

Space Rats of the C.C.C.

Harry Harrison

That's it, matey, pull up a stool! Sure, use that one. Just dump old Phrnnx onto the floor to sleep it off. You know that Krddls can't stand to drink, much less drink *flnnx*; and that topped off with a smoke of the hellish *krmml* weed. Here, let me pour you a mug of *flnnx*, oops, sorry about your sleeve. When it dries you can scrape it off with a knife. Here's to your health and may your tubeliners never fail you when the *kpnnz* hordes are on your tail.

No, sorry, never heard your name before. Too many good men come and go and the good ones die early, aye! Me? You never heard of me. Just call me Old Sarge, as good a name as any. Good men, I say, and the best of them was - well, we'll call him Gentleman Jax. He had another name, but there's a little girl waiting on a planet I could name, a little girl that's waiting and watching the shimmering trails of the deep-spacers when they come, and waiting for a man. So for her sake we'll call him Gentleman Jax, he would have liked that, and she would like that if only she knew, although she must be getting kind of grey, or bald by now, and arthritic from all that sitting and waiting but, golly, that's another story and by Orion it's not for me to tell. That's it, help yourself, a large one. Sure, the green fumes are normal for good *flnnx*, though you better close your eyes when you drink or you'll be blind in a week, ha-ha!, by the sacred name of the Prophet Mrddl!

Yes, I can tell what you're thinking. What's an old space rat like me doing in a dive like this out here at galaxy's end, where the rim stars flicker wanly and the tired photons go slow? I'll tell you what I'm doing, getting drunker than a Planizzian *pfrdffl*, that's what. They say that drink has the power to dim memories and by Cygnus I have some memories that need dimming. I see you looking at those scars on my hands. Each one is a story matey, aye, and the scars on my back each a story and the scars on my ... well, that's a different story. Yes, I'll tell you a story, a true one by Mrddl's holy name, though I might change a name or two, that little girl waiting, you know.

You heard tell of the C.C.C.? I can see by the sudden widening of your eyes and the blanching of your space-tanned skin that you have. Well yours truly, Old Sarge here, was one of the first of the Space Rats of the C.C.C., and my buddy then was the man they know as Gentleman Jax. May Great Kramddl curse his name and blacken the memory of the first day when I first set eyes on him ...

* * * *

‘Graduating class ... ten-SHUN!’

The sergeant’s stentorian voice bellowed forth, cracking like a whiplash across the expectant ears of the mathematically aligned rows of cadets. With the harsh snap of those fateful words a hundred and three incredibly polished bootheels crashed together with a single snap and the eighty-seven cadets of the graduating class snapped to steel-rigid attention. (It should be explained that some of them were from alien worlds, and had different numbers of legs, etc.) Not a breath was drawn, not an eyelid twitched a thousandth of a millilitre as Colonel von Thorax stepped forward, glaring down at them all through the glass monocle in front of his glass eye, close-cropped grey hair stiff as barbed wire, black uniform faultlessly cut and smooth, a *krmml* weed cigarette clutched in the steel fingers of his prosthetic left arm, black gloved fingers of his prosthetic right arm snapping to hatbrim’s edge in a perfect salute, motors whining thinly in his prosthetic lungs to power the brobdignagian roar of his harshly bellowed command.

‘At ease. And listen to me. You are the hand-picked men - and hand-picked things, too, of course - from all the civilized worlds of the galaxy. Six million and forty-three cadets entered the first year of training and most of them washed out in one way or another. Some could not toe the mark. Some were expelled and shot for buggery. Some believed the lying commy pinko crying liberal claims that continuous war and slaughter is not necessary and they were expelled, and shot as well. One by one the weaklings fell away through the years, leaving the hard core of the Corps – *you!* The Corpsmen of the first graduating class of the C.C.C! Ready to spread the benefits of civilization to the stars. Ready at last to find out what the initials C.C.C. stand for!’

