

**If it takes a thief to catch one—then this scheme ought to work just fine**

**F. PAUL WILSON**

*Illustrated by Vincent Di Fate*

## RATMAN

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When the viewscreen picked up an approaching ground car, Orz snapped his fingers and a half-kilo space rat leaped from the control console to his shoulder.

"Let's go, 62," he said to his favorite employee.

The space rat grasped the fabric of his master's shirt tightly in his tiny paws and lashed his tail about nervously. He didn't like meeting strangers, but it was part of his job; his master had found that there was a definite psychological advantage in appearing with a space rat on his shoulder.

Orz and 62 reached the hatch just as the ground car pulled up alongside. They scrutinized the two occupants as the freighter's loading ramp descended.

The first to disembark was a portly little man wearing a stylish orange tunic that should have been two sizes larger. His companion probably weighed as much but was taller and better proportioned.

Orz's long legs carried him swiftly down the ramp after it had settled and the portly one came forward to meet him.

"Mr. Samuel Orzechowski?" he asked, mangling the pronunciation.

Orz smiled. "That's right, but you can call me Sam, or Orz, or, as some people prefer, Ratman." And being a client, he thought, you'll no doubt choose the last one.

"Well," the little man replied, "I guess 'Ratman' will do. I'm Aaron Lesno, president of the Traders League and this is Evan Rabb, our treasurer," he said, indicating the man beside him.

"Welcome to Neeka," said Orz.

"Could I ask you something, Ratman?" Rabb hastily interjected. He couldn't take his eyes off 62. "Is that a space rat?"

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"A small one," Qrz nodded. "A baby, really."

"Aren't you afraid of. . ."

"Of losing my ear?" he grinned. "Not at all. I imagine you two and the rest of the League are somewhat in the dark as to my methods, and you've probably got a lot of questions. I've found it best in the past to get everyone together and explain things to everybody at once. It saves me time and you money."

"An excellent idea!" Lesno agreed. "We've all been anxiously awaiting your arrival . . . well," he corrected himself with a glance at Rabb, "almost all ... but I'm sure there would be no problem in getting everyone together."

"What did you mean by 'almost all'?"

Orz asked.

Rabb spoke up. "One of our more influential members was vehemently opposed to the idea of retaining you."

"Oh, really? Why?"

"Have no fear, Ratman," Lesno assured him with a smile, "hell let you know why at the meeting tonight"

"That's fair enough," Orz said. "Now can someone come back and pick me up in a few hours for the meeting?"

"Why not come with us now and let us show you around a bit?" Lesno offered. ... Orz shook his head and gestured over his shoulder to the ship. "Sorry . . . feeding time." Rabb and Lesno stiffened and glanced nervously from 62 the open hatch. "Yes, quite," Lesno muttered,



"Very well, then, we'll have someone call for you in, say, three hours."

"That'll be fine. This settled, the two-man welcoming committee lost little time in putting some distance between themselves and the squat little freighter.

"Seems like pretty decent fellows," Orz told 62 as he made his way up the ramp and down the central corridor. As they approached the rat room, 62 began to prance excitedly on his master's shoulder and was literally doing a dance by the time Orz hit the door release. His several hundred fellow employees inside took up the same excited dance at the sound of the door sliding open. The cages were arranged five high along the walls of the long, narrow room. They

were simple, steel-sided boxes with front doors of quarter-inch steel mesh; each was self-cleaning, had its own water supply and was equipped with an automatic feeder.

But Orz had never trusted automatic feeders, so now he went from cage to cage and shoved food pellets through the tiny feeding hole in the front of each. He had to be nimble for the rats were greedy and anxious and a fingertip could easily be mistaken for a pellet. His practiced eye decided how much each rat should get. This was important: a rat became fat and lazy if overfed and would gnaw his way out of the cage if underfed. A rat in either condition was of little use to Ratman. Fifty cages stood

open and empty and Orz placed a few pellets in each; 62 was frantic by now so he decided to give the little fellow something before he jumped off his shoulder and into one of the empty cages. The rat rose up on his hind legs, snatched the pellet from Orz's proffering fingers with his tiny, handlike paws and began to gnaw noisily and voraciously.

