

Basic Right by **ERIC FRANK RUSSELL**

There is no visible horizon beyond which the unleashed intellect cannot advance. But where is it taking mankind? Compare the brutal complexities of galactic conquest, as pictured here and in Poll' Anderson's Genius, with the possibility of man's conquest of himself. This story provides the perfect closing to our adventure in exploring the enormous scope of man's intelligence and of the universe he inhabits.

THEY CAME OUT of the starfield under the earth, from the region of a brilliant sun called Sigma Oetantis. Ten huge copper-colored ships. Nobody saw them land. They were astute enough to sit awhile in the howling wastes of Antarctica, scout around and seize all twenty members of the International South Polar Expedition.

Even then the world did not take alarm. The newcomers, who titled themselves Raidans, hazarded a guess that within a fortnight earth would become curious about the fate of the captured. But it didn't work out like that at all; contrary to expectations the Terran prisoners proved so submissive and cooperative.

By signs and gestures the Raidans conveyed their cover-up order: "Send out reassuring messages."

The captives did it willingly, in straightforward manner, playing no tricks, well-nigh falling over themselves in eagerness to please. Routine signals from the polar expedition continued to be picked up by listening-posts in Australia, New Zealand, and Chile. Nobody found reason to suspect that anything out of the ordinary had occurred down there within the ice barrier where blizzards raged throughout the long-drawn night.

Within the next eleven weeks the invaders learned the Terran language, devoting all their time to picking it up as fast and fluently as possible. This chore could have been avoided by insisting that the prisoners learn to speak Raidan but the tactic would have involved loss of conversational privacy. The Raidans preferred to do the work and keep their talk strictly to themselves.

In the twelfth week Zalumar, commander of the fleet, summoned Lakin, his personal aide. "Lakin, there is no need for us to waste any more hours upon this animal gabble. We can now speak it well enough to make ourselves properly understood. It is time to get out of this frozen place and assert ourselves in conditions of comfort."

"Yes, sire," agreed Lakin, heartened by the thought of coming sunshine and warmth.

"The leader of these prisoners is named Gordon Fox. I wish to speak with him. Bring him to me."

"Yes, sire." Lakin hastened out, returned shortly with the captive.

He was a tall, lean Terran, lank-haired, his face adorned with a polar beard. His gray eyes examined Zalumar, noting the broad shoulders, the long, boneless arms, the yellow eyes, the curious green fuzz overlying the skin. Zalumar found himself enjoying this inspection because it was made with a curious mixture of servility and admiration.

"I have something to say to you, Fox."

"Yes, sire?"

"Doubtless you've been wondering why we are here, what our intentions are, what is going to happen in the near future, eh?" Without waiting for a reply, he went on, "The answer is brief and to the point: we are going to take over your world."

He watched the other's face, seeking fear, shock, anger, any of the emotions normally to be expected. But he detected none of them. On the contrary, Fox seemed gratified by the prospect. There was no rage, no defiance, nothing but amiable complacency. Maybe the fellow had failed to grasp precisely what was meant.

"We are going to assume ownership of Terra lock, stock, and barrel," emphasized Zalumar, still watching him. "We are going to confiscate your world because the rewards of life belong to the most deserving. That is our opinion. We have the power to make it the only acceptable opinion. Do you

understand me, Fox?"

"Yes, sire."

"The prospect does not annoy you?"

"No, sire."

"Why doesn't it?"

Fox shrugged philosophically. "Either you are cleverer than us or you aren't, one way or the other, and that is that. If you aren't, you won't be able to conquer this world no matter what you say or do."

"But if we are cleverer?"

"I guess we'll benefit from your rule. You can't govern us without teaching us things worth learning."

"This," declared Zalumar, with a touch of wonder, "is the first time in our history that we've encountered so reasonable an attitude. I hope all the other Terrans are like you. If so, this will prove the easiest conquest to date."

"They won't give you any bother," Fox assured.

"You must belong to an amazingly placid species," Zalumar offered.

"We have our own peculiar ways of looking at things, of doing things."

"They appear to be vastly different from everyone else's ways, so different as to seem almost contrary to nature." Zalumar put on a thin smile. "However, it is a matter of no importance. Very soon your people will look at everything in *our* way, do everything in our way. Alternatively, they will cease to exist."

"They're in no hurry to die," said Fox.

"Well, they're normal enough in that respect. I had you brought here to inform you of what we intend to do and, more importantly, to show you why your people had better let us do it without argument or opposition. I shall use you and your fellow captives as liaison officers, therefore it is necessary to convince you that your world's choice lies between unquestioning obedience or complete extermination. After that, it will be your duty to persuade Terran authorities to do exactly as we tell them. Lakin will take you to the projection room and show you some very interesting pictures."

"Pictures?"

"Yes, three-dimensional ones in full color. They will demonstrate what happened to Planet Ki4 whose people were stupid enough to think they could defy us and get away with it. We made an example of them, an object lesson to others. What we did to their world we can do to any planet including this one." He gave a careless wave of his hand. "Take him away and show him, Lakin."

After they'd gone he lay back in his scat and felt satisfied. Once again it was about to be demonstrated that lesser life-forms are handicapped by questions of ethics, of morals, of right and wrong. They just hadn't the brains to understand that greed, brutality, and ruthlessness are nothing more than terms of abuse for efficiency.

Only the Raidans, it seemed, had the wisdom to learn and apply Nature's law that victory belongs to the sharp in tooth and swift in claw.

In the projection room Lakin turned a couple of switches, made a few minor adjustments to controls. Nearby a large grayish sphere bloomed to life. At its middle floated a tiny bead of intense light; near its inner surface swam a smaller, darker bead with one face silvered by the center illumination.

"Now watch!"

They studied the sphere. After a short while the dark outermost bead suddenly swelled and blazed into fire, almost but not quite rivaling the center one with the intensity of its light. Lakin reversed the switches. The two glowing beads disappeared, the big sphere resumed its dull grayness.

"That," said Lakin, having the grace not to smack his lips, "is the actual record of the expulsion from the stage of life of two thousand million fools. The cosmos will never miss them. They were born, they served their ordained purpose, and they departed—forever. Would you like to know what that purpose was?"

"If you please," said Fox, very politely.

"They were created so that their wholesale slaughter might knock some sense into their sector of the cosmos."

"And did it?"

"Beyond all doubt." Lakin let go a cold laugh. "On every planet in the vicinity the inhabitants fought each other for the privilege of kissing our feet." He let his yellow eyes linger speculatively upon the other. "We don't expect you to believe all this, not right now."

"Don't you?"

