

# BILL The Galactic Hero

The Planet of the Robot Slaves (Bill the Galactic Hero, Vol. 1)

Harry Harrison

©1965

I

Bill never realized that sex was the cause of it all. If the sun that morning had not been burning so warmly in the brassy sky of Phigerinadon II, and if he had not glimpsed the sugar-white and wine-barrel-wide backside of Inga-Maria Calyphigia, while she bathed in the stream, he might have paid more attention to his plowing than to the burning pressures of heterosexuality and would have driven his furrow to the far side of the hill before the seductive music sounded along the road. He might never have heard it, and his life would have been very, very different. But he did hear it and dropped the handles of the plow that was plugged into the robomule, turned, and gaped.

It was indeed a fabulous sight. Leading the parade was a one-robot band, twelve feet high and splendid in its great black busby that concealed the hi-fi speakers. The golden pillars of its legs stamped forward as its thirty articulated arms sawed, plucked, and fingered at a dazzling variety of instruments. Martial music poured out in wave after inspiring wave, and even Bill's thick peasant feet stirred in their clodhoppers as the shining boots of the squad of soldiers crashed along the road in perfect unison. Medals jingled on the manly swell of their scarlet-clad chests, and there could certainly be no nobler sight in all the world. To their rear marched the sergeant, gorgeous in his braid and brass, thickly clustered medals and ribbons, sword and gun, girdled gut and steely eye 'which sought out Bill where he stood gawking over the fence. The grizzled head nodded in his direction, the steel-trap mouth bent into a friendly smile and there' was a conspiratorial wink. Then the little legion was past, and hurrying behind in their wake came a huddle of dust-covered ancillary robots, hopping and crawling or rippling along on treads. As soon as these had gone by Bill climbed clumsily over the split-rail fence and ran after them. There were no more than two interesting events every four years here, and he was not going to miss what promised to be a third. A crowd had already gathered in the market square when Bill hurried up, and they were listening to an enthusiastic band concert. The robot hurled itself

into the glorious measures of "Star Troopers to the Skies Avaunt," thrashed its way through "Rockets Rumble," and almost demolished itself in the tumultuous rhythm of "Sappers at the Tithead Digging." It pursued this last tune so strenuously that one of its legs flew off, rising high into the air, but was caught dexterously before it could hit the ground, and the music ended with the robot balancing on its remaining leg, beating time with the detached limb. It also, after an ear-fracturing peal on the basses, used the leg to point across the square to where a tri-di screen and refreshment booth had been set up. The troopers had vanished into the tavern, and the recruiting sergeant stood alone among his robots, beaming a welcoming smile.

"Now hear this! Free drinks for all, courtesy of the Emperor, and some lively scenes of jolly adventure in distant climes to amuse you while you sip," he called in an immense and leathery voice.

Most of the people drifted over, Bill in their midst, though a few embittered and elderly draft-dodgers slunk away between the houses. Cooling drinks were shared out by a robot with a spigot for a navel and an inexhaustible supply of plastic glasses in one hip. Bill sipped his happily while he followed the enthralling adventures of the space troopers in full color, with sound effects and stimulating subsonics. There was battle and death and glory, though it was only the Chingers who died: troopers only suffered neat little wounds in their extremities that could be covered easily by small bandages. And while Bill was enjoying this, Recruiting Sergeant Grue was enjoying him, his little piggy eyes ruddy with greed as they fastened onto the back of Bill's neck.

This is the one! he chortled to himself while, unknowingly, his yellowed tongue licked at his lips. He could already feel the weight of the bonus money in his pocket. The rest of the audience. were the usual mixed bag of overage men, fat women, beardless youths, and other unenlistables. All except this broad-shouldered, square-chinned, curly-haired chunk of electronic-cannon fodder. With a precise hand on the controls the sergeant lowered the background subsonics and aimed a tight-beam stimulator at the back of his victim's head. Bill writhed in his seat, almost taking part in the glorious battles unfolding before him.

As the last chord died and the screen went blank, the refreshment robot pounded hollowly on its metallic chest and bellowed, "DRINK! DRINK! DRINK!" The sheeplike audience swept that way, all except Bill, who was plucked from their midst by a powerful arm.

"Here, I saved some for you," the sergeant said, passing over a prepared cup so loaded with dissolved ego-reducing drugs that they were crystallizing out at the bottom. "You're a fine figure of a lad and to my eye seem a cut above the yokels here. Did you ever think of making your career in the forces?"

"I'm not the military type, Shargeant . . ." Bill chomped his jaws and spat

to remove the impediment to his speech and puzzled at the sudden-fogginess in his thoughts. Though it was a tribute to his physique that he was even conscious after the volume of drugs and sonics that he had been plied with.

"Not the military type. My fondest ambition is to be of help in the best way I can, in my chosen career as a Technical Fertilizer Operator, and I'm almost finished with my correspondence course . . . "

"That's a crappy job for a bright lad like you," the sergeant said, while clapping him on the arm to get a good feel of his biceps. Rock: He resisted the impulse to pull Bill's lip down and take a quick peek at the condition of his back teeth. Later. "Leave that kind of job to those that like it. No chance of promotion. While a career in the troopers has no top. Why, Grand-Admiral Pflunger came up through the rocket tubes, as they say, from, recruit trooper to grandadmiral. How does that sound?"

"It sounds very nice for Mr. Pflunger, but I think fertilizer operating is more fun. Gee-I'm feeling sleepy. I think I'll go lie down."

"Not before you've seen this, just as a favor to me of course," the sergeant said, cutting in front of him and pointing to a large book held open by a tiny robot. "Clothes make the man, and most men would be ashamed to be seen in a crummy-looking smock like that thing draped around you or wearing those broken canal boats on their feet. Why look like that when you can look like this?"

Bill's eyes followed the thick finger to the color plate in the book where a miracle of misapplied engineering caused his own face to appear on the illustrated figure dressed in trooper red. The sergeant flipped the pages, and on each plate the uniform was a little more gaudy, the rank higher. The last one was that of a grand-admiral, and Bill blinked at his own face under the plumed helmet, now with a touch of crow's-feet about the eyes and sporting a handsome and grayshot mustache, but still undeniably his own.