Three hours later, Orz flipped a particular switch on the console, checked to make sure the door to the rat room was open, then headed for the hatch. There, after casting an eye through the dusk at the approaching ground car, he secured the hatch, but opened a small panel at its bottom. With 62 perched watchfully upon his shoulder, he was

waiting at the bottom of the ramp when the car arrived. Lesno was alone inside. "Well, Ratman," he said with a smile, "everybody's waiting, so—" then he spotted 62 and his face fell. "Does he have to come along? I mean, he won't get too excited, will he?"

"Don't worry," Orz replied, sliding into his seat, "he won't bite you." To lessen the man's anxiety he made a point of keeping 62 on his far shoulder.

"Your advertising literature was quite timely," Lesno remarked as they got under way, hoping conversation would take his mind off those two beady eyes peering at him around the back of his passenger's head. "The rat problem was reaching its peak when we received it. I

trust that wasn't just coincidence."

"No coincidence at all. I keep my ear to the ground and word got around that there was a space rat plague on Neeka. I figured you could use my services."

Lesno nodded. "We had heard a few stories about you but didn't know whether to believe them or not. Your advertising claims were quite impressive. I just hope you can live up to them." About twenty exporters and importers were waiting in the conference room on the second floor of the Traders League office complex. It was a motley group of discordant colors, shapes, sizes and ages. Lesno entered ahead of Orz and lost no time in bringing the meeting to order.

"We all know why we're here," he said, tapping the gavel twice, "so there's really no use in wasting time with introductions." He pointed to Orz. "The creature on this man's shoulder is introduction enough. Ratman has arrived and he's going to tell us something about himself and about space rats." So saying, he relinquished the podium.

Nothing like a businesslike business, Orz thought as he stood up and received a slight spattering of applause. They knew of his claim to be able to control space rats with space fats and were frankly dubious. But this was nothing new to Orz.

Without even a glance at the audience, he nonchalantly snapped his fingers and

tapped the top of the podium; 62 immediately leaped from his shoulder to the podium and began to sniff the wood curiously.

"This," he began, "although a specimen of *Rattus interstellus*, is not a true 'space rat' in the full sense of the word; but his parents were. Lab-raised space rats—such as 62, here— can turn out to be quite friendly, but they are no less cunning, no less intelligent and certainly no less vicious when cornered. These are the rats I 'employ' so to speak.

"But first let's puncture a few of the myths that have grown up around the space rat. First of all, no matter what the spacers tell you, space rats have no psi powers; they don't know what you're

going to do next . . . it's just that their reflexes are developed to such a high degree that it almost seems that way when you take pot shots at one with a blaster. They will respond to ultra-frequency tones but by no means do they have a language . . . they're intelligent, all right, but they're a long way from a language." His eyes flicked over the audience. These were traders, barterers; they recognized a man who knew what he was talking about, and they were all listening intently.

He continued. "But just what is it that distinguishes the space rat from other rats?" To dramatize his point, he allowed 62 to crawl onto the back of his hand and then held, the fidgety creature



aloft.

"This is the product of centuries in the pressurized but unshielded holds of interstellar cargo ships. Wild genetic mutation and the law of survival of the fittest combined to produce a most adaptable, ferocious and intelligent creature.

"Everyone knew of the space rat's existence, but no one paid much attention to him until an ensign aboard the freighter Clinton was kept awake one night by the continuous opening and closing of the compartment door outside his cabin. The ship was in port, and, under normal circumstances, he would have spent the night in town, but, for one reason or another, he had returned to his

quarters.

"Now, these doors which divide the corridors into compartments open automatically when you touch the release panel and remain open as long as a simple electric eye beam is broken; when the beam makes contact again, the door closes! The doors naturally make some noise when they operate, and this is what was disturbing the ensign. But, every time he checked to see who was wandering up and down the corridor, he found no one. Checking with the guard detail he found that he was the only person authorized to be in that area of the ship.

