



The Unnecessary Man
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About Garrett:

Randall Garrett (December 16, 1927 - December 31, 1987) was an American science fiction and fantasy author. He was a prolific contributor to *Astounding* and other science fiction magazines of the 1950s and 1960s. He instructed Robert Silverberg in the techniques of selling large quantities of action-adventure sf, and collaborated with him on two novels about Earth bringing civilization to an alien planet. Source: Wikipedia

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"I recall," said the Businessman, "that William Wrigley, Junior, once said: 'When two men in a business always agree, one of them is unnecessary.' How true that is."

The Philosopher cast his eyes toward Heaven. "O God! The Mercantile Mind!" He looked back at the Businessman. "When two men in a business always agree, one of them will come in handy as a scapegoat."

THE IDLE WORSHIPERS by R. Phillip Dachboden

Lord Barrick Sorban, Colonel, H.I.M.O.G., Ret., sipped gently at his drink and looked mildly at the sheaf of newsfacsimile that he'd just bought fresh from the reproducer in the lobby of the Royal Hotel. Sorban did not look like a man of action; he certainly did not look like a retired colonel of His Imperial Majesty's Own Guard. The most likely reason for this was that he was neither.

Not that he was incapable of action on a physical level if it became necessary; he was past forty, but his tough, hard body was in as fine a shape as it had been fifteen years before, and his reflexes had slowed only slightly. The only major change that had occurred in his body during that time had been the replacement of an irreparably damaged left hand by a prosthetic.

But Lord Barrick Sorban preferred to use his mind, to initiate action in others rather than himself, and his face showed it. His was a precision mind, capable of fast, accurate computations, and his eyes betrayed the fact, but the rest of his face looked, if anything, rather like that of a gentle, persuasive schoolteacher—the type whom children love and parents admire and both obey.

Nor was he a retired colonel of the Imperial bodyguard, except on paper. According to the official records, he had been retired for medical reasons—the missing left hand. In reality, his position in the Imperium was a great deal higher than that of an ordinary colonel, and he was still in the active service of the Emperor. It was a secret known only to a comparative few, and one that was carefully guarded.

He was a fairly tall man, as an Imperial Guardsman had to be, with a finely-shaped head and dark hair that was shot through with a single streak of gray from an old burn wound. In an officer's uniform, he looked impressive, but in civilian dress he looked like a competent businessman.

He held the newsfac in his prosthetic left hand, which was indistinguishable in appearance and in ordinary usage from the flesh, bone, and blood that it had replaced. Indeed, the right hand, with its stiff little

finger, often appeared to be more useless than the left. The hand, holding the glass of rye-and-ginger, gave an impression of over-daintiness because of that stiff digit.

Lord Sorban paid little attention to the other customers in the bar; customers of the Green Room of the Royal Hotel weren't the noisy kind, anyway. He kept his attention on the newsfac for the most part; only a small amount of awareness was reserved for the approach of the man he was waiting for.

The banner line on the newsfac said:

BAIRNVELL OCCUPIED BY IMPERIAL FORCES

He read through the article hurriedly, absorbing what facts he didn't know, and then flipped over to the editorial page. If he knew the *Globe*, there would sure as Space be an editorial.

There was.

At 0231 Greenwich Earth Time, 3/37/229, the forces of the Imperial Government occupied the planet Bairnvell. (See article, Page One.) The ships of the Imperial Space Force landed, purportedly at the request of Obar Del Pargon, rebel leader of the anti-Presidential forces. That such an action should be condoned by the Imperial File is astounding enough; that it should be ordered by the Prime Portfolio himself is almost unbelievable.

The government of Bairnvell, under the leadership of President Alverdan, was not, by any means, up to the standards of the Empire; the standard of living is lower, and the political freedom of the people is not at all what we are used to. But that is no excuse for interfering with the lawful government of any planet. If the Imperium uses these methods for extending its rule, the time must eventually come when our own civil liberties will be in peril.

Perhaps Lord Senesin's actions are not so surprising, at that. This is the third time during his tenure as Prime Portfolio that he has arbitrarily exercised his power to interfere in the affairs of governments outside the Empire. Each such action has precipitated a crisis in Galactic affairs, and each has brought the Empire nearer to conflict with the Gehan Federation. This one may be the final act that will bring on interstellar war.

The ...

Colonel Lord Sorban stopped reading as he noticed the approach of the man he'd been waiting for, but he didn't look up until the voice said:

"I see you've been reading it, my lord." The voice was bitter. "A real fiasco this time, eh?"

Sorban looked up. "It looks like it might mean trouble," he said carefully. "Have you read all of it, Mr. Senesin?"

