

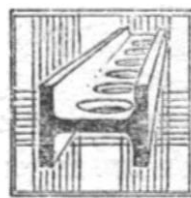
NOW

INHALE

BY ERIC FRANK RUSSELL

They say Nero fiddled while Rome burned; Taylor's problem was to play games while his executioner burned....

Illustrated by Martinez



IS leg irons clanked and his wrist chains jingled as they led him into the room. The bonds on his ankles compelled him to move at an awkward shuffle and the guards delighted in urging him onward faster than he could go. Somebody pointed to a chair facing the long table. Somebody else shoved him into it with such force that he lost balance and sat down hard.

The black brush of his hair jerked as his scalp twitched and that was his only visible reaction. Then he gazed

across the desk with light gray eyes so pale that the pupils seemed set in ice. The look in them was neither friendly nor hostile, submissive nor angry; it was just impassively and impartially cold, cold.

On the other side of the desk seven Gombarians surveyed him with various expressions: triumph, disdain, satisfaction, boredom, curiosity, glee and arrogance. They were a humanoid bunch in the same sense that gorillas are humanoid. At that point the resemblance ended.

"Now," began the one in the middle, making every third syllable a grunt, "your name is Wayne Taylor?"

No answer.

"You have come from a planet called Terra?"

No response.

"Let us not waste any more time, Palamin," suggested the one on the left. "If he will not talk by invitation, let him talk by compulsion."

"You are right, Eckster." Putting a hand under the desk Palamin came up with a hammer. It had a pear-shaped head with flattened base. "How would you like every bone in your hands cracked finger by finger, joint by joint?"

"I wouldn't," admitted Wayne Taylor.

"A very sensible reply," approved Palamin. He placed the hammer in the middle of the desk, positioning it significantly. "Already many days have been spent teaching you our language. By this time a child could have learned it sufficiently well to understand and answer questions."

He favored the prisoner with a hard stare. "You have pretended to be abnormally slow to learn. But you can deceive us no longer. You will now provide all the information for which we ask."

"Willingly or unwillingly," put in Eckster, licking thin lips, "but you'll provide it anyway."

"Correct," agreed Palamin. "Let us start all over again and see if we can avoid painful scenes. Your name is Wayne Taylor and you come from a planet called Terra?"

"I admitted that much when I was captured."

"I know. But you were not fluent at that time and we want no misunderstandings. Why did you land on Gombar?"

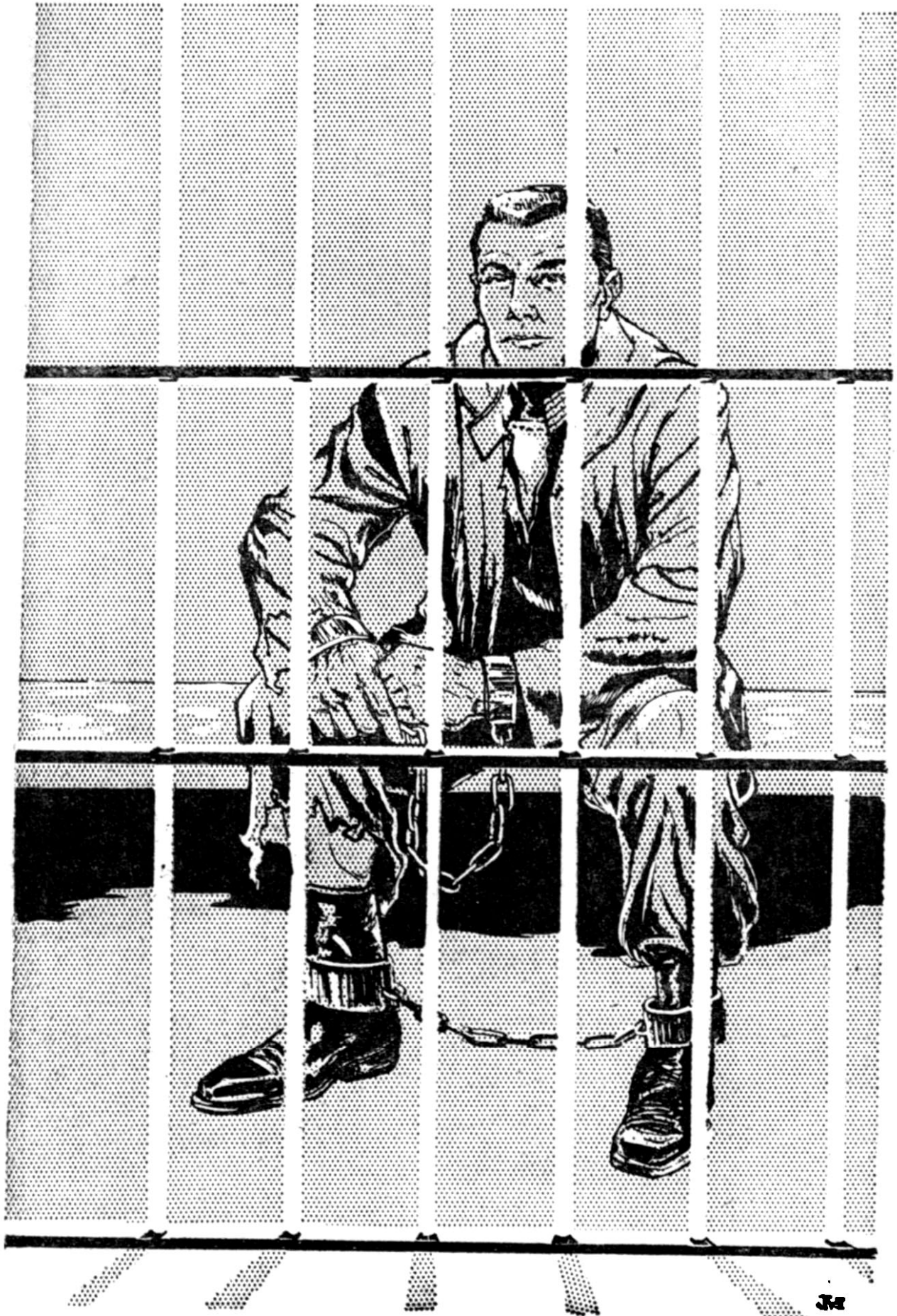
"I've told my tutor at least twenty times that I did it involuntarily. It was an emergency landing. My ship was disabled."