"Of course not. Anyone can fake a stereoscopic record of cosmic disaster. You'd be gullible indeed if you let us confiscate your world on the strength of nothing better than a three-dimensional picture, wouldn't you?"

"Credulity has nothing to do with it," assured Fox. "You want to take us over. We're glad to be taken over. That's all there is to it."

"Look, we can back up our pictures with proof. We can show your own astronomers upon their own star maps exactly where a minor sun has become a binary. We can name and prove the date on which this change took place. If that doesn't satisfy them, we can convert to a ball of flaming gas any petty satellite within this system that they care to choose. We can show them what happens and demonstrate that we made it happen." He stared at Fox, his expression slightly baffled. "Do you really mean to say that such proof will not be required?"

"I don't think so. The great majority will accept your claims without argument. A few skeptics may quibble but they can be ignored."

Lakin frowned in evident dissatisfaction. "I don't understand this. One would almost think your kind was eager to be conquered. It is not a normal reaction."

"Normal by whose standards?" asked Fox. "We are aliens, aren't we? You must expect us to have alien mentalities, alien ways of looking at things."

"I need no lecture from you about alien mentalities," snapped Lakin, becoming irritated. "We Raidans have handled a large enough variety of them. We've mastered more life-forms than your kind can imagine. And I still say that your attitude is not normal. If Terra reacts in the way you seem to think it will, without proof, without being given good reason to fear, then everyone here must be a natural-born slave."

"What's wrong with that?" Fox countered. "If Nature in her wisdom has designed your kind to be the master race, why shouldn't she have created my kind as slaves?"

"I don't like the way you gloat about your slavery," shouted Lakin. "If Terrans think they can outwit us, they've another think coming. Do you understand?"

"Most certainly I understand," confirmed Fox, as soothingly as possible.

"Then return to your comrades and tell them what you have seen, what you've been told. If any of them wish for further evidence, bring them here immediately. I will answer their questions, provide any proof for which they may ask."

"Very well."

Sitting on the edge of the table, Lakin watched the other go out. He remained seated for ten tedious minutes. Then he fidgeted for five more, finally mooched several times around the room. Eventually Fox looked in.

"They are all willing to take my word for it."

"Nobody desires to learn more?" Lakin showed his incredulity.

"No."

"They accept everything without question?"

"Yes," said Fox. "I told you they probably would, didn't I?"

Lakin did not deign to answer that one. He made a curt gesture of dismissal, closed the projection room, went back to the main cabin. Zalumar was still there, talking to Heisham, who was the fleet's chief engineer.

Breaking off the conversation, Zalumar said to Lakin, "What happened? Did the bearded low-life get the usual fit of hysterics?"

"No, sire. On the contrary, he appears to enjoy the prospect of his world being mastered."

"I am not at all surprised," commented Zalumar. "These Terrans are philosophical to the point of

idiocy." His sharp eyes noted the other's face. "Why do you look so sour?"

"I don't like the attitude of these aliens, sire."

"Why not? It makes things easy for us. Or do you prefer to get everything the hard way?"

Lakin said nothing.

"Let us congratulate ourselves upon our good fortune," encouraged Zalumar, oozing oily self-confidence. "Victory without battle comes far cheaper than one paid for in blood. A planet mastered is worth infinitely more than a world destroyed."

Speaking up with sudden resolve, Lakin said, "According to the books we've found here, and according to our own preliminary observations, these Terrans have a civilization only a couple of jumps behind our own. They have short-range spaceships on regular runs to their outer planets. They've even got that small colony we noticed on the system of their nearest star. All that has to be born of and supported by a technology that cannot be the creation of imbeciles."

"I agree," chipped in Heisham, with the enthusiasm of an engineer. "I've been studying the details of their ships. These Terrans are supposed to be about twenty thousand years younger than we—but technically they're nothing like as far behind. Therefore they must—"

"Quiet!" roared Zalumar. He paused to let ensuing silence sink in, then continued in lower tones. "All species are afflicted by what they consider to be virtues. We know that from our own firsthand experience, don't we? The disease of goodness varies as between one life form and another. This happens to be the first world we've discovered on which the prime virtue is obedience. They may have a modicum of brains but they've all been brought up to respect their betters." He threw his listener a sardonic glance. "And you, an experienced space-warrior, permit it to surprise you, allow it to worry you. What is the matter with you, eh?"

"It is only that their submissive attitude runs contrary to my every instinct."

"Naturally, my dear Lakin, naturally. We submit to nobody. But surely it is self-evident that Terrans are not Raidans, never have been, never will be."

"Quite right," approved Heisham.

Now under double-fire, Lakin subsided. But deep down within himself he wasn't satisfied. Within this peculiar situation was something sadly and badly out of kilter, his sixth sense told him that.

The move was made next day. Ten ships rose from the barren land hearing with them the twenty members of the I. S. P. Expedition. In due time they landed upon a great spaceport just beyond the environs of a sprawling city which, Fox had assured, was as good a place as any in which to tell the world of the fate that had come upon it from the stars.

Zalumar summoned Fox, said, "I do not go to native leaders. They come to me."

"Yes, sire."

"So you will fetch them. Take all your comrades with you so that if necessary they may confirm your story." He eyed the other, his face hard. "With what we've got we do not need hostages. Any treacherous attack upon us will immediately be answered a hundredfold without regard for age or sex. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sire."

"Then get going. And you won't take all day about it if you're wise."

He strolled to the rim of the flagship's air lock door and watched the twenty make off across the hot concrete, hurrying toward the city. They were still hairy-faced and wearing full polar kit under the blazing sun. Four clean-shaven Terrans in neat, cool uniforms drove up and braked at the bottom of the ladder. One got out of the car, shaded his eyes as he looked upward at the alien figure framed in the lock.

With total lack of amazement, this newcomer called, "You sent no beam warning of arrival. We've had to divert two ships to another port. Carelessness like that makes accidents. Where are you from?"

"Do you really expect me to know your language and be familiar with your rules and regulations?" asked Zalumar, interestedly.

"Yes, for the reason that you had twenty Terrans with you. They know the law even if you don't. Why didn't you beam a warning?"

"Because," said Zalumar, enjoying himself, "we are above your laws. Henceforth they are abolished

so far as we are concerned."

"Is that so?" gave back the other. "Well, you're going to learn different mighty soon."

"On the contrary," retorted Zalumar, "it is you who will learn, we who shall teach." With that he returned to his cabin, smiled to himself, fiddled around with a thick file of papers. Three hours later he was called to the lock door by a crewman. He went there, looked down upon the same uniformed quartette as before.

Their spokesman said, blankly and unemotionally, "I'm ordered to apologize to you for questioning your right to land without warning. I am also instructed to inform you that certain persons whom you wish to see are now on their way here."