The young man nodded. The bitterness in his voice was paralleled by the bitterness reflected in his face. "Oh, yes. I read it. The other newsfacs pretty much agreed with the *Globe*. I'm afraid my father seems to be rather in the soup. Being Prime Portfolio in the Terran Empire isn't the easiest way to stay out of trouble. They'll be screaming for a Special Election next." He sat down next to the colonel and lowered his voice just enough to keep anyone else from hearing it, but not enough to sound conspiratorial. "I think I've got a line on those tapes."

Colonel Sorban raised an eyebrow. "Really? Well, I wish you luck. If you can uncover them in time, you may be able to save your father's career," he said, in a voice that matched Senesin's.

"You don't sound very concerned, my lord," said young Senesin.

"It's not that," said the colonel. "I just find it difficult to believe that—" He cut his words off as another man approached.

The second newcomer was a red-faced, plumpish man with an almost offensively hearty manner. "Well, well! Good afternoon, Lord Sorban! Haven't seen you in some time. A pleasure to see you again, my lord, a distinct pleasure! I don't get to Honolulu often, you know. How long's it been? Four years?"

"Two, I think," said the colonel.

"Really? Only two? It seems longer. How've you been?"

"Well enough," said the colonel. "Excuse me—Mr. Heywood, I'd like to present you to the Honorable Jon Senesin; Mr. Senesin, this is Robar Heywood, of South African Metals."

While the two men shook hands and mouthed the usual pleasantries, Colonel Lord Sorban watched them with an amusement that didn't show on his placid face. Young Senesin was rather angry that the *tête-à-tête* had been interrupted, while Heywood seemed flustered and a trifle stuffy.

"So you're the son of our Prime Portfolio, eh?" he said. There was a trace of hostility in his voice.

Colonel Sorban saw what was coming and made no effort whatsoever to stop it. Instead, he simply sat there in straight-faced enjoyment.

"That's correct, Mr. Heywood," Senesin said, a little stiffly.

"I should have known," Heywood said. "You look a great deal like him. Although I don't know that I've ever seen your picture in the newsfacs or on the screens."

"Dad prefers to keep his family out of the spotlight," said Senesin, "unless we get publicity for something other than the accidental fact that we happen to be the family of the Prime."

"Yes, yes, of course. I see. May I stand the three of us a drink?" Senesin and the colonel were agreeable. The drinks were brought. Heywood took a swallow of his, and remarked casually: "Do you agree with your father's politics, sir?"

"I don't know," Senesin said flatly.

Heywood misunderstood completely. "Yes, I suppose it is a bit disappointing. Hard for a man's son to divide his loyalty like that. You can't support his actions, and yet you hesitate to condemn your own father."

"You mistake my meaning, Mr. Heywood," young Senesin said sharply. "I said, 'I don't know' because I honestly don't know what my father's politics *is* any more."

But Heywood only compounded his error. "Of course not. How could you? Since he became Prime, his policies have been erratic and unpredictable, not to say foolish."

This is it, thought the colonel, wondering what young Senesin's reaction would be. He didn't have to wonder longer than half a second.

"Mr. Heywood," said Senesin, his voice oddly tight under the strain of suppressed emotion, "a person should learn to know what he's talking about before he makes any attempt to talk. If you must talk drivel about my father, I'll thank you not to do it in my presence." And before Heywood could formulate an answer, Senesin turned to the colonel. "If you'll pardon me, my lord, I have another errand to perform. I'll see you at eleven." Then he turned and walked out.

Heywood stared at his receding back. "Well," he said after a moment, "I guess I spoke out of turn. But he seemed ... " He turned back to his drink, shrugged. "Oh, well. Tell me, my lord, what do *you* think of Senesin's policies? How long do you think he'll last in office?"

The colonel adroitly avoided the first question by answering the second. "I dare say he won't last long. There'll be a great fuss in the File, and most of his own party will desert him—I think. They hardly have any choice, considering the reaction of the populace to this Bairnvell thing."

"And I agree," said Heywood decisively. "We've got no business interfering with the lawful governments of planets and systems outside the Empire. The old days of Imperial expansion are over. Why, the way Lord Senesin acts, you'd think Emperor Jerris the First was on the throne."

"Well, not quite," Colonel Lord Sorban said dryly. "I can't imagine any Prime Portfolio in the time of Jerris I daring to act on his own initiative."

"Exactly," said Heywood, just as though the colonel had agreed with him. "That's why we have a constitutional Empire today. One man can't be allowed that much power without the consent of the governed. The people must have a right to depose anyone who abuses the power they give him." He swallowed the remainder of his drink. "Can you imagine what it would be like if the present Emperor tried to pull that sort of stuff? Not that he *would*, mind you; he's too good an Emperor for that. He sticks to his job. But these are different times. And then, too, we can't afford to antagonize the Gehan Federation. After all, I mean, *war* ... " He shook his head at the thought.