"Then why did you blow it up? Why did you not make open contact with us and invite us to repair it for you?"

"No Terran vessel must be allowed to fall intact into hostile hands," said Taylor flatly.

"Hostile?" Palamin tried to assume a look of pained surprise but his face wasn't made for it. "Since you Terrans know nothing whatever about us what right have you to consider us hostile?"

"I wasn't kissed on arrival," Taylor retorted. "I was shot at coming down. I was shot at getting away. I was hunted across twenty miles of land, grabbed and beaten up."



"Our soldiers do their duty," observed Palamin virtuously.

"I'd be dead by now if they were not the lousiest marksmen this side of Cygni."

"And what is Cygni?"

"A star."

"Who are you to criticize our soldiers?" interjected Eckster, glowering.

"A Terran," informed Taylor as if that were more than enough.

"That means nothing to me," Eckster gave back with open contempt.

"It will."

Palamin took over again. "If friendly contact were wanted the Terran authorities would send a large ship with an official deputation on board, wouldn't they?"

"I don't think so."

"Why not?"

"We don't risk big boats and important people without knowing what sort of a reception they're likely to get."

"And who digs up that information?"

"Space scouts."

"Ah!" Palamin gazed around with the pride of a pygmy who has trapped an elephant. "So at last you admit that you are a spy?"

"I am a spy only in the estimation of the hostile."

"On the contrary," broke in a heavily jowled specimen seated on the right, "you are whatever we say you are—because we say it."

"Have it your own way," conceded Taylor.

"We intend to."

"You can be sure of that, my dear Borkor," soothed Palamin. He returned attention to the prisoner. "How many Terrans are there in existence?"

"About twelve thousand millions."

"He is lying," exclaimed Borkor, hungrily eyeing the hammer.

"One planet could not support such a number," Eckster contributed.

"They are scattered over a hundred planets," said Taylor.

"He is still lying," Borkor maintained.

Waving them down, Palamin asked, "And how many ships have they got?"

"I regret that mere space scouts are not entrusted with fleet statistics," replied Taylor coolly. "I can tell you only that I haven't the slightest idea."

"You must have *some* idea."

"If you want guesses, you can have them for what they are worth."

"Then make a guess."

"One million."

"Nonsense!" declared Palamin. "Utterly absurd!"

"All right. One thousand. Or any other number you consider reasonable."

"This is getting us nowhere," Borkor complained.

Palamin said to the others, "What do you expect? If we were to send a spy to Terra would we fill him up with top-secret information to give the enemy when caught? Or would we tell him just enough and only

enough to enable him to carry out his task? The ideal spy is a shrewd ignoramus, able to take all, unable to give anything."

"The ideal spy wouldn't be trapped in the first place," commented Eckster maliciously.

"Thank you for those kind words," Taylor chipped in. "If I had come here as a spy, you'd have seen nothing of my ship much less me."

"Well, exactly where were you heading for when forced to land on Gornbar?" invited Palamin.

"For the next system beyond."

"Ignoring this one?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I go where I'm told."

"Your story is weak and implausible." Palamin lay back and eyed him judicially. "It is not credible that a space explorer should bypass one system in favor of another that is farther away."

"I was aiming for a binary said to have at least forty planets," said Taylor. "This system has only three. Doubtless it was considered relatively unimportant."

"What, with us inhabiting all three worlds?"

"How were we to know that? Nobody has been this way before."

"They know it now," put in Eckster, managing to make it sound sinister.

"This one knows it," Palamin corrected. "The others do not. And the longer they don't, the better for us. When another life form starts pok-

ing its snout into our system we need time to muster our strength."

This brought a murmur of general agreement.

"It's your state of mind," offered Taylor.

"What d'you mean?"

"You're taking it for granted that a meeting must lead to a clash and in turn to a war."

"We'd be prize fools to assume anything else and let ourselves be caught unprepared," Palamin pointed out.

Taylor sighed. "To date we have established ourselves on a hundred planets without a single fight. The reason: we don't go where we're not wanted."

"I can imagine that," Palamin gave back sarcastically. "Someone tells you to beat it and you obligingly beat it. It's contrary to instinct."

"Your instinct," said Taylor. "We see no sense in wasting time and money fighting when we can spend both exploring and exploiting."

"Meaning that your space fleets include no warships?"

"Of course we have warships."

"Many?"

"Enough to cope."

"Pacifists armed to the teeth," said Palamin to the others. He registered a knowing smile.

"Liars are always inconsistent," pronounced Eckster with an air of authority. He fixed a stony gaze upon the prisoner. "If you are so careful to avoid trouble, why do you *need* warships?"

"Because we have no guarantee that

the entire cosmos shares our policy of live and let live."

"Be more explicit."

"We chevvy nobody. But someday somebody may take it into their heads to chevvy us."

"Then you will start a fight?"

"No. The other party will have started it. We shall finish it."

"Sheer evasion," scoffed Eckster to Palamin and the rest. "The technique is obvious to anyone but an idiot. They settle themselves upon a hundred planets—if we can believe that number, which I don't! On most there is no opposition because nobody is there to oppose. On the others the natives are weak and backward, know that a struggle is doomed to failure and therefore offer none. But on any planet sufficiently strong and determined to resist—such as Gombar for instance—the Terrans will promptly treat that resistance as unwarranted interference with themselves. They will say they are being chevvyed. It will be their moral justification for a war."

Palamin looked at Taylor. "What do you say to that?"

Giving a deep shrug, Taylor said, "That kind of political cynicism has been long out of date where I come from. I can't help it if mentally you're about ten millennia behind us."

"Are we going to sit here and allow ourselves to be insulted by a prisoner in chains?" Eckster angrily demanded of Palamin. "Let us recommend that he be executed. Then we

can all go home. I for one have had enough of this futile rigmarole."

Another said, "Me, too." He looked an habitual me-tooer.

"Patience," advised Palamin. He spoke to Taylor. "You claim that you were under orders to examine the twin system of Halor and Ridi?"

"If by that you mean the adjacent binary, the answer is yes. That was my prescribed destination."

"Let us suppose that instead you had been told to take a look over our Gombarian system. Would you have done so?"

"I obey orders."

"You would have come upon us quietly and surreptitiously for a good snoop around?"

"Not necessarily. If my first impression had been one of friendliness, I'd have presented myself openly."

"He is dodging the question," insisted Eckster, still full of ire.

"What would you have done if you had been uncertain of our reaction?" continued Palamin.