"That's the way you will look," the sergeant murmured into his ear, "once you have climbed the ladder of success. Would you like to try a uniform on? Of course you would like to try a uniform on. Tailor!"

When Bill opened his mouth to protest the sergeant put a large cigar into it, and before he could get it out the robot tailor had rolled up, swept a curtain-bearing arm about him and stripped him naked. "Hey! Hey!" he said.

"It won't hurt," the sergeant said, poking his great head through the curtain and beaming at Bill's muscled form.. He poked a finger into a pectoral (rock), then withdrew.

"Ouch!" Bill said, as the tailor extruded a cold pointer and jabbed him with it, measuring his size. Something went chunk deep inside its tubular torso, and a brilliant red jacket began to emerge from a slot in the front. In an instant this was slipped onto Bill and the shining golden buttons buttoned. Luxurious gray moleskin trousers were pulled on next, then gleaming black knee-length boots. Bill staggered a bit as the curtain was whipped away and a powered

full-length mirror rolled up.

"Oh, how the girls love a uniform," the sergeant said, "and I can't blame them."

A memory of the vision of Inga-Maria Calyphigia's matched white moons obscured Bill's sight for a moment, and when it had cleared he found he was grasping a stylo and was about to sign the form that the recruiting sergeant held before him.

"No," Bill said, a little amazed at his own firmness of mind. "I don't really want to. Technical Fertilizer Operator . . ."

"And not only will you receive this lovely uniform, an enlistment bonus, and a free medical examination, but you will be awarded these handsome medals." The sergeant took a flat box, offered to him on cue by a robot, and opened it to display a glittering array of ribbons and bangles. "This is the Honorable Enlistment Award," he intoned gravely, pinning a jewel-encrusted nebula, pendant on chartreuse, to Bill's wide chest. "And the Emperor's Congratulatory Gilded Horn, the Forward to Victory Starburst, the Praise Be Given Salutation of the Mothers of the Victorious Fallen, and the Everflowing Cornucopia which does not mean anything but looks nice and can be used to carry contraceptives." He stepped back and admired Bill's chest; which was now adangle with ribbons, shining metal, and gleaming paste gems.

"I just couldn't," Bill said. "Thank you anyway for the offer, but . . ."

The sergeant smiled, prepared even for this eleventh-hour resistance, and pressed the button on his belt that actuated the programmed hypno-coil in the heel of Bill's new boot. The powerful neural current surged through the contacts and Bill's hand twitched and jumped, and when the momentary fog had lifted from his eyes he saw that he had signed his name.

"But...!"

"Welcome to the Space Troopers;" the sergeant boomed, smacking him on the back (trapezius like rock) and relieving him of the stylo. "FALL IN!" he called in a larger voice, and the recruits stumbled from the tavern.

"What have they done to my son!" Bill's mother screeched, coming into the market square, clutching at her bosom with one hand and towing his baby brother Charlie with the other. Charlie began to cry and wet his pants.

"Your son is now a trooper for the greater glory of the Emperor," the sergeant said, pushing his slack-jawed and round-shouldered recruit squad into line.

"No! it can't be . . ." Bill's mother sobbed, tearing at her graying hair.

"I'm a poor widow, he's my sole support . . . you cannot . . . I"

"Mother. . ." Bill said, but the sergeant shoved him back into the ranks.'

"Be brave, madam," he said. "There can be no greater glory for a mother."

He dropped a large and newly minted coin into her hand. "Here is the enlistment bonus, the Emperor's shilling. I know he wants you to have it. ATTENTION!"

With a clash of heels the graceless recruits braced their shoulders and lifted their chins. Much to his surprise, so did Bill.

"RIGHT TURN!"

In a single, graceful motion they turned, as the command robot relayed the order to the hypno-coil in every boot. "FORWARD MARCH!" And they did, in perfect rhythm, so well under control that, try as hard as he could, Bill could neither turn his head nor wave a last good-by to his mother. She vanished behind him, and one last, anguished wail cut through the thud of marching feet. "Step up the count to 130," the sergeant ordered, glancing at the watch set under the nail of his little finger. "Just ten miles to the station, and we'll be in camp tonight, my lads."

The command robot moved its metronome up one notch and the tramping boots conformed to the smarter pace and the men.. began to sweat. By the time they had reached the copter station it was nearly dark, their red paper uniforms hung in shreds, the gilt had been rubbed from their pot-metal buttons, and the surface charge that repelled the dust from their thin plastic boots had leaked away. They looked as ragged, weary, dusty, and miserable as they felt.

II

It wasn't the recorded bugle playing reveille that woke Bill but the supersonics that streamed through the metal frame of his bunk that shook him until the fillings vibrated from his teeth. He sprang to his feet and stood there shivering in the gray of dawn. Because it was summer the floor was refrigerated: no mollycoddling of the men in Camp Leon Trotsky. The pallid, chilled figures of the other recruits loomed up on every side, and when the soul-shaking vibrations had died away they dragged their thick sackcloth and sandpaper fatigue uniforms from their bunks, pulled them hastily on, jammed their feet into the great, purple recruit boots, and staggered out into the dawn.

"I am here to break your spirit," a voice rich with menace told them, and they looked up and shivered even more as they faced the chief demon in this particular hell.

Petty Chief Officer Deathwish Drang was a specialist from the tips of the angry spikes of his hair to the corrugated stamping-soles of his mirrorlike boots. He was wide-shouldered and lean-kipped, while his long arms hung, curved like those of some horrible anthropoid, the knuckles of his immense fists scarred from the breaking of thousands of teeth. It was impossible to look at this detestable form and imagine that it issued from the tender womb of a woman. He could never have been born; he must have been built to order by the government. Most terrible of all was the head. The face! The hairline was scarcely a finger's-width above the black tangle of the brows that were set like a rank growth of foliage at the rim of the black pits that concealed the eyes-visible only as baleful red gleams in the Stygian darkness. A nose,

broken and crushed, squatted above the mouth that was like a knife slash in the taut belly of a corpse, while from between the lips issued the great, white fangs of the canine teeth, at least two inches long, that rested in grooves on the lower lip.