Acknowledging this with a sniff of disdain, Zalumar went back to his desk. A multijet plane screamed far overhead and he ignored it. Doubtless some of the crew were leaning out the locks and nervily watching lest something long, black, and lethal drop upon them from the sky. But he couldn't be bothered himself. He had these Terrans weighed up—they just wouldn't dare. He was dead right, too. They didn't dare. The shrill sound died over the horizon and nothing happened.

Some time later Fox appeared with two other I.S.P. members named McKenzie and Vitelli. They conducted a bunch of twelve civilians into the cabin. The dozen newcomers lined up against a wall, studied the Raidan commander with frank curiosity but no visible enmity.

Fox explained, "These, sire, are twelve of Terra's elected leaders. There are thirty more scattered around, some in far places. I regret that it is not possible to trace and bring them here today."

"No matter." Zalumar lay back in his chair and surveyed the dozen with suitable contempt. They did not fidget under his gaze nor show any signs of uneasiness. They merely gazed back steadily, eye for eye, like a group of impassive lizards. It occurred to him that it was well-nigh impossible to discern what they were thinking. Oh, well, the time-honored tactic was to start by kicking them right in the teeth.

"Let's get something straight," harshed Zalumar at the twelve. "So far as we are concerned, you are animals. Lower animals. Cows. My cows. When I order you to produce milk you will strain to produce it. When I order you to moo you will promptly moo, all together, in concert with the other thirty who are absent."

Nobody said anything, nobody got hot under the collar, nobody appeared to care a solitary damn.

"If any one of you fails to obey orders or shows lack of alacrity in doing so, he will be jerked out of mundane existence and replaced with a good, trustworthy, and melodious mooer." Silence.

"Any questions?" he invited, feeling a little irritated by their bland acceptance of racial inferiority. A scowl, just a frightened half-concealed scowl from any one of them would have given him much inward pleasure and enabled him to taste the full, fruity flavor of conquest. As it was, they made victory seem appallingly insipid; a triumph that was no triumph at all because there had been nothing to beat down.

They didn't so much as give him the satisfaction of meeting their queries with a few devastating retorts, of crushing them with responses calculated to emphasize their individual and collective stupidity. Still in line against the wall, they posed silently, without questions, and waited for his next order. Looking at them, he got the weird feeling that if he'd suddenly bawled, "Moo!" they'd have all mooed together, at the tops of their voices—and in some mysterious, elusive way the laugh would be on him.

Snatching up the intercom phone, he called Captain Arnikoi and when that worthy arrived, said, "Take these twelve simpletons to the registry on Cruiser Seven. Have them thoroughly recorded from toenails to hair. Extract from them all the details you can get concerning thirty others who have yet to arrive. We shall want to know who the culprit is if one of them fails to turn up." "As you order, sire," said Amikoj.

"That's not all," continued Zalumar. "When you've finished I want you to select the least cretinous specimen and return him to this ship. He will be retained here. It will be his duty to summon the others whenever I require them."

"It shall be done, sire."

Zalumar now switched attention back to the twelve. "After you have been registered you may go back to your posts in the city. Your first act will be to declare this spaceport the sole and exclusive property of the Raidan fleet now occupying it. All Terran officials will be removed from the port, none

will be allowed to enter except with my permission."

They received that in the same silence as before. He watched them go out, moving dully along one behind the other, following Arnikoj's lead. Great God in Heaven, what witless animals they were!

Zalumar flow stared querulously at Fox, McKenzie, and Vitelli. "Where are the other seventeen members of your expedition?"

"They remained in the city, sire," explained Fox.

"Remained? Who said they could remain? They are required here, here!" He slammed an angry fist upon the desk top. "They have not the slightest right to stay behind without an order to that effect. Who do they think they are? I shall swiftly show them how we deal with those who think they can do as they like. I shall—"

"Sire," chipped in Fox, cutting short the tirade, "they asked if they might stay a short while to clean up and change into more suitable clothing. I told them I felt sure you would approve of them looking more presentable. It didn't seem reasonable to suppose that you might resent their efforts to please you."

A momentary confusion afflicted Zalumar's mind. If a trooper goes AWOL solely to fetch his commanding officer a gold medal, what does the latter do about it? For the first time he sensed a vague touch of the indefinable something that was troubling the uneasy Lakin. All was not quite as it should be. This Fox fellow, for instance, was twisting his arm in front of two witnesses and there was nothing much he could do about it. Determined to concoct a gripe, he growled, "All right, let us accept that their concern for my pleasure is praiseworthy and therefore excusable. Why have you and these other two not shown the same desire to gratify me? Why have you returned in those shapeless and filthy clothes, your faces still covered with bristles? Are you telling me that seventeen care but three do not?"

"No, sire," said Fox, busily polishing apples that might prove to be scoot-berries. "Someone had to come back. We hope that when the seventeen return you might graciously permit us to go and get cleaned up in our turn."

"You had better do that," conceded Zalumar. "We can recognize animals with no trouble at all. Therefore it isn't necessary for you to look like them, smell like them."

He watched the other carefully, seeking a hint of hidden anger such as a slight narrowing of the eyes or a tightening of the jaw muscles. Fat lot of good it did him. Fox's features remained wooden behind his polar mask of hair. McKenzie acted like he was stone-deaf. Vitelli wore the same unctuous smile that never left his moonlike face.

"Get out," he ordered. "Report to Arnikoj. Tell him you have my permission to visit the city after the others have returned. Be back by nightfall."

"And after that, sire?"

"You will remain under Amikoj's personal command. I will send for you whenever I want you."

When they had gone he strolled to the nearest port, gazed out at the great city. Slowly and with miserly lovingness he took in its towers, spires, skyways, and bridges. Mine, he thought, all mine. A worthy prize for the worthy. The battle to the strong, the spoils to the bold and brave.

Lakin mooched in, said hesitantly, "I have been thinking, sire. We're sort of all bunched up together. Ten ships practically standing side by side. Might it not be better if we spread ourselves a little? Couldn't we keep, say, four ships here and place three each in two other spaceports?"

"Why?"

"We don't yet know what their best weapons are like—but we do know that one well-placed bomb could vaporize the lot of us."

"So could three bombs. So what have we to gain by splitting up?"

"Unless they dropped them simultaneously, the first blow would warn the rest. Some of us could escape and hit back."

"If they can summon up the nerve to drop any at all," said Zalumar, "you can bet your life they'll drop them together. It's all or nothing so far as they're concerned. Probably they would do their best to wipe us out if they thought for one moment that it would do them any good. They know it won't. They know it would bring retaliation from the Raidan Imperial Forces. We would be avenged."

