

POLYWATER DOODLE

Sometimes a man doesn't know what's good for him— like being marooned by a couple of crooks on a desert planet. But you can learn some useful things that way . . .

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Illustrated by Vincent di Fate

"You're bad news, Starfuzz," groaned Icy Lingrad, pressing her hands against her beautiful but pale temples. "You're bad news, you're phony, and you're sick-sick-sick."

"I resent your implication that we're totally compatible!" Omar

Olivine growled at her. He wished she would obligingly drop dead, or at least shut up. He felt in no condition to bandy insults with his psychotically anti-sexual shipmate.

Ravi Holbein, with his usual smoothness even though his voice had a ravaged quiver, put in: "Among the possible actions we might consider is returning to Douthit Three."

"NO!" Olivine and Icy shouted in chorus.

Holbein shrugged weakly. "It was just a thought," he mumbled.

"For one thing," said Olivine, "the Patrol's sure to be swarming around that planet by now. For another . . . well, I hate these withdrawal symptoms as much as you do, but we must be over the worst of the cold-turkey routine. If we went back, and did succeed in landing and get ourselves some super-pot fixes, we'd just have this whole miserable routine to go through again. And probably in a Patrol prison, without the benefit of deep-sleep tanks to make it easier."

Feeling too twitchy to remain seated, Olivine stood and strode nervously around the control deck of the stolen port-service ship *Glumers Jo*. For a while he stared blankly at the viewscreen's portrayal of the starscape outside. As an ex-proxad of the Space Patrol he had no trouble estimating the ship's position and course after a mere glance at the visible blue-giant beacon stars. The *Glumers Jo* was five days out from Douthit Three, on a bearing Flat External West 14 degrees.

"Let's don't just *sit* here!" snapped Icy.

"And what does the lady suggest?" Olivine asked harshly.

"Sneak back into civilization some way!"

"And how will we do that, with Patrol detectors peeled for us everywhere?"

Icy grimaced, "You're supposed to be brainy, Starfuzz. You figure a way. No, don't. Every idea you have just gets us in a worse mess! You're a put-up job, Proxad Omar Olivine."

"That's a nonsensical lie!" he yelled.

"In fairness to the young woman's viewpoint, Mr. Olivine," Holbein said ponderously, "it does appear that misfortune has dogged our footsteps, since our escape, with a more than random consistency."

Olivine continued to stare at the viewscreen. At last he turned and said, "O.K., we're in this together, so you two might as well know what's going on. I'll give it to you straight."

"Hah!" snarled Icy.

"As an eager young proxad in the Patrol," Olivine began, "I was the willing subject of hours of psychoanalytic probing. As a result, the Patrol's CIT computer knows me about as well as I know myself. It can predict me. It knows what I want, and how I'll go about getting it in a given set of circumstances.

"So it probably wasn't a Patrol goof that enabled us to steal this ship and escape during the process of being transferred from one prison ship to another. It was the kind of opportunity the Patrol knew I would grab. And they knew I would take the ship to Douthit Three for a cargo of super-pot. And that we would rig the ship's fire-fighting system to make a flamethrower to use on Douthit Three's dinosaurs. And that we would store the super-pot in the midship lockhold, where an electric spark was all set to

activate the extinguisher sprays which would pour on enough fuel to burn our cargo to ashes, cooking us to the gills in the process.

"That computer rigged the whole thing," he finished plaintively.

"Aw-w-w-w," drawled Icy in mock pity.

"Go to hell," he told her.

"Most interesting," said Holbein. "It occurs to me that the flame-thrower was not your idea, however. Forgive my immodesty, but I believe a remark of mine led us to try that."

"O.K.," shrugged Olivine, "so the Patrol has your mind pretty well mapped, too. They psychoprobe con men as well as cops, don't they?"

After some hesitation, Holbein admitted, "If one cooperates with those who ask questions, life in prison tends to be more abundant."

"Slobs!" snorted Icy. "The star-fuzz shrinks didn't get anything but a hard time from *me!*"

"I find it difficult," said Holbein, "to see a purpose, a motivation, behind the Patrol's actions. Surely prisoners would not be permitted to escape without what the minions of the law considered a very good cause . . ."

"They wanted to blow the lid on Douthit Three," explained Olivine, "so the Confederal Council would be forced to go to the expense of putting an armed guard around the planet, to keep people away from the super-pot. Either that, or send in a team of ecologists to do the equally expensive job of exterminating the super-pot weed. It was a political gambit the Patrol used us for."

"I see. However, we've lost our cargo, which limits our ability to perform as lid-blowers," commented Holbein.

"All the more reason for the Patrol to keep us from sneaking down on some civilized planet, where the whole story might leak out," said Olivine. "They'll hold us in secret if they catch us."

"Then let's go to Dusty Roost," said Icy.

Olivine frowned. "I think that's exactly what the Patrol wants us to do," he said. "If they could claim our cargo was delivered to the criminal stronghold of the Roost for gradual smuggling into civilization, it would scare hell out of everybody. So I'm not going to play into the Patrol's hands by going there . . . especially with no cargo."

"A sound decision," approved Holbein. "Speaking for myself, I had doubts about the Roost even when our cargo was intact. While I am not a stickler for law and order, I admit a preference for the companionship of persons who are. Indeed, I had certain expectations that the Roosters might seize our cargo over our recently deceased bodies, as it were, rather than purchase it for coin of the realm."

Olivine shook his head. "We could have avoided that. The Roosters aren't united. They're in gangs, sometimes just one planet per gang, that snipe at each other about as much as they exploit outside commerce. If the right man could consolidate the bunch of them . . ."

He trailed his voice off and glanced around furtively at the others, but neither Holbein nor Icy seemed to have paid much attention to his inadvertent revelation. It wouldn't do to let his companions know what his goal was . . . his dream of power.

Yes, he mused silently, he would go to Dusty Roost. But not yet. Not under these circumstances, which would open nothing better for him than, perhaps, a job as a torp for some two-bit gang chief. When he went into the Roost, he would go with power . . . power with which to gain still more power . . . power to make the Space Patrol cringe in fear, and crawl to him on its lily-white belly . . .

"Then we could have played one gang against another to assure ourselves fair compensation for our cargo," said Holbein.

"Yes," Olivine nodded.

"Blosh!" Icy snapped vulgarly. "Quit moaning over might-have-beens, you sticks! We're on a perch *right now*, and want to know how we get off it!"

There was a silence.

Finally Holbein said: "The young woman has a point, Mr. Olivine. We are rather thoroughly perched. And, as you have so astutely deduced, any action you might take to improve our position would, in high probability, have been anticipated by the Patrol's CIT computer. A bind, indeed."

Olivine couldn't disagree with that. He returned to his chair and sat in glum thought for several minutes.

At last he said, "I can think of only one possibility. I'll step down, Holbein, and put you in charge. I'll instruct the ship to obey your orders from now on, not mine. With you running our show, the computer's predictions will no longer apply."

Holbein looked startled. "Much as I appreciate the honor, Mr. Olivine, I have never commanded a ship before, and would find myself ill at ease in such a position. It also occurs to me that your officer might be among those anticipated by the Patrol."

"Well, hell," exploded Olivine, "we've got to do something! The Patrol might also anticipate we'll get so balled up out of fear of being anticipated that we'll just sit here, like we've been doing!"

"Quite true," murmured Holbein, "but I still cannot bring myself to accept your offer."

Olivine cursed and stared at his knees. But there was no avoiding the obvious. Regretfully, he turned to look at the young woman. "Well, what about it, Icy?" he demanded. "Will you take charge of this tub?"

"Sure, Starfuzz!" she leered. "If you care to risk it."

"I don't have a choice," he growled. "Ship?"

"Yes, sir," responded the *Glumers Joe*, in the unmodulated voice of a medium-capacity compucortex.

"I hereby relinquish command to Miss Lingrad, with the instruction that you obey her orders, and her orders alone, as you have obeyed mine in the past. Is the instruction fully understood and accepted?"

"Yes, Mr. Olivine. I await your orders, Miss Lingrad."

"Continue on course for the present," Icy said.

"What's this?" sneered Olivine. "No immediate brilliant action to instigate?"