"I am Petty Chief Officer Deathwish Drang, and you will call me 'sir' or 'm'lord.'" He began to pace grimly before the row of terrified recruits.

"I am your father and your mother and your whole universe and your dedicated enemy, and very soon I will have you regretting the day you were born. I will crush your will. When I say frog, you will jump. My job is to turn you into troopers, and troopers have discipline. Discipline means simply unthinking subservience, loss of free will, absolute obedience. That is all I ask . . ."

He stopped before Bill, who was not shaking quite as much as the others, and scowled.

"I don't like your face. One month of Sunday KP."

"Sir..."

"And a second month - for talking back."

He waited, but Bill was silent. He had already learned his first lesson on how to be a good trooper. Keep your mouth shut. Deathwish paced on.

"Right now you are nothing but horrible, sordid, flabby pieces of debased civilian flesh. I shall turn that flesh to muscle, your wills to jelly, your minds to machines. You will become good troopers, or I will kill you. Very soon you will be hearing stories about me, vicious stories, about how I lulled and ate a recruit who disobeyed me."

He hatred and stared at them, and slowly the coffin-lid lips parted in an evil travesty of a grin, while a drop of saliva formed at the tip of each whitened tusk.

"That story is true."

A moan broke from the row of recruits, and they shook as though a chill wind had passed over them. The smile vanished.

"We will run to breakfast now as soon as I have some volunteers for an easy assignment. Can any of you drive a helicar?"

Two recruits hopefully raised their hands, and he beckoned them forward.

"All right, both of you, mops and buckets behind that door. Clean out the latrine while the rest are eating. You'll have a better appetite for lunch."

That was Bill's second lesson on how to be a good trooper: never volunteer. The days of recruit training passed with a horribly lethargic speed.

With each day conditions became worse and Bill's exhaustion greater. This seemed impossible, but it was nevertheless true. A large number of gifted and sadistic minds had designed it to be that way. The recruits' heads were shaved for uniformity. The food was theoretically nourishing but incredibly vile and when, by mistake, one batch of meat was served in an edible state it was caught at the last moment and thrown out and the cook reduced two

grades. Their sleep was broken by mock gas attacks and their free time filled with caring for their equipment. The seventh day was designated as a day of rest, but they all had received punishments, like Bill's KP, and it was as any other day. On this, the third Sunday of their imprisonment, they were stumbling through the last hour of the day before the lights were extinguished and they were finally permitted to crawl into their casehardened bunks. Bill pushed against the weak force field that blocked the door, cunningly designed to allow the desert flies to enter but not leave the barracks, and dragged himself in. After fourteen hours of KP his legs vibrated with exhaustion, and his arms were wrinkled and pallid as a corpse's from the soapy water. He dropped his jacket to the floor, where it stood stiffly supported by its burden of sweat, grease, and dust, and dragged his shaver from his footlocker. In the latrine he bobbed his head around trying to find a clear space on one of the mirrors. All of them had been heavily stenciled in large letters with such inspiring messages as KEEP YOUR WUG SHUT-THE CHINGERS ARE LISTENING and IF YOU TALK THIS MAN MAY DIE. He finally plugged the shaver in next to WOULD YOU WANT YOUR SISTER TO MARRY ONE? and centered his face in the o in ONE.

Black-rimmed and bloodshot eyes stared back at him as he ran the buzzing machine over the underweight planes of his jaw. It took more than a minute for the meaning of the question to penetrate his fatigue-drugged brain.

"I haven't got a sister," he grumbled peevishly, "and if I did, why should she want to marry a lizard anyway?" It was a rhetorical question, but it brought an answer from the far end of the room, from the last shot tower in the second row.

"It doesn't mean exactly what it says-it's just there to make us hate the dirty enemy more." .

Bill jumped, he had thought he was alone in the latrine, and the razor buzzed spitefully and gouged a bit of flesh from his lip.

"Who's there? Why are you hiding?" he snarled, then recognized the huddled dark figure and the many pairs of boots. "Oh, it's only you, Eager."

His anger drained away, and he turned back to the mirror.

Eager Beager was so much a part of the latrine that you forgot he was there.

A moon-faced, eternally smiling youth, whose apple-red cheeks never lost their glow and whose smile looked so much out of place here in Camp Leon Trotsky that everyone wanted to kill him until they remembered that he was mad. He had to be mad because he was always eager to help his buddies and had volunteered as permanent latrine orderly. Not only that, but he liked to polish boots and had offered to do those of one after another of his buddies until now he did the boots for every man in the squad every night. Whenever they were in the barracks Eager Beager could be found crouched at the end of the thrones that

were his personal domain, surrounded by the heaps of shoes and polishing industriously, his face wreathed in smiles. He would still be there after lights-out, working by the light of a burning wick stuck in a can of polish, and was usually up before the others in the morning, finishing his voluntary job and still smiling. Sometimes, when the boots were very dirty, he worked right through the night. The kid was obviously insane, but no-one turned him in because he did such a good job on the boots, and they all prayed that he wouldn't die of exhaustion until recruit training was finished.

"Well if that's what they want to say, why don't they just say, 'Hate the dirty enemy more,'" Bill complained. He jerked his thumb at the far wall, where there was a poster labeled KNOW THE ENEMY. It featured a life-sized illustration of a Chinger, a seven-foot-high saurian that looked very much like a scale-covered, four-armed, green kangaroo with an alligator's head. "Whose sister would want to marry a thing like that anyway? And what would a thing like that want to do with a sister, except maybe eat her?"

Eager put a last buff on a purple toe and picked up another boot. He frowned for a brief instant to show what a serious thought this was. "Well you see, gee-it doesn't mean a real sister. It's just part of psychological warfare. We have to win the war. To win the war we have to fight hard. In order to fight hard we have to have good soldiers. Good soldiers have to hate the enemy. That's the way it goes. The Chingers are the only non-human race that has been discovered in the galaxy that has gone beyond the aboriginal level, so naturally we have to wipe them out."

