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THE TRAITOR

By JACK DOUGLAS

WHEN Galactic Councilor Brown finished his speech against the Lukan I quit the war.

The war, the first the Galaxy had fought in 500 years, was ten years old then. We'd lost Sirius in the Third Battle of Sirius, the whole Magellanic Cloud sector in the Lukan Winter Offensive of 3072, and the whole Sun-Alpha Centauri sector was threatened every day by the Lukans still holding out in the Pluto Pocket they'd consolidated in a raid six years before. We were holding the Andromeda front all right, and raiding their home galaxy every week with high casualties and no solid foothold yet.

An all out war. A war of survival. I never knew what that really meant until the Lukans came. Ever since time began on all the planets of all the stars in the Galaxy, intelligent life has

Commander Stone hated being ostracized, yet there was no acceptable place for him in the Galactic civilization. It was too prescribed—too perfect. Then came the devastating war with the Lukans and he found the Galactic way of life was not perfect enough.

been fighting wars of survival. Wars to preserve the tribe, the nation, the way of life. But now, after 500 years of total peace and progress, we are fighting for true survival—the survival of intelligent life as we know it through all the endless light-years of the vast Galaxy spinning in the void of space out of which, suddenly, the Lukans came. They came in one terrifying moment we all had burned into our minds: the Andromeda X Massacre. I saw what was left up there with my own eyes, and I'll never forget it, but there are worse things than a physical horror.

An all out war that exploded on a Galaxy without an army, without any means of defense. A Galaxy where all men prided themselves on having, at last, outgrown the passions that bring

war, and where no living being had shot a weapon in 500 years. Unless he was a member of the Companies like me. That's right, I'm a Companion, in fact I'm a Commander. Commander Stone of the Red Company, Earthmen. I've been in the war from the start. In those early days it was the despised and outlawed mercenaries of the Companies who saved the Galaxy, fought for time on the outer galaxies, and died all across the far reaches of space under those smoking weapons of the Lukans. Ten years I've fought, managed to survive somehow, and picked up just about every medal in the Galaxy including the first Milky Way Cluster ever awarded because I invented the light-screen. Now I'm quitting, I'm through. The hell with survival!

I'll take it a step at a time. It was a routine job, that January 15, 3066, when we first ran into the Lukans. An exploration party to Andromeda, the third outer galaxy the Galactic Council wanted explored for possible colonization or trade. The only job left for the Companies in those days was escorting these expeditions because the Council was smart enough to guess that other Galaxies might not be as peaceful as we were. The only fighting men left were in the Companies, so we got a little respectable again because they needed us, but they made sure we didn't get paid enough to do more than survive. There were

three Companies along on this trip: mine, Mike Colenso's White Wedge Company, Earthmen, and X-Rab's Martian Fourth Company. Colenso, X-Rab and I were scouting with small patrols each when the Lukans hit. I thought then it was all over for me and the Company. I know now that there couldn't have been more than forty of them, but I didn't know it then.

"Can you see them, Red?" Colenso shouted over the noise of our firing.

X-Rab and his Martians were down behind a hill and out of sight, and I couldn't see a damn thing. Nothing! Except a lot of smoke without noise, my men going down like cinders, and some shifting lights all different colors.

"Nothing!" I yelled back, "smoke, lights, nothing!"

"We ain't got a chance!" Colenso shouted.

We were using our new style fusion guns that melted anything they touched. But I could not see anything to shoot at. I was trying to remember a prayer when Colenso turned on his infra-red searchlights to see if they would show up anything.

The Lukans turned all their fire on the lights as if they thought it was a flank attack. Right then I got it. We could see them all right, but all we saw was those moving patterns of colored light. And that was all they could see of us!

"Mike!" I yelled, "Get them under cover!"

We got the men under cover. It didn't work. Somehow they could still see us.

"Lights!" I yelled to Mike, "Get every man to put his infrared on the ground in front of him pointing up! Fast!"

