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STRANGER IN PARADOX

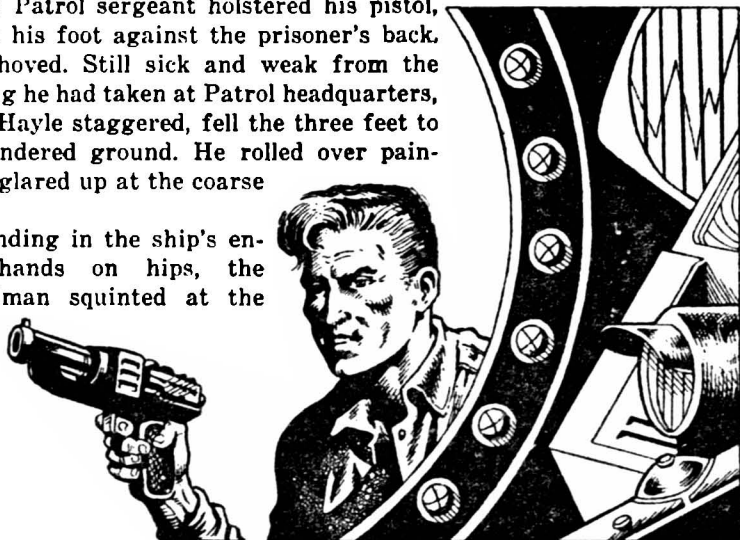
By KEITH LAUMER

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It was kill or be killed . . . unless a man was smart enough to beat the Patrol at its own game. Hayle was smart enough. Now all he needed was one little bit of luck . . . like a shattered Eye.

THE Patrol sergeant holstered his pistol, put his foot against the prisoner's back, and shoved. Still sick and weak from the beating he had taken at Patrol headquarters, Troy Hayle staggered, fell the three feet to the cindered ground. He rolled over painfully, glared up at the coarse face.

Standing in the ship's entry, hands on hips, the Patrolman squinted at the



black sky, the surrounding wall of tangled jungle.

"OK, you're on your own," he said. "This here is Camp Paradox. You pull your time now like a smart boy. Don't try no fraternizing with the other cons. We just got the one rule." The Patrolman turned his eyes on Hayle. "Nobody breaks it."

Hayle got to his feet. The Patrol sergeant spat in the dust, leaned to pick up a flat bundle, canvas wrapped, tossed it into the dust at Hayle's feet.

"If I were you, I wouldn't waste no time," he said. He turned and was gone. The lock cover moved quietly, seated with a click.

Hayle grabbed up the bundle, turned and ran for the shelter of the trees ringing the ravaged clearing. In seconds a killing wave of heat and high-speed particles would wash a radius of fifty yards as the Patrol ship went up. Hayle knew the ship well; until a week ago it had been his property. Under the newly painted inscription 'TMJ L-87' the name 'Tara Lee' could still be made out.

He cleared a fallen log and dived behind the bole of a giant ironwood tree as the vivid blue glare of the drive flared out. He hugged the ground until the rumble of displaced air died away, then yanked at the wires binding the flat package; they were

tough, tightly twisted. He pried an end loose, worked at it. One loop came free, another. He raked the rest of the binding away, dug at the lacing closing the end of the canvas bag, watching the surrounding forest as he worked, pausing every few seconds to listen. The inmates had seen him landed, of course; only their fear of each other kept them back for the moment. The time to jump a man was when he was new, fresh from outside. Hayle knew that much from rumor and the hints thrown out by the patrolmen.

The lacing parted, and Hayle ripped the bag open. There was no telling what was in it. He hoped for shoes and a gun; any kind of gun. Sometimes, he had heard, the patrol boys slipped one in just for the hell of it, especially if things were too quiet in Camp.

Hayle stared at the blunt shortsword which slipped from the canvas. He wondered where they had looted the battered relic. He dug deeper; a short length of nylon rope and a permatch. Not much to go up against a nerve gun with. He glanced around once more, then sat up and wrapped the rope around his waist, twisting the end under. He thrust the sword through the rope, and tucked the permatch into the tiny pocket of the coarse prison breeches. There were no other preparations he could make.

This was his equipment to face a new world.

A large green dragon fly floated overhead, tilting awkwardly in the wind which kept the dust moving. Already he was feeling the need for water. The sun rode high in the dark sky, beating down through arching foliage to parch the littered ground. His face ached from his interview at Patrol headquarters.

He would have to locate water first. He checked the accessibility of the clumsy weapon at his hip, then rose and started down the almost imperceptible slope, into the deeper underbrush. He stopped after a few paces, listening. This time he thought he heard the crack of dry sticks ahead and to the right, abruptly ceasing as he stopped. He touched the sword, moved on.

He heard the sounds again; it was impossible to move silently on this ground. No point in stopping, though; it was as well to meet now as later.

HAYLE hitched at the scarred hilt, searching out of the corner of his eye for a tell-tale movement. If he pretended complete unawareness, that might give a momentary advantage, make the other a little less cautious.

Hayle skirted a low branch, and caught a sudden motion to his left. He jerked the sword free,

leaped into the brush. A man scrambled up, darted away. Hayle dropped to the ground, lay silent. If the fellow on the right thought the fleeing man was Hayle, suddenly panicked, and followed

The grass parted beside him, and Hayle lunged, grabbed a pair of legs incased in rawhide boots. With a heave, he threw the man to the ground, then jumped up and stood over him, the sword at his throat.

The man rolled his eyes, choked. He still gripped a foot-long hunting knife in his left hand.

"Listen," Hayle said. "We don't have to kill each other, just because the Patrol wants it that way. Why not join forces and maybe we can work out something . . ."

The man rolled suddenly, struck. Hayle felt the sharp bite of the knife, the grate of the blade on his shin bone. The sword rose and chopped, just once, with frantic force. Hayle stumbled back, gritting his teeth. The other man threshed in the dry brush for a moment, then lay still, his head at a grotesque angle. The dull blade had broken his neck, hardly drawing blood.