"What anyone else would do," Taylor retorted. "I'd hang around until I'd got the measure of it one way or the other."

"Meanwhile taking care to evade capture?"

"Of course."

"And if you had not been satisfied with our attitude you'd have reported us as hostile?"

"Potentially so."

"That is all we require," decided Palamin. "Your admissions are tantamount to a confession that you are a spy. It does not matter in the least

whether you were under orders to poke your inquisitive nose into this system or some other system, you are still a spy." He turned to the others. "Are we all agreed?"

They chorused, "Yes."

"There is only one proper fate for such as you," Palamin finished. "You will be returned to your cell pending official execution." He made a gesture of dismissal. "Take him away."

The guards took him by simple process of jerking the chair from under him and kicking him erect. They tried to rush him out faster than he could go, he stumbled in his leg irons and almost fell. But he found time to throw one swift glance back from the doorway and his strangely pale eyes looked frozen.

When the elderly warder brought in his evening meal, Taylor asked, "How do they execute people here?"

"How do they do it where you come from?"

"We don't."

"You don't?" The warder blinked in amazement. Putting the tray on the floor, he took a seat on the bench beside Taylor and left the heavily-barred grille wide open. The butt of his gun protruded from its holster within easy reach of the prisoner's grasp. "Then how do you handle dangerous criminals?"

"We cure the curable by whatever means are effective no matter how drastic, including brain surgery. The incurable we export to a lonely planet reserved exclusively for them.

There they can fight it out between themselves."

"What a waste of a world," opined the warder. In casual manner he drew his gun, pointed it at the wall and pressed the button. Nothing happened. "Empty," he said.

Taylor made no remark.

"No use you snatching it. No use you running for it. The armored doors, multiple locks and loaded guns are all outside."

"I'd have to get rid of these manacles before I could start something with any hope of success," Taylor pointed out. "Are you open to bribery?"

"With what? You have nothing save the clothes you're wearing. And even those will be burned after you're dead."

"All right, forget it." Taylor rattled his irons loudly and looked disgusted. "You haven't yet told me how I'm to die."

"Oh, you'll be strangled in public," informed the warder. He smacked his lips for no apparent reason. "All executions take place in the presence of the populace. It is not enough that justice be done, it must also be seen to be done. So everybody sees it. And it has an excellent disciplinary effect." Again the lip smacking. "It is quite a spectacle."

"I'm sure it must be."

"You will be made to kneel with your back to a post, your arms and ankles tied behind it," explained the warder in tutorial manner. "There is a hole drilled through the post at the

level of your neck. A loop of cord goes round your neck, through the hole and around a stick on the other side. The executioner twists the stick, thereby tightening the loop quickly or slowly according to his mood."

"I suppose that when he feels really artistic he prolongs the agony quite a piece by slackening and re-tightening the loop a few times?" Taylor ventured.

"No, no, he is not permitted to do that," assured the warden, blind to the sarcasm. "Not in a final execution. That method is used only to extract confessions from the stubborn. We are a fair-minded and tender-hearted people, see?"

"You're a great comfort to me," said Taylor.

"So you will be handled swiftly and efficiently. I have witnessed many executions and have yet to see a sloppy, badly performed one. The body heaves and strains against its bonds, the eyes stick out, the tongue protrudes and turns black and complete collapse follows. The effect is invariably the same and is a tribute to the executioner's skill. Really you have nothing to worry about, nothing at all."

"Looks like I haven't, the way you put it," observed Taylor dryly. "I'm right on top of the world without anything to lose except my breath." He brooded a bit, then asked, "When am I due for the noose?"

"Immediately after you've finished your game," the warden informed.

Taylor eyed him blankly. "Game? What game? What do you mean?"

"It is conventional to allow a condemned man a last game against a skilled player chosen by us. When the game ends he is taken away and strangled."

"Win or lose?"

"The result makes no difference. He is executed regardless of whether he is the winner or the loser."

"Sounds crazy to me," said Taylor frowning.

"It would, being an alien," replied the warden. "But surely you'll agree that a person facing death is entitled to a little bit of consideration if only the privilege of putting up a last minute fight for his life."

"A pretty useless fight."

"That may be. But every minute of delay is precious to the one concerned." The warden rubbed hands together appreciatively. "I can tell you that nothing is more exciting, more thrilling than a person's death-match against a clever player."

"Is that so?"

"Yes. You see, he cannot possibly play in normal manner. For one thing, his mind is obsessed by his impending fate while his opponent is bothered by no such burden. For another, he dare not let the other win—and he dare not let him lose, either. He has to concentrate all his faculties on preventing a decisive result and prolonging the game as much as possible. And, of course, all the time he is mentally and morally handicapped by the knowledge that the end is bound to come."

"Bet it gives you a heck of a kick," said Taylor.

The warder sucked his lips before smacking them. "Many a felon have I watched playing in a cold sweat with the ingenuity of desperation. Then at last the final move. He has fainted and rolled off his chair. We've carried him out as limp as an empty sack. He has come to his senses on his knees facing a crowd waiting for the first twist."

"It isn't worth the bother," decided Taylor. "No player can last long."

"Usually they don't but I've known exceptions, tough and expert gamesters who've managed to postpone death for four or five days. There was one fellow, a professional *alizik* player, who naturally chose his own game and contrived to avoid a decision for sixteen days. He was so good it was a pity he had to die. A lot of video-watchers were sorry when the end came."

"Oh, so you put these death-matches on the video?"

"It's the most popular show. Pins them in their chairs, I can tell you."

"Hm-m-m!" Taylor thought a bit, asked, "Suppose this video-star had been able to keep the game on the boil for a year or more, would he have been allowed to do so?"

"Of course. Nobody can be put to death until he has completed his last game. You could call it a superstition, I suppose. What's more, the rule is that he gets well fed while playing. If he wishes he can eat like a king. All the same, they rarely eat much."

"Don't they?"

"No—they're so nervous that their

stomachs refuse to hold a square meal. Occasionally one of them is actually sick in the middle of a game. When I see one do that I know he won't last another day."

"You've had plenty of fun in your time," Taylor offered.

"Quite often," the warder admitted. "But not always. Bad players bore me beyond description. They give the video-watchers the gripes. They start a game, fumble it right away, go to the strangling-post and that's the end of them. The greatest pleasure for all is when some character makes a battle of it."