The firing stopped as if it had been cut with a knife. It was the light-screen. I got the Milky Way Cluster No. 1 for that. It's perfected now, and it's our best weapon. The Lukans don't have it, and don't ask me why. There're an awful lot of things we don't know about the Lukans to this day. In fact, we don't really know anything. Did you ever try to fight an enemy you can't really see, can't hear, can't talk to? That's total war.

That day, when we put up the makeshift screen, the Lukans stopped firing. We could still see them through the infra-red beams. I fired at every patch of light in sight. In five minutes they ran. At least, they vanished. I lost thirty men, Mike lost twenty-two, and X-Rab lost sixty, nearly his whole patrol because he had not thought of the light-screen. One thing X-Rab did prove. The Lukans are as solid as we are. He grappled with one of those shimmering light patterns and it was as solid as an Earth-bear.

"But who they are?" X-Rab wanted to know.

"If they're solid why the hell can't we see them?" Colenso wanted to know.

"The brain," I said. "The light

reflecting from their bodies just doesn't come together into a form in our brains. It's the same for them. They see us, but they don't."

"They must very much different be," X-Rab said.

"How the hell do we fight a bunch of lights?" Colenso said.

"Maybe we won't have to," I said. But what I was thinking was how *could* we fight without an army, without a militia, without enough weapons to equip anything but the thousand Companies scattered across the Galaxy in outlawed strongholds? One thousand Companies of no more than 500 men each! Five hundred thousand men to fight shimmering lights I didn't for one second think were from Andromeda. We got out of there fast and I reported to the Council myself. I could see that they had the same thing on their minds.

"Andromedans are backward, almost savages," the Chief Councilor said.

The Council Chamber was filled. Every Councilor was there. But no one else. When I had told the Chief Councilor what I had to tell him in private, he called a closed session. The room was packed and hot and scared.

"Perhaps they won't come back," the Chief Councilor said.

"Maybe they will," I said.

"Shifting lights!" one Councilor said.

Then I heard Councilor Brown for the first time. He was a new Councilor, a noted liberal. He

said, "We can't fight, we don't have an army, no weapons! We'll have to talk to them."

"How," I said, "I bet we can't. I didn't hear a sound out there and soldiers talk in a battle, I know. Anyway, I don't think they'd listen. They hit us without warning. I guess they don't believe in free trade."

"This is no place for jokes, Stone!" Brown said.

Then the Chief Councilor said, "It's up to the Companies. We'll have an army in a year."

"The Companies!" Brown cried, "No!"

"Do you have another suggestion?" the Chief Councilor asked.

"A peace mission. One ship to Andromeda," Brown said.

"All right, agreed," the Chief Councilor said, "but we'll take a few precautions, too."

The whole great Galaxy was under the threat of doom that day. I walked out of the Chamber and went to Laura. Since I was a recruit in the Company I had wanted Laura, but she wouldn't come with me to our Titan stronghold, and Companions are forbidden to marry. Heredity you know, they wanted to stamp our breed out. I was thinking about that when I left the Chamber. Outcasts. Vermin. Now they wanted us to save the Galaxy—if we could. Laura, the only thing I wanted in their whole perfect Galaxy and they refused her to me. How many times had she sat there in the dark beside me and said, "I love you, Red, but I want

to be married. I won't live in a stronghold-marriage, not even with you." And how many times had I tried to explain, "I'm a Companion, I can't change that. I don't know, even if I could quit I couldn't live in a city, or on an automatic farm. It chokes me. I know they're all making a perfect civilization, but it just isn't for me. I get restless. I don't care about a perfect civilization." I was thinking about that when I went to Laura that night.

"It's up to the Companies," I said across the small living room of her apartment. The city had forty million people in it then, and all Laura could have was two small rooms in a small, old 200 story apartment house. Good rooms, everything automatic, because with 500 years of peace there had been time to do a lot for living, but small. She had red hair, Laura did, and she was tall. Across the room that night she seemed almost pretty. She was not, but I loved her. I guess I always will even though she'll hate me forever. But then she loved me, and she smiled.

"You can do it." Laura did not scare easily.

"Who knows? How many of them are there? How do they fight? I don't even know if the men'll do it."

"Red!" she cried.