Colonel Lord Sorban had listened to Heywood's soliloquy with patience, but he felt his irritation growing. Much as he had enjoyed the play between Heywood and young Senesin, he had expected to get some information out of the boy before he left. And besides, Heywood's clichéd monologue was beginning to pall.

Therefore, the colonel finished his own drink, uttered some polite banalities and got out.

He walked around the corner to the restaurant, was bowed into a seat by an ultrapolite android, and quietly ordered his meal. While he waited, he spread the newsfac on the table in front of him, holding it with his right hand while his left elbow rested on the table and his left palm cradled his left jaw. In that position, there was nothing odd-looking about the fact that his left thumbtip was in contact with his larynx and his left middle finger was pressed tightly against the mastoid bone just behind his left ear. His lips began to move slightly, and anyone at a nearby table would have assumed that he was one of those readers who are habitual lip-movers.

"The Senesin boy says he has a lead on the tapes. That's all I could get out of him just now, but I have an appointment with him at eleven tonight. How far shall I let him go, Sire?"

The sensitive microphone in the tip of his thumb picked up the nearly inaudible sounds; the speaker in his middle finger vibrated against his skull and brought him the answer to his question.

"For the moment, I'll leave that up to you. But I wouldn't try to stop him just yet."

"Very well, Sire," murmured the colonel. He had already made up his mind to let the Senesin boy go as far as he could. The lad was smart, and

his attack would at least provide a test for the psycho-sociological defenses that surrounded the Emperor.

"Do you think those tapes—if they exist—are genuine?" the voice asked.

"According to young Senesin," the colonel said carefully, "the tapes are supposed to show that certain ... ah ... 'highly-placed persons' in the Imperial hierarchy are influencing members of the Government illegally. You figure out what that might mean, Sire; it's a little too ambiguous to mean much to me."

"Influencing,' eh? That could mean anything from a broad hint, through pressure and bribery, to actual brainwashing," said the voice from the finger.

"Which one do you think it is, Sire?" the colonel asked with mock innocence.

The voice chuckled, then said, "I haven't tried brainwashing yet."

"No-o-o," agreed the colonel, "but you might have to if Lord Evondering gets in, and if you have to, you will."

"Colonel," said the voice gently, "there are times when I believe you don't have a very high opinion of your Sovereign's moral outlook."

The colonel grinned, although he knew the listener couldn't see it. But he knew the other was grinning, too. "I humbly beg your majesty's pardon."

"You'll have to wait a while, colonel; Imperial pardons have to be by the Portfolio for the Interior. Your Sovereign is an impotent figurehead."

"Sure you are, Sire," said the colonel. "Meanwhile, what about those tapes?"

"Get them—or copies of them. They can't be dangerous in themselves, but if they're genuine, I want to know who's bugging this place. I can't have spies in the Palace itself. Otherwise, keep your eyes on the Senesin boy."

The voice went on giving instructions, but the colonel lifted the thumb of his left hand from his larynx; the waiter was approaching, and if he wanted to speak to him, it would be better not to have to interrupt the flow of words from his finger.

The android put the dishes on the table. "Coffee, sir?"

"Yes," said the colonel. "Cream, no sugar. And bring a second cup as soon as I've finished with the first." Only a part of his attention was given to the waiter; the rest was focused on the instructions he was receiving. The instructions kept coming until after the coffee had been brought. Then the voice said:

"Any questions?"

"No, Sire," said the colonel, replacing his thumb.

"Very well. I'll be expecting your report sometime between eleven and midnight."

The colonel nodded, brought his hand down from the side of his jaw to pick up his fork and begin a concerted attack on his lunch.

Hawaii, with its beauty and its perfect climate, had been the obvious choice for the center of the Terran Empire. For centuries before the coming of interstellar travel, the islands had been used to a mixture of tongues and races, and the coming of the Empire had merely added to that mixture. In the five centuries since Man had begun his explosive spread to the stars, more "races" had come into being due to the genetic variations and divisions that occurred as small groups of isolated colonists were cut off from Earth and from each other. The fact that interstellar vessels incorporating the contraspaces drive were relatively inexpensive to build, plus the fact that nearly every G-type sun had an Earth-like planet in Bode's Third Position, had made scattering to the stars almost an automatic reflex among men.

It had also shattered the cohesion of Mankind that had been laboriously built up over several millennia. The old U.N. government had gradually welded together the various nations of Earth under one flag, and for nearly two centuries it had run Earth like a smoothly operating machine. But no culture is immortal; even the U.N. must fall, and fall it did.

And, during the chaos that followed, a man named Jerris Danfors had grabbed the loosened reins of government just as Napoleon had done after the French Revolution. Unlike Napoleon, however, Jerris had been able to hold his power without abusing it; he was able to declare himself Emperor of Earth and make it stick. The people *wanted* a single central government, and they were willing to go back to the old idea of Empire just to get such a government.

