

STRANGERS IN PARADISE

CHRISTOPHER ANVIL

Our free catalogue is available upon request. Any Belmont/ Tower titles not in your local bookstore can be purchased through the mail. Simply send 150 plus the retail price of the book and write Belmont/Tower Books, 185 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10016.

Any titles currently in print are available in quantity for industrial and sales-promotion use at reduced rates. Address inquiries to our Promotion Dept.

Belmont/Tower Books • New York City

Table of Contents

Part I.

STRANGERS IN PARADISE

A BELMONT/TOWER BOOK—October 1972

Published by

Belmont/Tower Books 185 Madison Avenue New York, N.Y. 10016

Copyright © MCMLXIX by Christopher Anvil

All rights reserved.

Printed in the United States of America

I. Disaster Landing-----._____ 9

II. "Thank You For

Your Consideration" _____ 11

III. The Killer Forest..... _____ 13

IV. City of Universal Care_____ 15

V. At Home in Paradise.....__ 23

VI. The Want-Generator-----27

VII. The Technicians----- 34

VIII. By Trial and Error____.____39

IX. Consider It Done_____45

Part II.

X. Return to Paradise-----51

XL Something Didn't Work----- 54

XII. Chaos_____60

XIII. Deadlock_____69

Part III.

XIV. The Dukes of Desire____.____79

XV. Surnamed The Terrible..... 87

XVI. Oggbad's Army_____ 98 • _ _

Jr Oft M.

XVII. Triumph.....104

XVIII. Trapped_____.____..111

XIX. The Bluff_____	115
XX. Blackout _____120
XXI. The Duke and the Usurper_____	126
XXII. Planetary Pilots	_____131
XXIII. "Their Bearing is an Insult"	137
XXIV. "Your Grace May be Aware"	142
XXV. King and Emperor.....	152
XXVI. The King's Legions ..._____	157
XXVII. Interstellar Patrol.....	165

I. Disaster Landing

Vaughan Nathan Roberts, captain of the *Orion* which had just crash landed, crouched in the spaceship tender's hatchway and held down the trigger of the Superlight rifle. The explosions in the confined space deafened him, the air filled with pungent smoke, and a grisly haze of blood and fur whirled around him. There was a scream that he heard as if through a layer of cotton, and suddenly the fading daylight of the forest clearing shone unobstructed into the hatchway.

In the center of the clearing a huge gray creature shaped like a tiger, paused to take one quick lick at its torn bloodied chest. Then it streaked to the right, past the brush and low branches that made a screen of leaves at the forest edge.

The screen of brush and branches at the forest edge was broken by a grassy stretch under a tree with massive limbs upraised to form the outline of a huge lyre. The limbs, which bore needle-sharp thorns longer than a man's forearm, were arched so high that a rider could have passed beneath on horseback. The thorns, outlined against the SKY, suggested upraised daggers poised to strike.

The huge cat shot under the tree in a blur close to the ground.

There was a faint *twang*.

The limbs whipped down, their outer ends spread out like a fan.

The cat bounded clear an instant ahead of time to vanish

into the forest. Behind it the thick limbs, with a writhing motion like so many snakes, pressed their long sharp thorns against the ground as if feeling for prey.

From inside the tender came the moan of one of the men hurt in the crash.

Roberts hurried to his side. He was worried about his men but he was even more concerned about the *Orion*.

He knew what was wrong.

One of the gravitor's coils had burned out.

It would have to be rewound.

Cassetti, the gravitor technician, was badly wounded. He pointed at the bulky technical manual, and Captain Roberts understood that Cassetti wanted him to do the rewinding. But Roberts had other ideas. He patched up Cassetti's shoulder and put him to work.

The rewound gravitor, to their relief, worked. But it worked with vibration, flexing of the coils, chafing of the insulation, and strong gravitic stresses that squeezed and reshaped the metal of the gravitor wire itself. The varying field created large-scale transient g-forces that would threaten ship, crew, and equipment as long as the drive was on.

All that the crew of the *Orion* had had was bad luck.

But then Morrissey, a triumphant smile cracking his face, yelled out, "Sir, I've contacted the spaceport!"

Their luck was bound to change.

10

H. "Thank You For Your Consideration"

Roberts, feeling a sense of relief, seated himself at the communicator, noted that the screen had been knocked out in the crash, and then spoke slowly and clearly:

"This is Captain Vaughan Roberts, T.S.M. *Orion*, Interstellar Rapid Transport Corporation. I have a wrecked tender and three badly injured men in a forest clearing on the far side of a belt of cultivated land outside the city. We're about forty miles from the spaceport. You can locate the position more accurately from our signal. There are six of us, all told, and we'd appreciate transportation out of here. But what we need urgently is help for the three injured men. How soon can you get an ambulance skimmer out here?"

There was a brief pause, then a calm voice replied:

"I am always with you, Vaughan."

Roberts stared at the communicator. "Am I speaking to the spaceport?"

"No, Vaughan. This is the Planetary Control Center, Paradise City, Paradise."

"Put me in touch with the spaceport, please."

"We are in touch with all facilities, Vaughan."

"I have three badly injured men on board. How soon can you get help to them?"

"Standard transport can't reach your present location, Vaughan. If you will approach the city, you will make your job and ours easier."

Roberts' mind seethed with unspoken profanity.

"The point," he said, "is that we *crashed* here. If we

11

should try to take off now, the best we could expect would be to crash again in a worse spot. We're calling on you to respond under the standard Reciprocal Aid agreement, and send an ambulance skimmer out to pick up these injured men."

"Vaughan, there is no air transport on this planet. All transport is by surface or tubeway."

Roberts sat back. Then he frowned at the communicator.

"Am I talking to a human, or to an automatic communications device?"

"You are speaking to the Human Liaison Circuit of the planetary computer. I am always with you, Vaughan. You are not alone."

"We are humans," said Roberts. "We are not heavily armed. We have no armored vehicles to travel in. Do *you* advise us to try to approach the city by way of this killer forest?"

There was a lengthy silence, then a different voice replied. "We cannot reach you by air transport, because we have none. Wheeled mechanized ground transport, which we do have, cannot penetrate the forest. Other forms of ground transport would require special fabrication and unacceptable expense. Hence we are powerless to aid you

in your present location, Therefore, you must move yourself closer to the city to receive assistance from us. However, to move yourself on foot through the killer forest would probably be fatal. Therefore we cannot advise that you do it."

"Then," said Roberts, "can you put me in touch with some human who might offer help or advice?"

"This information is not available."

He glanced at Hammell. "How long can the men hold out?"

"I don't know. Cassetti is in pretty bad shape."

"If Morrissey can't fix that communicator, you and I will have to try to make it to that city tomorrow."

Hammell winced.

"Through that forest?"

"Can you think of some other way?"

"When—when would we be leaving?"

"If we're going to have any chance to get into the clear by sundown, we'd better leave at dawn."

12

IE. The Killer Forest

They snapped shut their faceplates and a few minutes later pushed through the broken branches at the edge of the clearing.

The moment they were inside the screen of leaves a dense swarm of things, roughly the size of yellow jackets, whined around their heads, banged against their faceplates, and dove at them viciously from all angles.

Roberts shoved a branch back out of the way, and there was a big gray nest on the trunk of a nearby tree, with more of the things coming out in clouds. So far, the things hadn't managed to get through the armored suits, but Roberts' confidence was shaken by the sudden realization that what he had taken for dead branches on the ground were actually bones.

Methodically, they ripped the big nest to pieces. The insects responded with a fury that surpassed anything they'd shown before. But as Roberts and Hammell continued to destroy the nest, the attacks faded out, and the insects devoted themselves to carrying away small caterpillarlike forms that were apparently their young.

Roberts and Hammell finished the nest, marked the trees prominently, carried away the stump, detoured around another stump several times as large, then stopped and looked back. The way into the clearing now seemed clear, even if they came back with damaged suits. Roberts, however, glanced at his watch.

13

"Fifty-five minutes, and we've traveled a few hundred feet."

"We could have done worse," said Hammell. "What bothers me is that roaring noise."

Through the trees at the edge of the open space poured a sheet of small bright-green insects. Behind them loomed a bright-green ridge the height of a snow bank. There was a continuous crackling sliding noise from nearly every direction.

A bright-green cloud of flying insects passed low overhead to drop all around them—and on their suits, and helmets, and faceplates—and for an instant Roberts was treated to the sight of waving claws, stings, jaws, and barbed wing-covers. And then they had flown away after the others, and a fresh cloud loomed out from the crest of the bright-green bank.

"Too close," said Roberts. "Let's get around to the side if we can."

After a hard struggle through the trees, with frenzied animals darting past them in all directions, they finally found themselves standing in a forest stripped of leaves and a part of its bark, with nothing green in sight save for the crescent-shaped, bright-green wave before them.

Roberts checked his compass.

"They're headed southeast," he said above the roar. "We want to go east. If we follow, they might lead us out of the forest."

Hammell nodded. "*Good* luck, for a change!"

They looked around at where the bright-green swarm had turned back from the bare soil, as light reflects from a mirror, and was traveling now to the southwest.

Cautiously, they raised their faceplates, breathed deeply, and then took slow sips of water from their canteens.

"What's the name of this planet again?" said Hammell.

"Paradise," said Roberts drily. "Let's hope the city fits the name a little better."

14

IV. City of Universal Care

That evening, they cached their spacesuits, guns, knives, packs, and canteens near the branch of an irrigation ditch close to the spot where water gushed up out of a supply pipe into the ditch. They looked around to note the identifying features of the spot, waded the irrigation ditch, and headed toward the city, counting the rows of crops as a guide to help find their way back to this spot. As they walked, the buildings began to loom over them, mostly unlit themselves, but lighted from below by bright street lamps. And now a new change became apparent, Hammell sniffed sharply.

"Garbage. We're approaching this place by way of the dump."

Roberts shook his head.

"We don't dare change direction. We need the name of that street just ahead, so we'll know how to get back to the cache if we need to."

They plodded on and the going got worse. Now they were in the dump. They squelched through it, ankle-deep, knee-deep, as rats foraged around them. The street lamps up ahead, protected by heavy wire mesh, cast a glow over the details of the scene that they could have done without. Then they plunged and heaved up the steep embankment at the edge of the street, where on the far side the big buildings stood, each the size of a city block, and each separated from the next by a space of the same size.

15

As they staggered out onto the street, Roberts, though now so tired that each step was a fight, led the way to the battered street signs affixed high up on the corner of the nearest building:

477th St.-Agrtcultural B Ivd.

Something crashed to the pavement, and Roberts looked blankly around.

A chunk of paving block hit the building beside him, the flying bits stinging like hail.

What happened next wasn't clear to either of them, perhaps because of the long hike, perhaps because this was so different from what they had expected. Somehow, they were surrounded by a jeering crowd of children, some of them carrying broken bottles. Someone let fly a chunk of brick that barely missed Roberts. The others at once rushed in. From somewhere came a loudspeaker's roar, shouted warnings, the loud blast of a piercing whistle. And then there was a glare of yellow light in Roberts' eyes and an authoritative voice was accusing him of starting a riot. He was seized, there were angry shouts and curses, he saw a flash of bright light from bicycle-type wheels, a blur of blue-painted metal and a large white number, there was a stretch of blankness, and then a heavy resounding *clang*.

Roberts and Hammell sat up dazedly, to find themselves on cots in a cell.

Dizzily, Roberts tried to get to his feet. Now that they were here, there was something they had to do. Something — but what was it?

The next thing he knew, there was a clatter of the cell bars that jarred him awake, and a loud voice issuing from a kind of robotlike form on wheels ordered them to get up, eat the bowl of paste thrust through the cell bars, and get ready to report for their hearing.

A few minutes later, the cell door clanged wide open, and they were rushed out.

Directly in front of him stood a far larger metal box, on low massive wheels, with a variety of antennas sticking up,

16

and mouthpieces, viewscreens, and receptor heads thrust out toward him under the glowing sign: *CRIMINAL COURT*.

From this maze of screens and speakers, a voice was murmuring, ". . . fingerprints, palm prints, retinal patterns, total body index: *not on record*. Conclusion unavoidable that this individual is not native to this planet."

"I've been trying to tell you that," said Roberts. "We had gravitor trouble. We headed for the nearest repair facility, got here crippled, couldn't raise any response on the communicator, and half-a-dozen of us came down in the ship's tender. The tender cracked up in a forest forty miles from the spaceport. Three of my men were badly hurt. One of us stayed with them and two of us hiked out for help. When we reached your city, here, we got chunks of cement slung at us, a gang of kids went for us, and then your iron gendarmes arrested us for causing a riot."

"Unsuitable attire," snapped a voice from the metal box to Roberts' right.

Then a speaker in front of Roberts was murmuring, "On basis of correlation of statements of both accused, overall probability of guilt is 0.2, necessity of making example 0.1. Therefore adjudge innocent, transfer to Immigration."

At once, a loud voice announced, "We find the accused *innocent* of all charges brought against him."

From Roberts' captors, to either side, came low murmurs of discontent.

The large roboid before him said sternly, "This case has been transferred to Immigration for disposal. Relevant information of interest to applicant: 1) No individual not already a citizen will be compelled against his will to become a citizen. 2) Due to food and material shortages, no one not a citizen will be fed, sheltered, clothed, or otherwise allowed to become a charge on the planet, until otherwise decided by the due and constituted authorities." There was a brief pause. "Name."

Roberts blinked. Apparently he would have to become a citizen in order to exist while arranging for repairs.

Before Roberts could say a word he was rushed up a gravity-lift, down a hall and shoved into a room—where he was weighed, measured, photographed, fingerprinted, palm-, toe-, and footprinted, retinographed, his mouth pried open

17

and teeth examined—and then he was presented with an identification card and run down the hall to a window where ration books popped out of slots onto a counter. Next he was hurried out to a store full of huge vending machines and outfitted with a new set of clothes.

Roberts and Hammell found themselves outside, holding their own clothing wrapped in big bundles, and each wearing a kind of loose long-sleeved blouse, loose long pantaloons, ill-fitting shoes, and a long-billed, high-topped, floppy cap.

Roberts looked sourly up the street at the, milling crowd, then glanced at Hammell. Do *you* have any ideas?"

"I wouldn't know an idea if one banged into me," growled Hammell. "I'm so mad I can't see straight."

"We need to get in touch with someone in authority. If any human on this planet *has* authority."

"Yes," said Hammell. "But how?"

"If they have any kind of public communications system here, there ought to be a directory."

While they were trying to think where to look for one, a large mobile metal box stopped in front of them, and abruptly shot its antennas to full height. Metal covers on its side snapped back and a dazzling yellow light flashed in their faces. A set of long flexible metal arms whipped out, a mesh-covered speaker snapped, "Spot check," and with a quick flip of the metal arms the robot emptied their pockets onto the sidewalk. Next, it rapidly felt them all over, then jerked loose the bundles they were carrying, so that they spilled open in the street.

"Nonexplosive: clothing. But nonstandard. You *have receipts for these?*"

"Of *course*," said Roberts. "Yes, *certainly*."

"Produce the receipts."

"They're on board the spaceship *Orion*. We wore these clothes on board *Orion*, came down to arrange for repairs, got sent to Immigration, and then got the clothes we're wearing now. These clothes in the bundles are the clothes we wore *when we came down*."

"Spaceship visits are rare, improbable. It follows that this

explanation is improbable. *Arrest on suspicion of shoplifting*. You will come with me for immediate interrogation while investigations proceed."

The two men were separated, placed under bright lights for a long series of questions, then put back into a cell with two cots, a light bulb, a toilet, a 3-V set that didn't work, and a decorative design on the ceiling that obviously incorporated the pick-up heads for a sight-and-sound recording system.

As the robot-jailer rolled off down the corridor, Roberts and Hammell eyed the ceiling and lay down on the cots without a word.

Several hours crawled by, then a tall gray-haired man wearing dark-blue blouse and pantaloons of good material and narrow cut walked down the corridor and stopped outside the cell.

"Which of you is Roberts, Vaughan N.P"

"I am."

"You represent yourself as a spaceship captain?"

"I'm captain of T.S.M. *Orion*, Interstellar Rapid Transport Corporation. The ship is now orbiting this planet with a nonfunctional main gravitor. I came down here to arrange for repairs but our tender went out of control, we cracked up, two of us hiked in to get help, were attacked by a gang, arrested, dragged into court, given to understand we could immigrate or starve to death, then arrested because we couldn't produce receipts for the clothes we'd worn down, and here we are."

"I see. And this other individual—let's see—Hammell?"

"He's the cargo-control officer assigned to *Orion*."

"I see. My name is Kelty. I'm assistant-chief of the Law Enforcement Department, acting under the planetary computer, which technically is chief. I'm afraid I have some bad news for you gentlemen."

"Not surprising," growled Hammell.

Roberts said, "This planet has been nothing but bad news since we got here."

"Then why not go to another planet?"

"Our gravitor burned out. We had to strip the coils of the tender's gravitor to make emergency repairs." "Where

did you land?"

"We didn't land. We crashed inside a forest between a couple of wide tracts of cleared land. The spaceport was about forty miles from where we crashed."

"Then," said Kelty, watching Roberts alertly, "you were well inside the killer forest. I'm surprised you got through alive." His look of suspicion had disappeared and now he smiled. "You used your heads. Such good sense deserves success, but I'm sorry to have to tell you, we have no way to go in after those men and the repair facility you're looking for is no longer here." Roberts looked at him blankly.

Kelty said, "You've apparently assumed that the population of this planet grew up from a beginning with a few tough settlers to its present size. But it isn't so. This city was built and staffed by highly trained technicians, with a computer in overall control. Then the tax-free foundation which paid for it opened a campaign on half-a-dozen overpopulated worlds, gathered from their slums millions of 'socially disadvantaged individuals' and used the last of its excess money shipping them here. That is how this planet was settled." Roberts grappled with the mental picture this created. Hammell said, "Was there ever a repair facility here?" "It looked nice in the plans and it did a good job when the populace was coming in here. After that, there wasn't much use for it. When a mob looted and burned it, the computer had what still remained reprocessed to fill more urgent needs. There's nothing left now but a plot of ground where the facility used to be."

Hammell shook his head and glanced at Roberts. Roberts finally said, "There's no way at all to get the repairs done here?"

"Not without the equipment and the technicians. The equipment was looted. About that time, the technicians saw the way things were sliding and made recommendations, which the computer, in compliance with its built-in directives, rejected. The technicians got fed up. One fine morning they pulled out, leaving the computers programmed to neither produce nor maintain air-travel mechanisms. The tech-20

technicians went to the far side of the killer forest, and set up independent farming communities over there. This planet being what it is, they're evidently having plenty of trouble, but they prefer it to the city. We can't reach them to bring them back. We have no air transport. And the computer couldn't be programmed to restore the repair facility except by these technicians."

Roberts said, "Could these technicians be persuaded to come back temporarily, just to program the computer so we can get a few repairs made?"

Kelty's eyes glinted. "If so, they'll never get away again. They broke their contract. Now the whole roboid police is on the lookout for them. Naturally, I will obey the orders of the planetary computer and seize them the instant they show up. No, you could never possibly persuade them to come back here. We've tried to hire people to take their place, but without success. Who wants to spend his time struggling with the frustrations of a gigantic slum-city? Everything you do here fails. Put up a light bulb, and someone will smash it. Install a water pipe in the afternoon, and it will be ripped out by next morning. Bare maintenance is all the computer and its mechanisms can manage. For most specialists, the work is solid frustration. My job is a little different. It's quite a challenge to use limited force in such a way that a measure of order is maintained. But I do it, and I aim to continue to do it."

Roberts thought it over. "I can see what you're up against. But unless we can get the computer and the technicians together, how can we get the ship—or even the ship's tender —repaired?"

Kelty shook his head. "In the present set-up, it's impossible. The computer can't divert effort because of the widespread disorder and destructiveness of the populace."

"Damn it," said Roberts, "I can't leave my ship in orbit, and the men trapped on board, helpless!"

"But, you see, unless some order can be brought out of this chaos, we have no choice in the matter. And to do that would take a change in the attitude of the populace. There's only one other way."

"What's that?"

Kelty studied him speculatively. "*If* you and your men,

21

who have considerable technical background, will first consent to devote your time and training exclusively to work for the city from now on, *then* we might be able to work something out." He straightened up, and then stepped back. "Then, you see, it might be worth the computer's while to rebuild the repair facility."

V. At Home in Paradise

22

That evening found Roberts and Hammell in a five-room apartment on the sixth floor of a ten-story building. The building had emergency staircases littered with cans, broken bottles, garbage, and large rats, which had disputed the men's right to passage. The gravitor-drop had a chain across the entrance, bearing a dented *NO POWER* sign. There was not a whole piece of glass to be seen in the building.

The empty window frames looked out over a park, where dead trees had four-letter words carved in their bark and spindly grass sprouted amidst heaps of rotting garbage.

From down in the streets came a scrape and rumble as battered cleaning-machines picked up trash. From the building above came a chorus of yells:

"Kill the lousy mechs!"

A fusillade of bottles smashed down on the machines' armored tops. Loudspeakers broadcast appeals for law-abiding cooperation and the air shook with curses rung back in answer.

Roberts and Hammell stared out the window at the buildings and parks, laid out like the alternating squares of a checkerboard and stretching off to the horizon. In the distance, lit by the setting sun, the buildings looked

fantastic. Nearby, rats scurried amidst the trash in the park. From overhead, a loose bundle of garbage plummeted past the window, opening out as it fell.

23

Hammell turned away from the window. "*Now* what do we do?"

"The first thing is to get out of here. Kelty seems to think this will make us eager to join him. I wouldn't want to stay in this place on *any* terms."

"The forest is murderous. The city won't help. That leaves the technicians."

Roberts nodded. "If we can get them to help, maybe we can straighten the mess out yet."

The men made an uneasy sleep.

Roberts came dizzily awake to find the room faintly lit by a reflected glow from below, where powerful street lamps stood protected by big metal shields and heavy wire mesh. From the walls came a twang of metal as the rats wrestled with the tin shoved into their holes. From the door came a scrape that Roberts interpreted as a rat trying to move the can jammed between the doorframe and the gnawed corner. Then the scrape came again, louder, and Roberts sat up. He reached out carefully, and closed his hand around the neck of a heavy bottle.

Wide-awake now, he could see that Hammell was out of bed, but he couldn't see where he was. Carefully, Roberts got up.

From the doorway came a louder, longer scrape.

Slowly, the door swung open.

From the darkness of the next room, a stooped figure eased in, faint light glinting on the edge of a broken bottle in its hand.

From behind the door came a brief glint of reflected light. There was the rap of glass striking bone. The intruder dropped. There was a crash and the sound of splintering glass.

A long moment passed, and nothing else happened.

Hammell stepped out from behind the door, glanced toward Roberts, and waited a moment.

Hammell said, "How much rest are we going to get in this place?"

"You're right." Roberts felt carefully along the floor. "Here, help me turn the mattress over on top of the broken glass. All we need is a cut foot."

They gathered their bundles of clothing, carefully checked 24

to be sure they had everything, and eased out into the next room. Around them, there was the scurry of feet, as rats went across the floor. Then they found the door, eased out into the pitch-black hall, and a low voice spoke, close to Roberts:

"You get their ears?"

Roberts shifted his bottle, landed a solid blow, heard something thump to the floor, and groped forward toward the steps. As he pulled open the door, something ran across his foot. He eased onto the steps and started down. The slow descent to street level seemed to take all eternity. Then they reached the lower hall, found the front door, and eased it open.

Outside, the street was brightly lit.

A roboïd policeman, whip antenna up, rolled past with a silvery flash from the spokes of its swiftly turning wheels.

Roberts waited, then carefully pulled the door wider. The policeman was a dwindling speck in the distance. Roberts and Hammell slipped out, walked quickly down the block and turned left, toward the west, and open land.

Up under one of the street lights, a loudspeaker blared:

"Halt, thieves! You are detected on the central board! Mobile police units are already on the way. You cannot escape!"

"Run!" said Roberts.

From overhead someone shouted happily, "Hunt! A hunt!"

Roberts and Hammell ran, hampered by the bundles they were carrying. Overhead, fresh loudspeakers blared. There was the sound of banging, shouting, and a concerted rush to the windows. Screams of "Hunt! There they go!" rang out. A bottle crashed into the street just behind. The next bottle hit to the right and in front, scattering broken glass over the street. "Thieves! Thieves! *Kill* them. Look out! *Here come the mechs* There was a pause, then a loud jeering, and a deafening rattle and smash farther back.

Urgently, the loudspeakers boomed, "You must cooperate! Do not obstruct the law-enforcement officers!"

Straight ahead, the brightly lighted street abruptly came to an end, a garbage-filled park on one side, and a high building on the other side. From this building, streaks of light flashed down, the reflections from hurtling bottles, as Roberts and Hammell sprinted past.

25

"Look out!" screamed someone overhead.

Roberts and Hammell shot over an embankment in a headlong rush, heard a squeal of rats as they plunged knee-deep in a mass of garbage, then slammed forward on their bundles. As they pulled free, they glanced back to see the police robots, bottles bursting and splintering in a dazzle of light from their metal tops and sides.

Roberts and Hammell stumbled across the dump, fell forward on soft earth, and looked back to see the robots spreading out along the edge of the embankment. But they didn't go down the steep bank, where they might overturn or mire down in the piles of garbage.

The loudspeakers blared, "You have left the city! Before you is only bare ground and the killer forest!"

The hail of bottles let up. Voices shouted from the buildings, "You're *out!* You *can't live out there!*"

26

VI. The Want-Generator

By noon, they found themselves looking across a wide dry ditch at the mingled trees and shrubs of the forest. The forest edge ran in an almost straight line, north and south.

"Now," said Roberts, "we can't just walk into that mess. We've got to find the cleared path we came out on. Is it to the north or south?"

Hammell looked around. "Why didn't we follow our own footprints back?"

Roberts glanced back. In the enormous field, the only irregular feature was their fresh footprints in the soft soil.

Roberts said, "There weren't any footprints. Whatever cultivates this field must have wiped out the prints."

They turned back to the forest.

"Well," said Hammell, "which way?"

Roberts looked around thoughtfully. "South."

"South it is."

Simultaneously they saw, far away and straight ahead, a low cloud of dust.

Out of this there resolved a low broad frame, straddling the rows at the edge of the field, with an angled wing

thrust out into the wide ditch. The frame was rushing toward them at high speed, suspended above the earth on antigravs, with the low cloud of dust rising behind it.

Roberts plunged toward the broad dry ditch, rushed across the bottom of it with Hammell close behind, and

27

scrambled up the far bank. A roaring hiss was now audible, and growing louder fast. Breathing hard, Roberts forced himself up the last of the slope into a patch of brush at the forest edge.

The brush gave way before them. An instant later, the cultivator roared past behind.

Wind swept over them, and they looked out through a whirling cloud of dust.

"That was close!"

"Sure was. But—"

Suddenly, Roberts grabbed for his sheath knife.

All around them, the brush was unfolding large leathery leaves that swung up to blot out earth and sky. At a touch, they wrapped themselves around Roberts and Hammell, and clung tighter with every movement. The worst of it was, the helmets were tilted back on their lock rings, and their faces were bare.

Roberts barely had time to reach his knife. As the leaves wrapped around him, his arms were pinned to his sides down to the elbow. The clinging velvety surface drew snug across his face, tight against his nostrils, and shut out the air. Only from the waist down was he free. He turned, felt a stem draw tight, like a stretched cord, reached out with the knife, and cut it. With his free lower left arm, he tore at the big leaf across his face. At once, fresh leaves wrapped snugly around his arm and chest, pinning the arm. He sucked in desperately, bit through the leaf as it pressed into his mouth, then dragged in a breath of air that stopped as abruptly as a slammed door when a new leaf wrapped around his face.

Roberts struggled to concentrate on that sharp knife held in his right hand. He turned slowly, cutting away each stalk as it grew taut. Carefully, he stayed in the same spot, lest he bring himself within reach of fresh leaves. Meanwhile, his need for breath was growing. Already, his chest was straining in a spasmodic effort to draw in air. He cut and turned, cut and turned, then strained desperately to free his left arm. The clinging leaves, slashed loose at the base, reluctantly

28

pulled free and, for an instant, all he could do was drag in great gasps of air.

Hammell, working the same way, managed to free himself a moment later. The two men stood breathing deeply, then cut their way out through the few tall waving leaves between them and the field.

"That's the eighth time," said Hammell heavily, "that this planet has almost killed us."