"So he set up watch. Opening his door a crack, he peeked through to the

corridor and waited. But no one came and he was about to give up when he spotted this large space rat come running down the corridor. As it approached the door it leaped over a meter into the air and threw itself against the release panel. The door slid open as the creature landed on the floor and it scurried through before the door closed again."

The traders were smiling and shaking their heads in wonder as Orz paused and placed 62 back on the podium. "Since it is doubtful that the rat could have accidentally leaped against the release panel, it must be assumed that he learned by watching. That would make him a highly unusual rat... they thought. Then they discovered that the whole colony

aboard the Clinton knew how to operate the doors! Then other spacers on other ships began watching for space rats while their ships were in port—that's when their movements are the greatest; they stick pretty much to the cargo holds in transit—and it was discovered that the Clinton rats were not so extraordinary. These reports fired the interest of researchers who figured they would go out and catch themselves a few space rats and put them through some tests." The audience broke into laughter at this point. They were all quite familiar with the elusiveness of the space rat

"Another characteristic of the space rat was soon discovered: viciousness. It

took quite a while, but, after much effort and many scars, a number of space rats were caught. And, as expected, they proved virtually untrainable. We hoped to do better with their offspring.

"I was working with the offspring when I heard about a rat problem in the nearby spaceport. Traps, poison, even variable frequency sonic repellers had failed to control them. I went to investigate and found that a good many space rats were jumping ship and setting up residence in the warehouses which ring every spaceport. Another factor was added. In the warehouses they meet other strains of space rat from other ships and the resultant cross-breeding produces a strain more intelligent and more

ferocious than even the cargo-ship rat. I managed to catch half a dozen in as many months, mated them and began to go to work on the offspring. Through a mixture of imprinting and operant conditioning, second generation space rats proved quite tractable.

"But I needed more wild rats and tried the wild idea of training my lab rats to help catch other rats. It worked out so well that I decided to go into the business of space-rat control." He paused and glanced around the room. "Any questions?"

An elderly trader in the front row raised a bony hand. "Just how does one rat go about catching another?" he asked in a raspy voice.

"I'll demonstrate that tomorrow," Orz replied. "It'll be easier to understand once you see the equipment."

A huge, balding man with a grizzled beard stood up without waiting to be recognized. "I've got a question, Ratman," he said belligerently. "If all you've got are a few trained rats, why do you charge so much?"

This elicited a few concurring mutters from other members of the audience. Here, no doubt, was the man Lesno had referred to earlier that day.

"You have me at a disadvantage, sir," Orz replied with a smile.

"I'm Malcomb Houghton and I guess I rank third, or fourth, around here in cubic feet of warehouse space."

Orz nodded. "Very glad to meet you, sir. But let me answer your question with another question: Do you have any idea what it costs to operate a privately owned freighter, even a small one such as mine?"

My overhead is staggering."

Being a businessman, this argument seemed to make sense to Houghton, but he remained standing. "I just wonder," he began slowly, "if you can train rats to catch other rats, how do we know you didn't land some special trouble-making rats here on Neeka a few months ago to aggravate the situation to the point where we had to call you in?"

The audience went silent and waited for Ratman's reply. Orz cursed as he



felt his face flushing. This man was dangerously close to the truth. He hesitated, then cracked a grin.

"How'd you like to go into partnership with me?" he quipped. The tension suddenly vanished as the audience laughed and applauded. Orz gathered up 62 and left the podium before Houghton could zero in on him again. He couldn't tell whether the man was stabbing in the dark, or whether he really knew something.

Lesno escorted him out the door. "Wonderful!" he beamed "I think you're the man to solve our problems. But time is of the essence! The port residents have been on our necks for months; their pets are being killed, they're afraid for

their children and they're afraid for themselves. And since the rats are based in the warehouse district, we might be held liable if we don't do something soon. And"—he put his hand on Orz's shoulder and lowered his voice—"we've been keeping it quiet, but a man went after a few of the rats with a blaster the other night. They turned on him and chewed him up pretty badly."

