

Eric Frank Russell
THE SPACE WILLIES

CAST OF CHARACTERS

John Leeming
His life depended on his proving a lie.

Mayor Snorkum
When it came to "lapping a pie," the mayor couldn't be beaten.

Major Klavith
He had a habit of taking fact for fiction - and fiction for fact

Commodore Keen
There was nothing more important to this commander than a properly zipped zipper!

Eustace Phenackertiban
His intelligence was such that he was commonly known as "Brain Child"

Colonel Farmer
He sometimes mistook the scout-pilot barracks for a day nursery.

I

HE KNEW he'd stuck his neck out and it was too late to withdraw. It had been the same since early childhood, when he'd accepted dares and been sorry immediately afterward. They say that one learns from experience; if that were true, the human race would now be devoid of folly. He'd learned plenty in his time, and forgotten most of it within a week. So yet again he'd wangled himself into a predicament and undoubtedly would be left to wangle himself out of it as best he could.

Once more he knocked at the door, a little harder but not imperatively. Behind the panels a chair scraped and a harsh voice responded with obvious impatience:

"Come in!"

Marching inside, he stood at attention before the desk, head erect, thumbs in line with the seams of the pants, feet at an angle of forty-five degrees. A robot, he thought, just a damned robot.

Fleet Admiral Markham surveyed him from beneath bushy brows, his cold gaze slowly rising from feet to head then descending from head to feet.

"Who are you?"

"Scout-Pilot John Leeming, sir."

"Oh, yes." Markham maintained the stare then suddenly barked, "Button your fly."

Leeming jerked and showed embarrassment. "I can't, sir. It has a defective zipper."

"Then why haven't you visited the tailor? Does your commanding officer approve of his men appearing before me

sloppily dressed? I doubt it! What the devil do you mean by it?"

"With all due respect, sir, I don't see that it matters. During a battle a man doesn't care what happens to his pants so long as he survives intact."

"I agree," said Markham. "But what worries me is the question of how much other and more important material may prove to be substandard. If civilian contractors fail on little things like zippers, they'll certainly fail on big ones. Such failures can cost lives."

"Yes, sir," said Leeming, wondering what the other was getting at.

"A new and untried ship, for instance," Markham went on. "If it operates as planned, well and good. If it doesn't . . ." He let the sentence peter out, thought awhile, continued, "We asked for volunteers for special long-range reconnaissance patrols. You were the first to hand in your name. I want to know why."

"If the job has to be done, somebody must do it," Leeming answered evasively.

"I am fully aware of the fact. But I want to know exactly why you volunteered." He waited a bit, urged, "Come on, speak up! I won't penalize a risk-taker for giving his reasons."

Thus encouraged, Leeming said, "I like action. I like working on my own. I don't like the time-wasting discipline they go in for around the base. I want to get on with the work for which I'm suited, and that's all there is to it."

Markham nodded understandingly. "So do most of us. Do you think I'm not frustrated sitting behind a desk while a major war is being fought?" Without waiting for a response he added, "I've no time for a man who volunteers because he's been crossed in love or anything like that. I want a competent pilot who is an individualist afflicted with the fidgets."

"Yes, sir."

"You seem to fit the part all right. Your technical record is first-class. Your disciplinary record stinks to high heaven." He eyed his listener blank-faced. "Two charges of refusing to obey a lawful order. Four for insolence and insubordination. One for parading with your cap on back-to-front. What on Earth made you do that?"

"I had a bad attack of what-the-hell, sir," explained Leeming.

"Did you? Well, it's obvious that you're a confounded nuisance. The space-base would be better off without you."

"Yes, sir."

"As you know, we and a few allies are fighting a big combine led by the Lathians. The size of the opposition doesn't worry us. What we lack in numbers we more than make up for in competence and efficiency. Our war-potential is great and rapidly growing greater. We'll skin the Lathians alive before we're through."

Leeming offered no comment, having become tired of "yessing."

"We've one serious weakness," Markham informed. "We lack adequate information about the enemy's cosmic hinterland. We know how wide the Combine spreads but not how deep into the starfield it goes. It's true that the enemy is no wiser with regard to us, but that's his worry."

Again Leeming made no remark.

"Ordinary warships haven't flight-duration sufficiently pro-

longed to dig deep behind the Combine's spatial front. That difficulty will be overcome when we capture one or more of their outpost worlds with repair and refueling facilities. However, we can't afford to wait until then. Our Intelligence Service wants some essential data just as soon as it can be got. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good! We have developed a new kind of superfast scoutship. I can't tell you how it functions except that it does not use the normal cesium-ion form of propulsion. Its type of power unit is a top secret. For that reason it must not fall into the enemy's hands. As a last resort the pilot must destroy it, even if it means destroying himself, too."

"Completely wrecking a ship, even a small one, is much more difficult than it seems."

"Not this ship," Markham retorted. "She carries an effective charge in her engine room. The pilot need only press a button to scatter the power units piecemeal over a wide area."

"I see."

"That charge is the sole explosive aboard. The ship carries no armament of any sort. It's a stripped-down vessel with everything sacrificed for the sake of speed, and its only defense is to scoot good and fast. That, I assure you, it can do. Nothing in the galaxy can catch it, providing it's squirting from all twenty propulsors."

"Sounds good to me, sir," approved Leeming, licking his lips.

"It is good. It's got to be good. The unanswered question is that of whether it's good enough to take the beating of a long, long trip. The tubes are the weakest part of any spaceship. Sooner or later they burn out. That's what bothers me. The tubes on this ship have very special linings. In theory they should last for months. In practice they might not. You know what that means?"

"No repairs and no replacements in enemy territory - no means of getting back," Leeming offered.

"Correct. And the vessel would have to be destroyed. From that moment the pilot, if still surviving, has isolated himself somewhere within the mists of Creation. His chances of seeing humankind again are remote enough to verge upon the impossible."

"There could be worse situations. I'd rather be alive some place else than stone-dead here. While there's life there's hope."

"You still wish to go through with this?"

"Sure thing, sir."

"Then upon your own head be it," said Markham with grim humor. "Go along the corridor, seventh door on the right, and report to Colonel Farmer. Tell him I sent you."

"Yes, sir."

"And before you go, try that damned zipper again."

Obediently, Leeming tried it. The thing slid all the way as smoothly as if oiled. He stared at the other with a mixture of astonishment and injured innocence.

"I started in the ranks and I haven't forgotten it," said Markham, pointedly. "You can't fool me."

Colonel Farmer, of Military Intelligence, was a beefy, florid-faced character who looked slightly dumb but had a sharp mind. He was examining a huge star-map hung upon one wall when Leeming walked in. Farmer swung around as

if expecting to be stabbed in the back.

"Haven't you been taught to knock before you enter?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then why didn't you?"

"I forgot, sir. My mind was occupied with the interview I've just had with Fleet Admiral Markham."

"Did he send you to me?"

"Yes, sir."

"Oh, so you're the long-range reconnaissance pilot, eh? I don't suppose Commodore Keen will be sorry to see you go. You've been somewhat of a thorn in his side, haven't you?"

"It would seem that way, sir. But I joined the forces to help win a war and for no other purpose. I am not a juvenile delinquent called up for reformation by the commodore or by anyone else."

"He'd disagree with you there. He's a stickler for discipline." Farmer let go a chuckle at some secret joke, added, "Keen by name and keen by nature." He contemplated the other a short while, went on more soberly, "You've picked yourself a tough job."

"That doesn't worry me," Leeming said flatly.

"You might never come back."

"Makes little difference. Eventually we all take a ride from which we never come back."

"Well, you needn't mention it with such ghoulish satisfaction," Farmer complained. "Are you married?"

"No, sir. Whenever I get the urge, I just lie down quietly until the feeling passes off."

Farmer eyed the ceiling and said, "God!"

"What did you expect?" asked Leeming, displaying a certain aggressiveness. "A scout-pilot operates single-handed; he has to learn to dispense with a lot of things, especially companionship. It's surprising how much a man can do without if he really tries."

"I'm sure," soothed Farmer. He gestured toward the star-map. "On that the nearest points of light are arrayed across the enemy's front. The mist of stars behind them are unknown territory. The Combine may be far weaker than we think because its front is wafer-thin. Or it may be more powerful because its authority stretches far to the rear. The only way to find out exactly what we're up against is to effect a deep penetration through the enemy's spatial lines."

Leeming said nothing.

"We propose to send a special scout-ship through this area where occupied worlds lie far apart; the Combine's defenses are somewhat scattered here, and their detector devices are relatively sparse." Farmer put his finger on a dark patch on the map. "With the speed your vessel possesses the enemy will have hardly enough time to identify you as hostile before they lose trace of you. We have every reason to believe that you'll be able to slip through into their rear without trouble."

"I hope so," contributed Leeming, seeing that a response was expected.

"The only danger point is here." Shifting his finger an inch, Farmer placed it on a bright star. "A Lathian-held solar system containing at least four large space-navy stations. If those fleets happen to be zooming around the bolt-hole, they might intercept you more by accident than good judgment. So you'll be accompanied that far by a strong escort."

"That's nice."

"If the escort should become involved in a fight, you will not attempt to take part. Instead you will take full advantage of the diversion to race out of range and dive through the Combine's front. Is that understood?"

"Yes, sir."

"After you get through you must use your initiative. Bear in mind that we don't want to know how far back there are worlds holding intelligent life - you would never reach the end of those even if you continued to the crack of doom. We want to know only how far back there are such worlds in regular communication with various members of the Combine. Whenever you come across an organized planet playing ball with the Combine, you will at once transmit all the details you can offer."

"I will."

"As soon as you are satisfied that you have gained the measure of the enemy's depth, you will return as quickly as possible. You must get the ship back here if it can be done. If for any reason you cannot return, the ship must be converted into scrap. No abandoning it in free space, no dumping it into an ocean or anything like that. The ship must be destroyed. Markham has emphasized this, hasn't he?"

"Yes, sir."

"All right. We're giving you forty-eight hours in which to clear up your personal affairs. After that, you will report to Number Ten Spaceport." Farmer held out a hand. "I wish you all the luck you can get."

"Thinking I'll need it?" Leeming grinned and went on, "You're laying very heavy odds against ever seeing me again. It's written across your face. I'll be back - want to bet on it?"

"No," said Farmer. "I never gamble because I'm a bad loser. But if and when you do return, I'll tuck you into bed with my own two hands."

"That's a promise," warned Leeming.

The take-off came at one hour after sunset. There was a cloudless sky, velvet black and spangled with stars. Strange to think that far, far out there, concealed by sheer distance, were countless populated worlds with Combine warships parading warily between some of them, while the allied fleets of Terrans, Sirians, Rigellians and others were on the prowl across an enormous front.

Below, long chains of arc-lights dithered as a gentle breeze swept across the spaceport. Beyond the safety barriers that defined the blast-area, a group of people were waiting to witness the ascent. If the ship toppled instead of going up, thought Leeming wryly, the whole lot of them would race for sanctuary with burning backsides.

A voice came out of the tiny loud-speaker set in the cabin wall. "Warmup, pilot."

He pressed a button. Something went whump; then the ship groaned and shuddered, and a great circular cloud of dusty vapor rolled across the concrete, concealing the safety barriers. The low groaning and trembling continued while he sat in silence, his full attention upon the instrument bank. The needles of twenty meters crawled to the right, quivered awhile, became still. That meant steady and equal pressure in the twenty stern tubes.

"Everything all right, pilot?"

"Yes."

"Take off at will." A pause, followed by, "Lots of luck!"

"Thanks!"

He let the tubes blow for another half minute before gradually moving the tiny boost-lever toward him. The shuddering increased; the groan raised its pitch until it became a howl; the cabin windows misted over and the sky was obscured.

For a nerve-wracking second the vessel rocked on its tail-fins. Then it began to creep upward, a foot, a yard, ten yards. The howl was now a shriek. The chronically slow rate of rise suddenly changed as something seemed to give the vessel a hearty shove in the rear. Up it went, a hundred feet, a thousand, ten thousand. Through the clouds and into the deep of the night. The cabin windows were clear, the sky was full of stars and the moon looked huge.

The loud-speaker said in faint, squeaky tones, "Nice work, pilot."

"All my work is nice," retorted Leeming. "See you in the asylum."

There was no answer to that. They knew that he'd become afflicted with an exaggerated sense of freedom referred to as take-off intoxication. Most pilots suffered from it as soon as a planet lay behind their tail and only the stars could be seen ahead. The symptoms consisted of sardonic comments and abuse raining down from the sky.

"Go get a haircut," bawled Leeming into his microphone.

"And haven't you been taught how to salute? Baloney baf-fles brains!"

They didn't answer that, either.

But down in the spaceport control-tower the duty officer pulled a face and said to Montecelli, "You know, I think that Einstein never worked out the whole of it."

"What do you mean?"

"I have a theory that as a man approaches the velocity of light, his inhibitions shrink to zero."

"You may have something there," Montecelli conceded.

"Pork and beans, pork and beans, Holy God, pork and beans," squawked the control-tower speaker with swiftly fading strength. "Get undressed because I want to test your eyes. Now inhale. Keen by name and keen by-"

The duty officer switched it off.

II

HE PICKED up the escort in the Sirian sector, the first encounter being made when he was fast asleep. Activated by a challenging signal on a preset frequency, the alarm sounded just above his ear and caused him to dive out of the bunk while no more than half awake. For a moment he gazed stupidly around while the ship vibrated and the autopilot went tick-tick.

"Zern kaid-whit?" rasped the loud-speaker. "Zern kaid-whit?"

That was code and meant, "Identify yourself - friend or foe?"

Taking the pilot's seat, he turned a key that caused his transmitter to squirt forth a short, ultra-rapid series of numbers. Then he rubbed his eyes and looked into the forward starfield. Apart from the majestic haze of suns shining in the dark, there was nothing to be seen with the naked eye;

So he switched on his thermosensitive detector-screens and was rewarded with a line of brilliant dots paralleling his course to starboard, while a second group, in arrow formation, was about to cut across far ahead of his nose. He was not seeing the ships, of course, but only the visible evidence of their white-hot propulsion tubes and flaming tails.

"Keefa!" said the loud-speaker, meaning, "All correct!" Crawling back into the bunk, Leeming hauled a blanket over his face, closed his eyes and left the autopilot to carry on. After ten minutes his mind began to drift into a pleasant, soothing dream about sleeping in free space with nobody to bother him.

Dropping its code-talk, the loud-speaker yelped in plain language, "You deaf? Cut speed before we lose you!" Leeming clambered angrily from the bunk, sat at the controls, adjusted them slowly. He watched his meters until he thought their needles had dropped far enough to make the others happy. Then he returned to bed and hid himself under the blanket.

It seemed to him that he was swinging in a celestial hammock and enjoying a wonderful idleness when the loud-speaker roared, "Cut more! Cut more!"

He shot out from under the blanket, scrambled to the controls and cut more. Then he switched on his transmitter and made a speech distinguished by its passion. It was partly a seditious outburst and partly a lecture upon the basic functions of the human body. For all he knew the astonished listeners might include two rear admirals and a dozen commodores. If so, he was educating them.

In return he received no heated retorts, no angry voice of authority. It was space-navy convention that a lone scout's job created an unavoidable madness among all those who performed it, and that ninety percent of them were overdue for psychiatric treatment. A scout on active service could and often did say things that nobody else in the space-navy dared utter. It's a wonderful thing to be recognized as crazy. For three weeks they accompanied him in the glum silence which a family maintains around an imbecile relation. He chafed impatiently during this period because their top speed was far, far below his maximum velocity, and the need to keep pace with them gave him the feeling of an urgent motorist trapped behind a funeral procession.

The Sirian battleship Wassoon was the chief culprit; a great, clumsy contraption, it wallowed along like a bloated hippopotamus, while a shoal of faster cruisers and destroyers were compelled to amble with it. He did not know its name but he did know that it was a battleship because on his detector-screens it resembled a glowing pea amid an array of fiery pinheads. Every time he looked at the pea he cursed it something awful. He was again venting his ire upon it when the loud-speaker chipped in and spoke for the first time in many days.

"Ponk!"

Ponk? What the devil was ponk? The word meant something mighty important, he could remember that much. Hastily he scrabbled through his code-book and found it: Enemy in sight.

No sign of the foe was visible on his screens. Evidently they were beyond detector range, and had been spotted only by the escort's advance-guard of four destroyers running far

ahead.

"Dial F," ordered the loud-speaker.

So they were changing frequency in readiness for battle.

Leeming turned the dial of his multiband receiver from T back to F.

On the screens five glowing dots swiftly angled away from the main body of the escort. Four were mere pinheads, the fifth and middle one about half the size of the pea. A cruiser and four destroyers were escaping the combat area for the time-honored purpose of getting between the enemy and his nearest base.

In a three-dimensional medium where speeds were tremendous and space was vast, this tactic never worked. It did not stop both sides from trying to make it work whenever the opportunity came along. This could be viewed as eternal optimism or persistent stupidity, according to the state of one's liver.

The small group of would-be ambushers scooted as fast as they could make it, hoping to become lost within the confusing welter of starlights before the enemy came near enough to detect the move. Meanwhile, the Wassoon and its attendant cohort plugged steadily onward. Ahead, almost at the limit of the fleet's detector range, the four destroyers continued to advance without attempting to disperse or change course.

"Two groups of ten converging from forty-five degrees rightward, descending inclination fifteen," reported the forward destroyers.

"Classification?" demanded the Wassoon.

"Not possible yet."

Silence for six hours, then, "Two groups still maintaining same course; each appears to consist of two heavy cruisers and eight monitors."

Slowly, ever so slowly, twenty faintly discernable dots appeared on Leeming's screens. This was the time when he and his escort should be discovered by the enemy's detection devices. The foe must have spotted the leading destroyers hours ago; either they weren't worried about a mere four ships or, more likely, had taken it for granted that they were friendly. It would be interesting to watch their reaction when they found the strong force farther behind.

He did not get the chance to observe this pleasing phenomenon. The loud-speaker let go a squawk of, "Ware zenith!" and automatically his gaze jerked upward to the screens above his head. They were pocked with a host of rapidly enlarging dots. He estimated that sixty to eighty ships were diving in fast at ninety degrees to the plane of the escort, but he didn't stop to count them. One glance was sufficient to tell him that he was in a definite hot-spot.

Forthwith he lifted his slender vessel's nose and switched to full boost. The result pinned him in his seat while his intestines tried to wrap themselves around his spine. It was easy to imagine the effect upon the enemy's screens; they would see one mysterious, unidentifiable ship break loose from the target area and swoop around them at a speed previously thought impossible.

With luck, they might assume that what one ship could do all the others could do also. If there is anything a spaceship captain detests, it is to have a faster ship sneaking up on his tail. The fiery end of a spaceship is its weak spot, for there can be no effective armament in an area filled with pro-

pulsors.

Stubbornly, Leeming stuck to the upward curve which, if maintained long enough, would take him well to one side of the approaching attackers and round to the back of them; He kept full attention upon his screens. The oncomers held course in a tight, vengeful knot for four hours, by which time they were almost within shooting range of the escort. At that point their nerve failed. The fact that the escort still kept impassive formation, while one ship headed like a shooting star for their rear, made them suspect a trap. One thing the Combine never lacked was suspicion of the Allies' motives and unshakable faith in their cunning.

So they curved out at right angles and spread in all directions, their detectors probing for another and bigger fleet that might be lurking just beyond visibility.

Belting along at top speed, one Lathian light cruiser realized that its new course would bring it within range of the missiles with which Leeming's strange, superfast ship presumably was armed. It tried to play safe by changing course again, and thereby delivered itself into the hands of the Wassoon's electronic predictors. The Wassoon fired; its missiles met the cruiser at the precise point where it came within range. Cruiser and missiles tried to occupy the same space at the same time. The result was a soundless explosion of great magnitude, and a flare of heat that temporarily obliterated every detector-screen within reach.

Another blast shone briefly high in the starfield and far beyond reach of the escort's armaments. A few minutes later a thin, reedy voice, distorted by static, reported that a straggling enemy destroyer had fallen foul of the distant ambushing party. This sudden loss, right outside the scene of action, seemed to confirm the enemy's belief that the Wassoon and its attendant fleet might be mere bait in a trap loaded with something formidable. They continued to radiate fast from their common center in an effort to locate the hidden menace and, at the same time, avoid being caught in a bunch. Seeing them thus darting away like a school of frightened fish, Leeming muttered steadily to himself. A dispersed fleet would be easy prey to a superfast ship capable of overtaking and dealing with its units one by one. But without a single effective weapon he was impotent to take advantage of an opportunity that might never occur again. For the moment he had quite forgotten his role, not to mention his strict orders to avoid a space-fight at all costs.

The Wassoon soon reminded him with a sharp call of, "Scout-pilot, where the hell do you think you're going?"

"Up and around," replied Leeming sourly.

"You're more of a liability than an asset," retorted the Wassoon, unappreciative of his efforts. "Get out while the getting is good."

Leeming yelled into the microphone, "I know when I'm not wanted, see? We're being sabotaged by defective zippers, see? Come on, lift those feet, Dopey - one, two, three, hup!"

As before, the listeners took no notice whatsoever. Leeming turned his ship onto a new course with plane parallel to that of the escort and high above them. They now became visible on his underbelly screens and showed themselves in the same unbroken formation but sweeping in a wide circle to get on the reverse course. That meant they were leaving him and heading homeward. The enemy, still scattered be-

yond shooting range, must have viewed this move as dangerous temptation for they continued to refrain from direct attack.

Quickly, the escort's array of shining dots slid off the screens as Leeming's vessel shot away from them. Ahead and well to starboard the detectors showed the two enemy groups that had first appeared. They had not dispersed in the same manner that their main force had done, but their course showed that they were fleeing the area at the best speed they could muster. This fact suggested that they really were two convoys of merchantment hugging close to their protecting cruisers. With deep regret Leeming watched them go. Given the weapons he could have swooped upon the bloated parade and slaughtered a couple of heavily-laden ships before the cruisers had time to wake up.

At full pelt he dived into the Combine's front and headed toward the unknown back areas. Just before his detectors lost range, his tailward screen flared up twice in quick succession. Far behind him two ships had ceased to exist and there was no way of telling whether these losses had been suffered by the escort or the enemy.

He tried to find out by calling on the interfleet frequency, "What goes? What goes?"

No answer.

A third flash covered the screen. It was weak with distance and swiftly fading sensitivity.

Keying the transmitter to give his identifying code-number, he called again.

No reply.

Chewing his bottom lip with annoyance, he squatted four-square in the pilot's seat and scowled straight ahead while the ship arrowed toward a dark gap in the hostile starfield. In due time he got beyond the full limit of Allied warship's non-stop range. At that point he also got beyond help.

The first world was easy meat. Believing it impossible for any Allied ship to penetrate this far without refueling and changing tubes, the enemy assumed that any ship detected in local space must be friendly or, at least, neutral. Therefore, when their detectors picked him up they didn't even bother to radio a challenge; they just let him zoom around unhampered by official nosiness.

So he found the first occupied world by the simple process of shadowing a small convoy heading inward from the spatial front, following them long enough to make an accurate plot of their course. Then, because he could not afford to waste days and weeks' crawling along at their relatively slow pace, he arced over them and raced ahead until he reached the inhabited planet for which they were bound.

Checking the planet was equally easy. He went twice around its equator at altitude sufficiently low to permit swift visual observation. Complete coverage of the sphere was not necessary to gain a shrewd idea of its status, development and potentialities. What he could see in a narrow strip around its belly was enough of a sampling for the purposes of the Ter-ran Intelligence Service.

In short time he spotted three spaceports, two empty, the third holding eight merchant ships of unknown origin and three Combine war vessels. Other evidence showed the world to be heavily populated and well-advanced. He could safely mark it as a pro-Combine planet of considerable military

value.

Shooting back into free space, he dialed X, the special long-range frequency, and beamed this information together with the planet's approximate diameter, mass and spatial coordinates.

There was no reply to his signal and he did not expect one. He could beam signals outward with impunity but they could not beam back into enemy territory without awakening hostile listening-posts to the fact that someone must be operating in their back areas. Beamed signals were highly directional and the enemy was always on the alert to pick up and decipher anything emanating from the Allied front while ignoring all broadcasts from the rear.

The next twelve worlds were found in substantially the same manner as the first one: by plotting interplanetary and interstellar shipping routes and following them to their termini. He signaled details of each one and each time was rewarded with silence. By this time he found himself deploring the necessary lack of response; he had been gone long enough to yearn for the sound of a human voice.