They found the straight wide belt cut by the insects and holding their guns warily at the ready, they started into the forest. Stretching out in front of them was a path of devastation that stretched as far as they could see. There was no blade of grass, no tiniest small plant in sight in front of them, but only an occasional tree, stripped leafless and bare. They walked through an eerie silence between clumps of thick vegetation in the distance to right and left, but nothing bothered them. Nothing came near, save a small mouselike creature that blundered out, looked in both directions, gave a desperate squeak, and vanished back into the undergrowth with desperate kicks of its hind legs.

After several hours, they found where the horde of insects had first poured into view. In another hour or so, they found the clearing, and near one side of the clearing, the wrecked tender. The large flattened metal spheroid on its three stubby legs looked like home.

"Come on inside," said Morrissey. "Maybe you can settle a problem that's been bothering me. The question is, whether or not I've gone nuts."

The communicator had been moved from the control room, and its case removed, exposing the works, and Morrissey pointed out a timer unit between the set and the power supply. . -

"After I had the power back on, I brought this in here where it wouldn't get hurt again, and put that timer in there when I started work. I wanted to check the hatches again, and be sure everything was secure before nightfall. I knew if I just started work, I'd forget everything else, so I set the timer to cut off th& current and give a long loud ring."

Roberts and Hammell nodded.

29

"Well, I was visualizing the circuit and the action of the different parts and suddenly I wondered what would happen if I fed the current to an interface that's ordinarily left unconnected in this kind of circuit. I made a few adjustments, so I wouldn't wreck anything, and then I tried it. The next thing I knew, the timer went off."

Roberts and Hammell looked blank.

Morrissey paused.

Roberts said, "What of it?"

"I'd fallen asleep. I figured I must just have been more tired than I'd realized. I checked the ship and came back, still curious about this circuit. I reset the timer, and switched on the set. The next thing I knew, the timer was going off again, and this time I was picking myself up off the deck. Again I'd fallen asleep. This began to seem peculiar. I checked the ship, came back, cut the current to the interface way down, set the timer for ten minutes,

and switched on the set. Right away, I wanted to go to sleep. I wanted in the worst way to sink deep asleep, sound asleep—and then the timer was going off and I came awake again."

Hammell stared at the circuit.

Roberts frowned. "What did you do then?"

"I cut the current to the interface to the barest trickle. I reset the timer, snapped on the circuit—and yawned. I didn't exactly feel *tired*, but I wanted to go to sleep. I fought it till the timer went off, then the feeling that I wanted to go to sleep faded away, and I just sat there in a cold sweat."

"And," said Roberts, "you're wondering whether it really happened or you imagined it?"

Morrissey nodded. "That's it."

"Let's try it."

Morrissey bent eagerly over the timer. There was the snap of a switch.

Roberts yawned.

Hammell put his hand to his head, swayed against the nearest bulkhead, massaged his eyes and forehead.

It came to Roberts that he had walked miles and miles today, and miles and miles yesterday, and no wonder he was tired. He was worn out. What he needed, what he wanted, was sleep, a long, deep, quiet sleep.

30

Hammell was already stretching out on the deck. Morrissey was fighting off a yawn.

Something was shaking him violently.

Roberts dizzily opened his eyes. The swirling scene steadied. There was a big face looking down on him, that resolved into Morrissey's face, the electric-blue eyes worried.

"Sir, I'm sorry. I never realized it would hit you so hard."

Roberts remembered the circuit and pulled himself to his feet.

"Don't blame yourself. Hammell and I were worn out." Roberts' head was throbbing where he'd banged the deck, but that was a minor matter. "You've got a new discovery here. This could be important."

Excited now, and more than a little scared, they tried setting after setting, with the current low and the timer set

for less than a minute.

For less than a minute, Roberts looked at Morrissey and Hammell, and despite a fierce struggle to control himself, he wanted to blow their brains out.

Then the timer went off. Morrissey whistled, and tried another setting.

Roberts realized suddenly that his We had been a failure. He wanted money. With enough money, what couldn't a man do? Stacks of crisp green bills seemed to float tauntingly before him. In his mind's eye, he could see piles of gold and platinum bars and soft leather bags of diamonds. He wanted *money*. He *had* to have money. He—

Morrissey changed the setting.

Roberts felt a desire for self-sacrifice. What, he asked himself dizzily, could be nobler? With a hard effort, he fought off the desire to offer himself to science for experimental purposes, then an urge to volunteer himself as a human bomb-carrier. Not out of hatred of the enemy. No, not that. Out of love for mankind. Out of—

Morrissey changed the setting.

Hammell grinned. Morrissey swore. Roberts said, "Well, Morrissey, *now* we know what you've got here."

"That's more than I can say. What is it?"

"It's a want-generator, that's what it is. A desire-

31

stimulator. And if we can't get a strangle hold on this planet with it, and lever the population around so we can get that ship repaired, *I'll* be surprised."

Morrissey bunked. "*How?*"

"Why, what's the cause of the trouble? The people here are destructive and they're disinterested in work. They hinder, not help. Right?"

"Right."

"Then all we have to do is get them to *want to create*, rather than destroy, and to *want to work*, right? Now *here* we have a want-generator that plays the range of human desires like the keys of a piano. Once we find the right settings, where's the problem?"

"You're right," said Morrissey. "Here I've been complaining because we happened to hit on this when we're stuck in this miserable place. It never occurred to me this might get us *out* of here."

The next morning saw the start of a week of painstaking experiment. Where the first work had gone smoothly, the next steps were maddening.

"Damn it," said Morrissey, "it's just *impossible* to broadcast this signal, or aim it or focus it. At this rate, we'll have to take the set into the city, and *hide* it there somewhere."

Roberts had another worry. "If we trade with those technicians, we've somehow got to block that generosity signal, so it doesn't affect *us*, too. Otherwise, well probably end up by giving them the set."

Another week crawled by, and then in desperation, they discovered that a supertranquilizer pill, several tins of which were in the emergency chest, not only stopped them from worrying how long the delay would last but also solved the problem. It stopped them from feeling any perceptible want or desire, natural or induced, at all. Once they took the pill, they were as good as vegetables for the next four to six hours.

"Okay," said Roberts. "Now, how are we going to work this?"

Morrissey said, "We'll take apart the want-generator and make a communicator; then I'll tell the technicians we've got

32

some extra guns, ammunition, protective suits, and so on, to trade. I'll ask for circuit components, and also some things we don't especially want, so we have a little leeway in trading. Before they get here, we'll make the circuit back into a want-generator. When they land, we'll take pills, turn the want-generator on, and that's it."

"We'll need to be very sure it's on the right setting," said Roberts.

Morrissey nodded. "We'll check that before taking the pills. I'd probably better turn it on low at first, see how it works, and then come back in and gradually step up the power, so they don't notice it. Meanwhile, *we'll* have taken the pills—"

Hammell objected, "The trouble with that is, we won't be able to react right. We're going to act like zombies."

Morrissey thought it over.

"When I set up the meeting, I can say we've been knocking ourselves out, can't think of any solution, and so on. They'll expect us to look depressed."

Roberts nodded. "That ought to help, anyway. What about when they leave?"

"Before that, I'll start to cut down the power. After they leave, I'll step it up again, so they don't come to their senses the minute they get out of the clearing. If we work it right, and try to make reasonably decent trades with them, they may never guess a thing."

"Okay," said Roberts. "Just so *they* don't skin *us*."

33

VII. The Technicians

It was just a few days later that the technicians arrived in two medium-sized skimmers. They were bearded, roughly dressed, bristling with guns—and gave the impression of watching in every direction at once.

As soon as the skimmers dropped into the clearing, Roberts, Hammell, and Morrissey chewed up their pills. They'd scarcely swallowed the last bits when a layer of glass seemed to slide down over the world. They could *see* through the glass, but nothing out there really meant anything, ever had meant anything, or probably ever would mean anything. So there was no point in getting excited about anything.

Tranquilized into two-legged vegetables, Roberts and Hammell trudged to the hatch, while Morrissey bent at the set.

The technicians climbed out of their skimmers.

Roberts and Hammell shambled across the clearing. Morrissey dropped out the hatch, and drifted after them.

The technicians stared at them, looking bemused.

"Poor guys," said one.

"Yeah, you can sure see *they've* been clobbered."

"Remember what it was like for us last winter? It's hit them already."

Roberts and Hammell listlessly raised a hand in greeting.

A burly giant with a bristling red beard glanced at his

34

companions, "Ah, fellows, we're all in the same boat. Do we have to *trade* with these poor guys?"

The rest of the men shifted their guns in embarrassment.

"After all," suggested a small wiry technician with a rifle in his hand, a knife in his belt, and a pistol butt protruding from under his armpit, "we're *all* human."

"Sure, why be greedy?"

Someone mumbled, with a catch in his voice, "They'll have trouble enough, anyway, no matter what *we* can do for them."

Roberts had the impression of looking out through a glass wall and sensing invisible forces that beat powerfully on the other side.

A technician with a scar down the side of his face, and a rough, no-nonsense cast of countenance, suddenly shut his eyes. Tears ran streaming down his cheeks.

Roberts' brain sluggishly added up two and two. He reached back and shook Morrissey by the arm.

"Turn it down."

Morrissey nodded listlessly and headed back for the tender.

The technicians were now choking, trembling, and struggling to keep control of themselves.

Roberts said nothing, because the technicians were clearly too choked up to talk.

Morrissey disappeared into the tender.

The red-bearded giant thrust out his right hand, palm up. He began, "*Anything* we can do—"

Roberts, through the dull placidity imposed by the super-tranquilizer, sensed a sudden lessening of force outside the glass wall. Suddenly there was no force there at all.

The red-beard frowned. "Within reason, of course."

Another of the technicians wiped his eyes with his sleeve. "After all, *we* have to live, too, you know."

Roberts glanced around.

Morrissey was just coming out of the tender.

The scarred technician said flatly, "Those that are fit to survive, *survive*." He eyed Roberts and Hammell. "Nature weeds out the incompetent."

By now, every eye amongst the technicians was fast drying.

"These supplies weren't easy to get," growled the red-bearded giant. "If you have something to trade, we'll be willing to *consider*—"

Morrissey paused, halfway out of the tender, with a strange expression on his face. Then he turned around and plodded back again.

The small wiry technician shifted his gun around and alertly watched Morrissey go back into the tender.

"What's *he* doing?"

Roberts struggled to get some kind of idea through the glass wall.

"He—he's got indigestion."

Hammell, with a look of painful effort, said carefully, "Can't keep anything down."

"Could be ten-day fever. Has he got spots on the backs of his hands?"

The air outside the glass wall seemed to suddenly thicken again, then got thicker yet by graduated stages.

Tranquilizer or no tranquilizer, it came through to Roberts that Morrissey was botching the job.

Tears were spurting out of the technicians' eyes. The short wiry technician rushed forward and emotionally offered Roberts his gun. The giant red-beard, weeping uncontrollably, clasped Hammell like a brother. Before Roberts could figure out what to do, he found himself surrounded by piled-up supplies, with the technicians wringing his hands tearfully. And then, apparently unable to bear their emotion, they all piled into one of the skimmers.

"We'll be back! We'll bring you more arms, and seeds, and everything. Just tell us what you need! We really *want* to help!"

The skimmer shot up over the trees and vanished.

They spent the next few days making a map and plotting the settings to induce wants. The city, they charted at night, moving low over the darkened buildings, lit from below by the heavily shielded street lights. Meanwhile, Morrissey developed a method for focusing the device more accurately, so as to concentrate the effect or spread it over a wide re-

36

gion. Then they decided that they were ready to go to work in earnest.

"You can see," said Roberts, studying the completed chart, "that we can hit any or all of the city, with one likely

exception. The computer itself is probably unreachable."

"Stands to reason," said Hammell. "Desires are *emotional*.. The closest thing that the computer has to an emotion is its set of built-in directives."

"So," said Roberts, "we have to work through the *people*, not the computer. Now, the technicians left the city for exactly the same reasons that the computer has been driven to supplying only bare necessities. The people are destructive and uncooperative. What we have to do is to correct that, right?"

"Right," said Hammell.

Morrissey took out a sheet of paper with a list of settings. He read: "Desire for achievement, desire to excel, desire to cooperate, desire to make friends, desire to learn, .desire to work hard, desire to help others. Once we get started, that computer will have the easiest time it's had since it was made."

"Then," said Roberts, "it ought to be possible to get the technicians to go back. And once we get the technicians back there, and the populace cooperating, there should be no trouble getting things made so we can repair the ship."

"When shall we start?" said Morrissey.

Roberts said briskly, "Right now. Why not set the want-generator on 'desire for achievement,' and give the whole city a good jolt for the rest of the day?"

Hammell nodded. "They certainly could use it."

Hammell grinned. "Do you suppose we'll notice much difference if we take the skimmer up late this afternoon, and look them over through the glasses?"

Morrissey nodded. "Should."

Roberts nodded. "Okay. Set it up."

Morrissey grinned. "Good as done."

Roberts and Hammell got their guns, climbed into the skimmer, and watched the clearing drop away below. The ground flashed past, forest giving way suddenly to neat rows of crops. Far off to the south, a dust cloud crawled across the

37

ground, and they realized it was the cultivator coming north again.

"Good to be up here," said Hammell.

Roberts glanced around, to see no flying predator nearby. "It sure is." He glanced up, toward *Orion*, orbiting unseen far overhead. "And let's hope we're up there again pretty soon."

Just then, far ahead, the city rose up over the horizon and seemed to flow swiftly toward them.

VIII. By Trial and Error

38

A second and closer look corrected Roberts' impressions. It wasn't a riot. It was a war. The police robots were being overturned and smashed with sledge-hammers and lengths of pipe. The humans were steadily forcing their way into the center of the city.

If the roboid police were destroyed, there would be nothing to protect the computer. If the computer were destroyed, the ship would *never* be repaired.

"Hang on," said Roberts. He whipped the skimmer around and streaked for the forest.

Hammell said, "Did Morrissey set it up wrong?"

"I don't know. But God help us if that mob wrecks the computer."

The sun was sinking toward the horizon. To their left, a flying cloud of roughly hand-sized gangbats appeared, and turned with *a* flash of white teeth to intercept the skimmer. The skimmer pulled ahead, streaked along over the wide cleared lane through the forest, then Roberts located the clearing and dropped down beside the tender's cargo hatch. A few moments later they were inside, pulling the skimmer in and locking the hatch.

In the personnel section of the tender, the communicator was turned up high.

". . . now being driven back along the main avenues leading from Planetary Control. Again we urge all citizens to re-

39

main indoors and avoid joining in this disturbance. Unnecessary loss of life can be avoided only if all law-abiding citizens remain in their assigned quarters."

Roberts and Hammell climbed the ladder to the airlock, stepped in, pushed open the inner door, and found Morrissey in a glare of light, staring at something out of view from the door. Roberts stepped forward. By the communicator screen, a pair of whirling hypnotic spirals seemed to briefly catch his gaze, drawing one eye slightly to the right and the other to the left, till a scrambled chaos of light and shadow on the screen suddenly

took on depth and sprang out into the room, and now Roberts was looking at a fleeing mob, their discarded weapons rolled over by police robots sweeping in rigid lines down the long straight avenues from the center of the city.

Morrissey said shakily. "That was *close*. If I'd been an hour later getting that 3-V fixed, I wouldn't have known what was going on till too late."

"What happened?" said Roberts. "They acted like they were set up to 'want to revolt.' "

"I checked that," said Morrissey. "What I had set up was 'desire for achievement,' all right. What we overlooked was, what *kind* of achievement? Suppose they think the greatest achievement would be to *overthrow the computer and the robots?*"

Hammell turned to Roberts. "Remember what they yelled when they threw the bottles at the maintenance robots? '*Kill the mechs!*'"

"Ye gods." Roberts glanced at Morrissey. "What did you do to stop them?"

"Set the want-generator for desire to give up, and beamed it at them, full power. Naturally, the computer and the ro-boid police weren't affected, so in almost no time they had things under control. I've been cutting down the power since then."

Hammell swore. "There goes *that* setting. We won't get much help from 'desire for achievement.'"

Roberts was frowning. "It's worse than that. It means we don't know how they'll react to *any* given desire."

Morrissey nodded. "Look at this." He hit the 'Replay' button and a recorded view appeared, showing an apartment

40

house door coming slowly open. A crafty individual with a knife eased out, carrying a cord on which was strung a dozen odd objects. As he peered around, something flicked into his neck from the side, he clawed at his throat, staggered to the sidewalk, and a moment later a second figure greedily took possession of the string, bent over the fallen figure to take it by one ear, pulled out a knife, briefly tested its edge with a thumb—

Morrissey hit the 'Replay*' button.

Black smoke poured out of a building. A set of scurrying figures ran past carrying a torch, sprinted down the block, hurled the torch through a window, threw half-a-dozen bottles in after it, and dove into the gutter. A yellow flash and flames roared out the window to climb high up the side of the building.

"Accomplishment," said Morrissey drily. "Collect ears, burn buildings, smash the town to bits."

Roberts snapped the switch to see what was happening.

At once, a mob appeared, racing in full flight down a street where no roboid police were anywhere in sight. Screams of terror mingled with the blare of loudspeakers:

"Be calm! *You are in no danger!* No punishment is intended for those who took part in this disturbance!"

Someone screamed, "They're after us!"

The loudspeaker boomed. "Be calm!"

There was another scream.

"HERE THEY COME!"

Roberts glanced at Morrissey. "Better turn that thing down."

"I've *already* got it turned down almost all the way."

On the screen, the mob was running so fast that anyone who hesitated was immediately trampled underfoot.

"The trouble," said Morrissey, "is that once they get going they go faster and faster all by themselves. They build up a kind of inertia all on their own."

The communicator was saying, "This view is typical of the streets in a twenty-mile ring around the Planetary Control Center. All citizens are urged to remain indoors. Repeat. All citizens are urged—"

Roberts said, "We've got to stop it."

"What would you suggest?" asked Morrissey.

41

"How about 'desire to fight? That ought to nullify the panic."

Hammell nodded. "They can't be scared and mad at the same time."

Morrissey didn't say anything but glanced at a list of settings tacked on the want-generator frame, then bent over it carefully. He straightened and glanced at the screen.

The screaming mob rounded a corner and there was another terrified mob coming from the other direction. They fled headlong straight into each other, hit like two avalanches in collision, and were strewn all over street and sidewalks by the impact. They then suddenly looked furious, and sprang to their feet.

"*Quick*!" shouted Roberts. "Shut it off!"

"Done," said Morrissey.

On the screen, the mingled remnants of the two mobs waded into each other savagely.

"It's *started*," said Morrissey, "so it *goes on by itself*." Each one of them saw someone else glaring at him. That was because of our want-generator here. We turned that off. But, already, they were swinging at each other. And the punches connected. Well, what would *you* do? Now they've got *real* reasons to be mad. You want me to set it up for 'desire to flee'?"

"No. This is just one scene. For all we know, on other streets they're still running. Or maybe they're fighting and running at the same time. Set it up for 'desire to sleep.' I don't see what harm *that* can do."

On the screen, the combatants gradually seemed to run down. They looked around, yawning.

"Quick!" said Roberts. "Shut it off!"

"The trouble," said Roberts, "is that we just aren't used to this thing yet. We need more practice. This is like stepping out into space for the first time. The thing is strange. But that doesn't mean you won't master it, with practice."

Morrissey looked slightly encouraged. "It *is* true that this is the first time we've used it."

"Sure," said Hammell. "We were bound to have trouble."

"But," said Roberts, "already we're getting used to it. We know, for instance, that the effect builds up a lot faster than

42

we thought. And we also know that, once started, there's a sort of inertia—the thing tends to keep going by itself."

"Whew," said Morrissey, glancing from the 3-V to the want-generator. "I don't know. I'm almost afraid to touch this thing."

"Don't worry about that," said Hammell, "a little education will straighten everything out in no time. We can dial 'desire to learn.'"

"How do we know they can get anything *to* study? Does the place have a library?"

"It's bound to," said Hammell. "Come on. Let's get on with it."

With visible reluctance, Morrissey turned to the want-generator. Then he shrugged, glanced at the list of settings, and got to work.

Roberts was starting to have doubts about this approach. "How long is this going to take? Education is great but it's kind of a long-range proposition. We want to get off this planet some time in the foreseeable future."

"Well," said Hammell, "we worked up a small war in less than a day."

Morrissey straightened. "There we are. Now, what do we do? Shall we all watch it at once, or should we set up a system of watches?"

Hammell shrugged. "Why not let it work for an hour or so? 'A watched pot never boils.'"

"Just listen to this," said Morrissey.

". . . will be done," the communicator was saying, "in order to supply suitable study materials. We repeat, however, that books, films, spools and exhibits on such subjects as shoplifting, explosives, safe-cracking, mental-suggestion, seduction, death rays, hypnotism, aphrodisiacs, sabotage, secret jiu-jitsu blows, and undetectable murder methods are forbidden under a law which has just been enacted. However, if anyone wishes to learn about anything else, the necessary materials will be provided, following due and careful consideration of the request."

Hammell sagged against the bulkhead.

Roberts shook his head. "*Another zero.*"

Morrissey had an odd smile on his face. "What next?"

43

Roberts and Morrissey had been wrestling with the local variety of antelope for the better part of two hours when a stream of incredible profanity burst out from the other section of the ship. They sprinted for the airlock.

". . . miserable, brainless, incorrigible *cretins*," Hammell was snarling. He glanced at Roberts. "*Look at this. I set up 'desire to work.'*"

Standing out from the screen, in realistic three-dimensional solidity, was a small crowd with hammers, pipes, and crowbars. As they moved back, it was possible to see that that they were crowded around a half-disassembled police robot. Proudly, they took out gears, shafts, and small electric motors, and divided them up amongst themselves.

". . . sort of activity," the communicator was saying, "will not be tolerated, nor will further removal of paving blocks, door and window frames, or lengths of gas or water line. Your law-enforcement agency orders you to

cease and desist from further demolition, remodeling, and private unauthorized construction. Strict penalties will be imposed . . ." "That does it," said Hammell.

"We've got to work in some other wants and desires, or they aren't going to accomplish anything, either. Let's let 'desire to think' run for a while, then very carefully we can switch to another signal, maybe 'desire to improve,' and see what happens. If some kind of mess starts up, we can go back to 'desire to think' again."

Morrissey began to look excited. "That might work, at that."

"Okay, let's give them a vacation for a few hours, then start hitting them with 'desire for sleep.' They'll be in better shape to think straight tomorrow if they get plenty of sleep tonight."

IX. Consider It Done

That night, the roboid police patrolled in vain. Not one crime was committed, anywhere in the city. All the humans were asleep.

AH that night, -the roboid police had nothing to do but travel up and down the empty streets.

"Now," said Hammell, "This is more like it."

Morrissey beamed. "We're starting to get the hang of the thing."

Roberts, conscious of having originated the idea, modestly said nothing

The next day went along the same way, until six o'clock P.M., when Roberts shut down operations till around nine.

"It's working," said Hammell. "You can see an improvement in their appearance."

"That sleep helps," said Morrissey.

"Not only that, they *look* thoughtful."

"What we're doing ought to really uplift this place," Morrissey agreed.

There was a jarring buzz from the communicator.

Morrissey sat up. "Who might *that* be?"

"Probably the technicians," said Hammell.

"Leave the visual transmission off," said Roberts, sitting

up

44

Morrissey nodded. "How about visual *reception*?" "Okay by me."

45

Morrissey snapped on the communicator.

The three-dimensional image of Kelty, assistant-chief of the city's law-enforcement department, sprang into view. Kelty looked exhausted.

"Okay. You win, Roberts. *Roberts*," said Kelty. "Do you hear me?"

"I hear you."

"I'm throwing in the sponge. You'll have your repairs as soon as we can get the shop set up."

"You said that couldn't be done."

"The events of the last few days have given the computer some new data to work on. The computer now knows it can be destroyed. One of the computer's built-in directives is that it safeguard itself, so long as the resulting actions aren't inimical to the long-term welfare of the populace. That directive is now brought into operation."

"I see. But why call me?"

"I've been thinking things over for the last couple of days. Believe me, I haven't thought as much in most years as I've thought in the last couple of days. The thing is perfectly obvious. First, there's the worst upheaval we've ever had on this planet. Following this, we have the most fantastic set of exasperating petty-sabotage operations, in turn followed by utter silence. Then, there is one concentrated burst of violence, followed again by silence. We have this two days in a row."

Seen on the 3-V, Kelty shook his head. "By no stretch of the imagination could a thing like this come about by *accident*. This is a demonstration of control that stuns the mind. Control by whom? The most searching investigation, using surveillance devices all over the city, reveals not the slightest evidence of how it's done. So we're blocked there. But who *could* provide the leadership for a thing like this? Only the technicians, or complete outsiders. I happen to know that the technicians are in no position to do it. With them, in that wilderness, it's touch-and-go.

"Now then," said Kelty, "where does this leave us? We have the following events: You and your cargo-control

officer present yourselves to the city government, requesting repairs. You are refused. A few weeks go by, and someone masterminds an attack that all but destroys the entity that

46

refused you help. Following this, there is a demonstration that someone is exercising nearly absolute control over the populace. All I can say is, I'm sorry I was so slow to catch on. I've put the problem to the computer in the light of these facts, and it is prepared to rebuild the Class II repair facility at once, especially if you'll hold down the destructiveness of the populace until the work is done."

Roberts waited until he was reasonably sure he had control of his voice.

"Kelty, you understand that I don't admit interfering in the internal affairs of this planet?" Kelty nodded glumly.

"However," said Roberts, "from what you've told me, and from what we've seen watching the 3-V, it does seem that this destructiveness you speak of ought to die down for long enough to get the repair facility completed."

Kelty sighed in relief. "Consider it done. Listen Roberts—" "Yes?"

"I don't know who you *really* are, or what are your intentions. With such power as you've demonstrated, obviously you're far more than the captain of a cargo ship. I don't ask you to admit that. All I say is this—if you decide to fit this planet into your plans, just *tell me what you want done*. Is that all right, Roberts?"

"I hear you," said Roberts, fighting to keep his voice even. "That's all I ask," said Kelty. "I'm sorry it took me so long to catch on."

The three-dimensional image faded out. Roberts turned off the communicator.

Morrissey said, in a surprised voice, "That's it. That's what we've been trying for."

Hammell said hesitantly, "You know, he's right. With this device, we could exercise enormous power." He paused. "But, of course, we wouldn't want to." "Of course not," said Roberts, scowling. "It would be selfish," said Morrissey.

They dropped the subject but it hung in the air afterwards.

The days till now, having been filled with trouble and danger, had crept past a minute at a time. The following

47

days, filled with success, went by in a flash. Suddenly the repair facility was done, the special tools made, the repairs finished, and the three injured men were on their way back to the tender. Roberts, Hammell, and Morrissey disassembled the want-generator and stood watching the city on the 3-V.

"Well," said Hammell, "believe me, we *earned* those repairs."

The people had changed in a way that was hard to pin down, but which came across as a marked increase in self-respect and self-reliance.

Morrissey said exasperatedly, "The planet's still a mess, though. Look there."

A group of youths stalked past, four abreast, wearing armbands marked with triple thunderbolts. They were neat, trim, and confident; the rest of the citizens hastened to get off the sidewalk as they approached.

A roboïd policeman cruised by, plainly uncertain just what to do about this phenomenon.

"*Somewhere*," said Morrissey, "there must be someone in

that city who did a lot of thinking—about just how much *jrj*, *j-r*

power he could get, with the right organization." *JTUTt J.M.*

Hammell nodded. "Kelty's going to have a great time when that outfit gets going."

Roberts was frowning at the screen. He could sense what was coming. Morrissey and Hammell both had a feeling of dissatisfaction. The job wasn't done yet.

Hammell said, "We've all got accumulated leave coming. I wonder—"

Morrissey was frowning at the screen. "That's a thought. We ought to be able to *finish* this."

48

X. Return to Paradise

Roberts glanced from the viewscreen to the landing display and dropped the heavily armed Patrol ship into the clearing between a gnarled tree with thorns as big as a man's forearm and a spaceyacht whose insides were luxuriously appointed.

Roberts looked warily all around, determined to avoid the experiences he'd had the last time. He loosened his fusion-gun in its holster and pulled himself out of the hatch. He sucked in a breath of fresh planetary air, glanced around at the rustling leaves and gently blowing grass, looked up at a white puffy cloud drifting across the clear blue sky, and abruptly snapped his gun out of its holster as brush moved in a rippling motion at the edge of the clearing.