A mighty roar went up from the massed throats, a cheer of hoarse masculine enthusiasm that echoed and boomed from the stadium walls. At a signal from von Thorax a switch was thrown and a great shield of imperviomite slid into place above, sealing the stadium from prying eyes and ears and snooping spyish rays. The roaring voices roared on enthusiastically - and many an eardrum was burst that day! - yet were stilled in an instant when the Colonel raised his hand.

‘You Corpsmen will not be alone when you push the frontiers of civilization out to the barbaric stars. Oh no! You will each have a faithful companion by your side. First man, first row - step forward and meet your

faithful companion!

The Corpsman called out stepped forward a smart pace and clicked his heels sharply, said click being echoed in the clack of a thrown wide door and, without conscious intent, every eye in that stadium was drawn in the direction of the dark doorway from which emerged...

How to describe it? How to describe the whirlwind that batters you, the storm that engulfs you, the spacewarp that enwraps you? It was as indescribable as any natural force!

It was a creature three metres high at the shoulders, four metres high at the ugly, drooling, tooth-clashing head, a whirlwinded, spacewarped storm that rushed forward on four piston-like legs, great-clawed feet tearing grooves in the untearable surface of the impervitium flooring, a monster born of madness and nightmares that reared up before them and bellowed in a soul-destroying screech.

'There!' Colonel von Thorax bellowed in answer, blood-specked spittle mottling his lips. '*There* is your faithful companion, the mutacamel, mutation of the noble beast of Good Old Earth, symbol and pride of the C.C.C. - the *Combat Camel Corps*! Corpsman meet your camel!'

The selected Corpsman stepped forward and raised his arm in greeting to this noble beast, which promptly bit the arm off. His shrill screams mingled with the barely stifled gasps of his companions who watched with more than casual interest as camel trainers girt with brass-buckled leather harness rushed out and beat back the protesting camel with clubs while a medic clamped a tourniquet on the wounded man's stump and dragged his limp body away.

'That is your first lesson on combat camels,' the Colonel cried huskily. 'Never raise your arms to them. Your companion with a newly grafted arm will, I am certain, ha-ha!, remember this little lesson. Next man, next companion!'

Again the thunder of rushing feet and the high-pitched, gurgling, scream-like roar of the combat camel at full charge. This time the Corpsman kept his arm down and the camel bit his head off.

'Can't graft on a head, I'm afraid,' the Colonel leered maliciously at them. 'A moment of silence for our departed companion who has gone to the big rocket pad in the sky. That's enough. Ten-SHUN! You will now proceed to the camel training area where you will learn to get along with

your faithful companions. Never forgetting that they each have a complete set of false teeth made of imperviomite, as well as razor sharp claw caps of this same substance. Dis-MISSED!

The student barracks of the C.C.C. was well known for its 'no frills' or rather 'no coddling' decor and comforts. The beds were impervitium slabs - no spine-sapping mattresses here! - and the sheets of thin burlap. No blankets of course, not with the air kept at a healthy four degrees centigrade. The rest of the comforts matched, so that it was a great surprise to the graduates to find unaccustomed luxuries awaiting them upon their return from the ceremonies and training. There was a *shade* on each bare-bulbed reading light and a nice soft two centimetre-thick pillow on every bed. Already they were reaping the benefits of all the years of labour.

Now, among all the students, the top student by far was named M-----. There are some secrets that must not be told, names that are important to loved ones and neighbours, therefore I shall draw the cloak of anonymity over the true identity of the man known as M-----. Suffice to call him 'Steel', for that was the nickname of someone who knew him best. 'Steel', or Steel as we can call him, had at this time a roommate by the name of L-----. Later, much later, L----- was to be called by certain people 'Gentleman Jax', so for the purpose of this narrative we shall call him 'Gentleman Jax' as well, or perhaps just plain 'Jax', or Jax as some people pronounce it. Jax was second only to Steel in scholastic and sporting attainments and the two were the best of chums. They had been roommates for the past year and now they were back in their room with their feet up, basking in the unexpected luxury of the new furnishings, sipping decaffeinated coffee, called koffee, and smoking deeply of the school's own brand of denicotineized cigarettes, called Denikeig by the manufacturer but always referred to humorously by the C.C.C. students as 'gaspers' or 'lungbusters'.