"What the hell do you mean, naturally? I don't want to wipe anyone out. I just want to go home and be a Technical Fertilizer Operator."

"Well, I don't mean you personally, of course-gee!" Eager opened a fresh can of polish with purple-stained hands and dug his fingers into it. "I mean the human race, that's just the way we do things. If we don't wipe them out they'll wipe us out. Of course they say that war is against their religion and they will only fight in defense, and they have never made any attacks yet. But we can't believe them, even though it is true. They might change their religion or their minds some day, and then where would we be? The best answer is to wipe them out now."

Bill unplugged his razor and washed his face in the tepid, rusty water.

"It still doesn't seem to make sense. All right, so the sister I don't have doesn't marry one of them. But how about that " he pointed to the stenciling on the duck boards, KEEP THIS SHOWER CLEAR-THE ENEMY CAN HEAR. "Or that-

The sign above the urinal that read BUTTON FLIES-BEWARE SPIES. "Forgetting for the moment that we don't have any secrets here worth traveling a mile to hear, much less twenty-five light years-how could a Chinger possibly be a spy? What kind of make-up would disguise a seven-foot lizard as a recruit? You

couldn't even disguise one to look like Deathwish Drang, though you could get pretty close-

The lights went out, and, as though using his name had summoned him like a devil from the pit, the voice of Deathwish blasted through the barracks.

"Into your sacks! Into your sacks! Don't you lousy bowbs know there's a war on!"

Bill stumbled away through the darkness of the barracks where the only illumination was the red glow from Deathwish's eyes. He fell asleep the instant his head touched his carborundum pillow, and it seemed that only a moment had elapsed before reveille sent him hurtling from his bunk. At breakfast, while he was painfully cutting his coffee-substitute into chunks small enough to swallow, the telenews reported heavy fighting in the Beta Lyra sector with mounting losses. A groan rippled through the mess hall when this was announced, not because of any excess of patriotism but because any bad news would only make things worse for them. They did not know how this would be arranged, but they were positive it would be. They were right. Since the morning was a bit cooler than usual the Monday parade was postponed until upon when the ferro-concrete drill ground would have warmed up nicely and there would be the maximum number of heat-prostration cases. But this was just the beginning.

From where Bill stood at attention near the rear he could see that the air-conditioned canopy was up on the reviewing stand. That meant brass. The trigger guard of his atomic rifle dug a hole into his shoulder, and a drop of sweat collected, then dripped from the tip of his nose. Out of the corners of his eyes he could see the steady ripple of motion as men collapsed here and there among the massed ranks of thousands and were dragged to the waiting ambulances by alert corpsmen. Here they were laid in the shade of the vehicles until they revived and could be urged back to their positions in the formation. Then the band, burst into "Spacemen Ho and Chingers Vanquished!" and the broadcast signal to each boot heel snapped the ranks to attention at the same instant, and the thousands of rifles flashed in the sun. The commanding general's staff car-this was obvious from the two stars painted on it-pulled up beside the reviewing stand and a tiny, round figure moved quickly through the furnacelike air to the cornfort of the enclosure. Bill had never seen him any closer than this, at least from the front, though once while he was returning from late KP he had spotted the general getting into his car near the camp theater. Al least Bill thought it was he, but all he had seen was a brief refit view. Therefore, if he had a mental picture of the general, it was of a large backside superimposed on a teeny, antlike figure. lie thought of most officers in these general terms, since the men of course had nothing to do with officers during their recruit training. Bill had had a good glimpse of a second lieutenant once, near the orderly room, and he knew he had a face. And there had been a medical officer no more than thirty yards away, who had

lectured them on venereal disease, but Bill had been lucky enough to sit behind a post and had promptly fallen asleep.

After the band shut up the anti-G loudspeakers floated out over the troops, and the general addressed them. He had nothing to say that anyone cared to listen to, and he closed with the announcement that because of losses in the field their training program would be accelerated, which was just what they had expected. Then the band played some more and they marched back to the barracks, changed into their haircloth fatigues, and marched-double time now-to the range, where they fired their atomic rifles at plastic replicas of Chingers that popped up out of holes in the ground. Their aim was bad until Deathwish Drang popped out of a hole and every trooper switched to full automatic and hit with every charge fired from every gun, which is a very hard thing to do. Then the smoke cleared, and they stopped cheering and started sobbing when they saw that it was only a plastic replica of Deathwish, now torn to tiny pieces, and the original appeared behind them and gnashed its tusks and gave them all a full month's KP. .

"The human body is a wonderful thing," Bowb Brown said a month later, when they were sitting around a table in the Lowest Ranks Klub eating plasticskinned sausages stuffed with road sweepings and drinking watery warm beer.

Bowb Brown was a throat- herder from the plains, which is why they called him Bowb, since everyone knows just what thoatherders do with their thoats. He was tall, thin, and bowlegged, his skin burnt to the color of ancient leather. He rarely talked, being more used to the eternal silence of the plains broken only by the eerie cry of the restless thoat, but he was a great thinker, since the one thing he had plenty of was time to think in. He could worry a thought for days, even weeks, before he mentioned it aloud, and while he was thinking about it nothing could disturb him. He even let them call him Bowb without protesting: call any other trooper bow b and he would hit you in the face. Bill and Eager and the other troopers from X squad sitting around the table all clapped and cheered, as they always did when Bowb said something.

"Tell, us more, Bowb!"

"It can still talk-I thought it was dead!"

"Go on-why is the body a wonderful thing?"

They waited in expectant silence, while Bowb managed to tear a bite from his sausage and, after ineffectual chewing, swallowed it with an effort that brought tears to his eyes. He eased the pain with a mouthful of beer and spoke.

"The human body is a wonderful thing, because if it doesn't die it lives."

They waited for more until they realized that he was finished, then they sneered.