After weeks that stretched into months, enclosed in a thundering metal bottle, he was becoming afflicted with an appalling loneliness. Amid this vast stretch of stars, with seemingly endless planets on which lived not a soul to call him Joe, he could have really enjoyed the arrival from faraway of an irate human voice bawling him out good and proper for some error, real or fancied. He'd have sat there and bathed his mind in the stream of abuse. Constant, never-ending silence was the worst of all, the hardest to bear.

Finally, while he was nosing after a merchant convoy in expectation of tracing a thirteenth planet, he got some vocal sounds that at least broke the monotony. He was following far behind and high above the group of ships and they, feeling secure in their own backyard, were keeping no detector-watch and were unaware of his presence. Fiddling idly with the controls of his receiver, he suddenly hit upon an enemy interfleet frequency and picked up a conversation between ships.

The unknown lifeform manning the vessels had loud, somewhat bellicose voices, but spoke a language with sound-forms curiously akin to Terran speech. To Leeming's ears it came as a stream of cross-talk that his mind instinctively framed in Terran words. It went like this:

First voice: "Mayor Snorkum will lay the cake."

Second voice: "What for the cake be laid by Snorkum?"

First voice: "He will starch his mustache."

Second voice: "That is night-gab. How can he starch a tepid mouse?"

They spent the next ten minutes in what sounded like an acrimonious argument about what one repeatedly called a tepid mouse, while the other insisted that it was a torpid moose. Leeming found that trying to follow the point and counterpoint of this debate put quite a strain upon the cerebellum. He suffered it until something snapped.

Tuning his transmitter to the same frequency, he bawled, "Mouse or moose, make up your goddam minds!"

This produced a moment of dumbfounded silence before the first voice grated, "Gnof, can you lap a pie-chain?"

"No, he can't," shouted Leeming, giving the unfortunate Gnof no chance to brag of his ability as a pie-chain lapper.

There came another pause, then Gnof resentfully told all and sundry, "I shall lambast my mother."

"Dirty dog!" said Leeming. "Shame on you!"

The other voice now informed, mysteriously, "Mine is a fat one."

"I can imagine," Leeming agreed.

"Clam-shack?" demanded Gnof in tones clearly translatable as, "Who is that?"

"Mayor Snorkum," Leeming told him.

For some weird reason known only to alien minds, this information caused the argument to start all over again. They commenced by debating Mayor Snorkum's antecedents and future prospects (or so it sounded) and gradually and enthusiastically worked their way along to the tepid mouse (or torpid moose).

There were moments when they became mutually heated about something or other, possibly Snorkum's habit of keeping his moose on a pie-chain. Finally they dropped the subject by common consent and switched to the abstruse question of how to paddle a puddle (according to one) or how to peddle a poodle (according to the other).

"Holy cow!" said Leeming fervently.

It must have borne close resemblance to something pretty potent in the hearers' language because they broke off and again Gnof challenged, "Clam-shack?"

"Go jump, Buster!" Leeming invited.

"Bosta? My ham-plank is Bosta, enk?" His tones suggested considerable passion about the matter as he repeated, "Bosta, enk?"

"Yeah," confirmed Leeming. "Enk!"

Apparently this was regarded as the last straw; their voices went off and even the faint hum of the carrier-wave disappeared. It looked as though he had managed to utter something extremely vulgar without having the vaguest notion of what he had said.

Soon afterward the carrier-wave came on and a new voice called in guttural but fluent Cosmoglotta, "What ship? What ship?"

Leeming did not answer.

A long wait, and then the voice demanded again, "What ship?"

Still Leeming took no notice. The mere fact that they had not broadcast a challenge in war-code showed that they did not believe it possible for a hostile vessel to be in the vicinity. Indeed, this was suggested by the stolid way in which the convoy continued to plug along without changing course or showing visible sign of alarm.

Having obtained adequate data on the enemy's course, Leeming bulleted ahead of them and in due time came across the thirteenth planet. He beamed the information homeward, went in search of the next. It was found quickly, being in an adjacent solar system.

Time rolled by as his probes took him across a broad stretch of Combine-controlled space. After discovering the fiftieth planet he was tempted to return to base for overhaul and further orders. One can have a surfeit of exploration, and he was sorely in need of a taste of Terra, its fresh air, green fields and human companionship.

What kept him going were the facts that the ship was running well and the fuel supply was only a quarter expended. Also, he could not resist the notion that the more thoroughly

he did this job, the greater the triumph upon his return - and the better the prospects of quick promotion.

So he continued on, piling up the total to seventy-two planets before he reached a preselected spot deep in the enemy hinterland, at a point facing the Allied outposts around Rigel. From here he was expected to send a coded signal to which they would respond, this being the only message they'd risk sending him.

He beamed the one word "Awa," repeated at intervals for a couple of hours. It meant, "Able to proceed; awaiting instructions." To that they should give a reply too brief for enemy interceptors to catch; either the word "Reeter," meaning "We have sufficient information; return at once," or else the word "Buzz," meaning "We need more information; continue your reconnaissance."

What he did get back was a short-short squirt of sound that he recognized as an ultra-rapid series of numbers. They came in so fast that it was impossible to note them aurally; he taped them as they were repeated, then reached for his code-book as he played them off slowly.

The result was, "47926 Scout-Pilot John Leeming promoted lieutenant as from date of receipt."

He stared at this a long time before he resumed sending "Awa-Awa." For his pains he got back the word "Foit." He tried again and once more was rewarded with "Foit." It looked vaguely blasphemous to him, like the favorite curse of some rubbery creature that had no palate.

Irritated by this piece of nonsense, he stewed it over in his mind, decided that some intervening Combine station was playing his own game by chipping in with confusing comments. In theory, the enemy shouldn't be able to interfere because he was using a frequency far higher than those they favored. All the same, somebody was doing it.

Concluding that no recall meant the same thing as not being recalled, he resumed his search for hostile planets. It was four days later that he happened to be looking idly through his code-book and found the word "Foit" defined as "Use your own judgment."

He thought it over, decided that to go home with a record of seventy-two enemy planets discovered and identified would be a wonderful thing, but to be credited with a nice, round, imposing number such as one hundred would be wonderful enough to verge upon the miraculous. They'd make him a Space-Admiral at least.

This idea was so appealing that he at once settled for a score of one hundred planets as his target-figure before returning to base. As if to give him the flavor of coming glory, four enemy-held worlds were found close together in the next solar system and these boosted his total to seventy-six. He shoved the score up to eighty. Then to eighty-one.

The first hint of impending disaster showed itself as he approached number eighty-two.

III

TWO DOTS glowed on his detector-screens. They were fat but slow-moving, and it was impossible to decide whether they were warships or cargo-boats. But they were traveling in line abreast and obviously headed some place to which he'd not yet been. Using his always successful tactic of shadowing

them until he had obtained a plot, he followed them awhile, made sure of the star toward which they were heading, and then bolted onward.

He had got so far in advance that the two ships had faded right out of his screens, when suddenly a propulsor tube blew its desiccated lining forty miles back along the jet-track. The first he knew of it was when the alarm bell shrilled on the instrument board, the needle of a pressure meter dropped halfway back, the needle of its companion heat meter crawled toward the red dot that indicated melting point.

Swiftly he cut off the feed to that propulsor. Its pressure meter immediately fell to zero, its heat meter climbed a few more degrees, hesitated, stayed put a short while, then reluctantly slid back.

The ship's tail was filled with twenty huge propulsors around which were splayed eight steering-jets of comparatively small diameter. If any one propulsor ceased to function, the effect was not serious. It meant no more than a five percent loss in power output and a corresponding loss in the ship's functional efficiency. On Earth they had told him that he could sacrifice as many as eight propulsors - providing that they were symmetrically positioned - before his speed and maneuverability were reduced to those of a Combine destroyer. With this in mind, he stubbornly rejected the impulse to reverse course and run for Rigel. Instead he kept on toward planet number eighty-two, reached it, surveyed it and beamed the information. Then he detected a shipping route between here and a nearby solar system, started along it in the hope of finding planet number eighty-three and adding it to his score. A second propulsor shed its lining when halfway there, a third just before arrival.

All the same, he circumnavigated the world at reduced speed and headed for free space with the intention of transmitting the data. But he never did so. Five more propulsors blew their linings simultaneously. He had to move mighty fast to cut off the feed before their unhampered blasts could melt his entire tail away.

The defective drivers must have been bunched together off-center, for the ship now refused to run straight. Instead, it started to describe a wide curve that eventually would bring it back in a great circle to the planet it had just left. To make matters worse, it also commenced a slow, regular rotation around its longitudinal axis, with the result that the entire starfield seemed to revolve before Leeming's eyes.

The vessel was obviously beyond all hope of salvation as a cosmos-traversing vehicle, and the best he could hope to do with it was get it down in one piece for the sake of his own skin. He concentrated solely upon achieving this end. Though in serious condition, the ship was not wholly beyond control; the steering-jets could function perfectly when not countered by a lopsided drive, and the braking-jets were capable of roaring with full-throated power.

As the planet filled the forward view-port and its crinkled surface expanded into hills and valleys, he cut off all remaining tail propulsors, used his steering-jets to hold the ship straight, and blew his braking-jets repeatedly. The longitudinal rotation ceased and speed of descent slowed while his hands sweated at the controls.

It was dead certain that he could not land in the orthodox manner by standing the ship on its tail-fins. He lacked enough power-output to come down atop a carefully con-

trolled column of fire. The ship was suffering from a much-dreaded condition known to the space service as weak-arse, and that meant he'd have to make a belly-landing at just enough speed to retain control up to the last moment. His eyes strained at the observation-port while the on-coming hills widened, the valleys lengthened, and the planet's surface fuzz changed to a pattern of massed treetops. Then the whole picture appeared to leap at him as if suddenly brought into focus under a powerful microscope. He fired four propulsors and the lower steering-jets in an effort to level off.

The nose lifted as the vessel shot across a valley and cleared the opposite hill by a few hundred feet. In the next two minutes he saw five miles of treetops, a clearing from which arose an army of trellis masts bearing radio antennae, a large village standing beside a river, another great expanse of trees followed by a gently rolling stretch of moorland. This was the place! Mentally reciting a quick prayer, he swooped in a shallow curve with all braking-jets going full blast. Despite this dexterous handling, the first contact slung him clean out of his seat and threw him against the metal wall beneath his bunk. Bruised and shaken, but otherwise unhurt, he scrambled from under the bunk while still the ship slid forward to the accompaniment of scraping, knocking sounds from under its belly.

Gaining the control board, he stopped the braking-jets, cut off all power. A moment later the vessel expended the last of its forward momentum and came to a halt. The resulting silence was like nothing he had experienced in many months. It seemed almost to bang against his ears. Each breath he took became a loud hiss, each step a noisy, metallic clank.

Going to the lock, he examined the atmospheric analyzer. It registered exterior air pressure at fifteen pounds and said that it was much like Terra's except that it was slightly richer in oxygen. At once he went through the air lock, stood in the rim of its outer door and found himself fourteen feet above ground level.

The automatic ladder was of no use in this predicament since it was constructed to extend itself from air lock to tail, a direction that now was horizontal. He could hang by his hands from the rim and let himself drop without risk of injury, but he could not jump fourteen feet to get back in. The one thing he lacked was a length of rope.

Muttering some choice cuss words, he returned to the cabin, hunted in vain for something that would serve in lieu of rope. He was about to rip his blankets into suitable strips when he remembered the power cables snaking from control board to engine room. It took him a hurried half-hour to detach a suitable length from its terminals and tear it from its wall fastenings.

During the whole of this time his nerves were tense and his ears were continually perked for outside sounds indicating the approach of the enemy. If they should arrive in time to trap him within the ship, he'd have no choice but to set off the explosive charge and blow himself apart along with the vessel. But silence was still supreme when he tied one end of the cable inside the lock, tossed the rest outside and slid down it to the ground.

He landed in thick, cushiony vegetation bearing a slight resemblance to heather. Racing to the ship's tail, he had a

look at the array of propulsors, realized that he was lucky to have survived. Eleven of the great tubes were completely without their essential linings, the remaining nine were in poor condition and obviously could not have withstood more than another two or three days of steady blasting. Now he took a quick look at what was visible of the world on which he stood. The sky was a deep, dark blue verging obscurely to purple, with a faint, cloudlike haze on the eastern horizon. The sun, now past its zenith, looked a fraction larger than Sol and had a redder color. Underfoot the heather-like growth covered a gently undulating landscape running to the eastward horizon where the first ranks of trees stood guard. To the west the undergrowth again gave way to great trees, the edge of the forest being half a mile away. Leeming now found himself in another quandary. If he blew the ship to pieces, he would destroy with it a lot of stuff he needed now or might need later on - in particular, a large stock of concentrated food. To save the latter he would have to remove it from the ship and take it a safe distance from the coming explosion - all the while running the risk of having the enemy put in an appearance. A sense of urgency prevented him from pondering the situation very long. This was a time for action rather than thought. He started working like a maniac, grabbing packages and cans from the ship's store and throwing them out of the air lock. This went on until the entire food stock had been cleared. Still the enemy was conspicuous by its absence. Now he took up armloads from the waiting pile and bore them into the edge of the forest. When this was finished he climbed aboard the ship, had a last look around for anything worth saving. Making a roll of his blankets, he tied a waterproof sheet over them to form a compact bundle. Satisfied that nothing remained worth taking, he put on his storm coat and tucked the bundle under his arm; then he pressed the red button at one side of the control board. There was supposed to be a delay of two minutes between activation and the resulting wallop. It wasn't much time. Bolting through the airlock, he jumped straight out and dashed at top speed toward the forest. Nothing had happened by the time he reached the trees. Crouching behind the protective thickness of a great trunk, he waited for the bang. Seconds ticked by without result. Something must have gone wrong. Cautiously he peeked around the rim of the trunk, debated within himself whether to go back and examine the connections to the explosive charge. At that point the ship blew up. It flew apart with a tremendous, ear-splitting roar that bent the trees and shook the skies. A great column of smoke, dirt, and shapeless lumps soared to a considerable height. Gobs of distorted metal screamed through the treetops and brought branches crashing down. Somewhat awed by the unexpected violence of the explosion, Leeming sneaked a look around the tree trunk, saw a smoking crater surrounded by two or three acres of torn vegetation. It was a sobering thought that for countless millions of miles he had been sitting on top of a bang that size. When the enemy arrived, it was pretty certain that they would start a hunt for the missing crew. Leeming's preliminary survey of the world, though consisting of only one quick

sweep around its equator, had found evidence of some sort of organized civilization, including one spaceport holding five merchant ships and one Combine light cruiser. This showed that the local lifeform was at least of normal intelligence and as capable as anyone else of adding two and two together. The relative shallowness of the crater and the wide scattering of remnants was clear evidence that the mystery ship had not plunged to destruction, but rather had blown apart after making a successful landing. Natives in the nearest village could confirm that there had been quite a long delay between the ship's plunge over their rooftops and the subsequent explosion. Examination of fragments would reveal non-Combine material. Their inevitable conclusion: that the vessel had been a hostile one and that its crew had got away unscathed.

It would be wise, he decided, to put more distance between himself and the crater before the enemy arrived and started sniffing around. Perhaps he was fated to be caught eventually, but it was up to him to postpone the evil day as long as possible.

The basic necessities of life are food, drink and shelter, with the main emphasis on the first of these. This fact delayed his departure a little while. He had food enough to last for several months; but it was one thing to have it, another to keep it safe from harm. At all costs he must find a better hiding place to which he could return from time to time with the assurance that the supply would still be there. He pressed farther into the forest, moving in a wide zig-zag as he cast about for a suitable cache. Finally he found a cavelike opening between the great arched roots of an immense tree. It was far from ideal, but it did have the virtue of being concealed deep within the woods.

It took him more than an hour to shift the food-pile for the third time and stack it neatly within the hole, leaving out a small quantity representing seven days' rations. When this task had been completed, he built up part of the opening with clumps of earth, used twigs and branches to fill in the rest. He now felt that if a regiment of enemy troops explored the locality, as they were likely to do, there was small chance of them discovering and either confiscating or destroying the cache on which his continued liberty might depend.

Stuffing the seven days' rations into a small rucksack, and tying the bundled blankets thereto, he set off at fast pace along the fringe of the forest headed southward. He had been trudging along for about three hours when a jetplane soared above the horizon, swelled in size, and shot silently overhead. It was followed some seconds later by a shrill scream. It was an easy guess that the jetplane had come in response to a radio call telling about a spaceship in distress and a following explosion. No doubt there'd be great activity at the base from which it had come; once they received confirmation that a ship had indeed been lost, the authorities would assume it to be one of their own and start checking by radio to find which one was missing. With luck it might be quite a time before they accept the fact that a vessel of unknown origin, probably hostile, had reached this far.

In any case, from now on they'd keep a sharp watch for survivors. Leeming decided that this was the time to leave the forest's fringe and progress under cover. His rate of movement would be slowed but at least he'd travel unobserved. There were two dangers in taking to the woods, but

they'd have to be accepted as lesser evils.

For one, unless he was mighty careful he could lose his sense of direction and wander in a huge curve that eventually would take him back to the crater and straight into the arms of whoever was waiting there. For another, he ran the risk of encountering unknown forms of wild life possessed of unimaginable weapons and unthinkable appetites.

Against the latter peril he had a defense that was extremely effective but hateful to use, namely, a powerful compressed-air pistol that fired breakable pellets filled with a stench so foul that one whiff would make anything that lived and breathed vomit for hours - including, as often as not, the user. Some Terran genius had worked it out that the real king of the wilds is not the lion nor the grizzly bear but a kittenish creature named Joe Skunk, whose every battle is a victorious rear-guard action, so to speak. Some other genius had synthesized a horrible liquid seventy-seven times more revolting than Joe's, with the result that an endangered spaceman could never make up his mind whether to run like hell and chance being caught, or whether to stand firm, shoot, and subsequently puke himself to death.

Freedom is worth a host of risks, so he plunged deep into the forest and kept going. After about an hour's steady progress he heard the whup-whup of many helicopters passing overhead, traveling toward the north. By the sound of it there were quite a few of them, but none could be seen crossing the few patches of sky visible between the treetops. He made a guess that they were a squadron of troop-carriers transporting a search party to the region of the crater.

Soon afterward he began to feel tired and decided to rest awhile upon a mossy bank. Reposing at ease, he pondered this exhaustion, realized that although his survey had shown this world to be approximately the same size as Terra, it must in fact be a little bigger or have slightly greater mass. His own weight was up perhaps as much as ten percent, though he had no way of checking it.

It then struck him that the day must be considerably longer than Earth's. The sinking sun was now about forty degrees above the horizon. In the time since he'd landed, the arc it had covered showed that the day was somewhere between thirty and thirty-two hours in length. He'd have to accommodate himself to that with extended walks and prolonged sleeps and it wouldn't be easy. Wherever they may be, Terrans have a natural tendency to retain their own time-habits.

Isolation in space is a hell of a thing, he thought, as idly he toyed with the flat, oblong-shaped lump under the left-hand pocket of his jacket. The lump had been there so long that he was only dimly conscious of its existence; now it struck him with what approximated to a flash of pure genius that in the long, long ago someone had once mentioned this lump and described it as the "built-in emergency pack."

Taking out his pocketknife, he used it to slit the lining of his jacket. This produced a flat, shallow box of brown plastic. A hair-thin line ran around its rim, but there was no visible means of opening it. Pulling and pushing it in a dozen different ways had no effect whatever.

Reciting several of the nine million names of God, he kicked the box with aggravated vim. Either the kick was the officially approved method of dealing with it, or some of the

names were potent, for the box snapped open. At once he commenced examining the contents which, in theory, should assist him toward ultimate salvation.

The first was a tiny, bead-sized vial of transparent plastic ornamented with an embossed skull and containing an oily, yellowish liquid. Presumably, this was the death-pill, to be taken as a last extreme. Apart from the skull there was nothing to distinguish it from a love-potion.

Next came a small sealed can bearing no identifying markings and devoid of a can opener to go with it. For all he knew it might be full of shoe polish, sockeye salmon or putty. He wouldn't put it past them to thoughtfully provide some putty in case he wanted to fix a window some place and thus save his life by ingratiating himself with his captors.

The next can was longer, narrower and had a rotatable cap. He twisted the cap and uncovered a sprinkler. Shaking it over his open palm he got a puff of fine powder resembling pepper. Well, that would come in very useful for coping with a pack of bloodhounds, assuming that there were bloodhounds in these here parts. Cautiously, he sniffed at his palm. The stuff smelled exactly like pepper.

He let go a violent sneeze, wiped his dusty hand on a handkerchief, closed the can and concocted some heated remarks about the people at the space-base. This had immediate effect for the handkerchief burst into flames in his pocket. He tore it out, flung it down and danced on it. Opening the can again, he let a few grains of pepper fall upon a dry piece of rotten wood. A minute later the wood spat sparks and started blazing. This sent a betraying column of smoke skyward, so he danced on the wood until it ceased.

Exhibit number four was a miniature camera small enough to be concealed in the palm of the hand. As an aid to survival its value was nil. It must have been included in the kit with some other intention. Perhaps Terran Intelligence had insisted that it be provided in the hope that anyone who made a successful escape from a hostile world could bring a lot of photographic data home with him. Well, it was nice to think that someone could be that optimistic. He pocketed the camera, not with any expectation of using it, but solely because it was a beautiful piece of microscopic workmanship too good to be thrown away.

The fifth and last item was the most welcome and, so far as he was concerned, the only one worth a hoot: a luminous compass. He put it carefully into a jacket pocket. After some consideration he decided to keep only the pepper-pot. The death-pill he flicked into an adjacent bush. The can of shoe polish, sockeye, putty or whatever, he hurled as far as he could.

The result was a tremendous crash, a roar of flame, and a large tree leaped twenty feet into the air with dirt showering from its roots. The blast knocked him full length on the moss; he picked himself up in time to see a great spurt of smoke sticking out of the treetops like a beckoning finger. Obviously visible for miles, it could not have been more effective if he'd sent up a balloon-borne banner bearing the words, Here I am!

Only one thing could be done and that was to get out fast. Grabbing up his load, he scooted southward at the best pace he could make between the trees. He had covered about two miles when he heard the distant, muted whup-whup of a

helicopter descending upon the scene of the crime. There'd be plenty of room for it to drop into the forest because the explosive can of something-or-other had cleared a wide gap. He tried to increase his speed, dodging around bushes, clambering up sharply sloping banks, jumping across deep, ditch-like depressions, and all the time moving on leaden feet that felt as if they were wearing size twenty boots. He forced himself to push on until darkness set in. Then he had a meal and bedded down in a secluded glade, rolling the blankets tightly around him and keeping his stink-gun near to hand. What kind of dangerous animal might stalk through the night he did not know and was long past caring. A man must have sleep come what may, even at the risk of waking up in somebody's belly.

IV

LULLED by the silence and his own tiredness, he slept for twelve hours. But despite the long and satisfying snooze, he awakened to find he was only partway through the alien night. There were many hours to go before sunrise. Feeling refreshed and becoming bored by waiting, he rolled his blankets, consulted the compass and tried to continue his southward march. In short time he had tripped headlong over hidden roots, stumbled knee-deep into a hidden stream. Progress in open country was possible in the combined light of stars and moons, but not within the forest. Reluctantly, he gave up the attempt. There was no point in wearing himself out blundering around in barely visible patches that alternated with areas of stygian darkness. Somehow he managed to find the glade again. There he lay in the blankets and waited with some impatience for the delayed dawn. As soon as daylight had become sufficiently strong to permit progress he resumed his southward trek, keeping it up until midday. At that point he found a big rocky hollow that looked very much like an abandoned quarry. Trees grew thickly around its rim, bushes and lesser growths covered its floor, various kinds of creepers straggled down its walls. A tiny spring fed a midget stream that meandered across the floor until it disappeared down a hole in the base-rock. At least six caves were half-hidden in the walls, these varying from a narrow cleft to an opening the size of a large room. Surveying the place, he realized that here was an ideal hideout. He had no thought of settling there for the rest of his natural life, but it would at least serve as a hiding place until the hue and cry died down and he'd had time to think out his future plan of action. Climbing down the steep, almost vertical sides to the floor of the place proved a tough task. From his viewpoint this was so much the better; whatever was difficult for him would be equally difficult for others and might deter any searching patrols that came snooping around. He soon found a suitable cave and settled himself in by dumping his load on the dry, sandy ground. The next job was that of preparing some food. Building a smokeless fire of wood chips, he filled his dixie with water and converted part of his rations into a thick soup. This served to fill his belly and bring on a sense of peaceful well-being. After finishing his meal he rested awhile, then set about investigating his sunken domain. But, even though he did

everything in the most lackadaisical, time-wasting manner of which he was capable, he still found it well-nigh impossible to cope with the lengthy day. He explored the pseudo-quarry from side to side, from one end to the other, had two more meals, did various chores necessary and unnecessary, and still the sun was far from setting. As nearly as he could calculate, it would be another six hours before darkness fell. There was only one thing to do; at the first sign of a yawn, he wrapped himself in his blankets and drifted into a comfortable, dreamless sleep.