"Fat chance I've got. I know no Gombarian games and you people know no Terran ones."

"Any game can be learned in short time and the choice is yours. Naturally you won't be permitted to pick one that involves letting you loose in a field without your irons. It has to be something that can be played in this cell. Want some good advice?"

"Give."

"This evening an official will arrive to arrange the contest after which he will find you a suitable partner. Don't ask to be taught one of our games. No matter how clever you may try to be your opponent will be better because he'll be handling the familiar while you're coping with the strange. Select one of your own planet's games and thus give yourself an advantage."

"Thanks for the suggestion. It might do me some good if defeat meant death—but victory meant life."

"I've told you already that the result makes no difference."

"There you are then. Some choice, huh?"

"You can choose between death in the morning and death the morning after or even the one after that." Getting up from the bench, the warder walked out, closed the grille, said through the bars, "Anyway, I'll

bring you a book giving full details of our indoor games. You'll have plenty of time to read it before the official arrives."

"Nice of you," said Taylor. "But I think you're wasting your time."

Left alone, Wayne Taylor let his thoughts mill around. They weren't pleasant ones. Space scouts belonged



to a high-risk profession and none knew it better than themselves. Each and every one cheerfully accepted the dangers on the ages-old principle that it always happens to the other fellow, never to oneself. But now it had happened and to him. He ran a forefinger around the inside of his collar which felt a little tight.

When he'd dived through the clouds with two air-machines blasting fire to port and starboard he had pressed alarm button D. This caused



his transmitter to start flashing a brief but complicated number giving his co-ordinates and defining the planet as enemy territory.

Earlier and many thousands of miles out in space he had reported his intention of making an emergency landing and identified the chosen world with the same co-ordinates. Button D, therefore, would confirm his first message and add serious doubts about his fate. He estimated that between the time he'd pressed the button and the time he had landed the alarm-signal should have been transmitted at least forty times.

Immediately after the landing he'd switched the delayed-action charge and taken to his heels. The planes were still buzzing around. One of them swooped low over the grounded ship just as it blew up. It disintegrated in the blast. The other one gained altitude and circled overhead, directing the search. To judge by the speed with which troops arrived he must have had the misfortune to have dumped himself in a military area full of uniformed goons eager for blood. All the same, he'd kept them on the run for six hours and covered twenty miles before they got him. They'd expressed their disapproval with fists and feet.

Right now there was no way of telling whether Terran listening-posts had picked up his repeated D-alarm. Odds were vastly in favor of it since it was a top priority channel on which was kept a round-the-clock watch. He didn't doubt for a moment that, hav-

ing received the message, they'd do something about it.

The trouble was that whatever they did would come too late. In this very sector patrolled the *Macklin*, Terra's latest, biggest, most powerful battleship. If the *Macklin* happened to be on the prowl, and at her nearest routine point, it would take her ten months to reach Gombar at maximum velocity. If she had returned to port, temporarily replaced by an older and slower vessel, the delay might last two years.

Two years was two years too long. Ten months was too long. He could not wait ten weeks. In fact it was highly probable that he hadn't got ten days. Oh, time, time, how impossible it is to stretch it for a man or compress it for a ship.

The warder reappeared, shoved a book between the bars. "Here you are. You have learned enough to understand it."

"Thanks."

Lying full length on the bench he read right through it swiftly but comprehensively. Some pages he skipped after brief perusal because they described games too short, simple and childish to be worth considering. He was not surprised to find several games that were alien variations of ones well-known upon Terra. The Gombarians had playing cards, for instance, eighty to a pack with ten suits.

Alizik proved to be a bigger and more complicated version of chess with four hundred squares and forty pieces per side. This was the one that

somebody had dragged out for sixteen days and it was the only one in the book that seemed capable of such extension. For a while he pondered *alizik*, wondering whether the authorities—and the video audience—would tolerate play at the rate of one move in ten hours. He doubted it. Anyway, he could not prevent his skilled opponent from making each answering move in five seconds.

Yes, that was what he really wanted: a game that slowed down the other fellow despite his efforts to speed up. A game that was obviously a game and not a gag because any fool could see with half an eye that it was possible to finish it once and for all. Yet a game that the other fellow could not finish, win or lose, no matter how hard he tried.

There wasn't any such game on the three worlds of Gombar or the hundred worlds of Terra or the multi-million worlds yet unfound. There couldn't be because, if there were, nobody would play it. People like results. Nobody is sufficiently cracked to waste time, thought and patience riding a hobbyhorse that got nowhere, indulging a rigmarole that cannot be terminated to the satisfaction of all concerned including kibitzers.

But nobody!

No?

"When the last move is made God's Plan will be fulfilled; on that day and at that hour and at that moment the universe will vanish in a mighty thunderclap."

He got off the bench, his cold eyes

expressionless, and began to pace his cell like a restless tiger.

The official had an enormous pot belly, small, piggy eyes and an unctuous smile that remained permanently fixed. His manner was that of a circus ringmaster about to introduce his best act.

"Ah," he said, noting the book, "so you have been studying our games, eh?"

"Yes."

"I hope you've found none of them suitable."

"Do you?" Taylor surveyed him quizzically. "Why?"

"It would be a welcome change to witness a contest based on something right out of this world. A genuinely new game would give a lot of satisfaction to everybody. Providing, of course," he added hurriedly, "that it was easy to understand and that you didn't win it too quickly."

"Well," said Taylor, "I must admit I'd rather handle something I know than something I don't."

"Good, good!" enthused the other. "You prefer to play a Terran game?"

"That's right."

"There are limitations on your choice."

"What are they?" asked Taylor.

"Once we had a condemned murderer who wanted to oppose his games-partner in seeing who could be the first to catch a sunbeam and put it in a bottle. It was nonsensical. You must choose something that obviously and beyond argument can be accomplished."

"I see."

"Secondly, you may not select something involving the use of intricate and expensive apparatus that will take us a long time to manufacture. If apparatus is needed, it must be cheap and easy to construct."

"Is that all?"

"Yes—except that the complete rules of the game must be inscribed by you unambiguously and in clear writing. Once play begins those rules will be strictly followed and no variation of them will be permitted."

"And who approves my choice after I've described it?"

"I do."

"All right. Here's what I'd like to play." Taylor explained it in detail, borrowed pen and paper and made a rough sketch. When he had finished the other folded the drawing and put it in a pocket.

