

Riddle Me This

Roberts eyed the bristling model of the huge space station with no great happiness.

"And," said the Colonel, rotating it to bring another rank of fusion turrets into view, "three battalions of crabs are on internal guard duty in this place."

"Hm-m-m," said Roberts, studying the big metal gate below the latest set of turrets. "We're sure two of our men are alive in there?"

"Positive. We're still getting random signals from the deep implants. They're alive. Under torture."

Roberts turned the rim of a little wheel that rolled the model over, and rapid-fire guns and missile snouts protecting the gate came into view.

"Naturally," said Roberts, "if we blow the place up, we kill our own men."

The Colonel nodded. "As a matter of fact, there are quite a few things we *could* do. We have a distinct advantage in technology over these crabs. But if we're not careful, the prisoners will get killed."

"Yet, if we leave the place alone, they'll continue to get tortured?"

"Exactly."

"Suppose," said Roberts, "we put a stiff threat to the crabs to let them go, or else?"

"The diplomats have already done it. The crabs deny any human is in there. That's as far as the diplomats are prepared to go for us. Earth isn't going to declare war on Crustax for two apparently ordinary spacemen, and Crustax knows it."

Roberts turned the model slowly around, and watched the successive ranks of gun turrets swing into vies.

The Colonel said, "Normally, an entire Crustaxan fleet is within easy reach of this strong point. But the crabs are minus one fleet since they tried to gobble up Storehouse. They're shorthanded, and they're shuttling fleets around to try to hide it. This place was covered last month, and it may be covered again next month. Right now, there's nothing between us and it but a few light scout ships and an outdated cruiser."

"What's behind that gate?"

The Colonel pushed a button, and on the model, the huge doors rolled back, to disclose a vast lighted interior with big ships at docks, or floating free inside.

"All the guns," said Roberts slowly, "are on the *outside*?"

"The big guns. But don't forget, the three battalions of guards are on the *inside*."

"How good are they at torture?"

"They have a natural talent for it."

"Where are the captives from?"

"Paradise," said the Colonel. He added dryly, "I'm referring to the planet by that name, of course."

Roberts blinked. "Where Hammell, Morrissey, and I were marooned?"

"The same, Roberts. As a matter of fact, these men volunteered out of loyalty to you. They were newly trained technicians on the planet, and after studying the last exchange of messages, they came to the conclusion that the Interstellar Patrol is actually the 'Royal Guard.' Don't ask me to explain their reasoning. That want-generator you used on the planet had a powerful effect. At any rate, they're good men."

Roberts swallowed, and with an effort, relaxed. When the Colonel had said, "these men volunteered out of loyalty to you," this for some reason had made it a personal matter for Roberts. Roberts was, therefore, going to free them? or the crabs were going to pay a steep price in blood. Roberts wasn't sure this was the right way to think, but it was the way he *did* think.

The Colonel glanced seriously at Roberts.

"You see the problem. If we destroy the place, we destroy the men. If we don't destroy it, we leave the men to be tortured. But there's more to it than that. If we go there in an unarmed ship, we can very likely get inside; the commander of this fortress would be delighted to have some more Earth prisoners. But even assuming that you get in, surprise them, and free the prisoners, how do you get away afterward in an unarmed ship? There are those weapons on the outside to deal with. The likelihood of capturing all those turrets from inside is very small. On the other hand, you can go there in a ship that can handle the weapons? and then the crabs will never let you near the place without a fight. That would defeat our purpose."

"Suppose it's a heavily armed ship camouflaged to look harmless?"

"Fine? except that the Crustax Fleet goes in for camouflage in a big way. They have dreadnoughts rigged out to look like big supply ships. Their larger supply ships often look like dreadnoughts. You can't tell who is what without the best instruments. The natural result is that they are suspicious of other people's ships, and if we go in there in a battleship fixed up to look exactly like a large spaceliner, they will automatically suspect what it really is. Their detecting instruments are nothing special; but where trickery is concerned, their naturally deceitful character gives them a running start."

Roberts considered it, frowning. "And what do they gain by all that?"

"It's ingrained in their character to start with. Until the adult molt, their whole life is spent *in the sea*. The ocean on Crustax sounds at least as bad as the ocean back on Earth. Only the toughest and most wary survive. Since a lot of the things in the sea are bigger and faster than they are, they find deception very handy. Once they get out into space, that's just a bigger ocean from their viewpoint, and they use deception there, too. It's automatic."

Roberts looked at the model thoughtfully.

"What kind of individual is in charge of that fortress? Assuming we know."

"A fanatic by the name of Garvast Nade. Garvast Nade is the 'son,' so-called, of Arvast Nade."

Roberts said, "Arvast Nade? "

"Was blown to bits, with his whole fleet, in the attempt to capture Storehouse."

"Hm-m-m. Therefore, Garvast Nade? "

"Garvast Nade has had his career wrecked by the obliteration of his 'father's' fleet and reputation. As nearly as we can follow it, a 'family' on Crustax is strictly a voluntary matter of an adult selecting promising young who have survived to the adult molt, with the young, in turn, hunting for a strong adult sponsor."

"Therefore, Garvast Nade has reason to seek revenge on humans? Assuming that is, the crabs have emotions."

"Oh," said the Colonel, "they have emotions, all right. If anything, they have more emotions than we have. You're right, Roberts? Garvast Nade, a fanatic selected by a power-hungry conqueror, has plenty of reasons to seek revenge on humans."

"How *smart* is he?"

"*That* we don't know. Supposedly he has brains, or Arvast Nade wouldn't have sponsored him."

Roberts eyed the dark-gray model with its yawning gate and ranked turrets, and suddenly had a sensation like a cold wind on the back of his neck.

The Colonel sat back, and cleared his throat.

"Our men are very seldom captured. These two were caught while serving on the crew of a fast freighter belonging to a small outfit that handles some of the toughest shipping jobs in this end of the universe. Our men were there to try to track down a very peculiar recent shipment, but we now think we had the wrong ship. The head of this shipping company changes the names of the ships arbitrarily, and shifts the officers around at will, which can make it exasperating to try to decipher what happened. At any rate, the ship got off course, and Arvast Nade captured it. When he got through with the prisoners, he passed the survivors over to Garvast."

The Colonel thought a moment. "As I say, Roberts, we don't have many of our men taken prisoner. But if they are captured by a humane opponent? and particularly if we have no reason to believe they are known to *be* our men? then we usually make no special attempt to free them. Sometimes, their friends get them out. Usually they can manage it themselves. But this, you see, is a little different."

Roberts nodded.

The Colonel said, "We aren't going to leave them there. We will either get them out, or something unfortunate is going to happen to this space station." The Colonel looked at Roberts. "This strikes me, Roberts, as being suited to your special talents, and I am turning it over to you."

"Thank you, sir," said Roberts, ugly sensations alternating with the chill at the back of his neck. "And what can I have to do this job?"

"Whatever you can lay your hands on," said the Colonel, eyeing the model with no very pleasant expression. "Whatever isn't already nailed down tight by somebody else is yours."

Roberts smiled at the wording of that stroke of generosity. That meant that things were so tied up already that the Colonel could think of no adequate force to give Roberts, and so he, therefore, left it up to Roberts to scrape one together by himself. On the other hand, that particular wording might prove to be useful. At any rate, it placed no limitation in material on him.

"Yes, sir," said Roberts. "I'll get started right away."

Roberts saluted, and went out immediately.

The first thing to do, he told himself, on the way down the corridor, was to get hold of his men. They, at least, would not have been assigned to some other job without Roberts knowing about it.

Roberts shoved open the corridor door to the room they shared while on the dreadnought, passed the bunks and desks to pause at a hatch-like door beyond the thick window of which the sun shone brightly on dazzling sand stretching down to blue and white water. Roberts frowned, momentarily distracted.