A familiar-looking thing much bigger than a tiger, with close gray fur, silently blurred out of the brush to bound

straight for Roberts, forepaws outstretched.

Roberts fired, fired again, jumped down the hatchway, grabbed the lever and heaved.

Clang! The hatch slammed shut.

WHOOM! There was a noise like an enormous gas burner, gone almost as soon as it began. The ship quivered. Then there was a thud somewhere aft.

Roberts crouched in the cramped space under the hatch, gripping the fusion-gun, and listened intently. He, heard nothing more. Very cautiously, he raised the hatch.

51

From above, where to one side the big hatch of the luxurious spaceyacht was now wide-open, a rough masculine voice called down.

"The place hasn't changed much, has it?"

Roberts looked up to see Hammell, somewhat foreshortened by the angle of vision, grinning down at him.

"No," said Roberts, automatically glancing around the clearing and taking a quick look overhead. "Not out here, at least. Where's Morrissey?"

"Up above. He just got through setting up the gear. Come on up, if you can stand to leave that flying fort of yours."

Hammell touched a button beside the hatch, and the hatch swung silently shut. He and Roberts walked toward a softly glowing oval on the deck. The right half of this oval was green, and the left half red. Roberts stepped carefully onto the green, and at once the walls of the ship dropped downward, and with a soft murmur an oval section of the next level overhead slid back. One-by-one, the levels dropped past, disclosing entrances to a succession of medium-sized > rooms with curving walls—designed for entertainment, eating, sleeping—and then they passed the level where Morrissey had set up the equipment and reached the control room, which seemed comparatively small because of the inward-curving sides near the nose of the ship. Roberts caught a polished silvery bar, stepped out of the lift and nodded to Morrissey, who glanced up worriedly from the communicator.

"Hello, Morrissey," said Roberts.

Morrissey blinked at the battle armor.

"Sir," he said, "something's changed since we were here before."

"What?"

"The screen no longer gives continuous news broadcasts from the city."

"That doesn't sound good."

They sat down in the three chairs in front of the control panel and Roberts, in the center, adjusted the focus of the spy-screen. At once, he had a sharply detailed view of a potholed street strewn with trash. To the left was a large building with the windows knocked out. To the right was a park where rats scurried amidst the leafless dead trees and

52

smoldering heaps of garbage. Straight ahead, in the center of the street, two small boys stood menacingly with short lengths of iron pipe, their legs wide apart, their clothes ragged and dirty save for armbands marked with triple lightning bolts. Just rolling onto the screen were a pair of roboid policemen, their whip antennas swaying, the sunlight flashing on the spokes of their high bicycle-type wheels.

Roberts said, "If this is typical, no wonder they aren't broadcasting."

53

XL Something Didn't Work

Hammell was leaning forward tensely. "Something's getting ready to blow in that city. Otherwise the police just wouldn't be this heavily reinforced."

On the screen, two more roboid policemen had swung into view behind the first pair, and these were followed in turn by a flying wedge of roboid police.

Straight ahead, the two boys in the middle of the street stayed where they were and jeered.

As Roberts glanced from one screen to the other, the two boys snapped their arms forward. The lengths of pipe arced out to slam into the roboid police, and then twin flashes of dazzling light outlined a tangle of ripped and torn metal housings, shredded insulation, bent tubing, and bare gears, shafts, and axles. The first pair of roboid police smashed to a stop.

The two boys were already sprinting toward opposite sides of the street.

The second pair of roboid police rolled unswervingly past the wreckage of the first.

Roberts, Hammell, and Morrissey stared at the screen, their expressions perfectly blank.

From behind a heap of garbage at the edge of the park, two more boys raced out, clutching short lengths of pipe.

As Morrissey snapped a switch, twin speakers to either side of the spy-screen came on, relaying sounds from the

54

scene. An amplified voice spoke out: "Clear the street. This warning will not be repeated. Clear the street. Further violence against your law-enforcement officers will be met with maximum force. Clear the street."

Two more roboid policemen smashed to a stop in a whirl of flames, smoke, and showers of sparks.

Behind them, the V of a flying wedge rushed forward. Unlike the others, which had been light-blue, these roboid police were painted black with silver markings.

For a moment there was a silence broken only by the hiss of tires on pavement, the pound of feet, and the panting of breath. Then there was a concerted yell, "*Kill the mechs*! The boys' arms swung back in unison.

At the fronts of the police machines, small doors snapped up and back. From behind each door came a bright spurting flash.

The boys' arms flew out, their knees buckled, and their lengths of pipe dropped free as they fell sprawling to the pavement amidst sudden dazzling flashes of light.

The flying wedge of roboid police swept steadily forward with no change of speed or direction. Their narrow tires, heavily loaded, crossed the torn inert bodies, cut, ground, and slashed them. The tires and rims turned red, lay down narrow red strips in absolutely straight lines on the pavement.

Hammell, Roberts, and Morrissey, momentarily unable to move, sat with their hands gripping the edge of the control panel.

A pretty woman, a baby bundle in her arms, rushed from a door down the street, screaming, "My boys! My boys!" and ran toward a pair of the inert, mangled bodies, herself coming into the path of the flying wedge.

In the fronts of the onrushing police robots, the little doors snapped open.

Hammell gave a sound of horror.

Roberts, his mind a whirling maze of calculation, came to his feet. His patrol ship was heavily enough armed to handle any concentration of police robots. If he took the ship to the edge of this section of the city—

On the screen, directly in the path of the flying wedge,

55

the woman screamed, and raised her bundle high overhead, as if to lift her baby out of danger—

From behind the little doors, bright flashes spurted out.

Roberts had already started to turn away, his hand reaching out for the battle armor he would wear to cross the clearing.

On the screen there was a huge, brilliant, dazzling flash as the 'baby' blew up.

Roberts, blank-faced, one hand on the battle armor, stared at the screen.

Beside him, Morrissey stood motionless with a perfectly blank expression.

Hammell grunted in disgust and settled back into his seat.

Roberts tilted the battle armor back against the wall of the ship and sat down.

On the screen, the wedge of roboid police swept by, followed by two long columns of roboid police firing as they passed at the building and into the dump that stood on the opposite side of the street.

Down the street at the end of the building a flash of movement left Roberts with a brief afterimage of something vaguely shaped like a camera, which had apparently recorded what had happened so far, and was now pulled inside as the roboid police came dangerously close.

The long double column of roboid police was now slowing to a halt, the point of the wedge extending exactly to the center of the intersection beyond the far end of the building. From the left, a second wedge followed by another double column appeared from behind the building, moving along the intersecting street, and joined up with the first wedge. The individual roboid police now turned ninety degrees to form lines facing the building and the adjoining parks, and the lines moved farther apart to open up a wide protected strip of avenue between the lines.

Down this protected roadway came something long, low, and broad, with jointed body sections running on many wheels, with turrets on top slowly swinging large-muzzled uptilted guns toward the building.

From the building came shots, and small bundles that arced out and down. Up and down the street, more small

56

bundles flew out from the cellar windows. With bright flashes, gaps began to appear in the lines of roboid police.

The long many-wheeled device now slowed to a stop. Its upward-pointing barrels moved slowly, methodically. At the mouth of each gunbarrel there was a blur, then another blur, then another blur.

From the windows of the building came a flash, then from the next window another flash, then from the next window another flash.

Another long low many-wheeled device rolled past the first and stopped farther down the street to heave its explosive shells through the next section of windows.

The repeated short blast of a whistle cut through the roar of explosives. The firing and tossing of bundles from the windows abruptly stopped.

Down the street came a chunky vehicle with several big hemispherical bulges at the top. It stopped at a thing in the street which resembled a manhole cover, flipped the cover off with two pronged levers, eased forward and dropped something round over the hole. Wisps of yellowish smoke began to escape around the edges.

"Sealing off the sewer system," said Hammell. "No one will get out of the building that way."

"They'd better get out *some* way pretty quick," said Morrissey, "or they aren't going to. Look there."

A low blocky object, like a huge metal brick, heavily mounted the sidewalk and moved massively forward on concealed wheels or rollers. The door of the building snapped back before it like a matchstick, there was a bright flash from underneath, with no visible effect, then the device was inside. It backed up, taking half the doorframe and part of the adjoining wall with it, and rolled up the street to the next door. In the silence now that the shooting had died away, there was a dull heavy crunch. The massive device reappeared and rumbled down the sidewalk. Behind it, there now moved forward a host of spidery devices, varying from about one to four feet tall, that moved methodically into the building, followed by low long broad things with many short legs like metal centipedes. These crawled from a steady procession of low broad-roofed carriers with open sides that

57

rolled up the street, discharged their cargo, and moved on to vanish around the corner.

Time passed, and spidery many-legged metal forms appeared on successively higher floors of the building and finally on the roof. But only two humans were carried out, and both of them were plainly dead.

"Well," said Roberts finally, "before we can decide what to do this time it looks like we're going to have to figure out what's developed out of what we did the last time."

Morrissey nodded. Hammell glanced moodily out at the clearing.

From behind them came the bland voice of Holcombe, the lifelike roboid butler that had come with the spaceyacht, and which added that special touch of luxury that had enabled the manufacturers to overcharge for this deluxe version of the ship. Holcombe was saying: "A little light refreshment, my lords?"

Morrissey said wearily, "*Just* a pitcher of water, Holcombe. Plus three glasses and a large bottle of aspirin."

"Yes, my lord." Holcombe bowed and retired.

The three men stared moodily at the screen.

It took them most of the day, methodically working with the spy-screen, to get a rough idea of what was going on in the city. Once they had it, they sat back in exasperated bafflement.

From one end of the city to the other, barring only the region around the Planetary Control Center itself, a highly organized gang of fanatics seemed to be at work, operating from a network of their own tunnels. These tunnels were independent of the city's network of steam lines, cables, pipes, and underground maintenance tunnels, though the two connected at a number of points. Except at these points, the city's surveillance devices showed nothing of what went on inside the newly dug tunnels. Hence the spy-screen, which operated from taps on the city's surveillance system, also showed nothing except at these points. But from watching the movement of maintenance and combat devices inside the city's runnels, it became obvious that a continuous skirmishing and probing was going on, with the

58

computer trying to isolate and clean out sections of the fanatics' tunnels, while the fanatics calculatedly sabotaged water pipes, steam lines, and power cables, to keep the computer distracted with maintenance problems, and its tunnels clogged with maintenance devices. Meanwhile, above ground, gangs of fanatics wearing triple-lightning-bolt insignia burst out to seize able-bodied, protesting citizens for work in the shovel-gangs. The general bulk of the populace, if anything, looked more rundown and put upon than before. Now they had two sets of rulers instead of one, and the rulers were at war with each other.

"This network of tunnels," said Hammell finally, "makes it a mess. How do we know what effect we're having on them if we can't see them?"

Morrissey ran his finger down a paper tacked by the locator screen, flipped the paper up, and ran down a second list underneath.

"Here we are. 'Desire for light and air.' 'Desire to escape confinement.'" He flipped up the next page. 'Desire f.or room, space.'"

"Could we work it so that a *blend* of all those desires would be generated? After all, with this synchronous rotor setup you worked out, we can hit different sections with different things at the same time. Why not the same section with several settings at once?"

"But not throughout the whole city?"

"No, of course not," said Roberts. "Who knows what would happen? No, just try one place at a time. A good spot to start might be near the building where all the fighting occurred earlier. There should still be some people in tunnels under there. Then we can see how this works."

XII. Chaos

They switched the spy-screen back to a view, of the building and of the garbage-filled park beside the building, and Morrissey set up the want-generator to hit just that section of the city with 'desire for light and air,' 'desire to escape confinement,' and 'desire for room, space.'

Then they watched the screen.

Somewhere underground, fanatical humans lurking in runnels would be suddenly stricken with an urgent desire for light, air, and unconfined space.

Very soon, these humans should come to the surface.

For a long time, they waited.

But for a long time, nothing happened.

Roberts, frowning, studied first the building, then the park, to make out finally, in the center of the park amidst the enormous heaps of garbage, the remains of what appeared to be a bandstand. He was frowning at this structure when a wild-looking individual with improvised gun in one hand suddenly burst from a trapdoor in the center, and plunged out into the heaped-up garbage. Right behind him came two more, their faces frantic and chests pumping desperately for air. After the first three came a flood of humanity, each carrying a club, a length of pipe, a gun apparently taken from a wrecked roboid policeman and fitted with a stock, or some other weapon. There was no room for them all on the bandstand and they didn't try to stay there

60

but immediately sprang off into the heaped garbage to plunge and heave desperately, as if trying to climb up into the open air itself.

Last out of the hole came a man about five feet ten inches tall, strongly built, neatly dressed in coveralls with triple-lightning-bolt armband, carrying a rifle in his right hand, and plainly boiling mad. He gestured angrily toward the trapdoor, shook his fist, and threatened the others with his gun. His voice came out in a flow of words so rapid that all Roberts could make out was the sense of urgency and the tone of command. Meanwhile, the scores of armed men ceased their struggles and lay flat, face-down in the garbage, or stared up dazedly at the open sky overhead, and tried to act as if they didn't hear.

At the same time, around the edges of the park, roboid police began to pour in from eight different directions, coming both ways along the four wide streets that intersected to form the boundaries of the park.

Around the sides of the one-time park, the rapidly accumulating roboid police milled, searching for some route

through the heaps of garbage. Here and there, one or two eased in, went forward a little distance, lost headway, came to a stop, backed up, and slammed forward again, to bog down in towering piles of decaying trash and garbage.

Down one of the intersecting streets came a long snakelike wheeled carrier, which pulled alongside the edge of the dump and slowed to a stop. The arched armored roof tilted up and back in sections, the first sections swinging far back to brace the carrier from tipping off-balance as, successively, other heavy sections swung up and over. Out of the carrier crept a long device like a huge metal centipede, with flanged underside instead of legs. The device inched its way forward as successive waves of expansion and contraction moved along its length. The headlike appendage at the front, fitted with multiple visual receptors behind thick glass plates, and two groups of four large gunmuzzles on a side, selected a low place between two heaps of garbage and pushed forward steadily, thrust ahead by the metallic bulk following along behind in steady successive waves of expansion and contraction, the flanges lifting, tilting, flowing forward, dipping down, and thrusting steadily back.

61

Now an amplified voice boomed out:

"You are surrounded. Surrender peacefully and you will be remanded for psychiatric examination to the Central Medical Computer. You will not be harmed. Resist, and you will be destroyed at once. You have no choice. Surrender. Throw your weapons toward the—"

Atop the bandstand, the man who'd been arguing with the 'others had dropped to one knee, his gun resting on a half-rotted rail at the edge of the platform.

There was a solitary bang, and the voice demanding surrender went silent.

Morrissey said, "They aren't throwing their guns out, and they aren't fighting, either. That metal snake is going to get to them in about a minute-and-a-half and blow them to bits. Isn't there something we can—"

Roberts thought fast and said, "Reset the generator. Hit them with 'desire to obey the law.'"

"That's it," said Morrissey. Quickly, he reset the want-generator.

The leader of the humans, on the bandstand, was talking in a low urgent voice, lying flat on the stand as a metallic head started up over a mound of trash, and suddenly every other human stood up. Every single individual either threw a length of pipe, or threw a padded bundle, or fired a gun, or lunged right or left through the garbage to get a clean shot or throw around the side of the stand.

Everyone's aim was good.

In a terrific series of flashes, the head end of the huge metal centipede blew apart. ,

In one spontaneous surge, the humans then plunged through the garbage to the stand and, in a line that moved

like clockwork, dropped one-by-one through the trapdoor into the interior.

All save for the leader, who was now on his knees, hands clasped and head uplifted, lips moving, his expression earnest.

"Shut it off," said Roberts exasperatedly.

On the screen, the leader suddenly bowed his head, opened his eyes, and jumped down the hole.

The trapdoor slammed shut.

62

A plume of dirty smoke climbed up from the wrecked front end of the metal centipede.

"Now what?" said Morrissey, glancing from the controls to the screen. "Did I somehow get the wrong setting?"

"No," said Roberts. "As usual, it was the right setting, but they just interpreted it their own way. To them, 'desire to obey authority' meant desire to *obey their leader*. And to their leader, it apparently meant desire to *obey God*. None of them had the slightest impulse to do what *we* intended, and obey the *city* authority—the computer and the roboid police."

"So far," said Morrissey, "you've got to admit we're getting nowhere."

"We've just started," said Roberts stubbornly.

Hammell said sourly, "Yeah. We're finding out the things that *don't* work."

Outside in the forest, where darkness was starting to gather, something gave a bellowing roar which the yacht's thin hull hardly seemed to muffle.

The roboid Holcombe appeared at the entrance to the gravity-lift, and bowed.

"Dinner is served, my lords."

Dinner was a sumptuous meal but halfway through the dessert the curving wall of the spaceyacht's dining saloon lit up in a reflected pinkish glow. There was a bellow of pain and rage from outside. From overhead came a metallic rattle, then a muffled booming voice: ;

"Your attention, please. This vessel is fully protected by appropriate devices of the Advanced Synodic Products Corporation. It will retaliate automatically against any aggressive or hostile action."

Hammell swore under his breath.

There was a second glare of pink light, the deck shook underfoot, there was a bellow that traveled around in a large circle outside, then abruptly there was a dazzling white glare, followed by a sizzle as if ten tons of meat had been dropped into a monster frying pan.

Morrissey understood that sound. It meant that some gigantic beast, singed by the spaceyacht, had galloped around

63

and gotten too close to the patrol ship. Which of the patrol ship's big fushion-guns had done the business was a good question, but it was all the same to whatever got in their way. .

Hammell said nervously, "The stinking fifth-rate computer on this tub must not be able to distinguish between dead behemoths lying around and live ones sneaking on. Otherwise, how did *that* thing get so close? Maybe Roberts was right. Maybe we should have settled for less luxury and a better-functioning computer." Hammell finally shook his head, glanced absently toward Morrissey and suddenly jumped back.

Roberts had silently entered the compartment and was swinging shut the back panel.

He grinned. "What's the matter? Don't I look nice in this thing?"

HammeU's laugh came to him clearly through the earphones of the suit. "You look like an overgrown gorilla. I was thinking about those animals outside, and for a second, I thought one had gotten in. Ye gods, that suit is big."

"You want one?" said Roberts. "There are three extras just like it on the patrol ship—for three other crew members. In fact, you could sleep there. There are four bunks. I could bring back a couple of extra suits for you to wear across the clearing, and—"

Hammell hesitated, then shook his head.

"No, thanks. We couldn't work in armored suits."

Reluctantly, Roberts nodded. He went down the grav-drop, out the hatch, and into the night.

Roberts slid out of the bunk, performed a series of exercises to the computer's satisfaction, shaved, showered, dressed, ate an A-ration bar, drank two glasses of water, swung the suit of battle armor out of its sling, got into it and headed for the hatch. Roberts had the hatch up and had already pulled himself halfway out, before he saw what was going on outside.

Three huge mottled-gray cats were working on the remains of several gigantic bony-snouted creatures, tearing the meat off the bones in chunks, and wrestling with sheets of

64

tough fibrous membrane that apparently separated one huge bundle of muscle fiber from another.

Creeping in on the cats, apparently for a quick grab at a chunk of the meat, was a many-legged, segmented green creature with a set of jaws about three feet long.

Overhead, light-blue against a sky that was a darker blue with drifting white clouds, huge birds circled and eyed a behemoth with suggestively flicking sledgehammer tail which was standing upright on two hind legs beside the space yacht. The head and shoulders of this beast were inside the yacht, the big door of the spaceyacht was buckled outward and the side inward, to make room.

Studying the other animals with cold calculating gaze from the foliage of the giant thorn tree, which for some reason tolerated it, was a large head.

Roberts dropped back inside the patrol ship and slammed the hatch.

The voice of the symbiotic computer spoke from the helmet's earphones.

"For an armored member of the Interstellar Patrol to retreat in the face of mere beasts, with onlookers watching from another ship, is unacceptable."

"To do anything else would be nuts. And as I've explained at least a dozen times, I'm *not* a member of the Interstellar Patrol."

"Evidently you've neglected to study your 'Model A-6 Battle-Suit Dynamics.' A demonstration is in order. Press down the chin-lever in the left side of the helmet."

Roberts, not wanting to pointlessly antagonize the computer, pressed down the lever. He immediately found himself walking toward the hatch. Before he knew what had happened, he'd thrown the hatch open, and was climbing out.

The three gigantic cats looked up from their meal and bared their teeth. The green many-legged creature swung its yard-long jaws around and hissed. In the thorn tree, the snakelike eyes looked on with cold calculation.

Roberts dropped off the curving side of the ship, his feet sinking more deeply into the soil at every step, as if the suit were acquiring mass as it moved forward. He was headed straight for the green many-legged creature.

65

After a moment's startled hesitation, this beast opened up its yard-long jaws and lunged for Roberts.

Roberts' right foot came up in a kick that left a ten-inch-wide groove in the soil, hit the creature's lower jaw and shut it with a *CLACK!* that echoed around the clearing.

His right hand then reached out, seized the top of the creature's snout, and yanked it down, cracking its nose into the ground.

The three huge cats began edging back toward the forest.

All the many legs of the green creature now began to kick, but Roberts set his feet, turned the whole head over side-wise, pinned the upper swell of the head under the right arm of his suit, and gripping the forward curve of the snout with his left arm, heaved the head of the monster along with him as he started for the spaceyacht. Behind him, the rest of the beast lifted clear of the ground, like one cable of a suspension bridge, the far end anchored out of sight somewhere back in the forest.

Roberts kept going for the spaceyacht, his feet sinking as if he were in soft muck.

Behind him, there was a heavy rending, a loud creak, successive cracking straining noises, then the rustling and swishing of uncounted leafy branches, followed by the ground-shaking crash of a big tree.

The far end of the many-legged creature suddenly was trotting along, stumbling and lurching as it crossed ground not selected by the head end, so that some of its feet went down into holes while others banged into rotting logs and low hillocks, but the creature did its best, and stopped instantaneously when Roberts stopped, beside the gray pillar-like leg of the behemoth that had its shoulders and snout inside the spaceyacht, and its huge sledgehammer tail swishing threateningly behind it.

Roberts unhesitatingly reached up, gripped one of the tail's muscular cords, which stood out like tree roots, and yanked on it as if he were ringing a bell.

The upper end of the creature froze. There was a menacing rumble. The tail wrenched, twisted, and couldn't get free. The head and shoulders of the behemoth jerked back and out of the spaceyacht. Roberts gripped the tail. The animal tried without success to step back to get its balance, but

66

Roberts held the tail while his body blocked the right rear leg.

Ponderously, stamping hard with its left leg to try to right itself, the creature tipped over, to land full-length with a shock that jarred the earth.

Overhead, in the thorn tree, a little flutter of leaves marked the departure of the snake.

The behemoth staggered to its feet, gave a pitiful bleat, and bolted for the forest.

Roberts let go the head of the many-legged creature, its eyes came warily half-open, and with steadily gathering speed, it headed for the forest.

Roberts looked around, saw that the clearing was deserted, and climbed up the handholds to find out what had happened inside the spaceyacht.

Inside, Hammell and Morrissey stared at him as he climbed out of the battle armor. Roberts was slightly damp with perspiration.

Hammell and Morrissey, on the other hand, looked like they'd spent the night being bounced around in an oversize tin can.

"Well," Roberts said, "are you guys *sure* you don't want to come over to the patrol ship?"

Hammell stared at the armor, and said hesitantly, "Ah—no offense, but—look, was it *your* idea to just go out there and kick those monsters around?"

"No," said Roberts frankly, "The symbiotic computer on the patrol ship got the idea, and it—well—made the initial suggestion."

"Ah. And so you—"

"Naturally," said Roberts, standing the battle armor against a bulkhead near the gravity-lift, so he would remember it when they went up, "when the symbiotic computer is unhappy, the ship isn't worth living in. I have to extend myself a little now and then to keep the symbiotic computer happy."

Morrissey glanced out into the clearing where the huge dead carcasses were lying around, swallowed hard, and said nothing.

67

"We'll stay here," said Hammell firmly. Roberts shrugged exasperatedly. "Suit yourself." They went up to the spy-screen, and as they turned it on, a dazzling flash loomed out through an unfocused scene of grayness and blowing smoke, and when Roberts adjusted the focus, a nightmarish barren landscape came into view, with running figures briefly glimpsed in the distance.

XIII. Deadlock

68

"Ye gods," said Hammell. "It looks like that first time we tried to do something, and they had a revolution going before the day was over."

Roberts said, "The want-generator hasn't been on overnight, has it?"

Morrissey shook his head. "We couldn't even have started to figure out what to do. We left it turned off."

"Then we don't have that to worry about, at least. Let's follow one of these avenues toward the center of the city."

The scene shifted, up one of the long avenues, to show, at first, scattered gangs of men moving forward out in the open, then men moving single-file next to the buildings then, farther on, men sprinting across intersections to emerge opposite the center of the next block, cross the street at a run and disappear through doorways guarded by armed men who stayed flat against the wall and peered warily toward the nearest intersection.

As the scene shifted still further forward, the alternating checkerboard pattern of buildings and garbage-filled parks was suddenly interrupted.

Hammell said in astonishment, "Two-thirds of the city is in revolt!"

"At least," agreed Roberts. As the scene changed, they could see, at the high windows of the smashed buildings outside the barrier, triple-lightning-bolt banners hung out. In

69

the dumps, pipes torn out of buildings were thrust deep in the heaps of garbage, with triple-lightning-bolt flags flying from them. Along the edges of the barrier itself, there were flashes of occasional explosions as small parties of men tried to force their way through. Then, apparently, some new command was given. Along the whole length of the enormous barrier, the attempt to break through gradually died out.

After a lengthy silence, Hammell said, "Trying to make something out of this place is like trying to build a house out of hand grenades."

Morrissey nodded. "It was easy to see what they needed before—but what do they need *now*?"

Roberts stared off into the distance.

Hammell shook his head. "Where do we even start? Last time, we had an inert mass to work with. This time, we've got something that explodes from one crisis to the next. How did this mess ever come about, anyway? I thought we'd improved things, not set up a powder keg."

Roberts, who at least had been sleeping at night, began to dimly see a possible cause of the trouble.

After a moment, he said tentatively, "Every time we've used the want-generator, except at very low power on just the three of us, there's been an *inertia*. Once started, the effect seems to go on, even though we turn off the want-generator itself. We've accepted this as a fact, but we haven't tried to find any mechanism to explain it. What if each individual has, in effect, a slight *want-generator capacity* himself? Suppose that once his desire is aroused, it energizes a *field*, similar to an electric field around a wire. This hypothetical desire-field, once energized, would create, in effect, a force tending to maintain the desire, because any lessening of the desire would cause a flow of energy from the collapsing field to reinforce the desire. The result would be an *inertia of the desire*, once created."

Morrissey blinked. "In that case, there should be induction effects. Once a strong desire is created, it will tend to induce a corresponding desire in others, and there will be something similar to attraction and repulsion, based on these interacting desire-fields."

There was a moment's silence as they thought it over, then

70

Roberts said, "To begin with, to all intents and purposes, these people were *destreless*, or rather, their desires were comparatively few, simple, and predictable. It follows that there would be comparatively few of these interacting desire-fields. What *we* apparently did was to *set up more of these interacting fields*."

Hammell said, "Of course, this is just a theory."

"Sure," said Roberts. "But we weren't operating without a theory before. We had a theory. The theory was that the city, and the people in it, were *passive subjects for the operation of the want-generator*. Granted that when the effect was concentrated on just the three of us, here, it seemed to work that way. But then, the city is much larger, the effect is more widespread, and there are far more of what you might call 'natural want-generator units' in the city. Well, we've been acting on the theory that the want-generator operated on a passive object, and the passive object is now running away with the experiment. It's time to reconsider the theory."

Hammell thought it over. "You figure we've set up these 'desire-fields' with the want-generator, and now they're in operation, whether we run the want-generator or not?"

"How else do you explain what's going on? It's exactly as *if* such fields were in operation."

"Remember how we hit the whole city with 'desire for achievement'? And how then we discovered that their idea of achievement was to 'Toll mechs'? And to stop that, we had to give them a stiff jolt of 'desire to give up'? Then there was an uncontrollable panic, and we gave them a shot of 'desire to fight' to break the panic? That, incidentally, started a mass of fist fights, and we had to use 'desire to sleep' to end that? Remember?"

"Yes," said Roberts. "I wouldn't be likely to forget that."

"Well, if 'desire to give up' knocked 'desire for achievement,' and if 'desire to fight' knocked out 'desire to give up', and so on, these hypothetical fields have all been discharged except the last one, which, as I remember, was 'desire to think.' Where's the problem? Where did *this* mess come from?"