By the end of his fourth day in the cave, Leeming was bored to tears. This was not his idea of the full life and he could no longer resist the urge to get busy. He'd have to bestir himself before long in order to replenish his food supplies. The time had come, he felt to make a start on the tedious chore of shifting the hidden dump southward and installing it in the cave.

Accordingly, he set forth at dawn and pushed to the north as fast as he could go. This activity boosted his spirits considerably, and he had to suppress the desire to whistle as he went along. In his haste he was making noise enough, and there was no sense in further advertising his coming to any patrols that might be prowling through the woods.

As he neared the scene of his landing, his pace slowed to the minimum. Here, if anywhere, caution was imperative since there was no knowing how many of the foe might still be lurking in the area. By the time he came within easy reach of his cache he was slinking from tree to tree, pausing frequently to look ahead and listen.

It was a great relief to find that the food-dump had not been disturbed. The supply was intact, exactly as he had left it. There was no sign that the enemy had been anywhere near it. Emboldened by this, he decided to go to the edge of the forest and have another look at the crater. It would be interesting to learn whether the local lifeform had shown enough intelligence to take away the ship's shattered remnants with the idea of establishing its origin.

As quietly and carefully as a cat stalking a bird, he sneaked the short distance to the forest's rim, gained it a couple of hundred yards from where he'd expected to view the crater. Walking farther along the edge of the trees, he stopped and stared at the graveyard of his ship, his attention concentrated upon it to the exclusion of all else. Many distorted hunks of metal still lay around, and it was impossible to tell whether any of the junk had been removed.

Swinging his gaze to take in the total blast area, he was dumbfounded to discover three helicopters parked in line close to the trees. They were a quarter mile away, apparently unoccupied and with nobody hanging around. That meant their crews must be somewhere nearby. At once he started to back into the forest, his spine tingling with alarm. He had taken only two steps when fallen leaves crunched behind him, something hard rammed into the middle of his back, and a voice spoke in harsh, guttural tones.

"Smoooge!" it said.

Bitterness at his own folly surged through Leeming's soul as he turned around to face the speaker. He found himself confronted by a humanoid six inches shorter than himself but almost twice as broad; a squat, powerful creature wearing a dun-colored uniform and a metal helmet, and grasping a lethal instrument recognizable as some kind of gun. This char-

acter had a scaly, lizard-like skin, horn-covered eyes and no eyelids. He watched Leeming with the cold, unblinking stare of a rattlesnake.

"Smooge!" he repeated, giving a prod with the gun.

Raising his hands, Leeming offered a deceitful smile and said in fluent Cosmoglotta, "There is no need for this. I am a friend, an ally."

It was a waste of breath. Either the other did not understand Cosmoglotta or he could recognize a thundering lie when it was offered. His reptilian face showed not the slightest change of expression; his eyes retained their blank stare as he emitted a shrill whistle.

Twenty more of the enemy responded by emerging from the forest at a point near where the helicopters were stationed. Their feet made distinct thuds as they ran with the stubby, clumping gait of very heavy men. Surrounding Leeming, they examined him with the same expressionless stare. Next they gabbled together in a language slightly reminiscent of the crazy talk he had interrupted in space.

"Let me elucidate the goose."

"Dry up; the bostaniks all have six feet."

"Now look here," Leeming interrupted, lowering his arms.

"Smooge!" shouted his captor! making a menacing gesture with the gun.

Leeming raised his arms again and glowered at them. Now they held a brief conversation containing frequent mention of cheese and sparkplugs. It ended to their common satisfaction after which they searched him. This was done by the simple method of confiscation, taking everything in his possession including his belt.

That done, they nudged him toward the helicopters. He went, trudging surlily along while holding up his pants with his hands.

At their command he climbed into a helicopter, turned quickly to slam the door in the hope that he might be able to lock them out long enough to take to the air without getting shot. They did not give him the chance. One was following close upon his heels and was halfway through the door even as he turned. Four more piled in. The pilot took his seat, started the motor. Overhead vanes jerked, rotated slowly, speeded up.

The 'copter bounced a couple of times, left the ground, soared into the purplish sky. It did not travel far. Crossing the wide expanse of moorland and the woods beyond, it descended upon a concrete square at back of a grim-looking building. To Leeming's mind, the place resembled a military barracks or an asylum for the insane.

Here, they entered the building, hustled him along a corridor and into a stone-walled cell. They slammed and locked the heavy door in which was a small barred grille. A moment later one of them peered between the bars.

"We shall bend Murgatryd's socks," announced the face reassuringly.

"Thanks," said Leeming. "Damned decent of you."

The face went away. Leeming walked ten times around the cell before sitting on a bare wooden plank that presumably was intended to serve as both seat and bed. There was no window through which to look upon the outside world, no opening other than the door. Resting his elbows on his knees, he held his face in his hands.

How long he sat there he did not know. They had deprived him of his watch and he could not observe the progress of the sun; thus he had no means of estimating the time. But after a long while a guard opened the door, made an unmistakable gesture that he was to come out. He exited, found a second guard waiting in the corridor. With one in the lead and the other following, he was conducted through the building and into a large office.

The sole occupant was an autocratic specimen seated behind a desk on which were arrayed the contents of the prisoner's pockets. Leeming came to a halt before the desk, still holding up his pants. The guards positioned themselves on either side of the door and managed to assume expressions of blank servility.

In fluent Cosmoglotta, the one behind the desk said, "I am Major Klavith. You will address me respectfully as becomes my rank. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"What is your name, rank and number?"

"John Leeming, lieutenant, 47926."

"Your species?"

"Terran. Haven't you ever seen a Terran before?"

"I am asking the questions," retorted Klavith, "and you will provide the answers." He paused to let that sink in, then continued, "You arrived here in a ship of Terran origin, did you not?"

"Sure did," agreed Leeming, with relish.

Bending forward, Klavith demanded with great emphasis, "On which planet was your vessel refueled?"

There was silence as Leeming's thoughts moved fast. Obviously they could not credit that he had reached here non-stop, because such a feat was far beyond their own technical ability. Therefore they believed that he had been assisted by some world within the Combine's ranks. He was being ordered to name the traitors. It was a wonderful opportunity to create dissension, but unfortunately he was unable to make good use of it. He'd done no more than scout around hostile worlds, landing on none of them, and for the life of him he could not name or describe a Combine species anywhere on his route.

"Are you going to tell me you don't know?" prompted Klavith sarcastically.

"I do and I don't," Leeming responded. "The world was named to me only as XB173. I have no idea what you call it or what it calls itself."

"In the morning we shall produce comprehensive star-maps and you will mark thereon the exact location of this world. Between now and then you had better make sure that your memory will be accurate." Another long pause accompanied by the cold, lizard-like stare of his kind. "You have given us a lot of trouble. I have been flown here because I am the only person on this planet who speaks Cosmoglotta."

"The Lathians speak it."

"We are not Lathians as you well know. We are Zangastans. We do not slavishly imitate our allies in everything. The Combine is an association of free peoples."

"That may be your opinion. There are others."

"I am not in the least bit interested in other opinions. And I am not here to bandy words with you on the subject of interstellar politics." Surveying the stuff that littered his desk,

Klavith poked forward the pepper-pot. "When you were caught you were carrying this container of incendiary powder. We know what it is because we tested it. Why were you supplied with it?"

"It was part of my emergency kit."

"Why should you need incendiary powder in an emergency kit?"

"To start a fire to cook food or to warm myself," said Leeming, mentally damning the unknown inventor of emergency kits.

"You are lying to me," Klavith stated flatly. "You brought this stuff for purposes of sabotage."

"Fat lot of good I'd do starting a few blazes umpteen millions of miles from home. When we hit the Combine we do it harder and more effectively."

"That may be so," Klavith conceded. "But nevertheless we intend to analyze this powder. Obviously, it does not burst into flame when air reaches it, otherwise it would be risky to carry. It must be in direct contact with an inflammable substance before it will function. A ship bearing a heavy load of this stuff could destroy a lot of crops. Enough systematic burning would starve an entire species into submission, would it not?"

Leeming did not answer.

"I suggest that one of your motives in coming here was to test the military effectiveness of this powder."

"Why bother, when we could try it on our own wastelands without going to the trouble of transporting it partway across a galaxy?"

"That is not the same as inflicting it upon an enemy."

"If I'd toted it all the way here just to do some wholesale burning," Leeming pointed out, "I'd have brought a hundred tons and not a couple of ounces."

Klavith could not find a satisfactory answer to that so he changed the subject by poking a third object on his desk.

"I have identified this thing as a midget camera. It is a remarkable instrument and cleverly made. But since aerial photography is far easier, quicker, wider in scope and more efficient than anything you could achieve with this gadget, I see no point in you being equipped with it."

"Neither do I," agreed Leeming.

"Then why did you continue to carry it?"

"Because it seemed a darned shame to throw it away."

This reason was accepted without dispute. Grabbing the camera, Klavith put it in his pocket.

"I can understand that. It is as beautiful as a jewel. Henceforth it is my personal property." He showed his teeth in what was supposed to be a triumphant grin. "The spoils of conquest." With contemptuous generosity he picked up the belt and tossed it at Leeming. "You may have this back.

Put it on at once; a prisoner should be properly dressed while in my presence." He watched in silence as the other secured his pants, then said, "You were also in possession of a luminous compass. That I can understand. It is about the only item that makes sense."

Leeming offered no comment.

"Except perhaps for this." Klavith took up the stink-gun.

"Either it is a mock weapon or it is real." He pulled the trigger a couple of times and nothing happened. "Which is it?"

"Real."

"Then how does it work?"

"To prime it you must press the barrel inward."

"That must be done every time you are about to use it?"

"Yes."

"In that case, it is nothing better than a compressed-air gun."

"Correct."

"I find it hard to believe that your authorities would arm you with anything so primitive," opined Klavith, showing unconcealed suspicion.

"Such a gun is not to be despised," offered Leeming. "It has its advantages. It needs no explosive ammunition, it will fire any missile that fits its barrel, and it is comparatively silent. Moreover, it is just as intimidating as any other kind of gun."

"You argue very plausibly," Klavith admitted, "but I doubt whether you are telling me the whole truth."

"There's nothing to stop you trying it and seeing for yourself," Leeming invited. His stomach started jumping at the mere thought of it.

"I intend to do just that." Switching to his own language, Klavith let go a flood of words at one of the guards. Showing some reluctance, the guard propped his rifle against the wall, crossed the room and took the gun. Under Klavith's instructions, he put the muzzle to the floor and shoved. The barrel sank back, popped forward when the pressure was released. Pointing the gun at the wall he squeezed the trigger.

The weapon went phut! A tiny pellet burst on the wall and its contents immediately gassified. For a moment Klavith sat gazing in puzzlement at the damp spot. Then the awful stench hit him. His face took on a peculiar mottling, and he leaned forward and spewed with such violence that he fell off his chair.

Holding his nose with his left hand; Leeming snatched the compass from the desk with his right and raced for the door. The guard who had fired the gun was now rolling on the carpet and trying to turn himself inside-out with such single-minded concentration that he neither knew nor cared what anyone else was doing. The other guard had dropped his rifle while he leaned against the wall and emitted a rapid succession of violent whoops. Not one of the three was in any condition to pull up his own socks, much less get in the way of an escapee.

Still gripping his nostrils, Leeming jerked open the door, dashed along the passage and out of the building. Hearing the clatter of his boots, three more guards rushed out of a room, pulled up as if held back by an invisible hand, and threw their dinners over each other.

Outside, Leeming let go of his nose. His straining lungs took in great gasps of fresh air as he sprinted toward the helicopter that had brought him here. This machine provided his only chance of freedom, since the barracks and the entire village would be aroused at any moment and he could not hope to outrun the lot on foot.

Reaching the helicopter, he clambered into it, locked the door. The alien controls did not baffle him because he had made careful note of them during his previous ride. Still breathing hard while his nerves twanged with excitement, he started the motor. The vanes began to turn.

Nobody had yet emerged from the stench-ridden exit he had used, but somebody did come out of another door farther along the building. This character was unarmed and apparently unaware that anything extraordinary had taken place. But he did know that the humming helicopter was in wrong possession. He yelled and waved his arms as the vanes speeded up. Then he dived back into the building, came out holding a rifle.

The 'copter made its usual preliminary bumps, then soared. Below and a hundred yards away the rifle went off like a firecracker. Four holes appeared in the machine's plastic dome; something nicked the lobe of Leeming's left ear and drew blood; the tachometer flew to pieces on the instrument board. A couple of fierce, hammer-like clunks sounded on the engine but it continued to run without falter and the 'copter gained height.

Bending sidewise, Leeming looked out and down through the perforated dome. His assailant was frantically shoving another magazine into the gun. A second burst of fire came when the 'copter was five hundred feet up and scooting fast. There came a sharp ping as a sliver of metal flew off the tail-fan, but that was the only hit.

Leeming took another look below. The marksman had been joined by half a dozen others, all gazing skyward. None were attempting to shoot because the fugitive was now out of range. Even as he watched, the whole bunch of them ran into the building, still using the smell-free door. He could give a guess where they were heading for, namely, the radio room.

The sight killed any elation he might have enjoyed. He had the sky to himself, but not for long. Now the moot question was whether he could keep it to himself long enough to make distance before he landed in the wilds and took to his heels again.

V

DEFINITELY, he was not escaping the easy way. In many respects he was worse off than he'd been before. Afoot in the forest he'd been able to trudge around in concealment, feed himself, get some sleep. Now the whole world knew - or soon would know - that a Terran was on the loose. To keep watch while flying he needed eyes in the back of his head, and even those wouldn't save him if some superfast Jets appeared. And if he succeeded in dumping his 'copter unseen, he'd have to roam the world without weapon of any kind.

By now he was some distance over the forest in which he'd been wandering. It struck him that when he'd been captured and taken away, two helicopters had remained parked in this area. Possibly they had since departed for an unknown base. Or perhaps they were still there and about to rise in response to a radioed alarm.

His alertness increased, he kept throwing swift glances around in all directions while the 'copter hummed onward. After twenty minutes a tiny dot arose from the far horizon. At that distance it was impossible to tell whether it was a 'copter, a jetplane, or what. His motor chose this moment to splutter and squirt a thin stream of smoke. The whirling vanes hesitated, resumed their steady whup-whup. Leeming sweated with anxiety and watched the faraway

dot. Again the motor lost rhythm and spurted more smoke. The dot grew a little larger but was moving at an angle that showed it was not heading straight for him. Probably it was the herald of an aerial hunt that would find him in short time.

The motor now became asthmatic, the vanes slowed, the 'copter lost height. Greasy smoke shot from its casing in a series of forceful puffs, a fishy smell came with them. If a bullet had broken an oil line, thought Leeming, he couldn't keep up much longer. It would be best to descend while he still retained some control.

As the machine lowered he swung its tail-fan in an effort to zigzag and find a suitable clearing amid the mass of trees. Down he went to one thousand feet, to five hundred, and nowhere could he see a gap. There was nothing to do but use a tree as a cushion and hope for the best. Reversing the tail-fan to arrest his forward motion, he sank into an enormous tree that looked capable of supporting a house. Appearances proved deceptive for the huge branches were very brittle and easily gave way under the weight imposed upon them. To the accompaniment of repeated cracks, the helicopter fell through the foliage in a rapid series of halts and jolts that made its occupant feel as though locked in a barrel that was bumping down a steep flight of stairs.

The last drop was the longest but ended in thick bushes and heavy undergrowth that served to absorb the shock. Leeming crawled out with bruised cheekbone and shaken frame. He gazed upward; there was now a wide hole in the overhead vegetation, but he doubted whether it would be noticed by any aerial observer unless flying very low. The 'copter lay tilted to one side, its bent and twisted vanes forced to a sharp angle with the drive-shaft, bits of twig and bark still clinging to their edges. Hurriedly, he searched the big six-seater cabin for anything that might prove useful. Of weapons there were none. In the tool box he did find a twenty-inch spanner of metal resembling bronze and this he confiscated, thinking it better than nothing. Under the two seats at the rear he discovered neat compartments filled with alien food. It was peculiar stuff and not particularly appetizing in appearance, but right now he was hungry enough to gnaw a long-dead goat covered with flies. So he tried a circular sandwich made of what looked and tasted like two flat disks of unleavened bread with a thin layer of white grease between them. It went down, stayed down and made him feel better. For all he knew the grease might have been derived from a pregnant lizard. He was long past caring. His belly demanded more and he ate another two sandwiches.

There was quite a stack of these sandwiches, plus a goodly number of blue-green cubes of what seemed to be some kind of highly compressed vegetable. Also a can of sawdust that smelled like chopped peanuts and tasted like a weird mixture of minced beef and seaweed. And, finally, a plastic bottle filled with mysterious white tablets.

Taking no chances on the tablets, he slung them into the undergrowth but retained the bottle which would serve for carrying water. The can holding the dehydrated stuff was equally valuable; it was strong, well-made, and would do duty as a cooking utensil. He now had food and a primitive weapon, but lacked the means of transporting the lot. There

was far too much to go into his pockets.

While he pondered this problem, something howled across the sky about half a mile to the east. The sound had only just died away in the distance when something else whined on a parallel course half a mile to the west. Evidently the hunt was on.

Checking his impulse to run to some place better hidden from above, he took a saw-toothed instrument out of the tool kit, used it to remove the canvas covering from a seat. This formed an excellent bag, clumsy in shape, without straps or handles, but of just the right size. Filling it with his supplies, he made a last inspection of the wrecked helicopter and noticed that its tiny altimeter dial was fronted with a magnifying lense. The rim holding the lens was strong and stubborn, and he had to work carefully to extract the lens without breaking it.

Under the engine casing he found the reservoir of a windshield water-spray. It took the form of a light metal bottle holding about one quart. Detaching it, he emptied it, filled it with fuel from the 'copters tank. These final acquisitions gave him the means of making a quick fire. Klavith could keep the automatic lighter and the pepper-pot and burn down the barracks with them. He, Leeming, had got something better. A lens does not exhaust itself or wear out. He was so gratified with his loot he forgot that the lens was somewhat useless at night.

Now that he was all set to go he wasn't worried about how soon the searchers spotted the tree-gap and the 'copter. In the time it would take them to drop troops on the spot, he could flee beyond sight or sound, becoming lost within the maze of trees. The only thing that bothered him was the possibility that they might have some species of trained animal capable of tracking him wherever he went.

He didn't relish the idea of a Zangastan land-octopus, or whatever it might be, snuffling up to him in the middle of the night and embracing him with rubbery tentacles while he was asleep. There were several people back home for whom such a fate would be more suitable, professional loud-mouths who'd be shut up for keeps. However, chances had to be taken. Shouldering his canvas bag, he left the scene.

By nightfall he'd put about four miles between himself and the abandoned helicopter. He could not have done more even if he'd wished; the stars and three tiny moons did not provide enough light to permit further progress. Aerial activity had continued without abate during the whole of this time, but ceased when the sun went down.

The best sanctuary he could find for the night was a depression between huge tree-roots. With rocks and sod he built a screen at one end of it, making it sufficiently high to conceal a fire from anyone stalking him at ground level. That done, he gathered a good supply of dry twigs, wood chips and leaves. With everything ready he suddenly discovered himself lacking the means to start a blaze. The lens was useless in the dark; it was strictly for daytime only, beneath an unobscured sun.

This started him on a long spell of inspired cussing after while he hunted around until he found a stick with a sharply splintered point. This he rubbed hard and vigorously in the crack of a dead log. Powdered wood accumulated in the channel as he kept on rubbing with all his weight behind the

stick. It took twenty-seven minutes of continuous effort before the wood-powder glowed and gave forth a thin wisp of smoke. Quickly, he stuck a splinter wetted with 'copter fuel into the middle of the faint glow and at once it burst into flame. The sight made him feel as triumphant as if he'd won the war single-handed.

Now he got the fire going properly. The crackle and spit of it was a great comfort in his loneliness. Emptying the beef-seaweed compound onto a glossy leaf half the size of a blanket, he three-quarters filled the can with water, stood it on the fire. To the water he added a vegetable cube and a small quantity of the stuff on the leaf, and hoped that the result would be a hot and nourishing soup. While waiting for this alien mixture to cook he gathered more fuel, stacked it nearby, sat close to the flames and ate a grease sandwich. After the soup had simmered for some time he put it aside to cool sufficiently to be sipped straight from the can. When eventually he tried it the stuff tasted much better than expected, thick, heavy, and now containing a faint flavor of mushrooms. He absorbed the lot, washed the can in an adjacent stream, dried it by the fire and carefully re-filled it with the compound on the leaf. Choosing the biggest lumps of wood from his supply, he arranged them on the flames to last as long as possible, and lay down within warming distance.

It was his intention to spend an hour or two considering his present situation and working out his future plans. But the soothing heat and the satisfying sensation of a full paunch lulled him to sleep within five minutes. He sprawled in the jungle with the great tree towering overhead, its roots rising on either side, the fire glowing near his feet while he emitted gentle snores and enjoyed one of the longest, deepest sleeps he had ever known.

With the sunrise he breakfasted on another can of soup and a sandwich. Kicking apart the remnants of the fire, he picked up his belongings and headed to the south. This direction would take him farther from the center of the search and, to his inward regret, would also put mileage between him and the cache of real Terran food. On the other hand, a southward trek would bring him nearer to the equatorial belt in which he had seen three spaceports during his circumnavigation. Where there are ports there are ships. So all that day he continued to plod southward. Half a dozen times he sought brief shelter while aircraft of one sort or another scouted overhead. At dusk he was still within the forest and the aerial snooping ceased. The night was a repetition of the previous one, with the same regrets over the loss of his blankets, the same difficulty in making a fire. Sitting by the soothing blaze, his insides filled and his legs enjoying a welcome rest, he felt vaguely surprised that the enemy had not thought to maintain the search through the night. Although he had shielded his fire from ground-level observation, it was a complete giveaway that he could not hope to extinguish before it was seen from above.

The next day was uneventful. Aerial activity appeared to have ceased. At any rate, no planes came his way. Perhaps for some reason known only to themselves they were concentrating the search elsewhere. He made good progress without interruption or molestation and, when the sun stood highest, used the lens to create a smokeless fire and make

himself another meal. Again he ate well, since the insipid but satisfying alien food was having no adverse effect upon his system. A check on how much he had left showed that there was sufficient for another five or six days.

In the mid-afternoon of the second day afterward he reached the southern limit of the forest and found himself facing a broad road. Beyond it stretched cultivated flatlands containing several sprawling buildings that he assumed to be farms. About four miles away there arose from the plain a cluster of stone buildings around which ran a high wall. At that distance he could not determine whether the place was a fortress, a prison, a hospital, a lunatic asylum, a factory protected by a top security barrier, or something unthinkable that Zangastans preferred to screen from public gaze. Whatever it was, it had a menacing appearance. His intuition told him to keep his distance from it.

Retreating a couple of hundred yards into the forest, he found a heavily wooded hollow, sat on a log and readjusted his plans. Faced with an open plain that stretched as far as the eye could see, with habitations scattered around and with towns and villages probably just over the horizon, it was obvious that he could no longer make progress in broad daylight. On a planet populated by broad, squat, lizard-skinned people, a lighter-built and pink-faced Terran would stand out as conspicuously as a giant panda at a bishops' convention. He'd be grabbed on sight, especially if the radio and video had broadcast his description with the information that he was wanted.

The Combine included about twenty species, half of whom the majority of Zangastans had never seen. But they had a rough idea of what their co-partners looked like and they'd know a fugitive Terran when they found him. His chance of kidding his captors that he was an unfamiliar ally was mighty small; even if he could talk a bunch of peasants into half-believing him, they'd hold him pending a check by the authorities.

Up to this moment he'd been bored by the forest with its long parade of trees, its primitiveness, its silence, its lack of visible life. Now he viewed it as a sanctuary about to withdraw its protection. Henceforth he'd have to march by night and sleep by day - provided he could find suitable places in which to hide out. It was a grim prospect.

But the issue was clear-cut. If he wanted to reach a spaceport and steal a scout-boat, he must press forward no matter what the terrain and regardless of risks. His only alternative was to play safe by remaining in the forest, perpetually foraging for food around its outskirts, living the life of a hermit until ready for burial.

