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SLACKER'S PARADISE

By Malcolm Jameson

*Or it seemed that way till the commander of a
space rowboat found a gigantic enemy battleship
that was determined to surrender to him!*

At a corner table in Spider Hinton's place on Juno three young officers sat. One of them drummed continually on the table top with restless, nervous fingers, and scowled about the place in obvious discontent. The other two were relaxed and appeared to be enjoying themselves as they toyed with the stems of their glasses and watched the girls begin to assemble. All three wore the slender silver badge of the crescent moon as well as the usual insignia of the Terrestrial Space Guard.

It was that crescent and what it signified that was what was so annoying to Lieutenant (jg) Alan MacKay, T.S.G.R.F., Class 5. In the parlance of officialdom it meant simply "an officer of limited qualifications," but to the impatient young MacKay and the public at large—and to the girls who entertained the Fleet, and to the personnel of the Fleet itself, *especially* to the personnel of the Fleet itself—it meant unqualified, untrained, unfit. It meant half-baked and incompetent. It meant that its

wearer was quite likely to be a strutting young ass masquerading as a Guard Officer, quite imposing over the tea table, but a joke in the thermless void. And Alan MacKay resented that very much.

It annoyed him exceedingly that his apparently wonderful luck in having been commissioned and given command of an SP boat while still a junior at Yalnell was attributed to the powerful political pull of his mothersome Aunt Clara. For it was true. With Machiavellian cunning she had worked every wire to insure his having the highest possible rank and the cushiest possible jobs. He did not know it, though he suspected it from the fate of his monthly plea for more active duty, but the jacket that held his service record, at the Department was plastered over with little notes clipped to it, such as, "Do not shift this officer to other duty without seeing me—JBH, High Admiral," "PD only," meaning planetary duty only, and the like. Whenever he thought of his Aunt Clara he cursed her softly under his breath, and not once did his conscience trouble him for his gross ingratitude.

The cabaret was beginning to fill up for the midday jamboree. Two girls stopped at the table for a moment. Ensign Hartley had waved them down just as they came in.

"Sit down," he invited, "and crook an elbow with us. We're off for the rest of the day."

"You! Humph," said one of them, tossing her head. "You'll keep for the dull times. Today there'll be real sailors here—fighting men." She gave a tug at her companion's arm. "Come along, deary—you can't afford to have *them* catch you hanging

out with planet lice." They walked away.

"You asked for it, you damn fool," growled the other ensign, Terrell. "Didn't you read the board when we came in off patrol? The *Pollux* is coming in. She's all shot to hell from that big battle off the Trojans, on her way to Lunar Base for general repairs. Every man jack on her has been given the Nova rosette, and Captain Bullard rates a diamond clasp for his Celestial Cross. The best thing we can do is get out of here and make ourselves as small as possible until she shoves off."

"Yes," said Lieutenant MacKay, rising, grim and red of face.

He strode out of the room and into the locker room where their spacesuits hung. Officers and men from the eight other SP boats were just coming in and taking off their armor so they could go onto the dance floor. MacKay nodded perfunctorily to one or two of them, then beckoned to his own two junior officers to follow him on outside.

"He may inspect us," he said, tersely, "get back on board and slick her up." To himself he added disgustedly, "we can't fight, but we can shine brightwork—as if a man like Bullard cared a damn about shiny brass!"

For Bullard was to him what he had come to be to practically every young man and boy on the five planets—an idol. Who had not heard of his exploits in this tedious and long-drawn-out war between the Federation of Interior Planets and the Jovian Empire? And now Bullard was here! Alan MacKay winced. That meant he would have to meet him, for etiquette was rigorous. All junior ship commanders had to pay their respects

to any visiting senior. He was at once elated and ashamed, for though he was a big, strapping fellow with a fine education, he bore that telltale crescent on his chest—the stigma of the unfit. What if he was commanding officer of the *TSS SP 331*? The bawdy songs of the Service and the old sky-dogs had but one translation for that "SP." It was "Slacker's Paradise."