"A strange game," admitted the official, "but it seems to me disappointingly uncomplicated. Do you really think you can make the contest last a full day?"

"I hope so."

"Even two days perhaps?"

"With luck."

"You'll need it!" He was silent with thought a while, then shook his head doubtfully. "It's a pity you didn't think up something like a better and trickier version of *alizik*. The audience would have enjoyed it and you might have gained yourself a longer lease of life. Everyone would get a great kick out of it if you beat the record for delay before your execution."

"Would they really?"

"They sort of expect something extra-special from an alien life form."

"They're getting it, aren't they?"

"Yes, I suppose so." He still seemed vaguely dissatisfied. "Oh, well, it's your life and your struggle to keep it a bit longer."

"I'll have only myself to blame when the end comes."

"True. Play will commence promptly at midday tomorrow. After that it's up to you."

He lumbered away, his heavy footsteps dying along the corridor. A few minutes later the warder appeared.

"What did you pick?"

"Arky-malarkey."

"Huh? What's that?"

"A Terran game."

"That's fine, real fine." He rubbed appreciative hands together. "He approved it, I suppose?"

"Yes, he did."

"So you're all set to justify your continued existence. You'll have to take care to avoid the trap."

"What trap?" Taylor asked.

"Your partner will play to win as quickly and conclusively as possible. That is expected of him. But once he gets it into his head that he can't win he'll start playing to lose. You've no way of telling exactly when he'll change his tactics. Many a one has been caught out by the sudden switch and found the game finished before he had time to realize it."

"But he must keep to the rules, mustn't he?"

"Certainly. Neither you nor he will be allowed to ignore them. Other-

wise the game would become a farce."

"That suits me."

Somewhere outside sounded a high screech like that of a bobcat backing into a cactus. It was followed by a scuffle of feet, a dull thud and dragging noises. A distant door creaked open and banged shut.

"What goes?" said Taylor.

"Lagartine's game must have ended."

"Who's Lagartine?"

"A political assassin." The warder glanced at his watch. "He chose *ram-sid*, a card game. It has lasted a mere four hours. Serves him right. Good riddance to bad rubbish."

"And now they're giving him the big squeeze?"

"Of course." Eying him, the warder said, "Nervous?"

"Ha-ha," said Taylor without mirth.

The performance did not commence in his cell as he had expected. A contest involving an alien life form playing an alien game was too big an event for that. They took him through the prison corridors to a large room in which stood a table with three chairs. Six more chairs formed a line against the wall, each occupied by a uniformed plug-ugly complete with hand gun. This was the knock-down-and-drag-out squad ready for action the moment the game terminated.

At one end stood a big, black cabinet with two rectangular portholes through which gleamed a pair of lenses. From it came faint ticking

sounds and muffled voices. This presumably contained the video camera.

Taking a chair at the table, Taylor sat down and gave the armed audience a frozen stare. A thin-faced individual with the beady eyes of a rat took the chair opposite. The potbellied official dumped himself in the remaining seat. Taylor and Rat-eyes weighed each other up, the former with cold assurance, the latter with sadistic speculation.

Upon the table stood a board from which arose three long wooden pegs. The left-hand peg held a column of sixty-four disks evenly graduated in diameter, the largest at the bottom, smallest at the top. The effect was that of a tapering tower built from a nursery do-it-yourself kit.

Wasting no time, Pot-belly said, "This is the Terran game of Arky-malarkey. The column of disks must be transferred from the peg on which it sits to either of the other two pegs. They must remain graduated in the same order, smallest at the top, biggest at the bottom. The player whose move completes the stack is the winner. Do you both understand?"

"Yes," said Taylor.

Rat-eyes assented with a grunt.

"There are three rules," continued Potbelly, "which will be strictly observed. You will make your moves alternately, turn and turn about. You may move only one disk at a time. You may not place a disk upon any other smaller than itself. Do you both understand?"

"Yes," said Taylor.

Rat-eyes gave another grunt.

From his pocket Potbelly took a tiny white ball and carelessly tossed it onto the table. It bounced a couple of times, rolled across and fell off on Rat-eyes' side.

"You start," he said.

Without hesitation Rat-eyes took the smallest disk from the top of the first peg and placed it on the third.

"Bad move," thought Taylor, blank of face. He shifted the second smallest disk from the first peg to the second.

Smirking for no obvious reason, Rat-eyes now removed the smallest disk from the third peg, placed it on top of Taylor's disk on the second. Taylor promptly switched another disk from the pile on the first peg to the empty third peg.

After an hour of this it had become plain to Rat-eyes that the first peg was not there merely to hold the stock. It had to be used. The smirk faded from his face, was replaced by mounting annoyance as hours crawled by and the situation became progressively more complicated.

By bedtime they were still at it, swapping disks around like crazy, and neither had got very far. Rat-eyes now hated the sight of the first peg, especially when he was forced to put a disk back on it instead of taking one off it. Potbelly, still wearing his fixed, meaningless smile, announced that play would cease until sunrise tomorrow.

The next day provided a long, arduous session lasting from dawn

to dark and broken only by two meals. Both players worked fast and hard, setting the pace for each other and seeming to vie with one another in effort to reach a swift conclusion. No onlooker could find cause to complain about the slowness of the game. Four times Rat-eyes mistakenly tried to place a disk on top of a smaller one and was promptly called to order by the referee in the obese shape of Potbelly.

A third, fourth, fifth and sixth day went by. Rat-eyes now played with a mixture of dark suspicion and desperation while the column on the first peg appeared to go up as often as it went down. Though afflicted by his emotions he was no fool. He knew quite well that they were making progress in the task of transferring the column. But it was progress at an appalling rate. What's more, it became worse as time went on. Finally, he could see no way of losing the game, much less winning it.

By the fourteenth day Rat-eyes had reduced himself to an automaton wearily moving disks to and fro in the soulless, disinterested manner of one compelled to perform a horrid chore. Taylor remained as impassive as a bronze Buddha and that fact didn't please Rat-eyes either.

Danger neared on the sixteenth day though Taylor did not know it. The moment he entered the room he sensed an atmosphere of heightened interest and excitement. Rat-eyes looked extra glum. Potbelly had taken on added importance. Even the stolid, dull-witted guards displayed faint

signs of mental animation. Four off-duty warders joined the audience. There was more activity than usual within the video cabinet.