"It depends on what you mean when you say the desires were "knocked out,"" said Roberts. "Maybe 'desire to fight' eliminates 'desire to give up.' They're directly opposed to each other. But how does 'desire to think' eliminate 'desire

71

for achievement'? And how do either of them eliminate 'desire to kill mechs,' which these people had to start with?"

Hammell was silent for a moment, then his eyes narrowed in thought. "One desire may just be *set aside* for a while, as when you tune a receiver to pick up one signal instead of another."

Roberts nodded. "And it seems to me that we've added quite a few signals to those that can be picked up in that city. 'Desire to achieve' seems to be operating, and in practice it's still interpreted the same way: 'Kill mechs.' This affects 'desire to learn,' which is interpreted as 'desire to learn how to kill mechs.' And then, 'desire to work' seems to be in operation, since, for instance, the improvised tools and weapons take work. But that desire manifests as 'desire to work at killing mechs.' And it's obvious that for all this to happen so fast, 'desire to think' must have been operating, no doubt in the form of 'desire to think how to kill mechs.' Every desire we've added has apparently been brought to serve that one dominating desire that they had before we started, namely, 'Kill the mechs.' Thanks to that, they've got a fair chance to blow up the planetary computer and smash every machine that serves it."

"Yes," said Hammell. "And once they succeed in that, there'll be mass starvation here, because the computer and a few technicians run the mechanized farms through roboid machinery. Once they destroy the computer they land right back in a bare subsistence, dog-eat-dog set-up."

"Speaking of technicians," said Roberts, frowning, "have you noticed the different kinds of specialized machines that weren't here before? Did that computer program itself to make them. Or—"

Morrissey had been experimentally changing the view on the screen, and now cleared his throat. "While you theoreticians have been groping for conclusions by pure deduction, I've gotten hold of some facts. Take a look at this."

Roberts and Hammell glanced at the screen, saw a tall gray-haired man standing before a wall-sized screen showing a roughly rectangular section of fortified city, with square bastions at the corners.

Beside him stood a burly giant with bristling red beard, who said angrily, "Damn it Kelty, they'll *tunnel*. Right this

72

minute, a dozen teams of shovel-gangs are digging under your fortified line."

Hammell stared at the red-bearded giant. "That's one of the technicians!"

Roberts ran his hand over his face. The last time they'd been here, Kelty, second-in-command of the city's huge police force, had told Roberts that the bulk of the technicians had left the city. Moreover, Kelty said, there was great enmity between the bulk of the technicians and the computer, and hence no chance of the technicians returning to the city. So, how—

From somewhere in the ship came an odd creaking grating noise, but Roberts was too preoccupied to pay any

attention to it.

Morrissey said, "I suppose if anything could make that planetary computer give concessions to get the technicians back, this is it."

On the spy-screen, Kelty was now saying, "Very true. Right this minute, they're tunneling. But eventually, they'll have to come up, or come out into another tunnel that we control. And when they do—"

"No, they won't have to come out. That's the point. They can dig from that fortified line of yours, right under one of the power mains, all the way to Center, and with a little luck they can then blow the computer itself right off the map."

"If," said Kelty, "they don't lose their following first."

"How?"

"This tunnel will take a long time to dig. A lot of food will be consumed during that time. They don't have it *to* consume. The stores outside the line have only so much, and no more is going to them. Without food, the fanatics will lose their grip on the populace. They'll be forced to give up."

The red-bearded giant shook his head. "Maybe we can starve the *other* eighty or ninety per cent of the populace into submission, but not that crew. They're a bunch of fanatics, led by a fanatic to end all fanatics. They'll dig till they don't have the strength to lift a pick. And all they need to do to maintain their strength is to take the lion's share of the food for themselves."

"The point," said Kelty, "is in this other eighty or ninety

73

per cent of the populace you speak of. What will they do *when they don't get food?*"

The giant snorted. "Raid the remaining food stores, steal from each other, run around screaming till they're out of strength. Don't kid yourself that they'll attack the fanatics' leader. He's got ninety per cent of the men with weapons. The best the rest of them will do is to knock off a few stragglers and isolated guards here and there to relieve their feelings. Meanwhile, the fanatics and their work-gangs will tunnel. When the computer blows up, you and I and the rest of us will have no choice but to get out somewhere beyond the forest, and I can tell you from experience that that's no fun. But it's better than starving, which is what will happen to us if we're back here once the computer is gone."

Kelty's face had the look of a man forcing himself to consider unwelcome facts. He turned away, then suddenly turned back again.

"What's your idea?"

"We're producing some items of machinery I haven't mentioned before."

"Namely?"

"I've got three oversized trenchers in process, and the largest is almost finished. These are step-trenchers. The first makes a trench big enough for a canal. The second rides up the bottom of that and sends its dirt up on a conveyer. The third rides in the bottom of *that* trench and makes a deep cleft like a glacial crevasse. Let the fanatics try to tunnel across *that*. For insurance, we can drop projectors of some good heavy gas in there, and when their tunnel comes through the wall of the trench down below, the gas will go to work on them."

Kelty looked horrified. "That's—"

"It will *work*."

Kelty shook his head. "A trench like that would cut every power and water main from Center out."

"We can stop the flow from the cut mains. We've thought out how to—"

"I don't mean that. This will cut off their water supply."

"Let it. We'll still be alive afterward, and we'll have the wherewithal to put the whole place back together again."

74

"Do you have some way to put millions of dead men back together? The minute you cut those mains, you sign the death-warrant for three-quarters of the human population of this planet."

"The minute you let the Great Leader blow up the computer, you sign the death-warrant for ninety-nine per cent of the human population of this planet."

Kelty hesitated. "Suppose we cut off the water in the main from here? Just shut the main valves?"

"Now you're grasping at straws. Their leader thought of that before we did. He's already got gangs of men doing nothing but carrying up buckets and waterproofed trashcans filled with water. A deep trench is what we need, to cut their tunnels. Shutting off the water from here won't do it."

Kelty shook his head wearily. "These trenchers of yours *will* cut through the mains? Won't they break down?"

"They'll chew right through them. *That* part's no problem. What we need is your approval, so we don't waste any time. When you're dealing with fanatics, you can't afford to give them any advantage, and we don't want them to get a minute's lead on us."

"But it's my job in a situation like this to *restore order with a minimum loss of life*."

"That's exactly what I'm talking about. You spend a winter out with us in that forest, and you'll run into situations that make this seem easy by contrast. All you have to do is *stop those fanatics*, and the best-skilled, most cooperative section of the populace *lives*. This is horrible in its way—" the giant shrugged—"but what do you expect? This way, you get to save the sources of power, the skills, and the organization, to hold back what you might call the wild forces of this planet. Do you know what it's like to fight the elements and the beasts and insects of this so-called paradise *with no technology*? *That's* the problem, Kelty. To save *humanity plus technology*."

Kelty, his face pale and shaken, said, "How long before this first big trencher of yours is ready?"

"We're checking it over now. About three hours."

Til think it over."

"The sooner we get started with it, the better."

"All right. I'll think it over."

75

Roberts glanced at Morrissey. "Is there any way we can possibly find this chief fanatic they call the Great Leader?"

Morrissey shook his head. "So far as I can see, only by pure luck. He's almost sure to be in one of those tunnels, and since the city's surveillance system doesn't cover the tunnels, the screen won't either. How do we find him?"

From somewhere in the ship came a creaking noise that momentarily caught Roberts' attention, but then he saw what was happening on the screen. The red-bearded technician had left the room, and Kelty had crossed to a kind of typewriter keyboard set out from the wall. His hands flashed over it in a blur. After only a moment's delay, the wall lit up in several lines of green letters: PLAN FEASIBLE.

LONG-RANGE COST ACCEPTABLE. PLAN IS APPROVED.

Now that it was too late, it suddenly came to Roberts that the crisis might have been delayed by using the want-generator on Kelty; but now the computer had accepted the plan, and the want-generator could no more sway the computer than a bee could frighten a sledge-hammer.

Hammell said, "Wait—why not hit the whole city with an overpowering jolt of desire for peace? Just pour it on, and *end* this!"

Morrissey's face cleared. "Why didn't we think of that sooner?" He set up 'desire for peace' on the want-generator, and turned it on.

Roberts, Hammell, and Morrissey waited tensely to see what would happen.

Somewhere, there was a grinding crunching noise.

Roberts looked around curiously, then a flash of movement on the screen caught his attention.

A number of hard-looking individuals were walking out of doorways and climbing out of trenches in the garbage dumps. They tossed their guns aside and, waving their hands over their heads, shouted "Let's be friends!" and walked out toward the burnt bare no-man's land and its wire barrier.

The roboid police devices waited until the men were well out in the open. Then they opened fire, and shot the men down.

76

More men came forward behind them, shouting, "We want peace!"

The roboid devices cut them down with automatic efficiency.

Still more came forward.

"Shut it off!" said Roberts.

The roboid devices waited for a better shot, and suddenly the targets vanished in flying dives into the nearest gutter, through cellar windows, and behind heaps of trash.

The three men stared at the screen and the unmoving bodies.

"Well," said Morrissey in a dull voice, "*that* sure didn't work."

Hammell said shakily, "Suppose we hit Kelty with an extra-strong dose of 'desire for peace'? He could call off the police, couldn't he?"

Roberts thought a moment, then shook his head. "If the computer is in its right mind, so to speak, it will sack Kelty if he tries that. The fanatics have apparently booby-trapped the roboid police so many times that any call for peace will ring false."

"Damn it," said Hammell, "we can't influence the *computer*. The thing has no emotions *to* influence."

Roberts was frowning. "There's a thought."

"What do you mean?" said Hammell.

Roberts glanced through the porthole, which was nearer Hammell than himself, at the patrol ship. "It just occurred to me that if the want-generator won't influence the computer, maybe we've got something else here that *wiU*."

"We have?" Hammell turned around, looked out, and froze.

"There are advantages," said Roberts, "to having something a Little stronger than a spaceyacht. We—what's the matter?"

Hammell drew in a slow deep breath. ;

"Have you been hearing a funny grating noise lately?"

"Now that you mention it," said Roberts, "I have. Why?"

"Ease over here a little, and look outside from a different angle. Don't make any fast move, or the thing may jerk back and hurt the ship."

Frowning, Roberts carefully eased over toward Hammell

77

—to look directly into the cold calculating gaze of a pair of reptilian eyes as big as his fists. The thing had a large pointed head. Roberts at once recognized the creature. This was the thing that had been looking down from the thorn tree. Apparently it had coiled itself around the ship to climb up this high, and the pressure of its coils had created the creaking noise.

Roberts carefully glanced aside, at his battle armor. Probably the best thing to do was to get into that, go out, and —

Hammell murmured, "Oh, oh. Look—"

CRACK/

The porthole—transparent plate, frame, gasket, rims, and all—smashed inward and clattered and bounced on the deck.

The big head was right there in the ship beside them, looking at them and the want-generator coldly.

78

XIV. The Dukes of Desire

There was a creaking grating noise and the head flowed in farther on its dark-green muscular neck.

Roberts, half-paralyzed, began to have the illusion that he was dreaming. This *couldn't* be real. With an effort, he forced his mind to face the facts.

For him to try to quickly reach the battle armor now would only rivet the snake's attention. *Any* sudden motion was a form of suicide. Yet, to stay still promised the same result after a slight delay.

Very gradually, he began to ease toward the armor.

The snake was feeding in another length steadily, but abruptly it froze, looking back past Roberts.

It dawned on Roberts that the snake had just spotted the battle armor standing against the wall. Its attention riveted, the snake hung motionless.

Roberts' voice was barely a murmur.

"Morrissey."

"Sir?"

"Turn on 'desire for peace.' Focus it on the yacht here."

Morrissey, moving with slow careful motions, refocused the want-generator.

Roberts warily turned, very slowly, to look around.

A sleepy film suddenly seemed to come down over the snake's eyes.

At the same moment, Roberts felt an intense yearning for

79

peace and quiet. *Enough of conflict.* For heaven's sake, the thought went through his mind, why can't everyone get along together?

The snake was moving carefully, its huge head lowered and somehow suggestive of a dog expecting a kick. With increasing speed, the length of neck went out the hole in the ship, followed by the head.

There was a grating, grinding, scraping noise, and Roberts cautiously put his head out, to see the creature drop free at the base of the ship and rapidly head for cover.

Roberts sucked in a deep breath, and glanced around.

"Morrissey?"

"Is there a timer in that circuit?"

"Yes, sir."

"Set it for a minute, and give us a stiff jolt of 'desire for sleep.' "

Morrissey bent briefly at the controls.

Roberts suddenly realized that he was worn out, dazed. The room spun around him, and he sat down, cradled his head on his arms, sagged forward against the control panel. . . .

. . . Somewhere, tinnily, a bell was ringing, and Roberts dazedly sat up. He felt as if he had been dredged up from a hundred fathoms down, but he was amazed at how his desire for sleep had evaporated. Now he felt rested, refreshed, and—

Suddenly he remembered something, and sprang to the porthole.

Outside, the huge snake lay motionless, half in and half out of the forest.

Hammell and Morrissey were both face-down on the control panel. As the timer's bell rang on, only Morrissey began to stir.

The alarm kept ringing, and now Morrissey groped around dazedly but couldn't seem to connect with it.

Naturally, Roberts thought. He glanced around sourly. After a night spent in this bucket, who *wouldn't* be worn out? Every time you turned around, some monster was coming in after you. Why not just live in a cheesecloth tent, and get it over with quick?

80

Morrissey finally found the timer, shut it off, and passed out again.

So far, Hammell hadn't even moved.

Roberts leaned out to see what damage the snake might have done to the yacht in climbing up it, and at once he heard a rustle overhead and felt the heat of the sun, shining down on his neck, abruptly cut off.

There was a dazzle of light.

WRAP/

Roberts was inside so fast that he knocked Hammell half out of his chair, landed in a sprawl over the edge of the want-generator's control panel.

The air outside the porthole was suddenly filled with huge blue and green feathers. There was a sizzling noise, a smell of cooked meat and burnt pinfeathers, a kind of low popping sound, and a burnt-paint smell.

Cautiously, Roberts looked out to see one of the smaller turrets on the patrol ship swinging back into position.

Just what caused it, Roberts didn't know, but there was something about the patrol ship as he looked at it that suggested reproach.

Roberts eased farther back and looked around. Morrissey and Hammell were still asleep. Roberts glanced at the patrol ship. How had it—

That thought was drowned out as it began by a crackling noise, and the boom of a loudspeaker close by:

"YOUR ATTENTION, PLEASE. THIS VESSEL IS FULLY PROTECTED BY APPROPRIATE DEVICES OF THE ADVANCED SYNODICS PRODUCTS CORPORATION. IT WILL RETALIATE AUTOMATICALLY AGAINST ANY AGGRESSIVE OR HOSTILE ACTION."

Hammell was immediately on his feet. Morrissey lurched out of his chair and looked stuporously around.

"The *maker* said Hammell. "Where-"

"It's right down below," said Roberts, "and it's just started to move. This super-deluxe warning system you've got here just *woke U up*."

Morrissey looked blankly at the want-generator.

'JThen-"

"Then," said Roberts, "it follows that the snake, at least, is affected by the want-generator. The last time we were here,

81

we used a 'desire to help out' field to persuade the technicians to trade with us on a fair basis. The instant that field was shut off, there was an uproar out in the forest. It occurred to me at the time that there might be a bunch of predators out there being obliging to their prey."

Hammell glanced at the hole in the side of the ship. "That knowledge may just get us some sleep tonight. But we're *still* stuck with the problem of what to do about this city. The want-generator may affect the wild animals, but it still doesn't affect that computer."

"No," said Roberts, "but something we can do *may* affect the computer. I was thinking of doing it with the patrol ship alone, but this business with the snake suggests new possibilities."

Hammell glanced uneasily out into the clearing. "What were you thinking of?"

"Well," said Roberts, "the immediate problem here is that the fanatics and the computer are opposed. Either one, if successful, can destroy the other. Enmity has to be destroyed inside of three hours or so, or we are right on the edge of a crisis that can mean the death of millions of people."

"Yes," said Hammell, "I see the *problem*. But where's the *solution*?"

Roberts said, "Why do we get unexpected reactions from the people in the city when we beam desires at them? Isn't it because *their thought processes are different*?"

"Sure," said Hammell exasperatedly. "But how do we—"

"We have to affect, not only the emotions, but the thought processes, too. The want-generator affects only the emotions. *We've got to reach their minds*."

Morrissey looked puzzled.

Hammell said, "I can see, with the guns on that patrol ship of yours, that you can reach their *bodies*. But how do you get at their *minds*?"

"When you and your brother," said Roberts, "are about to shoot each other, it really breaks up the family quarrel fast if you find some outsider waiting around to shoot the survivor."

"Yeah," said Hammell, frowning, "that's a point. You mean, we make ourselves the villains, in order to unite them?"

"Once we're the villains, will they listen to us?"

82

Hammell looked momentarily foolish. "Then how *do* we do it?"

"Obviously, somebody *else* has to be the villain."

"*Who?* There are only three of us."

Roberts thought a moment. "How's 'Oggbad' sound?"

Morrissey said blankly, "Who in space is Oggbad?"

"If we're going to have a villain," said Roberts, "I fail to see why any of *us* has to be stuck with the job. Let Oggbad do it."

"Who's Oggbad?" said Morrissey.

"Do *what?*" said Hammell.

Roberts said, "Amongst other things, attack the city. Can you think of any better way to get our advice listened to than by a demonstration of what the fiend Oggbad is up to?"

Morrissey looked at Hammell. "Have we missed this much sleep?"

Hammell shook his head. "We can follow it this far: a) The city is divided into two warring factions; b) We've got to unite them to straighten out the mess; c) An outside menace is the best way to unite them; d) *We* don't want to play the part of this outside menace ourselves, because that would debar us from taking any direct part in the situation; e) Therefore, somebody *else* should do it—I suppose Oggbad is as good as anybody; but, in the first place where do we get Oggbad? And how do we provide Oggbad with an army to attack the city? And, just incidentally, that computer may be stupid in dealing with people, but that doesn't mean it can't check facts. We've got to convince *both* sides. How do we outwit the computer! And, best of all, how do we do all this in three hours or less?"

Roberts said patiently, "With a decent night's sleep, all this should be obvious. Who says we've got to have a real villain? A real villain is likely to get out of hand and complicate the situation when we want to simplify it. Oggbad is strictly a figment of our imagination."

"*Your* imagination," said Hammell.

"But," said Roberts, "Oggbad is to appear real, to the city. This he will accomplish by attacking the city."

Morrissey said earnestly, "How does a figment of your imagination attack the city?"

"Take a look out that porthole," said Roberts. "As we

should know, there are beasts out in that forest that can create chaos in nothing flat. Do you mean to tell me you don't see how Oggbad can attack the city?"

"But," said Hammell, "to lead the animals—how does he—"

Morrissey gave a sudden start. "Ye gods. We *must* need sleep. We've already seen that the want-generator affects the animals. If that holds true, we can control the animals!"

"I don't *mean* that," said Hammell. "How do we *explain*, so it convinces the computer, among others, that this Oggbad can influence the animals?"

"Obviously," said Roberts, "the only conceivable ways are for Oggbad to be either a great animal trainer, a great biologist, or a great sorcerer. And if the story is going to have to stand the computer's scrutiny, I'm in favor of putting in broad claims right at the beginning, so if the computer is going to choke on it, we find it out right at the beginning."

"H'm," said Morrissey. "How is the computer, based on science, going to judge a *sorcerer*?"

Hammell said thoughtfully, "There are rumors of planets run by—ah—if not sorcery, something just as good."

"Exactly," said Roberts. "That's what I want to take advantage of."

Morrissey shook his head. "This part starts to make sense to me, but there's a catch. Kelty saw you and Hammell when we were here before. So did the computer's surveillance system. The technicians have seen all three of us. How do we explain that a cargo-ship captain, his cargo-control officer, and his communications officer, are tangled up in a fight with this sorcerer Oggbad?"

"Frankly," said Roberts, "I'm a little sick of being a cargo-ship captain. I don't think a cargo-ship captain is going to have much impact on them, anyway. If we're going to deal with the city, let's deal with them on nothing less than an equal basis. I'm not interested in going through another dose of what we got the last time."

Hammell nodded, but Morrissey shook his head. "They've got records of our last visit."

"That won't do them much good," said Roberts, "if every time they see us, we're *inside a suit of battle armor*."

84

Hammell said, "Are you going to say we're investigative officers of some kind?"

"No, because then we have to say what bureau we're working for, and so on. I'm in favor of our appropriating so much rank, right at the start, that it jars them back on their heels, makes them listen when we talk, and makes them hesitate before asking *any* questions. If we're going to get them out of this mess, I fail to see why we have to do it on bended knee. The last time we were here, the animals tried to eat us, the plants tried to smother us, the people threw bottles and chunks of cement at us, and the roboids slapped us in prison. This time, let *them*

accommodate themselves to *us*. I don't know what you guys intend to be, but as far as I'm concerned, I aim to get a little satisfaction out of this mess. I'm going to be Vaughan the Terrible, Duke of Trasimere, and I'm on the trail of the evil prince and sorcerer Oggbad the Foul, and if anyone disbelieves or doubts my word, I'll punish his impertinence with a couple of blasts from my fusion-guns, *which are real*."

Hammell grinned. "Between the fantastic story, and the real power, it would be possible for the computer to get tied in knots."

Morrissey said, "And there's nothing to prevent our beaming 'desire to believe' at the people. The computer won't be affected, but we should be able to so tie up the computer that it doesn't know what to accept and what to reject."

"Okay," said Roberts. He got into the battle armor, and went back to the patrol ship intending to make a few slapdash preparations, such as smearing fresh paint over the ship's Interstellar Patrol identification, which had always showed through any covering he put over it. But the symbiotic computer immediately took a hand.

"Effacing the patrol ship designation without good reason is prohibited."

"I *have* good reason."

"What?" demanded the computer.

Roberts, stupefied at this last-minute delay, gave a quick explanation, and waited angrily for the next piece of obstruction.

"Excellent," said the symbiotic computer. "The plan shows admirable insight into the nature of the problem. However,

85

you evidently have neglected to study your 'Patrol Ship Special Board Number Three-Typical Ship and Equipment Disguises and Physical Aspects of Stratagems.' A demonstration is in order. Press down the blue lever numbered '3' at the left of the control panel."

Roberts hesitated. Beads of sweat popped out on his brow. Then he got control of himself, stopped thinking what the last demonstration had been like, and pushed down blue lever number '3' at the left on the control panel.

XV. Surnamed The Terrible

86

At once, there was a hum, and a clank from the weapons lockers where, among other things, the suits of battle armor were stored. From outside came a low whirring noise and a faint sliding sound. Then there was a

continuous low rumble, followed by an odd noise Roberts couldn't place. Then the ship lifted.

Roberts waited a moment, then snapped on the outside viewscreen, to see in astonishment that the spaceyacht was already painted jet black with silver markings, and was now acquiring a set of weird symbols—oddly distorted silver cats, skulls with one red and one blue eye, silver snakes with gold-colored insides apparently pulled out through their mouths. The sight gave Roberts a nauseous sensation, but he watched as the slender arms with their batteries of nozzles moved over the spaceyacht while the patrol ship circled it.

There was a clank and rumble from inside the weapons lockers, then the patrol ship set down again.

Roberts quickly climbed out the hatch, and was startled to see that his whole ship was now gold with a kind of platinum trim. Some kind of dark purple marking was evident further forward, and Roberts glanced around, walked aft along a horizontal fin, dropped off, and took a look at the ship.

From a short distance, the impression of wealth and power set Roberts back on his heels. No detail of trim had

87

been overlooked, and on the sides of the ship were three complete coats of arms, the center one placed slightly higher than the other two, and surrounded by a kind of bright golden sunburst.

Roberts shook his head, and glanced up at the big hatch of the spaceyacht, where Hammell was leaning out to stare at the lurid designs.

The two men looked at each other blankly, then Roberts grinned, and called, "Ready?"

Hammell nodded. "How many passes?"

"Two should do it, especially if there's some time in between."

"Okay."

They got back in their ships, lifted off, flew low and fast away from the direction of the city, and then rose high into the sky on the far side of the planet. From very high up, Hammell and Morrissey dove on the city, the speed of their passage creating a crack and rumble that brought people into the streets on both sides of the barrier. A few moments later, Roberts flashed low over the city, the sound of his passage creating an even sharper crack and louder rumble.

The communicator buzzed, and there was a faint click, as if someone had just snapped it on. An authoritative voice said, "Planetary Control Center, Paradise City, Paradise. No flights are authorized, and no landings permit ___"

A harsh voice snarled, "Re damned with your authorization. This is the Imperial light cruiser *Droit de Main*, flagship of Search Force IX. Vice Admiral Sir Ian Cudleigh is aboard this ship, in direct service to Their Imperial

Highnesses the Dukes of Malafont and Greme, who accompany His Royal and Imperial Highness, Vaughan, Duke of Trasi-mere, surnamed The Terrible, Prince Contestant to the Throne. You seek to bar our way at your own immediate and deadly peril. Submit at once, or we destroy you and every inhabitant of this place. We are on a business of holy vengeance, and you stand warned. Master of the Ordinance! Give them a taste of our steel!"

Roberts sat wide-eyed and half-paralyzed. As thick as he had intended to lay it on, this beat anything he'd had in mind.

There was a faint clicking from somewhere forward, and

88

on the outside viewscreen, two buildings, one inside and one outside the foam-covered barrier of wire and mines, erupted in sheets of flame and smoke.

The harsh voice wasted scarcely a second. "Enough! Stand ready if this place lies servile to the fiend ... all right, you, which is it? Oggbad, or Vaughan?"

There was a brief buzz from the receiver, then, "Vaughan."

"So be it. Now, know you that their Imperial Highnesses are locked in mortal combat with Oggbad the Traitor. Know you that Oggbad, though shorn of his material power, still sways mighty forces in the realms of sorcery. Only if his soul be cleaved from his body, and chained for its ten million years of punishment in the nether regions, will the blight be ended. Know, then, that as this condition is as yet unmet, and as you serve the Duke Vaughan, Oggbad may seek to smite you. Now, listen closely. If, under fear of the traitor's evil power, you recant to Oggbad, Duke Vaughan will then faithfully seek to cleanse your soul by agony here, where a set time of it goes further, before sending you to your reward. These are—There goes the fiend! Give chase!"

The scene on the viewscreen flashed backwards, whirled, and for the second time, the patrol ship streaked after the spaceyacht.

The communicator clicked off. The voice of the symbiotic computer said, "The instruments in the city are now picking up all the signs and indications of a formidable fleet passing the planet."

"Good."

Roberts, streaking along the curve of the planet after the spaceyacht, was starting to wonder what a patrol ship with fully trained crew would be like. What had happened so far was apparently mere routine, as far as the symbiotic computer was concerned.

Then he was swinging the patrol ship low over the forest, and following the spaceyacht in a wide curve to a landing in the clearing. He extended the stabilizer feet, snapped off the gravitors, and got up.

He yanked open the weapons locker, to get out the battle armor, and a glittering suit of armor with helmet

curving up into a slender spire came out on its sling. The breastplate of this suit was covered with a dazzling coat of arms. The big

89

fusion-gun that hung on the right side was matched on the left by a broadsword. Tied to the top of the helmet's spire was a thing like a pink silk handkerchief.

Looking closely, Roberts could see that his armor was essentially the same as what he'd been wearing before. But the effect was very different.

He wasted a moment asking himself how that had been done. Was there some kind of metal-working equipment recessed into the hull behind the weapons locker? How—

The voice of the symbiotic computer spoke drily: "In a crisis, each minute is a precious jewel."

Roberts swore, got into the armor hurriedly, and started for the hatch. On the way, the sword banged around and got crosswise of his legs. He'd barely recovered his balance when he straightened up and rammed the helmet's spire into the ceiling. There was a sarcastic throat-clearing noise in the earphones, but the symbiotic computer didn't actually say anything; the cause of this trouble was its own fault.

Roberts finally managed to get the hatch open despite the spire, heaved himself out, and crossed to the spaceyacht. where Morrissey and Hammell looked up from the spy-screen to stare at him in amazement.

"Not my idea," said Roberts, getting out of the armor. "This idea belongs to the God-blessed computer. What's going on in the city?"