"Boy, are you full of bowb!"

"Sign up for OCS!"

"Yeah-but what does it mean?"

Bill knew what it meant but didn't tell them. There were only half as many men in the squad as there had been the first day. One man had been transferred, but all the others were in the hospital, or in the mental hospital, or discharged for the convenience of the government as being too crippled for active service. Or dead. The survivors, after losing every ounce of weight not made up of bone or essential connective tissue, had put back the lost weight in the form of muscle and were now completely adapted to the rigors of Camp Leon Trotsky, though they still loathed it. Bill marveled at the efficiency of the system. Civilians had to fool around with examinations, grades, retirement benefits, seniority, and a thousand other factors that limited the efficiency of the workers. But how easily the troopers did it! They simply killed off the weaker ones and used the survivors. He respected the system. Though he still loathed it.

"You know what I need, I need a woman," Ugly Ugglesway said.

"Don't talk dirty," Bill told him promptly, since he had been correctly brought up.

"I'm not talking dirty!-" Ugly whined. "It's not like I said I wanted to re-enlist or that I thought Deathwish was human or anything like that. I just said I need a woman. Don't we all?"

"I need a drink," Bowb Brown said as he took a long swig from his glass of dehydrated reconstituted beer, shuddered, then squirted it out through his teeth in a long stream onto the concrete, where it instantly evaporated.

"Affirm, affirm," Ugly agreed, bobbing his mat haired, warty head up and down. "I need a woman and a drink." His whine became almost plaintive. "After all, what else is there to want in the troopers outside of out?"

They thought about that a long time, but could think of nothing else that anyone really wanted. Eager Beager looked out from under the table, where he was surreptitiously polishing a boot and said that he wanted more polish, but they ignored him. Even Bill, now that he put his mind to it, could think of nothing he really wanted other than this inextricably linked pair. He tried hard to think of something else, since he had vague memories of wanting other things when he had been a civilian, but nothing else came to mind.

"Gee, it's only seven weeks more until we get our first pass," Eager said from under the table, then screamed a little as everyone kicked him at once. But slow as subjective time crawled by, the objective clocks were still operating, and the seven weeks did pass by and eliminate themselves one by one. Busy weeks filled with all the essential recruit-training courses: bayonet drill, smallarms training, short-arm inspection, greypfing, orientation lectures, drill, communal singing and the Articles of War. These last were read with dreadful regularity twice a week and were absolute torture because of the intense somnolence they brought on. At the first rustle of the scratchy, monotonous voice from the tape player heads would begin to nod. But every seat

in the auditorium was wired with an EEG that monitored the brain waves of the captive troopers. As soon as the shape of the Alpha wave indicated transition from consciousness to slumber a powerful jolt of current would be shot into the dozing buttocks, jabbing the owners painfully awake. The musty auditorium was a dimly lit torture chamber, filled with the droning, dull voice, punctuated by the sharp screams of the electrified, the sea of nodding heads abob here and there with painfully leaping figures.

No one ever listened to the terrible executions and sentences announced in the Articles for the most innocent of crimes. Everyone knew that they had signed away all human rights when they enlisted, and the itemizing of what they had lost interested them not in the slightest. What they really were interested in was counting the hours until they would receive their first pass. The ritual by which this reward was begrudgingly given was unusually humiliating, but they expected this and merely lowered their eyes and shuffled forward in the line, ready to sacrifice any remaining shards of their self-respect in exchange for the crumpled scrap of plastic. This rite finished, there was a scramble for the monorail train whose track ran on electrically charged pillars, soaring over the thirty-foot-high barbed wire, crossing the quicksand beds, then dropping into the little farming town of Leyville.

At least it had been an agricultural town before Camp Leon Trotsky had been built, and sporadically, in the hours when the troopers weren't on leave, it followed its original agrarian bent. The rest of the time the grain and feed stores shut down and the drink and knocking shops opened. Many times the same premises were used for both functions. A lever would be pulled when the first of the leave party thundered out of the station and grain bins became beds, salesclerks pimps, cashiers retained their same function-though the prices went up-while counters would be racked with glasses to serve as bars. It was to one of these establishments, a mortuary-cum-saloon, that Bill and his friends went. "What'll it be, boys?" the ever smiling owner of the Final Resting Bar and Grill asked.,

"Double shot of Embalming Fluid," Bowb Brown told him.

"No jokes," the landlord said, the smile vanishing for a second as he took down a bottle on which the garish label Rte. WHISKEY had been pasted over the etched-in EMBALMING FLUID "Any trouble I call the MPs." The smile returned as money struck the counter. "Name your poison, gents."

They sat around a long, narrow table as thick as it was wide, with brass handles on both sides, and let the blessed relief of ethyl alcohol trickle a path down their dust-lined throats.

"I never drank before I came into the service," Bill said, draining four fingers neat of Old Kidney Killer and held his glass out for more.

"You never had to," Ugly said, pouring.

"That's for sure," Bowb Brown said, smacking his lips with relish and raising a bottle to his lips again.

"Gee," Eager Beager said, sipping hesitantly at the edge of his glass, "it tastes like a tincture of sugar, wood chips, various esters, and a number of higher alcohols."

"Drink up," Bowb said incoherently around the neck of the bottle. "All them things is good for you."

"Now I want a woman," Ugly said, and there was a rush as they all jammed in the door, trying to get out at the same time, until someone shouted, "Look!" and they turned to see Eager still sitting at the table.

"Woman!" Ugly said enthusiastically, in the tone of voice you say Dinner! when you are calling a dog. The knot of men stirred in the doorway and stamped their feet. Eager didn't move.

"Gee-I think I'll stay right here," he said, his smile simpler than ever.

"But you guys run along."

"Don't you feel well, Eager?"

"Feel fine."

"Ain't you reached puberty?"

"Gee..."

"What you gonna do here?"

Eager reached under the table and dragged out a canvas grip. He opened it to show them that it was packed with great purple boots. "I thought I'd catch up on my polishing."

They walked slowly down the wooden sidewalk, silent for the moment. "I wonder if there is something wrong with Eager?" Bill asked, but no one answered him.