Jerris the First was neither a power-mad dictator nor an altruist, although he had been called both. He was, purely and simply, a strong, wise, intelligent man—which made him abnormal, no matter how you look at it. Or supernormal, if you will.

Like Napoleon, he realized that wars of conquest were capable of being used as a kind of cement to hold the people together in support of their Emperor. But, again, unlike Napoleon, he found there was no need to sap the strength of Earth to fight those wars. The population and

productive capacity of Earth was greater than any possible coalition among extra-Solar planets and vastly greater than any single planet alone.

Thus the Terran Empire had come into being with only a fraction of the internal disruption which normally follows empire-building.

But Man can flee as well as fight. Every invading army is preceded by hordes of refugees. Ships left every planet threatened by the Empire, seeking new, uncharted planets to settle—planets that would be safe from the Imperial Fleet because they were hidden among a thousand thousand stars. Mankind spread through the galaxy faster than the Empire could. Not even Jerris the First could completely consolidate the vast reaches of the galaxy into a single unit; one lifetime is simply not enough.

Nor are a dozen.

Slowly, the Empire had changed. Over the next several generations, the Emperors had yielded more and more of the absolute power that had been left to them by Jerris. While history never exactly repeats itself, a parallel could be drawn between the history of the Empire and the history of England between, say, 1550 and 1950. But, while England's empire had begun to recede with the coming of democratic government, the Terran Empire continued to spread—more slowly than at first, but steadily.

Until, that is, the Empire had touched the edges of the Gehan Federation.

For the hordes that had fled from the Empire had not forgotten her; they knew that one day the Empire would find them, that one day they would have to fight for their independence. So they formed the Federation, with its capital on the third planet of Gehan's Sun.

It was a federation in name only. Even after several generations, the refugees had not been able to build up enough population to fight the Empire. There was only one other way out, as they saw it. They formed a military dictatorship.

In the Twentieth Century, the German Third Reich, although outnumbered by its neighbors and enemies, populationwise, had concentrated all its efforts on building an unbeatable war machine. Japan, also outnumbered, had done likewise. Between them, they thought they could beat the rest of Earth. And they came dangerously close to succeeding.

The Gehan Federation had done the same thing, building up fleets and armies and material stockpiles as though she were already at war.

And, in doing so, her citizens had voluntarily forfeited the very thing they thought they were fighting for—their freedom.

But they posed a greater threat to the Terran Empire than that Empire had ever faced before. Any nation so totally prepared for defensive war may, at any moment, decide that the best defense is a good offense. Any nation which subjects its people to semislavery for the sake of war must eventually fight that war or suffer collapse.

The Empire had to change tactics. Instead of steady expansion, she was forced into a deadly game of interstellar chess, making her plays carefully, so as not to touch off the explosive temper of her opponent.

It was not a situation to be handled by clumsy fools.

And Lord Senesin, the Prime Portfolio of the Imperial File, the elected leader of the Empire, the constitutional head of the Imperial Government, was accused, not only of being a clumsy fool, but of being a dangerous madman. The planet Bairnvell was an independent, autonomous ally of the Gehan Federation, and, although not actually a member of the Federation, was presumably under her protection. For the Imperial Fleet to go to the aid of rebels trying to overthrow Bairnvell's lawful government seemed to be the act of an insane mind. The people of the Empire wouldn't stand for it.

Colonel Lord Barrick Sorban was well aware of the temper of the people and of the situation that prevailed politically in the Empire—more so, in fact, than most men. He was also well aware that internal strife of a very serious nature could so dangerously weaken the Empire that the Gehan Federation would be able to attack and win.

His job was to cut off that sort of thing before it could gain momentum. His job was to maintain the Empire; his only superior was the Emperor himself; his subordinates hand-picked, well-trained, and, like himself, unobtrusive to the public eye. And not one of those subordinates knew who the colonel's superior was.

The colonel strolled along the streets of Honolulu with all the courteous aplomb of a man who was both an officer and a gentleman of leisure. He dropped in at various respectable clubs and did various respectable things. He went into other places and did other things not so respectable. He gave certain orders to certain people and made certain odd arrangements. When everything had been set up to his satisfaction, he ate a leisurely dinner, topped it off with two glasses of Velaskan wine, read the tenth edition of the *Globe*, and strolled out to the street again, looking every inch the impeccable gentleman.

At ten minutes of eleven, he took a skycab to the fashionable apartment house where the Honorable Jon Senesin, son of the Prime Portfolio, made his home. The skycab deposited him on the roof at two minutes of eleven. The android doorman opened the entrance for him, and he took the drop chute down to the fifteenth floor. At precisely eleven o'clock, he was facing the announcer plate on Jon Senesin's door.

Senesin opened the door. There was a queer look—half jubilant, half worried—on his face as he said: "Come in, my lord, come in. Care for a drink?"

"Don't mind if I do, Jon. Brandy, if you have it."