Morrissey said, "I've been watching this screen since we started, and as nearly as I can tell, the people generally are scared, and subject to all kinds of rumors. The general impression seems to be that the planetary computer got a spaceship up, and the Great Leader is up there fighting it in one of his own. As for the fanatics themselves, the more rank they have, the more uncertain they seem to be; but again, so far as I've been able to find out, the top ones are still completely out of sight."

"That makes it nice," said Roberts, trying to tilt the armor against the wall. The needlelike tip of the spire, even though it rested at a shallow angle against the wall, looked as if it might just push a hole through the hull. Exasperated, Roberts tilted the armor away from the wall, and tried to ease it down on the deck. At that last moment, it got away from him, and hit the floor with a heavy thud.

90

Hammell and Morrissey jumped and looked around. Roberts straightened up carefully, "This thing sure isn't made of feathers. And watch out for the spike on the helmet. I don't know what kind of metal it is, but it doesn't give, and it's got a point like a needle."

Hammell and Morrissey acknowledged the warning with bare grunts, and immediately turned back to the screen. Roberts looked around at the porthole to find it temporarily repaired with an airtight double-plate-and-gasket screwtight seal. Satisfied that nothing was going to come in there, Roberts slid into his chair, and immediately saw, on the screen, Kelty and the red-bearded technician.

"Nuts," the technician was saying. "There isn't any such place. You've been sold a bill of goods. The whole—"

"Shut up for a minute," said Kelty, "and see for yourself. We got the whole thing down as it happened. Look at this." He tapped one of several buttons on the edge of his desk, and the far wall of the room suddenly was like blue sky, across which a black and silver ship, weirdly decorated, streaked erratically into view, followed a moment later by a dazzling golden ship that unleashed searing bolts of energy that missed the black and silver ship by the narrowest of margins.

Kelty said, "A 'bill of goods,' huh? Are you going to tell me the Great Leader dreamed this up?"

The technician looked dazzled. "Still, I never heard of—"

"Wait," said Kelty. "The computer's air-traffic control circuit ordered the ship off. Here's what happened." He touched a second button. The wall blanked.

A voice said authoritatively, "Planetary Control Center, Paradise City, Paradise. No nights are authorized, and no landings permit—"

The wall flared with color, and a hard face, eyes narrowed, scarred below the left eye and across the bridge of the nose, appeared against an unfocused background, to snarl, "Be damned with your authorization. This is the Imperial light cruiser *Droit de Main*, flagship of Search Force IX, Vice Admiral Sir Ian Cudleigh is aboard this ship."

The red-bearded technician stared at the screen, where the tough figure suddenly turned aside:

"Master of the Ordinance! Give them a taste of our steel!"

91

Kelty hit another button, and the wall lit with a view of buildings exploding in sheets of flame and smoke.

At the end, Kelty turned to the technician. "Then the first ship showed up again, and the two ships went out of view, and the long-range pickups started feeding in more data. *There's a fleet out there.*"

The technician, obviously shaken, stared at the blank wall. "Where does this leave us?"

"You tell me. The computer had to make a quick choice which side to be on, and it must have only taken one-tenth of one per cent of its circuits to decide that. There wasn't much choice, if you know what I mean."

"But where in space did these—"

There was a jarring buzz. A voice said urgently, "Now receiving."

The wall lit up again. A very pale face, marked by dissipation but with intense dark eyes, looked out from under a narrow golden crown.

"I see you not. To whom do I speak?"

"This is the Planetary Control Center, Paradise City, Par-

"Listen closely. It is I, Oggbad, Prince of the Empire, Premier Peer of the Kingdom, High Master of the Unseen Realms. I require your immediate aid to repulse the treasonous assaults of the low villains, Vaughan, Percy, and Ewald, Yield at once to my command or come under ban of the most hideous punishment. How say you?"

There were several buzzing sounds of varying pitch, then the words, "Owing to a lack of sufficient data—"

"Bah! These are the words of poltroons or traitors! I am Oggbad! *Yield!*"

There was a total silence, then, "Very well! You think the material power of the traitor Vaughan will protect you. I say it will not! Nay, if the fools hound me throughout the length of the universe, and drive me from sun to sun, and destroy the last remnant of my worldly power, still I am Oggbad. In the unseen realms, guns count for nought. All is unchanged, and I am still High Master of the Unseen Realms. As an earnest of my intent, and a warning to those who believe matter can of a right rule the universe, I shall enspirit the very animals with a hate of your treason, and hurl the might of the

92

forest against you. Nay, I say, yield, or face the most dread powers of the Unseen Realms!"

The computer could manage nothing but a buzz.

"So be it," said the pale dissipated face looking at them from the wall, its dark eyes blazing. "You anger me. And though I be shorn of material power you will soon learn the might of my dominion. I *will* regain a footing for my power! And as I am here, *you* will serve, or I will destroy you. Bear my words closely in mind."

The wall went blank. Kelty stared at it dazedly. The technician passed a hand across his eyes.

Finally, Kelty said, "All right. But we're on the right side, at least. That last business was lunacy. That's—"

There was another jarring buzz. "Now receiving."

Kelty and the technician winced and turned back toward the wall. The wall lit up with a view of the same scarred

tough face they'd seen first. This face now had a thoughtful exasperated look.

"The fiend has slipped away. No cloak of invisibility could hide so large a ship from our instruments, but there it is. He is gone. Trouble is on foot again. But he'll not leave this world alive. Well, so be it. I speak now to the Earldom—Designate of Paradise, so-called. *Answer!*"

The computer gave another buzz. "We are listening."

"Why have you a voice but no face?"

"Owing to technical difficulties."

"Be damned with technical difficulties! On all we know, Oggbad is still alive! Listen closely. As you have yielded to His Royal and Imperial Highness, Vaughan, Duke of Trasi-mere, Prince Contestant to the Throne, on the truth of whose cause the light of Heaven shines, so are you in duty bound to obey him. You are now a part of the Empire, in immediate fiefdom to Duke Vaughan himself. Whosoever denies this, does so on instantaneous peril of his life. Now then, the cursed Oggbad is loose on the planet. You must set your defenses in order. Mischief is afoot, and on such a scale as you may never have seen before. But fear not. Duke Vaughan is here. His material power is no small weight against the invisible might of Oggbad. Oggbad must first ensheathe his strength in material form to act in the visible realms. The Duke Vaughan's power is already on rein to act. And we are

93

quick, ready, and hold our minds to the task, we will come through the storm. Oggbad's first onset is the worst. Prepare to see the Duke Vaughan himself within the hour. There is no time to waste."

The wall went blank.

Like two punchdrunk fighters, Kelty and the red-bearded technician stared at the wall.

Roberts, himself half-dazed, suddenly realized that Kelty and the technician, probably the two most important humans in the computer-run part of the city, were now stuck on dead center. The slightest push would move them in either direction.

"Quick!" said Roberts. "Hit Kelty with 'desire to inform, explain, and expound'! Easy at first, then if he does what he should, step it up. We want the rest of the city to know what's going on."

On the screen, Kelty was saving dazedly, "Are we dreaming? How do we *handle* a thing like this?"

The red-bearded technician was starting to grin. "They don't waste any time do they? Well, well. What does the computer say to *this*?"

"That's a point," said Kelty. He crossed to the keyboard set out from the wall. Almost immediately, the wall lit up

in yellow letters:

INSUFFICIENT DATA

Kelty stepped back as if he'd been struck.

The technician nodded. "That's about all we can expect from it. After the crisis is over, *then* it will have the data and the answers."

"Damn it," said Kelty, "we've got to do *something!*" His face cleared. "Yes, we'll let the people know what's going on!"

"What good will that do?"

"Maybe it will give that collection of fanatics something to think about beside blowing up the computer."

"Yes. That's an idea."

Roberts glanced at Morrissey. "Okay. So far so good. But now we have the little problem of providing Oggbad with an army."

Morrissey said, "I've been thinking about that. It strikes 94

me we're making big promises, and don't know whether we can actually come through with any results."

"If not, they're no worse off in that city than before. And for us, we can always explain it away by 'capturing' Oggbad, and then having him escape by sorcery as soon as we figure out what to do next. After all, when you've only got three hours to save the lives of millions of people, you can't expect perfection."

"Well, no—" said Morrissey.

"What *might* work," said Roberts, "is to make a kind of large U-shaped pattern of desire to escape and move it slowly forward, from the forest across the cultivated belt toward the city. Can we do that?"

Morrissey nodded. "That's about what I'd planned. What I don't know is whether it will *work*."

"Let's try it. If we can get those behemoths really moving, they should be able to cover that distance pretty fast. Then there's the problem of the city. Unless that symbiotic computer puts its oar in again, what I think we ought to do is for Hammell and me to land near the border between the two parts of the city, while you move the animals along—"

"If they move," said Morrissey.

"—and also pour 'desire to cooperate' at the city's populace. Once we get them into the right frame of mind, we'll wait till the animals arrive, and then there'll be a common enemy. After that, any time the people start to break into factions, Oggbad will bash them over the head. Meanwhile, we can use the want-generator to pour the right desires at the city, while the situation itself tends to make it certain that these desires are *interpreted the right way*. Once we really get that set-up going, we can probably shut off the want-generator entirely, except for emergencies."

"We don't know yet," said Morrissey stubbornly, "if those animals will *move*. I'm going to have to use different intensities of U-shaped regions of desire to escape, one region inside the other, to create a kind of fear-gradient, if you know what I mean. The desire to escape has to be strongest at the outermost region, so that the animals will move forward in the right direction, toward the center-line of the U."

"Good." Roberts glanced at Hammell, "Now, unless this

95

Duke Vaughan is going to turn up all alone, you'd better come with me."

Hammell nodded without enthusiasm. "I guess so."

"Great," said Morrissey. "And what happens if some tree-sized animal with eight-feet jaws goes after the ship? What do I do then? It takes concentration to work this want-generator and watch the screen to be sure things aren't getting out of hand. I can't do that and fight off a horde of monsters at the same time."

"H'm," said Roberts. "Why not hit them with 'desire to sleep'? It certainly worked on that snake."

Morrissey turned around. "*Holcomber*

"Yes, my lord?"

"The tranquilizers."

"At once, my lord."

"Okay," said Roberts, heaving the battle-armor over on its face so he could get the back-plate open, "then *that's* settled. Watch out for the point on this helmet when I get up."

"Listen," said Morrissey, "I keep trying to tell you, these animals *may not move*. Or they may mill around, fight each other, and generally be slow as mud."

"Use 'desire to cooperate' on them in the center of the U. Do the best you can. Just pour on the power and hope for the best. It will be quite a coup for Oggbad if you *can* manage it."

Morrissey said something Roberts didn't quite catch, but then he was inside the armor, and the rest of the comment came across clearly in the earphones: ". . . to be quite an experience. Who got this bright idea, anyway?"

Hammell's voice, somewhat hollow, replied, "*We* did."

"Yeah. Then I guess we're stuck with it. Well, stay healthy."

"I'll try. Watch out for the gangbats. Don't let Oggbad get you."

Roberts, inside the armor, swung shut the back-plate, listened critically to the multiple click of the latch, and shoved home the lock lever.

"Okay, let's go. Stick close to me crossing the clearing."

"I sure will," said Hammell.

"And look out for the spike on this helmet"

96

A few minutes later, Roberts and Hammell were climbing aboard the patrol ship.

And a few minutes after that, they were sweeping out in a wide curve, in order to come back toward the city high up, and from a different direction.

97

XVI. Oggbad's Army

Kelty was apparently acting fast under the influence of 'desire to inform, explain, and expound.' The patrol ship's symbiotic computer, in the guise of a tough no-nonsense Imperial officer, made arrangements to land, and immediately the buildings nearby were crowded with nervous onlookers.

Roberts and Hammell, taking care not to run each other through with their helmet-spikes, squeezed out the patrol ship's hatch, to face an uneasy-looking Kelty, who was accompanied by a nondescript individual with triple lightning bolts on his armband, on the sash across his chest, and on the visor of his floppy cap. The place was surrounded with roboid police, who with apparent uneasiness, faced the gap blasted in the barrier that last time Roberts had gone by. Through this gap, a number of armed toughs were seeping forward, but the roboid police apparently hesitated to stop them lest they provoke an uproar in the midst of the ceremonies

Roberts decided there was no point in fooling around. His voice came out amplified into a close resemblance to thunder: "I am Vaughan of Trasimere. Let all who would serve me kneel. Let all who would serve the traitor Oggbad stand."

Kelty wasted no time kneeling. About fifty per cent of the toughs with armbands took a quick glance at the guns on the patrol ship, and the ruined buildings nearby, and either knelt

or dove for cover. The remaining fifty per cent remained upright. The nearest tough, with the largest number of lightning-bolt insignia, gave a peculiar laugh, and a sidewise flick of his right hand. His followers snapped up their guns. One heaved a sharpened axle straight at Roberts.

There was a brief crisscrossing dazzle of white lines from the patrol ship's fusion-cannon.

The wind blew away a few puffs of smoke, and all that was left of the immediate opposition was a smoldering armband here, a red-hot piece of metal there, and a scattering of grisly trophies that Roberts tried not to look at.

Giving no time for the stunned silence to turn into a new show of opposition, this time from under cover, Roberts demanded in a voice of thunder, "Who else serves Oggbad the fiend? Know you not that each man of this city will serve his true liege-lord or die? What manner of treachery is this?"

To give emphasis to his words, and because he sensed he might look silly just standing there after this speech, Roberts whipped out his sword. The sword came out with a menacing hiss that carried a long way into the silence. Then, since it would have been ridiculous to threaten the whole city, he took a quick step toward Kelty.

A roboïd policeman immediately blocked his way.

Roberts' sword flashed out, sliced the machine in two with one blow, and a hard kick of his right foot knocked the pieces twenty feet away. He gripped Kelty by the shirt front.

"Serve you Oggbad?"

"No! But this has all been so fast—and we have a—ah—a *febellion* going on here—"

"A rebellion? *Against me?*"

"No. No. Against the machine's." Hastily, Kelty gave an explanation of the situation in the city, at the end of which Roberts shrugged. *

"This is no matter. It is of the past. What concerns us now is Oggbad. I accept the submission of that part of the city ruled by the thinking-machine. And by grace of the power invested in me as suzerain create the thinking-machine a Baron of the Duchy of Trasimere. So, too, do I create you, Kelty, a Baron of the Duchy of Trasimere. Let no man raise his hand against your joint authority in the Inner City, by which I so designate that portion of land within this barrier

of fanged wire and subtle entrapments, upwards to the limits of the aery realm, and downward to the center of the

world. Now, so much for that. We have still this Outer City to deal with. Who rules there? Every minute the power of Oggbad ensheathes itself in matter, and we waste time on this foolery! *Who rules?* Come forward now, or I destroy your power root and branch, thorn, twig, seed, and fruit! Come forth, I say!"

Roberts was becoming aware of an urgent desire to cooperate. If everyone else was feeling it as strongly as he was, the factions in the city wouldn't last long. But how could he cooperate with somebody who didn't show up?

Just then, as he was wondering what to do next, and wishing the symbiotic computer was handling this instead of him, a strongly built figure about five feet ten, carrying a rifle in his left hand, strode forward, handed the rifle to one of a small group of followers, and walked toward Roberts unarmed. This man had a look of intelligence and intense self-discipline. When he was directly in front of Roberts, he dropped on one knee.

Roberts said, "You rule in the Outer City?"

"I have five to ten per cent of the people behind me. My men are armed. The others aren't."

"Good enough. Do you yield to me, Vaughan of Trasimere —or would you serve the foul traitor Oggbad?"

"I'm for you."

"Then by grace of the power vested in me as suzerain, I create you a Baron of the Duchy of Trasimere, and ruler of the Outer City, by which I designate that portion of the presently existing city outside this barrier of entrapments and fanged wire, upward to the limits of the aery realm, and downward to the center of the world. Let no man raise his hand against you in the Outer City. Rise, Baron. Now, we have no time for the pleasures which should attend these ceremonies, or for their proper form. Each minute spent here, the foul cause of Oggbad advances that much the further. Dissension within our ranks must be healed at once, as it serves Oggbad's cause. Now then, you Baron Kelty, and you, the thinking-machine with rank of Baron, and you, Baron of the Outer City, listen close.

"What Oggbad will do, we know not. But he vanished to

100

the west, and from the west will his attack almost certainly come. Therefore, so far as is possible, post your main strength to the west, with but light forces toward the other quarters. Hold strong reserves in hand. Fight by craft and cunning, from hidden places. Oppose stone walls and empty space to Oggbad's attack, so far as it be possible. Fight him not by main strength. That I will do, as my strength surpasses his. Seek to pin him, entangle him. Chisel at his power. When confronted, run, hide, and appear again at his flank. Let his arms fight stone and air, while your sword seeks his belly.

"Oggbad fights by—"

HammeH's voice interrupted. "Your Gracel Look overhead!"

Roberts turned toward the ship. "Master of the Ordnance! Bring down those birds!" Roberts turned to his two wide-eyed human Barons. "Their form is but a physical envelope for Oggbad's purpose. Now it begins."

From the ship, a voice called, "Your Highness, this planet must have crystal on it, and Oggbad has found it! The guns are enwrangled!"

Roberts grappled blankly with the word 'enwrangled', then turned around, to see the big fusion-guns aimed generally toward the birds, but apparently unable to aim precisely. The guns were moving in small circles around their true point of aim, and not one pointed directly at any of the birds.

"Then," said Roberts thinking fast, "it *is* Oggbad! Well, gentlemen, get your men quickly in hand. Remember, Oggbad's first onset is the worst. I will shield you as best I may, and in the end we will win, because our cause is just. Now, get to cover! *Quickr*

A terrific desire to fight was building up, in Roberts, and, no uoubt, in everyone else around. But only Roberts and Ham-mell knew that the same angry desire they felt was, in all likelihood, shared by the huge birds.

Suddenly, there was a fierce scream from overhead. Roberts looked up, to see the birds draw in their wings. At that same instant, he realized that their camouflage was far better than it seemed. He had seen three birds. But when they began to dive, their green upper feathers came into

101

view, and there were nearly a dozen of them. At once a voice, so like Roberts' own amplified voice that he thought it must be his, roared: "*Guards! We'll fight on foot!*"

This sounded valiant. It sounded heroic. It just suited the situation, except for one little detail:

There was no one left in the patrol ship.

Hammell already had his sword in one hand and his gun in the other. The patrol ship was already letting off futile bolts at the birds, its enwrangled guns doing no damage. So far as Roberts knew, there was nothing left in the ship but a couple of empty suits of battle-armor. Meanwhile, from windows and doors, people were looking at him, the birds, and the patrol ship to see what would happen next.

Roberts, cursing himself, turned back toward the patrol ship, and braced himself to shout another order.

The patrol ship, somehow sunk deeply as if it were digging its way into the cracking concrete, disgorged from its hatch an armed man-sized figure in silver armor. Then another, and another, until there were half-a-dozen of them outside. Since they couldn't be human, they must be roboid, controlled by the symbiotic computer. But where in the cramped interior, with so much space already taken up by guns and missile storage, was there room for the fabricating machinery and the stocks of materials? Was the ship so much more advanced than it seemed? Roberts looked around, hastily gave up trying to find the answer, and roared, "*Have at the fiend!*"

A huge shadow was sweeping over the ground, and now gigantic claws shot toward him. Roberts fired his fusion-gun, sheared off one of the clawed feet with a savage stroke of his sword, was grappled and knocked backward by the other, beheaded the bird, and landed in a tangled bloody mass of bone, sinew, and feathers. He pulled himself free, to find the air suddenly thick with birds of every description fighting the people and each other. A moment later, carnivorous bats began to arrive, to dive at Roberts' faceplate, bounce off, then cling to his armor, and squeak their teeth grittily over every bump and joint, in the hope of getting through into the flesh underneath.

The city's loudspeaker system was booming, "Take cover!

102

Get to the tunnels! The city is under attack! Get to the tunnels!"

Flying insects were all over the place now. The air was like fog. The screams of the people told of the attacks of every kind of flying pest known to the planet. It dawned on Roberts that Morrissey had been successful beyond their wildest dreams. If they weren't careful, they might exterminate the very population they were trying to save.

103

XVII. Triumph

The onslaught of another gigantic bird knocked Roberts back into the foam-covered entanglement of wires, mines, and sharp-edged strips of metal. Something seemed to snap inside him, and in a terrific outburst of anger, he sliced the bird in half, cut the entangling wires, and settled grimly to the work of slaughter.

He had killed half-a-dozen giant birds, and uncounted numbers of smaller birds and carnivorous gangbats, when Oggbad's main force arrived on the scene.

Huge gray cats, ordinarily daytime creatures, loomed at him out of the gathering dusk. The computer's roboid police, firing from windows and doorways, were suddenly confronted with gigantic beasts with armored bony snouts and tails like giant sledge-hammers. Many-legged segmented creatures crawled up the sides of buildings, groped around out in the air, vanished within, and reappeared in the tunnels. Enormous snakes grappled with equally enormous armored metal caterpillars and, as often as not, the snakes crushed or smashed some vital part before the guns of the metal caterpillars could kill the snakes. The street lights came on to light a scene out of a nightmare, a war amongst animals and machines, with no humans in sight but Roberts and Ham-mell, dripping blood, the golden coating of their armor chipped and dented, but swords and guns in hand and hew-

104

ing to the task with such savage energy that they seemed to be everywhere at once.

Toward dawn, a powerful amplified voice boomed out: "The power of the fiend yields to the Duke! The usurper weakens!"

As daylight shone down on the bloody shambles, the same voice roared: "By command of the Duke, clear the tunnels of the enemy! The worst is over!"

By noon, dented roboid maintenance machines were dragging off the bodies of huge creatures in one direction, while towing disabled machines away in the other direction.

Kelty, covered with large and small bandages, beside an equally bandaged figure with tattered lightning-bolt armband, was in a building along the boundary between the two parts of the city, listening attentively to Roberts, whose armor looked as if it had spent the last thousand years grinding along under a glacier. Roberts wasted no time finishing up the conference with his two subordinates.

"That's how it is," he said. "Now you've experienced it. Oggbad enspirited those beasts, using the arts of the Unseen Realms, and had he been able to calm their mutual distrust, it would have gone ill with us. Next time, he may have learnt that lesson. By that time, our strength must encompass a portion of the forest itself, and all of the fields, lest he destroy the food supply. No man can rest easy while the fiend's soul still cleaves to his body. Now, then, my duties do not allow me to oversee the details. Great affairs are afoot in the Empire, and I must see to them. But count on me to come back, to reward the diligent, destroy the faithless, cleanse by agony the souls of those ensnared by Oggbad—and, if possible, surprise the fiend himself when he expects it least."

Kelty glanced at the fanatic's leader, who looked back with the expression of someone tangled up in a legal matter that threatens to go on forever, but who is determined to find a way to somehow warp it to his own advantage. This fit right in with the atmosphere of the Baron's Council Hall, which was what Roberts had named the building. In this building, there was a mild, but nevertheless noticeable, urge to *think*. Since Roberts had been in here, several patrolling guards had turned away uneasily, while others had briefly stepped in with an air of interest. Other parts of the city had

105

other faint but noticeable suggestions of a desire to work, a desire to study, to relax, to worship, or to rest. For each place, a slight but definite atmosphere had been created, and was being maintained, by the want-generator. But that didn't mean that a person wouldn't seriously misinterpret the *purpose* of the desire.

"I hope," said Roberts, noting the intensely calculating look on the faces of his two human companions, "that there will be *no warning among my vassals*. In the Empire, it is our custom to submit such affairs to heavenly judgment. This we do by sending both disputants into the next world. We can get them there, but so far have found no way to get them back again. Now, gentlemen, I must leave for a time. Would that Oggbad were destroyed, but at least his material power and the strength of his coalition are broken. While you hold him here, we must smash the last of his confederates." Roberts stood up. "Goodbye for now, gentlemen. I am sorry to be in such haste. But I'll be back."

Roberts went out, to the ship just outside and, worn-out and half-dazed, and not knowing if he were Duke Vaughan, or whether Oggbad was real or what was going on, he got back into the patrol ship, managed to get out of his armor without spearing Hammell with the tapering helmet-spike, and lifted off.

The viewscreen showed him that, down below, battered and bandaged tens of thousands were cheering the rising patrol ship.

"Well," said Roberts, sucking in a deep breath, "either they're cheering us or our departure."

"Our *apparent* departure," said Hammell.

"Correct," said Roberts, starting to feel like himself again.

He swung the ship in a fast steep climb, taking it apparently toward outer space. When he'd gotten up high enough, the symbiotic computer told him that was enough to enable it to fool the planetary computer into thinking they'd left the planet. Then Roberts came back from a different direction, and headed for the clearing.

"Well," he said, "that gets us past the first crisis, anyway. Now they've got a urgent reason to stick together. The next thing we want to do is to lay down an overall 'desire for order' field in the city, and a 'desire for adventure' field out-

106

side. It seems to me there's an interaction between a person's natural desires and the field impressed by the want-generator. People can only be comfortable when the two are compatible. What we want is for the workers to be in the city, and the warriors and hunters to be in the forest. This business of trying to cram different types into the same mold in the same place won't work. Let's have it so that if a man wants out, he can *get* out. The only thing is, after he does get out, survival is *his* problem."

"What you figure," said Hammell, "is that those who want to learn will find it possible to study, those who want to fight, to conquer something, will be able to do that; those who want to work will be able to—and the desire-fields will keep the warriors from raiding the workers, and the teachers from trying to drag the warriors into the classrooms; while the *individual*, if he outlives one desire, is free to settle in another place with a different outlook, so long as his own desire doesn't so conflict with the desire-field there as to make him acutely uncomfortable."

"That's the general idea," said Roberts. "And if we can do it, it ought to eliminate a lot of need for external controls, allow a good deal of freedom, and bring this place closer to being a paradise than it would ever be with a computer monotonously doling out food, clothing, lodging, and everything else on a ration system, and then insisting that everyone should be happy. The computer is great for rationalizing the production and distribution of the necessities of life. But it just naturally gets stuck when it leaves *desire* out of its calculations."

"Which," said Hammell, "it naturally does. Human leaders do it themselves. There's nothing quite like desire to wreck *anyone's* calculations. Maybe even ours."

Roberts nodded soberly. "Very possible. Well—well see."

Their accumulated leave was almost up when the three men took a final look at the city on the spy-screen. The

change in the place was noticeable not only in the glazed windows and cleared parks, but in the walk of the people who remained in the city. They no longer had to fear being

107

knocked over the head and robbed for daring to make anything. Those who best loved a good knock-down drag-out fight, an ambush, or a raid for plunder, were out beyond the roboid-manned barrier line fighting Oggbad's army. Either they had what it took and came back with a heavy leather sack of fangs and claws, which the computer—on Duke Vaughan's order, relayed from a distance—would redeem at an impressive price in whatever merchandise or service the victorious warrior might choose; either that, or else they lacked what it took, and "went to Oggbad." Those who tended to be warriors mostly with their mouths were in a yet worse spot. The workers invariably asked to see their trophies, while the warriors were becoming adept at spotting them on sight, and would lug them off to the forest just for the fun of it.

"Boy," said Hammell, "what a place! And yet, if anyone should go around there now demanding a revolution, he'd get brained."

Roberts nodded. "They don't want to revolt, because their

real desires have a legitimate outlet: Not just the desires «j *TJT*

they *ought* to have, but the desires they *do* have. A man *JrCLft LIL*

who wants steak can get awfully sick of a steady diet of ice cream. Even if it's the best ice cream made, and he can't find any fault with it."

Morrissey said moodily, "I'll hate to leave this place. And I *still* don't trust the head of that gang of fanatics."

Hammell said, "Just among the three of us, it's going to be a little hard to go back to being a cargo-control officer after being His Imperial Highness, Duke Ewald of Greme."

Roberts said, "The first chance we get, after we stock up on some more parts for the want-generator, we'd better come back here."

108

XVIII. Trapped

The return trip to Paradise was so routine as to become tiresome. Toward the end, however, there was a sudden break in the monotony.

On the last leg of the trip, with the spaceyacht in the lead, Roberts was in the control seat of the salvaged Interstellar Patrol ship when a quiet little bell attracted his attention. In front of him, the battle screen lit up. To

one side, an auxiliary screen came on, to show an exaggeratedly military-looking individual, with the insignia of a lieutenant colonel, who spoke in brisk authoritative tones: "By order of the Commanding Officer, Squadron R, 876th Interstellar Combat Wing, Space Fleet XII, you are hereby commanded to halt for inspection re Exotic Drugs Act, Section 16, paragraph . . ."