"Why should we," I said bitterly. For five hundred years they had hated us. Obsolete men, throwbacks, fossil remains of long dead passions. Useless idlers, brawlers, space-bums, un-

civilized and anti-social. Tolerated in our distant strongholds because it kept us out of the way of progress, and because ever since old Cannon Connors formed his Purple Gang 500 years ago we had been useful in a negative way. Psychology doesn't change in everyone overnight, not even with the best of intentions, and Connors formed his Gang because there were people to hire him to help them take things from others. Soon other people were hiring Companies to defend them against Connors. That's how the Companies started. The Free-Companions, we fight for anyone who has the money to pay. The Galactic Council labeled us anti-social-types-B-6 and outlawed us. Useless, dangerous, forbidden to marry, banned from all cities in groups of more than two, and the little fingers cut off our left hands so that everyone would know us for what we were. They could have wiped us out, but then they found we were useful after all. We drained off all the antagonisms in the society, and all fighting was done amongst ourselves. Sooner or later we would kill ourselves off and that would suit them fine. Everyone else could go their peaceful way and no one got hurt except us. And then the jobs began to die out until there was nothing left for us to do but escort expeditions beyond the Galaxy. And deep down, I knew, all the Companions knew, that the Galaxy was right and we were wrong. We were obsolete.

THE TRAITOR

We were useless. We fought amongst ourselves and the rest of the Galaxy passed us by.

"I've spent half my life sitting alone in one of those few old bar-rooms we have left, looking out the window at all the people going somewhere, working, always busy and building, and knowing I had no part in it, and knowing I didn't want any part in it. I sit there and just want to sit and then get into my ship and go back to the stronghold. But I watch them and I don't know why I can't be like them. Sometimes I think we all wish we could. It's not pleasant to be useless and sit waiting to die out."

The room was warm and small in the low light of the illuminated ceiling. Laura came and kissed me.

"Now you're really needed," she said.

I had been thinking the same thing. Now we were needed! Maybe this was our chance. Maybe this was our destiny, to fight for the Galaxy, to really belong to the society again. There was a thrill in that thought I've never forgotten. I still feel it sometimes, even now out here 60,000,000 light years away from the Galaxy.

"Maybe we could get married someday after all," Laura said that night. "They'll have to change the law."

"They can't put back my finger," I said. Bitterness is something that leaves slowly even when you're sitting with a real

hope of being a part of the world again.

"It'll be a mark of honor now," Laura said.

I think that thrilled me the most. I could see myself walking with my left hand proudly in sight for the first time in my life, smiling at the passing people because I was with them at last, even if it was with them in a war I knew already would kill billions of us. I was happy then, in a way, but I wasn't fooling myself. This was not going to be a skirmish. Whatever it was going to be it wasn't going to be pretty at all.

It wasn't pretty. It began with the Andromeda X Massacre.

I left Laura that next morning on my way to the stronghold on Saturn's moon Titan. But not until I had watched the Peace Mission go off toward Andromeda. It was Brown's plan, and I agreed it should be done. I didn't want that war, even if it would mean a lot to me, I didn't want to belong that badly. The Peace Mission ship left. It was unarmed and unprotected. It landed on Andromeda X-6. It never came back. X-Rab's Fourth Martian Company, and mine, both at full strength, went up there to find out what had happened. We found them all dead, the ship blasted, and ten thousand of the native creatures burned to cinders. There were no Lukans. They had hit hard and gone. But they had left us a message. Every one of the four

hundred man party was hanging by his heels and drained of blood.

"Like the cows you earth men eat," X-Rab reported to the Council, his face as pale as a red Martian face can get, "Empty, blood none, gone all, through tubes in the throat drunk. We see."

The horror of that stunned the Galaxy. I still feel a little of that cold chill when I think of a people who live on animal blood. I look at Rajay-Ben and I shiver sometimes. But then, after I had seen those four hundred corpses hanging drained of blood in the bleak Andromeda X-6 hills, I had never been so ready to fight in my life. I was mad, and I was scared. There could be no living with the Lukans. And it was not going to be a pleasant war. If we lost, we would cease to exist, all of us from one end of the Galaxy to the other. However different we were in the Galaxy, we were all warm-blooded animals. The Lukans, I know now, are plant-life, and I eat my dinner alone. At the time I got into my ship and spoke over the televiewer to the Company.