Hayle sat down, examined his slashed leg. It was a gaping cut, four inches long and sickeningly deep. But for the bone, it would have been deeper. He ripped a

strip from the cuff of his trousers, bound it tight around the wound. This was a poor beginning.

He moved on, limping; he heard no one now. He had started out with the idea that he wouldn't play the Patrol's game here, but already he had killed a man. He wondered if the man had been a criminal, or another shanghaied victim like himself. He had an idea that few real criminals were sent here, that this was a special camp for "political" prisoners. Stumbling into the Patrol's 'restricted' area was enough in itself to consign a man to this.

The ground sloped more steeply now, and rotted wood and mosses were moist underfoot. The bush grew lushly here, and tall ferns leaned in the hot wind. Hayle pushed through a stand of sharp-edged grass and found his feet in oozing mud. He went on a few steps, batting vainly at swarming insects, then leaned and tasted the water. It seemed good enough. There wasn't much point in hesitating; he would have to drink it eventually.

He leaned over, and a smashing weight drove him face forward into the shallow water. Strangling, he fought, got his knees under him, drove his feet hard against the bottom, twisting. One hand was free now, and Hayle reached blindly back, felt a shoulder, and dug in his fingers.

His attacker cried out, pulling back, and Hayle's head was above water. He drew an agonizing breath, threw himself face down again, twisting. Overbalanced, the other fell forward, and Hayle tore free, lunged and found the man's throat. Cartilage crushed beneath his thumbs. He ignored the blows from flailing arms and legs; when the body was still, he rose, staggered back to shore.

He lay on the ground, gasping. Mud stung his eyes, grated on his teeth. He hadn't understood before what savagery he faced. His plan of enlisting his fellow convicts in a pact, to put an end to the killing, and eventually to capture a patrol ship. . . . Now it seemed like a school-girl's fancy. These men were savage animals; and the only rule was Kill Or Die.

A clever idea, this was, to let the condemned be their own executioners. It would appeal to the vicious, dulwitted Patrol officers. Hayle remembered the pleasure the fat Patrol Captain with the old-fashioned eyeglasses had taken in watching the boys work him over, 'questioning' him.

Anger rose up again. There must be some way to break this cycle, to take this game away from the Patrol.

Hayle rested, then went back into the water to wash the mud from his hair, nostrils, mouth. He drank deep, then considered

the next step. Before him the swamp stretched away, a treacherous tangle of trees, vines, sawgrass, apparently endless. Cautiously, he turned back to the forest. He had to find one man who would listen to reason. . . .

PATIENTLY, Troy Hayle watched beside the dark pool in the cave that was his den. In the orange light of the tiny fire he could dimly discern the sluggishly moving forms of small blind fish. One swam closer, and Hayle tensed; it moved away, and Hayle sighed, shifted his position. Food-gathering was a tiresome process—and, except for such tedious methods as this—a dangerous one.

Behind Hayle, an angry buzzing sounded. He turned, his hand on the half-finished knife he had begun to shape from the stump of the shortsword after it had snapped between the ribs of an ambusher. One of the giant dragon-flies, its darting shadow huge against the damp cave wall, circled erratically, struck against stone with a sharp clatter, veered, dived to the floor, fluttering. Abruptly, it was still. Hayle rose, crossed the narrow space, stirred the dead insect with a toe. He stooped, touched the glistening green body, then picked it up, carried it back to the firelight. With his knife, he opened the two-inch thorax. It split along the

centerline. Bits of broken glass fell out, and a tiny gear. A maze of hair-fine wires filled the case. Hayle stared at the tiny machine. The eyes were two quarter-inch lenses.

Suddenly, Hayle understood. This was how the Patrol watched their prisoners, spying on every move. This was the reason that quick vengeance followed any attempt of the hag-ridden inmates to join forces, stop the insane killing decreed by the Patrol whenever two men met in Paradox. The hovering eyes, seeming to be no more than heedless insects—watching, transmitting every scene to Patrol HQ. And the victims, knowing only that fraternization was death—and that at any instant attack might come from any quarter—soon learned the rule of Kill or Die.

Exultation rose in Hayle. This was what he had been waiting for—one tiny bit of luck, one small advantage, to tip the scale against the Patrol by only a feather-weight. But a weight that a determined man could use to trigger an avalanche.

Fishing forgotten, Hayle reviewed again his plan. Not really a plan, he knew. Only a vague idea, a formulation of the situation in terms of a few imperatives. There were still so many links unclosed . . .

Paradox was a terraformed planetoid, once, long ago, a pleas-

ure resort in the first days of expansion into space, when incredible fortunes were being made by a few bold adventures. The gravity and atmosphere generators buried at the tiny world's heart had been built to last an eon. Now, a century after the last of the great corporations had died of taxation, they functioned still. But the tropical gardens had long since run wild, the carefully pruned trees burgeoned into jungle, and here, in an isolation undreamed of by earlier ages, the ruthless Patrol dumped their victims.

Only one possibility existed for escape; the Patrol ship. Its capture was basic to any plan. One man alone could, conceivably, overcome the armed fourman crew. Separate them, ambush them one by one—

But here practical planning ended. With cooperation between prisoners, a concerted attack—. But somehow, the Patrol always knew. Hayle had seen them come twice in the four months of his imprisonment, to pounce, string up offenders by the heels, and blast off, leaving behind another page in the legend of terror that kept their victims obedient.

But now—their pretty scheme had developed a tiny flaw. Just one hairline crack in the gigantic masonry of Patrol dominance, an advantage his masters would not suspect. He had something

to offer now as hope when next he held a knife at a man's throat and solicited his cooperation. And now another plan began to form . . .

TROY Hayle lay flat on a tiny platform of woven twigs, high in a tree near the clearing where months before his fire arrows had burned out the den of a sly killer. He looked out across steaming jungle, the black water of the swamp, the tiny island where his hidden den lay, and beyond to the wall of distant vegetation, almost over the curve of the miniature horizon.

A green dragon-fly passed overhead, darted back to hover, humming. Hayle carefully avoided looking directly at the device, pretended to scan the trails below as though in quest of a victim. The hovering eye moved on.