"I'll start as early as possible," Orz assured him. "You just send somebody around tomorrow with a good-sized truck and I'll be waiting."

Rabb must have overheard them as he approached. "That won't be necessary," he said. "We're placing a truck at your disposal immediately. I'll drive it over

to your ship and Lesno will bring me back after dropping you off."

Orz said that would be fine and he arranged a time and place of meeting with Lesno for early the next morning on the way back to the ship. A few minutes later he and 62 were standing next to the borrowed truck watching die two League officers drive away.

"Ratman!" whispered a voice from the deep shadows under the ramp. Orz spun around. "Who's there?" he asked guardedly.

"I'm your contact."

"You'd better come out and identify yourself," he said.

Muttering and brushing off the knees of her coveralls, a tall, statuesque

brunette stepped out of the shadows. "Where have you been for the past hour? We were supposed to meet as soon as it was dark!"

"Just who are you, Miss?" Orz asked.

She straightened up and stared at him. "You don't take any chances, do you?" she said as a wry smile played around her lips. "O.K. I'm Jessica Maffey, Federation agent NE97. I'm the one who received a smuggled shipment of fifty of your best harassing rats, drove them into town and let them go in the warehouse district. satisfied, Ratman?"

Orz grinned at her annoyance. "You're Maffey, all right . . . I've got a picture of you inside, but you can't be too careful." He glanced around. "Let's get inside

where we can talk."

"Speaking of going inside," she said, "there's been a steady stream of rats going through that little opening in the hatch."

He nodded. "Good. I activated a high-frequency call before I left. All the harassers you loosed should be snug in their cages by now."

He unlocked the hatch and led her to the rat room. As he busied himself with transferring 62 to a cage and checking on the harassing rats, Jessica looked around. From the darkened recess of each cage shone two gleaming points of light, and all those several hundred points of light seemed to be fixed upon her.

"Three missing," Orz was saying. "That's not too bad. . . accidents do happen." He pressed a button on the wall and the open doors on the cages of the harassing rats swung shut with a loud and simultaneous clang.

"How about a drink?" he offered his guest.

"As a matter of fact, I'd love one! she replied, sighing with relief as they stepped back into the corridor. Orz looked at her curiously. "It gets a little dry and dusty sitting under a loading ramp," she explained with tight smile.

With Jessica seated in his spartan fastidiously neat living quarters her hand around a cold gin tonic, Orz began to talk business "Federation Intelligence

only gave me a sketchy idea of what's going on here. You were to fill me in on the rest, so why don't I tell you what I know and you take it from there."

"Go ahead," she told him.

Drink in hand, Orz paced the room as he spoke. "Let's start with this planet Neeka is a fiercely independent, sparsely populated world which exports a lot of food and imports a lot of hardware. Formerly a splinter world, it agreed to trade with the Federation but refused to join it. They were asked to join the Restructurists in their revolt against the Federation but turned them down. They want absolutely no part of the war . . . and I can't say as I blame them.

"However: the Haas Warp gate is right outside this star system and the convoys stack up in this area before being shot through to the battle zones. Fed agents discovered a turncoat feeding information on the size and destinations of the convoys to someone on this planet. That someone, in turn, was transmitting the info to the Restructurists via subspace radio. He's been stopped temporarily, but as soon as he makes another contact, he'll be in business again. I was told to meet you here and stop him. That's all I know."

Jessica nodded and drained her drink. "Right but subspace transmissions can't be traced so we-had to depend on deductive reasoning. First of all, you're



allowed to be pro-Federation, or pro-Restructurist on Neeka, and you're allowed to talk all you want about either cause. Nobody minds. But try to do something to aid either cause, and you wind up in prison. Strict neutrality is enforced to the letter on Neeka. Therefore, partisan natives, such as myself, and the man we're after have to go underground.