"Not yet we wouldn't," Lakin contradicted. "To date Raidan hasn't the faintest notion of where we

are or what we're doing. I have just asked Shaipin whether he had yet beamed our official report. He hasn't. Until he does so, and receives Raidan's acknowledgment, we are just another task force lost in the mist of stars."

Zalumar gave a grim smile. "My dear Worryguts Lakin, only we know that we're out of contact. The Terrans *don't* know it. They're not going to take the risk of enticing a full-scale attack that will cremate the lot of them. Like everything else, they have a natural desire to survive. They value their skins, see?"

"I asked Shaipin why he hasn't yet signaled our whereabouts;" Lakin persisted. "He said he'd not yet received the order from you. Do you wish me to tell him to beam our report?"

"Certainly not." Turning his back upon him, Zalumar again absorbed the glorious vision of the city.

"Sire, regulations require us to report immediately we have overcome opposition and taken complete command."

Swinging around, Zalumar spat at him. "Do you think I, the commander, am ignorant of regulations? Shaipin will send the necessary signals when I say so, and not before. I am the sole judge of the proper moment."

"Yes, sire," agreed Lakin, taken aback.

"And the proper moment is not yet."

He said it as though it might never come.

Zalumar was quite a prophet.

Shaipin still had not been given the order a month later. Nor three months later, nor six. It never occurred to him to query the omission or, if it did, he preferred to keep his mouth shut. As for Lakin, he had tactfully refrained from mentioning the matter again. To his mind, Zalumar had staked his claim to full responsibility for everything done or not done—and he was welcome to stay stuck with it.

Through the many weeks events had shaped themselves beautifully. The Terrans cooperated one hundred per cent, displaying no visible enthusiasm but functioning with quiet efficiency.

Whenever Zalumar felt like larruping the leadership he ordered the entire snollygoster to parade before him and forty-two of them came on the run. His word was their command, his slightest whim had the status of a law. He did not doubt that if he'd been capable of sinking to such childishness he could have made them worship the ground on which he trod and kiss every footprint he left in the dirt. It was a wonderful exhibition of what can be done when the choice is the simple one of obey or burn.

One result of all this was that he, Zalumar, had fled the confines of a warship for the first time in more years than he'd care to count. He was no longer encased in metal, like a canned *rashim*. The tactic had been the easiest ever, requiring not even the chore of waving a magic wand. All he'd had to do was ask and it shall be given unto you. No, not ask, tell.

"You will confiscate and assign solely to me this world's most imposing palace. Whoever occupies it at present will be thrown out. All necessary repairs will be tended to without delay. The palace will be decorated and refurbished in sumptuous style suitable to my position as Planetary Governor. You will provide a full quota of trained servants. I'll inspect the place immediately everything is ready—and for your own good you'd better make sure that it meets with my approval!"

They made sure all right. Even on Raidan nobody had it half so magnificent or a third as luxurious. He could think of many military, contemporaries who'd grind their teeth with envy to see Nordis Zalumar, a mere ten-ship commander, making like a natural-born king. Nay, an emperor.

The palace was enormous. The center portion alone came close to being an international monument in its own right, without considering the vast expanse of east and west wings. Even the servants' quarters were about the size of a large hotel. The grounds around the palace numbered four thousand acres, all carefully landscaped, complete with a lake filled with multi-colored fish and ornamental water-fowl.

It was evident that the place had been prepared with a lavishness that had no regard for cost. A world had been looted to gratify the one who could vaporize it from poles to core. Three thousand million animals had combined to pay the heavy premium on a fire-insurance policy.

Zalumar approved; even he could not dig up a lordly quibble. There was only one snag: The palace lay two thousand miles from the spaceport, the city, the seat of world-government. There was only one solution: he ordered a new spaceport built on the fringe of his estate. This was done and his ten-ship fleet

moved to the new location.

Next, he commanded the entire world leadership to set up home immediately outside his guarded gates. Nobody moaned, groaned, raised objections, or so much as favored him with a disapproving frown. There was a rush of prefabricated buildings to the designated spot, and a new township sprang into being complete with a huge web of telephone wires and a powerful radio station.

Meanwhile Zalumar had taken possession of his property. The transfer was made without ceremony; he merely stalked in at the front door as becomes one who literally owns the earth. His first move was to assign apartments in the west wing to his senior officers, inferior ones in the east wing to his twenty-one Terran stooges. This tactic helped populate a great emptiness, provided company, ensured a constant supply of adulation or, at least, dumb agreement.

"Aie!" he sighed with pleasure. "Is this not better than squatting in a hot can and being hammered day after day for the greater glory of others but never of ourselves?"

"Yes, sire," dutifully approved Heisham.

Lakin said nothing.

"We shall now reap the rewards of our virtues," continued Zalumar. "We shall live the life of . . . of—" He felt around in his jacket, produced a small pocket book and consulted it. "A character named Reilly."

"I have heard him mentioned by the Terrans," said Heisham. "And I imagine this is just the sort of place he'd have." He let admiring eyes survey the room, finished, "I wonder who did own it and what has happened to him."

"We can soon learn," Zalumar answered. "A Terran has just crossed the hall. Go get him and bring him here."

Heisham hastened out, came back with Vitelli.

"To whom did this place belong?" demanded Zalumar.

"To nobody." Vitelli favored him with his usual oily smile. "Nobody?"

"No, sire. Previously this was the world's largest and latest international hospital."

"And just what is a hospital?"

The smile faded away, Vitelli blinked a couple of times and told him.

Zalumar listened incredulously, said, "An individual who is sick or injured is either capable or incapable of recovering. He can regain his efficiency or he is permanently useless. One thing or the other—there is no third alternative. That is logical, isn't it?"

"I suppose so," responded Vitelli, with reluctance.

"You don't suppose anything," Zalumar contradicted in louder tones. "You know for a fact that it is logical because I have said that it is. And say 'sire' when you answer me!"

"Yes, sire."

"If an individual can recover, he should be left to do it as best he can; he has every inducement to succeed, knowing the penalty of failure. If he cannot do it, he should be got rid of in the orthodox way; he should be gassed and cremated. It is sheer waste of time and effort for the fit to coddle the unfit."

He stared hard at Vitelli who offered no remark.

"It is contrary to natural law for the efficient to assist the inefficient who should be left to stew in their own juice. How many defective bodies were being pampered in this . . . uh . . . hospital?"

"About six thousand," informed Vitelli, again forgetting the "sire." "Where are they now?"

"They were transferred to other hospitals. It has meant a little overcrowding in some places but I guess things will be straightened out in due time."