The gigantic dreadnought that served as an approximation of home contained a number of features Roberts didn't understand. The door from the corridor invariably and without delay listed who was assigned to the room? but Roberts never saw anyone put the names on the door. The door apparently put the names there *itself*. The hatchlike door here at the opposite end of the room, whose window looked out on a sandy beach, was sometimes brightly sunlit, and sometimes looked out on terrific storms. It was obvious to Roberts that the dreadnought didn't carry a private ocean around inside of it, and also didn't have its own internal sun. Which of Roberts' theories explained the situation, he didn't know, but he looked out exasperatedly, then shrugged, and changed into a swimsuit. He stepped out the door, felt the sunlight hot on his skin, and pulled the door shut behind him. As he walked out, scanning the dazzling beach, with its march of white-capped waves rolling in, a strongly built figure burst from the water and plunged ashore.

At the same moment, Roberts' feet got the message to him that he had walked out onto the equivalent of a bed of hot coals. He sprinted across the dazzling beach, his feet sinking deep in the burning sand, and was down the slope till suddenly he was on dark wet sand, and then he dove headlong into the water. The icy shock slid over him, taking away his breath. He surfaced, shook his head, and saw the powerful figure of Hammell standing on the wet sand, watching him with a smile.

Roberts swam back, and waded out onto the shore, the water curling around his feet as it ran far up the beach. Roberts called to Hammell.

"Where are Morrissey and Bergen?"

Hammell grinned, and pointed seaward. "They're racing me to shore."

Roberts glanced out, to see the flash of an arm a hundred feet or so from shore. An instant later, he saw, still further out, another swimmer.

Roberts shook his head wryly, and waited.

Hammell picked up a towel, dried himself briskly, and spread the towel neatly on the hot sand. He lay down, stretched out comfortably, and assumed a drowsy air as if he had spent the last half hour

sunbathing.

Dan Bergen, chest heaving, short hair plastered to his skull, staggered ashore. An instant later, he was followed by Morrissey.

"This time," Bergen gasped, nodding to Roberts, then glancing around, "we *beat* him." He paused abruptly, looking past Roberts. Behind Bergen, Morrissey shook his head ruefully. "When he hits the water, he turns into twins. One drowns in our wake. The other materializes at the finish line."

Bergen glanced at Roberts. "Can you beat him?"

"Not me," said Roberts. "He's got a little submarine hidden around here, somewhere. You can't win."

Morrissey waded out, grinning. "What did the Colonel have to say?"

"Plenty," said Roberts.

Hammell opened one eye.

"I hope you told him we were looking forward to a long drowsy vacation."

"Strange to say," said Roberts, "I forgot that. He was busy telling me about a couple of guys who are prisoners of Crustax. It seems that the crabs have them locked up in a space fortress with three battalions of guards, and enough guns and launchers on the outside to stand off a Space Force battleship."

Hammell frowned and sat up. Morrissey and Bergen stood breathing deeply, and listened closely as Roberts described the situation. At the end, Hammell lay back, frowning.

"How do we get to them?"

"It seems to me," said Roberts, "that the situation has to be so arranged that the crabs *gladly* take us in because they *want* to."

Morrissey cleared his throat. "They'll *want* to, all right. This Garvast Nade will be happy to have us."

"Sure," said Bergen. "He could use more material."

Morrissey nodded. "The more information he can get, the better the crab high command will like it, and him. To say nothing of the personal gratification."

Hammell frowned. "Has it occurred to you that this thing as the elements of a baited trap? These two prisoners are the bait. This space fort is the trap. We go in the open door, the door closes behind us ? and then what?"

Roberts said, "It seems to me there are possibly four times when we could be trapped. First, on approaching this fort, when the Crustax fleet could show up, and catch us between their ships and the fort itself. Second, we could be trapped with our ship inside the fort's spaceport, when those gates shut behind us. Third, we could be trapped when we leave the ship to get the prisoners. And, fourth, after we pass out through the gates, again their fleet could turn up."

Hammell nodded. "Then, on top of that, they might get on our ship while we're in their fort, and where does that leave *us*?"

Bergen said hesitantly, "Could we possibly disguise our ship to look like one of them, and slip in unnoticed?"

"Maybe," said Roberts. "But we couldn't fool them for long, especially once we got inside."

Morrissey said, "What do we have in the line of captured recognition signals, code books, and so on?"

"Only a few outdated ones turned over to us by the Space Force in repayment for past services. They'd give us more, but they don't have them."

Hammell said, "The more I think about trying to camouflage our ship to look like theirs, the less I like it. On top of everything else, how do we fool Garvast Nade when we don't know how Garvast's mind works?"

Morrissey said, "We know he's *hostile*."

"And," said Roberts, "naturally good at detecting camouflage."

"Suppose," said Bergen, "we camouflage our ship as a freighter? that is, a human-style freighter?"

Morrissey shrugged. "He'll spot the fakery."

"But then," said Roberts suddenly, "suppose we camouflage the imitation freighter as a warship. Knowing, of course, that *they will detect the harmless freighter underneath.*"

Bergen looked surprised, then nodded enthusiastically.

Hammell sat up. "Not bad. They'd figure we were easy to take."

"Hm-m-m," said Morrissey. "A subtle approach. But what if the outer camouflage job fools them, and they don't let us in?"

Roberts said, "We can't take that chance. There has to be a flaw."

Morrissey shook his head. "They may not detect the flaw. Remember, they aren't as familiar with our warship designs as we are. And then, if they *do* detect it, how do they explain that we put the flaw there? The trick will be obvious."

"Not," said Roberts, "if it is a *Crustax* warship."

Hammell and Morrissey glanced at each other. Bergen looked impressed.

"But," said Hammell, "how do we explain our own reliance on the out-of-date recognition signals? How do we talk with the fort? How do we convince the other side that we even *thought* we had a chance to fool them in the first place? We have to reasonably *think* we're convincing, or they'll look for some trick in our arrangements."

"We can talk to them by message machine only. Our ship, you see, will have been heavily damaged. Everything but the message machine was smashed *in the attack on Storehouse*, and that is the only means of communication we can use."

The other three men looked briefly intent, then Hammell cleared his throat. "In other words, they detect that we are trying to gain entrance by disguising ourselves as Crustaxan survivors? So they rub their hands, and say, 'Step right into my parlor.'"

Morrissey said, "That might work. That is to say, it might get us *in* there. *Then* what?"

"In an operation like this," said Roberts, "a certain amount of improvisation is unavoidable. It seems to me that the main thing is to get in."

"O.K., let's try it for size. I'm the crab general and I see this wrecked dreadnought show up. It flashes the outdated recognition signal. For an instant, I don't know what to think. The message comes in, explaining that nearly all their communications are knocked out. Suddenly I spot an obvious flaw on this battleship? "

"Dreadnought," said Roberts. "Inside, under two layers of camouflage, we want something no smaller than a battleship. It follows that the outside has to be *big.*"

"Dreadnought," corrected Hammell. "Suddenly I spot an obvious flaw on this dreadnought, check my detectors carefully, and realize an Earth ship is underneath. O.K.? what *kind* of Earth ship?"

"Hm-m-m." said Roberts. "It should be something harmless. Preferably, something they'll be delighted to let in."

"How about a colonization liner? One of the big ones that takes colonists from the colonization centers out on the first leg of the trip?"

"Yes. They'd like that. With enough cunning, they could use the ship later for deception of their own."

"So far so good," said Hammell.

"Now," said Roberts. "About this error that has to be obvious to them and not us?"

There was a silence, then Morrissey suggested.

"Could we make this ship a mirror-image of what it's supposed to be?"