It was in the same gloomy mood that Lieutenant MacKay watched the descent of the mighty monster of the void from alongside his own tiny craft parked outside the thin dome of Hebesport. He marveled at her size, and yet she was being brought down with an apparent ease and dexterity that amazed him. For the reports of her damage had not been, exaggerated. Every plate of her showed signs of a fight.

Two-thirds of her false collision nose had been shorn off and what was left of it was covered with blue-scale, indicating it had been done with a fierce hydroxygen ray. Hardly a square yard of her skin but was patched with hastily riveted plates. One fin had been melted clean away and the slag from it hurled aft along her hull, where great frozen gobs of it still clung. A queer and clumsy-looking jury-rig was where her jet-deflectors should have been, and a yawning hole in the bottom was all that remained of the nether turret.

But she came down neatly and without assistance from the ground force. MacKay continued to stare, wondering what she was like inside, for in common with his mates of the Juno Patrol, he had never set foot within a big ship. He had been told

that she was packed from stem to stern with machinery and gadgets but he could not imagine such a quantity of machinery. His major subject in school had been interplanetary languages; what he had learned about physics and mechanics he had picked up on his little *SP 331*.

MacKay saw the groundport open and a man he knew must be Bullard step out, accompanied by several others. They had started across the field toward the entrance to the dome when suddenly they stopped in mid-field and turned their faces upward. A small ship was coming in from the opposite direction, and judging from the corona of bright flame all about it, it was furiously decelerating. Despite his short service and general ignorance on matters of the void, MacKay had learned to read that sign. It was one of the Council's dispatch boats on special service. Nothing else was driven at that furious, tube-burning pace.

The Bullard party waited where they stood until it had landed, and they continued to stand there while a man sprinted across the field in huge bounds to them. MacKay saw Billiard take a white envelope from him, and turn it over and over in his hands as the messenger poured out some additional news with many gesticulations. Billiard at first shook his head, then nodded, and the man walked back toward his ship.

Whatever Captain Bullard had meant to do first, the arrival of this ship evidently changed his plans. Instead of continuing on to the dome, he abruptly altered his course and came straight toward where the line of SP boats lay. MacKay called a warning to his men within, and sent another flying down the line to rap on hulls and wake up the shipkeepers within.

Goose pimples arose on his skin as he stood and waited. His ship having come in first, had been parked farthest down the line, so that it was not until Bullard had inspected all the rest that he rounded the nose of the grounded SP boat and advanced straight upon MacKay. He answered the junior's salute briskly and asked:

"Permission to inspect you, sir?"

MacKay nodded dumbly, but he need not have. Bullard had already passed him and was inside. The *SP 331's* young skipper let the officers who were with Bullard go in first, then he followed. Bullard was already half through. He came out of the cubbyhole that passed for an engine room and into the control booth. He turned to one of his aids.

"Best of the lot, eh?"

The officer addressed nodded.

Bullard caressed the knobs and buttons on the control panel with skilled fingers, then he glanced upward at the port bulkhead. A grim smile showed for an instant on his face, then he suppressed it. He looked full at the purple-faced MacKay, who was gasping like a fish out of water. There was a twinkle of questioning amusement in the eyes of the famous captain of the *Pollux*.

"One of my men, sir," blurted MacKay, blushing to the roots of his hair. "He got a transfer to the Fleet. We felt we ought to

put that up."

"That" was a small silk flag—a single red star on a pale-blue background. Its counterpart hung proudly in millions of homes on Earth, Venus and Mars. It was the current service flag. It meant that a member of the household had gone to the war.

"So," said Captain Bullard, "that's the way you feel about it?" The smile was off his face now, and his eyes were piercing and hard. They never wavered below the level of MacKay's own eyes, but the junior had the feeling that he was being studied from tip to toe. He got no clue from Bullard as to what the answer should be.