"No big payoff," I said. "Council wages, you know what that means. But they'll supply us, they'll start turning out so many fusion bombs those Lukans'll wish they ate bombs before they get anymore of our blood! There will be an army, but for now it's up to us. Okay, anyone who wants to fight step forward one pace." I looked away from the viewer. When I looked back, they

were standing in the same single lines on all ships. "What?!!" I cried, "Not one?! Damn . . ." Poor Johnny Cole, my youngest sub-ensign who was killed at the First Battle of Sirius, said, "Sir, they've all stepped out."

That's how it was with us then. And that's how it was with me. We held the line for a whole year alone. Looking back, I don't know how we did it. There was the light-screen, it helped, and then the Lukans fought in the only way we could have stopped them, in small, quick raids. It was a fast moving, strike here—strike there, type of war, and that saved us. But we lost 300,000 of our 500,000 men before the new volunteers began to come up. X-Rab went in that first bloody battle of Andromeda. I never knew I could like a Martian that much. He took at least 500 of those shimmering lights with him. They got into his Command Ship and he hid in the engine room until they tried to get it started. Then he blew it up. They fought hard, and they fought good, those, shimmering lights. We found their home galaxy the sixth year, after the fighting had gone to far larger forces and they had taken the Magellanic Cloud sector. Our summer offensive took us to the edge of their formless galaxy. My Company had 20,000 men in it by then and I lost half of them up there in Lukania. It was a homogeneous galaxy, not like ours, and all Lukans are the same. We took no prisoners, and

neither did they. Maybe we wouldn't have anyway, but no Lukan ever let himself be taken alive. And none of us ever let ourselves be taken alive. That was the kind of war it was. Our existence against their existence. I fought it for ten years, and now I'm through.

A year ago now we took a prisoner. He was a spy. We caught him without a weapon to use on himself trying to get out of the Central Research Building on Alpha Centauri-4. I was on leave at the time and they called me down. The Lukan just sat there in a cell shimmering like a rainbow. We knew what he ate, at least one thing he ate. The bowl of hot cow-blood seemed to flow up the glass tube into nothing. Just a patch of shimmering colored light. I had never seen one this close. I stood there staring at him. I suppose he was staring at me.

The problem of communication turned out to be simple. We tried a hundred methods, nothing worked. Then someone remembered that long ago, in the early days of intra-Galactic explorations, a Martian had invented a machine that picked up sound waves and converted them into the sound waves of any of the basic languages. We tried it on the Lukan. It did not work. Then an operator of the machine suggested trying it by putting in sound waves and sending out light waves.

The Chief Councilor told the

operator, "Ask him who he is, where he's from."

The shimmering light said nothing.

"Tell him," the Chief Councilor said, "that he's safe."

Nothing.

I was angry. That shimmering thing in there had been killing my men for nearly ten years. The operator tried using every sound wave in our basic languages and got nowhere. Almost every sound wave combination. I lost my head then, I suppose. All I knew was that I was looking at a prisoner who had killed my men, who was one of the unknown creatures who were out to destroy every living thing in our Galaxy. I burst out in the old Earth slang we use in the Companies. We kept that harsh, vulgar old language mostly out of spite, I suppose, we were marked as different so we wanted to sound different.

"Tell the son-of-a-bitch to can the crap or they'll be picking him up with a spoon!" I yelled.

The operator looked at me. "Sir?"

"Go on, tell him!" I said.

"Beg pardon, sir," the operator said. "You're using the Companies' variant of the old Earth dialect No. 8, we don't have the machine coded for . . ."

"So code it!" I roared.

He coded it. It took him about five minutes. Then he beamed it to the Lukan. I watched the shimmering lights suddenly move. The operator yelled:

"I have something!"

"What the hell is it?" I snapped.

The operator frowned. "He says, 'Rajay-Ben, Superior-Leader, 08799931.'"

The Chief Councilor broke in, "Where's he from, what was he after when we caught him, where is his base! Ask him!"