Roberts said, "Or suppose the *scale* of the ship were slightly wrong?"

Hammell nodded. "There is something they would spot that, we, supposedly working from

photographs, rough readings of mass, and so on, might have wrong. However, there's still a slight hole in this plan. What do we do after we get inside that fort?"

Bergen said, "We could pound it to pieces from inside."

Morrissey suggested, "What if we tell them we're packed solid with atomite. Release the prisoners or we'll blow the whole place up."

"Great," said Hammell. "This fanatic, Garvast, might tell us to go ahead. Then where are we?"

"It seems to me," said Roberts, "that we've got to risk landing on this place. From past experience, I think our battle armor will protect us in close fighting."

"What about the three battalions of guards? You know we aren't going to get any army to transport with us. It's bound to work out that the four of us have to do the whole job."

"If," suggested Roberts, "we could first get them to board *our* ship? "

Hammell looked thoughtful.

Bergen beamed. "Trap them!"

Morrissey looked uncomfortable. "And suppose they capture the ship?"

Hammell's gaze was remote and calculating. "Personally, I'd hate to capture even an Interstellar Patrol scout ship. A *battleship*, now? "

Bergen's eyes shone in creative effort. "We can put in false walls, and line the corridors with mines and automatic guns. Nothing will fire till they're well inside."

Hammell cast a fishy look at Bergen, and glanced at Roberts, who said, "We'll leave that end of it to you, then, Bergen. But we're going to have to do a little more work on this thing. A possible plan is only the first step. Next we have to work out the alternatives in case the crabs don't cooperate with us at any given point."

Hammell said, "Let's allow enough alternatives so we don't have to improvise too much after we get in there. It isn't healthy to rely on having strokes of genius when you get in a tight spot."

"Unfortunately," said Roberts, "we don't know for sure what they've got in there, so we can't help improvising. But we'll eliminate it so far as possible."

"Just so it's a well-planned operation," said Hammell, looking uneasy again. "Otherwise it could be a mess."

"We'll do our best," said Roberts.

From the relay center in the interior of the imitation space liner, the view from the imitation wreck's forward pickups flashed onto Roberts' viewscreen in the battleship. A brief winking of lights was all that visually showed the existence of the Crustax space fortress as they approached. All that is, except for the blotting out of the stars by the looming bulk of the place.

There was a clacking noise, and Roberts watched the message as it slowly came out of the machine. Across the room, a small language computer clicked and hummed, apparently laboring to keep up with the incoming signals. These noises, Roberts thought, could not be a result of the computer's actual operation: they must have been added as a guide for the user. If so, the computer wasn't having an easy time with the message. The clicks came slowly, then in brief bursts, and the computer's hum sounded high-pitched and strained. Then, with a final burst of clicks and a corresponding series of clacks from the printer, the message wound up out of the printer. Roberts pulled it free, to read:

Seal Ready

Stamp-Emblem Ready

Number One Paper

Strike: Embossing Master Emblem Number Two

**** Border

Begin Message

From:
Commander
Space Fortress *Ironclaw*

To:
Commander
Unidentified Damaged Warship

Sir:
Your *****-signal received and acknowledged herewith. This is the correct signal for the *****.
However, we require the following information:
1) Who are you?
2) What is the name of your ship?
3) What are the circumstances surrounding the ***** of your ship?
This information must be forwarded at once, or we must refuse entry. Stand off while replying.

Cordial claw-claspings,

Gratz Ialwo,
Commander
Space Fortress *Ironclaw*

Fold Message and Glue Shut
Stick Seal
Stamp Great Claw on Front
Eject

Roberts looked up blankly.

Who was Gratz Ialwo?

Across the room, Morrissey straightened from the visual display, as the battery of detectors labored to unravel the details of the fortress.

"Still clear as mud," growled Morrissey.

Roberts turned to the printer. How would the message he was about to send, which was slanted for the fanatical Garvast Nade, affect "Gratz Ialwo"?

A hatch came open, and Hammell stepped in. "Everything's set," he said, then glanced again at Roberts. "What's wrong?"

"Gratz Ialwo."

Hammell glanced at the printer, then at the message, but kept his mouth shut.

Roberts decided to send the original message. He snapped a little spool into the sending device. The printer clacked. Across the room, the translator labored, to produce a translation of the message just sent. Roberts ignored the coded instructions for the receiving printer, and read the message:

From:
Arvast Nade
Commander, Fleet *****
To:
Garvast Nade
Commander Fortress *****

Sir:
I ***** survived the ***** suffering ***** this ship severe damage, ***** and ***** receiving apparatus

out of order. No ****. Vital information relative Earth **** at **** **** without delay. We ****enter
Fortress. Vital **** **** surprise **** coming, urgent **** at once.

Signed,

Arvast Nade
**** Fleet ****

Roberts glanced back at the screen, and saw nothing but a huge blackness, with stars showing around the edges. He glanced around the control room, seeing Morrissey at the forward detection screen, and Hammell now by the manual fire-control bank, the big manual-override lever shoved back in the "off" position. Roberts was by the pilot seat, the printer to his right, and the seat to his left, with the screen above the curving control panel before the seat.

Roberts, looking around, had the sensations of a frontier-raised colonist, seeing a miniature power-unit for the first time.

Roberts' Space Force training told him that this little room could not even be the control room of his own patrol ship, much less of a full-size battleship. And yet, as he'd seen clearly enough when he first boarded it, it *was* a battleship, full-size, armed to the teeth, and deadly.

Morrissey said, "That monster gate is starting to open. It's like a big metal curtain sliding up from the center, while another half slides down below it."

"Good," said Roberts.

Hammell said, "Have they answered the message?"

"Not yet. Where's Bergen?"

"Still improving his traps."

Roberts slid into the control seat, and reached out to reset the screen. A slightly different model from that on his own ship, this screen's differences bothered him. Yet when Roberts punched the split-screen button that was awkwardly located just above the course display, the button refused to depress. Irritated, Roberts pushed harder. The button yielded slightly, then shoved up against his finger, to recover its original position.

Roberts growled to himself, stood up, leaned forward, put his thumb on the button, and shoved down hard. The button resisted, then went *click*. The screen divided into two sections, the external viewscreen to the left, the battle screen to the right.

"Good," growled Roberts, at once feeling more at home.

There was a loud *clack!* from the printer, and just then Morrissey called, "Look at that gate!"

There was a *click* as the split-screen button depressed by itself, and a *snap* as a stubby lever below the screen jumped into a new position.

Roberts, just reaching out to take the message as it came from the printer, caught the motion, and realized that the ship had just canceled his directions. Instead of providing both battle and viewscreen, it chose to provide a single larger battlescreen view. There was another *snap*, and a small auxiliary screen to the left came on to provide a small external view, apparently to placate him.

Roberts irritably tore the message from the printer, noticing at the same time what Morrissey was pointing out? an iris-of-the-eye effect that followed the separation of the two sliding gates. Behind the big sliding gates, there remained a separate gate, like the shutter of a huge camera, and this gate had moved only enough to show a relatively small opening at the center. This mechanism hadn't been present in the model the Colonel had shown Roberts, which at once raised the question what else might be different? Unlike some other organizations, the Patrol didn't hesitate to use very advanced? but somewhat bug-ridden? techniques. This generally gave good results? but it could also give surprises. How had they got the information on that fortress? Then Roberts shrugged and read the message:

From:

Commander
Space Fortress *Ironclaw*
To:
Arvast Nade, Commander
Survivor of Meteor Storm

Sir:
Welcome, survivors! Your ***** fleet believed lost without *****. You may enter ***** gates at once.

Sad news must ***** ***** the death of Garvast Nade following your reported loss. I, Gratz Ialwo, the closest ***** of Garvast Nade, welcome you as a *****.