The extended day had several hours yet to go; he decided to have a meal and get some sleep before the fall of darkness. Accordingly, he started a small fire with the lens, made himself a can of hot soup and had two sandwiches. Then he curled himself up in a wad of huge leaves and closed his eyes. The sun gave a comfortable warmth, and he drifted into a pleasant doze. Half a dozen vehicles buzzed and rattled along the nearby road; brought wide awake, he cursed them with fervor, shut his eyes and tried again. It wasn't long before more passing traffic disturbed him.

This continued until the stars came out and two of the five small moons shed an eerie light over the landscape. He stood

in the shadow of a tree overlooking the road and waited for the natives to go to bed - if they did go to bed, rather than hang batlike by their heels from the rafters.

A few small trucks went past during this time. They had orange-colored headlights and emitted puffs of white smoke or vapor. They sounded somewhat like model locomotives. Leeming got the notion that they were steam-powered, probably with a flash-boiler fired with wood. There was no way of checking on this.

Ordinarily he wouldn't have cared a hoot how Zangastan trucks operated. Right now it was a matter of some importance. The opportunity might come to steal a vehicle and thus help himself on his way to wherever he was going. But as a fully qualified space-pilot he had not the vaguest idea of how to drive a steam engine. Indeed, if threatened with the death of a thousand lashes, he'd have been compelled to admit that he could not ride a bike.

While mulling over his educational handicaps, it occurred to him that he'd be dim-witted to sneak furtively through the night hoping for the chance to swipe a car or truck. The man of initiative makes his chances and does not sit around praying for them to be placed in his lap.

Upbraiding himself, he sought around in the gloom until he found a nice, smooth, fist-sized rock. Then he waited for a victim to come along. The first vehicle to appear was traveling in the wrong direction, using the farther side of the road. Most of an hour crawled by before two more came together, also on the farther side, one close behind the other.

Across the road were no trees, bushes, or other means of concealment; he had no choice but to keep to his own side and wait in patience for his luck to turn. After what seemed an interminable period a pair of orange lamps gleamed in the distance, sped toward him. As the lights grew larger and more brilliant, he tensed in readiness.

At exactly the right moment he sprang from beside the tree, hurled the rock and leaped back into darkness. In his haste and excitement, he missed. The rock shot within an inch of the windshield's rim and clattered on the road. Having had no more than a brief glimpse of a vague, gesticulating shadow, the driver continued blithely on, unaware that he'd escaped a taste of thuggery.

Making a few remarks more emphatic than cogent, Leeming recovered the rock and resumed his vigil. The next truck showed up at the same time as another one coming in the opposite direction. He shifted to behind the tree trunk. The two vehicles passed each other at a point almost level with his hiding place: Scowling after their diminishing beams he took up position again.

Traffic had thinned with the lateness of the hour, and it was a good while before more headlights came beaming in the dark and running on the road's near side. This time he reacted with greater care and took better aim. A swift jump, he heaved the rock, jumped back.

The result was the dull whup of a hole being bashed through transparent plastic. A guttural voice shouted something about a turkey leg, this being an oath in local dialect. The truck rolled another twenty yards, pulled up. A broad, squat figure scrambled out of the cab and ran toward the rear in evident belief that he'd hit something.

Leeming, who had anticipated this move, met him with raised spanner. The driver didn't even see him; he bolted

round the truck's tail and the spanner whanged on his pate and he went down without a sound. For a horrid moment Leeming thought that he had killed the fellow. Not that one Zangastan mattered more or less in the general scheme of things. But he had his own peculiar status to consider. Even the Terrans showed scant mercy to prisoners who killed while escaping.

However, the victim emitted bubbling snorts like a hog in childbirth and had plenty of life left in him. Dragging him to the side of the road, Leeming searched him, found nothing worth taking. The wad of paper money was devoid of value to a Terran who'd have no opportunity to spend it. Just then a long, low tanker rumbled into view. Taking a tight grip on the spanner, Leeming watched its approach and prepared to fight or run as circumstances dictated. It went straight past, showing no interest in the halted truck. Climbing into the cab, he had a look around, found that the truck was not steam-powered as he had thought. The engine was still running but there was no firebox or anything resembling one. The only clue to the power-source was a strong scent like that of alcohol mixed with a highly aromatic oil.

Tentatively, he pressed a button on the control panel; the headlights went out. He pressed it again and they came on. The next button produced a shrill, catlike yowl out front. The third had no effect whatever: he assumed that it controlled the self-starter. After some fiddling around he found that the solitary pedal was the footbrake and that a lever on the steering wheel caused the machine to move forward or backward at speed proportionate to the degree of its shift. There was no sign of an ignition switch, gear-change lever, headlight dimmer or parking brake. The whole layout was a curious mixture of the ultra-modern and the antiquated. Satisfied that he could drive it, he advanced the lever. The truck rolled forward, accelerated to a moderate pace and kept going at that speed. He moved the lever farther and the speed increased. The forest slid past on his left, the flatlands on his right, and the road was a yellow ribbon streaming under the bonnet. Man, this was the life! Relaxing in his seat and feeling pretty good, he broke into ribald song.

The road split. Without hesitation he chose the arm that tended southward. It took him through a straggling village in which very few lights were visible. Reaching the country beyond, he got onto a road running in a straight line across the plain. Five moons were in the sky, and the landscape looked ghostly and forbidding. Shoving the lever a few more degrees, he raced onward.

After an estimated eighty miles he by-passed a city, met desultory traffic on the road but continued in peace and unchallenged. Next he drove past a high stone wall surrounding a cluster of buildings resembling those seen earlier. Peering upward as he swept by, he tried to see whether there were any guards patrolling the wall-top, but it was impossible to tell without stopping the truck and getting out. That he did not wish to do, preferring to travel as fast and as far as possible while the going was good.

He'd been driving non-stop at high speed for several hours when a fire-trail bloomed in the sky and moved like a tiny crimson feather across the stars. As he watched, the feather floated around in a deep curve, grew bigger and brighter as

it descended. A ship was coming in. Slightly to his left and far over the horizon there must be a spaceport.

Maybe within easy reach of him there was a scout-boat, fully fueled and just begging to be taken up. He licked his lips at the thought of it.

With its engine still running smoothly, the truck passed through the limb of another large forest. He made mental note of the place lest within short time he should be compelled to abandon the vehicle and take to his heels once more. After recent experiences he found himself developing a strong affection for forests; on a hostile world they were the only places offering anonymity and liberty.

Gradually the road veered to the left, leading him nearer and nearer toward where the hidden spaceport was presumed to be. The truck rushed through four small villages in rapid succession, all dark, silent and in deep slumber. Again the road split and this time he found himself in a quandary.

Which arm would take him to the place of ships?

Nearby stood a signpost but its alien script meant nothing to him. Stopping the truck, he got out and examined his choice of routes as best he could in the poor light. The right arm seemed to be the more heavily used to judge by the condition of its surface. Picking the right side, he drove ahead.

Time went on so long without evidence of a spaceport that he was beginning to think he'd made a mistake when a faint glow appeared in the forward sky. It came from somewhere behind a rise in the terrain, strengthened as he neared. He toiled up the hill, came over the crest and saw in a shallow valley a big array of floodlights illuminating buildings, concrete emplacements, blast-pits, and four snouty ships standing on their tail-fins.

VI

HE SHOULD have felt overjoyed. Instead he became filled with a sense of wariness and foreboding. A complete getaway just couldn't be as easy as he'd planned: there had to be a snag somewhere.

Edging the truck over to the side of the road, he braked and switched off his lights. Then he surveyed the scene more carefully. From this distance the four vessels looked too big and fat to be scout-boats, too small and out-of-date to be warships. It was very likely that they were cargo carriers, probably of the trampship type.

Assuming that they were in good condition and fully prepared for flight, it was not impossible for an experienced, determined pilot to take one up single-handed. And if it was fitted with an autopilot, he could keep it going for days and weeks. Without such assistance he was liable to drop dead through sheer exhaustion long before he was due to arrive anywhere worth reaching. The same problem did not apply to a genuine scout-boat because a one-man ship had to be filled with robotic aids. He estimated that these small merchantmen normally carried a crew of at least twelve apiece, perhaps as many as twenty.

Furthermore, he had seen a vessel coming in to land - so at least one of these four had not yet been serviced and was unfit for flight. There was no way of telling which one was the latest arrival. But a ship in the hand is worth ten some

place else. To one of his profession, the sight of waiting vessels was irresistible.

Reluctance to part company with the truck until the last moment, plus his natural audacity, made him decide that there was no point in trying to sneak across the well-lit spaceport and reach a ship on foot. He'd do better to take the enemy by surprise, boldly drive into the place, park alongside a vessel and scoot up its ladder before they had time to collect their wits.

Once inside a ship with the air lock closed he'd be comparatively safe. It would take them far longer to get him out than it would take him to master the strange controls and make ready to boost. He'd have shut himself inside a metal fortress, and the first blast of its propulsors would clear the area for a couple of hundred yards around. Their only means of thwarting him would be to bring up heavy artillery and hole or topple the ship. By the time they'd dragged big guns to the scene he should be crossing the orbit of the nearest moon.

He consoled himself with these thoughts as he maneuvered the truck onto the road and let it surge forward, but all the time he knew deep within his mind that this was going to be a crazy gamble. There was a good chance that he'd grab himself a cold-dead rocket short of fuel and incapable of taking off. In that event all the irate Zangastans needed to do was sit around until he'd surrendered or starved to death. That they'd be so slow to react as to give him time to swap ships was a possibility almost nonexistent.

Thundering down the valley road, the truck took a wide bend, raced for the spaceport's main gates. These were partly closed, leaving a yard-wide gap in the middle. An armed sentry stood at one side, behind him a hut containing others of the guard.

As the truck shot into view and roared toward him, the sentry gaped at it in dumb amazement, showed the typical reaction of one far from the area of combat. Instead of pointing his automatic weapon in readiness to challenge, he jumped into the road and tugged frantically to open the gates. The half at which he was pulling swung wide just in time for the truck to bullet through with a few inches to spare on either side. Now the sentry resented the driver's failure to say, "Good morning!" or "Drop dead!" or anything equally courteous. Brandishing his gun, he performed a clumsy war-dance and screamed vitriolic remarks.

Concentrating on his driving to the exclusion of all else, Leeming went full tilt around the spaceport's concrete perimeter toward where the ships were parked. A bunch of lizard-skinned characters strolling along his path scattered and ran for their lives. Farther on a long, low, motorized trolley loaded with fuel cylinders slid out of a shed, stopped in the middle of the road. Its driver threw himself off his seat as the truck wildly swerved around him and threatened to overturn. Picking the most distant ship as the one it would take the enemy longest to reach, Leeming braked by its tail-fins, jumped out the cab, looked up. No ladder. Sprinting around the base, he found the ladder on the other side, went up it like a frightened monkey.

It was like climbing the side of a factory chimney. Halfway up he paused for breath, looked around. Diminished by distance and depth, a hundred figures were racing toward him. So also were four trucks and a thing resembling an armored

car. He resumed his climb, going as fast as he could but using great care because he was now so high that one slip would be fatal.

Anxiety increased as he neared the airlock at top. A few more seconds and he'd be out of shooting range. But they'd know that too, and were liable to start popping at him while there was still time. As he tried to make more speed his belly quirked at the thought of a last-moment bullet plowing through him. His hands grabbed half a dozen rungs in quick succession, reached the airlock rim at which point he rammed his head against an unexpected metal rod. Surprised, he raised his gaze, found himself looking straight into the muzzle of a gun.

"Shatsi!" ordered the owner of the gun, making a downward motion with it. "Amash!"

For a mad moment Leeming thought of holding on with one hand while he snatched his opponent's feet with the other. He raised himself in readiness to grab. Either the fellow was impatient or read his intention because he hammered Leeming's fingers with the gun barrel.

"Amash! Shatsi-amash!"

Leeming went slowly and reluctantly down the ladder. Black despair grew blacker with every step he descended. To be caught at the start of a chase was one thing; to be grabbed near the end of it, within reach of success, was something else. Hell's bells, he'd almost got away with it and that's what made the situation so bitter.

Hereafter they'd fasten him up twice as tightly and keep a doubly close watch upon him. Even if in spite of these precautions he broke free a second time, his chances of total escape would be too small to be worth considering; with an armed guard aboard every ship he'd be sticking his head in the trap whenever he shoved it into an air lock. By the looks of it he was stuck with this stinking world until such time as a Terran task-force captured it or the war ended, either of which events might take place a couple of centuries hence.

Reaching the bottom, he stepped onto concrete and turned around expecting to be given a kick in the stomach or a bust on the nose. Instead he found himself faced by a muttering but blank-faced group containing an officer whose attitude suggested that he was more baffled than enraged. Favoring Leeming with an unblinking stare, the officer let go a stream of incomprehensible gabble that ended on a note of query.

Leeming spread his hands and shrugged.

The officer tried again. Leeming responded with another shrug and did his best to look contrite. Accepting this lack of understanding as something that proved nothing one way or the other, the officer bawled at the crowd. Four armed guards emerged from the mob, hustled the prisoner into the armored car, slammed and locked the door and took him away.

At the end of the ride they shoved him into the back room of a rock house with two guards for company, the other two outside the door. Sitting on a low, hard chair, he sighed, gazed blankly at the wall for two hours. The guards also squatted, watched him as expressionlessly as a pair of snakes and said not a word.

At the end of that time a trooper brought food and water. Leeming gulped it down in silence, studied the wall for another two hours. Meanwhile his thoughts milled around. It seemed pretty obvious, he decided, that the local gang had

not realized that they'd caught a Terran. All their reactions showed that they were far from certain what they'd got. To a certain extent this was excusable. On the Allied side of the battle was a federation of thirteen lifeforms, four of them human and three very humanlike. The Combine consisted of an uneasy, precarious union of at least twenty lifeforms, three of which also were rather humanlike. Pending word from higher authority, this particular bunch of quasi-reptilians couldn't tell enemy from ally.

All the same, they were taking no chances and he could imagine what was going on while they kept him sitting on his butt. The officer would grab the telephone - or whatever they used in lieu - and call the nearest garrison town. The highest ranker there would promptly transfer responsibility to military headquarters. There, Klavith's alarm would have been filed and forgotten and a ten-star panjandrum would pass the query to the main beam-station. An operator would transmit a message asking the three humanlike allies whether they had lost track of a scout in this region.

When back came a signal saying, "No!" the local gang would realize that a rare bird had been caught deep within the spatial empire. They wouldn't like it. Holding-troops far behind the lines share all the glory and none of the grief, and they're happy to let things stay that way. A sudden intrusion of the enemy where he has no right to be is an event disturbing to the even tenor of life, and not to be greeted with cries of martial joy. Besides, from their viewpoint where one can sneak in an army can follow, and it is disconcerting to be taken in force from the rear.

Then, when the news got around, Klavith would arrive at full gallop to remind everyone that this was not the first time Leeming had been captured, but the second. What would they do to him eventually? He was far from sure because previously he hadn't given them time to settle down to the job. It was most unlikely that they'd shoot him right off. If sufficiently civilized they'd cross-examine him and then imprison him for the duration. If uncivilized they'd dig up Klavith or maybe an ally able to talk Terran and milk the prisoner of every item of information he possessed by methods ruthless and bloody.

Back toward the dawn of history, when conflicts had been confined to one planet, there had existed a protective device known as the Geneva Convention. It had organized neutral inspection of prison camps, brought occasional letters from home, provided food parcels that had kept alive many a captive who otherwise might have died.

There was nothing like that today. A prisoner had only two forms of protection, those being his own resources and the power of his side to retaliate against the prisoners they'd got. And the latter was a threat more potential than real. There cannot be retaliation without actual knowledge of maltreatment.

The day dragged on. The guards were changed twice. More food and water came. Eventually the one window showed that darkness was approaching. Eying the window furtively, Leeming decided that it would be suicidal to take a running jump at it under two guns. It was small and high, difficult to scramble through in a hurry. How he wished he had his stink-gun now!

A prisoner's first duty is to escape. That means biding his time with appalling patience until there occurs an opportunity

that may be seized and exploited to the utmost. He'd done it once and he must do it again. If no way of total escape existed, he'd have to invent one.

The prospect before him was tough indeed; before long it was likely to become a good deal tougher. If only he'd been able to talk the local language, or any Combine language, he might have been able to convince even the linguistic Klavith that black was white. Sheer impudence can pay dividends. Maybe he could have landed his ship, persuaded them with smooth words, unlimited self-assurance and just the right touch of arrogance, to repair and reline his propulsors and cheer him on his way, never suspecting that they had been talked into providing aid and comfort for the enemy.

It was a beautiful dream but an idle one. Lack of ability to communicate in any Combine tongue had balled up such a scheme at the start. You can't hoodwink a sucker into donating his pants merely by making noises at him. Some other chance must now be watched for and grabbed, swiftly and with both hands - provided they were fools enough to permit a chance.

Weighing up his guards in the same way as he had estimated the officer, his earlier captors and Klavith, he didn't think that this species was numbered among the Combine's brightest brains. All the same they were broad in the back, sour in the puss, and plenty good enough to put someone in the poky and keep him there for a long, long time. In fact they were naturals as prison wardens.

He remained in the house four days, eating and drinking at regular intervals, sleeping halfway through the lengthy nights, cogitating for hours and often glowering at his impassive guards. Mentally he concocted, examined, and rejected a thousand ways of regaining his liberty, most of them spectacular, fantastic, and impossible.

At one time he went so far as to try to stare the guards into a hypnotic trance, gazing intently at them until his own eyeballs felt locked for keeps. It did not bother them in the least. They had the reptilian ability to remain motionless and outstare him until kingdom come.

Mid-morning of the fourth day the officer strutted in, yelled,

"Amash! Amash!" and gestured toward the door. His tone and manner were decidedly unfriendly. Evidently someone had identified the prisoner as an Allied space-louse. Getting off his seat Leeming walked out, two guards ahead, two behind, the officer in the rear. A box-bodied steel car waited on the road. They urged him into it, locked it. A pair of guards stood on the rear platform hard against the doors and clung to handrails. A third joined the driver at the front. The journey took thirteen hours, the whole of which the inmate spent bouncing around in complete darkness.

By the time the car halted Leeming had invented one new and exceedingly repulsive word. He used it immediately the rear doors opened.

"Quilpole-enk?" he growled. "Enk?"

"Amash!" bawled the guard, unappreciative of alien contributions to the vocabulary of invective. He gave the other a powerful shove.

With poor grace Leeming amashed. He glimpsed great walls rearing against the night and a zone of brilliant light high up; then he was pushed through a metal portal and

into a large room. Here a reception committee of six thug-like samples awaited him. One of the six signed a paper presented by the escort. The guards withdrew, the door closed, the six eyed the arrival with complete lack of amiability. One of them said something in an authoritative voice and made motions indicative of undressing. Leeming called him a smelly quilpole conceived in an alien marsh.

It did him no good. The six grabbed him, stripped him naked, searched every vestige of his clothing, paying special attention to seams and linings. They displayed the expert technique of ones who'd done this job countless times already, and knew exactly where to look and what to look for. None showed the slightest interest in his alien physique despite that he was posing fully revealed in the raw.

Everything he possessed was put on one side and his clothes shied back at him. He dressed himself while they pawed through the loot and gabbled together. Satisfied that the captive now owned nothing more than was necessary to hide his shame, they led him through the farther door, up a flight of thick stone stairs, along a stone corridor and into a cell. The door slammed with a sound like that of the crack of doom.

In the dark of night eight small stars and one tiny moon shone through a heavily barred opening high up in one wall. Along the bottom of the gap shone a faint yellow glow from some outside illumination.

Fumbling around in the gloom he found a wooden bench against one wall. It moved when he lugged it. Dragging it beneath the opening he stood upon it but found himself a couple of feet too low to get a view outside. Though heavy, he struggled with it until he had it propped at an angle against the wall, then he crawled carefully up it and had a look between the bars.

Forty feet below lay a bare, stone-floored space fifty yards wide and extending as far as he could see to the right and left. Beyond the space a smooth-surfaced stone wall rose to his own level. The top of the wall angled at about sixty degrees to form a sharp apex, ten inches above which ran a single line of taut wires, without barbs.

From somewhere beyond his range of vision poured powerful beams of light that flooded the entire area between cell-block and outer wall, as well as a similarly wide space beyond the wall. There was no sign of life. There was only the wall, the flares of light, the overhanging night and the distant stars.

"So I'm in the jug," he said. "That really fixes things!"

He jumped to the floor and the slight thrust made the bench fall with a resounding crash. It sounded as if he had produced a rocket and let himself be whisked through the roof. Feet raced along the outside passage, light poured through a suddenly opened spy-hole in the heavy metal door. An eye appeared in the hole.

"Sach invigia, faplap!" shouted the guard.

Leeming called him a flat-footed, duck-assed quilpole and added six more words, older, time-worn, but still potent. The spy-hole slammed shut. He lay on the hard bench and tried to sleep.

An hour later he kicked hell out of the door and when the spy-hole opened he said, "Faplap yourself!"

After that he slept.

Breakfast consisted of one lukewarm bowl of stewed grain resembling millet and a mug of water. Both were served with disdain and eaten with disgust. It wasn't as good as the alien muck on which he had lived in the forest. But of course he hadn't been on convict's rations then; he'd been eating the meals of some unlucky helicopter crew.

Sometime later a thin-lipped specimen arrived in company with two guards. With a long series of complicated gestures this character explained that the prisoner was to learn a civilized language and, what was more, would learn it fast - or else. Education would commence forthwith.

Puzzled by the necessity, Leeming asked, "What about Major Klavith?"

"Snapnose?"

"Why can't Klavith do the talking? Has he been struck dumb or something?"

A light dawned upon the other. Making stabbing motions with his forefinger, he said, "Klavith - fat, fat, fat!"

"Huh?"

"Klavith - fat, fat, fat!" He tapped his chest several times, pretended to crumple to the floor and succeeded in conveying that Klavith had expired with official assistance.

"Holy cow!" said Leeming.

In businesslike manner the tutor produced a stack of juvenile picture books and started the imparting process while the guards lounged against the wall and looked bored. Leeming cooperated as one does with the enemy, namely, by misunderstanding everything, mispronouncing everything, and overlooking nothing that would prove him a linguistic moron.

The lesson ended at noon and was celebrated by the arrival of another bowl of gruel containing a hunk of stringy, rubbery substance resembling the hind end of a rat. He drank the gruel, sucked the portion of animal, shoved the bowl aside.

Then he pondered the significance of their decision to teach him how to talk. In bumping off the unfortunate Klavith they had become the victims of their own ruthlessness. They'd deprived themselves of the world's only speaker of Cosmoglotta. Probably they had a few others who could speak it stationed on allied worlds, but it would take time and trouble to bring one of those back here. Someone had blundered by ordering Klavith's execution; he was going to cover up the mistake by teaching the prisoner to squeal.

Evidently they had nothing resembling Earth's electronic brain-priests and could extract information only by question-and-answer methods aided by unknown forms of persuasion.

They wanted to know things and intended to learn them if possible. The slower he was in gaining fluency the longer it would be before they put him on the rack, if that was their intention.

His speculations ended when the guards opened the door and ordered him out. Leading him along the corridor, down the stairs, they released him into a great yard filled with figures mooching aimlessly around under a bright sun. He halted in surprise.

Rigellians! About two thousands of them. These were allies, fighting friends of Terra. He looked them over with mounting excitement, seeking a few more familiar shapes amid the mob. Perhaps an Earthman or two. Or even a few humanlike Centaurians.

But there were none. Only rubber-limbed, pop-eyed Rigellians shuffling around in the dreary manner of those confronted with many wasted years and no perceivable future. Even as he gazed at them he sensed something peculiar. They could see him as clearly as he could see them and, being the only Earthman, he was a legitimate object of attention, a friend from another star. They should have been crowding up to him, full of talk, seeking the latest news of the war, asking questions and offering information. It wasn't like that at all. They took no notice of him, behaved as if the arrival of a Terran were of no consequence whatever. Slowly and deliberately he walked across the yard, inviting some sort of fraternal reaction. They got out of his way. A few eyed him furtively, the majority pretended to be unaware of his existence. Nobody offered a word of comfort. Obviously they were giving him the conspicuous brush-off.

He trapped a small group of them in a corner of the yard and demanded with ill-concealed irritation, "Any of you speak Terran?"

They looked at the sky, the wall, the ground, or at each other, and remained silent.

"Anyone know Centaurian?"

No answer.

"Well, how about Cosmoglotta?"

No reply.