Ignoring all this, Taylor took his seat and play continued. This endless moving of disks from peg to peg was a lousy way to waste one's life but the strangling-post was lousier. He had every inducement to carry on. Naturally he did so, shifting a disk when his turn came and watching his opponent with his pale gray eyes.

In the midafternoon Rat-eyes suddenly left the table, went to the wall, kicked it good and hard and shouted a remark about the amazing similarity between Terrans and farmyard manure. Then he returned and made his next move. There was some stirring within the video cabinet. Potbelly mildly reproved him for taking time off to advertise his patriotism. Rat-eyes went on playing with the surly air of a delinquent whose mother has forgotten to kiss him.

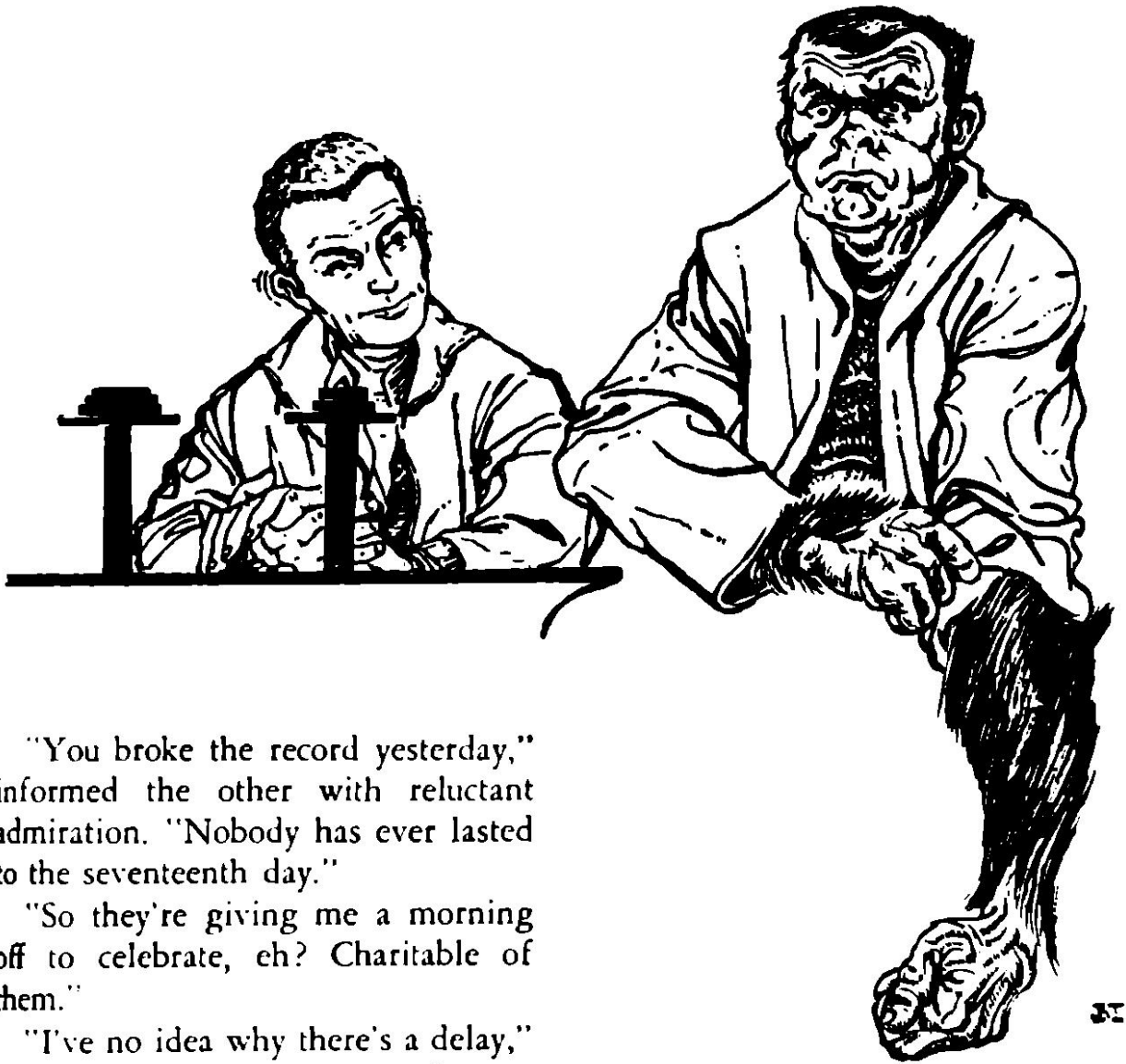
Late in the evening, Potbelly stopped the game, faced the video lenses and said in portentous manner, "Play will resume tomorrow—the seventeenth day!"

He voiced it as though it meant something or other.

When the warder shoved his breakfast through the grille in the morning, Taylor said, "Late, aren't you? I should be at play by now."

"They say you won't be wanted before this afternoon."

"That so? What's all the fuss about?"



"You broke the record yesterday," informed the other with reluctant admiration. "Nobody has ever lasted to the seventeenth day."

"So they're giving me a morning off to celebrate, eh? Charitable of them."

"I've no idea why there's a delay," said the warder. "I've never known them to interrupt a game before."

"You think they'll stop it altogether?" Taylor asked, feeling a constriction around his neck. "You think they'll officially declare it finished?"

"Oh, no, they couldn't do that." He looked horrified at the thought of it. "We mustn't bring the curse of the dead upon us. It's absolutely essential that condemned people should be made to choose their own time of execution."

"Why is it?"

"Because it always has been since the start of time."

He wandered off to deliver other breakfasts, leaving Taylor to stew the explanation. "Because it always has been." It wasn't a bad reason. Indeed, some would consider it a good one. He could think of several pointless, illogical things done on Terra solely because they always had been done. In this matter of unchallenged habit the Gombarians were no better or worse than his own kind.

Though a little soothed by the warder's remarks he couldn't help feeling more and more uneasy as the

morning wore on without anything happening. After sixteen days of moving disks from peg to peg it had got so that he was doing it in his sleep. Didn't seem right that he should be enjoying a spell of aimless loafing around his cell. There was something ominous about it.

Again and again he found himself nursing the strong suspicion that officialdom was seeking an effective way of ending the play without appearing to flout convention. When they found it—if they found it—they'd pull a fast one on him, declare the game finished, take him away and fix him up with a very tight necktie.