Young Senesin poured the brandy, speaking rapidly as he did. "I've made an appointment to get those tapes, my lord. I want you to go with me. If we can get them, we can break this whole fraud wide open. Wide open." He handed the colonel a crystal goblet half filled with the clear, red-brown liquid. "Sorry I left so hurriedly this morning, but if that Heywood character had said another word I'd have broken his nose for him."

The colonel took the goblet and looked into its depths. "Jon, what do you expect these tapes to prove?"

The young man's face darkened. He walked across the spacious room, brandy goblet in hand, and sat down on the wall couch before he spoke.

"Just what I told you, my lord. I expect to prove that my father's mind has been tampered with—that he is not responsible for the decisions that have been made in his name—that he is going to lose his position and his reputation and his career for something that he would never have done in his right mind—that he has been the duped pawn of someone else."

The colonel walked over toward the couch and stood over the young man. "Someone? You keep referring to 'someone.' Ever since you asked me to help you, you've been mysterious about this someone. Whom do you suspect?"

Senesin looked up at the colonel for a long moment before he answered. Then: "I suspect the Emperor himself," he said, half defiantly.

The colonel raised his finely-drawn brows just a fraction of an inch, as though he hadn't known what the answer would be. "The Emperor? Hannikar IV? Isn't that a little far-fetched?"

Senesin shook his head vehemently. "Don't you see? Legally, the Emperor is powerless; the Throne hasn't had any say-so in the Government for over a century—except to sign state papers and such. But suppose an Emperor came along who wanted power—power such as the old Emperors used to have. How would he go about getting it? By controlling the

Government! He could slowly force them to give him back the powers that the people of the Empire have taken so many centuries to obtain."

The colonel shook his head. "Impossible. Not even the Emperor could control the votes of the whole File for that purpose. It simply couldn't be done."

"Not that way; of course not," the young man said irritably. "But there *is* a way. It's been used before. Are you up on your history?"

"Reasonably well," the colonel said dryly.

"How did Julius Caesar get dictatorial powers? And, after him, Augustus? Rome was threatened by war, and then actually engaged in it, and the patricians were glad to give power to a strong man."

"That was in a state ruled by the few patricians," the colonel pointed out, "not in a democracy."

"Very well, then; what about the United States, during World War II? Look at the extraordinary powers granted to the President—first to stop a depression, then to win a war. What might have happened if he hadn't died? Would he have gone on to a fifth and a sixth term? How much more power could he have usurped from the hands of Congress?"

The colonel wondered vaguely what history texts young Senesin had read, but he didn't ask. "All right," he said, "now tie your examples up with His Majesty."

"It's very simple. By controlling the mind of the Prime Portfolio, the Emperor can plunge the Empire into war with the Gehan Federation. Once that has been done, he can begin to ask for extraordinary powers from the File. If he has a few key men under his thumb, he can swing the majority of the File any way he wants to. Don't you see that?"

The colonel said: "It does make a certain amount of sense." He paused, looking at the young man speculatively. "Tell me, son: why did you pick me to tell this tale to?"

Senesin's sensitive face betrayed his anxiety. "Because you have been my father's best and oldest friend. If he's really being made a puppet of, I should think you'd want to help him. Do you like to see him being destroyed this way?"

"No," said the colonel honestly. "And if he is actually being controlled illegally, if he is actually being blamed for things he did not do of his own free will, I'll do everything in my power to expose the plot—that I promise you."

Jon Senesin's eyes lit up; his face broke into a smile. "I *knew* I could depend on you, my lord! I *knew* it!"

"Just how do you propose to go about this?" asked Colonel Lord Sorban.

There was fire in young Senesin's eyes now. "I'll turn the whole case over to the people! I have some evidence, of course; the queer changes in behavior that Dad has exhibited during the past few years, and such things as that. The things that made me suspect in the first place. But that isn't acceptable evidence." He finished his brandy and got up excitedly to walk over and pour himself another. He glanced at the colonel's goblet, but the colonel had three-quarters of his own drink left.

Senesin talked as he poured. "Did you ever hear of a group called the Federalist Party?"

"Yes," said Colonel Sorban. "They want to federalize the Empire and get rid of the Imperial Family. Not a very popular group."

"No, but they're right! They're right! Don't you see that? And nobody pays any attention to them!"

"Calm down, son. What have the Federalists got to do with this?"

"They have sympathizers in the Palace," Senesin explained. "They've been able to get proof that the Emperor is illegally tampering with the Government, that he's been brainwashing my father. And they're going to turn that proof over to me."

"I don't quite follow the reason for that," the colonel lied easily. "Why don't they use it themselves?"

"They can't. Nobody'd believe them. Everyone would think that the proof had been faked for political propaganda.