Roberts, who had spent some time in the Space Force himself, had never before seen such a combination of meticulously close-cropped iron-gray hair, stiff face, and ramrod-straight posture, with uniform pressed into dentproof knife-edged creases. Over the left shirt pocket of this uniform were three rows of ribbons, and while Roberts did not recognize half of them, there was one that he knew to be the Cross of Space, with three stars. The Cross of Space was awarded sparingly—to win it required proof of heroism in the face of such danger that it was rare for the hero to come back alive. Try as he might, Roberts could not visualize the

111

miracle that would enable the same man to win this award a total of four times and live.

But while Roberts thought, the situation evolved.

The stiffly erect figure was saying now, "You will not resist the beam. You will not attempt to parley. You will open outer hatches to admit boarding parties without delay. . . ."

Roberts squinted at the ribbons again, and then glanced around.

The patrol ship, the purchase of which Roberts considered an unusual stroke of luck, was equipped with devices he could never have afforded to buy new. One of these could extrude a set of metal arms, to spin a shell of camouflage around the ship, hide its formidable armament, and create the appearance of a harmless rebuilt derelict. Other devices could make fast precise measurements of shape, size, mass, and other characteristics, to pass to computers which searched almost instantaneously through hosts of reference standards to determine what the data might mean. On this information, presented to the pilot in symbols on the battle screen, the patrol ship's battle computer could act at once, bringing the ship's weapons to bear on changing targets, and altering speed, course, and altitude to meet the situation. Presiding over these weapons, sensing elements, computers, and various special devices, and acting toward the pilot as a combinaton conscience and subconscious mind, was what was known as the symbiotic computer. At this moment, the symbiotic computer, in its own way, was doubtless considering the rasping, authoritative voice, which stated: "You will at all times obey the instructions of the inspecting personnel. You will cooperate fully in exposing your ship to thorough search for contraband. Resistance or procrastination will be dealt with severely...."

The many symbols now appearing on the battle screen riveted Roberts' attention.

It gave him pause to consider who would want such things as:

- a) A large salvaged cruiser stripped for ultrafast acceleration.
- b) An irregular rocky object some four hundred feet in diameter, hollowed out inside, with several large masses

of undetermined nature floating around the interior.

112

c) A simulated Space Force dreadnought mocked up on a girder-ship frame.

d) An irregular metallic object eight feet across, with fusion-guns sunk deep in hidden walls.

Roberts fingered the curved surface of a small glowing ball recessed into the control console. As he turned the ball, a corresponding white circle on the battle screen moved from one symbol to the next, and each in turn was enlarged, to show fine detail. Roberts' attention focused on a big cargo section with what looked like severe damage; hidden inside were grapples to seize any ship that came close enough to give help.

Now it became clear why the 'colonel' on the screen looked so exceptionally military. Real military men had work to do, and doing this work was their job. But this fellow's job was *to look military*. Where the fakewreck artist collected his victims by drifting along a traveled route looking helpless; and where the trapminer made his profit by maneuvering his chunk of 'ore' into position to catch prospectors unaware; and where the slugger prospered by sudden attack;—for the same purpose, the two-day wonder mimicked the Space Force.

Now the 'colonel' was looking at Roberts with hard authority-

"Is *that clearly understood?*" -

Roberts' course display now showed its line of big dashes drifting off to the right. The track display showed a curving line that wove past the asteroid belt to the stylized blue-green image of Paradise, with the little image of the ship slipping well off the line. The battle screen showed the patrol ship caught in a wavy blur, representing another gravi-tor beam, like the one that gripped the spaceyacht.

Roberts asked himself what all these commerce raiders were doing here. Two previous trips had told that there wasn't enough commerce past this system to make a living for a tenth of them. But if they weren't here to prey on commerce, what *were* they here for?

He considered one possible reason;

Suppose some outsider had visited Paradise, and had been shrewd enough to deduce, from what had happened earlier, the existence of the want-generator?

113

What would a gang of commerce raiders do to get hold of a *device that could influence desires from a distance?*

But then, Roberts realized, if such a person had been on Paradise, he could have found out still more.

Suppose the commerce raiders had learned of Oggbad and the Empire? Would the raiders care to tangle with such a situation? What if Oggbad the Sorcerer and the three Dukes *were* fighting for mastery of an Empire? Then what? The want-generator would still be worth enough to justify taking on whoever had it—but the risk ought to be spread by gathering a strong force. That was how the commerce raiders would naturally think.

While Roberts considered this, the imitation colonel gave signs of impatience.

"Let's have your attention here, mister!"

The only way out that Roberts could see was to convince the raiders that the situation was too dangerous to handle. Yet, a simple calculation showed more firepower on their side.

It followed that Roberts would have to run a bluff.

114

XIX. The Bluff

On the screen, the two-day wonder's fuse burned short again, and he turned away, as if to rasp an order to an unseen subordinate.

Roberts spoke first:

"This is a King's Ship."

The 'colonel' swung around.

"What's that?"

Roberts looked the two-day wonder directly in the eye.

"Sobeit you wish death, there is no surer way than this."

The two-day wonder stared at him so blankly that Roberts wondered if he had guessed wrong. If so, everything he said would be totally meaningless. But it was too late to worry about that.

Roberts spoke grimly:

"A King's Ship will not stand inspection by any mortal power in or out of space. He who attempts it will face the full might of the Empire. You are warned." '

The figure on the screen momentarily congealed into a riving statue. Then he leaned completely back out of

focus of the screen.

There was a garbled noise from the speaker, then the automatic descramblers went to work, the garble seemed to distort itself into new shapes and forms, and suddenly it came across, rough and low-pitched, but understandable: "Quick! Where's Maury?"

115

"Holed up with Parks and the lawyer. Why?"

"Get him on this screen!"

"Are you nuts? He'll—"

"I said, get him!"

"Okay. Okay!"

The 'colonel' reappeared, his manner conciliatory: "We certainly don't want to—er—detain a foreign ship against its will, Mister—ah—?"

In a cold voice, Roberts said, "My name is not at issue. Neither is it at issue whether you will hold this ship against its will. You lack the power to hold this ship against its will. You will release this ship or die. *That* is what is at issue."

In the silence that followed, Roberts became aware that, around him, there were a great many quiet noises. There was a hum, and a low clank from the weapons locker. From outside came grating and whirring sounds and from somewhere forward there was a continuous murmuring rumble. The patrol ship, though it lacked room, had a trait that endeared it to Roberts: When trouble was coming, the patrol ship got ready. Its captain didn't have to concern himself with the little details any more than a man on the brink of a fist fight had to consciously raise his own blood pressure.

On the screen, the 'colonel' glanced around.

"Yes! Put him on!"

The screen divided vertically, to show an additional face. This new face took a cool glance at Roberts, and turned very slightly toward the imitation colonel.

"What's all this about?"

"It's like that stuff down on Three! I grabbed this guy on a beam, and—"

"Are you wasting my time over a reel-in on' spme spacer punk? *We'll talk about this lot—*"

"No! Hold it, Maury! *This is that Empire stuff!*"

"Nuts. That's a rebuilt dogship. Look at your long-range screen and read the lines. Grow up."

"But, this guy—"

Roberts flipped a switch on the control panel.

There was a slight jar, and the outside viewscreen showed torn camouflage drifting past.

"You hold a King's Ship at your peril."

Roberts reached for the firing console, but the symbiotic

116

computer got there first, and the switches moved of their own accord. A large white beam sprang out from the patrol ship toward the asteroid belt.

In the asteroid belt, there was a dazzling explosion.

From a previously unused speaker to the left of the instrument panel came a clear questioning voice:

"Imperial Dreadnought *Coeur de Lion* to masked Imperial Ship *Nom de guerre*. Do you need help?"

On another auxiliary screen appeared the image of a tough officer in glittering helmet and breastplate, with eyes of a blue so pale that they resembled ice.

It took Roberts an instant to realize that the symbiotic computer was filling in the details. Then he answered:

"Imperial Ship *Nom de Guerre* to Imperial Dreadnought *Coeur de Lion*. We are detained by outspacers, who claim the right to halt and board us, in search for contraband."

"Demand if the scum be leagued with Oggbad."

Roberts glanced back at the communications screen. The two-day wonder looked ready to shut his eyes and slide under the table. The other individual, Maury, had a look of intense and calculating awareness.

Roberts looked him in the eye, and spoke in a tone suggesting the crack of a whip:

"Serve you Oggbad the Fiend?"

Maury's brow wrinkled. His face took on the look of a rocket-specialist grappling with his first gravitor. He opened his mouth, shut it, then opened it again.

"No."

Roberts glanced at the auxiliary screen.

"He denies allegiance to Oggbad."

"It is the policy of the Empire to avoid clashes with out-spacers till our present wounds be bound up. Warn this dog to stand clear of the Earldom—Designate of Paradise. Demand that he let loose his hold on you and the bomb-ship. If lie does so, take your departure. If not, run the iron down his throat."

"Have I leave to slam home the bomb-ship?"

"Do that first. Then the rest will go quicker."

Roberts glanced back at Maury. Roberts' voice was brisk and businesslike:

"I propose to you that you let loose my ships, and further

117

that you agree to stand clear of the Earldom-Designate of Paradise, which is the third planet of this star, counting from the star outward. Do you agree?"

Maury, his expression baffled, said, "I agree."

Roberts turned back to the auxiliary screen. "He agrees."

The figure on the screen looked faintly disappointed. "If he does as promised,' you have no choice but to break off. At some future time, we may settle these old accounts."

Roberts watched the battle screen. The wavy blur vanished. The patrol ship and the spaceyacht were free.

Roberts nodded coldly to Maury.

Maury, his expression that of a person thinking very hard, nodded back.

Roberts broke the connection.

So far, so good. Rut one careless slip would unravel the whole illusion.

Roberts made certain the communicator was off, thought a moment, then tapped a button beside the glowing amber lens marked 'Smb Cmp.'

"Any fishnet pickups between us and the spaceyacht?"

The voice of the symbiotic computer replied, "Two. They were drifted out on narrow pressor elements of a compound beam. They're in position between here and the yacht."

"Fishnet pickups are expensive. If we don't hurt them, our friends in the asteroid belt will pull them back *in* again when we leave. If—"

The symbiotic computer spoke complacently. "The parasite circuits are already in place."

"Good. Let's see these fishnets on the screen."

The outside viewscreen promptly showed, outlined in red, two large fuzzy networks of fine lines, between the space-yacht and the patrol ship.

"Okay," said Roberts, and carefully guided the patrol ship away from them, as if he were moving off on his own. When he reached an angle that would avoid the pickups, he switched on the communicator, and called the yacht on a tight beam.

Hammell and Morrissey appeared on the screen, their faces tense.

Roberts said, "Don't talk. Just follow me."

Hammell nodded, and Roberts snapped off the screen.

118

The patrol ship moved slowly off, and the spaceyacht swung slowly after it.

Carefully, Roberts watched the battle screen for any sign of trouble. When nothing developed, he glanced down at the course display, and sent the little symbol of the ship gradually angling back toward the line of red dashes. As he moved, Roberts gathered speed, so that not long after the symbol of the ship was again centered on the display's dashes, the dashes themselves faded to pale pink, then white. The ship was now back on course, and moving at the correct speed.

The asteroid belt, by now, was far behind.

But all the way down to the planet, Roberts could see Maury's face—thinking, weighing, calculating.

XX. Blackout

The landing itself was no problem. The two ships slid down through heavy clouds, moved low over dense forest, and came to rest a little before sunset in the same clearing where they'd set down before.

Roberts peered out into the clearing, sniffed the cool fresh air, inhaled deeply, sighed with pleasure, raised the hatch a little further, felt the breeze on his face-There was the faint tick of an automatic turret.

WHAP!

A blur of yellow fur and claws blew apart in mid-air.

Roberts shook his head, shut the hatch, and went to the nearest weapons locker to get battle armor. He opened the locker, and out on its sling came a glittering metal suit with tall tapering spire on the helmet, a gauzy pink cloth on the spire, and a dazzling coat of arms on the breastplate.

Again, to fit the part Roberts was playing, the patrol ship had 'improved' the armor.

Roberts looked at it irritatedly, and tried another locker. Out came a more dazzling suit, with spire plus flashing crown on the helmet, and a larger broadsword in a lavishly jeweled scabbard.

Roberts tried the other two lockers, which stubbornly refused to open.

The voice of the symbiotic- computer said drily, "When

120

playing a part, little inconsistencies add up to a big loss of belief."

"Exactly who," said Roberts, "is going to watch me go this short distance?"

"Those who are not seers should avoid predicting the future."

"Nuts." Roberts climbed into the armor, and made his way to the hatch. He turned backward, head bent, and managed to get the hatch open without ramming anything with the spire. He crouched, turned around, aimed the spire out the opening, followed it through, and dropped to the ground. The hatch clanged shut behind him, and Roberts started for the spaceyacht.

About halfway there, he became conscious of a face back in the shadows, watching him with awe. Roberts corrected himself. Watching the *armor* with awe.

That the symbiotic computer had been right again did nothing to improve Roberts' frame of mind. Especially since he could now see that it was obvious. The accumulated effects of the want-generator had led thousands from the city to venture deeper into the forest, seeking adventure and trophies, and the most capable survivors might by now be on an almost equal footing with the creatures that naturally lived there.

Roberts climbed up the handholds of the yacht and banged on the big cargo door. At once it swung open. Roberts used the spire to keep Hammell back, and as soon as he was inside, jabbed the button that swung the door shut.

"Ye gods," said Hammell, staring at the armor. "Let's not bother with *that* until we need it. Incidentally, you almost stabbed me with that helmet spike when you came in."

Roberts said shortly. "There's somebody watching from the edge of the clearing. Don't forget, we've gotten a lot of these people interested in going into the forest. That's what they're doing."

Hammell momentarily had the foolish expression of one caught overlooking the obvious.

"Moreover," said Roberts, "I was using that spike to keep you away from the hatch. You don't look too much like Duke Ewald of Greeme right now." He hesitated, then cleared his

121

throat. "When you're playing a part, little inconsistencies add up to a big loss of belief. You want to remember that."

Hammell looked groggy. "I should have thought of it, but for some reason, I forgot."

Roberts felt a little better. He said cheerfully, "Where's Morrissey?"

"Up on the fifth level, checking the gear."

"You'd better go up first. We don't want him to get speared with this helmet spike."

"Okay."

Hammell stepped onto the green half of the glowing oval on the deck and drifted up the grav-lift. The doors overhead slid open and shut, and he was gone from sight.

Roberts allowed him time to warn Morrissey, then followed. The doors slid open one after another, then the fifth level dropped into view, and Roberts gripped the handhold and pulled himself out.

Hammell and Morrissey were standing by a wide improvised control panel. Roberts said hello to Morrissey, got out of the armor, and glanced around.

"How are things in the city?"

"That's a good question," said Morrissey, scowling. "There's no broadcast from the city, and the spy-screen doesn't work."

Roberts glanced at the blank gray screen. "Can you fix it?"

"If it was something wrong with the screen *itself*, maybe. But I tried a test transmission, and the screen's okay. The trouble is, there's *no transmission from the city*."

"What would cause that?"

Morrissey shrugged. "If we had our own spy devices in the city, I might be in a position to say. But this set-up is tapped onto the city's own surveillance system. Now, how does that surveillance system work? If the city's general power supply fails, does the surveillance system fail? If so, it could be that they've had a power failure. Or, it could be that the power supply is okay, but that somebody has knocked out the surveillance system itself. Not knowing how the system works, I don't know what's possible."

"Could the technicians have found out someone had tapped the surveillance system?"

Morrissey nodded. "Among other things. It could even be

122

that there's a gentleman's agreement that the system will only be used during certain hours. All I *know* is, the screen doesn't show us anything, because there's no transmission to pick up."

Roberts shook his head. "What we're here for is to use the want-generator to straighten out the mess in that city. But how can we use it, when there's no way to watch the effect? Moreover," added Roberts, "we've got this fleet of commerce raiders. How do we concentrate on what we're doing with that troop of baboons ready to drop in anytime?"

Hammell said, "It's worse than that. The odds are, they've got at least one agent already on the planet. Any time we make a public move, that guy will report it."

Morrissey frowned. "Come to think of it, they'll be able to use their instruments to follow the movements of our ships here. Then they can compare what we *say*, as reported by their agent, with what we do, as shown by their instruments. We can't say we're going off to fight Oggbad, for instance, and then just land our ships out of sight while we decide what to do next."

"No," said Hammell, "they'd know we were faking."

"And we can't afford *that*," said Roberts.

Morrissey said, "The wonder is that we ever got away from them at all. How did you work it?"

Roberts described what had happened, adding, "I'd think it was a pretty good bluff if we were far away by now. But since we aren't, our safety depends on *keeping them afraid to try anything*, for fear the mighty Empire will blow them to bits."

"Which," Hammell growled, "means every move we make not only has to make sense for our purposes, but also has got to be convincing *to the commerce raiders*,"

"Correct," said Roberts.

Morrissey, scowling, said, "This is certainly going to make things complicated."

"When you consider the likely situation on this planet," said Roberts, "it's going to pile up complications to the point where it's a question whether we can move at all. Just think of the factions here. There's the planetary computer with its roboid devices and built-in directives. As a sort of semi-independent extension, there's Kelty and his army of roboid po-

123

lice. There's the technicians, and the machines and devices the technicians have made. Then there's the Great Leader and his fanatics. Plus the general bulk of the populace itself. Superadded on all this is the effect of the measures *we* took while we were here the last time. And, of course, the whole thing is bound to have developed since then, even though we won't know how until we get the spy-screen to work."

Morrissey nodded moodily. "And since the trouble with the screen is on the other end, there isn't much we can do about that."

There was a moody silence.

Out in the clearing, it was getting dim, and Roberts absently tapped the switch to opaque the portholes, lest they be watched from outside. Then the silence stretched out again.

Finally Hammell said, "There ought to be *some* way to simplify this."

Morrissey nodded. "Sure. What?"

Roberts was about to suggest, yet again, that they all move into the patrol ship, where at least, their skins would be safe. But just then—

BAM!

The ship jumped underfoot.

Roberts instantaneously dove for his battle armor.

There was a rapid series of jolts and heavy crashes. Something clattered on the deck, hissed, spun, and bounced, in a blur of mist.

Roberts heaved open the back-plate.

Hammell and Morrissey, caught in the mist, stumbled toward the grav-lift, and were lost in swirling grayness.

Roberts squirmed into the armor, his eyes shut, and holding his breath. But even though he was now inside, so was a certain amount of gas. He staggered to his feet, shut and locked the back-plate, groped for the emergency-breathing chin-lever, couldn't find it, and suddenly, despite himself, his straining lungs sucked in a little breath of air that smelled sweetish and strange.

Roberts' thoughts vanished like startled fish. There was a gap when he was aware of nothing at all, and then he was standing, stuporous and empty-minded, as there appeared through the fog, from the direction of the grav-lift, a heavily

124

armed figure wearing an armored suit with wide transparent faceplate, flexible airhose looped over the left shoulder, and speaking diaphragm in the side of the mouthpiece.

From somewhere down in the clearing, an amplified voice boomed out:

"YOU ARE UNDER ARREST! BY ORDER OF THE PLANETARY DEVELOPMENT AUTHORITY, YOU MUST EVACUATE THESE SHIPS AND COME OUT DISARMED AND WITH YOUR HANDS CLASPED BEHIND YOUR HEADS! YOU HAVE FIFTEEN SECONDS TO COMPLY WITH THIS ORDER!"

125

XXI. The Duke and the Usurper

Roberts fought off a host of other thoughts and kept his mind riveted on that one thought that clarified the whole situation:

I am Vaughan, Duke of Trasimere, Prince Contestant to the Throne. This planet is the Earldom-Designate of Paradise. Its every inhabitant is rightly subject to my command, save only Oggbad, the sorcerer.

Once Roberts knew who he was, everything simplified itself wonderfully.

Alertly, he studied the armored figures edging toward him. The expressions of fear and awe visible through their faceplates suggested that they were not ill-intentioned. What had happened, then?

In a kindly voice, with the natural overtones of power and authority that followed from a knowledge of who he was, Roberts said quietly:

"Kneel to your liege-lord." ' The armored figures, wide-eyed, dropped to one knee.

This told Roberts that the men were not from off the planet, but were from the city, and were acquainted with what had happened on his last visit, when the sorcerer Oggbad had escaped into the wilderness, and the leaders and population of the city, after a little unseemly wavering, had rallied to the true cause. Their allegiance once pledged, and his power to reward and punish once established, they would

126

not readily turn against him. Roberts spoke sternly: "Let whoever is of highest rank among you answer my questions. *Did Oggbad send you here?*"

The sergeant looked around, but there was no one else to do it. He said, "No, your—your highness. A man landed in a —ah—official Planetary Development Authority ship, and announced that we'd been tricked, and he was taking over the planet. He had an army of—'administrators'—with him. They're all over the Inner City. He gives the orders. We didn't know *you* were here."

"This fellow is an outspacer?"

"He-ah-?"

"He does not belong to the Empire?"

"No."

"Then he is an outspacer and has no right here. Did this fellow come with you?"

"Yes, he—"

"Is he in this ship?"

"He's outside, at the loudspeaker. There he goes now."

The amplified voice boomed out:

"AT ONCE, OR WE WILL DESTROY BOTH OF THESE SHIPS AND . . ."

Roberts nodded. "Go below, and warn your companions that I shall be down to settle this shortly."

The men went out.

Roberts, breathing air that the suit had now almost cleared of the fumes, was having more and more trouble fighting off a throng of distracting thoughts that conflicted with his new-found clarity of mind. He took a few moments to shove these thoughts out of his consciousness. There would be time enough for all that later. The main thing *now* was to take care of this officious usurper.

With this purpose clearly in mind, Roberts checked sword and gun, and stepped into the grav-shaft.

A throng of armored men moved back respectfully as Roberts walked to the cargo door to look down into the clearing.

Below, some eighty to a hundred heavily armed men nervously ringed the patrol ship. Closer to the patrol ship, redly glowing fragments lay like driftwood marking high water at a beach. The larger turrets of the ship aimed straight ahead, as if disdaining such petty opponents, but the smaller turrets

127

made little adjustments that served as warnings to come no closer.

Floodlights, mounted on disk-shaped grav-skimmers, lit the scene, which was given an inferno aspect by a thin mist blowing across the clearing from a ring of generators around the edge. Through the upper reaches of this mist, hosts of bats with glistening teeth dove at the clearing, but then with desperate twists and turns flitted away again.

Between the patrol ship and the spaceyacht, stood a little cluster of figures beside a loudspeaker aimed at the patrol ship. One of these armored men spoke into a microphone, and his words boomed out:

"AND I REPEAT-YOU WILL SURRENDER AT ONCE OR BE DECLARED OUTLAWS, SUBJECT TO ATTACK ON SIGHT, FORFEITURE OF ALL PROPERTY AND ASSETS, AND DENIAL OF RIGHT OF ENTRY AT ALL CIVILIZED ..."

His tone of voice spoke of close familiarity with rules and regulations, accompanied by a dim understanding of human nature. It came to Roberts that even if the fellow had any power over him, his conclusion would be the same:

Better dead than that man's prisoner.

The loudspeaker was now blaring the words:

"THEREFORE, BY THE AUTHORITY VESTED IN ME, I HEREBY ..."

Roberts suddenly had enough. The suit amplified his words into a voice of thunder:

"MASTER OF THE ORDINANCE! SILENCE THAT DOG!"

From the patrol ship, a bright line of light reached out to the loudspeaker. There was a brief display of sparks, then a pleasant quiet.

Beside the loudspeaker, the man with the microphone swung around, his voice small and officious. "Take *that* man prisoner!"

Roberts rested his hand on his sword hilt.

No one moved.

Roberts studied the usurper coldly. Roberts' voice came out low and level. "What false illusion of power emboldens a fool to challenge the true liege-lord of this world?"

The individual in the center, firmly gripping the useless

128

microphone, spoke in a small but determined voice. "I am P.W. Glinderen, Chief of Planet. Owing to the—spectacular irregularities—which have taken place on this planet, the Planetary Development Authority has regressed the planet to pre-provisional status. I have duly and officially been appointed chief. You are evidently the cause of the irregularities. I therefore place you under arrest, and instruct you to strip yourself at once of all weapons and armor, open this other ship to immediate inspection, and instruct those within to come out at once, disarm themselves, and surrender. If you carry out these instructions promptly, I believe I can endorse a plea for clemency in your case." Roberts replied coldly, his voice edged with scorn: "No one can enforce his will where he lacks both right and power. The rulers of this world have yielded to me. Your vaunted authority is either fraudulent or void."

P.W. Glinderen opened his mouth, shut it, and then spoke determinedly:

"In other words, you *admit to planetary piracy*? You state that you have *seized this planet by force*?" Roberts spoke as if to a child:

"Is the authority of lord over vassal based on force alone? Better to die, than to yield to such a claim, and better never to seize such a perilous allegiance. None need yield to a foul or empty cause. Against such, there is the appeal to Heaven, which will grant victory or apportion vengeance."

P.W. Glinderen began to speak, looked thoughtful, and tried again:

"May I ask if your name is not—" he leaned over to another of his party, listened, nodded, and said, "—Vaughan

N. Roberts, and if not, what *is* your exact identity?"

The question caused Roberts a moment of uneasiness. But one who has lost his identity, and then recovered it, is none too eager to let it go a second time. Roberts' voice came out with anger and conviction:

"To question another in this manner assumes a superiority dangerous to one who is, in fact, a trespasser, without right or power, and with his life in the hands of him he seeks to question. You ask my name. I am Vaughan, Duke of Trasi-mere. Seek you any *further* answers?"

129

The Planetary Development official stared at Roberts, then again gathered himself to speak.

A loud ticking sounded from the patrol ship.

Someone in Glinderen's party looked around, then urgently grabbed Glinderen.

The patrol ship's big fusion-cannon aimed directly at him.

Glinderen opened his mouth, and tried, to speak, but was unable to get any words out.

Roberts turned to the men who earlier had surrounded the patrol ship and who were now gathered between the patrol ship and the spaceyacht.

"Take this man and his fellows prisoner, and return them to the city. Give warning that I shall soon be there to set straight whatever folly these people have brought about."

The armored men enthusiastically seized Glinderen and his companions, and hustled them onto the grav-skimmers. Then the men on the spaceyacht asked for orders, and Roberts sent them off with the rest. The whole outfit roared away with impressive efficiency, taking prisoners, loudspeakers, floodlights, and mist-generators with them.

Roberts, with the feeling of having satisfactorily completed an unpleasant task, turned to see Hammell and Morrissey, holding pressure-bottles and masks to their faces, watching him wide-eyed.

At that instant, with the tension relaxed and Roberts himself off-guard, suddenly the thoughts he'd held off burst into consciousness.

Vaughan, Duke of Trasimere, Prince-Contestant to the Throne, suddenly realized with a shock what was myth and what reality.

Morrissey held the mask away for a moment.

"Was that PDA Chief a fake-I hope?"

Hammell added nervously: "The whole Space Force will come out on a planetary piracy charge." He sucked a fresh breath through the mask. "You know that, don't you?"

Now Roberts knew it. Now that he had, in effect, challenged the whole human-occupied universe to war.

XXII. Planetary Pilots

The two weapons lockers that Roberts had been unable to open, were swinging wide. Glittering suits of battle armor traveled out on their slings.

"The new recruits," said the symbiotic computer, "will suit up at once and return to the yacht to gather necessary goods and equipment."

Hammell and Morrissey stared at the two glittering suits of battle armor.

"New *recruits*?" said Morrissey.

Roberts said reassuringly, "Don't worry about that. That's just how it talks. It's under the impression we're in the Interstellar Patrol. There's no point arguing; you'd better go along with it. Otherwise you don't get any food or water, and the bunk stays locked in place and you wind up having to sleep on the deck. But never mind that. We've got to get the want-generator over here anyway. Not only could animals damage it, but conceivably somebody might get at it while ware away."

"Away?" said Hammell. "Where are we going?"

"Where do you think?" said Roberts. "There's only one place to straighten out this mess, and that's the city."

Hammell and Morrissey got into the battle armor without a word. But they looked as if they were doing a lot of thinking while they did it.