It was time to go now. The new man who had been delivered had been caught in the blast of the departing Patrol ship, and had lain screaming, broiled alive, for an hour before falling suddenly silent. Either he had died of burns, or one of the watchers had finished him off. In any case, the plan would have to wait again, for the next visit of the Patrol ship.

Hayle had seen five new arrivals since he had come to Paradox, and he was no farther along with his scheme than he had

been months ago. It had been a long and bitter year. One leg was a little lame, the legacy of the wound he had taken on his first day. He was leaner, harder, practiced now with bow and spear and knife. He had learned to live on leathery turtle eggs, masses of minuscule crustacea, stunted berries, and the strange blind fish from his pool. He had survived and grown wise in the ways of Paradox. But escape was no nearer. The new man was dead, another hope for a recruit lost. Hayle checked the special knife he had filed from the broken short-sword, and started down from his lofty platform. His new idea was still untried; he had ventured out into danger for nothing.

Hayle dropped from a low branch to the ground, moved off toward the water's edge. He would lie hidden near the ford until dark, then cross. It would be good to get back to his secure den, to rest and plan—

There was a dudden rustle of leaves, and Hayle froze—too late. A man crouched, startled momentarily at Hayle's soundless approach, then turned to reach for a hidden weapon. Hayle leaped, locked an arm around the man's throat, hurling him sideways to slam stunningly against the ground. In violent embrace, the two smashed through brush, rolling, twisting, Hayle fighting

for the grip he needed. The other man was big, too big, Hayle thought with detached clarity. He glimpsed an Eye darting excitedly above. This was his chance, he realized. Now, if he could manage it.

He surged against the crushing grip of the other, groped for the special knife. He forced the lever over with his thumb, straining against the fingers at his throat, his face buried in the other's shoulder. He raised the knife, and struck hard . . .

The man jerked, and Hayle twisted, his mouth near the man's ear.

"It's a fake," he hissed. "Make it look good . . ."

The fingers at his throat probed, agonizingly. He had been a fool to take the chance. Blackness was closing in. He must forget the plan now, and fight for his life . . .

"I have the Patrol's secret . . ." he managed. The fingers pressed, unrelenting. Hayle knew he must strike again. He groped for the knife, still protruding from the back arched over him, the telescoping blade held in the skin only by a barbed quarter inch of blade. Painful, but hardly fatal, the doctored knife would seem to penetrate six inches into a living body, while barely drawing blood. A clever ruse to fool the Eyes. . . But only if the victim were quick-witted—and



unafraid. And now it had failed, and he must force the lever back, and strike again . . . if he could.

Suddenly the pressure was gone. The fingers buried in his throat relaxed. Hayle sucked in air, feeling the man go limp, sliding from him. Hayle scrambled aside, crouched. The man lay, face down, the knife standing in his back, pink blood in a tiny rivulet down his side. Hayle gripped the hilt, pulled. Six inches of blade seemed to emerge from the body. Hayle leaned close murmured. "You're doing fine."

He grasped the man's ankles, took a limp wrist in his left hand, and heaved. With the body over his shoulder, he moved off into the brush. A green dragon-fly followed. The Patrolmen watching would wonder, Hayle knew. But he had props ready in his cave. Burned human bones to toss outside. The Patrol had seen cannibalism before. They would believe it now, and the incident would be forgotten. But in the cave, the plan would go forward—with two plotters joined now in a team. Hayle's throat ached, but he hardly noticed; his luck was turning at last.

HAYLE stirred the fire, raked out the roasted tubers, and pushed one across to his guest.

"Not very tasty, but nourishing. How's the back feeling?"

"Sore," the other replied. "You were too damned realistic. How's your throat?"

"I'll live."

"By the way, my name is Griffin."

"Hayle." The two men shook hands, grinning.

"What was that you said about the Patrol's secret?" Griffin said.

Hayle brought out the remains of the shattered Eye. Griffin examined it.

"No wonder the damned bugs are always flitting around when there's any action," he said. "And this means we're safe here, in the cave."

"We can do what we like, as long as there's no Eye around. Now, let's talk plans."

"How long have you been here?" Griffin asked.

"About a year."

"I've been here three. I haven't worked out a plan yet; not one that really looks possible."

"So we'll have to try the impossible. Just getting together's a pretty good start."

"True," Griffin said. "But just a start. And a partial program's no good. I intend to succeed in getting out of this, and back to Earth to shed a little light on the activities of our glorious Patrol. We can't afford to make a mistake."

"This is no time for caution, Griffin. We need the ship. One of us will bait it in, the other will

take on the job of hijacking it while the crew is out on the chase. I've got a knife, a spear, and a bow. We won't ever get a better chance. There's nothing to wait for."

Griffin looked at Hayle. He hesitated.

"Supposing we pulled off the miracle; what then? We knew nothing about the outside security arrangements; we need more time to study—"

"There's nothing to study. We take the ship and play it by ear, Griffin. Now, while we have our health. Tomorrow one of us might be killed—then the survivor would be back where he started. With the secret of the Eyes, we have one small advantage. Let's use it."

"Yes," Griffin said thoughtfully. "That bit of data makes a difference." He stood up. "You're right, there's no point in hesitation. I trusted you once and I'm still alive. I might as well go all the way. Come on; I'll introduce you to my partner."

HAYLE followed Griffin as he eased between a leaning slab and the veined wall of the fissure, to emerge in a low-ceilinged chamber. He gaped at the room and at the rough-hewn chairs, table, bunks, the stone and wood utensils before a fireplace where a small blaze crackled. A hearth of flat stones had been built out

before a natural niche where the logs burned. On its edge a man sat, scratching at a square of hide stretched on a frame.

Half an hour later, with explanations and introductions completed, Hayle sat at the table across from the two men, a clay mug of hot 'tea' in his hand. Kregar, Griffin's partner, a grey-haired man of middle height with penetrating blue eyes, looked at him thoughtfully.

"How do you know you weren't seen?" he asked.

Griffin explained the secret of the Eyes. "We split up and looked innocent whenever one showed up. They didn't see us together."