"Now, it would be as easy to smuggle in a subspace transmitter as it was to smuggle in your rats, but hiding it would be an entirely different matter. It's a huge piece of hardware and it needs a large power supply"

"So the man we're after," Orz broke in, " is someone with easy access to an

off-planet source of information, and a place big enough to hide a subspace transmitter without arousing suspicion."

"And a warehouse right here in port has the size and access to the necessary power," Jessica concluded. "Since the members of the Traders League own all the warehouses, they are the obvious target for investigation."

"But which one?"

She shrugged. "Their security is too tight for me to do much snooping. The only way to get into those warehouses is to be invited in. That's where Ratman comes in." Orz was thoughtful. "It really shouldn't be too difficult I was informed by the Traders League when they retained me that their warehouses are

fully automated and computer-operated."

"With a population density as low as Neeka's Jessica added, "labor is anything but cheap."

"Right," he continued. "And, if I wanted to hide a subspace radio in one of those warehouses, I'd disguise it as part of the automation works and no one would ever be the wiser. All I've got to do tomorrow, when I go into the warehouses, is keep my eyes open for an unusually large computer-automation rig. When I find it I'll just 'accidentally' expose it as a subspace transmitter. The Neekan authorities will take care of our spy after that."

He suddenly halted his pacing and snapped his fingers. "Forgot to turn off

the call signal for the rats. .

. I'll be right back."

"Mind if I come along?" Jessica asked.

"Not at all."

She watched Orz's back as he led her down the narrow corridor to the bridge. "Can I call you something other than 'Ratman?'"

He grinned over his shoulder. "Sam will do fine."

"O.K., Sam: how did you get started in all this?"

"Well, I got the idea a few years ago and thought I was a genius until I started looking for backers. Everyone I approached thought I was either a swindler, or a nut. As a last desperate

hope I went to IBA."

"What's IBA?"

"Interstellar Business Advisers. It's a private company with some pretty canny people working for them. They dug up somebody who promised to back me halfway, then they approached the Federation with this undercover idea. Since I'd be able to get on otherwise unfriendly planets, the Federation put up the rest of the money. So now I'm a full-time Ratman and a part-time Fed man. And when my reputation spreads, IBA has got some ideas for starting a corporation and selling franchises." They entered the bridge as he was speaking and Jessica noticed that it was as meticulously ordered as his quarters.

Two additions to the standard console caught her eye immediately.

"Improvements?" she asked, pointing to a brace of toggle switches. Orz flipped one of the toggles to 'off' and turned to her. "Those are the high-frequency signals for my rats. They've got an effective range of about two kilometers and when a rat hears the proper tone, he makes a beeline for this ship."

"And what's that?" She indicated a bright red lever with three safety catches and "Danger" written in

white letters along its length.

The lightness left his voice. "For the direst of emergencies only," replied. Feminine curiosity aroused, Jessica

went to touch it. "What does it do?"

"That's my secret," Orz replied with a tight smile and snatched wrist away from the lever. "I've to use it and I hope the day never comes when I do." To draw her attention elsewhere he pointed to far wall.

"See that inconspicuous little switch over there by the intercom speaker? When that's in the down position—like now—the controls are locked,"

"You're just full of tricks, aren't you?" she said, trying to hide a smile. He was like a little boy showing off a new toy.

"Can't be too careful."

Lesno, Rabb, Houghton and a few others were ready and waiting when Orz pulled up in front of the Traders League

offices with the truck.

"Straight ahead," said Lesno as he hopped in beside Orz. "We'll start with Rabb's places first since they're the closest." Two left turns brought them up before a huge structure with a "Rabb & Co." sign above the sliding doors. Orz waited until the others had arrived, then addressed the group.

"First of all," he told them, "you must keep all humans away from any warehouse where, my rats are at work, so give whatever employees you have the day off. Next, let me explain that space rats set up a close-knit community within a warehouse—one community per warehouse—and that each community has a leader who achieved his position



by being the most cunning and the most ferocious in the community."