"Y-y-yes, sir," he gulped. "We do."

Captain Bullard continued to gaze at him relentlessly. MacKay felt that more was expected of him.

"Oh, sir," he exploded, "I didn't ask for this—it was a doting aunt—I've tried and tried, but they turn my letters down—it ... it —"

"Enough!" said Bullard, hard as nails. "It is not what you do, but how you do it that counts. There is an old Earth saying, 'They also serve who stand and wait.' You know no gunnery, I daresay, nor one end of a torpedo from the other. You may lack much special knowledge that our profession requires. That is all your new moon means to me. But you know *something*. It is *how* you use that in a real emergency that matters—not what you ought to know."

Lieutenant (jg) Alan MacKay, T.S.G.R.F., Class 5, nodded

miserably. It sounded reasonable—consoling even—but at the bottom of his heart he knew he was doing empty and useless and humiliatingly safe duty when the course of all history was at stake. Captain Bullard whirled where he stood.

"I should like to speak to the lieutenant privately," he said, quietly.

When the others had withdrawn he addressed MacKay again.

"You are about to have your chance. You saw that messenger boat come in? She is a virtual wreck. She cannot be repaired for days. But her captain has delivered me a message that must go on. It is highly secret and urgent and must not be sent through the ether. It must be delivered to the commander in chief by hand, or failing that, orally. He is now hovering off the Jovian System maintaining our blockade there. How soon can you start?"

"Within the hour, sir," answered the startled MacKay. Now that he had received what he had been begging for, he was frightened. Was he good enough? Could he do it? What if he failed?

But Bullard showed no hesitation. He produced an envelope that MacKay saw was sealed with heavy state seals.

"This," said Bullard, "is written in plain English, not enciphered code, and there is a reason for it. That 'MR' in red letters on the lower front corner means at 'messenger's risk.' That is your authorization, if threatened with capture or loss of the document, to open it and read it until you have memorized its contents. Then you are to eat it, or otherwise completely destroy it. After that, you must use every effort to deliver it to the

commander in chief, suffering torture, if required, rather than divulge its purport. Are you ready to undertake that?"

MacKay looked into the steely eyes. He saw something he could not evade. That question was not a query—it was a command.

"I am," he said simply, and held out his hand for the message.

"You will give me your receipt, please," said Captain Bullard, evenly.

Lieutenant MacKay's hand trembled as he wrote out the receipt, but as he handed it across he was rewarded with a friendly smile from the man he had so long admired—and but a moment ago had feared.

"Remember"—Bullard glanced down at the paper—"Mr. MacKay, if you are caught by the enemy, you are on your own. All will depend then on your own judgment and your capacity for action. You have a great responsibility. Do not be afraid to exercise it. Bear in mind that in a grave emergency, *any* action is better than inaction."

MacKay was vaguely aware of a warm grasp of the hand, a slap on the shoulder, and his boyhood hero was gone. A second later he had snapped out of it and was holding the general alarm button hard down. There was much to do to make ready to hop off within the hour.

MacKay looked back once, after he had cleared Hebesport. The dome with the depot and cabaret under it looked like a dime on the sidewalk seen from a five-story window, and the black ships lying on the ozone snow outside like flies—one big one and the rest dots. He had told neither Hartley nor Terrell where they were going or why. He had only set the course and promised to explain in due time. Hartly was the assistant for astragation, and Terrell's job was handling the motors. As a relief for Hartley, there was Red Dugan, the scarlet-haired, freckle-faced quartermaster. Terrell's helper was Billy Kelsey, the radio-man, better known as Sparks. Sparks alone of them did not wear the silver crescent. He was an old Fleet Reserve man, having done his time long ago in the early Martian Wars.