'Throw me over a gasper, will you, Jax,' Steel said, from where he lolled on the bed, hands behind his head, dreaming of what was in store for him now that he would be having his own camel soon. 'Ouch!' he chuckled as the pack of gaspers caught him in the eye. He drew out one of the slim white forms and tapped it on the wall to ignite it then drew in a lungful of refreshing smoke. 'I still can't believe it . . .' he smoke-ringed.

'Well it's true enough, by Mrddl,' Jax smiled. 'We're graduates. Now throw back that pack of lungbusters so I can join you in a draw or two.'

Steel complied, but did it so enthusiastically that the pack hit the wall and instantly all the cigarettes ignited and the whole thing burst into flame. A glass of water doused the conflagration but, while it was still fizzling fitfully,

a light flashed redly on the comscreen.

'High priority message,' Steel bit out, slamming down the actuator button. Both youths snapped to rigid attention as the screen filled with the stern visage of Colonel von Thorax.

'M-----, L-----, to my office on the triple.' The words fell like leaden weights from his lips. What could it mean?

'What can it mean?' Jax asked as they hurtled down a dropchute at close to the speed of gravity.

'We'll find out quickly enough,' Steel ejaculated as they drew up at the 'old man's' door and activated the announcer button.

Moved by some hidden mechanism the door swung wide and, not without a certain amount of trepidation, they entered. But what was this? *This!* The Colonel was looking at them and smiling, *smiling*, an expression never before known to cross his iron visage at any time.

'Make yourself comfortable, lads,' he indicated, pointing at comfortable chairs that rose out of the floor at the touch of a button. 'You'll find gaspers in the arms of these servo-chairs, as well as Valumian wine or Snaggian beer.'

'No koffee?' Jax open-mouthedly expostulated and they all laughed.

'I don't think you really want it,' the Colonel susurrated coyly through his artificial larynx. 'Drink up lads, you're Space Rats of the C.C.C. now and your youth is behind you. Now, look at that.'

That was a three-dimensional image that sprang into being in the air before them at the touch of a button, an image of a spacer like none ever seen before. She was as slender as a swordfish, fine-wedged as a bird, solid as a whale and as armed to the teeth as an alligator.

'Holy Kolon,' Steel sighed in open-mouthed awe. 'Now *that* is what I call a hunk o' rocket!'

'Some of us prefer to call it the *Indefectible*,' the Colonel said, not unhumorously.

'Is that *her*? We heard something ...'

'You heard very little for we have had this baby under wraps ever since the earliest stage. She has the largest engines ever built, new improved MacPherson's [The MacPherson engine was first mentioned in the author's story, *Rocket Rangers of the I.R.T.* (Spicy-Weird Stories, 1923).] of the most advanced design, Kelly Drive [Loyal readers first discovered the Kelly Drive in the famous book *Hell Hounds of the Coal Sack Cluster* (Slimecreeper Press, Ltd, 1931), also published in the German language as *Teufelhund Nach der Knackwurst Express*. Translated into Italian by Re Umberto, unpublished to date.] gear that has been improved to where you would not recognize it in a month of Thursdays - as well as double-strength Fitzroy projectors [A media breakthrough was made when the Fitzroy projector first appeared in *Female Space Zombies of Venus* in 1936 in True Story Confessions.] that make the old ones look like a kid's pop-gun. And I've saved the best for last...'

'*Nothing* can be better than what you have already told us,' Steel broke in.

'That's what *you* think!' the Colonel laughed, not unkindly, with a sound like tearing steel. 'The best news is that Steel, you are going to be Captain of this space-going super-dread-naught, while lucky Jax is Chief Engineer.'

'Lucky Jax would be a lot happier if he was Captain instead of king of the stokehold,' he muttered and they all laughed at this joke. All except him because it was no joke.