Riled, he walked away and tried another bunch. No luck. Within an hour he had fired questions at two or three hundred without getting a single response. It puzzled him completely. Their manner was not contemptuous or hostile but something else. He tried to analyze it, came to the conclusion that for an unknown reason they were wary, they were afraid to speak to him.

Sitting on a stone step he watched them until a shrill whistle signaled that exercise time was over. The Rigellians formed up in long lines in readiness to march back to their quarters. Leeming's guards gave him a kick in the pants and dragged him to his cell.

Temporarily he dismissed the problem of unsociable allies. After dark was the time for thinking because then there was nothing else to do. He wanted to spend the remaining hours of daylight in studying the picture books and getting well ahead with the local lingo while appearing to lag far behind. Fluency might prove an advantage someday. Too bad that he had never learned Rigellian, for instance.

So he applied himself fully to the task until print and pictures ceased to be visible. He ate his evening portion of mush after which he lay on the bench, closed his eyes, set his mind to work.

In all of his hectic life he'd met no more than twenty Rigellians. Never once had he visited their three closely bunched solar systems. What little he knew of them was hearsay evidence. It was said that their standard of intelligence was high, they were technologically efficient, they had been consistently friendly toward men of Earth since first contact nearly a thousand years ago. Fifty percent of them spoke Cosmoglotta and about one percent knew the Terran tongue. Therefore, if the average held up, several hundred of those met in the yard should have been able to converse with him in one language or another. Why had they steered clear of him and maintained silence? And why had they been mighty

unanimous about it?

Determined to solve this puzzle, he invented, examined and discarded a dozen theories, all with sufficient flaws to strain the credulity. It was about two hours before he hit upon the obvious solution.

These Rigellians were prisoners deprived of liberty for an unknown number of years to come. Some of them must have seen an Earthman at one time or another. But all of them knew that in the Combine's ranks were a few species superficially humanlike. They couldn't swear to it that he really was a Terran and they were taking no chances on him being a spy, an ear of the enemy planted among them to listen for plots.

That in turn meant something else: when a big mob of prisoners become excessively suspicious of a possible traitor in their midst, it's because they have something to hide. Yes, that was it! He slapped his knee in delight. The Rigellians had an escape scheme in process of hatching and meanwhile were taking no chances.

They had been here plenty long enough to become at least bored, at most desperate, and seek the means to make a break. Having found a way out, or being in the process of making one, they were refusing to take the risk of letting the plot be messed up by a stranger of doubtful origin. Now his problem was that of how to overcome their suspicions, gain their confidence and get himself included in whatever was afoot. To this he gave considerable thought.

Next day, at the end of exercise time, a guard swung a heavy leg and administered the usual kick. Leeming promptly hauled off and punched him clean on the snout. Four guards jumped in and gave the culprit a thorough going over. They did it good and proper, with zest and effectiveness that no onlooking Rigellian could possibly mistake for a piece of dramatic play-acting. It was an object lesson and intended as such. The limp body was taken out of the yard and lugged upstairs, its face a mess of blood.

VII

IT WAS a week before Leeming was fit enough to reappear in the yard. The price of confidence had proved rough, tough and heavy, and his features were still an ugly sight. He strolled through the crowd, ignored as before, chose a soft spot in the sun and sat.

Soon afterward a prisoner sprawled tiredly on the ground a couple of yards away, watched distant guards and spoke in little more than a whisper.

"Where do YOU come from?"

"Terra."

"How'd you get here?"

Leeming told him briefly.

"How's the war going?"

"We're pushing them back slowly but surely. But it'll take a long time to finish the job."

"How long do you suppose?"

"I don't know. It's anyone's guess." Leeming eyed him, curiously. "What brought your bunch here?"

"We're not combatants but civilian colonists. Our government placed advance parties, all male, on four new planets that were ours by right of discovery. Twelve thousand of us

altogether." The Rigellian paused while he looked carefully around, noted the positions of various guards. "The Combine descended on us in force. That was two years ago. It was easy; we weren't prepared for trouble, weren't adequately armed, didn't even know that a war was on."

"They grabbed your four planets?"

"You bet they did. And laughed in our faces."

Leeming nodded understandingly. Cynical and ruthless claim-jumping had been the original cause of the fracas now extending across a great slice of the galaxy. On one planet a colony had put up a heroic resistance and died to the last man. The sacrifice had fired a blaze of fury, the Allies had struck back and were still striking good and hard.

"Twelve thousand, you said. Where are the others?"

"Scattered around in prisons like this one. You certainly picked a choice dump on which to sit out the war. The Combine has made this its chief penal planet. It's far from the fighting front, unlikely ever to be discovered. The local lifeform isn't much good for space-battles but plenty good enough to hold what its allies have captured. They're throwing up big jails all over the world. If the war goes on long enough, this cosmic dump will become solid with prisoners."

"So your crowd has been here about two years?"

"Sure have - and it seems more like ten."

"And done nothing about it?"

"Nothing much," agreed the Rigellian. "Just enough to get forty of us shot for trying."

"Sorry," said Leeming sincerely.

"Don't let it bother you. I know exactly how you feel. The first few weeks are the worst. The idea of being pinned down for keeps can drive you crazy unless you learn to be philosophical about it." He mused awhile, indicated a heavily built guard patrolling by the farther wall. "A few days ago that lying swine boasted that already there are two hundred thousand Allied prisoners on this planet and added that by this time next year there would be two millions. I hope he never lives to see it."

"I'm getting out of here," said Leeming.

"How?"

"I don't know yet. But I'm getting out. I'm not going to stay here and rot." He waited in the hope of some comment about others feeling the same way, perhaps evasive mention of a coming break, a hint that he might be invited to join in. Standing up, the Rigellian murmured, "Well, I wish you luck. You'll need all you can get."

He ambled away, having betrayed nothing. A whistle blew, the guards shouted, "Merse, faplaps! Amash!" And that was that.

Over the next four weeks he had frequent conversations with the same Rigellian and about twenty others, picking up odd items of information but finding them peculiarly evasive whenever the subject of freedom came up. They were friendly, in fact cordial, but remained determinedly tight-mouthed. One day he was having a surreptitious chat and asked,

"Why does everyone insist on talking to me secretively and in whispers? The guards don't seem to care how much you gab to one another."

"You haven't yet been cross-examined. If in the meantime they notice that we've had plenty to say to you, they will try to force out of you everything we've said - with particular reference to ideas on escape."

Leeming immediately pounced upon the lovely word. "Ah, escape, that's all there is to live for right now. If anyone is thinking of making a bid maybe I can help them and they can help me. I'm a competent space-pilot and that fact is worth something."

The other cooled at once. "Nothing doing."

"Why not?"

"We've been behind walls a long time and have been taught many things that you've yet to learn."

"Such as?"

"We've discovered at bitter cost that escape attempts fail when too many know what's going on. Some planted spy betrays us. Or some selfish fool messes things up by pushing in at the wrong moment."

"I am neither a spy nor a fool. I'm certainly not stupid enough to spoil my own chance of breaking free."

"That may be," the Rigellian conceded. "But imprisonment creates its own especial conventions. One firm rule we have established here is that an escape-plot is the exclusive property of those who concocted it and only they can make the attempt by that method. Nobody else is told about it. Secrecy is a protective screen that would-be escapers must maintain at all costs. They'll give nobody a momentary peek through it, not even a Terran and not even a qualified space-pilot."

"So I'm strictly on my own?"

"Afraid so. You're on your own in any case. We sleep in dormitories, fifty to a room. You're in a cell all by yourself. You're in no position to help with anything."

"I can damned well help myself," Leeming retorted angrily. And it was his turn to walk away.

He'd been in the poky just thirteen weeks when the tutor handed him a metaphorical firecracker. Finishing a session distinguished only by Leeming's dopiness and slowness to learn, the tutor scowled at him and gave forth to some point.

"You are pleased to wear the cloak of idiocy. But am I an idiot too? I do not think so! I am not deceived - you are far more fluent than you pretend. In seven days' time I shall report to the Commandant that you are ready for examination."

"How's that again?" asked Leeming, putting on a baffled frown.

"You will be questioned by the Commandant seven days hence,"

"I have already been questioned by Major Klavith,"

"That was verbal. Klavith is dead and we have no record of what you told him."

Slam went the door. In came the gruel and a jaundiced lump of something unchewable. The local catering department seemed to be obsessed by the edibility of rat's buttocks. Exercise time followed.

"I've been told they're going to put me through the mill a week from now."

"Don't let them scare you," advised the Rigellian. "They would as soon kill you as spit in the sink. But one thing keeps them in check,"

"What's that?"

"The Allies are holding a stack of prisoners too."

"Yes, but what they don't know they can't grieve over."

"There'll be more than grief for the entire Zangastan species if the victor finds himself expected to exchange very live prisoners for very dead corpses."

"You've made a point there," agreed Leeming. "Maybe it would help if I had nine feet of rope to dangle suggestively in front of the Commandant."

"It would help if I had a very large bottle of vitz and a shapely female to stroke my hair," sighed the Rigellian.

"If you can feel that way after two years of semi-starvation, what are you like on a full diet?"

"It's all in the mind," the Rigellian said. "I like to think of what might have been."

The whistle again. More intensive study while daylight lasted. Another bowl of ersatz porridge. Darkness and a few small stars peeping through the barred slot high up. Time seemed to be standing still, as it does with a high wall around it.

He lay on the bench and produced thoughts like bubbles from a fountain. No place, positively no place is absolutely impregnable. Given brawn and brains, time and patience, there's always a way in or out. Escapees shot down as they bolted had chosen the wrong time and wrong place, or the right time but the wrong place, or the right place but the wrong time. Or they had neglected brawn in favor of brains, a common fault of the overcautious. Or they'd neglected brains in favor of brawn, a fault of the reckless.

With eyes closed he carefully reviewed the situation. He was in a cell with rock walls of granite hardness at least four feet thick. The only openings were a narrow gap blocked by five massive steel bars, and an armor-plated door in constant view of patrolling guards.

On his person he had no hacksaw, not lock-pick, no implement of any sort, nothing but the bedraggled clothes in which he reposed. If he pulled the bench to pieces and somehow succeeded in doing it unheard, he'd acquire several large lumps of wood, a dozen six-inch nails and a couple of steel bolts. None of that junk would serve to open the door or cut the window bars. And there was no other material available. Outside stretched a brilliantly illuminated gap fifty yards wide that must be crossed to gain freedom. Then came a smooth stone wall forty feet high, devoid of handholds. Atop the wall was an apex much too sharp to give grip to the feet, and an alarm-wire that would set the sirens going if either touched or cut.

The great wall completely encircled the entire prison. It was octagonal in shape and topped at each angle by a watchtower containing guards, floodlights and guns. To get out, the wall would have to be surmounted right under the noses of itchy-fingered watchers, in bright light, without touching the wire. That wouldn't be the end of it either; beyond the wall was another illuminated area also to be crossed. An unlucky last-lapper could get over the wall by some kind of miracle only to be shot to bloody shreds during his subsequent dash for darkness.

Yes, the whole setup had the professional touch of those who knew what to do to keep prisoners in prison. Escape over the wall was well-nigh impossible, though not completely so. If somebody got out of his cell or dormitory armed with a rope and grapnel, and if he had a daring confederate who'd break into the power room and switch off everything at exactly the right moment, he might make it. Up the wall and over the dead, unresponsive alarm-wire in total darkness. In a solitary cell there is no rope, no grapnel, nothing ca-

pable of being adapted as either. There is no desperate and trustworthy confederate. And even if these things had been available, he'd have considered such a project as near-suicidal.

If he pondered once the most remote possibilities and took stock of the minimum resources needed, he pondered them a hundred times. By long after midnight he'd been beating his brains sufficiently hard to make them come up with anything, including ideas that were slightly mad.

For example: he could pull a plastic button from his jacket, swallow it, and hope that the result would get him a transfer to hospital. True, the hospital was within the prison's confines but it might offer better opportunity to escape. Then he thought a second time, decided that an intestinal blockage would not guarantee his removal elsewhere. They might do no more than force a powerful purgative down the neck and thus add to his present discomforts.

As dawn broke he arrived at a final conclusion. Forty or fifty Rigellians working in a patient, determined group might tunnel under the wall and both illuminated areas and get away. But he had one resource and one only. That was guile. There was nothing else he could employ.

He let go a loud groan and complained to himself, "So I'll have to use both my heads!"

This inane remark percolated through the innermost recesses of his mind and began to ferment like yeast. After a while he sat up startled, gazed at what little he could see of the brightening sky, and said in tone approaching a yelp, "Yes, sure, that's it - both heads!"

Stewing the idea over and over again, Leeming decided that it was essential to have a gadget. A crucifix or a crystal ball provides psychological advantages too good to miss. His gadget could be of any shape, size or design, made of any material as long as it was visibly and undeniably a contraption. Moreover, its potency would be greater if not made from items obtainable within his cell such as parts of his clothing or pieces of the bench. Preferably it should be constructed of stuff from somewhere else and should convey the irresistible suggestion of a strange, unknown technology.

He doubted whether the Rigellians could help. Twelve hours per day they slaved in the prison's workshops, a fate that he would share after he'd been questioned and his aptitudes defined. The Rigellians made military pants and jackets, harness and boots, a small range of light engineering and electrical components. They detested producing for the enemy but their choice was a simple one: work or starve.

According to what he'd been told they hadn't the remotest chance of smuggling out of the workshops anything really useful, such as a knife, chisel, hammer or hacksaw blade. At the end of each work period the slaves were paraded and none allowed to break ranks until every machine had been checked, every loose tool accounted for and locked away. The first fifteen minutes of the midday break he spent searching the yard for any loose item that might somehow be turned to advantage. He wandered around with his gaze fixed on the ground like a worried kid seeking a lost coin. The only things he found were a couple of pieces of wood four inches square by one inch thick and these he slipped into his pocket without having the vaguest notion of what he intended to do with them.

Finishing the hunt, he squatted by the wall, had a whispered chat with a couple of Rigellians. His mind wasn't on the conversation and the pair mooched off when a curious guard came near. Later another Rigellian edged up to him. "Earthman, are you still going to get out of here?" "You bet I am!"

The other chuckled and scratched an ear, an action that his species used to express polite scepticism. "I think we've a better chance than you're ever likely to get." Leeming shot him a sharp glance. "Why?" "There are more of us and we're together," evaded the Rigellian as though realizing that he'd been on the point of saying too much. "What can you do on your own?" Just then he noticed the ring on the others ear-scratching finger and became fascinated by it. He'd seen the modest ornament before. A number of Rigellians were wearing similar objects. So were some of the guards. These rings were neat affairs consisting of four or five turns of thin wire with the ends shaped and soldered to form the owner's initials. "Where'd you dig up the jewelry?" he asked. "Where did I get what?" "The ring." "Oh, that." Lowering his hand, the Rigellian studied the ring with satisfaction. "We make them ourselves in the workshops. It breaks the monotony." "Mean to say the guards don't stop you?" "They don't interfere. There's no harm in it. Besides, we've made quite a few for the guards themselves. We've made them some automatic lighters as well and could have turned out a lot for ourselves if we'd had any use for them." He paused, looked thoughtful and added, "We think the guards have been selling rings and lighters outside. At least, we hope so." "Why?" "Maybe they'll build up a nice steady trade. Then when they're comfortably settled in it we'll cut supplies and demand a rake-off in the form of extra rations and a few unofficial privileges." "That's a smart idea," approved Leeming. "It would help all concerned to have a high-pressure salesman pushing the goods in the big towns. How about putting me down for that job?" Giving a faint smile, the Rigellian continued, "Handmade junk doesn't matter. But let the guards find that one small screwdriver is missing and there's hell to pay. Everyone is stripped naked on the spot and the culprit suffers." "They wouldn't care about losing a small coil of that wire, would they?" "I doubt it. There's plenty of it and they don't bother to check the stock. What can anyone do with a piece of wire?" "Heaven alone knows," Leeming admitted. "But I want some all the same." "You'll never pick a lock with it in a million moons," warned the other. "It's too soft and thin." "I want enough to make a set of Zulu bangles. I sort of fancy myself in Zulu bangles." "And what are those?" "Never mind. Get me some of that wire - that's all I ask." "You can steal it yourself in the near future. After you've been questioned, they'll send you to the workshops." "I want it before then. I want it just as soon as I can get

it. The more the better and the sooner the better." The Rigellian thought it over, finally said, "If you've a plan in your mind keep it to yourself. Don't let slip a hint of it to anyone. Open your mouth once too often and somebody will beat you to it." "Thanks for the good advice, friend," said Leeming. "Now how about a supply of wire?" "See you this time tomorrow." With that, the Rigellian left him, wandered into the crowd.

At the appointed hour the other was there, passed him the loot. "Nobody gave this to you, see? You found it lying in the yard. Or you found it hidden in your cell. Or you conjured it out of thin air. But nobody gave it to you." "Don't worry. I won't involve you in any way. And thanks a million."

The wire was a thick, pocket-sized coil of pliable copper. When unrolled in the darkness of his cell it measured a little more than his own length, or about seven feet.

Leeming doubled it, waggled it to and fro until it broke, hid one half under the bottom of the bench. Then he spent a couple of hours worrying a nail out of the end of the bench. It was hard going and it played hob with his fingers but he persisted until the nail was free.

Finding one of the small squares of wood, he approximated its center, stamped the nail halfway into it with the heel of his boot. Footsteps sounded along the corridor; he shoved the stuff out of sight beneath the bench, lay down just in time before the spy-hole opened. The light flashed on, a cold, reptilian eye looked in, somebody grunted. The light cut off, the spy-hole shut.

Resuming his task, Leeming twisted the nail one way and then the other, stamping on it with his boot from time to time. The task was tedious but at least it gave him something to do. He persevered until he had drilled a neat hole two-thirds of the way through the wood.

Next, he took his half-length of wire, broke it into two unequal parts, shaped the shorter piece to form a neat loop with two legs each three or four inches long. He tried to make the loop as near to a perfect circle as possible. The longer piece he wound tightly around the loop so that it formed a close-fitting coil with legs matching the others. Propping his bench against the wall, he climbed up to the window and examined his handiwork in the glow from outside floodlights, made a few minor adjustments and felt satisfied. He replaced the bench and used the nail to make two small nicks on its edge representing the exact diameter of the loop. Lastly he counted the number of turns to the coil. There were twenty-seven.

It was important to remember these details because in all likelihood he would have to make a second gadget as nearly identical as possible. That very similarity would help to bother the enemy. When a plotter makes two mysterious objects which are to all intents and purposes the same, it is hard to resist the notion that he knows what he is doing and has a sinister purpose.

To complete his preparations he coaxed the nail back into the place where it belonged. Sometime he'd need it again as a valuable tool. They'd never find it and deprive him of it because, to the searcher's mind, anything visibly not disturbed

is not suspect.

Carefully, he forced the four legs of the coiled loop into the hole that he'd drilled, thus making the square of wood function as a supporting base. He now had a gadget, a thing-umabob, a means to an end. He was the original inventor and sole proprietor of the Leeming-Finagle something-or-other. Certain chemical reactions take place only in the presence of a catalyst, like marriages legalized by the presence of an official. Some equations can be solved only by the inclusion of an unknown quantity called X. If you haven't enough to obtain a desired result, you've got to add what's needed. If you require outside help that doesn't exist, you must invent it.

Whenever Man had found himself unable to master his environment with his bare hands, thought Leeming, the said environment had been coerced or bullied into submission by Man plus X. That had been so since the beginning of time: Man plus a tool or a weapon.

But X did not have to be anything concrete or solid, it did not have to be lethal or even visible. It could be as intangible and unprovable as the threat of hellfire or the promise of heaven. It could be a dream, an illusion, a great big thundering lie - just anything.

There was only one positive test: whether it worked. If it did, it was efficient. Now to see.

There was no sense in using the Terran language except perhaps as an incantation when one was necessary. Nobody here understood Terran, to them it was just an alien gabble. Besides, his delaying tactic of pretending to be slow to learn the local tongue was no longer effective. They knew that he could speak it almost as well as they could themselves. Holding the loop assembly in his left hand, he went to the door, applied his ear to the closed spy-hole, listened for the sound of patrolling feet. It was twenty minutes before heavy boots came clumping toward him.

"Are you there?" he called, not too loudly but enough to be heard. "Are you there?"

Backing off fast, he lay on his belly on the floor and stood the loop six inches in front of his face.

"Are you there?"

The spy-hole clicked open, the light came on, a sour eye looked through.

Completely ignoring the watcher, and behaving with the air of one far too absorbed in his task to notice that he was being observed, Leeming spoke through the coiled loop.

"Are you there?"

"What are you doing?" demanded the guard.

Recognizing the other's voice, Leeming decided that for once luck must be turning his way. This character, a chump named Marsin, knew enough to point a gun and fire it or, if unable to do so, yell for help. In all other matters he was not of the elite. In fact, Marsin would have to think twice to pass muster as a half-wit.

"What are you doing?" insisted Marsin, raising his voice.

"Calling," said Leeming, apparently just waking up to the other's existence.

"Calling? Calling what or where?"

"Mind your own quillpole business," Leeming ordered, giving a nice display of impatience. Concentrating attention

upon the loop, he turned it round a couple of degrees. "Are you there?"

"It is forbidden," insisted Marsin.

Letting go the loud sigh of one compelled to bear fools gladly, Leeming said, "What is forbidden?"

"To call."

"Don't display your ignorance. My species is always allowed to call. Where would we be if we couldn't, enk?"

That got Marsin badly tangled. He knew nothing about Earthmen or what peculiar privileges they considered essential to life. Neither could he give a guess as to where they'd be without them.

Moreover, he dared not enter the cell and put a stop to whatever was going on. An armed guard was strictly prohibited from going into a cell by himself and that rule had been rigid ever since a fed-up Rigellian had slugged one, snatched his gun and killed six while trying to make a break.

If he wanted to interfere he'd have to go see the sergeant of the guard and demand that something be done to stop pink-skinned aliens making noises through loops. The sergeant was an unlovely character with a tendency to shout the most intimate details of personal histories all over the landscape. It was the witching hour between midnight and dawn, a time when the sergeant's liver malfunctioned most audibly. And lastly, he, Marsin, had proved himself a misbegotten faplap far too often.

"You will cease calling and go to sleep," ordered Marsin with a touch of desperation, "or in the morning I shall report your insubordination to the officer of the day."

"Go ride a camel," Leeming invited. He rotated the loop in manner of one making careful adjustment. "Are you there?"

"I have warned you," Marsin persisted, his only visible eye popping at the loop.

"Fibble off!" roared Leeming.

Marsin shut the spy-hole and fibbled off.

As was inevitable after being up most of the night, Leeming overslept. His awakening was abrupt and rude. The door burst open with a loud crash and three guards plunged in, followed by an officer.

Without ceremony the prisoner was jerked off the bench, stripped and shoved into the corridor stark naked. The guards then searched thoroughly through the clothing while the officer minced around them watching. He was, decided Leeming, definitely a fairy.

Finding nothing in the clothes they started examining the cell. Right off one of them discovered the loop assembly and gave it to the officer who held it gingerly as if it were a bouquet suspected of being a bomb.

Another guard trod on the second piece of wood, kicked it aside and ignored it. They tapped the floor and walls, seeking hollow sounds. Dragging the bench away from the wall, they looked over the other side of it but failed to turn it upside-down and see anything underneath. However, they handled the bench so much that it got on Leeming's nerves and he decided that now was the time to take a walk. He started along the corridor, a picture of nonchalant nudity. The officer let go a howl of outrage and pointed. The guards erupted from the cell, bawled orders to halt. A fourth guard, attracted by the noise, came round the bend of the corridor, aimed his gun threateningly. Leeming turned round

and ambled back.

He stopped as he reached the officer who was now outside the cell, fuming with temper. Striking a modest pose, he said, "Look - September Morn."

It meant nothing to the other who flourished the loop, did a little dance of rage and yelled, "What is this thing?"

"My property," declared Leeming with naked dignity.

"You are not entitled to possess it. As a prisoner of war you are not allowed to have anything."

"Who says so?"

"I say so!" informed the fairy somewhat violently.

"Who're you?" asked Leeming, showing no more than academic interest.

"By the Great Blue Sun, I'll show you who I am! Guards, take him inside and--"

"You're not the boss," interrupted Leeming, impressively cocksure. "The Commandant is the boss here. I say so and he says so. If you want to dispute it, let's go ask him."

The guards hesitated, assumed expressions of chronic uncertainty. They were unanimous in passing the buck to the officer. That worthy was taken aback. Staring incredulously at the prisoner, he became wary.

"Are you asserting that the Commandant has given permission for you to have this object?"