"On the other hand, if *I* do it, all I can be accused of is having a personal motive. And if a man wants to get his father out of a jam, most people will agree that I have a perfect right to do so. Besides, I have enough influence to get people to listen to me, to give the evidence a fair hearing. If the newsies got this stuff from the Federalists, they'd throw it away without looking at it. But they'll listen to me."

"The newsies?" asked the colonel in a perfect imitation of mild astonishment. "You intend to turn this stuff over to news publishers?"

"Certainly! That's the only way. Put the evidence before the people, and they'll see what they're up against. I personally don't care whether we have an Emperor or not, but at least we can force Hannikar IV to abdicate in favor of Crown Prince Jaimie."

"I see." The colonel took another sip at his brandy and appeared to think it over. Wisely, young Senesin said nothing.

"How are we to get this evidence?" the colonel asked at last.

"We're to meet a man," Senesin said, with an air of melodrama. "We will get a call at fifteen of twelve, telling us where to meet him. We have to be there at midnight."

Oh, brother, thought the colonel, they really picked their man. They've got him thinking he's hip-deep in a romantic spy story.

Was I that way at twenty-two? A romantic? I suppose I must have been; why else would I have joined the Guards? Not for the pay, certainly.

Hell, I guess I'm still a romantic, in a way. Being a secret agent isn't all fun and games, but it has its compensations.

Aloud, he said, "Very well, son; I'll go with you. Did you tell them there'd be someone accompanying you?"

"I told them I'd have a friend along. I told them it would be you. They said it was all right, that they knew you were a friend of Dad's. They even knew you've been a little bitter at being retired from the Guards so young." He looked embarrassed. "Pardon me, my lord."

"That's all right," said the colonel steadily. He managed to give the appearance of a man who was doing his best not to look bitter.

"You aren't carrying a gun, are you?" Senesin asked suddenly. "They said we weren't to be armed. They'll probably search us."

"I haven't been in the habit of carrying a gun lately," said the colonel. "They won't find anything on me."

He finished his brandy while Senesin finished his second one. While the younger man refilled both goblets, the colonel asked permission to use the bathroom. He was gone less than three minutes, which he had spent with thumb and middle finger to larynx and mastoid bone.

At eleven forty-five promptly, the phone chimed. No face appeared on the screen when young Senesin answered it, but a voice gave an address on Kalia Road.

Three minutes later, the two men were on the roof, signaling for a skycab.

At ten o'clock the next morning, a panel slid aside in a wall that had previously seemed solid. Colonel Lord Barrick Sorban stepped into the room, thinking as he did so that he really was a romantic. He actually rather enjoyed the idea of using secret passages and hidden panels to gain access to the Emperor's private apartments in the Imperial Palace.

He gave a gentle nod to the man in the blue lounging robe who sat in a big easy-chair just across the room. "Good morning, Sire."

"Morning, colonel," said His Imperial Majesty, Hannikar IV. "How are things shaping up?"

The colonel chuckled. "Not a single one of the newsies printed a word of it, Sire."

These men were close friends, and had been for years, yet they clung to the formal titles, both from habit and for self-protection. The accidental use of a first name could mean a dead giveaway at the wrong time.

The Emperor was a smaller man than Colonel Sorban, but he was far more impressive. While the colonel seemed rather mild, the Emperor looked—well, Imperial. He looked just as an Emperor ought to look—handsome, dark-haired, stern at times and kindly at others. The square jaw gave an impression of firmness of character, while the sapphire-blue eyes were penetrating without being harsh or hard.

"What about the Senesin boy?" he asked.

"He's in jail," said the colonel.

His Imperial Majesty raised an eyebrow. "Oh?" It was a question and a command.

"Not by my orders," said the colonel quickly. "He got a little upset. He'd taken those tapes and documents around to four editors and had been thrown out four times. The fifth time—at the *Globe*, as a matter of fact—he accused the editor of being in your pay. A hassle started, and the editor called the Honolulu police. Don't worry, Sire; one of my boys got the tapes and stuff."

"Is it genuine?"

"The evidence? Yes. The Federalists had the goods on you, all right." He grinned. "As you said, everything but brainwashing."

"I'll take care of it," said the Emperor. "Prince Jaimie's been going through the family files, and I rather want him to see this batch of stuff, too. Meantime, get the Senesin boy out of that cell; I want to see him. He's got guts, if nothing else."

"He has sense, too, Sire; he's just a little too young yet." He almost added "and romantic," but he stopped himself in time.

"How long will it take to get him out?" His Majesty asked.

"I can have him here in half an hour. The editor of the *Globe* will drop the charges. I can put a little pressure on in the right places."

The Emperor nodded. After a moment, he thumbed a button on his chair arm. "Inform Lord Senesin that he is requested to appear for a Royal Audience in forty-five minutes," he said firmly.

"Yes, Sire," said a voice from a hidden speaker.

The Emperor looked at the colonel. "Get the boy."