The operator translated, waited, looked up at us. "He says, Rajay - Ben, Superior - Leader, 08799931, and . . ." The operator stopped.

"And what?!" the Chief Councilor said. "Speak up. This is no time to hem and haw!"

The operator took a breath, " 'And you can all go to hell on a mule'. What is a mule, sir?"

I said, "Old Earth animal, used in ancient armies, it's got a metaphoric meaning in the dialect."

The operator nodded, "I see, very interesting." The operator was a specialist, he had the detachment of a specialist and I felt like wringing his neck right then.

"Repeat it," the Chief Councilor said. "Tell him if he wants to live he'll tell us everything, make him understand!"

The operator repeated it. I could see that the strange dialect was beginning to interest him. It was a mark of his upbringing; an expert in languages but not familiar with the common slang of the Companies because that was anti-social, not at all proper. It would have made me madder if I wasn't totally concerned with

that unresponsive patch of colored light. The operator looked up;

"He says, 'Who you kidding, buster, I've had it in spades anyhow, so don't bother me.' What is buster, Commander?"

That did it. I blew up. The operator crawled into a shell and translated without comment from then on, but we got nothing more out of that Lukan. Just, "Rajay - Ben, Superior - Leader, 08799931." Name, rank and serial number. We gave it up. As we left, the operator ventured to say to me:

"Excuse me, Commander, but that dialect fascinates me. I wonder if you could spare a few minutes some time . . ."

"See me after the war," I said.

The operator shrugged. "Sorry. You know, that Lukan isn't really speaking your old Earth dialect, of course, the machine merely finds the closest known language or dialect to catch the . . . the similarity, the . . . flavor, yes, the flavor, the feel of his language."

"I'm aware of that," I said curtly and walked away from the operator.

The flavor of his language. I'm trying to tell this straight, you understand. I don't make excuses, but maybe it'll help if I can make you understand what happened to me. I left the city then and went back to my Company. We were holding an advance sector of the Andromeda front at the time, and getting ready for a spring offensive

straight into Lukania itself again. It was just something inside me then. The flavor of his language. It bothered me. I know now that if you're going to have to fight an all-out war, maybe it's better not to know anything about your enemy.

Fighting a galactic war keeps a man busy, so it wasn't until six months had passed that I heard about the Lukan again. He was still alive and still impossible to break. I think we would have tortured him, we wanted information that badly, but how can you torture something you can't really see, don't know enough about to know what will hurt him? But I heard something else and left the front fast. It was Brown they told me to see.

"He let one hint drop," Brown explained, "about an opposition to the war in Lukania. One of the Councilors leaked it. We arrested him, of course." And Brown looked at me sadly. "What else could we do, the people were angry."

Brown had aged from the young liberal. I suppose we all had. Basically Brown was a good, kind, honest man. He had opposed the war at first, and he had meant it. I knew that. It was what made it worse in the end.

"The people?" I said. "Why?"

"Well, when the word leaked, a few unstablers, you know the kind, we can't control every hidden impulse . . ." and Brown waved his hand as if he were very weary. "They spoke out against the war, just a few, not

one-millionth of one percent in the Galaxy."

"And?"

"We arrested them, had to protect them. The people on Centauri-4 lynched six of them the first day."

"Lynched," I said, "in the Galaxy?"

"War does some strange things. We're fighting for survival. The people want to survive."

"I know," I said. But a lynching in our Galaxy. It was impossible. Not for 500 years had we had violence like that.

"We hadn't told them about that Lukan," Brown said. "We knew their temper, they'd have lynched him. Now I have to tell them. Tonight." I saw a light in Brown's eyes, a sudden fire, and he sat forward. "I've been picked to speak. I'll tell them about this Lukan, and about what we're fighting for. Life itself. Civilization itself. I'll tell them."

"If they don't know after ten years . . ." I began.

"Of course," Brown broke in. "Survival, but it's more than survival, they know it and we know it now. Much more than survival."