"Let's get started on detailed planning, then," the grey-haired man said with decision. "With Hayle's information we're ready to move." He smiled ruefully. "All we need now is a plan of action."

"We'll have to take a ship away from the Patrol," Hayle said. "To do that, we have to draw them here. That's easy enough; we simply flaunt the killing rule, openly."

"Yes, that will work, of course," Kregar said, eagerly. "Two of us to be the quarry, the third to take the offensive. I've watched the ships landing on these punitive missions. A crew of four. Three disembark, armed with heat projectors or some type of automatic solid projectile

weapons. Their job is, of course, to contact their target and carry out the usual business of stringing the victims up.

"One man is left on board the ship. His post is at the entry port; he carries a wide-field high-frequency stunner; I presume this is to enable him to disable any attacking force without fatal injury to any of his fellow Patrolmen who might be in range.

"Their landings are usually made at a point as near as possible to the position of the target, which they seem to know with uncanny accuracy. Your discovery of their Eyes explains that, Hayle."

"How can you be sure there is only one man aboard while the other three men are out after their man?" Hayle asked.

"They use a class L scout for these visits," Kregar said. "They carry a four man crew."

Kregar reached for the hidden frame he had been at work on when Hayle arrived in the cave. "I've worked out here the position of our emplacement," he said, placing the diagram on the table. "We have to assume that the ship will touch down at the most suitable point in the vicinity of its objective. If we bait them in at this point," he indicated a spot near the entrance to 'headquarters', marked on the stretched skin, "they'll have little choice but to bring it

down here." He pointed to a tiny circle marked 'pool'.

Halfway up the slope, Hayle saw the boldly drawn X labelled 'Emplacement'. "Our bait moves off up-slope," Kregar continued. "His objective is of course to draw the Patrolmen as far as possible from the ship. In that we can count on only limited success. We'll have perhaps three minutes to do our work after we launch our attack. When the signal has been given by the 'bait' that he's been taken, we attack. Not a second before."

"Yes," Hayle said. "We'll need every possible moment to secure the ship before the patrol returns—and they'll come back in a hurry at the first sound we make."

"Right. The offensive party will advance as soon as the guard has been knocked over, enter the ship, and secure a hand weapon; possibly the sentry's stunner, if it is still intact. He will then cut down the returning patrol."

"What about the—bait, the two men who lead the Patrol away?"

"Since the usual practice is to suspend them from a tree as a display, uninjured so that they can make the maximum of noise for the longest possible time, they should be quite safe for the few minutes which will be required to get to them and cut them down."

"That means leaving the ship unguarded," Hayle said.

"Unavoidable," Kregar replied.

"How about another man?" Hayle said.

"We can't risk it," Kregar said. "We had to have at least three, but we run the chance of losing a man if we attempt to enlist another; and we can manage with three."

"What about the offensive party?" Hayle said. "What does he attack with? The ship will be sitting in an open clearing, from the landing blast—and it will be plenty hot. We can't get close enough for a sure kill with a bow and arrow."

Kregar looked at Hayle, rubbed his hands together. That of course, is the crucial detail of our plan," he said. "But I think we'll have a surprise for them."

"Kregar is quite a chemist," Griffin put in, "as well as a strategist. He's found deposits of some very useful chemical substances and ores. We smelted metal in a wonderful natural furnace, farther back in the rock. Come on; I'll show you."

Hayle followed Griffin and Kregar to a box crudely made of split wood. Griffin squatted, pulling away the covering of dried grass. Hayle leaned over and saw a grey, blunt mass of cast iron, nearly three feet long, tapering from a rounded breech to a flaring muzzle. Two sets of heavy

studs projected from the sides of the tube, for mounting. Beside it a row of heavy iron-grey balls nestled in the packing.

"The powder charges, wads, and fuses are here," Griffin said, indicating another box.

Hayle touched the coarse pitted surface. He had a sudden mental picture of spurting flame, the expression on the patrolman's face. . . .

"Our emplacement," Kregar said proudly, "will mount a five centimeter howitzer."

THE jungle was still as Troy. Hayle lay concealed in deep grass, staring down across a sparsely grown stony slope to the flat ledge where a tiny pool threw back the sunlight. The trap had been set and baited; the next move was up to the Patrol.

Hayle, Kregar and Griffin had scouted the area at dawn, to insure that no other hunters lay in wait. The gun, packed over with clay and bark to resemble a section of log, had been hauled into position by Kregar. The Eyes had paid him no particular attention. The emplacement, built of heavy blocks of stone set in the ground and covered over, had been placed months before. Kregar had waited until he was unobserved, had then levered the clumsy weapon into position, alert for a warning hum, and covered it with a screen of twigs

and leaves prepared in advance.

It had been two hours since Griffin and Kregar had walked into the open, pantomimed a cautious conversation, and moved off into the wooded area beyond the pool, paying no attention to a quickly gathering group of Eyes which hovered at tree-top level. Hayle hoped their pick-ups were as inefficient in resolving detail as he had surmised. Now, lying behind the gun, Hayle went over in his mind the plan of attack. He would wait for the arrival of the ship; then, quickly, lay the gun accurately on target. At the signal from Griffin, a single shout, he would touch the per-match to the fuse, firing the fifteen ounce iron ball. Without waiting to see the effect, he would immediately reload and prepare to fire again.

Hayle would wait until he saw that the sentry was disabled, then advance, secure the stunner if intact, and if not, enter the ship and arm himself. He would then man the entry and taking the returning Patrol by surprise, pick them off.

That was the plan, Hayle thought; and it could conceivably work. IF the Patrol responded as usual; IF the single guard stood in the open part; IF the cannon fired properly, and accurately; IF he himself were successful in finding a weapon, and then beating three-to-one odds.

IF, Hayle went on relentlessly, the Eyes didn't spot the ambush; IF the cannon didn't blow up; IF no outsider interfered at a crucial moment . . .

Hayle shook his head angrily. He thought of the puffed face of the paunchy Patrolman who had delivered him here, his callous arrogance. He remembered the hairless thug with the old-fashioned spectacles who had stood with his hands in his hip pockets, watching indifferently as two beefy, sweating hoodlums twisted and prodded at him, expertly inflicting agony without wounds. A warm feeling of rage began to fill him. His legs ached to be up, his hands itched to smash a malevolent Patrol face. Perfect anger, he thought, driveth out fear . . .