"So!" Zalumar thought a bit, looked as though about to voice something drastic, changed his mind and said, "You may go." After Vitelli had departed, Zalumar commented to the others, "I could order the prompt destruction of all this defective rubbish. But why should I bother? The chore of tending a horde of mental or physical cripples keeps Terran hands busy. Things remain orderly and peaceful when everyone is fully occupied. It is a world with time on its hands that makes itself a dangerous nuisance."

"Yes, sire," agreed Heisham, admiring him.

"Well, we now know something more," Zalumar went on. "In addition to being cowardly and stupid

they are also soft. They are soft and yielding, like this stuff they call putty."

Lakin said in the manner of one meditating aloud, "How far does one get by plunging a sword into a barrel of putty? How much does one really cut, stab or destroy?"

Studying him blank-faced, Zalumar harshed, "Lakin, you will cease annoying me with senseless remarks."

Everything worked smoothly for another two years. In between regal jaunts around his planetary property Zalumar lurked in his palace like a spider in the center of its web. Terra remained utterly and absolutely his to command, ran itself according to his directions. There had been no trouble other than that attributable to ordinary misunderstandings. In nobody's history had anyone sat more securely upon the throne than had the Emperor Nordis Zalumar.

At his command three groups of Raidan officers had gone on a tour of inspection of Terran colonies on Venus, Mars, and Callisto. No crude frontiersman would risk cutting their throats; the home-world remained hostage for their safety. They were due back most any time.

A fourth bunch had gone to look at a small settlement in the Centauri group, earth's first foothold in another system. They'd not return for quite a piece. None of these groups had sailed in a Raidan warship; they'd all been taken in Terran spaceliners, traveling in utmost comfort as was proper for a higher form of life.

Of the sixteen hundred Raidans composing the original task force, less than two hundred continued on military duty. A hundred formed the permanent palace guard. Eighty kept watch on the ships. All the rest were touring Terra, going where they pleased, at no cost whatsoever. Every man a prince and Zalumar the king of kings.

Yes, every man a prince—that was no exaggeration. If any of them saw something he fancied behind a shop window he walked inside, demanded it, and it was handed over. An expensive camera, a diamond pendant, a racing motor-bike, a streamlined moon-boat, one had only to ask to be given.

Thus two junior navigators owned a subtropic island on which stood a magnificent mansion. They'd seen it from a confiscated amphibian, landed, marched in, and said to the owners, "Get out." They'd said to the servants, "You stay." So the owners had gone posthaste and the servants had remained. Similarly, twenty grease monkeys were touring the world on a two-thousand-ton luxury yacht, having ambled aboard, ordered all passengers ashore, and commanded the crew to raise anchor.

It seemed impossible that in such circumstances any Raidan could be discontented. Yet here again was that whining nuisance Lakin with a further batch of moans and groans. Some folk evidently would gripe even if given the cosmos on a platter.

"It can't go on forever," opined Lakin.

"It isn't intended to," Zalumar gave back. "We aren't immortal and more's the pity. But so long as it lasts our lifetimes we have every reason to be satisfied."

"Our lifetimes?" Lakin's expression showed that a deep suspicion had been confirmed. "Do you mean that Raidan is to be left in ignorance of this conquest and that contact with our home forces is never to be made?"

Zalumar settled himself deeper in his chair which resembled a cunning compromise between a bed and a throne. He folded hands across an abdomen that was becoming a little more prominent, more paunchy with every passing month.

"My dear witless Lakin, an official report should have been sent more than two and a half years ago. If, like these Terran animals, we had been dumbly obedient and beamed that report where would we be now?"

"I haven't the slightest idea," admitted Lakin.

"Neither have I. But one thing is certain: we would not be here. By this time a consolidating expedition would have arrived and off-loaded the usual horde of desk-bound warriors, noncombatant officials, overseers, exploiters, slave drivers, form fillers, and all the other parasites who squat all day and guzzle the spoils that space roamers have grabbed for them."

Lakin stayed silent, finding himself unable to contradict an unpleasant truth.

"As for us, we'd be summarily ordered back into our metal cans and told to go find yet another

snatch. Right now we'd be somewhere out there in the sparkling dark, hunting around as we've been doing for years, taking risks, suffering continual discomfort, and knowing the nature of our ultimate reward." He pursed his lips and blew through them, making a thin slobbering sound. "The reward, my dear fatheaded Lakin, will be a row of medals that one can neither eat nor spend, a modest pension, a ceremonial mating, a shower of kids, old age, increasing feebleness and, finally, cremation."

"That may be so, sire, but—"

Waving him down, Zalumar continued, "I am of a mind to let the parasites seek their own prey and thus justify their own existence. Meanwhile we'll enjoy the prize we have gained for ourselves. If greed and ruthlessness are virtues in the many, they are equally virtues in the few. Since arriving on Terra I have become exceedingly virtuous and I advise you to do likewise. (Remember, my dear belly-aching Lakin, that on our home-world they have an ancient saying." He paused, then quoted it with great relish. "Go thou and paint the long fence, Jayfat, for I am reclining within the hammock.")

"Yes, sire, but—"

"And I am very comfortable," concluded Zalumar, hugging his middle.

"According to regulations, not to send a prompt report is treachery, punishable by death. They will gas and burn the lot of us."

"If they find us, *if* they ever find us." Zalumar closed his eyes and smiled sleepily. "With no report, no signal, no clue of any sort, it will take them at least a thousand years. Possibly two thousand. When they rediscover this planet, if ever they do, we shall be gone a long, long time. I am splendidly indifferent about how many officials go purple with fury several centuries after I am dead."

"The men think that a report to Raidan has been postponed for strategic reasons known to the senior officers," Lakin persisted. "If ever they learn the truth, they won't like it."

"Indeed? Why shouldn't they like it? Are they so crammed with patriotic zeal that they prefer to be bounced around on a tail of fire rather than stay here living the life they have earned and deserve?"

"It isn't that, sire."

"Then what is it?"

"A quarter of them are nearing the end of their term of service."

"They have reached it already," Zalumar pointed out. "All of us have reached it." He let go the sigh of one whose patience *is* being tried. "We are in retirement. We are enjoying the Terran pension which is on a scale far more lavish than anything Raidan offers to its conquering heroes."

"That may be—but I fear it won't prove enough."

"What more do they want?"

"Wives and children, homes of their own among their own kind."

"Pfah!"

"We can mate only with our own species," Lakin went on. "Men detained here beyond their term of service are going to be denied that right. It is no satisfactory substitute to have absolute claim on this world's treasures. Anyway, one soon loses appreciation of the value of something gained for nothing, one becomes bored by getting it for the mere asking."

"I don't," assured Zalumar. "I like it, I love it."

