimes I'm not at all sure my friends here thank me for it. Our planet is dead, Commander, and so are we. We're dead inside. But we have a dream. We want to live again. And to live again our planet must live again." The old man paused as if trying to be sure of telling it

right. "We mean no harm to anyone. All we want is our life back. We don't want to live forever like lumps of ice circling around a dead heart. What we plan may kill us all, but we feel it is worth the risk. We have thousands of ionic power reactors. We have blasted out Venturi tubes. We found life still deep in the center of this planet. It is all ready now. With all the power we have we will break the hold of our dead sun and send this planet off into space! We ... "

I said, "You're insane! It can't ... "

"But it can, Commander. It's a great risk, yes, but it can be done, my calculations are perfect! We want to leave this dead system, go off into space and find a new star that will bring life back to our planet! A green, live, warm Nova-Maurania once again!"

Rajay-Ben was laughing. "That's the craziest damned dream I ever sat still for. You know what your chances of being picked up by another star are? Picked up just right? Why ... "

Portario said, "We have calculated the exact initial thrust, the exact tangential velocity, the precise orbital path we need. If all goes exactly, I emphasize, *exactly*, to the last detail as we have planned it we can do it! Our chances of being caught by the correct star in the absolutely correct position are one in a thousand trillion, but we can do it!"

It was so impossible I began to believe he was right. "If you aren't caught just right?"

Portario's black eyes watched me. "We could burn up or stay frozen and lifeless. We could drift in space forever as cold and dead as we are now and our ionic power won't last forever. The forces we will use could blow the planet apart. But we are going to try. We would rather die than live as walking dead men in this perfect United Galaxies we do not want."

The silence in the room was like a Salaman fog. Thick silence broken only by the steady hum of the machines deep beneath us in the dead planet. A wild, impossible dream of one thousand lost souls. A dream that would destroy them, and they did not care. There was something about it all that I liked.

I said, "Why not get Council approval?"

Portario smiled. "Council has little liking for wild dreams, Commander. It would not be considered as advancing the future of United Galaxies' destiny. Then there are the ionics." And Portario hesitated. "And there is the danger of imbalance, Galactic imbalance. I have calculated

carefully, the danger is remote, but Council is not going to take even a remote chance."

Yuan Saltario broke in. "All they care about is their damned sterile destiny! They don't care about people. Well we do! We care about something to live for. The hell with the destiny of the Galaxies! They don't know, and we'll be gone before they do know."

"They know plenty now. O'Hara's beamed them in."

"So we must hurry," Portario said. "Three days, Commander, will you protect us for three days?"

A Council offense punishable by instant destruction with United Galaxies reserve ionic weapons in the hands of the super-secret police and disaster teams. And three days is a long time. I would be risking my whole Company. I heard Rajay-Ben laugh.

"Blast me, Red, it's so damned crazy I'm for it. Let's give it a shot."

I did not know then how much it would really cost us. If I had I might not have agreed. Or maybe I would have, it was good to know people could still have such dreams in our computer age.

"Okay," I said, "beam the full Companies and try to get one more. Mandasiva's Sirian boys would be good. We'll split the fee three ways."

Yuan Saltario said, "Thanks, Red."

I said, "Thank me later, if we're still around."

We beamed the Companies and in twenty minutes they were on their way. Straight into the biggest trouble we had had since the War of Survival. I expected trouble, but I didn't know how much. Pete Colenso tipped me off.

Pete spoke across the light years on our beam. "Mandasiva says okay if we guarantee the payment. I've deposited the bond with him and we're on our way. But, Red, something's funny."

"What?"

"This place is empty. The whole damned galaxy out here is like a desert. Every Company has moved out somewhere."

"Okay," I beamed, "get rolling fast."