It might be hours, perhaps many hours, before the ship arrived. He looked up, wishing it were here now. He drew a deep breath, relaxed. Better save the energy until it's needed.

A faint rumble sounded, at the edge of audibility. Hayle stiffened, cocked his head, listening. It was not imagination; it was getting louder.

Hayle looked up, among the glaring stars, unfiltered by the thin blanket of air, searching for a moving point. Then he saw it, far out to the east, moving in a great slow arc. The ship was here, so soon . . .

He shrank against the earth, mouth dry, pulse thudding. This is it, he thought.

The light was brighter now than a star, blazing overhead, pulsing brilliantly, growing. The sound was a thunder, beating against the flattened grasses, the sun-seared slope. It was above, roaring like a maddened giant, the great white eye coruscating, glaring like a second sun. Fierce heat lashed at him; his eyes closed against the rush of searing air, the blast-whipped smoke. The thunder of the rocket filled the world, drowning even the howl of the heat-driven wind. He could only grip the earth, and hold his position. And then the sound was sheared by harsh silence.

A rain of scorched leaves patterned down, grit and tiny stones bounced from his back, smoke and dust boiled upward among whipping branches, smouldering leaves. Then ringing stillness, and the faint descending whine of pumps from inside the ship. Hayle spat dust from his mouth, cautiously wiped dirt from his eyes. A loud ping as hot metal contracted; muffled sounds; Hayle was close enough to the ship to see the space pits in the hull, the scars around the fueling ports. The ship had landed dead center on the spot marked on the map.

Hayle lay watching, relaxed now, ready. When the time came, he would act. He had his knife, made from the blunt shortsword the Patrol had contemptuously thrown to him. If he failed to find a weapon in the ship, he would at least return the gift before he died.

Hayle watched the port. It trembled, swung in. The black interior of the ship, a harsh voice, a movement; then a Patrolman ducked in the entry, hopped down, glancing at the surrounding forest, unslinging an elaborate light automatic rifle. He moved forward a step, turned to wait. There was a delay, more voices. Then the second man dropped down, tossed a cigarette on the ground, absently stomped it out with a booted toe, peering into the trees. A third was at his heels, pushing past him with a word. The first two men moved off down slope, the other angling away to their left. Excited green dragonflies hovered, darting.

A fourth man appeared at the port, scratching his chest. He looked around, spat deliberately, leaned against the port. That's perfect, Hayle thought. The per-match was in his hand. Wait for the signal—and don't miss . . .

A minute passed, two, three.

Far away beyond the pool, a shout floated back; the signal! Hayle tensed, and the lounging sentry straightened, squinted

across the slope to his right, spat again—and stepped inside.

Hayle was conscious of his heart beating, pounding almost painfully. Sweat ran down his forehead; dust floated in the sunlit air. The precious seconds were running out, while down below beyond the ship Griffin and Kregar struggled in the hands of the Patrol. Now they were adjusting the ropes around their ankles; now they looped them over a high branch, hauling; now the men began their self-sacrificing agony, swinging, head down, hoping that a hundred-to-one miracle would save their lives, waiting for the crack of the gun.

Only a minute or two now until the three Patrolmen would reappear; Hayle fought an impulse to jump up, go in after the guard. It would be useless, he knew; he must stay with the plan. Why didn't the man reappear!

A shape moved beyond the port, and Hayle felt muscles tense; time seemed to stop. Then a small figure, grey clad, moved to the open port, looked down, turned and awkwardly reached with one foot for the step. A new prisoner—

Behind, the Patrolman, hat off, put a foot against the face of the other and shoved. The slight body fell backward with a thin cry, rolled over on the ground, rose hesitantly, and brushed back short hair in a feminine

gesture. Hayle realized then, suddenly, that the new prisoner was a woman. The guard was in the entry. Now! Hayle struck the permatch—the Patrolman pulled at his half-open tunic, reaching up to lay a hand tenderly on his jaw, saying something to the girl. As she turned away, the sky split with a thunderous crack and the guard leaped sideways, arms and legs wide, seeming to hang for an instant posed against the tarnished metal surface of the stabilizing fin, then whipping over the top edge in a mad tumble of loose limbs, trailing redness, to slam the earth and rise in violent reversal, a tattered dummy glimpsed through clouded dust.

HAYLE was up, running; he leaped low bushes, rocks, not feeling the slash of broken stones, eyes on the open port.

He heard a scream, remote, meaningless. He could see the bulkhead inside the port now, dull green, a tiny red light glowing in a panel. With a leap he cleared the platform, scrambled into the silent gloom of the entry lock. He stared around him, spotted an arms rack, empty. The inner door stood ajar. Hayle knocked it aside, slammed a fist against the lift lever. The tiny platform slid smoothly up, uncovered an open exit, stopped. He sprang out, jerked open a locker

door; charts. Another locker, another. Dirty shirts, a liquor bottle, bundled papers, magazines. He scooped the contents from a drawer, stepped across the papers and litter on the floor, tried a heavy box. Locked.

He couldn't stay any longer. He was back in the lift, dropping. He darted out, flattened against the wall, drew the knife, and waited. Outside he saw sunlight on trees, the stony slope. A loud voice called; he heard the pounding of running feet. Only one man. Hayle shrank back, arm down, the blade's point at the edge of the port. The platform creaked, and there was a scrape of boots, heavy breathing.

"Gronski," a wheezy voice called. A hand appeared on the edge of the port, and then a round face, bushy browed, red, was staring into Hayle's. The knife punched through cloth and flesh, grated on bone. The man jumped convulsively, and at the movement Hayle reached out, seized the collar of the Patrol tunic, yanked the collapsing weight inside.

He twisted the knife, freed it, pulled the heavy body back, jumped to the port. The other two were coming up now. They called, "Tull, Gronski . . ."

Hayle spoke without thinking, imitating the wheeze of the man he had knifed. "Yeah," he said. "Come on up."