Reverent lowering of antennae,

Gratz Ialwo, Commander
Space Fortress *Ironclaw*

Roberts glanced from the message to the screen, where the inner gate was steadily opening wider. Apparently, despite everything, Ialwo was fooled so far. Now Roberts' detectors picked up a transparent membrane that ballooned out as the gate opened, apparently to prevent the loss of an internal atmosphere through the opened gates.

Roberts leaned across to the printer, tapped out the usual heading, and then the message, hitting the "garble" button frequently:

Sir:
Our ***** severely ***** by damage and reception is *****.

We wish to enter, and request assistance ***** ***** Severe ***** of ***** causing recurrent difficulties which urgently need ***** without delay.

***** *****

Arvast Nade, Commander
Fleet *****

Morrissey called, "The gate is almost wide open."

Roberts glanced at his screen. "It took them long enough."

"Crab technology seems to leave a little something to be desired."

Roberts aimed the ship at the center of the opening, and guided it toward the interior.

Hammell looked at the scene of the gigantic interior that was opening up on Morrissey's screen, as the camouflaged battleship glided in. He murmured, "Quite an effort to save just two men. I hope they appreciate it."

Morrissey said uneasily, "We haven't saved them yet."

Roberts snapped a communicator switch, and said, "Personnel Monitor? locate Dan Bergen, and tell him to come to the control room."

Bergen's voice at once came out a small speaker to the right of the screen.

"Be right there, sir. Where are we?"

"Almost inside."

Roberts was studying the view on the battle screen in puzzlement. The screen was blinking, switching rapidly from one view to another. The first view showed the spaceport facilities as seen by their

own lights, and by the light floating globes or lightships that drifted in the interior. The second view, apparently taken from the same viewpoint as the first, showed ranks of guns and odd shieldlike objects in a somewhat larger space than the first view showed.

Slowly, the wrecked imitation dreadnought entered the spaceport. Now it moved slowly ahead, completely inside, the transparent membrane pressed tightly around it by the artificial atmosphere of the spaceport.

Roberts alertly studied the screen.

Morrissey said sharply, "The inner gate's *closed!* It *snapped* shut!"

Roberts glanced at a small auxiliary screen which showed the view to the rear. Where the open gate had been, there was now a solid surface with a massive grille sliding quickly down across it.

With a puff of briefly visible vapor, the membrane expanded, came free at one edge, and drifted away from the ship.

The printer clacked.

Roberts read:

No Seal
No Stamp
Shoddy paper
No Embossing
Tide-Dregs Border

Begin Message
From:
Commander
Space Fortress *Ironclaw*

To:
Most Honorable
High Admiral
Arvast Nade
Commander
Battle Fleet IV

Most Honored Sir:
***** abasements before your noble self as you enter, crowned with victory.

We beg you to emerge from your victorious vessel in order that we may properly welcome you.

Servile clutchings of sand before you.

Gratz Ialwo, Commander
Space Fortress *Ironclaw*

Fold Message Without Glue
No Seal
No Stamp
Eject

Roberts glanced quickly at the screen.

Several of the glowing spheres were coming closer, to illuminate the hulk. A small plain vessel of some kind was starting out from a distant dock.

Roberts reread the message.

"We seem to have made the wrong approach to this outfit somewhere."

Hammell was studying the fort through the master-control viewscope. He growled, "It looks to me as if this place is well armed, but the weapons are hidden behind all this loading equipment." He looked up. "What's wrong?"

"Take a glance at this message."

Hammell read it, grunted, and passed it to Morrissey. Morrissey and Bergen read it together. Bergen whistled.

"Shoddy paper, and 'Most Honored Sir,'" said Morrissey. It sounds as if they want to carve Nade up the middle."

Hammell looked into the viewscope. "That boat must be coming out to get him. They seem heavily armed."

Roberts glanced at his viewscreen again. Suddenly the scene readjusted. The approaching boat filled the screen, and an abrupt shift in focus showed the still further magnified interior through a large viewport in the front of the boat. This showed what looked like large lobsters in space-armor, carrying guns, moving into position behind the side hatch of the vessel, while other lobsters looked grimly out the front.

Somewhere in Roberts' ship, there was a low rumble, then a voice spoke quietly but firmly:

"The four volunteers will prepare to don armor and enter the Crustaxan fortress."

Hammell looked grim. Morrissey winced, as Bergen nodded and looked pleased. Roberts glanced around moodily as four lockers opened up. He studied irritably the four suits of battle armor that slid out into view.

"It won't work," he said. "They're too clever."

The battle armor had two large upper arms, with room for big pinching claws, along with what looked like a kind of trapdoor in the chest. The lower half looked relatively normal save for a kind of thick tail or extension of some kind in back. A quick glance at the viewscreen showed Roberts that this much was "normal" for the inhabitants of the fortress. But the business did not stop there.

On the chest of Roberts' armor was emblazoned a weird-looking monster like an octopus with the head of a shark. Hammell's armor bore a kind of big intertwined snake with large teeth. Morrissey's had a giant sea horse with a nasty look on its face, two impressively muscled scaly arms, a dagger in hand, and large sharp teeth. Only Bergen's looked like the regulation Crustaxan armor on the screen. Bergen's armor was considerably dented, blackened in places, and bore long scars and marks where the metal looked almost as if it had boiled and frozen in succession, to leave rings of beaded metal around an uneven surface.

Roberts strained his mind to try to encompass what was behind this, and failed.

"Listen," he said, "instead of this, whatever it is, what do you say you make the armor look like those things marked on it? Then we'll be aliens, and it will throw all their plans out of gear. We need a little room to improvise."

There was no answer.

Roberts shrugged, and headed for the armor. Each of these Interstellar Patrol ships had its own "symbiotic computer," and he had discovered that there was no point arguing with the things, though *sometimes* they would take suggestions.

Hammell, the same look of moody resignation on his face, started for his armor.

Before either man could reach it, three of the suits of armor? excepting only Bergen's? trundled back into the lockers. The lockers shut, and there was a rumbling noise.

The voice of the symbiotic computer said, "Not a bad idea. One moment . . . Volunteer Bergen, you may put on your armor. There will be a brief delay for the others."

Hammell looked at Roberts.

Roberts said intently, "Make sure we can move in that armor. We don't want to get in there and be helpless."

"Don't worry. These forms are suited to combat. You will adapt to them readily."

There was another rumble and the three lockers came open.

Roberts winced, and Hammell took a step backward. Bergen, struggling to get into his unfamiliar armor, made an abortive grab for his gun.

The armor now matched the creatures emblazoned on the front, but, in three dimensions, they were far more hideous than Roberts could have imagined.

Roberts' armor had various sizes and shapes of metal tentacles absently coiling and uncoiling, while Hammell's came out of the locker followed by some fifteen feet of sinuous flexing metal snakelike body. Morrissey's rolled into the room on caterpillar treads, the upper part of each arm as big around as the trunk of a sizable tree.

Bergen inside his suit, extended big claws, and laughed. "I'm the only human here."

Roberts cautiously avoided the metal tentacles, walked around to the rear of his armor, and snapped open the backplate.

"No," said Hammell, looking around irritably, "this is too much. How do I walk inside this thing? How do I handle anything? There are no arms or legs on it. It won't work. Let's have something a little more reasonable."

"The volunteer," said the symbiotic computer placidly, "will kindly refrain from criticism. The boarding craft is approaching. The armor will be found highly satisfactory? unless you would rather go out without it."

Roberts climbed in, to find the interior looked the same as usual. He got the back plate shut, and?

? Suddenly he was flexing giant tentacles, eager to get the enemy in his grasp and snap him in half. Roberts blinked.