"I'm going to sleep on it," Icy said, rising from her chair.

"We've wasted enough time already!" he snarled.

"Shut up! I'm boss now, and I said I'm going to sleep!" She whirled and left the control deck.

"This should prove interesting," said Holbein.

"Maybe. At least she had a point about getting some sleep. That's the only escape we have from this cold turkey treatment. We may as well follow her example."

They wandered separately to their sleeptanks. Olivine climbed in his, checked the fluid levels in the nutrient and deepsleep tubes, pulled down the lid over him, and felt the feeder needles snuggle into place in his upper arms.

When he woke he was no longer in the tank. He opened his eyes on a cloudless blue-green sky, and with his facial tissues screaming *sunburn!*

He leaped to his feet and stared wildly about at an arid, sparsely vegetated landscape, scorched under a blazing Type K sun.

Marooned! That psychotic wench had dumped him!

A pack of supplies was on the ground, by the spot where he had awakened. He tore off and read the note attached to it:

"Dear" Starfuzz:

Chuting you into space would suit me better but old Holbein and the ship might have been squeamish about that.

I'm dumping you because I can't trust you. If you could override this ship's brain to take it away from the spaceport, you could take it away from me if you changed your mind. So bye-bye.

Your planet is called Flandna. You're the only carnivore on it, so have fun and . . .

Die quickly,

P. Lingrad.

He wondered numbly what the "P." stood for, having never heard Icy's real name.

II

Groaning, Olivine opened the pack and found a tube of Kwikeeze. He applied the ointment to his burning face, and in a moment that source of discomfort faded. His other physical and mental miseries were not so easily cured, however. The gnaw of withdrawal seemed to feed on and gain new power from his dismay at having been marooned.

And that dismay, by itself, would have been bad enough.

He couldn't recall much about this planet Flandna, and that was a bad sign. If it was a world people could live on with any satisfaction, he would have heard more about it. From his first feel of the place, he sized it up as one of the many borderline worlds that just missed being livable. Air breathable, but a little too thin. Sunlight, a little too hot, and heavy on the ultraviolet. Water present, but too scarce. Native flora and fauna, also on the scarce side, and probably poisonous.

The kind of world, in short, that had often wiped out human colonies with a delayed and sneaky ecologic backlash.

Icy's note said he was the only carnivore on the planet, which meant he'd better watch out for dangerous plants. They probably had means of fighting back against grazing animals, to maintain a balance of population.

Grimly, he examined the contents of the pack.

There, the news was better than he had expected. Icy was at least giving him a chance to survive, so far as equipment would help.

A major item was one of the recently developed rationmakers, into which any alien animal, or vegetable substance, could be loaded for conversion to edible protein and carbohydrate. It also purified water.

Everything else was standard emergency survival gear of types Olivine was familiar with . . . bedding and tenting, sonic knife, nuclear powerblock, heater-cooler, and various incidentals.

But no distress beeper with which to call for rescue. And Olivine was already beginning to feel he would prefer rescue, even by the Space Patrol, to spending much time on Flandna.

Glumly he reloaded the pack, slid the straps on his shoulders and stood up. For a moment he studied the arid landscape, getting the lay of the terrain in mind. Then he chose his direction and began walking.

The one necessity neither the pack nor his immediate surroundings could supply was an adequate water source. That he would have to find. By going downhill, he expected to find water sooner or later.

The hiking quickly became pure torture. Olivine knew part of the trouble was that months in prison had softened him physically. Also, the dismal state of his morale was weakening him even further, but he couldn't fool himself with fake cheerfulness. And there was the heat, and the low humidity which was sucking up his body moisture so voraciously that his sweat evaporated before it had time to dampen his clothes.

Under this load of misery, his formerly maddening withdrawal symptoms were soon too trivial to be noticed.

And he seemed to be getting nowhere.

After four hours of hiking with only brief breaks, he could see no improvement in the surrounding land. It was still marlboro of the harshest sort. The vegetation was stringy and dry, where it grew at all. He had seen a few insect-sized fliers, but no other animal life, although he had noticed occasional holes that could have been burrows. He guessed that the animals here, like those of many high-temperature desert climates, did most of their foraging and moving about in the cool of night.

Finally he came upon a plant that was leafier than the others he had seen and promised to contain a fair amount of moisture. He stopped, got the knife, a pair of protective gloves, and the ration-maker out of his pack, and approached the plant cautiously.

It made no move, so he took a tentative swipe at it with the knife, slashing off a small leafy limb. The plant quivered. Quickly Olivine waded in, hacking away with the knife until the entire plant was chopped to pieces. He stuffed these into the receiving compartment of the rationmaker, closed the lid, and turned the device on. It worked with a dim humming sound.

While he waited on it, Olivine inflated the tent and carried all his stuff inside. In almost desperate haste he plugged the heater-cooler into the powerblock and flicked the dial to the lowest temperature reading. A gush of cool air came out of it and he flopped down in relief.

In a moment the rationmaker quit humming and sounded a soft chime. He picked it up and studied the product compartment readouts to find out what the plant had yielded.

Very few ready-to-eat constituents, he saw, but a large amount of normal cellulose that could be reprocessed through a second stage into digestible molecules. More salts, many poisonous, than found in E-type plants, and all of these could be dumped except the sodium chloride, which Olivine figured he would need at the rate he had been sweating.

The moisture content was disappointingly low: 3.3 cubic centimeters of free water and 1.8 c.c.'s of polywater.

Olivine blinked at this last reading. This was something he hadn't seen before on the readouts of a food analysis-resynthesis device—the separation of pure poly-water. Usually the analysis process either left polymeric water as a moistening agent in the cellulose and carbohydrate compartments, or else blasted it into ordinary water. This was one of the advances of the rationmaker, which was reported to represent a breakthrough in this kind of device.

For human consumption, however, polywater was of limited value. It was good for constipation, but that problem Olivine did not have. He flicked the little toggle that would convert the polywater into its more usual, drinkable form. Then, after studying the substances he had to work with, he set the resynthesis formula and reactivated the device.

Five minutes later he was nibbling a little block that felt and tasted like salty ice cream, but that had to be chewed and swallowed like a non-melting food. It left him, feeling better, though thirstier, than before.

But his exhaustion, along with the dread of the heat waiting for him outside the tent, kept him from going in search of a plant from which to drain a few more c.c.'s of water. That would have to wait until night, he decided. Meanwhile he studied the directions attached to the rationmaker with care, to see if he was missing any bets in his use of the device. Carbohydrates and proteins were, after all, largely oxygen and hydrogen, so why shouldn't such a device be equipped to break these down into water?

Finally he sighed and gave up. Such a use apparently hadn't struck the manufacturers as desirable. Stretching out on his back, Olivine closed his eyes and slept immediately.

The sun was still high when he woke, and he had to wait five fretful hours in the tent for the cooling of twilight. There was a lamp cap in the pack, which he strapped on his head before starting his downhill trek once more.

The Flandnan desert was coming to life with approaching darkness. He could hear the squeaky calls of small animals as he strode along, and finally got a look at a couple of them. They appeared quite ordinary desert inhabitants, rat to rabbit in size, quite possibly mammalian, and six-legged.

He could not catch one. They did not scurry out of sight at his approach, but moved swiftly out of reach if he came too close. Olivine guessed they were not afraid of being eaten by a larger animal, but were cautious about being trampled on. At last he knocked one over with a well-aimed rock, and processed it through the rationmaker. It yielded nearly a cup of water which he gulped down quickly. Then he dumped the nutrient components, which were too dry to re-synthesize into anything edible.

Later, after darkness was complete and he had switched on his cap lamp, he killed another and made a meal off its ingredients.

Once he caught a glimpse of a larger animal, also centauroid in structure, that would have resembled an Earth boar, except that it was as lanky as a greyhound. It slunk quickly away from his light.

The coolness, the food, and the sounds of life around him were a healing influence on Olivine's morale. His situation, he realized, was far from hopeless.

All he had to do was stay alive—and the rationmaker should make that simple—until a ship passed close enough to the planet to detect his nuclear powerblock. Two weeks, two months . . . six months. at the outside. Space travel disasters were fairly frequent, and an overdue liner always brought search-and-rescue ships out along the liner's route to take a look at such semi-inhabitable planets as Flandna where survivors could be grounded.