Until that moment, Mackay had never felt the weight of responsibility. The *SP 331* was much like his own yacht in its general characteristics and he had never had any misgivings about his ability to handle her. Her armament was so inadequate as to never have given him a qualm. It consisted simply of a 10 mm. needle gun, fit only to detonate a stray mine. The SP boats were designed simply to patrol, not fight. But now she might have to fight or run, and since she could not do the former, it left no choice but the latter. And that, a swift computation showed, was almost as impossible.

MacKay was still trying to figure out how with his low rocket radius he could make the best possible speed to the Fleet and still keep back enough fuel in reserve to enable him to duck an emergency, when suddenly the emergency came. It was Red, the quartermaster, who announced it. He had been exploring space ahead with the not too sensitive old Mark I thermoscope the *SP 331* was fitted with.

"There's something ahead, something big," he reported. Red pulled the book to him that contained the resultant patterns of various combinations of infrared rays originating from mixed substances. He puzzled over the cross-index until he came to the type figures that matched those visible on the face of the thermoscope. He read out of the book:

LT—848—501, surcharged with F type spots: an atomic-powered type BBB with propulsion cut, but auxiliaries running. Usually indicates five units distance at normal intensity. Apply inverse square rule for other readings.

That could only mean a Jovian battleship of the most powerful class, lying to in the vicinity! For the Federation boasted nothing bigger than the highly specialized Star-class cruisers, such as the *Pollux*.

Almost in the same moment, the televox came to life with a sputter and a crackling. A guttural voice was speaking:

*"Phraedon? Seznik ng aut flotzkrigen zub snugelbisker!
Phraedon?"*

"What is that?" yelled Hartley.

MacKay listened as the message was repeated. He knew the Jovian dialects better in written form than by ear.

"He wants to know if we are Terrestrials. He says if we are, to come alongside and arrange surrender."

As he spoke he twisted the jet-deflector to hard dive and hard right. Simultaneously he jammed down the button that released maximum rocket power.

"Handle her, Hartley, I've got a job to do."

The realization that he had failed at the one real mission he had been assigned almost bowled MacKay over. His vocal cords felt tense and paralyzed, and cold sweat stood out on his forehead and more trickled down his ribs, but he knew the hour had come to destroy the important message. Yet he hesitated. Had he really been overhauled by a Jovian? For how could a Jovian, no matter how big, elude the clouds of cruisers that swarmed about Jupiter and his planets?

He paused, irresolute, with his fingers still on the flap of the sealed envelope. Sparks flung open the door of the radio booth and stuck his head out.

"Message coming through from *Pollux*. I'll give you the decode in a jiffy." He slammed the door.

"How are we doing?" MacKay asked Hartley, nervously.

"Rotten," said Hartley. "She's come into sight—big brute, with black and white checks on her sides—she's piling on the power now."

Sparks stepped out of the booth. The slip he handed MacKay read:

For your info: INTERCEPT Dir-Gen to c-IN-c:
Complete retirement as previously ordered. Await further orders at Mars Base. Messenger ship note changed destination.

MacKay waited no longer. His trembling fingers tore open the precious envelope and he took out the flimsy single sheet of paper it contained. He knew now that the blockade had been abandoned for some reason unknown to him and the Jovian fleet was free to come out. He spread the paper open and read.

He skipped the flowery heading. It was from the Grand Federated Council to the commander in chief. The first paragraph was full of flattering words about how well the fleet had done. The second spoke of the hardships endured by the three planets during the long war, and of the millions of men lost and the trillions of sols spent. Taxation was now unendurable. The third paragraph read:

Until now we had hoped that our blockade would win eventually, but late information advises us that the *flerig* crops on all Jovian satellites are bumper ones this year, and that herds of *leezvartle*, under intensive breeding, are actually larger than at

the beginning of the war. Since the enemy has unlimited resources of minerals, it is clear that we can no longer hope to win. Hence the order for your withdrawal.