'Everything is completely automated,' the Colonel continued, 'so it can be flown by a crew of two. But I must warn you that it has experimental gear aboard so whoever flies her has to volunteer...'

'I volunteer!' Steel shouted.

'I have to go to the terlet,' Jax said, rising, though he sat again instantly when the ugly blaster leaped from its holster to the Colonel's hand. 'Ha-ha, just a joke, I volunteer, sure.'

'I knew I could count on you lads. The C.C.C. breeds *men*. Camels too, of course. So here is what you do. At 0304 hours tomorrow you two in the *Indefectible* will crack ether headed out Cygnus way. In the direction of a *certain* planet.'

'Let me guess, if I can, that is,' Steel said grimly through tight-clenched teeth. 'You don't mean to give us a crack at the larshnik-loaded world of Biru-2, do you?'

'I do. This is the larshnik's prime base, the seat of operation of all their drug and gambling traffic, where the white-slavers offload and the queer green is printed, site of the *flinx* distilleries and lair of the pirate hordes.'

'If you want action that sounds like *it!*' Steel grimaced.

'You are not just whistling through your back teeth,' the Colonel agreed. 'If I were younger and had a few less replaceable parts this is the kind of opportunity I would leap at...'

'You can be Chief Engineer,' Jax hinted.

'Shut up,' the Colonel implied. 'Good luck, gentlemen, for the honour of the C.C.C. rides with you.'

'But not the camels?' Steel asked.

'Maybe next time. There are, well, adjustment problems. We have lost four more graduates since we have been sitting here. Maybe we'll even change animals. Make it the C.D.C.'

'With combat *dogs?*' Jax asked.

'Either that or donkeys. Or dugongs. But it is my worry, not yours. All you guys have to do is get out there and crack Biru-2 wide open. I know you can do it.'

If the stern-faced Corpsmen had any doubts they kept them to themselves, for that is the way of the Corps. They did what had to be done and the next morning, at exactly 0304:00 hours, the mighty bulk of the *Indefectible* hurled itself into space. The roaring MacPherson engines poured quintillions of ergs of energy into the reactor drive until they were safely out of the gravity field of Mother Earth. Jax laboured over his engines, shovelling the radioactive *transvestite* into the gaping maw of the hungry furnace, until Steel signalled from the bridge that it was 'changeover' time. Then they changed over to the space-eating Kelly drive. Steel jammed home the button that activated the drive and the great ship leaped starward at seven times the speed of light. [When the inventor, Patsy Kelly, was asked how ships could move at seven times the speed of light when the limiting velocity of matter, according to Einstein, was the speed of light, he responded in his droll Goidelic way, with a shrug, 'Well - sure and I guess Einstein was wrong.'] Since the drive was fully automatic Jax freshened up in the fresher while his clothes were

automatically washed in the washer, then proceeded to the bridge.

‘Really,’ Steel said, his eyebrows climbing up his forehead. ‘I didn’t know you went in for polkadot jockstraps.’

‘It was the only thing I had clean. The washer dissolved the rest of my clothes.’

‘Don’t worry about it. It’s the larshniks of Biru-2 who have to worry! We hit atmosphere in exactly seventeen minutes and I have been thinking about what to do when that happens.’

‘Well I certainly hope *someone* has! I haven’t had time to draw a deep breath, much less think.’

‘Don’t worry, old pal, we are in this together. The way I figure it we have two choices. We can blast right in, guns roaring, or we can slip in by stealth.’

‘Oh you really *have* been thinking, haven’t you?’

‘I’ll ignore that because you are tired. Strong as we are, I think the land-based batteries are stronger. So I suggest we slip in without being noticed.’

‘Isn’t that a little hard when you are flying in a thirty-million-ton spacer?’

‘Normally, yes. But do you see this button here marked *invisibility!* While you were loading the fuel they explained this to me. It is a new invention, never used in action before, that will render us invisible and impervious to detection by any of their detection instruments.’

‘Now that’s more like it. Fifteen minutes to go, we should be getting mighty close. Turn on the old invisibility ray...’