There was only one client who could hire all the Companies at one time. United Galaxies itself. We were in for it. I had expected perhaps ten Companies, not three against 97, give or take a few out on other jobs. It gave me a chill. Not the odds, but if Council was that worried maybe there was bad danger. But I'd given my word and a Companion keeps

his word. We had one ace in the hole, a small one. If the other Companies were not here in Menelaus yet, they must have rendezvoused at Galaxy Center. It was the kind of "follow-the-book" mistake United would make. It gave us a day and a half. We would need it.

They came at dawn on the second day. We were deployed across five of the dead planets of Menelaus XII in a ring around Nova-Maurania. They came fast and hard, and Portario and his men had at least ten hours work left before they could fire their reactors and pray. Until then we did the praying. It didn't help.

Mandasiva's command ship went at the third hour. A Lukan blaster got it. By the fourth hour I had watched three of my sub-command ships go. A Sirian force beam got one, an Earth fusion gun got another, and the third went out of action and rammed O'Hara's command ship that had been leading their attack against us. That third ship of mine was Pete Colenso's. Old Mike would have been proud of his boy. I was sick. Pete had been a good boy. So had O'Hara. Not a boy, O'Hara, but the next to the last of old Free Companion from Earth. I'm the last, and I said a silent good-bye to O'Hara. By the sixth hour Rajay-Ben had only ten ships left. I had twelve. Five thousand of my men were gone. Eight thousand of Rajay-Ben's Lukans. The Sirians of Mandasiva's O Company were getting the worst of it, and in the eighth hour Mandasiva's second in command surrendered. It would be over soon, too soon. And the dream would be over with the battle. I broke silence.

"Red Stone calling. Do you read me? Commander Stone calling. Request conference. Repeat, request conference."

A face appeared on the inter-Company beam screen. The cold, blank, hard-bitten face of the only Free Company Commander senior to me now that O'Hara was gone, Jake Campesino of the Cygne Black Company. "Are you surrendering, Stone?"

"No. I want to speak to my fellow Companions."

Campesino's voice was like ice. "Violation! You know the rules, Stone. Silence cannot be broken in battle. I will bring charges. You're through, Stone."

I said, "Okay, crucify me later. But hear me now."

Campesino said, "Close silence or surrender."

It was no good. We'd had it. And across the distance of battle Rajay-Ben's face appeared on the screen. The colored lights that were a Lukan's

face and I knew enough to know that the shimmering lights were mad. "The hell with them, Red, let's go all the damned way!"

And a new face appeared on the screen. A face I knew too well. First Councillor Roark. "Stone! You've done a lot in your day but this is the end, you hear me? You're defending a madman in a Council crime. Do you realize the risk? Universal imbalance! The whole pattern of galaxies could be destroyed! We'll destroy you for this, Stone. An ionic project without Council authorization."

I said to Campesino, "Five minutes, Commander. That's all."

There was a long blank on the screen, then Campesino's cold face appeared. "Okay, Red, talk. I don't like civilian threats. You've got your five minutes, make it good."

I made it good. I told them of a handful of people who had a dream. A handful of people who wanted their home back. A few lost souls who would rather die trying to live the way they wanted to live than go on living in a world they did not want. And I told them of the great United Galaxies, that had been created to protect the dreams of everyone in it and had forgotten why it had been created. I told them that it did not matter who was right or wrong, because when a man can no longer dream something has gone wrong in the Universe. When I finished, Campesino's face was impassive.

Campesino said, "You heard Commander Stone, men. Close off, Stone, give me a minute to get the vote."

I waited. It was the longest minute of my life.

"You win, Red," Campesino said. He was smiling at me. "Go home, Councillor, battle's over."

The Councillor went. He said there would be hell to pay, and maybe there will be, but I don't think so, they still need us. We lost thirty thousand good men in all the Companies. But when the next dawn came Nova-Maurania was gone. I don't know where they went, or what happened to them. Here in my stronghold I sometimes imagine them safe and rebuilding a green world where they can smoke pipes and live their own lives. And sometimes I imagine them all dead and drifting out there in the infinity of space. I don't think they would mind too much, either way.

THE END

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