Yes, six months at the most, he told himself.

And he couldn't be too sure, with only the light of his lamp, but the terrain seemed to be improving as he marched along. Vegetation seemed more abundant, suggesting more ground moisture. He steered clear of the larger clumps, remembering the warning he had taken from Icy's note.

He muttered a curse at the thought of that beautiful hunk of devious, frigid femininity. If he ever got his hands on Icy . . . well, she had earned all the rough treatment he would delight in dealing her!

He boiled at the thought and his eyes glared angrily as he strode on through the night. The hell of it was, though, that his chance of ever encountering Icy again was extremely slight. The Confederation was too big for that. You met people, separated from them to go your separate ways among the hundreds of worlds, and your paths never crossed again.

And infuriated though he was, Olivine had no intention of ever going looking for Icy, just to punish her for dumping him. Life was too short to waste in search of vengeance . . .

Except, of course, vengeance upon the stinking Space Patrol! What a slob he'd been, letting that crummy do-gooder outfit snow him for so many years, thinking he was king of the universe when they made him a full-fledged proxad! And then had slapped him down over a little harmless payoff! As if a proxad ought to live on the miserly pay the Patrol gave him!

He was well out of it, even as a marooned escapee from "justice", he told himself bitterly. And given half a chance he'd *show* that Patrol . . .

Something tripped him and he sprawled forward, coming hard against the dry ground. Surprised but not hurt, he tried to stand up, but his booted feet pulled themselves out from under him and he sprawled again.

He twisted into a sitting position and his light revealed a ropey red vine looped around his ankles. It was dragging him along on his bottom toward a small flat cluster of leaves six feet away.

So this was one of the dangerous vegetables of Flandna! Olivine grinned tightly as he got the sonic knife out of the pack. This plant was going to find itself prey rather than preyer!

He reached forward and slashed at the tentacle. The knife blade skidded along the surface without making a scratch.

Alarmed, Olivine examined the knife. It was working properly, and the sonic edge ought to slice anything softer than granite with ease. He tried it on the loop of red again with no more result than before.

Frantic now, he began jerking with his legs, trying to kick himself free before the plant could pull him into its maw or whatever. But he could do nothing. He was dragged up beside the leafy clump, and held there.

Rigid with terror, he waited for whatever was to happen next.

The plant had a dead-animal stench which Olivine decided, with an hysterical giggle, was highly appropriate.

"Icy shouldn't have lied to me," he babbled at it. "She said I was the only carnivore, but you're a carnivore, too. Aren't you?"

The plant made no response. "What are you waiting for!" Olivine stormed in terror.

But the plant seemed content to hold him.

Slowly, the man calmed. He took a deep breath and let it quaver out in jerks. Whatever the plant was going to do to him, it was in no hurry about it. It was giving him time to think about escape.

He looked again at his legs. The red tentacle was gripping tightly around his ankles, but outside his boots. If he could slide the boots off . . .

He tried. The tentacle was bearing down too tightly for that. The boots were pressed in snugly around his ankles. He couldn't remove them.

For a split-second, he thought about amputating his legs just below the knee. The thought had no appeal at all.

He stared at the plant, and frowned. How did it mean to dispose of him? It hardly seemed big enough to have a man-sized maw somewhere under its leaves. It was no larger than a two-year-old peony bush. Unless the maw was underground . . .

Olivine laughed. Maybe the plant wasn't hungry right now, but *he* was. Why not try turning the tables?

He slashed off a leaf and stuffed it into his rationmaker. The plant jerked, and dragged him a couple of inches closer. Then it became quiet again. Olivine cut off another leaf. And another. The plant writhed and twisted, but it could not stop him. Within a minute, it was reduced to a tuft of stems, the tentacle extending up and out of the center of the tuft to make loop that slammed around alarmingly for a few moments after the man had completed harvesting the leaves. Then it flopped to the ground, but did not loosen its grip.

And Olivine saw where the dead-animal stench was coming from. A dead animal.

It was one of the rabbit-sized centauroids, previously hidden under the leaves, and well along the road to decay. Decomposition was not advanced so far, though, as to obscure the marking around its ear midsection where the plant's tentacle had circled it for however long the animal had taken to die.

The plant hadn't eaten it at all. It had merely left the body there . . . *to enrich the soil!*

"I'll be damned!" grunted Olivine in dismay. "Not food, but fertilizer!" What a way to end his career! But in any event, this meant the plant wasn't a carnivore, after all. Not strictly speaking.

He twisted as far from the putrid corpse as the tentacle would let him, and turned on the ration-maker. The organics of the leaves turned out to be about the same as those of the plant he had processed earlier. He stared at the readouts, trying to think of something appetizing to make, and decided he wasn't hungry after all. Not with that stinking animal a few feet away. He converted the polywater to normal H₂O, and drank the liquids. Then he dumped the dry nutrients.

"More fertilizer for you," he told the plant.

For a while then he just sat there, looking at the red tentacle. It took up slack in itself, he noticed, by making a large loose loop, tightly twisted together near the ends that disappeared into the ground and held his ankles.

He tried cutting the limber loop with his knife, but failed as before. This was sterner stuff than the leaves, not only proof against the gnawing teeth of trapped animals but against the ferocious bite of a manmade cutting tool as well.

A remarkable vegetable, that plant, he mused. Real handy with that tough tentacle, almost as if it knew what it was doing. The coil around his ankles tight and stiff as hell, and the same where the ends of the loop were twisted together. But the loop itself relaxed and floppy. As if the plant knew what part of the tentacle had work to do and what part could take it easy . . .

Olivine snorted in self-disgust. He was wasting time admiring the plant's intelligence when he should be trying to get away from it!

And if the plant had no use for the loose loop of tentacle right now, maybe he did! He had something more powerful than a sonic knife at his disposal.

He picked up the loop, bent it double, and shoved the bend into the receiving compartment of his rationmaker. Then, holding the lid down as tightly as he could he turned on the rationmaker.

The plant went into frenzy. The effect was explosive in its violence and suddenness. The tentacle whipped about like the end of a high-voltage cable, slashing the ground and occasionally the man with a fury of blind blows.

Stunned, grimacing from the beating, Olivine crawled away, gripping the rationmaker for dear life. But he couldn't seem to escape the rain of blows even after he had tumbled half a dozen meters away.

Cursing, he counterattacked, stuffing more of the tentacle into the rationmaker. Through a fog of pain and wrath he realized that his ankles had been released as soon as he turned the device on, but he was accepting no surrender. He kept stuffing until there was nothing left to stuff. Then he slapped the lid shut and stared about wildly, in search of another enemy to attack

Only when his light swept across the torn hole in the ground by the small animal's corpse did he realize how complete his victory had been. In its frenzy the plant had worked its roots free, and they had

gone into the rationmaker, too.

Shivering, partly from reaction and partly from the growing chill of the night, Olivine jerked the top from his pack, inflated it, crawled inside, and turned on the heater. After resting a moment, he undressed and treated the stinging welts raised by the lashing tentacle,

Warm but exhausted, he looked at the rationmaker, and decided he was too tired to fool with it. He laid down and napped for a while.

III

A light patter of rain roused him. He sat up and looked at his watch. It was ten hours past sunset, and at a rough guess six hours past dawn, as near as he could judge from the length of the previous day. He would have to measure star motions, he told himself, for an accurate timing of Flandna's rotation, so he could recalibrate his watch accordingly.

But right now he ought to be thinking about some means of capturing the rain pattering on the roof of his tent . . .

Before he could get any plan into operation, the rain stopped. He cursed and turned his attention to the readouts on the rationmaker.

What he saw brought a grin. The tentacle plant had held a large amount of water, he guessed in the roots, and polywater also. The poison content had been extremely high, and he assumed it was these unidentified poisons which accounted for the tentacle's toughness. Usable food components were low, and that was O.K. because he was more thirsty than hungry at the moment.

He drank the normal water and decided to save the polywater for later. In fact, if he could find something to store it in, he might build up an emergency supply.