When I left, Brown invited me to sit in the Galactic television room to hear his speech. I got there early. Brown was not there yet, but the room was already filled with the other Councilors, a lot of Company Commanders like myself, and all the new army Generals in the city at the time. I looked at the battery of screens

that showed the great halls of every planet in the Galaxy and could hear the murmuring of the crowded millions in those halls. At last Brown arrived. He seemed nervous, but he smiled at me. When he held up his hand for silence, I leaned forward to listen.

I don't remember that speech now. I listened. I listened carefully. I remember he spoke of working together, fighting together so that someday we would have peace again not only in the Galaxy but in the whole universe. He spoke of the survival of the whole universe, not just us, and of our bringing peace even to Lukania itself. But he said there could be no co-existence with Lukans, they must be wiped out. It was all true, I knew that better than most. The words were true, except . . . well, there was a feel, a flavor as the operator had said that day with the Lukan. I couldn't place it. I was worrying it in my mind when I heard Brown start to talk about the Lukan prisoner. As I said, I don't really remember that speech now because as I sat I heard the word. I missed it in a way. I heard it but it didn't mean anything at first. But I sat up straight and waited. The word came again, there was no mistaking it.

". . . traitor!" Brown had shouted into all the audio-tubes.

That word, even in ancient days, chilled a man. But now, in a war of horror like ours, in a

war of ultimate survival, who could be a traitor? One of us working for the Lukans?! Who? Who was the traitor! I listened but I heard no name that I recognized. The first traitor in the Galaxy. The danger, the horror of it, made me as cold as if I had been on Pluto outside the insulated cities.

"Traitor! Traitor!" roared the billions out there in the halls of the Galaxy. On the screen I could see them all standing, their faces twisted with hate and outrage. I realized that my own face was twisted like that as I waited to hear the name. It is still confused to me, what I felt, but I remember one thing. I prayed it was not a Companion. But who?!

Brown was shouting, his face red with anger now. "... a creature ready to drink our life's blood! He defies us! He says nothing! He will not help us save life itself. He sits there an ob-scene, filthy shimmer of lights, and will do nothing to save civilization! This vile traitor to all that has meaning in life!"

"Traitor! Traitor!" roared the screens.

I don't know if it showed on my face. I sat there, colder now than any traitor could have made me. Brown shouted on, in a transport of rage and hate for the Lukan back there shimmering in his cell. Brown shouted of saving life itself, of saving civilization. Not *our* life, not *our* civilization! He shouted of that Lukan as a traitor.

"What will we do with all traitors," Brown shouted.

"Kill them! KILL THEM! TRAITORS!" roared the screens.

I sat. I just sat there listening to the screens, watching the flushed faces of the Generals, the eager, open mouths of the Councilors, even the grim faces of the Company Commanders. Then the speech was over. They all crowded around Brown, all the Generals and Councilors and Commanders. The screens still roared and shook to the angry feet of billions of people. I waited. At last Brown came over to me. He was flushed with excitement. The kind, almost sad eyes of the young liberal were hot with anger.

"Well, Stone, that should build a little morale, eh?"

I said very slowly, "That Lukan, Brown, he's a Lukan."

Brown waved a sharp hand like a knife, "The Lukan traitor!"

"He's a spy, a Lukan soldier," I said, and I got mad. "Damn it, Brown, don't you understand?! He's a Lukan! A Lukan!"

Brown just stared at me. "Are you feeling well, Commander?" They were all staring at me in that room. I could feel the screens filled with angry, shouting people. Brown said gently, taking my arm, "Of course he's a Lukan, I told them, Stone, I just told them. Now you just sit down and . . ."

It was his eyes. I saw it there. He did not understand. None of them did. They never would. It

was like the bodies of the Lukans themselves, we could see them but our brains could not understand what it was we saw. Brown was looking at me kindly and yet with that look I knew so well that said he thought I had lost my reason, battle-fatigue no doubt. I tried once more.

"Brown," I said slowly. "You called the Lukan a traitor."

"A traitor to all life, to civilization," Brown said in cold, harsh voice. I saw all the heads in the room nod in angry agreement. I turned and left.