The thoughts died down, but the sensation that he possessed a variety of powerful flexible limbs persisted. He could, in fact, seem to *feel* with them.

Roberts cleared his throat, and wondered if the computer would hear him.

"No offense, friend," said Roberts, "but the illusion of control of all these tentacles is likely to be hard to maintain. It might work for an octopus, but someone with just two pairs of actual limbs? "

The complacent voice replied, "One dozen pairs of limbs, Volunteer."

"How do you count? "

"The fact of ten separate individually-controlled digits is not to be dismissed merely because they are activated at the ends of another set of jointed appendages."

Roberts frowned. "O.K., *maybe*. Where are there any weapons?"

"An excellent point. While carrying out a truly creative masterpiece, the artist sometimes loses sight of mere necessities."

There was a further rumble and *clank*, and the armor was jerked back into the locker, with Roberts inside it. The door of the locker shut. A weird intense light flickered briefly. Then the door opened up again.

"Weapons," said the symbiotic computer, "will be found in the usual place? attached to the weapons belt. Now, prepare to leave with your prisoner."

"What prisoner?"

"Admiral Nade, obviously, is your prisoner."

A small voice spoke in Roberts' ear, and Roberts recognized Dan Bergen, who said exasperatedly, "Does anyone understand what's going on?"

Hammell's voice, similarly small but clear, said, "All I know is, I'm inside armor that's shaped just about right for a boa constrictor that's thick through the chest. Nobody has explained anything to *me*. The funny thing is, I think I sense how to work the thing."

Roberts said, "If I can follow it correctly, the symbiotic computer wants us to act as if we've captured Nade."

"Who is *we*?" Hammell demanded. "So far as I know, there's no intelligent creature in the known universe that matches the shape of this armor."

Roberts said, "That ought to confuse the Crustaxans. I don't like the way that last message went. We want to get them off-balance."

"That's nice for a start, but where do we go from there?"

"We get the prisoners loose from the Crustaxans."

"*How*? You've skipped a few steps. What do we do *next*?"

"Don't ask me. But we've obviously got to get in that fort somehow. We'll have to see what turns up, and move fast."

"Yes, but . . . for the love of? "

"Bergen," said Roberts, taking a glance at the outside viewscreen.

"*Sir*?" said Bergen unhappily.

"Lead the way to the nearest hatch onto the outside of this hulk. That boatload of armored crabs is getting close. Let's see? They look like they're heading for the wreckage of that armored bridge in back of the main turrets."

O.K.," said Bergen. "We can go though in back of the false wall. But we don't dare get out in the corridor, or we'll get blown up."

"Lead the way," said Roberts.

Bergen went out the aft hatch. Roberts stood back to wave Hammell and Morrissey ahead, and involuntarily jumped back as they started to move. They looked like a giant armored python followed by an armored tank with a muscular sea horse inside of it.

Roberts growled to himself, watched Hammell's armor slither up through the hatch, while Morrissey's rose up on a kind of hydraulic jack arrangement that boosted him to where the treads could get a grip. In the corridor, Hammell slid along close behind Bergen, while Morrissey bumped and rumbled along behind Hammell.

Roberts shuddered at the sight, took hold of the hatchway with half-a-dozen tentacles, vaulted through, and strolled along the corridor behind Morrissey.

The voice of the symbiotic computer spoke in Roberts' ear:

"Communications spy-pickups are now moderately well distributed throughout the spaceport itself. We are processing large numbers of official and personal messages."

"What good does that do us? Have you found any trace of the prisoners?"

"Two references suggest that they are in the 'tank.' We have no indication yet as to where the 'tank' is located."

"That's a real help," said Roberts dryly.

"The principal benefit, however, is an improvement of language ability. We now have many cross-checks on previously uncertain words and phrases.:"

Bergen said, "Watch you don't bang anything going through here." He led the way through a narrow passage lined with squat guns on tripod mounts, connected by cables with small boxes hung on the bulkheads, this passage being one that paralleled one of the main corridors of the imitation dreadnought, the guns set to sweep the corridors after the Crustaxans were well inside the ship.

Bergen stopped. "Here we are." He undid a heavy fastener, slid a thick panel out of the way, and stood back to let Roberts, Hammell, and Morrissey go through the opening into what looked like the patched-up remains of a warship's bridge.

From somewhere came a clang, and Hammell said, "That's the outer hatch of the air lock. They're coming in."

Roberts noticed that Hammell's voice sounded clear, and as loud as usual, and realized that he was

now hearing him "normally"? that is, by way of the speaker in Hammell's battle armor, which made sound vibrations in the air, and were picked up by Roberts' armor, and reproduced loud and clear so that he would know he was not hearing Hammell over the communicator.

Roberts turned, in order to face the inside hatch of the air lock.

Slowly, this hatch began to open.

Roberts turned his head and used his chin to fully depress a short broad lever inside the helmet of his suit. This snapped on the armored suit's communicator, and shut off its external speaker.

"Hammell," said Roberts. "Try your communicator."

"Here," said a small voice.

"Bergen," said Roberts, "step out in front of the rest of us. We want them to see you first."

The inner air-lock door was steadily coming open. Now a set of armored claws reached in.

Bergen's small, somewhat plaintive voice said, "Now what do I do?"

The inner air-lock door swung heavily open.

Eight or nine space-armored figures, carrying long-muzzled guns, stepped in.

Hammell's small voice spoke urgently in Roberts' ear. "Listen, what's the picture? What do we do?"

"Just follow my lead," said Roberts, "and don't worry. The general idea, for now, is that we are a collection of aliens who have captured Arvast Nade. We're here to stick a red-hot poker into the Crustaxans. As for the prisoners, our only interest in *them* is that we'd like to have them to wring some information out of them for ourselves."

Hammell's voice said uncertainly. "O.K. Lead on."

So far, so good. But for the moment, Roberts was not sure just what do next.

The Crustaxans, looking around, now spotted "Arvast Nade."

Roberts strained his mind for the right move to make next.

Abruptly, Roberts' voice boomed out, though his mouth was tightly shut:

"Gar trak no clagg bar ke ia tu dek holben? "

Suddenly, Roberts began to hear it differently:

"? by right of conquest. We also claim this prisoner here enslaved. You may step aboard this ship alone at our goodwill. We are masters of this great starry sea. How is it that we know not the like of you?"

Half in and half out of the air lock, the Crustaxans stood paralyzed.

Roberts' voice went on by itself, as he listened admiringly.

"We are come to split the stars between us, to say who owns here and who there. Have you no speech? Know you not the mighty of the realms of space? In your own tongue we conjure you to lead at once to your chiefs!"

The collection of frozen shapes at the air lock jarred into a semblance of disorganized motion.

Several with insignia on their spacesuits contended to thrust each other forward, and a large individual with claws like giant nutcrackers received the honor.

"Aaah," came his reply, "we . . . eh . . . hah . . . we welcome you to *Ironclaw* Fortress with . . . ah . . . cordial feelings of fellowship. But let's not stand talking here. Let us escort you to the commander. Admiral Ialwo is eager to see your, ah, *prisoner*."

Roberts attempted without success to unravel the undertones and innuendos of this speech. His job was made no simpler by the translation process. Where the symbiotic computer was itself uncertain how to render tone or emphasis, it gave various renderings simultaneously. The effect was like hearing a chorus of identical people simultaneously recite the same words in different tones of voice.

Roberts, however, did not hesitate. When the armor remained silent, he spoke in a loud firm voice. Now that things were moving, he aimed to keep them moving.

"We accept your cordial welcome," he said, "and we return it in the exact spirit in which you offer it." He glanced at the two armored monsters beside him. "Let us go, gentlemen."