He opened the rationmaker's polywater compartment and peered in to estimate the bulk of its contents. The polywater, in a clear colloidal mass, looking like a sagging glob of gelatin slightly larger than a tennis ball, sat quivering in the center of the cubical space.

But it didn't stay there.

As soon as the compartment was open, a pseudopod of the stuff formed and reached up toward Olivine's face.

Startled the man jumped back. The pseudopod fell short and slopped down the side of the ration-maker and onto the tent floor. Rapidly the globule remaining in the compartment flowed into this lengthening ribbon until the whole mass was out.

While the wriggle of polywater resembled a plant tentacle only in form, that resemblance was enough to freeze Olivine for the moment it required for escape from the ration-maker. But now he realized he had nothing to fear from the stuff. It was, after all, pure H₂O, differing from ordinary water only in that its molecules were strung together into supermolecules, which made it about half again as dense as ordinary water and about fifteen times as viscous. It was "plastic" water, so to speak . . . stuff that had been discovered back in the Twentieth Century and had a myriad of uses, principally as a lubricant since it remained stable and liquid from over 600 degrees Centigrade down to 40 below.

And so what if the stuff had suddenly formed into a tentacle shape and slid out of the rationmaker when he opened the lid? After all, there were dozens of mnemoplastics—stuff that tended to regain an earlier shape—on the market. Tangline was one of the best-known of these. Why not plastic water that was mnemonic?

The wriggle was now oozing across the tent floor—running downhill, Olivine told himself—like a thin, transparent snake. It was approaching the heater-cooler, which it could gum up, and Olivine was about to move the device out of the way when the polywater halted. It was motionless for a few seconds, and then began bending itself. It formed a loop with its front section, then lifted its remaining length, in a series of 180-degree bends, to form a grid standing vertically over the loop base.

The grid was directly in the path of the flow of warm air from the heater. The polywater was warming itself!

Olivine stared in surprise, then shrugged. "O.K., stuff, you're alive I've got a flexible mind. Nobody

ever heard of living polywater before, though. And I can't figure out how you work."

He bent down to peer closely at the highest segment of the grid the riggle had formed, looking for normal structure. There ought to be a gut, or a nerve ganglia, or a sense organ, or something. But he could see nothing but clear colloid. Not even a speck of lint picked up from the tent floor.

Olivine sat back, thinking hard. Slowly, he began to reach some tentative conclusions.

What he had here, evidently, was about the simplest life form imaginable—pure water so structured molecularly as to function volitionally. And its life process was probably equally simple, such as soaking up heat, as it was doing now, to be expended in maintaining its form and in moving itself about. And also, he guessed, for whatever amount of thinking it might be capable of.

Heat could create free electrons within the polywater, and speed their motion . . . in short, could produce tiny electrical flows in the molecular lattice. So the creature must think electrically, and sense the same way. What it could learn about its environment in that manner . . . well, that would take some experimenting to find out.

For a while Olivine mulled over the fact that the creature's surface had to be a one-atom-thick layer of hydrogen, but that didn't lead him to any informative conclusions, so he gave up on it.

The practical consideration was that he, by chance, had discovered a new life form of a startlingly basic type. Something not even the Space Patrol nor the CIT computer knew about. He had happened to be marooned on this particular planet with a new type of rationmaker that let polywater come through the analysis process *as* polywater. Certainly the CIT computer couldn't predict something it didn't know existed!

So, he thought with grim satisfaction, when the doodle leaped out of the rationmaker at him, an unknown factor entered the equation of former Proxad Omar Olivine. All he had to do was find a way to bring that factor into play . . .

Rescue came at dawn four days later.

Olivine came out of his tent as usual, then froze at the sight of a Patrol pick-up bug standing not a dozen meters away.

"Good morning, Ollie," came a voice from the bug's exterior speaker. "I trust you slept well."

Olivine nodded dumbly, trying to tell himself this was what he had been hoping for. But capture was hard to accept emotionally, desirable though he knew it to be.

"That you, Coralon?" he asked, thinking the voice sounded familiar.

"Right, old buddy. I happened to be passing close when HQ got the word you were stranded here, and I was sidetracked to give you chauffeur service, back to you-know-where. Are we going to do it the easy way?"

For a moment Olivine hesitated, eying the bug's gunsnouts that were capable of blasting him to bloodbutter, stunning him, or tangling him, depending on which button Proxad Dayn Coralon chose to push in the control room of his ship hovering out in space.

Olivine shrugged. "I'll go quietly just this once, Danny, as a personal favor to an old pal."

"Good boy!" Coralon's voice approved.

"What about my stuff?" asked Olivine, looking toward the tent. "Shall I just leave it?"

"No. Better not. It's stolen property, so we'd better bring it along: Pack up."

Olivine deflated the tent and began stuffing it and the other equipment into the pack.

"How did HQ find out about me?" he asked as he worked.

"A call one of our scouts monitored at the edge of the Roost area," Coralon replied. "It seemed that your partners in crime on the *Glumers Jo* wanted to get past the Rooster pickets without being shot at. They were trying to explain how a con man and a no-talent doll could grab a port-service ship and get away with it. They had to explain about you, including how they had dumped you on Flandna Perhaps the Roosters would have got around to picking you up. The Patrol decided to beat them to you, so here we are."

That last, Olivine realized, was meant as a light goad, inviting him to try to make a break for cover in expectation of later rescue by the Roosters. He was having none of that! Despite the "old buddy" talk of Proxad Coralon, Olivine knew that his one-time classmate at the Space Academy would relish an excuse

to butter him. After all, to goody-goods like Dayn Coralon Olivine was that lowest of criminals, the turncoat crooked cop.

"So Holbein and Icy made it to the Roost," he remarked.

"Yep, they managed to slip past us," replied Coralon.

Olivine grimaced. Slip past, hell! The Patrol had wanted the *Glumers Jo* to reach Dusty Roost all along. That was the finishing touch on the Douthit Three super-poll play.

As for whether the Patrol had meant for Olivine to reach the Roost as well was another question. He guessed not. Having served the Patrol's purpose, and not being a harmless small-timer like Holbein or Icy, the starfuzz had probably intended to get him safely back into prison.

Which meant that his move, in putting Icy in command of the *Glumers Jo*, had been anticipated like everything else he had done!

But no more of that. Not if he could hang onto his polywater doodle.

Savagely he snarled, "That damned CIT knew I'd wind up here all along! It could have sent one of you slave-boys to pick me up long before this!"

"Sorry to have kept you waiting, Ollie," Coralon chortled. "Maybe you're right. And maybe the CIT held off until Icy Lingrad's call was monitored, just so you couldn't be *sure* you're right. Who can plumb the subtleties of a heavy cornpucortex, hah?"

Olivine snorted a curse. "Just watch your step, old pal. Don't get out of line, and don't ever consider yourself a free man. Just toe the Patrol's mark like the pliant little saint you're supposed to be, and maybe you'll never learn what a total slave you are to that computer!"

Coralon laughed. "Thanks for the warning. Now hurry it up a bit will you, old chum? I have other duties to get on with. Isn't everything packed?"

"Yeah. I'm ready to go," said Olivine.

"What's that tube sashed over your shoulder?"

"Two meters of syphon tube full of polywater I've saved."

"Got a stuffy tummy, hah?"

Olivine glowered. "No, but I probably will have in the Patrol's oh-so-humane dungeons. It was my emergency water supply."

"O.K., bring it along. The tube's stolen property, and we can dump the poly into my ship's auxlube tank. Get aboard the bug."

Olivine picked up the pack and approached the bug with a sarcastic grin. "Ten cents worth of tube and maybe fifty cents worth of polywater to confiscate in the name of the Patrol. I'd forgotten what big-time operators proxads were!" he sneered.

"As I said, the tube's stolen property, old pal," Coralon replied coldly. "If you want to keep the poly for bellyflush, I'll give you a tube to keep it in."

"Such magnanimity!" snorted Olivine. He stowed the pack in the bug, then climbed in himself. "I'm aboard."

"O.K.," came Coralon's voice. "Port closing."

The door swung into place and locked firmly against its seals. Olivine settled back in his seat, readying himself for lift-off.

What he felt instead was a needle penetrating his rump. He remained conscious just long enough to realize he had been slipped a knockout.