Inform his Imperial Majesty that a peace commission is being sent and request an immediate armistice. Advise him our terms in general will be the following:

Recognition of Jovian dominion over all outer planets and satellites; division of asteroids to be determined by conference, as well as the amount of indemnity we shall pay—

MacKay had turned pale. It was monstrous, shameful! That the Federation should weaken now, after having relieved half the suffering planets controlled by the ruthless and aggressive Callistans and won all the major battles of the war, was unthinkable cowardice. Why, they were giving the Jovian Emperor—self-styled, for in the beginning he was only a Callistan soldier of fortune—more than even he had ever hoped to gain. And the ultimate in degradation was that unsolicited and ignominious offer to pay indemnities!

He ran through the incredible message once more. Then the *SP 331* lurched violently.

"They've hooked us with a tractor beam," shouted Hartley. MacKay tore a strip from the Council's message and rolled it into a pellet which he popped into his mouth. He followed it

with another and another. By the time the small patrol vessel was locked against the captor's spaceport, he had swallowed the last of it. Its many-sealed cover had been reduced to black ashes, which he slowly crumbled between his fingers.

The televox came to life with:

"Lu supnitte af trelb vittervang—LOSHT!"

"They're damned polite," muttered Lieutenant MacKay, as he buckled on the gold-hilted dagger that was the ceremonial descendant of the sword. "Will his excellency have the kindness to come on board—PLEASE!" he mimicked, bitterly.

To say that Lieutenant (jg) Alan MacKay was surprised when he stepped out of the *Draval's* inner lock would be to commit a gross understatement. He was, to be most exact, simply flabbergasted.

Eight side-boys lined the passage, and a rank of four musicians, tooting the raucous *zibl* pipes that give Ionic music its particularly ghastly effect, were rendering full imperial—if distinctly cacophonous—honors. Two gigantic drummers battered out the ruffles. Beyond them stood a gold-laced admiral and his staff, all of them gaunt and emaciated-looking, but rigged out in all their finery.

MacKay saluted clumsily. He was astonished to see the admiral bow deeply, and in the doing, unhook his own poniard from its clasp. When he straightened up from his obeisance, he

took two steps forward and handed the swordlet to MacKay.

"Pliss," he said, "you take it. Ve het ver' grit fribble ta scap—bat Trestians olright. Now ve gat life-boats ant go away. Maybeso To gat *Draval* other time, no?" He looked appealingly at MacKay.

"I think we will do better if we converse in Ionic," suggested Lieutenant MacKay, glancing stupidly at the token of surrender he held. He did not quite know what to do with it. Impulsively he handed it back to the admiral. "Do I understand that *you* are surrendering to *me*?" he asked, still unbelieving.

"Yaas," said the admiral, and with another sweeping bow, indicated he might come farther into the ship to hear the reasons.

They walked down a long glittering passage. On either side MacKay had glimpses through explosion-proof glassite bulkheads of masses of monster vacuum tubes; banks of condensers and transformers; immensely intricate bits of machinery composed of strangely arranged helixes, glowing spheres, and literally miles of glistening wires, He had not the faintest notion of what any of the machines were called or what their function.

The admiral led the way into a luxurious office and sat down wearily. He seemed very weak. All his suite had mysteriously disappeared.

"We destroyed our consort—a ship that was manned wholly by Callistans, and killed all the Callistan officers we had on board. We managed to elude your most effective blockade, and got this far, but I am afraid we cannot go farther. It is for that

reason I place the ship under your protection."

MacKay blinked. *His* protection! He thought feebly of the *SP 331's* 10 mm. micro-Bertha. It was too silly, too wacky. This was all a dream. But the admiral talked on, earnestly and pleadingly. MacKay was brought back to a sense of reality by a series of quivering jolts that momentarily shook the ship.

"My staff and remaining crew taking off in the boats," explained the admiral. "They are holding one for me. I must get back as soon as possible."