"Every day I see windows full of gold watches," said Lakin. "They tire me. I have a gold watch which I obtained by demanding it. I don't want fifty gold watches. I don't even want two of them. So what use are all the others to me?"

"Lakin, are you near the end of your term?"

"No, sire. I have another twelve years to serve."

"Then you are not yet entitled to be mated. As for those who soon may be entitled, that is their worry and not yours."

"It will be our worry, sire, if they cause trouble."

Zalumar's yellow eyes flared. "The first mutineers will be slaughtered as a warning to the rest. That is established space-discipline which I, as commander, am entitled to order. Be assured that I shall have no hesitation in ordering it should the need arise."

"Yes, sire, but—"

"But what?"

"I am wondering whether we can afford to take such action."

"Speak plainly, Lakin, and cease to talk in riddles."

"Three years ago," responded Lakin, with a sort of gloomy desperation, "there were sixteen hundred of us. There are less today."

"Go on."

"Forty-two died in that epidemic of influenza to which they had no natural resistance. Eighteen killed themselves joyriding in a commandeered plane. Twenty-three have expired from sheer overeating and indolence. Two vanished while exploring under the seas. This morning three met death by reckless driving in a powerful sports car which the Terrans had built to their order. About forty more have come to their end in forty different ways. We're being thinned down slowly but surely. If this goes on long enough, there'll be none of us left."

"My poor foolish Lakin, if life goes on long enough there will be none of us left no matter where we are, here or on Raidan."

"On Raidan, sire, our passing would not be tantamount to defeat for us and victory for these Terrans."

Zalumar favored him with an ugly grin. "In death there is neither victory nor defeat." He made a gesture of dismissal. "Go thou and paint the long fence . . ."

When the other had departed Zaluinar summoned his chief signals officer. "Shaipin, I have just heard that some of our men are getting restless. Do you know anything of this?"

"Somebody is always ready to gripe, sire. Every military force has its minority of malcontents. It is best to ignore them."

"You have six beam-operators per ship, making sixty in all. Are any of these among the grouchers?"

"Not that I am aware of, sire."

"More than two years ago I ordered you to put all the beam-transmitters out of action just sufficiently to prevent them from being repaired and used in secret. Are they still immobilized? Have you checked them lately?"

"I examine them every seventh day, sire. They remain unworkable."

"You swear to that?"

"Yes," said Shaipin, positively.

"Good! Could any one of them be restored in less than seven days? Could it be made to function in between your regular checks?"

"No, sire. It would take at least a month to repair any one of them."

"All right. I continue to hold you personally responsible for seeing to it that nobody interferes with these transmitters. Anyone caught trying to operate one of them is to be killed on the spot. If you fail in this, you will answer for it with your head." The look he threw the other showed that he meant it. "Is Heisham around or is he vacationing some place?"

"He returned from a tour three or four days ago, sire. Probably he will be in his apartment in the west wing."

"Tell him I want to see him immediately. While you're at it, find Fox and send him here also."

Heisham and Fox arrived together, the former wearing a broad grin, the latter impassive as usual.

Zalumar said to Heisham, "You are in charge of the nominal roll. What is our present strength?"

"Fourteen hundred seventy, sire."

"So we're down one hundred thirty, eh?" observed Zalumar, watching Fox as he said it but getting no visible reaction.

"Yes, sire," agreed Heisham, too well-pleased with himself to be sobered by statistics.

"A self-satisfied smirk is at least a pleasant change from Lakin's miserable features," commented Zalumar. "What has made you so happy?"

"I have been awarded a Black Belt," informed Heisham, swelling with pride.

"You have been awarded it? By whom?"

"By the Terrans, sire."

Zalumar frowned. "There can be no worth-while award on a world where anything may be confiscated."

"A Black Belt means nothing if merely grabbed," explained Heisham. "Its value lies in the fact that it must be won. I got mine at the risk of my neck."

"So we're down one-thirty and you've been trying to make it one-thirty-one. No wonder the men get careless when senior officers set such a bad example. What is this thing you have won?"

"It's like this, sire," said Heisham. "Over a year ago I was telling a bunch of Terrans that we warriors are raised like warriors. We don't play silly games like chess, for instance. Our favorite sport is wrestling. We spend a lot of our childhood learning how to break the other fellow's arm. The natural result is that every Raidan is a first-class wrestler and hence an efficient fighting-machine."

"So—?" prompted Zalumar.

"A medium-sized Terran showed great interest, asked what style of wrestling we used. I offered to show him. Well, when I recovered consciousness—"

"Eh?" ejaculated Zalumar.

"When I recovered consciousness," Heisham persisted, "he was still there, leaning against the wall and looking at me. A lot of witnesses were hanging around, all of them Terrans, and in the circumstances there was nothing I could do about this fellow except kill him then and there."

"Quite right," approved Zalumar, nodding emphatically.

"So I snatched him in dead earnest and when they'd picked me off the floor again I asked—"

"Huh?"

"I asked him to show me how he'd done it. He said it would need a series of lessons. So I made arrangements and took the lessons, every one of them. I passed tests and examinations and persisted until I was perfect." He stopped while he inflated his chest to suitable size. "And now I have won a Black Belt."

Zalumar switched attention to Fox. "Did you have any hand in this matter?"

"No, sire."

"It is just as well. Folly is reprehensible enough—I would not tolerate Terran encouragement of it." He turned back to Heisham. "Nobody has anything to teach us. But you, a senior officer, consent to take lessons from the conquered."

"I don't think it matters much, sire," offered Heisham, unabashed.

"Why doesn't it?"

"I learned their technique, mastered it, and applied it better than they could themselves. To win my prize I had to overcome twenty of them one after the other. Therefore it can be said that I have taught them how to play their own game."

"Humph!" Zalumar was slightly mollified but still suspicious. "How do you know that they didn't let you throw them?"

"They didn't appear to do so, sire."

"Appearances aren't always what they seem," Zalumar said, dryly. He thought a bit, went on, "How did it happen that the medium-sized Terran mastered you in the first place?"

"I was caught napping by his extraordinary technique. This Terran wrestling is very peculiar."

"In what way?"

Heisham sought around for an easily explainable example, said, "If I were to push you it would be natural for you to oppose my push and to push back. But if you push a Terran he grabs your wrists and pulls the same way. He helps you. It is extremely difficult to fight a willing helper. It means that everything you try to do is immediately taken farther than you intended."

"The answer is easy," scoffed Zalumar. "You give up pushing. You pull him instead."

"If you change from pushing to pulling, he promptly switches from pulling to pushing," Heisham answered. "He's still with you, still helping. There's no effective way of controlling it except by adopting the same tactics."