I walked in the streets for a long time that night. Everywhere people were talking of the Lukan traitor. I found my old ancient barroom and sat there drinking. There were two other Companions in the room. Old Companions with their little fingers missing. The Council had rescinded that law as soon as the war started and most Companions were just new-army soldiers now. I looked out into the street and watched the people passing and the old feeling came back, the feeling of not being one of them. I don't think I had any plan at first, but I suddenly heard in my mind, "Rajay - Ben, Superior - Leader, 08799931. And you can all go to hell on a mule!" In my language. I left the barroom and went to the military prison. The flavor of his speech! I could have been wrong, very wrong, but the flavor of the Lukan's speech was the flavor of an old soldier, a man like me. I found the trans-

lating-machine operator. He was surprised, but I told him it was a special interrogation. Since the war began we have rigid discipline in the Galaxy, and my record was well known. No one questioned Commander Stone, the hero of the Initial Contact, the inventor of the light-screen, the veteran of ten years of the war of survival. The operator came.

The Lukan, Rajay-Ben, was lying on his bunk. When we stood before his cell, the shimmering lights moved and came erect.

"Tell him who I am," I told the operator. "Name and Company."

The operator stared at me. It was strictly against all regulations.

"Tell him!" I said.

The operator told him. I could see the shimmering lights move toward the cell door. The operator said:

"He says, sir, 'Well I'll be dipped in mud, I know the Commander's record and his damned Red Company.'"

"Ask him how he knows."

The operator said, "He says captured documents, they've deciphered our written languages, he fought you four years ago off Sirius."

"Tell him I've been a soldier for thirty-one years."

The operator translated. I watched the shimmering light in that cell and I'll swear I saw it stiffen, and then come very close to us.

The operator said, "He says,

'Twenty-eight for me, Fourth Lukan Inter-Galactic Patrol, what's on your mind.'" And the operator said excitedly, "You did it, sir! We've got his unit. We know they have our language..."

"Shut up!" I snapped. I was right. The Lukan had given me the sign I needed, he had told me his unit, he trusted me. I didn't know then that I could trust him, but I didn't give a damn. If I was wrong I didn't care if I lived or not.

"Ask him," I said. "Why he is fighting this war."

The operator translated, listened, and said, "No use, sir, he just says, 'I just work here.'"

I curled my hand around my fusion pistol and said slowly, "Tell him that in our Galaxy they are calling him a traitor. Not a spy, a traitor. Tell him I'm quitting the war."

The operator jumped to his feet. He was staring at me. Before he could move a step I had the fusion pistol aimed at his belly.

"Tell him," I said.

The operator stood there for a second, frozen. I curled my finger around the pistol. The operator bent over his machine. I waited. The shimmering lights were motionless. The operator looked up, there was hate in his eyes, but he said:

"He says, 'How's that again?'"

"Repeat it," I snapped.

The operator repeated it. "He says," the operator said in a flat, empty voice, "'I read you loud and clear. It's getting that way

back home, that's why I volunteered for this spy bit.'"

There it was. As I stood there wondering why I should bother to go on living, I saw the shimmering light seem to slide between the bars, a small part of it, and felt a hard grip on my shoulder.

The operator bent to his machine. It was the first time the Lukan had spoken first. "He says, 'I know a galaxy a hell of a long way off. They got a nice little war there, they need soldiers, the pay's A-number-one.'"

Well, I'd lived my life as a soldier, an outcast mercenary until the Lukans came to give me back my respectability, and I still liked a glass of whiskey. I held the pistol on the operator.

"Stand clear," I said.

He stared. "Commander! You can't! I..."

"Stand clear," I shouted.

He stood clear. I aimed the pistol and in one quick burst melted the lock. The shimmering lights came out and I felt something like a hand reach and hold mine. I needed the operator and we took him with us, Rajay-Ben and I. My little scout ship was in a field at the far edge of the city. But I had a stop to make first. Laura. It was a mistake, but I'd do it again. There are some things a man has to do.

When you've been a soldier as long as I have you take precautions. I tied the operator in a hall closet and locked Rajay-Ben in with him. Then I went up to

see Laura. She kissed me and I held her very close.

"I'm quitting the war," I said at last.