IV

Coralon was talking to somebody . . . somebody with a younger man's voice, perhaps a Patrol cadet in training.

". . . Before we deliver him," the proxad was saying as the words became meaningful through the lifting fog of unconsciousness. "So keep an extremely tight lip, Greg. Leave the questioning to the experts who'll debrief him under high-sensitivity microdar monitors. He's a clever chunk of slime, and don't forget it. He might learn more from our questions than we would from his answers. Besides, he has no

information we need."

Olivine was lying not quite flat on his belly, with his mouth hanging open and drooling slightly. He resented the disgusting appearance this was giving him, but he resisted the impulse to stop the drool. If Coralon thought he was still out like a light . . .

"O.K., sir," the younger man said "I assumed we would do a routine interrogation, but if HQ says no . . ."

"That's the order," said Coralon firmly. "And after all, this guy's not going to be going anywhere for a long, long time. The experts can pump him as dry as they like."

Olivine remained motionless, listening for more talk, but the two men of the Patrol were silent. Well, that had been a forlorn hope, anyway. Coralon was no idiot to say something revealing in the presence of a presumably unconscious prisoner.

More informative than words to Olivine's ears were the sounds of the ship around him. To his sharp, experienced hearing, those sounds told a great deal.

He was not in a regulation twenty-meter proxad's cruiser, but in one of the giant utility tank ships the Patrol used often as heavy freighters and occasionally as paddy wagons. And why was a top-gun proxad like Coralon jockeying a freighter-paddy wagon?

Surely not merely to pick up a stranded escapee.

No, Coralon's presence aboard a utility tanker had to mean some very important freight was aboard. And the bypassing of the interrogation routine, for fear of disclosing some secret to Olivine in the process . . . maybe a careless word that would enable him to guess what that cargo was

But what good would knowledge of the cargo do a man in his position? Surely the Patrol didn't think he could grab something as bulky as the load carried by a utility tanker! Nor could he override this ship's compucortex—not with Coralon around, certainly—and make off with freighter as well as freight.

Unless . . .

He couldn't avoid a telltale twitch when the answer hit him. He instantly added a soft snort and gulp to it, then became tensely motionless. Coralon would know he was awake now and playing possum. If the proxad was supposed to bait him with some data, now was the time he would do it. He waited.

All the proxad said was, "Quit kidding. I know you're awake."

Olivine sat up and gazed around dully. He was sitting naked on a cot inside the barred cubicle against the inboard bulkhead of the auxiliary control lounge . . . just where he had judged himself to be. On the foot of the cot was an outfit of regulation prison garb, and a plastic tube full of polywater.

With inward relief and outward indifference he tossed the tube out of the way and began dressing. "It wasn't reg to make me sit on a mickey needle," he complained.

"It was in this case," replied Coralon, who was seated out in the lounge with his younger partner drinking coffee. "That knockout was specifically ordered. We want you back in your proper box without further ado, old pal, and you know our prisoner-handling routines too well for us to take chances. Quit griping, chum. The extra nap didn't hurt you."

"I said I would come quietly," Olivine grouched.

Coralon chuckled, "And you kept your word, too. You were as quiet as a mouse."

Olivine snorted. For a moment he stared around, giving a long look at the viewscreen, which was unoblingly blank. "We're on course for Sarfyne Four, I take it," he said.

"That's your destination, old buddy," Coralon responded evasively.

Olivine stared at him, then shrugged. "To hell with you," he said tiredly. "Do I get breakfast before the inquisition?"

"Ship, give the prisoner breakfast," Coralon directed.

"Yes, sir," replied the utility tanker. A deck panel opened by the cot and a serving pedestal rose, carrying a steaming plate of amegg along with fruit juice, coffee and toast. The prisoner fell to with a good appetite.

"I've instructed the ship, which is the *Barnaby*, by the way, to give you food, water, and toilet facilities as you request, without the O.K. of myself or Mr. Brantee," said Coralon. "Anything else you need will require my approval."

"So the young sucker's name is Brantee, huh?" said Olivine around a mouthful of food. He gazed at the young man. "Another victim of the Patrol's snow job, all eager and dedicated to upholding the Confederate standards of piety, privilege, and status quo." He sneered. "There, without the grace of God, went I when I was equally young and gullible. I wised up fast, but not fast enough."

Brantee smiled easily. "You wouldn't try to subvert me, would you, Mr. Olivine?"

"Not much point in that," the prisoner replied. "You're already in, and there's no turning back, boy. You've had it."

Brantee laughed.

"You see, Greg," Coralon said to his partner, "my old pal Ollie has more than a touch of megalomania. That's why he entered the Patrol in the first place. The thought of being a proxad—a proxy admiral—appealed to his delusions of grandeur. He didn't get the message that, in the Patrol, responsibility has to accompany power. Probably because he doesn't know the meaning of the word 'responsibility'. His idea of being a proxad was to land on whatever Confederate world to which he was sent, make free with his choice of the colonists' wine and women, line his pockets with a bit of bribery or plain thievery, and then—at his leisure—deal with the local crime problem he had been assigned. Hell, by that time, old Ollie would be a bigger crime problem than the one he was supposed to handle!" The proxad chuckled reminiscently.

"I can't see how he would get away with that for five minutes!" said Brantee, sounding appalled.

"Because he was clever," shrugged Coralon, "and because of the glamour of the Patrol and that pretty-boy pan of his. Women have always tended to spoil him rotten, anyway."

"Spoken like a jealous man," growled Olivine, who was not appreciating being psychoanalyzed. "You and that pitiful mud-pie face of yours. They tell me, Coralon, that even the streetwalkers of Nov-madder charge you double."

The proxad grinned. "My sex life is quite satisfactory for a *normal* man, chum."

"But how did he make proxad in the first place?" young Brantee persisted. "Surely the CIT computer's analysis would show up his personality flaw!"

"He made it because he's got ability," said Coralon. "The Patrol hated to pass up a guy with so much on the ball, and hoped appropriate mental therapy and training would get him out of that obsession of his. It didn't work out," he finished sadly.

"Damned right it didn't work," snapped Olivine, "and I'll tell you why! Because I'm *not* a psychotic, with megalomania or anything else! What I've got is the perfectly natural human drive for supremacy. That's a drive our artificial society with its precious Patrol suppresses, because it rocks the boat. But being taboo doesn't make it any less natural. Look at the most peaceable animals! Look at cattle, for instance, meekly nibbling grass. Every herd has, its boss bull, who fought for and won supremacy."

"Most guys are like you two. They let their drives be suppressed. But not me. I'm a healthy-minded male human, doing the best I can to fulfill myself."

"And fortunately for everyone else," said Coralon, "you're failing."

"I'm playing against a thoroughly stacked deck," Olivine retorted. "That stinking computer. Any society has to be sick to make a computer its top dog."

"More responsibility can be built into a computer than any man, or group of men, can possess," said Coralon.

"Responsibility!" snorted Olivine. "That word's your all-purpose pat answer! Look, you jerks, let's get on with the inquisition, after which I'd appreciate some privacy."

"No questioning this trip," replied Coralon, standing up. "That will be taken care of on Sarfyne Four. Let's go, Greg."

"What do you mean, no questioning?" Olivine demanded. "Maybe you can pick my brain for something that'll help in recapturing old mealy-mouth Holbein and that Lingrad!"

Coralon grinned. "They're no friends of yours, now that they've dumped you, hah? Well, don't fret, pal. They'll get theirs if they ever set foot out of the Roost."

"Ah, the mighty Patrol!" Olivine sneered angrily. "A guy like me you hound bravely across half the galaxy, but when it comes to dealing with two dozen entire planets full of pirates and smugglers, your

bright blue uniforms take on a yellowish glow."

Coralon's face hardened. "The Roost," he said coldly, "doesn't lend itself to quick, easy solutions. Our policy of containment may not be ideal, but it's better than the full-scale war it would take to clean out the Roost."

"Yeah, anything to avoid a fight . . . with an enemy who might have teeth!" Olivine snapped back. "Coralon, you poor sap, those grandmotherly types back on Earth who dictate Patrol policy are making cowardly hypocrites out of the lot of you! How do you hold your head up in public?"