He then glanced sharply at the battered armor inside which was Bergen.

"You, *slave!* Move!"

Roberts' battle armor added its own bit gratuitously, tacking the words on so neatly that there was no delay between Roberts' words and its own:

"*Move*, I say! Ha, ill-formed beast, dost wish another winding on the rack?"

A kick from Roberts sent the clawed figure staggering, to land with a crash against the base of the hatch opening.

Hammell was gliding along beside Roberts, the scales of his armor against the metal underfoot making a noise like the continuous riffling of a deck of steel cards. Hammell's voice came out in a loud guffaw.

"It doth entertain me greatly to see the clumsy figure stagger. You recall the arrogance with which it entered into our presence?"

Morrissey was rolling along beside Hammell, tracks clanking.

"We must remember to give it fodder ere too many more days pass. 'Tis best to keep it alive. I misdoubt we have drained the dregs of its secret knowledge as yet. A few more turns of the screw? Who knows?"

Roberts, alarmed, watched the shifting of guns amongst the Crustaxans. One of them swung his gun toward Roberts as Roberts entered the lock. Roberts, without thinking, reached for his sword.

It occurred to him belatedly that if he drew the sword, the whole situation, already shaky enough, might come unstrung.

One of the armored suit's larger limbs, however, obeyed his impulse instantly, and whipped out the sword. There was a glittering arc in the air. The Crustaxan's gun landed on the deck in two pieces. The suit thrust the point of the sword into the Crustaxan's armor at the midsection. Roberts' voice spoke casually.

"A little more respect to your betters, my lad, or you have a short life in front of you. Well, do we want to spend the whole day here? What's all this?"

Hammell had one of the Crustaxans battered off his feet, and another wound up in the coils of his armor. The tail of the armor was twining and untwining menacingly. Hammell's voice was a low rumble:

"This churl did menace me."

Morrissey had one of Crustaxans upside down by one foot, and jerked its gun away with his free hand.

"This fellow tried to pry at my treads as I passed. Why not slaughter the lot?"

"Come, come," said Roberts' voice, "we are here to be friends. 'Tis the nature of a crawfish to be a crawfish, and we should be philosophic about it. For now, anyway."

Morrissey promptly dropped the Crustaxan on his head, bent his gun into a pretzel, and courteously returned it. Hammell loosened the coils of his armor, and the Crustaxan inside fell out on the deck. Roberts observed that he himself had absently taken three or four of them around the neck by various tentacles, and now let them loose after a final squeeze.

The biggest Crustaxan, by the air-lock door, stared around, hesitated, and then shut the air-lock door.

Roberts had a sense of something missing, and realized he didn't see Bergen anywhere. He looked all around.

Bergen was huddled behind a couple of paralyzed Crustaxans, big-clawed arms over his face, his armor clanking against the air lock as he shook.

Apparently what had happened so far had induced some respect in the Crustaxans, as the transfer from the lock to the shuttle, and from the shuttle to the spaceport itself, took place without incident.

Roberts, Hammell, and Morrissey? along with Bergen, who cringed in Morrissey's grip? found themselves standing on a thing like a four-sided dock, which, with many others like it, was thrust out into empty space enclosed by the spaceport. The dock apparently had an axial gravitic field, as work was going on all its four sides, with Crustaxans striding back and forth at angles of ninety and one hundred eighty degrees from what Roberts' instincts considered "up."

The spokesman of the party that had taken Roberts and his companions from the ship had the helmet of his armor off, and was talking in a low voice to the leader of a platoon of guards waiting on the dock. Roberts was too far away to hear what was said, but this didn't bother the battle armor, which selectively amplified the Crustaxans' murmurs, until they were louder than the shouts of laborers on the dock, *their* voices being moderated till they were merely sounds in the background.

"Impossible," the leader of the guards was saying. "Their Excellencies know something about that ship which you do *not* know."

"I don't doubt it," said the spokesman for the shuttle party. "But what I say is true, just the same. Don't take my word for it. Ask anyone who was out there with me."

"You seem straightforward. I'll take your word that you *think* it's so. Now, let's be sure I follow this. First, you're satisfied that isn't Nade's command ship?"

"Bah! It's anything *but*. Not only is size-scale off, but the inside of the air lock is wrong. The pressure was about right, but not quite. The bridge itself is like nothing you ever saw. Grant that it's a shambles, still? "

"Be specific."

"Well, there isn't a claw rest anywhere. And the switch-stalks are all too short. You'd have to stick your pincers into the control board up to your elbow to get close enough to get your manipulators onto the switches. The read-outs are too low, and the pilot's seat is solid in back. How are you going to sit in it? At a first glance, yes, it looks plausible. But then the details hit you."

"Now, how about Nade himself?"

"I don't know about that. The armor is nonstandard design, but you can't be sure. It's got fittings in all the right places. But if that's Nade, he's sure got his claws in the mud."

"Pretty much beat down, eh?"

"He feels it coming before they hit him."

There was a peculiar grating crunching noise that came across untranslated, and then the guard leader said, "Well, we'll even up the score when we give this bunch the thin-slice treatment. You still think all these fakes are real, eh?"

"I tell you, fakes *couldn't* act this way! They come across as fake as a force-10 meteor storm!"

They're just faking on a deeper level. But I'll bear that in mind."

The guard commander left the shuttle-party spokesman, and walked over to Roberts. He clashed his claws together.

"Honored guests, accompany me. You will be taken directly to the audience."

Hammell growled, "Your Grace, another half dozen of those shuttles are heading for our ship."

"No bother," said Roberts. "We can use some more specimens."

The guard leader paused, then bellowed a command. The guards, bristling with weapons, formed a double line along the edges of the dock. One of the guards, carrying a thing like an overgrown washtub, with the flat bottom of it turned up, raised a kind of mallet, and hit the tub a mighty blow. The top of the tub vibrated with rhythmic *thump-thump-thump* sound. The nearest of the guards marched off in unison between the lines on the dock.

The guard leader said sharply to Morrissey. "Stay right with me. If you fall behind, my officers may mistake it for disrespect, or even an attempt to escape, and use strong measures on you without thinking."

Morrissey promptly rotated on his treads, to look across the interior at the far side of the spaceport.

"If you will pardon me, Your Grace, I think I will admire the view for a few moments."

Hammell coiled himself into a sizable heap with a tip of armored tail sticking out the bottom.

"Ho-hum. I think I shall ease the fatigue of the day with a little snooze."

The guard commander, just briskly starting off, stopped and turned as Roberts reached out, took Bergen, who was just starting after the guard commander, and jerked him off his feet.

"My sincere and humble apologies," said Roberts dryly to the guard officer. "We could not agree to accompany you until it is understood that your officers will accommodate themselves to our pace. Otherwise, some momentary lapse of restraint on our part might lead us to unintentionally dismember your officers."

"Ah!" said the guard commander silkily. "Is that so?" He bellowed a new order.

The guards whirled, guns leveled, and approached at a run.

Morrissey reached out a tree-trunk arm, and with a loud snapping noise bent up fifteen feet of thick L-shaped angle-iron that protected the edge of the dock.

Hammell unfolded from his coil like a streak of metallic glitter, and flashed into the ranks of approaching soldiery, hitting them below knee-level. Using these numerous legs as a snake uses twigs, rocks, and blades of grass, this equivalent of a tool-steel boa constrictor flashed in and out amongst them, the soldiers thrown in all direction like logs afloat in a rapids. Morrissey, like a giant spooning soup, reached methodically into the tangled heaving mass with his length of massive angle iron, to flip member of the guard off the dock and out into the void.

Roberts, meanwhile, casually held the guard commander with a few pairs of tentacles, switching grips on him from time to time to put him on the path of any angry guard that happened momentarily to get past Hammell and Morrissey. This way, the guard commander received the blows meant for Roberts.