He reached into the back of the truck and brought out a simple cage. Inside was a very large and very vicious-looking space rat. "This is one of my Judas rats. I've selectively bred them for ferocity and any one of these is a match for any three ordinary space rats. Within hours after his release, my Judas rat will have established himself at the top of the community's pecking order." Once again Orz reached into the back of the truck and brought out a cage, but this one was larger and empty. "Normally a space rat wouldn't go near a trap like this, but he'll follow the Judas if the Judas is the community leader. And once the

community has followed him inside and is buy at the bait, the Judas hops outside, releases this catch and a spring closes and locks the door. He then returns to the ship. The cage is made of a lightweight titanium alloy that not even a space rat's teeth can dent." He held up the cage. "Tomorrow morning this should be filled with a community of very angry space rats."

"Is that's all there is to it?" Hough-ton blurted incredulously. Orz could imagine the man's mind tallying and totaling, and deciding that no matter what his overhead, Ratman charged too much. "This is outrageous! I'll have nothing to do with such nonsense! We're being hoodwinked!" Somebody doesn't want

me in his warehouse, Orz thought and was about to say something when Rabb beat him to it.

"The League has already retained Ratman, Malcomb, and we voted to use the treasury to do so ... remember? So you have, in effect, already paid for his services, and it would be foolish of you not to take advantage of them."

Houghton paused, considering Rabb's words, then he glanced at the cage and shrugged. "I guess I don't have much choice," he said sullenly and turned toward his car. "Let me know when you get to my places."

It was late in the day when they finally did get around to Houghton's warehouses, but Orz had preferred it that

way. He had his suspicions and wanted to see as many of the other warehouses as possible before confronting Houghton. There had been nothing suspect in the others, although Lesno's computer setups had been somewhat larger than most, but nowhere near big enough to house a subspace radio.

Houghton met them outside.

"I've only got a few cages left," Orz told him, "so we'll do as many as we can and I'll get the rest tomorrow after I collect the cages I've set out today."

"Might as well start with the main house," Houghton replied and led them toward the largest building of his complex. The doors slid open to reveal a huge expanse of concrete floor with

crates and boxes stacked almost to the ceiling. Huge cranes— controlled by a computer that knew the exact location of every item in storage—swung from above. Looming against the far wall was a large, metal-paneled structure.

Orz pointed to it. "Is that your computer?"

"Yes," the bearded man replied absently, "now let's get on with this . . . I haven't got all day."

"Mind if I take a look at it?" Orz asked and started walking toward it. This was what he had been looking for; it was big enough to house two subspace transmitters. "Rats love to nest in those things, you know."

"I assure you there are no rats in there

so stay away from it!" Houghton almost shouted. He began to follow Orz and Lesno and Rabb trailed along.

Orz went to the nearest inspection plate and began loosening the screws which held it in place.

"Get away from there!" Houghton yelled as he came up. "You don't know what you're doing! You could mess up my whole operation!"

"Look, if I'm going to do my job right, I've got to check this out!" The inspection plate came off in his hands then and he stuck his head inside. Nothing unusual. He replaced it and went to the next plate with the same result. Four more inspection plates later he was sure there was no subspace

transmitter hidden within.

Houghton was standing behind him and tugging angrily on his beard as Orz replaced the last screw.

"Are you quite through, Ratman?"

Orz stood and faced him. "Awful big computer you've got there, Mr.; Houghton," he said matter-of-factly. He was chagrined, but refused to show it.

"That's the computer for my whole operation. I found it easier to centralize the system: instead of installing new unite all the time, I just add to the central unit and feed it into the new buildings as they are built. It's much more convenient."

"More economical, too, I'll bet," Orz added laconically.

"Why, yes. How did you know?"

"Lucky guess."

Jessica was waiting for him back at the ship. "Don't bother telling me you didn't find anything," she said as he collapsed in a chair, "that look on your face tells me the whole story."

"I was so sure it was Houghton! The way he objected to the League retaining me, the way he tried to rake me over the coals at the meeting last night, the way he blew up this morning, I was sure he had something to hide. Turns out he's only a cheapskate with a centralized computer."