"Come on, Greg, we have work to do," growled the proxad. He stalked out of the lounge, followed by the trainee.

Olivine chuckled, realizing he had got under Coralon's skin. The Roost *was* a touchy subject with the tougher-thinking proxads, such as Coralon. It galled them to be told to lay off the Roost, to leave that sanctuary for criminals strictly alone, and merely try to blockade traffic in and out. They realized all too well that a policy of containment couldn't work for a sector of the galaxy some forty cubic parsecs in volume.

Left alone, Olivine sat on the edge of his cot and studied his prison cage, not deterred by the certainty that the ship *Barnaby* was observing and taping his every action. Why try to hide his interest in escaping, when that interest would be presumed, anyway?

Not that he expected to spot any weakness—the control lounge cages of utility tankers were constructed to be *secure*, and this one was. The Patrol had, screamed with agony when legal decisions had forced it to provide such cages as this, to be used when a single prisoner was being transported, to avoid what amounted to solitary confinement of a lone miscreant in some lower-deck dungeon. The fact that Coralon had placed Olivine in the cage indicated that the utility tanker's lockup deck was uninhabited. In all likelihood, Coralon, Brantee, and Olivine were the only people aboard.

But even if the two Patrolmen were preoccupied elsewhere in the ship, and if Olivine could manage to get out of his cage, the ex-proxad realized something more—much more—would be necessary for a successful escape.

Barnaby had to be neutralized, or at least thoroughly distracted. Otherwise, the ship would simply hit him with a glob of tangline and leave him trussed up, maybe in a bone-breaking position, until one of the Patrolmen got around to untying him and putting him back in the cage.

And a compucortex of *Barnaby's* caliber was not easy to trick or disable. There was no chance of overriding *Barnaby*, already under Coralon's firm command, as he had overridden the *Glumers Jo*, which had a lower-capacity compucortex and which he had found in an unmanned condition. And it would take an awful lot of distraction to occupy *Barnaby's* attention circuits to a point where the ship would ignore the prisoner's actions.

Olivine frowned. He was not ready to admit that he was stumped, but he could certainly see no easy solution.

And his guess about the *Barnaby's* principal cargo—a guess he was sure was accurate—made him want out very badly.

That cargo, nestled down in the main hold, had to be a *ship*. And no ordinary ship. While it was small compared to the utility tanker that was transporting it, or even compared to the *Glumers Jo*, it *had* to be very special to get the kind of handling it was receiving. It had to be a fighting ship of the Patrol, and more.

What excuse was there for one spaceship to haul another in its hold?

Answer: The ship being hauled was not ready to travel on its own.

And when couldn't a ship travel on its own?

Answer: When it hadn't been *mastered*!

And why wouldn't the master-to-be come to the ship instead of the ship being brought to him?

Answer. The master-to-be was too busy to make the trip, and officially considered such by the Patrol high brass.

Was a proxad ever *that* busy?

Answer. No, but a *vizad* might be!

Conclusion: The *Barnaby's* cargo was a vizad's command cruiser, in an unmastered status.

It was enough to make Olivine's mouth water.

What other cargo than a ship—a cargo that was its own transportation—could he hope to grab, and thus make Coralon ultra-cautious in his words with the prisoner so that the prisoner would never learn of the cargo?

Olivine grinned wolfishly. To an intelligent man, a conspiracy of silence could be as informative at times as words.

But knowing the vizad's cruiser was waiting, just a few decks away, wasn't getting him to it. He stood up and prowled his cage in agitation.

The answer, if there was an answer, had to lie in the polywater doodle. The doodle was the new factor in the equation, the thing unknown to the Patrol, to Coralon, and to *Barnaby*. Of that he was quite sure.

Before being rescued from Flandna, Olivine had used his time well, running dozens of tests on the little colloid creature. As a result, he had a pretty good understanding of its nature, its habits, and its potentials.

It had been, without doubt, the "brains" of the tentacle plant that had tried to use him for fertilizer. Not a brilliant brain, by any means, but one capable of keeping its plant form well nourished and watered in a highly unfavorable environment.

Nature had never intended it to survive—like a disembodied soul—the plant in which it had grown. **In** the ordinary course of events, when disaster hit that plant, its poly-water content would have soaked into and been dispersed by the dry soil of Flandna. That would have been death, and highly undesired, as Olivine had learned from the gingerly way in which the doodle had jerked back from contact with the ground. After that, the man had offered the doodle a length of syphon tube as a substitute body, and the doodle had taken to it immediately.

The habit pattern it had followed in plant form had modified, proving the doodle had sense enough to be adaptable. Not once had it attacked the man. But parts of the pattern remained stable, since they still served the doodle's needs.

For instance, it was seldom active when in warm surroundings. Activity during the heat of the Flandnan day would have been useless, since fertilizer-on-the-hoof stirred about only at night. Only when the temperature began dropping did the doodle "wake up". That was why Olivine was confident the secret of the doodle had not been learned by the Patrolmen while he was unconscious from the mickey needle shot. The doodle had been as warm as it wanted to be itself and thus in no need of seeking heat, the inside of the pick-up bug had been warm, as was the inside of the *Barnaby*.

So Coralon could squeeze the doodle out of its syphon tube, analyze it, and suck it into the tube which now lay on Olivine's cot without seeing an indication that it was other than ordinary polywater. Because that's what the doodle acted like in its "sleeping" stage.

But when "awake" the doodle was something else! It could—to a degree—learn. It could be taught tricks. It could follow an order.

It could do these things by duplicating motions Olivine put it through a few times, with warmth as a reward. It did not understand spoken language, or any code of tappings the man could devise, but it did understand shapes, motions, positions, and objects.

It could bend itself into the outline of a pair of spectacles—a joined O.O. for "Omar Olivine". It could follow an obstacle course, after having been dragged through the appropriate motions, to reach a container of hot water. It could climb up Olivine's, body and out one of his extended arms for a similar reward held in his hand.

Also, it could creep under Olivine's blanket to huddle curled against his warm stomach, as it did one night after straying outside the tent while he slept. This Olivine had not encouraged, because the creature had returned several degrees colder than ice, and its touch had scared him witless for a minute, in addition to being painful.

But now, aboard the *Barnaby*, the question was how could he make use of the doodle's abilities?

There were possibilities . . . one of which was the opening of the bulkhead door in the back of his

cage, which would give the prisoner the run of the ship for the very few seconds it would take *Barnaby* to tangline him. Another, perhaps impossibly complicated, would be the shorting by the doodle's body of a couple of *Barnaby's* key circuits. The obstacle course the doodle would have to run to reach those circuits was long and involved. Olivine was not sure his own memory of utility tanker construction was accurate enough for him to train the doodle properly, or if the doodle could retain that much instruction, or that the path to be followed would not pass close enough to a heat source to end the doodle's mission prematurely.

But there was a problem that came before any of those. Training the doodle for anything at all required actions on his part that could hardly be disguised. If he started putting that tube of polywater through a series of senseless motions, how would he explain his actions to *Barnaby* and the Patrolmen? That he was practicing an obscure Plaxadalican snake dance? That he had suddenly gone batty?

Olivine knew all too well that no such explanations would be bought. Not by a guy like Coralon, who had been around enough to be surprised at nothing and suspicious of everything.

The prisoner flopped on his bunk face down, his head resting on his forearms, to conceal the snarl of angry frustration that was twisting his handsome features.

V

Five ship-mornings later young Brantee entered the lounge alone, distractedly asked the prisoner how he was faring, and ordered a mug of coffee from the ship. His mind seemed a thousand parsecs away as he sat sipping and gazing at nothing.

Olivine studied him. This was a departure from the norm. Coralon sometimes came into the lounge alone, but not Brantee. And at this time of day they usually came in together. Neither of them spent much time there—just enough to satisfy the letter of the no-solitary edict.

"What's up?" Olivine asked.

Brantee gave him a resentful glance. "Nothing's up. Have some coffee, Olivine."

"Don't try to kid a kidder, punk," snapped the prisoner. "I know buck fever when I see it, and you've got it, boy! Now, what's going on?"

"What's buck fever?" the Patrol trainee asked.