She said, "What, Red? Are you wounded? What's the matter darling?"

"No, just inside." Then I told her about Brown and his speech. She had heard it.

"But I don't understand," she said. "It was a beautiful speech, should work wonders with morale, Red." It was in her eyes, too. I watched her and she watched me. I saw her face darken. "You mean you're just running out?! You're deserting!"

"Yes! I've got to! That speech, don't you see what's happened in the Galaxy? Everyone! Come with me, Laurie, I can't fight this war anymore. Come with me. We're going to a galaxy so far off they'll never find us and we'll never have to see this place again. Come with me!"

She spat it out then, "You coward! You traitor!"

There was pure hate in her eyes, too, and she ran for the telescreen transmitter. She did not understand either. I left. I ran. She would report me, and by now they might have discovered the escape of the Lukan. I didn't kill her. I should have, of course, but I didn't and I don't regret it. We made my ship with twenty minutes to spare, and once in space there isn't a patrol ship that could catch me. I've been fighting in space too long for that. But Laura had reported

me. In the Galaxy they were up in arms. I was a traitor. Rajay-Ben and I were both traitors now. When I reached the Company it had been blasted. From behind a small asteroid in Andromeda I looked at the smoking ruins of my Company. There was only one thing left, run far and fast, but I needed fuel for a trip Rajay-Ben said would cover 60,000,000 light-years. My only hope was Mike Colenso. When we walked in on Mike's headquarters ship on an outpost near Lukania, Mike spat on the floor and told me:

"You won't get out, Red, you have had it!"

"Sit down, Mike."

"You and your blood-drinking buddy!" Mike said, looking with loathing at Rajay-Ben's shimmering pattern.

"Listen," I said to Mike. I told him the story. I told him about my blasted Company. Twenty thousand innocent men blasted because they wanted me that badly. I think Mike saw it. I know he did. Any old Companion would have seen. A lot of them have and are up here with me and Rajay-Ben. A lot of Galactic Companions and a lot of Rajay-Ben's old soldiers from the Lukanian Patrols. I know Mike saw it because he said:

"Fuel up, Red, and beat it fast."

We were almost too late. Five minutes after we took off for Salaman, the new galaxy, a Lukan fleet attacked Mike's Company. They came in overwhelm-

ing force and blasted Mike in twenty-five minutes. The operator, who was with me in the ship because I still needed him, bent over his machine while Rajay-Ben and I were watching the battle in the rear televiewer.

The operator said, "He says, 'They're after me. I'm getting the signals. Someone reported!'"

They were. The Galactic Forces and the Lukans hunted us for a long time, but they never found us out here. We've got a nice little war out here, nothing big, no survival involved. Just a plain old war for pay. Back in the Galaxy they hunted down every man with a missing little finger on his left hand. If there could be one traitor like me, they were all suspect now. A lot of the old Companions are up here with us. Rajay-Ben is a good soldier. Sometimes I fight with him, sometimes against him, but either way I respect him. They have a powerful whiskey in Lukania, and sometimes when we're sitting around in the evening getting drunk and watching the four suns of our headquarters planet go down in a beautiful purple sky, I drink so much of that Lukanian whiskey I could swear I can really

see Rajay-Ben sitting there across the table. Really see him, a tall, solid thing a little like me but without a head. I'm not sure, but I hope that someday I'll really be able to see him.

The one thing I regret is what happened to the Company. Twenty-thousand men, not counting all Mike's men, blasted because I couldn't shoot Laura. I think I'd have beaten them to the Company otherwise. But I couldn't blast her. Not to save twenty million lives. There are some things a man just doesn't do, some things a man can't do. That's the difference, I suppose, between me and all the rest of them in the Galaxy. They would have blasted her. The way they have become now, they would. They never had a chance to be outside the society in all those 500 years of peace, and when the strain of the war hit they could not help identifying the society with life itself, just couldn't understand how anyone in all the Universe could want or need or have anything but the Galactic way of life. It's too bad, I liked it in the Galaxy. Maybe I'll go back someday, but now there's nothing there worth going back to, nothing in the whole Galaxy worth fighting for.

THE END