"What makes you so sure he hasn't got it stashed somewhere else?" Jessica asked, coming over and handing him a



drink.

He accepted it gratefully and took a long slow swallow before answering. "I'm not sure of anything right now. But, if that transmitter's here—and we know it is—it's got to be in one of those warehouses. Which reminds me ..." He got to his feet slowly and trudged to the rat room. Jessica didn't follow, but glanced out into the corridor when she heard the clang of cage doors. Furry gray and brown shapes were scurrying toward the hatch.

"What are you up to?" she asked as Orz reappeared.

"I had a brainstorm on my way back to the ship. We'll find out if it worked tomorrow." Orz noticed Jessica in the

crowd outside Rabb's main warehouse. She smiled and winked mischievously, knowing he couldn't acknowledge her. The crowd was waiting to see if Ratman could live up to his claims and watched intently as he and Rabb disappeared inside. An uncertain cheer began and died as he reappeared dragging—with little help from Rabb—a cageful of clawing, squealing, snarling, snapping space rats. Having retreated to what it considered a safer distance, the crowd applauded. Lesno strode forward, beaming. "Well, Ratman, I knew you could do it! But what are you going to do with the little monsters now that you've caught them?"

"Most of them will have to be gassed

and killed, but I'll save a few of the best for breeding purposes

... I like to keep my working stock as strong as possible."

They completed the rounds of Rabb's buildings, then moved on to Lesno's. The novelty had worn off and the crowd was beginning to thin by the time they got around to Lesno's third warehouse, but interest was renewed at the sound of Orz's voice calling from within.

"Mr. Lesno! There's something you ought to see in here!"

Lesno, went in. Rabb, Houghton and some of the braver members of the crowd—Jessica among them—followed him in.

It looked as if a bomb had gone off

inside. Every crate, every package had been torn open. Even some of the computer paneling had been torn away.

"What happened?" Lesno cried, staggered by the destruction. Orz shrugged and pointed to the full cage. "I don't know. There's your community, caged and ready to go. But I've never seen anything like this before."

Houghton was looking over the ravaged computer. "Never seen a computer that looked like this," he muttered. "Is this some new model, Aaron?" he asked Lesno. Rabb came up. "Looks like part of a subspace radio!"

"Ridiculous!" Lesno sputtered. "What would I be doing with—"

"You're a spy!" Houghton declared.

"A Federation spy!" A blaster suddenly appeared in Lesno's hand. "Don't insult me by linking me to the Federation!" Houghton shrugged. "So you're a Restructurist spy, then. Just as bad. You get twenty years either way."

"I'm not going to argue with you, Malcomb. Just stay where you are."

"You can't escape, Aaron!" Rabb warned.

Lesno smiled. "Of course I can," he said and pointed the blaster at Orz. "Ratman is going to volunteer the use of his ship. He's even going to come along for the tide to make sure no one gets trigger-happy." Orz caught Jessica's eye. She was readying to make a move, but he shook his head. They had succeeded

in destroying Lesno's effectiveness as a spy. It didn't matter if he escaped. And so, with a blaster at the back of his head, Orz preceded the little man to the truck.

"You work for the Federation, don't you?" Lesno said as Orz drove them toward the spaceport.

"I'm afraid I don't have time to work for anyone other than Sam Orzechowski."

"Come now, Ratman. I was suspicious yesterday when I saw the way you gave Houghton's computer a going over and this morning's revelation confirmed my suspicions. Why deny it?" Orz shrugged. "O.K., I occasionally do some snooping for the Federation."

"How did you get on to me?" Lesno

asked earnestly. "I thought I had a foolproof arrangement."

"Well, I wasn't sure, but Houghton's centralized setup started me on a new approach. I figured that if one man could centralize his computers, another could decentralize a sub-space transmitter. Then it struck me that you'd have to take the transmitter apart in order to sneak it into town. And since it was already in pieces, why not leave it that way? At least that's what I would have done. So the next thing to do was to look for the man with the slightly larger computers. You fit the bill."