"Nervousness before a fight. It comes from knowing the chips will be down, pretty damn quick, and from not knowing how much yellow you're going to show. It's worst in squirts like you who haven't been in many fights. Now, let's have the news, kid."

Brantee stirred restlessly. "There's nothing to tell."

"Where's Coralon?"

"Busy. He said to tell you he'll drop by a little later."

Olivine grimaced. The kid was plainly under orders to keep his mouth shut. But a kid can be tricked .

..

"O.K, I see I'm not going to get anything out of you," the prisoner said. "But let's get something straight, boy. I value my skin a lot more than I do your company. So with the ship as witness, I hereby excuse you from baby-sitting me if there's some kind of emergency that needs your attention."

Brantee put down his mug and leaped to his feet. "Thanks, Olivine!" he snapped over his shoulder as he hurried toward the door. Then he halted suddenly, turned and walked slowly back. "There's no . . ." he began, then shut up when he saw the grin of triumph on Olivine's face.

The Patrol trainee whirled and stomped out of the lounge cursing.

"Tell Coralon I got a right to know what's up!" Olivine squalled after him.

Alone, he paced his cage, his mind working furiously. What was happening? The kid hadn't been faking; no kid could put on that convincing an act. The *Barnaby* was heading for trouble . . . no question about it.

But what kind of trouble?

Five days out from Flandna . . . Mentally, Olivine constructed a globe of space, with Flandna at its center and with a radius roughly equivalent to the distance five days of normal drive would cover.

The globe intersected . . . well, it intersected plenty of places where a starfuzz ship might not be completely welcome, but only one really dangerous zone: the edge of the Dusty Roost pirate enclave!

And come to think about it, where else but in the Patrol's thin cordon around the Roost would a new vizad—field-promoted from proxad—be waiting for an unmastered command cruiser to be shipped out from HQ?

It all fitted together. The *Barnaby* was supposed to deliver the cruiser before taking Olivine on to the Sarfyne Four prison world. But right now, approaching its first destination, it was on the verge of encountering more Roosters than Patrol ships!

But it could be highly deadly. A Patrol ship had never yet been allowed to fall into Rooster hands. If the *Barnaby* could fight its way through whatever assault the pirates might be mounting, or if reinforcements rallied in time, all would be well. But if the utility tanker were about to fall into enemy hands, *Barnaby* would self-destruct with a violence that would leave nothing but a rapidly dispersing smell of metal in space.

Olivine cursed and grabbed at the bars of his cage. "*Coralon!*" he bellowed. "Ship, tell *Coralon* to tell me what's going on out there!"

"Your message will be delivered, sir," *Barnaby* replied.

"Right now!" he snarled.

Half a minute passed before the proxad's voice came over the speaker. "What's happening is none of your business, Ollie!" he snapped hurriedly. "Now shut up and don't pester me, or the ship! Order anything you want immediately, because I'm instructing the ship to ignore you starting in one minute. Out!"

"W-wait a second!" Olivine yapped in terror. "You can't leave me trapped here like a rat . . ."

But the proxad was obviously no longer listening.

"If you require food, drink . . ." began *Barnaby*.

"Oh . . . oh, yeah! Gimme a bourbon on the rocks, Ship!" Olivine directed, getting a grip on himself. "Make that *three* bourbons on the rocks so I'll not need to ask for more!"

"Very well, sir."

The serving pedestal rose, carrying the three ice-filled glasses. As Olivine had learned earlier, the ship served him no booze, but tried to be accommodating. Thus, an order for bourbon on the rocks brought ice and nothing more. He removed the glasses from the pedestal and placed them on the floor.

Then he waited, counting seconds and wondering just how literally *Barnaby* would take *Coralon's* instructions to ignore him. Or if the proxad would realize how sweeping that instruction was, and would modify it. Because if the ship ignored him *completely* . . .

He judged a minute had passed. "Damn it, *Barnaby*, at a time like this you could've given me some booze," he complained. "*Barnaby?* . . . Answer me, you misconnected idiot!"

No response.

It was now or never.

He grabbed the tube-encased doodle, coiled it into a tight spiral on the floor, and hurriedly dumped the ice from the three glasses over it, spreading the lumps out to cool the creature into wakefulness as rapidly as possible. He tried not to let himself get in a stew as he watched for the doodle to begin moving. The *Barnaby* was well-armed and strongly shielded, he reminded himself. It would be no quick and easy pushover for a whole squad of Rooster raiders. And so far as he could tell, the battle hadn't even been joined yet.

At that instant the ship lurched and a dull *Thunk!* jarred through it.

Olivine jittered. A near miss! The attack was beginning!

The doodle finally stirred. The man felt of it, judged it to be chilled enough to remain awake for the job at hand, laid it out in a straight line on the floor, and hurriedly began putting it through its training program.

He shoved a tip of the tube under his left shoe, in the space between the arch and the floor, and wriggled it through.

"You'll have to flatten to get through that crack," he muttered at it, "but the door's not sealed, so you

can make it. Then, as you come through, thicken out again, and climb straight up, like this . . ." He guided the doodle up the side of his shoe and then his trouser leg, standing up gradually as he did so. "Then when you get this high, start feeling around for a hole . . ." He swung the tip of the tube back and forth in a search pattern, ending at a corner of his pocket which he was pinching to a small hole with his other hand. "When you find it, just crawl in, like this . . . and your conductivity will do the rest, and your old pal will come put you back in your tube and find a warm place for you."

With that he wadded the tube and cupped it in his hands for a moment, long enough for the doodle to feel warmth without gaining much increase in temperature.

Then he went through the whole routine again.

For so critical a job he would have liked to have spent half an hour putting the doodle through its paces, but there wasn't time. The *Barnaby* was lurching and thumping continually now, and the battle would *have* to end, one way or another, within a very short while.

He went to the bulkhead door, unsealed the end of the doodle's tube, and ran the tube between his thumb and forefinger from the other end to squeeze the creature out onto the floor. Being careful not to tear its colloidal substance apart, and have to take time to let the doodle pull together again, he pushed its tip against the thin crack at the bottom of the door. "Slurp through, damn you!" he hissed.

Slowly, the doodle began disappearing. Olivine sighed with satisfaction. So far, so good. He wished the doodle could hurry it up, but it had to go membrane-thin to get under that door, and a membrane made a low-volume flow. He would have to be patient.

He muttered, half-sentimentally: "If I didn't have you to count on, little trickle, I'd be out of my skull by now!" At least the doodle was giving him something to do other than pace helplessly while waiting for the air to *whoosh* away, or for the ship to self-destruct, or for the pirates to be defeated so that he could be carted on to prison.

The doodle was, however, as unmindful of Olivine's words as it was of his hard-pressed mental stability. Its one concern was to regain a desired state of warmth, and it had received inputs to guide it to that goal. It continued to flatten its substance and ooze through the crack . . . between the warm floor and the warm door. Membrane thin during the passage, it soaked in the heat from the surrounding metal. When all of it was beyond the door, it felt quite comfortable, except for its lack of a containing husk and that was no urgent need. As it had achieved its goal, it promptly forgot the remainder of the input and relaxed on the floor.

"Good work!" whispered Olivine as the last of the doodle vanished under the door. "Now hurry up and foul that lock circuit "

Wham!

"Ugg!" he grunted in dismay. The ship had been hit! He held his breath against an impulse to whimper, but wherever the hit had been the ship was handling the emergency O.K. The air pressure had remained steady. "Hurry, doodle! Please hurry!" he begged.

Ker-WHANG!

This time the lounge lights flared brilliantly for a split second, then dimmed, and Olivine could hear the faint *click-click-click* of power adjustors going into action. The door, against which he had been pressing his hand, suddenly gave way, and he half fell into the passageway beyond the bulkhead.

Free! But with no time to waste.

Quickly he slurped the doodle into its tube and stuffed it in a pocket, not stopping to wonder how the creature had got to the floor so promptly after fouling the lock. He dashed for the aft-tube, slid down **to** the main hold, swung nimbly out onto the deck, and skidded to a quick halt.

For an instant he gazed in awed delight at the sturdy, forty-meter tapered cylinder of gleaming silver held erect in the *Barnaby's* belly cradle.