Quickly wearying of this, the guard commander bawled a new order.

The tumult subsided. Hammell raised up, and looked out of the tangled heaps of soldiers.

Morrissey knocked loose a few more clinging to the edges of the dock and trying to take aim at Hammell, then propped his angle-iron upright, leaned on it, and waited.

Roberts had let go of the guard commander, save for one long slender tentacle, like a snare made of wire, that had him by what served for a foot.

"It would be appropriate," said Roberts judiciously, "since your armed strength is so inferior to ours, to avoid any action which we might mistakenly interpret as a discourtesy. Should we come to feel that there has been any serious provocation, we might find it necessary to wipe out the stain by dismantling the whole installation."

The guard commander was apparently making efforts to speak, and finally achieved it.

"I? You? We will adjust the rate of march to . . . to avoid any difficulty with the officers."

"Proceed," said Roberts, cheerfully.

The commander bellowed orders.

The guards, breastplates dented, weapons bent, many of the guards nursing injured limbs, fell in in two long lines.

With Roberts, Hammell, and Morrissey setting the pace, they headed for the audience.

The audience chamber proved to be a huge room; the near end was a blank wall, and the far end another blank wall. Roberts had the impression he was standing on the bottom of a giant's empty swimming pool. From a heavily glassed-in platform overhead, a creature well equipped with large claws on pincers looked down, holding a microphone in a set of comparatively small appendages at its chest.

"Pleasant greetings," purred the creature's amplified voice. "It is certainly a rare treat to have helpless victims present themselves as you have, both incapable of sustained resistance and yet sufficiently arrogant to add zest to the situation. Allow me to acquaint you with my identity. I am Gratz Ialwo? formerly Garvast Nade? Commander of Fortress *Ironclaw*."

Roberts silently digested the face that, with one sponsor finished off, a promising Crustaxan might

get another sponsor.

"I," said Roberts, "shall return the favor, and acquaint you with *my* identity. I am Rasgaard Seraak, Adjunct-Coordinate to the Empire, Galactic East."

That sounded good to Roberts. What it meant, he didn't know, but that was Ialwo's problem, not his.

"Uh? " came Ialwo's voice after a pause. "And your companions?"

"I," said Hammell, offhandedly, "am Prince Gdazzrik of the March."

"And I," growled Morrissey, "am known as Sarkonnian the Second, Lord Auxiliary of the Realm to the West."

There followed a further silence. Ialwo, when he did speak, sounded somewhat hesitant.

"And the other individual, who accompanies you?"

"His identity," said Roberts, trying to unravel the significance of the peculiar sound of Ialwo's voice, "must remain for the moment undisclosed."

"There has been a suggestion that he is in reality Arvast Nade, Admiral of Crustax."

"I am," said Roberts candidly, "aware of the suggestion."

"You are also aware that you are in a hopeless position."

Roberts had been looking over the walls of the place as he talked, noting that they were apparently metal, with a number of small openings high up, below which were long, nearly-vertical brownish stains. The door that had shut behind them had fit into the wall in such a way as to leave no visible trace. Knowing the strength of the battle armor, Roberts was not prepared to say they were helpless; but he was inclined to think they would have some trouble getting out of here.

Roberts laughed, as if he had just heard an unusually funny joke. The armor eliminated some little imperfections in the laugh, which boomed around the smooth-walled chamber as a explosion of rare good humor.

Hammell and Morrissey chortled appreciatively.

Bergen trembled all over.

Ialwo's voice murmured, "So, this is the sound our interrogators identify as meaning 'entertainment, skepticism, or good cheer'? We'll adjust *that* attitude."

Abruptly there was a hiss.

From one of the holes high up across the room, a liquid jet reached out and arced toward the floor, but flashed into vapor before it hit.

Ialwo said pleasantly, "One of the most difficult engineering feats is the disposal of excess heat. The answer, nearly always, is to somehow conduct it to the external environment. But? when the external environment is itself far hotter than the . . . say . . . armored suit which needs to be cooled . . . what then, eh?"

There was another hiss, and a further spurt of sizzling vapor, this time from another hole.

Roberts considered the situation. Possibly the best solution was a take a shot at Ialwo, then see if he could cut his way out of this place. But? could he cut through fast enough?

Roberts relaxed. The armor made his casual reply even more cool and unconcerned. "Such an attempt would constitute a serious provocation. A person in an inferior position might well think carefully before venturing such a provocation."

"And in what way do you punish a provocation when the provocation succeeds in creating your demise?"

"Very easily, if serious preparations have been made beforehand."

"You will not escape this room. Whatever powers you my possess, the walls of this tank constitute an obstacle which will require a measurable pause for you to get through. *That is all that is necessary.* Your first motion at attempted escape will result in an instantaneous molten discharge that will cook you inside your armor. Again I ask: 'In what way do you punish a provocation when the provocation

succeeds in creating your demise?"

There was a tone of barely suppressed jubilation in Ialwo's voice that Roberts didn't care for. However, he still had the possibility of creating unease in Ialwo's mind, since Ialwo's information came from prisoners thoroughly convinced of the reality of one of Roberts' earlier masquerades.

"I will tell you a story," said Roberts, his voice calm and unconcerned, "and at the end of this story, you will not only release us from this chamber unharmed? something which you will do anyway, as you have no choice? but you will also find a suitable way to make amends. *The Empire looks after its own, and does not treat such insults lightly.*"

There was a lengthy pause. A lack-of-breath sound was back in Ialwo's voice when he spoke.

"What Empire do you speak of?" Ialwo demanded.

"*The Empire.*"

"Uh? " said Ialwo. "This . . . ah . . . is some governmental organization allied with Earth?"

"Earth," said Roberts, "acts on a basis of relatively short-range profit and loss. The Empire arranges its accounts somewhat differently, on a more long-range basis."

"Crustax," said Ialwo cautiously, "has had no formal contact with the Empire of which you speak. We have heard only *rumors*. Rumors prove nothing."

"Each and every Citizen of the Empire," said Roberts, "may rely? if his conduct be good, and his pursuits proper? upon each and every other Citizen of the Empire for protection against outsiders. In fact, the provision of such protection by one who is not a Citizen is often sufficient to move His Majesty to grant Citizenship to mere allies and associates? a boon for which many crave, and which is hard to gain."

There was a prolonged silence, during which Roberts seemed to hear Ialwo thinking.

"And," Ialwo said craftily, "if the rescue attempt *fails*?"

Roberts groped for an answer to the question, and with his mouth still shut heard his voice answer cheerfully:

"Why, all depends upon the manner of such a failure. There is failure, and then again failure. If failure ends in base cowardice, what is there to say? That is disgrace. But if it ends in glorious searing of a more powerful foe, and even if its failure doth rock him on his throne, perhaps cast him down into disorder and ruin? why, there is vengeance, if not success. 'Tis then a glorious failure. If known, it will be sung by the minstrels to the King himself. If unknown, yet it will be recorded on the Great Books, and seen aloft in Heaven. What is done cannot be undone, and glory once gained, though it rust on Earth, is immutable in the Great Records of Time. It is far best to succeed, but Honor may require? even unsure of success? that the attempt be made."

There followed a very lengthy delay, then Ialwo murmured, "This proves nothing at all. And yet? " He paused. "Let us hear this story you were going to tell."

"Once," said Roberts coolly, calculating how to mix the large quantities of fabrications in with the very slender whiff of truth, "there was a leader of a mighty power allied with a still mightier Empire. All that was needed to make the happiness of the leader complete was to possess Citizenship in the great Empire. But this Citizenship was hard to achieve, particularly since the leader was of a completely different race from that of the Empire. It could only be won by proof of valor and craft in a good cause, in service of the mighty Empire. Much time passed, and then the opportunity presented itself. Another power seized certain Citizens of the Empire, and held them against their will.