"I'm telling you that he hasn't refused permission. Also that it is not for you to give it or refuse it. You roll in your own hog-pen and don't try to usurp the position of your betters."

"Hog-pen? What is that?"

"You wouldn't know."

"I shall consult the Commandant about this." Deflated and unsure of himself, the officer turned to the guards. "Put him back in his cell and give him his breakfast as usual."

"How about returning my property, enk?" Leeming prompted.

"Not until I have seen the Commandant."

They hustled him into the cell. He got dressed. Breakfast came, the inevitable bowl of slop. He cursed the guards for not making it bacon and eggs. A display of self-assurance and some aggressiveness was necessary to push the game along. For some reason the tutor did not appear, so he spent the morning furbishing his fluency with the aid of the books. At midday they let him into the yard and he could detect no evidence of a special watch being kept upon him while he mingled with the crowd.

The Rigellian whispered, "I got the opportunity to take another coil of wire. So I grabbed it in case you wanted more," He slipped it across, saw it vanish into a pocket.

"That's all I intend to steal. Don't ask me again. One can tempt fate too often."

"What's the matter? Is it getting risky? Are they suspicious of you?"

"Everything is all right so far." He glanced cautiously around. "If some of the other prisoners learn that I'm pinching wire they'll start taking it too. They'll snatch it in the hope of discovering what I intend to do with it, so that they can use it for the same purpose. Two years in prison is two years of education in unmitigated selfishness. Everybody is always on the watch for some advantage, real or imaginary, that he can grab off somebody else. This lousy life brings out the worst in us as well as the best."

"I see."

"A couple of small coils will never be missed," the other went on. "But once the rush starts the stuff will evaporate in wholesale quantities. And that's when all hell will break loose. I dare not take the chance of creating a general ruckus."

"Meaning you fellows can't afford to risk a detailed search right now?" suggested Leeming pointedly.

The Rigellian shied like a frightened horse. "I didn't say that."

"I can put two and two together as expertly as anyone else." Leeming favored him with a reassuring wink. "I can also keep my mouth shut."

He watched the other mooch away. Then he sought around the yard for more pieces of wood but failed to find any. Oh, well, no matter. In a pinch he could do without. Come to that, he'd darned well have to do without.

The afternoon was given over to linguistic studies on which he was able to concentrate without interruption. That was one advantage of being in the clink, perhaps the only one. A fellow could educate himself. When the light became too poor and the first pale stars showed through the barred opening in the wall, he kicked the door until the sound of it thundered all over the block.

VIII

FEEET came running and the spy-hole opened. It was Marsin again.

"So it's you, faplap," greeted Leeming. He let go a snort of contempt. "You had to blab, of course. You had to curry favor by reporting me to the officer." He drew himself up to full height. "Well, I am sorry for you. I'd fifty times rather be me than you."

"Sorry for me?" Marsin registered confusion. "Why?"

"Because you are going to suffer."

"I am?"

"Yes, you! Not immediately, if that is any consolation. First of all it is necessary for you to undergo the normal period of horrid anticipation. But eventually you are going to suffer. I don't expect you to believe me. All you need do is wait and see."

"It was my duty," explained Marsin semi-apologetically.

"That fact will be considered in mitigation," Leeming assured, "and your agonies will be modified in due proportion."

"I don't understand," complained Marsin, developing a node of worry somewhere within the solid bone.

"You will - some dire day. So also will those stinking faplaps who beat me up in the yard. You can inform them for me that their quota of pain is being arranged."

"I am not supposed to talk to you," said Marsin, dimly perceiving that the longer he stood by the spy-hole the bigger the fix he got into. "I shall have to go."

"All right. But I want something."

"What is it?"

"I want my bopamagilvie - that thing the officer took away."

"You cannot have it unless the Commandant gives permission. He is absent today and will not return before tomorrow morning."

"That's no use. I want it now."

"You cannot have it now."

"Forget it." Leeming gave an airy wave of his hand. "I'll create another one."

"It is forbidden," reminded Marsin very feebly.

"Ha-ha!" said Leeming.

After darkness had grown complete he got the wire from under the bench and manufactured a second loop assembly to all intents identical with the first one. Twice he was interrupted but not caught.

That job finished, he upended the bench and climbed it.

Taking the newly received coil of wire from his pocket, he tied one end tightly around the middle bar and hung the coil outside the window-gap. With spit and dust he camouflaged the bright copper surface of the one visible strand, made sure that it could not be seen at farther than nose-tip-distance. He slid down, replaced the bench. The window-gap was so high in the wall that all of its ledge and the bottom three inches of its bars were invisible from below.

Going to the door he listened and at the right time called, "Are you there?"

When the light came on and the spy-hole had opened, he got the instinctive feeling that a bunch of them were clustered outside the door; also that the eye in the hole was not Marsin's.

Ignoring everything else, he rotated the loop slowly and carefully, meanwhile calling, "Are you there? Are you there?" After traversing about forty degrees he paused, gave his voice a tone of intense satisfaction and exclaimed, "So you are there at last! Why don't you keep within easy reach so that we can talk without me having to summon you through a loop?"

Going silent, he put on the expression of one who listens intently. The eye in the spy-hole widened, got shoved away, was replaced by another.

"Well," said Leeming, settling himself down for a cosy chat, "I'll point them out to you first chance I get and leave you to deal with them as you think fit. Let's switch to our own language. There are too many big ears around for my liking." Taking a deep breath, he rattled off at tremendous speed and without pause, "Out sprang the web and opened wide the mirror cracked from side to side the curse has come upon me cried the Lady of-"

Out sprang the door and opened wide and two guards almost fell headlong into the cell in their eagerness to make a quick snatch. Two more posed outside with the fairy glowering between them. Marsin hovered fearfully in the background.

A guard grabbed the loop assembly, yelled, "I've got it!" and rushed out. His companion followed at full gallop. Both seemed hysterical with excitement. There was a pause of ten seconds before the door shut. Leeming exploited the fact. Pointing the two middle fingers of one hand at the group, he made horizontal stabbing motions toward them. Giving 'em the Devil's Horns they'd called it when he was a kid. The classic gesture of donating the evil eye.

"There they are," he declaimed dramatically, talking to something that nobody else could see. "Those are the scaly-skinned bums I've been telling you about. They want trouble. They like it, they love it, they dote on it. Give them all they can take."

The whole bunch managed to look alarmed before the door cut them from sight with a vicious slam. Listening at

the spy-hole he heard them tramp away, muttering steadily between themselves.

Within ten minutes he had broken a length off the coil hanging from the window bars, restored the spit and dust disguise of the holding strand. Half an hour later he had another neatly made bopamagilvie. Practice was making him expert in the swift and accurate manufacture of these things. Lacking wood for a base he used the loose nail to dig a hole in the dirt between the big stone slabs composing the floor of his cell. He rammed the legs of the loop into the hole, twisted the contraption this way and that to make ceremonial rotation easy. Then he booted the door something cruel.

When the right moment arrived he lay on his belly and commenced reciting through the loop the third paragraph of Rule 27, Section 9, Subsection B, of Space Regulations. He chose it because it was a gem of bureaucratic phraseology, a single sentence one thousand words long meaning something known only to God.

"Where refueling must be carried out as an emergency measure at a station not officially listed as a home-station or definable for special purposes as a home-station under Section A(5) amendment A(5)B, the said station shall be treated as if it were definable as a home-station under Section A(5) amendment A(5)B providing that the emergency falls within the authorized list of technical necessities as given in Section J(29-33), with addenda subsequent thereto as applicable to home-stations where such are-

The spy-hole flipped open and shut. Somebody scooted away at top speed. A minute afterward the corridor shook to what sounded like a massed cavalry charge. The spy-hole again opened and shut. The door crashed inward.

This time they reduced him to his bare pelt, searched his clothes, raked the cell from end to end. Their manner was that of those singularly lacking in brotherly love. Turning the bench upside-down, they tapped it, knocked it, kicked it, did everything but run a large magnifying glass over it.

Watching this operation, Leeming encouraged them by emitting a sinister snigger. There had been a time when he could not have produced a sinister snigger even to win a very large bet. But he could do it now. The ways in which a man can rise to the occasion are without limit.

Giving him a look of sudden death and total destruction, a guard went out, staggered back with a heavy ladder, mounted it and suspiciously surveyed the window-gap. As an intelligent examination it was a dead loss because his mind was concerned only with the solidity of the bars. He grasped each bar with both hands and shook vigorously. His fingers did not touch the thread of wire nor did his eyes detect it. Satisfied, he got down and tottered out with the ladder. The others departed. Leeming dressed himself, listened at the spy-hole. Just a very faint hiss of breath and occasional rustle of clothes nearby. He sat on the bench and waited. In short time the lights blazed on and the spy-hole popped open. Stabbing two fingers toward the hole, he declaimed, "Die faplap!"

The hole snapped shut. Feet moved away, stamping much too loudly. He waited. After half an hour of complete silence the eye offered itself again and for its pains received another two-fingered curse. Five minutes later it had yet another be-

stowed upon it. If it was the same eye all the time, it was a glutton for punishment.

This game continued at erratic intervals for four hours before the eye had had enough. Leeming immediately made another coiled loop, gabbled through it at the top of his voice and precipitated another raid. They did not strip him and search the cell this time. They contented themselves with confiscating the gadget. And they showed symptoms of aggravation.

There was just enough wire left for one more blood-pressure booster. He decided to keep it against a future need and get some sleep. Inadequate food and not enough slumber were combining to make inroads upon his physical reserves.

Flopping full length on the bench, he sighed and closed red-rimmed eyes. In due time he started snoring fit to saw through the bars. That caused a panic in the passage and brought the gang along in another rush.

Wakened by the uproar, he damned them to perdition.

Then he lay down again. He was plain bone-tired - but so were they.

He slept solidly until midday without a break except for the usual lousy breakfast. Then came the usual lousy dinner.

At exercise time they kept him locked in. He hammered and kicked on the door, demanded to know why he wasn't being allowed to walk in the yard, shouted threats of glandular dissection for all and sundry. They took no notice.

So he sat on the bench and thought things over. Perhaps this denial of his only measure of freedom was a form of retaliation for making them hop around like agitated fleas in the middle of the night. Or perhaps the Rigellian was under suspicion and they'd decided to prevent contact.

Anyway, he had got the enemy bothered. He was messing them about single-handed, far behind the lines. That was something. The fact that a combatant is a prisoner doesn't mean he's out of the battle. Even behind thick walls he can still harass the foe, absorbing his time and energy, undermining his morale, pinning down at least a few of his forces. The next step, he concluded, was to widen and strengthen the curse. He must do it as comprehensively as possible. The more he spread it and the more ambiguous the terms in which he expressed it, the more plausibly he could grab the credit for any and every misfortune that was certain to occur sooner or later.

It was the technique of the gypsy's warning. People tend to attach specific meanings to ambiguities when circumstances arise and shape themselves to give special meanings. People don't have to be very credulous, either. It is sufficient for them to be made expectant, with a tendency to wonder - after the event.

'In the near future a tall, dark man will cross your path.

...'

After which any male above average height, and not a blond, fits the picture. And any time from five minutes to five years is accepted as the near future.

'Mamma, when the insurance man called he really smiled at me. Do you remember what the gypsy said?'

To accomplish anything worthwhile one must adapt to one's own environment. If the said environment is radically different from everyone else's, the method of accommodating to it must be equally different. So far as he knew, he,

Leeming, was the only Terran in this prison and the only prisoner held in solitary confinement. Therefore, his tactics could have nothing in common with any schemes the Rigelians had in mind.

The Rigellians were up to something, no doubt of that. They wouldn't be wary and secretive about nothing. It was almost a dead-sure bet that they were digging a tunnel. Probably a bunch of them were deep in the earth right now, scraping and scratching without tools. Removing dirt and rock a few pounds at a time. Progress at the rate of a pathetic two or three inches per night. A constant, never-ending risk of discovery, entrapment and perhaps some insane shooting. A year-long project that could be terminated in minutes with a shout and a chatter of automatic guns.

But to get out of a strong stone cell in a strong stone jail one doesn't have to make a desperate and spectacular escape. If sufficiently patient, resourceful, glib and cunning, he can talk the enemy into opening the doors and pushing him out.

Yes, you can use the wits that God has given you.

By law of probability various things must happen within and without the prison, not all of them pleasing to the enemy. Some officer must get the galloping gripes right under his belt. Or a guard must fall down a watchtower ladder and break a leg. Somebody must lose a wad of money or his pants or his senses. Farther afield a bridge must collapse, or a train get derailed; or a spaceship crash at take-off. Or there'd be an explosion in a munitions factory. Or a military leader would drop dead.

He'd be playing a trump card if he could establish his claim as the author of most of this trouble. The essential thing was to stake it in such a way that they could not effectively combat it, neither could they exact retribution in a torture chamber.

The ideal strategy was to convince the enemy of his malevolence in a way that would equally convince them of their own impotence. If he succeeded - and it was a big if - they would come to the logical conclusion that the only method of getting rid of constant trouble would be to get rid of Leeming, alive and in one piece.

The question of exactly how to achieve this fantastic result was a jumbo problem that would have appalled him back home. In fact he'd have declared it impossible, despite the basic lesson of space-conquest which is that nothing is impossible. But by now he'd had three lonely months in which to incubate a solution - and the brain become wonderfully stimulated by grim necessity. It was a good thing that he had an idea in mind; he had a mere ten minutes before the time came to apply it.

The door opened, a trio of guards scowled at him and one of them rasped, "The Commandant wishes to see you at once. Amash, faplap!"

Leeming walked out saying, "Once and for all, I am not a faplap, see?"

The guard booted him in the buttocks.

The Commandant lolled behind a desk with a lower ranking officer seated on either side. He was a heavily built specimen. His lidless, horn-covered eyes gave him a frigid, unemotional appearance as he studied the prisoner.

Leeming calmly sat himself on a handy chair and the officer on the right immediately bellowed, "Stand to attention in the

presence of the Commandant'"

Making a gesture of contradiction, the Commandant said boredly, "Let him sit."

A concession at the start, thought Leeming. Curiously, he eyed a wad of papers on the desk. Probably a complete report of his misdeeds, he guessed. Time would show. Anyway, he had one or two weapons with which to counter theirs. It would be a pity, for instance, if he couldn't exploit their ignorance. The Allies knew nothing about the Zangastans. By the same token the Zangastans knew little or nothing about several Allied species, Terrans included. In coping with him they were coping with an unknown quantity.

And from now on it was a quantity doubled by the addition of X.

"I am given to understand that you now speak our language," began the Commandant.

"Not much use denying it," Leeming confessed.

"Very well. You will give us information concerning yourself."

"I have given it already. I gave it to Major Klavith."

"That is no concern of mine. You will answer my questions and your answers had better be truthful." Positioning an official form upon his desk, he held his pen in readiness. "Name of planet of origin?"

"Earth."

The other wrote it phonetically in his own script, then continued, "Name of race?"

"Terran."

"Name of species?"

"Homo nosipaca," said Leeming, keeping his face straight.

Writing it down, the Commandant looked doubtful, asked,

"What does that mean?"

"Space-traversing Man," Leeming informed.

"Hm!" The other was impressed despite himself. "Your personal name?"

"John Leeming."

"John Leeming," repeated the Commandant, putting it down.

"And Eustace Phenackertiban," added Leeming airily.

That was written down also, though the Commandant had some difficulty in finding suitable hooks and curlicues to express Phenackertiban. Twice he asked Leeming to repeat the alien cognomen and twice Leeming obliged.

Studying the result, which resembled a Chinese recipe for rotten egg gumbo, the Commandant said, "Is it your custom to have two sets of names?"

"Most certainly," Leeming assured. "We can't avoid it, seeing that there are two of us."

Twitching the eyebrows he didn't possess, the listener showed mild surprise. "You mean that you are always conceived and born in pairs? Two identical males or females every time?"

"No, no, not at all." Leeming adopted the air of one about to state the obvious. "Whenever one of us is born he immediately acquires a Eustace."

"A Eustace?"

"Yes."

The Commandant frowned, picked his teeth, glanced at the other officers. If he was seeking inspiration he was out of luck; they put on the blank expressions of fellows who've come along merely to keep company.

"What," asked the Commandant at long last, "is a Eustace?"

Gaping at him in open incredulity, Leeming said, "You don't know?"

"I am putting the questions. You will provide the answers. What is a Eustace?"

"An invisibility that is part of one's self," Leeming informed him.

Understanding dawned on the Commandant's scaly face.

"Ah, you mean a soul. You give your soul a separate name?"

"Nothing of the sort. I have a soul of my own and Eustace has a soul of his own." He added as an afterthought, "At least, I hope we have."

The Commandant lay back in his chair and stared at him. There was quite a long silence during which the side officers continued to play dummies.

Finally the Commandant admitted, "I do not understand."

"In that case," announced Leeming, irritatingly triumphant, "it is evident that you have no alien equivalent of Eustaces yourselves. You're all on your own. Just single-lifers. That's your hard luck."

Slamming a hand on the desk, the Commandant gave his voice a bit more military bark and demanded, "Exactly what is a Eustace? Explain to me as clearly as possible!"

"I'm in poor position to refuse the information," Leeming conceded with hypocritical reluctance. "Not that it matters much. Even if you gain perfect understanding there is nothing you can do about it."

"That remains to be seen," opined the Commandant, looking bellicose. "Cease evading the issue and tell me all that you know about these Eustaces."

"Every Earthling lives a double life from birth to death," said Leeming. "He exists in close mental association with an entity that always calls himself Eustace something-or-other. Mine happens to be Eustace Phenackertiban."

"You can actually see this entity?"

"No, never at any time. I cannot see him, smell him or feel him."

"Then how do you know that this is not a racial delusion?"

"Firstly, because every Terran can hear his own Eustace. I can hold long conversations with mine, providing that he happens to be within reach, and I can hear him speaking clearly and logically within the depths of my mind."

"You cannot hear him with the ears?"

"No, only with the mind. The communication is telepathic, or to be more accurate, quasi-telepathic."

"I can believe that," informed the Commandant with considerable sarcasm. "You have been heard talking out loud, shouting at the top of your voice. Some telepathy, enk?"

"When I have to boost my thoughts to get range, I can do it better by expressing them in words. People do the same when they sort out a problem by talking to themselves. Haven't you ever talked to yourself?"

"That is no business of yours. What other proof have you that a Eustace is not imaginary?"

Taking a deep breath, Leeming went determinedly on, "He has the power to do many things after which there is visible evidence that those things have been done," He shifted attention to the absorbed officer sitting on the left, "For ex-

ample, if my Eustace had a grudge against this officer and advised me of his intention to make him fall downstairs, and if before long the officer fell downstairs and broke his neck-" "It could be mere coincidence," the Commandant scoffed. "It could," agreed Leeming. "But there can be far too many coincidences, If a Eustace promises that he is going to do forty or fifty things in succession and all of them happen, he is either doing them as promised or he is a most astounding prophet. Eustaces don't claim to be prophets, Nobody visible or invisible can foresee the future with such detailed accuracy."

"That is true enough."

"Do you accept the fact that you have a father and mother?"

"Of course," admitted the Commandant.

"You don't consider it strange or abnormal?"

"Certainly not. It is inconceivable that one should be born without parents."

"Similarly, we accept the fact that we have Eustaces and we cannot conceive the possibility of existing without them."

The Commandant thought it over, said to the right-hand officer, "This smacks of mutual parasitism. It would be interesting to learn what benefit they derive from each other."

"It's no use asking what my Eustace gets out of me,"

Leeming chipped in. "I can't tell you because I don't know."

"You expect me to believe that?" asked the Commandant, behaving like nobody's fool. He showed his teeth. "On your own evidence you can talk with him. Why have you never asked him?"

"We Terrans got tired of asking that question long, long ago. The subject has been dropped and the situation accepted."

"Why?"

"The answer was always the same. Eustaces readily admit that we are essential to their existence but cannot explain how because they've no way of making us understand."

"That could be an excuse, a self-preservative evasion," the Commandant offered. "They won't tell you because they don't want you to know."

"Well, what do you suggest we do about it?"

Dodging that one, the Commandant went on, "What benefit do you get out of the association? What good is your Eustace to you?"

"He provides company, comfort, information, advice and-"

"And what?"

Bending forward, hands on knees, Leeming practically spat it at him. "If necessary, vengeance!"

That struck home good and hard. The Commandant rocked back, displaying a mixture of ire and scepticism. The two under-officers registered disciplined apprehension. It's a hell of a war when a man can be chopped down by a ghost.

Pulling himself together, the Commandant forced a grim smile as he pointed out, "You're a prisoner. You've been under detention a good many days. Your Eustace doesn't seem to have done much about it."

"Not yet," agreed Leeming happily.

"What do you mean, not yet?"

"As one free to roam at will on an enemy world he has enough top priority jobs to keep him busy for a while. He's been doing plenty and he'll do plenty more, in his own time

and his own way." ,

"Is that so? And what does he intend to do?"

"Wait and see," Leeming advised with formidable confidence.

That did not fill them with delight.

"Nobody can imprison more than half a Terran," he went on. "The solid, visible, tangible half. The other half cannot be pinned down by any method whatsoever. It is beyond anyone's control. It wanders loose, collecting information of military value, indulging in a little sabotage, doing just as it pleases. You've created that situation and you're stuck with it."

"We created it? We didn't invite you to come here. You dumped yourself on us unasked."

"I had no choice about it because I had to make an emergency landing. This could have been a friendly world. It isn't. Who's to blame for that? If you insist on fighting with the Combine against the Allies you must accept the consequences - including whatever a Eustace sees fit to do."

"Not if we kill you," said the Commandant nastily.

Leeming gave a disdainful laugh. "That would make matters fifty times worse."

"In what way?"

"The life span of a Eustace is longer than that of his Terran partner. When a man dies his Eustace takes seven to ten years to disappear from existence. We have an ancient song to the effect that old Eustaces never die, they only fade away. Our world holds thousands of lonely, disconnected Eustaces gradually fading."

"So?"

"Kill me and you'll isolate my Eustace here with no man or other Eustace for company. His days will be numbered and he'll know it. He'll have nothing to lose, being no longer restricted by considerations of my safety. Because I'll be dead, he'll be able to eliminate me from his plans and give his undivided attention to anything he chooses." He eyed the listeners as he finished, "It's a safe bet that he'll run amok and create an orgy of destruction. Remember, you're an alien lifeform to him. He'll have no feelings or compunctions with regard to you."

The Commandant reflected in silence. It was exceedingly difficult to believe all this and his prime instinct was to reject it lock, stock and barrel. But before space-conquest it had been equally difficult to believe things more fantastic but now accepted as commonplace. He dare not dismiss it as nonsense; the time had long gone by when anyone could afford to be dogmatic. The space adventures of all the Combine and the Allied species had scarcely scratched one galaxy of an unimaginable number composing the universe; none could say what incredible secrets were yet to be revealed including, perhaps, such etheric entities as Eustaces.

Yes, the stupid believe things because they are credulous - or they are credulous because of their stupidity. The intelligent do not blindly accept but, being aware of their own ignorance, neither do they reject. Right now the Commandant was acutely aware of general ignorance concerning this lifeform known as Terrans. It could be that they were dual creations, half-Joe, half-Eustace.

"All this is not impossible," he decided ponderously, "but it appears to me somewhat improbable. There are more than twenty lifeforms associated with us in the Combine. I do not

know of one that exists in natural copartnership with another."

"The Lathians do," contradicted Leeming, mentioning the leaders of the opposition, the chief cause of the war. The Commandant was suitably startled. "You mean they have Eustaces, too?"

"No, I don't. They have something similar but inferior. Each Lathian is unconsciously controlled by an entity that calls itself Willy something-or-other. They don't know it, of course. We wouldn't know it if our Eustaces hadn't told us."

"How did they find out?"

"As you know, the biggest battles to date have all been fought in the Lathian sector. Both sides have taken prisoners. Our Eustaces told us that each Lathian prisoner had a controlling Willy but was blissfully unaware of it." He grinned, added, "They made it plain that a Eustace doesn't think much of a Willy. Apparently a Willy is a pretty low form of associated life."

Frowning, the Commandant said, "This is something definite, something we should be able to check for ourselves. But how are we going to do it if the Lathians are ignorant of this state of affairs?"

"Easy as pie," Leeming offered. "They are holding a bunch of Terran prisoners. Get someone to ask those prisoners, separately and individually, whether the Lathians have the Wil-lies."

"We'll do just that," snapped the Commandant, his manner that of one about to call a bluff. He turned to the right-hand officer. "Bajashim, beam a signal to our chief liaison officer at Lathian H.Q. and order him to question those prisoners."