It was indeed a vizad's command cruiser!

He scampered up the ramp to its main lock. The seal, he saw, was still in place, evidencing the cruiser was unmastered and untampered with in transit. With a quick jerk he ripped off the seal and spoke:

"Ship, I'm your vizad! Open up!"

The lock opened and he jumped inside. "Close the lock and instruct the *Barnaby* to unload you immediately! The *Barnaby* is under attack! Use whatever emergency procedures are necessary to get us into action without delay!"

"Yes, Vizad. Welcome aboard," replied the cruiser.

Olivine could hear clangings dimly through the hull as he scurried up to the command deck. He hoped the *Barnaby* wasn't giving the cruiser an argument about the unloading. The Patrol's ships, as well as its men, had orders of rank, and a command cruiser was several steps above a utility tanker.

Indeed, the cruiser was out in space by the time he reached the battle console and studied the situation revealed by the viewscreens.

The attacking Rooster squad was composed of three giant warships—slugburgs—served by at least two dozen twelve-meter minimans—tiny one-man ships which were, at the moment, carrying the brunt of the assault while the slug-burgs held position outside effective range of the *Barnaby's* weaponry.

It was a typical gauntlet pattern of attack, used by the pirates when a victim's best hope was to run for her protective destination with minimal evasive maneuvering. The pirates were strung out in front of the *Barnaby*, with the three slug-burg biggies holding their distance while the minimans drifted back, singly and in clusters, to take passing slaps at the utility tanker.

Even six or eight at a time, the little attackers could not blast the *Barnaby* out of action. That wasn't their job. They could wear the Patrol ship down, however, by inflicting small but incremental damages, without risking heavy pirate personnel and tonnage losses in the process. When they had the victim weak and groggy enough, then the biggies would move in for the kill.

Olivine knew what he had to do, and he didn't particularly mind doing it. Loyalty among thieves, he had always thought, was a highly nonsensical concept, anyway. In any event, until his mastery of the command cruiser was accepted beyond question, he had to act like a Patrolman, and act it to the hilt.

"Parallel the *Barnaby* at two hundred kilometers," he snapped, "and slash-laze the attacking minimans! Gimme manual on your hardest forward laze and I'll keep the biggies busy!"

The cruiser's laser offensive flared into action, and the beams, guided by the most brilliant compucortex mountable in a ship, did not miss. One after another the minimans were gashed—often sliced completely through—and simply vanished from the scene of battle as they lost warpage and teetered into normspace, to be instantly left far behind.

But the three biggies were too distant, and their screens too effective, for Olivine to do them real harm with the beam.

The cruiser reported: "Seven minimans destroyed, sir, and the others attempting to disengage."

"Stay after them!" ordered Olivine. "The biggies are pulling back, too. Let's bark at their heels! Cut into any of them you can reach!"

"Yes, sir, Reinforcements will arrive in eighteen minutes, and the *Barnaby* is calling, sir."

"O.K. I'll brief you fully when we have a moment, Ship, but you'd better know now that I'm operating under a cover the *Barnaby* crew doesn't know about. So act on no instruction Proxad Coralon may try to give you. Put him on."

The proxad's enraged face flashed on the viewscreen. "Olivine!" he bellowed. "Get back here with that cruiser or I'll blast you to nebulosity!"

"With the popguns that old scow carries?" leered Olivine. "Don't fantasize, old pal!"

Coralon glared. "Command cruiser 749JN-10, you have been seized by an enemy of the Patrol, an escaped prisoner! Restrict him immediately and return to the hold of the *Barnaby*!"

"My regrets, Proxad Coralon," responded the cruiser, "but your instructions cannot be accepted."

Coralon's look of utter dismay brought a roar of laughter from Olivine. "You've had it, pal!" he gloated. "I'd love to watch you explain at HQ how the hottest ship in space was swiped from the Patrol! I see you in civvies in less than a month, pal. Or they may throw the book at you and give you my cell on Sarfyne Four!"

"You heard him, Cruiser!" the proxad yelled. "You heard him *admit* stealing you! Now return to the *Barnaby*!"

"I cannot comply, Proxad Coralon," said the cruiser.

"Wise up, pal," snickered Olivine. "You know mastery can't be overridden like that! And I'm *master* of this beautiful boat!"

Coralon's shoulders drooped. He knew well enough that, for a Patrol ship of the line, mastery was a total, instant, unquestionable bond.

It had to be that way. A Patrolman's ship had to be loyal beyond all doubt, and nothing short of death, disavowal, or thorough reconditioning could break that loyalty.

"Your time will come, Ollie," the proxad promised grimly.

"Don't hold your breath in the meantime," Olivine chuckled. "Break comm, Ship."

Coralon's face vanished to be replaced with a view of the battle *situation*. The battle, however, was over.

"Where did the biggies get to?" Olivine demanded.

"Their retreat carried them into concealment in the Veil, sir. Shall we continue pursuit?"

"Yeah. We need concealment, too, from the *Barnaby* and those Patrol reinforcements. Move into the Veil, cut down to a safe speed, and keep going. Don't chase any biggies, though, if you happen to detect them in that soup. Let 'em be."

"Very well, sir."

The Veil, the starlit rind of the vast cloud of gas and dust that lay like a barrier between Dusty Roost and the rest of the galaxy, glowed dimly ahead. Suddenly they were in it. Olivine watched as the green dot representing the *Barnaby* slowly faded from the rear screen as the Veil substance blanked out detection. More slowly, the stars of the galaxy faded from sight.

He stood up and stretched luxuriously, feeling a contentment he had seldom experienced. He had succeeded, after years of frustration, to an extent beyond his wildest dreams.

A command cruiser!

The hardest, fastest, fightingest ship ever built! Probably no more than a dozen of them in the universe, and his, being the newest, was doubtless the best.

A ship like this meant power for its master. Power limited only by the master's desire and ability. And by his refusal to be hogtied by the goody-good morality of the Space Patrol.

"Ship, it's time I named you. From now on, you're *Castle*."

"Thank you, Vizad Olivine. I am *Castle*."

"And don't call me by my rank of vizad. Simply address me as Olivine. That will be more in keeping with my cover as an escaped prisoner who stole and mastered you. That's my cover, carefully developed by HQ over a period of eight years. As a criminal, I'm to infiltrate Dusty Roost, and with you to back me up, attain the highest position possible in Rooster leadership, in order to subvert the pirates."

"I understand, sir."

"Good. You were not led to doubt my authorization of mastery by the words of Proxad Coralon?"

"Not at all, sir. I am familiar with prison-ship security measures, sir, and am confident that, even during a pirate attack, you could not have escaped the *Barnaby* against the Patrol's wishes, sir."

Olivine gave a pleased nod, then thought again and felt anxiety hit the pit of his stomach. .

That CIT computer was still dogging him!

But . . . *no!* Not any more. This time the escape wasn't rigged by the Patrol, to send him off like some automatic puppet on a string to do some errand! Escape would have been impossible without the assistance of his polywater doodle. Which the Patrol hadn't known about. He couldn't have got past his cage door without . . .

Still, the *Barnaby's* power had gone on the blink just at the instant the door unlatched . . . and the doodle had been lying on the floor beyond the door.

He gave a soft snort of disgust with himself.

After all, even if the door had been meant to unlatch when the power blinked, it wouldn't have swung open if he hadn't been pushing against it.

And besides, the CIT computer wasn't that stupid . . . or didn't think he was that stupid. For his cage door to unlatch because of a power fluctuation was too obvious an invitation to escape! The computer would *know* he would get wise to a trick like that!

And above all, the Patrol wouldn't let a vizad's command cruiser fall in his hands by intention. Why, nothing short of total pacification of Dusty Roost could make up for the amount of crow the Patrol would have to eat over a blunder like that!

Having thought the matter through to his satisfaction, Olivine gave the pocket containing the doodle an affectionate pat. "Bourbon on the rocks, *Castle*," he ordered.

"Yes, sir."

The serving pedestal rose from the floor. Olivine picked up the frosty glass and drank a toast to his freedom.

Let the Patrol watch my smoke! he gloated silently. *Or their own smoke, because they're the ones who'll be burning!*