"B-but—"

"I am Jallikat—you may have heard of me—I was one of the first who advocated a union of the Jovian satellites. I had no idea, of course, how tyrannical the Callistons would prove to be, or what a fantastic madman they had for a leader. I need not relate how Europa and Ganymede were induced to join us, or our subsequent conquests elsewhere. But all that is over. The empire is an empty shell and overripe for destruction. The *flerig* crop is a complete failure. Our once vast herds of *leezvartle* have been slaughtered to the last animal—"

MacKay gave a start. It was an example of what skillful propaganda could do to unman an enemy.

"The Callistans have more local revolts on hand than they can manage. In another day they will collapse, for the people are starving. Your blockade, my young friend, has beat them.

"You wonder why I bring you this battleship. I will tell you. We have listened to your director and we trust him. He has said

that the war aims are for the liberations of the subject peoples. Very well, when that day comes, I will need a fleet, and we wish these ships which have always been manned by Ionians, to be spared as a nucleus for our future nation. We do not so trust your allies, the Martians. They would either add them to their own navy, or destroy them to keep them out of other hands."

The admiral smiled hopefully.

"Now that I have delivered it safely into your hands, may I have your permission to go back to my people?"

"Why, certainly," said MacKay, perfunctorily. He was too dumfounded to add anything to that. Almost before he knew it, the admiral had gone. A moment later there was one last thudding jolt. Lieutenant (jg) Alan MacKay felt a peculiar tingling all over his body. He—a wearer of the crescent—was in complete command of the biggest battleship of the skies. It was an empty and crewless battleship, to be sure, but only yesterday even ships like the indomitable *Pollux* would not have dared approach it except in divisions of six. It made him feel a little faint.

MacKay pulled himself together and walked out into the passage. He was not certain by what way he had come, for there had been several turnings. The ship was vast and strange, and eerie in its silence. But after several false tries, which humbled him further, he found the air lock. He straightened up and drew a deep breath. Five seconds later, he stepped down into the eight-

by-eight control room of the microscopic *SP 331*.

"No kidding, fellows," he announced in a pathetic effort at being nonchalant, "but we have captured a battleship. Leave this little thing as she is and let's go aboard and look her over."

Four pairs of eyes stared at him, and four sets of lips twitched into incredulous grins. After a moment Terrel spoke up.

"O.K., I'll bite. What's the gag?"

"I mean it," said MacKay, seriously. "The gag is that there is not a soul on board her nor a bite of anything to eat. How she's fixed for fuel or anything else is something we don't know. Our first job is to find out."

They explored that ship like miners exploring a new-found cave. Time after time they became lost, or wound up in blind passages. It took the best part of an hour before they came to the control room, embedded behind thick armor in the very bowels of the ship. MacKay found a set of plans and dragged them out. Hastily he translated some of the more important symbols on them for the guidance of his helpers.

"Here," he said to Terrell, "this is the motive-power layout as well as of the auxiliaries. Take Red with you and see if you can dope out what makes this ship move and how to keep the lights and things on. You'll have to stand watch and watch when you do. Report back in an hour or so, in any case. Have Sparks locate the radio and let me know the minute he can start sending. You, Hartley, take this set and have a look-see at the magazines. I wouldn't be surprised if the powder hasn't gone sour. If it has, flood or smother. Look for labels on the wall alongside locked

valves. 'Belligish' something or other is what you'll find—it means 'to extinguish.' I don't see how you can go wrong if you turn one on."

After they had gone, MacKay made a cursory examination of the control room. Its thousands of gadgets must have taken a score of men to operate, and very little of it meant anything to him, accomplished yachtsman though he was. He gave up the job and busied himself with examining the more important of the ship's papers.

What they contained was ample confirmation of what the admiral had said. Request after request for vital supplies had been turned down, or ersatz material sent in its place. Much of the correspondence dealt with the failure of the supposedly "just as good or better" substitutes. He felt better over his instructions to Hartley when he learned that half the ship's magazines had already been smothered on account of deteriorating powder.