"What's the monkey business . . ." The voice was a grunt as the platform shook again, and a tall man was standing with drawn hand blaster in the entry. This time Hayle struck with an upward slash, and the hilt of the knife was slippery with dark blood that welled, as the fellow stumbled back, disappeared, the knife jammed in a rib. Hayle whirled to the dead man on the floor, searched for a weapon. Nothing; it must have fallen outside.

A dancing violet light lit the entry, and cursing started, rose to a shout, stopped abruptly. There was a long silence.

"Hey," the man outside called. "You inside there." Hayle stood silent.

"A deal," came the voice. "Let me in; I'll turn you loose."

"Get up on the platform," Hayle said.

"Come on out."

"Come and get me."

There was a hum, and an Eye hovered at the entry. Hayle watched it. It darted away, came back, hung outside the port.

"Come on out of there, crumbum," called the Patrolman. "You got no knife now; you ain't got a chance."

"What was that you said about turning me loose?" Hayle called.

"Yeah, I'll set you down anywhere you want. Come out with the hands up."



"You'll have to come in after me now," Hayle said. "That Eye picked up what you said. Your future in the goon squad won't be worth much unless you get me in a hurry."

"Lousy con," the fellow squawked. The platform vibrated, and then steadied. Hayle's stomach tightened to a hard knot.

"That's far enough," he said. "I've got the port covered. Now tell me what you'll offer if I give up."

There was silence. Just one break now, Hayle thought . . .

The sound was a shattering roar, a hammer blow against the hull, a whining of ricochet mingled with a howl from the Patrolman. Hayle whirled onto the

platform and jumped, stiffening his legs, to slam both heels against the head of the man crouched on the ground. Hayle twisted, grabbed for the throat; but there was no need; the neck was broken.

Hayle rose, panting, and saw the girl, up on the slope among the trees. A trail of smoke wound up from emplacement. She had seen the first shot, manned the gun—no time now to waste.

The knife! He turned to the slashed body, tugged at the knife. The girl was coming down the slope staring at him.

"Get in the ship," he called. He freed the knife, stooped to pick up a fallen blaster, ran toward the trees.

An Eye dropped toward him,

and he raised the blaster, fired. The tiny machine exploded. He ran on, pushing toward the dense jungle that had been the bait's agreed destination. Always before, the Patrol had strung up the men it wanted to punish. But there was no certainty that they hadn't shot Griffin and Kregar instead.

Then Hayle pushed through a screen of high brush and saw the swinging figures, head down, twenty feet in the air, side by side. This was the danger spot. There would be killers watching . . . He stopped, set the blaster for continuous low fire, and stepped into the space beneath the tree. He aimed the blaster, blanketed the entire perimeter, then clambered into the tree.

"Kregar, Griffin; we made it," he said.

Griffin hung limp, mouth open, face purple. Blood oozed from under his closed eyelids. Kregar stirred, spoke. "Welcome back, Hayle," he said.

THE girl came up to stand at Hayle's side as he sat strapped in the pilot's seat, setting up the take-off sequence.

"Where you going to head, Mister?" she said.

"I don't know," Hayle said. "Anywhere; out of here."

"Listen," the girl said. "My name's Salinda Steele. I've been a prisoner of these pigs for two

years. I know where their headquarters is, and it's a pushover. Head for that. You'll never get through the cordon anyway—"

"We're heading for Earth," Hayle said. "If we get through, there'll be time enough later to take care of the Patrol. Better get tied in."

"Listen to me," the girl said. "I spent last night pouring drinks for three of the top Party leaders. This ship is the hottest thing they've got, and it's loaded for bear. And wait till I tell you . . ."

"Look," Hayle said, "we'll be doing all right if we can just get out of this spot."

"Let me finish," the girl put a hand on Hayle's arm. "I just want you to know the spotters, or Eyes as you call them, transmit to this ship. They hardly ever tune them in at base. So nobody saw. And get this—their base is right here on Paradox. It's not thirty miles from here, on the other side."

Hayle turned to the girl. "Here?"

"Yes; and there are absolutely no defenses. This ship is the only armed one between here and Station Seven, a week's run in-system."

"Griffin," Hayle called; "Kregar, did you hear what she said?"

"I heard," Griffin said weakly. He was conscious but very ill. Hanging head-down was tough

on a big man, Hayle thought. "But it doesn't sound reasonable," Griffin went on. "Why would these scoundrels leave their base unguarded?"

"You don't understand how complacent these boys are," Salinda answered. "They've never met any opposition; they don't expect to. They have the whole system as their private playground. There's never been anyone to threaten them. They keep this bucket around for appearances, but even it's got a regular patrol to run. Nobody can get off Earth with anything carrying weapons, and nobody gets near here without being picked up anyway. But we're here, inside the defenses; and this boat packs a regular destroyer's firepower."

"What do you know about armaments, Miss?" Kregar asked. "How would you know what their defensive arrangements are?"

"Yeah," Salinda said. "I'm just a female; what would I know. . . . Well, I don't want to shock you fellas, but they didn't bring me out here to pour tea. I've spent a lot of time with these guys in the last two years; I've listened to them talk when they were drinking, feeling good. They talk around me like I was deaf, dumb, and blind."

"You were among them for some time, Miss Steele," Wasson said. "Why did they wait this long to consign you to Paradox?"

"I tried to knife a guy last night; he turned out to be a big shot. To me he was just another big ape with wandering hands. That was the last straw, I guess. They were always threatening to do something to me. They finally did it."

There was a short thoughtful silence. "Look," Hayle said, "suppose we did attack their base; the other Patrol ships would swarm all over us. We want to get back to Earth. We intend to break the Patrol, and with the information we have we can do it. We don't want to waste the chance, getting a little short-range revenge."

"The only way you'll make it is to take the Base first," Salinda said. "It can be captured, and you'd have a bunch of big wheel Patrol boys cold. Another thing; they don't know you have this tub; you can probably get the big transmitter intact, without any message going out to the rest of the fleet. You can send them off on a wild goose chase."