They were looking down the rutted street, at a brilliantly illuminated sign that cast a tempting, ruddy glow.

SPACEMEN'S REST it said. CONTINUOUS STRIP SHOW and BEST DRINKS and better

PRIVATE ROOMS FOR GUESTS AND THEIR FRIENDS. They walked faster. The front wall

of the Spacemen's Rest was covered with shatterproof glass cases filled with tri-di pix of the fully dressed (bangle and double stars) entertainers, and further in with pix of them nude (deangled with fallen stars). Bill stayed the quick sound of panting by pointing to a -small sign almost lost among the tumescent wealth of mammaries.

OFFICERS ONLY It read.

"Move along," an MP grated, and poked at them with his electronic nightstick. They shuffled on.

The next establishment admitted men of all classes, but the cover charge was seventy-seven credits, more than they all had between them. After that the OFFICERS ONLY began again, until the pavement ended and all the lights

were behind them.

"What's that?" Ugly asked at the sound of murmured voices from a nearby darkened street, and peering closely they saw a line of troopers that stretched out of sight around a distant corner. "What's this?" he asked the last man in the line.

"Lower-ranks cathouse. Two credits, two minutes. And don't try to buck the line, bowb. On the back, on the back."

They joined up instantly, and Bill ended up last, but not for long.

They shuffled forward slowly, and other troopers appeared and cued up behind him. The night was cool, and he took many life-preserving slugs from his bottle. There was little conversation and what there was died as the red-lit portal loomed ever closer. It opened and closed at regular intervals, and one by one Bill's buddies slipped in to partake of its satisfying, though rapid, pleasures. Then it was his turn and the door started to open and he started to step forward and the sirens started to scream and a large MP with a great fat belly jumped between Bill and the door.

"Emergency recall. Back to the base you men!" it barked.

Bill howled a strangled groan of frustration and leaped forward, but a light tap with the electronic nightstick sent him reeling back with the others.

He was carried along, half stunned, with the shuffling wave of bodies, while the sirens moaned and the artificial northern lights in the sky spelled out TO ARMS!!!! in letters of flame each a hundred miles long. Someone put his handout, holding Bill up as he started to slide under the trampling purple boots. It was his old buddy, Ugly, carrying a satiated smirk and he hated him and tried to hit him. But before he could raise his fist they were swept into a monorail car, hurtled through the night, and disgorged back in Camp Leon Trotsky. He forgot his anger when the gnarled claws of Deathwish Drang dragged them from the crowd.

"Pack your bags," he rasped. "You're shipping out."

"They can't do that to us-we haven't finished our training."

"They can do whatever they want, and they usually do. A glorious space battle has just been fought to its victorious conclusion and there are over four million casualties, give or take a hundred thousand. Replacements are needed, which is you. Prepare to board the transports immediately if not sooner."

"We can't-we have no space gear! The supply room . . ."

"All of the supply personnel have already been shipped out."

"Food . . ."

"The cooks and KP pushers are already spacebound. This is an emergency. All non-essential personnel are being sent out. Probably to die." He twanged a tusk coyly and washed them with his loathsome grin. "While I remain here in peaceful security to train your replacements." The delivery tube plunked at his elbow, and as he opened the message capsule and read its contents his

smile slowly fell to pieces. "They're shipping me out too," he said hollowly.

III

A total of 89,672,899 recruits had already been shipped into space through Camp Leon Trotsky, so the process was an automatic and smoothly working one, even though this time it was processing itself, like a snake swallowing its own tail. Bill and his buddies were the last group of recruits through, and the snake began ingesting itself right behind them. No sooner had they been shorn of their sprouting fuzz and deloused in the ultrasonic delouser than the barbers rushed at each other and in a welter of under and over arms, gobbets of hair, shards of mustache, bits of flesh, drops of blood, they clipped and shaved each other, then pulled the operator after them into the ultrasonic chamber. Medical corpsmen gave themselves injections against rocket-fever and spacecafard; record clerks issued themselves pay books; and the loadmasters kicked each other up the ramps and into the waiting shuttleships. Rockets blasted, living columns of fire like scarlet tongues licking down at the blasting pads, burning up the ramps in a lovely pyrotechnic display, since the ramp operators were also aboard. The ships echoed and thundered up into the night sky leaving Camp Leon Trotsky a dark and silent ghost town where bits of daily orders and punishment rosters rustled and blew from the bulletin boards, dancing through the deserted streets to finally plaster themselves against the noisy, bright windows of the Officers' Club where a great drinking party was in progress, although there was much complaining because the officers had to serve themselves.

Up and up the shuttleships shot, toward the great fleet of deep-spacers that darkened the stars above, a new fleet, the most powerful the galaxy had ever seen, so new in fact that the ships were still under construction. Welding torches flared in brilliant points of light while hot rivets hurled their flat trajectories across the sky into the waiting buckets. The spots of light died away as one behemoth of the star lanes was completed and thin screams sounded in the space-suit radio circuit as the workers, instead of being returned to the yards, were pressed into service on the ship they had so recently built. This was total war.

Bill staggered through the sagging plastic tube that connected the shuttleship to a dreadnaught of space and dropped his bags in front of a petty chief officer who sat at a desk in the hangar-sized spacelock. Or rather he tried to drop it, but since there was no gravity the bags remained in mid-air, and when he pushed them down he rose (since a body when it is falling freely is said to be in free fall, and anything with weight has no weight, and for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction or something like that). The petty looked up and snarled and pulled Bill back down to the deck.

"None of your bowby spacelubber tricks, trooper. Name?"

"Bill, spelled with two L's."

"Bil," the petty mumbled, licking the end of his stylo, then inscribing it in the ship's roster with round, illiterate letters. "Two `L's' for officers only, bowb-learn your place. What's your classification?"

"Recruit, unskilled, untrained, spacesick."

"Well don't puke in here, that's what you have your own quarters for. You are now a Fuse Tender Sixth Class, unskilled. Bunk down in compartment 34J-89T-ooi. Move. And keep that woopsy-sack over your head."