But the question that pressed relentlessly on his brain was the big one. What should he do about that message? Abandon this hulk and go on in the *SP 331*? Or had the news he had just come by altered the situation so materially that it did not matter whether the message was delivered? He decided to radio Terra, giving the news he had just acquired, and ask for further instructions, even though according to the code, no messenger was permitted to query his orders.

That idea was knocked in the head as soon as it was conceived. Sparks came in.

"I found it," he said, "and it works. I traced back and

followed a lead into here. You can start sending any time now. Use that set over there." He pointed to a panel half-concealed by a huge switchboard. "Here's something interesting I found—a complete set of all our codes and ciphers! Wouldn't that burn 'em up at GHQ? Here are a few—you'll notice they are printed in Jovian thin-line type—guess they issued them to all their ships."

MacKay frowned. If the Callistans had all their codes, he could not hope to communicate confidentially with the director, the *Pollux*, or anyone else. Should he indicate that revolution was on the verge of breaking out in Jovia, the emperor might stamp it out before the Earthmen and allies could help. Yet the information he had in his possession was incredibly valuable. Had the Council had it a few days earlier, they would never have sent their pusillanimous peace offer. If they had it now, they would surely recall it.

"Hold everything," said MacKay, and sat down to think. His brain felt numb and his skin was tingling again. He was almost afraid to face the fact that was every moment, forcing itself more and more into the foreground. It was that at that moment he—he, the lowly junior grade lieutenant of Class 5 of the Reserve—held the fate of the Solar System's peoples in his hand. Upon what he did next—or failed to do—everything hung. No matter how slight his action, the repercussions would be interplanetary. It was a crushing thought to one who had never had to make a major decision and stand by its consequences.

It was only a matter of a minute or so that he sat there in sober study, though to him it seemed much longer. He groaned. "Oh, if I only knew, What would a man like Bullard do? He

would do something, I bet."

The thought of Bullard was tonic. The picture of the man came up before him, vivid and clear. He could almost hear him talking, and the exact words of that memorable interview came back to him. They were strangely prophetic.

"It is *how* you use what you know that counts in an emergency—you may be on your own—all will depend on your own judgment and capacity for action—do not be afraid to exercise it—any action is better than none."

That was the gist of it. That was the Bullardian philosophy in a nutshell. Act! Damn the torpedoes; go ahead! Cut the Gordian Knot, if there was no other way.

Lieutenant MacKay made up his mind. They might hang him for high treason, but what he was about to do was, to the best of his sincere judgment, the only thing to be done under the circumstances. It was what the peoples of all the worlds of the System hungered for. When he spoke again it was with a firm steady voice and flashing eyes.

"Sparks! Start sending—reserved State wave length—priority symbol—urgent. 'From the Council of the Federated Planets to the Emperor of Jovia. Sir. Within the next twelve hours you will by decree grant whole and unconditional freedom to all your subjects beyond the confines of the planetoid Callisto. You will at once recall and immobilize all strictly Callistan war craft. To permit the orderly doing of this

we have temporarily withdrawn our forces. Should you fail to comply within the time set, we shall resume the assault.' Let's see, I think that covers it. Sign off with the usual high seal symbol. You know the one. Got it?"

"Yep," said Sparks, his hand steadily pounding away. "All gone. Now what?" The grizzled old radio man had something like admiration in his eyes, though he could only guess the story behind what was transpiring.

"Give me the key. I'm a bum operator, but nobody can do these sneezes but me. I doubt if you could even read them."

MacKay sat down. All his self-consciousness had evaporated. He was plunging along now, and letting the chips fall where they might. He might make ridiculous errors in plain code, or Ionic or Ganymedian grammar, but he didn't care. If the idea got across, that was enough. It did not matter now about his ignorance of gunnery, or engineering, or anything else nautical. He was using the thing he did know—planetary languages.