"This big transmitter," Kregar said. "Is that the official State Broadcast Station? The one that handles the propaganda broadcasts?"

"This is one of them," the girl said. "There are two."

Kregar looked at the others. "We have to have that station, gentlemen," he said. "We can put our story on the air from

here. And Miss Steele's idea about dealing with the Patrol squadron one at a time seems like a good one. I say let's try it."

"The idea has its points," Hayle said. "What do you say, Griffin?"

"It might work. I'd say it depends on how much Miss Steele knows about the landing routine, recognition signals, the lay-out of the Base, and so on."

The girl smiled. "Call me Lindy," she said. "I can tell you whatever you want to know. I've spent a few nights in the control center . . ."

PATROL vessel TMJ C-23, returning from a routine delivery of a condemned prisoner to Camp Paradox and the enforcement of exemplary discipline for a violation of Camp Regulation One, reported to Solar Center Tower, requesting permission to land. Kregar and the girl stood behind Hayle, listening. Griffin still lay in his acceleration couch.

There was a long pause during which a conversation in the background mingled with a crackle of static. Then a deep voice: "Whatta you wanna land for, C-23? You got trouble?"

"Autopilot's out again," Hayle wheezed, imitating Gronski.

"Ah, Cripes," the voice said in disgust. "OK, come on down." The voice went on, yelling off-

mike. "Off your duffs, you GCA guys; we're bringin' this can back in. And get me that mechanisms wise-guy . . ."

"Slick", Salinda said. "GCA will get you down to atmosphere."

A quarter-hour of instrument reading, power adjustments, and tense conversation ensued. Then GCA reported 'releasing Control'. Hayle took over, lowered the ship gently to the blackened pad, cut power, and turned.

"OK, we're down," he said, in the echoing silence. "Are you sure they'll come out to the ship unarmed?"

"Sure," Lindy said. "There's only about eight guys in the station complement here. You'll get four of them coming out. Then we'll have to go in after the other four. The wheels over in Party Town know what hit them."

Kregar came up to report a ramp cart headed out from the sheds. "We'd better get the port open," he said. "We'll let them inside, then herd them into the chart room for safe keeping."

"Don't be a sucker," Lindy said coldly. "Burn the rats!"

"We'll try to take them alive," Hayle said. "They're just the hired hands."

"Yeah?" Lindy said. "The hired hands never treated me any better than the bosses did. They love their work. Don't get soft on them now."

The cart swung around the ship, slid to a stop, and four men stepped off. The first clambered up onto the loading platform, stepped through the port and stopped dead, staring at Hayle.

"Back up, Mister," Hayle said in a voice that was carved in granite.

The man stepped back, mouth open. Kregar pushed him through the door to the chart-room. "No sound," he said.

The next man was on the platform, through the port, blinking in the gloom. "Where's—" he began.

"In there," Kregar said, motioning to the open door.

"What's goin' on here," the man barked. Hayle swung a fist, slammed the man against the steel wall, then hauled the limp body clear of the entrance as the last two men stood, gaping. One craned his neck, looking into the ship. The other stared at Hayle, then Kregar. "You guys are convicts," he said suddenly. He started to turn, and Hayle and Kregar fired simultaneously. The man who had turned slammed against the rail, spattering blood, then slid down. The last man crouched, wide-eyed.

"I'll do what you boys say," he bleated. "Don't kill me."

Kregar pulled the corpse inside, locked the chart-room door on the three captives.

"We'll wait about half-an-

hour, I think," Kregar said. "That's time enough for the repairs they were supposed to make, isn't it, Troy?"

Hayle nodded. "I'll tell these birds to strip and toss the uniforms out," he said.

Lindy, dry-eyed and tough, looked across at the sheds. "No alarm," she said. "I don't think anybody noticed anything."

"How are you feeling, John," Hayle said, stepping back to where Griffin still lay, limp in the couch.

"I'm all right," Griffin said. "But I must tell you; I'm afraid I'm blind."

THE uniforms were a poor fit. Hayle thought, looking from his own seamburst outfit to Lindy's baggy one. "We won't fool anybody in these get-ups," he said.

"We'll be on the cart," Lindy said. "They won't be paying much attention. They'll see the colors, that's about all. We just go in and spring it on them. And don't let anybody make a break toward that TX."

"You're the expert, Lindy," Hayle said. "We might as well get going."

Lindy turned to Griffin. "Take care of yourself," she said.

The three dropped to the ground, stepped onto the cart, moved off, leaving Griffin aboard. Hayle watched the windows of

the rambling operations building, trying to detect movement inside, gave up. Beyond the edge of the oversized port, built to accommodate large military vessels, buildings towered.

"That's the old Solar Rest Center, Linda said. "The big wheels have converted it into a bunch of private palaces for themselves. They've got everything in the world there. They live like kings."

The cart rolled in under an overhanging observation deck. Hayle stopped it ten feet from a door marked ENTRY 2-G. The three moved wordlessly to the door, opened it, walked in. At the far side of the broad room a dull-faced man looked up from papers before him, stared at them. Hayle walked toward him. He saw the man's eyes leave him, go to the others behind him. The fellow's eye's narrowed; he stood up.

"Who are you guys?" he said.

Hayle reached for his blaster, and the man moved like lightning. A glare lit the room as a blaster appeared from nowhere in his hand, firing. Hayle leaped sideways, raised his weapon, and fired. The man spun against a desk, dropped.

"Three to go," Lindy said. "Down here."

She pushed through a door behind the desk, and Hayle followed her down a dim corridor.

She stopped at a door standing ajar.

"This is the dormitory," she whispered. "I'll hit the switch."

As the light flicked on, Hayle saw a man in the bunk directly before him, sleeping heavily. He stepped sideways, searching for the others. Two rows on empty double-deck bunks, neatly made; nothing else.

"Let's roll that guy out of there and lock him in the john," Lindy said.

Hayle stepped to the bunk, prodded the man. He snored, started to turn over. Hayle took his shoulder and heaved. The man hit the floor heavily, grunted, sat up blinking.

"Get going," Hayle said. "In there."

The man struggled to his feet, puffy-eyed, unshaven, naked.