No sooner had Bill found his quarters and thrown his bags into a bunk, where they floated five inches over the reclaimed rock-wool mattress, than Eager Beager came in, followed by Bowb Brown and a crowd of strangers, some of them carrying welding torches and angry expressions.

"Where's Ugly and the rest of the squad?" Bill asked.

Bowb shrugged and strapped himself into his bunk for a little shut-eye. Eager opened one of the six bags he always carried and removed some boots to polish.

"Are you saved?" A deep voice, vibrant with emotion, sounded from the other end of the compartment. Bill looked up, startled, and the big trooper standing there saw the motion and stabbed toward him with an immense finger. "You, brother, are you saved?"

"That's a little hard to say," Bill mumbled, bending over and rooting in his bag, hoping the man would go away. But he didn't; in fact, he came over and sat down on Bill's bunk. Bill tried to ignore him, but this was hard to do, because the trooper was over six feet high, heavily muscled, and ironjawed. He had lovely, purplish-black skin that made Bill a little jealous, because his was only a sort of grayish pink. Since the trooper's shipboard uniform was almost the same shade of black, he looked all of a piece, very effective with his flashing smile and piercing gaze.

"Welcome aboard the Christine Keeler," he said, and with a friendly shake splintered most of Bill's knucklebones. "The grand old lady of this fleet, commissioned almost a week ago. I'm the Reverend Fuse Tender Sixth Class Tembo, and I see by the stencil on your bag that your name is Bill, and since we're shipmates, Bill, please call me Tembo, and how is the condition of your soul?"

"I haven't had much chance to think about it lately . . ."

"I should think not, just coming from recruit training, since attendance of chapel during training is a court-martial offense. But that's all behind you now and you can be saved. Might I ask if you are of the faith . . . ?"

"My folks were Fundamentalist Zoroastrian, so I suppose . . ."

"Superstition, my boy, rank superstition. It was the hand of fate that brought us together in this ship, that your soul would have this one chance to be saved from the fiery pit. You've heard of Earth?"

"I like plain food . . ."

"It's a planet, my boy-the home of the human race. The home from whence we all sprang, see it, a green and lovely world, a jewel in space." Tembo had

slipped a tiny projector from his pocket while he spoke, and a colored image appeared on the bulkhead, a planet swimming artistically through the void, girdled by white clouds. Suddenly ruddy lightning shot through the clouds, and they twisted and boiled while great wounds appeared on the planet below. From the pinhead speaker came the tiny sound of rolling thunder. "But wars sprang up among the sons of man and they smote each other with the atomic energies until the Earth itself groaned aloud and mighty was the holocaust. And when the final lightnings stilled there was death in the North, death in the West, death in the East, death, death, death. Do you realize what that means?" Tembo's voice was eloquent with feeling, suspended for an instant in mid-flight, waiting for the answer to the catechistical question.

"I'm not quite sure," Bill said, rooting aimlessly in his bag, "I come from Phigerinadon II, it's a quieter place . . ."

"There was no death in the SOUTH! And why was the South spared, I ask you, and the answer is because it was the will of Samedi that all the false prophets and false religions and false gods be wiped from the face of the Earth so that the only true faith should remain. The First Reformed Voodoo Church . . ."

General Quarters sounded, a hooting alarm keyed to the resonant frequency of the human skull so that the bone vibrated as though the head were inside a mighty bell, and the eyes blurred out of focus with each stroke. There was a scramble for the passageway, where the hideous sound was not quite as loud and where non-corns were waiting to herd them to their stations. Bill followed Eager Beager up an oily ladder and out of the hatch in the floor of the fuse room. Great racks of fuses stretched away on all sides of them, while from the tops of the racks sprang arm-thick cables that looped upward and vanished through the ceiling. In front of the racks, evenly spaced, were round openings a foot in diameter.

"My opening remarks will be brief, any trouble from any of you and I will personally myself feed you head first down the nearest fuseway." A greasy forefinger pointed at one of the holes in the deck, and they recognized the voice of their new master. He was shorter and wider and thicker in the gut than Deathwish, but there was a generic resemblance that was unmistakable. "I am Fuse Tender First Class Spleen. I will take you crumbly, ground-crawling bowbs and will turn you into highly skilled and efficient fuse tenders or else feed you down the nearest fuseway. This is a highly skilled and efficient technical speciality which usually takes a year to train a good man but this is war so you are going to learn to do it now or else. I will now demonstrate. Tembo front and center. Take board 19J-9, it's out of circuit now."

Tembo clashed his heels and stood at rigid attention in front of the board. Stretching away on both sides of him were the fuses, white ceramic cylinders capped on both ends with metal, each one a foot in diameter, five feet high,

and weighing ninety pounds. There was a red band around the midriff of each fuse. First Class Spleen tapped one of these bands.

"Every fuse has one of these red bands, which is called a fuseband and is of the color red. When the fuse burns out this band turns black. I don't expect you to remember all this now, but it's in your manual and you are going to be letter-perfect before I am done with you, or else. Now I will show you what will happen when a fuse burns out. Tembo-that is a burned-out fuse! Go!"

"Unggh!" Tembo shouted, and leaped at the fuse and grasped it with both hands. "Unggh!" he said again, as he pulled it from the clips, and again "Unggh!" when he dropped it into the fuseway. Then, still Ungghing, he pulled a new fuse from the storage rack and clipped it into place and with a final Unggh! snapped back to attention.

"And that's the way it is done, by the count, by the numbers, the trooper way, and you are going to learn it or else." A dull buzzing sounded, grumbling through the air like a stifled eructation. "There's the chow call, so I'll let you break now, and while you're eating, think about what you are going to have to learn. Fall out."

Other troopers were going by in the corridor, and they followed them into the bowels of the ship.

"Gee--do you think the food might be any better than it was back in camp?"

Eager asked, smacking his lips excitedly.