For an hour he sat, jabbering forth dramatic appeals to the Ionians, the Europeans and the others to arise and drive out their conquerors. He told how the crew of the *Draval* had done it, and said she was waiting for them to join her. He promised the support of Terra, and the quick return of the Federated Fleet to aid them if they only showed resolution. He went on and on, his hand never ceasing. It was Sparks who broke him off.

"A call on another wave, sir. It's from Admiral Alley Cat, or something that sounds like that. He says knock it off—it's all over. They've dug a bird somewhere that knows English.

Anyhow, he's on the way here."

MacKay slumped back in his seat. He had not known how tired one could get merely flicking the hand. But there was another clicking starting up. It was on the high State wave he had just been using. He listened.

"Urgent for *Pollux*. If you possibly can, turn back and find the *SP 331* you used for messenger. Her operator is stricken with cosmopsychosis and is sending wild and extremely damaging messages. Suppress him even if it involves destruction of the patrol boat.

"Signed, DIRECTOR."

"Oh, gosh," said MacKay, "now I've got to start explaining. You do it—I'll dictate."

When the full story was on the ether, MacKay was in a state of virtual collapse. He looked with a dull eye upon Terrell who came in to report that the power installation was miles beyond his comprehension, though he did think they would have lights for a while.

"It doesn't matter," said MacKay, wearily, and closed his eyes. The issue would be determined then.

It was the next day that Admiral Jallikat brought his squadron

up. There was the *Tschasnick*, the *Perl*, and the *Bolonok*, all battleships, four cruisers and a number of lesser craft. The admiral promptly sent over enough men to man the *Draval* and get her under way. She picked up speed sluggishly and headed Earthward to the point where the *Pollux* was limping back, trying to intercept them.

"I'll go ahead in the *SP 331*," said MacKay, the moment the messenger reported the *Pollux* had been picked up by the sensitive thermoscopes of the big ship. "It is I, and I alone, who have to face the music."

Lieutenant (jg) Alan MacKay left his tiny SP boat tied up to the *Pollux's* entry port and silently followed the commander who had admitted him toward Captain Bullard's cabin. He entered and stood just inside the door, waiting anxiously for what the captain had to say. He was not happy.

Bullard rose from his desk and walked forward without a word until he came face to face with the young officer, and not a foot away. He reached out his right hand and with two fingers seized the silver pin on MacKay's chest. With a single resolute yank, he ripped it away and a bit of the cloth came with it. Without looking at it he flung it backward across the room.

"I'm sorry about the tear," said Bullard quietly, "I did not mean to be quite so vigorous. But here, this will cover it—"

From his own breast he unpinned the broad, star-spangled gold-threaded ribbon of the Celestial Cross.

"After all," he said, and this time he smiled, "*you* won a war, whereas all I won was battles."

Note:

The seemingly incredible situation in the middle portion of this story occurred in almost identical fashion during the 1st World War, in 1918.

A pair of Austro-Hungarian battleships—the *Zrinyi* and the *Radetsky*—surrendered to an American sub-chaser. Their condition was the same, and their purpose was the same. The crews were Dalmatians and foresaw the dismemberment of Austria and hoped for the establishment of a Dalmatian Republic. They refused obstinately to surrender to either Italian or French ships, though they were both in the Adriatic. They insisted on finding an American captor, as they were hopeful that we would return the ships to them as a nucleus for their own fleet. The biggest they could find was a sub-chaser.

The young lieutenant who took over the *Zrinyi* was just out of college and had never been on board a battleship. There was no food but the ersatz stuff left by the Austrians. It took them days to make out what was what, as the crew promptly deserted as soon as the ship was safely under the American flag. But the American kids hung on, and

managed to keep steam up and run the ship until the Peace Treaty finally disposed of it.

The Italians eventually got them, and used them for targets. They were like our Connecticuts.

M.J.

THE END.

[The end of *Slacker's Paradise* by Malcolm Jameson]