"It sounds crazy to me. However, it is nothing unusual for aliens to have cockeyed ways of doing things. All right, Heisham, you may go away and coddle your hard-won prize. But don't encourage any of

the others to follow your bad example. We are losing men too rapidly already."

He waited until Heisham had gone, then fixed attention on Fox.

"Fox, I have known you for quite a time. I have found you consistently obedient, frank and truthful. Therefore you stand as high in my esteem as any mere Terran can."

"Thank you, sire," said Fox, showing gratitude.

"It would be a pity to destroy that esteem and plunge yourself from the heights to the depths. I am relying upon you to give me candid answers to one or two questions. You have nothing to fear and nothing to lose by telling the absolute truth."

"What do you wish to know, sire?"

"Fox, I want you to tell me whether you are waiting, just waiting."

Puzzled, Fox said, "I don't understand."

"I want to know whether you Terrans are playing a waiting game, whether you are bidding your time until we die out."

"Oh, no, not at all."

"What prevents you?" Zalumar inquired.

"Two things," Fox told him. "Firstly, we suppose that other and probably stronger Raidan forces will replace you sometime. Obviously they won't leave you here to the end of your days."

Hah, won't they? thought Zalumar. He smiled within himself, said, "Secondly?"

"We're a Raidan colony. That means you're stuck with the full responsibilities of ownership. If anyone else attacks us, you Raidans must fight to keep us—or let go. That suits us quite well. Better the devil we know than the devil we don't."

It was glib and plausible, too glib and plausible. It might be the truth—but only a tiny fragment of it. For some reason he couldn't define Zalumar felt sure he wasn't being told the whole of it. Something vital was being held back. He could not imagine what it might be, neither could he devise an effective method of forcing it into the open. All that he did have was this vague uneasiness. Maybe it was the after-effect of Lakin's persistent morbidity. Damn Lakin, the prophet of gloom.

For lack of any better tactic he changed the subject. "I have an interesting report from one of our experts named Marjamian. He is an anthropologist or a sociologist or something. Anyway, he is a scientist, which means that he'd rather support an hypothesis than agree with an idea. I want your comments on what he has to say."

"It is about we Terrans?"

"Yes. He says your ancient history was murderous and that you came near to exterminating yourselves. In desperation you reached accord on the only item about which everyone could agree. You established permanent peace by mutually recognizing the basic right of every race and nation to live its own life in its own way." He glanced at his listener. "Is that correct?"

"More or less," said Fox, without enthusiasm.

"Later, when you got into free space, you anticipated a need to widen this understanding. So you agreed to recognize the basic right of every species to live its own life in its own way." Another glance. "Correct?"

"More or less," repeated Fox, looking bored.

"Finally, we arrived," continued Zalumar. "Our way of life is that of ruthless conquest. That must have put you in a mental and moral dilemma. All the same, you recognized our right even at great cost to yourselves."

"We didn't have much choice about it, considering the alternative," Fox pointed out. "Besides, the cost isn't killing us. We have been keeping a few hundred Raidans in luxury. There are three thousand millions of us. The expense works out at approximately two cents per head per annum."

Zalumar's eyebrows lifted in surprise. "That's one way of looking at it."

"For which price," added Fox, "the planet remains intact and we get protection."

"I see. So you regard the situation as mutually beneficial. We've got what we want and so have you." He yawned to show the interview was over. "Well, it takes all sorts to make a cosmos."

But he did not continue to yawn after Fox had gone. He sat and stared unseeingly at the ornamental

drapes covering the distant door, narrowing his eyes occasionally and striving within his mind to locate an invisible Terran tomahawk that might or might not exist.

He had no real reason to suppose that a very sharp hatchet lay buried some place, waiting to be dug up. There was nothing to go on save a subtle instinct that stirred within him from time to time.

Plus unpleasant tinglings in the scalp.

Another three and a half years, making six in all. Suddenly the hatchet was exhumed.

Zalumar's first warning of the beginning of the end came in the form of a prolonged roar that started somewhere east of the palace and died away as a shrill whine high in the sky. He was abed and in deep sleep when it commenced. The noise jerked him awake, he sat up, unsure whether he had dreamed it.

For a short time he remained gazing toward the bedroom's big windows and seeing only the star-spangled sky in between small patches of cloud. Outside there was now complete silence, as though a slumbering world had been shocked by this frantic bellowing in the night.

Then came a brilliant pink flash that lit up the undersides of the clouds. Another, another, and another. Seconds later came a series of dull booms. The palace quivered, its windows rattled. Scrambling out of bed he went to the windows, looked out, listened. Still he could see nothing, but clearly through the dark came many metallic hammerings and the shouts of distant voices.

Bolting across the room he snatched up his bedside phone, rattled it impatiently while his eyes examined a nearby list of those on duty tonight. Ah, yes, Arnikoj was commander of the palace guard. He gave the phone another shake, cursed under-breath until a voice answered.

"Amikoj, what's going on? What's happening?"

"I don't know, sire. There seems to be some sort of trouble at the spaceport."

"Find out what's the matter. You have got a line to the port, haven't you?"

"It is dead, sire. We cannot get a reply. I think it has been cut."

"Cut?" He fumed a bit. "Nonsense, man! It may be accidentally broken. Nobody would dare to cut it."

"Cut or broken," said Arnikoj, "it is out of action."

"You have radio communication as well. Call them at once on your transmitter. Have you lost your wits, Arnikoj?"

"We have tried, sire, and are still trying. There is no response."

"Rush an armed patrol there immediately. Send a portable transmitter with them. I must have accurate information without delay."

Dropping the phone, he threw on his clothes as swiftly as possible. A dozen voices yelled in the garden not a hundred yards from his windows. Something let go with a violent hammering. He made a jump for the door but the phone shrilled and called him back.

He grabbed it. "Yes?"

Arnikoj screamed at him, "It is too late, sire. They are already—" A loud br-r-op-op interrupted him, his voice changed to a horrid gurgling that receded and slowly ceased.

Zalumar raced out the room and along the outer passage. His mind seemed to be darting forty ways at once. "They," who are "they"? Another Raidan expedition that had discovered this hide-out of renegades? Unknown and unsuspected Terran allies at long last come to the rescue? Mutineers led by Lakin? Who?

He rounded a corner so fast that he gave himself no chance to escape three armed Terrans charging along the corridor. They grabbed him even as he skidded to a stop. This trio were big, brawny, tough-looking, wore steel helmets, were smothered in equipment and bore automatic guns.

"What is meant by this?" shouted Zalumar. "Do you realize—"

"Shut up!" ordered the largest of the three.