130

131

Transferring the want-generator and spy screen to the patrol ship took the better part of two hours, but things didn't stand still while they did it. At intervals they could hear, on the patrol ship's communicator, the voice of Kely, in charge of the city's roboid police; the, voice of the red-bearded spokesman for the technicians; and the voice used by the planetary computer itself. On the other side was a harsh demanding voice that wrung the facts from stammering humans and toneless computer, and made it plain that regardless of Oggbad, the Planetary Development Administration, or the Space Force, everyone would loyally obey his liege-lord the Duke, or his liege-lord the Duke would smash the place into smoldering rubble.

Once the want-generator and spy-screen were set up, there was a brief lull, and the three men got out of their armor and considered the restricted space in the patrol ship. Roberts, hoping they would be sufficiently impressed to give up the impractical spaceyacht, stood by quietly.

Standing near the hatch looking forward, the most prominent feature was the glistening three-foot-thick cylinder that ran down the axis of the ship, creating a shimmer of reflections exactly where anyone would naturally walk. Hammell and Morrissey had already banged into it, and now moved more warily.

To the left of this cylinder was the control seat and console, forward of which was a blank wall. To the right of the cylinder, the space was now cluttered with the spy-screen and want-generator, while straight ahead the deck itself warped sharply upward over the missile bay.

Aft of where Roberts stood, everything was constricted. Between the cylinder and the various drive and fuel-storage units, there was little but a set of claustrophobic crawl-spaces so tight that it was necessary to exhale to get in.

Beside Roberts, however, was one of the patrol ship's better features. Whatever might be said about other details, the final maddening touch—cramped sleeping arrangements—had been left out. The bunks were large and comfortable, and once in his bunk, a man could stretch out for a full night's rest. But there was no denying that most of the ship lacked space.

Hammell and Morrissey, after looking around, glanced at each other, and then Hammell turned to Roberts accusingly.

132

"It's even smaller on the inside than on the outside."

Roberts was listening to the symbiotic computer warn Kelty that Glinderen's party shouldn't be allowed to use a communicator. Roberts replied absently, "It's a thick hull."

"Maybe so, but—what's behind that?" Hammell pointed to the wall that took up the space in front of the control console.

Roberts frowned. "At first, I thought it was some kind of a storeroom. But I've never been able to find any way into it."

Hammell said, "That looks like the edge of a sliding door, in front of the control console."

"When you're at the controls during an attack, that door slides shut. If the ship out here is holed, you can still function."

Morrissey looked around. "What's under the deck here?"

Roberts bent, and heaved back a section. Underneath was a tangle of tubes, cables, and freely curving pipes, of various sizes and colors, smoothly branching and reconnecting, some sinking out of sight beneath the others, and the whole works set into a pinkish jellylike insulation or sealant of some kind. As they watched, a translucent pipe about the size of a man's forearm began to dilate. In a series of waves of contraction and dilation, ball-like lumps of something with a golden glint traveled along, to vanish under the next section of deck.

Roberts lowered the panel, and glanced at Morrissey. "Any more questions?"

Morrissey scratched his head, but said nothing.

Hammell looked around in puzzlement. "This seems to be pretty advanced." He stepped forward and glanced up through an opening overhead.

"Is there another deck up there?"

"No. That's the upper fusion turret."

"What's that—ah—thing like a wheel, with a handle—"

"The handwheel for elevating the gun."

Hammell blinked. "You aim the gun *by hand*?"

"There's a multiple control system. The gun can be operated by the battle computer or by the symbiotic computer, with no one on board. Or, you can operate it yourself

133

from the control console. .But if you have to, you can also do it completely by hand."

"Which has precedence, the manual control, or the automatic?" _,

"So far as the guns are concerned, I *think* the manual. Where the flying of the ship is concerned, the computers can lock you out anytime. It's not that the manual controls are disconnected, or don't work, but that they take a setting and you can't move them. If a man were strong enough, I don't know what would happen."

Morrissey said, "What about the communicator?"

"Same thing as the flying controls, except that if you're around, at least you know what's going on. You can hear what the symbiotic computer is saying. The computer can *take off* in the ship, and unless you happen to hear the slide and click of the levers and switches, you won't even know what happened."

Hammell looked around, and squinted at the bulkhead, or reinforced section of hull, or whatever it was, in front of the control console.

"I'll bet that symbiotic computer is in there. It's the logical place. *You're* on one side of the controls. *It's* on the other."

Morrissey shook his head. "Too vulnerable. The same hit might knock out pilot and computer both."

"Where is it, then?"

Morrissey pointed at the deck.

Hammell shook his head. "There's a symmetry about having it on the other side of the control console. If it's heavily enough protected, that business about the same hit wouldn't count. And it would make it easier to—"

Just then Roberts heard the communicator say, ". . . preparations had best be complete to receive His Royal and Imperial Highness, the Duke Vaughan, at the Barons' Council Hall within the quarter hour. Your own head will answer for it if aught traceable to you goes wrong. His Highness is in no sweet mood after what happened here a few hours ago-----"

"Okay," said Roberts. "Here we go."

Hammell and Morrissey, tied up in their argument, looked surprised.

134

"Wait a minute," said Hammell, "what are we going to *do*?"

Roberts pulled his battle armor out on its sling. "The only place we can straighten the mess out—or even find out what's going on—is in the city. So, we have to go to the city."

"Yes, but what do we *do* there?"

"We've got to *simplify* the situation. There are too many factions. It's like trying to go somewhere with half-a-dozen different pilots, each backing his own flight-plan. We've got to simplify it. The only way I can see is for us to get control of the major factions ourselves."

Hammell shook his head. "That would have been fine-before Glinderen showed up. *He's the Chief of Planet.*"

Roberts frowned. "I don't think Glinderen, or anyone else who approaches this planet on a routine basis, can ever hope to straighten things out. I don't see any way to unite these factions unless *we* do it."

Morrissey said, "Suppose we *do* unite the factions? Suppose we throw out Glinderen? Suppose we end the

fighting? Suppose we scare off Maury and his fleet of commerce-raiders? Suppose we even get halfway started on the job of straightening out this place? Then what? Glinderen merely goes off-planet, and signals his report to PDA Sector Headquarters; PDA Sector HQ then notifies Space Force Sector HQ and the Colonization Council; Space Force Sector HQ says it's overburdened and calls for reinforcements; that call gets to Space Force GHQ at the same time as an urgent recommendation from the Colonization Council; Space Force GHQ sends out the orders for a reserve fleet to come in here; meanwhile, Glinderen brushes his teeth, takes a shower, slides in between the cool sheets, and sleeps the sleep of the just; down here, so far as any court in the known universe is concerned, *toe* are planetary pirates. One fine day, the Space Force sets down, and we either give up or get blasted into molten slag. Glinderen comes back down here, and *methodically undoes everything we've done*, and puts it back together *his* way. Where's the gain?"

Hammell nodded. *That's* what I mean."

Roberts silently got into his armor, then glanced at the instrument panel.

135

"Here's an example of what I mean. While we've been talking, the ship has taken off. We're almost there."

Morrissey said urgently, "Look, Glinderen has us on the horns of a dilemma. If we *don't* give up, the Space Force kills us. If we *do* give up, *he* imprisons us. I don't want to get gored. But if I have to, I'll pick the shorter horn."

Roberts checked fusion-gun and sword. "You say the Space Force can finish us off. That's *provided Glinderen notifies them*. What if he gets no chance to do it? That horn breaks off."

Morrissey blinked, and, frowning, started getting into his armor, but Hammell looked worried.

"Let's not get out of a *false* charge of piracy by carrying out *actual* piracy. Glinderen is *lawfully in charge here*."

A sliding sound from the direction of, the control console, and a quiet alteration in the tone of the gravitors, told them that they were starting down.

Roberts said quietly, "You're overlooking something."

Hammell said, with considerable strain in his voice, "I don't know what. Glinderen's authority is *real*. I don't like to do it, but this has gone far enough. I'll have to go to Glinderen, and—"

The voice of the symbiotic computer said, "We are now landing at Paradise City."

136

XXIII. "Their Bearing is an Insult"

The Barons' Council Hall, near which the patrol ship now landed, was floodlit and surrounded by roboid police and heavily armed members of the Citizens Defense Force. More roboid police rolled up to form a double line, with narrow land between, from the ship to the Council Hall.

The patrol ship promptly blew up the nearest roboid police, and blasted to bits those that tried to take their place.

Roberts, coming out the hatch, decided that what looked fishy to the patrol ship looked fishy to him. He drew his sword.

As Hammell and Morrissey came out behind him, he growled, "Be on your guard! This has a look I like not!"

The two men, in glittering armor, whipped out their fusion-guns.

The roboid police eased a trifle further apart.

Roberts, studying the Citizens' Defense Force, observed that no one was faced *out*, to guard the site. They were all faced *in*.

Roberts strolled into the narrow lane between the roboid police. "*Draw these lines apart!*"

The roboid police backed up an inch.

With one violent blow of his sword, Roberts sliced the nearest roboid policeman in half. He chopped the next one apart, hewed his way through the third—

Suddenly there was room around him.

137

He strode between the lines toward the Council Hall, then abruptly came to a halt. Ahead and a little to his left, where he would have had to step if he had gone between the original lines, was what *looked* like a repaired place in the concrete.

Roberts drew his fusion-gun, aimed, and fired.

A geyser of flame roared up. Chunks of concrete shot skyward like the discharge of a volcano.

From the patrol ship, searing shafts of energy reached out. There was a sizzling multiple *Crack!* like a dozen thunderbolts striking at once.

The roboid police were two lines of glowing wreckage.

Roberts jumped the smoking crater and headed for the building. On the way, he noticed the large sign that

proclaimed, "Municipal Detention Center." He shot the corners off it, and it fell, uncovering the more solidly anchored plaque bearing the words, *Barons' Council Hall*. Roberts kicked the fallen sign out of his way, and opened the door.

At the near end of a big table, two men came to their feet. They were Kelty, the lean, well-dressed assistant-chief of the planetary computer's roboïd police, and the red-bearded giant who was spokesman for the technicians. At the foot of the table sat P.W. Glinderen, and, to his right, a knowing cynical individual who looked at Roberts with a smirk. Beside this individual was a bored-looking man with broad shoulders and a detectable bulge in his armpit. To Glin-deren's left were seated several neatly dressed smooth shaven men who apparently were administrators of some kind.

Roberts stepped to the empty place at the head of the table and pulled out the chair.

Hammell and Morissey took their places to Roberts' right but, as he remained standing, they too stayed on their feet. At the far end, Glinderen and the officials to his left methodically glanced over papers, while to Glinderen's right, the shrewd-looking individual eyed Roberts, Hammell and Mor-rissey with a knowing smile.

Hammell's voice remarked, "Your Grace, I like not the air of the rabble at the foot of the table. They should stand till you are seated."

Glinderen looked up.

138

"*You* are at the foot of the table. And let me warn you, before you try any theatrical display, that I have notified the Space Force, and the three of you will be in prison before the week is out." His voice changed to a whiplike crack. "Now sit *down*."

Roberts, aware of the orders he had earlier heard the symbiotic computer give, knew that Glinderen was not to have been allowed the use of a communicator.

Roberts glanced at Kelty. "Is this true?"

Kelty nodded unhappily. "I tried to stop him. But Glinderen convinced the planetary computer, and it blocked me."

Roberts said coldly, "Then this means war. Their so-called Space Force is in the asteroid belt. If it attempts to interfere with this world, I shah¹ summon the battle fleets of the Empire."

At the other end of the table, the crafty individual to Glinderen's right laughed silently.

As Roberts contemplated this low point in his plans, Ham-mell's voice reached him:

"Your Grace, I know that these outspacers have customs different from ours. But their bearing is an insult. Not alone to Trasimere and the Empire, but to Malafont and Greme as well." •

Roberts looked at the individuals at the far end of the table. Glinderen and his officials were ignoring everyone else. To Glinderen's right, the crafty individual sat back and grinned, while to *his* right, the tough was studying Hammell as if he were a peculiar kind of insect. No one at the far end of the table was taking Roberts and his party seriously. Moreover, *they* now controlled the planetary computer, and they had already called the Space Force.

Hammell's voice was courteous but firm:

"I know, Your Grace, of your desire to avoid conflict with the outspacers while our own struggles are yet unsettled. Nevertheless, Your Grace, I respectfully call to your attention that this world is yours, and that I am your *guest* upon it."

The shrewd individual rocked back in his chair, grinning. Roberts said politely, "If the gentlemen to Mr. Glinderen's

139

right belongs to Mr. Glinderen's party, I trust that Mr. Glin-deren will call him to order while there is yet time for Mr. Glinderen to call him to order."

Glinderen glanced up, frowning. "Mr. Peen is a commercial representative for Krojac Enterprises. He is entirely —"

"I see," said Roberts.

Mr. Peen went into a fresh fit of silent laughter.

Through no volition of his own, the fusion-gun jumped to Roberts' hand. A dazzling lance of energy reached across the table.

Glinderen and his aides sprang to their feet as Peen went over backward.

Roberts heard his own voice say coolly, "I apologize to their Graces of Malafont and Greme for this incivility."

Hammeli's voice said, in a tone of gratification, "The stain is wiped away, Your Grace."

Morrissey's voice added coolly, "Say no more of it, Your Grace. However, that other fellow, also to the right of Glinderen, hath a look which I care not for."

Roberts' voice inquired politely, as Roberts, his mouth tightly shut, listened incredulously:

"That second gentleman, Mr. Glinderen, is of your party?"

Glinderen said, "No, no! He's Mr. Peen's—"

Crack!

The second gentleman, springing to his feet and yanking a short-barreled weapon from his armpit, collapsed on the floor.

Roberts' voice said coolly, "I apologize to His Grace of Malafont for this unpleasantness."

Morrissey's voice said cheerfully, "The unpleasantness is transmuted to pleasure, Your Grace."

As a matter of fact, the sudden departure of the grinning pair was a relief to Roberts. But the way they had departed was something else again. To see whether he now had control, or whether the battle armor was just going to operate on its own from now on, Roberts said experimentally, "Let us be seated."

The words were dutifully reproduced by the armor. He sat down, and Hammell, Morrissey, Kelty, and the red-bearded giant, smiling cheerfully, followed his example.

140

At the far end of the table, Glinderen stared from the pair on the floor to Roberts. *"This is murder!"*

141

XXIV. "Your Grace May be Aware"

Glinderen sat down, wide-eyed. His subordinates swallowed, sat down, and kept their mouths shut.

Roberts waited an instant, but the battle armor had apparently said all it—or the symbiotic computer speaking through it—intended to say. It was up to Roberts to fill the growing uncomfortable silence.

Roberts leaned forward. "Where is the Baron of the Outer City, Mr. Glinderen?"

Glinderen swallowed hard. "He was carrying on a brutal policy. I deposed him. He is in prison."

Roberts glanced at Kelty. "Is this true?"

Kelty said, "From Glinderen's viewpoint, it's true. Mr. Glinderen convinced the computer to place the roboid police at his command, and the next time the Baron of the Outer City came in here, Glinderen imprisoned him. Glinderen then tried to take over all the rest of the city with the roboid police, but by then it was too tough a

proposition. Then he tried to pacify the populace by being very lenient. In the process, crime skyrocketed. We have crimes now that we never dreamed of before."

At the other end of the table, Glinderen was beginning to show an impatient urge to speak.

Roberts deliberately laid his fusion-gun on the table, the muzzle pointed at Glinderen.

The planetary administrator stopped fidgeting.

142

Roberts said to Kelty, "Release the Baron. Have him brought up here, with all the respect due his rank and duty."

"I don't know if the computer will cooperate."

"The computer will cooperate or cease to exist."

Kelty got up, and left the room.

Roberts looked at Glinderen. "What was Mr. Peen's business here?"

"He was a—commercial representative for Krojac Enterprises."

"Why was he here?"

"To arrange for an emergency repair and salvage facility here. A new colonization route is being established. This will mean a sizable flow of traffic past this solar system. Krojac Enterprises is contractor for a rest and refit center farther along the route and, naturally, they want to increase their business. The traffic past here should be sufficiently large that a repair and salvage facility would serve a useful purpose and be profitable."

Roberts sat back. Suddenly the reason for the gathering of commerce raiders was clear. The looting of a colonization convoy offered enormous profits in captured ships.

He said, "Do these colonization routes of yours suffer from the attacks of brigands?"

Glinderen nodded. "Occasionally. These are usually very brutal affairs. Why do you—" he paused, looking at the fusion-gun.

Roberts said easily, "This explains why your Space Force should set up a watch in the asteroid belt of this sun. It is a convenient place to protect against such attacks."

Glinderen's face cleared. "Yes," he said.

Just then, the door opened and Kelty came in. "The computer has released him. He's on the way up."

"Good." Roberts glanced back at Glinderen. "Now, Glinderen, I am curious to know how you could seek to wrest a world of mine from my grip without fear of what would follow. I also wonder at your effort to name me as someone other than Vaughan of Trasimere. I want a short clear rendering, and it had best be courteous."

Glinderen was now perspiring freely. "First," he said. "First, I—never heard of this Empire before. Second, there was an—an incredible reference to a certain 'Oggbad the

143

Wizard.' Third, you and your men invariably appeared in battle armor of a type that offers little view of the face; this was an obvious—a—ah—*apparent* attempt at disguise. Fourth, only two of your ships ever appear at close range. That suggests that there are no more. Fifth, Vaughan N. Roberts, and a number of companions, were on this planet some time ago, and the records show that very strange things happened at that time also. It seemed to me that the con-, elusion was perfectly clear* To disprove it, you have only to remove your armor, one at a time if you wish, and show that your appearance is not that of the people who were on this planet before, and who were known to Mr. Kelty and others here. Also, if you will bring in, *to close range*, some more ships of your—ah—Imperial Fleet—it might do a good deal to convince me. That such an Empire should exist, and be unknown, seems to me frankly incredible."

Glinderen snapped his jaw shut and sat silent, trembling slightly. Roberts studied him, well aware that Glinderen had, in a few well-chosen words, exposed the whole masquerade. Kelty and the red-bearded technician were glancing at Roberts, as if to try to read his concealed facial expression. At the door, the Great Leader, the fanatic known as the Baron of the Outer City, stood listening attentively. If these people should be persuaded by Glinderen, Roberts' only support would be the patrol ship's weapons.

To Roberts' right, Morrissey shoved his chair back. "This fellow hath a tongue that—"

Roberts put his hand on Morrissey's arm, "It is true that he is frank-spoken, but it is at my request."

Morrissey settled reluctantly into his seat. Roberts looked at Glinderen. "First, you say you never heard of the Empire. Space is large, Glinderen. The Empire knows of the outspace worlds, if the outspace worlds know not of it. This planet is out of our way. We would never have come here save for an attempt on the part of Oggbad to seize the throne by intrigue and the use of his magical powers. That you know not of such things is proof of your ignorance, nothing more. Possibly you suppose that Oggbad is a harmless fellow, who with vacant mind recites some empty formula, traces a wandering sign in the air, and with palsied hand shakes a wand while he gibbers his insanity at the moon. If so, you judge

144

not by the thing itself, but by your image of the thing. You hear the echo of a distant explosion, and smile that people feared it where it tore the earth open. You charge us that we do not expose our persons and faces, and yet *Oggbad with att his powers is on this world!* What would you have us do, hand ourselves over to him, bound and

gagged?

"You say that only two of our ships have appeared at close range, and it would perhaps convince you if there were more of them here. I have but to give the word, and this planet is ringed with them. But to bring them to the surface of this world were a source of grave danger. How then could we know that Oggbad, using arts that are none the less real for your disbelief, had not escaped aboard one of these ships? With Oggbad, one must keep a firm grip lest a seeming illusion turn out real, and what was thought reality dissolve into mist. Next, you say a man with a name like mine passed this way before, and strange things took place. That this should convince *you* is not odd. My wonderment is greater yet, as I see here the design of Oggbad, forehanded to prepare a trap for the future, if it be needed.

"What you know not, Glinderen, is that at this time, the mere rumor of the escape of Oggbad would work great evil in the Empire. At this moment, the Electors are met in solemn conclave to weigh the might and worth of the contestants to the throne. None of the contestants may remain on hand, lest by threat or subtle blandishments they seek to weight the scales of judgment. All are retired from the lists, some to prepare their minds for the outcome, others to repair the neglect of their domains occasioned by the struggle for primacy. Just so am I here. But if word were now given that Oggbad were loose, no one knew just where, who could trust the deliberations of the Electors? Who would accept their decision, and who claim that the influence of Oggbad had weighed invisibly in the balance? The trouble we have had from this sorcerer beggars a man's powers of recollection. To risk that he be let loose on us again is too much. Only after the Electors' choice is made, dare we think to risk it. His power for mischief shrinks once the choice is made. Then the Empire draws together, no longer split, but one solid whole."

Roberts paused, noting that Kelty, the red-bearded technician, and even the fanatical leader of the Outer City, were

145

all nodding with the satisfied expressions of those who hear their leader successfully defeat an attack that threatens them as well as him.

What surprised Roberts was the wavering expression on the face of Glinderen.

"Yes," said Glinderen, wonderingly, "This certainly does answer many of my objections. However—"

Roberts spoke very gently. "Remember, Glinderen, I am not on trial here. Have a care. Where I have explained to you, many would have said. 'The actions of the outspace dog, and the wreck he has made, offend me. Dismember the fool!'"

To Roberts' right, Hammell started, like one whose attention has wandered.

"Your Grace?" He glanced from Roberts to Glinderen, and there was a click as he gripped his sword.

"Not yet," said Roberts. "It was only a thought."

"Your Grace has but to give the word—"

"I know, but it is not yet given." Roberts glanced at the red-bearded technician. "As we talk here, has Glinderen some hidden device to record our actions?"

"Not Glinderen. But that pair on, the floor are wired from head to foot."

"We may wish to speak privately later. Let us take care of this now."

The technician called in some guards, who carried the bodies outside.

Roberts, considering what to do next, now heard a perfect reproduction of his voice say calmly, "This business is about complete. The authority of Glinderen here is at an end. The laws he has enacted exist now on the sufferance of you, my Barons, who may do as you wish to right the damage as quick as possible. I like not what I have heard here. This fellow Glinderen could not doubt Oggbad if Oggbad had acted full-force against him. Has Oggbad been quiet of late?"

Kelty nodded. "No attempt to break through since Glinderen has been here."

Roberts settled back to let the armor do the work-whereupon the armor quit talking.

Roberts said, "By holding back, Oggbad recuperates his strength, convinces Glinderen the tales of his prowess are

146

naught but wild imaginings, and allows Glinderen free rein to turn our arrangements into chaos at no cost to Oggbad. The next move may be an attack by Oggbad in full strength. Are we prepared?"

Kelty said, "If the Baron of the Outer City will take over control of his territory, I can put back into line all the robots we've moved back to keep order."

The Baron nodded. "Okay. Provided you deliver to me that lot of special prisoners, and let go everybody jailed under the no-defense law."

"Done," said Kelty. He glanced at Roberts. "Well have a far stronger set-up than we had when Oggbad made that first big attack. I doubt that a similar attack would get by the walls, except for some coming in by air."

"Unfortunately," said Roberts, "Oggbad is not likely to attack the same way a second time. What if he ravages the crops?"

Kelty hesitated. "We have gas generators, an airborne corps of the defense force, and a few very fast gas-laying vehicles. We'd have more, but our production program was cut back by Glinderen."

Roberts turned to the red-bearded technician.

"How is your production of special devices?"

"Derailed. We're back on the old maintenance routine. Somebody in KQL block smashes a light bulb, so we put in another one, and he smashes that, and so on, until everyone who feels like smashing a light bulb gets bored, and they decide to let us put one there. Well, you can see what level we're operating on."

Kelty said, "But the best of it is that whoever gets caught gets his picture and an account of his exploits in the *Paradise Star*. Some PDA administrator claims this 'gives the offender a sense of identity and being-ness.' The lack of that was supposed to be the cause of the trouble, so this is to cure it." Kelty glanced at the technician. "Did you bring that—?"

The red-bearded giant smiled ironically and handed over a folded glossy sheet, which Kelty opened out and turned around. "Yes, here we are. We wanted you to see this." He handed it to Roberts.

Roberts flattened the sheet on the table. It was nicely printed, with the words *Paradise Star* in large flowing letters

147

at the top, over the picture of a small angel carrying a harp and flying toward a stylized star. Under this was a banner headline:

DULGER SLAYS SIXTEENI

Roberts looked up from the account, which praised the murderer's record. "What manner of joke is this?"

"Oh," said Kelty, "that's no joke. That's *news*. That paper is turned out by the millions of copies."

The technician said, "Right this minute, we've got between six and seven hundred of these guys undergoing rehabilitation downstairs, and we've got sixty more second-guesting after *making new records!*"

Kelty nodded, "And at the present rate, it won't be long before they're coming around the third time. What gets me is that we have to arrest the citizens if they try to defend themselves. If you protect yourself, you're denying the murderer his 'right to an identity', and only a trained psychologist is competent to decide whether this will interfere with the murderer's later treatment."

Roberts looked at Glinderen.

"This was *your* idea?"

"No," said Glinderen. "It was recommended by my Chief of Psychology."

"But you approved it?"

"I lack the specialized knowledge to evaluate the program. Therefore it received automatic approval."

"Where's your Chief of Psychology?"

"Probably in his office. I can—"

"Did you have any *doubts* about this procedure?"

"Well—I asked some questions. I was reassured, however, that this was a valuable therapeutic method."

The technician nodded. "I happened to be watching that conversation on the surveillance screen. That was before Glinderen ordered us to stop using the surveillance system. What happened was that the psychology chief said this method would create a sense of real importance and meaningful existence in the criminal. Glinderen hesitantly asked, 'What about the victims?' The Psychology Chief said, 'Un-

148

fortunately, they are dead, and we can do nothing for them. Our duty is to rehabilitate the living.' Glinderen nodded, and that was it."

Hammell growled, "If I might have directions where to find this Chief of Psychology—"

"No," said Roberts, "that's too good for him." Roberts glanced at the fanatical leader of the Outer City. "Baron, have you considered this problem?"

"Yes, but I can't think of anything slow enough."

"H'm," said Roberts, forgetting he was in armor, and absently putting thumb and forefinger to the faceplate of the suit. "There must be some—"

Glinderen said stubbornly, "He is a PDA—"

"But," said Roberts, "if he should *volunteer* to take up residence in Paradise—in order to give the planet the benefit of his experience—"

The Baron of the Outer City nodded agreeably. Kelty smiled. The red-bearded giant absently flexed his large muscular hands.

"If he should volunteer," said Roberts, "then perhaps the best place for his services would be in *whatever block has the most vigorous competition -for a new homicide record*. Possibly he can contribute to 'a sense of real importance and meaningful existence' in someone there." -

"Yes," said the Baron of the Outer City, with a beautiful smile.

Glinderen burst out, "What if he should be *IxleoT*

Roberts said regretfully, "Unfortunately, he would then be dead, and we could do nothing for him. *Our* duty is to rehabilitate the living."

Glinderen nodded, blinked, and stared at the wall.

Roberts said, "Then *that* is taken care of. Gentlemen, these matters must be settled, but the longer we dwell on them, the greater the danger that Oggbad may make some determined move—"

Kelty said suddenly, "*If* he's still here. I don't know why I didn't think of this. Glinderen's PDA ships have come down here and taken off again. *He could have sneaked away on any of them.*"

Everyone looked at Roberts. Once again, the whole structure of his argument threatened to collapse.

149

Roberts thought fast, then shrugged. "Outspace ships. Yes, he could *leave the planet*, but what then? Oggbad's ambition is to seize the throne of the Empire. Luckily, to pass from here to the Empire requires special navigating devices which outspace ships lack, and which Oggbad himself does not understand and cannot build. His own ship, he has lost. Yet, if he escapes, it *must* be on a ship of the Empire, with such a navigating device installed, unless Oggbad wishes to carve out a new domain in the outspace realms. If so, why, we are well rid of him. My belief is that he is still here."

Once again, everyone looked convinced. Roberts himself *felt* convinced. Oggbad and the Empire were taking on such reality that Roberts had to remind himself to do nothing that would commit him to produce proof.

Noticing this, Roberts felt a sudden suspicion. But there was no time to check on that. He turned to Glinderen. "If you are given the opportunity to leave this planet, how long will it take you?"

"Several weeks, to get everything in order."

"You may as well start now."

Glinderen and his party obediently left the room.

"Now, gentlemen," said Roberts, "there remains one problem. Glinderen has called for help from the outspace fleets. Of course, the Imperial battle fleets—" Roberts found himself believing this as he said it—"will defend the planet, but there is still the problem that our ships dare not come so close that Oggbad can use his powers upon them. This means that close defense must be handled by the city itself." Roberts glanced at the red-bearded technician. "We need multiple rapid-fire guns and missile launchers. Have you plans for them, and can you make

them?"