"The mighty leader selected two hardy friends, disguised his most dread warship as a liner of Earth, and disguised the liner of Earth as a ruined alien hulk . . ."

Ialwo sucked his breath in? suggesting that Interstellar Patrol camouflage was better than Crustaxan detectors.

". . . And," Roberts went on, "journeyed to the space fortress where the Citizens were imprisoned. Once there, he was admitted by the crafty governor, and taken on board along with his friends, and a robot packed solid with *Ultrax* instantaneous fulminating-gas explosive, to a large audience chamber.

Here, the governor menaced him, and the mighty leader set the robot to explode at the first sign of hot metal which the governor threatened to pour in. The pressure generated by the explosive would, of course, shove the hot metal back in its passages, and probably blow the roof off the audience chamber.

"Meanwhile, the warship in the spaceport of the fortress had taken note of the defenses, and was now prepared to raze the interior with its powerful guns. Outside, at a distance, a fleet of the leader's warships stood by, to inflict retribution if the leader should be harmed. Attacked inside and out, with the landing force already within its gates, the situation for the fortress commander did not suggest the likelihood of victory.

"That," concluded Roberts, "is the story. And now I suggest that you consider it carefully."

There was a faint tremor underfoot, and the governor murmured, "That *is* a warship. Well, well. Now I will tell *you* a story." He gave a low grinding popping noise that the suit tentatively translated as a laugh. "Once there was a young survivor of Crustaxan seas, who entered into adulthood with high promise, was chosen as the successor of a great leader of high position, and succeeded to command of a mighty fortress. His future seemed to glitter before him. Then Earthmen destroyed the great leader, brought him down in disaster. His successor was forced to abandon the name, covered with dishonor, and enter into a much lesser succession. Meanwhile, some captives being squeezed for information exuded a story about an Empire that no one knew to exist, and stuck to this impossible story until three equally impossible Earthmen disguised as monsters turned up at the space fortress, and were entrapped inside, along with a camouflaged warship, which floated in the spaceport under the far mightier camouflaged guns of the fortress. At this point, the impossible monsters, trapped in a heat-treatment room, repeated the same impossible Empire story, leading the governor of the fortress to see the connection between the two, and recognize the story as a clever posthypnotic sidetrack to mislead interrogators seeking admissions under torture. Very clever. But now the governor could see the way to great honors by capturing the warship of the Earthmen, regardless of the price, and the Earthmen themselves, dead or alive, because after what happened at Storehouse, *the leaders of Crustax will delight in such a victory over Earthmen.*

"How," Ialwo concluded gloatingly, "do you like *that* story?"

"Somewhat boring," said Roberts uneasily. The battle armor strained the uneasiness out of his voice, and added, "A clumsy warrior thrusts too soon, revealing to his opponent his weak point, whereupon he must pay the penalty."

"Meaning what?" said Ialwo sharply.

Since Roberts didn't know, he was relieved to hear the armor answer coolly:

"Meaning that what you cannot bear is further disgrace. *Personal* disgrace, Ialwo. Disgrace that you must *live* with indefinitely, or else destroy yourself."

"The possibility of such disgrace does not exist in this situation. Combat, yes! But that is honorable. Disgrace? *No!*"

Somewhere, there was an odd grating grinding noise, like a set of drills and scrapers busily at work.

Roberts still didn't see the outcome, but his voice was cheerfully insinuating:

"And suppose you are associated with a worse disaster than your former sponsor, Admiral Nade? What then?"

There was a final scrape-*grind* noise, and a small dully-glinting thing popped into view, and ran ratlike along the base of the wall to the far end. There it huddled in the corner and quivered and shook as new grating, grinding noises accompanied the accumulation of a pile of metal shavings.

Roberts looked on blankly.

There followed a sound as of a thick wad of metallic cloth shoved through a small opening, and a second thing just like the first popped into view, to scuttle along the base of the wall and join the first one.

Ialwo murmured, "What kind of thing? "

Roberts' brain sluggishly added up the facts: *He* had never seen anything like that. Ialwo had never seen anything like that. But who else was involved in this collision? Only the symbiotic computer. But the

hole the thing made was too small to help. Wait, now. Suppose?

Roberts was still working it out as his voice said, "Watch it closely, Ialwo. Dozens of such things are loose in the fortress. As they reproduce quickly, soon there will be thousands? unless you can persuade us to take them with us when we leave."

"But what *are* they?"

"Just a development of a thing called a *rat*, which is a pest amongst the humans. This variety is a result of much development. It utilizes iron in its metabolism, in a form which makes it exceedingly tough, hard to kill, and capable of gnawing through almost any barrier. What it is after, of course, is your stores, reserves, food stocks, though it can live for some time, if need be, on spaceship fuel? such as doesn't leak out after it gnaws through the tanks. It is a very dirty creature, and? "

"Spaceship fuel," muttered Ialwo. "Stores, reserves, and food stocks!"

"At this moment, the things are eating and reproducing all over the fortress. All they do is eat and reproduce. Except, of course, to? "

"Hold your explosion!" roared Ialwo. "This is not aimed at you!"

A white-hot stream poured down from a hole high up, at the far end of the chamber. It landed away from the corner. The creatures there gnawed frantically. There was a second, much briefer dazzling spurt, with less pressure behind it. It fell too far out, but splattered the corner.

There was a desperate squeal, and one of the ratlike creatures tore around the floor, jumping into the air, twisting backwards, and biting at its glittering fur. The other, however, suddenly popped out of sight, leaving a single hole behind it. The first ran, humping itself desperately, along the base of the wall toward the place from which it had come in, then suddenly reversed itself and popped out? amidst streams of flowing metal? through the new hole.

Behind it, others began to come in through the original hole. These ran, humping and scuttling, with momentary unpredictable pauses, along the base of the wall and vanished out the fresh hole at the far end.

Ialwo cursed, and urgent spurts of flowing molten metal rained down, to miss them completely.

In the silence that followed, Roberts said, "They are not easy for a nonexpert to kill. Much skill and know-how is required."

Ialwo's voice sounded suddenly sober.

"How did these things get *in* here?"

"No problem in that," said Roberts' voice, matter-of-factly. "They are adept at concealing themselves. You have sent a number of your shuttles out to the ship. That's all it takes. They, for that matter, could easily throw themselves across the gap from ship to docks. One good shove, and they will drift the rest of the way."

Ialwo didn't say anything.

Roberts' voice was almost regretful.

"You can imagine how these things will spread, what damage they will cause, and what honor will be heaped on whoever is considered responsible for letting them get started. You do understand who will get all the credit for the trouble these things will cause, don't you, *unless* you can persuade us to get rid of them for you? Bear in mind that they are reproducing while you think."

Ialwo's voice came out in a croak:

"What do you want?"

The camouflaged battle ship was well on its way back, with the rescued prisoners recuperating in deep sleep, when Hammell said wonderingly, "Who would have believed it? He was ready enough to fight a war? that didn't bother him? but *rats* were too much."

Roberts said thoughtfully, "The effect of a blow depends not only on how hard it hits, but on where it hits, and how unexpectedly. He was a fortress commander, and all set for a fight. But the rats hit him on the raw nerve ends, *unexpectedly*. He couldn't gather from questioning us that anything like that was

coming, since we didn't know it ourselves. The symbiotic computer cooked that one up all on its own."

Morrissey smiled. "*There's* deception for you! The Crustaxans are pretty good at it. But how do they compete with that?"

"Two heads," agreed Roberts cheerfully, "are better than one. Even if one *is* a symbiotic computer."

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