"Somebody will pay for—"

"I said to shut up!" He swung a big hand, slapped Zalumar with force that rattled his teeth and left him dazed. "See if he's clean, Milt."

One of the others ran expert hands over Zalumar's person. "Nothing on him, not even a loaded sock."

"O.K. Toss him in that small room. You stand guard, Milt. Beat his ears off if he gets uppish."

With that, two of them hustled around the corner, guns held ready. Twenty more similarly armed Terrans appeared and chased after the first two, none of them bothering to give the captive a glance in passing. Milt opened a door, shoved Zalumar's shoulder.

"Get inside."

"To whom do you think you're—"

Milt swung a heavy, steel-tipped boot at the other's tail and roared, "Get inside when you're told!"

Zalumar got in. The small room held a long, narrow table and eight chairs. He flopped into the nearest chair and glowered at Milt who leaned casually against the wall by the door. A minute later someone opened the door and slung Lakin, through. Lakin had a badly discolored face and a thin trickle of blood along the jawline.

"Arnikoj is dead," said Lakin. "Also Dremith and Vasht and Marjamian and half the palace guard." He touched his features tenderly. "I suppose I'm lucky. They only beat me up."

"They will pay dearly for this," promised Zalumar. He studied the other curiously. "I suspected you of disloyalty to me. It seems that I was wrong."

"One can foresee trouble without having to take part in it. I've known for long enough that Heisham was brewing something. It was obvious that sooner or later—"

"*Heisham?*"

"Yes. His term of service ended two years ago—and he was still here. He is not the kind to sit around and do nothing about it. So he waited his chance."

"What chance?"

"We maintain a permanent ships' guard of eighty men. Everyone serves in rotation. Heisham needed only to hide his time until he and a bunch of sympathizers were selected for guard duty. The ships would then be his to do with as he pleased."

"That would be of no use. He couldn't take away ten cruisers with a mere eighty men."

"He could make off with two ships, each with a skeleton crew of forty," said Lakin.

"The fellow is stark, staring mad," declaimed Zalumar. "Immediately he shows his face on Raidan, he and all those with him will have to undergo interrogation, with torture if necessary. And when they've given up every item of information they'll be executed as traitors."

"Heisham doesn't think so," Lakin responded. "He is going to put all the blame on you. He's going to tell them that you prohibited the sending of a report because you wanted all the spoils and the glory for yourself."

"They won't take his unsupported word for that."

"There are eighty men with him and they'll all say the same. They've got to—they're in the same jam. Besides, he has persuaded the Terrans to confirm his story. When a Raidan commission arrives to check up the Terrans will give evidence in Heisham's favor. He's quite confident that this tactic will not only save his life but also gain him honor."

"How do you know all this?" demanded Zalumar.

"He told me of his plans. He invited me to come in with him."

"Why didn't you?"

"I didn't share his optimism. Heisham always was too cocksure for my liking."

"Then why didn't you inform me of this plot?"

Lakin spread hands to indicate helplessness. "What was the use? You'd have taxed him with treachery and he'd have denied it, knowing full well that you were already tired of my warnings. Would you have believed me?"

Letting that awkward question pass unanswered, Zalumar buried himself in worried thought, eventually said, "The Terrans will not support his tale. They have nothing to gain by doing so. It is of total indifference to them whether Heisham's gang live or die."

"The Terrans have agreed to confirm everything he says—for a price."

Leaning forward, Zalumar asked in tones of suppressed fury, "What price?"

"The eight ships Heisham could not take."

"Intact and complete with their planet-busting equipment?"

"Yes," Lakin brooded a moment, added, "Even Heisham would have refused such payment had the Terrans any idea of where Raidan is located. But they don't know. They haven't the slightest notion."

Taking no notice, Zalumar sat breathing heavily while his features changed color. Then suddenly he shot to his feet and yelled at the guard.

"You piece of filth! You dirty, lowdown animal!"

"Now, now!" said Milt, mildly amused. "Take it easy."

The door opened. Fox entered along with McKenzie and Vitelli. The latter bestowed on Zalumar the same unctuous smile that had not varied in six long years.

All three wore uniform and carried guns. Thus attired they looked much different; they'd acquired a hardness not noticed before. It wasn't quite like Raidan hardness, either. There was something else, a sort of patient craftiness.

Zalumar still had an ace up his sleeve; without giving them time to speak, he played it. "The ships won't do you any good. We shall never tell you where Raidan is."

"There's no need to," said Fox, evenly. "We know."

"You're a liar. None of my men would give you that information, not even a self-seeking swine like Heisham."

"Nobody did tell us. We found out from what they did not tell."

"Don't give me that! I—"

"It was a long and tedious task but finally we made it," Fox chipped in. All your wandering, sight-seeing tourists were willing to talk, being lonesome and far from home. We chatted with them at every opportunity. Not one would say just where he came from but every one of them readily admitted he did not come from some other place. We have analyzed records of eighty thousand conversations spread across six years. By simple process of elimination we've narrowed it down to the system of Sigma Octantis."

"You're wrong," asserted Zalumar, straining to hold himself in check. "Dead wrong."

"Time will show. There won't be much of it, either. Maybe we could build a super-fleet by combining the virtues of your ships and ours. But we're not going to bother. It would take too long. We'll have learned how to operate your vessels before another day has passed."

"Eight ships against Raidan's thousands?" Zalumar indulged in a harsh laugh. "You haven't a hope of victory."

"There will no thousands from Raidan. We're going to send those ships hotfoot after Heisham. Even if they don't overtake him they'll arrive so close behind that the Raidan authorities will have had no time to react."

"And what then?"

"A new binary will be born."

There was a brief silence, then Zalumar rasped with all the sarcasm he could muster, "So much for your well-beloved basic right."

"You've got hold of the correct stick—but at the wrong end," said Fox. "The right we recognize is that of every species to go to hell after *its own fashion*."

"Eh?"

"So when you arrived we were willing to help. It was a cinch. One naturally expects the greedy and ruthless to behave greedily and ruthlessly. You ran true to type." Taking his gun from its holster, Fox carefully laid it in the center of the table. "This is further assistance."

With that they went out, Fox, McKenzie, Vitelli, and the guard named Milt. The door slammed shut. The lock clicked. Metal-shod boots commenced a monotonous patrolling outside.

Zalumar and Lakin sat unmoving throughout the rest of the night and the whole of next day, staring blindly at the table and saying nothing. Toward dusk a tremendous bellowing sounded from the spaceport, screamed into the sky. Another and another, eight in all.

As the sun called Sol sank blood-red into the horizon, Zalumar walked ashen-faced to the table and picked up the gun. A little later the patrolling footsteps went away.