He was still wallowing in pessimism when the call came in the afternoon. They hustled him along to the same room as before. Play was resumed as if it had never been interrupted. It lasted a mere thirty minutes. Somebody tapped twice on the inside of the video cabinet and Potbelly responded by calling a halt. Taylor went back to his cell and sat there baffled.

Late in the evening he was summoned again. He went with bad grace because these short and sudden performances were more wearing on the nerves than continual day-long ones. Previously he had known for certain that he was being taken to play Arky-malarkey with Rat-eyes. Now he could never be sure that he was not about to become the lead character in a literally breathless scene.

On entering the room he realized

at once that things were going to be different this time. The board with its pegs and disks still stood in the center of the table. But Rat-eyes was absent and so was the armed squad. Three people awaited him: Potbelly, Palamin, and a squat, heavily built character who had the peculiar air of being of this world but not with it.

Potbelly was wearing the offended frown of someone burdened with a load of stock in a nonexistent oil well. Palamin looked singularly displeased and expressed it by snorting like an impatient horse. The third appeared to be contemplating a phenomenon on the other side of the galaxy.

"Sit," ordered Palamin, spitting it out.

Taylor sat.

"Now, Marnikot, you tell him."

The squat one showed belated awareness of being on Gombar, said pedantically to Taylor, "I rarely look at the video. It is suitable only for the masses with nothing better to do."

"Get to the point," urged Palamin.

"But having heard that you were about to break an ages-old record," continued Marnikot, undisturbed, "I watched the video last night." He made a brief gesture to show that he could identify a foul smell at first sniff. "It was immediately obvious to me that to finish your game would require a minimum number of moves of the order of two to the sixty-fourth power minus one." He took flight into momentary dreamland, came back and added mildly, "That is a large number."

"Large!" said Palamin. He let go a snort that rocked the pegs.

"Let us suppose," Marnikot went on, "that you were to transfer these disks one at a time as fast as you could go, morning, noon and night without pause for meals or sleep, do you know how long it would take to complete the game?"

"Nearly six billion Terran centuries," said Taylor as if talking about next Thursday week.

"I have no knowledge of Terran time-terms. But I can tell you that neither you nor a thousand generations of your successors could live long enough to see the end of it. Correct?"

"Correct," Taylor admitted.

"Yet you say that this is a Terran game?"

"I do."

Marnikot spread hands helplessly to show that as far as he was concerned there was nothing more to be said.

Wearing a forbidding scowl, Palamin now took over. "A game cannot be defined as a genuine one unless it is actually played. Do you claim that this so-called game really is played on Terra?"

"Yes."

"By whom?"

"By priests in the Temple of Benares."

"And how long have they been playing it?" he asked.

"About two thousand years."

"Generation after generation?"

"That's right."

"Each player contributing to the

end of his days without hope of seeing the result?"

"Yes."

Palamin fumed a bit. "Then *why* do they play it?"

"It's part of their religious faith. They believe that the moment the last disk is placed the entire universe will go bang."

"Are they crazy?"

"No more so than people who have played *alizik* for equally as long and to just as little purpose."

"We have played *alizik* as a series of separate games and not as one never-ending game. A rigmarole without possible end cannot be called a game by any stretch of the imagination."

"Arky-malarkey is not endless. It has a conclusive finish." Taylor appealed to Marnikot as the indisputed authority. "Hasn't it?"

"It is definitely finite," pronounced Marnikot, unable to deny the fact.

"So!" exclaimed Palamin, going a note higher. "You think you are very clever, don't you?"

"I get by," said Taylor, seriously doubting it.

"But we are cleverer," insisted Palamin, using his nastiest manner. "You have tricked us and now we shall trick you. The game is finite. It can be concluded. Therefore it will continue until it reaches its natural end. You will go on playing it days, weeks, months, years until eventually you expire of old age and chronic frustration. There will be times when the very sight of these disks will drive you crazy and you will beg for merci-

ful death. But we shall not grant that favor—and you will continue to play.” He waved a hand in triumphant dismissal. “Take him away.”

Taylor returned to his cell.

When supper came the warden offered, “I am told that play will go on regularly as from tomorrow morning. I don’t understand why they messed it up today.”

“They’ve decided that I’m to suffer a fate worse than death,” Taylor informed.

The warden stared at him.

“I have been very naughty,” said Taylor.

Rat-eyes evidently had been advised of the new setup because he donned the armor of philosophical acceptance and played steadily but without interest. All the same, long sessions of repetitive motions ate corrosively into the armor and gradually found its way through.

In the early afternoon of the fifty-second day Rat-eyes found himself faced with the prospect of returning most of the disks to the first peg, one by one. He took off the clompers he used for boots. Then he ran barefooted four times around the room, bleating like a sheep. Potbelly got a crick in the neck watching him. Two guards led Rat-eyes away still bleating. They forgot to take his clompers with them.

By the table Taylor sat gazing at the disks while he strove to suppress his inward alarm. What would happen now? If Rat-eyes had given up for keeps it could be argued that he

had lost, the game had concluded and the time had come to play okey-chokey with a piece of cord. It could be said with equal truth that an unfinished game remains an unfinished game even though one of the players is in a mental home giving his hair a molasses shampoo.

If the authorities took the former view his only defense was to assert the latter one. He’d have to maintain with all the energy at his command that since he had not won or lost his time could not possibly have come. It wouldn’t be easy if he had to make his protest while being dragged by the heels to his doom. His chief hope lay in Gombarian unwillingness to outrage an ancient convention. Millions of video viewers would take a poor look at officialdom mauling a pet superstition. Yes, man, there were times when the Idiot’s Lantern had its uses.

He need not have worried. Having decided that to keep the game going would be a highly refined form of hell, the Gombarians had already prepared a roster of relief players drawn from the ranks of minor offenders whose ambitions never rose high enough to earn a strangling. So after a short time another opponent appeared.

The newcomer was a shifty character with a long face and hanging dewlaps. He resembled an especially dopey bloodhound and looked barely capable of articulating three words, to wit, “Ain’t talking, copper.” It must have taken at least a month to teach him that he must move only one disk

at a time and never, never, never place it upon a smaller one. But somehow he had learned. The game went on.

Dopey lasted a week. He played slowly and doggedly as if in fear of punishment for making a mistake. Often he was irritated by the video cabinet which emitted ticking noises at brief but regular intervals. These sounds indicated the short times they were on the air.