"You can double-check while you're at it," interjected Leeming, "just to clinch it. To us, anyone who shares his life with an invisible being is known as a Nut; Ask the prisoners whether all the Lathians are Nuts."

"Take note of that and have it asked as well," ordered the Commandant. He returned attention to Leeming. "Since you could not anticipate your forced landing and capture, and since you have been kept in close confinement, there is no possibility of collusion between you and Terran prisoners far away."

"That's right."

"Therefore I shall weigh your evidence in the light of what replies come to my signal." He stared hard at the other. "If those replies fail to confirm your statements, I'll know that you are a shameless liar in some respects and probably a liar in all respects. Here, we have special and very effective methods of dealing with liars."

"That's to be expected. But if the replies do confirm me, you'll know that I've told the truth, won't you?"

"No," said the Commandant savagely.

It was Leeming's turn to be shocked. "Why not?"

Thinning his lips, the Commandant growled, "As I have remarked, there cannot possibly have been any direct communication between you and other Terran prisoners. However, that means nothing. There can have been collusion between your Eustace and their Eustaces."

Bending sidewise, he jerked open a drawer, placed a loop assembly on the desk. Then another and another. A bunch of them.

"Well," he invited with malicious triumph, "what have you

to say to that?"

IX

LEEMING went into something not far from a momentary panic. He could see what the other meant. He could talk to his Eustace, who in turn could talk to other Eustaces. And the other Eustaces could talk to their imprisoned partners. Get yourself out of that!

He had an agile mind, but after three months of semi-starvation it was tending to lose pace. Lack of adequate nourishment was telling on him already; his thoughts plodded at the very time he wanted them to sprint.

The three behind the desk were waiting for him, watching his face, counting the seconds he needed to produce an answer. The longer he took to find one, the weaker it would be. The quicker he came up with something good the more plausible it would sound. Cynical satisfaction was creeping into their faces and he was inwardly frantic by the time he saw an opening and grabbed at it.

"You're wrong on two counts."

"State them."

"Firstly, one Eustace cannot communicate with another over a distance so enormous. His mental output just won't reach that far. To talk from world to world he has to have the help of a Terran who, in his turn, has radio equipment available."

"We've only your word for that," the Commandant reminded. "If a Eustace can communicate without limit it would be your best policy to conceal the fact. You would be a fool to admit it."

"I cannot do more than give you my word regardless of whether or not you credit it."

"I do not credit it - yet."

"No Terran task force has rushed to my rescue, as would happen had my Eustace told them about me."

"Pfah!" said the Commandant. "It would take them much longer to get here than the time you have spent as a prisoner. Probably twice as long. And then only if by some miracle they managed to avoid being shot to pieces on the way. The absence of a rescue party means nothing." He waited for a response that did not come, finished, "If you have anything else to say, it had better be convincing."

"It is," assured Leeming. "And we don't have my word for it. We have yours."

"Nonsense! I have made no statements concerning Eustaces."

"On the contrary, you have said that there could be collusion between them."

"What of it?"

"There can be collusion only if Eustaces really exist, in which case my evidence is true. But if my evidence is false, then Eustaces do not exist and there cannot possibly be a conspiracy between non-existent things."

The Commandant sat perfectly still while his face took on a faint shade of purple. He looked and felt like the trapper trapped. The left-hand officer wore an expression of one struggling hard to suppress a disrespectful snicker.

"If," continued Leeming, piling it on for good measure, "you do not believe in Eustaces, then you cannot logically

believe in conspiracy between them. On the other hand, if you believe in the possibility of collusion then you've got to believe in Eustaces. That is, of course, if you're in your right mind."

"Guard!" roared the Commandant. He pointed an angry finger. "Take him back to his cell." Obediently, they started hustling the prisoner through the door when he changed his mind and bawled, "Halt!" Snatching up a loop assembly, he waved it at Leeming. "Where did you get the material with which to make this?"

"My Eustace brought it for me. Who else?"

"Get out of my sight!"

"Merse, faplap!" urged the guards, prodding with their guns. "Amash! Amash!"

The rest of that day and all the next one he spent sitting or lying on the bench, reviewing what had taken place, planning his next moves, and, in lighter moments, admiring his own ability as a whopping big liar.

Now and again he wondered how his efforts to battle his way to freedom with his tongue compared with Rigellian attempts to do it with bare hands. Who was making the most progress? Of greater importance, who, once out, would stay out? One thing was certain: his method was less tiring to the underfed and weakened body, though more exhausting to the nerves.

Another advantage was that for the time being he had side-tracked their intention of squeezing him for military information. Or had he? Possibly from their viewpoint his revelations concerning the dual nature of Terrans were infinitely more important than details of armaments, which data might be false anyway. All the same, he had avoided for a time what might otherwise have been a rough and painful interrogation. By thus postponing the agony he had added brilliance to the original gem of wisdom, namely, that baloney baffies brains.

Just for the hell of it he bided his time and, when the spy-hole opened, let himself be caught in the middle of giving grateful thanks to Eustace for some weird service not specified. As intended, this got the jumpy Marsin to wondering who had arrived at the crossroads and copped some of Eustace's dirty work. Doubtless, the sergeant of the guard would speculate about the same matter before long. And in due course so would the officers.

Near midnight, with sleep still evading him, it occurred to him that there was no point in doing things by halves. If a thing is worth doing it is worth doing well - and that applies to lying as much as to anything else. Why rest content merely to register a knowing smile whenever the enemy suffered a petty misfortune?

His tactics could be extended much farther than that. No form of life was secure from the vagaries of chance. Good fortune came along as well as bad, in any part of the cosmos. There was no reason why Eustace should not snatch the credit for both. No reason why he, Leeming, should not take unto himself the implied power to reward as well as to punish.

That wasn't the limit, either. Good luck and bad luck are positive phases of existence. He could cross the neutral zone and confiscate the negative phases. Through Eustace he could assign to himself not only the credit for things done, good or

bad, but also for things not done. In the pauses between staking claims to things that happened he could exploit those that did not happen.

The itch to make a start right now was irresistible. Rolling off the bench, he belted the door from top to bottom. The guard had just been changed, for the eye that peered in was that of Kolum, a character who had bestowed a kick in the rump not so long ago. Kolum was a cut above Marsin, being able to count upon all twelve fingers if given sufficient time to cogitate.

"So it is you!" said Leeming, showing vast relief. "I am very glad of that. I befriended you in the hope that he would lay off you, that he would leave you alone for at least a little while. He is far too impetuous and much too drastic. I can see that you are more intelligent than the other guards and therefore able to change for the better. Indeed, I have pointed out to him that you are obviously too civilized to be a sergeant. He is difficult to convince but I am doing my best for you."

"Huh?" said Kolum, half-flattered, half-scared.

"So he's left you alone at least for the time being," Leeming said, knowing that the other was in no position to deny it.

"He's done nothing to you - yet." He increased the gratification. "I'll do my very best to keep control of him. Only the stupidly brutal deserve slow death."

"That is true," agreed Kolum eagerly. "But what-"

"Now," interrupted Leeming with firmness, "it is up to you to prove that my confidence is justified and thus protect yourself against the fate that is going to visit the slower-witted. Brains were made to be used, weren't they?"

"Yes, but-"

"Those who don't possess brains cannot use what they haven't got, can they?"

"No, they cannot, but-"

"All that is necessary to demonstrate your intelligence is to take a message to the Commandant."

Kolum popped his eyes in horror. "It is impossible. I dare not disturb him at this hour. The sergeant of the guard will not permit it. He will-"

"You are not being asked to take the message to the Commandant immediately. It is to be given to him personally when he awakens in the morning."

"That is different," said Kolum, vastly relieved. "But I must warn you that if he disapproves of the message he will punish you and not me."

"He will not punish me lest I in turn punish him," assured Leeming, as though stating a demonstrable fact. "Write my message down."

Leaning his gun against the corridor's farther wall, Kolum dug pencil and paper out of a pocket. A strained expression came into his eyes as he prepared himself for the formidable task of inscribing a number of words.

"To the Most Exalted Lousy Screw," began Leeming.

"What does 'lousy screw' mean?" asked Kolum as he struggled to put down the strange Terran words phonetically.

"It's a title. It means 'your highness.' Man, how high he is!" Leeming pinched his nose while the other pored over the paper. He continued to dictate, going very slowly to keep pace with Kolum's literary talent. "The food is insufficient and very poor in quality. I am physically weak; I have lost much weight and my ribs are beginning to show. My Eustace

does not like it. The thinner I get, the more threatening he becomes. The time is fast approaching when I shall have to refuse all responsibility for his actions. Therefore, I beg Your Most Exalted Lousy Screwship to give serious consideration to this matter."

"There are many words and some of them long ones," complained Kolum, managing to look like a reptilian martyr. "I shall have to rewrite them more readably when I go off duty."

"I know, and I appreciate the trouble you are taking on my behalf." Leeming bestowed a beam of fraternal fondness.

"That's why I feel sure you'll live long enough to do the job."

"I must live longer than that," insisted Kolum, popping his eyes again. "I have the right to live, haven't I?"

"That is precisely the argument I've been using," said Leeming in the manner of one who has striven all night to establish the irrefutable but cannot yet guarantee success.

"I cannot talk to you any longer," informed Kolum, picking up his gun. "I am not supposed to talk to you at all. If the sergeant of the guard should catch me he will--"

"The sergeant's days are numbered," Leeming told him in judicial tones. "He will not live long enough to know he's dead."

His hand extended in readiness to close the spy-hole, Kolum paused, looked as if he'd been slugged with a sockful of wet sand. Then he said, "How can anyone live long enough to know that he's dead?"

"It depends on the method of killing," assured Leeming.

"There are some you've never heard of and cannot imagine."

At this point Kolum found the conversation distasteful. He closed the spy-hole. Leeming returned to the bench, sprawled upon it. The light went out. Seven stars peeped through the window slot - and they were not unattainable.

In the morning breakfast came an hour late but consisted of one full bowl of lukewarm pap, two thick slices of brown bread heavily smeared with grease, and a large cup of warm liquid vaguely resembling paralyzed coffee. He got through the lot with mounting triumph. By contrast with what they had been giving him, this feast made the day seem like Christmas. His spirits perked up with the fullness of his belly.

No summons to a second interview came that day or the next. The Commandant made no move for more than a week. Evidently His Lousy Screwship was still awaiting a reply from the Lathian sector and did not feel inclined to take further action before he received it. However, meals remained more substantial, a fact that Leeming viewed as positive evidence that someone was insuring himself against disaster.

Then early one morning the Rigellians acted up. From the cell they could be heard but not seen. Every day at about an hour after dawn the tramp of their two thousand pairs of feet sounded somewhere out of sight and died away toward the workshops. Usually that was all that could be heard, no voices, no desultory conversation, just the weary trudge of feet and an occasional bellow from a guard.

This time they came out singing, their raucous voices holding a distinct touch of defiance. In thunderous discord they were bawling something about Asta Zangasta's a dirty old geezer, got fleas on his chest and sores on his beezee. It

should have sounded childish and futile. It didn't. The corporate effort seemed to convey an unspoken threat. Guards yelled at them. The singing rose higher, defiance increasing along with the volume. Standing below his window, Leeming listened intently. This was the first mention he'd heard of the much-abused Asta Zangasta, presumably this world's king, emperor or leading hooligan. The bawling of two thousand voices rose to a crescendo. Guards screamed frenziedly and were drowned within the din. Somewhere a warning shot was fired. In the watchtowers the guards edged their guns around, dipped them as they aimed into the yard.

"Oh, what a basta is Asta Zangasta!" hollered the distant Rigellians as they reached the end of their epic poem. There followed blows, shots, scuffling sounds, howls of fury. A bunch of twenty fully armed guards raced flat-footed past Leeming's window, headed for the unseeable fracas. The uproar continued for half an hour before gradually it died away. The resulting silence could almost be felt. At exercise time Leeming had the yard to himself, there being not another prisoner in sight. He mooched around, puzzled and gloomy, until he encountered Marsin on yard patrol.

"Where are the others? What's happened to them?"

"They misbehaved and wasted a lot of time. They are being detained in the workshops until they have made up the loss in production. It is their own fault. They started work late for the deliberate purpose of slowing down output. We didn't even have time to count them."

Leeming grinned into his face. "And some guards were hurt?"

"Yes," Marsin admitted.

"Not severely," Leeming suggested. "Just enough to give them a taste of what is to come. Think it over!"

"What do you mean?"

"I meant what I said - think it over." Then he added, "But you were not injured. Think that over, too!"

He ambled away, leaving Marsin uneasy and bewildered. Six times he trudged around the yard while doing some heavy thinking himself. Sudden indiscipline among the Rigellians certainly had stirred up the prison and created enough excitement to last a week. He wondered what had caused it. Probably they'd done it to gain relief from incarceration and despair. Sheer boredom can drive people into performing the craziest tricks.

On the seventh time round he was still pondering when suddenly a remark struck him with force like the blow of a hammer. "We didn't even have time to count them." Holy smoke! That must be the motive of this morning's rowdy performance. The choral society had avoided a count. There could be only one reason why they should wish to dodge the regular numbering parade.

Finding Marsin again, he promised, "Tomorrow some of you guards will wish you'd never been born."

"Are you threatening us?"

"No, I am making a prophetic promise. Tell the guard officer what I have said. Tell the Commandant, too. It might help you to escape the consequences."

"I will tell them," said Marsin, mystified but grateful.

The following morning proved that he had been one hun-

dred percent correct in his supposition that the Rigellians were too shrewd to invite thick ears and black eyes without good reason. It had taken the enemy a full day to arrive at the same conclusion.

At one hour after dawn the Rigellians were marched out dormitory by dormitory, in batches of fifty instead of the usual continuous stream. They were counted in fifties, the easy way. This simple arithmetic became thrown out of kilter when one dormitory produced only twelve prisoners, all of them sick, wounded, or otherwise handicapped.

Infuriated guards rushed indoors to drag out the absent thirty-eight. They weren't there. The door was firm and solid, the window bars intact. Guards did considerable confused galloping around before one of them detected the slight shift of a well-trampled floor-slab. They lugged it up, found underneath a narrow but deep shaft from the bottom of which ran a tunnel. With great unwillingness one of them went down the shaft, crawled into the tunnel and in due time emerged a good distance outside the walls. Needless to say he had found the tunnel empty.

Sirens wailed, guards pounded all over the jail, officers shouted contradictory orders, the entire place began to resemble a madhouse. The Rigellians got it good and hard for spoiling the previous morning's count and thus giving the escapees a full day's lead. Boots and gun butts were freely used, bodies dragged aside badly battered and unconscious. The surviving top-ranker of the offending dormitory, a lieutenant with a severe limp, was held responsible for the break, charged, tried, sentenced, put against a wall and shot. Leeming could see nothing of this but did hear the hoarse commands of, "Present. . . aim . . . fire!" and the following volley.

He prowled round and round his cell, clenching and unclenching his fists, swearing mightily to himself. All that he wanted, all that he prayed for was a high-ranking Zangastan throat under his thumbs. The spy-hole flipped open but hastily shut before he could spit into somebody's eye.

The upset continued without abate as inflamed guards searched all dormitories one by one, testing doors, bars, walls, floors and even the ceilings. Officers screamed bloodthirsty threats at sullen groups of Rigellians who were slow to respond to orders.

At twilight the guards dragged in seven tired, bedraggled escapees who'd been caught on the run. Their reception was short and sharp. "Present. . . aim . . . fire!" Frenziedly Leeming battered at his door, but the spy-hole remained shut and nobody answered. Two hours later he made another coiled loop with the last of his wire. He spent half the night talking into it menacingly and at the top of his voice. Nobody took the slightest notice.

By noon next day a feeling of deep frustration had come over him. He estimated that the Rigellian break-out must have taken most of a year to prepare. Result: eight dead and thirty-one still loose. If they kept together and did not scatter, the thirty-one could form a crew large enough to seize a ship of any size up to and including a space-destroyer. But on the basis of his own experiences he thought they had remote chance of making such a theft.

With the whole world alarmed by an escape of this size there'd be strong military screens around every spaceport, and they would be maintained until the last of the thirty-one

had been rounded up. The free might stay free for quite a time if they were lucky, but they were planet-bound, doomed to ultimate recapture and subsequent execution. Meanwhile, their fellows were getting it rough in consequence and his own efforts had been messed up. He did not resent the break, not one little bit. Good luck to them. But if only it had taken place two months earlier or later. Moodily, he was finishing his dinner when four guards came for him. "The Commandant wants you at once." Their manner was edgy and subdued. One wore a narrow bandage around his scaly pate, another had a badly swollen eye. Just about the worst moment to choose, thought Leeming. The Commandant would be all set to go up like a rocket at first hint of opposition of any kind. You cannot argue with a brass hat in a purple rage; emotion comes uppermost, words are disregarded, logic is treated with contempt. He was going to have a tough job on his hands. The four marched him along the corridor, two in front, two behind. Left, right, left, right, thud, thud, thud - it made him think of a ceremonial parade to the guillotine. Around the corner in a little triangular yard there should be waiting a priest, a hanging knife, a wicker basket, a wooden box. Together they tramped into the same room as before. The Commandant was sitting behind his desk, but there were no junior officers in attendance. The only other person present was an elderly civilian occupying a chair on the Commandant's right; he studied the prisoner with a sharp, intent gaze as he entered and took a seat. "This is Pallam," introduced the Commandant with amiability so unexpected that it dumbfounded the listener. Showing a touch of awe, he added, "He has been sent here by no less a person than Zangasta himself." "A mental specialist, I presume?" invited Leeming, wary of a trap. "Nothing like that," said Pallam quietly. "I am especially interested in all aspects of symbiosis." Leeming's back hairs stirred. He did not like the idea of being cross-examined by an expert. Such characters had penetrating, unmilitary minds, and pernicious habit of destroying a good story by exhibiting its own contradictions. This mild-looking civilian, he decided, was definitely a major menace. "Pallam wishes to ask you a few questions," informed the Commandant, "but those will come later." He put on a self-satisfied expression. "For a start I wish to say that I am indebted for the information you gave at our previous interview." "You mean that it has proved useful to you?" asked Leeming, hardly believing his ears. "Very much so in view of this serious and most stupid mutiny. All the guards responsible for Dormitory Fourteen are to be drafted to battle areas where they will be stationed upon spaceports liable to attack. That is their punishment for gross neglect of duty." He gazed thoughtfully at the other, went on, "My own fate would have been no less had not Zangasta considered the escape a minor matter when compared with the important data I got from you." Though taken by surprise, Leeming was swift to cash in. "But when I asked you to see to it personally that I had better food. . . Surely you expected some reward?" "Reward?" The Commandant was taken aback. "I did not

think of such a thing."

"So much the better," approved Leeming, admiring the other's magnanimity. "A good deed is doubly good when done with no ulterior motive. Eustace will take careful note of that."

"You mean," put in Pallam, "that his code of ethics is identical with your own?"

Damn the fellow! Why did he have to put in his two cents worth? Be careful now!

"Similar in some respects but not identical."

"What is the most outstanding difference?"

"Well," said Leeming, playing for time, "it's hard to decide." He rubbed his brow while his mind whizzed dizzily.

"I'd say in the matter of vengeance."

"Define the difference," ordered Pallam, sniffing along the trail like a hungry bloodhound.

"From my viewpoint," informed Leeming, inwardly cursing the other to hell and perdition, "he is unnecessarily sardistic."

There, that gave needed coverage for any widespread claims it might be desirable to make later on.

"In what way?" persisted Pallam.

"My instinct is to take prompt action, to get things over and done with. His tendency is to prolong the agony."

"Explain further," pressed Pallam, making a thorough nuisance of himself.

"If you and I were mortal enemies, if I had a gun and you had not, I would shoot and kill you. But if Eustace had you marked for death, he'd make it slower, more gradual."

"Describe his method."

"First, he'd let you know that you were doomed. Then he'd do nothing about it until eventually you became obsessed with the notion that it was all an illusion and that nothing ever would be done. At that point he'd remind you with a minor blow. When the resulting fear and alarm had worn off, he'd strike a harder one. And so on and so on with increasing intensity spread over as long a time as necessary."

"Necessary for what?"

"Until your doom became plain and the strain of waiting for it became too much to bear." He thought a moment, added, "No Eustace ever has killed anyone. He uses tactics peculiarly his own. He arranges accidents or he badgers a victim into dying by his own hand."

"You mean he drives a victim to suicide?"

"Yes, that's what I've said."

"And there is no way of avoiding such a fate?"

"Yes there is," Lemeing contradicted. "At any time the victim can gain personal safety and freedom from fear by redressing the wrong he has done to that Eustace's partner."

"Such redress immediately terminates the vendetta?"

"That's right."

"Whether or not you approve personally?"

"Yes. If my grievance ceases to be real and becomes only imaginary, my Eustace refuses to recognize it or do anything about it."

"So what it boils down to," said Pallam pointedly, "is that his method provides motive and opportunity for repentance while yours does not?"

"I suppose so."

"Which means that he has a more balanced sense of justice?"

"He can be darned ruthless," objected Leeming, momentarily unable to think of a retort less feeble.

"That is beside the point," snapped Pallam. He lapsed into meditative silence, then remarked to the Commandant, "It seems that the association is not between equals. The invisible component is also the superior one. In effect, it is the master of a material slave but exercises mastery with such cunning that the slave would be the first to deny his own status."

He shot a provocative glance at Leeming, who set his teeth and said nothing. Crafty old hog, thought Leeming - if he was trying to tempt the prisoner into a heated denial he was going to be disappointed. Let him remain under the delusion that Leeming had been weighed in the balance and found wanting. There is no shame in being defined as inferior to a figment of one's own imagination.

Now positively foxy, Pallam probed, "When your Eustace takes it upon himself to wreak vengeance, he does so because circumstances prevent suitable punishment being administered either by yourself or the Terran community? Is that correct?"

"Near enough," admitted Leeming cautiously.

"In other words, he functions only when you and the law are impotent?"

"He takes over when the need arises."

"You are being evasive. We must get this matter straight. If you or your fellows can and do punish someone, does any Eustace also punish him?"

"No," said Leeming, fidgeting uneasily.

"If you or your fellows cannot or do not punish someone, does a Eustace then step in and enforce punishment?"

"Only if a living Terran has suffered unjustly."

"The sufferer's Eustace takes action on his partner's behalf?"

"Yes."

"Good!" declared Pallam. He leaned forward, watched the other keen-eyed and managed to make his attitude intimidating. "Now let us suppose that your Eustace finds justifiable reason to punish another Terran - what does the victim's Eustace do about it?"

X

IT WAS a clever trap based upon the knowledge that questions about factual, familiar, everyday things can be answered automatically, almost without thought. Whereas a liar seeking a supporting lie needs time to create consistency. It should have got Leeming completely fozzled. That it did not do so was no credit to his own wits.

While his mind still whirled his mouth opened and the words, "Not much" popped out of their own accord. For a mad moment he wondered whether Eustace had arrived and joined the party.

"Why not?"

Encouraged by his tongue's mastery of the situation, Leeming gave it free rein. "I have told you before and I am telling you again that no Eustace will concern himself for one moment with a grievance that is wholly imaginary. A Terran who is guilty of a crime has no genuine cause for complaint. He has brought vengeance upon himself and the cure lies in his own hands. If he doesn't enjoy suffering, he need only

get busy and undo whatever wrong he has done to another."

"Will his Eustace urge or influence him to take action necessary to avoid punishment?"

"Never having been a criminal myself," answered Leeming with great virtue, "I am unable to tell you. I suppose it would be near the truth to say that Terrans behave because association with Eustaces compels them to behave. They have little choice about the matter."

"On the other hand, Terrans have no way of compelling their Eustaces to behave?"

"No compulsion is necessary. A Eustace will always listen to his partner's reason and act within the limits of common justice."

"As I told you," said Pallam in an aside to the Commandant, "the Terran is the lower form of the two." He returned attention to the prisoner. "All that you have told us is acceptable because it is consistent - as far as it goes."

"What do you mean, as far as it goes?"

"Let me take it to the bitter end," suggested Pallam. "I do not see any rational reason why any criminal's Eustace should allow his partner to be driven to suicide. Since they are mutually independent of others but mutually dependent upon each other, a Eustace's inaction is contrary to the basic law of survival."

"Nobody commits suicide until he has gone off his rocker."

"Until he has done what?"

"Become insane," said Leeming. "An insane person is worthless as a material partner. To a Eustace he is already dead, not worth protecting or avenging. Eustaces associate only with the sane."

Pouncing on that, Pallam said excitedly, "So the benefit they derive is rooted somewhere within Terran minds? It is mental sustenance that they draw from you?"