"It is completely impossible that it could be any worse," Bill said as they joined a line leading to a door labeled CONSOLIDATED MESS NUMBER Two. "Any change will have to make it better. After all-aren't we fighting troopers now? We have to go into combat fit, the manual says."

The line moved forward with painful slowness, but within an hour they were at the door. Inside the room a tired looking KP in soap-stained, greasy fatigues handed Bill a yellow plastic cup from a rack before him. Bill moved on, and when the trooper in front of him stepped away, he faced a blank wall from which there emerged a single, handleless spigot. A fat cook standing next to it, wearing a large white chef's hat and a soiled undershirt, waved him forward with the soup ladle in his hand.

"C'mon, c'mon, ain't you never et before? Cup under the spout, dog tag in the slot, snap it up!"

Bill held the cup as he had been advised and noticed a narrow slit in the metal wall just at eye level. His dog tags were hanging around his neck, and he pushed one of them into the slot. Something went bzzzzz, and a thin stream of yellow fluid gushed out, filling the cup halfway.

"Next man!" the cook shouted, and pulled Bill away so that Eager could take his place. "What is this?" Bill asked, peering into the cup.

"What is this! What is this!" the cook raged, growing bright red. "This is your dinner, you stupid bowl This is absolutely chemically pure water in

which are dissolved eighteen amino acids, sixteen vitamins, eleven mineral salts, a fatty acid ester, and glucose. What else did you expect?"

"Dinner . . . ?" Bill said hopefully, then saw red as the soup ladle crashed down on his head. "Could I have it without the fatty acid ester?" he asked hopefully, but he was pushed out into the corridor where Eager joined him. "Gee," Eager said. "This has all the food elements necessary to sustain life indefinitely. Isn't that marvelous?"

Bill sipped at his cup, then sighed tremulously.

"Look at that," Tembo said, and when Bill turned, a projected image appeared on the corridor wall. It showed a misty firmament, in which tiny figures seemed to be riding on clouds. "Hell awaits you, my boy, unless you are saved. Turn your back on your superstitious ways, for the First Reformed Voodoo Church welcomes you with open arms; come unto her bosom, and find your place in heaven at Samedi's right hand. Sit there with Mondonguc and Bakalou and Zandor, who will welcome you."

The projected scene changed; the clouds grew closer, while from the little speaker came the tiny sound of a heavenly choir with drum accompaniment. Now the figures could be seen clearly, all with very dark skins and white robes from the back of which protruded great black wings. They smiled and waved gracefully to each other as their clouds passed, while singing enthusiastically and beating on the little tomtoms that each one carried. It was a lovely scene, and Bill's eyes misted a bit.

"Attention!"

The barking tones echoed from the walls and the troopers snapped their shoulders back, heels together, eyes ahead. The heavenly choir vanished as Tembo shoved the projector back into his pocket.

"As you was," First Class Spleen ordered, and they turned to see him leading two MPs with drawn handguns who were acting as bodyguards for an officer. Bill knew it was an officer because they had had an officer-identification course, plus the fact that there was a KNOW YOUR OFFICERS chart on the latrine wall that he had had a great deal of opportunity to study during an anguilluliasis epidemic. His jaw gaped open as the officer went by, almost close enough to touch, and stopped in front of Tembo.

"Fuse Tender Sixth Class Tembo, I have good news for you. In two weeks your seven-year period of enlistment will be up, and because of your fine record Captain Zekial has authorized a doubling of the usual mustering-out pay, an honorable discharge with band music, as well as your free transport back to Earth."

Tembo, relaxed and firm, looked down at the runty lieutenant with the well-chewed blond mustache who stood before him. "That will be impossible, Sir."

"Impossible!" the lieutenant screeched, and rocked back and forth on his high

heeled boots. "Who are you to tell me what is impossible . . . I"

"Not I, Sir," Tembo answered with utmost calm. "Regulation i3-9A, paragraph 45, page 8923, volume 43 of Rules, Regulations and Articles of War. 'No man nor officer shall or will receive a discharge other than dishonorable with death sentence from a vessel, post, base, camp, ship, outpost, or labor camp during time of emergency . . . ' "

"Are you a ship's lawyer, Tembo?"

"No, Sir. I'm a loyal trooper, Sir. I just want to do my duty, Sir."

"There's something very funny about you, Tembo. I saw in your record that you enlisted voluntarily without drugs and or hypnotics being used. Now you refuse discharge. That's bad, Tembo, very bad. Gives you a bad name. Makes you look suspicious. Makes you look like a spy or something."

"I'm a loyal trooper, of the Emperor, sir, not a spy."

"You're not a spy, Tembo, we have looked into that very carefully. But why are you in the service, Tembo?"

"To be a loyal trooper of the Emperor, sir, and to do my best to spread the gospel. Have you been saved, sir?"

"Watch your tongue, trooper or I'll have you up on charges! Yes, we know that story-Reverend-but we don't believe it. You're being too tricky, but we'll find out . . ." He stalked away, muttering to himself, and they all snapped to attention until he was gone. The other troopers looked at Tembo oddly and did not feel comfortable until he had gone. Bill and Eager walked slowly back to their quarters.

"Turned down a discharge . . . !" Bill mumbled in awe.

"Gee," Eager said, "maybe he's nuts. I can't think of any other reason."

"Nobody could be that crazy," Bill said. "I wonder what's in there?" pointing to a door with a large sign that read ADMITTANCE TO AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY.

"Gee-I don't know-maybe food?"

They slipped through instantly and closed the door behind them, but there was no food there. Instead they were in a long chamber with one curved wall, while attached to this wall were cumbersome devices each set with meters, dials, switches, controls, levers, a view screen, and a relief tube. Bill bent over and read the label on the nearest one.

"Mark IV Atomic Blaster-and look at the size of them! This must be the ship's main battery." He turned around and saw that Eager was holding his arm up so that his wrist watch pointed at the guns and was pressing on the crown with the index finger of his other hand.

"What are you doing?" Bill asked.

"Gee-just seeing what time it was."

"How can you tell what time it is when you have the inside of your wrist toward your face and the watch is on the outside?"