‘Don’t !!’

‘Done. Now what’s your problem?’

‘Nothing really. Except the experimental invisibility device is not expected to last more than thirteen minutes before it burns out.’

Unhappily, this proved to be the case. One hundred miles above the

barren, blasted surface of Biru-2 the good old *Indefectible* popped into existence.

In the minutest fraction of a millisecond the mighty space-sonar and superadar had locked grimly onto the invading ship while the sublights flickered their secret signals, waiting for the correct response that would reveal the invader as one of theirs.

'I'll send a signal, stall them, these larshniks aren't too bright,' Steel laughed. He thumbed on the microphone, switched to the interstellar emergency frequency, then bit out the rasping words in a sordid voice. 'Agent X-9 to prime base. Had a firefight with the patrol, shot up my code books, but I got all the-----s, ha-ha! Am coming home with a load of 800,000 long tons of the hellish *krmml* weed.'

The larshnik response was instantaneous. From the gaping, pitted orifices of thousands of giant blaster cannon there vomited force-ravaging rays of energy that strained the very fabric of space itself. These coruscating forces blasted into the impregnable screens of the old *Indefectible* which, sadly, was destined not to get much older, and instantly punched their way through and splashed coruscatingly from the very hull of the ship itself. Mere matter could not stand against such forces unlocked in the coruscating bowels of the planet itself so that the impregnable imperialite metal walls instantly vapourized into a thin gas which was, in turn, vapourized into the very electrons and protons (and neutrons too) of which it was made.

Mere flesh and blood could not stand against such forces. But in the few seconds it took the coruscating energies to eat through the force screens, hull, vapourized gas and protons, the reckless pair of valiant Corpsmen had hurled themselves headlong into their space armour. And just in time! The ruin of the once great ship hit the atmosphere and seconds later slammed into the poison soil of Biru-2.

To the casual observer it looked like the end. The once mighty queen of the spaceways would fly no more for she now consisted of no more than two hundred pounds of smoking junk. Nor was there any sign of life from the tragic wreck, as was evidenced when surface crawlers erupted from a nearby secret hatch concealed in the rock and crawled through the smoking remains with all their detectors detecting at maximum gain. *Report!* the radio signal wailed. *No sign of life to fifteen decimal places!* snapped back the cursing operator of the crawlers before he signalled them to return to base. Their metal cleats clanked viciously across the barren soil and then

they were gone. All that remained was the cooling metal wreck hissing with despair as the poison rain poured like tears upon it.

Were these two good friends dead? I thought you would never ask. Unbeknownst to the larshnik technicians, just one millisecond before the wreck struck down, two massive and almost indestructible suits of space armour had been ejected by coiled steelite springs, sent flying to the very horizon where they landed behind a concealing spine of rock, which, just by *chance* was the spine of rock into which the secret hatch had been built that concealed the crawlway from which the surface crawlers with their detectors emerged for their fruitless search, to which they returned under control of their cursing operator who, stoned again with hellish *krmm!* weed, never noticed the quick flick of the detector needles as the crawlers reentered the tunnel this time bearing on their return journey a cargo they had not exited with as the great door slammed shut behind them.

‘We’ve done it! We’re inside their defences!’ Steel rejoiced. ‘And no thanks to you, pushing that Mrddl-cursed invisibility button.’

‘Well, how was I to know?’ Jax grated. ‘Anyways, we don’t have a ship anymore but we *do* have the element of surprise. They don’t know that we are here, but we know *they* are here!’

‘Good thinking... hssst!’ he hissed. ‘Stay low, we’re coming to something.’

The clanking crawlers rattled into the immense chamber cut into the living stone and now filled with deadly war machines of all descriptions. The only human there, if he could be called human, was the larshnik operator whose soiled fingertips sprang to the gun controls the instant he spotted the intruders, but he never stood a chance. Precisely-aimed rays from two blasters zeroed in on him and in a millisecond he was no more than a charred fragment of smoking flesh in the chair. Corps justice was striking at last to the larshnik lair.