For reasons best known to himself Dopey detested having his face broadcast all over the planet and near the end of the seventh day he'd had enough. Without warning he left his seat, faced the cabinet and made a number of swift and peculiar gestures at the lenses. The signs meant nothing to the onlooking Taylor. But Potbelly almost fell off his chair. The guards sprang forward, grabbed Dopey and frogmarched him through the door.

He was replaced by a huge-jowled, truculent character who dumped himself into the chair, glared at Taylor and wiggled his hairy ears. Taylor, who regarded this feat as one of his own accomplishments, promptly wiggled his own ears back. The other then looked fit to burst a blood vessel.

"This Terran sneak," he roared at Potbelly, "is throwing dirt at me. Do I *have* to put up with that?"

"You will cease to throw dirt," ordered Potbelly.

"I only wiggled my ears," said Taylor.

"That is the same thing as throw-

ing dirt," Potbelly said mysteriously. "You will refrain from doing it and you will concentrate upon the game."

And so it went on with disks being moved from peg to peg hour after hour, day after day, while a steady parade of opponents arrived and departed. Around the two hundredth day Potbelly himself started to pull his chair apart with the apparent intention of building a camp fire in the middle of the floor. The guards led him out. A new referee appeared. He had an even bigger paunch and Taylor promptly named him Potbelly Two.

How Taylor himself stood the soul-deadening pace he never knew. But he kept going while the others cracked. He was playing for a big stake while they were not. All the same, there were times when he awoke from horrid dreams in which he was sinking through the black depths of an alien sea with a monster disk like a millstone around his neck. He lost count of the days and once in a while his hands developed the shakes. The strain was not made any easier by several nighttime uproars that took place during this time. He asked the warder about one of them.

"Yasko refused to go. They had to beat him into submission."

"His game had ended?"

"Yes. The stupid fool matched a five of anchors with a five of stars. Immediately he realized what he'd done he tried to kill his opponent." He wagged his head in sorrowful reproof. "Such behavior never does them any good. They go to the post

cut and bruised. And if the guards are angry with them they ask the executioner to twist slowly."

"Ugh!" Taylor didn't like to think of it. "Surprises me that none have chosen my game. Everybody must know of it by now."

"They are not permitted to," said the warder. "There is now a law that only a recognized Gombarian game may be selected."

He ambled away. Taylor lay full length on his bench and hoped for a silent, undisturbed night. What was the Earth-date? How long had he been here? How much longer would he remain? How soon would he lose control of himself and go nuts? What would they do with him if and when he became too crazy to play?

Often in the thought-period preceding sleep he concocted wild plans of escape. None of them were of any use whatever. Conceivably he could break out of this prison despite its grilles, armored doors, locks, bolts, bars and armed guards. It was a matter of waiting for a rare opportunity and seizing it with both hands. But suppose he got out, what then? Any place on the planet he would be as conspicuous as a kangaroo on the sidewalks of New York. If it were possible to look remotely like a Gombarian, he'd have a slight chance. It was not possible. He could do nothing save play for time.

This he continued to do. On and on and on without cease except for meals and sleep. By the three-hundredth day he had to admit to himself that he was feeling somewhat

moth-eaten. By the four-hundredth he was under the delusion that he had been playing for at least five years and was doomed to play forever, come what may. The four-twentieth day was no different from the rest except in one respect of which he was completely unaware—it was the last.

At dawn of day four twenty-one no call came for him to play. Perforce he waited a couple of hours and still no summons. Maybe they'd decided to break him with a cat-and-mouse technique, calling him when he didn't expect it and not calling him when he did. A sort of psychological water torture. When the warder passed along the corridor Taylor went to the bars and questioned him. The fellow knew nothing and was as puzzled as himself.

The midday meal arrived. Taylor had just finished it when the squad of guards arrived accompanied by an officer. They entered the cell and removed his irons. Ye gods, this was something! He stretched his limbs luxuriously, fired questions at the officer and his plug-uglies. They took no notice, behaved as if he had stolen the green eye of the little yellow god. Then they marched him out of the cell, along the corridors and past the games room.

Finally they passed through a large doorway and into an open yard. In the middle of this area stood six short steel posts each with a hole near its top and a coarse kneeling-mat at its base. Stolidly the squad tramped

straight towards the posts. Taylor's stomach turned over. The squad pounded on past the posts and toward a pair of gates. Taylor's stomach turned thankfully back and settled itself.

Outside the gates they climbed aboard a troop-carrier which at once drove off. It took him around the outskirts of the city to a spaceport. They all piled out, marched past the control tower and onto the concrete. There they halted.

Across the spaceport, about half a mile away, Taylor could see a Terran vessel sitting on its fins. It was far too small for a warship, too short and fat for a scoutship. After staring at it with incredulous delight he decided that it was a battleship's lifeboat. He wanted to do a wild dance and yell silly things. He wanted to run like mad towards it but the guards stood close around and would not let him move.

They waited there for four long, tedious hours at the end of which another lifeboat screamed down from the sky and landed alongside its fellow. A bunch of figures came out of it, mostly Gombarians. The guards urged him forward.

He was dimly conscious of some sort of exchange ceremony at the half-way mark. A line of surly Gombarians passed him, going the opposite way. Many of them were ornamented with plenty of brass and had the angry faces of colonels come fresh from a general demotion. He recognized

one civilian, Borkor, and wiggled his ears at him as he went by.

Then willing hands helped him through an air lock and he found himself sitting in the cabin of a ship going up. A young and eager lieutenant was talking to him but he heard only half of it.

". . . Landed, snatched twenty and beat it into space. We cross-examined them by signs . . . bit surprised to learn you were still alive . . . released one with an offer to exchange prisoners. Nineteen Gombarian bums for one Terran is a fair swap, isn't it?"

"Yes," said Taylor, looking around and absorbing every mark upon the walls.

"We'll have you aboard the *Thunderer* pretty soon . . . *Macklin* couldn't make it with that trouble near Cygni . . . got here as soon as we could." The lieutenant eyed him sympathetically. "You'll be heading for home within a few hours. Hungry?"

"No, not at all. The one thing they didn't do was starve me."

"Like a drink?"

"Thanks, I don't drink."

Fidgeting around embarrassedly, the lieutenant asked, "Well, how about a nice, quiet game of draughts?"

Taylor ran a finger around the inside of his collar and said, "Sorry, I don't know how to play and don't want to learn. I am allergic to games."

"You'll change."

"I'll be hanged if I do," said Taylor.

THE END