Jon Senesin sat in a soft chair, his hands gripping at the arms as though it might at any time fall from under him. He looked at the three other men in the room. His father, Lord Senesin, looking rather tired, but with a slight smile on his lantern-jawed face, sat on his son's left. One hand ran nervously through his gray hair.

On Jon's right sat the colonel, looking cool, unperturbed, and very gentle.

Between them sat the Emperor.

Jon's face looked pale, and there was a slight nervous tic at the corner of his mouth. "I ... I don't understand," he said. "I—" He swallowed hard as his voice failed him.

"Nothing hard to understand, son," said the colonel mildly. "We've been looking for evidence to break up the Federalists for several years. Some of them are honest men who are simply against any kind of hereditary monarchy—we'll let them go eventually. Some of them are fanatics—the kind that is against any form of government that happens to be in power; they'll get psychiatric treatment. But the leaders of the group are agents of the Gehan Federation. My men are picking them up now. The man that contacted you and me last night was arrested within two minutes after we left."

"But—the *evidence!* Those tapes. The documents. They all seemed genuine. They seemed so convincing."

"They should be convincing, Jon," said Lord Senesin in his smooth oratorical baritone. "You see, they are perfectly true."

Jon Senesin looked at his father as though the older man had suddenly sprouted an extra set of ears. "Y ... You've been brainwashed?"

The Prime Portfolio shook his head. "No, son, not that. Did you see anything like that on the tapes?"

"N-no. But the others. Fileman Brenner, Portfolio for Defense Vane, General Finster—all of them. I thought—"

"You thought wrong, son," said Lord Senesin. "I am and always have been working loyally with His Majesty. He gives the orders, and I carry them out."

Jon's voice became taut. "You mean you're helping him? You're trying to get the Empire into a war with the Gehan Federation so that *he* can become another dictator, like Jerris the First?" He kept his eyes carefully averted from the Emperor as he spoke.

Thus he didn't notice that His Majesty looked at Colonel Sorban with an expression that said, "You're right. He does have guts."

Lord Senesin said: "No, son; I'm not working toward that at all. Neither is His Majesty. There would be no point in it."

Then, for the first time, the Emperor spoke. His voice was soft, but commanding. "Mr. Senesin, let me explain something to you."

Jon Senesin's head jerked around. There was a confused mixture of fear and determination on his face.

"Mr. Senesin, I no more want war than you do. I am trying to avoid it with every power at my command. I have that duty to my people. But I have another duty, too. A duty, not just to the Empire, but to the human race as a whole. And that duty is to establish, not a Terran Empire, but a Galactic Empire—a single, consolidated government for every planet in the galaxy. Man can't go on this way, divided, split up, warring with himself. Man can't live in isolation, cut off from other worlds, other types of societies.

"We can't have a part of the human race living in constant fear of another part. We can't allow the conditions that exist at this moment in the Gehan Federation. To paraphrase Lincoln, 'The galaxy cannot exist half slave and half free.'

"Right now, there is evidence that the Gehan Federation will collapse internally within less than five years. The only way for the President of the Federation to avert that collapse will be to declare war on the Empire. We have had to take certain risks in order to insure that when and if war does come, we will win it.

"Bairnvell was one of those risks. Not too great a one, as it turns out; evidently the Federation government doesn't see that our possession of that base is a vital factor in our own defense. Strategy in three dimensions isn't easy to reason out.

"Mr. Senesin, I have no desire for power in a personal way. Any power I have is used for the good of my people. I have no police system for terrorizing the people; I don't suppress the freedom of every man to say or print what he wants. To call your Sovereign a fatheaded slob in a news-fac might be considered bad taste, but it isn't illegal. I can't even bring a civil suit against you, the way an ordinary citizen could.

"Now, I'll grant that I sometimes use illegal means to control the Empire. But there are reasons for that. I—"

He was interrupted by a soft chime. He pressed a button on his arm-chair. "Yes?"

"You go on the interstellar hookup in twenty minutes, Sire. The File has assembled," said a voice from a speaker.

"I'll be right there." He stood up and glanced apologetically at the other three men. "Sorry. Political announcement, you know. You two go ahead and explain to Mr. Senesin." Then he looked directly at the Prime Portfolio. "I'll tell them you're slightly ill." He reached out, took Lord Senesin's hand, and grasped it firmly. "I'll make it look good, old friend, don't worry. I'll need your help with Lord Evondering when he gets the Primacy."

The other men were on their feet already. They watched in silence as he walked out the door, then eased themselves back into their chairs.

"I still don't understand," Jon said softly. The bitterness and anger seemed to have left him, leaving only puzzlement in their wake. "If you take orders from him, Dad, then this isn't a democracy any more. It's become another Imperial dictatorship."

"Son," said his father, "the Empire never has been a democracy in the sense you're thinking about. Ever since Jerris the First, it has been ruled solely by the Emperors. Always.