"But how did you manage to tear the place apart?"

"That was easy. If you could go hack

to that warehouse now, you'd find a tiny, high-frequency labeler attached to the door. I have a "number of vandal rats trained to be specialists in making a mess out of a building. The labeler told them where to go to work." Shaking his head in admiration, Lesno remarked, "You should be working for us."

"But I don't want a Restructured Federation," Orz replied. "I sort of like it the way it is."

"But there are such inequalities in the galaxy! Some planets are drowning in their surpluses while other planets are starving, and the Federation does nothing!"

"The Federation doesn't think such matters are within its scope."



"They will be when we win!" Lesno replied righteously.

Orz knew argument was futile and allowed a shrug to be his only reply. Once on the ship, it was evident to Orz that Lesno knew his way around freighters. He retracted the ramp, secured the hatch and then followed Orz to the bridge.

He gestured to the extra seat "You just sit there and keep out of the way, Mr. Ratman, and you won't get hurt. I'm not a murderer. If all goes well, I'll drop you off at the first neutral port we reach. But I won't hesitate to shoot you if you, try anything."

"Don't worry," Orz told him. "My mission was to stop you, not capture

you. I really don't care if you get way."

Lesno's eyes narrowed. This lack of chauvinism did not fit his conception of a Fed man. Something was up. His suspicions were reinforced when he found the console inoperable.

"Where's the lock?" he demanded.

Orz pointed across the room. "By the speaker." But Lesno made no move. Instead his eyes roved the room until they came to rest on the red lever. His face creased into a smile.

"You didn't think anyone would be fooled by that, did you?" Orz nearly leaped from his seat as the Restructurist reached for the lever. "Don't touch that!"

"Sitdown!" Lesno warned, pointing the gun at Orz's chest "I told you before,

I'm not a killer but—"

"I know you're not!" Orz said frantically. "Neither am I. That's why you've got to leave that lever alone!"

Lesno merely smiled and kept him covered while he released the first two safety catches. "listen to me, Lesno! That lever sets off a special tone stimulus and releases every one of my rats! They've all been trained to attack anyone and everyone but me when they hear that tone ... I installed it for use in a situation when it was either kill or be killed! This is not one of those situations!" Lesno was having some trouble with the third catch, but it finally yielded. "A good try, Ratman," he said and, ignoring Orz's cry of protest, pulled the lever.

Faintly, from far down the corridor, came a metallic clang. A load, wailing tone filled the ship. Lesno paled and turned anxiously toward his captive.

"Why didn't you listen to me, you fool!" Orz yelled.

Lesno suddenly believed. Horror stricken, he began to push and pull the lever back and forth but with no effect. He was still working at it when the squealing, gray brown carpet swept through the door. Orz turned away and tried unsuccessfully to block out the screams and sickening sounds of carnage that filled the bridge. He had trained the rats too well . . . there would be no stopping them. And when all was quiet again, Orz congratulated himself on

having kept his stomach in place. But then 62 leaped up-to his accustomed spot on his shoulder and began with great contentment to clean his reddened claws and jowls.

Only Jessica came to see him off, Orz had cleaned up the rat problem and the people were appreciative, but they had either seen the corpse that had been removed from his ship, or they had heard about it

"I see the red lever's been removed," Jessica remarked. She hadn't been near the ship since the incident.

Orz avoided her gaze. "Yeah. I took it out . . . can't quite look at it." He changed the subject abruptly. "Well, now that this thing's been cleared up,

what'll you be doing with yourself?"

"I've no intention of settling down and becoming a good Neekan citizen, you can be sure of that!" she replied. "I'm putting in for an assignment as soon as possible. There's too much going on out there for me to get tucked away on this rock!"

Orz smiled for the first time in several days. "That's funny. I was thinking of taking on an assistant. This business is getting a little too complicated for me to handle alone." He paused as Jessica waited eagerly.

"You like rats?" he asked.