"What's the beef," he muttered, backing away.

Hayle rammed the muzzle of the pistol against the man's ribs. "Move off," he said.

The man turned and walked round-shouldered to the door, looked back, stepped inside the tiled room. Hayle closed the door and shot the bolt.

A SCREAM sounded from behind him, and Hayle spun to see Lindy drop, felled by a blow from a heavy-set man. Hayle fired, knocking the newcomer back against the door. He

shoved the blaster into his belt, ran to the girl. She lay, loosely sprawled. He knelt, took her hand, feeling for a pulse. There was a creak from the door, and Hayle turned, drawing the blaster. A Patrolman leaped through the door, aimed a kick that caught Hayle's gun hand, knocked the blaster flying. Hayle fell back, rolled, came to his feet as the man rushed him. A heavy fist caught him high on the cheek, rocked him. Automatically, he lashed out, felt a blow land solidly in his face in a blinding burst of stars. Half stunned, he back-pedalled, came up against a bunk, blinking his eyes, fighting away blackness. He saw a movement, ducked, heard the crash of a hand against the sideboard of the top bunk, swung his fist up in a desperate jab that sank into hard stomach muscles.

The fellow staggered against him, clutching, and Hayle uppercut him savagely, left, right, pushing him away. He stood loosely before Hayle, then folded to the floor. Hayle stood for a moment, breathing heavily, looking down at the man, then went to the girl. She stirred, moaning.

"OK, fella," a soft voice said. "Lift 'em."

Hayle turned slowly, raising his hands. A paunchy naked figure stood, gun in hand.

"I seen you looking at Doole,

figurin' whether to kick his brains out now you had him down," the man said. "You passed it; for that I give you a break"

"You might as well shoot," Hayle said. "I'll never go back."

"You'll go back," the man said gently. "Right now, since we ain't got a cage here, I'm puttin' you in the tank aboard the bucket. Let's go."

"You forgot your pants," Hayle said.

"Thanks for remindin' me. Gimme yours."

"Come and get them."

The man stared at Hayle through half-closed eyes. "Doole's worth maybe one more crack like that one," he said. "Peel."

Hayle started slowly unbuttoning, stalling. Maybe Griffin would come around, turn the tables. Maybe Lindy would somehow divert the Patrolman's attention for an instant, make him look away . . .

Hayle tossed the tunic after the trousers and boots. The man stood steady as a rock, covering him. "All the way," he said. "A guy don't get such big ideas when he's raw."

The fellow dressed slowly, grunting as he pulled the garments on one-handed, his eyes never leaving Hayle. There was no sound from the man on the floor or from Lindy. Hayle

glanced at her, saw her breathing regularly. Maybe she was faking, would jump the man from behind when they passed, give him an opening.

"Let's go." The man moved to Lindy, kicked her lightly on the thigh, watching her eyelids. He motioned Hayle through the door.

They passed down the hallway, pushed through the door into the office.

"Got Harry, huh?"

Hayle felt the sweat rolling down his face. He pushed the gate open, started across the room. Then they were past the door, in the harsh sunlight.

It was a long way across the ramp to the slender ship. Hayle felt numb, unfeeling. His face throbbled dully from the blows, cut knuckles stung, the hot pavement burned his feet. It didn't matter, Hayle thought. It was easier to just let it go. It was the desperate striving to cling to life that hurt. Dying was easy. He would wait until the last moment, until the next step would take him into the shadow of the ship, and then he would turn and make his last play.

Long shadows lay across the ground; another few minutes and the sun would set. Hayle looked at the dark sky, the blazing stars, the glint of light off the hull of the ship. Close, he thought. There stands the ship,

and there are the stars; but we kill each other, here in the dust.

Only a few more steps now. The sun was hot on the side of Hayle's face. He would never see it set. He looked into the blackness beyond the open port—and thought suddenly of Griffin. His step faltered, then he went on, into the shadow.

"What are you going to do with my friends, Mister?" Hayle called loudly. "They're hurt pretty bad; maybe dead."

There was no answer. Hayle didn't care. His words had been for other ears. Now he was at the platform, swinging up on it, stepping through the port.

"Hold it there," said the Patrolman, softly. "Don't get too far ahead." The big man clambered awkwardly up behind Hayle, prodded him through the port. "Don't get any ideas about the arms rack," he said. "Just ease forward."

Hayle took two steps, stopped, turned around, hands high, looking past the guard. The other narrowed his eyes, stood blocking the narrow way.

"A little to the right, Griffin," Hayle said steadily.

"Don't try to play no games with me, con," the man growled. He moved toward Hayle. "Move on—"

"All right, Griffin," Hayle said. "Take him."

At the last instant, the patrol-

man whirled, as the garish flare of Griffin's blaster lit the dim passage. With a grunt, he jumped back, slammed against the deck full length with a crash.

Hayle went limp. "We did it, Griffin," he croaked. "We did it."

YOU had me worried, Griffin," Kregar said.

"I'm tough enough," Griffin said. "Are you ready to make that broadcast?"

"Here, eat some soup first," Lindy said.

"We're set up now," Hayle said, but don't you think we ought to clean out the Party boys over in the fancy buildings first? We don't know exactly who we've got there."

"Don't worry," Lindy said. "All those names I gave you were here when I left, and they're still here; we've got their transportation. I didn't miss many."

"You named some of the top Party men, Lindy," Kregar said, "and the Patrol Chief, plus a lot

of minor lights who may have come up since my time. I think we've bagged some sort of general gathering. The Gods were with us on this venture."

"I don't think we'll have anything to worry about from the wheels," Hayle put in. "With the launchers laid on the middle of their pleasure dome, they're under control . . . The blustering on the closed circuits was a bluff."

"Go ahead with your broadcast, Kregar," Griffin said. "I want to hear it, too."

Kregar nodded, threw a switch, looked steadily at the glass eye. He was seeing more than the blank lens, Hayle knew. He was seeing the faces of millions who would hear the words that would blast the Patrol from power, composing suitably dramatic words in which to tell the news.

"People of Earth," said Kregar. "I give you back your Universe!"

THE END