"The Imperial Family is a special breed, son. It's a genetic strain in which the quality of wise leadership is dominant. It's a quality that's more than just intelligence; wisdom is the ability to make correct judgments, not only for one's self, but for others."

"But, Dad!" There was almost a wail in the boy's voice. "That makes the whole democratic system in the Empire a farce! It's totally unnecessary! *You're* unnecessary! He could run everything by himself!"

Lord Senesin started to say something, but Colonel Sorban interrupted.

"No, you young fool, he is *not* unnecessary! He is, in a very real sense, the Emperor's shield. Our Emperors have always given the people of the Empire the kind of government they *need*, not the kind of government they *want*. There are certain things that *must* be done, whether the people like those things or not.

"How long do you think the Empire would last without the Imperial Line to guide it? Not ten years! The thing is too big, too vast, for any ordinary man to handle the job. The voters are perfectly capable of electing a man to the Primacy on the strength of his likable personality alone—look at Lord Evondering. A hell of a pleasant guy, without a glimmering of real wisdom.

"When the people don't like the things the Government does, they throw it out—even if the thing done was actually for the best. The people demand a new Government. We can't allow them to throw the Emperor

out, so we need a scapegoat. This time, it happened to be your father, here. He happened to be Prime at a crucial time, and he had to give orders that made him unpopular. So he'll have to get out, and let the Loyal Opposition take over. But the Emperor will go right on running things.

"Your father is far from unnecessary, son. He's a hero, dammit, and you'd better remember that! He's taking the rap for another man because he knows that he is expendable and the other man isn't.

"Oh, your father could probably ride this thing out and stay in the Primacy for a couple more years. But this mess with the Federation is going to get a lot stickier than it is now. The Emperor is going to have to do things that the people will hate even worse, and we might as well let that fool Evondering take the rap. He'll look so bad by the time he leaves the Primacy that everyone will be screaming for your father back again, to clean up the mess."

Jon Senesin still looked dazed. "But, if that's the case, why allow the people to vote at all?"

"Because that's the only way you can keep an Empire stable! As long as the average man feels he has a voice in his Government, he's forced to admit that any failures are partly his own fault. Nobody rebels against a government he can vote against. As long as he has ballots, he won't use bullets."

Lord Senesin said: "I know it's a shock, coming this way. But look at it right, son."

"I am," said Jon slowly. "At least, I think I am. But it doesn't really seem right. Not yet." He looked at the colonel. "One thing I don't understand, my lord. Why did you let me take all that evidence around to the newsies? And why are you telling me all this now? I'm still not fully convinced. Aren't you afraid I'll tell the whole story?"

But it was his father who answered. "You tried that, son. It didn't work, did it?"

"No. But *why*? Why wouldn't they believe me, even when I had all that evidence?"

"Because they don't *want* to believe you," said the colonel. "Ever hear of a father-image? The Emperor is a symbol, Jon. He's not a human being in the eyes of the average man. He's the kind All-Father, the godlike being who dispenses mercy, but not justice.

"Haven't you ever noticed that orders of judgment against criminals are signed only by the courts and by the Portfolio of the Interior? But pardons and paroles are signed by the Emperor.

"It may not sound ethical to you, but that's the way the Emperor has to operate. He takes credit for all the nice things he does, and lets others take the blame for anything that's distasteful.

"You could blat it around all over fifty star systems that the Emperor was a louse, and all you'd get is a poke in the eye for your troubles.

"It's not easy for him, and don't ever kid yourself that it is. He's going out there now to tell the Empire that your father and his Government have resigned. He has to try to make his best friend and most loyal subject look a little less black than he has been painted, and all the time it was the Emperor who wielded the paint gun. Do you think that's fun?"

"No," said Jon softly. "No, I guess not." He paused. "Wouldn't it have been easier to take the evidence away from me, though?"

"No. That would have left you furious. No amount of talking would have convinced you. As it was, you convinced yourself that there is no way to attack the Emperor directly. He's safe right where he is."

Jon shook his head slowly. "It all seems so ... so tangled. It still seems as though the whole deception is ... well, *wrong*, somehow."

"If you look at it in a certain way," said Lord Senesin, "I suppose it does seem wrong. But it's necessary. Absolutely necessary."

"Maybe," said Jon, still unconvinced. "It certainly does look as though His Majesty has himself in an almost impregnable position. It's a wonder he needs agents like you."

Colonel Lord Barrick Sorban smiled a little. The boy would see the thing straight eventually. He had what it took, even if it didn't show much at this stage. Actually, he was more than halfway convinced now, but wouldn't admit it to himself yet. At least he'd been able to put a finger on one thing.

Aloud, the colonel said: "You're not altogether wrong there, son. When you come right down to it, *I'm* the unnecessary man."

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