"I don't know."

"Does your Eustace ever make you feel tired, exhausted, perhaps a little stupefied?"

"Yes," said Leeming with emphasis. "How true, brother, how true. Right now he'd find pleasure in choking Eustace to death."

"I would like to pursue this phenomenon for months," Pallam told the Commandant. "It is an absorbing subject. There are no records of symbiotic association among anything higher than the plants and six species of the lower elames. To find it among the higher vertebrates, sentient forms, and one of them intangible, is remarkable, truly remarkable."

The Commandant looked impressed without knowing what the other was talking about.

"Give him your report," urged Pallam.

"Our liaison officer, Colonel Shomuth, has replied from the Lathian sector," the Commandant told Leeming. "He is fluent in Cosmoglotta and therefore was able to question many Terran prisoners without the aid of a Lathian interpreter. We sent him a little more information and the result is significant."

"What else did you expect?" Leeming observed, inwardly consumed with curiosity.

Ignoring that, the Commandant went on, "He reported that most of the prisoners refused to make comment or to admit anything. They maintained determined silence. That is understandable because nothing could shake their belief that they were being tempted to surrender information of military

value. They resisted all of Colonel Shomuth's persuasions and kept their mouths shut." He sighed at such stubbornness.

"But some talked."

"A few are always willing to blab," remarked Leeming.

"Certain officers talked, including Cruiser Captain Tompass . . . Tompus . . ."

"Thomas?"

"Yes, that is the word." Swiveling around in his chair, the Commandant pressed a wall-button. "This is the beamed interview unscrambled and recorded on tape."

A crackling hiss poured out of a perforated grid set into the wall. It grew louder, died down to a background wash. Voices came out of the grid.

Shomuth: "Captain Thomas, I have been ordered to check certain information now in our possession. You have nothing to lose by giving answers, nothing to gain by refusing them. There are no Lathians present, only the two of us. You may speak freely and what you say will be treated in confidence."

Thomas: "Mighty leery about the Lathians all of a sudden, aren't you? You won't fool me with that gambit. Enemies are enemies no matter what their name or shape. You'll get nothing out of me."

Shomuth, patiently: "I suggest, Captain Thomas, that you hear and consider the questions before you decide whether or not to answer them."

Thomas, boredly: "All right. What do you want to know?"

Shomuth: "Whether our Lathian allies really are Nuts."

Thomas, after a long pause: "You want the blunt truth?"

Shomuth: "We do."

Thomas, with a trace of sarcasm: "I hate to speak against anyone behind his back, even a lousy Lathian. But there are times when one is compelled to admit that dirt is dirt, sin is sin and a Lathian is what he is, eh?"

Shomuth: "Please answer my question."

Thomas: "The Lathians are nuts."

Shomuth: "And they have the Willies?"

Thomas: "Say, where did you dig up this information?"

Shomuth: "That is our business. Will you be good enough to give me an answer."

Thomas, belligerently: "Not only have they got the willies but they'll have a darned sight more of them before we're through."

Shomuth, puzzled: "How can that be? We have learned that each and every Lathian is unconsciously controlled by a Willy. Therefore the total number of Willies must be limited. It cannot be increased except by the birth of more Lathians."

Thomas, quickly: "You've got me wrong. What I meant was that as Lathian casualties mount up the number of unattached Willies will increase. Obviously, even the best of Willies cannot control a corpse, can he? There will be lots more Willies loafing around in proportion to the number of Lathian survivors."

Shomuth: "Yes, I see what you mean. And it will create a psychic problem of great seriousness." Pause. "Now, Captain Thomas, have you any reason to suppose that a large number of partnerless Willies might be able to seize control of another and different lifeform? Such as my own species, for example?"

Thomas, with enough menace to deserve a space-medal: "I wouldn't be surprised."

Shomuth: "You don't know for sure?"

Thomas: "No."

Shomuth: "It is true, is it not, that you are aware of the real Lathian nature only because you have been warned of it by your Eustace?"

Thomas, startled: "By my what?"

Shomuth: "By your Eustace. Why should that surprise you?"

Thomas, recovering swiftly enough to earn a bar to the medal: "I thought you said Useless. Silly of me. Yes, my Eustace. You're dead right there."

Shomuth in lower tones: "There are more than four hundred Terran prisoners here. That means more than four hundred Eustaces are wandering around unchallenged on this planet. Correct?"

Thomas: "I am unable to deny it."

Shomuth: "The Lathian heavy cruiser Veder crashed on landing and was a total loss. The Lathians attributed it to an error of judgment on the part of the crew. But that was just three days after you prisoners were brought here. Was it a mere coincidence?"

Thomas: "Work it out for yourself."

Shomuth: "You realize that so far as we are concerned your refusal to reply is as good as an answer?"

Thomas: "Construe it any way you like. I will not betray Terran military secrets."

Shomuth: "All right. Let me try you on something else. The biggest fuel dump in this part of the galaxy is located a few degrees south of here. A week ago it blew up to total desruction. The loss was a severe one; it will handicap the Combine fleets for quite a time to come."

Thomas, with enthusiasm: "Cheers!"

Shomuth: "Lathian technicians theorize that a static spark caused a leaking tank to explode and that set off the rest in rapid succession. We can always trust technicians to come up with a glib explanation."

Thomas: "Well, what's wrong with it?"

Shomuth: "That dump has been established for more than four years. No static sparks have caused trouble during that time."

Thomas: "What are you getting at?"

Shomuth, pointedly: "You have admitted yourself that more than four hundred Eustaces are roaming this area, free to do as they please."

Thomas, in tones of stern patriotism: "I am admitting nothing. I refuse to answer any more questions."

Shomuth: "Has your Eustace prompted you to say that?"

Silence.

Shomuth: "If your Eustace is now present, can I question him through you?"

No reply.

Switching off, the Commandant said, "There you are. Eight other Terran officers gave more or less the same evidence. The rest tried to conceal the facts but, as you have heard, they failed. Zangasta himself has listened to the taped records and is deeply concerned about the situation." "He needn't worry his head about it," Leeming offered. "Why not?" "It's all a lot of bunk, a put-up job. There was collusion between my Eustace and theirs."

The Commandant looked sour. "As you emphasized at our last meeting, there cannot be collusion without Eustaces, so it makes no difference either way."

"I'm glad you can see it at last."

"Let it pass," chipped in Pallam impatiently. "It is of no consequence. The confirmatory evidence is adequate no matter how we look at it."

Thus prompted, the Commandant continued, "I have been doing some investigating myself. In two years we've had a long series of small-scale troubles with the Rigellians, none of them really serious. But after you arrive there comes a big break that obviously must have been planned long before you turned up but soon afterward took place in circumstances suggesting outside help. Whence came this assistance?"

"Not telling," said Leeming knowingly.

"At one time or another eight of my guards earned your enmity by assaulting you. Of these, four are now in the hospital badly injured, two more are to be drafted to the fighting front. I presume that it is only a matter of time before the remaining two are plunged into trouble?"

"The other two have arbitrated and earned forgiveness.

Nothing will happen to them."

"Is that so?" The Commandant registered surprise.

Leeming went on, "I cannot give the same guarantee with respect to the firing squad, the officer in charge of it, or the higher-up who ordered that helpless prisoners be shot."

"We always execute prisoners who break out of jail. It is an old-established practice and a necessary deterrent."

"We always settle accounts with the executioners," Leeming gave back.

"By 'we' you mean you and your Eustace?" put in Pallam.

"Yes."

"Why should your Eustace care? The victims were not Terrans. They were merely a bunch of obstreperous Rigellians."

"Rigellians are allies. And allies are friends. I feel bad about the cold-blooded, needless slaughtering of them. Eustace is very sensitive to my emotions."

"But not necessarily obedient to them?"

"No."

"In fact," pressed Pallam, determined to establish the point once and for all, "if there is any question of one being subordinate to the other, it is you who serves him."

"Most times, anyway," conceded Leeming with the air of having a tooth pulled.

"Well, it confirms what you've already told us." Pallam gave a thin smile. "The chief difference between Terrans and Lathians is that you know you're controlled whereas the Lathians are ignorant of their own status."

"We are not controlled consciously or unconsciously,"

Leeming insisted. "We exist in mutual partnership, the same as you do with your wife. Sometimes she gives way to you, other times you give way to her. Neither of you bother to estimate who has given way the most in any specific period and neither of you insists that a perfect balance must be maintained. That's how it is. And it's mastery by neither party,"

"I wouldn't know, never having been mated," Pallam turned to the Commandant. "Carry on."

"As probably you are aware by now, this planet has been set aside as the Combine's main penal world," informed the

Commandant. "Already we hold a large number of prisoners, mainly Rigellian."

"What of it?"

"There are more to come. Two thousand Centaurians and six hundred Thetans are due to arrive and fill a new jail next week. Combine forces will transfer more enemy lifeforms as soon as we have accommodation for them and ships are available." He eyed the other speculatively, "It is only a matter of time before they start dumping Terrans on us as well."

"Is the prospect bothering you?"

"Zangasta has decided that he must refuse to accept Terrans."

"That's up to him," said Leeming, blandly indifferent.

"Zangasta has a clever mind," opined the Commandant, oozing patriotic admiration. "He is of the firm opinion that to assemble a formidable army of mixed prisoners all on one planet, and then add some thousands of Terrans to the mixture, is to create a potentially dangerous situation. He foresees trouble on a far greater scale than we could handle. Indeed, we might lose control of this world, strategically placed in the Combine's rear, and become subject to the violent attacks of our own allies."

"That is quite possible," Leeming agreed. "In fact it's quite probable. In fact it's practically certain. But it's not Zangasta's only worry. It's the one he's seen fit to put out for publication. He's got a private one, too."

"And what is that?"

"Zangasta himself originated the order that escaped prisoners be shot. He must have done so - otherwise nobody would dare shoot them. Now he's jumpy because a Eustace may be sitting on his bed and grinning at him every night. He thinks that a few thousand Eustaces will be a proportionately greater menace to him. But he's wrong."

"Why is he wrong?" inquired the Commandant.

"Because it isn't only the repentant who have no cause to fear. The dead haven't either. The arrival on this world of fifty million Eustaces means nothing whatever to a corpse. Zangasta had better countermand that shooting order if he wants to go on living."

"I'll inform him of your remarks. However, such cancellation may not be necessary. As I have told you, he is clever. He has devised a subtle strategy that will put all your evidence to the final, conclusive test and at the same time may solve his problems to his own satisfaction."

Feeling vague alarm, Leeming asked, "Am I permitted to know what he intends to do?"

"He has given instructions that you be told. And already he has swung into action." The Commandant waited for the sake of effect then finished, "He has beamed the Allies a proposal to exchange prisoners."

Leeming fidgeted around in his seat. Ye gods, the plot was thickening with a vengeance. From the very beginning his sole purpose had been to talk himself out of jail and into some other situation more favorable for sudden departure at high speed. He'd only been trying to lift himself over the wall with his tongue. Now they were taking up his story and plastering it all over the galaxy!

"What is more," the Commandant went on, "the Allies have notified us of their acceptance providing we exchange rank for rank. That is to say, captains for captains, navigators

for navigators and so forth."

"That's reasonable."

"Zangasta," said the Commandant, grinning like a hungry wolf, "has agreed in his turn - providing that the Allies take Terran prisoners first and make exchange on a basis of two for one. He is now awaiting their reply."

"Two for one?" echoed Leeming, blinking. "You mean he wants them to release two of their prisoners for every Terran they get back?"

"No, no, of course not." He increased the grin and exposed the roots of his teeth. "They must return two Combine troopers for each Terran and his Eustace that we hand back. That is two for two and perfectly fair, is it not?"

"It's not for me to say." Leeming swallowed hard. "The Allies are the judges."

"Until a reply arrives and mutual agreement has been achieved, Zangasta wishes you to have better treatment. You will be transferred to the officers' quarters outside the walls, you will share their meals and be allowed to go for walks in the country. Temporarily, you will be treated as a non-combatant and you'll be very comfortable. It is necessary that you give me your parole not to try to escape."

Holy smoke, this was another stinker. The entire fiction was shaped toward ultimate escape. He couldn't abandon it now. Neither was he willing to give his word of honor with the cynical intention of breaking it.

"Parole refused," he said firmly.

The Commandant was incredulous. "Surely you do not mean that?"

"I do. I have no choice. Terran military law does not permit a prisoner-of-war to give such a promise."

"Why not?"

"Because no Terran can accept responsibility for his Eustace. How can I swear not to get out when half of me cannot be got in? Can a twin take oath on behalf of his brother?"

"Guard!" called the Commandant, visibly disappointed.

He mooched uneasily around his cell for a full twelve days, occasionally chatting with Eustace nighttimes for the benefit of ears lurking outside the door. Definitely he'd wangled himself into a predicament that was a case of put up or shut up; in order to put up he dared not shut up.

The food remained better in quantity though little could be said for its quality. Guards treated him with that diffidence accorded to captives who somehow are in cahoots with their superiors. Four more recaptured Rigellians were brought back but not shot. All the signs and portents were that he'd still got a grip on the foe.

Though he'd said nothing to them, the other prisoners had got wind of the fact that in some mysterious way he was responsible for the general softening of prison conditions. At exercise time they treated him as a deep and subtle character who could achieve the impossible. From time to time their curiosity got the better of them.

"You know they didn't execute those last four?"

"Yes," Leeming admitted.

"It's being said that you stopped the shooting."

"Who says so?"

"It's just a story going around."

"That's right, it's just a story going around."

"I wonder why they shot the first bunch but not the second? There must be a reason."

"Maybe the Zangastans have developed belated qualms of conscience," Leeming suggested.

"There's more to it than that."

"Such as what?"

"Somebody has shaken them up."

"Who, for instance?"

"I don't know. There's a strong rumor that you've got the Commandant eating out of your hand."

"That's likely, isn't it?" Leeming countered.

"I wouldn't think so. But one never knows where one is with you Terrans." The other brooded a bit, asked, "What did you do with that wire I stole for you?"

"I'm knitting it into a pair of socks. Nothing fits better or wears longer than solid wire socks."

Thus he foiled their inquisitiveness and kept his silence, not wanting to arouse false hopes. Inwardly, he was badly bothered. The Allies in general and Earth in particular knew nothing whatever about Eustaces, and therefore were likely to treat a two-for-one proposition with the contempt it deserved. A blank refusal on their part might cause him to be plied with awkward questions, impossible to answer. In that case it would occur to them sooner or later that they were afflicted with the biggest liar in history. They'd then devise tests of fiendish ingenuity. When he flunked them the balloon would go up.

He wasn't inclined to give himself too much credit for having kidded them along so far. The few books he'd been able to read had shown that Zangastan religion was based upon reverence for ancestral spirits. The Zangastans were also familiar with what is known as poltergeist phenomena. The ground had been prepared for him in advance; he'd merely plowed it and sown the crop. When a victim already believes in two kinds of invisible beings, it isn't hard to persuade him to swallow a third.

But when the Allies beamed Asta Zangasta a curt invitation to make his bed on a railroad track, it was possible that the third type of spirit would be regurgitated with violence. Unless by fast, convincing talk he could cram it back down their gullets when it was halfway out. How to do that? In his cell he was stewing this problem over and over when the guards came for him again. The Commandant was there but Pallam was not. Instead, a dozen civilians eyed him curiously. That made a total of thirteen enemies, a very suitable number to pronounce him ready for the chopper. Feeling as much the center of attention as a six-tailed wombat at the zoo, he sat down and four civilians immediately started questioning him, taking it in relays. They were interested in one subject and one only, namely, bopamagilvies. It seemed that they'd been playing for hours with his samples, had achieved nothing except some practice in acting daft, and were not happy about it.

On what principle did a bopamagilvie work? Did it focus telepathic output into a narrow, long-range beam? At what distance did his Eustace get beyond range of straight conversation and have to be summoned with the aid of a gadget? Why was it necessary to make directional search before obtaining a reply? How did he know how to make a coiled loop in the first place?

"I can't explain. How does a bird know how to make a

nest? The knowledge is wholly instinctive. I have known how to call my Eustace ever since I was old enough to shape a piece of wire."

"Could it be that your Eustace implants the necessary knowledge in your mind?"

"Frankly, I've never given that idea a thought, But it is possible." "Will any kind of wire serve?"

"So long as it's non-ferrous."

"Are all Terran loops of exactly the same construction and dimensions?"

"No, they vary with the individual."

"We've made careful and thorough search of Terran prisoners held by the Lathians. Not one of them owns a similar piece of apparatus. How do you account for that?"

"They don't need one."

"Why not?"

"Because when more than four hundred of them are imprisoned together, they can always count on at least a few of their Eustaces being within easy reach at any given time." Somehow he beat them off, feeling hot in the forehead and cold in the belly. Then the Commandant took over.

"The Allies have flatly refused to accept Terran prisoners ahead of other species, or to exchange them two for one, or to discuss the matter any further. What have you to say to that?"

Steeling himself, Leeming commented, "Look, on your side there are more than twenty lifeforms of which the Lathians and the Zebs are by far the most powerful. Now if the Allies had wanted to give priority of exchange to one species do you think the Combine would agree? If, for example, the favored species happened to be the Tansites, would the Lathians and Zebs vote for them to get home first?"

A tall, authoritative civilian chipped in. "I am Daverd, personal aide to Zangasta. He is of your opinion. He believes that the Terrans have been outvoted. Therefore, I am commanded to ask you one question,"

"What is it?"

"Do your allies know about your Eustaces?"

"No."

"You have succeeded in hiding the facts from them?"

"There's never been any question of concealing anything from them. With friends, the facts just don't become apparent. Eustaces take effective action only against enemies and that is something that cannot be concealed forever."

"Very well." Daverd came closer, put on a conspiratorial air. "The Lathians started this war and the Zebs went with them by reason of their military alliance. The rest of us got dragged in for one cause or another. The Lathians are strong and arrogant but, as we now know, they are not responsible for their actions."

"What's this to me?"

"Separately, we numerically weaker lifeforms cannot stand against the Lathians or the Zebs. But together we are strong enough to step out of the war and maintain our right to be neutral. So Zangasta has consulted the others."

Lord! Isn't it amazing what can be done with a few yards of copper wire?

"He has received their replies today," Daverd went on.

"They are willing to make a common front for the sake of enjoying mutual peace - providing that the Allies are equally

willing to recognize their neutrality and exchange prisoners with them."

"Such sudden unanimity among the small fry tells me something pretty good," observed Leeming with malice.

"It tells you what?"

"Allied forces have won a major battle lately. Somebody has been given a hell of a lambasting."

Daverd refused to confirm or deny it. "You are the only Terran we hold on this planet. Zangasta thinks he can make good use of you."

"How?"

"He has decided to send you back to Terra. It will be your task to persuade them to agree to our plans. If you fail, a couple of hundred thousand hostages will suffer - remember that!"

"The prisoners have no say in this matter, no hand in it, no responsibility for it. If you vent your spite upon them a time will surely come when you'll be made to pay - remember that!"

"The Allies will know nothing about it," Daverd retorted.

"There will be no Terrans and no Eustaces here to inform them by any underhanded method. Henceforth we are keeping Terrans out. The Allies cannot use knowledge they do not possess."

"No," agreed Leeming. "It's quite impossible to employ something you haven't got."

They provided a light destroyer crewed by ten Zangastans. With one stop for refueling and the fitting of new tubes it took him to a servicing planet right on the fringe of the battle area. This dump was a Lathian outpost but those worthies showed no interest in what their smaller allies were up to, nor did they realize that the one Terran-like creature really was a Terran. They got to work relining the destroyer's tubes in readiness for its journey home. Meanwhile, Leeming was transferred to an unarmed one-man Lathian scout-ship. The ten Zangastans officiously saluted before they left him. From this point he was strictly on his own. Take-off was a heller. The seat was far too big and shaped to fit the Lathian backside, which meant that it was humped in the wrong places. The controls were unfamiliar and situated too far apart. The little ship was fast and powerful but responded differently from his own. How he got off the ground he never knew, but he made it.

After that there was the constant risk of being tracked by Allied detector stations and blown apart in full flight. He charged among the stars hoping for the best and left his beam transmitter severely alone; calls on an enemy frequency might make him a dead duck in no time at all.

He arrowed straight for Terra. His sleeps were restless and uneasy. The tubes were not to be trusted, even though the flight-duration would be only a third of that done in his own vessel. The strange autopilot was not to be trusted merely because it was of alien design. The ship itself was not to be trusted for the same reason. The forces of his own side were not to be trusted because they tended to shoot first and ask questions afterward.

More by good luck than good management he penetrated the Allied front without interception. It was a feat that the foe could accomplish, given the audacity, but had never attempted because the risk of getting into Allied territory

was nothing compared to the trouble of getting out again. In due time he came in fast on Terra's night side and plonked the ship down in a field a couple of miles west of the main spaceport. It would have been foolish to take a chance by landing a Lathian vessel bang in the middle of the port. Somebody behind a heavy gun might have stuttered with excitement and let fly.

The moon was shining bright along the Wabash when he approached the front gate afoot and a sentry bawled, "Halt! Who goes there?"

"Lieutenant Leeming and Eustace Phenackertiban."

"Advance and be recognized."

He ambled forward thinking to himself that such an order was manifestly stupid. Be recognized! The sentry had never seen him in his life and wouldn't know him from Myrtle Mc-Turtle. Oh, well, baloney baffies brains.

At the gate a powerful cone of light shone down upon him. Somebody with three chevrons on his sleeve emerged from a nearby hut bearing a scanner on the end of a thin black cable. He waved the scanner over the arrival from head to feet, concentrating mostly upon the face.

A loudspeaker in the hut ordered, "Bring him into Intelligence H.Q."

They started walking.

The sentry let go an agitated yelp. "Hey, where's the other guy?"

"What guy?" asked the sergeant, stopping and staring around.

"Smell his breath," Leeming advised.

"You gave me two names," asserted the sentry, full of resentment.

"Well, if you ask the sergeant nicely he'll give you two more," said Leeming. "Won't you, Sarge?"

"Let's get going," growled the sergeant, displaying liverish impatience.

They reached Intelligence H.Q. The duty officer was Colonel Farmer. He gaped at Leeming and said, "Well!" He said it seven times.

Without preamble, Leeming demanded, "What's all this about us refusing to make a two-for-one swap for Terran prisoners?"

Farmer appeared to haul himself with an effort out of a fantastic dream.

"You know of it?"

"How could I ask if I didn't?"

"All right. Why should we accept such a cockeyed proposition? We're in our right minds you know!"

Bending over the other's desk, hands splayed upon it, Leeming said, "All we need do is agree - upon one condition."

"What condition?"

"That they make a similar agreement with respect to Lathians. Two of our men for one Lathian and one Willy."

"One what?"

"One Willy. The Lathians will take it like birds. They have been propagandizing all over the place that one Lathian is worth two of anything else. They're too conceited to refuse such an offer. They'll advertise it as proof positive that even their enemies know how good they are."

"But-" began Farmer, slightly dazed.

"Their allies will fall all over themselves in their haste to agree also. They'll do it from different motives to which the

Lathians will wake up when it's too late. Try it for size. Two of our fellows for one Lathian and his Willy."

Farmer stood up, his belly protruding, and roared, "What the blue blazes is a Willy?"

"You can easily find out," assured Leeming. "Consult your Eustace."

Showing alarm, Farmer lowered his tones to a soothing pitch and said as gently as possible, "Your appearance here has been a great shock to me. Many months ago you were reported missing and believed killed."

"I crash-landed and got taken prisoner in the back of beyond. They were a snake-skinned bunch called Zangastans. They slung me into the jug."

"Yes, yes," said Colonel Farmer, making pacifying gestures.

"But how on Earth did you get away?"

"Farmer, I cannot tell a lie. I hexed them with my bopamagilvie."

"Huh?"

"So I left by rail," informed Leeming, "and there were ten faplaps carrying it." Taking the other unaware he let go a vicious kick at the desk and made a spurt of ink leap across the blotter. "Now let's see some of the intelligence they're supposed to have in Intelligence. Beam the offer. Two for a cootie-coated Lathian and a Willy Terwilliger." He stared around, a wild look in his eyes. "And find me some place to sleep - I'm dead beat."

Holding himself in enormous restraint, Farmer said, "Lieu-tenant, is that the proper way in which to talk to a colonel?"

"One talks in any way to anybody. Mayor Snorkum will lay the cake. Go paddle a poodle." Leeming kicked the desk again. "Get busy and tuck me into bed."

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Proofing corrected OCR errors - other errors left as published.
Line breaks are exactly as in 1958 Ace paperback edition.