Justice it was, impersonal and final, impartial and murderous, for there were no ‘innocents’ in this lair of evil. Ravening forces of civilized vengeance struck down all that crossed their path as the two chums rode a death-dealing combat gun through the corridors of infamy.

‘This is the big one,’ Steel grimaced as they came to an immense door of gold-plated impervialite before which a suicide squad committed suicide under the relentless scourge of fire. There was more feeble

resistance, smokily, coruscatingly and noisily exterminated, before this last barrier went down and they rode in triumph into the central control now manned by a single figure at the main panel, Superlarsh himself, secret head of the empire of interstellar crime.

‘You have met your destiny,’ Steel intoned grimly, his weapon fixed unmovingly upon the black-robed figure in the opaque space helmet. ‘Take off that helmet or you die upon the instant.’

His only reply was a slobbered growl of inchoate rage and for a long instant the black-gloved hands trembled over the gun controls. Then, ever so slowly, these same hands raised themselves to clutch at the helmet, to turn it, to lift it slowly off...

‘By the sacred name of the Prophet Mrdd!’ the two Corps-men gasped in unison, struck speechless by what they saw.

‘Yes, so now you know,’ grated Superlarsh through angry teeth. ‘But, ha-ha, I’ll bet you never suspected.’

‘You!!’ Steel insuflated, breaking the frozen silence. ‘You! *You!!* YOU!!!’

‘Yes, me, I, Colonel von Thorax, Commandant of the C.C.C. You never suspected me and, ohh, how I laughed at you all of the time.’

‘But...’ Jax stammered. ‘*Why?*’

‘Why? The answer is obvious to any but democratic interstellar swine like you. The only thing the larshniks of the galaxy had to fear was something like the C.C.C, a powerful force impervious to outside bribery or sedition, noble in the cause of righteousness. You could have caused us trouble. Therefore we founded the C.C.C. and I have long been head of both organizations. Our recruiters bring in the best that the civilized planets can offer and I see to it that most of them are brutalized, morale destroyed, bodies wasted and spirits crushed so they are no longer a danger. Of course a few always make it through the course no matter how disgusting I make it, every generation has its share of super-masochists, but I see that these are taken care of pretty quickly.’

‘Like being sent on suicide missions?’ Steel asked ironly.

‘That’s a good way.’

'Like the one we were sent on - but it *didn't work!* Say your prayers, you filthy larshnik, for you are about to meet your maker!'

'Maker? Prayers? Are you out of your skull? All larshniks are atheists to the end...'

And then it was the end, in a coruscating puff of vapour, dead with those vile words upon his lips, no less than he deserved.

'Now what?' Steel asked.

'This,' Jax responded, shooting the gun from his hand and imprisoning him instantly with an unbreakable paralysis ray. 'No more second best for me, in the engine room with you on the bridge. This is *my* ball game from here on in.'

'Are you mad?' Steel fluttered through paralysed lips.

'Sane for the first time in my life. The superlarsh is dead, long live the new superlarsh. It's mine, the whole galaxy, *mine.*'

'And what about me?'

'I should kill you, but that would be too easy. And you did share your chocolate bars with me. You will be blamed for this entire debacle, for the death of Colonel von Thorax *and* for the disaster here at larshnik prime base. Every man's hand will be against you and you will be an outcast and will flee for your life to the farflung outposts of the galaxy where you will live in terror.'

'Remember the chocolate bars!'

'I do. All I ever got were the stale ones. Now ... GO!'

* * * *

You want to know my name? Old Sarge is good enough. My story? Too much for your tender ears, boyo. Just top up the glasses, that's the way, and join me in a toast. At least that much for a poor old man who has seen much in this long lifetime. A toast of bad luck, bad cess I say, may Great Kramddl curse forever the man some know as Gentleman Jax. What, hungry?, not me - no - NO! Not a chocolate bar!!!!

v1.1 - fixed missing quotes and some typos. billbo196, Dec 2008