The technician nodded. "We were working on those, as a defense against Oggbad, when Glinderen landed. With this maintenance headache off our necks, we can get back to it."

"Good," said Roberts. "The city must quickly be put in order, and its defenses made strong."

His three principal human lieutenants expressed eagerness to get to work, and the planetary computer made no objection, so Roberts stood up, and everyone else at the table followed suit.

Just then, with the tricky meeting over, with the major

150

factions on the planet unified, and with Glinderen safely sidetracked, the outside door opened up and, one-by-one, there walked in, to the quiet tap of a drum, six man-sized figures in silver armor.

151

XXV. King and Emperor

The *six* silver-armored figures crossed the room to halt before Roberts. The first, with drawn sword, stood to Roberts' right. The second, bearing a drum, stopped to his left. The fourth, fifth, and sixth, heavily armed, stood guard as the third knelt before Roberts holding up a golden tray.

Roberts did the obvious, took the sealed envelope lying on a silver cushion, tore off an end, worked the message out, and read past a complicated set of figures, dates, and code words, to the sentence:

ELECTORS CHOSE THIS DAY HIS ROYAL AND IMPERIAL HIGHNESS, VAUGHAN, DUKE OF TRANSI-MERE AND EARL OF AURIZONT, TO BE KING AND EMPEROR.

What good this did, Roberts didn't know. But he was now stuck with it.

"The Electors have chosen," he said, and handed the paper to Hammell and Morrissey, **who** at once dropped to one knee, heads bowed, to murmur, "Your majesty—"

Cursing inwardly, Roberts considered the problem of Kelty, the technician, and the fanatical leader of the Outer City. He held the message out to them, and said, "For the immediate future, this changes nothing. Oggbad in his rage may still lash out. All preparations must go forward without deky. But—" his voice took on a harder tone: "—the day of faction in the Empire is gone. Outsiders now interfere at their

152

peril. Tis customary to kneel, my lords and gentlemen, as a sign of fealty." The three men, with varied expressions, dropped to one knee.

Roberts considered how quickest to bring the thing to an end.

"Rise," he said, "we must be about our duties without delay. None knows when Oggbad will attack, or what the outspace vermin will do next. Good evening, gentlemen."

With the silver-armored figures serving as guards, Roberts, Hammell, and Morrissey left the hall.

Once inside the ship, they watched the armored figures disappear through an opening forward of the control console. Once the figures disappeared, the opening disappeared. The three men got out of their armor and looked at each other.

Hammell said, "When there's time—"

Morrissey nodded. "Well have to go over this ship. There's more to it than I realized."

Roberts locked the hatch, and said, "What that business about the Electors did to improve things, I don't know. But we've got Glinderen off our necks, and the chief factions on the planet are now united."

Hammell shoved his armor into the locker on its sling. "I had my doubts in there whether we were doing the right thing, but that business about Glinderen's Chief of Psychology did it for me. If we don't get anything done here but to deliver that guy to the wolves, we've accomplished something."

Morrissey shoved his armor into his locker, and glanced at the spy-screen. "The screen's working. And I don't like to say anything, but I left the want-generator turned off and set for 'desire to sleep' and it's now set for 'desire to believe, to accept on faith.'"

"Stands to reason," said Hammell drily. "Where's it focused?"

"On the Barons' Council Hall."

Roberts had already put his armor away and now stripped and jabbed a button in the wall. A cramped shower cubicle popped open. "The only thing that bothers me," he said, "is the Space Force expedition headed for the planet. But there must be a way to straighten *that* out, too—if we can just work it out."

153

The following weeks went by like a pleasant interlude between hurricanes. Glinderen was too busy getting ready to leave to make trouble. His chief of Psychology, having made the mistake of walking alone past the wrong doorway, volunteered to become a citizen of Paradise, and was now cozily bedded down in the most murderous section of the city. Every authority in the city was working day and night to prepare against attack. Roberts, Hammell, and Morrissey devoted most of their time to the want-generator and spy-screen. By now, they had a

formidable total of partly-trained soldiers who could put up a fight in fixed defenses. The Citizens' Defense Force and the fanatics of the Outer City promised far worse trouble for an invader. The roboid police, so long as they were on solid footing, had the advantages of speed, uncanny coordination, and an impressive lack of fear.

The city's technicians, meanwhile, relieved of endless maintenance, put back in shape all the devices they had hidden on the arrival of Glinderen. These devices, combined with the rapid-fire guns the computer's automatic factories were now turning out, promised that the city would be able to put up a tough fight.

However, one little problem remained to be solved.

The day following the departure of Glinderen and his administrators, Hammell remarked, "So far, so good. Now, what do we do when the Space Force shows up?"

Morrissey suggested, "There's no love lost between the Space Force and the Planetary Development Administration. And Glinderen belongs to PDA. Can we make anything out of that?"

Roberts shook his head. "If we make PDA look silly, the Space Force will be secretly delighted. But it's still their duty to physically back up Glinderen. We'll be just as dead afterward, no matter *how* they chortle at Glinderen's expense."

"One thing I wonder about," said Morrissey, "is why you told Glinderen the Space Force had a detachment *in the asteroid belt*?"

"Because Glinderen is almost sure to go straight to them. I'm eager to see what happens."

Hammell looked blank. "How will we see what happens?"

"When Maury and his boys had us in their gravitor beam,

154

they sent up some fishnet pickups in order to listen in on any tight-beam messages passed between our ships. The symbiotic computer planted parasite circuits in the fishnet pickups. Those pickups are expensive. They've long since been pulled back in, and stored where Maury can see that no subordinate appropriates them. Many of the parasite circuits— which outwardly are little more than electrically charged dust particles—have floated off into the atmosphere of Maury's base, to stick to walls and viewports, and get carried out to other places on people's clothing. Every time Maury checks his pickups, more parasite circuits float out. Each of these circuits will relay signals from other circuits. And on the way from the asteroid belt to the planet, here, the patrol ship sowed micro-relays at intervals, to pass along the signals. That's how we'll know what happens."

Later that day, Glinderen's ships arrived off the asteroid belt, and were stopped by the two-day wonder. Glinderen immediately reported the situation on Paradise. The two-day wonder got hold of Maury. Maury appeared, dressed as a general, speedily dug out all the information he wanted, and gave orders to let Glinderen proceed. Glinderen refused, and demanded action.

The two-day wonder now exhausted his stock of military poses trying to get Glinderen to move on. Glinderen angrily accused the two-day wonder of trying to evade his responsibilities, and threatened to report him to Sector Headquarters. The two-day wonder called Maury. Maury, determined not to saddle himself with a horde of administrators who were worthless for ransom, but sure to bring on a crusade if he killed them, promised immediate action, and sent some followers disguised as Space Force men, who methodically smashed the infuriated Glinderen's transmitters, but otherwise left the ships undamaged.

Having got rid of Glinderen, Maury remarked to one of his chief lieutenants, "The more I hear of it, the better this Empire looks."

"Tricky stuff to fool with," said his lieutenant uneasily.

Roberts listened alertly.

"Yes," said Maury, "but they'd *ransom that king*."

"Get our head in a sling if—" Maury's lieutenant paused. "But if they made trouble, *we'd kill the king*, rightF

155

"Right. And he's down there with just two ships. Get the latest on that convoy. It's already had a five-day delay at R&R XII-C. If we stick around waiting for it, we'll be here when the Space Force comes through after this king. If *we* grab him first, then if he's real, we get the ransom. If he's a fake, we take over his racket, whatever it is."

XXVI. The King's Legions

156

Hammell said shakily, "Boy, that's all we need."

Morrissey, at the want-generator, looked around. "*Now* what?"

"Maury," said Hammell, "is coming down here with his fleet of commerce raiders to grab 'the king' for ransom."

Roberts smiled the smile of the angler when the fish takes the worm. "Yes, and *that* gives us our chance."

"How?" demanded Hammell. "Maury may not be as tough as the Space Force, but he's next best."

"Yes, but if this preliminary bout with Maury turns out right, maybe the main event with the Space Force will get canceled."

"How do you figure that?"

"If we aren't here, there isn't much the Space Force can do to us."

"Meaning, if we run for it—"

"No, In *that* case, the situation is open-and-shut. We're guilty, and our story is a fake."

"Then, how-"

"If we disappear—if Maury *is seen to capture us*—"

"Then *Maury's* got us! How does that help?"

"Suppose the sequence of events goes like this: Maury attacks. After a stiff fight, he is seen to haul us into his ship on a gravitor beam. He leaves. The Space Force arrives. Beforehand, naturally, we've destroyed the yacht. All the Space

157

Force has to go on is that Maury swallowed us up, and then Maury vanished. Now, on that basis, who can prove anything about anything?"

Morrissey was nodding enthusiastically, "It's not foolproof, of course, but—"

"Not *foolproof*!" said Hammell. "Ye gods! Look, Maury captures us, and then disappears. *How do we get away from Maury?*"

Roberts said irritably, "Obviously, he never captured us in the first place."

"You just said-"

"He is *seen* to haul our ship in on a gravitor beam. That's how it *looks*. Our ship disappears into his larger ship, and his ship, and his fleet, then leaves. That's the appearance. But what actually happens is, *we capture him*."

Hammell's eyes widened.

"We use *our* gravitor beam," said Roberts, "and once in Maury's ship, you and I get out, in battle armor, while Morrissey beams 'desire for peace' at Maury and his crew. We'll be drugged against the effect of the want-generator. We put it to Maury, Do as we say or else. Then, if necessary, Morrissey beams 'desire to obey' at the rest of Maury's fleet as Maury orders them to leave. Bear in mind, Maury is out to *capture* us. He won't attack to kill."

"H'm," said Hammell, "that does seem to provide a natural explanation for everything. What Maury thinks, of

course, won't match what everyone else thinks—but he won't be in any position to do anything about that."

Maury's commerce raiders came out of the asteroid belt like no Space Force fleet ever flown, each separate chief keeping his own ships of whatever size and class together.

The two-day wonder went to work at once:

"By order Space Force Sector H.Q., Lieutenant General Bryan L. Bender Commanding, this Force is directed to proceed to the planet Boschock III, and there establish formal relations with the representatives of the political entity known as the Empire."

The patrol ship was prompt to reply:

"By command of His Royal and Imperial Majesty, Vaughan

158

the First, surnamed The Terrible, this planet is inviolate soil, bounden into the fiefdom of His Majesty as Duke of Trasimere, and thereby into the Empire. You enter here at your own instant and deadly peril."

The two-day wonder lifted his chin heroically: "The Space Force has its orders. We can do no less than our duty."

The patrol ship headed directly for the onrushing fleet.

Hammell uneasily watched the battle screen. "That's a lot of ships."

"Yes," said Roberts, "but dead kings don't bring much ransom."

Maury's fleet closed in, and a new, more oily voice spoke up: "Certainly we of the Space Force do not have the slightest desire to do any harm to the most sacred person of your king. We are prepared to do whatever we can to accommodate these differences and smooth relations between our separate nations and viewpoints. We suggest that a meeting be held immediately following the landing—"

The patrol ship interrupted: "Following the landing, nothing will remain for you but penance in Hell."

In quick succession, two gravitor beams reached out for the patrol ship.

In instantaneous reply, dazzling shafts of energy reached out from the patrol ship, to leave bright explosions in the distance.

An 'asteroid,' towed by two massive high-thrust ships, was now cut loose, and reached out with a narrow penetrating beam aimed at the patrol ship's reaction-drive nozzles.

The patrol ship deflected that, and two searing bolts of energy struck the massive asteroid, which was not visibly affected. There was a faint rumble as a missile dropped free from the patrol ship. There was another rumble, and another, and another.

More of Maury's ships methodically aimed fusion-beams at the reaction-drive nozzles. While the patrol ship could frustrate each attempt, the response was taken account of in the next try, the individual blows woven together to create a net in which the patrol ship's efforts grew rapidly more constricted. This was happening so fast that to Roberts it appeared to be a blur of dazzling lines on the battle screen, leading to one obvious result, until suddenly the patrol ship

159

was caught, its own fusion-beams deflected harmlessly by the combined space-distorters of the commerce raiders.

—and then, in rapid succession, dazzling bursts of light sheared an enormous chunk from the asteroid, while others knocked out four of Maury's ships.

Roberts bunked.

The patrol ship's missiles had somehow gotten through, *completely undetected*.

The auxiliary screen, still transmitting the scene in Maury's headquarters on an ultrafast rebuilt cruiser, showed the commerce raiders' consternation. But then the patrol ship swerved crazily, and swerved again.

"Got it!" growled Maury, mopping his brow.

From the patrol ship, fusion-bolts lanced out in all directions, striking two of Maury's ships, apparently by sheer chance. A missile blew up short of the mark, shotholing another of his ships with flying bits and fragments.

Cursing, Maury's gunners reported that neither they nor their battle computers could keep up with the patrol ship's movements. They couldn't predict whether a hit would be crippling or deadly.

"Aim to miss," snarled Maury. "So long as they don't know we're doing it, it won't matter."

Firing furiously, with an inferno of attack around it, the patrol ship withdrew toward Paradise, spun down through the atmosphere, and by a remarkable last-minute feat of piloting, set down in only a moderately hard landing outside the Barons' Council Hall.

A robojd policeman immediately rushed out to guard the ship. From all directions in the inner city, robojd police began racing to the scene.

"Okay," said Maury. "Lay smoke."

A series of missiles streaked through the atmosphere, landed within several hundred yards of the downed patrol ship, and exploded in enormous clouds of dirty smoke.

The intruding roboid police slowed abruptly.

"Landing ships down," said Maury.

Four big ships dropped fast through the planet's atmosphere to disappear in the boiling uprush of smoke.

"Landing teams out," said Maury.

160

Roberts depressed a communicator switch. "Kelty—open fire!"

The roar reached Roberts only faintly through the patrol ship's hull, but listening critically, Roberts was grateful not to be on the receiving end of the city's rapid-fire guns at short range. He gripped the controls. "Cease fire five seconds."

The firing died away.

The patrol ship burst up through the smoke. "Morrissey—"

"Ready."

"Coordinates—"

As Roberts flashed toward the ultrafast cruiser that was Maury's headquarters, suddenly the symbols on the battle screen seemed to multiply. At the same instant, Maury's fleet broke into individual squadrons racing in all directions. Maury's headquarters ship exploded, and out of the fragments shot a streak that dwindled to a speck before Roberts realized what had happened.

Then the outside viewscreen changed its scale, and showed the whole scene shrunk down to small size.

From the distance, a sizable fleet approached, its ships precisely positioned for mutual support. Before this fleet, like startled fish, the commerce raiders dispersed in all directions. Already moving off the edge of the screen was the chief commerce raider of them all, his escape ship pouring on acceleration as it streaked for the nearest break-point to some quiet hideout far from trouble.

Roberts swore, whipped the patrol ship around, and shot after the fleeing commerce raiders, laying down a ruinous fire, and under its cover dropping inflatable deception packs among the widening clouds of debris.

Hammell, waiting in his battle armor to go into Maury's ship, called, "What's wrong?"

"The Space Force has shown up!"

Roberts spun the ship after another fleeing commerce raider, succeeded in laying a few more packs, and gave it up in disgust.

On the outside viewscreen, the approaching fleet was decelerating fast.

Morrissey said nervously, "*Now* what do we do?"

"Well, I've sowed a lot of deception packs—"

"What for?"

161

Roberts exhaled carefully. "The idea was that we could inflate them to dummy ships, beam 'deside to believe' at that fleet, and—"

Hammell said incredulously, "What, the *Space Force*?"

Roberts could now see just what likelihood there was of that working. "*It's a chance*," he said stubbornly, "and we're in no spot to ignore a chance."

"Then," said Morrissey, "let's get out of herel This *slap* is fast, isn't it?"

"*That's* an admission of guilt," said Roberts, inwardly kicking himself for not 'chasing' the commerce raiders at top speed.

Hammell had the same idea. "Why didn't you go after Maury? Nobody would have known whether you were chasing him, running away, or what."

"It would have been out of character," said Roberts lamely, "for the King to leave with a larger force approaching."

"*Nuts!*" said Hammell. "His screen could have been damaged. He could have been wounded or knocked out."

The communicator buzzed imperatively.

Moodily, Roberts reached out to snap it on. Before he could reach the switch, there was a *click*, and a cold voice said, "What interstellar force is this? Stand warned! This is a King's ship, on the King's business, and you have no right to patrol here."

An auxiliary screen lit up, to show a frowning officer in the uniform of a Space Force lieutenant-general.

"What ship is this?"

"Imperial ship *Nom de Guerre*. Who asks?"

"Lieutenant-General Nils Larssen. *What Empire?*"

"*The Empire.*"

"Who commands that ship?"

There was a silence, and Roberts, fearing that the symbiotic computer had run out of words, snapped on the sound transmission.

"*I command this ship!*"

"Who are you? *Identify yourself.*"

Roberts suddenly found himself at the parting of the ways. He could meekly identify himself. Or he could carry the bluff to the ridiculous point where he challenged the Space Force.

Abruptly he discovered that he *couldn't back down*.

He said coldly, "You come too late to save your comrades.

162

They are dead, or fled like cowards. Now I wait to test *your* steel."

Larssen looked blank. He pursed his lips, turned away, then turned back, apparently to rephrase the question.

Roberts waited, grimly aware of the cracking ice he stood on.

At this delicate juncture, the symbiotic computer put its oar in. With icy hauteur, using Roberts' voice, it said:

"I have spoken."

Larssen opened his mouth and shut it. His face reddened.

"Listen, Mister—I don't give a damn *who* you are! You'll answer my questions, and you'll answer them straight!"

Roberts groped for some way out.

Then he heard his own voice speak coldly from the communicator, as if to someone nearby, "The bark of this interstellar dog hath a petulant note."

Hammell's voice, though Hammell was standing by in silent paralysis, said coolly, "We know ways to train the surly cur, and he intrudes too far."

Morrissey was sitting at the want-generator, looking from Roberts to Hammell as if they'd gone insane, and now he had the added treat of hearing his own voice contribute, though his mouth was tightly shut:

"We'll send this rabble to the Earl of Hell, and let them mount patrol on the fiery march."

On the screen, Larssen paused, an odd listening expression on his face.

A voice like Roberts' own voice called, "Master of the Ordinance!"

"Ready, Sire!"

"Master of the Helm!"

"Ready, Sire!"

"Then we'll put it to the test! Master of the Helm, brace your engines! Master of the Ordinance, pick your targets!"

A roar and a howling whine sounded together as the gra-vitors counteracted the reaction drive, in a prelude to a furious burst of acceleration.

On the control console, a switch snapped forward to activate the deception packs and create the appearance of a formidable squadron—though the Space Force detectors should quickly spot the trick.

163

Larssen, suddenly perspiring, called, "*Waitr* Then he whirled and shouted an order.

On the screen, the hurtling formation of ships began slowly to turn, swinging away from Paradise.

Roberts, startled, saw Larssen turn back to the screen, his expression intent and wary.

"I didn't mean to intrude on a region you patrol."

An elaborately courteous voice replied, "To do so were an mcivility."

"Then *patrol* it if you want it so damned much!" snarled Larssen.

"The interstellar regions subject to the rule of His Royal and Imperial Majesty, Vaughan the First, we will patrol, surely."

Larssen shut his mouth with a click of the teeth.

The screen abruptly went blank, but a silent burst of profanity seemed to radiate from it after it was off.

Roberts, drenched in sweat, groped in his pocket for a handkerchief, but couldn't seem to connect with it.

Hammell, looking like a ghost, got out of his armor.

Morrissey staggered to his feet and promptly banged his head on the shiny cylinder that ran the length of the ship.

Roberts finally located the handkerchief and wiped the sweat out of his eyes. He took another look at the outside views creen.

Larssen's fleet traveled past in formidable array.

Roberts glanced at the battle screen. On his side there was only the patrol ship, and the imitation ships blown up out of —Roberts blinked, and adjusted the outside viewscreen—

There amongst the seeming patrol ships and cruisers lay a gigantic ship—a dreadnought fit to take on whole fleets all by itself. The sunlit side was toward Roberts, and the name was clearly visible: *Coeur de Lion*.

164

XXVH. Interstellar Patrol

Roberts took a deep breath. "Well, men, we're still alive. And here's one big reason."

Hammell ducked under the glittering cylinder and looked at the screen.

Morrissey warily slid one hand along the cylinder and ducked under to stand beside Hammell.

"Great space!" said Hammell, suddenly seeing what Roberts was looking at.

Morrissey murmured, "*Coeur de Lion*. Isn't that the ship you said call you when Maury stopped us at the asteroid belt?"

"Yes," said Roberts. "But I thought it was just a clever gambit of the symbiotic computer. Now there it is."

Hammell asked uneasily, "It's friendly?"

"I hope so. *But where did it come from?*"

Hammell said hesitantly, "Apparently the Space Force didn't see it till the last minute. They were going to chop us into mincemeat. Then, all of a sudden, they changed their minds."

"It must have been invisible," said Roberts. "Wait, now, what—" Suddenly, what he was trying to think of came to him. "Listen, our missiles got to Maury's ships *undetected*."

Morrissey asked wonderingly, "They were the missiles originally supplied with this ship?"

"I haven't bought any."

165

Morrissey stared at the screen. "Listen, this may sound nuts, but when I look at that ship, it looks to me a lot like *this one we're on*. That one is a whole lot bigger and the proportions aren't identical, but—there's a kind of *similarity of plan*—"

Hammell said nervously, "That dreadnought was invisible. This ship's missiles were invisible. That dreadnought looks like this ship, owing to a kind of similarity of plan. This ship is an Interstellar Patrol ship. It follows that that dreadnought—"

Roberts' throat felt dry.

Morrissey said, "What happens to unauthorized individuals who get caught using Interstellar Patrol Ships?"

Hammell sucked in his breath. "The Interstellar Patrol is even worse to tangle with than the Space Force. They don't operate by the book. Set-ups nobody else can handle go to the Interstellar Patrol."

Roberts uneasily considered the bargain he had gotten— even though it had cost the better part of his life's savings— when he had bought the patrol ship at the salvage cluster. Now he wondered if, through some piece of treachery, the original crew had been slaughtered, and now the dreadnought was waiting patiently for Roberts to identify himself, and if he didn't—

"Nuts," said Roberts. He snapped on the communicator.

"Imperial Ship '*Nom de Guerre*' His Royal and Imperial Majesty Vaughan the First commanding, to Imperial Dreadnought *Coeur de Lion*. How many of that first batch of out-space dogs got away with their skins?"

Immediately, a tough-looking individual appeared on an auxiliary screen. His gaze drilled into Roberts' eyes.

Roberts saw no virtue in pussyfooting around. If the dreadnought was going to blow him up, well then, *let* it blow him up. He looked directly into the eyes of the face on the screen, and growled, "The Empire does not maintain these ships at heavy cost that her captains may use them for toys. *Speak up!* Hast thou swallowed thy tongue? Didst thou accomplish anything, besides to look pretty?"

The tough, scarred face on the screen broke into a momentary grin. "Your Majesty, forgive my witless hesitation. We feared you dead from these verminous outspacers. We

166

cleaned out the lot, save for one that broke into subspace even as we poised thumb and forefinger to pop him like a grape.

"That one was the worst," said Roberts, as Hammell and Morrissey stared. "There went the brain and guiding will of the evil band."

"Some other time, he may run afoul of us, and have a slower ship, or we a faster."

"Hasten the day," said Roberts, smiling. He was beginning to think he worked out the combination.

The face on the screen changed expression slightly.

"If Your Majesty please, the Empire anxiously awaits your return to heal its wounds in the pomps and pleasures of the coronation. The Great Lords and Nobles count the days till they may reaffirm their loyalty to the Crown and swear allegiance to Vaughan the First. If we may accompany you—lest other outspace dogs pop up out of nowhere—'Tis daring greatly, I know, to suggest it, but *Coeur de Lion* has spacious accommodations. We may take aboard *Nom de Guerre* and all, if you like. 'Twould speed the day of your return. I crave forgiveness if I presume—"

"And it were freely granted, but your offer is welcome. We shall come aboard at once."

The man on the screen bowed his head respectfully. "Your Majesty doth greatly honor us."

" 'Tis an honor to honor such loyal subjects."

The tough face looked humbly appreciative. Then the screen went blank.

Hammell and Morrissey stood speechless as Roberts headed the patrol ship toward the dreadnought.

Hammell took a deep breath. "Look—no offense if I call you sir—is this an Interstellar Patrol ship? You must know a lot more about this than *we* do. Or is it a—ah—an *Imperial* ship?"

Morrissey swallowed and listened alertly.

Roberts said cheerfully, "We weren't talking on tight-beam, and there are plenty of technological ears on that planet, now that the technicians have had time to go to work. The more wide-awake among them will put together

167

the number of times 'interstellar' and 'patrol' occurred in the conversation with Larssen and then they will realize in whose tender hands their fate rests. But they can't prove a thing."

"Then," said Hammell, thinking hard, "this last conversation was a blind?"

"No, it just takes a certain piece of key knowledge to figure it out."

"What might *that* be?"

"Anyone listening to that conversation would be justified in thinking I was the boss. And because of the fact people might be listening, that's how it *had* to be. But what do you think?"

Hammell smote his forehead. "You were *ordered* to come on board?"

"Correct."

Morrissey said, "Why not just have the conversation on tight-beam?"

"Because I wanted to put them on the spot, to see what they'd do."

Morrissey glanced at the gigantic dreadnought on the outside viewscreen. "Anyone who'd do a thing like that ought to *be* in the Interstellar Patrol."

Roberts nodded. "As Hammell says, they don't operate by the book."

Morrissey stared at him. Hammell said, "Holy—"

Roberts pressed the button to the left of the instrument panel, near the glowing lens lettered 'Smb Cmp,' and said, "How does the Interstellar Patrol recruit new members?"

The symbiotic computer replied, "By whatever method works." It then described several reasonably conventional methods, and added, "*Ships* are sometimes used to obtain recruits, as nearly every independent individual actively operating in space and hence basically qualified as a recruit at one time or another needs a ship. The patrol ship is always modestly priced for its value, as the salvage operator finds it hard to dispose of and impossible to break up. The ship attracts only a certain basic type. Those who want it must have the proper mental, physical, and moral equipment, and the right basic style of self-respect, or the ship's symbiotic computer

won't accept them. Those accepted are next tested by

168

the use to which they put the power of the patrol ship's equipment. Those who successfully pass the built-in obstacles become members of the Interstellar Patrol, captains of their, own ships and, in due time, they often recruit their own crew at no expense to the Patrol—sometimes before they really accept that they are members—"

"Oh, my God—" said Hammell.

Morrissey looked thunderstruck. "I *knew* we should have stayed on the yacht!"

"—or before the prospective crew," the symbiotic computer went on, "expresses a truly sincere desire to enlist. However, just as the judgment of the symbiotic computer is accepted in the selection of the ship's captain, so is the judgment of the captain accepted in the selection of the ship's crew. This method has proved highly satisfactory and inexpensive." The symbiotic computer paused a moment, then added, "Moreover, the procedure is in accord with the highest traditions of the Interstellar Patrol."

Hammell nodded. "It would be."

"Well," said Roberts, "don't complain. It's not everyone who escapes from a routine space-transport to be a king or a duke—or a member of the Interstellar Patrol."

Roberts saw the look of puzzled surprise, a brief glint of pride, and the glow of interest light the faces of: Hammell and Morrissey. They weren't going aboard the gigantic ship as *prisoners*, to be interrogated, after all. They were actually going *as members of the legendary Interstellar Patrol*.

Roberts saw the brief outthrust of jaw that told of determination to make good. That was how *he* felt, too.

It occurred to him that neither he, nor Hammell, nor Morrissey, would have voluntarily tried to enlist in the Patrol. They might not make it. Their qualifications might not meet the standards. They might not like it if they did make it. So the Interstellar Patrol, with deep-laid craft, had so arranged matters that none of them had the faintest idea what was going on until the thing was accomplished.

An organization run on that basis must be no lover of red tape and stuffed shirts. In an organization so capable of understanding human nature, it might be possible to get things done.

Roberts guided the patrol ship on its course and, gradual-

169

ly, the gigantic curve of the dreadnought loomed closer to fill the viewscreen.

Before them, the big hatch slowly swung wide, to reveal the brightly lighted interior. Space-suited figures stepped into view to wave them forward.

Carefully, Roberts guided the patrol ship through the outer hatchway into the gigantic spaceship.

170